

## nanobison farewell issue – volume 3 number 9

This is a PDF version of our final nanobison issue, nanov3n9. Thanks to all who contributed to this issue, to all of the other issues, and to the zine effort.

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Thanks to our contributors for these previously displayed stories, which have been removed at the authors' request after the initial issue release plus three months:

- **Jolaneering** - Science Fiction from *Ann Wilkes*
- **The Last Word in Lonesome** - Science Fiction from *Lon Prater*
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Original Art by Alycia Helbling

## The Magus Dreams of His Bride

by Kristine Ong Muslim

The magus dreams of his bride  
in a large cathedral  
of obsidian rock.

He stepped on the bones  
of the ones before her  
scattered on the ground,  
waiting for her to rise--  
black and perfected,  
vertebrae stretching to a tail,  
head tapered to  
reveal the brain.

Bristling, she emerged  
out of the cauldron  
of liquid fire  
then held his hand and howled.

## House of Coal

By Joseph Plaxton

All Jackson remembers from last night is panic. He recalls only parts of the trip home from work, and then the fury, the painful beating of his heart as he had pulled into his driveway. He remembers running to the neighbor to find a telephone, and the tears that had dripped tar-black down his smoke-colored cheeks. Now, everything smells like the smoke, the greasy powder that had fallen from the walls and ceiling of his home to land and embrace everything in its path. Everything ruined and Kingsley, the fire chief, inside right now, wandering through the rubble, inspecting the cause. "Looked like something near the fridge," he had said only moments ago, before heading in for a second or third look. "Did you have anything flammable sitting anywhere near it?"

"No," Jackson had said. Now he feels exhausted, worn out, the sun beginning to rise and bleed purple into the sky. Birds chirp in the trees surrounding him, but none of this everyday crap matters. Only the pungent stench of smoke and the fire chief inside his house, rooting through his things and him standing outside alone. The ambulances, the fire trucks and police cruisers had left not long ago, but Jackson remained behind to answer repeated questions, stand around and watch nosy neighbors watch him. It should have been him, the color of charcoal. He should have at least been there with them, because now everything is gone. He realizes that he is still wearing the blanket a police officer had offered earlier while questioning him to help the chill that had nestled deep inside his bones. The kind of chill that digs deep into your body and never truly goes away. Death in the next faded heart beat. If only ... if only ...

"Yup, definitely started somewhere behind the fridge," the voice of the fire chief comes from behind, startling Jackson.

"I believe the fire started inside the wall. The house is old. Faulty wire, maybe. Do you know when the house was last rewired?"

"We bought it only a few years ago," Jackson says. "I have no idea."

"The former home owners never mention anything?"

"They were an old couple. Died one after the other. If there is any kind of information like that, it'll be upstairs in the bottom drawer of the dresser along with the rest of the paper work."

"Great, I'll get to that as soon as I can. Now, I have to ask that you stay out of the house until the inspector comes. The air inside is toxic, so I wouldn't advise it anyways."

"Do you suspect arson?"

Kingsley pulls back his head and frowns. "No, if I did the police would still be here. Like I said, it looks as though it started inside the wall, but I'm not the expert here. The official inspector will confirm it." The fire chief pauses, as though realizing something. More birds chirp in the trees,

the congregation singing a lament. "You should've left with your family," the fire chief says. "Looks like you should see a doctor, though. Tell ya what, I'll contact the insurance company for you. We'll hook up later when you're feeling better." Again he pauses, then adds, "I'm sorry for your loss," as though these words alone could fill the sudden hole inside him, could heal the wound that only feels physical but is not and might never stop bleeding. The sting of tears fills Jackson's eyes, and although his mouth is opening and closing, like a fish, no words come out. And when the words do come out of Jackson's mouth, they are mutilated and choked.

"They're all gone," he says, the watery tar-black dripping all the way down to his chin. He looks away from Kingsley to the now hollow house. Hollowed of its soul and life and Jackson wants to go in there and lick the walls, taste the aftermath of death until he chokes on it. "They're all dead."

The fire chief puts his hand on Jackson's shoulder. "It'll get easier with time," he says, but Jackson barely hears. "Let me get my truck, I'll take you to the hospital myself. You're in no shape to drive." Then he's gone, his bulk dissolving and Jackson is staring at the kitchen window. Just beyond the broken glass panel, there is a set of shadowy shoulders, a shadowy head with no hair and midnight slick skin. The whites of its eyes blink, and two rows of large teeth catch the sun and begin to chatter with loud ticking sounds.

Jackson tries to scream, but the world around him closes in, and he can feel the ground coming up to greet his body as everything, the neighbors watching from porches and windows, the chirping birds and the blinding sun disappear and go blessedly silent.

#

Two hours later and Jackson is still unconscious. Dreams do not leave him alone. He is standing in his home, the way it was only one day ago. In the living room, all is silent, the soft orange light from the lamp and a blue florescent glow from the television illuminate the room and Jackson, in the middle of the room, feels relaxed. Adel and Jesse and Otto are in the other rooms, tucked peacefully inside their beds. Jackson knows this, and tries to call out to them, but they cannot hear him, so he tries to move, to go to them, but his limbs are heavy, lethargic and limp. With an audible tink, the sound of a blown light bulb, the living room fades to pitch-black. The muscles in his legs stiffen and cramp, but still he cannot move.

Silver light fills the blackness, the moon moving faster than it does in real time, fills the window behind him.

Shadows move within the inky blackness, silver moon rays catching the whites of their eyes. Jackson can move again, and he raises his arms, stretches them out before him, his fingers reaching for the things out there. The smell of smoke clogs the inside of his nostrils, and his fingers graze upon one of the hairless creatures moving, dancing around him. Its skin is like touching scorched wood and its flesh chips to ash and charcoal-black paints his fingers. He pulls back and expects retaliation, but none comes, the creature he had touched converges in with the rest, their teeth and eyes blocked only by the crazy movement of their arms. *The people of death*, he thinks, *the people of coal*, and the smoke trails into the living room, exciting the

creatures, the sound of snapping fingers and the fire climbs the wall just inside the next room, in the kitchen, and its almost comforting glow of campfire yellow and orange illuminates the entrance.

The smoke collects around the dancing tribesmen, fills their essence and their eyes grow, their teeth expanding to the size of wooden planks and only get bigger. As they close in, their scorched wooden fingers and tongues dig into his nose, into his mouth, down his throat. *Coal to soak in all the poison.* The words fill his ears; they silence the snap and crackle of the fire consuming his life. He tries to scream, but he is suffocating in their embrace, their teeth white and large, so large that it's all he can see. He blinks the tears away from his eyes, the light, fluorescent now and horribly white, blinds and stings, digs deep into his eyes like daggers. There is an external gasp, a quick breath of air, then "Chief Kingsley, I think he's awake now," and the chief's large shoulders and head eclipse the fluorescents.

"Had us all worried there for a while, little buddy," he says and smiles. Jackson winces at the man's large teeth. "I had to call another ambulance after you took that nose dive." Cold fingers press against his wrist, and Jackson realizes a nurse is standing to his left, checking his pulse. Her smile is sympathetic, melancholic but well meaning. When she's done she writes something down on her clipboard, then leaves. Her sneakers squeak upon the waxed floor.

As Jackson sits up, rubbing his eyes to try to clear them, the world tilts with vertigo and nausea. In front of his bed, there are white walls with grey bordering and three metal tiers full of intravenous bags, plastic hypodermics, Popsicle sticks and wound dressings. He concentrates on these for a moment, to fight the nausea, and expects the scent of a hospital, but all he can smell is the smoke from the fire. He looks down to see that he's still wearing the same clothes from last night, all streaked in black from that one moment he went inside the smoke congested house and called out to Adel, to Otto and Jesse, but with no answer. The sound of crackling fire had been layered over a dreadful silence, a silence he'll never forget.

The fire chief steps in front of the bed, blocking the view of the white wall and the supply shelf. His smile is gone, and his eyes hold pain that is foreign to the man's previous disposition. "I'm really sorry about your family," he says. "And I'm also sorry if I seemed unsympathetic earlier this morning. I just never know the right thing to say to people who've lost so much."

How about just shutting the fuck up and leaving me alone. The thought is not a question, but a desperate demand. Jackson keeps the words to himself. "Is there any reason you're still here?" he asks. The fire chief raises his eyebrows again, two thick caterpillars climbing his forehead, and for reasons lost to Jackson, the man looks surprised.

"Just worried about you. Besides, I wasn't here the whole time. I just came back about ten minutes before you woke to check up."

"Well, I'm still alive, thank you. So if you don't mind, I'd like to be alone and wait for the doctor release me."

Chief Kingsley nods his head, purses his thin lips.

"Unless, of course, you have more questions?"

"No, but I do have some news from your insurance. They're sending out an adjuster. He'll be around the site sometime this afternoon to assess some of the damage. He'll want to get a statement from you."

"Do I have to be there today?"

"No, considering the circumstances. So tell me, where you gonna stay? Family? Friends?"

Jackson frowns, his only possessions, aside from his car, are smoky and black underneath the hospital's clean sheets. "No," he says. "I'm all alone now."

"Not even an aunt or uncle somewhere?"

Why won't this bastard just leave me alone? "Yeah, but they live in Montreal and Edmonton."

Chief Kingsley nods his head again as though taking a second to register the information. "You can stay with me, if you want. I got an extra room, and Maggie won't mind."

"If it's all the same to you, Chief, I'll do fine just getting a room somewhere until I can find a place of my own."

"Just offering," the Chief says. "If you change your mind, you know where to get a hold of me."

He turns and steps out of the room, and Jackson is finally alone. He shifts position on the bed, wonders how he's going to get home, or where he's going to go for that matter. As the uncertainty cultivates inside his stomach, spreading its dark wings up into the sensitive parts inside his ribcage, he realizes that he truly does not want this isolation. He craves the company of those who can no longer comfort him, take care of him, the ones who could foster this sudden loneliness and make him feel complete and in control.

#

The motel room is small, but it's all Jackson can afford. The bathroom is such that when you sit on the toilet your knees rub against the minute vanity, and if you stand before the mirror and turn too quickly, you run the risk of falling into the bathtub. The kitchen is the size of a broom closet, holding a miniature sink, small counter, two electric burners, and a bar fridge. The bedroom and living space is the biggest room with a double sized bed and the 17-inch television Jackson is sitting in front of on an uncomfortable chair that looks decades old.

He is wearing the cheap Wal-Mart suit fellow bartenders had helped him buy with their kindly donations and a tip-jar over at the bar with a sign on it saying, "Help our fellow, who lost everything, get back on his feet." Below the words, there was a picture of Jackson serving drinks. News travels fast in this town. The day after the fire, after Jackson had called his boss telling him of the tragedy and that he needed a few days off, people he barely knew stopped him on the street to offer condolences they did not really mean, just doing it for the sake of fuzzy warm feelings. His boss had passed him a few envelopes full of fives, tens, twenties, and

one with a roll of quarters. And the clothes; Jackson probably has more clothing now than ever before.

But dreams of the hairless creatures, painted midnight-black with smoke grease, their flesh of charcoal and scorched wood, do not leave him alone. Jackson can see them when he is awake, while talking with the insurance adjuster, driving the car, and even today, in the cemetery near the end of his family's funeral. Always in the shadows, hiding behind trees, inside other people's homes and cars and staring out at him through windows, their teeth long and white, their eyes large circles of hunger and lust.

Sitting on the chair, smoking a cigarette, Jackson feels nothing. A great humming silence deep in his core and until now the cigarettes a habit avoided. Yet, when he puts the cigarette up to his lips and pulls hard, inhaling the grey smoke, his head feels feather-light, his vision blurs. He stays close to the element that had consumed his life, suffocated his family. He often smoked one cigarette after another, not minding the subsequent vomiting or the sleepless nights. He sits with his arms flat on the armrests. In his other hand, a bottle of bourbon scotch. His eyes red-rimmed and half-open, lips parted. A new age zombie wearing a suit and tie. The television on, but nobody to pay it any attention.

A knock on the door, Jackson jumps, and the long shaft of disregarded ash drops from the burning ember of the cigarette and crumbles to the floor. Another knock, more desperate than the one snapping Jackson back into real time, real life, and "Jackson, are you in there, buddy? Come on, answer the door."

Jackson snubs the cigarette into the ashtray sitting on the nightstand, lights another, gets up and answers the door. He expects family visiting from other provinces for the funeral, his mother or father, his in-laws, but it is Chief Kingsley standing there, knuckles poised to knock again. "Boy you look like shit! Look even worse than earlier this afternoon at the funeral." He waves his hand in front of him, left to right, left to right. "And you stink. What's that shit you got there, whiskey?"

Jackson's mind crawls back to that other place, where dreams and reality are almost one, and he cannot digest everything the Chief has said. So he says, "What do you want?" instead, avoiding Chief Kingsley's worried and suspicious eyes, the flush in his cheeks spreading as though the man is embarrassed for Jackson, feels sorry for the pathetic piece of shit before him. Jackson looks down at his feet.

"I came to see how you're holding up, and now that I've seen you, I think that it's time for you to stop feeling sorry for yourself. Come on, let's go for some coffee and sober you up."

Jackson looks up into the Chief's eyes, can feel blood heating his own face now, and white spots fill his vision. Who is this man to judge him? A man he didn't even know a week ago. And now he's staring at Jackson like a long lost friend, his expression full of sympathy and 'I'm gonna take care of you whether you like it or not' hard love. "I don't want any coffee," Jackson says. "I just

want to be left alone." And he goes to close the door in Kingsley's face, but the fat man is too quick, sticking out his foot to jam the door, and he says, "I know what's happening to you. And if you stay in this state, you will die."

The door bounces off the Chief's foot, and Jackson lets it open again. He says, "What if that's what I want?"

"I wouldn't blame you," Kingsley says. "But not like this. Come for coffee with me. We have to talk."

A dull, throbbing pain behind Jackson's eyes, his body dehydrating, and perhaps coffee is a good idea. "Talk about what?"

"The things you've been seeing since the fire," the Chief says. "And what now lives inside your house."

#

The sun sinks eastward and there is a cold breeze blowing brown and yellow leaves down the street. The leaves fill the sky whenever wind blows strong enough to shake their former homes free of the dying to prepare for the long sleep. They fall to the ground and the wind swipes them up again, twirling them around in circles like lost souls, like baby birds thrust out of the nest too early. The dull pulse of voices in the cafe pulls Jackson back, and he looks away from the window, wonders why he never watched, sat down and really watched the artistic ritual of nature. Always too busy following the rituals of life, avoiding the inevitable as though it were something you could hide from, autumn and winter, old age and death.

"Here we go," Kingsley says, sitting down across from Jackson and placing a bottle of water and a coffee in front of him. "Drink up, the water is so you don't dehydrate. The coffee can actually make you worse." Along with the coffee and water, Kingsley has also bought a sandwich. He picks it up off the plate, groans so that Jackson can almost see the man salivate, and digs in his large white teeth. A loud lettuce crunch and juice flows down his chin. He licks his lips once the bread and meat is away. Tiny crumbs hang onto his tongue and Jackson feels sick to his stomach. Feels as though the half-pint of whiskey he drank in under an hour is just sitting there, on the upper level of his stomach like sour milk, and he wonders if he'll have to sit and watch Kingsley eat. He turns his head and looks out the window, but something tar-black catches the corner of his eye.

"I hear we're in for a nasty winter," Kingsley says, and just behind him, shadows come alive. Behind another costumer, on the other side of the room, slick black arms stretch out, the skin scaly like a snake, its bulbous head without hair, eyes, a nose, a mouth. It stretches up and turns around, places its hands upon the wall and begins to climb. Kingsley and everyone else in the cafe do not notice, the hum of many conversations continue to pulsate in Jackson's eardrums, and no one in the long line-up even flinch as the naked creature climbs the wall, leaving dark, oily hand and foot prints as it goes. "A long cold winter," Kingsley says and Jackson tries to pretend nothing is wrong. "Lots of snow, and a lot of really cold days." Kingsley looks

out the window, looks up to the sky overcast with low, threatening clouds. "Looks like it could snow any day now."

The creature reaches the top, crawls on its hands and knees across the ceiling, towards Jackson and Kingsley, its round head twirling around as though working out a cramp. This isn't real, Jackson thinks, *\_only in my head, this isn't real\_*, and aloud "I hate winter," hoping Kingsley hasn't noticed the sweat on his forehead, the shaking of his hands or the tremble in his voice. But Kingsley doesn't even look up, too caught up with his meaty sandwich and its finger licking juices to notice the thing almost above, its head thrashing, coiling, large teeth breaking through the mouth, thick black flakes falling from the crumbling fissure there, and it sounds like something chewing through wood or plaster.

"Can't say I'm a big fan of winter, either." Kingsley says. He must have looked up from his sandwich, because now he's reaching across the table. "Hey, buddy. You okay?" His hand touches Jackson's shoulder. Jackson flinches, and the thing above has stopped crawling. It opens its mouth wide, a sick and wretched smile, a howl of victory. Jackson's heart pounds painfully inside his chest. He can smell smoke; it fills his nostrils and makes it hard to breath.

"Chitta bit," the thing makes the noises through its mouth as its teeth gnaws and chews on nothing but air. "Chitta dow," and Kingsley takes his hand away as Jackson heaves, then stands up quickly, the backs of his knees thrusting the chair away.

The murmur of voices stop, and everyone stares at Jackson, anxious eyes all over him, waiting for him to lose it. Some even appear to anticipate it, their mouths working up and down, "yes, yes, yes," old women and men with nothing better to do than watch television and gossip.

Kingsley stares up at him, his eyes huge and worried. "Jackson?" he says. "What's wrong?"

"Chitta bit! Chitta dow!"

"I have to go," Jackson says, clutching his stomach and looking at the floor as he rushes outside. He barely makes it before the vomit burns the back of his throat and he is puking on the cafe's front step, chasing away a young couple who had just pulled in. He rests his arm on the plastic garbage bin, the garbage inside overflowing with paper cups and uneaten donuts, the sweet smell of rot with flies buzzing. Jackson bends over and vomits until his stomach is empty. The sidewalk, littered with cracks, have tiny blades of grass seeping through. The brick wall has cigarette butts sticking out of the mortar. The faces of Adel, her premature grey hair, and little Otto and Jesse flash behind his eyelids when he closes his eyes. Their eyes unforgiving, digging holes into his mind, and when the retching subsides, he sits down on the concrete, cool and wet from his vomit.

He could die here, alone and detached from the world.

"Yeah, you could die here, if you really wanted." Jackson opens his eyes to Kingsley standing above him, reading his thoughts as though he were an open book. "Here, you forgot your

coffee," Kingsley says, handing him the paper cup. The coffee feels warm in his hands, sends chills to race up his arms and dance upon his spine. He doesn't open it, just holds it with both hands, hugging it close.

"I'm not used to this kind of pain," Jackson says. Kingsley sits down beside him, avoiding the vomit, and listens. "I don't know what to do. A week ago, my life was normal, always had been normal. We moved here about three years ago because Adel was offered a good teaching job. I knew I could find work here so I didn't mind. As a bartender, I have seen all kinds of sorrow. I've seen a lot of loss, people talk when they drink, you know? But I never thought ..."

"Never thought it would happen to you," Kingsley finishes for him.

"Yeah," Jackson says. "And now I feel like ... I don't know."

"You're different now," the chief says. "You can see things now that most people can't, things that most people will go on and on in life and never see."

"And what does that make me, fucking special or something? I don't want to see the things I see!"

"It makes you different," Kingsley says, sounding irritated. "And that's all. You have a new life ahead of you now. You will never be the same, and eventually you will come to learn that. What will make you special is how you come through. On your hands and knees, bleeding from your stomach, or standing strong. The choice is up to you."

The fire chief stands up, brushes his pants free of dust and cold. "Well, I should get going now. Maggie will be waiting for me at home."

As he walks away, Jackson looks up and says, "You can see them too."

Kingsley turns around, a small smile plays at the corner of his lips, yet the smile does not reach his melancholic eyes. "Oh, I've seen them since I was a kid, Jackson," he says. "And many worse things."

"Then what do I do?"

The wind teases the few hairs remaining on Kingsley's head. "You do what your gut tells you to do to survive, Jackson. That's all any of us can do."

#

Jackson stands in front of the ruined house.

Days have gone by, weeks, and Jackson has not seen Kingsley. The man's words and what he might know work on Jackson's mind, but soon Jackson begins to forget where the wisdom even came from. He lives on instinct. He goes to work, returns to the motel and avoids the bottle. He takes care of himself, washing every day and brushing his teeth, all the things a normal person should do. The restoration people are cleaning out the rubble and ruined furniture of the old

house, preparing to rebuild. Jackson isn't sure if he wants to move back. Might sell the place and move back to the city. Back home. But something in his gut, his instincts, keeps him here, in this small town, every day.

Perhaps he remains for the memory of his children, Otto and Jesse. The playgrounds, the school, and all the other kids they played with a monument. Perhaps he stays because this town is where Adel felt most happy, most at peace with herself. More likely, it has something to do with the bald men and women he sees climbing trees and walls while gnashing their teeth, their tar-black skin reflecting the light of the sun or moon, their eyes, when they have eyes, wild and insane.

The night, his time of work, has come alive in ways Jackson has never noticed before. He watches the streets from the window of his motel room. Before and after work, his eyes on the stars above, the slow ascent and descent of the moon, and the drunk, stoned children of the night, the ruined, starved souls, starved for an end to ritual and malevolence yet creating wickedness themselves with their mouths and fists. Flashing police lights, the cacophony of sirens and radios, and the snapping of handcuffs create more entertainment than the cable television his room came with. Reality is the true guts and grit of life.

Sometimes after work, he heads out for late-night walks, often passing the ruins of his life. He stands there now. The structure is gloomy, enshrouded with shadows and it reminds Jackson of ghosts. In the back yard, the people of coal dance in circles around a bonfire under the stars. Jackson tries to talk to them, but they don't answer. They just move their bodies, snap their teeth at the cold, and so he stands with his hands in his pockets, the cool autumn night air biting at his cheeks. Since the incident, he's only been inside the house twice, once with the insurance adjuster, and a second time with the restoration crew. He avoids the place during the day. The sunlight no longer belongs in his realm of existence, the night marking the time of his rebirth.

You are different now. You have a new life ahead of you.

There is movement deep in the shadows of blackened windows. The early morning dancers are gone. They are waiting for him inside, have been since the first day he saw them. But they are patient in their waiting, would wait until the day Jackson died if they had to. He takes a step onto the property, steps past the large garbage bin, and wanders his way to the back door.

#

Inside, the house is silent, the same dreadful silence he experienced the night he opened the door and heard only the snap and crackle of fire. The smell of smoke is still strong, so strong that Jackson pauses a moment to cough. When his lungs finally begin to accept the air, he peels off his jacket and lets it fall onto the floor. Nowhere else to put it, the restoration people had taken most of the salvageable wooden furniture, leaving behind anything completely upholstered, completely ruined for the garbage. He curses himself for not bringing a flashlight, but his eyes are adjusting to the dismal light coming in through smoke-stained windows. He steps into the kitchen, where the fire had begun, and says, "Okay, here I am."

Nothing answers; the room is quiet and motionless.

Jackson kicks off his shoes and removes his socks. His feet make sucking sounds as he steps around. He feels the softness of the tiled floor, the grit from the walls and the part of the ceiling that had caved in. Next, he peels off his shirt, lets it fall to the blackened floor, and steps over to where the fridge used to be. The fridge stands near the middle of the room now so that the inspector could do his work. Jackson steps up to the wall, stares into the holes there, their depth, their darkness and complexity. He reaches out, touches the edge. This one hole, this is where it started. He knows this because the insurance adjuster had showed him when they went through the contents of the house. He also knows this because it feels right. The air inside the hole is cold and heavy, waiting to touch his warm flesh.

Jackson pulls his hand away to look at the black grease painted on his fingers. An oily residue that reminds him of hash oil he used to smoke back in school, before he met Adel. It too is cold on his cheeks as he rubs it in, painting his face black. He digs into the hole until his hands are as black as the environment around him. He paints his body the color of pain, the color of life cut short, the color of false security and everyday lies. A shade with all existing colors mixed in, the universe and everything now upon his chest and neck and face, and he bends over to remove his pants, his underwear, rubs the smoke onto his erection, beneath his balls, inside the crack of his ass, his legs and his feet, until he is completely covered. Until he can taste nothing but the smoke and it burns his lungs and makes him want to gag.

But he doesn't. Absolute animal instinct now and he fondles himself, calls out the names of his lost ones. "Adel," he says. "Otto, Jesse," and strokes himself up and down, up and down until his heart begins to race and the wall before him shifts, growing arms and opening eyes. Teeth as large as fingers smiling at him through that hole, urging him onward, and he wonders for a moment what Chief Kingsley would think of this madness if he were to see it. But the arms and legs stretch out, ending all thought, and he grips himself tighter as the limbs wrap around his body, pulling him inside, marking him as its next victim. He climaxes as his body touches the skeletal remains, and the pressure of being dragged into the wall does not hurt. Doesn't hurt because his body is liquefying with the orgasm, letting him pass between ribbed wooden beams like water, and the teeth are smiling. They smile and take Jackson in, and the world sinks, whirlpools down and down until there is nothing more.

#

Outside the burnt house, Jackson lights a cigarette. The taste fills his mouth, a disgusting taste that kept him from smoking throughout his adolescent days, but he enjoys the habit now. Even enjoys the taste. Somehow, it feels like home.

Running a hand through his hair thick with the stench of house fire, he takes a deep drag, and turns to head back to the motel. Behind, he leaves a trail of blue-grey mist in rhythm to his breath. The smoke raises into swirling, ghostly fingers, and the road ahead a labyrinth of murky streets, many sharp turns and a few dead ends. But the sky is turning a deep purple with the sun lurking just below the horizon, and Jackson shivers slightly in the early morning chill. It's the

kind of shiver he knows will never entirely fade, but the thought doesn't bother him anymore. Winter is still far away.

###

## The Peacekeeper of Bullfrog

by SC Bryce

It was a terrible plight, Dermanassian thought, to be alone in the world. To be the last of a race once the envy of all civilizations, now lost to mass insanity and death.

The residents of Bullfrog stared as he dipped his spoon into his crockery bowl. "Freak," someone snickered.

Dermanassian moved his angular face deeper into the shadows of his hood.

Perhaps leaving the east had been a mistake. But although they were cousins of sorts, the eastern elves were a mediocre substitute for his own kind. It was his awkwardness with them as much as desire to see the world and test himself against it that had driven him to wander the land at the threshold of adulthood.

Ending up in this swampland inn at the beginning of storm season was a bit of poor planning and bad luck.

The town of Bullfrog was, by local standards, a major trading hub. To him, it was a stinking settlement on a patch of drained bog, which might have been more pleasant left under water. Yet he needed rest and supplies, and so he ventured into Bullfrog one morning hoping for both. He planned to be on his way as dawn burned off the morning fog. Instead, he had been trapped in the fens by a sudden storm. Now, he sat in damp clothes eating his second dinner of pungent stew. The rain lashed through the trees outside; rising waters swirled among the stilt supports of the inn and the thin trees dotting the fens.

The people of Bullfrog were over-protective of their marsh, though it was suitable only for ranching their bizarre livestock - giant rodents with a lingering, musky flavor symbolic of the place itself. The folk made it clear they did not like outsiders; they rarely spoke to him, which he thought was just as well. Yet they spoke about him, in overly loud voices meant to ensure he would hear their taunts and insults. The innkeeper pointedly instructed him to destroy his dishes in the fire when his meals were finished, so as not to contaminate the good folk of Bullfrog. And, of course, to compensate the innkeeper for his losses, Dermanassian was charged twice the rate. The youth noted the innkeeper had no such queasiness when handling his coins.

Their treatment of Dermanassian was new to him only in its extreme. His race had been gone for thirty-some years - long enough for one generation of humanity to depart and another to be born and mature. It was sometime during this revolution of time that the reputation of his race had changed. Where once he might have traveled surrounded by luxury, respect, and kinsfolk, he now crouched in the corner of a run-down inn, slumping his shoulders to minimize his height as if the citizens of Bullfrog might miraculously forget that he was in the room.

His meal finished, Dermanassian stood. He gathered his dishes to take with him to his room, for he had no desire to reward the innkeeper's malicious avarice with additional coin.

"Like diseased rats, they were," a man spat as Dermanassian reached the door.

His hand hesitated on the latch, but he did not need to turn to know who spoke. It was, inevitably, Roca, who loudly insulted him and his race whenever he was present and probably even when he was not. Roca, with brown curling hair that hung in ringlets wet with rain and grime. With yellow pants torn on the left leg so that his scuffed knee poked through as he lounged in his chair. With the ceramic tankard that never emptied no matter how much he consumed. With the chipped tooth that glinted when he guffawed at his own jokes until Dermanassian found himself imagining his fist landing squarely in the man's jaw.

"Ach! No doubt they deserved it."

Dermanassian heard Roca spit into the fire. His knuckles whitening, he opened the latch and stepped into the rain. He took care not to slam the door behind him; he certainly would be charged for any imagined damage.

Unprotected by the inn's wooden frame, he was lashed by the wind. His cloak billowed around his legs. Instantly, his pants were soaked through, undoing what little service the inn's hearth had performed toward drying his clothes. His black hair whipped about his face and he wiped it absently away. The moment he finished the gesture, more hair broke free of his braid. He sighed; it was futile to strive for any comfort in this bleak place.

His room, or hut as he thought of it, was the farthest in a series of such one-room structures. Its thatch roof offered minimal protection against the wind and storm so that Dermanassian found himself existing in a perpetual dampness filled with the howling of wind forcing its way into the gaps between the slat boards. He would be happy when this storm finally lifted, the floodwaters drained, and he could depart from this purgatory.

He splashed down the building's five stairs, two of which were already below the floodwaters. He steadied himself against the urgent tug of the currents, leaning forward with his dishes clutched to his chest and his cloak's hood flapping around his face.

He rushed as best he could through the muddy water to his assigned hut, head bent against the swirling wind and driving rain, and booted feet slipping on rocks hidden by the waters.

Behind him, he heard the splash of rapid, lurching footsteps.

Dermanassian did not turn.

The splashing grew louder; the sounds of wet pursuit, of more than one pursuer.

He grimaced in his hood. He clutched his bowl tighter to his chest.

"Boy!" Roca yelled. His voice thick with liquor, mixed with the voice of the storm.

Dermanassian refused to turn. He was still paces from his lean-to and had no wish to engage the crude natives of Bullfrog. He wanted nothing more than to be left in peace, to sit upon his soggy mattress and wait out the rain.

Roca shouted, "I'm talking to you!"

Dermanassian grunted as a rock thudded into his shoulder. He stumbled, dropping the heavy bowl. It sank into the roiling water as Roca and his friends laughed and slapped each other on the back.

Dermanassian spun, his black eyes flashing. He squinted into the rain at Roca, accompanied by two men from the inn. He knew them to be ranchers who worked with Roca, for he had often heard them happily discussing the more gruesome aspects of their trade. They carried fistfuls of stones.

"Why don't you run, boy?" they taunted.

Dermanassian flinched and his gut filled with foreboding. He did want to run. But he was tired, he was wet, he had nowhere to go, and emotion churned in his fatigued brain. He should have nothing to fear from such oafs as these. He was a desert elf still, a member of a distinguished and cultured people, far superior to these rodent farmers. Yet, his sword and daggers lay in his hut, for civilized folk did not carry weaponry to the meal table and thus he had no way to defend himself as the men's arms cocked to throw the rocks.

He ducked, protecting his face with his arms.

The rocks pounded into arms, his thighs, his stomach. He gasped and dropped to one knee. The fast water swirled about his leg and, unbalanced, he was nearly dragged under by the current.

The men of Bullfrog rushed toward him, Roca leading. Dermanassian felt himself covered in grappling hands whose thick, working fingers dug into his flesh. His arms were twisted and yanked back. Roca grabbed the youth's angular jaw and forced his head back so that the rain pounded into his unprotected face. He squinted, hardly able to open his eyes against the driving rain.

Roca leaned close, his face a hateful blur and his breath heavy with alcohol. "You're a proud one, I think. Too proud for your kind." His wide fingers clamped hard on Dermanassian's face; his mouth filled with salty blood as his cheeks were crushed into his teeth. His mind flashed with fear and anger.

"Now, don't you worry, boy," Roca whispered, his voice barely heard above the storm. "We're not going to do anything more than you deserve."

The men twisting his arms laughed and jerked him harder, until Dermanassian thought his arms would be wrenched from his shoulders. He gasped from the pain. Roca sneered. He dropped his hold on Dermanassian's jaw, reached back, and suddenly punched the youth in the eye.

Dermanassian's head snapped back. He would have crumpled into the water, but Roca's men held him fast by the arms. He shook his head slowly, his vision momentarily gone and his whole body stinging with the blow. Whatever anger he had toward the men vanished; he had nothing in him but terror, for he suddenly understood that these men would no longer be placated by taunting him over a few tankards. They meant to kill him.

Roca pulled back and slammed his fist into Dermanassian again and again until the youth's awareness swirled with laughter and shocks of pain and blood and water and the howling of the storm... until his pain-befuddled mind had no room even for fear. Then the men released his arms and they fell to his sides, unnoticed.

"Where's your pride now, boy?" Roca whispered.

Dermanassian swayed on his knees before toppling into the floodwaters.

He did not immediately notice that his swollen face was submerged and, perhaps, he would not have cared. Strong fingers wrapped in his black hair, pushing his head down as the current spun around him. He opened his mouth to breathe, and sucked in the tepid marsh water. His body spasmed. He tried to cough, but the effort only brought more water into his lungs. His body convulsed, its struggle to survive waking his mind.

Frantic, he reached for the calloused hand forcing his head under the water, groping at its wrist as he tried to yank it away. His other hand fumbled for the heavy bowl, sunk near his feet. He grabbed its round edge and swung it up. The bowl slammed into Roca's face, shattering against his broad cheek. Roca jerked back, stumbling in the fast water. He wiped a thick-fingered hand against his cheek and leaving a line of his blood streaking down his face as it mixed with the rain.

Dermanassian coughed deeply, vomited water, and staggered to his feet.

Roca sneered. He reached behind his back and pulled out a serrated knife, a wide ranchers' blade that shone dully in the gray of the storm. It was a knife meant to cut through tough hide and hair, to slice flesh from the bone. Even drunk and bloodied, Roca gripped it with an experienced hand.

"Cur," he hissed.

Dermanassian knew he would receive less mercy from the rancher than the rodents clubbed and carved in the slaughterhouse. He crouched, peering at Roca through his swelling eyes. Blood mixed with the rain, streaking the youth's face a watercolor red. His black hair was drenched and tangled, his gray cloak twisted in the wind. His entire body trembled with agony and exertion. Marsh water dribbled from his nose and mouth. He wheezed, trying to fill his water-logged lungs with swamp air, but gasped as his fractured ribs burned from the effort.

Roca's companions were behind Dermanassian, cutting off retreat as well as any possibility of rushing to his hut for his sword. They made no move toward him; they were grinning and relaxed, evidently content to watch Roca disembowel him. Likely, they would not move so long as they believed he presented more sport than serious threat.

Though the red and rain clouded his vision, he focused on Roca stalking forward. Terror filled the youth's veins, but he did not panic for it numbed his mind to all considerations but cold survival. He was on his feet. He could fight. He would fight. He would not be murdered in this wind-lashed bog. He would not be murdered by the likes of Roca. He had not survived the downfall of Glorious Tehare only to end his short life in Bullfrog. Dimly, he knew what was happening to him, for during his training he had many discussions with veterans: it was an abandonment of the self to training, reflexes, and skill. It both frightened and strengthened him.

He panted, but the swamp water still bubbling from his aching chest was forgotten. He did not think of his torn lip, his bruised cheeks, or his eyes made huge by purpling flesh. He had senses for nothing but Roca and the knife, lunging toward him.

There was a flash as the blade caught the light, a shout from one of Roca's friends, a growl from Dermanassian. The youth gripped Roca's wrist and, using all his strength, twisted and hauled backward. Roca spun, hitting the marsh water with a heavy splash, and his knife was lost beneath the flood.

Dermanassian stalked to the side, so that all three men faced him. He unclasped his drenched cloak and threw it aside, for its wet bulk weighed on him.

Roca cursed, his face flush with embarrassment and drink.

Dermanassian did not allow him to stagger his feet. Instead, the youth rushed forward and kicked Roca in the throat. Roca squealed and Dermanassian felt the flesh and bone yield beneath his boot. Roca's neck twisted in a series of snaps until the bones jammed his flesh into odd bulges and his head sat at a grotesque angle. His eyes wide, his mouth fell open. He teetered for a single instant, then collapsed into the floodwaters and vanished.

For a moment, both Dermanassian and Roca's friends stood stunned. Then one of the three men - Nert - pulled a knife from a leather sheath strapped to his thigh. It was a massive, if crude, dagger; its hilt was made from the leg of a white goat so that the pommel was fashioned from a yellowing hoof, and the blade so long that it was almost a sword. The two ranchers hunched forward in the driving rain.

"I will not die here," Dermanassian gritted to himself, tensing for the onslaught.

They came in a howling fury, a wall of churning limbs and battle cries, determined to bring down the weaponless youth.

Dermanassian lashed out with a desperation that was strangely detached. His fist slammed into a broad jaw, his knuckles scraping across day old stubble. He spun, grabbing and twisting an

arm backward, and then struck the vulnerable joint as hard as he could. The bone broke with a crack like the branch of tree; he felt it abruptly yield. Nert screamed with shock and realization as he stared in horror at his dangling arm.

Dermanassian did not pause. The goat-knife was in his hand and he struck out with it, his movement smooth and controlled. He drove the long blade up into Nert's stomach, beneath his wide ribs, and into his pounding heart. Nert's body went rigid, and Dermanassian kicked him from the knife even as he died.

There was movement behind him. Dermanassian rolled the knife's hilt in his hand and whipped the blade in a wide arc. He felt it slash through cloth and flesh. He turned to face the wounded man, the bloody knife tight in his fist.

"Monster," the man cursed, clutching his gaping abdomen and backing away. His organs, pale pinks and blues and whites never intended to be seen, were cradled by his thick fingers. Despite the cleansing rain, the man's shirt and pants dripped with blood. With a cry, the last rancher spun. Nearly losing his footing, he staggered back toward the inn.

Horrified, Dermanassian flung the gory knife from him and it disappeared into the rushing floodwaters with a plop nearly lost to the rage of the storm. Feral, he ran to his hut. He bounded up the stairs and flung open the door, almost filling the tiny space with driving rain. Unheeding, he grabbed his travel pack, his sword, and fled into the darkening swamp leaving the door to the hut swinging in the wind.

#

Dermanassian panted as he huddled in the crook of a branch high above the flood marsh. The storm tossed the tree and lashed his exposed skin as first light streaked the pewter sky. The storm's voice had lost much of its strength and he dared hope that it might pass entirely before this day's end. He could travel much faster then, faster than his stumbling flight through the dark.

He was exhausted, as much from shock as from physical effort. He had trained in the martial arts, as had every youth in his city. He had excelled at them too - both in grappling and bladework. And he had dreamed of the opportunity to prove himself superior to some opponent, in real combat, not just some sparring ring. Yet, he had never seriously imagined what it might be like to kill someone. To sink his blade into another's body and feel the skin puncturing, the organs tearing, the blood leaking down the offending hilt and hand. His hand.

He shuddered.

They would have killed him. They would have held his head beneath the floodwaters until his lungs filled with the brackish mess. They would have gutted him, letting his innards plop into the water and his blood mix with the rain. And they would have felt none of the guilt torturing him. He wiped the back of his hand against his nose, but instantly regretted it as the movement set off yet another wave of throbbing.

He heard splashes in the distance.

Dermanassian realized he had been listening to the sound for some time, but only now did he understand that it was the sound of footfalls. The noises, still distant, were frenzied and determined. They fanned out through the fens searching for him. They must have chased him most of the night.

He gathered his gear and slipped down from the tree without a sound, the floodwaters reaching to his knees. He would not wait here; Dermanassian was sure they would find him. He did not think the folk of Bullfrog would concern themselves with the fact that he had defended himself; certainly he was not willing to gamble his life upon their understanding.

"Well, now."

Dermanassian jumped and turned, his hand grabbing at the wet hilt of his sword. The blade pulled free of the sucking of sodden leather as the youth saw a broad-shouldered man leaning against a tree. The man's small crossbow aimed at Dermanassian's chest. The youth had no doubt that the man's relaxed confidence was directly linked to his skill with the compact weapon. He had the look of a hunter, with a pack brimming with camping gear and braces of red squirrels dangling from their bushy tails.

The man smiled coldly as he approached Dermanassian. His voice rumbled as deep as a giant's. "You must be the vicious killer the whole town is tromping through this swamp looking for. But, if you ask me, you look more like a runaway kid who's gotten himself into more trouble than he can handle."

The man limped forward, stopping far enough away that Dermanassian could not hope to lunge at him with his sword. The cross-bowman merely had to call out to the townsfolk and Dermanassian would be trapped.

"Let me go," Dermanassian pleaded.

The man shouldered his backpack into a more comfortable position. "Well, let's see. I'm the peacekeeper here in Bullfrog. Right now, nothing would keep the peace better than pinning you to that tree and letting the good people of Bullfrog stone you to death. After all, you murdered three men."

"He died?" Dermanassian had hoped against all reason that the man he injured would live. "I did not mean to kill him."

"With his guts hanging to the floor, from what they tell me. I've not seen the corpse myself, having just come back with the easing of the storm." The peacekeeper sucked his teeth in thought. As the storm lessened, Dermanassian heard the faint sloshing of people moving through the water in the distance. "Roca and his pack were fools; it was a matter of time, really, before their foolishness did them in. They got no worse than was their due, and probably better."

"Let me go," Dermanassian asked again, anxious.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to let them kill you right here in the swamp. We've got to have a trial first, you know." The hardened man winked. "Then we'll stone you."

Dermanassian's heart sank with the few, futile hopes he had allowed himself. The wet footsteps grew closer and he knew the searchers were almost upon them. In moments, he would be overwhelmed. "I am doomed then. You care nothing for what I have to say, nothing for justice."

"Justice here is what we say it is." The man called out to his fellow swamplanders, armed with spears and bows, as the first of them appeared amongst the trees. "I don't know where you're from, boy, but this here," the peacekeeper continued, opening his arms expansively as if to encompass the entire swamp, "this here is the real world."

The folk of Bullfrog closed their circle around him.

#

Bullfrog did not see many prisoners and, those that it did, found their visits shortened by speedy executions. Thus, Dermanassian's prison was a corroding cage strung high in the branches of a tree, exposing him to jeers of passersby. He was uncertain why Bullfrog's peacekeeper did not hold his trial right away, but, after two days of squatting in the cage, reasoned that his presence and looming trial was providing a measure of entertainment for Bullfrog. During its storm season, in particular, when few travelers stopped in the swamp, Bullfrog seemed in desperate need of amusement. The arrival and beating of the desert elf, the deaths of three ranchers - even ones of ill-repute - and the capture of their killer was more activity than the trading post had seen this season.

The Shame Tree overlooked a raised longhouse, which served as the peacekeeper's office and home, as well as a center of activity now that he had returned from his hunt. The gigantic longhouse had a wide covered porch stretching across its front. The peacekeeper sat with his friends, working the dark hides of squirrels and telling tales of when he served in the kingdom's army as it marched upon the rebels holding the Pass of Trifal. He talked with practiced ease, hardly pausing as he swatted the mosquitoes swarming in the dusk. Their numbers had multiplied into thick clouds as the flood receded and were kept from overwhelming Bullfrog only by the oily wax burning in innumerable braziers and filled the town with curls of acrid smoke that melted into the night sky.

"We huddled behind the jagged rocks," he told. "The enemy's catapults lit the darkness with balls of rock and fire, crashing all around us, burning anything that could be burned, smashing anything that could be smashed. There were flaming corpses and screaming wounded. We were down to our last hundred men. It was us foot-soldiers and Lord Tagel. We could run away, or we could try to take the fortress. History knows how we decided.

"Staying to the darkness as best we could, we gave our final battle cry and rushed the mountain. We must have been god-possest. We wove through their deadly arrows, forcing our way up the cliffs, more sure-footed than the wildest cats, more fearsome than demons.

Then we engaged them, hacking our swords through their ranks so that their limbs flew and the stones grew slick with their blood. Down into the bowels and up into the towers of their fortress we raged. Our swords carved vengeance for our fallen comrades and we screamed their names and the king's."

The peacekeeper sighed dramatically. "We became lost in our warlust, blinded to anything but its power. Maybe it was hours - I just don't know - but when red dawn finally came the enemy was defeated. The rising sun found vultures circling, but beneath, the royal flag waved bloody and triumphant upon the ramparts."

The peacekeeper chatted a bit longer, showing off the ragged scar that ran down his bad leg before he said his good-nights. He waved away his guests with a hearty laugh as he covered the fires in his braziers.

Dermanassian watched the townsfolk disappear into their homes, the muddy swamp pulling loudly at their feet. When they were gone and only the peacekeeper remained, he said softly, "That is not how it happened. Lord Tagel's army was slain to the man; he alone escaped, having ridden in the back. The mountain cult that defeated him was infiltrated and destroyed by assassins the next month."

The peacekeeper's face turned to stone. The weak moonlight cast bizarre shadows through the swamp trees so that he looked like a statue in a haunted garden.

"The story you tell," Dermanassian added, rubbing a long finger along the rusting cage, "was the concoction of royal advisors. My tutor was one of them" His lips were misshapen and bruised, and so he enunciated every word. "You are no hero of war. Not only did you not fight in that battle, but given your description of war, sir, I doubt you ever served in any army at all." He continued before the peacekeeper could speak. "Tell me, Peacekeeper," he asked, looking hard into the man's eyes through his swollen ones, "do the good folk of Bullfrog know your battle-honor is as feigned as your justice?"

The huge man glowered and answered with a forced, angry laugh. "Say what you want. Do you think they'd believe me? Or you, a stinking outsider? Your kind has no credence here."

"It would not matter whether they believe me, or even if I tell them. One day, a drop of doubt will fall over their minds - doubt spreads in the mind like spilled ink on parchment. When it does, your power here will fail."

Without a word, the big man spun on his heel.

As he vanished into his longhouse, Dermanassian called out, "As you told me, sir, this is the real world - and you are a fraud, whether the folk of Bullfrog know it yet or not."

The peacekeeper slammed the door behind him, leaving Dermanassian alone in the chirping darkness.

He did not regret his comments. Two days in a cage had turned his panic into fatalism. He knew now why successful fighters put their passions aside to survive; wild emotions did a caged man no good. Thus, though his eyes scanned the cage again in hope of escape, he knew that he would be killed, whether he gave lie to the peacekeeper's tales of imagined heroism or not. Still, he suspected that his trial might well begin at daybreak. Perhaps, he thought morosely, it was for the best. He had no desire to continue hanging from this tree like a criminal, awaiting the brutal pleasure of the people of Bullfrog, his body a collage of bruises, dull aches, and mosquito bites. Since there was little chance of him escaping, better they simply execute him and get it over with.

Still, his heart lurched when some time later the door to the longhouse opened. The peacekeeper's shoulders slumped. His face was an unreadable mask, though his hand twitched as it clutched his crossbow. He limped down the stairs from the porch and over to Dermanassian's cage, his bad leg first scraping across the wood boards and then dragging through the swamp muck.

When Bullfrog's peacekeeper did not speak, Dermanassian murmured, "Is your decency so far gone that you would murder me here, without even a pretend trial? No," he shook his head, "forgive me. Perhaps simple murder is more honest." Weak from exposure and injury, he used the bars of his cage to pull himself to his feet. Unable to stand at his full height, he hunched.

The peacekeeper stared. "I'm not a murderer." The protest jerked from his mouth.

Unconvinced, Dermanassian watched the crossbow. Any moment, he supposed, the peacekeeper would aim it at his chest and let the bolt thud into his heart.

Following his gaze, the peacekeeper too looked down at the crossbow clutched in his twitching hand. As if noticing it for the first time, he started. Then, without another word, the peacekeeper turned and limped back into the longhouse, leaving Dermanassian puzzled.

His trial did not start at daybreak. The peacekeeper did not leave his longhouse all day and, when a woman carrying biscuits came by, he yelled through the door that he was ill and sent her away. She came to Dermanassian's hanging prison and held up a yellow biscuit in offering. Ravenous, he smiled and reached to take it but, just as his fingertips touched it, she laughed and threw it into the mud.

It was not until near midnight two days later that the peacekeeper shuffled from his house.

"What do you want?" the peacekeeper asked Dermanassian, his voice a hoarse and unnatural whisper and his skin flush with fatigue and humiliation. "If they know, they will run me out in shame. Or worse. This town is all I have. I can't lose it."

Dermanassian snorted. "So now I am an extortionist as well."

"Aren't you?"

Dermanassian had no sympathy to spare for the peacekeeper. "What fantasies you live in are your concern. I want nothing to do with them, with you, or, for that matter, Bullfrog. As to my desires, there is none greater than walking from this place, never to return. Should Bullfrog and all its inhabitants be washed away in the next storm, so much the better."

The peacemaker blinked inscrutably. "You'll just go away?" He pulled a polished key from his pocket and offered it to Dermanassian.

Dermanassian frowned. He had no wish to be taunted. "If this is a further example of local humor, sir-

"No," the big man shook his head. "Take the key, go from Bullfrog, and leave me what little honor I have left."

Still wary, Dermanassian took the key and jiggled it into the lock. Swinging the door open, he slid stiffly down from his prison. "What will you tell them? What will you say happened to me?" he asked with suspicion.

The peacekeeper shrugged listlessly. He motioned Dermanassian to follow him back to the longhouse.

Dermanassian's sharp eyes scanned the darkness for signs of the swamplanders. He did not trust that the peacekeeper was not luring him out for more sport. Yet the peacekeeper led him to the longhouse without incident.

The inside of the house was lit by a single fat candle, burned nearly to the stub. Its wax pooled onto a simple wood table. The crossbow, still loaded, leaned against a chair leg.

The peacekeeper pointed to behind the door where Dermanassian's belongings lay in a jumble. "Take them," he gestured.

Dermanassian snatched them up, swinging his travel pack across his shoulders and drawing his sword. He felt reassured with the familiar blade in his hand; whatever plan the peacekeeper had, at least it would not find Dermanassian unarmed.

The peacekeeper stared at the flickering candle; its wavering light cast strange shadows across his face. His eyes were flat, deadened. Dermanassian peered outside, again looking for ambushers who might be lurking in the night.

The big man's hand twitched against his leg, as if feeling his scar through his tough pants. "I was hardly more than your age when the guard caught me," he said abruptly, the words tumbling from his mouth. "I didn't mean to kill the clothier. I just wanted his purse. I'd never seen gold coins before. I didn't mean to kill him. I-" He looked at Dermanassian suddenly, as if yearning for forgiveness and understanding. "I'm not a murderer," he stammered.

"And I am not your confessor, sir," Dermanassian said coldly, no more than glancing at the broken peacekeeper. "If you are seeking absolution, then seek elsewhere."

Satisfied that none waited to attack him in the moonlight, he slipped into the darkness, determined that dawn should find him far from the swamps of Bullfrog.

As he crossed into the reedy trees, he caught the thwack of the crossbow as it was released inside the longhouse. He paused in his step, and empathy flashed within him despite his attempts to ignore it. After a moment, he continued on, hoping the peacekeeper at last found peace.

###

## Missing Boggs

by Clare Marie Clerkin-Russell

Boggs was missing.

This in itself was not an unusual thing. In the two years since the death of his little daughter the big man was known to occasionally hit the synth during his shift. Then he would stagger off into any of the hidey-holes that could be found among the caverns and warrens of Strombekker Station. They kept him on the payroll simply because the Conglom needed its Suits and Boggs was a man who could don a three-story tall Handler and play it like a finely tuned instrument for days in the radiation-filled vacuum of the inner system. That's where the Conglom's Collectors were. And the money.

If Strombekker's had been riding Newton's whip in-system then Boggs's supervisor, an equally seasoned Suit named Almeter, would have been hopping mad. But Strombekker's was coasting outward to rendezvous with the Barges that wandered in from beyond Sirius. Yet after several hours of missed work even Almeter's patience evaporated like ice under low pressure.

"Seen Boggs?" he demanded in the down-shift locker room.

A half dozen men and women with impressive musculature and quick eyes looked at each other with what amounted to a collective shrug.

"Anyone?" Almeter barked.

A Rigger named Peckwish slammed a locker door and said: "I sent him out to the old docks this morning. Control pinged me that a Weirdling ship had vectored in overnight."

Almeter frowned. Pressure scars warped his brow and cheeks to make him look like an angry miniature titan. "Why send Boggs?" he demanded.

Peckwish raised his hands. "Rob Billitty was busy on another job."

Almeter closed his eyes and ordered his augmented glands to release a hormone called supervisory patience. Rob Billitty. The old joke at Strombekker's: whatever happened, that old space-hand Rob Billitty would always be with them.

Strombekker Station fell in-system four times a year to harvest the quicksilver spheres from the living Collectors. The giant human-designed creatures used the intense radiations from burning Sirius to help open Einstein-Hawking-Pradishar keyholes into the very fabric of the universe. Once open, the Collectors harvested the primordial probability schema that powered starships, far-flung colony worlds, and the economy of an interstellar civilization. Strombekker's purpose was to carry the full Q-spheres to a transfer orbit where empty Star Barges waited to hustle their cargo to energy-desperate worlds and customers.

Almeter said, "Explain more, Peckwish."

Peckwish grinned at his own joke. The Suits of Strombekker's occasionally played into the quirky mythos that surrounded their work: the claim that by pulling out the very stuffing of the cosmos they were radically altering reality. Whenever an employee made a mistake they would blame good old Rob Billitty. Even Almeter had used it on a few occasions himself.

"Peckwish," the tone was an order.

Peckwish shuffled and explained: "Boggs has dealt with Weirdlings before. Knows the lingo. Sort of."

Almeter nodded. "Makes sense. Anyone try a check-in?"

"Can't raise him. I figured ..."

"What?"

"Is Boggs in trouble again?"

"Depends. How much work is there to do?"

Peckwish shrugged. "My shift's over, Boss. That's B-Trick's problem now."

Almeter growled something inaudible and backed out into the corridor. In his own way Peckwish was right. The next shift, B-Trick, was due to start in ten minutes. Any irregularities would have to be reported to the B-Trick supervisor. If Boggs didn't turn up soon there might be trouble, for both the missing Suit and his supervisor.

Almeter shunted his transceiver and called: "Boggs? Please answer."

No response. From the nearby locker room he could hear chuckling. A-Trick could have done better by Boggs, Almeter reckoned angrily.

Almeter glanced at his dai-slate. He skimmed inventories and the Q-sphere maintenance tasks his team had knocked down. Except for the missing Boggs it had been a good shift, overall. Incoming work showed three ships vectoring toward Strombekker's. He paused. The icons registered them all as Weirdlings. It was odd to have so many ships from that species, a species from just beyond the galactic rim, arriving at once.

Almeter switched a channel and looked at the status of the old docks. A trickle of power and some sort of activity registered down in a vacuum bay at the station's south pole. A grav-drop could have gotten him there in five minutes but his dai-slate had to re-route him past a vacuum bridge that had collapsed almost a century ago. He called Boggs twice but there was still no answer. By the time he reached the large docking bay door a tickle of worry was growing in Almeter's belly.

The portal surrounding the door was bathed in green and Almeter stepped onto the cold metal plates of the docking zone. It was a huge, dim cavern and he emerged near the main landing skirt. A hundred meter swath of blackness stood a few bare meters away. A faint flicker of blue shimmered whenever dust touched the energized field-screen that kept the cold death of space at bay. Squatting like a whale on the verge of pouncing was the chitinous form of the Weirdling ship. Almeter walked past its whorls and appendages toward a distant glow. When he was a dozen meters away he stopped.

Tall dark forms, like creatures cloaked in mist, stood in a semi-circle before Boggs. The big man was kneeling next to a work lantern, his back turned toward the aliens. Even from where Almeter stood he could see the shoulders of the man's filthy workalls shake as if he were struggling with something.

Quickly, Almeter moved toward the scene. "Boggs?" he called.

The big man did not answer.

Almeter walked past, and later he decided through, the dozen Weirdlings and up to the missing Boggs. The big man pivoted slightly and looked toward his approaching supervisor. Almeter halted and stared. Boggs's broken face was alight with tears and joy. In his arms he held a very surprised but very happy-looking six year old girl. The little toothy visage framed within a mop of dark Ophelian hair looked a great deal like the man who held her.

"It's my Deena," Boggs choked out the words and a sob racked his chest and shoulders.

"Papa, don't cry," the little girl whispered.

Almeter stared quizzically from man to child and back to the man. Boggs kept photos of this child in his locker and on a mantel in his little run-down apartment. Both were shrines, of a sort. Although this child seemed slightly older than the one in the photos it was definitely Deena, Almeter realized.

But Deena had died from Stealth Syndrome almost two years ago! Almeter had attended the sad little funeral in a dusty church alcove near the heart of the Station. He could still smell the flowers Conglom HQ had ordered decanted for the wake. Almeter placed a quivering hand on Boggs's shoulder.

"I don't understand," the old supervisor said. Somewhere he thought he heard his dai-slate buzz.

Boggs cleared his throat. It would have been an effort for him to pull his eyes from Deena, so he said to Almeter while staring into the little girl's face: "It was the Weirdlings, Boss. They brought her back to me."

"Boggs. This is impossible."

The big man's voice rose slightly: "Boss, don't say that! She's here. All that matters."

Almost plaintively Deena placed her hand atop Almeter's where it rested on her father's shoulder. It was warm and soft and slightly grubby in the way that only a child's hand could be. When she stared into Almeter's eyes he saw a mix of puzzlement, happiness, and fear amid the hazel specks. The dai-slate buzzed like a worried insect.

Almeter turned toward the nearest Weirdling. The mist-creature was a gauzy, out of focus simulacrum of a veiled humanoid. Its sketch of a face featured a pair of large black eyes above twin slits that may have been nose and mouth. The thing stared beyond Almeter to some point at the far end of the bay. Then it seemed to shift its attention and refocus those blank eyes upon him. Almeter had the impression of looking into the same void that the nearby field-screen kept at bay.

"How..." Almeter began to ask. He stopped. Could these things understand him?

As if in reply the Weirdling said: "We speak the Tongue. Be it difficult for us." The voice was a rasp. Like static on a deep space radio band.

"How did this child come to you?" Almeter asked.

"She appeared among us. Alone. Frightened."

"How?"

"This we know not. Against all probability she came to our dark world on the Edge of All Things. We learned her Tongue. Cared for her, and then discovered from her descriptions where she may have originated."

The dai-slate droned. Almeter stared at the being. How could a dead child return to life? Against all probability the Weirdling had said. Almeter shivered. Was the old Strombekker Station joke for real? Had the Collectors somehow altered the fabric of reality? Rob Billitty at work on a cosmic scale?

Almeter asked, "When did Deena arrive among you?"

The Weirdling replied in a faraway voice: "Two of your years ago. Shortly before the others began to arrive."

"Others?" Almeter asked. The dai-slate on his wrist sent a galvanic tingle across his skin. Someone really wanted him! Angrily he snapped the dai-slate open and demanded: "What the hell is it?"

A long pause and then: "This is Fossinger. I may need your help."

Almeter glanced back at Boggs. He held Deena tightly in his big arms. Soft smiles and tears of joy touched both their faces.

"Hello?" a voice called from the dai-slate.

Almeter peered down into the device. Fossinger was the B-Trick supervisor. Almeter's head whirled. Automatically he asked: "What's the problem?"

"I need you're A-Trick crew back."

"What for?"

"Lots of ships coming in. My team will need help tonight."

"Ships?"

"Yeah, ships. Over a dozen. And they're all Weirdlings. Look for yourself."

The dai-slate's screen jumped and Almeter saw a dozen blips with the alien icons attached. He blinked three times and then said: "Can you link me to long range gravitic and emissions scans?"

"Sure. Why?" Fossinger replied.

"Do it now!" Almeter yelled.

"Okay, okay. Keep your ... Jesus Cristo!"

On the screen the dozen Weirdling vessels became hundreds. When the gravitic scan updated, the background became a fog of thousands of alien vessels. Almeter turned his head slowly toward the Weirdling.

"We return the others to you," the mist being said. "All of your missing will now be home."

Almeter nodded with a reverence he had not felt in decades.

"Almeter! Almeter!" the voice on the dai-slate demanded.

Almeter looked toward Boggs and little Deena. He smiled softly at the happy scene.

"Almeter! Can you explain this?" the voice from the dai-slate demanded.

"Go ask Rob Billitty," he replied.

###

## Ancestral Voices

by Nyki Blatchley

"Remember," said Eltava, "I saw her first."

The Traveler glanced speculatively at his companion. Her growl had seemed like a challenge, but there was a twinkle in her dark, slanted eyes.

"And what makes you think," he asked mildly, "that I'm interested?"

She snorted, but couldn't help it turning into laughter, and the Traveler recognized Eltava's mood. She knew he was teasing her, but had decided to let him get away with it. "Because she's exactly your type."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're my type," he commented.

"Oh yes," she said casually, "but otherwise ..."

The girl at the stream straightened and stretched, as if to illustrate the words, and both pairs of eyes watched her, his grey eyes appreciatively, her dark ones longingly.

The object of Eltava's desire was a slim girl in her late teens whose soft, curvaceous body had a dark olive complexion, with a garland of bright flowers around her long, black hair and another belting her simple tunic. Through the fading light from up on the hill, it was difficult to make out what she'd been doing: washing something perhaps, but not clothes.

The Traveler looked sideways again at Eltava's rapt face, the expression he'd seen so many times on it, since she'd been a child. He'd been looking forward to searching for the city of Enchiau together: it was a mystery that had been fascinating both of them. Though he'd never visited Enchiau, it had been a great city when he was young, a hundred years ago. So he'd been surprised, visiting this part of the world for the first time in many decades, that no-one had heard of it, and that its former location seemed to be the heart of a great forest.

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" he said.

She looked suddenly unsure. "I'm coming with you," she said. "You need me."

He laughed, trying to deny that the prospect of their separation hurt him. He knew he couldn't deny her this. He'd lived for more than a century, and there was no sign that he'd ever age; but Eltava had to live her youth now, or it would be gone before she knew it. "I always need you," he said softly, "but I'll be all right."

She looked at him appealingly. "I want to help you find this city," she said; "but ..."

"But," he added, "I know you, Eltava. You have to get these things out of your system."

"You make it sound like I'm a child," she growled through her teeth.

The Traveler tried not to smile. "Well," he teased, "I did hold you as a baby." He shook his head. "No, not a child. Just in love." He kissed her. "I'll come back this way," he said, "though I don't know how long I'll be. Have fun." Standing, he shouldered his pack.

#

The Seideën scout, perched on a high branch amid the foliage, watched the abomination straighten from washing her demonic icons in the stream and walk away. He was barely aware of the snarl on his face, though it helped: he wasn't immune to the creature's outward charms. But great Melamith strengthened his resolve and reminded him of the corruption beneath that enticing façade.

His attention turned to the two more distant figures on the ridge. The man, who looked about thirty, was clearly from the north, where his own people had come from two generations before: tall and fair-skinned, though the shoulder-length hair was dark, not blond like his own people's. The woman, a little past the blossoming of maidenhood, was like nothing he'd ever seen before: dressed in leather, she was tall and strong, with an ochre tinge to her skin and short-cropped hair. Could she, he wondered, be another abomination?

He saw the man get to his feet and disappear down the far side of the ridge. After a few moments, the woman followed the abomination in the direction that must lead to the settlement.

He offered up a prayer to Melamith, who had led his father's people safely from the cold wilderness of the north to this fruitful land, and who had now delivered to them a settlement of the accursed Demon Children that infested the land he had given to them. The darkness would be scourged, in his name.

After a suitable interval, the scout slipped down from his tree and followed at a discreet distance.

#

Eltava was frustrated. The village had offered her hospitality that was warmer than mere obligation required, but in five days she'd been unable to get to know the beauty from the stream, whose name was Drustil. Eltava had spoken with her many times, but only in company, giving her no opportunity for seduction.

Drustil seemed a lively, friendly girl, often giggling and playing with the other younger women and flirting with the younger men; yet she tended to turn shy and tongue-tied when Eltava spoke to her, blushing a little and studying the ground. Eltava did wonder whether the girl was aware of her feelings, but there was no way of telling how she took them. She'd been in villages where women who loved each other were cast out, or even stoned to death. She couldn't

imagine such extremes from these gentle people, but it was entirely possible that her feelings would disgust Drustil.

Yesterday afternoon, she'd several times fancied that Drustil had been watching her when she thought herself unobserved, looking away an instant before Eltava caught her eye. Screwing up her courage to face the possibility of rejection and a hasty departure, she'd determined to speak to her at sunset, a time of quiet leisure in the village. But the girl was nowhere to be found.

It was a small settlement, such as could be found almost anywhere in the world: a dozen houses of wattle-and-daub in the forest clearing among small fields of barley and vegetables. Chickens clucked and pecked busily among the houses, and a few cows and pigs grazed and rootled on the edge of the dark, pathless forest that cut them off from other communities. It was a special occasion when a visitor arrived from another village.

And there was the mound.

No-one spoke about the mound, though Eltava was unsure whether this was due to secrecy or lack of communication. She knew a tongue not unlike theirs and could make herself understood, but she wished she shared the Traveler's fluency with languages.

The mound was clearly not a natural hill. Perhaps five times her height, it rose from flat ground, green and perfectly circular. She had looked surreptitiously for an entrance but could see nothing, and she was wary about looking too obviously.

It seemed otherwise a relaxed community, with no obvious leader, though an elderly man called Ashleët and the wise-woman Kaani were highly respected. But something was missing, something Eltava couldn't put her finger on. Maybe, she reflected, it was merely her frustration over Drustil.

She was there now, but Eltava saw that she was with a boy of about own age called Nuenit, who seemed often in her company. Eltava saw now, with a catch of her heartbeat, that they were obviously flirting together. Though he wasn't the only one Drustil behaved like this with, she had a sinking feeling that this was more serious, and she felt adrift in despair.

She'd felt this kind of desire a few times, though she knew deep down that it was always short-lived. The Traveler was her love for life, always and forever. She remembered no time when she hadn't loved him, first as a child adoring a special adult, then as a young girl with a crush, finally as an equal lover. The world was a secure place with him in it.

But she needed danger too, conquest and heartache, and the wonder of someone who could feel swept away by her strength and mystery. How could she have that from a man who had cleaned her up as a baby and played with her as a child?

Eltava's head came around suddenly, wondering what had caught her attention. No-one else had reacted; but, as she glanced about her, a little boy came at a stumbling run into the village, his cries too fast and high-pitched for her to follow.

Instantly, the village was full of people running and shouting. Eltava grabbed the nearest person, the elder Ashleët. "What's happening?" she demanded.

"A raid." There was a quiet panic in Ashleët's eyes. "It's the Seideën. We must hide in the forest."

She stared at him: she didn't know who these Seideën were, but they were obviously feared by the villagers. "Aren't you going to defend your homes?" she demanded.

He spread his arms. "We don't know how to fight," he said. "It will be all right, the ancestors will protect us."

Eltava hesitated for a moment, tempted to tell him not to be superstitious, but she knew better. "I'm sure they will," she said cautiously, "but they'll want you to help them, surely?"

Ashleët stared at her blankly. "We trust the ancestors," he said and hurried off.

Eltava could hear crashes from the forest in the direction the child had come. The raiders clearly knew that the village had been warned and had abandoned stealth. Her hand went instinctively to her side, and she cursed fluently. For courtesy and lack of need, her sword lay beside her sleeping-place, and whether she was going to fight or flee, she'd no intention of doing it unarmed.

Racing into the hut, she yanked out the sword, leaving the scabbard behind, and ducked outside again. In the few heartbeats it had taken, everything had changed. The villagers were gone and the clearing was filling up with strangers: short, stocky men with square faces, angular features and yellow hair, wielding swords and axes. Some carried torches, and she saw fire set to a couple of buildings.

Eltava glanced around, assessing the situation. There looked to be between twenty and thirty of them, and none of the villagers were offering resistance. Though she had a high opinion of her weapon-skills, she wasn't a fool. Her eyes flickered around, seeking the safest route of flight, then stuck in horror.

By the mound, her back to the village, Drustil stood on her own. The raiders caught sight of her at the same moment.

Caution and commonsense went tumbling down the slope of terrified desire. With a wordless yell that turned every head to her, Eltava raced across the clearing to where Drustil stood.

"What the ..." She paused, frustrated at not being able to curse in this language. "What are you doing here?"

The girl half turned her head. "I must summon the ancestors," she said.

"Why you? And can't you do it from somewhere safer?"

"No," she said. "Even if I get killed, I must stay."

"They won't kill you," Eltava growled. "I won't let them touch you."

Drustil glanced around, her dark eyes startled and wondering, but there was no time to question, as the first raiders reached them. Eltava turned and swung her sword several times in a fast, wide arc, forcing the leading two men to leap back. They circled around warily, keeping back as she moved her sword more slowly now, trying to keep three directions covered. Though she'd have no chance if they rushed her, she'd probably kill a couple of them first, and there seemed no volunteers to be her victims.

"Demon," spat one of the men. "All abominations must die. Melamith the Lord commands it."

Eltava knew the tongue he spoke, though she doubted that the girl behind her did, and assumed that the abuse was aimed at her. She'd been in countries before where a woman bearing arms had been seen as blasphemous.

Then, seeing the speaker's eyes, she realized that they were focused past her. "All servants of the Dark One must die," another called out; and a voice from somewhere shouted, "Witch."

Eltava had an instant to wonder about this. A few moments before, she'd have laughed at the suggestion that these gentle villagers, or the beautiful girl behind her, were servants of evil. But Drustil's comment about summoning the ancestors sent cold steel through her guts. Could these men be right?

She only had a moment to wonder, though. The abuse was doing its work, unifying them against the enemy, making them forget their fear of death. A couple of heartbeats more, Eltava knew, and they'd rush her.

A hand gripped her free arm from behind. She checked the beginning of a stroke, half-turned, as she realized that it was a small, soft hand. Drustil's voice urged her, "This way, now."

It was less the girl's urging than the sudden shock on the raiders' faces that made her allow Drustil to tug her backwards into the deep passageway, where moments before had been unbroken hillside.

#

It was cool under the canopy of trees, even in the early afternoon. The gazelle, drinking at the tiny pool and ignoring the constant skittering in the undergrowth, spooked a moment at something; but it was only a fox, come for a drink. They watched each other warily, with respect but no great interest, as they shared the water-hole.

Then, abruptly, both fox and gazelle stiffened, head up and ears alert at the heavier tread approaching. By the time the Traveler reached the pool, it was deserted, other than the skittering underfoot, a bird issuing a furious challenge from somewhere and the eternal insects.

Sighing, he slipped off his pack and sat on a patch of sparse, open grass, unslinging a water-bottle for a long pull. Nearly empty. Glancing at the pool, he shrugged. The water was too stagnant: he needed to find a running stream.

The Traveler felt lonely. That was strange: in more than a century of life, he'd spent plenty of time on his own and had always enjoyed his own company as much as that of others. But he'd grown used to having Eltava with him, in the last few years; and the five days had not only seemed very empty, but had played on his nerves too. Most of the time, he knew that she'd come back to him, but only most of the time. What would he do, if one of her affairs became permanent?

But she wouldn't be Eltava, if she weren't free to wander. Part of her appeal as a child had been the beautiful intensity with which she'd pursued each passing fancy, and she was no different now. He just had to trust her love for him.

After resting for a while, the Traveler looked around him, listening and sniffing. It was hard to tell, over the breeze rustling the canopy, the sounds in the undergrowth and the buzzing of insects, but he thought he could hear trickling water somewhere near.

The city of Enchiau should be nearby too, if anything of it still remained; but, though that might be his ultimate goal, he needed to track down the water. He was fairly sure that it was that way, down the gently-sloping forest floor.

The ground sloped gently downwards for perhaps ten minutes' walk, before falling off more sharply. There was a little rocky crag, perhaps twice his height, that would have been easy enough to climb down; but, to one side, it merged into a steep earthy slope, where something (deer perhaps, or wild goat) had scored a faint path down through the dust. The Traveler scrambled to its foot to find a busy little stream cascading out of a much larger hole, splashing down into a course a little way below.

The Traveler was drawn immediately to the opening: something seemed to be drawing him to this hole, calling him to come inside and investigate further. He took a step towards it, then disciplined himself to deal with the essentials first. Once he'd drunk and filled both his bottles, though, he examined the opening. It came up to his waist and, when he peered inside, vanished into darkness.

He hesitated. Normally, he'd have felt no great curiosity about this, but the call was strong. Puzzled, he leant further, putting his head as far in as he could while still keeping firmly anchored in the sunlit world. There was definitely a pull, and he realized what it was. Power. He could always sense power, such as he had himself, and he could feel it inside. Not actually someone using power, more like the remnants, radiating out like the heat from a fire.

That gave him even more pause. In the five days since he'd parted from Eltava, he'd seen no human, or even signs that any human ever passed that way; yet someone with an immense amount of power had used it here, under the earth. The sensible course, he knew, would be to turn away and go nowhere near it. Power this secret would likely mean danger, and he should avoid it.

But then, the Traveler had never been sensible. Not in that way, at any rate, the way that would make him turn away from a mystery and leave it unsolved. This must have some connection

with his search. He wasn't sure how, exactly; but a great city had vanished without trace, from memory as well as from the landscape, and some great power had been used where it had once stood.

He examined the opening again. It was difficult to be sure, but the echoes, when he tossed a pebble experimentally inside, didn't suggest that it narrowed. Bundling up all his possessions, he crawled inside. The pebbles on the stream-bed dug sharply into his hands and knees, but he only had to crawl a short distance before the echoes told him that the space was growing larger. Standing, he discovered that the roof was beyond his reach.

Finding the tinder-box in his pouch still dry enough for a few heartbeats' light, he saw a crack twisting between rock-walls, the roof lost in shadows. He must be deep underground by now, he thought; then stopped abruptly. He would be under the ground he'd trodden to get here, he realized. The rock from which the stream emerged had been no more than twice his own height; and, though there was a slope beyond, he could hardly have gone far enough to account for much of a rise. Yet there was no doubt that he was far below the surface.

The Traveler stood motionless for a long time, wondering what to do. He could crawl back, of course, and get out of this unnatural place. It did briefly occur to him to wonder whether the way out would still be there: he'd seen enough to know that such things were possible. But the stream was still flowing. Magic or no magic, it had to be flowing somewhere.

So he could crawl back, escape from the passage and flee this weird place. And spend the rest of his life, which might be a good deal longer than most lives, wondering what it was exactly that he hadn't seen today.

Sighing, he turned back to where the high cleft vanished round the bend, trying to use all his senses, natural and extra ones, to pick up clues about what might lie ahead. But there was nothing, he realized, prickly fear creeping over him. No sounds or smells came from round that bend, and none of the power whose radiation still hung about him. It was as though the world ceased to exist a few paces away from him.

Very slowly, he made his way around the bend in the passage. Almost at once, though, he came to a stop. What was he doing? Why was he making this pointless, unpleasant journey underground, when what he searched for was a city? A city would be on the surface, not down here. Come to that, why search for Enchiau anyway? It was nothing to him, he'd never even been there. If he turned round now, he could be back with Eltava within five days. After all, he'd no way of knowing that it was safe to leave her. What if she never came back to him? He couldn't allow that.

As he turned to retrace his steps, a memory came to him from somewhere. Eltava was eight at the time, and he was letting her spend a couple of hours with him on board his ship, Searcher, in dock. He'd turned his back for what seemed like a heartbeat, and when he looked again, he saw the child's delighted face peering down at him from halfway up the mast.

"What are you doing up there?" he called, and she shouted down, "Wanted to see what it was like up here."

"All right." He remained calm, not wanting to panic her. "But can you come down, now you've seen?"

Eltava began to climb down. He held his breath the whole time, looking up at her from beside the mast. Halfway, she slipped and lost her hold. He noticed vaguely that she didn't cry out, but he was mainly concerned with pushing down his blinding rush of panic and getting underneath her.

He lay on the deck, still holding onto the child he'd caught, and finally managed, "Don't ever do that again."

She looked at him with that appeal he could never resist. "Why not? I knew you'd catch me. And I've been up there, now."

The Traveler pulled himself back in the act of turning away from the passageway. Since when did he distrust Eltava? And since when was he any less curious than her? That wasn't him.

Now that he was able to look from the outside, he knew that the suggestions hadn't come from him. All around him, something was catching at whatever it found, suggesting eminently sensible reasons as to why he shouldn't go any further. He could feel it, now that the spell was broken, now that he understood what to look for. It wasn't power exactly, which was why he hadn't sensed it, but it was a barrier between him and what lay beyond.

But a barrier that relied on his cooperation. Keeping clearly in his mind the mischievous face of that child he'd loved, and loved even more now, the Traveler walked forward.

#

Whirling back from the opening in the mound that had appeared so suddenly, Eltava took up her guard in the defensible position between high, close sides. But Drustil said, "No, come with me. They won't follow."

Eltava looked at the enemy. The girl was right, she realized. There was fear on their faces, and they made no move towards the new doorway. In their position, she reflected, she'd probably have felt the same.

Walking backwards, never taking her eyes off them, Eltava followed the girl she desired, but now didn't quite trust, further into the mound. After a few steps, the passage turned and the light vanished. Eltava fumbled for her pouch, intending to get out her tinderbox, but Drustil put a hand on hers. "We mustn't bring light here," she said.

Though it occurred to Eltava to wonder how she knew, she was more aware of the soft, warm hand on hers, which she didn't want to go away. Without thinking, she dropped her sword and covered Drustil's hand with hers.

There was a long pause; and, when Drustil spoke, her self-assurance was gone, and she was nothing more than a nervous young girl. "Eltava," she said; and Eltava realized with a lurch that, in all the times they'd spoken together, this was the first occasion she'd heard her name from the girl's mouth. "You ... I've seen you looking at me. Like a man looks at a woman he wants."

Eltava swallowed. "You're very beautiful," she said, immediately cursing herself silently for sounding inane.

"So are you." There was wonder in Drustil's voice. "I've never met anyone like you. It makes me feel... I don't know, strange, whenever you're around. Scared, but tingly."

In the darkness, Eltava was aware that they were very close, and she suddenly didn't care what Drustil was. She bent to kiss the smaller girl, but missed in the dark and kissed her nose instead. Drustil giggled and gathered her in for a proper kiss.

When they finally came up for air, though, Drustil sighed. "Eltava," she said, sounding as if she was enjoying saying the name, "there's ... something I've got to do."

That sobered Eltava a little. "You mean ... raising spirits?"

They were close enough that she could feel Drustil nod. "I have to summon the ancestors," she said. "I'm the keeper of the talismans."

Eltava was aware of her holding her hands up. "Grandfather," she said, "are you there? I need to talk to you."

"Of course I'm here," said a voice beside them, and Eltava nearly jumped out of her skin. "I wouldn't miss talking to my favorite grand-daughter."

"Grandfather, it's urgent, we're ..."

"And who's this with you?" The voice, old but strong, sounded curious.

"Oh ... this is Eltava. She's ..."

"Drustil, you're blushing," said the voice. "Ah, so that's it. A roll in the forest with a boy was good enough for your grandmother; but you have to try something new."

"Grandfather ..."

"You, what's your name? Eltava. You seem decent enough. You make sure you don't hurt Drustil. You hear me, young lady?"

"I've no intention of hurting her," Eltava protested, unsure of how to speak to an ancestral spirit.

"Grandfather," said Drustil urgently, "we're under attack. Remember I told you about the Seideën? The ones with the god who hates everyone? They've attacked us, and they're burning the village. We need you."

"Burning the village?" The garrulous old man was gone suddenly, and he sounded angry and decisive. "The cheek of it. Of course we'll help. But ..." He hesitated. "We can't go out without you leading us, sweetheart. We'll try to protect you, but ..."

Eltava heard her swallow. "All right," she said. "Eltava." Her voice sounded uncertain. "I've got to go back outside."

"Out there?" She couldn't believe it. "We wouldn't last long enough to get across the village."

"I have to go outside, or the ancestors can't, and we won't stand a chance. You don't have to go."

"Don't be an idiot," Eltava snapped. "You don't think I'd let you go on your own, do you?" She took a deep breath. "Now?"

"Nearly," said Drustil. Wrapping her arms around Eltava, she gave her a long kiss. "I'll feel safe," she said at last, "if you're with me."

Eltava swallowed, hoping her voice remained steady. "I can't promise they won't hurt you," she said, "but they'll have to hack their way through my dead body first." Recovering her sword, she took Drustil's hand and followed the younger girl the few steps up the passage.

#

The darkness vanished instantly, as the Traveler rounded the bend in the passage, and he was standing under a clear, open sky of a pale, hot blue emphasized by the few wispy straggles of white cloud, and a fierce yellow sun. Only these clouds hung motionless, without the faintest breeze to blow them across the sky. There were no sounds and no smells, but there was plenty to see. A few paces ahead, buildings began: mostly of mud-brick, some of red sandstone, a few of gleaming white marble.

The Traveler had never walked the streets of Enchiau, but he'd been to other cities in this part of the world, and he knew how their builders thought. There was no sign of the modern fad for brightly painted façades, nor the domes with which recent builders had been experimenting. This was a city that hadn't changed for a hundred years, at least.

The road between the buildings was dust and stone, but no dust-swirls played at his feet, even where he stepped. It was utterly still and utterly deserted, until he turned a corner and came face to face with two women and a man.

For the first heartbeat, the Traveler was caught between starting in surprise, calling out a greeting and feeling warily for his sword-hilt, but only for that long. By then, it had become clear to him that none of these three figures was moving a muscle.

He moved forward cautiously, puzzled. He'd seen statues, in Hafdosu and Nessit, that people swore looked completely lifelike; but, impressive though they were, he'd never been able to see much life in them. This was life in every detail, from the carving of tiny lines and wrinkles to the color tones of skin and clothes, from the facial expressions to the way the cloth draped.

It made a strange scene, too. It was clear that one of the women, dressed in a gaudy, low-cut gown such as had been fashionable in these parts when the Traveler was young, was flirting with a finely-dressed young man, allowing the other woman, a little plainer, to quietly relieve him of his purse. Fascinated to find out what material the artist had used to create such reality, the Traveler stretched out his hand and touched the nearest figure.

He touched warm flesh.

He jumped back, more shocked than if his hand had been burnt. He stared at the figures, sure that they were going to move, but there was no sign that they even breathed. He saw a strand of the young man's hair, raised as if ruffled by the wind, but motionless.

Finally deciding that he wasn't going to solve the mystery merely by staring at this unnatural group, he turned his back on them, constantly glancing back to see whether they'd moved, and made his way up the road.

The further he went into the city, the more such figures he saw, as if turned to stone while going about their business. But they weren't stone. Every one of them was as soft and warm as any human he'd ever touched.

The Traveler found himself trembling by the time he reached the great building high up in the center, almost overcome by the sheer unnaturalness. Here, as elsewhere, crowds of motionless people were scattered about the great plaza in front of the doors; but, glancing inside, he could see no-one in the building's dim interior.

The Traveler hesitated for a while, partly to screw up his resolution, partly to get back his breath after the long, uphill walk through the streets to the rise on which he now stood. Then he went inside.

It was clear at once that this was a temple. It was one huge hall, each of its pillars incorporating a little altar, a small statue of a stiff, unnatural male figure above a stone slab stained the black of old, dried blood. For an instant, the Traveler wondered whether this was a sign of human sacrifice before he realized, with a little relief, that these slabs weren't big enough to take anything larger than a chicken.

And at the far end, fifty paces away, stood a much larger altar, a crude statue towering over it. And he saw that he'd been mistaken in thinking the building deserted. In front of the altar, on a golden throne, a figure sat motionless, dressed in rich robes of bright colors. He was a powerful-looking man, large and strongly built, a handsome, ruthless face fringed by shoulder-length black ringlets and a beard.

It wasn't until the Traveler had cautiously covered half the distance, that he realized what was unusual. Even from the door, with minimal light filtering in to illuminate the temple's dimness, he had been able to see the figure in as much detail as if he stood before him. It was almost as if this man shone with his own light.

It would have taken very little for the Traveler to have turned tail and fled that unnatural place, searching for the way back to the underground passage and its stream. It was less courage than curiosity that made him continue to walk forward. Not to mention stubbornness: he'd come this far, and he was going to discover the answer to the mystery.

He wondered who this man could be. A king or a high priest, he guessed, since he was obviously a figure of huge power: even frozen like the rest, the sensation of power coming from him was almost tangible. Yet what could have happened, to have left him and all his people in this state?

The Traveler reached the altar and stopped a pace in front of the throne. The dark eyes, arrogant with a hint of sadness, stared past him into the space of the temple.

Then the eyes moved and focused on him. "Who are you?" demanded the man.

#

Eltava and Drustil paused for a moment at the exit, adjusting to the light and sharing another kiss. "Stay behind me," Eltava said and walked carefully out, aware of Drustil behind her and a rustling further back in the darkness.

There was no-one at the exit: clearly the Seideën wanted to keep away from the demonic mound, with its magical opening. All the buildings were on fire now, and the raiders were looting; but Eltava could only see about a dozen of them. The rest, she assumed, were pursuing the villagers through the forest.

"Witch!" a voice screamed from the other side of the clearing, and within moments, men were running at them from all sides, hefting their weapons.

The first man to reach Eltava swung a big double-handed axe at her. Flinging her blade up to parry, it bit into the wooden handle, and she managed to yank the weapon out of his hands. Backhanding awkwardly, she caught the man's face with the side of his own axe, knocking him flying. Another sweep flung it off the sword, forcing another warrior to duck.

Turning, she clashed swords with the next man. The isolated part of her mind that assessed while she fought registered that he wasn't very good; so she made a quick flick to push his weapon aside and lunged, pushing the point into his unprotected throat.

Pulling back, ignoring her enemy collapsing as his hands tried to keep the blood from spurting out of the wound, Eltava was turning to face the next attack, when a scream came from behind her. Whirling, she found Drustil on the ground, blood oozing from her shoulder, as a Seideën warrior stood over her, sword raised.

Eltava's expertise suddenly deserted her, and she lunged in desperation, clumsily intent on preventing the blow. Her enemy changed his stroke as it fell, swiping at her legs. Leaping to avoid the sword, she landed awkwardly, twisting her ankle as she fell. Her sword flew out of her hand.

Trying to clear her spinning head, Eltava tried to anticipate where the blade would fall, ready to twist away from it. The Seideën reared up for the blow, stood motionless an instant, then collapsed, blood spurting from his suddenly cleft head, as gnarled hands pulled a scythe from the wound.

An old man stood above her, a grim expression on his face. Looking around, Eltava saw that the clearing was now full of people: hundreds of them, and more were following, pouring out of the mound. Some were old and some young, but all looked strong and vigorous, and they carried clubs, axes and scythes.

Most of the raiders turned and fled, some of the ancestors pursuing them, others dispersing into the forest, turning the hunters into the hunted. But one stood his ground, yelling to his comrades, "No, stand in the name of Melamith. Destroy the accursed demons. Kill the witches. He will protect us."

A few of the men seemed to heed him, and Eltava saw one rush at Drustil, who still lay on the ground. Forgetting her twisted ankle, she leapt to her feet, tackling him to the ground and pounding him with her fists. A red gauze shrouded her mind, and all she could think of was the need to kill the man beneath her. Her hand closed around a knife on his belt and, drawing it, she stabbed, again and again.

"I think we're safe now." A voice spoke above and behind her, and Eltava instinctively struck out with the knife in her hand. But a smaller, softer hand stopped the blow. "Come back, Eltava," said the voice, and a beautifully soft mouth gently touched her forehead.

The redness evaporated from Eltava's mind, and she saw Drustil's face hovering over her. "We're safe now," she repeated, and Eltava saw, glancing around, that no Seideën was alive in the clearing. "But maybe we'd better put the fires out."

#

It took all the Traveler's self-control not to scream aloud, when the figure spoke, and he did take several involuntary steps backwards. "You ... you're not ..." He swallowed and tried to speak again. "You're ... not like the others?"

The man regarded him calmly. "No," he said, as though there could be no possible doubt, "I'm not like the others."

"But ..." He tried to gather himself up and stop stuttering and staring. "Who are you?"

There was a slight pause. "That was what I asked you," said the man. "You haven't answered."

"Oh ... I'm ... My name's the Traveler. I'm just ... I was looking for the city of Enchiau. Is this ... have I found it?"

The eyes gave him their full attention, and it was almost as if his skin were being flayed. He gave a whimper. "Why?" the man demanded after a moment.

"Because ... Please stop that, it hurts. Because I'd heard of it, but no-one seemed to know it had ever existed. I don't understand why."

The full, flaying gaze lessened, and the Traveler slumped in on himself. "How do you remember Enchiau?" the stranger demanded. "Its memory was blotted out. No-one born in the last hundred years has had the knowledge of Enchiau. What makes you different?"

The Traveler was struggling to control himself, but he found sudden strength from the realization that he could answer this question. "Because," he spat through his teeth, "I was born more than a hundred years ago. All right?"

There was silence, as the man studied him in puzzlement. Now he had the leisure to collect himself, the Traveler realized something else strange. This man was speaking his own language, the tongue he'd spoken growing up, more than a hundred years and half a continent away.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I've told you who I am. And this place: how did I get here from under the earth?"

"You wouldn't understand," said the man. "Where we are is beyond the measurements of man. In the past, and outside time entirely. For myself: if you remember Enchiau, don't you know who I am?"

The Traveler hesitated. Most of these arrogant, self-important rulers hated it when people hadn't heard of them, and this one was clearly more arrogant, more self-important than most. But he had no idea and could think of nothing to say.

"I ... I didn't really know very much about Enchiau," he said cautiously. "I never came here, you see, and ..."

"My name is Lenitu," said the other. "I am Enchiau's guardian deity."

The Traveler stood for a moment, speechless and stupid. "You're a god?" he managed at last. He'd encountered plenty of demons and other supernatural beings, but a god was different. His own people's gods had been the fields and forests and the great mountain that protected his village: capricious but benevolent spirits, always present but never seen. He'd encountered beliefs in other kinds of gods, most of which hadn't impressed him; but it had never even occurred to him that he might come face to face with one of them.

"I'm the greatest of all the gods," said Lenitu, with such self-assurance that it hardly occurred to the Traveler to wonder why, in that case, he had never heard of him. "Enchiau is the seat of my power, and this is my great Temple. All come here to worship me and to give me sacrifice."

"But ..." The Traveler hesitated, wondering for a moment whether he should argue with a god, but he felt he had to understand what was going on. "No-one's moving out there. They're all..." He struggled for the right word: not frozen, since their flesh was warm; not petrified, since they were soft.

"I've preserved them," said Lenitu. "They'll never leave me, now. They'll never lose my grace."

The Traveler stared at him, wondering if he'd understood correctly. "Are you saying," he demanded slowly, "that you did that to them? To the people who worshiped you?"

"They still worship me," said Lenitu casually. "They're my faithful people."

"They're not anything," snapped the Traveler. Suddenly, he was too angry to wonder whether he ought to speak like this to a god. It was wrong; and, whoever this idiot might be, he was going to convince him of that. "You've stopped them being anything. If nothing happens to you, if you don't move or change, you're not alive. You might just as well have slaughtered them all."

"They exist in a moment," said Lenitu, sounding as if he didn't greatly care whether or not he explained himself. "All their being is in that moment, in which they're utterly faithful to me. Because that moment is out of step with the time of mortal existence, neither they nor the city have any reality in that existence. It can only be reached by breaking through the barrier I've placed around it - as you've clearly done."

"But why?" The Traveler's mood was swinging between rage and bewilderment. "What's wrong with people living their lives out? What's wrong with them changing, making choices and..."

He stopped abruptly: something had just clicked into place. "That's it," he said, "you're scared they won't choose to worship you."

Lenitu's eyes never flickered, never flinched away. "A god is not scared," he said. "The mind of man can never hope to measure a god's mind. But I will not have my people deserting me. This way, everything is safe."

"This way," the Traveler snarled, "everything is dead. It's the risk that makes it worthwhile, don't you understand?" He met the god's relentless eyes, and sighed. "No, I don't think you do."

"I've no need to understand you. And I've no need to justify my ways to an unbeliever." Yet, even as he said this, a look of doubt came into his eyes for the first time. "I'm not a cruel god," he said, a little more gently. "I want to look after my people, and I can't do that if they turn away from me. Surely even a mortal can understand that."

Remembering his own thoughts about Eltava that day, the Traveler realized that he did understand, but understanding wasn't condoning. "You know," he said, speaking softly in wonder at the discovery without considering its implications, "I think I pity you."

He realized, as soon as the words were out, that this hadn't been a sensible thing to say. Lenitu's eyes flashed with rage; but, when he spoke, his voice remained controlled. "A mortal," he said, "does not pity a god. You disturb me. Go."

"I'll go." The Traveler wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do, but he knew he had to try to break this terrible spell. He had arts of his own, though to oppose the work of a god ... But maybe there was something he could do.

Turning, he ran out of the temple. The square outside was full of motionless people, who disturbed him even more, now he knew the reason. Picking one at random, a solid, middle-aged man who looked as if he might have been a successful artisan, the Traveler focused his mind, trying to penetrate the man's thoughts.

They were there, he realized, although they were like no thoughts he'd ever encountered before: slow like treacle, unwilling to move or change. Picking at them, the Traveler found excitement at the prospect of a lucrative sale he was going to conclude later that day; wondering whether he really had enough money for the second workshop he was planning to open; concern that his second daughter was being defiant about the very nice, very successful young man he'd found for her; and adoration of Lenitu. The Traveler watched those thoughts for a while, and nothing changed.

Concentrating harder, he tried to slide another thought into the man's mind: a sensation of doubt. He willed him to question whether all around him was real, and whether Lenitu really was watching over him. He nudged and worked the thought further and further into the man's mind, hoping that it would be enough to shock him out of his complacency, make his mind move again ...

"No." The voice boomed all around him, but the Traveler recognized Lenitu. "No, you will not corrupt my people. Go."

And the Traveler felt a sense of nothingness close around him.

#

It was sunset when Eltava saw Drustil leaving the village and followed her. Everyone had been working hard at repairing the salvageable houses, though several would need to be completely rebuilt. No-one had actually asked Eltava to help: she was a guest, and one that had fought to save them. But she wouldn't have dreamt of standing by and watching.

The ancestors had remained for a while before returning to their mound, and she'd been amazed how the villagers had taken this in their stride, greeting parents and grandparents, as well as others who seemed more distant.

Eltava found Drustil where she'd first seen her, kneeling by the stream, and stood for a moment, simply enjoying the sight. The younger girl glanced up and smiled.

"I need to wash them," she explained, and held up three small stone objects, wincing slightly as she raised her injured shoulder. "The talismans. I have to do it every day, at sunset."

Eltava knelt beside her, a little awkwardly, since her twisted ankle still hurt. "That's what you were doing when I first saw you," she said. "The evening I came to the village. That's when I fell in love with you."

Drustil's raised eyebrows turned into a broad smile, and Eltava took a while to appreciate how beautiful her dimples were.

But she couldn't put it off. "Drustil," she said, "what happened today? What are you? A priestess? A sorceress? Do you have power over the ancestors?"

Drustil frowned, clearly puzzled. "I'm not sure what those words mean. I'm the keeper of the talismans, so it's my job to talk to the ancestors. Just because they're dead, it doesn't mean they're not part of the village. They like to know what's going on: who's in love, who's quarreled, what the harvest's like. I tell them."

"But ... they came out when you called them."

"Well, of course." Drustil's eyes widened. "Wouldn't you, if your home was being burnt?"

Eltava thought about that and, though it sounded strange, there was something very natural about it. Pushing it away from her mind, she reached out to the other girl, gathering her into her arms, and they kissed.

A long time later, Eltava murmured, "I do love you, Drustil."

"Me too. I... didn't quite realize that was what I was feeling. But... when we were in the mound, and you were so close and I felt so safe with you..." She gazed at Eltava, her soft eyes wide. "I suddenly wanted to kiss you and hold you and touch you." She giggled, a lovely blush suffusing her olive face. "Touch you everywhere."

"I ... I wasn't sure." Eltava felt absurdly unsure of herself. She could face down enemies in battle; she'd encountered sea-monsters; she'd fought and defeated demons. But she was terrified and tongue-tied before this sweet young girl. "There was that boy ... Nuenit. I wasn't sure if you and him ..."

Drustil put her head on one said. "I like Nuenit," she said simply. "I've always known him, and we've always got on well. There aren't that many choices of people to marry."

"You don't have to marry," Eltava objected.

"I suppose I don't. But ... I've always wanted to, you see. I want to have children. When I'm an ancestor, I don't want to be an ancestor without descendants." She put her head on one side. "Haven't you ever wanted children, Eltava?"

Eltava shrugged, feeling a little awkward. "Once or twice, I suppose," she admitted. "But not for long. I don't think I'd be a good mother."

"I don't know. I've seen you with the children, and they all adore you. You're really good with them."

"Oh, I don't mean I don't like children. But settling down and having my own: that's a different matter." She looked at Drustil again. "So ... where does that leave us?"

Drustil swallowed, then looked up again, eyes suddenly mischievous. "Well," she said, "I'm not promised to anyone yet. We could see what happens, can't we?" She kissed her again. "Eltava," she added uncertainly, "what ... um, what exactly do two girls do together?"

Eltava felt herself suffused by pure joy. "I'll teach you," she said. "But I warn you, I might have to show you lots of times."

And she drew her giggling lover down to the ground with her.

#

Entering the clearing with the stray piglet he'd tracked down among the trees, the Traveler saw Drustil watching Eltava teaching a group of children to use pieces of wood as swords. Only one showed any aptitude at all for it, but everyone seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves, including Eltava. Smiling, he returned the piglet to its sow, before crossing over to them.

They'd stayed in the village several months now, since he'd returned from his search for Enchiau. It had taken him a while to realize that he wasn't dead, after Lenitu had banished him from the endless instant that was Enchiau. But, once he'd realized that, he'd looked around to see that he was standing in the forest, watching the stream cascade out of the hole in the rock-face.

His first instinct had been to go back inside, to see if he could get back to Enchiau and have another try at convincing Lenitu how wrong he was. But, deep down, he'd known he didn't want to return, and that he shouldn't. He'd never change the god's mind. And Lenitu had been right, when he'd said that the mind of man couldn't measure a god's mind. He'd no wish to try.

The Traveler had known a great many people, over the many lifetimes he'd lived. Some were good, some evil, and most couldn't be defined so easily; but, to some extent, he'd understood even the wickedest of them. Standing in front of Enchiau's forgotten god, he'd glimpsed a mind that was trapped, just as surely as his people's bodies were trapped. Where humans, imperfect and stupid, grew through their lives, for good or evil, Lenitu had come into being finished and had nowhere to go. The Traveler decided that he'd been right: he pitied him.

Drustil smiled up at him, as he came up beside her, wiping the muck of the pig off his hands. At first, he'd felt jealous of Eltava's adoration of this young girl, a little scared, in spite of his determination to allow her the freedom to choose. But it was impossible to dislike Drustil, and they'd become closer as he'd come to understand that this wasn't going to be permanent. He just hoped now that Drustil wouldn't be too hurt when Eltava finally decided to leave.

"You found it?" she asked.

He nodded. "Same place as last time. I think there might be truffles there."

"You know so much," she said. "You seem to fit in here. I mean, Eltava tries, but ..."

He laughed. "But Eltava grew up in a city, in a house with servants. I grew up in a village not unlike this one."

She looked up at him, curious. "But you left it."

"I left, yes, and I don't regret it, but it's nice to spend a little time somewhere like it."

They were both silent for a moment, watching Eltava and the children. "She's almost ready to leave," said Drustil suddenly.

The Traveler turned abruptly. "Has she said?"

"No, but it's obvious. Grandfather thinks so too. He likes her, even though he pretends not to."

That made the Traveler smile. Fascinated, he'd persuaded Drustil to let him talk to the ancestors, and he'd found her grandfather to be one of those old men who used their crotchiness to hide a genuinely affectionate nature. "Will you be all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'll miss her, but I'll have the time we've spent together to remember. And Nuenit keeps hinting about marrying. I think I'd like that." She considered a moment. "I'll always love her, but ... It's like the ancestors, I think. I mean... they die, and we love other people, people who are still alive, and that's right. But it doesn't mean we forget the ancestors, or stop loving them too, in a different way. They're always with us. I think that's what it'll be like."

The Traveler nodded, surprised to hear such a sophisticated attitude from a young village-girl. "I'm not sure she'll agree," he warned. "If she's made up her mind to do something, she can be stubborn."

Drustil giggled. "That's putting it mildly," she said. "I'll talk to her. We both knew this was likely to happen. It's all right." She smiled at the Traveler. "Take care of her, won't you?"

"Always."

He looked around the village and the forest that surrounded it, with its constant sounds and movements, its change and its imperfection, that had taken the place of the changeless city. Whatever happened, he realized, would be good. It was life.

###

## i AND GOD

by Sean Melican

I found him. He'd say he found me 'cause that's how they are - they want and I think even need the credit - but I found him. I wish to Hell I hadn't.

I'd locked myself in a cargo crate and was on the orbital platform before Father Antonio ever knew I was gone.

A man in a jumpsuit decorated with flames (I thought some sort of engine tech) I was sure was anything but an engine tech was sauntering after me so I'd ducked into the lounge and wouldn't you know but there was only one seat free. The man at the table seemed surprised, but thinking about it now, I'm ashamed to say I should've seen it was an act he was that transparent.

"Order something. You see anyone else not drinking? Whatever you want. It's on me." He peered over my shoulder. "Don't turn around, but he's here." He signaled the waitress.

I said, "Whatever he's having. Hurry." I watched her walking away. I was sure her smile was for me. "Been a long time since I seen something that pretty. Be a change for me."

I spat. "Orange juice. Who in Hell are you?"

He smiled, and I thought it was 'cause of what he said next. "Virgin screwdriver. Let's people think you're drinking. More often than not, it's best to let 'em think you're one of 'em." He smiled. "That way, when the shit hits the fan, you've got wits enough to duck."

The man in the jumpsuit came to our table. "St. Anselm's said they're missing a boy. It's a boy's school, you know the kind." He never looked at me. "You don't want their kind on your ship. You should know that."

"I should."

"So who's this boy?"

"He's my prentice. I'm a parser."

The man paled and took a step backward. I'd noticed the pocks on my savior's face (I write that knowing what he is), but his sleeves had been rolled down. He rolled them up. His skin was a raw color and his nails long, yellow and brittle.

"Well, then," said the man, backing away.

"Fools. Think the gamma stays in you. Do it seem to you I glow in the dark? You're afraid."

I shook my head.

"Sure. It's suicide, being a parser. You could stay here, get caught, go back to St. Anselm's 'til you're of age and then what? Ain't no other ship gonna take a stray, not looking the way you do."

I wished desperately for something more than orange juice. "You're gonna say I owe you. Well, call him back if you want."

He shook his head. "You can go. The choice is always yours. It always is. But look around. You're ten years younger than the youngest man here. You stick out. Most crews are honest. They don't have any need, or room, for someone green, and for that matter, someone illegal. So. Go." He waved his hand.

"Couldn't I do something other than parse? Your captain, doesn't he need a mate or something?"

Eduardo smiled. "You offering your services or your, uh, services? Captain Briggs don't need a first mate, a second or otherwise. What he needs is a parser. I'm dying. But go. You've got a long life to live. Go live it."

I looked around. He was right. The other men, the women too, were clean, had neat hair, didn't have lice.

"Deal," I said. We shook hands but I had to sign something too.

#

Going from the station through the tube and into the bright light of the ship hurt my eyes.

"Space is vast," he told me. "Hold your thumb and forefinger apart like this. Good. You're a louse who wants to travel from one nail to the other. Long trip. But if you pinch your fingers, it's just a hop. We're just that louse, right? The engines do the job of making the fingers pinch."

I didn't like the idea of being a louse or living under some guy's thumb.

He grinned. "We call that the government. Laws of men, supposed to keep us safe, sane. Make men - and women too, but mostly men - good folks when they really wanna follow the laws of nature. Eat, fuck, even kill when you want, that sort of thing." He poked me with his elbow. "You know what I mean?"

I shook my head.

"Didn't teach you much religion at St. Anselm's, I guess. Why you think there's all those rules in the Bible?"

Uncomfortable, I said, "You religious?"

He shrugged. "Most men out here are. You don't have to be, but I'd bet my immortal soul you'll be too."

"You're on," I said.

He grinned. "During a pinch, it's your job to keep the m'am going. Lotta guys I know like to talk about stroking her, keeping her fluid, but that's crude."

I thought it was funny.

You couldn't actually see inside the matter-antimatter chamber. All you had were 'grams, sliders, even an old keyboard.

"In regular space, them artificial minds do our job. It's easy. Predictable. Good for machines, bad for guys like you and me. How much physics they teach you at St. Anslem's? As much as they did religion? Or maybe the better question is how much you learned?"

I shrugged.

"Bible says that in the beginning was the Word, and maybe that's true, but the architecture of the universe is mathematical. Words are slippery, meanings sort of shifting when you least expect it, but math is solid, real. You can make black seem white, good seem wrong, that sort of thing if you've got a silver tongue, but two plus two is four no matter how you split it. Speed of light is a constant but only in a real universe. You can exceed the speed of the light if you invoke  $i$ , the root of negative one."

I shrugged.

"Problem is,  $i$ -space has real consequences. Well, sort of. It's better if I show you. After all, the way you're staring at me, I might as well have been speaking in tongues. When you get a chance, touch the walls. Feel what you feel. Outside, there's nothing. In real-space, there's particle-antiparticle pairs appearing and disappearing like that." He snapped his fingers. "But here, there's nothing at all. Nothing outside, just in."

"Look, stop talking 'bout religion, all right? It was Hell. There was nothing saintly about it, about the other boys and some of the brothers I was sure were devils. That I'd rather die than be back there should tell you something."

"Oh, it does. A lot."

"So. Stop."

"Deal."

#

"There's two problems with a m'am. The only way to contain the fluids is with a magnetic field. But one that runs hot, like ours, fails sometimes. Only for a split, but it's enough." He ran his fingers over his pocks. "And even if the mag containment doesn't fail, sometimes there's a collision. Two gamma rays." He made a V with his fingers for emphasis. "There's lead all around

the tube, but in some spots the bursts have made thin spots and the gamma gets out. It's why fools think we glow."

There was a klaxon.

"Going to a pinch. In real-space, no time passes." He snapped his fingers. "But not in i-space. Watch the numbers on the 'gram. And, three, two, one."

I'd expected, as you probably would too, some sort of shudder or high-pitched whine or something, but there was nothing like that all. The 'grams, however, went crazy.

"i-space. See these numbers?" His fingers were thin and long. His nails were sharp and yellow. "In real-space, mass, charge and spin are entirely predictable. But in i-space, they can be anything. See? Here, for example. Electrons and positrons have a spin of a half in real-space but here they can be anything at all. Lot of times it's a factor of pi, which is hard to correct for. You and I, we've gotta keep our eyes on the numbers, use these sliders to reject the false numbers, keep the engine going."

"And artificial minds?"

He snorted. "Grown in a vat of logic? Deprived of the basics of human experience? The fictions? The lies? That, that is what separates us from machines. Only our minds," he tapped his temple, "can separate fact from fiction. Parsing the real from the imaginary."

I stared at him.

"This space? We created it. People did, people like you and me. It's why logic doesn't work here, it's a fiction."

"Idle minds," I said.

He nodded. "i-space is the devil's work, like everything else made by men. God set limits, boundaries between the real and imaginary; the devil broke 'em. God is real, without an atom of fiction to Him. He can't be here."

"So this is Hell?"

"As close as you'll get. Remember, the devil's also the Father of Lies."

After that, we didn't talk. It was hard work. The numbers were sometimes obvious, but often subtle, the interplay of mass, charge and spin adding up to something that was so close it might have been real if not for something - you couldn't quite put your finger on it, you just felt it - something that just wasn't quite right.

"Like pushing a rock up a hill. You think you're almost there and then," - he snapped his fingers again - "forget it, it's all back to square one. When you get a chance, put your hand on the bulkhead. Or better, your forehead."

You sweated a lot, parsing. It dripped down your back, off your armpits and down your sides, down your cheeks, into your mouth, your eyes. And that burned, made it hard to see, hard to parse.

"Take a break, huh? She's not a big ship. She's not called the Nutshell for nothing. You take two rights, a down, a left and one more down and there's a cafe."

Remember, I came up in a box so I had no real idea how big the ship was but I found it strange how I was entirely alone and, after a while, lost. St. Anselm's was mostly a large and very old former prison (and sort of current prison)) with bricks that were always damp when it was raining. And it was always raining. That's why the holly bushes grew like weeds all around, thick and tall and deep, a moat of close branches and brambles. As good as wire for the most part. The ship's walls were circular except on the narrow floor and made of some sort of metal that was empty to touch. Not cold or warm or wet or dry or anything. You couldn't walk through it but otherwise it was as if wasn't real.

It wasn't cold but I felt a chill. This was, for the moment, the entirety of the universe. I was terrified we'd never fall back into real-space.

After a long time of up and down and left and right, I found what passed for a cafeteria. St. Anselm's had one where women with no hair and big moles ladled out under- or overcooked potatoes, beans, cheap vitamins. Here there was just a rack of sticks, nothing but sticks. Meat sticks, vegetable sticks, antimicrobial sticks, uppers and downers. And squeeze bottles of over-sweetened juice.

I picked several and sat in one of four seats around a plastic table. A while later a boy came in. You could tell he was 'hanced, the way he walked and talked. I've been eight years old, I've known more than I can count, and none of them were like him.

"You must be the parson's new boy."

I stood up, ready to beat him. "The what?"

"Parson. There's only three of us. Now four. The captain, me, the parson and you. There'll be three again, I hope. I'm hoping to get off soon."

"He's a parser, not a parson. Me too."

The boy nodded. His eyes were a curious color, almost without color, and I'd swear they flashed. Mechanical eyes or something. Not human. "He's that, and a parson too."

"He never told me that."

"You're from St. Anselm's, right? He told you he was a righteous man, what would you have done? 'Sides, we don't know he's really a parson or not, but he passes."

I swore. "Is everyone a true believer?"

"The parson and me now. You aren't, I'm guessing, and the captain ain't either."

I sat down. "Does everyone know St. Anselm's? It's just one building on one lousy world."

He nodded. "It's our business. Me, I coulda let my old man beat my ass 'til I was dead, or silicon up. You gotta get permission where I came from, but there's way around it. Like you, you know? Parsers are supposed to be thoroughly vetted," - they talked like that; it's one way to know one from the other - "'fore they slide, but not you." He tapped his temple.

"They're just hallucinations. 'Sides you got those chips, right? They know what's real and what's not."

He shook his head. "Didn't he tell you 'bout the minds? Same with the chips. You have to shut 'em down during a pinch or they go mad. It's like having a dream only with a dream sooner or later you wake up and know that it was only a dream. But here you're awake and there's no firm boundary between the true and false. It's enough to drive a man mad. It's why parsers usually have extensive training, but no silicon."

"So you're human when we pinch? Fully human? How's that make you feel?"

His voice was tight. Controlled. Saying they're not human can get you locked up a lot of places. "You think we're different, you and me? What you do to get here? Stick someone? Can't get out of a place like you did without leaving a few bodies. But the difference between you and me? I know what I did. Know what it means. I've accepted."

I got up to collar him, beat him, teach him a lesson I'd learned more times than he had, but he was smaller, quicker.

"Clean up the trash, huh? Captain Fokke doesn't like shit like that laying around case we lose spin."

I stood up.

"Parson says every man rises to his purpose," he said and grinned.

He was at the hatch before I could reach him.

I got lost again trying to get back. You learned at St. Anselm's to be aware of your space, so you could hide when you needed to, or run.

The captain was too tall to really be a man, with shoulders that nearly touched both sides of the bulkhead and a great black beard as thick and prickly as holly bushes. (I still had a hundred or maybe a thousand scratches to prove just how thick and prickly they are.)

"You been looking for me. I been looking for you."

"No. Um, sir. What about?"

He held out his hand. His hands were heavy with calluses, his nails bit to the quick, his iron grip painful. You didn't expect hands like that on a captain of a ship like this. "Captain Fokke."

"I thought the parser called you Briggs. Captain Briggs. Sir."

"Either's fine. Been a long time at this." He sighed. "A long, long time. Some would say whole lifetimes. Man sometimes needs a couple different names keep from being too known. Benjamin. Bernard. After a while, like everything else, names don't matter." He studied his fingernails. "Got a squirt says a boy escaped St. Anselm's. Says there's a reward."

"I'm emancipated."

His laugh was ugly. "The Hell you are." He sighed. "But, we've got a schedule to keep. Java's a long run and there's plenty boys at St. Anselm's. They'll forget about you before they ever forgive you."

I said nothing. What could I say?

"First mate says you harassed him 'bout being 'hanced.

It's a crime, you should know. But not like knifing a priest."

"I didn't want to, of all of them he was one of the few who was nice, but I'd gone too far. 'Sides I only cut him a little. Had to show him I was serious but I wasn't gonna kill him."

"Sometimes we gotta do things that are necessary but ain't right." He shrugged. "You did what you had to. We all do. Even the parson. Mate says you gave him shit."

I nodded.

"You did what you had to. Right?" He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "Kid's a prick. Should've been a cabin boy, not a mate. Won't be a problem for long anyway. His family's waiting."

"You've got cabin boys?"

"Oh, Hell no. Not for a long, long, long time. "Got these nasty little machines," - he wiggled his fingers - "That keep things clean. Or you." He laughed unpleasantly. "Mate told me 'bout that. Kid's at least got a sense of humor."

Now my voice was tight and controlled. "You wanted to see me?"

"You did, son. This here ship's a little different than most. A little different than when she started. So're the people who're on it. Used to be more, a lot more." His voice was low and quiet now. "My wife and baby girl, for example. You're an unbeliever, and that's important. Parson wants you to accept, but you know better. Like me. We gotta stick together. You cave and he wins."

"Is this a game?"

He shrugged. "Tell me what else it is."

"Parson says the devil's real."

"Oh, he is. Evil is. But God? Parson will tell you He's real but He can't be here, in imaginary space, but you and I are real, right? Solid." He punched my shoulder hard. "Evil's real, so's the devil. I know that for an absolute fact. It ain't as if God don't exist, but that He's abandoned us." He poked me in the chest. It hurt a lot more than it should've. "You. Me. The parson especially. Not the mate no more. Little fucker's jumping ship like the rat he is. You getting the pieces yet?"

"Pieces?" I shook my head.

He shook his. "You're lost, right? Really lost. I'll take you back to the parson. I don't accept, never will, but sometimes he finds the light for someone weak or desperate enough. Did for my mate, huh?"

I'd swear the way he led me wasn't the way I'd come, or even possible. But we find the m'am quickly enough, and the parson welcomed me. "Need a break myself."

He left me there, so did the captain, left me to slide the numbers. You could tell we'd gone deeper into i-space. The numbers were absurd. I'd thought earlier had been tough, me and the parson sweating bullets, but alone it was very nearly impossible.

It wasn't until my eyes were bleary, my hands cramped, my fingers raw and bloody that the parson returned and casually leaned against the bulkhead.

"You gonna help out?"

He chewed on his fingernail and spat out a yellow piece. "Time is it?"

My watch was broken, the glass cracked and the hands bent. It was cheap but it'd been a birthday gift from Father Antonio.

"When you break it?"

"I don't remember."

He nodded. "Maybe in the holly bushes? Or the cargo box in the freighter? Though that was dark, right? Dark and cold. A transition maybe? How much you remember between the bushes and the box?"

I thought for a while. "Nothing."

He sighed. "Lot of guys figure it out before now. Captain likes you, which is good 'cause you're gonna be here a while I think."

The klaxon sounded.

"You can rest for a while, but soon enough you'll have to be back here. Come on. There's something you should see."

We went to an observation bubble where you could see the tube, a sort of inky black nothingness blotting out the light of the universe, connecting the ship from the station. The mate came out the other end and all the people hugged him or patted his shoulder or shook his hand, and then they walked away.

The parson draped his arm around my shoulder. "Tell me something. Would you like to go out there?"

Where the mate had gone and all those people had stood was empty. "Where are we?"

"Want you to look at one more thing." He put his finger to my chest, right where the captain had that had hurt so much, and then pushed a little. His finger disappeared to his last knuckle.

"Oh God!" I leaped away and his finger came out, his skin, his nails still clean and yellow.

"Captain still won't accept it. He laughed when he signed. Ninety days to make that trip, and only his soul in return. And since he was sure he didn't a soul, he was bargaining away empty air. But just 'cause you don't know you have a fortune don't mean it can't be taken. Makes it easier is all. The mate, he finally understood."

"Understood what?"

He poked me in the chest again, and it hurt. "You got shot 'cause you stuck the priest. You think you just cut him a little but you nicked an artery. Stuck in the holly bushes, you were a sitting duck. I'll tell you that, but the rest you gotta figure out."

Which is why I'm writing this down. The captain gave me his log, which is this old-fashioned paper book, a quill and an inkpot, (he had to show me how to use them) and told me to write whatever I needed. When I tried to turn back to see what else was written, the pages were blank; but when I tried to write on those, the ink spilled off like water off wax.

I've got all the pieces. I can even see what the puzzle's supposed to look like. But the rest? I tried feeling the walls in real space again and again and you can feel the difference. Sometimes they're cold and sometimes warm - depends on how close and if you face the sun. Sometimes I think I see Father Antonio's ghost trying to tell me something, I hope to forgive me. But there's no saints in i-space. Only three of us. Only me, the captain, the parson. And the parson don't count.

###

## Bingo's Luck

by Clifford W. Dunbar

"My brother says you cheated him last night."

I opened my eyes slowly, squinting up through bright Florida sunlight. My nose wrinkled at the smell of last night's alcohol.

"We want the money back." The man was tall and heavysset and wore a shiny new brown leather jacket. I recognized one of his three companions from our little gambling session of the night before. Derek. He must have been the brother in question. He wore a leather jacket too.

"Could you keep it down?" I said. "Bingo's trying to sleep."

Bingo's fat black head rested on my lap. He was snoring. My hand rested on his tightly muscled shoulder.

"Forget about your dumb dog!" one of the group said. The man wore a scarlet bandana around his head, a sleeveless white T-shirt, and a gold wristwatch. He must have been the token white guy, maybe even the kind who enjoyed slumming with us black people.

"That Bingo is his lucky dog, Malik," Derek warned his brother. "He said the dog was how come the coins always came up his way."

"That mangy mutt?" Malik said.

"Derek's right. Bingo's my lucky dog."

"No such thing!" the white guy said.

"Shut up, Johnny!" Malik loomed over me and stared down at Bingo. He pressed his hand into the palm tree trunk above my head. "That dog don't look so lucky to me."

"But how else could he win so much money?" Derek protested.

"He must have cheated!" Malik crouched down low enough for me to smell the fresh new leather of his jacket. "Where's our money?"

"Take it easy," I said. "You don't want to wake Bingo. Besides, people are starting to stare."

The gang looked around suspiciously. We were in Miami's Bayfront Park, clear blue ocean on one side and busy Biscayne Boulevard on the other. Behind us was a bustling cluster of overpriced tourist shops. In front of us, a bunch of college kids tossed a frisbee around instead of studying the books that filled their scattered backpacks.

"There ain't no one looking at us!" said the fourth man. His head was shaved and he wore a silver ring through his nose. His gold wristwatch partially covered an extravagant tattoo.

Clack-clack-clack. A gaudy little girl with loud wooden sandals marched along the sidewalk, hand in hand with her mother. Across the street, an old man running with a baseball bat in one hand and a cell phone in the other pushed through and around straggling gaggles of people. I had only been in Miami for two days; maybe that kind of behavior was normal here.

"Give me your wallet!" Malik said.

"I already spent the money." I gestured at the fast-food styrofoam that fluttered emptily at my elbow. "There isn't enough left to matter."

"Let me see!" Malik demanded. "Let me see how much is left!"

"OK. Just don't wake Bingo." I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet, with the sad spirit of submission diligently drilled into me by the bullies of my childhood schoolyards. I was careful not to disturb my snoozing canine companion.

"There's only five dollars in here!" Malik exclaimed.

"Hey," Derek said. "He's not carrying any ID!"

Only because I didn't know how to obtain the fake kind. I was still working out the finer details of the fugitive life style.

"Where's your ID?" Derek asked, obviously offended by my social irresponsibility. "Who are you?"

"I don't have it any more." I had buried the name Ryan Wilson with all my little plastic cards in a cold mountain cave in Montana two weeks ago, the day after Bingo's first birthday.

"Get up!" Malik said, at the same time making it impossible for me to do so, since he was standing right in my face.

"But I don't want to disturb Bingo --"

Malik slammed his dirty Nike into my side with a swift strong kick. The heavyset man had it all over me in weight. I took a spin that sprawled me onto my face. Poor Bingo got knocked flat on his back.

Like most of his kind, Bingo sleeps a lot. But Bingo wakes up especially hard. It was one of the traits that cost him his breeding rights in the Project. Too bad that wasn't all it cost him.

"Mommy, look!" The little girl with the loud shoes pointed at Bingo. "That dog's eyes just changed color!"

The squat lady yanked her daughter away without a glance in our direction. "Don't be silly, dear. Dogs' eyes can't change color."

Parents should give their kids more credit.

Bingo sprang to his feet and shook his head, throwing off deep sleep like icy cold bathwater. His gaze keened from deep dark blue into bright golden alertness.

"But look, Mommy!"

The lady humored her daughter by turning for an instant, then gasped. "Filthy animal!" She pulled on her daughter's hand again and they made off in the direction of the overpriced souvenir shops.

I had darkened Bingo's bright crimson and gold flanks with the local topsoil. How else was I supposed to disguise what he was?

Bingo snarled at Malik and the gentle ocean breeze went from balmy to brisk. The surrounding barometric pressure dipped in response to the sudden heat differential, disturbing the air and kicking up small gusts of wind. Micrometereological phenomena they called that back at Hermes Project headquarters. They could be very messy.

"I warned you not to wake him," I gasped, clutching at the pain in my side.

Malik looked at Bingo and laughed. "What, that little dog? I'm supposed to be afraid of that little thing?"

"Hey, he's not that little," I protested. Malik was just being insulting now. The Hermes Project veterinarians had given Bingo a thorough physical on his birthday. Bingo measured 21 inches at the shoulder.

Bingo shook his head and bounced forward, nostrils flaring. He sniffed the air and flicked his gaze from me, to Malik, to the other gang members. Finally he zeroed in on Malik. He growled and gathered his hind legs under him for a mighty leap forward. He sprang.

He didn't get far. A brightly colored butterfly swirled across his path. His eyes went from yellow to green. He wagged his tail and playfully attempted to sniff the fluttering bug. The air calmed down around him as he romped away from us in pursuit of his new friend.

Ah, Bingo. If only you were a little more... reliable. We wouldn't be in this position. We would still be at Camp Williams, the Hermes Project's top secret breeding center in the Montana mountains, like the loyal soldiers we had turned out not to be.

Malik and his band of followers ignored my K9 partner and advanced on me instead. Malik kicked me again.

I tried to point out that it wasn't really cheating if I explained my strategy beforehand and they agreed to play anyway. I had told Derek right up front that Bingo was my lucky dog. If Malik hadn't knocked the wind out of me, I might have been able to reason with him. As it was, however, his distinguished companions decided to join him in the kickfest.

"Yeah, think you can cheat us!" Derek let loose with another good one to my chest.

Bingo must have heard my involuntary cry of anguish. He spun around to face us again. His ears went back flat and he bared his teeth and charged. Stray gusts of wind swirled around him, throwing up dried leaves and old grass clippings. Hackles rose all up and down the coarse dark fur of his neck, shoulders, and back.

This was it, I thought. Bingo's in full attack mode now!

All the Hermes Project dogs were trained in the basics of hand-to-hand combat. Some learned better than others, of course.

The wind picked up speed along with Bingo's anger. He rushed forward in classic attack position, eyes narrowed and tail down, opening his mouth to take a big bite out of Malik's big butt.

"Heads up!" I shouted to the gang. "Here he comes!"

But Bingo stumbled over his own four feet and smashed snout-first into the ground. He looked up and shook his head, a dazed expression settling over his gentle features.

Derek laughed and kicked me again.

My little Bingo. The runt of the litter, but still near and dear to my heart. At least the little guy was trying.

I tasted blood and rolled away, trying to stand up and maybe call for help from the college students. They were still happily throwing their red frisbee in the air. But before I got a chance to shout, the pierced guy grabbed me from behind and tossed me down to the ground again. I tried to grab for a handful of his metal rings, but he just swatted my hand away. Apparently he was ready for that one.

"Them students ain't going to help you!" he laughed.

He was right. The college students didn't even look in my direction. This kind of thing must happen all the time in Miami. All I had ever known was a Mississippi farmhouse and the US military, and neither of those had worked out particularly well for me. Not that life on the run from the Hermes Project's notorious Reclamations Unit was working out all that great either.

It was the token white guy's turn. He kicked me in the face. Bingo raised his head just in time to see it. He pulled his lips back and growled again. The micrometeorological phenomena stirred up some loose dust and leaves and knocked the frisbee out of its smooth trajectory.

The red saucer wobbled in the air and dipped in our direction. For one brief moment, it crossed between Bingo and the sun and threw a fleeting shadow into the H-dog's eyes.

Startled, Bingo jerked his head up and barked at the flying object.

Blam. The frisbee blew apart in mid-air. Tiny bits of hot plastic shot out in all directions. One of them smashed into a nearby streetlight.

The light burst with a loud popping sound. Glass showered onto Biscayne Boulevard and onto the rows of cars parked there.

Car alarms sprang to life as falling glass hit the motionless vehicles, whooping and wailing and whining in a deafening din.

The old man with the baseball bat had reversed course and was slowly walking back. He turned and gaped in the direction of the car alarms. Malik and Derek and associates were directly in his line of sight. He raised his baseball bat and shook it at them.

"You!" he yelled. "You thieves! Shoplifters! You stole those leather jackets and watches from my store!" The man waved his cell phone in the air. "I called the cops on you!"

The old man jumped into the street and ran straight for us. Six lanes of cars honked and skidded all around him. He made it across unhit, a living tribute to the masterful skills of the Miami driver.

Malik and his gang looked up at the sound of the old man's voice. They looked at each other and looked around the park, obviously considering a multitude of pre-planned escape routes.

"Did he say he called the cops?" Derek asked.

"I'm outta here!" Malik said.

They took off running past the college students, who were searching everywhere for their lost frisbee. The old man was right behind them, waving his bat and shouting directions into his phone as the sirens grew louder. I rolled over and put my arm around Bingo. "I told them you were my lucky dog," I gasped.

Bingo wagged his tail and licked my face. A lot. I felt better. Bingo crouched low and bounced back and forth on his forelegs. He wanted to play, but we had no time. I painfully picked myself up off the ground and fumbled in my jeans for Bingo's leash. Law enforcement was on the way and I didn't want to be around when they arrived, even though we hadn't broken any laws that they would know about except maybe the laws of physics.

We played it safe and crossed Biscayne Boulevard at the nearest stoplight. Even so, some idiot honked while we were right in front of him. He drove a silver Porsche convertible and was all prettied up with gold chains and a loose silk shirt. He was probably trying to make an impression on his South Beach model girlfriend. Bingo yipped in surprise, wide-eyed and startled at the sudden sound. Something popped in the guy's engine. There was a hissing noise and steam blew out. I kept walking, pretending not to notice. Bingo didn't make it easy to keep a low profile but that didn't stop me from trying. A few more steps past the curb and the driver's curses quickly faded into the background noise.

I was aiming for a small grocery store I had spotted late last night. It was closed at the time, but should be open now. Bingo needed his morning meal and a cup of coffee wouldn't hurt me either. I didn't want to follow the route we had taken last night, which would have meant three blocks west and three blocks north. It would be smarter to zigzag, taking one block west then one block north and so on. That way I could pick out a tail if there was one. Just like in the movies.

I was pleased with myself. I hadn't been here long, and already I was getting to know my way around downtown. I almost let myself believe I could stay for a while.

When I made my first right turn, Bingo's eyes greened and he pulled back hard on the leash. He dug his feet into the ground and whined.

"Bingo," I said. "Let's get a move on!"

So he sprang up and got a move on, but in the wrong direction. He wanted to retrace our steps of the night before.

"No!" I said. "Not that way!" I pulled back on the leash.

True, I was violating the rules of canine communication by using so many words. The trainers at Camp Williams taught us to keep the communication down to one or two syllables at a time. It helped the dogs to focus, they said. I didn't care. Bingo didn't focus half the time anyway.

But he sure focused now. He focused on not going anywhere. He sat down hard on the pavement and faced away from me and whined, his tail nervously beating against the sidewalk.

The last thing I wanted was to stay in one place for long. The Reclamations Unit was coming for us and I didn't want to make it easy for them.

"Come on, Bingo," I said. "Let's go this way instead. Explore new places, meet new people."

My fellow street people stared at me like I was crazy. This from a bunch of guys who slept under bridges and argued with the aluminum recyclables in their shopping carts.

"OK Bingo, you win." After all, we were a team. Why should I get to make all the decisions? Besides, we were attracting attention and that was not good. I relaxed my grip on the leash. "Lead on, my friend."

Bingo jumped up and rushed forward, his tail wagging in delight.

"Hey!" I said. "Heel!" Even Hermes Project rejects like Bingo knew better than to pull their handler along on their leash.

Bingo gave me some slack but his tongue hung out of his mouth and his tail waved in eager anticipation. We headed west along SE 1st Street, past the imported clothing and luggage stores, the way we had come the night before.

A lady with a shiny mobile food cart was doing a brisk business selling hot dogs, tacos, and things I didn't recognize to a line of pedestrians. Bingo's eyes turned an eager green and his tail wagged as he sniffed the air but he kept on going. Now that surprised me. He purposefully ignored fresh meat. Where could he be leading us?

I knew the answer as soon as I asked myself the question. It had to be to the same place he led us last night. I was still tired and hungry after two weeks of hopping trains and hiding in the back of pickup trucks to get down here from Camp Williams, and after the game with Derek I was eager to spend my winnings on an evening meal for us both. The grocery store was closed, but Bingo led us to a spot around the corner and stopped. I tried to urge him on, but he refused to budge until he was distracted by a stray cat. Only then was I able to get to the fast food place and order takeout. I hadn't paid much attention at the time.

Now we were back at the same place, and Bingo planted himself on the sidewalk again.

"Bingo! What is it about this place?"

He got up and wagged his tail, eyes green with eager anticipation.

I was willing to humor him, so I stood there for a few minutes by his side. Behind us, salsa music blared from a music store while in front of us reggae music blared from an electronics store. Bunches of birds perched on overhead utility lines. Cars were parked all along the street, except in front of the fire hydrant. In accordance with my new status as a wanted criminal, I checked the license plates for anything that looked government-issue. Everything looked civilian to me. Not that the Reclamations Unit would be so obvious anyway.

"Bingo," I said. "I just don't get it."

A teenage bicycle rider chimed her bike bell at a driver who opened his car door right in front of her and deftly swerved around him. Bingo looked up at the sound of the tinkle and glanced the girl's way in curiosity. Then he looked at me and bounced on his forepaws. He had forgotten why he stopped here. It was time to move on.

It didn't take us long to reach the grocery store. I slipped Bingo's leash around the thin tree outside and tied it securely. He cocked his head sideways, tongue lolling out of his mouth. I would have to leave him alone for a few minutes.

I tried to explain why. "It's not like it was in... well, you know where." I didn't want to say the name Camp Williams out loud. I might be a dognapper and a deserter, but I wasn't a traitor. "Back there, we handlers could bring dogs into the mess hall and the little store too. Out here in the real world, that kind of stuff is illegal." I put my hands on my hips and cocked my head to the side just like his. "Illegal! Can you believe it?"

Bingo barked in enthusiasm and for once nothing blew up. He cheerfully thumped his tail against the sidewalk as I pulled a smelly twenty dollar bill out of my left sock. Years of being bullied as a kid had taught me the value of a decoy wallet.

Once inside the store, I only took a few minutes to find what I needed. I was clutching a pound of ground beef and gulping down a hot cup of coffee as I walked back out into the heat.

"Bingo?"

He was gone. Even his leash was no longer tied to the tree.

I threw down the coffee but not the beef.

"Bingo?" I cried. "Bingo!"

No response, apart from a few curious stares from passing humans.

I tucked the bag of cold ground beef under my armpit and cupped my hands to my mouth.

"BINGO!!!"

Nothing. No howl to let me know he was near. No tap-tap-tap of running feet on the sidewalk as my canine companion rushed to my side.

All this shouting was getting me nothing but unwelcome attention. Time to reconsider strategy. I took a deep breath and tried to think.

Suppose Reclamations had come for Bingo. Would he really have let himself be taken without a fuss? Hard to say. But no point riding that train of thought, because if Reclamations had taken Bingo then he was probably dead by now.

Maybe Bingo remembered what he was looking for at his spot three blocks down and around the corner.

I burst into a run, startling a couple with a baby carriage. The baby cried. The woman cursed. The man flinched. I was sorry, but it couldn't be helped.

As I approached the corner, flocks of terrified birds darted across my path, squawking in terror and fleeing from something down the street where Bingo had stopped. Rats and mice scurried frantically from the same direction, squealing and screaming in panicked hysteria. A cat scrambled out of a garbage dumpster, hissing and clawing to get away, hair all puffed up in an instinctive fear response.

I stopped. Mundane animals always bolt in blind terror from true hermesdogs. Reclamations had found us.

I edged around the corner entrance of an electronics store and stared in horror. There was Bingo, back at the spot he had identified first last night and again this morning. But he was not alone.

With him was Ranger, another H-dog, but a superior model. Ranger had aced her H-Factor tests and then gone on to specialized training as a long-range tracker. She could track anybody anywhere on the planet.

No one could escape an H-capable tracker. I had been foolish even to try.

Bingo nuzzled the larger dog and sniffed in intimate places. Ranger patiently withstood Bingo's affection. Poor little Bingo. I felt sympathy and admiration for him at the same time. He had known a day in advance that Ranger would show up at this exact spot and had gone out of his way to meet her. While I had been desperately fleeing from Reclamations, innocent little Bingo had been seeking to lead us right to them.

Craig Strickland was now coaxing Bingo into the back seat of a late model Ford sedan parked in the exact spot the dog had predicted. Craig's sandy blond crewcut and light blue eyes looked right at home in the Florida sun. He spotted me and turned to face me, smiling and smirking at the same time.

"I came for my cargo," he said, holding Bingo's leash up like a hard-won trophy. "And I got it."

It was Craig who had untied Bingo from the tree.

"Let him go," I said.

Craig ignored me. "I knew we were close when I overheard some little girl babbling to her mother about how she saw a dog whose eyes changed colors." He smirked again. "From there, all I had to do was follow the sirens. And all those car alarms. Was that you too?"

Bingo wagged his tail happily.

"Let him go."

Craig shook his head. "You know the drill, soldier. Your pup didn't make the cut. It's cargo now, and I always get my cargo."

Through the open door of Craig's car I could see a shiny aluminum item that looked like a small briefcase. But I knew what it really was.

"Bingo is more than just cargo."

"Open your eyes, Ryan. That's all it is. It's the same with any of the dogs that come from... You know."

Of course I knew. The Hermes Project, the secret US Army initiative named after the ancient Greek god of alchemy. The scientists at Camp Williams used the lead-into-gold metaphor for

the selective breeding of ordinary military dogs into extraordinary canines. They did this by administering tests designed to measure special abilities and breeding the high scorers. But not everybody gets to make a splash in the gene pool. Bingo's scores were too erratic, too unstable for him to be a useful hermesdog.

"You can't have Bingo," I said, clenching my fists.

Craig laughed. "Ryan, I already have it!"

"You're not going to kill him and put his brain in that thing!"

The shiny briefcase was a cargo container, specially constructed to hermetically seal a canine brain in its interior and preserve it during transport.

Craig shook his head. "The brain is cargo. That's all it is. Something for the guys in the white coats to study in The Lab."

None of us knew where The Lab was, but we all knew you pronounced it with capital letters.

Craig shrugged. "Can we get on with this? It'll be a lot easier if we work together. I'll let the major know you cooperated and maybe after a few months' probation he'll let you stay."

A few months' probation meant scooping poop and cleaning cages back at Camp Williams. I didn't mind the work, but I couldn't bear sacrificing Bingo.

"I'm not going back," I said. "Neither is Bingo."

Craig looked genuinely sad. "I can't let a failed experiment run around unsupervised. It wasn't bred to be a pet, you know."

"Bingo's not a pet! He's my ward."

"Come on, Ryan. A selective breeding program means that some animals won't make it, remember?" He was quoting from the training manual. "Bingo just happened to be one of them. I'm sure they'll assign you another, in time."

And if that one failed too?

"We're not talking about breeding cows for milk, or horses for speed," I said.

"That's exactly what we're talking about. Just the parameters are different."

"But Bingo is more than that!"

"Bingo is US Army property, and you stole it." Craig reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small cylindrical vial.

"Put that away," I said, stepping closer. The little brown pills were designed to produce heart failure with minimal damage to cerebral tissue. They smelled like meat so they would be irresistible to the dogs.

Craig looked around. Pedestrians were going about their business, and no one was paying much attention to us. He lifted the side of his touristy flamingo-decorated shirt just high enough to expose the top of the pistol stuffed into his waistband. "You won't be able to stop me."

Bingo pulled his snout out of Ranger's anatomy at the sight of the pistol. His eyes widened and his gaze shifted from blue to yellow. One ear bent back; the other stood at attention. A quick gust of wind tossed loose litter around the street.

"Please..." I was begging now. "Please, let him go. Just say you never found us. No one has to know you let us escape."

Craig shook his head. "You're not making this any easier for yourself." He popped the top on the vial and tipped it so that one tiny brown tablet fell into his hand.

I quickly unwrapped the pound of ground beef I still carried and stepped forward. A tasty little pill was one thing but a whole pound of fresh ground beef was quite another. "Bingo! Bingo, come here!" I held the beef in my outstretched hand.

"Don't even try it," Craig warned. He kneeled on the sidewalk and pulled hard on the leash, dragging Bingo closer to him. Bingo protested, digging his feet into the ground. He growled at Craig.

Ranger stood over Bingo and lowered her head and bared her teeth. Wind rustled palm fronds and palmetto bushes as Bingo struggled in Craig's grip and Ranger closed her jaws around Bingo's neck.

"She's trained to restrain other canines," Craig commented. "All the Reclamations dogs are." He grabbed Bingo's snout and forced his fingers into his mouth to pry it open. His other hand held the pill.

Still Bingo could not take his eyes off the pistol. All hermesdogs knew that small arms meant danger. They all underwent training in defensive techniques.

Craig pushed the pill into Bingo's mouth.

"No!" I yelled, and threw the ground beef at Craig's hand.

"Ow!" Craig yelled as the meat hit his wrist. The pill went flying. Red-faced with anger, he turned to face me. His change in position put the pistol at his hip directly in front of Bingo's face.

Bingo's eyes clouded over with the dim recollection of recent training. The Camp Williams scientists had developed a small arms defensive technique they called "snuffing". When the bad guy pulled the trigger, the well-trained H-dog responded by snuffing the spark that made the bullet go boom. Bingo's response, as usual, didn't work out exactly as planned.

He blinked. The pistol went off and tore a bloody hole in Craig's pants. The bullet ricocheted off the pavement near the middle of the street and smashed through the wide display window of the appliance store. It blew away one of the TVs in the window.

A fire started inside the store. The fire alarm went off. The sprinkler system turned on.

Half a dozen soaking wet customers pushed each other out the front door, over the sidewalk, and out into the street.

An oncoming cement truck swerved around the customers and plowed into a red Toyota parked on our side of the street.

The red Toyota slammed forward into a white Dodge van, which slammed into the yellow fire hydrant and bent it sideways. Water gushed from the ground beneath the hydrant, a pressurized surge that blasted Ranger off her feet and tossed her against the display window behind us. She slumped to the sidewalk, unconscious.

Craig barely had time to scream about the bloody burn on his thigh. He dropped Bingo's leash and rushed to Ranger's side to save her from drowning under the spraying water.

Sirens again. The valiant employees of the City of Miami were having a busy day.

"Bingo!" I grabbed his leash. "Heel!"

The gunfire might have deafened him. My own ears were still ringing. I gave the leash a little tug. Bingo gave me a dazed look and then stared off in the direction of the ground beef. It was gone, washed away by the watery onslaught.

"Come on, Bingo. We'll get more." H-dogs need frequent feeding as much as they need frequent rest and I knew Bingo must be starving by now.

We set off north along 2nd Avenue, since the sirens seemed to be coming from the opposite direction. We quickly slipped through the crowd of the curious, come to see what all the fuss was about. A few blocks later we came across another sidewalk food vendor. We took a

moment to devour hot dogs and hamburgers, enjoying the comfortable seating and fragrant aromas of a busy downtown bus stop.

Then we were off again, wandering the colorful and multilingual streets of Miami while I pondered our fate. Craig and Ranger would be occupied for a little while, but they had come a long way and a little mishap with a fire hydrant was not going to stop them from completing their mission. How could we escape a pursuer who could track us anywhere?

Only by going somewhere they would be unwilling to follow. Some third world hellhole maybe? But hermesdogs were already deployed in the worst of those areas. Some other not-so-friendly country then, one that might take offense at learning that a top secret mess had spilled over into their backyard and had to be cleaned up by another product of the same top secret project. The bureaucrats behind the Hermes Project would hardly risk those repercussions. If I found such a country and kept a low profile, they might leave Bingo and me in peace.

As vague as it was, it was the only plan I had. I still had to figure out where to go and how to get there. I was sad to think of leaving the US and apprehensive about a new life in a new country, but it was our only choice. Still struggling with these thoughts, I took a deep breath and looked up.

Where were all the tall buildings?

I spun around and oriented myself. Miami's pretty skyscrapers were maybe a mile behind us. While I was lost in my dismal depressing thoughts, Bingo had been forging bravely onward into the unknown without the invaluable benefit of my expert guidance.

I gave a little tug on his leash to try to turn him around.

"Hey, Bingo!" I tugged again. "About face! Heel, boy!"

He didn't respond. He just kept slogging ahead.

A bridge sprouted out of the landscape in front of us. How was I supposed to know Miami had a river? I thought Florida was all beaches and orange trees. I also thought it was strange to see pleasure boats and barges sharing the same waterway, passing through such a desolate part of town.

A wide paved sidewalk near the waterside was decorated with terraced yellow brick planters where a mishmash of flowers and bushes and weeds struggled to survive. The sprinkler system was rusted over. The poor plants were mostly dried up and neglected, just like the three people who lay sleeping it off on the sidewalk.

Bingo walked to the other side of one of the terraced rectangular planters and found a spot in the shade. He turned all the way around, almost like he was chasing his tail, and finally settled down. He fell asleep immediately.

This had been a tough day for Bingo. I sat down too and leaned back against the brick planter. The tall pillars that supported the bridge blocked the sun here, and the shadows brought welcome relief from the mid-afternoon heat. I closed my eyes and followed Bingo into slumberland. It was nice there. But it ended too soon.

I gasped in pain at the sharp blow to my ribs. I would know that nasty Nike anywhere. I opened my eyes and peered up at a fat face framed by the park's bright spherical lights.

"Ha-ha!" Malik laughed. "Hey, cheater! Remember us?"

Afternoon had turned into night, and apparently this park was a regular hangout for Malik and his followers. They were still wearing their leather jackets and gold wristwatches.

"What? You thought an old man with a baseball bat could catch us?" said Johnny with the red bandana. "We left him eating our dust!"

Bingo ran circles around the gang, happily wagging his tail. His eyes were green with delight. The friendly little H-dog had led us here on purpose, intentionally reuniting us with his new friends. Sourly I began to wonder if the little runt was worth saving after all.

"What do you want from me? I told you I don't have your money anymore!"

"I don't believe you," Malik said. "Get up. Empty your pockets!"

I leaned against the brick planter and pulled myself to my feet. The four of them blocked any possible escape. Bingo pranced up and down with happiness. The dog was useless.

I turned my pockets out. Some small change dropped to the ground.

"You see? I told you there wasn't much left."

"Search everywhere," Derek suggested. "Make him take his shoes off."

"Do it!" Malik said. "And your socks, too!"

Like some of the more thorough lunch money bandits of my school days, they had me. I knew better than to put up a fight. All I could do was pull the cash out of my socks, hand it over, and hope for the best.

"Take it," I said to Malik.

"You lied to us!" Malik said. "There must be hundreds of dollars here!"

"I never lied to you! I told you I didn't have your money. I only won twenty bucks off Derek, and I already spent it, like I said."

"So how did you get all this money?" asked the pierced guy.

"I told you!" How many times did I have to repeat it? "Bingo's my lucky dog!" Bingo had talents outside the scope of the Hermes Project's target parameters. I had already taught him to control the outcome of a coin toss. We were working on dice, too. After that, he could graduate to roulette wheels and slot machines. Bingo was eager to please and a willing student. The hard part was keeping him focused.

"Malik," Derek said. "Why don't we take the dog? We could use a lucky dog!"

Bingo was sniffing the pierced guy now. The guy scowled and swung at him open-handed. Bingo dodged just in time.

"He's my dog," I said. "He won't stay with you. He'll just come running back to me."

"He'll stay with us if you tell him to," Malik said.

He might, at least until he forgot what I told him.

"Besides, we've got this." Derek grabbed the leash and yanked hard. Bingo scrambled to keep his footing. He looked back and forth between me and Derek, his head cocked sideways and his tongue hanging half out of his mouth.

I shook my head. "You can't have him. Now let him go."

Malik raised his fist and shoved it in my face. "What are you going to do about it?"

The only thing I could do.

"I'll flip you for him. Heads, Bingo stays with you and I walk away. You keep the money, too. Tails, Bingo stays with me and we walk away together. Either way, you guys keep the money, so you can't really lose."

"I'll flip for that," Malik said eagerly.

"Hey, wait a minute," Derek said. "If he's really your lucky dog, won't the coin come up your way anyway?"

I wasn't so sure. "But we're flipping to see whose lucky dog he is. While the coin is in the air, Bingo isn't anybody's lucky dog. He only becomes someone's lucky dog when the coin lands."

Derek looked skeptical.

"Besides," I reminded Derek, "you're the one holding the leash."

"Let's do it!" Malik said. "Johnny, gimme a quarter!"

"Use one of his," Johnny said, pointing to the coins that had spilled from my pockets to the ground.

"No!" Derek said. "We should use our own money."

"What's your problem, Johnny?" Malik said. "I'll give it right back to you!"

Johnny frowned as he plucked a shiny new quarter out of his pocket. He handed it to Malik. "You better!"

Malik fingered the quarter for a moment, closing his eyes and whispering supplications to whatever generous deity had so richly blessed his life thus far. He tossed the coin into the air.

The quarter twirled up and then back down again. It clinked ominously against the pavement a few times before it came to a complete stop.

We all peered down at George Washington's grim countenance.

I had lost him. I lost Bingo.

"Ha ha!" Malik mocked. "Ha ha! We got ourselves a lucky dog!"

Bingo wagged his tail with happiness, nuzzling his new friends like long-lost lovers reunited. He had traded me in for another set of humans.

"Bingo?" Not since Sandra Lee Norton rejected me in the third grade had I been so hurt.

"You lost, cheater!" Derek said.

Bingo pushed his head under Malik's hand, practically begging to be scratched. My stomach sank down to my knees and took my heart with it. Could I get him back by force? Probably not. There were four of them and one scrawny me. Even so... Even so, Bingo had made his choice and I had to respect that.

"Get out of here, cheater!" said the pierced guy.

"Bingo?" Could I at least say good-bye?

The dog turned away from me and sniffed at Derek's pants.

I rubbed the back of my hand against my mouth so no one would see my lower lip tremble.

"Get lost, cheater!" Derek said. He reached down and found a rock and threw it at me. I winced as it struck my shoulder.

"He likes ground beef," I said quickly. "You don't have to cook it. And make sure he gets his exercise. He needs to run and play every day. And let him sleep when he needs to..."

Malik threw another rock. It hit me in the chest. I dodged another rock from Derek, and then Johnny and the pierced guy joined in. I gave Bingo a last longing look and walked out past the bright illumination of the park lights and into the darkness.

I paused for a moment, hoping that at the last minute Bingo would come bounding back to me, wagging his tail and begging for play and maybe even falling flat on his face.

It didn't happen.

Anxiety gripped me like a mugger grips a baseball bat. Were they treating him all right? I took a position behind a bush and watched them for a while. Malik was flipping Johnny's quarter and laughing victoriously every time it landed. Johnny had pulled a bottle from somewhere and was sitting on a bench drinking from it. He didn't take his eyes off the coin. Derek and the pierced guy slapped each other on the back. Bingo wagged his tail high and bounced up and down on his forepaws.

I couldn't take it anymore. I needed to get away, so I broke into a run, as fast as I could, back the way we had come. Back to Bayfront Park, where I could lean against a palm tree and cry the night away along with all the other sad souls miserable enough to spend the night there.

I stumbled onto a main road where four lanes of messy Miami traffic honked at me and at each other. I slowed to a walk, out of breath from the running and the sadness. Tears blurred the broken sidewalk in front of me and it took a moment to spot the stark darkness of my shadow against flashing white lights. A car engine roared up behind me and I spun around to see a late model Ford bump the curb and come right at me, hazard lights flashing and headlights on full beam, an excited H-dog barking in the rear seat.

The car skidded to a stop just before running me over. Craig Strickland leaned across the passenger seat and pushed open the door. He held his pistol below window level so the passing cars couldn't see it but I knew it was aimed right at me. He motioned with his arm. "Get in."

I hesitated for a moment, but I had nowhere else to go. I took a seat next to Craig and closed the door.

"Where's the runt?"

"Gone," I said sadly.

"Gone!" His face flushed with anger. I noticed his pants leg was burned and bloody from where the pistol had discharged. He pulled out a pair of handcuffs. "Put your hands behind you!"

I obeyed, greatly persuaded by the proximity of the pistol but also out of general apathy. Without Bingo, there was no more reason to keep up the fugitive routine.

"Where is it? I want my cargo!"

"He's not mine anymore."

Craig's jaw dropped. "What have you done, Wilson?"

"I lost him in a coin toss with the locals. I was supposed to win!"

Craig's face went expressionless. He said, quietly, "You released an untrained H-dog into the civilian population? Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?"

"I think so," I said.

"I should shoot you right now!"

"So do it!"

Craig slipped the pistol back into his pants. I knew he was way too law-abiding to shoot me.

"Ranger!" Craig said. "Find!" He held up a vial of scent. Essence of Bingo, distilled by one of the Hermes Project veterinarians for situations just like this.

Ranger clawed the back seat in excitement. Her eyes greened and she crouched low. Her snout stayed above the horizon, which meant Bingo was close. But I already knew that.

Craig turned the car in the direction Ranger indicated. "How many of them are there?"

"Four," I said.

"That's just great."

Ranger barked when Bingo was close enough for visual. Malik was challenging his captive audience of sleeping drunks and addicts to a game of coin toss and Bingo was faithfully following at his side along with the rest of his gang.

Craig parked the car by the side of the road and turned off the lights. He pulled a key out of his shirt pocket and unlocked my handcuffs.

"You're releasing me?"

"Not a chance." He slipped the cuffs through the steering wheel and locked them around my wrists again. The key went back into his shirt pocket. He got out of the car and slammed the door behind him without wasting any more words on me.

The back door opened and Ranger hit the ground running. Craig didn't bother with the leash. Ranger headed unhesitatingly for Bingo, zigzagging around the rectangular brick planters and hopping over the supine sleepers who lay unconscious on the sidewalk. Craig was right behind her.

Malik didn't see them coming, but Bingo did. The little guy ran -- as usual, in the wrong direction. Toward Ranger.

Bingo opened his mouth and bared his teeth. I stared in astonishment. Bingo was defending his newfound friends!

"Hey! Bingo!" I could read that much on Malik's lips even though I was too far away to hear him. Then Malik saw Ranger heading his way, head low and lips pulled back, eyes red with fury. The heavyset man stopped cold.

Bingo matched Ranger's red glare and raised his hackles. He stood his ground. Fresh wind pushed at the plants in the planters.

Ranger stopped short, snarling at Bingo. The two dogs locked eyes, both refusing to give. Cold winds whipped around them, knocking stray papers around and waking dozing drunks. Malik stood frozen. Derek and Johnny were unmoving. The pierced guy had already fled.

Craig walked up then, his shirt fluttering in the winds. He barked a command to Ranger, but I was too far away to hear it. The big H-dog leaped forward in a mad charge for her prey.

The globe-shaped park lights fizzled, startling Malik out of his frozen posture. He broke into a run. I heard a loud scream as the park lights flickered again and Malik smashed into one of the rectangular planters. The wind picked up as the two dogs closed in on each other, and the park lights went out entirely.

The sharp crack of gunfire. If it was Craig's, hopefully the pistol was in his hand this time.

A few streetlights still shone from down the block, but there was not enough illumination to make out the action. The wind pushed against the side of the car, but I heard nothing else above my own slowed breathing and accelerated heartbeat.

I reached over to turn the car's headlights on but the cuffs wouldn't stretch. I squirmed around in the seat and hit the switch with my shoe.

Light splashed forward and caught the park in the periphery. Malik was rolling on the ground in agony. Derek was standing over him. Craig held the pistol in front of him, obviously aimed at Bingo. He had missed, probably for fear of hitting Ranger. The two dogs were now entangled in a vicious fight, biting and tearing and clawing at each other. Micrometeorological phenomena surrounded them, whipping dust and dirt into the air.

With Malik writhing on the ground, Derek ran full-speed at Craig, fists raised as if to pummel him. He yelled something. I couldn't make it out through the car's closed windows, but it was clear to me that Derek thought Craig had shot his brother. Craig raised his pistol at Derek but Derek just kept on coming. I doubted Craig would shoot an unarmed civilian anyway.

I managed to work the handle of the driver's side door with my feet. I kicked the door open.

Blam! A passing car ripped the door off its hinges and tossed into the street in front of me.

Bingo spooked at the sudden loud noise and the passing car's engine burst into flames. The driver jumped out and took off running. He dropped a paper bag and a beer can bounced out of it and clattered to the street behind him, all shiny and colorful in the burst of engine fire.

The park lights stuttered on for a few seconds to highlight the sight of Derek and Johnny pounding on Craig before going dark again. Craig called out for Ranger but when the dog turned toward him Bingo attacked her flank. She spun around again, howling and snarling in frustration. Water gushed into air as the rusty old park sprinklers went off under fast and forceful pressure.

The cold water brought Malik to his feet. He looked around at the chaos created by Bingo and Ranger.

"I'm outta here!" he yelled to Derek and Johnny and burst into a run. He ran right past Craig's car and saw me sitting handcuffed to the wheel. "That's some lucky dog you got, cheater! You can keep him!" and kept on running, his two partners right behind him.

Bingo was mine again!

With new desperation, I pulled and yanked at the steering wheel but it didn't give. I tried another angle, and caught a glimpse of something glistening in the road out of the corner of my eye.

The key! It must have been knocked out of Craig's shirt pocket during the fight. The water from the sprinklers had pushed it down across the sidewalk, under the car and over to the other side.

The tricky part was grabbing it between both shoes to get it off the ground. I stretched and squirmed, but it kept falling back down. Finally I pushed off my left shoe and used my toes to press the key against my right shoe and drop it onto the car seat. I grabbed it and unlocked the handcuffs.

I rushed over to where Craig lay unconscious on the pavement and handcuffed his wrists in front of him. He would still be able to follow us, but the cuffs would slow him down. I could have placed the cuffs behind him, but he would be helpless and he didn't deserve that. The guy was just doing his job. The flowing water led me to a sewer grate and I tossed the key through the grill.

The bigger dog was starting to get the better of Bingo. He was bleeding from his ears and flanks. In an uncharacteristic act of physical courage I grabbed Ranger from behind and flung her away from Bingo. I don't know what I would have done if she had turned around and attacked me. Instead, she rushed to Craig's side and licked his face and whimpered.

"Bingo!" I grabbed the leash. "Heel!"

We double-timed it out of there to the tune of approaching sirens. I headed up a small slope and around a side street, in the opposite direction from downtown. We found ourselves on the bridge over the river. A few small boats passed below, on smooth water that reflected their running lights and the blue lights from the safety buoys that dotted the riverbanks. I pushed ahead eagerly, anxious to put the bridge between us and the park.

Even so, our pace slowed to a walk as we crossed the broad waterway. I couldn't push Bingo much faster than that. The dog was wounded and by this time he must be hungry again. His head drooped almost to the ground.

Four lanes of cars passed us in both directions, each one adding to the background noise of big city traffic. One of those cars flashed high beams at us from behind and swerved straight for us. I gasped and spun around. It was a late model Ford. Craig Strickland, bruised and beaten, clutched at the wheel with grim determination. A raging H-dog clawed at the seat behind him.

The car bumped the curb and beamed bright light straight into Bingo's eyes. The tired H-dog yelped at the oncoming vehicle and dark fluid spurted all over the sidewalk. Craig stomped the brake with no visible effect and I realized that the dark fluid was brake fluid. Bingo had destroyed the exact part of the car that could have saved us.

The Ford surged forward and Craig pulled hard on the steering wheel to avoid us, smashing into the bridge rail inches from where we stood. His rear end fish-tailed out into the street. Craig

picked his bloody head up off the steering wheel. I could see he was still wearing the handcuffs. He glared and opened his mouth to speak.

His words were cut off by the blare of a compressed air horn. An onrushing semi truck clipped his back end and shoved the car right at us. I grabbed Bingo but it was too late to get away so I jumped up on top of the guard rail to keep us from getting crushed. Craig's car crashed through the rail with a loud metallic tearing sound and took us with it. We tumbled out into open air just inches below the falling car. My legs jerked a few times trying to find solid ground but it wasn't there anymore. My legs stopped jerking then, because my body locked up in fear.

Bingo dug his claws into me and snapped me out of it. He was scrambling for support, but I didn't have much to offer. I tried to think but it wasn't easy with the wind whistling in my ears. We fell so fast it was even hard to breathe. I managed to spread my arms out and stop the spin and get ready for the mother of all bellyflops. I looked up to see that the car's momentum had spun it off on another trajectory. I looked down to see a wide flat ship between us and the water.

Its cargo was covered in tarpaulin. I had no idea what it was, but it was coming up fast so I hoped it was soft.

Splat! It felt brick-hard but I was still alive so it was soft enough. Oof! Bingo landed right on top of me. I gasped for breath, sandwiched between dog and tarpaulin.

I heard a huge splash but I was too stunned to turn my head. It had to be Craig and Ranger coming in for a landing. Hopefully the car protected them from the worst of the impact. Without a driver side door, they would have an easy exit and even with the handcuffs Craig and Ranger together could make it to shore.

"Hey! Is somebody up there?"

There was no place to hide.

"Over here!" I shoved Bingo off my stomach. He scrambled to his feet and held his nose high, sniffing unseen objects in the wind.

A brown face poked up from the edge of tarpaulin and stared at Bingo.

"The dog is mine," I said. "He doesn't bite or anything." Just blows stuff up when you least expect it.

"Hey mon what are you doing on this boat?" the man said. "Come on down here right now!"

I carried Bingo down the ladder that led to the deck. Three other men were waiting for us there. They were not smiling. One of them pointed a gun at me.

"I'm the captain of this ship," a man with a mustache said. "How did you get aboard? What are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said. "It was an accident. We fell..."

"Where I'm from, we throw stowaways overboard!"

"I'm sorry, sir. Um, where are you from exactly?"

"Someplace where US laws won't protect you," said the man holding the gun. He had a nasty grin.

"Please let me explain," I said, having no idea of how I could possibly explain our presence here.

The captain looked at his watch. "This better be good. You're interrupting my poker game."

Suddenly I was feeling lucky again.

"So you're a man who likes a wager. Let's flip for my passage then. Just a coin toss. If I lose, I'll jump overboard right now and take my dog with me. If I win, you take me with you. What do you say?"

"This ain't no passenger ship," the captain said.

"If I stay, I'll work my way. You get another crew member."

"What about the dog?" the captain said as he pulled out a coin.

Bingo wagged his tail and panted with excitement.

I smiled. "He stays if I stay. Bingo is my lucky dog."

###

## The Unwritten Future of Princess Melodious Squeak

by Todd Wheeler

Splyt Adams was startled by the banging outside his door. He was just about to type on his computer where, on the screen, the cursor blinked below the header 'Chapter 23.' He waited a moment, only the noise of the street below coming through the open windows into his small artist's loft. His hands hovered over the keyboard when another bang made him jump in his swivel chair.

The old warehouse was often noisy. The painter next door did his work while playing Broadway show tunes. The sculptor upstairs had recently acquired a nail gun. This noise however was centered at Splyt's door or more exactly on it. The door, a heavy cattle car type that slid across, buckled as if a battering ram were being used against it. The pounding continued until the bottom corner came off the track.

Splyt leapt up as a large man forced his way through the gap in the doorway. He was large in the tall and very muscled sense as opposed to Splyt who was a large man of the short and very rotund variety. The man was grinning broadly. He carried a paper shopping bag in his left hand and a brightly colored toy in his right. He wore bluish-green pants with a matching shirt on which was a large stain of strawberry jam. The man pointed the toy and said:

"Splyt Adams!"

"Uh."

"You are Splyt Adams."

"Who?" Splyt pointed at the stranger.

"I am Jothor Ten-Smith." He dropped the shopping bag, looking around the walls and ceiling. "Guardian Third Class, Entrepid Division."

"Okaaaay," Splyt said, breathing out.

At least he knew what he was dealing with. The Entrepid Division appeared in Loyalty Oath, Splyt's latest book. He had churned it out in two months to fulfill his contract and get the hell away from his publisher. The book was wildly popular and put him back in the top ten of science fiction authors. At the conventions his fans had started dressing like the military units described in the book.

"I'm going to sit down now," Splyt said.

"Yes, please do. I don't have much time."

"Good."

"There is much to explain. You may have doubts but I am Jothor Ten-Smith. I can prove it."

"S'alright. What can I do for you?"

"I need to see the manuscript for your next book."

Splyt nodded and smiled. Just like the other fans, he wanted a sneak peek. Splyt thought it would be easy enough to placate him. He was obviously hopped up on meth or dust or worse.

"Well, I don't have a copy here. It's with my agent."

Jothor, his grin turning into a bit of a snarl, came closer. Splyt leaned back as the man gripped the arm rests of Splyt's chair. He smelled rather funky.

"Perhaps," Jothor said, "you could print out another copy."

"Ss-ss-sure."

#

As the laser printer spit out the sheets Jothor explained his visit. He had come from a parallel dimension. A device allowed Jothor to cross over for two hours before being pulled back. The artist upstairs started the compressor. The nail gun went 'whacka-whacka-whacka-whacka-whacka'.

"And of all the people in my dimension," Splyt said loudly, making small movements in his chair towards the cell phone on his desk, "you came to see me. I'm honored."

"I had to see you, no other." Jothor paced back and forth with the toy held behind his back.

"Your books describe my dimension. The places, the people, the events in your books, they have parallel versions where I exist. Not exactly the same, but very close. Close enough to predict the future. That is why I must see your next book. Those events have not yet happened."

Splyt nodded. If nothing else the experience would make a great article. The man was unhinged and it might be dangerous to dispel his fantasy. Nonetheless Splyt thought he could torment him a little bit.

"Uh huh. Jothor? For the sake of argument, not that I doubt you, but how exactly would you prove to me that you're not, let's say, some crazy fan?"

"Would a crazy fan have this?" Jothor held up his toy, smiling like a child.

"What is it?"

"Oh, this can ruin your day."

"It looks like a Lego toy put together wrong by a drunk dad the night before Christmas."

"This is a dangerous weapon," Jothor said. "Don't force me to use it."

"I think you're going to have to."

"I don't want to."

"How else can I know for sure? Perhaps you have other evidence, maybe in your spaceship?"

Jothor stopped pacing and looked around.

"What object is disposable?"

Splyt sighed and pointed across the room.

"That clock on the bookcase. It was a wedding present."

"The wooden clock?"

"Do you see another one in here?"

Jothor looked around the room, jerking his head up and down. Satisfied that there were no others, he pointed the weapon at the clock. Splyt heard a hollow plastic click followed by a louder Bang! There was a flash that blinded him. A wave of heat came over his face followed by bits of charred wood. When he blinked away the spots he saw black streaks on the bookcase and on the wall above it. Wisps of smoke curled in the air.

Jothor pointed the weapon toward Splyt who heard a beeping noise. Jothor nodded toward him. Splyt shuddered, not wanting to die. The beeping was persistent. Jothor came in close again, crushing the cell phone with the butt of the weapon. He nodded toward the beeping noise with his teeth bared like an angry cat.

"Your printer. It's out of paper."

#

The nail gun compressor upstairs had cycled off. Splyt stood up slowly when the printer was done. Several heavy paper weights on the desk had potential as weapons. Jothor looked nimble

enough to dodge them, plus he would still block the path to the door. Splyt could jump out the window but the fall from fifty feet might kill him. He picked up the thick stack of manuscript pages from the printer tray and handed them over. Perhaps the lunatic would leave once he had what he came for.

"Is this all?" Jothor asked.

"That's it, that's all of it."

Jothor sat down on a low filing cabinet next to the door.

"The others were further along."

"Others? What others?"

Jothor looked up, his eyes shifting around the walls. "Uh, nothing."

"Other writers?"

"Er, sort of."

"Who else have you been threatening?"

"Trying to read here."

Splyt put his hands on his hips. "Who else?"

"Just you. You're the only writer, the only important writer," Jothor said, shaking his grinning head. "They all get uppity when they think there's competition."

"They who?!"

"They you," lowering the manuscript. "You exist in other dimensions. You aren't the first 'you' I've visited. Happy now?"

"Then how do you know I'm the right one? The right Splyt Adams?"

"You're the right one. I got all your books before I came here. I had to check the facts to be sure."

"Really? All of them?"

Jothor shook his head. He picked up the shopping bag and dumped out a pile of books.

#

Jothor was reading quickly, dropping the pages on the floor as he scanned them. He glanced every so often at Splyt who had taken up a station leaning against his desk. Splyt was getting annoyed. Jothor was cutting into his afternoon latte break.

"How did you find out that my books contained your history?" Splyt asked.

"The priestess had a vision-" Jothor began through gritted teeth.

"Priestess? What priestess?"

"This was long ago, about a thousand years. When the Star cult was formed-"

"Star cult? That's backstory! That's never been published!"

"May I continue?"

Splyt nodded. Maybe the guy had broken into his office and read his notes on the novel series. The Star cult was a minor reference, a pre-pre-cursor Splyt had come up with to explain future events. From the cult came the fanatical school of science which later developed faster than light space travel.

"The priestess saw this dimension, saw the pages and words in her vision. These were transcribed and held secret. When the prophecies came true the Star cult dedicated itself to developing the crossover device."

"The cult still exists?"

Jothor pulled back his left sleeve and raised his arm. Splyt could see a tattoo made of a cluster of asterisks and other symbols. The tattoo shifted in the light like a hologram.

"We have been developing the device for centuries. Once we could cross over, we hoped to find the rest of your books."

"Why?"

"Knowing the future would give us a great advantage in overthrowing the scientific establishment," Jothor said, lowering his arm and looking at the manuscript again. "They rejected the spiritual doctrine and led our people into sin and sloth. The leaders are weak and vulnerable now. But the cult needs new prophecies to convince the unbelievers to come back to Haht-Man."

Splyt sat down again, stunned. Haht-Man didn't appear in the books or in the backstory notes. He never spoke of Haht-Man to anyone and had never written it down, emulating the tradition of his fictional cult. Haht-Man was the Star cult's secret name for God.

#

Time passed and pages fluttered to the floor.

"How is it that you got here?" Splyt asked.

"Haven't we been over this already?"

"I understand the dimension stuff," Splyt said, opening his desk drawer slowly. "I am a science fiction writer after all. You and I live on different membranes or 'branes', right? The problem is, you should be stuck there and me stuck here. There's no way for you to travel through the 'bulk' that exists in between."

"I don't pass through," Jothor said, twitching and smiling. "Particles are organized by quantum processes. I am assembled here. Photons and gravitons are what pass through the bulk as you call it. They carry the message and the energy to assemble me. It is the gravity that pulls me back after two hours."

"You can't just appear out of thin air," Splyt said as he sharpened a pencil. Perhaps he could stab Jothor in the eye and escape. "You have to be made of something otherwise you'd violate the most basic law of physics. The law of conservation: matter cannot be created or destroyed. Therefore you cannot possibly exist. Ah ha!"

Jothor wiped a line of drool from his mouth. He waved the weapon in the air.

"So what, you have a ray-gun. Could be some kind of laser, or just a trick. You're not answering my question."

"One object, namely me, is assembled in this space using available matter. The corresponding object is then assembled in my dimension using matter there."

"Must have been a big chunk of matter," Splyt said.

"Yes. I am in your dimension and the man down the street in apartment #17 is not, nor his toaster, nor, uh," Jothor looked down at the strawberry red stain on his shirt, "most of his cat."

"Most?"

"On the bright side, it wasn't most of his wife."

#

The nail gun started up again: 'whacka-whacka-whacka-whacka-whacka'. Splyt was bored. He thought perhaps this maniac was telling the truth and really was from another dimension.

Jothor knew things he couldn't know otherwise and he had blown up a clock. On the other hand, that didn't give him the right to hold people hostage. Splyt had had enough and he had to pee.

"Having fun?" Splyt asked.

"What?"

"Fun! You've been smiling since you got here."

"I have?" Jothor got up and crossed over to the mirror on the wall next to the bookcase. Spittle was foaming at the corners of his mouth. He poked at his face.

"The problem with your bodies," Jothor continued, "is there are so many muscles to control and keep track of. Not to mention these ears. It's like being surrounded by sound."

Splyt stood up. He had three pencils in each hand. He edged toward the door. "Your people look different? I made you human in my books."

Jothor turned and rushed forward. Splyt tried to confuse Jothor with a stutter step but his belly worked against him. Jothor grabbed Splyt by the shirt and hoisted him up. Pencils jabbed into Jothor's neck did nothing to slow him down. Splyt was slammed onto the desk.

"Don't move!"

"Gask!"

Jothor let go and scanned the last dozen pages as Splyt coughed. The nail gun was performing a samba. The pages dropped to the floor.

"What happens to the princess?"

"Princess?" Splyt croaked.

"Princess! Princess! What do you call her? Tatrianna? She wields the influence over the president."

"She's not called Tatrianna in your world?"

"I cannot translate the name. It's like the singing of your mice."

"Mice? Mice sing?"

"Yes! Can't you hear them? There must be hundreds in this, this place! Singing. A melodious squeak!"

"Princess Squeak?"

The grin was a death's head. Blood dripped along the pencils and onto the desk. Jothor grasped Splyt's neck.

"My time is short. What happens to the princess?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me!"

"I don't know! I haven't written it yet!"

"Does she succeed in her plans? Does she die?"

"I-uh. Plans?" Splyt was dizzy. And tired. He was pretty sure he was soiled.

"If you do not tell me, I will kill you and your family. I have enough time to reach your wife and daughter."

"Daughter?"

"Yes, your daughter. Cally. You dedicated the last two books to her."

Splyt started laughing. Jothor let go of Splyt's neck. He sorted through the books on the floor and picked one up, displaying the dedication.

"Cally's my sister," Splyt said, still laughing. "I've been divorced for five years. We never had kids."

"This can't be. The other books. The events. Everything matches! But the priestess said you fathered a child."

"You've got the wrong dimension again," Splyt said, sitting up on the desk. "Good luck next time, sucker!"

Click, Bang!

#

Below the open window a man found bits of flesh on the roof of his car and a fine mist of blood on the windshield. The police investigated. The nail gun artist could provide no information. Inside the loft the police found the body of Joel Bronson, a retired marine who had lived down the street in apartment #17. The forensics team determined he was not the person present when Mr. Adams was killed. While it wasn't clear why Mr. Bronson's body was in the loft, the

autopsy showed he had died of a heart attack elsewhere. Mr. Bronson was cleared of any wrong doing. This was of great consolation to his widow who was able to bury him with full military honors. Along with most of his cat.

###

## Wings of a Cow

By Neil Carstairs

There was a cow on the roof of 12-22 DuPre.

Jabowski sat in his agency issue sedan drinking coffee and wondering whether the cow would still be up on the roof by the time Fire and Rescue's mobile crane arrived. The cow wasn't very big, more like a calf if truth be told, and was colored brown and white. The wings, Jabowski guessed an ornithologist would be able to tell which bird they were derived from, were half open as the animal flapped them nervously. The cow had every right to be nervous. 12-22 was a three-story townhouse and the pitched roof was old-fashioned slate. The cow's hooves slithered and skittered as the beast trod its way along the ridge line, two legs one side, two the other.

The crowd that was gathering at street level took Jabowski's interest. Everyone had a right to stop and stare; the problem was who would be in the wrong place at the wrong time if the cow took the decision to come down. He drank the last of his coffee and pulled himself out of the car. There were two parking wardens amongst the onlookers; Jabowski co-opted them to help him form a thirty-meter cordon. How far could a cow fly anyway? He knew it had got up onto the roof. But coming down? If he shifted the crowd back to a hundred meters there would be a riot.

Jabowski's decision was made for him when he heard a woman's awestruck voice say,

"It's taking off."

He looked up in time to see the cow stretch its wings. It had an impressive span and the animal made a half step-half jump movement to launch itself skyward. The onlookers held their breath as silence came to the street. The cow glided, briefly, and looked as if it belonged in the air. Then gravity and lack of experience took over. The wings flapped twice before folding back on themselves, and the animal plunged towards the ground.

Jabowski closed his eyes before impact. The wet slap told him all he needed to know. The crowd sighed in distress. Jabowski risked a look and was relieved to see that one wing had flopped across the worst of the offal that was spilling out of the animal. As he made his way up the drive to the house Jabowski skirted the rapidly spreading pool of blood. The property owner came to meet him. Jabowski flashed his badge. The owner said his name was Keegan, and then added.

"It's my son."

Jabowski looked from the owner to the cow and back.

"I don't see the family resemblance," he said.

"No, this isn't my son. My son is responsible for this."

"And how is that?"

"He has a mini-lab in our loft. He bred this hybrid cow and has been keeping it in our garden. I guess it slipped its tether and flew onto the roof."

"I guess," Jabowski heard Fire and Rescue's approaching sirens. "Where is your son now?"

"I don't know," Keegan seemed honest in his answer. "As soon as he saw the cow was up there he ran out of the house."

"Any idea where he would go? Friends? Relatives?"

"He's been hanging out at a tech bar called Larry's down on the waterfront for the last year or so. I think that's where he got the mini-lab."

"I can find the place," Jabowski turned as a young woman approached them. "Can I help you?"

"Only if you are Tim Keegan." She had avoided looking at the cow on the way up the drive but the thick stench of death was hanging in the air and her face was beginning to turn the color of milk.

"No," the badge came out again, "Special Agent Jabowski, I'm with the Hi-tech Unit. And you are?"

"Ruth Kelly," she fished in her pocket and pulled out an ID card, "I work for Heart, the student counseling service at the University. I received a call from Tim's girlfriend this morning. She seemed very concerned about him."

"In what way?" Fire and Rescue arrived, the crew spilling out of their vehicle to stare at the dead cow.

"She told me he had done something very bad and he was worried about the consequences."

"Take a look," Jabowski gestured at the cow.

"Is that what he did?" Ruth decided to keep her eyes on the federal agent.

"He did the creating," Jabowski said, "the cow did the jumping."

"And where is he now?" The student counselor looked as if she was going to be sick at any moment.

"That's what I was trying to find out when you arrived."

"He needs help," Ruth said, "I'm sure this must be illegal."

"Operating a gene lab without a license, hybrid creation without a license, failure to take due care of hybrid life, failure to notify Federal agencies of hybrid's existence," Jabowski listed the first few infringements he could think of. "The kid is looking at a minimum of five years."

"My son is studying Applied Genetics," Keegan interrupted with a shade of pomposity. "He has his thesis written, I'm sure this must come under University rules."

"No," Jabowski shook his head. "The University has gene experiment licenses but only within specified labs open to inspection."

Ruth Kelly was easing herself away from the sight and smell of the cow.

"What are you going to do?" Her mid-west accent had a waver in it as she fought to control her stomach muscles.

"His father told me about a tech bar, I'll try there first."

"Can I come with you? If there are any students there I may be able to persuade them you are acting in Tim's best interests."

Jabowski figured that wasn't such a bad idea.

"How did you get here?"

"Taxi, it's waiting over there."

"If you pay it off you can travel with me. My car's over there, the grey one."

The crowd was, if anything, getting bigger. Half a dozen newsgroup drones floated over the street, broadcasting the death of a cow to a shock hungry audience. Jabowski typed the name of the bar into his sat-nav console. The route flashed up, along with an advertising blurb for the bar. He smiled as he read the lines of flashing text. Ruth opened the door and sat next to him.

Jabowski drove slowly until the street cleared. The Keegans lived in the Goldhay district, up in the hills that threw evening shadows across the city when the sun set behind them.

"Do you usually make house calls?" Jabowski asked as he guided the car onto the city bound highway.

"Tim is currently on exam leave and his girlfriend was very insistent I see him today."

"Do you have her name?"

"No."

"Do you have a contact number for her?"

"No," Ruth shook her head, "we're a counseling service. We operate in complete confidentiality for all callers."

"But not enough to stop you talking to me?"

"Tim is obviously in trouble," Ruth replied, "it is part of my duty to help him in any way I can. This includes dealing with law enforcement agencies."

Jabowski sensed there was something left unsaid.

"What's the other reason?" He asked as the traffic began to slow.

"Other reason?" She looked across at him, her hazel eyes catching the sun.

"Personal visits can't be the norm."

Ruth was quiet for a moment. Jabowski didn't say anything; he waited for her to fill the silence.

"Five students involved in genetics have gone missing in the last year. I don't want it to become six."

"Has this been reported to the authorities?"

"Yes, police from the Missing Persons Bureau have looked at each case and come to the same conclusion. The students are simply running away from the extreme pressure of exams. The fact that they are all over twenty-one means that unless there is evidence of a crime the police can't proceed any further."

Jabowski saw the signs for the Docklands and guided the car down an off-ramp. The officers who had looked at the missing students hadn't been wrong in what they told Ruth, but had they been right? The traffic was lighter now and he made good progress through the older part of the city. Most of the buildings were original, old brick and stonework that was dark with history. He found a parking slot on a quayside, paid on his card for the privilege. He walked with Ruth in bright sunshine to the single story glass and metal building that was built from quayside

down into the harbor water. Ocean waves slapped against the stone pilings with a rhythmic slap like the slow hand clap of a gospel choir. A gull, its razor beak the same yellow as the sun, eyed them as if they might form part of its next meal.

"This is Larry's," the detective said, "ever been here?"

"No," Ruth watched a hologram of a lobster scuttle across the roof of the tech bar.

"And that's Larry," Jabowski said, recalling the information gleaned from his sat-nav system.

"He's a Northern Lobster, supposedly two-hundred years old."

"And is he?" Ruth asked as the doors slid back to admit them.

"If he is it doesn't show on him," the detective led the way in.

The late afternoon customers hadn't arrived yet. Jabowski could see maybe half a dozen people, mostly clustered around a game of null-g pool. Behind the bar, in a long tank, was Larry. Ruth gazed at the lobster.

"Has he been gene-tweaked?" she asked.

"As far as I know the two-hundred year old bit is genuine," Jabowski walked up to the bar. The lobster moved across its bed of sand, lasers swept his carapace and transmitted the reflected image up onto the roof.

"Is Laszlo around?" Jabowski asked. The barman looked at him like he knew Jabowski was a cop.

"Who's asking?"

"My name's Jabowski," he flashed his badge.

The barman slouched away, as if carrying the message was the hardest thing he had ever done. He returned a couple of minutes later followed by the owner of Larry's. Laszlo was tall and wide and built like a granite block. He greeted Jabowski with a nod of his blonde head and led them across to an empty table.

"Is this your partner?" Laszlo asked, looking at Ruth.

"This is Ruth Kelly; she's a counselor at the university."

A waitress approached.

"Would your guests like a drink Mr. Laszlo?"

The bar owner looked a question at Jabowski and Ruth.

"Vanilla coffee, please" Ruth said.

"I'll take the same," the detective added.

"So this isn't a social call?" Laszlo asked.

"No. We're looking for one of the kids who hang out here. His name's Tim Keegan."

"I think I know him," Laszlo nodded. "But we get so many from the university some days that it's hard to keep track of them."

"What about the group over there?" Jabowski pointed to the pool game.

Laszlo studied them for a moment as the waitress returned with their drinks.

"All from the university, some under graduates and some post graduates. Want to talk to them?" Laszlo asked.

"Sure," Jabowski and Ruth followed the bar owner across to the pool game.

Laszlo did the introductions. Jabowski gauged the group. They were all young, or at least younger than him by ten years or more, and they had all been gene-jumped in some way or other. Two of the girls wore backless dresses to show off their snakeskin grafts, a third had the delicate pattern of a monarch butterfly threaded into the skin of her cheeks. The boys were more macho; the tails of wolf and fox predominated as they strutted around the pool table. Jabowski felt them examining him; he had not been grafted, spliced or jumped and to these kids that put him on a level with a caveman.

The group's spokesperson turned out to be a twenty five year old called Hermann. His foxtail matched the color of his elongated ears.

"Yeah, I know Tim," Hermann admitted as his eyes stayed fixed on Ruth Kelly.

"Seen him today?" Jabowski asked as the balls clattered through their three dimensional cage.

"Saw him heading to the genetics block as we came here," Hermann shook his tail at Ruth.

"Did you speak to him?"

"No, he was down at park level, heading for the basement labs." Hermann caught hold of his tail and drew it around his body. "Want to stroke it?" he asked Ruth.

"No, thank you," she smiled and held out a card, "but if you ever feel the need to have psych-evaluation concerning your inability to cope with the basic human form then we at Heart can arrange a counseling session."

Hermann's lips twitched in disgust. He turned away. Jabowski smiled as he followed Ruth back to Laszlo's table.

"Any good?" Laszlo asked as Jabowski sipped at his coffee.

"Possibly," Jabowski could see that Hermann was still watching them, or maybe just Ruth.

"What do you know about Hermann?"

"Off the scale intelligence," Laszlo gave the group a sidelong glance. "But most of them are. Hermann is on his way to a double PhD."

Jabowski finished his coffee.

"Time to head for the university."

Ruth followed him back out into the sun light.

"Hermann seemed to take a liking to you," Jabowski said.

"I'm not sure why, I know I'm not his type."

"Oh? What is his type?"

"Girls who are willing to be gene jumped. Did you see the grafts they had? That amount of gene therapy needs total dedication."

"And you haven't got it?"

"My parents are neo-Christian. I haven't followed them fully down that road but some aspects of their beliefs have stuck."

"So you're authentic?"

"Yes," they had reached Jabowski's car and she gave him a challenging stare across the roof of the vehicle. "Does it shock you?"

He didn't answer until they were inside and the air conditioning was running.

"Well?" Ruth prompted.

"I did twelve years in the Army Special Investigations Bureau, straight from military college where my father sent me from the age of four. We signed on the line to say we agreed to no genetic manipulation. I've never gone against that requirement."

Ruth was silent for a moment.

"Are you married?" she asked.

Jabowski shook his head and said,

"Who is going to marry a man whose genes do not carry any kind of certification?"

Ruth was silent, looking out over the bay at the dark outline of a multi deck suspension bridge. After a moment she gave him her card.

"If you ever want to talk," she said, her hand shaking ever so slightly.

Jabowski held the card, studying it like it was some kind of alien artifact. Ruth broke the growing silence by saying,

"Shall we head over to the university?"

"Sure," Jabowski slipped the card into an inside pocket. He reversed out of the parking slot. He took the road that clung to the edge of the bay as if it were a drunk hanging onto a wall. Seals basked on rocks that littered the shoreline as they allowed the slight forms of waders to roam between them. Ruth watched the passing scene in silence, and Jabowski was unable to find the right words to start a conversation. They drove, without speaking, the fifteen miles to the university through the early afternoon traffic of shoppers and delivery drivers.

The university sprawled its way around a crescent shaped bay in a series of four and five story buildings linked by a web of transparent walkways. Jabowski threaded the car down the narrow roadways, over speed humps and under the suspended plasglass ribbon-bridges that were thronged with students and lecturers. Ruth spoke for the first time since leaving the quayside, directing Jabowski round the back of the genetics block to a parking area shaded by a dozen broad-leaved trees. They were next to the bay again, a concrete sea defense providing the third side of the triangle around the parking lot.

Jabowski let her lead him to a dark tinted glass door. Inside, a security guard the shape of a soccer ball sat behind a bank of monitoring screens. He looked at them through watery blue eyes and said.

"Help you?"

Jabowski showed his badge and Ruth her University ID. There was no reaction from the guard.

Jabowski said, "We're looking for a student named Tim Keegan. It's been suggested he may be here."

The guard flicked at the keyboard in front of him and read from one of the screens.

"He logged in using his flashcard two hours and eight minutes ago."

"So he's still here?"

"Yup," another couple of taps, "he went through the security to Level 3. Should still be there."

"Anyone else down there?"

The guard sniffed noisily and said,

"Not sure I should give that information; we do have security issues here."

"I understand that," Jabowski replied, "but it may have a bearing on how I approach Tim."

The guard gave a half shrug and typed another command.

"Professor Eugene Laroche is the only other registered occupant of the lab."

"Do you know Laroche?" Jabowski asked Ruth.

"Not personally, but I have heard of him. He's a big noise on the faculty pushing for federal funding on research projects."

"How do we get to Level 3?" Jabowski directed his next question to the guard.

"First you need clearance," the guard put a portable scanner onto the counter top. "Retinal scans first."

Jabowski and Ruth took turns in putting their right eyes to the scanner. The guard watched his display and nodded. He gave them each a temporary pass and then called a service drone.

"Passes last two hours, after that you're locked in. Follow the drone."

Jabowski and Ruth followed the drone as it floated down the corridor. After two turns they reached a bank of elevators. The drone called one for them. They stepped inside, the drone remaining in the corridor as it signaled the elevator where to take them.

The ride down took less than fifteen seconds. A remote camera monitored them all the time. When the door slid open they had to swipe their passes to get through a security screen. The Level 3 laboratory was in partial darkness. Opposite them stood a bank of cages. Some were occupied. The creatures inside stirred, a few came to the bars to examine the new arrivals whilst others cowered away. Jabowski took a quick look into the cages. They were human, or at least had some human genes in them. The smell of them lay in the air like a blanket, catching at his throat. He felt Ruth shiver; she had pushed close to him in fear at what she saw.

"Is this legal?"

"I'm afraid so," Jabowski said, softly. "The university has licenses for radical experiments."

A whisper came to them from one cage. Jabowski stepped close, peering into the shadows at a creature less than a meter tall that lay huddled in a straw filled corner. The creature made another sound through lips that were cracked and dry and a face and body covered in coarse hair. Jabowski squatted down, breathing through his mouth as the stench of the creature's waste filled the air around him. He studied the animal, and then corrected himself, it wasn't an animal it was a genetically modified human. Blue eyes gazed at him imploringly. The mouth, full of thick yellow teeth, opened and spoke again. This time, Jabowski understood.

"Water ..."

Jabowski looked around and saw a dozen water bottles stacked to one side.

"Give me one of those," he said to Ruth, and when she passed it to him he slid the bottle into the bars and held it while the creature sipped quickly to ease its thirst.

"What are you doing?"

Jabowski half turned. A thin man in a white coat approached them. Jabowski stood to meet him, showing his badge and identifying himself. The thin man stared at it and smiled.

"You got here quicker than I thought."

"We did?"

"Oh, yes," the man rubbed his hands together. With another smile he held one out to Jabowski. "Eugene Laroche, Professor of Applied Genetics."

Jabowski shook the hand, feeling as if he was missing something.

"Why were you expecting us?" he asked.

"Come through and I'll explain." Laroche turned away. Jabowski stopped him.

"The hybrids in these cages are not being cared for properly."

"I know," Laroche shrugged, "staffing isn't what it used to be and we struggle to cope. I'll get my students to clean them all up tomorrow."

"I can get a court order to ensure compliance with all relevant laws," Jabowski held his place.

"There's no need," Laroche seemed distracted, as if he was eager to move them on. Reluctantly, Jabowski followed. Ruth, with a final look into the cages went after the two men.

The corridor opened into a white walled laboratory. Only one other person was in the room. He sat at a workstation, watching them with nervous eyes. Jabowski didn't wait for introductions.

"Tim Keegan, I presume," he said, as he stopped in front of the young man.

Keegan stood, stepping away from Jabowski. The student looked towards Laroche. The professor said,

"Are you carrying a sidearm, Agent Jabowski?"

Laroche had moved to his workstation. Now he stood, aiming a nerve-jammer at Jabowski, with a grin of delight on his face.

"Please hand it over to Tim," the professor walked closer, gesturing at Ruth to move and stand next to Jabowski. With slow movements Jabowski slid his gun out of his shoulder holster and held it out to Keegan. The student grabbed it and put the gun in a draw before taking out another nerve-jammer. Keegan went and stood a few paces to Jabowski's left.

"Well," Laroche said, "what a pretty picture we make."

"I take it you're going to explain what's happening?" Jabowski was gauging the distances involved. He could manage one, but not both. Beside him, Ruth was shaking. He put his hand on her arm in reassurance.

"Genes. What other reason can there be?"

Jabowski thought about the answer. He looked at Ruth. Considered his options for a moment and said.

"Our genes?"

"Correct." Laroche's grin got wider. "Yours, and Miss Kelly's."

"Why?"

"You already know the answer to that," Laroche's face became serious. "We ran through the entire population gene database and came up with maybe two-dozen candidates. After background checks we were left with the two of you."

"We're both natural," Jabowski stated the obvious.

"Yes," Laroche gestured with the gun. "And there's more."

Jabowski decided to let the professor do the talking now. He waited in silence until Laroche couldn't contain himself any longer.

"Not interested?" Laroche asked.

Jabowski shrugged.

"How long have you been in this city?" Laroche asked.

"Sixteen days," Jabowski said.

"And you, Miss Kelly?"

"Twelve days."

"Why are you here, Agent Jabowski?"

"The local area office had a vacancy. I was transferred in from Chicago."

"And you, Miss Kelly?"

"The National Counseling Service posted me here."

"What about your parents, Agent Jabowski?"

"They're both dead."

"Any siblings?"

"No."

"Miss Kelly, how about your family?"

"The same."

Laroche's smile was that of a shark circling its prey.

"Your personal backgrounds have precluded you from forming any close personal ties with other people. Over the last year neither of you have done anything more than send birthday or Christmas mail greetings. You are both now living in rented accommodation. No-one will miss you."

"What are you going to do?" Ruth's voice carried a tremble of fear.

"I need you for the next stage of our research. You are perfect, a male and female subject to provide baseline genetic material. We will splice your genes and stitch your genes. We will

tweak them and transform them. We will deconstruct you and reconstruct you. In essence, Miss Kelly, you will multiply a thousand fold into a multitude of hybrid types."

Jabowski kept his features still; glancing at Tim Keegan he saw the student was rocking nervously from foot to foot. Keegan was the weak link here, all Jabowski had to do was exploit it. He thought about what Laroche had said.

"The hybrids in the cages outside, they're the missing students, aren't they?"

"The essence of the students is out there, certainly. They were, however, all volunteers."

"They volunteered to die?"

"They volunteered to take their lives onto a new plane."

Jabowski shrugged and half turned to Ruth.

"I'm sorry," he said. She frowned.

"What for?"

"This."

Jabowski reached out and took hold of a handful of her blouse with his left hand. With his right hand he tightened his grasp on her arm, then he swung Ruth round and threw her at Laroche. The professor's jaw dropped. He fired the nerve-jammer on instinct and the blue-white blob of supercharged energy hit Ruth in the side as she pirouetted towards him. Jabowski was already moving. Tim Keegan's eyes had followed Ruth's flight. Too late, he realized his mistake. Jabowski grasped his wrist and twisted it as his free arm came up in a forearm smash that took the kid off his feet. Jabowski pulled Keegan's gun free and dropped to one knee as he turned. Laroche was struggling with Ruth. She had careered into him, her unconscious limbs tangling with the professor's, pulling him half to the floor. Jabowski gave Laroche enough time to free himself and look up. Their eyes met across the lab. Jabowski squeezed the trigger and saw the sphere of energy flash across the space as if it were a lightning bolt. Laroche managed a scream, as his nerves were pulse shredded by the force of the shot. He crashed to the floor alongside Ruth, legs kicking spasmodically for a moment until he lay still.

Jabowski turned back to Keegan, but saw with relief that the kid was out of the game. He went to Ruth and felt for a pulse. It was there, just about, weak and thready. Ruth had the build that the kind of energy kick she had just got called for fast medical support. Jabowski lifted her onto his shoulder. Laroche and Keegan were still both unconscious. He left them there, sprawled on the laboratory floor, and headed back to the elevator.

Jabowski took the turns in the corridor by memory. The fat guy was still on the security desk. He was eating a double layer chicken salad sandwich on rye bread. The guard's eyes widened as he saw Jabowski approach.

"Need help?" The question came round a mouthful of food.

"She just needs some air," Jabowski told him.

The guard pressed the door release as mayo dripped onto his desk. Jabowski nodded his thanks and went out into the bright sunshine. He used his remote to open the car door and slid Ruth onto the back seat with relief. Jabowski stretched his back to release the cramp that had set in, and then he called for backup and paramedics. After that, with a glance to the building, where the guard still sat eating his sandwich, Jabowski went to the trunk of his car and got out a pump action shotgun.

He checked Ruth again. She was still unconscious, and her pulse was fluttering from fast to slow and back again. It had been a long time since Jabowski had last done an emergency aid course. He had no idea other than to wait for the experts. Jabowski heard a high whine and looked up to see a security dart pass over the car park and then bank round to take station overhead. The dart was blue, with yellow chevron marks down each side. Jabowski didn't recognize the pattern; he slipped the safety catch off the shotgun and waited. A second dart came over the treetops and came to a hover above the laboratory building. This one had the same markings as the first. Jabowski drummed his fingers on the stock of the shotgun. He decided they must be university security darts, alerted by his call for backup. The local field office would have called the university as a matter of course.

At least, that was what he hoped.

Jabowski saw movement amongst the trees. A half dozen figures flitting in and out of the sun dappled shadows. The kids from the tech bar came out into the sunlight, spreading out to form a line. Hermann was in the middle, holding a foldaway machine pistol. Three of the others carried similar weapons and the two girls on the flanks had hi-fire crossbows loaded with explosive quarrels. Jabowski looked at the darts above and knew they weren't here to help him. He shivered in the warmth of the sun.

The standoff lasted ten minutes. No one spoke. No backup came for Jabowski. Ruth's legs kicked a couple of times and Jabowski heard her breathing stutter as she fought for breath. Hermann had the kind of smile on his face that a cat wore when it played with its prey. His tail switched back and forth as if the pleasure of the moment was driving it. Jabowski decided to go for Hermann first, simply because of the smile. At least the others were serious or nervous or both.

Jabowski was taking a final breath and tightening his grip on the shotgun when he heard the doors to the lab open. He glanced over his shoulder. Things went from bad to worse. Laroche and Tim Keegan came out, carrying their nerve-jammers. The professor was limping; the student had blood smeared around his nose and mouth. They came close to Jabowski.

"I should kill you," Laroche said.

"And I should have killed you," Jabowski shrugged, "but we all make mistakes."

The professor's eyes narrowed.

"Put down your shotgun," he said. "I will make this as painless as possible for you and Miss Kelly."

Movement over Laroche's shoulder caught Jabowski's eyes. The security guard came out from behind his desk. He waddled across the grass and paving until he reached the little tableau. The guard was truly gargantuan; his huge stomach was round like a bowling ball and folds of flesh hung down over the collar of his shirt as if they were the sails of a tall ship. Jabowski wondered why, with all the gene science around, the guard didn't fix himself slim. Most likely he was simply a glutton, and nothing could be done for him.

"Is there a problem, Professor Laroche?" The guard asked.

"Nothing that can't be handled, Hal," Laroche didn't take his eyes from Jabowski.

Hal gazed up at the security darts.

"They're not university security," he said.

"No they're not," Laroche spoke through gritted teeth. "We have an arrangement with a private group to provide an over watch on campus. I called them in after this man assaulted me in the laboratory. Go back to your desk."

Hal sniffed and looked at Hermann and his gang.

"What about them?" he asked.

"What about them?" Kalpinsky's patience became paper-thin. "They're with me. That's all you need to know."

Hal pulled his belt up over his stomach.

"This man is a federal agent," he said, as if the anger coming from the professor was nothing.

"This man is impersonating a federal agent. The real Max Jabowski died in a road accident three days ago."

"Oh?" Hal looked at Jabowski. "Is that true."

"No," Jabowski could feel his blood running cold. Laroche had just revealed the depths of his plan. If he could alter federal records, move people around the country like they were pieces on a chess board then how much support was he getting from those individuals in positions of real power?

"He's lying," Laroche said. "Now, Hal, if you know what's good for your pay slip and your pension then I suggest you get back behind your desk right now."

"I can't do that professor," Hal said.

Laroche's head rotated round to look at Hal, eyes wide with shock.

"What?" the professor wasn't sure he had heard right.

Hal drew his sidearm in a fluid almost-too-fast-to-see motion. The gun was a big, silver magnum that caught the sun in flashes of brilliant white as he first whipped the barrel across the back of Laroche's head and then forward again across Tim Keegan's forehead. Both men went down with grunts of shock and splashes of blood as Hal threw himself down behind Jabowski's car. The federal agent was a scant second behind him as Hermann and the other kids screamed in anger.

Hermann opened fire first. A hundred rounds of nine millimeter parabellum bullets turned the bodywork of the vehicle to Swiss cheese. The windshield showered around them like a winter snowstorm. Hal looked up at the two security darts and shouted into his collar.

"Ruby Five, go, go, go."

Hermann stopped firing and started reloading. The other kids began to circle round the car. Jabowski saw the first, a guy with the spikes of a horned lizard on his head and back, come into view with his machine pistol held ready. The shotgun blast merged with the siren howl of the darts as they reacted to the action below. The kid went down in a heap and Jabowski rolled over to fire up at the darts.

"Don't worry about them," Hal shouted and pointed towards the bay.

Four interceptor drones leapt into view over the sea defense, splitting into pairs and attacking the darts. Jabowski saw the blur as two drones went through the dart above the laboratory as if it wasn't there. Pieces of blue and yellow shell spiraled down ahead of the main body as it hit

the flat roof and exploded. Metal and masonry fell like shrapnel. Jabowski heard a scream from one of the kids as they were hit. One of the girls fired her crossbow. She missed the car but hit the building. The concussive blast shattered windows and punched a hole in the wall. More concrete scythed across the parking lot. Hal popped up over the car for long enough to fire two shots at the kids before Hermann raked them with another long burst.

Jabowski was watching the second dart. It had moved away from above them, reacting to the drone threat but not quickly enough. One drone sliced through the rear drive compartment. A bursting fuel cell pushed the dart into the treetops where the last drone hit it square in the flank. The explosion ripped leaves from branches and sent flaming wood splinters out to replace the masonry.

Silence returned for a moment, almost shocking in its intensity. Jabowski looked along the ground. All he could see of Hermann was the kid's left leg. That was all he needed. He shot it out from under Hermann and saw in its place the upper body and shocked face of the kid on the ground. Jabowski thought for about half a second on his next move and then fired a shell into Hermann's chest.

Hermann's death seemed to suck the life out of his companions; as if he were the brain and they were unable to function without him. Hal took the chance to kneel and take out one of the crossbow girls. Jabowski rolled over a carpet of glass shards and fired three shells in rapid succession that lifted a kid with a squirrel's tail off his feet. The few who remained began to melt away into the smoke that rolled down out of the burning trees.

Jabowski let them go. He was looking up, and the world was becoming a truly uncertain place.

Four more blue and yellow darts were coming from over the main campus as emergency sirens and alarms filled the air with their noise. From over the bay came five matt black security darts in response. The opposing units met in the air above the university. Laser and plasma beams and fire-and-forget mini missiles wreathed the sky. The first dart to fall was matt black, hitting the main university building and tearing away half of its faux Roman façade. Jabowski wanted to speak, but his throat was dry and his lungs empty as the ferocity of the combat increased.

Two blue and yellow darts died in swift succession, one of them slicing through a gossamer thin ribbon bridge as it fell ground wards. Students and faculty, mesmerized by what was happening around them, tumbled to their deaths. The battle became one sided, the remaining blue and yellow darts doing more for survival than threat. One vanished in a fireball to three simultaneous missile strikes. The other took avoiding action from a plasma beam and careered straight into a two-story lecture theatre. It never came out.

Jabowski didn't think anything else could surprise him now. The high whine of a jet-powered trimaran scooting across the bay did. The vessel drew alongside the sea defense. Expanding ladders popped into view, followed moments later by a dozen black clad men armed with assault rifles. They spread out across the parking lot and disappeared into the trees. Jabowski, feeling incredibly tired now the firefight was over, put his shotgun onto the roof of the car and leant in to look at Ruth. He wished he hadn't. Hermann had done to her what he'd done to the car. Jabowski straightened. He could still see Ruth's legs. They were unharmed. Jabowski's mother had always told him if he wanted to know how good a girl's breeding was then look at her legs. Ruth had good legs.

A couple of the armed men returned. They went and stood with Hal and stared down at Laroche and Keegan. None of them spoke. It was as if a decision had been made and a judgment passed. Finally, one of the men raised his rifle and shot Laroche through the head. A second later he did the same to Tim Keegan. Jabowski grabbed the roof of his car to stop himself collapsing. His legs had drained of strength in an instant. Hal, almost reluctantly, came to him.

"That was murder," Jabowski said.

"That was justice," Hal replied, his gun held down by his side.

"What's going on?"

"A war is what is going on. It's being fought between scientists and corporations on one side who are driven by profit and ego and zero morality and those of us who believe that Man is made in God's image and shall not have his DNA sequence modified or his genes spliced with those over whom we have domain. They seek to change humankind beyond recognition; we seek to defend it."

"And you?" Jabowski looked at Hal's girth.

"We're not above tweaking our genes in the course of our duties," Hal said as he patted his stomach. "People only saw my shape. They never saw the thin man inside watching them."

"I guess you could say you were a deep cover agent," Jabowski said.

Hal chuckled.

"You're a good man, Jabowski, an honest and truthful man who we have been watching for many years. We would have tried to recruit you if we thought you would have joined us. We knew you wouldn't. So we didn't try."

"You can't hide all this." Jabowski said, gesturing at the scene around them. Hal simply smiled.

"This city is in an earthquake zone. The damage here can be explained away by that fact. Those who talk of security darts and gun battles will be treated as if suffering from shock. Explosions will be caused by fractured gas mains, the sound of shots by the movement of the earth itself. Within forty eight hours this will be another forgotten tragedy."

"And me?" Jabowski asked.

"Laroche has already arranged for you to have died in a road accident. That fact can remain on record."

"And Ruth?"

"She's like you. Too honest, too trusting in the justice system to see how it can be manipulated by injustice. We can arrange for her to die in the same accident as you if you want."

Jabowski nodded, as if that was an idea that appealed to him.

"She had good legs," he said.

Hal's eyes dropped towards the car. Jabowski took his chance. He turned, reaching for the shotgun. He got his hand on it; the sun had warmed the stock and it felt good to lift the weapon up off the roof of the car. Jabowski began to turn back towards Hal.

He never made it any further.

###

## Download the Dream

By Jim Daly

Connecting to server ...

Simon: Dudes!

Dave: Check out that website, Simon.

Simon: Already have. Awesome.

Ed: You're not talking about 'Videobrain' again.

Simon: What else.

Ed: That stuff sucks.

Dave: It rocks! Simon, it'll be the experience of your life.

Ed: Until they invent virtual sex, or the downloadable pizza.

Dave: He who cannot afford the headpiece, mocketh.

Ed: I've already got a headpiece I'm happy with, thanks. It's attached to my neck.

Dave: While you've been sitting in your bedroom scratching your balls, I've been sailing down the Amazon in a canoe; I've been to the peak of Everest.

Ed: Eh, no actually, you've been in your bedroom scratching your balls too.

Dave: Don't listen to him Simon, just try it. You got to check out the download tonight.

Ed: It sucks.

Simon: It's pretty heavy. I'm pasting some of this into the message. Here it comes.

Exclusive to Videobrain Entertainment - Experience 'Operation Afghan Freedom' at first hand - tonight.

Dave: Incredible! You got to do it Simon!

Ed: If it's going to be so great, why don't you do it?

Dave: My Dad has taken away my headpiece.

Ed: Haaaaa!

Dave: Shut it. Simon, you going for it?

Simon: Dunno.

Ed: Why did he take it away, Dave? Did he think you'd be exhausted after climbing Everest?

Dave: He's not giving it back till my grades improve.

Ed: So that's the last you'll ever see of it.

Dave: You're getting on my tits.

Simon: Shut up you two. Look, here's some more from the website.

The Journalists who have agreed to wear our neuro-caps will be close to, but not in the midst of the shelling. Their neuro-caps, will monitor and transmit their brain activity during the bombardment, which will be streamed live, real-time, to your 'Dream Machine' headpiece. This unique experience cannot in any way endanger your health. The headset is calibrated only to deliver neural stimulation within safe limits.

Simon: This sounds a bit scary to me.

Dave: I've used it loads of times. It is one hundred per cent safe.

Simon: But this is my first time.

Dave: You are such a wimp. Just for once, experience life, Simon!

Simon: OK, I'm going to do it. I hope you're right about it being safe.

Dave: Attaboy!

Ed: Are you sure?

Dave: Shut up Ed. Get your piece on Simon, and live your own war film! Ace war correspondent, Simon Fuller!

Simon: OK - I'm putting on the headset.

Dave: Don't sign off! I want you to tell us what it's like.

Ed: Yeah, tell us how many villages you can see being blown away.

Simon: I'm downloading, hang on for a while.

Dave: Good going Simon!

Ed: Take the headpiece off if it doesn't feel right.

Dave: You've nothing to fear, Simon.

Ed: Simon, you out there?

Dave: Relax, he's just started downloading.

Simon: Whoa!

Dave: He's plugged in!

Ed: OK Simon?

Simon: This is totally amazing - unreal. I feel strange, like a different person.

Dave: Awesome. I never felt that.

Ed: What's happening?

Simon: It's cool, feels like early morning; I'm looking up at a cloudless, deep-blue sky.

Dave: Forget the school essay stuff. Where's the war man?

Simon: It's like I thought I heard something, but maybe I didn't. Now I'm running around in this patch of dusty ground, kicking a big yellow ball. I can see Mama inside the white hut, cooking something in the kitchen, singing to herself.

Dave: Are you taking the piss? Who's Mama?

Ed: This is priceless.

Simon: I'm looking up at the sky again. I feel something in the air.

Dave: Maybe he's got the wrong download.

Ed: What is it, Simon?

Simon: There's a blinding flash of light, like a giant flashbulb going off, and a sound like thunder. I'm shouting for Mama.

Dave: Who the hell is Mama? What's going on, are you seeing your own Mother? How is that possible?

Simon: Oh, God, I'm scared. A cone of orange rising from the ground into the sky; spreading out over the sky like an egg in a frying pan, spreading wider and wider, covering more and more of the sky. On the ground another cloud, like the one in the sky, is spreading, coming towards us.

Ed: Happy now, Dave?

Dave: None of this makes sense. Whose mind is he in? And why is a civilian target being bombed? We only bomb known terrorist bases.

Ed: Best to take out the kids while we're at it, so they don't become known terrorists when they grow up.

Dave: There must be a mistake.

Ed: Whose mistake Dave? Still want Simon to keep going? Let's find out how it all ends, eh?

Dave: Simon, you still there? Get that headpiece off.

Ed: Suddenly war isn't Dave's cup of tea. Simon, keep it on. Tell us how it all ends. If they live happily ever after.

Dave: Cut it out, Ed. Simon, take it off.

Ed: Playing a different tune now, Dave.

Dave: Shut up. I'm trying to think.

Ed: Don't break the habit of a lifetime.

Simon: The whole world is becoming as hot as an oven.

Dave: Take off the headset, Simon.

Ed: Thought it was supposed to be safe?

Dave: Something is wrong with this whole thing. This isn't a journalist. The Afghans have pulled a fast one. The neuro-cap is on a small child. And if they've sabotaged the neuro-cap, they may have sabotaged the transmission itself. This could be the world's first cyberspace terrorist attack.

Ed: How many people use these things?

Dave: I don't want to think of how many - a lot. Are you copying, Simon? This is not what you signed up for. Get out now.

Simon: Hot winds lifting whole houses into the sky. A burning man, flying through the air, slamming against our house, smashing into powder, like the wings of a moth crushed in your hand.

Ed: Simon, get out!

Simon: The orange clouds are coming. They aren't going to stop. Mama telling me not to worry. Holding me tight.

Dave: Simon!

Ed: Simon, just pull the headset off!

Simon: Nobody should have to suffer like this.

Dave: Simon, take it off. Copy me man.

Dave: Simon! Copy me.

Ed: Simon! Take it off.

Simon: Eyes burning. Taking it oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo  
oo  
oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

###



Original Art by Alycia Helbling 1

## the nowhere glow

by Peter Schwartz

I'm a six foot shadow  
the death of rhyme  
an idea in a raincoat worming through the nights  
like gunshots

a sequel to the magic  
a stretched immigrant  
mispronouncing the needle  
in an alley of the distant and lethal

an elaborate servant  
playing chameleon by the garbage cans  
till the lowest man on the totem pole  
can truthfully be called king

I will be him, undone by less than nothing  
a gutted actor fishing out his bones  
to fashion xylophones to play the night out  
one note at a time

an exile from the world  
of the paper fed and puckered  
an injured guest of the daily minarets  
that form like juries over marrow

an untouchable bloodline  
dying in the midst