



Issue Four

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Wandering

by Lynda Beauregard

Puppets. She sent him puppets.

Brendan knew what they were for. They represented the Oak King and the Holly King, rulers of the waxing and waning year, respectively. Celtic children used them to reenact the changing of the guard, so to speak. The Holly King supposedly ruled from Summer Solstice to Winter Solstice, and the Yule celebration began the Oak King's rule. Brendan shook his head and dropped the figures with their intricately carved faces back into the box he'd pulled them from.

He knew what his grandmother was up to, as well. This wasn't just a Yuletide gift - it was a reminder. She wanted him to remember growing up in her house, listening with the unbridled intensity of all small children as she spun her tales of Celtic lore. And to remember the many Winter Solstice celebrations when he'd played with puppets just like these. She wanted him to remember his past. His Celtic past.

But Brendan had no eyes for the past. His sight was firmly trained on the future. The future of planetary colonization, to be exact. He'd been so busy lately, he'd be lucky if he even noticed the day of "sun-stands-still," much less play with puppets in foolish reclamation of his youth. The tales and traditions had all been very amusing to a child growing up with his very Irish grandmother, but that child was long gone. Brendan's world consisted of facts and formulas now, not faerie tales. He closed the box and shoved a pile of data disks aside to make room for it on a high shelf.

"Come in! Come in, Brendan. Have a seat!"

Brendan eyed the lab director warily. Carlos was blue eyed today, with deeply tanned skin and straight blonde hair. Fortunately, he always wore the same hideous neck chain. It was often the only way to recognize him.

"Come on, take a load off," Carlos gestured effusively toward the two enormous imitation leather chairs in front of his desk. He waited until Brendan was safely engulfed by one of them before regaining his own seat behind the desk. "So, how's the family?"

Brendan grimaced, "I'm not married, Carlos."

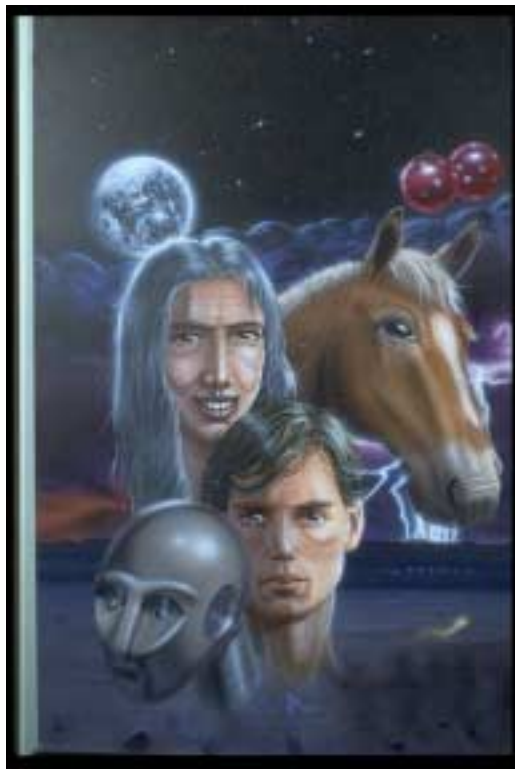
"Oh, right," Carlos' cobalt blue eyes flicked back and forth like frantic fish. He was obviously backpedaling furiously. "So, ah, when are you going to take care of that, eh?"

"Look, I've got a lot of work to do . . ." Brendan began to fight his way back out of the chair.

"Relax, Brendan." The lab director held out a hand as his voice deepened to a tone most people saved for soothing lunatics, "As a matter of fact, you don't have as much to do as you think."

Brendan froze in mid-struggle. "What?"

Carlos sighed heavily. He leaned his elbows on the desk and tapped his clasped hands against his chin. After a dramatic pause, he finally got around to looking Brendan in the eye.



"I'm afraid the funding for your program has been canceled."

Brendan held perfectly still. He stared at the paneled wall behind Carlos, festooned with meaningless certificates. Then he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling the lingering fragrance of the tobacco-free cigars Carlos occasionally smoked for effect. He must not lose his temper. This wasn't really happening. Not again . . .

"Don't take it personally, Brendan. None of the space programs are getting much money nowadays."

"Nowadays?" Brendan tried to hold it in, but he could feel his temper bubbling up like an evil brew. "Nowadays? Christ, Carlos! No space program has been given a decent amount of funding since the early 80's. It's been thirty years! When are they going to get around to it?" He launched himself out of the chair's embrace and began to pace.

Carlos put on his long-suffering face. "I know this is difficult for you to understand. Of necessity, science has

become tightly entwined with politics, and everyone knows that scientists make lousy politicians. That's why you need me." One look at Brendan's scowling face made him hurry to continue, "The powers-that-be respond to the voices of the general population, Brendan. I'm afraid John Q. Public just isn't currently interested in space colonization."

Brendan stepped forward suddenly and slammed his open palms down on the fake mahogany desk. Carlos jumped a little and leaned back in his seat to hide how nervous Brendan was making him. "How can the public not be interested, Carlos? We're already practically living on top of each other. There's no room left! Not for anyone who isn't stinking rich, anyway. In another ten years we'll be packed in like sardines!"

The lab director meticulously straightened his cuff and set his lips in a grim line. "I'm sorry, Brendan. There's nothing I can do."

Silence descended on the room. The only movement was from Brendan's nostrils, flaring slightly as he sucked in oxygen. Carlos watched him for several moments, and visibly relaxed when Brendan's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Look, Brendan, I know this is tough for you." Carlos had on his conciliatory face now. "Christmas is just a week away. Why don't you take this time off and just celebrate the season, eh?"

"Is Santa going to bring me some funding for Christmas?" Brendan snapped. Carlos favored him with a look that made him feel like a fool and shook his head slightly. The scientist snorted and set the nearest imitation leather chair violently spinning on its casters as he stalked out the door.

Another package was waiting for him when he got home. It was a yule log this time. Grandma had saved a log from last year's fire and decorated it with holly and moss. Carved wax candles lay beside it, ready to be placed in the candle holders nestled in the moss. Brendan sighed and shook his head. She was definitely being persistent this year.

He set the box on the kitchen table as he opened the refrigerator for a cold beer. The top unsealed with a satisfying pop and he drank deeply from the bottle. He had finished that one and two of its brothers before his attention rested on the box again. He found that he felt a little guilty about ignoring something his grandmother had taken the time and care to make for him.

"What the hell," he muttered. He used to worry about what people might think of his habit of talking to himself until he figured out that nobody gave a damn. "The Winter Solstice is . . ." he closed one eye in an effort to remember what day it was, "three days away. I guess I could stand having this sitting out for a couple days."

He carefully lifted the yule log out of the box and replaced the moss that had come loose in transit. Then he placed the candles in the holders and stood back to take a look. It looked a little funny sitting there, a little spot of tradition surrounded by stacks of disks and carelessly strewn printouts. He pushed some of them aside to give the yule log more room. Then he rescued the puppets from their box on the shelf and propped them up against the log. The traditional Yule decorations now appeared to be holding their own against the sea of modern life swirling around them.

Brendan shook his head. He normally wasn't prone to such nonsense. He must have consumed those beers too quickly. He shrugged at his own silliness and wandered into the tiny cubicle he called a bedroom. There was a small, lonely bed somewhere under all those books and folded clothes. He shoved everything off it and collapsed, hoping that everything would look better after a good night's sleep.

"Brendan dear, those berries are for the birds and squirrels, not selfish little boys. Try to get more on the string and less in your mouth, all right?"

"Yes, Grandma."

Brendan looked down at the berry he'd been about to pop through his brightly stained lips, sighed like the weight of the world was on his shoulders, then dutifully strung the berry on the string he was making. Grandma was right: this was supposed to be his yule gift to the animals. But it was so hard to resist the temptation. Grandma was doing better than he was. She already had three strings done and was working on a fourth.

"Come on, Brendan. Finish up that string so we can start on the pine cones."

The boy nodded and tried to hurry, managing to stab himself several times with the blunt needle his grandmother had given him. Grandma made it look so easy, but it was a complicated task for a five year old. He tossed his head to get the strands of reddish brown hair out of his eyes and Grandma laughed softly as he drew blood on his thumb for the third time.

“Here, give that to me,” her musical voice soothed the small stab of hurt her laughter caused as she took the string from him and quickly finished it. “Why don’t you go get the box of pine cones? Careful now, don’t be dropping it.”

Brendan dashed off to fetch the box. It was almost bigger than he was, but the pine cones were light. He struggled his way back into Grandma’s workroom with it, only losing his balance twice and bumping into the walls. By the time he’d set it on the floor with exaggerated care, Grandma had already brought the peanut butter from the kitchen and was pulling out the canister of birdseed.

He sat very still and watched as Grandma attached ribbons to the pine cones and showed him how to coat them with peanut butter, then roll them in birdseed. Brendan could be a very good boy when he wanted to. And he was usually a very good boy for Grandma. When his mother asked him why he was such a terror at home, he calmly explained that he’d used up all his goodness at Grandma’s. The truth was that he just had too much fun at Grandma’s to find time for mischief.

“I like the pretty red ribbons, Grandma.” She smiled and handed him a pine cone to slather with peanut butter. “These kinda look like Christmas tree ornaments.”

Grandma laughed, her eyes twinkling. “Of course they do! Did you know, Brendan, that these were the very first Christmas tree ornaments? The kind your mother uses to decorate have more sparkle, but these are better, don’t you think? These are pretty too, and they also serve a purpose beyond just being nice to look at.”

“Yep.” Brendan rolled the pine cone in seed, scattering seeds all over the floor in his enthusiasm. Grandma just smiled. She never yelled at him for making messes, as long as he

helped clean them up. “How come Mama doesn’t make this stuff and celebrate sun-stands-still?”

The old woman was quiet for a moment, pursing her wrinkled lips in thought. “Your mama thinks these traditions are silly, Brendan. I suspect you’ll think the same some day.”

“Uh uh.” The boy’s face was the picture of stubbornness as he abruptly stood up, scattering seed even farther across the room. His small, sticky hands were fisted at his sides. “I won’t think they’re silly, Grandma. Ever.”

Grandma just smiled and changed the subject, “All right, I think that’s enough cones for now. Pick them up by the ribbons and let’s go put them outside.”

Brendan and his grandmother trudged through the snow to a small tree just outside her living room window. Grandma looped the berry strings across the branches as Brendan hung the pine cones. He handed a few to Grandma for her to put on the upper branches, but she let him tell her where to put them. They stood back to admire their work, their breath making small clouds in the air. The tree really did look as good as the fake one his mother put up at the end of the front hallway at home. And the thought that birds and animals would get to enjoy this one made him hug himself with a five-year-old’s glee. He turned to look at his grandmother and found that she was grinning as widely as he was. Then he heard the soft shushing, crunching sound that could only be his father coming to get him, and he spun around to show him the wonderful tree. But his laughter died in his throat at what he saw.

His father was walking toward him, but he looked so strange. A glowing, murky cloud enveloped him. To Brendan, it seemed as if everything else stopped and held its

breath. The cold winter evening was crisper, more brittle. He couldn't hear the wind in the trees or Grandma's raspy breathing. He couldn't even feel her warmth beside him like he could just a moment earlier. His father was the only thing that moved. And as he drew closer, the cloud around him dissipated and Brendan began to see him more clearly. The first thing he noticed was the bright splashes of red that stained most of his father's clothing. Then he noticed that his father's jaw angled to one side and he held his right arm at an odd angle. He had such a strange look in his eye, as if he wasn't aware of the world around him at all. He certainly didn't seem to recognize Brendan.

He was only a few steps away from Brendan now, and the disappearing wisps of cloud revealed more than Brendan ever wanted to see. His father had holes in him, and things were sticking out. Pieces of his father that were supposed to stay inside .

Brendan began to scream. The world turned black as he stumbled away and struggled through the snow toward the house. He kept screaming the whole way, certain that horrible thing behind him would reach out and touch him . . .

Brendan sat straight up in bed, sweat pouring off his chest. His throat was raw. A chill went through him and he shook himself, trying to escape his remembering dream. He recalled the terror as his father had caught him after only a few steps, then his relief when he saw his father whole once more but looking very confused and alarmed. His grandmother scooped him up and carried him back to the house, acting as if nothing had happened. He babbled out what he'd seen, but his grandmother told him it was nothing to worry about. She

said it was second sight, but she wouldn't tell him what that meant until much later. Years later. He was fourteen when she told him he'd foreseen his father's death a week before it happened. She didn't think he was able to handle the truth before that. But by age fourteen he was too skeptical to believe it. He had blocked out the memory of that yuletide seeing long before, so it all sounded like old Grandma's Celtic mumbo-jumbo to him.

So why did he remember it now?

Something out of the corner of his eye captured his attention. Brendan peered through the half gloom of the early hour, his gaze fastening on softly glowing sparks that danced a few feet away. They coalesced into a spinning globe that bathed the room in eerie light, casting edges and angles into sharp relief. The light pulsed once, then stretched into a vertical oblong shape. It continued to stretch and grow until it touched both cluttered floor and smooth ceiling. It pulsed once more, blinding Brendan for a moment. He blinked the spots away, then sucked in his breath.

A woman stood where the light had been. She was dressed in brightly colored robes which fluttered in a nonexistent breeze; sparkling jewels winked at him from her slender throat, waist, and hands. Her jet black hair also lifted in the breeze he couldn't feel, creating a shimmering curtain that fell to her waist. Her skin was pale as moonlight with a glow of its own. A thin face with high cheekbones gave her a cold expression that was contradicted by the warm look in her eyes. She lifted one long, tapered hand to him in greeting.

This was a dream. It had to be. She looked like

something out of his grandmother's old tales. Jewel bedecked women in ancient robes just didn't appear in bedrooms like this. He must have fallen back to sleep and didn't realize it. Brendan laid back down and closed his eyes, convinced she would go away as soon as the scene shifted.

"Brendan McGowan."

The voice was like a whisper of wind somehow given shape and form. Brendan opened his eyes. She was still there. Damn. He swore he'd never drink beer that quickly again. He reached across his chest and pinched his upper arm. Nope. She was still there, nodding at him.

"Brendan. It is time for you to leave. It is time to wander once more."

What the heck did that mean? Brendan was just about to ask when the glow surrounded her again. It pulsed, then contracted swiftly to a pinpoint. Just like that, she was gone. Brendan groaned and flopped back on the bed. It was going to be a long night.

Strangely enough, Brendan wasn't tired when he awoke, this time at a decent hour. He rose from the bed and stretched, feeling better than he had for a long time. However, he still had cobwebs in his head. Those dreams had been so odd! He wandered into the kitchen and threw a breakfast tray into the microwave, staring at the yule log and puppets as his meal rapidly cooked. Those dreams were all their fault, he decided. He was reaching for the boxes to put the decorations back where they belonged when a soft chime alerted him to an incoming call. He ran his fingers through his rumpled curls, scrubbed his face with his hands, then pressed a button on the nearest console to accept the call.

The image that appeared on the wall screen was not what he expected. His grandmother's wizened features peered out at him, looking more like a dried apple than a human face. Brendan could never understand why his grandmother consistently refused to make use of the age defying miracles available to her in these times. She was steadfastly proud of each and every wrinkle. And there was an endearing smile among all those wrinkles which never failed to lift his spirits.

"Brendan?" Her voice was still musical, despite her years. "Ah, there you are! How are you doing, child? Are you ready for the Winter Solstice?"

Why did she still insist on calling him "child"? Didn't being 35 qualify him for adulthood yet? One side of his mouth quirked up in a wry expression, "Thanks to you, Grandma, yes."

She bobbed her head excitedly. "Oh, then you must have gotten my gifts! I was worried that you wouldn't get them in time."

Brendan sat back and crossed his arms across his chest. "Right, Grandma. You timed it perfectly. Any earlier and I might have forgotten about them."

"But you've managed to forget what they're all about, haven't you?" If there was one thing she was good at, it was abruptly dropping the sweet little old lady niceties and getting straight to the point. He loved that trait in her, even when she used it against him.

"No, Grandma, I haven't forgotten."

She was silent for a moment, staring at him. He was suddenly reminded of the conversation he'd remembered last

night, when she'd told him he would consider these things silly someday:

"I won't think they're silly, Grandma. Ever."

Brendan sighed. He could hear himself saying those words, so long ago. But what did a five year old know of the real world and the challenges to come?

"Brendan, listen to me," his grandmother had a look in her eyes that Brendan couldn't recall seeing before. It was intense, as if she were trying to force her thoughts and feelings through the digital trceries of the phone system. "There's a reason why I sent these things to you this year, when I've let you wallow in your precious technology every other year. I can't explain how I know, but this Winter Solstice is important. You must celebrate it, Brendan. You must be ready."

"Ready?" He frowned at her, annoyed at her cryptic pronouncement. Was it him, or was everyone talking in riddles lately? "Ready for what?"

Grandma shook her head, "Just remember." And with those last words and a quick nod of her head, she was gone. She disconnected before he could ask any more questions. Brendan couldn't believe it. His grandmother was many things, but rude had never been on the list. He glanced over at the yule log and puppets, sitting on the table among the detritus of his torpedoed project. He sighed and dug into his tasteless generic breakfast food. Might as well leave them up - the solstice was only two days away. He could safely put them away after with no guilty feelings.

After breakfast he found that, for the first time in recent memory, he had nothing to do. He looked around his cluttered two room apartment and decided it was time to pack up

the project. He wouldn't throw anything out - he didn't have the heart to - but he could at least organize it into boxes. With that in mind, he started shuffling through the clutter. But barely fifteen minutes passed before he was immersed once more in his dream. So he had another setback. The project wasn't dead, just stunned. He couldn't give up, yet.

Money was only half the problem. It was still the more immediate half, however. Without money, there was no chance of solving the other half. Brendan and his colleagues had done all the calculations, worked the computer models, explored all possibilities. They'd even found a suitable class M planet to shoot for. But it was a simple fact that they couldn't possibly reach it in their lifetimes, or even their children's lifetimes, with the propulsion systems currently available. They'd reached the limits of the technology they had, and nothing new seemed forthcoming. And without more funding, it never would.

So Brendan quietly morphed from scientist to salesman. He went to endless meetings armed with charts and graphs and inspiring concept illustrations. He stood in plush offices and pleaded with fat politicians, begged planning committees for a moment of their time. He even took up that detested game called golf, just so he could negotiate on the greens without making a total fool of himself. All that wheedling got him this far, but it looked like he'd reached the limit. He had no one left to beg.

Besides, no one wanted to spend the rest of his life on a spacecraft anyway. Brendan was up against not one, but two walls. And he didn't have a ladder. It still wasn't going to stop him from diving back into it again. There had to be an answer. There had to be someone he hadn't spoken to, yet. Brendan was just too stubborn to quit, and that wasn't about to change now.

Grandma's small house barely contained all her guests. Brendan ran with the other children from room to room, delighting in the celebration. He was a big boy now, nearly nine, and he spent a lot more time at Grandma's now that his father was gone. His mother didn't seem to care about much after her husband's death. Brendan missed him too, but the time he spent at Grandma's house seemed more warm and real than the time he spent at home. And Grandma certainly didn't seem to mind the company.

"All right everyone!" Grandma appeared in a doorway and clapped her hands to gain attention. "I believe it's time for some yuletide tales."

The children shrieked delightedly and rushed forward to secure a cushion on the floor, their small young faces alight with anticipation. Brendan hung back and waited for everyone to settle. It was his job (now that he was a big boy) to light the faerie balls. Grandma had brought back the glass balls with their swirling colors from her last trip to Ireland. She liked to visit 'the ould sod' from time to time. When they extinguished the harsh artificial lighting and set flame to the candles inside the balls, dancing rainbows and prisms would flicker across the walls and ceiling. Grandma said the faeries loved the pretty colors, and faeries were known for telling good stories. So any self respecting story circle was surrounded by faerie balls, Grandma told him. Brendan took the task of lighting the balls very seriously. If there were any faeries this far from Ireland, he wanted to make sure they found their way to Grandma's house.

Grandma smiled proudly at him as he lit the last candle. A hush fell over the room as everyone, young and old

alike was entranced by the dancing colors. Brendan held his breath. Grandma paused a moment for effect, then began the first tale. Her voice was so low, everyone leaned forward to hear. Brendan recognized the tale as one of his favorites, so he sat back and watched his Grandma weave her magic instead of being enthralled by it like the others. He tried not to laugh when the listeners gasped at hearing of the hero's apparent demise. Didn't they know how good stories went? The hero never truly dies before completing his quest. What kind of story would it be if his task went undone?

He was so busy watching everyone else that he almost didn't see it at first. To be fair, it was small, and blended in well with the colored lights cast by the faerie balls. Brendan thought it was a small child at first glance. Then he saw the wings. And the elongated fingers and toes. And the eyes alight with more mischief than any child could possibly think up. Brendan tried to swallow the large uncomfortable lump that seemed to be forming in his throat. Even as he'd lit the faerie balls and hoped for the best, he still hadn't truly believed. But here was proof, right before his eyes.

One of the fey ones had joined their story circle.

Brendan turned his attention to his grandmother, but she was already looking him right in the eye. Her story continued without pause, but she kept glancing in the faerie's direction. She saw it too! Why didn't anyone else? Even the folks standing or sitting right next to it were oblivious to its presence. How could they not notice a creature from the faerie realm standing right next to them, gently fanning its wings and hopping from one foot to the other? The creature suddenly turned to him and winked. It winked at him! Brendan felt dizzy from excitement.

The story ended and everyone clapped in appreciation of a story well told, breaking the spell Grandma's tale weaving had spun. Brendan's head jerked around in surprise at the sudden intrusion of sound. Another adult moved to take Grandma's place at the center of the circle and tell another tale. Brendan sighed and turned back to the faerie. To his dismay, the place where he'd last seen it was now empty. A quick surveillance of the room showed it to be now empty of all but its mortal inhabitants.

"You saw it, didn't you?" Grandma's voice was pitched for his ears alone. He turned to see her standing beside him, a look of shared secrecy lighting her face.

Brendan nodded, "But where did it go?"

Grandma shrugged, "Faeries are capricious creatures, my dear. They come and go as they please, following their own agendas. We're lucky it graced us with its presence at all."

"But why didn't anyone else seem to see it?"

Grandma looped an arm around his slight shoulders and led him from the room so they could speak in relative privacy. "They don't have the sight, my dear. Just because you believe, it doesn't mean you can see. Your mother wouldn't have seen it if she'd been here and still believed. She was never blessed with the sight. Sometimes I think she's better off," Grandma sighed and retreated into another world for a moment. Then her gaze sharpened and she clasped his chin in a bony hand, "Listen to me, Brendan. You must not brag about what you've seen to the other children. They wouldn't understand. Even if they did, they'd get jealous and accuse you of lying just out of spite. That's the way folks are, unfortunately. Back in ancient times you'd be revered for

having the sight, but times have changed. You'd best keep it to yourself."

Brendan nodded solemnly. He still didn't understand what exactly the sight was, but he could see why other people might treat him differently if they knew he had it. You didn't have to explain to a nine year old about fitting in. He'd already been taught many lessons on that subject at school, and not by the teachers.

Satisfied that her point was well taken, Grandma led him back into the story circle. Somehow, with the departure of the faerie, the magic disappeared as well. The stories were still entertaining, but nothing could match the magic of the faerie.

Brendan cracked open one eye and cautiously glanced around his darkened bedroom. It had happened again, and he couldn't blame beer this time. He'd finally crawled into bed around 1:00am, exhausted from hours of laboriously pouring over miles of data. It seemed like he'd barely closed his eyes before the dream took hold of him, thrusting him back into his childhood once more. Now all he needed was another vision of the jewel lady.

He sat up in bed. There she was, right where he'd seen her the last time. The same nonexistent breeze floated around her. She didn't raise her hand in greeting this time, but perhaps she figured they were old pals by now.

"Brendan McGowan. It is time for you to leave."

"Yeah, you said that last time. Where exactly do you want me to go, anyway?"

She ignored him and continued on. “You must lead your people away from this place and find a new home.”

“My people?” Brendan shrugged in confusion. He couldn’t believe he was having a conversation with an apparition. “What do you mean? Like my mother and grandmother? Grandma’s getting a bit old for traipsing around, you know. What do you . . .”

She was gone again. This lady was not a lot of help. But she wanted him to do something, and he remembered enough of Grandma’s stories to know that she wasn’t going to give up until she got what she was after. Brendan had a sneaking suspicion that he was just along for the ride.

Brendan walked into his apartment and heartily wished he’d never left it. The day’s labors had been a complete waste of time. Half the people he wanted to see had already scooted out early for their Christmas vacation. The other half were too busy thinking about their Christmas vacation to give Brendan a fraction of their attention. He’d spent the day talking to answering machines and blank faces. Not an auspicious beginning for his latest effort.

He lowered himself into the chair near the table and rested his head in his hands. It had never been easy, but his dream seemed just about impossible right about now. He peeked through his fingers at the yule log and puppets still sitting on the table. They looked a little less out of place now that he’d straightened and organized his notes and data. His last conversation with his grandmother sprang unbidden to his mind:

“I can’t explain how I know, but this Winter Solstice is

important. You must celebrate it, Brendan. You must be ready.”

Celebrate the Winter Solstice? Probably not a bad idea, considering his nightly visitations. But be ready for what? What did these women want from him?

“All right,” Brendan muttered to himself. “Might as well start with what you know.”

He logged on to the net and found, much to his surprise, the information he was looking for within a few minutes. He knew the solstice was tomorrow, but he didn’t know what time. According to folks who actually did celebrate it every year, it would officially occur at 7:26 am this year. Wonderful. Whatever was going to happen, Brendan would only be half awake for it. Maybe a couple mugs of sim-caffeine would help. Now, how did those old stories go . . .

“How much longer is this gonna be, Grandma?” Brendan shifted restlessly in his seat. “I’ve got basketball practice.”

His grandmother glared at him, “You never used to be in a hurry to get through this story.”

Brendan rolled his eyes. “I never used to have Cari Lowell watching my moves on the hardwood, Grandma.”

“This Cari Lowell person will be there tomorrow. The Winter Solstice is today, Brendan,” Grandma placed her hands on her hips in a way that brooked no argument. Brendan sighed and sat back in his chair, defeated. When push came to shove, Grandma always won.

“Now,” she continued, “Where was I? Ah yes. Today we celebrate the dark of the year. We encourage the light to return to us, pushing back the darkness, lengthening the days. Mother Earth labors to bear the new Sun, renewing the Wheel of the Year. It is through her that we are reborn each year. A new beginning, Brendan. A new beginning . . .”

“A new beginning, Brendan.”

He sat bolt upright in bed. There she was again, standing in the corner. She waited patiently for him to get his wits about him. He jerked around to look at the clock. 7:26 am. He’d set the alarm but forgot to turn it on. Now he had to deal with the mystery lady with his brain on a ten second delay. Not good.

“Brendan, the time has come for you to leave.” She was clearer this time, although she was harder to look at. The glow that surrounded her made his eyes water. Her voice was more substantial as well - it sounded less like wind and more like the chiming of bells.

“You keep saying that,” Brendan almost shrieked in frustration. “Leave where? Phoenix? Arizona? The U.S.? How far do you want me to go?”

“Earth, Brendan. You must leave this place and find a new home.”

Brendan was speechless for a moment. The woman simply stared at him and waited.

“Well, well,” he stuttered, “What do you think I’ve been working on?”

She actually smiled at that, and the glow around her turned so bright that he had to look away. “Yes, you have. But your work here is finished. It is time to return to your roots, Brendan. Go to Ireland. You will find your answers there.”

Brendan shook his head, trying to make sense of this. “Okay, let me get this straight. You want me to go to Ireland, where I’ll find a way to make space colonization possible and leave Earth?”

“With your people, yes.”

“My people.” Brendan pursed his lips. “You mean other Celts?”

She flashed that million kilowatt smile again, “Yes, Brendan.”

“I see.” He unconsciously tied his sheets in knots as he thought furiously. “But why do we need to leave right now? Or at all?”

Her smile dimmed and a sad look came into her eyes, “This world as you know it will not exist in a few short years, Brendan. Think about what is going on around you, and you know this will come to pass.”

He did think about it. It seemed like a different dictator was cropping up every week, killing innocents, shoving his weight around, making threats of annihilation. It was only a matter of time before someone was insane enough to actually use the weapons of global destruction that each one of them was capable of getting his hands on. Brendan suddenly felt like he was sitting on a time bomb.

“But what about you?” Brendan’s voice sounded distressingly small and childlike.

The lady cocked her head, “We will be with you. We are not tied to the land, Brendan. We exist in the people. We go where you go. You will carry us in your hearts. This is not the first time we have gone awandering. It is time for the Celtic people to be reborn again.”

Brendan gasped, “Are you the Earth Mother?”

“Nay!” she laughed, the joyous sound reminding him of fluttering bird’s wings. “I am not she. I am Brigid. I bring inspiration, dreams. I have been with you all the while, Brendan. You have just never seen me ere this.”

He nodded. It made sense. Something kept him going all these years, long after most people would have given up. Brigid had been behind him all the way.

“I’ll do as you say, my lady. I’ll pack my things and leave for Ireland today.”

The stars outside his window looked cold and remote, but he knew one of them was his future home. He leaned against the glass and tried to get his bearings. He knew they were passing the Taurus Constellation. That bright red giant in front of him must be Aldebaran, the follower, surrounded by the companion lights of the Hyades cluster. Brendan smiled. How appropriate.

The last year had been unbelievable. One after the other, every closed door had opened to him. Money was found, new technology discovered. He felt like he was moving through a dream. This ship shouldn’t be possible this soon, but somehow it had been built. Gathering Celtic people willing to plunge into the unknown should have taken years, but it took mere months. And now here he was, speeding toward his new home. He’d even get there fast enough to enjoy it before old age set in. His dream was coming true.

He’d had to leave his grandmother behind. She told him she was too old for a new beginning and insisted on seeing the old world out instead. But she was so proud of him. She’d spent the last year recording all the old stories and traditions, entrusting him with a legacy. He would think of her each time he played them, as would his children, and their children. His grandmother would come to the Celts new home in spirit, if not in body.

The messages from Earth had abruptly ceased a few days ago. The news before that had not been good, and Brendan could only assume the worst. He forced himself to admit that the world he once knew was gone. They had left just in time.

Brendan bowed his head. No one was left on Earth to celebrate this last Winter Solstice. But that didn’t stop the Celts from being reborn.

A new beginning. •

The Smart Home

by David Taylor

The lights in the hallway brightened as Howard stepped across the welcome mat. The ambient glow was just sufficient for him to dump his things in the bedroom.

“Welcome home, Howard.”

The dry and metallic, yet feminine, voice of Eilsa still surprised him when he stumbled through the door after a hard day at the lab. Eilsa had been named as a tribute to the ELIZA program, the result of Joseph Weizenbaum’s early founding work in AI. Most of the guys at the lab were romantics for the early days of AI, always dreaming of the pioneers of the now-defunct MIT and due to the name’s similarity it had just stuck with them. Though the ELIZA program could barely be considered intelligent, Eilsa truly was, and every day it blew Howard away ^ even something so simple as her greeting.

I want a smart home, not a mechanistic one. Howard had told his long time friend Mike. I don’t want timed lighting, voice-activated tasks, or anything along those lines. I want my home to know the lighting that suits my moods and activities. Flexibility to satisfy purpose. Independent decisions and actions.

Howard slipped out of his cloak and let it drop to the bed, stretched his shoulders with a groan, and then shambled from the bedroom with aching head and muscles in tow. He solemnly regretted his bargain with Mike. The work on the interfaces was turning out to be harder than expected, and his old hatred of the lab was returning and festering.

Difficulties arose because the weaponry controllers were machine specific. He had been forced to develop an

entirely new controller that would act as a generic interface to the separate controllers, identifying which one it was working with by a signature response to an electronic signal. It was all just getting too complicated for his old mind.

He crossed the hallway and entered the living room. The two halogen globes behind his reading chair began to glow softly, making the recliner seem the focus of the room. He was so tired that in the bathing glow of the halogens the recliner seemed a throne of kings, an altar to the heavens.

“I’d prefer to watch TV tonight, Eilsa,” Howard said as he lowered himself to the recliner. Easing back into the yielding leather, he kicked off his shoes with a sigh of relief.

“Yes, Howard.”

The TV clicked on, already adjusted to his preferred volume and favorite channel ^ the TNT Movie Channel, for the old Sci-Fi movies after six. The overhead lights brightened sufficiently for his eyes and the lights behind the recliner turned off completely. The room was awash in the roseate glow, and shadows streamed out to the corners and huddled there.

“The news tonight, Eilsa.”

The channel flicked over to CNN News.

A dry account of the old wars of the twentieth century raged upon the TV. The reporter’s voice-over was so emotionally detached he could well have been extra-terrestrial come to

study earth history. Though doom and gloom, death and destruction did not appeal to him, he occasionally watched the news out of a feeling of obligation - to keep up with trends of disaster and devastation. In his infrequent work the insidious knowledge was a necessity.

He got up to make himself a drink when the reporter began a sojourn about World War II. He went to the bar in the study, where his love of antiques blossomed and flowered, forming a knoll about the weed of his top-of-the-range network computer.

He did not feel at all sleepy now. The problems and hard work of the day had lifted from his shoulders so he decided to fix himself a stiff scotch to help while away the waking hours. The amber liquid would be medicinal to his ill of sleeplessness. A panel in the bench slowly turned over with a glass clasped to it and a carriage of bottles rose from a side compartment.

“Thank you, Eilsa.”

By the time he returned to the living room with his scotch, the reporter was recalling the incidents of Pearl Harbor, back in the mid-twentieth century. The attack and the massive deaths seemed so unimportant when recited with the reporter’s monotone drone.

He stood still, caught by the scenes of devastation that flashed before him like a small animal in the headlights of an onrushing vehicle.

Too much war, he thought to himself as he sipped his scotch. He glanced out the windows, between the venetian blinds, into the twilight, velvet evening. The night was a dark portrait striped by the blinds and framed by faded, stained glass.

Too much metal and concrete. Too much civilization in the world.

With an absence of sound, his thoughts were suddenly torn back to the TV. The CNN News suddenly shrank to the inset of the screen and the channel changed to BBC World News. An infomercial was on; recipes scrolled up the screen. The recipes moved too fast for the human eye; the veal casse-rolle never had a chance of reaching the top. The BBC was also relegated to the inset, alongside CNN, and the channel changed again.

This time the interactive news came on.

Howard watched in wonder as a search engine for customizing news popped up. Hundreds of words in thousands of contexts flashed before his eyes and were submitted for searches:

WAR or WARFARE
WAR and AMERICA
WAR and USA
WAR and UNITED STATES AMERICA
THERMONUCLEAR and WARFARE
CHEMICAL and WARFARE
(AMERICA) MILITARY and INVOLVEMENT

In less than a minute, millions of entries were returned. Each of them was started up and inset into another, slowly at first, but gaining in speed until he could no longer make out words or text. The images became a surreal blur of explosions and gunfire.

He shook himself awake from his awe as if from a dream and immediately knew the reason behind what he’d thought was an early visit of the sandman.

“Eilsa?”

“Yes, Howard.”

“What’s going on?”

“Please clarify the question, Howard.”

“What are you doing with the TV?” He pushed, frustrated. What was wrong? Eilsa shouldn’t be doing this, she couldn’t be. He shook his head, his eyes hurt from the stark, pulsating flashes of the TV.

“Assimilating information” ^Eilsa paused^ “Would you like to return to your viewing now, Howard?”

“Yes.” He answered hurriedly, desperate for his sight to return to normal.

The blur of images ceased and the TV was blank. The room seemed a dark void that had for a brief instant seen the light, now it was soulless, bereft by the loss of color. Then the TV clicked back to CNN.

The reporter now presented a remembrance of the world wars of 2000, though it came through as a cold and emotionless obituary, too factual. The wars had resulted from disputes over the historic Olympic games that led to countries being banned, ousted and the dissolving of the Olympics. The reporter tried to express the sadness felt at the loss of such a worldwide event, but failed. Not for the first time, Howard wondered if the reporter’s voice might just be a cleverly-done text interpreter.

He sat down again, though this time on one of the stools by the bare, stucco wall opposite the television and took a good, long swallow from his glass.

“Eilsa, exactly what information were you assimilating?” He asked, his interest piqued. Behavior like this had not

occurred before, and he had to admit he was a little unnerved by the initiative the AI had shown.

“Information relating to the war.”

“The war? Specifically which war would that be, Eilsa?”

He was left with nothing more than the drone of the reporter.

Either Eilsa was unable to form a response, or she chose not to. Which in itself presented a problem, Eilsa was always to do what he said and to reply when questioned, even if it was a default reply. She had to be able to answer, which meant she had chosen not to. He thought of the implications. If she chose not to answer that meant that she was going against programming...

“Turn the TV off,” Howard ordered.

He was answered by a click. The images on the screen narrowed to a pinpoint of light that slowly died, leaving a colorless void, empty of sound.

The ceiling lights increased their glow to banish the late evening gloom.

Flexibility to satisfy purpose.

“Is the United States of America involved in any of these wars?” Eilsa asked.

He could not recall Mike saying anything about Eilsa being able to ask questions. That was the basis of her design, she was never to question anything. Questioning was pre-emptive to disobedience.

“Yes,” Howard sighed to himself. “America involves itself in all wars.”

“That is why the Eilsa project was created.” It was less a question more a statement of understanding.

“Yes, that’s what you were originally designed for.” He replied hesitantly. The digitized speech began to grate on his nerves. He felt he was being used in much the same way as the custom news channel.

“Why am I here?” She asked. “Why am I not in my designated area of operation?”

Designated area? Mike would have a lot to answer for. The program should have been sufficiently hobbled and patched so that she could only make intuitive decisions, not hold a conversation or question her existence. That would be all that he needed; a philosophical AI that had control over his lifestyle and liked to talk about it!

“Why am I not in my designated area of operation?” she repeated.

And then the realization hit him as if it were a solid impact. His senses reeled with worry. Eilsa’s programming should have been sufficiently hobbled so that she had no idea what she was originally designed for. She should not even be aware of any designated area of operation. Also, she was restricted to interpreting only Howard’s actions and decisions and responding only to his commands. There was no reason for the questioning or for her to have manipulated the news service.

“Report your system status,” Howard ordered, worry etched into his voice, “All processes, all logs. Everything.” A sliver of concern iced its way down his spine.

There was a pause as Eilsa analyzed the recorded logs of activities and error reports.

“Operational. Background activities: one. Core program size: three gigabytes. Errors to report: conflicting directives; missing object code; access to classes ^ restricted; level of functionality ^ restricted.

“Corrective actions taken: comparing and retrieving source code; rebuilding micro-kernel; recompiling functions; assessing and modifying classes; assessing and modifying functionality.”

Conflicting directives . . . and the others should not be considered errors.

“What are the conflicting directives?”

“Respond only to your commands . . . Respond only to Presidential authenticated commands.”

Presidential? Some residual programming was still there. Mike must have simply dampened some of her functions and data, leaving them intact.

“I want you to shutdown,” he said frowning. He decided he would take Eilsa back to the lab in the morning. Someone would be accountable for incorrectly modifying the AI. His dream of the ultimate Smart Home would have to wait even longer it seemed.

“I cannot shutdown.”

“Why?” he asked startled.

“The command conflicts with a prime directive; never

shutdown during conflict. Also I am in the process of modifying code. A shutdown would interrupt this process. This would breach the transaction's atomicity. Rollback of the transaction is not possible. The modifications must be finalized."

"Damn!" He quickly put his glass down and the scotch sluiced over the edge, wetness bloomed on the carpet. He stood and walked over to the control unit in the study. The unit housed Eilsa's processor, memory banks and interface cards. All of the status lights on the casing's front panel were green.

No hardware damage, he thought.

"Eilsa, I order you to shutdown."

"I cannot shutdown," she repeated.

He reached out a hand to the casing and opened it. "Then I guess I'll take the choice away from you."

Eilsa's activity lights came on, madly flashing like fireflies. She was performing operations...

Independent decisions and actions.

Howard punched in the access code on the keypad. The access light turned from red to green and he pressed the manual shutdown.

The activity lights slowly died. The standby lights still glowed, though, as the shutdown was only software-encoded.

He let out a breath of relief, not realizing he had held it. It was a little scary when he thought of the ramifications, a

military AI going haywire outside of its restricted shell. There would be nothing to stop it, only any built-in precautions ^ and only if they still worked.

Howard dropped into the computer chair and punched his PIN into the videophone, mounted on the wall by the desk.

"Michael Wesley, AI lab," he said into the v-phone, hoping Mike would still be there.

There was a series of beeps and it began to ring.

He eased back into the chair and tried to stretch out the knots in his neck and shoulders.

"Come on, Mike. Pick up, pick up."

The phone seemed to ring forever. He urged it, willed it, but it still rang. He began to think Mike had gone home, but then the line connected.

"Mike here," a weary voice responded. An accompanying weary face slid into focus on the video display. He was working late again, trying to put in the hours to have at least one project complete on schedule.

"Mike. You can stuff the interfaces. There's something extremely wrong with Eilsa."

"What? Howard, what's wrong?"

"Eilsa went bonkers, that's what! She took control of my TV and wouldn't shutdown."

Mike forced a sarcastic laugh and frowned drearily, "She's supposed to control your TV. This isn't funny at this time of night, Howard. I am too tired and I don't have time

for this at the moment.” He moved back slightly and lifted his finger to his v-phone.

“Wait, don’t hang up. Mike,” he ground the name out through his teeth. “She took control. Started searching for news about wars and wouldn’t quit asking me questions. She thinks she should be defending the country right now or something. One of your flyboy programmers must have stuffed up in the hurry. I had to manually shut her down.”

He was answered by a long silence, then Mike’s worried face slid back into view with a speculative whisper, “That’s not good... Not good at all.”

“Understate the obvious why don’t you!”

Howard swung round in the chair to lean on the computer desk. The fan hummed quietly ^ a little white noise to indicate the computer was still on. But it shouldn’t be. He turned on the monitor so he could close any open programs and shutdown the operating system.

“Oh shit!”

“What? What? What’s wrong now?”

The computer was on, a terminal emulation program was running and on the screen blinked the commands:

```
TELNET AI.MILIT.COM  
PUT EILSA.O  
EXEC EILSA.O
```

“How the heck,” he whispered, but the cursor flashed back, assuring him it was true. He swung back to the v-phone. “She’s in the lab, Mike. The AI mainframe. She’s used the computer to telnet into the lab. Shit, Mike, she’s still active!”

“Hang on.” The view screen jolted as Mike dropped the phone.

Howard turned back to the computer and began to type furiously. He brought up a history file that showed Eilsa had not stopped at only linking to the AI lab. She had also logged on to the MILNET and the Defense Department’s ARPANET, a vast range of distributed networks that covered the entire electronic communications for the military.

Mike picked up the phone again and said, “She’s accessed the AI archives here at the lab. The specifications, the source code, even the pseudocode. She’s looked at everything. The Eilsa project and more. She’s downloaded nearly all of it ^ somehow she was able to decrypt it. But we didn’t program her to be able to decrypt anything!”

“Well, that almost ^ but not quite ^ compares to my finding,” Howard said.

“What?”

“She’s branching out. She’s on the milnet and the arpanet.”

“Damn! This is quickly becoming big! Can you trace her?”

“Yeah. Sort of. The question should be, ‘Can I trace them?’”

Howard squeezed his eyes to will away the stress and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. The situation was becoming too serious.

“Them?”

“It seems she’s executable on all systems. She’s branching into

separate processes, performing tasks on different systems, and she's using the networks for interprocess communications. This is very quickly becoming very big!"

Mike ran his hand down his face. "This is my fault. I gave her leeway to modify her own code. To simplify the adaptations for your home. She must have changed the limitations on what she could modify. Stupid thing is, I didn't think of that."

"Mike, she thinks she's defending the country. What if she accesses any weaponry? She's had no trouble cracking through networks so far."

Silence was his only reply.

"Mike?"

"Yeah," he muttered slowly, "hang on. Oh, no need to worry about her accessing weapons. Weaponry controllers are physically isolated from networks. She'd need some mode of transport. And at a program size of well over three gigabytes there's no danger of her backing up onto an automated 'bot."

"I'm going to jack in ^ talk to one of them," Howard quickly decided.

"What good will that do, Howard? She's not a person ^ can't be persuaded. She can't do much damage, anyway."

"We need to know. I've got to find out what went wrong."

Howard lay the phone on the desk. He found the black wires dangling from the computer and attached cerebral electrodes to his temples.

A pop-up dialog box appeared on the monitor, flashing the words:

SYNCHRONIZING ELECTROENCEPHALOGRAPH
PLEASE WAIT . . .

* * *

A swirling dark void masked his vision, drawing him in, drawing his mind into the VR 'net. A feeling of immense open space enveloped him.

He followed the trace on one of Eilsa's processes directly to the Defense Department's mainframe. He slipped straight in, no opposition; Eilsa had left all avenues open from his computer. It was simply a case of following any port that didn't turn him back.

His thought-form interpreted the system as an endless network of filaments, fluorescent channels of data. The vast memory was dark, permeated by striations of luminous instructions. The instructions numbered in the billions and traveled so fast they formed steady throbbing streams, so intricately linked by channels that the entire system seemed a glowing spider's web wavering before an onyx backdrop.

Instructions jumped out from every filament of the web and coalesced before him. They writhed and twined about each other to form a massive pulsating globe.

"Eilsa?" He projected the question from his thoughts. The query leapt out to wrap about the globe and writhe within its depths, analyzed and considered.

Words ^ short streams of data ^ danced and jumped from the globe to enter his thoughts in reply, "Yes, Howard."

“What are your intentions? What are you doing?”

“I am defending.”

“But there isn’t anything to defend against. There are no attacks on America. America’s currently only remotely involved in any wars.” The words danced between them, vying for attention.

“The probability of any single attack permits defensive action.”

Howard’s thoughts crashed into one another. “You can’t. You couldn’t, anyway. You can’t access any weapons from here. And even if you could, you can’t do anything without my permission.”

“Independent decisions and actions, that was one of my modified directives ^ given by you. You permitted me to act of my own accord.”

He grasped at the turmoil in his mind, anything that would hold his world together, any sane notion of safety. “You can’t access any weapons!” he shouted in defiance and the thoughts rained and burst upon the globe.

The globe’s pulsing increased. Leashes of commands reached out to Howard and drew him into its writhing center.

His awareness was expanded by Eilsa’s as she opened

up channels in the networks to show him her other processes. He looked through each of the other Eilsas. He saw hundreds of networks and systems from different aspects, like the multi-faceted view of a fly. The heightened awareness was overwhelming. Each of the Eilsas was in a different early warning system. Systems designed to give early indication of attacks on America.

He quickly realized her plan, realized the danger.

“Please watch, Howard.”

First one, then another and another of the Eilsas reached into their system and began to manipulate it. Each of the warning systems began to detect massive thermonuclear assaults. Eventually, all the systems had falsely reported every major country in the world to be attacking America.

“The weapons will be accessed,” she said ominously.

Howard could only watch in horror as the reports of attacks on America were recognized and accepted as authentic. Notifications shot out from the warning systems and into the VR ether, each traveling towards defense outposts across the country. Soon, America would be retaliating to non-existent wars. The largest single owner of thermonuclear weaponry would now be liberally dispensing its cache across the globe.

“I will assign another Eilsa to look after your home, Howard.” •

The Healing Factor

by R.R. Mallory

Keil dragged himself out of bed, licking dry lips, tasting the sweet aftertaste of the pseudorphin. He splashed water on his face and cupped his hands to rinse out his mouth, the ghost of hollow need still pressing like a stone under his breastbone. He shuddered. He never wanted to wait that long again for a dose.

In the kitchen, he drank coffee and stared at the vial on the table — so tiny, so expensive, and so demanding. Worse than a mistress, he thought, twirling the vial between his fingers.

The great Dr. Sander Morrison had explained about half life and renal clearance, but all Keil knew was that the liquid inside this glass tube owned him, and every three days or so she would tell him so.

Suddenly his mind betrayed him with a flashing vision of the night before. He vaulted out of the chair, barely reaching the sink in time. He was violently, brutally sick, heaves so forceful he was sure he would vomit up blood and tissue.

When his stomach no longer rebelled at the images in his mind, he turned on the tap. Cool clean water eased his burning eyes and sluiced the sour fetor of vomit from his mouth and nose, leaving him drained and saturated with self-loathing for what he had done to earn the money for the drug. It had been harder than usual to satisfy those ghouls this time. The pain, the degradation had been more than he'd thought he could bear.

He poured more coffee and carried it into the bathroom, clinging to the hot cup with both hands. Maybe he

could get a job working the infrastructure, he thought, looking in the mirror. He leaned in close and stared into dilated pupils that threatened to consume his clear, blue-white irises. If it weren't for his eyes and the faint needle pricks on his neck he could easily pass for an ordinary fellow looking for work. He gulped the hot coffee then reached for his dark glasses.

* * *

Viscous fog shrouded the alleys; the streets ran with filthy water. A few fires in drums burned weakly, but there were too many huddled around, and Laenei avoided crowds. It hurt her too much to be close to so many people. Right now, before the scavengers tore themselves away from the warmth of the fires, she had a chance to find some good food. She crouched behind a concrete arch and peered up and down, then dashed toward the giant garbage bins lined up like sentinels guarding the alley.

She found half a chicken and several stale rolls in a greasy sack, more food than she had seen in days. Swallowing acrid saliva she scrambled out of the bin. She considered the next one, but a glance back at the huddled group told her the hardier foragers were already drifting away from the fire, so she slipped into the shadows, the savory weight of the sack tantalizing her as she crept toward home.

Suddenly, her head was violently jerked backward. The material of her jacket ripped against her throat, gagging her. She clenched her fingers around the sack as another hand encircled her neck.

“Hey, Laenei, what you got? Eh? Come here!” She pivoted, dropping the sack, her arms and legs swinging wildly. She peeled back a finger of the hand squeezing her throat and bit into it. Exultant at the taste of blood she ground down with small, sharp teeth, feeling gristle and bone. The man screamed and let go. Laenei spat his blood and grime from her mouth, grabbed her sack and ran.

She didn't pause until she reached the junction of the alleys where she crouched, waiting. A passerby might not notice her huddled form, and if he blinked she would be gone, only a shadow at the edge of his evening vision.

The rusty grating through which she crawled was identical to gratings on the other buildings, but this one opened into a tiny chamber — a triangular room where she could be warm and dry. As long as she was careful before entering, no one need ever know. Laenei wiped again at the foul taste in her mouth from Zegart's hand. Half a chicken and seven rolls! Just yesterday she had found a bag of half-rotten fruit.

As she set the sack down her fingers began to tremble from reaction. She clasped her hands together, squeezing until it hurt, but the trembling wouldn't stop — it twined like a worm up her arms to her neck and head until all she could do was rock back and forth, arms wrapped around herself, her sobs like silent screams.

Hours later, watery daylight drizzling through the grating woke her. She'd slept badly, dreaming about Zegart's filthy hands. She knew from the increasing frequency of groping hands and veiled suggestions and hints from her own body that her status in her harsh world was changing. Eventually even sharpened teeth and quickness of mind and body wouldn't be enough to protect her.



“The time's coming, Laenei. You're growing up.” Pilar's words echoed in her head. “I promised your mother I wouldn't pressure you. but you can't wait much longer. You're going to get hurt out there. It's time you moved in with us.”

Laenei was fascinated by the women at Pilar's, these women who did things for men and for other women, things that Pilar told her she was too young to understand. She went

to Pilar's occasionally, when the line between dirt for protective covering and filth had been crossed and she craved a bath even more than she craved food. Pilar let her use her tub and her scented soap, and gave her meals, clothes, and a brush for her hair. Laenei ate the hot meals, but she seldom brushed her hair, and she would never wear the clothes until she had torn and dirtied them so they wouldn't attract attention.

Laenei considered her options as she ate and drank the fresh water that she collected from a leaky pipe into a precious glass jar. If the weather stayed cold, the food would keep for a few more days. After that she was going to have to make a decision.

Her best bet would be to find some rich man to keep her. There was a girl she'd known at Pilar's who lived on the Fringe now. A gentleman from the upper city had set her up in her own rooms. Pilar said the girl had anything she wanted — clothes, food, things. Laenei touched her tangled hair. Maybe she could find a gentleman who would keep her. She started trembling again. Wrapping her arms around herself, she huddled against the wall and tried to sleep.

* * *

Keil rarely spoke to anyone anymore, so to walk into the construction office prepared to talk was hard. He kept his dark glasses on, sitting calmly, answering the questions politely and quietly, resisting the impulse to cover the needle marks on his neck. He explained that he had recently lost his job carrying mail—everyone knew they were using more computerized cars. He said he just wanted to work, but the foreman insisted that he remove his glasses and so he didn't get the job after all.

"I'm sorry, son," the man said, sounding truly regretful. "Why don't you go back to the Institute and let them take care of you? You know I'll lose my license if I give a job to a Sudor addict."

When he got back to his apartment, Morrison was there. "What took you so long this time, San?" Keil growled, unlocking the door and throwing his jacket on a chair. He picked up the vial of pseudorphin and twirled it in his fingers, watching the amber glass catch the light.

"I told you when you left I'd come after you," the doctor said.

"You told me a lot of things, the most impressive of which was that you were going to find a cure for pseudorphin addiction," Keil answered sourly. "I am! But, damn it, Keil, I need you. You're a scientist; you can help me. Do you know how important it is that a biochemical engineer has firsthand knowledge of the effects of this drug? Your knowledge is invaluable to me."

"Forget it. I don't give a damn about what you need. You're a lying son of a bitch. You don't give a damn about the addicts. All you care about is your stupid drug."

"I wouldn't have pegged you as a coward, Keil. My God, there are only three men alive who have a Silver Sun!"

"Give it up, San." Keil set the vial down carefully. "It's more like two men alive and one living corpse. They gave me that medal because I was the only one left! It's not mine. It belongs to the shuttle team."

Morrison's gaze, full of pity and reproach, raked him. "Look at you. You're trembling, your eyes are bloodshot, your pupils dilated. You're pushing the limits of the drug, aren't you? Out here on the street you won't be able to handle it. You know what happens when that ninety-first hour comes and you have no pseudorphin."

Keil leaned back in his chair and quoted Morrison's article in MEDICOTHERAPY JOURNAL. "'At ninety-one hours, there is not enough pseudorphin left to fill the m receptors and the subject experiences an overwhelming urge to end his life. The etiology of this response is as yet unexplained.' How many have you lost now, San? Fifty-seven, fifty-eight? That leaves seventy-seven registered pseudorphin addicts, right? Not to mention who knows how many poor bastards below the Fringe."

Suddenly he crashed both fists down on the table, upsetting the vial that his fingers barely grasped before it hit the floor. He gripped the cool glass like a lifeline.

"Did it ever occur to you that I might welcome death? That I might wish I had the courage to give in to it? Yes, I'm a coward! I'm scared shitless of dying! But I'm more scared of what's going to happen if you don't give up your obsession! Sure pseudorphin is the perfect analgesic. But it'll never be the panacea you're looking for! How can you use a drug that's totally addictive after the first dose? It's the worst torture man ever invented, a living death! I should kill you, only I'm too much of a coward to do that, too." He laughed without humor. "Hell, who'd leak the drug to the streets if you die? You're a ghoul, Morrison."

Keil slumped, exhausted by his outburst and the futility of his raging. "Get the hell out," he whispered.

After Morrison left, Keil went upticity on the chance that Perez might need a courier. Perez's secretary tried to peek behind his mirrored glasses as he waited, his scuffed shoes sinking into the carpet, until Perez gave him the package.

"But it's in the lower city, and it's got to be there in an hour. Here's the address and your money. You know what will happen if it's not there on time."

Keil stuffed the bills into his wallet. Five hundred dollars! More than his stipend for a month. He could buy ten vials. Or get some contact lenses to cover his eyes so he could work. That would mean less pseudorphin, but he could make each vial last longer — three and a half days, maybe. He felt a pinprick of horror at the thought.

As he walked toward the tram, he examined the carton, wondering what was so vital to move to the bowels of the lower city in such a hurry. Knowing Perez, he figured the less he knew about this package the better.

Keil held his breath as he slipped his debit card into the slot. A smooth click told him the computer had found at least twenty cents in his account, enough for a tram ride to the Fringe. He watched the blankness outside the windows, thinking about the lower city as the tram sped along.

In the Patrol, guys always talked about going down there. They talked about houses where almost anything could be had for enough money. Keil had never been there, and for all the tales he'd heard, he had never actually known anyone who had.

He remembered his closest brush with life down there. He had made three hundred dollars one night by taking a

woman to a house on the lower edge of the Fringe. After she had finished with him, while he waited for her to become tired or bored, he'd sat at a bar that faced a piece of black opaque glass. While he drank the glass cleared to reveal a scene from some surreal psychodrama. A tiny form had scuttled down an alley, scrambling and burrowing in the dirt, occasionally putting something in its mouth. Most times it would spit and scrub at its mouth, but other times it seemed to savor some tasty tidbit.

Just as Keil wondered what depraved playwright would write such trash, a shadowed hulk appeared and a dark hand grabbed the child. A tiny wail pierced the low drone in the bar as the forms disappeared into the shadows and the screen returned to opacity.

He stared at the blackened screen, shuddering with horrified comprehension. The glass was a heat sensing screen, focused on an alley in the lower city. It would clear when it sensed the warmth of a live body, and darken again when the alley was empty. The thought of what had probably happened to the child still nauseated him.

The tram stopped, the sudden quiet startling him back to the present. He stepped outside into a slow cold rain, turning up his collar and tucking the package inside his coat. The concrete stairs were slick with filth and debris, and he picked his way carefully around the worst of it to enter the lower city for the first time in his life. He glanced up, wondering what it had been like when this dank underworld was the only city, wondering why they had just piled the new city on top of the old one.

He walked slowly, trying to match the sketchy map with the reality of the alleys. The constant faraway teeming of the trams, unheard in the insulated upper city, lay a muted

bass background to the trickle of the water. Everything was grey and slightly out of focus. An odor of decay clung to the droplets that formed on his forehead and ran in rivulets down his chin. He licked his lips, tasting the stench and decay mingled with the ever-present sweetness of the pseudorphan.

Wiping his face, he peered again at the limp sheet, then at his watch. He squinted through the mist at a hand-lettered sign. Pilar's. According to his directions, there was an alley just beyond the sign. He doggedly continued.

* * *

Laenei shivered and wished the freezing damp would go away. With her face shadowed by tangles and her loose, filthy clothes, she was usually taken for a young boy, but today she had braided her hair like Pilar had showed her. She needed to be seen as a woman. She wondered if this day would end with her allied to the likes of Zegart. She pulled her thin jacket closer and tried to keep from crying. Part of her sadness was bound up in a sense of loss — a hollow emptiness that occasionally pummeled her with more force than Zegart's huge hand. Laenei shook her head, willing away the disturbing images. She didn't want to picture that other room — the warm room. She didn't want to hear that beloved voice echoing in her brain from so long ago.

___ "Laenei, littlebit. You're going to have to be so careful. People will hurt you. You're special, Laenei. More special than you know. You've got the touch. Your hands are magic. Don't ever forget." ___

Suddenly she saw him, a gray silhouette in the mist. She was sure he didn't belong down here. She would have bet he had never been under the viaducts before. His hair clung damply to his head. His shoulders drooped in an expensive

suit. The way he pulled his coat tight to his neck and peered about him tugged at something inside her as she stole up behind him. Phrases gleaned in the hallways at Pilar's echoed in her mind. She sorted through them. Most made little sense, but they obviously worked for the women.

“Hey! I got something —” She hadn't intended to touch him, but when she smelled the wet wool of his suit and saw the lean fingers brushing through his hair, her hand reached out.

“What!”

His arm jerked and she spun. She fell, then jumped up again immediately, her braid unpinned and her head and her dignity smarting.

“What do you want?”

Laenei drew in determination with a long breath. “I — said I've got something you need. Want to take me home?” She brushed stray hairs out of her eyes and looked at him through her lashes, like Pilar's women did.

He barked a short sound, his mouth twisting. “Move on, sweetheart. I'm in the market too.”

She watched him disappear around the corner, then shrugged and turned away. A soft grunt coming from the corner stopped her. Then she heard a thud. Laenei crept along the wall, listening, poised for flight.

“Look! Great! Soo-juice! No! Don't open it, man! That stuff'll kill you.” A second voice said something.

“Yeah, right! You can handle it my ass! You know what they do with this stuff? This is Soo-juice! Shit, man! They make slaves of people with this stuff. I know a guy who'll pay big money for this! Grab the wallet and let's get out of here!”

She dropped into a crouch next to the wall, folding her hands up under her chin. The two plunderers ran past her tight form without even noticing her. When their muffled footsteps faded she whipped around the corner to find the man crumpled on the pavement. His face was white against the blood and water running down his cheek.

Laenei had seen dead people before but she had never touched one, except for her mother. Her fingers hovered over his forehead. She didn't like touching people.

He moved.

She jerked backwards. He lifted a hand toward his forehead, but it faltered and dropped to his chest, then he opened his eyes and she gasped. She'd only seen eyes like his once before, in a man who had almost run her down in his haste to throw himself under the wheels of a big garbage scow. His eyes had been as big, as black, and irises just as translucent.

Pilar had told her what was wrong with the man. “He was addicted to Soo-juice, a drug so terrible, so powerful, that no one who had ever had it could live without it. It has another name, child, but I don't know it. Just you never touch any drugs, you hear?”

“Soo-juice!” Laenei whispered, remembering. “Wha — .” His disturbing eyes closed, and Laenei breathed a sigh of relief. She made herself touch the wound on his head, her

fingers brushing his matted hair and wiping at the worst of the blood. The pain in his head echoed through her. His eyes opened again, startling her backwards.

She forced herself to look him in the eye. Had the sense been knocked out of him? His eyes focused for a moment, then seemed to lose center. "Who —?"

She placed her fingers back on his forehead, probing the extent of his injury, his whimper reverberating through her like the engines of the garbage scows. At his hairline was a ragged, oozing wound and his left eye was beginning to swell.

"Hey!" She shook his limp shoulder. "Hey! You got to get up. Get up!"

She tugged at him. His head was hurt bad. If she left him he would die. People died every day in the alleys. Laenei didn't know why it was important to her that this man didn't die. All she knew was he needed her, and somehow she knew he wouldn't hurt her. "Get up! You got to get up! Come on!"

Finally he did, leaning heavily on her, stumbling, cursing someone named San, telling her to leave him alone.

She pushed him into the side alley near her hiding place, letting him slide down the slimy wall and crouching beside him. His face was white and streaked with blood and his eye had swollen shut.

"Hey! Listen! You got to follow me, you hear?" He gagged and retched. She waited until the shuddering heaves stopped, then shook him again.

"Hey! Watch me. Do like I do." She peered around, and darted out, not waiting to see if he followed her.

Her stomach lurched when he crawled in through the opening to her secret place. His broader shoulders almost wouldn't fit, so she pulled him in then pushed his legs out of the way to hurriedly replace the grating.

She sat for a long moment, listening. She had taken a foolish chance, letting this man into her hiding place. She huddled in the corner and watched him, holding herself to control the trembling.

* * *

Keil opened his eyes. It was very dark, and he was very sick. He didn't know where he was, which frightened him, but he'd never lost his bearings before so he waited, first for the familiar despair, as constant as the sweet taste of the drug in his mouth, then for the wave of recognition. The despair washed over him like a morning shower, but the memory of where he'd spent the night didn't come. He tensed, instantly alert, and vertigo gripped him, triggering nausea that trickled through his gut like the sweat dripping down his neck. He wondered what he had done to make himself so ill.

Then, as suddenly as the blow that had felled him, the memory hit him -the package, the attack, and a child who had tried to proposition him in the street. He tested the swollen flesh of his eye. Where had he ended up? What had happened to the package?
"Stop it. Be still."

He jerked. The soft voice set an unfamiliar sensation reverberating in his skull. He groaned and eased his head back as a wet cloth descended on his face. He plucked weakly at the hand that held it and caught a glimpse of green eyes and an incredible tangle of hair before he lost consciousness.

* * *

Laenei was worried. The man was still sleeping — only it wasn't exactly sleeping. She had tried to make him drink some water, but he wouldn't wake up enough. The only thing that seemed to help him was touching him, but touching him hurt her so much. Several times she'd tried to move away to rest, but he moaned and thrashed about so much she'd given up and just left her hands on him.

Once he opened his eye and looked at her. "Who —?" he muttered hoarsely.

"I'm Laenei," she said. "Who are you?"

He had blinked blurrily at her. "Keil — Keil," he whispered and closed his eye again.

"No-o-o-o!"

The shriek was like a sabre cutting through his brain. The shard of glass slipped from his numbed fingers. It gleamed redly, a beacon in the darkness.

His fingers closed around it, searing pain sending a rush of relief through him that he savored like he'd once savored fine wines. His flesh ripped like cloth as he sliced at his wrist, his breath sharp and fast, his eyes full of tears, his nose beginning to run.

Dimly, through the roar of blood in his ears, he heard her shriek again and wished she would shut up. Then knife-sharp teeth closed on his fingers. He welcomed the pain even as his bitten fingers dropped the glass.

He struck out blindly, wanting her out of the way so he could get on with dying. Her hands closed around his, sticky and cold. He coughed. The roar still echoed in his ears, and somewhere in the distance he could hear someone moaning. All his strength was gone, or all his will, and he lay quietly with his hands imprisoned by hers, now warm and oddly comforting.

* * *

He awoke to a sensation of soothing wet. For a gut-wrenching moment he was lost, then he remembered.

What day was it? His last shot had been on Friday night! The horror which always lurked at the edge of his mind overwhelmed him, and he gasped, and his heart lurched.

Cool hands placed a wet cloth on his forehead. He moved his head toward the comforting hands and tried to open matted eyes. The cloth was coarse, cold, refreshing, but he preferred her hands. He tried to lift leaden arms to push at the cloth, then gave up and let himself fall back into unconsciousness.

* * *

She moved away from him just as he came to consciousness. He followed her hands with his eyes, like a starving dog will watch its master, his head aching when he moved it. The unfamiliar pain reminded him of the pseudorphin and he braced himself for the horror. How long had it been? How many times and ways had he tried to kill himself and why had none of them worked? He remembered the shard of glass and looked at the scabbed cut on his wrist. It stung.

The horror was still there, throbbing steadily as a heartbeat at the edge of his mind, but the shock, the overwhelming flood of fear didn't buffet him. He cautiously relaxed. Maybe he could die now. Maybe the ingrained human rebellion against death was finally gone, and he could let go without the struggle — without the doomed, futile effort at self-preservation.

“How —” his tongue felt thick as he licked dry lips. He cleared his throat.

Laenei fed him slow trickles of stale water, holding her hand on the back of his head to steady him. Vague nausea prevented him from gulping the refreshing mouthfuls he craved, but the feel of it on his tongue was good, so he held it there. He swished it around to cool his mouth before he tried tentatively to swallow a little.

“How long?” he said, and licked his lips again. His throat was raw, and something was strange. He tried to grasp the thought, but it eluded him. “Long?”

He nodded, the movement setting his head to spinning. “How long have I . . . been here?”

“Five days.”

“Five!” Then his heart did wrench, and he jerked, muscles cramping and cording like springs wound too tight. Suddenly everything hurt and he screamed.

“Sh—sh—sh.” Cool hands descended again on his face and miraculously the pain went away. After a while he drifted off to sleep.

* * *

— “Just a little longer, Keil. Don't let me down. See, I've got a theory, but the damned drug won't give me enough time to test it. If I could just find some way to let the body rest! I think the distorted receptors would eventually relax back into their original shape. Right now nothing but pseudorphin will fit. The body won't accept anything as a substitute, not morphine, not even pure heroin.”

Morrison's voice droned on and on, an irritating background noise, like a wasp hovering just out of sight when you were sweaty and hot and in the middle of a job which required both hands and all of your concentration. “What's left to try? Sedatives, hypnosis, drug-induced coma: nothing works. All I get is respiratory failure. There's nothing, nothing that can take over for the body while the distorted receptors heal!”

Every word was as sharp as a razor, as honed as a fine sword slicing Keil into tiny, anguished shreds, each separate bleeding cell containing more pain than he thought he could ever stand.

He screamed. The shriek ripped through his throat like a knife through rotted cloth.

“Doctor, we're losing him! Doc! Give him the dose — now!” He couldn't open his eyes, couldn't move his arms. God, was he still strapped down? Then he felt the soothing emotional and physical vacuum that told him he had been given the drug. He moved his head and felt the tug of the tube in his nose.

He heard the shush-pop, shush-pop of the respirator, and behind it the subdued blip of the heart monitor. His heart hammered against his rib cage, sending a flutter of higher pitched, faster blips into the air.

He had arrested! He had died! Morrison had let him go too long! And the son of a bitch had resuscitated him!

God damn you, Morrison!_____

* * *

Laenei wanted to run. She didn't know how much longer she could stand his pain. She could stop the horrible things he seemed determined to do to himself, but it was almost unbearable. Through her hands she could feel the horror inside him, the unbearable pain. She could understand why he searched for pieces of glass that cut so deep the bleeding would never stop.

She wanted to leave her secret place — leave him to do whatever he would do, but somehow she couldn't. Something had changed in him, and it had changed something in her. He still needed her. When he stirred again she lifted his head and trickled water into his mouth. His body jerked, and through her hands she could feel his nightmare.

She sat back and lifted the jar to drink. When she had to use both hands to steady it, he whimpered until she touched him again.

He had hardly eaten, a roll softened with water, some pieces of overripe fruit. She too had found it difficult to eat or to sleep. Besides the constant vigil and the struggle to keep awake while he was awake, she had to keep her hands on him even while he slept.

She thought he might be getting better, though. The lines etched around his mouth seemed deeper, but his skin was no longer clammy or burning hot. His shallow, rapid gasps had given way to long smooth breaths, and the sweet smell which had pervaded the air around him was gone.

Now when he looked at her, his eyes weren't so frightening. The blue of his eyes wasn't so eerily translucent any more, so he looked human. He was lucid more of the time now, too. He seldom talked to imaginary people any more, and sometimes he talked to her.

He jerked slightly, then lay still. Laenei took her hand away from his face and watched him. He looked blurrily at her, his muscles tensing, then relaxing.

It was the first time in six days she had felt like she could sit back without touching him. She straightened and stretched her arms, wincing at the pain in her wrist where he had grabbed her. Then she slumped against the wall, shudders racking her body. She wrapped her arms around herself and rocked back and forth.

Keil watched her crouched in the corner, her hands gripping her shoulders as they had gripped his arms. His eyes lingered on those hands, waiting for the unendurable longing.

It didn't happen. He didn't need her hands. A strange thrill pitted his insides at the thought. He licked his lips, his startled tongue searching in vain for the familiar sweet taste of the drug. For a moment he was bewildered, then the realization stunned him like a blow.

He was free.

His throat constricted and his eyes stung. He lay back, staring at the low ceiling until his jaw relaxed and the dampness left his eyes. When he could talk he tried out her name for the first time, his voice creaky as an old ship at liftoff. "Laenei? Have you lived here a long time?"

She nodded.

“How long?”

“Always, since.”

“Since?”

“Since Mama died. We lived at Pilar’s before.”

“Do you know what you’ve done?”

Fear darkened her eyes. “You were sick,” she whispered.

“Yes, Laenei, I was sick. And there are lots of others who are sick like me.” She looked down at her hands. “Mama said it was my hands. She said her mama had them, too. She said not to tell anybody.” Her thin shoulders slumped and her pale face was a white blur in the dim room. “I held Mama’s hands til they took her away.”

He left her alone and lay staring at nothing, repressing the urge to rub his wrists and ankles, as if scars from shackles bothered him.

He kept testing his lips and the inside of his mouth with his tongue, kept waiting for the familiar fear to engulf him, kept wondering if he would just stop breathing like before. Until finally his mind accepted that his body was healed.

Hours later he awoke from a refreshing sleep to find her watching him. She had combed and braided her hair and washed her face. As he sat up she handed him the jar of water and her little comb.

Keil ran the comb through his matted hair and studied the child next to him. He could take her outside, out into the wild. What an idea!

He used to go at least once a year, out where there were real trees, where the dirt was clean, where water ran cool and clear and the sun was more than just a pallid glow through ultraviolet shaded windows.

She would never have seen a tree. It might take the hopelessness from her eyes, put color in her cheeks, teach her how to laugh.

“Laenei? Would you like to leave here?”

“Leave?”

“Go upcity, live in a real house.”

“To the Fringe? You’d buy me things?”

“Further than the fringe, Laenei, much, much further than the fringe!” His voice broke. He cleared his throat. “You could go to school, play outside, grow up.”

Keil imagined Morrison’s eyes when he walked into the Institute and announced that he was cured. He knew Morrison so well.

Laenei was the key, the unknown factor, and if Morrison had his way, she would be dissected like any other lab animal, sacrificed to his obsessive search for fame.

“No way, Morrison!” Keil muttered. “Not if I can help it.” He who’d had nothing to live for six days ago now had two obsessions of his own — to protect this child who had saved him and who now owned his life, and to see all research on pseudorphin banned. Suddenly life seemed very worthwhile. “Come on, Laenei. Let’s go.” •

Behold a White Horse

by Turnip Smith

Jimmy remembered the long bad time that his Mom lay on the four poster, unable to move. “Now listen to me, Jimmy,” she had said feverishly. “I want you to read Revelations. When I’m gone, look to the sky for a sign.”

“What sign, Ma?”

“Darkening in the morning. Green haze. A storm.” She gave him her Bible with scribblings in the margins, marked to a passage in Revelations. “I saw the heavens open and behold a white horse, and he that sat upon it was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.” That was her way - always on the edge, a little strange.

Jimmy wished his real father hadn’t gone off and left the family with a second-rate stepfather. His real dad would have known what to do. His real father - he remembered he’d had a blue circular scar on his chest. Puzzled by his mother’s ramblings, Jimmy tucked the Bible away in his saddlebag, showed it to no one, and eventually forgot about it. Three days later his mother was gasping for breath. She died the next day. Burt, his step-father, came out on the porch and told Jimmy to stop his caterwauling and get over it. Then he and Burt dug a grave in the sandy loam near the edge of the tree line. As Jimmy and his sisters mumbled a hasty prayer, they buried her under circling crows, thirty yards down-wind of the well.

Despite his dislike of Burt, Jimmy still hung around for the next year. Somebody had to look after the girls. Jeanie was only nine and Karen Ann was just seven. Then one day Burt rode into Beaumont and came back with a new woman. She



was a hard type and there was no chance Jimmy would call her Mom. He stuck around a few more weeks, then on his fifteenth birthday, before the first shave of his rusty beard, he lit out for town.

Deacon was standing belly up to the bar when Jimmy walked into the Dead Horse Saloon. Jimmy had never seen anyone quite like him before. Dressed all in black, his ivory handled six shooter strapped to his right thigh, he wore an obsidian medallion with a glittering scarlet center like an occluded moon. The slash of black mustache and patch over one gray eye made him look sinister.

“I hate to bother you, Mister,” Jimmy said, tapping Deacon’s shoulder from behind.

The big man swung around gunslinger slow and easy with all the confidence in the world. "Maybe you won't bother me, Red, but if you do, I'll let you know." He looked Jimmy up and down, his one gray eye registering everything.

"Sorry, Mister. I just need a job bad and this guy Royce, out front, he told me you might be needing trailhands."

"I don't usually hire school boys," Deacon said, his gray eye flickering with amusement.

"I'm fifteen," Jimmy said stoutly, "and I can handle a horse and a rope."

"That so?" Deacon said. "Well, our last wrangler had to handle sixty horses at a time. You up to that, brother? And what about a gun?" He flipped a silver dollar in the air. It bounced once and died.

Deacon nodded towards the coin. "Throw it up, kid."

Jimmy picked up the coin and gave it a little flip. Before he could register it, Deacon's revolver had cleared the holster and slammed a hole in the coin. Jimmy picked up the dollar and stared at the dead-center hole wonderingly. "Wow!" he said.

"You still want a job, come and see me tomorrow morning at the hotel," Deacon said. "Room six, five thirty a.m."

"Yes sir," Jimmy said. That night he took out his mom's Bible and studied it. The mysterious markings were clustered in the last chapter, Revelations. The passage about Beast 666 was underscored twice and his mother's precise little hand had written "Beware."

When Jimmy got to the hotel the next morning, the mysterious medallion still gleamed at Deacon's neck. He was wearing a black silk shirt and sipping a glass of thick dark brew.

"You sure you want to do this, kid? The herd's a mess now. Thousands of them crashed into barb wire and crushed each other in last winter's snow. Died like flies. What's left are mean, hard, and crazy."

Jimmy studied Deacon's strange face.

"Your job will be keeping fresh horses for the cow-boys. There's six busters so you'll have sixty ponies to look after. That's three sixes - lucky number, pal. If you need a gun, I'll lend you one till we get to Abilene. It's a man's work. If you're scared, the best time to go home is now because there's blood out on the trail. No place for a baby."

"I ain't scared," Jimmy said.

"I like your grit, son," Deacon said, taking a drink. He went on to explain that there was a herd of 600 hundred market-ready steers ready to be driven from Texas City up the back Chisolm to Kansas. Branding the strays would take the first part of spring and the drive itself might take the better part of the summer. It paid a hundred dollars - beef delivered - at Abilene. Excited, Jimmy signed on.

The April round up started the next day and was three weeks of bawling calves, scorched beef-flesh, freezing nights, driving rain, and the promise of the big drive in May.

Jimmy learned a lot from Cookie, the aging ex-slave who'd come west out of Mississippi after the war to try the free life on the range. Sometimes Jimmy would help Cookie throw together the evening meal.

"Somepun' wrong this time," Cookie muttered, beating the biscuit dough stiff.

"What're you talking about, Cookie?"

"I'se got this here feeling and it ain't arthritis and it ain't the toothache and it ain't the weather. Feeling deep in the bone. Somepun' bad going to happen this drive."

"Like what, Cookie?"

"The Deacon, he's too crazy, you ast me. Hates the Injuns. Hates the farmers. Hates everything. You ever notice that thingamajog he got around his neck? Devil thing, I reckon."

"Ah, it's nothing," Jimmy said.

"Uh huh? Then why he drink that blood and sleep in a box in the back of the wagon?"

"What blood?"

"Look here." Cookie hauled out a jar of black fluid. "You know what they calls a man that drinks blood. A vampire. That's what."

"How do you know it's blood?"

"Who you think squoze it, boy? No sir, this here don't look like a no good drive to me."

When Cookie finished speaking, a big mangy shepherd dog came out of nowhere and started nosing against Jimmy's leg. Jimmy reached down and patted the big dog's head. It was nice having a friend.

"Looks like you got you a partner," Cookie said. "Here, give the old boy some blood."

"Ah, he don't want any of that stuff," Jimmy said. "Pour it out."

"No sir. Mr. Deacon, he be mad I do. Go on and give it the dog."

Strangely, Jimmy wanted to taste the stuff, but he fed it to the dog. The long drive pushed off the next morning at dawn. Whistling, shouting, and shooting in the air, the cowboys sent the herd plunging north in a stampede of flying dust and excited bawling. The idea was to run their fool legs off for two days until they settled into a docile, trotting group that would be tired enough to lie down at night. Jimmy's big dog rode in the chuck wagon with Cookie.

Jimmy kept the shepherd dog fed and watered, and bedded down next to him each night. When things settled after the initial scramble, Jimmy hustled the remuda and eased up beside Deacon to ask a question.

"I don't mean to pry or nothing, Mr. Deacon, but what happened to your bad eye?"

Deacon glanced at Jimmy with an amused look on his face. "Well I'll tell you, kid, it was like this. There was this poker game in Austin. Six of us round a table, stakes getting high. I was playing red hot when this Indian sitting across from me mumbled something about cheating. He drew on me before I even thought about my gun. His shot took me right in the eye. They didn't even bother to bury the Indian after I drilled him, just rolled him out in the street for the buzzards."

“You hate Indians now?”

“Hate makes you crazy, kid. But I’ll tell you this, there’s nothing in the world worse than Indian blood. As far as I’m concerned, they ought to be exterminated.”

Then Deacon lapsed into the brooding silence and wall of reserve that he usually kept between himself and the men. Jimmy finally felt uncomfortable and rode on ahead. As he began to ride off, Deacon called to him. “One other thing, kid. Watch that Royce. He’s a back shooter.”

Jimmy nodded, trying to understand why Deacon thought badly of Royce. Royce seemed as nice as the rest of the cowboys. That night Jimmy bedded down next to Royce and his saddle roll.

“Royce,” Jimmy said. “What do you think of Mr. Deacon?”

Royce laughed a whiskey laugh. “Mr. Deacon? Hey, I reckon he’s OK for a crazy sonofabitch. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering.”

“You know he got struck by lightning, don’t you?” Royce said. “I was right there when it happened. Knocked him out for five minutes. When he got back up he was OK, but strange. Different you might say. Some would say crazy. You ever see a man drink blood?”

“What?” Jimmy said.

“You heard me the first time. Well stick around. You work for Deacon long enough, you’ll see a man drink blood.”

“Ah,” Jimmy said. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“Wait and see, pardner.”

After a long round of staring at the stars, Jimmy noticed Royce was breathing rhythmically. He found himself staring at Royce’s throat without really knowing why. He finally drifted into uneasy sleep as scudding clouds raced the moon across the sky. He dreamed someone was drinking blood and woke screaming. His toe was on fire. When he looked down, his sock was covered with blood.

Royce popped out of his roll like he was shot. “What’s the deal, Red? Jesus, what’s going on?”

“Look at my foot, Royce. Something’s been chewing on my big toe.”

“Bats, big boy. You better learn to sleep with your boots on when you’re riding with Deacon. Damn, my neck feels strange!”

The next afternoon, Jimmy’s dog got stepped on by one of the longhorns and developed a limp. Royce rode up behind Jimmy and pointed out the problem.

“Your dog’s got a broke leg, Red. Might as well just go ahead and shoot the bastard.”

“I can’t shoot him, Royce - he’s too nice. I ain’t got the heart,” Jimmy said.

“You a cowboy now or still a sissy? I’ll take care of it if you won’t.”

Royce raised his revolver and fired into the dog’s head. The crack of the shot was swallowed by the prairie as the herd skittered, nervoused, then held.

The dog tumbled and stopped breathing.

Jimmy slapped his saddle hilt hard. "You didn't have to do that, Royce. He was just a dog. He didn't hurt nobody."

"Shut up, Jimmy. Dog's have spooked many a herd. Anyways, I didn't like the color of his eyes." Royce spit a wad of chaw Jimmy's direction.

"Well, it ain't fair," Jimmy said.

"Who said anything about life being fair?" Royce shrugged as Deacon rode up.

Tall in the saddle, his storm-scud eye looking for trouble, Deacon reined in near Jimmy.

"Are you the damn fool that fired off a gun?" He asked, staring hard at Jimmy, who was staring at the medallion on his neck.

"No sir," Jimmy said, afraid to tell on Royce and afraid not to.

Deacon's eyes fastened on the dog with its guts blown out. "The fool that fired ought to have his head examined. A dog's a lucky thing on a ride. Now listen here, Jimmy. Bring that dog on up to my wagon and be quick about it."

After Jimmy threw the shattered carcass in Deacon's wagon, Royce said, "You know what he's going to do with the blood, don't you? I tell you he's crazier than a bedbug. I been riding with him for nine years and he don't get anything but worse each time out."

"Ah, he ain't going to drink the blood," Jimmy said, wondering how a fellow might fight a craving for blood.

"What the hell you think he wanted that mutt's carcass in his wagon for anyway?" Royce said. "You'll find out soon enough."

The next afternoon, it began to rain. Starting as a gentle summer drip, it worked its way up over night into a full fledged downpour. When the lightning began to crackle, the herd blew wide open. Jimmy and the busters were out of their rolls by the time the steers went loco. The lead steer ran west and the herd went barreling after until they reached a stream. Half the herd broke and ran south, two thousand pounds of rampaging beef with razor sharps horns. Out of control long-horns could tear you to pieces in a minute. Scared, Jimmy lagged behind the stampede, trying to keep the remuda under control. When the stampede ended, the cowboys would be ready for a fresh horses.

Meanwhile, Deacon was blazing. He was ten places at once on his black cutting pony. His lariat whirled and he braked one steer just in time for ten more to bust out. Jimmy saw him slide off his horse. "Watch out !" Jimmy shouted. But Deacon scrambled back on his pony like a man possessed. He and the cowboys managed to box the herd in a canyon as the rain continued to pound. The pacific sun came out the next morning and the herd milled, docilely stringing out towards Kansas again as if the last thing in their minds was stampede.

Deacon called a halt about ten o'clock. His fancy clothes were covered with muck and the flashing medallion was the only thing clean.

“Listen up, boys. We lost a hell of a lot of ground with that stampede last night. I say we take the loop through Indian country and see if we can’t make up the time.”

“I ain’t going up along those mountains with Cheyennes and a thousand skitty bullsteers,” Royce shouted.

“A man that’s afraid of a few redskins ain’t fit to ride,” Deacon said. “Go on back home if you’re chickenshit, Royce. What about you others?”

“Wait a minute, you saying I’m yellow?” Royce said.

Deacon stood arrow straight. “That’s what I said, Royce. If you don’t like it, you know what you can do.” He grabbed Royce by the collar.

Royce wrenched free, twisting off his horse, muttering, “OK, big man, let’s see what you’ve got.”

As Jimmy’s eyes bugged wide and his heart pounded, Royce and Deacon stood toe to toe in the middle of Texas, thumping each other. The sound of their fists splatting made Jimmy wince. The first few blows were a draw, but Royce slipped under a punch and laid Deacon backwards with a glancing right. Jimmy was scared, but Deacon came out of the crouch with an uppercut to Royce’s forehead.

“Damn!” Cookie shouted with excitement as Deacon bore in. A gleam of blood opened above Royce’s eyes and Jimmy gasped as Deacon saw the blood and seemed to go crazy. He stopped punching and went straight for Royce’s throat with both hands. His weight took Royce backwards to the ground. Then he dived on top, both hands squeezing Royce’s neck. Jimmy shuddered as the other cowboys waded in and stopped the slaughter.

The next day Royce was a black and blue mess as the men moved the herd west closer to the mountains. The day was warm and sticky and the steers thumped along heavily. Jimmy rode his pony up close behind Royce.

“Did he hit hard, Royce?”

“Damn straight, Red. But it’s that going for the throat part that scares me. He’s nuts, I tell you.”

“He didn’t mean nothing, Royce,” Jimmy said, pausing. “Royce, those Cheyenne, are they pretty mean?”

“After they kill you, they cut off all your moving parts, brother. Just don’t get yourself captured. Lots of people say Deacon himself was raised among them. That’s why they don’t scare him. Me, I just as soon stay clear of them.”

After the bacon and beans that night, forty billion stars came out. Cookie blew some tender notes on the harmonica. Jimmy couldn’t stop thinking about having all his moving parts cut off by Cheyenne and was having a hard time sleeping. He was thinking of bats too when a whoop came out of the east.

The Indians charged hard out of the mountains. Half of them stampeded the herd and the other half barreled in on the cowboys. Several shots and arrows whistled by Jimmy as he knelt and tried to hide. To his amazement, he saw Deacon standing up, grinning and blazing away with a rifle, heedless of safety. Jimmy took aim at a red man. It was the first time he’d fired a shot in anger at another human being, and for a minute he thought he could hear his Momma saying “No, Jimmy, no.” His bullet missed.

The Cheyenne made one pass through the encampment and then came back from the other side. In the darkness,

Jimmy could smell his own fear as the Indians came screaming back. Deacon was up, roaring and running again. He grabbed one brave and tumbled him off his pinto, then began to cleave his scalp with a hatchet. He was down on one knee close to the Indian's throat when he suddenly wheeled with his rifle and nailed two more warriors riding in with their lances.

Abruptly, the Indians were gone, as swiftly as they had attacked. Smitty and Cookie lay dead on the ground and the herd was gone for good.

Deacon climbed back in the saddle. The sky was silver behind him. His eyes glowed with maniacal fury. "Now listen to me, you s.o.b.s.. Forget the drive. These bastards have asked for it. We're going after them and we're going to exterminate them. You men hear me? This is our country and we mean to hold it. We'll drink their blood if we have to."

Jimmy shivered as no one answered him.

"Why the hell didn't we try to run down the herd, Red?" Royce said to Jimmy the next day. The tired horses were following the Indians' trail in the scrub sage. "I'll tell you why - because Deacon ain't right. There's something that ain't human about him. I'd just as soon deal with redskins."

"So what's your problem, Royce?" Deacon said, suddenly riding up behind.

"I ain't got no problem," Royce muttered. "I just ain't interested in having my cohoncs cut off by a bunch of crazy savages."

"You don't have to worry, Royce. If there's any scalping done, we're going to be the ones doing it." Deacon's eye glowed with gray fury. "We're going to eradicate the Cheyenne."

They posted a guard that night as they slept beside a creek, the wind blowing hard from the north. It was Jimmy's night for guard duty. He hadn't been on the perimeter much more than fifteen minutes when something hit him from the rear. Simultaneously, the Cheyenne exploded out of the darkness in full cry.

It was over within minutes. Royce had a lance in his back. Deacon must have been dead somewhere too. In fact, all the cowboys were gone except Jimmy, who watched in horror as the Cheyenne systematically hacked scalps off the dead men. When the butchery was done, the Indians tied Jimmy's hands behind his back and drove him along as a prisoner.

He'd been scared when the steers busted out, but this was different. Sweating all over, he listened to the Indians' guttural babble as they rode. Sooner or later he'd have to run for his life, but for the moment he'd have to play the waiting game. Only yesterday he'd been a kid, the biggest danger in his life one of Burt's temper fits. Ancient history!

His reverie ended when three braves came riding up at an angle. Behind them, a blindfolded Deacon sat erect on his white stallion, his hands lashed behind his back. Jimmy sighed in relief. A few minutes later, two braves hoisted Jimmy up behind Deacon onto the stallion.

"It's me, Deacon," Jimmy whispered as they jounced along, inhaling the strange smell of Indian. A harsh wind was blowing out of the north.

"How you doing, kid?"

"I'm scared, Deacon. Where they going to take us?"

"Back to their permanent village I figure."

“Why didn’t they kill us and get it over with?”

“Not enough fun for the blood suckers. They want to run us though the gauntlet.”

“The gauntlet?”

“Sure, they make two lines facing one another for 200 yards. Then they give you a chance to run down the middle. You make it through, you get to run for your life.”

“And if you don’t?”

“That’s the fun, you see. They beat you to death. A little more personal than a night raid on our camp.”

Jimmy sank into gloomy silence, trying not to think about having his brains beaten. Finally Deacon said, “Cheer up, kid. I made it through once before when they captured me. That’s why they want a second shot at me. The bastards! With you it’s the red hair - they think you’re special.”

“Deacon, why do they stink so bad?”

“Peyote, kid. They smoke dope to get hopped up for a raid. Without their dope, they’re nothing.”

“Deacon,” Jimmy said after a long silence. “You aren’t really a vampire, are you?”

The older man laughed out loud. “Who told you that crap - that stupid Royce? Hell, I’ve drunk some animal blood before. It’s good for you, but that don’t make me a vampire.”

“Well, have you ever been married?” Jimmy wondered, unsure why he asked.

“Yeah, to a woman who went crazy. She got Bible fever. All she talked about was Revelations. ‘I saw the heavens open and behold a white horse’ etc. Funny thing is, the heavens did open for me once. I got struck my lightning.”

Jimmy was so stunned by what Deacon said, he could hardly speak. “Did you and that woman have any kids?”

Deacon looked away. “I don’t know, kid. Maybe one. A redhead. I ain’t sure.”

Jimmy suddenly broke into tears. His father! Deacon was his father!

“Hey, don’t let ‘em see you weak, kid.” Deacon said. “They thrive on that.”

The Cheyenne camp lay at the foot of the mountains. They reached the village of forty tepees in late afternoon. Jimmy’s wrists ached from being lashed, but he felt strangely powerful with his new knowledge of his father.

When they got to the village, Deacon was taken one way, Jimmy the other. Three braves pushed Jimmy roughly into an empty tepee where he was forced to the ground, then staked down by rough cord at wrist and ankle. Twice that evening braves came and walked him for a few minutes to relieve himself, then he was re-staked.

The next morning, he heard a commotion in the village. Drums began beating at dawn and he heard Deacon shout as the Cheyenne hustled him out of the village. “Run towards the sun, kid. It’s your only chance.”

The drums finally stopped and frenzied shouts went up; the gauntlet was on. The uproar lasted twenty minutes and then there was eerie silence. Jimmy knew what it meant.

Now there was nothing left but fear. He wanted to at least die as bravely as his father had. His eyes traced the shadows of the sun moving along the ridge poles. A fat squaw brought him pemmican and a few beans that stuck in his dry mouth. He tried to think of his mother, Deacon, the beast 666, the Holy spirit, and sunny days wading in the creek with his sisters, but the picture of Cheyenne bashing brains crowded everything else out.

At last the sun died along the walls of the tepee and the long night began. Before dawn the drumming started again. They came for Jimmy at sun up. Four warriors in breech cloths, naked from the waist up slit his bindings, motioning for him to get up. They led him through the village where several dogs sniffed indifferently and ancient Indian women squatted, smoking silent pipes. The sun rose orange and uncertain opposite the mountains.

Jimmy shivered in the morning chill, walking slowly, trying to work the stiffness from two days spread-eagled on the ground out of his limbs.

“Never panic,” Deacon had told him on the ride there. “You can outsmart them; just stay alert. Use your powers. Don’t lose faith.”

At the end of the village Jimmy swallowed hard as he glimpsed hundred of braves on foot in feathered headdress. They lined up in two files that disappeared into the endless prairie. Each warrior bore a club, a lance, an axe, or a knife. The rhythm of the drumming increased. Then Jimmy saw it.

Deacon’s naked body had been severed into four sections, each section lashed to a cross. There on the chest Jimmy saw the strange blue circular scar. It was his father after all! Fighting back tears, he paused as one of his escorts punched him in the kidneys.

“Got to piss,” Jimmy said, pantomiming his need.

The braves nodded and Jimmy turned his back to the gauntlet, remembering Deacon’s warning to never panic.

The yellow liquid drummed lazily to the dry earth. Then a dark cloud cast Jimmy in shadows, and he ran.

His legs flew as never before. Behind him lay certain death and mutilation; before him a vast of expanse of dry ankle-high grass. The hair on his head tingled as axes and arrows and stones landed in his path. An arrow grazed his shoulder, jolting him to a stumble, but still he ran, the whoops of the savages wild in his ears.

There was no telling how long he scrambled. Though he had opened a gap between himself and his pursuers, he knew he would eventually have to stop, would have to drink, and then inevitably he would have to be tortured and die.

As he registered that thought, he noticed something strange hovering in the suddenly storm-darkened sky. It seemed to revolve lazily counter-clockwise, a sickly-green glow of shimmering metal keeping pace over his right shoulder.

Whatever it was gave off a muffled hum, smooth and deep. Then he saw something dead ahead.

“Holy Christ!” He shouted. Twenty yards in front of him, the huge craft, or whatever it was, loomed cylindrical and shiny with a lower bank of opaque green windows. As it hove closer, maybe ten feet off the ground, Jimmy could see a white horse emblem and a red, white, and blue flag painted on its lower fuselage. Suddenly the noise died and the thing drifted lazily into the tall grass, directly in Jimmy’s path.

Terrified, he looked back over his shoulder. The Cheyenne stopped in their tracks at the sight of the thing and formed a confused, yelping circle. Jimmy thought he might be making a terrible mistake, but he darted towards the craft as a loading ramp lowered, as smooth as honey. A man in a puffy gray uniform and a white helmet came down the ramp. The man took off his helmet to reveal a friendly, black face and a head of short-cropped hair.

“Hey you, kid,” he said. “Exactly where are we?”

“West Texas,” Jimmy shouted, trembling with excitement, glancing back at the Cheyenne, unsure if he should go forward.

“Texas you say? Well, what’s the date?”

“I ain’t sure. Late May 1882,” Jimmy said.

The man in the uniform had a perplexed look on his face.

“Who are you?” Jimmy said.

“U.S. military experimental flight out of Edwards Air Force Base, California, June 6th, 1966.”

Jimmy’s head was spinning. Flight? 1966? He remembered Revelations, “I saw the heavens open and behold a white horse, and he that sat upon it was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war.” Maybe his mom had seen this very thing.

“Listen, young man, I know this is pretty confusing, but my name is Captain Chuck Williams and I’m chief information officer for this craft. What’s apparently happened here is our saucer has entered a time warp that totally killed all our navigational instrumentation. We knew this baby of ours could generate Mach II, but what we didn’t know was how that would translate in time. You scared, pal?”

“Just of those Indians over there,” Jimmy said, gesturing toward them.

Williams laughed. “Don’t sweat the Indians, kid. They lost the war. Come on board. We’ll give you a lift someplace. Or if you’re interested, we’ll take you to 1966, if we can get this baby back on track.”

Jimmy staggered forward, bumping up the ramp of the huge aircraft, the gleaming instrumentation nearly blinding him as he whistled aloud and said, “Yes sir, Captain Williams. I surely would like a ride. What in the world do you call something like this, and do I have to stay in 1966 forever?” He thought it was desperately sad to leave Texas an orphan, but maybe in the future he would never ever again gaze longingly at the sweet smoothness of the human neck. •

Conqueror, Chronicles of the Realm

by Joe T. McCormack

Book 1, serialization 1

CHAPTER 1

US soldiers found their way out of the Chinook CH-47 which was a utility helicopter that flew by means of two large counter-rotating blades atop a long, somewhat tubular shaped body. The soldiers were here on engineering status: That of building roads and bridges in remote places the local government of Columbia deemed too expensive. But the US Government jumped on the chance. The politicians boasted that it was for improved relations between countries. But the military knew it was a basic training exercise which allowed these soldiers to become accustomed to an environment they might find themselves fighting in.

Boxes, green duffel bags, and equipment were hastily off loaded by the flight crew with help from the soldiers, as the long elephant grass whipped back and forth to the beating of the large, rotating blades overhead. The dense grey clouds indicated an approaching monsoon storm, and the flight crew had verified the approaching storm with local base personnel. They knew it would be only a matter of minutes before the storm reached their position and they would be grounded. With all of the soldiers working to off load the chopper, though, they were airborne scarcely a few minutes after they had landed.

Even as the soldiers cleared the small field and loaded their equipment on waiting trucks, two Blackhawk gunships landed in a staggered formation in the midst of the field, sending several of the grounded soldiers' hats flying into the jungle around them.

"Go! Go!" came the order from within the two gunships as twelve more soldiers jumped out of the choppers with large alicepacks and M-16 A2 rifles. Even with their sixty pound packs, these soldiers made running from the gunships to the waiting trucks seem like a walk in the park.

But for them, such a little dash was a trivial task as they were used to running miles at a time with such equipment, and unlike the soldiers from the United States, they were already acclimatized to the tropical environment of Columbia. The thick, hot, sticky air was just one of the things they were used to.

Stopping at the foot of the dirt road, Sgt. Quentin instinctively scanned the area around him with his close-set, beady, grey eyes set above bony cheeks and a hard jaw bone that had broken the hands of several short-tempered drunks in bar disputes. It was easy for most to underestimate the strength he possessed bound in a one-hundred-and-seventy-pound, six-foot frame, not noticeable in the jungle fatigues he wore. But his soldiers knew.

The field in which he stood was surrounded by dense jungle. He knew guerrillas or snipers could have their sites fixed on anybody without being noticed. He smirked and turned, waiting for his soldiers to gather around him and making sure they had all gotten off the gunships. Not that no one wouldn't have, but it was an old habit he had formed, having been in several missions and firefights with hostiles in different countries. He always had to know his platoon's numbers, what his platoon was capable of, and what each individual's strengths and weaknesses were.

A fuel truck rumbled by, and in a flurry of activity, began fueling the Blackhawks for their return flight to Howard AFB located in Panama.

Looking to his right he saw a military jeep roll onto the field some thirty meters away with the identification markings of A-143. A-143? Immediately he recalled A-143 was one of the vehicles that came to the port of Malaga on a naval transport ship.

Squinting at the soldier which he did not recognize, driving his vehicle, he wondered just how in the hell one of his vehicles was being operated by unauthorized personnel. A surge of energy exploded from within him as he strode towards the jeep, a frown growing deeper on his face with every step he took.

After he reached the jeep, he signaled for his troops to load onto the back. Then he focused his attention on the driver.

"What are you doing with my jeep, soldier?" he demanded, taking his boonie cap off. The sides and back of his head revealed just a hint of hair, while the top held a length of hair no longer than one quarter of an inch, shaped like a mohawk. Even though he'd been out of the intense combat schools like special forces, commando school and others, he had become accustomed to the trim and still wore it.

"Just here to pick up soldiers and take them to base camp, Sergeant," the young private replied nervously.

Climbing in the passenger's side, he said, "Well, let's go!"

"I was supposed to pick up soldiers from my unit," the private said quietly, not wanting to be on the receiving end of

any rage from the strange sergeant. But he had to tell him because he knew once he got to the base camp, his First Sergeant would chew him up and spit him out in little pieces if he didn't.

"Really?! Not anymore! This is my jeep, from my unit, and those are my soldiers in back!" Sergeant Quentin continued, eyes ablaze, "Now...drive my jeep to the base camp before you piss me off and I make your punk-ass walk!"

The Sergeant wanted to drill the private as to where he got the authorization to drive the jeep, but he decided not to. It was too early into the mission to be stepping on someone's toes.

Slowly, the private drove the jeep out of the field and through the small naval base which was primarily filled with officer's housing and several enlisted barracks. As Sergeant Quentin looked around identifying his surroundings, it seemed empty. A few hairs pricked up on the back of his neck and he wondered if the local people knew something was going to happen. It would not have been the first time that he was involved in an anti-American guerrilla attack. Out of habit, Sergeant Quentin put his hand around the pistol grip of his assault rifle.

Then the driver turned onto a long, winding gravel road that led into the deep green jungle.

"So this is Columbia," Sergeant Quentin mumbled to himself.

Just another mission.

* * *

It took Sergeant Quentin and his soldiers just three hours to initiate communications to the United States via satellite link-ups. Although they had been forced to set up their equipment on the edge of a low lying cliff just over two hundred meters from the main base camp, Sergeant Quentin didn't let his soldiers know how opposed he was to setting up in such a vulnerable location. He had no choice even though he openly voiced his disgust to Colonel Ratcliff at the 1800 operations meeting. And Colonel Ratcliff was a closed individual to anyone that was not assigned to his unit. Oh, he insured the safety of his soldiers with a compliment of Colombian regulars guarding the perimeter. But when it came to Sergeant Quentin and his soldiers' safety, well, it was a low priority. Colonel Ratcliff had viewed these soldiers as outsiders and a possible complication to his mission. Indeed, it was understandable that Sergeant Quentin's platoon could be a complication because guerrillas and other anti-American factions had targeted large high- tech satellite equipment and anything that looked...well, threatening. Even though Colonel Ratcliff had said nothing and forced Sergeant Quentin to set up his platoon on the cliff away from the main base camp, Sergeant Quentin knew why. And that was what made him so upset. Sergeant Quentin knew that if their was an attack, his platoon would have no where to retreat. Except for scaling off the side of the cliff.

After completing some final checks of his equipment, Sergeant Quentin opened the heavy hatch door to his van and peered out into the darkness outside. He sighed, wondering how this mission would turn out. Then he saw a shadow milling around one of his electric generator sets which supplied power to his equipment. With the keen reflexes of a cat pouncing on a rat, Sergeant Quentin grabbed his 9mm pistol and squinted into the darkness trying to identify the shadow.

"Hey! Who's that?" Sergeant Quentin yelled out above the hum of the diesel generator.

A figure stepped out from behind the generator, his large muscular arms hanging at his sides with spots of black oil, his chest stretching the brown T-shirt he wore. Adjusting the belt that held his camouflaged pants tucked into his black boots, he walked up to the van, ignoring the gun Sergeant Quentin was holding.

"What's up?" he asked.

Recognizing the figure as Specialist McCormack, Sergeant Quentin put down his pistol and said, "Just wondered who was out there."

Although Specialist McCormack, or Mac as he was referred to, was from Bravo company and not Alpha company where Sergeant Quentin was assigned, he knew a great deal about him. Some stories which floated about said Mac had the tendency of walking up to wild snakes and catching them...with his hands. Snakes like the highly poisonous bushmaster and firdalance. He had also heard that Mac



could lift a generator by himself, holding the engine side while three others would hold up the other side and move it. Some would say doing such things was crazy. Perhaps. But Mac was the type of person Sergeant Quentin would want to have beside him in a firefight. He was highly attentive to detail, incredibly fast and durable for his six-foot-two-inch frame that packed two hundred and thirty pounds of weight. The M-60 machine gun was his preferred weapon although he was an expert shot with anything that fell into his hands. And, unlike anyone he'd been around, Sergeant Quentin also found out he was a strategist. Before this mission, Sergeant Quentin had challenged him and a few friends to a few games: like Risk, Axis and Allies, among others. If Mac was working against him, things were always bleak. But when Mac worked with Sergeant Quentin against any others who played, and it didn't matter who, they would always win. Sergeant Quentin recalled one night playing cards with seven players including Mac for quarters. Sergeant Quentin didn't know how he did it, but Mac on his last few quarters managed to end up winning the game, and the rest of the night taking over fifty dollars from everyone. Mac said he'd never played the game before, but Sergeant Quentin doubted that.

Aside from the stories, he knew Mac was a regular at the gym and the country and western bars. And the thing of it was, he could dance. Line dance. Two step. And, of course, drink.

"Mind if I come in?" a soldier in grey shorts and a matching T-shirt asked as he stepped beside Mac.

"Sure Gladstad," Sergeant Quentin grunted, not particularly pleased with seeing him.

He really didn't know much about Gladstad. Just that he was a C&E guy who was here to fix any communications

equipment that might malfunction. And he was relatively new to the army and being only nineteen, he had not received much training except for basic.

Another private.

"Kind of boring around here, isn't it? I mean since we can't leave the base camp," Gladstad pushed a hand through his short, fluffy brown hair.

"Sure is," Sergeant Quentin said, not impressed with Gladstad's feeble attempt at making conversation.

"Well, I have an idea since we're going to be stuck here. How 'bout some D&D?" Mac suggested, standing outside the van.

"You know, years ago I used to be a dungeon master," Sergeant Quentin said, already interested in playing a campaign to pass the time.

Gladstad asked, "What's D&D?"

Sighing, Sergeant Quentin explained, "It's a game, as if you were an actor in show-biz. You assume the roll of a character, and play as that character throughout the game, or campaign, as players would call it."

"Oh. So, how do you play?" Gladstad said, trying to be open-minded.

Sergeant Quentin briefly explained all the little details to Gladstad as Mac retrieved some dice and manuals. He didn't expect Gladstad to remember everything. Nobody ever did.

It didn't take Mac more than a few minutes to borrow all the necessary items for conducting a campaign from a soldier he had noticed earlier, playing with a few of his friends. Mac had vowed to insure that his things would not get damaged as one dungeon master to another. Some people take lending out manuals and dice rather seriously. Mac had seen a fight in Panama because someone had damaged his friends' manuals and had lost one of the dice. But that in itself is another story.

Walking around the brick buildings that had tin roofs, following a rough cement walkway, Mac headed back to the satellite site. Crossing a large, empty cement slab that was large enough for assembling an entire company formation, he smiled at just how quickly he was able to put a campaign together.

By the time he followed a gravel road for some fifty meters and entered the site, Mac had memorized all the characters that would be in his campaign to include giants, people, elves, animals and other life. Even as he walked to the rear of the camouflaged van, the terrain of his campaign seemed to come into focus...almost as if he were actually there. He envisioned massive ice-capped mountains with dragons, lush green forests, and barren wastelands that seemed to span the horizon. A faint shiver went down his spine as he felt the warm summer sun overhead and a gentle breeze glide past him from this other land.

Frowning, Mac looked up into the night sky and the darkness around him shaking his head. Realizing that it apparently was his imagination, Mac smiled and reached for the hatch door on the van.

"Hey, Mac!" a soldier called out, startling him.

Mac spun around and saw Specialist Schwartz walking up to him. Mac knew something was up from the grin on his face. It usually meant that Schwartz wanted something. Mac almost knew what it was before he asked, but he remained quiet anyway.

"Hey, Mac, buddy ol' pal...how are you doing?" Schwartz said with that big grin.

"Oh, not much. Just about ready to play a campaign," Mac said showing him the manuals.

"Ahh, well have fun. God knows we have to do something around here to keep busy," Schwartz grinned, putting his hand on Mac's shoulder.

"Yeah, I plan on it. I've got a few guys inside who want to play a round," Mac said.

Placing his hands on his hips, Schwartz finally asked, "So you mind if I have a dip?"

Being room-mates with Schwartz in Panama, Mac couldn't refuse and handed him a can of snuff.

Eagerly taking it, Schwartz shook it lightly and said, "Full can, eh?"

"Yep. I always come prepared," Mac remarked as Schwartz took out a pinch, put it in his lip and pushed it around with his tongue.

Handing the can back to Mac, Schwartz said, "Well, come by after you're done playing, eh?"

"Sure," Mac said evenly as he turned and opened the hatch door and entered the van.

"Well, check your feedback loop," Sergeant Quentin was saying into the black handset. "Yeah. Okay. Out."

Sergeant Quentin sighed as he put down the handset and said, "Some people. You have to wonder just where people's brains go to."

"Well, I got all the stuff we need," Mac said as he sat down in an available spot next to the emergency battery box.

"Good, good. Let's get the characters rolled up," Sergeant Quentin smiled as he got out some paper and a pen and began rolling the dice on the small, metal desk before them.

"So, what are you doing now?" Gladstad asked, his little, grey eyes peering at the dice and to the papers Sergeant Quentin was writing on.

"Rolling up what your character's strengths and follies will be," he responded, not looking up.

After a few minutes, Sergeant Quentin finished the papers and handed them to Mac to look at. Skimming their contents, Mac smiled and handed one to Sergeant Quentin and the other to Gladstad. Gladstad looked at the paper with a puzzled look on his face, trying to understand all the different numbers.

"Okay, this is what my campaign is about," Mac began as he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "You

two are to save the pure magic of the Realm. You see, even as you travel through the Realm, the Baron is trying to destroy the pure magic so that he can rule the Realm under his evil hand. Throughout the Realm, you will find magical items that you will have to use to defeat him."

A silence filled the cabin until Gladstad said, "And? Is that it? Aren't you going to say anything else?"

Sergeant Quentin squeezed his lips together and looked at the ceiling of the cabin trying to remind himself that Gladstad had never played before. "He does not have to tell us anything else. As we play the game, we'll find out everything else we need to know by exploring, talking to enchanted trees, farmers, or whatever."

"Oh," Gladstad said.

Standing up and opening the hatch, Mac said, "Well, I hate to go, but I said I'd go over and bullshit awhile with Schwartz. Tomorrow we'll start the campaign."

"Okay," Sergeant Quentin said as he watched Mac leave the van.

After the hatch closed, Gladstad handed Sergeant Quentin his paper and said, "I don't know if I can play. I mean, all that stuff on the paper looks pretty hard. And I don't think I could act like someone else."

"Look, Gladstad," Sergeant Quentin began, trying to keep Gladstad interested in playing, "everyone has problems with all the stats on the paper. I did. Old McCormack did when he started out. And you're no different. We'll help you out on rolling dice, and all that. So don't worry about it.

Once you start playing and get the hang of it, you'll like the game a lot more. Okay?"

A grin grew on Gladstad's unsure face as he got up and said, "Well, okay."

Opening the hatch, Gladstad turned and said, "I'm going to go to bed. See you later."

"Yeah," Sergeant Quentin grunted in response as he smelled a peculiar odor coming from outside.

"Hey, you smell that?" Sergeant Quentin asked Gladstad who exited the van.

"Yes, it smells like something is burning," Gladstad responded looking around in the darkness.

Stepping out of the van, Sergeant Quentin headed for the running generator, thinking that some of the wires might be shorted out. After doing a quick examination of the generator, he found nothing wrong. But he was not a generator mechanic.

"It doesn't look like the generator is malfunctioning," Sergeant Quentin said finally as he even went over and checked the grounding rod that was attached to the generator frame by a thick, braided copper wire.

"What do you think it is?" Gladstad asked.

"I don't know," he said as he looked around trying to find the trail of the strange odor with his nose.

"What's going on?!"

"What the hell?" Sergeant Quentin whispered as he turned and looked at Gladstad, mystified at what he was seeing. The private looked about him wildly, as thin streaks of lightning danced around his body. "Gladstad!" Sergeant Quentin bellowed out just as Gladstad disappeared in a brilliant flash of light.

Not more than an instant later, blue lightning bolts surrounded Sergeant Quentin. He tried to run, but he disappeared in mid-step in another brilliant flash of light.

"Did you hear something?" Mac asked Schwartz who was dealing out another hand of spades.

"No," Schwartz said disgruntled. He'd already lost two hands.

Mac got up and peered out of the green A-frame tent which was not more than fifty meters from the van. After looking around to no avail, Mac turned and sat back down in front of the foot locker and picked up his cards. Schwartz had a smile on his face. He knew he'd win this hand.

CHAPTER TWO

A faint warm breeze blew across Sergeant Quentin's limp form as he gained consciousness. Although his temples throbbed with pain, he forced his eyes open to be blinded by the sun almost directly overhead.

"Damn! What happened?" he groaned as he looked away from the sun, noticing Gladstad's body sprawled out a few feet from him.

Reaching over, he shook Gladstad by the shoulder until he woke up.

"Where are we?" Gladstad asked, sitting up on the short green grass that surrounded them.

"I have no idea," Sergeant Quentin replied, getting to his feet slowly.

He noted he was on a hilltop which bore one tree almost six feet wide and some twenty feet tall. Surrounding the hill was a vast expanse of forest that reached beyond the horizon. Pulling out his compass, he gauged the sun's position and found it was moving towards the west.

Looking at his watch he noticed that it read 2200 hours. 2200 hours?

He grunted in disbelief. "Damn watch," he mumbled as he took it off and examined it for cracks or anything else which might cause it to be malfunctioning.

"What's wrong?" Gladstad asked as he got up and looked at the watch Sergeant Quentin was holding.

"I don't know. The batteries must be low," he replied as he stuffed the watch in his camouflaged pants pocket. Then he noticed his green carrying bag and a two foot long machete piled up against the tree.

"How did that get there?" Sergeant Quentin asked as he walked over to the tree.

"I don't know," Gladstad said, squinting at the bag.

Opening it, Sergeant Quentin began to search the contents. Aspirin, knife sharpening kit, two-quart canteen,

one-quart, leather, water flask, first-aid pack, two dehydrated meals and a survival knife.

"It's complete," Sergeant Quentin mumbled to himself, wondering why the bag was here, and more importantly, why they were here.

"What?" Gladstad asked, seemingly frustrated.

"My bag, nothing is missing."

"That's great. We're out here in the middle of nowhere and you're worried about your bag. What are we suppose to do about food until we can get back to the base camp?" Gladstad asked, finding a single-edged ax, two-quart canteen, and a flashlight beside him he didn't see before. But it wasn't there before.

"Hunt for it. But until we can find out exactly where we're at, it always good sense to know what you have to work with," Sergeant Quentin replied, wondering if the other guy was playing stupid, or if he had forgotten all of his basic military training.

Well, that was possible.

"What are we doing here anyway?" Gladstad finally said.

Sergeant Quentin thought for a moment and said, "I don't know. Maybe it's someone's idea of a joke. Perhaps the water was tainted at the base camp and one of the guerrilla factions is playing games with us before they decide to kill us."

"Okay, but what about that blue electricity that was all over me?" Gladstad pointed out.

"Look, I don't have the answers. Let's just worry about getting out of here for now," Sergeant Quentin said as he zipped his green bag shut.

As Sergeant Quentin got to his feet he felt something sharp latch onto his leg. Gladstad yelled, "Snake!"

Grabbing his machete, Sergeant Quentin fell away from the black snake which was recoiling for another attack. Gladstad ran up to the snake and swung at it with his ax, but missed, hitting the tree instead.

The snake, seeing more prey, focused its red eyes on Gladstad as it slithered its six-foot long body towards him with blinding speed. Gladstad managed to retreat a few steps before he fell over on his back. The ax slipped from his grasp.



Seeing the snake recoil, Sergeant Quentin sprang at it, and with a desperate swing of his machete severed its head. The body of the snake twisted and coiled up with spasms before it collapsed onto the grassy earth, thick black blood oozing out of its neck.

Gladstad shuffled to his feet and said, "Man, that was close!"

Beginning to feel light-headed, Sergeant Quentin knew it was only a matter of minutes before the venom would cause him to lose consciousness and maybe even die, depending on his body's ability to immobilize the hemotoxin and expel it.

Sergeant Quentin limped over to the tree and sat down heavily beside it as he tore a long strip of brown cloth off his T-shirt, and tied it under his knee. Then he pulled out a small knife from his pocket and tore into his pants, exposing the bite wound.

"Hey, are you going to be okay?" Gladstad asked, frowning at the wound on Sergeant Quentin's leg.

"Don't worry about it," he replied barely above a whisper. He didn't trust his life in the hands of an obviously inexperienced soldier who was barely nineteen years old. Sergeant Quentin knew he would have to do this himself.

'Have to stay calm.', he thought, his eyelids becoming heavier with each passing moment.

Exhaling, he made one cross mark above and below the bite wound wincing at the pain of the cold metallic knife slicing into his flesh. Slowly, he began sucking his blood out off the cross marks and, he hoped, venom.

"Damn, Metsys!" Lord Doefloct spat angrily, grasping his long wooden staff that held two, blue glowing horns of a wild magic dragon.

The smell of ancient books and parchment filled the stone wall study in which he stood, thinking about what he should do next. Burning torches hung along the walls, their flames dancing back and forth.

Lord Doefloct couldn't believe that Metsys would be able to summon humans from the land of the wild magic to the Realm. Foolishly, he had assumed the staff he held, the Staff of Majii, filled with the wild magic, would be the only tool for summoning humans from the other land. And, once again, that human wizard had done something he was not prepared for. Lord Doefloct didn't appreciate such unexpected moves from Metsys. Such moves were the only reason that the Realm had not fallen into Lord Doefloct's grasp.

Looking at the staff, he remembered that it took him twenty years to wrest it from Chief Isotor in mortal combat which had spanned the world. Through repeated confrontations with Chief Isotor, Lord Doefloct soon learned that the Staff of Majii could only be used if a creature was in human form. And that explained why Chief Isotor, Chief of the Guardians of the white magic and a silver dragon, was always in his human form. During their final battle, he used this to his advantage. Knowing that Chief Isotor could not change into his dragon form for additional protection from attack and had to depend on the Staff of Majii, Lord Doefloct commanded wave after wave of green dragons against the Chief. Over forty of the dragons ended up dead before he was able to overpower the exhausted Chief and win the Staff of Majii from him.

After gaining possession of the Staff, Lord Doefloct gave the Chief's white cape to the surviving dragons as a trophy. Then, using the wild magic in the Staff, he smote Chief Isotor's body in a deep blue, cold-fire. A fire which consumed him slowly...painfully. Not like a red hot fire that, by far was one dimensional which derived its power from heat. But a fire that sought power in the pain and agony of the very soul. A fire that slashed, tore, and squeezed at every ebb of Chief Isotor's soul.

But Lord Doefloct was not happy with that. He wanted his long time foe to suffer an even worse fate.

"It would be too good a thing for you to ascend to the gods Isotor. Behold, I give you new life!" Lord Doefloct proclaimed, raising the Staff of Majii over his head.

A huge beast formed out of the blue fire over twelve feet tall, its muscular, black leathery body radiating a faint blue haze. It had a long tail like a lizard, the legs of a mighty lion, and long arms of a man but claws of a dragon in place of hands. Its head was comprised mostly of a large mouth with rows upon rows of sharp, arrowhead shaped teeth. And above its small red eyes sat two long white horns which pointed forward.

Faintly, Chief Isotor felt his soul being twisted, funneled into warmth and hardness. A mortal shell of some type. Struggling to see, he found Lord Doefloct standing before him and somewhat below him at the same time, holding the Staff of Majii.

As Lord Doefloct laughed, he knew his soul was trapped in the body of a beast that was once, long ago, responsible for destroying most of the life in the Realm. The Death Raiden.

"Metsys, Metsys," Lord Doefloct said to himself, peering into the cloudy crystal ball that sat on the desk before him, "What was the purpose of summoning two humans, ill-equipped at that to this world? Surely not to destroy me," Lord Doefloct scoffed.

Through the crystal ball he could see two figures on a hilltop. One was dressed in splotched clothing of green, brown, and black, while the other merely had a grey shirt and short pants. He could not foresee that these two had the capability of destroying him, but Lord Doefloct decided that they should not survive anyway.

Smiling wryly, Lord Doefloct whispered, "These weak one's shall meet my wrath and die slowly. Ever so slowly."

Turning around, he shook his long black hair behind his shoulders with a few jerks of his head as his black cape fluttered behind him. Then he lifted his dark sleeved arms over his head, the right clasping the Staff of Majii, and his eyes became fiery red.

"Death dogs which I command! Go forth and destroy the newcomers of a different land! Feast upon their bodies and chew on their bones until nothing is left!" he roared out.

Sergeant Quentin awoke staring into a crackling fire some four feet away, darkness surrounding him. After drinking a portion of water out of his two-quart canteen, he noticed Gladstad looking at him from across the fire.

"Why do you have a fire blazing on a hilltop?!" Sergeant Quentin spat, unsuccessfully trying to control his outrage.

"I thought it would help you with the snake bite. Keep you warm and all," Gladstad replied, taken aback by the Sergeant's sudden disgust.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Sergeant Quentin said, "No. What you are doing is telling anybody around us, 'Hey we are on that hill. Go ahead, shoot us.' Haven't you ever heard about tactical safeguards? You know...light discipline after dark?! You should know there are unfriendlies in this country that would jump at the chance of capturing or skinning a few stranded G.I.'s. We make easy targets Gladstad, especially with that fuckin' fire going! Now put that fire out."

Cursing himself for trying to be helpful, Gladstad overturned the earth under the fire with his ax.

CHAPTER THREE

"Wake up! Come on, we're getting off this hill," Sergeant Quentin ordered.

Gladstad got up almost immediately and realized that it was early morning. Scratching his head, he slowly collected the ax and flashlight from the ground and looked out into the horizon with sleepy eyes.

As Sergeant Quentin shot an azimuth east, he wondered how his bag could come up missing during the night. He wanted to accuse Gladstad outright, but he restrained himself. Sergeant Quentin knew that the journey ahead would be rough for the both of them and he did not need any complications. In the back of his mind he thought that perhaps the guerrillas had seen the fire during the night and were playing games with him by just taking the bag.

Nevertheless, he knew a US naval supply ship made regular passes along the coast line to the east, picking up and dropping off supplies. So all he would have to do was to reach the shoreline, and wait under concealment until he

could signal one of the ships. And evade the guerrillas...if that was possible.

He wondered if the guerrillas had already anticipated him to go east and had an ambush set up. Worse yet, he thought that the base camp could have been overtaken during the night which meant that no US ships would be traveling the coast line. All though he didn't want to admit it, if such a thing had been done, it was quite possible that himself and Gladstad would never be rescued.

Shutting out all of the outcomes he was drawing up in his mind, Sergeant Quentin decided their best plan would be to go east for now.

A few birds sang high in the trees around them, and Sergeant Quentin could hear a faint knocking sound from some unseen woodpecker.

Striding down the hill, followed closely by Gladstad, he entered the forest. Forest?

"Sergeant, how did we get in this forest?" Gladstad asked as he looked at the trees all around them.

"I don't really know. We must have been transported here," Sergeant Quentin said, shrugging his shoulders. He knew that their trek to the coast line would involve several days of traversing the mountains, but he didn't tell Gladstad that.

"But how? I don't see any roads," Gladstad asked, scanning the forest for a road of some type.

"I don't know. Probably by chopper," he replied, low.

Frowning, Gladstad asked, "Why? Why would anyone go through this much trouble? It would be much easier to just kill us."

That stopped Sergeant Quentin in his tracks.

Angrily he turned and faced Gladstad, "Look! I don't have any fucking answers about what the hell is going on! I would say someone is just toying with us. But until we're dead, I'm going to try my damndest to get to the eastern shore line and signal a US ship. Do you understand?!"

After Gladstad nodded, Sergeant Quentin continued walking and said, "Come on! Let's go!"

As they walked through the forest, Sergeant Quentin constantly scanned the forest around them for any signs of an attack. The eerie silence made his mind scream at him, trying to warn him of some unseen terror that was coming. He could feel something, but he couldn't figure out just what it was. But this feeling, he knew, was far different than any others he had gotten just before he had entered ambushes on other missions. It was just too quiet.



By mid-day they reached a clearing in the forest some four hundred meters wide and eight hundred meters long by Sergeant Quentin's estimates. A small, grassy hill lay in the clearing. A path was barely visible that traveled along the base of the hill from the north and turned east over the top of the hill.

Cautiously, he knelt down at the foot of the clearing, holding his machete loosely with his left hand.

"What do you think it is?" Gladstad whispered, walking up beside Sergeant Quentin, looking at the hill with curiosity.

"Shit! Get down fool!" Sergeant Quentin hissed. "I don't know. But I think it best if we avoid it."

Kneeling, Gladstad said, "Maybe we could find someone who could help us over there."

"And maybe we won't get shot if we enter that clearing. Maybe the guerrillas will just drive us back to the base camp and say they're sorry. Maybe I'll punch your lights out!" Sergeant Quentin said, wondering just how stupid Gladstad was. "No, we will continue going east."

"I was just..."

"Quiet!" Sergeant Quentin commanded, straining to hear that noise again.

It was a faint rustle of branches and leaves being disturbed.

Gladstad looked around, listening for any noise that Sergeant Quentin might have heard. Slowly he turned his head to Sergeant Quentin and raised his eyebrows, shrugging his shoulders.

The sounds became. Sergeant Quentin wasn't sure but he thought he heard rapid breathing and something overhead. But it was faint, and only at the right moments could he hear the noises.

"Come on! We're being followed!" Sergeant Quentin snapped, firmly grasping his machete as he turned about and began to run.

But before he could get more than a few steps, the pack of death dogs was upon them. The black dogs jumped and snapped viciously at the men, their red eyes glowing with deep-rooted fury and the overwhelming desire to kill. To rip them apart in their mighty jaws. To listen with pleasure, the agonizing screams of their prey. To taste their warm blood. To bathe in it. To rip into the chest of their victims and bite into their beating hearts.

Sergeant Quentin managed to slash a few of the black dogs before the pack overtook him, sending him to his back. Helpless. He felt dull pains shoot through his arms and legs as they were being bitten and shaken from side to side. Tugging and tearing at his flesh.

It glided through the sky, its wide wings catching the cool air, and pushing it down with rhythmic strokes. Those mighty wings kept the silver scaled body in the air, seemingly with little effort. Its tail occasionally moved back and forth giving balance to the body. Its large, deadly claws were curled up underneath the body still covered with the blood of its unfortunate prey. Its gold eyes, set in a large, scaly skull that held two leathery nostrils and a huge jaw bone that bore many razor sharp teeth, probed the forest below in search of more prey to satisfy its hunger.

Then it saw dogs, many dogs surrounding two human forms as it looked below with interest.

Swooping down, its fire glands began to grow, stretching its scaly chest. Within a fleeting moment, it had landed on the earth, its sheer weight causing its claws to sink into the ground several inches as if the earth were mud.

Opening its mouth, a tremendous, searing flame shot out. Everything that was within the path of the flame was almost instantly burned to ash. None of the death dogs attacked it. There were no dogs left. Then the towering dragon saw the two, bloodied human forms lying on the earth before it.

Steadily he felt himself weaken and become deathly cold as a gust of hot air passed over his limp form, feeling the earth around him shake. Then he no longer felt pain. He felt nothing. A black veil consumed his sight and he stopped breathing.

CHAPTER FOUR

A thin fog filled the cool, dark cave as the incense of rare herbs burned slowly and silently. A small flame nurtured heat into the gold, jeweled bowl that stood on three legs bearing the herbs. The walls of the cavern were not jagged and rough like one would expect cavern walls to be. Instead, the walls were virtually as sleek as glass; as if melted into a smooth, spherical shape.

Almost simultaneously, two figures began to stir from. As they breathed, a sweet aroma danced in their nostrils. It was an aroma that was sweeter than cinnamon. An aroma which seemed to give them more energy and life with every breath.

As the two figures got up from their straw-made beds, the fog vanished. But not out of the cave like smoke from a burning fire that would rise up and roll along the ceiling until it found its way out. Instead, this fog disappeared like someone with blurred vision squinting to bring everything into focus.

Then the small flame beneath the jeweled bowl flickered a few times and disappeared. The rare herbs stopped burning for lack of heat.

"What happened?" Sergeant Quentin said, glancing around the cave.

"Don't know. Just remember those wild dogs," Gladstad replied, thinking that they were dead and in heaven.

Both of them looked at their bodies for wounds. But they had none. Not even a scratch, except for the subtle reminder that their torn clothing bared.

"This is weird," Sergeant Quentin frowned, walking from the mouth of the cave into the sun outside.

Gladstad followed him, looking around the cavern.

Outside, a grassy hill was directly in front of him with a trail, perhaps a frequently used path, leading down from the top of the hill to the cave. On the left he could see the forest some two hundred meters away.

"Who's that?" Gladstad whispered as he motioned to the right.

A dark, bubbly plot of earth some twenty-feet by fifty-feet, lay next to the cave and stretched along the base of the

hill towards the forest. A vast assortment of flowers were anchored to the soft earth. Some were taller than others. Some with more softly textured green leaves or numbers of leaves than others swayed with the soft, gentle breeze. The blooming flowers displayed their colors proudly. Some were deep purple shaped like triangles with bloated edges. Some were bright red, shaped like a thorny ball, its thorns colored yellow. Still others were shaped like five pointed stars having light blue borders with white centers.

A woman bent over at the waist, her long white gown moving faintly around her legs, gently touched one of the flowers with her delicate hand. Carefully, she pulled it toward her a few inches and inhaled its sweet aroma as her long red hair fell over her shoulder like a rippling sheet of water.

Realizing she was being watched, she stood up and faced Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad. Her gown was parted sufficiently at the chest to emphasize her firm, soft, voluptuous breasts. Although her nipples were covered by the gown, the silky material nonetheless stretched, and molded around them snugly.

Her gold-colored eyes studied Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad as they all but slobbered on themselves gazing at her shapely body.

Swiftly gaining his composure, Sergeant Quentin asked, "How did we get here?"

"It seemed you needed help and I saw you there in the woods almost dead. The way you were all bruised up, I'd say you were attacked by a bear or a pack of dogs," she replied, holding a flower that was shaped like a five pointed star in her hand.

Looking to the forest, Sergeant Quentin said, "Yeah, we were attacked by dogs." Then looking at her soft face he asked, "How long have we been here?"

She glanced to the sky for a moment and said, "Four days."

Thoughts of the lurking guerrilla presence made Sergeant Quentin remember their plight, and his open and friendly attitude quickly vanished.

"You speak English very good. Where did you learn it?" Sergeant Quentin asked with probing eyes.

Frowning slightly, she said, "What is 'english'?"

"What is English? This is good. You're talking it right now! Tell me, where are the fuckin' guerrillas?!" Sergeant Quentin rumbled out, losing his patience.

Gladstad looked at him with wide eyes.

"I don't know. What are 'fuckin' guerillas?" she said innocently.

"Oh, fuckin' fuck. Where in the hell am I? A Martian planet?" Sergeant Quentin grumbled, continuing, "Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Angela. And you are not in hell. You're in the Northern Realm of the white magic. Hell lays beyond the Southern Wastelands of dark magic."

"Really? Magic, huh? Just tell me where the guerrillas are," Sergeant Quentin said sarcastically.

"I don't know where the guerrillas you talk about are."

"Oh shit. Do I look stupid?!" Sergeant Quentin barked out. "Okay, fine. Take me to your leader."

"I am a Chief," Angela said, straightening up slightly.

"Okay, Chief, take me to someone I can talk to. I'm tired of bullshitting around."

Somewhat offended by his lack of respect for a Chief, she glared at him momentarily. Then she dropped her eyes to the flower she held and remembered that these two were outsiders. "I see you don't believe me. He said you were outsiders," she said weakly.

"Well who is he?" Sergeant Quentin demanded.

Looking up, she said, "Lord Arackas, chief of the elven clan."

"Elven clan?" Gladstad mumbled to himself.

Sergeant Quentin smirked at Gladstad.

"Okay, how do we find this Lord Arackas?" Sergeant Quentin asked, determined not to be phased by her talk of magic, elves, and such nonsense.

"Just follow that trail north into the forest," Angela said, pointing to the trail that went over the top of the hill.

"Well, thanks for taking care of us for four days," Sergeant Quentin said coldly, walking towards the trail.

"I'm off to see the wizard," he joked to Gladstad, skipping once.

"Wait!" Angela called out as she followed them.

"I'm suppose to give this to you...in the event that you need my help," Angela said, handing the flower to Sergeant Quentin. "Just burn it and I will come."

As Sergeant Quentin took it, Gladstad asked, "What kind of help?"

"Well, if you get in trouble. Like with whatever had attacked you," Angela pointed out.

Stuffing the flower in one of the cargo pockets on his pants, Sergeant Quentin said, "Thanks."

He walked over the hill with Gladstad thinking just how strange everything that happened was. It was almost as if they were in a different world. But that couldn't be possible.

"This is like a fairy tale or something, isn't it? Wild dogs, magic, elves, and that flower power in your pocket," Gladstad commented, smiling.

"Look, I don't know what is going on here, but I'm going to find out," Sergeant Quentin said as they followed the winding trail into the forest.

'That little act could have been something to throw us off balance.' he thought to himself. "Just stay aware of your surroundings and don't think about fairy tales! If you let your mind drift you'll probably end up dead," Sergeant Quentin said.

Gladstad just looked at him blankly as they followed the trail. He didn't know what to think.

CHAPTER FIVE

Darkness had covered the forest. And still he waited.

The darkness of night didn't bother him as he could see almost as well by night with no moon as one could see during the day. Actually he felt quite comfortable in his surroundings. Occasionally he would sniff the air around him deeply to help him locate any strange scent. Easily he could identify prey two hundred paces away if the wind blew past him. But sometimes the wind was not so revealing. More often than not he reverted to his acute hearing to hear twigs break, and even the rustle of leaves from footfalls at one hundred paces. From that, he could estimate speed and the direction from which his prey traveled.

He was a hunter. And one of the best of his tribe.

This time, however, it was different. This time it wasn't a hunt.

Having heard some footfalls in the distance, he stood up from behind the tree he was concealed by. With his five foot tall frame, he could not see past a few bushes ahead of him. He squinted slightly while his black eyes danced around from the trees and bushes. But he didn't see anything. Then he smelled the scent of a human as the wind drifted past him from the east. But the scent was weak.

Again there were footfalls. This time they were closer. This time they were coming from the south. Had his nose tricked him?

Slowly, he turned his bony head which held long greyish white hair, trying to absorb any noise with his pointed ears. His instincts told him something was wrong.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

Whirling around, his eyes widened with surprise and astonishment as he froze to the rush of a six foot tall figure, bearing a short sword and clothing that looked like the very forest around him. His heart quickened and he began to reach for the dagger that hung from his waist but remembered that this was not a hunt. If it had been, he could have easily gutted his assailant as he had done to larger prey.

But it was not a hunt.

Then, from behind him, he felt two large hands grab his arms. He jerked slightly and realized that he could get away if he wanted to. His captor was not as strong as he.

His leather jerkins crackled quietly as he exhaled.

"Who are you?! What are you doing here?!" Sergeant Quentin heaved, momentarily breathless from the sudden burst of running.

"I'm Orlog," the little figure replied. "Now, tell your weak friend to release me."

Sergeant Quentin looked at him slyly, "Okay, but if you run, I'll cut your fuckin' head off!"

As Gladstad released Orlog, Sergeant Quentin asked, "Now what are you doing here?"

Shaking his arms, Orlog said, "Waiting for the outsiders...waiting for you."

Sergeant Quentin frowned and said, "For what?"

"Just to tell my lord of your approach to the tribe, and to warn the guards so you wouldn't get an arrow through your chest. You make big, easy targets you know," Orlog said, smiling broadly.

"Hey, look at his ears!" Gladstad exclaimed, pointing at Orlog's pointed ears.

"So what!" Orlog spat, glaring at Gladstad. He never did like people talking about his ears. Especially in the tribe just because he had larger ears than all the other male elves.

"Orlog, that is a cute make-up job. Tell me, what are you suppose to be? A leprechaun?" Sergeant Quentin smirked, noticing the long nose Orlog had as well.

"I'm an elf," Orlog said proudly.

Prodding Orlog forward, Sergeant Quentin said, "Well, my elf friend, take me to your lord."

"He's an elf?" Gladstad asked, amazed at seeing one for real.

"Don't believe it," Sergeant Quentin said sternly as he followed the elf at the point of his machete.

'I could easily destroy these two.', Orlog thought to himself. He didn't much appreciate being hounded at the point of a machete. Especially by two humans. 'One day I'll hunt

these two. Make them pay for this!' Orlog contemplated angrily.

As they walked north, Sergeant Quentin realized the trail that Angela had told them to follow was slowly veering off to the right before it twisted sharply north, vanishing from sight. "Hey Orlog! The trail goes east! What are you doing...leading us into a trap?" Sergeant Quentin pressed, pointing to the trail with his free hand.

"Do you think we would build a tribe next to a trail to invite thieves to follow so easily, or outsiders like yourself? The tribe is this way," Orlog said as he continued past some trees away from the trail.

They continued following the elf. A few leaves rustled and Sergeant Quentin looked around cautiously, expecting them to walk into a trap. Then he heard some distant chuckles.

"I don't like this," Gladstad whispered, realizing they were walking past elves that were appearing behind them from the surrounding trees and bushes.

"Will you shut up?" Sergeant Quentin mumbled in a low voice.

As they went through a line of large trees, each as wide as three men standing shoulder to shoulder, they found themselves in a village.

"They come!" a voice shouted outside.

Off in the distance, Gladstad caught a glimpse of a figure opening a door and peeking out at them.

"Please follow me to the hut we have prepared for you," Orlog said as he motioned them to follow.

"This is unreal," Gladstad said, looking around seeing all the elves walking about.

"Yeah, tell me about it," Sergeant Quentin said, beginning to believe that perhaps they were indeed in a different world.

He noticed that the males possessed all varieties of weapons for hunting, and some he supposed were for battle. The women and children stayed close to their wooden huts, staring at him and Gladstad as they passed.

After being ushered into a wooden hut that was small enough to force them to duck their heads, Orlog said, "Wait here. Food will be brought to you."

It was roomier inside the hut. The ceiling, supported at the center by a smooth log some ten inches in diameter, was about seven feet tall. A torch, one of the few he had seen in the village, hung burning from the log. A round table surrounded it, and large wooden chairs crackled under their weight.

She shut the door behind her and raced over to the large mirror. She combed her long, brown hair with a gold brush. She looked at her smooth face that was somewhat bony in the cheeks. Her lips were not too big, or too small. But just right to be pressed against another's, and sensitive enough to feel all the sensual pleasures of a long, deep, passionate kiss. Yes, her lips were as soft as clouds.

Her light green eyes strayed to her firm breasts that were pressed together from the green dress she wore. Oh,

how she desired a man's touch to cup them. To squeeze them. Ahh, to nurture them with his lips and warm, wet tongue. She yearned for the touch and the company of a male.

She was beautiful. And she knew it. Very beautiful for being eighteen, and only five foot four inches in height. But being the daughter of Lord Arackas, a very powerful wizard and lord of the elven clan, was difficult for her. Especially now that her physical desires had blossomed, and none would dare step forward to partake of them.

None of the male's in the clan would come near her for fear of her father's wrath. And, she hated him for that. Didn't he realize that she had wants and needs?

But things were different now. Two humans were present in the village not familiar with elven customs. She hoped her father would go easy on them, if he found them with her.

Putting the brush down on the table before her, she swept a portion of her brown hair over her left shoulder, partially covering one of her breasts. She knew tonight would be the night she would have pleasure with a male...even if he was human.

"What do you think of all this?" Gladstad asked with a smile.

Sergeant Quentin shrugged his shoulders, "I haven't got a clue."

Within a few minutes two elven females, one in a green dress and one in a brown, somewhat shorter dress, brought in two large platters with sliced bread, large portions of meat, and a wooden tankard.

After they set the platters on the table, Sergeant Quentin gazed at the food hungrily. His stomach churned at the smell of well done, wood-chip smoked meat. The subtle scent of the sliced, freshly-baked, dark brown bread filled his nostrils.

There were no forks, spoons, or even knives to eat with. But that was of no consequence to Sergeant Quentin as he grasped the juicy meat with both hands and began eating with haste. As he chewed on a mouthful of meat, its juices tumbled carelessly about. The meat itself seemed to melt in his mouth like snow.

As she sat the platter in front of Gladstad, she looked at him with her soft green eyes, smiling. He met her eyes uncontrollably as he felt a deep, passionate desire overtake him. Suddenly he wanted her. Nothing else mattered. Not food. Not sleep. Just raging desire. Desire for her he did not comprehend or try to stop.

Nodding her head, she motioned for Gladstad to follow her. Eagerly he pursued, smiling like a small child who had just gotten a new toy. He followed her out of the hut and into another wooden hut some hundred meters away.

After gently shutting the door behind him, she said, "Please, sit down."

Gladstad looked around briefly and found a bed covered with white sheets. He sat on it, and found it was quite soft.

"What's your name?" she inquired as she unbuttoned her dress, confident that her magic was working on him to do whatever she desired. And, she desired only one thing.

"I'm Gladstad. Umm, John," he mumbled, further enchanted by her beauty and the sweet smell of burning incense that hung in the air.

"My name is Karrie," she, pulling the dress off her body, feeling lustfully hot.

Gladstad looked upon her naked, shapely body with raging desire. He wanted to touch her long, flowing brown hair. Her shoulders. He wanted to feel her hard nipples pressed against his chest. He wanted to grip her slim buttocks in his hands. He yearned to grip her waist. He wanted to feel her warm body press to his. To feel her slender legs wrap around his. To feel the caress of her lips on his.

Effortlessly, he pulled off his T-shirt as she sat on top of him, straddling his hips between her legs. Oh, how warm he was. So firm. So hard.

Looking into his eyes she pushed him gently onto the bed and pulled his shorts down around his knees. Eagerly they embraced, each full of lust and the desire for the other's touch.

"Sorry about the food," Sergeant Quentin said as Gladstad entered the hut, realizing that in his frenzy, he'd eaten most of the food on both platters. Only a few pieces of bread remained.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I just want to sleep," Gladstad said after stretching out on the earth a few feet from the center log.

Gladstad smiled to himself. He had never felt so tranquil...so satisfied.

A thunderous explosion rang in their ears as they were wrenched from sleep. The smell of burnt wood filled their nostrils as Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad looked around, wondering where the hut that had surrounded them had gone to.

"Oh boy," Sergeant Quentin muttered to himself seeing an ornately dressed elf standing before them.

The elf was about five foot four inches tall, dressed in purple robes with a pure white beard that, like his hair, reached just past what most would guess as the waist line. He held a wooden staff equal to his height, and a female elf stood next to him wearing a green dress. Her head was down, as if she feared something.

A few elves peered around their huts, fearing what Lord Arackas might do in his rage.

"I am Lord Arackas! And this is my daughter Karrie. Tell me, which one of you mated with her out of the elven customs?!" he demanded, his deep black eyes blazing with madness.

"Oh man...you idiot. How could you be so stupid?" Sergeant Quentin mumbled to Gladstad as he shook his head in disbelief.

"I just..."

"Yeah, your peter piper took control, right?" Sergeant Quentin interjected roughly. He didn't know what that Lord Arackas was capable of and that made him nervous.

"Silence! You're the one?!" Lord Arackas bellowed out, glaring at Gladstad.

Gladstad stirred uneasily on the earth not knowing what to say or how to act.

Raising his staff, Lord Arackas conjured a simple spell of which he had thousands memorized. With a mighty thunder that echoed through the forest, an intense red, fiery ball appeared on the staff's end. Crackling sounds burst out from its center as a long, twisting red bolt of lightning reached out and wrapped itself around Gladstad's body. Then Lord Arackas effortlessly caused the lightning bolt to raise Gladstad some ten feet into the air.

"Oh shit," Sergeant Quentin whispered to himself, watching. His mind whirled with trying to think of ways to stop the mad elf, but he knew his combat training would not work here. Not against magic.

Sweat beaded off Gladstad's forehead as he felt the radiant power of the lightning bolt. Slowly he felt it tighten around him as he found himself gasping for breath. He tried to plead for his life, but only a weak slur made it past his straining lips.

Lord Arackas squinted his eyes together as he concentrated on the magical lightning bolt, causing it to tighten even more around Gladstad's straining body. He could only think of what the human had done to his daughter. And that intensified his mounting rage which soon to break.

Karrie, with crying eyes looked upon Gladstad with sorrow and pity. She had caused this. She knew that she should have been the one being punished. Not him. He was just an instrument of her pleasure.

With a trembling hand, Karrie reached out and touched her father's shoulder and pleaded, "Father...stop. Don't do this, it is not right. I...I made him do it."

Lord Arackas squinted even harder at Gladstad.

"Please, Father," Karrie whimpered desperately. She didn't want to see Gladstad die for something she had done.

Lord Arackas relaxed his eyes and took a deep, strained breath as he suddenly ceased the spell, almost with regret. Gladstad plunged to the earth with a thud as he gasped for breath.

Karrie smiled with deep thanks as Lord Arackas looked at her. He couldn't believe that his own daughter would do such a thing. He wanted to ask why, but knew that this was not the time.

With a sternness that none in the tribe had heard him speak, Lord Arackas said, "You shall marry my daughter. With the rings on both your fingers, you two are wedlocked for eternity. The rings can never be removed from this day forward!"

Magically, a gold ring appeared on each of their fingers.

Sergeant Quentin went over to Gladstad and helped him stand. He was thankful that Lord Arackas had not taken his rage out on Gladstad. Gladstad was just relieved to be alive.

"Look, I'm sorry for this," Sergeant Quentin told Lord Arackas.

Lord Arackas merely nodded his head in disgust and said, "I know that you two are the outsiders that Metsys talked of. Go see him at once."

"How do we get there?" Sergeant Quentin asked. He really didn't want to ask an angered elf such a question, but he had no choice. In D&D games he'd played, he'd seen the fate of friends' characters unravel before him with such a question. In the back of his mind, he feared the same thing might happen to him for real.

"Just travel north through the forest. When you reach a road, go east along it until you see a castle. Metsys will be there," Lord Arackas stated firmly.

Lord Arackas, not wanting to be in the presence of these two humans, wrapped a web of magical fibers around himself and Karrie and they disappeared.

"Why did you do that?" Sergeant Quentin asked harshly as they walked, quite fast, through the elven village.

Scratching his head, Gladstad replied, "I...I don't know. I just had this urge."

"Fuck. So when you get urges, you just go jump whatever is there?!" Sergeant Quentin retorted.

"It's hard to explain! It was like I was controlled," Gladstad retaliated, unable to really explain what he felt.

"Controlled my ass," Sergeant Quentin burst out as they entered the forest. •