

Special Feature:

Interview with Author Barth Anderson

By

Betsy Dornbusch

Barth Anderson is the author of *Patron Saint of Plagues*, a futuristic novel about a man-made virus that takes over Mexico City and the virus-hunter brought in to stop it. Barth's short works have appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Talebones*, *Strange Horizons*, as well as other magazines and anthologies. He's received several Honorable Mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and he won the Spectrum Award for Best Short Fiction in 2004. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife and two children.

We'll start with your books. There are so many intriguing details in *Patron Saint*: wetware wiring people to a government database, hotly disputed borders between the US and Mexico, religious/political conflict, not to mention the brutality of the disease itself. The protagonist, Henry David Stark, even has an interesting dialect. What statement, if any, were you trying to make about the real future with the combination of your fictional elements and characterization?

Thanks. It's meant to be a fun read, first and foremost, so I'm glad you found *Patron Saint* intriguing.

I guess, if there's a statement about the future it's in the inevitability of these monolithic cultures, like America and the Mexico of *Patron Saint*, being intensely vulnerable to nature.

When the story begins, virus hunter Henry David Stark has to solve a couple mysteries – on his grandfather's thriving and healthy farm, Stark is studying why a plant disease called “gold mold” never made an inroad there (gold mold is a disease that has raged through farm fields across America, bringing the U.S. economy to its knees). Soon after, a mysterious and devastating disease emerges in Mexico, an ascendant superpower thanks to a bold new technology called the *pilone*, and Stark is called in to tamp down the outbreak.

Patron Saint begins in post-Land Reform America, where the once monolithic ownership of farmland has been democratized, that is, it's been stripped from the few corporations that owned it and turned over to small, democratically run farming cooperatives. It's a decentralized, Jeffersonian America compared to ours, and the

hero, Henry David Stark, is a product of it, an old school, small D democrat. Then as I said, *Patron Saint* quickly changes scenes to Mexico, which has become, in many ways, what America is now, a comfy nest for global corporate economy. Corporations aren't in and of themselves evil, but they are elementally undemocratic, and the network of corporations that prop each other up creates in Mexico a kind of fascism that stands as counterpoint to the diverse, democratic network of Stark's America.

For whatever reason, many Americans are uncomfortable talking about America's demise. I'm not. I think we have to talk about it, because monolithic cultures like ours can't last forever. For example, those of us in the organic foods world have been seeing America's greatest natural resource, agriculture, in dire straits for years. Namely, genetic engineering, and the streamlined number of varieties that we propagate is a real vulnerability. When I was young, there were scores of sweet corn varieties that farmers could choose from, plant, and sell. Now, we have four in common usage. Same with potatoes. This streamlining has occurred in practically every crop that American farmers grow. The Irish potato famine occurred, as everyone probably knows, because the English gave the subjugated Irish one variety of potato to grow, and the whole nation grew it, to their peril. With a total lack of variety in the Irish fields, all it took was one pathogenic microbe shipped in from South America (where potato varieties have been in diverse supply for centuries) to rock that entire culture. As I write this, we're learning the something similar may be the cause of colony collapse disorder, the "vanishing of the honeybees." A microbe or mite from Australia may be to blame – but our use of basically one variety of bee throughout the US is the true problem. We're setting a number of stages for something akin to gold mold to occur right now.

On a side note, I finished the book's final edit amid Hurricane Katrina's landfall in New Orleans (if you read carefully, the deluge and levee metaphors will tell you which passages were written last) and, agree with the observation or not, it struck me that I was watching the first clear sign of America's inability to execute basic services, like the maintenance of levees. Or bridges. The monolith is starting to rock.

Why did you choose your setting, Ascension (formerly Mexico City)?

I love Mexico City. It's dramatic, beautiful, mythic, and monstrous all at the same time. I've been traveling there since I was four, so it's very much a part of me, but still quite foreign, too. There are probably more Mexico and Mexico City stories in my future.

Your current WIP is called *The Magician and The Fool*. I know Tarot plays a role, but not much else. Tell us about the story.

Well, it's two stories actually. One is about a homeless man named Boy King who thinks he's being stalked by ancient malevolent forces (and maybe he is!), and the other is about a lapsed art historian named Jeremiah Rosemont who receives a mysterious invitation to Rome because his opinion is needed on a rare Tarot deck. The full story, then, is how these two stories interlace.

Throughout, questions surface about the history of Tarot, since the mysterious deck seems to challenge the card's accepted history, namely, that Tarot comes out of Egypt. That's completely un-provable and improbable, so *The Magician and The Fool* sits squarely on another premise, the idea that Tarot's origins are uniquely Italian (though, throughout the book, cults of all stripes are claiming the mysterious deck as their own). I don't think any Tarot scholarship has put forth the ideas that I'm proposing in this book, that the cards have their roots in occult disciplines of the Ancient Romans and Etruscans.

Care to share any personal anecdotes about Tarot?

One of the most interesting readings I've ever given was to a deaf woman who had an interpreter conveying all my rantings to her via sign language. There I was, interpreting symbols from the cards for the interpreter who was creating new symbols with her hands for the deaf woman. Symbols upon symbols and interpretations upon interpretations. It still boggles my mind to contemplate that reading.

You also write a lot of nonfiction articles about food and organic farming, including running "The Wedge," the website for the well-known Co-op. How does this interest and experience inform your fiction?

On a process level, I think writing articles for the Wedge website, with monthly and sometimes weekly, even daily deadlines, has made me a more nimble and less precious writer. I haven't written to immediate deadline like this since I was nineteen and a radio news reporter for my hometown radio station (it was mostly writing obituaries and stripping down newswire stories, making them readable). I'm much more confident about throwing down a sentence and letting it stand, these days.

Talk to me about your short works. What themes are you exploring in short fiction lately?

Certainly "meaning" is a theme. I think characters in both my recent short stories and *The Magician and The Fool* struggle with the meaning of events around them. It's not a theme, but surreality is a key feature of my recent short stories, too ("A Clockwork Requiem" at *Clarkesworld* and "The Last Escape," due out soon in the anthology *Paper Cities*), and the events of *The Magician and The Fool* are

certainly disorienting for both Boy King and Jeremiah Rosemont. All this speaks directly to the nature of Tarot cards, actually. What do they mean? Is there really a secret “meaning” to anything, everything? Is “meaning” in the cards, in the symbols, or in us? What the hell *is* meaning? One could ask the same questions of stories. Do they mean something in and of themselves or do readers supply “meaning”? Why do we go to authors and Tarot readers to tell us what something might mean? Do stories really even mean anything or can they just be an affect, a special effect, an emotion rather a moral?

Should I keep asking myself questions like this? Or should we move on?

(laughing) What’s been a favorite story, based on theme or otherwise?

I guess I'm partial to stories that address alienation and feelings of disjointedness while still maintaining a core, genre spark, and it's rare to find authors who hit those notes simultaneously. I think SF and F is thought to provide answers (meaning!), classically speaking, so I appreciate the writer who can say, “Humans got nothin’,” and not pretend otherwise. In the newer crop of writers, Doug Lain's and Mark Teppo's stories are deeply intriguing and satisfying to me as a reader, mainly because they describe the world the way I see it. Surreal. Their worlds are wondrous and a little menacing, but exploration and even adventure is still there. Alan Deniro's stories, too, are always speeding off over high cliffs, and I'm deeply grateful to him for every story he writes.

I guess if I were going to offer up one book that hits these notes for me, it would be *Catch-22*.

What about the theory of the “grand theme” in story—that fiction should speak to national or worldwide problems of the day? Is this something you believe in, or do you prefer to keep your fiction more personal, “close to heart”, so to speak?

No, I don't abide by that theory. *Patron Saint of Plagues* does attempt to address issues of the day, but that has more to do with the political animal and news-hound in me. I don't believe fiction *should* speak to national problems.

I'm very actively trying to get away from consciously following themes or issues of the day. I want them out of my writing and out of my brain. I can be depressingly over-analytic, so I'm trusting myself more in my writing these days and shutting off my chatterbox brain. I'm *feeling* my stories more instead of thinkingthinkingthinking them all the way through. I think becoming a father really changed that in me. Now, I write. I edit. I finish. And that's good. I'm a more present person, which is a good thing, for my writing and my kids, since, ironically, writing almost by nature can discourage one from being present. Pay attention to a room full of writers some

time. It's like an ADHD convention. We're a very distracted lot. I'm trying to countermand that in myself.

Some people think writing short fiction is much harder than writing novels. As a veteran of both lengths, what are your thoughts? Are there any differences in how you approach short verses long fiction?

I spent years trying to get short stories right. They were tough for me. In the late eighties, in college, I was convinced I'd never be able to get my brain around short stories. I was too much of a novelistic thinker, I thought. Everyone read my stories and said, "This reads like the first chapter of a book." And I'd say, "Crap." That went on into the nineties.

I discovered Gene Wolf very late, during my reconnection with SF and F, and reading his short work opened my brain right up. Maureen McHugh did this to me, too. For each of these writers, every sentence is like another incremental dilation of a camera lens, letting in a little more light, information, or field of vision of what we're looking at. To me that explained what short stories can do. They're like peeking through a keyhole. Novels can certainly be written this way (*Mission Child* by McHugh comes to mind), but more often than not, novels are the whole room. A novel rifles through the drawers and reads the diary under the bed, but a short story is just a tiny viewing through one small aperture, and that's all.

I'm still figuring out novels, though. *Patron Saint* was my attempt at a strongly plotted story. Plot is not my strong suit and I wanted to get it right before starting to experiment with the novel form. That's always the way I've been. Learn the conventions thoroughly, then riff. *The Magician and The Fool* is strongly plotted, too, but I loosened up a lot while writing it. I had to. A personal crisis interfered with the story during a crucial rewrite and deadline, and I learned so much from that that I'm still processing it actually. All the plotting, research, back story, notes and notes and notes went right out the window as my life changed beneath my feet, and the story tumbled and reformed daily, sometimes hourly. I mean, I got two chapters out from the ending, and I was like, "No idea. No idea how this thing ends now." That's very unusual and a bit scary for me. I've always been a proponent of writing the ending first or at least knowing exactly how the ending will play out. But there was no other way to write this book. I had a deadline and had to trust how the book was happening, because I was changing too fast to understand what was even happening to me, let alone how the book ended. It was as if someone else was leaping into the driver's seat and writing the story. My editor knew a lot of what I was going through and was scared for me, I think, skeptical that the book could be completed, let alone coherent. But I think I wooed her over. Of the ending she wrote, "The ending! Holy crap! Holy CRAP!"

Anyway. I'm excited to see what this new person in my brain writes next.

What have you read lately, speculative fiction or otherwise?

I just finished *Twin Cities Noir*, an anthology of noir fiction by Minnesota writers. And I'm constantly reading, or catching up with, Mark Teppo's "The Oneiromantic Mosaic of Harry Potemkin" at Farrago's Wainscot, one of the boldest pieces of fantasy I've read in years. People overuse the term *tour de force* ("show of strength"). But that's exactly what "Harry Potemkin" is.

No writing career is easy, but in the past few years you've sold to professional markets and earned a two-book contract. What have you done in the past to establish your success, and what do you see for your career in the future?

There's no doubt that short fiction is the farm league of the science fiction and fantasy field, and the key to my own success, such as it is. When my agents approached Juliet Ulman, my editor-to-be at Bantam Spectra, the first thing she said to them was, "Barth Anderson? I was wondering when I was going to see something from him." Some writers may be able to jump right into novels, but editors pay very close attention to short fiction in this market.

As for the future, I have a non-fiction food book coming out from Wheatland Press called *A Skeptic's Guide to Natural Foods*, and, beyond that, I can tell there's an alliance forming between my food writing and my fiction. This would be a great ease to my mind, if it happened. I think my writing peers look at my organic food career and go "What's *that* about?" Meanwhile, my organic and grocery colleagues hear about my books and go, "He writes *what*?" Hard to say what the next project will be, but it might be a mystery that takes place somewhere in the organic food/farming world. I've told a few people about the plot and I get a good "ooo" factor.

What do you think about the notion that "science fiction is dead?" (Caveat—here at *Electric Spec* we are actively seeking science fiction stories!)

Rubbish. I think there's terrific interest in science fiction outside our cul-de-sac market, but SF writers/editors would never know it because we're convinced everyone hates us. It's simply not true.

SF magazines and publishers need to take a lesson from the organic food world's highly successful marketing, because the similarities between the natural foods market and SF/F market are intriguing. Both are very small segments of larger markets consisting of highly informed and motivated devotees with near evangelical loyalty. Both are dominated by a split between, what the natural foods world calls, the "core" and the "midlevel". The core is the card-carrying devotee:

The SF fan and the political organic partisan are really of one stripe. Then you have the midlevel, the person who wants the products in question but doesn't hold to the core's agenda. They shop for health and taste, and don't care about organic certification or the politics of the farmer. The mid-level reader, then, reads for good stories and insight, not simply because it *is* science fiction.

It's important to understand that in the natural foods world, the midlevel makes up about 45% of the market, the core about 10%. And yet, many natural foods companies pitch to the core – the people who will buy the product no matter what.

Successful natural foods companies (like my co-op, the Wedge) figured out how to pitch to the midlevel and core simultaneously. It's not a betrayal of core values to serve both the food-lover and political junkie (though core devotees will always tell you otherwise – loudly). Science fiction writers need to read beyond their genre and understand why non-genre readers read what they read. SF/F editors and publishers have all but abandoned their “mid-level” reader when buying works and marketing them, though I think that's changing. The smart editor should be asking: Why do non-genre readers recognize Kelly Link? Or Jonathan Lethem? Margaret Atwood? Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*? That's the midlevel and that's where all future growth is for the genre.

So ultimately, I think questions of SF being dead are misguided. SF isn't dead. It simply tends to trap itself by playing solely to its core.

We work with a lot of first-time authors at *Electric Spec*. What's the best advice you can give writers?

Don't get caught up in one piece for too long. The best advice I ever received was to break new ground continually, especially early in your writing career. Your growth as a writer is dependent upon exposing yourself to new forms, stories, conundrums, endings, characters, etc. If there's one gnawing problem with a short story that you've been working on for longer than, say, six months (for short fiction, even that might be too long), take that basic thing you want to get right, reshape it, and place it in a new story, a new context. You can always come back to a story later and try to retool it. But, when in doubt, keep your feet moving and let them take you over the next hill whenever possible.

Also, continually read new works by writers who are unfamiliar to you. Challenge your own comfort zones. The more newness and innovation you can bring to the workbench in your brain the better, says me.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with *Electric Spec*!

SEASON OF THE BEASTS

By

Barth Anderson

It's finished now, but these mementos still lie scattered around my bed: a Ziplock bag full of water, a bowl of sea salt, old, cold cups of coffee, the TV remote, the DVD remote, and the remote I rigged for the lights, my ankh, a big abalone shell of burnt wooden match sticks, my grandmother's crucifix, and a bottle of varapamil prescribed by the Capricorn. I'm Crusoe sorting through shipwreckage as I pick up the scattered claw-sheaths and abandoned carapaces, which are hard as the shells of horseshoe crabs. It smells musty, like kittens being born in this dark room, but it's been three days since the last beast came. So ends another season.

The claw sheaths are the same color as the carpet, a rusty red. I should pull the blankets from the windows so I can see them better, but I want to preserve my inner sanctum a little longer. I've endured five of these. A season usually lasts six weeks, coming every other year. Midwinter. Always. It starts with a shot across the bow: a tremor, or a slight flutter over the right ear. Aspirin and codeine can numb these small pains, but only for a few days, a week at most. Soon, drugs stop working, and light - especially the menacing sun - can feel like a spinning drill bit in my eye.

Then the music starts. A Baroque fugue rattles the window panes and sets my downstairs neighbor to hitting her ceiling with a pan, and every trumpet blast and cello stroke blaring from my skull is a symphony of pain. I pinch the pressure point on my left hand. I gobble aspirin straight from the bottle. I contemplate sawing my own head off because the musical incubation will soon end, and the hatching will begin. In the dark of my bedroom, I sit with a Ziplock bag of ice pressed against my head.

Our agony, I squint my eyes and pray over the deafening fugue's barrage, *who art inevitable, harrowing be thy name . . .*

My heart buckles as a sharp beak splits through my head, a tooth growing from bone. It nips at my fingers. I drop the ice, lie back, and resign myself to the bed. The beak strains to open, hissing and screeching, cracking me, and sending fissures through my skull.

Thy domination come, thy whim be done, on earth as it is in ruin . . .

I usually pass out, waking from this trauma hours later, the weight of a hatchling on the right side of my head. In the mirror, I can see its hard wings folded neatly over its back, concealing the fact that this beast is sharpening its rust-red claws on me.

In the mirror now, the beast long gone, my black hair is neatly combed, newly cut, and I look rested. I separate the hair roots over my right ear, looking for scar tissue. Nothing. Despite their viciousness, beasts never leave a mark.

But back in Season of the Beasts #2, they left a mark on the Capricorn whether he admits it or not. He had come to my apartment, hoping to celebrate publishing a paper on treating patients suffering from Helsinki Syndrome - prisoners who adhere to their captors' dogma, even after release.

"Where - What *is* that?" said the Capricorn, he'd said, edging toward me in my dark apartment.

The newest creature was clinging to the side of my head like an evil beret. A deadly swath of light was piercing into my room. "Shut the goddamn door," I moaned. "My skull keeps growing them," I said, pointing to the old carapaces lying in a crescent around my bed where they'd been shed and discarded by maturing beasts. "My skull is a demon egg. When it's not playing demonic music, it's making demonic babies."

The Capricorn had bug eyes, so as he took a pen from his pocket and pushed it toward the beast's face, he looked comically scared.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I have no clue."

The beast considered the pen with crossed eyes, slowly looking up Capricorn's arm to his face. Then, without warning, it launched itself from the side of my head with an excruciating kick and attached itself to Capricorn's chest. Cap fell face forward onto the floor, the beast's wings clacking and applauding beneath him. After a loud tussle, the thing scurried off into the shadows and Capricorn jumped to his feet, shouting, "What in the name of fuck was that?" He said this over and over. For about an hour. When he calmed down finally, he said things like, "Did you see it? I've never - I've never seen - I couldn't imagine - did *you* see it?"

There were no answers for his half-formed questions, so eventually he left, gripping a dishtowel in both hands to soak up the blood.

I saw the Capricorn six months later at a party where he seemed to have lost all ability to socially regulate himself. He laughed too long and loudly at meager puns, drank straight from the punch ladle, set a few women guests on edge with probing questions about their sexuality, and interrupted conversations with non-sequiturs that wound maze-like into dark confessions.

Cornering him late in the night, I asked him if he was feeling all right. "You're acting, I don't know, edgy."

With his insect eyes, Cap seemed nervous having me stand too close to him. He raised his finger and said, "You are *terra incognita*, bro - land of dragons - so stay the fuck away from me."

He backed away from me, heels clocking into chair legs. I noticed with a pang of jealousy that the Capricorn had little white scars on his index finger.

Give us our nightly terror, I prayed after I saw Cap's lacerated finger, and despise us for our pathetic weaknesses, as we despise those pathetically weaker than ourselves. And lead us not into numbness but deliver us into pain.

After gathering the array of prescription bottles from my nightstand, I store them in my burgeoning medicine chest for next season. Maxalt. Ergotomine. Varapamil. Omega-3. Naturum matriculum. Ginkgo biloba. Morphine. Feverfew. Scorpion tea from that Chinese herbalist that Capricorn hates. Marijuana.

Acupuncture. Acupressure. Mint oil. Codeine. Tylenol. Cafergot. Exorcisms, healings, chakra realignment, profane liturgy, pleas, tears, screams. Once that beak pokes through, all my potions and strategies vanish. First one squirms out of my skull. Then another. Another. A trio. A beast-brood. A flock. A clan. Nothing can stop my body from populating the earth with demons.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the horror forever and ever.

Amen.

When it finally ends, the season strands me without fanfare. I go from lying supine at the mercy of these hellish births to cleaning out the refrigerator and paying my utilities bills and opening month-old mail. Ignoring those tasks a bit longer, I pick up the most recent beast-shell and its splay of translucent, sepia-veined wings. I believe I can smell something deep and musky. Blood? Brain? Afterbirth? Whatever it is, I appreciate this smell because as soon as the season ends, like the Capricorn, I could convince myself so easily that this nightmare was just a nightmare. But I resist that triteness with all my might. Because in its course, the season sharpens me, and this lingering animalian, afterbirth smell reminds me of that sharper reality. From this moment on, every day leading me away from this season takes me further from the marvel of disembodied symphonies and skull-cracking births, takes me further from that smell of monsters breeding, the smell of my own body's mysterious gear-work.

Now the shells and wings have been gathered, and I've picked up all the claws. It smells like fresh laundry in here now, not newborn cats, so I'm ready to hoist the Venetian blinds, throw open the sash, and welcome in the bland sunlight.

*"Season of the Beasts" is a reprint from *Say...Aren't You Dead*, Nov. 2003; *Fortress of Words*

Dying Light

By

Neil Carstairs

Kendon heard sirens as he heated the last thread of silver. They died swiftly, as if whatever had summoned the emergency services was close by. He put away his tools, turned off the burner, and put the piece into the safe.

He stepped out of the workshop into a cold November afternoon. Down towards the road, red and blue strobe lights flashed eerily. The road was blocked. The children would be late home as that was the only route for the school bus. He walked down to the house and went to the living area, always so quiet when the children were out. Spotlights illuminated the room in a half dozen yellow cones of light. A portrait of his wife looked down upon him. The half-smile he had captured seemed to mock him, as if she was thinking, "you never wanted children and here you are missing them."

I miss you more, he thought. They are the only connection I have with you. It had been three years since she had died, and still their friends weren't speaking to him, as if he were to blame for the cancer that had ravaged her body.

Mrs Martinez, his housekeeper, appeared in the doorway. "A car is coming up the driveway, sir."

He went with her to the front door and watched as tree shadows raced across grass, pursued by twin headlights. As the car rolled to a halt, he saw the yellow and blue cubes of its markings. The electric whine of the vehicle's engines died, and two cops, a man and a woman, got out.

The woman asked, "Mr. Kendon?"

"Yes."

"May we come in?" She wore a holstered pistol on her hip and her name tag read "Delaney."

It was the way she spoke. It was the way her partner looked down at the gravel driveway. It was the way Mrs Martinez began to pray, in Spanish, beside him, that told Kendon all he need to know. He led them inside.

"Sir, there has been an accident," Delaney said.

"My children?" He said it just for the need to speak. A void was opening around him; dark shadows edged his vision.

"The school bus was involved in a collision. Your children have been taken to St. Jude's Clinical Centre. We can take you there now."

"How badly are they hurt?" He was having trouble breathing.

"I don't know." She was lying; Kendon could see it in her eyes. "We weren't the first unit on the scene. By the time we arrived your children were already being transferred."

"Can we go now?" asked Kendon.

"Of course."

"Can you get in touch with the Grandparents?" Kendon asked Mrs. Martinez. "And let Hal know where I will be."

He got in the back of the patrol car. On the dashboard, a touch screen was awash with maps and scrolling data. Delaney looked back at him. She was attractive in a hard sort of way. Close-cropped hair showed her neural web implant in the right side of her skull. Kendon could imagine her scanning him, making sure he wasn't going to get sick on her. He was a long way from that, somewhere in the realm where the human brain dislocates itself from reality and continues to function.

They turned right at the end of the driveway, away from the accident.

Kendon said, "What happened?"

"A tanker hit a car and went across the carriageway to collide with the school bus," she said. "We're still investigating how that happened."

Kendon rested his head on the seat. The car was out of the hills and onto the lowland roads. He watched oncoming vehicles with dread, trying not to think of what it would have been like to see a tanker on a collision course. The city came out of the gloom.

St. Jude's was a sprawling four-storey complex that included a teaching hospital and was, as far as Kendon knew, a centre of excellence for clinical science. He had been here once before, but not to the trauma unit. The lights were headache bright, reflecting off sterile walls enough to make him narrow his eyes.

In a room called "Trauma Six," Rebecca and Daniel lay side by side on grey cots. They had a life support unit each. Rebecca's face was bruised, her hair cut away roughly to reveal a torn scalp. Fluid drained from an incision in her skull. Her eyes were shut. Daniel, at first sight, seemed uninjured. It was as if he was sleeping there to keep his sister company. Then Kendon saw dark stains around his son's abdomen. He looked away.

"Mr. Kendon?" A doctor entered, holding a touch screen, scrolling to find the details he needed. "I'm Dr. Aziz. Are you the father of Rebecca and Daniel Kendon?"

He nodded.

"There was nothing we could do, Mr Kendon," Dr. Aziz said. "The injuries your children received caused them to die within minutes of the accident."

Kendon felt a hand on his shoulder and realised it was Delaney. She smiled, trying to reassure him.

"But we were lucky. An emergency trauma team reached the accident site and initiated procedures to preserve their memory core." Dr. Aziz turned the touch screen around. "Give me your thumb print. Then we can move to the next stage."

Kendon closed his eyes. He was at the edge of an abyss, darkness beckoned with a cold hand. He shivered despite the warmth of the room. "No."

Dr. Aziz frowned, glancing at Delaney as if he had misheard and wanting reassurance that he hadn't.

"Mr Kendon," he said, "you understand what I am asking?"

"Yes." Even to Kendon his voice sounded weak and indecisive, he spoke again, louder. "Yes."

A silence grew between them, disturbed only by the rhythmic pulse of the monitors and the soft whine of the machines keeping his children's memories preserved. The door opening broke the tableau. A nurse came in followed by Rebecca and Daniel's grandparents.

Dr. Aziz asked the nurse who they were.

"Grandparents," the nurse said.

Dr. Aziz looked relieved. "Please help me. Mr. Kendon is in shock. He is refusing permission for resurrection. Can you persuade him to go ahead with the procedure?"

"Michael?" asked Virginia Ross. She had spoken to Kendon only twice since the loss of her daughter. "Tell me you're not serious. Tell me you want them alive."

Kendon was shaking; he clenched his fist in his lap to stop it from being seen.

"I can't," he said, looking away from her accusing eyes.

"Perhaps we should talk about this outside," Dr. Aziz said, "where we will be less emotional."

Kendon didn't want to leave. They would pressure him as soon as the door closed behind them.

"Don't listen to him," Virginia turned on the doctor with ferocity "He's unbalanced. He doesn't know his own mind. I've been concerned about him for some time, and now this. You must let me give permission."

The doctor backed away, only to find her following him as if she were stalking prey. "It has to be the closest relative."

"But they're my grandchildren." Virginia turned to Delaney. "Please help me. He's trying to kill my little babies."

"Are you willing to make a legal challenge as to the duty of care for the two children?" The way Delaney spoke sounded stilted. She was probably reciting some section of law she had downloaded through her neural web.

"Yes." Virginia looked at her husband for agreement.

"Yes." He spoke in the way that said he always agreed with her.

"We cannot wait more than four hours before memory loss occurs," said Dr. Aziz.

"We'll have to put in a request to convene a Resurrection Court," said Delaney.

"We have full legal panels on duty call," said the doctor. "This can be done within the hour."

"Fine," Delaney said. "I am issuing a temporary restraining order on all parties involved not to enter this room. An officer will be stationed outside. Only

medical staff attached to this hospital will have access, and they will be accompanied all the times. Do you understand?"

Virginia nodded.

"Mr. Kendon?" Delaney prompted.

"Yes." He was tired, and his children were dead. He could barely muster the strength to meet her eyes.

Virginia and her husband left with the doctor.

Delaney said, "You need to get something inside you"

He went with her simply because he had no energy to do otherwise. They found a dispenser in the main waiting area of the trauma unit, and then sat side-by-side, unwrapping high-energy bars as they waited for their drinks to cool.

"You shouldn't be afraid." She blew on her coffee and then took a sip. "I'm a clone." She smiled. "See? We're not monsters, we're not freaks. We're just people who died and got resurrected."

He looked away, embarrassed that she had read his thoughts.

She continued, "I was on a lunch break, in uniform, and walked into a jewellery shop to buy a birthday gift. I'd taken off my flak jacket and the kid holding up the shop shot me." She put fingertips to her chest, above and to the right of her left breast. "Pow. Just like that, I'm lying on my back staring at the ceiling and dying. It was just after the time the State brought in full insurance for officers killed on duty. Medical teams preserved my memory and then force grew my clone within three months. I testified against the kid and watched him go to the chair."

Kendon turned back to her.

She half-smiled. "I've had no psychological problems. I've had no physical problems. All I have had is total joy that I was given a chance to live again." Her eyes slid past his face to focus behind him. The smile faded and her eyes darkened.

Kendon glanced over his shoulder.

A priest had entered the waiting room. He came over to them, sharing a look of distrust with Delaney. "Michael."

"Hal." Kendon stood and allowed Hal to embrace him.

"How are they?"

"Dead." Kendon felt the wall of grief begin to break. Hal put a hand out to steady him.

"And they want to resurrect them?" Hal asked.

"If you need anything, I'll be around." Delaney walked away.

"A clone." Hal said.

"How did you know?"

"I can tell. They all have a certain look around the eyes." Hal's mouth was a hard line. "Now, about Rebecca and Daniel."

"Marie's parents have challenged my decision. There is to be a Resurrection Court."

"Have the children been given the last rites?"

"No, and now there is no chance of that. The police are only allowing hospital staff into the room, and then only with an escort."

Hal nodded, as if expecting the answer. "Then we can only prepare for the court. Have they offered you counsel?"

"All I have been told is that there is to be a hearing, nothing else."

"The usual sensitive handling of such a case," Hal said. "And even I haven't offered you my thoughts or prayers."

Kendon felt the weight of his decision in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to be home with his children. He wanted to turn back time and go and pick Rebecca and Daniel up from school.

A lecture room had been converted into a court by moving an office desk in for the judge and dividing the seating, half for the Petitioner, the other for the Defendant.

A young man with dark hair tied in a ponytail and a hologram tattoo of a butterfly on his left cheek approached. "Mr. Kendon, the State has appointed me to represent you. I--"

"I will represent him," Hal interrupted.

The young man frowned, "I'm quite able--"

"Please," Hal held up a hand, "I don't want a dispute. Mr. Kendon is quite entitled to refuse or change any appointed representative."

The young man shrugged, lifted his slimcase off the floor, and left the room.

Hal directed Kendon to sit in the front row, and then took a place beside him. Across the narrow aisle, Kendon's in-laws talked in hushed tones to their attorneys. A court recorder set up a digicam, two ushers made sure the judge's flat screen was working and net linked properly, and a uniformed guard stood beside the door. The door slid open and the guard said, "All rise for the Honourable Judge Jamie Delacroix."

The judge hurried to his place. He was short and balding and had an Angeleno's cast to his dry skin. Delacroix tapped the screen with his ID and then looked around the room. "Will the petitioner's representative make themselves known?"

"Your Honour," one of Virginia's team stood, "State Attorney Joshua Oaken represents the petitioner."

"And the defendant?"

Hal stood. "Your Honour, I am Father Hal Jones. I represent the defendant."

Delacroix eyed the priest. "Can you identify yourself?"

"Of course."

An usher approached Hal with a scanner and held it to his left eye

At his desk, Delacroix watched the iris image appear and then the database search commence. It took a matter of seconds for Hal's biography to scroll up onto the flat screen. Hal had a Doctorate in Religious Philosophy, a Post-Graduate Degree in Law, a Masters Degree in Medical Ethics, and was a Member of the State Law Commission. "The court recognises you as competent to represent the defendant. Mr. Oaken, please address the court."

Oaken said, "Your Honour this case is one of heart-breaking simplicity. Two children lie dead, their memories preserved, and we have the duty to resurrect them. We can do no more than that for them."

"Father Jones, please make your address," said Delacroix.

"The State Attorney believes this case to be simple," said Hal. "I agree in all but one aspect. It is not our duty to resurrect the dead. It is our duty to protect the living. The state will make emotional arguments about bereavement. The state will talk of loss of potential, about reclaiming life as a gift for the future. I intend to show how the advance of science has not gifted us with resurrection but has, in fact, stolen life."

Delacroix made notes on his screen and scrolled up the hundreds of relevant decisions in similar cases. The principal judgement had been made five years before. Delacroix refreshed his memory of the decision. "The court is aware of the emotive issues surrounding this case. We assume that the representatives understand the principals of *State versus Toft*. The court will only consider arguments based on this decision"

Hal seemed disappointed, but not surprised. Oaken suppressed a smile. It gave him an advantage.

Delacroix said, "Mr. Oaken, you have the floor."

"We call State Trooper Jane Delaney to the stand," said Oaken.

Delaney was sworn in by an usher, and she described the events of the late afternoon.

Oaken thanked her and then called Dr. Abdullah Amir Aziz, who gave a simple summary of his actions.

"I have one more witness to call," said Oaken. "Mrs. Virginia Ross."

Oaken led her through the evening. "You came to the hospital?"

"Immediately," Virginia said, wiping tears from her face.

"And what happened then?"

"Our son-in-law was with the children. He refused permission to resurrect them."

"Did you expect him to do that?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because they're children. His children."

"And you want them to be given the chance to live again?"

"Of course." Virginia looked affronted that Oaken could even doubt such a thing. "Everyone who cannot choose should be offered the chance of life."

"Thank you." Oaken sat down with a smile of reassurance to Virginia.

Hal gave Virginia a moment to gather herself. Then he asked, "What did you mean by *everyone who cannot choose*?"

"I meant that those who die suddenly, or those who are too young to have a full knowledge of life, should be resurrected."

It was the standard argument advanced in all debates on the subject.

"Have you ever known anyone choose not to be resurrected when given the chance?" asked Hal.

"Yes, as you well know." Virginia's voice hardened.

"I might know," Hal said, "but the Court doesn't. Please explain."

"My daughter died of cancer three years ago." Virginia's eyes slid towards Kendon.

"Your daughter was Rebecca and Daniel's mother, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"And Michael Kendon's wife?" Hal laid a hand on Kendon's shoulder.

"Yes."

"And she chose to die?"

"She didn't choose to die. She chose not to be resurrected."

"Why?"

"Because . . ." Virginia paused. "Because she and her husband joined a religious sect that does not believe in resurrection."

"They became Christians?" Hal asked.

"Yes." Virginia nodded.

"Thank you, I have no further questions."

Oaken said, "No further witnesses."

"Father Jones?" asked Delacroix.

"I have only one witness to call." Hal looked at his companion. "Michael Kendon."

It seemed a long way from his chair to the witness stand. Kendon felt every pace as another step towards loneliness. Once seated, he read the pledge.

"Michael," Hal priest said, "please tell the court why you do not want your children resurrected."

It was the first time he had been asked directly, and Kendon's face reflected the inner pain he felt. "Because I do not believe that they will be my children. They will not be the Rebecca and Daniel I raised from birth. They will simply be copies." He ran out of words, but not tears.

Hal said, "Michael, I know this is hard. Can you tell me about your family?"

Kendon wiped his tears away. "Rebecca was born under state licence, natural conception, natural birth. Daniel was born under the second quarter lottery award of '73, again a natural conception and natural birth."

"You chose to have two children?"

"Yes. Marie and I are both only children. We wanted to have more than one child, even though we had to win Daniel through our fifth lottery application."

"And why natural conception and birth?"

"We believe that choosing the sex of your child, their eye colour, or any of the hundred or more other options that you get at the fertility clinics is wrong. The designer baby is a fashion choice, not a gift from God."

"So Rebecca and Daniel are your children," Hal said, "and for better or worse their genetic inheritance is from you and your wife."

"Yes."

"Your wife died when?"

"Three years and three months ago. From cancer."

"Did she undergo treatment?"

“Of course” Kendon looked at Virginia. “Marie didn't want to die. She went through all the available treatments and operations until the doctors could do no more.”

“But she did not go through resurrection?”

“No,” Kendon said, after a pause to draw breath.

“Why?”

“We. . . She did not believe it was right.”

“In what way?”

Oaken made notes for the first time since Kendon had taken the stand.

“Our soul is not something that can be transferred as you would pour milk from one broken jug into another,” said Kendon.

“And you feel the same way about Rebecca and Daniel?”

“Yes,” he said with a break in his voice. “I didn't want this. I wanted to see them grow up and become adults. I wanted grandchildren.”

“You could have all of that,” Hal said, “if you let them be resurrected.”

“No.” Kendon shook his head. “They would simply be a copy. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just a copy.”

“As parent, you have the right to define your children's welfare,” Hal said. “What happens if the court rules in favour of the State and Rebecca and Daniel are resurrected. Will you want to see them?”

“I don't know.” Kendon looked down at his hands. They were shaking. “Truly, I do not know.”

“No further questions.”

Oaken asked only one question. “None of us want to be here, Mr. Kendon. This debate is too complicated for a single court to contemplate at four o'clock in the morning. I ask you just this. Should your children be resurrected, will they see you any differently or will they see the man who has loved them and raised them?”

Kendon stared at Oaken. He closed his eyes. He could see Rebecca and Daniel running towards him, arms outstretched. “They will see their father.”

“Thank you. No further questions.”

Kendon stepped down.

“You may begin your final address to the court,” Delacroix said to Oaken.

“I stated at the start of this hearing that the case was one of simplicity,” said Oaken. “We have a moral duty to resurrect Rebecca and Daniel. Nothing I have heard has changed this. *State versus Toft* laid the foundation for this duty. Rebecca and Daniel are minors, injured in a tragic accident. Their future is in our hands, a future we must guarantee. That is the State's view, that is my view, and I hope it will be the view of the court.”

Father Hal Jones allowed a period of silence to grow in the courtroom before he stood. “For many years Church and State have been in conflict over the continuing advances in medical science. The Church altered its position last year regarding the cloning of humans. This change took into account *State versus Toft* and I believe challenges that decision.

“We do not dispute the right to life of a clone. We do not challenge the right to choose to create a clone by any individual, corporate body or agency.

Once the cloning procedure has been successful then a new life has been created. We oppose the forced implantation of personality and memory of a deceased person onto the clone. This action contravenes the basic human rights of the clone to exist as an individual. Such an act is wrong and it is time the courts accepted that a clone has the right to a life with a personality developed naturally through environmental contact and not through the methods used in the resurrection procedure.”

Hal spoke with a growing passion. “I am sure that Michael Kendon would not oppose the cloning of his children, but only if those clones were born naturally and allowed to grow and develop as individuals. I beg the court to see the rights of the clone ahead of the rights of the deceased.”

“This court rules in favour of the Petitioner,” said Delacroix. “The resurrection of Rebecca Kendon, deceased, and Daniel Kendon, deceased, will continue under the supervision of Dr. Abdullah Amir Aziz until such time that he decides they can be placed under the care of the State Welfare Unit. As in all cases of resurrection, the deceased shall be returned to the family unit to aid their recovery from this trauma.”

Delacroix addressed Kendon. “Mr. Kendon, the Court orders you to undergo psychological re-profiling in order that you accept the return of your children.”

He stood without another word and left the courtroom.

“That was an interesting argument you advanced,” Oaken said to Hal.

“I had hopes it might be listened too.” Hal ignored Oaken's outstretched hand.

“It will take a few years before the court admits to the possibility of a personality existing before any external influences take effect,” said Oaken.

“You mean a soul?” asked Hal.

“Soul or personality, it doesn't really matter. The court needs to see the argument, not the semantics.”

“But one day?” Hal prompted.

“One day they may leave room for appeal.”

Spring sunshine bathed the garden in a pale glow that edged the first shoots of growth with diamond bright light. Kendon, sitting in his workshop, saw the shadows on the grass and wished it were winter again. Spring brought birth and rebirth. This was not the time he wanted. This was not the day he wanted. He looked down at his work He had been cutting leather, creating a series of empty hearts that would lay, one within another, upon a work he had yet to title.

He heard the children first, their feet on gravel and their voices loud on the still air. Rebecca and Daniel burst into the workshop with the force of a hurricane. Kendon closed his eyes for a moment, listening to them.

“Daddy, Daddy,” they shouted.

His eyes opened and he lifted the leather craft knife before turning to greet them.

The Ambiguity Broker

By
Fredrick Obermeyer

If Dan Casterson didn't sell his last Ambiguity patch soon, then he would lose his job. He checked the client list on his computer and found a single lead. Sandra Sukorvo had sent a package showing interest in Possibilities Inc. Seeing his career flash before his eyes, Casterson hopped in his car and sped down there.

He stopped outside her house and checked everything. His hair was slick and his suit was well-pressed. But his breath still tasted like the pepperoni pizza he had for lunch. He gulped down two breath mints, cleared his throat, grabbed his briefcase and got out of the car.

Outside the sun beat down on him and he started to sweat. Casterson sighed and tried not to think about what would happen if he failed. He'd lose everything. His house, the car, his health club membership, his Certainty tech, his silk bathrobes. And his wife, Denise. If he lost this gig, she'd divorce him.

Casterson walked up to the front door. A dog emerged from the backyard. His Certainty contacts activated. Dog, German Shepherd, female, five years old. Name: Daisy.

The dog growled.

Casterson froze and tried to smile. That dog didn't look like no Daisy to him. "Good girl," he said.

The dog wasn't buying it, though. She growled and started towards Casterson.

Shaking, Casterson backed up, fearing the dog would rip him to shreds.

But at the last second, a fat man in a bathrobe emerged from the house and said, "Get the fuck back in here, Daisy." He smacked the dog on the hindquarters.

She yelped and ran back in the house.

Casterson sighed with relief. His contacts blinked out information. Alexander Sukorvo, thirty-five, husband of Sandra Sukorvo (maiden name: Pechard).

Casterson frowned. He preferred to deal with the woman of the house. They usually had control of the money and were susceptible to his charms. But in this case, he was desperate. He activated his Ambiguity patch with a mental command and it deactivated all of the Certainty tech in his body, including the contacts.

"Hello, Mr. Sukorvo," Casterson said.

"What do you want?"

“My name is Dan Casterson, Sir. I’m an Ambiguity agent from Possibilities Inc. Your wife asked for some literature about our ambiguity programs and I thought I’d stop by for a moment and discuss our—”

“Not interested, pal. Take a hike.” Sukorvo belched, reached down into his robe and scratched his balls.

Dan felt depressed, but he kept his smile on. Never give up on the customer. Keep at them until they crack. Besides, he had tried cold calling all the other leads and gotten jackshit for his trouble.

“I’d only take a moment of your time, Mr. Sukorvo,” Casterson said.

“I don’t need ambiguity. Now get lost.”

Casterson walked up to him. “Are you sure? Many people like living in Certainty, but aren’t you bored knowing almost everything in life? Don’t you long for the days when you could look at a tree and not be sure there was a cat or a raccoon behind it? Or maybe the chance to mishear a conversation? Or the ability to have two different interpretations about what you’ve read and watched?”

“No. I’m a freelance biographer and I deal in facts, Mr. Casterson, not ambiguities. Now I have some work to do, so if you’ll excuse me.” Sukorvo turned to go back into the house.

Get in the customer’s confidence, Casterson’s mentor had once told him. Appeal to their ego. Make it seem like you’re genuinely interested in what they do. “May I ask what you write?”

“I write biographies of famous figures in the pre-Certainty age. People like Kant and Jan Horsk?”

“Jan Horsk? I’m really interested in his life. Could I come in for a moment and look at what you’re writing?”

Sukorvo frowned. “I usually don’t show my work off before it’s complete.”

“Of course not. But I’d be interested to hear your theories about Horsk.”

“I don’t know. Sandra will be home in an hour and I have to start dinner...”

“Then maybe you could just give me an overview.”

Sukorvo seemed uncertain. But after a moment’s hesitation, he said, “All right.”

Sukorvo let him in the house. Deep inside, Casterson smiled. Once he got inside the customer’s home, he was halfway there. Sukorvo led him into the kitchen where there were stacks of papers and books. Sukorvo also had a neural-link word processor set up next to them.

“Here’s my notes,” Sukorvo said. “I got a three book contract with Cassidy Publishing and I’m planning a fourth book about Horsk and the coming of the Certainty Age. Sandra doesn’t think I’ll get anymore published, but what does she know? I got enough money from my parents to last me a couple of decades.”

Casterson feigned a deep interest and waited for the right moment to bait his hook.

“Can I ask you something, Mr. Sukorvo?” Casterson said.

“What?”

“Have you ever tried ambiguity?”

“No. And I’m not interested.”

“Why not?”

“I like having certainty of my senses and of information. I mean, look how chaotic and disordered society was before the introduction of Certainty. Sensory information wasn't filtered, misinformation ran rampant, people couldn't always hear or understand each other's words, even when they spoke the same language. And people were given far too much range to engage in multiple interpretations of thought and image—”

Before Sukorvo went off on a long spiel, Casterson jumped in and said, “Yes, but couldn't you say that we humans lost something when we gave up ambiguity? The ability to see and interpret the world in a myriad of different ways. What about art and film and ideas?”

Sukorvo snorted. “Who wants to see a picture or a film or read a book with multiple interpretations? Most people want one concrete interpretation of the world, Mr. Casterson, not a bunch of different ones. Now I appreciate your persistence in trying to sell me on your old-fashioned idea, but I'm afraid I have to ask you to—”

“Just wait a second. Can I show you something?”

“I don't think I—”

“It'll only take a minute.”

Casterson placed his briefcase on the table, opened it up and revealed the Ambiguity patch. He took it out of its case and held it up.

“I don't think I'd like—” Sukorvo said.

“Just consider this a free sample,” Casterson said. “If you don't like it, then you can always take it back.”

“What does it do?”

“It temporarily inhibits all Certainty technology in your body. Here, try it.”

Sukorvo hesitated for a second, but then he put the patch on his head.

“How does it work?” Sukorvo said.

“Just click it on,” Casterson said. He reached over and activated the patch.

“If you agree to our offer, then they'll have a patch implanted in your spine. You can turn your Ambiguity on or off at your leisure.”

Sukorvo glanced at the kitchen window. “I don't feel any different.”

“Just look at this,” Casterson said.

“Look at what?”

Casterson took out a Rorschach card and showed it to him.

Sukorvo blinked and looked closer.

“What is this?”

“I'm not sure. It looks like a cat. Or maybe...it's some people...”

“Actually the ink blot's of a couple of maidens cavorting sexually together. If you still had your Certainty technology still active, then it would have automatically given you the maidens. But without it active, you can come to your own interpretations.”

“But how does that help me?”

“Ah, read this.” Casterson handed him a card with a sentence on it. The sentence read: She left the maze to find herself.

“So?”

“Well, think about it. Did the woman literally leave the maze to find herself or did she figuratively leave the maze to find herself?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Exactly. With Certainty technology active, it would have forced you to favor a literal interpretation of the sentence. But with it deactivated, you can accept either a literal or a figurative interpretation of that same sentence.”

“But that still don’t help me with anything.”

“Let me ask you this. What if the Certainty and its technology are fallible?”

“That’s an obvious statement. Everybody knows that nothing in the universe can be a hundred percent certain.”

“Yes—”

“But our society does argue that most things can be known to a near absolute amount of certainty.”

“True. But the need for ambiguity still remains. If you accept the idea that Certainty technology is fallible to some degree, then you must also accept the idea that there is a need for subjective interpretation. Certainty technology eliminates that ability, but we restore it. Let’s say you witness an accident at an intersection. Two people crash into each other. One is into the wrong.”

“There’d be cameras.”

“Then a street without cameras. You’re the only eyewitness and you catch the accident out of the corner of your eye. Who is in the wrong?”

“Whoever went out into the intersection first.”

“What if it’s a blind corner and they hit each other within seconds?”

“I’d see who it was.”

“Yes, but what if you only catch a glimpse of it? Your Certainty technology would ascribe blame to an individual. But what if it’s wrong? What if it was the other person’s fault? What if subjective interpretation and analysis allowed you to determine who was properly in the wrong? Wouldn’t you argue that the ability to perceive two different interpretations of the same event and make a decision based on the same evidence is more important than having the Certainty impose only one interpretation on you?”

“Perhaps. But your premise is flawed in a number of ways.”

“How so?”

“First, the cops would determine who is guilty by analyzing the tire tracks and the angle of impact. Second, subjective interpretation would not automatically allow for the right conclusion to be drawn. Third, Certainty technology would allow me to back up to the moment of the accident and run a frame by frame analysis to determine who was in the wrong. So you see, I have no need for ambiguity.” Sukorvo took off the patch and laid it on the table.

Casterson sighed, feeling defeated. He should have known the husband would be a tough nut to crack. But he would try. “You ever hear a conversation and feel uncertain what a person said, even with Certainty technology enhancing audio playback?”

“No.” But to Casterson it almost sounded like a yes.

“Take your wife. She’s on the phone.”

Sukorvo appeared annoyed.

Casterson knew he'd have to tread lightly.

"I don't listen to my wife talking to her friends on the phone."

"I'm not saying you do. But if you overhear only a part of a conversation, how can you be exactly sure what she said?"

"Certainty technology enhances my hearing and analyzes voices for clarity..."

"But it can't do that if you're not close enough for it to pick up the sound from her voice. What if she said something important that she didn't want you to hear? What if Certainty technology only caught part of the conversation and gave you the wrong interpretation?"

"Like what?" Sukorvo's face grew tight.

"I don't know. Perhaps she forgot to pay a bill or—"

"Look, my Sandra is a good woman. She'd never do anything behind my back. I love her."

"I never said she would. But you know, what if..."

"Sandra isn't cheating on me." Sukorvo trembled. "Now you get the hell out of my house before I throw you out."

"I'm sorry." Casterson frowned, closed his case and started to leave.

But before he could get to the door, Sukorvo said, "Wait."

Casterson tried not to smile. He had Sukorvo.

"You said it allows me to come to my own interpretation."

"Yes, it does."

"Do you use it yourself?"

"Of course," Casterson said. "Every day." Perhaps it wasn't the whole truth, but he did activate his Ambiguity patch when dealing with customers.

"Then maybe...maybe I could...do you have a free trial?"

"Not free. But if you make a down payment of three hundred, you can have the Ambiguity patch for thirty days."

"Thirty days. Then maybe I..."

"It's only temporary. If you don't like it, you can always return it."

"I don't know. Maybe I should talk to Sandra about it. You see, she doesn't like it when I—"

"Just try it."

"O.K., maybe I could try—"

Casterson heard the door open. He turned.

"Honey, I'm home," a female voice said.

Casterson frowned.

A tall woman with red hair entered the kitchen. She had big breasts showing through a thin white T-shirt, deep red lips and fair skin with a sunburned nose.

"Hi, Sandy," Sukorvo said.

"Who's this?" She looked at Casterson and frowned.

"This is...this is...I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

"Dan Casterson. Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

He gripped Sandy's hand and shook it. She had a firm grip and smelled like lilacs. Dan struggled not to look down at her breasts. The nipples were showing. God, they were beautiful breasts.

Sukorvo stepped in between them and said, "He's an Ambiguity broker. I think I'm going to try—"

"Oh, we don't need it."

"But I was just telling your husband how much you could—"

"That fellow broker of yours, what's his name? Petersen...yeah, that's his name. He already sold me an Ambiguity package the other day."

That son of a bitch, Casterson thought. He beat me to the sale. Great, now I'm screwed.

"When?" Casterson said.

"This morning. But it ain't worth it." Sandra turned and smiled. "Sorry to burst your bubble, Mr. Casterson, but we're not interested."

"I..."

"You can go now. We're rather busy."

"Yes, fine."

Casterson felt faint as he walked towards the door. Maybe he could get a job selling used cars or stock portfolios. He wanted to cry. But looking at Sandra made him feel a bit better. God, she was hot. If her husband wasn't around, he would have loved to tear that sweaty T-shirt off, kiss her breasts and fuck her right there on the kitchen table. But she didn't look that interested in him.

Casterson frowned and walked back to his car. Along the way, he glanced back at Sandra for a split second.

She winked at him.

He blinked and looked again.

Or did she?

The Chrysalis

By

B.J. Anderson

I hate children. I hate their absolute honesty, their shameless horror at the sight of me. I hate it when they point and scream, "Mommy, look at him!" I hate their glistening eyes and perfect fingers, their flawless skin and angelic voices. I am even more appalled that my reaction to this wiggling ball of flesh I've found is the same reaction children have towards me. Horror, nausea, sick fascination. My God, I'm just like them--maybe worse--for I know better.

A waxy layer of curd-like vernix crusts her wrinkled flesh Lemon yellow patches mottle her white skin, and her eyes are like black pin pricks. She looks like a grub. I want to look away, but I can't. I should drown her. Throw her in a bag with a brick and toss her in the river like an unwanted cat. I would be doing her a favor. She will have nothing in life. She will be mocked, ridiculed, teased relentlessly. She will pray for death, maybe even take her life in the end. Wouldn't I be dead now had I the guts to end it?

She blinks those infinitesimal eyes and a smile curls her almost nonexistent lips. She is too young to be smiling. She will face so much misery in life, yet I can't throw her out like my father did me, like some bits of cold fries or a crumpled wad of toilet paper. I will keep her in my one-room, run-down shack with the boarded windows and ratty shag carpet. She won't have to go to school and she'd be some company, if I can bring myself to look at her.

"I want to go to school."

I lower my book to look at her. The shabby patchwork dress the neighbor bought her at a yard sale clashes with her now-gamboge splotches. Ridiculously long arms hang nearly to her calves and she's never grown more than three tufts of black hair on her wrinkled head. My God, they will be merciless if she goes to school. They will run away like lambs from wolves, screaming "freak!" or "monster!".

"No, Dana. You wouldn't like it."

Sharp elbows jut out as she places her stick-like fingers on her hips. "How do *you* know? Have *you* ever been to school?"

"Once. A long time ago. It was miserable." That, of course, is an understatement. The little bastards nearly stoned me to death before the teacher intervened. I do not want that for Dana. She deserves better, much better.

"Well, I'm going. Whether you like it or not."

I sigh in defeat. She will soon learn the cruelty of children.

I hunker in my hood, despite the 100-degree weather, as the yellow bus pulls up to the row of mailboxes. Hands on each of Dana's knobby shoulders, I look into her eyes and try to smile.

"If you have trouble, call me. I will come immediately. If they tease you, just call and I will pick you up. You will never have to go again."

"Silly Daddy, what are you worried about?"

She turns, walks to the bus. I spin on my heel so the children won't see me. No need to give them any more ammunition to tease her. We only go out at night, and the only people she's seen are the freaks, the ghouls, the horribly disfigured, and the occasional stoned teenager. Can she handle it? I hear snickers, one girl squeals, another outright screams. I would get her if my feet weren't rooted to the ground in fear. The door snaps closed and the bus drives away. She is gone. I am a coward.

I'm facing the woods where I found her; she was beneath a lichen-covered log with a bunch of grubs. People don't leave their babies under logs. What kind of monster did that to her? She is ugly, but she deserves better than that, much better.

I sit by the phone, the same place I've sat for the past seven hours, waiting for her call. I know she will--it's only a matter of time. I hope something terrible hasn't happened. She should have called hours ago. I glance at the keys hanging like grapes on the *Home Sweet Home* sign next to the door. I've only used them when the shadows of the moon can hide my hideousness. Should I take them, venture out in the day? I've avoided the sun so long; its rays are like flames licking my face. I shudder at the thought of flames, blazes, and infernos. I can't go out there. I'm a lily-livered chicken shit. I will just continue to wait. She will call.

Flip-flops clap up the wooden stairs and I know the shoes are sunny yellow. Just a shade lighter than Dana's spots. The aluminum screen door slams against the wall as she barges in with a smile as big as Texas. A new light is in her eyes, like some hunger has been satiated. I am shocked that it is not a frown and tears.

"Dad! You wouldn't believe my day!"

"Oh?" I furrow my brow and bend my head so she won't have to look at me. She has seen what normal people look like, and I am ashamed of my appearance.

"When I first got to school, the kids were really mean." Her voice quiets, but she loses none of the joy in her eyes. "They said I looked like a freaky bug."

"I told you you wouldn't like it."

"No, it got better." She pulls a rolled-up parchment secured with a red thread of yarn from the same hand-me-down, garage-sale backpack I used as a child.

"What's that?" I eye the thing with the wariness of an old spring bear.

"Mrs. Adams painted it for me."

"Mrs. who?"

"Mrs. Adams. My teacher." Dana unrolls the parchment, smoothing it with her stained palms. "She put her hands to her mouth when she saw me."

In horror, I think, casting down my eyes so they don't deceive me.

"She said I was the most beautiful person she'd ever seen, and she wanted to paint me."

She was just being nice "She painted you?" I am curious, wondering how this Mrs. Adams could paint a flattering picture of Dana. I use my good arm to hoist myself from the indent in my chair. The picture is in watercolor, soft and pure. It's Dana, but something else is there, something in Dana I've not noticed before. Yet, when I look at her after looking at the picture, I see it. Beauty. There is definitely beauty this Mrs. Adams has seen and painted, and it's not just an illusion she's made up to keep from hurting Dana's feelings. She's added nothing to Dana's features, nor has she taken anything away. I cannot take my eyes from it.

"What do you think?"

I inhale deeply and pull my eyes from the watercolor. "It's nice, Dana. Very nice."

The smile falls slightly from her lips. She eyes the painting, and then eyes me. Rolling it up, she stuffs it in her bag and marches back to her room. Had I known she was going to get sick, I would have thought of something better to say.

"You Dana's father?"

I pull my hood almost shut over my face, barely leaving room for my eyes and nose, so that I may look at Mrs. Adams without her having to look at me. Beneath the glow of the hospital's incandescent bulbs, a soft body gives way to a pudgy face framed by a halo of salt and pepper hair. Too much hot-pink lipstick clings to her coffee-stained teeth, but her smile is like the sun setting on the swamp. Her skin is not quite white, not quite brown, and sprinkled with velvety rumples. Her tent shirt needs ironing and her wrinkle-free slacks are wrinkled. She is beautiful.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

She holds out her freckled hand and I take it, shuddering at the melted purple flesh on my own I notice her looking at it, but it's not in horror, nausea, or sick fascination. It's something else, like excitement. She tears her eyes from the hand and studies my face, even though she can only see a little of it.

"How is she doing?"

"They don't understand what's happening to her." I struggle to keep my tone smooth, not cracking. "Her insides are changing. They strapped her to the bed to keep her from curling up in a ball. The doctor said he's never seen anyone like her before."

Mrs. Adams smiles "Neither had I. If you need anything, you call me." She scrawls her number on a crumpled receipt and thrusts it into my hands, closing my fist around it with her fingers. "And I would love to paint your portrait sometime. When you are comfortable with the idea."

I watch through the glass windows as she sits by Dana's side, petting her head and holding her hand. I turn away, shoving the receipt in the pocket of my jeans, not yet ready to see if Mrs. Adams can find beauty in me.

I took Dana home because the doctor's wanted to run a bunch of tests. They brought scientists in crisp white coats and wrapped her room in plastic covered with biohazard warnings. Strong hands pushed me away, saying she never was my daughter, and that I was wrong to not have reported her the minute I found her in those woods six years ago. In the night I took her, wrapped her sweat-drenched body in the hospital sheets and snuck out the fire escape when no one was watching. They all had their backs turned, pouring over charts, x-rays, and laboratory results from all the blood they'd drawn. She deserved better than that, much better.

I couldn't go home because they would have found me, so I went to that place in the woods where I discovered Dana six years ago. I laid her on pine needle litter and she smiled, a thin slash across her mottled face.

"You going to leave that house, Daddy?" She was delirious. "You going to break out of that hood and come into the light of day?" When I didn't answer, she stood, clambered up a tree like a squirrel, and sat while I waited below. She shed the clothes and folded her body into itself, sealing herself into one giant blob, and I could no longer see my daughter. The turquoise shell encasing her hung from the branch she'd climbed to, like some giant caterpillar's cocoon. What Dana used to be was gone.

Wispy fluttering wakes me from my bed of hospital sheets laid over pine boughs, and my eyes dart to Dana's tree. A splash of gamboge and black flashes in the first rays of the rising sun before escaping the canopy. The cocoon stands empty; Dana has left. I climb up the rough bark to the limb where she rested. I touch the empty, paper-thin chrysalis, its wispy parchment crumbling in my fingertips. I grin, so much that it stretches the scarred tissue around my mouth to the point of hurting. I find a well of tears springing up from my core as I look to the sky. I wish I could see how beautiful she must be.

"Where is she?" The doctor in the white coat slams me against the wall of my shack, rattling my teeth and producing an instant bump on my head where it hits the wall. He bares his teeth, his face in anger is as hideous as mine "Where did you hide her, you God-damned freak?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." My heart pounds. I do not care that they see my face, that they call me a freak. I am exhilarated and feel like I'm bursting. "Last time I saw her she was in that hospital bed with a bunch of needles and tubes stuck in her."

"We have video cameras. We know you took her!"

"You must have seen someone else. I'm not her father, remember? I don't care about her anymore." But that's not true. Of course I care about her. I will always care about her. My heart explodes and I am free.

Pushing me to the floor, they stomp out, like soldiers of a genetic army ready to poke and prod, search for the reasons and rhymes of life no matter the consequences. I smile as I watch them slamming the doors to their white minivans. Picking up the phone from its cradle I fish the crumpled fast food receipt from my pocket and dial the number scrawled on it.

"Mrs. Adams? This is Dana's dad. Yes, I am fine. Dana's fine too. No, she escaped the hospital. She's gone now; flew away. Yes, yes. All for the better. Why did I call? Well, I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I was wondering if we could meet somewhere."

I sit on a park bench, watching the monarch butterflies flitting around my head. Children play on the jungle gym like monkeys at the zoo. Some of them stare at me, their mouths open as their mothers shoo them along. I don't mind. One tiny girl with rivers of golden hair smiles shyly and waves. I smile back. The sun shines on my nearly bald head, on the few tufts of hair that remain. I close my eyes, thinking of Dana. I hope wherever she is, she's as happy as I am. When I open my eyes, there is Mrs. Adams with her rumpled skin and her smile like the sun setting on the swamp. She's carrying an easel and a large sketch pad.

"Ready?" she asks.

"Finally," I say.

Rendezvous

By
Jennifer Crow

Lauren MacIlroy scraped two scrambled eggs onto her plate, buttered two slices of toast, and poured herself a glass of orange juice. She carried them to the table, careful as always to step around her husband's ghost. He slumped in a chair, his pale form stained with ephemeral blood.

Her gaze skated past his presence when she sat, and though her silverware chattered a bit against the plate, she thought she did quite well at ignoring Peter. It was typical, she thought. In life, he never argued or raised his voice, just watched her with sad eyes until she came around to his point of view. In death, his broken, accusatory form loomed over the hardwood table like a question mark, the closing punctuation of their marriage.

Lauren ate the last two bites of egg, ignoring the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. In a few moments - as soon as she placed her dirty dishes in the sink - he would vanish. She kept her eyes focused on her plate as she filled its emptiness with the glass and the silverware. Habit allowed her to cross the room without glancing at its other occupant.

In twenty years of marriage, she and Peter had eaten breakfast together almost every morning. That last morning was a notable exception, and Lauren suspected that was the source of Peter's persistence. He'd made one of his rare stubborn gestures, insisting that she stay to eat with him. Had he sensed, somehow, the fleeting opportunity for goodbye? But she, equally obstinate in her way, had blown him a kiss and handed him a list of chores as she went out the door.

It was a friend who had called her on her cell, told her to come home right away. But all the speed in the world changed nothing. Lauren leaned against the sink, her fingers flexing over the stainless steel. She clung to that complete absence of Peter. She was learning to understand it.

"I'm sorry, all right?" She turned, but the chair was empty. No body, no blood.

No Peter.

The rest of the day she could manage; her deceased husband hadn't appeared at work or in the store or under the trees at the park. Lauren found herself constantly watchful, though, in case he decided to expand the horizons of his haunting.

Another morning, and she caught a flush of red on the white tile inlay of the table top. *Red kitchen in the morning, widows take warning*, she thought. And then, *Peter would have laughed at that*.

She missed eating with him, beginning the day with talk of plans, or companionable silence. The rhythm of life had suffered a fatal disruption when that drunk had run a stoplight and ended Peter's life. And it seemed Peter sensed it, too. Why else was he sitting in the kitchen every morning, wordless and unlovely?

"I should have taken the errands that day," she said. She still couldn't bring herself to look. The glass she held chilled her fingers. "Maybe I would have done them in a different order. Maybe I was the one who should have died."

Peter made no answer.

"What do you want?" She'd read somewhere that if one wanted a ghost to go away, that question often worked. And yet - she gave his place a quick sidelong glance, and something like relief crept up on her when she saw Peter's translucent bulk like a shadow.

"What do I want?" The question startled her. She set down the juice and stared at her upside-down reflection in her spoon. "I want Peter back. I want him not to have died."

It was a foolish wish, she knew. She had lived long enough to know that death ended things. And yet . . .

And yet Peter sat across from her, as he had every morning for years. She pushed back from the table. Careful to step around her dead husband's ghost, she took out another plate and set of silverware, another glass. She fixed his breakfast, just as he always liked it, and set it on the table in front of him.

When she settled herself in her seat again, she bowed her head over her cold breakfast and took a deep breath. Once she'd gathered her courage, her hope, she looked up, and into Peter's smiling eyes. His ghost fingers picked up phantom silverware, his ghost teeth chewed spirit toast. They ate together in companionable silence.

And when she cleared the plates, he was gone.

As she scraped remnants of eggs into the garbage disposal, the phone on the counter jangled. Her hand hovered over it a moment before she answered. "Oh, hi, Janet. Fine. No, really."

She listened for a moment, then said, "I'd love to get together - it *has* been too long. Breakfast?" She glanced at the sink, the two dirty plates. "I have plans for breakfast tomorrow. How about lunch?"

The First Casualty

By

Steve Goble

Belar gave scant heed to the carnage around him. This village was nothing to him. Even if he could kill them all, there wasn't vengeance enough in this world to replace his Vella.

Folt, Belar's second-in-command, waved smoke from his eyes as he approached afoot. "All Severn dead or fled, captain," Folt reported. His face was tinged with ash from the burning huts. A smear of blood on his forehead caused Belar to hiss in concern, but Folt wiped it away. The blood was not his own.

"And what of Vatch?" Belar asked, continuing to scan the aftermath of the battle.

"No sign of Prince Vatch," Folt reported, sheathing his sword and summoning his mount.

"Vatch threw away that title, lieutenant, when he married a Severn witch," Belar barked. "I suggest you toss it aside as well."

"Aye, captain." Folt's eyes dropped at the reprimand but lifted again as his steed approached, led by a footman. Folt mounted the powerful, shaggy beast, and Belar noted how the man swelled with the pride only a mounted Skorsman could know.

"Let's purge this place of corpses and assemble the troops, Folt. We'll move upstream a bit, away from the witch stench, before we take our rest."

"Aye, captain." Folt tugged at his steed's mane and turned it toward the tollem that stood at village center. Belar watched in grim satisfaction as footmen set fire to the pole, carved with the faces of false Severn gods.

"May we burn all such from our memories," Belar muttered to himself, and kissed his temple ring.

He prodded his steed to stalk the perimeter of the village. The Severn, typically, had not put up much of a fight. The Severn fought from a distance, with witch spells under the cover of night. They blighted Skor crops, sickened Skor herds, poisoned Skor water. But confront them with strong Skor steel, and they wilted. The Severn had no strong leader, no cohesive battle units, no real discipline.

But they had their witches. Beautiful, exotic, enticing. Young Skorsmen, heedless of training and temple lectures, were lured away by that intoxicating promise, spurred, no doubt, by Severn incantations under the full moon.

It was that mixing of the blood, Skor and Severn, that had prompted the campaign to wipe out the witches. For weeks now, Skorsmen had probed further and further into the Wald Valley, killing witches and destroying their tollems.

Belar watched as the bodies - men, women and babes - were carried to the tollem. Their witch-pole would be a pyre, a final insult because the witches preferred to bury their dead. A detail from Belar's unit would return the handful of Skor dead to Primat, to be burned in a pyre of honor.

Belar watched the flames grow, and took his steed upwind. This had been bloody work, and needful, but the Severn weren't his primary concern. He needed to find Vatch.

Belar noticed a hand clawing at the dirt nearby. One Severn woman, at least, had survived. He rode toward her, and she glanced up through hair tangled with mud and blood.

"Tell me, woman. I seek Vatch, who married Prilla. Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head slowly, and held up a hand in a plea for mercy.

"Tell me where Vatch is, and I may spare you."

"Angen, I believe. He may be in Angen," she said, pressing her face to the ground and crying. "Damn you."

Belar considered whether to kill her. His offer of mercy to a Severn witch meant nothing, and his orders were to let none live. Killing Severn in battle was one thing, but killing a defenseless woman was another. Defenseless ...

He imagined this woman gathering with her weird sisters, dancing nude in the moonlight, calling forth another plague to fester inside the walls of Primat. The last years had been nothing but torment for Belar. He could not bear the thought of another witch-born plague, like the silent thief that had stolen the life of his Vella and his unborn child last snow. The same plague had claimed Vatch's father, King Tromat, along with hundreds of others. Bile rose in Belar's throat.

He leaned forward to whisper into his steed's twitching ear. "Ch'ahala, kill." He did not watch as the great beast dropped its fanged head and snapped its jaws on the woman.

Folt returned to Belar's side. "Captain, the honor detail is set to depart."

"Good. Go with them, Folt, and take word to King Hagath. Tell him his brother may be in Angen. I go there next."

"Aye, captain." Folt smiled wearily. Belar knew the lieutenant would not mind some time away from this bloody campaign. Folt blew on his horn, and the honor detail departed.

"The rest of you, mount and assemble," Belar ordered. "We ride. And may the One let no more witches gather here."

The Skorsmen heeded their captain's orders with a cheer.

The steeds stepped cautiously on the narrow trail. To Belar's right, the hills stretched above, tall grass and snatchthorn providing ample cover for ambush - if only the Severn had the balls and the military sense to take advantage of it. Throughout this campaign, Belar and the other Skor units had met nothing but token resistance. The decimated villages behind him testified to the Severn's futile defense.

But Vatch, once as fierce a Skorsman as Belar had ever seen, could prove dangerous. Belar vowed not to underestimate his enemy. Vatch had grown

up a prince, with all the advantages Primat could offer. Vatch knew the ways of saddle and sword, and he knew how to lead men. If Vatch took command, even the unruly Severn might learn to fight back.

To Belar's left, the hill dropped steeply to the Wald River below. The river's roar and the valley's echo made verbal commands almost useless, and would cover the sounds of ambushers acreeep on the hill above. But Belar could see the scouthawks circling routinely far ahead, and they had seen no sign of trouble.

Behind him, a troop of twenty mounted and forty foot followed. They had feasted on pillaged stag and bread, and they were well rested despite the morning's carnage. The men were in good spirits, a product of discipline, and faith in the One. Again, Belar kissed his temple ring.

The arrows took a quarter of Belar's men before he even knew there had been an attack. A snort from his steed, and its sudden cattish crouch, alerted him to the danger. Belar drew sword and whirled his beast around, expecting attack from the hillside above. Instead, he saw arrows soaring overhead - arrows loosed from the river.

Belar shouted orders even as his yowling steed completed its spin. He grimaced as he realized the archers had chosen their targets well. Nearly all the wounded and dead had been riders. Belar wondered why he had not been hit, and only then noticed the limping gait of his steed. An arrow had pierced Ch'ahala's thigh.

It had been a brilliant ambush — the work of Vatch.

"With me, by the One!" Belar roared as he charged down the steep slope. Ch'ahala made a valiant effort despite her wound. Healthy, the beast would have landed in an easy crouch and bounded to the river's edge before any archer could have strung another arrow. But this time she landed awkwardly, whimpering madly. She fell on her side, her wound spilling blood.

Belar's heart cried to care for the beast, but that would have to wait. Climbing to his feet, he was heartened to see the remaining riders all plunging into the river, where Severn archers stood in water to their waists. Footmen spilled down the slope all around him as arrows flew. Belar joined the surviving footmen and charged into the river.

Swords flashed in the sun. Blood ran on steel. Water churned. Belar, even as he fought, wondered how the Severn archers had eluded the scouthawks. There was no time to puzzle that out, though; his Skorsmen were woefully outnumbered. Only four steeds were in the fight. The others had scattered when their riders fell. Belar cursed aloud; the animals were ignoring their training.

That was not the only surprise of this battle. These Severn fought well, without panic. They had abandoned bows, instead clutching steel and standing their ground when the Skorsmen charged. In every other battle, Severn archers had fled once they'd loosed an arrow or two.

More of Vatch's work, no doubt.

"For the One! For the One!" To Belar, his war cry sounded pitifully weak amid the din of river and the clang of steel and the cries of the dying. The waist-

deep water dragged at his armored legs, and the footing was treacherous. Further out into the river whitewater flowed, raising an unholy roar.

The Wald River carried blood downstream toward Primat, and too much of that blood was Skor.

Belar slew one man, then turned to seek a new target. A witch-man rose from below, spitting water into Belar's face. The next instant, a mace smashed his helmet. Belar spun, out of control and out of his senses, and splashed into the cool, red waters.

He tried to stand, but could not move. A foot came down on his back. Vaguely, he wondered if it were a Skorsman's boot or a witch's sandal. It did not matter, he supposed.

He blurted out a last prayer to the One and was surprised by the bubbles that erupted from his mouth and nose like a thousand bright red suns.

The sound of those rising bubbles, carrying away his life, echoed in Belar's mind. In darkness he listened to them, gurgling, and thought they were asking him questions he could not answer. He struggled to understand them, and slowly came to realize they were not interrogating him.

They were telling him he was alive.

Belar was on his back, on a soft bed. He opened his eyes slowly. He saw a dark-haired woman, stirring a cauldron in a hearth nearby. That, not his blood, was the source of the gurgling. Her back was to him, and Belar reminded himself to keep silent.

He was in a dwelling of some sort. An earthen dwelling, a cave perhaps. Drying roots and herbs hung all around, spilling an odd array of scents into the room.

Belar tried to gauge the distance to the woman, but found he couldn't. He realized his left eye was covered.

He tried to rise, but could not. His arms were bound to rails on both sides of the bed. His ankles were similarly bound.

His chest hurt, and his head pounded. He rustled in his bed, testing the restraints, and was surprised to feel the tickle of the shaggy hide that covered him. His clothes were gone.

"So, you wake." The woman stood over him, although Belar had not heard her move. Her dark eyes burned with anger, and a grainbird's claw dangled from a strip of leather around her neck.

A witch, Belar realized. He silently asked the One to forgive his failure at the Wald.

He blinked, and the witch was gone. He shook as violently as he could, trying to free at least an arm, but the effort caused him great pain. Spent, he exhaled loudly and relaxed his muscles. His nerves remained at full tension.

"A Skor commander," a male voice said. "Taken by witches. Surprising turn of events for you, I suppose?"

Belar looked toward the entrance. A tall, fair man dressed in hides strolled toward him. "Vatch," Belar said.

"Indeed. And you are Belar, if I recall. Of the Pride."

Belar said nothing.

Vatch pulled a stool by the bed, and sat down near Belar's head. "You are lucky to have lived."

"Lucky to be a witch's prisoner? I'd rather have died," Belar said.

Vatch grinned, and shook his head. "How they make men like you ..." He sighed. "Two of your footmen fished you out of the water. They carried you almost to the bank before my men fell on them and cut them down."

"How many ..." Belar almost was afraid to ask.

"Survivors? A handful of Skor escaped, I believe. Most of the pride-beasts will return to Primat on their own, I suppose. But you alone were brought here."

"Alone ... among witches."

The woman brought a wooden ladle to Vatch, who took it and bowed his head in thanks. She bent to kiss him, her breasts dangling obscenely within her loose tunic. Vatch kissed her voraciously. When he was done, she cooed at him like a bird. Vatch smiled.

Once she stood erect again, Vatch lowered the ladle to Belar's mouth. "Drink this."

The fluid within was warm and smelled like soup. Belar turned his head to refuse it, but Vatch did not remove the ladle. "It's lichen-root. It will keep you alive."

"Lichen! Witch-root! An evil brew!" Belar held his breath to avoid the aroma.

Vatch laughed. "Your head wound is soaked with the stuff, has been for days. And for all the crowing of your priests, they, too, have been seen collecting lichen-root in the valley. Your priests would do well to share their knowledge with the people, instead of doling out only what they see fit."

Belar screamed. "Release me!"

Vatch turned to the woman and gave her the ladle. "He'll be hungry soon enough. Keep it hot." He returned his gaze to Belar. "You'll stay here."

"A prisoner ..." Belar groaned.

"You could be a corpse."

Belar breathed deep. "Why didn't you kill me?"

Vatch sighed. "Call my mercy an attempt, probably in vain, to save lives."

"You butcher my unit, then talk of saving lives?"

Vatch stood, anger reddening his face. "You are a warrior, Belar. Men die in war. On both sides. Both sides!"

"Which makes me wonder all the more why I am still alive. I know it's not so you can arrange a hostage exchange."

Vatch glared. "You've taken no hostages." He closed his eyes tight, took a deep breath, and smiled warily. "Ever the warrior, aren't you Belar? Even strapped like a calf for sacrifice, you bait me with words, trying to draw me out, trying to make me show a weakness."

Belar tried to hide his alarm at the word "sacrifice." Apparently, he failed, for Vatch's smile widened.

"You think we are going to string you up, dance naked around your body and blood you like a calf?" He laughed. "My, your priests have filled your head

with pretty tales!" Vatch paced and rubbed his eyes. "I've told you, I'm trying to save lives. The gods know I started too late."

"Do not speak of your false gods to me," Belar warned.

Vatch turned and stared at him, as though he were a puzzle. "I don't know how to do this. You won't believe anything I need to tell you."

"A lie is a witch's tool," Belar said.

"And a priest's. And a king's. You pushed further up the valley than any other unit. You came specifically for me, true?"

It was Belar's turn to smile. "You know I'll tell you nothing about my mission."

"You need not. My brother ascended to the throne, and he fears I will dispute his claim. That's the reason for your purge."

"I see you've begun shaping an army," Belar retorted. "That river ambush, no Severn tactic, that."

Vatch sighed. "I should have begun forming an army as soon as word reached me that father had died. So many deaths, because I did not want to believe Hagath would turn butcher ..."

"He had to," Belar said accusingly. "People, cattle dying with fever, spitting blood. Witch spells killing innocents."

"Witch spells turned on Primat? You believe that?"

"People in Primat die, cattle die, crops wilt. But Severn people thrive, Severn cattle thrive, Severn crops thrive. Explain that, witch-husband!"

Vatch sat. "The Severn survive the same way your priests survive. We take the lichet-root. We feed it to our cattle. We cultivate it. It's very strong medicine. Ask your priests. They know the truth, even if they won't speak it."

Belar stared. "Why would the priests lie ..."

"Why not? Skor children are indoctrinated at birth to never question authority, to do what they are told. The priests decide who fights, who shovels dung, who raises children. Their tools are your ignorance, and your fear. Fear of the Severn."

Belar shook his head. "You haven't an ounce of true Skor blood left in you. You've tossed all, for this witch wench of yours."

Vatch leaned close and whispered. "She's worth all that I have, and more. Belar, I've trained fighters only to defend this valley from the likes of you. I have a long way to go, and I don't know if I can build a defense faster than you can destroy us. I don't want a war, and I don't want Hagath's throne."

"Don't tell me that; I know better. To rule Primat ..."

"I left Primat three years ago, for reasons of my own. I love Prilla. I have come to love these people, this life."

"You prefer a smelly cave to the throne of Primat?"

Vatch laughed. "Difficult for a man like you to grasp, I know. But it is true. I learned too much during my training at the hands of priests to ever love Primat."

"And so you worship false gods?"

Vatch sighed. "The Severn see a god in every tree, every stream. I can't recall half the names. And, when I'm frightened, I still call on the One. Out of habit. I don't really expect the One is listening. Or that it matters that much."

Belar wished he could cover his ears. "You blaspheme ..."

"I've been doing it a lot," Vatch shrugged. "Yet never a lightning bolt."

"Blasphemy!"

"Belar, I've seen men pray to your god and die, I've seen men here pray to hundreds of gods and die. And I've seen blasphemers prosper, or die. It makes no difference, as far as I can tell.

"But the Severn live real lives, Belar. If they want to farm, they farm. Hunters hunt. Artisans train those who want to learn, not those told to learn. They are more suspicious than a soldier who musters out tomorrow, yet they know joy. Who in Primat knows joy?"

Belar seethed. "Joy? When witch plagues kill hundreds?"

Vatch stood again. "Think, Belar. If we could command plagues, would we let you burn village after village? Would we hide beneath the river waters, breathing through reeds, waiting with bow and steel to fight you man to man? Why didn't we just burn some roots, chant some spells and turn you all into pond-jumpers?"

"You deny the magic?"

Vatch laughed. "Oh, no. We ensorceled your scouthawks, I admit. And scattered your pride-beasts. Beasts are easy to spell. And Severn women swear by their ointments, and their love philtres. Our crops are good, and for all I know the ceremonies and dances help. But commanding plagues, and killing innocents, it goes against all these people hold dear."

"What they hold dear is the land at river-mouth, where Primat holds sway over trade. They covet our riches, our ..."

"Covet?" Vatch stood wide-jawed. "They pity you! They feel sorry for you, being told what to believe, when to eat, when to mate. They covet nothing you have. Belar, it was all I could do to persuade these people to train for their own defense. Warfare, organization, laws ... it's all nothing to them. Every village has its own customs. There must be a hundred different spells for simply making a mutt come home. And there have been, I don't know, hundreds of moondances aimed at halting your armies. None of those worked." Vatch stared at Belar, hard. "So I brought you here."

Belar spoke through clenched teeth. "To what end?"

Vatch pulled a knife from his pocket. Belar saw the sharp blade, recognized it as good Skor steel.

"To what end?" he asked. "Why, to release you." He cut the leather strap that held Belar's left hand.

"Release?"

"Yes." Vatch cut the strap on Belar's left leg. "I've healed you. You'll even have use of that eye again. I'll give you some lichee-root, if you'll take it. Just chew it raw. Or make a brew of it. It will help. You may remain here until you feel more able. Or you may go, I don't care. You'll be treated well throughout this village, and no one will harm you here."

He moved to the other side of the bed, and cut the bonds there. "When you wish to return to Primat, tell me. I'll escort you through the valley myself. You will go home again, Belar."

Belar gasped. "I do not understand."

"You'll probably never understand." Vatch returned the knife to his pocket. "But I'll take you home. We'll have to ride forries, we Severn have no pride-beasts."

Belar rose slowly. His back hurt. "We're bound to run into Skorsmen. They'll kill you on sight."

Vatch held his breath for a few seconds. "Will my death stop the campaign against the Severn?"

Belar shook his head. "No."

Vatch sighed. "Then I hope you'll grant me safe passage among your men, as I do for you among the Severn."

Belar climbed out of the bed, slowly, wondering if some trap were about to spring. "Why free me?"

Vatch grew irritated. "Go home, Belar. Tell people what happened to you. That we had you in our witchy clutches and let you go unharmed. That I don't want the throne of Primat. I've too much to live for here."

Belar walked toward the outcast prince. "I want to leave now."

"Fine. You should eat the lichee."

"No."

They walked out of the room side by side. At the end of a long hall, they emerged in a sunlit clearing. The Wald River, wider and calmer this far upstream, flowed quietly. Between Belar and the river, dozens of huts stood. Children skipped around the tollem, chanting.

A bit downstream, Belar saw the white markers of the buried dead. Three stood at the heads of fresh mounds. Small mounds, he thought. He looked at Vatch.

"Children," Vatch said, "killed by the same fever that haunts Primat. Most of us seem to be safe, but the lichee does not work for all."

Belar's good eye searched the town. "This is the biggest Severn village I've seen."

"There are hundreds of villages like this further up the valley," Vatch said. "Severn breed like rabbits. You'd be surprised how quickly a people can grow when the breeding is left to nature and desire, not to a priest's timetables and orders."

He stared at Belar, and his face grew deadly serious. "We outnumber you by degrees you can't imagine, Belar. Your priests know it, and that's why they fear us. They fear the mixing of our peoples, the loss of their hold on authority. If I have to organize an army and drive Primat into the sea, that's what I'll do. But I've no wish to do that. Tell my brother that, once I've gotten you back to Primat."

Belar gawked as a young woman brought his clothes, and his weapons. She knelt politely and held the bundle while he removed his britches from the pile. Her face put him in mind of someone ... Vella. Not a true likeness, but the smile was like Vella's. And the hair spun like hers, though darker.

"What is your name, girl," Belar asked as he donned the britches.

“Brennal. My name is Brennal.” It was clear that she feared him, and she gulped when he took the sword instead of the tunic. Weapon in hand, Belar felt the old courage rising.

“I could slay you now,” Belar said to Vatch.

“Yes, you could,” Vatch said. “It would be a mistake. With one stroke you can kill thousands of people. Many of them yours.”

“Without you to lead them ...”

“They’d be lost,” Vatch said. “That’s why I haven’t considered turning myself over to Hagath. But I’ve taught enough of them to do you some genuine damage, even if I’m gone, and enough of them know what’s at stake to keep up the fight. No more easy prey.”

Belar held the sword at ready for four heartbeats. Then he rammed its point into the ground. “I’ll not kill you.”

Vatch sighed. “That is well-thought.”

“I’ll not kill you ... today,” Belar added, reaching for his tunic. He stared at Vatch. “You’ve thought of surrender?”

“If I thought it would save my family, I might ... but, I’m selfish, too. I’ve much to live for.”

Two lads had brought the saddled, shaggy forries by the time Belar had finished dressing.

“I’ve ordered lichee packed, just in case your wisdom grows, Belar.” Vatch pointed to a small sack tied to the saddle.

Belar stared at Vatch. “I don’t know if you are a fool, or a sage. Or if you’ve bespelled me.”

“Probably a fool,” Vatch said. “Shall we ride?”

Belar looked over the disgusting mounts. “Just the two of us?”

“Yes. I go with you. I’ll not send my men any closer to Primat than I must. Unless I someday have to send all of them.”

Belar sighed, and climbed aboard the forrie. “I don’t trust you, Vatch. But you have remembered at least a bit of your Skor honor, and treated me well. I will convey your message to Hagath. It will not stop the assaults ...”

Belar paused to look around him. He was surrounded by Severn faces. He saw fear. He saw anger. He saw curiosity. He saw a baby spitting up.

“Stay with your people, Vatch. I’ll ride alone. There are more of my men downstream than yours. I’ll be safe enough.” He spurred the forrie into a slow trot. No one spoke as he departed.

The shaggy mount seemed to know its task, and Belar’s mind was able to wander. He could not separate truth from lies, witchcraft from experience. Truth, to Belar, had always been what the priests said it was. Perhaps that still was true. Perhaps not. Whether sorcery had clouded his mind or whether Vatch had lifted a veil of lies, Belar found himself wandering in doubt. And in pain.

His head pounded. He glanced at the sack tied at his saddle horn. But he would not reach into that sack.

He followed the river until he neared the ambush site. The dead were everywhere. He asked the One to welcome their souls.

A hiss of breath caught his attention. A footman, young, crawled out of the water and tried to stand. His ripped tunic revealed a nasty gash across his chest. Mud filled the wound. The young soldier fell onto his face, and Belar was beside him in an instant.

“What is your name, son?” Belar got no answer as he rolled the footman onto his back. Belar’s fingers scraped mud from the wound, and fear filled him as his fingers revealed the depth of the injury. “The One has shown you mercy, lad, to keep you alive thus until help came.”

He said it, even though he knew there was precious little he could do. This soldier would die, like the others. Still, Belar ran to the forrie and took a flask of clean water from the saddle bag.

His eye fell again on the bag of litchet-root, and he realized he no longer knew what to believe. He’d been raised to believe the priests of Primat and until this moment had done so without question. Vatch had tried to throw doubt into all Belar knew, but could Vatch be trusted? Vatch was a prince, raised on intrigue and a master of it.

Belar, confronted now with a dying soldier, realized he knew nothing for certain. The discovery shook him. He heard the young soldier moan, and sighed himself. He removed the litchet-root from the saddle horn. Kneeling beside the footman, Belar soaked the wound with clean water. Then he poured a handful of the musty root into his hand.

Belar took a deep breath. He was a soldier; this new uncertainty was merely another wall to breach. He would learn truth himself, with no more help from priests or renegade princes. The liars, whoever they proved to be, would pay.

“May the One forgive me,” he said, rubbing the litchet-root into the footman’s wound.

Seven-Ten Split

By
Tim Mulcahy

At the time, I had no idea what I was doing in the cab. A cop named Tom Bennigan called, forcefully requesting my presence at the Midtown Lanes. I could barely stand the soft hum of the cab's electric motor. Scotch hangovers were the worst.

I was concentrating on the pain gnawing at the inside of my right eye when a high pitched tone blasted my brain. "Jack Kerouac!" I said.

"Did you see that son of a bitch?" the cab driver said.

"Two cars on the whole road and you to idiots have to cut each other off."

"He should watch where he's going."

I looked down at the floor of the cab and rubbed my temples. Days like this, I wished my great grandmother stayed on Earth instead of coming to this god forsaken planet.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the Big Rock hadn't hit the southern continent on the other side. They said there was six months of dark, followed by a month of snow. In the end there wasn't much of a colony left. If it hadn't been for the Emperor and the Shamans we probably all would have checked out.

The instant the cab hit the bump I knew my battle with nausea was over. The prior night's dinner, and whatever my stomach was using to digest it, shot out of my mouth.

"Hey, cut that out," the cab driver shouted.

I gagged again and spit on the floor one more time before looking up. It was my favorite defiant look.

"Get out of my cab." The car pulled over to the curb.

It was only a half a block to the alley so I figured it was a good time to get out. I stepped out of the cab and flipped the guy a token.

"No tip? Come on mister, look at my cab."

"Next time keep your mouth shut." I turned and started walking up the street. The driver said something to my back, probably a curse, before driving off.

Midtown Lanes were inside a big gray, stone building. A wide stairway led to a landing guarded by large Ionic columns. There were several cops blocking the entrance.

"Can't go in," one of the cops said.

"I was called."

"By who?"

"Guy named Bennigan."

"You the Emperor's Champion?" he asked.

"That's me."

"You look like shit."

"I feel worse. You going to let me in or should I go home?"

The guy stepped aside. I grabbed the iron ring on the heavy oak door. Despite the mass, the door was well balanced and the door opened easily.

Every five years the Emperor held a tournament to identify the greatest bowler in Altman. The winner was said to be in god's favor and was basically given the keys to the city.

On one level it was a pretty good deal if you're the winner. Losing was another story. Everyone in the tournament who didn't win, *i.e.* everyone but me, got the electric chair. I lost a lot of friends in my last tournament.

I stepped into the lobby and handed my coat to the attendant. At the far end I saw more plainclothes cops milling around in a wide circle.

One of the cops broke himself free from the pack and came towards me. He was tall, wearing a gray double-breasted suit and a fedora. The thing that struck me about the guy was how thin and white he was, like an albino that had been dead for a bit, long enough for most of the fat to have rotted off his frame.

"Tom Bennigan," he said.

"Alec Turec," I said. I shook the guy's hand. He had a strong grip for a guy who looked like he belonged in a coffin.

"Thanks for coming down."

"What can I do for you?"

"Could you tell me where you were last night?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Routine question. Is there some reason you don't want to tell me?"

My hangover had worn off just enough for me to be scared, but not enough to keep me from being a smartass. "I was in bed with my girlfriend," I said.

Bennigan took out his notebook and pen. "And her name is?"

"Hermione Gold." He looked up at me. I was smiling. He was not. "Come on, it's a joke."

"So you were alone then," Bennigan said.

"But I was drunk. That must count for something."

Bennigan folded his notebook and put it back in his breast pocket. "Come with me." He turned and walked up the lane, assuming I would follow.

I hesitated when I reached the foul line. Even after being out of the game for a year and a half, the thought of crossing that line seemed abhorrent to me. Of course there was also the conditioning from an early age, also known as beatings.

"Mr. Turec?"

I looked up to see Bennigan watching me. By then the crowd of cops had cleared away from the body.

Reamus was lying on his side, his head was in the gutter. He was wearing his maroon velour shirt and black leather pants. His afro wig was off to the side along with a shattered Fender Stratocaster.

I knelt down and placed my fingertips on the lane. It hadn't been oiled yet. Reamus was probably in the middle of his Monterrey Pop Ritual when he died.

"Amazing," I said, fascinated by the corpse of a man who had almost been a friend.

"Why?" Bennigan asked.

"Reamus was blessing a match. You don't fuck with a Shaman at all, hell you don't even go into an alley when he's in the middle of his ritual, but to do him when he's in the middle of it risks bringing all kinds of bad mojo down on your head."

"We figure he was killed by bowling a ball," Bennigan said.

Reamus looked like he was hit more than once. His nose and cheekbones were smashed. There were teeth scattered around the gutter and on the adjoining lane.

"Care to let me in on why you asked me down here?"

"Not here," he said. I followed Bennigan to the far end of the alley. He took up position at the one pin, I stood in front of the six. "The Emperor requires a favor."

For the briefest instant I toyed with the idea of running. Reality slammed down on that one real fast. The star was called Altman, the planet, Altman Three, and the only city on the whole fucking rock was also named Altman, short for Alternate Manhattan. It was the only city. The bottom line was that there was no place else to go.

In the old days, the Emperor's Champion acted as a liaison between the Emperor and the Guitar Shamans. I don't know why they needed a liaison but they apparently did. After awhile, the job became ceremonial.

"And what is the Emperor's bidding?" I asked.

Bennigan waited for a second, probably trying to figure out if I was being sarcastic. I half was. "The Emperor would like you to search Mr. Rudolph's apartment." Rudolph was Reamus's name before he was elevated to Shaman.

Every smartass comment I ever had a hope of thinking of was sucked right out of my head. I just stood there in front of the cop with a blank expression on my face.

"Why me?" I finally asked.

"You are the Emperor's Champion."

"Yeah, I know that but—"

"And it's your job to act as liaison between the Emperor and Shamans."

"Yeah but shouldn't I be talking to a live Shaman?"

"It's not necessary."

"Not—"

"We'd prefer they not know you went in."

"What if they find out?" I was already sorry I asked that question.

"They might kill you."

"Might?"

"The rules aren't exactly clear."

"There's a rule book? If there is, I'd sure like to get a look at it."

“More like tradition,” Bennigan said. He looked down the alley at the rest of the cops who were drawing chalk lines around Reamus, taking pictures, and doing general cop shit.

“So, let me get this straight, if I go into Reamus’s apartment, the Shamans might kill me.”

“Right.”

“But if I don’t go, the Emperor will definitely kill me.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, that just sucks,” I said.

Bennigan shrugged and gave me a thin-lipped smile that made him look even more like a skull.

“What do you want me to look for?” I asked after a few seconds.

“Word has it that Reamus kept a diary. We want you to find it.”

“I see. What’s in this diary?”

“You don’t need to know, just find it.”

“Do you know what it looks like?”

“Black leather.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah that’s it. You think you can handle that?”

I wasn’t sure what Bennigan was getting at. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

The cop looked down at my hands.

I noticed that they were shaking. “I need a drink,” I said.

“You think you should?”

“I think I’m entitled, want to come?”

“I’ll pass,” Bennigan said. He turned back to the body.

The alley bar was a long rectangular beast with all the booze loaded up in the center. It was made of some kind of cheap wood; I think they called it mahogany.

Back when they first colonized this place, some idiot planted mahogany trees modified for the cold weather. I guess they thought they were pretty or something. Well, the things started growing like weeds. I heard somewhere that mahogany was slow growing on Earth. Not here. It’s everywhere and a real bitch to cut down.

I sat down on a stool made of mahogany, of course, covered in green leather.

“And what can I get for the Emperor’s Champion?” the bartender asked.

“Don’t be an asshole, Billy, get me a scotch.”

Billy grabbed a thick tumbler and dipped it in a bin of ice. Then he turned and grabbed a bottle from the top shelf.

“Thanks,” I said. I reached for my wallet.

“Your money’s no good here, you know that,” Billy said.

I took a sip of scotch. The burn was still there but Billy gave me the good stuff. It didn’t quite feel like razor blades going down.

A sound near the front door distracted me from my drink. It was a woman, very classy looking, black hair, blue eyes, wearing a charcoal gray business suit with a skirt that was just above the knees. The look was finished by matching close-toed pumps.

"Who's that?" I asked Billy.

"You don't recognize her?"

"Should I?"

"That's Eva Reardon."

"Get out, little Eva?"

"Not so little anymore," the bartender said.

Eva spotted me from the shoe rental desk. She locked onto my eyes and held them as she walked over. "What are you drinking?" she asked.

"Scotch, want some?"

"Sure."

"You're looking good: I didn't recognize you when you first walked in. What's it been, five years?"

"Seven."

Billy brought Eva's drink over.

She lifted it and toasted the air between us before taking a sip. Her red lips opened over the glass, allowing the scotch to flow in between her teeth. A line of lipstick was left on the glass as she put it down on the bar.

I'd first met Eva during her year of transition. According to *On the Road*, fifteen-year-old girls had to do their duty as Mexican prostitutes.

"What brings you here?" I asked. Eva turned and looked at the gaggle of cops milling around Reamus's body. She lifted her drink and pointed her index finger in that direction while she took a sip.

"Got a call from some cop, Bennigan I think."

"Yeah, he called me too."

"You know what's going on?" Eva asked.

"You hear about Reamus?"

"No."

I pointed to the group cops standing around Reamus's body. "He's dead."

Eva's expression went blank. For a second I thought she was going to drop her glass. Instead she took a sip, closed her eyes and swallowed.

When Eva opened them again she looked directly at me. There was a hardness to her I wasn't sure I liked. "How'd it happen?" she asked.

"Somebody bashed his head in with a ball."

"They know who?"

"Not that they told me," I said. I noticed Bennigan out of the corner of my eye coming over.

"Miss Reardon?" Bennigan said.

"Yes."

"I'm Inspector Bennigan, thanks for coming down."

"Did I have a choice?"

"Not really. I see you met Mr. Turec."

"We know each other," she said. "What do you want?"

Bennigan looked at me before pulling out his notebook. I got the sense that the thing was a source of comfort to him.

"According to our sources, you and Mr. Rudolph were ..."

"Involved," Eva said after a couple of seconds of dead air.

"Yes, involved," Bennigan said.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"I don't know if Mr. Turec told you—"

"That Reamus is dead?"

"Yes."

"He did."

"We'd like you to go with Mr. Turec to Mr. Rudolph's apartment."

"Why?"

"We asked him to find something for us. You might be of assistance."

"What is it?" Eva asked.

"We need find Reamus's diary," I said.

"I can't go into his apartment," Eva said.

"You've been there before," Bennigan said.

"Not when he's not there. I mean, without permission ..."

"You'll have the Emperor's Champion with you," Bennigan said.

Eva looked at me. She didn't need to say a word, her expression said it all: drunk, loser, has-been. I never felt so much like a piece of shit in my life as I did at that moment. I think what bothered me more than the look was the realization that, at some level, she was right.

After the tournament there really wasn't anything left to prove. It wasn't just the accomplishment, it was the way I did it, beating Jimmy Flaherty by hitting the seven-ten split in the tenth frame. But it wasn't just that, it was what happened after, watching Jimmy's face fall as the pin went down, how his eyes darted around when the guards came for him

"Good ball," was all he said to me as they led him away.

When I was a kid, I actually believed the game was magic, that some new world would open up to me if I won. That ended when I watched the guards drag Jimmy away.

Like everyone else, I read *On the Road* when I was young. After the tournament, I went back to it, several times in fact. It came across as silly, self-absorbed and pointless, not the same book I read as a child. There were no hidden meanings that I could see. Maybe that's why I started drinking.

"Fuck it," I said. I downed the rest of my scotch and got up. "You coming?" I said to Eva.

Most of the Shamans lived in the Village, next to Downtown. Downtown was the dead part of Altman. The part where the skyscrapers were, buildings that we no longer knew how to build or even maintain. Their skeletons adorned the skyline as a stark reminder of what the place was like before the Big Rock.

Shamans did two things besides blessing matches. They interpreted *On the Road* and they dug. They went into Downtown when no one else would and

started rooting around. Pretty much all of the tech we have since the Big Rock was salvaged by the Shamans.

Reamus lived on the top floor of a red brick three story walk-up. The stairway was dark, lit by a single bare bulb. I started up the stairs. The wood creaked with each step.

"Wait here while I find a light." I fumbled around in the darkness for minute. "Ow. Something wobbled, then hit the floor with a deep thud.

"You all right?"

"Found a light." I picked up the lamp and turned it on.

The apartment looked like someplace an old man would live. Every bookcase was full and books overflowed onto the floor. Then there were all the knick-knacks, glass statues, broken pieces of furniture.

Eva started snooping around the pad. I watched as she grabbed a book, thumbed through it, set it down, then moved on to another. It was as if she was remembering the stuff.

"What was Reamus to you?" I asked.

She stopped over a white paper pamphlet. It was old, the edges of the pages yellowed. "League Rules of Bowling."

"What?"

"That's what this pamphlet says."

"I wonder if that's what they used to call the Bowler's Guild," I said.

"I don't think so."

"I'll go check the bedroom," I said. Eva intercepted me on the way.

"No, let me."

I decided to check out the kitchen. There were books in there also, on the floor, the kitchen table, even on the countertop. I wondered whether ever Reamus ate.

As I walked to the refrigerator I noticed something odd about the kitchen table. It was made out of mahogany, a big, heavy, clunky thing. More like a desk than a kitchen table. I didn't notice the drawer at first, maybe because there was no handle. I reached under the table and put my right hand flat on the bottom and pulled it open. A black leather notebook and a couple of fountain pens were inside.

When I looked up I noticed Eva standing at the entrance to the kitchen.

"Find anything?" she asked.

"I think I found it."

"Good, can we get out of here? I'm getting the willies."

"Find anything in the bedroom?"

"Just more books."

Eva seemed freaked. I wondered if it was a good idea to let her go into the bedroom. It might have brought back memories or something.

The evening mist had settled into a fog. It was cool and the dampness settled on my cheeks and the tip of my nose.

Eva was more rattled than I thought. I suggested we stop for a drink. The cab dropped us at the Red Lioness. Mind you, I had never seen a lion, or a

lioness for that matter. The only way we knew they existed was because of the Shamans. Jack knows, there was nothing in *On the Road* about lions.

Eva ordered a martini. I stuck with the scotch. Our drinks arrived, and we each took sips, without bothering to toast.

"Hell of a night," I said.

She shrugged and took another sip of her drink. I guess neither one of us felt much like talking. For my part, I couldn't help wondering what was so important about the diary that I had to risk my life to get it.

I knew there always was tension between the Shamans and the Emperor but this seemed extreme. I had been holding the diary as if my life depended on it, since leaving Reamus's apartment. I lifted it to the bar and put my hand on the cover. I was about to open it when I noticed Eva looking at me.

Her eyes were locked onto me with that same hard expression I noticed in the bowling alley. It seemed to soften when she noticed me looking back.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I guess this whole thing's starting to get to me," she said.

"I'm not surprised."

Eva smiled and took another sip of her drink. Her eyes fell to the diary. "What do you think it says?" she asked.

"Got me."

"You think I could hold it? I mean, I was wondering if Reamus might have said anything about me in his diary."

It sounded reasonable. I was about to slide the diary down the bar to her when I remembered that look. Something about it made me hold back. It wasn't that I didn't trust Eva. In truth, I didn't. I didn't know her. What held me back was the realization that Bennigan would probably pop me if I didn't turn the book over to him.

"I better not."

"Why not?" Eva asked.

"If you must know, I'm afraid to let the thing go until I give it to Bennigan. I suspect the guy will pop me if I don't turn it over to him.

"You going to call him?" Eva asked.

"Probably as soon as I finish this drink," I said.

We finished our drinks. Eva suggested we have another, then another. By the third drink I had calmed down quite a bit. I noticed Eva was a lot looser also.

It wasn't just that Eva was gorgeous, though there was that. We started talking about the old times, her transition, time she spent as an apprentice bowler. I was surprised to learn that Eva was accepted into the Guild and was eligible for the next tournament.

Things starting getting intimate. At one point she put her head on my shoulder. Finally, Eva put her hand on my forearm. "Listen ..."

"Yeah."

"I live near here," she said.

"And?" One of two things was coming. Eva was either blowing me off or about to invite me up to her apartment. To my surprise, I hoped it was the latter. It was.

Like Reamus, Eva lived in a three story walk-up. The biggest difference was that this one was kept-up better, lots of lights and stairs that didn't creak when you stepped on them.

For an instant I thought about asking her where she got the scratch to pay for the place. That thought left my mind as she closed the door. Her arms flew around my neck and she pressed her lips to mine. I dropped the diary.

Our fucking was somewhere between rutting animal and gentle love. In the end, I was lying in her dark bedroom, only the light of a single street lamp streamed in past the open white curtains. Eva was lying next to me asleep.

As usual, in quiet moments of relative sobriety, I found myself thinking. My thoughts that night were dangerous. I knew that, yet I couldn't stop thinking them. No matter what direction I turned, my mind seemed to beam into the diary lying on Eva's living room floor.

For a moment I thought of waking Eva, but it would be just another escape, like the booze. Instead, I got up.

The diary was lying on a gray area rug, bathed in the glow of a high street light shining in through the window. I grabbed the book and sat down on the sofa.

At first I couldn't open it. I rubbed my hands over the leather, as if I was trying to channel some insight into the writing, maybe looking for an invitation to read. If I'd been smart I would have handed the book over to Bennigan unopened and been done with it. I didn't. I sat there, reading, for the next three hours.

My trance was broken by the sound of movement in the bedroom. A few minutes later, Eva walked out. She was wearing a white chiffon robe, tied closed. The robe came down to the top of her thighs.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"Sure."

"You all right?"

There must have been something in the way I looked at her. "Fine," I said.

While Eva made coffee I continued to thumb through the diary. There was no way I was able to read it all. Instead I scanned, picked sections and compared.

"What were you doing all night?" Eva asked from the kitchen.

"Reading."

"The diary?"

"Yeah."

"Coffee will be up in a minute." Eva sat down on the couch next to me. I couldn't help noticing that her robe opened a bit as she sat down. "You sure that was such a good idea?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's Shaman stuff, how do you know what it even means? You could get the wrong idea."

"Well, I definitely got some ideas," I said.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"Want to hear them?" I asked.

“Not really.”

“Please. I needed to talk this out.”

She sighed. “If you must.”

“Okay, here goes. First of all, everything we believe is bullshit.” It took me all night, but I finally managed to spit it out.

Eva leaned back, pulled away. “Don’t say that.” She looked around her apartment as if someone were listening.

“I mean bowling has nothing to do with the ancient Mayan ball game.”

“No?”

“The Emperor must have made that one up.”

“Don’t say any more.” Eva seemed almost frantic. “I don’t think you should read any more.” She reached across my lap for the diary.

“What are you doing?” I grabbed the diary and pulled it away.

“That thing is dangerous. You shouldn’t be reading it. Let me give it to him.”

“Stop.” I pushed her away.

She knelt on other end of the couch glaring at me. Eva talked like she was afraid but the expression she wore looked more like anger.

“What now?”

“Call Bennigan I guess.”

“You’re sure?”

“No, but I don’t know what else to do.”

She tied her robe and went into the kitchen to make breakfast. I went into her bedroom and found my pants. Bennigan’s card was in it.

An hour later I was back on the street looking for a cab.

It was a sunny morning, a rare event in Altman. There was an orange hue on the buildings and sidewalks. I turned right toward Sixth Avenue. At the corner I saw a Shaman leaning against the wall. He was a negro. I recognized the guy. His name was Lou Cerrano, Claymore was his Shaman name.

“Claymore,” I said, greeting the Shaman.

“What kind of game you playing at?”

“Not sure what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You know god damn well. Where the fuck you get off going into Reamus’s apartment?”

“It was at the Emperor’s request.”

“That don’t mean nothing to the Shamans. You want to go traipsing into our shit you got to come through us.”

“I’m not sure the Emperor sees it that way,” I said. I never saw a Shaman get angry before.

Claymore looked at the diary I was carrying. “What do you think?”

“I think I’m in way over my head,” I said.

“That’s the first smart thing you said. You best turn that over to me. I doubt the Emperor would be too happy with your reading list.”

“Just have to risk it, I guess,” I said. There was a cab coming down the street. I flagged it down. As I opened the door to get in I felt a hand on my arm.

“You know, you keep going like this, you’re going to have to choose a side.”

“Between who?”

“I think you know.”

Bennigan told me to meet him at the Midtown Lanes. He stepped out from behind the bar. “You found it?”

“Yeah, I found it.”

“Excellent, the Emperor will be pleased. Bennigan reached out to take the diary.

I hesitated.

“Don’t be stupid, Turec.” The cop took another few steps closer.

Light from the street entered the alley as the front door opened. Bennigan and I turned just in time to see Eva walk in.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“He’s been reading things he shouldn’t have,” Eva said as she walked up next to Bennigan.

“Glad you could make it,” Bennigan said.

“I bet you are,” Eva said. “Apparently our champion’s been doing some deep thinking.”

“Deep thinking?” Bennigan said.

“Yeah, I liked him better when he was a drunk.”

“It’s not polite to talk about someone in front of them,” I said. “You work for him?”

“The Emperor, actually, we all work for the Emperor, even you,” Eva said.

“Seems your involvement’s a bit more direct,” I said. I started backing down the alley.

“What’s he know?” Bennigan asked.

“Way too much,” Eva said.

“So, you’re a spy?” I asked.

“I like operative,” Eva said. “How do you think I could afford that apartment?”

“So, it wasn’t budding love,” I said.

“Please, you’re a drunk.”

“Well, this is all very interesting,” Bennigan said, “but it really does beg the question. Does he have the code or not?”

“I don’t know,” Eva said.

They both looked at me. Bennigan pulled out his pistol. “Well, Mr. Turec, I guess the first question is whether you even know what we’re talking about.”

I didn’t answer, instead I flipped the diary open. “If I tell you, what happens?”

“You remain in the Emperor’s favor.”

“You can go back to being a drunk,” Eva said. I wondered why she was being so malicious. I also got the sense that she was lying.

I didn't need to ask what would happen if I didn't tell them. The threat from Bennigan's 38 snub nose was obvious. "It's right here." I put my hand on the book.

"Bring it over," Bennigan said.

"You're wasting time, shoot him and take the diary. Who gives a shit if he knows the code?" Eva said.

That was all I needed to hear. I wasn't sure if I even thought about what I was doing. The instant Eva told Bennigan to shoot me, I tore the third-to-last page from the diary and plunged it into my mouth.

"Shoot him, you idiot," Eva said.

Bennigan raised his pistol and cocked it. I'll never know if he was about to fire, but he lowered the gun when he saw me swallow. "Well, that was pretty stupid."

"Not from where I'm standing," I said.

"You will, of course, give me the code," Bennigan said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because, if you don't, I'll shoot you."

"And lose the code forever?"

"Nothing is forever, Mr. Turec, we just go back to the status quo."

I backed further down the alley as Bennigan raised his gun again.

"Last chance, Mr. Turec."

"You sure you want her to hear it?"

Bennigan looked at Eva. "Sorry honey, I guess I get the reward."

Bennigan walked down the alley toward me, holding his pistol in front of him.

"Tell me," he said when he got next to me.

"What reward?" I asked

"Whoever brings the Emperor the diary gets to live the rest of their life in the god's favor."

"Like me?"

"Yeah," Bennigan said.

"I'm not sure it's worth it," I said. I turned my back to Eva so Bennigan and I were both looking at the back of the alley. The instant I sensed Bennigan at my shoulder, I struck. I slammed my elbow into the cop's face. He went down. The gun fell from his hands and into the gutter. Then I heard the sound of a rolling bowling ball.

I looked over my shoulder just in time to see the ball slam into the back of my ankle. Pain shot through my leg as I went down.

As I hit the floor I heard another ball rolling. Before I could react it hit me in the chest.

The first ball managed to make it to the end of the lane. The second one, the one that hit me in the ribs, was cradled in my midsection.

Eva had her hand over the blower, cooling it as she waited for the first ball to return. Bennigan started to move just as the ball returned to the end of the alley.

I heard two steps, then the sound of the ball rolling. It was a straight roll, I figured I was done for. There was a cracking sound, like twigs breaking. It wasn't me.

Bennigan's head snapped back and blood shot into the air as the ball hit him square in the face before sliding into the gutter and continuing to the ball return.

"Condescending prick. That's what you get for calling me honey."

I rolled over. There was blood in my mouth.

"Well, shithead, you can tell me the code." Eva started walking toward me. She was carrying a ball in her left hand.

"You killed Reamus?"

"I'd thought you'd have figured that out by now." She smiled as she walked down the alley toward me. Her eyes were glassy, an insane look of glee in them. She was looking forward to killing me.

"Bitch."

I crawled to the gutter and grabbed Bennigan's pistol.

Her smile disappeared when she saw me pointing the 38 at her, hammer cocked, ready to fire.

We just stared at each other across the alley.

"What now?" she asked.

"You tell me."

"You don't have the balls." Eva transferred the ball to her right hand and charged.

I wasn't planning on shooting her. In fact, I didn't want to. The first time I pulled the trigger was by reflex. The shot missed. The second and third shots were fired out of fear. Both of those hit her in the midsection.

The first bullet didn't slow Eva down. The second took her down to her knees. She fell about three feet from me, the ball slid from her hand.

"You shot me."

"You're surprised?"

Eva looked down at her chest to see the slowly expanding blood stain. She actually smiled before her eyes rolled up into her head. Her face slammed onto the lane with a dull thud.

I saw a shadow move from the shoe rental. I pointed my gun in that direction.

"Easy man." Lou Cerrano came out of the shadows. He was holding a pistol. It was pointed at the ceiling. "I'm not here to do you."

I put down my pistol after I realized he could have shot me at any time. "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd let the Emperor get the diary, did you? I guess you made your choice," Cerrano said. He sat down cross legged in front of me.

"I think it was made for me."

Cerrano shrugged. We both looked at Bennigan's destroyed face, then over at Eva's body. She was still twitching but it seemed like reflex rather than life. It didn't matter. I wasn't going to do anything to keep her alive.

"You read the diary?"

“Enough of it.”

“So you know.”

“I know what. I’m not sure why, though,” I said.

Cerrano took one more look at Eva. The twitching stopped, a small river of blood worked its way toward the gutter and began slowly flowing toward the fallen pins.

“It’s why we dig. They say the code was buried somewhere Downtown.”

“Reamus found it.”

“That’s what we hear but it needs to be confirmed.”

“How you going to do that?” I asked.

“Well, that’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn’t it?”

I sat up and faced Cerrano. A stabbing pain shot into my side as I folded my legs. “What’s that mean, anyway?”

“Got me; it’s just a saying,” he said. Cerrano watched as I spat the mouthful of blood. “Man, you’re fucked up.”

“Been worse. You were talking about the code.”

Cerrano hesitated another second until he made some kind of internal decision. “You know god, the one the Emperor talks to?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, the Emperor’s talking but nobody’s listening. It ain’t no god; it’s a starship, the one that brought us here. When the colony got up and running, the powers that be sent the beast up to a Lagrange orbit and set it to standby.”

“See, that’s the thing I didn’t dig from the diary. Reamus said he found info that the first Emperor salvaged the communications equipment after the Big Rock but didn’t say anything about a code.”

“The code will turn it on again, that’s what we think, anyway.”

“And what happens then?”

“Not sure, my guess is that it will start the colonization cycle again, deliver tech, know-how, all that shit.”

“No kidding.”

“So, that leads us back to the question,” Cerrano said. “Is it really in the diary?”

“It was.”

“Was?”

“I swallowed it.”

“You did what—you some kind of idiot?” Even in pain, I enjoyed seeing Cerrano lose his cool. That beat reserve of the Shamans always did bug me.

“They’d have shot me,” I said.

“I might now.”

“Don’t sweat it. I remember your stupid code.” It was my turn to be cool and detached.

“Okay, what is it?”

I slid the diary across the wood to him.

He didn’t pick it up at first. His composure returned. When he finally picked it up, the Shaman flipped through the diary to the torn-out page. He shook his head and let out a little laugh. “Don’t that beat all,” he said.

"So, what happens to me?" I asked.

"Seems you just got yourself a seat at the table."

"At least until I give up the code," I said.

"I've been thinking about that."

"You think fast."

"I do when I have to," Cerrano said.

"And?"

"You're the Emperor's Champion."

"That I am. I'm not sure that'll be much use in the new world order," I said.

"I'm not so sure about that," Cerrano said.

"Really?"

"We have the code—"

"Assuming I give it to you."

"Yes, assuming that. But the Emperor still has the only communicator. I also doubt that even if he gets the tech he'll know how to use it."

"Where does that leave me?"

"You'll do your original job."

"Liaison?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

I felt my mouth filling with blood again. "Look, I really could use some help here."

Cerrano put his arm around me and pulled me up.

I groaned as I leaned into the Shaman.

"You going to make it?"

"I think so." We limped out of the alley toward the front door. Cerrano's arm was around my waist. I was surprised at how such a skinny guy could be so strong.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

"Shoot."

"What is the deal with Kerouac?"

"Damned if I know. I think the first Emperor liked his book," Cerrano said.

"And bowling?"

"That one I know. The first Emperor couldn't figure out how the Mayan ball game worked so he latched on to a game he understood."

"Okay, how about the Shamans?"

Cerrano craned his neck to look at me. "You ask a lot of questions."

"It's my nature I guess." We walked on. Cerrano pushed the heavy oak door. We stepped into the orange light of the Altman sun. I pulled back, trying to catch my breath before taking on the stairs.

"So anyway, about that Monterrey Pop Ritual."

Cerrano sighed. "If you must know, the guy who started the Shamans was a big Jimmy Hendrix fan."

"Who?"

"A musician, it's not important."

"So Reamus was right."

"About what?" Cerrano asked.

“It is all bullshit.”

“I guess so, but it worked, at least for awhile.” Cerrano grabbed me tight around the waist and took the first step. “You sure you can make it?”

“Depends, where we going?”

“How about a drink? Cerrano asked.

I thought about it for a second. “No thanks. I got some thinking to do.”

My Mind's Eye

By
Lesley L. Smith

In the particle-accelerator control room, I was trying to keep careful watch on the beam energy since we were at unprecedented high levels. Unfortunately, keeping watch was becoming more and more challenging as my cataracts progressed. Out of the corner of my eye however, I saw something move in the off-limits detector area. There was a floating iridescent squished sphere that disappeared, and then there was a floating iridescent torus which had also promptly disappeared. "What the hell?" We were looking for new particles but they were supposed to stay inside the detector--not fly around outside it.

Quickly, I slapped down the big red emergency Off button and spilled the coffee in front of me. "Good one, Louis," I muttered.

While I was looking for something to mop up the mess, the phone rang. It was Pierre, the night shift manager. "Why are the proton and antiproton beams off?" he demanded.

I wasn't sure what to say. I was still trying to keep my vision problems from him; he'd take me out of the rotation if he knew. But I'd definitely seen something. I knew cataracts didn't make you see stuff that wasn't there--they kept you from seeing what was right in front of your face. While I was thinking, I wiped the coffee spill up with my sleeve.

"Louis? Answer me. Thanks to you, we're going to lose detector data."

I pictured persnickety Pierre's moustache twitching like a mouse's whiskers. I took a deep breath. "Something moved in the detector area."

"That's not possible. The beam will not start unless the detector area is evacuated. And if it was a person, the radiation would kill him immediately--he wouldn't have time to move around."

"I know that," I said. "I've been doing high-energy physics since before you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye."

"Tell me exactly what you saw, old man," he growled.

Old man? I bet I could still whip his scrawny ass. "I'm telling you, there was something moving in the off-limits area."

I thought back. What I'd seen in my peripheral vision didn't make sense. Uh oh. It was still before dawn. Had I fallen asleep? "I didn't get a great look at it. Maybe we should check the security tapes?"

"You bet your ass I'll be checking the security tapes," Pierre said with undisguised disgust.

The security tapes didn't show anything but two blurry blobs in quick succession. The security team went in and looked around but they didn't find anything. Pierre was pissed, so he suspended me and promised to 'initiate termination proceedings'. If this was it, what an ignominious end to an illustrious career.

Thus, I found myself at 6:00 a.m. waiting at the security desk for my daughter to pick me up, like I was a little kid in the principal's office. No doubt about it, that Pierre was a pain in the behind; I regretted ever hiring him. The irony of being fired by a kid I hired wasn't lost on me. Maybe when I retired as Lab Director, I should have retired all-together. But since my wife passed, all I had was my job and my daughter.

As I sat in the lobby twiddling my thumbs, I heard, "Good morning Professor Johnson," coming out of the security guard's mouth. He wasn't talking to me--not with that pleasant tone.

"Good morning, Juan," my beautiful daughter said. "And I told you to call me Louise."

I stood up and looked in the direction of my daughter. Every time I saw her, I remembered the tiny baby my wife and I brought home from the hospital, the leaky-diapered Louise as she took her first steps, the exuberant Louise as she rode her bike down the driveway for the first time, the nervous valedictorian Louise giving her speech, and the proud confident Louise in her Ph.D. robes. "Hi, honey."

"Hi, Pop," she said. "I guess you're stirring up trouble down here as usual?" She grinned--at least it sounded like she did. "Shall we go?"

After we got in the car she said, "So what happened?"

"I saw something in the detector area."

"You saw something!" Louise said. "So is your vision clearing up then?"

I hadn't told her the doctor said my vision would only clear up with surgery. And there was no way I was going to get surgery. That's what did in my wife. "Peripheral vision," I muttered.

"It sounds like turning off the beam was the right thing to do," she said, starting the car.

"Do you believe me?" I asked, looking forward so I could see her out of the corner of my eye.

"Of course." She glanced at me and smiled. "So, where to now? Home?"

Imagining my empty house made me sigh. I pushed down the lump in my throat.

Louise shot me a sympathetic look. She could read me like a book; she was like her mother that way. "I can't get used to the idea of you rattling around in that big house by yourself," she said. "How about we go out for pancakes?"

I nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

When the waitress brought my fancy baked pancake, it was the biggest one I'd ever seen. It even peeked out from behind my blurry spot. "How am I supposed to eat all that?"

Louise giggled. "Just wait a second. It'll deflate."

Sure enough, after a minute or so, it sunk down to a more reasonable size, and I dug into it.

Louise had already attacked her ultra-thin Swedish pancake with gusto.

"Who knew pancakes came in so many shapes and sizes," I said.

She took a sip of coffee. "Yeah. Mine's so thin it's two-dimensional, but yours is definitely three-dimensional, or technically, including time, four-dimensional."

I took another giant bite. "This is really good," I said with my mouth full of egg, apple, and cinnamon.

"I'm glad you like it. So, who or what did you see in the detector area?" she asked, leaning over the table. "I'm dying to know."

I told her about the weird flying sphere and torus things.

She was suitably impressed. "How bizarre!" she said. "I wonder what they were? Could they be debris from a new particle?"

"That was my first thought," I said. "But they weren't aligned in the direction of the beam. And why would they make it through all the detector plates only to stop in the air outside the control room?"

We debated the issue the rest of breakfast until Louise's phone rang. As she talked, her face flushed.

"We have to get back to the lab ASAP!" she finally said, hanging up the phone.

"I'm suspended, remember? Are you sure I can come?" I asked.

"Yes, you can come. That was Pierre on the phone."

"Let's go then." I threw some money on the table and we ran out the door. In the car, we gunned it and soon pulled into the lab parking lot.

At the lab we ran to the control room. When we got there, Pierre was standing like a statue as columns twisted in the air. At least that's what it looked like to me. Rainbows shimmered on their surfaces like the top of an oil slick.

Louise gasped. "Bizarre. I can't quite see it."

"What is it?" Pierre said. "There's something here, but I can't focus on it."

I could see it. "Try your peripheral vision."

"I see something!" Louise yelled. "It looks like a rainbow!"

Then the columns disappeared.

Moments later new columns appeared several feet away. Their undulating forms started to pinch in the middle and then sparks erupted from the edge of a piece of electrical equipment as one of the columns grazed it.

"You didn't turn off the beam?" I asked, hitting the Off button, but keeping my eyes on the apparitions.

Pierre said, "What if it's some kind of particle debris? This is the highest energy ever achieved on earth."

I resisted the urge to say 'Duh'; he was my boss after all. I pointed at the columns that were splitting in two, forming four smaller columns. "They're still here and there's no power. They can't be from the particle beams."

They disappeared again.

"You were saying?" Pierre said. I imagined him smirking.

His comment was interrupted by eight floating shimmering blobs appearing in the control room. And two of them were right near Louise.

She froze with a horrified look on her face I hadn't seen since she was ten and falling out of that oak tree. "What's happening?"

Over my dead body would I let something happen to my girl! "No!" I yelled and smacked the things away from her. They felt like squishy metal--cool and smooth but yielding to my touch.

The other six objects followed and all eight fell toward the floor. And then they stopped and turned around, moving as one, in my direction.

I backed away but was quickly stopped by a workstation behind me in the small room.

The things followed me, one hitting a computer and causing more sparks to erupt.

Pierre was edging out the door. "Maybe we should get out of here."

I held up my hands, prepared to fight I-didn't-know-what as the things cornered me.

"Dad!" Louise said. "Be careful!"

"I'll, uh, go get help," Pierre said from the hall. He took off.

"Louise, please get out of here," I said. I was surrounded but they weren't touching me.

"I'm not leaving you," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

It was just like when she turned sixteen and insisted on getting a job. "Please, honey. I can't lose you, too."

"I'm not leaving you, and that's final." She took a step closer. "Are you scared? It's almost like they're looking at you," Louise whispered.

"That would imply..." In my mind's eye I thought over all I'd managed to see: a sphere, a torus, two columns, four columns, eight blobs. "What if it's one creature? One creature that lives in more than four dimensions."

"The beam," she said, catching on immediately. "We passed a new energy threshold. We must have caught their, er, it's attention." Her look of surprise was replaced by the look of wonder she had the first time she looked into a telescope.

"What now?" she asked.

It was just like the time I met her multi-pierced Harley-riding tat-covered high school boyfriend. I took a deep breath.

"Now we try to communicate with it."