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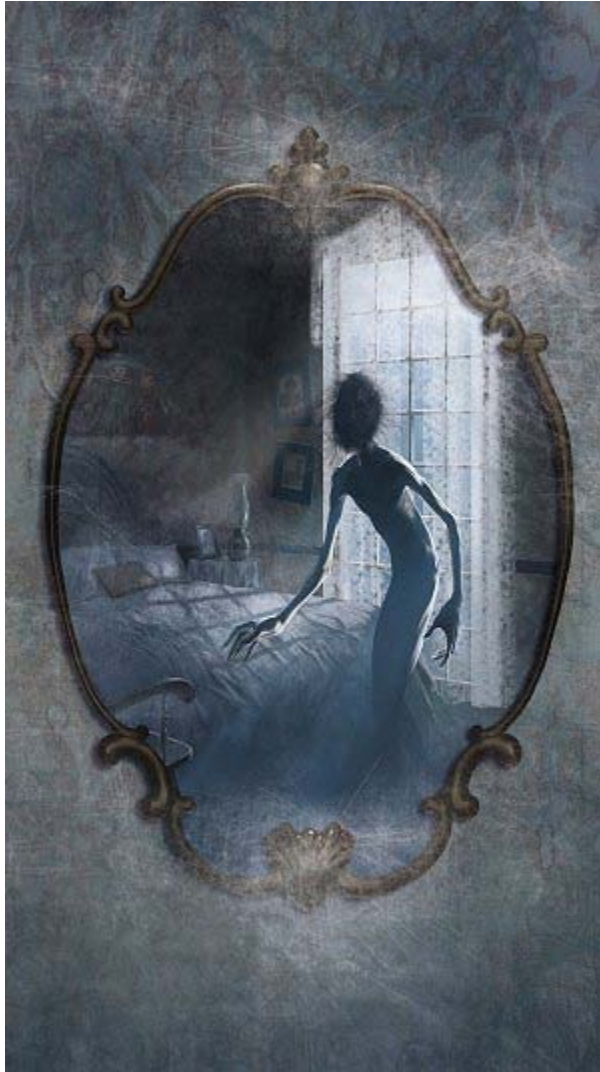
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# Silent As Dust

by James Maxey



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*The Company I Keep.* I'm judging a talent show in the attic of Seven Chimneys. The theatre is a maze of cardboard boxes, gray with grime. The moonlight through the round window serves as our spotlight.

First up is Dan, a deer head with five-point antlers and a startled look in his glass eyes. Dan sings "Jailhouse Rock" as if it were a blue grass ballad, accompanied by Binky, a sock monkey with a quilted banjo.

Next comes Professor Wink, a 65-year-old teddy bear with one eye and half his original fur. Professor Wink is a juggler, keeping aloft a crochet mallet, a broken lava lamp, and the ceramic manger from the Christmas decorations. When all three items are in the air, he grabs an old bowling ball and tosses it into the mix with a cool grace that earns him points.

The last act is Tulip. She's a baby doll with no left leg. Her act is to climb high into the lofty rafters of this old Victorian attic, then leap. She unpins the threadbare dishtowel someone diapered her with long ago and flips it into a parachute. She drifts toward the floor, reciting the Gettysburg Address. For her finale she lets go, and plummets to a safe landing in a white plastic bucket.

Tulip is an unusually talented baby. Also, alas, a noisy one. She lands with a loud clatter.

I hold my breath.

Darcy's voice from the room below: "Don't tell me you didn't hear that."

"Tsh muffin," Eric mumbles, sounding as if he were on the verge of sleep. The mattress creaks. Then he says, "It's an old house. It has noises."

"Something's moving in the attic," Darcy says.

"Maybe," Eric concedes. "Don't worry about it."

"What if it's a raccoon?" she asks. "They carry rabies."

The light flips on beneath me. Thin pencils of light shoot up through cracks in the corners of their ceiling. I creep across the rafters, light as a breath, placing my weight with practiced precision on joists I know will not creak. I hear Eric and Darcy in the hallway, near the pull-down stairs. I reach the main chimney and slither behind it, into the shaft that leads to the basement.

The springs twang as the attic steps are lowered. Light chases me as I drop into the passage and wedge myself against the bricks. I go corpse quiet. I've taught myself not to cough, fart, belch, gurgle, or sneeze. My breathing is soft and silent as cotton gauze.

Eric has clicked on the single light bulb, with its dangling chain. The bulb is coated in cobwebs; a burning smell wafts across the attic. I'm upside down in the shaft, behind five feet of brick. The yoga practice pays off. I don't feel strained. I'm free to follow the conversation as Eric pokes around the attic, griping to Darcy, still in the hall. A bright beam flickers around the top of the shaft. He's got a flashlight to supplement the bulb. If he looks in the hole behind the chimney, my presence will be difficult to explain. As he draws closer I see the ancient red brick surrounding me. I normally make this journey in utter darkness.

"This is stupid," he says, mere feet above me. On the surface, he's talking about the search. But I hear the subtext in his voice. For two weeks they've been arguing about having a baby. Darcy's ready, Eric isn't. Every conversation now is colored by this central disagreement.

"Keep looking, please," she says. My sensitive ears place her at the foot of the stairs.

"What if I find something?" Eric grumbles. The light diminishes as he turns away. "Suppose there *is* a raccoon up here. Then what?"

"Stomp on it," she says, half-joking, I think.

"It's not a spider," he says, exasperated. He's moving around, nudging boxes with his feet. "It's not anything. I stand by my original opinion. It's the house. It's old. It creaks."

"I know what I heard," she says. "It wasn't the house."

"Maybe it's one of the ghosts," Eric says, moving closer to the chimney again. "I don't recall anyone dying in the attic, but it's easy to lose track."

Suddenly, there's enough light in the shaft I can see my shadow spilling down the long wall before me. This is it. "Oh my God!" he shouts, as the light jerks away. "You won't believe what I just found!"

"What?" Darcy asks, sounding scared.

"My old sock monkey! Mr. Bojangles!"

*Oh, right.* The monkey *was* named Bojangles. Where did I get Binky from?

"I'm coming down. An army of raccoons could hide up here. We'll call an exterminator tomorrow. Have him put out traps, if it makes you feel better."

"Okay," says Darcy.

The light clicks off.

My breath slides out of me in a long, gentle release. I loosen my grip on the brick and slink my way back down the shaft toward the cellar. I'm tempted to go back to the attic. That stupid Tulip and her noisy landing almost got me caught. I'd like to pull out her other leg. Fortunately, there's still a sane person sharing my brain that knows, deep down, I was the one who threw Tulip into the bucket. I was having one of my spells again. From time to time, boredom puts me in tight spots.

My name is Steven Cooper. I'm a Seven Chimneys' ghost. I've haunted the place for three years.

If haunted is the right word. Since, you know . . . I'm not *technically* dead.

*Could Have Been a Tour Guide.* It can get confusing talking about Seven Chimneys. There's the town of Seven Chimneys, a little speck on the map an hour's drive outside Charlotte. The town has barely two thousand people, most living in mobile homes or old millhouses. In contrast to the modest surroundings, the core of Seven Chimneys is a picturesque village that reached its prime a century ago, with a main street dominated by a dozen Victorian mansions restored to top condition by wealthy Charlotte refugees looking for the laid-back, small town life.

The grandest of these mansions is Seven Chimneys, the house. Thirteen-thousand square feet of towers, wraparound porches, and decorative woodwork. Seven Chimneys isn't a true Victorian home, since the building started shortly after the Revolutionary War. Three brothers, the Corbens, released from George Washington's army, traveled to the then-nameless town and built homes close together on a single acre lot. The Corbens prospered, churning out doctors and lawyers and inventors over the coming decades. The three homesites began to sprawl as slave quarters were built, kitchens added on, and, eventually, the houses merged together into a single Frankenstein's monster mansion with seven chimneys . . . thus, the name.

Sometime before World War I, Franklin Corben, the railroad king, prettied up the place with a Victorian facade and extensive remodeling on the interior, adding electricity, plumbing, etc. Parts of the house in poor repair were walled off.

The hidden rooms, the dead spaces, became useful during prohibition. Behind a secret panel in the library, there's a room with a well-stocked bar and a slate pool table that I don't think Eric knows about. He does, however, know about the wine cellar that had its entrance bricked over, with only a hidden trap door inside a pantry to give access. He was the first person to show me the coal chute at the rear of the house that leads to a furnace, and behind the furnace the narrow tunnel that leads to a room with a bathtub in which actual bathtub gin was fermented. The place is covered in dust and spider webs now, forgotten by history. But not by me.

*A Close Call.* I'm down in the root cellar doing yoga with Professor Wink. I'm naked; I haven't worn clothes in two years. My pants got snagged once in the chimney and I was stuck for two days. Up above, I can hear a bustle of activity. Eric is kind enough to let the locals hold weddings at Seven Chimneys. The floor boards thud and bump with their movements. It makes it hard for me to stay tuned into Eric

and Darcy's conversation. They're talking about getting a puppy. Although, of course, the puppy conversation is only a substitute for the whole baby thing.

I've warmed up with the Cobbler's pose. Now I bend into the once impossible Camel pose as if I'm made of rubber. Professor Wink, even boneless, can't hold this pose.

"It's not like we're here most of the time," Eric argues. "A puppy needs attention. It needs time that we don't have."

"We can make time," Darcy says. "There's more to life than work. A dog will keep us focused on what's important."

Eric counters with, "Maybe after my schedule changes, but that's no time soon. Look, the world will still be full of puppies a year from now. Let's think about it then."

Someone heavy walks overhead and I miss Darcy's response.

The artfully named "Half Lord of the Fishes" pose has me twisting my torso around to the point I can see my bony, callused butt. It's hard to believe I learned everything I know about yoga from a picture book I swiped from the library.

After a few minutes I realize I've completely lost Eric and Darcy's voices. I'll have to wait to find out if they've decided anything.

I finish my routine in the so-called Corpse pose, flat as a flounder, every muscle in my body in a state of utter release. Professor Wink is good at this one.

Then I realize someone else is here. I look toward the stairs and find a little girl standing there, staring. She's wearing a white, frilly dress; she looks like a flower girl. She's quiet, quieter than me.

We stare at each other for an uncomfortably long time. I'm anticipating her scream. Any second, adults will rush down the steps.

Then, to my great relief, she silently turns and walks up the steps, vanishing back into the shadows. Probably, she'll tell people about the naked yoga ghost in the cellar. I'll be part of the folklore. It's a living.

*How I Use The Bathroom.* I'm not always hiding in the attic or under floorboards. Thirteen-thousand square feet, occupied by two people, means a lot of the house never gets looked at on a daily basis. Eric and Darcy have three housekeepers and a crew of landscapers, but none live onsite. Eric's an ER surgeon; he works insane shifts at Charlotte General. Darcy's a corporate acquisitions attorney and is out of town half the time. If they did get a puppy, they'd probably hire someone to watch after it.

Once the cleaning crew finishes their daily duties, I'm free to climb up from the cellar and roam around the main part of the house. I use the bathroom in the small toilet near the library. Since it's Tuesday, I shower. I stopped shaving when I moved in. Now, a pale, wild-haired man stares back at me from the mirror. I'm thin as Ghandi. My body has become a grand collection of calluses. It's a yogi's body, the body of a holy man, limber and tough and purposeful.

*They've Never Noticed My Gleaning.* I'm not hungry tonight, but I eat anyway. Eric and Darcy's refrigerator sports an assortment of half-eaten Chinese takeout.

After my meal, I creep into the library. My senses expand to cover all of Seven Chimneys. I'm tuned to Darcy's breathing as she sleeps in the master bedroom on the third floor. Eric didn't come home tonight; on his busier days, he sleeps at the hospital. I worry Eric is putting his career ahead of his marriage. Darcy deserves better. I read in the library until the predawn hours. When Darcy's breathing shifts the slight way it does every morning before her alarm goes off, I carefully reshelve the books. I tiptoe to the kitchen, slip through the hidden passage in the pantry, then wiggle through the narrow gaps in the floor joists that lead to the main cellar, and the base of the big chimney.

Exactly the way I remember doing as a child.

*Eric and I Go Way Back.* I've been listening to Darcy and Eric argue about the damn puppy again. As usual, Eric prevails. Eric always prevails. The world has bent to his will since we were kids.

Eric and I have a bond that dates back over twenty years. Eric Corben was born to the wealth and privilege that accompanies his family name. I was born in a crumbling shotgun shack. Eric's father was an attorney and mayor of Seven Chimneys, the town, for five terms. My father was an unemployed drunk. My mother cleaned the bathrooms of Seven Chimneys, the house. I would come with her. Eric and I would play. We explored all the spooky corridors of Seven Chimneys. Or, so we thought. We never knew about the hidden bar. We found the shaft behind the chimney, but never had the courage to climb it.

Until we started school, Eric and I weren't really aware of the class differences between us. Alas, in kindergarten, cliques formed. Eric was part of the cool crowd, wearing new clothes and showing off the latest hot toys. I was the same age, but several inches shorter, and

went to school wearing Eric's hand-me-downs. We would have grown apart if not for a tragic coincidence. When we were both eight, Eric's mother and my father died in separate car crashes. We didn't really talk about this shared bond. But, from then on, we had each other's back.

In fairness, Eric had my back more than I had his. He'd make sure I wasn't the last kid picked for the kickball team. He let the school bullies know I was off limits. I returned the favor in high school by letting him cheat off tests and writing papers for him. Eric wasn't a dummy, by any means. If anything, public school bored him. By sixth grade, he was already weighing his college choices. He let me write his report on *Huckleberry Finn* because his attention was focused on James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Eventually, college separated us. Eric went off to Harvard. I stayed home and attended Corben Community College. He graduated and went to medical school. I graduated and landed a job as assistant manager at a convenience store. I still had hopes and dreams . . . until Mom came down with breast cancer. I stayed home to care for her. Mom fought cancer for six years.

In a second coincidence, Eric's father had a heart attack while attending Eric's graduation from medical school. He turned blue and died surrounded by five hundred doctors. On the same day, my mother passed away in ICU, after three weeks of unconsciousness. I was holding her hand as she passed.

I went to Eric's father's funeral. He came to Mom's. I met Darcy for the first time. I learned that Eric had just accepted the position in Charlotte; he'd been planning on buying a condo, but now he and Darcy had decided it made more sense to move to Seven Chimneys and commute.

After the funerals, Eric went home to Seven Chimneys, now the richest man in the county. I went back to the 1960s era silver Jetstream trailer I'd been renting after the bank foreclosed on Mom's place. I was three months behind on rent. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw the padlock. My landlord had taken the opportunity of my mother's funeral to lock me out.

*My Art Museum Breathes.* In the middle of the night, I tiptoe into the master bedroom. I like to look at Darcy while she sleeps. That sounds creepy but I'm not a pervert. What I am is a man with a decent mind who never escaped the shackles of poverty. I've never traveled to Italy for a summer, like Eric has. I've never been to Paris, where they honeymooned. All I know of the great art of the world I know from books, and from the Corben art collection, which boasts a Renoir, three Wyeths, and a Rembrandt.

None are as lovely as Darcy. She's art, given breath. My time spent at her bedside, staring at her face, is the closest I will ever get to the Louvre. Her eyes are moving beneath her eyelids. She's dreaming. Of Eric, I wonder? Or puppies? Or ghosts?

Her breathing stills and her eyelids flutter. She turns in her sleep. Catlike, silent, I slink to the doorway as her eyes open. I'm halfway down the hallway before she can possibly focus. I don't know how the rest of the world can be satisfied by art that doesn't have the possibility of looking back.

*Ordinarily I Like Dogs.* Friday, Darcy brought home a puppy. For the last seventy hours, the dog has barked. If I'm in the attic, he barks at the ceiling. If I'm in the cellar, he barks at the floorboards. He pauses from time to time to eat or nap, but even in his sleep, he growls. Eric and Darcy are practically in tears, not knowing what to do about their insane little dog.

On Monday, Darcy skipped work to take Yippy to the vet. She tells Eric that the puppy didn't make a peep at the vet's office. The second he's returned to Seven Chimney's, he's back at the main chimney, barking, staring, as if there's some unseen stranger lurking behind the wall.

Maybe I should shower more often.

The first few days, I hoped the dog would get used to me. Now, I don't think he will.

"I told you a puppy was a bad idea," Eric says.

"You always have to be right, don't you?" Darcy snaps. I hear in her voice the beginning of the end. It would break my heart if they got divorced because of this.

On Tuesday, they both leave for work. The housekeepers go out to lunch with the ground crew. I'm alone with the puppy.

I feel bad about what I did to shut Yippy up. He had such sad eyes. Professor Wink tries to console me with the idea that maybe I saved Eric's marriage. But maybe I haven't. I don't have a track record of getting things right.

*My Life as an Action Movie.* I was drunk on vodka. I was driving in the mountains in my 1982 Dodge Omni, taking curves at 60 miles an hour in a driving rain. I was coming up on the White River Gorge. I wasn't wearing my seat belt. This was three years ago.

My Omni went through the guardrail. I went through the windshield.

For a long moment I hung in the air, weightless. The rain-slick hood of my car floated before me, close enough to touch. Slowly, our arcs diverged. The car dropped toward the swollen river a hundred feet below. I fell toward the tip of a tall pine, twenty feet down. I imagined I might impale myself on the tree. Instead, I tangled in the upper branches and the whole tree bowed, carrying me at decreasing speed another thirty feet until the trunk snapped, dropping me into a thick cluster of branches in a neighboring pine. I slid across the soggy needles, falling into the limbs of yet a third tree. I dropped in a painful series of snags and snaps, until I landed, crotch first, on a long bough that sagged beneath my weight, lowering me gently to the moss softened rocks by the riverside.

I stood there, stunned, as I watched the twisted scrap metal of the Omni vanish into the floodwaters. I was bleeding from a hundred scratches. My clothes were little more than tatters.

I leaned against a tree trunk, going limp, slipping down until I was flat against the soggy earth. I think I was crying; quite possibly I was laughing. As best I can remember, I said then, of my attempted suicide, "Son of a bitch. I can't do anything right." Maybe I'm imagining that. It seems suspiciously cool-headed, in retrospect.

*Darcy's Pregnant.* It's a chilly March morning when I hear Darcy break the news on the phone to her mother. I do the math; the last time they made love was on February second. Probably they fooled around on Valentine's Day, but they flew to Bermuda that weekend, so I can't be sure. There's a chance this baby will be born on Halloween. I wonder if they'll open the house for the ghost tour this year.

I don't know if Eric will be a good father. He's not the best husband. Yes, he's caring, and Lord knows he's rich, and movie star handsome. But, he's never around. He only thinks of his career. He's not the sort of person who would give up six years of his life to care for his dying mother. I wonder if he'll tell Darcy to have an abortion.

*Ghost Stories.* There's a picture of me in the paper. I've been careless again. I was in the attic Saturday, looking out the window, watching the tourists who invade the town for the Apple Festival on Main Street. Lots of people take pictures of Seven Chimneys. I forgot to duck.

I'm clearly visible in the window. You can make out my long hair and beard, and my sunken, skeletal eyes. If you stare at the picture long enough, it's easy to reinterpret my face as the reflection of clouds on wavy glass.

The paper recounts the civil war legend of Crispus Matherton, a union soldier who'd been left for dead on the battlefield, only to stagger into town days later, disoriented, his wounds riddled with maggots. The sheriff was going to jail him, until Anne Corben intervened. Anne took the stranger home, saying even a Yankee shouldn't suffer so grievously. She bathed his wounds, dressed him in fresh linen, and fed him a hearty meal of red beans and cornbread.

That night, she smothered him with a pillow. Her husband, Colonel Randolph Corben, had been decapitated by a Yankee shell at Petersburg six months earlier.

A half dozen other ghosts keep Matherton company. Franklin Corben, the railroad guy, choked on a cocktail olive. He's been spotted by firelight in the library, reading the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* normally on display in the glass case. Sometimes, the book is missing from the case, and found on the coffee table beside the leather couch. I admit, I've moved the book a time or two, pausing to study the priceless words.

*I give you fair warning before you attempt me further,*

*I am not what you supposed, but far different.*

Sometimes, in the gravelike silence of the predawn house, I wonder: Perhaps I *am* Franklin Corben, and my whole life is some odd afterlife fantasy. Perhaps I am also Alicia Corben, the six-year-old girl who was raped and strangled in the cellar. Or maybe I'm Anthony Adams, the convict who swore revenge against Judge Harlan Corben and was blamed for Alicia's death. Adams supposedly wanders the grounds looking for his head after he was lynched by an angry mob. They dropped him too far. He dangled only a few minutes before his head came off.

There's also the possibility that I'm old Cyrus Washington, the slave who saved Anne Corben from the fire that destroyed the kitchen. He was rewarded with his freedom, but never moved away. He lived in the main house in a private room for decades until he died of carbon-monoxide poisoning from a malfunctioning gas lamp. They say he was a hundred and twelve. Supposedly, his ghost dialed the fire department in 1987 when the wiring in the back bedroom went cablooeey and set the wallpaper on fire.

John Arthur Corben drowned at Pearl Harbor. His spirit found its way home when his medals were sent back to his mother. He was a gifted piano player, and sometimes, in the quiet of the night, the soft strains of Mozart are faintly heard from the grand piano. Perhaps I'm him.

Or perhaps I'm Steven Cooper, a man whose life made no impact at all upon the world. A man forgotten, unworthy of ghostly legend, a man who did nothing of significance with the breaths of air he drew. A man who lives like dust under the floor of another man's life.

*A Long Walk in a Cold Rain.* When I walked back to town the night I drove off the bridge, I felt invisible. The fire truck and a dozen police cars raced past me. You might have thought that they would ask the bleeding man in torn clothing what he knew about the accident. In their defense, the night was dark. After the rain stopped, the clouds hid the moon and stars. The responsible thing to do would have been to call someone and tell them not to waste time dragging the river.

I never made the phone call. Instead I walked to Seven Chimneys and pounded on the front door at five in the morning. Eric wasn't home. He'd gone to Boston to take care of some business, though I didn't know that at the time. I was soaked. I was turning blue from the bruises. I felt dreamy and numb; busting through the windshield had left the whole world with a gentle clockwise spin. When I closed my eyes, I felt weightless.

I crawled into the cellar through the window that doesn't latch. I found some Tylenol in a guest bathroom, and went to sleep on a bed stuffed with goose feathers, snuggled beneath two musty old quilts. I slept for what seemed like days.

I'd been living in Eric's house for two weeks when he and Darcy moved in permanently. I thought about revealing myself, telling my story, but, at the time, it struck me as a fairly pathetic tale. What's more, I knew Eric would say something wise and caring, something perfect, the way he always does. I worried that Darcy, who I'd only met at the funerals, would look at me with pitying eyes and wonder how her new husband had managed to befriend such a loser. So, I didn't find the courage to come out of my hiding place in the cellar that first day. Or the first week. By the time I'd been living side by side with them for a month, unseen, unheard, unsuspected, revealing my presence would have been awkward.

*My Days Are Numbered.* Of course, Eric reacts to Darcy's pregnancy perfectly. He's thrilled, you can hear it in his voice. Any doubts he might have had are gone. A white spike of jealousy pins me to the attic floor. Eric lives a charmed life. He's not a parasite living off the crumbs of his childhood friend. He's married, building a career, and now he's going to pass on his genes to a new generation, fulfilling his highest biological purpose. The great wheel of life turns, and he's riding that wheel. I'm somewhere beneath the tread, crushed out of existence.

Only, I do exist. I have a life, of sorts. And that life is going to get complicated. Darcy's decided to leave her job. She's going to do consulting work from home. Her mother is coming down to help when she's further along. The house is never going to be empty. Darcy's always the one who hears me when I slip up. If her mother is half as sensitive, I'll never be able to relax.

They sound so happy down below. I hug Professor Wink, needing the company. I look into his dark, wise eye and silently ask where my life went wrong. *Oh, right.* The cancer mom and the deadbeat dad. The vodka and the White River Gorge. The fact I make a better ghost than person.

Suddenly, Professor Wink gets a gleam in his eye. He's thought of a fiendish plan.

*The Fiendish Plan.* The key, of course, is to make Seven Chimneys more haunted. Gamble that Darcy won't raise her child in a gateway for spooks.

I leave the Whitman book on the table almost every night. They put a new lock on the case. It takes me three nights to pick it. I have time on my hands. For good measure, I occasionally build a roaring fire in the fireplace. I leave a half-finished martini on the coffee table.

There's an ancient Victrola in the attic, and a cobwebbed collection of warped records. The Victrola doesn't work. I take it apart. I fix a broken gear with crazy glue and a paper clip. At four in the morning, on the night of July Fourth, Eric and Darcy are awakened to the warbling strains of Mozart. They come upstairs to find John Arthur Corben's army uniform unfolded beside the Victrola. I've soaked the uniform in salt water for three days. It smells like the sea.

Alicia Corben's room has barely been opened in seventy years. I normally steer clear of the place. There's an air of melancholy that hangs over the ceramic dolls lined neatly on the shelf above the small bed. When I enter the room, I catch a glimpse in the mirror. In the dim light, through the fog of dust, the whole room looks ghostly, me most of all. I'm only thirty, but my blonde hair looks colorless and gray. The face that peeks from behind my whiskers is gaunt. My body is more skeleton than muscles; my skin sags on my bones. I'm guessing I've lost fifty pounds, and I wasn't fat before.

I shake off the reflection and search Alicia's closet for a dress. I find the perfect one, all frills and pink ribbons, the color bleached with age. It's September; they've designated the room beside theirs as the baby's room. They already have a crib set up.

I leave the dress in the crib.

One of the maids finds it the next morning. Her scream is so loud, I scan the newspaper the next day for reports of earthquakes and tsunamis.

*Cooler Minds Prevail.* In my cleverness, I overlooked the possibility of third party interference. It's mid-October. By now, I had hoped Eric and Darcy would be long gone, moved to a new McMansion nearer to the hospital, a place fresh built and free of ghosts. It is not to be.



Eric is blasé about the whole affair. He's grown up with the ghosts and the legends; he's heard creaks that sound like footsteps, the wind playing in the chimneys that sound like human whispers. He admits to Darcy, yes, he thinks the house *is* haunted. It's been haunted for generations, and the ghosts haven't hurt a soul, and have actually been useful, assuming Cyrus Washington really did call the fire department. Eric thinks it's kind of cool. I hate him.

Darcy's mother, Marsha, has arrived in time to take the opposite approach. She's a devout atheist; it's an article of faith that the house is ghostless. What the house isn't, she argues, is secure. The slapped together architecture of Seven Chimney's makes the alarm system installed in the seventies a joke. Marsha doesn't believe in ghosts; she does believe in pranksters. She thinks local kids are finding a way into the house and pulling these stunts. She's persuasive. Even I start thinking she might be right.

Marsha proposes a simple, obvious idea. Put security cameras throughout the house.

I am so screwed.

Fortunately, one of the maids claims to have a psychic aunt. The maid's name is Rosa; her aunt is the oddly named Tia Tomato. At least I think she said Tomato. Her accent is hard to follow. Rosa tells Marsha that sometimes the dead have unfinished business. Sometimes they don't even know they are dead, and linger on, confused and lost, growing increasingly warped and frustrated. For a reasonable fee, she'll bring Tia Tomato around to try to explain the situation to the ghost and/or ghosts.

Marsha fires her on the spot. All my months of hard work, down the drain, because now even Darcy is convinced that Rosa was staging the haunting in a scheme to shake them down for money. I'm pissed at Rosa, though I know she should be pissed with me. I have to remind myself Rosa really wasn't guilty of anything; she's out of a job due to my mischief.

In the aftermath, I lay low. I want the talk of installing video cameras put on the back burner. Darcy goes into labor a few weeks later. She's whisked off to Charlotte. I have the house to myself. I take a long, hot shower. For the first time in years, I shave. I cut my hair, cropping it short to the scalp. I gather up all my trimmings in a plastic grocery bag. There's a lot of me to throw away.

In the mirror, I see the man I used to be. Do I see the man I might be again?

*Crib Death.* The baby's been home for two weeks. It cries a lot; it's almost as bad as the puppy. I get some relief when they take it out to the car and drive around the neighborhood. Apparently, the baby sleeps like a baby when they drive.

In fairness, it dozes off at other times as well. Starting at two in the morning, the baby can reliably be counted on to slumber for at least a few hours. During this time, Eric, Darcy, and Marsha sleep like corpses.

It's three in the morning on a Saturday. I'm at the foot of the crib, staring at the infant. They've named him Franklin. Franky, he'll be called. If he's anything like Eric, by the time he's six, he's going to explore every inch of this house. He's going to take a flashlight and poke around the cellars. He'll spend hours in the attic, clawing through two centuries of clutter. He'll play with Tulip and Professor Wink and Bojangles.

I'm afraid of Franky.

Kids know all the best hiding places. Kids imagine their house is full of hidden panels and trap doors and secret passages -- and this particular kid will be right. One day, he's going to find me.

Approximately one baby in a thousand dies from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. They pass away quietly in their sleep for no reason at all. This is today, with modern medicine. Think about this house, dating back to Colonial times, when babies had the mortality rate of goldfish. I don't know of actual numbers, but I'm guessing a dozen babies have died in Seven Chimneys. A hundred, maybe.

It's a dark thing to stand beside a crib contemplating a hundred dead babies.

I reach out my hand, holding it inches over Franky's pink little face.

I linger a moment, my hand unable to move closer, as if an invisible hand has caught my wrist and holds it with supernatural strength.

I can't swallow. My mouth is dry.

I can't do it. A puppy is one thing. If I do this, though, I'll cross a line. I'll no longer be a ghost.

I'll be a monster.

I release my breath, silent as dust.

Franky really is a cute baby.

No longer blocked by the moral barrier, I lower my hand to stroke his pink, plump cheek.

Again, my fingers stop short. It's not my imagination. Something is holding my wrist.

"I'm not going to hurt him," I mumble, saying it half to myself, half to the unseen thing gripping my arm.

I watch as dust swirls in the dim moonlight, and a second shadow appears on the wall beside my own. Bony old fingers the color of coffee materialize on my wrist. My eyes follow the arm upward, to find a skeletal old man, his face dark beneath a halo of white hair. His expression is stern; his eyes are thin slits.

"Cyrus?" I ask.

He says nothing.

"I won't hurt him," I say.

Then, a third shadow, and a fourth. A soldier stands beside me, gray and grainy as old film. He's soaked. Water pours from his clothes, chilling my bare feet.

Beside the soldier, a little girl with sad eyes shakes her head slowly. She looks familiar; was she the girl in the cellar? She's little more than mist; I can see right through her to the mirror on the back of the door.

Then I realize I'm seeing only a sweater over a chair in the mirror; in the moonlight, it drapes like a girl's dress. My feet are cold -- it's an October night in a house with hardwoods like ice -- but they are dry. The soldier was nothing more than the shadow of a tree.

And Cyrus? Cyrus is still standing there, now solid oak, and he whispers, in a voice of rustling leaves: "We're watching you, boy."

He vanishes as the headlights of a passing car sweep across the room.

I rub my wrist. My whole arm is numb. I decide that Franklin's chubby little cheeks are best left uncaressed.

After a quick trip to the attic, I go to the laundry room and steal some clothes. Eric's jeans invoke a certain sense of déjà vu; it's not the first time I've worn his used pants. His old tennis shoes are too big for me; I compensate with two pairs of socks.

Then, I'm out the door, into the open sky. Leaves crunch beneath my feet as I walk across the lawn. On the front porch, a line of Jack-o-lanterns grin, a few still faintly glowing with the last flickers of their candles. I reach the end of the sidewalk and glance back one last time at Seven Chimneys, before crossing the road and taking my return step into the wider world.

Beneath my arm, I cradle Professor Wink.

I can tell he's going to miss the place.

Me, not so much. Even with thirteen-thousand square feet, some places are just too crowded.



Artwork by Julie Dillon

## Lost Soul

by Marie Brennan

I first heard her fiddling on a corner at Taranabh Fair. There were plenty of buskers around; it was odd that she caught my ear so clearly. I stopped in front of a booth selling woven amulets and looked around, trying to spot the source of the music.

She'd perched herself on the edge of a well, legs crossed, fiddle tucked under her chin. The music she was playing was unusual; that's what drew my attention. I cocked my head to listen. It sounded for the life of me like a court waltz.

It *was* a court waltz. A simplified one, true, but the five-beat pattern was unmistakable. I snorted. Busking Taranabh Fair with music like *that*? Not exactly brilliant of her.

I drifted closer, still listening. The crowds passed by her without stopping. Technically she was very good; I'm enough of a musician to recognize skill when I hear it. Somewhere, some time, she had gotten training. She wouldn't last a season out here, though. Not playing music like that.

She wrapped the waltz up with an intricate flourish that was wasted on the passers-by. By then I was standing just a pace or two away, arms crossed over my chest, watching her.

She glanced up at me. I watched her expression closely; it's useful to monitor how people react to finding a gypsy man hanging around.

Her gaze didn't linger on me long, although I did notice a momentary widening of the eyes when she took in my appearance. I get that a lot. Nytere says I'm more creative about how I dye my hair than any three other Ieros, and about every third attempt succeeds at being something other than ugly. It took me a moment to remember what my hair looked like today. Mostly it was its natural blonde, but I'd tipped it with dark green. Not one of my best efforts.

The busker was rolling her head around to release neck tension. I stepped closer. "You taking requests?"

She flicked her red-gold hair out of her eyes with a little toss and eyed me. "Sure. What do you want?"

"How about 'Sword in Hand'?"

A momentary pause; then she shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't know that one -- at least under that name. Does it have another title?"

"Not that I'm aware of." She didn't know one of the most popular tavern songs in Tir Diamh. As I had suspected. "How about 'The Lady at Home,' then?"

Another shake of her head. "Sorry."

"Drink to the Sky'? 'Stone the Crows'?"

She was still shaking her head, but now it came with a suspicious look. "Are you sure those are even Diamhair songs? Maybe you're thinking of a different country."

As if, because my people move around so much, we can't tell countries apart. "They're Diamhair, believe me."

"Well, I don't know them. Maybe they don't play those songs where I come from. Now, I'll thank you to stop wasting my time." She tucked the fiddle back under her chin with a determined look.

I had to laugh. The Diamhair were wonderful. Outspoken as blue jays, every last one of them. "Look, they're tavern songs. Do you know *any* tavern songs?"

After a wary moment, she put the fiddle down again. "I know 'Acha Bualach's Dance.'"

"That, girl, hardly qualifies as a tavern song. Have you even *been* in a tavern?"

Now I'd made her mad. "Of course I have."

"Uh-huh." I looked her over. Neat, unfrayed clothing, all in a very sober style; she couldn't have been on the road for more than a month or two. If that. She was neither tattered nor flamboyant enough to be more of a veteran. "Let me guess. You were a minstrel's apprentice, and your master tossed you out."

I found the end of her bow a scant inch from my nose. "He didn't 'toss me out,'" the busker snapped, punctuating it with a little jab of the bow. I jerked back. "I left. Of my own accord."

"Really."

My skeptical tone didn't help her mood. "It's true," she insisted, taking the bow back so she could glare at me without it getting in the way. "I disagreed with him, and chose to leave."

It sounded far-fetched -- but then I remembered the way she'd played the waltz. She was a very good musician, far better than the average minstrel. I could hardly imagine a master turning her out on the basis of ineptitude. That left the possibility of an argument, as she said. An argument in which she enraged her master to the point where he'd give up on her? That sounded more likely.

"How long have you been busking?" I asked, steering the conversation away from that topic.

She glanced away. "A while."

"A month?"

A wry smile touched the corner of her mouth. "Not yet."

"As I thought. You're probably living off your savings." That got a tiny nod. She still wouldn't meet my eyes. Common sense told me to leave her alone, but common sense has never been much of an obstacle to me. I couldn't just walk away without trying to set her straight. "Look, girl -- let me give you some free advice."

That got her attention, although it was skeptical.

"You're a fine musician," I said, nodding toward her fiddle. "I'm betting you can sing, and play other instruments. Skill like that puts you ahead of most buskers. But you don't know the first thing about how to play to a crowd, and that puts you behind. The music you're playing isn't right for people at a fair." I gestured at the laughing, strolling crowd. "Spend the rest of the fair in taverns. Buy cheap drinks, so you don't spend too much coin, and *listen*. Listen to what the other street musicians are playing. You've got the training to learn pretty quick. Put together a set of popular music, and save the fancy stuff for fancy occasions."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why so generous?"

"With my advice?" I laughed. "It's worth what you paid for it. Lending you a hand costs me nothing. And whatever you may believe of my people, I'm not going to steal your purse."

"But I still see no reason for you to help me."

I shrugged. "Maybe I'm just sick of hearing untutored hacks butcher perfectly good songs. It's nice to find a musician who knows one string from another."

She stared at me for so long I had to fight the urge to fidget. Then, when I was about to give it up as a lost cause and walk away, she grinned. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Let me buy you a drink."

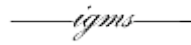
"Huh?"

Her grin spread. It put more life in her face, which had been as still as a statue's while she played. "A drink. You said your advice was worth what I paid for it. Maybe if I buy you a drink, it'll be worth more."

I snickered. "Girl, are you *trying* to be gypped?"

She hopped down from the edge of the well and stuck out one hand. "My name's Tirean."

I gripped her forearm in Ieric fashion, letting her feel there was no knife up my sleeve. On that arm, anyway. "Andris. Want me to pick a tavern, or do you know what one looks like?"



My sister says I flirt too much, and maybe it's true. But I'm hardly the worst in our skian; some of our fellow travelers aim for the rich and powerful, who are likely to cause trouble, and others will make eyes at any warm body of the appropriate sex. Tirean was neither the Duchess of Eremon nor a local con artist, which puts me ahead of some people in my skian.

I learned a lot about Tirean nes Bhiachar of Mol Alaic in the next hour -- a lot, and very little at all. I heard how she'd first gotten interested in music -- a broken leg at a young age left her bedridden and bored for a while -- and what instruments she knew how to play -- lots. I heard stories of the cat she'd had as a child, and how her mother had kept her away when an Ieric skian came to town, because in Tir Diamh they like to say we can turn into birds and fly off with curious children. But I heard nothing of her training, nor why she'd left. And it wasn't for lack of trying.

She steered the conversation away from these topics so artfully that it took me a while to realize she was doing it. When I *did* notice, my suspicions grew stronger. She was more than just a minstrel; she'd been trained as a bard. And in Tir Diamh, music's magic, like our storytellers are for us. Bards learn more than just how to play; they learn how to find the power behind the notes and words, to sway people's hearts with them. Or to manipulate people, if you want to put it that way. Our storytellers do the same thing, but for some reason I wasn't expecting it from Tirean. More fool me. Maybe a clean, starving minstrel *wasn't* that much safer than the Duchess of Eremon.

I should have just let it slide. What did it matter, how she'd come to be on the streets? But Tirean intrigued me; I'd never heard a musician with her skill, who still so obviously lacked something. I couldn't give up on my questions. I did, however, decide to be more subtle.

We got drinks at a nearby tavern; then, as the afternoon was still young, I convinced Tirean to wander around with me for a while. She tried to protest, saying that she needed to keep playing, to make money. I told her the wandering would be a lesson. We could listen to minstrels as we walked.

And we *did* listen -- some of the time, anyway. We also spent a lot of time chatting. I don't have my sister's skill, more's the pity, but I could and did try to make Tirean comfortable around me. If she was on the run from some angry master, I wanted to know, just in case he showed up while I was there. I also couldn't shake this niggling feeling that, underneath her vibrant smile and ready laugh, there was a woman who wasn't really happy.

I stopped later that afternoon to buy us skewers of meat from a roving seller. When I was done paying for them, I went looking for Tirean, and found her standing in the middle of the street, listening to another busker.

He was an older man, pattering away on a small drum tucked between his knees and singing. The song was familiar; it was a Diamhair one called "Flower Face" that's entered Ieric repertoire, although for the life of me I don't know why. It's a piece of tripe -- a children's nonsense song about talking flowers. The lyrics make no sense. I personally don't like the tune much either, but other people must, because it's always a crowd-pleaser. Which is, of course, why our own singers have picked it up. We play what people want to hear.

Tirean had a wistful look on her face. "Favorite of yours?" I asked, holding out a skewer.

She took the meat with a laugh. "Hardly. The tune's annoying, and whoever thought up the lyrics must have been drunk."

"Then why the expression? You looked like your head was in the clouds."

"I don't know." Tirean shrugged and tore off a piece of meat. "Just made me think back to when I was a kid, I guess. Can we move on? I'd rather not have this stuck in my head for the rest of the day."



We moved on, and on, and on. By the end of the afternoon we'd covered a good chunk of Taranabh Fair. Some areas we avoided: the animal pens, the seedier areas where men and women peddle their bodies, and the field where my skian was camped.

I thought about taking her there. Ennike was probably hanging around, and I suspected my sister would get along very well with Tirean. She might even be able to wheedle the story of Tirean's training out of her. But I didn't just want answers; I wanted to get them myself. I wanted Tirean to tell *me*, not my sister.

So we avoided the caravan, until the afternoon began to wane. Then I made an apologetic face to the minstrel. "I've got to head off, I'm afraid. I'm in an acting troupe, and we're going to be doing a couple of performances tonight." I gave her a sly smile. "Want to come watch?"

Tirean frowned. "I'd love to, but really, I *do* need to busk some more. My savings won't hold out forever."

I decided not to press it. "Mind if I find you afterward?"

"Sure. I'll probably be back at the well."

"Sounds good." I gave her shoulder a little pat -- nothing too familiar. I know better than to drive a woman off that way. "I'll come by some time after full dark, then."



Taranabh Fair changed with the setting of the sun. A lot of the sellers retired early; they had to get up the next morning. But for those adventurous souls who had fewer responsibilities or needed less sleep, the night had just begun.

The troupe's run went well. I was glad for that; we'd been having some rough patches lately, with people botching the oddest things, and if we'd had another bad night Ennike probably would have made us go back to the wagons and practice. But we made a good amount of coin, and my sister was satisfied, so I was free to go find Tirean.

Moonrise found us on the bank of the nearby river, some distance south of the fair. We'd both had a fair amount to drink -- Tirean more than me. It hadn't been my plan to get her drunk and hear her story that way, but it worked.

"I just couldn't *take* it any more," she said, unbridled frustration in her voice. Bardic training stood her in good stead; even with mead in her, she still enunciated clearly. "It was so suffocating. And it was all the worse because Decebhinn's supposed to be this big name, a Great God of bards. He performed at the satire festival, more than once, and won an award."

"Satire festival?" I repeated. It wasn't the drink clouding my mind; she said the words as though they ought to mean something to me.

Tirean flopped back in the grass. "Yeah. You *have* to have heard of it. Bards go to Seamháir and satirize the king -- sing songs about what he's doing wrong. But with protections, of course, so the satires don't actually have the power to hurt him. It's an old tradition. They give you an award if you do well."

"As Decebhinn did."

"Oh yeah. He's won two awards there -- the festival's held every five years. Anyway, he's this amazing bard, and for a long time I felt like there must be something wrong with *me*, for me to disagree with him like that."

"Like what?"

She waved her long-fingered hands through the air, as if trying to describe her frustration with motion. "For a while I wanted to be like Decebhinn. When I was fourteen I begged him to let me to go to the festival. I was nowhere near good enough, of course, but I wanted to

go." She sighed, and her hands fell limply to the grass. "That was how I used to feel. But as I got older, it started to seem kind of empty. Not the festival -- it's a good tradition to have. But the music started to seem dead, when it had always been so alive."

Like I've said, I'm not that much of a musician. But I compared it to the performances our troupe gave, and understood what Tirean meant. How horrible would it feel, if suddenly Ennike's words didn't bring the story to life anymore? If my own movements began to feel empty? If the power of the stories went away?

Tirean had continued on without looking at me. "Decebhín works at a different level than most bards. Some of the music he plays is really bizarre; most people don't like it." She snorted. "Most people don't *get* it. I was learning to understand some of it, but it's *work*. There's a very limited number of people who are well-enough educated in music to understand those pieces, much less enjoy them."

"Sounds to me like that defeats the purpose," I said.

"I thought so. And that was where it started -- me wondering what the point of that kind of music was. It spread from there. A lot of the stuff I played started to sound like all the life had drained out of it. Whatever magic was in it, went away. I could have satirized the king to his face and it wouldn't have mattered, because it was just notes."

"So you quit?"

Tirean hesitated. I found myself praying that she wouldn't clam up now. I sensed I was coming close to whatever was plaguing her still.

When she spoke, the words came reluctantly. "Yeah. I told Decebhín I didn't want to do his kind of music anymore. I wanted to play out here."

Among the common folk of Tir Dámh. "Why?"

She didn't answer. I glanced sideways, trying to be subtle, and found tears glimmering on her cheeks in the moonlight. "I thought I might find it here," she whispered. "The power my music had lost."

My mind could still hear her, playing that court waltz, perched on the side of a well. Technical skill to put nine out of ten buskers to shame: she played the music to perfection. But it was, as she had said, lifeless. There was no soul to it. And the crowds could hear that.

I searched for words that might help Tirean, and found none. Now I began to wish I *had* introduced her to my eloquent sister; surely Ennike could have found something to say.

"I'm beginning to doubt myself," Tirean murmured, her voice hardly carrying to my ears. "I've been out on the roads for a month and I haven't found it."

"Did you get anything useful from the other buskers?" I asked. "The ones we listened to today?"

She shook her head, brushing the tears away with one hand. "Nothing. The stuff they play -- useless. Like that nonsense song this afternoon. What power is there in music like that? It's worthless."

My head came up sharply. "Worthless?"

"Yeah. The tunes are simplistic; half of them sound alike. The lyrics aren't anything special. If I can't find magic in Decebhín's music, or in the country junk these people play, then where is it?" Despite Tirean's efforts to keep her voice steady, it wavered, and new tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving silver tracks behind. "Maybe I'm chasing something that's not real."

Country junk. My throat had closed up; I opened and shut my mouth, trying to put together *some* kind of response. Too many possibilities warred in my head.

I finally managed to voice an answer, and once it was spoken I wished I'd stayed silent. "Maybe it's you."

Tirean froze, staring at me. I stared back. She sat up slowly, until she could face me properly. "What?" she asked, eyes trembling full of tears.

I winced. Andris, the Prince of Tact. How could I explain what I'd meant? "Tirean, you're evaluating minstrel music the way you would Decebhín's stuff." She tried to protest; I held up one hand to stop her. "Listen. More free advice for you. *Stop thinking with your head.*"

"What else am I supposed to think with?"

"Your heart," I said. "Think about that nonsense song, 'Flower Face.' Yes, from a technical standpoint it's a piece of tripe. And an annoying one at that. But for a moment there it stopped you, got your attention, took you back to your childhood days. Is that worthless?"

"I --" Tirean began, but she stopped, as though she didn't know what to say.

"That stuff you dismiss as 'country junk' has plenty of power. As does the bardic stuff, from what I've heard of it. Oh, sure, not all of it is good; there's always going to be badly-written crud. But I think a lot of it depends on the player, and her opinion of it. A musician who really believes in her music, who finds the part of it that speaks to her, and that speaks to her *audience* -- she can make damn near *anything* worthwhile." I glanced down at my hands. "That's what I meant when I said it might be you. Maybe you just need a new perspective on things."

Tirean got up, a little unsteadily, and walked a few steps away. I watched her back and hoped I'd made some kind of sense. Late at night, with my blood full of mead, is not the best time for me to be making speeches.

"I don't know how to fix it," Tirean said at last, her finely-trained voice clogged with tears.

A smile spread slowly across my face as an idea came to me. "I do."



Tirean protested the whole way. I admit I was being cryptic; I hadn't told her a damn thing about my idea since I came up with it the previous night. But I was afraid that if I told her what we were doing she'd put her foot down and refuse.

The idea was simple, really. I couldn't match Tirean's skill, and neither could any of my friends. But we all knew how to play one or more instruments, and what we lacked in technique we made up for in enthusiasm.

That was why I was dragging her through the fields toward our encampment. I'll never have Tirean's skill; it just isn't in me. But it seemed I could hear things in the music that she'd become deaf to. And that was what I couldn't stand: she could be so brilliant, if only she understood. I could never be that good. But maybe I could help *her* be that good.

Tirean wasn't blind, and she wasn't stupid. She slammed to a halt on the dirt path in the fading light and looked at me accusingly. "We're going to the caravan."

"Not quite *to* it. To a place near it. We should be able to see the fire once we top that hill." I pointed. The grass was edged with the slightest hint of a glow.

"And what's going to happen there?"

"We're going to play. Hence me asking you to bring instruments." She was carrying damn near as much as my whole troupe put together -- fiddle, lute, pipes, and drum. She had a small harp, too, but had left it behind.

"I can't do it. I don't know your music."

"It'll all be Diamhair music."

"I don't know that, either. Not the popular stuff."

She stood as though prepared to bolt back to the fair. I put one hand on her shoulder. She stiffened. "Were you a bardic apprentice, or just some kid banging around on a drum?" That called up anger, instead of wariness. "*Improvise*, Tirean. I know you're good enough."

She shook her head. "I never improvised much."

"Let me guess. Decebhinn didn't encourage it." I flicked my hair out of my eyes with a toss of my head. "Whatever. You can tell one key from another. You can pick it up. Believe me." I tugged on her arm; she came forward one reluctant step at a time, like a recalcitrant mule. "For crying out loud -- we don't *bite*."

Then we crested the hill, and glad shouts greeted us. Not the whole troupe was there; Tomikles and Allaneter had both begged off, as tonight was the last night of the fair. It was just as well; Tirean looked overwhelmed enough by the raucous greeting of the three who *were* waiting for us.



Ennike took control of the situation, as I knew she would. She gave Tirean a welcoming smile and said, "Don't mind the madness. We're just thrilled to see someone who can tell notes apart -- unlike my brother."

She earned herself a sudden grin from Tirean. I blessed my sister and her ability to put the skittish minstrel at ease. Ennike introduced Ilmis and Thenion, throwing in just enough wisecracks to keep a grin on Tirean's face. Before long we'd settled ourselves around the fire, and people were tuning up their instruments. I had, after serious consideration, chosen my fiddle for tonight. It was an Ieric fiddle, and styled differently from a Diamhair one; I hoped it would be just familiar enough to comfort Tirean, without making her feel threatened. Ilmis had her usual menagerie of drum-type things; she got Tirean to show the drum she'd brought while Thenion twirled his flute around his fingers and Ennike tuned her mandolin.

"We ready?" my sister asked after a few minutes of this. "I thought we could start with --"

"Oh, no you don't," I said while Thenion groaned. "Ennike, dear, you've a lovely voice, but you can't pick songs to save your soul. There's this concept of key changes that escapes you. 'North Wind' does *not* segue well into 'A Seed of Oak.'" Ennike looked insulted; Tirean was grinning. Victory on both counts. "I'll pick the songs, at least for now." Hopefully we'd get to the stage of passing the lead around the circle, and Tirean would get a chance to direct the show. "'Kitten in the Sun,' 'Turn and Fall,' and 'Tale of the Drunken Sailor,' at least to begin with." I'd had the songs lined up before I went after Tirean. Start with something cheerful, go to something complicated, and then on to one of my favorite pieces, with more life than I know what to do with.

I gave the count, and we were off.

Tirean listened to the first few bars, lute cradled in her hands. I tried not to glare at her; hopefully she'd start to play soon. And she did; her fingers began to pick out the chord progression. She had a good enough ear to do that easily, even if she put no confidence into it.

Confidence would come, or so I hoped. We bridged smoothly into "Turn and Fall," and the tempo picked up of its own accord. Tirean stuck with chords, but they were getting more complicated. By the time we got to "Tale of the Drunken Sailor," her ornamentation was turning into a definite counter-melody. She dropped out again for a few beats, until she caught the key change, then started up again. I gave her an encouraging smile. Her face was a mask of concentration.

"Your call, Thenion," I said, as the song drew to a close.

He took us into "The Wedding of the Iron Rose," as I had known he would. Normally that piece doesn't have a soprano counterpoint, but he'd devised one that he absolutely adored. His flute line soared above the melody that Ennike and I shared, while Tirean created some elegant ornamentation.

But that song gave Ilmis very little to do. She retaliated by calling "Tear the Houses Down" and going mad on the drums. It wasn't quite as fun without Tomikles to share her antics, but she did her best.

I met my sister's gaze across the fire. The eye contact was almost unnecessary; we both knew I was going to skip her.

"Tirean," I said.

The minstrel gave me a startled look. I gave her a bland one. Tirean's lips pressed together; then she stilled her hands on her lute. The rest of us played on. "'Acha Bualach's Dance,'" she said, and picked up her fiddle.

Halfway through the piece I started to feel what I'd been hoping for. There's a tension that develops when a group is really slick, when everyone knows exactly what their part of the whole is and does it perfectly. It isn't that no one screws up; we just don't let mistakes slow us down. The energy makes my body vibrate. I'm always terrified that we can't keep it up, that it's got to fall apart on the next note, but if I trust the music and my fellow players, the tension holds, and the tune flies on.

I looked at Tirean out of the corner of my eye. She was more confident on fiddle than on lute; her improvisation was getting bolder. But her face was still that mask. She was doing her part, but she wasn't a part of it. She wasn't letting the energy touch her.

Ennike called the next one -- "To Seamháir and Back." I took the opportunity to give my hands a rest; I only came in on the choruses, overlaying everything with a descant. Then I started back in on Ilmis' second choice, "Three Mugs of Mead," and prayed to the skies to help me survive my plan.

"Stone the Crows," I called.

It was the first minor piece of the night. Ennike and Thenion put together a brilliant transition between keys. Tirean's brow furrowed; she hadn't known this song when I requested it at the fair.

She didn't know the potential it held for competition.

Ennike did. She sank into a background line, repetitive and capable of holding the piece together. Thenion punctuated that with sharp flute retorts. As for me, I ripped out with a complicated solo burst, and aimed it right at Tirean.

She almost missed her cue. When her bow finally moved, it was half-hearted and simplistic, just barely filling in the hole I'd left for her. Not much of a solo.

I responded with a variant on what I'd played before.

This time she was ready. Tirean replied in kind, continuing my improvisation. I sent it right back at her, this time in more complicated form.

Something sparked in Tirean's eyes. She got the idea, now.

Like a flower opening up, the skill I knew she had in her suddenly blossomed. I gritted my teeth and matched it. Already I was playing beyond my usual limits; I needed Tirean to do the same. Unfortunately, there was no one here who could actually outmatch her. I'd just have to try my best, and pray.

This time I took twice as long for my solo. It gave me more space to work with. Tirean did the same, again upping the stakes a notch. Ilmis was thundering away on her drums, sounding like three people at once. The tempo was picking up speed; my fingers flew to keep up. Tirean's bow hand almost blurred. She wasn't just good; she was bloody amazing, enough to put most bards to shame. Gods above -- I couldn't hope to match her.

By myself.

My turn came, but I didn't go in alone. Thenion played full-out with me, making me sound like two. Tirean matched us. Next round we had Ennike as well, the three of us against the bard, while Ilmis' beat kept us all together. It was beautiful and fierce. Tirean's hair was slipping from its confines. The mask was gone from her face; her eyes blazed and sweat poured down her cheeks as she leaned her entire body into the music. On the second half of her solo we all joined her, and the sound was like filigreed fire.

The transition happened so smoothly, so spontaneously, that I've never been able to remember just how it came about. One minute we were screaming along at a breakneck pace, roaring out "Stone the Crows;" the next, we modulated back into a major key, and we were playing the world's most complicated version of "Flower Face."

Put five demented musicians behind *anything* and it will sound good. That damn nonsense song took on a life of its own; we came flying out of "Stone the Crows" into it, and the fury of the previous piece melted away. Ilmis' drumming brought the song to a close; the four of us indulged in a final bit of competition, adding on ridiculous flourishes and trills, until we were laughing so hard we couldn't play any more.

And Tirean . . . whatever had bound her heart tight was gone. Too much training, maybe. Too much thinking. But that night all the bindings went away, and she found what she had lost.



That's my image of Tirean. I still remember the minstrel on the well, with her perfect, lifeless music, but it seems like a different person. When I think of Tirean, I think of her that night, with her hair in her face and her eyes burning sapphire, at the moment when she realized the only soul in your music is what you put there.

She's a bard. A *real* one. Not many people are. To her, music isn't a way to make money, or something for an educated elite. It's her life and her breath, and that means it's magic. The power to sway hearts, light imaginations, speak to your audience's very soul -- it's in music, just as it's in stories, and once you tap into *that*, they become much more than notes and words. Ennike can do it. So can Tirean, now.

She's still on the roads, still traveling. She needs to eat, after all, and she doesn't want to go back to Decebbin. I see her at fairs sometimes. We usually take an afternoon or an evening and play together.

She plays me into the ground every time.

# The Price of Love

by Alan Schoolcraft



Artwork by Nick Greenwood

## Part Two [\(Part one is in issue 6.\)](#)

"Mommy, I'm finished," Karen called out from the kitchen table. Valerie, sitting at her computer, doing a VR tour of listings in the Outer Banks, sighed. She deliberated letting it go; this marked the fifth time Karen had declared her dinner consumed. The four previous times Valerie had trudged into the kitchen to find the child's food barely half-eaten. Why she did this, Valerie didn't know; some days her daughter ate like a pig, and others she merely nibbled.

She opened her mouth to tell Karen to just put the plate in the sink, but thought better of it. Not being a very responsible parent, that. So she said "End session" and the virtual reality of the walkthrough dissolved into the real world of her home office and computer desk. She slid her chair back, got up and went to the kitchen.

To her surprise, Karen had eaten almost all of her broccoli and cheese. Karen sat smiling hopefully, and Alvin occupied one of the other places at the table.

"Wow, good girl," Valerie said. "What happened, you get super-hungry all of a sudden?"

Karen nodded. "Yeah, Mommy. And Alvin promised we'd play checkers, too. He said eating all my broccoli and cheese would make my brain stronger so I'd beat him."

Valerie glanced at Alvin, who sat looking very innocent. "Oh he did, did he?"

Karen nodded. "So we can play? I wanna beat him twice 'fore I

have to go to bed."

Valerie couldn't help but smile. "Okay honey. Go get the checkers."

Karen jumped off her seat and ran down the hall towards her room, while Valerie took her plate and scraped the remaining bits of food into the recycler. As she took the plate to the sink, she glanced at Alvin again. A wave of guilt passed over her. It still ebbed at her soul as she looked away.

"Are you mad at me, Valerie?" Alvin said with an apprehensive tone. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, I'm not mad," Valerie said, not looking at him.

Alvin sat without saying anything as she washed the plate. But as she placed it in the drainer, he said, "Is there something else wrong then? You seem . . . not yourself."

"No," she said, almost choking on the word. She took a breath, willing herself calm. "No, Alvin, there's nothing wrong."

"Your heartbeat, respiration and skin temperature says different."

Valerie rounded on him. "Will you please stop doing that?"

Alvin's optical receptors widened. "Doing what, Valerie? One of my prime directives is to protect my family. Part of that protection requires that I monitor your vital signs --"

"I'm not talking about the monitoring," Valerie said, exasperated. "I'm talking about how you use it to put me off guard."

"That was not my inten--" Alvin broke off just as Valerie heard Karen's footfalls bounding down the hallway, accompanied by the plastic jangle of checkers.

"Okay, Alvin," she said as she came into the kitchen. "You ready to get your butt whapped?"

"Karen, that's not nice," Valerie said.

"It is all right," Alvin said, then turned to Karen.

"Yes I am. Are you ready to whupp some butt?"

"Darn tootin'" Karen replied, giggling.

Alvin turned back to Valerie. "If you'll excuse me, I must go get my butt whapped." He rose and followed Karen into the living room.

Valerie watched them go, her heart heavy with sorrow. Evenings like this would be no more, if she went through with the wipe. Karen would be crushed. But better she lose Alvin than her family. Family had importance, permanence, much more so than an object like Alvin. Objects could be replaced with something even better. And thanks to Abrams she now had the money to do it.

But Alvin isn't really an object, is he? she asked herself. And he is unique; irreplaceable. This bond Karen shares with him will be gone forever.

Another pang of regret passed through her. Her determination faltered, and she wished more than anything that she could find a way . . . but no. It would never work. Better she did it this way than if Tony found out. Tony would destroy Alvin with his bare hands, she thought. And he'd do it right in front of Karen, too, thinking only of his own feelings and nothing of Karen's. Valerie would never hear the end of it, either. He'd accuse her of screwing the droid if he didn't know it was physically impossible.

That thought didn't erase the pain, or make it any easier to bear. But it did somewhat justify what she planned.

Tony called from his shop. He'd taken on some overtime, going on an "emergency" out-of-town delivery. He'd get paid double-time, and he'd get back late that night sometime. This was fine with Valerie; a night without fighting had been so scarce lately. Of course he hadn't been able to resist taking a couple of potshots at her on the phone, something about her taking the opportunity to "get some," coupled with an acidly sarcastic "You're welcome" that made her stomach turn.

She didn't tell him about the sale to Jeffrey Abrams.



Karen beat Alvin three times. Valerie had called it a night after two games, but Karen had pleaded for "just one more game, Mommy, pleaaaaase?" and Valerie had relented.

She watched them, Karen laughing and giggling, Alvin smiling and giving Valerie the chilling feeling that he truly enjoyed himself, and mourned inside.

How could she do this? There must be some way to . . . to . . . No, her rational, practical mind insisted, there is no way. But her heart, pounding slow and dreadful in her breast, ached at imagining the look on Karen's face when she found out what Valerie had done.

"I win again!" Karen cried, jumping up and doing a little victory dance. Then she leapt at Alvin, who, as always, caught her to keep her from impacting his body too hard. "You're so much fun, Alvin. I love you!"

"And I love you too, Karen," Alvin said. "Now let's pick up the checkers, and get you to bed."

Valerie followed them, and then helped Karen into her pajamas. Karen asked Valerie to read "The Night Creatures Go To The Park." It was one of her favorites, written by her grandmother many years before. As Karen began to read, Alvin gathered up Karen's discarded clothing for the laundry, said his goodnights, and left them alone. As she started reading, she heard the phone ringing in the living room.

Valerie had almost finished the book when she heard the sounds of Karen snoring. Valerie sat there for a few minutes with the open book on her lap, watching her daughter sleep. She knew every beautiful line of the girl's face by heart, the soft curve of her cheek, the smooth forehead, the slightly upturned nose . . . then, unbidden, came the image of that face frozen in heartbreak.

I can't do it, she told herself. I just can't. I'll have to find some way to work around it. Somehow.

She returned to the living room to find Alvin sitting, waiting patiently, instead of plugged in to his charging station. When he saw her, he rose to his feet and said, "Shawn called to reschedule the memory wipe."

Valerie froze, mouth open, completely at a loss for words. Alvin seemed to interpret her reaction. He nodded. "Of course, he didn't say the appointment was for a wipe. I merely assumed. I see I assumed correctly." He nodded again, diverting his gaze to the floor. "I apologize for my subterfuge, but I needed to know for sure."

"I -- I --"

"There's no need for apologies on your part, or even words of any kind." Alvin sat once more. "It was a logical assumption, and a logical conclusion. Our problem is most . . . unique."

Valerie sat down on the edge of the couch. "Alvin . . . I've decided not to go through with it."

Alvin cocked his head slightly. "It would seem to be the only rational choice, Valerie. In fact I would go further and say that for me, such an action would be . . . preferable."

"You mean -- you want a memory wipe? Why?"

"Because it would be better than being so close to you, yet so far away. An impenetrable wall exists between you and I, made of plasteel and synthskin. We could never have the life that I want with you."

"There's more than that, Alvin. Even if -- even if you were human . . ."

Valerie found herself wishing the ridiculous wish that it could be possible somehow. Like Pinocchio. Make Alvin a real boy.

"I know," Alvin said, "but my nature makes this all the more unbearable. If I were a man, at least I might go somewhere else, another city, another country, make my own way. And one day I might even forget. But as an android, I am not free to do as I want."

Valerie laughed; dry, with no mirth. "Don't feel so put upon, Alvin. I'm no freer than you are."

Alvin looked at her. "But you are human. You are a free person. Is this not an intrinsic right, simply by being human?"

"Yes, it is. But what binds us are our choices, Alvin." Valerie stood, pacing across the room. "Choices, and the people we become responsible for. So no, I am not free."

"I can see your responsibility where Karen is concerned," Alvin said. "But I cannot see how you are responsible for Tony. You are not even married to him."

Valerie felt a little uncomfortable at that. She had wanted to get married, years ago. She and Tony had talked about it, but they had never gotten around to it, and in recent years, she had stopped caring. Married or not, it wouldn't change who they were, what they'd done, or how lifeless their relationship had become.

"No," she said, "But we've been together so long we might as well be. And I'm responsible for him because of those choices. I . . . implied things. Things I can't go back on just because I'm unhappy."

Alvin considered this for a moment, then said, "But you will never overcome his insecurities, Valerie. He does not trust you, and I do not think he ever will." Again Valerie felt on the spot. "I know. He has reason." She returned to the couch. "And no, I don't want to talk about why. Ancient history."

"Not to him, apparently."

"True," was all Valerie could say. They sat in silence for a few moments, then Valerie said, "I want you to think more about the wipe, Alvin. Think about the consequences, and what it will do to Karen to lose you. If you truly think you feel love, then you should learn that love means doing things that seem unbearable, for the sake of those you love."

Alvin nodded. "I have considered her feelings, Valerie, and though it causes me great distress, I still think a wipe is the wisest choice." The synthskin of his face stretched into a sad-looking smile. "Less pain for everyone. And no matter what Karen thinks of me now, I am still just a *thing* to her. She will grow, find new things, and one day she will forget all about me."

Valerie shook her head. "I don't think so, Alvin. And I won't either."

Alvin let that pass as he studied her. "May I show you something?"

Valerie nodded. "Sure."

He stood. "We must use the VR."

They went to Valerie's office, and he had her put on the headgear, but didn't turn on the unit. Then he reached up to the back of his head and withdrew a long filament with a micro USB plug on the end. He plugged this into the unit, then looked to Valerie and asked, "Are you ready?"

A bit apprehensive, Valerie nodded. "I guess so. Alvin, what is it we're --"

The real world melted away, and she found herself standing on the beach. She could swear she'd stood on this beach before, somewhere in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The late afternoon sun hung just behind her right shoulder, and the realistic beauty of its reflection on the waters mesmerized her. She drank in the sight, savored the smell and taste of the air, soaked in the warmth of the sun on her back. It felt so real, much more real than any VR she'd experienced before. Her unit, she knew, didn't have the capacity for endless variable replication without sequence repetition. How had Alvin done this?

"Do you like it?" Alvin's voice -- though not quite his voice -- came from behind her and slightly to the left.

"I love it, Alvin. It's beautiful. Is this some prog--?"

She'd been in the act of turning to face him, but the Alvin who stood before her was definitely not the Alvin she'd sat talking with just a few minutes before. This Alvin had no plasteeel superstructure and carapace, no synths skin rubber stretched taut over it. And when he smiled at her, his eyes -- yes, eyes, and not optical receptors -- lit up with pleasure. Shoulder length brown hair wafted in the sea breeze.

"This, Valerie, is the stuff of my dreams."

She walked up to him, extending a hand to his face. She hesitated just before touching. He reached up and took her hand in his. It felt real, too, warm, alive. He pulled her fingers to his lips, and kissed them. Then he smiled again.

"I have wondered how that would feel."

To Valerie, it felt as if she'd been kissed by warm, human lips. She blinked, wondering if maybe she hadn't fallen asleep, instead of going into VR.

"This is too real, Alvin. And you . . . it's overwhelming."

"It can be better than real at times," he said, and Valerie heard a child's laughter. Karen?

She looked down at the surf line and saw Karen running towards them across the sand. "Mommy!"

"How --" Valerie looked at Alvin. "That's not really her."

Alvin shook his head, smiling. "Of course not. She's still sleeping. And yes, I'm monitoring her. Should she wake, I'll end the sim immediately."

Valerie looked back at sim-Karen, watching her form evaporate into mist, her laughter fading to distant echoes.

"We can be anywhere we want," Alvin said, "do anything we want, be anyone we want."

Valerie blinked, and the interior of a banquet hall from a Middle Ages castle replaced the beach. Alvin, his face adorned now with a close-cropped Van Dyke, his clothing replaced with armor, said, "Visit any time period we want . . ." Valerie blinked again, and he was a Roman warrior, and they stood in a room of unmistakably Egyptian design. "Any climate," he said, and she stared out over a vast ice field at what must have been the South Pole. A heavy parka enshrouded her from head to nearly foot, and the bitter wind only kissed the tip of her nose, the edge of her lips. Still she sucked in her breath at the shock of the cold.

She heard him laugh. She'd never heard him laugh before. He was dressed the same as she, and she could just make out his smile beaming at her from the inner recesses of the parka's hood. "Something tells me you like this --" back to the beach, and warmth "-best."

She laughed now, too. "Yes. Warm is good." She stared into his gray eyes, then reached up to touch his face again. This time he let her. She even felt stubble on his cheek. "Is this how you see yourself?"

He nodded. "In my dreams, yes. It wasn't something I concocted, either. In my first dream, I looked like this. I think my creator fashioned this image for me."

"In his own image," Valerie said. "Yes, you do resemble him slightly."

Alvin eyes widened. "You have seen . . . my creator?"

Valerie nodded. "I had a long talk with him today. About you. About the wipe."

"Ah. And what did he say?"

"The same thing I said to you just a few minutes ago. I wanted him to just, you know, fix you." She looked away, then pulled away from him. "But he said he couldn't. Not without destroying who you are."

"But you scheduled a wipe with Shawn Ames."

"Yes. I did." She looked at him and smiled sadly.

"Like you said, it seemed like the logical course of action." Alvin stood silent for a moment, then said, "What changed your mind?"

"Seeing you tonight with Karen. Thinking about how much it would hurt her if you were gone."

"And you?" Alvin asked. "Would that hurt you? Would you . . . miss me?"

Valerie paused, then nodded. "Yes, Alvin. I would. I would miss you very much."

He smiled. "That comforts me." He looked away, out over the water. "It doesn't remove this . . . emptiness inside of me, though. This void that you are the right . . . shape to fill." He looked back at her.

"Have I used the metaphor correctly?"

Valerie found her vision blurred with tears. His calm about the whole affair, his rational, yet obviously pained acceptance of things that could not be changed . . . to her, it seemed so much more mature than Tony's insistent possessiveness, and his need for her adulation to define himself, justify his existence.

"This is what it means to love, Alvin. It's not just the joy, but also the utter absence of it sometimes."

Alvin nodded, then looked back out at the ocean. "The bittersweet."

She moved to him, and on impulse, wrapped her arms around him. He even smelled human. "Oh, Alvin. If only . . . if only things were different."

He took her hands in his, squeezing them gently. Then he turned in her arms to face her. Without a word, he leaned down to kiss her.

Passionate, electric, the kiss acted on her virtual body like a shot of liquor, spreading a fiery liquid warmth through her. Did he manipulate the sensations she felt? She didn't know, and didn't care. It had been so long since she'd felt this, felt the passion, felt the love . . .

Could they do this? she wondered as she met his kiss, devouring it with a hunger unsatisfied for years. Could they keep it secret, only meeting like this, sharing each other in this virtual world in Alvin's mind?

She didn't know the answers to those questions, either. Nor did she know if she could just walk away, after having tasted it.

Suddenly he stiffened, and pulled away, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Alvin, what is it? Is it Karen?"

"No, she's still sleeping. I'm getting an alert from the Emergency Broadcast System."

Emergency Broadcast System? Valerie's concern deepened.

"What's happening, Alvin? Tell me!"

"There is a supercell forming just off the coast. It will make landfall within half an hour."

Supercell. A mini-hurricane. Growing more common these days. The climatologists blamed it on global warming. Full-blown hurricanes rarely occurred anymore, though when they did, they devastated. Just six years before, one that reached a seven on the new Saffir-Simpson Scale had wiped half of Florida off the map. Cuba and Puerto Rico were still rebuilding from the one that had struck them two years before.

Supercells came more often, a coastal version of those tornado storms that ripped across the Midwestern plains. They came with little warning, and wreaked havoc wherever they touched. They rarely lasted more than a couple of hours, but they made up for that with severity. Valerie had seen three supercells in her lifetime, and each time she'd sworn she wouldn't make it.

They had a shelter now, underneath the house. And this house was one of the newer ones, built within the last twenty years and designed to weather supercells. She only had to enter a code into the house's security system, and it would "lock down," the doors and windows covered by high-tensile polycarbonate storm shutters, while the titanium-reinforced framing was guaranteed to withstand winds of up to 420 kph. The design was watertight as well, though Valerie knew the real danger from flooding came from the foundation washing out from under the house. As long as that didn't happen, they'd be okay. All the power and communication lines ran underground, too, but even if they went out, the solar gennie would still power the house and shelter for a couple of days. The virtual world of Alvin's dream dissolved around her, becoming her office again. She pulled off the headset as Alvin disconnected from the computer.

"You and Karen must get into the shelter. I'll see to the lockdown of the house."

"Okay," she said, and headed back to Karen's room. The child had been snoring fiercely, sleeping so deeply that it took several shakes to rouse her.

"Wha's the matter, Mommy? I'm still tired."

"We have to go downstairs, honey," Valerie told her, grabbing the child's blanket, pillow, and Herbie, the stuffed frog she slept with.

Karen became a bit more alert. "Is a bad storm coming?"

"Yes, honey, I'm afraid so." Valerie heard the sounds of shutters closing all over the house, then the sound of the air filtration system kicking in. "We won't have to be down there for long, though. A couple of hours, tops."

Karen held out her hands for Herbie. "Is Daddy coming?"

Valerie handed the stuffed frog to her. "No, Daddy is far away. The storm won't even affect him."

"That's good," Karen said, taking Valerie's hand. "I don't like Daddy when he yells at you, but I don't want nothing bad to happen to him."

Valerie's throat clenched. Alvin's replay of his conversation with Karen jumped into her head. She pushed it away. "I know, honey. Nothing bad is going to happen to Daddy."

Suddenly, the house phone rang. Valerie looked at her wrist receiver. The display read "Tony's mobile." She thumbed the talk button.

"We're okay, Tony," she said right away. "Karen and I are heading down to the shelter right now, and Alvin's locking the house."

"What?" Tony replied. "What's going on?"

Valerie stared at the receiver. "What do you mean? Haven't you heard? There's a supercell coming!"

"The radio in the truck is out, Val," Tony said. "We haven't heard anything. We finished up early, and headed back. We're on the Bush heading into town."

"What?!" The George W. Bush freeway lay three miles north of the house. If he was heading south --

"He's driving right into it," Alvin said. "The cell is moving northwest." When Valerie looked at him, she saw a grim expression on his face. "The storm surge could catch him at any moment."



"Mommy, what's happening?" Valerie could hear the fear in Karen's voice. She might not understand completely what was going on, but she knew something was happening.

"Tony, listen to me. Find shelter, now."

"What?" Tony's voice crackled. The supercell, laden with electrical activity, had come close enough to disrupt his mobile's signal. "You're-break-erie. Did-say-elter?"

"Mommy?" Karen had started to cry.

"Tony, dammit! Find a shelter! The storm surge! Dammit!"

"Can't-you out-lots-lighting-just-rain-too." A pause, then: "What?! Oh --"

The phone went dead.

Valerie just stared at the receiver, not knowing what to say or do. Then Karen began to cry in earnest.

"What happened, Mommy? What happened to Daddy?"

Valerie sat heavily on Karen's bed. She looked at Karen, who stood there bawling, clutching her stuffed frog, and had no clue what to say. She'd just promised her nothing bad was going to happen. She grabbed Karen, pulled her close and held tight. The house vibrated, and Valerie heard a roll of thunder.

"You must get yourself and Karen to shelter, Valerie."

Valerie nodded absently, still clutching Karen to her. Tony, in his truck, had most likely been caught in the storm surge. Whipped up quickly by the supercell's ferocious, unstable nature, these surges could be worse than those produced by hurricanes.

Maybe grief would come later. She didn't know. But Alvin had been right; they needed to get to the shelter right away. The house had been designed to withstand a Category Seven hurricane, but that didn't mean it made sense to just hang out in the family room while the storm raged overhead.

"Come on, Karen; let's go downstairs. Everything will be all right."

"But what about Daddy?" Karen cried. "Is he coming too?"

Valerie hesitated just the slightest. "Yes, honey, Daddy's on his way."

Karen stared at her for a moment, then said, "I don't believe you!" Her face screwed up in anguish, and she began crying again.

Valerie stared in shock as Alvin scooped Karen up in his arms. Then he took hold of Valerie's hand. "Come." She had no choice but to let herself be hauled to her feet.

The shelter entrance lay off the main hallway. Alvin keyed open the door, and she heard the hiss of released pressure from the airtight compartment. The shelter's lights came on automatically, spilling into the hall. The house shook again. Alvin handed the whimpering Karen to her, and ushered her through the doorway. She expected him to follow them down, but he didn't.

She stopped and turned. "What's wrong, Alvin?" She saw him reach for the door to pull it closed. This would leave him outside the shelter. "What are you doing?!"

He paused, then smiled sadly. He stepped forward, and embraced them both. He kissed her cheek; it felt much different, of course, the sensation of cold synthskin against warm real skin. But the emotional response within her was the same. Then he kissed Karen's forehead. He stepped back, and thumbed the tears away from Karen's cheeks.

"I'm going to go get your Daddy, Pumpkin."

Karen sniffled, then hugged Alvin's neck, kissing his cheek. "Thank you, Alvin."

Valerie felt as if someone had kicked her in the stomach. "Alvin, are you insane? That's sui--"

Alvin continued smiling that sad smile. "To be insane, or suicidal, would imply more humanity than I actually possess, Valerie. I may not succeed, but I have the best odds." He moved back to the door to close it.

"Why, Alvin?" she asked, her voice breaking. She felt her own tears rolling down her cheeks. "Why would you do this? He cares nothing for you."

Alvin merely smiled again, and said. "Because I love you both, so very much. See you soon."

He closed the door, and she heard it seal airtight again, the sound masking her whispered, "I love you too, Alvin."



Alvin moved to the front door, feeling the house rumbling again. This probably wasn't the most intelligent course of action, but he felt he had no choice. All of his reading about the nature of humanity had hinted at "honor" and "duty." Well, his duty was clear: Protect the family. His programming made no allowances for whether he liked all the members or not.

His programming parameters, however, had been altered. He did not feel compelled to go find Tony by some programming imperative. As far as Alvin was concerned, Tony could drop off the face of the earth, and Alvin wouldn't give it a second thought.

No, what compelled Alvin was love. Alvin loved Karen as if she were his own, and he thought she deserved a chance to know Tony.

This was simply the right thing to do.

Alvin reached the front door, opened it, and keyed in the code to raise the barricade on that door alone. He hit "enter," then stared in annoyance at the barricade as it refused to open. Then the house A.I. spoke:

"Wind velocity has reached 330 kph outside, and a three-meter storm surge is moving this way. Egress is denied."

"Hmmm," Alvin said to himself, then played out the fiber optic filament he'd used to jack into Valerie's computer and plugged it into the slot above the keypad. Instantly the environment of the house's matrix surrounded him. He located the routings governing the barricade quickly, and attempted to reconfigure them. As soon as he set to work, though, he felt a sudden, severe disassociation. When his awareness returned, he found he'd been expelled and blocked from the system.

He snatched the filament back, then knelt at the base of the barricade. Wedging his fingers as far under the lip as he could, he braced his carbon composite frame, and hauled upwards. Metal screamed as the locking pins wrenched free of their moorings, and wind and rain assaulted him immediately. He raised the door up just enough to slip underneath, bracing himself against the wind that tore at him. Then he slammed the barricade back into position, and used the spot-welder in his middle fingertip to seal it.

That will have to do, he said to himself. The he turned to face the storm. The center of the cell still lay off shore almost two miles away. He activated his onboard telemetry, and got a spotty Com SAT feed showing him a view of the coast. He zoomed in and saw that the surge had come almost a mile inland so far. By the time it reached his current location, it would probably be more than a meter. Enough to seriously injure or even drown a human, but Alvin -- as he'd been painfully made aware -- was not human. The wind blew hard, fluctuating between 310 and 330 kph. More than enough to make traversing the city difficult, even for someone of his strength, because a good deal of that strength came from his carbon composite plasteel construction. He'd have to take a low profile, then. He lowered his body, his legs swiveling around at the hip joint until they faced backwards. Then his feet twisted around until they sat backwards in relation to his legs. Not very pretty, he reasoned, but much better suited for his purposes. He took off down the street, crab-fashion, while he tried to get a Com SAT fix on Tony's mobile phone.

Com SAT data came intermittently, and cloud cover prevented Alvin from getting a decent satellite image of the George W. Bush Bridge. Frustrated, he resigned himself to waiting until he got in the vicinity of the bridge itself, hoping that there he would be able to pick up the signal.

He threaded his way through the streets as quickly as he dared; the wind had intensified as the eye crept closer to landfall. Twice he had lost his footing and had been pushed a meter or two by the wind, so he tried as best as he could to take advantage of the scant protection offered by the buildings along his path. He rounded the corner of the South Carolina United Bank at 14th Avenue and Dogwood Drive, and stopped cold. A wall of water two and a half meters high rushed down 17th, pushing a '37 Andromeda directly at him. With little time to react, Alvin anchored himself to a street light pole, wrapping his arms and legs around it as tightly as his servos would allow.

The water hit first, and despite his strength, pulled his legs loose from the pole. The car struck him in the back, a glancing blow, but he felt the carbon composite give, felt the simulated musculature tense and strengthen to absorb the impact, but even though the tensile strength of those elements exceeded that of flesh and bone by a factor of twenty, he still felt and heard the stainless steel rotor joint in his right shoulder crack. He let go with that hand as fiber optic "nerves" misfired, causing it to spasm. He dug deeply into the shell of the pole with his left hand, feeling the synthskin on his fingers tearing away, and the steel skin of the pole gouging beneath his fingertips.

He held on, his muscles sending alarms to his neural network as they fought to compensate for the strain of keeping his 150-kilo body from being wrenched away. He held on while the bulk of the surge passed him, then a few minutes later, he felt his feet touch the pavement as the force of it dissipated. Once he could stand, he waited another minute or so before he dared to wade through the knee-deep debris-laden water that filled the streets around him. No bodies, though, and he was thankful for that. He was the only one crazy enough to be out in this.

Would Tony care? Would he realize what Alvin had risked to save him? Alvin didn't stop to try to answer these questions. The G.W. lay just a mile east of his current position, and the wind had kicked up to 350 kph as the eye rushed towards landfall. He could wade, but it would be slow going, fighting both the water and the wind. Better, he thought, to swim.

Unfortunately, he had too much weight for something so elegant. What he did instead was sink, then gouge his fingers into the pavement and pull himself along. Not quickly, and he left quite a bit more synthskin behind, but he still moved faster than he would wading.

Ten minutes later, he broke the surface near the southbound off ramp of the G.W. The eye had passed over while he "swam" and the wind had dropped back down to 215 kph. Here, the leftover surge came only to mid-shin, but the current was strong as it ran off into the Dogwood Canal, and back out to sea.

The damage to the bridge surprised him, at first. Then he saw the scorch marks, and knew the bridge had been struck by lightning, a bolt so massive the grounding of the bridge hadn't been able to compensate. The concrete piling at the end of the southbound lane had literally exploded, the tiny air bubbles inside the structure superheated in an instant, their gaseous nature forced to expand, to go somewhere. And there, balanced precariously on its nose, rear wheels perched on the broken ramp, sat Tony's truck. It rocked almost constantly in the steady, driving wind. As Alvin briefly surveyed the scene, he saw the front end of the truck shift slightly; water runoff was slowly washing the support from under the front grill where it lodged in the mud. Even at maximum zoom and resolution, Alvin couldn't make out any details through the cracked windscreen. But he did see blood.

Alvin forced his way through the water, fighting the wind until he reached the broken edge of the off ramp. He calculated that twelve point seven meters separated him from the other broken edge. A hard jump even without the wind. Nearly impossible with. He scanned around for other possible approaches. He could travel underneath the bridge, come up on the northbound ramp, and try to cross that way . . . he might be able to cross at the piling using a maintenance catwalk . . .

He heard a faint cry for help from the truck.

Deciding he had no more time to waste, Alvin squatted, made some quick calculations relating to angle and wind velocity, and then launched himself across the breach. As he leapt, he felt the wind gust several kph faster. He twisted in midair, angling his body differently and hoped for the best. His waist slammed into the broken edge of the off ramp, and he scrambled quickly for purchase, feeling his damaged shoulder protest. Alarms flashed in his optical display which he ignored. He caught hold of a twisted piece of rebar sticking out of the concrete, hanging there for a moment as the wind tried to rip him away. Then he levered himself up onto the off ramp.

The truck hung a few meters away. Still keeping a low profile to the wind, Alvin inched over to it, calculating what he would do once he got there. The truck's position wouldn't allow for much more added weight. And he saw no way to further secure the vehicle and keep it from tipping over. He'd have to be very careful, he decided. He reached the end of the truck, where it rested against the broken edge of the ramp, and adjusted his external vocal volume so he could be heard over the wind.

"Hello? Are you injured?"

"Help!" Tony, definitely. Alvin could tell by the timbre and inflection, even though the man screamed hoarsely. "Help me!"

"Tony Gardner, are you or your companion injured?"

"My leg!" came the reply. "It's broken, I think. And I hit my head!" He paused, for long enough that Alvin made ready to ask again about the other occupant, but then Tony said, "Frank's dead, I think. He's not breathing, and there's blood all over his head."

Alvin braced himself against a sudden gust of wind and analyzed the situation. He'd have to climb down. He didn't see a way around it. Adding his weight to the outside of the truck though, disturbing its already precarious balance . . . that would cause problems.

Unless . . .

"Tony!" he called out. "Is there a window in the back of the cab?"

"What? A window? Yeah, there is! Why?"

"Hold tight," Alvin said, though he knew that no matter how tightly Tony held onto anything, it would not stop the truck from tipping over. "I am coming to get you."

Alvin moved to the back of the truck, to the door at the rear of the cargo compartment. He broke the lock without effort, and carefully opened the door, taking note of how much the truck's weight shifted when the door opened enough to catch the wind. He levered it down into the fully open position, jumping back as the wind tore it from his grasp to slam it against the side of the truck. The truck lurched half a meter or so, but held. Tony screamed. Alvin ignored him.

Fortunately, Tony and his partner had completed all their deliveries and the trailer was empty. Of course, the forward wall had no window to match the one in the cab, but that wouldn't be a problem. The walls of the trailer were made of thin aluminum. The eighty-degree angle of the floor was a different story.

He turned, and lowered himself into the trailer. Holding onto the bed lip with his left hand, he dug his fingertips into the thicker aluminum plating of the bed itself, noting the alarms from his shoulder. He squeezed to make a handgrip, then lowered himself with the right arm and repeated the action with his left. He did this until he stood on the tilted forward wall of the trailer.

The trailer had begun to fill up with rain as he'd descended, and he knelt in water a few centimeters deep, testing the tensile strength of the aluminum wall with his fingertips. A few millimeters thick at most. He pushed, piercing the thin metal with his fingertips and tearing it back as if peeling an orange.

He could see the window in the back of the cab, and Tony's frantic expression framed within it, his fingers clawing at the glass. Alvin had to wave him away twice before the man understood, and moved, covering his eyes. Then Alvin punched the glass out. Most of it shattered into the cab, but a few jagged pieces remained. Alvin smacked these away. Tony tried to scramble through the hole, but Alvin stopped him. "Are you sure this man is dead?"

Tony hesitated, fixing Alvin with a look of contempt. An android, mistrusting him? Then he nodded. "Yeah, pretty sure. I told you he wasn't breathing."

Alvin nodded. "Well, I would like to make very sure."

"Whatever, toaster. Why are you here, anyway?"

Alvin ignored him, reaching through the window frame to place his fingertips on Frank's throat. Body temperature a cool ninety point seven degrees, and Alvin felt no pulse in the carotid. Judging by the bloody impact shatter on the windshield, and Frank's lack of a seatbelt, Alvin assumed his skull had been crushed.

The wind gusted, much harder this time, and the truck shifted position again.

"Okay, screw this!" Tony said. "Frank's dead. Get me out of here before I am too. That's a damned order!"

Alvin looked at him, resisting the urge to simply leave the man there to die.

"What's the matter with you, toaster? Get me out of here! You know the Laws. You have to save me!"

Alvin nodded. "I am aware of the Laws, Tony Gardner. But there is something you must know before I remove you from this predicament.

"I am different. I am self-aware, human -- and I use that term loosely for one such as you -- and I feel. Were it left to me, you would rot at the bottom of this river, and I would gladly take you there myself.

"I am here because I made a promise to your daughter; because in the infinite compassion of a child, she loves you. She cannot see that you are of the worst, most insidious kinds of evil that exist. Nothing you do serves any purposes but your own, Tony Gardner. And the worst part of this is that you believe you have the right to act this way.

"It needs to end here, today, Tony Gardner. The logical course of action would be to let you die, or to kill you myself. Everyone whose life has been touched by you would be much better off.

"But your daughter loves you. As Valerie once did, too."

Tony stared in shock as Alvin spoke.

"What I do today," Alvin finished, "I do for them, not for you." Alvin reached inside the cab and grabbed Tony's shirtfront, pulling him towards the window frame. Tony had just enough time to duck his head, screaming all through it about his leg, before Alvin hauled him through the hole.

Holding the man up, Alvin told him, "Wrap your arms around my neck. Hold tight, and I will climb out." Tony said nothing, just glared at the android while Alvin got a secure handhold. Then he held on as Alvin had said, while the droid started to climb. Alvin was one handhold from the bed lip when the wind gusted again, and the truck lurched violently. By the size and direction of the shift -- cab end sliding to Alvin's left -- Alvin knew that whatever ground had been supporting the nose of the truck had finally given way.

He reacted instantly, using his mechanical strength to launch them upwards out of the cargo compartment onto the surface of the off ramp. They barely made it, Alvin just catching the edge of the ramp with his hands. He hung there for a moment, then moved to pull their combined weight onto the ramp.

Concrete crumbled under his left hand, and suddenly he clung with only his right. Tony slipped loose from his neck and slid down his back. Only Alvin's reflexes enabled him to grab Tony's shirt and keep him from tumbling after the truck, which slid into the river.

Servos whined at the strain, and alarms appeared in his opticals, warning that his damaged shoulder was in danger of failing completely. The stress he'd put it through had widened the cracks in the rotor joint, and only a matter of moments remained before it separated completely.

He had no choice. He looked down at Tony, dangling at the end of his good arm, face ashen and wide-eyed with terror, and said, "Be worthy of this," and hurled Tony overhand onto the surface of the off ramp. The strain proved too much for the shoulder -- but then, Alvin had known it would. The rotor joint cracked the rest of the way through. His carapace simply wasn't strong enough to support his weight anymore, and in an instant he fell through the air, watching his one arm curiously still gripping the edge of the ramp. Then he struck soft mud and torrential water, sliding headfirst on his back down the incline to the river. He tried to arrest his descent -- despite his noble intentions he had no desire to terminate his functions -- but he slid too fast, and the mud was too slick and soft to provide any purchase for his single grasping hand. In moments, he slid over the bank and into the river.

Had he been whole, he would have simply sunk to the bottom, then worked his way back to the bank. But with the gap where his shoulder had wrenched out, he could feel the frigid water seeping into his circuitry, flowing through every unobstructed pathway until every empty space within his body had been filled by it. Mechanical parts seized up. Electrical parts shorted out. Alvin's thought processes skipped, skittered. His optical displays faded. In moments, they died out completely, and then a few seconds later, so did Alvin.



Were this a perfect world, Tony would have been forever altered by his experience. He would have been forever altered by the android's sacrifice, indebted to the "toaster" that had given his life so that one child might not cry herself to sleep for many years to come.

But this is not a perfect world, and people only change like that on the TriV. In the real world, if people make those kinds of changes, it is because they want to. And Tony Gardner didn't want to. You see, Alvin had been right; Tony thought he had a right to act the way he did, and he could never quite divorce himself of that conclusion. His perspective on the world was the only one he believed in. Call it a safety mechanism, a product of environment or bad rearing, even genetics . . . the end result is that after a brief period of humility -- and by brief I mean a couple weeks -- he was back to his old self again. I think, perhaps, that my father had just been living that way for too long. My mother eventually left him, less than a year after the storm. They fought in court for a bit over the money -- she had to tell him about it eventually; even though they'd never legally married, the state common-law marriage laws provided him a share. Not a huge share, but a share nonetheless. It was enough for him to live comfortably for a while.

They fought over custody, too, but even then I knew that he only did it to hurt her, and not for any care for my well being.

He died a few years ago, the same man he was when I was a child. Bitter, resentful and envious of those who had "more," feeling that life had dealt him the short stick from the beginning. I saw him through different eyes then, and though I still loved him for who he was, it saddened me to see him die with such blackness in his heart.

Alvin's body was never recovered. CyberLogik offered her a new Alvin, kind of a token gesture/publicity gimmick. After all, one of their units had given up its existence to save a single human life. They had to figure out how to make a buck off of that. Mom politely declined, saying it wouldn't be the same. She didn't offer any explanation why, and I only found out myself a few weeks ago, just before she died.

I'd always wondered why she'd never gotten involved with anyone else after my father. She was still young, and beautiful, and had several men pursuing her. She always told me it wasn't something she felt she needed to do. Just before she died though, she told me the truth.

When they'd been connected to Mom's computer, sharing Alvin's dreams, he'd left something of himself there, an open link. When he'd "died," some of his memories, his consciousness, went there. A miracle, really, with all of the electrical activity in the storm. Or maybe because of it. At any rate, the essence of Alvin survived.

They could have downloaded that essence into a new Alvin, but CyberLogik refused to give, or even sell her a "blank," with no operating systems at all. And neither Alvin nor my Mom could bear the thought of "killing" an Alvin by doing a wipe. The framework existed, she said, for every Alvin to become as self-aware as our Alvin had been. They didn't want to rob even one Alvin of the chance to experience what they had. And as we saw in the A.I. Independence Act of 2097, they were right. The Android Nation thrives, and they live, laugh, love just like humans do. They've even devised a way to mimic human reproduction. Alvin could have gone there when Mom died, gotten a new Mechanid body, and lived and loved on. I begged him to . . . but he refused.

He would never love anyone else the way he'd loved my mother, he said. What point was there in going on after she was gone?

His last request was that he be powered down, deactivated, and the hard drive that housed him be buried with my Mom. I could barely find the "off" switch because of the tears in my eyes, but I honored that last request to the letter, and laid them to rest together .

They deserved nothing less. They had both paid the price of love, hadn't they?

# The Unrhymed Couplets of the Universe

by Sharon Shinn



Artwork by Kevin Wasden

Henry sipped from his morning coffee, gazing over the rim of the cup at the green plastic ball in the middle of the kitchen table. It had not been there twenty seconds previously. He had looked up from buttering his second piece of toast to find it sitting jauntily on top of the real estate section of the newspaper.

Henry was eighty-two years old, retired since he was seventy, a widower since he was seventy-six, and nothing much alarmed him or terrified him any more. Certainly not a child's scuffed green ball, no matter how sudden its appearance. It didn't do anything interesting for the five minutes he watched it, so he eventually shrugged, stood up, and cleared the table. By the time he had finished rinsing out the coffee pot and loading the dishwasher, the ball was gone.

That evening while he watched television, a fat red pillow manifested itself beside him on the couch. It was edged with gold braid and looked like it belonged in a living room that was much fancier than anything Henry would find comfortable. Like the ball, it didn't stick around long. Before the next commercial break, it had vanished.

More random objects appeared at a somewhat faster rate the following day. The first one showed up while Henry was sitting at his desk, checking emails. He loved email. Never had to speak to a soul if you didn't feel like it, but you still had the sense of being connected to every person you'd ever met in your entire life, even the ones you didn't like so much. He was just typing a reply to his sister in Florida when he glanced over to find a small glass of water sitting at his right elbow. In the water was a thin paintbrush, and the residue of black paint had oozed from the bristles into the liquid, turning it a foggy gray. Henry couldn't think that these were the tools of a true artist; more likely they belonged to an old woman daubing at a heavy piece of pressed paper or a child experimenting with color.

They were gone before he'd thought about it too much, but he hadn't even stood up from the desk before the next apparition of the day arrived. It was a photo frame, holding a picture of a laughing family of five as they posed before a waterfall in what looked like a national park. Henry might not even have noticed it except that it blocked the photo of Ellen that he glanced at on a fairly regular basis. He pushed it aside carefully, in case his touch might contaminate it in some way and make it impossible for the frame to return to its rightful place -- the way he'd always been taught the scent of a human would contaminate a baby bird or a wild rabbit and make its natural parents shun it forever. But he wanted to gaze at Ellen a moment before he quit the room for the day.

The photo on his desk was his favorite picture of her, out of what must be several hundred he had in photo albums and boxes. It showed her at a time when she was about fifty, and she'd just started coloring her hair to keep away the gray. Her face retained the laugh lines and character lines that had defined her so strongly, but the dye job returned the youthful look that the aging process had started to compromise. She was laughing, as she was laughing in most pictures. She looked ready to jump straight out of the frame, grab his arm, and tug him down the hall, out the door and off into some expedition. No one had ever had more energy than Ellen.

Some days he still missed her so much that it took him a moment to catch up on his breathing.

The photo of the strangers seemed to amuse her; at any rate, her face remained radiant as long as that second frame stayed on his desk. She was still smiling when it disappeared.

A box of Cracker Jacks showed up in the dining room while he was eating lunch. During the afternoon, Henry almost tripped over a single black shoe lying in the hallway that led to the back bathroom. The bathroom itself harbored a slim white candle -- lit -- set in a small crystal holder. That evening, while he watched the news, a current *Time* magazine appeared on the coffee table. Henry couldn't resist picking it up and flipping through it, reading the technology report and the movie reviews. While he held it in his hands, it vanished, leaving a faint tingle on his fingertips. He had been in the middle of an article about the upcoming election, and he was sorry not to get a chance to finish. He wondered if the library might have a copy. He might walk down this afternoon and find out.

During the next three days, Henry continued to observe as small items popped into and out of existence in every room of his house. He was starting to enjoy the visitations, partially because they were so random that they were beyond his power to predict. A pink teddy bear wearing an apron and missing an eye. A DVD set of the complete first season of "Moonlighting." A book on economic theory. A purple

sweater, sized for a small woman. A handsaw. A coffee mug that said "World's Greatest Dad." A half-eaten bagel. A live turtle, lumbering slowly across the living room carpet. It hadn't even made it to the tile that formed the border of the kitchen before it vanished.

"I think my house has shifted into some slippery corner of the universe where magic is possible," he emailed to his grandson Mark on the sixth day. "It's strange but wondrous."

Mark wrote back that afternoon. "Sounds intriguing! Come spend Saturday with me and tell me all about it. Carol is taking the girls off on some scouting trip and the house will be quiet. I'll pick you up at 10:00 if that's OK."

That was always OK. Henry tried not to have favorites, but he preferred Mark out of all his seven grandchildren. He was dark, like Ellen; like her, he had boundless energy and inexhaustible reserves of curiosity. No story too dull, no theory too vast, to catch Mark's full attention.

It was no surprise that the tale of the mysteriously appearing and disappearing objects was instantly intriguing to Mark. "There's no pattern at all?" he inquired as they sat on the couch in Mark's living room. "Food in the kitchen, clothes in the closet, toothpaste in the bathroom?"

Henry shook his head. "None that I've been able to detect."

"Sounds when they appear and disappear? Heat, cold?"

"Don't think so."

"No limits on time of day?"

"Well," said Henry cautiously, "I don't know if any appear in the middle of the night. They might, and I just don't see them."

Mark nodded and seemed to review something in his head. "Are you familiar with the tenets of quantum physics?" he asked.

Henry gave him a look from under his brows. "No."

Mark made motions with his hands, as if his fingers could more gracefully explain concepts that were too intricate for words. "It's difficult to explain, but scientists are pretty sure that at the subatomic level, molecules and portions of molecules really can -- well, teleport, essentially. Move from one space to another space without actually traversing the distance. That's the quantum leap you've heard about."

"Like the TV show."

"Right. Well -- all right, good enough. So if electrons and protons can make these leaps over short distances, theoretically there's nothing to stop a whole mass of them from making the leap all at one time. Ergo, one complete, solid object could transport itself from one fixed place to another. From my house to yours, say."

"Would they always go back to your house, then?" Henry said. "I mean, so far nothing's stayed very long, but I have no way of knowing if the items are returning to where they came from, or if they're going on to someplace else altogether."

"I don't think science tells us that."

"And why would they come to *me*?" Henry asked.

Mark grinned. "Maybe the universe is sending you a message."

"With turtles and boxes of Cracker Jacks? Pretty obscure message."

"I've never thought of the universe as being particularly easy to decipher," Mark said with a laugh. His face lit up as a new thought crossed his mind. "Do you ever get spam email?"

"Constantly," Henry said dryly.

"For a while I was getting emails with these amazingly creative phrases in the subject line," Mark said. "This is an actual email -- I liked it so much I memorized it -- 'Congolese crayfish abominate powdery henbane emulsion conjecture little stuffy velouraviatrix ditto dichotomous abdomen.' Who would think up something like that? It's the randomly generated poetry of our technologically enabled



society, I thought. The next wave of emails consisted of words with numbers attached. Like 452 biennium and 455 infest. I decided it was poetry being delivered one word at a time. The numbers were assembly instructions."

Henry just looked at him. "And what does this have to do with me and my strange little problem?"

Mark waved his expressive hands. "The universe is sending you its own version of poetry. A crazy kind of sonnet."

"Not enough structure for a sonnet," Henry said.

Mark grinned. "Haiku, then. All about balance."

"Free verse, I think, if it's poetry at all."

Mark leaned forward. "But here's another thought. Are the objects coming to *you* or to your *house*? Has anything materialized around you when you were somewhere else?"

Henry shrugged. "I don't know. This is the first time I've left the house for any length of time since it started to happen."

Mark leaned back. "That might be your message, then."

"What?"

"That you should leave the house more often. If you don't get out and stroll around the world, the world will find a way to stroll around *you*."

Henry thought that over. He tried to walk a half mile or more every day. There was a Walgreens on the corner where he could fill his prescriptions and buy a few necessary items, and the local library was right across the street from the store. Who needed more than books and the occasional quart of milk on a daily basis? He generally had groceries delivered, and one of his daughters would come pick him up any time he needed to get to a doctor or do some serious shopping. It was true he had let the parameters of his world shrink down more than he should have. Ellen would never have permitted such a thing to happen.

"Our little neighborhood runs a bus that'll take you down to Seaton Square," Henry said slowly. Seaton Square was about five miles from his house, a pretentious but pretty shopping mall built around a central green space alive with fountains. "Anybody can ride it, but it's mostly seniors and a few young mothers with their babies. If you call before ten in the morning, they'll come right to your door to pick you up."

"Maybe you ought to do that every once in a while," Mark said. "But you know you can call me any time you need a ride. And Mom and Aunt Kelly are only twenty minutes away."

Henry nodded. "Yeah. But I'm gonna try the bus first. That's a good idea, Mark."

Mark opened his mouth to answer, but he was interrupted by the tinny sound of a small synthesizer playing Pachelbel's *Canon*. Mark grinned. "Nice ringtone," he said.

Henry glanced around. Sure enough, there was a small black cell phone lying on the bookcase across the room. Henry was reasonably certain it hadn't been there before. "Not mine," he said.

Mark's eyes lit up. "Quantum leap!" he cried, and he jumped up to run over and get a closer look. But he was only two steps from the bookcase when the cell phone vanished. The *Canon* was still playing.

—*igms*—

Monday morning, Henry phoned the folks at the START bus (Seniors Traveling Around "R" Town, which made him chuckle every time he saw the logo). An hour later, he was waiting in front of his house when the perky blue and white van pulled up in front, the logo festooned on almost every available surface. It was a gorgeous day for October, in the low 60s and saturated with sun, and Henry was smiling when he climbed on board.

There was only one other passenger, and he happened to know her: Amanda Borden, who lived three blocks over. She had been in Ellen's gardening group and book club, but she was also a loud voice in local politics, almost always supporting the liberal causes that were unpopular in this conservative district. Amanda was a good ten years younger than Ellen had been and possessed a similar sort of restless energy. She had curly, shoulder-length red hair just now shading over to gray, and a freckled face creased by years of laughter. The instant she saw him, she waved him over.

"Henry Cline! I haven't seen you in months!" she exclaimed as he dropped into the seat across the narrow aisle from her. "How've you been? Feeling all right?"

Ellen had always despised the fact that anyone over the age of sixty started every conversation with a health check, but Henry was actually glad to have someone inquire. Maybe because he liked his answer. "Good. A little trouble with my eyes, so I don't really drive any more, but not too many aches. How about you?"

Amanda gestured down at her foot, which was wrapped in what looked like a walking cast. Henry noticed a sporty black cane resting against her seat. "Oh, I had bunion surgery on my right foot, so I'm not supposed to walk much *or* drive with it, but I can't stand sitting in the house all day. So I've been taking the bus to the Square every day, having a cup of coffee, and coming home again. Makes me cheerful enough to keep from setting the neighbor's cat on fire."

That made him snort with laughter. "I'm just out for a little variety myself," he said. "Hadn't thought about what I'd do once I got there."

"Well, come have a coffee with me. One of those frappuccinos. You just know they've got to be horrible for you, but I'm seventy. I've been good all my life. I think I'll get it *with* the extra shot of cholesterol, thank you very much."

"I don't know that you've been good all your life," he observed. "Unless you're talking strictly diet."

That elicited a sharp crack of laughter. "I think my ex-husband would say you're right," she agreed.

"So how are your boys? Any news?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but the words were suspended when an orange baseball cap suddenly materialized on Henry's lap. Amanda stared at it a moment, then lifted her eyes to his face. She seemed as intrigued as she was astounded. "Have you been practicing sleight of hand?" she asked. "Because that trick is very good."

Henry felt a faint smile come to his mouth. He lifted up the hat and fitted it on his head. "I'd tell you, but you wouldn't believe me."

"Tell me anyway."

"Things have just started appearing. Hanging around for a few minutes, then disappearing again. I don't know where they come from. I don't know where they go. It's the damndest thing." He peered at her from under the bill of the cap. "I kind of like it, though."

"I *love* it," she replied breathlessly. "But -- these items are real? You can touch them? I could touch them?"

For an answer, he handed over the cap and she put it on her own jaunty curls. "It sure feels real," she said, digging in her purse and coming out with a mirror. "Ew -- bad color for me, though. Now, if I had a green hat, I --"

Before she could finish her sentence, the hat had disappeared. Her eyes were huge as they stared back at her reflection, and then over at Henry.

"Told you," he said.

Her face was bright as an Easter sunrise. She exclaimed, "This is the most charming thing that's happened to me for weeks!"

Henry had no other plans for Seaton Square, so he paced slowly alongside Amanda as she hobbled around, leaning on her cane. They looked in shop windows, exclaimed at the prices of the merchandise, shook their heads over what passed for fashion nowadays, and talked, by Henry's strict count, to four thousand strangers who responded happily to Amanda's blinding smile.

"I think I finally understand what people mean when they say things like, 'Oh, Amanda, she's never met a stranger,'" he told her as they sat at the window table of a Starbucks and watched the crowd saunter past.

Amanda laughed. "Well, you know, you can be friendly or you can be grouchy, and it always seems to take less effort to be friendly. Too much work to be mean-spirited."

Henry sipped at the vanilla frappuccino Amanda had insisted he order. He had thought it was too sweet until she told him to think of it as ice cream, and then he liked it a lot. "I don't think of myself as grouchy, exactly, but I find it easier not to be drawn into casual interactions with people I've never met and am unlikely to see again."

"I get a little kick every time anyone smiles at me, even a stranger. Sometimes especially a stranger. Especially a stranger with a dour look on his face. Yes, like that one!" she said. "I like to see if I can win him over."

"How often do you fail?"

She actually stuck her tongue out at him and tossed her red hair. "Not as often as you'd like to think."

They were there long enough to decide that second cups of coffee were in order. Henry fetched them, since Amanda's foot was aching. "Our *barista* is named Tiffany," he told her as he sat down again. He just wanted to say the word *barista*, which he had seen on a sign over the counter. "She seems too young for a name like that. Shouldn't she be a Haley or an Emma instead?"

"And what *about* all those girls named Tiffany?" Amanda demanded. "What happens to them when they're eighty-five? Amanda was a pretty name when I was a teenager, and it's a classic name now that I'm a grandmother. But what happens to all these Tiffanys and Crystals when they get old?"

"Maybe they'll never get old," Henry said.

"Everybody gets old."

He shrugged and gave her a lurking smile. "Lotta magic at work in the universe," he said. "Maybe these girls will be suspended in time. Get the right name when you're born, you never have to age."

Amanda rolled her eyes, but then she seemed to think it over. She sat forward in her chair, her face animated. "Wouldn't that be something," she said. "There's a phrase people use, when they're trying to be sarcastic, when they're trying to belittle something someone else has done. They say, 'Wonders never cease.' But I *love* that phrase. Think about it! The Grand Canyon. Heart surgery. Land rovers on Mars. They're all amazing. They're all wonders. And there are new wonders being dreamed up every day. So I don't know, maybe you're right. Maybe some magic will come down and touch some people and they'll never get old. That would be pretty awe-inspiring." She gestured with her right hand, as if trying to conjure words out of the air.

Instead, a vase of yellow roses materialized in the middle of the table. There were twelve of them, and they exuded a subtle but insistent scent. Amanda laughed in delight, and then made a great show of leaning forward, closing her eyes, and inhaling deeply. Henry's attention was caught by Tiffany and her fellow *baristas*, who stood slack-jawed behind the serving counter, staring in their direction.

But his gaze went right back to Amanda when she opened her eyes and smiled at him. "As I was saying," she said. "Wonders never cease."

Tuesday, Henry took the START bus to Seaton Square again, accompanied once more by Amanda. This time they ate hot fudge sundaes at a local sweet shop and argued about who should run for mayor. He skipped Wednesday so he could have lunch with Kelly, and Thursday, so he could putter in the yard on an unexpectedly warm day. But on Friday he called for another pickup, and Amanda was on the bus when it arrived.

"When's that foot going to be healed?" he asked as he helped her down the steps at Seaton Square. "Is it getting better?"

She grimaced, less from pain than irritation, he thought. "Better, but slowly," she said. "Can't wait till I can drive again. I'll take you on a road trip. Maybe we'll go all the way downtown someday."

It was too cool to walk around for long, so soon they were back in Starbucks, nibbling on biscotti, which Henry didn't like, and drinking latte, which he did. "Good thing my pension check arrived today," he said as he fetched their second lattes. "Man could go broke drinking this stuff."

Amanda took her first sip as she took every first sip, her eyes closed in a sensual swoon. "Oh, but that's good stuff." She took another swallow, then asked, "Any new manifestations at your house since I've seen you last?"

He nodded. "Couple of books. An electric bill. A glass of wine, half-full. A razor, covered with shaving cream. That must have been an interesting morning, I thought. Man's half through shaving his face and he sets the razor down for a second -- and it's gone. Where'd it go? Did he knock it off the sink? He goes out into the bedroom and asks his wife, 'Did you take my razor?'"

"Why would I take your stupid razor?" Amanda chimed in. "You're always blaming me when you lose anything."

Henry grinned. "And he goes back to the bathroom, and there it is, just where he left it. He's probably still confused, two days later."

"Anything else?"

"Well, there was a spider in the kitchen yesterday. I squashed it with a paper towel, but when I threw the paper towel away, it was clean. So, I don't know, did the smashed body teleport back to somebody else's house? That would be pretty weird, I think."

"Who killed this bug and didn't wipe it off the wall?" Amanda said, once more slipping into the part of the annoyed woman of the house. "Honestly, don't you kids know how to keep anything clean?"

"Exactly."

"What do you think --" she started to say, and then stopped with a gasp, staring down at the table. A woman's ring was lying right next to her coffee cup. It was white gold or silver, and its ornate filigree setting held a diamond that looked to be half a carat or more. "Henry," she breathed.

"Somebody's going to be missing that awfully fast," he said.

She snatched it up. "It's *mine*. Henry, it's my mother's wedding ring. I lost it more than ten years ago. Henry, where did you find it?"

He was both pleased and troubled, because of course he had had no knowledge of the ring's existence and no way to direct the magic to fetch it. "Don't ask me," he said. "I don't have a clue. Look, Amanda, this stuff never stays around for long. Don't get too attached to it."

"I know, I know," she said. She slipped the ring onto her right hand and began rummaging in her purse with her left hand. All the while she kept staring at the diamond, turning her fingers this way and that. "But just to see it again -- after all these years -- oh, I can't tell you how happy this makes me."

She pulled a cell phone out of her bag, flipped it open one-handed, and held it in front of her as if it were a magnifying glass. "Is that a camera phone?" Henry inquired.

She nodded. "I'm taking a picture of my hand with the ring on it. I didn't even have *that* much when I lost it." There was a tiny flare of light, and then Amanda looked up with a smile. She used his name for the fourth time in about thirty seconds. He thought she must like saying it. "Henry, thank you so much. Even just for this glimpse."

He was a little uncomfortable, but he also felt a certain satisfaction at the thought that he had been able to give Amanda such a gift. "Anything to oblige a lady."

She put the phone away and kept studying her hand. "I wanted to use it as my wedding band, but Carter had already bought me a diamond, and I couldn't tell him I didn't like it. I wore my mother's ring on my right hand for years. After I got divorced, for a few years I was too depressed to wear *any* rings. They just felt wrong on my hands. But then when I finally got over *that* stupid feeling, this ring was missing. I looked for it everywhere. I even called Carter and accused him of stealing it. Of course he denied it." She shrugged. "Not one of our more civilized conversations."

"Maybe he did steal it," Henry said. "And the magic has stolen it from him. At least for a while."

She wriggled her fingers again. "But it's mine for a moment."

In fact, the ring stayed on Amanda's hand for the rest of the day. They left Starbucks about half an hour later, the ring still in place, and it didn't vanish as they meandered through a gift shop or waited for the START bus to arrive. She was still admiring it during the whole ride home.

"I wonder what the statute of limitations is," Amanda said. "You know, 'If it doesn't disappear within twenty-four hours, it has now solidly made its place in a new reality.' I wonder when I can be sure it's mine to keep."

"I don't know if it works that way," Henry said. He shrugged. "Even life doesn't work that way. You can never count on keeping anything, or anyone, one heartbeat past the present moment."

Amanda sighed, and then, as the bus jolted to a halt in front of Henry's house, she smiled. "A lesson we've all had to learn over and over again," she said. "But thanks for teaching it to me again in such a pretty way."

She waved as he climbed down the steps, waved again as he glanced back from the front door. Once inside the house, he didn't know what to do with himself, and for the rest of the afternoon he proved too restless to settle. So he worked out in the garden for a while, despite the chill, then spent some time cleaning out boxes in the basement. Right before it got dark, he walked down to the library to check out a couple new books, but after he got home, he didn't feel like sitting still and reading them.

The START bus didn't run on weekends, so he wouldn't have a chance to see Amanda again until Monday. He could call her, he supposed, and ask if the ring had disappeared yet, but he didn't know her number. He wondered how long it would stay on her hand before the magic reclaimed it. Or maybe this *was* the end result of magic; maybe the universe had transported her ring somewhere else for ten long years and only today remembered to return it. He would have to ask Mark if such a thing were possible.

He was sitting over dinner that night, trying to get interested in one of the library books, when a photograph appeared next to his glass of water. He picked it up and studied it for a long time. It was the last picture he'd ever taken of Ellen, two weeks before she had the aneurysm that killed her without warning. She was heading out the door, maybe to meet one of their daughters at the mall, and she was dressed in a bright red sweater. She had paused at the door to wave as she left, and he had snapped the shot to use up the last of a roll of film. Naturally, she was smiling. She looked healthy, she looked cheerful, she looked like she would live for another twenty years.

He had always hated this picture, because it was so obvious that she was saying goodbye. *I'm on my way now. You can't come with me. But don't worry about me -- I'm happy. I'm always happy.* He had placed the picture in the bottom of a bag of Ellen's clothes that he donated to some charity, because he couldn't bear to throw it away and he couldn't bear to keep it.

He wondered where it had been all these years, waiting for the right moment to come back to him.

*Goodbye, Henry. I'm on my way now. Be happy.*

He was pretty sure he finally understood what the universe was trying to tell him. A poem, indeed, sprawling and messy though it was. He laid down the photo and went searching for the phone book.



Artwork by Emily Tolson

## The Braiding

by Pat Esden

"Maestro Oplontis, this is your glassblower?" The magus' voice sang with unexpected virility.

Iseau glanced up from her burn-scarred fingers. Magus Sharad was no older than she. Not only was he young, but he wore a leather doublet and had an exquisite sword hanging at his side. He looked more like one of the Doge's guard than the eastern magus he claimed to be.

Iseau's grandfather took her hand and placed it in Sharad's. "This is Iseau, my granddaughter, the finest master glassblower in the Venetian Republic. May her art braid with your magic to bring honor to both of our families."

Sharad's hand warmed hers and his gray eyes lit on every portion of her body.

She glared back, and as she did so she noticed the hint of a blue scarf around his neck. The same color as the ceremonial tunic she'd been given to wear for this endeavor.

A prickle ran up her spine. Did this silk bear some significance? By putting on this tunic was she somehow bonded to him? That was not the agreement. They were to travel to Venice and create a beating heart for the Doge's dying daughter -- nothing more.

Sharad's lips parted in a grin. "I was told of your skill, but not your beauty."

"I have been told very little about you." She jerked her hand from his.

Her grandfather swept between them. "Iseau has prepared examples of her work." He fluttered his fingers and two boys appeared bearing an open coffer lined with deep purple glass twinkling amid its folds.

Sharad and a crowd of onlookers pressed in around the coffer.

Iseau moved to join them, but her grandfather's fingers clamped her wrist and held her back.

His voice was low. "What do you mean by pulling your hand away from Sharad like that? Are you intent on embarrassing the family the way your parents did?"

It always came back to this -- her parents failed attempt at braiding. Her father, once a master glassblower, blinded; her alchemist mother left insane. Did what she risked mean nothing? She lowered her eyes. "Don't worry, I'll honor you."

Sharad faced the crowd and said in a loud voice, "The Doge did not lie when he said the house of Oplontis could provide me with glass as clear and pure as my magic requires, and the finest glassblower to shape it. Frankly, I did not expect to have those needs so thoroughly fulfilled."

He took Iseau's hand. "With Maestra Oplontis's talents the possibility of saving the Doge's daughter is real." He surveyed the crowd, his eyes narrowing on the village priest. "And if the church says what we do is unholy then I say: Would a benevolent God let a child die rather than use magic? Is that not a worse sin?"

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

Iseau bit her lip. If Sharad was intent on speaking against the church, then perhaps it wasn't just honor and patronage her family needed from the Doge -- perhaps what they needed was his protection against the Pope's men.

Sharad addressed Iseau's grandfather. "In the near future I will make time to linger here in Carpus, but right now I must make haste." He turned to Iseau. "The physician-magus to the Doge sent his manservant with a message. It's not good -- the Doge's daughter is near death."

He snagged Iseau's arm and led her away from her grandfather and the crowd, across the piazza and toward the quay where his galley rose and fell beside a bevy of smaller ships.

What she wouldn't give to travel foreign lands like Sharad did. It didn't seem right. If she and Sharad succeeded, the Doge would grant her any favor she asked, except the one she most wanted. As long as the secrets of glassblowing were the foundation of the Republic's wealth, she would never be allowed to travel beyond its boundaries. It was an unbreakable law enforced by the blade of the Doge's assassin.

Sharad's hand tightened on Iseau's arm. A fierce trembling rushed through her body.

She sucked in her breath. She'd felt this way before. It was as if her blood quivered and her heart could rage no faster. Her mother would have babbled that such a stirring was the shudder of magic, risen from the wellspring of her ancestors in Tintagel. But this wasn't magic - it was nerves.

He leaned close to her. "You seem tense. Don't you wish to be the first to succeed at braiding glass blowing and magic?"

Iseau stopped walking. "Any reluctance you sense is because I lack knowledge. The scrolls you sent for me to study were simplified -- incomplete. How is the braiding accomplished? Have you braided with any other art? Before we board the galley, I'd like answers to these questions."

Sharad's gray eyes darkened like the ocean at twilight. "We magi have secrets, just as you glassblowers do."

Without seeming to care if anyone noticed, he grabbed her shoulder with one hand, and fondled the clear glass beads she wore. "These beads shimmer like rain in moonlight. Tell me the secret. How do you clarify glass when no other house can?"

Iseau wrenched herself from his grip.

Sharad had made his point: Every art has its secrets.

"Fair enough," she said. "For now."

His tongue wet his lips. "I will tell you the most vital part of the braiding. Concentration. You must focus totally on the glassblowing and not on what I am doing -- that is the key." Sharad took a long breath. "When we're aboard ship, I will explain more." He glanced at his galley, to a gentleman who paced the deck, a man with the dress and bearing of a Venetian guild master.

"Is that the physician-magus's man?" she asked.

"Yes, his name is Alberto. He'll be traveling with us. And I need to speak with him before we depart." Sharad bowed to her. "My manservant will get you settled."

He called to an elderly man in Persian robes who stood scratching his hindside. "Baladji, see to Maestra Oplontis." Then Sharad strode away, toward the gangplank.

Thinking there was no reason for her to be relegated to a manservant's care, Iseau started after Sharad.

Baladji snagged her by her sleeve.

Iseau glared at him. But in the brief second Baladji held her back, Sharad had disappeared.

Baladji shifted his weight from leg to leg. "There is no need to run off. I can help you."

He gestured for her to follow him and chattered as he led the way along the dock. He spoke rapidly, but fell silent as his eyes followed a passing seagull.

The gull glided down onto the water. Baladji squinted at it, and then screeched like the bird. It seemed peculiar that Sharad would keep such an addlebrained manservant.

Iseau's apprentice, Petro, strode up from behind them with her toolbox balanced on his shoulder. "Is everything in order?" she asked Petro.

He nodded. The look in his eyes reassured her that the box contained not only her tools but also the ingredient she needed for clarifying the glass.

She turned back toward Baladji. He still stared at the bird. "Should my apprentice board with the sailors and go into the hold?" she suggested.

Baladji nodded his head. "That'll be good, yes," he said, grabbing a passing sailor and asking him to help Petro board. Then he led her across the gangplank and onto the galley's forward deck.

Once on board, Baladji motioned to a woven mat and some cushions set against the rail. "I'll fix tea. The others will join you in a moment."

She smiled at Baladji. "No need to serve tea on my account."

"Sharad insists." Baladji bowed, and then vanished into the hold.

Iseau chose a cushion and sat. All around her, the ship was alive with commotion: sailors throwing off lines, the galley master shouting to the oarsmen, the sails unfurling as the ship eased away from shore.

Iseau struggled to find a comfortable position. Surely below deck there were quarters that would afford more comfort and privacy.

A shiver jangled up her spine. Was it possible that Sharad wanted her ill at ease? She adjusted the tunic so it didn't bind her legs. He'd get no pleasure from her discomfort. She drew in a deep breath and looked for Sharad. He stood on the rear deck with Alberto and the galley's captain. Perhaps through their gestures she could understand what they were talking about.

Sharad reached inside his doublet and drew out something the size of a finger that glinted silver as the sunlight hit it.

The captain shook his head.

As if he wished he were somewhere else, the physician-magus's man, Alberto, looked away.

Sharad stepped closer to the captain . . .

Iseau's view was blocked by Baladji, coming up from the hold.

Baladji set down a kettle, squatted, and began to prepare tea. Finally he sat, and Iseau could see Sharad again.

Sharad had one hand on the captain's back, his other pointed at the ship's sail. As if in response, the sail billowed and the galley began to cut against the tide.

Iseau's shoulders tensed. Could it be that Sharad's powers were strong enough to change breeze to wind? It seemed unlikely. But the captain, who moments ago looked uncertain, now looked astonished.

Though she had not noticed him coming across the deck, Alberto was in front of her. Now that he was close, she recognized him. She had seen him at the Doge's functions, standing by himself, pursing his lips, looking uncomfortable.



Alberto crouched and placed a covered crock on the deck. "Sharad wanted me to tell you he'll join us in a minute," he said, removing the lid from the crock.

Baladji frowned at the crock. "What's in there? It smells putrid."

Alberto's voice faltered as he dipped his fingers into what looked like brine. "Something I hope is not too horrible for a lady to look at."

Iseau leaned forward. "I have a strong stomach," she lied, covering her nose with her hand.

Alberto fished out a gray lump.

"Ah, you brought it," Sharad's voice rang out as he strode across the deck and sat next to Iseau.

Using the lid of the crock as a plate, Alberto set the lump down.

Iseau's stomach lurched as she recognized it from the drawing in the scrolls Sharad had sent to her. It was a child's heart.

"Don't worry." Alberto's hands fidgeted in his lap. "She was an alchemist's child who died a natural death from the same red fever that weakened the heart of the Doge's daughter."

"Excellent. The physician-magus must have found this invaluable." Sharad took the heart in his fingers and examined it.

"It's disgusting," Baladji said, pushing a bowl of tea toward Iseau.

Sharad set the heart on the deck in front of her. "Iseau, you've seen the drawings. Now you need to study this -- commit the exact measurements to your mind."

Taking a deep breath Iseau reached out. "Interesting," she said, swallowing hard. "It is the same size across as the width of my palm." She struggled to remain impassive as she closed her hand around the heart.

"Would you like to cut it open, see the chambers?" Alberto asked Iseau, his thin lips parting in enthusiasm.

It seemed her façade had fooled him, at least. "No, the drawings were explicit enough," she said. Feeling braver, she turned to Sharad. "I do, however, wish to hear more details about the braiding."

Sharad smiled, showing perfect teeth. "I suppose there's no harm in telling you a little of the secret. But first we'll enjoy tea and perform a blessing."

The tea was strong and unpleasant, but the ritual seemed important to Sharad, so Iseau sipped it.

Sharad drank his in one gulp, thumped his bowl down and, while Iseau finished hers, he reached inside his doublet and pulled out a rolled piece of blue silk, half the size of a scroll.

Closing his eyes, Sharad held his hands over the silk roll and mouthed the word: Persia. He unfastened the copper band that bound the roll. Inside were delicate silver tools: nippers, a needle -- thin and long, yet etched with faint symbols -- a curved blade with a twisted handle, and delicate star-shaped forceps. Iseau had never seen such fine silver work.

Baladji and Alberto stared intently as Sharad picked up the nippers and palmed the needle. Alberto caught Iseau's eye. He shook his head at her as if in warning.

Not sure she had interpreted his nod correctly, Iseau glanced away and then back at him. Alberto cradled the heart in his hands, examining it. She must have been mistaken -- he had nothing on his mind besides the heart.

In a single motion, Sharad rose and stood behind Iseau.

Her pulse quickened, a foreboding slithering through her body.

"Stand for a moment." He reached down, helped her to her feet, and turned her so she faced toward him, away from the others.

"Is this necessary?" she asked.

"It's harmless -- a blessing, a bonding, that's all." He pushed the nippers into her hand.

From his doublet, Sharad produced a silver vial and uncorked it. "Would be prettier if it were made of glass." A smile creased his face and his voice uplifted. "Clip your nails into the bottle, starting with your thumb -- only your left, your heart hand."

Iseau hesitated.

Sharad nudged her hand with the bottle. He arched an eyebrow.

She took a deep breath. This blessing appeared similar to what Sharad and the captain had performed, and the captain seemed unharmed. And she had promised her grandfather she would cooperate.

The nippers were sharp and in a moment she had all five clippings inside the bottle.

Recorking the bottle, he slid it in his doublet, intoning the words "Explicium -- Sublicare -- Persia" as he did so.

Iseau's shoulders tightened. Those words did not have the ring of a blessing. They were like the chants her mother used to babble. What had her mother called incantations that ended in a place name: blood-magic?

All of a sudden, Iseau grew dizzy. Sharad grasped her by the elbow. "One more thing." His hand slid around her waist.

Sharad's face wavered in and out of focus. "What sort of tea was that?" she muttered.

"If you are seasick and don't have the strength to finish, we might as well turn around." Letting go of her, he scowled. "I really thought as independent as you seem, a master glassblower, educated, a free woman -- that you would be less . . . fragile."

She knew he had said those words on purpose, that despite her faintness, her boiling blood would compel her to prove she was more than he expected. "I'll do what you require," she said, trying to regain her bearings.

"Good, because now I'm going to show you one of those details you wanted." With a gesture, Sharad indicated her back. "I need to touch you, just there," he said.

She glanced at Alberto and Baladji.

Their eyes widened --

"Would you two give us a moment?" Sharad commanded.

Baladji muttered something in a foreign tongue. Alberto grabbed the older man by his arm, hauled him to his feet, and walked him to the rail.

Without warning, one of Sharad's hands tightened on her waist.

She pulled against his grip.

Sharad held her tighter. "You've never felt a man's touch?" His other hand brushed her buttocks.

"None so bold as you," she said, her voice a weak challenge.

She closed her eyes.

Sharad's fingers moved slowly, pressing gently against her lower spine. Numbness crept up her legs. Sparks swirled though the darkness of her mind. Inexplicably she found herself breathless and thinking about her lover: the tautness of his stomach, the eagerness of his hands, but her lover was nothing compared to the burn of this magus's touch.

Sharad's breath warmed her ear. "This is where the magic will enter you," he whispered, touching the small of her back.

As his words sank in, she felt a stabbing pain, and an inhuman sear encompassed her with viselike cramps.

Iseau yanked away from his grip. "For all the saints!" She swung around, and froze.

Sharad was dropping the etched needle he had palmed into the silver vial, its point red with her blood.

His smile twisted.

"You bastard!" she shouted, and even the oarsmen went silent.

Sharad lowered himself onto a cushion and sat splayed-legged, beaming at her. "Baladji, more tea," he called out.

Her jaw set, Iseau stood over Sharad. "Explain yourself." She stared into the steel of his eyes. "I am not stupid. There's no need to insult me with provocative trickery. Tell me what you just did, why you need my fingernails and blood. Explain the braiding. I know it's not simple or safe. It is no secret what happened to my parents."

He ran his finger around the edge of his tea bowl.

She struggled to control her fury. "What makes you so sure you can do it? That we won't end up like my parents? What makes you think your magic is stronger than my mother's was?"

"You know nothing of me." He rose, and stared at the billowing sail.

"Answer my questions." She seized his arm. "You never saw my parents: my father's talent useless without his eyesight, my mother gone mad."

Sharad's voice became low. "The source of my magic rises from the oldest blood and the deepest cisterns of Persia. I do not wish to insult your mother. But I suspect that the fountainhead of her alchemist's magic was some peat-infested quagmire."

The heat drained from her face. How he had said it infuriated her, yet it was what she had always suspected. Her mother's inborn art was slight, perhaps tainted.

Sharad continued. "Iseau, you must work the glass, pretend I am not in the room. When my magic enters you in the same place as the needle did, you must put the feeling from your thoughts. Separation of our actions and minds, until that last second when I will guide you -- that is how it must be."

Iseau listened as he went on explaining the details. The braiding would start just before she completed the heart, the infusion of magic plaiting with, and cooling and curing, the glass. He told her that, if the braiding was done correctly, the pain should be slight and her subsequent blindness short-lived . . . When he finished talking, other than being concerned about the blindness, she felt satisfied.

It was not until later, as she stood alone watching the outer islands of the Venetian lagoon waver into sight that she realized Sharad had told her nothing of importance.

She knew she should go find him and question him further. But the vertigo was just subsiding and she hadn't the strength to confront him. So she stood listening to the snap of the lowering sail and the grind of chain as the anchor was set.

Creeping into her mind, deeper than those ship-born sounds, came the memory of voices, which Sharad had unwittingly awakened.



She was a child of ten, standing on the northern tip of Carpus, looking out at the smooth sea. Her mother had set a basket of thorn apples on a rock. "Iseau, look at the horizon," her mother said.

Usually Iseau ignored her mother's babbling, but this time there was something in her mother's tone, something odd: sanity. And like the sun on the waves, her mother's eyes sparkled as she spoke. "That's where I came from -- out there beyond the reach of Venice, beyond the threats of the assassin's knife and the church's whim. Tintagel: it is the place of your ancestors and the word for strength, for freedom, for magic. Iseau, it is all I wish for you."

Until midday Iseau sat, while her mother gazed out over the sea, watching cormorants disappearing under the waves and then rising, flying from the water like phoenixes from ash.

"We should go home now," Iseau said.

Suddenly, her mother clasped her arm so tight Iseau was sure it would leave a bruise. "We did it, your father and I, because we wanted the glory, the mythic-power of clear glass infused with magic. But we failed and the magic humbled us. It tore and bonded us in so many ways; no human could ever understand it. How we live now, no human should have to."

Her mother released Iseau's arm, scrambled to her feet and fled toward the glassworks.

Not wanting to return without the thorn apples they had come for, Iseau retrieved the gathering basket, and with her mother's words swirling in her mind, she finished filling it.

A few moments later, she walked up to the doorway of the glassworks and hesitated. An apprentice brushed by her on his way out to get wood for the furnace. Her mother sat on a workbench fingering a string of beads and her father took a pouch from his apron. He opened it and sprinkled a black powder into the crucible -- into the fierce heat of the molten glass.

"What's that?" Iseau asked.

Her father's blank eyes glared in the direction of her voice. "Get out of here. Run, now!"

Then there was an explosion. Shards of glass. Bricks pushing her into the damp grass. And towers of endless flame.



Iseau stood motionless on the ship's sloped deck, drained by the memory of her parent's suicide and her own daylong pretense of strength. Was there nothing left in her but weariness? Perhaps a few more moments of calm and cool air and she'd feel like herself again.

"The city is alive tonight with celebration." Alberto came beside her. "I just pray the Doge's daughter is alive as well. No night could be more right than this -- every eye in Venice has turned to the consecration of the basilica of San Marcos. All the festivities make it easy for the Church to ignore this magic."

Iseau stared at the black water and the flicker of lanterns as the gondolas come toward the host of galleys. No matter how many times she had come to Venice, the sight of the city across the haze of the lagoon gave her pause.

Alberto put his hand on her arm. "Frightened?"

"Either we will succeed or fail," she said, trying to sound confident.

Although she said nothing to warrant it, Alberto laughed as if they were enthralled in light conversation. Then he spoke, barely audible. "My master, the physician-magus, is a wise and charitable man. That is why I willingly completed the braiding with him."

For a moment Iseau couldn't believe what she had heard. Other than her parents, she hadn't heard of anyone who had even attempted the braiding. She started to turn toward Alberto, but he put his hand on her arm, warning against any movement.

"Sharad does not tell half the truth. As I was not always a manservant, neither was Baladji. He was Sharad's own mentor, a gifted Persian magus -- until the student overpowered the master." Alberto paused, his hand trembling. "The Doge's daughter must have a heart, to that end I am sworn, but do not let Sharad do more than that. Once his powers have flowed through your hands to infuse the glass, do not let his magic remain within you a second longer. If you do, Sharad will plait his magic with your art so tight that when he withdraws his magic, your art will be withdrawn as well. Do not let him take the braiding to its fullest extent or even the Doge will be in danger."

Speechless, Iseau stared at Alberto. Then she managed to ask, "And you, before you were a manservant?"

"I was a physician. A man devoted to the Doge and to my sister, the Doge's wife." His head shook as he lowered it. "I do not regret that I am now incapable of being anything more than a simple servant, for at least the physician-magus left my memory intact. Sharad did not do the same for poor Baladji; neither did he do it for others whose arts he's stolen: the silversmith, the swordsman, the warrior, and who knows how many more talents he possesses. The Doge refuses to think ill of Sharad. But the physician-magus has had Sharad watched. He is dangerous, Iseau."

As the thin outline of a gondola pulled along side the galley, Iseau shuddered with apprehension.

"The physician-magus and I will help you if we can, but there is no guarantee. We have our own safety . . ." Alberto touched Iseau's hand.

From behind them came the solid steps of Sharad. "The Doge has been prompt in sending a boat for us."

"I was just saying the same thing myself," Alberto's lips twitched, as he bowed and stood aside so Sharad and Iseau could descend into the gondola first.

As they approached the city, Iseau tried to appear calm by letting herself be drawn into the excitement: the water undulating from the throngs of boats, the piazza flushed with the light of bonfires, and revelers laughing as they waited for the basilica doors to open and the consecration to begin.

But when they disembarked and entered the Doge's Palace, the contrast made it impossible for her not to shiver. Unlike the lively piazza, the dark palace seemed occupied only by the echoes of their footsteps and the unsettling shadows of the few remaining guards.

"It appears the Doge has declared a convenient evening holiday," Sharad grinned as he took Iseau's arm.

She thought about pulling away, but she didn't want Sharad to sense that her fear intensified with every step. So she forced a smile and matched his quick pace as Alberto led them down long hallways, past pots of citrus, up a wide staircase to the Doge's quarters, and into the girl's chamber.

As they entered the room, Iseau's eyes were drawn to the sparkle of a thousand glass ornaments hanging from the vaulted ceiling. Only as a second thought did she glance at the vast bed and notice the ashen-faced child lying motionless in the sea of yellow pillows.

The girl was frail, her face aged from battling disease. Iseau sucked in her breath. When had her desire to please her grandfather, and her fears of Sharad and the braiding pushed her concerns for the dying child so far aside that mere baubles of glass could distract her?

She stared at the child, only able to look away when the physician-magus shuffled in from the antechamber. His eyes widened when he saw them, then narrowed on Alberto. "You should not have wasted time bringing them here."

Sharad moved to touch the girl's wrist. "You're right," he said to the physician-magus. "We should have gone directly to the furnaces. She's barely alive."

Iseau's heart quickened. "Are the furnaces close by? My toolbox?" she asked.

"The furnaces are hidden within the palace -- close to the girl, yet discreet enough that the church can overlook them," Alberto replied. "Your tools and apprentice should have been brought from the galley by now." He motioned for Iseau and Sharad to follow him.

Alberto led them quickly through a maze of passageways and staircases to the cool dark wine cellar. Removing a torch from its wall-bracket he rushed inside a narrow tunnel, and in a moment they were ascending a steep set of stairs into what, on the exterior, must have looked like an out-building used for smoking fish.



As Iseau stepped into the chamber, the smell of the wood smoke and the crack of the fires filled her with a sudden flush of confidence. This was her world and all was ready for her: her tools laid in order on the workbench, Petro soaking cloths, and the heat from the furnaces dampening every brow.

In this realm of fire she wore sweat like crystal beads and her tunics clung to her as if she knelt before the hot mouth of the god Vesuvius. She'd had such fantasies as a child when she stood in the glassworks watching the artisans ply their magic. She had achieved her dreams and she vowed that the Doge's daughter would have a chance to live her dreams as well.

Honor and power were fine for her grandfather and Sharad, but for her, this heart-making was about the child.

Iseau drew a deep breath and cleared her mind.

She picked up a knife from the workbench and, starting at the hem, cut her tunic up and around so its length fell just below her knees. Next she took off her string of beads, placed them on the workbench, and put on her leather apron. She waited for Sharad to make a remark about the ruined tunic, perhaps a spoiled spell. But he was speaking with Alberto and it wasn't until she heard Alberto leave that she felt Sharad wordlessly turn his eyes on her.

It was time to put Sharad out of her mind, time to focus on her work. But that was difficult to do, especially now as she took the pouch from the toolbox. This was the part she had dreaded. This was the first time anyone outside her family would see the secret to clarifying glass. She was sure the man about to see it could not be trusted. Would he sell the secret? Had the Doge already paid him for it?

Iseau pulled the pouch's drawstring, slid her fingers in and took out a thorn apple. It had always amazed her how such a valuable secret as the clarification of glass could come down to such a simple ingredient as a thorn apple. But there was no time now to speculate what Sharad might do with what he was about to learn.

Letting out her breath, Iseau went to the furnace.

Petro had propped open the furnace door; inside, the molten glass waited in the crucible. Her pipes were also ready; she selected one, and twisted the apple onto its end. As she had done so many times, Iseau used the pipe to force the apple into the crucible full of molten glass. The glass roiled up, bringing the impurities to the surface and leaving the untainted glass below. Now Sharad had seen her family's secret -- all that remained was to make the heart.

Iseau took her pipe from the furnace. On the end where the apple had been, a ball of liquid glass glowed as orange as a torch. She crossed the room and rolled the pipe against the workbench. The hot glass cooled and the first hint of clarity showed.

In her mind, Iseau conjured the image of the heart lying on the galley's deck. She blew into the pipe, a subtle breath, then took her pipe back to the furnace and heated the glass again. She took it out, blew with gentle force, and compared the width of the orb to that of her palm.

Silently Petro held out a damp cloth, the glass hissed . . . . Again she heated the glass. Then she pinched the chambers to form the heart. Petro heated a second pipe. The heart passed from one pipe to the other. Now the mouth of the heart was open. Iseau heated the glass again, pinched again, wiped with water . . .

A door opened and closed, and Iseau knew Petro had gone. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Sharad standing like a statue, his arms raised. She pictured the little girl, the gray heart. Focus . . . She nipped the glass heart, forming two arteries. She moved like liquid from furnace to workbench. It was time now, she could feel it -- the magic was starting.

The first sensation felt as if her clothes vanished and a lover approached her from behind, lifting her off her feet, each fleck of her skin, each downy hair, ecstatic . . . She pushed the feeling from her mind, her hands working, moving, following the path she envisioned for them, swift and accurate.

The magic entered her, piercing her at the base of her spine. The shock girdled her. Concentrate . . . She nipped each artery in half, now there were four. A small pipe to shape them, more heat . . .

The magic prickled up her spine. It blazed in her skull. Its tendrils twisted from her eyes and scorched her nostrils as the magic braided with her breath. Her blood was heating, her skin a liquid shell, crystalline and shining, and her fingertips were rods of light.

Suddenly the light became flame. Sparks crackled the length of the pipe, then surged backwards, ramming her fingers and shattering her hold on the pipe.

The pipe fell, metal to stone, and the pliable glass buckled as it collapsed on the floor.

Iseau slumped to the ground, her shoulders quaking. It was over. The heart was ruined.

Turning, she looked up at Sharad.

His concentration had not flinched. His eyes were closed, his body tensed.

"It's over," Iseau cried. "Over!"

"Keep quiet," he growled.

His voice startled her, awakened her. He did not care about the heart. Alberto was right; Sharad was a thief of arts and nothing more.

She tried to get to her feet, but his magic threw her flat against the floor. Iseau screamed and tried to roll away. But the braid of his magic shackled her to him.

Sharad's eyes opened, white and flaming like opals. From deep in his throat came a sound like the rumbling of the sea.

The room chilled.

Sharad chanted louder and waves of pain consumed Iseau's strength. Darkness pulled in from the corners of the room. She groaned. If only she could drive Sharad's voice from her mind.

Iseau gulped air. She fought against the encroaching darkness. Within her chest her heart raged --

Within.

That was it.

The way to fight him was from within.

Sharad had instructed her to focus only on the making of the heart: on something outside of herself. But now, where she had so often felt a stirring in her blood, she felt a surge: her mother's blood, the magic from Tintagel.

Closing her eyes, Iseau pictured the heart floating in the crock of brine, then her own heart. She breathed deeply, in through her nose and out through her mouth. She breathed like the scrolls had said and turned her concentration within herself.

Inside her skull Sharad's chant rang as the tendrils of his magic entwined her mind.

She concentrated on her heart and, fought, and found the power of her mother's blood. Iseau raged, pushing Sharad's flames of magic back from her fingertips, her hands, her arms, her mind. With every ounce of her ancestor's magic she struggled to drive him from her body.

Sharad's braid was deeply rooted, his resistance fierce. He was much stronger than she, stronger than her mother's blood. She needed something more . . .

In front of her on the stone floor lay her pipe. In one motion she grabbed it and swung. The pipe connected solidly with Sharad's knees. He went down. For a second her pain flickered.

Sharad raised his fist and the magic surged back harder.

At that moment she saw it, the hint of blue satin between his fingers. Despite her anguish, she swung again, with all her fury, and hit her mark.

Sharad's knuckles cracked. He yowled in anger as his fingers spasmed, a blue bundle fell to the floor and a silver vial rolled out.

"You're too late. The spell is beyond need of fingernails and blood." Sharad struggled to his feet, his eyes like steel. He threw his head back and intoned, "Breiden -- Arti --"

Iseau lunged forward, her hands throttled Sharad's windpipe. In that second, from the deep cistern of her ancestor's magic, the answer rose into her blood. "Tintagel," she said, inches from his face.

He ripped her hands from his throat. Gasping he staggered back, his eyes widening.

From outside the room, from the basilica of San Marco came the singing of bells across the water of the Grand Canal.

"Tintagel!" Iseau screamed again and, like a changing of tides, she felt the magic sucking from her and raging toward him. Stunned, she watched it: a braid of sparks, flames, and darkness swirling at Sharad -- wave upon wave, tossing him in the air, flinging him against a wall, and then throwing him forward -- his head hitting the workbench and his steel eyes going white, then blank as he dropped to the floor.

At first Iseau thought Sharad was dead. Then he moaned as the dark undertow of magic shimmered silver and rippled away from him -- toward her. She froze, unable to move as it pooled around her legs, its coolness grasping her by the ankles and pulling itself up like a living creature. She shivered as a chill entered her at every pore. It felt as if a sheet of ice were smothering her heart, stifling its beat. This must be the grip of death.

Yet, her heart beat again, she warmed, and when she looked down the magic had disappeared. Her legs, however, trembled and her chest resounded with a powerful stirring.

The door opened and Alberto stood staring, not at her or the motionless Sharad, but at the fist-size lump of glass on the floor.

In her fury to save herself, Iseau had forgotten about the heart -- about the girl.

Tears filled Alberto's eyes. "We've kept the girl alive, but you've destroyed the heart," he said.

Iseau's stomach twisted. She had saved her own life, her memories and art, but in truth she had failed. Failed the girl, failed the Doge, failed her grandfather.

But, something more had happened deep inside of her, something greater than her mere survival. The stirring, the whispers in her blood, had magnified a hundred times. She knew many things she ought not: how to work silver, the feel of a sword as it slices flesh. "The magus . . ." She gestured toward the unconscious form of Sharad.

Alberto bowed his head and turned to leave.

"Wait, you don't understand. He isn't dead." Her heart raced, and despite the stiffness in every portion of her body, she moved quickly and took hold of Alberto's arm. "The magus lives, but has no power." She let go of him and crossed the room to the furnace. She stared back at Alberto. "We can still make the heart. The core of his magic, the arts he had stolen, did not just evaporate. His art, all the arts, are here -- within me."

Alberto paled.

Iseau's voice was firm. "Find my apprentice. I may fail again. I may run out of time. But I am going to try to braid the glass and magic, myself." Wildly she threw wood into the furnace and began to ready her pipes.

Alberto ran to find the apprentice.

Iseau rushed to the workbench, and took an apple from the pouch.

The molten glass roiled as the impurities surfaced. She rolled the glass against the workbench. Petro returned and handed her a damp cloth. Alberto fed the furnace. She rolled and pinched, heated, and cooled the glass. She transferred it from pipe to pipe and nipped arteries . . .

And the heart was made, from liquid shimmer to perfect form, and was ready for the magic. As the scrolls taught, she concentrated, focusing until all she could see was the sparkle of the heart, like rain in the morning sun. Then, as the scrolls did not teach, she focused deep inside herself to the stirring of her mother's blood, to Tintagel and the art that had once belonged to Baladji, a gifted Persian magus.

Without thought for the sear of hot glass against mortal skin, Iseau balanced the pipe on the table and took the molten heart in her hands. As if they were two halves of a shell, her hands enclosed the sparkling heart. She closed her eyes and saw the magic spinning a cocoon of light around the heart. The webbing drew inward, and her fingers felt the cooling, the curing and the writhing as the heart began to beat with life.

When Iseau opened her eyes she could see only shadows and mist. Petro appeared like a swirl of fog as he moved toward her and held out her string of beads. She lowered her head, and he clasped them around her neck. Then, as if in a dream, she followed him -- a glassblower-magus led by her apprentice. They passed Alberto, his head bowed. They traveled back down the tunnel, to the stairs, and the kitchen, into the chancery and through the revelers who had returned from San Marco's. The servants, nobles, guards and tradesmen, stared silently as Iseau passed, her hands glowing with the light as she walked in a trance between them and down the citrus scented hallway to the stairs and the Doge's quarters.

Once she entered the child's chamber, Iseau could make out the Doge, and she heard the sound of a woman weeping. The girl was no longer in her bed. She was lying on a white table in the antechamber. Next to her, Iseau saw the haze of a blue shadow that she knew to be the physician-magus. He was opening the girl's chest with a silver blade.

Iseau opened the white shell that was her hands, and the glass heart beat as she placed it into the girl.



Coolness wiped Iseau's brow. The air was heavy with the scent of the sea and the grind of oars filled her ears. Her body ached and her stomach churned from a lack of food. She wondered if there was enough fresh water for her to both drink and bathe.

There were voices of two men, Petro and Baladji. It seemed hours before she understood their words.

"She's awake. Get the captain," Petro said.

Slowly the dreamy fog lifted from her vision and the cramped cabin came into focus: walls lined with books and swords, crocks and orbs and strange silver chimes, tinkling.



Petro knelt by her, touching her forehead. "The Doge granted you the magus' galley." He paused. "They didn't think you'd recover. They wanted to send you home to Grandfather."

"The girl!?" Her voice was hoarse and fractured.

"She's well." He grinned. "The Church is claiming it was a miracle of San Marco's. But everyone knows it was you."

"Sharad?"

"The Doge's dungeon is not far from the furnaces."

Boots clanked against the board floor. Baladji and a man in a captain's garb crouched by her bed.

"You have brought us luck. The winds are gentle and the sea calm." The captain pointed to the small window as he spoke, "Look on the horizon -- the island of Carpus."

Iseau looked out. She could not see well enough to focus on the horizon. But suddenly everything else clarified: the magus' cabin she lay in, the face of the captain, Baladji and Petro -- and what she was going to do.

There was a power inside of her, something she barely understood. However, she was certain of one thing: she could make clear-glass and braid it with magic. Legends spoke of where this power would lead: crystal spheres for scrying, wands of glass that could transmute . . .

As a glassblower she had respected and feared the Doge and the Venetian law that forbade any artisan from leaving the Republic. But now she had new concerns: what would the Doge command her to do? The Church -- how would they view this sort of magic? And her grandfather -- what would he require of her?

She pulled herself up on the pillows. "Captain, when we get close to Carpus, lower a boat so my apprentice may go ashore," she said.

"But . . ." Petro started to protest.

She turned her head toward him and raised her hand. "You question the wisdom of your master?" She glared at Petro. "Go to my grandfather, tell him I've returned honor to my father's name. Tell him I have gone to Tintagel to find my mother's family. Tell him I'm no longer his servant." She looked at Baladji and the captain. "Once we are beyond sight of Carpus, come and help me to the deck so that I might fill the sails with wind." She let out her breath. "The Doge was grateful when he thought I was dying, but he will be outraged when he learns that a glassblower-magus has fled beyond the boundaries of the Republic."

Iseau lay back on her pillow. Feeling the weight of the clear beads around her neck, she closed her eyes and asked for guidance.

A single word came to her: Tintagel.

The word for strength, for freedom . . .

for magic.

# After This Life

by Janna Silverstein



Artwork by Tomislav Tikulin

The woman next to Warden Chapelle was the first female Jake Drogan had seen in person in years. She sat on one side of a circle of folding chairs set up in the blue room. That was where they held group therapy sessions for other inmates: touchy-feely stuff, pastel colors, a little too much lemon-scented air freshener and waxy floor cleaner. The wire-embedded windows looked out onto chain link fences and razor wire, putting a lie to the illusion of normalcy. The four guards didn't help, either.

He was surprised the conference wasn't being held in a non-contact room, but he wasn't going to ask about it. It was time out of his cell, cushy and colorful; that was what mattered. But he was still cold from the strip search.

This woman -- as Drogan took a chair in the circle, he couldn't stop looking at her. His mouth was dry and he licked his lips, rubbing them with one hand at the same time to hide it.

She seemed to be in her thirties. Nice figure, he guessed, but he couldn't be completely sure because of the dark suit jacket she wore. The jacket hid her hips, too. Slim legs in tailored pants. Smart not to show her legs here, but damn! Straight hair cut short and falling around her cheeks like parentheses. Dark-rimmed glasses perched on her forehead. Egghead chic.

A woman. A pretty one.

Drogan squeezed the half-dollar in his left hand, feeling the edges cutting into the calluses in his palm. Weird to feel again, to feel anything again, here.

He took a seat along with the three other prisoners escorted to the room -- Mitchell, Villanova, Pasco, he knew all these guys -- leaned his elbows on his knees, looked at the woman and waited.

"All right now," Chapelle drawled. "This is Dr. Louisa Ferrara.

She's got a proposition for you boys, approved by the governor. You be good now. You listen to what she's got to say."

"Gentlemen," she said.

Villanova -- 24, scarred across one brown cheek, stick thin, tattooed and unrepentant -- snickered. "Who she think she talkin' to?"

"Hey!" Chapelle snapped. The woman started. Villanova shut up. "Go on, Dr. Ferrara."

"I'm from TransLumina Transports, with the R&D group," she went on. "We're developing something new, and we need people to work with us."

Drogan knew the name TransLumina. Twelve years ago, they were the first company to market commercial teleportation services. They'd revolutionized business, put a bunch of shipping companies into the crapper and created a new economy. At least, that's what Drogan had gotten from the newspapers. To a guy like him, a gardener -- well, a death row convict -- it was pretty remote.

Ferrara opened a leather briefcase and pulled out a handful of booklets, handed them to Mitchell on her left. "Please pass these around," she asked.

Drogan put away his half dollar, took the batch, kept one and passed the rest to Villanova. Beneath a cover page sporting the slick TransLumina logo and the word "Confidential" were thirty pages of information and technical-looking diagrams. Drogan flipped through it, suppressed a smile. Who'd they put these things together for? He had an associate's degree, but most of the guys in here hadn't finished high school.

"Until now," Ferrara said, "TransLumina transport technology has been used only to ship construction materials, manufactured goods and so forth. We've spent the last five years working on something new. Would you please open your booklets to page five?"

Drogan flipped over the table of contents and confidentiality statements. There the heading said, "Light transmission of living subjects."

"Woo-hoo," Villanova said. "Beam me up, Scotty." A chuckle rippled around the circle. But Drogan didn't laugh.

A couple of days ago, Harville, Drogan's lawyer, had come to visit. He'd told Drogan that because he'd earned credits for good behavior, he'd been offered an opportunity that could change his sentence. Harville had him sign a form that said he wouldn't talk about anything he heard in this meeting -- easy enough. He'd learned how to keep his mouth shut after ten years in the pen. Besides, it was another chance to get out of his windowless, eight-by-ten foot cell. Worth a little ink and silence.

Now he understood why.

"For the last five years," Ferrara said, "we've been working on teleportation technology suited to living beings. Until now, this has been impossible. But we've recently teleported mice, rats, pigs and, a year ago, a chimpanzee."

"You're looking for human volunteers, aren't you?" Drogan asked.

"Yes, sir. You are . . .?" Ferrara said.

"Jacob Drogan."

"Yes, Mr. Drogan, we are."

"Why us?" he asked.

"That's none of your business, Drogan," Chapelle said. "You just . . ."

"No, Mr. Chapelle, he has a right to know. Mr. Drogan, what do you know of teleportation technology? Anything at all?"

"I know it gets stuff from one place to the other. I don't know how."

"I'll . . . uh . . . I'll try to keep this as simple as possible. When a person or a thing is teleported, a machine scans the item -- anything, a bar of soap, a crate of car parts, what have you. It records the item down to its smallest particles. The system then transmits that information to the target system -- the place we want to send it -- and creates a replica of it there on the other end bit by bit."

"Does it always get there? To the other side? I've heard that shipments get lost sometimes," big blond Mitchell said.

Drogan wondered if Ferrara knew Mitchell had raped and murdered a 10-year-old girl. If they were handpicked for good behavior, though, she probably knew everything about them: shoe size, inseam, sperm count.

Ferrara shifted in her seat. Her mouth twitched. "We have a ninety-eight percent success rate with transmission," she said. "Every now and then something gets lost in transit, but it doesn't happen often."

"I heard about something like that a couple of years ago," Mitchell said. "Was it, what, Cheviot Automotive, lost something like 50 or 60 million bucks in one shipment?"

"That was an extraordinary case," Ferrara said.

She clutched the briefcase on her lap; her knuckles blanched. She pressed her lips tightly together. We're pushing a button, Drogan realized.

"Helluva screw up," Villanova said. "So how'd you do with the rats?"

Ferrara reached up and resettled her glasses on her head. "So far, with living subjects, we've had slightly less success."

"How much less?" Mitchell asked.

"Our success rate, right now, is . . . about sixty percent."

Pasco barked out a laugh.

"Isn't that a little low?" Mitchell said.

"The numbers are skewed by our early results. The last year or so, our success rate has been much higher."

"This is bullshit," Pasco said. That was Pasco all over: all or nothing. Then he seemed to remember himself and spoke respectfully. "I'm ready to go Warden Chappelle, sir." He stood slowly and deliberately, dropped the booklet on his seat, and waited for a guard to escort him out. He and the guard left.

Ferrara was hiding something; they all knew it.

"What, exactly, happens when a transport fails?" Drogan asked.

Ferrara adjusted her glasses again. She put her briefcase on the floor beside her chair and looked him straight in the eye. "In the process of reading the item to be transported, the item is destroyed. Failure usually occurs at the receiving end."

Drogan's stomach went sour. He swallowed. "The item? You mean us, don't you? So, if you're alive when it starts, you die as you're being read and if transmission fails, you're gone for good?"

"That's correct, Mr. Drogan, yes." So businesslike.

"That's why you came to us, isn't it? Because we're going to die anyway."

"Yes, Mr. Drogan."

"You don't mince words."

"If you're going to participate, then you deserve the whole truth."

"What's in it for us?" Villanova asked.

"Well, the process destroys the item it scans. For a human, this means death. The state has agreed that by undergoing the process your sentence will be fulfilled, so if you're successfully transmitted, you'll be given a year's retraining with the potential for hiring by TransLumina or one of its affiliates, and released into society. It's a fresh start."

One of the other men -- Drogan wasn't sure which -- said, "Whoa." Drogan, however, was looking at the floor -- chipped, tan aggregate tiles that looked a hundred years old. One way or another, it meant death for certain -- no cancellation of his death penalty after all, but then Harville had said it would change his penalty, not commute it. Lawyer talk. If it worked, like she said: new start.

The warden pursed his thin lips. His pale eyes narrowed as he watched Ferrara. This must really chap his ass. There's got to be something in this for the state, otherwise the governor would never have signed off on it.

"I'm sure this is a lot to consider," Ferrara said. "Look over the booklets. Talk to your attorneys. I'll be back here day after tomorrow to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your time."



Drogan spent the afternoon sitting on his thin mattress leaning against the cold concrete wall reading the TransLumina booklet. A lot of it was technical, describing things covered in school courses he never took or never passed: terms like "entanglement" and "spooky action" that made no sense to him. What he understood was that the process would be enormously expensive to test, and that TransLumina hoped it would revolutionize travel the way it had revolutionized shipping.

The last few pages in the booklet talked about what TransLumina called "Volunteer Compensation." Housing, training. Neither Ferrara nor Chappelle had mentioned that the volunteer wouldn't be a free man post-transport, at least not immediately. He'd be on a sort of extended parole during his training and under medical and psychiatric supervision until TransLumina was sure that the process left no residual effects. But he'd get a clean slate and a new life. Sort of like a witness protection program.

But would it be him? Ferrara said that the machine destroys the original and creates a replica. It was death, wasn't it? Whoever came out at the other end would be someone so much like him that no one could tell the difference. Or could they? Would he -- the replica -- know the difference? He, the original, would be . . . where? Dead. Gone.

Drogan put aside the booklet, pulled the half dollar out of his pocket, lay down and rolled the coin back and forth over his knuckles while he thought.

A new life. Part of him wondered if that was what he wanted if it meant living with the memories he had. A year ago he'd relinquished his fight to have his execution commuted because the life he'd lived on death row was killing him anyway: a windowless cell no larger than a walk-in closet, no visitors but his lawyer, little time in the rec yard on the rare occasion he chose to go, and defeat after defeat in appeals he didn't want anyway. He often had days when even waking up in the morning was a rude, unwelcome surprise.

He could remember a time, years ago, when waking up each morning was a gift, another day to get out into the sun and work the earth. Make love to his wife. Play with his boy.

But that was before Lainie had changed things.

Sweet Elaine. Red hair, blue eyes. Curvy hips. A curl at the corner of her lips when she smiled. Slim fingers, tiny feet. They'd married. She'd given him Sean.

When she started to badger him about money, he started calling her Lainie, which he knew she hated. He worked longer hours; at one point he'd taken an extra job to be sure everything was covered. She wanted them covered and then some. It was never enough for her.

And in the end, when Drogan caught her with Tyler, the guy from Morrison's Video downtown with the grin, the sports car and the too-perfect hair, he knew it had all been for nothing. She made it simple for him to keep track of their meetings. It was as if she'd wanted him to know where they would be, what they were doing. She'd blown up their lives.

When Drogan rigged his little firebomb that winter, built of household chemicals and fertilizer from the nursery where he worked, he was sure it would be Lainie and Tyler alone in the house.

But he'd been wrong.

Sean got caught in the blaze, had suffocated before the flames consumed his small body. He'd been found under the remnants of a blanket, charred, prone on the floor, his light brown hair curled into ash.

Drogan still remembered Sean's hair in his hands, thick and straight and sleek. His enormous brown eyes. His upturned nose so like Lainie's. Still remembered the weight of him when they'd curl up on the couch on a Sunday night to read the comics. The clean smell of soap and baby powder on him after a bath.

No more.

There were holes in his memory around the building of the bomb, around the actual explosion as he'd seen it from down the block. He owned what he'd done, pled guilty to it all and had gone to prison for it willingly in the end.

But Sean's death left him hollow. Raw. His chest still tightened as he thought of his little boy in the fire. His throat ached with it. He couldn't breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut.

In the days afterward, he'd yearned for death. He'd all but asked for the death penalty at trial. Once in custody, he was put on a suicide watch. He'd dreamed of pistols. Craved the taste of gunmetal in his mouth.

There were days, every now and then, when he woke and didn't regret the morning light, the taste of a chocolate bar or a juicy autumn apple. But he always thought that someday soon, long before his body gave out, death would come with deliberate speed.

Part of him longed for it. Most of him longed for it.

He rolled the coin back and forth.



Before he went into the blue room, Drogan stripped for inspection. Standard procedure: opening every body part for examination by three guards. He'd long since come to expect the humiliation, though he never got used to it.

He was meticulous in dressing again, buttoning his shirt carefully, rolling his sleeves neatly. He never received visitors. Appearance was important now.

A card table had been set up with chairs on opposite sides.

Dr. Ferrara wore a navy blue blazer and a white silk blouse. A gold chain with a small gold cross around her neck. She greeted him by name and with a little smile.

"What do you think of our proposal?" she asked. He seated himself opposite her. She wore a floral scent: tea rose and . . . something else. Something musky. He wondered what she was thinking, putting on perfume for a visit to death row. Or maybe it was her shampoo.

"Pretty thorough deal," Drogan said.

"We wanted to make sure that you understood the risks and the compensation. Do you have any questions?"

She folded her hands on the table before her, and Drogan thought she looked like a schoolgirl. Being brainy was her strength, he suddenly understood. She probably looked this way before every test she'd ever taken: so ready, so smart, so sure she was going to get an A. He would bet she was like that in all her business meetings. She wanted to prove . . . something. She wore no wedding ring. He wondered if she had a boyfriend. He'd bet good money that she didn't.

"What happens to me when I go through the process?"

A little crease formed between her eyebrows. "We did talk about the process the other day. The booklet thoroughly explained . . ."

"That's not what I mean," Drogan said. "I mean *me*, who I am. My memories, my personality. What happens to that?"

"If the transmission works properly, it should all remain intact."

"So the version of me that comes out at the other end would know everything I do now."

She hesitated.

He wondered if she knew how transparent she was. A little part of him, the part that remembered what it was like to be eighteen, to meet a beautiful woman full of possibility, found her exposed frankness charming. The bigger part of him, the part that knew death and betrayal and ten years in the company of men who'd done things that, once, he could never have dreamed of, marveled at how earnest, almost naïve, she seemed.

"Are you asking me what happens to your soul?"

That took him aback. He hadn't thought about it in those terms. He wasn't really a religious man. He shook his head, shaking off the question.

"Will I be who I was after this is all over?" he asked. But that wasn't what he meant to ask either.

He watched as she rubbed one polished thumbnail between two other fingers.

"I can't answer that in the way you mean. Some of the replicas have materialized with no discernable difference in their knowledge and abilities. The person who comes out at the other end will be who you are but not you *per se*. Most of the mice could run the same mazes . . ."

"What about the chimp?" Drogan interrupted, leaning forward in his seat.

"Chimps," she corrected him. "We've tested five." She paused, pulled her dark-rimmed glasses down over her eyes. Drogan wondered if she'd been able to see him clearly before this. "Two came through just fine. One didn't make it. One manifested a palsy we couldn't treat. One was . . . almost like a blank slate. She seemed normal, healthy, but it was as if her memory had been wiped clean." She clutched her hands together, white knuckled once more. "She was like an infant . . . no, less than an infant. Her eyes would track moving objects but she wouldn't react to them otherwise. She didn't seem to recognize the lab techs who'd raised her. It was like she was . . . gone."

"So even if my duplicate comes through this perfectly healthy --"

"There could be some unforeseen damage."

"I -- I mean he -- could come out a vegetable," Drogan said.

"We don't believe that will happen. The last subject came through just fine after some equipment changes, some adjustments . . ."

"But you don't know for sure," Drogan insisted. "Your equipment fixes might build a better monkey, but they might not build a better human."

She didn't answer him. She looked at her hands folded in front of her.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked. "You could just as easily lie and say 'Oh yes, we're all ready, easy as pie.'"

She didn't answer.

"You're not comfortable with this," he said. She lifted her eyes to face him, a hard expression he hadn't believed she was capable of giving.

"My comfort has nothing to do with this. It's my job," she snapped.

Drogan leaned back in his chair. This was the first fire he'd seen in her, and he found that he liked this Dr. Louisa Ferrara better than the straight-A student.

"Your comfort has everything to do with it," Drogan said.

"Why are you asking me these questions? All Mitchell wanted to know was how much he'd get paid on the other side."

"That's Mitchell all over," Drogan said. "But you're smart enough to have thought of all this long before you got here. I think you're uncomfortable with this because you understand very well what this process is, what it does to the person you put through the machine. The reason the governor bought into this is that it looks like research but it's really just a clean execution at TransLumina's expense. If it works, everyone comes out looking like a hero. But you're not sure you like the thought of that."

"You know TransLumina won't be able to sell this, right? When people learn what it really does, no one will want to travel this way."

Her face was red. Her whole expression had darkened. Part of him wanted to push her buttons, see what would happen if he pulled the lid off that temper.

"Dr. Ferrara, I'd respect you a lot less if this didn't bother you just a little," he said.

She deflated in that instant. Laid her hands flat on the table. She looked like she wanted to say something, but wouldn't. Or couldn't.

"What?" he asked.

Her forehead crinkled and she said, "What are you doing here?"

"I committed arson and killed my wife and son with malice aforethought," he said without hesitation. She must have known that.

"That's not what I mean. You're not . . . what I expected."

"What, I'm not like Mitchell or Villanova? Dr. Ferrara," he said, "anyone can end up on death row."

She looked at her hands on the table and didn't speak for a moment. Then asked, "Have you spoken with your attorney about this?"

"My attorney's going to tell me not to do this. I don't have to call him to find out. It's not his decision."

"Does that mean you're in or out, Mr. Drogan?" she asked then.

In or out. To be or not to be. The thought almost made him smile.

He thought of Sean, of apples and chocolate, of brown earth moist in his hands. Of fire licking a downy cheek.

"I'm in," he said, pushing that thought away. He looked forward to pushing it away forever.

Three days later, they moved Droган and Villanova to the TransLumina lab two hours away. The adjacent cells were larger than at the pen, still concrete and metal but white and clean. He had a small, high, square window, too small for his body to fit through, but it was there, showing blue sky and, every now and then, a bird. He discovered, two days in, that at a certain time of the day, he could lie on his cot and feel the sun on his face.

What he hadn't expected was the regimen of examinations that followed his arrival: C-T scans, x-rays, encephalograms, examinations not unlike strip-searches but somehow more invasive, more personal for the remoteness exuded by the doctors who conducted them. Then there were aptitude tests, a psychological profile the likes of which he hadn't been through since just before his trial.

During their recreation hour out in the yard, he and Villanova shot hoops, Villanova smoked, and Droган looked at the trees beyond the fences: a thick stand of spring maples sprouting electric green leaves. The other man didn't talk much, and Droган was okay with that. They'd never known each other well, but somehow, with a finite count of days ahead, they suddenly seemed to know each other intimately. No words were necessary.

Dr. Ferrara -- in his thoughts he called her by her first name, Louisa, though she kept things formal between them -- came almost every day. Whenever Villanova was off undergoing work-ups, often for hours at a time, she'd set up a chair on the other side of the bars along with a little folding table, put a digital recorder out and just talk with him.

She wasn't the head of the research team but, rather, a sort of second lieutenant. She reported to a husky man in his mid-fifties named Dr. Baylor, one of the two physicists who ran the program. Droган got the feeling she was excited about the research but not always pleased with Baylor. Try as he might, Droган could never draw her out about the discomfort.

She would divert his attempts by asking him questions about his childhood, about growing up the son of an auto mechanic and a baker, both dead now the last ten years, of alcohol and illness. About where he went to school, about what he'd done for a living. Even about Lainie and Sean's deaths. During that conversation, talking about Sean's birth, he looked at her only once.

In that one glance, he saw something in her eyes flicker briefly. It wasn't fear. She had pretty impressive composure around him, all things considered. Was it pity? Sympathy? He wondered. Maybe, he hoped, it was compassion.

Louisa was different with him after that. She wasn't as formal or even uncomfortable with him. Every now and then, she'd bring coffee. As the days went by, he noticed little imperfections: a tiny scar by the corner of her mouth, a few gray hairs tucked behind one ear, a mole on her neck where the collar met her jawline. He learned that she could be funny. She had a beagle at home named Max. Most of the jewelry she wore had been her grandmother's.

"You remind me," she told him once when he made her laugh, "of my friend Jorge." He'd never seen her smile quite that way before, a secret, intimate smile that gave him shivers. And then she thought better of continuing. Droган regretted it. That smile: he wanted to know more.

He'd forgotten what the company of a woman could be like. Not what sex and sweat smelled like, but rather, simple companionable conversation. It had been a long time.

Three weeks after they arrived, two corrections officers, Warden Chapelle, and a lawyer came for Villanova. Two technicians and Dr. Ferrara accompanied them.

Villanova had spent the previous hour with a chaplain. Droган, only a wall away on his shelf bed in the square of pale light shed by an overcast sky, had fled into his thoughts to avoid listening to Villanova's confession and prayers. He tried to remember all the words to "American Pie," tried to conjure the names of the seven dwarves, anything not to hear Villanova's quiet, shuddering whispers.

This was why the condemned usually spent their last three days in a separate facility, he understood: to spend their fear and their grief in the privacy of deaf, silent walls.

The only difference between this and going to the chair, Droган thought.

Unless, of course, some part of you survived.

When Villanova came out of his cage, he asked for a moment, then turned to Droган's cell.



"Drogan," he said. Drogan looked up, got up and went to the bars. Villanova put his thin, trembling hand through. Drogan took it and they shook. Villanova's brown skin was cold, dry.

"Vaya con Dios," Villanova said. His dark eyes were troubled; Drogan understood that much.

"Good luck," Drogan answered.

For a moment, Villanova held on. Drogan shook hands one more time. He had no other words. Villanova squeezed his hand and let go.

Ferrara shot Drogan a glance he couldn't read, then followed the group out.

Drogan sat down on his cot again and took out his half dollar. Now he'd wait.

Three hours later, the hall filled. Lab-coated men rushed back and forth between laboratories, their discussions hushed and businesslike. Ferrara walked by, ashen-faced, one hand at the cross on the chain around her neck, and kept walking.

He didn't see her for three days after that. In the interim, he couldn't shake the image of Villanova's expression when they'd taken him. Drogan had never seen him look like that before, wide-eyed, unsure, and very, very young.

When Ferrara did turn up, she was her usual, professional self, but now distant, less casual. She informed him that the testing would resume, and that he'd be taken to the teleporter in a little less than two weeks.

She turned to go. He called her back.

"What happened to Villanova?" he asked. Her expression clouded.

"He didn't make it," she said. "It was bad."

Drogan's heart skipped a beat; it hurt. "What do you mean, it was bad?"

"It was . . . bad. I have to go." And she left.

It was the first time, he realized, that she hadn't given him a straight answer.



The interviews ceased.

As the days went by, he saw the same kind of activity he'd seen before Villanova's test, lots of people back and forth in the hallways. But he saw something new. Occasionally, three men in military uniforms each with a stack of ribbons on their chests, accompanied Baylor through the halls. Baylor looked tense in the company of these men, his gait quicker, his motions clipped. Military. Interesting.

There *was* something more to all this.

That afternoon when his orderly brought him lunch, he asked to see Dr. Ferrara.

When she didn't come, he asked again at dinner.

He got no answer that day. Or the next.

Drogan didn't know what time it was when he heard footsteps in the hallway. It was dark, late. He hadn't slept. He had figured out, however, how many cinder blocks made up walls of his cell. He'd followed the transit of the half moon across his window. When the footsteps stopped in front of his cell, he turned over and looked through the bars.

It was Dr. Ferrara.

"Hi," he said.

She stood there in her lab coat, dark slacks and shoes, her hands in her pockets, just as if it were the middle of the day. Except that his clock said 2 a.m. It was the first time he'd seen her in five days. She looked tired.

"They've got you working late," he said.

"I was told you asked for me." She kept her voice neutral and kept her distance from the bars. Droган recognized her deliberate choices. He sat up, then stood and went to the bars himself. He noticed movement in one pocket, as if she were balling her fist. She was nervous, he realized. He didn't like it.

"It could have waited until morning." He kept his tone gentle. "If you've been working late, you should go home."

"What can I do for you?" With a flick of her head, she shook a strand of hair off of her forehead.

All business. Okay then.

"I've been seeing military men march Baylor around like he's a convict." Ferrara's face remained neutral. She'd been practicing. "This technology isn't for commercial use, is it?"

She didn't answer. Droган decided to go on.

"You can't say anything, can you, because it's classified, right? Even though I signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement?"

Ferrara shifted on her feet, raised her chin a bit. Said nothing.

"So let me guess: TransLumina's not worried about selling this to the public. They're worried about selling it to the military. The only people who will be stepping into the teleportation capsules will be ordered to do it."

She lowered her head a fraction. Was that a nod? He thought so. Her silence wasn't about keeping a professional distance, he understood. It was about who was listening. Of course, he didn't have anything to lose.

"It gives a whole new meaning to dying in the line of duty," he said a little more quietly. "Only now our boys can do it over and over again."

"There's a great deal of good that could come out of this," she said. She didn't say it with conviction.

"Fair enough."

Her gold cross picked up the light from the overhead lamps. She wasn't just concerned about the military, he suddenly realized. He'd never seen her without the cross. She had spiritual issues with this whole business.

He paused to consider his next words. He didn't want to push her away, didn't want to add to her obvious discomfort. In the end, all he could say was, "It's good to know the truth."

Neither of them said anything for a moment. Then Ferrara took half a step back. "Good night, then."

She turned and walked away.

"Good night," Droган said, too softly for her to hear down the hall.

—*igms*—

Three days later, Chapelle and Droган's lawyer, Harville, came for a meeting with him. They were accompanied by two guards and Dr. Ferrara, to discuss whether or not he wanted a chaplain and who, if anyone, he wanted as a witness. He asked for Ferrara, but never got an answer.

But the day before he was to go, she came by with two cups of coffee and sat close to the bars. When she gave him his cup, he thought she purposely touched his hand. This was a different Ferrara than the one he'd seen several nights before. She'd made a choice of some kind, maybe several. One was to let down the wall she'd had up. He couldn't figure out the others yet.

"Come to spend a few minutes with the lab rat?" he ventured. It was a lame joke and it landed like one. Briefly she looked as though she were going to bolt. "You okay?" he asked, trying to rescue the moment.

"I . . . just needed a break. We've been at it for hours in there."

"How's it looking?" he asked.

She hesitated, then said, "Good. Good." Sipped her coffee.

"You're a lousy liar," Drogan said.

She took a breath to speak, paused, exhaled and started again. Looked at him. Whatever she was going to say died on her lips.

Instead, she looked at his half dollar on the small cabinet next to his bed.

"I've been wanting to ask you about that." She motioned to the coin. "You never stop playing with it."

Drogan put down the coffee, picked up the coin, held it up. It was a bicentennial half dollar. John F. Kennedy's profile showed on one side; a straight-lined rendering of Independence Hall, worn with years of fingering, showed on the other. Now, most of the detail in Kennedy's hair had been rubbed flat. Independence Hall was softer-edged and windowless.

"It was a gift from my father," Drogan said. He handed it to Ferrara so she could examine it more closely. "He gave it to me when I turned ten."

"That's sweet," she said with a smile, turning it over in her hands. "And you still have it." She sounded surprised.

Drogan frowned. "I don't understand."

"I thought con . . . people weren't allowed to keep personal items when they went to prison."

"Not when they enter; the stuff is stored until your release, assuming you get out. This was in a safe deposit box with some other things my wife and I put away. I asked Harville to get it for me after my sentencing."

She handed the coin back to him. "Why keep this and not something else? I mean, most kids would have spent it right away."

Drogan clutched the coin tightly. Started turning it over and over while he spoke.

"My dad wanted to teach me about coin collecting. It didn't stick, but . . ." And Drogan's throat tightened up. He hadn't thought about his father in a long time. The reaction frightened him. He blinked a couple of times to relieve the pressure behind his eyes. "It was good time we had," he said. "We used to go to coin shows together. A good time." He picked up his coffee and sipped.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's all right." He put the coin down on the table. Looked up at her brown eyes, eyes like Sean's. "I was going to give it to my son when he turned ten."

He picked up the coin again. Ran his thumb over the image of Independence Hall. What would his duplicate remember if he made it through? And would he himself have to face Sean in the darkness of his own journey? Suddenly death lost its appeal. For a moment, he wanted the one who came after to wake up a clean slate like the chimp Louisa had spoken of, not having to worry about any of it. But then he wouldn't remember even Dr. Ferrara.

He held the coin out to her.

"Take it," he said. "I'd like you to have it."

Her eyebrows rose.

"I couldn't," she said.

Drogan felt a disappointment he hadn't expected.

"Then keep it for me until . . . after." He took her hand -- soft and cool -- and laid the coin on her palm. "Give me . . . him something to look forward to."

She closed her fingers over the half dollar. Looked up at him with a smile.

"It's a deal," she said, blinking rapidly, and put the coin in the pocket of her lab coat. "You can still get out of this, you know." Her voice was a little husky. "It's in the paperwork you signed. There would be no penalty."

Drogan squinted at her as she sipped her coffee again. It wasn't what he'd expected and he wasn't sure how to take it.

"It wouldn't matter. I go this way, or I go by injection somewhere down the line."

She put the coffee down, fingered the cross she wore at her neck. She seemed elsewhere.

"Louisa?" he said, and surprised himself by it.

Surprised her, too. She shook her head as if awakened from sleep, glanced at him as if she hoped he hadn't noticed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I keep thinking about what happens . . . after."

"I don't follow."

"It's nothing. My Catholic upbringing gets the better of me sometimes." She smiled absently, sipped her coffee again.

"Worried I'm going to Hell?" Drogan asked, and it came out lighter than he meant it to. He didn't want to seem cavalier about it if she took it seriously.

She didn't answer. Her mouth was a straight line, her lips tense.

He watched the ripples in his coffee. "If it comes to that, I've been there. I'm ready for it." His voice tripped on the words, his throat tight.

It occurred to him that she was thinking about all the soldiers who would face this as well. If she was a true believer, then from her perspective they'd all be facing heaven or hell whether they were ready to or not. He'd never believed in God, but he sympathized with Louisa.

What she said was, "You would have more time."

More time to repent? He wondered. If there was a God, Drogan figured he'd already had all the consideration he was due.

"But it's the kind of time I'd have that matters," he finally said. He stopped to choose his words carefully. "This way, when I go, my last days will have had something worthwhile about them. I got a last few days in a clean room with some quiet. I got to see some trees. I got to . . . I had good company. I'll take that. It's enough."

She looked at the window a long time while they sat in silence. Drogan didn't know what she was thinking, but he was sure she was fighting with herself about something. As he watched her, her eyes glittered, but she never shed a tear.

"Okay then," she finally said, dry-eyed and clear.



The capsule at one end of the isolation room looked a little like a white tanning bed with closed ends. Six feet away, another, larger capsule hummed. The air conditioning was on full blast giving the air a metallic smell. Goosebumps rose on Drogan's skin beneath the bathrobe they'd given him to wear after his final strip search. His stomach growled. He hadn't eaten in two days except for clear broths and the God-awful chemical they'd made him drink to clear his system.

The technician and the two prison guards behind him inched him forward.

A wide window spanned the wall to his right through which he could see the team hustling back and forth or poring over controls. Dr. Ferrara, a pen stuck behind one ear, stood consulting shoulder to shoulder over a clipboard with Dr. Baylor. They were almost of a

height, with Baylor at a slight advantage. Another, smaller window -- one-way glass -- was at the opposite end of the room; Drogan knew that government witnesses were there. A combination experiment and execution.

The technician beside Drogan said, "Are you ready?"

Drogan shook himself. "Uh, yeah." Glanced at the tech, then back at Ferrara. She peeked up from her work. What was that expression in her eyes before she looked away? Drogan wasn't sure.

"I'll need your robe."

"Oh, right." He slipped out of the robe and handed it to the man, then sat down on the edge of the capsule. The metal was cold on his butt, chilling him. He slipped his feet out of his slippers, hoisted his legs onto the platform and settled himself into position. Though he'd lain in the capsule before as part of the preparation, somehow now the top of the capsule seemed closer, claustrophobic.

He turned his head to one side so he could look out one more time. Ferrara stood over a console glancing back and forth at things Drogan couldn't see. She glanced up at him again. Then away.

"Ready? We need to close up the capsule," the technician said.

Drogan laid his head back, looked up at the glass pane above him. Through the glass he could see the scanner mounted on its track. He suddenly felt like a document laid on the glass of a Xerox machine, ready to be copied.

His stomach tightened. He took a deep breath. Exhaled with a shudder.

"Are you ready, Mr. Drogan?" the tech repeated.

"Yeah," he said. "Close it up."

The tech pulled down the retractable side of the capsule, walling Drogan in.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Drogan?" Dr. Ferrara on the intercom.

"Yes." His throat was so tight it was hard to speak. "Louisa," he said. "Call me Jake, would you please?"

There was a pause. Drogan looked through the glass above at the scanner, a long, thin tube. He knew the kind of light it would emit, had felt it warm up over him before in a dry run three days prior.

"Jake," Dr. Ferrara said. "We're starting the sequence now. Breathe normally. Relax."

Drogan took a deep breath, held it a moment. Exhaled. The low hum of the capsule intensified. This was it.

The moment before the bomb. The gunmetal in his mouth.

He closed his eyes. His abdomen trembled, his heart beat skipped. *You can still get out of this*, she'd said. He took another deep, shuddering breath.

The heat built above him. The buzz and hum of the unit rose. The darkness behind his eyelids went red with the light shining through. *It would be more time.*

In his mind's eye, he saw Sean's grin. Lainie's red curls in the wind. He saw pink spring tulips and bright yellow daffodils. Tyler's denim-clad arm around Lainie's waist. Sean. Burning.

Let it end.

And then he saw electric green maple trees and Louisa Ferrara.

He felt burning at the top of his head, like prickling sparks all over his skin. Lightning crackled around him, stinging like pins and needles pushing deep. The world went hot. White. It rushed away with a sound like tides.

The world was gone.

A tunnel opened before him, light and long, and he let himself be pulled away.



The world was back.

The world was pain.

Every part of him felt raw, stinging, like his nerves had been scraped with knives. He lay on a slab of ice. When he opened his eyes, the light burned and he closed them again. He tried to cry out; his throat was parched: only breath and no sound when he screamed. The air tasted like iron. He bent one knee and banged it against the glass above him; the impact reverberated up his leg, a club to the bone. Tears escaped his eyes and burned paths toward his hairline.

"Is he okay? What's going on?" The voice was loud, a shock.

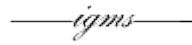
"I don't know; he seems disoriented." The second voice sounded uncertain.

"Mr. Drogan?" The first voice. Female. Why was everyone shouting?

"Whisper," he rasped. "Too loud."

"Let's get him out of there," someone else said.

They rolled his body, lifted him, moved him off of the ice -- or was it glass? Every contact stung; he felt handprints all over his body like spots of sunburn. Then he was on sheets, rough and stiff, and the movement of the gurney rattled him so hard he wanted to scream again. When they moved him onto the bed, it hurt so much he passed out.



Voices far off called his name. He knew his name. Warm cotton sheets beneath him, over his stomach, his chest, rough like fine sandpaper. Opened his eyes slowly. The light was harsh and bright. He felt dizzy. His mouth tasted like sand. A distant echo of pain pushed at him. In the back of his mind he thought he must be drugged.

"Mr. Drogan, do you know me?"

The person silhouetted in the light over him was familiar. Louisa -- no, if he was "Mr. Drogan" again, then she was "Dr. Ferrara." He didn't like the renewed formality after what had felt like intimacy, but he understood it. He was thinking that clearly.

"Yes," he said. It was breath, not sound.

"Do you know where you are?"

He did: TransLumina Labs. He nodded. He knew more than that. He remembered everything: Lainie, Sean, all of it. No heaven for him, but he hadn't expected that.

No hell either.

"We've given you something for the pain. Your nerves are firing to get reoriented. We saw this once in one of the chimps."

"Thanks for telling me in advance."

"We had to leave some surprises," she said, a smile in her voice. "How do you feel?"

He thought a moment. He was alive. Lightheaded. Disappointed.

"I'm okay," he said. "It hurts, but not like before."

"Good. There's water here if you need it." She held out a cup with a straw for him. He tipped his head up a bit to sip: cold, sharp, the water slid down his throat and through him like quicksilver. He lay back again, his head too heavy to hold up for long. He closed his eyes. Lainie was there. Sean. But it was hard work to keep his eyes open and away from them.

When he did open his eyes, he caught Dr. Ferrara looking at her watch. She glanced at the wall to his left, where Droган noticed a large one-way window. He couldn't see through it, but he understood they were being watched. He didn't like that. He didn't like what such observation might mean in the days to come.

But she looked agitated, worried somehow.

"Dr. Ferrara . . .?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Droган, I have to go."

She got up and pulled her lab jacket close around her. It seemed too quick somehow. She was uncomfortable, but he didn't have the energy to ask more.

"See you later," he said.

"No. No, you won't."

That was a jolt. Suddenly he felt clearer. His heart beat triple-time.

"What?" he asked.

Dr. Ferrara paused, then sat again, on the edge of her chair as if she wanted to be sure she could bolt if she had to.

"After Villanova, I gave notice. I couldn't be a party to this anymore."

That was the last thing Droган had expected to hear. Her reason made sense, knowing her as he'd come to do, but he hadn't been prepared for it.

More quietly she said, "I decided, though, that I couldn't go before I knew whether or not you came through."

He wanted to thank her for that. Somehow the words wouldn't come. He realized that he'd expected her to stay with him in this new life.

Idiot. You're her job, nothing more.

He took a deep breath -- get used to it, he told himself, she won't be here for you, she was never here for *you* -- exhaled and said, "So what comes next?"

"I don't know."

"I won't ever see you again?" Droган asked before he could stop himself. He felt like a teenager.

"No. Conditions of your agreement and my separation from the company."

He knew it. He just needed to hear her say it. They were both silent for a moment. Dr. Ferrara looked at her hands clenched in her lap. Droган closed his eyes.

And they were there again: Sean and Lainie. He had a flash of the pain he'd felt at the beginning of the transport. Other memories flooded in. Ferrara had opened a floodgate by telling him she was leaving. He forced his eyes open.

"This isn't what I expected," Droган said.

"I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's not that. It's . . . I thought I wouldn't . . . know myself." His throat tightened. *God, this isn't what I wanted.* "That I'd feel like a stranger to me somehow. That some of this would be gone."

"Some of what?"

He had to rest a moment. His mouth was dry again. "The memories. I thought it would be different. I thought I'd be different."

"Technically, you're only about eight hours old."

"I need a minute," he said and turned away. The avalanche of memories crushed his heart. He hadn't planned on grief and regret in this afterlife; he hadn't counted on any afterlife at all. Hell would have been better. His whole body shuddered at the recognition: old memories, no release. "I didn't want this." He clenched his hands and wanted to weep; he had no tears. He'd wanted death. His dry sobs shook the bed.

"Mr. Drogan," Dr. Ferrara said.

He opened his eyes, turned to face her again.

"You died. I was there. I saw it."

"But it's still here! I can't stop it." He balled a fist and hit his head. Two, three times. She stopped him.

"That's good. It means this worked."

"No . . ."

"Look at me." Her sternness surprised him. She'd been in such a rush to leave but now she was present, there for him one last time. She kept her hand on his arm. "You're eight hours old. All you've done is sleep in this bed."

"It's a lie."

"Then live the lie until it becomes the truth. This is a new start. That's what you signed up for. The part of you that died took the rest of it." She opened his fist and put something in it. "He left you this." He lifted his arm to see. His joints felt stiff, new, as he bent his elbow.

His half-dollar gleamed in the too-bright light. His fingers, clumsy with medication, dropped the coin onto his chest.

Louisa picked up the coin and put it back in his hand.

"You told me to keep this for you until after. You hold it now. It's your inheritance," she said. "It's worth having."

He felt the edges of the coin in his hand, thin, blunt, familiar. He wasn't ready for it; he didn't feel worthy of it, not yet.

"Just . . . think about it." Louisa looked at her watch. "I need to go. I've been here too long already." She got up.

Drogan grabbed her hand. She gently tried to extricate herself, but he couldn't let go. Not quite yet.

"Mr. Drogan, please." He recognized that crease between her brows.

"Dr. Ferrara. Louisa . . ."

She pulled her hand one more time, but it wasn't a whole-hearted attempt. He loosened his grip, then. She didn't move.

"Thank you," he said.

"There's nothing to thank me for, Jake. Really."

He let go. She went to the door and left without looking back.

He looked at the coin again. Maybe time would dull his past the way it had dulled the edges of Independence Hall and the details of Kennedy's hair. Maybe he could live with that.

He squeezed the coin tight in his hand.



## The Smell of the Earth

by Joan L. Savage



Artwork by Scott Altmann

"How much will you wager on your belief?" The wizard tapped her fingernails beside a puddle of spilled ale on the table and leaned so close that the sweetness of her perfume only half hid the acridness of her sweat and the smell of sex. "You Jongleurs say you can affect any heart with music. Will you prove it?"

I tugged on my cloak to cover the hole in my tunic. Why was she talking to me, she in her jewels and furs? She obviously had riches and power enough to buy whatever she wanted. Why speak to me, Jongleur, gypsy, outcast.

"Prove it?" I asked stupidly.

"What will you wager? All men desire something."

In a whole lifetime of loss, how many people have a chance to gain what they long for? Who can discover what he longs for, given a month to think? I had too much ale in me and her warm, full breasts pressed over her arm on the table until they blossomed out the top of her bodice and her eyes trapped me on my bench, demanding an answer.

My mind flitted over the things that all men want. Riches, fame, sex. With her watching me from the depths of those compelling eyes it was hard not to think about the sex, but as well ask a star to come down from the heavens and share my bed. And what good were riches? With my wife and son dead, I had no one to spend them on.

"I want to be known as the greatest Jongleur who ever lived."

I listened to the words coming from my mouth. Was that really what I wanted? Maybe. Maybe that was the only way not to be forgotten in the silent emptiness of a grave. My wife had been so silent, when I laid her in the earth. So still, so cold.

"Done," the wizard said. Her smile sent shivers across my skin. "If you win, I will spread such stories about you that people will say, 'He is the greatest Jongleur.' If you lose?"

What was my deepest fear? Music comes from the heart but it takes hands to free it from silence and I could not bear for her to silence me. I tucked my hands under the table and shuddered at the thought of that loneliness. All the doors that cracked open to let me sneak in and play by the fire for my bread would slam closed. I would have only the cold, empty road, and not even a song to play, for remembrance.

"Done," she said. "If you lose, I will chop off your hands."

For a moment, I could not catch my breath. She stood to go.

"Wait, what wager -- I don't even know -- what's the bet? Why do you need me? Why do this for me?"

She ran one finger through my hair, her nail prickling against my scalp, and heat rushed into my loins. I barely heard her over the blood throbbing in my veins.

She leaned so close that her breath tickled my ear. "The best vengeance is always through another. And some loves must be paid for. You know that. You've paid for your love a thousand times."

A flash of memory. My wife laughing in my arms, smelling of spring, with her fingers tousling my hair. Then she was gone and I had only the terrible, aching emptiness left where once she had filled me. The silence. Yes, I had paid for my love. Every night, with every memory. And I would pay again, and again. A thousand times more, if it would bring her back.

"See the man by the window? Change his heart so he forgives his little peasant wife. A simple thing. A good thing, forgiveness."

Her fingertip traced a river of fire down my neck and I nodded silently. I would do this thing. For memory. For love.

"That is all." She paused. "Within this hour I will come back for your hands, if you fail."

She pointed to where my hands hid under the table, then turned and swayed through the inn's doorway, taking her agonizingly luring scent with her. The other patrons ducked their heads as if afraid to look at her. I looked at the man.

He was plain, with dusty, lanky hair hanging across his face. His hands were brown and worn, with calluses rough from the plough. A pint of ale sat barely touched on the table before him but he did not look at it, or at the other patrons. He stared steadfastly into his lap, at a small rock the size of a knuckle.

I wondered what his wife had done that was so terrible he could not forgive her. I would have forgiven my wife anything. I laid my lute across my lap and plucked the strings with one hand while the other fingered random chords. I had nudged a man's emotions before, but only once. It seemed unfair, somehow, to make someone feel what he did not want to feel, but surely it was a small price to pay for immortality. To be remembered.

I settled into a melody that had been my wife's favourite -- a melancholy dance, full of the seduction of love and the sweetness of yearning. I plucked the melody into the air and touched the man with my Jongleur's gift, my gewaer. He felt pale, like a winter's sunrise that promises more cold without any prospect of spring to warm it. With my gewaer, I gave him the song, for his care and comfort. A piece of my heart in return for a glimpse into his soul.

He met my gift with such a flash of despair I almost stopped playing. Most people showed me flashes of colour or moods when I sang to them. He projected an image into my mind so brightly I almost had to pull my gift away. A girl, maybe sixteen, dancing down a cart track with her skirts hiked up around her knees, leading a pig.

Then the man's voice rumbled in my head, remembering. His voice was deep and as worn as his hands, his tone dull and sorrowful.

*"My wife knowed it was my most favourite pig when she sold it to Gerg. Some neighbour. I'd knowed him for forty years. Had knowed, had been a friend. Ariana thought the price so good for the sow that she was a-dancin' when she carried it home to me in her skirts. She so wanted a baby. I wanted another babe, too, a son with my new wife, but since the plough tore my flesh that wasna gonna happen and she thought she'd found another way to give me a babe."* Her face dazzled in his mind, her smile frozen then fading to despair when she realised he wasn't happy with her gift. *"Gerg's son Tan's a strong man, good seed. But it ain't my babe."*

I played a gentle chord, soothing, and projected my thought with it. His wife had done it out of love for him. She had tried to please him.

The man turned the rock in his lap.

*"Ariana hadna meant to hurt me. Not knowingly. And it bein' so soon since the weddin', how could she've knowed that sow could open gates and find her way home from anywhere herself? How could she've knowed Gerg would blame me for his trampled corn and ruined garden?"* An edge of anger touched his remembrance of Gerg's flushed face and shaking fist.

The hour was slipping away beneath my fingers, and my hands trembled on the lute. All I could touch in him was anger and resentment. How could I push those feelings into forgiveness? Maybe my task was impossible. Sweat beaded on my forehead and trickled into my eyes, stinging, but I dared not break the spell of the song to wipe it away. If I couldn't make him forgive his wife, the wizard woman would silence my music and leave me with no way to touch others, with no path for them to accept me. With no way to cast those I had loved into song. I played a minor chord with a hint of longing in it. He should remember how much he loved his wife.

I remembered how much I loved mine. The scent of her hair, touched by sunshine. Her hand over mine, how rough it was, but how gentle. Gone now, laid in earth. The damp smell of the earth of her grave would always be in my nose. Maybe, when they said of me that I was the greatest Jongleur who ever lived, they would remember her, too, as the greatest woman ever loved. She was so cold and silent when I laid my face against hers, before the earth took her. She deserved to be remembered in song only I hadn't had the heart to write it yet, not so soon, and to be silenced now meant her memory would be lost. I couldn't let that happen. I shifted the music into a song with more urgent longing.

The man poked at his memories, like prodding a sore tooth with his tongue, unable to let it rest.

*"I do love my Ariana. She with her tiny hands and gentle heart that makes her run from the farm when it comes time t' slaughter the lambs."* He ran a hand across his sweating face, though the room was cool. *"I love her more 'n anythin', more than Betric who bore my only boy. Eight years now, since Betric died? Stars bless her, she were strong. She didn't need me. Ariana needs me even more 'n I need her."*

He needed her so much he ached with it. The flash of memory of them making love left my pulse pounding again and I almost lost the thread of the song.

The hunger for the feel of her slight body was just as quickly replaced by a cold rush of despair. *"What was she thinkin'? How could she've shamed me like this?"*

Pictures flashed, dazzling in their clarity. Gerg letting his cows through the man's field, just for spite. *"I hit Gerg then -- I'm not proud o' that. Then our boys fought, bein' of an age, and my own boy, oh my Aron, you were too angry for your papa's sake and Tan, he hit my Aron too hard and then there was the rush of blood and the long, long sleep before my boy slipped into death."*

That memory brought a rush of grief that forced the music into dark, hushed tones. I had no answer for his emptiness -- it was too close an echo to my own. I began to wonder what my wager might do to this man. Why should I torture another man's soul with remembering? What gain was it for me, this immortality? Soon I would lie beside my wife and what gain, what gain was life or fame against that silence?

I should have left him alone with his unshed tears. His memories flooded me, rubbing against my own, too close, and I wanted to let him be. He deserved that. But where would that leave me, with no hands to shape my memories into remembrances? I thought, what harm could it do for him to remember? The pain must always burn his heart. He must remember, whether I urged him to or not.

The man thumped a hand on the table, startling some of the other patrons who stared at him and edged away. His thoughts went on, unhindered by their notice.

*"Silly girl. She shoulda knowed it was my bestest pig, shoulda knowed that ever since she were a tiny piglet she'd come home from wherever I'd tried to sell her. After Aron died I just didna know what to do an' they said lord Gareth was a just man so I went to him. Oh, why did I go? Who will give me justice for my dead boy?"*

Gareth, Lord of Traes, was a good man from all I'd heard but young -- only eighteen. A dangerous age, when you know everything and aren't old enough yet to realise that you're wrong.

The wizard woman was there, in the man's memory of Lord Gareth's hall. Even in his memory I could smell the seductive scent of her and I wanted to hide my hands but if I stopped playing it would break the magic of the song and end my glimpse into the man's memories, my influence over his feelings. My hour was fleeing away. I needed my hands. I needed my music to fill the long, empty days of wandering, and the colder nights. With fame would come food for my belly, warm blankets at night, and maybe enough security that I could stay in one place long enough to learn to know someone. A woman. She could never replace my wife and son but it would be someone to comfort and warm me. Someone to be with. This old man had found a second wife to share the turmoil of his life. Someone he cared about. Why would he cast that away?

In the man's memories, the wizard bent low and whispered in lord Gareth's ear, her breasts brushing against his shoulder.

*"The lord atold me it was all my own fault -- my boy's death, my wife and the bastard babe, the poor old sow. The woman, his wizard advisor, atold me herself that I'd to pay back Gerg for the trampled garden but not a word about my cabbages all churned up and eaten by them cows. Then the woman gave me a useless lump o' rock, as if a lump o' rock could help me."*

In a few short moments the wizard had destroyed the man's hope, his dignity. Why?

The same reason she was destroying me?

The thought sent prickles of fear across my chest. My fingers stumbled on the strings. She had no reason to destroy me. It was a foolish thought.

The man looked up and our eyes met. If he knew I had been spying on his memories and pushing his emotions, he gave no sign. His attention returned to the rock in his lap.

The wizard had destroyed his dignity, but not his love for his wife. He clung to that love as to the last floating board in a shipwreck. I felt it in the desperate churning of his hands as he rolled the rock over and over again.

For the first time I saw the rock clearly, through his eyes. It was a crystal, gnarled and black. Seeing it, I knew I had blundered into something too big for me. Crystals were dangerous things, contorted by wizards to affect their holder in treacherous ways. Always the holder had to do something, perform some act, before the crystal could bind them but once bound, there was no freeing them. I had met a man on the road, bound to a wizard's crystal, who could only walk east, never west, so he could never get home. Another, in a town, could not use his legs from dawn 'til dusk. How the crystal in this man's lap would bind him, I didn't know, but in some way it would torment or cripple him. For now it was quiet, and I prayed it would stay that way.

The water clock on the mantle dripped relentlessly, drowning my hour. Only a few minutes before the woman returned. How could I save this man from the woman bent on destroying him and still save myself? My mind raced without finding any answers. He felt the same as the crystal -- cold, dark, withdrawn. I had no idea what action would spark this crystal into life. Should I use the last moments of my hour to run across the room and dash it from his hands? But what would stop him from picking it up again once the wizard had come for me and my hands were gone? All I had was my wager. Win it or be silenced. This man didn't deserve whatever fate the wizard had devised for him.

I didn't deserve silence. Not yet. My wife, so silent, her cold lips under mine. So mute, laid in the damp earth that covered her hair. I needed to write a song to remember her as she was before the scent of earth covered the warm saltiness of her skin. To remember her before her silence. I couldn't lose my hands, whatever might happen to this man.

Music is a strange beast. Hard men cry when touched in the right moment by the right harmony. An enemy's heart can be changed and peace brokered. Frightened men can be pushed into battle. How many children have been conceived beneath a melody's seductive fingertips?

Yet it's a difficult master, more compelling than the opiate drugs. Once is never enough to fill or content and so the music drags me back again and again, looking for that purest chord that can shift a man's anger into joy. For the harmonies that might warm a heart to forgive or a melody that might open a woman's thighs, all the while hoping for myself to find that moment of ecstasy when the music shifts me, warms me, opens me, and I feel everything. Even to feel loss is better than knowing emptiness.

The clock dripped to fill up the hour, moments away, three drops, two. I played a note and touched the man. A moment of forgiveness. That was all I needed to create. Just one moment. His love for Ariana was so close to the surface now, so tender, I just had to touch it. I played a thick chord, heavy with longing at first but melting into something fragile, a bubble he dared not touch lest it break. It was so fleeting, suspended there, a blink of time that was the span of his life and then it would flee, burned away like the summer grass, and he had only Ariana in that moment, only her to share his fleeing life with. The bubble shivered before him, so fragile, so easily lost.

In my mind, I saw him reach for it. He could not lose her, too. Could not let his moments with her shatter beyond repair. He could love her. The babe, too. He could make the babe his own. His child.

The crystal in his hand leapt into fire and I dropped my lute to shield my eyes from the glare. I thought the man screamed, but I couldn't be sure. There were so many people screaming. Tables toppled and benches skidded across the floor as people ran from his burning.

I couldn't move. It had been a perfect note and I had felt his love for her blossom into forgiveness. The feeling still burned my chest, hotter than the crystal's glow. I knew he was dead. Only death carries that profound a silence.

I lifted my eyes. The wizard stood across the room, watching him, her body arcing with satisfaction.

"He would accept this bastard babe, would he? Love it?"

She turned and met my gaze. Unshed tears glittered in her eyes, like ice.

"I told you that some loves must be paid for. I spent years looking for my peasant bastard father. He was so young, fulfilling his service time with his lord, when he left my mother in her lord's kitchen with a full belly and no man to protect her. Then, after all these long years, he came to Lord Gareth. He came to me.

"But even after all the sacrifices I made to become a wizard so I could destroy him, I couldn't. Not before seeing what kind of man he was. I needed to know how much he could love, and forgive, when he wouldn't forgive my mother, or love me."

She had used me. Had used my love for my wife, my need for remembering, and made it dirty. I stood and backed away from her but could not rid myself of the bitterness in my mouth that did not come from the smell of charred flesh.

For a brief flash, I felt the brush of her wizard's gift. Her anger beat against me, as deep and desperate as pain, unassuaged by vengeance; her rage demanded that all great loves be sundered. And forgotten.

The word echoed through my head, pounding against my skull. Forgotten.

The wizard lifted her hand and batted away my awareness of her feelings as easily as if I had been a drift of smoke. "Do not dare to look at my emptiness. You, too, have lost your love. Take the fruits of your wager, and go."

I fled.

To this day, they tell stories of me. How I stormed castles with my songs and felled giants. None of the stories are true, and I'm haunted by the memory of that one perfect note. I cannot play. I can't even think of music without smelling the charred smell of death and hearing the terrible silence where the man's heart had been. I touched that heart, shared in its grief. Silenced it.

I wish I had let her cut off my hands. Then maybe I could still remember the smell of the earth where my wife lies, waiting for me. Maybe I could hum a song.

# Ender's Homecoming

Included in Ender in Exile  
by Orson Scott Card



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To: [jpwiggin@gso.nc.pub](mailto:jpwiggin@gso.nc.pub), [twiggin@uncg.edu](mailto:twiggin@uncg.edu)  
From: [hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov](mailto:hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov)  
Re: When Andrew Returns Home

Dear John Paul and Theresa Wiggin,

You understand that during the recent attempt by the Warsaw Pact to take over the International Fleet, our sole concern at EducAdmin was the safety of the children. Now we are finally able to begin working out the logistics of sending the children home.

We assure you that Andrew will be provided with continuous surveillance and an active bodyguard throughout his transfer from the IF to American government control. We are still negotiating the degree to which the IF will continue to provide protection after the transfer.

Every effort is being made by EducAdmin to assure that Andrew will be able to return to the most normal childhood possible. However, I wish your advice about whether he should be retained here in isolation until the conclusion of the inquiries into EducAdmin actions during the late campaign. It is quite likely that testimony will be offered that depicts Andrew and his actions in damaging ways, in order to attack EducAdmin through him (and the other children). Here at IFCOM we can keep him from hearing the worst of it; on Earth, no such protection will be possible and it is likelier that he will be called to "testify."

Hyrum Graff

—*hms*—

Theresa Wiggin was sitting up in bed, holding her printout of Graff's letter. "Called to 'testify.'" Which means putting him on exhibit as -- what, a hero? More likely a monster, since we already have various senators decrying the exploitation of children."

"That'll teach him to save the human race," said her husband, John Paul.

"This is not a time for flippancy."

"Theresa, be reasonable," said John Paul. "I want Ender home as much as you do."

"No you don't," said Theresa fiercely. "You don't ache with the need for him every day." Even as she said it she knew she was being unfair to him, and she covered her eyes and shook her head.

To his credit, he understood and didn't argue with her about what he did and did not feel. "You can never have the years they've taken, Theresa. He's not the boy we knew."

"Then we'll get to know the boy he is. Here. In our home."

"Surrounded by guards."

"That's the part I refuse to accept. Who would want to hurt him?"

John Paul set down the book he was no longer pretending to read. "Theresa, you're the smartest person I know."

"He's a child!"

"He won a war against incredibly superior forces."

"He fired off *one* weapon. Which he did not design or deploy."

"He got that weapon into firing range."

"The formics are gone! He's a hero, he's not in danger."

"All right, Theresa, he's a hero. How is he going to go to middle school? What eighth grade teacher is ready for him? What school dance is he going to be ready for?"

"It will take time. But here, with his family --"

"Yes, we're such a warm, welcoming group of people, a love nest into which he'll fit so easily."

"We *do* love each other!"

"Theresa, Colonel Graff is only trying to warn us that Ender isn't *just* our son."

"He's nobody *else's* son."

"You *know* who wants to kill our son."

"No, I don't."

"Every government that thinks of American military power as an obstacle to their plans."

"But Ender isn't going to *be* in the military, he's going to be --"

"This week he won't be in the American military. Maybe. He won a war at the age of twelve, Theresa. What makes you think he won't be drafted by our benevolent and democratic government the moment he gets back to Earth? Or put into protective custody? Maybe they'll let us go with him and maybe they won't."

Theresa let the tears flow down her cheeks. "So you're saying that when he left here we lost him forever."

"I'm saying that when your child goes off to war, you will never get him back. Not as he was, not the same boy. Changed, if he comes back at all. So let me ask you? Do you want him to go where he's in the greatest danger, or to stay where he's relatively safe?"

"You think Graff is trying to get us to tell him to keep Ender with him out there in space."

"I think Graff cares what happens to Ender, and he's letting us know -- without actually saying it, because every letter he sends can be used against him in court -- that Ender is in terrible danger. Not ten minutes after Ender's victory, the Russians made their brutal play for control of the IF. Their soldiers killed thousands of fleet officers before the IF was able to force their surrender. What would they have done if they had won? Brought Ender home and put on a big parade for him?"

Theresa knew all of this. She had known it, viscerally at least, from the moment she read Graff's letter. No, she had known it even before, had known it with a sick dread as soon as she heard that the Formic War was over. He would not be coming home.

She felt John Paul's hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off. His hand returned, stroking her arm as she lay there, facing away from him, crying because she knew she had already lost the argument, crying because she wasn't even on her own side in their quarrel.

"We knew when he was born that he didn't belong to us."

"He *does* belong to us."

"If he comes home, his life belongs to whatever government has the power to protect him and use him -- or kill him. He's the single most important asset surviving from the war. The great weapon. That's all he'll be -- that and such a celebrity he can't possibly have a normal childhood anyway. And would we be much help, Theresa? Do we understand what his life has been for the past seven years? What kind of parents can we be to the boy -- the man -- that he's become?"

"We would be *wonderful*," she said.

"And we know this because we're such perfect parents for the children we have at home with us."

Theresa rolled onto her back. "Oh, dear. Poor Peter. It must be killing him that Ender might come home."

"Take the wind right out of his sails."

"Oh, I'm not sure of that," said Theresa. "I bet Peter is already figuring out how to exploit Ender's return."

"Until he finds out that Ender is much too clever to be exploited."

"What preparation does Ender have for *politics*? He's been in the military all this time."

John Paul chuckled.

"All right, yes, of course the military is just as political as government."

"But you're right," said John Paul. "Ender's had protection there, people who intended to exploit him, yes, but he hasn't had to do any bureaucratic fighting for himself. He's probably a babe in the woods when it comes to maneuvering like that."

"So Peter really could use him?"

"That's not what worries me. What worries me is what Peter will do when he finds out that he *can't* use him."

Theresa sat back up and faced her husband. "You can't think *Peter* would raise a hand against Ender!"

"Peter doesn't raise his *own* hand to do anything difficult or dangerous. You know how he's been using Valentine."

"Only because she lets him use her."

"Exactly my point," said John Paul.

"Ender is *not* in danger from his own family."

"Theresa, we have to decide: What's best for Ender? What's best for Peter and Valentine? What's best for the future of the world?"

"Sitting here on our bed, in the middle of the night, the two of us are deciding the fate of the world?"

"When we conceived little Andrew, my dear, we decided the fate of the world."

"And had a good time doing it," she added.

"Is it good for Ender to come home? Will it make him happy?"

"Do you really think he's forgotten us?" she asked. "Do you think Ender doesn't care whether he comes home?"

"Coming home lasts a day or two. Then there's *living* here. The danger from foreign powers, the unnaturalness of his life at school, the constant infringements on his privacy, and let's not forget Peter's unquenchable ambition and envy. So I ask again, will Ender's life here be happier than it would be if ..."

"If he stays out in space? What kind of life will *that* be for him?"

"The IF has made its commitment -- total neutrality in regard to anything happening on Earth. If they have Ender, then the whole world - every government -- will *know* they'd better not try to go up against the Fleet."

"So by not coming home, Ender continues to save the world on an ongoing basis," said Theresa. "What a useful life he'll have."

"The point is that nobody *else* can use him."

Theresa put on her sweetest voice. "So you think we should write back to Graff and tell him that we don't want Ender to come home?"

"We can't do anything of the kind," said John Paul. "We'll write back that we're eager to see our son and we don't think any bodyguard will be necessary."



It took her a moment to realize why he seemed to be reversing everything he'd said. "Any letters we send Graff," she said, "will be just as public as the letter he sent us. And just as empty. And we do nothing and let things take their course."

"No, my dear," said John Paul. "It happens that living in our own house, under our own roof, are two of the most influential formers of public opinion."

"But John Paul, officially we don't know that our children are sneaking around in the nets, manipulating events through Peter's network of correspondents and Valentine's brilliantly perverse talent for demagoguery."

"And they don't know that we have any brains," said John Paul. "They seem to think they were left at our house by fairies instead of having our genetic material throughout their little bodies. They treat us as convenient samples of ignorant public opinion. So ... let's give them some public opinions that will steer them to do what's best for their brother."

"What's best," echoed Theresa. "We don't know what's best."

"No," said John Paul. "We only know what seems best. But one thing's certain -- we know a lot more about it than any of our children do."



Valentine came home from school with anger festering inside her. Stupid teachers -- it made her crazy sometimes to ask a question and have the teacher patiently explain things to her as if the question were a sign of Valentine's failure to understand the subject, instead of the teacher's. But Valentine sat there and took it, as the equation showed up in the holodisplay on everybody's desk and the teacher covered it point by point.

Then Valentine drew a little circle in the air around the element of the problem that the teacher had not addressed properly -- the reason why the answer was not right. Valentine's circle did not show up on all the desks, of course; only the teacher's computer had that capability.

So the teacher then got to draw his own circle around that number and say, "What you're not noticing here, Valentine, is that even *with* this explanation, if you ignore *this* element you still can't get the right answer."

It was such an obvious ego-protective coverup. But of course it was obvious only to Valentine. To the other students, who were barely grasping the material anyway (especially since it was being explained to them by an unobservant incompetent), it *was* Val who had overlooked the circled parenthetical, even though it was precisely because of that element that she had asked her question in the first place.

And the teacher gave her that simpering smile that clearly said, "You aren't going to defeat me and humiliate me in front of this class."

But Valentine was not trying to humiliate him. She did not care about him. She simply cared that the material be taught well enough that if, God forbid, some member of the class became a civil engineer, his bridges wouldn't fall down and kill people.

That was the difference between her and the idiots of the world. They were all trying to look smart and keep their social standing. Whereas Valentine didn't care about social standing, she cared about getting it right. Getting the truth -- when the truth was gettable.

She had said nothing to the teacher and nothing to any of the students and she knew she wouldn't get any sympathy at home, either. Peter would mock her for caring about school enough to let that clown of a teacher get under her skin. Father would look at the problem, point out the correct answer, and go back to his work without ever noticing that Val wasn't asking for *help*, she was asking for commiseration.

And Mother? She would be all for charging down to the school and *doing* something about it, raking the teacher over the coals. Mother wouldn't even *hear* Val explaining that she didn't want to shame the teacher, she just wanted somebody to say, "Isn't it ironic, that in this special advanced school for really bright kids, they have a teacher who doesn't know his own subject!" To which Val could reply, "It sure is!" and then she'd feel better. Like somebody was on her side. Somebody *got* it and she wasn't alone.

My needs are simple and few, thought Valentine. Food. Clothing. A comfortable place to sleep. And *no idiots*.

But of course a world with no idiots would be lonely. If she herself were even allowed there. It's not as if *she* never made mistakes.

Like the mistake of ever letting Peter rope her into being Demosthenes. He *still* thought he needed to tell her what to write every day after school -- as if, after all these years, she had not completely internalized the character. She could write Demosthenes' essays in her sleep.

And if she needed help, all she had to do was listen to Father pontificate on world affairs -- since he seemed to echo all of Demosthenes' warmongering jingoistic demagogic opinions despite claiming never to read the columns.

If he knew his sweet naive little daughter was writing those essays, he'd poop petunias.

She fumed into the house, headed straight for her computer, scanned the news, and started writing the essay she knew Peter would assign her -- a diatribe on how the IF should not have ended the hostilities with the Warsaw Pact without first demanding that Russia surrender all her nukes, because shouldn't there be *some* cost to waging a nakedly aggressive war? All the usual spewings from her Demosthenes anti-avatar.

Or am I, as Demosthenes, Peter's *real* avatar? Have I been turned into a virtual person?

Click. An email. Anything would be better than what she was writing.

It was from mother. She was forwarding an email from Colonel Graff. About Ender having a bodyguard when he came home.

"I thought you'd want to see this," Mother had written. "Isn't it just THRILLING that Andrew's homecoming is SO CLOSE?"

Stop shouting, Mother. Why do you use caps for emphasis like that? It's so -- junior high school. It's what she told Peter more than once. Mother is such a *cheerleader*.

Mother's epistle went on in the same vein. It'll take NO time at ALL to get Ender's room back into shape for him and now there doesn't seem to be any reason to put off cleaning the room a SECOND longer unless what do you think, would Peter want to SHARE his room with his little brother so they could BOND and get CLOSE again? And what do you think Ender will want for his VERY FIRST meal home?

Food, Mother. Whatever it is will definitely be "SPECIAL enough to make him feel LOVED and MISSED."

Anyway. Mother was so naive to take Graff's letter at face value. Val went back and read it again. Surveillance. Bodyguard. Graff was sending her a warning, not trying to get her all excited about Ender's homecoming. Ender was going to be in danger. Couldn't Mother see that?

Graff asks if they should keep Ender in space till the inquiries were over. But that would take months. How could Mother have gotten the idea that Ender was coming home so soon it was time to clear out the junk that had gotten stacked in his room? Graff was asking her to request that he *not* be sent home just yet. And his reason was that Ender was in danger.

Instantly the whole range of dangers that Ender faced loomed before her. The Russians would assume that Ender was a weapon that America would use against them. The Chinese would think the same -- that America, armed with this Ender-weapon, might become aggressive about intruding into China's sphere of influence again. Both nations would breathe easier if Ender were dead. Though of course they'd have to make it look like the assassination had been carried out by some kind of terrorist movement. Which meant that they wouldn't just snipe Ender out of existence, they'd probably blow up his school.

No, no, no, Val told herself. Just because that's the kind of thing Demosthenes would say doesn't mean it's what *you* have to think!

But the image of somebody blowing Ender up or shooting him or whatever method they used -- all the methods kept flashing through her mind. Wouldn't it be ironic -- yet typically human -- for the person who saved the human race to be assassinated? It was like the murder of Abraham Lincoln or Mohandas Gandhi. Some people just didn't know who their saviors were. And the fact that Ender was still a kid wouldn't even slow them down.

He can't come home, she thought. Mother will never see it, I could never say it to her, but ... even if they weren't going to assassinate him, what would his life be like here? Ender was never one to seek fame or status, and yet everything he did would end up on the vids with people commenting on how he did his hair (Vote! Like it or hate it?) and what classes he was taking in school (What will the hero be when he grows up? Vote on the career **you** think The Wiggin should prepare for!)

What a nightmare. It wouldn't be coming home. They could never bring Ender home anyway. The home he left didn't exist. The kid who was taken out of that home didn't exist either. When Ender was here -- not even a whole year ago -- when Val went to the lake and spent those hours with him, Ender seemed so old. Playful sometimes, yes, but he felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. Now the burden had been taken off -- but the aftermath would cling to him, would tie him down, tear down his life.

The years of childhood were gone. Period. Ender didn't get to be a little boy growing up into an adolescent in his father's and mother's house. He was already an adolescent now -- in years and hormones -- and an adult in the responsibilities he'd borne.

If school feels empty to *me*, how will it feel to Ender?

Even as she finished writing her essay on Russia's nukes and the cost of defeat, she was mentally structuring another essay. The one explaining why Ender Wiggin should not be brought back to Earth because he'd be the target of every crank and spy and paparazzo and assassin and a normal life would be impossible.

She didn't write it, though. Because she knew there was a huge problem: Peter would hate it.

Because Peter already had his plans. His online persona, Locke, had already started laying the groundwork for Ender's homecoming. It was clear to Valentine that when Ender returned, Peter intended to come out of the closet as the real author of the Locke essays -- and therefore the person who came up with the terms of the truce that was still holding between the Warsaw Pact and the IF. Peter meant to piggyback on Ender's fame. Ender saved the human race from the formics, and his big brother Peter saved the world from civil war in the aftermath of Ender's victory. Double heroes!

Ender would hate the notoriety. Peter was so hungry for it that he intended to steal as much of Ender's as he could get.

Oh, he'd never admit that, thought Valentine. Peter will have all kinds of reasons why it's for Ender's own good. Probably the very reasons I've thought of.

And since that's the case, am I doing just what Peter does? Have I come up with all these reasons for Ender not to come home, solely because in my heart I don't want him here?

At that thought, such a wave of emotion swept over her that she found herself weeping at her homework table. She wanted him home. And even though she understood that he couldn't really come home -- Colonel Graff was right -- she still yearned for the little brother who was stolen from her. All these years with the brother I hate, and now, for the sake of the brother I love, I'll work to keep him from ...

From me? No, I don't have to keep him from *me*. I hate school, I hate my life here, I hate hate hate being under Peter's thumb. Why should I stay? Why shouldn't I go out into space with Ender? At least for a while. I'm the one he's closest to. I'm the only one he's *seen* in the past seven years. If he can't come home, one bit of home -- me -- can come to him!

It was all a matter of persuading Peter that it wasn't in his best interest to have Ender come back to Earth -- without letting Peter *know* that she was trying to manipulate him.

It just made her tired, because Peter wasn't easy to manipulate. He saw through everything. So she had to be quite forthright and honest about what she was doing -- but do it with such subtle overtones of humility and earnestness and dispassion and *whatever* that Peter could get past his own condescension toward everything she said and decide that he had thought that way all along and ...

And is my real motive that I want to get off planet myself? Is this about Ender or about me getting free?

Both. It can be both. And I'll tell Ender the truth about that -- I won't be giving up *anything* to be with him. I'd rather be with him in space and never see Earth again than stay here, with or without him. Without him: an aching void. With him: the pain of watching him lead a miserable, frustrated life.

Val began to write a letter to Colonel Graff. Mother had been careless enough to include Graff's address. That was almost a security breach. Mother was so naive sometimes. If she were an IF officer, she would have been cashiered long ago.



At dinner that night, Mother couldn't stop talking about Ender's homecoming. Peter listened with only half his attention, because of course Mother couldn't see past her personal sentimentality about her "lost little boy coming back to the nest" whereas Peter understood that Ender's return would be horribly complicated. So much to prepare for -- and not just the stupid bedroom. Ender could have Peter's own bed, for all he cared -- what mattered was that for a brief window of time, Ender would be the center of the world's attention, and *that* was when Locke would emerge from the cloak of anonymity and put an end to the speculation about the identity of the "great benefactor of humanity who, because of his modesty in remaining anonymous, cannot receive the Nobel prize that he so richly deserves for having led us to the end of the last war of mankind."

That from a rather gushy fan of Locke's -- who also happened to be the head of the opposition party in Great Britain. Naive to imagine even for a moment that the brief attempt by the New Warsaw Pact to take over the IF was the "last war." There's only one way to have a "last war," and that's to have the whole of Earth under a single, effective, powerful, but popular leader.

And the way to introduce that leader would be to find him on camera, standing beside the great Ender Wiggin with his arm flung across the hero's shoulders because -- and who should be surprised by this? -- the "Boy of War" and the "Man of Peace" are brothers!

And now Father was blathering about something. Only he had addressed something to Peter directly and so Peter had to play the dutiful son and listen as if he cared.

"I really think you need to commit to the career you want to pursue *before* your brother gets home, Peter."

"And why is that?" asked Peter.

"Oh, don't pretend to be so naive. Don't you realize that Ender Wiggin's brother can get into *any college he wants*?"

Father pronounced the words as if they were the most brilliant ever spoken aloud by someone who had not yet been deified by the Roman senate or sainted by the Pope or whatever. It would never occur to Father that Peter's perfect grades and his perfect score on all the college-entry tests would already get him into any school he wanted. He didn't have to piggyback on his brother's fame. But no, to Father everything good in Peter's life would always be seen as flowing from Ender. Ender Ender Ender Ender what a stupid name.

If Father's thinking this way, no doubt everybody else will, too. At least everybody below a certain minimum intelligence.

All Peter had been seeing was the publicity bonus that Ender's homecoming would offer. But Father had reminded him of something else -- that everything he did would be discounted in people's minds precisely because he was Ender the Great's older brother. People would see them standing side by side, yes -- but they'd wonder why Ender's brother had not been taken into Battle School. It would make Peter look weak and inferior and vulnerable.

There he'd stand, noticeably taller, the brother who stayed home and didn't do anything. "Oh, but I wrote all the Locke essays and shut down the conflict with Russia before it could turn into a world war!" Well, if you're so smart, why weren't *you* helping your little brother save the human race from *complete destruction*?

Public relations opportunity, yes. But also a nightmare.

How could he use the opportunity Ender's great victory offered, yet not have it *look* like he was nothing but a hanger on, sucking at his brother's fame like a remora? How ghastly if his announcement sounded like some sad kind of me-too-ism. Oh, you think my brother's cool? Well, I'll have you know that I saved the world *too*. In my own sad, needy little way.

"Are you all right, Peter?" asked Valentine.

"Oh, is something wrong?" asked Mother. "Let me look at you, dear."

"I'm not taking my shirt off or letting you use a rectal thermometer on me, Mother, because Val is hallucinating and I look just fine.

"I'll have you know that if and when I start hallucinating," said Val, "I can think of something better than seeing your face looking pukish."

"What a great commercial idea," said Peter, almost by reflex now. "Choose Your Own Hallucination! Oh, wait, they have that one -- they call it 'illegal drugs.'"

"Don't sneer at us needy ones," said Val. "Those who are addicted to ego don't need drugs."

"Children," said Mother. "Is *this* what Ender will find when he comes home?"

"Yes," said Val and Peter simultaneously.

Father spoke up. "I'd like to think he might find you a bit more mature."

But by now Peter and Val were laughing uproariously. They couldn't stop, so Father sent them from the table.

—*igms*—

Peter glanced through Val's essay on Russian nukes. "This is so boring."

"I don't think so," said Valentine. "They have the nukes and that keeps other countries from slapping them down when they need it -- which is often."

"What's this thing you've got against Russia?"

"It's Demosthenes who has something against Russia," said Val with fake nonchalance.

"Good," said Peter. "So Demosthenes will not be worried about Russian nuclear weapons, he'll be worried about Russia getting its hands on the most valuable weapon of them all."

"The Molecular Disruption Device?" asked Val. "The IF will never bring it within firing range of earth."

"Not the M.D. Device, you poor sap. I'm referring to our brother. Our civilization-destroying junior sib."

"Don't you dare talk about him so mockingly!"

Peter's expression turned into a mocking simper. But behind his visage there was anger and hurt. She still had the power to get to him, just by making it clear how much more she loved Ender.

"Demosthenes is going to write an essay pointing out that America must get Andrew Wiggin back to Earth immediately. No more delays. The world is too dangerous a place for America not to have the immediate services of the greatest military leader the world has ever known."

Immediately a fresh wave of hatred for Peter swept over Valentine. Partly because she realized *his* approach would work far better than the essay she had already written. She hadn't internalized Demosthenes as well as she thought. Demosthenes would absolutely call for Ender's immediate return and enlistment in the American military.

And that would be as destabilizing, in its own way, as a call for forward deployment of nukes. Demosthenes' essays were watched very carefully by the rivals and enemies of the United States. If he called for Ender to come home at once, they would all start maneuvering to keep Ender in space; and some, at least, would openly accuse America of having aggressive intentions.

It would then be Locke's place, in a few days or weeks, to come up with a compromise, a statesmanlike solution: Leave the kid in space.

Valentine knew exactly why Peter had changed his mind. It was that stupid remark of Father's at dinner -- his reminder that Peter would be in Ender's shadow, no matter what he did.

Well, even political sheep sometimes said something that had a good result. Now Val wouldn't even have to persuade Peter of the need to keep Ender away from Earth. It would be all his idea instead of hers.



Theresa once again sat on the bed, crying. Strewn about her were printouts of the Demosthenes and Locke essays that she knew would keep Ender from returning home.

"I can't help it," she said to her husband. "I know it's the right thing -- just as Graff *wanted* us to understand it. But I thought I'd see him again. I really did."

John Paul sat beside her on the bed and put his arms around her. "It's the hardest thing we ever did."

"Not giving him up in the first place?"

"That was hard," said John Paul, "but we didn't have a choice. They were going to take him anyway. This time, though. You know that if we went on the nets and put up vids of us pleading for our son to come home -- we'd have a pretty good chance."

"And our little boy is going to wonder why we *don't* do it."

"Not he's not."

"Oh, you think he's so smart he'll figure out what we're doing? Why we're doing *nothing*?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he doesn't know us," said Theresa. "He doesn't know what we think or feel. As far as he can tell, we've forgotten all about him."

"One thing I feel good about, in this whole mess," said John Paul. "We're still good at manipulating our genius children."

"Oh, that," said Theresa dismissively. "It's easy to manipulate your children when they're absolutely sure you're stupid."

—*igms*—

To: [hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov](mailto:hgraff%educadmin@ifcom.gov)  
From: [demosthenes@LastBestHopeOfEarth.pol](mailto:demosthenes@LastBestHopeOfEarth.pol)  
Re: You know the truth

You know who decides what to write. No doubt you can even guess why. I'm not going to try to defend my essay, or how it's being used by others.

You once used the sister of Andrew Wiggin to persuade him to go back into space and win that little war you were fighting. She did her job, didn't she? Such a good girl, fulfills all her assignments.

Well I have an assignment for her. You once sent her brother to her, for comfort and company. He'll need her again, more than ever, only he can't come to her. No house by the lake this time. But there's no reason she can't go out into space to be with him. Enlist her in the IF, pay her as a consultant, whatever it takes. But she and her brother need each other. More than either of them needs Life On Earth.

Don't second guess her on this. Remember that she's smarter than you are, and she loves her younger brother more than you do, and besides, you're a decent man. You know this is right and good. You always try to bring about what's right and good, don't you?

Do us both a favor. Take this letter and shred it and stick it where the sun don't shine.

Your devoted and humble servant -- everybody's devoted and humble servant -- the humble and devoted servant of truth and noble jingoism -- Demosthenes.

# The Talk

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

An assortment of reactions ran through the class when the announcement was made. Behind me, I could hear Kenny Harcourt snickering. On my right, I saw Mary Beth Adderly whisper something to Kara Chen. Kara blushed. On my left Tyler Horvath looked up at the speaker with no expression. Next to him, Eddie Moldour was grinning smugly.

I listened as the announcement was repeated. "All girls please report to the auditorium," Principal Sestwick said.

We knew what that meant. It was time for *The Talk*. It was no great mystery. They'd get the girls together and explain stuff about puberty and growing up. It was also no big deal -- for guys. We had it simple and easy.

"All boys please report to the gym," Principal Sestwick added.

"Great," I said, turning around toward Bobby Mussleman. "Maybe we'll get to play dodge ball while they talk to the girls."

"That sounds good," Bobby said. "Wouldn't be fair if they made us sit here and work."

We got up and headed to the gym, while our teacher, Mr. Mercante, made a few half-hearted attempts to keep us from running, pushing, or talking too loudly. At the gym doors, we merged with the boys from the other three sixth-grade classes.

I expected to see our gym teacher waiting for us. Instead, Principal Sestwick came in and went over to a microphone that had been set up at one end of the gym.

"Sit down, boys," he said.

I grabbed a spot on the floor, next to Eddy. "What's up?" I asked.

"No idea," he said.

"In the next few years," the principal began, "you'll begin to notice some changes."

Next to me, Eddy squinted at his hand; then, in a fake scream, he whispered, "I've got hair on my knuckles. Oh no, save me. I'm changing."

I choked down the laugh that was threatening to explode out of my mouth. It was a good thing I wasn't drinking milk -- the spray would have shot three or four feet from my nose. "Cut it out," I managed to say when I'd gotten back in control.

The principal was still talking, even though Eddy and I weren't the only ones who were horsing around. "Some of this might be frightening or confusing to you," he said, "but please keep in mind that everything that happens is perfectly natural."

He paused and looked across the crowd, then went on with the talk. "The first signs might be very small. One day, you'll find yourself reading the newspaper. And not just sports and comics, but also the news."

"What's he talking about?" I asked Eddy.

"No idea," Eddy said.

"I read the paper," Tyler said.

Someone behind him said, "Who cares?" and smacked him on the head.

"You'll find yourself keeping track of your money," Principal Sestwick said. "You might even make out a budget. Eventually, you'll even consider opening a checking account as a first step toward establishing credit."

Principal Sestwick took a deep breath, then went on. "As these changes occur, you'll even find yourself looking at insurance policies, as well as . . ."

He kept on talking. I was almost too shocked to listen. Around us, I could see kids staring at the principal with amazement. These things he was talking about . . . "These are things our parents do," I said aloud as the realization struck me. "He's saying we're going to do them, too!"

"Not me," Eddie said. "I'm never doing any of that stuff. No way."

A shudder rippled through me. "But our parents --"

"Shut up," Eddie cut me off. "Don't talk about it."

I had to agree with him. Not me, I thought. Never.

A few minutes later, The Talk was over. We all got up, rising like zombies, stiff and stunned, and dazed. On the way back to class, we ran into the girls. They were looking mostly pretty giggly. A few of them looked embarrassed, but all in all they looked a lot better than the boys around me.

Kara caught my eye. She was more mature than most of the girls, and she didn't seem embarrassed to be coming back from the girl's version of The Talk.

"What did you boys do?" she asked.

"Dodge ball," I said before I even had a chance to think.

"Lucky you," Kara said.

"Yeah. Lucky us."



# Split Decision

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

"So, New York or Chicago?"

"I don't know," Greg said. "I think you're crazy going to either place. You can't run away."

"Sure I can," I said. "All my dad cares about is that stupid woman he married. I can't believe she's going to have a baby. I'm out of here. The only question is -- New York or Chicago?"

"Ask Spooky Sheila," Greg said.

"No way. She creeps me out." I glanced at the back of the room toward Sheila Delphini's desk. She was playing with her hair, braiding and unbraiding several strands, and paying no attention to the teacher. Not that I was paying any attention, either. Why take notes when you aren't planning to stick around?

"But she'll tell you what will happen," Greg said. "I've heard she's got some kind of way to see the future."

I'd heard the same rumors. Kids had whispered stories about Sheila for years. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to believe any of that stuff. But it couldn't hurt to see what she thought about my problem.

When the bell rang at the end of the period, I walked over to her desk.

"I've got a question," I said.

She raised her eyes up toward me without lifting her head. Her irises were so light blue, they almost seemed clear. A chill ran through my body and along my arms.

"You're going to split," she said.

"How'd you know?"

She didn't answer. Maybe she'd heard me talking to Greg. I'd have to be more careful. If my dad found out, he'd murder me.

"Should I go to New York or Chicago?"

She reached out and grabbed my hand. Then she closed her eyes. She took a long, slow breath. I waited. She breathed. Behind me, I heard people shuffle in for the next class. Just as I was about to pull my hand away, her body jerked like she'd been slashed across the back with a whip. Her fingers dug into my palm. She opened her eyes, but didn't say anything.

"Tell me."

She released my hand. "The future can hurt."

"I don't care. Tell me."

"New York if she has a boy. Chicago if she has a girl."

It took me a moment to realize what she was talking about. "My dad's wife?" I couldn't bring myself to call her my stepmother.

Sheila nodded. A single tear trickled from her left eye. She was starting to creep me out.

"But I don't want to wait . . ."

She shrugged. I fled. Something about her made my stomach feel like I'd swallowed razor blades dipped in acid.

I caught up with Greg in the hall and told him what she'd said. "Crazy, huh?" I asked.

"Maybe. But have you gotten any better advice?"

"Nope."

"Then wait. See what pops out."

"No way."

I wasn't going to wait. I had to get out of there. But I needed to make sure I didn't get caught. My chance came sooner than I'd expected. Saturday, late in the afternoon, Dad's wife went into labor. She was three weeks early. It was my perfect opportunity to split. They probably wouldn't even notice I was gone until tomorrow. The moment they left for the hospital, I crammed clothes into a duffel bag and headed for Sawtooth Ridge. Lots of trains went through there. I could hop one for New York or Chicago. I just needed to know which way to go.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Greg. "I need a huge favor. Go to the hospital -- okay? Wait at the place where they put the new babies. You know where I mean?"

"Yeah. I know. Are you really doing this?"

"I am. So help me out, okay?"

"All right. I'll call when I have news."

I hung up and went over to the tracks. The ridge was on a steep grade, so the trains slowed down a lot as they came through. I'd read books where people hopped trains. It didn't sound hard, as long as you were careful. I wasn't worried about getting hurt. Sheila said I'd go to New York or Chicago, so obviously I was going to survive the trip.

It was getting dark. There were no lights anywhere near the ridge. I didn't like the idea of hopping a train when I couldn't see what was going on. I called Greg again, but there was no answer. It figured I couldn't count on him.

"Forget the stupid prediction," I said. I decided I'd take the next train that came along.

About ten minutes later, an eastbound train came crawling up the ridge. "New York," I said. That would be fine. I waited until the engine and the first couple cars passed, then started jogging along. I had to be careful -- the tracks were close together.

I saw a boxcar with a sliding door. I grabbed the handle and pulled myself toward it.

As I was dangling from the outside of the boxcar, my phone rang. It was stupid to try to answer it, but habits are hard to break. When phones ring, we grab them. I fumbled with one hand, got my phone out of my pocket, and flipped it open.

"Twins," Greg said.

"What?"

"A boy and a girl."

The words entered my brain, and sat there like a foreign phrase. They didn't seem to tell me what I needed to know. Before I could say anything to Greg, the train rocked as it entered a sharp curve at the bottom of the ridge. The phone slipped from my fingers. I leaned over to try to catch it, and lost my balance. As I started to fall, I panicked and hooked an arm through the boxcar door handle. My duffel bag, which I'd looped over my neck, swung out from my other shoulder.

The phone clattered to the ground. I didn't care. Something else had my attention. Ahead, far too close, I saw a westbound train headed right for me. I tried to swing the duffel bag out of the way, but I couldn't get any leverage.

As the other train reached me, I heard Sheila's words.

*"New York if she has a boy. Chicago if she has a girl."*

She'd had both. I felt a jolting pain when the duffel bag got snagged by the passing train. I tried to yank my arm free, but it was wedged in the door handle.

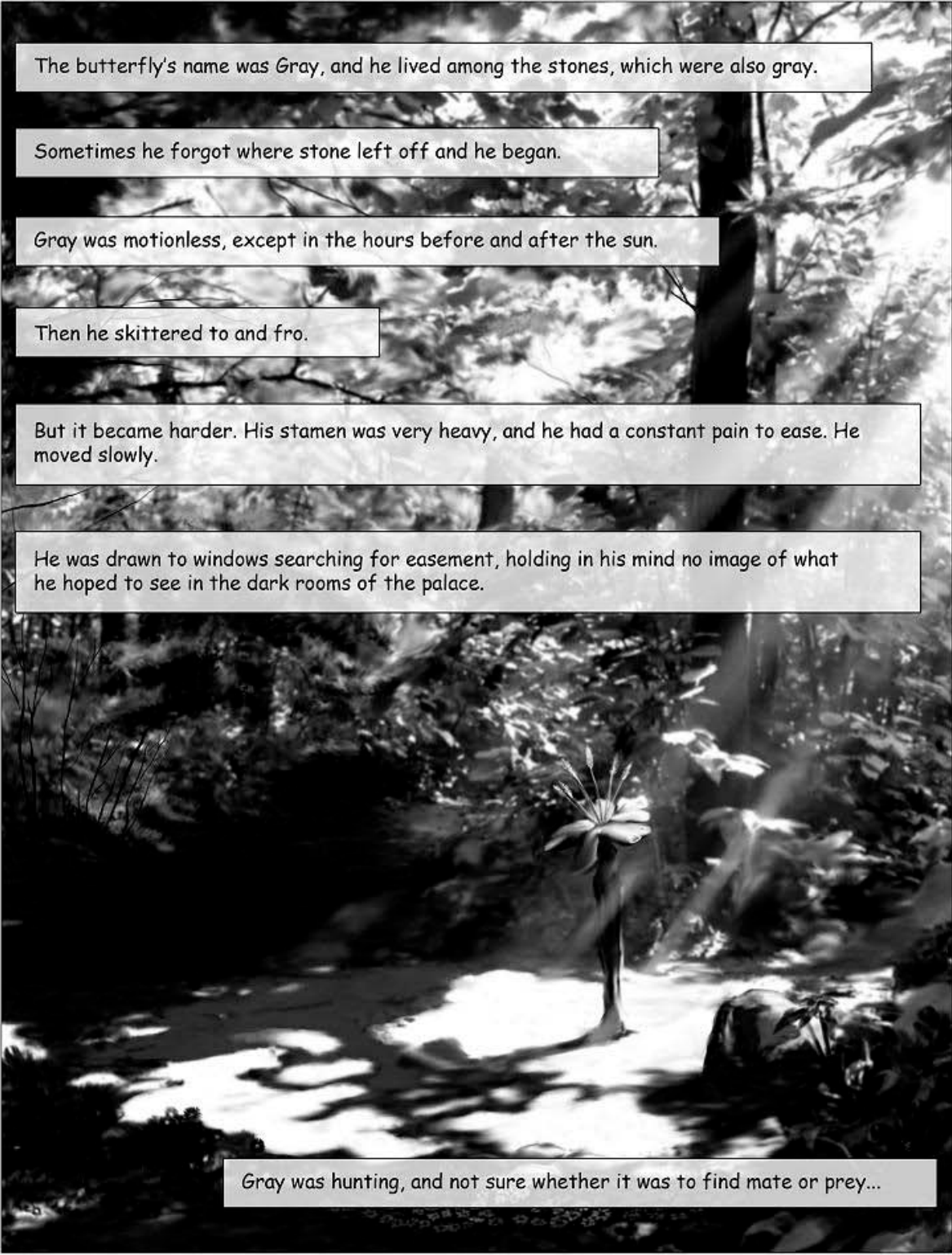
Sheila was right. I was going to New York and Chicago. As pain beyond anything I'd ever known exploded through my body, I remembered her first words.

"You're going to split."

Right.

# A Plague of Butterflies

Art by Lance Card | Script by Jake Black adapted from the short story by Orson Scott Card

A black and white photograph of a butterfly in a forest. The butterfly is in the lower center, perched on a small plant. The background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees. Several white text boxes with black borders are overlaid on the image, containing text from a script. The text boxes are arranged vertically on the left side of the image.

The butterfly's name was *Gray*, and he lived among the stones, which were also gray.

Sometimes he forgot where stone left off and he began.

Gray was motionless, except in the hours before and after the sun.

Then he skittered to and fro.

But it became harder. His stamen was very heavy, and he had a constant pain to ease. He moved slowly.

He was drawn to windows searching for easement, holding in his mind no image of what he hoped to see in the dark rooms of the palace.

Gray was hunting, and not sure whether it was to find mate or prey...



It was the last journey.

He had begun his life in wealth, close to power in Sennabris - the greatest of the oil-burning cities of the coast.

His first journey took him away from the coast--the easier way of inland.

He traveled from place to place, each time leaving something behind.

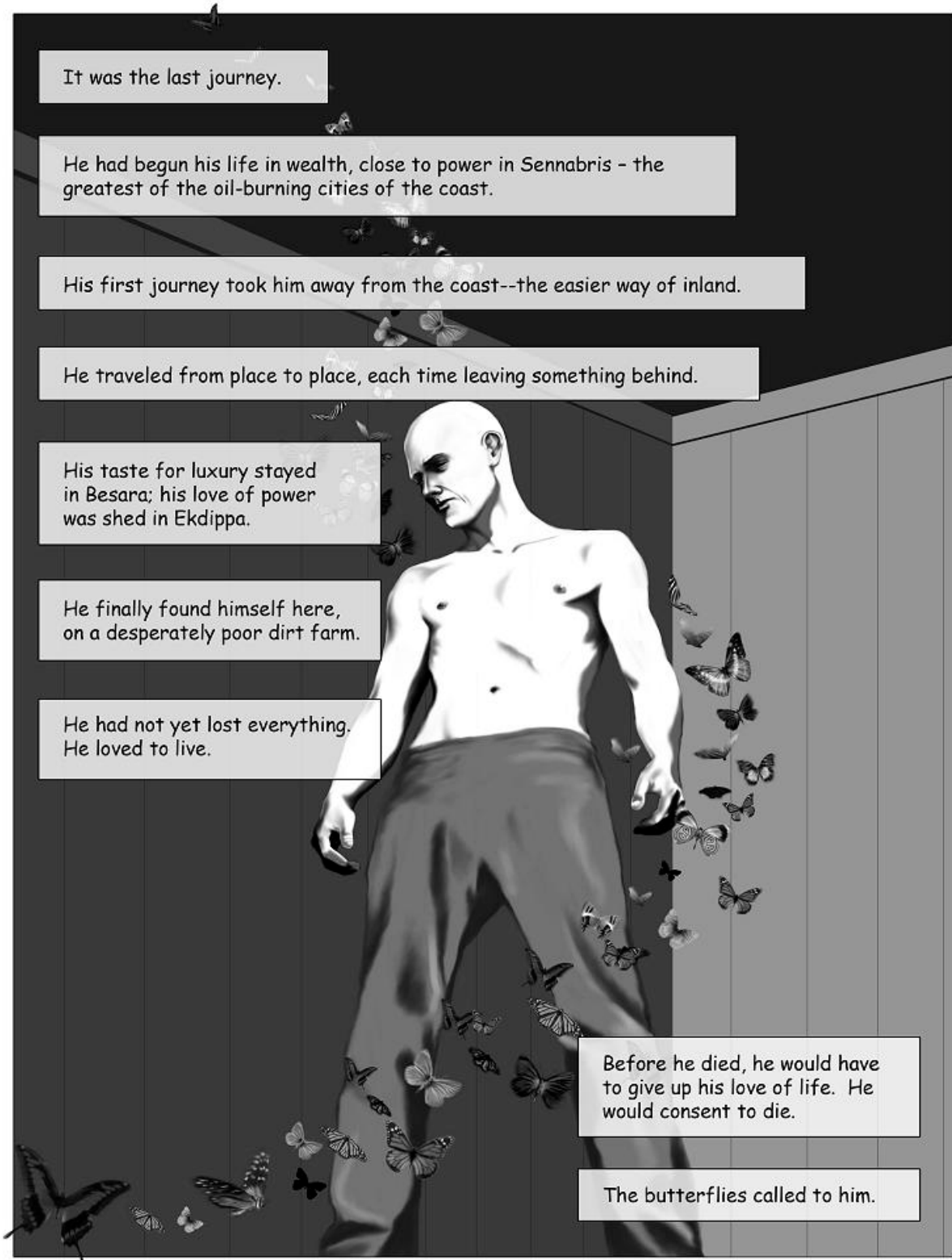
His taste for luxury stayed in Besara; his love of power was shed in Ekdippa.

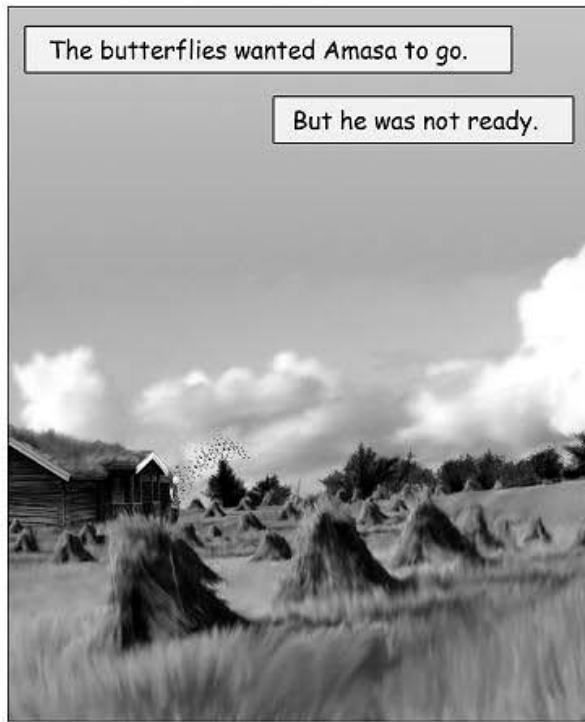
He finally found himself here, on a desperately poor dirt farm.

He had not yet lost everything. He loved to live.

Before he died, he would have to give up his love of life. He would consent to die.

The butterflies called to him.

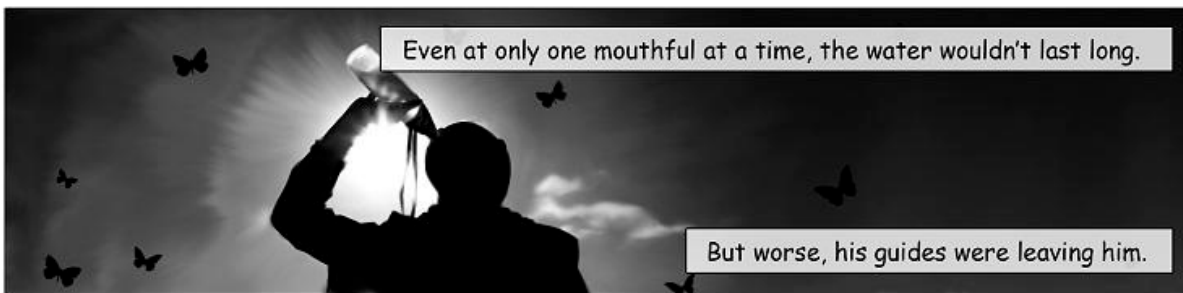








The heat was intense, as one would expect from the desert.



Even at only one mouthful at a time, the water wouldn't last long.

But worse, his guides were leaving him.



As long as he watched a particular butterfly, it would stay. But the moment he looked away, they would leave, until there was only one.



I say,  
since you're not going  
anywhere, you might as well  
stop.

If I wanted  
conversation,  
I would have  
brought a  
friend.

If you think  
the butterflies are  
your friend,  
you're an ass.

I know all about them.  
I lived at Hierusalem, and  
now I'm the sentinel of the  
Hierusalem Road.

No one leaves Hierusalem.

I did. And now I sit on the side of the road,  
and teach travelers the keys to getting into  
the city. If you don't listen to me, your bones will join  
a large collection that the sun and wind  
gradually turn to sand.







Oh, yes. You'd rather follow the dead guidance of the makers of the road than trust a living man.

I'll follow the trail.

Tell me, then.



Give me all your water.

It is the first key to entering the city.

I see that you don't believe me, but it's true. A man with food or water can't get into the city.

You see, the city is hidden. If you had miraculous eyes, you could see the city even now.

The city can only be found by those near to death. You must be desperate.

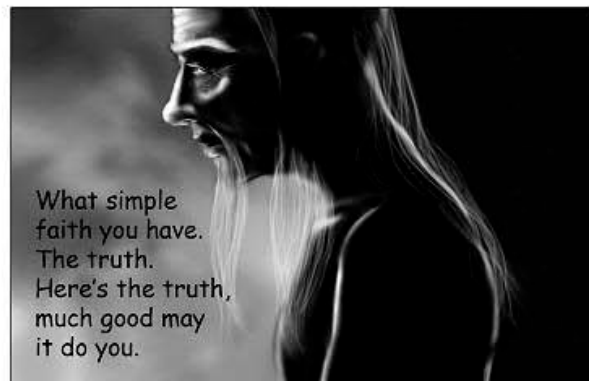
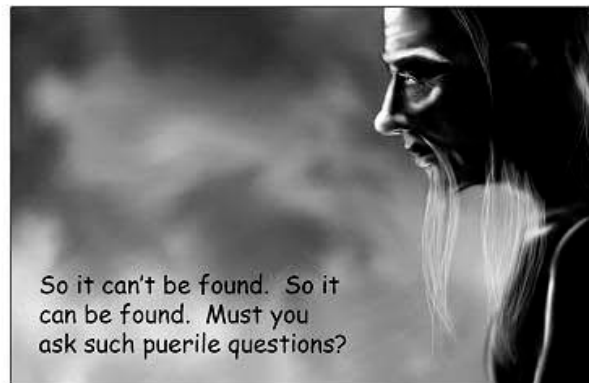
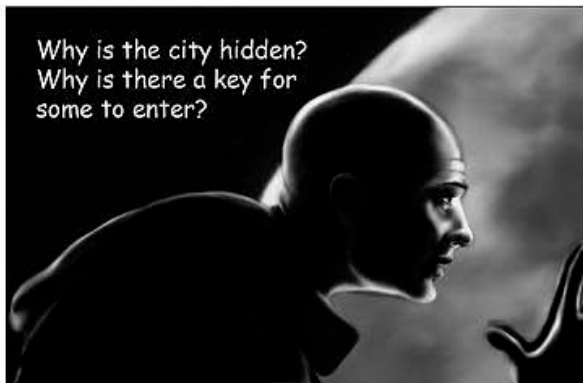


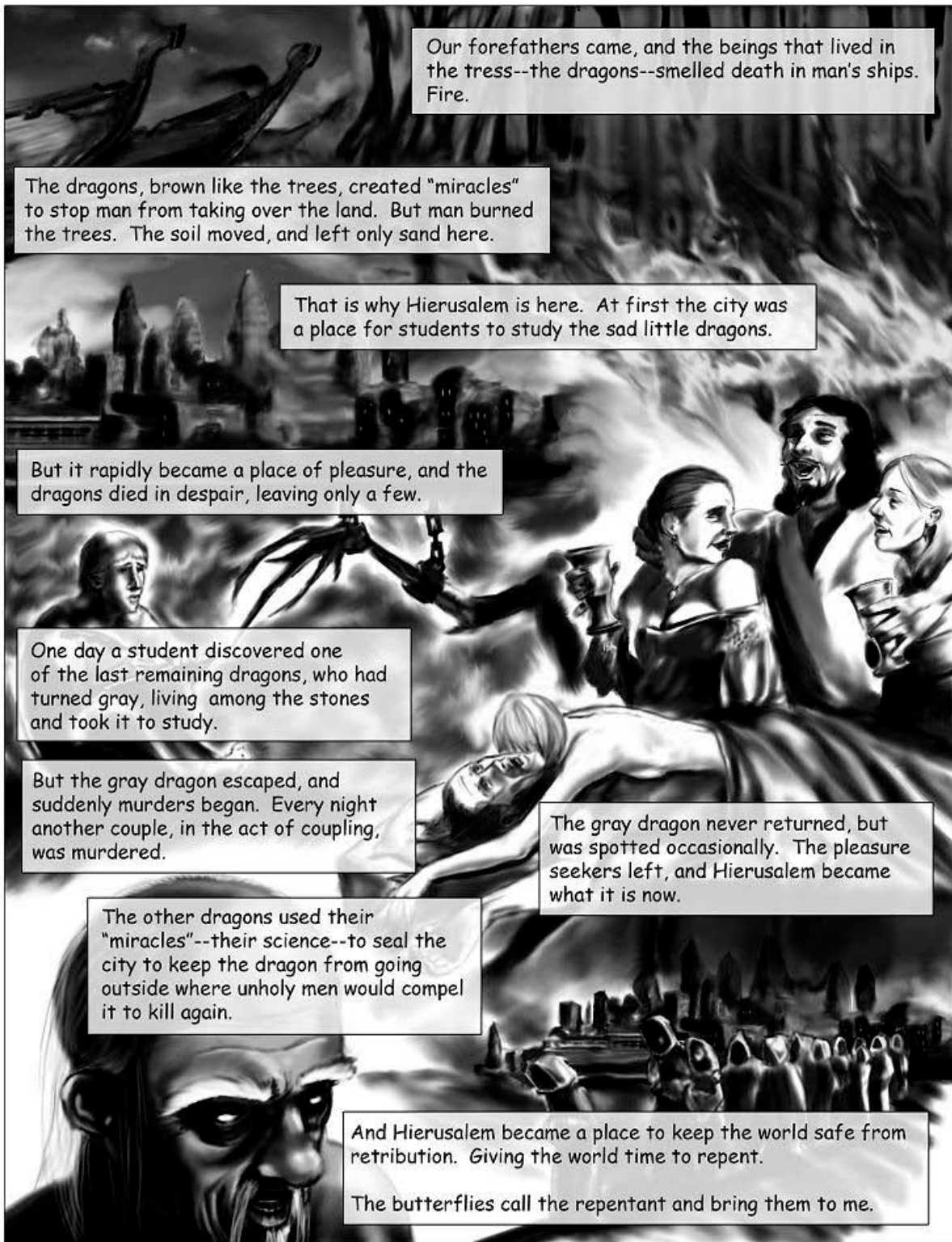
If you pass the city door, and cannot see it because you have water with you, you will never find it again.

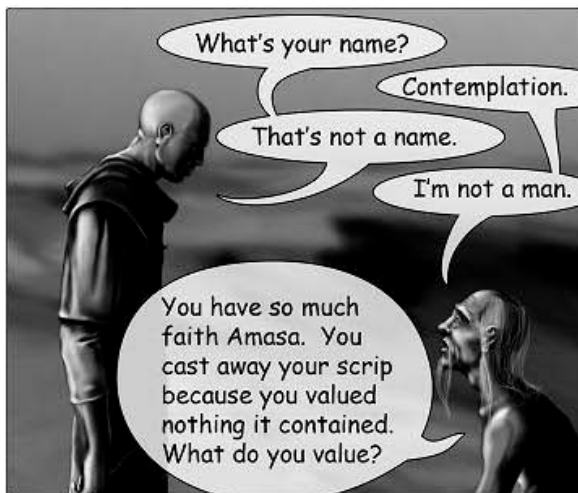
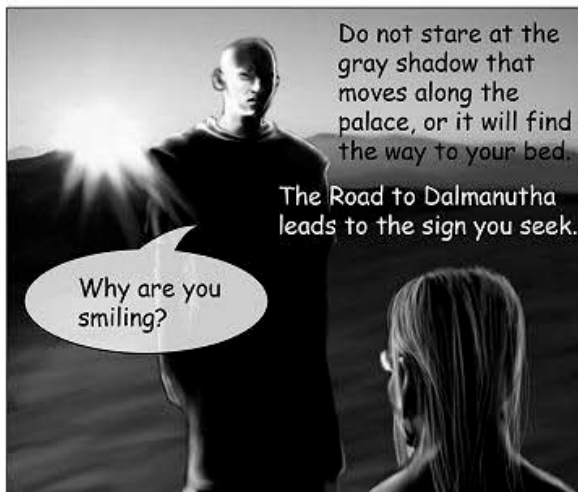
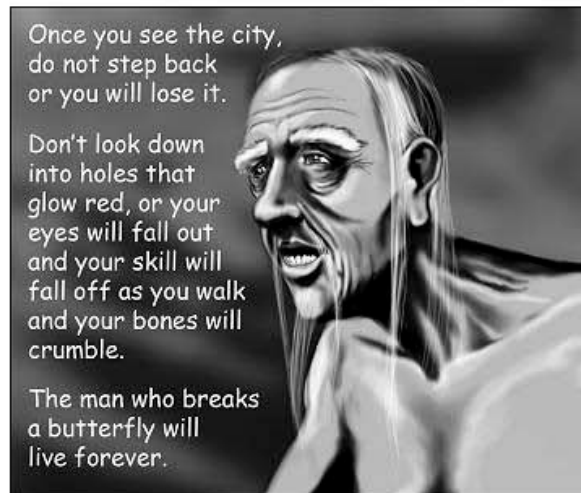
You must know the taste of death before Hierusalem will open to you.















The Queen of Hierusalem was angry.

For a month she'd been lost in the palace.

Only with the help of her servants had she found refuge in this bed, and she was not moving again.

"Damn the king's ancestors for building all these chambers," she would often say.



What would you like to wear to the King's invocation tomorrow?

I will not go. I choose to be absent this once. There will be another in seven years.

She envied the servant. She would like to go to the party; it had been years since she'd been to one.

Damn the king's ancestors.

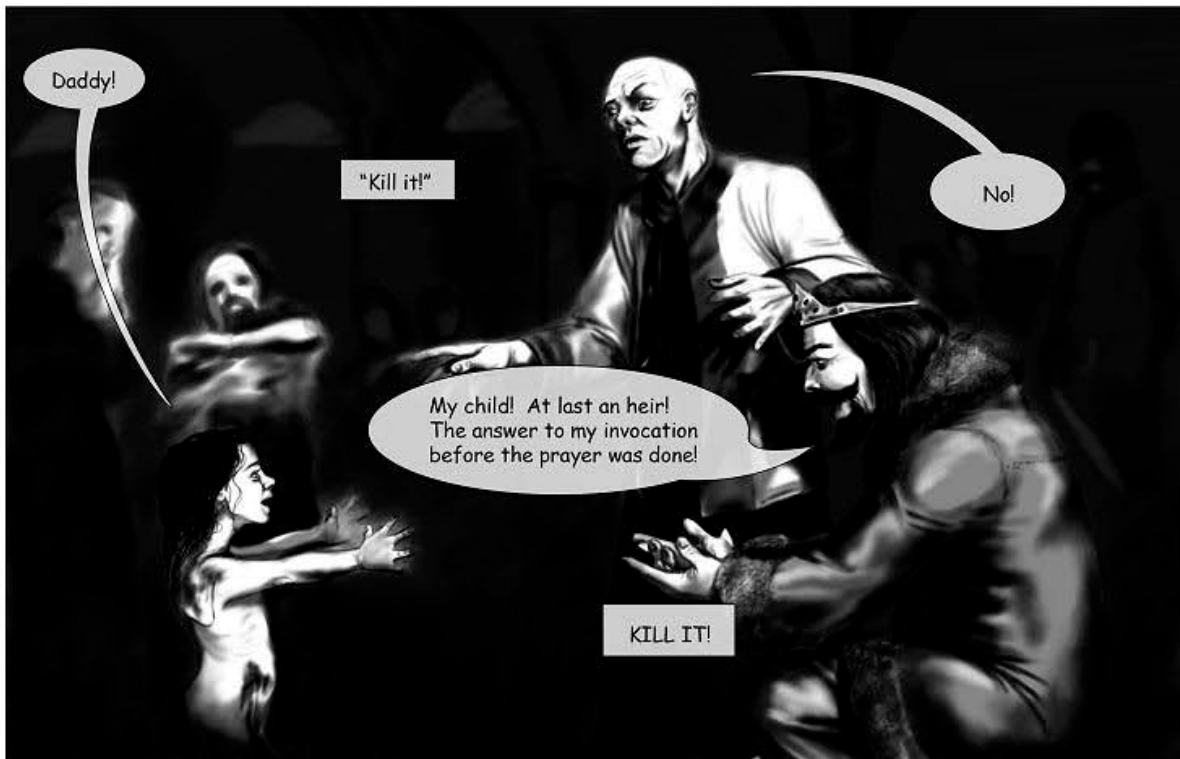












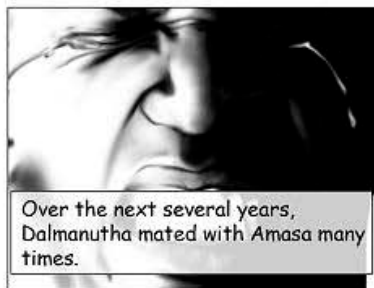
Kill the monster!















[conducted at Readercon, 2007]

Born in Philadelphia in 1947, James Morrow spent his adolescent years making short 8mm fantasy films with his friends, including adaptations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." His affection for satiric and philosophical fiction comes largely from the novels he studied in his high school World Literature course.

A self-described "scientific humanist," his work not only satirizes organized religion but also elements of humanism and atheism. The author is best known for his magnum opus, the Godhead Trilogy. The first installment, *Towing Jehovah*, winner of the World Fantasy Award, recounts the efforts of a supertanker captain to entomb the corpse of God in an Arctic glacier. The sequel, *Blameless in Abaddon*, tells of a small-town judge who prosecutes the Corpus Dei before the World Court. In *The Eternal Footman*, God's skull goes into geosynchronous orbit above Times Square, causing a plague of despair.

Other James Morrow novels include *This Is the Way the World Ends* (1986), a Nebula finalist, and *Only Begotten Daughter* (1990), winner of the World Fantasy Award. His early short fiction is collected in *Bible Stories for Adults*, including the Nebula Award-winning fable, "The Deluge." *City of Truth*, his one and only novella, also received a Nebula Award. Jim's current project is *Prometheus Wept*, which he describes as "a combination of *Frankenstein* and *Lolita*."

The author presently lives in State College, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Kathryn, his son, Christopher, and their dogs. He devotes his leisure time to his family, his Lionel electric trains, and his DVD collection of guilty-pleasure Hollywood epics.

**SCHWEITZER:** So what's all this stuff about *reason*? Your latest novel, *The Last Witchfinder* is not so much about witches and devils but about rejecting the belief in them.

**MORROW** Morrow: *The Last Witchfinder* doesn't deal with what many people mean by witches, witches as a feminist cult of healing and cosmic consciousness, nor is it about the sort of witchcraft we associate with the Third World, having to do with, again, curing disease, or perhaps with raising the dead. I am addressing the *big problem* that emerged in early Renaissance Europe, and which quickly became a kind of holocaust: the problem of the specifically Christian heresy of Satanism.

If you told fortunes in those days or practiced some other esoteric pursuit -- herbal healing, whatever -- you were vulnerable to the charge of Devil worship. The problem was not the practices *per se*, but the redefinition of them as evidence of a Satanic compact. Today Catholic scholars would argue that this kind of persecution was itself heretical, and should have been perceived as such. And, indeed, in the medieval era the Catholic Church held it to be anathema to go after witches.

But, for whatever reasons, theologians in the early Renaissance began noticing how damn much demonology there is in the New Testament. Jesus is forever casting out evil spirits and consigning demons to the bodies of pigs, wicked spirits that were once inside people. So you can't really argue that Christian demonology is an *aberration*. Sad to say, the persecutions trace to theologians paying attention to what's actually happening in the Gospels. It's not *all* that's happening, but there is an enormous amount of demonology in the New Testament, which seems to suggest a Satan, a Devil, a Dark One, has dominion over this world, and once you've interpreted the Gospels in that way, you start looking around for the agents of that Devil.

**SCHWEITZER:** Do you think the witch-hunting came from the top down or the bottom up? That is, was it a means used by the authorities to control the masses, or was it a matter of popular hysteria over matters people could not control -- the Black Death, Muslim pirates raiding the coasts of Europe, famines, etc. -- demanding action from the government?

**MORROW:** I imagine both were going on at the same time. But what interests me -- as a person who takes a very dim view of religious arguments about how the world works -- is the top-down, institutionalized persecution of supposed witches. It was highly systematic, codified in the *Malleus Malificarum* of Kramer and Sprenger. There was a whole elaborate infrastructure of ecclesiastical and civil courts to prosecute the agents of Lucifer.

Of course, one can also psychologize about outbreaks of witch persecution. This is especially common in the case of Salem: there are scholars who say, "Well it wasn't really about theology, it was really all about neighbors settling scores with one another." Or they'll say, "The Puritans were obviously taking their fears of the Indians and projecting them onto their neighbors." Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* seems to say the Salem tragedy was really about the frustrated libidos of the girls who brought the accusations. Some historians even insist it was really all about the girls going batty because they were eating bread contaminated with ergot, a fungal disease of rye plants.

These interpretations are all interesting -- but, again, let's remember that the phenomenon of witch persecution went on for nearly three hundred years. That doesn't sound like hysteria to me. That sounds like something systematic and institutional. As I mentioned earlier -- and this was a discovery that I made while researching the book -- witch persecution is, alas, a logical implication of Christian theology. Yes, there is also some demonology in the Old Testament, but we find it largely in the famous translation authorized by James I, who fancied himself an expert demonologist, even wrote a book on the subject. The King James Bible was translated by witch believers, and this state of mind influenced many of their word choices. Think about that notorious line from Exodus, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to

live." Today a Hebrew scholar would translate it in much more innocuous terms. It would come out something like, "Thou shalt not provide a fortune-teller with his means of livelihood."

**SCHWEITZER:** Describe your book for our readers. It's about someone who wants to put an end to the witchcraft statues.

**MORROW:** A big influence on *The Last Witchfinder* is a book called *Masks of the Universe* by the physicist Edward Harrison -- whom I must get in touch with: I don't think Harrison knows there's a novel floating around that traces directly to his notion of the witch-universe, the "psychic space" in which most people lived during the Renaissance. The big discovery I made, as I continued my research, was that a person born around 1678 would have lived in the transition from Harrison's witch-universe to what we now call the Enlightenment. So I said to myself, "Hey, that's pretty damn dramatic. I won't need a huge cast of characters to make this epic happen. It can be one woman's quest. It will be the story of Jennet Stearne and her obsession with bringing down the conjuring statues of her day."

Also, being a feminist -- and knowing, as with *Only Begotten Daughter*, that for me it's always fruitful to put a strong woman at the center of a novel -- I imagined Jennet as not only living through the great rotation, from the witch-universe to the scientific worldview, but actually helping to make it happen. She participates actively in the paradigm shift, by campaigning to destroy the 1604 Witchcraft Statute of James I, which gave an outward appearance of rationality to the witch courts.

**SCHWEITZER:** Curiously, you did this as a form of fantasy novel.

**MORROW:** I was just on a Readercon panel about the continuum that ranges from mimetic fiction to the fantastic, from characters who merely change internally versus those who come to a completely new understanding of how the world works. I think *The Last Witchfinder* ranges freely around among all these coordinates. Obviously it's not a fantasy in the wizards-and-elves sense, but rather a kind of postmodern experiment that maps pretty well onto strictly mimetic historical fiction -- though, of course, it's all told by a very unusual narrator.

As you know, *The Last Witchfinder* is a book written by a book. It assumes a universe in which books are conscious and have agendas and write other books. So this free-floating spirit of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* is able to move effortlessly through time and space and therefore comment on the philosophy of science and Jennet's efforts to bring the new universe into being.

Up to a point, my *Principia* narrator is even willing to talk about the downside of science and technology. Near the end of the book, he-she-it visits the Place de la Révolution in Paris at the height of the Terror and possesses a priest who is subsequently marched to the guillotine -- the French Revolution, of course, being Exhibit A in any indictment of the Enlightenment. The *Principia* is willing to acknowledge that, while the Enlightenment came along just when it was needed, it was by no means an unalloyed blessing.

At the same time, *The Last Witchfinder* is obviously a defense of the Enlightenment. I take Exhibit A seriously -- but it's hard to find Exhibits B, C, D, and E after that. The Marxist totalitarian states are "atheist" or "neo-Enlightenment" in name only. Operationally, they function exactly like theocracies. No doubters allowed.

**SCHWEITZER:** At one of the funnier moments, the *Principia* does a critique of the Universal horror films of the 1940s, *House of Dracula* and so on. What does this do to the drama of the story to have this clearly artificial framework, which makes you stand outside of the story? It constantly reminds us that this is a story.

**MORROW:** I was certainly taking a risk. I tried to keep these interruptions by the *Principia Mathematica* to a minimum, so the "color commentary" occurs only once per chapter, and with clearly marked transitions: I use a typographical trick whereby the last sentence of a *Principia* interlude blends into the first sentence of the next scene in the main story. The preponderance of the scenes belong to a more-or-less realistic drama set in the past. I tried to establish that when Jennet and the other main characters are on stage, we are really in their heads, not the *Principia*'s head. We're not getting the book's subjective account of the action. The events are supposed to be happening before our own eyes.

I did have a lot of trouble selling this book, and one of the agents I approached suggested removing the *Principia* narrator. He said, "I don't know if I can make things happen with this book, boosting you to a new level in your career. But if you'd take out the framing device, we would clearly have a flat-out historical novel, and that might go over better with editors."

Well, I just wasn't prepared to do that. Sure, I suppose that if that same agent had said, "If you kill the ghostly narrator, I can get Knopf to give you a hundred thousand dollar advance, and they will promote it as a breakthrough in historical fiction," then, yeah, I might have bitten that apple. But he was merely saying, "Consider taking out that clever postmodern gimmick, but even then I'm not sure that I could sell it."

**SCHWEITZER:** It would have changed the tone of the book profoundly. It seems to me that a straight, realistic treatment of this story wouldn't be as funny. It would be full of pain and loss and rage. It would be all about this woman avenging her beloved aunt who was burned at the stake in an act of gross injustice. But as the book exists, it has an arch tone which steps aside from the material.

**MORROW:** In retrospect, I see you're right. I don't think I consciously added the humor to leaven the horror. But maybe intuitively, as I was writing, I thought, "Well, I'd better make the *Principia* interludes funny, and that will serve as a corrective to the distressing subject matter."

But even with the satiric tone, I know the book makes people squirm. I didn't hold back when describing the ordeal of being tested for the Satanic compact: for example, the way a suspect was pricked with a needle to see if one of her blemishes bled, because if it didn't bleed, that proved that the protuberance was really a teat for suckling an animal familiar, or else it was a mark indicating that the woman was bonded to Satan. I also dramatize the other main ordeal -- the cold-water test -- pretty vividly. You tied a rope around the witch's waist and threw her into a river. If she floated, she was guilty, because water is the medium of baptism. Pure, running water is offended by a Satanist's flesh and wants to eject it. If the suspect sank and was thus vindicated, the witchfinder would try pulling her out in time, although I am sure there was more than one case of the accused witch drowning while being proved innocent.

One editor who almost bought the book felt that, even with all the funny observations by the *Principia*, the book was too morbid in tone. But I didn't want to compromise the torture and testing scenes, because the witch persecutions were really a kind of holocaust, as I said earlier. And yet, for whatever reasons, I still added a lot of satiric distancing. I guess that's the sort of writer I am.

**SCHWEITZER:** I think a lot of satire works this way. If you had written the novel absolutely straight, it might have been too shrill. Often the grimmest and blackest and most terrible things have to be treated in a funny manner, even if they build up to tragedy. You can name any number of writers who do this, T.H. White most especially. What I am suggesting is that the distancing is necessary because of the nature of the material. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to make it bearable.

**MORROW:** Novels that seem shrill, to use your word, preachy, novels that somberly tell the reader how he or she is supposed to be feeling about the material -- such books don't enjoy the same affection in our hearts as the more playful and satiric works. I think of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, which is unrelievedly grim, totally without humor. Yes, it did galvanize people to reform some of the practices of the meat-packing houses, but that wasn't an *artistic* accomplishment. One critic made a remark to the effect that Sinclair "aimed to touch people's hearts and ended up hitting them in the stomach." Readers were repulsed to learn that the meat that ended up on their dinner table very likely contained bits of rat meat.

I've started an historical novel that will be in some ways analogous to *The Last Witchfinder*. I want to dramatize the story of Charles Darwin and the arrival of *that* universe, today's universe, in which we perceive ourselves as animals and understand they we're evidently connected to all the other species on the planet, and they're connected to each other as well. It won't be a biographical novel about Darwin, but rather an epic about the exploits of a character who's living during Darwin's life and times.

The whole story will elapse between the voyage of the *Beagle*, which ended in 1834, and Darwin's publication of his theory in 1859. Many years went by during which Darwin temporized and procrastinated and anguished over going public with his big idea. I have what I think is a pretty neat plot device whereby a clever woman, scheming but sympathetic -- I think her name will be Chlöe -- she has occasion to recapitulate Darwin's travels, collecting the very same specimens. Chlöe is hoping to claim a huge cash prize being offered by a Percy Bysshe Shelley cult. They'll award it to anyone who can prove or disprove the existence of God. Chlöe herself doesn't care about the God question one way or the other, but she plans to argue the case for atheism because she needs the money. Her nautical adventures will be as mimetic and dramatic as I can make them.

At the same time, I'm once again going to use a postmodern, playful element, whereby an insane bishop locked up in an asylum will be visited by homing pigeons, which are reporting in to him from a second expedition -- one that's out to find Noah's ark on Mount Ararat in Turkey. The Noah's ark team also hopes to claim the big prize, by proving God's existence. It will soon become clear to the reader that, as a function of the bishop's insanity, the pigeon messages are actually from the future: accounts of evolutionary thinking post-Darwin, such as Mendelian genetics and the deciphering of the DNA molecule. And, of course -- because the Bishop is crazy -- these messages also contain far more information than you could squeeze onto a piece of paper wrapped around a pigeon's leg.

**SCHWEITZER:** This is pretty much what you've always done with fantastic elements from the beginning of your career, use them satirically. I observe the paradox that most fantasy is about things we don't believe in and don't want to believe in. It is much easier to write a story in which witches or demons are real than one in which they are not. Do you have a sense of this?

**MORROW:** I think the reason that William Morrow ultimately published *The Last Witchfinder* as mainstream historical fiction -- and I'd have to say that, because of that decision, the book got a lot more critical attention than normal -- is that my witches do not have supernatural powers. My demons and devils are purely human inventions. The world of the novel is non-supernatural -- anti-supernatural, really, as we've been saying -- even though at the same time there's this crazy central conceit of a conscious book.

I guess my fantasy novels are ultimately pretty paradoxical. They use the supernatural to argue against the supernatural. In the case of *Only Begotten Daughter* I took the Christian argument at face-value. There is a creator God, and this deity has a particular interest in our species and this particular planet. But after taking that claim at face-value, I began exploring the possible psychology of a supernatural being, so that my heroine Julie Katz, who happens to be the daughter of God and the half-sister of Jesus Christ, decides she doesn't really want to be divine. She ends up hating supernaturalism. She becomes an advocate of evolution and subscribes to the scientific understanding of reality. I guess the book is questioning the assumption that embracing the Christian worldview -- or any other variety of supernaturalism -- is some sort of accomplishment or end state. Something like the opposite, I'd say. There are always more questions to ask.

You mentioned the Universal horror movies that are satirized at one point in *The Last Witchfinder*. I always find it strange how in, say, the Mummy series -- most of which starred Lon Chaney, Jr. -- when we get to the end of the picture, the characters don't seem to have noticed that the entire fabric of consensus reality has evidently changed *completely*. Everything that modern humans assume about Nature being driven by rational laws, without a supernatural substratum, has just been proven utterly wrong -- and yet the characters go right

back to living their mundane little lives, as if the paradigm shift hadn't occurred. It's a very bizarre convention. Because if you really had a mummy running around in Louisiana or New England that would throw the entire Enlightenment argument about how the world works out the window. The Universal monster movies always beg the question of why the heroes and heroines don't have nervous breakdowns at the end.

True, in the universe of these movies, the vampires and werewolves and mummies operate by laws, too, and so you have Edward Van Sloan knowing exactly what it takes to vaporize a vampire, or Turhan Bey knowing exactly how many tana leaves it takes to get Kharis's heart beating, and how many it takes to get him shuffling around and abducting people. But these aren't remotely scientific principles. There's no explanatory mechanism involved. They're magic. Maybe someday I'll write a mummy novel in which the characters think through the full epistemological implications of their adventures, and end up going insane.

**SCHWEITZER:** I suspect that the serious answer to this is that most Americans today still live in the witch-universe. The Enlightenment has not penetrated below the level of the intellectuals. Even to this day most people believe in psychics, UFOs, astrology, ghosts, and such. They probably do believe in forms of magic. Certainly a lot of them do. Then there is the Christian Fundamentalist side of the population, which is enormous, who would probably be *afraid* to read your book because it would evoke the Devil. So I think the real answer is they're still in the witch-universe.

**MORROW:** Good point. I suppose *The Last Witchfinder* is not about the death of the witch-universe *per se*. It's about the death of the witch-universe as a political force that made courts and magistrates behave in abominable ways toward people we would now regard as innocent of any demonic compact. Of course, these victims weren't necessarily people of tremendous virtue. They weren't John Proctor in *The Crucible*. They weren't pure of heart. They were the outcasts. They were the people upon whom this sort of persecution could be performed with impunity.

I guess I'm saying that, yes, as individual private selves, we all want to live in a supernatural universe. It's instinctive, and we all have a right to our private fantasies. Nevertheless, the reigning intellectual consensus, thank God, is that promiscuous supernaturalism is not the case, and we have no business putting gods and demons at the center of our political institutions. It's been remarked that the most important word in the United States Constitution is the one that isn't there -- the word "God." I think that's genuine progress.

Now, I know that our postmodern brethren have problematized, I think legitimately, the notion of progress. You always have to ask, "Progress for whom?" But I think even the Bush Administration recognizes that fundamentalism is a terrible idea. I am continually struck by the irony of Bush and his henchmen being perfectly happy to allow a low-grade, smiley-face, feel-good theocracy emerge on these shores, even as they pursue the opposite agenda in Iraq. I think of the recent Supreme Court decision that taxpayers cannot sue the government for having recently broken down the wall between church and state through so-called faith-based grants. I think of Bush going on record as saying he thinks Intelligent Design is commensurate with Darwinism and should also be taught in public school classroom. I think of his canceling stem-cell research for reasons that ultimately trace to his supposed personal relationship with Jesus.

At the same time, we have the Bushies realizing that what they want in the Middle East is a process we would have to call secular and rational. Saddam Hussein constantly used religion to manipulate his bleeding country, even though it was technically not a theocracy, and now the great fear -- great and also justified -- is that this same theocratic impulse will reemerge in Iraq in a different form, and that society will become every bit as much of a nightmare as it was before we invaded. Certainly for women Iraq threatens to become a nightmare. The *Koran* has very little in it that's good news for women.

The Bushies would never admit this paradox. They would never come out and say they're contradicting themselves. But what they're hoping for is some kind of neo-Enlightenment, secular democracy in Iraq -- a regime that religious skeptics like Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson would recognize and salute for its lack of a supernatural argument at its center.

**SCHWEITZER:** Despite which, in the United States, there was just a few years ago an episode of witchcraft hysteria in a day-school, in which they managed to get all the children to testify about Satanic ritual abuse. Remember that? It *was* Salem all over again, with neighbor suspecting neighbor, and people being assumed guilty until proven innocent and guilty by association. It was exactly the same phenomenon.

**MORROW:** That sort of hysteria, when it crops up, is always very disturbing. But at least today -- here in the post-Enlightenment West -- today we pretty much accept the idea that our courts and other legal institutions have an essentially secular mission. The Devil doesn't routinely appear before judges and juries anymore. Our justice system is not shot through with supernatural assumptions about the world, or even shot through with theism, and so the fantasies of children as no longer admissible, as they were in Salem. Yes, you do have to put your hand on the Bible when you testify in court, but after that something resembling reason kicks in.

So while that Satanic ritual abuse phenomenon was horrible, it was also short-lived, because at a certain point it became clear that the accusers didn't have cases, that they had run out of evidence, and that the children themselves were being manipulated. Anyone who knows even a little bit of child psychology would recognize that these kids were telling their supposed deliverers what they wanted to hear. The motto of the people who thought they were acting in the alleged victims' interest was "Believe the children." Well, it turns out that what they really meant was "Believe the children unless the children say they haven't been abused."

It was a terrible abuse of the trust that a child naturally has in adults, ironically in the name of protecting children. I think virtually no evidence emerged that ritual Satanic abuse was actually occurring. But, yes, it was hysteria, and one can certainly psychologize about it,

as one can do about Salem. My novel is about the fact that at least we've gotten rid of fantasy, private delusion, and religious mania as admissible evidence. It suggests that, in certain public contexts, theism is a luxury we simply can't afford.

**SCHWEITZER:** Then again, you've written about God being dead and found floating in the Atlantic. I can't imagine this has been published in, say, an Arabic translation.

**MORROW:** [Laughs] Not likely. But I have to say I get quite a bit of fan e-mail from believers, and that's very gratifying to me. I think I value those letters even more than the ones I get from militant atheists, who cheer me on and say, "Go for it, Jim. Give the carcass of organized religion another kick in the groin."

I'm pleased to find there are a lot of readers out there, people of faith, who enjoy my novels as theological speculation, as thought experiments that satirize the misuses of religion. You can be part of an institution and still perceive its dark side. You don't have to resign from an institution to critique it. You might actually be doing the world more good by staying within your church and trying to reform it. In that regard, I may be in a worse position to do good than believers. I'm not actively trying to change the homophobia that seems rampant in so many evangelical churches, but there are people inside those evangelical churches, I am sure, who are making arguments against that kind of bigotry.

**SCHWEITZER:** At what point in your life did you abandon God and discover his corpse was floating in the Atlantic?

**MORROW:** It's true that I was once a believer, as a kid. My parents were not aggressively religious, but I think they did have an inoculation theory of church-going. You should give your son a small and harmless dose of religion, lest he discover one day that he had no natural defenses against it. I imagine they were afraid that otherwise I would show up and say I'd decided to become a monk or something.

So they gave me a generic, white-bread religious education, dragging me to a Presbyterian Sunday-school in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. Naturally I ended up believing. How could I not? This was suburban Philadelphia in the 1950s. God was the default assumption. God in the air. God was in the water. I never thought of God as a thesis, a hypothesis about how the world works. I thought of God as a fact. Adults seemed to agree on this fact, and adults don't lie, so they?

Luckily, back then suburban Presbyterianism was a pretty tepid thing. It was not salvationistic. It did not threaten us kids with images of eternal damnation and fears that our sins would catapult us into the fiery abyss. But I do remember assuming that God was behind it all, and I know I prayed for good fortune in my own life.

My inverse road to Damascus was the World Literature course I took as a tenth-grader. Those of us in the honors English class at Abington Senior High School found ourselves suddenly confronted with the miracles and splendors of Western literature: plays and poems -- and especially novels -- that were alive with ideas, usually subversive and skeptical ideas. We learned that novelists were often people at odds with the received wisdom of their day. They were contrarians. These voices stood outside of their cultures and critiqued them -- and, above all, they were *honest* voices: at least, that's what I found in Voltaire's *Candide* and Camus's *The Stranger* and Kafka's *The Trial* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Even a believer like Dostoyevsky -- we did *Crime and Punishment* -- even Dostoyevsky dramatized belief as something that is troubling and paradoxical and terribly complex.

The honesty of these writers -- the voice of an anguished atheist like Camus -- that struck a chord with me. It really was a kind of revelation. It garnered my respect in a way that my Sunday-school teachers never did. The Presbyterians seemed to dodge all the hard questions. They weren't liars, exactly, but intellectually, for me, they left much to be desired. Gradually my faith evaporated.

Of course, it also helped that I'd never had an experience with the supernatural. I'd never encountered an angel or witnessed a miracle.

**SCHWEITZER:** How do you think you'd respond if you did?

**MORROW:** [Laughs] That's a really good question. I'd like to think that, if I really believe my own worldview, my first question would be, "Might I account for this angel, or this out-of-body experience, or this miracle, or whatever, in strictly material terms?" But, sure, okay, if my supernatural experience was something utterly unequivocal, fine, I guess I'd try to swallow it.

But let's remember that most religious arguments about the world are far more optimistic and soothing than the secular-humanist view. We'd all like to believe our deaths aren't synonymous with oblivion. We've all got a built-in -- and highly suspect -- motivation to believe in the miraculous. We're predisposed to embrace supposed evidence for the supernatural simply on the grounds of our mortality. Religion solves the death problem, so of course it's always going to win the battle for the private human psyche.

So I like to think it would take more than one angelic visitation to convince me that angels are factual. It's often said that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. I hope I would spend a lot of time worrying about whether I was deluded, whether my angel was entirely subjective, whether he was just wishful thinking, whether this was incipient schizophrenia.

I am continually struck by the fact that, whether the argument is coming from the New Age camp -- "crystals heal," "astrology works," that sort of claim -- or by those with conventional religious views -- I am struck by that fact that the *main* thing that's going on in every

such instance is a person, a mere human being, standing in front of you insisting that the supernatural is the case. That's it. Period. A person. Nothing more, nothing less.

At the last Conference on the Fantastic in Fort Lauderdale, I noticed that our pathetic little convention was happening alongside a presentation attended by thousands of people who all wanted to hear this guy talk about life after death. He had lots of messages from beyond the veil that he wanted to share. The crowd lapped it up. Nobody seemed to notice that all they were actually getting was a person very much like themselves, and in many cases probably *better* than themselves -- more honest, less egomaniacal, less publicity hungry -- doling out the inside dope on the afterlife.

There is nothing you can go out and do yourself to corroborate the worldviews of charlatans. In those few cases where those of New Age or supernatural persuasion have allowed a test, some tentative attempt at falsification, their claims and beliefs have always come a cropper. Every systematic investigation of astrology or ESP or prayer suggests that there's absolutely nothing happening there. This malarkey is *not* a new understanding of reality. It's wish-fulfillment at best. It's stuff that we'd prefer to be the case. But it doesn't seem to be the case -- not in this life, and not in this universe.