

Eldritch Science

May 2021



Djas-Puhr — Settling the Score
Jose Sanchez

Editorial

We still have the content item: First Chapters! Yes, if you are a Neffer and have published novels, send us the first chapter (and, if you wish, the cover image), and we'll publish it as an introduction to your tale.

As a Reader reward, your Editor has published a series of SF novels, most recently Airy Castles All Ablaze, Eclipse—The Girl Who Saved the World, Against Three Lands, Minutegirls, Mistress of the Waves, and The One World. Soon to appear is the third Eclipse novel, Stand Against the Light. If any of you would like a free review copy of any or all of these, you have but to ask.

Writings

- 2 ... Weekend Treasures by Melody Friedenthal
- 7 ... Five-Billion-Year Mission by David C. Kopaska-Merkel
- 7 ... Flashfish by Adrian Rayner
- 14 ... The Azazel Tree by Chris Owens
- 25 ... Invasion Now by George Phillies
- 39 ... The Bar is High by David C. Kopaska-Merkel

Fiction by Neffers

- 40 ... Just Another Job by J. F. Posthumus
- 40 ... Cover for Fantastic Schools 2
- 50 ... Rachel Griffin and the Missing Laundry by L. Jagi Lamplighter
- 69 ... The Street Survivors by Ian J. Malone and Chris Kennedy

Artwork

- Cover: Djas-Puhr — Settling the Score by Jose Sanchez
- 7 ... Mountain Lion by Angela K Scott
- 14 ... Flight by Angela K. Scott
- 25 ... Eagle by Jose Sanchez
- 70 ... Mermaid Waves by Angela K. Scott

Weekend Treasures by Melody Friedenthal

Weekends you'll find me at the Treasures 'n Trash flea market down on Old Grafton Road. All the regulars know me there; I've been a regular myself for nearly thirty years. The wife and I arrive early on Saturdays so we can be all set up and ready for the first treasure hunters by 6:30 AM.

The spots aren't reserved but Thelma and I always stake out some territory at the far end of Aisle G. Harry thinks we're crazy, because we're so far from the porta potties and the fast food franchises, but it suits us. There's nobody to our left and some woods behind, so we get a little peace and quiet, and some shade, too. And it's a corner that's easily overlooked by the revenuers...

We set up three tables every week. One displays my collection of old glass milk bottles, each one adorned with a dairy logo. I've got dairies from all over the state and a half-dozen from even further afield. I usually sell one or two a day. That's okay, though, I'm in no hurry. Each one's got a story and if they don't sell, well, I still have my story, don't I?

The second table is packed with Thelma's quilts – we do a nice business on them. They look

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real nice and colorful sitting there and the tourists can't resist. I tell them that the quilts are hand-crafted by my pretty wife. That gets 'em. Thelma just smiles from behind the rickety table and continues piecing fabric.

The last table just has junk.

Once we get set up, I leave Thelma in charge and make my first per-am-bu-lation down the dusty, winding pathways of the market, to see what I can see. You really can find treasures this way, although half the time when I get back Thelma just sighs and points to our junk table. I protest, try to tell her what a great gadget I've found, or how useful this whachamacallit will be when it gets cleaned up a bit, but more often than not she won't be swayed and the thingy goes onto the third table. Sometimes I sneak it off again when she ain't looking.

When I'm done hunting it's Thelma's turn. I sit and greet the bargain hunters and she goes out, ostensibly to get us coffee, but she does some hunting of her own. You wouldn't guess it to look at her, all white-haired and rosy-cheeked, but my wife has the hunting instincts of a hungry tigress and that's no lie. Besides the coffee, she usually comes back with some pre-plastic currency or maybe some old-format DVDs that you can't find anywhere anymore.

But the best thing Thelma returns with - a reliable treasure - is gossip. I don't know how she does it, but every week she comes back with some tidbit that makes my jaw drop. Like how Harry was marrying again and how his current two wives and their seven kids were all excited. Or that I ought to take a look at the bald newcomer in Aisle C because she thought he might be IRS. Or how Martine, who sells old science fiction books just a few spots down from us in Aisle G, was having an affair with both of the Smith brothers, her own competitors down on Aisle M.

I guess people just feel they can confide in my Thelma - she comes back with the most amazing stories. I hear all about it while we sit side-by-side in our folding chairs, drinking our coffee and eating some raspberry Danish we've brought from home.

In the afternoon I'll go hunting again, and this time it's my job to bring back ice cream sundaes.

Now, I know Thelma enjoys this weekly treat but I think she secretly makes me bring us dessert so my hands are too full to pick up any more trash... err, treasures.

One gorgeous Saturday afternoon we were sitting and eating our ice cream in the shade of the maples that grew in the undeveloped plot behind our tables. Business was slow but it was pleasant watching the silly tourists go by, my woman at my side, and no need to do anything but enjoy the breeze and the gossip.

I told Thelma I needed to see a man about a horse, winked, and strolled into the woods. Fifty feet in the noise from the hawkers and the visitors was just about swallowed up by the trees. I could hear just a murmur but I couldn't see a blessed thing.

It was much nicer peeing here than walking the whole way back to the entrance to Treasures 'n Trash where the porta-potties are. They're clean enough in the morning but by late afternoon, with the sun beating down, the woods smelled a whole lot better.

I finished my business, and was about to return to my beloved, when a noise distracted me. It was a whirring followed by a crystal bell "ting!" at the end, and it seemed to come from off to my left.

Strange, I thought.

The land here was county-owned and was left natural as a buffer between the commercial district in the north-east and the state highway off that-away. When I was a boy, teenagers scared the younger kids with stories about how these woods were inhabited by zombies, gremlins and the like, but all I ever saw were some squirrels and a moose I named Chester.

I stepped carefully over a tiny stream and pushed the branches of a young spruce out of the way. Then I saw it.

It weren't no squirrel. Not Chester, neither.

It was about five feet tall at the shoulder (and I call it a shoulder for want of a better word), hairy along its grayish-blue bulbous middle. There was a yellow lump on top of that tubby middle and four yellow legs in brown boots under it. The four blue hands - well, man-ip-u-la-ting extremities - radiating out from its middle were all busy. One was rubbing some fallen leaves against itself, two were

holding some kind of keyboard and the fourth looked to be typing on it. There was a strong smell, but it wasn't as bad as the porta-potties. In fact, it smelled a bit like cinnamon after-shave.

I think the critter had been seeing a man about a horse, too, or maybe about a hex-a-pedal herbivore.

A gentleman should excuse himself on occasions like this so I mumbled my apologies and turned to go.

I stopped in my tracks when the colorful creature opened one of its mouths and said, "Would you happen to have a three-inch purple doohickey?"

I was pretty shook up. I didn't rightly know what a doohickey was and wondered if Thelma did; that woman knew everything. But even if I didn't know whether or not I had one, the critter deserved an answer.

"Not sure. What's a doohickey?"

"It's a special kind of thingamabob which morphs into a preon gizmo when under gravitational stress."

"Hmmm. I've got all sorts of doodads; perhaps we can do business. Wanna take a look?"

"That would be a fine thing. Gratitude goes out to you. My collaborator of the first rank will join us."

I took this to mean that the critter had a partner or colleague. Well, the more the merrier, I say.

It said something into the machine it was holding, and all of a sudden the undergrowth some ten feet behind it was disturbed, the branches swaying to and fro. Another one of the creatures came out from behind a wild blueberry bush. It was a bit larger than the first guy and its coloration was reversed. It looked a bit like a giant blue-footed booby, and it was carrying a purple thingamajig in one of its yellow manipulators, turning it over and over. This critter was saying something that even to my human ears sounded rather heated.

I'm guessing it was the alien version of a certain four-letter word, but that's just me.

"My name is Thorvald," I said. "Pleased to meet you both," I added for politeness' sake.

The second critter stretched out that grayish-blue lump of his momentarily and then said, "Mine

is Hrkring. My collaborator of the second rank is calling himself Merkidot this solar cycle. Would you happen to have a purple doohickey? About three inches long?"

"I've already asked him," Merkidot sighed.

"How about a thingummy? We need a transparent thingummy with retractable whatsises. And a thermal gimcracky of large but variable dimensions"

"I have all sorts of things on my third table and you gentlemen are welcome to come take a look. If I don't have it, I'll betcha someone at the market does."

I led them over the stream and through the woods back to the flea market, only to discover all of our neighbors had closed shop for the day and Thelma beginning to pack up.

"What took you so long, old man?" She sounded aggrieved.

"I was having a nice conversation with these two... men. This is Hrkring and his collaborator is Merkidot. They need a three-inch purple doohickey which morphs into a preon gizmo and a transparent thingummy. Either of those things among the junk... err, treasures on the third table?"

Thelma's eyes widened in what I'm guessin' was astonishment at first sight of our potential customers. But Thelma's alright – she doesn't have a prejudiced bone in her body.

"Well, let's see. What does a doohickey do? Maybe we've got something that will do the same job." I looked at Thelma with pride. Good question. Why hadn't I asked that? She got right down to business.

Hrkring said, "It wraps around a sonic amulet and keeps the glitches out."

"Is that a doohickey in your, umm, hand?" she asked.

"Yes, it is, but it broke when our vehicle and your planet tried to inhabit the same section of space-time. Now its molecules are hipurtated into rigidity but we need it to be flexible."

Thelma pursed her lips and stood awhile in thought. And while in uffish thought she stood, I offered Merkidot and Hrkring the last of our raspberry Danish, and chatted politely while the little wheels turned inside my beloved's head.

"I have just thing!" she exclaimed, picking up a small plastic egg from our third table - the one we reserve for junk of the finest kind. Harry calls it all "trash" because of the name of the market, but I prefer the eternal mystery of "junk".

Thelma pried open the egg, which fell into two halves in her hand. Inside one half was some purple gloop. She teased an edge with one finger and worked the putty away from and out of its plastic shell slowly but surely.

"Watch this." My bride rolled the putty between her hands, still strong and able as the day we wed. She made a small snake of it and showed it to Hrkring. "You can even see it morph. You can wrap it around anything and it will keep the glitches out, one hundred percent."

"I despaired at finding a purple morphable doohickey on your planet but I perceive my ears can now relax," Merkidot stretched his yellow lump and then telescoped it back in.

Hrkring said, "Gratitude to you both. What is the price for the doohickey?"

Thelma smiled. She said, "This is a very special purple doohickey. It is not only flexible but has many extraordinary properties."

She demonstrated how one could twist, fold, and pop the putty, and even showed our guests how it could copy images. She stretched the putty all around and then pressed it onto my favorite comic strip from last Sunday's newspaper. (We always have newspaper around, to wrap the merchandise for transport.) Thelma peeled the putty from the paper and triumphantly displayed the blurred image of a yellow-and-black cartoon tiger.

Merkidot rattled off something to Hrkring, and Hrkring responded by rotating 360 degrees while making the whirring-ting! noise I heard in the woodlands behind the market.

Hrkring then turned to me and said, "We shall report that you humans have highly advanced aesthetic sensory apparatus."

I was a little confused but Thelma pushed a white curl off her forehead and said, "How nice. I will set it aside for you. What else can I show you gentlemen?"

"We are also in need of a transparent thingummy, preferably with retractable whatsises. Our own

works well in nano-gravity but to reach escape velocity from your planet we need one of thicker skin."

"A transparent thingummy...hmm," Thelma mused.

I walked over to the right-most of our three tables, and considered the choices before me. Transparent, yes. I wasn't sure about the retractable whatsises.

"How about this?" I asked, handing Hrkring a graceful hourglass-shaped milk bottle. It sported the outline of a contented orange cow with the words "Happy Acres Dairy" in an arc below her. One of his manipulating extremities grasped the waist of the milk bottle and brought it up to one of his four eyes, with the base of the bottle closest to his bluish lump.

More jibber-jabber between the customers. I didn't understand a word so I just waited, and thought about suggesting to Thelma that we get some Chinese food for dinner. They jabbered some more. I swear, it can even make an easy-going guy like me vote to make English the official language.

Thelma yawned and then said, "So, will it work?"

Merkidot said, "The skin is thick and contains space-time in the perfect proportion. I believe it will give us the retro-boost required but Hrkring says we must have retractable whatsises."

I rubbed my chin. It was getting late and most of the vendors had packed up and gone home already, but with a little bit of luck I'd be able to find some whatsises of the retracting variety. I asked them to wait, and circled around our tables and strode up Aisle G. At the first cross-lane I turned left and continued about a hundred feet. Yup, Danny was still there but he was packing up. He had jacks in his ears under the dreadlocks and was bopping around to some music so I had to raise my voice a bit to get his attention.

"Hi, Grandpa!" He was a good kid despite his smart mouth, and worked at the flea market every weekend selling office supplies to raise money for his graduate program in astrophysics.

"Hey Danny. I want to buy some ball-points."

He sold me a package of a dozen with black ink, but then I turned back and bought another dozen with blue ink, which I hoped was enough. I headed back to Thelma and our two customers.

Thelma was laughing when I got there. “What’s the joke?” I said.

“Merkidot was telling me about the last time he laid an egg and the convolutions he went through to get it fertilized.”

I sometimes wonder how I’ve spent forty years with that woman. Everybody knows males don’t lay eggs. But see what I mean? Even strangers gossip with Thelma.

I shook my head and returned to the business at hand.

“Behold: retractable whatsises!” I declaimed, and clicked a Bic a few times.

Hrkring asked if he could examine our high-tech retractable solution to his intractable problem. He clicked and clicked some more. Then he dropped seven or eight of the ball-point pens into the milk bottle/thingummy. He held the bottle up to his eyes and appeared to squint through its transparent skin at the whatsises.

Merkidot took the remaining pens and said, “These will provide mutual coherence. Their spectral variation will allow us to fine-tune the moment of phase shift but we will have to retrofit them to the thingummy.”

Thelma set the whatsises aside too.

“The last piece of apparatus we need is a thermal gimcracky. It must be rather large but storable in a small 4-dimensional space. Hrkring must be able to deploy it using a single extremity, and its insulating qualities must be uniform and consistent, and at least 75 on the krepulian scale. Its color and aroma are unimportant compared with the metrical specifications.”

Thelma got that look in her eye which told me she was up to something.

She said, “I believe we have the highest quality thermal gimcracky in the galaxy right over here.” She pulled a quilt out from the bottom of her layered coverlet display.

She continued, “You see we have many gimcrackies. But this one is the one for you. It will keep your eggs and whatsises snug as a bug in a

rug. It can be folded and unfolded with just one hand, or any extremity you like, if you lay it down on any two-dimensional surface, and when fully deployed it will cover a California-king size bed or both of you. And although you were too concerned about the other features to specify the color, you can see it has a lovely moiré pattern which will bring much joy to your vehicle. And better yet: the contrasting trim makes it even more valuable.”

Hrkring and Merkidot agreed that our thermal gimcracky would do the job about as well as anything else they were likely to find on this planet, so the next step was to negotiate a price for all the widgets.

Merkidot suggested that we might be amenable to giving them a discount since they were doing so much business with us.

Thelma pointed out that we had kept the store open well past our normal business hours, just for them.

Hrkring reminded us that he and Merkidot would have to retrofit the whatsises and that the delicate operation would take four to the sixth power lilopans, a unit of measure used for linear time that he could not, most unfortunately, convert for us into human terms. But time is money, they said, and we had to allow that this was often true.

I said it was only fair that a middle-man be allowed to make a few percentage points for the knowledge that brings two parties together, and that the retractable whatsises cost me a pretty penny.

Seeing their hesitation and wanting to press my advantage, I reminded them that we had provided them with one-stop shopping, only a short distance from their crippled vehicle. And I closed the sale by casually lifting up the purple putty and deforming it so the tiger grew before their very eyes.

Merkidot closed all four of his eyes, or maybe her eyes (I was still sure males don’t lay eggs but Thelma had done so well thus far that I didn’t want to intrude), whirred a bit and then opened them. He sat down on the ground, his yellow legs arrayed around him. Reaching into a pocket in the left rear boot, he withdrew some green rocks the size of ping-pong balls and a small gizmo, or may-

be it was a gadget or a flapdoodle - hard to say.

He passed the rocks up to Thelma and the device to me. "I believe these will be equitable payment. The green rocks are beryllium aluminosilicate and the electronic unit will allow you to bypass all involuntary governmental-revenue enhancement petitions."

I looked at my ladylove, her white hair coming loose from her bun, her apple cheeks blossoming into a smile.

The moiré-patterned thermal gimcracky was a water-stained moving company quilt that we used to protect Thelma's handiwork between our house and the flea market. And the electronic gadget seemed like just the thing if that bald guy in Aisle C did turn out to be with the IRS.

"It's a deal!"

We waved farewell and bon voyage.

"So, wanna get some Chinese take-out for dinner?"

Five-Billion-Year Mission David C. Kopaska-Merkel

So here's the thing:
on ST: TNG we find
our distant ancestors,
who looked just like us,
scattered their seed across the galaxy,
on a thousand thousand planets,
where one-celled critters
(call them bacteria),
proceeded to evolve for billions of years.

Some of them, on each planet,
became humanoids,
uncannily resembling one another,
interbreeding with more facility
than horses and donkeys,
and, oh yes,
these other species,
each more uniform
than almost any pair of human siblings,
can learn English
at the snap of a finger--
deus ex magically!



Flashfish by Adrian Rayner

Vision.

That's what you need to catch a flashfish.

The fishermen sitting round the pond were the best on Keratea Space Station. They all had special skills. The mathematicians using advanced algorithms to predict the fish's next location, the guys with hyper senses who could hear a fin flap under water or the speedsters who could cast a line in a millisecond.

Like the fish, they were gene bent. Mutated, same as Shqiptar. The result of generations of exposure to the toxic waste processed on Keratea space station. But the flashfish were special, nothing like them had been seen before or since. A teleporting fish. A fisherman's ultimate challenge. There for a second, then a silver flash and gone, then another flash and it was back on the other side of the pond. It was like fishing for a ghost. No pattern to its movement, completely random, nobody could predict where it was going next.

Except for Shqiptar. Because he had the Vision. He knew exactly where the fish was going because he could see the future. That's how he knew that in precisely five seconds there would be a silver flash and a tug on his line. That's why he'd cast his float out to that pinpoint position on the

pond.

Three, two, one...silver flash, a tug on his line, then the splashing out on the pond.

He quickly pressed the stun button on his rod's handle before it could teleport from the hook and the splashing stopped. He reeled in his prize, pulled the stunned fish from the water and held it high above his head.

Shqiptar looked round the pond at his fellow fishermen. Big smiles across their faces, thumbs up. Life or death, his choice.

He grabbed the fish by the tail with both hands and brought it down hard on the stones next to him. A sickening thud, then a loud cheer from his audience. The flashfish twitched then lay still, blue eyes bulging, mouth wide open. A kill. One more for him and the record books.

#

Three days earlier, he'd taken the hyperloop from Piraeus up to Neo Attica. As the loop cleared the outskirts of the city, he had a good view of Pendeli mountain and the space elevator on its summit, towering up into the deep blue Athens sky, like a black finger pointing to heaven. He changed lines at Ekali and took the Keratea Station branch. The hyperloop reached the end of the line, the summit of Pendeli. Below him, two million tonnes of steel embedded in the marble of Pendeli, the space elevator's anchor, all that kept it from floating into space. And in front the tether, the tubular pylon of carbon nanotube stretching forty thousand kilometres up to the counterweight in space holding it rigid. That was Keratea Space Station, the place he'd been born. Where he'd lived before he got the ground job.

When it was built it was named Alberon Four, one of the original space elevators built by the Alberon Corp. The European Federation debated long and hard where to site it and in deference to supporting the crippled economies of the outlying states, they'd picked Greece. Trillions of Federation Euros were invested, twice the cost of building it. The rest was siphoned off to line the pockets of the Greek elite. Which was nothing new, because they'd been doing the same for the last five hundred years. Business as usual.

But the station was an economic success, the

hub for the European Space Initiative, the jewel in the Federation's space exploration programme.

Then the Federation built a new space elevator in the Alps. Newer tech, closer to space, cheaper to run. So, they had to find a new use for Alberon Four. That was easy. The environmental lobbies had finally pushed the Federation into banning the storage of hazardous waste, so they needed to get rid of the crap. They used the age-old strategy, 'Send it somewhere else'... and now they'd found the where and the how. Send it to Athens, load it on the space elevator, up to the station then nudge it off into space. Easy peasy. Out of sight, out of mind, not your problem anymore.

But you needed guys on the station to process the waste, package it up and push it into space. Fortunately, the Greek authorities had long experience of garbage disposal, and the guys from the Keratea waste site in Athens were quick to put up their hands. That's how the space station got its new name and crew.

As usual, the bean counters soon saw a way to squeeze profits. Store the crap in the cheapest containers before dispatching it up to the station. Each year trim a bit more off, add a few million to the bottom line. Not a problem. But it was a problem for the guys forty thousand kilometres up on the station. Eventually the radioactive and chemical sludge began to leak. Four generations later everyone up on the station had bent DNA, including the fish in the pond.

Shqiptar exited the hyperloop station and took the escalator to the space elevator's passenger chamber gate. At the gate, the red beam from the security scanners lasered up and down his body, confirmed his identity and validated his pass. The gate hissed open.

Across the platform, the Passenger Chamber. Only one transport a day now as visitors were few. As he walked over, he spotted the holo graffiti sprayed on the chamber door. He stopped and looked at the words, mesmerised by the pulsing as they warped and shifted colour. He could just make it out, some anti-war slogan:

*"Bombing for peace is like f***ing for virginity."*

He figured it must be a reference to the Federa-

tion war with the British Marxist Republic that finished a few years ago, after the republic surrendered. Which he knew a lot about, he'd been in the Federation team that negotiated the cease fire.

The door to the chamber in front of him slid open. Inside three fellow passengers. Station workers, "Sky Slopers". Ragged clothes wrapped around disfigured bodies, courtesy of their bent DNA. The dull green bioluminescent glow from the interior lights gave them a ghoulish appearance. Their bags and rucksacks were stuffed with things they couldn't get on the station. Booze mainly, and probably drugs scored from the dealers down in Omonia.

As he entered, the mingled stench of BO and chemicals hit him like a brick. When he'd first left the station, it'd taken weeks to get rid of it.

The Sky Slopers fixed him with a suspicious stare. He held up his withered left arm and said a few words in Arvanitika, the Greek-Albanian dialect only they used, let them know he wasn't some etsi ketsi Grounder. Smiles spread across their faces; he was one of them. An Arvanite. A brother.

The girl on his left with the toothless smile offered him a reefer. He took it and winked an Arvanite thank you. She held up a crooked finger. The tip glowed red, then a flame trickled up in the air, a "gift" from her bent DNA. He put the reefer in his mouth, leant forward and lit it up. He sucked in a deep breath, sat down then plugged in his comset.

The Sky Slopers kept quiet about their "gifts", fear of what the Grounders would do to them if they found out. Occasionally, rumours trickled out from the station, but that was all, just rumours.

Guilt crept into a corner of his mind. Guilt that he'd left them, tried to forget them and the Station, his home, his people. But he couldn't let it distract him, he was here to do a job. And his career depended on doing it right.

The door slid shut. A jolt as the chamber swung forward to begin its journey. First, over to the loading bay, then it was clamped to the tether, joining the other chambers on their way up to the station, like threaded beads crawling up a taught black string.

The chamber's ancient holo system activated and the screen crackled and warped until an image appeared. Still the same old vid from the Alberon Four days, nobody'd bothered to change it. The woman was a poster for last century's best escort; short green hair, a mohican on the top, holo tattoos moving across her face. She spoke with that clipped accent they'd all used back then:

"Welcome to this Alberon Corp luxury passenger chamber. Passengers' safety is our top priority. We are pleased to advise that this chamber is composed of state-of-the-art graphene aerogel composite that"

Shqiptar switched off his comset and the drone disappeared. He wondered how much of the technobabble his fellow passengers understood. Not much from the blank looks on their faces.

The guy next to him started talking. Shqiptar let him explain what was wrong with the quality of quantameth these days, but didn't take it in. The only thing he remembered was that the guy felt strongly about it.

He stubbed out the refer on the chamber floor, opened his hand terminal and continued working on preparations for his meeting with Kaldellis, the most important meeting of his life.

The passenger chamber joined the tether and began its long climb up into the blackness of space.

#

Keratea space station.

Nickname: "The Mansion." Coined by Babis Kaldellis, self-appointed leader of the station.

Slogan: "All waste aspires to the condition of shit." Borrowed from Don de Lillo's *Underworld*.

And nowhere in the solar system was that slogan truer than on Keratea station.

Back home.

That familiar smell, the same as in the chamber. And the dull green glow from the bio lights. The constant grinding noise from the processing station and the thump of airlocks as the waste was kicked into space. The crew with their bent genes and deformed bodies, trudging around in the gloom like zombies. Shqiptar thought he'd never get used to it again. Six hours later and he felt like he'd never left. Shortly after that he'd won the

plaudits of the fishermen at the station pond.

Now he was holed up in his guest quarters, revisiting his notes for the meeting.

A knock on his door. He looked at the face on the monitor. Old guy, sixtyish. Thinning white hair, bulging blue eyes. A smile of anticipation cracked the face, a flash of gleaming white teeth. Babis Kaldellis. Champion of the workers, leader of the station, the kingpin. You scratch his back, he'll scratch yours. And he knew a lot of backs with big itches. That's how he got things done and kept him on top of the heap, literally top of the shit heap.

Shqiptar opened the door.

Kaldellis held out a hand and Shqiptar shook it with a courteous smile. The white teeth flashed back at him.

"So, here you are, boy. Fit as a fiddle, I see. Life with the Grounders must suit you. Listen, you should know how proud we are of you up here. "Sky Slopper makes good on the ground". Trust me, it really meant a lot to us up here, when you got that high-flying job in the Commission. You're held in great esteem up here, boy."

Shqiptar didn't remember getting a letter of congratulations from Kaldellis, or anyone else from Keratea Station.

"Thank you so much for the kind words, Mr. Kaldellis. Your tribute is much appreciated. I'm afraid I'm rather tied up at present, busy preparing for tomorrow's meeting. Perhaps we could continue our chat tomorrow?"

"Of course, dear boy. Fully understand. You crack on, I'll pick you up on my way to the office. Say around eight a.m. Keratea time." The voice took on a patronising tone. "And don't think we're not hard at work as well, *boy*."

Kaldellis turned and left.

So, his opening gambit; the sweet talk first, the patronising jab at the end. The flattery then the condescension. Wear the opponent down, Kaldellis's *modus operandi*.

Shqiptar sat down and poured a large shot of whiskey from the bottle he'd stashed in his luggage. He was worried. Still no Vision for tomorrow, one that could help him with the negotiations. That was the thing about short term presci-

ence; sometimes you saw something useful, sometimes nothing. When he was younger, he hoped he'd be shown the winning lottery numbers, but it never happened.

It was like looking round a corner before you got there. Hearing something that was going to be said, maybe seeing something that was going to happen. You'd get a couple of flashes a day. Seeing a few weeks ahead happened less often, and perhaps once a month you saw something from six months down the line.

Over the years he learned to harness it, move it where he wanted. Perhaps show what was going to happen at a meeting, even get a look at a presentation or hear a speech. Just enough to give him the edge. That's how he'd got the job with the European Federation and made him the best negotiator in the Commission, and landed him the role of Chief Federation Negotiator when the space garbage strikers discussions broke down last month. That and the fact he was born on Keratea Station.

If there was one thing Arvanites excelled at it was stubbornness. There was an old Greek saying: "There was a fight between an Arvanite and a wall. The wall went away". The garbage workers' union was no exception, it was a constant thorn in the side of the authorities. The recent unrest had been rumbling along for months. Slowdowns, work to rule, the occasional stoppage. A nuisance, but the authorities had contingencies in place. What really made a difference was when the unions on the ground came out in support. That's what upped the stakes and that was all down to Kaldellis. He was the guy that pulled the vying factions in the unions together. He greased the wheels; a bribe here, a favour there. He had them all in the palm of his oily hand.

Kaldellis had issued an ultimatum. Pay us a realistic wage, give us healthcare cover, stop sending the leaking cans, or we all strike.

And that would result in huge problems on the ground. Piles of toxic waste in leaking containers, a nightmare for the Federation authorities.

Then a rumour leaked out, the Federation had plans to send in the military. The negotiations broke down and the strike began.

Then, from nowhere Kaldellis agreed to re-

sume talks, and that's when Shqiptar got the call and his chance to make his name.

Now he needed a window into tomorrow's meeting. A Vision. Something to give him an edge. He'd been focusing all evening, trying to make it happen, but nothing.

Why now? Why had it deserted him now? Why on the eve of the most important job of his life?

Eventually, he got into to bed, thoughts jumping around in his head like flashfish in a pond.

Then just as he closed his eyes it came to him. Like a camera roll. He knew what he had to do.

The next morning Kaldellis arrived promptly at his door, eight a.m. exactly. Bulging blue eyes, beaming smile, dazzling white teeth.

"Come with me, boy."

No flattery today, then. Straight to contempt.

Kaldellis took point, leading Shqiptar down the main station corridor, past the lifts and through the fire door exit. Kaldellis's office was at the top of the station, from where he could look down on his empire and plot his Machiavellian schemes. Ten floors up from where they were, twenty flights of stairs. Kaldellis bounded up the stairs, two at a time, another of his games. Show his sixty-two-year-old body was as sharp as his mind, teach the young whippersnapper a lesson.

Shqiptar followed. By the fifth flight he was breathing heavily, Kaldellis had disappeared from sight. By the tenth he was gasping for air. He took the final ten flights at a steady pace, stopping for a few seconds at the top of each one.

When he reached the top Kaldellis was waiting for him, a triumphant smile on his face. Breathing normally, not a trace of sweat on his face.

"There you are, boy. Thought you weren't going to make it. Not far now."

Through a fire door and onto a narrow gantry. Shqiptar looked over the side and his head swirled as he saw the void below. Down to the bottom of the station, forty flights of stairs. He felt his body sway and made a grab for the rail. Which should have been a couple of feet higher.

A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Easy, boy. Nearly lost you there. Wouldn't want that to happen, eh."

Shqiptar's vertigo eased as they made it through the door at the far end of the gantry and into Kaldellis' office.

Kaldellis strode towards the desk at the end of the room, the one Shqiptar'd seen last night in the Vision and sat down on the huge chair behind. He settled himself into an imperious pose, like a king on his throne ready to bestow trinkets on his subjects. The trinkets would be his words of wisdom, cast like pearls before his sycophantic admirers.

Shqiptar wasn't one of them.

He sat on the small chair on his side of the desk, Kaldellis towering above him on his "throne" the other side.

Kaldellis peered down at him. The bulging blue eyes, the beaming smile, the white teeth. Shqiptar watched Kaldellis pick up a pen and roll it between his fingers, watching the holo patterns around the barrel, pulsing and changing as they moved up to the nib. Waiting.

So, Kaldellis had given him the white pieces, wanted him to make the first move. Today he was going to stall, last night's vision had told him what to do. He'd proceed with a standard opening gambit. State your position. Draw a line in the sand. Then hear your opponent's response. He steadied himself, focused his mind and locked his gaze onto the blue eyes.

"The Federation would like to offer their sincere thanks for your generous offer to renew negotiations, Mr. Kaldellis. We very much appreciate the gesture and take it as a sign that we can move forward and achieve a resolution to the current situation, one we hope will satisfy both parties. However, before we begin with the negotiations, I really need to revisit the current economic situation facing us today across all states within the Federal Union. I recognise that up here in the station you are somewhat isolated, I can fully appreciate that, but we need you to understand that the economy is still recovering from the pointless four years of war forced on us by the British Marxist Republic. Apart from the appalling waste of life, the economic sacrifice has been near catastrophic. Everyone and everything has suffered, Mr. Kaldellis. Our infrastructure, communication networks, businesses, institutions. It's everyone's duty to make

sacrifices during the reconstruction. We cannot make exceptions. We cannot offer concessions to one party, when we can't do so to others equally in need. We need you to understand this Mr. Kaldellis."

He ended with a conciliatory smile. An offer to bridge differences. An open door to a solution.

Kaldellis blinked. The smile and teeth were gone, the bulging eyes narrowed.

"I think we need a whiskey, Shqiptar."

His name at last. Recognition.

Kaldellis got up and moved towards the drinks' cabinet in the corner of the office.

His cue, just as he'd seen in last night's vision. Even though he'd seen what he was going to do next, there was a chance it could go wrong. Anxiety gripped him. The thought of being caught made his stomach churn, he knew what Kaldellis was capable of. With his heart beating like a triphammer he carefully got up, moved swiftly behind the desk, opened the third draw down on the left-hand side, and took out the data tab. Nearly there now, Kaldellis was still pouring the drinks. He slipped the tab in his pocket and sat back in his seat. Thank God, he'd done it.

Kaldellis turned around, a drink in each hand, returned to his throne and put a glass down in front of Shqiptar.

Kaldellis took a deep breath and a long swig from his glass, then looked at it as though it was telling an old story, one that everyone should know.

The blue eyes lit up again, this time tinted with menace.

"Shqiptar, you are one of us. I'd hoped you would be on our side. You were born here, lived up here. You know what it's about. Us up here, them down there. The shit producers and the shit shovelers. That's reality. The beauty and the beast. Us hidden up here out of sight and out of mind, an embarrassment, a hiccup in their Eden. A bit of dog shit under their shoe. I offer to negotiate and you bring me nothing. For years they have poisoned us, sent us their leaking containers. Sat there while our bodies disfigured, our DNA bent. And when we ask for just recompense - a decent wage, medical care, waste that doesn't leak - what do they do? Do they try to make amends? Offer one

Euro of compensation? No, they decide to send in the military. And that's not all. Next they plan this..."

Kaldellis got up, and with the flourish of a practised waiter placed a data tab on top of the desk and tapped the holo play button.

A woman warped into view. Heads up display glasses, short straight hair, deadpan. Federation technician's uniform. A boffin. She commenced the lecture:

"Plans have now been drawn up for the construction of the new Pearson five nine five Space Elevator. At the end of its one hundred and forty-four-kilometre cable, the tangential velocity is ten point nine three kilometres per second. That is more than enough to escape Earth's gravitational field and send probes at least as far out as Jupiter. Once at Jupiter, a gravitational assist manoeuvre could permit solar escape velocity to be reached..."

With a press of his finger, Kaldellis cut the transmission.

"Do you see? Do you know what this means? Once they build it, they won't need us. At the top of their new tether they can achieve escape velocity, shoot their waste directly into space. Far cheaper than paying to pack it and push it out. It will be the end for us. Everyone on this station will lose their jobs and livelihood. Generations poisoned, then they crush us. It is a declaration of war."

His head was buzzing with the implications of what Kaldellis had just said. He answered with as much conviction as he could muster.

"Mr. Kaldellis, I believe you are reading too much into this. This is just a plan, pure scientific conjecture."

Kaldellis shook his head disbelievingly.

"Then why has the construction commenced? We have proof. In the British Marxist Republic, on top of the mountain called Ben Nevis. Part of the deal to stop the war, the deal you helped negotiate."

He was right. That was part of the peace deal. Two hundred years of Marxist idealism, the "Corbett Vision", had left the British economy in ruins, and its industry in a technological backwater. Part of the deal gave the UK authorities the technology and funding to build a next generation

space elevator. But there'd never been plans to use the elevator for garbage disposal. Kaldellis had talked his own way into this. His mind had conceived one Machiavellian plot too many.

"You are correct, Mr. Kaldellis. It was in the deal, but I wasn't aware construction had commenced. And I'm certain there was no provision for any waste disposal facility. I can promise you this is not the case."

"You expect me to believe that? It would be very convenient if the deal with your new BMR "friends" included a provision to get rid of your toxic crap, and get rid of us at the same time. No, you go back to your masters and tell them my terms. Think about it tonight. I will pick you up tomorrow at the same time. This meeting is finished. Off you go."

He dismissed Shqiptar with a flick of his hand.

Shqiptar was anxious to see what was on the data tab he'd stolen. He hurried back to his room and plugged it into his hand terminal.

"Oh my God..."

His jaw hit the floor.

Kaldellis's plan.

He was taking toxic waste from the processing plant and making bombs. Chemical bombs. Over a hundred of them. There was a map of Europe, a red dot on each capital city. And Kaldellis had a copy of a secret Federation military file detailing the proposed assault on Keratea Station if a mass strike went ahead. A high level of casualties was predicted in the attack, and a directive to take down the strike leader.

Kaldellis thought the attack was imminent. That's why he'd chosen to reopen negotiations, and why he'd been summoned to the station now. It gave Kaldellis time to distribute his bombs, one in every European capital city. Maybe that's what the three Sky Sloppers he met on the way up were doing. Planting bombs.

And it got worse. Much worse. Catastrophically worse.

The maniac was planning to set one off soon, as a warning to the Federation. "You come for me and I'll push the button and set off the rest. I'll do to you what you've done to us for the last two hundred years. I'll send your shit right back to you."

Shqiptar was in no doubt that Kaldellis was

going to do it. Perhaps tomorrow, maybe the day after. Hundreds would die. Maybe thousands.

Panic gripped him, his mind reeled at the enormity of what he'd read, sweat poured off his body.

And there was no way he could get a message down to the authorities in time. Kaldellis had a communication lock down in force on the station.

Then he realised. He hadn't seen it. Not in any short-term Vision nor in any showing him the weeks and months ahead. No pictures or words or sounds. Nothing.

So, it wasn't going to happen. But why not? What would stop it?

A flash in his head. Camera roll...a new Vision...

My God, that's what was going to happen tomorrow. That's why he hadn't seen anything about the bombs. It was one of the toughest things he'd have to do in his entire life. He wasn't sure he could go through with it, but he'd seen the Vision and he was the only one who could do anything about it.

He tossed and turned all night, playing it through in his head.

Next morning, Kaldellis arrived at his quarters spot on time, same as yesterday. The smile and teeth were back. Kaldellis was sure he had the winning move.

Now they were back at the top of the station, forty floors up, heading back to Kaldellis's office, going through the fire door and across the gantry. This time Shqiptar kept next to the wall, Kaldellis was next to the hand rail, just as he'd seen last night.

He turned, put his hand on Kaldellis's shoulder and pushed.

Up till now it had been easy, like watching a holo movie he'd seen a hundred times; déjà vu. The universe had ordained it and he was just following the script, a pawn on the cosmic chess board.

But nothing could prepare him for what he was seeing now. The look of horror on Kaldellis's face as he went over the rail, the bulging blue eyes, the mouth wide open. And the scream. That blood curdling scream as he went down in the void, arms and legs flailing and then the dull thud as he finally hit the bottom.

A cold hand gripped Shqiptar's gut, sweat poured from his brow, his heart pounding in his chest. He retched, felt the bile rising up his throat. He held the rail fast and took a few deep breaths, steadied himself.

He knew what he had to do next. Run. Run as fast as he could down to the docking bay and jump on the passenger chamber due to depart in eleven minutes.

Six Months Later:

They'd found Kaldellis's mangled body at the bottom of the fire escape a few hours after Shqiptar had left the station.

Six months later Shqiptar was still struggling with the memory of that day. He'd saved thousands of lives, but he was still a murderer. The Federation court had ruled justifiable homicide. He was a free man. A hero. But he didn't feel like one.

When he showed the authorities the data tab, it sent a lightning bolt to the very top of the ruling elite. Nobody'd realised how serious Kaldellis was or how much damage he could have wreaked. It tempered the approach of the authorities and engendered a willingness to compromise.

And he used his new found fame and status to fight for their cause; his cause, his people. Thanks to Shqiptar's efforts, the Sky Slopers got their medical coverage, a decent wage and a commitment to fix the leaking containers. They got what Kaldellis had wanted. In the end he won, even though it was his death that precipitated the deal.

Shqiptar handed in his notice and returned to Keratea Station. Nobody there missed Kaldellis's rule. The iron grip, the bullying, the bulging eyes and the white teeth. Now they'd finally got what they wanted, what they'd dreamed about. Shqiptar was welcomed back with open arms by his Arvanite brothers.

#

The fisherman with the cranial extensions next to him gave him a knowing smile, the one to let Shqiptar know he'd worked it out, processed all the options and possibilities in his head. He knew where the flashfish was going to be. He cast his line with a confident flick of the wrist.

The guy may have been right, but he was too slow. A flash in the pond and a tug on Shqiptar's line. First come, first served.

He pressed the stun button on his rod's handle, pulled the stunned fish from the water and held it high above his head, presenting his prize to the other fishermen.

Broad smiles stitched across their faces as they watched him, their thumbs up. Life or death. His choice.

Shqiptar knelt down and gently released the flashfish back into the water.

Silence from the audience.

No more killing.



The Azazel Tree

Chris Owens

From a rooftop in Nede, Seth studied the Field of Good and Evil as its lines of probability writhed over the city-state. Evil twisted to the east, an obsidian vortex darker than the night, swallowing the translucent strands of Good, or at least, whatever vestige of Good remained in the city. Probabilities were building. Soon, Evil would strike: a fire here, a string of brawls there, thefts, and murder, if

not outright massacre.

Seth scrambled for the vortex, clutching his freshly cut staff. A roofer by trade, his heels knew how to tread the steep inclines, and by sapping bits of probability with the oak, his rawhide sandals all but glided along the tiles.

The row of pitched roofs ended, with a fifteen-foot gap between Seth and the next gable. He didn't pause. Rather, he squeezed his staff and took a running leap. By all human probability, he should have plunged six stories, his body broken upon the cobblestone alleyway. Instead, he felt his palms tingle as his staff borrowed from the translucent filaments above. Good probabilities flowed through him. His feet dangled in the air, and after a moment of vertigo, he landed.

The jump forgotten, Seth ran, his legs flowing without thought, his focus on the twisting lines of obsidian, and the shouts and screams ahead.

He descended, halting at the eaves. Down below, in dim pools of streetlight, a five-foot man leaned against a row house, his bulky arms wrapped across his flab. A woman, taller by a head, paced semicircles about him, flailing her arms and shrieking incoherence. Even from six stories down, the man radiated irritation, his right cheek convulsing with scowls.

Seth didn't know what this was about. He didn't need to know. Strands of Evil whirled above the couple, tensing to the breaking point, ready to explode over the city. He stretched his staff toward the vortex and opened his mouth. As the epicenter burst, he pulled the probabilities down and Evil flowed toward him like lightning.

He bottled it into his being. It was akin to sipping a mouthful of wine. Indeed, to some dark part of him, it tasted sweet. It urged him to swallow. He knew he mustn't do that. On its own, the Evil would seep in after half a day, but Seth vowed to expel it before dawn. He'd make sure of it.

On the street, the woman drifted away in silence while the squat man, his scowl dissolved, combed his fingers through thinning hair and went his way. Above, the obsidian web relaxed between translucent strands, reflecting the perpetual stalemate, the balance of Good and Evil. There would be no wave of tragedy tonight.

Turning to go, Seth scaled for the crest. He paused midway. A boy, about nine or ten, perched above him with his back against a chimney, the full moon sparkling from his round eyes. He reached into his dirty nest of reddish-brown curls and scratched his scalp. "How'd you do that?"

Seth crossed his arms in an attempt at authority. "You are not supposed to be up here."

The boy grinned. "Neither are you."

"What are you doing here, boy?"

"Got no place to go. Might as well be here than no place at all." The boy pointed to the weave of obsidian and translucent strands. "What's that?"

"What is what?" Seth's eyes widened. Did the boy see the Field as well? In all his years, he had never known another soul who shared his gift.

"Those lines." The boy furrowed his brow. "It's like when you spread metal shavings over parchment and put a lodestone underneath."

"And what would you know of such things, young man? Few in Nede have so much as blinked at a lodestone."

The boy cast his eyes to the tiles. "My father--he was in the Lodestone Guild." The boy spoke in past tense.

"What about your mother?"

"Never knew her." The boy's lips tightened and squirmed. "My father raised me. Then the Spike came and a bargeman found his body in the Gihon. It's been rougher than a dog's bark ever since."

Seth rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. The Spike had begun a year past, with tensions in and among the Guilds, vendetta begetting vendetta. Despite his best efforts, the city-state had yet to settle.

"Who looks after you?"

The boy huffed. "Let's just say there ain't no guild for orphans. Not in Nede anyways."

"Well--maybe there should be." Seth couldn't let this boy go back into the streets, not when they shared a gift. He didn't have much of a place--it barely housed him--but he'd do what he could. "If you need a home--"

The boy shrugged. "Don't even know your name."

He held out his palm. "Seth Tyler."

The boy pressed his palm to Seth's. "A roofer by name and callous."

"Very astute," Seth said.

"A Lodestoner has to know more than his own Art. That's why they're the king of Guilds." Shrugging, the boy blinked at the tiles. "My father told me all he could before he died."

Seth nodded to himself, certain that the man's tongue had killed him. The boy was too young to apprentice, and the Lodestone Guild forbade tutoring the uninitiated, family or not. Better to pester a mother bear and her cubs than the Lodestoners and their secrets. "It is not too late to look into roofing."

"Maybe I will." The boy held his hand out, and once more, they touched palms. "I'm Ferro, by the way."

After taking an ironwood ladder to the street, he led the boy along a six-foot hedge cobbled from stone and mortar. Lamppost after lamppost illuminated the night, ten-foot stalks bearing yellow-white globes, strange beacons burning on nothing.

Nobody understood how the Lodestoners created light, and most folks preferred not to know, fearing what sinister arts the Guild practiced in their Sanctum. Few, though, yearned to undo the era of lights and mechanisms, dependent as it was on a cabal of men garbed in black robes. Life was easier than a generation ago.

They passed under the shadow of an archway and halted at the checkpoint. A guard scuttled from his shack, rubbing gunk from his left eye, while scrutinizing Seth with his right. "Until sunrise, the Roofer's District is barred to nonresidents."

"Do you know where the thatcher lives?" Seth emphasized the last syllable, fiddled at his earlobe and struck his left sandal on the cobblestones, giving the code for the day and the month, and identifying himself as a journeyman.

"Follow the scent of smoke." The guard stroked his shaggy sideburns and returned to his shack without another glance. "Good night and go home, Brother Roofer."

As they rounded the corner, onto Shingler Street, Seth shook his head. He preferred the rooftops. After sunset, the streets had too many hassles, with each guilded district having its own set of signals and codes, barring entry to the uninitiated.

"You never did answer me." Ferro pointed to the sky. "What's that?"

Though the lampposts dimmed the starlight, the web of obsidian and translucent fibers burned in Seth's inner vision--even when he closed his eyes. He lowered his voice. "The Field of Good and Evil." He counted ten paces, checking over his shoulder this way and that, before whispering. "It is more complex than any lodestone field."

A smile flickered across the boy's face. "And what would you know of lodestones?"

"My father--he was a Lodestoner too." Seth felt a pang of old grief. He'd been fourteen when his father disappeared. One whiff of a good vintage, his mother used to say, and that man had the loosest tongue in Nede. Of course, she never accused the Lodestone Guild, but then, nobody dared do that.

"Why'd you choose roofing over your paternal Guild?"

"Because I--" Seth felt his fist harden about the staff. Because I hate the Lodestoners, he wanted to say. Instead, he said, "Because I like the view from up there."

As they turned onto Thatcher, a narrow street with few lampposts, Ferro eyed the Field.

"Where's it coming from?"

"It comes from us all." Seth tapped his chest. "We all have the probability for good within. And we all have evil, even those of us who lock our inner darkness behind bulwarks of holiness. It has a way of leaking out. Gather enough folk in one place and you get something like that."

"The man and lady back there." Ferro stuck a thumb over his shoulder. "How come I didn't see lines coming out of them?"

Seth tucked the staff underneath his arm and spread his fingers. "Isolated threads are thin, imperceptible." He interlocked his hands. "Woven together, the probability of Good and Evil blanket the population."

"Back there. You took away some of the--" The boy mouthed the syllables before he spoke them. "--probability."

Seth nodded.

The boy pressed his palms together. "Where is it?"

He patted his sternum. "Right here--sort of."

Ferro's eyes grew wide. "You going to let it out?"

"Most definitely."

His building, an old brick-stack, stood three levels high, a dwarf among the newer, six-story towers of concrete and glass. They descended a flight of steps and passed through a dim, damp corridor.

"Here we are." Seth rattled his key into the lock. After a click, he shoved at the unpainted door, and it whined open. He toggled a switch, and from the ceiling, a Lodestoner's globe began to cast dim yellows. A curtain divided the latrine and the tub from the rest of the room. There was a cot, an icebox, a small stove, but not much else.

He slumped against the doorframe. "Take the cot."

"You going to sleep any?"

"Perhaps."

The boy looked about the room with a blank face. "I'd like to be your apprentice."

"By Guild consensus, you must be thirteen."

Ferro shook his head. "Not roofing. What you do at nights."

"There is not much of a living to be had in what I do at nights," he said.

"I can see that." The boy yawned and stretched his way to the cot. "You and me, we've got a gift. And meeting you like that, it's like fate--like I'm supposed to learn what you do."

"All in good time," Seth said.

Ferro nestled into the cot and rubbed his eyes. "That's what my father used to say."

"For now, good dreams, Ferro." Seth nudged the probabilities with his staff, aiding the boy's descent into slumber. In an instant, Ferro nodded off. As silent as he could, Seth locked the door, and returned to the rooftops.

#

He entered Avalon Bottom, the preserve that divided the city with a valley of trees and streams, following the gurgle of a creek, his staff guiding him in the predawn hour. Redwoods loomed all around, and to his heavy eyes, the wooden columns seemed to hold the crimson sky aloft.

Among treekind, the redwoods were unique in their ability to bottle Evil and remain uncorrupted. He'd had many to choose from. Long ago, he had selected neither the tallest, nor the thickest, nor the oldest--for such seemed sacrilege--nor did he burden many trees with the task. Just one. He called it the Azazel Tree.

He hiked to the valley floor, where four streams merged and flowed around an island mound. He trudged through the moat, water chilling him to the knees. After a ten-foot climb, Seth came to it, the Azazel Tree, his sandals dripping in mud.

He circled the tree for seven paces, brushing the bark with his fingers. "Once more, I must tax you. As I will again, again, and again. You must bear the evil my kind carries, and hold it within yourself for eons to come."

Seth planted his staff between lines of bark and took a deep breath. He sensed the tree's store. Despite his visits, its capacity had only increased, perhaps fueled by growth, sunlight and water.

As he exhaled, Seth discharged the probabilities that he had carried within him. Evil flowed through his staff and vanished into the tree's core. His mouth filled with a bitter taste. A part of him, his native evil, roared at the loss. Pure temptation urged him to tap the tree, drink the probabilities within--drink!

He stumbled to the stream and dipped his head beneath the water. The shock froze him to the skull, chasing his exhaustion into a corner and washing away temptation. He gulped a helping of water, raised his head from the stream, and spat the bitterness from his mouth.

In time, he would succumb--if left to himself. No. He couldn't do that. Nor could he keep going it alone. Ferro was right. He needed an apprentice. Seth hadn't found the boy by happenstance. Cosmic forces had drawn them together.

Dawn came as an orange swath cutting through the forest, a radiance that no Lodestoner could match. He followed the stream for a mile, paralleling the bank until the water gave itself to the Gihon River. There, he found a young oak, packed with life and low-lying branches. Seth seized the end of a wrist-thick branch, letting the probabilities flow through his fingers.

#

With his legs dangling from the cot, Ferro hefted the branch from his lap. "What kind of tree is this?"

"Oak," Seth said.

The boy sniffed the broken end. "Why'd you pick that?"

Seth lifted his staff and twirled it on his palm, directing the probabilities to keep it aloft. "Probability flows best through oak."

Ferro's eyes lit up. "It's a good conductor, you mean."

Seth gave a single nod. "Your first task, as my apprentice, is to carve a staff for yourself."

Ferro didn't smile, but his eyes did. "Is oak a good condenser?"

Seth blinked at the boy. "Pardon?"

"Is that where you stored the probabilities you took from the sky? An oak tree?"

Seth lowered the staff to his side and considered. He almost told him. And he planned to, in time, but the boy was too young, and the temptation of the Azazel Tree too great. He raised a finger. "Now, what kind of Guild would we have, if its grandmaster blabbed all its secrets in one session?"

"And what kind of apprentice would I be, if I didn't try to pilfer them?" Ferro leapt from the cot, tossing the branch in the air. He caught the oak with his thumb and whirled it from fingertip to fingertip. "How's that?"

"You learn quickly," Seth said.

"On the streets, you have to." With his free hand, Ferro covered his mouth, feigning a yawn. "Remember your little knockout trick? I learned that too."

Fatigue crashed upon him. His eyes ached with exhaustion. His vision blurred. In a stupor, he staggered to the cot, the staff slipping from his hands and clattering to the floor.

The boy chuckled. "Rest up, Seth."

#

He woke to the aroma of pigeon and greens. Ferro looked up from tending the stove, giving a pan an absent stir, and grinned. "Sleep well?"

"How long have I been out?" He lifted himself from the cot and stretched his limbs.

"It's midafternoon." The boy ladled stew into a wooden bowl. "I didn't mean to sap you that hard."

"Didn't mean to? I missed a day's labor."

"Let the roofs roof themselves, Seth." The boy handed him the bowl. "We're a guild unto ourselves."

Taking the bowl, Seth nodded his thanks. "If don't roof, we starve. If we starve, there goes our guild." He sipped. The broth scalded his tongue, leaving a pungent aftertaste.

In the corner, a newly carved staff rested atop a bed of oak shavings.

"Your staff is done," Seth observed.

Ferro strolled to the corner and plucked his staff from the floor, examining it with narrowed eyes. "I'd much prefer yours."

"Then it is yours," Seth said.

"No. Then I don't want it." Ferro frowned, his nostrils crinkling in disgust. "I don't want you to just give it to me."

After stew, they trekked to the central plaza, in search of a cot for Ferro. As Seth navigated the maze of stalls and tents, he forced his face to uncurl. He disliked open markets with its dishonest hawkers, pickpockets, and the like. Above, the obsidian lines trembled with the confluence of Evil.

The boy tugged his sleeve. "What's next?"

"We find you a cot."

Ferro shifted his staff from one hand to the other. "I mean, what's next in my apprenticeship? Yanking the negative from the sky?"

"Not so loud." Seth put a finger to his lips.

"Considering my sleep mishap, I think we need to slow the lessons down."

The boy flattened his mouth, and thereafter, didn't sound more than a grunt.

In time, Seth spotted a pile of cots under a blue-striped tent. As he rummaged through the wares, a merchantess approached, crafting her lips into a smile. He looked about for Ferro, but the boy was gone.

"In case you need me--I'm Chavvah," the merchantess said.

Seth took in her plump figure, accentuated by an indigo gown a size too small, and felt the blood flush his cheeks. "How--how much for your cots?"

"A cot for one?" Chavvah leaned her hip against the tent pole and twisted a coil of coppery hair. "Or two?"

He cleared his throat. "One."

"Would you require assistance in carrying it back to your abode?" Her eyes flickered. "Perhaps a demonstration of its many uses?"

His pulse quickened. True, he'd found her striking from the first glance, but now, desire thundered within him. In his mind's eye, he saw himself taking her home, and his heart began to scheme. What about Ferro, wherever he'd gotten off to? He didn't care. Nothing mattered but her. The boy could look after himself. Why had he bothered with the brat in the first place?

In the sky, obsidian threads converged from all directions, tensing into a vortex. He realized what was happening; the probabilities were drawing him to Evil like an iron mote to a lodestone. A thought occurred to him. And then another. "You are married." Seth squeezed his staff and drew the probabilities into himself--Good probabilities--to fight the evil within. "And a mother."

Chavvah covered her mouth. "How?"

"I know." Desire faded, leaving his stomach to curdle. He felt disgusted with himself, at what he'd almost done. He lifted his staff toward the sky and channeled the probabilities down. He drew and drew, bottling more Evil than he'd ever drawn.

Chavvah held her stomach with both hands. "It--it's not like me."

Seth fled the market and hurried to Avalon Bottom. He didn't know how long he could hold this much Evil. The sooner he was rid of it, the better.

He followed the creek to the valley floor, trudged the stream, and clambered the mound. He collapsed before the Azazel Tree, gasping for air. His heart pounded within his ears. Without words or ceremony, Seth poked the bark with his staff, and funneled Evil into the tree. As always, the Azazel Tree drank it down, uttering no complaint.

When he was done, a metallic aftertaste filled his mouth. He gagged.

A single, dry cough sounded. He looked up. In the midst of the forest shade, an oak stave swished at his forehead. Pain slammed his skull, sending flecks of white dancing across his vision, and then--darkness.

#

Cold water splashed his face. Seth writhed on his back, copper wires biting and binding his wrists and ankles. Then the agony hit, a throbbing that made the forest spin, and he slipped into delicious oblivion--at least, until the water came again.

"Stay with me, Seth." A voice--a boy's voice. "You took it pretty hard in the head."

Slowly, the name came to him. "Ferro?"

"I was scared I'd lost you there," the boy said.

Seth struggled against his copper bonds.

"What--what happened?"

"Oh, I bopped you in the head with the oak you gave me." Ferro giggled. "Then I snapped it to pieces. I'd rather take than be given something. That's why I'm stealing yours."

Seth felt his stomach lurch. "I don't understand."

"Night after night, you stole the negative from the sky. Then you came here to stash it in this tree." Ferro leaned over him, twirling Seth's oak about, and in his dizziness, the boy, and the ground he stood on, seemed to whirl with it. "Then, why's negative growing? Why the Spike? Hadn't you wondered?"

Seth opened his mouth, but he had no answer. Was the boy blaming him?

"Or how about that tart in the marketplace? What a catch. And you almost caught her too. You probably wanted to take her then and there."

"How do you know about that?"

"Know about it?" Ferro barked a fake laugh.

"I've been planning it for weeks."

Seth's heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"We're alike, you and I--just opposite," the boy said. "We manipulate the probabilities. I take away the positive. You take away the negative. I caused the Spike as you caused the Lull before that."

"If--if that's true, then you're as responsible for your father's death as the Lodestoners. The Spike was the catalyst. Not that the Guild needed much prodding."

"The Lodestoners didn't kill my father," Ferro said. "I did. Of course, I didn't kill him all at once, not until he spilled all his lodestoning secrets."

"As I've spilled mine?"

"I knew all of that already." Ferro turned to the redwood. "I didn't need all your secrets. Just one."

"The Azazel Tree."

"That's what you call it?" The boy rapped the bark with Seth's staff. "For a year now, I've puzzled it. If I consumed too much negative, the Field would grow less negative. So I stole the positive. But I couldn't steal too much. If things got too negative too fast, people would flee. The Field would diminish."

"It is not too late to reverse it, Ferro."

"And end up like you? Working the positive for everyone but me?" The boy snorted. "You lose sleep over what? To wallow in a filthy cot? To have someone like me come along and take what little you have?"

Obsidian streaks twisted above the Azazel Tree, a cyclone consuming half the sky, vortex within vortex, portending great Evils, worse than anything Seth had ever seen. He needed his staff--and now. He tried adjusting the probabilities, enough to weaken his bonds, but struggle as he might, the copper wire did not yield. The copper seemed to restrain the Good, just as it restrained his hands.

"I know what you are about to do. I know the temptation myself," Seth said. "Think. If you take in that much Evil, what will that do to you? You are far too young--"

"My father used to say that. You're too young. All in good time. Wait till you're older." The boy swung the staff, missing Seth's nose by an inch. "I wasn't too young to kill him, was I? He found that out." Ferro returned the staff to the Azazel Tree and worked it inside a nook. "After this, nobody will say that to me again."

It began with a trickle. Oil-like threads sprouted from the Azazel Tree and spiraled along the

staff, seeping into the boy's arm. The threads thickened into rope-sized tentacles, gushing into the boy, enveloping him. In the sky, the vortex reached its breaking point, erupting into an obsidian inferno. Waves of Evil crashed over the city-state.

The Azazel Tree creaked and groaned, louder and louder, until the rootstock exploded into a cloud of sawdust. Down the Azazel Tree came, with a roar that left Seth's ears ringing. The tree slapped the stream, chopping at the water, and sending waves to surge its banks. The trunk settled into the creek for hundreds of feet, terminating in a mountain of branches and leaves.

The sawdust parted, revealing a creature towering nine-feet high, clutching Seth's staff, and standing where the boy had stood. It bore Ferro's face but it was no longer a boy. Reddish-gray scales armored a human-like frame, a hide tougher than skin and more malleable than bark.

"What's a matter, Seth? Have I shot up since you've last seen me?" Ferro examined himself with gleaming eyes. His voice, rather than deepening with size, had a heightened pitch. "That's what happens sometimes. One day, you're looking down at a runt, and the next, you're craning your neck. And then you can only hope you haven't messed with him too bad, cause then it's payback."

"What have you done to yourself?"

"I could kill you, Seth." To make the point, Ferro pressed the staff against Seth's windpipe. "But death's never a goal in itself. Only the means, when it suits me." He flung the staff over his shoulder, a sneer contorting his face into ugliness. "For now, Evil dreams, Seth."

The staff arced down, slicing the air with a hiss. Seth steeled himself, and after a blaze of sparks and pain, returned to nothingness.

#

After a deep, dark fog, Seth found himself blinking at two golden circles, Lodestoner's globes hanging from metallic tiles. Wool blankets, smelling of sweat and blood, cushioned him from a concrete floor. Finding his wrists unbound, he tried hoisting himself up, only to have the mother-of-aches split his skull and compel him to the floor.

He touched his forehead, feeling the contour of lumps and swells.

"How do you feel?" A lady with fiery locks huddled in the opposite corner--the merchantess from the market.

"I could complain," Seth said.

She cleared her throat. "Did you ever find the cot you were looking for?"

Seth grunted. "What are you doing here?"

"I was--brought here," she said.

He scanned the room, taking in the distant hum, the steel paneling and the outline of a door-frame, almost seamless within the walls. A handle protruded from the door and beneath it, a keyhole, set within a copper circle. This was a cell within the Lodestoner Sanctum.

She raised herself from the floor and ambled over, her heels clacking on the concrete. They greeted formally, with palms pressed, silk against callous.

"I am Chavvah Agora."

"Seth Tyler," he said.

Sadness touched her olive eyes. "About yesterday . . ."

With his hand, he waved the thought away. "I know. I know."

"I--don't want to share your cot or blanket," she said. "I'd never do that to my daughter. Or her father."

"Nor I, Chavvah."

She bit her lip. "It's terrible out there. Parts of Nede are aflame. There's rioting between Guilds. A freak, who calls himself the Grandmaster, has cordoned the city walls to prevent evacuation."

Seth massaged his eyes. In his darkest imaginings, he had never conceived of things coming to this, and from the sound of it, they could only get worse. "The Grandmaster?"

"Our captor." She rubbed her forearms, and for the first time, he noticed the violet bruises that circled her wrists. "He staged a coup within the Lodestoners. He's going to strong-arm the Guilds under his thumb. He'll use the Roofer's district for detaining dissidents--he wanted me to tell you that. Thatcher Street is to be razed and its residents--"

"Where is he now?" Seth asked.

"Dominating Nede, I suppose." Though the air tasted lukewarm, shivers ran along her shoulders.

"I'm to be got with child, he says. Or he'll kill me and bring another. If you refuse still, he'll kill her and bring another. Again and again."

Despite the rod of pain lodged in his head, Seth levered himself up. "Did he--harm--you?"

"Not in that way." Chavvah folded her arms, clutching her shoulders as if fending off a winter chill. "I have seen his--gender. It is a shriveled root, unformed in the way of men."

"The brat toys with us on his playground." He massaged the back of his neck, casting a blank gaze over the concrete. "But we don't have to follow his rules."

Seth crawled to the door. He rattled the handle, and as expected, the door didn't budge.

Chavvah locked her arms tight. "I've tried. Believe me, I've tried."

Peering into the keyhole, he touched its copper cover and tried to work the probabilities. Nothing. The copper acted as a barrier, resisting the flow. Without his staff, without oak, he couldn't surmount it.

He looked about the room. "I need wood."

"Everything here is concrete and metal." Her face contorted with disgust. "The Lodestoners and their metal."

Seth leaned his back against the door, his thoughts scouring for a way. He tapped the concrete with his fist, sending a pulse of probability--without success. The floor went too deep. Even with his staff, the inanimate bent only so far, for the probabilities worked best on hearts and minds, flesh and blood.

She shrugged. "Parts of my shoes are wooden."

"What kind?"

"Poplar, so the cobbler claimed."

He studied her shoes, leathery insteps grafted onto dyed, wooden soles, pricy affairs that put his fraying, rawhide sandals to shame. Uttering a long sigh, he tapped his chin in a nervous fidget, and shifted his finger to his upper lip. At last, he motioned toward her feet. "May I?"

Her face blanked for a time, until Seth believed she'd refuse, for unless a man cobbled for a living, requesting a lady's shoe seemed unseemly. However, Chavvah removed her left shoe, and handed it over, her eyebrows raised in curiosity.

Spreading his fingers along the sole, he delved the wood's conductivity, feeling the poplar absorb bits of Good from the air, flow like sludge, and dissipate back into the room.

"Inferior," he muttered, but at least, it flowed.

Chavvah planted a hand to her hip. "The cobbler charged me two day's wages."

"Had you known we'd end up like this, you might have paid more for oaken clogs." Seth pinched at the sole and let the probabilities flow. It took some minutes, but with his head pounding and sweat dripping down his cheeks, he extracted a poplar splint from the midst of the wood.

Chavvah snatched the shoe from his hands, her mouth falling open as she brushed her fingers along the indentation.

"How is it?" he asked.

She slipped the shoe onto her left foot, and pursing her lips, paced to and fro. "It'll do."

He jiggled the poplar into the keyhole and drew at the probabilities. Once again, it took time for the odds to build, for the wood to mold itself to the lock's pins, but when he had it, he turned the splint. The lock clicked. He twisted the handle, and the door groaned open, letting a humid, copery stench intrude.

"Thank goodness," Chavvah said.

"Yes. Thank Goodness." Seth peeked out, finding himself at the end of a passage lined with iron doors. He strolled into the corridor and Chavvah followed, her shoes clacking close behind. "Do you know the way out?"

She shook her head, absently rubbing her bruises. "There was a tunnel. Down and down, he carried me. I remember a murky realm, endless and cluttered. But mostly, I remember that my heart was ice. For a time, it was easy to believe that this was the underworld and he, its lord."

They came to the end of the corridor and climbed a flight of metal steps. After a landing, the staircase took a right angle turn, and after another landing and a switchback, they entered a chamber obscured by size and gloom.

He squinted at a gray, column forest that loomed forty feet to a ceiling of cement slabs. Like vines, cables drooped from column to column, snaking down to the mesh of wires and brass

tubes that adorned the wall. A hum permeated the air, and in the distance, many waters rumbled--the Gihon.

"Lodestoners have no sense of decorum. No touch of femininity." With her forefinger, Chavvah brushed dust from a metal clamp that fastened a tube to the wall. "Everything's stale down here. There's life here, but it's false life."

"Perhaps those who labor here become just like that," Seth said. "Dead inside."

They meandered through the columns, past coils dispensing wire, through pallets and shelves holding mechanical guts. It was amidst these wares that Seth stumbled upon the first body, a man robed in charcoal wool, sprawled on the floor, his face puffy and purple-black. With both hands, Chavvah muted her gasp.

"Dead on the outside too," he said.

Her eyes moistened with tears. "This is the underworld."

Seth led her away, into a hallway of redwood partitions, past rooms and alcoves, where globes alighted desks draped in parchment, diagrams with lines, dots, and glyphs. Of course, many of those rooms housed the dead also.

Far off, to the right, over the maze of partitions, wood clanged against metal, the strike reverberating throughout the concrete chamber. Oak, he knew. Something inside him recognized the voice of his oak staff. And where his staff was, he would find Ferro.

"It's him, isn't it?" Chavvah asked.

"Either way, it might be best for you to wait here. I'm going to scout ahead." Seth inhaled metallic air into his lungs and hurried through the labyrinth of corridors and workrooms. He followed the sounds of wood on metal, until he came upon an opening. At the end of the chamber, scores of disk-like platforms protruded from the floor, each supporting a tarnished, copper cylinder that stretched to the ceiling. Here, the drone grew loudest and the roar of the Gihon shook the floor.

A nine-foot silhouette strode from platform to platform, a colossus with bark-like scales and a boy's face. On occasion, the boy stopped to beat Seth's staff against a copper cylinder. Seth felt his hands curl into fists. Ferro was treating his staff

like a drumstick. In time, the boy nodded to himself and climbed a platform, holding the oak against its cylinder. And then Seth understood. This was the boy's Azazel Tree, the place where he stashed the probabilities stolen from the city. Perhaps, as redwood bottled Evil, copper bottled the Good. When Ferro finished expelling the probabilities into the cylinder, he staggered, and the staff dropped from his hands.

From far off, a man's voice cried out. "Grandmaster--they've escaped!"

"Find them." Leaving the staff, Ferro leapt to the concrete with a thump and stalked into the darkness. "Or you'll wish you'd ended up like your dead brethren."

With the hum and the river roar muffling his footfalls, Seth dashed for the platform, even as his neck hair warned him it was a trap. He was ten paces from his staff--five paces--a pace. A scaly limb sprouted from the gloom, catapulting him into the air. He landed on his side in a blur of pain.

Ferro's voice cut through the background noise. "You'll have to show me your little escape trick, Seth."

Seth tested his limbs, and finding nothing broken, clambered to his feet. "I'm done showing you anything."

Ferro slid the staff from the platform and spun it in his fingers. "Never cross a Lodestoner, so folk whisper in dark corners. Reveal a Guild secret, the tiniest, and nobody will ever find your body." Ferro snorted his contempt. "Yeah, they protected their secrets. And yeah, they'd a reputation. They encouraged it. They seeded the rumors themselves--you know why? People feared to betray them. Rumor made them powerful. Do you want to know the truth though?"

Seth said nothing.

"The truth is, unlike me--" Ferro smacked the platform with the staff. "Unlike me, they wouldn't squash a horsefly."

"Is that what you are doing, Ferro?" Seth felt his eyes narrow. "Squashing Nede like some horsefly? I thought you feared depopulating the city."

"I've plans for it, Seth. Rule--not ruin. It'll be a true city-state again, with a real leader--with a real army."

"Army? Nobody has attacked us in centuries."

"That doesn't mean we won't attack them," Ferro said. "It's time to pummel the other city-states and gather their populations to Nede."

"And drown the city in Evil." Seth felt as if frost coated his veins. If he didn't stop this tonight . . .

"It solves my puzzle, don't you think? A population explosion. A mushrooming Field. A harvest of Probability. A feast to forage and plunder. Who knows what I'll become?" Ferro's eyes widened as he shifted his gaze beyond Seth. "Ah. There's the little tart."

Seth turned halfway, keeping the boy in the corner of his eye. A black-robed Lodestoner marched toward them, wielding a wooden cudgel in one hand, and with the other, shoving Chavvah by the scruff of her neck.

The Lodestoner halted between Seth and Ferro, craning his neck so as to gawk at his lord from deep-set sockets. He bellowed with a raspy voice. "I found her among the bureaus, Grandmaster."

"He's vicious for a Lodestoner. I bet he'd pay to gut his own mother." The boy winked at Seth. "I believe, Orrell, that I've just found the Lodestoner who'll oversee Thatcher Street."

Orrell seemed to suppress a smile. "I would be honored, Grandmaster."

Ferro drifted toward them, whirling Seth's staff upon his pinkie. He narrowed his eyes at Chavvah. "That is, Orrell, if you take them--" The boy sliced the air, swiveling the staff at Seth. "--back to their cell and do whatever you've got to do to."

Death's never a goal in itself, Ferro had said. Evil drove the boy, not to kill Seth, but to corrupt him, and if Seth gave in, to preserve his life--or Chavvah's--he'd lose whatever goodness that remained in him.

"Better to die with a grain of Good," Seth said, "than to become a harvester of Evil."

Ferro's nostrils flared. "Orrell, make sure they live. Make sure they're both capable of the task."

The Lodestoner swallowed, and with unhidden lust, ogled Chavvah with bulging eyes. His right hand, the hand that bore the cudgel, trembled. "As you Chavvah wiggled free and sprang for Seth's arm, gripping his elbow with all her strength. "It can't happen again."

"One day, my father dragged me to the marketplace," Ferro said. "He spotted a blue-striped tent where this chubby tart was stacking cots. He turned around, scarlet as could be, and marched us back home. He wouldn't tell me--but I knew."

"Never again," she said.

"Later, as I broke his thumbs, I got it out of him." Ferro's fists tensed about the staff. "He told me how he dragged this wench into the alley and had his way. In time, she gave birth. Of course, the wench's husband didn't want a brat that wasn't his, so he took the matter up with the Lodestoners. They brought in group after group until she singled my father out. In the end, the Guild fined him a

"It can't be," Chavvah said.

Ferro spread his arms. "What's a matter, Mother? Don't recognize your own son?"

Seth ground his teeth together. "This is your--mother?"

"Remember the marketplace? I steered you right to her, Seth. Didn't I introduce her? Oh--that's right. I was too busy fixing the probabilities from my hidey-hole." Ferro bowed toward Chavvah, a hand behind his back. "Seth, let me present--my mother." When he finished with the mockery, he rose with a glower in his eyes and signaled his lackey.

Orrell came at them, his cudgel swooshing left and right. Seth shoved Chavvah away, taking a stand between her and the Lodestoner, dodging swipes that came within inches. The man grazed the skin along Seth's forearm, before adding a glancing blow to his torso. In a pulse of pain and numbness, Seth reeled to the concrete.

Chavvah bolted for the darkness, but in a few blurred strides, Ferro outpaced her. He yanked her by the forearm and dangled her in the air. "Make me a brother, tart. If you pop out females, I swear I'll toss them in the river."

As Seth ran a finger along his gash, a familiar sensation came back to him. The cudgel--it was oak. Orrell lifted the cudgel and arced what should've been the knock-out blow. Seth rolled on the concrete, his hands reaching for the probabilities. The cudgel missed his temple by a finger-breadth. Seth shot his hand behind the oak and plucked it from the man's fist.

"Impossible," the man said.

"Improbable, yes." Seth swiped the Lodestoner in the knees and the man crumpled to the floor. Lifting himself up, Seth winked at the man as he clutched his knees and moaned. "But then, I should know. Probabilities are my trade." With the cudgel, he tapped the man in the forehead--enough to put him under.

"The probabilities are my trade too, Seth." The boy tossed Chavvah aside and strode toward him, twisting and twirling the staff from one hand to the other. "And you can never beat a Grandmaster at his trade."

From her spot on the floor, Chavvah shook her head. "Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can still see the man's face. It's much like that face." She pointed to Ferro. "I see it in his eyes. The same fervor. The same hunger for power." She shook her finger at Ferro. "But the boy I gave birth to was nothing like that."

Raising the cudgel, Seth drew all the remaining Good from the Field, concentrating the probabilities within the oak. In his inner vision, the translucent threads faded into nonexistence. "Just yesterday, Chavvah, this was a boy named Ferro--not this thing--whatever it is."

The boy pounded the staff on the concrete. "I'm still Ferro. But I'm still your Azazel Tree, Seth. I'm its heart, where you bottled the probabilities. I'm every bit of what you made me."

"You are what you made yourself, Ferro. In a way, you are the boy I regret meeting on the rooftops, and yet, I have to wonder, were you ever really a boy? Were you ever innocent?"

"I'm not a boy!" Ferro scowled at him, raising the staff over his shoulder, moments from raining the oak down on him. "Stop calling me one!"

Seth flung the oaken cudgel as hard as he could. Up and up, the cudgel flew, bursting with Good, spinning in near invisibility. In two eye-blinks, the cudgel lodged into Ferro's skull. Ferro toppled to the concrete with a boom and the staff rattled to Seth's feet. The body convulsed and blood trickled from the wound.

After one last twitch, the fleshy parts rotted away, leaving nothing more than a withered log.

Fighting a wave of nausea, Seth grabbed his staff from the concrete. He'd never killed before. It was self-defense, he reasoned. He had to protect

Chavvah. He had to save Nede. By all logic, he had done the right thing. But it still felt wrong.

Seth strolled to the copper cylinder, and ignoring his aches both old and new, scrambled atop the platform. The cylinder hummed and droned. The hair on his scalp and neck began to rise. Whatever Art the Lodestoners practiced here, it was indeed dark. He pressed his staff to the cylinder and sensed the probabilities bottled within, a year's worth of Good. With the oak, he siphoned every morsel, and released it into the city.

Chavvah looked up at him, her eyes wide and shaking. "Is it over?"

He slumped to the platform. "Is it ever over, Chavvah?"

#

From the rooftop, Seth dismissed his dozen apprentices, men and women who, over the months, he had stumbled upon. None of it was happenstance. The translucent filaments--Good itself--had drawn them together. Soon, he would teach them how to drain Evil from the Field, bottling those probabilities into a new Azazel Tree.

Three remained behind: Chavvah, her husband --a thin man with a cropped beard--and of course, Talitha, their daughter.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind, Seth?" Chavvah asked.

"She shows promise." Seth put his hand under Talitha's chin and tried not to think of the girl as Ferro's half-sister. She, in turn, beamed a smile at him. "In fact, I think she's stronger in the probabilities than any of us."

"But?"

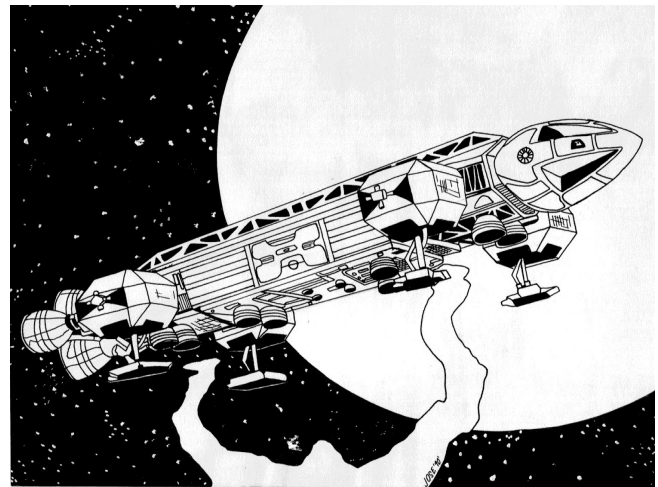
"It can leave one tainted. At least, one so young." He patted Talitha's shoulder. "It's not good to grow up too fast, knowing the ways of Evil. One day, she just might be the salvation of Nede, but all in Good time."

The Field of Good and Evil hovered over the city-state, motionless, as if asleep. Tonight, Nede would rest easy.

Invasion Now George Phillies

The White House

Lurking in the White House sub-basement, the signless door with two Marine guards in combat dress hid the Presidential Operations Center. A complete rebuild of everything down here, Horatio Bridgewater thought, courtesy of my predecessor



Eagle by Jose Sanchez

but one. And if he'd lived another week, he'd have been able to see it. Instead, to the outrage of the left and right chattering classes, the facility was opened by me, 'President Accident' to my many foes.

The Marines saluted as Bridgewater passed. He acknowledged with a sharp nod. The Joint Chiefs, Bridgewater thought, were more than a bit surprised that I remembered what Ike said about the President...civilians do not salute, so he didn't. The *Army Times* report 'I'll stand with Ike, General Eisenhower,' went over really well with the troops, once they heard the explanation.

The Operations Center had a row of computer wall screens, consoles for junior staff, and a very few comfortable chairs.

"The President!" the Center Director shouted. The staff members on duty began to stand.

"Carry on!" Bridgewater interrupted. "You got me up at half past dark for this, so keep your eye

on this emergency.” Whatever it is, he added to himself.

“Sir?” the Center Director asked. Frank MacPherson, Bridgewater thought, the most junior of the Directors. “On screen three.”

“Yes?” Bridgewater asked. “Appears to be scenic western Wyoming, more or less, even with map labels suppressed.”

“Yes, sir. And the scarlet triangles are points where airliners went down,” MacPherson explained. “Eight of them. Two Search and Rescue aircraft, up to localize crash sites. One Police Helicopter.”

“And the circle?” Someone had drawn a circle through six of the triangles, the other triangles being inside the circle.

“Aircraft crossing the circle, going in, explode in midair. The triangles inside the circle are aircraft that were there when all this started. They all went down at about the same time,” MacPherson explained. “All were at high altitude. Low altitude craft explode closer to the middle. A sharp air controller recognized the pattern and started routing aircraft away.”

Bridgewater nodded. “My personal compliments to the controller. Did any of the aircraft call for help?” MacPherson shook his head. “Pray tell, what is at the center of this circle?” Bridgewater pointed at a location on the screen.

“National Wilderness Area,” MacPherson said.

“If it is half-past dark here, it is only quarter past dark there,” Bridgewater said. No one laughed at his somewhat feeble joke. “It will be hours before anyone can make a useful ground search.”

“Sir?” one of the junior people, someone Bridgewater did not know yet, spoke up. “Report from Air Force Intelligence. Just came in. Starting about the same time in northern Canada, eastern Peru, and near the Chilean border with Argentina, aircraft dropped off the radar, transponders going silent. I’ll have it up on the main map in a moment.”

“Did anyone have any explanation for these crashes?” Bridgewater pointed at the Wyoming map.

“No, sir,” MacPherson answered. “We’re in touch with the Wyoming Highway Patrol. They

lost the chopper and two men. They politely asked if we could get them some satellite reconnaissance images; otherwise, searchers would be fumbling about in the dark.”

“Do it,” Bridgewater said. “Did anyone on the ground see anything?”

“We’re looking for that,” MacPherson answered. “There aren’t many people awake at five in the morning. Someone did see the chopper go down. It exploded violently in mid-air. The description ‘flew into an incandescent searchlight beam, just as the beam turned on’ is a bit unclear.”

I got up for this? Bridgewater wondered. I suppose I have to make the show of caring. “We’ll need a press statement, ‘The White House was greatly saddened by the aerial tragedies over Wyoming this morning. Actions have been taken to prevent a repetition. Private aircraft are strongly encouraged to avoid the area until further notice. Federal resources have been deployed in support of search and rescue operations.’ No need to mention if we lost any aircraft.”

“On it,” MacPherson answered.

“And perhaps some reconnaissance drones?” Bridgewater asked.

“Being readied in Grand Forks,” Sir,” MacPherson said.

“I imagine our Canadian allies and South American friends may have similar requests,” Bridgewater said, “assuming those reports are accurate.”

“Sir, the Snakedance Neutrality Act?” MacPherson warned.

“Does not apply to search and rescue missions.” Bridgewater shook his head. “If airplanes are crashing, someone might in principle need to be rescued.”

Chapter Wyoming

“Good morning, down there,” Arthur Montville’s voice boomed down from the lower gallery overlooking the great room.

“Good morning, up there,” Michael Lovejoy answered politely. “Good to see you sleepyheads are finally up.” He smiled.

"I will have you know that my dear wife and I were up to watch the sun rise," Arthur answered.

"It's not my fault the sun is so stoned, passing over Colorado, that it shows up for work two hours late," Michael joked. "I was up to see a thin sliver of aging moon low in the sky. I was impressed by how early the local gun club's firing range was open, well before dawn, including what sounded to be autofire. As you said, the house is so sound-proof that you only hear hunters when you leave the windows open, but I was out on my beautiful balcony to admire the aurora. I got three thousand more words into my new novel, looked out at dawn's early light and realized I had better shower and get dressed. By then the quaint column of smoke seemingly lit by flames well to the north had thinned substantially, but I decided I might as well come down and see if any of you were up. The network news coverage is totally scrambled. I think a half-dozen passenger airliners blew up in midflight, not far from here, or perhaps not. The network news is confused. I considered that maybe I should wake you up. Then it occurred to me that you and your wife might very well be up and prefer not to be disturbed for a bit."

"You would surely have knocked," Clarissa Montville answered, her amber curls now being visible over the lower gallery's railing.

"Indeed, I would have," Michael said. "I have this quaint aversion to being filled at your hands with fast-moving pieces of lead. But I decided I should wait, because you did say you got up at sunrise."

"Ummh, getting back to what you said, column of smoke?" Arthur asked.

"That's why considered waking you guys," Michael responded. "It's probably one of the crashed airliners, in which case there's no hope of rescue, not to mention that wandering around in the woods on the ground in the dark would be unlikely to get us to the crash site."

"Crashed airliners?" Victoria Trelawney, still in peach-and-cream heavy bathrobe, peered over the great room's upper gallery

"The news is very unpleasant. Would you prefer it before or after breakfast?" Michael asked. He waved at her. She was, he thought, a truly bright

and beautiful woman, or would be if only he were several decades younger.

"Before," Arthur said. "And the next time something disastrous happens, you are entitled to pound on the door and shout Emergency! Emergency! Everyone to get from room! I assume you recognize the line."

"I read the tale in the Saturday Evening Post when it first appeared. Perhaps wake our other guests?" Michael asked.

"Skip Jill and her husband," Victoria said. "She was up late. Bruce is actually not really functional until he gets another two hours of sleep, no matter what."

"Our English guests set their alarm for a bit ago," Arthur added. "I know this because when they first arrived they looked at the wind-up alarm clock, and being a young folk and computer jock Perc wondered what it was, let alone how it worked. The Brigadier will doubtless be up in a few minutes. He takes the back stairs down to the weight room, showers afterwards, and should be here soon."

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" Retired Brigadier Rupert Fitzhugh-Marshall peered over the far end of the upper balcony.

"Indeed, Rupert," Michael said. "And we have an issue for your expert advice. Though I should apologize to you, Arthur, first. I actually didn't figure out about the airliner problem until just now. The networks are a bit incoherent."

"So are you watching Fake News or Commie News?" Clarissa grinned.

"Both, actually," Michael said, "once I figured out how the split screen worked."

"You got that to work?" Arthur asked. "I knew that was in there someplace."

"Why don't we get everyone down here," Michael proposed. "Of course, it's your house, which you have generously opened up to this, the private working group of the world's greatest science fiction writers, but it might be easier if I said everything once."

"I believe," Rupert Fitzhugh-Marshall said, "that it is technically my turn to poison the lot of you with my breakfast cooking, though decades of experience in the British Army allow me to cook while listening."

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"To start at the beginning," Michael said, "somewhat before dawn a series of airliners flying not quite over us exploded. Actually, the authorities were apparently quite quick to figure out what was happening and divert flights, but the best count is seven airliners and well over a thousand people died. I might have seen one while I was typing; there was a vertical column of fire which I thought was a meteorite. Result? We are inside an air forbidden zone outside of which is an air restricted zone. Besides the airliners, a number of private planes — I haven't heard a count on that — and at least three search and rescue helicopters exploded in midair, rather closer to the center of the zone than where the airliners detonated. For all the babbling on the idiot box, no one has a clue what is going on. Alternatively, anyone who has a clue is not talking."

The assembled group spent time listening to the television, realizing that they were not learning very much.

Clarissa looked up from her laptop. "While I was listening to you, I also brought up the local news. Well inside the zone, there have been a bunch of people who tried to telephone for help. Most calls were interrupted almost immediately. State police sent toward the scene went out of radio contact much of the way in, but before they got to anyone who had called. The Governor is urging people in that zone to make haste about leaving. Of course, the place is a National Forest, so many of those people will be leaving on foot for a considerable time."

"Airliners simply don't fall out of the sky," Victoria said. "At least, not in large numbers, not unless someone is doing something to them."

"But mentioning smoke," Rupert said, "breakfast is ready. After breakfast, we should determine exactly where that column of smoke is. Assuming, that is, that one of you has a good magnetic compass with sight, so we can triangulate its location."

"Smoke is odd," Arthur observed. "We're in the wet season, not to mention there was recent

rain. And that last TV image, those folks crashed well north or west of us."

"It was a bit east of north," Michael observed, "where that notch in the next hill is."

Clarissa looked alarmed. "That's Parker's Crossing," she said. "Right on Route 312. They could have had a house fire. Dear, may I violate the no phone at meals rule? Bring up the town's forestcam?"

"Perhaps you'd better," Arthur said. "Though it's a good bet it's in powersaver mode at this hour, and will need until we're done eating to warm up."

"Meanwhile," Percival Nyquist observed, "if you will forgive an Englishman's opinion, this is a truly fine omelet. Your American bangers are first-rate. Shall we turn to our writing efforts? You see,..."

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"My turn on the dishes," Victoria observed, the meal finally over.

"And I should have the forestcam up in a few seconds," Clarissa said. "Finding an open signal path was a pain. Someone's doing arc welding or the like, right near it, to scramble its signal so badly."

"What are we to see?" Michael asked.

"The town is surrounded by a clearing, open cattle fields," Clarissa said, "except to the south, where there's a sharp rise. The camera is several hundred feet up, and gives a view of a bucolic paradise. Well, bucolic unless that other church decides to preach up another crusade against the Mormons."

"Crusade?" Percival asked. "Aren't we in the wrong ... millennium? You Americans do have some quaint ideas."

"Against the Mormons," Michael added. "Friends in Oklahoma reported that this was an annual event, one that did not impress most of their fellow citizens."

"And here we go," Clarissa announced. The camera view began to pan right to left across an open field.

"Why are those people lying in the grass?" Ar-

thur asked. "I know tourists are a bit slow, but it rained hard yesterday. They should notice the ground is soaking wet." The camera continued to pan, finally reaching buildings.

"They've burned," Michael said.

"And they're well spaced," Rupert added, "well too far for fire to leap from wall to wall." The camera continued to pan across a scene of destruction.

"That was 'the other church'," Arthur said. "Those were Heaven help us reinforced concrete walls, but they've fallen over."

"Shouldn't we be able to see folks wandering about?" Percival asked. "I'm judging by the size of the cars, well, what's left of them."

"Yes, we should," Arthur answered. "And here's the far end of town, and open fields, an...what's that thing?"

"Tank," Michael said. "Note the turret."

"That's no model or mark I know," Rupert said. "And I did give a lecture at Sandhurst recently. And the color is weird. Lime-green? Is the color good?"

"Grass looks OK. And several more folks lying on the ground," Arthur said. "All in lime green clothing." The camera made its back pan, now covering a much wider area.

"Fire was contained," Victoria said, "Just as the master of the house decreed."

"Arthur," Clarissa said, "The townsfolk. They must be sheltering in the trees. They for sure need food and water, blankets, and the like. I'd notify County Emergency Services, but their lines are all busy."

"All both of them," Arthur said. "I told Mayor Lincoln two lines was not enough, but he's cheap. When he shouldn't be."

"Load up the vans," Rupert said. "All sorts of emergency supplies. That includes your first aid and trauma kits."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Percival said. "Though I'm still on crutches, not able to be much of a help."

"And I have under two months to go," Percival's wife Jessica announced, "so I can walk. If I'm careful."

"You two stay here," Arthur said. "Perhaps

wake up Jill and Bruce?"

"Arthur," Rupert asked, "Would you mind opening your gun locker? For starters, at this season the bears can be a mite grumpy."

"Can do," Arthur answered. "Most of you folks are comfortable with good weapons?"

"My service training was a half century ago," Michael said. "Though an M16A1 is sort of like an AR-15."

"Can you still hit something?" Victoria asked.

"Now you're getting picky," Michael countered. "If I am inside the barn when I aim at the broad side. I'll do better to bring my good camera and its relay base."

"We'll run that through my phone," Clarissa said, "so the local cable company doesn't get stingy with your baud rate."

"I'm looking at the map," Victoria said. "I get a bad feeling, too. We should perhaps take this side road, which gets us within a mile of the camera, on the far side of the hill. Can you manage that, Michael, at your age?"

"If you don't insist on me sprinting the mile," Michael said. He smiled at her. "I do more miles on less flat terrain at home. Can someone find a compass for me?"

"Shall I get out the hunting rifles?" Arthur suggested.

"Arthur," Rupert said, "the more I look at this, the more I get a very bad feeling about it. Mayhaps you and your other half, if you can carry them easily that far, should get out your cannons? And we carry extra ammo for you."

"A few miles with the Barretts? No problem," Clarissa said, "if we're not carrying tons of camping gear."

"Rifles, ammunition, binoculars, first aid, trauma, and such like," Rupert said. "Blankets and rations we leave in the car."

"You afraid of getting lost?" Arthur asked.

"Just because I got lost once inside this house," Arthur began. "No, but if we become separated I can walk south and be sure to find Pullman's Knife Road. Unless I miss it and keep on walking."

"Well, it's only two lanes, paved, with a median divider and Botts Dots," Victoria agreed. "So you of all people could miss it."

“Now, now, just because I couldn’t figure out where the stairs up were, when I was on the top floor...”

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“I see the camera tower,” Michael called. “At least, it’s a boxy thing on a pole, with antennae sticking out in all directions.”

“Forward!” Clarissa called to the man a distance ahead of her. He now had a target she thought, so she no longer needed to be calling out course corrections to keep him moving in the right direction.

“At the overlook.” Michael finally answered. He approached an enormous oak tree, hid behind it, and cautiously looked around its side. The scene was much as the forestcam had reported. The Highway ran southeast to northwest. The town – larger than he’d expected from the forestcam, which only caught the town’s northern perimeter – was indeed burned to the ground. Burned vehicles were parked neatly next to their houses. To his count, the number of bodies on the ground, south along the highway, was larger than he’d thought. North of town the strange tank was flanked by a half-dozen bodies, men in green.

He pulled out his camera and powered it up. “Is this still working?” he asked.

“We hear you loud and clear,” Victoria answered.

“Okay, I’m going to start sending images so you see what’s going on before you get up here,” Michael said. “There are indeed bodies on the ground. The entire village, such as it is, burned. I don’t see many standing above ground basement walls. The place was pretty thoroughly leveled. And here we have the tank-thing I mentioned. Rupert, have you figured out what it is yet?”

“That’s a negative,” Fitzhugh-Marshall answered. “And I did fairly recently teach vehicle identification back across the Atlantic, so I really should be able to identify it. It just doesn’t match anything I remember.”

“We’ll be up to you in a couple of minutes,” Arthur said. “It might be better if you wait until we catch up with you.”

Michael continued to survey the ground. There

was no sign of motion. He did close-up shots on a few of the buildings, and a few of cars, which appeared to have been cut in half horizontally. The rubble was still smoldering. The crunch of dead leaves underfoot alerted him to the approach of his friends. “Behold!” he said as they clustered around him. There were exclamations of dismay.

“Something is very strange here,” Rupert said. “I get a bad feeling, about the same as when I was in ’stan just before there was an ambush.”

“Now my phone and your camera base are speaking to the Internet,” Clarissa said, “through the tower. The blue upload light is on, and the little display says we are uploading to notpermitted.net, whatever that is.”

“It’s a website,” Michael explained. “It stores videos. It’s dispersed across the Western world and beyond. It’s like those other social media sites, except they’re entirely tolerant of nonlegal not technically criminal postings, even unpopular ones. Press the green button, please? We’ll hear the front end of the file, make sure that it’s what I pre-recorded.” The group listened as the electronics repeated what Michael had prerecorded. “I don’t think we’re going learn more from up here, but as the Brigadier is concerned and you other than Victoria are married, while I am single, I shall get to go down there and do video close-ups, that you could watch on the laptop Arthur packed. Unless there is some objection?”

“I could go,” Victoria said. “I’ve had practical experience at this sort of thing.”

“Dear,” Michael answered, ignoring her sudden that glare in his direction, “there may be something dangerous down there, and one of us has most of her life ahead of her. I don’t. Also, if a dragon or the Deadly Mantis shows up – which would explain this – I would rather have you than me providing covering fire.”

“Lad,” Fitzhugh-Marshall said, “no, that’s silly since you’re older than I am. But I was about to give you the advice I would give a trooper. Be prepared to sprint, well, at your age walk with dispatch to the nearest cover. You’ll be walking up to that tank first?”

“Notwithstanding your military curiosity,” Michael said, “I am going to start at the other end of town and stay well out in the open, hoping that

any surviving locals don't accidentally shoot me."

He started to walk slowly down the slope.

"In any event," he said, "I am now live to not-permitted.net and I repeat that I am allowing maximum copyleft to anyone who wants to repeat this. To repeat my word of warning, there appear to be bodies on the ground, so folks who get upset with the notion that human beings can die should possibly look at something else rather than this report. Kitten pictures, if you don't find images of fierce carnivores to be excessively frightening.

"This camera is not gyroscopically stabilized, so I will occasionally pause and cycle through a panorama of the scene, but between those pauses the view may be a bit jerky. Indeed, I may occasionally have to drop the camera into its carrying case so I have both hands free, though the slope looks to be reasonable if possibly a bit slick."

Michael continued down the slope. "I've now reached level ground on the far side of the highway and approaching the people lying on the ground. Ahoy!" He shouted. "Folks lying on the ground! You could get up!"

Nothing happened. As he walked closer it became obvious that the people in front of him were dead.

"We definitely have bodies here. I will try to abstain from capturing images of faces, so that relatives don't find out from me that someone has died. That means I am covering the lens part of the time. The folks I'm looking at clearly dressed hastily. The woman in front was running in bare feet."

He walked up to her, looked carefully, and announced: "There are several obvious entrance wounds. They appear to have been cauterized; the hole is black. Here is a close-up. The three children are the same way. They were all shot in the back, and landed on their stomachs. And now we come to someone who must've rolled. Dear me, that is an enormous exit wound."

He paused to image.

"This situation is beyond bizarre. What had happened here? I'm now walking towards the remains of Parker's Crossing. I'll keep well to one side. There still a fair amount of smoldering wood, though I don't see any flames."

"I'm now coming up on the village. It occurs to me. If anyone has picked up on this video yet, and you are in the same state that I am, would you please notify Wyoming State Emergency Services of what has happened. We tried calling 911 but couldn't get through."

A gleam in the rubble attracted his eye.

"I'm going to walk up to this wall, which collapsed flat at about my knee height. But the surface looks more like melted than fractured. Okay, I'm getting a tight close-up using the macro lens feature. For the curious, since there is a fair piece of wood smoke, the smell is a mixture of burning wood and roast pork. Educated people know what that means.

"It'll take me a few minutes to finish walking around the village. I haven't actually spotted any bodies, but most of the houses have collapsed into their basements. But here I have, I'll get a close-up, it appears to be the remains of a hunting rifle, except the barrel looks to have been cut in half. I see brass lying on the ground, but I don't see obvious signs of an owner or body.

"Okay, I am around the village, I am walking back to the highway where the peculiar vehicle is. I'm going to approach the vehicle from the south side so that if life becomes interesting I have a shorter dash to the woods."

For a while he was quiet. Viewers could see him gradually approaching the tank on the road ahead. Every so often he stopped, doing a careful and slow panoramic view of the surrounding terrain in all directions.

"Okay, I have now reached this vehicle. It has eight road wheels, a turret on top that is clearly askew, and there is writing on the side."

"Question for Rupert. When you put a big gun on top of the tank, isn't it usually the custom to have a hole running the length of the gun barrel? This barrel looks to be solid, and I don't mean there is a plug in the end. There is also a large hole in the side of the vehicle, I'll get to that in a bit. I don't recognize the language, and it's clearly not English or Russian or Hangul.

"Now we look inside the vehicle, something appears to have blown up, because there's a lot of scrap metal on the ground and distortion and

burned area. If I look to the rear, there are large seats, metal, for I count six people. The seats look very large. If I look the other way, there is a wall, so the turret and the front section are partitioned from the rear. And now I will very slowly approach the folks lying on the ground.”

He ambled down the highway toward the first of the people lying on the ground.

“Hello!” He called. “Hello! I’m a civilian. Do you need first-aid?”

There was no response.

He closed to fifteen feet and stopped.

“Okay,” he announced, “it is now painfully obvious why I couldn’t recognize that alphabet.”

He walked up to the man on the ground, his camera pointed down the road.

“The difficulty is that this dead person is not human. I am now going to give a close-up of the face. But I’m warning you first, just in case someone is delicate of heart. I am switching to the close-up lens.”

He walked up leaned over, and pointed the camera.

“Note the prominent horns, the eyes well above the center of the head, the open mouth with the teeth of the cat or lion, and I will now get a close-up of one of the eyes.”

He stopped talking for a moment, focused on what he was doing.

“Notice that the eye pupil is a slit rather than a circle as it is in a human being, and the slit is horizontal rather than vertical as it would be in a cat.

“Also, what I would’ve called an iris in a human being is a bright orange, a color I don’t recall ever having seen in people. I don’t see any pockets on this fellow’s unitard. I don’t see any sign of webbing or other gear, so I’m going to advance to the other characters who are also I infer dead.”

“Michael, this is Arthur.”

The voice on the camera intercom was perfectly clear.

“Your video it has been picked up by nine television networks, several of which are broadcasting everything uncensored. And Clarissa’s phone is saturated with attempted incoming calls.”

Chapter The White House Morning

“Mister President?” Bridgewater looked up from the draft report on Social Security stability. He considered that he really should have had breakfast first.

His Secretary of Defense, actually his predecessor’s Secretary whom he had not replaced, an event to happen very soon, leaned through the door. “The Operations Center called. They urgently request you join them.”

“On my way,” Bridgewater said. He turned to one of his Secret Service escorts. “Secure the office.”

“Done automatically, sir,” the agent responded.

Someday, Bridgewater thought, he would remember all the local procedures, but that time is not yet. “The Operations Center. Lead the way.”

The Center was much as he remembered from last night, except it was considerably more occupied.

“Mister President?” Bridgewater remembered Bruce Ishimoto as the senior Center Director. “Screening in your private office down here.”

Bridgewater followed Ishimoto.

“The video is from a Michael Lovejoy, who’s some sort of a writer,” Ishimoto said. “Science fiction, it seems. He and friends were on a ridge overlooking Parker’s Crossing. Apparently they were up before dawn, reached the ridgetop, and started taking videos. They’re rather graphic.”

“Other people have seen this?” Bridgewater asked.

“They have a feed to notpermitted.net, with several smaller networks picking up the feed live,” Ishimoto answered.

“Did we get drones out?” Bridgewater asked.

“The first one went in very high. We have images of house fires. Then we lost contact. The State Police sent in another pair of helicopters. One vanished. The other, flying nap-of-earth, was recalled before it reached any of the crash sites.”

“Sheriffs, whoever, on the ground?” Bridgewater asked.

"Situation is very confused," Ishimoto answered. "The County had a very small force. Their 911 service was swamped, impossible to reach them. Most of the State Police are at the far end of the state, another Hanbury demo."

"Hanbury folks are entirely peaceful," Bridgewater said.

"Apparently the Governor thinks otherwise." Ishimoto shrugged. "Lovejoy's people were up before dawn, went to this town rather than searching the trees for a crashed airliner. Apparently no one else outside realized that this town was not in good shape. So here we are." He pointed at a screen image.

"Town's been flattened," Bridgewater said. "OK, see key images."

Bridgewater watched as Ishimoto and a video technician brought up stills, finally reaching Lovejoy approaching the tank. "Do you have a list of the people in this group?"

"Apparently it's a gaggle of SF authors having a writing retreat," Ishimoto said. "I have a list."

Bridgewater looked at the list, recognized several favorite names, and realized he had been joined by two counsellors to the former President.

"Ladies?" he said.

"We have to get this broadcast off the air," Aiesha Twithorpe announced.

"Absolutely," Brenda Goldman agreed.

"First Amendment, people," Bridgewater said emphatically. "Hiding things from the public is how Chisholm lost and why the late lamented, may he rest in peace, was in such deep political trouble. Now the vox populi will turn on me over those bodies, not to mention conspiracy experts will make a mint if we try to make this-all secret. And now our videographer is approaching...what is that thing, anyhow? And who thinks lime green is a good vehicle color?"

"Unknown AFV, Mister President." Colonel Radetsky was lead Pentagon liason, Bridgewater said.

"And the language we see on its nose? What language is that?" Bridgewater asked. He had really, he thought, wanted to spend this Saturday on Social Security issues, and this was a distraction.

"We're working on it, Sir," Radetsky said.

"Unknown."

"See if you can get a phone call through to one of these people," Bridgewater said. "And I want a coherent briefing as soon as possible."

"Already doing that," Ishimoto said. "They have to pick up, and lots of folks are trying to reach them."

"Sir," Twithorpe said, "you need a National Security Council meeting."

"Absolutely," Goldman agreed. "It will impress the press and opinion leaders across DC."

"How wonderful," Bridgewater droned. "There are no coherent data yet. There is nothing to discuss. Mentioned data, are there satellite images yet?"

"Being downloaded and interpreted," Ishimoto said. "We were a bit unlucky with the timing on overflights."

"We have your phone call, Mister President," Radetsky said. He passed Bridgewater a telephone.

"I'll take it here," Bridgewater said.

"Privately. Please get the video up on a screen, then vamoose."

"Hello, Bridgewater here. Line is a bit noisy."

"Hello, Mister President. Clarissa Montville taking your call."

"We've met. Unicon. Before I got into politics. Any sign of survivors?"

"No, sir, only bodies."

"Mister President!" Ishimoto interrupted.

"Look at the video feed! They're Martians."

Bridgewater looked at the still, an alien face, and decided that explaining that Mars was empty of life would be a waste of his time.

"Is that real?" Bridgewater asked.

"Marshall-Fitzhugh here. That's Brigadier, retired, British Army. Up on a hill, can see it through my high-power binoculars. Horns are quite apparent. Oops, have more approaching, vehicle in distance."

Bridgewater thought for a moment. "They're clearly hostile. Treat them accordingly. For example, shoot them."

"Thank you kindly, Sir," Rupert answered.

"Thank Clarissa for taking my call," Bridgewater said. "Bridgewater out."

"Marshall-Fitzhugh out."

"Mister President!" Twithorpe said. "We should be choosing peace, not war."

"Absolutely," Goldman agreed.

"Apparently you failed to notice the dead bodies," Bridgewater said. "Small children in their pajamas gunned down as they ran away. Thank you, but I am about to be very busy with my military advisors, and don't have time for this argument."

& & &

"How charming," Michael said. "I am walking up to the next figure. He or perhaps she or it is visibly dead. Head shot. Ditto the next fellow. Note the bright blue blood. However, this fourth fellow appears to have had a significant amount of outside belt that got pulled off and then dropped. Okay, my camera is going into its bag, so I can put on gloves, at which point I will transfer -- there's a lot of this stuff and it's fairly heavy -- but I will transfer it into my carryall, because it looks as though it would be interesting to recover. Now my gloves, careful not to touch their outsides with my skin, go into the carryall. Okay, that's done, I'm now going to walk by the other side of the vehicle and see if it's obvious what caused the big hole. Oh, one last thing."

He paused.

"You on the ground appear to have been soldiers. Join the people you killed. Go to your God like the soldiers you are."

There was bit of silence.

"Okay, I'm back to the vehicle, on the far side, and roughly where the explosion was. I see holes in the side of the vehicle. If I look carefully, the holes are, oh, a bit more than 1/2 inch across. I can see the thickness of the wall, which is small. And grabbing my multitool, I pull away this piece of wall that is almost detached and I will now drop it and the multitool into my carryall. And close the carryall. Can any of you tell from all the incoming calls and other confusion if there is anything in particular people want me to photograph?"

"There's a lot of confusion at the far end," Clarissa said. "But I am sorting through incoming

calls. Oh, here's the Pentagon, and here's the White House. I'll take that one."

"Break! Break!" Rupert shouted. "Michael, there's a column of smoke coming up the road, not quickly, but not very far away. The source is not in my line of sight. Perhaps you should consider..."

"Running for my life," Michael said.

"You're headed to your right!" Arthur shouted. "That's partly towards the incoming..."

"Closest cover! And don't expect me to stop when I hit the woods," Michael responded.

"Michael," Clarissa said, "you couldn't hear it, but I had a short conversation with the President. He said these characters were demonstrably hostile, so we can give you covering fire while you are running uphill."

"And remember," Michael said, words coming between gasps for breath, "like it says in at least five my novels, above all, friendly fire is fire. Kindly do not shoot me."

He reached the edge of the woods and began a run uphill, breathing harder and harder as he climbed.

"Michael," Clarissa said, "Something is coming around the last bend. It's that same lime-green color. It's smoking at the rear."

"OK, I'm curving into the woods a bit. Tell me when you can't see me," he answered. He slowed, realizing he had to pick his footholds more carefully.

"There's another one of those tank things," Clarissa said. "It's parking near the wrecked tank. Creatures are disembarking from its rear, a half-dozen of them, and two from the front. I see them in my monocular. Same horns, same eye positions, ...and they walk like a turkey. You're out of sight someplace. The half-dozen are forming a perimeter, surrounding the wreck and the bodies."

Michael scrambled over a fallen tree. This hill, he thought, seemed to have grown much taller and steeper on the way up.

"One of the guys in front is pointing something at the bodies," Clarissa said. "No, I can't tell what. Now he's pointing it at the ground. He's pointing at the hill, roughly the direction you took."

The slope suddenly became very steep. Was

there a way around, Michael wondered? To the right, the rise became a cliff. "Have to dodge left," he said. "Ground right looks impassable."

"Lad," he heard the Brigadier over his cell camera, "as you are being chased, better to make less noise, as in no talking."

Michael bit his tongue.

"Michael," Clarissa said, "one of the folks next to the tank is pointing up the hill in your general direction. He's waving. OK, you have pursuit, guys in greens walking briskly up the slope after you. Oh, and the tank turret is slowly turning in your direction."

Lovejoy considered his predicament. 'First science fiction writer to be killed by space aliens' was not high on his bucket list. It was not even low on his bucket list. He ran harder.

A warbling note and bright flash, followed by a crash and the sound of a falling tree, had to be the aliens behind him. Loud noise to his left was gunfire. Bright flashes of light and warbling whistles behind him must be the aliens doing something. A shock wave and loud roar knocked him into a tree, to which he clung, trying to regain his balance. His ears rang. Four loud shots rang out, then four more. He thought the gunfire had stopped. Or was it too quiet for him to hear?

Gasping for breath, he reached the top of the hill. Clarissa Montville pointed at a tree and gestured. He circled behind it and stopped, leaning back to catch his breath.

"OK, lad, good run!" That was the Brigadier. "Those last shots were Miss Trelawney here, making sure they all stay dead. They will. Assuming they had their brains in their heads."

"Can we please go home now?" Michael managed. He looked at his camera, still clutched tightly in his hands. "Perhaps I should bring up live again?" he asked.

"You are live," Arthur answered. "And the audience likely wonders what is happening behind you."

"Oh, right." Michael stepped out from behind the tree and point his camera down the slope. He counted eight alien bodies, most spread out across the hill, where they had been climbing toward him, and an alien tank that looked to have exploded.

"They had decent tactics," Rupert said. "They started shooting, took down that tree for some reason. We ambushed them, so they charged our position, firing from the waist. Of course, half of them were down already, and the rest had bad guesses about where we were hiding. And that non-armored personnel carrier? You shoot it forward of midships with a Barrett, in this case two of them, and it blows up."

"It's time to leave," Clarissa said, "before their reinforcements show up."

"Agreed," Rupert said. "Let's head for our SUVs, as swiftly as possible."

"Most of you can run ahead," Michael said, "cram into the SUVs, and get back to start packing. I'm the slow end of movement, but there's no need for me to hold all of you back."

"And you get back how?" Arthur asked. "Teleportation?"

"I'll stay with you, Michael," Victoria said. "The rest of you take the two SUVs, start loading, and someone returns with Michael's car to the foot of the side road. No, don't try to bring it up here; it won't make it."

"Perhaps more of us here in case it gets hairy?" Rupert asked.

"I'm way more worried about their calling in some bleeping air strikes," Victoria answered. "Now, get moving! Before we get our asses bombed. Michael, I've got your backpack and car-rally."

"OK, reverse our bearings," Arthur said. "Let's go."

The group began its move through the woods. "Love," Clarissa added, "about ten degrees south of that, so we for sure hit the road, there being no trail to follow."

"Done," Rupert said. "Sharp thinking, that."

"I should carry something," Michael said to Victoria.

"Kindly recall that you are close to a half century older than I am," she answered, "and one of us is a physical fitness fanatic, so please ditch your nineteenth century gallantry."

"Eighteenth, thank you," Michael responded. "I hear and obey."

"Mob ahead of me," Victoria shouted, "one of

you phone home, tell them to start packing everything!”

“On it,” Rupert shouted back.

“A cannie lassie, she is,” he added, far more quietly. “But I packed while you all were loading for the rescue expedition, so I can wait with an SUV, not this Rube Goldberg route march scheme.”

“Agreed,” Clarissa said.

& & &

Michael and Victoria followed Rupert into the house.

“I believe it is time to decamp,” Arthur said, looking across the Great Room, “and then some. So if you could pack your personal goods, swiftly? Dear, if you could go around the house and close the steel shutters on all the windows while I empty the gun locker?”

“On it,” Clarissa ran up the stairs.

“People,” Rupert said, “I think we want to be out of here quickly. Yesterday, even.”

“Clarissa and I had mostly moved to the new house,” Arthur said, “except it’s not quite ready yet. Plain furniture and dishes we can leave here; that’s the old TV that barely works. Gun locker is actually mostly empty. We did some shooting, just for relaxation, but we still have plenty of ammo.”

“So we only brought the his and hers Barretts,” Clarissa called from the third floor balcony. “Four AR-15s. Then we have a Pre-64 Winchester Model 70 in .300 Winchester Magnum. That’s Victoria’s toy. And the Glocks.”

“We’re taking your two SUVs, Arthur?” Rupert asked. “We gassed them up yesterday. I’ll help you with your armory.”

“Car keys?” Victoria asked. “Do I load Nyquist suitcases into the blue or the camou SUV?”

“Set them by the rear of the camou SUV,” Arthur shouted from the basement. “They’re unlocked, but we made need to think a teeny bit about loading plan.”

“We’re packed,” Percival said. “An early departure was clearly indicated. Jill and Bruce

moved our suitcases and theirs downstairs.

There’s rather little I can do while I’m on crutches, and my dear wife should do even less.”

“I’ll take my car,” Michael said. “I’ll need a bit to pack.” His friends laughed at the joke. They believed in travelling light; for a two-week stay he’d arrived with three large suitcases and a carry-all. He disappeared upstairs.

Slamming noises from upstairs marked Clarissa closing window shutters.

“I feel completely useless,” Percival observed. “Wait. All those blizzard supplies in the pantry. I’ll drop them in to trash bags for the cars.” He limped off toward the kitchen.

“We’re expecting a blizzard?” Michael asked as he came down the stairs with his first suitcase.

“We’re expecting chaos on the roads, closed restaurants, and a preference to keep driving,” Percival said. “Dear, please just sit down,” he said to his wife.

“Perks, I’m not that fragile. Really,” she answered.

“Consider this would be a slightly inconvenient moment for you to go into premature labor,” he responded.

“Point well made,” she answered. “But why does this house have those shutters?”

“Hunting season,” Arthur answered, as he pounded up the stairs, Rupert following behind. “Forest fires. Outer walls are reinforced concrete, with central insulation layer. The original owner built this house to last. Windows are triple-glazed, but still.”

“Arthur!” Rupert shouted. “We have three cars. We need a passenger manifest.”

“I take the my camou SUV. Clarissa takes her robin’s-egg blue. Michael has his vehicle.” Arthur paused. “Rupert, I would take it as an honor if you would go with my wife. Female is the deadlier of the species, but if anything arises you look imposing. And take Percival and Jessica – you did say you’d delivered several babies in one of those unmentioned wars?”

“I’ve got six weeks to go,” Jessica reminded.

“Lass, Murphy gets a vote here,” Rupert observed. She nodded in agreement.

“OK, their suitcases to the blue car,” Victoria said. “Arthur? You’ll take Bruce and Jill?”

"Agreed."

"I really need a local navigator," Michael observed.

"You just follow Pullman's Knife Road," Arthur said as he came up the stairs with several crates of ammunition.

"The direction into the town that just burned?" Michael asked, "Or the direction into the National Wilderness?"

"Oh, shoot, I forgot," Arthur grumbled. "I was just going to take trail 7 south, but that's for four-wheel drive and all-terrain mods. Not bumpy, but likely to be soggy. Our SUVs both have winches. No way your car will make it."

"County roads," Victoria shouted as she ran back up the stairs. "I'm your navigator, Michael!"

"Thank you!" Michael said.

"Victoria, you keep your Winchester," Arthur said.

"My favorite," she answered. "And a Glock, just in case."

& & & &

"Coming up! Four miles, straight and flat," Victoria said. "No other cars. Turn is at midpoint, just before the high-voltage lines."

"Noted!" Michael hard-braked for the approaching turn, then hit the accelerator as he pulled out of the curve onto the straightaway. "Is the road up to ignoring speed limits?"

"Within reason," Victoria answered. "I wouldn't take it at a hundred."

"This is an old car. I doubt it goes that fast," Michael answered. "Still at 75, under two minutes and we turn south. I'm just trying to spot the ro...oh, mercy me." He floored the accelerator, ignoring the speedometer as it rose beyond 100.

"Mike! You can slow down!" Victoria said. "We have plenty of time!"

"Note color of oncoming vehicle, just came around the bend," Michael answered calmly. The lime-green of an alien combat vehicle was unmistakable. He decided not to hear Victoria's words.

"They are slow. We are very fast. We have perhaps a mile; they must have two. This is our only exit other than overland on foot, well, car on

trail until we bog down." He eased off on the accelerator. "We seem to be up to...I didn't know this car went that fast."

"I see the road sign," she shouted. "On the left! Bright red!"

"Got it." Michael braked, gently at first, then harder. "Lean back in the seat. I might miss the turn and not a neighboring tree. He slipped into the left lane, waited, then back. A bright flash passed to their left. "OK, we know their range. Chase the splash." He slipped into the left lane and floored the brakes. The car's ABS system chattered loudly. A bright flash passed, this time to the right. He slipped to the right. A bright flash passed, this time to the left. "Now we see how bright the guy is. Now we don't chase..." Another bright flash to the left. Wheels squealed as he released the brakes and put the wheel over. The car made the turn, began to skid on the gravel as he floored the accelerator again. The car fish-tailed left and right on the gravel of the side road. Bright light and a load roar marked something hitting trees behind them.

"That was a bit close. I hope you were taking notes," he said not quite calmly. "We really need to put that in our next novels. Though I prefer less realistic research models. I think that's a turn, a distance out there."

"And then the road gets curvy. Very curvy. With drop-offs on one side or the other," she warned.

"Noted. We'll slow down when we get close."

"What did you mean 'chase the splash?'" she asked.

"For my epic novels *Commander Darkheart of Naval Intelligence* I read Roscoe's *Destroyer Actions in World War 2*," he answered. "In a gun duel between warships, the enemy notes where their shell landed relative to you, and corrects to hit where you are. They do not aim at the point where they missed, so you steer your ship toward that point. Except the other guy figures this out and corrects. These people figured out, but I was a step ahead of them. Mentioning figuring out, can your gadget figure out how to find the internet?"

"No bars," she answered. "There should be...perhaps someone is jamming."

"This car is so old fashioned it has an electronic devise known as a 'radio'," Michael observed. "It's really modern. It doesn't use a coherer for signal detection. Perhaps try the AM bands." They waited patiently while she searched for a station.

"...still no word from the White House," a nameless announcer said. "Governor Billingsley has called out the National Guard. Television stations are recycling Michael Lovejoy's spectacular footage of the alien invaders...some of it will frighten small children and easterners. No more news on the nuclear power plant failures...nuclear reactors around the world have lost twenty percent or more of their rated power output...in parts of France, the power grid buckled under the load...Oh, here's another note from the Governor. He's calling up the state's unorganized militia...that's everyone, man or woman, with a gun...if you have small children, or aged dependents, loading them into a car and heading away from the landing area is recommended. Otherwise, go to the nearest school gym, public library, VFW, or AmVets post. You get to organize yourselves. Choose your own officers and sergeants, get in touch with neighboring towns. There'll be more on that later...and here is my fellow announcer, the ever-lovely Cecelia White..."

"Hello, listeners," Cecelia's voice was that of someone's still-vigorous grandmother, "...while Abe here is making coffee, collecting news, making coffee, and other good things, in particular making coffee, I have some background on Michael Lovejoy. He's a science fiction writer. He and his friends were on a writing retreat near Parker's Crossing – the former Parker's Crossing – we know this because they did a book signing at Honest Ernie's Entertainment Emporium in Idaho Falls, and we had Honest Ernie on the phone earlier. They went to investigate a smoke column – you've seen the rest on TV. They left and are headed south. No one knows where they are. Cell phones in the area aren't working. If any of you science fiction gentlemen are listening, and have the alien gadgets you grabbed, please bring them to any commercial air field – Idaho Falls may be the simplest...Michael Lovejoy's novels include..."

-- she rattled off a list of novels – "...those of you watching television at the same time, the State Police are about to put up additional videos from north and west of the National Forest. That includes more aliens. No, there's no doubt that they're not human beings. Farm homes – the people got out in time – being burned. These people are very much not friendly. Please enjoy your target practice. And here's Abe again, with my coffee..."

"Hello, listeners," Abe said. "It seems there was White House news...it didn't reach us at first...For the Armed Forces. All leaves are cancelled. Return to your duty station. If you are remote, please report to your nearest Military Base of any service. The *Washington Record* reports that the Armed Forces have been brought to Defense Condition One, with the qualifier we are not at war with any nation on Earth..."

"Interesting," Michael said, "Washington seems to have gotten off the mark rather quickly on this."

"Perhaps this was not the first landing," Victoria said. "Perhaps Bridgewater actually makes decisions, as abnormal as that sounds. More seriously. Michael, are you all right? You seemed to have taken this rather calmly."

"I was definitely not all right while that tank was shooting at us. If it had had a decent traverse rate on its turret, or a gunner faster on the trigger, we would be toast. Burnt toast. And if we don't reach those bends ahead before the tank gets to the intersection, we may still be burnt toast. However, I was not terrified when I descended on Parker's Crossing. We knew the town was destroyed. The people on the ground, the humans, were obviously dead. The folks with the strange tank were surely the guilty parties. They left bodies on the ground – they must have routed. My main hazard was surviving locals who panicked and used me for target practice. I was not sure that the deaders in green were aliens, but they were something very strange."

"You're a very cold-blooded man. Do you have Vulcan relatives?" Victoria asked.

"Unlikely," he answered. "I'm sorry that this offends you."

“Michael, dear, you’re not at all offensive,” Victoria said. “For all of our event, you are remarkably kind and considerate and thoughtful towards me. You even figured out how to tease me safely. And behaved exactly the same way to everyone else. When you went downhill toward the town, the act of a very brave man, you moved from SF author to ‘the sort of man I like’, the sort I almost never meet.”

“You carefully don’t talk about your past employer,” Michael said. “So consider your future employer...everyone on Earth has now heard of us and our books. That’s seven billion new customers. What was wrong in the past?”

“They tended to be type super-alphas with severe testosterone poisoning,” she responded, “and even ten years ago fresh out of college I thought they were jackasses. Telling me how great they were in bed, even the married ones, was also not at all a selling point.”

“How quaint,” Michael answered. The direction of the conversation, he thought, is perhaps becoming ominous. But some omens are better than others. “So now you associate with SF writers. I hope that’s better; it doesn’t sound that it could be worse. And that’s a T intersection coming up, I think. Which way?”

“Left, and expect a better road.”

“Oh, good. And, as you can reach my travel kit, please break out for me a can of diet soda and a box of chocolate chip cookies,” Michael asked. “Can in the forward cupholder, please. You’re welcome to take something for yourself.”

“You know, we just ate.” Victoria shook her head.

“When there is no time to eat, then it is most important to feast,” Michael countered. “That’s from my Klangor the Barbarian series. Klangor himself said it, so it must be true. Also, look at the clock. It’s after noon.”

“We took that long?” she wondered. “Breakfast, packing for the first hike in the woods, two hikes through the woods, your television show, and packing afterwards.”

“The Brigadier was really getting antsy toward the end of packing,” Michael said, “not that I blame him. And he was right. We were almost

too late getting out.”

“That was him motivating people,” Victoria answered. “If he were actually worried, he’d turn completely calm.”

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the voice from the radio announced, “we have new and amazing news. West of the disaster area, a family of six was detained by aliens. They were given a message ‘take this to your nearest telegraph station and have it sent to your territorial governor and his superiors’. The Wakefield family was then released, unharmed. They reached the town of Barnard’s Crossing, where phone lines are still up, as they had promised relayed it to the Governor, and let people see it.

“The message was simple, the radio continued. “ ‘We are the Invincible Empire of the Stars. You and the rest of your planet are ordered to lay down your arms, surrender, and submit to our rule. We will soon be sending a set of Imperial Governors to instruct you and your fellow government officials on their duties. Resistance is futile. Submission is your only choice.’ So, yes, we’ve been invaded by another planet, just like in those crazy sy-fy flicks. No response yet from the White House.”

“Oh, the shock,” Victoria said. “We should head ‘not downwind’ from the area, as it may, well...”

“...be given the gift that keeps on glowing?” Michael suggested.

She laughed.

The Bar is High David C. Kopaska-Merkel

1.

Asteroid boom, that was the flashiest;
vaporized the Yucatan sea,
sent a trillion tons of boiled seafood
up the Mississippi river valley
as far as Montana,
crisped the giant lizards in a New-York
minute,
blotted out the sun.

2.

OK, the Big One.
The Permian climate tanked,
no one's sure why;
nearly scrubbed the planet clean—
no more than 5% squeaked by;
what do you think gave the dinosaurs
their lucky break?

3.

But wait, there's more:
ever heard of Ediacara? Killing fields
more than half a billion years old—
paper-thin worms,
delicate fans,
several kinds of living disks,
gone, all gone,
gobbled up, outfought, rubbed out
by ancestors we wouldn't recognize
at a family reunion.

So if you want your next big dying
to be remembered at all
you'll have to do better
than a trillion tons of plastic
and all the oil that used to be dinosaurs.

Fiction by Neffers

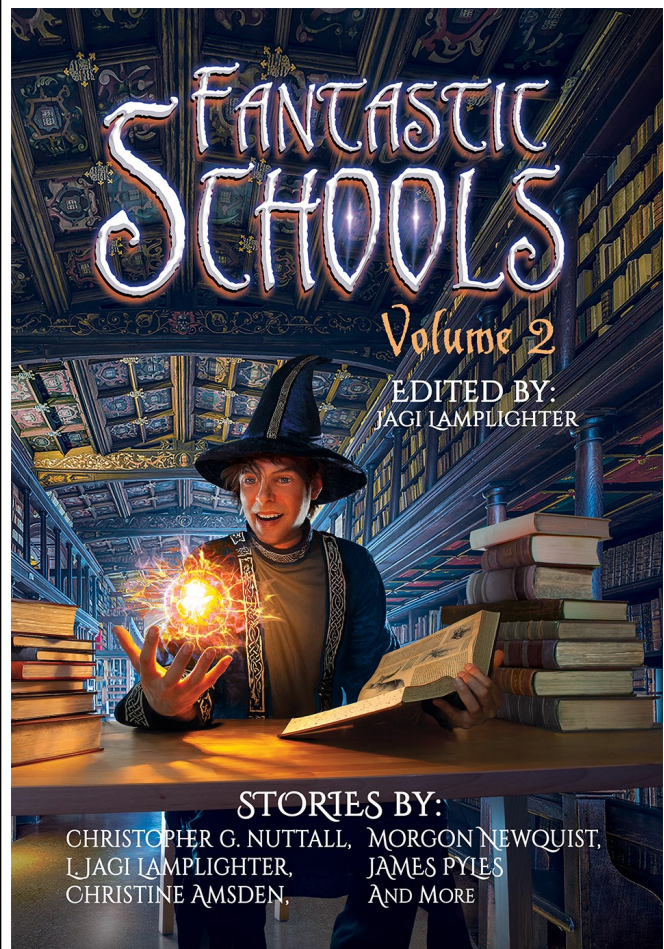
We reach here a traditional section of Eldritch Science, namely Fiction by Neffers, fiction by people who are dues-paying or Public Members of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Our first two stories are a bit different, namely they are tales from the anthology *Fantastic Schools Two*, the first the opening story by J. F. Posthumus and the second Rachel Griffin and the Missing Laundry by L. Jagi Lamplichter. We then offer the opening chapter of the novel *Street Survivors* by Ian J. Malone and Chris Kennedy.

Just Another Job by J. F. Posthumus

A substitute teacher for the Hogsback Public Schools, Harold Sylverson expected his assignment at Hogsback Creek Academy to be just another job. Robes and school uniforms? Those aren't too unusual. An old historic building with no electricity? Well, he's got solar portable chargers for his phone. This isn't his first rodeo in odd-ball places, after all.

But the students in his classroom are something of a completely different sort and Harold quickly discovers magic is real and he's in charge of teaching World History to a group of magically-inclined children!

What could possibly go wrong for someone without even a smidge of magical ability?



Chapter One

The road leading to Hogsback Creek Academy left Harold very thankful to be able to park his car in the dirt lot to the left of the sprawling stone buildings. The twisty, turny roads that led to the school had multiple ninety-degree curves with steep ravines on one side the entire way. Several times, he'd looked over to see nothing but rocks, trees, and tiny black dots representing buildings. Even barely doing twenty miles an hour, his heart had lived in his throat for fear of missing a turn and plummeting over the side of the road.

How anyone managed to zip by him, Harold was still trying to figure out.

Drawing a deep, calming breath, he opened his car door and turned to his current assignment. Staring at the building, he felt his nerves calming as wonder replaced the fear.

Hogsback Creek Academy, itself, resembled some fancy castle complete with a carriage house, enormous greenhouse, and fields sprawling behind the structures as far as the eyes could see.

Who was he to argue? He was here to be a substitute teacher for the coming week. Seemed someone had come down with the flu or something, and he was needed to take over the World History class.

Admittedly, Harold was thoroughly intrigued by the design of this school building. He easily spotted some Italian Renaissance in the main building, alongside some German and French influences. The windows were clean. He squinted at them, despite the blinding sunlight. They appeared to be clean from top-to-bottom inside *and* out.

If that were the case, he'd have to remember to ask how they managed that feat.

The cry of a hawk pulled his gaze skyward, and he watched as a large raptor soared around a spire before vanishing into the structure.

Interesting, he thought. Perhaps the bird simply nested there? After all, in Virginia, falconry wasn't a legal pastime.

Detaching the phone from his car charger, he frowned. No signal. That would make things a bit difficult. Not too surprising, though, considering how far into the middle of nowhere this place was located. He suspected, from the ups and downs of

the road he'd taken, they were at the top of a mountain. Or close to it.

This wouldn't be the first time he'd worked where cell signal was zilch. There were plenty of dead zones in the mountains of Virginia. Sometimes in areas you wouldn't expect.

Mountains did tend to kill signals. Even five minutes from civilization, you could lose cell signal. It happened in the rural areas. One reason why home phones would never, entirely, die.

It was also why he made certain his phone had a large storage capacity. He kept his music selection updated and a few favorite movies downloaded. He never went anywhere unprepared for 'rustic' living. Portable chargers, tablets, a car charger, and even a solar-powered charger were all things he kept in his 'emergency pack'.

After being sent to the middle of nowhere to teach some Boy Scouts how to build huts out of twigs and branches, along with the history behind how people lived during the 1600s, Harold never went anywhere without his solar-powered charger.

Not everyone was meant to be without technology, and Harold loved his phone.

Popping his car's trunk, Harold grabbed a bulging backpack, suitcase, and his briefcase. Another two suitcases remained in the trunk. He slammed the trunk, pressed the 'lock' on his key fob, and headed for the huge, wooden, double doors that were more medieval in style than contemporary. Along with the stone, the wood was aged, weather-worn and ancient. The hinges were large, black, and wrought iron. Elegant. He'd seen them on castles and other renaissance-era buildings.

He suspected they had been hand-crafted.

As he approached, the door to the right swung open. A tall, stern man stood in the doorway. Long, flaming red hair pulled back into a ponytail before curling around his shoulders. His eyes were emerald green and were filled with confusion.

"Who are you?" the man asked, arms folded and hidden within the voluminous robes he wore.

"Harold Sylverson," Harold said pleasantly. He offered a bright, friendly smile. At least, Harold hoped it was a bright, friendly smile. He felt rather confused, himself. "I'm the substitute for world history?"

"The... what?" the man repeated before taking a long moment to regard Harold's clothing and accessories. He shrugged. "World history, eh? Come in, I'll show you to your chambers. Whom are you... substituting for?"

"Thank you," Harold said, trying to not sigh. "Mrs. Clarke."

The man merely stared longer at Harold before turning and entering the building.

It was going to be one of those positions, Harold decided. Left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing. But... how could this fellow not know he was the substitute? Did they not keep up with their fellow teachers?

"And your name, sir?" Harold asked, as he followed the man into the foyer.

"Olam Kram. Instructor of herbology," he replied, not looking back at Harold.

"Ah. That's an impressive greenhouse you have," Harold said, staring at the grandeur around him.

"Thank you," Kram replied, with something more akin to life finally entering the man's voice. "It is my pride and joy."

Harold nodded. Gave some sort of polite reply, but he didn't remember what it was. He was too wrapped up in trying to absorb everything he saw.

The interior was even more impressive than the exterior. He recognized a lot of antiques as they traversed the corridors. He could have sworn he witnessed a broom sweeping itself along one side hallway. Another hallway had a bucket at one of the windows. There appeared to be a rag hanging on the window.

There was no possible way a rag could be cleaning a window by itself.

Harold would be damned if it didn't appear that way, though. He hurried along behind Kram, hoping he was just imagining things.

The staircase resembled those used by servants in a typical castle. Winding, made of stone, Harold was dying to know the history behind this majestic building. The stones were cool to the touch. They were also smooth beneath his fingers. Curious.

Even more curious were the lit sconces lining the wall.

That's when Harold realized he hadn't seen

any electrical outlets. No light switches. Nothing to even hint at electricity in the school. Yet, the building was a comfortable temperature.

Everyone knew castles were drafty. Anyone with a history degree was aware that tapestries were used to keep warmth inside the castle. A method to combat the cold dampness that could easily seep through the stone structures.

Yet, this place did not have that problem.

Finally, after ten minutes of walking up the winding staircase, Kram stepped onto a landing and opened a door. Harold followed him through into another hallway lined with doors. Small tables were scattered about the hallway, displaying vases of sweet-smelling flowers or delicate statues.

"These are your chambers," Kram stated, opening the third door on the left.

Harold peered inside to find a small, if not comfortable, sitting room. To the right was a bedroom. Both rooms were fully furnished.

"Thank you. I'll return later to unpack. Could you show me to my classroom?" Harold asked, dropping his suitcase on a chair.

"Oh. Uh, yes. Of course," Kram managed to say.

Chapter Two

Fifteen minutes later, Harold stepped into a large room that reminded him more of a college classroom than anything remotely like a school.

The classroom was designed in a way that resembled a small auditorium, with enough descending rows of seats for at least one hundred students. At the bottom of the rows was a pedestal stage, large enough for any display, or even a small rock band to perform. There was no projection screen or multimedia devices that Harold could see, only a desk that must have cost a fortune at an antique dealer's showroom. That beauty sat to the left of the stage, with a matching chair. Harold found himself rushing down the center aisle to get a better look.

There was a bang, and Harold looked up in time to see the heavy wooden door shutting, leaving him in the room alone.

Sliding the backpack off his shoulders, Harold straightened his tie, made certain his button-up

shirt was neat, and rolled his shoulders. The backpack did not go on the desk but rather the chair behind the desk. He did gently ease the briefcase onto the desk, flicking the metal tabs up, before opening it slowly. Almost reverently, he removed the gradebook, small box that held his prized fountain pens, and a pack of multi-colored pens. He removed a small pencil box, which held extra pencils, markers, a pair of small pencil sharpeners, and a pair of small scissors.

Opening the long, middle desk drawer, he found parchment paper, a quill, inkblot and bottle, and a tiny knife.

Harold frowned. Opening one of the drawers on the side of the desk, he found more items that went with learning calligraphy as used up to the 19th century. Perhaps this classroom had been used for something similar. Or perhaps that was part of the lessons taught by Mrs. Clarke, the teacher for whom he was substituting.

Shaking his head, he opened the bottom drawer, which held a dusty, leatherbound book. Removing the book, he slid all the parchments, quill, and other oddities into that drawer, closing it once everything was tucked away neatly.

Holding the book over the side of the desk, he brushed it off. The stirred dust sent him into a sneezing fit. Sniffing, he delved into an outer pocket of his backpack and opened a pack of tissues. Blowing his nose, he tucked the used tissue into a small ziplock bag before tucking it into an outer packet.

Carefully, he opened the book, and his dark brows nearly vanished into his hairline. The script was written in neat writing. It wasn't the age of the paper, which in itself was impressive from his opinion, but rather the content.

Witches and wizards! He moved the backpack onto the floor and began devouring the words. So intent upon every word written by whoever had written this incredible telling of the history of magic, perceived by someone who believed themselves to be a magic user, he almost didn't notice the students as they entered the room and took their seats.

Their movement pulled his attention back to his job.

Closing the book, he slid it into the top drawer,

promising to read more later.

Standing, he squared his shoulders and moved from behind the desk until he stood at the podium.

"Good morning, class!" He greeted the students, ignoring the fact they all wore long robes with weird symbols on the lapels of the shirts that stuck out from the collars.

He was at a complete disadvantage, since no one had even given him a list of student names. As soon as this class was over, he needed to seek out the principal and discuss certain things with Mr. McMillan.

Only half the class replied with a 'good morning'. Time to try again.

"I said 'Good morning'! Come on, show some spirit here!"

The entire class spoke up, that time, though still only half was exuberant about it. At least, it was a start.

"I'm Mr. Sylverson. Your substitute for this week. Unfortunately, Ms. Clarke has taken ill and will be out for a while," he said, keeping the smile plastered on his face. "Please take out your books. Since it seems she didn't leave me a syllabus, someone will have to tell me what chapter you left off on."

His words were met with confused faces and silence. A hand slowly, hesitantly rose into the air.

"Yes... what is your name?"

"I'm Emily. Emily Andrews," the petite blonde said. "Everyone knows about Madame Clarke, Master Sylverson. She didn't use a book for her class."

"Oh." That was not what he expected to hear. He sighed and turned around, pulling his backpack from the floor and dropping it on the chair. "Okay. What era were you in the middle of before she got sick?"

Emily gave him a smile that he did not trust. "We were learning about the Middle Ages. Castles, feudalism. That stuff."

"Perfect!" He turned to his backpack and pulled a large binder from it. Flipping the binder open, he removed a stack of papers. Looking around the classroom, he frowned. This was going to be a bit more complicated than he'd originally expected. There were at least thirty students in the class. "You can pair up. This is a basic test for that

era. If you guys pass it, we'll move onto the next topic."

He watched as all the students pulled out quills, ink bottles, and ink blots.

"No, no. We're not using that stuff today. Pull out your pencils or pens."

"Um... we don't have those. We use quills, sir," another student spoke up. A brown-haired boy with a round face, slightly-pointed ears, and blue eyes that glittered with mischief and humor.

Harold sighed. This was going to be one of those positions. Where he had not been given the right information and the kids never came prepared.

Grabbing a large pack of pencils from his backpack, because he was always prepared, he added it to the stack of papers.

"The pencils will be returned at the end of class. One per student."

He handed the pencils to the young man who'd spoken up and the papers to Emily.

"Please hand these out to your fellow students."

Up close, he could tell the little symbols on their lapels were pins. Each one was a different symbol. The two students he chose both wore eagles. Glancing around, he spotted three other symbols: a dolphin, lion, and what looked like a lizard.

Weird, he thought as he returned to his podium. But whatever. Everything in this school was weird.

Within moments, the papers and pencils had been handed out. At least a third of the class was trying to hide grins as they all but caressed the pencil in their hands and the paper on their desks. The others were staring at the paper and pencil as though it were going to bite them or had resigned expressions.

"Now, if you all promise to be diligent and work together on this test, I'll play music," Harold stated, moving back to his desk. "Any preferences?"

"Classic rock!" someone shouted.

Harold turned, a grin threatening to spill across his face. "Your request..."

He pulled out his phone, attached a cable to a

portable charger and began tapping the screen. The charger's light sprang to life. Were those sighs of longing he heard behind him? No... impossible! He tapped the 'play' icon and Led Zeppelin sprang from his speakers.

Heads began bobbing to the music. It took a total of three heartbeats for him to realize the same students who eagerly accepted the mundane pencil and paper were the ones now bobbing along to the music. Or perhaps 'head banging' was a more apt description.

It warmed his heart to see it. What puzzled him the most, were students who were trying to figure out how to hold the pencil. They stared at their classmates, wrapping their fingers around the wood and slowly making marks on the paper. The music, he could tell, was both foreign but intriguing to these children.

That song ended. The next began; and Harold was feeling worried about the other students. But they were slowly adapting to using the pencils.

Perhaps they were just messing with him? After all, who didn't know how to hold a pencil?

Finally, one of the students slammed the pencil against the desk, pushing the paper off his desk. The paper flew away before floating to the floor. Some of the students, Harold noticed, exchanged wary gazes.

"Something wrong, young sir?" Harold asked, choosing a sort of title instead of a name he didn't have yet.

"Yes. I don't know why we have to use this thing?" the student all but yelled, holding up the pencil. "There is nothing wrong with a quill!"

"Quills are messy. The ink takes too long to dry, and I don't like having black-smudged fingers. That is why," Harold replied, leaning against the back of his chair.

The kid tossed his head, reminding Harold of a high-strung horse who didn't want to do a task.

"I will not be subjected to this absurdity! I am a Westerford. I should not be forced to use such mundane and piddly instruments!"

"You will use such items in my class, young man," Harold stated, rising from his chair. He tapped his phone, stopping the song, which caused a wave of groans. "If you do not sit, you will regret

that outburst and your behavior.”

“What are you going to do? You’re not but a substitute! I’ll bet you don’t even know how this school works!”

“Very well. You will be doing a ten page essay on the Crusades. Due tomorrow. Half of your grade will depend on that paper. It will be done using a pencil. You will include the technology, the impact the Crusades had, those involved with the Crusades, and the Knights Templar.”

Young Mister Westerford appeared as though he’d been struck by a bowling ball. His eyes were wide, his cheek twitched, and his mouth formed a perfect circle.

“You... you can’t... you can’t do that!” he stuttered.

“Can. Have. Did. Keep going and I’ll add pages,” Harold stated, keeping his gaze level with his student.

“That’s not fair!” another boy exclaimed, standing up beside him. “All we’ve ever used are quills! We don’t even know how to use that thing called... what’d you call it? A pen-sill?”

“A pencil, you moron,” another voice muttered.

Harold searched the class but couldn’t figure out who’d said it. Normally, he didn’t approve of name calling, of any sort, but in this case... it did seem rather fitting.

“It appears you’ve joined your friend in doing a ten page essay, young man,” Harold stated. His eyes traveled over the classroom. “Since it appears you two are wearing the same pins, I’m going to presume you’re in the same group. If a third decides to stand up and argue, every student wearing that lizard pin will be doing a ten page essay on the Crusades.”

A hand rose into the air.

“I hope you are not planning on joining them, miss,” Harold stated, voice hard.

“No, sir,” the young woman said cheerfully. She brushed back a strand of auburn hair. “They’re Houses. The pins? They represent Houses here at Hogsback. Each student is placed into a House. It’s basically a particular wing. If you like, some of us can stay behind and answer some of your questions?”

Houses? What the hell was this place? Harold

wondered. He vaguely recalled that British boarding schools were organized in a manner that included the concept of Houses, but he had never come upon it in America. This place was getting stranger and stranger.

The young girl, though, sounded... hopeful? Her eyes were eager and drifted between him and his phone. Several of the other students were nodding, also.

“What’s your name, young lady?”

“Amber. Amber Tilley,” she replied.

“Very well. You and your classmates can remain behind. Provided your tests are finished.” He addressed the rest of the class. “Those who have finished, and are not remaining behind, may go after bringing forward the tests, complete with names at the top of the paper.”

Within minutes, students had turned in their papers, and most were scurrying from the room like rats deserting a sinking ship.

“You and your cohort may leave, young Westerford. Oh, and turn in your test. You will be graded on what you did and did not finish.”

The pair of students flushed red, picked up the pencil and paper, scribbled their names at the top before handing it to Harold. The moment it was out of their hands, they raced from the room.

Harold waited until the door shut behind the pair before turning to the dozen students who wore a variety of the pins. Each held the pencils as though they were lifelines.

“Who wants to start?” he asked, leaning against the podium.

“Could you, maybe, play more of that music while we talk?” asked one of the girls. Long black hair fell in a smooth sheet to her waist. She lowered thick, full lashes, and Harold sighed.

He knew her type. Pretty, petite, with exotic features? He’d seen that in plenty of schools. There was a reason it was a trope in movies for the exotic-looking girls to get all the boys mooning over them.

She also reminded him of his niece at that age. His niece who turned into a beautiful, successful, and happily married woman. Shrugging, he lowered the volume before hitting the play button. He’d been a sucker for his niece, too.

“Okay. Now that I’ve kept my end of that little

request, who wants to start?"

"Let me start at the beginning," Emily said. The others nodded at her, and she continued. "Hogsback is a school for magecraft. Witches, wizards, sorcery... anything spell-based. Potions, animal care, summoning of all sorts. It's taught here. Most are mage-born. But some of us, those here, are born to mundanes. Andy, there, his mom is an elf. Jackson? His dad was fae."

Harold glanced around the group. The two boys had their hands up. It wasn't hard to figure out who was who. Andy had pointed ears. His skin was honey gold, and his eyes were an unearthly green. Jackson was slender with silvery-blond hair cut short. His pale white skin was nearly translucent, even in the dim lighting of the room. His ears weren't tapered, but they weren't entirely human, either. Nor were his brilliant silver eyes.

"Magic? Are you serious?" Harold asked, trying to wrap his brain around what he'd just been told. "Mage-born? Mundane?"

Emily replied to his latter pair of questions "Mage-born means magically gifted parents. Mundane refer to non-magical folk."

"Yup. We can all do magic here. Some of us are full-blooded 'other'. Like werewolves, fae, elves, a couple half-elves," Jackson said. His voice was musical, and he practically sang the words.

"Hogsback welcomes pretty much anything not purely mundane. Anyone who can do magic is allowed entrance, if you can pass the aptitude tests," Andy added. He shrugged. "It's either here or being sent off up North."

"Or out West," another girl said. She shook her head. "The Houses are divided up by what element you're most connected with, too. So the students in each house aren't all good or bad."

"Though the House of Fire tends to be very hot-headed. No pun intended. Wesley is a pain in the ass. A bully to everyone who isn't rich and from a mage-born family," another boy added.

"Also thinks he's a gift to the girls here," Emily muttered.

"Let's go back to the magic thing. You mean actual magic. The twitch-your-nose-and-things-go-poof magic?" Harold asked.

The students laughed.

"No, sir. Not like those old TV shows," Emily

said. "More like the new stuff. Not that words and gestures are always needed. And wands? They're great for storing spells, but other than that? They're nothing more than a crutch. A good witch, wizard, or whatever should never depend upon a crutch."

"Or have to say words to a spell. You may need to do magic when noise could get you into trouble," Amber said. It sounded like a rule or quote.

"Or fancy gestures. You have to learn to visualize the spell. To say it silently," Jackson said. He sighed. "It's easier said than done, to be honest."

"I'm Isabella." The black-haired girl with Asian-like features said, introducing herself. "Magic is very real, sir. Let me show you."

She held her hand out. Fire leapt to life in the palm of her hand. Bringing up her other hand, she cupped them together and formed a fireball. It grew larger and larger the further she moved her hands apart, until it was the size of a large wiffle ball.

"You can touch it," she said.

Harold shook his head. This was not happening. He'd been brained. Or maybe he'd driven over the side of the cliff, and this was some demented version of Hell? Magic was not real. Everyone knew magic wasn't real.

Yet... that fireball looked very real.

"Thanks, but I'm going to pass."

Isabella shrugged, a friendly smile on her face. She flattened her hands, until the fireball was gone. She brushed her hands together, as though dusting them off.

The door to the classroom opened, and another adult stood in the threshold, backlit by the hallway. They stepped into the room, and Harold could tell it was a man. From how the students were suddenly uneasy, he suspected this was Mr. McMillan.

Chapter Three

"I believe you students have classes to be at," the imposing figure said in a pleasant voice. Almost teasing. He moved with ease down the stairs,

his robes sweeping the floor.

Harold was impressed.

So that was how the royals of old moved down stairs without tripping, he thought in awe. Just the barest of kicks to the front of the garments before stepping down. Kick, step, repeat. Fascinating.

“Yes, sir,” all the students said. They grabbed their supplies and hurried off, taking a moment to wave to Harold before departing the room.

“I am the headmaster here. Lord McMillan,” he said, the corners of his lips turning up in a tiny resemblance of a smile.

Lord McMillan had a head full of black curly hair with auburn highlights. His eyes were a rich brown that seared through Harold. A shiver danced down Harold’s spine at the power this man commanded. His features were chiseled, and Harold believed they would be better suited on a military man in peak performance than the principal to a school.

An aristocrat to the core, Harold thought.

One with a purely American accent, too.

“Young Weasley said you gave him a ten page essay to write,” McMillan stated, moving around the classroom. He picked up a discarded pencil that one of the students had dropped. The lips twitched, and the smile grew slightly. “He believed I would change your decree.”

Decree? Headmaster instead of principal? Yep. This was Hell. A strange Hell, but oddly appropriate for him, Harold thought.

“I may suggest that sort of thing to the other instructors to dole out when students misbehave in their classrooms. It had a curious effect on the students.” McMillan turned, his fingers turning the pencil over and over.

Harold wondered if it was a nervous habit. But what did this man have to be nervous about?

“How did you get here?” McMillan suddenly asked. “How did you get by the wards?”

“I drove up,” Harold replied simply. “Wards? You mean security systems?”

“Curious. Only those with magical blood in them can see this place. What are you?”

“I am a world history teacher, part-time, for the Hogsback County School System. I was given this address and told you needed a substitute teacher.

My name is Harold Sylverson, and I suspect I’ve died and gone to Hell.”

McMillan laughed. He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks. Shaking his head, he wiped his eyes with the sleeves of his robe. A very human behavior in Harold’s opinion.

“My dear sir, you are not dead. Nor have you gone to Hell. Well, no more than any other school is Hell. You are welcome to stay here, though I believe you’ll need an intense tour of this school and introduction to how things are done around here.” Headmaster McMillan held out his left hand, his right still holding the pencil. “Welcome to Hogsback Creek Academy, School of Magecraft, Harold Sylverson. Home to the Fighting Bumblebees, witches and wizards. If your week goes well, maybe we can convince you to remain.”

Harold’s smile trembled a bit before steadying. Could he even survive this job? Did he want to continue or run away? Did he want to take that road back down the mountain the same day he drove up?

Not really. Surely the students couldn’t be that bad... could they?

“Thank you, sir,” Harold replied. “I think I need to make sure I can survive the day’s classes before I consider an extended stay, though. Make sure I can sleep in my bed without fearing some angry kid is going to turn me into a toad.”

McMillan snickered and shook his head. “No, no. Nothing like that would happen to you.”

“What did happen to Ms. Clarke?” Harold asked. His eyes narrowed on the headmaster.

“What did she teach? Why don’t I have a syllabus? Or even a list of students’ names?” He paused before all but demanding, “And why is there no electricity here?”

“One question at a time, Harold,” McMillan said, amusement filling every feature. “Madame Clarke grew ill with griffin flu. Poor thing angered a griffin on a field trip, and it bit her. Though it is easily healed, the body must rest, and she requires constant observation to keep her from trying to fly.” He shook his head, though the laughter never left his eyes. “One should never anger a griffin.”

Harold stared at the headmaster in dumbfounded disbelief. “A... griffin bit her? On a field trip?”

"Oh, yes. Thankfully, none of the students were injured or bit. That could've been rather difficult. Ever try to keep a teen from flying?"

"No, I can't say that I have," Harold replied, slowly shaking his head back and forth.

"It's very difficult, I assure you. But, no matter. You would need more time to adjust before being allowed to request field trips and such."

"Uh huh."

McMillan smiled brilliant, revealing perfect white teeth. "As to your second question, Madame Clarke taught the history of witchcraft and magick-ry throughout the world. Since you don't have that knowledge, please continue with teaching our students world history. It would prove beneficial to the students who have only known the magical world." He paused and stared at the windows over Harold's shoulder. "Perhaps I should consider adding more mundane classes to the schedules. Allow the students to learn more about you mundanes. Yes, yes, I think I will look into that."

"Electricity?" Harold prompted.

This conversation was just getting stranger and stranger.

"Oh, well, this place was built before electricity became a thing. We haven't bothered upgrading, because it would require mundanes to come in. I don't even know if the power companies come this far up the mountain."

"So, it's not because magic interferes with electricity or anything like that?"

McMillan snorted. "Heavens no. Who told you that?"

"Uh, no one. I just..." Harold shrugged and gestured around him.

"Oh. No, nothing like that," McMillan replied, still obviously amused with Harold. A chime sounded and McMillan grinned. "Your next class will be arriving shortly. I'll see you later."

Harold watched McMillan depart as the students arrived. He sighed and waited until the students were seated before addressing the class.

"I'm certain you're all aware of Madame Clarke's illness. I am Mr. Sylverson, your substitute. As you can tell from my attire, I am not here to instruct you on the history of witchcraft, magic, or anything like that. I am here to teach you about world history."

"You mean mundane world history?" a young girl asked in a derisive tone. "No one needs to know anything like that."

"I'm sure you also think you don't need to know basic math or science," Harold asked. "But I suspect those will be on the agenda before long. Now be quiet before I assign a ten page essay on the topic of my choice."

The girl's eyes widened before narrowing into thin slits. She kept her lips pressed together, obviously not happy. But at least she was quiet.

"As I was saying, I am here to teach you world history." He reached for the stack of papers and pencils. "This test will give me a general idea on what you currently know about the middle ages. You will use the provided paper and pencil to answer the questions. You may work in pairs. If you're good, I will play music while you work quietly."

"I refuse to do this. I will not be forced to use mundane items," the girl snarled. She stood and stalked down the stairs. "You're a mundane. You can't do anything to us."

A fireball formed in her hand. Her blue eyes, the color of a perfect flame, glittered.

Harold didn't show the fear that he felt. This girl meant business, and he had zero ability to stop her.

Another young girl rose from the seats. A large glob of water fell over the girl's hand. On the other side, a young boy rose, also. The pair had enough similarities to be siblings, if not twins. One wore a dolphin, the other an eagle.

"Knock it off, Carol," the boy snapped. "You know what would happen if Headmaster McMillan knew you attacked a teacher."

"He's a substitute," she objected.

"Still a teacher," the other girl countered.

"How did you know I was a mundane?" Harold asked, zeroing in on the girl's earlier comment.

"No self-respecting mage would be seen wearing something like that," the girl retorted, tossing her head.

"That's not true," another kid called out. "My parents work in the mundane world. They wear clothes like that all the time."

"Yeah, so do mine! We aren't that different

from the mundanes, and we have to live with them!”

“How’d you know, Carol? Who told you?” Water Glob girl demanded.

Carol turned on her. “I don’t have to tell you anything, Lorilee.”

“No, but I would like to know,” Harold said, interrupting the kids who were gathering around the troublemaker. “How did you know?”

“I know how she found out!”

All eyes in the classroom turned to a young boy who was standing at the desk Wesley had occupied in the prior class. He was holding two furry ears in his hands. They looked, to Harold, to be rabbit ears.

“Rabbit ears! Charmed for eavesdropping!” the boy exclaimed. “I saw you and a bunch other Lizards standing around Wesley before class.”

“Wow. Ya’ll are going to be in so much trouble,” the water-glob girl said, her Southern twang really coming out. “You’ll be lucky you don’t get expelled. Which means you’d either have to be shipped out to North Dakota for school or go to some mundane school. Better hope your parents can homeschool you for everything else, if you have to go to a mundane school.”

Carol’s face paled.

“Actually, I’m thinking two ten page essays. One on the Crusades, and the second on the witch hunts of Europe during the 1400s. With a third, twenty page essay on World War II. Pay close attention to Hitler. His rise to power and his beliefs. You may learn something, young lady.” Harold paused, before adding, “I’ll have to check with Headmaster McMillan, but I believe Wesley and the others who participated in this activity should also have to do those essays. No quills allowed.”

“Wow. You’re harsh, Mr. Sylverson,” Water-Glob girl said in awe.

“What is your name, young lady?” Harold asked. He needed something to call her other than Water-Glob Girl.

“Ashley Humphries,” she replied. “That’s my brother, Perry.”

“I’m Alex Campbell,” the boy who’d found the ears called.

“Wonderful!” Harold said. “Why don’t we al-

low Ms. Carol to return to her seat. Her grade will be very dependent upon those essays, and you all still have that test to finish.”

The students waited until Carol had returned to her seat before settling themselves.

Harold reached over and scrolled through his playlist before finding Highway to Hell. He hit ‘play’.

There was a smattering of laughter as the intro began playing. Harold was quickly learning which students were familiar with the mundane world and which lived in their naive little worlds.

Or, perhaps, it was the mundanes who lived in a cloistered world? Sheltered from the majestic creatures of myth and legend, from fireballs conjured at a person’s fingertips.

Harold had a lot to think about, but one thing he didn’t need to think about was if he was going to stay.

These kids needed a link to the outside world, and for now, he was it.

Leaning back in the ancient, antique chair, he glanced at the leather-bound book.

Besides, he had a lot to learn about the history of witches, witchcraft, and magic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Wife and a mother of five, **J.F. Posthumus** is an IT Tech with over a decade of experience. When she isn’t arguing with computers and their inherent gremlins, or being mom to the four younger monsters (the eldest has flown the nest and doing quite well on his own), she’s crafting, writing, or doing some sort of art. An avid gamer, she loves playing Dungeons & Dragons, and a variety of other board games with her family and friends. She’s also a hopeless romantic, thanks to all the fairy tales she cute her eyetooth on. They were what J.F. Posthumus learned to read before she discovered the *Boxcar Children Mysteries*. From there, she fell into the rabbit hole that’s reading, where she discovered a love for mysteries, fantasy, and the occasional romance. Since writing was a favorite subject, she naturally incorporated her love of murder, mysteries, and fantasy into her works.

Rachel Griffin and the Missing Laundry L. Jagi Lamplighter

The thing Rachel Griffin feared had come upon her.

If she wanted to successfully complete her freshman year at Roanoke Academy of the Sorcerous Arts, she had to pass a practical test in Music.

She stood by the open window of her dorm room in Dare Hall, flute poised before her lips. Her shoulder-length, straight black hair fluttered in the breeze. Outside the window, ferns bloomed beneath the paper birches. In the mirror atop her roommates vanity, she could see her reflection: a tiny girl in a black academic robe with a heart-shaped face, eyes that displayed her part-Korean ancestry, and a mortarboard cap atop her head. In the cage above the second set of bunkbeds, on the far side of the room, the familiar of one of her roommates, a red-winged blackbird, pecked rhythmically at its seeds. Closer at hand, atop her own bottom bunk, her black and white cat that was just a cat purred softly where it lay curled upon her bunk.

She lifted the silver instrument to her lips and paused.

Rachel hated practicing her flute. She had no idea why. Normally, she was a very diligent student. She worked hard and dutifully completed assignments. The flute itself was a lovely silver instrument that had once belonged to her grandmother. It should have been a joy to play. Yet practicing struck her as such a dreadful chore that she could not get herself to do it.

In the fall, it had not mattered. The assignments had been simple, and Rachel had impressed the tutor, Miss Cyrene, with her quick memorization and competence at reading music. However, she had known all along that she could not rely on her perfect memory alone to pass the class. To perform enchantments, she needed to be able to play an instrument. Sooner or later a time would come when she would be asked to play something too difficult for her current mediocre skills.

That time was now.

Did Roanoke have a shame flute, such as they had used in the Middle Ages to punish bad musicians? Would her neck be forced into the ring that held the heavy iron instrument and her fingers into the holes in the top bars, so that she would have to stand in front of the class, stuck in the position of playing a flute, enduring the mockery and derision of her fellow students? Or maybe they would further imitate this earlier form of punishment by parading her all over campus so people could throw rotten fruit at her. Rachel pictured various people she knew throwing tomatoes and rotten peppers at her and sighed.

Maybe it would be better if Roanoke did employ the shame flute. Rachel hated being the center of the attention of a crowd. Avoiding such a fate was one of the few things she could think of that might induce her to actually practice.

"Hey, Rachel," the voice of orphan-boy Sigfried Smith issued from the calling card in her pocket. Like Rachel, he spoke with a British accent, though his was lower class. "Lucky and I struck something."

"Wouldn't it be more accurate," came the gravelly voice of Lucky the Dragon, "to say we didn't strike something?"

"Lucky and I struck nothing," corrected Siggy's voice. "Did you know that there was nothing under our dorm?"

Rachel, who still stood by the arched window of her room, her dreaded flute in hand, reached into her pocket for the calling card from which their voices were issuing. She peered into the small rectangle of glass. She could see Sigfried's nose and part of Lucky's Jade eye. This contributed precisely nothing to trying to figure out what they meant.

"I say, that makes no sense at all?" Rachel began, thinking that this was not unusual when speaking with Siggy. "Could you..."

She started to ask him to move the calling card so as to show this supposed nothing, but an idea struck her. If she went in person, she could postpone practicing her flute.

"Never mind!" she cried, "I'll be right down!"

* * *

Rachel ran down five flights of stairs to the basement. In one hand, she carried Vroomie, her

steeplechaser-model bristleless broom. Waiting for her in the cellar of Dare Hall was her blood-brother, Sigfried the Dragonslayer, and his familiar, Lucky the Dragon. Sigfried was a well-built, impossibly handsome fifteen-year-old with wild blond curls. Lucky was a golden Asian lung, or water dragon, with ruby-colored stomach scales and long, long whiskers, horns, back ridge, and a tail tuft of flame red. They both awaited her arrival with eager faces.

The carpet that normally covered an area of floor in the back corner of the large music room in the cellar of Dare Hall had been rolled to one side. In the bare spot was a roundish hole. Rachel peered into this hole. It went down three or four feet. Below that was air and a dim light.

"See!" Sigfried crowed, pointing at the floor. "We struck nothing."

"Struck..." Rachel's eyes went very wide. She straightened and crossed her arms. "Siegfried Smith! Don't tell me you were trying to burrow through the floor with flaming dragon acid again!"

Sigfried and Lucky glanced at each other and then back at her. Siggy said, "I thought you'd be pleased. Don't you hate being stuck inside? Now, we can get out anytime."

He had her there.

She knelt and peered into the hole, adjusting her black robes and tossing the tassel of her cap out of her eyes. Below was a tunnel, most likely a maintenance hallway. She had seen such hallways beneath the school once in a dream, but she had never stopped to consider whether they might be real.

Glancing up, she said, "Shall we pop in and take a look?"

Sigfried grinned a grin so bright that there was a danger of blindness. "That's why I like you, Griffin. No, 'maybe it's too dangerous' Or, 'You're not supposed to go there.' Just 'Let's pop in and take a look.'" He turned to Lucky. "You want to do the honors, Lucks, and go first?"

"Sure thing, boss!" said the dragon.

In a flicker of red and gold, he plunged head-first into the hole.

* * *

Ten minutes later, they were exploring the tun-

nels, only Sigfried's girlfriend, Valerie Hunt and her familiar, Payback the Norwegian elkhound, had joined them. The five of them stood atop a wooden boardwalk that ran the length of the entirely-round corridor. Or rather three of them, Valerie, Siggy, and Payback, stood. Rachel and Lucky both hovered; Rachel sat side-saddle upon the seat of her steeplechaser, and Lucky, who was naturally buoyant, snaked lazily through the air.

"Do you know," Valerie asked as she ran her hand along the smooth black substance, "that they have discovered new rocks on Mars? Rocks not of this earth?"

She wore her camera with its red strap over her long black academic robe and held a magnifying glass, with which she peered at the substance of the wall, her golden hair in bright contrast to the dark, glassy coating. Her familiar paced back and forth across the boardwalk, sniffing at the many interesting scents to be found.

"I want to go to Mars!" Siggy crowed. "Lucky, we could be the first humans to own new rocks. That might be almost as good as gold. Some might contain gold! Griffin!" He turned to Rachel, who hovered beside him "Can we Sorcerers make a broom that can carry us to Mars? If so, I'm in!"

"I'm not sure," Rachel replied. "We can put it on our list of things to look into."

She looked both ways down the long tunnel, lit by the soft glow of domestic will-o-wisps. She half expected to see Sarpy, as the students called Umberto Sarpento, the sleepy custodian who kept Ranoke Academy going and herded the various fey that ran things behind the scenes, but there was no sign of him.

She turned to Valerie, gesturing toward the smooth, shiny walls. "Do you have any idea what this substance is? I've never seen it before. I do recognize this stuff over here."

She floated her steeplechaser forward about fifteen feet to where the black walls changed to white and knocked against one of the plates of smooth, porcelain-like substance that lined the round walls.

"This is the stuff of basic conjurations," she continued, "which is interesting, because it could not have been conjured directly onto the wall, or it

would have vanished again twenty-four hours later. It must have been fitted here, carried outside—where it could be put out under the full moon three months in a row—and then carried back here. Still, makes a rather nice wall covering. I’m surprised it is not used more often.”

Rachel floated back to where the other two stood, surrounded by the black rock. “But do you know what this is? It almost looks like obsidian.”

“It is obsidian,” Valerie replied. She raised a finger. “Cool factoid from your favorite rock hound, me.” She pointed the finger at herself and grinned. “If you heat granite hot enough that it melts, what you get is obsidian.”

“Really?” Rachel leaned forward. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” replied Valerie. “Before I found out about the World of the Wise, back when I had no idea that magic was real, I was in Rock Hounders, the geology club at my junior high. One day, they took us to see this guy who had a Fresnel lens—this enormous magnifying glass—in his back yard. The thing was about two foot square. It could concentrate ordinary sunlight up to three thousand eight hundred degrees. The guy picked up a perfectly normal piece of granite gravel and put it under the lens. Then, he used the lens to heat it until it was so hot that the rock melted. It turned into obsidian.”

Valerie knocked on the smooth black glassy substance coating the inside of this section of the hallway. “Looked just like this.”

“Do you think that is what this is?” Rachel asked, awed. “Melted granite?”

“Do you think this was done with magic?” asked Sigfried. “Could a cantrip or a talisman be hot enough to melt through stone? Man, that would be wicked! We could melt an entire side of Roanoke Hall and never have to go to class again!”

“A cantrip? Maybe,” she murmured, flying her steeplechaser up higher so she could run her hand over the smooth, cool black glasslike substance of the corridor’s ceiling. “Usually, when they move earth and stone with cantrips, it...doesn’t look like this. More like someone stretched the rock. I haven’t seen anything like it before.”

Rachel peered down the corridor, burning with

curiosity. What else might be down here? Would there be clues to how these corridors were made or why they were entirely round? But then she sighed. She was not supposed to be exploring the corridors beneath Roanoke Academy. She was supposed to be studying for her dreaded enchantment final.

“Listen, I think we should...”

From father down the corridor came the sound of weeping.

* * *

The three students and their two familiars crept forward, seeking the source of the sound.

“Can you see it?” Rachel whispered to Sigfried.

Siggy touched his robe in the middle of his chest, where Rachel knew his All-Seeing amulet was hidden. Then he scrunched up his face. “I see something. Take out your calling cards. I’ll share what I see.”

The two girls pulled out rectangles of green glass the size of old-fashioned calling cards. An image appeared in the glass of both cards. Rachel stared at hers.

Boiling hot water flowed out of a pipe in the wall of an underground chamber. The water flowed into a gigantic tub filled with soapy water, in which garments, mainly black robes, were being washed. Around it stood a group of old women. The women were fishing garments out of the hot water with long hooks and rubbing them against old-fashioned, ribbed washboards before depositing them into a second gigantic tub, this one filled from a second pipe, which seemed to be cold water. The women themselves were tiny, maybe two feet tall, if that. They wore neat dresses of brown burlap and green bonnets. Some wore white aprons or red shawls. All of them, to a woman, had wild, wispy, white hair that seemed to escape any bun they might have tried to fasten it into.

A second group of the little old ladies fished the robes from the cold water and waved a stick over them. Water fell from the robes back into the gigantic tub, and the robes were instantly dry.

Valerie’s voice rose shrilly. “Washer’s-at-the-

Ford! We've seen them! We're all going to die."

"What? Where?" Siggy spun in a circle, his hand on the hilt of his knife. Why he always went for his knife rather than his fulgurator's wand with its charges of useful spells, Rachel did not quite understand. Though, it occurred to her, maybe it was because he had only known about magic for less than a year, while he had been an orphan trying to defend himself on the dangerous streets of the bad areas of London for fourteen years before that. Sometimes habits die hard. "Lucky, prepare to burninate it!"

"I'll burn its face so much it won't have a face!" the dragon cried loyally.

"The old washing ladies!" Valerie cried. "It doesn't help to burn them. It's already too late. If you see them, you die!"

"You are thinking of bean-nighe," Rachel laughed kindly. "These are bean-tighe. They are very kind, friendly domestic fey who do laundry."

"Oh." Valerie pressed a hand against her chest as she caught her breath. "Not going to die today because I accidentally saw an old lady after all."

"Aw!" Siggy let go of the knife hilt. "Thought I was going to get to fight something."

Valerie ignored him, gazing carefully at the tiny old ladies pictured in her calling card. "So, they are called ban-tee, like tea is banned here? They don't look particularly scary. Actually, they look rather jolly."

"They are," Rachel agreed. "At Gryphon Park, our bean-tighe are very friendly. I used to like going to sit with them when I was very little. They would give me hazelnuts and fresh berries, or whatever was in season."

"Is that how our laundry gets done?" Sigfried gaped. "Tiny old ladies scrub it by hand? Why don't they install a washing machine? Doesn't Ouroboros Industries make washing machines using magic?"

"They do," Rachel nodded. "But they only invented those recently. I suspect laundry has been done this way at Roanoke for a number of centuries."

"Where does all that water come from?" asked Valerie.

"College creek, I guess," Rachel replied.

"How do they get it so hot?" asked Valerie.

"I..." Rachel frowned at the huge gushing pipe, "don't know."

"Ace! Bet we could take out a lot of enemies with that much boiling water. Annoying kids from math class, too." Sigfried opined. "Oh, there's the crying bloke. Hold on."

The scene in the calling card shifted. It now showed a little figure who was hidden behind one of the gigantic tubs. The tiny man was as brown as a nut. He wore no clothing except for a red turban and a matching red loincloth.

"What, in all that is sacred, is that?" gawked Valerie.

Again, Rachel, who had grown up with domestic fey her whole life, could not help laughing.

"It's a bwbach. They clean our rooms."

"Oh! You mean when I put a bowl of milk with honey in it outside my door, this is what's drinking it?" the other girl's face took on an odd expression. "Naked. In a loincloth. Not sure I want one of those cleaning my room. Touching my stuff."

Rachel giggled.

"And you're okay with this? You grew up with these Loincloth Larrys?" Valerie demanded.

Rachel shook her head. "No, we have bwca at home. They are furry and dress...more normally. Bwcas are a kind of cousin to the bwbachs."

From off the side of the card came a voice. Sigfried shifted the image back to the bean-tighe. A new creature stood there. She was a foot taller than the tiny cleaning ladies. Her humble appearance, peasant skirt and embroidered blouse and a green kerchief over her hair, was offset by the fact that she walked on chicken feet and her face had a beast-like snout.

"What's that?" asked Sigfried. "A Muppet?"

Valerie snickered.

Rachel narrowed her eyes, searching her perfect memory for drawings or descriptions that might come close. "Not sure. A kikimora, maybe?"

The sharp and shrill voice of the newcomer asked, "Where is the laundry from Dare Hall, Rooms 2A to 2D?"

The little old ladies looked up with their beneficent smiles. They answered one after another.

"Fenguth has not brought it."

"He says it was taken."

"Missing."

"Fenguth is the butt of a prank by a mischievous fey."

"That is no excuse," screeched the chicken-legged being. She scowled. "Wasn't it only just last week that he broke the water jug?"

"He claimed it was not him," replied one of the bean-tighe as she scrubbed. "He claimed a miscreant."

"He claims a lot of things," scoffed the kikimora. "Well, no longer. If Fenguth does not bring the laundry...every robe that is missing...his time here is done. He will be cast out. Marched to the edge of the wards and expelled from the campus!"

"But..." a bean-tighe with an apron that could have been made from a lace doily, spoke up. Her face drawn with concern. "If a bwbach loses its place, isn't it..."

"Bwbach, bogle, what is it to me," scoffed the kikimora. "He has until nightfall to bring the garments or his days at Roanoke are through!"

* * *

Back in the hallway, Rachel covered her calling card, which returned to its green-tinted state.

"Oh, no," she whispered softly, pressing a hand against her chest.

"What's wrong?" asked Valerie. "What does that mean, bwbach or bogle?"

Rachel's voice seemed to stick in her throat. "Bwbach are good fey. Helpful. But if things go all pear-shaped for them, they turn into bogle, which are a kind of malevolent sprite.

"I could eat the pear," Lucky offered hopefully in his gravely voice, "if it would help."

"You mean the loinclotted, naked bloke is going to transform like the Hulk! Wicked! Can we watch?" asked Sigfried.

"Can I eat the Hulk?" Lucky asked hopefully. "Is it a hulk of cheese?"

"I don't see what's so bad about turning into a bog-whatsit," Sigfried declared. He crossed his arms. "I'd pay to be more malevolent."

But Rachel understood. She understood, all too well. She herself had once faced a decision where, had things gone otherwise, she would have lost

who she was. It would have been the same as death. That was not so different from what would happen to this Fenguth if he did not find the missing laundry.

In that instant, she resolved in her heart that if there was anything she could do to help the little fey retrieve the stolen clothing, she would do it.

Except...

She was supposed to be practicing her flute.

Rachel sighed. She wished she could understand why practicing was so difficult. It was such a beautiful instrument. She could recall her grandmother, the august Lady Amelia, Duchess of Devon, standing on Dartmoor playing the silver flute, her long fingers moving gracefully over the instrument as she called the horses in from the moors or the hounds in from the hunt through music alone. Her grandmother had spent nearly a century as a Vestal Virgin—the Wise lived longer than mundane folks—before she had left the order to marry Blaise Griffin. Rachel liked to picture Lady Amelia playing her silver flute as she stood with the other Vestals, defending the Eternal Flame.

Rachel glanced over her shoulder, back the way she had come. If she returned to practicing now, would it really make such a difference? Wasn't she going to fail her music final no matter what she did now? Wasn't it better to keep one bwbach from turning into a bogle than to spend a fruitless few hours practicing an instrument that—if she was thoroughly honest with herself—she was never going to learn to play in time?

"Come on," she announced, turning back to the others. "Let's help him. Let's find the missing laundry."

* * *

"Hallo, there." Rachel walked right by the bean-tighe who paid her no mind and sat down with her back to the wall near the sniffing bwbach. She was careful not to look right at it. She knew small fey of this kind hated that. So she looked up at the gigantic tub holding the laundry and the hot water rushing into it from the enormous pipe in the wall.

Sniffle.

"I'd like to help. Find the laundry, I mean."

Sniffle.

"Can you show me where you last saw the

laundry? Maybe my friend's dog can catch the scent of the culprit—she calls it a perp—and we can track him down for you.

Silence.

Then his red turban-covered head turned toward her. Out of the corner of her eye, Rachel glimpsed large brown eyes, round as saucers, blinked rapidly.

"Student-girl help Fenguth?" it inquired in a high reedy voice.

"Student-girl help Fenguth," Rachel replied, nodding.

"Fenguth come."

* * *

The little bwbach in its strange red garments led the others down the round hallway until it came to a random spot that did not look any different from other random spots to Rachel and her friends. It was in the middle of one of the black obsidian lengths of hallway. Nothing particular marked it as distinctive, but Fenguth stomped upon the boardwalk once and announced that this was the spot.

"What spot?" asked Valerie, forgetting for a moment and looking directly at the bwbach, which shrank away from her until she remembered and averted her eyes.

"Where Fenguth last saw laundry."

"Very good," Valerie nodded crisply.

"Payback, do your stuff, girl!"

Valerie made some hand gestures to the dog, who sniffed the area carefully, barked twice, and set off at a trot. The others, even Fenguth, exchanged glances, shrugged and followed.

"Rather creepy to think that my laundry could be going through all this. Makes me want to wash my intimates in the bathroom sink," muttered Valerie. She turned to Rachel. "Does this happen often?"

"What? You mean losing laundry?" Rachel asked as she floated forward. "Not that I've heard of. Neither my parents, who attended Roanoke in their day, nor my older siblings ever mentioned losing clothing." She glanced in the general direction of the little fey. "Has it happened before—that someone's lost laundry?"

Fenguth shook his head. "Bwbach very careful with laundry. Guard with our life! None ever lost before." He paused. "Except Moilpubh. One time, Moilpubh misplace whole load of boys' underwear."

"What happened?" asked Rachel. "Did they forgive him?"

Fenguth shook his head. "Got the boot. Marched off campus." He shrugged. "It okay. No one like Moilpubh."

After a time, they saw a black lump on the walkway ahead of them. Fenguth let out a gulp and a cry of joy. He ran ahead and, sure enough, lying on the ground was a black robe. Fenguth snatched it to his chest and cradled it in his arms, cooing to it and rocking it while rubbing his cheek against the rough cloth.

"Maybe Fenguth not become bogle!" he cooed in a hopeful tone.

"Is that all of them?" Rachel asked.

Fenguth's shoulders slumped. "No. Fenguth took from boys' floor seven robes. This only one."

"It's a good start," Valerie said cheerfully.

"Payback, find the next one."

* * *

Payback led them down a tunnel and then a second tunnel. They reached a musty hallway that Rachel suspected was seldom traveled.

"Oooff," Valerie held up her arm in front of her face. "Dusty."

"Your wish is my command!" Sigfried produced a silky red handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Ugh! I don't know where this has been!" She put her hand out, blocking him. "I don't want some cloth you blew your nose on!"

"Blew my nose!" Sigfried cried, outraged. "I would never blow my nose on a handkerchief! I keep a snotrag for that!" From his back pocket, he pulled out a matted, yellowy something that might once have been a piece of cloth. Both girls backed away simultaneously. "Handkerchiefs are for ladies. That's why we knights-in-training carry them."

Valerie gingerly accepted the red handkerchief and held it over her mouth. Underneath it, she said, her voice a bit muted, "Can't one of you en-

chanters just blow and, poof, the dust is gone?"

Whipping out his trumpet, Siggy blew upon it. Silvery sparkles gathered at the mouth of the trumpet and whooshed down the corridor in a dramatic, gale-strength blast. This produced a wonderful garden-fresh scent, but it also stirred up a huge amount of dust that must have been lying on the ground, making the air even dustier. It also blew away all the domestic will-o-wisps that had been providing light.

"Thanks, boyfriend," Valerie said wryly, as they stood in the dark. She and Rachel both began coughing.

"Lux," Rachel commanded, but nothing happened. The Word of Light was not one of the cantrips she had practiced assiduously.

"Lux!" Valerie tried, but she, too, was not especially good at cantrips.

"Lucks!" commanded Sigfried.

Lucky the Dragon breathed a long plume of red-orange flame, lighting up the corridor. Valerie both chuckled and sighed.

* * *

A few minutes later, they were back in a well-used section of corridor, surrounded by the pleasant golden glow of will-o-wisps.

"Okay, fey-guy," Valerie pulled out her reporter's notebook as they walked, "as a reporter for the Roanoke Glass, I have some questions."

"Questions?" Fenguth cocked his head, his turban wobbled dangerously.

"When did you last see all the laundry?"

"Fenguth gather it. Bring into tunnel. Put down to shut door. Hear chuckle. Turn head. Laundry gone!" The little fey let out a heartbreakingly sad moan.

"A chuckle?" Valerie noted this down. "I see. Did you recognize the chuckle? Any idea what made it?"

The little man hung his head. "Bad fey."

"But you don't know which bad fey?"

Fenguth shook his head. Meanwhile, Siggy and Lucky began making faces at each other in the reflective surface of the shiny obsidian.

Valerie shook her head at her boyfriend, amused, and then turned to Rachel. "Griffin, you're the walking encyclopedia. What kind of fey

might it have been?"

Rachel tipped back her head, thinking. "Well, we have a lot of mischievous fey on Roanoke Island. Most of them live outside the wards around the campus and cannot approach the school; however, any of them might have snuck in back in February, that time that the wards were breached. So...a sprigman?" She turned to the bwback. "Was there a wind?"

He shook his head.

Rachel said, "Spriggans pop around, sometimes in the ground, sometimes flying."

Valerie asked, "Wouldn't that not leave a trail for Payback to follow?"

"Oh!" Rachel's eyebrows shot up. "No. I guess not. So, not a sprigman."

"What other mischievous fey are known to live on Roanoke Island?" Valerie asked.

"Let's see. Hmm," Rachel went through her memory. "A trow? Trow live in the meadows at the northwest end of the island. They are famous for tying shoelaces together. Anyone have their laces tied together?"

They looked down. Rachel and Valerie were both wearing boots. Siggy's feet were bare.

"Hmm. That tells us nothing. Could be a trow, but...no proof." Rachel said. "A phooka? Always a possibility. A Redcap? They are often more destructive, and a redcap probably would have stopped to taunt. Foidin seachrain? They trick travelers by looking like false sod...so probably not stealing clothing. I would say trow or phooka. Most likely a phooka."

"Does this help us find the clothing?" asked Valerie.

Rachel sighed. "No."

Valerie turned back to the bwback. "How often do the domestic fey here at the school lose their jobs? Often? Almost never?"

"Almost never! We work hard!" the little man cried.

"And if you don't find these..." Valerie continued, "...boys robes from Dare, apparently? You get escorted off campus?"

Fenguth nodded forlornly.

"Don't worry," Rachel said encouragingly, "We'll find them."

“Or Siggy can buy you new ones.” Valerie gave her boyfriend a friendly punch. “He’s rich.” moaned Lucky. “That’s my hoard of gold you’re eyeing. I know the name of every coin! Are you asking me to part with Huntington McCoffey the Third for this red-diapered...whatever it is...I just met?”

Valerie rolled her eyes.

* * *

Another fork brought them into a third tunnel. This third one was not round with sections of obsidian and conjured porcelain, like the first two, but was a regular, rectangular access tunnel such as one might find in mundane buildings. It was also rather musty.

This time, Rachel whistled the three notes Sigfried had played upon his flute. She could not produce a gale wind like he could, but that was not what was needed. Silver sparks flew from her mouth, and a pleasant vanilla-scented breeze cleared the air of dust.

“Thank you, Rachel,” Valerie said politely. She glanced at her boyfriend. “See, some people can freshen the air without plunging us into darkness.”

“We can’t help if some people’s winds are inferior,” Sigfried replied magnanimously. “Right, Lucky?”

“Right, Boss. Dragon-light is the best light!” Both girls sighed.

* * *

The corridor they were following merged with another, which soon slanted upward to a trapdoor that opened into the menagerie.

All around them were stalls for animals. Some were wooden. Others were made of metal or of the white porcelain of basic conjuring material. Yet others were of unfamiliar substances, perhaps meant to better constrain a specific type of magical beast.

Through the bars in the stall doors, the students could glimpse a chimera, a greyhound, a sheep, a warthog, a giraffe, and a lioness. Sigfried and Lucky immediately ran to examine the chimera. Valerie gazed in puzzlement at the warthog with its big, curving tusks.

“Who wants a warthog for a familiar?” she gawked. “Wouldn’t that be annoying to bring to class?”

Rachel looked around, but there was no sign of Flora Towers Skaife, Roanoke’s Mistress of the Beast, nor of any of the three, blonde young women who worked as her student helpers. Turning around, she watched Payback. The elkhound sniffed around the doors of the stalls and paused outside one, sniffing more carefully.

Climbing onto her broom again, Rachel floated up higher, so that she could peer down into the stalls. Inside the stall Payback had singled out, she saw a strange sight. A pile of dark robes seemed to be moving on their own. No, she was looking at a robe—or possibly two or three robes—being worn by a short, hairy man maybe two-and-a-half-feet tall. The creature had shaggy rust-colored hair, oblong ears, a long, protruding nose, and wide, bare feet. Tufts of bristly hair stuck out from its face, forming a beard of sorts or perhaps something that might better be called whiskers.

It was a fenoderee, a fey known for helping with domestic chores, particularly around the barn—a fenoderee wearing some of Fenguth’s missing laundry. Was that a pair of boys boxer shorts upon its head like a hat?

Rachel could not help herself, she blurted out, “But I thought fenoderee disdained clothing.”

The legends all claimed that one would reject clothing in a huff.

The fenoderee spoke in a surprisingly deep voice. “Much colder in New York than back on the Isle of Man.”

Rachel looked at the fey for a time. This was a bigger one, so she dared looking it in the face. It stared back.

“I don’t think those belong to you,” she said slowly.

“Mine now,” muttered the fenoderee.

“Fenguth’s laundry! Fenguth’s laundry!” cried Fenguth, jumping in the air in an attempt to see over the stall. The little thing did not come close. “Give back, you bully! Why steal it?”

“I didn’t steal it,” grunted the fenoderee.

“Where did you find them?” Rachel asked kindly.

"Lying in front of my hidey hole."

"Those robes belong to students," Rachel said gravely. "If we don't get them back, Fenguth will lose his place and turn into a bogle."

The hairy fey shrugged. "Don't matter to me. Bwback, bogle." It paused. "Though bogles are trouble. One tore through here several years back, throwing feed everywhere. Took hours to clean up."

"So, you don't want more bogles, right? More feed thrown around?"

The fenoderee pouted.

Valerie called from where she stood looking up at Rachel, "Ask it if we could buy them back. Give him something else instead."

The creature paced around the stall, the long robes dragging behind it through the hay. Then it let out a high-pitched screech.

Lucky hung over the stall wall, gazing down at it. The fenoderee gawked at the dragon, alarmed.

"Get that one out of here! No fire in the menagerie! No fire!"

"I'll take it away," Rachel countered, "if you give me back the robes."

"I'll give you back the robes," it replied, "if you deliver this week's feed to the dorms."

"Feed. You mean for familiars? The ones that don't live in the menagerie or eat in the dining hall?" asked Rachel.

It nodded its head, the boxers bobbing up and down.

"All seven dorms?"

"All seven, even Raleigh," replied the fenoderee. There was a gleam in its eye that Rachel did not like.

Siggy, who was still over by the chimera, could not see the gleam. He cried, "Sure! Deliver feed. How hard could it be? We deliver the feed. You give us the clothing back. Capeesh?"

"Capeesh," growled the fenoderee.

"We go!" Fenguth cried joyfully.

* * *

The pallet of various kinds of meats and feeds was enormous. Rachel tried lifting it with the tiathlu cantrip but could hardly get it off the ground. Even using charges from her wand, a slim length

of silver that had once belonged to her grandmother, she found herself groaning with the effort of keeping it afloat.

"Hang on, Griffin," Sigfried gave her a brotherly bump with his shoulder and picked up the rope hanging from the front of the pallet. "Heave ho!"

With a grunt, he started pulling.

The pallet that was so heavy that Rachel could not lift with magic, that pallet, Sigfried pulled with the strength of his muscles alone.

Rachel watched gaping.

Valerie looked on with that happy look that girls get in their eyes when they are proud of their boyfriends. Lucky flew along overhead, gazing down at his boy with fondness. Fenguth jumped onto the top of the pallet and let Siggy pull him along, like a child on a hay ride.

* * *

They made their way down a tunnel that ran along the west side of the campus. The others seemed to be in merry spirits, but Rachel found her feet dragging.

The truth was she was heartbroken.

She had spent hundreds of hours, literally as she had kept careful count, working on three spells: two enchantments, the wind spell and the paralysis hex, and a cantrip—the lifting cantrip. Yet, after a year of hard work, she still could not lift something that Sigfried could carry with muscle power alone. True, Sigfried was amazingly fit, but magic was supposed to be able to do more than muscles could do. She should be able to lift more with a cantrip than a boy—even an amazingly-strong one—could pull by brute strength.

But a year of work, and she couldn't even do that.

If she couldn't play the flute and she couldn't master cantrips, like lux and tiathlu, what kind of sorceress was she going to be?

As she plodded down the maintenance tunnel behind the others, an idea cheered her up. The enchanters who lived in Dare Hall used music to perform their magic, control the weather, cast hexes, heal, summon, and the other things enchantments

could do. If playing the flute was too hard for her, maybe she was not cut out to be an enchantress. What if, as they made this tour of the seven dorms—one each for the seven Sorcerous Arts—she considered, however, briefly, each kind of magic and what it was that she truly wanted to excel at. If she picked a different specialty, something other than enchantment, she could afford to fail her test in Music.

What kind of sorceress was she, truly?

* * *

The first dormitory they came to was Marlowe Hall, the home of students who specialized in conjuring. By the time they reached it, Sigfried was barely sweating. Valerie was carrying a few objects that had fallen from the pallet. Rachel was seated on her broom, hovering beside them. Fenguth, still atop the pallet, was snoring quietly. She had not realized that fey creatures could snore.

Rachel had never been in Marlowe before. The trapdoor from the maintenance tunnels opened into a hallway filled with statues. Brightly-colored murals covered the walls. Through open doors off this hallway, they caught glimpses of art studios where students painted at easels or stood before conjuring shelves pulling objects from the air. In the hallway, two girls played with a tiny panda who might have been someone's familiar, but which Rachel suspected was a snowdoll—a conjured thing that would last twenty-four hours and then vanish.

To the left was the room where the familiars' food was stored. They transferred the feed and meat marked for Marlowe to the appropriate bins and dishes. As they worked, Rachel thought about Art class. She loved drawing. It was a skill that she had picked up just this year. She had started out rather awkwardly, but she often drew in classes while her tutors reviewed their subjects as, with her perfect memory, she never needed to hear anything twice to remember it. Her pictures were beginning to actually resemble real objects.

Would she want to be a conjurer?

Problem was, conjuration required a familiar, and Rachel's cat had turned out to be...just a cat. She could fake part of conjuration with her perfect memory, but if she wanted to be a serious conjurer,

she would need to get a real familiar. The thought of replacing her beloved Mistletoe was too painful.

With a sigh, Rachel put aside the idea of specializing in conjuration.

As they left Marlowe, Fenguth remarked, "Marlowe all right. Some bwbach not mind it. Fenguth prefer Dare. Dare best hall."

Rachel and Siggy grinned at each other.

"You can say that again!" Siggy and Lucky high-fived each other.

"You Dare show-offs," Valerie rolled her eyes. "Dee is the best dorm, and you know it. Well, maybe you don't, Siggy. I can't see you reading a book, but Rachel does."

Rachel smiled, "It was the dorm I wanted to live in before I came to Roanoke, but my siblings put me in Dare with them."

"What's so great about Dee?" asked Siggy.

"Library," said Fenguth. "Books and books and books." He paused. "Book boggles live there. No need for bwbachs."

"Do book boggles clean our rooms, too?" asked Valerie, "or just organize the books."

Fenguth shrugged. "Some bwbachs go there. But not Fenguth or Ulpath or Moilpubh or Gilpus. We prefer Dare."

* * *

Next, they headed for Spenser, the home of the Canticlars—those who spoke the Original Tongue, the individual words of which were known as cantrips. Inside the dorm, every object was labeled. Every widow, doorjamb, shelf, and painting had a little label on it bearing the word for the thing in the Original Tongue.

Rachel paused and peered at the labels. "Why are these here?"

Valerie said, "It's for learning languages. They do that at the National Language School in the mundane world as well—the school where diplomats learn the languages they need for their work."

"But, what's the point?" Rachel asked, puzzled.

"The idea is that if you look at it enough times," Valerie explained, "you'll eventually remember it."

Oh. Of course. Rachel bit her lips together before she said something that would embarrass somebody, probably herself. Sometimes, she forgot that other people had to see something more than once to remember it.

* * *

As they continued north to Dare Hall, Rachel considered becoming a canticler. Learning the Original Language would be easy. She already knew some words and she would only need to encounter the rest of them once to learn them.

But knowing the words was the least of what a canticler had to do. The real task was performing the cantrips—convincing the world around you to listen and obey. She had just seen how well she did with tiathlu and lux. Spenser Hall was not for her.

* * *

The room for familiar feed in Dare Hall was in the cellar off the music room—the room where Siggy and Lucky had dug their hole. While Rachel and Valerie unpacked the food, Sigfried surreptitiously slipped off and pushed the rug back over the hole in the floor. The Ginger Snaps were on the stage at the far end of the music room, rehearsing. While the students finished unpacking, Fenguth sat on the floor gazing wide-eyed at the band, which consisted of a group of red-haired musicians and some of their friends and relatives. Rachel did not blame him. The Ginger Snaps were good. Their music was lively and urged one to dance. That was one of the joys of living in Dare Hall, hearing all the musicians play.

Next, they returned to the tunnels and set off through a corridor that crossed under the commons to the east side of campus. They did not stop at Roanoke Hall, where classes were held, because no familiars lived there, and any familiar who chose to eat with the students in the dining hall did not need a delivery of special food.

As they walked, they discussed the culprit responsible for distributing the seven robes to the far reaches of the campus and mused about what it might be. Rachel gave the others several pointers for recognizing phooka, including that they were

usually black or white, or black and white, and that they often had red eyes. The conversation drifted from the wild fey, to speculation about how many might have slipped on campus the night the wards were breached, to a discussion of the events of that night, including the epic battle between Sigfried and the ogre. Fenguth listened with great excitement as the orphan boy described how he had fought the nigh-invulnerable creature and, after Lucky broke the charm that protected the brute's life, leapt up on its back and slit its throat with his Bowie knife.

"Sorcerer-Boy very brave!" the fey murmured, wide-eyed.

"You can say that again!" Valerie declared, adding, "That was one of the most terrifying moments of my life! Facing off against that ogre after he knocked you out, Siggy—okay, I thought you were dead—as we waited for Lucky to come and break the charm. Boy, was that terrifying!"

Sigfried grunted as he pulled the pallet, which was growing lighter each time they stopped. Drawing a deep breath, he asked cheerfully, "I never did hear what happened while I out cold. How did you girls live?"

Valerie shivered. "Luck, I guess, and Rachel." "Rachel?" asked Siggy.

"She walked right up to the ogre and started talking to it." Valerie shook her head in admiration. "Kept it busy for a minute or two. Probably saved all our lives."

"What did you say to it?" Siggy turned to look at Rachel. Valerie and Fenguth and Lucky all turned to look at her, too.

Uncomfortable under everyone's scrutiny, Rachel ducked her head, "I-I called it by its name. Reminded it of its humanity." She added with a wry smile, "Didn't help in the long run. It was still evil. But I did slow it down for a bit."

"How did you know its name?" Valerie asked.

Rachel shrugged. "Now and then, odd bits of knowledge I heard over the years snap together in my head. It's one of the advantages of perfect recall, I suppose."

* * *

The next dorm was DeVere Hall. The trapdoor

was locked. Above the lock was a plaque showing pictures of a redcap, a merrow, and a chimera. Beside the door, a rock with a hole in it hung from a string.

“What’s this?” Valerie asked.

“It’s locked!” Sigfried declared. “Shall we open it with magic? Or have Lucky burn it open.”

“Burninate it!” Lucky cried. “Turn it to sludge!”

“Or we could hit it with a sledge hammer,” said Siggy.

“Or,” Lucky offering hopefully, “eat the food and just say we left it.”

“I like that one!” Sigfried nodded. “Let’s do that.”

“Ew. No. Some of these foods are...not very appetizing.” Valerie shuddered.

“I don’t know about that!” Siggy picked up a few containers. “Grains with meat juices!”

“Juices are good!” said the dragon.

“Or meal worms.”

“They make a meal, right?”

“Or dried meat!” crowed Siggy.

“We could eat dried meat all day,” said Lucky.

“And still have room for dinner.”

Valerie cleared her throat. “Rachel? You’re our fey expert.”

Rachel lifted the stone with a hole. “DeVere is for warders. You wouldn’t ward off a chimera with a rock with a hole in it. Or a sea creature like a merrow. Rocks with holes are for woodland fey, so...”

She touched the rock to the panel showing the redcap. The trapdoor clicked open.

“DeVere scary place,” murmured Fenguth as he crept over the threshold. “Bwbachs not like to work here.”

“Why is that?” asked Rachel.

“Easy to get trapped. Stuck between two ward-ed doors. Can’t get out. Moilpubh once stuck in between two doors for a week.”

“But it’s okay, right, because no one likes Moilpubh?” asked Valerie.

Fenguth shivered and quickly ran back outside to the tunnels below.

* * *

As they continued south, heading for Drake Hall, Rachel wondered about DeVere. Should she ditch enchantment and become a warder? It would be very easy for her, memorizing what stopped what. It would be hardly be any effort at all. In fact, just by reading books from her family library, she knew more possible warding combinations than some professionals in the field. There was an art to it, of course, but her experience so far suggested that she might be able to master it. And yet...

Warding took patience and, in many cases, having your feet on the ground, literally. There was very little warding that could be done in the air. It was not an ideal Art for someone who practically lived on her bristleless. Rachel, who was currently walking, leaned over and patted Vroomie, where the steeplechaser lay atop the pallet Sigfried was dragging. Somehow, she did not feel the calm, patient, grounded way was for her.

* * *

Drake Hall came next. The tunnels passed under the moat and opened into a room off of the summoning chambers in the cellar. Rachel had been here once before, during a battle against a teacher who had turned into a dragon. The students in Drake studied thaumaturgy, which was an intriguing Art. It used math and precision to combine other arts together to make spells that accomplished things that no other magic could accomplish.

Would she like to be a thaumaturge? The process was interesting, and, while many of the kids in Drake were snobbish, there were a few here, particularly two young men, who were dear to her. Might it be a better place for her than Dare?

Then their path took them outside, and both Valerie and Rachel balked. Ahead of them stood cages holding goats, rabbits, doves and more. Rachel’s heart began beating oddly in her chest.

“Oh, look, Lucky!” Siggy declared. “It’s the convenient-to-go lunch boxes.”

“Oh, boss, can I? Can I?” Lucky swooped forward.

“No!” Valerie’s voice cracked. “Lucky, those

are not for you.”

“But Goldilocks,” Lucky hung his dragony head. “They’re just going to be eaten.”

“But not by you,” Sigfried’s girlfriend replied firmly.

Rachel stared at the cages. Sacrificial beasts, meant to be fed to the creatures the thaumaturges summoned. Rachel was not sure she could stomach such a thing. True, she fed meat to her cat. By accompanying this outing, she was helping feed meat to animals now. Yet, somehow, that felt different from feeding live goats to chthonic monstrosities.

No, she decided, she could not stomach Drake.

Fenguth also shrank away from the cages, hurrying back inside the moment the creatures were fed.

“Bwbachs in Drake very brave,” he murmured to Rachel. “Fenguth not want to go there. Fenguth like Dare.”

“Why do you like Dare?” Rachel asked him.

Fenguth’s face lit up. “Music. You hear it? Like liquid honey kissing the ears.”

“Yes, I rather guess it is,” Rachel admitted slowly, “Unless you are listening to me playing. That’s a bit more like sandpaper on the ears. But, yes...I understand.”

“Sometimes, when work is done, we creep in and listen. To boy with cello. Girl with tuba. Fenguth and Moilpubh and Ulpath and Gilpus. Our ears grow happy. Sometime, even when working, Moilpubh and Fenguth slip into practice room and hear violin or woodwinds that make hearts brave and thews strong. One time, we heard young man singing. He sang song about fairies and white bells. Ears grew so happy.” He sighed, contently, as if remembering a scrumptious feast, his gaze starry-eyed.

“I thought nobody liked Moilpubh,” said Rachel.

“Maybe Fenguth like Moilpubh a little,” Fenguth admitted grudgingly. He looked sad.

In a sudden moment of discernment Rachel squatted down beside the little fey, “Fenguth, is that part of what you are afraid of? That you will become a bogle, and, like when Moilpubh was stuck in DeVere, no one will notice or care, because they don’t like you either?”

Fenguth trembled like a leaf in the wind.

She gave him the kindest smile she could.

“Well, for what it is worth, I like you.”

* * *

As they walked, Fenguth’s words echoed in Rachel’s memory. Our ears grow happy. She, too, loved music. Some of her happiest memories were of singing for her father when she was a little girl. She had begun singing for them at four and started formal lessons at six. She recalled her father and her beloved grandfather listening with pleasure as she sang, her mother smiling encouragingly in the background. Even her august, Victorian grandmother had looked down over her pince-nez and declared her tiny granddaughter’s singing to be “Passable, I suppose,” which was high praise from Lady Amelia.

Since coming to school, Rachel had learned to cast some simple enchantments, particularly a few hexes, by whistling. But this only worked for short spells—two or three notes. More than that and the magical energy buzzing through her body disrupted her ability to whistle. For longer enchantments, an instrument was required.

* * *

The next stop was Raleigh Hall, the home of the alchemists who made magical talismans. Siggy, who was looking a little tired now, or maybe he was just irked about Valerie having stopped Lucky from eating the sacrificial animals, it was hard to say, pulled the pallet to a stop on the ramp in front of the next trapdoor.

“Halt! Who goes there?” called a cultured, elegant voice.

Rachel looked around. It was not a voice she had heard before, so it wasn’t one of the proctors, or the custodian, or the groundskeeper.

“I say! Don’t you ignore me, you unruly students!”

“Whose talking?” whispered Valerie, looking left or right.

Sigfried made a kind of a squawking noise and pointed. “The door! The door is talking!”

Rachel peered closer. Sure enough, there was a face carved into the trapdoor through which they needed to pass in order to enter Raleigh Hall. The face was entirely made of wood, but the eyes seemed to track them, and the mouth moved as it spoke.

"I am speaking, you ungrateful wretches! Do you expect me to open for you after the respect you have shown me? I think not. Stand out here and cool your heels all night for all I care!" declared the face in the door.

"What in...things that things are in...is that?" asked Valerie, babbling in her surprise.

"Animated door." Rachel kept her voice low, not wanting to offend it more. "This is Raleigh. I have heard that every object in this dorm is either alive or a talisman with magical powers."

"Why is that?" Sigfried asked, straightening up and stretching, first to one side and then to the other.

"Because they practice on their dorm. Making magic items, I mean," replied Rachel. "Or so I've been told."

"Creepy!" Valerie declared in a singsong voice.

Rachel took a deep breath and walked forward. Curtsying to the trapdoor, she said kindly, "Honored door, we do not mean any discourtesy. We have never visited your august dorm and do not know the etiquette expected."

"Oh, is that so? Well, I might be convinced to make an exception for a bunch of greenhorns. What's your business?"

"Bringing food to the familiars who live here."

"Bringing food, you say?" The door gave a snort of amusement. Rachel was unpleasantly reminded of the gleam in the fenoderee's eye. "Very well. You may pass."

The door swung open, and the small group entered Raleigh Hall.

The walls had eyes. The doors had eyes. The doorknobs turned of their own accord if anyone approached them. Feather dusters moved independently, dusting the wainscoting and paintings. Some of the banisters were singing.

Inside the room where the feed went, the bins all had eyes. They opened their big mouths with excitement as Sigfried dragged in the pallet. How-

ever, the moment the group of them began unpacking the food, they snapped their mouths shut and refused to budge.

Fenguth said, "Raleigh bwbachs life difficult. Doors slam on them. Dressers try to eat. These bins famous throughout school. Always give a hard time."

"I bet that is why the fenoderee said 'Raleigh, too'. He probably doesn't like to face off against the obnoxious bins," Rachel stared up at them. The openings were above her head.

"Oh, really," Siggy chuckled, rolling up his sleeves. "Let us at 'em."

Siggy strode forward and grabbed the handle of the bin. It popped open easily, gaped, and, with a snap, caught him, drawing him in head first, and snapped shut again. His legs kicked from the top of the partially-closed feed bin.

The bin made a low, dark chuckling noise. It moved the lip of its opening out and in, as if trying to chew on the young man.

Sigfried was entirely undismayed. In a loud voice, he declared, "What shall it be, Lucky? Shall I pull them out of the wall? Explode them? Shred them to bits? Or would you rather burn them?"

"I could melt them?" suggested Lucky. He snaked down from above and hung over the bin. "Or just bite them. Dragon bites can be deadly."

"I'm learning to box, you know," replied Siggy's muffled voice. "I could use 'em for boxing practice."

There came a few sharp knocks, and the bin made an oof sound.

"And then I could burn 'em," Lucky replied happily. "And then eat them."

Siggy's legs kicked. There came another two or three sharp blows from inside the bin, which let out a groan of pain. Lucky tipped his head back, opened his mouth, and sucked in air, preparing to breath fire.

"No need for all that! No need for all that!" cried the bin, flapping its mouth open and spitting out Sigfried.

"See, we're open! We're open!" called another.

After that, they had no trouble with the bins.

* * *

As they left, Rachel considered life as an alchemist. She rather liked alchemy, actually. She was not a natural like Sigfried, who seemed to have a real knack for it, but she had a sense of how to combine influences to make effective talismans.

Problem was, in the long run, alchemy came down to a cantrip, the one used to transfer the alchemical influences to the item being created. And she was not at all good at that cantrip. It seemed a silly thing to be an alchemist who had to constantly rely on other people to do the final step for her.

Besides, occasionally alchemy was fun, but she was not a person who wanted to carry an arsenal of talismans, or even wear a charm bracelet, as many alchemists did.

Alchemy just was not for her.

* * *

The final stop was Dee Hall, Valerie's dorm. It was also the secret home of Rachel's heart, the place she had wanted to live when she first came to Roanoke, the home of scholars and books. Living in Dee was like living in a library.

The trapdoor for Dee had shelves to either side of it. The halls were lined with books, as were the window alcoves, the risers between each step, and the doors. Even the room where the familiars ate was lined with books. Some of them, Rachel noted, were on how to care for various animals, and what they ate.

Rachel paused a moment and breathed in the wonderful book scent.

Ahhhh. It smelled so good. Was this the place for her? Should she make Dee Hall her home? Then she could be a scholar and spend her days studying and researching. She loved to learn; it was the thing she loved the most, knowing things, finding them out. Surely, this was the place for her.

Only if she moved to Dee, everything would change.

Suddenly, the thought terrified her, so much so that a tightness in her chest made it hard to breathe.

"Girl looks sad?" The little fey tugged on her robe, looking up. "Scared?"

He looked so solicitous that Rachel knelt down and spoke to him.

"I am thinking of making a change. Of moving, from Dare to Dee. Only," she swallowed, "moving means changing who I spend my time with. My roommates. My core group—that's the people I take classes with. I love Dee. I love learning. But..."

She looked around with longing, but the lump in her throat was growing larger. Would she be happy with Valerie and her roommates as her new friends? Or would she feel...

"Girl afraid that if she leave Dare, she change?" asked the bwback with surprising discernment of his own "New place. New life. Maybe become new self. Maybe not girl anymore?"

Was that what she was afraid of, becoming a sort of human bogle? If she gave up on being an enchantress, changed dorms, changed classes, ultimately, probably, changed friends, at least the ones she spent the most time with, would she like who she would become?

"Fenguth not want to be bogle," the little fey said, his eyes wide with fear. "Fenguth not want to go away."

Rachel looked him in the eyes. She figured they knew each other well enough know that he would not shy away. She smiled. "Don't worry, Fenguth. We won't let that happen."

As she straightened, she thought that all it took to save Fenguth was to regain a few robes. Would it be that easy for her?

* * *

They returned the pallet to the fenoderee in the menagerie, who reluctantly removed his new wardrobe and gave it back to Fenguth. The little fey carefully counted all the laundry they had retrieved and announced that of the seven missing robes, they had gathered five.

"Look at that, little guy," Sigfried crowed. "Only two more robes, and you're home free!"

"Maybe Fenguth not be bogle after all," the little fey said happily, hugging his laundry.

Valerie called Payback and had her sniff the place where the fenoderee had found the robes.

And then, they were off again, following the silver and black elkhound.

They brought the five robes they had recovered to the laundry and gave them to the bean-tighe, then they continued following Payback. This time, as they walked, following tunnels that led them under Roanoke Hall, the passageway grew warmer and the air bore traces of cinnamon!

“Salamanders!” Rachel cried, smiling as they rounded a corner. “I bet there’s a whole enclosure of the ones they put in the hearths in the dorm during the winter. Do you think they...”

Her jaw gaped.

Ahead was a gigantic chamber filled with enormous pipes through which, from the sound of it, water rushed. Beneath the pipes, warming them, was the most enormous salamander she had ever seen or even heard of. Most salamanders she had encountered were hearth-sized, not much bigger than iguanas. The boiler back at her home had one about the size of a Komodo monitor dragon.

This salamander was ten-feet-high and at least fifty-feet-long. She had no idea they could grow so large. Even a hundred feet down the hallway, she could feel the heat radiating from it.

“Look at the rocks behind it!” Valerie pointed at the black and ember-colored lizard. “Some have been slagged to obsidian. This thing made all these tunnels!”

Rachel gawked at the titanic heating-fey. Valerie was right. The salamander must have burrowed through the earth, forming the tunnels they had been exploring all afternoon. The tunnels were obsidian where it burrowed through rock, and where it had passed through earth, the white, con-jured wall slabs had been put up to reinforce the earth.

“What is this place?” Siggy asked. Lucky flew up into the heights of the chamber, flying around the giant pipes.

“The school’s boiler room,” Rachel guessed. “All that hot water must come from here...and the heat in the winter.”

Their group approached the boiler room. Up close, they could see that the salamander was in an enclosure walled off with brass and gold, just like a hearth salamander. The great pipes were supported by lesser pipes, giant wheels, and massive lev-

ers leading to vents designed to carry heat away from the boiling room toward the main hall. These levers and wheels were tended by a squat, furry fey maybe three feet tall with a long beard, longer mustache, and a hat that looked like a brass teapot. Or maybe it was wearing an actual teapot on its head. It frowned when it saw the students, but when it saw Fenguth, it shrugged and returned to its tasks.

“Domovoi,” Rachel murmured to the others.

“Whatever that is,” Valerie whispered back.

“Et’s-lay et-gay out-ay of ere-hay!”

Valerie tried to continue down the hall, leaving the boiler room behind, but Payback followed the scent path right into the boiler room. The domovoi frowned forbiddingly at the elkhound, who paid it no heed. The students followed, sweat beginning to form on their brows from the oppressive heat.

The dog paused and barked.

“Hey, Furry Beard Guy,” Sigfried called to the domovoi, “have you seen any—”

Then he fell silent because two black robes floated into sight. They hung in the air, to the puzzlement of both the students and the domovoi.

“Hey, boss!” called Lucky. “Up here!”

“Look!” Sigfried cried, pointing up into the pipes. “There it is! The thing that took the robes!”

Overhead, a little fey squatted on a pipe. It was skinny and gray with a tuft of wild hair tied with a ribbon sticking up between very large ears. It grinned maniacally, pointing and cackling.

Oh, of course.

“What is that?” Valerie asked. She raised her camera and snapped a photo. “A phooka? A trow?”

Rachel shook her head. “Bogle.”

“You mean like this guy will become if we don’t get those robes back,” Siggy stuck his thumb at Fenguth. “That makes sense. You said these bog-whatevers are troublesome.”

The bogle gestured. With a whoosh, the two flying robes tumbled into the salamander’s enclosure. Instantly, both robes began to smolder.

“No!” Fenguth let out a bloodcurdling screech.

He ran forward, arms outstretched. When he reached the enclosure, he tried to climb the brass fence. It must have been very hot, because he

screamed and pulled back his hands.

The salamander turned its huge head with its snub, salamandery nose and began moving toward the fallen robes. Rachel gasped. If the salamander touched them, they would burst into flames.

She did not hesitate. She did not even think. She just whistled. Blue sparks burst from her lips and struck the titanic salamander. Sparkles played across the gigantic black and red creature.

It froze.

Valerie gawked up at the motionless salamander. "Wow, Rachel," she breathed, "Did you just freeze the entire, dinosaur-sized salamander. It's huge! First that breeze in the corridor and now this. You're amazing enchantress."

Rachel did not answer, but she blushed with pleasure. Maybe she was not so bad at enchantments after all.

The robes were still in danger. Smoke issued from them now.

"Tiathlu!" she cried, performing her favorite cantrip.

The two robes were much lighter than a pallet of familiar feed. With a gesture she whisked the last two robes out of the salamander enclosure and into the arms of the waiting Fenguth, who shrieked with joy, hugging the garments and rubbing his cheek against them.

Up on the pipes, the bogle cackled again and dashed away. No longer able to see it, Rachel remembered back, recalling what she had seen earlier and examined it in her memory: the gray, knobby limbs, the scrap of ribbon tied in its hair.

No, not ribbon, red cloth. Like a bwback's turban.

Suddenly, everything Fenguth had told her, the sadness she had seen in his eyes, came back to her. A dozen little things snapped into place in her mind.

Oh. Her lips parted softly. An idea had struck her, an idea so crazy she was almost afraid to speak it aloud, and yet...

"Wait!" She jumped on her steeplechaser and flew up toward the hot pipes. It was uncomfortably warm here, but the idea buzzing through her thoughts was so powerful that she hardly noticed. "Bogle, wait!"

Seeing no sign of it, Rachel called downward.

"Sigfried, where is it."

Sigfried did not even look her direction. He tapped his chest lightly, where his All-Seeing amulet lay and then pointed upward at a different section of pipes. Rachel flew that direction.

A creepy cackle sounded from the direction Sigfried had indicated. Rachel caught sight of the bogle again. It waved its hand. A force sent Rachel and her broom flying. She spun sideways. Knocking into the hot pipe, she screamed.

Keeping a hold on her bristleless, she darted away, her cheek and arm aching where they touched the metal of the pipe. Turning around, she faced the bogle again. Was she crazy? Should she even try? Was it too dangerous?

But it had worked with the ogre. He had remembered...

She looked the bogle in the eyes and called it by its name: "Moilpubh!"

The bogle stopped. Its maniacal grin took on a strange, strained quality.

"You're Moilpubd, aren't you?" she asked softly, not breaking eye contact. "It's not true that no one liked you. Fenguth misses you."

The bogle took an uncertain step back. Rachel wiped sweat from her face. It was beginning to run into her eyes.

"Isn't that what happened? You were stuck in DeVere for over a week, and no one noticed? After that, you thought no one cared, and it became hard to do your work? So they let you go?" She gazed deeply into the bogle's eyes and blurted out, "I think if you forgive Fenguth and the others, you might be able to turn back."

"Fenguth," she called downward, wiping her face again on her sleeve. "Ask Moilpubh to forgive you?"

"Forgive?" the little fey gazed up, puzzled. Its eyes grew very, very wide. "Moilpubh?" A huge smile creased its face. "Moilpubh!"

And, just like that, everything became clear. It was not just Moilpubh who needed to forgive. If Rachel wanted to move forward as an enchantress, she would have to forgive her grandmother. It was not practicing that Rachel hated. It was the flute.

Lady Amelia had long graceful fingers, but Rachel's were short and slender, like her half-

Korean mother. When she played the instrument, a part of her mind recalled previous attempts to learn to play, back when her disapproving, Victorian grandmother was still alive. Rachel remembered the tall, august woman criticizing Rachel's fingering, criticizing Rachel's playing, criticizing Rachel's mother—of whom the duchess disapproved.

As a child, the duchess's judgmental manner had wounded her, but since coming to school, Rachel had learned a great deal about Amelia Griffin, Lady Devon that she had not known as a child.

Her grandmother had loved Blaise Griffin all her life, but when they were young, he had fallen in love with and married someone else. Amelia had become a Vestal Virgin.

Vestal Virgin vows were for life, but when a demon murdered Blaise Griffin's wife and children, Amelia had broken those vows to leave the order and marry him. Breaking her vows weakened the Eternal Flame she had devoted so many years of her life to guarding. While she had loved her husband, Amelia had never forgiven herself for breaking those vows.

Blaise Griffin, much as Rachel adored him, was not an easy man to live with, and yet Lady Devon had enjoyed a good life with him and bore him two sons. Then, twenty-five years ago, her younger son had been slain in the Battle of Roanoke.

It had broken her grandmother's heart. She had never truly been the same again.

By the time she tried to teach her tiny granddaughter to play the flute, she had become a cold, critical woman, but considering what she had been through, Rachel suddenly found that she could not fault her. It was time to forgive.

All this came in a flash, but it was as if Rachel's world had turned upside down, or maybe, it turned right-side up for the first time.

"Miss Griffin! Get away from there!" From below came the voice of Mr. Fuentes, Rachel's favorite proctor. "That's a boggle! It's dangerous!"

He stood in the tunnel just outside the boiler room. With him were two other proctors. They all looked up in great concern.

No! Not now! Panic threatened to overwhelm

Rachel.

"It's okay! I can do this!" She called back.

"Miss Griffin, those are dangerous fey. You need to come down right now."

"Please, I..." Rachel bit her lip.

The craziness was creeping back into Moil-pubh's eyes. If she lost him now, there was little chance that she could ever get him back again.

A new voice spoke below them, an older masculine voice, one Rachel had seldom heard before.

"Let her be, Fuentes."

Rachel glanced down. Beside the domovoi was an older man with a somewhat bulbous nose, a hairline that had receded half-way across his head, and short gray hair behind that. It was Mr. Sarpento, the school janitor.

"Sarpy, the boiler room is dangerous," Mr. Fuentes objected. "Miss Griffin's going to get hurt. Not to mention the bogle. Those things are..."

"Let her be," the janitor said gruffly. "I want to see what happens. Never seen one of 'em do that before. You keep doing whatever you're doing, child."

Hope leapt in Rachel's heart. Was it possible, restoring a bogle to his former bwbach state? What else could she do to remind him of who he used to be?

Suddenly, she felt embarrassed and ashamed. How in the world could she have thought that she could do this. She knew nothing about this Moil-pubh. There was nothing she could say or do that would remind him...

Only, there was.



Breakthrough by Jose Sanchez

Slowly, Rachel flew her steeplechaser back to the ground. She stepped off it and knelt on the hot stone floor of the boiler room. For a moment, she just knelt there, sweat streaming down her face and neck, her eyes closed.

Then she opened her mouth, and she sang:

*White coral bells
Upon a slender stalk,
Lilies of the valley deck my garden walk.*

*Oh don't you wish
That you could hear them ring?
That will happen only when the fairies sing.*

She finished singing, but no one spoke, not even Siggie or Lucky. Rachel opened one eye. Fenguth stood before her, his little jaw slack with amazement. Next to him stood a second little bwbach, its face, too, was suffused with joy.

"Moilpubh?" Rachel asked softly.

"Yes. Moilpubh is back! Moilpubh—" the second little fey suddenly realized that it was naked and let out an ungainly squeak, covering his loins with his hands. Valerie stepped forward and proffered Sigfried's red silk handkerchief. Quick as a flash, the little fey grabbed it and tied it into a new loincloth.

"Not taking that back." Sigfried muttered to Lucky. "No girl should wipe her mouth with it after that!"

* * *

The Music final had arrived. Rachel stood in the back of the classroom, her silver flute in her hands. At the front of the room, Sigfried was playing his trumpet. Indigo sparkles came from the instrument, and all five of the bean-tighe seated to the left side of the room, rose from their chairs and obediently trotted across the classroom to stand in front of him. Only three other students had been able to summon all five of the little old lady fey. Some of the others had not been able to summon even one.

One of those had been Rachel.

Each student was allowed three tries. Rachel had tried twice. In a moment, she would be al-

lowed to try one more time.

She practiced the fingering without blowing on the mouthpiece. She could see now what the problem was. Her fingers were too small for this flute. This made it a little easier. At least, she knew that stretching farther might help. She would need to find a new instrument, but that was for the future. There was no time to learn something new in the next few minutes.

As Sigfried finished, Rachel took a deep breath and went forward to take her final turn. Lifting the silver flute, she began to play. Her lips were tired from her earlier attempts, yet she forced herself to concentrate doing her best. At first, nothing happened, then a few indigo sparks left her instrument and drifted to the left. After a few more bars, a single bean-tighe slowly began to stand, as if she might possibly be thinking of walking over to where Rachel played.

Oh please, Rachel begged mentally. Just one. All I need is one to pass.

She could not bear it. She closed her eyes.

She played the piece as best she could, wincing at each missed note. When she finished, there was a moment of silence and then gasps. Rachel opened one eye.

Five shapes stood before her.

Rachel whipped her head to the left, but only one chair was empty. The other bean-tighe sat complacently in their places, knitting and ignoring her. Rachel turned back to the front of the room.

A single bean-tighe stood in the center of the room. Next to her were the fenoderee, Fenguth, the domovoi, and Moilpubh. Fenguth winked at her.

* * *

As she prepared to leave class that day, Miss Cyrene, the Music tutor, came up beside her. "That was quite a performance, Miss Griffin."

Rachel hung her head. "Actually, it was not a particularly impressive performance."

A glint of kindness came into the blonde woman's eye. "There is more to enchantment than summoning. Befriending the things you summon is also a very important part. However..." she pinned Rachel in place with her steady gaze. "Next year is

Sophomore Choir. If you want to continue with enchantment after sophomore year, you are going to have show great improvement.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rachel took her leave and headed for the door. She was not sure how she would go forward, but she knew now that she loved music, loved enchantment, and loved living in Dare Hall. Maybe she would figure out how to play this flute, or maybe she never would. Yet, somehow, she would find a way to become an enchantress.

As she left the classroom, she caught sight of two familiar little fey hiding in the shadows, their heads wrapped in bright red turbans, loincloth of a similar color their only other garments.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Both of you.”

From the shadows came the answer: “It okay. Fenguth and Moilpubh like music.”

The Street Survivors by Ian J. Malone and Chris Kennedy

Chapter 1: Dog Days in Duval

“Hoooo, Haaaaalll! Hooooo, Haaaaalll!”

Taylor took in a breath, then let it out in jittery steam as the chanting mob outside the tunnel continued their assault on his cramped, steel hiding space. Never in all his years had he been so nervous, not even in his early days as commander of Swamp Eagle Security. Still, there he was, a bundle of nerves, iron-taut muscles, and perspiration, ready to face the verdict of the inevitable.

“Hoooo, Haaaaalll! Hooooo, Haaaaalll!”

Taylor closed his eyes and focused, the thick North Florida air soaking his skin like a sponge. *Come on, T, get a fargin grip. Everybody’s watchin.*

A throat cleared to his right.

“Excuse me, Chief Van Zant?” a male voice asked. “I’m afraid it’s time.”

Taylor barely heard the comment past the cacophony of screams outside, mixed with the thunder of his own heartrate.

“Hoooo, Haaaaalll! Hooooo, Haaaaalll!”

Another throat clearing. “I’m sorry, Chief, but we really have to be going.”

Taylor knew that to be true. Even still, his feet refused to move. He winced when something hard and round like a grenade was pressed into his palm.

“Right this way,” the man said.

Taylor exhaled, then opened his eyes. A black-haired man in his early twenties, wearing a navy-blue golf shirt with a star-studded J below the collar, was motioning him forward. *Moment of truth.*

The walk toward the tunnel’s end felt like a death march, mostly because Taylor knew no one was coming to save him this time. Not Billy or Smitty. Not Jack or Stan. Not even the ghost of Charlie Daniels, whose classic war cries of old had always been there in the field to remind Taylor that he wasn’t alone. Today, however, that sadly wasn’t the case.



"Hoooo, Haaaaalll! Hooooo, Haaaaalll!"

You've got this, T, Taylor tried a final time to psych himself up. You've gone head-to-head with the Zuul, the Veetanho. Even the Cartography Guild itself, and every single time you've come out the other side. This ain't any different.

Taylor grimaced again when a blast of light flashed ahead. *Shit, I'm gonna die.*

"And now!" a new voice boomed over a loud-speaker. "The moment you've all been waiting for!"

"Hooooo, Haaaaaallll!"

"Here to throw out the first pitch for *your* Jacksonville Generals, the chief executive and commanding officer of Jax's own Swamp Eagle Security... Taylor... Van... Zaaaaaannnnntttt!"

The raucous Frankie Field crowd leapt to its feet as the lone human jogged out toward the pitcher's mound, wearing denim jeans and a team-issued Generals jersey, his long, blond hair tied back into a ponytail under a matching ball cap. "Dooo vaaalll! Dooo vaaalll! Dooo vaaalll!"

Taylor gazed aloft into the clear, blue Duval County sky, then returned his attention to the grandstands, where 40,000-plus of his fellow North Floridians erupted with cheers.

"Duval, Duval, Duval!" the chants continued. "Duval, Duval, Duval!"

Now a tad more relaxed, Taylor doffed his cap to salute the crowd, then squared himself on the bump in preparation for the task at hand.

"Van Zant enters his windup," the announcer said. "Here's the pitch!"

One might've heard a pin drop.

"Strike!" the umpire shouted.

The stands roared with approval as Taylor saluted them once more with his cap. Afterward, he trotted off the field to multiple high-fives as the Jacksonville Generals ballplayers exited the dug-out.

"You totally owe me 20 credits for that." The Eagles' press officer, Lisa Kouvaris, was leaning against a wall, arms folded across her chest, wearing jeans and a collared blouse, when Taylor re-entered the tunnel. "I was sure you'd at least one-hop it to the plate."

"You do know I was all-county as a starter at Lee High, right?" Taylor headed for a nearby ice-

tub filled with sports drinks.

"So I've heard," Lisa said. "Regardless, I'd think splitting the zone with a fastball in front of 40,000 screaming rednecks, all hopped up on Long Branch beer and Chatham chili-cheese dogs in a big league stadium, might offer a slightly different experience."

"Easy." Taylor grinned. "You're datin' one of those rednecks, remember?"

Lisa shot him a sideways look.

"Any word from Billy?" Taylor twisted open a bottle and took a swig.

"Funny you should ask that," Lisa said. "The *Osyrys* just emerged from hyperspace about 30 minutes ago. They're inbound now and oughta be in



orbit shortly.”

“Cool.” Taylor turned for the exit. “That gives me just enough time to return to campus and—”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Lisa grabbed his arm. “I know you’re anxious to ride off into the sunset after your moment of glory back there, but Billy and the crew will need at least a few hours to resupply the ship and get her prepped for redeployment. That gives us plenty of time to head upstairs to the mayor’s suite and shake some hands.”

Taylor dropped his head. “You could totally handle that without me, ya know.”

“I know I could,” Lisa said. “I also know you abhor schmoozing with celebrities and local politicians. That doesn’t change the fact that we need those permits to finish the restoration project on our old campus before we can turn that property to the NFMTA in time for fall semester. You’re the face of Swamp Eagle Security, Taylor. That’s why it’s gotta be you up there, not me.”

Taylor frowned at the wall, though, in truth, he took his press officer’s point. The entire state of North Florida had seen an explosion of growth in recent years, especially around Jacksonville. That meant more kids were entering the area’s school system, and a lot of them would look to go merc after graduation. They needed a place to train, hence why Taylor had agreed to donate the Eagles’ old campus out by the airfield to the local chapter of the North Florida Mercenary Training Academy.

“Okay, fine.” Taylor put up his hands. “We’ll head upstairs to the mayor’s suite and—”

“Osyrys to *Van Zant*.” The voice of the Eagles’ executive officer, Major Billy Dawson, registered via pinplant comms in Taylor’s head. “*You got a copy?*”

Taylor keyed open the channel and spoke aloud. “Your timin’ is impeccable, Billy. What’s your status?”

Lisa rolled her eyes.

“*The ship and crew are standing by in orbit and ready to depart for Karma,*” Billy said. “*Be advised, the bidding for the contract I mentioned starts in less than a hundred eighty hours. That means we need to hit the road quick if we expect to get a crack at landing it.*”

“Copy that,” Taylor said. “Radio ahead to Jack and tell him to prep the shuttle. I’m on my way to

you now. Van Zant out.”

Lisa folded her arms while her boss wrapped his call. “So much for that resupply, huh?”

“What can I say?” Taylor shrugged. “My crew knows how to plan ahead.”

“Uh, huh.” Lisa smirked. “Tell that corn-fed XO of yours, he owes me one for this.”

Taylor leaned in and kissed his girlfriend’s cheek. “I and the future mercs of Duval County have every confidence you’ll close the deal, babe. I’ll call you as soon as we’re back from Karma.”

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