

The Midnight Recollections

Also by Jesse Gordon

Time Chaser

The Knack



THE MIDNIGHT RECOLLECTIONS

Jesse Gordon



jessture books

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

THE MIDNIGHT RECOLLECTIONS

Copyright © 2005 by Jesse Gordon

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form.

A Jessture Book
<http://www.jessture.com/>

ISBN: 1-4116-2743-1

“Yet Another Reality” first appeared in *Aphelion*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

“A Pair of Wings” first appeared in *Anotherealm*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

“The Demon in the Drain” first appeared in *ShadowKeep*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

“Lucifer Works at Starbucks” first appeared in *From Beyond*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

“On a Cold Winter’s Night” first appeared in *From Beyond*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

(Continued on next page)

“Color Conformity” first appeared in *Aphelion*; copyright © 1999 by Jesse Gordon

“Ascension” (previously unpublished) copyright © 2003 by Jesse Gordon

“Don’t Feed Santa Yellow Snow” first appeared in the *ShadowKeep Christmas Carnage 2001 Anthology*; copyright © 2001 by Jesse Gordon

“Starship Earth” first appeared in *ShadowKeep*; copyright © 2002 by Jesse Gordon

“Swarm” first appeared in *Deep Magic*; copyright © 2003 by Jesse Gordon

“The Chair” (previously unpublished) copyright © 2004 by Jesse Gordon

“The Gilded Flame” first appeared in *Sword’s Edge*; copyright © 2004 by Jesse Gordon

Contents

Yet Another Reality / 13

A Pair of Wings / 38

The Demon in the Drain / 44

Lucifer Works at Starbucks / 73

On a Cold Winter's Night / 81

Color Conformity / 116

Ascension / 136

Don't Feed Santa Yellow Snow / 139

Starship Earth / 162

Swarm / 213

The Chair / 238

The Gilded Flame / 241

Author's Note / 258

This book is dedicated to *all* the editors and masters of the Web who have endured my various flights of fancy over the years—but I'd especially like to acknowledge David Bowlin for taking me under his wing back when it all began.

The Midnight Recollections

Yet Another Reality

In the midst of some nameless night's tossing and turning to confused dreams, Eric Gudin awoke from blissful sleep and rubbed his eyes, saw the form of a translucent boy standing expectantly at the foot of the bed.

"It's time for you to choose, Eric," said the boy.

"Choose what?" Eric mumbled, wondering why he was having a daydream at night, for Kyle had never appeared at such a time as this until now.

"Your path, of course. And don't give me any excuses. You turn thirteen in two days, so it's now or never, live or die. What do you choose?"

Eric winced as he got out of bed, yesterday's bruises on his back and thighs implementing their full pain now. He went up to Kyle and swung a hand through the boy's gaseous torso. "I don't know. If staying alive means living like a lunatic who sees invisible angels in his bedroom at night, maybe it's better to be dead. At least seeing angels in heaven wouldn't get me thrown into the nut-house."

Kyle shook his head, looking disappointed. "You still think you're crazy for seeing me? *That's* crazy. And besides, if you're insane, how is it that I can hear and see *you*?"

Eric shrugged. "Luck, I guess. Look, I have enough problems without having to deal with you. I'm tired and I want to sleep, so leave me alone."

"Oh, yes," Kyle said, stepping forward and concentrating his gaze full on Eric. "I have problems, woe is me. My parents are stoners and they beat the hell out of me if I don't smile when they play their perverted games with me. I'm just another speck of dirt on the sidewalk that means nothing in the world and it's my life, so butt out.' Everyone has problems, Eric, but they don't get rid of them by getting wasted and sleeping their lives away. You have a gift, and, like it or not, I'm not going to let you throw it away."

“You call what I have a *gift*? Not being able to tell what’s real and what’s not? Never being sure if I’m in the real world or some other reality? Being called a freak, feeling even more like one when I have to talk to you in public and everyone else sees me talking to air . . . you call that a *gift*? Well, I don’t want it anymore.”

Turning away, Eric wrapped his arms about his chest and bit his lip, knowing any minute now he’d be crying like a wuss. *Damn, I wish I had a joint right about now.*

Kyle placed a hand on Eric’s shoulder, a cold breath of air on living flesh that had come to be a sort of comfort over the recent months. When he spoke, his voice was gentle, fatherly. “Too bad, champ. You have it and the only thing you can do is learn how to use it. Now come with me. I want to show you a few things before you make your decision.”

With his hand Kyle covered Eric’s eyes and suddenly everything was getting larger, brighter, and with a sudden sickening sensation like that of falling and being really dizzy at the same time—

—realities shifted.

* * *

It didn’t hit him at first, how he was suddenly standing fully dressed in the baseball aisle of the local Comics & Cards shop, Yankees cap on his head and a wad of chewing gum in his mouth. That was just his body waiting to be animated as he floated nearby, wondering if what he was seeing was real or just another image conjured up by his brain as it drown in the fumes of some joint, for sometimes that’s how he switched realities: on accident while he was stoned out of his mind. *At least this time I’m in one of the better lives.*

“Duh,” said Kyle, appearing out of thin air as Eric stepped into his body. “You don’t have to be high in order to get in touch with metaphysics. Now, why did you come here?”

Eric shrugged and stepped aside as some other kid passed by in the aisle. “You brought me here.”

“No, I only gave the suggestion. *You* chose what direction to walk after that. You chose to come here because this is where you

want to be right now. And here you are.”

Rather than try to figure out something he knew he wasn’t quite understanding yet, Eric went with the flow of his new reality, reaching into his pants pocket and finding a familiar wad of dollar bills there, given to him (he somehow sensed) by his parents. It was supposed to have been for school lunch, but he never spent it on food when he could stop by Comics & Cards afterward and buy a copy of *ElfQuest* and a pack of Topps. The total came out to be just a bit more than he had on him, but Danny, the shop’s owner, was cool with that. Danny knew each and every one of his customers just as well as he knew the storylines of each and every comic book within the walls of his domain. Whenever Eric went up to the register, Danny winked and told him he didn’t have to pay any tax, that it was “on the house.”

Outside, the sun was bright and the sky was clear; it was the perfect day for some fooling around away from home.

“You up for some practice at the park?” Kyle asked, picking up a discarded stick and swinging it like a bat.

Eric nodded, adjusting his baseball cap so that it was backwards. “You bet. And today it’s gonna be five homies in one game!”

* * *

Wylder Park was only a block or so away from Eric’s home and the place for anyone twelve and under to be hanging out after school. He had his own area of the park that he used for baseball practice: a flat stretch of grass where other kids usually played soccer or flew their kites.

“We got a rowdy crowd out here today,” Kyle said, spitting and handing Eric a bat. Both boys’ clothing discreetly became appropriate for the event: striped baseball uniforms, no logo, but enough to give anyone passing by the notion that this was an official game.

Out on the grass field, a thousand screaming fans suddenly appeared, and the air was filled with their trembling voices. Among them was Kiley, just out of school for the afternoon, as she still wore her backpack. She smiled, cheering Eric on with the other fans. He smiled back at her and suddenly anything was pos-

sible, everything was right—this was where he wanted to be and who he wanted to be.

“Right,” said Eric, stepping up to the plate and taking a practice swing. “Let’s give ’em what they paid for!”

Glove on one hand, baseball in the other, Kyle flashed an elfish grin and strode purposefully onto the mound. A nod to the catcher who’d just appeared behind Eric, the windup and the pitch—a tight curve ball, but Eric was ready for it. He swung; it was a perfect swing, one that sent the ball hurtling out across the small field, past the fence, up into the air where the sky claimed it for all eternity. Even so, he took off like a bullet, rounding first, second, third, and sliding home in a magnificent cloud of dust.

“Another home run from Eric Gudín and the crowd goes wild!” Kyle shouted, jumping up and down as he ran to Eric’s side and helped him up. “See? What’d I tell you? Will it and it will happen! That was awesome!”

“Thanks,” Eric replied, smiling and running into the crowd. He hugged Kiley. She hugged him back and gave him a kiss.

“That was great!” she said. “You know, Eric, someday you’re gonna be famous and you’ll get all this money and move away to some big mansion and you’ll forget me.”

Putting a finger on her lips, Eric rolled his eyes and laughed. “You know I’ll never forget you. Wherever I go, I’ll take you with me.”

Kyle appeared beside them and tapped Eric on the shoulder while making a gesture as if he were checking his wristwatch (even though he wasn’t wearing one). “Eric, we have to go. We have a schedule to keep.”

Darn, and just when I was beginning to enjoy myself, Eric thought. He kissed Kiley again and whispered into her ear, “I’ll see you soon, okay?” Then she and the rest of the crowd melted away.

Running home, sweaty and satisfied with the day, it was easy for Eric to think he was having a great life. It was easy to imagine himself bounding up the front steps of his parents’ lovely two-story house, his best friend at his side, the bright midday sun making everything golden. He went inside and stopped by the kitchen for a glass of grape juice.

“Mom, I hit a home run today!” he exclaimed.

"Yeah, you should have seen it," Kyle added, although his voice could not be heard by anyone other than Eric.

Mrs. Gudín smiled and patted him on the head. "That's wonderful, honey. I couldn't be more proud. Now why don't you go on upstairs and wash up?"

Eric nodded and went up to his bedroom. He felt like the luckiest boy in the world, especially since tonight was potatoes au gratin night. He tossed his backpack onto his race-car-shaped bed, kicked off his sneakers and socks, and padded out into the hall with a fresh towel in his hand. Halfway to the bathroom, he halted suddenly and cringed. Mr. Gudín was calling from his bedroom.

"Eric." His voice was raspy, swollen, soaked with beer. "Eric, come in here."

At that moment Kyle appeared by his side and linked his arm in Eric's. "Let's leave . . . *now*," he hissed, but it was too late already. The new reality was setting in again and Kyle became merely a banished daydream, the words, "Oh, shit . . ." trailing off his lips as his body dissolved away into nothing. In his place stood the old shadowy notion that real life was much stronger than the surreal, and all the old fears rattled loose from their dank mental cages.

Eric went into his parents' bedroom, dared not disobey his father in the hopes that maybe tonight's beating wouldn't be as bad as the last. As if on cue, the light from outside became darker as the sun hid behind a hazy brown cloud, like a frightened child covering his eyes before the bad part in a bloody movie. The walls became dirtier, the floor more cluttered, the smell mustier, the mood more somber . . . more real. So real, even, that when he tried to close his eyes, tried to *wish*, he still couldn't escape back into the daydream place of a moment ago. He never could go there when it mattered, when he accidentally stumbled *here* in this insanely real world where there was only the odor of alcohol and the feel of Dad's searching fingers, pulling down his underwear and blatantly invading his private region. There would be only a precious few moments now before mustered dignity gave way to painful disgust.

"Dad . . . stop. Please don't do that."

Trying to reason with the man was futile; trying to struggle was suicidal. He merely earned himself a slap across the face, a burning in his cheeks, rougher hands on his thighs.

Take it without a fight, he thought grimly. Maybe there'll be less pain if he doesn't see fit to hit me anymore. Maybe he won't ask me to do those other things if I just be quiet and get it over with. God, I wish I really could be in that daydream house right now . . . if only it was real, the kitchen, ice-cold grape juice, the race-car bed, fresh towel, scent of Dove soap . . . good. Keep thinking. Keep your mind off what's happening between your legs. Pretend it's already over and Dad's lying passed out on the floor. Don't let the tears blind you. Clean yourself off and try to forget it ever happened unless you want to get beaten again.

Be strong. Think of the daydream . . .

* * *

Kyle came back later when Eric was in the bathtub. He was staring quietly at the wall and seeing nothing.

"Eric?" Kyle whispered, kneeling at the edge of the tub and waving his translucent hand (less solid now than before) in front of his friend's face. "Eric, did it happen again?"

Eric nodded and turned his head to look at Kyle, who now wore shorts and a T-shirt (as he always did for sleepovers) and who was little more than a breath of shadow against the dull white of the toilet bowl.

"Why'd you cast me away?" Kyle asked, his voice soft, brittle—like he'd been slapped hard across the face.

"There was nothing you could've done," Eric said, now turning his attention to the water in the tub. "You're not real."

"I'm not real only because you think I'm not."

"If you were real you would have helped me."

"How could I have? You let your fear take over, you let reality control you again and again! That's why I disappear whenever your parents get the itching for a fuck. Be strong and I can help you, but otherwise . . ."

Otherwise I'm just another crazy kid, Eric thought. Another sorry statistic people hear about in the news when someone gets shot. The only difference is that I'm the only person on this side of

town who sees a ghost that tells him if he believes in the impossible, the impossible can happen. Yeah, right! Like my parents are ever gonna treat me like more than their little whore, like I'm ever gonna find my way out of this hole . . .

"Eric, you're not trying," Kyle said, noticing that his body was fading away again.

"Maybe later," replied Eric as he sighed and fixed his gaze once again on the bare bathroom wall. Thinking nothing, seeing nothing, hardly even awake, he sat suspended in a place somewhere between realities.

* * *

After his bath, Eric dressed, stuffed a pack of cigarettes into his backpack and sneaked out of the house. Knowing that it would be more pleasant to spend the rest of the evening at Kiley's, he walked quickly along the cracked sidewalks and tried to ignore his latest surroundings, which were reflective of a neighborhood that ranked somewhere between middle and lower-class. Most of the homes here were single-story houses that had been built in the early seventies and had not received much care since.

Kiley's place was near the freeway and had the most horribly overgrown yard Eric had ever seen. He jumped the tall wooden fence and waded through bristly grass and weeds and went around to her bedroom window, where he tapped on the glass (softly, for her parents didn't care much for him, being a street-punk and all). Kiley didn't care, though. She slid her window open and let him inside with a kiss. Together they spent the rest of the evening smoking a secret stash of weed and boldly making out until Eric finally stumbled home without his virginity nor a clue as to how he'd lost it. Higher than a kite, he tripped and lurched his way towards home, his surroundings swirling about him like the currents of a whirlpool. When he tried to cross the street, he missed his footing and fell off the curb. He landed face-down on the street and started laughing, thinking to himself, "Now *that* was a rush!"

Airy hands, grabbing at his shoulders and hauling up onto his feet, brought back some sense of reality to his thoughts. With his head lolling back and forth, Eric squinted and saw that Kyle was

holding him now, supporting him as he stumbled across the street.

"Dude," Eric murmured. "You missed the good stuff. Kiley and me, we got it *on*."

Kyle wasn't impressed. "You stupid fool," he said. "You think getting high and becoming a babbling idiot is cool? Just wait until tomorrow morning."

"Aw, Kyle, you're such a fucking wab! You gotta start having some fun. Live a little—or what, you can't get a hard-on? Are your nuts inverted?" Eric grabbed at his friend's groin, but Kyle slapped his hand away and pushed him onto the ground.

"Look at yourself, Eric," he said with a disgusted scowl on his face. "Is this what you really want?"

Eric blinked, turning his eyes towards the sidewalk, which had now become a mirror, reflecting his image, as well as Kyle's. Only it couldn't have been his own image he saw, for the boy in the mirror was several years older and sickly looking. Pale skin, dark circles under the eyes. The face was familiar though, his own, but yet not as it was supposed to be. With shaky hands he touched his own cheeks, ran fingers over mouth, pulled back lips and saw sores inside, tongue recoiling.

My face as it would look inside a nightmare, he thought.

"As it *could* be," Kyle whispered, kneeling beside Eric. "As you could make yourself, if you wanted."

Trembling all over now, Eric coughed and sat up in a teenager's body. "That's crazy . . . I'll never get that bad."

"This is what you are right now. This is the reality you've weaved for yourself. Past, present or future don't matter; it's all relative. This is you as you believe yourself to be."

"Take me back," Eric croaked, unaccustomed to his deepened voice and sore throat. "This isn't real. This isn't me. I'm not here right now."

"You're always *here*," Kyle said, placing his hand over Eric's eyes. "It's what surrounds you that changes."

He took his hand away and Eric saw that he was back in his bedroom again, kneeling over his bed, Kyle (ever-present) at his side. Looking around with wild eyes, he saw that it wasn't his favorite reality, but it wasn't his worst either, and his body was once again the familiar twelve-year-old's. It took him a moment to find

his voice, but Kyle waited patiently until it came.

“Okay, so I do some things I shouldn’t do,” Eric rasped. “But it’s all I have to keep my mind off my parents and . . . and what they do to me.”

“So why do drugs? Why get wasted? What does it do to solve your problem?”

“I dunno . . . it helps me get away.”

“Aha. It helps you get *away*, but that’s only one of the paths to happiness, and every time you get thrown back here. There are countless other paths, and they all lead to the same place, which in turn means that you can find your way there through the use of more than one tool. Maybe even through the use of the greatest tool ever invented: your mind.” Kyle put his arm around Eric’s shoulder and knocked on his head. “Think about it. When you’re not here in this reality, where are you?”

Eric shrugged and looked off at the wall. “I’m in a better place, usually. Somewhere my parents don’t hurt me and we get along like a normal family.”

“So you could say that’s your escape, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why don’t you stay there where you want to be?”

“Because it’s not real, it’s all in my head.”

“Who’s to say? If you really think about it, everything that exists in this universe is all in your head and my head and everyone else’s. The only way we know about existence is through our *minds*, and we all perceive things differently. No two people are alike. Nor are their visions of what the universe is. Billions of different, unique universes all rattling around in humans’ heads, that’s all existence really is. There is no set standard for what’s real and what’s not, so therefore, why should you believe that what causes you pain is reality and that what causes you joy is fantasy?”

Eric groaned and held his head in his hands. “I don’t know, I DON’T KNOW! You’re giving me a headache. Go away!”

A breeze brushed against his skin. He looked up and found it was morning already (or had it been like that all along?) and that his bedroom window was wide open, a whiff of something like summer honeysuckle wafting past the curtains.

Yet another reality, he thought, *or I’m still high off my ass . . .*

* * *

Stretching grandly, Eric got out of bed, pulled on a pair of shorts, and made his way out into the kitchen where Mom was making breakfast. *Breakfast*—real food and not just that frozen crap he usually got—as he could see when he perched himself upon a stool in front of the counter where Mom always had his orange juice ready for him every morning. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and put his breakfast plate in front of him.

“Sleep well?” she asked, putting the butter back in the fridge.

“Uh, yeah,” Eric replied, a little bug-eyed, for he wasn’t used to seeing his mother, dressed so atypically in cutoffs and a tank-top. She looked so healthy and happy. No dark circles under the eyes, no stringy pale hair, no slouched shoulders or pudgy limbs. Nor was he used to seeing the apartment in such a clean, bright and cheery state.

“Great. I hope everyone can make it for your party tonight. They *are* still coming, right?”

Eric nodded and started rattling off a list of names he’d never heard before but knew as well as anything. When he was through, he paused and wondered, *Since when do I have friends?*

“It’s going to be a hot day,” Mom said, writing a small list. “I’ve got some errands to run, so when you’re through eating, go down to the store and pick up some drinks. Whatever you like, so long as it’s enough for your guests, okay?”

“Okay, mom,” replied Eric, mouth full of egg and toast. He was eating like a starved child. Even though he wasn’t really hungry, there were still the tastes, the smells, the sensations he could not resist and he hoped Mom didn’t notice his almost frantic fork-to-mouth motions.

When he was through, he rinsed off his dishes and grabbed the wad of dollar bills left for him on the kitchen counter. He went back to his bedroom and found a pair of well-worn sandals, which he slipped onto his feet. His bike, a sturdy Huffy, leaned in wait against the closet door. As he hauled it out into the hallway, he took a moment to glance around himself and think, *Gee, this feels pretty good. There’s this tingling sensation inside me that I haven’t felt ever . . . I think . . . but it feels pretty right.*

He rode out into the morning sunlight, where all around the apartment complex people were already lounging about on their patios listening to music or chatting with friends. In the pool, a dozen or so children were splashing away gleefully. Out on the neighborhood streets, Eric saw people mowing or watering their lawns, the sky above so blue and clear . . . Kiley wearing a flowery dress and running barefoot across her parents' front yard, running towards him and calling out.

"Eric! Gotcha!"

A splash of water and he was off his bike, kicking off his sandals and tackling Kiley in a water-fight with the garden hose calling the shots. Laughter rang out across the grass, arms waved, fingers tickled, and droplets of cool water soaked Eric's hair and shorts as he fell over Kiley and paused for a moment to stare into her eyes as she blinked prettily.

"I'm so glad you could make it," she said, and somehow Eric knew she was talking about something more than his simply riding to her house. He could see the notion behind her eyes and he couldn't help but sneak in a brief kiss on the nose before she brought the hose up and splashed him again in the face. She squirmed away, rolled onto her knees, laughing as Eric fell back, surprised, rubbing water out of his eyes and spitting bits of grass out of his mouth. For a second his vision was blurred and he staggered to his feet, scrunched up his nose and held his breath as he felt reality slip from beneath him again.

* * *

He was home again, there was the smell of candles burning, the sight of his birthday cake, the sounds of a handful of boys and girls (including Kiley) standing around him at the kitchen table and singing "Happy Birthday" terribly off-key but with bright smiles on their faces. Afterwards everyone gathered around the TV and ate cake as they watched a cheesy horror movie and laughed at all the bloody parts because they were so fake. Mom couldn't stand it, though, and paused the VCR just long enough for Eric to open his presents.

"Happy birthday, Eric!" everyone cheered.

Happy birthday, Eric. The words echoed inside his head and became sweeter with each passing second, making him wish they'd been spoken for real and not merely something he was dreaming up in the middle of some notion he didn't want to be

* * *

The bat resting at the foot of his bed wasn't much better than a piece of scarred and battered wood with electrical tape wrapped where the handle should have been. Eric crawled to the edge of the bed and touched the wood with his hand. It had been so long ago since his mom, during a rare window of normality, had bought him this bat—probably just to shut him up whenever he got in the way of his parents' routine binges.

Dad's stern orders came fluttering back to him:

"Your mom and I are tired from work. Dinner can wait until later. Now, go outside and play baseball or something, and don't come back a minute before dark." They always sent him away when they knew they were going to get wasted. Maybe because they cared about him and knew that if he were around when they did it that he would get hurt, or maybe he only imagined that they cared when really they didn't want to share their stash. Either way, he was stuck outside, all by himself, hungry and alone, trying to act like he wanted to be out on those cold evenings when he had nothing on but a pair of shorts and a tank. He would wander the sidewalks that weaved around the apartment complex until he grew sleepy and finally stumbled back home to find his parents both drunk or already passed out. Needless to say, dinner was nonexistent on nights like those.

"It's a shame," said Kyle, folding his arms and shaking his head. "A billion different realities and you keep coming back here."

"Why are you doing this to me?" Eric breathed as he looked away from the bat and up into Kyle's eyes. "You keep showing me what I can't have and it's killing me. Who are you to do this to me?"

Kyle sat on the bed and crossed his legs. He placed both hands over his chest. "I'm a boy, a son, a kid just like you. Before I

became this apparition I was flesh and blood. I know what you're going through because I've been there before." He paused for a moment, closing his eyes and making a sour face, before continuing. "My father used to abuse me when I was little. It started off real early and as a sort of game . . . at least, that's what he told me it was . . ."

* * *

Kyle's father liked to watch first. That's how it all began: crouching just out of sight or looking through one of the peepholes as his son undressed for bed or took a shower. Kyle was only five, so he thought that perhaps it was merely a fatherly thing, Dad watching over him to make sure he didn't slip in the tub . . . and yet it seemed strange that Dad didn't actually come inside like Mom did to help him take a bath. Like he was afraid of something or hiding something—like that time Dad had been standing in his bedroom doorway for so long, watching Kyle sleep—or, more accurately, watching him *feign* sleep. With his eyes open just a crack, Kyle could see his father watching him intently and doing something within the confines of his pants.

"What are you doing, dad?" asked Kyle, opening his eyes fully.

With a sudden jolt, Dad zipped himself up and swore out loud. "Damn it, Kyle, I thought you were asleep." A series of rapid, nervous breaths and then, "Sorry. Go to sleep."

Kyle wasn't sure what his father had to be sorry about. Dad always looked guilty of something whenever he was caught staring, which was kind of stupid since he wasn't hurting anybody—not initially, anyway.

The touching came later, when Kyle was seven. It was a rainy day and Mom had gone somewhere for the day, leaving Dad to babysit. For an hour or so, Kyle played video games in the den, until he noticed Dad standing in the doorway, staring in his usual manner.

"Kyle," Dad said softly, his voice raspy, strained. "Go take a shower. We're eating out tonight."

A normal enough request. Kyle went upstairs to the bathroom and started his shower. Moments after he'd stepped in and star-

ted shampooing his hair, the shower curtain opened and there was Dad, undressed and smiling strangely as he stepped into the tub.

"A game," Dad said. "All fathers play it with their sons, but it's a secret. Not for mommy to know. Our little secret, okay?"

The secret was kept for three years. Mom never knew about what went on when she wasn't there, how Dad's infatuation with his son went from "playful" touching to something worse. Kyle didn't know what to think, for it was almost inconceivable that his own father would try to hurt him—yet the things that happened in the shower were not entirely pleasant. At first it was interesting, curiosity leading him on, but Dad didn't stop once Kyle had had enough. He wanted him to do other things as well, things that were more pain than pleasure. Kyle would ask his father to stop, but the man never listened. He merely grunted something like, "Shh, almost there now," and moved faster, causing Kyle to cry. Then, when it was all over, the familiar warning: "Remember, this is our little secret. Mommy doesn't know." And lastly, a sense of impending danger if Kyle were to tell his mother, a crushing fear if he kept the secret.

Those secret games in the shower taught Kyle to hate his body and to despise what he thought of as sex. He wished sometimes that he didn't have a penis, knowing that that particular organ was the cause of much of his pain. Adults seemed to derive immense pleasure from sex, but how could the act be anything but bad if this was how it made you feel? Dad always whispered that he loved Kyle after each "secret game" was over, but as Kyle grew older he knew it wasn't love his father felt for him but something else. Something like a vile hunger, something that wasn't natural as he caught on to the notion that what his father was doing to him was flat-out wrong. He'd seen his friends' fathers, and he'd learned a few things about the way normal men interacted with their sons—he was becoming more and more certain most other fathers did not do the things to their sons' Dad did to his. And to call it a secret game . . .

For three years though, the secret was kept, all along Kyle feeling like he was going to burst unless he told someone, asked someone if what he and his father did was right—yet he *couldn't* tell anyone, because if he did, something bad might happen to

him. That's what Dad told him after every time, and the look on the man's face meant he knew what he was talking about. Kyle didn't want anything bad to happen, so he kept silent, crying only in private, where his mother couldn't see or hear him . . . until that one afternoon when she came home early from an errand and, upon hearing her son's sobbing, walked in on the "secret game" as it was being played out on her own bed.

That particular game was never finished and all the other games with Dad were put to a stop. Mom went to a judge and got her to keep Dad away for awhile; she also gave Mom full custody of Kyle, who was rapidly realizing just how precarious his situation with Dad had been. Bad enough so that Kyle didn't see his father again for months. During that time, he lived with Mom in a new home and learned from a special doctor about what was right and wrong when it came to his own body and sex. New words rattled around inside his head, like "abuse" and "molestation". He learned to regard Dad as a monster rather than his father, learned that for all this time he'd been doing things with his father that were really, really bad. Of course, he'd sensed they were somehow strange, perhaps even abnormal (and especially painful, at times), but hearing it from his mother and shocked relatives . . . Kyle felt like a freak himself for being so stupid, so ignorant to the truths at hand.

Time helped him get over the worst of it. He lived with his mother in a new house, in a new neighborhood where he went to a new school, made new friends, and tried to forget about his old life (funny, he was only twelve years old and he felt so grown-up already, like he was thirty or forty already). He'd almost forgotten completely when Dad suddenly reappeared out of the blue one day.

Kyle was walking home from school and a car pulled up alongside him. The window rolled down, Dad stuck his head out.

"Hello, Kyle. I've come to drive you home."

Don't get in the car, someone in his head screamed. Dad's a stranger now, and Mom and the counselor told you not to talk to strangers. Keep walking. Ignore him. Run away if he tries to bother you.

"Kyle, don't be afraid. I'm your *father*. I know they told you bad things about me but that's because they didn't understand

what we had.”

Ignore him.

“Come, Kyle, get in the car and we can start over again. We’ll go someplace where they can’t split us up again. Just you and me.”

He’s lying. He only wants to touch you again, do those bad things to you.

“Whatever they told you about me was a lie. You *know* I wouldn’t hurt you. I love you, Kyle. Love you. Now come and get inside the car.”

Stay away from the car, Kyle!

His legs kicked into high gear; he was running along the sidewalk now. The sound of a warm car engine purring as it pursued him made him run faster, not looking back but knowing who it was that followed him. Ahead, there was a busy four-lane street and a red light. Not daring to wait it out at the corner, Kyle plunged into the traffic, tried to look both ways first but tripped over his shoelace, which had become undone. He fell to the ground, heard a horrendous screech, saw a glimpse of tire as it hurtled towards him—there was a flash of pain so wretched it devoured his senses entirely, and then . . . he died.

* * *

An angel made of bright light surrounded him in its arms, cradled him, quieted him like he was a little baby again. “Shh, there there, it’s all right now. It’s over.”

Tears squeezed from Kyle’s eyes became memories flowing so quickly that he could experience his entire lifetime, and many other lifetimes, in a single breath, a thousand times more encompassing than anything he could have experienced on Earth. Yesterday, today, tomorrow all became one in a single moment.

“Am I dead?” he asked.

“It depends on what you mean. Nothing really ceases to exist, though forms of matter can be changed. You are now vibrating on a higher frequency that is currently incompatible with human flesh. Do you wish to stay here or continue your work below, on Earth?”

“My work?”

“Yes, the work every human travels to Earth to do. To enlighten, to teach, to help build and nurture the physical realm.”

“But . . . what can I do?”

“Anything, starting with the first of billions of lost souls. Go to a child like yourself, help him see through his misfortune and rise above it.”

* * *

An eternity passed and Kyle was returning to Earth not a second after he'd left. “Oh, God, there I am,” he heard himself whisper as he passed over the sight at a busy city intersection. “Hard to believe, that's my body lying there all rumpled on the street, soaking the pavement with my blood . . . and there's Dad, running out of his car and screaming; he thinks it's all his fault. He's also screaming at God for doing this to him, punishing him for his sins. There he is bending over my body as some poor lady in a Benz dials up 911 on her cell phone. He really *did* love me, but somehow got confused with his carnal desires. Geez, look at all the cars stopping. The streets will be backed up for miles and all because I got hit by a car”

Looking away, Kyle felt the pull of someone not too far away. He passed by people on the streets, almost as if he were walking, but he had no body, only his desire to seek out the call which drew him to an old dusty baseball diamond in a run-down park where a lone figure, a boy, swung a beat-up old bat over and over against a tree and imagined it was his father.

He's the one, Kyle thought and settled himself beside the boy, scaring the shit out of him but forming a new beginning nonetheless.

“I remember that,” Eric murmured, curled up on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. “I thought I was crazy when I first saw you . . . I must still be ‘cause you're still here.” He reached under his pillow for a pack of cigarettes.

Kyle sighed, quickly wiping away a tear that had trickled down his cheek. “Don't you ever wonder why you have the gift to change realities like you do?”

“No . . . I dunno. I don't care. Can I get some sleep now?”

"No, you can't sleep now," Kyle said, scowling as Eric lit his cigarette and took a drag. "And yes, you *do* know very well why you can see all the different realities, but you're acting like you don't because you're afraid of being right and accepting that responsibility. So you act like you're dumb, like you don't know, when really, inside, you're screaming, 'I know what to do, I know how to do it, but I'm afraid to because I might be wrong or I might make a mistake.' That's what everyone thinks. That's why they all act stupid, stumbling along whatever path they're handed, good or bad, without questioning why they were given it. But not you. I'm not going to let you slip away like that and neither are you. I'm going to suggest one more reality to you now, and afterwards, if you still deny the power of your imagination, then I'll have no choice but to leave and help some other kid who'll listen. You'll be on your own, *completely*, if that's what you want. Kyle, the 'crazy vision who haunts you', will be gone forever."

Eric grunted. "I'm starting to think *I'm* a crazy vision—"

"One last try on my part," Kyle said, grabbing the cigarette from Eric's fingers and making it disappear with a flick of his wrist.

"Hey," Eric began, sitting up . . .

* * *

In a new reality, at dusk:

An alley downtown with muddy water and trash all around. Eric looked down at himself and found he was wearing baggy clothes: too-big denim jacket, oversized sweater, wide-legged corduroy pants, stained sneakers. He was wearing a backpack, and he could sense immediately that all his belongings in the world were in that bag. No more, no less. He also had a case of the sniffles.

A raspy voice called out to him from the semi-shadows. "Hey, little shit. What's up?" A young man, pale of face and possessive of a swollen expression, stepped towards Eric and gestured at his pack. "You got what I'm looking for?"

Eric sensed that he did, and reached into his pack for the plastic baggies. The exchange of money for drugs was quick and mostly instinct on Eric's part, as if he'd been doing this sort of

thing for years. He counted the wad of bills he was handed and nodded to the young man. "Same time next week."

A moment later the man was gone and Eric, feeling certain he shouldn't stay in one place for too long, was walking briskly along the city streets, keenly aware of all who passed near him, of how they looked at him, of how the knife in his jacket banged slightly against his chest, ready for him should he need to defend himself.

His home in this reality was an abandoned single-story office building that no one had cared to look after in years. All the windows and doors were boarded up tightly, except for one in the back that he always kept accessible so that he could wriggle inside every night to sleep. It wasn't the coziest of places, but in the few weeks he'd lived here no one had bothered him. By now he'd even learned to call the place home.

Quickly, he crawled in through the window and replaced the board firmly before scuffling about in the darkness and flicking on the flashlight he had in his pack. Once lit up, he looked around the small storage room to make sure he was alone; then he took off his backpack and settled himself upon the sleeping bag that lay rumpled in one corner, facing the window. As usual, dinner was an uninspired, half-empty bag of potato chips.

Too bad I can't just keep Don's hundred or so dollars in my pocket and run off with it, maybe buy a hundred cheeseburgers. But of course he's expecting his money tonight and I should be grateful for the small change I get—I'm better off than poor Barney living in his cardboard box like a troll.

He finished off his meal with a joint. Even though he knew he would be starved in another few hours because of it, he enjoyed each drag and tried to relax somewhat, maybe enjoy an evening for once, be tranquil so that when Kiley came by after her rounds she would be able to hang with him while he was in a good mood.

A short while later the board in the window rattled and Kiley came slithering in.

"Hi," Eric greeted, crawling over to give her a hug and a kiss. He handed her the rest of the joint and she took a few hits before getting into the sleeping bag with him and snuggling close.

"The guys were bitching today," she said as she reached down and unzipped his pants. "They say Don's not happy with our *performance*. Says he can get better scouts somewhere else if we

don't start putting out more."

Eric grunted and allowed his hands to wander. He didn't really feel like having sex right now, but Kiley seemed to want it, so he obliged without protest, half concentrating on getting the job done and half letting his mind wander of its own accord. He'd done this sort of thing several times before when he'd had to sell himself for extra money, sometimes even just a meal (if he was hungry enough).

That's the way it was on the streets: Sooner or later you gave in to make ends meet with nothing more than the flesh you carried around on your bones. Your body was the only thing you could bargain with that you couldn't really lose . . . unless you got yourself killed, of course. Nevertheless, when you were hungry enough, you didn't really care how you got food or money, just as long as you got what you needed. Sometimes you tried to enjoy yourself, and sometimes you just spaced out while a total stranger fornicated with your body. Sometimes your mind didn't even know when it was over unless you reminded yourself, "Hey, it's been awhile. Shouldn't you see what's happening to the rest of you?" On rare occasions you blinked and found yourself walking along the street, your buttocks sore but your pocket full of money.

Most of the time, though, you were perfectly coherent and had to fight for payment when the perved guy (sometimes woman) you'd just fucked refused to part with his cash. You went for your clothes at the side of the bed, grabbed the knife and threatened to slit his throat, and if he laughed at you for being some twelve-year-old rat, you threatened to go to the police or tell his wife, if you knew he had one. If you were lucky, it worked; if not, you got tossed out like yesterday's garbage.

Eric hardly noticed his interaction with Kiley was over until she was napping in his arms. He took off the condom and tossed it into a corner knowing he wouldn't be around in another few days, so why bother cleaning up? That was the way of things here: always moving, never staying in one place too long . . . a hell of a life that many people fell into but few survived in. Even with Kiley pressed up against him he couldn't help but feel like the loneliest person in the world. He tried to tell himself that he was lucky to be alive, to have whatever small commodities he'd been blessed with during his three months of being homeless and to

keep hope that everything would work out sooner or later. Still, there was that one vision he often had that brought tears to his eyes. It was possible to adjust to the loneliness of the streets, but he would never be able to push away that vision that so forcefully took hold of him when he least expected (or desired).

* * *

Moving through the city streets, Eric became mentally invisible and made his way along the sidewalks alone. There were hordes of other people around him, driving, shopping, strolling, but none of them paid any attention to him, a pock mark on the fragile egg-shell of society. It felt strange to be amongst a bustling crowd and yet be totally detached from it. He was bumped, jostled, poked by people rushing about their day. When they looked his way they saw through him, as if he wasn't even there, but he knew he was because he could see everyone else, hear their conversation, smell the scents of their cologne or clothing like an animal would, even though his nose was stuffed up and his head thick with the flu.

Where am I going? He wondered to himself as he shoved his hands into his pockets and tried to ignore the cold. It was now winter, he realized with a slight start (but hadn't it been summer just a few seconds ago?) and he was still without a home. That was probably the reason he was walking around without any destination in mind: to stave off the cold, to be doing something with himself so he wouldn't freeze up solid in some dank alley.

As he crossed another street, he spotted a family of three approaching a video game store. The parents joked good-naturedly with their preteen son as he gushed about some impending purchase. The father ruffled the boy's hair and insisted that "all a real man needs to beat a game is four buttons: A, B, select and start. None of this fancy PlayStation, ten-button hooey." The mother's comment was something like, "What *is* it about you men and your obsession with toys?" before she and her family entered the store.

Meanwhile, Eric stood quivering on the sidewalk and trying to hold in a sneeze.

I wish that boy was me. I wish those parents were mine. I wish that . . . that I could just be happy like he is and only have to think

about something stupid like a new video game. No more worrying about when I'll get to eat, if I'll get killed in a knife fight, if that itching down in my crotch is anything serious. To just be a kid for awhile . . .

The combined effects of his sickness and introverted melancholy mood were probably to blame for his not noticing the hands around his torso until it was too late. How the hell he'd walked into an alley, he didn't know, but he *did* know he was in one now and three guys in chains and leather were throwing him up against a wall as they ripped his backpack from his shoulders. He was punched and kicked in the stomach and groin, and the pain was unbearable. He started coughing uncontrollably and doubled over as the men scurried off with his belongings, one of them shouting, "Message from Don: You're fired!"

"Fuck . . . you!" Eric tried to yell, though he only managed a few frantic breaths as he squirmed on the cold ground, his hands over his belly and crotch. Gritting his teeth, he tried to stop his coughing and reminded himself that he still had five dollars stuffed in his underwear. Thank God the dumb bastards hadn't been rapists.

With limbs shaking uncontrollably now, he got to his feet and stumbled out of the alley. He was hurting enough to consider going to a hospital, though he didn't know where the nearest one was, and the crowds of people around him looked too busy to care about what happened to one more street punk.

Stumbling along for the entire length of a block, his pain only worsened and his vision started to become fuzzy. He was seeing stars by the time he reached the crosswalk and collapsed at the feet of a decent-looking gentleman wearing a gray overcoat and carrying a briefcase.

"Geez, kid," gasped the man as he squatted and supported Eric by the shoulders. "What's happened to you?"

"Just . . . take me away from . . . here," Eric breathed, wincing as his gut wrenched. "I want to go now . . . anywhere but here."

The man holding him smiled and his body suddenly morphed into that of a young boy's, familiar blond hair, blue eyes and that all-knowing smile wrapping around Eric's shivering form like a blanket.

"Only you can take yourself from here," Kyle whispered into his ear. "Only you can take yourself to the place you want to be. Do you want to go there now?"

Squeezing his eyes shut, Eric clenched his fists and gave in to the yearning that had been eating away since he'd first discovered his gift. "Yes . . . yes, I don't want this loneliness anymore. This isn't my reality. I want my own . . . I want it so bad . . . I'll never let it go" Then he started crying violently. His whole body shook, his face became soaked with tears, but Kyle only held him and spoke softly into his ear.

"Shh. It's okay. Eric, it's all right. You've made it. Open your eyes, Eric, and see what you've made."

It took a moment for Eric to stop the flow of tears, but he managed it and found he was no longer in pain. Additionally, he was no longer lying in the middle of a city street but instead sitting at the edge of a race-car shaped bed in a clean, warm bedroom.

Kyle stood and spread his arms. "The bedroom of your dreams, right?"

Silently, Eric left the bed and went over to his (his?) dresser, upon which a bunch of Legos and a Mr. PotatoHead had been placed. He touched the Mr. PotatoHead, which surely felt real, and then turned to look around the rest of the room. A large oversized wristwatch clock hung at the foot of his bed; a desk and computer in one corner; a beanbag in the shape of Eric Cartman sat next to a color TV; a set of weights and a bench had been placed in another corner; from the ceiling hung a mobile of the solar system and all over the walls were glow-in-the-dark stars.

"This is all real?" he asked at last, a smile touching his lips as he peered out the window and saw a beautiful day outside with kids playing ball and having water-fights on bright green lawns.

"Oh, it's real," Kyle said, dropping onto all fours and reaching underneath the bed. "You want proof?"

Before Eric could answer, he was being bombarded with the spray of a Super Soaker water gun and Kyle's laughter.

"You're gonna get it!" Eric shouted with a smile as he lunged for the gun. Kyle ducked away and started running around the room, squirting Eric at regular intervals until he was dripping wet.

Finally, Kyle tripped over his own feet and Eric grabbed the gun, dousing his friend, who moaned and made gargling noises like he was being slaughtered.

"I surrender!" he yelled, slicking back his wet hair and giggling like a maniac. Eric started to laugh too, but stopped abruptly when he heard the bedroom door opening. He turned and saw Mom, trim and healthy, standing in the threshold, shaking her head at the sight of her water-drenched son but smiling nevertheless.

"Kiley's here to see you," she said. "She's down in the den."

She was just as pretty as he could ever have imagined her, sitting on the sofa in her favorite sky-blue dress and sandals with the sun shining on her like a spotlight from heaven.

"Hello, Kiley," he said, approaching her where she sat. Cheerfully, she sprang up and gave him a hug and a kiss, fully convincing him that she was real and not just a daydream. He caught the scent of oranges, her favorite fruit, and smiled.

"Happy birthday," Kiley said, brushing a drop of water from his cheeks. "You've made it."

Behind them, Kyle stood and beamed happily. Kiley winked at him and gave him a thumbs-up. Eric blinked and looked confused.

"What—?"

"I'm finished here, Eric," Kyle said. "Kiley's your new guardian angel now, and you are hers. Take care of each other, and remember, you can make your life whatever you want it to be. You can be whoever you want to be. That's the gift every human has but only a precious few realize."

Eric stepped forward and hugged his friend. "Thanks . . . for everything you've done. I hope we'll see each other again."

"Oh, we'll always be together," Kyle said, tapping Eric's chest. "Whenever you feel warm inside and you get the urge to just kick back and be one with every wonderful thing that surrounds you, that'll be me, smiling from the inside."

"Cool," Eric said, already feeling something wonderful spreading throughout him. He took Kiley's hand and watched as Kyle started to glow, shimmer and then melt into the fabric of this newly woven reality. It was sort of sad to see him go, but Eric

knew he'd found his true path and with a little of that warm feeling as his guide, he would surely find his way true within the new journey he'd created for himself.

A Pair of Wings

To anyone else, they were simply a pair of wings made from wooden twigs, colorful paper, and feathers from the chicken coop.

To Aiden, the wings were a golden set of keys.

He would roam all over his papa's farm in search of the materials he needed to craft his first and most magnificent work of art. Certain vegetables he used to make colors, others he used for their oils that would keep the wood frames of his wings moist and flexible. He would spend hours on end up in the loft of the barn, where he crafted the masterpiece.

When he mixed his special paints, a messy task, he wore only his favorite pair of faded blue overalls, with the leggings rolled up and the right shoulder-strap buckle missing. With bare legs dangling over the edge, he would whistle a tune into the hot summer air and stir his paints, sometimes dripping bits onto his feet . . . or onto an unfortunate animal below. Every so often a breeze came inside and tousled his hair, promised to be there for him when the time was right.

After the paint was ready, Aiden set aside his mixing cans, which were actually old tin cans that had at one time contained beans or olives, and got to his feet. Before engaging in part two of his Project, he tiptoed to the small diamond-shaped window of the loft and peered out over the golden wheat fields.

Papa was out there with the other men, bare-backed, their powerful muscles rippling, cutting, pulling, hauling. Papa would have ordered him to help in the work . . . if only he knew where his boy was!

It wasn't that Aiden didn't want to help. After being alive for ten long years (everything was long when you were a kid), he'd done his share out in the fields, working to harvest the wheat, building his muscles up big and strong like Papa's, letting the sun deepen the golden hue of his skin.

No, Aiden was not weak by any means, nor was he sick or unfit. He was a strong child who, in the eyes of the other men, would one day grow up into a strong man himself to help in the harvests . . .

. . . once he got his mind out of the sky.

“There’s no life for a dreamer,” his papa had once said at the dinner table. “Dreaming does not bring food to your belly, nor clothing for your back. If you want those things, you have to keep your feet on the ground, not in the clouds.”

Mama had agreed. Mama always agreed with whatever Papa said, for her dreams had been stolen long ago by that man and replaced with numbing practicality.

Aiden had tried. He’d rolled up his sleeves, gotten his hands dirty and his feet wet, just like the other grown men on the farm, but his eyes, those big brown eyes, still gazed upward into the heavens where the moon and the sun and the stars ruled over an empire of endless space with no limits.

The farm work, it only fulfilled a small part of his being, for there was nothing on the ground as enchanting as the deep blue sky above. Despite all the sweaty days out in the fields, Aiden’s sore limbs often reached heavenward at bedtime, as if he could touch the moon itself, grab a handful of stars or dance a few rounds with the creatures of the zodiac.

Someday he would reach the sky. That much he vowed on the first night when the workings of his grand Project had just begun to manifest themselves.

From then on Aiden had collected his tools everyday while working in the fields, where he stuffed as many corn husks into his overalls as he could when the men weren’t looking. At the day’s end, he would go to the water stables to wash the husks (and himself) clean before hiding them in his secret place up in the loft.

Everything he needed was acquired by secret means, because Aiden knew that if Papa found out what he was planning, his dream would never be allowed to fly. Papas never liked imaginations much.

Now here he was, up in the loft of the barn on a hot summer afternoon while the rest of the men were out in the fields working as lemmings did. They were probably too mesmerized with heat

to care where he was right now. He would get a scolding later, when the sun set, but right now he had all the privacy he needed to tend to his Project.

He left the window and squatted over a pile of hay, clearing some of it away. Beneath the straw mesh lay his Project, his wings, his pride at knowing that his own hands had built a work of art.

Aiden brought his wings over to his collection of paints and proceeded to splash color upon them. He painted swirls and dots and stripes, bringing the creation ever closer to life. He spent the rest of the afternoon there in the barn, using his fingers to paint those colorful designs and imagining how he would be a brilliant icon of color shooting through the sky like a comet.

Never before had he considered himself an artist of any sort. Growing up on a farm, his work was meant to be expressed through the tiring of his arms and shoulders. But, no, he thought as he gazed upon his self-induced spectacle. The ground was not for him.

Looking up after what seemed like only a short while, he realized that it was bordering on night outside and that Papa would be coming in soon.

Aiden rushed to hide his creation in its corner, so it could hopefully dry by tomorrow morning undisturbed. Once satisfied that his wings were sufficiently hidden, he scooped up the paint cans and dumped them in the corner as well, for it would do no good to have his Project discovered prematurely.

As he climbed hastily down the ladder, the boy saw that his hands and overalls (and even his feet) were smudged with paint and oil. Unbuckling the left shoulder strap, he shucked off his overalls, knowing that he wouldn't have to explain if he could just get to the water stables in time before his papa did.

So he padded naked from the barn, his clothing rolled into a tight little ball in his arms. A packed dirt path led from the barn up to the water stables, and Aiden ran up it, thanking the stars for his luck so far.

However, as he emerged from the back side of the barn, he suddenly froze in his tracks, for Papa and his men were walking directly towards him!

When Papa saw him, he squinted and raised an eyebrow in the gathering darkness.

Naturally, the man demanded to know what the boy was doing here without his clothing on, looking like a hairless monkey, when he should have been out in the fields working like a man. Some of the other men watched and snickered, saying that he'd been eating lunch with the horses.

Papa only glowered and snatched away his boy's overalls, sniffing them and nodding when he recognized the scent of the barn all over the cloth.

Shame and fear flooded over Aiden, and he lowered his head, his otherwise broad shoulders drooping in resignation.

The scolding which followed was the usual one, only more embarrassing because when he was spanked there was no cloth to hide his flinches. The men watched and cooed as the "baby dreamer" was disciplined. He was bare in every respect, unable to hide his tears or cries of discomfort.

A farmer's son had no business with dreams.

Once the spanking was finished, Aiden's face was thoroughly dampened with tears—not from the stinging pain on his rear, but from the humiliation. Never before had he been spanked out in the open, and naked as Adam! He was an infant in their eyes now, a baby still suckling at his mama's breast, with no place in a land of men.

Papa left him there, kneeling on the ground to rub his sore bottom. The tears only made things worse, because men did not cry. Boys cried. Maybe not as much as girls, but cry they did, when their papas weren't watching or when their mamas told them it was all right to.

Maybe he didn't want to be a man . . . even though the men got first pick at the day's harvest for dinner. While Aiden washed himself in the stables, the men went to dinner inside the house. There came the sounds of deep masculine voices talking, laughing, clinking plates, belching.

Papa had taken his overalls inside as further humiliation, so Aiden held himself and entered the house as quietly as a cockroach, passing the kitchen and going up to his room to be by himself. Papa would complain about the wet footprints, but that would only happen if the men put off drinking until the later hours of the night.

Whatever the case, Aiden didn't care right now. He dressed himself in clean, dry clothes and sat at the edge of his sleeping mattress, ignoring the protests of his swollen buttocks and the pangs of hunger emanating from within his belly. On a piece of torn paper he wrote his message.

"Goodbye Papa. I am going to touch the sky."

He'd stopped going to school when he was eight, at which time Papa had deemed him strong enough to begin serious work in the fields. Since then he'd continued to practice what he knew, hiding such private endeavors under his mattress. His spelling was ordinarily illegible, but he'd practiced *these* words for a long time, knowing that one day he would be putting them to use.

Now the message was ready. Aiden folded the paper scrap and slid it into his pants pocket for later, when the men were asleep. Until then he curled up on his mattress and waited.

His time came soon enough. The house became perfectly quiet and still near midnight, at which time he rose from feigned sleep, placed his message on top of his clothing trunk, and tiptoed barefoot down the hallway. He'd never worn shoes (or socks, for that matter), since Papa said they were too expensive and too easily worn out by a growing boy. Hence his feet were tough-skinned, walkable on rough stone or gritty hot pavement, but noiseless on the floorboards as he crept from the house and into the barn. There, in the corner of the loft, his wings waited for him, glowing in a ray of moonlight.

Not a single doubt or fear entered his mind as he picked up the apparatus and climbed down from the loft. Even the animals were extra quiet. They knew him well and knew he had to do this, so they made no commotion as he left the barn.

He knew where to go. A gravel path led to the main road which guided him up a steep hill . . . the only hill for miles in the farmer's valley (perhaps a gift from above for the only dreamer in the land). He only hoped there would be a good wind tonight, for as he walked along the road, the air was deathly still.

The land held its breath.

After a few minutes of travel, Aiden reached the crest of the hill, some 50 feet in the air. The upward slope had been gradual; the side he now faced dropped downward abruptly, forming a cliff.

Standing at the cliff's edge, he took a deep breath and donned his wings. He slid his torso into the holder straps and buckled the waist belt (one of his old belts he'd once worn to school, long ago), to secure his body. There were two more straps that slung across his chest and shoulders, which he fastened firmly. At last his arms found their places, giving the wings support and motion.

He was ready now.

Taking a few more eager breaths, Aiden spread his wings, listened to the rustle of corn husk and feather. He looked down past his toes and along the sheer drop of the cliff, where there was nothing but rock and sunbaked shrubs. However, down was not where he wanted to go, so he brought his gaze to scan the sky above . . .

. . . and a breeze suddenly sprang up. Obviously it was time to go where he'd dreamed of going since he was old enough to talk. He spread his wings high into the air, arms taught, muscles tensed, hands firmly clasping their holds. The moment of action had come.

"One . . . two . . . THREE!" he shouted.

He leaped from the cliff. His feet left the rock and came together, his chin pointed defiantly ahead of him, his arms grabbed a gust of starlit wind . . .

. . . and he flew.

The breeze supported his body as he soared like a bird through the night air. With a gentle flap of his magnificent wings, he was lifted higher into the sky by powerful hands unseen.

The wind did most of the work, laboring in unison with the Aiden's slow, steady rhythm. The ground was far below him now, but he was not afraid. His strong arms held fast, making the wings a part of him . . . an extension of his own body which cut through the moonlight like a comet. Beneath him the Earth whizzed by, unable to touch him or confine him any longer; above him the sky was open wide, a billion twinkling stars watching his moment of triumph, for on this night he truly was a part of the cosmic merri-ment.

He flew.

The Demon in the Drain

Joey Miller stuck his tongue out at the bathroom mirror and examined it, making odd faces the entire time. His hope was to gross out his younger sister enough so that she would leave the bathroom to him until he was through brushing his teeth for bed. Maybe if he tried the octopus face she would take the hint and split.

“Ew!” cried his sister, dropping her hairbrush and flinging her hands over her eyes in disgust. “Mommy! Daddy! He’s doing it again!”

“Mmf!” was Joey’s reply. He stepped off the edge of the toilet seat and rushed at his sister, his eyelids turned inside out and his lips pulled above and beneath his teeth as he wiggled his hands through his spiky brown hair. The ploy worked, for she fled the bathroom in terror, screaming like only girls knew how, and he closed the door, locking it so he could finish brushing his teeth in peace, with the sink all to himself.

Stepping up onto the toilet seat again for extra height, Joey peered back into the mirror, practicing tomorrow’s faces and wishing dearly he had a third eye protruding from his forehead. Monica certainly wouldn’t have the guts to hog the bathroom if she had a Cyclops for a brother!

He found the toothpaste and his brush (which had a neon red cap that was shaped like a shark’s head) and proceeded to brush his teeth, making sure to gurgle loudly when he heard his sister knocking impatiently at the door. Her banging did not ease up, however, and only became more demanding as his noises became more grotesque. Finally, upon hearing the approaching footsteps of his not-too-pleased-about-having-to-get-out-of-bed-at-nine o’clock-in-the-evening father, he spit the toothpaste leftover into the sink and gargled quickly just as the banging on the door turned stereo.

"All right already!" he shouted, jumping off the toilet. "I can hear! Quit banging so loud!" He fumbled with the toothpaste tube, planning to screw the cap on super-tight so Monica couldn't open it without a fight, but as he started to grab it, one of his fingers accidentally sent the cap rolling into the sink . . . and down the drain.

"Rats!" he cried, and climbed back onto the toilet seat for a better view. His father had been meaning to replace the drain cover when he had time, and had told everyone to be extra careful with their smaller items until then.

"Joseph! Open the door now, or your next allowance will be *severely* cropped!"

The fearsome rumble of his father's voice (coupled with the threat of an allowance cut) was more than enough to pry Joey from the toilet seat. He unlocked the door, stuck his tongue out at Monica again, and pointed at the sink. "The toothpaste cap's stuck in the drain."

Mr. Miller swatted at his son's head. "Ugh. Didn't I tell you to be careful around the sink until I fixed it? And what's all the noise about?"

"Monica wouldn't give me my space, so I—"

Scowling, Mr. Miller held up his hand. "I don't want to hear it! Joey, why do you always have to bother your sister like this? What I wouldn't give for a night when you weren't trying to make her life miserable."

Monica, who'd been clinging to her father's leg the entire time, now stepped forward and retrieved her fallen hairbrush. As she leaned over, she spotted Joey's bare feet and took it upon herself to stomp on one quite firmly.

"Yeow!" cried Joey, and he lunged at his sister with his hands, not quite reaching her face before Mr. Miller grabbed him by the pajamas and hoisted him up over his shoulder. "Hey, *she* stepped on *my* foot! Why don't you swing *her* around like a sack of potatoes?"

"That's enough, you two," he said, not caring to pay more attention than he had to at the moment. "Joey, it's too late to be pestering your sister. Monica, brush your teeth and don't forget to turn off the light when you're finished."

"Yes, daddy," Monica replied, smiling sweetly as Mr. Miller carried Joey, torso wriggling like a worm's, from the bathroom.

"She wasn't that nice before you came!" protested the boy, trying to wrench free of his father's grasp. "She always hogs the sink! And she always steps on my feet whenever I don't move out of the way for her to look at her dumb ol' face in the mirror!" He would have continued his tirade indefinitely had not Mr. Miller given him a look of utter exasperation as he set Joey down on his bed.

A single word parted his father's lips. "Sleep."

Joey rolled his eyes but made no further protest. Climbing under the sheets as Mr. Miller flicked off the light, the boy made one last face imitating his sister's and mock-gagged for a second before a stern "Shh!" sounded from the doorway.

"Sleep!" hissed Mr. Miller, and he closed Joey's bedroom door.

Joey sighed and stared up at the pastel blue of his ceiling where moonlight that trickled in through the Venetian blinds of the window beside his desk cast pillars of pale whiteness over his bed. On some nights he talked to the pillars, like they were unearthly guardians watching over him, always there to listen when he had something to talk about. Tonight was one of those nights.

"She thinks she's so cute," he murmured out loud. "All she has to do is smile and she gets her way, every time! Whenever I smile like that, they think I'm 'up to no good'! I'm two years older than she is and I get no respect! And even if I were a little eight-year-old brat like her, I'd still be the one who gets blamed for everything. What I wouldn't give to have her locked in a cage or . . . or stuffed down a drain!"

Nevertheless, that was the way things were, and it was very unlikely he would be able to rearrange the situation single-handedly, so he gave up talking to himself and allowed his eyelids to slowly droop as he fell into sleep. It seemed he was on the verge of dreaming and waking, both at once, for hours until a familiar pressure in his abdomen brought him to rub his eyes and sit up. He hated having to relieve himself in the middle of the night, but when Mother Nature called, it was impossible to ignore her without losing some dignity.

He got out of bed and crept to his door, opening it slowly and tiptoeing into the dark hallway where all was silently still. As he approached the bathroom, brushing his hands against the walls to make sure he didn't bump into anything, the warm glow of a tiny owl night-light perched above the toilet helped guide his steps a little better until he could find the light switch.

After doing his business, he flushed and went to the sink to wash his hands, finding that when he looked down into the drain, the toothpaste cap was gone.

"What . . . ?" he wondered out loud, and peered more closely at the drain. Had his father already removed it? He hadn't seemed to be in the mood for such a chore, but nevertheless the cap was gone, the drain empty.

Too bad dad didn't think to stuff Monica down there while he was at it, he thought.

With a sigh, Joey left the sink to dry his hands, and was halfway to the door when he suddenly froze in his tracks, an unusual sound tickling his ears.

It was coming from the sink, and it was not one of the usual noises sinks made, like water gurgling as it ran through the pipes or the "nob-nobb" of air when it got trapped in there. The sound that emanated from the drain now was like nothing he'd ever heard before. Almost like a whisper, deep and throaty, trying to rise above the pipe's domain, there was not enough solidness in the sound yet to form communication.

Nevertheless, Joey's curiosity was piqued. He approached the sink with careful steps, wondering whatever could be making such odd noises from a drain. Perhaps some sort of animal had gotten trapped in the pipes from outside and had somehow wandered here. Then again, maybe it was a deformed mutant squirrel that fed on metal, toothpaste-leftover, and spit.

That particular idea urged him to look down into the sink, down into the dark drain. He really hoped it was a mutant.

"Psst! Hey kid! There you are!"

With a terrified yelp, Joey leaped backwards and pressed his back against the bathroom wall, his eyes wide as he warily surveyed the sink from a safe distance. The echoing sound continued to waft through the air, mixing with the frenzied beating of his heart.

The sink was speaking to him! This was both his wildest fantasy and his worst nightmare come true. As he imagined in either dream, his body was suspended and his mouth dropped open in awe. When the sounds did not cease, he bit his lip in an attempt to wake himself up and received only pain in response.

This was no dream!

The noises grew louder and gained a harsh edge, as if whatever dwelled in the drain was getting angry at being ignored. Joey certainly did not want his parents to be awakened by a loud-mouthed sink, so he stepped forward again, clutching his pajama shirt in two white-knuckled hands. Once he leaned over the edge of the sink, the noises from within became clearly audible again.

"Well, well! Looks like you've finally sprouted some courage from that miserable hide of yours!"

Joey peered down the drain, but saw nothing more substantial than a murky darkness, and so decided that he must be going crazy, because up until now the sink had never ever spoken to him . . . especially not in such an irritated tone. He wasn't quite sure what to do, but he knew he couldn't simply let his mouth hang open like a dullard's. It took some practice, but once he got the muscles of his jaw to reawaken, words came.

"What . . . who, no . . . *what* are you?"

There was a sarcastic grumble from the drain. "Hah! *There's* an original sentiment! You rip it from *Star Trek*?"

Joey frowned and folded his arms. "I hate *Star Trek*. Now answer my question."

"Geez, kid! Those brown spikes must be implanted pretty deep within that thick skull of yours for you not to know a simple *pîpa daemôn* when you see one!"

"But I can't see a thing down there," Joey protested, leaning over the edge of the sink with his hands clutching the rim. "And I've never heard of a 'peepa-day-mon' before."

"Ugh! Such a terrible misuse of Romance and classic Latin!"

"Pe-pa . . . *pîpa day-munn* . . ." attempted Joey, to no avail.

The talking drain let out a harried sigh. "'Pipe demon', kid, though some people so kindly refer to me as a bad pipe dream. I'm a causer of great mischief and confusion, and I love practical jokes. I'm also an Aquarius. Is that enough explanation for you?"

Having climbed onto the toilet for better leverage, Joey leaned his head into the sink as far as he dared, squinting down the drain in hopes of seeing something. The flick of a tail-like apparatus was enough, and he jerked his head up in a mixture of horror and amazement. The only word able to escape his lips was, “Cool!”

“Ooh, so now you’ve come to accept me? After you, a puny human boy, were shivering like vanilla Jell-O pudding! What makes you think that I won’t jump right out of here and snack on that fleshy rump of yours?”

Joey moved his head back a little more, but only a little. With a defiant look, he thrust his chin forward and began to reach for the faucet. “Cause, if you even try, I’ll wash you right away . . . with *hot*.” He moved towards the left knob, but a terrified yelp from below made him reconsider.

“Hey, hey now!” rasped the pipe demon. “You’ve made your point! Now kindly put your chin away and let’s get down to business.”

Returning to his normal crouch upon the toilet seat, Joey cocked his head. “What business?”

“Ah. Allow me to introduce myself formally. I am Raluphus, of the Third Sludge lineage. Knowing your simplistic ways with words, I will allow you to call me Ralph. You, of course, are Joey, lowly boy in need of a little assistance concerning getting even with his imperially-inflated sister.”

“Oh,” Joey breathed, beginning to smile. Though as a rule he never liked to associate with monsters of any sort—especially the pesky one under his bed—he was warming quickly to this particular fellow. They’d known each other for mere minutes and already they had something in common! Grinning something terrible, he leaned his elbows against the rim of the sink and propped his chin atop his knuckles. “Okay, I’m listening.”

Ralph cleared his throat . . . at least that was what Joey assumed he was doing, for he still had no idea what the pipe demon looked like except that he had a long slimy tail.

“It’s no secret that your sister needs a lesson or two in how to treat men properly. I’ve been listening in on you two every night for the last week or so, assessing the situation. Oh, by the way, that idea about shoving her down here, now that is worthy of a

pipe dream!”

“You really think so?” Joey asked, elated. He allowed himself a proud smile before he sobered again, turning his eyes to slits. “Hey, wait a minute! How’d you know I wanted to do that?”

“There are pipes underneath your bedroom, you know. Not very big ones, but extremely conductive of sound if you press your ear really close. Do you always talk to yourself before beddy-bye time?”

Joey blushed. “I don’t talk to myself! I talk to . . . to my ceiling. There are these strips of light that shine in from outside, and they don’t complain when I’m in the mood to unload my frustration . . . it’s not the craziest thing I could be doing at night!”

“Woah! Talk about an overactive imagination! No wonder nobody around here takes you seriously! But we can change all that, if you want.”

“Now you’re talking! What’s the plan?”

Ralph coughed up a hoarse laugh. “Come now, don’t be modest! Yours is more than adequate!”

“You mean . . . stuffing Monica down the drain?”

“Sure! Why not get back at her on a grand scale? I’ll bet she’d never expect to find herself stuck down here in a million years! But I can be good company. You should hear my Bob Hope impression.”

The offer was tempting, Joey had to admit that, even if it proved to be completely ridiculous. How could he put a four-foot-tall sister down a drain that was barely an inch and a half wide? Yet, there seemed to be no problem with talking to a pipe demon. “How would we get her down there? Isn’t the drain too small?”

“Tsk-tsk,” chuckled Ralph. “You obviously haven’t seen my kind in action before. I have my ways with troublesome little children. Now, shall we begin?”

“I don’t know,” murmured Joey, biting his fingernail nervously. “My parents would be real mad if they found out I’d put my sister down the drain. My dad can get small stuff out, like toothpaste caps and rings, but I’m not so sure about a girl. In any case, I know he’d be mad at me.”

“Oh, pish on your parents! They’ll never notice she’s gone! We’ll take her down here, have some fun with her and then wonder why we were so nervous in the first place about creating a

little mayhem where it's obviously needed. Besides, I'm getting tired of smelling your dad's stinky fingers every time he tries to fish something out of the drain—as if he has the right! Doesn't he know that what falls down here is legally mine by international pipe law?"

Joey shook his head. "I don't keep up much with monster laws, but really . . . can you stuff my sister down there?"

"I can," Ralph assured him, voice full of pride. "If you'll kindly guide her here, we can get this party going!"

"All right, but this better not get me in trouble!"

"Hey, would I lie? I take my business very seriously, kid. This can be a slam-dunk job, but only if you promise me one thing."

Joey looked vigilantly down the drain, still seeing nothing more than the occasional flicking of a shiny tail. "What would that be?"

"You must never tell your parents about me."

Ralph's voice was quite serious when he spoke now, causing a tremor of nervousness to wriggle upward from Joey's abdomen. When the nervousness got to his hands, he raised a finger to his mouth and started chewing again on his nails. The pipe demon was offering him the chance of a lifetime . . . so why wasn't he taking it? He'd be a fool to refuse, and yet there was a tiny, pestering voice inside his head warning him that the deal couldn't be this simple. There had to be some catch somewhere he wasn't thinking about right at the moment (probably because he was imagining his sister being eaten by the sink and how he'd love to hear her scream). How did other boys behave when pipe demons came to them and offered to stuff their sisters down a sink drain?

"Hey, kid!" grumbled the pipe demon. He was beginning to sound impatient. "Joey! What's with the moment of silence? You can trim your nails later. Now, go get that cute little sister of yours—I'll be waiting."

"I don't know," Joey said finally, furrowing his brow. "I mean, she's just my puny sister and all, but I don't want to *hurt* her. Just scare her a little, teach her to start respecting me."

The pipe demon sighed. "Joey, Joey, Joey. You aren't getting soft on me are you?"

"No, but—"

“But nothing! We’re giving your sister much unneeded beauty sleep while we stand around here clucking like chickens! You’ve been wanting to get back at her for a long time, and now’s the perfect opportunity! But if you’re going to throw it out the window, there are plenty of other, more succulent children to deal with. Like that girl who lives across the street. She looks like a meal and a half!”

“Most definitely,” Joey agreed, laughing, “but I’ll have to think of a way to get her—my sister, I mean—down the drain—”

“Just leave that part to me, kid. All you have to do is bring her here and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Nodding and flicking off the light, Joey padded back down the hallway to his bedroom. All the way, he walked with his head twisted around, eyes transfixed on the bathroom. He hoped Ralph wasn’t just a bad pipe dream. Demon. Whatever. So long as Monica learned her lesson well and gave him some respect for a change.

Eventually, after an semi-eternity of muttering to himself in frustration, Joey fell prey to his own weariness and slept.

* * *

Seemingly moments after he’d closed them, Joey was opening his eyes to the morning and yawning groggily, his body draped across his bed so that his feet dangled over one side and his head over the other. When he glanced over at the huge wristwatch-shaped clock on his wall, which read eight-fifteen, he let out a fitful growl and jumped to his feet. He’d already missed half of *Captain Planet*, and worse yet, Monica had probably gotten to the prize at the bottom of the Cocoa-Puffs box!

He ran into the kitchen to find his sister sitting at the large oaken table, the familiar brown box of cereal dwarfing her tiny head. She was wearing her usual pink pajamas and bunny slippers, slurping her breakfast and smiling prettily.

“G’morning, Joey.”

Without a word he went straight to the cereal box and stuck his hand inside, sifting through the food to find the prize—a yo-yo that glowed in the dark. When his fingers touched nothing more substantial than balls of chocolate, he turned to Monica

and glared.

“Okay, where’s the prize?” he demanded, trying to peek at her left hand, which was conveniently hidden underneath the table.

“None of your business,” said Monica, and continued eating. Joey lunged at her, attempting to grab her hidden hand, but she was already sliding from her chair and bounding off into the den like a pink bunny rabbit. “You should’ve woke up earlier, sleepy-head!”

Joey would have gone in pursuit, but he knew it would be useless to wrench the toy from her now, when his parents were still asleep. They’d definitely skin him if he made Monica cry, which she most certainly would do when he filled her slippers with leftover macaroni and cheese.

For the time being, he satisfied himself with breakfast. As he climbed up onto the counter to reach the really big bowls he liked on the second shelf of the cupboard, Monica scurried in behind and took her bowl of cereal into the den to watch cartoons. For some girlish reason she let loose a giggle when she saw him up there, as if he was the recurring joke around the house since last week when he’d tried climbing up and fallen. If his mother hadn’t stopped using paper plates, he would have flung one at his sister now. Maybe if he aimed right, she would swallow it and make clinking noises whenever she walked.

Captain Planet was nearly over by the time he got to the den. Monica was sitting cross-legged in his favorite spot directly in front of the TV so that her nest of hair blocked out a fair portion of what went on the screen.

“Hey, move your fat head!” Joey yelled, and tossed a couch cushion at her.

“Eek!” she screamed, ten times louder than he had, and jumped to her feet, pointing at the floor where her overturned bowl had deposited a sizable puddle of milk onto the carpet. “Look at what you made me do!”

“I did *not*!” Joey retorted, staring in horror at the accident. “I was aiming for your head!”

Despite his reasoning, all luck drained from his side of the room as his sister folded her arms and stalked off in the direction of the hallway. “I’m telling!”

"Ugh!" growled Joey, realizing he'd fallen easily into another of his sister's traps. What a way to start off the morning! The least he could do was lessen his punishment by removing his own bowl from the den, since eating of any kind wasn't allowed in there, and he did so with great haste, sitting himself at the table just as a sleepy-eyed Mrs. Miller entered.

"Come see, mommy! Come look at what mean ol' Joey did!" pleaded Monica, pulling her mother by the hand.

If looks could kill, the one Joey gave his sister would have fried her on the spot, leaving only two steaming puddles of pink dripping from cooked-marshmallow slippers.

"Joseph!" shouted Mrs. Miller from the den. "You march your butt right in here and clean up this mess—NOW!"

There was no use in fighting fate today, for it was clearly set on destroying any status he had as an older brother.

Promptly after wiping up the spilled milk (while Monica watched on in delight from the doorway), he was grounded to his bedroom for the rest of the day until such time as his parents were able to think of a more permanent punishment. Joey obeyed, but made sure to stop by the bathroom first.

"Ralph?" he called, sticking his head down into the sink and looking for movement.

"Geez, kid!" rasped the reply from below. "What are you trying to do, demolish my eardrums!?"

Joey paid no attention, for he was too caught up in his own excitement. "Oh, Ralph, I'm so glad to see you! I mean, hear you! I think it's time to teach Monica her lesson."

"Great! Then let's do it! Go and bring the lass in here, then close the door while you wait out in the hall. I'll give you the signal when I'm done."

Joey nodded and smiled deviously as he left the bathroom and padded towards the den. From the kitchen he could smell his mother's cooking and hear her humming as she went about her routine of preparing lunch. If he knew his parents correctly, by now his father would be out on the porch reading the newspaper like he did every Sunday, which meant Monica was alone in the den . . .

. . . and prey to his delightful plan.

Before entering the room, he stuck his head around the corner of the doorway to make sure his sister was all by herself. Sure enough, she sat in the huge recliner, wearing a disgustingly pink dress that made Joey want to gag, but he held his stomach and tiptoed into the den, smiling as tenderly as he could manage. When Monica saw him, she looked at him with an unreadable expression.

“What are you doing out of your room?” she asked, stroking the hair of her Barbie doll which she clutched in one tiny hand.

Joey came to stand at her side and bowed his head. “I just wanted to come and tell you sorry for being so rotten before. I shouldn’t have thrown the pillow at you, and I shouldn’t have yelled at you to get out of the way. You’re my only sister and I should have more appreciation for how lucky I am to have someone so wonderful to keep me company. I mean, I could never forgive myself if something happened to you and all I thought about was seeing the TV.”

As he spoke, he couldn’t believe what was coming out of his mouth, and almost puked twice, but it paid off in the end, for when he was finished, Monica was blushing. She actually believed his feigned speech! Girls may have pioneered getting whatever they wanted with compliments and sweet faces, but when it came down to it, they were just as susceptible to the effects of flattery as anyone else.

“Anyway,” he continued, glancing nervously towards the kitchen doorway. “I also wanted to make it up to you.”

Monica’s face brightened. “Really?”

“Sure. I’ve been working on a surprise in my bathroom, er, I mean bedroom . . . uh, that is, it’s *in* the bathroom.”

“Wait a minute,” Monica said, narrowing her eyes. “Why is my present in the bathroom?”

Joey thought quickly. “I needed soap. You see, I carved you a dove made of soap, like the one I made in art class a few weeks ago.”

Instant magic. Monica’s face lit up again and she slid from the recliner enthusiastically. “Ooh! Really!”

“Um, yeah, really. Now, follow me.”

Hurriedly, Joey led his sister into the hallway, stopping at the bathroom door and turning to face her with a wide grin on his

face. He gestured inside. "It's in the sink."

Monica started inside, but stopped as she passed through the threshold. "Aren't you coming too?"

"Of course not," replied Joey. "Ladies first is the rule of a true gentleman." For added effect he bowed grandly.

Blushing again, his sister turned and entered the bathroom fully, and once she was clear of the door, he grabbed the knob and pulled it shut just in time to hear a frightened yelp from within. Then a noise like a garbage disposal being turned on . . .

. . . another yelp . . . slurping, the familiar "knob-knob" sound of air stuck in the pipes, silence—

—and, at last, a satisfied belch.

The entire process took no more than ten seconds. Ralph was really efficient at whatever he did! Upon hearing the burp, Joey re-entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him, scrunching up his nose at the musty, damp smell that suddenly filled his nostrils. Along the floor was a trail of greenish slime that led from the middle of the bathroom to the sink, which was covered in the goo.

Monica's clothing was strewn all over the place, though she herself was nowhere to be seen.

With a satisfied sigh, he approached the sink, trying not to step in the slime. "Ralph?" he hissed, looking into the sink. "Ralph? Did everything go okay?"

Another belch emanated from the drain and a pair of pink, slime-soaked underwear came shooting into the air, just barely missing hitting Joey's head.

"Ew!" he cried, flinging his arms over his head. Of all the most terrible sights to see, pink panties were the worst!

"Sorry," came Ralph's satisfied reply. "Cotton gives me gas."

Joey nodded sympathetically. "I'm the same way with oatmeal, but my parents make me eat it anyway, like I'm a horse or something! Speaking of my parents, they're gonna flip when they see this mess! You didn't say anything about slime, even though it's pretty cool."

"Well, normally I'm not this disorderly, but your sister kicked like a mule the entire way down! I can still feel her kicking now."

Grinning, Joey poked his head into the sink. "Is she down there now? Hey! I can hear her squealing! Ha! This should show

her!” The sound of Monica’s shrill cries had never sounded better than they did now, muffled and coming up from the drain in scarcely more than a hollow whisper. Anyone else would have dismissed the sound as a mouse’s, but Joey knew what it really was.

“Joey! Let me out of here now!” cried the girl threateningly. “When mommy finds out about what you’ve done she’s gonna spank your butt ‘till it’s red!”

“My, she’s a feisty little fillet!” Ralph commented. “But she’s snug and cozy down here now.”

“Good job,” commended the boy, hopping off the toilet and making for the door. “I wish I could stay here all day and listen to the beautiful noise, but I *am* grounded, after all. See ya’ ‘round, sis!”

Another insistent cry came from the drain, mixing with Ralph’s bubbly chuckle, and Joey left the bathroom, figuring that his parents could deal with the mess when they found it. Being grounded to his bedroom for the entire day, he certainly couldn’t be blamed for his sister’s mess! And besides that, since they didn’t believe in pipe demons, there was no way they would think of looking down the drain and finding their precious little girl covered in a thick film of sink goo.

Finally, he thought, Monica is getting what she deserves, and this time she can’t run to mommy for help. Only me and Ralph can set her free—if we ever feel like it! And after the way she’s been treating me lately, that could be a long time from now.

Joey closed his bedroom door and made himself comfortable on the bed, where he planned out a day of reading comic books and playing video games simultaneously.

* * *

It took until four-thirty for his parents to figure out something was wrong. Joey was on page thirteen of *Silver Surfer* when his mother came knocking at his door with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Joey, honey, have you seen your sister lately?”

With the most innocent and angelic of faces, the boy sat up in bed and shrugged his shoulders. “Gee, mom. Sorry, but I’ve been in here all day. Has something happened to her?”

"I'm not sure yet," replied Mrs. Miller as she rubbed her chin. "I found her clothes scattered all around the bathroom, and everything was wet. Are you sure you haven't seen her? She didn't tell you she was going outside to play or anything like that?"

Another shrug. "Nope, but I bet she went swimming with her friend Welma across the street. They always sneak off without telling you, but I guess this time Monica was lazy about changing into her bathing suit."

Mrs. Miller didn't seem to be satisfied. "Hmm . . . I don't think so. Monica wouldn't do something like that without telling me or your father first."

"Maybe she got eaten by the sink," Joey offered, snickering.

"Oh, come now, Joey dear. Don't be silly. This is serious."

Don't be silly. That was all his mother thought of him? A silly little boy who never told the truth or used his manners even if his life depended on it? "How am I supposed to see anyone or anything when I'm caged in here all day? When you find Monica, will you ground her to her room for messing up the bathroom?"

"I don't like the tone of your voice, young man. If you want to eat dinner tonight, I suggest you keep your temper to yourself. And how I deal with your sister is none of your concern."

Joey looked away from his mother's face, biting back an unsavory word or two. Even with Monica gone he was still treated like a pet, secondary to her. Not once had his mother asked him how he was, as if he couldn't compare to the worth of an only daughter.

At any rate, Mrs. Miller left him alone again without more than a sigh of approval . . . or perhaps exasperation.

* * *

When Joey looked up from his comic book, it was getting dark outside. Out in the front yard, Mr. Miller was calling for Monica to come inside. He'd been yelling himself horse to no avail for the past fifteen minutes, and as Joey went to his window and peeked out through the blinds, the look he saw on his father's face was none too pleased. As he watched further, he saw his mother walk out onto the lawn and stand by her husband's side, where she spoke to him nervously.

Though he couldn't hear exactly what was being said, from the look on his parents' faces, they were approaching the panic stage, and Joey was enjoying every minute of it.

* * *

Six o'clock arrived and Joey didn't smell dinner for the first time since his mother had caught the flu a few years back. By now he was famished, and so managed enough bravery to open his bedroom door a crack and spy down the hallway. It was unusually dark since the two hall lamps, one at each end, hadn't been turned on yet.

When he entered the kitchen, all was still, and his parents were nowhere to be seen. Taking advantage of the situation, Joey raided the fridge for a sandwich and took it into the den to watch TV while he ate. As he pigged-out in front of a *The Simpsons* re-run, it dawned on him that the house seemed odd without anyone else inside it. On the one hand, it was nice to be able to watch something without having to yell at his sister to sit down, but on the other hand, now that it was getting dark, he was beginning to get the spooky feeling that perhaps he'd started something unanticipated when he'd put Monica down the sink. What if his parents had freaked out completely and were burrowing into every backyard in search of their daughter?

To ease his fears (or perhaps aggravate them), he got up from the recliner and brushed some crumbs from his pajamas as he walked slowly to the front porch. The warm breath of late summer blew in through the screen door, and outside the sky was turning orange on the horizon. It reminded him of a movie he'd once seen where everyone on Earth had perished and only one man was left alive to keep himself company.

Turning away from the door, Joey thought about what Monica was doing in the sink. He wondered if Ralph was talking to her and if she'd stopped shrieking yet.

The screen door rattled and Joey's parents entered, looking terribly upset and haggard. Mr. Miller was saying something like "don't worry, we'll find her," while Mrs. Miller sobbed uncontrollably. They walked right past the den and into the kitchen as if the very world had come to an end. Curious, Joey followed his

parents into the kitchen and saw his father dialing a number on the phone while his mother wept in a chair.

"Who are you calling?" he asked, cocking his head to one side.

"Oh, there you are," murmured his mother between tears. "We can't find your sister anywhere. We checked all her friends houses and they haven't seen her, so maybe it's time we called the police."

The police! This certainly hadn't been part of his plan! What would a cop do if he knew Monica had been willingly thrown into a sink drain by her jealous brother? The time to come clean was now or never, he realized, and threw himself in between the phone and Mr. Miller.

"Dad, wait! I . . . I know where Monica is."

Mrs. Miller looked up and sniffed uncertainly. "You do? What do you mean?"

"Yes, Joseph," Mr. Miller added, clicking the telephone receiver off. "What do you mean?"

Joey sighed looked towards the hallway. "I didn't mean to keep her there for too long, but this pipe demon came to me last night and told me he was a *peepa-deemun* and he offered to help me get back at Monica for being so overbearing—"

Mr. Miller put his finger across Joey's lips. "All right, Joey. Cut the fancy wording and just tell us where your sister is."

"Well," Joey began, his nervousness increasing with every breath. "She's in the bathroom sink drain."

A mixed look of horror and confusion crossed the Millers' faces as they both stood together in front of their son. In unison they both cried, "What?"

"It's no big deal!" Joey wailed, fearing a severe spanking before he could fully explain the situation. "Ralph will just spit her back up if I ask him to!"

Mrs. Miller looked to be on the verge of fainting, for she leaned on her husband for support. Mr. Miller, though clearly shocked, fought to keep his stern demeanor as he wagged a finger at Joey. "Young man, this is why we never let you have pets!"

By now tears were streaming down the boy's face, and he shifted back and forth on his feet. "Please don't be mad! I'll go to him right now and get Monica!"

"Oh, no you don't," said his father, stepping forward to grab him by the pajama shirt and simultaneously causing Mrs. Miller to stumble forward too since she'd been leaning on him. "I don't trust any kind of creature living in a sink drain, especially one named *Ralph*. You and your mother stay here while I check out the situation."

"But dad—"

"No buts. If I'm not back in five minutes, call the animal control center."

Mrs. Miller took over restraining her son as Mr. Miller left the kitchen, unfastening his belt along the way.

"Dad! Wait!" cried Joey insistently as his father disappeared into the hall. "Belts only work on human butts! Ralph's a pipe demon!"

"Oh, dear God," moaned Mrs. Miller. "What have you gotten us into, Joseph?"

There came a horrendous belching sound from the bathroom, one that easily drowned out Mr. Miller's startled yell. For a few brief moments both his shouting and the belching sound grew louder until a bone-rattling explosion shook the house. Both Joey and his mother fell to the floor and covered their heads, expecting the ceiling to collapse upon them, sealing them in a dusty tomb, but after one last thump sounded from down the hall, everything became deathly quiet.

Joey kept squirming, trying to break free of his mother's grasp, for he was beginning to think the worst had happened: His father had been sucked in by the pipe demon. But why would Ralph do that? He didn't seem like a mean demon . . . though he'd only known him for a day.

"Mom! Let me go! I wanna see what happened!" With a firm tug, Joey tore free, leaving behind several of his pajama buttons in his mother's hand, and scurried towards the hall on all fours.

"Joey!" cried Mrs. Miller, crawling in pursuit of her son. "Come back! We've got to call the police!"

The boy wasn't listening, and was out of sight in a second, leaving Mrs. Miller alone to crawl to the phone and yank it from its holder so hard that the cradle fell off the wall. Frantically she dialed the number for EMS, imagining what she was going to say to the operator.

Meanwhile, Joey snaked his way through the hallway, blind except for the feel of the wood floor underneath his hands and feet. As he got closer to where the bathroom was, he noticed the floor was immersed in large puddles of liquid. He hoped it was water, but wouldn't have been surprised if it was something more disgusting. He tried not to think too much about what might have happened between his father and Ralph, knowing that there was not a peep from either human or demon, and suddenly he felt very unprepared for what lay ahead. Suppose his father lay unconscious on the floor with a huge chunk of sink in his head? He didn't think he was strong enough to lug one hundred and fifty pounds of dad from the hall to his bed.

Concentrating so much on his worries, Joey almost didn't notice when his hand struck a moist object lying in the growing stream of water. Running his fingers over the object, he discerned the shape of his father's shoe . . . without a foot inside it.

"Psst! Joey! What are you doing!? Come back here now before you get yourself hurt!"

Joey heard the sound of his mother scurrying up behind him and felt her hands tugging at his feet. "Don't worry, mom! I know what I'm doing! Ralph won't touch me!" Mrs. Miller began to protest, but her pleas didn't stop Joey from pushing the bathroom door open.

The state of the bathroom was chaotic. Even though there was no light, Joey could hear and feel the rush of water gushing from the direction of the sink, which most certainly had been demolished if not totally incinerated. There was water everywhere, spraying forth and soaking him to the bone as it formed a shallow lake about half a foot deep. At this point, he decided to stand up and feel for the light switch.

"Hey, Joey!" It was Ralph who spoke, in his typical raspy way, though now it sounded much clearer and louder. "So there you are! Look at the mayhem I've created!"

The boy backed against the bathroom wall and swallowed a yelp. The pipe demon was undoubtedly free of the sink now, and that was either a good thing or a bad thing, depending on what had happened to Mr. Miller. "Uh," Joey began, his heart hammering away at his chest. "Have you seen my father in here by any chance?"

“Seen him—hah!” replied Ralph. “I *devoured* him! He was a lot hairier than your sister, though . . .”

Suddenly Mrs. Miller burst into the bathroom. “You ate my husband!?”

“Ooh, another uppity adult! Come just a little closer, sweetie, so I can feast on that magnificent bosom!”

“I most certainly will not!”

Joey’s head was reeling, and he spread his feet apart as he held his head. This was no friendly pipe demon! He was sure now that Ralph hadn’t taken care of Monica just to help a miserable boy out—he’d eaten the girl because he was hungry! And now his father was being digested, and if something wasn’t done quick, his mother would inherit the same fate.

“Whaddya say, Joey?” chimed Ralph. “Should I take care of Mrs. Cold Shoulder here?”

The boy opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out. When he tried to move his limbs, he found they were numbed stiff with terror. Luckily, Mrs. Miller wasn’t so flabbergasted, and she grabbed her son by the arm, yanking him from the bathroom as the pipe demon laughed throatily.

“Come on, Joey!” she cried. “We’ve got to get away from here!”

As he stumbled after his mother, his mouth finally found words. “He l-ied! Ralph lied t-to me!”

A tall but chubby police officer was just about to knock on the Miller’s front door when the water-logged mother and son stumbled through; they were babbling a mile a minute.

“Monster . . . sink . . . ate husband . . .” mumbled Mrs. Miller.

“Yeah . . . demon . . . lied said . . . *help!*” Joey added, equally incoherent.

The police officer didn’t smell any alcohol on either of them, though he was still quite skeptical. “Listen, ma’am. I wanna hear your story, but you have to slow down and start from the beginning.”

The officer placed his hands upon Mrs. Miller’s shoulders to console her, but she only flung them away and grabbed the man by his badge, pulling him towards the doorway. “Save your sweet talk for later, chum! You can lock me and my son away in an insane asylum, but only after you come and see for yourself what’s

devoured my husband and daughter!”

No further convincing was needed to urge the officer into the house. The first thing he noticed was the water streaming across the floors, the second, that there was an odd, bubbly kind of grunting coming from down the long hallway.

“Good Lord in Heaven,” breathed the cop, stepping over a sock that had washed out from the bathroom. “What have you people been doing in here?”

“It wasn’t us!” Joey whined, pointing urgently towards the hall. “It was *him*!”

Mrs. Miller sighed and pushed the officer forward. “We’ll talk later. For now just go arrest that beast or whatever you police people do in a situation like this!”

“All right, I’m going,” said the officer, half grinning and half frowning (a motion which made his pudgy complexion exceedingly peculiar) as he drew his flashlight and clicked it on. He made his way down the hallway, Mrs. Miller and her son following close behind, the former peeking over his shoulder and the latter spying from behind a thick thigh.

“You might want to draw your gun,” suggested Mrs. Miller as they approached the bathroom.

“Ma’am,” the officer whispered. “Let me handle this. You two should stay out here. Oh, by the way . . . is the light switch on the right or the left?”

“The left,” Joey offered. “Right beside the door frame.”

Boots sloshing in the ankle-deep water, the cop stepped forward and into the bathroom, his light flashing about faster and faster as he let out a credulous yelp. A moment later he found the light switch and flicked it on, Joey and Mrs. Miller sidled curiously through the threshold and gawking at the sight which greeted them.

It was definitely not a typical drain-clog that smiled back at the three humans. From where the sink had once been anchored to the floor there was a huge hole filled with the mass of a slimy, green skinned serpentine creature writhing amongst various cracked pipes and valves that spouted water into the air. In the rising water there were various items of discarded clothing, all of which was torn or shredded.

Ralph flicked his forked tongue and flashed his red eyes. "Joey! You've brought me dinner! How thoughtful!"

Joey stepped forward slightly and crossed his arms. "I did *not*! This is a police officer, and if you don't spit up my dad and my sister, he's gonna give it to you real good!"

The cop looked shakily down at Joey. "I am?"

"He is?" gurgled Ralph, a tinge of resentment in his voice. His scaly head tilted to one side. "But Joey, I thought we were friends. Surely any boy would love to have a loyal bathroom associate to dispose of all his problems. I thought you were one of those. Why the sudden change of heart?"

Joey decided to say what he wanted to say before the last of his courage burned out. "You didn't tell me you ate people! I thought you just . . . kept them hostage or something. You lied to me!"

"Me? Lie?" asked Ralph in mock shock.

"Yeah! You never told me anything about eating when we made the deal!"

"You never asked, kid!"

The police officer had no idea what the two were talking about, but then again, he'd never had to deal with a ten-foot-long pipe snake before.

Mrs. Miller stepped forward, nudging the police officer in the ribs. "Shouldn't you be doing something about now?"

"Er, okay," replied the man unceremoniously. He held up his gun and tried to keep his hands steady. "Uh, excuse me, er, whatever you are, but I'm going to have to place you under arrest for, er, breaking and entering, and possible, er, assault. Come willingly and I won't have to use force . . ."

"I hate it when my food talks back to me," sighed the pipe demon, his elongated neck craning closer to the human trio.

Mrs. Miller rolled her eyes. "That's the best you can do!?"

"Ma'am, please stop clawing at my arm—"

The officer's sentence was cut short as Ralph lashed out with his tongue and took hold of the gun, yanking it from his grip with the slightest of ease. The man barely had time to realize what had happened when he suddenly found a slimy tentacle wrapped around his arm, pulling him towards Ralph's open, toothless mouth. The writhing anatomy seemed to have found its way up

from the hole in the floor, which gave no view of just how long this creature really was.

“Hey!” Joey shrieked, pulling on the officer’s jacket to keep him from being devoured, to little avail. “Ralph! Stop it right now!”

“Joey?” cried a voice from somewhere down the pipe demon’s throat. “Joey? Is that you?”

“Dad!” the boy shouted back in surprise, allowing a moment of weakness to rip the cop’s jacket from his fingers. The sound of Monica and Mr. Miller shouting excitedly was drowned out temporarily as Ralph’s mouth contorted impossibly to accommodate his latest feed’s chubby body. Mrs. Miller let loose a terrified scream as the police man was swallowed whole, sans his uniform, which the monster promptly spit up with a loud belch.

“Mmm, he’s nice and plump!” Ralph grumbled, licking his lips. Joey looked at his mother, who was thinking the same as he was, and both darted for the bathroom door, alas a little too late. As the boy reached the threshold, a startled yell sounded behind him as Mrs. Miller’s leg was seized by one of Ralph’s tentacles. In reflex, she grabbed Joey’s ankle and he grabbed hold of the towel rack beside the door.

“Ah-aah,” cooed the pipe demon with a laugh. “I see that the rest of my meal is trying to escape! How rude!”

Mrs. Miller grasped her son’s ankle as firmly as she could, but the creature’s pull was growing increasingly stronger. She knew she wouldn’t be able to hold on forever, and that if she did, she would only take Joey with her into a slimy prison. Glancing over her right arm, she saw another tentacle reaching for Joey’s free foot, and that decided her.

“Joey, honey!” she cried. “He’s got me, but you can still get away! Run for help!” With that, she let go and scrunched her eyes shut.

Joey wasted not a moment and sprang out into the hallway, preferring not to see the last of his family eaten. As he slipped and splashed towards the kitchen he could hear Ralph’s familiar belch and raspy voice as he called to the boy.

“Joooeey! Come back! I haven’t had dessert!”

At the doorway to the kitchen, Joey suddenly got an idea and made his way to the refrigerator, a mischievous smile playing

across his lips. If Ralph wanted dessert, Joey was going to give him one he'd never forget!

The water was knee-high when Joey re-approached the bathroom, his idea clutched tightly in his hands. He paused only momentarily to take a deep breath before he plunged, spitting water from his mouth, into the pipe demon's lair.

"Ah! Joey!" greeted Ralph in delight. "You've decided to return after all! I was beginning to think I'd have to go after you!"

Joey gritted his teeth. "I just remembered how I hate eating dinner without dessert."

"How touching," Ralph murmured, his tentacles silently wrapping around the boy's ankles. "Really, I *am* going to miss you, Joey, but you know the old adage: 'You are what you eat', so in the end I guess we won't be missing each other after all."

"Yeah . . . right," Joey muttered under his breath, closing his eyes tightly.

He was drawn forward and thrust into the pipe demon's mouth. There were no teeth, but lots of saliva and something that smelled like moss. It took all his strength to keep hold of the object in his hands as a powerful tongue swished his body around, pulling off his pajamas. Then, an experience he found quite disgusting, Joey was forced down the creature's throat headfirst and dropped into a mushy chamber that smelled the worst yet.

"Joey?" cried Mrs. Miller from somewhere to Joey's right. He felt a hand touching his arm. "Didn't I tell you to run?"

The boy righted himself and got on his knees. "Is Monica still here?"

"Yes," came the sound of Mr. Miller's voice. "This creature seems to have lousy digestion—but we're still stuck. What are we going to *do*?"

The police officer sneezed. "Rats! I think I'm allergic to something in here!"

"Joey, I told you to run—"

"Everybody shh!" Joey demanded, trying to feel for his sister's mouth, for she was wailing like an infant. "I have a way for us to get out of here! But you all should hold your noses first."

Everyone must have taken the hint, for immediately there was silence in Ralph's stomach. Joey smiled, though nobody else could see it, knowing that he'd given an order and everyone had

followed it. The power felt good.

However long he would like to revel in the feeling, now was neither the time nor the place. He uncorked the bottle gripped in his hand and dumped its contents, hearing Mr. Miller's muffled protest, onto the floor of Ralph's stomach. Once finished, he tossed the bottle aside and held his own nose, for the liquid's putrid stench threatened to overpower him.

"Nww fwhat?" muttered Mrs. Miller behind her palm.

"Now," Joey replied, leaning back against a slimy wall, "we just sit back and wait."

It didn't take long for results to begin manifesting themselves. Joey noticed that the liquid of Ralph's stomach was rapidly becoming warmer and more bubbly. Up until a few minutes ago, there had been movement, as if the pipe demon was slithering somewhere rapidly, but now the floor and walls of the stomach undulated in a progressively slower, lazier motion. Finally, all motion ceased except for the faint pulsing of blood through Ralph's veins.

"I think it worked!" hissed Joey, standing and wiping goo from his backside. "Quick! Somebody lift me up to the throat!"

The police officer's amused chuckling sounded from one end of the stomach. "You put the beastie asleep, didn't you? From the smell of things I'd say it was some vintage wine, late nineteenth century . . ."

Joey beamed almost bright enough to provide light. "I figured since it always puts my dad out whenever he drinks—"

"Could we just forget about the wine," interrupted Mr. Miller, who clearly wasn't thrilled at the idea of wasting an entire bottle of spirits on a ten-foot snake, "and work on getting out of here?"

The cop shut up and got to his feet, making his way carefully over to where Joey jumped up and down impatiently. Squatting, he allowed the boy to climb up onto his shoulder.

"Keep it steady," Joey ordered as he was raised up to where Ralph's esophagus began. Feeling with his hands and fingers, he discerned rubbery ridges and bumps that he used as foot-holds to hoist himself upward.

"Be careful, Joey!" his mother hissed from below.

As he climbed through Ralph's esophagus, he could feel the tunnel of flesh expanding and contracting slightly as air rushed in, then out in a slow rhythm. The pipe demon was obviously fast asleep, just as planned, though when he reached the outside, Joey wasn't quite sure what he was going to do next.

The entire climb was longer and harder than the descent had been. More than once his toes slipped from their precarious holds and he went sliding several feet back down again, but after several minutes of relentless determination, he reached the pipe demon's tongue, which was pastier and easier to hold on to. The mouth was open a crack, allowing a dull ray of light to filter in and glint off pools of saliva.

Grimacing, Joey crawled across the tongue and to the rubbery lips; he thrust one of his legs through—

"Eeek!" shrieked someone from outside.

"My God! Something's coming out of there!"

A sea of voices bombarded Joey's ears as he squeezed the rest of his body through the pipe demon's lips. He deposited himself onto a cold, wet concrete floor and rubbed saliva from his eyes, trying to see clearly the forms standing around him.

"Look! It's a boy! And he's alive!" someone shouted, and Joey felt hands grasping his shoulders, pulling him to his feet.

"Stand still," a voice ordered and he felt water spraying his face, then a cloth wiping over his skin. Once the gunk was out of his eyes, he could see that he was standing in a sewer canal, lit by fluorescent light. Several dozen people stood in a crowd around him, most dressed in orange and yellow construction-worker jump suits, and stared, eyes wide, at the spectacle before them.

"Hey, kid," the worker who held him said. "You okay? How'd you get in that thing's mouth?"

Joey was about to explain the whole situation when another, shriller voice cut through all the rest.

"Excuse me! People, please! Get some more lights over here!"

A thin, willowy balding man holding a microphone thrust himself before Joey as another with a video camera shined a bright light in his face. The balding man stood beside Joey and wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Good evening, folks. I'm Steve Schulz with this exclusive Channel 5 news story. Just moments ago, city workers here at Dis-

posal Project 1 were startled to see a large, serpent-like creature wash up from the stream of sewage behind me. But more startling is the appearance of a young boy, who only moments ago climbed from the creatures mouth.” At this point, Mr. Schulz turned to Joey and squatted so that their heads were level with each other. “Tell us, what was going through your mind when you discovered you’d been eaten by a sea-monster?”

Still sensitive to all the bright lights, Joey raised his hand up to his forehead and squinted at the camera that was focused on him. “Uh, well first of all . . . it’s not a sea-monster. It’s a pipe demon . . .” He trailed off and, remembering that he was naked, lowered both hands over his groin.

“Don’t worry about that,” Mr. Schulz chattered. “We’ll edit later. Now, give our viewers a personal account of what happened!”

By now Joey was flushing bright red, so worried about indecent exposure that he almost forgot about his family and the police officer still trapped inside Ralph’s stomach. Instantly he was babbling and tugging at the construction workers’ jump suits. “Oh my gosh! I almost forgot! My mom and dad are still in there! And my sister too! And this police guy!”

The group of people, particularly the reporter and his entourage, swarmed over to Ralph’s sleeping form in such a tightly-packed mass that Joey couldn’t see a bit of what was going on. He jumped up and down and tried to climb over the people’s backs as he heard yells for a ladder and rope.

“Hey! I wanna see too!” cried the boy, darting back and forth, trying to get a glimpse at the pipe demon.

“Heave!” someone cried, again and again until finally the crowd loosened just a bit so that Joey was able to squeeze through and into a tiny circle in front of Ralph’s mouth, where the members of his family and the cop were all spitting out saliva.

“Oh thank you, thank you!” Mrs. Miller sighed, shaking the hand of every worker she could reach. “I don’t know what we would have done without you!”

“Yeah,” the police officer chimed. “It was getting mighty frizzy down there . . .”

Mr. Schulz wasted no time. “Sir,” he said, addressing the worker who was unbuckling his harness. “What we have just wit-

nessed is truly remarkable. How does it feel to be a hero?"

"Well," replied the worker, beaming proudly. "I like to think that it was all part of a day's work."

Joey's mouth dropped open and he pushed his way towards the reporter and his camera. "Wait a minute! *I* was the one who climbed all the way up that demon's throat and called for help! If it wasn't for me, we'd all still be stuck down there, waiting to be digested!"

Mrs. Miller stepped behind her son and put her palm against his mouth. "You'll have to excuse little Joey. He tends to get excited easily."

An apathetic murmur sounded among the gathered workers, who seemed more interested in staring at Mrs. Miller's breasts, and the news crew continued their interview of the "Savior Dressed In Orange" as Mr. Miller picked up his son and carried him over his shoulder towards the nearest manhole.

"But dad!" the boy whined, wiggling his arms and legs ferociously. "I wanna be on TV as a hero!"

Mrs. Miller hustled her daughter and herself close behind Mr. Miller. "Please try to keep quiet, honey. You're certainly in no condition to be seen without any underwear by half the country. Besides, you have a big mess to clean up at home and the sooner you start on it, the sooner you'll be done."

Joey looked like he was going to implode. "Whaddya mean *I* have to clean up the mess!? It's not my fault Ralph's a slob! Why don't you make *Monica* clean it up! She's the one who got eaten!"

Monica snickered and stepped in close to her brother. "See what happens when you try to outsmart a girl? It *always* blows up in your face."

Speaking of faces, Joey's was red as a tomato, and he swiped at his sister, though a little too late, for Mr. Miller was already climbing the ladder that led to the busy city street above, where three times as many people had gathered. As the Miller family, naked as baboons, emerged, a mixture of laughter and gasps persuaded Joey to keep his mouth shut until they found a way to get home with some dignity. Maybe if he was quiet enough, his father would let him walk on his own so that his butt wouldn't be sticking up in the air for the world to see.

Luckily, there happened to be a taxi nearby, and on the whole ride home, Joey found himself wishing that the pipe demon would wake up soon and devour his parents again. The thought was delectable, though he knew it would probably end up somehow embarrassing him further, because he was a boy and therefore not allowed dignity when there was a little sister to suck it all up.

Glancing over to where Monica sat on Mrs. Miller's lap, Joey saw the girl flash a smile, as if she'd known this would happen all along.

Lucifer Works at Starbucks

Making himself comfortable in his favorite Starbucks window seat, Donald Roeser was about to look over the day's stock exchanges when he noticed a new employee serving espresso to a frail elderly woman two tables over. After a moment of gawking in disbelief he realized that he was staring at Satan, that he was dressed in a vest and apron, and that he was serving drinks at Starbucks of all places. More disturbing was the fact that the woman—as well as everyone else in the restaurant—seemed unaware of such a peculiar situation.

“Afternoon, Don.”

Jumping in his seat, Donald turned away from the devil and saw his good friend Terrence resting his briefcase beside the table as he sat down. “Shit, Terry,” he breathed, clearing his throat and straightening his tie. “Don’t startle me like that.”

Terrence said, “I’m sorry. What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s not me,” Donald replied, picking up his coffee. “It’s *him*.”

“Who?” asked Terrence, glancing around at the other tables.

“Look over my shoulder—no, my *right* shoulder.” When Terrence shrugged and stared blankly, he let out an exasperated sigh and jerked his thumb behind him. “Him. The guy with the horns. Don’t stare. He might notice you.”

“Oh, him? Talking to the elderly woman? He’s worked here for quite some time, I’m sure. That’s the new thing around here. Better service to make up for the high prices.”

Donald started to fidget. “Better service. Ha. I’ve never noticed him before today. What could he possibly be doing here? Scheming to steal everyone’s soul when they least expect? How could the managers even consider hiring such a character? Wouldn’t his presence deter business?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Terrence as he gestured for service. “Even the Prince of Darkness needs to earn a living somehow. It’s

nice to see the fellows here have obliged him. Stop being so tense and go with the flow. It's your lunch break."

"You must be nuts. How can you just blow this off like that? Aren't you the least bit worried that society's standards have fallen low enough to allow the devil to work in a public restaurant?"

Terrence shrugged. "It's the 21st century. Tolerance is the big thing now. Ah, there we go."

Turning slightly in his seat, Donald saw that Satan was coming towards their table. "Good Lord, he's coming this way," he hissed. "Put your hand down, you fool!"

"Come on, Don, relax. This is your lunch break."

"Like hell it is! I'm not going to sit around and sip coffee while the Master of All Evils struts around as if—" He had to shut up and straighten in his seat at this point, for the devil had just reached the table. He wore a name tag that read, "Lucifer".

"Good afternoon," Terrence said, as if he were speaking to any old waiter—who had horns growing out of his head. "I'll have a Zimbabwe Latte."

"Very good," said Lucifer. Then, looking down at Donald, "Would you like anything, sir?"

Donald bit his lip and faced the devil. "Shouldn't you be, er, burning souls in hell right now?" Underneath the table, Terrence kicked him. He kicked back just as hard, intent on getting some insight.

Lucifer took the question in good spirits and laughed, a deep baritone rumble with a tinge of malice around the edges (he was, after all, the devil). "I see my reputation precedes me. True, my biggest pastime does involve a certain amount of evil and merciless torture, but the bills still have to get paid. Besides, I quite like playing the role of common layman three days a week. Makes all the rest of what I do seem less daunting."

"But you're Satan," Donald insisted, furrowing his brow and trying not to sound too outraged in the presence of great evil. "Satan doesn't simply go around serving coffee and croissants to people in his spare time unless it involves some plot for world domination."

"Actually, I enjoy serving coffee," the devil responded, "and I prefer to be called Lucifer. It has a friendlier ring to it than Satan.

Now if you'll excuse me, I have to prepare your friend's order."

With that, Lucifer left the table and Donald turned back to face his friend, who simply shook his head. "You're making too much of this. You really are."

"No, I'm not," Donald snapped back, getting up and straightening his tie—something he always did whenever he was nervous, infuriated or nervously-infuriated. "I can get used to the idea that it is now legal in most states to eat roadkill or become a prostitute. I can get used to the fact that Mervyn's is now selling fish-netting to teenage girls as clothing. I can get used to the fact that TV stations are now allowed to broadcast afternoon cartoons that have more violence than an R-rated movie, but allowing, even encouraging society to mingle with Lucifer himself . . . that's too much. I won't just sit here and in good conscience allow such an atrocity to play out. Wanted criminals aren't allowed to walk the streets freely, so why should the devil be allowed to? I'm going to see the manager right this minute."

Terrence chuckled and buried his face in his newspaper. "Good luck. That'll probably be Darth Vader."

Said joke notwithstanding, Donald approached the main counter and asked for the manager anyway. Promptly a tall gentleman wearing a graying ponytail came out and shook hands with Donald.

"Hello, Mr. Roeser," he greeted. "I'm Stan Parks. I've been told you're dissatisfied with an aspect of our service?"

Donald cleared his throat and glanced quickly around, hoping Lucifer wasn't within earshot. "Well, er, yes. I'd like to discuss your hiring policies. You see, not five minutes ago the, er, devil came to my table and—"

"Ah, I see," interrupted Stan, apparently believing he had enough information to assess the situation. "You wanna make a complaint concerning Lucifer?"

"Well, uh, perhaps so, but . . ." Donald trailed off, for a moment considering the implications of getting the devil fired from his day job. Making license plates in hell, he thought. That's what would happen to any stubborn human who thought it improper for the Prince of Darkness to work blue-collar. "Perhaps just a comment then," he continued, feeling his courage drain away like blood through a syringe. "I don't feel comfortable, as a customer,

to be in the presence of the devil while trying to have my lunch.”

Stan shook his head and called Lucifer over, much to Donald’s distress. “I’m sorry, I’ve been a nuisance,” he blurted quickly, starting to step away. “I’ll just finish my coffee and be on my way —”

“Nonsense,” said Stan, grabbing him by the arm and smiling assuredly. For a moment there was a vision of the manager grinning deviously while he cackled something like, “You say you want to piss off the devil, eh? You got it!” when he was really saying, “I won’t stand for a dissatisfied customer. Now let’s get to the bottom of this.”

Lucifer came up beside Donald, giving him a brief nod and grin. “Is something the matter?” he asked.

“It seems so,” said Stan, folding his arms.

“No, no, no, that’s okay—” Donald blurted.

“This gentleman here is dissatisfied with your service. Now, sir, exactly what is your complaint?”

By now Donald had broken out in a sweat. He dabbed at his forehead with the back of his hand and over-adjusted his tie so that it was nearly strangling him. “Actually, if you must know, I-I simply thought it b-bad practice to be hiring the devil as-as an employee of your otherwise f-fine establishment.”

For a moment he feared he’d said too much, and that any minute now he’d find himself under a mile of brimstone, but instead of getting angry, Lucifer only smiled and put his hand on his shoulder.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” he said. “You don’t trust my reputation as the devil. Let me assure you, that when I show up for work here every morning, it’s only to participate in the practice of fair employment. An exchange of money for services, which is what any other job is, right? And I do leave my pitchfork downstairs, if you know what I mean.” He laughed then, along with Stan, as if at some inside joke. Donald couldn’t grasp the humor of the situation, for Lucifer’s fingers were singing the fabric of his suit.

“Look, Mr. Roeser,” said Stan after he’d calmed down. “It’s not our place to hire or fire employees because of their personal life. Lucifer has done very good work here and we will continue to keep him as one of ours. I’m sorry if you don’t agree with our hir-

ing policy, but I can't fire the devil simply because you don't like him."

Donald would have complained further, but he was beginning to feel a bit dizzy and needed to sit down. Lucifer reached out to grab him and, despite his feeble refusal, led him back to his table.

"Oh, Donald," sighed Terrence, putting down his newspaper and looking mildly concerned. "There you go again, getting yourself into a huff over the slightest things. It's your lunch break, for God's sake. Do you want a glass of water or something?"

"I do not," Donald grumbled, hastily brushing off the devil's hands from his shoulders as he rearranged himself in his chair. "I'm fine. Kindly let go of me."

"I'll get something to fix you right up anyhow," Lucifer said and wandered off quickly.

Terrence pulled his chair beside Donald's and helped undo his tie. "You don't look so good. Maybe we should go."

"No, no," Donald replied, waving his hands in a flustered way. "I just need a moment to gather myself."

"You really are taking this rather hard. I mean, no one else here seems to mind that he works here—"

"I was raised a good Christian, Terrence. Ever since I was little my mother and father taught me to praise God and shut out evil, whether it was in the form of violence, drug abuse, promiscuity, adultery . . . but now it's like I'm becoming some kind of extinct dinosaur. Kids are starting to have sex in the fourth grade, billboards are Playboy centerfolds, people are shooting each other right and left just so they'll make the nine o'clock news, and now here we have restaurants hiring demons and playing it off as equal opportunity. People may call me old-fashioned, but I know I'm right." A pause, then a forlorn glance at Terrence. "We're a dying breed, Terry. You and I."

Though Donald couldn't see, Terrence rolled his eyes as he put his arm around his friend's shoulder. "Oh, now you know that's not true. Things may be different, society may be changing, but that doesn't mean anything more than a little adjustment. Heck, having the devil work at Starbucks is actually a good thing, if you ask me. The less time he spends ruling his empire of damnation, the better. I know lots of people who would prefer having Lucifer serve them coffee rather than having him poke them with

a fork.”

Smiling wanly, Donald knew his friend had a point. Why question the devil’s decision to work above-ground for a change? It would be like questioning a thunderstorm that rained hundred dollar bills. No one in their right mind would do that; they’d be too busy scooping up armfuls of money.

“Here we go,” announced Lucifer when he returned to the table, a steaming cup in his hands. “This one’s on the house, and so is everything else you’ve ordered today, just to show I’m a nice guy. I shaved the chocolate myself. A guaranteed delight.”

Knowing who’d been poking around in the kitchen, Donald’s first instinct was to refuse the cup and throw up all the other food he’d ordered during his lunchbreak, but then it occurred to him that if the devil had wanted to poison him, he would have done so long ago. Hell, he could have driven a pitchfork through my heart by now if he’d wanted me dead, he thought. Refusing his coffee and insulting him would be pushing my luck, especially since he offer to pay my tab, which will save me ten bucks. I’ve already eaten the devil’s croissant, I might as well drink his coffee too. Why the hell not? He lifted the cup to his lips, sipped and—quite to his surprise—uttered a murmur of satisfaction.

“Do you like it?” asked Lucifer.

Donald nodded, suddenly feeling much better about everything as a comfortable warmth spread throughout his body. “Thank you, Lucifer. I’ll be damned if this isn’t the best cup of coffee I’ve ever had.” Then, a feeble look up at Lucifer. “Sorry. No pun intended.”

“None taken. Now, if you need anything else, don’t hesitate to call on me, all right?” With that he turned and left, attending to some other business.

Donald took another sip of coffee as Terrence replaced his chair on the other side of the table. “You see?” he said. “You made a big deal over nothing. The devil isn’t scheming anything. He just wants to serve coffee. It’s like I always tell you: read a book all the way to the end and you’ll probably be surprised by the ending.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Donald began. “The devil *is* sort of a nice fellow after all—”

His voice was cut off abruptly as the PA system came to life

with a brief squeak.

“Your attention please, everyone.” It was Stan, and he had Lucifer standing next to him at the front of the restaurant. Donald turned his chair so that he could watch and sip. “We’ve had a terrific month here at Starbucks, and I’d like to thank each and every one of our customers for helping our little cafe thrive.” A round of applause crackled throughout the restaurant; a few people even whistled. “I would also like to thank our newest Employee of the Month, Lucifer, for his fine service to our community. Without him much of this would not have been possible.”

Another cheer, this one noticeably louder than the first, went up as Lucifer removed his apron and stepped up to the mic, adjusting it’s height. “Thank you, everyone,” he said, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “It’s nice to feel appreciated by so many warm, devoted souls. I must return now to my domain below, but before I do, would like to remind you all to have a very nice day and don’t forget to pay.” Another wash of chuckles from the customers. He stepped away from the microphone and sank downward into the floor, leaving a hot cloud of smoke in the air and a burn mark on the tiles.

“Wow,” Donald murmured. “That was surreal.”

“Yes,” Terrence concurred. “He loves to do the floor thing.”

Standing, Donald pulled on his coat and prepared to leave. “Speaking of which, my supervisor will go through the floor if I’m not back at work on time. I’d better get going.”

“Same here,” said Terrence, reaching between the salt and pepper shakers for the butter knife. “Just let me take care of today’s lunch and I’ll walk you out to your car.”

Donald nodded, looked down at Terrence and then watched in a mixture of awe and horror as his friend proceeded to saw off his ring finger with the butter knife.

“My God!” he exclaimed, backing away from the table. “What are you doing?!?”

Terrence looked up as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. “What does it look like I’m doing? I’m paying my dues. You have to pay for the best service in town. I mean, come on. How else do you think I got that job as editor of *OC Weekly*?”

He was unable to respond as he tore his eyes away from the

sight of oozing blood on the table looked around for the exit. All around him other customers were carrying bits of their own bodies or pieces of expensive jewelry up to the main counter as payment for whatever they had received in return. He saw the elderly woman Lucifer had been serving espresso to earlier, now young and lithe, carrying her own eyeballs, no doubt the ironic price for renewed youth, in her trembling hands. Thinking of his own hands, he looked down and found he was holding something: a receipt. Though he had a good feeling what the price was, he read it anyway and then let it fall onto the floor.

"Shit," he muttered, going limp and letting the receipt fall onto the floor.

"What is it, Don?" asked Terrence, attempting to lift his briefcase with one less finger.

"I drank the devil's coffee," Donald said, "and it was the best cup I ever had."

On the floor, the words on the receipt burned maliciously: Thank you for having lunch with us. TOTAL AMOUNT DUE: One soul.

On a Cold Winter's Night

The dream did not manifest itself obviously at first. All there was consisted of darkness and a slight breeze, which could very well have meant that Dolph was still lying in his bed except that he could feel himself standing.

After an indeterminable amount of time he found movement in his legs and sensed with his fingers, as they brushed over a rough vertical surface, that he was moving forward. Though he could see nothing, he knew instinctively he was nearing his destination. He also knew that getting *there* was imperative, that the need burning in the pit of his stomach wouldn't go away until he found what he was looking for.

A flash of lightning lit the way ahead of him and he caught sight of a long, unfamiliar hallway with several doors on each side and a tall window at the end. None of those mattered, though, for it was what lay behind the last door that was important.

Another flash and he was there, touching the doorknob with his trembling fingers. The blood was boiling madly in his veins, filling his ears with a relentless ringing as he pushed the door open and thrust himself through the threshold. Darkness descended upon him again, except this time he could still see something, an image, wavering and frightful as if a bright stage light shone down from nowhere and forced him to look at who was coming towards him.

It was his mother and father, stepping towards him with their arms outstretched, their faces twisted in eerie patterns of distress—their eyes empty gray circles.

With an abrupt lurch, Dolph awoke from the dream in a cold sweat and nearly fell from the living room sofa where he lay. For a moment he simply sat, rubbing his eyes and allowing his heart to calm itself as he looked around groggily. Glancing at the VCR's digital display he saw that it was half past ten.

It was the week before Christmas.

He'd gotten home from school at the usual time and done all his homework promptly so that he could spend the rest of the day lounging on the overstuffed pastel blue sofa in his parents' living room and watching *Married with Children*. As usual, with a pillow over his chest and his feet draped over the side of the sofa, he'd lazily let his eyelids flutter closed as the familiar drone of audience clapping and cheering lulled him to sleep.

As often as he'd fallen asleep in such fashion, his mother had made it a point to lug him into his bedroom, but tonight he noticed the TV was still on and he was the only one in the house—a curious situation in itself since both his parents made it a point to be home from work no later than six-thirty.

He was making hot chocolate in the kitchen when there came a knock on the front door. Yawning, he left the counter, passed—seemingly in slow motion—through the living room (still bathed in the TV's pale aqua glow), and walked into the front hall, where he expected to greet his parents.

Instead it was Nancy and Bill Morris, good friends of his mother's, who stood holding one another in the dry, chilly winter air. He saw on their faces a look of utter devastation that he would not soon forget, and within the blink of an eye he was wide awake.

"What's wrong?" he asked, fearing an answer.

"Oh, Dolph," Nancy rasped, her face masked behind tears and smeared mascara. She had not changed out of her formal work clothes. "We just came from the emergency room, and . . . I don't know how to tell you this, but . . . your parents were in a car crash. They didn't make it."

Despite the initial shock, Dolph found no tears, only a strange hollow feeling, as if his soul had been sucked from his body, leaving a black emptiness behind. Suddenly he couldn't feel anything inside anymore. Never in all his fourteen years had something so horrible happened, and he didn't quite know how he was supposed to feel.

Nancy and Bill helped him pack a bag and afterward drove him, opaque as he was, to their home. They made it clear he could stay there for as long as he needed; Dolph's only response was a quiet nod from the back seat of the car as he stared out at

the passing houses and flashing holiday decorations and such. A mere hour earlier these holiday expressions would have warmed his heart, but now there was nothing to warm.

He ate at the Morris's house—some vegetable soup, since he had been raised as a vegetarian. He showered and got ready for bed, insisting that he was fine and refusing any consolation offered. He just wanted to be alone with his thoughts and work out the emptiness on his own. Shaking their heads, the Morris's bid him good night and left for their own bedroom, saying that if he needed anything he should not hesitate to knock on their door.

However, as he lay spread out on the sofa, alone in the den, he knew he was far from okay, for he still had not shed a single tear.

Until now.

It happened all at once, without him really thinking about anything at all. He lay on his back, gazing at the ceiling as moonlight shone in from the window and mixed with the myriad colors that radiated from the Christmas tree, casting dreamy patterns upon the pastel blues of his boxer shorts and T-shirt. He was nowhere near sleep, and indeed, as the clock neared 2:00am, he found himself clutching the sheets and gritting his teeth, a voice in his head screaming, "Please, let me fall asleep soon, before it happens. Before I . . ."

The clenching spread to his face, squeezing the tears out, and he bit his lip as the first salty droplet ran down his cheek, immediately followed by others that had been building up over the last three hours.

Dolph cried. He poured his soul out into the night, asking questions that had no ready answer and trying to muffle the sounds with his pillow. He had never felt so alone and helpless in all his life, and suddenly the moments of his past he'd once thought inconsequential were now sacred mental photographs of instances he would never experience again. *At least*, he thought, *not in this lifetime.*

For awhile he wept in solitude, making more noise than he cared to hide, until he felt two warm arms around him. Nancy and Bill had come into the den to offer comfort. He turned his tear-ravaged face upward and saw it was Nancy who held him, be-

dragged and teary-eyed as well.

"I think I'll always feel this way," Dolph whispered between involuntary sniffs.

At that moment Nancy hugged him closer, her own tears glassy specks on the boy's dark blonde hair. "No you won't," she said. "No matter how bad it might seem right now, the world always continues. Tomorrow will come, bringing a new day, a new chance to live."

He didn't believe her, but felt slightly better having someone to cry with. Eventually, at some early morning hour, he found sleep in her arms.

* * *

News of what had happened spread like wildfire, and the subject of who would take care of Dolph was foremost on everyone's mind. His parents had been in their late thirties when they'd died, too young to really have considered writing a will or providing for the future should a catastrophe occur.

Consequently, Dolph had to turn to his relatives for help. He was an only child, so the burden wouldn't be outrageous to anyone who took him in, although contacting his kin proved to be more difficult than first expected. Over the years, and especially after Dolph and his parents had moved out to California, he'd not kept up regular communications with the rest of his family. Now that he was finally attempting to speak with his aunts and uncles and cousins, he discovered that an alarming percentage of his family had died or become unavailable recently. The most recent death was an even greater shock to the remaining family. "This has been a bad year for our family," one of his aunts commented over the telephone. "It's like some invisible fly swatter is snuffing us out one by one."

The comment was hardly a comforting one, but nevertheless made Dolph wonder how much truth it held.

Finally, after a handful of phone calls, Dolph connected with his uncle Ari, who lived in Maine and it was decided that he should go stay with him for awhile. It was awkward at first, because he hadn't spoken to the man for nearly seven years, but after a few minutes the conversation began to flow smoother, and

he thought that maybe there *was* life after death.

"I would love for you to stay with us," Ari said once the situation at hand had been explained. "Your aunt Michelle and I have been wanting to see you again after so long. Please, stay with us for as long as you like."

So the matter was arranged. Dolph had a place to stay where he could get away from the immediate vicinity of his loss and away from the legal processes that would surely arise shortly, though he was a trifle nervous about seeing his relatives again after such a long time. While talking on the phone, Ari explained that he saw the other members of the family quite often and this trip would be a good chance for him to catch up with everyone. It would be a big change for him to move to the eastern end of the United States, since he'd grown up in California and its typically warm climate, but it felt good to have somewhere to go, and someone to be with.

With a heavy heart Dolph returned to his parents' home for the last time and found his father's suitcase. In an eerie silence that was extremely depressing, he packed all the things he thought he would need for the trip to Maine. He felt like he was sleepwalking as he carried his suitcase out to the Morris's car, for he knew that he was probably leaving this place for the last time. As he rode to the airport, as he hugged the Morris's goodbye, and as he watched through the airplane window as the California ground fell away, he felt the rush of a strange kind of anticipation. Dolph was normally a laid-back sort of person, but perhaps recent events had "over-wound his springs," as his father had liked to say. In fact, he could almost hear his father's voice right now, telling him to relax, that things would be fine once he got up to Maine and put the whole ordeal behind somewhat.

Before long, he'd fallen asleep with his headphones on, listening to a *Bee Gees* album and not waking again until the plane touched down later that evening in Boston.

* * *

Darkness, all around, and not a sound. Dolph blinked several times but could see nothing.

A flash of pale whiteness. For an instant he caught sight of a

long hallway, now oddly familiar, with doors on either side and a huge arched window at the end. Its curtains had been pulled open. Air rushed and eddied like something alive, whispering through the hall and brushing against his skin like ghostly fingers pulling him forward.

Though his surroundings were alien, he groped his way with a fair amount of certainty through the darkness, knowing that he had to reach the last door. His quivering fingers brushed cautiously over rough wallpaper, his bare feet slid across chilly wooden floorboards, and all the time he was getting closer and closer and closer.

There was no fear within him as he neared the end of the hall, only an anxious need, an irresistible desire to reach that last door and discover what lay beyond. Another flash from the window and he was there, standing with his hand reaching for the doorknob, the tiny hairs at the nape of his neck standing on end awaiting . . .

Dolph opened his eyes, falling out of the dream just as quickly as he'd fallen in. There wasn't much time to think about why his recurring dream had returned as he sat up in his seat and removed his headphones, realizing the plane had landed and people were beginning to file out. He'd brought a backpack with him, which he slung over his shoulder as he stepped out into the aisle, following everyone else and yawning himself awake. He pulled out his wallet so he could glance once more at a photo of his uncle, just to be sure he would recognize the man when he saw him. As he stepped out into the terminal he almost instantly heard his name being called.

"Dolph! Oh my, it's him! I can't believe it!"

Looking up, he saw his aunt Michelle (at least, he *hoped* it was her—it had been a while) running towards him with her arms outstretched and a cheerful smile on her lips. Ari followed close behind, slightly less exuberant but happy to see his nephew all the same. He was just as Dolph had pictured in his mind: tall and trim, with a mane of light brown hair tied back into a ponytail. His beard was trimmed very neatly now, giving him the look of a Hollywood producer and not a freeway-going hippie, as before. Michelle still had curly hair, bright blond and well-tended. She

was still shapely even though her skin was a bit paler than perhaps it once was; her smile was as radiant as ever.

"You've grown," said his uncle after they'd hugged. "Another year or so and we'll be even-shouldered!"

Dolph blushed and realized it was true; he no longer had to crane his neck to see his uncle's face.

With an abundance of conversation, the trio made their way to the luggage pickup area for Dolph's bags. He was glad he'd brought along warm clothing, for it was frigid outside, and it made the California "winter" temperatures seem like summer as his teeth began to chatter. It was a relief when they reached the car.

He stared out the window for most of the drive through New Hampshire and Maine, trying to catch glimpses of the landscape, but darkness had rapidly encroached upon evening and he could only make out vague shapes beyond the speed guards of the interstate. From the bits and pieces of imagery he did manage to grasp, New England was indeed cold and not a very hospitable place to someone traveling on foot. Especially in the stretches of wilderness between country homes.

"It may seem lonely at first," said Michelle, quite in unison with Dolph's identical thought, "but in the daytime the open country is very beautiful. We sometimes get deer roaming up to our front yard, if we be real quiet."

"And if you're good, you can even try some of my homemade wine," Ari added.

Michelle slapped her husband lightly on the shoulder. "Ari! Don't give the boy ideas like that!"

Ari only chuckled and turned onto the off-ramp. Now they were passing through a more suburban region, with large two-story homes built in the New England style. Dolph was all eyes and silent as he observed the sights of the town, noting that there were no palm trees, but lots of snow. In California, snow was, for the most part, a delicacy saved for certain mountain ranges and it certainly had never fallen at Dolph's doorstep. Here, whenever light allowed, he saw that grass lawns had been blanketed in white crystalline sheets of the stuff, as had the rooftops and treetops. It was like something out of a dream.

Gradually, the houses they passed grew larger and older-look-

ing, and were more spread apart. Dolph was on the verge of asking just how far into the wilderness his uncle lived when Ari announced their arrival. They turned onto a smaller road that was fenced in on both sides by thick masses of trees which formed a kind of tunnel that led to a low hill where Ari's home presided.

And a splendid house it was:

Built in the traditional Old English style, the three-story house rose towards the sky fearlessly, as if the clouds revolved around it in servility. The whole of the ground floor had diamond-shaped windows, most of which were made of beautiful stained glass set into dark brick. Two huge pine trees grew on either side of the front door, reminding Dolph of guards, and they were decorated with Christmas lights to resemble giant flashing candy canes.

"Wow," murmured Dolph. His eyes were as big as moons.

Ari smiled and pulled the Ford into a large garage with an automatic door. "I thought you'd say something like that. I bet you've never seen a house like this in California, eh?"

"Only in movies," Dolph admitted. "Do you actually *live* here?"

"Of course we do," said Michelle. "And you can stay as long as you like."

With help, Dolph brought his suitcase and bags up the front walk, gawking at everything as he went, to where Michelle had already opened the front door. She ushered everyone inside and shut the door quickly, for a breeze had picked up and threatened to steal the warmth of the house.

Ari gestured to a coat rack that resembled a cactus and Dolph removed his jacket, hanging it on one of the bright green arms. There were no thorns, of course.

Dolph's gaze traveled along the walls of the hall as he followed his uncle into an expansive landing where the main staircase came to rest upon a polished hardwood floor. At the foot of the stairs was a large Native American Indian throw-rug.

"I'm afraid you'll have to carry your shoes the rest of the way," Ari said, removing his Adidas. "I'm a Grinch when it comes to tracking dirt on the rugs."

Michelle said, "When you've brought all your stuff to the bedroom, come down to the kitchen and have some hot chocol-

ate.”

She disappeared into the kitchen as Dolph took off his own shoes, then followed his uncle up the staircase. They came to the second floor hallway, which was carpeted and which had numerous framed paintings hanging on the walls, depicting members of Dolph’s family, most of whom he’d never seen in person before. He did recognize a few though.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, pointing to a painting of his grandfather. “It’s grandpa! Wow, it looks almost like a photograph!” He looked at another painting and saw his grandmother rendered with equal splendor. “Where did you get all these from? Who painted them?”

Ari, putting down the suitcase momentarily, held up his right hand and pointed at his head, smiling. “It’s all from right here.”

“You painted all of these?” Dolph asked, wide-eyed for the hundredth time. His uncle seemed full of surprises. “I didn’t know you could paint.”

“It’s a talent I acquired several years ago,” replied Ari smugly as he resumed walking down the hall, suitcase in hand. “It was something I never knew I had until I tried. Of course, once I met your aunt Michelle, things changed completely, and what you see around you is the result. Here we go.” Ari stopped in front of the third door on the left. “Your master’s suite.”

Ari entered first, flicking on the lights, and Dolph followed, mouth hanging open. It was the biggest bedroom he’d ever seen in his entire life, and there was even a fireplace! There was a large bed with pastel blue sheets already spread out, and in one corner was a huge television with humongous woofers set on either side.

“I feel like royalty,” said Dolph as he placed his backpack upon the bed.

Ari set down the suitcase beside the bed and walked over to where the personal bathroom was. “There’s soap and towels in here, and when you bathe, make sure the knob is pulled out all the way or else the water temperature can be a pain in the butt.”

* * *

Michelle was waiting downstairs with three steaming mugs of hot chocolate set upon an ivory-white counter that had several stools

pulled up to it. Adjacent to the kitchen was a lounge occupied by beanbags, a low coffee table, and a big-screen television, all resting on polished wood floors.

Ari flicked on the television and found *The Tonight Show* was just starting, while Dolph perched himself on a stool and sipped from his mug.

"Your uncle watches this show every night," Michelle said as she sat beside Dolph. "Not that I mind being kept awake by his bawling when he watches it in bed." With this comment she made a sour face, not without humor, and took another sip from her mug. "On most nights, he forgets to turn the TV off and falls asleep, so if you happen to hear voices coming down the hall at three in the morning, it's probably an all-night infomercial."

"Har-har," Ari retorted, and downed the last of his hot chocolate. "Perhaps if we can make room in this little barrage against my nightly habits, I can show Dolph the gallery upstairs."

At this, Dolph's interest was piqued. "The gallery? What's that?"

Ari smiled strangely, placing his mug on the counter, stood, and smoothed out his sweater. "Follow me and you'll find out."

Michelle remained behind, setting the dishes in the washer, as Ari led his nephew up to the third floor.

"I call this The Garden," he explained as they ascended the staircase and stepped into an elaborately decorated hallway. Here, the wallpaper depicted colorful flowers and grass rendered in pastel shades. There were many closed doors on either side of the hall, each with a symbol carved into it, though Ari did not take time to stop and show Dolph any of these.

As they approached the end of the hall, Dolph was hit by a sudden flash of *deja vu*, despite the fact that he knew this was his first time here. There was something extremely familiar about—

"This is where I come," Ari said, taking Dolph's attention away from the arched window that occupied the end of the hallway, "when I feel I need to be alone with my ideas. I can express anything I want with my paintings, and my most treasured works are inside this room." He grinned again and unlocked the paneled wooden door, which swung open without a sound. "This is my gallery."

"Not many people get to see this room," said Michelle, seem-

ingly arrived from out of nowhere. *Has she been following us the whole time?* Dolph wondered, casting a surprised glance over his shoulder. For some reason unfathomable, he held his breath while passing through the threshold.

“Woah,” Dolph breathed, his eyes falling upon a large canvas which still rested on its easel. “It’s Aunt Meg!”

He stepped up to the painting and examined the perfect portrait of his aunt. The brush-strokes were so fine and precise it was hard to believe that this was not a photograph.

“It’s real paint, real canvas,” Ari assured.

“But it looks so real! Like a photograph, almost.”

Ari smiled again. “It’s *supposed* to look like a photograph. I like as much realism as possible in my paintings and I put the utmost care into each one. I like to have the individual memory of every person I paint, a clear image is a clear window to the soul.”

Dolph moved on to the next painting that was equally impressive and that portrayed one of his seldom-seen uncles whom he recognized from his parents’ family photo album. More gasps followed as he was led around the gallery, viewing dozens of portraits of his family and other people he’d never seen. “Our whole family must be in here,” Dolph exclaimed when the tour was over. “Even the ones that have died. The eyes are the best, almost like real ones. I can almost feel them watching me.”

As he said this, he looked at another painting—so naturally he didn’t see the sudden paleness of Ari’s face. “Er, thank you, Dolph. I’ve never heard anyone describe my work in quite that way before, but it is a pretty accurate observation. I’ve always felt that the eyes are the windows to a person’s soul.”

“Hey,” said Dolph, spotting another easel in one corner, by one of the curtained windows. This one was covered by a rust-colored cloth. “Is this a new painting?”

“Uh, yes,” Ari replied nervously, stepping in front of Dolph, “but it’s not finished yet. I never show my work off until it’s complete.”

“Oh,” Dolph said, disappointed. *Even the prettiest flowers have the sharpest thorns if you aren’t careful*, he caught himself thinking, and he wondered why in the world *that* idea was rattling around in his head.

“Don’t mind him,” Michelle sighed, putting her hands on

Dolph's shoulders. "Ari's very sensitive about his creative processes which, by the way, will be severely dampened if we all don't get some sleep."

Ari smiled, the color coming back to his cheeks, and he rubbed his eyes. "Yeah. I guess it is pretty late, eh? If we're going to have any sort of fun around here tomorrow we'd better call it a night."

The warmth came back to Dolph, except as they were leaving the gallery, when he heard a mental sigh within himself, as if he'd been holding his breath the entire time.

Once at Dolph's bedroom, Ari and Michelle said good night and reminded him that if he got hungry or thirsty in the middle of the night, he was free to go down to the kitchen any time he liked.

"Thanks," said Dolph with a mild smile, "for everything."

Ari winked. "Don't mention it. Good night."

"Good night."

With that Dolph closed the bedroom door and stood still for a moment, listening to the sound of footsteps traveling down the hall a bit, then to the sound of a door closing, and finally, to silence.

Removing his clothes, he padded into the bathroom to take a shower. He was lathering his hair when he noticed a change in the air. There was a cool draft coming in that hadn't been there before. As he rinsed himself off, the draft dissipated.

Well, well, he thought as he toweled himself dry. *Behind all the fancy furniture and big-screen TVs is a good old-fashioned moody heater, like the one at my own house.* Their old heater had had the habit of turning off at the worst times, and Ari's home was no exception to the rule that even the fanciest homes had flukes.

He rummaged through his suitcase, and was pulling on his bedclothes when he paused and stared at the floor beside the bed.

His shoes had been moved. He was sure of it, remembering that he'd placed them with the heels facing the bedside table. Now they were facing the opposite direction.

Furrowing his brow, Dolph looked around the rest of the room, seeing that everything else was untouched. He checked the door and found it still closed tightly. Maybe, he thought, his

mind was just playing tricks on him. At nearly two o'clock in the morning, anyone was bound to start seeing things that didn't make sense.

At any rate, he was tired. He finished putting on his pajamas, shoved his suitcase onto the floor, climbed into bed, and pulled the blankets up to his chin.

In an instant he was asleep.

* * *

In the darkness of their bedroom Ari held his wife close to him. Both sat in the window seat and gazed outside to watch a silent, unmoving landscape bathing in pale blue moonlight. The trees seemed to remain purposely still, staring back and awaiting the first rays of dawn, which were so far away.

"Do you think he suspects anything?" Michelle whispered, shifting in her husband's arms.

"No," replied Ari softly, "but I think it's best this way. For him, and for the rest of us." He traced a pattern in her hair, as she leaned her head against his chest.

So lovely, he thought to himself. My gift and my curse, my reason to live . . . and my reason to die.

The weight in his arms shifted again. "Ari? What are you thinking about?"

"How much I love you."

The two exchanged a brief kiss on the lips before Michelle stood and reached into her blouse, pulling out a necklace with a midnight-blue stone attached to it. "I think it's time for you to go to the gallery."

Ari stood now, nodding and swallowing the lump in his throat. Though it pained him to do so, he reached out and took hold of the necklace, lifting it over his wife's head and stepping back with it dangling from his fingers. Upon the instant the necklace broke contact with her skin, Michelle's features began to blur and waver, as if she were underwater, then they began to dissolve like mist that dissipated into the darkness with alarming quickness. A heartbeat later, she was no more.

Alone, he held up the necklace, rubbing his thumb over the blue stone, feeling its warmth, trying to find some comfort there.

“Soon,” he uttered into the silence, placing the necklace upon the cushions of the window seat. “Soon we will be together again. Forever.”

* * *

The gallery waited patiently for him. He entered quietly and locked the door behind him with meticulous care, navigating through the room without needing light, for he knew this place by heart. Once seated before the painting, he turned on a small lamp and uncovered the canvas, revealing an elaborate portrait of a huge ballroom in which numerous people of all ages mingled about cheerfully. Everyone in the picture was dressed formally, the men and boys in tuxedos, the women and girls in pretty dresses. Smiles graced everyone’s lips as some couples danced and others sat on plush sofas, chatting happily. The children in attendance also danced with each other and played games of hopscotch or jacks.

After surveying his work for a moment, Ari reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a photograph of Dolph. He studied the boy’s features until he was able to form a mental picture in his head. Once he brought it into a crisp focus it, he began to paint.

* * *

The room was large and capped with a dome ceiling from which numerous crystal chandeliers hung, casting their sparkling light onto the tiled floor below, where Dolph stood, blinking.

Why have I come here? he wondered, looking down at himself and seeing that he was clothed in a formal suit complete with freshly shined dress-shoes and red bow-tie. Looking around him he saw that there were dozens of other people dressed up as well. No, not people. Mannequins. Lifeless dummies that *looked* like his relatives but which were deathly still.

“Hello?” he called out into the eerie silence. No reply. He focused his gaze upon a nearby representation of his uncle Joey, standing with a wine glass in hand, smiling at aunt Meg, but his eyes weren’t looking at his wife. They were looking at Dolph. So

were Meg's.

Something's wrong, Dolph thought, and took a few steps backwards as he glanced at the other mannequins whose eyes watched him intently. Their faces were permanently shaped to form happy smiles, to give off the impression of happiness but their eyes were filled with sadness. They followed his movements as he backed away from the center of the room, yet no other parts of their bodies moved. For some reason this frightened him and he knew he had to get away from this place as quickly as possible. He turned and started running along the perimeter of the room, looking for a door, but there appeared to be none. Only large windows with elaborate curtains covering them. With hands that shook he reached out to pull open the nearest one.

Gasping as the curtains parted, Dolph realized that what he was standing in front of was not a window but a painting, and it was of his parents. They held each other and gazed out at him with melancholy expressions, their lips curled eerily, their empty eye sockets starving holes. The sight of them like this startled Dolph so that he stepped backwards and bumped into a frozen relative. It took an enormous amount of courage not to piss himself but to run up to the next curtained "window" and hope it was a real way out. Flinging the curtains aside, he found himself staring at another painting, this one of his grandfather, eyeless and smiling.

He ran again to the next window, and the next, and the next, uncovering more of the morose portraits until he yanked open the last one and screamed. This painting was of himself, without any eyes. Only hollow, empty holes in his skull . . .

His eyes flew open and he took an instinctive breath of air. He was back in bed, holding the sheets tightly in his clenched fists, shivering like a tree branch in a windstorm. For a few moments he remained that way, glancing uncertainly around himself until recognition slowed his heartbeat.

Running his hand through his hair, he swung his legs over the side of the bed. As a rule, he never had nightmares and certainly he'd never had dreams powerful enough to cause him to sweat like he was now. Even though the dream had passed, and he was awake, the images he'd seen were fresh on his mind and very dis-

turbing, though he had no idea what they meant. His mother had once said that dreams were sometimes foretellings—or *omens*—of things to come. If that was true, he didn't want to know why he'd dreamed of something so morbid.

His throat was parched, so he left his bed and padded over to the door, opening it slowly and quietly, not wanting to disturb Ari or Michelle. Thankfully, the floorboards were in good repair as he crept downstairs through the darkness without a sound and poked about in the kitchen cabinets until he found a large glass that he filled with water from the giant Alhambra bottle beside the refrigerator. Downing the glass in one long swig, he filled it again, this time only halfway, so he could bring it upstairs, just in case any more profound dreams came his way.

He was returning to his bedroom, about to close the door, when quite abruptly a sound made him stop and listen. There was music wafting down the hall, and it sounded as if it were coming from the third floor.

Placing the water glass inside his room beside the door, he stepped back out into the hallway and listened some more, recognizing an old *Moody Blues* tune his mother had once played often, when she had been alive. Despite the many occasions upon which he'd made fun of his parents' archaic musical tastes, he knew this song by heart, and hearing it now made his eyes water.

An overwhelming curiosity filled him and he tiptoed towards the stairs, the music becoming clearer as he neared. As he ascended the steps, he felt an unnatural chill surround him, and upon reaching the landing, Dolph sucked in his breath, for the floor here was uncarpeted and freezing cold beneath his bare feet. The air too was frigid, and though it was too dark to see much, he knew his breath must have been coming out in clouds.

Nevertheless, he made his way forward, determined to seek out the source of the nostalgic music. He was sure that it was coming from the end of the hall, where his uncle's gallery was, and by the time he reached the appropriate door, he was shivering with cold and anticipation. What his perceptions told him was real seemed so much like a dream that he was unsure whether or not he was indeed standing or lying in his bed, asleep.

Dolph tried the knob, but found it locked. It was clear Ari took nothing for granted where his paintings were concerned.

More curious than ever, he got onto his knees and tried to peer through the old-fashioned keyhole, for though now the music he heard was elusively drifting in strange currents about his head, he knew the source lay within the gallery. However, he could see nothing as he squinted into the darkness, his eyes thirsty for light.

“... *Dolph* ...”

At the sound of his name, Dolph fell backward away from the door and landed abruptly on his backside. He looked all around him for the source of the whispery voice, but there was no one in the hall with him. Not that he expected anyone to be.

“... *Dolph* ...” came the voice again, airy, elusive, but audible enough to send a shiver down his spine, for it hadn’t come from anywhere but inside his head this time.

What is this, Poltergeist? he thought to himself, crawling on all fours towards the door. As he put his face to the keyhole again, the music abruptly stopped, followed by a drafty silence—then a noise that resembled breath, condensing into words.

“... *don’t let him finish your eyes* ...”

A heartbeat later, the air became warm once again and Dolph’s teeth stopped chattering.

More confused than frightened, he sat back on his heels to listen for more sounds, but none followed. He knew he couldn’t have imagined the whole occurrence, because his feet were still icy cold from the floor and his heart was still pounding in his chest. The voice, his recent dreams, the paintings without eyes ... there had to be a connection there he didn’t quite understand yet.

Don’t let him finish the eyes. The memory of the voice rang clearly in his mind, reminding him of the portrait without eyes. It had been his portrait, sans eyes. Was the voice talking about that? And who was *him*?

He waited for a little while longer, hoping to find some answers, but all he found was his own sleepiness catching up with him. As he finally stood and returned to the second floor, he started to wonder if the whole thing had simply been a case of sleepwalking.

“Dolph? What are you doing up?”

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Ari standing a few steps down the hall. He was garbed in a long white t-shirt and

blue cotton pajamas, his hair mussed from apparent sleep. It took a moment, but Dolph found his voice and jabbed his finger towards the staircase. "I heard music coming from upstairs, and I thought that maybe you were still awake, so I went up to see."

A look of concern spread over Ari's face. "Are you sure you heard music?"

"I swear."

To Dolph's astonishment, his uncle only smiled, folding his arms. "I wouldn't be concerned if I were you. I have an old radio up there that sometimes decides it doesn't want to stay off. It happens a lot during power surges, but it's nothing to worry about."

"But . . . I heard voices too."

Ari shrugged. "The wind outside. We're pretty high up here, so the winds are naturally stronger, and they whistle louder when they blow past an old house like this. Again, it's nothing to worry about."

Dolph shifted on his feet, casting a glance over his shoulder. His uncle seemed too sure of himself. He wanted Ari to go with him upstairs, check all the doors to make sure there were no burglars (or ghosts) and alleviate any chance that something really weird was going on. There had been music coming from up there, and voices too, yet Ari seemed like he didn't give a damn . . . or he didn't want his nephew to believe there had been any. Perhaps there was a secret at hand he wasn't supposed to know, and he had accidentally stumbled upon it outside the gallery door—and if that was so, what was the secret?

Ari offered nothing more than said explanation, so Dolph had to make himself satisfied with that for the time being. "I guess maybe I'm just really tired," he said, running his hands through his hair. "I should get back to bed."

"Good night," Ari murmured, watching him pad into his bedroom and close the door softly.

Inside his room, Dolph pressed his back up against the door and listened, as if he expected to hear something. There was nothing more, however, than the sound of his uncle's footsteps returning to the bedroom down the hall. After silence had settled around him, he wondered if he should sneak up to the third floor and investigate for his own peace of mind, but decided not to,

feeling the fatigue in his limbs and around his eyes. More likely, if he went up those stairs again, he would be coming back down head-first, and then he would really be in trouble. Besides, there was probably a good chance he'd imagined the whole thing, exaggerating natural sounds until they resembled unnatural ones.

Despite his attempt at self-comfort, though, it took him longer than usual to fall asleep again.

* * *

Morning arrived with the scent of scrambled eggs and fried potatoes drifting into Dolph's room through the air vents. He stirred amidst the blankets and pillows, opening his eyes and stretching his frame before throwing the covers aside and going to the window. Outside, contrary to his hopes, it was cloudy and gray, the trees swaying restlessly.

As he dressed, Dolph considered his nightmares of the night past, and decided they had been just a case of sleepwalking, which he did once every so often. He was about to leave and go downstairs when his foot knocking into something. He looked down and saw the glass of water he'd brought to his room last night, now overturned. So, he had woken up! Now he remembered more clearly. The staircase, making his way into the kitchen, filling the glass, returning to his room, and hearing the music in the hallway . . . he couldn't have done all that while sleepwalking, could he? Yet the idea of ghosts or spirits shuffling around on the third floor seemed a little presumptuous.

Finding a washcloth in the bathroom, he wiped up the spilled water and brought the glass downstairs to the kitchen, where Ari and Michelle sat at the counter, talking. When they saw that Dolph had entered, their conversation ended abruptly.

"Good morning, Dolph," Ari greeted with a smile. "You must be famished. I hope you like hash browns."

Dolph placed the empty glass on the counter and pondered whether or not he should reveal his nocturnal experiences to Michelle. Perhaps she could provide a better insight than Ari had.

"Did you sleep well?" Michelle asked, rising from her seat.

"Sure," he replied, choosing secrecy over honesty.

Michelle nodded and began to heap some fried tofu onto a plate for him. "That's good. I know you're a vegetarian so I made sure to buy things you could eat. Hope you like spicy tofu om-elets."

Dolph said, "I'm sure these will be the best I've ever had," and took a seat at the counter. "Especially since they smell so darned good."

The breakfast proved to be exquisite. After he was finished eating, Dolph offered to do the dishes, but of course Michelle wouldn't hear of it, so Ari took the opportunity to show his nephew the wine cellar.

It was quite large and well-kept, with tiled floors and neatly arranged racks holding what must have been a hundred or so vintages.

"To me, each bottle of wine serves as a snapshot of it's year," Ari explained, pulling a bottle of cheap red wine out. There was a small label on it that read "1969 Red Special." Dolph noticed it was half-empty. "I bought this one from some guy who made his own wine, probably in his bathtub . . . though I don't remember a lot about 1969. It all probably went with the other half of this bottle!"

He replaced it and pulled out another, more dignified vintage and was about to say something else when Michelle called out from the kitchen, announcing a phone call for Ari.

Ari replaced the bottle of wine in the rack and headed for the stairs with a wink. "I'll be back in a minute. Don't get drunk or anything."

Dolph smiled, stuck his hands into his pockets and faced the wine rack, counting bottles. He was in the twenties when he began to notice a change in the air behind him, an effect that caused the tiny hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. The exposed areas of his flesh tingled as the air around him became chilled.

It was happening again!

His first instinct was to run for the stairs, but with all his will he remained standing still, listening for the sound he knew would inevitable trickle out of nowhere.

"... *Dolph* ..."

The voice swirled around him like some invisible dancer eluding his senses and yet challenging him to recognize the source.

"Who are you?" he breathed, his own voice quavering as he felt an almost intangible touch on his right shoulder. He was afraid to turn around for what he might see, but at the same time, he was expectant. It was like a part of him had been waiting for this moment.

Slowly he turned around, and his face became a projection of wonder as he saw the apparition hovering barely inches away.

It was his mother.

There was no solid substance, but an almost electrical sensation as his mother took his hands in hers, translucent mist dancing upon his fleshed fingertips. Though the rest of her body was made of a pale bluish-white light, her eyes were clear and bright.

"Mom . . ." he breathed, awe-struck.

His mother put a finger to his lips, silencing him. "*. . . shh . . . keep secret . . . Dolph . . . your life is in danger . . .*" She spoke to him in a voice that was nonexistent in all mechanical terms. It seemed to bounce itself off of Dolph's own breath or the rustle of his clothing or any other existing sound, trying to become its own individual entity, and only half-succeeding.

"My life? Why?" he whispered.

"*. . . you are the last one . . . don't let him finish your eyes . . .*"

"Don't let who finish—?"

"*. . . no questions . . . go to the gallery tonight . . . stop him before he can finish . . .*"

Suddenly another noise sounded from the top of the staircase. Ari was returning. Dolph blinked once and found that his mother was gone, the air once again normal, the transcendental touching of his fingers dissolved—but not the warning.

Keep secret, she'd said, and Dolph quickly wiped the startled expression from his face, stuffing his hands back into his pockets like nothing had happened—and yet watching his uncle more carefully now than before, hiding his excitement behind carefully mustered disinterest.

"Now then," Ari said, coming towards Dolph, a smile on his lips. "Where were we? Ah, yes, the wine."

His uncle went on to describe several important things concerning the proper aging of wines, but Dolph wasn't listening to a

single word. Rather, his thoughts were elsewhere, wandering up the stairs to the third floor and trying to get through the last door at the end of the hall, and then . . . what? His mother had warned him of a danger against his life, but Ari wasn't the kind of man who would purposely harm others.

Or was he?

Dolph found himself wondering just how well he knew the man. It had been seven years, after all, since they'd last seen each other, and a lot could happen with the passage of time, good or bad. Suddenly he did not want to be alone in a cellar with Ari.

After a few moments his uncle noticed Dolph's growing discomfort and suggested they find something interesting to do for the day, never mind how cloudy it was outside.

So they went to the movies.

Michelle remained behind as usual, saying that she would be busy making a special dinner for everyone. Dolph thought it strange that his aunt seemed to stand apart from him and Ari, as if it wasn't her place to have fun in their presence. She was always sort of in the background, never really a part of the moment.

"Isn't Aunt Michelle coming with us?" Dolph asked, putting on his jacket.

"No, not this time," replied Ari, "but soon we'll be doing things together."

Michelle, who'd been standing nearby with an apron flung over herself, now leaned down, just a bit, to kiss Dolph on the cheek. "Don't worry about me," she said. "I'll be fine. Now go and have some fun." Her lips were chilly.

Dolph's mood turned towards melancholy as he stepped out under the gray sky and waved goodbye to his aunt, who stood in the doorway and smiled cheerfully, waving back with her baking glove. He watched her standing there from the window of Ari's car, watched until the car rounded a corner and she was out of sight.

At which point, as if a blanket had been lifted from over his head, the dreary thoughts and emotions that had been floating through his head were gone. There had been a growing weight within his chest, one that had begun last night and had continued to disturb him until now, when he was no longer near the house.

Something about that place, he thought to himself, biting his

lip, *isn't as it should be, and I've got the feeling Ari knows what it is.* The man was keeping something secret, or else he would have told Dolph about the apparitions. Anybody else would warn their house guest of voices and music and ghosts that appeared warning you of danger. The dream hadn't been a coincidence, he was sure of that now, no matter what his uncle said about breezes and old radios. It had been a warning, coupled with that of his mother, urging him to find out why she was here and what that had to do with the gallery.

Tonight, he promised himself. *Tonight I will find out.*

"You're being awfully quiet back there."

Dolph snapped out of his trance and looked towards the rear-view mirror, where his uncle's eyes stared back at him like silver moons. Warm or cold, the stare was piercing and intimidating. "I'm just in a thoughtful mood."

"Oh really? What are you thinking about?"

The question was posed too casually. Dolph answered with a lie. "The snow."

"Is that all?"

"Yeah. Why? Should I be thinking of something else?"

Ari cleared his throat, his gaze leaving the mirror. "You miss you parents," he said, his tone compassionate.

Dolph's heart skipped a beat, the melancholy sentiments returning. He bowed his head, staring at his hands. "Yes."

"They died too young," continued Ari. "Like so many other people I've known. Lives just cut short for no reason at all it seemed. It doesn't seem fair that death should be able to hold all the cards, does it?"

"No," murmured Dolph softly.

There was a moment's pause before Ari spoke his next words, during which time Dolph felt his pulse begin to quicken. "Dolph, if there's anything that life has taught me, it's that there's always a way to paint over mistakes."

That was the extent of their conversation until they arrived in town and found the movie theater.

The day passed quickly for Dolph as he was taken from the museum to the movies to Pizza Hut and finally to the local shopping mall. Ari even found time to pull off the road at one point and stage a snowball fight with Dolph—an experience the boy had never had until now, and it exhilarated him. Still, in the back of his mind, there was that silent nagging that he be on guard at all times. Everything else was like one big daydream.

Late evening had fallen when they finally returned home. Michelle had already prepared dinner and had it spread out atop the dining room table as Ari and Dolph shed their winter coverings in the front hall.

“I’ll go wash up,” Dolph said, and climbed the stairs quickly, for he’d held his bladder way too long during the latter half of the day.

Now alone, Ari gathered Michelle up in his arms and kissed her tenderly. “You didn’t have to do this, you know.”

“Sure I did,” came Michelle’s reply, smiling enthusiastically. “If this is going to be our last night here, we should all appreciate the material things before we go. Give Dolph some last warm memories of his life here in the flesh and blood world.”

Ari grinned. “You’re right. We’ll make this night one to remember. Forever.”

They kissed again and went into the dining room to wait for Dolph, who came down in due time. Dinner commenced shortly thereafter. Michelle had, knowing of her guest’s eating habits, prepared a fabulous spinach-lasagna which the boy had several servings of, along with freshly-baked cherry pie afterward. Halfway through the meal, Ari rose from the table and went into the wine-cellar, returning with a bottle of his favorite red wine.

Fetching three glasses from the kitchen, he poured everyone a glass and offered a toast. “This is to Dolph’s arrival, and to the many good times we shall have in the coming future.”

Dolph blushed and took a sip from his glass, swallowing immediately, finding that he’d missed the taste and having Ari explain to him how to swish the liquid around in his mouth before swallowing. It was okay, but he couldn’t fathom how people got hooked on the stuff.

“Just remember,” Michelle cautioned, putting on her best motherly expression, “only *one* glass.”

"Tsk-tsk, Mother Hen," jested Ari, winking at his nephew. "Dolph's old enough to enjoy some of the rewards of manhood."

After dinner, everyone went into the lounge where a game of poker began. Dolph brought his half-finished glass of wine with him, not paying attention to the slight giddiness that was setting into his limbs. For the moment, he even forgot about what he was supposed to do later in the night, and lost himself to the game, of which he won half the rounds, once he picked up the rules.

By the time eleven o'clock arrived, Dolph was feeling the effects of too much wine, so he went upstairs to his room as the others cleaned up. He managed to shower quickly before he fell asleep almost immediately upon laying down, trying to remember something important that couldn't quite push its way through the sluggish currents of his brain.

* * *

"I think that took his mind off of what he saw," Ari whispered as he dried off a clean plate. "There's nothing like a glass of wine to bring sleep on like a silent spring shower."

Michelle smiled, although the rest of her face looked pained. "I still think it's the same as drugging him."

"Well, at least he won't feel anything this way. He'll be sound asleep when the painting is finished."

"Once he's . . . passed on," murmured Michelle, her complexion turning sickly, "you'll . . . take care of his body?"

Ari nodded. "The cliffs should be unoccupied this morning. And after I've taken care of that, I will return here and join the rest of you." With that, he reached up and removed his wife's necklace, sending her back to the non-physical world she inhabited, where she would wait for him.

The last of the dishes were put away, and the counters all spotless and clean, as usual. Without a word, Ari turned off the lights and left, placing the necklace into his pocket.

* * *

Outside it had begun snowing. Tiny ornate flakes of whiteness fell, unseen, from the heavy sky to rest atop the darkened house

and the trees surrounding it in silent watchful patterns. A single flake swirled about in endlessly changing air, flying lazily about in every direction of the night until it's journey ended at the window of a sleeping boy who lay curled up in his bed, seemingly cozy and protected.

His breath came in a steady, slow, peaceful rhythm that was undisturbed by the numerous transparent forms which stood around his bed, looking somber and grim as if witnessing a funeral in progress.

Meanwhile, the boy's eyelids twitched as his mental counterpart experienced elsewhere . . .

Dolph sat in his parents' living room once again, and it was Christmas Eve. He sat in the pastel blue sofa he'd known and loved since he was little, surrounded by the smiling faces of his relatives, most of whom he'd never seen in person. Looking down in his lap, he realized he was in the midst of opening a present and everyone was eager to see what it was, including himself. With his fingers he dug into the wrapping paper enthusiastically until he'd uncovered a square brown box made of some unidentified material. There was a handle on top.

"Go ahead," urged one of his cousins. "Open it up, Dolph."

"Yeah, and hurry," someone else said. "There's not much time."

Dolph pulled on the handle and the top of the box came off easily, revealing a shiny metallic object within.

A key.

When he picked it up, everyone in the room burst out cheering, and Dolph blinked, surprised to find that he was standing in a dark room, and it was not his own.

* * *

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, Dolph found that he was holding a key and that his head throbbed something terrible (the aftermath of too much wine, no doubt). Squinting in the darkness, he guessed that he was in Ari's bedroom, but why had he come here?

"... Dolph, the key ..."

Light from out of nowhere played across Dolph's face as two figures approached him urgently.

"Mom? Dad?" he said uncertainly, still half asleep. "How did you get here? What's going on?"

The form of his father leaned over him. ". . . we're new additions . . . takes a while for the living to fade away completely, I suppose, but . . . there is no time for this now he must be stopped—upstairs in the gallery . . . NOW!"

Motion took hold of Dolph's legs, overpowering the fear and confusion that tried to keep him from doing what he now knew he had come here to do: stop Ari from stealing his soul.

* * *

Twenty-four candles burned brightly against the night, casting their flickering glow upon watchful ceiling rafters, and obedient floorboards, watching the nearly motionless painter work his magic.

His creation was splendid in detail, a magnificent work of art depicting the ones he loved most in their happiest moments, together at once. Everyone in the picture was complete except for two: a tall, long-haired gentleman with a well-trimmed beard, and a youth, almost as tall, with blond hair. Where the eyes of these two should have been were hungry empty spaces, awaiting completion.

The painter had yet to touch his brush to the canvas, for he was deep in silent prayer, his lips moving ever so slightly in the wavering light as he asked the heavens for their guidance and understanding of what he was about to do.

Because this is necessary, he thought. Because it's the only way I will ever be able to share my life with the ones I love where there is no age or dying, no disease. A price has to be paid, but I'm willing to pay if it means I get to be reunited with Michelle again.

Surely God would forgive him in time for falling prey to his own love.

Afraid of letting anxiety or excuses cloud his thoughts, he finished his prayer and unclasped his hands, flexing them in preparation for the task ahead.

The perfect shade of blue had been mixed earlier, and now its

container was uncapped. Brush dipped inside, harnessing a tiny amount—just enough for the waiting image on the canvas.

“Forgive me, Dolph . . .”

* * *

Dolph crouched outside the gallery door, clutching the key in his fist and licking his lips. Every part of his body tingled. He heard no noise from within, but knew Ari was in there, seeing the light that escaped through the keyhole. There was nothing else he could do but make his entrance now, before it was too late.

Hands shaking, he shoved the key into the lock, turned, and pushed the door open, blinking in the candlelight, bright to him after spending so much time in the dark. Ari whirled around in his chair, obviously surprised to see his nephew standing there in the doorway.

“Dolph,” he began. “What are you doing here?”

There were tears in Dolph’s eyes as he made his way forward, pointing an accusing finger at his uncle. “You did something to them, didn’t you?”

“Dolph, you shouldn’t be here—”

“No. I’m not leaving until you tell me what’s going on here. Why are my parents telling me to stop you from finishing my eyes?”

Ari swallowed and stood, putting his brush down. He could lie to Dolph, but it wouldn’t matter in a few minutes anyway. Perhaps the boy would even understand if he simply lay the cards out on the table and held nothing back. Either way, he was taking a risk. “Dolph. Your parents are no longer of this world. It’s done, over with. I can’t change that back, but that doesn’t mean we still can’t see them.”

The muscles of Dolph’s neck tensed as he held back a second wave of tears. “Where’s Aunt Michelle? She’s not in your bedroom.”

“No,” replied Ari, slumping his shoulders somewhat, “she’s not. She’s . . . dead.”

The blood in Dolph’s veins went cold. “What do you mean she’s dead?”

"What I mean," Ari said, lowering his head, "is that Michelle is dead. Cancer got her five years ago."

Dolph did not understand. "But . . . I felt her when she touched me, when she hugged me in the airport, when she kissed me on the cheek."

"Yes, you did. She was there, and she's here now, only in a different form." Running his hand through his hair, Ari glanced back towards his painting, then turned his gaze full upon Dolph. "What if I told you I've found a way to cheat death?"

"It has to do with your painting, doesn't it?"

Ari nodded and beckoned for his nephew to approach the easel. "This painting . . . it's more than that. It's a home for the souls of everyone you've ever called 'family'. There's a place for everyone here. You see, instead of simply dying and going off somewhere, leaving everyone else alone, I can paint the souls right into the canvas. I don't know how but in my paintings the people are alive again."

Gazing at the painting, Dolph was struck by its beauty and detail. It was a view of the dance hall he'd dreamed of, full of family members, all dressed formally and caught in the act of merrymaking. He saw himself too, dressed in a tuxedo and with his hair combed nicely, except for the loose lock that always hung down over his forehead. Peering closer, he discovered that even the dimple of his chin had been rendered perfectly, and he could almost count the wispy hairs that made up his eyebrows. The detail was exquisite, except for the fact that his eyes hadn't been finished.

"What happens when you finish my eyes in the picture?"

"Then . . . you will join your mother and father, and everyone else you love," Ari said slowly, putting his hands upon the boy's shoulders. "Dolph, this is a wonderful thing. Wouldn't it be wonderful to spend as long as you liked with the ones you love?"

". . . *lies* . . ." came an airy voice from out of nowhere.

Dolph turned his head to the right and glimpsed the form of his father standing behind the easel, his features blurred but menacing.

"Dad," breathed Dolph, swallowing hard. This was no dream.

The apparition passed through the easel. ". . . *Dolph, he has trapped us here, in this painting* . . ."

Ari turned deathly pale. “No, Dolph. Don’t listen to him. It is you and I who are trapped here, in this world of sickness, age and death, apart from our family—”

“... *do not lie to our son* . . .” It was Dolph’s mother who spoke now, appearing beside her husband. Together they stood, forms wavering, fading in and out of existence as if it took an enormous effort to be visible for only a few seconds. “. . . *your talent has failed you and damned us* . . . *Dolph is the only one left—do not condemn him as well* . . .”

Ari ignored the pleas. “Listen to me, Dolph,” he said, holding his nephew’s arms tightly as he picked up a paintbrush, his hand shivering ever so slightly. “This brush, and this painting are my talent, my device to cheat death. Dolph, I could render your essence inside this picture forever. You would never die, and never grow old. Five years ago when cancer took Michelle’s life, I thought I’d lost her forever, but when I began painting and found I had this ability, it gave me new hope, and not just for her. For everyone else in our family who was sick or on the verge of dying or dead . . . I brought their souls here to exist in beauty and happiness forever.”

“But my parents weren’t sick,” whispered Dolph. “Aunt Meg and Uncle Joey weren’t sick or dead either. You killed them, didn’t you? Killed them all by painting them here.”

“No. It’s not as simple as that. With Michelle in the painting, she needed company. So I . . . *added* some of our family to be with her.”

Biting his lips, Dolph stared at the painting, the scope of the situation dawning on him. “You took their lives and stuck them in here. You *killed* them.”

“It’s not as terrible as that—”

“What will happen to me if you finish my portrait?”

“You will enter the scene and be with your relatives, your aunts and uncles who’ve been waiting so long to be with you.”

“What about my body?”

Ari averted his gaze. “Now isn’t the time to think about that.”

There was no need for further explanation. With all his might Dolph planted a firm kick in Ari’s shin and wrenched free, leaping towards the painting. He grabbed it with both hands, inadvertently knocking over a candle from its place atop a small wheeled

tray, and whirled around to see his uncle staggering towards him, a stool in his hands.

“I’m so sorry Dolph, but I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this —”

Terror seized Dolph, but he refused to let himself become the prey of anyone or anything. His foot struck out again, connecting with Ari’s groin, causing a horrendous screech to cut through the air. The stool dropped from his uncle’s hands, missing its intended target by mere inches.

By now Dolph was sure he’d broken more than one of his toes, but he ignored the pain as he clutched the painting and ran for the door, knocking over several more candles as he went. In a moment he was out in the hall and running blindly towards stairs he could hardly see. With incredible luck he made it down to the second floor without harm. However, halfway down the ground-floor stairs he missed his footing and went sprawling onto his front, the air knocked out of him as the painting flew from his hands.

“Dolph!” cried his uncle, scuffling down the second floor hall. “Dolph! Don’t do this! Bring back the painting before someone gets hurt!”

The approaching noises from above spurred his pain-wreaked body to continue moving, though he had no idea what he was supposed to do or how he was supposed to do it. He crawled on all fours, feeling for the painting until his hands closed around the rough canvas. Stumbling to his feet, he made for the front door and clawed at it until it swung open with a gust of frigid winter wind.

Hardly prepared for the cold in his pajamas, Dolph plunged out into the snow-swept night, stifling a cry as his feet were bombarded by the snow beneath him. The chill climbed rapidly up his legs and arms as he ran across the front yard, unsure of where he was going except that he had to get away from Ari. The long tunnel of trees gave way to dim yellowish light from the main street, where lampposts burned. Once he’d reached it, he turned back briefly, expecting to see Ari gaining on him, but instead he saw something else altogether.

The house was on fire. Through the third floor windows he could see angry flames devouring all the wood and other flam-

mables that gave it life. The abundance of snow did not have any effect on the fire's rapid growth as it spread to other areas of the house.

As if in applause, the wavering treetops danced in the frigid breeze, watching the flames feed on their prey.

"Dolph!" cried a hoarse, angry voice. Like a crack of thunder from out of nowhere, Ari's form came staggering through the tunnel and out into the lamplight. He held a flashlight, its light bouncing wildly in every direction.

Dolph screamed and turned to run again, but his moccasins did little to keep out the cold, for his feet were numb blocks of ice, hindering instead of helping, and he went sprawling.

"For the love of God, Dolph!" Ari shouted, grabbing onto one of his nephew's ankles. "Stop this insanity at once! Give me the painting!"

Hands clutched at Dolph, but he kept himself thrown over the painting and began to thrash as Ari attempted to lift him. Desperately the boy tried to think through his terror, and considered tearing the painting. Perhaps if it was damaged he wouldn't want it anymore.

Against better judgment, he allowed himself to be drawn to a standing position and instantly began pulling at the canvas, trying to rip it from its backboard. This proved useless, however, since his fingers had become as affected by the cold as his feet. Ari reached for the painting, a little too late, as Dolph broke free with a violent yell.

"You killed them!" he screamed. He forced his legs into motion and darted for the nearby trees, knowing he would probably get lost and die out in the cold before he found another living soul, but if that was the price he had to pay in order to save his family from Ari's insanity, he would gladly pay it. The sound of his uncle's footsteps and ragged breath followed Dolph as he plunged into darkness. Branches and leaves tore at his pajamas and skin, every one seeming like a fleshless hand trying to prevent escape. It was a mad thought, but it helped to drive him on faster, away from the beast behind that had taken on human form. He tried to put that thought out of his mind, tried to block out everything but the continuous movements of his legs, and had almost succeeded when suddenly there was a change in the darkness

around him. He was no longer under the cover of trees, for above was the dull gray of an overcast sky, and below a darker mass-ground, which abruptly led to an even blacker darkness. Something told him he'd better not run into that, and so he veered to the right, dropping to his knees and gasping for air, his every fiber shivering with cold. With teeth chattering, he craned his neck to look behind him. Dare he hope to have lost his uncle in the trees?

Fate didn't seem to share Dolph's sentiments as his uncle stepped out into the open. There was nowhere else to go, he realized, seeing with the aid of Ari's flashlight that they were perched upon a cliff that dropped off into the night without mercy. With his last ounce of energy, he scooted himself closer to that frightful ledge, intending to throw either the painting or himself, he wasn't sure which.

Ari stepped in closer, steadying the flashlight. "Stop! Dolph, listen to me! Can't you see that you're only harming yourself?"

"Get away," Dolph whimpered, drawing up his knees close to his chest. "You have n-no right to t-take my life away . . ." It was so cold he could hardly speak.

"Sometimes personal sacrifice must be the answer, Dolph. You may not like it, but in the end, the cause is noble. Can't you see that's why you came here? Fate has such a special gift to you, more than anything you'll ever find under the Christmas tree. None of us will ever have to be alone ever again. Can't you see this is how it was meant to be? Now let me take you somewhere warm."

"No."

"Please Dolph, don't be so unreasonable. There is nothing out here but cold and death."

By now Dolph's hands were shaking violently. "What you offer is worse. If I d-die, I want my s-spirit t-to be free. Then I can find my way to my f-family on my own, but only if there are n-no chains holding me down."

Ari moved slowly again, his growing provocation barely contained. "Dolph, you don't know what you're saying. The cold has affected your senses—"

"No!" screamed Dolph as his uncle took another step closer, his arm reaching out. The boy began to back away again, a mo-

tion that only fueled Ari's anger.

"Damn it, Dolph! Don't be a fool! Give me the painting now!"

Forcefully Ari stepped forward, leaning over to grab the canvas, but he never made it. With whatever strength that was left in him, Dolph thrust his leg against Ari's ankle. The flashlight's beam suddenly pivoted upwards than whirled around in the air violently until it came to rest at Dolph's feet, shining into his face through a mist of snow raining down. There was a scuffling from somewhere beyond the light, a startled yell that faded, began to echo, and then was cut short by a sickening thud.

Squeezing his eyelids closed, Dolph felt a tremor run up his spine as he realized what had happened. There was no way any man could have survived a fall like that, especially since the impact had sounded so loudly. The imprint of it on his mind would not go away, and he could still hear the echo minutes after it was gone.

With tears clouding his vision, Dolph fought the urge to peer over the edge of the cliff and crawled onto all fours, grabbing the discarded flashlight. Unsteadily he rose to his feet and clutched the painting under his arm, making his way back into the patch of trees. Whether the cold was beginning to numb his mind over as well as his body or not, he felt nothing in his chest but the beating of his heart. All he knew was that he had to get himself somewhere safe and warm before he died too, ending what was left of his family.

He walked as quickly as he could back in the direction he'd come, and stumbled out somewhere down the street from Ari's house. He couldn't see it from here because the trees were too thick and tall, but then again, he didn't really want to.

"... Dolph ..."

He looked down at the painting. In the street lamps' sulfurous light the colors were all backwards, but he could see clearly everyone's eyes gazing at him from the ballroom. After a moment of staring and squinting all he could see were those eyes ... some blue, others brown or silver, but all gleaming and alive.

"... Dolph, you must get yourself to someplace warm ..."

His mother's voice spoke to him, soft but insistent. With the painting in his arms, he began to walk, limping badly down the

street, until he spotted another house with the front lights on, perhaps because someone inside had seen the blaze nearby. Now that he knew he would be safe, he brought himself to perform one last task.

Kneeling beside the road, he gathered some snow up in his palm and held it over the painting. Though he knew he would never hear his parents' voices again after this moment, there was nothing else to be done but free them, and all the others from their prison of canvas. If the painting's existence was a prison, its destruction would bring freedom.

"I love you all," he cried, and began to rub the snow over the portrait.

"... *thank you, Dolph . . . we love you forever . . .*" came a universal voice, a universal thank you.

Dolph's hot tears mixed with the snow and growing heat rising from the oil paints. He smeared the once-intricate image into a brown pool, and as soon as the painting was no more, a cozy warmth spread throughout his body. His limbs stopped quivering and the pain in his feet subsided, assurance that he would live to see a new day.

Filled with a new kind of inner peace, he stood and left the painting's skeleton behind as he headed for the neighbor's house, a satisfied smile on his lips. He was alone in the world now, but he felt the comfort of his family's spirits surround and protect him. That was more than any painting could have done.

Color Conformity

D*reams are always better than reality*, Jonah Moreno thought to himself as he awoke to the typical dull grayness that was his bedroom. With a disappointed moan he slapped the shrill alarm off and rolled onto his back, stretching. His wife Joyce was stirring in bed beside him and yawning prettily as the dull gray sheets slid down her blue torso to reveal her bare breasts and thighs.

The only bit of loveliness in the entire room, Jonah thought. On an off-day he could have paused to enjoy the sight of her naked body, maybe even enjoy some playful intimacy, but today there was a strict schedule to be maintained and no sooner had he yawned than he was rising and walking into the small shower panel set into the wall of their bedroom.

“Five minutes to wash myself and get dressed,” he mumbled as the sonic spray came on and he leaned against the gray wall of the shower. “Ten to eat breakfast and catch a glimpse of my son before he’s shuttled off to school. Just like yesterday, just like tomorrow. Not enough time to even think about anything else.”

Joyce, sensing her husband was in a bad mood, decided to give him his shower alone and slipped a gray robe over herself. On the rare days when he got moody like this it was usually best to let him be, for trying to help workout his frustrations simply ate up too much of their time. That was for licensed psychologists to work out, on legally-granted off-time.

Their six-year-old son, Ronnie, was usually agreeable in the mornings and woke up quietly when his mother shook him gently. He rubbed his blue face groggily but nodded and asked for blueberry pancakes with maple syrup for breakfast.

“Why not try another color this time?” Joyce joked as she rummaged inside Ronnie’s closet for a clean body suit. “You’ve had *blueberry* pancakes for the last two weeks. Don’t you get tired of the same thing everyday?”

“We’re Blues,” Ronnie said, pulling on his blue underwear, “and we don’t get tired of ourselves.”

Not necessarily, Joyce commented to herself as she handed him his blue bodysuit and boots. “Right, then. Blueberry pancakes it is. Now hurry and get dressed.”

Five minutes later, Jonah and his family sat at the breakfast table and ate in silence. It wasn’t that they didn’t have anything to say or that they detested conversation with one another; there simply wasn’t time to be wasted when they were hungry and on a schedule. Files had to be processed at Jonah’s office, lessons had to be learned at Ronnie’s school . . . society had to keep to the schedule it had created for itself.

“We have to get going,” Jonah announced halfway through their eating period. Joyce obviously hadn’t eaten enough, but she nevertheless helped to clear the table quickly so she could get dressed in time to take Ronnie to school and get herself to work an executive office, similar to Jonah’s but separate to ensure maximum productivity as set out in *The Manual of Social Imperatives*.

* * *

The morning was overcast, making everything seem grayer than usual. Since there were no trees or bushes allowed in this sector, the ground was paved with cold steel, just like the Moreno’s living complex. Numerous other Blues were exiting their apartments and heading for the transportation terminals a block and a half down the street.

“See you at seventeen-hundred,” Jonah said, kissing his wife briefly on the lips and his son on the forehead before everyone was off to their respective destinations for the day. He jogged quickly along the shiny gray sidewalk and checked his wristwatch periodically. Somehow, the time had crept up on him so that he was now running late.

The transportation terminals were crowded upon his arrival, filled with dozens of people of various colors waiting for their rides. Dodging a middle-aged Orange gentleman who was waiting for the bus that would take him to his construction site, Jonah glanced again at his watch, then out across to the Blue line ter-

minimal, where he saw the 0700 bus pulling away.

Swearing under his breath, he slowed to a walk again and ran a hand through his hair, trying to think of what to do next. He had an hour to get to work and the next Blue line would be arriving at seven forty-five far too late to get him to his proper sector on time. He would be half an hour late if he waited for the next bus and tardiness was a crime that rivaled blasphemy. His supervisor wouldn't tolerate a sluggish employee and would surely have him demerited or even fired if he started popping in at inappropriate hours of the day. A year ago, one of the employees in his department had come in fifteen minutes late and gotten booted. What was worse, he'd eventually had to convert to a Brown and become a farmer to make ends meet.

No, that wasn't a pleasant fate. Jonah's social position might not have been as prestigious as he'd have liked, but it was more than some people were stuck with. He'd be a fool to waste his status because of a late bus, which meant he had only one option if he wanted to get to work on time: He would have to take one of the other buses.

Immediately, Jonah's gaze went up to the roof of the terminal, where the arrival/departure times were flashing across wide video screens attached to the domed ceiling. Beneath each screen was a sign reading, "Thank you for riding with Metro Shuttle. Color mixing strictly prohibited." That meant he could be fined a pretty penny if he was caught riding any bus that wasn't designated for Blues. But what else could he do? Wait and risk losing his job or catch the next bus that passed through his sector and risk being arrested by the police. Either way, he was tempting fate.

One of the video screens beeped and a computerized voice came on, announcing that the 7:05 Purple line was about to leave. Jonah quickly made his way towards the Purple terminal and found a map, displaying the line's route through the city. As far as he could tell, this bus passed through his work sector before it reached its destination in the Purple sector.

"Purple line 207, final boarding sequence . . ."

Jonah looked at the terminal where the Purples were filing into their bus. It was his last chance to be on time. Without a further thought, he squared his shoulders and strode towards the

bus, getting in line and trying to act like nothing extraordinary was happening. The driver gave him an inquisitive look as he swiped his credit card quickly and entered the passenger cabin, which was mostly full. There was one seat near the rear of the bus that was unoccupied and he made a beeline for it, hoping that everyone was either too sleepy or disinterested to notice him.

As he sat down a Purple behind him made a muffled gasping noise and he heard soft murmuring, something like, “Look at that Blue. Unbelievable!”

Jonah turned towards the window and tried to concentrate on the terminal outside, though he kept getting looks from this tall, husky man a few seats in front of him.

God, what the hell am I doing? was a repetitive echo in his head.

He watched a pack of Reds, their bodies tall, trim and muscular, as they went to the bus that would take them to their sporting events and gymnasiums. They were the athletes, the sports stars of Shade City who made a living by tossing a ball through a hoop, or swimming in a pool of water, or swinging about a set of uneven bars and defying the laws of gravity for an audience of paying Elites.

Presently, the bus pulled out of the terminal and was on its way to the Purple sector. Jonah looked down at his watch, saw that ten minutes had passed and that his palms were still sweating. Looking up again he saw that the husky man was still watching him at regular intervals perhaps deciding whether or not to roll the foolish Blue riding a Purple bus, though Jonah hoped with all his might against something like that.

Outside the traffic was building. The gray city streets were crowded with Blues rushing to get to their respective workplace on time. Jonah noticed that the bus was approaching the building he worked in and looked anxiously at the driver, who was making no move to get into the pickup lane. He considered getting out of his seat and asking the driver if he was going to stop soon, but then it occurred to him: this bus was for Purples. They had no reason to stop in a Blue sector and it was probably against the law anyway.

Jonah watched with increasing dread as the bus passed through the Blue boundary and into the Purple sector. It wasn't

much different here except that the majority of the people on the streets were purple, not counting the occasional Oranges who were with Shade's City Public Service. The buildings were still tall, made of the same glossy metal that made up everything else in the city.

One major difference that Jonah noticed immediately was the video screens. Instead of broadcasting the daily business report, they showed movies or interviews with actors and actresses, and updates on upcoming plays and music concerts. Naturally, since Purples were designated entertainers and artists, it made sense that their news reflect their career paths. In the Blue sector, all information was geared towards the low-level executive employees.

"Line 207, Stop 1," announced the bus driver.

I suppose this is as good a place as any, thought Jonah as he stood and followed several Purples, including the husky man who'd been watching him, out the rear exit of the bus. Immediately, he felt self-conscious as other people in the transportation terminal gave him odd glances—though at least he was relieved about getting off the bus.

"Mama, that man's color is wrong!" exclaimed a small child, no more than five years old, walking with his mother and (presumably) brother. Jonah stared for only a moment, recalling that Purples were allowed to have two children, unlike Blues, who were limited to one per couple. Blues weren't quite middle class and weren't quite lower class but somewhere in between. They got some respect, a fair amount of money, but only enough social status to be able to live in basic apartment complexes. That meant strict sexual regulations in the name of population control. Once Ronnie had been born, the doctors, in accordance with Shade law, had removed Joyce's ovaries. The operation was painless, left no damage whatsoever, physically, and allowed a married couple to engage in sexual intercourse as often as they wished without risking unwanted (and illegal) pregnancy.

Realizing that the mother and her two sons were long gone and that he was staring dumbly at the ground, he began searching the screens above for the next bus that would hopefully take him to the Blue sector again. The next bus available would leave him reasonably close to where he wanted to be, though it didn't really matter now since there was no way he could prevent being late to

work now but he could still try.

With half an hour's time to kill, he started wandering around the terminal as if he were oblivious to his situation. He noticed a group of three brawny Purples hanging about the restrooms, watching him with scrutinizing eyes.

Great, thought Jonah, turning away and shivering. All I need is to be seen by a chain gang. I can see the headline already: Jonah Moreno found dead at age twenty-five with a knife in his back. Officials report he was last spotted boarding a bus headed for the Purple sector. Poor fool, didn't he realize that's against the rules of civilization?

Deciding that his over-thinking was making him nervous, Jonah found a bench to sit on and opened his briefcase to make sure all his paperwork was in order. No sooner had he taken a seat than he noticed a shadow falling over him. When he looked up, he found he was surrounded by the men he'd seen near the restroom. They were all young, in their late teens or early twenties, and they were all exceedingly muscular. Their expressions were not welcoming.

"Hey, Blue," said one of the men. "What do you think you're doing here?"

"Probably got on the wrong bus looking to bleed someone's taxes."

"Yeah, you Blues are all the same. Pretend you're something special just because you can count to a hundred. Now you think you can just walk wherever you please and no one's gonna see you, eh?"

Jonah closed his briefcase and started to stand. "Look, I don't want any trouble."

One of the men grabbed his briefcase and opened it, carelessly punching away at the keyboard inside. "Ooh, he's got one of those fancy Travel computers. You must be a mite rich to have something like this. I have an idea: Let's take this Blue to our office and have a little *business meeting*, shall we?"

"Wait," Jonah urged, feeling a pair of strong arms binding his own. "You don't understand—"

"Just like a Blue, to think that we Purples can't form a thought because we were trained to entertain rather than become accountants or whatever it is you people do in those fancy corpor-

ate offices of yours.”

The men led him to the restrooms and closed the door behind to insure privacy. Then the “meeting” began. Jonah was fit and relatively well-built, thanks to mandatory exercise regimes, but he had never been much good with his fists, and compared to the bulky muscle mass his attackers possessed, he was a shrimp trying to escape the jaws of a shark. The tallest of the men slammed him into a wall and pulled his arms behind his back while hands searched his bodysuit for pockets. They found his credit card and ID, then kicked him in the gut so that he was down on all fours, panting and trying to regain his balance. One of the men grabbed him by his scalp and was about to throw a punch aimed for his face when the door to the restroom suddenly flew open and another Purple stepped in.

“Let him be,” ordered the newcomer. Jonah was in too much pain to really examine the man, but he knew he was tall and as much of a hulk as his attackers.

One of the other men snickered. “Or what? You think you can take all three of us by yourself?”

In answer, a flurry of punches and kicks followed. Jonah staggered to his feet and defended himself as best he could, actually managing to get in a few good punches before someone hit him over the head and everything went black.

The color of sleep.

* * *

When Jonah came to, he was no longer in a public restroom but lying in an unfamiliar apartment. His boots had been removed and his body suit unzipped down to his waist; a bandage had been applied to his left pectoral. His head also hurt something terrible.

“Hello?” he called out, sitting up slowly on a plush gray sofa. “Is anyone here?”

A moment later a tall Purple, presumably the one who’d rescued him from the restroom, came into the room and Jonah recognized him as the very same man who’d been watching him intently on the bus. He looked to be in his early twenties, with short black hair and a well-trimmed goatee. His neck was thick and his torso well-developed, like that of an athlete’s, though he

appeared very trim and graceful as well.

“Ah, I see you’re finally awake,” said the man in a deep but smooth voice. A singer’s perhaps? “How do you feel?”

“Better than I would have felt if you hadn’t come into that bathroom after me,” replied Jonah, touching a bandage on his head and wincing. “Thank you, sir.”

“Please, call me Frank. Is there anything I can get you?”

“Maybe some cold water.”

Frank nodded and left again, walking in a very precise manner. Jonah stood and zipped his suit up partially as he looked around at the apartment. There was something strange about the place, something that was right in front of him but which he couldn’t quite identify readily since his eyes weren’t trained to notice such things. He blinked and suddenly it hit him: There was color in the room. Above and behind the big-screen TV was a large tapestry hanging on the wall; the lights in the room had been dimmed, but he could still make out the picture, a panoramic view of a valley, with trees and grass and flowers all growing freely, all splashed with color. Green, blue, red, orange, pink, turquoise—it was almost painful to gaze upon amidst all the regulation gray of the apartment.

“Stephen Dunsel, 2015, oil on canvas.”

Jonah jumped slightly at the sound of Frank’s voice, for he hadn’t heard him come back.

“Here’s your water.”

Thanking him, Jonah took the small glass offered, pausing for a second to look at Frank’s hands. They were bigger than his, well-shaped, and purple. He’d seen people of different colors before, but never this close and for this long. It took an effort not to stare, one that Frank seemed to share as well.

“I didn’t know color for leisure was allowed in this sector,” Jonah said after he’d taken a few sips.

“Actually, it’s not, but there are worse things going on in the city. A painter who likes to keep some secret works on hand for himself is hardly at the top of the Social Order Enforcement list. So, what brings you here to the Purple sector?”

“Well, I was late for work and I thought I could get on a Purple bus and make it there on time. Things didn’t go as smoothly as I would have liked.”

"I'll say," Frank said, shaking his head. "Those guys you ran into really had it out for you. Around here, Purples don't have much of a taste for Blues, especially since the Interracial Debates began last month. A lot of fingers are being pointed at the government as a whole as being the force behind color oppression and such. They all think you're the ones messing up their government paperwork and such."

Jonah frowned. "You're a Purple."

"I don't like seeing people get hurt, even if they aren't the same color as I am. Everyone's human, so everyone can feel pain."

How true, thought Jonah. We may be of different skin colors, but we all have ten fingers, ten toes . . . we're all built the same. I wonder if everyone's blood is red too?

"Anyway," continued Frank, putting his hands on his hips. "We shouldn't stand around here all afternoon wasting time. I assume you'd like to return to your sector as soon as possible?"

"Do you have a personal vehicle?"

"No, but there's the bus . . . and a little creativity on our part. Follow me."

Frank lead him to the bedroom where the shower was and told him to remove his suit.

"Why?" asked Jonah, somewhat nervous about disrobing in front of a stranger, and a Purple at that.

"Because," Frank replied, rummaging in the compartment of an enormous dresser until he found a canister of purple paint. "If you want to make it anywhere in this part of town without getting your butt kicked, you've got to act the part. For the rest of the day you're going to be a bona fide Purple."

Certainly the feds would put him in chains for something like this, but there was nothing else he could do if he wanted to get back home in one piece. He stripped off his suit and stood in the shower as Frank handed him the spray paint canister and he began coloring his body purple. At first he tried to go quickly, for he felt strange having another person watching him so closely. Presumably, Frank had never seen a naked Blue before and was simply curious to know how they were put together, but it was still intimidating especially when he had to ask for help to finish spraying his back in the places he couldn't reach on his own.

"I hope this stuff won't chip or streak if I sweat," he said, trying to relax.

Frank continued working as he spoke. "Not body paint. This stuff is used a lot in movies and on stage when actors must portray members of another color. It only comes off in a sonic shower."

"Are you an actor?"

"Yeah. I'm also a painter, a dancer, and a singer. A little bit of a variety helps keep me sane and it helps to pay my bills."

Jonah brushed a finger over his left arm and found the paint had already dried on his skin. "That was fast."

"Mm-hm. Has to be during live shows when you only have a minute or so to change characters backstage. Lift your right foot so I can get the sole."

Doing as he was told, Jonah couldn't help but feel fascinated. As a Blue, he had naturally been raised in a businesslike atmosphere, learning about everything that had to do with bookkeeping, accounting, and managing a business. In school, his entire teachings had been made up of math and economics, the practical side of keeping a government in order. He knew nothing of art or how it worked; only that that was what Purples were for and it wasn't his place to be curious about it. Yet he couldn't help himself.

"Do all Purples know things like this?" he asked.

Frank nodded and finished the left foot. "That's our designation: the arts. From the day we learn to speak we are taught all the elements of entertaining others. Music, acting, painting, dancing . . . that's our career path. It's what we were meant to do."

"Just like us Blues, who are trained to run the government, and like Reds, who are trained in athletics, and Greens as police officers. Each color has its own job in society."

"You're finished," Frank announced, stepping back and handing Jonah a purple body suit. He took it and started pulling it on when he noticed his reflection in the mirror over Frank's dresser and paused, one leg in, one out.

"I never thought I would see myself in any other color," he murmured, touching his own cheek. "I can't imagine what my wife will say when she sees me like this."

"There's only one way to find out, now isn't there?"

* * *

The transportation terminals were as busy as ever when they arrived, but this time Jonah didn't get any curious or hate-filled stares as he and Frank wormed their way towards the 207 line (it made sense to go back home the same way he'd come).

"There's one leaving in ten minutes," Frank murmured, examining the schedules above.

Jonah took a seat at one of the benches and nodded, only half paying attention as he watched the people walking around him. Now that he wasn't so uptight he could actually study the Purples, who really were not much different from Blues except that they talked about different things. Like the group of teenagers sitting several seats over. They were rehearsing lines for their first public play and giggling through all the mistakes.

In my own sector, he thought, those kids would be studying pie-charts and numbered graphs. They probably wouldn't be laughing so much either. Nobody laughs when they have to become walking calculators.

He started thinking, then, of his own life. As far back as he could remember, he'd been taught business. Everyday, he thought order, discipline, economics, even when he watched a movie with his parents and asked the innocent question, "Why do Purples get to spend their time acting like other colors when we can't?"

Shrugging helplessly, his mother would always reply, "It's the way things are, my son. You may not like it, but you have to obey the rules or be cast out of society."

"Like those people in parts of Britain or Africa?"

"Yes, dear. And we wouldn't want to live like *that*, now would we? In chaos, no firm structure of government, with disease and famine widespread? At least here in the Americas everyone has enough. Everything is balanced out, with the exact number of people in the right jobs doing the right things. No surplus or excess. It may be hard for you to understand now, but it keeps clothing on your back and food in your stomach."

Jonah would then nod, deciding that if he was to grow up to be what he was pre-programmed to be, he might as well try to en-

joy it even if he never really did.

"Jonah, are you okay?"

Frank's waving hand brought him back to the present. "Yeah, I'm fine. I was just thinking about things."

"Check out the vids. Something's up at the Debates."

Glancing up to where the video screens were, Jonah saw that a fair share of them were now broadcasting a news bulletin. Through the many other voices ringing out in the terminal, Jonah could hear the news anchor speaking in somber tones:

"The Interracial Debates continue this afternoon without much progress from yesterday's meeting. Leaders from the Seven Sectors met this morning at Shade City Hall and it is reported the discussions since then have been riddled with tension.

"One of the major arguments seems to be between the Elites and the Browns. Many farming and garbage disposal unions are insisting on higher pay and better working conditions while in the Purple sector, many people are protesting their right to freedom of color, which was banned nearly a century ago. These protests have been peaceful until eleven hundred hours this morning, when a fight broke out in front of a Blue office building. Five people were injured; there were no fatalities."

"Damn," Frank muttered, looking away from the vids. "This is liable to cause a stir. It's a good thing we disguised you when we did."

Jonah nodded and shook his head, unable to understand what the big deal was. You were born into a sector and that was that. What you did with your life was guided by the color of your skin . . . a simple and effective manner of controlling the balance of power within a large community. Yet there were people who still believed the whole system was a sham, a method of keeping the rich in high positions and the poor in humble ones. Now *that* was ridiculous, for if the color system had not been put into place, everyone would try to do what they wanted, ignoring the necessary, mundane jobs that every society required to keep itself running smoothly. If everyone was a movie star, who would dispose of the city's garbage? Who would keep the sewers clear and running? Who would weave clothes for everyone to wear?

Then there were those pro-choice activists who attacked the method of color-coding humans. They insisted that it was wrong

to force a child into a certain color when it had only been away from the womb for a matter of hours, that it was against the very laws of nature to permanently dye a child's skin, thereby insuring it would only be able to function in one specific sector.

"We'd better get going," said Frank, gesturing to where the 207 had just pulled up. "I'll see you to the Blue sector terminal and then you're on your own."

Jonah thanked him and boarded the bus. As he took his seat, he found that he was experiencing a tinge of disappointment as if going back home was more of a chore than a privilege. He would have to face his superiors at work and beg for them to keep him on, probably at a cut pay rate. He almost wanted to stay in the Purple sector, maybe even find a new life here somehow, but then he shook his head and realized he was thinking crazy thoughts.

I was born a Blue and I'll die one. That's the way things were meant to be.

* * *

Already the mood on the bus had changed since the morning. People conversed with each other nervously, and more than once Jonah picked up the words "Interracial Debates" and "trouble", often used in the same sentence. Then, at the Blue/Purple boundary line, the bus was stopped and ordered to turn around: Inter-sector travel had been temporarily restricted as the result of a bomb threat.

Swallowing a lump that had suddenly formed in his throat, Jonah looked from the green-skinned police officers outside to Frank, who sat beside him and looked thoughtful.

"They're not letting anyone through," Frank said. "Looks like you're stuck here for awhile. But don't worry, you can stay with me for as long as you need to."

Jonah didn't reply. He only chewed his fingernail and hoped Joyce and Ronnie were all right.

* * *

He made a point of calling them from Frank's place at eighteen hundred hours. Ronnie answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Ronnie, hi, it's daddy. Is mom there?"

"Yeah, she's home. How come you're not home yet?"

"Oh, I have to do some overtime at work, but I'm going to see you soon, I promise. Now put mommy on."

The line crackled for a moment as Jonah heard his son put down the telephone receiver. He could see the boy in his head, running from his bedroom to find Joyce, shouting, "Mommy! Phone call!" like he always did. A moment later, Joyce's voice came through.

"Jonah? Ronnie tells me you have overtime or something? What's the deal?"

"It's a long story," Jonah said, soothed somewhat by the sound of her voice. "I missed my bus to work this morning and got on a Purple line. Luckily, though, I'm able to stay with a, uh, friend. I'm working on a way to get home real soon."

"But haven't you been watching the news? They've isolated every sector! There's talk of a city-wide riot too."

"I know, I've heard, but I'm sure things will work out somehow. Just look out for yourself and Ronnie. I'll see about getting back as soon as I can. I love you."

"I love you too. Don't be long."

"I won't," Jonah said and clicked off the phone. Placing it back on the small table beside Frank's bed, he went out into the living room and sat on the sofa.

"How'd it go?" asked Frank, sitting and watching the news.

"My family's fine. I'm just worried I'm going to be stuck here for quite awhile, and with this sudden upsurge between the colors . . . everything's turning crazy."

"Either that or for once people are trying to open their eyes," said Frank, his gaze transfixed on the TV screen. He looked dreamy, like his mind was a million miles away.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Frank shrugged, blinking. "I don't know. I just don't see what all the big deal is over a person's color. If a Brown wants to be a lawyer, he should be able to. Back in the old days people of all colors used to work doing anything they liked, and they could live anywhere they wanted. It may have been less efficient, but people got along somehow."

"I guess," Jonah murmured, scratching at his arm. "Say, this body paint is getting itchy. Do you suppose I could have a shower?"

"Sure. You know where it is. The clothing recycler is beside the mirror."

Jonah nodded and went into the bedroom, where he pulled off his boots and body suit, sticking the latter into the recycler to be cleaned. Then he got into the shower and pulled the water-guard closed. It was nice to take a real water shower for a change and not have to worry about being late for something. He closed his eyes and leaned his elbow against the wall, allowing a cool stream of water to flow down his back and take his mind away from all the turmoil of the day. Like tiny fingers, the jets of water massaged his muscles, and quite unexpectedly, the fingers became real and he turned around to see Frank had come into the shower behind him.

"Frank, what are you doing?" he exclaimed, starting to get out of the shower, but Frank put his fingers to his lips and urged him back inside.

"Shh," he said, working his palms against Jonah's skin. "You look like you need a massage."

Jonah squirmed uncomfortably, feeling Frank's aroused body pressed against him. "I'm not that way. Besides, this is illegal. If anyone found out, we'd both be thrown in jail for God knows how long."

Sighing, Frank let go and stepped out of the shower. "Sorry. I mean—shit, I'm sorry, Jonah. I don't know why I—I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"You haven't offended me," Jonah said as he turned on the sonic shower briefly and went for a towel. Frank sat at the edge of his bed, head in his hands, shoulders quivering as he cried.

"You don't know how hard it is," he said, "being like I am, in a society that prides itself on efficiency and perfection. My kind aren't welcome. We're a defect, not allowed to have feelings and certainly not allowed to have the desires any human feels. I thought maybe with you it could be different. You, a Blue who didn't look down on me, a Purple. But I suppose I'm not that lucky."

Jonah had been quietly fretting near the dresser, wanting to console the man somehow but at the same time feeling ashamed over being in a gay man's bedroom. Nevertheless, there was no one watching, and Frank needed someone at his side; there was only one thing to do.

"Don't cry," he said, sitting beside Frank and putting his arm around his shoulder. He half expected to have a team of police officers come barging into the room, but all he got was a teary eyed glance and a nod of appreciation. Yes, even Purple homosexuals had feelings that needed to be respected.

"God, what am I doing?" Frank muttered, wiping his face and smiling. "Here we are in the midst of social strife and I'm worried about getting a date?" He gestured towards the living room. "Let me set up the sofa bed for you."

Once dry, Jonah took his clothes and went into the living room, where a fresh gray sheet had been spread over the opened sofa. Jonah spread himself on the bed and tried to sleep, but so much had happened today and it was hard to even close his eyes without having some fragment of memory flash in the darkness. He thought of the morning, sitting on the bus and having everyone look at him; of the men in the restroom and the sheer hatred they'd had for him; of Frank and his hands kneading his back, his purple genital a different color but built the exact same way as any Blue's.

Then he found himself thinking of Frank's eyes, brown . . . another trait they shared. No matter what color your skin was changed to as a baby, you always kept your eye color. Ronnie's were blue, like his mother's, and Jonah was suddenly remembering that day, six years ago, when his son had been born and he'd caught his first and only up-close glimpse of a human in its natural state. Tan skin, almost brown, but not like the Browns of today. More natural, with a deeper hue. It was hard to describe, and Jonah had spent the first few hours with the baby in his arms, hugging him, kissing him and relishing every second of the naturalness.

It had been strange afterward, when Ronnie had been deemed healthy, strong and ready for the skin treatment. As the doctors carted him off to the lab, Jonah had felt something strange in his gut, a kind of tightening, like he was losing something, though he

knew he was being ridiculous, because without a legal skin color, his son could never become a proper citizen

Eventually sleep came, and he dreamed of being a Purple, then spray-painting his body to become a Blue then peeling off that color to reveal the natural brown underneath.

Was that his true color or just another layer of dye?

* * *

The next morning things got worse. Jonah sat at the kitchen table watching the TV as he ate breakfast. Apparently a protest group made up of five thousand people had gathered outside city hall and were demanding that they receive the same benefits Blues and Elites did. So far, three people had been killed in fistfights and twenty-three injured.

"I can't watch this," Frank said, getting up from the table. "Besides, I have work, and you might as well come along if you're going to be stuck here in this sector."

On Wednesdays Frank taught dancing classes in his own personal studio. Business was normally good, but today only three people showed up probably because of the increased number of agitated Greens patrolling about on their motorcycles to break up any fights that might have started. No one felt like doing much of anything when their every move was being monitored.

Around noon, all the dancers left for lunch and didn't come back, so Frank simply closed the studio doors and turned on the "CLOSED" sign in the window.

"There's no point in dragging the horse to water if he won't drink," he commented, folding his arms. "But that doesn't mean we still can't have a little fun. Would you like some free dance lessons?"

"Sure," Jonah replied. He was finding it easier and easier to be around Frank the more time he spent with him, and since last night's shower incident he'd come to the conclusion that it was okay to be friends with a Purple who happened to be gay.

They spent the next five hours together practicing. Jonah had very bad balance, having never practiced a single dance step in his entire life, but he was willing to slip and fall, trip and fall, flip and fall time and time again until eventually he got the hang of a few

basic moves. By seventeen hundred hours he was hungry, sweaty and bruised in several places, but feeling happier and freer than he ever had in his life. There was something about doing what he wasn't born to do that fueled an eagerness and curiosity he'd only recently noticed bottled up inside himself. Once it bloomed, he couldn't help but become transfixed with the desire to experience all the things he'd never tried before. By the time evening arrived and Frank took him back to his place, he was ready to sleep like a rock.

That night was the last night of peace he ever had.

* * *

Jonah stayed with Frank for several days as the turmoil in the streets continued. He made sure he called Joyce daily to make sure they were all right. The Seven Sectors were still isolated as talks between politicians continued to no avail and people were still getting beaten up in the streets for being the wrong color. The hardest hit were the Elites, the only humans allowed to keep their original skin color. Since they were the wealthiest, they were hated most and beaten worst if they dared step out the doors of their homes without bodyguards at their sides. Next high on the most-hated list were the Blues, who were direct employees of the Elites.

Street fights broke out all over the city and many news stations urged people to stay inside their homes unless leaving became absolutely necessary. Jonah holed up in Frank's apartment and watched the riots on TV, losing hope with each broadcast that he would make it home at all.

Early next week, Frank suggested they go grocery shopping, for all that remained in the food cooler wasn't enough to feed them both.

"If we stick together we should be okay," he said, pulling on his clothes. Jonah, still in bed, yawned and turned onto his side. The thought of having to go outside into the burning city streets made him cringe.

"Jonah, we have to go now."

Sighing, Jonah kicked off the sheets and rose from bed. "All right, then. I don't know why you're so anxious all of the sudden,

but I suppose we can't put it off any longer."

Frank merely furrowed his brow and looked off elsewhere, waiting for him to get dressed. As he fumbled with the laces of his boots, an odor tickled his nostrils.

Smoke.

"You smell that?" Jonah asked, jumping to his feet.

"Yes," said Frank, nodding sadly as if he'd known this was going to happen. "It's an acid fire. We'd better get out of here before we're burned alive."

Outside a crowd had gathered, made up mostly of the tenants of the apartment building that was now being eaten by flames. Somewhere in the distance sirens blared, but everyone knew it would be too late before the fire fighters arrived. Parents held their children, little old ladies held their cats, Jonah held Frank as he cried.

"Hey, easy now," he whispered into Frank's ear. "We're lucky to still be alive. That's all that really matters."

"They did it because of me."

"Frank, no—"

"Yes they did. No matter how hard society has tried to make everyone equal, we're still all as different from each other as possible, aren't we?"

Jonah's arms cradled Frank as tears continued to stream from his eyes. "Maybe being different is a good thing. We're just not used to it yet."

They stood together and watched the building burn down and afterward walked together to find a hotel, only they didn't make it. Two blocks away from the apartment complex a gunshot rang out suddenly and Frank lurched forward.

"Frank?" Jonah cried, stumbling to the ground and trying to hold onto his friend. "Frank? Oh, God—"

"Purple homos!" someone called out. Footsteps neared.

Jonah knelt on the ground, trying to assess the extent of the gunshot wound. "Oh, God, Frank! Don't move! I'll get help!"

Even as the life drained from his body at an alarming rate, Frank managed a smile. "Don't ever . . . let anyone . . . tell you that you . . . can't dance," he rasped just before his body went limp and he died.

Tears streamed from Jonah's eyes as he hugged his friend

closely, wishing he'd had the courage to come to this sector years ago and do all the things he'd done in the last few days. Now all he had left was a memory, and it wasn't enough to make him want life.

"Hey, fag! Get up!"

Four Blues surrounded him, each holding a gun pointed at his head. He stood, for a moment actually wanting a piece of lead in his chest, for he no longer had a reason to live until his life flashed before his eyes and he saw his wife, as a pretty girl, then as a beautiful young woman giving birth to his son and his son growing from a baby into a young boy. The same boy who waited for his father's return somewhere in the Blue sector where Jonah had silently hated his life and never noticed how lucky he was until now.

"Wait . . ." he whispered, trying to find his voice. He raised his hands above his shoulder, noticing that they were stained red with Frank's blood. Red.

"Did you say something, fag?" one of the Blues said, stepping in close and scowling.

"Wait," Jonah said, louder this time a pathetic attempt at saving himself. "I'm . . . I'm a Blue, like you . . ."

Laughter shook the gang of men, for obviously they didn't see a Blue man standing in front of them; they saw a Purple trying to lie his way out of being killed.

"No, really . . . I am!" Jonah cried, scratching at his skin with his fingers, trying to uncover the blue underneath, but of course it wouldn't come off without a sonic shower. And even if it had, he couldn't have stopped the bullet from discharging and piercing the flesh of his chest. The pain was unbearable and Jonah fell at once to the ground where his blood poured from the wound, thick and warm and red.

Red. Just like Frank's. Just like any human's, no matter what color their skin was—then black, for when you were dead you were dead, and colors didn't matter anymore.

Ascension

I thought I was ready to die. Laying in the hospital bed, a feverish aching clinging to every crevice of my being, I welcomed death's escape. I closed my eyes, let go . . . let the pain wash over me like a tidal wave, separating soul from flesh, carrying me out of my diseased body and away from the perils of Earth forever.

I died.

Afterward, I could still hear myself thinking, still hear myself wondering: *If I'm dead, why am I wondering about being dead?*

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on a rounded, sandy rock a dozen or so yards across. At the center of the rock a single apple tree bore its fruit and provided adequate shade from an omnipotent sun that seemed to shine from all parts of the cloudless sky.

Heaven, I thought. Somehow not what I'd expected. A desert island floating in the center of a vast, motionless ocean. I got to my feet (noting that my body was bare) and walked to the edge of the rock, where I peered down into the water. It was so clear and so still that I could have seen all the way to the bottom had the ocean not been so incredibly deep. Everything here was beautiful, but incomplete—like a painting that hadn't been finished.

Nevertheless, I was content. I spent many days happily being. I went swimming; I basked in the sun; I sat in the shade of my apple tree and feasted on its fruit; I drifted in solitude alongside my thoughts without a care in the world. For a while it was all I needed—this eternal now. Without the incessant battering of society, my mind became serene; without environmental pollution or overindulgence, my body became lean and wiry, devoid of disease, devoid of excess. I could have continued like this indefinitely had the wish truly been mine.

However, boredom had somehow found its way into my new world. It crept closer with each passing day, each passing lifetime.

At long last I found myself beginning to wonder: Was this all there was? Lying here on my rock, passing days as if they were minutes? Speaking out loud to myself every so often just to be sure I still recognized the sound of my own voice? Masturbating in silence while trying to recall a woman's touch? There were, of course, no women here. There was no one here but myself.

On one occasion it rained. Torrents of water droplets fell from invisible clouds. Despite the initial thrill of such a change in routine, I soon became wet and cold. There was little to cover myself with, so I merely crouched under the apple tree and waited it out. The storm continued for what seemed like days, drenching me to the bone. Then, just as I got used to the incessant moisture, the rain stopped and all was serene once again.

I was unexpectedly disappointed.

Another lifetime passed, and nothing changed. I eventually became frustrated and so proceeded to pick all the apples from my tree and hurl them into the ocean. Then I sat near the water and watched for days as the apples floated in a stationary fashion. There was no current, no past or future. Only absolute peace. Absolute solitude.

Perhaps the former was not possible without the latter.

The apples eventually rotted, and my hunger became unbearable. I soon began wasting away, lying prone beneath the stripped apple tree and watching as the muscles of my arms diminished, the skin became loose and papery.

Funny, I thought. To die in Heaven.

I should have been upset, apprehensive, afraid—instead I welcomed the transition. It was a change, a moving path . . . even if the end result was yet another unknown.

At long last, I faded away, succumbing to a white light which surrounded me like a blanket as an unseen force lifted me upward, carrying me by my feet through a murky tunnel, up above Heaven, above the deep womb of the universe, out into a frigid, stark room where I was suddenly surrounded by people much larger than I was, much louder.

People.

As soon as the memory flashed in my mind, it began to fade away. I tried to talk, tried to open my eyes wider to see what was happening, but I'd forgotten how. Suddenly everything I knew

was slipping away, fading into the recesses of my memory as a newness rushed in like air into a vacuum. I started crying, frustrated, saddened—elated.

“It’s a boy,” said someone standing above.

Alas, too late, for I could no longer understand the words.

Don't Feed Santa Yellow Snow

I killed Theresa's cat on Christmas Eve. With a slingshot and a marble. It was an accident, of course—Patches had simply run in front of my shot at just the right moment and gotten clocked in between the eyes. At least, that's the story I kept repeating in my head as I stood over the animal's lifeless form. Truthfully, I was pretty good with a slingshot. I knew exactly where I'd been aiming, I knew exactly why this cat was dead, and I knew that I was going to be in big trouble when Theresa found out. She'd tell Mom. Mom would tell Dad, and Dad would make whipped cream out of my ass.

Maybe she's just knocked out, I thought, but it was obvious she was much worse off. I'd been nudging her with the edge of my sandal for nearly ten minutes now and nothing. With a sigh, I pocketed my weapon of mass destruction and hoisted Patches' body in my arms. I took her out into the unpaved alleyway that ran behind our duplex and deposited her amongst the sea weeds—the grass that hadn't been cut in a decade, if at all. In actuality, the alley was more of a time-worn pathway of packed dirt drowned in unkempt trees, bushes, and tall grass. There were probably things tossed here by neighbors that had never been recovered in twenty years . . . things that had never been *meant* to be recovered.

Like Nicole Chamberlain's body. My family had moved into the neighborhood in '12. A year later, this high school cheerleader and her boyfriend had supposedly been fooling around down at the "pipe yard," which was four blocks west of our duplex. Dad had told me that the girl didn't want to put out, and that the guy had gotten really angry and killed her because of it (they'd both been drunk, supposedly, but that was pretty heavy still). Afterward, he'd hidden her body somewhere in this very alleyway to keep the police from finding it. Though the alley stretched for blocks and blocks, the cops (if they'd really wanted to) could have

had a huge search or something. Maybe chopped down all the overgrown trees and mowed all the unkempt grass and maybe figured out for sure if Nicole was out here somewhere after all—but to this day, that had never happened. It was an unspoken rule that everybody seemed to have: Whatever the alley takes, it takes. Don't ask questions; just let it go.

It was kind of a strange idea, now that I thought about it. Dad had told me the story about Nicole, about the alley—both of which he'd heard from this decrepit old woman who lived across the street from us—with a fair amount of amusement. However, other people seemed to take it much more seriously. They never wanted to talk about it. Maybe they were *scared* of it.

I wasn't. I passed through here everyday. Agnes Cotton Elementary was a couple of blocks southeast of here—I'd trek through the tall grass and trees for about five minutes before emerging onto San Pedro like an explorer discovering civilization for the first time. So I was used to this place, which to me wasn't so much scary as it was . . . lost.

Glancing westward, I could see clear down to the pipe yard, a small rust-colored patch amongst all the foliage. I could even almost make out the small square sign with the bright white letters "Keep Out." Behind me, to the east, the alleyway stretched as far as I could see. And in between, where I stood, nothing but decadence.

That was Patches' resting place, Davy Setter style.

I went back home covered in wispy gray hairs (we'd named the cat Patches because she'd always had a habit of shedding her coat in big patches that got all over) and smelling like cat. That tipped Theresa off big time. She looked up from her coloring book as I crossed the porch quickly, kicking off my sandals and pulling my T-shirt over my head as I went.

"Where's Patches?" she asked, that uncanny girl sense evident in her voice.

I didn't even stop, just headed straight for the bathroom as I called over my shoulder, "I think she's out back." Hey, it was the truth. If any small part of me felt remorse for Theresa's dumb ol' cat, it was the part that decided to tell the truth . . . even though another part of me was trying to convince my entire brain to worry about whether or not my killing the cat would have any-

thing to do with the amount of gifts Santa Claus brought me this year.

Cats had nine lives, right? I was almost certain that Patches was somewhere in the middle as far as lives went, so she'd be coming back pretty soon. Not like a person. If I had killed a person, I would have freaked out, because people lived once and then died and that was it. But cats came back. I knew they did, because when I was four Patches got hit by a car. Dad told me what had happened and I remember crying for days about it. Then, maybe a week later, Patches came back—Dad said he'd found her wandering around the streets and picked her up on the way home from work. Her fur was slightly lighter than before, but it was her. She'd cashed in one of her lives and come back.

Surely if a cat could come back after being hit by a car, being hit with a marble wasn't too bad. And if she *didn't* come back . . . well maybe that's what she wanted. It wasn't my fault.

It wasn't my fault . . .

* * *

Mom had me when she was twenty. Despite the unexpected births of both me and my sister, she'd kept her youthful figure through her aerobics classes and strict vegetarian diet. Over the years, she'd slowly been trying to convert the Setters to "humane consumption," although her efforts contributed largely to The Battle of the Meal Plans. Theresa, being a girl and all, took Mom's side as far as eating was concerned; me and Dad stood behind our In N' Out Burger and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Consequently, dinner frequently resembled a gang war. On one side of the table sat the women with their stir-fry. On the other side sat the men, digging like ravenous bloodhounds into their steaks.

This year, though, would mark our first vegetarian Christmas as a family. Mom insisted we call a cease fire and share one dinner, together at the table instead of scattered about on the living room floor watching *A Christmas Story* for the billionth time. How she convinced Dad to go all-veggie, I'll never know, though I think it had something to do with sex. Dad once said that for guys, when you hit puberty, your brain went into your pants—and that if you ever gave your pants to a girl, she'd be able to control

you forever. I had just turned ten this year, and had certainly not given my pants to any girl; therefore, I still possessed total control of my brain, as well as my insistence that we have ham included somewhere in the Christmas dinner.

"But we've always had ham at Christmas," I said, following Mom back and forth from the counter to the stove to the counter and back to the stove again. Theresa sat on the kitchen counter, swinging her legs back and forth, meticulously breaking apart the long stalks of spaghetti that would later serve as the backbone of our dinner.

Mom continued to move the cooking along despite my protests. "Davy, one day without meat won't kill you."

"But you gotta have meat with spaghetti! Without it it's like . . . it's like, um, a burger without the burger! I mean just the buns and ketchup and pickles, but no burger!"

"You should try it, Davy," said Theresa from her post on the counter. "It might make you *calm* for a change."

I turned and glared at her. If I hadn't killed her cat, I would have let her have it, right in the middle of her dorky eight-year-old face. As it was, though, I simply scrunched up my fingers and toes and accumulated my frustration as if it were static electricity.

"Theresa, don't start on your brother," Mom intervened. Hearing the phone ring, she quickly thrust her ladle into my hand. "That's probably your grandma. Stir the sauce, would you Davy?"

I sighed and took hold of the ladle, stirring the tomato sauce with dread. It was so thin. "How can you and Mom eat like this?" I asked, not so much as a statement of disgust, but as a genuine need to know: Why did vegetarians deprive themselves of the necessities of meat?

"Mom says it keeps your eyes bright," Theresa said. "And when you grow into a big kid, your face won't be so greasy."

"My face isn't greasy."

"I didn't mean you."

I stirred on in silence for a moment before getting an idea. With what must have been a Grinchy-grin I looked at my sister and pointed out the window above the sink. "There! Look, I think it's Patches!"

Theresa's face brightened as she dropped what she was doing,

hopped off the counter and peered out the window. With the late afternoon light streaming in, it was a little hard to see anything beyond the dusty screen, but I insisted that I'd seen Patches, and that Theresa should go fetch her before she ran away again and got hit by another car. That last part cinched it. Lower lip quivering, Theresa exited the kitchen through the screen door and began calling Patches' name.

Now alone in the kitchen, I *really* began cooking. There were some bacon bits in the fridge, which I added generously to Mom's sauce, along with the bowlful of onions and garlic she'd prepared. I quickly stirred everything together so that it wouldn't be too easy to tell the meat from the veggies.

Dinner, Davy Setter style.

* * *

Dad was the same age as Mom, which meant his notions of tradition came from the same era as Mom's (can you say "vegetarian Christmas?"). He was like a big kid, really, who still had his bowl-cut from high school, still wore ankle bracelets, and still found time to spend a couple hours a week down at the Vans Skate Park. He did all the holiday stuff well enough, though he'd developed the deplorable habit of waiting until the very last moment possible to wrap the non-Santa Claus presents.

Twenty minutes before dinner was ready, he called to me from the bedroom. I walked in to find him surrounded by numerous boxes of varying shape and size that looked like they had been wrapped by the Elephant Man. What hadn't yet been wrapped lay waiting inside a large blue Wal*Mart bag. As I sat crosslegged on the floor and Dad handed me the Scotch tape, I tried to catalog all the items I'd asked for that could have possibly been bought at Wal*Mart, the odds for and against Dad's buying them, and the overall average rate of glimpses into the bag I could possibly get on accident if I played my cards right.

Dad noticed my wandering eyes and flashed a smile. "I've already wrapped your gifts," he said as he placed a pair of CDs and something called a "*Love on the Rocks* Sleep Maker" at my feet. "Here, do your mother's, and if you give away the secret I'll kill you."

"Ew, *Hanson*," I grumbled, taking hold of the scissors.

"Your mom used to go to all their concerts before the keyboard player died."

"Are my presents just as lame?"

"No, worse—now just get this done before Theresa comes prying."

We wrapped in silence for a couple of minutes—mostly because the wrapping paper Dad had given me had little tiny kittens dancing all over it. They were very cartoonish and had bright red stripes, but they still reminded me of Patches. Sad . . . that wasn't really the right word to describe how I was feeling. I was just wondering how many lives Patches had left.

"Dad?"

"Huh?"

"You know how Santa will only bring you presents if you're good?"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"Would he still bring presents if you, um, accidentally did something bad?"

Dad paused for a moment, obviously anticipating the worst. "Like what?"

"I dunno . . ." I thought for a moment. "Like maybe if you were outside playing and you stepped on a snail on accident. I mean, that's killing, but you didn't mean to do it."

"I don't think that would be too high on Santa's list of no-no's."

"And if it is?"

With a sigh, Dad got to his feet and scooped up the presents. "Davy, you worry too much. Besides, no matter what, you won't find out what *Santa* has in mind this year until you wake up in the morning, so just have fun in the meantime. All right?"

I shrugged and finished wrapping Mom's "*Love on the Rocks*."

* * *

Dinner on Christmas Eve, Setter style: A *Jars of Clay* CD blaring out of the boombox in the living room. Everybody sitting together at the table in the dining room and wearing the same clothes they'd put on that morning. T-shirts, cargo shorts (for me

and Dad), denim overalls for Mom, a summer dress for Theresa, and bare feet for all. Mom and Dad took turns taking a few Polaroids of the family until I demanded we begin eating before I dropped dead from hunger. With a slight scowl on her face, Mom put the camera away and got us all to bow our heads as we said grace.

Halfway through, the Christmas tree fell over with a loud *thwump!* and everything went dark. I heard Dad swear and rise from the table. He instructed Mom and Theresa to stay put as he and I went on a quest to secure and restore light to the Setter household. Ten minutes, seven matches, two candles and three stubbed toes later, we came to realize that there was no circuit box on our side of the duplex. It was on our neighbors' side, which posed two very big problems. One, our neighbors were Arabic and spoke not a word of English. Two, our neighbors were vacationing elsewhere for the month.

So it was with typical male bone-headedness that Dad and I decided to break into our neighbors' side and find the circuit box come hell or high water. Well, we didn't really *break* in. Dad first tried jimmying the windows—much to Mom's shock and disbelief. She just stood there in the alley, holding Theresa's hand and shaking her head.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she murmured between several nervous glances towards the darkened street.

"We're not stealing anything," Dad reiterated with a grunt as he attempted to slide the window open. It only went up a couple of inches—too narrow for him to fit through. I was a better fit. He hoisted me in his arms.

"Tom—what are you doing?"

"Just a little innovation, that's all."

"You are *not* sending David in there by himself!"

Mom grabbed me by the ankles, but I pulled away, reaching for the windowsill with my hands. "I can do it, Mom. Nobody's home."

"I don't care if no one's home, you're not going in there!"

It took a couple of minutes, with Mom and Dad arguing and negotiating control of my body until I finally spoke up and reminded Mom that I had been in the neighbors' house once or twice since moving here—I knew what the inside was like.

"It's Christmas, for God's sake," Dad said. "We're not going to spend it in the friggin' dark. Davy will be in and out, two minutes tops."

"Yeah, Mom."

Mom looked pissed. She let go of my feet and took Theresa by the hand as she headed back towards the front of the duplex. "Fine. Do whatever."

"I think she's mad," I observed as Dad lifted me again. I climbed through the window and felt around in the dark with my toes until I was sure I was standing on the floor and not someone's cactus plant.

"She's not mad," Dad said. "She's just venting, that's all. Here—take the candle and find the circuit box. It's probably somewhere on the wall adjacent to our side. The switch that doesn't match the others is the one you flip, got it?"

I nodded and took the candle from Dad. "This is so ghetto, Dad. Why don't we ever have flashlight batteries during emergencies?"

"You and Theresa always kill the flashlight when you build your forts. Now hurry up and turn the power back on. I'll be right here—and don't touch anything besides the circuit box!"

I told him I knew what to do and left the window.

It was kind of freaky, tip-toeing around in someone else's house at night. Even though I knew no one was there besides myself, there was still the notion that at any moment a horrible disgusting head would peer around any corner. Every creak and crack that the floor made had me freezing in place, listening closely for any signs of the Boogieman.

I nearly wet myself when I entered the living room and saw someone sitting on the couch. For a split second I considered screaming, but then I realized it was only a mannequin. A very, very realistic mannequin dressed in a smock and wearing a turban on his head—Dom Deluise if he'd been petrified. His beard looked as if it were made of real human hair. I stepped in close, examining his features for a moment before I got a chill that ran the length of my spine.

The eyes looked so real. I wondered if they were watching me.

With a shudder, I turned away from the mannequin, pushed away any questions as to its purpose here in the living room as I

scanned the wall behind the couch. Momentarily, I found the circuit box hidden creatively behind a hanging rug. Sure enough, as Dad had said, all but one of the switches were in the “on” position. I flipped the rogue switch and heard a slight pop (hopefully the power on our side turning back on). My mission completed, I turned back towards the living room doorway—and froze in my tracks.

The mannequin was gone.

I blinked, felt my heart leap into my throat as every horror movie I’d ever seen flashed through my mind. For what must have been the longest minute of my life I remained perfectly still, listening, looking around the living room, wondering if the mannequin had actually been a real person. If so, why had he just sat there all still like that, and what was he doing here all by himself in the dark? Was he a bum? And if so, where had he gone?

“Psst! Davy!”

Dad’s voice hissing from the window brought me some courage. I moved quickly, trying not to look at anything as I made a beeline through the darkness. When I got to the window, I nearly jumped through. Dad helped pull me out, and only when I was standing in the driveway, familiar gravel and dirt under my feet, did I realize just how scared I had been.

“Dad,” I murmured, voice quivering ever so slightly. “There was somebody in there.”

Dad’s face paled just a bit (whether out of fright or embarrassment at the possibility of being caught breaking and entering, I couldn’t tell). He paused for a moment, staring at the darkened window. Then he quickly pulled it closed and grabbed my arm. “Come on. The last thing we need on Christmas Eve is the next door neighbors calling the cops because we broke into their place.”

“But Dad,” I said, looking back towards the window as we approached the front lawn. “It wasn’t one of the neighbors. It was some guy I’ve never seen before. He was sitting on the couch. I thought he was a dummy at first, but after I’d fixed the power, I looked back and he was gone.”

With a frown, Dad paused and looked back down the alley. After a moment, “Let’s not tell Mom about this, okay? At least not until after Christmas.”

“Dad?”

“Yeah?”

“I thought the neighbors were out of town for the holidays.”

“I thought so too . . . but they *are* Arabic. They have different traditions than we do. Maybe when we celebrate Christmas, they turn all the lights off and meditate for a month straight.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, chuckling nervously. I’d heard of yogis who could fall asleep underwater for half an hour and then wake up again in perfect health.

If yogis could do it, why not Arabians?

Mom and Theresa were righting the tree when we got back inside. Half of the living room floor was covered in discarded decorations and pine needles, but the lights were on, and the CD player was once again broadcasting *Jars of Clay*. We spent a couple minutes getting the bare necessities done before Mom insisted we all return to the dinner table and eat.

“I don’t want us having a cold Christmas dinner,” she said, picking some tinsel from her hair as she headed for the dining room.

Dad finished arranging several of the presents under the tree. “No, you just don’t want us missing your veggie-rama on the off-chance that we’ll actually like it.”

“Har-har,” replied Mom.

We reconvened at the table and dinner commenced. The Davy Setter spaghetti sauce went over really well with Dad, who commented that it tasted almost like *meat* lasagna—how’d she do it? Mom merely ate slowly, glancing at her plate as if something were wrong, but she couldn’t figure out what. Her answer came in a couple of minutes when Theresa’s face turned real pale and she puked all over the garlic bread. Mom jumped up from the table, grabbed Theresa and hauled her to the bathroom while Dad and I attempted cleanup without actually looking at the mess. The smell was horrific, though, and enough to spoil our appetites. Mine especially, since I was having second thoughts about my decision to enhance Mom’s cooking. I mean, I knew Theresa was a veggie and all, but I didn’t think eating meat would affect her like this.

God, I hoped Santa was too busy to notice.

* * *

“Bacon bits,” Mom said in the sternest of voices. “You put bacon bits in the sauce, didn’t you?”

She was correct, of course, so there was no reason for me to answer. I just sat at the edge of the couch and stared at my toes. The twisted thing about the situation was that I was more worried about how this would affect my odds of receiving a basketball for Christmas.

“Well?”

“I didn’t think she’d get sick,” I mumbled after a moment.

Theresa whimpered from where she sat at the opposite end of the couch. Half-dried tears streaked her face—I had to wonder if she was playing this up to get me in deeper trouble or if she really did feel as bad as she looked.

Dad shook his head and told me to go to bed. “The mood’s dead,” he said. “Just go brush your teeth and hit the sheets.”

I stood and looked longingly at the motherlode beneath our tree. “What about—?”

“Not tonight.” Dad put his arm around my shoulder and led me to the bathroom. “Teeth, face, bed. Got it?”

I nodded.

* * *

My parents weren’t the types who were real hard on you when you’d done something wrong—but they got the job done. I lay in bed for what seemed like hours just staring at the wood paneling of the walls. Out in the living room, I could hear Mom and Dad reading stories to Theresa, calming her down I suppose.

I was far from calm. My palms were all sweaty and my stomach felt tight. Santa would be coming tonight, and he undoubtedly knew everything I had been doing for the past couple of hours. The cat, the spaghetti sauce, breaking into the next door neighbor’s place . . . forget the coal in the stocking thing. Santa would be crapping in my stocking tonight for sure. If he came at all.

A part of me wanted to stay awake all night so that when the Big Guy finally arrived I could explain things from my point of

view. But as usual, the eventual heaviness of my eyelids grew until I was konked out and playing a harp in La-La Land.

* * *

A noise on the roof woke me. I opened my eyes, glanced around the bedroom without moving. Down past my feet I could see Theresa asleep in her bed. To my right, the doorway to the living room (where my parents slept) stood slightly ajar. Through the opening, a myriad of colors danced upon the floor beams—the Christmas lights had been left on. I sat up, trying to get a glimpse of the tree in the hopes that Santa had already come and, in a moment of good cheer, left my presents under the tree.

I was out of bed and halfway to the door when a scuffling noise from above halted my steps. It sounded like someone walking. I watched the ceiling, following the sound of whoever it was on our roof making his way towards the back of the duplex. And then a slight thud, in the backyard, followed by silence.

The bedroom that Theresa and I shared was at the back of our side of the duplex. As such, there were two really large windows that offered a great view of the backyard—except now, with the curtains drawn, I could only wonder who was prowling about outside. I'd left the window beside my bed open slightly, and now a chilly breeze (much too cold for a Texas winter) wafted in, sent goosebumps up my arms. Slowly I crossed the floor, crawled across my bed and parted the curtains to find—snow.

The entire backyard, the shed, the trees beyond were all covered in fluffy white snowflakes. Just like on TV. Except this was San Antonio, this was real, and at the center of an Instant Wonderland there was a set of footprints that began out of nowhere and lead across the snow, into the shed.

I was mesmerized. Without thinking, I exited through the window—and discovered first-hand that the snow really *was* real. It came up to my ankles and it was freezing cold. Clad solely in a pair of boxer shorts, I was ill-prepared for the cold that stung my feet. Instinctively, I sprinted for the driveway, where the snow gave way to grass and dirt. For some reason, the snowfall had been localized entirely in the area surrounding our duplex.

I craned my neck and glimpsed as much of the roof of our du-

plex as I could, but there seemed to be nothing up there besides more snow. My attention returned to the shed. I wondered what kind of person could just appear in the middle of a yard like that. Of course, it could have been some dangerous criminal on the run, but curiosity got the better of me and I decided to investigate. I climbed back into my bedroom (never mind that I trailed snow everywhere) and threw on some clothes. Then I tried waking up Theresa.

"Therese! Therese! Wake up!" I hissed, shaking her roughly, but she stayed asleep. For a moment I thought she might be dead, but she was still breathing. She just wouldn't wake up. Maybe I'd *really* made her sick when I'd screwed up dinner.

Apprehension flaring, I left Theresa's sleeping form and went into the living room, where Mom and Dad were cuddled up together on their bed. I tried rousing them as well, but (like Theresa) they remained comatose no matter what I did. I even tried slapping Dad's face around a little but he was out of it.

A thought hit me then, and it turned my blood cold. The man I had seen on our neighbor's side. What if he had been a killer? What if he had somehow found his way into our side of the duplex and had drugged everybody? I whirled around, nervously scrutinizing the rest of the living room. Our TV was still here, and all the presents were still under the tree. The front window appeared to be closed, though I was too scared to go over and check because the window was right next to the doorway that lead into the dining room—the *dark* dining room where anyone or anything could possibly be hiding this very moment.

"Mom . . . Dad," I whispered, trying once again to rouse them. "Please . . . wake up" I might as well have been trying to get a dog to speak English. They didn't budge. I reached over and tried to turn on the turtle-shaped lamp beside their bed, but it wasn't working. In fact, as I soon found out through trial and error, nothing electrical at all was working except for the Christmas lights.

An immeasurable amount of time passed before I found myself standing out in the backyard again, a need to know overpowering any fears I may have had. I was armed with Dad's baseball bat as I followed the telltale footprints to the shed and stopped a few feet in front of the door. The darkness within was

too impenetrable to contemplate. It wasn't much brighter out here, but at least there were a pair of street lamps standing in the alleyway which provided something of a bluish glow over the yard.

"Hello?" I called out. There was no vocal answer but a surprised rustling which emanated from the darkness. I edged closer. "I'm gonna turn on the light, okay?" However foolish the action may have been, I reached inside the shed and flicked on the light switch—

—and screamed. Mostly out of surprise at first, for there was a woman huddled inside the shed. She nearly convulsed when she saw me, fell back against the rear wall of the shed. I took a step back as well, an urge to look away nearly overcoming my intense curiosity, for this woman—wait, this *girl*; she only looked older because of her extreme wounds, but she couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen—looked like hell. Worse, actually. Her skin was deathly pale, with gaping lesions all over her face and arms. Her hair was thin and stringy; on the left side of her head she was nearly bald. One of her eyes was swollen shut. The other was bloodshot, bulged too much to be healthy.

She was quivering uncontrollably.

It took me a moment to take all this in. In that time, the girl didn't move an inch—she simply remained transfixed, like a frightened animal. "Are you okay?" I asked, checking my grip on the bat.

The girl stared at me for a second, as if she didn't comprehend. As I watched in horror, some kind of worm crawled out of the swollen, disfigured eye, made its way down her cheek, and slithered into one of the lesions. I felt like puking, looked away for a second and then back. She was still there. I was afraid of her, afraid of standing here rooted to the spot like this, but I was also afraid that if I ran she might chase me. It was that fear of having to turn your back on something: You'd rather face it head-on than having it pounce on you from behind.

Eventually, I found my voice again. "I'm David." No response. Just that petrified stare. "What's your name?"

It took her a moment, gargling incoherently at first, but she managed a reply: "Nicole." It was a croak. Her voice was so ragged it sounded like an old man's. Unnaturally deep and hollow.

I started to ask her if she needed help.

"He's after me," Nicole gurgled, coughing a bit. Her semi-good eye darted to a point somewhere over my shoulder. I turned my head slightly, now wondering if maybe Nicole wasn't the worst of my worries. Despite the occasional uncanny snowflake falling from the sky, the yard was quiet and still. It was as if me and Nicole were the only ones left alive in the world. Another glance at her, though, and I questioned the possibility of her actually being *alive*.

"There's nobody there," I said, as much for her consolation as for my own.

It didn't seem to help, though, for she started sobbing. Thick, greasy, black tears. "God, I don't know what to do . . . I'm so tired of this . . . I just want to go home . . ."

She continued to sob, and as I watched her, I realized I wasn't really afraid of her anymore. I was sad for her. "Where do you live?"

She looked up at me and sniffed, trying to wipe the tears off her cheek but instead just smearing them around. "That way," she said, pointing southeast. "Would you . . . would you take me home?"

I bit my lip, looked around at the pseudo winter.

"I . . . I just don't want to go alone. I know . . . I know that if someone went with me I would feel safer."

My first instinct was to politely decline—but then I thought if I didn't take her home, how long would she stay out here? Days? Weeks? Until her physical state became even more grotesque? What if whoever was chasing her came by and attacked me as well? I would feel immensely better if I knew that there was nothing but tools in our shed (and not a half-dead girl).

"Okay," I said.

Nicole smiled a little then, revealing yellowed teeth. She really was in terrible shape, but she could walk. We had made it to the entrance of the alleyway, where the snow gave way to the more familiar tall grass and trees, when she stopped suddenly and started feeling around in her jacket pockets.

"What's wrong?" I asked as I glanced around at what was now a typical San Antonio summer night. It didn't feel like Christmas at all but rather a strange dream you might have after eating too much pizza before bedtime.

"My keys . . . I forgot my keys" She looked imploringly at me. "I can't get in the house unless I have my keys."

I had to look away from her again because another worm was making its way out of one of her nostrils. "Um, do you remember where you had them last?"

Nicole looked thoughtful for a moment. "We came down together . . . we stopped at the pipe yard . . . after we, uh, had the fight . . . I ran down the alley . . . I remember something dropping, but I didn't care then because I was scared."

"You're Nicole Chamberlain," I breathed. I dropped my bat.

"Chamberlain . . ." she murmured. "Yeah . . . that's . . . that's my family name. How'd you know?"

"You're supposed to be . . . I mean . . . I've heard of you." I couldn't bring myself to say, "You're supposed to be dead," the way she was looking at me. I don't think she knew she was dead. But I was sure she was the same girl Dad had told me about when we'd first moved here—and for some reason, on Christmas day, here she was. Dead but not dead.

We walked on in silence, mostly because I just didn't know what to say or think about the whole situation. Nicole needed to find her keys; that was all the challenge my brain could handle right now.

Two blocks west of my backyard, she stopped and pointed to a large patch of tall grass that was well on its way towards consuming the rusted fence beyond. "There," she said assuredly. "They're in there."

Don't ask me how she knew. She simply crouched down on all fours and started searching. I took the hint and got on my knees, started pulling back long stalks of grass. There was a street lamp strategically placed to our advantage, although it was still hard to see what the heck I was doing.

"What the fuck?" I heard Nicole murmur beside me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"They're here," she responded, and grabbed my wrist. I flinched, started to pull away out of instinct.

"Hey," I yelped.

"Right here."

She placed my hand on the dirt, where the ground sloped slightly and the grass was at its thickest. "Where?" I asked, noti-

cing how her hand shook. There was also this faint smell, now that I was closer to her . . . as if she hadn't bathed in weeks.

"*Here*," she repeated, now patting my hand on the dirt with growing urgency.

I leaned back, caught a glimpse of her face in the light of the street lamp. Something was oozing from her right eye. She seemed preoccupied.

"You mean they're buried here?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I guess . . . I don't know why . . ." Her voice trailed off as she brought her hands up into the light. They were all gnarled, the flesh swollen and bruised in some places, far too thin in others. Her fingertips were ragged, the skin there peeling, revealing bone underneath. Almost desperately, she looked at me again and breathed, "What's happened to me?"

Her breath caught me by surprise, for we were sitting knee to knee, and this was the first time she'd faced me directly while talking. Needless to say, it was the worst thing I'd ever smelled; I felt my stomach turn.

"Wait here," I instructed, clutching at my stomach. "I'm gonna get a shovel."

With that I turned and ran back up the alleyway towards my parents' duplex. When I got to the back gate I found that the backyard was still a Winter Wonderland. I doubled over, fell on hands and knees and puked all over the snow. The decaying state of Nicole's body, the smell of her breath was still warm in my mind. Too real, too horrific to simply tuck away just yet—but I wanted to. I wanted to be able to just open my eyes and realize the whole thing had been a dream.

I sat up, shaking slightly, and peered down the alleyway. I could still make out Nicole's form, a distant silhouette. She was waiting for me.

My family remained comatose. I checked Mom, Dad, and Theresa again for good measure, but it was as if the whole world was dead, paralyzed—except for me and the half-dead girl. Briefly, I considered simply curling up in a corner and crying until I woke up (if this was a dream after all), but that would only add to the stagnation surrounding me. At least if I was talking to Nicole, however repulsive she may have been, I would be *doing* something. Some small form of activity that might somehow have

an impact on getting me past this nightmare.

I fetched a shovel from the shed, and for the first time in my life, I actually appreciated the fact that Mom had insisted we keep a family garden. Sunday mornings had often been the bane of the week—laundry, household chores, and gardening duties. But I guess it wasn't all bad. I got exercise in between frequent water fights initiated by Dad and we got to eat whatever we grew . . . oh, God. I found myself remembering the good old times, and I was only ten.

Nicole was still there when I returned with the shovel. She didn't say anything, just nodded and gestured towards the mound. I got on my knees and started pulling out as much of the tall grass as I could with my bare hands. After a moment, Nicole joined me; in a few minutes, we had the mound uncovered. There were lots of beetles.

"How did your keys get in here?" I asked, pausing for a moment to wipe the sweat from my brow. I also chucked off my jacket and tossed it on the ground.

Nicole made a thick, gurgling noise in her throat that sounded vaguely like, "I dunno." She coughed, spit up something dark and gooey, looked at me helplessly with a shrug.

"Never mind," I replied, looking away. Out here, away from the cold of my backyard, her body was warming up—like bad meat thawing. I got to my feet quickly and started digging in earnest.

It was only a few minutes before the shovel struck something hard. Something was buried here, not too deep. I reached down and started brushing dirt away with my hands—and flinched when my fingers came into contact with something soft, meaty. Suddenly there were tiny black beetles pouring all over my hands.

"Crap!" I fell back and shook my hands off, simultaneously allowing light from the nearby streetlight to fall upon the rotting face of Nicole Chamberlain. Nicole Chamberlain buried half-assed in the dirt, two blocks from my parents' house.

The half-dead Nicole let out a soft groan—a horrific baritone. She was staring at her own body as it was being devoured alive by insects. Being turned to dirt. "That's me," she whispered. Several of the exposed bugs were crawling up onto her now, though she seemed not to care. I was petrified, disgusted. I stood on unsteady

legs, feeling my belly muscles clench. I would have puked again, but there was nothing left. What came out of my mouth was a stifled burp.

"I wonder how long I've been here," I heard Nicole utter in her zombie's voice. The sound was terrifying—I would never in my lifetime wish the experience on anyone. Yet, I couldn't work up the urge to run away from her. There was too much sadness in her voice, too much need. She wasn't like the zombies in movies who simply walked all around town to feed on your brains; I knew she wouldn't hurt me—and even if I *did* run away, I had the feeling she wouldn't leave until I helped her.

With all the courage I could muster, I approached the mound again, set to work uncovering as much of dead-dead Nicole's body as I could. She wore the same clothes as half-dead Nicole.

"In the jacket pocket," half-dead Nicole whispered.

I crouched over the body, holding my shirt over my nose with one hand and pulling back her jacket with the other. Her blouse underneath was unbuttoned and came open with the jacket, revealing her right breast. I blinked, instinctively looking away out of shame and revulsion, for the smell was absolutely vile. I don't know how I did it, but I managed to reach into the inside pocket and, momentarily, I grasped the keys. Immediately afterward, I stood, turned away from the mound and inhaled some fresh air. A scratching sound made me turn around again and I found Nicole attempting to brush as much dirt up over her dead-dead body as possible. Her methods weren't too efficient, though, as bits of the flesh on her hands started peeling off.

"Let me do it," I said, tucking the keys into my pants pocket. I grabbed the shovel again and started digging a few feet from where dead-dead Nicole lay.

"What're you doing?" half-dead Nicole asked, rising to her feet.

"I'm gonna do this *right*," I said, and proceeded to create a hole roughly three feet deep. I don't know how long it took—the sky never lightened—but when I was through, I was too tired to even be afraid anymore. With half-dead Nicole's help, I dragged dead-dead Nicole's body into the new grave and began filling it with dirt. The beetles crawled up my arms and got in my hair, but I simply brushed them away whenever they got annoying. Eventu-

ally, I found myself attending my first funeral. Half-dead Nicole and I stood side by side staring down at the grave, hardly noticeable, covered with bits of grass that would hopefully blend in with the natural chaos of the alleyway over time. I don't know what Nicole was thinking, but somehow this act of finality seemed important. Something had been closed, and yet something had been opened, though I didn't know what.

Momentarily, we started walking eastward along the alleyway. We passed my backyard, still covered in falling snow. We reached San Pedro, turned south, and walked past the liquor stores, the small burger joints, the flower shops. Agnes Cotton loomed up on our left, beyond the traffic lights, which were all green. We were the only ones present.

"I used to go there," Nicole whispered as we crossed the street. The light flashed red, but that hardly mattered at the moment. "Ms. Canales . . . does she still teach there?"

"Yeah, I have her for second period," I muttered, rubbing my eyes. My head felt thick, my eyes like lead. It probably should have been dawn already, but the sky was still a black hole.

"Aye, Carumba!" Nicole chuckled in between a coughing fit.

I had to laugh, then. She was mimicking Ms. Canales. "She must have watched *The Simpsons* too much as a kid."

"Ever get hit in the head with one of Ms. Candy's baseballs?"

"Aw, I *hate* her! She makes us read about basketball before she lets us play. What a wench."

Nicole laughed again. The sound was still sickly, but strangely tolerable. "I got into so much trouble there. In fourth grade me and this other girl snuck up onto the roof—you know, through that stupid staircase they have at the end of the second floor . . ."

"Me too! Did you know you can climb into the trees from there and down the other side to the street?"

"Never tried that. I *did* run through the back fence during P.E.—you know where they just leave it wide open? Ms. Candy didn't even notice because it's so far back across the field . . ."

And in this manner we talked, swapped stories (became friends, I realized afterwards) all the way to her house. I hadn't been paying attention to the streets, but it looked like Kings Highway, which wasn't too far from my parents' house but outside my general radius of travel. The trees here were tall and en-

veloped the street in a kind of leafy tunnel. Nicole was walking in front of me when she stopped, faced me and smiled.

"This is it," she said.

I looked at the house—two stories, large front yard, well-kept. A rich person's home. My family would never be able to afford a house like this. I knew if she had never died, I probably would never have met her.

"Thank you, David."

I turned, startled, to face Nicole—for her voice no longer sounded decrepit—and gasped. She was alive again, looking like a teenager should, no rotting flesh, no swollen face, no public-restroom smell. She was translucent, glowing faintly. Her face was clean.

"What . . . ?" I began.

"I'm home. You weren't afraid. You . . . you finished it."

I was confused, tired, but she smiled anyway, leaned in close, and gave me a kiss on the lips. "Remember what it feels like to be alive tonight," she breathed. I could taste strawberries.

The kiss lasted a moment, and then she was gone. I blinked in the darkness, suddenly surrounded by life. The crickets chirping, the sound of a faint breeze—the Earth began to breathe again. I didn't know what had happened, but I was changed somehow. There was a lightness inside my chest that hadn't been there before. A completeness that I couldn't understand or comprehend completely just yet.

"Merry Christmas," I whispered, and began the walk home.

The streets were still unnaturally empty, but they no longer felt dead. I trekked through the alleyway without the slightest of fears—no fear of darkness, no fear of bugs or snakes or drunken winos hiding in the bushes. Everything around me just *was*. No complication.

When I turned into my parents' backyard, I stopped suddenly and blinked. There was some sort of large animal standing in the center of the Winter Wonderland. It was tall, several feet taller than Dad, and it had a furry hide, long muscular legs, a bushy tale that wagged slowly, creating a snow angel on the ground. It was almost like a large dog with an elongated neck and really short ears.

It wore a harness.

The beast paid me brief attention before returning its gaze to the rear of my parents' duplex. The impression I got was that it wasn't afraid of me—or at the very least, it was too preoccupied to care what a much-smaller ten-year-old human boy was doing prowling around at four o'clock in the morning (I had no exact notion of the time, but my eyelids felt heavy enough for it to be almost morning). I crossed the yard slowly, my attention at first drawn to the beast itself, and then to my bedroom window, which I'd inadvertently left open. The Christmas lights shone all the way from the living room, and every so often, a silhouette broke the light.

Someone was moving about inside.

Instinct took over—I ran forward, climbed into the window and across my bed. “Dad! Mom!” I called out, for I thought they'd awakened. I entered the living room and skidded to a stop. The mannequin from our next door neighbors' half of the duplex now stood before me. Only he was animated, alive. He stood in the center of the room, poised as if thinking some extremely delicate thought.

I swallowed.

“That's a nice angel,” he said. It took me a moment to realize he was referring to the paper-and-crayon angel Theresa had made for the tree. It rested now atop a choppy pyramid of pine needles, no taller than I, and was lit from the inside by a couple of stray Christmas lights Dad had tucked away for effect. Our Christmas tree.

“My sister made it,” I said. I glanced at my parents; they were still asleep. I looked back at Mr. DeLuise. “Are you Santa Claus?”

A smile, slight shaking of the head. “No. I am . . . Retribution.”

I didn't know what the word meant. It sounded bad. I opened my mouth to say something else, but at that moment I heard a purring from behind. I turned around and saw a cat—Patches. Her fur was almost white now, but it was her, I was certain. She ran across the floor and leaped into my arms. She mewed.

I turned again to face Retribution, but he was gone. All that was left behind of his presence was a breeze, which seemed to come out of nowhere and which tousled my hair.

“Remember what it feels like . . . to be alive tonight.”

The voice was like an echo, carried on the breeze, which headed back into my bedroom. I followed it, climbing onto my bed and pulling the curtains wide open. The snow was gone, but the air was alive with color. Like the Aurora Borealis, accompanied by the sound of distant bells. After a moment, the occurrence faded, leaving behind the half-trimmed grass and dusty driveway that had become my home these last three years.

Everything was.

“Davy?”

Mom’s hand on my shoulder. I faced her. “Mom.”

“Why are you dressed like this?”

I looked down at myself. I saw my shirt, my pants, my shoes and socks—and something else that hadn’t been there before. There was no telling what it was, but I could feel it. “Patches came home,” I said, cradling her in my arms and stroking her neck.

Mom smiled. “I knew she would. Now get some sleep, baby. It’s still early.”

“Okay.”

I let Patches down on the floor and undressed, climbed under the bedsheets. For a brief moment I spied Theresa down past my toes, her mouth hanging open, her soft snoring balancing out the delicate silence. Satisfied, I shifted my head against the pillow and sighed, the breeze gently ruffling the curtains, making them look like twin guardian angels watching over me. How many times had I lain here, seen the exact same thing? Felt that same comfort and not even noticed it . . . until now.

I closed my eyes, and I remembered.

Starship Earth

They woke when the sky turned on. Or rather, it was a sudden lightening far above the emerald canopy of the jungle that brought them to a state of abrupt consciousness. Levi sat up first, coughing as he inhaled warm, humid air into lungs that were not accustomed to breathing. Beside him, Jocelyn likewise took a moment to regain familiarity with something so simple as breathing, remembering how to move an arm or leg—how to blink one's eyelids in wonderment as it became obvious that something was wrong.

"Levi?" Jocelyn breathed, linking her arm with her partner's. "What's going on? Where are we? What's happened to our clothes?"

Levi looked down at himself, found he was naked. Even so, his body was covered in a sheen of sweat and moisture condensed from the humid air. The effect was an unnatural sort of chill hugging the skin while all around the warmth was nearly oppressive. It was the same for Jocelyn.

"I don't know . . . are you okay?"

"Yes . . . just feel like I've been asleep for ages. God, look at this place"

Silence fell over them both as they took in their surroundings. The jungle stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. Leafy vegetation hugged the ground, yielding to taller, larger mushrooms (some of which towered more than twenty feet in the air) which, in turn, were dwarfed by more colossal trees with multi-colored leaves. Above, the sky was a cloudless white, the sun (if there was one) glowing through an eternal haze.

Where Levi and Jocelyn sat there was a sort of clearing speckled with squat, leafy green shrubs. At the edge of the clearing there grew a handful of short (no more than ten feet in height), spindly-looking trees with purple leaves bearing fruit. Moisture dripped from the edge of the leaves, ran down the sides

of the trunk in tiny rivulets.

Levi moved to stand up, but paused as his hand came in contact with the ground, which was rubbery, slick—almost flesh-like—with small channels and puddles of clear water trickling in miniature ravines.

“Look at this,” he said, tapping Jocelyn’s shoulder. He placed his hand firmly on the ground. Water seeped between his fingers.

“It’s some kind of . . . *turf*,” Jocelyn observed, shifting onto her knees and feeling the ground with her own hands.

“No, wait . . . feel that?”

Levi’s eyes met Jocelyn’s. “It’s beating,” she whispered, awestruck. “It . . . it has a pulse.”

The question flashed in their minds, then: Where *are* we?

Levi got to his feet, helped Jocelyn up. Despite their apparent solitude, she crossed one arm across her breasts and covered her loin with her other hand. Levi took the hint and nodded.

“Here,” he offered, and walked over to one of the shrubs. He took hold of one of the large, fleshy leaves and pulled—or at least he tried to. His fingers grasped the leaf, but when he tried to pull it away, tear it from the stem, his arms started shaking. Suddenly his mind clouded over; everything seemed to be in reverse. The harder he concentrated on pulling at the leaf, the less his body responded.

“What the—?”

His words came out in a drawl. He shook his head, tried to turn and look at Jocelyn, whose voice he could barely hear through a mechanical buzz in his head. She was shouting something:

“Levi! Let go!”

But he couldn’t. He was locked up, paralyzed. A kind of insane fear was filling every corner of his mind, and he knew that if he so much as moved a muscle, he would die. No . . . it was more than that. If he moved, he would be *punished*. For what, he couldn’t fully comprehend, though he knew it had something to do with the plant. An overwhelming feeling he couldn’t ignore.

Not allowed to kill . . .

An almost electrical jolt shot through him then as he felt hands on his shoulders, pulling him away. He stumbled backwards, losing his footing on the slick ground as Jocelyn half fell

with him, half helped to lower him into a sitting position with her arms around his chest to support him.

"Levi! What's wrong? Can you hear me?"

With arms quivering, he raised his hand—a feat which now took all of his strength and concentration—and clasped Jocelyn's.

"I'm . . . I'm okay . . . shocked, I think . . ."

It was an effort to speak, but it was immensely better than paralysis. And with each passing second, he could feel his strength and motor skills returning. "Don't touch the leaves," he murmured. "Poisonous or something."

"Not poisonous—just off-limits to us grabby humans."

Levi felt Jocelyn's body tense behind him, for she had not spoken. It had been someone else, a male. He craned his neck so that he could look past Jocelyn's shoulder, and he saw a short, elderly man approaching from the edge of the clearing. He was bald, the skin of his face and forehead wrinkled with age. His long beard was completely white (matching his pubic hair, which covered most of his genital), and it very nearly reached his navel. His shoulders were slightly hunched—but his body was still wiry with muscle, his steps still agile.

"Well, well. Look at you two," he said as he squatted beside Levi's prostrate form. "A regular Adam and Eve, eh?"

"Help me up," instructed Levi, struggling to get himself into a sitting position. Jocelyn scooted behind him, hiding as much of her female anatomy as possible.

The old man chuckled. "Even in a crisis situation, still got time to think about yer shame, huh? Well, you'll get used to it soon enough."

"Who are you?" Levi asked, trying his best to look formidable. It was difficult, though, for despite his tall, muscular frame he was still weak as a baby; if this wrinkled old stranger wished to kill Levi and rape Jocelyn, then it would be so.

"Why, I'm West," the old man replied, offering his hand cheerfully. "And you?"

Levi took hold of West's hand. There was strength in the grip. "I'm Levi."

"Ah, Levi." West smiled and glanced up at Jocelyn. "And you, lovely?"

"Her name's Jocelyn," Levi responded, drawing West's attention back to himself.

"Hmm. Wife?"

"Girlfriend."

"Ah, so they're bringing couples in now?" West furrowed his brow, looked off as if pondering some all-important thought.

"You've been here for a while, I take it?" Levi asked when West didn't say anything.

West nodded. "Came here on my fiftieth birthday—how's *that* for a birthday gift, eh? Of course, that was some time ago . . . kind of hard to count the years without a calendar, but judging by this"—he hefted his beard with one hand—"it's been nearly twenty years."

"Okay . . . *here*," Levi breathed, attempting to sit up straight on his own. He succeeded, but not without an audible grunt. "Where is *here*? What is this place?"

West focused his eyes on Levi's once again. "A zoo? A prison? A paradise? I haven't been able to figure it out yet."

"A zoo?" came Jocelyn's voice from over Levi's shoulder.

"Maybe. There are all kinds of animals, most of which I've never seen in my life. And there are alien creatures too, and, well . . . you've already discovered the exotic plant life. My personal perspective is that we're part of a collection. Yes, that's more on the mark. In twenty years I've done my share of exploring, and found no one to give me a straight answer—but I can still *think*, see? I can still reason."

Levi bit his lip. "Yes, but where *are* we? What country is this? How did we—did you—get here?"

West responded with an unsettling grin. "Country, son? Well, I can't tell you that for sure . . . but I can tell you that we're not on Earth anymore. Hell, I haven't seen Earth in a long, long time. You two kids are the first humans I've seen since I was abducted." He laughed then. "How strange it is, to see people again. You'll, er, have to forgive me if I've forgotten my manners, but you see . . . it's been a while."

A pause. Levi turned and glanced at Jocelyn. Her expression was unreadable, though her grip on his shoulders tightened. He turned back to face West. "What do you mean by *abducted*?"

West stood, looking slightly amused. "Can you walk yet?"

Mustering all his strength, Levi got to his feet, and though he was slightly light-headed, it felt better to be standing at his full height now. He was considerably taller than West.

“Good.” West started towards the edge of the clearing. “Follow me, then. I will show you where we are. Maybe answer a question or two along the way.”

Levi and Jocelyn paused for a moment, uncertain as to how wise it would be to follow this man. Besides, Levi wasn’t sure how far he could walk just yet. The dizziness was fading, but his legs still quivered.

When he noticed the others weren’t following, West halted in his tracks, looked over his shoulder. “Oh, how foolish of me. The in-feeling’s still got a hold of you, eh, boy?” He chuckled. “Took me a while to get used to it at first as well. Now come along. It will wear off faster if you keep moving. And it’s only a quick jaunt to the Edge of the World.”

Again, Levi and Jocelyn looked at each other, their expression communicating the thought: Is this guy senile or just really, really out of touch?

“Well, come along, then!” West exclaimed, gesturing with his arms. “I’m not going to eat you—it’s against the rules.” He chuckled again.

Jocelyn supported Levi by the arm as he took a few tentative steps towards the edge of the clearing. “Can you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m fine.”

“Ah, that’s the spirit,” West said, and he turned and led them into the jungle, towards the Edge of the World.

* * *

“They must think we enjoy the view. The human sector is right along the perimeter, so we don’t have to cross through any other sectors to get to the Edge.”

West and his new companions waded collectively through a field of what appeared to be luminescent ferns and fleshy, oversized *Dieffenbachia* plants.

“They suck up all the daylight,” explained West, shouting over his shoulder as he pushed forward. “At night, they provide just about the only light you’ll find here. There’s the cosmos, of

course, but no moon. You'll see why soon enough"

He fell silent then, leaving Levi and Jocelyn to wonder for the hundredth time what his words meant. Jocelyn, whose lower half was now covered by leaves, had cast aside her modesty for the most part, though she was still strategically positioning herself behind Levi whenever possible.

"How big is this place?" she asked, stumbling slightly as some sort of creature brushed over her bare foot. A slight high-pitched croak and whatever it was scurried off into obscurity.

West glanced back at her and smiled in his perennial way. "Never mind the carpet crawlers. They don't bite. In fact none of the animals you'll find here in the human sector are dangerous. It's only when you cross into other sectors, places where the primary inhabitants are carnivorous . . . but to answer your question, in all my time here I've done my share of exploring. I've walked, climbed, swam until I was exhausted—for days, weeks at a time, and still the horizon stretches out in every direction as far as the eye can see."

"What keeps dangerous animals from entering our sector?"

"Smart design, I suppose. There are no barriers, but there's usually a stream or irrigation channel to mark off each section of land, so far as I can tell. And it's all arranged like a giant chessboard, you see. The vegetation, the food in any given sector is only compatible with the inhabitants of that sector. Cross over and try to eat something and chances are you'll wind up with a severe tummy ache or worse . . . though there are the occasional universal foods everyone can eat. Ideally, though, a sector's inhabitants will stick close to home or risk starvation otherwise. Hence the reason you and I can survive here for years without being eaten by a crocodile. They know without tools, we humans are pretty helpless.

"The same probably goes for a lot of other smaller or weaker creatures who can't defend themselves against larger predators. You see, this place is meant as a sort of refuge, I'm guessing, or a collection, as I've mentioned before. Now, you can't have the pieces of your collection eating each other and messing things up, right? That's why there are rules, some of which you—Levi, is it?—have already discovered. No killing is allowed. Not even if it's us humans trying to make some coverings for our shameful bod-

ies. Guess God is more liberal here . . . but I digress.

“Only certain, designated fruits are edible, and if you try to go over your allotment . . . well, you’ll know, trust me. I’ve had the pleasure of being able to learn this through trial and error. A miracle, really, that I’m still alive after all the nights I would go to sleep having eaten some wretched fruit that was pecking its way through the walls of my stomach. But that’s the way of things here. Keep it simple, everyone is allowed to live, but there is no over-indulgence. No tools, no weapons, no clothes, no frills. Just the basics. Truly a Garden of Eden . . . except for a few small inconsistencies.”

The conversation had mostly alternated between West’s narrative and Jocelyn’s questions. Levi had merely listened, regaining all his former strength but still feeling a bit off-center. Now, though, his edge was returning as well—he was himself enough to indulge in curiosity.

“You said *they*? They know without tools, we humans are pretty helpless. Who are you talking about?” he asked.

“The people who brought us here,” West answered.

“So, you’ve seen our kidnappers? Why did they take us? Is this some kind of military experiment?”

West’s expression turned skeptical. “Do you think our space program is capable of *this*?”

The group fell silent for a while then as they reached a moderately-sized river at the mouth of a densely overgrown forest. West suggested that everyone rest for a few minutes and proceeded to kneel before the river, dipping his face in for a drink. Jocelyn followed suit, while Levi stood, hands on hips, his eyes scanning the imminent forest. At first it didn’t register in his mind, that across the river there was something odd about the whole landscape. Not the way the ground suddenly sloped sharply upward, nor the fact that there was dark soil providing nutrients to unkempt grass (they had passed through patches of dirt in between the more prominent areas covered by the fleshy turf). No, it was something else—

—and suddenly it hit him. The horizon directly in front of them was unnatural. It didn’t match the rest of the sky, which had (until now) kept an even consistency as if there were no sun—only an all-encompassing white glow above the mist which

hugged the jungle roof.

“The sky,” he said, pointing. “Why does it get darker right there, just above the treetops? And it’s only right here, in front of us. The farther left or right I look it gets brighter again, matches everything else.”

“Ah, you’ve noticed the shield, eh?” West said, standing and uselessly combing his matted beard with his fingers.

“Shield?”

“Yes. Right past those trees, actually. The Edge of the World, as I like to call it. I hope you’re not afraid of heights?”

West’s companions shook their heads.

“Good. Let’s get to it, then.”

* * *

Together they stood, at the Edge of the World, looking out into the eternal vacuum of space. It was actually a narrow metallic ledge that ran behind a tall, white (similarly metallic) wall which in turn hid behind the tree cover and dense undergrowth. West had led them up a small access ladder bolted into the side of the wall and through a narrow cleft where two adjoining layers of the wall overlapped. Now they stood in a state of contrast, their wet (from their swim across the river) bodies glistening in magnificent starlight, dripping water droplets and bits of grass and mud onto the ultra-clean, futuristic deck. There was a sense of, *we shouldn’t be here*, but so far no one had come to take them away or punish them. There was just this tiny spot in space and time where three humans pondered their existence in the universe.

“So, we’re inside a giant bubble?” Levi asked, eyes wide with wonder.

West nodded. “Think of it as one of those . . . oh, what’s the name now? Little glass bubbles with water sealed inside—when you shake it the snowflakes get all roused up? Well, never mind. The point is we’re on some sort of disc-like ship or planet or whatever, with a half-sphere bubble sealing us and the atmosphere inside.”

“And this walkway here,” Levi said, gesturing at the deck. “Does it go all the way around the, er, ship?”

"Indeed it does," replied West with a twinkle in his eye. "I arrived here alone, with no one to talk to, nothing to do but explore. And explore I did. I left myself a trail and started walking, starting from right here. A seven month walk and I ended up here, right where I started . . ."

Jocelyn was half-listening to what was being said as she stepped forward and reached out toward what West called the "shield." Her first inclination was to believe that their environment had been sealed in a thick glass dome—but when her fingers came into contact with the shield, she knew otherwise. The shield rippled, as if she were touching a wall made of water.

She looked at West. "This is what's keeping us alive in here?"

"Yes indeed." Brushing his hand over a section of the shield, West smiled. "Never thought I'd see anything like this in my lifetime. Imagine that: Humans in space."

A collective pause, and then Jocelyn (taking Levi's hand) spoke:

"So, this is paradise, then. The Garden of Eden."

Levi snorted. "Or someone's notion of what Eden should be like."

"You don't like it here?"

"It's not the place. It's the idea. We weren't asked to come here, we just woke up and here we were. We were *abducted*."

"Perhaps," said West, pausing for a moment. He stared out into space and studied the ornate patterns of a nearby nebula. Then he whispered: "Or perhaps we were rescued."

Levi looked at him. "How do you see that?"

"When I left Earth . . . 2007 . . . things weren't looking too good for the human race in general. Especially being an American. I remember being a boy and saying the Pledge of Allegiance every morning at school with such pride . . . to be a part of the greatest country on the planet." He shook his head and laughed. "Funny how you don't realize your shit stinks until you're standing on the other side of the bathroom door. It took awhile for most of us to see that in order to be the strongest, you have to bully the most people. In our case, we took our foreign policy and shot it up the nose of anyone within reach. No cooperation and we bombed them off the face of the Earth, and . . . well, that pissed a lot of non-Americans off. I'm sure twenty years' time

hasn't solved all those problems for you kiddies."

A silence fell over the group. There were more questions, of course, but memories of Earth for each of them were strong, complicated. The truth of the matter was, war was waiting around the edge of every corner for Levi and Jocelyn's generation. Maybe this time it was the war to end all wars, and if that were true, they were very lucky to be here.

"Well, we should get going," West finally said, patting Levi's shoulder (a feat indeed, considering the younger man's height).

Levi blinked, nodded as he felt Jocelyn's grip in his hand tighten. They left the Edge of the World with slightly more answers, but many, many more questions.

* * *

The rest of the day was spent learning the ropes. West gave his guests the grand tour of the human sector, which was nearly three square kilometers of land. He showed them which fruits and berries they were allowed to eat and which ones to steer clear of. He also walked them along the rivers which sectioned off their territory from that of the ship's other inhabitants.

"See?" said West at one point, standing in a spot where four rivers came together. "They're artificial. Water's pumped up from below right here, and it's drained there. Every corner of every sector I've seen is like this. Some kind of filtration system I'd wager . . . keeps the counterclockwise motion going indefinitely."

Levi stood at the edge of the bank, where the fleshy turf sloped sharply down into the rushing water. The rivers were equal in width—no more than forty feet across—and indeed, where one river died, another was born. The resulting flurry of bubbles was more than enough to hide any technological equipment that may have lurked beneath the surface.

"I'm going to take a look," Levi announced. "Is it safe to swim here?"

West shrugged. "There are no dangerous fish, but the current will swallow you up. Nearly caught my death that way years ago when I tried swimming down to the bottom to see what was there. Current sucked me in, banged me up pretty good. Hit my head, but somehow I made it back up to the surface. It wasn't an

experience I'd want to relive, but it did show me an aspect of this world I'd never believe possible unless I saw it with my own eyes."

Jocelyn's interest piqued. "What's that?"

With a smile, West looked from Jocelyn to Levi and back again. "Invisible surgeons."

Levi blinked, uncomprehending. "Come again?"

"You can't get hurt here," West replied, raising his right arm. "At least not permanently. They fix you up when you're sleeping." He paused for a moment, then quite suddenly and unexpectedly bit into the flesh just above his wrist. It wasn't a deep wound, but it bled, and it was enough to startle his companions.

"My God, what's wrong with you?" Jocelyn exclaimed, backing away. Levi took a tentative step back as well.

West only groaned momentarily, pushing back the pain and then looking back up at them with that crazed smile that seemed to have integrated itself into his face along with all those wrinkles. "Oh, do calm down! I'm only making an example. A small injury. When I wake up in the morning, it will be gone. There won't even be a scar."

"And what if you bleed to death before then?" Jocelyn pointed out.

"My darling, I've had plenty of opportunities to do just that in my time here. Falling from trees, breaking bones, accidentally splitting the skin of my left leg wide open—each time I found myself with a grave injury I thought, this is it. I'm going to die in paradise. Yet I lived, I was healed, and there was never the threat of infection. Miraculous, eh?"

Neither Levi nor Jocelyn knew what to say. Again, their experiences with West were walking that thin line between intriguing and maniacal. Nevertheless, they stayed with him, for he was their only source of information at the moment.

They found a small patch of grass nestled between several large mushrooms and fruit trees. West found a spot for himself and lay down. Levi sat with his back against one of the mushrooms, Jocelyn cuddling in his arms. He was about to ask what time it was when suddenly the sky flashed a brilliant white for a moment and then fell completely dark.

Like a light bulb had just burned out.

“What the hell was that?” Levi exclaimed, he and Jocelyn scrambling back onto their feet. At first it looked like everything was pitch black, but as their eyes adjusted, they saw dim shapes, shadows illuminated by the fluorescent shrubs. On the ground, West remained relaxed, his normally pale white skin now tinged an eerie neon blue. His beard glowed like a T-shirt under a black light.

“It’s nighttime,” he answered. “Don’t worry, no bed bugs here.”

It took a little getting used to, but eventually Levi nodded and sat back down on the ground, Jocelyn still in his arms. He looked up and caught a glimpse of the stars between the jungle’s canopy—a view more marvelous than anything offered back on Earth.

“It’s beautiful,” whispered Jocelyn into his ear.

Levi didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure what to say, what he *wanted* to say. It had been a long day, he was tired from all the walking, climbing, swimming . . . the effect was somewhat intoxicating. All this beauty and nature—yet he kept telling himself, *We were abducted. Taken from our home. Even if our prison is a paradise . . . it’s still a prison.*

He wanted to know why.

“So what’s your story?” asked West after a time.

“Pardon?” Levi mumbled, looking back down at the ground beside him. He felt Jocelyn twitch in his arms—apparently she’d drifted off to sleep.

“Your story. Where are you and Jocelyn from, how’d you meet . . . you know, the things we’d talk about if we were out having a beer at some bar on Earth.”

“Oh . . . sorry. It’s just . . . this place. Well, I live in California. Los Angeles. I was born in Long Beach, though. Moved up with my parents when I was a kid. Decided it was as good a place as any to live, so I’ve stayed there ever since.”

“No family plans yet?”

“I’m twenty-three . . . it hasn’t really come up.”

“Ah, yes. How long it’s been since I’ve seen my twenties.”

Levi snorted. “Don’t be so nostalgic. Being young and single in 2027 means handing over half your paycheck in taxes to the government.”

"Is that what your last memory of Earth is going to be?"

"Who says it's going to be the last?"

An almost elf-like chuckle rang out through the night. "My boy . . . in case you haven't noticed, we're a long way from home."

"Yes, but it's still just a spaceship, right? A mechanical craft which needs maintenance, fuel, just like a car or bicycle. We can't just go on forever drifting through space. Sooner or later, we'll have to pull in somewhere."

West sat up now, apparently inspired by the conversation. "And what will you do then? Waltz right up to our alien caretakers and ask them in plain English, 'Pardon me, sir, but I'd like to get off now?'"

"It's not right, though. Being . . . taken."

"Depends on the reason. In my time, we were on the brink of war. America had lost most of its allies over oil disputes. Sure, we employed the media to make it look like we were fighting terrorism, *let's go out guns toting and blast the bad guys*—a country with a mission, right? Wrong! It was all about money! That's all it ever was. We created our enemies to give us reason to go over into foreign territory and push our policies. And in doing that, we bullied a lot of other countries to either support us or become terrorists themselves."

Levi scowled. "So Hussein, Bin Laden, Chung, Marx—you don't think those guys were real?"

"Of course they were *real*, and they were terrible, terrible people. They just weren't the anti-Christ. Sure, there were the religious fanatics who believed we were pure evil, but the mainstream media made it look like everyone over there had an American flag burning in their dining room come supper time. The hotshots on Capital Hill wanted oil, they wanted money, and they had the backing to do whatever they wanted—so they did. Now, that same government, that lying, manipulative body of businessmen . . . do you trust them to have a backup plan for Joe Somebody? Of course not."

"You really believe that? I mean that conspiracy theory bullshit?"

"Never mind," West groaned, rolling his eyes and scooting forward somewhat. Evidently, he thrived on debate. "My point is the last thing I remember before coming here was sitting in my

office, doing some overtime. It was during that whole China Rebellion thing. The news was on TV somewhere in the background and I could hear Peter Jennings talking about how the American government was ‘secure in its defense against the Chinese forces.’ I remember thinking, Oh there they go again. Telling us what we want to hear, trying to keep everyone calm—yet the President is incognito, supposedly being guarded by Secret Service. Yeah, we’re secure enough that we have to have our number one guy locked away in a bomb shelter while the rest of us pray to our gods that we don’t get fried by a nuke.

“I’m stepping off the path here, I know, but getting back to my point: all that phony reassurance. I was getting sick of it. I had a headache, I needed to finish my work. So I got up to turn off the TV when I noticed there was this humming in the air. Sort of like fireworks, but bigger somehow. And then . . . then this split second of bright light. You wouldn’t think so, but your brain can process a lot in a millisecond. I saw my entire life in one moment, everything summed up before me—and in the back of my head, I’m still thinking, those assholes on TV . . . they don’t know anything about anything . . . but then again, that’s what they’re paid for. And it all made sense. Where I was heading, where humanity was heading. We couldn’t save ourselves—we didn’t *want* to save ourselves. Help had to come from somewhere else.” He spread his hands, gesturing at the surrounding jungle. “I think they’ve done us a favor, son, by taking us here to Eden. Almost like a second chance. Start things anew.”

“Yes, but what if—” Levi started, but stopped abruptly. He was going to say, “but what if we don’t want to be saved?” The notion made him think, though: Who wouldn’t want to live in a virtual paradise? Especially in a day and age when Earth was polluted, overpopulated . . . just more people sucking up the same air, more frustrated minds wanting the universe to revolve each and every one of their lives.

His thoughts drifted back to six days ago . . .

Standing in line at the rations office with his hands in his pockets, his fingers toying with his liberty card. There had been talk of cutbacks—after all, the war was in full swing. Food, medicine, supplies had to be redirected to the soldiers out in the field. The

result was an overworked, underpaid, lower-middle-class workforce trying to break even in a severe recession. and yet the wealthy were exempt because of their “contributions to the community.”

“Next in line.”

Levi, stepping up to the teller, sliding his card across the counter. A bloated-looking social services worker smiling idly at him as she scans his data into her terminal and notes that his total income for the previous quarter has exceeded the quota for his financial class.

She says, “Hmm,” without looking at him. “Name please?”

“Levi Mendez.”

“Ethnicity?”

“Black.”

“Did you claim any dependents on your last tax return?”

“No.”

“Marital status?”

“I’m single.”

The teller nods then, punches in a few buttons into her computer as she repeats an obviously memorized bit of fluff: “Okay, Mr. Mendez. Are you aware of the American Pride Fund?”

Barely a moment to mumble an uncertain response. “Um, I think—” Levi begins, but he’s cut off as the teller continues with her speech.

“Okay. As a single working male under the age of 35, you are obligated to participate in the program. Beginning with your next paycheck, a 5% donation will be automatically transferred from your account to the APF. If you have any questions, please call the APF Help number being downloaded to your card.”

The room seemingly fading then, Levi’s eyes focusing on the teller’s as she hands him his card. He wants to wring her neck, as if she’s somehow personally responsible for his (now) being able to take home only 56% of his paycheck after taxes.

A glance to the left and to the right, the security guards looking back, ready to beat him to the ground if he flipped out and started giving the rations office staff black eyes. He takes his card, turns away, and walks out of the office—but he doesn’t get very far after that before he’s slamming his fists into a bus stop billboard.

“Fuck!” he shouts. And all around, people watching him, wondering whatever could be make a young, able-bodied male under the age of 35 want to set a public office on fire.

Memory shifts. Levi is sitting with Jocelyn in his apartment. They’re having Chinese take-out—Jocelyn is wearing one of those tight T-shirts that makes her already sizable breasts stick out even more. Her body, memories of the previous night’s sex, the way she smiled pleasantly when he spoke to her . . . all good reasons to want to take their relationship to the next level. But most importantly, it would save money.

Jumping right to it: “There’s another reason I asked you here tonight, Joce.”

Jocelyn smiling, licking some bit of food from her plastic fork. “Oh, so it’s not just so you can get me into bed before ten?”

Levi smiling, “I wouldn’t dream of depriving you of your beauty sleep. But I did want to ask you something. About us.”

“And what’s that?”

“Jocelyn . . . come live with me.”

Jocelyn swallowing her food, making a funny face as she laughed lightly. “Wow, that’s right out there in front, huh?”

“Yeah, I know—but there isn’t any other way to say it. Being back with you, it just feels . . . so comfortable. To have you with me. We can stay here or get a bigger place . . . but I want to do something for the both of us instead of just waiting and waiting. You know? Time passing by and all that jazz . . .”

“We’ve only been back together for a month. Don’t you think it might be kind of soon to be coming home to my mess every day?”

“I’d relish every minute of it.”

Another smile. Jocelyn looking down at her hands. “You know, it’s actually not too bad of an idea. I mean . . . it would be nice to wake up in the morning with the guy still there, still lying next to me instead of heading out the door.”

A tinge of jealousy, irrational anger. *She’s not mine. We agreed to see other people and not let ourselves get angry over it.* Still, it’s there: that final reason for wanting her to move in with him.

I want her to have better.

She looks up, catches the glint in his eyes. The answer is given without her speaking as she returns to her meal. “We’ll need

more plants. And some pictures to hang over all those Playboy centerfolds in the bedroom.”

Levi laughing uncontrollably now, thinking of how silly it was, for him to keep those posters there, clinging to teenage infatuations—for Jocelyn to agree to have sex with him with two dozen naked women stuck to the walls. And suddenly he knows he can do it. He can cast aside the wanderlust of youth and stick to one girl, whether or not she’s The One. The worry of making the wrong choice is a minuscule speck on the back of his mind.

Reaching out now, touching her hand with his. She’s on the verge of saying something else when suddenly there’s this harsh sound in their air.

“Levi, what—”

—light exploding all around him.

Awash in *deja vu*, Levi opened his eyes and found it was daytime on Eden (as West had dubbed it). Evidently he’d slept through the whole night, trouble-free. Beside him, Jocelyn sat up and stretched.

“See? Eh? What did I tell you?” West was suddenly leaning over Levi and thrusting his arm out for inspection. The spot where he’d bitten himself yesterday was unmarred. “Nothing. Not even a scar! Good as new!”

Levi sat up, rubbed his face with his hand. “And here I thought it was all a dream.”

West chuckled, walked over to one of the nearby mushrooms and tilted his head back so that his mouth caught a thin stream of water dripping from the plant’s roof.

“I dreamed of us,” Jocelyn murmured, sitting cross-legged and pulling back her hair. “We were playing hide and seek with a young boy—he had a name, but I can’t remember it. It was in that field of glowing bushes we passed through yesterday. He was our son.”

“Oh, man,” Levi breathed, grinning. “The day I have a son . . .”

He stood and brushed bits of dirt and grass from his buttocks—the only notable drawback of having spent the night naked in a jungle. Amazingly, he had no bug bites.

West suggested a bath, and showed them to a part of their sector where a clump of humongous mushrooms grew, creating a slope in the turf. Their roofs were covered in moss that hung down in strands, creating glittering curtains that reflected the sunlight. There was also a small waterfall, fed by the nearby river which pumped water into a shallow pond from which the mushrooms drank. The banks of the pond were covered in a mossy film, and a variety of leafy green plants flourished there.

It was a pleasant experience. There was no soap, of course, but nature provided a distinct freshness of its own. The smell of clean water, earth, the flower-scented breeze. And fresh fruit for breakfast.

What would I be doing on Earth, right now? he wondered as he sat with West and Jocelyn beside the pond after their baths. *Punching in at the auto shop, listening to Tony's bitching about how his girlfriend is always cheating on him with skinny white guys. Instead . . . I'm here. On a spaceship called Eden.*

When they finished their breakfast, West stood and suggested yesterday's exploration be continued. Levi and Jocelyn followed him from the pond, heading towards the middle of their sector. Five minutes into the trek and suddenly West halted dead in his tracks.

"What?" Jocelyn whispered. "What is it?"

They were standing before a patch of short, squat trees with branches that stuck out far and low. There were vines hanging from the branches, dangling to meet the overgrown grass so that a forward view was almost impossible. West had parted the vine curtain and was now looking through at what was on the other side.

He said: "I don't know . . . but it wasn't here yesterday."

Levi and Jocelyn followed West out into a small clearing where the grass and trees and shrubs sharply receded from the turf. At the center of the clearing (and in stark contrast to the rest of the jungle) there stood a structure, slightly elevated from the ground by a foundation of the same metallic material found at the Edge of the World. The structure was maybe the size of half a dozen phone booths all crammed together, and it had a translucent door which offered a mottled view of the inside.

"I wonder if we're supposed to see this?" Levi murmured as he circled the structure. "I mean, they did such a good job of masking the Edge of the World . . ."

West stepped up to the door and wiped away some of the condensation so he could peer inside. "Holy Hannah, it looks like—" He turned the latch and pulled open the door, revealing the interior of the booth. "—computers!"

Indeed, the inside of the booth housed a number of computer terminals embedded right into the rear wall. There were no keyboards—only rubbery grips which protruded from the metal beneath each screen.

"Five fingers," Levi noted, entering the booth and pointing to one of the grips. "That's us."

"You know," West said, sliding his hands into the grips of one terminal. "I'm willing to bet—"

"Hello, West," came a masculine voice from out of the air. The screen in front of West came to life then as a console flashed various commands.

West laughed. "Look at that! It's almost like DOS, eh?"

"Query not understood."

Everyone exchanged glances.

"Well? Ask it something," Levi said with a shrug.

Hands still pressed firmly into the grip, West said: "Er, hello there."

"Greeting already given. Please submit your query."

"May I ask who I am talking to?"

"Terminal number 5083, information database and communications gateway."

"Communications gateway—for whom is this booth intended?"

"This terminal is intended for use by the human inhabitants of KwazaEart sector 5083."

"KwazaEart—what is that?"

"KwazaEart. Two definitions: A refuge for endangered species; the multi-species life preserve currently assigned to the Milky Way galaxy."

Levi bit his lip and looked at Jocelyn. *Endangered species.* What did that say about their presence here aboard Eden?

West continued asking questions:

“What does KwazaEart mean? Is there an English, er, translation?”

“Translating. Zero exact matches found, one approximate match: KwazaEart. Starship Earth.”

“So, we are indeed aboard a ship?”

“Affirmative.”

“Is there a crew? Someone who pilots the ship?”

“Requested information unavailable.”

“Hmm.” West brushed his beard. “Why have I been brought here?”

“To fulfill the requirements of KwazaEart’s endangered species protocol, it was necessary to bring you here in order to gain adequate information concerning the proper handling of the human species.”

This information seemed to come as a surprise to the old man. “You mean I’m a test subject?”

“Affirmative. However, the natural environment nurtured inside the greenhouse prohibits the use of invasive tactics when biological information is gathered.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Query not understood.”

“How long are we to stay here?”

“Until the galactic human population rises above ten million.”

A silence fell over the booth. Despite the ever-present tropical warmth, Levi felt his blood run cold. Whether or not there was life on other planets, he couldn’t fathom, but the last time he’d checked, there had been over ten billion people on Earth alone. Now this computer was telling them that less than ten million humans existed *anywhere* in the galaxy.

West didn’t hesitate before asking his next question: “How many humans are currently, er, *alive* in the galaxy?”

“Requested information unavailable.”

“Does Earth still exist?”

“Affirmative.”

“Are there any humans alive on Earth?”

“Requested information unavailable.”

“Damn.”

Pulling his hands from the grips, West looked at the others. His face suddenly looked older, paler than it should have been. "Well." A pause, and then (when he couldn't think of anything else to say), "Well."

Jocelyn looked to be on the verge of tears as she stepped up to one of the consoles and slipped her hands into the grips.

"Hello, Jocelyn."

"Why are Levi and I here?"

"Due to unexpected forecasts regarding the longevity of the human body, it was necessary to begin studies on the effectiveness of human reproduction from a limited gene source."

Jocelyn blushed, stepped away from the console and gestured for Levi to give it a try. He did so, taking a moment before asking his question:

"How many humans are alive here on KwazaEart?"

"Requested information unavailable."

Levi furrowed his brow. "Is this the only human sector on the ship?"

"Negative. There are eleven other sectors aboard KwazaEart available for human population."

Out of questions, he pulled his hands from the grips and faced West. "Well, it seems we're not allowed to know just how alone or how not alone we are out here in space."

"But there are the other human sectors," Jocelyn offered.

Levi nodded. "Apparently. West, I'm guessing you haven't seen any of these?"

"Would've been something to keep me busy all those twenty years."

Indeed.

They left the booth shortly thereafter. West continued his guided tour of their sector, but somehow he suspected everyone's mind was elsewhere.

* * *

The days passed, eventually turning into weeks. Levi and Jocelyn became familiar enough with their new home that they didn't need West's guidance anymore. And despite the rather grim reasons behind their stay aboard KwazaEart, they found things to

keep themselves busy. Swimming, games of freeze-tag in the fields, mind games drawn in the dirt with their fingers, long conversations held under the stars in their favorite grove . . . making love for the first time in The Pond.

West still liked to do his share of exploring. Once his younger companions felt comfortable being left alone, the old man took to disappearing for days at a time. It was during the first of those absences when Levi, having wished his friend well, returned to The Pond to find Jocelyn having her morning bath. His first inclination was to splash right in and join her, but instead he paused for a few minutes, watched from beside one of the large mushrooms. She was facing away from him, washing her hair, letting the water trickle down her back, down her buttocks . . . and in between her legs, the alluring dampness there.

Levi found himself aroused, both physically and mentally. Wordlessly, he slipped into the water, came up to her from behind, and clasped her waist in his hands. She turned to face him and his lips met hers. She didn't protest, nor did she complain about his growing beard stubble as he nibbled affectionately at her neck, her shoulders. It was a new experience entirely, to make love out in the open with all the added sensations nature had to offer.

They rested afterwards, lying together on the bank beside the pond, and it became obvious to Levi, then, what it meant to be here, to live in Eden. He'd touched on it back in his apartment, that night Jocelyn had come over and he'd been able to look at her, to tell himself he could commit to her indefinitely. Here, she was all he would ever have. There were no other women for him. Only Jocelyn. Whatever problems they'd had back home, they'd have to overcome them now or truly find themselves alone.

* * *

He was dozing at some point in the late afternoon when an unexpected noise brought him to consciousness. Half asleep and half awake, he at first thought he was hearing the tail end of a dream, but when he opened his eyes, saw the jungle glistening around him, he sensed an unnatural quietness. No birds chirping, no frogs croaking. And yet, he'd heard a voice. A human voice, he

was almost sure.

With the slightest of movements, he looked to his right and saw Jocelyn asleep on her front in the moss bed. Had she spoken? No, she was sound asleep, and the voice had been masculine. His instinct was to call out West's name, but there was something in his gut telling him West hadn't returned from his latest expedition.

His eyes scanned the banks of the pond, the encircling jungle. No movement. Yet there was a nagging sense of being watched—

—he sat up suddenly, turned around to look behind him as he heard rapid footsteps approaching. Someone was running towards him—a human—and it wasn't West. With a bloodcurdling scream, the stranger lunged at Levi, who ducked out of the way, grabbed Jocelyn under the armpits and hauled her to her feet.

"Joce! Wake up!"

He positioned her behind himself as he whirled around again, fully expecting his attacker to be rushing him again. Instead, he saw a naked, fair-skinned man lying prostrate on the ground at the edge of the pond, his upper half submerged in the water. His limbs twitched, as if he was having a seizure.

"Geoffrey! Geoffrey!"

Levi started, looked back towards the jungle and saw another human running forward now. A woman. She rushed past Levi and Jocelyn and stumbled onto her knees beside Geoffrey's (presumably her husband or boyfriend) body. So distraught as to almost be useless, she lifted his head from the water so that he could breathe.

"Geoffrey! What's happened? Talk to me!"

Levi glanced over at Jocelyn. "It's the same thing that happened to me, on our first day here. The ship's security system kicking in, just like West said." Which meant Geoffrey had intended murder, mayhem, or both.

The woman continued to scream hysterically as she attempted to move her partner's body further up the bank, but she kept slipping in the moss, getting it in her hair, on her face. Pretty soon she was a mess.

Levi walked towards them, started to bend over so that he could help, but no sooner had he grabbed hold of Geoffrey's ankles than he found himself being verbally assaulted by the

woman.

"Get your hands off him, you monster!" she shouted, and made to strike him.

"No, wait!" Levi exclaimed, not because he feared injury but because he knew if she was intending him harm, she too would end up paralyzed.

It was too late, though. The telltale trembling took a hold of her body. Her eyes went wide, her mouth caught in a grimace. She fell forward into his arms.

"West wasn't kidding," Jocelyn said, approaching Levi as he propped the newcomers' bodies up against a nearby tree. "We really can't get hurt here."

"Unless you happen get the paralysis near water," Levi said, watching with some concern as Geoffrey coughed and spit water from his mouth. He was young (perhaps near Levi's age), light-skinned, had short blond hair and vibrant blue eyes. His partner was just as fair, though on the skinny side, with small compact breasts that looked to be underdeveloped. Both shared an expression of wild terror.

"We're not going to hurt you," Jocelyn said, squatting so that her eyes were level with theirs. "We were brought here just like you were. You're on a spaceship."

Levi placed his hand on her shoulder. "You shouldn't get so close, Joce . . ."

"They're just frightened," she replied, and shrugged away. "It's understandable."

"Would it still be understandable if we'd not had the security in place and he'd gouged my eyes out?"

"But we do have the security in place, and I know I certainly appreciated having West there when we first arrived . . . even if he was a little creepy at first."

Levi rubbed his face, forcibly grabbed Jocelyn's arms and pulled her into a standing position.

"Please," he said. "Talk to them if you like, but stand over here."

Jocelyn didn't seem to understand the necessity of exercising caution, but she heeded Levi's words, standing out of arm's reach of their guests.

"I wonder where they're from?" asked Levi after a moment.

Jocelyn responded, "There must still be life on Earth. I hardly think they're extraterrestrials. The woman spoke English" She trailed off, for the woman was now moving her head about slowly, mouthing words with her jaw.

"Wazz . . . heppenin . . . wi-uth?"

"It's wearing off," Levi explained. He gestured around himself at the jungle. "This place . . . it's like a Garden of Eden, but there are rules, and if you break them, well, you are punished. But it's only temporary. It wears off after a few minutes."

It was evident from their expressions that they didn't believe that to be true, but eventually they were able to move again (albeit, in a limited fashion), and their speech became understandable:

"How did we get here?" asked the woman, immediately covering her loin with her hands.

"We're not sure ourselves," Jocelyn offered with a shrug. "I think there was some kind of accident where me and my friend here lived. We were together in his apartment and suddenly there was this flash of light . . . and we were here. Where are you two from?"

"Tinah," grumbled Geoffrey, rolling his head sideways to look at his companion. "We don't know them. Keep quiet." He coughed and spit excess water from his mouth.

Folding his arms across his chest, Levi scowled. "We're not the enemy here. In case your memory needs refreshing, you attacked me."

Geoffrey made a sudden movement, as if he wanted to stand up, but his body convulsed violently again and he fell back onto the ground on his side. The paralysis had taken over his body again. Apparently, he'd been having violent thoughts again. Tinah, though similarly inclined, withheld her offensive urges and crawled over to her mate's side, helping to lift him into a sitting position again. "Leave us alone!" she yelled over her shoulder.

At this point, even Jocelyn was inclined to label their new guests as "assholes."

"Come on," Levi instructed, taking Jocelyn's hand. "Let them handle themselves. We're wasting our time standing here."

They left The Pond together.

* * *

"Where did Geoffrey and Tinah come from?"

"Requested information unavailable."

"Why are they here, aboard Eden—I mean, aboard KwazaE-art?"

"Due to unexpected forecasts regarding the longevity of the human body, it was necessary to begin studies on the effectiveness of human reproduction from a limited gene source."

Levi stepped away from the console and nodded at Jocelyn. "They're here to fuck. Just like us."

"You make it sound so scientific," Jocelyn responded dryly. "You know, though . . . I'm beginning to get the idea our caretakers ran into some unexpected problems when they took us humans on. I mean, the computer's basically telling us that the reason for our being here, the reason another couple, one male, one female, has been brought aboard is because they misgauged our longevity. They probably thought we'd last longer than seventy or eighty years apiece."

"Or else West simply drove them nuts."

Jocelyn laughed. "That too. But what I'm saying is that I'll bet we're going to start seeing a lot of new faces around here in the coming days and weeks. Like we were told yesterday, West was the test subject. When they found out he was aging, nearing the end of his life span, they realized they needed a way to keep our species going. First you and me, then Tinah and Geoffrey, and however many other couples they can find out there in the galaxy."

"So basically, we're here to repopulate our species, Adam and Eve style?"

"Mm-hmm. Ten million. That's a lot of babies."

"And lucky us: Ol' Geoffrey and Tinah are our first neighbors. They're not giving us many options as far as interbreeding is concerned."

Jocelyn shot him a warning glance. "Excuse me?"

"I'm kidding, Joce," he replied and put his arm around her. "She's all skin and bones. I have to have some meat on my women." He caressed her buttocks.

"I can't shave under my arms anymore, you know."

"That's okay. Neither can I."

They both laughed, cradling each other. Then, after a moment, Jocelyn felt her belly with her hands. "Levi . . . back at The Pond, when we . . . what if I'm pregnant?"

Levi's hand found hers. "If you are, then you are. We'll have a child."

"But there are no hospitals here. No doctors. I don't know how to deliver a baby."

That caught Levi off-guard. He didn't know how to deliver a baby either. Nature was all fine and good when you thought about it, but in reality giving birth would involve much more than Jocelyn simply squatting beside a river and cleaning herself up afterward. And if there were complications . . . For a terrifying moment, he really was at a loss—but then he got an idea. Letting go of Jocelyn, he plugged into the computer again. He asked it:

"Can you give me instructions on how to deliver Jocelyn's baby?"

"Requested information unavailable."

Levi swore under his breath.

"It did say before," Jocelyn offered, "that our caretakers were still gathering information on our species. Maybe they don't really know how humans reproduce."

"Well you'd think an alien race capable of building a giant ark would have a little more insight into how their guests work. Aw, fuck. We're screwed . . . unless West somehow went to medical school before he got dropped off here."

"Ew, no!" said Jocelyn with a shudder. "I don't want him touching me down there!"

"Even if he *has* gone to medical school?"

The look on Jocelyn's face was answer enough: No West.

* * *

Upon returning to The Pond, they found that Geoffrey and Tinah were gone. Over the course of the following week, the two couples only ran into each other once, near the Edge of the World. Levi and Jocelyn were returning from a session of star-watching when they spotted their respective neighbors several dozen yards off in the river. Or rather, Geoffrey was in the river while Tinah stood

on the bank, looking disgusted.

They were arguing loudly.

"I wonder if they've discovered the Edge yet?" Jocelyn thought out loud.

"Shh," hissed Levi, a smile playing across his lips. "This is too funny."

The argument was apparently over Tinah's distaste for nature. Geoffrey wanted her to bathe, yelled at her that she stank—but she wouldn't get in the water, citing a fear of being bitten by piranhas. She wanted a real bath, in a real bathtub—not out in the open where there were bugs and insects and germs. Indeed, she kept shifting back and forth on her feet, as if standing in one place too long would suddenly attract every dangerous insect known to man to climb up her legs and gobble her up.

Finally, Geoffrey hauled himself out of the water, grabbed her (kicking and screaming) about the waist and tossed her into the water.

"Wonderful. They've created the first soap opera on KwazaE-art." Jocelyn shook her head and dove into the river, swam across to the other side. Levi followed suit, almost sad to have to miss the rest of the performance.

* * *

West returned to The Pond the next day with news of his latest expedition.

"What marvelous plant life!" he exclaimed, literally jumping up and down with excitement. "Three sectors over, north from here—or at least, north as I see it—a forest of redwoods that wasn't there the last time I passed through the area. They're improving upon the basic design! And a plethora of new animals! New arrivals, as it were. Seems we're not the only ones in need of a lift, eh?"

Levi, Jocelyn, and West sat cross-legged on the moss bed. When at last Levi was able to get a word in edgewise, he filled West in on Geoffrey and Tinah's arrival.

"Really now?" The old man's eyebrows raised impossibly high, creasing his forehead. "That's wondrous news!"

"Not really," Jocelyn said, shrugging. "They're not as, ah, open to the idea of living here on Eden as we are. In fact, it's probably best if we stay out of their way until they come to terms with the situation.

West shook his head. "A pity. I would still like to meet them, though. Perhaps after they've settled in?"

"They've kept out of our way since we first met," Levi responded, "but we caught them over by the Edge of the World. With any luck they'll set root over there and that'll be that."

That ended the conversation.

* * *

The next morning, Jocelyn came down with a case of morning sickness. Levi and West found her kneeling beside some bushes, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She was trembling.

"What's wrong?" Levi asked. He squatted beside her and saw the evidence splattered all about the ground. The vomit didn't smell as bad as it could have, but it was an unsettling sight nonetheless. "You're sick?" He looked up at West. "I thought you said no one could get sick here."

West looked flustered. "I, well . . . I've never fallen ill in twenty years. No rashes, no big bites either . . . I assumed . . ."

He trailed off, sensing Levi's frustration. "Here, baby," he said to Jocelyn. "You're burning up. Let me take you to the moss bed. You'll be cooler there."

She didn't protest. Levi hefted her in his arms and brought her to The Pond, where she rested fitfully for a few awhile. The men brought her water to drink, and (per West's instructions) a mixture of various herbs, which she drank and subsequently proceeded to throw up shortly thereafter. While Levi was going nuts with having to watch his girlfriend suffer, West was the calm and collected nurse, speaking softly to her, keeping her cool and sending Levi out to gather specific herbs that would supposedly quicken the healing process.

"Where'd you learn all this?" Levi asked late in the day, when Jocelyn was sleeping.

"My wife," replied West. "God bless her, before she died, she was my savior. Diet-wise anyway. Always had a concoction for me

when I was feeling ill, or just tired or upset. She used to have a garden out in our backyard. I would think she was nuts, going through all that trouble when you could easily go to the local pharmacy and pick up something ten times as potent. But she persevered anyway, despite my nonchalance. When she died, that garden was all I had left . . . and I remember telling myself, for her I would continue her hobby. If I kept the garden alive, I would keep her memory alive."

Levi nodded, and for the first time since their meeting, patted his friend on the back. And West was a friend, he realized. Not just a neighbor or coincidental acquaintance, but someone who offered his help, his abilities, his comfort—no questions asked.

"Thanks," Levi found himself saying.

West smiled. "It's my pleasure. I'd like to think there's something useful still rattling around inside the library of my brain."

Just then a thought occurred to Levi. "Hey. The computer terminal. It might have some useful information for us. I didn't think of it until now." He glanced over at Jocelyn, who seemed peaceful enough, then started into the jungle. "Watch over her, would you? I'm going to play Twenty Questions."

"But it's nearly nightfall!" West called after him.

"I can find my way."

* * *

Even as his body penetrated the vine curtain that hid the computer terminal, he knew already something was wrong. He stopped at the edge of the clearing, eyes fixed on the booth.

The door was open, and Tinah stood inside. She was accessing one of the consoles.

Levi felt a pang of alarm rise within him, but he snuffed it out, reminding himself that this device was almost certainly intended for anyone who found it. Not just Jocelyn, West, and himself. Still, there was that feeling. Perhaps a male territorial thing, but a feeling nonetheless.

"Hi," he said, stopping at the doorway. Tinah jumped in surprise, whirled around to face him so that her hair fell unceremoniously over her face. She pulled it back and let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh, it's only you. I thought it was dick-face." Apparently, she had come to possess a certain amount of comfort aboard KwazaE-art.

"Dick-face," Levi repeated, trying not to laugh.

"My husband, Geoffrey."

"Oh. Ah . . . cute nickname."

"Yeah . . . whatever." She fell silent for a moment. Levi caught her eyes on his crotch. "You and that Mexican girl married?"

"No. Well, not officially, but we *are* together."

"How has she taken this whole 'have as many babies as you can' thing?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The computer here . . . it told me that we're supposed to be 're-populating the species.' Having sex, making babies. You know."

There was a pause before his answer as he considered his feelings talking to Tinah about this. Their conversation was not overtly improper, but he felt her eyes examining his body, felt a tinge of that adolescent wanderlust mixed in with the rest of his emotions. *But no*, he thought. *That's not going to happen. You're with Jocelyn. You know that. There should be no problem here. You're in control.*

"She's a trooper," he said. "We've had our problems, but we've come to terms with things. If we ever have a baby, well, we'll have a baby."

Tinah paused for a moment, this time making it obvious she was checking him out. "I'm sure you'll make a good father."

Levi bit his lip. "I came here to do some research."

She smiled, gestured to a nearby console. "Be my guest. There's room for two."

He tried to play it off, stepping into the booth and going right for the grips. *Ignore her advances. You're here to work. It's her problem, not yours.* However, no sooner had his hands taken hold of the molded rubber than he felt Tinah's body pressing against him from behind. She reached around his waist, her hands brushing over his belly.

"Hey," he warned, turning around and grabbing her by the shoulders. He held her at arm's length. "What do you think

you're doing?"

Her response was to touch him again, this time gliding her hands down his chest and to his crotch.

"You're much bigger than Geoffrey," she said, taking hold of his penis. "I always thought the Black Men Are Bigger thing was a myth."

Her touch gave him pleasure. Her intent, however, sent a shiver up his spine. She would give herself to him, have sex with him, bring out the inner urges which had caused his relationship with Jocelyn to crumble in the first place.

He would not have it.

"No," he said, his throat suddenly dry. He pushed her away—hard, so that she stumbled, fell back against the wall with a mild yelp. She was breathing heavily already, her eyes transfixed on his rising member.

"But you want it," she breathed, starting towards him again. "It's meant to be. We're here to have children . . . and I want a child. But I don't want it with Geoffrey. He wouldn't appreciate it like you would . . ."

He made to dodge her outstretched arms, but at the crucial moment, darkness suddenly filled the booth as night swallowed KwazaEart.

"Oh!" Tinah cried, stumbling into his arms. This time her hold on him was accidental, but he was still uncomfortable with her proximity to his erection. Whether or not it was the polite thing to do, he shoved her away again and stumbled towards the booth's entrance.

"Where are you going?" Tinah cried out in the darkness. "You can't just leave me here! It's pitch black!"

Levi didn't answer, only stumbled into the semi-darkness, swearing under his breath, "Damn it, damn it, damn it . . ."

* * *

Jocelyn's condition improved by morning. She said she felt slightly light-headed, but otherwise she was fine. And hungry. She made quick work of the four "apples" (as West had designated the large, fleshy fruits which grew in abundance aboard KwazaE-art) Levi had picked for her.

"Perhaps there are microbes present here," West said thoughtfully over his breakfast. "We just don't get sick because there's a sterilizing agent in the atmosphere, or in the water or some such thing. But let's say it's not perfect. Let's say, each time a new species is brought onboard, a new antibody to that species' microbial baggage has to be developed. I mean, Jocelyn fell ill after Geoffrey and Tinah's arrival."

"Yes, you and Levi are still healthy," Jocelyn pointed out. "And I don't suppose anyone over in that other human sector you found was sick?"

"It may be a matter of time," West murmured, "or we may never catch it. The complexities of the immune system—quite an invigorating conversation to start the day. Eh, Levi my boy?"

Levi mumbled something that may have passed for an answer, only no one understood it. He sat noticeably apart from the other two, and his face was swollen under the eyes. Needless to say, he had not gotten much sleep during the night.

Jocelyn noticed his somber demeanor and scooted next to him, touching him affectionately. "Levi, what's the matter?"

He kept his gaze fixed on the ground between his feet. "Couldn't sleep. I was worried about you." The latter half of his explanation was only a half-truth, for even though he had been concerned about Jocelyn's sudden illness, his mind nevertheless kept plaguing him with memories of Tinah's attempted seduction in the computer terminal. How much he had hated and loved her embraces, both at once. Even now the thought made his penis start to swell.

Before he embarrassed himself, he got to his feet and left the moss bed. "I'm going for a swim," he said and was gone.

Jocelyn looked curiously at West, who could offer no more insight than a shrug.

"He's *your* boyfriend," he said.

* * *

He stood at the edge of the river bank, his toes grappling the turf firmly, his arms hanging limply at his sides as he examined the rushing waters for any indication of what lay below. There was an abundance of oxygen being filtered up from somewhere, but from

where . . . that was what Levi wanted to know.

West had recommended against trying to tackle the current, but Levi didn't care anymore. He'd lost control yesterday at the terminal, and now he needed to perform some kind of life-affirming act to prove to himself that he still had control. And the longer he stared at the churning waters, the more convinced he was that he could reach the riverbed and make it back to the surface without complication.

He walked several yards upriver, paused one last time to clear any doubts, and dived fearlessly into the water. The current grabbed him immediately—stronger than he'd expected, but he fought it, swam down into a murky darkness that enveloped several large pipelines. The further along his body was pulled, the faster the current, so he reached out and grabbed onto one of the pipes for anchor. The lower half of his torso remained horizontal as the current continued to suck at him. He glanced over his shoulder—and started, for not two yards beyond his feet was a large turbine.

The discovery of just how far he'd been carried came as a shock, and he cursed himself for not having walked further upriver before jumping in. With all his strength, he started pulling himself along the pipeline in the opposite direction, but it was not easy work. His fingers were soon raw from clawing at the rough metal, the tips trailing blood. All too soon it became obvious he was doomed, for his arms tired, his head started buzzing from holding his breath too long . . . and he realized by the time he made it far enough upriver to beat the current and swim to the surface, it would be too late.

He held on for as long as he could, but eventually his hands missed their grip and he slipped. His body was swallowed up by the current. In a moment of terrible pain, somewhere between semi-consciousness and what he was sure was certain death, he was sucked into the turbine. The blade caught him on the leg first, then on the chest, splitting skin, fracturing bone, sending a cloud of blood into the surrounding water.

The last thing he felt was the odd vacuum created by his punctured lung, and a pang of desire to have been born a fish.

Levi Mendez, floating naked in a square-shaped chamber filled with a viscous liquid. Levi Mendez, watching from somewhere nearby and talking to someone else about what was happening:

"He's in a locally-induced coma. His mind has shut off while his body heals itself with the aide of our equipment."

"Remarkable. He's responded phenomenally well to the regeneration therapy. I should like to study our future human patients to see if they respond equally as well."

"I don't see why not. This species is the most adaptive, resilient species I've yet to see. And the capacities of the human brain . . . the amount of information that can be processed in a millisecond. Half a millisecond . . ."

"Such a shame, really, what happened to their home world."

"Indeed. The body is endlessly regenerating itself and yet the mind is simultaneously seeking methods of one's own self-destruction."

"Hard to fathom. Is it tragedy to them? Or is it all just a game?"

"A question poised that only eternity can answer."

"Hm. You know this one is less sharing of his reproductive facilities than the others."

"Out of fear? Out of revulsion?"

"No . . . I do not think so. The act of sexual reproduction brings him immense joy and physical pleasure, but it seems he can only . . . no, he will only allow himself to experience those sensations with a single female."

"Then his offspring will be limited to the number of children his mate can produce in her lifetime?"

"That is correct. Ideally, he would fertilize as many embryos as possible. However, since that would require sexual intercourse with several different females, it is not likely."

"Then the perpetuation of the species will progress much slower. And if this trait is passed onto the subsequent offspring, the prospective family will have to risk inbreeding or imminent death."

"We have been working on the problem, as well as possible solutions—including sterilization after the first child is born."

"Would that not defeat the purpose of encouraging the humans to reproduce in the first place?"

"The prospective number of humans to be acquired in the near future would warrant some form of birth control until we learn the effects of a growing civilization in a limited environment such as KwazaEart. There is no universal solution. Only learning through experience. Overpopulation would be just as disastrous as the opposite."

"Of course."

"Let us check our other patients. We will return to this one when he is ready for reanimation . . ."

Levi Mendez, leaving himself to float alone in the regeneration chamber until his body was ready to wake up again.

* * *

Jocelyn and West found them spooned together in a small orchard, where the trees were short and spindly and there was not a speck of grass or soil to cover the turf. Geoffrey and Tinah (most likely at the latter's suggestion) had swept the area clean in a vain attempt to proclaim some sort of territorial ownership over this particular part of the sector. Unlike The Pond, where Levi and Jocelyn bathed, ate breakfast in the morning and slept at night, this orchard was no longer a part of KwazaEart to be shared by all. It was now property of two stuck-up humans who would rather rule nature than simply be a part of it.

"Look who hired Martha Stewart," West joked, walking unabashedly into the center of the clearing. Jocelyn was too young to really know who he was referring to and so chuckled politely before requesting that they get down to business.

West extended his leg and poked Geoffrey's sleeping form with his foot. The young man started and grunted something unintelligible before rousing his wife and sitting up. He eyed his visitors coldly.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Our friend," Jocelyn answered. "He's missing. We were wondering if you've seen him."

Tinah perked. "You mean Levi?"

Geoffrey covered her mouth with his hand. "No, we haven't seen him, and quite frankly, we don't give a damn."

Jocelyn fought the urge to run. She knew she couldn't be hurt, but it was still frightening knowing that every word you said was a possible stick of dynamite. The slightest thing might set Geoffrey off, and though it wouldn't really make much difference, she would rather have him relatively sober than maniacal.

"Is that all you're going to tell us?"

"That's all you need to know."

There was no point to further conversation. Jocelyn and West turned to leave.

"If you find him," Geoffrey called out as they left the orchard, "tell him that if he ever touches my wife again, I'll make him regret it."

Those last words seeded an ugly revelation in Jocelyn's heart. She almost turned back to demand an explanation, but she kept her pace, letting her legs carry her of their own accord while her mind pondered the question: Had Levi cheated on her? The notion ignited intense emotion within her, and she found herself thinking of years past. Back on Earth, dating him in high school. He'd been her first lover, a gift she'd treasured with all her heart and soul. Somehow he hadn't seen that at the time and did what so many men typically did when they were young: He found another girl to sleep with, thinking Jocelyn would accept it as he did. As part of life, of being young, of satisfying the curiosities of the flesh.

They hadn't stayed together after that. She'd expected nothing from future boyfriends, then, except a passing affair. Eventually she'd hid the pain far enough away to actually sort of enjoy sleeping with a different boyfriend every couple of months, just to fill the void. At least she could have the comfort, when she could get it, of a warm body to hold through the night . . . pretend it was Levi lying next to her. Pretend that he'd never strayed and never would.

And then he'd come back. Apologized for doing what he did. They'd spent an afternoon together talking things out before going back to his place that night and (foolishly, now that she thought about it) having sex until they were sweaty and exhausted. Even then, with him holding her in bed and whispering into her ear that he wanted to stay with her forever, she told herself not to cling. Not to expect him to follow through on his word,

but to simply enjoy what time with him she had. In the weeks and months following their reunion, though, she couldn't help but cling. She wanted a lifelong partner. There was no denying it, and with him keeping his end of the bargain, it was easier and easier to believe it could be true.

Until now. Until Eden, where Levi's mate could no longer be who he'd fallen for. *He likes smooth women*, she thought again. That was that. On Earth, she'd been able to keep herself hairless where it mattered. "Smooth as a dolphin," he would say. But here, on Eden, her pubic hair had grown back fully, completely covering her vulva. Under her arms, similar patches of thick black hair now flourished in the pits. He'd said he didn't mind when they made love in The Pond, but now with Tinah here . . . she was new, smooth (even well after her arrival from Earth). Nothing hiding that cleft between her legs from Levi's wandering eye.

I'm just the husky, hairy girl he dumped in high school for a slim nymph on the swim team.

She burst into tears without realizing until West put his arm about her shoulder.

"There, there, my darling. Please don't fret. If we condemn him before we truly know, then there is no point to any of this. We will find him, I promise you."

Jocelyn smiled faintly and rubbed her eyes. Though touching on a subject far from what was on her mind, West's words filled her with the slightest shred of hope. Not until she heard it from Levi's own mouth would believe it was truly over between them.

Push it all down, she thought. *Carry on.*

* * *

He felt as if he'd been crying, but in a good way. Levi opened his eyes and blinked several times to clear away some of the condensation on his eyelids. Slowly, he turned his head in the direction of rushing water, saw the nearby river several yards away, and let out a low, long groan. He was alive, yes—but what condition was he in? There was no pain, so he sat up slowly, holding his knees with his hands. Still no pain. Only the familiar sensation of water droplets trickling down his chest, rolling off his arms and legs. The morning dew unraveling from his body.

There should be scars, he thought, a sudden remembrance of his ordeal with the turbine prompting him to examine his torso in depth. He found nothing though. No torn flesh, no shattered bones—he took several deep breaths and felt his lungs expanding and contracting as they should.

He was whole.

Getting to his feet, he approached the river's edge and looked for anything that might explain how he'd made it out of the river on his own while simultaneously unconscious and severely injured. Of course, there was nothing. Not even the slightest fragment of memory to explain how he was alive after an accident that should have killed him.

Miraculous, as West would have put it.

* * *

Tinah was sobbing beside the pond when Levi arrived. At first, he only saw her from behind, and therefore didn't realize she was crying. He strode purposefully up to her, ready to chew her out.

"Where are my friends?" he asked.

She started in her usual way and craned her head up to look at him. That's when he saw the tears. *Oh God*, he thought. He hadn't been expecting *this*. Whatever anger he had inside him melted away, became tangled with sympathy. That part of him that couldn't resist a woman in need.

"What's the matter?"

"I just . . . I feel lost. I need someone to talk to . . . please?"

Tinah patted the ground next to her. With a sigh, Levi took a seat. *Five minutes*, he told himself. *Five minutes to hear her out and no more*.

Tinah fought the grimace on her face with a slight smile. "He doesn't love me, Levi. I tried to believe he was just . . . *uncomfortable* showing his feelings for me, but not once . . . not *once*, Levi, did he say 'I love you.'" She turned away, started sobbing again. "When we make love . . . it's like I'm not even there. He tells me to get on my hands and knees and he does it from behind, hardly touching me, hardly saying anything at all."

"Why did you marry him?"

"Because," Tinah answered, now turning to face him full. "I need a man. Someone to share myself with . . . if I can't do that, it gets all bottled up inside so that I feel like I might die. Have you ever felt like that? Like you needed to express yourself so bad but the person you're with doesn't understand?" She put her hand on his leg. "Levi . . . what's happened to us?"

"Tinah—"

"I mean our people? We're born into the universe, and we spend our lives suppressing our true selves. Suppressing what it is we really want from each other. Eventually, we grow old and die, never really knowing what it would be like to open ourselves up. We were meant to share with each other . . . our feelings, our desires. I just . . . I just want to feel that I'm a part of that. I want you to feel you're a part of that."

She was manipulating him, he knew it. But part of him wanted to ignore the warning signs. Part of him wanted to give in, *yes it's true. I want the same thing you do . . .*

"Please," she continued, now stroking his thigh. "I need this. Now . . . or I'll never know what it feels like to be loved. I will go back to Geoffrey and have his babies until I can have no more, and when I am old and ugly and he won't make love to me anymore, I will wish for even the days when he would tell me to get on my hands and knees and I would cry because I thought I could ever get something better from a man."

The look in her eyes, that sad, pleading look, the tears—he froze up, and he was caught off-guard as she lowered her head to his groin and took his penis into her mouth. The moment passed so slowly, excruciatingly pleasurable. And he found himself thinking, *she's never experienced love, never experienced the joy in sex, yet she was evidently experienced in giving her man all the pleasure in the world. I could give her what she's never had . . . she knows that. Just like in high school, and college . . . all those girls wanting the same thing. Me giving it to them because I thought I could give them better. And then, Jocelyn. A girl who was slightly out of step with everyone else, too tall and husky for most guys, but he went out with her anyway because he thought he could show her the love and attention she lacked from other guys. Just like all the rest, but he couldn't move on after that because . . .*

. . . because she gave me better.

Suddenly it all clicked for him. The reason he felt ashamed, the reason he felt he had to return to her every time he tried loving someone else.

"Stop," he breathed, and he moved to push Tinah away. Simultaneously, he heard a gasp coming from behind. He turned and saw Jocelyn and West standing at the foot of the moss bed.

"Levi . . ." Jocelyn whispered, her face a mask of utter devastation.

Tinah immediately removed herself from Levi's lap and scurried away into the jungle in the opposite direction. Apparently her words had been two-faced.

Levi was enraged. With Tinah, yes, but more so with himself. Had yesterday's guilt taught him nothing? He rose to his feet and faced Jocelyn. There was no hiding the aroused state of his genital.

"Joce, let me explain . . ."

She turned away and ran from The Pond before he could say anything more.

For the first time since their meeting, West looked uncomfortable. He kept quiet as Levi ran past him, following Jocelyn's path. He called her name, but she didn't answer, and he knew already that she wasn't going to talk to him. At least, not right now.

He stumbled out into the glow field and took a moment to get his bearings. He caught site of Tinah, maybe a dozen yards off, running homeward. Out of some sort of childish anger, he went after her, unsure if his intent was to scold her, harm her, or both. He did know, however, that he needed to make a statement—for her sake and for his own. No more beating around the bush.

He crossed the field in no time, entered the jungle on the other side. Up ahead, Tinah changed course, heading northeast into an area where the turf was covered with grass and soil, and the trees were short and spindly.

"Tinah!" he called, slowing his pace and scrutinizing his surroundings. This was unfamiliar territory, a patch of their sector West had perhaps forgotten to show them during his initial tours. He took an uncertain step forward and felt the ground had changed beneath him. He had to adjust his foot's grip on the turf, which was now suddenly bare and slick again, as if someone had

swept all the dirt away—

“Motherfucker!!!”

Geoffrey’s attack caught him completely by surprise and knocked him off his feet. He fell forward onto the ground, his attacker managing one hard blow to the back of the head before the paralysis took hold of his body. Levi, winded and dazed, rolled over onto his side as Geoffrey fell beside him, arms outstretched. Somehow, he was fighting the paralysis and winning—marginally—so that his hands were able to claw at Levi’s neck.

Holy shit, Levi thought. He’s overcome the security system somehow!

The fingers closed around his neck in a stranglehold. Geoffrey was convulsing violently now, and the veins of his neck bulged obscenely, yet still he poured all his strength into squeezing his fingers. Levi blinked, tried to clear the buzz from his sight. His body was slow to respond: He grabbed his attacker by the wrists, tried desperately to loosen the grip around his neck. At first it worked. He was able to wrench Geoffrey’s hands from his neck and roll into a crouching position. But as his adrenaline kicked in, he realized it was too late to avoid becoming incapacitated at Eden’s whim.

“No! Stop it!” Tinah cried from somewhere nearby. Levi could feel her hands grasping at his shoulders now, trying to pull him off her husband, but he was too inebriated with the struggle at hand, and she was not strong enough to intervene.

It wasn’t just the onset of paralysis that had them locked together in cold blood—it was the struggle between him and Geoffrey. Somehow both men were still able to struggle with each other despite KwazaEart’s mechanism for preventing such activities. The expression on both men’s faces was identical: Pure and utter rage. More than animal, more than human, it was what allowed them semi-control over their movements. Back on Earth, such rushes of adrenaline had been rumored to give people super-human strength in times of crisis; now it enabled them to bring violence into paradise.

Levi channeled all his willpower into moving his right arm and struck a blow to Geoffrey’s face. It crippled him, but he got some small satisfaction out of seeing the blood gush from his opponent’s nose.

Eden tightened its hold, though, causing Levi to cry out and fall onto the ground. His breath came in short gasps. It felt as if his lungs were being squeezed by an invisible pair of hands. For a moment he feared he would black out. Geoffrey took advantage of the moment and lunged at him again, this time slamming an elbow into Levi's belly. Levi grabbed him by the ears and head butted him—and that ended the struggle, for neither man could stand to resist the paralysis any longer. They collapsed beside each other. Levi was horrified to find that his heart had stopped beating. For a moment he was awash in regret over having pushed himself past the limit, but eventually his pulse returned, slow and soft so that he was able to do little else but gasp for breath.

After a moment, Tinah came to stand over him.

"Are you happy? Look what you've done to yourselves. Look what you've done to me." The tears from her eyes dripped onto his chest. She squatted beside him to wipe them away, then became very still, staring into his eyes. And he saw it: the total and complete insanity there. He had thought it confusion before, at The Pond, but it was really something else entirely.

Without a word, she moved her hands down to his groin and started stroking his penis. *Oh my God*, he thought and tried to move an arm, a leg—anything to protect himself. Of course, he remained prostrate, and Tinah continued her movements, trying to get his organ to respond. Mercifully it didn't—the result of the paralysis, no doubt—but that didn't deter her. After several minutes of fruitless labor, she frowned and leaned in to perform fellatio on him. Still no result.

"Levi," she whispered, her voice quivering. "What's the matter, honey?" She ran her hands up his chest, straddling him now and thrusting her genital against his in a futile attempt to achieve penetration. Nevertheless, her movements were ineffective. He was completely impotent.

"Levi . . ." she groaned in frustration, increasing her speed. "Levi . . . Levi, please don't do this!"

Please get me through this, Levi prayed. *Make this moment pass . . .*

"Levi!!! I don't want his child!" Tinah screamed suddenly, now slamming her thighs against his, causing him pain. "Please, Levi! I don't want his child!"

She continued her efforts for several minutes longer before finally giving up and collapsing upon him in near-exhaustion. Her tears soaked his face, and for a while that was all he felt or heard until his ears caught another sound from beside him. He turned his head and saw Geoffrey looking at him.

There were tears flowing from the man's eyes.

* * *

"It's hard. I'm bigger than most women, I know that. When I was younger I used to hate looking at myself in the mirror. Too tall, too big-boned. Husky, my dad used to call me—that was my nickname, can you believe it? He would joke around with me like that, trying to keep my spirits up in his own way. But it was hard. My younger sister was born perfect. Perfect body with the slim little waist, and rounded, regular-sized breasts. Not like mine, all big and oval-shaped. She got all the boys, even started dating before I did. None of the boys my age wanted to go out with me. I was too big for them, I scared them. The men, they only wanted the slim young schoolgirl look . . ."

West listened and nodded at regular intervals as Jocelyn poured her heart out. They sat together at the Edge of the World, which now served as a makeshift psychiatric clinic.

"Levi was different. So much like me. I knew he felt differently about sleeping around, but he was raised like everyone else to kind of shut it inside. When we got together I remember asking him why he'd chosen me, and he told me honestly that a lot of his other girlfriends had been put off by his, uh, you know . . . his *size* down there. They either didn't want to try it with him or else they did and ended up feeling more pain than pleasure. And the ones who enjoyed sleeping with him were too wild for his tastes. So I thought, okay—maybe I have a shot here. He's gentle, compassionate, and at the very least, our bodies are a good match. You know? You try to cling to certain pieces of the relationship even when you know it could change course without warning.

"When I caught him messing around with other women, I thought it was over. I was ready to accept the loss, but he came to me and told me that he didn't want to break up. He wanted to stay with me because I was special. I asked him then, why'd he

cheat on me, and he said he just felt too bad for the other women, being crapped on by other guys—he wanted to treat them right, just like he wanted to treat me right, and somehow I believed him, believed I was okay with that so long as I got my share. But, well, you can't do that, can you?" She paused, reached down and pulled a piece of grass from between her toes. "I wouldn't want anything to do with him, except he always comes back to me wanting to keep his commitment alive. I can honestly believe he will stay with me for the rest of my life . . . but he'll always have that soft spot for the ladies. He'll always think he can fix every girl's problems and still be loyal to me . . ."

She trailed off, uncertain of what else to say.

"It's never easy," said West. "Our genes drive us so insistently into pairs, yet we each have our own mind, our own desire for solitude and privacy. Torn between two extremes, as it were. The trick is to find some sort of balance between the two. I suspect that is our challenge here on Eden. This is our second chance."

Jocelyn sighed. "We've not done remarkably well so far."

West faced her, studied her features silently for a moment. "How precious was that while."

"Pardon?"

"Youth, I mean. I'm reminded of my own, when everything was so sharp and dangerous and new. So serious, I was. Like most young men, I wanted to make something of my life, so I put my career ahead of everything else. The rationalization was that I wanted to have a family someday, but not until I was successful enough to have something to offer to a prospective bride. Problem with that was, I was thirty-nine by the time I reached the top of the ladder, so to speak. Nothing wrong with that, but I found myself wary of having kids so late in life. I didn't want to be old when my son was ten and looking for a father to play football with. So I told myself kids weren't necessary. I found a wife who agreed, and we got married. At the time, it was an ideal arrangement despite the 'what-ifs?' When she died though . . . ah, how I'd wished for something to remember her by.

"You see, you and Levi are in the midst of youth right now. Turmoil, confusion, fear . . . that's what it is to be young. It gives you memories to cherish when you're an old fart like myself. And you will cherish them, believe me."

Half scowling, half smiling, Jocelyn said: "That doesn't make me feel any better."

"It's not supposed to," West replied. "You're not old yet."

* * *

Levi slipped his hands into the grips and (once the computer had acknowledged his presence) made his request:

"I want to speak to one of our caretakers."

"Query not understood."

"Don't give me that shit! I know you're watching us! I know you're studying us! I want some answers, some explanations, and I want them now!"

"Query not understood."

Infuriated, Levi had the urge to pound the console screen with his fist, but he knew that would get him nowhere and so simply took a deep breath to calm himself. It had been a long day. After his fight with Geoffrey in the orchard, he'd taken a long walk throughout the sector in the hopes that he would find the courage to face Jocelyn. He'd chickened out instead, come here with the ridiculous notion that a computer could solve his problems for him.

Then again, it wasn't the computer he wanted to talk to but the people who'd built it. The people who'd brought him here and forced a commitment upon him in the name of the future human race.

"I'm not leaving until you talk to me."

No answer (that is, no useful answer—only the computer's monotonous error message).

"Talk to me . . ."

"Query not—"

"I already know that!" he snapped, this time actually banging his fist against the wall in frustration. He immediately regretted it afterward for fear of inviting another bout of paralysis. Amazingly, though, he was spared, and suddenly a notion popped into his mind. He walked over to the entrance and kicked the door open forcefully.

"Stupid piece of shit!" he yelled, drawing out his anger and kicking at the door again with the heel of his foot. The pain was

uncomfortable, but it proved his theory: Physical violence wasn't allowed when used against living creatures, but artificial creations, inanimate objects evidently didn't count. He could tear this place to the ground if he wanted to.

He returned to one of the consoles. "Okay, here's the deal. Somebody talk to me now or I start tearing your precious terminal apart. With my bare hands, if necessary."

This time the computer responded with silence. *Good*, thought Levi. *We're making some progress*. He waited a minute for any further indications that perhaps his point was getting through and, when nothing happened, made good on his word. He jumped onto the door, using his body weight to weaken the hinges so he could detach it from the frame. Once this was accomplished, he hefted the door in his arms and charged back into the terminal, where he began using his new battering ram to wreak havoc. He smashed one of the console monitors, shattering the glass and sending a flurry of sparks into the air.

"Talk to me, God damn it!" He dropped the door and rushed at one of the remaining consoles, cracking the glass with his elbow. Small shards exploded at him, cutting his skin, making him bleed, and without clothes or shoes, his body was soon covered with small scrapes and bruises. He ignored the pain, though, as he turned to face the remaining console—

—and froze as he saw an image of his mother upon the screen.

"Oh, Levi," she said with a saddened smile.

Levi was caught quite off guard. How was this possible?

"Mom? How'd they contact you?"

"I wish that were the case, but alas, I am not your mother. I only look like her."

"You're an alien?" Levi was both disappointed and relieved.

Mrs. Mendez looked thoughtful for a moment. "Why don't we stick with *caretaker*. Sounds nicer, and makes it easier for us to speak with each other." She fell silent for a moment, still smiling, still sad in a distant sort of way.

"What's the matter?" Levi asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. It's just . . . you've grown so much since you were a boy. A sturdy young man now."

"I thought you were an—I mean . . . you're not my mother."

"No, I am not. But sometimes I almost wish I was."

Levi was confused. Was she or wasn't she—

"You're very special, you know," she continued, not giving him the chance to dwell on small details.

"You're not my mother."

"Does it really matter? I know you, I care for you. You might call it love, even."

"Who *are* you?"

Mrs. Mendez sighed. "Such curiosity. Such perseverance. You sleep at night, but you never rest. The desire to know the truth—even if ignorance is far more pleasant—permeates your being."

"I like to know who I talk to."

"You're frustrated."

"Of course."

"You want to follow the societal norm, to be exclusive to Jocelyn as your lover, your wife—yet you feel the need to share yourself with other women. Some of it is hormonal, the deep-seeded instinct in your genes to perpetuate themselves . . . and some of it is your awareness of other peoples' displeasure, and your desire to give them the love you have given and received from Jocelyn. You want to share the experience."

There was a considerable silence as Levi felt a knot within him untie. In one clairvoyant statement, his caretaker had pinpointed the source of his frustration and brought it out into the open for him to see. *Of course*, he thought. *There are no secrets on Eden. Not even in the mind.* How else could the security system operate with such effectiveness?

"You're reading my mind," he said.

"Not in the typical sense. Everything here is unified. One. You are not merely a part of KwazaEart, you *are* KwazaEart. Therefore there can be no reading of your mind because it is not your mind to read. It is our mind. You and I, Jocelyn . . . Geoffrey and Tinah . . . Here, the body is merely an extension of our mind's eye. People of different shapes and sizes representing a spectrum of thoughts, ideas, feelings. All physical representations of one eternal mind. As it once was in the true Garden of Eden." A pause, and then: "That is how I know why you are not with Jocelyn right now. That is how we know. And that is why it is imperative you go back to her, for what affects one aspect of our be-

ing affects us all.”

Levi snorted. “Easier said than done.”

“She loves you, Levi. It hurts her to see you with other women, yes, but she can see beyond it. She can withstand the pain as long as you are with her. And ultimately, if you can achieve your goal of monogamy, her love for you will be like no other you have experienced. You will know what it is to truly be part of the oneness. Your son will know.”

“My son? But how would you know—”

“Please, Levi . . . just listen. Know that whether you are here or on Earth or in some other part of the galaxy in another body entirely . . . know that you are part of something wonderful.”

“You’ve already said as much.”

“But you don’t believe it.”

“What I believe,” is none of your business, he was about to say, but corrected himself. “I’m here, on Eden, and I don’t think there’s much chance of us pulling into Earth anytime soon, now is there? So I will stay. I will help repopulate the human species or whatever it is I’m here to do. I just . . . I just want . . .” He trailed off, uncertain now of why he’d really come here in the first place. He’d been angry, confused, disappointed with himself. There was a yearning for something, but he couldn’t pinpoint it.

“You want to know the meaning of life.”

He looked up at the screen again. He didn’t say anything because he didn’t have to.

Mrs. Mendez continued for him. “You want to know the meaning of life because somehow if you knew, you wouldn’t have any adverse emotions anymore. Everything would make sense, you wouldn’t have to wonder, wouldn’t have to worry anymore about how it will all turn out, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then . . .” Mrs. Mendez said, sighing. There was a note of caution in her eyes. “Think about that. Really *think* about it. Knowing all the answers . . . there’d be no reason to ask the questions, right? No reason to solve the puzzle, no reason to take the journey . . . no reason for life. I suppose it’s an irony for the human race. How pleasant it would be to just be, and yet humans cannot. It’s not in your purpose. That, we discovered almost too late. It didn’t occur to us that a race as advanced as yours would

age and die in such a short period of time—but it is in your makeup. To solve the riddle. And when you do, there is nothing left to do but die, be reborn only to solve the same riddle all over again. To dupe the boredom.”

Silence followed. Levi found himself wanting to say something in response, but he couldn’t find the right words. Or perhaps he no longer had the pent-up emotion to back those words. When at last he looked back up at the screen, the image of his mother was gone, replaced by the black command prompt.

* * *

She was sleeping in their usual spot when he returned, quietly squatted beside her and brushed her hair with his hand. When she awoke, he put his finger to his lips, gestured for her to follow him without rousing West. He led her to the glimmering glow field, where they could easily see the cosmos without having to swim across the river that sectioned off the Edge of the World.

“I want you to know that I love you,” Levi said as they walked side by side amidst the glowing leaves. “No matter what’s going on, no matter how badly I fuck things up—I love you and I want to stay with you and be with our kids and that’s that.”

“There’s not much choice, is there?” Jocelyn responded with a slight touch of sarcasm.

“No, it’s not that.” Levi stopped and took Jocelyn’s hands in his own. “I’m not just settling. I always wanted this, with you, but . . . you know. When you’re a teenager all you want to do is fuck everyone you can before you grow up and it’s over. That doesn’t really change I guess as you get older, but how you think about it does. How *I’m* thinking about it.”

Jocelyn studied him for a moment and then looked away, her eyes becoming watery. “I need someone, Levi. I need someone to show me that I’m not like everyone else. Not just another girl.”

Levi sighed. “Look. I’m not going to take the easy way out and say that Tina started it. I did my part too, but for what it’s worth, we’ve never really done anything. I mean . . . I couldn’t. I got so mad at myself for even letting it happen.”

“Because then you’d have to explain it to me somehow—”

“No, because then I would know I’d hurt you. And I can’t stand to see you get hurt. I don’t ever want you to be hurt.”

He looked at her as she wrapped her arms around him, rested her head against his shoulder. Her tears were warm against his skin. “Levi . . . if me and West hadn’t found you at The Pond . . . what would have happened?”

Nothing, he wanted to say. *I would have stopped before anything serious happened.* At least, that’s what he wanted to believe. “I don’t know,” he said aloud, and that seemed to end the conversation. There was no storybook ending, no details wrapped up neatly—only the fact that they still held each other long after they’d stopped talking.

Perhaps that was enough.

“Good evening, my little vultures. It’s five-o, which means it’s time for your Uncle Mackie to deliver his usual evening rant. As most of you probably know, the end of August marks the onset of firefly season. No, we’re not talking the cute little bioluminescent beetles that flutter around your mamas’ backyards just so you can have the privilege of catching them in a jar for Show and Tell the next day. We’re talking translucent fairies, angels, Aurora Borealis—an unexplained phenomenon that has yet to be officially documented by the scientific community, as well as the news media.

“That said, I want us to break in on the ground floor this year. I want *real* footage, *real* samples, *real* reports concerning these babies, and I’m offering front-page real estate to the first danger hunters’ club that provides me with just that. No fuzzy black screens with a couple random pixels in the center; no digitally-enhanced percolations gathered from your mommies’ toilet bowls; no sleekly-edited video clips from *Alien Insider* made to look they came from your own computers. This is the big time.

“Oh, and Hagar—your human piglet story has been debunked.”

A collective chuckle filled the interior of the Goblin’s Club PC café. Behind three aisles of idle computer terminals, Mackie Davidson, the café’s one and only admin, leaned casually against the information desk and addressed his audience: two dozen registered danger hunters, all sitting cross-legged on the bare floor. Most were in their late teens or early twenties—high school and college students come to trade stories, gather information, and post news concerning their respective clubs’ current assignments.

Alyssa Newman and her club partners, Vanessa O’Brien and Carl Hanson, (all considerably younger than the majority) lounged together at the rear of the crowd. Despite their youthful physical appearances, the only thing really setting them apart

from their older counterparts were their DHC emblems, which were made of carved wood instead of silver. That and the fact that, having traveled to the café using their airblades, they weren't wearing any shoes.

"I can do it, Ness," Carl whispered, grinning devilishly. He feigned attention as Mackie continued with his lecture.

"No you *can't*," replied Vanessa.

"Yes, I *can*. Wanna see?"

"Yeah, I do, but I still think you're gonna screw it up."

Alyssa, wearing a rather serious expression, lifted her gaze from her PDA momentarily and glared at her quarrelsome companions. "Vanessa. Carl. Shh! You're gonna get us kicked out."

Carl leaned over somewhat, twirling a small neon-orange hyper yoyo in his hands. "Nessa doesn't think I can swipe Mackie's password without him looking."

Alyssa sighed. "This is our last day together as the Urban Prophets. Can you two try wrapping it up without an argument?"

Carl looked ornery, but kept his silence for a moment as he leaned back and surveyed the half-circle top of Mackie's cluttered desk. The neon glow of the computer screen (which faced towards the back wall) cast a bluish sheen over various stacks of data cards, computer parts, and discarded candy wrappers.

"Psst! Alyssa! Let me borrow your PDA."

"No," replied Alyssa, tersely. "I'm trying to take notes."

"This'll only take a second. Besides, we already know all this stuff. Mackie's just reading from the bulletin board."

"Fine."

She handed over her PDA. Carl took it and winked at Vanessa, whose expression read: Show, don't tell. He went to work, attaching his wristband to the PDA and calling up the appropriate program.

As much as Alyssa disliked foolish behavior when it wasn't appropriate, she had to admit it was sort of fun watching Carl revel in his own affinity for all things electronic. In particular, he enjoyed tinkering with gadgets that could be "tweaked" with relative ease. A hyper yoyo, which was really just a metallic sphere tuned to a magnetic field produced by the corresponding wristband, was the perfect example. Most kids had one or two, but Carl was probably the only boy on his block who'd installed a miniature

video camera into his. Plug the wristband into a computer (in this case, Alyssa's PDA) and presto—instant spycam. What was supposed to be an amusing toy had now become a nifty tool for the resourceful and prurient alike.

"Watch and learn," he whispered as he flicked his wrist slightly. The yoyo bounced up into the air and hovered obediently a few inches from his face. He blinked, keeping his eyes focused on Alyssa's PDA screen and delicately guiding the yoyo along the fringes of the assembly. Every so often, he would accidentally jerk his wrist a little too quickly, causing the magnetic field to purr as the yoyo realigned itself. However, if anyone noticed they didn't make a motion to alert Mackie, who continued talking, unaffected. Licking his lips, Carl leaned forward slightly, edging the yoyo along the floor, past the vending machine, up along the neon lighting of the rear wall. Mackie's terminal was almost in view when Vanessa quite abruptly jostled his knee with her own, disrupting his concentration and sending the yoyo out of control. It buzzed unceremoniously and fluttered around in the air above Mackie, who (without missing a beat) jumped up and grabbed it in his hand.

"Well," he said, looking immediately at Carl. "It looks like the Urban Prophets are just *dying* to move on to other things." Several people turned to face the children. Carl's face was beet-red.

Mackie continued: "While I scold the little talking fetuses here, the rest of you go ahead and get back to whatever it was you were doing. Don't forget to lock-in your assignments before you leave tonight, and remember that the money jar's always open for donations. Peace out."

The crowd dissipated, most people returning to their terminals, some heading for the vending machine or restroom. Carl, Alyssa, and Vanessa slowly got to their feet as Mackie approached them. At twenty-seven, he was still young enough to be able to relate to the majority of his clientel—yet he carried with him a sense of adulthood, an air of respect and responsibility. Not to mention the fact that, despite an affinity for sweets, he was pretty well-built and could physically take care of business, if necessary.

"This isn't a playpen," he said, "and I'm not your babysitter. You guys know that."

Carl, prompted by a nudge in the ribs from Vanessa, flashed a boyish grin and replied, "Sorry, Mackie. It won't happen again."

"Yeah, that's right . . . because if it does, I'll start expelling you tots left and right. Understood?"

The children nodded.

His authority reinforced, Mackie held up Carl's yoyo and examined it with an amused smile. "Nice work, by the way. You can hardly tell there's a camera inside."

"God only knows what he uses it for," said Alyssa, rolling her eyes. She tended to be wary of technology when paired with the mind of a twelve-year-old boy.

Mackie chuckled, shaking his head and handing the yoyo back to Carl. "Just be glad you didn't break anything. I meant what I said about not fooling around in here. It's hard enough getting people to take the only metaphysics-related DHC hub in Santa Clarita seriously without having a couple punk airbladers running amok." He shoved his hands into the pockets of his board shorts. "So . . . I hear you guys have some 'major insight' into the fireflies thing?"

Alyssa nodded, glad for the change of subject. "Hopefully. There's supposed to be a major swarm tonight around midnight."

Mackie laughed, gesturing for the children to follow him to his desk. "And you came by this information via the Weather Channel?"

"No . . . we've been talking to someone, um, in the know."

"Ah. And this someone in the know told you he can predict a swarm despite the fact that to date no one has ever been able to do such a thing?"

"It's a *she*," Alyssa answered, setting herself on a stool. "She's seen many swarms before, just like many people probably have. The reported cases are a minority when compared to the number of sightings that are simply written off as flukes or coincidences; most people think they are seeing something that has already been documented by the scientific community, so they don't bother to take out their cameras or notepads."

Mackie scowled playfully. "Are you sure you're not, like, thirty-five years old?"

Vanessa snickered. "She likes to use a lot of those big words. Basically, we've been talking to a lot of different people who all

say they've seen firefly swarms. Some see them more often than others . . . we found someone who swears she can make out a cycle to their appearances."

"It's like predicting the weather," Carl added with an assured nod. He was still toying with his yoyo, albeit this time he was sure to keep it within arm's reach.

Mackie disagreed. "You can't just *track* these things. They don't show up on any kind of equipment until they're . . . *there*. Maybe you're looking out across a field and all of the sudden the air lights up with a bunch of the little buggers. It could be fifty feet away, it could be a hundred and fifty—it's like trying to predict where a raindrop will fall during a thunderstorm."

"Maybe, maybe not," said Alyssa with a secretive smile. "It's hard to track ghosts, they don't show up easily either—but there are people who just know when and where one will make an appearance. In any case, you'll just have to wait and see, won't you?"

For a moment Mackie looked as if he might debate the issue further, but there was club work to be done, databases to be updated, terminals to be maintained. As such, he merely smiled and offered his hand to Alyssa. "Alyssa, my girl, I do believe you've learned to blow smoke. We call that sensationalism in the danger hunting biz."

"Right."

The children looked each other, sharing a smile. They left the desk then, Mackie calling after them: "Good luck tonight, and good luck in L.A., Carl. Hope you'll keep in touch."

He didn't see Alyssa twitch slightly at the reminder of Carl's impending departure.

* * *

The Neomancers were sharing a smoke at the edge of the Goblin's Club parking lot when Alyssa and her companions exited the café. Gary Barnett, the Neomancers' leader, snickered deviously.

"Hey, Little Hanson!" he called out, gesturing for his friends to follow him. They quickly crossed the lot and surrounded the children, who'd been strapping on their airblades for the trip home. "I couldn't help but overhear your girls talking to Mackie about a one-up on the swarms tonight."

Carl finished strapping on his blades before standing at his full height and folding his arms defiantly. "They're not my girls. They're my *partners*."

"Whatever you call it, Hanson," said Gary. He was sixteen, and a good head taller than Carl. He reached out and ruffled Carl's hair as he would a child's. "Whatever gets you the action, right?"

Alyssa scowled, muttering under her breath: "What a pig."

"What do you want, Gary?" Carl grumbled, not giving the older boy a chance to respond to Alyssa's observation.

Even in the fading crimson light of the early evening, Gary's eyes seemed to flare somewhat. He glanced briefly at Alyssa as he said to Carl, "How about a cease-fire? A pact? We both want the same thing, and that's to get some really good documentation on the fireflies. Both our clubs can work together. I got a car. You guys can ride with us wherever you need to go, and in exchange we get to share whatever footage comes up tonight. Fifty-fifty, teamwork all the way. That's what it's all about, right?"

Carl snorted. "Not when half the team is only interested in upping their own stats while letting the other half do most of the work."

Gary's expression darkened. "You'd better watch it, Hanson. You're playing with the big boys now. Know how to mind your elders."

"You're only sixteen," Vanessa pointed out.

"And you're just a bunch of little underage kiddies with an *honorary* Goblin's Club membership, registered under Mackie's name. You get the credit now for that Dead Whistler fucker, but you'd better be careful. One day you might rub Mackie the wrong way, and he might not be so friendly anymore—and you'll suddenly find that he's taken credit for all your assignments."

"Gary," said Carl quietly. "Do us all a favor and fuck off."

Nobody said anything. Alyssa and Vanessa watched nervously as Carl, clenching and unclenching his fists, stared Gary down. True, he was tall for twelve, and quite athletic—but Gary was taller, on the Canyon High School competitive wrestling team, and had a well-known reputation for using his fists whenever it suited him. He would have the advantage in a fight, Carl had to know that.

“Carl, let’s go,” Alyssa whispered, linking her arm in his.

Carl bit his lip, holding his stance for a moment longer before hefting his backpack and making his way out of the Neomancers’ circle. One of the older youths moved out of the way slightly, much to Gary’s chagrin.

“Fuck it,” he said, and the Neomancers dissipated.

Both clubs went their separate ways.

* * *

The Urban Prophets made their way northward along Whites Canyon Road. It was a slow ascent (past numerous apartment complexes, gated communities and corner hydrogen stations), leading them into the foothills, where their respective parents’ homes lay: a patchwork of single-story, southern California houses that had, for the most part, been built in the late twentieth century.

They cut through Canyon High School’s football field, where the year-rounders were having practice, and ended up on the steps behind North Oaks Park for a brief rest stop.

“Okay, game plans, everyone,” said Carl as he sipped from his water bottle, his sweaty face bathed in the acrid light of the nearby street lamps. “We have to be at the trailer park by eleven thirty, so I should probably pick you girls up by eleven the latest.”

“I’ll be ready,” said Vanessa. “Message me and I’ll meet you in the alley like we usually do. Just don’t wake up the next door neighbors’ dog or we’re screwed.”

Carl almost spit water all over the sidewalk. “That wasn’t my fault,” he exclaimed with mock insult. “I’m not the one who forgot blades don’t work on water or in small swimming pools.”

“Still, Rupert didn’t start wailing until *you* came stumbling over the fence.”

Shaking his head and facing Alyssa, Carl suddenly became aware of her sullen demeanor. “Why so quiet, Aly?”

She replied, without looking up, “You’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Aw.” Carl set down his drink and skated beside her. “It won’t be so bad. We’ll call each other all the time, I can come down on weekends . . . we’ll make each Sunday better than the last, okay?”

"I know, but . . ." Alyssa trailed off, unable to help herself as she started sobbing softly. *I hate this*, she thought. *We've had such a great summer together . . . it went too fast. Everything's changing too fast.*

Carl sat beside her, took her in his arms, and dealt with the situation in the only way he knew how: by talking about anything and everything that came to his mind, even if it had absolutely no relevance to what was going on at the moment. Talking and cuddling, waiting it out.

"You know, at my mom's work she has this section leader who's lactose intolerant, and so they had this party one day for someone's birthday. In the middle of it they gave this guy some vanilla ice cream, saying it was made from rice milk—just to see what would happen if he ate it—and about ten minutes later this God-awful smell fills the room, nobody knows where it's coming from, and then they look over and see this guy all red-faced, just sitting at his desk and looking like he just took a shit in his pants . . . my new school looks pretty cool. I've seen the gym there, and I met my new swim coaches. They're pretty cool too. The team made the state championships last year and they want to do it again this year, so maybe if I work real hard I won't screw it up for them . . ."

Alyssa eventually found herself smiling again, apologizing for her foolishness and wiping her tear-streaked face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"No worries," Carl said, paying Vanessa a brief, somewhat embarrassed glance. "What?"

"You guys aren't going to kiss?"

He flushed bright red and separated himself from Alyssa, who suddenly feigned interest in the straps of her airblades.

Vanessa groaned, getting to her feet. "Go on, don't mind me. Really. If you two want to have one last make-out fest, I'll just wait over here . . ."

"Ness . . ." Alyssa began with a sigh.

"Come on! He's such a good kisser! Remember that time out behind the school, when I grabbed his butt—"

"I didn't *want* to kiss you," Carl interjected. "I just did it to shut you up."

Vanessa wiggled her tongue at him, making a face. “Kissy-kissy, Carl Hanson is a lip-wrestler!”

“We should get going,” Carl said, pushing off from the stairs and starting down the street—but not before he flicked Vanessa off.

She chattered cheerfully all the way home.

* * *

Alyssa was unusually silent as she and Carl rounded the corner of Ermine, slowly ascending the uphill slope until they reached 19830. She set herself down on the grass beside the brick mailbox in front of her parents’ house and undid the straps of her blades, removing them one at a time. When she stood to face Carl again, he was suddenly four inches taller.

“Well,” she said quietly and with a smile that was difficult to muster. “Thanks for walking me home once again.”

“No prob.”

A pause, an uncertainty as to what was the right thing to do at the moment—and then she suddenly found herself wrapping her arms around him, trying to get an impression of his body that she could take with her indefinitely.

He held her and smoothed her hair with his hand. “Aly . . .” he said began, and lifted her head with his hands.

Their eyes met, and she was his in that moment. Whatever feelings she’d been accumulating for him over the past year or so suddenly came flooding uncontrollably over her. It didn’t matter anymore, all the anxiety and nervousness over admitting she liked him, all the worry of how to tell him, how to make it right. She just wanted to be with him, to let him know that she wanted to be with him. It didn’t matter how he reacted, or if they never saw each other again after this moment. She only knew she needed him now.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” she whispered slowly, “but would you kiss me? I mean, I know it might be stupid —”

“It’s okay,” he interrupted, smiling sweetly. Always so polite, so tender. He leaned in close so she could reach him. The kiss was much quicker than the one he’d given Vanessa, but quite potent

nonetheless. For the moment their lips touched, he was all around her: his arms holding her, his breath mingling with hers, his odor of sweat, shampoo and the outdoors filling her senses. Even after the day's physical exertions, he still smelled nice. Sweet, not sour.

He pulled back afterward, licking his lips. "You taste like strawberries."

"Oh," she replied, blushing and looking away. "It's . . . I use Chapstick."

He giggled. "You're fruity."

"You dork."

"See you tonight, then?"

"Sure thing."

"Cool." He let go of her, jumping briskly from the curb. As he glided down the street he yelled out, "Don't worry! It'll be fun!"

Yeah, Alyssa thought to herself. *It'll be fun.*

* * *

"Bedtime."

Alyssa started, ever so slightly, and found that her father was standing behind her, peering over her shoulder. She'd been concentrating so diligently that she hadn't heard him come out into the backyard. The delicate insect sounds emanating from the surrounding backcountry, the trickling of water wafting from the kitchen as Mrs. Newman finished up the night's dishes, the distant rumble of the skyway—she'd tuned out everything but the LCD of her camera, which was mounted on a squat tripod and aimed skyward.

Clearing her throat, Alyssa straightened some, pulling back her unclad hair. "Five more minutes, dad."

Mr. Newman put his arm around her, kissing her hair. "Sweet, you have school tomorrow."

"Five minutes max, I promise. If I shut the camera off now I'll lose an hour's worth of work."

"Five minutes, and not a minute more."

Her father straightened, letting her go and peering up into the sky, an infinite indigo speckled with glittering stars. "Nice night," he said, smiling playfully. "Nice and clear. You find any aliens

yet?"

"Dad," giggled Alyssa. "Aliens are bogus. I'm making a weather map."

"Oh, so you're a meteorologist now? I thought last week you were a metaphysicist."

Alyssa leaned over the camera once again, talking as she worked. "It's for a club assignment. We're researching fireflies—a phenomenon like the Northern Lights, but accompanied by small fairy or angel-like creatures. People see them all the time, but it's nearly impossible to track or predict where they'll appear. The only thing we have to go by is weather, moon shifts . . ."

Mr. Newman paid his daughter an inquisitive glance. "You don't believe in aliens, yet you believe in *fireflies*?"

"Not really, no. I believe people are seeing some sort of natural phenomenon, something that takes their breath away. There's no explanation for it, so they look for some kind of symbol to give it meaning. Like when people see the Virgin Mary in a thundercloud. It's not *really* the Virgin Mary, but people perceive it as such."

"That's not something I would discuss frankly with anyone but your closest friends." Mr. Newman folded his arms, shook his head slightly. "I should have taken you to church when you were younger."

"I've read the Bible."

"I know, but . . . sometimes when you see something, and you don't understand it, even if you perceive it as something that's not really there . . . sometimes it can be all the more significant that way. Sometimes the fantasy matters more than the reality."

Alyssa straightened, facing her father. She furrowed her eyebrows. "But no one *knows*."

Mr. Newman chuckled, facing the stars again. "No, no one really knows until they die, I suppose. Then it probably all makes sense. But while we're alive here on Earth all we have is our belief, our faith."

Alyssa studied him for a moment, studied this thirty-something, towheaded man who was her father, her personal confidant in most cases. While her mother was the down-to-earth parent, focusing mostly on her daughter's academic and athletic needs, Mr. Newman was the behind-the-scenes advocate who of-

ten took it upon himself to tackle Alyssa's emotional needs. When her feelings were hurt, her heart broken, he was there, offering a shoulder to cry on, a reassuring voice to make everything better.

Carl suddenly popped into her mind. She blinked and shook her head slightly, repressing the urge to draw comparisons between her best friend and her father.

"Okay," she murmured, shutting off her camera and folding up the tripod. "I'm finished for tonight."

Mr. Newman leaned in for a kiss. "Love ya', sweet," he said.

Alyssa pecked him on the cheek and left him stargazing.

* * *

8/25/2074

Dear Journal,

The final weekend of summer vacation has been a busy one for the Urban Prophets. We've attempted to wrap up our research concerning the firefly mystery through a series of online interviews. Tonight will be our field report. We will be meeting with one of our contacts, who has promised us a front-row seat to one of the swarms. Tomorrow, well, tomorrow school starts.

It will be my first school year without Carl, whose parents have decided to relocate to Los Angeles. A part of me is happy since he will be joining the best swimming team in the county, and that's what he wants. The jealous part of me wants to keep him all to myself, though. I know I will be busy this year with gym, as I've decided (like Carl) to continue doing competitive athletics at school. I'll be concentrating on other things. Maybe it will even be bearable, eventually.

As for the club, I can't see us splitting up, but there's going to be a period of inactivity as we sort ourselves out. My coaches all say it gets tougher in junior high, as this is when we start actually competing for college money. I can't complain, since they're all cool about it. There's just a lot of work to do. I don't know. Maybe I've

just gotten used to being a kid. I'm really going to miss . . . now. It may not make sense, but, well, I guess it had to happen sometime.

I will update my journal again after tonight's assignment is finished.

~Alyssa Newman

Alyssa sat, bare legs draped over the edge of her desk, notebook propped in her lap, and slowly gazed about her bedroom. Her “office” took up one corner of the room and consisted of a cluttered desk and billboard (which displayed a number of metaphysics-related news articles and photographs). It had served quite well as her center of operations for the past two years. To the right of the desk was her dresser and mirror, half covering the sliding door frame of her closet. To the left, her weight-training machine and a small stand displaying a handful of medals and trophies from various gymnastics meets.

Mix n’ match, she thought. *Nothing fitting together quite right.*

Momentarily, Mrs. Newman stuck her head into the room and reminded her daughter that it was half past nine.

“I know,” Alyssa said with a sigh as she rose from her desk. “I was just turning in. Goodnight, mom.”

She closed the bedroom door, turned off the lights, and stripped down for bed. There would be no problem sneaking out later, for she and her parents had come to an understanding in recent years: Once the lights went out and the clothes came off, her bedroom was off-limits. No one would check her in the middle of the night, no one would discover her absence.

She slid between the sheets and lay curled up with her PDA clutched in her hand. She managed to stay awake until ten-thirty, at which point her drowsiness got the better of her and she dozed fitfully.

* * *

“Hey, Alyssa. Wake up.”

Alyssa convulsed suddenly in her bed, gasping as she sat up. She blinked into the semi-darkness, the translucent screen of her

dreams fading away, blending into the murky details of her bedroom. She'd fallen asleep, she realized. She'd been dreaming of something unusual, perhaps even something unpleasant—

"Um, Alyssa? I can see your crack."

Alyssa pulled back her hair and arranged the sheets around herself before picking up her PDA. Carl's face glowed reassuringly on the tiny screen. He was clad in a long-sleeved black pullover and a beanie with *The Revisions* (his second-favorite punk band) printed across the front.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." Alyssa rubbed her eyes and checked the time. *"Just a bad dream. You're ten minutes late."*

Carl shrugged. *"The night bots are being ornery tonight. Anyway, me and Nessa are at Sky Blue. Hurry and get over here. Oh, and make sure you stay out of the light when you come down, okay?"*

"Right."

* * *

Blading to Sky Blue Mesa Elementary was a bit tricky at such an early hour, for there was a curfew in effect. Alyssa stuck to the shadows, cutting through neighbors' backyards whenever possible and venturing into a lighted area only when she had to cross Glasser to reach the soccer field. From there she met up with her companions and they skated together to Moon Canyon Trailer Park, half a mile north along Whites Canyon.

"Maggie Yelchin, J-22," Vanessa said, reading off her PDA as they turned onto a long strip of dirt road that perforated the trailer park.

Moon Canyon was a man-made abscess just south of Plum Canyon. It served mostly as a debris field for the West Sierra Skyway. The area was nestled between two low hillsides, napped with wispy tall grass and gangly sycamores, discarded car parts and jet-tisoned fuel cells—and presently bathed in an unearthly glow being cast by the aggravated clouds above. It was like a black and white analog film that had been colorized badly: The soil was a sulfuric yellow, the grass an almost neon lime-green, the neatly-aligned mobile homes' metallic finishes glinting like polished ster-

ling.

“Look at that,” Carl murmured, his gaze alternating between the stormy sky and the skin of his hands, which now had an aqua hue to it. He rolled up his sleeves. “I’m turning into Casper.”

“Your eyes are yellow too!” Vanessa exclaimed. She looked down at herself, marveling in the phenomenon. “It’s like being in a room full of black lights, only better. You think so, Aly?”

Alyssa swallowed, her eyes transfixed on the storm clouds. “I think this is going to be one humongous swarm.”

Carl studied the spectacle alongside his companions for a moment, the magnetic fields of their airblades humming and crackling. “Let’s find Maggie,” he said at last, and started down the road.

The girls followed, Alyssa recording everything with her camera. Evidently, the mysterious cloud cover seemed to be localized within the trailer park’s general area. According to previous documentation, such atmospheric disturbances were commonplace, but never had anyone reported anything of this size. The sky looked as if it might split open at any moment.

Maggie Yelchin’s trailer was located at the rear of the park, where a shallow mound straddled the skyway’s protective mesh. Several hundred yards up in the air was the Sierra, a winding track of flickering skyway markers. Cars sped by at regular intervals, resulting in an ever-present mist (the bi product of most modern hydrogen-powered vehicles) that rained down from above and caused the mesh to sizzle and crackle.

“She must never get any sleep,” Vanessa commented as they entered a small yard sectioned off by a squat white plastic fence. Several colorful children’s toys lay scattered about the grass.

Carl snickered. “For the rent, I could sleep through a car crash.” He hopped onto a rickety wooden platform, positioned at the foot of the trailer’s door, and knocked loudly.

Momentarily, a tired-looking, thirty-something blonde answered. She smoothed the sides of her bedraggled hair with her hands and squinted at the children.

“Yes?”

Alyssa glided forward. “Maggie Yelchin?”

“Yes? What’s this about?”

“I’m Alyssa Newman. We spoke earlier about the fireflies?”

Maggie blinked. “You’re Alyssa?”

“Yeah.” Alyssa gestured at her friends. “This is Carl and Vanessa. We’re the Urban Prophets.” A pause as she revealed her wooden DHC badge and tried to think of how to make her introduction more . . . official. “We’re, um, from the Goblin’s Club.”

“Yes, yes I know,” Maggie said with a chuckle. She stepped out into the ethereal night, closing the trailer door behind her and wrapping her arms about herself. “I just . . . you’re all so much younger than I’d expected. You know, it’s a little late to be skating around town by yourselves.”

Carl snorted. Vanessa blushed. Alyssa bit her lip and wished she’d taken Mackie with them, especially if Maggie was going to make their underage status an issue.

She forced herself to respond: “Well . . . we *are* on assignment. This kind of phenomenon can’t be properly documented unless an effort is made by the investigative community to do just that. In this case we lose a little sleep.”

Maggie smiled, looking just the slightest bit charmed. “All right. Uh, how does this work?”

Alyssa raised her camera. “I’d like to do a quick interview, if there’s time.”

“Okay,” said Maggie, and she gazed out across the shimmering valley. “I’d say we have about half an hour or so. You see that greenish mist up there? Kinda underneath the clouds?”

Hitting the “record” button on her camera, Alyssa nodded. “Yeah.”

Maggie continued: “Well, it kinda settles down to the ground in these snaky sort of funnels, right over there out of the light of the skyway. That’s where you can see them. They hug the ground in swarms. From here it looks like a bunch of glowing fog. Patches of *fairy dust*, as I, uh, like to call it.”

“And you never told anyone about them?” asked Carl.

“I did once, when I first moved here a couple years ago. Scared the shit—sorry—I mean scared me to death. I called the police, but by the time they got here the fireflies had all gone. They only stick around for a couple minutes at most each time, you see.”

Alyssa focused the camera on Maggie’s face. “How do you know when there’s going to be a swarm?”

"Well, that came later," Maggie said, fidgeting with her hair again. "Like I said, I've been living here for a couple years, mostly without problems. Every August, though, I hear this howling in the air—not like wolves or anything, but . . . you ever seen one of those classic racing cars, the ones with the rubber tires? In the races, they're going over a hundred on the speedway and you hear the howling of the tires against the track—it's like that, except there's no track out here. So I can hear them coming before they actually come. Sometimes a day, a couple days before they show up I'll just hear this howling. And then there's a night like this, you I just know I'm going to see them again." She fell silent, gazing out across the valley once more. "Shh. You hear it? They're coming . . ."

The children looked at each other nervously, listening as a sudden breeze sprayed runoff from the skyway onto their hair and faces. Sure enough, a distant hum, an ethereal buzzing could be heard as if floating in the air all around them.

Carl wiped some moisture from his face. "What do you think they are?"

Maggie sighed, swallowed. "I don't know, except that they've been in my dreams ever since I first saw them. I hear that same howling too. Like a thousand screams all at once. I hear them now and I almost get flashbacks, memories of things I've never done, places I've never been—all so vivid, so real."

Alyssa suddenly became preoccupied, holding the camera steady, but recalling her own dreams from earlier in the evening. Something about fireflies—

"It's not just me, though," Maggie continued. "Friends, family—people all over are talking about things like . . . I don't . . . it's like something big is going to happen, but nobody knows what. We're all getting bits and pieces in dreams, but nobody can see the big picture. I don't mean to scare you or anything, but I think the fireflies are a sign, a warning maybe . . . I don't know."

Thunder rolled. Lightning flashed somewhere in the broiling cumulonimbus like a cry of pain, an aching wound that suddenly split open in a downpour of piercing water droplets.

Maggie nodded, covering her head with her arms. "They're here. It always rains when they're here."

Alyssa squatted and stuffed her camera into her backpack. "Have they ever hurt you?"

"No," Maggie replied, shaking her head. "Of course, I've always kept my distance . . . but they don't seem to be out to get anyone."

"Good," Carl said with a smile, "because I don't feel like getting bitten tonight." With that he pushed off from the platform and glided towards the end of the trailer park. When he noticed the girls weren't following, he stopped and turned around. He held out his hands. "You coming or what?"

After a brief hesitation, Alyssa and Vanessa thanked Maggie for her input and skated to where Carl waited.

Just after they cleared the mesh together, Maggie called after them: "Be careful."

The Prophets skated slowly into the flickering darkness, Carl leading with his flashlight. They were a good distance from the trailer park (now a distant cluster of shimmering lights) when the rain suddenly stopped and all was eerily quiet.

"Stop," Alyssa said, tugging on Carl's sweater. She looked up at the sky, studied the swirling mist, which seemed to be dancing over their heads, considering whether or not to descend further. "Stay right here . . . everyone turn off their lights."

"Aly, what—"

"Shh. Just do it." She crouched close to the ground, motioning for her companions to follow suit. "We might scare them off with all our lights."

Carl looked doubtful. "How do you know?"

"Well, I don't *know*, but—"

"Wait, look," Carl hissed, covering her mouth—as well as Vanessa's—with his hands. He pointed towards a clump of trees a handful of yards off. There was motion in the darkness, the sound of footfalls hitting wet ground, someone coming towards them—

"Ha!"

The girls screamed (more out of surprise than terror) as Gary Barnett and the rest of the Neomancers flicked on their flashlights and came bursting out of the darkness like howling specters. Gary grabbed Carl around the neck, hauling him to his feet and grinding his knuckles into his scalp.

“Woohoo!” Gary howled. “You see that? Little Hanson was scared shitless!”

The others laughed as Carl pulled himself free and swore out loud. His cheeks were flushed bright red.

Gary laughed. “Oh, what’s the matter? You think we were some kind of horribly deformed mutants coming to snack on your brains?”

Carl scowled, imitating Gary’s tone. “Oh, what’s the matter? Did you think we were the police coming to break up your little circle-jerk?”

“Hey, fuck you, Hanson—”

“Guys!”

Alyssa had gotten to her feet and was regarding both Carl and Gary with a stern, matter-of-fact expression. “We didn’t come here to pick a fight. We came here to do research.”

Gary glanced at her, sneering. “Same here. Word has it your trailer trash friend thinks this is a good place to see a swarm. Judging by the weather, I’d say she just might be right. Lucky for us.”

“You’ve been spying on us!” Vanessa exclaimed.

“Yeah, Gary,” said Carl. “You’re cramping our style. We were here first.”

“You weren’t *anywhere* first,” Gary responded, stepping in close to Carl now. “Remember that. I could call the cops right now, tell ‘em there’s a bunch of twelve-year-olds running around past curfew. Yeah . . . wouldn’t your parents love to see you getting escorted home by the bots, your faces plastered all over every police receiver in the county. It’d be bedtime at seven-o sharp until the day you turn eighteen.”

Carl glanced questioningly at Alyssa, who appeared to be lost for words. What could she say? The Urban Prophets *were* minors, and they *were* breaking curfew.

“Yeah,” Gary continued, facing Carl once again. “Your dad will probably whoop your ass real good. Maybe give you matching scars this time.” He touched Carl’s chin, at which point the younger boy swatted at him with his fist. The two were suddenly at each other’s throats.

“Stop it!” cried Alyssa, stumbling forward. One of Gary’s friends grabbed her around the waist, restraining her. She started

kicking and thrashing. “Nessa! Get help! Nessa!”

Vanessa didn’t answer. In fact, she was no longer within the circle of light. Gary, straddling Carl on the ground, halted his assault long enough to look up and shout, “Where’s their friend?”

Before anyone could answer, the sky suddenly flared brightly, and the air became filled with the fireflies’ horrendous howling—only this time the effect was intensified tenfold. The youth who’d been holding Alyssa let her go, and she stumbled to the ground. Immediately she retrieved her camera, attempting to hold it steady while she used her free hand and shoulder to shield her ears from the noise. She could see Gary in her peripheral vision. He rolled off Carl and shouted at his companions to run back to their car and fetch their cameras.

Carl staggered to his feet, a thin stream of blood dripping from his mouth. His face was caked with bits of grass and mud.

“Nessa!” he called. He squinted into the trembling darkness and spotted her standing several feet away from himself and the others. She was paralyzed, shoulders slumped, mouth hanging somewhat open in a zombie-like grimace. The air about her had become electrified as the swarm funneled down from the sky and enveloped her body. Their frenzied motions tousled her hair, ruffled her clothes, manipulated her limbs as if she were a lifeless doll.

The urgency of the situation began to dawn on everyone as they were suddenly caught in a deluge of icy water droplets carried on the violent wind. Alyssa dropped her camera and threw herself to the ground, covering her head with her hands to protect herself from the assault. Between tightly clenched fingers, she glimpsed Gary crawling towards her.

“Gary!” she shouted, her voice hardly carrying over the fireflies’ shrieking. “We have to help her!”

Gary was several feet closer to the swarm than Alyssa was. With wild, frightened eyes, he glanced at Vanessa, then at Alyssa, and then down at the ground, where Alyssa’s camera lay.

Don’t do it! Alyssa screamed inside her head. *Don’t be an asshole!*

Somewhere behind her, Carl was yelling something unintelligible. Gary turned to face the swarm once more, shifted himself into a low crouch as if getting ready to pounce—but at the last

moment, he faltered.

"I'm sorry!" he yelled, and scooped up Alyssa's camera. He departed, leaving the children to fend for themselves.

Alyssa eyed the swarm again. Vanessa's body was still rippling as if she were made of paper. Something had to be done right now.

"We have to grab her!" Carl shouted. He was crouching beside Alyssa now, cupping his hands around his mouth.

"But what if—"

"Stay here! If something happens to me, I want you to run and get help!"

There was no time to protest, for Carl suddenly launched himself at the swarm as Alyssa watched on in horror. She fully expected him to become swallowed up, just as Vanessa had. However, just as he came into contact with the funnel, it abruptly dissipated, and the rain stopped. All became silent and tranquil once again.

"Ness!" Carl yelled, catching her in his his arms as she toppled forward, unconscious.

Alyssa rushed forward, offering her support. "Is she still breathing?" she asked. She took hold of Vanessa's wrist to feel for a pulse—

—and suddenly everything around her flashed, a million freeze-frames assaulting her all at once.

"Ah!" she cried out, jerking her hand away. She closed her eyes, wincing as her brain sorted itself out. "D-don't touch her, Carl . . . something's wrong—"

"Aly, calm down," came Carl's voice. "It's okay, I've got her . . . we'll call an ambulance . . . Aly?"

Alyssa opened her eyes again, blinked away the tears that had suddenly welled up behind her eyelids. "I'm . . . I'm okay. I just, I saw . . ." She trailed off, wiping her face with her sleeve.

"Saw what?" asked Carl.

She looked at him, saw the concern in his eyes. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him something she didn't understand, something of utter importance . . . but as soon as the feeling had taken hold of her, it had dissipated without a trace—and besides, Vanessa was injured.

"Nothing," she said. "Let's just get some help—"

At that moment, Vanessa convulsed suddenly, sitting up and taking in large gulps of air as if she'd been holding her breath underwater. She eventually calmed down and looked questioningly at her friend.

"What happened?"

Alyssa immediately felt the tension in her gut release. She almost laughed with relief as she replied, "They came—they were all around you, Nessa. Don't you remember?"

Vanessa's expression turned curious. "No . . . I was standing next to you guys when Gary—hey, where'd the Neomancers go? Guys? What's *happened*?"

"We'll explain on the way home," Carl answered, getting to his feet. "Can you walk?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Let's split before someone finds us out here."

* * *

The journey home was uneventful. Carl and Alyssa dropped off Vanessa half a block from her parents' house.

"Are you guys sure you aren't putting me on?" she asked, eying her friends warily.

Alyssa looked at Carl, whose worried expression matched her own. Vanessa nevertheless insisted she was fine despite the revelation that she'd been swallowed by a swarm during her memory lapse. She hugged Alyssa, wished Carl good luck with his move in the morning, and then skated quietly down the street.

"I don't think she believes us," Alyssa murmured as she and Carl headed eastward. When they reached Ermine, they glided slowly up the hill like they'd done so many times before—only now something was missing. It was as if Carl was already gone, as if all familiarity and comfort had left the neighborhood, leaving behind the empty shells of houses and trees.

"How about you?" whispered Alyssa when they reached the back gate of her parents' house. "Are you okay?"

Carl nodded and slicked back his matted hair. His lower lip was bruised and swollen, though he seemed to be dealing well with his wounds. "I guess that's the one good thing about leaving tomorrow: I won't have to put up with Gary's shit anymore."

"That's for sure. I can't believe he stole my camera. How am I gonna get it back?"

"Let it go for now," Carl said, giving Alyssa one last hug (a polite one this time, with none of the ardor of their former interlude). "We've had enough to deal with today."

"Yeah . . . I guess we sort of went out with a bang." Alyssa bit her lip. "Carl . . . I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"It's weird, I . . . I don't know, but . . . I have these dreams sometimes. Like something big is going to happen and I'm seeing a part of it before it actually does."

Carl wrinkled up his nose. "Okay . . . that's strange."

"I mean, I'm not psycho or anything, but I think I dreamed of the swarm tonight, before I met you guys. Maybe I was just imagining what it would be like. You know, like when I'm going to have a big gym meet the next day and I'm laying it all out in my head the night before. But when I touched Vanessa out behind the trailer park . . . I saw it all again, Carl. All at once." She looked up into Carl's eyes, searching for an answer.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Dunno. Maybe you're like those people who can feel the rain in their bones before a thunderstorm. You know, like when dogs seem to know there's going to be an earthquake or tornado before the rest of us do. Like Maggie Yelchin. That was a big swarm tonight—I don't see why it couldn't have messed with your head in some way."

"So you think . . . I mean . . . but how do you *know*?"

"I don't. Sometimes nobody knows. Things just are." He smiled and let her go as he started down the street. He murmured "goodbye" over his shoulder.

Alyssa wasn't sure if he'd understood her. Perhaps he was too weary to give it any serious thought at the moment. She turned away and started climbing the side gate, which would give her access to her bedroom window.

"Alyssa."

She looked behind her. Carl had made his way back to the edge of the sidewalk. "I've always thought of you as more than just a sister," he said, managing a wan smile. Then he was off, gliding down the hill and silently disappearing around the corner.

For a few minutes thereafter, she sat straddling the gate and watched the street as the trees rustled gently in the breeze, casting moving shadows on the pavement, filling the night air with nature's subtle tenor.

Eventually, she hopped onto the ground, crept through her bedroom window, and stumbled onto her bed without even removing her blades. Surprisingly, she was unable to fall asleep (despite the fact that she was quite exhausted). She tossed and turned until she came to lie facing the window.

That's when she saw it. A spark of emerald-green light moving about in the darkness of the backyard.

Firefly, she thought, her heart skipping a beat. She slipped out of bed and removed her blades without taking her eyes off the window. Part of her was adamant about finding some sort of camera to take a photograph with—perhaps her webcam—but no, that would only work with her notebook computer, and it would take too long to turn it on. She would have to satisfy herself with what her eyes showed her, what her brain recorded.

She opened the window with painstaking care and climbed outside. She crouched on the grass and remained motionless for a moment as she watched the firefly dance about the undergrowth. There was no indication of a swarm nearby—this one had either lost its way or else come here intentionally.

It's followed me home, Alyssa thought as she crawled along the ground, edging her way closer while trying to make as little noise as possible. She was succeeding rather well when the firefly, apparently alerted to her presence, suddenly fluttered several feet up into the air.

She jumped to her feet, her arms outstretched. *Wait! Don't leave yet!*

The creature hesitated, poised above the yard, ready to dart off into the night. However, after a decisive moment, it began to descend toward her. She held out her hands, palms upturned, creating a small platform for the firefly to land on. When it touched her skin, her whole body shivered, and she found herself smiling suddenly as an overwhelming sense of well-being filled her from head to toe.

It was beautiful: Small, delicate wings made of light illuminated a slim, vaguely humanoid figure. There were no refined bod-

ily features (such as a face), no indication whether the creature was male or female. It just was.

Alyssa was disappointed when it leapt off her fingers and disappeared over the treetops . . . but she wasn't sad. The feeling of utter contentment continued to flow through her, just as it had at Moon Canyon. The difference now was in the clarity. When she'd touched Vanessa (after the swarm had enveloped her), everything had come in all at once, a million tiny signals—undecipherable. Taken individually, though, the message was crystal-clear: Everything was going to be okay.

Eyes wide with wonder, she watched the sky for several more minutes before retiring to her bedroom.

As she drifted off to sleep, she realized that she still didn't know what the fireflies were all about, what tomorrow would be like without Carl—what her life would mean from this point on, but (for the moment) it was okay—she was okay.

That was all the comfort she needed.

The Chair

The place was called Nick's Burgers, simple and upfront, and was wedged into a dusty shoulder off the Interstate 5.

Lewis wasn't much of a greasy spoon fanatic, though after being on the road for nearly six hours he was famished and more than a little eager to stretch his legs—and with Coby in the passenger seat, begging and nagging for a pit stop since Fresno, Nick's would have to do.

"Thank God," sighed Coby, once they'd parked. "I thought I'd have to go the whole day on a Coke and a Snickers bar." (They'd been up since five in the morning—to and from Sacramento—helping a friend move.)

Lewis concurred, and was quite looking forward to a chicken sandwich when, upon entering the diner, he found himself suddenly chilled to the bone.

"What's wrong?" Coby asked, stopping beside him.

"Feel that?" Lewis asked.

Coby tilted his head sideways, then smiled broadly. "Air conditioning—feels damned good. Come on. Let's get a window table."

That wasn't it. What Lewis felt could only be described as an oppression, a hidden weight burdening the counter tops, tables, and clientele (though outwardly there seemed to be nothing wrong with the establishment). The place was decent enough, and the food smelled good, but there seemed to be a thin film over everything—calcium deposits between the floor tiles, excess Windex streaking the counter tops . . . unidentifiable, almost invisible stains streaking the walls and ceiling. It might have been a bad day, it might have been a bad year; either way, the place seemed to slouch in on itself.

Lewis followed Coby to one of the tables. The window was tinted (stained was more like it), and it made the outside world look like a faded photograph. The light that filtered through cast

a sickly glow over the half-dozen customers who ate their meals in silence.

Momentarily, a waitress (whose name tag was too faded to read) came to take their order. Her analgesic curls were done up in a haphazard bun and there were dark circles under her eyes.

Coby ordered a ham and cheese; Lewis, after a moment's distraction, decided on fries and a medium drink.

"That's all?" Coby asked after the waitress left.

Lewis shrugged. "I've lost my appetite."

"Tell me about it." Coby draped one arm over the back of his chair. "This place has about as much charm as a funeral parlor."

When their food came, Lewis ate slowly, taking his fries one at a time and chewing each morsel to a flavorless paste before swallowing. Meanwhile, his eyes darted about as he attempted to pinpoint the source of his unease. Was it the nauseous lighting? The smell of damp earth masked beneath the funk of some foreign curry? The fuzzy, mangled rendition of Steve Roach's "Midnight Loom" faintly playing on an unseen jukebox?

He might have gone mad trying to dissect what, for all intensive purposes, was merely the product of his own exhaustion—and then he saw it, at the far end of the room, sitting between the men's and women's restroom doors: a chair.

It was a rickety-looking thing, slapped together from bits of pressboard and ashes and spare splinters, its seat frayed from years of use. It belonged in the garbage, yet here it was: a curiosity that seemed to warp the area around it, to draw gravity into a concave (the tables nearby were suspiciously vacant).

With some difficulty, Lewis swallowed a mouthful of potato and said, "Isn't that an odd place to put a chair?"

Coby glanced over his shoulder. "Not necessarily. If there's someone ahead of you, you can sit while you're waiting."

"But you have to admit, it's sort of out-of-place."

"This whole dive is out of place," Coby laughed.

Lewis sighed and pushed his plate away. "Can't you feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"Something. I don't know—cold, sadness, darkness—the moment we set foot in here I felt it." Lewis paused, glanced at the chair again. "I feel like there's somebody sitting there, watching me."

Coby turned around, facing the chair. "That's crazy. There's nothing there."

Lewis got up. "Let's go."

"Fine," said Coby, standing as well, "but first I need to piss." He headed towards the men's room.

"No!" Lewis cried, his heart suddenly hammering. He grabbed Coby's arm. "Don't. We'll find someplace else."

Coby shimmied out of his grip, went anyway. "Relax. I'll be right back."

He disappeared into the men's room, and for a brief instant Lewis felt his pulse dribble down to nothing—until, mercifully, Coby reappeared and stood wiping his hands on his pants.

"No towels," he said.

"Let's just go," said Lewis.

Coby nodded and looked at the chair. Then he looked at Lewis. "Just to show you what a little bitch you're being . . ." he said, and sat in the chair.

Lewis nearly suffered a seizure. "Coby . . . get up . . . please."

"Relax, see? Just a chair." Coby crossed his legs, fiddled with his shoelaces—and suddenly his movements became blurred, as if he were merely an afterimage superimposed on reality. For a moment he looked confused, waving his hand before his face—then he was gone.

Lewis screamed, stumbled backward. Someone caught him; it was the waitress. Her face was gaunt, devastated.

"Looks like you need to sit down, hon," she said.

Lewis screamed again and tore out of the diner. It was better outside, better where the sky was still blue and cars still passed on the highway.

Coby, thought Lewis, fumbling for his cellular phone. *Oh, God, Coby!* He punched in 9-1-1, stumbled to his knees and turned to face the diner once more—and froze.

Nick's Burgers was gone. Then again, it might not have been there in the first place. Instead there was only a hollowed-out ruin—skeletal beams and deformed pipes and half-dead door frames long ago charred to a crisp.

The Gilded Flame

Four hundred turns, thought Alexander as Touchwood Inn came into view. It was a welcome sight amidst the winter landscape he'd been traversing on foot for the better part of a fortnight. *So much has changed, and yet nothing at all.*

He quickened his pace, for as much as he'd come to appreciate the natural beauty of snowfall in Kyrth, cold was cold, and he suddenly found himself longing to wind down the remainder of the evening beside a warm fire. He entered the inn and stood in place for a moment, savoring the warmth as tiny eddies of snow slithered across the shag carpeting of the parlor.

Home at last.

Behind him, a stout dwarf, serving as doorman, politely pushed the door shut and tapped his staff on the rug. A small sparkling cloud settled onto the fabric, dissolving the snow before it had a chance to melt.

"You be warming your garments during your stay?" he asked in sharply accented Human as he hobbled in front of Alexander and gestured at the complimentary hearth.

Alexander responded with a silent nod. He was not unkind; his extended journey had merely made him weary and not in the mood for small talk—at least not until he'd had a drink or two in him.

He slipped out of his clothing and descended down a shallow staircase, which brought him into the belly of the inn. Subdued lighting, provided by enchanted torches hung between delicate tapestries, illuminated cushioned, burgundy-colored wooden seats pulled around oaken tables. To the left, a walkway (carved out of the inn's stone foundation) led up to the steaming bathhouse; to the right, another shallow staircase leading to a crescent-shaped pit of personal booths that had been carved as elaborate alcoves into the woodwork of the walls. Each booth was complimented by a decorative spray of flowering vines.

The furnace was apparently in good repair this evening, for there was an abundance of bare flesh amongst the patrons. Alexander nodded at several of the waitresses, who welcomed him with hugs and kisses as he made his way into the bathhouse. He bathed among familiar friends and shared many tales of his most recent journeys across Marrybird (as well as the rest of Kyrth). His audience was enraptured, not wanting to let him go until at last he rose from the water to dry himself off.

"As much as I have enjoyed regaling you with stories from the theatre," he said, "I'm afraid I am quite tired."

"Just one more story?" implored an appealing lass.

Alexander smiled gently, slicking back his long dark hair. "Another time, when the weariness of the flesh does not weigh so heavily upon the mind."

He returned to the den, where Gregori waited. Gregori called out to him as Alexander descended into the pit.

Gregori was several turns older than Alexander, and as such had a certain heavysset look to his otherwise youthful face. It was sometimes referred to as 'the weight of advanced calendar age,' and it had crept into his bones ever so slightly as the seasons had passed. He was not old, for his skin was still smooth, his auburn hair still full, his posture straight . . . he had, as nearly all veteran Kyrthians did, the body of a youth who'd lived a long, long life.

Nevertheless, Alexander was pleased to see him once again. He offered the man a hug. "Wonderful to see you, Greg. And wonderful to see Touchwood is still going strong."

Gregori chuckled. "When the place isn't being repaired due to some outrageous accident or minor mishap. Never mind that, though. You must be weary after your long journey. Here, I have a table for you." He led Alexander to a booth. A cinnamon-scented candle rested at the center of a modestly-sized table, illuminating the alcove, warming the woodwork.

"Very good, Gregori." Alexander sighed as he slid onto the seat and rested his head against the wall.

"Can I get anything for you?"

"A bowl of soup, perhaps."

Gregori bowed humbly. "Of course. Anything, old friend."

He left the booth and Alexander was left alone to enjoy a quiet moment. He closed his eyes and stretched somewhat, feel-

ing the warm stone beneath his bare feet, the silky cushioning against his buttocks and thighs. The pleasant smells of good food wafted through the air, blending with the sounds of peoples' merriment as they conversed cheerfully with one another. Many, many seasons had passed since he'd first come to Touchwood (and to the city of Faire), but for a moment he was able to reach back across a sea of memories and touch the shoulder of the pouting adolescent he'd once been.

"A recipe from Helena."

Alexander opened his eyes to find Gregori had placed a steaming bowl upon the table. He'd also brought cider.

"Tell me again," said Alexander, sitting forward and calmly stirring his soup, "why you chose such a . . . *questionable* name for this place."

Settling himself across from Alexander, Gregori uncorked the cider bottle and began pouring. "A bit of humor is all. Used to be called the Crystal Goblet back when I first opened as your average brawl house. However, in the past five or six hundred turns, the bloody place has been burned down on no less than fifteen separate occasions. In the beginning it was war with the elves, then, even when Marrybird was at peace, drunken Guardsmen would stumble in and find a way to misuse their royal mana—I finally wised up to my rotten luck and decided to take it with a chuckle rather than a curse. In fact, due to a rather unpleasant rogue curse I happened to receive before I had Touchwood properly enchanted, I actually called the place The Rotten Apple for nearly eight turns. But people seem to appreciate the humor, and business has always been astounding. There never ceases to be an abundance of amiable young men who are willing to give of their time and energy to make sure we're running proper. I'd wager our bed maids have just a little something to do with that."

"And Arin? Is she still around these days?"

"Of course. She's, ah, with one of our patrons at the moment."

"So she's still . . . ?"

"A bed maid? Why, yes. I can pass along the news of your arrival, if you like."

"Yes, of course."

Gregori nodded and rose to his feet. "Well, like I've always said, please stay as long as you like—I've reserved a room for you, naturally. If I'm not available when you're ready to turn in, approach old Dale at the bar. He'll give you the key."

"Thank you," Alexander said. "Give my regards to Helena and the laundry girls."

"I surely will."

Gregori left the booth, and Alexander ate his soup, sipped his cider. Soon he was tingling from head to toe and comfortable enough to nap right there at the table. He leaned back, bottle in hand, and gazed at the candle, allowing himself to become somewhat hypnotized by its flame.

"Alexander!"

He felt a soft hand on his shoulder, turned and found himself in the presence of a slender blond woman. She was somewhat flushed, her body glistening with a light sheen of scented bathwater.

"Arin, my dear," said Alexander, making room for her in the booth. She bounced beside him, throwing her arms around him and pecking him on the cheek. He was not quite in the mood for such cheerful play just yet, but for her sake he acquiesced, replacing the cider bottle on the table and returning her embrace. She had the feel of a carefree youth despite the fact that she was a mere season younger than he. After a moment, tasting strawberry cider on her lips, he asked, "Have you been drinking?"

Arin giggled. "A little. I know I shouldn't get carried away, but Goddess knows I can't help myself sometimes. Especially when I think of you and how long it's been since we were last together." She sobered somewhat and ran her hands down his chest, traced the ridges of muscle with her fingers. "You've been hardened by your journey, but now that you've come home, things can be as they once were."

"If only that were possible." Alexander sighed. "I'm afraid there's something on my mind at the moment."

"Let the mind rest, then." Arin snuggled closer.

"Not this time, my dear, my precious love."

"What is it, then? Why has your mood become sullied?"

Alexander gazed into her eyes as he brushed her soft cheek with his hand. "I am four hundred seasons old this morn-

ing . . . I've become old these last few turns."

She blinked, tilted her head to one side, for she did not understand. "But nobody becomes *old* in Kyrth, Alexander. Lifelong youth is a gift from the Goddess, given to those who have taken Her into their hearts."

"Ah, but She did not promise immortality. Our youth is lifelong, but we still have not been granted long life. We still leave this realm once our precious time in the flesh has run its course."

"You are half elf," Arin said, as though to remind him.

True, his face was beardless—even his genital lacked adult hair—but his ears were rounded, and he had the height of a typical human adult. His mother had been human, after all; her blood was undoubtedly the dominant force flowing through his veins.

"Only half," he said, contemplatively. "It is not enough to disregard my mortality. Only full-blooded elves know the secret to eternity. Perhaps that is why, when one gazes into their endless, crystalline eyes, one sees an entire history. Kingdoms built and destroyed; lovers lost long ago to war or time; thousands, tens of thousands of sunrises and sunsets, all blended into the gilded flame of remembrance."

Arin rested her head against his chest. He felt the hot sting of her tears against his skin and he knew she was crying. Perhaps she was genuinely saddened, in her own childlike manner, to lose a lover who'd shared so many intimate nights with her. However, she would never understand. He would leave Touchwood for the last time tomorrow morning, and she would go about her business as a bed maid, sharing endless nights with endless men . . . and eventually she would forget him. She would find simple bliss, and he would be happy for her.

Arin whimpered. "Why do you speak of such things?"

"I did not want to leave before saying goodbye."

"But you do not have to leave. You can stay here with me."

"Do not be selfish, my dear." Alexander made an effort to cool his emotions. "I would like nothing more than to spend an eternity beside the hearth, with you by my side. However, I have come to avenge Min."

At this Arin stiffened, straightened in his arms. Her gaze met his.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Do not be," Arin replied, softly. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is I who have been callow towards your love for her. She was yours, and you were hers."

Alexander fell silent, allowing memories of Min to flow through him once again. She had been his soul mate, she had come after all his childhood infatuations, after his adolescent experimentation with Arin and other girls. She had been a mature passion, a lifelong promise that had failed to fulfill itself, for she had died many turns ago while training as a royal athlete at the Eternal Champion. At the time, Alexander had been devastated, unable to understand why the Goddess and her consorts had allowed such a thing to happen to someone so young, someone who'd endured immense challenges during her childhood as a Marrybird exile, only to have her life ended in a fit of godly passion during a Game of the Gods. Gods were not supposed to use their fleshed children for such deeds, but an exception had been made in Min's case. An exception that had proven fatal.

Arin had become Alexander's lover afterward, offering him solace as a familiar acquaintance who could share his despair and offer her affection. He shared love with her, though it was somewhat detached, and certainly not enough to stave off his thirst for the answers to questions a mere mortal was perhaps never meant to know. Subsequently, he'd left her here in Faire and gone to explore Kyrth. However, his life had quickly become, he now realized, an unsatisfying journey that had led him full circle without providing the answers he sought. As such, sitting here in the familiar warmth of the inn, he was ready to end the journey.

Presently, Gregori returned to the booth with more cider and a bowl of fruit. He immediately noticed Arin's solemn disposition.

"Arin, my child, what's the matter?"

She did not answer, but rather looked imploringly at Alexander.

"I shall go to the Shrine of Taurus tomorrow," he said slowly, and finished off the last of his drink. "I will summon Taurus. We will discuss . . . retribution."

Gregori went pale. He seated himself. "Vengeance? Against

one of the gods?"

"I have waited long enough for an alternative to present itself to me."

"And so you will fight a god?"

"If need be."

"You're only part elf. You are still mortal. I don't suppose I can talk you out of this."

"Alas, no. My mind is made up."

Gregori sighed, poured himself a glass of cider. "Gods, I need a drink—and I'm not even the one whose life is at stake."

Alexander smiled. "Do not worry yourself, my friend. Our many, many turns of friendship have engraved themselves into my memory. In life or in death, I will not forget."

"Yes, of course." Gregori shook his head and laughed. "Listen to you, all full of nymph talk. I remember when you were still just a cub, when you first came into Faire from the Cove. Ha, a human boy with elves' blood raised by nymphs. Tell me *that's* not the humor of the gods. You used to sneak in here constantly to see the ladies. Laurel finally gave up and instructed that if you were to come here, it would be to work. Whatever skirts you chased, you were to chase them on the clock."

"Indeed."

"You stuck to it, though. A good hard worker, I'll give you that. Laurel raised her boys right."

Silence fell over the booth as everyone entertained their own thoughts. Arin had separated herself from Alexander and was now brooding over a handful of figs.

Gregori eventually sighed, set down his glass, and paid Alexander a serious look. "You're really going to do this? Tomorrow?"

Alexander nodded.

"Then you will need a flesh oracle, a human body Taurus can animate during battle."

"Yes, but—"

"Then I will be yours."

"Gregori, I cannot ask this of you—"

Gregori held up his hand. "Alex, if this is the manner by which you will leave Kyrth, then I will be at your side."

Alexander studied his friend's face, noted the unwavering gaze, the firm set of the jaw. Throughout his life, Gregori had

been a friend and a father-in-name, and despite his instinctive objection, he could think of no one he would rather have at his side.

"You realize," said Alexander slowly, "that if I win, you will most likely be dead or wounded beyond salvation."

Gregori nodded. "Of course. And, if Taurus wins . . ."

"I would give no other man the honor."

"Bloody right."

Alexander smiled and clasped Gregori's hand in his own. "Thank you, my friend."

* * *

"Min is dead."

"I thought you were asleep."

"There is no changing that."

"Perhaps not."

"Then why go through with this madness?"

Arin lay with Alexander, her legs intertwined with his, her head resting atop his chest. She'd caught him quite off guard, feigning sleep after their lovemaking and then suddenly lifting her face to his and presenting her thoughts.

He twitched, ever so slightly, and gently ran his fingers through her golden locks, the edges of which had been set aglow by the faint candlelight. "The gods know all, while mortals must spend their lives seeking their own answers. I have journeyed far, and for a long, long time. I have found nothing. The only thing that has made it bearable is the promise that one day it will all pass, and I will find my answers. I have chosen tomorrow as that day."

"But the Goddess gives us all the gift of free will. This is not a path you must follow in order to be reunited with Min."

"Min's free will was taken from her. Taurus exercised his own on the day he usurped my beloved and killed her. What free will has there been for me, separated from my mate and forced to wander this realm alone?"

Arin pouted, rose from the bed and cleaned the seasoned honey from between her legs. "There is still beauty in life, moments to cherish, moments of delight. Were you not in ecstasy

when you made love to me tonight?"

Alexander did not answer, for he had no answer to give. Physical pleasure and spiritual pleasure were, for him, oftentimes very similar. He knew that he had been comforted by her presence, but to speak of their coupling in words would be to act as any average man did towards any average bed maid.

Such is not the case, he thought. *I love Arin, but I also love Min.*

"When you leave Touchwood in the morning," Arin said, crossing the bedchamber, "you will be leaving me, again."

With that she turned away and let herself out.

* * *

Arin did not offer her presence for the Calling. While a small part of Alexander was hurt by this, he *did* understand her motives. *It is better this way*, he thought, rising from his bed. The morning sunlight cascaded into the bedchamber, warming the woodwork, warming his body. At some point during the early morning, one of the laundry maids had brought his clothes, (cleaned and dried), and placed them atop the chiffonier. He pulled on his leggings. *To imagine my absence as something intangible, like a dream, to know that I am gone, but not having to witness my death; it is perhaps not the ideal scenario, but it will have to do.*

He pulled his hair back, bundled it at the nape of his neck, and examined himself briefly in the mirror. It had been a long while since he had seen himself as such. He was not surprised, however, to find that he still carried the appearance of a young man. It was as if his body had refused to take more than a few modest steps past adolescence, past the Games (and past Min's death).

A knock at the door signaled Gregori's arrival. Alexander left the bedchamber and greeted his friend with a meaningful embrace. They descended the staircase together, crossed the unoccupied den, and exited the inn. Outside, the sky was clear, the sunlight reflecting off the snow-covered ground, highlighting the web like wings of the morning fairies as they dashed between the tree branches.

Touchwood's pantheon was located behind the inn, in a sub-

terranean grotto. Polished stone steps led inside, where the many gods' shrines were illuminated by enchanted torches hanging along the walls. A multitude of alcoves had been carved into the stone of the walls; each alcove held a meticulously-carved statue resembling one of Kyrth's numerous minor gods and goddesses. The males were tall and muscular, with handsome faces. The females were lithe, with generous, well-shaped breasts and lush figures.

"Welcome," greeted the caretaker, a slight, robed man who appeared out of the shadows as if he'd been conjured from the firelight itself. "Let those who pass into Her kingdom be pure of heart." He rose his hand and, in a swift, efficient motion, sprinkled holy water on his guests.

Alexander bowed, offering his thanks and requesting an audience with Taurus.

"Ah, of course. His shrine is available at the moment. Please proceed."

Taurus' statue was perhaps the most provocative of all the male gods'. Being a god of the flesh, a god of the senses, he expected interpretations of his physical form to carry a certain degree of exaggeration. As such, his rendered body was exceedingly sensual, his large, acutely alert genital sculpted in great detail. Many human men came to him seeking manifestations of virility. Alexander, however, was uninterested in such affairs at the moment. He knelt on the cold stone floor before Taurus' likeness and, with an affirming nod from Gregori, began the Calling.

Humans, having no inborn magical abilities, were required to use physical catalysts, such as enchanted water, in order to perform magic. Alexander, on the other hand, was half elf, and possessed his own reservoir of inborn mana, which he'd cultivated over the course of his life. He extended his mana now, cupping his hands together and working a receptacle spell as he called forth the essence of Taurus. The transference proceeded at Alexander's discretion, for gods could not inhabit the bodies of human men or women unless they were granted the proper permissions.

Momentarily, the area surrounding Taurus' alcove brightened as Alexander directed the receptacle at Gregori, who solemnly received the god into his body. The transfer was nearly instantan-

eous, and marked by a sudden straightening of Gregori's shoulders, a narrowing of the eyes as human determination was replaced with godly assurance.

"Alexander," Taurus greeted, now fully integrated within Gregori's body. He flexed his limbs, adjusting to the strengths and sensations of a fleshed man. He smiled. "My subject, my child. Why have you called Taurus to the physical realm?"

The gods were all-knowing. Taurus did not have to ask a question that had an obvious answer. Still, it was appropriate that Alexander play along until the ultimatum presented itself.

He rose to his feet. "Many turns past, when I was a youth, my beloved Min and I trained at the Eternal Champion as royal athletes for your Games. While on display before the many gathered kingdoms, come to witness the splendor of the competition, a god let loose his wrath for the sake of his own passion."

All cheer drained from Taurus' face. "Speak with care, mortal child."

Alexander continued, unflinching. "We are both minor creations forged by Lorianis' benevolence. I speak as a mortal man to a minor god, to a long-ago human who has evolved over many lifetimes and achieved a state of grace beyond the confines of the flesh. You may have created Kyrth, but you are nevertheless bound by the Goddess' rules. When you affected Min during the Games, you violated those rules." He paused, sensing Taurus' mounting rage. The minor gods were not infallible, and when this was sometimes pointed out . . .

"You place your life at risk for the wrong reasons," Taurus warned. "Min was a beautiful child, a glorious flesh creation-but she had no power beyond the strength of her body. She would have lived out her life in mediocrity and eventually died, just as you will eventually die. As meaningful as your presence here in Kyrth may seem, you are all bound by the same fate."

Alexander closed his eyes, and for the briefest of moments, Min was alive again: a radiant young woman, sound of body and of heart, though perhaps unalluring to other men, due to her plain facial features. On the afternoon of her death, he'd left the watercourse to watch her performance in the gymnasium. He was there now, working his way through the masses of other fellow athletes (and gathered citizens) milling about the floor. He

caught sight of her on the podium, chalking up her bare hands and feet. She was preparing for her routine on the extended trainer, a culmination of Old Earth gymnastics apparatus arranged into three ascending tiers: uneven bars, dance floor, and balance beam.

The domed ceiling of the gymnasium, comprised of several levels of intricately intertwining arches, rose high into the otherworldly haze of Kyrth's minor gods and goddesses. They observed the proceedings with much anticipation as their chosen human athletes competed for them. The kingdom with the most highly-decorated team would garner much godly favor, and would be rewarded handsomely with prosperous weather and seasonal safety from dangerous wildlife, rogue magic, and so forth.

Alexander watched with pride as Min, facing the apparatus, walked up the podium and stood poised. Her performance here would bring Marrybird to the forefront of the rankings. When the scorekeeper called her name, she presented herself before the judges and began the exercise. Her unclad body, a prime example of tempered musculature and graceful beauty, moved unhindered between the bars. For the first half of her routine, her form was fine: well-executed skills, impeccable lines, neat toe point. She advanced easily to the second tier. Her trainer, riding atop a rather large and colorful dragonfly, kept pace alongside the apparatus while calling out instructions. Min was almost ready to ascend to the third (and final) tier when the air around her suddenly humidified, causing large droplets of water to condense onto the springboard. It was during her attempted mounting of the balance beam that her feet slipped violently upward, as if tied together by invisible ropes.

A non-physical intervention.

The amassed spectators elicited a collective gasp, watching in horror as Min convulsed involuntarily. She fell headfirst onto the beam, her body instantly going limp as it collapsed awkwardly onto the podium.

"Min" There were tears in Alexander's eyes as he came out of his reverie. "You sacrificed her so your chosen kingdom would win. Marrybird lost the Games to Krey by a single head that season."

"Sacrifices are made," Taurus answered, "for the good of the

whole. You forget how much you are given in this life, Alexander Day Tree. Long life, lasting youth, free will to roam this realm without the ravages of disease or age . . . there is always a price for such splendor.”

“But why *her*?” Alexander flared. “Why not a hardened criminal or an ungrateful heretic?”

Taurus’ patience was at its end. “The experienced storyteller does not ask why his story must be told. He merely knows that he must tell it, and that its characters must be created and destroyed in order to reach an acceptable ending. There is no malice in such an act—humans have created malice in demanding too much of their storytellers.”

“That is no challenge for *you*. You are the storyteller, while humankind has been relegated to playing meaningless characters.”

“Silence!”

With a powerful swoop of his arm, Taurus grabbed Alexander around the neck, hauling him off his feet. Somewhere nearby, the pantheon’s caretaker cried out in distress. Taurus glared at him, and the man promptly scurried back into the wavering shadows.

“Passion alone,” growled Alexander, now gathering his mana, “does not win the battle.” He grabbed Taurus’ arm with both hands and used it for leverage as he planted his feet in the god’s abdomen. That separated them, and gave Alexander a window of opportunity. He called his mana, forming his battle circle. A sapphire-hued sphere expanded from his solar plexus, enveloping himself and his opponent. The perimeter of his influence hissed and crackled as it came into contact with the various stone structures of the chamber.

Taurus’ expression turned lethal as he realized his mistake: He’d allowed himself to become ensnared in Alexander’s battle circle. Therefore, Alexander would be able to execute the first attack move, not Taurus, whose only options were self-protection at this point.

Alexander attacked. It was a cautionary blow that struck Taurus square in the chest and sent him sprawling into one of the pantheon’s many shadowy corners. Alexander followed, though not before deftly removing his boots so that his bare feet touched the stone floor. This allowed him to better maintain his protect-

ive shell, as energy was discharged outward through his hands, and reabsorbed through his feet in a continuous cycle.

“Even the gods must be held accountable for their actions,” he said, scanning the shadows. Taurus had evidently hidden himself. “The question is to whom.” He sent a burst of flame into one corner of the chamber, replacing shadow with light. Simultaneously, he was abruptly knocked off his feet by a blow to the head as Taurus appeared beside him. He stumbled forward onto his knees, his vision blurring, his mana wavering uncertainly (and matching his state of sudden semi-consciousness).

“Accountability,” said the god, extending his own mana, “can be interpreted in many different ways.”

Alexander stumbled to his feet. He was now caught in Taurus’ battle circle, though he noted that the mana used to construct it was crimson-hued, and therefore powered by passion, aggression. The blow of his opponent’s move would be powerful, but it would not have any of the precision that Alexander’s had had. Taurus may have been a minor god, with godly abilities, but working through the flesh circuit of Gregori’s body, he was prone to the same tendencies as any human being.

Still, it was powerful. Alexander could only block and brace himself as a bolt of energy the length of his own body sent him through the ceiling of the pantheon. He was blasted up into the snowy wilds in an explosion of crumbled stonework and fiery embers that sent the immediate wildlife scattering. Physically, his body was unbroken, for he had been blocking well—however, the mana he’d expended for such an effort would take some time to recharge. He stood, ignoring the intense cold pressing against his bare feet, and quickly retreated into the nearby forest growth.

Taurus’ voice mocked him as he scurried up the puckered trunk of an elderwood: “You see, Alexander? The forces that drive this realm and all living things within it are more powerful than you can ever imagine! Perhaps you are in need of a lesson concerning retribution!”

Alexander continued his ascent, finding handholds and toe-holds where he could until he was well off the ground. Peering through the leafage, he spied Taurus making his way out of the hole in the ground and advancing into the woods.

“Oh, great tree spirit,” Alexander whispered (in the Elvish

tongue) as he grasped the bark more firmly. "Allow me to partake of your abundant magical reserves so that I may protect myself from danger."

The voice of the elderwood's druid spirit sounded in his head: *Bring no quarrel to these woods.*

Indeed, Alexander felt no stream of energy in his feet. The druid sensed that its magic was wanted for personal gain—Alexander's survival against an enemy he'd purposely provoked and would have no part of it. He could filch the druid's mana, thereby acquiring the energy he sought, but such an act of selfishness would likely tarnish his reputation amongst the other residents of the forest. If he defeated Taurus, he would have to live with such an encumbrance.

He looked down below, spotted Taurus making his way between the trees. He was calling out Alexander's name as he would a lost child's. "Alexander . . . where are you, Alexander? Come out and play. Isn't that what you want?"

Alexander waited patiently until his opponent passed close to the tree—at which point he dropped down onto the god's shoulders. Both men started rolling around on the snow, eliciting primal growls and using their fists (rather than their magic) to batter each other.

He has come for a fight, Alexander thought, noting the apparent absence of a battle circle. He slammed his fist into Taurus' face. Blood splattered onto the snow. *A simple game, a game of conflict—that's all I am to him. That's all Min was . . .* He dodged a blow, rolled onto his feet as he took the initiative and formed his second battle circle.

"A game, then," he said, conjuring a pair of pseudo-swords. He tossed one to Taurus. "We shall fight to the death."

Taurus seemed only too happy to oblige. He accepted the offered weapon, parrying Alexander's subsequent thrusts, retaliating in kind. They continued in this manner for several bouts—the battle circle alternating between them both—until, at last, Alexander knocked the sword from Taurus' hand. Battered and bloodied from the mêlée, he crouched over his opponent, the flickering blade of his sword pressed delicately against Taurus' neck.

"Alexander . . ."

He froze, poised to kill, his eyes going wide as he spotted his

beloved Min standing in the snow several feet away. Her translucent body was robed in bright white light. She was the same as she'd been those many seasons ago, except for her russet-brown hair, which had grown long and luxurious.

"Min!"

She smiled pleasantly at him. "Oh, Alex . . ."

"I have defeated Taurus, then! You have come back—"

"No, I am here of my own accord, for I could bear witness to your suffering no longer." She stepped closer. Her feet left no prints. "Lorianis does not wish her children to quarrel so. It saddens her to see such things."

Alexander removed himself from Taurus, collapsed in the snow at Min's feet. He reached out to touch her, but his fingers passed through. She was unfleshed, an apparition-perhaps even an illusion. "Min," he breathed. It was difficult to speak, for he had sought her presence for so long, and now to suddenly have her standing before him . . .

She sighed again. She spoke gently into his ear. "What is it you wish to achieve by slaying Taurus? You cannot reverse the events of the past, nor can you affect Taurus' soul once it passes from this realm. The body is disposable; the soul is forever."

"But I have missed you so very much," Alexander replied, his entire body shivering from the cold, as well as from his own unbridled emotion. "Seeking the reason behind your demise, trying to convince myself life was worth living . . . for more than three-hundred turns I have lived in uncertainty."

"I know, my love . . . but this is not how the Goddess wishes us to be reunited."

"You cannot know," Alexander continued, hearing her, knowing. "No one can possibly know what it is like for me. I am trapped here, my everlasting youth a curse, because I must endure it alone." Somewhere behind him he knew Taurus was shifting, perhaps readying himself for another attack move. He felt the breath of Min's angelic touch upon his neck, in his hair, and he did not move, did not even call the slightest spark of defensive magic.

"We are not children anymore," Min said. "You must remove yourself from this place of anguish, or you will remain in a state of unrest forever. As the gods create him, Man creates his own

Heaven, and he creates his own Hell. The time has come for you to choose between the two.”

Alexander said nothing. He turned slightly, half-hearing Taurus’ bloodcurdling cry, catching sight of his murderous expression as he rushed forward, pseudo-sword flaring crimson. His instinct was to block, to survive at all costs-but instead he did something else altogether. He lowered his arms, gazed at Taurus, and said:

“I forgive you.”

The blade speared him through the chest. The pain was at once terrible and liberating, and it caused him to cry out in agony as he fell forward onto the ground. The battle circle faded away as did his life force. Closing his eyes, he relegated himself to death’s steely grip and hoped for Heaven, hoped for Min. The cold stung him, mixed with the pain, until at last he could take no more.

Soul was separated from flesh.

* * *

It is a vision of tranquility, lasting an eternity and lasting no time at all. There is no way to differentiate between Heaven and hope, but it does not matter to him, for he is happy at last. Touchwood is his world, his tapestry of warm memories, his space of love. He spends a lifetime there with Min, with Arin and Gregori, and with a multitude of other friends. There is food and drink, music, games, and an abundance of good cheer throughout. In the mornings Alexander takes long walks with Min along Faire’s snowy borderlands; in the evenings, they retire together to his bedchamber and make love. Afterwards, they lay curled together and listen to the far-off echoes of anguish and longing rumbling in distant thunderclouds.

The storm may come again, but not for a long while.

Author's Note

T rue to form, I was somewhat perplexed when it came time to put together this collection. As with most of my written works produced during the 1999-2004 period covered herein, the editing process was an experimentation. In the writing I was learning how to tell stories, figuring out exactly *what* I wanted to tell; in the assembly, I was attempting to draw a somewhat coherent map of the past five years.

I ended up taking the chronological default.

“Yet Another Reality” was, I think, my first published story, and is probably the most devastating to date. I had a number of other works making the rounds at the time, but Eric’s story was picked up first—and so I was fortunate enough to have made my first appearance with a bang, even if the subject matter was unpleasant. The premise is simple, and indicative of an unconscious theme I seemed to be exploring at the time: the nature of reality (and how I, like many others, would often like to change it to better suit myself). This is also evident in “A Pair of Wings,” which focuses on a young boy similarly stuck in a reality that doesn’t agree with him.

In “The Demon in the Drain,” the main protagonist is once again an individual fed up with a certain aspect of his life—in this case, his kid sister. Sibling rivalry is no laughing matter to those involved, but I knew from the get-go that I wanted to treat Joey’s story with a light-hearted touch.

“Lucifer Works at Starbucks” is similarly fanciful, though I can recall actually sitting poised at my desk for a while and trying to think of something meaningful to insert beneath the surface. The ending is by no means a *surprise*, but I rather like the attempted wickedness.

I remember being somewhat dubious over “On a Cold Winter’s Night” when it first appeared in *From Beyond*. Sometimes a story comes to me that seems to have an elusive point, and this

was one of those doozies. I liked how it began, I liked how it ended, and I liked everything in between—but I couldn't quite categorize it in my head, and so I was never confident with it on the whole until much later, when feedback trickled in and I realized there was something to Dolph's story.

The original draft for "Color Conformity" had Jonah and Frank paired as lovers locked in a world segregated not only by prejudice, but by actual skin color. The overall effect was intended to be quite over the top; the editor I was working with at the time noted that perhaps the effect would be *too* hot for most readers to handle—so the final draft was presented without the same-sex slant, and the subject matter was made less abrasive (the original tragic ending remained, however). It was one of the few times I was asked to alter my ideas for publication, but I believe it paid off.

The two previously unpublished stories appearing in this collection have two things in common: One, they both represent an attempt on my behalf at writing "micro fiction." Two, they are both contest entries that crashed and burned, but that held a spot in my heart afterward. "Ascension" is actually a super-condensed version of a longer story I wrote right around New Year's, 2000. Covertly, it has to do with the infamous Y2K threat—though I'll admit it's not obvious.

"The Chair" was written in one sitting and entered in an online horror flash-fiction contest; Steve Roach's *Midnight Moon* was indeed playing in the background throughout.

Davy Setter's house (or *duplex*, for you detail scouts) is based on a house I used to live in during my San Antonio days. My fondness for the location has grown tenfold with the passage of time—I was Davy's age when I lived there, and quite ignorant of any sort of subtle magics that might have been going on, but in hindsight the alleyway behind our house was more than just a stretch of grass and dirt. I only wish I knew then what I know now.

(By the way, concerning the name of the Christmas tree entity at the end: The first magazine I submitted the story to responded with the possibility of publication, although the editors weren't too keen on the name "Retribution." I countered with the suggestion that in many cases, retribution can be *good* as well as

bad—a consequence of one’s actions, yes, but not necessarily a punishment. That didn’t quite sell the story, so I peddled the idea elsewhere, and eventually made it in the *ShadowKeep* anthology.)

Starship Earth literally came out of nowhere. *ShadowKeep* was running a “spaceship” contest—entries could be about anything, as long as the setting was on or about a spacecraft of some type—and I happened to have a novel I was shopping around that took place on a giant ark of sorts. I drafted a prequel involving the lead character’s parents and submitted it—though it grossly overshot the word count limit. I didn’t make the contest, but the novella *did* appear in *ShadowKeep* (then-run by David Bowlin).

As with “Don’t Feed Santa Yellow” the setting for “Swarm” is inspired by a previous dwelling of mine. In this case it is the Santa Clarita Valley area, which I absolutely adore. While the Urban Prophets’ adventure is set in the latter half of the twenty-first century, much of the locale is actually taken from the 1990s. How ever inaccurate it may be, I am quite keen on imagining Canyon Country somehow continuing as it is now despite the inevitabilities of time and development and any other mismatched ideas set forth in “The Dead Whistler”—which is a less-polished version of this story that was once published in *Demensions*, by the way.

The final story to appear in this collection is last year’s “The Gilded Flame.” Kyrth is indeed an epic fantasy world, and quite a stretch when compared to my usual style. I started out with this sort of fantasy, though, as my first conscious literary composition was actually an account of Alexander’s days as a youth. It was early material, however, and easily discarded in favor of the more contemporary work I preferred at the time. I *still* prefer contemporary fiction, but Kyrth is one of those imaginary places I can’t help thinking about every so often—and so Touchwood Inn was born, Alexander and Min’s love affair rekindled from long-lost notes and half-written poems (yes, poems!).

And so there it is: a five year stretch of the imagination distilled into a handy paperback. I’d like to think I’ve learned along the way, collecting experience with the passage of time—though that oft-coveted, time-released wisdom everyone keeps talking about still eludes me.