



# Gods New and Used

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Mark Finn

This book is dedicated to Wade Sanchez  
because I told him I would.

A Gathering of Storms is for Bill Willingham,  
for inspiration and friendship.

Slings and Arrows is for T.K.

Road Trip is for two guys named Chris: Petkus and Roberson.  
Viva Elvis, baby.

The Secret Life of Lawrence Croft is for the legacy of Bootleg  
Graphics, Absolute Comics, and all of their varied associates,  
including, but not limited to: John "Hammerhead" Lucas,  
Bill "Bill-Man" Hany, Rob "Mr. Perspective" Kelley,  
William "Will-Man" Traxtle, Shane "Shane-Man" Campos ,

Melisa “Melisa” Johnson, Glen “Glen-Man” Zgabay, and

Michael “Board-Head” Washburn.

Those were the days.

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# Author’s Introduction

These stories take place in, around, or because of a city that never existed. San Cibola, a fictional West Coast city founded in November, 1998 by four writers: Bill Willingham, Matt Sturges, Chris Roberson and myself. We devised some neighborhoods,

some characters, and a few interesting places, geographical and otherwise. The whole thing was dubbed “Clockwork Storybook” and sent on its merry way, drifting on the Internet for anyone with a web browser to find.

Thankfully, it’s been around the world a few times since then. For those of you visiting our city for the first time in the pages of this book, following is a brief introduction to the shared world of San Cibola. If you are the kind of person who doesn’t like those “Dramatis Personae” and the like at the front of your book, please feel free to skip ahead to the first story and start reading. I’ll understand, I promise. All of this stuff will be here if you need to peek at it later.

#### A Tourist’s Guide to San Cibola

San Cibola—also known as Magictown, The Big Onion, The City of Fourteen Hills, and numerous other epithets—is a major California city roughly 270 miles north of San Francisco . A popular tourist destination, San Cibola boasts historic Victorian architecture, a variety of ethnic neighborhoods, beautiful natural scenery, and the famed Canal District, a twentieth century re-interpretation of Venice, Italy covering over six square miles in the north of the city.

San Cibola is home to more than two million people, including Chinese-Americans, Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Latinos, and the Te’Maroans, a South Pacific Island culture found nowhere away from their place of origin except for San Cibola. Most of its inhabitants live and work in the city, taking

advantage of SCAT, the San Cibola Area Transit, to reach any destination from Spanishtown to the Rue Livre. In their free time, San Cibolans enjoy the dozens of city parks, the Opera of the West, the San Cibola Philharmonic, a multitude of fine International cuisines, professional hockey with the San Cibola Freeze, and the thrills of the World of Adventure theme park on Powell Island.

The city gets its name from the Spanish mission that was its earliest structure. The Mission of San Juan de la Luz de Cibola was founded in 1620, and operates as a Roman Catholic church to

this day, although in a different location. The city existed for nearly two hundred years as a tiny Spanish settlement with a population of less than three thousand. When gold was discovered in 1849, however, the small town blossomed almost overnight into a cosmopolitan city of nearly a hundred thousand, serving as a seaport and railroad hub for all of northern California.

The city grew again in the early years of the twentieth century, when immigration was at its peak. New arrivals from Germany, Italy, Ireland and China added to the rich cultural mix of ethnicities and swelled the population. The famous Canal District was constructed between 1925 and 1940 with a mixture of private funds and Works Progress Administration monies; the project provided jobs for hundreds of San Cibolans during the Great Depression.

Today's San Cibola is a vibrant modern city, home to multinational corporations, dazzling architecture, and the arts.

Useful Definitions

## **Neighbor**

A term used colloquially to refer to a member of the supernatural “underground”. It encompasses any member of the supernatural community, as well as anyone aware of its existence as something other than fantasy or myth. The antonym of Neighbor, Norman, refers to someone who is outside the community or unaware of its true existence.

## **Neighborhood**

The supernatural community at large, encompassing all mythological and fantastical individuals and groups living in San Cibola.

Norman

A contraction of Normal Human. A semi-derogatory term used by members of the world’s supernatural community, to refer to normal people. In the colorful argot of the supernatural community it is always used as the proper name of a single person. Example: “Normanis out in force tonight.” “Norman isn’t welcome in this place.” “Never involve Norman in Neighborhood affairs.”

## **SCAT**

Short for “San Cibola Area Transit,” SCAT is San Cibola’s name of choice for the city’s underground rail system. The SCAT authority oversees city buses as well, but when used in common parlance the term refers only to the subway.

Important Places

## **Doyle's**

Though its proper name is The Ormond Sacker Club for Extraordinary & Exotic Personages, this Downtown establishment catering to Neighbors and gentlemen adventurers alike is the oldest such club operating on the west coast of the United States . Established in 1914 by the mysterious Ormond Sacker, the club from earliest days limited admission to card-carrying members only, though in later years this practice was relaxed. Maintaining most of its wood paneled charm, Doyle's is a popular meeting place for those hoping for quiet conversation, good food and drink, and the complete and utter absence of Norman .

## **Howard Reese House**

Recently renovated by Ian Rosewood, the Howard Reese House (named after a prominent wizard in the community who owed the house) is a safe house for the Neighborhood. Any neighbor down on his luck or requesting sanctuary can receive food, shelter, and medical care. The house is staffed by volunteers and funded with donations.

## **Pocket Shop**

A small, expensive gift boutique in Arcadia that sells "anything that can fit into your pocket." The owner, Ian Rosewood, also stocks a plethora of magical charms, talismans, spell components, and other oddities in a secret room in the back of the store for a select few clientele.

Notable People

## **Allison, James**

James Allison has been running Doyle's for just about as long as anyone can remember. And that's a long time. Though a powerful thaumaturge in his own right, Allison is just as likely to lead with his fists as he is with a spell.

## **Bowen, Samuel**

The seventh son of a seventh son, Sam is trying to track down and pinpoint the source of an ancient curse that has wiped out almost all of his family. The problem is, Sam doesn't know who cursed his family, or why, or with what kind of magic. His travels have taken him across America and back, and even into Mexico. San Cibolais his last hope.

## **Bretz, Mike**

The most puissant wizard in San Cibola, Mike Bretz has powers greater than 100 voodoo priests. He tends to keep to himself, so not much is known about him. In person he's crude, unfashionable, and quick to anger.

## **Rosewood, Ian**

Ex-monster hunter and owner of the Pocket Shop in Arcadia, an expensive gift boutique where people can purchase "anything they can fit in their pockets". For those in the know, Ian carries a line of occult paraphernalia, spell-casting ingredients, and monster-hunting gear.



# A Gathering of Storms

Monday Morning, 8:17 AM

Bryan hated being late to work. His boss, Fitzroy Bahntre, was a real jerk about people coming in late. “The weather is happening now, people,” he would say in a lilt that was high-pitched and deep all at once, owing to an accent that no one could seem to figure out. “If you are not covering it, then you are out in it.”

Bryan thought that was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard in his life and he tried to never be late to work for no other reason than he hated hearing it. Today, however, was unavoidable. A three-car pile-up on Loop 255 slowed traffic to a crawl and he spent a good thirty minutes leaning on his horn along with the other trapped commuters, which did nothing to hasten the rate of travel but made him feel better. He couldn’t call in, either, because he left his cellular phone back at his apartment. Not a good way to start Hell Week.

The annual Foreign Weather Conference was set to start this Tuesday and would run through Thursday. Fitzroy was the chairman of the conference and had been for as long as anyone could remember. Fitz told everyone he hated it, and they all believed him. He described the whole ordeal as “Meetings, meetings, and more meetings. Everyone has to present something, and since it’s usually about weather on the other side of the world, who cares?” To make matters worse, the conference always fell on the first day of spring, and in San Cibola, that meant a whole week of inclement weather. It never failed. One of the busiest weeks of the year, made all the more busy by the fact that the general manager was always gone.

As the departmental head of human resources, Bryan was supposed to be in charge of things this week in Fitz’s absence, but that wasn’t really going to happen. Bryan was still the new guy in the office with ten months under his belt. Everyone at the bureau knew their job backwards and forwards, and even if there was a problem, they sure wouldn’t take it to him. No one really liked Bryan. There was politeness, sure, but there was also a little jealousy, since he transferred laterally in for his position at the bureau. He never got invited out for drinks by any of the staff, never got asked to join the bowling team. This irritated him. He hated working with people that he couldn’t connect with. At group functions, he kept close to Fitz, mainly because he didn’t feel comfortable with anyone else. In his six-month review, Fitz told him

he was too bureaucratic-ish. Fitz always used made-up words like that. “You need to loosen up, for God’s sake. Just because you wear a suit is no reason to act like you do.” He still chafed at that remark. He was a fun guy, he told himself. In college, he was a riot. Everyone in his fraternity told him so. He honestly couldn’t figure out what the problem was.

The San Cibola Bureau of the National Weather Service was located on the outskirts of town, near Fortuna. Everything about where Bryan worked was bland and uninteresting, from the neutral cream and gray color of the bricks to the boxy, squat shape of the building. Even the satellite dish and radio tower just behind the northwest corner was boring. The building was solid. It conveyed strength, dignity, and order. Bryan hated it. When he first started working at the bureau, he tried to spruce the place up with pictures of Malibu and Big Sur. Sporty yet reflective. Fitz told him to take them all down. Too many complaints from the Brian’s fellow workers, he had said. That’s when he knew he was working with philistines. Bryan parked his car in the spot farthest from the door in visitor’s parking and sprinted into the building.

Everyone in administration was seated in the conference room for the Monday meeting when Bryan burst in, breathing hard, and hustled to his seat. He studiously ignored the smirks from his co-workers, sat down between Molly Murdock and Lou Steiner, and said, “Sorry, Boss. Traffic, I swear to God.” Everyone started laughing. Bryan looked around, confused. Fitz wasn’t there. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Molly, one of the few co-workers he liked, slid the telephone on the table closer to Bryan. "Fitz isn't here. He's here."

"Hello Bryan." Fitzroy was on the speakerphone. His voice sounded deep and thick and completely sick.

"Fitz? Are you coming in today?" Bryan said loudly. He hated speakerphones.

"No, Bryan, I'm not. I have 102 degree fever and I am dying right now, just talking to you." He was even harder to understand than usual.

Bryan leaned forward anxiously. "What about the conference?"

"Babe, that is officially now your department."

Bryan felt his heart fall onto the table. He tried to pull back from the phone, but it zoomed in closer until it filled his vision completely. Bryan thought he could actually hear Lou Steiner grinning wolfishly beside him.

"Me? Oh, Fitz, I don't think that's possible. I've got a ton of things to catch up on—"

"Bryan, pick up," Fitz commanded. He did so. "Bryan, this is your job, to back me up. You're second-in-command. Now, we both know you will be mostly useless around there anyway, so think of this as your chance to show them all that you can do this management thing."

Oh, Christ, Bryan thought. Guilted into working. "Yeah, okay. I'll give it a try."

“Good. Now, go into my office. On my desk is a large manila folder marked ‘Conference’. Everything is in there, ready to go. Just follow the itinerary to the letter and you’ll do fine.”

“Right.”

“Now get going, you have to be at the hotel to greet the guests in one hour. And take your cell phone in case we need to talk.”

Yeah, right, thought Bryan. Like I’ll call you for something like this. “Sure thing. I’m gone.” He hung up. Everyone was trying to look busy. “Okay, well, I have to go get some stuff and get going, so...” No one said anything. He walked out of the conference room and shut the door behind him and tried very hard not to listen to the snickers that leaked out into the hallway.

Bryan drove the Loop with one eye on the contents of the ratty manila folder. Most of the papers were reservation confirmations at the Pacific Vistas Hotel in Spanishtown, but there was also a confusing jumble of emails, itineraries, schedules, and other similar lists. He separated the folder into two stacks of paper on the passenger seat: Useful and Shit. It took most of the drive to separate, as Fitzroy had the deplorable habit of saving everything. He called it his CYA Policy. “Always cover your ass in management, Bryan.” It was the axiom by which he lived, as far as Bryan could see. He made the full loop around the East Bay to his apartment in Rue Livre to grab his cell phone, then exceeded the speed limit all the way back to Spanishtown.

Bryan took the first Spanishtown exit, which avoided the

older, more settled, and more unattractive neighborhoods that made up the district and went straight to the upscale, gentrified commercial centers. He drove briskly down the refurbished streets, hardly giving a passing glance to the renewal projects taking place all around him. Bryan was too focused on finding the hotel and too distracted by the piles of paper beside him. That folder was his job for the next few days, and he didn't even know where to begin. Finally, the Pacific Vista appeared in front of him, set back off the main streets and up on a slight hill that overlooked the Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific Vista hotel used to be a Spanish mission that overlooked the long strip of land that eventually became Ocean View. The owners of the Pacific Vista hotel decided to keep the general look and feel of building's Spanish heritage, while showing off its upscale finery at the same time. Bryan gave his Lexus to the valet with instructions to keep it handy and raced inside. As he strode into the lobby, his first thought was, my God, it's Liberace at the Alamo. Taken momentarily aback by the ongoing war between metallic gold and clay stucco, he could only gape in wonder at the red-carpeted staircase that curved up on either side of the front desk and joined a landing that led to another staircase that split into two halves, curving up and around to become the second floor some twenty feet overhead. It made a nice circular frame for the gold and crystal chandelier some three stories above him. The front desk itself was a solid slab of dark mahogany,

polished to the point that he could see himself.

“Ah, hello?” he heard a clipped British accent address him.

Bryan lowered his gaze to the man behind the counter. He was tall and thin, his balding head covered with a dignified comb-over. His even, brown eyes were set into a pasty-looking British face, complete with emphatic nose and square jaw. A compact, salt and pepper mustache gave him a stately appearance.

“Who, me?” asked Bryan .

“Yes, you, hello.” He paused, then leaned forward, over the counter. “Do-you-require-any-assistance?” he said, stressing each word.

“Sorry. Yeah, I do. I’m Bryan Donner.” He walked forward, hand outstretched. “My boss is Fitzroy Bahntre, with the National Weather Service. I’m looking for a Mr. St. John.”

“Oh, my, yes indeed.” The man gripped Bryan’s hand firmly, suddenly all smiles. “I am the hotel manager, Nigel St. John.” He pronounced the last name distinctly.

“Sin-gin?”

“Yes, exactly, St. John,” he beamed. “Will Mr. Bahntre be here soon?”

“Well, there’s a bit of a problem. Fitzroy is deathly ill, so I am going to be running the show here.”

“Really.” His smile faltered.

“Yep. I’m his second-in-command at the center, so he sent me.” Bryan leaned in close to St. John, radiating confidence. “Just point me in the right direction, and I’ll have these weathermen

eating out of my hand.”

“Ah. Yes. Quite.” St. John’s smile wilted slowly. “Yes, well, are you quite sure Mr. Bahntre won’t be up and around?”

“Nope, it’s all me,” said Bryan, insulted that St. John wasn’t bolstered by Donner’s assertion. Who did this guy think he was dealing with, anyway, thought Bryan. “Don’t worry, Mr. St. John, everything will be fine. In addition to heading up human resources, I’ve done several national trade shows for the FCC.”

“Trade shows. Jolly good.” He said, all happiness gone from his face. “Well, Mr. Donner, if you will please come with me, I will show you our preparations in the conference room.” He ushered Bryan off to the hallway behind the stairs.

“ . . . Hello?”

“Fitz, it’s Bryan. Listen, I need . . . ”

“Are they there yet? It’s raining outside.”

“I know it’s raining, I can see it from the lobby. What does that have to do with anything? No, they aren’t here yet. I need . . . ”

“Bryan, are you at the right hotel? They should be there already!”

“Yeah, the Pacific Vista hotel, a smarmy limey named Sin-Gin, I’m here. I can’t find your meeting notes.”

Bryan, it’s all in the manila folder.”

“I’ve got the folder, I can’t find it.”

“Look in the back.”



“ . . . I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I reorganized the stuff in your folder.”

“Oh God, Bryan . . . ”

“It was all a mess! You had four month old e-mails in there!”

“Bryan, the contents were in chronological order.”

“ . . . Shit.”

“Okay, um, look for something titled “Agenda” or

“Docket” . Or maybe “Meeting Schedule.”

“Jesus, Fitz! You don’t remember what it was?”

“No, Bryan , because all I was going to do was pull the last five or six pages out from the back!”

“Okay, okay. Never mind. Hold on . . . ah, got it. Meeting Agenda? This is it?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“Okay, I just . . . oh, um . . . uh . . . ”

“Bryan? What?”

“Fitz, is this some sort of a joke?”

Bryan sat in the lobby, numbly reading the schedule of events while he listened to the rain pouring down from the low clouds in flood-like quantities. It’s a gag, all a big gag, he thought. Fitz is in on it, and everyone at the office, too. It’s just like college. They’re putting me on. Once again, I’m playing Frank Burns to their Hawkeye and Trapper John. Well, this is it. I’ve had e-fucking-nough. I’m going to greet a very normal set of boring

meteorologists, go through the motions of this little conference, and pretend like nothing is wrong. I will bullshit my way through the proceedings just like I used to do at the trade shows and make like they are all my close friends. They will love me. Their little joke will completely backfire on them. And then I'll go back to the office and kill everyone there.

As he entertained these thoughts, the front doors opened and a six-foot tall Japanese man walked in, red-faced, and carrying a large wooden drum over his shoulder. He took one look at Bryan and stalked over to him, a deep scowl set into his face. Bryan stood up instinctively, put on his best professional smile and tried very hard not to stare.

"You," said the man in a deep, rumbling voice, "are not Fitz."

"No, I'm Bryan Donner, with the National Weather Service. Are you with the conference?"

The man ignored Bryan's outstretched hand. "Where's Fitzroy?" he asked.

"Well, he's a little under the weather right now, ha ha ha .

.. "Bryan stopped laughing when he realized he was the only one. "It's the flu, or something worse. I'm Fitzroy's assistant at the bureau and in charge of human resources . . ."

"Your title is of no consequence to me. Has Fei Lian arrived?"

"No, actually, you're the first."

“AH HAH! I win again!” he roared, and threw his hand backwards, striking the drum and making the windows rattle with a thunderous crash. Jesus, thought Bryan, this guy is certifiable. Then another thought hit Bryan . The man wasn’t wet. He just came in from a driving rain and was bone dry. Before Bryan could inquire about his observation, St. John appeared at Bryan ’s side with a box lid full of printed nametags.

“Ah, Raiden, how nice to see you again.”

“St. John.”

“I thought I heard you from across the room, there. Here’s your nametag. The bar is open right now. I believe you know the way.” Raiden took the proffered nametag without comment and walked into the lounge.

St. John thrust the box into Bryan ’s limp arms. “Okay, here’s what you need to do. Explain that you are Mr. Bahntre’s assistant, answer no more questions than that, ask them their name, check it off on the list, and then direct them to the bar.”

“Hey, wait a minute, now, I can . . . ”

“No, you can’t. Bloody Norman . Listen up, they’ve held the annual Foreign Weather Conference here for a long time now, and I intend to keep this hotel in one piece. So, if we are both going to survive the week, I suggest we work together. And of course what I really mean by that is take your cues from me. Now, let me know as soon as Donar gets here.”

“Donar?”

“Yes, Donar. Big guy, red beard, hammer. Donar!” He

turned on his heel and walked away, muttering. Bryan turned back to the door to see two identically-dressed Chinese women walk in, followed by a sulking, bearded man in a toga.

“ . . . Hello?”

“Fitzroy, I quit.”

“Oh, come on, now, Bryan . It’s not that bad.”

“You lied to me! You said it was going to be no problem!

Instead, I’m having to baby-sit a bunch of freaks in Halloween costumes! None of them can remember my name, they all keep calling me Norman. They all want you and apparently no one else will do, so can you please get down here and placate them?”

“I will do no such thing! I have a temperature! I’m sick!

You can handle it.”

“I’m onto your joke anyway, none of them are foreign.

They speak perfect English.”

“No, you’re just hearing perfect English.”

“What?”

“Bryan, I want you to think of these people as visiting foreign dignitaries, okay? They aren’t from around here, and they are all used to being sucked up to. So, do this as a personal favor to me, suck up to them. I think you’ll find it’ll go a lot smoother.”

“Who the hell are these people, Fitz?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, you want to know, I’ll tell you. They’re gods.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m serious!”

“Fuck you.”

“Really!”

“Fuck you, Fitz! I read it on your little itinerary; I didn’t believe it then and I don’t believe it now.”

“Okay, you don’t want to believe me, fine. But, you will have to treat them with kid gloves if you value your life, the weather in this area for the next year, and most importantly, your job. Got me?”

“Yeah, I hear you. But I’m going to write an official letter of complaint to the regional admin.”

“Finish the conference first, then you can do whatever you want.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Where are you now?”

“In the lobby.”

“Has Donar shown up yet?”

“No! Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Bryan, please just relax. If you want to live through this, you’ve got to pull that bug out of your butt.”

“Look, I gotta go. Someone’s coming. Another one of the freaks just walked in. This guy’s got a big shell on his head.”

“Call me when everyone gets there, okay?”

“I’m going to get you for this, Fitz.”

“Smile, Babe.”

“Fuck you.”

Tuesday Morning, 8:54 AM

Bryan stood behind the podium with his most professional shit-eating grin on his face. The Sunset Room of the Pacific Vista hotel was large and pleasantly decorated, designed to accommodate fifty or more people. Today, it was at full capacity. The bulk of the conference attendants were seated around a long table. A smaller group of attendants lined the outer wall in chairs provided by the hotel. Every eye in the room was on Bryan. He swallowed, but nothing went down. He took a sip of water, squared the stack of papers in his hands, and began.

“Well, it looks like almost everyone is here, so we’re going to go ahead and start. Welcome to the . . . Hundred and ninth Foreign Weather Conference. As most of you are aware, I am not Fitzroy Bahntre. . .”

“You can say that again,” mumbled Awka Paraawa, from the Te’Maroan contingent that arrived late last night. This brought a round of titters.

Bryan smiled even wider. “No, I’m Bryan Donner . . .”

“Good name,” interrupted Donar, his hammer at rest on the tabletop. He was clean-shaven, which caused everyone at the table some distress. No one would tell Bryan why, so he just

stopped asking.

“ . . . With the National Weather Service. My official capacity at the San Cibola branch is Director of Human Resources. I handle all of the bureau’s insurance needs, take care of all the employee records, and create additional . . . ”

“In other words,” called Hanish, from the far end of the table, “you’re a bureaucrat.” His three attendants snickered. Uneasy mutters erupted around the room.

Bryan kept on smiling. “Actually, it’s not so bad.” Perfect, Bryan thought, you played right into my speech, you Indian freak. “I really like helping people such as yourself work out their differences. You see, in today’s fast-paced world, it’s vital to keep one finger on the paradigm of interpersonal relationships in the workplace. One of my key action items involves tangential interfacing with all of the employees to address their concerns on a mano e mano level. I also pulse upper management monthly in regard to those employee concerns. See, I consider myself to be very schedule-driven. Take today’s agenda, for example . . . ” He stopped as the muttering increased. Raiden stood up and pointed at Bryan .

“Mortal, are you trying to be funny?”

Bryan looked frantically around as the room fell to a hush.

With absolutely no idea of what to say to this group of lunatics, he leaned into the microphone and said, “No.”

Raiden scowled. “Why don’t you just get on with your opening remarks, Norman .”

“Bryan. Yes, of course.” Raiden sat down. Bryan went back through his notes again, stalling while he thought of something to take the place of the three-minute speech he’d prepared about himself and his job.

He was saved when the door opened and a six-foot tall naked steaming fetus-like baby walked into the room and said in a deep Hispanic accent, “Sorry I am late, everyone. The slipstream was murder.” Bryan’s mouth went slack. It’s a baby, he thought, over and over again, a giant, steaming baby. There were general greetings from some of the assembled. The baby walked straight up to Bryan and said, “I am El Nino. Do you have my name tag?” Bryan searched his mind for something to say. El Nino wasn’t a steaming water-head baby; it was just a patch of warm water, a natural meteorological phenomenon in the Pacific Ocean.

Something Fitzroy said yesterday came back to him and he tried to push it away again, but this time it lodged firmly in the front of his brain. They’re gods. He looked back at the conference table and all of a sudden, everything was different. They were different. Raiden’s face was a Japanese demon head, red as blood. The Te’Maroan gods doubled in size. Several of the Indian gods had little genies flitting about their heads, and many of the attendants sported multiple eyes, mouths, arms, and legs. Fei Lian bore a stag’s head, complete with antlers, and smelled powerfully bad. The dinner fork that Posiedon was playing with was a trident. Long-Wang was a coiled Chinese dragon with gold scales. They



all looked at him with a mixture of hatred and disgust. Every hair on Bryan's body stood straight out, and then he fainted.

“ . . . Hello?”

“Fitzroy!”

“Bryan? Why are you whispering?”

“Okay, this isn't funny anymore. I quit.”

“I take it El Nino showed up? Why are you whispering?”

“They're all going through their reports. Fitz, what am I supposed to do?”

“Manage things, Babe. Manage things. If they get too rowdy, tell them to keep it down. If they wander, tell them to get to the point.”

“But they won't listen to me! They call me Norman and laugh.”

“Okay, who's up now?”

“Uh . . . Hurakan.”

“Good, he'll be a while. Listen up, Bryan, I'm going to tell you a few things about our distinguished guests . . .”

The Te'Maroan gods finished their presentation, “We Still Have Some Worshippers,” and sat down in unison amid scattered applause. Bryan stepped back up to the podium. “Okay, we'll take a quick break now and have lunch in the dining room. I think we can eat and come back in an hour, don't you, Poseidon?”

Everyone laughed and Poseidon blushed. “Don't anger me, Norman,” he muttered into his beard.

Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain, punched Poseidon on the

shoulder. “See, you old horse-eater? Everyone knows about you and that waitress!” Bryan smiled, not caring in the least that he had no idea what he was talking about. He was just glad he made a connection, any connection.

The group got to their feet, stretching and groaning about how tiring physical manifestations could be. Bryan called after them, “Remember, the quicker we get through this, the quicker we can go get drunk!” He felt odd saying it, but they reacted with enthusiasm. Feels like college again, he thought while dialing Fitz’s number. As it rang, he opened up his legal pad to a page marked “Dirt” and prepared to write down whatever Fitz told him.

At lunch, he sat with El Nino and several of the Polynesian and Asian gods that weren’t weather-related. They all talked about the slump the humans were in, and Bryan nodded sympathetically, keeping his mouth shut. El Nino listened as well, and when all the complaints were in, he spoke to the table. “I do not share your pessimism, what with the number of people out there who are rejecting monotheism daily. Even in America —”

“That’s easy for you to say,” said Yama-no-kami, the Japanese goddess of forests and agriculture. “You have that market penetration in America, thanks to the television. Most of our worshipers don’t have radios. I have to rely on word of mouth for new converts.” And so the discussion went, until Madame Wind got up from the Chinese Storm God’s table amid snickers and walked up to Bryan.

“May I have a word with you, Donner-San?”

“Sure.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood up.

“What can I do for you?”

“I was wondering when Fitzroy was going to show up.”

“Well, he’s very sick. I think it’s the flu.”

Her eyes flashed. Lightning danced in her pupils. “That lying pig! He simply knows better than to show up here without having returned one of my messages all year! Weak, foolish mortal!”

Other gods were staring now. Bryan’s face was fire engine red. “Uh, I don’t know anything about that. Would you like me to mention it the next time I talk to him?”

Madame Wind composed herself, now all smiles. “Yes, please do.” She walked back to her table. Conversation slowly resumed throughout the room. Feeling like he’d just dodged a cannonball-sized bullet, Bryan sat back down and listened to the gods until it was time to reconvene.

When they walked back into the conference room, they found that St. John’s staff had tidied the place up and laid out a table full of delicacies relating to each god and their culture. More mundane tastes also crept in, as Bryan saw more than one carafe of Coca-Cola on the table. Everyone sat down in a good mood. Bryan took his place at the podium and tried to talk over the sounds of gulping, chewing, and smacking lips.

“Now remember, the quicker we get through these, the sooner we’ll be free to drink.” Everyone nodded agreeably. “I

spoke to Fitz during lunch,” he said and noticed many of the faces light up. “He’s still very ill, but will try to swing by before everyone leaves. In the meantime, we’ll have to make do without him.” He glanced pointedly at Fei Lian and added, “Heaven help us all.”

They all laughed and pointed at Fei Lian, who had a banana in each hand and was eating them both at the same time. Fei Lian said, “What?”

Bryan patted himself on the back. He might just make it out of here alive yet.

“ . . . mmm. . . hello?”

“FITZ!”

“Bryan? Good God, man, it’s three o’clock in the morning. What . . . where . . . ”

“FITZ!”

“Stop shouting. Where are you, it’s very noisy?”

“At that secret bar you told me to take ’em.”

“Oh no. Who are you with?”

“Um . . . Fei Lian, or Feng Bo, or whoever he says he is now . . . ”

“Does he have the stag head on?”

“Uh . . . no. He’s the old man.”

“Then he’s Feng Bo.”

“So it’s him, Donar, Hurakan, Mananan mac Lir, Moana Wee-Wee . . . ”

“Waiwai.”

“ . . . And a buncha others. Oh, and El Nino. Shit, that kid can drink!”

“And how much have you had to drink, Bryan ?”

“One ’r two ‘s all.”

“Are you using your credit card for this?”

“No, they’re buying me drinks. Donar is giving me sips from his horn, Fitz. Ever drink mead from a horn before? It’s better than a beer bong.”

“Okay, listen, don’t drink any more. Not from the bar, not from Donar, no more.”

“Zeus and Begorrah, why for?”

“Because you have to be up in five hours.”

“Hey, Fitz . . . they want me all to axe you something.”

“ . . . Go ahead.”

“What really happened between you and Madame Wind last year? Hello? Hellooo?”

“Goodbye, Bryan . Don’t call back or you’re fired.”

Wednesday Morning, 7:36 AM

Bryan’s alarm was going off. He reached for it and fell off the couch. Where am I, he asked himself. This is not my beautiful couch . . . With Talking Heads lyrics bouncing through his head, he sat up and looked around. Gold. Stucco. He was in the lobby of

the Pacific Vista hotel. He looked for the source of the alarm and could find nothing. St. John appeared before him and answered the cell phone on the glass table.

“Hello, Mr. Donner’s personal answering service for nights when he’s gone around the bend.” St. John answered in his most professional tone. “Ah, Mr. Bahntre, so good to hear from you! No no, everything’s fine. No, no property damage, but then again, it’s only Wednesday, right? Oh, certainly, he’s here in my lobby right now, looking like the back end of a rhino.”

St. John flipped the phone into Bryan’s lap and walked off, muttering. Bryan tried to talk but only a hoarse grunt came out.

“Bryan, it’s Fitz.”

“H’lo Fitz.”

“This is a payback for that three A.M. phone call you made last night. How you feeling, babe?”

“Like freshly-hammered shit.”

“Good! Because it’s seven-thirty right now, which means you have an hour to get right with the world. Today is the big day. Don’t screw it up, Donner. Get a shower. Use one of the gods’ rooms. And eat some breakfast. Hurry, go.”

Bryan hung up on him and trudged to the courtesy phone to call Fei Lian’s room, that being the one god least likely to use the shower anyway.

Bryan tapped his feet impatiently in the elevator; he was late and he knew it. He noted his reflection in the mirrored interior of the elevator. St. John's housekeeping staff was a wonder. They steamed and pressed his suit in thirty minutes, and even shined his shoes. Too bad the man inside the suit looked like he went ten rounds with a waffle iron.

The doors dinged at him, then opened. St. John was leaning on the front counter, smiling bemusedly. "Ah, I see you have chosen to join the rest of the waking world?"

"St. John," Bryan muttered as he passed.

"They're waiting for you in the conference room."

"Thanks again. Oh, and have someone bring me some coffee, please. And some aspirin." He didn't really want it; he just ordered it to put St. John in his place.

"My staff has taken the liberty of providing all of the guests with morning refreshments. We decided to include you as well."

Jesus, what an asshole, he thought, walking into the Sunset Room.

The gods were all seated in their appropriate spots. Everyone saw him and shouted, "NORM!" He shrank from the verbal barrage as they all laughed and slapped high fives. Oh great, he thought, a nickname.

"Very funny, very funny. Everyone eat something?" Grunts and nods from the gods and goddesses. "Good, because we've got a long day ahead of us. All of the old business is out of the way. Reports have all been noted." He turned some pages on the podium. "The only item of new business up for the day is . . . motion to grant the entity known as 'El Nino' deific status." Ev-

everyone sobered up instantly. He cleared his throat. "I'm going to get some coffee and some Advil, then we'll hear the opening remarks from the petitioners."

"Hello, Bryan."

"How did you know it was me?"

"Intuition. What's up?"

"Oh, this is going to shit real quick. I did like you asked me to, made some jokes, got 'em laughing, did the socializing thing . . ."

"Right. So, what's the problem?"

"They're going to kill us all! I can't stop them!"

"Calm down. Where are they now?"

"At lunch."

"I see. So, they aren't cracking the planet open just yet."

"Fitz, I'm serious! You have to get down here now!"

"Oh my, we're back to this. At least you're not quitting again."

"FITZROY!"

"Okay, what's going on?"

"Well, I brought forth the new business, just like you said, and called the delegation up to the podium. The Te'Maroans went first, and they all started bitching about how crappy a job Awka and his sons were doing at helping out the fishermen. Well, that got all of the sons bitching back at how the humans have abandoned them and so why should they help out? Then the other



Polynesian gods joined in, and they all started shouting and banging on the table. Tawhaki was so mad, he was crackling. Me and Poseidon no sooner got them separated before the Asian gods of agriculture got up and did the same damn thing! Calling themselves ‘AEFEN’—”

“AEFEN?”

“Asian Entities For El Nino.”

“Oh God.”

“Well, Yama-no-kami and Sukuna-Biko called the entire Chinese Ministry of Thunder a bunch of flatulent old men, and that started it all up again. Whose bright idea was it to give the Asian gods so many goddamn drums anyway?”

“Bryan, so far, you’re not telling me anything I haven’t had to deal with myself for the past ten years.”

“You’re kidding? It’s always like this?”

“Usually worse. Listen, they’re gods, the big melodrama is what they do. But there’s a treaty in place that prevents them from harming one another during the conference.”

“What about me? What about after the conference?”

“Don’t piss any of them off and you’ll do fine.”

“What if . . . maybe I did?”

“What? What did you do?”

“Well, Itzpapalotl was—”

“Who?”

“Itzpapalotl. Aztec goddess of agriculture. Looks kinda like a dragon.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Me neither, but that isn’t saying much. Well, she started in on what a swell thing El Nino was and then started chastising all of the storm gods for neglecting their subjects, and so I interrupted her and said, ’Thank you, but I believe this argument has been put forth already. In the interest of time, if you don’t have anything new to add, would you please wrap it up?’ And then she said . . . why are you laughing?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, babe. You did just fine. She’s minor, she’s an Ag god, don’t sweat her wrath. I still have a death sentence on my head if I ever set foot in the diamond mines of Africa. Really, it’s fine.”

“But she threatened me with Ketchup-Quattle, what ever the hell that is.”

“Quetzlcoatl. And I don’t think you’ll have to worry about him, either. He won’t dare show his face in San Cibola.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been doing this for ten years. You learn a lot about this shit after a while.”

“I can’t keep up with it. Thank god for the nametags.”

“You’re doing fine. Keep jumping in on them if they go astray. Remember, they all want attention. What’s next on the schedule?”

“Those opposed to El Nino get to speak, then we vote.”

“Call me after the vote, I’ve got some instructions for you.”

“Will do. I gotta go grab a bite.”

“Keep me posted.”

Bryan counted all of the ballots again. There was no getting around it. He would have to cast a vote. Not that it mattered much. Fitz had already told him which way the NWS wanted him to go. That part was easy. It was telling the assembly what the decision was that made his hands shake. He stuck his head out the door. All of the gods and goddesses were standing around in the lobby in small groups. El Nino was by himself, sitting on the couch where Bryan spent the night. “Everyone? You can come back in now. El Nino, I’ll call you in a minute.” He didn’t acknowledge Bryan. They all filed back in dutifully. When they were seated, looking at him expectantly, Bryan put his hands on the podium and said, “Okay, it’s a tie.” The gods began to mumble. “As you know, in the event of a tie, the National Weather Service gets a tie-breaking vote, in accordance with the Earhart Amendment of 1927. In this matter, the NWS has decided to vote in favor of El Niño.”

The room exploded with thunderclaps, shouts of outrage, flashes of lightning, and hurled obscenities. Bryan banged on the podium with his hand. “This matter was discussed, and I was told by Fitz how the NWS wanted me to vote!”

“Why should we listen to Norman, anyway?” growled

Long-Wang, his dragon scales shining in their anger. “He is nothing to us. I’m not giving up a fraction of my power.”

“Right!” chimed in Vayu. “I say we kill the human and

use that energy to—”

Poseidon stood up and pointed with his trident. “Shut up!

All of you! I’m sick of this shit! You agreed to play by these rules. You set up the parameters. Don’t blame Norm here because you haven’t been governing your appointed domain. I don’t like it any more than you do, but El Nino is in. Remember this, though: he’s not affiliated. I suggest you call in whatever favors you might have in your pantheon and see if you can do some cross-promotions to pick up a few worshippers. But keep the human out of it. You wouldn’t act like this if it were Fitz up there, would you?”

Everyone got quiet by degrees. When it was silent in the room, Bryan nodded to Poseidon and said, “So, it is officially declared. I’ll, uh, go get the new god.” He walked out into the lobby, wiping his brow, and put a hand on El Nino’s steaming shoulder. “We’re ready for you now.” El Nino followed him back into the conference room, an unreadable expression on his baby face. Once inside, Bryan shut the door and walked back up to the front. “The vote is in, El Nino. Are you ready to accept the verdict of this council?”

“I am,” he answered.

“Then it is so declared that you have now been granted deity status. Your official classification shall be . . .” he leafed quickly through his sheaf of papers. “Ah . . . your official classification is Deity, Second-Tier, Non-Aligned, Minor God of Storms. Congratulations.”

Bryantook a knee and shielded his eyes as all of the gods and goddesses raised their hands and said, “Welcome, Brother Storm.” Bryan could see and feel the light through his shut, covered eyes, and started to panic. What if I go blind, he thought wildly. Then he felt a hot hand on his shoulder. He rose, blinking. El Nino was now a golden, glowing, steaming baby. It was even more unsettling. Bryan motioned to the microphone. El Nino stepped up to it.

“Thank you, my fellow gods and goddesses. And thank you, Bryan Donner, for your advice and council during these debates. My friends, I have been around for many years now, first as a phenomenon, then as an entity. It feels good to finally be a god.” He paused, looking at his friends and enemies around the conference table. “I know some of you don’t trust me, and that is understandable. I will just have to work that much harder to earn your trust.” He paused to gather his thoughts. “I would like to suggest two items of business, if I may, for our next meeting. The first concerns my sister, La Nina. I would like to recommend her to deity status as well.”

“But she’s not even an entity!” sputtered Afa, the Samoan storm god.

“I know, but I have my reasons, which I will discuss at our next meeting. The second item of business is that I would like a grant to pursue my own, independent pantheon.”

“I knew it,” muttered Lonko, the Te’Maroan god of agriculture. “Make him a god and he turns his back on us.”

“Again, I thank you. That is all.” He sat down to weak applause. Bryan took the mike again.

“It’s been a long day, people. We’ve done a great thing here. The NWS would like to take you all to dinner to celebrate. I have been instructed by Fitzroy to take you all to Doyle’s for food and beer, as long as someone can tell me again how the hell to get there.”

“Yeah, hello?”

“Bryan? It’s Fitz.”

“Hey, Fitzroy! Hey guys, say hi to Fitz!”

“I can hear them. Tell them hi back.”

“He says hi, guys. So, what’s up?”

“You’re at Doyle’s, I take it?”

“Yeah, we’re eating.”

“So, is El Nino a god?”

“Yep.”

“Good job. Have you talked to him yet about our concerns?”

“Yeah, we had that talk. He’s going to play ball.”

“Excellent. I can call the home office tomorrow. Good work, babe.”

“Do you have any guarantees that he’ll honor his end of the bargain?”

“He knows which side his bread is buttered on, if you take my meaning.”

“Actually, I don’t. You mean to tell me the National Weather Service has a storm god at its beck and call now?”

“Sort of. Yes and no. There’s a trade off . . . it’s a complicated relationship. I’ll show you how it works when you come in tomorrow.”

“Oh, speaking of which, can I have tomorrow off? Catch up on some sleep?”

“Tell you what: take a half-day. Come in afternoon , I want a full report on everything.”

“So, you’re feeling better.”

“Good enough to sit behind my desk all day. I need to get out. Besides, it’ll be a beautiful day tomorrow.”

“Right. Okay, I’ll drink a beer for you.”

“You do that.”

“Bye.”

“Ciao, Babe.”

Thursday Afternoon, 12:09 PM

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the foreign weather flunky,” said Molly as Bryan breezed through the door.

“What the hell happened to you?” asked Virgil Hilts, the senior technician. “You’re in real clothes.”

Bryan looked down at his blue jeans and plaid oxford.

“Oh, I just needed a change. Sorry about that, but last night was

the first eight-hours of sleep I got all week.”

“Was it bad?” asked Molly, genuinely concerned.

“Yeah. I’m going to go debrief the boss now and try to figure out where to start on my paperwork.

Lou walked into the room. “Hey, you’re back,” he said without any real enthusiasm. “Did they bury you?”

“Oh, it was bad, but nothing I couldn’t handle. How were things here?”

Lou threw up his hands. “You don’t want to know. Half the phones are still out.”

“Yeah!” said Molly. “It was nutty yesterday. First, the server went down. Then, we had to manually adjust the dish . . .”

They all joined in heaping complaint upon complaint.

Bryan listened to it all, a small smile in the corners of his mouth.

He finally figured out who Norman was, and as of right now, it wasn’t him.

## **Slings and Arrows**

Feb 15th

Doc Crossthwaite wasn’t really a doctor and everyone



knew it. Not having a piece of lambskin that said he paid forty thousand dollars for an education didn't make him any less wise, however, so almost everyone called him "Doc."

He was very knowledgeable about a great many things and something of a local guru on the UNC campus. Doc's little cottage was poised at the edge of the campus district and Rue Livre and would have been a precious thing had Doc given a shit about the lawn or the roof or any of the half-dozen things that needed tending to. The only area not overgrown was the well-trod pathway from the sidewalk to the front steps. Years of collegiate footsteps had compacted the earth so severely it was impossible to grow anything there.

Usually, the house spilled over with the comings and goings of various people: grad students looking for the dirt on a particular professor, any number of drug dealers (for medicinal purposes only), even the occasional guru groupie, tending to the doctor's various needs. Today, however, when his current visitor showed up, he chased everyone out and locked the door. It seemed that even in Doc Crossthwaite's world, Sam Bowen knocking on your door was a special instance.

"Love," said Crossthwaite, "is a powerful thing." He seemed to be searching for every individual word in his too-full brain. "I mean, people have gone to war over this shit, you know what I'm saying?" He took a drag off of his cigarette and chased it with an Oreo cookie. "Lot of people think it's something that

comes upon them, like a flu bug or something. Others, your artsy-fartsy types mostly, ascribe mystical powers to it, like an old-style incarnation of the deity. 'I'm not in control of my actions, it was Love what did it to me'. You see what I'm saying?"

Sam nodded and watched ashes and crumbs fall from Doc's red and gray mustache onto his large, tie-dyed shirt that barely contained his mass.

"They are all right, mostly, but they are all totally wrong.

Love is energy, man. A very special kind of energy. Some folks can tap into it naturally, like a psychic or something, right? Others, they are closed off to it. Some of us are receptive, others not. Now, once you access that energy, you can do some pretty amazing shit with it. Write better poetry, be more creative, straighten up and get a real job . . ." he paused. "Even kill someone. Oh, yeah, man, love is some powerful shit."

Sam nodded. Doc stubbed out his cigarette and washed it down with a nearby tankard of coffee. "You sure you don't want some?" Doc held up the coffee.

"No, I'm fine."

"Your world, chief." He drank deeply, and when the tankard came away, Sam noticed his mustache was dripping.

Crossthwaite was oblivious. "So, now we come to this . . ." Doc picked up the object on the table between them. "This is a conduit."

Sam furrowed his brow. "A conduit?"

"Yeah, like a funnel. This opens up your receptors, even if they're closed off." He passed it to Sam, who took it gingerly

between two fingers.

“Does it specify a person, or does it go with something inside you?” Sam asked, clearly worried.

Doc Crossthwaite looked down over his glasses and smiled. “You mean do you have any control over it? Sorry, Padre, but it doesn’t work like that. You know the principle of diffusion?”

Sam nodded glumly.

“Well, when you get opened up to such powerful energy, it goes to where it’s not, you know? You can’t control it any more than you can try to run from a smoke-filled room.” Doc licked his lips. “Can I see that again?”

“Yeah, sure.” Sam passed it over, lost in thought.

Doc turned the arrow over in his hands. It was small, a little more than a foot long, like a child’s toy. Three white fletches were attached to one end. A silver-tipped point was affixed to the opposite end. Doc brought the silver tip close to his eyes and asked, “Where did you find this, anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, I pulled it out of my ass last night.” Sam couldn’t even enjoy the look on the doctor’s face. It was what Doc said in reply that pulled Sam out of his reverie.

“Dude, you are so fucked.”

Feb 1st

How the man made it past the bouncers, Sam never knew.

God knows, Doyle's had one of the most lenient dress codes in the world, owing much to the uniqueness of its clientele. But this guy was just scummy. His trench coat was four different colors, none of them original, and his hair was a scraggly, stringy mess.

At least he didn't smell bad, which meant that he was either trying for that look, or was just damn lucky, Sam didn't know which.

In any case, he walked up to Sam, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Hi, I'm Sheldon, I denied Christ." This line was delivered with the same soulless weight as, "Welcome to Taco Bell, would you like to try our new Frito Burrito?" It wouldn't have mattered to Sam if the line was delivered in full, majestic baritone with flamboyant hand gestures, it still meant that he was dealing with a lunatic. Sam smiled and turned away.

"Are you Sam Bowen?" Sheldon asked.

The question was a medicine ball in the groin. "Yeah, I'm Bowen." Sam turned slightly to face him as Sheldon took the adjacent stool. Silas smiled to himself and served Sheldon something amber in a glass.

"Thanks, Silas," said Sheldon.

Sam shot Silas a "do you know this guy" look, and Silas shrugged in a sort of "yeah, but you're on your own" kind of way.

Sheldon drained his glass and asked, "The Sam Bowen that helps people find things? The troubleshooter?"

"Well, yeah, sorta," said Sam. In addition to taking care

of his own particular situation (tracking down the origins of a curse that wiped out his whole family) Sam occasionally applied his knowledge and experience in the supernatural to helping out people who needed an expert in such matters.

“Listen, I know you’re busy, so let me get right to it. I want to hire you.”

“To do what?” asked Sam, content to play this game if only to see what the punch line was.

“I want you to find my girlfriend, Dawn.” He signaled to Silas, who refilled quietly and quickly and disappeared to another part of the bar.

The very first thing that leapt to Sam’s mind was, this guy has a girlfriend? Instead, he asked, “Okay, what happened? Kidnapping?”

“No, she just . . . left. Here, I got this . . .” He pulled from the crumpled interior of his coat an equally crumpled sheet of yellow legal paper. Sam read the note:

*Sheldon,*

*We’ve been together for a while, now, and things have been pretty okay. But I feel the urge to move on. Specifically, I feel the urge to stray. Trust me, after all this time, I recognize it for what it is. Sorry, but it’s a real bitch being Greek. You were a lot of fun, Shel, really. I can honestly say I had the most interesting time with you in about three hundred*

*years. Take care of yourself. Please, please, please remember me if we meet again!*

*Love, Eos*

Sam read the letter twice. “Okay,” he said, massaging his temples in a gesture that was way too world-weary for him. “Since you made it past O’Ryan, I’m going to assume that you have a reason to be in Doyle’s.”

Sheldon looked at him blankly. Sam said, “You’re a Neighbor, right?”

“Oh, right. Well, as I told you before, I denied Christ.”

Sheldon put his second drink away for emphasis.

“And, because of that, you can . . . ?” Sam trailed off, expecting Sheldon to fill in the blanks. For the first time in the conversation, Sheldon took the upper hand.

“You don’t know shit, do you? I’m the Jew. The Wandering Jew. Ahasuerus was my real name. ‘Tarry you until I return?’ Heard of me, now?”

“Sorry, doesn’t ring any bells,” said Sam huffily.

“And you’re supposed to be some expert.” Sheldon scoffed.

“I’m no expert. I’m just doing my own thing. I never said I was a biblical scholar.” Sam was on the defensive now.

“Okay, look, when they were taking Jesus up the hill to be crucified, right, there I was, watching the parade. Hell, the Romans had daily processions, we all turned out to watch them. Well,

this long-haired hippie tripped and fell right in front of me, and asked me for a little help. How was I supposed to know who he was? He looked like a fucking thug. Anyway, we had words, and that son of a whore cursed me.”

“Jesus cursed you?” Sam was incredulous.

“Yeah, bet you didn’t know he could do that, did you? His fucking sycophants kept it out of all of their propaganda, so no one would know what an asshole the guy was. Remember Judas? Think he was really overcome with remorse? Bullshit, man. Jesus kept tabs on all of them, and when they . . .”

Sam held up his hand. “Okay, I get it, you’re the Wandering Jew.”

“Call me Sheldon.”

“Right. What about your girlfriend?”

“Dawn.” Sheldon turned glum at the mention of her name.

“Dawn Eos?” Sam asked, hoping to put two and two together.

“Dawn-Dawn? No, just Dawn. She’s Greek.” He said it proudly.

“Greek.” Sam repeated. “As in, the pantheon?”

“Yeah, the pantheon.” Sheldon frowned. “Maybe you aren’t the guy for the job.”

“So, let me sum this up, then, for myself: You’re the Wandering Jew, and you want me to find your Greek goddess Eos, because she’s left you. That about cover it?”

“Yeah,” said Sheldon, still glum.

“Sorry, but that’s not quite my line of work. Try Stonehill.”

“I did, he sent me to you.”

“Did he.”

Sheldon noticed the irate look on Sam’s face and thinking it was directed at him, said, “Look, I ain’t no freeloader. I can pay you.”

“In what? Shekels?” Sam was craning his neck around to look for Stonehill at his usual table, but found it vacant.

“Yeah, ten thousand of them.” Sam whipped his head back around. Sheldon was holding a battered envelope that fit right in with the rest of his ensemble. “Here’s five, to get you started.

You find her, it’s ten. You help me set up a meeting with her, just one face-to-face talk, it’s fifteen.”

Sam looked at the envelope. It might have been chump change to Stonehill, but to Sam, that money was food, a new pair of boots, rent, research, spell components, and a host of other things. He took the envelope and weighed it experimentally. “How do you know she’s still in the city?”

“I just do, don’t ask me how. Besides, she’s got relatives here,” Sheldon said.

“You got a picture of her?”

“Uh, no, she’s a little camera-shy.” Sam started to shake his head, when Sheldon produced another battered sheet of paper.

“But here, look, I wrote down a complete description of her, even her clothes.” Sam looked it over, and aside from some poetic li-



cense, it was pretty thorough. Sheldon watched him read and added, "Please, Mr. Bowen."

Sam sighed. "Okay, but no promises. Even if I can find her, she may not want to talk."

"I know," Sheldon smiled for the first time. "I think you can find her, though. I'm a very good judge of people."

"Yeah, now you are," said Sam. "Fat lot of good it will do you."

The crack went over Sheldon's head. He stood up and threw a fifty-dollar bill on the bar. "That's for me and you. I'm staying at the Reese Halfway House. Call me there if you come up with anything."

"Okay," Sam sighed again. In spite of the sudden influx of money into his life, he was dreading this. He slipped the envelope into his pocket, then turned to the retreating Sheldon. "Say, Sheldon, where'd this cash come from, anyway?"

"Bael, Bowen, I've been around for over two thousand years, you'd think I'd know a trick or two about making money. Shit!" He stalked off.

Bowen turned to Silas. "What'd I say?" he said.

Silas shrugged and wiped the counter.

Feb 2nd

Cupid drove the Loop 255, looking for the exit that would take him downtown. The stereo was loud enough to make the chassis of the other cars on the loop vibrate and hum. Driving in the car was a conceit, not because he was three feet tall, but because he didn't need it. He was Cupid, he didn't have to drive a car. The little wings on his back were deceptively powerful and would carry him over great distances in a heartbeat. Problem was, every time he used his wings, it reminded him that he was Cupid. Specifically, it reminded him that he was a three-foot tall baby with a little cloth diaper on. He missed being tall and beautiful. He missed the adoration, the attention.

The car, in this instance, a 1979 convertible Corvette Stingray, was a way of making him feel like a complete god again. He was too short to reach the pedals, but every time he moved his right foot, the car sped up or slowed down. He could work the steering wheel; that was still doable. Unfortunately, the car was red. Cupid had no choice in the matter. Well, that's not entirely true, he could have chosen white or pink, but to Cupid that was totally unacceptable for a Stingray. It was bad enough that his dick was little more than a corn nut without people thinking he was a girl altogether. So he drove fast, swore often, and tried not to think about the color of the car.

The downtown exits were zooming by so fast Cupid barely had time to take the last one. He cut through three lanes of occupied traffic and made the off-ramp with a fourteen-car brake light salute in his wake. He flipped them all off and cut the volume on

the stereo so he could concentrate. Robert Plant's banshee wail became a tiny moan. Cupid sang "Whole Lotta Love" under his breath as he looked at the street signs. Several pedestrians stopped to stare at the car and were rewarded with a one-fingered salute from the diminutive driver. He finally found Merced, and, in keeping with the spirit of his day, it was one-way in the wrong direction. Swearing, he drove to the next street, Carpenter, and took a right.

It was Groundhog Day at Doyle's, and the bar was in the midst of a wake. Everyone was wearing black armbands for Phil Connors, a local weatherman who mysteriously vanished seven years ago. Ever since then, the only real Groundhog Day party to attend was at Doyle's.

This was the lunch crowd, and although the place was packed, it was subdued. Security was at a minimum, since most of the trouble happened at night. The patrons, professionals, mostly, were smiling at their armbands and taking advantage of the lunch specials and getting soused on Punxsutawney Punch, one of Silas's more lethal concoctions.

And being that Doyle's was the kind of place that it is, and that reputation is, if anything, understated, it should come as no surprise that no one even blinked when Cupid walked into the room.

"Fucking finally," he growled, walking straight to the bar, shooting looks this way and that. "Go on, say something, I dare

you,” he muttered.

“Can I help you?” The bartender looked him straight in the eyes, an even gaze.

“Yeah, you got food?” Cupid’s expression didn’t change.

“Sure, you want to see a menu?”

“No, just bring me the biggest sandwich you got and the biggest, darkest beer on tap.” Cupid finished, still expecting a crack.

“You want your beer now or with the sandwich?” asked the bartender.

“Now,” said Cupid. His defenses were still up.

“No prob.” The bartender turned the order in at the kitchen window, and then drew Cupid a half-yard of something that looked like motor oil. “Here you go,” he said and hung around to get Cupid’s reaction.

Cupid took a long drink, smacked his lips, and screwed up his face. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s one of our house brews. It’s called ‘Velvet Jones’.”

“I don’t get it,” said Cupid.

The bartender shrugged. “Our brewmeister has a weird sense of humor.”

“What’s in it?” said Cupid, drinking deeply.

“It’s a chocolate stout.”

Cupid narrowed his eyes. “That wasn’t a wisecrack, was it?”

Silas shrugged again. “Hey, you asked.” He drifted off to

tend to other customers.

Cupid turned to his beer. It was good, in spite of the fact that the beer was made with chocolate. He looked around. The place hadn't changed much since his last visit, and that was fifteen years ago. Cupid surveyed the crowd, looking for familiar faces, but it was a lost cause. He didn't really expect to see anyone, but he was bored and hungry.

The bartender sat a huge plastic tray down in front of him, and Cupid spun around to face it. He was staring at an 18" long submarine sandwich, sitting on a bed of fries, with four small buckets, containing ketchup, beef broth, mustard, and mayo. Cupid whistled. "Now, that's a sandwich!"

The bartender grinned. "Here," he said, sliding another stout over. "This one's on me."

"Why?" said Cupid, picking up a section of the sandwich.

The bartender leaned on the bar with his elbow and took a swipe at the bar with a white rag. "Because if it wasn't for you, I'd be out of a job."

"How's that, exactly?" asked Cupid as he shoveled one end of the sandwich into his mouth.

Silas leaned on the bar. "Hey, if I had a dime for every dumb shit who sat across the bar from me and drank like a fish all night because he was pining for some girl, I'd be a rich man. Of course, every time I listened to them spill their guts about Jennifer, or Natalie, or whoever, I got handsomely tipped. So, the least

I can do is buy you a beer.”

Cupid laughed, an explosion of breadcrumbs and pieces of meat. “That’s great! What’s your name, kid?”

“Silas. What do you want me to call you?”

“For you, Cupid. Only people I like can call me Cupid.

Everyone else, I make ‘em call me Eros. Well, Silas, I tell you, you’re a lot smarter than your predecessor.”

“Who, Al?” asked Silas.

“Don’t remember his name. But the last time I was here, he started in on me with the wisecracks when all I wanted was a beer and a sandwich. Like, why in Hades would you want to piss off a god?”

Silas shrugged. “Dunno. Me, I never wanted to. So, what did you do?”

Cupid pulled out an arrow from the quiver on his chest.

“Special shaft, just like this one. Delayed reaction. You start to feel like something is missing from your life, like you’re not complete. Gradually, it takes up more and more of your thoughts, until you come to realize, you need to find someone to settle down with. You need to be in love.” He started to snicker. “But, because of the tip, here, you can’t! You’re doomed to failure!” He slapped the bar and howled. “Oh, I got a million of them.”

Silas exhaled and rubbed his chin. “That’s a little more complicated than the standard crush-type thing I read about, huh?”

“Hey, I’ve had a lot of time on my hands.”

“Sure,” said Silas. “Well, that clears up one mystery. I

always wondered what happened to old Al. How'd you shoot him, by the way?" asked Silas.

"With my bow."

"No," said Silas, flipping his rag. "I mean, where. I'm surprised no one tried to stop you."

"Oh, you mean here in the bar! No, man, I shot him in the parking garage when he was leaving."

"Ah. Well, there you go, then." Silas nodded.

"Say," said Cupid, "you're pretty knowledgeable about the, what do you call it? The Neighborhood?"

Silas nodded and said, "Yeah, I guess."

"I'm looking for some people. Maybe you can help me."

Silas wiped another section of the bar. "I'll do what I can."

Feb 3rd

Gary heard the knocks for a long time before he broke away from his work to answer them. He was in the middle of a particularly difficult piece of music, and it was slaying him. He finally threw his pencil down on the desk and screamed, "All right, for shit's sake, unclench your fist!"

He flounced to the door, the perfect picture of put out, flung it open and screamed, "O-My-God!"

Cupid hovered in the doorway. "Hello, Ganymede," he

said, trying his damndest to sound pleasant.

Gary recovered, his hand on his head. "I do not need this shit." He sighed and put both hands on his hips. "First off, I'm Gary Meade, got it? You on my doorstep, just saying that name, makes me feel older than dirt."

"You are older than dirt." Cupid flitted heavily (and only Cupid was capable of such a contradiction) into the entrance hall.

"Listen, I got a couple of questions, maybe you can answer them."

"That's just great, because I'm in the middle of a film score and I don't need the interruption." Gary shut the door.

"Would you like to come in? Oh yes, that would be nice, thank you. Not at all." He squeezed by Cupid and made a beeline for the kitchen. "What do you want, Eros?"

Cupid followed, looking at the high ceilings, track lighting along the walls, and natural wood furniture. It was a tasteful house, and was among the more expensive real estate in Arcadia.

He hated it. "I'm, ah, I'm looking for somebody. Say, you got anything to drink?" He rounded the corner, where Gary was pouring hot water into a mug.

Gary steeped his tea bag and said, "I'm out of ambrosia.

You want some wine? Diet Coke?"

Cupid looked into Gary's wide-open blue eyes, studied his wavy brown hair. "On second thought, skip it."

Gary made a strangled sound in his throat and flitted heavily (on second thought, there are two people who are capable of that contradiction) into his study. "You know, I don't need



this. I really don't."

"Yeah, ah, Gary, I'm really sorry to have crashed your mundane love nest, here, but I'm looking for some family."

Gary sniffed. "What on earth makes you think I keep up with any of your fucked-up relatives?" Cupid just looked at him.

Gary hung his head, suddenly sheepish. "Well, I may know of a few people's whereabouts."

"Yeah, that's more like it." Cupid shook his head in disgust. Ever since Ganymede's cup-bearing days, he was the biggest gossip on Olympus. Every scrap of information he picked up was passed on to his lover, Zeus. Thanks to Ganymede's interference, a lot of thunderbolts were thrown around on a bunch of gods just trying to do a little scheming and planning. If there were any other way to find the family, Cupid wouldn't even be here.

"Well, Gary, you gonna stare at my dingus all day or are you gonna write down some names and addresses for me?"

Gary reached for his Rolodex. "You know, I never liked you, you little bastard."

"That's because when I still looked like a Greek god and you were the teenage rent boy on Olympus, I didn't want anything to do with you."

It was the end of the day. Cupid was tired and discouraged. This was the last name on his list, and it was the one he'd been dreading the most. He knocked on the door, cautiously. Behind him, he could hear the sounds of the neighborhood: children

playing, dogs barking, garage doors opening. Suburbia. So named because it was actually worse than urban living, primarily because it was such a lie. Mortals spent their lives trying to be something other than what they really were, and it colored everything they did. These little pockets of homes, built to look like they were thirty years old, when they would really fall apart in half that time, gave the impression of serenity and stability. And yet, every day, Cupid found the most deviant shit in the 'burbs. It was all a facade.

The door opened. "Yeah, can I help you?" It was the face of a man in his late thirties, and he looked tired and run-down.

Cupid stared; he didn't recognize him. "Anteros?"

The man blinked, then blinked again. Suddenly, the face took on more familiar lines, and he looked pissed off. "Get the hell away from here!" he hissed.

"Anteros, wait," said Cupid, his hands up. "Please, I need to talk to you."

"Get away from me, Eros." He reached behind the door and came out with a baseball bat.

"You think that's going to stop me?" asked Cupid.

"No, but it'll make me feel a whole lot better." He stepped out onto the porch and took an experimental swing.

"Come on, Anteros, we're brothers." Cupid hovered out of reach of the wood.

"Used to be brothers, until you stole what was mine!"

"Honey?" The voice that drifted from inside the house

was feminine and worried. “Are you okay? Who is it?”

“It’s my deadbeat half-brother, Joyce,” he called over his shoulder. “Don’t you dare come out here! He’s just leaving.”

“Should I dial nine-one-one?” Joyce asked.

“No, it’s all right,” he said, his voice both loud and soothing. “He’s leaving now.”

“What the hell is nine-one-one?” said Cupid.

“It’s what us normal people do when we’re in trouble.

Not all of us have godlike powers anymore!”

“Look, that was not my fucking fault!” Cupid screamed.

“I didn’t have any choice in the matter!”

“Yeah, but you didn’t give that power back, either, did you? You selfish bastard. You wanted a playmate, so Mom made me. But you didn’t like sharing your toys and your responsibilities. Son of a bitch!” He swung the bat really hard. Cupid ducked his head and the bat almost clipped his wings.

“Hey, you told me you were tired of following me around all the time! I thought I was doing you a favor!”

“Know what I do now? I’m a bloody paper-pusher. I don’t even know what my company sells!” Swish swish went the bat.

“Okay, okay, look, I’m going,” said Cupid, backing up.

“Just answer me one question: where’s Mom?”

“Like I know?” They were out on the lawn now, and neighbors were stopping their lawn tending and mailbox retrieval duties to stare.

“Hey, Andy,” called a man from across the street. He was wearing golf pants and a knit shirt. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, Paul, I’m good over here,” said Anteros, swinging again. “Don’t worry about me.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” said Cupid. “Don’t you keep in touch with her?”

“Whatever communication I once had with Mom dried up the day you decided to be the all-encompassing aspect of love.”  
Swish swish.

“You dumb motherfucker, I told you, if you want to blame anyone, you need to blame Hallmark!”

“Hey, pal,” said Paul from across the street. “You want to keep that kind of language down? We got children, here.” He gestured at the small throng of bicycled youths who had gathered to watch batting practice.

“Oh, that’s it, you cocksucking bag of meat . . .” said Cupid, reaching for his bow and quiver. Now, Cupid is an ace archer, an expert, perhaps the fastest ever. It’s actually to Anteros’ credit that Cupid launched only one arrow at Paul Forson before the baseball bat that had been swishing in front of Cupid finally connected with the back of the god’s head. Anteros’ arms vibrated with the impact, and Cupid did a forward somersault in midair.

“Son of a bitch!” he said, rubbing his head.

Bless Norman’s heart, they only see what they want to see. Take the aforementioned Paul Forson, for example. Paul was confused. For a brief instant, he saw the hippie on Andy’s front

lawn turn to face him, and he had an impression of an arrow streaking towards him. Then he saw Andy bean the hippie in the back of the head. The next minute, he was walking back towards the house and making a list of reasons why he was divorcing his wife, Leslie. He decided to rely on total honesty and moved his fuck-lust for his ass-heavy secretary to the top of the list. The other reasons were secondary, but don't worry, he'd tell her everything, like how she managed to burn the macaroni and cheese every single goddamn time she made it.

Cupid turned to face Anteros, who drew the bat back again.

"I got lots more where that came from," Anteros said, a smile of malicious glee on his face.

"All right, all right," said Cupid, hurriedly putting the Corvette between him and his brother. "Do you know someone who would know where Mom is?"

"No one comes out here! I'm out of the family, thanks to you!" He made to strike the car.

"Fine," said Cupid, getting into the 'Vette. The car roared to life. "I tried. Kiss my ass. I hope you choke on your mundane suburban existence." He roared off, his single middle finger high in the air. Fucking humans, he thought.

Feb 4th

Gary Meade had just settled back down to his music.

Cupid's visit yesterday had completely unhinged him for the rest of the day. It was only after a full meal, two bottles of wine, and four hours of dancing at Le Petite Morte that he was able to sleep soundly enough to forget all about the creepy winged baby.

"Okay, now, we have eight measures to go before the key change . . ." he muttered to himself as he drew a few notes in on his paper. Every measure or so he would shuffle through the pages and add or take away notes for other parts of the orchestra.

He was finally back in the groove of things when there was a knock on his door. Ignore it, he thought to himself, they'll go away. More knocking, louder this time. Don't get up (knock knock), he thought. No, don't (knock knock) do it. Think of a (knock knock) peaceful river (knock knock knock). . .

"Jesus Christ, keep your pants on!" he screamed. "God oh mighty shit dammit!"

He flounced to the door, flung it open, and screamed,

"What the hell do you want?"

Sam Bowen took a step back. "I'm sorry, I was looking for Gary Meade, but I can come back later . . ."

"Oh, stop it, I'm not dangerous," said Gary, who had just given Sam the once-over. "I'm Gary, and I am busy, but not too. So." He leaned on the open door, one arm high in the air. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm looking for someone, and I have reason to believe that you may know where she is."

Gary's face fell. "Gods and monsters, you aren't a Neigh-

bor, are you?"

"Yeah, I am," said Sam. "I'm Sam Bowen." He stuck his hand out.

Gary sighed and took the offered hand, limply. "Well . . . shit. Come in, I suppose." He backed out of the door and let Sam in. Sam walked into the living room and looked around. "You want something to drink?" asked Gary .

"I'll get it," said Sam quickly. "A glass of water is fine. Just show me to the kitchen."

"Okay, what—ever," said Gary , wondering where this was going. He showed Bowen the kitchen and opened the cabinet containing glasses. Sam grabbed a plastic tumbler and stuck it under the faucet.

"What's this all about?" said Gary , waving his hand at Sam's efforts.

"Well, I knew something of your old job, and I didn't want you to think that I presumed . . ." he stopped because Gary was cackling madly.

"Oh, sweet Petunia, that's great! You are a doll, you know that? That's the sweetest and most unnecessary thing anyone's ever done for me."

"I didn't mean to offend you," said Sam, his voice thick with embarrassment.

"Goodness gracious, no. That's sweet, Mr. Bowen, really. But I loved my job on Olympus . It was a ball. I sometimes really

miss it.”

“But you were a slave, right?”

“No, I was more like a personal valet. Zeus was very kind to me.” Gary’s eyes grew misty. “I never wanted for anything. No bills to pay, all the food I could ever want, wine flowing out of the faucets. It was heaven. Literally and figuratively.”

Sam let him drift for a few seconds before interrupting.

“Well, interestingly enough, that’s what brings me here today.”

Gary shook his head, clearing the cobwebs away. “What’s that?”

“I’m looking for one of your former associates.”

“Twice in two days, what are the odds?” muttered Gary.

“Oh, is someone else looking for Eos?” asked Sam.

“EOS! Oh my God, she’s back in town?” Gary whooped and did the hustle back into his workroom. Sam followed, with no accompanying dance steps.

“Yeah, she’s back in town, and someone is looking for her.” Sam took out a notepad. “I take it, then, you haven’t seen her?”

“Nope.” Gary sat down primly. “Say, who wants to find her, anyway?”

“Her old boyfriend.”

Gary raised his eyebrows. “It wasn’t, well, domestic trouble was it?”

“Nothing not like that,” Sam reassured. “Up until a week ago, they doted on each other.”



“How do you know?” asked Gary .

“I checked with who they were staying with. No trouble from either of them. Plus, she left him a note.”

“Well, I guess it won’t hurt to let you know that she’ll probably get around to calling me and we’ll go clubbing or something.”

Sam wrote down his number. “You’ll have her call me if she comes by?”

Gary copied the number into his Rolodex. “Sure.”

“Okay, thanks. Do you know of anyone else who might know where she is?”

Gary made an ugly face. “Well, she has a sister. . .”

Sam walked up to the apartment building and checked the address again. This place was a dump, even for Spanishtown. San Pablo was a major street, running north to south, and completely defined for the area. Up north, it caught a lot of the tourist traffic, and the shops and buildings were splendid in their renovations. But as San Pablo crept south, the buildings became more functional, then a little run-down, then finally dilapidated. The bustling crowds of North San Pablo dissolved into lone women in very high heels, walking in slow circles. Everything, from the cars on the street to the man on the front stoop, seemed to slow down in a haze of poverty.

Atlas Towers apartment complex was just south of the nice part of San Pablo , but it looked like it belonged much further

down the street. Sam walked up to the entrance, opened the shaky glass door, tried the second and found it locked. To the left of the door was a brass plate with doorbells and nametags beside each one. Sam pressed the button for 210, marked "S & D."

"Hello?" said a man's voice, tinny through the buzzer.

"I'm looking for Selene," said Sam. "It's about her sister."

"Who are you?" Now it was a woman's voice, though no less tinny.

"My name is Sam Bowen."

"Hold on." Click.

Sam stood in the entrance hall for close to fifteen minutes, getting angrier and angrier. Finally, as he was walking back to the buzzer, finger outstretched, to tell them off, the woman's voice crackled through the speaker and stopped him. "Okay. Come on up." The inner door gave a great clunk, and Sam pushed it quickly.

It opened, and the smell of old people and cats hit him in the face. Lovely, he thought. Across from him was an elevator.

He pushed the call button, and the doors opened immediately. He looked at the interior. The smell of old people was stronger in here. Sam shrugged and stepped inside and mashed the 2 button on the battered panel.

Five minutes later, the doors mostly opened. Sam squeezed through them and threw a mild Slavic curse on the elevator. The doors closed and the elevator started its descent. Christ, he thought.

The door to 210 was open a few inches, held in place by a chain.

A man was looking at him through the crack. Either that, or a very

tall bearded lady. “Mr. Bowen?”

Nope, Sam thought, not a lady. “Yeah, call me Sam.”

The door shut, then reopened, wider. Pungent incense drifted out into the hallway. The bearded man was tall and thin and wore a shapeless T-shirt and baggy shorts. “I’m Dennis.” He held out his hand.

“Nice to meet you.” Sam stepped into the apartment. It looked nothing like the rest of the building. It was huge as far as apartments go, clean, neat, and tasteful in its Bohemia. Dennis sat down in a wicker chair, suspended from the ceiling.

“Selene will be out in a second. Here, take a seat.” He motioned to a beanbag chair, a hanging rattan basket chair, and a small futon. Sam took the futon, knowing it would be the easiest to get up from. Dennis asked, “Dawn isn’t in any kind of trouble, is she?”

“Not that I know of,” said Sam. “I’m looking for her on behalf of Sheldon. He wants to try to reconcile with her.”

Dennis snorted. “Well, if she’s moved on, he’s got no chance of that.”

Sam said, “I don’t know about that, myself. I’m just trying to find her and get her to have a meeting with him.”

“Well, Mr. Bowen, you’ve come to the wrong place.” A woman emerged from the long hallway. She was pale and blonde and mostly naked through her gossamer robes. Sam looked away quickly and stood up.

“You must be Selene.”

“Sorry about the wait downstairs, I had to check on you.”

“Check on me?” Sam asked. “Why?”

“I needed to make sure you were legitimate, and not some asshole with a computer who tracked me down to try and court me.”

Sam looked incredulous. “That happens?”

Dennis smiled. “Occasionally. But people we don’t know, knocking on the door, asking about Dawn, tends to make us raise shields now and again.”

“Okay,” said Sam, trying to get back on track. “So, you said you don’t know where she is?”

“No, and I doubt that my sister will come to me if she needs to crash. Our relationship is somewhat . . . strained.” Selene looked a little guilty. “Sibling rivalry and all that.”

“Okay, well, I’m sorry to have wasted your time.” Sam stood up and handed Selene a page from his notebook. “If you hear anything, or if she comes by, would you have her call me?”

“I’ll try, Mr. Bowen.” They got up and followed him to the door.

“Nice meeting you,” Dennis said.

In the hallway, Sam turned. “Say, are you somebody famous?”

Dennis grinned. “Does it matter?”

“I guess not.” Sam turned as the door shut. He took one look at the elevator and headed for the stairs.

Feb 6th

Cupid sat at the bar at Doyle's, nursing a half-yard of Velvet Jones (and the author must beg your forgiveness at the visual metaphor of a three-foot tall baby nursing a beer. But "sipping" sounds far too delicate an act for someone as coarse as Cupid. In truth, nursing is the only verb that really fits, as Cupid's draughts were not unlike the powerful suction of a baby going at a nipple. So, nursing it is, and I apologize for the apparently flip-pant choice of words). Silas noted the despondent look and wisely kept mum. People, even gods, tended to act certain ways when they were upset. The people who sighed and shifted around on their bar stool were the kind of people who wanted to talk but wanted you to ask them what was wrong. They had to be coaxed into it. People like Cupid, who sat there and stared into space with a little frown line over the bridge of their nose, were trying to work something out and didn't want to be disturbed. So Silas did his job and waited for the tilted glass aimed in his direction that indicated it was time for a refill.

Cupid noticed Silas' impeccable bar etiquette, of course, but was too pissed off and depressed to be impressed by it. He was on his fourth Velvet Jones when Silas walked over to the man who had just sat down to Cupid's right.

“Mike,” said Silas by way of a greeting, expertly flipping a coaster at the man.

“Silas, how you doin’?” said Mike.

Silas shrugged. “Getting by. Usual?”

“Nah, let’s shake it up a little today. I want a French dip on sourdough, fries, and let’s see, how about a Mithril pale ale.”

“You got it.” Silas came back a minute later with a pint of beer. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Mike paid for everything with a twenty-dollar bill. “Keep it.”

“Thank you.” Silas moved away.

Cupid closed his eyes. He knew where this was going. To himself, he counted down: 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

“Hey there. Haven’t seen you in here before.” It was Mike, talking at him. Shit.

“No, I haven’t been back in fifteen years,” said Cupid in the flattest, dullest voice he could muster.

“You here on business?” asked Mike.

Cupid looked at the man. He was short, with blonde hair worn in a short crew cut. He wore brown glasses and was dressed in a short-sleeve knit shirt with an alligator on the pocket, black pants, and matching shoes. Over the knit shirt was a dirty gray Members Only jacket, straight out of 1986. He was Joe-Fucking-Average. How the hell did he get in this place, Cupid wondered.

“No, I’m doing some personal stuff,” said Cupid. “Private, want-to-be-left-alone things.”

“Huh. It’s not going too well, I take it?” said Mike.

Oh, boy, thought Cupid, he’s not going away. Or getting the hint. “No, not really.” Cupid turned to face him. “I’ve burned a couple of bridges in the past, and well, a lot of the family is in hiding. I figured I could start here, but so far, I haven’t gotten a nibble.”

“Jeez, that’s rough,” said Mike. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m trying to find my mom,” said Cupid.

“No shit?” Mike said. “And your family won’t help you?”

Man, that’s rough. You just don’t come between a boy and his mother.”

“You know, that’s what I thought, but these people really know how to hold a grudge. I mean, Mom pissed some of them off, too, but that was a long time ago,” said Cupid.

Mike shook his head. “The nerve of some people.”

“Tell me about it.”

Mike’s food showed up at that point. Silas looked at the two of them chatting and quick-stepped in the other direction.

“Hey, want a fry?” Mike slid his plate over to Cupid.

“Yeah, thanks.” He took one and as he swallowed it, and realized how hungry he was. “Hey, Silas, bring me one o’ these, too,” he yelled. Silas nodded.

Mike nodded appreciatively to Silas. “That guy is the best damn bartender I’ve ever seen, anywhere.”

“Yeah, he’s amazing. In and out, just like the four winds,”

Cupid said.

Silas came over to the pair with Cupid’s bill and Mike deftly snatched it away. “I got this, Silas.”

“Oh, hey, you don’t have to do that . . .” said Cupid.

“No, no, I insist. You’re having a shitty day, you got some bad news, the least I can do is buy you a sandwich,” said Mike.

Cupid was stunned. “You know, that’s the nicest thing anyone’s done for me in years.”

Mike waved it off and handed Silas another twenty-dollar bill.

Cupid stuck out his little baby hand. “I’m Cupid.”

Mike took it and shook hard. “Mike, Mike Bretz.”

Still Feb 6th

“Howard Reese House, this is Prentice.”

“Prentice, hi, it’s Sam Bowen.”

“Sam, how are you?”

“Getting by, thanks. Listen, do you have a guy named Sheldon staying there?”

“Oh, yes we do. Hold on a second.”

...

“Hi, I’m Sheldon, I denied Christ.”

“Sheldon, Sam Bowen here.”



“Yeah, Sam?”

“I thought you might like a progress report on your case.”

“Okay, but can we do it over dinner? I’m starving.”

“Sure, where can I meet you?”

“I need to eat Greek. There’s a little restaurant on the corner of McCormick and 65th, you know where that is?”

“I can find it. I’ll meet you there at seven?”

“Deal.”

“Bye.”

The restaurant was one step up from a greasy spoon. It was called Olympus, and even the red neon sign that bore the name seemed to think that was a bit presumptuous and gave up on the O. Sam walked up to Olympus and cocked his head to one side. He looked around the neighborhood, but there was simply nothing else close by, this street being one of the buffers between the financial district and Eden Park.

Approximately two blocks South of McCormick Avenue, the buildings and streets became noticeably cleaner and prettier. 65th street, from that point on, was comprised of little bistros, tobacconists, bakeries, gift shops, and other gentrified establishments. It is doubtful that most of the residents of Eden Park even knew of Olympus restaurant, or McCormick Avenue, where Sam Bowen stood, his toes hanging off the curb, wondering if he should go inside.

Eventually, however, Sam entered and immediately spied

Sheldon in the ambient amber glow of the dining area. He was talking with the waiter, an older man in a dirty tux shirt. Sam walked up to the table and pretended not to notice the cracks in the linoleum.

“Sheldon, hi,” said Sam, sitting down. The waiter scurried off.

“Hi. I denied . . .”

“Christ, I know. Why do you keep repeating that?”

Sheldon turned, his face sour. “Because, Bowen, He cursed me! Cursed, you understand? Know how those work? Bael and Crom, you are fucking thick sometimes!”

Sam blinked once, then stood up. “You know what, I don’t need this shit. Keep your money, Sheldon . . .”

Sheldon leapt to his feet, saying, “Wait, Sam, don’t go.

I’m sorry, really I am, please, I just . . .”

Sam held his hand up for quiet. “Sheldon, I . . . Look, let’s just start over, okay?”

Sheldon sat, head down, and said, “You’re right, I’m sorry, really, it’s just been a bad week.”

Sam followed suit and looked for a menu. The waiter came back with glasses of water. Sheldon said, “Sam, listen, let me treat you. Do you trust me to order for both of us?”

“I guess,” said Sam, still mollified by Sheldon’s outburst.

Sheldon turned to the waiter and started speaking in fluent Greek. The waiter answered, they had a chuckle, and then he was off.

“What did you get?” asked Sam.

“Good stuff, I promise.” He clapped his hands together.

“So, what do you have for me?”

“Well, not much. I did a little research and came up with a list of H’s and L’s living in the area . . .”

“H and what?”

“Heroes and Legends. Anyway, I did some checking around on Eos, and, uh, well, you know she’s been through San Cibolabefore, right?”

Sheldon sighed. “Yeah, that’s why we decided to come here for the holidays.”

“Right. Well, I talked to the few members of the family that would be favorable to her, and they haven’t seen her at all.”

Sheldon’s face fell. “But they’ll call me if something turns up.”

“Huh,” said Sheldon. He was clearly disappointed.

“What I wanted to talk to you about was, maybe you could think of some old friends of hers that aren’t family? Somewhere else to check?”

Sheldon put his head in his hands. “It’s Orion, I knew it!

He’s all she ever talks about!” He seemed close to tears.

Sam remembered reading something about Eos and Orion having a love affair. He said, gently, “Um, Sheldon, Orion is dead.”

Sheldon sniffed. “Really?”

“Yeah, killed by Artemis, I believe.”

“Good!” He smiled perversely. “One less fucko to worry

about.”

Their appetizers showed up: some olives and fig leaves with meat inside of them and some puff pastries with cheese. Sam picked at them. They smelled weird. Sheldon ate with relish.

Sam talked instead of eating. “Look, skip the ex-lovers.

Her pattern indicates she doesn’t backtrack. Can you think of anyone else, someone she, uh, hasn’t been with yet?”

Sheldon raised his eyebrows. “Well, I don’t have a checklist, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No, I’m not saying that. Look, let me be honest with you: she’s probably with someone else right now.” Sheldon’s face melted. “No, now don’t get that way, you knew what you were in for from the start, right?” Sheldon nodded, head down. “Okay, so, let’s be practical about this. Did she mention anyone new, anyone you just met, maybe? Or someone old that she didn’t get to yet?”

With herculean (oh, shut up, I know, I know) effort, Sheldon composed himself. “Whoo. Let me think. We’ve been staying at the Reese House since Christmas . . . We haven’t really been very social since then . . . No, Bowen, I can’t think of anyone, really.”

“Okay, look, if you do, then you call me as soon as you can.”

Sheldon nodded and slumped down in his chair, as if the effort of clear thinking had drained him. Their food arrived and cut off all conversation for several minutes as the waiter piled

several dishes of steaming food onto the table.

“So, what is all this?” said Sam, prodding the brown meat with a fork.

“That’s lamb, and it’s great. That over there is a cheese pastry and it’s brilliant, and you should try the greens, too. They’re excellent. Oh, and that’s a yogurt sauce for dipping.”

“A yogurt sauce?” said Sam, eyes wide.

Sheldon stared. “Never had Greek food before?”

“Does a gyro count?” asked Sam.

“Did you get it at a mall?”

“Yeah.”

“Then no, it doesn’t count.” Sheldon took large portions of everything. Sam played it safe and, like most men, went for the lamb, figuring since he knew what one looked like, it couldn’t be that bad.

Well, it was.

Sam politely swallowed his bite and reached for his water. After half a glass, he broke off some of the cheese pastry-that-looked-more-like-a-casserole and tried that. It was edible, but compared to the lamb, so were his boots.

“Great, huh?” Sheldon wolfed everything down, his spirits restored by the food. Sam nodded weakly.

“So, what are you going to do in the meantime?”

“Well,” said Sam, pushing his plate away, “I’m going to try some out of the way, Neighbor-type places, and if I don’t find

anything in another week or so, we'll go to magic."

"Why don't we go to magic right now?" said Sheldon matter-of-factly.

"Because of what I have to go through every time I do a location spell," said Sam, matching the tone of the question. "It's a trump card for me, and I'll only use it if I really have to."

"Okay, okay, you're the boss." Sheldon got up, threw some bills on the table, and said, "I got this. Really, sorry about the yelling thing earlier, I'm just . . . well, I really miss her, you know?"

Sam nodded. "I'll call you if something comes up."

Sheldon clapped him on the shoulder, a gesture that Sam didn't like at all, and left the restaurant. Sam went straight to the bathroom where he spent a good twenty minutes in the single stall and killed most of the roll of toilet paper. That lamb went through him like corn through a goose.

Feb 7th

Cupid leaned heavily against Mike Bretz, laughing hysterically. Bretz was trying to talk and drink at the same time, resulting in an irregular spray of beer and spit that both flew up in his face and dribbled down into his lap.

"No, wait, listen . . . just listen . . ." gasped Cupid.

Mike chuckled deeply and finally sat down his beer. "Okay, I'm listenin' . . ."

“Okay, pick up the beer.”

Mike did so.

“Now, laugh, first . . .”

Mike sat stone-faced, then burst into guffaws. “I can’t!”

he wailed.

Cupid fell backwards off the bar stool and landed heavily on the floor. When he pulled himself up, he gasped, “Okay, fuck that. Drink your beer, then laugh.”

Bretz finally composed himself. “Okay,” he said, clenching his jaw tightly. “I’m good to go. Finish your joke.”

“Right.” Cupid drained his glass, then looked around for Silas. “Hey, Silas, can I get another?”

“Sorry, Cupid,” said Silas from the far end of the bar, where he was clustered with the rest of the employees. “Last call was an hour ago.”

“Fuck, what time is it?” asked Cupid.

“Just after four o’clock,” said Silas without looking at his watch. The waitresses looked quite put out. Silas kept his face carefully neutral.

“You close down at four?” yelled Cupid.

“Settle down, tell me your joke, then we can go to my place,” said Bretz, patting Cupid on the shoulder.

“Okay, okay, where was I?” said Cupid, turning back to Bretz.

“A guy comes out of a bar, really drunk,” offered Silas.

“Right!” Cupid smiled, his face loose with drink. “So, this guy comes out of this bar, drunk as shit, and sees this nun walking down the street.”

Bretz started to titter.

“So, he runs up to this nun and starts beating the shit out of her, just kicking her and punching her, until she’s just cowering and whimpering in the gutter . . .”

Bretz continued chuckling.

“So, the guy looks down at her and says, ‘Not so tough are you now, Batman?’”

Bretz fell face first onto his forearms, laughing until he was crying. Cupid stood up on the barstool and scratched his diaper with satisfaction.

“Hey, guys?” said Silas. “It’s getting late. Want me to call you a cab?”

“No cab!” said Mike quickly. “I’ll drive.”

“You’re too drunk to drive,” said Cupid. “Let me.”

“You got a car?” said Mike.

“Oh brother, do I got a car. Come on. Let’s go to your place. You know any girls?”

“No.”

They got up, leaning on each other, Cupid swaying back and forth as if he were on a clothesline, and slipped out the door.

Bethany breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God. But shouldn’t you have called them a cab?”

“No,” said Silas, “not if Bretz says no. The last one I called



for him, he got pissed off and turned the driver into a centaur.”

“What an asshole,” said Bethany, putting on her coat.

“That makes two of them.” Silas turned off the register and threw his rag on top of the bar.

Feb 9th

Sam was on his third pass through Widdershin’s Books when he saw her. She was at the checkout counter, paying for a book. As she handed over a twenty-dollar bill, he saw that her fingers up to the second knuckle on each hand were bright pinkish-red. It was Eos, called the Dawn.

It had been a difficult week. The last time he’d done this much legwork on a case, he’d been chasing a female cat burglar through Chinatown. Even then, he had a car to rely on. This time, he was SCAT and bus-dependant.

He spent a lot of time cruising the various coffee shops, bookstores, nightclubs, and any other likely hangout for a Greek nymphomaniac looking to score. Armed with only a description, it was a long, slow process that resulted in a lot of bad guesses, muttered apologies, and in a couple of cases, hurriedly-scribbled phone numbers. In truth, she wasn’t much like what Sam had pictured, despite the description Sheldon gave him.

She was wearing loose, baggy blue jeans and a tight-fit-

ting white blouse that was partially covered by a tattered denim jacket. This peculiar layering of clothing did nothing to hide her Greek figure, made more emphatic by her relative lack of height. Sam found himself looking at her aquiline nose and the peculiar curve of her upper lip. Then she was out the door, and Sam was dashing to keep up.

He caught up to her as she was walking up the steps to the Colby building. "Excuse me?" he called after her.

She turned and locked eyes with him. "Yeah?" she said.

"You're Dawn, right?" Her eyes were like staring into a tropical lagoon, they just seemed to go on forever . . .

"Yeah, who are you?" she frowned.

"Sam C. Bowen," he said.

She frowned deeper. "Oh, you."

"Hey, what does that mean?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, let's just say, you've put a bunch of bees in everyone's bonnet, trying to find me. Did it ever occur to you that I might want a little privacy?"

Sam took a step back, his grin faltering. "Uh, well, yeah. I mean, I wasn't trying to hassle you, or . . ."

She stopped frowning. "Look, forget it. Okay, you've won." She grabbed his hand and pulled him off the path and onto the front grounds of the Colby building.

"Uh, where are we going?" Sam asked, thrilled by her touch.

"You want to have a go at it, right? Well, let's make it

interesting and get right behind this tree,” she said. The tree was not five feet away and she was already undoing her jeans with her free hand.

“No, wait, you’ve got the wrong idea!” Sam cried, as she yanked him the rest of the way behind the tree and into her arms.

She smelled like vanilla and sex.

Dawn stepped back, her hands still on his shoulders, her expression quizzical. “Okay, I’ll bite, Sam. What do you want?”

“Just to talk to you for a minute,” said Sam, sure that his heart was about to tear out of his body by way of his pants.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, one of those. Okay, let’s get a move on, though, I’ve got more stops to make.”

“Listen,” said Sam, forcing himself to concentrate. He decided to stare at her nostrils. “It’s about Sheldon.”

At the mention of his name, she dropped her hands. “What? Sheldon?”

“Yeah, your ex-boyfriend.” Sam really missed her hands on his shoulders. He followed the inner curve of her ear with nervous eyes. “He, ah, wants to meet with you, to talk things over.”

The frown was back, and it was endearing on her face.

“But, I wrote him a note, I explained it. He knows how I am.”

“Yeah, well, all he wants is the chance to talk to you one last time. No tricks, public place, I’ll even be there.”

She smiled wickedly. “That’s gonna make it hard for me to concentrate.”

Sam blushed and stared at the ground. Even her ears were cute. “So, listen, if you could do this for me, I’d consider it a personal favor. I think he just wants to tell you goodbye in his own way, you know?”

She considered it, screwing up her face in the most delightful way. “Okay, on one condition.”

“What’s that?” said Sam breathlessly.

“After he’s gone, you and me get together and finish what we started.”

Sam smiled. “Just go at it, no complications?” She nodded. “Maybe two or three times if we really like it?” She nodded again. “Deal.”

Dawn sighed, her chest heaving. “I’m probably gonna regret this, though. How about this Friday?”

“Ah, that’s no good,” said Sam. “Why don’t we all meet for dinner at Doyle’s, Monday night, say, seven?”

“Okay, Monday it is.”

“Great!” Sam wrote quickly in his notebook. “Here’s my number, call me if there’s a change of plans. Or, say, if you need directions, or something.”

“Oh, I need something, all right,” she grinned. “You’re cute, Sam.”

“I’ve got your word, don’t I?” said Sam, backing away.

“Yeah, Monday, Doyle’s, don’t worry.” She blew him a kiss he could almost feel and skipped into the building. It didn’t occur to Sam what she might be doing there until he was on the

SCAT back into Chinatown .

Feb 12th

When Mike Bretz and Cupid breezed by the doorman and entered Doyle's, the bar was packed to the rafters. It was, after all, Saturday night.

"Holy shit," exclaimed Cupid, "look at the broads."

"Yeah," said Mike, rather bitterly, "don't worry, though, it's all look, no touch."

"Ha! Look who you're talking to, Pally." He patted his quiver of arrows reassuringly. "We can score, or my name isn't Cupid." Several people hailed the duo as they strolled in, and their appearance brought grimaces from all of the wait staff, except Silas, of course, who had pints waiting for them by the time they had sat down on their barstools.

"Silas," said Mike.

"Silas," said Cupid.

"Gentlemen," said Silas, "let me know if you need anything else."

"Yeah, by telepathy," scoffed Cupid. "That guy, boy, I tell ya . . ."

"Brother, you said it." Mike touched his glass to Cupid's, and they drank deeply. Not for the first time, Mike found himself

staring at Cupid's quiver of arrows. "Say, Cupe, about those arrows . . ."

"Wuzzat?" Cupid asked.

"So, those arrows of yours, can they produce, you know, like, uncontrollable lust in a woman?"

"What? Gidouttahere, what do you think, I'm not the real deal or something? Those arrows are so old, they got dust on them."

"Wow," said Mike. "So, why don't you use them more often? You know, for yourself?"

"Bretzie," said Cupid, throwing a tiny arm about Mike's shoulder, "I learned a long, long time ago that it's better to get what you want through honesty than guile. It's more of a thrill, you know?"

"Yeah, but I . . ."

"And besides, look at me." He gestured to himself. "In this state, it's like a super challenge. Talking girls into doing me like this is like, sublime." He laughed heartily and clapped Bretz on the shoulders. "But hey, look who I'm talking to, a real man of the world, here."

"Yeah," said Mike, weakly. Sally Fell was walking through the door with that guy she'd been seeing for over a week now. She was petite and gorgeous, with dark brown hair that framed her heart-shaped face. Bretz felt his heart lurch, then he averted his eyes as they walked up to the bar and ordered.

Cupid, who had noticed all of this, leaned in and said,

"Boy, you've really got it bad for her, don't you?"

“Cupe, I’d eat a mile of her shit just to see where it came from, know what I mean?”

Cupid nodded, a sage with the face of a baby. “This is nothing new to me, Bretzie. It’s the oldest story in the world, you know?” Cupid slapped his leg. “I tell you what. This is an example to show you what I was talking about earlier, about using skill rather than brute force.” He floated off the stool.

“What are you going to do?” asked Mike cautiously.

“Watch and learn, Pally.” He floated over to Sally and her companion. “Excuse me, folks,” said Cupid in a voice that was just loud enough to stop the conversations at the nearby tables, “can I have a minute?” The couple blinked. Cupid continued. “You may have heard of me, the name’s Eros. God of love. What’s your name?”

“Sally,” said Sally.

“Ron,” said the man.

“Ron, Sally, nice to meet you. Okay, here’s my problem.

You see that guy over there?” Cupid pointed to Bretz, who was trying to turn invisible, but could get no further than deep, mottled crimson. “That’s Mike Bretz. Maybe you’ve heard of him.”

They nodded, with Sally smiling slightly.

“Well, he wants to make a pass at Sally here, but he doesn’t want to interrupt whatever you two have going on here. I mean, if he comes over, you’re honor-bound to let him know that you are on a date, right?”

“Right,” said Ron, now smiling.

“Okay, here’s the thing, Ron. I’m trying to prove my friendship to Mike there, and so what I’m offering to do, is take the beating for the pass he’s about to make. Whatever you want to do, I’ll take it, so Mike can make an honest pass at the lovely Sally here without having to worry about getting into a big fight. What do you say?”

The couple burst out laughing. “What if we refuse?” asked Sally.

“Well, then, no harm, no foul. But keep in mind,” he said to Ron, “you get to pound the shit out of me, guilt-free, so my friend can have an honest shot.”

“Tell you what,” Ron said, winking at Sally, “instead of a beating, how about a game of darts?”

“What?” Cupid yelled, amid the laughter of those seated around the couple. “You’re letting me off light, Ron. But hey, I’d be a fool to refuse. Come on.”

Ron got up to catcalls from those watching, but he was laughing and waving them off. He looked at Mike, and gestured to Sally. “Go for it, big guy.” Ron said. Then he and Cupid walked to the dartboard. Cupid gave him a thumb up and a huge grin. Sally was looking at Mike, chuckling heartily.

“Oh, you’ll all pay,” he said under his breath, as he stood up to walk the seven-mile stretch over to Sally’s table.



Feb 11th

Friday night was always family night at Chu Sheng Kai's estate. There was always a large feast, served family-style, and everyone sat around and talked about their week, what was happening, and so on. Even Chu's granddaughter, Elizabeth, was encouraged to participate, and she usually stole the show.

Sam was a recent addition to family night, owing mostly to his own pig-headedness about getting too close to anyone, even those he was accepting help from. These were trust issues, and he was slowly working on them. It didn't help matters that he was not universally liked within the family.

This brings us to Mi Hei, and her father, Jiang Shui. Jiang was Chu Sheng Kai's second-oldest son and old enough to be Sam's father. Jiang runs the Jen Long Security Force, a corporate army of guards and security specialists who protect private interests, most notably, Chu Sheng Kai's. Jiang's daughter, Mi Hei, was a couple of years younger than Sam, and on staff with the Jen Long. Her assignment, up until a couple of months ago, was Sam. She was instructed to officially help Sam with his manuscript translation (all part of Sam researching his family-curse thing) and to unofficially watch his back. In times of trouble, or when Sam was on assignment for Chu, Mi Hei was sent as his partner. Again, to watch his back. Mi Hei saw all of this as a demotion of her duties, which of course, it was. Add to this the

fact that she hated Sam's intrusion into the family because he was not Chinese, and, well, let's just say that their relationship was complicated and leave it at that, okay?

Back to family night: everyone was there, as usual. They sat in the floor around a large round table with a lazy susan in the middle. Everyone helped themselves, and Sam ate with gusto, as usual. Tonight's topic of conversation revolved largely around the success of this year's Chinese New Year celebration. Last year was marred by the tragic kidnapping of Elizabeth by Chu's oldest enemy. Now that enemy was gone (thanks by and large to Sam Bowen) and everything this year went off without a hitch.

"To the year of the Dragon!" Chu held his glass high, and everyone toasted and drank. Sam, by the way, was operating with a translation spell that was given to him during the Chinatown War a few months ago that no one bothered to remove from him.

"Ya Shen," said Chu to Sam (that's his family name; it means "Raven Spirited"), "I could not help but notice that you were absent for some of the celebrations."

"Yes, sir," said Sam. "I am doing some work for a man. I'm helping him to find his girlfriend."

Chu beamed as Jiang Shui scowled. "You see? My adopted son is very helpful. He gives of himself to others."

"How much is he paying you?" asked Mi Hei. Everyone else looked very interested as well.

"So far, about five thousand. I could make fifteen thou, if everything goes right." Sam murmured into his teacup.

“So, five thousand dollars is your price for missing the Festival of Lanterns with the family?” asked Jiang Shui.

“Venerable brother,” said Sam, which brought a mirthful smile to Chu’s face, “as I have no fixed income or job, I have to take advantage whenever I can. You wouldn’t want me to live off of my adopted father, would you? Where’s the gratitude in that? Or, perhaps, you could give me a job at Jen Long . . .”

Everyone laughed, especially Michael Chu, the youngest of the brothers (and already married with one kid, the aforementioned Elizabeth), and Mi Hei. She kept the snicker behind her hand, but Jiang Shui was already good and angry.

Chu held up his hand. “Son, if you throw a punch, you must expect a counterpunch.”

Jiang Shui fumed but kept silent.

“But Father is right,” said Mi Hei, “you should’ve put the family first, Bowen.”

“Well, sure, it’s the first thing on my mind, what with how welcome I’m treated by you and your father. Hey, I went to more stuff this year than last, and that was while I was working!”

“I don’t see that that has any bearing on—”

“Well, no, of course you wouldn’t—”

“Children!” said Chu sharply. “Please, my granddaughter is trying to explain what a pick-a-chew is.” He gave them both a stern look, and then turned his attention to Elizabeth, sitting between her mother and father.

After dinner, everyone adjourned to the family room for cards, games, music, and more conversation. Sam and Mi Hei played Hearts, which Mi Hei was very good at. Sam regretted having taught her the game.

“So,” Sam said, laying down a five of clubs, “let me get this straight. When I’m around, you don’t want me here, and when I’m not here, you want me around. So, which is it?”

“I want you to go away,” said Mi Hei, picking up the five to make a trick.

“Yeah, until the family stuff comes up. Then you get indignant that I’m not around.” Sam laid down a six of spades.

“Maybe you just irritate me by being alive,” said Mi Hei, making another trick.

“Or maybe you are confused about me,” said Sam, laying down another card.

“You’ve been hitting the crack pipe again,” said Mi Hei, laying down her last card. “I’m done. What do you have left?”

Sam counted his hand up. “60.”

Mi Hei scribbled the number down. “I’m winning again.”

“I know. I’m letting you.” Sam lied.

“What? Why?”

“Because I know it will piss you off, and you don’t have enough reasons to be mad at me.”

Her eyes flashed. “I don’t see why you have to be so antagonistic all the time.” Her mouth was set in a dangerous line.

“Perhaps you’d better just shut up.”

“So, that’s it, then. You have some issues you don’t want to admit.”

“You’re impossible. This conversation is over,” she said, gathering up the cards. “Elizabeth? Honey, do you want to play Go Fish?”

Elizabeth looked up from her coloring books. “Yeah!” she ran over and began to bounce beside the table.

“You know, if you quit the game, you forfeit and I win,” said Sam.

“God, I hate you. Come on, honey, let’s go over to your table.” She got up and left Sam with a small smile on his face.

Feb 9th (again)

Dawn stretched and yawned and rolled out of bed, ignoring the lump beside her. It was late in the evening, and he had already passed out. She was tired, but restless.

She walked, naked, into the kitchen and helped herself to an orange, peeled it with her fingers, and ate it standing over the sink. He was a bit touchy about messes. Tiny flecks of orange juice sprayed against her skin, mingling with the smell of sex and vanilla. As she ate, she thought about their last lovemaking session. It was more than enough to get her going again, but now another urge was streaming in, one she knew all too well.

Well, that didn’t last very long, Dawn thought, as she tossed

pieces of orange peel into the disposal unit. Unfortunately for her, this time, the craving was unfocused. That meant a lot of one-night stands and lucky mortals. She thought about the Bowen kid she'd met earlier today and smiled, until she remembered what she promised him and sighed.

Damn, she thought, no time for fun until after Monday.

Monday . . . Let's see, Saturday's the twelfth, so Monday would be . . . oh shit, he tricked me! She swore and chucked the rest of her orange into the trash. "That fucker!" In the heat of her anger, the craving became more intense. She thought briefly about waking him up but decided instead on the traditional break-up.

She dashed back into the bedroom, quickly dressed, shoved the rest of her belongings in a small purse that could not possibly contain so many things, and walked quietly back to the dining room. There, she sat down at the table and wrote a note.

*Daedalus—*

*Thanks for the wonderful time, the nickel tour, and all those wild rides! Unfortunately, I've got to motor on. If you ever see that bitch Aphrodite, first thank her for yourself, then slap her silly for me. I hate this part of it, which is why I try to keep it to people who would understand. Thanks for everything, and I mean that. Maybe I'll see you again some-time.*

*Most affectionately, Eos*

She kissed the paper as an afterthought, then quietly let herself out and locked the door behind her.

When Parker awoke the next morning, she was gone. While her eventual departure had not surprised him in the least, he was nevertheless taken aback by it. He read her note over coffee and thought about how she breathlessly approached him two weeks ago outside of the Colby Building . He didn't recognize her, of course, but that didn't matter. He figured out soon enough what they were about to do.

It had been a long, long time since Parker had last been with a woman. His work kept him very busy, and he found he had little time or use for modern courtships. So, with the precision and effortlessness of one who has lived so long, he pushed thoughts of the fairer sex out of his mind.

Until Eos came along.

The staff knew something was up, of course. The boss was a hard-nosed taskmaster who worked on everything at once. The day after he ran into Eos, he showed up for work fifteen minutes late. Instead of directing and correcting, he just walked around, asking everyone what they were working on. Then he let them go about their business with a curt nod. He went home for lunch that day, which puzzled them further. Of everything they could have guessed, no one suspected the boss was getting laid, Greco-Roman style, by the most infamous nymphomaniac on Olympus .

The next day, she showed up at his office for lunch. Ev-

everyone smiled all at once. Some of the women tsk tsked at the apparent age difference between the two. The men just slapped high fives, vicariously thrilled for their uptight boss. He left work early that day.

In the first week, Parker had thrown himself fully into their unique relationship. Finally, after a sufficient amount of fluids had been exchanged between them, he realized sharply just who it was he was rutting with. He remembered the trouble she used to cause, the fights she and Zeus had, and the mortals she visited.

And then, his rational mind returned to him and said, "By all means, keep fucking her. But don't be surprised if she cuts out on you in the middle of the night, old sport."

Not five days later, he was drinking coffee and holding her note. It was early, still. He drew the curtains back on his patio and watched the sun rise. As the rosy-fingers of dawn broke over San Cibola, he smiled and thought of the girl who just left him.

Sex is never meaningless. It can be done for shallow reasons or hollow emotions, but it is never completely without purpose. For Parker, it was a pointed reminder to not be such a goddamned workaholic. For Eos, it was a compulsion, a curse, given to her by Aphrodite in her anger over finding out that Eos had been with her husband, Ares.

They lay in bed that first night, breathless and sweating, and talked about the old times. Parker told her about everyone from the old gang that he still kept in touch with. She filled him in on her family, such as it was. A lot of their kind were no longer



around. Parker was simply thrilled to have her. There's a big difference between immortal and godly. Huge. Living a long time doesn't mean shit when you can tap into that primal stuff of creation. Parker had come close in his researches, but he never had that power himself. Now, he could at least feel some of it, however second-hand it may be.

She let him into herself. He told her things he'd kept secret for a hundred years. It was surprising how quickly he'd become intimate with her, and vice-versa. One night, breathless and sweaty, he'd asked her about it.

"Well," she said, turning over to face him, "I mean, when I was younger, I loved sex. Still do, always will. But about two thousand years ago, I got the idea that I might want to pick one man and settle down. Problem is, I can't. Not like I am now. So, instead of keeping it superficial and physical, when I'm with a man, I try to give as much as I can, for as long as we're going to be together."

"But why?" he asked her. "Doesn't it hurt more to leave, then?"

"Sometimes. But there's nothing like that feeling of first being in love with someone. It makes hamburgers taste better. It makes clothes feel wonderful. It can't compare. And," she entwined her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, "it makes the sex superb."

Parker closed his eyes and remembered every kiss she ever

gave him. It was a long time before he opened them again.

Feb 13th

At Sheldon's insistence, he and Sam met to discuss their plan of action. Even over the phone, Sam could tell that Sheldon was beside himself with worry. He didn't even object when Sam requested they meet in Chinatown, so Sam could introduce him to the best Chinese food in the world. To keep things simple, they arranged to meet at the Welcome Pagoda on Crane Street and hoof it from there.

The Welcome Pagoda was its usual swirl of people, both tourists and locals, even on a Sunday evening. Sam spied Sheldon in the crowd, dressed in his usual attire, with the addition of a particularly ratty backpack. He took the initiative and spoke first.

"Hey, Sheldon," Sam said quickly.

"Hey Sam," said Sheldon.

Sam was thrilled to not have to listen to the "I denied Christ" tag line. Perhaps Sheldon only had to do it if he introduced himself. "Come on," Sam said, "I'm taking you to my favorite restaurant."

"Ooh, sounds great! I love Chinese food." Sheldon fell right into step.

"So, you wanted to discuss our strategy or something?"

Sam couldn't wait to hear what this would involve. He was also a

little uncomfortable with helping Sheldon try to win Eos back since he had every intention of meeting with her as soon as he collected his fee.

Sheldon exhaled. “Yeah, so, okay, since it’s Valentine’s Day, I mean, I want to do something really romantic, you know? But, the problem is, we’re going to be at Doyle’s, and I just don’t want anyone laughing at me or something like that. That would kill the whole idea of what I’m trying to do, you follow?” Sam nodded, thinking, you sad bastard. “So, well, what I want to do is, I’ve written this poem.” He produced a crumpled sheet of paper.

“It’s called . . . ”

“Whoa, Sheldon,” said Sam, quickly, “I’m a firm believer that poetry should only be read by the intended victim. Why don’t you save that for her?”

“Okay,” said Sheldon, taking no offense. He stuffed the paper back into his coat pocket. “Anyway, I want to read that to her before we order dinner.”

“Sheldon,” said Sam, “look, can I give you some tactical advice?”

“Okay.”

“She’s going to walk in, listen to what you have to say, and then walk out again. I wouldn’t plan something big, on the off chance you can’t convince her to stay.” Sam felt bad, saying that, but the thought of rolling around with Dawn had worked itself into his brain. There was no way he was going to let this

clod come between himself and her.

“But if we work together, we can . . . .” Sheldon protested.

“Ah ah, no. I can’t help you play Cupid, here. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to find her in the crowd, escort her over to your table, and then I’m going to retreat to a distance where you both can see me, but you’ll have some privacy. After you’re both finished, well, then, you can pay me, and you can both live happily ever after. Hey, Zhu!”

They had walked up on Zhu’s Noodle Hut, a rolling cart that was eternally poised at the intersection of Crane and Sacramento Streets. Zhu scowled upon hearing his name.

“Bowen, you round-eyed hick! You never get my name right!”

“Mind your manners, I’m entertaining a guest.” Sam waved at Sheldon.

“Hi, I’m Sheldon, I denied Christ.”

“Big deal,” said Zhu.

“Bowen, are we eating here?” A look of horror crossed Sheldon’s face.

“Trust me, this stuff is great.”

“No it’s not,” said Zhu.

“Shut up, you little monkey,” barked Sam.

“But he’s a demon,” said Sheldon, seeing Zhu in his true form rather than that of a grizzled old man.

“Yeah, but he’s a terrific cook,” said Sam. “Let me have a four dollar box, with lemon chicken and orange chicken, two

eggrolls, and noodles.”

Zhu threw everything into a wax paper carton. Sheldon looked down at the giant spectral links holding Zhu in place. “What did they get you for?”

“Rampaging,” answered Zhu.

“How long you got left?” asked Sheldon.

“Three years. I’m coming for this guy first,” said Zhu, jerking his head at Bowen. To Bowen, he smiled and said, “And for your date?”

“Oh, that’s clever,” said Sam, grabbing chopsticks out of the jar.

“Okay, what’s safe to eat?” muttered Sheldon, peering into the dishes on the steam tray. “How long has that been sitting out here?” He pointed to the egg foo young with a scornful look on his face.

“All my food is fresh!” roared Zhu.

“Well, okay!” snapped Sheldon. “Let’s see, I want some rice, and some cashew chicken . . .”

“One dollar, two dollar, four dollar?” asked Zhu.

“Huh?”

“Get the four dollar box,” said Sam, already eating.

Sheldon nodded. Zhu scooped it up.

“What else?” Zhu asked.

Sheldon looked at Sam, who said, “Hey, if you like cashew chicken, you’re done.”

“Eight dollars,” said Zhu. Sheldon paid for both of them.

“And I hope you choke.”

“Come on,” said Sam, motioning with his head, “there’s a bench down the block, we can sit and eat.”

“What about something to drink?” said Sheldon, clearly disturbed by the casual dining situation.

“There’s a little store down the way that sells tea and soda.

Come on.”

Once they had situated themselves on the bench and Sheldon had fretfully bought a Coke for Sam and a can of tea for himself from the local grocer, they resumed their conversation.

Rather, Sheldon started talking again.

“Do you think that’s wise, I mean, you waiting off to the side like that? I’d rather have you at the table with me.” He took a bite of his cashew chicken and blinked rapidly.

“That’ll only intimidate her, two guys and one girl. No, I’m stepping out. You need your privacy, anyway. You don’t want me to hear all of those intimate details, do you?” Sam talked between bites, shoveling the food in as quickly as he could. It was better than usual, and that was saying a lot.

“I guess you’re right.” Sheldon took two more bites and said, “How’s your food?”

“Terrific.” Sam shoveled another mouthful in and said,

“Listen, Sheldon, don’t take this personally, but I think you should also consider a wardrobe change as well.”

“What’s wrong with this?” he said, looking down at his

trench coat.

“Nothing, really, except that it looks like you’ve been on the road for about nine years.”

“Well, I was. Oh, that reminds me,” Sheldon slid the backpack off his shoulders, “I have something for you. I little thank you present for helping me out.” He unzipped the pack and pulled out a pair of leather boots. “I made them for you.” Sam took the boots. They were beautiful, supple things, dark brown, with laces and rubber soles. The ends were reinforced with steel toes and there were two pockets along the sides. “Those are for either a knife, or maybe metal strips, like, to reinforce the ankles. Do you like them?” Sheldon asked hopefully.

“I don’t know what to say. They’re magnificent. Thanks.”

“Yeah, I noticed your old boots were really shitty, so I thought you could use some new ones. And speaking of shitty, Bowen, I can’t eat this stuff. It’s really off. You want it?”

Sam frowned. “That’s not like Zhu . . .” He grabbed a chunk of cashew chicken and rice with his chopsticks, ate it, and finally realized what the problem was: Sheldon had absolutely no taste whatsoever. Maybe it’s another by-product of the curse, he thought. “I’ll take it home with me,” Sam said, grabbing everything at once.

“Okay, so, tomorrow, I’m going to Doyle’s really early to stake out a table. Or should I get a booth?”

“Doesn’t matter to me in the slightest. I’ll be there after

six but before seven. Don't freak out, okay? It'll be fine."

Sheldon stood up, muttering, "That god-awful food is going to give me the scoots."

Sam left him standing by the bench, walking quickly home so he could finish his meal.

## Valentine's Day

Now, a lot of stuff happens on this day, and in a real short period of time. In the interest of keeping it straight, I am going to trot out a fairly strict chronology of events. I'll add commentary as necessary, so you won't think I'm trying to cheat you out of a full-fledged reading experience.

4:48 P.M.

Cupid and Mike Bretz (Cupe and Bretzie) perch themselves on barstools in Doyle's and begin to drink. Heavily. Mike is in a particularly foul mood, as the day is a reminder of the fact that women routinely shun his company. Cupid was also in a foul mood, for reasons that should be self-explanatory.

5:35 P.M.

Sheldon is dressed and ready to go. He paces the floor for another twenty minutes, then calls Sam Bowen and wakes him up from his nap.



6:25 P.M.

Sam arrives at Doyle's. He finds Sheldon, who has commandeered a booth, and is reprimanded for not coming in earlier.

Sam notices that Sheldon has cleaned his clothing and combed his hair, but it didn't really do anything to his appearance. Sheldon notices that Sam is wearing his boots.

The place is crowded. Apparently, the magical community has its fair share of wallflowers and misfits, those unwilling or unable to find true love. So, to escape the familiar woes of St. Valentine's Day, they come to Doyle's.

Meanwhile, Cupid and Bretz are well into their respective cups. Cupid is holding court.

"You think I like looking like this?" Cupid says loudly to Bretz, Silas, and a green and black-striped gentleman on the next stool. "Naw, the problem goes back to your mass media. This little holiday, this Valentine's Day, got the big push at the turn of the century. Guess who did the pushing? The greeting card and candy companies, that's who. Now this is a time when people still were taught the classics in school." He stands on the barstool and thrusts his baby chin out. "I was strong, tall, handsome, and hung like a window weight. Well, no man in the twenties, or even now, wants a love god more endowed than them. Even if it's true!"

He shouts this last part at the ceiling, shaking his fist. "So, they go

with the model you see before you. And they run it into the ground, until everyone swallows it, hook, line, and sinker, and conveniently forgets about the good-looking, well-hung god of love. Now," says

Cupid as he sits down, “think of it from my point of view. I go to bed with a full-grown body, and BAM! I wake up the next day with this little dingus. And, insult to injury, I can’t get it back, either. Now, I ask you, wouldn’t you be pissed at that?” General nods follow. “Wouldn’t you want to get a little payback?” More nods. “So, tell me why I should just hand out the good stuff to a bunch of ingrates who don’t know no better?” Silas shrugs and

moves away. Mike gets an angry look on his face for a second.

The green and black-striped man pays his tab and leaves.

6:55 P.M.

Sheldon is convinced that Dawn isn’t coming. Sam keeps him calm while he himself is on a slow burn all the while. He’s had more than enough of Sheldon’s antics.

7:03 P.M.

Mike Bretz traces a peculiar pattern into the condensation on the bar and wipes his hand absently on a large man who is picking up a round of beers.

7:09 P.M.

Dawn arrives and goes straight to the bar, where over a dozen men instantly notice her.

7:10 P.M.

Sam sees Dawn and clears a path to get to her. They briefly chat at the bar before Sam turns to show Dawn where he and Sheldon are sitting.

7:11 P.M.

Dawn starts to turn around, but stops as she recognizes

Cupid sitting further down the bar.

Cupid sees Dawn looking at him, but can't do anything about it, because a large man approaches and spins Cupid around to face him. He berates Cupid for not shooting an arrow into the heart of his ex-girlfriend to make her love him.

7:12 P.M.

Dawn makes her way over to Cupid in order to yell at him for being Aphrodite's son. Sam tries to restrain her but only succeeds in slowing her down. She is screaming, "Tell your fucking mom to take this curse off me!"

Cupid responds with, "Like I know where she is! Get lost, you dumb slut!"

The man is still yelling at Cupid. "Not that I expect you to know anything about true love, you deformed freak-baby!"

Now, what happens next takes place in under a minute.

Pay attention, there will be a quiz later.

Cupid floats up, wings beating fiercely. "You wanna know about love, you caveman?" He fires an arrow into the chest of the man, who falls back into the crowd. "I'll show you all about love!"

Two more arrows go flying into the crowd.

Silas sees what's happening and screams, "Gun!"

O'Ryan takes off from the door, a Louisville Slugger in hand. Fu Yan, the drunken boxer, cartwheels up onto the top of

the bar and starts running towards Cupid. The crowd is busy watching the man who just got shot.

“Fuck all you motherfuckers!” Cupid screams. One, two, three arrows fly into the crowd.

Sam grabs Dawn and dives sideways, away from Cupid and the bar. Dawn screams as she hits the ground, “Where is your mother?”

O’Ryan struggles through the crowd, who is scrambling away from Cupid and the bar. Fu Yan tries for a tackling leap and just misses as Cupid flies away from the bar. One, two, three arrows fly into the crowd.

O’Ryan swings a few times, making Cupid flit back into the reach of Fu Yan. One, two, three arrows fly into the crowd. Everyone is now diving under tables and racing out the door. Wulf leaves his post at the private club entrance.

Fu Yan executes a whirling kick that looks exactly like he fell off the bar. He barely misses the nimble Cupid and lands on the floor like a cat. O’Ryan takes another swing. One, two, three arrows fly into the crowd.

Wulf steps in behind Cupid, grabs the back of his head with a large arm, and slams him headfirst into the bar. Cupid’s bow drops from his unconscious fingers.

Rosemary Teatherwall, leader of the San Cibola Pentacle, and Morrigan, ex-goddess and Pentacle member in good standing, burst through the club entrance and help Wulf secure Cupid.

All is quiet for approximately three seconds. Then the panic

really starts.

Feb 16th

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Sheldon, I denied Christ. Where the hell have you been, Bowen? I’ve been trying to get ahold of you for a day, now.”

“Sheldon, I had some shit of my own to take care of. I got shot in the ass with one of Cupid’s damn arrows.”

“Oh, hey, sorry, that must suck. So, did you see what happened to Dawn?”

“Well, Sheldon, you know, what with the crowds and the arrows and the violence and stuff, I tell ya, she got away from me ...”

“Yeah, but did you see where she went?”

“And I’m going to have to lay low for a little while, because I can’t go out in public as long as I’m under the effects of the arrow . . .”

“Bowen, what about Dawn? We didn’t get a chance to talk!”

“Sheldon, look, I can do a lot from here. I’ve got a lot of phone numbers, I’ll look around.”

“What! No, Bowen, you gotta get out there . . .”

“Sheldon, I found her before, I can find her again. I think

I know where she's going, anyway. It'll just be a couple of days."

"Dammit, Bowen, this wasn't part of the deal!"

"Listen to me, you scruffy fuck. I took an arrow for you, all because you were too chickenshit to talk to your ex-girlfriend yourself. Don't yell at me."

"Oh, be serious, it's not like you are bleeding or dying or anything. It's a magic arrow. It probably doesn't even hurt."

"Sheldon, you don't know shit."

"Bowen, don't you fucking dare hang up on me, I—"

"Hello?"

"Sheldon. I denied Christ. What is your problem, Bowen?"

"Sheldon, I have some personal shit I'm dealing with right now, and I don't need your constant nagging."

"Personal shit, what personal shit?"

"Sheldon, let's just say that you aren't the only person operating under a curse, okay? Now, here are your options. You can have your money back, and lots of luck on your quest for Dawn, or you can let me work my shit out as quickly as I can. So, which is it going to be?"

"Sam, listen, if it's a curse, maybe I can help."

"No, you can't. Just do me a favor, Sheldon, and leave me alone. I'll call you when I've got something. Okay?"

"Okay, but can I just . . ."

"Goodbye, Sheldon."

Sam walked downstairs to the lobby of his apartment building. Benny Wan, the ghostly landlord of Benny's Pagoda Hut,

faded into view.

“Hello, Loverboy.”

“Hey, Benny. Say, do you know someone who can do some shopping for me? I can’t leave the building or I could infect someone with my family’s curse and accidentally cause their death. It needs to be a man. A straight man. Okay?”

Benny scratched his spectral chin. “I think I know someone. If he will do it, I’ll send him up to you.”

“Thanks, Benny.” Sam started back up the steps.

“Sam?”

He turned around. “Yeah, Benny?”

“Everything happens for a reason.” He faded out.

“I’d like to believe that, Benny. I really would.” Sam went back to his room to make some phone calls.

Feb 17th

Three days had gone by since Sam had changed his clothes or bathed, and his flat was taking on the unmistakable smell of a man stewing in his own juices. Benny Wan had sent a pockmarked Chinese man named Tommy to his door, and Sam sent him out for food and essentials. Those essentials didn’t include soap, however, and even Tommy became offended at Sam’s funk.

The food came from Zhu’s Noodle Hut, of course, and

Zhu kept sending his special misfortune cookies at no charge along with the food. So far, he had received:

IT SERVES YOU RIGHT, YOU TERRIBLE PERSON.

WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU'LL EVER FIND HAPPINESS?

ANY LOVE YOU RECEIVE IS MERELY AN ILLUSION.

WHY DON'T YOU JUST KILL YOURSELF AND

FULFILL YOUR DESTINY?

And Sam's personal favorite:

EVERYONE KNOWS WHAT A FUCKUP YOU ARE.

Today, Sam's food arrived as usual, delivered in a worn paper bag through the cracked door of his apartment. This time, however, a hand followed it and dropped change into Sam's hand.

"No, Tommy, you keep this for your trouble." Sam tried to hand the money back.

"No trouble. Do me a favor, brush your teeth. Money well spent." And he was gone.

Frowning, Sam padded into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. There was three day's growth of beard on his face, and his hair had already stuck to his head. His UNC T-shirt was stained with the ghosts of lunch and dinner's past. Sure, he didn't look great, but God knows he'd looked a hell of a lot worse. Sam shrugged and lay down in his bed and ate today's special, spicy brown chicken. He ate the egg rolls with his hands, letting the crumbs fall onto his shirt. When he was finished, he cracked open the misfortune cookie. Zhu outdid himself this time:



YOUR EMBRACE IS TRUE DEATH TO ALL.

Sam frowned as he stared at the paper. This came awfully close to the mark. Did Zhu know more about him than he let on?

Sam lay in bed for another half an hour before getting up and placing the message on the kitchen counter with all of the others.

He wiped his hands on his sweat pants and got to work.

He called everyone on his list of contacts, looking for Dawn. They were getting tired of hearing from him, too. He asked the usual questions, then thanked them and hung up when he got the expected answers. She wasn't around. She was hiding, and Sam had no idea why.

He called Doyle's and spoke briefly to Silas. Things at the bar quickly went back to normal after the St. Valentine's Day Incident. He hadn't seen Dawn either but promised to relay the message to call if he saw her.

Sam looked at his duffel bag and made a mental checklist of the things he would need to get in touch with Brother Lynx, one of his spirit animals. About halfway through that, he started doing a total inventory, then gave up and completely deconstructed his duffel bag. That took an hour, but when he was finished, he had a comprehensive list of everything he needed to bring himself magically up to snuff. The problem was, he couldn't leave the apartment without risking someone falling in love with him. And that would be a disaster. Some innocent girl, compelled by the arrow to give him her heart, and three days later, she's mowed

down by a bus or struck by lightning. Dangerous shit, this curse thing. It killed his whole family. It killed a woman he cared very much about. There was no way he was going to chance it.

He called Ian Rosewood at the Pocket Shop and asked if he delivered. Ian was sympathetic but no help whatsoever. He did promise to pull Sam's list and have it ready for him, should he be able to get someone to pick up the supplies for him. As Ian took more and more of the list down, he got increasingly cheerful. In the end, he told Sam he'd ask around to see if someone couldn't run out to Chinatown, provided that Sam had cash ready. Ian promised to call if he found someone, and they hung up.

Sam repacked everything into its respective compartment, leaving out what he would need to contact his spirit animals.

Brother Lynx could be difficult to handle and it would require some delicacy. Besides, Sam in no way felt like jumping through all the diplomatic hoops to get what he wanted from his spirit guides. Not being a Navajo could really put a damper on one's relationship with the medicine wheel. No, he decided, best to do this when he was out of options.

Sam stared at the phone, waiting for it to ring. It never did.

Feb 18th

When Tommy dropped off Sam's lunch, he informed Sam that he would not be coming by for dinner.

"Why the hell not?" asked Sam.

“Because you aren’t a shut-in. You are just crazy. And you stink so bad, you are smelling up the hallway.”

“Fine, then, go on, I don’t need you!” Sam yelled through the crack. Tommy retreated in a hurry.

Sam turned back to his flat. The mattress to the bed was hanging half-on, half-off of the bed. Empty cartons of Chinese food were everywhere, as were the contents of Sam’s duffel bag. Books lay, half-open or upside down to mark their place, on the table, the nightstand, and the floor. Okay, the place was a mess, but did it stink? Sam sniffed the air experimentally, but all he could smell was mandarin beef, fried rice, and won tons coming from the bag. He fell into it with a ravenous hunger and gulped everything down.

After lunch, he resumed his work schedule for the day. He had widened his telephone search for Dawn to include all of the coffee shops, bars, and bookstores that he had checked before. No one had seen her. He paced up and down on the floor for about an hour, then gave up on that and took a nap with the phone on his chest, just in case someone called. As he dozed, he dreamed.

Sam was in a square, wrought iron cage, suspended over water with a metal chain. He was angry and starving. A woman appeared above him, laughing and dangling fruit into the cage. He climbed up, hand over hand, until he could grab through the bars at her. He caught her hand and saw that it was Mi Hei. She looked at him and gave him a peach. As he took a bite with his

free hand, the bottom of the cage dropped away. Then there was a banging noise . . .

He awoke to the sound of someone knocking on his door and shouting his name. "I'm coming," he said thickly. He opened the door to find Ian Rosewood with two large paper sacks of stuff.

"Sam." Ian's nose wrinkled in disgust. "Good God, man, what's happened to you?"

"Long story. Hold on, I'll get your cash." Sam stepped away from the door and Ian let himself in.

"Sam, what's wrong? This place is a disaster area. You smell terrible and you look like shit."

Sam counted his money carefully and handed it over to Ian. "Long story short, I got hit with Cupid's arrow. I don't want to fall in love with someone or have someone fall in love with me, so I am going underground."

"Face first, from the looks of it." Ian pocketed the cash.

"Look, staying away from crowds is one thing, but this is all too much. You have to take care of yourself. And your place."

Sam debated on whether or not to mention to Ian that he was also under a curse. Maybe Ian would know something about it? Ian had a lot of connections in the Neighborhood. Then again, if Ian couldn't help him or didn't know anything, it was one more person who knew his secrets. And Ian was well connected. No, Sam decided, better to keep it from Ian.

But Ian was now scratching his beard. "You know, it just occurred to me. You've been pretty restless, right?"

Sam just looked at the apartment and nodded.

“What kind of arrow did you get hit with?”

“I don’t know.” Sam turned around in circles. “I’ve got it here somewhere.”

“Well, it could be the arrow that’s making you like this.”

Ian smiled.

“Ian, that would really just suck.” Sam put his hands on his hips. “I don’t know where the arrow is, but if I find it, would you want it?”

“It depends on what type, but sure, bring it by, I’ll give it a look.” He winked. “That would require you to step out of this cave, you know.”

“Yeah, I get you. Thanks for dropping this stuff off.” He ushered Ian to the door.

“No problem, I had business in Chinatown, so I thought I’d do you a favor. Want some advice?” he asked, stepping back out into the hall.

“Sure.”

“Find your center, and stay busy. If you focus on who you are, then you can get through this much easier.”

“Thanks, Ian.”

“No problem.”

Sam shut the door and leaned heavily on it. The agitation, the frustration, the pent-up anxiety rolled over him and settled in his chest. The phone was church mouse quiet, and he realized as

long as he sat there, it wasn't going to ring. It was mid-afternoon. Fuck this, he thought, I'm going out. He took a deep breath of stale, man-moldy air, and began to clean his apartment. It took about two hours and reduced him to a sweating, heaving wreck, but he did find Cupid's arrow, which he set aside to take to Ian later. After that, he marched straight into the bathroom, jumped in the shower, and stood under the spray until the water went cold. He shaved, changed into fresh clothes, and opened up the window to air out the place. Then he trotted downstairs, waved at Benny as he dashed by, and hit the door like a marathon runner breaking the tape.

It felt great to be outside, but Sam knew that if he wasn't careful, he would end up getting into trouble, so he forced himself to keep his head down and avoid all eye contact with women. He walked down to Ming Street, where he knew there was a general store run by a single man with no family. He bought paper, new pens, a new blank book, and some other household supplies, including incense cones and a brass burner in the shape of a dragon. When you lit the cones, smoke came out of the dragon's nostrils. It was tacky, but Sam didn't care, he liked it.

Sam's next stop was the electronics store on California Street. Three men behind the counter helped him pick out an answering machine and a couple of tapes. It was the expensive kind that could record conversations as well as take messages. Sam didn't care; for once, he had the money.

His final stop was the corner grocer at the edge of the

Asian Market. He bought some tea, fresh fruit (for some reason, he was craving peaches and pomegranates), bread, sandwich meats, and beans and rice. Laden with sacks and bags, he trudged home.

After the groceries were put away and tea was brewing on the stove, Sam hooked up his answering machine and recorded a message: "This is Sam Bowen. It's important that you leave me a message and a way for me to get in touch with you. Thanks."

Then he cleared away the junk on the table and laid out his writing supplies. From his duffel bag, he pulled out the ream of notes that he'd taken from Chu Sheng Kai's library. It was time to get organized. He turned the ringer off on the phone, pushed up his sleeves, and sat down at the table. It was going to be a long night.

Feb 19th

Sam woke up from his nap, yawned and stretched. He was wearing the clothes he had on yesterday. He looked at the neat stacks of paper on his table and smiled with satisfaction. All of his notes were in appropriate piles, and all pertinent information was written down in his various books. All of the spells that he had learned were written on cards phonetically as well as transcribed into his master book. In addition to that, he had an arm-long list of new directions for his research to go.

He looked at the clock and saw that it was just after eleven in the morning. He took a quick shower, lit some more incense, and poured a glass of iced tea. He swirled the tea around in the glass and thought about what he wanted to do next. It felt great last night to get back to tracking down the whereabouts of Uncle Jake, the ancestor who was responsible for his curse. He didn't want to stop digging. His mind was filled with new ideas. But following up on those leads would mean going to the one place he didn't need to be. He called Chu Sheng Kai's estate and got permission to take some books back to his apartment. Then he called Mi Hei.

"What do you want, foreigner?"

"How did you know it was me?" he asked.

"I have caller ID, you asshole."

"Are you particularly pissed at me for calling, or what?"

"Just tell me what you want, Bowen."

"I want you to meet me at campus in thirty minutes."

"UNC?"

"Yeah, can you do it?"

"Why?" she asked.

"It's very important, I swear, I'll explain it to you when get there."

"Bowen, I have no time for this shit, I'm on an errand for Dad."

"Believe me, he'll understand. Just meet me by the fountain in the commons in thirty minutes."



“ ... ”

“Please.”

“Okay, Bowen, but you owe me so big for this.”

Sam hung up, feeling shitty and proud of himself at the same time. With Mi Hei on the way to the campus district, there was no way she could be at Chu Sheng Kai's place when he was there. Problem solved. Sam scooted out the door and just caught the eastbound bus.

?

The houseboy let Sam in, smiling and bowing. Sam bowed back. “Is Master Chu here?”

“No, Ya Shen, he is out on business. Won't be back until late tonight. He told me you were coming by.” The houseboy smile increased in size.

“Great. I'll just go help myself, then.” Sam left him bowing and scraping in the hallway. That kid got weirder every time he saw him, Sam thought. He went straight to the library by Chu's office, then into Chu's office, to stand in front of a wall of books. Sam closed his eyes and thought about his list of questions and ideas. Where would he look? He began pulling books off the shelves, seemingly at random, reading inscriptions, flipping through pages.

He quickly found a selection of memoirs and hand-written books. Those were usually the best sources of information for his purposes. The whole process took no more than ten minutes.

Sam checked his watch. Mi Hei should be in the campus district now, he thought with a smile. It vanished when he thought about how mad she was going to be at him. Hopefully, the explanation he planned to give would suffice.

Sam stuffed the books in his duffel bag and left through the library entrance. Someone was talking to the houseboy in the dining room, most likely the gardener. The houseboy laughed.

Sam stuck his head into the dining room. "I got what I needed, so I'm going to just . . ." He trailed off. Standing not six feet from him was Mi Hei, a manila envelope in her hand.

"Bowen," she said, breathlessly.

"What are you doing here?" Sam was aghast.

"I, um, decided to do my errand for Father first, since it was, uh, such a high priority . . ." She walked closer to him. "You lied to me."

"I know, I'm sorry," said Sam, suddenly very distracted.

"I got shot with Cupid's arrow . . . Goddamn it, how could you be so stupid?"

Mi Hei was closer. "You should've told me the truth. I want to be mad at you. Can we go somewhere else?"

"I was going home," said Sam, "to do research."

"Let me drive you."

"Let's go."

Feb 20th

Is there anything sweeter, more sublime, than the rush that comes from mutual love? Doc Crossthwaite might have been a kook, but he had the right idea about love. It's energy, and you can pass it back and forth between yourself and another like a game of catch. Do it fast enough, and it turns into a dynamo and the power it generates will make you invincible.

Sam was no stranger to love. He had been in love many times in his life. The last recorded incident ended in the death of the girl he loved. After that, it was a lot easier to accept the quickies he sometimes got on the road, or as gratitude for doing various jobs, or whatever. As time wore on, he mostly forgot what the state of love felt like. On the few occasions that he found another woman attractive, he'd figure out some way to not like her. It was easier, safer.

When Sam first met Mi Hei, he was taken with her appearance. But there was something else that appealed to Sam. As he got to know her, he was impressed by her loyalty and her fearlessness. He also found he really wanted to be with her all the time. At the time, she was his research assistant, and Sam took great delight in making her angry. After a while, it got so he couldn't really remember if he liked her or not.

All Mi Hei knew was that she fell in love with Sam from the moment she laid eyes on him. She hated herself for being so unconventional (she was from a very traditional family), and she loved the fact that Sam Bowen was everything her father would

hate. He was white, blonde, and completely uncouth. He was a barbarian to her, and she was thrilled to be around him, so she hid her feelings behind scorn and family duty.

Neither one of them had ever admitted these feelings for one another, or to another person. It was a mutual secret, kept from each other and stifled with expected behavior and childish antics. It sat between them like a fat, happy Buddha for over a year now, just waiting to grab the two of them in a headlock.

Then Sam got shot in the ass with an arrow.

The arrow punctured the secret, and once punctured, made wet brrrapping noises as it flew nilly-willy all over the room.

It opened doors that Sam would rather have left closed.

Sam just read the last few paragraphs and has proclaimed loudly that all of the above is bullshit. He wants me to tell you that it was nothing like that, but I think he's just putting on this macho facade. Let's have a look at what happened in Sam's apartment, and then you can be the judge of who's telling the truth.

Mi Hei lay, naked, tucked under Sam's arm. Her lips brushed his neck gently. Sam leaned over, hanging off the bed, and cracked a window. Then he lit more incense. Mi Hei pulled him back close to him and snuggled in, sticking her feet under the blankets that were wadded up at the foot of the bed. They had been like this for the last twenty-four hours, stopping only for food and bathroom breaks. They attempted to shower once, but ended up right back in the bed again. So they stayed there and breathed each other up.

“We can’t keep doing this,” said Sam. “You could die.”

“Easy, Bowen, you haven’t killed me yet.” She kissed his neck again.

“No, I mean, really die. I’m cursed, you know.”

“I’ll take that chance.” She continued kissing his neck.

“Don’t say that!” Sam pulled away and looked at her. “I’m serious!”

“Why not?” Her eyes were open, clear. “I thought you didn’t care. Couldn’t care.”

“I don’t. No, that’s not true, I do. But I don’t want anything bad to happen to you.” He kissed her forehead.

“So, you care about me?” Her tone was playful.

“Mmm hmmm. Very much.”

“How much?”

“Lots.” Sam smiled at her.

“And lots and lots?”

“Yes.” They kissed again, reveling in the newness of the feeling. Mi Hei bit kisses around his mouth, talking quietly.

“Would you go so far as to say you love me?”

Sam was swimming in the feeling of her body pressed against him, her mouth on his. “I’d like to.”

She stopped kissing him. “Then why don’t you?”

“Because,” he took her head in his hands, “I’m afraid for your safety.”

“Then tell me you don’t love me,” she whispered.

“I hate you,” Sam said.

“I hate you, too.” They kissed and kissed and quickly resumed the business of passing energy back and forth.

Later, in the evening, they ate fruit in the bed, still naked.

Mi Hei took large bites of her peach while Sam gently scratched her back. She had the most beautiful back Sam had ever seen.

“God, this peach is delicious,” she said, smacking her lips in a way that made Sam weak in the knees.

“I had a dream about this, you know,” he said.

She rolled over to look at him. “Really?”

“Yeah. I dream a lot. Precognitive dreams or whatever you want to call them. I dreamed you gave me a peach and I fell out of a cage.”

“You know, if you want a bite, you could just ask me instead of inventing this wild peach dream story . . .”

Sam smiled at her. “Don’t get so cocky,” he said, grabbing her wrist and pulling the peach to his mouth. “I’m not done with you yet.”

She smiled wider. “Who says I’m done with you?”

“God, I hope you’re done with me. Look at these welts on my back,” Sam said, half-turning to show her the damage.

“Big baby. Besides, I was still tired.”

“See, you did this to me this morning because I woke you up to play with you. I just wanted a little of what we did last night . . .”

“All night, last night,” she amended.

“All night, last night. Gentle, slow . . .”

“Oh, come on, Bowen, don’t tell me you don’t like to just get busy every once in a while.” It was just a flash, but the old Mi Hei was back for a second. Sam blinked and she was gone. He whispered in her ear, “Maybe, but I’d much rather make love to you than fuck you.”

She looked at him, studying the lines in his face. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Sam smiled. “Yeah, I’m great. What say we go out to eat? Get out of the old apartment for a while?”

“Okay,” she said, jumping up and slipping into his T-shirt.

“On one condition.”

“What?” Sam struggled to find his underwear.

“After dinner, we go back to my place. Your bed is for shit.”

They smiled at each other, feeling the sparks between them.

Feb 21st

Okay, enough of that. While I’m sure we are all very happy for Sam and Mi Hei’s newfound love, there’s nothing in the world that can make a person feel lonely faster than being in the presence of that stuff. Let’s instead turn our attention to one of the other participants in our little passion play.

Mike Bretz had been at it for a week now, and he finally

figured the damn thing out. It was all in the shaft.

It had taken supreme effort on his part, elaborate machinations, and amazing self-control, but it was all going to pay off big.

He took the head off the first arrow and it exploded in his face. It took two days to resist the urge to compulsively masturbate, and it wasn't completely successful resistance, at that. Afterwards, he found the arrow to be inert.

He actually applied some theory to the second arrow and tried a Siphon spell from the opposite end. Instead of exploding, however, the magical energy billowed out in a lavender cloud that made him suicidally depressed whenever he got caught in it.

That took two more days to clear up.

Realizing that he had grabbed a random handful of arrows, Bretz decided to do some divinations, which utilized three

of his seven talismans, to figure out which arrows did what. That

process took three days and forced him to summon some Greek

philosopher named Epicurus to help him decode the symbols. Now, each arrow was marked with masking tape and a hastily scrawled note as to what it did.

Mike shook his head in admiration of Cupid. That little freak of nature had the most devious mind . . . well, not as devious as himself, but still and all, he was pretty clever. He held up the

arrow with the tagline, "fall in love with your best friend's girl,"

and wondered how often Cupid had visited Nashville. All that

was missing was a pick-up truck and a dog, and this arrow was a

Jerry Springer show waiting to happen. Of the four arrows he had

left, there was only one that interested him. He picked up the arrow labeled "lust" and took it to the workbench.

As he prepared his talismans and his magic coins, he



thought about Cupid's phone calls to him. The first one was apologetic and asked for help bailing him out of trouble. "Bretzie, I don't know what happened. I just lost control."

The second one was panicked. It seems he couldn't account for all his arrows. "Mike, did you see if anyone messed with me when I blacked out? That huge, hairy motherfucker clocked me from behind and I'm missing some arrows, man."

The third call, Cupid was pissed. He was being held by the pentacle and they were having a hearing soon. Could Bretzie

help him out and vouch for his character? "Dude, I really need you to back me up. Call me, please."

The fourth was suspicious. "Hey, where the hell are you, anyway? I hope you're not avoiding me, Bretz."

Of course, that's exactly what Mike was doing. And furthermore, he had no intention of helping Cupid in any way. If he came in for questioning, they would know in a second that Bretz had put spells on several people, including Cupid, to incite the whole situation. It had been a real bitch, too. Bretz had to work on Cupid when he was asleep, when his defenses were low. Even still, it took a few days for Bretz to get any kind of access to Cupid's emotional centers.

Now, as he used two conjured magic wards to seal off the shaft, away from the fletching and the tip, he couldn't help but grin. All that beer, all of those hours spent listening to that freak drone on, were all about to pay off. With the fletching and the arrowhead removed, he affixed two glass tips to either end of the shaft. Then he gently removed the wards and watched as pale light glowed from both ends. It was now a wand. Old-fashioned, Mike knew, but he had a soft spot for the classics. All those years of watching Doug Henning will do that to a modern sorcerer.

Rubbing his hands with glee, he opened up a very old book

of charms and started reading the recipes. This kind of magic fascinated him, mostly because it required work and effort to set up, and Mike usually had the patience for neither. He didn't cook, either, unless one counted toast, and this author doesn't. Mike read the spell directions slowly, twice until he was satisfied that he could pull off all of the steps.

"Let's see, what do I want to enchant?" he muttered. Looking around, he settled on five one dollar bills, a pair of leather gloves, his class ring (high school, not college), a well-worn paperback of Anias Nin's erotica and several wooden slivers such as might fit into a blowgun. At the last second, he brilliantly decided to make some thorns using the inert shafts, on the theory that they would take the charge better.

Distantly admiring his genius, Mike Bretz cracked his knuckles and got to work.

Still Feb 21st

The sixth floor of the Ormond Sacker Club was closed for a private party. At least, that was what most of the club members in good standing were led to believe. In truth, the large conference room was playing host to an emergency convening of the Neighborhood Disciplinary Committee.

This was the punishment phase of the standard formal hearing, as Cupid had been convicted two days ago of starting a

rampage on Valentine's Day in Doyle's. Over a dozen arrows were loosed in the bar, and people were trampled in the rush to avoid the attack. No one was seriously injured, even those who had been hit with an arrow (and for some reason, those people hit with arrows were strangely unavailable to participate in the trial, as they were busy screwing like weasels). For this case, however, there were more than enough witnesses and more than enough rules broken to demand disciplinary action.

Since it was the sentencing part of the process, the room was only about one-quarter full. Many of the spectators in attendance were dead authors, as the Ormond Sacker Club served as an afterlife for writers. Others were people of little to moderate importance in the neighborhood: local businessmen, district representatives, and other Neighbors on their lunch break.

Only three people in the crowd had any bearing on the proceedings: Lord Embellyn, the delegate from the fae community; Ambrose Bierce, representing the Ormond Sacker Club; and Audrey Stafford, headmistress at the Clearwater Academy for Magical Studies in the campus district. These three were designated as alternates to the disciplinary tribunal and would serve as witnesses to the sentencing.

At the front of the room, the three judges of the tribunal sat on the left side of the room. Calvin Rumsey sat in place of Alessandro di Lessa, who was out of the country on business. Parker was present, although he looked distracted and a little angry. Between them sat James Allison, the chairman of the proceedings. Across from them, on the right hand side of the room, was Cupid. Between them, in full security mode, were three members of the Pentacle: Clara Hemingway, Morrigan, and Rosemary

Tetherwall, all looking grim. In spite of their somber faces, many men in the audience murmured to one another that this was the best-looking Pentacle ever, and they weren't wrong.

Allison finally raised his hands for quiet, and the room dutifully obeyed. "Okay, let's get this underway. We've all got other things we need to be doing." He picked up a single sheet of paper and began speaking, glancing down at the paper from time to time. "Okay, Eros, also known as Cupid, has been found guilty, by overwhelming evidence, of causing a major disturbance at Doyle's on the night of February 14th of this year. In addition to willfully discharging his weapon while on the premises, he caused a riot and negatively impacted business for the evening." Allison addressed the crowd. "It is the purpose of this council to pronounce a sentence of punishment on Eros. He has waived his right

to council and has opted to represent himself. He now has the chance to address this disciplinary committee directly." Allison looked meaningfully at Eros. "Whenever you're ready."

"Okay, I got a few things to say," said Cupid. "First off, as I said before, what happened was a crazy accident. I don't know why I got so upset. That ain't like me. I'd like you to take that into account, please. Second, my quiver of arrows is a little light, if you know what I'm saying."

"Actually, we don't," said Allison. "Please clarify."

Cupid rolled his eyes. "Okay, so, I start a ruckus, which is very out of character for me, believe me, and suddenly I'm missing arrows? No, this was a distraction, I tell you. I was set up.

Hey, I'm the God of love, not the God of war. Work it out." Cupid sat back and crossed his arms. "That's all I got to say to you jokers. Go jump up a rope."

Allison blinked, then looked at Parker and Rumsey. "Well, then, I guess we have no choice but to pronounce sentence. Cal? Parker?"

Both men slid slips of paper over to Allison, who picked them up and studied them for a moment. Then he pocketed them and stared at Cupid. "Doyle's is a sacred place in San Cibola. It has its own special rules and regulations. As the official town center for the neighborhood, it is imperative that there be no violence on the premises. There has to be a place where people can meet and work out their differences, or take a break without worrying about someone slipping a knife between their ribs or calling a lightning storm down on their heads. Ordinarily, violence at Doyle's would be answered with violence, but in this case, no one was really hurt. No one even broke a glass in the stampede out the door. I do not think you were trying to hurt anyone, at least, not physically. Therefore, it is the decision of this council that you be banished from San Cibola for a period of no less than fourteen years . . ."

Gasps erupted from the audience, and Cupid stood up in his chair. "What?!"

"However," continued Allison, "the sentence will be reduced appropriately provided you render all arrows in the city limits inert."

Cupid grinned and said, “Sure,” very quickly. “Absolutely, I’ll deaden them right now. On one condition.”

“Eros, you are in absolutely no position to make any kind of demands.”

“It’s not a demand. It’s a request. I came here to find out where my mom is, and I still haven’t found her. No one from my family will help me. So, if I can just find out where she is, I will happily go there instead.”

Allison looked at Parker. The two of them seemed to have a conversation in the looks that passed between them. Then Parker wrote something down on a Post-It note and tore the sheet off. Parker handed the note to Allison, who held it up. “Okay, Eros, here’s what you want. It’s where she is. But you have to remove the charms first.”

“Sure, sure.” Cupid closed his eyes and made a waving flourish with his hands. “There. All gone.”

Allison said, “Not that I don’t trust you, but we’ll need to do a test.” He stood up. “Fire one of those love arrows at me.”

Cupid glanced at the Pentacle. “I, um . . . ”

Allison followed the look. “Rosemary, let him do it. It’s the only way to be sure.”

Rosemary nodded and glared at Eros. “If you value your life, you won’t hurt him at all.”

Cupid put on a brave face, but didn’t say anything.

Morrigan handed him his bow and a single arrow. Cupid picked

up the bow, exhaled sharply, and then the arrow was on its way to Allison. It struck him squarely in the chest and he said, "Ow!"

Allison pulled out the arrow. Cupid said, "Feel anything?"

"No," said Allison, rubbing his chest. "Just like I got hit with a baseball."

"That's because it's inert."

Allison sat back down, still rubbing his chest. "Okay, in light of the present circumstances, the banishment will be reduced to seven years."

Cupid's mouth opened, then closed. He nodded. "Can I have that paper, now?"

"Absolutely. The pentacle will escort you to the city limits," Allison said, handing the note off to Clara Hemingway. "And remember, we'll know if you try to get back in. Our sentries are very efficient."

The women ushered Cupid out the door. Clara glanced at the note and smiled. As Cupid left, he leaned back in and said to Allison, "Tell Silas hey for me."

Allison shook his head and motioned for the three witnesses to come up and sign the document detailing the nature of the punishment. As Ambrose Bierce bent over to initial the changes, he said to Allison in a low voice, "You realize, of course, he was all too eager to comply with your wishes. I don't think an arrow that has found its mark can be turned off."

"It can't," said Parker, leaning in. "I helped with those.

That was one of the first things I did. No, once it's in, you're

fucked. The little shit . . .”

Allison said to both of them, quietly, “I had a hunch. But this way, if he really was set-up, we hopefully just screwed up the plans of whoever swiped those arrows.”

“Unless he’s already used them,” said Bierce.

“Do you have to be so pessimistic all the time?” asked Allison.

Bierce smiled. “Sir, I delight in casting shadows. Only solid objects can do so.” And with that, he walked away.

Parker smiled. “Hey, you’re the one who rescued him.”

“Shut up,” offered Allison.

Feb 22nd

Sam returned to his hunt for Eos with great reluctance. Mi Hei’s bed was, indeed, much better than his own and provided a lot of distractions from the rest of the world. She didn’t want him to leave, either, but they both agreed to make an effort to return to their former lives (the ones without mutual love in them) and try to get some work done. Afterwards, they would meet for dinner and then go back to her place.

The plan sounded good enough, but they couldn’t stop kissing at the front door. Finally, Sam threatened to punch her if she didn’t let go of him, and with a long, final, sweeping kiss, she



smiled and closed the door in his face.

He walked the twelve blocks back to his flat, lost in thoughts of her. The weekend they spent together was bigger than he could hold in his head, and pieces of it kept spilling out and washing over him. He smiled to everyone he saw on the streets, friend or stranger, and whistled tunelessly as he walked.

At Benny's Pagoda House, he hesitated slightly before going in. Perhaps if he moved quickly . . . He pushed on the handle and bounded for the steps, glancing at the empty front desk out of the corner of his eye. He should have known better, for Benny was waiting for him at the top of the steps, a wicked grin on his face.

"See, Sam, I told you!"

"Hey, Benny," said Sam, attempting to dodge around him, but the ghost nimbly backed up to remain facing Sam.

"So, I get some complaints about you and that girl the other night, eh?" His smile threatened to eat his chin. "You have a sexy new girlfriend, you better keep it down, or people think I'm running a brothel!" He laughed raucously. "I knew she was special when you bring her around the first time!"

"Benny," said Sam, trying again to get around his landlord without touching his ghostly form, "that was over a year ago, and we hated each other back then."

"No, you never hated each other. Just didn't know you loved each other!" He cackled again. Sam heard someone fumbling with the doorknob to their apartment, no doubt to check on

who was making all of the racket.

“Right. Look, I have a case to get back to, so . . .” Sam

unlocked his door and stepped inside.

As he shut the door behind him, Benny shouted, “Okay, Sam, I don’t want to hold you up so you can get back to your date!”

Sam sighed. Maybe it was time to move.

The apartment smelled of incense, sex, and Mi Hei, though not necessarily in that order. It made for difficult working conditions, as he kept returning to her again and again. He had already checked his messages and found nothing of use or interest, so he made a few phone calls. Still nothing. The hell with this, he thought, I’ve got to get out of here. He made sure his answering machine was on before he left the apartment, still distracted.

Sam covered the Rue Livre district, checking coffee houses, bookstores, outdoor markets, and any other shop that sold alternative Norman things or catered to the Neighborhood sensibilities. As he worked, he kept finding things that reminded him of Mi Hei. At the end of the day, he had an amber necklace, a small jade carving of a crane, a book of Chinese love poems, and beautifully decorated scroll that he planned to fill with thoughts about her. He wrote an inscription on the inside of the book:

*Mi,*

*Thank you for touching me. The window has been opened*

*and I am looking at a new world.*

*Love,*

*Sam*

All of this good stuff didn't make up for the fact that Sam had zero leads, and so he headed back to his place in a bit of a funk. This time, he managed to not encounter Benny and breathed a sigh of relief as he entered his flat.

It still smelled of her.

There were two messages, both from Mi Hei. She was thinking about him and not being together was driving her crazy.

He called her house but got no answer, so he dialed her cell phone.

She answered on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hello, foreigner." It sounded a lot different from the other times she said it.

"Listen, I just had a day here, would you mind if we just chilled out over here, tonight?"

She sighed dramatically. "I guess so . . . but you'll owe me a back rub in the morning."

"Deal," Sam grinned and lowered his voice a little, "besides, I've got something for you."

"I know, you've been giving it to me all weekend," she said.

Sam blushed. "No, you horn-dog, I picked up something

for you today. A little something.”

“Hmm. I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me what it is, are you?”

Sam grinned. “Nope. You’ll have to wait until you get here. Think of it as an incentive.”

“Ugh, don’t say that, you sound like my father.” Sam blanched at the sudden thought of Jiang Shui finding out about them. “Hey, you want dinner?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick something up. No Chinese.”

“Hey, why not?”

“Bowen, you gotta eat other things once in a while. I’ll see you soon.”

Sam hung up, feeling much better. He lay down in his unmade bed and wrapped himself in the smell of her perfume.

Feb 23rd

Sam woke up with a mouthful of Mi Hei’s hair and the telephone ringing.

“Let the machine get it,” she mumbled, snuggling back against him.

“Okay,” he murmured. His hand absently found her breast.

She sighed and turned her head to face him for a kiss.

The machine was talking now as they kissed. A woman’s

voice. Something about coming over. Mi Hei broke the kiss. “What was that?” her voice, now stronger, held a note of suspicion.

“Dunno,” said Sam, getting up out of bed. “Let me see.”

He walked over to the machine and hit rewind, then play.

“Uh, Sam, this is Selene, Dawn’s sister. Listen, she showed up this morning in a state of . . . well, look, can you just come over? Dennis is here and I don’t really know what to do. She’s pretty . . . agitated, and I could use some help with her. Call me back, okay? Bye.”

Mi Hei raised an eyebrow. “Agitated, huh?”

“Yeah, who knows what that’s all about.” Sam was torn.

Mi Hei naked in his bed, or Dawn and the chance at another five grand?

“Do you have to go right now?” Mi Hei asked, getting up to join him. She embraced him, and their skin touching felt like an electric shower.

“God, I probably should, but I don’t want to.” He kissed her forehead.

“Say, wasn’t your hand right about here,” she placed it appropriately, “a few minutes ago.”

“Why, yes it was,” said Sam.

Mi Hei leaned into him. “Since you’ll be walking into a potentially hazardous situation, think of this as some protection against her charms.” She climbed up his body and kissed him.

They tottered back to the bed and collapsed.

Sam hit the buzzer for apartment 210. “Who is it?” said

Selene.

“Sam Bowen.”

“Thank Heaven. Come on up.” The door clacked once, and Sam walked in. He took the stairs effortlessly, still glowing from his morning exertions.

Dennis had the door open when Sam stepped out of the stairwell. “Hey, thanks for coming,” he said. “Come on in.”

Selene was standing in the room, looking at their hallway.

“She’s in there,” she said.

“You guys are talking about her like she’s going to turn into a werewolf or something,” said Sam. “What happened?”

Selene turned to face the men. “Dennis, would you be a dear and get me a drink?”

Dennis looked at Sam. “You want anything? Beer, Coke?”

“Do you have any orange juice?” asked Sam.

“Coming up.” Dennis disappeared into the kitchen.

“So, what’s up?” asked Sam again.

Selene took a seat in the hanging chair. “Well, she showed up banging on the door. I have no idea how she got through the front gate. Well, I have an idea, but it’s pretty unsavory. Anyway, she came in and she was all, like, ‘God, I need a man,’ and ‘get this fucking thing outta me.’ I tried to talk to her, but she just yelled at me.” She smiled self-consciously. “She always was a little jealous of me.”

The wall right behind Selene thumped and Sam heard a

muffled, "Bullshit!"

Dennis reappeared with a Diet Coke in a can and a glass of orange juice for Sam. "Thanks," said Sam, who drained the glass in a single gulp. They watched, Dennis with interest, Selene with a knowing look. "Okay, so, what do you want me to do?"

"Well, can you calm her down?" asked Dennis.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about her curse. Do you?"

Dennis shook his head, but Selene leaned in. "This much, I know. She gets urges. Sometimes, they are specific, but a lot of the time, it's just a general need. Much, I suspect, like a man."

Sam and Dennis glanced at one another. "After she takes care of the urges, she's fine. But if she doesn't take care of the urges, she could, well . . ."

"Well, what? Die?"

Selene laughed. "Only men think they will die from a lack of sex."

"Hey, it's true!" said Dennis. "It's been scientifically proven that men will explode if they don't have sex!"

"That's why Father gave men opposable thumbs," said

Selene. "You have a built in release valve."

"Ah, but a professional plumber does a much better job of fixing the pipes than I ever could."

"So, you're mortal," said Sam. Dennis nodded. "Then let me ask you this: sex with a goddess, what are the dangers?"

Selene's mouth opened. "Before you yell at me, I have to know

how much danger I'm in if I go in there.”

“Only a danger of dehydrating,” quipped Dennis. “Her family is rather notorious.”

Selene blushed, but didn't seem to mind.

“Okay, I've got it. I think I know what happened. Do you have any pliers?”

Dennis frowned in confusion, but got up. “Sure, let me look.”

“So, what do you think is wrong with her?” asked Selene.

“Here you go. Needle nose pliers.” Dennis thumped them into Sam's hand like a nurse handing a doctor some surgical instrument.

“You're not going to hurt her, are you?” said Selene.

“Relax. Just stay out here, we'll be out shortly.” I hope, thought Sam to himself. He walked to the first bedroom and turned the knob.

“Dawn? It's Sam.”

“Get in here,” she gasped. She was wearing the same outfit she had on at the bar. Her half-shirt was dirty and frayed, and her cotton pants had holes in them. She was filthy but still gorgeous, writhing on the unmade bed, squeezing her legs together and hugging herself very tightly.

Sam closed the door and didn't approach the bed. “Sam, help me please,” she begged.

“What's wrong?”



“I can’t control it!” She wailed, her hips thrusting into the air. “I feel like I’m possessed.”

“Dawn, roll over,” Sam said.

“Ooh, yeah, tell me what to do,” she sighed.

“Okay, Dawn, grab the headboard and do not let go, do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.” She got to her knees, held onto the wooden headboard, and looked over her shoulder. “Now what?” she breathed.

In spite of his feelings for Mi Hei, he felt hot and excited.

Sam forced a picture of her from the morning into his mind, and the feeling more or less went away. “Okay, hold still.”

She cooed. Sam approached the bed cautiously. Without touching her, he lifted up the back of her pants, and, sure enough, there was an arrow imbedded up to the feathers in the small of her back. He grabbed the arrow with the pliers and pulled it out. “Oh, Yeeesss! Oh, fuck yeaah!” she shrieked. Sam almost let go of the arrow. He stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the floor.

Dawn blinked, then sighed and collapsed. There was a knock. “Everything all right?” It was Selene.

“Go away,” said Dawn into her pillow.

Selene opened the door and did a double take upon seeing everyone still clothed. “Is that an arrow?”

“Recognize it?” Sam asked, holding it up for her inspection.

Selene’s eyes narrowed. “That little shit!” she said.

Dawn sat up on the edge of the bed. “Selene, don’t bother.

It was an accident.”

“That’s what he always says! That son of a bitch!”

“Now you’re talking!” Dawn stood up, stretched, and said,

“I’m fucking famished. I haven’t eaten in a week.”

The TaqArena was on San Pedro and easy walking distance from Selene and Dennis’ apartment. Sam and Dawn ate overstuffed breakfast tacos and talked.

“Feeling better?” Sam asked.

“I still need a good fuck, if that’s what you want to know.”

She said it without any trace of come-hither, but it still sent Sam’s blood flowing south.

Sam swallowed “Yeah, about that . . . I’ve sort of, well, there’s someone.”

“You got hit with an arrow, too, huh?” Dawn nodded sympathetically.

“Yeah, but the feelings are mutual.” Seeing Dawn’s reaction change, Sam added hastily, “But hey, if it wasn’t for her, we would’ve never left the bedroom, I promise.”

“That’s great,” she said distractedly.

“Don’t get too happy about it,” said Sam. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll find someone to fit the bill.”

“It’s not that, I’m just . . . a little jealous, I guess.”

“Jealous?” said Sam. “Of me? Why?”

Dawn bit into another taco and chewed quickly. “Think

about it. Do you know what it's like, never getting to settle down?

Not being able to really fall in love? I've tried it before, lots of times. They always say they understand when I tell them about the curse. Then I go and fuck somebody else and it kills them."

She took a big drink of her Coke. Sam didn't say anything. "And Selene, who slept with at least as many people as me back in the old days, gets to fall in love and have a normal, if mundane, life. Gods, I'd kill for a mundane life with one man."

"Hey, it's not Selene's fault. You had shitty taste in men.

Lord knows you weren't the first woman to exercise bad judgment in your crushes."

Her eyes got angry for a second, then she shrugged. "Ares.

Maybe you're right. Shit, he wasn't even that good. I really wish I could go back and do it over again."

"Well, you can't. All you can do is try to live as honestly as you can and work with what you have."

She nodded. "Oh, I know, I know." She leaned into the table excitedly. "You know, I've always thought about writing a book. Something about men and sex through the ages. I know a guy who can help me with the false credentials and a new name."

She flipped her hair around. "And getting it published would be a snap."

Sam smiled. "I think it's a great idea."

"Me too." She smiled back and returned to her breakfast.

Sam pushed the rest of his taco away. "Now, let's talk about Sheldon."

Feb 24th

Mike Bretz strode into the Hygate branch of the Bank of America, a smile on his face. He was the first one in the door, almost knocking the uniformed guard out of the way in his haste to get to the second window from the left. She was there, pretty and petite, all her womanly goodness tucked tightly into a conservative pantsuit. Cheryl Castelleja, 24 years old, no boyfriend. This much he knew. Soon, very soon, he would know a whole lot more.

“Hello, Mr. Bretz,” said Cheryl with false sincerity.

“You’re in early today.”

“Oh yeah, Cheryl, I got some business to take care of. The early bird gets the worm, you know?”

“Yeah,” said Cheryl, an automatic smile on her face. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I need to make this deposit,” said Bretz, sliding a check and a deposit stub under the window slot, “but I forgot I need to add another dollar to it. Can you add it in for me?” He smiled and slid over a single dollar bill.

Cheryl’s smile faltered in her impatience. “Sure,” she said, expertly snatching up the dollar and making the adjustment on a new deposit slip. Mike looked at her expectantly. She slid the dollar along the length of her palm, in and out, and slipped it into

the drawer. "Okay, Mr. Bretz, you're all taken care of."

"Well, yeah, but are you?" Mike leaned in closer. "I mean, is there anything I can do for you?"

The smile dropped. "What did you say?"

"Let me put it to you this way: do you ever get an itch that you can't scratch? Well, baby, I'm a bamboo back scratcher with your name all over it."

Cheryl leaned in closer, her lips almost brushing the glass.

"That's great, Mr. Bretz. Now, let me put it to you this way: if you aren't out of my face in five seconds, I am going to pull you through this transaction slot and kick you until you are dead. Got it?"

Bretz stepped away from the window. "What? I don't . . . I mean, I didn't . . ." He turned and ran out the door.

Lesbians, he thought, they're all lesbians. That's the only thing that makes any sense. The cute little grunge-puppy at Starbuck's had actually taken a swing at him when he bought his coffee. Straight chicks don't fight. He was certain of that. Not unless they were in prison.

The day was turning into a respectable downer. The gloves didn't work, the money was a total bust (and they were backed up by his class ring), and he lost his naughty paperback when he had to beat a hasty retreat from Rosemary Tetherwall. The only thing left at his disposal was the wooden blowgun darts he'd fashioned from the remains of the arrow.

Mike sat at Doyle's and wondered idly if maybe he had

done something wrong. No, he thought to himself, everything was perfect on his end. It had to be the girls. That was the only thing that made sense.

There was just one woman left to try and enchant. One woman that he knew wasn't gay. Sally Fell. He looked at the small collection of wooden splinters in his hand and decided it was way past the time to be subtle.

She came in, alone, in the evening. Bretz swallowed hard.

She looked amazing. She sat down at what Mike thought of as her table and ordered her usual white wine. After Bethany walked away, he sent a very minor cantrip over, just enough to put pressure on her bladder. Sally looked around, then got up and went to the bathroom, taking her purse with her.

Bretz got up and walked quickly to the jukebox. On the way, he forcibly threw several of the little wooden slivers onto the seat of her chair. A few of them bounced and rolled away, but one stuck in the padding at an angle. He was careful to not do a victory dance at the jukebox, so as not to attract unwanted attention. He chose his standard assortment of songs, then lingered and watched in the glass for Sally to return.

She came out of the bathroom, her face neutral. Bretz tensed. This would require pinpoint timing. She pulled her chair out. Bretz turned and began to saunter. Sally sat down. Bretz was directly behind her.

"Ow!" she said.

Bretz leapt to her side. “Are you okay, Sally?” he put a gloved hand on her elbow.

Sally, startled by his sudden appearance, said, “Fuck!”

“What?” said Bretz.

“What?” said Sally.

“What happened?” asked Bretz, squeezing her elbow.

Sally yanked her elbow out of his hand. “I sat down on something, then you appeared out of nowhere, that’s what fucking happened.” She stood up, leaving Mike to think about how well she said the word “fucking.”

“Good God!” she said, pulling the wooden sliver out of the chair. “Where the hell did that come from?” She looked at Bretz accusingly. “If this is your idea of a joke, it ain’t funny, Bretz.”

“What? Me? No! I didn’t . . . I mean I, well, just heard you yell and—”

“Bretz, I said ‘ow.’ I didn’t yell. If you hadn’t been hovering around me, you wouldn’t have even heard me.”

“I’m sorry,” Mike stammered. “I’ll just . . . I didn’t mean to . . . sorry.” He backed away, shaking his head in defeat. Cupid, you sonofabitch, he thought, I’ll make you sorry you ever came to San Cibola.

Feb 25th

Dawn sat at the table facing the front entrance to Doyle’s,

eating an Italian chicken sandwich, her legs crossed under her butt to keep from squirming. It was bad this time. She could barely taste the sandwich as she gulped it down. It was one-thirty. She was getting pissed.

When he finally came in, she didn't recognize him, not until he was standing right in front of her. "Hi, I'm Blake, I denied Christ," he said proudly. His hair was cut short and styled. He wore new clothes: a button-down shirt, modest tie, and tailored slacks.

"Oh my, Shel—sorry, Blake, you look great!" she gushed.

She stood up and hugged him, and broke the contact first. They sat down. "So, what gives?"

Sheldon-Blake shrugged. "Ah, you know, it was time."

He smiled at her, a really charming one. "Curses . . ."

"Foiled again," she finished, smiling with him. "So, what are you going to do? Now that you're Blake?"

"Well, I thought I'd see about doing some investment trading. Stock market. That kind of thing. I can do everything over the Internet, that way."

"I thought you hated computers."

He shook his head. "Sheldon hated computers. Blake is really interested in them. Bael, I really hate this stuff sometimes."

"I know," she said, her hand on his. "It's why I had to leave you."

"Dawn," he said, placing his hand on hers, "now that I'm



Blake, I was hoping that we could . . . well, you know . . .” He stopped when he saw Dawn’s face.

“Blake, I’m so sorry. It doesn’t work like that. I have my own curse to live with, too.”

Blake nodded, his head down. Winter came up to them.

“Can I get you anything?”

Blake looked at her. “Winter, right? I’ll have the meatloaf sandwich platter.” He watched her retreat. “And I pray that’s what I’ll get.”

Dawn giggled. “You always could make me laugh.”

“Nice to see I still can.” He tapped his knuckles on the table. “I still can, you know.”

Dawn nodded. “Blake, the time I spent with you was wonderful. And I’ll tell you something else: the last time I spent more than six months with the same man was over three hundred years ago. Oh, baby, I’ll never forget you.” She patted his hand again.

Blake exhaled. “It’s over, then. Okay, well, not to sound too piggish, but could we, you know, one more time? For old times sake?”

Dawn sighed and closed her eyes and leaned in. “Hey,” she whispered. “Do you remember the last night we made love?”

“Bael, yeah! It’s burned into my mind.”

“Good. Then why don’t we let that be our last time together? Not like this. I want you to remember me like I remember you.”

He slumped down in his chair. He wanted to cry. Dawn

got up, put her arms around his neck, and hugged him. She kissed the top of his head. "I'll never forget you."

"Nor I, you."

Winter appeared with a bowl of beef stew and sourdough bread. "Here's your special. Oh, wait . . ." She took the tray back, a perplexed look on her face.

Dawn looked at Blake. "Hey, at least she caught it."

"Yeah, well, I'm not really hungry anyway." He stood up and fished a twenty out of his pocket. "I got this. You take care of yourself, okay, Dawn?"

"You too." She kissed him on the cheek. He turned away quickly and walked out. Dawn sat back down, crossing her legs under herself to keep from fidgeting.

Feb 26th

Mi Hei drove while Sam navigated. "Go left up here," he said. She followed his directions while holding his hand.

"Hey, we're leaving Chinatown," she said teasingly.

"Give me some credit," said Sam. "I'm taking you someplace special."

"Where?" she asked.

"I'm taking you home."

She wrinkled her nose. "Huh?"

"You'll see." Sam smiled out of the side of his face.

Mi Hei made a strangling noise in her throat, but she smiled too. Sam continued to give directions until they were deep in the meaner part of Spanishtown. "I can see why you wanted to eat early," she said.

"Well, even though I know where we are, I'm not confident about the night life here. But don't worry, where we're going is safe."

"I don't worry, not when I'm with you," she said, her hand on his.

They took a left turn onto Redwood Lane, and Sam told her to park. At the corner was a dirty wooden building, held together by off-white paint. Over the door was a faded sign in red and black: CROSSROADS BARBECUE. Off to the side was a cartoon devil's head, smiling and winking. Underneath that was a slogan that read, "Even the devil likes it!"

Mi Hei cocked an eyebrow at him. Sam said, "Ever had barbecue? Real, southern barbecue?"

"Nuh uh."

He smiled and took her hand and dragged her across the street. The building was narrow and deep and looked like it had once been a bar. They opened the screen door and the unmistakable smell of cooking meat washed over them. Inside were small tables scattered randomly about the room. Around the perimeter of the room were a collection of fans, twisting this way and that, giving movement to the cool air that came through the open windows. At the back of the restaurant was the counter for orders. In

the dimly lit interior, Mi Hei heard the voice before she saw the man. Someone called out in a generous baritone, “Saaaaaam!”

“Hey, Elton!” Sam replied. They walked to the back, and now Mi Hei could see a huge black man, wearing a dirty white apron and a huge smile. He shook Sam’s hand warmly.

“How you been, son? You ain’t been comin’ around too much lately.” He stopped when he saw Mi Hei. “Oh, well, shut my mouth, now it makes all the sense in the world.”

“Elton, this is Mi Hei. Mi Hei, this is Elton, owner of the only authentic barbecue joint in California.”

Elton gently took her hand in his. “Welcome, Mi. Nice to meet you.”

“Hello,” she said, smiling.

“Elton, my friend here ain’t never had barbecue before.”

Elton dropped her hand and looked concerned. “Ever? Oh, girl, I am so jealous of you right now!”

“Why is that?” she said.

“Because I just finished putting the finishing touches on a fresh rack of ribs. You like pork?”

“Sure,” she said.

“Well, you got to have some of this, then.” He turned away to cut some meat.

Sam leaned in. “He always tells me what I’m going to eat.

Just go with it. It’s the thing, here.”

“Hey, Bowen,” she whispered, “when did your accent

show back up?”

Elton laughed. “I heard that!”

“Oh, you know I always go bad when I come in here,”

Sam said to Elton.

Elton leaned over the large serving counter. “Shoot, you need to come round more often, is what you need. You ain’t been getting no greens or nothing. What you need is some chicken.”

He turned away to cut some more.

“Elton, tell the lady where you from.”

“I was born in Kentucky, but raised in Mississippi. Jacksonville. I sure do miss it, too.” He nodded at Sam. “Since we both from the South, way out here on the Left Coast, that makes us brothers, ain’t that right, Sam?”

Sam nodded. Mi Hei giggled at the thought of the two men being brothers. Then she looked up at the menu painted on a wooden plank overhead and gasped. “What?” Sam asked.

“The prices . . .” All of the entrees were six dollars and sixty-six cents.

Elton leaned over the counter, a large cleaver in his hand.

“Don’t you go worrying about them prices, girl. The devil don’t scare me none, I can promise you that.”

“But isn’t it unlucky to invite so much evil upon your business?” Mi Hei was genuinely curious.

Elton grinned, and the cleaver flashed. “That depends on the business, I expect.”

They ate at Sam’s place. Sam spread a blanket over the

floor, held in place by candles. It wasn't much, but she kissed him for the effort anyway. He smiled and watched her strip the tender meat from the bone and go for seconds. She murmured how good the food was, and it made Sam very happy to hear it, like she'd passed some sort of test. After the ribs, she started in on Sam's chicken.

"You know," she said as she licked barbecue sauce off her fingers, "I am so glad we got all of the bullshit between us out of the way."

"Really," said Sam as he finished off his potato salad.

She locked eyes with him. "Now that we are together, I don't want to be with anyone else."

The words were rocks on his skull that left him dizzy and scared. "Mi Hei, are you saying you want to be with me forever?"

She nodded, moving closer to him across their dinner. "Say it, Sam, and damn your curse. Tell me now because I need to hear it."

Her face was close to his. Sam could feel the electricity she was throwing off. "Mi, you are beautiful, smart, graceful, and wonderful."

They were inches apart. "Say it," she whispered.

"I love you." His heart was a hummingbird in his chest.

"I love you too," she said, and then they kissed, a very passionate, barbecue-flavored kiss that brought tears to Mi Hei's eyes.

Feb 27th

Chu Sheng Kai shook his head sadly. “Ya Shen, you have no idea what you are asking me to do.”

They were seated in Chu’s office. Sam slouched dejectedly in the overstuffed leather chair. Chu smoked his pipe absently.

“Chu-San, I do understand, all too well. And I’m not fond of it. In fact, I hate it. But I can’t take that chance.” He stared at Chu. “Nor can you.”

“Is that a threat?” Chu raised his eyebrows.

“Absolutely not.” Sam slid forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Sir, I love her. She’s saved my life. I’ve saved hers. I don’t know what else to do.”

“Have you talked to Jiang Shui?” Chu set down his pipe and folded his hands.

“Her father?” Sam’s eyes widened to cartoon proportions.

“What kind of a fool do you take me for? He’d kill me!”

Chu smiled. “I don’t think he would kill you. But I don’t think he wants you to marry his daughter, either.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Sam, put out. “I’m good people, and he should know that.”

Chu picked up his pipe and resumed smoking. “That is not the point. He wants a Chinese man to marry his daughter.

Jiang sees Mi Hei as partially a grown man and partially an old maid.” He smiled. “In spite of his liberal education, I must say, he

is amazingly traditional. The perils of the middle child.”

Sam nodded. “I keep forgetting he’s not the oldest.”

“He is a good man,” Chu frowned, “but he would not understand why you love her. And he would be wary of you because of your special history.”

Sam jumped up. “And that’s why I want you to help me out with this.”

Chu waved him back down. “I know, but this presents a problem in that she is my granddaughter and you are my adopted son.”

Sam shrugged. “Who else can I trust? I think of this as family business.”

Chu exhaled smoke and made a face. “Dirty business.”

“I know. I am very sorry.”

“If I help you, it will cost you dearly. Are you prepared for that?” Chu tapped out the tobacco ashes in a glass ashtray.

Sam nodded somberly. “I am.”

“Very well. We will do this tomorrow.” Chu stood up.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have to get ready.”

Feb 28th

The weather was crisp and sunny, and that cool sunlight brought a soft glow to the atrium of Chu Sheng Kai’s estate. Sam wore a green silk robe, cinched at the waist. Chu wore a similar



garment in red and gold. Both knelt on the floor in front of a serving mat, a tea pot, various jars and utensils, a small, wood and brass box, and three cups. Neither of them looked at one another. Mi Hei entered the room, wearing a blue and silver robe. She smiled at Sam, then knelt down beside him and kissed him. "You look handsome."

Sam smiled. "I think you're biased."

"Doesn't he look handsome, grandfather?"

Chu was all smiles now. "He is striking in his robe. Now, Mi, sit here," he indicated the space opposite Sam. "and we will begin."

Grinning broadly, she did as she was told. Chu looked at each of them in turn as he spoke. "I know what you want me to do. My son, Jiang Shui, will need some convincing before he will change his heart, and I won't give my blessing unless the family is in complete harmony. Before we discuss this, I will show my love for you both and my admiration for your courage." He then slowly, expertly, made them a pot of tea. He served Sam, then Mi Hei, and then himself. He raised his teacup and they followed.

"The first sip is for health and good fortune." They drank. "The second sip is for knowledge and clarity of thought." They drank again. "The third sip is for longevity and wisdom." They drank one final time. Chu clasped them by the hand and chanted quietly for a few minutes. He then opened his eyes and smiled. "Now," he said, refilling their cups, "let's talk about your relationship."

He opened the small box and angled it towards Mi Hei. “My granddaughter, why don’t you begin? If I am to convince your father, I am going to have to know your heart. Tell it to me. Tell me everything.”

Mi Hei looked at him, then the box. “The first time I saw him, I was taken with him,” she said. “I thought he was attractive. So different from the men my father kept choosing for me. I think he sensed it. He was mad when you asked him if I could baby-sit him. We both knew you had a good reason, but I think he was scared, all the same. I was thrilled, even though I was mad he took me away from my regular security duties. I turned my anger at Dad into anger at Sam. I knew there was no way we could be together, so I pushed the feelings down and tried to forget about them. I knew I loved him then.”

Sam realized that she was still staring at the box. He tone was light, distant. Her eyes were wide. It was happening, he thought. He started to leave, but a wave of Chu’s hand stopped him. Mi continued. “I thought he was very brave when he rescued Elizabeth. That was the first time I thought he may be useful to the family, the first time I saw what you saw.”

Chu leaned over. “You will stay, and you will listen to this. This is the price for what you have asked me to do.”

Sam bit his lip, but he stayed put.

She told Chu everything in that breathy, distant voice. She talked about her jealousy of the Fox-Spirit (“I think he had a crush on her”), the one-night stand she had last summer when she kept

calling out Sam's name in bed ("He was so mad, he left before either of us finished"), and the Halloween party in October ("I was so scared about that Rosemary girl, and I was so glad that Sam didn't get that she was interested in him").

Finally, she told him about the last two weeks. About how good she felt, how honest and complete she finally felt. All of the secrets were out of the way, and they could finally look at each other without looking away. She described in detail how their first night felt. She told Chu everything that ran through her mind when they were making love: little details of their wedding, what their babies would look like, how each of her previous lovers withered and died inside of her, how she wanted nothing more than to please him and keep pleasing him, how she wanted to cry out that she loved him right then but was too scared. She told Chu how they learned more about each other in a week of mutual love than they had learned in a year of false hate and denial. She told Chu everything, a summary of her feelings and thoughts and emotions for the man sitting opposite her.

Every sentence was a kick in his heart. Every word, a small cut. Sam hung his head in shame, at a loss for anything else to do. Finally, mercifully, she stopped. The last thing she said was, "I hope that you can persuade my father to let me pursue my happiness with Sam, because I don't want to do anything else with my life without him in it."

When it was over, Chu took a drink with a shaky hand. He

closed the box and locked it with a small brass key. That done, he addressed Sam. "The box is yours, Ya Shen. Here is the key."

"It's in there?" Sam asked, his voice weak.

"Yes."

"What about me?" said Sam.

"What about you?" Chu emphasized the second word.

"Is it my turn now?"

Chu looked at him, angry. "No. I will not do the same for you. Your price for this is the memory of how much she loved you. Now, every time you look at her, you will know what you gave up. Every time you are around her, you will understand the nature of what you asked me to do. I am sick, Ya Shen. Sick in my heart for this."

"I'm sorry." He was staring at Mi Hei and her wide, empty eyes.

Chu dropped his empty cup angrily. "What did you expect? That I just wave my hand and everything is back to normal? I have taken the energy from her and put it in this box. She has lost something now, and will wonder what it was for a long time. This is all your fault."

Sam felt the anger welling up inside of him, but didn't want to fight. He knew he was to blame. "My curse . . ." he said.

"Then, why don't you figure out what it is and fix it?"

Chu waved his hand. "I give you the run of the house. Do what you have to do."

"What about her?" Sam said.

Chu handed him the box and the key. “When you open the box, it will all come back to her. The energy inside will not fade, but where it lands, it will stay for good. So be sure you have done what needs to be done to insure her safety. Do you understand?”

Sam nodded. “I do.”

Chu stared at him for a second. “Well, go on. Change clothes and hit the library.”

Sam stared at a book he was reading. Mi Hei walked in.

“Foreigner.”

He forced everything down and said, “Hello, Mi.”

“Grandfather said you needed some help.”

“Yeah, listen, I was wanting to step up the research, so can we go back to doing this stuff twice a week? Two heads are better than one.”

Mi Hei rolled her eyes. “Christ, more of this. Okay, listen, Bowen, if I’m going to help you, it won’t be translating, you understand? You are going to have to tell me what you are looking for. And it can’t be this week because I have shit to do. Next Tuesday. Got it?”

Sam held up his hands. This may be easier than he thought.

“Okay, okay, Jesus, I just wanted to, you know . . . because we . . . make a great team, and all.”

She made another face. “Not the word I would have used.”

“What? Great or team?”

“Take your pick,” she said, turning and walking out the

door. Sam touched the key, strung with a red ribbon around his neck, and tried unsuccessfully to blink back the tears.

Feb 29th

Mike Bretz hated Leap Years. This went all the way back to a book report he gave on Benjamin Franklin in the third grade wherein he credited the grand old inventor with the idea. The teacher actually laughed out loud at him, which broke the class up. For the rest of elementary school, he was called “Benjy Bretz” by his classmates, which did nothing for his portly self-esteem.

On that day, he blamed Benjamin Franklin for the blunder rather than the fact that he made up most of the book report on the way to class, and a lifetime of denial and unaccountability was born. It was with great relish in high school that he found out Franklin had a predilection for 13-year old French prostitutes, which gave him a variety of venereal diseases in his later years.

Mike sat at the corner of the bar at Doyle’s, staring at Sally Fell’s table and hating February, Leap Year, love, and lesbians. Periodically, he would finish his beer and nod to Silas. In the time it Silas to bring him a fresh one, he would rearrange the order on his List of Hate and start the process over again.

He was so preoccupied in his beer and his bile that he didn’t notice her until she was sitting next to him, staring widely.

“Hi, I’ve been looking for you,” she said, distaste evident on her face.

“Huh?” Mike looked at her. She was fairly short and curvy, but perfectly proportioned. Her hair was strawberry blonde, but it didn’t seem to go with her facial features. It didn’t spoil her looks, however. “What did I do?” Mike asked, afraid of the answer.

“You didn’t do a damn thing. Cupid, may he get cancer and die, did it to me.”

“You hate him, too?” Mike was incredulous. They had something in common, and she was still staring at him. “I’m Mike Bretz.” He held out his hand.

“Dawn.” She took it and caressed it and made Mike quiver.

“And I hope like hell this won’t take too long.”

“What? What won’t take too long?”

Dawn smiled. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

“No.”

Silas slid his tab over to Bretz, his face unreadable. “I’ve got this,” Dawn said, throwing a twenty on the table. “Come on.”

“Uh, where are we going?” Mike asked.

“To your place.”

“To my place?” Mike smiled. “Why?”

Dawn came over and took his hand. “Are you a virgin?” she said loudly.

“NO!”

Dawn smiled, but stopped when Mike smiled back at her.

“Look, don’t make that face again. Do you want to take me to bed or not?”

“Sure, no problem, you got it.” Mike actually beat Dawn to the exit, he was moving so fast. Everyone stared as they left. No one thought Bretz had that kind of speed in him.

## Roadtrip

March, 2000

In retrospect, I knew he would stop. He had to. It was fated to happen.

I was walking backwards down Interstate 5, thumb out, staring at the ass-end of Bakersfield in the distance, trying my best to get as far away from there as possible. I spent the morning in the saddest excuse for a Dunkin’ Donuts I’d ever seen, torn between watching the steady stream of ants pick their way through the cracked brick tiles on the floor and watching the prostitute with Tina Turner’s hair push ass out of the transient motel across the street. The coffee was too weak and the donuts too tough. Seventeen year-old kid behind the counter, listening to what sounded like a shoe in the dryer. Urban dance music, they call it. I call it a shoe in the dryer. But the kid seemed to like it.



I had enough of that shit. I walked east two blocks to the U-Haul repair center and caught a ride to the Interstate with two weird-looking kids on their way to San Francisco. When they hit the Interstate, I thanked them and hoofed it south.

I walked about at least five miles, my army duffel banging against my leg. No one even gave me a second look, and I didn't look too bad. Clean and shaved, at least. Blue jeans weren't dirty. Black army boots, but you couldn't really see them with the jeans over them. I had on a black T-shirt that was pretty tight, but not tacky-looking. I don't know. Maybe people just don't pick up hitchhikers any more. Whatever.

In any case, I saw the car, and it made my heart speed up.

Cadillacs always do that. I'm only human. Carnation pink, too.

Top down, mint condition, 1963 El Dorado. You know, the long, flat, boxy one? It was a hipster's car. I didn't care. I needed a lift, and it was fate if I ever saw it.

He slowed the boat and idled the big V-8 390 engine and pulled to the side of the road, rolling along at a pace that matched my backwards walking. We checked each other out. His radio was blaring, something loud with a bunch of yelling. I stopped walking. He turned the radio down.

The baby threw his small arm over the front seat, and I caught a glimpse of two tiny white wings peeking out over his shoulders. They were cotton ball white, not like the creamy interior of the car. Beside him in the front seat was a bow, like something a kid would use, and a matching quiver of arrows. In spite

of the fact that he was just over three feet tall, he wore a world-weary expression on his face that seemed very out of place. He scratched the side of his button nose with a little finger.

I leaned in on the door of the car. "Where you headed, big guy?" I asked.

"South. Texas. Where you goin', Elvis?" he asked. The adulthood of his voice caught me unawares. So did the name.

"I have no current destination in mind," I said. Shit like that always came out of my mouth when I was stalling for time or taken aback.

The baby grinned. "Hop in," he said. He moved the bow and arrows out of the way, out of sight between his seat and the

car door. I threw my bag into the back, vaulted into the car, and sat down.

"Thanks," I said. "Sweet fucking car."

"Ain't it, though?" he said, peeling out. We were off.

We drove for a while, listening to his God-awful music.

Somebody screaming about wanting to break stuff. Lots of cussing.

The kid that was singing was pissed off about something. I couldn't make out too much, so I just sat in the big, pink boat and watched the side of the road for those three-bladed windmills that line the hillside by the California highway like big, overgrown posies.

Every now and again I'd see them, turning in the wind slowly. It made me think of old knights fighting giants, which is just stupid.

There's no such thing as giants. But apparently, there's such thing as Cupid, so maybe I shouldn't go speculating too much.

Finally, more to get him to turn down the damn music

than anything, I asked, "So, what's in Texas?"

“Texans.” He glanced at me. “Sorry, Chief. Bad habit.

Gotta watch that attitude.” He lowered the volume, thank God, and extracted from the folds of his diaper a crumpled yellow Post-It note. I read the address written in pencil and handed it back.

“Who’s there?”

“Mom,” he said. “At least, I hope so. If that son of a bitch tricked me, I’ll go back to San Cibola and kick his monkey-fucking ass into the ocean.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up at the profanity and consciously lowered them. “Who’s he?”

“Hmm? Oh, Daedalus. Stark. Parker. Who the fuck knows what name he’s using now.”

“Daedalus.” I turned that name over in my mind.

“Where’ve I heard that before?”

He cocked his head. “You’re kidding, right? Greek guy? Built the labyrinth? Son named Icarus? The wings?”

“Oh, right! The kid flew too high and the sun melted the wax . . .”

“And down came Junior,” he finished, smiling. “You’d think that prick would learn by now.”

“So, how’d he know where to find your mom?”

Cupid shrugged. “Dunno. But he’s the first guy to give me an address.”

“Well, that was nice of him, at least.”

“Not really.” Cupid snorted. “They kicked me out of the

city.”

“San Francisco? Can they do that?”

“No, San Cibola. And yeah, they can. Fuckers. Alla them.”

He scowled, and that expression seemed finally like a good match for his little head.

“So, they kicked you out of the city, but they gave you the address to your mom’s place?”

He nodded.

“Hey, man, it could be worse.”

“I guess,” he said, making an expansive gesture with one hand, “but getting kicked out of San Cibola is kinda like getting sent to the principal’s office in kindergarten. You’ve pretty much gotta kill the class hamster with a brick to get in trouble.”

“Jesus, man,” I said, “what did you do?” He gave me a sharp look. “If you don’t mind me asking,” I amended.

He considered it for a second. “Nah, I guess I don’t mind. I’m in too good a mood, anyway. I shot up a bar.”

“With a gun?”

“No! Shit, man,” he reached beside him and pulled out the bow. “With this.”

“Oh, right, I wasn’t thinking.” Cupid snorted again. “So, did you kill anyone?”

Cupid cocked his head at me. “Are you putting me on? You know who I am, right?”

“Well, I got a pretty good idea, but I didn’t want to presume anything. I mean, look at me,” I indicated my face.

He laughed. “Right, sure. Well, I mean, I can’t kill anyone with these arrows. I can put a hurt on ‘em, but usually nothing physical, you know? Heartache, raw spots from jerking off too much, that kind of thing. No killing. Naw, no one got hurt, but did that matter? Fuck, no, man. I told them I was under hypnosis or some shit like that, a spell or something, but they didn’t believe me.”

“I don’t know if I believe you,” I said, smiling. He didn’t return it. “That was a joke.”

“Hey pal, if you’re sitting in this car, you believe it. Otherwise, you’d be back there still walking and waiting on someone to pick your dumb ass up.”

“Point taken.”

“Ah, don’t mind me. Like I said, I’m just a little frustrated.

What’s your name?”

“Aaron King.”

He blinked twice, then got over the name I gave him. He stuck his hand out. “Eros. Friends call me Cupid, Aaron.” We shook hands. And that’s how I met the God of Love.

We drove quietly for a while. I just enjoyed the ride. The sun was out but the air was cool, and with the top down, the smells of the road hit us and made every hill and valley interesting. Riding in a convertible is a lot different than riding in a regular car. Everything seems more immediate, more alive. You’re not looking through a filter of glass and breathing chemically cooled air. Everything has distance and weight and texture. You know you can reach out and touch the mountains or brush your hand along another car. It had to be what people like Henry Ford thought about when they were first making cars. Horseless carriage. The wind in your hair. Apollo’s chariot, tearing up blacktop like you’re driv-

ing the sun. Turns out, the car was part of Cupid’s godliness. He could’ve made anything he wanted to. “Don’t know why I chose

this car. Or this color. I was tooling around town in a 'Vette. I guess I was thinking classic road trip. I half expected to pick someone up and take 'em with me. No offense, but I figured it would be a chick."

"None taken."

"Good. I mean, you don't normally see men hitching unless they're loonies. Mostly, guys have their own wheels." He let that one sit between us for a half a mile, then picked it up again.

"So, what's your story? I'm dying to know."

"Ask me again, later, okay?"

"Sure, sure." I could tell he was miffed. No point in trying to get around it; I started talking to him so he would have to think about what he was saying instead of what I wasn't saying.

"So, you going to reconcile with your mother?"

"Come again?"

"You know, were you two, I don't know, fighting or something? Why haven't you seen her in a while?"

Cupid gave me another sharp look. I was getting tired of them. "No, nothing like that. We just sorta lost touch."

"Man, that's your mother."

"Yeah, well, I've been a little busy, haven't I?" His voice rose. "I didn't just run out on her. She left me, man! She and Ares went off to do their own thing. Then I got stuck in this gig," he gestured down at his diaper. "Fucking Hallmark."

"Hallmark? What did they do?"

He rolled his eyes. "The greeting card companies. All of

them. Back about a hundred-fifty years ago, people were still taught the classics. I was tall, handsome, perfectly proportioned, all of that business. Including a cock like a baseball bat. Cupid's arrow, my ass. Cupid's missile, was more like it. Anyway, the greeting card companies come along and decided to drum up some business and create national holidays with consumer demand built in. So, here we go with Valentine's Day. Problem is, no one wants to look at a Greek God like me when they send a message to their girlfriend. Think about it: you're telling her you love her, she's the one for you, all of that crap, and on the front is a guy who's better looking than you, hung like a window weight. Would you send that to a girl? Huh?"

"No, probably not," I said.

"Exactly! So, they do a little poking around and decide to play up the Saint part. If he was a saint, then he would be running with cherubim, right? Bam! That's their hook. Little baby, don't you get it? He's even got wings. Cupid's a boy in some of the stories. Transfer the god of love onto a little fucking kid. Safe image, everyone's happy, and the guys get cute points for sending a picture of a baby to their girl."

"Wow."

"Oh yeah. Everyone's buying cards, now, I'm working overtime in America, and I don't even realize it, but I'm in big fucking trouble." He scowled. "February 14th, 1927. I'll never forget it. That was the day I woke up looking like this."

“Damn, that’s rough.” I said, and I meant it.

“Brother, you don’t know the half of it. Psyche takes one look at me, she’s packed her shit and gone before noon.”

“No.” I had no idea who Psyche was, outside of the fact that it was obviously a girl.

“Yeah. And I can’t get it back, either. I’ve shot more compulsory arrows into more writers, artists, and advertising executives than I can count, but it’s no good. Even if someone manages to get the original model through the system, no one ever sees it. Just the cute little baby. It’s all about belief, man.”

I nodded. I knew exactly where he was coming from. “You still talk to her? Nike?”

“Psyche? Naw, man, she moved on. She’s in Hollywood now. New name, new face. She’s reinvented herself five times, now. Every fifteen years or so. Vain little bitch.”

“Women,” I said.

“Fuck ‘em,” he finished.

“Do you miss her?” I asked, immediately regretting it.

“Sometimes.” He snorted deeply and hawked a loogie into the slipstream. “I miss the little things, but basically, she was a pain in the ass. I could never lie to her. She always saw through that. I miss sleeping with her. She was a spooner. Still,” he finished, “I feel sorry for the bastard she’s fucking right now.” The way he said it made me think he didn’t really feel sorry for the guy at all.

I let him stew in his own juices for a minute before prompt-



ing him again. “Anyway. About your mother?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah. Ah, it’s a bunch of family bullshit, anyway. You don’t want to hear it.”

“I wouldn’t ‘a asked if I wasn’t curious,” I said.

Cupid regarded at me from the corner of his eyes, trying to size me up. Lord knows he wasn’t the first one to do it, either. I could see he was working something out, so I just let him. Eventually, he turned to me. “Okay, here’s the deal. I tell you, you tell me. That’s fair, right? Road trip, and all that aside, we’ll go story for story. Deal?”

“Yeah, okay.” Hell, that was easy, I thought.

Cupid sat back, satisfied. “Okay, well, it goes back a ways. See, no one’s really sure who my dad is. Was. Whatever. I mean, mom knows, but she’s never said.”

“How come?”

“It’s a god thing, man. You wouldn’t understand.” I shrugged a ‘what-the-fuck’ shrug, and he continued. “Point is, she never would tell me. Her son. I mean, I had an idea or two, but no one would talk to me about it.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“So, a couple a hundred years ago, I put my foot down. I told her, ‘Either tell me or you’ll never see us again.’”

“What’d she say?”

“She says, ‘Fine, I never liked your bitch-whore wife anyway.’”

I whistled. "Ouch."

"Well, if you know the story . . . We'd 'a never got married if it hadn't been for the big guy going to bat for us."

"Big guy?"

"Zeus. Aaron, you really oughtta read more. This is one of the better stories in the whole tableau."

"Yeah, yeah, go on with it," I said, irritated at the jibe.

"Okay, fuck it, it doesn't matter. Point is, I'm a man of my word. So, we bolt. Me and Psyche settled in New York."

"Where was your mom?"

"Still on the mountain."

"Olympus. Right." I said it just to show him I wasn't totally stupid.

"Well, then this shit happens, Psyche bails on me, and all of a sudden, I'm thinking that maybe it would be a good time to regroup with the family. So I go back up to the big house." He voice rose in pitch. "It was trashed, man. Gone. There were a few monsters left, but all the gods and goddesses were scattered. Some of them were dead. Inactivity. No believers. Only a few of the bigger guys remained, because we were in stories, poems, what-have-you. Anyway, I've been looking ever since."

"Since the twenties? Damn, man, that's a long time. You're just now getting around to finding her?"

"Well, like I told you before, I've been a little busy," he said evenly. "Besides, a lot of my people don't want to be found. Apparently, no one left the mountain on really good terms with

each other. The ones that made the best of it were the mortals, like the ex-wife and Daedalus. They had no trouble blending back in. Others . . .” he shook his head. “No room for a lot of the old-timers in the Industrial Revolution.”

“Damn, man, that’s a hard situation.”

Cupid nodded and didn’t say anything.

“Still, you’ve got a pretty good gig, right?”

“Sure. Power-wise, I’m still in the upper range. Stronger than Zeus, now.”

“Really, you oughtta be grateful. Those card companies did you a favor, way I see it.”

I watched his face go from pink to red and back again.

“Let me ask you something, King.” He turned completely away from the steering wheel to face me. The car slowed down but kept moving. “Ever had a night where you couldn’t get it up? Honestly, now. Beer, stress, whatever. You can tell me. Mano e Mano.”

“Uh . . .” I tried to get out from under the question, wishing like hell he’d watch the road. “Sure, couple of times.”

“Okay, let me ask you this. When you think about those times, do you wish more than anything that you could go back in time and not drink so much, or whatever, and fuck the shit out of that chick you were with?”

“Well, duh. Yeah, man, who wouldn’t?”

Cupid faced front again, his eyes back on the road. “That’s me, man, every goddamn day of my life. I’d trade all this in for

my old dick in a heartbeat.”

Los Angeles was tough to navigate. We were trucking along, minding our own business, when all of a sudden, we were in traffic up to our ass. Cupid didn't slow down; he just kept barreling on through, one hand on the horn, and one finger in the air.

“Come on, you dizzy motherfuckers!” he screamed.

Other fingers followed his salute, answering horn honks died in our wake, and I kept my hands inside the car and tried to remember the Lord's prayer. I couldn't decide if it was the one that started, ‘The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,’ or ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.’ I settled for whistling ‘There Will be Peace in the Valley.’

“Keep your eyes peeled for I-10,” he said as I watched the exit fly by us.

“We just missed it, Hoss.”

“Cocksucker!” he screamed. The wheel jerked, and the Caddy shot through three lanes of traffic, to the music of cars all over the place locking up their brakes. We hit the exit ramp doing sixty miles an hour. Behind us, someone fired a gun.

Cupid spent ten minutes trying to get to a non-existent access road that would take us back to I-10 before pulling over and asking for directions from a black man named Lester, sitting on an overturned milk carton in front of a gas station called Red's.

I thought about asking Cupid to just wiggle his nose or flap his wings and put us there, but considering his mood, I kept it to myself.

Directions cost us ten bucks, but Lester got us to where we wanted to be in just under twenty minutes. Cupid merged with the traffic on I-10 like a date rapist on prom night. More honks and screeches. Someone in a Mercedes tried to pull up next to us and complain, but Cupid flipped him off and punched it. We put a lot of road between us and him while Cupid cackled.

Eventually, the traffic thinned out some, but it was still crowded on the Interstate. I looked behind me and saw the city at a distance, a haze hanging over it like yellow cigarette smoke.

“I hate that fucking town, man,” said Cupid.

“Any particular reason, or just the drivers?”

“Hey, I’ll take ‘em all. But the main one is that they really made my job harder over the years.”

“How so?”

“Romantic comedies. Worst one ever? Sleepless in Seattle.”

“That’s a bad movie, anyway,” I told him.

“Yeah, but do they know that? Sheep and cattle, alla them, I swear to fuck.”

We pulled over for a break in Palm Springs. I stared at the streets along the Interstate, scratching a weird memory or feeling or something. Chino Canyon Road. Probably passed an exit for it or something and it was just now registering. Yeah, that was it. I stopped thinking about it, which was pretty easy to do.

Cupid drove us down Indian Road, up to some big truck stop that started out as a Pilot gas station and they just kept piling

shit on top of it until the trucks showed up. Cupid went to the bathroom while I played the crane game. Didn't get nothing, either. Damn thing was rigged. I wanted to kick the glass in and pull out one of those floppy beanie critters, but it wasn't worth the effort. Or the buck-fifty I sunk into it.

Cupid came out of the john and said, "You wanna grab a bite before we go?"

"Yeah, I could eat," I said.

We sat at the counter and a waitress ambled over to take our order, the kind the good Lord sees fit to make for the express reason of working in truck stops. Her name (I'm not making this up, either) was Thelma. It was perfect. She looked five years past the best year of her life. Built like a brick shithouse, all tits and ass. I played it cool, but Cupid acted stupid.

"What're y'all having?" she asked through her gum.

"Club sandwich, fries on the side, and a glass of your bathwater, Thelma," said Cupid, his eyes never leaving her chest.

"Cute," she said, turning to me. "Ain't heard that one all day. How about you, handsome?"

"Chicken fried steak and eggs. Iced tea."

"Fried or scrambled?"

"Fried. Sunny side up. Hard as you can fry 'em."

"Hard," she repeated, then gave me a wink. "Don't know if we do 'em any other way."

I just gave her an expectant look. She wiped the smirk off her face. "I'll get your tea." She moved away.

“Dude, that was cold.” Cupid said.

“Truck stop counter help? Come on, man, were you really planning on sticking around?”

“What if she spits in your food?”

“She won’t.”

The tea showed up, along with a glass of water for Cupid.

He started to say something to Thelma, but caught her eye and thought better of it. We drank in silence for a minute. Three college kids wearing baseball caps they hadn’t bothered to remove when they came inside were gawking at us. They were two seats down from us, turn the corner of the bar, and one over. A knight’s move in chess.

I leaned in on Cupid, pointed in the other direction, out the window, at the parked car. “We may have some trouble,” I said in a low tone of voice. “Kids down the way there, giving us the eye.”

“I caught it,” said Cupid. Nice to know he was on the lookout, too.

Our food showed up. I took one look at the mess on my plate and said, “Scuse me.”

She came back around, flicking a dishtowel at nothing in particular. “What’s the problem?”

“Ma’am, that ain’t no chicken fried steak.”

“Sure it is!” She made a face at me. “What are you trying to pull?”

I stared real hard and the brown, soggy lump on my plate.

“What’s that shit on top?”

“Gravy!” She was getting pissed. People were watching the scene over their coffee cups.

“Brown gravy? No cream gravy?”

“Just eat it, man,” said Cupid, half-finished with his sandwich already.

“Man, this ain’t no chicken fried steak!” It was the principle of the thing, now.

Thelma’s eyes flashed. “Look, just take a bite. It may not be the chicken fried steak you’re used to, but it’s good food.” She crossed her arms.

One of the college kids stood up. “Hey, Elvis,” he called out, real loud, “what’s the problem? Someone step on your blue suede shoes?” His buddies laughed and slapped high fives.

“Son, you’d best tuck your dick back in your pants, or I’m liable to break it off.” I pointed at him with my fork. Thelma chuckled. The kid blushed, and I realized all at once what his angle was. The little bastard had a crush on Thelma and was showing off.

“Fuck you!” he said. “You wanna throw down? Let’s go!”

His two buddies grabbed him, and Cupid grabbed me. He had a good grip for a little guy.

“Okay, okay, everyone settle down, Goddammit!” Thelma held her hands up, which did a lot for her cleavage. “You,” she turned to me, “if you want something else, I’ll bring it, but that’s



what our chicken fried steak is. You asked for it, you got it.”

“Well, I thought this kind of thing was common-fucking-knowledge.”

Cupid patted my shoulder. “Let it go, man, it ain’t worth it.”

“And you,” she turned to the college kid. “Y’all done ate, you paid, now get your shit and get out.”

“Motherfu—”

“Don’t go there, Junior!” Thelma picked up the phone and held it like a gun in front of her. “I’ll call the cops, I mean it.”

“It’s cool,” said one of the guys holding his buddy back.

“We’re going. Come on, man, let’s go.” They struggled out the door and vanished.

“Now,” said Thelma, smug that the crisis had been averted, “who needs topping off?” She picked up a coffee pot and made the rounds.

I ate my shit brown not-a-chicken fried steak and couldn’t help but notice that I didn’t see the three guys leave the parking lot. Cupid noticed it, too. “You ready?” he asked me.

“Yeah, let’s do this,” I stood up, threw her a ten-dollar bill, and said, “Keep it.” We walked back out into the sunlight and made for the car. Cupid flew, bobbing up and down like a cork on the end of a fishing line. No one else gave him a second glance. I wondered what they thought they were seeing.

The bottle just missed my head. I felt it whiz by my ear

and smash into a million pieces on the hood of the Cadillac. Cupid turned, snarling. “Sons a bitches!”

“Hey,” said the angry one, stepping out from a corner of the building, fist cocked.

I turned and caught his punch on my arm. Before he could throw another one, I turned a kick into his stomach that folded him in half like a jackknife. His two friends were right behind him but their heart wasn't in the fight. I saw Cupid pull his bow and aim at one of the kids. We were all moving in slow motion. I kicked the angry kid again, and he went backwards into one of his buddies. Cupid's arrow hit the other one in the side of the head. He looked comical with an arrow hanging out of his head, a funny expression on his face. A kid playing cowboys and Indians. He turned to his friend on the ground and leapt on top of him and started dry humping.

“What the fuck? Get off me, man!” the fuckee screamed.

The fucker just grunted some. The angry kid finally got free of the two of them, rushed me and wrapped me up in a tackle. We hit the ground, and I managed to get a knee between us.

“You gonna try to fuck me, too?” I hissed.

“Goddamn-Elvis-looking-mother-fucker!” He threw some weird punches that mostly missed. I used my knee to push him off me and flip him onto his back. We both rolled over to stand up, but I beat him to it and threw the heel of my boot into the kid's face. He fell to the side, holding his nose, and I stepped in and started kicking on him.

“Company’s coming,” said Cupid loudly.

“Working on it,” I said, firing kick after kick into the kid’s stomach. I kept at it until he puked. There was blood mixed in with his hamburger. I wish I’d ordered that. You can’t fuck up a burger at a truck stop. He started to crawl backwards, away from me and what was left of his lunch. I put one more boot on his ass and pushed him down.

“Man,” he said, as a line of spit and blood dangled from his chin, “It’s cool, man,” he waved me off his hand.

“Keep that mouth shut from now on, you got me, Junior?”

He didn’t say anything.

“Aaron, we really gotta go, man,” said Cupid. I turned.

Truckers came pouring out of the restaurant. I hopped into the back seat as Cupid floored it. We bounced off a curb and went caroming into the street, stopping traffic in both lanes, and laid rubber in a fishtail as we hauled ass back to the Interstate. I turned around to check for pursuit and saw the truckers trying to pull the kid with the arrow in his head off of his friend. Two guys were standing over the kid I kicked the burger out of.

“What the hell was that all about?” asked Cupid as I climbed into the front seat.

“Just takin’ care of business, man.” That was my first and only memory of Palm Springs. I think.

We drove in silence for a while, Cupid fuming, me very calm and relaxed. There’s nothing like handing out an ass whip-

ping to mellow you out. Cupid turned the radio back on and cranked it. It was more of that screaming stuff and I did the best I could trying to figure out the chord changes. Turns out, there weren't more than three of them for any of the songs that came blaring out of the speakers. I got bored pretty quick and tapped out a different tune on my knee.

The sign outside of Indio said, DATE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD!

I nudged Cupid. "Your kinda place, huh?"

Cupid didn't smile. "Ain't that kind of dates, Chief. It's the kind that makes you shit."

"Right." We pulled over anyway at a gas station to piss.

"Think you can keep from killing anyone in here?" asked Cupid.

"Depends on if they start any shit or not," I said, smiling.

"Dibs on the john."

"Oh, you fucker!" Cupid yelled, the tension broken as we raced for the toilet. It was a shitty prize to race for, let me tell you.

We would have been better off peeing outside.

While Cupid did his business, I picked out a six of beer.

The label on the bottle of something called Shiner Bock said it was brewed in Texas. Plus, it had a ram's head on the label. How bad could it be? I bought it and went out to the car to wait.

"What's that?" he asked, swooping back into the driver's seat.

"It's beer. From Texas. Thought you might like it."

“Aaron, thanks for the beer. But the next time you wanna go off like that, let me know, okay?”

After counting to three in my head, I reminded myself that this was his car and I was riding on his good graces. “Sure, okay, you got it.” I smiled at him.

“Cool.” He put the boat in reverse, and we were off again.

I cracked a beer and took a drink. “Good stuff. Dark, but good.”

“Hot damn,” Cupid said. He spun his thumb over the cap and it flew up and out of the car like a little UFO. He threw his head back and drank deep. “Ga-ahk!”

“What’s wrong?”

“You call this dark? It’s making love in a longboat!”

“What?”

“It’s fucking close to water!”

I waved him off. “You’re nuts,” I said cheerfully, “this is good stuff.”

“Next time, I’m picking the beer, King.” Cupid grumbled, but he drank three bottles of it anyway. After the third bottle disappeared over his shoulder to explode on the blacktop, he smacked his lips and said, “You know, it kinda grows on you in a soda pop sorta way.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“Dude, you really shouldn’t say that,” he said.

“Oh, that’s funny.”

We crossed into Arizona near sundown. About ten miles

East of Blythe, we started seeing signs for something called The

Thing:

HAVE YOU SEEN . . . THE THING?

Six miles later:

WHAT IS . . . THE THING?

Twelve miles after that:

TAKE ME TO . . . THE THING!

Every sign had a mile marker. It was somewhere in Arizona. After a dozen of those signs flashed by, Cupid turned to me.

“Shit, man, now I gotta see it, whatever the hell it is.”

“I’m with you.”

“Problem is, we ain’t going to get much farther. I’m for shit after dark when it comes to driving.”

“I’ll drive,” I offered.

“Like hell, man. No, we’ll stop. Phoenix?”

I shrugged. “Good for me.”

Phoenix was real cool after dark, all lit up against the backdrop of the mountains. It reminded me of another city, another place, but I couldn’t figure it out. We found a Howard Johnson, bought more Shiner Bock at a nearby grocery store, along with some pork rinds and Cheeto’s. I bought the groceries. Cupid sprang for the room. We sat on our beds until well after midnight, drinking and eating and flipping channels. Eventually, we found boxing on HBO and drifted off to sleep waiting for someone to throw a punch.

We got up the next morning with the TV still on. I wanted to shoot it. Some damn movie with that really nasal-sounding brunette, pretending to be some hairdresser. Art imitating life. I rolled over. Cupid was asleep, sucking his thumb. “Hey, Cupe.”

“What time is it?” he mumbled around his thumb.

“Eight-twenty, man. You getting up?”

“Go jump up a rope,” he said.

“Fair enough, I’m showering first.” I got up and did my business. Didn’t take long. Army training. I put on the jeans I’d worn the day before and found a clean white T-shirt in my duffel.

Eight-thirty. Cupid was still passed out.

“Breakfast?” I said.

“Son of a bitch,” he said, rolling over to face me. “It’s my road trip, what the fuck?”

“I don’t know, man, I just want to get back out there.”

Cupid sat up. “You dumb-ass,” he said, his voice full of wonder. “You want to see the fuckin’ Thing, don’t you?”

“Aw, man.” He caught me, the little shit.

“All right, all right, Christ. Give me two minutes. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of your roadside experience or something.” He flapped lazily to the bathroom and took a scrap-metal shit that just about stank up the whole room.

After breakfast, we hit the road again. The sun was already high in the air, and you could tell it was damned hot, but we

were cool and dry in the magic Caddy. It still made me want sunglasses, though.

Right away, Cupid started in with his music again. I couldn't handle it; I was in too good a mood. "Man, can we listen to something else?"

A V-shaped crease appeared in Cupid's forehead between his eyes. "What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know, just maybe something not so loud?"

"You like Zeppelin?" he asked.

"Nope."

"The Beatles?"

"Uh uh."

"The Stones?"

"Well . . ."

"Shit, King, tell me what you want?"

"Something American," I said.

"Limp Bizkit is American," he pointed out.

"Look, let me just fiddle with the radio, all right? I'll find us something."

"King, you gotta start paying attention. This is my car. It works for me. I made it out of creationary material. You can't fiddle with this radio."

"Look, just let me try, okay? I'll find something good."

Cupid grinned. He held his hand out in surrender. "Okay, cool, fine. Give it a shot. But don't say I didn't warn you."

I punched in a few buttons and got static. "Hold on," I



said, spinning the knob. The red needle slid up and down the dial.

I knew what I was looking for. Finally, I heard it. I punched in the station so I'd remember it.

Cupid stared, his baby chin quivering. "How the hell did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just . . . tuned it in."

He was now looking at his radio like it had betrayed him.

"And what the hell is this?"

"Hank Williams, Sr." I turned the volume up. "Give it a chance."

Cupid went back to driving, stunned at the musical mutiny that had taken place in his vehicle. Hank's plaintive wailing fit the barren scenery. I kept expecting to see a cartoon coyote come tearing across the road. There wasn't a damn thing to look at except the man-shaped cactus and rocks and in the distance, craggy mountains. After the second wailing chorus of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," Cupid nodded his head. "Okay, this is pretty cool."

"Really? You've never listened to Hank before?" I asked.

"Nope. Too close to the job description for my recreational needs. But this is pretty good. He really sounds like he's dying."

"Yep."

We let Hank tell us about hearts for a while. When we got to "Take These Chains from my Heart," Cupid sat bolt upright.

"Oh, I remember this guy!"

“Figured you would sooner or later.” We sped by a billboard that said IT’S AMAZING! THE THING!

“Yeah, I shot him, once.”

“No shit! You shot Hank Williams?”

“Yeah,” Cupid said with a touch of pride. “Longing for Love arrow. A classic.”

“Wow. When was this?”

“Shit, I don’t remember. But it was him, all right. He said he could see me, but I think he was projecting.”

“What?”

“Norman does it.”

“Who’s Norman?” I said, feeling stupid again.

“The mundanes. The normals. The straights. Regular people.” Cupid shook his head. “You’re a babe in the woods, pal.”

“Fuck you. What’s projecting?”

“Okay, when you look at me, what do you see?” Cupid turned to face me again, not looking at the road. I hated that trick.

“Three-foot tall baby with wings. No offense.”

“None taken. Okay, back at the truck stop yesterday, take Thelma. She’s been working that job say, ten years. Lives in town with a boyfriend who’s probably a truck driver, too. She’s got a hard, boring life, man. You think she can handle seeing a three-foot baby with wings come flying in her door?”

I shrugged.

“Hell no! She’d lock up. Go crazy. So, her mind sees it, but it wants to protect her, so it substitutes in something else.”

“Like what? Just a guy?”

Cupid nodded. “Truck driver, hobo, who knows. Personally, I think whoever’s looking at me replaces me with a person or thing that personifies how they feel about love. But I don’t know. The human brain is a fucked up thing.”

I was fascinated. “Then how come I can see you?”

Cupid said, “Some people are just built for it. I don’t know what to tell you. But they lock a lot of people up in this country who can confirm the existence of the supernatural. Next time you see a loony talking to himself in the bus station, squint real hard and look again. Chances are, he’s not alone.” He nodded at me.

“So, does everyone see you as Elvis?”

I sat back and thought about it. “I don’t know, really. I never gave it too much thought. But enough of them do. I know that.”

“Well, King,” said Cupid, a smirk on his face, “now that you know about me, I figure you owe me an explanation. Story for story, that was the deal,” he waggled a tiny finger at me.

What the hell. “Okay, so, let’s start from the top. First off, I ain’t Elvis. I don’t really know who I am, but I ain’t him.” Just saying that made me feel a whole lot better. “So, this is what I know for sure.”

“Uh, Aaron,” Cupid began. I waved him quiet.

“Hush up, now, you wanted to hear it, and I guess I want to tell it. So let me get all this out and then you can talk, okay?”

He nodded.

This is exactly what I told him.

My name is Aaron King, don't ask me how I know it. I just do. That part is easy. What I can't figure out is what happened to me when I was a child. I remember growing up in the South, I think, because I remember horses. And living in a big house. But I was poor, so maybe it wasn't my house after all.

Anyway, my childhood is real fuzzy. What I remember real clearly is the military. I drove a lot of heavy machinery, trucks and tanks, that kind of thing. Then one day, they gave me a test and found out that I had an aptitude for, well, violence, I guess. So they trained me in the martial arts and special assassination techniques. They made me a spy. I think a lot of that training involved wiping out a lot of my memory, in case I was captured and tortured.

I can still remember a lot of the missions I went on. I went to the South Pacific a couple of times, posed as a photographer, a race car driver, demolitions expert, even impersonated a rich man's son. A couple of times, I served as a liaison to the military in negotiating land purchases. Most of the spook work was deep cover, and I just sort of walked through the assignments, killed who I needed to kill, and did what they asked me to do. Lots of women in the espionage world, let me tell you. A lot of them just as deadly as a man. I had some tough scrapes.

That went on pretty good for a while. I'd go off on an assignment for a couple-three months, then they'd send me home

for a few months. Back and forth like that for years. Eventually, they let me assemble my own team of experts to help me out. I had a karate man, a driver, a spiritual advisor, a scrounger, and a bunch of other guys. Oh man, it was slick. Hand picked and ready for action at a moment's notice.

Well, the espionage game is pretty risky. The business changed, you know? Got so the ops were becoming less gray and more black. I lost my taste for it. It got so bad, I was intentionally tanking missions, hoping they would leave me out of the next one. But they just kept pushing more assignments on me.

Finally, the last straw: I was posing as a doctor, with orders to get close to this nun and whack her. Problem was, we had developed a . . . relationship, let's say. I couldn't do it so I walked. Besides, who wants to kill a nun and have that hanging over them for the rest of their lives?

By this time, I had a pretty good team assembled and we decided to strike out on our own, do our own things. I formed alliances with police departments and sheriff's departments all over the country to act as an intermediary force for law and order. There were missions and far more consulting jobs. It was nice, for a while. Everything just kind of moseyed along.

I should have known better. Two of my men, my trusted companions, sold me out. They told all of my enemies my secrets: how to get into my headquarters, how to access my spy technology, even the secrets of my kung fu. It destroyed my orga-

nization and me. So, I faked my own death. It stopped a lot of people from looking for me, but not all of them. Turns out, the guys sold me out to the same government organization I walked out on years ago. I couldn't believe it. Communists, sure, but my own country? I went on the run, and I've been running ever since, always one step ahead of them. I drifted down into Mexico for a while, then I came back up to the states and played around in Canada for a bit. Now I'm heading out to Texas.

I can't stay in one place for too long. My face always causes problems for me. Everyone thinks I'm Elvis, I have to tell them I'm not, blah blah blah. They always ask me to sing something, which is a joke, because I can't carry a tune in a bucket. Never could. Voice gets all cracked, and I get embarrassed. So, I keep my head down and try not to draw attention to myself. Along the way, hopefully, I'll remember more about who I am and what I'm doing here.

And that's the end of that.

Cupid drove without speaking for a long time. He kept trying to say something; he'd open and close his mouth. Nothing came out. Finally, he pulled over to the side of the road. "Aaron, that's the biggest bunch of shit I ever heard in my life!"

"What?"

"Super spies? Government conspiracies? Are you fucking nuts?"

"Hey, man, I didn't laugh at you or call bullshit on your story!"

“Because it’s true! I’ve got the wings, I’ve got the bow and arrows. I’m Cupid, you asshole! I ask you where you’re from, and you give me this, this fantasy trip about being James Bond, it’s just a bunch of . . .” he trailed off. I was glaring at him and he noticed it. There was a spot behind the ear where it’s pretty easy to get inside a man’s skull with your finger, if you hit it hard and fast enough. I was concentrating on that spot on his head, listening to my even, measured breaths. Cupid put the car in drive again. “Look, I’m sorry, man, I didn’t mean to yell. But it’s a skosh hard to just swallow that, know what I’m saying? I mean, how many other people have you told this story to?”

“You’re the first,” I said. I went back to watching the road, counting cacti.

“Well, think about how it sounds, man. If you told me you were Elvis’ illegitimate son, I could have swallowed that easier. Secret agents? Think it through, King.”

“Well, it’s all I know, I didn’t make none of that up,” I told him. Well, most of it, anyway. “Aw, just skip it, all right?”

“No, no, I think we can make this work. You’ve just got to conveniently forget a few facts, blur the edges a bit. It’ll make a good Christmas story . . .”

“I said drop it, goddammit.” This had ceased to be funny. Cupid looked at me, his eyes wide. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Cupe, I ain’t gon’ tell you again.”

He blanched and puffed out his cheeks and exhaled, long and loud. “Okay, King. Whatever you say.”

And that was all we said until The Thing.

I don’t know what I expected, but I should have fucking known better. Just outside of a little pecker track of a town called, appropriately enough, Johnson, Arizona, we saw the sign that said ONLY ONE MILE UNTIL . . . THE THING! We pulled into this huge roadside tourist trap-looking kind of place. They painted THE THING on the side of a building that was more like a grain barn than any receptacle for some cosmic gewgaw. It was also right next to a Dairy Queen. My stomach growled, but it would have to wait. I wanted to see what this fucking thing was before I did anything else.

We walked into the long, wide building, and all I could see in either direction was chest-high beige metal shelves, stuffed to overflowing with the worst kind of tourist souvenir crap I’d ever seen in my life. Shot glasses, plastic backscratchers with the word ARIZONA stenciled on it, sleeveless t-shirts, Mexican jumping beans, plastic tumblers, magnets in the shape of Arizona and New Mexico, snow globes, sombreros, and much more. God help me, there was some pathetic-looking shit in that place. Cupid went straight up to the front counter.

“We want to see the Thing!” he crowed.

“Fifty cents. Go through that door.” Her voice was dull and lifeless, beat to death by her job.

Cupid glanced at me and then paid for both of us. “Through



that door," she pointed. Built up along the back wall, close to the ice machine, was a faux cave entrance. Inset into this bizarre alcove was a swinging door. We pulled it open and went through it.

We were back outside. A cement sidewalk ran up to another metal building, and we could see two more beyond that, curving to the left to form a courtyard in the center. Off to the right was someone's trailer home. We walked into the first building and it was full of old cars, some of which were in pretty good shape. Along side the cars were garden tools from the 1700's and little cards explaining what was used for what or how old it was.

I walked quickly through it, and Cupid flapped to keep up.

The next building had a bunch of cowboys carved out of wooden stumps. They were painted pretty well, but they looked like puppets. The management seemed pretty proud of them. Every little window box had the sculptor's name underneath the exhibit. Maybe it was the owner's son or something. Opposite the wooden statues were a bunch of mannequins dressed in old-time clothing and being beaten and branded. It wasn't scary or disturbing, just a little sad. The clothes weren't even old. Cupid flew on ahead of me to see what was in the third building.

It was The Thing. There was a huge glass case, like a sarcophagus, that we could look down into up against the back wall. Cupid was hovering over it when I walked up. I read the legend, tacked over the wall, something about The Thing being found in

the desert and brought here and no one knows what it is or how old it is. Then I looked down into the case.

It was a mummy, or at least, it was supposed to be a mummy. The skull was half-visible under leathery-looking skin.

The Thing was dressed in the style of a prospector or some other frontier-type. Bony hands crossed over its collapsed chest. Mouth open and slack.

“What a gyp,” I said.

“Look, check it, you can see the wood grain on the tooth.

It’s a fucking carving, man. Probably the same motherfucker who slapped paint on all of those logs back there.”

“You know, I mean, I’m glad we stopped, but man, I was hoping it would be, I dunno, like a mutated lizard or something. You know? Six-legged goat? Something cool?”

Cupid laughed and I joined him. “Ah, screw this,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Let’s go get some food.”

We walked back into the gift shop and I riffled through their T-shirts. Cupid grabbed a couple of Mexican blankets. As I passed him walking up to the front counter, I said, “Why are you picking red and pink?”

His face was morose. “Doesn’t matter what color I pick, it’ll turn red and pink anyway.”

“Right.” I strolled up to the front counter. A big rack of sunglasses leapt out at me, and I picked a pair, the sturdy plastic black horn-rimmed kind. The woman behind the counter was in her mid-forties. She could have been Thelma’s older, uglier sis-

ter. I put on a smile for her. “‘Scuse me, Lady. You got any T-shirts that say ‘I Saw The Thing’ on them?”

The lady looked at me like I’d just popped out of a lamp.

“No, we don’t, but you know, that’s a good idea!” She picked up a scratch pad and pencil by the register. Cupid had joined me at the counter and we both stared at her, goggle-eyed, while she carefully wrote in big, cursive loops, the tip of her tongue sticking out through painted lips.

Cupid broke our incredulous silence. “Let me get this straight: you’ve got billboards up and down this fucking highway every hundred yards or so, like a Burma-Shave wet dream, and you don’t have T-shirts that say The Thing on them?”

“No,” she said, ringing up the two blankets, “sorry, mister. That gonna do it?” She slipped them into a plastic bag that had MYSTERY OF THE DESERT! THE THING! printed on it. I just shook my head.

“Yeah, we’re oh so done here,” said Cupid, handing her a twenty. She made change for him and we walked, beaten in spirit, to Dairy Queen next door. On the way over, Cupid said, “Sorry again, man.”

“Oh, hell, Cupe, it ain’t your fault people are stupid.”

“No, about before.”

“Oh. Ah, forget it.” We opened the door to the Dairy Queen, buddies again. I ordered a cheeseburger basket and a vanilla Coke.

“Um, what’s a vanilla Coke?” the pudgy girl behind the counter said, scratching her scalp with the eraser end of her pencil.

I turned to Cupid. “Man, I’m destined for disappointment on this trip, it seems.”

“It ain’t your day,” he agreed.

“Okay, Missy, do you sell Coke?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good. You got any vanilla extract back there?”

“Wait, let me check—yeah, okay.”

“All right, then,” I slapped the counter with both hands.

“Here’s what I want you to do: take that extract and splash it in the bottom of the cup, just a dollop or so. Then fill it up with Coke. That’s a vanilla Coke.”

She scrunched up her bulbous nose. “I gotta charge you extra.”

I balled up my fists, but Cupid laid a hand on my shoulder. “Relax. Grab us a booth. I’ll take care of this.”

“You gonna shoot her?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said. The girl’s eyes widened.

I nodded. “Okay, cool.” The Dairy Queen was half full, but the corner booth was unoccupied. I slid in with my back to the wall and waited for Cupid. He came over a minute later with a red plastic A-frame bearing the number 15. It reminded me of Anne-Margaret for some reason. I shook it off.

“King, man, you gotta take a pill. Normally, I’m the hot-

headed one.”

“Well, come on, Cupe, how hard is it to make a vanilla Coke? Or have a T-shirt with The Thing on it? Fuck!”

“Hey,” he said, suddenly worried, “you aren’t gonna go off in here, are you?”

I checked out the place. People sat in clumps around the restaurant. Families, all. Lots of kids. With effort, I breathed in through the nose, out through the mouth. Over and over, each breath more calming than the last. “No, man, I’m cool.” I finally said.

“Good!” Cupid said.

The manager came out with our food. He was tall, with a potbelly and a comb-over; in short, the poster child for Dairy Queen’s management program. “Sir, I understand you had a special request we could not meet, is that correct?”

“I didn’t mean to cause a ruckus,” I told him.

“No, no,” he said, holding up his hand, “it’s not your fault.”

He set the tray down. In addition to our food, there were two chocolate sundaes and two dollars and forty-three cents. “This ice cream and your drinks are on the house. Sorry again for the inconvenience.” He smiled at us and moved off.

“See?” said Cupid, smiling broadly. “Squeaky wheel gets the grease,” he said, stuffing a steak finger into his mouth.

“Uh huh. What did you do?” I bit into the cheeseburger I should’ve had yesterday. It was great.

Cupid looked down at his chest in mock modesty. “Ah, you know. Little of this, little of that.”

“Come on, spill.”

“Man, I’m so fucking good, I don’t even need the arrows!”

he said. I rolled my eyes.

Cupid slopped a handful of fries into his gravy and stuffed them into his mouth. “After a while,” he said, chewing with determination, “you can spot ‘em a mile away. I can size up the dull ones like that.” He snapped his tiny fingers. “That comment about charging extra? That’s management talking, pal. You think anyone else in the world making seven-fifty an hour is going to kick about a splash of vanilla? No fucking way. She’s up that guy’s ass. Trouble is, she’s a chubbo, so she’s pretty shy. So, I just leaned in real quick while I was paying and say to her in the God of Love voice—”

“Wait, the ‘God of Love voice’?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said, don’t interrupt. I said to her,

‘You know, he loves you, too.’ She looks at me with her big cow eyes all watery and shining and runs off. Now,” he leaned back against the plastic bench, “I don’t know for sure what happened, but my guess is that he had some kind of thing for her, although God only knows why. Look,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “No one’s at the front counter. They’re probably in the back office right now, smooching like goldfish.”

He sat back, all satisfied with his detective skills. I finished dunking my fries in ketchup and loaded them into my mouth.

“That’s a good story,” I said. “So, tell me about this God of Love

voice.”

“Aw, fuck you, man.” He threw a fry at me, and I laughed.

We hit the road with full stomachs, talking back and forth to each other about nothing in particular. One mile outside of Johnson, a huge billboard exclaimed GO BACK! YOU JUST MISSED . . . THE THING! “Fuck that, man,” I said.

Cupid flipped the sign off. We slapped a high five and hauled ass for New Mexico.

My new sunglasses worked like a charm. The sun was so bright anyway; looking through the lenses was like watching a day-for-night scene in a movie. Was it Flaming Star? Probably. Looked stupid. Always did.

That thought made me profoundly uncomfortable. I tried the radio again and got an old rhythm and blues station. We listened to Big Mama Thornton belt out “Hound Dog” with interest. Cupid, now over the fact that I could work the radio, listened, rapt. “Shit, man, she sounds pissed!”

“She is, man, that’s the point of the song,” I said. “Lieber and Stoller wrote the song for her, but they couldn’t say son-of-a-bitch back then, even on the black stations, so ‘hound dog’ was as close as they could get. But she sings it like ‘son of a bitch’, don’t she?”

Cupid was staring at me again in that way the made my head hurt. “What? What now, man?”

“You know a lot about this stuff, is all,” he said. “I guess that comes from growing up in the South, huh?”

I met his stare for a second, and then broke it. “Yeah, and that really made it hard, too, because I couldn’t sing. I tried, I really did, but I could never get it to sound right. Or even good. Man, that was frustrating. I never felt like I had a way of getting out what I was feeling inside. So, basically, I started beating the shit out of stuff.”

Cupid nodded, his eyes sympathetic. I didn’t like him feeling sorry for me. He had enough shit of his own to feel sorry for. I didn’t need it. I turned the radio station until I couldn’t hear the blues anymore.

“Do you mind?” asked Cupid. His hand hovered over the dial.

“No, go ahead,” grateful at last for some noise that didn’t make me feel funny. We crossed the New Mexico border listening to somebody named Rob Zombie. Creepy motherfucker, man. We stayed in New Mexico longer than we had intended.

The landscape was a lot like Arizona, just different-shaped cacti. The ground in New Mexico was more earthy, brown and rocky. Otherwise, it was the same desert. It was certainly the same sun. It lulled me, and I dozed lightly.

About ten miles out of Las Cruces, Cupid threw the car into a sideways skid, and screamed, “Sweet living fuck!”

When I could peel myself out of the passenger side door, I saw that we were sitting sideways, a ninety-degree turn from the direction we were traveling. “Hey, asshole! If you want to wake



me up, punch me in the fucking arm!”

“Huh? Oh, right, sorry man. But sweet living fuck!”

“So you’ve said,” I said. My heart was still on the road back there. I took a deep breath and waited for it to catch up.

“What did you do that for?”

Cupid pointed. We were facing an unmarked dirt road.

Tacked to a telephone pole that resembled a beaver’s teething stick was a wooden sign: SNAKE FARM. Underneath those words was what looked like an Indian pictogram of an eye with a funny little loop curving off the bottom of the eyelid. “It’s Horace, man!”

“Who the hell is Horace?” I asked, but Cupid was already moving the Caddy through the narrow posts and onto the dirt road.

I was about to find out.

We drove for a good two miles down this straight dirt road, smelling the desert all around us. At one point I checked behind us and couldn’t even see the Interstate. We were off the map. Up ahead, I could see a small house, one of those flat adobe things, painted bright pink and green in a diamond pattern. A dead neon sign (Snake Farm in pale red, the “S” a stylized snake) stood up on a rusted metal pole. In front of the house, off to the right a bit, was a four foot tall cement drainage pipe sticking up out of the ground, one of those huge ones that they build sewers with. Behind the pipe and beside the house was a fifties-style trailer with an awning hanging over the door. A TV antenna and a small satellite dish were side by side on top of the trailer, next to what appeared to be a solar panel. A guy sat under the awning on a

lawn chair, but I couldn't see him too clearly. The Caddy skidded to a stop.

"Horace? That you?" Cupid shot out of the car, flying quickly over towards the pipe. I hopped out and followed him.

"Eros?" The man came up out of the chair. I could see now he was an older man, deeply tanned by the sun, or possibly Mexican. In spite of his apparent constant exposure to the sun, the skin on his face was full and supple. On his shirt was a stylized bird of some sort. His face broke into a big wrinkly grin.

"Hey, young 'un, how you doin'?"

Cupid flew up and patted him on the shoulder and he returned the gesture. "Man, it's good to see you!"

"What'chu doin' out here in th' desert, Pard?" Horace asked.

"Road trip. Hey, Aaron, come here!" I caught up with them.

"This is my pal, Aaron King." He put a funny little emphasis on my name. "Aaron, this is Horace."

"Howdy," I said.

He shook my hand. "Glad to know ya,"

His accent sounded familiar. The name Horace Logan popped into my head. Louisiana Hayride director. "Let me ask you something, Horace. Where you from?"

"Originally?" He smiled. "Memphis. I'm an old-timer."

I nodded. "Thought so." Probably just a coincidence, I thought. They fell to talking and I glanced at the pipe and did a

double take. The pipe was actually a pit, full of hundreds of snakes.

Mostly rattlers, but I saw other ones in there that I couldn't place.

Solid-colored snakes with funny-looking heads. I watched them crawl and writhe and rattle for a while until I felt something near my leg. I jumped away from it, thinking a snake had gotten loose, but it was just a dog. He didn't freak out at my sudden move like some dogs do; he just stood there, looking at me.

"Hey, Pooch," I said, and gave him my hand to sniff. He was colored like a German shepherd, a big patch of black on his back like a blanket, but he looked like a cross between a wolf and a fox. Long, tall ears on a short, compact head. Triangular snout.

Junkyard dog skinny. Long legs. "Mister," I said to Horace, "this here is about the weirdest-looking dog I ever saw in my life."

Horace glanced over and grimaced. "Hell, son, 'at ain't no dawg. 'At's a jackal." He clapped his hands. "Set!"

The jackal turned away from me and bared his fangs. Then he nuzzled up under my hand and let me scratch behind his ears.

"He don't mind too good," I said.

"Oh, he minds well enough. Set!" Horace yelled again.

"What's his name?" I squatted down and got a lick on the chops for my trouble.

"Set's his name, and I was you, Son, I wouldn't get too comfy with that one."

I ignored the old man and rubbed the jackal's bristled fur on his neck. "Now, why would they go and name you something like that, hmm? What do they say when they want you to sit down?"

“The dog cocked his head at me and barked sharply in my face. I stood up fast. “Shit!”

Horace came over. “Hey, Set! Hey! Git outta here! I’ll take that leg back from you so fast . . .”

Set took off, but not before giving me a final indecipherable look. I rejoined Cupid and Horace. Cupid was filling Horace in on his Post-It note mission. “You took his leg away?”

“His balls too, long time ago,” he said absently. “I never should’a give ‘em back, neither.”

“Speaking of folks, you see your dad much?” asked Cupid.

“Oh, Sirius? Nah. We talk on the phone. E-mail. But we hardly ever get together.”

Cupid was surprised. “Did they leave Phoenix?”

“Ten years ago or so. Went to Oregon.”

“Damn, Horace, what are you still doing here? You’re in the middle of nowhere, here.”

“Well, I kinda gotta be, now don’ I? I leave, who’ll take care of Set?”

“Just take his leg with you,” I suggested.

“Ignore him, he’s new,” said Cupid. “Can’t you go someplace not so fuckin’ hot?”

“I like the heat. It’s a dry heat.” He kicked a rock on the ground. “Well, y’all wanna see th’ snakes? On the house? I got air conditionin’ inside.”

I shrugged. Cupid shrugged. “Sure,” we said.

“Come on, then,” he turned and walked toward the adobe house. Around the side, I spotted Set, watching us.

Horace had a shitload of snakes. Not just rattlers, either.

There was stuff from Africa, Australia, India and Egypt. Lots of cobras. Each snake had a handwritten card that talked about what the snake represented in the country or region it was from. All of them were poisonous. The glass was thick on every cage and reinforced with steel strips. Every lid had a padlock. “Man, you are theft-proof, here.”

“Gotta be. Just one of those snakes gets out, I’m dead.”

I smiled. “Do they carry a grudge?”

“No. Set do, though.”

I stopped talking to Horace after that.

In the back room there was a little gift shop. Cupid bought us both T-shirts that said “Snake Farm” on them, with a picture of a rattlesnake coiled on front. I picked up a rattlesnake skin wallet and went up to the rickety counter to pay for it.

Horace took the wallet from my hand and made a funny hand signal over it, then handed it back to me. “This’ un’s on the house. A gift, from me to you, on your new journey.”

“Well, uh, thank you,” I said. “Thank you very much.”

Horace grinned at me, like I was putting him on. Funny, I was thinking the same thing about him.

Finally, we were standing out on the porch, ready to leave.

Horace thanked us and wished Cupid good luck on finding his mom.

“Tell everyone I like that I said Hi,” Cupid said.

“Will do,” Horace grinned. He shook my hand again. “Nice to have met you. You’ll do okay, I think.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Hell, even Set likes you. Hang in ‘ere. Don’ let this young’un git you into too much trouble.” He waved once and walked back into the building.

“What a nutty old duck,” I said.

Cupid put on his sunglasses. “Egyptians, man. Kooky as fuck. But I love ‘em. Come on, let’s boogie.”

We hit El Paso at dusk and both of us breathed a sigh of relief. We were tired from the sun. Texas. Nothing else comes close to it. Never has, never will. Cupid exited pretty early on and we drove through town, looking for a place to hole up for the night. El Paso has more hotels with local flavor and colors than any place I’ve ever seen. Cupid passed judgment as he drove, pointing and nodding, “Shit hole . . . rat trap . . . shit hole . . . shit hole . . . rat trap . . . brothel . . .”

After ten blocks of this, I said, “Why don’t we just go back to the Motel 6?”

“There’s no bar at the motel 6.”

“Man, if you want booze, I’ve got a hunch we can find a liquor store quicker than this.”

Cupid held a hand up. “Trust me, okay?”

“Fine. Whatever.” I was in no mood to fight with him.

Cupid made a U-turn, upraised finger hanging out of the car as three pickup trucks screeched to a halt in front of him and a stream of Spanish was launched in our direction. We went all the way back to the Interstate and crossed under it, heading towards Mexico.

“We going native?” I asked.

“Close. Hang on.” The El Dorado leapt forward, made a zigzag turn, and came to rest in front of a long, two-story no-tell Motel called La Hacienda El Paso. Painted pink, of course.

I pointed at it, an imitation of Cupid. “Shit hole . . . rat trap.”

“Didn’t I tell you to trust me?” Cupid flitted up out of the car, arms out wide. “We made it! Texas, baby! Tonight, we celebrate!”

I climbed out of the car less enthusiastically. I could see the overpass arcing behind us, a steel and asphalt rainbow bridge.

“Okay, pal, this is your trip. But if this place sucks, I’m sleeping in the car.”

“Trust—Me,” said Cupid, with emphasis. We went into the lobby.

A stuffed rabbit with antlers affixed to its head greeted us when we walked in. The small office was paneled like the sides of a station wagon. The rabbit rested in the corner on a battered coffee table, with worn, frayed chairs flanking either side. Over the rabbit was a faded sign: NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SERVICE. To the left was the counter. A little hand bell and four pens

were the only things in sight. Hanging over the counter was another sign, this one hand written: ALARMA DEL ANILLO PARA EL SERVICIO. Cupid slapped the bell and a thin, reedy-looking Mexican man appeared from around a corner. “Hola!” he said.

“Need a room for the night, Paco,” said Cupid.

“Si, si, uno momento.” He ducked down and came up with a clipboard. “Una cama o dos?”

“Two beds,” said Cupid, “what the hell do we look like?”

The man made apologetic gestures and handed the clipboard to Cupid. “Complete esto, por favor. Usted tiene una tarjeta de crédito?”

Cupid wrote quickly. “No, I don’t have a fucking credit card. When did you people get civilized? I’ve got cash. You take cash?”

The man nodded. Cupid slapped down two twenties. The man coughed. Cupid added a ten. The bills vanished, replaced by a room key and two peppermints.

“Enjoy your stay,” the man said, in English. Cupid glared at him as he disappeared around the corner.

The room was serviceable, but just barely. The air conditioner was a wheezy, rattling thing that sounded like a hay baler trying to consume a Sherman tank, but it blew freezing cold air into our small, dark cave of a room, so I didn’t mind. The carpet was ratty, and the beds both had permanent dents in them. The whole room smelled enough like urine to bother me, but not so



much like urine that it was intolerable. I sucked on my peppermint, understanding now why he gave them to us. He should've had a jar in each room.

"Okay," said Cupid, "I admit, this place is not so good.

But around the corner from here, is a real live, honest-to-goodness cantina, with the best Mexican food on the planet! We can eat, sit up there, drink beers all night, and then it's just staggering distance back to the room!"

"Okay, that's a good deal, then," I smiled on one side of my mouth. "Let me change shirts, then we'll go. I'm starvin' like Marvin."

"That's what I'm talking about!" Cupid did a loop-de-loop while I put on one of the two pullover shirts with a collar I owned.

"Well, kiss my dirty pink ass." Cupid actually touched the ground, his hands on his hips, like an indignant midget.

"This don't look very authentic," I said.

The building was peach colored and shaped like a pueblo.

They even had square windows with rounded corners and logs sticking out of the top. A big neon sign over the place spelled out in cursive letters JARDINE'S CANTINA. Can and Tina blinked on and off intermittently. On either side of the front door, someone had recently built two large wooden decks and decorated them with multicolored lights, hubcaps, and beer signs. Two of those fancy outdoor sprinklers sprayed a fine mist over each deck, cooling the immediate vicinity. Perpendicular to the road was one of those signs with the you-set-them-up lettering and a red arrow

across the top portion of the sign. It read: UNDER NEW MAN-  
AGEMENT. Under that, the second line read: HAPPY HOUR,  
M – F 4 –7.

“Goddamn it,” said Cupid.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“8:30.”

“What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

“Shit.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’!”

“Well, hell,” I sighed, “let’s at least get some food. We  
just won’t hang out.”

“Yeah, okay.” Cupid’s heart wasn’t in it, however. He  
didn’t even fly in, he just waddle-walked next to me.

We seated ourselves. Aside from an old wooden bar that  
ran the length of the place, it was pretty much the same style on  
the inside as it was on the outside. “See, that bar is original. That  
was here before, but I don’t know about any of the rest of this  
shit.” Cupid swiveled his neck this way and that, snarling at the  
décor.

I ordered the grande enchilada plate and Cupid got a full  
order of fajitas. And beer. I was happy with Corona, but Cupid  
had to get something dark. Negra Modelo. I tried it and it was  
okay. Corona with lime was better.

We were both on our second beer by the time the food

came. Cupid took one bite and moaned. “Thank heaven the food hasn’t changed!”

He was right about that. The enchiladas were incredible. I don’t know if it was the best Tex-Mex I ever ate, but it was in the top three, sure as shit. We cleaned our plates and kept on eating chips and drinking beer. The place was starting to liven up. A couple of the waiters moved some tables off to the side. We followed their lead and parked at the bar.

The crowd now was about 5 to 1, Mexican to Gringo. Lots of common-looking folks, truck drivers, deliverymen, and so forth, were showing up, dressed in their pressed jeans and cowboy hats. Cupid snickered every time one or more of them walked through the door. I can only imagine what they saw when they looked at us. I should’ve known better.

It wasn’t too long before we had no room on either side of us at the bar. The jukebox was blaring, but it was all Spanish music, Latin dance, and Mariachi music. Couples were dancing, folks were drinking, and Cupid and I fell to playing a little game.

I’d point to a pretty girl and say, “Does she fuck?”

Cupid would hold up a thumb and forefinger like an artist measuring distance, squint through one eye, and give her the once-over. “Oh yeah,” he’d say, “like a wildcat.”

“How about her?”

“Eh . . . yeah, but she fakes her orgasms.”

“That one?”

“Holy shit. She’s a virgin.”

“Get outta here,” I said, craning for a better look. “Really?”

“Oh, wait, my mistake. She goes down.”

“So it’s only a matter of time,” I said.

We spent an hour doing that, getting drunker and drunker, not noticing that we had quite a few people looking at us. Well, looking at me, anyway. Finally, one of them made their move, and I was so hammered I almost didn’t catch it.

She came walking up to the bar, rolling her hips to and fro. She was short and curvy, maybe a little too much so. Her hair was long and curly down the back, Selena-style. Her wide and generous mouth was smiling as she wedged between me and Cupid.

“Two margaritas!” she shouted over the music. While she waited for her drinks, she propped her heart-shaped face up on the bar. “I think you’re the best-looking man in this place,” she said breathlessly.

“Well, thank you very much,” I slurred.

She almost squealed. “Ohmygod, that’s amazing, you even sound like him!”

Straight-faced, I said, “Sound like who?”

“Hey, don’t bullshit me,” she said, her drinks in her hand.

“My friend and I are sitting over there. You want to join us?”

I could see Cupid nodding his head so hard it was in danger of falling off. I looked her straight in the eyes and said, “Tell

you what, darlin', if it gets to be closing time, and you're still here and I'm still here, then we'll see about makin' some bacon, how's that?"

She blinked for a second, as if she didn't hear what I said, then turned her nose up. "Never mind, Ese, forget I asked." As she walked back to her table, I saw her shaking her head at her friend.

Cupid was aghast. "What the hell was that? That wasn't even funny, man, that was just shitty."

I ordered another beer. "Cupe, if I'm going to get laid tonight, I'll pick the girl. She won't pick me."

"Fuck, man, that's some balls," he said. "Lots of guys take what they can get and are thankful for it."

"Man, you're the God of Love, you oughtta know that it's no fun if they just throw themselves at you? I want to work for my chicken."

"Well, do me a favor, then, King, the next Latin hottie that throws herself at you, would you do your old pal Cupid a favor and toss her to me? I can't afford to be particular."

"You're an idiot," I said, poking him in the chest lightly.

"You've got arrows in that quiver that could put you in the middle of a Cupid sandwich every night if you wanted to."

Cupid shook his head. "Been there, done that. Zero appeal for me, now."

"Oh, sure, I guess it would be kinda like cheating," I said, nodding.

“Well, yeah, I mean, not cheating. Anyone shot with an arrow experiences genuine emotion. It seeks out some bit of your real feelings, conscious or unconscious, and rearranges things so that it brings those newfound feelings to the front.”

“Huh. Cool.” I thought about the frat guy dry humping his buddy from yesterday and snickered.

“Yeah, pretty cool. The thing is, would you rather work very hard to draw by hand a dollar bill so exact that it is indistinguishable from a real dollar, or would you rather find five dollars just lying in the street?”

I scratched my head. “I don’t get it,” I said.

Cupid ordered another beer. “Okay, wait, that one didn’t work. I would rather just have someone be attracted enough in me so that I didn’t have to go through the trouble of shooting an arrow into them. I think I’d like to be surprised that someone thinks I’m interesting enough to talk to.”

“That’s beautiful, man,” I said.

“Oh, fuck you, I’m being serious!”

I laughed. “I know, what’s your deal, man? I still don’t see what your hang-up is. Pick a chick out, plug her with an arrow. I’ll grab a girl, and we’ll go back to the room and nail them to the bed.”

“Ah, you don’t get it. Why should you?” He gestured at the mirror behind the bar. I stared at both of us. “You got it easy, pal.”

I pushed my empty bottle away and gestured for a new one. "Yeah, easy." I turned around, leaning back against the bar, and checked everything out again.

The curvy girl I gave the brush-off to and her friend were both glaring at me. I smiled and tipped my beer at them. In addition to a bunch of dancing and bobbing hats, there was a pool table in the corner. A few local wallflowers lined up on the walls, watching the game in progress.

Then I saw her.

She was leaning absently on the payphone, cue stick in one hand, rolling it back and forth across her palm. She had curves, but they were sleek curves, subtle arches rather than generous rolls. Her hair was long and full and straight and made me think of the night sky. Her eyes smoldered under a high, strong forehead, over regal, Aztec cheekbones. Fair skin, but still dark enough to make her eyes flash. She wore a white blouse, knotted at the stomach, and baggy jeans that covered up red cowboy boots. The most feminine thing I'd seen in years. No one was even giving her the time of day. It didn't make sense.

"I think I just got punched. I'll be back," I said to Cupid.

"Huh?" he asked, but I was already walking.

She saw me coming and smiled a small smile of recognition, then it was gone again. I made like I was going to make a phone call, and she moved aside. "Sorry," she said.

"Don't be, you were here first," I said, the phone to my ear. I was looking right at her, and as close as she was to me, it

was real hard to concentrate on speaking. I smiled at her.

“Yeah, come to think of it,” she said, “you should hurry up and make your call so I can go back to leaning on this phone.”

A smile punctuated the end of that sentence. She had a voice that was low and breathy, but strong. I was dancing in her eyes.

“Well, silly me, I don’t seem to have a dime for the pay phone.”

She smiled again, but her eyes were frowning. “A dime?

Where are you from?”

I glanced at the coin slot. 35 cents. I knew that. Why did I say a dime? “Well, I don’t want to call very far.”

“How far away are you calling?” she said.

“About two feet away, I’d say.”

She smiled again. “That was very nice,” she said. “There is no way you can be from around here—” she stopped as a shadow crossed her face and she dropped her eyes. I felt a large hand on my shoulder just before it spun me around.

I was looking into the chest of a huge Mexican, maybe six-one. He had on a red flannel shirt over a sleeveless T-shirt. Broad, angular face. A Hispanic Stanley Kowalski. “Whass the big idea, Ese?” he asked.

“Oh, sorry, did you want to use the phone?” I hung up the receiver and turned back to the girl. I knew he wouldn’t let me do it; he was too much of a tough guy.

“I don’ want to use the phone. You don’ want to use the



phone, either, Gringo. Why don't you go back to the bar and drink your cerveza?"

I said to the girl, "This your husband?"

"No, my boyfriend." Her face was neutral, but not for my benefit.

"We're engaged, pendejo!"

"That a fact?" I said, leaning back on the telephone.

"Please, just go," she said, her voice now very small.

"Got a date set?" I asked the guy.

"You're interrupting the flow of the game," he said. "Go back to the bar."

"Back to the bar, good idea," I said. Then to her: "Can I buy you a drink?" I got just one fleeting glimpse of her eyes flashing at me before I dropped under the big guy's fist. It smashed into the phone, and the receiver clattered. He howled and tried to block me in. I saw the girl going in one direction and the wallflowers going in the other to get away from the fight. Two of the guys he was playing pool with wedged in on either side of him and started kicking me. He tried to get another punch off, but I was crouched down, and my shoulders and back caught his awkward blows.

He still had the cue stick in his other hand. I yanked it down and away from him and came up with the heavy end. I used this to punch the guy to my right in the balls. He spun away from me and I had room to dodge out of the way.

Now the only thing to my back was the door to the

restroom. The big guy came straight at me as I brought the cue stick up and around in a hard, tight swing that connected across the bridge of his nose. Cartilage snapped, along with the cue stick, and neither one stopped him at all. We collided and smashed into the heavy metal swinging door. I put a rabbit punch into his side, then another and another. He had a thick layer of gut that I couldn't get past. His hands had me by the damn collar of my shirt and he was bouncing my head up against the door, over and over. The only thing I could use was my right leg. I kicked his knee as hard as I could. The second time, he let go and backed up, holding his thigh.

Now that he was out of my line of sight, I saw the bar and gathered to watch the goings-on. The big guy's buddy moved in on me with a cue stick of his own. I grabbed it, reversed it into his face, and he dropped without a sound.

Something hit me in the side of my head. It was my dancing partner's fist. I tried to stand up, but there it was again, and it kept me off-balance and trying to figure out where it was coming from. I got tired of catching his knuckles on my face and just went to the floor after the third one. The fourth one was already on its way, and as he stumbled forward from the force of his swing, I used my heel to spin his kneecap around to the side of his leg. He fell like lumber. Three men down. More were coming.

I couldn't work like this. The girl was between me and the door, about ten feet away. I grabbed her by the shoulders and steered

her through the crowd with me.

“What’s your name, darlin’?” I asked.

“Sylvia,” she said, as out of breath as I was.

“Aaron, nice to meet you. You got a car?” Screams to get a doctor from behind us.

“I got a truck.”

“That’ll do. Let’s go.”

Ten guys actually chased us out of the parking lot. Sylvia laughed maniacally, spraying gravel all over them.

We fucked in the bed of the pickup, and she was everything I thought she would be: uncontrolled, uninhibited, and noisy as all-get-out. Sometimes you can judge a book solely by its cover.

When we were through, she rested in the crook of my arm and talked about Jaime, the big guy, and how this was supposed to happen. I found out about how he was nice at first, which was good and all, because he had a real job. But over time, he grew more and more assertive and eventually turned into a jealous, evil tyrant, and how all of her girlfriends said she should drop him . . . anyway, she talked about a bunch of stuff.

Finally, I said, “Take that ring off.”

“This one?” she held up her hand. A small but clear diamond gleamed in the neon of the liquor store parking lot where we stopped to consummate our relationship.

“Yeah, take it off. You ain’t engaged to him anymore.”

“What do you mean? We’re still engaged. No one’s broken anything off.”

“Sylvia, if I could take you from him, then you really weren’t his to begin with, okay?”

“You gonna make me a better offer?” she said it playfully but I knew she was also dead-serious.

“Nope. Just passing through.”

“Oh,” she said quietly. “So, what was this, then? This pick-up truck tryst? What do you call that?”

“A damn fine time,” I told her. “You were the most beautiful thing I’d seen in a long time. That’s the truth. But Sylvia, when you go to a museum, you can’t take the pretty pictures with you. You’ve got to leave them there on the walls where you found them.”

“That’s such bullshit!” she cried. She was right, it was.

Cupid was better at those metaphors than I was. I tried again.

“How about this, then. I ain’t looking to get married for a long time. I don’t even really know who I am, or what I want. You just like what you see right now, that’s all.”

“So do you,” she said.

“Yeah, I know, I told you that already. I’m not lying to you, shit. You’d think that would still count for something, even if it wasn’t what you wanted to hear.”

She rolled off my arm and started to get dressed, sitting on her knees. I came up behind her and tried to kiss her. “Don’t,” she said. “I’ve got to go. So do you.”

“Hey,” I said in her ear, “It’s after midnight. Let’s just

camp out here tonight. You and me. No Jaime. No nobody. We'll pretend that it's always going to be like this. I get my fantasy, you get yours." I kissed her neck until she started breathing heavy.

"Come on, what do you say?"

She sighed, a very down-to-earth sigh and leaned back into my kisses. "Well, what's one night, right?" She reached through the back window and pulled a blanket out from behind the seats. "Come here, Elvis," she said.

I let it slide. We fucked twice more.

By the third time, I knew she was pregnant.

Cupid was beside the Caddy, pacing in mid-air, not even flying, just walking back and forth, when Sylvia dropped me off in the parking lot the next morning. We waved to each other, and then she was gone in a cloud of dust.

Cupid dropped down to eye level. "Hola, amigo!" I said.

"Hola amigo," he mimicked. "Why don't you shut up?"

"What's up your ass?"

"You told me you would warn me if you were going to start some shit, remember?"

"Hey, I didn't start it! That big gorilla-motherfucker did!"

"Yeah, and you were just the rebel without a clue, is that it? Shit, man . . ."

I didn't have the energy or the clear head to deal with it that morning. I held up my hands. "Aw, man, look, I'm sorry, but he was on me before I could get away. And he wasn't paying no attention to that girl, how was I supposed to know?"

Cupid stroked his chin. “Yeah, I guess so. But damn, man, you and road houses are just a bad idea, you know?”

“I know,” I said, hopping into the Caddy. My bag was stashed in the back. “Come on, let’s get breakfast. My treat. I need something.”

“You got plenty last night,” he said.

“Yeah, I did. Here, hold this.” I handed him my trophy while I turned around in the front seat and dug in my bag for a fresh T-shirt. I came up with the one from the Snake Farm, shrugged, and put it on.

“An engagement ring? Where’d you get that?”

“From Sylvia. I’m keeping it, too.”

“She gave it to you?”

“Yep. Of her own free will.”

“Smart. This’ll come in handy later.”

“What do you mean?”

Cupid coughed. “Oh, uh, well, in case you need the cash and have to pawn it or something.”

“Oh, right. Well, I don’t plan on pawning it.” I took the ring back from Cupid and slid it into one of the inner pockets of my new snakeskin wallet, then sat back down in the front seat.

“Let’s eat, man.”

We found a roadside taco stand and bought six of them, all different kinds, two Cokes, and two big bottles of water to wash it all down with. We sat in the car, watching the traffic zoom

by on I-10 and ate and talked. Cupid told me all about how the curvy girl and her friend came back over to him after things had settled down and tried to pick him up. He took a page out of my book and told them to go jump up a rope. I told him all about Sylvia. I didn't tell him that I thought she was pregnant. What good would it do anyone? No, I left that part out. Cupid didn't really care too much either way. He just wanted gory details. I gave them and took first-hand delight in the occasional envious second-hand "Fuck you!" that broke up my story.

After we'd finished the tacos and slugged down the soda and the water, it was time for the road again. "What's the plan today?" I asked him.

"We drive, balls to the wall, until we hit South Padre Island." He punched it, laying rubber.

When we were back in the flow of traffic, I said, "Look, man, I don't want to rain on your parade or anything like that, but what if she ain't there? It's a possibility, right? What are you gonna do?"

Cupid paused a beat before answering. "Well, if she's not there, then we had a hell of a time riding together and you got a free trip to the beach, I guess."

He didn't want to think about that any more than I didn't want to think about certain things. I dropped it.

West Texas was flat and tan once we got over the mountains. Miles and miles of Texas stretched before us on either side. Even the sky seemed bigger. The endless earth-colored flatland

was broken up by the occasional nest of cactus, patch of scrub brush, or grove of twisted mesquite trees. The stark face of the landscape made me think about the green hills and valleys of Tennessee. Something from my past . . . I just couldn't put a finger on it. My depression was instantaneous. Where did all that knowledge go? I turned on the radio, afraid to follow that train of thought. Soon, we were listening to some band called ZZ Top.

Decent guitar work, kinda showy, though. At least I could understand what they were saying.

Cupid was singing "Tube Snake Boogie" at the top of his lungs when the wail of the siren cut through the music.

". . . The fuck?" said Cupid.

"Ah, shit," I said, staring in the side mirror. "We got rollers."

"Fuck 'em!" he said, ready to punch the gas. I glanced at the speedometer. The needle sat at 100 mph.

"No, better stop. He'll call for back-up, and this car don't blend in real well with the regular traffic."

"Fuuuuuck." Cupid decelerated and pulled the boat primly to the side and waited for the law to catch up.

We watched him climb out of the Mustang. The trooper was immaculate in his pressed uniform. He was in his mid-thirties, his face lined from the sun and the road. Black mirrored sunglasses hid his eyes under a creamy white Stetson. His hand rested easily on his revolver as he sauntered up to the car. "Fine-looking



ride, gentlemen. Can I see your license and registration, please?"

The easy drawl in his voice carried the weight of authority.

"Be polite," I growled, as Cupid leaned over and hit the glove box.

"I will," he growled back. He took out a thin black wallet

I had never seen before and handed it to the officer. "Here you go, sir. Heck of a day, isn't it?"

"It is, at that." He scrutinized the wallet that most likely hadn't existed until thirty seconds ago. "Mister Eros, do you know how fast you were going?"

"Sorry, sir, I have no idea."

The trooper smiled. "One hundred and one miles per hour."

Cupid whistled. I smiled and shook my head. "Wow, I had no idea."

"Where you two fellahs goin' in such a big rush?" he asked.

"South Padre Island," Cupid said.

The trooper gazed at the brim of his hat for a second.

"Spring break ain't for another two weeks."

"Oh, no, sir. I just found out that's where my mother lives.

I haven't seen her in a hund—well, years and years." He let his head hang down for a minute. I patted his shoulder.

"He's pretty worked up about seeing her again," I explained.

The trooper started to say something. He looked right and left at nothing in particular. Finally, he said, "Wait right here," and marched back to the car.

Cupid snapped his head up. "What's going on?"

"Dunno," I said, looking as hard to the left as I could without moving my head. "Looks like he's writing something down."

The trooper came back a minute later. "Okay, boys, here's the deal. This is a warning. On it I wrote your speed up at 85, not a hundred. Over a hundred, we have to take you to jail for that.

Get what I'm saying?"

"Sure do, sir. I had no idea."

"No excuse, son. Other troopers down the road, they won't be as understanding as I am, they'll haul you straight to jail. Understand me?"

"Sure do. Thank you very much!" Cupid took the little clipboard and wrote the name Michael Jackson on the paper. The cop separated the two, gave him a copy along with his wallet.

"Okay, now, you folks be careful," he said, turning away.

"Will do. Oh, hey, officer? One more thing."

The cop turned around. I braced myself. This was pay-back for the barfight, I just knew it. I got ready to run. "Yes, sir?"

"We're gonna be stopping up at Fort Stockton. Is there a good place to get a chicken fried steak there?"

When we were driving again, I slugged Cupid on the arm.

"Goddammit, you scared the shit out of me!"

Cupid guffawed. "And you thought I'd cause trouble."

We ate chicken fried steak in Fort Stockton, the chicken fried steak I should've eaten two days ago. Coming out of Fort

Stockton was like riding into a cop convention. We saw black and whites every ten miles for two-three hours. Cupid watched his speed and swore a blue streak.

The radio kept us company, playing Stevie Ray Vaughn and The Mavericks and Lyle Lovett. Cupid even got into the swing of things, tapping his feet to “That’s Right, You’re Not From Texas,” but I suspect he was just distracted by the prospect of having to talk to his mother for the first time in a century. Otherwise, he’d be bitching a hole in the snow, or we’d be listening to some band with umlauts over their vowels.

By the time we hit San Antonio, the Interstate was crowded, and we were sniping at each other at every turn. I was sick of the fucking car. “Okay,” said Cupid, sharing my mindset, “I need your help here. We’re looking for 37 East. Give me a heads up if you can.”

“I’m on it,” I said, grateful to be doing something other than staring at the dashboard. Cupid kept up a steady torrent of profanity as he drove, and I swear, I think that’s what that big old Cadillac was running on this whole time.

“Looks like you gotta get on the loop,” I told him, pointing at the sign with all the numbers on it.

“Right,” he said, lurching the car to the right. “Damn, this state has some shitty drivers.”

I kept my mouth shut. At least we were being civil to each other. We hit the loop with almost no trouble, for once, and then made the clover leaf to thread onto Highway 37 unscathed. “Now

what?" I asked him.

"77 South," he said.

We found that one, too, and drove through some town called Harlingen, then caught 100 East, and finally saw a sign for South Padre Island as we drove into Port Isabel. By now, it was dusk, and the combination of the coastal air, the cool breeze, and the excitement of being at the end of the quest cheered us both up. Port Isabel didn't last long at all before we were on a long, low bridge leading out to the island.

"It really is an island," I said, dumbfounded.

"Well, duh, what did you think?" Cupid pulled out his Post-It note. "What's the address again?"

"210 E. Palm Street."

"Palm Street," he mumbled. It was dusk, now, and we were both peering at street signs that were partially obscured by palm trees and what appeared to be giant fat pineapples. We turned down Gulf Street, just cruising. I mean, the island wasn't that big, we'd run across it sooner or later.

"Palm Street," I said, pointing.

"Right or left?"

"Uh . . . right."

"Now you're just making stuff up," he said, turning wide.

We pulled up in front of the house. It was just like all of the other boxy, squat, faux adobe-style beach houses, except it was duck egg blue. Color was all that separated one house from

another. "There it is," he said.

"Yeah, but who are those assholes?" I said.

"I have no fucking idea," said Cupid, shutting off the car and exiting all at once.

Two big, angry rednecks were locked, arm to head, like two rutting moose. One guy was shirtless and wearing a bathing suit and flip-flops. He had receding blonde hair, a mullet cut (also known as the schlong-cut: SHort in the front, LONG in the back. I prefer 'mullethead', because it implies that something is wrong with him. But the schlong-equals-pecker analogy is real apt, too) and wore his mustache down to his chin.

The other guy was a pot-bellied, snap-button shirt wearing, bearded hulk of an urban cowboy, right down to the Wran-

gler jeans and the belt with an overly impressive buckle. They dug their heels into the grass, straining against each other, vying for leverage. Occasional grunts of "Cumawn" and "Sumbitch" could be heard.

Standing behind and above them on the porch was a woman in her mid-forties. She had once been beautiful, but the years had roughed her up a bit. Her hair was auburn-red, obviously dyed, piled sky high, and she was wearing a see-through housecoat that didn't even bother to cover her over-generous hips. Underneath the coat was some sort of clingy black material that was probably supposed to be pants. Across her ample, sagging bosom, she had on a halter-top that said South Padre Island from nipple to nipple. In one hand was a can of Dr. Pepper. With the other one, she

waved frantically at the two men and laughed, big, whooping honks of joy and brayed, “Y’all don’ fight!” over and over. I checked out the surroundings. Of course, the neighbors were watching, resigned looks on all of their faces. One of the women standing in the next yard over was crying into a crumpled paper towel.

“Mom!” Cupid flew over, bow out, arrow ready, and hovered over the two men. “What the hell are you doing?”

The woman looked up at her son, blinking hard. “Eros? Is that you?”

“Mother,” said Cupid, diving into her arms. Dr. Pepper sloshed all over the yard. They hugged for so long that the two rednecks stopped fighting.

“We gonna have to kick his ayss, too?” the cowboy asked the ex-surfer.

“If we gotta, we gotta,” the other one replied, starting for the steps.

I rushed up onto the lawn. “Hey, boy!” I shouted.

The blonde redneck turned around. “You want some a’ this too, greaser? Come on, peckerwood, step up, I gotta bucket fulla shit for yew.” He came off the steps, fists balled up. The cowboy followed close behind.

“Cupe, there’s some shit startin’!” I said, but he and his mother had finally noticed it.

“Billy! Earl!” The woman’s voice was nasal and grating, but they stopped coming at me and looked at her. “Go on home, now, this is my son, come to visit.”

“What about my needs, Venus?” said the cowboy.

“But I love you, Venus!” said the surfer. The crying girl with the paper towel renewed her wailing.

“Mom, I got this,” said Cupid. Faster than I could follow, he shot two arrows, one into each redneck. Damn, that guy was good.

The blonde surfer turned and ran over to the crying woman.

“Darla, baby, I was a fool and a shit. I love you. You’re the only one I ever truly loved. From now until forever, darlin’, I swear to fuckin’ God all mighty.”

She sniffed once, then dropped the paper towel. “Oh Billy!”

She jumped into his arms and they walked back into the house next door.

That left Earl, the cowboy, staring at the scene.

“Something’s missing in my life,” he said out loud. “I don’t think I’ll find it here. I need security. Family. That kinda thing.” He tipped his hat to Venus. “I beg yer pardon,” he said and trotted back to the black pick-up truck parked across from the Caddy. The engine roared to life. He loaded a huge dip into his front lip, spit once, and pointed at me. “Later, Elvis.”

Man, I was tired of hearing that name.

The neighbors began to disperse. Some of them seemed put out that they didn’t get to watch anyone fight. By the time the police cruiser rolled down the street, everyone, including us, was safely indoors.

“Now then, are you boys hungry?” Venus leaned against the counter, a fresh can of Dr. Pepper in her hand. She’d traded the see-through housecoat for a similar, more opaque model. We were seated at a rickety Formica table in a small, mostly clean kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, as far as I could tell. The place was okay, and it would have been great if someone had taken care of it. Bits of clothes, crumpled cigarette packs, empty cans, and other debris lay about the house like a light sprinkling from the garbage fairy. The furnishings were okay, for the most part, but nothing really matched. She had a few pictures up on the wall, but the only one I liked was that classical-looking picture of the skinny, naked, blonde girl with the real long hair blowing, and she’s standing in a huge clam shell. You know the one? She looks kinda like that Uma Thurman chick. Anyway, that was the only picture I liked.

Cupid brought me back to the question. “Hey, man, you hungry?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She shook her head. “Well, I never . . .” she turned away to face the stove. “Well, what do you boys want?”

“Mom, don’t go to any trouble,” Cupid said. He seemed real different all of a sudden. More like a kid.

She shushed him. “I could fry up some ham and make y’all some grilled cheese and ham sandwiches, how does that sound?”

“Sounds great,” I said.



“Yeah, that’s a keeper.”

Venus busied herself with the ham, bread, butter and skillet. I watched her cut hunks of Velveeta cheese while she chatted.

“I don’t know what made you come back, but I just knew you would some day, ‘course I wasn’t expectin’ to see you tonight, and with a house guest, no less, such a good-looking man, my word, you two just really don’t know how lonely it gets out here sometimes . . . ”

Cupid watched her cook, a funny expression on her face. I got up and helped myself to some iced tea out of the Tupperware pitcher in the refrigerator. I smiled at her and she nodded encouragement. I sat back down and caught a reproachful look from Cupid. “What?”

“ . . . Helpin’ yourself,” he muttered.

“Oh, Eros, honey, it’s okay. You can help yourself, too.”

He got up from the table and flew over to her.

“Listen, Mom, there’s something I want to say to you.”

She took him in her arms. “Shhh, it’s okay, son. I know.”

“No, you don’t, listen. I want to tell you I’m sorry. I . . . ”

“Oh, baby, it’s okay, I’m not mad at you,” she said, hugging him tighter.

“Everything’s all fucked up. I’ve been looking for you for so long. I just wanted you to know I never stopped thinking about you, even when I thought I’d never see you again.”

“Baby, it’s okay, I’m right here,” she patted him gently.

“Look at me, Mom, I’m a freak!” said Cupid, starting to cry. I wanted to be in another room.

“No, no, you’re beautiful, you’re a sweet little angel,” she cooed.

“All of my friends hate me! Everyone is gone! I thought I was going to be the only one left!” He was really sobbing now.

“Baby, it’s okay, I’m still here.”

She held him and rocked him, whispering endearments to him. He finally broke the embrace and wiped his face with his small hand. He turned and looked at me. “Sorry ‘bout that, man,” he said.

“Hey, it’s cool. I wish I had a mom to cry to, man.”

He made another face at me. Venus was talking again.

“Don’t worry, Eros, I’m right here. I won’t leave you again, my brave little helper.” He smiled at her and she smiled at him. “I just hope next time you’ll listen to me,” she said.

Cupid’s smile wilted. “What?”

“That bitch-whore human left you, didn’t she? I told you she would, didn’t I?”

Cupid backed out of his mother’s arms. “What?”

“Honey, it’s okay, I forgive you—” she started.

“I didn’t ask for your forgiveness! Why do you have to bring this shit up now? After all this time? Goddammit!”

“Hey,” she barked. Her smile was gone, now, too. “Don’t you cuss at me, kid. That woman was a bitch, and I tried to tell you that, but you just wouldn’t listen to me.”

“You never liked her!”

“Those sunsabitches at the bottom of the hill said she was prettier than me! Have you suddenly forgotten that little bit of the story?”

“So, you were jealous of a mere mortal, is that it?”

“Hey, kid, I told you once, I told you a million times, you give ‘em an inch, they’ll take a mile. You ‘member Daedalus?”

“Yeah, and that’s another thing: how did he know where you lived? Were you fucking him, too?”

She threw her empty Dr. Pepper can at him. “I’ll fuck whomever I want to fuck, Eros! I’m the goddess of beauty, or don’t you remember that? Your ex-wife seemed to conveniently forget it when the guys were licking her fucking feet.”

“God, Mother, you’re such a bitch. I don’t even want to talk you about this.” Cupid turned and stalked out of the room, sans wing power. She followed him out into the front yard, yelling, “Don’t you call me a bitch, you little bastard!”

I winced. That one hurt even me. Outside, a dog barked.

A couple of the neighbors came back outside to watch act two.

Maybe they would get to see a punch thrown, after all. I walked over to the stove and finished frying the ham, then grilled four sandwiches and ate two of them while listening to the dim strains of profanity and accusations.

The police came back by and talked to both of them. It was a long time before they came back into the house. When they

did, it was one at a time. Venus came in first, slamming the door behind her. She saw me sitting on the couch, leafing through her issue of Cosmopolitan, and made a visible effort to straighten her hair and compose herself. "I am sorry you had to witness that," she said, very prim.

"Aw, it's okay," I said, flashing a smile, "he can be irritating like that. I just spent two days with him in a car."

She laughed, another one of those short sharp honks. "You are just too precious! Hang on, sugar, I'll get you squared away in the guest room." She ducked around the corner, where I heard cabinet doors opening and closing.

Cupid came in while she was doing that. He was sullen.

"Where is she?"

"Fixing up the guest room for me," I said.

He made a disgusted face. "Aw, that's just great. I hate couch-crashing."

"You still got two sandwiches in there," I nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

That cheered him up. "Hey, thanks." He flew into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator open and close.

Venus came back into the living room. "You're all set, sweetie. Bathroom's at the end of the hall." She lowered her voice.

"Right next to my room." I looked up at her, but she was already sashaying toward the kitchen, a noticeable swing in her hips.

"Hey, Cupel!" I called out. "You want the bathroom? I'm gonna grab a quick shower, get the road off of me."

“Nah, go ahead,” he said, his mouth full of cold cheese and ham. “See you in the morning.”

“Right.” I retrieved my duffel from the Caddy and threw it into the guest room.

The shower was a blessing. I was surprised to see the water running off of me in brown streaks until I remembered I hadn't showered since the day before. I put my Snake Farm T-shirt back on and crept back into my room in my briefs. The bed was a cool womb and I crawled into it, grateful for the mattress and pillow.

I woke up when the door creaked open. It was Venus. She came quickly to the side of the bed. “Be quiet, you'll wake him up.”

“What's going on?” I squinted at her shadowy form through heavy eyelids.

“He doesn't know, does he?”

“Know what?” I said.

“You've come for me, haven't you?” She slipped out of her housecoat. She was naked underneath it, except for a strange, wide belt that held some of her amplexity in.

“No, ma'am, I was just hitching a ride,” I told her.

She slipped into the bed and I felt her skin touch my leg.

“Hush up, now, sweetie, you don't have to lie to me. I knew someone would come for me sooner or later.” She sighed. “I'm just so glad it's you,” she said, reaching for me.

“Lady, you got this all wrong,” I said, but she started kiss-

ing me.

I'm only human. She was the Goddess of Beauty at one time, although she now looked more like an ex-stripper now. Besides, she still had a lot of charm going for her. Especially with her hand between my legs. She climbed on top of me, and I didn't stop her.

Halfway through it, she started moaning, a little too loudly, "You're Elvis, you're Elvis," over and over.

"No, I'm not!" I grunted.

She stopped, surprised. "What?"

"I said, I ain't Elvis."

"But, you just gotta be . . ." she sputtered. "I just thought, I mean . . ."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I'm from the South, but that's about it."

"Mother," said a voice at the door. It was Cupid. "Get off him. He doesn't know."

Now she looked worried. "What?"

"What?" I echoed.

"Go back to bed, Mother. Aaron, get back to sleep. We'll all talk about this in the morning."

She climbed off of me, murmured an apology, and left.

Go back to sleep. Easy for you to say, you little freak, you didn't have the Goddess of Beauty in your lap a few minutes earlier, I thought. I went into the bathroom, masturbated into the toilet, and staggered back into bed. I was out pretty quick after

that.

I woke up to the sounds of them fighting. The clock said 10:30. It felt good to sleep for so long, but I was groggy. I lay there and looked at the ceiling and listened to them talk about me. Yell about me.

“I can’t believe you!” That was Cupid. “Bad enough you keep stirring up the neighborhood stiff dicks, you gotta jump on him not eight hours after we get here!”

“Well, I didn’t know!” Venus slammed something down.

“Why the hell did you bring him here, anyway? Don’t you know anything?”

“Look, I picked him up in California, I had no idea until we started talking about where he was from. But it’s cool, he doesn’t know anything—”

“Son, he’s not an idiot, he’ll fucking figure it out soon enough! You introduced him to Horus, for Christ’s sake!”

“And I suppose you’d just love for that to happen, wouldn’t you?”

Venus made a high-pitched barking sound. “And what the hell does that mean?”

“You want a comeback, don’t you?” Cupid’s voice lowered.

“NO!”

I got up and got dressed and walked into the kitchen. They stopped talking when I appeared. I sat down, and the nervous silence filled the space between us. Venus had made breakfast.

“Morning, sunshine,” she said. The words practically echoed in the kitchen. “You hungry? I made eggs and toast and bacon . . .”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. She filled my plate and then sat down between the two of us. I ate. They stared at me. “Uh, something wrong, y’all? Couldn’t help overhearing the conversation.”

Cupid looked away, and Venus blushed. Neither of them spoke. I patted my mouth with a paper napkin and stood up. “Well, Venus, I sure thank you for the hospitality. Cupe, I ‘preciate the ride, and all. But I think I’d best be moving on, now. Y’all have a lot to . . . talk about. I don’t want to spoil the family time.” They watched me walk back to the guest room.

I stuffed my dirty laundry into my army duffel and zipped it up. When I turned around, Cupid was hovering in the doorway.

“Look, man, I’m sorry. You don’t have to go, not if you don’t want to.”

“Cupe, you’re a good guy and all, but all this talk is making my head hurt. I’m sick of hearing it, you got me? Sick!”

Cupid nodded. “I know, look, it won’t happen again. I promise.”

“I know it won’t, ‘cause I’m taking off today.”

Cupid said, “Hold up. Listen. Why don’t you just stay the day? We can cruise around, take in some sun, check out the babes. Just relax for a day. Then, tomorrow, I’ll drive you back over the bridge and you can catch a ride at the highway. Come on, man, how ‘bout it?”



I stood there, looking at a three-foot tall baby wearing a diaper and an adult's expression, wings flapping merrily behind him, and for one brief second, he was my height, wearing a short toga, real good-looking guy. I blinked, and he was the baby again. Shit. I shook my head.

“Okay, one more day. But no more of that ‘he don’t know’ bullshit. I’m sick of hearing it, man.”

Cupid smiled. “Coolness. You got it. No more of that.”

“And keep your mom off my dick, she’s freaking me out.”

“Done, man.” He flew into the room. “What do you say we cruise a little bit? Grab you a bathing suit, scope out the Betties?”

He sounded like Cupid again. His badgering finally got a smile out of me. “Let’s go, man,” I said.

“Whoo hoo!” He flew out backwards. “I’ll go start the car. Mom! We’re going out!”

“Be back for lunch!” she called.

There wasn’t much to cruise; just enough shops so that if you were really creative, and didn’t mind settling for what was there, you could take care of all your shopping on the island. Anyone looking for something specific or special would have a drive ahead of them. Surf shops, boathouses, and sporting goods stores ruled the roost, with hotels coming in a close second. We stopped in at the Wal-Mart, and I bought a pair of tan cargo shorts to go to the beach in and, at the last minute, grabbed some suntan oil and

a big blue towel. “Man, Mom’s got that shit at the house,” said Cupid.

“Well, now I got my own stuff, in case I hit the beach somewhere else.”

“You da man,” said Cupid. He bought a big portable CD player and about three hundred dollars worth of CDs. Mostly his music, but I saw a couple of names I recognized in the pile. “For the beach,” he explained.

“What we need,” I told him, “is to go back to your mom’s place, grab a cooler, and load up on beer and sandwiches and shit, and just spend the day on the sand.”

Cupid stroked his chin in mock-thought. “Fine idea,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Back at Venus’ place, she’d made lunch for us: home-made chicken pot pie. She also washed and folded all of my clothes.

“I just thought, you know . . .” She was trying to apologize. I gave her a one-armed hug. It felt good, familiar. Something unlocked in my brain, but I refused to think about it.

“Thank you, Venus,” I said.

We sat down to lunch, and Venus and Cupid chatted about this and that, comparing notes on who was where and doing what. I half-listened, not knowing who they were talking about. At least they weren’t fighting.

“Who else is in San Cibola?” she asked him.

“Um. Let’s see. Who else did I . . . Oh, Ganymede.” They both made faces. “I, um, saw Eos briefly.”

“Who was that?”

“She was the one, you know, uh, you cursed her . . . because she and Ares . . .”

“Oh! That’s right!” She honk-laughed. “Oh, sugar, I haven’t thought about that slut or her sister in forever!” I couldn’t help noticing that who was promiscuous besides Venus was a whore, but it was all right for her to hump like a bunny.

After lunch, we grabbed some snacks from the pantry and borrowed Venus’ cooler. Something told me she had more than one. We found a liquor store and loaded the cooler up with Shiner Bock and ice, threw it in the trunk, and made for the beach. Cruising down the strip on the way to the beach, everyone stopped and stared. Pink Cadillac. Never fails. Then we high-tailed it to the beach.

It was silly, really. The whole island was sand. Even the civilized parts. We were south enough that March didn’t matter too much as far as the weather was concerned, so there was a decent crowd. It was mostly families, the lifers out on the island that visited once and never went home. Beachcombers, people building sand castles, sunbathers in all different shapes and sizes, kids throwing Frisbees and beach balls, even swimmers. I saw a few white sails on the water, even someone on water skis.

“Hey,” said Cupid, “wanna be ostentatious?”

“What do you have in mind?”

By way of a reply, Cupid turned the Cadillac onto the beach

and we rolled down to a bright spot, relatively clear of everyone else. “Let’s set up here and watch everyone come over. We can people watch. Plus, we’ll pull some chicks in with the car.”

“All right,” I said. We hopped out and arranged our gear just so on the beach: towels, cooler, boom box, Caddy. Cupid sat down on the blanket and started drinking. I didn’t feel like sitting; I’d done enough of that the last two days, so I leaned against the side of the El Dorado. “Cupe, toss me a brew, man.”

A bottle sailed obligingly over. “You da man,” I said.

“No, you da man,” he said.

We stopped talking after that. ZZ Top was blaring, we were drinking, and I just stared out at the ocean. The waves turned over, rose up again, and folded into the shore. Over and over. Each new wave ended at the beach, only to be born again thirty yards out. Endless.

I don’t know how long I stared out at the water, but when I looked around, our relative seclusion was gone. People had gathered in a wide semi-circle around us. College girls, old men, kids, married couples; it was a mixed bag. They were all doing their own thing, but it was all half-assed and distracted. Every one of them was also watching me.

Cupid saw me looking around and said, “Welcome back, man.”

I nodded to the throng. “What’s this shit?”

“Beats me, man. What do you think it is?”

“I dunno.” I came and lay down on the beach towel. “Toss

me another beer, man.”

Cupid rolled one out into my hand. “You wanna slow down on those? We only bought a twelve-pack.”

“This is only my second one.” Cupid pointed to the ground by the Caddy where I’d been standing. Six empty bottles were stuck, neck down, in the sand. “Man. I don’t remember that,” I said.

“Then you definitely need to slow down. You’re only human, man.” He punched that word, human. This whole thing felt funny. Again. My head was throbbing. Too much sun. I stuck the beer, untouched, into the sand beside my head and turned over onto my stomach, my chin on the back of my hands. I couldn’t see the ocean, but I could hear it. The gulls squawked and the children laughed. I think I fell asleep.

The next time I opened my eyes, I was staring at a pair of feet. Painted toes. They belonged to a statuesque blonde. Behind her was a shorter girl with red-brown hair. Both were wearing one-piece bathing suits that still managed to show off generous amounts of skin. If either of them was over 25, I’d eat Cupid’s bow.

“Hello, ladies,” I said, very drowsy.

“Hey, company,” said Cupid, for once, understated.

“Hi,” the blonde said, smiling. “I’m Jennifer. This is my friend Amy.”

“Call me Aaron. This is my pal, Cupe.” Cupid waved and

smiled.

The girls giggled. “Um, we—I just came over to tell you that you oughtta put on some sunscreen if you’re going to lay out. You’re already starting to pink up.”

“Well, thank you, Jennifer.” I reached for my tube of goo.

“I happen to have some sunscreen right here, but being that me and Cupe are both guys, I haven’t been able to get it onto my back just yet.” Jennifer held her breath. “Think you can help me out with that?”

“Sure!” she dropped to her knees instantly, a maneuver I was sure I’d see later. She grabbed the tube and squirted lotion into her hand.

“Sit down,” said Cupid to Amy, “you want a beer?”

“Cool.”

I grabbed Jennifer’s wrist. “Hold up. It’s just you and Amy, right? You ain’t got a big surfer boyfriend or something like that, do you?”

She chuckled. “No, it’s just us.”

“Good,” I let go of her arm. “I done played that scene out too many times already.” Cupid laughed.

“Hey man, I had to check,” I said, winking at Jennifer.

“Good call,” said Cupid, turning back to Amy.

Jennifer’s hands felt good on my back as she kneaded lotion into my shoulders, upper arms, and all down my back. “You got some good hands, there, Jennifer.”

“Thank you. You gonna do me next?”

I lifted my head up and gave her a grin. “Do you?”

“Lotion. My back.” She smirked. “Ha ha.”

“Oh, that too. Sure, why not? Tit for tat.”

A Frisbee bounced and landed on our towel. An older man wearing baggy swim trunks came up. “Sorry about that, it got away from me,” he said.

“No problem,” I rolled over on my side to check him out.

He kept looking at Cupid, but glancing at me. “Me and the kids decided to come out to the beach. Have to get our time in before March. Spring break makes it pretty unlivable, you know?”

“I can imagine,” Cupid said.

Another glance at me. “Yeah, we’re just visiting. We live in Harlingen.”

“Oh, we zipped through there on the way here,” said Cupid, as easy as you please.

Another look at me. “No kidding? Where you from?”

“Oh, I’m all over the place,” said Cupid. “Visiting family here.”

Another glance. “Family, huh?”

Jennifer poked me in the side. “You said you’d put lotion on me,” she prompted.

“Sure thing,” I said. She sat cross-legged in front of me, and I mechanically daubed the greasy shit on her back while she cooed and sighed. “I wish that guy’d go back to his fucking Frisbee game and quit gawking at me,” I said in a low voice.

“Just ignore him,” she whispered.

Now his kids were running up. “Kids, this is Cupe and Mr. King,” he said to them. The boy murmured something, but the girl just locked in on us and wouldn’t quit staring.

Now three college boys approached us. “Hey man,” the leader said to Cupid, “sorry to interrupt, but which ZZ Top is this?” He pointed to the boom box.

“El Loco,” said Cupid.

“Dude!” said the leader. The other two guys each handed him five dollars. He in turn handed one of the bills to Cupid.

“Thanks. It’s never about the money,” he told his followers, “It’s the principle of the thing.”

“I always say that,” said Cupid, stuffing the bill into his diaper.

“Where you boys from?” asked the Frisbee dad.

“Austin. UT.”

“Hey, great town!” the dad said.

It was officially a party. People kept coming up to us for some bullshit reason or another, and then sticking around to talk. A young married couple brought over more beer. The two kids who showed up with the Frisbee dad started making a sand wall around the blankets. More girls arrived. An old beachcomber with a bucketful of shells came by and handed me a sharp-spiraled conch shell. He gave everyone shells after that, and the married couple gave him a beer. The music was blaring. Somewhere back in the throng, I heard “Elvis.” I turned to see who said it, but couldn’t tell. Then I heard it behind me. “Elvis.” It was a whisper.



“Elvis.” Off to the side. I stood up and looked down on Jennifer.

She was on her knees in front of me, gazing up with submissive adoration.

“Who am I?” I asked her.

“Elvis,” she said.

“NO!” I backed away from her confusion, looking for Cupid, but I couldn’t see him for all the people. The whisper was a voice, now, bouncing from person to person. They crowded around me, reaching out to touch me.

“ . . . my Mother saw you once . . . ”

“ . . . love you . . . ”

“ . . . knew you weren’t dead . . . ”

“ . . . singing and dancing . . . ”

“Elvis . . . ”

“ . . . Elvis . . . ”

“ . . . Elvis.”

“I AM NOT ELVIS!”

I started swinging, not caring who I hit, and cleared a path through them. They still grabbed for me, trying to tell me things. My head felt like it was cracking open. I ran away from them, to the one place they couldn’t follow me.

The cool salt water splashed up on my feet as I ran into the ocean. I pumped my legs until I was waist-deep in the water and dove under. The pounding instantly stopped. Now my hand was stinging, a fiery heat that traveled up my arm. I found pur-

chase on the sea floor, feeling the wet sand and shells under my toes, and looked at my burning hand. I had been holding the conch shell in my hand when I started punching, and the shell had shattered and cut my hand. Bits of pink-white shell stuck out of my palm. Rivulets of blood ran off my hand, into the ocean. The drops hit the water and dissipated, consumed by the hungry sea. I remembered something vague about sharks in the Gulf of Mexico, and then I was fully underwater.

I could see the blood coming out of my hand in inky streams. I could see the bottom of the ocean, the seaweeds and weird-looking plants. My eyes were stinging, but I wouldn't close them. The blood clouded up the water, and I sat there, the breath roaring in my lungs, until I blacked out.

The water is gone, and I am weightless. Images. Smells of a house, sounds of my mother. I don't sound like nobody. I have no body, no body to call my own. That's all right, Mama. Screams from a crowd, girls shaking their head, having a fit. Some people tap their feet, some people shake their leg, some people clap their hands. I just kinda put 'em all together. Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, how great thou art.

Different screams, howls of outrage. I am the devil, the great Satan, the Anti-Christ, looking down from a bus window, the back seat of a car, the door of a train, the train I ride, sixteen coaches long. Mama cooking mashed potatoes. Bill, Scotty, DJ, are you lonesome tonight? Laughter in the studio, dancing around in my socks, having a good time, a good rocking tonight. Girls

climbing into the windows of the car. Flash bulbs cracking constantly, permanent stars in my eyes. Fat man with a cigar, promising me a million dollars. Don't be cruel, Mr. Sullivan. I think it's the most childish expression I've ever heard, but if they're gonna call me Elvis the Pelvis, there's not a whole lot I can do about it.

Westerns, musicals, dancing, singing, costumes that itch.

Guitars with no strings. The punch comes and misses me by two feet, but I fall down and act like it hurt. Nothing is real anymore.

Everything is two worlds, the privacy in front of the cameras and the madness behind the cameras. Judy dies. Uncle Sam calls. I got those hup two three four occupation G. I. Blues. Suddenly, Mother is gone. I can feel the wood on my cheek, the lid of her casket. I can't stop crying. Everything hurts. Gotta stay awake.

Little red pills do it, keep me up on the night watch. Not a problem.

Her name is Priscilla. She'd look better as a brunette. My

'Cilla, you give me fever, when you kiss me. We love each other.

Christmas with the family. I keep buying her cars. Sinatra welcomes me home. His daughter is cute. Not like 'Cilla. Back to make-believe. The gates of Graceland. Call my buddies over, I don't like being alone. I can't feel my mother anymore. The pills help.

Colonel Parker says it's okay. What the hell am I doing in

Hawaii? They tell me how to water ski, but it's just a platform,

and they show a movie of the water behind me. I hate it. Nobody tells me what to do anymore, except the fat man with a cigar.

Priscilla lives with me, now. Doesn't stop me, or the other girls.

I'm your very bothering mechanic. I tell Thumper we have to be careful. She laughs and wraps herself around me. Now I have a baby. I need discipline. I feel everything when the camera is on, and nothing when it's off. The pills help.

More beach. Dumb girls. Songs with kids. A little thing called Confidence. Orange, red, black belt. Taking care of business. The house isn't a home. Everyone yells, so I just stay away. My buddies go with me. Memphis Mafia. The family. No mother, though. Just the Colonel. I don't like him any more. The pills help.

I need answers that no one is giving me. Spirituality. Back to my roots. I know I'm sick. Gospel. Use the voice, my gift. Reach out to Jesus. He touched me. Tired of the movies, I go back to television. Black leather, hot as hell, but it is a baptismal fire. I still have the music. The voice. The passion. I'm not dead. I just feel dead. Karate takes 'Cilla. She was gone, anyway. The pills help.

I'm back in Hawaii. Phoenix. Sun God. Everyone is watching. I am reborn with a trumpet fanfare, rising from the ashes of my former self. No longer the devil, but an angel. The prodigal son. Graceland is empty. I call the guys. We go for cheeseburgers, in Colorado. The pills help.

I meet a man named Nixon. His neck quivers when he nods his head, so I just keep talking. I give him a gun. He gives me a

badge. Fair trade. New women in the house, now, but none of them are 'Cilla. Or Mama. I can't stop eating. Everything hurts.

The pills don't help anymore. I get new pills.

The music is there. Occasional concerts, public appearances. It's not so bad, see? I can do the show. I still have the voice. I'm still the King. They carry me to the limo because I can't walk. My medicine is waiting for me.

Betrayal. Sons a bitches. I'll fire their ass. I don't care.

Linda pats my arm. Or is it Ginger? Who is she? Just another crony? No, this one is different. She tries to turn me around. I can't turn anymore. Elvis, what happened? It's over. I'm dead.

Thus spake Zarathustra. The pills help.

The rush of water into my lungs never came. When I could see again, I was still underwater. The blood was gone, and my hand was whole, the pieces of the shell gone. I found the sea floor and pushed off with my legs and stood right up out of the water. I could see them all, staring at me. I walked out of the water, onto the beach, with more self-respect, more respect for fellow man.

Except that I wasn't a man. They watched me, like they used to, when every gesture was a magic spell. I heard the name, and someone said it again and this time, it didn't hurt my head. They were talking about me. Elvis Aron Presley.

Cupid was gone. The Caddy was still there. I gave Priscilla one of these, an El Dorado. Different year, though. No matter. A Cadillac is a Cadillac. I hopped into the front seat, driver's side.

All of the stuff, the towels, the jam box, the cooler, lay forgotten on the beach. I started the car. It roared to life, and I just had to smile. I put the Caddy in gear.

One of the girls came up to me. "I love you, Elvis."

I touched her cheek. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you very much." I left the beach with the people shredding my beach towel in the rear view mirror.

Me and Cupid had to have a little talk.

The sun was low, but it was still plenty light enough to see. I let the car take me back to Cupid. I pulled up at his mother's house. It was shut up tight and dark. I knocked on the front door.

No answer. I walked around to the back and tried that door. Locked, too. I took a deep breath and kicked through the wood in one smooth action. The door swung open after that. "Cupe?"

I could hear something moving inside. "It's me, man.

Where'd you go, man?"

I stepped inside. That picture I liked, the girl standing in the shell, was missing. Cupid floated slowly out from the hall, bow in front of him, arrow nocked. "Hey, man, what the hell are you doin'?"

"Stay the fuck away from me, King," Cupid said.

"You ain't scared of me, are you, Cupe?"

Cupid tightened his grip on his bow. "You scare the shit outta me, man. Ever since I figured out what you are, you have been scaring me shitless, man."

"Yeah, Cupe, listen, we need to have a talk about that."

“About what?”

I walked slowly to the kitchen table, hands up, palms out.

“There’s a bunch of shit you ain’t been telling me, man.” I sat down. “I just want to talk to you about that.”

Cupid didn’t budge. “I don’t believe you.”

I was getting pissed. “Cupe, have I lied to you yet? Come on, man, just put the bow down, I promise you, I just want to talk.”

Cupid lowered the bow. “Okay, but no tricks. You know how fast I am with this.”

“I know. We’re just going to talk.”

“Okay, what’s your beef?”

“First things first,” I said. “Where’s your mom?”

“She’s gone, you asshole!”

I wasn’t expecting an explosion from him. “What do you mean, she’s gone?”

“You took her myth, you son of a bitch!” He balled up his fist and shook it at me. “Why did you have to do that, man? She tried to give you an origin, Goddammit! I should’ve let her, but shit, man, I didn’t think you would try something like this.” He was sobbing, like last night, screaming through tears and snot.

I shook my head. “Okay, some weird shit happened today. But you gotta believe me, I don’t know what went down. I don’t understand any of this. You gotta tell me, why am I back?”

Cupid wiped his face on his forearm. “So, you’re you,

now.”

“Yeah,” I said, patting the table, “I’m me. For real. But how did this happen?”

Cupid inhaled, held it for a second, and blew air out through puffed-up cheeks. “Okay, from the top. People,” he waved his hands toward the street, “all of them, they all believe in stuff. The government is hiding aliens, professional sports are fixed, whatever. Because folks in general have no idea how powerful they are, they sublimate their creative energies by singing karaoke and playing video games. But sometimes, when enough people believe in something, they can call it into existence. Humans make their own reality, and apparently, to enough people on this planet, you are very much alive.”

“Yeah, but I died. I was forty-two.”

Cupid scratched his ass. “Well, I don’t know how all that transmogrification stuff works, but odds are, you’re the original model.”

“Cupe, I weighed almost 300 pounds when I died. Look at me, here. I’m young again. How does that work?”

“It’s how they see you, man.” Cupid moved forward, though still well out of my reach. “Everyone made jokes about you being fat and dying on the toilet, but when push comes to shove, they put the young, lean you on the postage stamp.”

“I was on a postage stamp?”

“Christ, man, what weren’t you on? Action figures, cookie jars, books, records, coffee cups, commemorative guitars, plates,



magnets, games, puzzles . . . shit, it's a wonder you took as long as you did to come back.”

“So, all the later years, they're just . . . gone?”

“No, you lived them, but from a cosmological point of view, that was your descent into hell. You died in hell and were reborn in the Mountain.”

“Sounds like a god, or something.”

“Elvis, you are a god.”

I stared at him for a long minute. “That don't figure, man.

What am I the god of, then?”

“Passion.” He said it and let it hang in the air for a minute.

“You stirred up people like no one before you or since. When you sang, the music took hold of you. It was the only thing you clung to your whole life. It's the one thing you're remembered for, first and foremost.” He smiled sheepishly. “I thought you were gunning for my job for a while.”

His smile broke some of the tension between us. I didn't want to ask the question, because I knew it would just wind him up again, but we were back to it. “So, what happened to Venus?”

Just as I thought, the smile vanished, and his face grew hard. “Every new pantheon has to overthrow the old pantheon, usually by force. Fortunately for you New American assholes, there hasn't been a whole lot of organization, or we'd all be pushing up the daisies.”

“English, please, motherfucker. What ‘New American’

thing are you talking about?”

“There’s more of you out there, in various stages of emergence. You don’t have a head deity to jump start things, so it’s taking some of you longer to figure it out.”

“Who else is out there?”

Cupid coughed and shrugged and looked away.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Shit no, why should I?” Cupid threw up his hands.

“You’ve done enough, thanks. If you fuckers get it together, I’m liable to go out next. Look, here’s what happened. Zeus defeated the Titans, and we became the New Gods. The Romans came along and decided to spare us, but we had to all change our names and make room for a bunch of weird city gods and goddesses. Second-stringers, all of them. We knew one day that we would be overthrown. Lots of my people got tired of waiting and spread out, like I told you. Worship was down. Christianity was on the rise. We lost a lot of power. I was lucky. I caught on and stuck around. Other gods sort of, well, fizzled out. But even if you fizzle out, there’s still the spark of divinity that stays with you. Until you’re overthrown. That’s what you did.”

“You gotta believe me, I didn’t mean to . . .” I started, but he cut me off.

“My mother was borne of the sea when the blood of Uranus fell into the ocean. You stood there, making sure everyone could see you, and cut your hand and ran into the ocean. Crude, but effective. The blood and the water mixed, and the pull of the

ocean sucked the spark out of my mother, the deity closest to your sphere of influence, and she ceased to be. You've got it, now."

"Dude, I had no idea."

Cupid pulled his bow and arrow out again. "Uh huh. Ignorance is no excuse." He notched the arrow and aimed at my chest.

"I tricked this one up special, just for you, just in case."

"Cupe, if I'm a god, that ain't going to do too much to me," I pointed out.

"Maybe not, but it's full of the love you had for your mother. It's more than enough to drop you to the ground, mourning her loss all over again."

"Cupe," I said, my voice level, "don't shoot that arrow."

"I just want you to feel a little of what I'm going through, is all." The bow creaked and the string tightened.

"Man, I've already been down that road. Didn't like it the first time. I know what you're going through, man, and I'm telling you, I didn't know. I'm more sorry than you'll ever know." I just knew he was going to shoot me. I closed his eyes and waited for it.

After a good ten seconds, I opened my eyes again. Cupid was crying, the bow and arrow slack in his hands. "I never got to ask her who my daddy was," he moaned.

I put my head down. "It was Ares."

He jerked his head around. "How do you know?"

“I just do. I got it, I dunno, from your mom, I guess. I’m sorry, man.”

I watched him cry for a long time, thinking about things I said. Thinking about me. When the waterworks finally stopped, Cupid squinted at me through red-rimmed eyes. “I forgive you, man,” he said.

I smiled at him. “Aw, Cupe, listen . . .” I stood up.

“But I still want you to feel this,” he said, the bow flashing up into his hand. Quicker than thought, the arrow socked me in the chest. Amid the pain, confusion, and the anguish, I screamed, “Cupid, you sonofabitch, I’m gonna get you for that!”

Cupid watched me cry and wail, his face immobile. “Huh.

Looks like you aren’t totally a god, yet. Who knew?” He paced back and forth. “Just so we understand our relationship, here, Elvis: I like you. I think you’re a swell guy, but right now I’m still real pissed at you.”

“If you think you’re pissed at me,” I sobbed, “you have no idea how fucking irritated I am at you!”

“I’ve still got a lot of strength, thanks to mass media. Since you didn’t grab my spark, it’s a safe bet that we won’t be working the same turf. But we may be bumping heads from time to time. Now, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way.”

“Why don’t you take that quiver and go fuck yourself?” I cried.

“The hard way, it is. Okay, pal, you had a chance. Hasta.”

He flew out through the front door. I started laughing

through the tears for my mother. I knew what he was about to do.

He came flying back into the house a few minutes later. “Give me the keys, Elvis.”

“Fuck you, you’ve got wings. Better still, you’re so goddamn powerful, make another car.”

“It don’t work that way, Pard. Just hand the keys over, and that’ll be that.”

“That will not be that. This is this.” The pain was subsiding and the ache set in, but I could live with that. I had before.

“I’m keeping your car, and if you think you can take the keys from me, you’re more than welcome to try.”

Cupid hesitated. I knew that despite his size, he was strong.

Why did he wait? Because he knew I had more than enough . . . passion . . . to make sure he never touched those keys. “Come on, big ‘un, give it a shot.”

Five hundred years from now the story will read that Elvis and Cupid fought for three days and three nights, and Cupid fired every arrow in his quiver at Elvis’ heart, but Elvis’ passion for the pink Cadillac was stronger than any arrow Cupid had.

What really happened was this: Cupid started forward, then stopped and pointed a finger at me while flying backwards. “This ain’t over, man. Not by a damn sight.”

“The hell it ain’t. Get out of my face, you flying freak.”

Cupid’s face turned beet red. He spun around in mid-air, kicking at nothing with his feet. “Fuckin’ humans. I’ve had it with

all of you.” He paused at the door to the house. “You’d just better hope you get to your fellow gods before I do, motherfucker!”

“Hey, Cupe,” I called after him, “if you want, I’ll drop you off in Harlingen!”

“Fuck off, Elvis!” The door slammed. He was gone.

I walked through the empty house and looked around. In Venus’ bedroom (canopy bed, pink lace everywhere) was the girdle she wore when she seduced me, laying askew on an antique vanity. Right beside the girdle was a hand mirror and a large conch shell. I took the belt.

There wasn’t much else in the house. I made myself a sandwich from Venus’ fridge and drank the last of her milk. She wouldn’t care. After my talk with Cupid, I could feel and see a bunch of things at once. Back at the beach, word of my arrival had already started to spread. The group of people traveled, en masse, up the beach, telling anyone who would listen the story. Exaggeration had already crept into the retelling of the tale. By the third retelling, I walked on the water to get back to the beach. Fans. Gotta love ‘em.

I could see farther than that, too. There was a shrine in Austin, Texas, where the college kids said they were from, in a restaurant. Everyone was eating Mexican food. In another shrine in New York City, I could see two people sitting down and discussing a contract. Confusing images collided in my brain, fighting for space. Thousands of people dressing like me, singing and dancing like me. Graceland restored to the look it had in the fif-

ties. I could see my name in movies, television, books, comics, hear it on other people's records. I was everywhere.

This wouldn't be like before, I promised myself. I still have stuff I want to do, and no one is going to be able to control or stop me this time. It's about the passion, now. The music.

My voice. What if it still wasn't there? I'd pushed myself into the Aaron persona for so long, maybe I'd forgotten how to sing. How would I incite passion if I didn't have the gift anymore?

Besides, I took Cupid at his word. I had to find out all I could about this New American Pantheon. Who else would it be? Would I have to recruit anyone? I considered briefly bringing Cupid along but decided he would be the type to hold a grudge. Nah, fuck him. He can do his own thing. He's not even an American. This would take time. I still wasn't ready. Godliness was still new to me. All this power. The people I could handle. I wanted to explore my abilities. Time to hit the road.

The Caddy was waiting for me outside. The key chain now bore a familiar lightning bolt. Captain Marvel's symbol. And mine. T.C.B. Cupid wasn't in sight, but I didn't figure he'd stick around. The El Dorado roared to life at my touch. As I put the car in drive, I got a tug in my heart, a yearning for Memphis, Tennessee. Horace said he was from Memphis. Now I know what he meant. Cupid had mentioned that he lived on a mountain. Olympus. I'd go to Graceland, my home, my mountain. I crossed the bridge,

heading north and east. A date popped into my head as I drove:  
2001. My lucky, most favorite number. That would be the come-  
back year. Lots of things to do before then. The start of a new  
century. New gods to replace the old ones. Mythology reborn.  
I turned on the radio. There were no words, just music,  
but I recognized it immediately. I opened my mouth and sang  
“That’s All Right, Mama” as loud and full of joy as I could. And  
a peace came over me, the first real peace I had felt in a long, long  
time. It was the voice. The gift. I was back.

I am Elvis.

“Before Elvis, there was nothing.”

—John Lennon

Afterward

Sylvia Ochoa’s baby, Venus Aaron Ochoa, was born Janu-  
ary 8th, 2001, at 4:35 in the morning. That, coupled with the events  
of January 1st, 2001, made Sylvia and her daughter move to Mem-  
phis, Tennessee, where Sylvia became an Initiate in the Order of  
Elvis. Venus didn’t know the unusual circumstances surrounding  
her conception and remained ignorant until her eighteenth birth-  
day, when Elvis appeared to her in a peal of lightning and gave



her a diamond engagement ring, which was once worn by her mother, and a wide belt, which he called a girdle. Wearing the ring, Elvis told her, she could not be subdued by any man. The girdle, He explained, came from her namesake, and when she wore it, she could charm any living creature and bend that creature to her will.

Venus took the ring and girdle and wore them into battle against the god El Nino and subjugated him, thus saving California from his wrath. Since El Nino couldn't wipe away the cities with wind and rain, he went to Elvis and begged for help. Elvis declared the fight between his daughter and El Nino legal and binding, but El Nino was not to be put off so easily. Elvis shrewdly agreed to punish California if El Nino would agree to give Tennessee mild weather in the summer months. El Nino agreed. When he found out that the girl who had defeated him was Elvis' daughter, he sent bitter cold and snow into Tennessee to cover the state for three months out of the year.

Since Elvis didn't like California anyway, he shook his legs and swiveled his hips and the ground followed his dance, and the cities crumbled at the touch of the God of Passion.

And that's why you get earthquakes in California from time to time.

## **The Secret Life of Lawrence Croft, or**

# Three Days of the Con-Dorks

Friday

Just Don't Call Him Late for Dinner

His name was Lawrence Croft, but nobody called him that.

His boss and fellow workers at the Novelty Candy Company called him Larry. So did his small circle of friends and larger circle of acquaintances, but they also called him Omicron Nightsliver.

Through gentle insistence and a couple of tantrums, he had managed to make the name of his legendary LegendMasters RPG elf archer character interchangeable with his own. The name was chosen with great forethought and consideration and owed nothing to the fact that at 300 pounds, Larry was about as elf-like as a Chrysler station wagon.

Today was special. Larry shut off his alarm and rolled out of bed, freeing the box springs from his tremendous weight. He waddled into the bathroom and showered hurriedly, using the bar

of soap to lather his hair. Larry blotted himself dry and dressed awkwardly, as the film of water still on his body made his clothes stick. The urban camouflage flack pants weren't so difficult to get on, but his lucky T-shirt (with the slogan "Character is What You Are in the Dark") gave him real trouble. He finally got it on over his stomach, perched his fedora on his head, and took a look at himself in the mirror.

His long, thin, brown hair was still wet and hung straight down on either side of his wide forehead. His thick tinted glasses sat squarely on his face, balanced on top of his bulbous nose and thick, doughy cheeks. Larry didn't bother checking out the rest of his body, he knew his own barrel-shaped frame by heart. He saw himself through fuzzy logic, a dashing and interesting person that other people would want to talk to. It was the hat that did it, he decided, picking up his tattered blue jean jacket, which rattled like scale mail from all of the buttons festooned upon it, and sliding his sausagey arms into the sleeves. Let them ask questions, he told the reflection. Let them all ask. And I will judge them all, and they will either get the answer to the question or my total scorn.

Omicron Nightsliver. We have the same eyes, you and me.

His character started out as a lark, mainly because elves got combat bonuses with a bow, and Larry had always wanted to shoot a bow. Omicron quickly took on a life and a personality all his own, however, the secret life and secret desires of Larry Croft. Omicron became everything great and right and wonderful about Larry Croft and gave him a chance to walk in his true form: the

intellect. It was Omicron who knew about the trapped chest in the fourth level of the Mad Dungeons of Venthor, not Larry. It was Omicron who rolled a natural 20 when he had to fire the arrow into the eye of the crimson wurm in the WurmWorld campaign. He saved them all, even D.J.'s crappy thief character. Omicron the Invincible. Omicron the Brave. Omicron the Noble. Larry just told them what Omicron did and everything would work out fine. Mostly. Sometimes, it took real effort to get him out of his head when he had to interact with the real world. Larry tore himself away from the mirror and his reverie. He had to get ready for MagicCon.

The important things went into his battered backpack first: dice, pencils, and his notebook, containing the character sheet of the aforementioned Omicron. There was a Deity-Level open tournament on the last day of the show, where players could bring their own characters and play in a special campaign game that was sanctioned by the LegendMasters publishers. Finally, he stuffed in the three LegendMasters core books: the Player's Reference Guide, the LegendMasters Campaign Book, and the Handbook of Fiends. Just in case someone else needed to borrow them. He had the rules memorized.

That more or less filled up the backpack, so he turned to his gym bag. He threw in a clean pair of underwear and a clean T-shirt (with the slogan "Dragon-Savvy" emblazoned across the front), along with a clean pair of socks. Larry stared at his meager

luggage, thinking hard. He should have more stuff, he just knew it. Then it hit him. Snacks!

Larry brought out the stash of junk food from his filthy kitchen. The real prize was a small box of candy they had let him take home from work. This box of sugary death included an assortment of Candy Draculas, Taffy Werewolves in all the different flavors, a few Novelty Mummies, a bag of Zombie Ju-Jus, and the grand pooh-bah of a Larry's snack world, a whole box of Cakensteins. On top of this horde, he added a bag of Parmesan and garlic Kettle Fried chips, a six-pack of Jolt cola, and S'mores Pop-Tarts for breakfast. Breakfast, he thought, I should eat before I go.

On the large, flat coffee table that doubled as the group gaming table was a Gumby's pizza box. Larry opened it up and extracted two cold pieces of pepperoni pizza, folded them together, crusts outward, and devoured the mess in four impressive bites.

He ate mechanically, like a shark, not really tasting his food. Once he felt the huge chunks of pizza inching their way down his gullet, he went to the fridge and upended the half-full two liter bottle of Mountain Dew directly into his face. Three tremendous swallows washed everything down just so. Larry belched loudly, the boom reverberating in his one-bedroom apartment, grabbed his two bags, and made for the door. He had to pick up the guys.

It wasn't until he was halfway to D.J.'s house that he remembered he forgot to pack deodorant and a toothbrush. What if there's a chick? he thought idly, then banished that notion from

his mind. Any women that would make it down into the gaming rooms wouldn't be the kind of uptight person that would stand on little things like hygiene.

It's Pronounced "Sin-Gin"

Nigel St. John quick-stepped into the lobby of the Radcliffe Hotel and sniffed the air experimentally. No malodorous smells lingered in the air, but it wasn't spring fresh, either. He looked around for Oscar Kuykendall, the day manager, and found him behind the front counter, deep in discussion with a member of the housekeeping staff.

"You there! Kuykendall!" St. John strode forward.

Oscar tore his gaze from the young woman, and his face lit up. "Ah! Mister St. John!" He was finally pronouncing his name right, thought St. John. Bloody yanks.

St. John put his hands on the counter. "Why aren't you at the meeting?"

"Well, sir, why aren't you?" Oscar asked cheerfully.

"Because I just walked in, didn't I?"

"And where would you have gone, sir?"

"To the Powell room, where ever the hell that is," replied

St. John, already exasperated with the man.

"Exactly!" Oscar pointed at him. "And that's why I'm here, to show you where the Powell room is."

"I see. And in the meantime, you're hobnobbing with the help instead of wiping the fingerprints off the counter?"

Oscar looked at St. John blankly. St. John sighed. “Never mind,” he said. “Come on. Let’s make this meeting fast, we have a lot to do.”

Oscar dismissed the housekeeper with a wave of his hand and lifted up the far section of the counter. “Yes sir, right this way.”

As they walked down the back hallway to the conference rooms, St. John took mental inventory of all the things that would need to be eventually fixed or replaced before the hotel was up to snuff. He stopped counting when he ran out of fingers and sighed. The Radcliffe Hotel seemed doomed to a life of mediocrity. Built in the mid-thirties with a combination of misappropriated WPA monies and Nazi Bund kickbacks, its patronage was not impacted in the slightest when the facts of its sordid past were revealed in the early fifties. The Radcliffe was located three blocks from Brewer’s street in the Gaslight district. The South Wing sported an excellent view of San Cibola Bay, which now included the impressive and boring water treatment plant. Too far away to command shoreline prices for its rooms and too close to the Gaslight to be convenient for most of the businessmen, the Radcliffe limped along with meager returns for fifty years. The only thing it now had going for it was that the hotel looked its age and made a nice piece of scenery for people frequenting the Gaslight district. It wasn’t even a stop on the various historic tours of the city any more.

For some reason, the owners of the Pacific Vista Hotel,

Hieber and Hawkins, took an interest in the quaint little rattrap.

So they bought the place for a song, intending to fix it up, restore it to its former glory, and that meant putting their best man

(Hawkins' words) on the job. "St. John," he said in their brief meeting, "if anyone can make that hotel sing, you can."

St. John listened attentively. After fifteen years, he fancied he understood his employers well. What Hawkins really said was, you're on a timetable to get this up to speed or you'll find yourself working at a Hotel 6 in Bakersfield. "Oh, well, thank you, sir," said St. John.

"Good show, then. They have some event coming up in a month. See what you can do to help them out, eh?"

Translation: we're watching you. St. John smiled. "You may rely on me, sirs."

And that was that. St. John's performance had somehow disappointed them. Maybe he was slipping. For fifteen years, he had run the city's premiere hotel for Neighbors and Norman alike with an iron grip. Perhaps they had heard about the fight between El Nino and La Nina at last year's Foreign Weather Conference. St. John had already given himself an ulcer worrying about it. For now, the thing to do was to press ahead. Get through this convention and then concentrate on the refurbishing.

St. John walked into the surprisingly spacious room. Including himself and Kuykendall, there were fifteen people in the room, from the other desk managers to the head chef. Managers,



all. St. John wrote his name on the dry-erase board behind the podium and faced the group.

“Hello, everyone, thank you for coming. My name is Nigel St. John,” he said it slowly, “Sin-Gin. Please pronounce it correctly. Right. Okay, we have a lot to do and very little time to do it in. The convention this weekend is, what?” St. John looked to Kuykendall for a prompt.

“MagicCon,” he said, cheerfully.

“MagicCon, right. No doubt another Neighborhood gathering. I expect since it’s being held here it’s going to be all the second- and third-class ne’er-do-wells. Well, I’m not knocking it, then. Okay.” St. John clapped his hands together. “We’ll need some dampening spells and some reinforcing spells, just in case things get out of hand, here. Someone bring the staff magician to me as soon as he arrives. Also, I want a word with the organizers when they show up.” He addressed Oscar directly. “You’ll stick with me through all of this, is that clear? I’m here to show you how to do things.”

“Yes, sir!” Kuykendall practically saluted.

“Fine. Also, make sure we have a bank of rooms set aside for the deities, should any show up. If you aren’t sure about mortal enemies and compatibility, come ask me. I’ve done enough of these bloody things, I should know. Finally, I want to make sure that the bar is fully stocked. All beers, all meads, Plutonian ale, Ambrosia, the works. That needs to happen by . . .” he glanced at his watch. “No later than eleven o’clock.”

The kitchen manager looked at Oscar, who shrugged and smiled.

“Also, make sure housekeeping and janitorial is on constant alert. God knows this place is barely passable, but we’ve got to be ready when the duels start. That means wet-vacs, people. If we don’t have one, we need to rent one. You,” he gestured to the head of housekeeping, “get on that. Something industrial. Make sure it can suck up blood.” The housekeeping manager blanched. “Okay, that’s all, I think. Oscar, you and I will adjourn to your no doubt filthy office and discuss other business. Let’s have a good show, people.” He clapped his hands together again and strode out, Kuykendall beaming in his wake.

The housekeeping manager stood and said the thing they had all been thinking. “Ese hombre está loco!”

Some Would Call It the Jedi Mind Trick

“D.J.?” his mother screamed from the bottom of the stairs.

“It’s 8 o’clock! You said to wake you when it was 8 o’clock!”

D.J. McGuinness heard his mother and shouted something inarticulate at her to indicate he was awake. Damn her, he thought as he made for the bathroom. As the water bounced ineffectually off his stocky frame, he thought about Larry’s apartment and mentally decorated his own fantasy pad for the ten thousandth time. In his room, he had laid out the night before his official day one convention wear: his new Levi’s and his old school Green Guy T-shirt with his infamous battle cry, “Time to Stomp!” across

the top. Let them all see the shirt and know the truth, he thought as he stared at the craggy image, that I am the master of four-color adventure. I cannot be stumped nor can I be beaten. Your trivia is my common knowledge. Your minutia is my daily bread. This was D.J.'s sixth MagicCon, and he knew the standard programming inside and out. There would be a Stump the Experts trivia panel, and he would come home with the top prize this year. He knew some of the staff, a few of the local artists and professionals, and even met the convention chairman, Leonard Lewellen, once. In a few more years, he would be a Big Name Fan and maybe even be invited to shows, which meant not paying for his hotel room or his con registration.

Downstairs, his mother had breakfast waiting, and he sat down heavily and began to eat without a word. His mother was not to be put off so lightly. "So, where are you going, exactly?" "San Cibola, Mother," said D.J. through his scrambled eggs. She knew that already. She just wanted to talk to him.

"And where in San Cibola are you going?"

"S a convention, Mother, MagicCon."

"Oh! One of those comic book places with the characters?"

D.J. sighed heavily at his philistine mother. Most of the time, it just wasn't worth the effort to correct her. "Yeah, like that."

His mother frowned and regarded him suspiciously. "It sounds like a business trip. Is Justin reimbursing you for ex-

penses?”

Justin Tripp was the owner of Comix Comix Comix (or Comix Cubed, for those in the know), in San Francisco. D.J. was the head register monkey and senior employee. Getting Justin to reimburse D.J. for anything would be like running across an Action Comics #1 in a quarter bin: impossible. Getting Justin to pay his weekly invoices was sometimes a chore, and that was for things he really wanted. “Mother, it’s not a business trip. It’s personal.”

The frown deepened. “Paid vacation?”

“Jesus, Mom, how many times do I have to tell you, it doesn’t work like that! He gives me forty percent off my new comics! That’s my perk!” Bits of bacon sprayed across the table. D.J. ignored them.

“Don’t swear. I just think you can find a better job that will treat you with respect, that’s all.” She wiped her hands on her dishrag to indicate the conversation was over. Outside, a familiar horn honked.

“That’s Larry,” D.J. said, standing up. “I gotta go.”

“Be careful on the road,” his mother said. She moved in for a kiss but D.J. was too nimble for her. He hit the stairs two at a time and was completely out of breath by the time he reached his room. His duffel bag was packed and ready to go, along with his master comics wish list, organized by who wanted what, name of book, issue number, and creative team. Inside the duffel bag was an empty backpack that D.J. would fill with comics as the

weekend wore on. This was known as the Backpack of Deals, and it was a minor legend itself among his circle of friends.

As it was, he was cutting it close. He had planned on having three hundred dollars to make his purchases with, but then Justin bought a back issue run of Werewolf By Night last week, so there went that cash. He had about a hundred and fifty bucks, but it wouldn't be nearly enough. Time to exert some of his only-child muscles.

D.J. thundered down the stairs and walked back into the kitchen and kissed his mom. "Bye, Mother," he said, then stopped. "Oh, I need some money for food."

His mother, still reeling from the kiss, asked, "How much?"

"Seventy— I mean, fifty bucks should do it."

His mother put her hands on her hips. "Don't lie to me, young man. I heard you say seventy five dollars."

"I don't want to be a burden to you," he said, looking down at the ground. From outside came a second, longer horn honk.

She shook her head. "You are a treasure," she said, digging into her purse. She pressed five twenty-dollar bills into his hand. "Don't tell your father," she said.

"Mom! This is too much!"

His mother held up her hand. "Not another word. Go. Tell Larry I said to be careful on the highway."

D.J. smiled at her and ran out of the house. Sometimes, it's just too easy. Larry's van chugged impatiently by the curb, farting smoke and various smells. He opened the cargo door, threw

his bag in, and leapt into the front seat.

“Let’s go,” he said. Larry put the van in gear and peeled out.

## It’s Two, Two Conversations in One

Stevie Fleckner stumbled awkwardly through the revolving doors of the Radcliffe, a fully loaded luggage cart trailing behind him. He moved slowly, brow furrowed in concentration, as the pile of printer’s boxes on the luggage cart swayed this way and that. With great care, he maneuvered his load to the front desk. “I’m Stevie Fleckner,” he gasped. “Director of programming. MagicCon. The manager wanted to see me?”

The young girl in the green blazer blinked twice at the man in front of her. He wore thick glasses that had fogged over, a tan bushwhacker’s vest, pockets fully loaded, and under that was a black T-shirt with a logo that read MagicCon in florescent green. They’re here early, she thought, slapping on her professional smile. “Past the concierge’s desk is a short hallway. The manager’s office is in there.”

“Thank you.” Stevie repeated the balancing act all the way across the lobby to the concierge’s desk. He left all of the boxes but the top one marked “Con Stuff that Really IS important.” That went with him into the meeting.

He was nervous about this, and that anxiety was giving

him serious stomach trouble. This was the seventh MagicCon to be held at the Radcliffe, and this was the first time in seven years that he had been asked to speak to the manager of the hotel. Len, the convention promoter, usually took care of that stuff, leaving Stevie free to resolve any conflicts between the live-action Vampire gaming and the Rocky Horror Picture Show review on Saturday night.

This morning, however, he had been pulled out of bed by his cell phone ringing. After answering it with a mumble, he came awake.

“Steve, it’s Len.” Len was the only person he knew who didn’t call him Stevie or Caster, his Traveller pilot from years ago when he still gamed.

“Morning. What time is it? Am I late?”

“Naw. Just got a call from the hotel. Apparently they’re under new management and they want to talk to someone about the programming. Would you mind going down there and taking care of it? If there’s anything to pay, tell them to call me. Otherwise, I trust you.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Stevie, thrilled at being asked to act in an official manner befitting the convention, and suddenly nervous beyond his wildest expectations. He made sure he was wearing this year’s convention T-shirt before leaving the house.

Now, he just had to be charming. And professional. And helpful. Stevie knocked weakly on the door, fully prepared to fail in all of the above categories.

“Come in,” said a clipped British accent.

Stevie shouldered open the door. Sitting behind a functional metal desk with a glass top was a very British-looking man, clean-shaven, wearing a business suit. He seemed out of place in the small office. Stevie was fascinated with the man’s high forehead. He’d never seen a British forehead before, and it was wider than he had ever expected.

“Well?” said the man, his arms folded.

“Oh, sorry, right.” Stevie stepped forward and held out his sweaty hand. “I’m Stevie Fleckner, director of programming.”

The short, round-faced man who had been standing behind and to the left of the desk intercepted the hand and pumped it warmly. “Oscar Kuykendall, nice to meet you. This,” he indicated the British man who’s put-out expression hadn’t changed since Stevie had entered, “is Mister Nigel St. John. Mr. St. John is the acting manager, and a very important man.”

“Hello.” St. John indicated the chair in front of the desk.

“Please take a seat, we’ll keep this brief.” Stevie sat down, the box in his lap. “Now then, Mister Felcher, you are the director of programming, are you not?”

“Fleckner. Yes sir.”

“What?”

“I said yes sir.”

“No no, before that, was that a cantrip? A charm? What was that?” He looked very worried.



“It’s my name. Stevie Fleckner.” Fleckner frowned and pushed his glasses up onto his nose. What was this? he wondered.

“Yes, I know that.” He glanced at Kuykendall, who shrugged and smiled. “Well, well, well . . . MagicCon.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Been doing this for a while, now?”

“For a while, yeah.”

St. John nodded. “Me, too. I’ve done a lot of these things, and so I know what you types are capable of. I want to be absolutely clear that we are not going to be taken advantage of, right?”

Stevie shook his head emphatically. “Oh, no sir, we aren’t trying to pull anything. We have a great relationship with the previous staff . . .”

St. John held up his hand. “And we’d like to keep it that way . . . provided we get a few ground rules straight.”

“Oh . . . okay.” Stevie didn’t know whether to be relieved or to up the tension a notch.

“Now, then, do you have a copy of the scheduled events that I could see?”

“Oh, yes, right here,” Stevie dug around in the box and came up with a file folder, stuffed to overflowing. He extracted two stapled sheets of paper and handed it across. St. John seemed reluctant to actually touch the top of the desk with any part of his arms. Finally, he scooted the schedule off the edge and caught it, glancing quickly down the page.

“Magic tournament? Here?”

“Uh, yes sir, on Saturday. All day.”

“Young man, we have other guests staying here.”

“Well, I know that, we were going to use the ballroom, which we reserved for the whole weekend.”

“The ballroom doesn’t enter into it. It says right here, ‘sanctioned dueling,’ misspelled, I should add. I’m afraid I can’t allow any dueling in the hotel.”

White-hot fire burned Stevie’s cheeks. His stomach rolled over. “But Mister Sin-Gin, it’s sanctioned! People will be showing up expecting to play!”

St. John leaned over the desk and said in a low voice,

“Look, Flaycher, just between the two of us, there isn’t a staff magician here at the hotel. I’m having to send for one at the last minute, and I’m on a waiting list. I’ve called the Pentacle, and they can be here in a pinch, but we otherwise have no protection against enchantments or sorceries. You can understand the gravity of that, I trust?”

Stevie rocked back in his chair. Was he talking about a Magic: the Gathering game? Maybe it was some sort of analogy, but Stevie had no idea what. So, until he could figure it out, he dropped back into his only real defense against gamers in a conversation: total bullshit. “Oh, well, sure, no protection, sure. That makes all the sense in the world.”

St. John nodded. “Good. I appreciate you working with us on this. Now,” he continued, “about your guest list.”

“Yes?”

“Any deities showing up?”

“Any gods?” Stevie looked at the man in awe. He got it now. This guy was one of them! Finally, it made sense. The British accent should have been a clue. Probably a Whovian, or maybe Blake’s 7. He certainly was old enough.

“Yes, gods, demigods, legends, that kind of thing?” The man was impatient.

“Oh, legends. Hmm, well, the guest of honor is Stanley Weissman . . . ”

St. John frowned. “Doesn’t ring any bells. What did he do?”

“He’s the creator of Mjolner, Son of Thor,” said Stevie.

“Very popular right now. The kids love it.”

St. John wrote it down on a yellow legal pad. “Okay, he’s using a different name. Again. Figures. Bloody one-eyed git. W-O-T-A-N . . . Fine.” He looked up. “Okay, who else?”

Stevie pulled out the mock-up for the program book and leafed through it. “Oh, the big media guest is Richard Hatch.”

“Who?”

“You know, Apollo?” Stevie tsked tsked in his head. Surely they had Battlestar Galactica in the UK?

“Apollo! My God, of course.” St. John scribbled more things down. “No one told me he was back. You’d think they could keep me in the loop, I swear, it’s like pulling the teeth out of a dragon’s mouth . . . ” he muttered. “Fine. Anyone else?”

Stevie was looking back through the book again. “Couple of locals, some big-name fans, this guy who walks around in werewolf make-up the whole time . . . Oh our author. First-timer. Dark stuff. Her name is Jane Callow.”

“First-timer. What’s she written?”

Stevie read her bio. “Name of the book is *The Spell of the Blood*. Not my cup of tea, I’m afraid.”

St. John wrote that down, too. “All right, what we have here is not so bad. What I need from you is an updated list on who else may be showing up. I want to know what wizards are where, and if there will be any mortal enemies in attendance. I expect a little rough stuff, but still, let’s keep it as low-key as possible.”

He put on a sporting smile.

Stevie gave him one in return. “Sounds good to me,” Stevie said. “Oh, one other thing, we’ll be doing the Vampire: the Masquerade Ball after Midnight.”

St. John’s head jerked up, his eyes wide. “Vampires? But I thought that they were gone?”

“Oh no, it’s making a comeback. Well, the live stuff never really went away. Anyway, it won’t be a big deal, maybe thirty or so. Last year we had a couple of self-styled vampire hunters who went around squirting everyone, but that will be handled this year.”

“Oh, yes, I remember them,” said Oscar. “Super soakers!”

“Right, super soakers,” said Stevie. He handed St. John a battered card, one of the last ones he had. He meant to run some

more off on his computer before the show, but time got away from him. "My cell phone's on the card. Call me if you have any questions. Or, you know, if you want to participate in the masquerade ball, or something like that."

St. John's smile was tight. "I'll call you, then. Thank you, good bye."

Stevie shut the door behind him. A hotel manager who was into gaming and stuff. He shook his head and grinned. This was going to be the best MagicCon ever!

?

St. John watched the door close, then he dove for the phone.

He called the Pacific Vista Hotel. "Hello, this is St. John. Where's Skaldrian? Well, find him and get him over here as fast as he can ride on that bleeding carpet of his." He hung up the phone and looked at Oscar's smiling face. "We're all doomed."

#### Another Hilarious Episode of Turk and Buzz

Fred "The Turk" Terkington made a mad dash from the cafeteria across Berkeley campus to his dormitory room. This morning's pancakes sat like a rock in his stomach, but he couldn't worry about that. It was convention time. His roommate, Brian "The Buzz" Bellingham, was still passed out from the night before, which was fine with Fred because it meant not having to answer any questions about where he was going and why he was skipping Friday classes. Not that it mattered to Buzz; he just liked

to dig on Fred whenever possible.

Fred dressed hurriedly, running his fingers through his short, wavy hair and absently tucking in his blue flannel shirt into his rolled up jeans. He put his glasses back on and gave himself the once over. The flannel shirt over the T-shirt helped to bulk him up a bit, but he still looked thin. He looked serious, maybe too serious. His intensity tended to turn the girls in the Radio-Television-Film department off. They avoided him, and really, that was fine, he supposed. He didn't want any significant other swiping any of his ideas. Those kinds of partnerships were always doomed to failure anyway.

His gym bag was already packed. In addition to his flannel shirts (red and blue only, those being the only kind he ever saw George Lucas wear), he included two T-shirts, Star Trek, and Planet of the Apes. His Star Wars shirt was currently on his body, underneath the flannel. Along with the clothes, he stuffed a copy of his working script for Space Avenger, his magnum opus, into the bag, protected under the few books and comics he planned on getting signed at MagicCon. He would make notes on it during the weekend; maybe show it to an interested producer, since it was common knowledge that the studios sent many scouts and industry people to these cons in an effort to find the "next big thing." And Turk Terkington knew that he would be the next big thing.

Certainly not at this con, but one day, they would hold a

special screening of his movie at MagicCon. He could clearly see himself up on stage, fielding questions from the packed audience. He could hear the thunderous applause and imagine some wide-eyed fan—female fan—in the third row thanking him for single-handedly saving science fiction movies.

His Oscar speech was already prepared. The sequels to Space Avenger swam in his head, begging to be let out. It was all about vision. One man, with all of his people behind him to make that vision happen. He would be that one man. It was just a matter of time. That and a high B average in his classes.

The sound of movement from Buzz's side of the room made him look around. Buzz made a snorting sound, leaned over, and vomited with practiced neatness into the plastic-lined trashcan beside his bed, snuffled once, then sat up. "Goin' to class, Bro?" he mumbled.

Crap! Fred looked at his luggage on the bed, then to the disheveled form of Buzz in the early morning light. "Uh, no, Buzz, I'm going away for the weekend."

Buzz snorted again and spit something into the trashcan.

"Where you going?"

"San Cibola."

Buzz grinned. "Road trip, Buddy."

"Yeah, road trip." Please, please just drop it, Fred thought.

"Hey, grab my comp2 homework, will you?"

Fred looked at Buzz. "Man, I'm not going to class today."

Buzz nodded. "You th' man, Bro. Thanks!" Buzz fell back

in the bed, rolled over and went back to sleep.

Fred shook his head. And that guy got laid, too. It made absolutely no sense. He threw his shaving kit into the densely packed bag and strained to re-zip everything. His toiletries included a box of condoms, which he had bought his freshman year and had still not cracked open. Maybe this con would change his luck. He hadn't counted on losing his virginity at a media convention, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He would take whatever he could get. He took one last look at the goatee on his chin that was valiantly trying to become a beard with no success, then shrugged, and walked down the hall to get Burt.

#### The Fourth Man is Revealed

Burt Vaughn looked at the contents of his suitcase again, hoping the shirts would somehow magically transform into something cool. It wasn't happening. No doubt about it, he would have to pick something up at the con. Something that he was into that one of the other guys didn't have yet. It would be a daunting task. He closed the suitcase and double-checked his wallet: a hundred bucks and his Mastercard with a little more than three hundred dollars to go before it was tapped out. The plan was simple. If all the receipts said "books," he could tell his folks they were essential for his classes.

Fred would be knocking on the door any minute now; he



had to hurry. He grabbed the short spiral-bound notebook, which contained all of his lists and notes, and stuffed it into the front thigh pocket of his cargo pants along with two ballpoint pens. In the other pocket went his palm pilot, which had even more notes. His cell phone was fully charged, and it went in the side pocket at his waist. The charger was in the suitcase already, so that was no problem.

That left only his baby. He lovingly folded the laptop computer and slid it into the black nylon carrying case. The zip drive went next, and as an afterthought, a short stack of blank disks, in case he needed to download anything. He rolled up the wires and cables around the modem and stuffed that in the special pocket on the side. Everything closed up nicely, and he threw the shoulder strap on. Not too heavy, unless he was walking to San Cibola. Burt stuck his head out into the hall and saw Turk walking hurriedly up to him. "Come on!" he stage whispered. "We gotta book!"

"Coming," Burt said. He slipped out into the hall. Turk made a face.

"What's the shirt, there, Meat?" he asked. Meat was the group's name for Burt, since he was the newest member and inexperienced in the ways of fandom. He hated it.

"What's wrong with this?" he asked.

"Dude, it's an R.E.M. shirt."

"Correction," Burt held up a finger. "It's a 1995 Concert T-shirt."

“Whatever. It’s a band shirt, man. Don’t you have something that blends in better?”

Burt frowned. “Is there some sort of dress code for this show?”

Turk rolled his eyes. “Well no, it’s just that . . . oh skip it.”

“And what exactly do you have on, Oh Great Slayer of the Bedroom? Star Wars T-shirt? Or your Logan’s Run apparel? Favor me, please, Casanova . . .” He stopped when the vein at Fred’s temple became visible. It was the one thing that Burt had over them all. He’d had several girlfriends and had no trouble whatsoever talking to the opposite sex.

“People are going to know you are a neophyte, is all, Burt,” said Turk.

“Dude, I am a neophyte, and I’m okay with that.” They started walking, but Turk stopped abruptly.

“What’s this shit?” he asked, pointing at the computer case.

“My laptop,” said Burt, “see, this is called a com-pu-ter.

We use them here in the 21st century . . .”

“Har-de-fuckin’-har. Why are you bringing it?”

Burt shrugged. “I dunno. Might want to do some surfing, check Yahoo auctions, play a little Quake, who knows?”

Turk shook his head knowingly. “Never happen, my friend.

Once you see the dealer’s room, you’ll be so stimulated by what’s out there in the real world, you’ll forget your little porn-finder there.”

“I kinda doubt that,” said Burt, but he looked dubiously at his nylon case as he said it.

“So,” said Turk, as they exited the dormitory, “you figured out your game plan yet?”

“Uh, well, sorta,” said Burt. “What I did was, I made a short list of everything I wanted, by category, then I thought I’d just pick up one thing at a time, as I come across it.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, hell, look.” They stopped in the Sproule Plaza, en route to University Street, and Burt broke out the palm pilot. He tapped the screen a few times with his pointer and several folders popped up. Each one had a label, like “Comics,” “Movies,” and “Shirts.” He tapped “Movies,” and the folder opened up. There was a list of ten or so bootlegs, PAL transfers, and compilation tapes. “See? I can cross this stuff off, one at a time, as I find it, then start over at the top when I’ve bought something off of each list.”

Turk looked at Burt. “How methodical. This is why I don’t play Magic: the Gathering with you anymore.”

“Shut up, this’ll work,” said Burt.

Turk shook his head. “You’ll learn, man, you’ll learn.”

They turned the corner and sitting in the No Parking lane was Larry’s van. D.J. leaned out the window.

“Let’s go!” he shouted. Burt and Turk broke into a run.

They leapt into the back door and the van lurched forward.

## Everyone Signs In

They hit the revolving doors of the Radcliffe like conquering Huns: D.J. in front, Turk and Burt in the middle, and Larry bringing up the rear, loaded down like one of Hadrian's elephants. In addition to his backpack, gym bag, and box of food, Larry also carried D.J.'s duffel bag and Burt's laptop. D.J. ran ahead and got in line behind the other convention-goers at the front desk. Turk and Burt headed through the lobby to the convention registration table located just outside of the East Ballroom and got in the longer line of convention-goers. That left Larry, who dropped everything in his hands and sat heavily down on the couch, breathing heavily. Nourishment, he thought, rooting through the box of sweets. I have to keep my strength up. He found the box of Cakensteins and pulled one out. Perfect. Light, fluffy, yellow sponge cake with a strawberry goo-filled center and icing on top in the shape of the familiar, flat-headed monster. The icing and molding suggested that Cakenstein was happy with his snack-cake fate. Larry didn't even notice as he shoved the entire thing into his mouth. It was like nothing on this earth, he reflected. The sugar went to work almost instantly on his system and returned his breathing to normal. Thus sated, he sat on the couch in a full sprawl and watched the other fans come in through the revolving door, occasionally nodding to people he recognized.

D.J. was fortified with a stack of cash from his friends and his mother's credit card information. They had been fortunate enough to get reservations in the Radcliffe, which always filled up first because it was where the action was, convention-wise. Everyone could party, play games, and do whatever, then just walk to the elevators and collapse in their rooms without having to worry about catching a taxi to the Special 8 down the street. No, the die-hard fans stayed at the Radcliffe if they knew what was good for them.

When the line finally cleared and he could see the front counter, he marched up to it, put on his most professional face, and said, "I have a reservation for this weekend."

"Name?" The young woman in the green blazer looked politely tired already. She stared fixedly at the screen in front of her.

"D.J. McGuinness," he said.

She typed something. "Is it under another name?"

D.J. panicked until he remembered. "Oh, it's under Nancy McGuinness."

The woman typed something else. "Okay, where is she?"

"She's not here. I'm her son. We reserved the room under that credit card. It's for me."

"Okay . . ." the woman typed some more things, a microscopic frown in her eyes. "Charge it to this card, then?"

"NO!" D.J. cried, all composure gone. "I have cash." He held up the wad of money proudly.

The woman sighed. "All right, no problem. That will be one hundred-seventy dollars and twenty-nine cents, please."

D.J. actually heard the blood rush out of his head. He knew the wad of cash in his hand by heart, and he was suddenly short, way short. "But . . . the convention . . . I'm with the convention . . . we get the special rate . . ."

The woman nodded. "Um hum, this price is the convention special, then there's hotel tax . . ."

"Hotel tax?" D.J. yelped. "What're we playing, Monopoly?"

She smiled thinly. "I agree, it's high, but there's nothing we can do about it. The rest of the charge is a deposit against amenities."

"Like what?" asked D.J.

"Any long distance, any movies watched, room service, that kind of thing," she said, the frustration creeping into the edges of her voice. "You'll get that back, provided you don't use any of those things. It's just a deposit."

This was getting out of hand. D.J. didn't want anything to be charged to his mother's credit card. She'd kill him if she knew he used it. On the other hand, if he just charged a partial amount to the card, then he could bring cash back and be the hero of the day. Or at least, not get into so much trouble. "Tell you what," he said, sliding the ungainly stack of money over to her, "this is for the room. Can you charge the rest to the card?"

“No problem.” She took the money with an unreadable expression and quickly counted it. “Lots of ones,” she commented, making new denominational stacks. “Okay,” the girl said, now that order had been restored. “How many keys?”

“Four.”

“What’s your name, sir?” The large, frumpy woman sat behind the folding table, a metal cash box and various writing implements in front of her. To her left, on an adjacent chair, was an open plastic file box with a slew of alphabetical tabs, each one a different color.

“Fred Terkington,” said Turk. She turned to paw through the tabs. “I’m also picking up a badge for Larry Croft.”

“Terkington and Croft,” she muttered. “Ah. Here you go. Smart thinking. You paid in advance.” She handed Turk a name badge, consisting of a fold-over plastic holder with a safety pin and a colored square of cardboard with MAGICCON 2K on it and a space for his name. Underneath the space was a sticker that said 3-DAY. Turk leaned down and wrote “THE TURK” in bold letters and pinned the badge to his shirt.

The woman handed Burt the same thing, including D.J.’s badge, and then turned back to Turk. “I can’t find any Croft. Is it with a C or a K?”

Turk and Burt looked at each other, uncomfortable. “Check under Omicron,” Turk said quietly.

“Omicron, Omicron, Omi- oh! Good to go!” She handed Turk the badge, which Turk left blank. He’d be damned if he was

going to write that name in. Let Larry do it himself. As they turned to go, the woman cried out, "Wait up, guys! Don't forget your program books!" She handed them four programs and turned to help the next set of people.

Turk leafed through the book on the way back to the lobby.

"Hey, the Anime room is showing Legend of the Overfiend . . ."

"Isn't that the one . . . with the demons . . ." Burt grimaced.

"The demons that are trying to take over the planet," Turk finished.

"And then they have sex with a bunch of high school girls, right?" Burt prompted.

"Dude, it's much more complex than that."

"Dude, it's tentacle porn."

Turk smiled in a patronizing way. "No, it's adult anime.

There's a big difference. In Japan, they have a different cultural barometer than us. Certain things are just not as taboo as others."

Burt was pretty sure that tentacle porn was deviant, no matter what country you were from. "Why would you want to watch that in a room full of smelly, sweaty guys?" he asked.

"Yeah, it doesn't seem like a good idea, all of a sudden."

Turk snapped the book closed.

D.J. was waiting for them when they got back. "There was a bit of trouble with the hotel," he said.

"What trouble?" Turk asked.



“Well, the room cost more because of hotel tax and amenities, which they really should put in the advertising ahead of time,” he said.

Burt thumped him on the arm. “Dumb-ass. I thought you’d done this before?”

“Hey, this is the first year I’ve handled the hotel stuff!”

D.J. held his hands up. “If anything, Larry should have warned me.”

“Aw, quit cryin’,” Larry said. “How much extra?”

“Fifteen bucks a piece,” he said, “which is going straight to my mom, because I had to charge that to the credit card.”

Everyone dug around in their pockets and handed D.J.

another mess of bills. D.J. put the money into his wallet where it immediately proceeded to burn a guilty hole. “Cool, thanks guys, you saved my ass,” he said. “Now, let’s get serious.” He handed out plastic punch keys to everyone. Burt and Turk distributed the badges. “Okay,” said D.J. “Everything is ready to go. Let’s dump our shit in the room and get started!”

Everyone nodded. D.J., Turk and Burt went back to the van for the rest of the bags. Larry stayed to watch what was already there. While he waited, he ate another Cakenstein and nodded to the people he knew who walked in.

I Love the Smell of Comics in the Morning

The doors to the West Ballroom were wedged open and a

great murmur came from inside. The guys were detained by the overweight Klingon acting as security just long enough to ensure that all four of them were wearing their badges. Then they were allowed inside.

The room was divided into four aisles, lined on either side with ten and twenty foot wide booths formed out of cafeteria tables.

Some of the tables were inverted, allowing people access into the booth, but most of the tables were covered in long, white boxes.

Behind those tables was an easel or some form of jury-rigged shelving, displaying rows of comic books.

Some of the dealers had strange-looking Japanese toys. A few of the dealers brought books. A couple of guys sold bootlegged videotapes and T-shirts. There was even a guy selling real chain mail and medieval weaponry. But comics ruled the roost.

D.J. surveyed the scene with a practiced eye, looking every bit like a military tactician. "Okay, let's each take a row. Meet you on the other side." He set off down the far left-hand wall.

Everyone else chose an aisle and waded into the fray.

Larry moved through the crowd much in the same way that a killer whale will scatter a school of goldfish. His nametag now read OMICRON in a heavy gothic script. People were only too happy to give Larry the right of way. He spoke to several convention-goers and dealers he knew, but they all kept the chit-chat to a minimum. This was not the time to be social. It was time to shop.

He stopped briefly to consider a chain mail coif, then moved on when he saw the price tag. At another table, he spied the Famous Monsters of Filmland magazine he was looking for, the one with the Cyclops from The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad on the cover. The price tag said thirty bucks. High, but not too high. Larry made a mental note to come back later to haggle the man down. He turned away from the booth and saw the corner end cap: some dealer bought three booths, opened the whole thing up, and lined the tables with plastic milk crates. Underneath the tables were stacks of board games and war games. A sign hung over the tables: FAT AL'S USED GAME BARN. Three men were rummaging through the crates, stacks of game modules beside them. Larry licked his lips, and a chill passed through his body. He hurried over.

D.J. walked with purpose. He stopped at each booth, quickly scanned the shelves behind the bearded and bespectacled dealers, ran the contents through his brain, and either stayed to browse or kept walking. If he found a match, something on the wall that struck his fancy or filled a hole in his collection, he would go through the dealer's boxes and try to build a stack of at least six books or magazines. Then he looked dubiously at the stack, pointed to the object on the shelf that he really wanted, and said, "Okay, how much for these and that one over there?" The strategy was very hit or miss. He either got a minimum of 20% off the purchase price (which was fine, because everyone knew that the dealers marked up their comics for the shows) or he would get a

flat answer from the dealer: No deals. D. J. would smile, hand the stack over, and say, “Never mind, then,” and walk off. It was shitty, but it was the law of the jungle in the huckster’s room. Eat or be eaten.

Sale tables were very important on the first pass. You had to check those out first, particularly when it was a store with overstock. You could find three and four dollar books for fifty cents. Sell those to your friends for half of book price, and you double your money. D.J. smiled as the stack of books beside him grew larger and larger. He would need to offload the backpack early on, it seemed.

Turk was in no hurry to explore the dealer’s room, so he strolled leisurely through the crowd. Only certain things interested him: video bootleg pirates, movie posters and lobby cards, and TV memorabilia. Everything else could wait. He would glance briefly through the comics and paw through the fanzines (no one ever had Buckaroo Banzai fanzines, but he had to look anyway) but most of his time and energy went into the dealers with media-based stuff.

He bought a VHS tape of Star Wars rarities from one dealer simply because it had all of the Saturday Night Live skits featuring Star Wars, going all the way back to a coked-up Carrie Fisher skit from the late seventies. Most of the other stuff that was on the tape, he already had. The guy also had some of the old Wizards and Warriors episodes on tape. He made a mental note to tell

Larry about those later.

Another dealer had lobby cards and he spent too much time there looking for obscure movies that no one would know but nevertheless had a famous actor or had great artwork. Those would go up on the wall of his dorm, and he could act scornful of anyone who didn't know what lobby cards were or didn't recognize the movie. He selected a lobby card from *The Duelists*, an early Ridley Scott movie with Harvey Keitel and Keith Carradine. Both actors were featured on the front of the card, swords drawn. It was a pretty good shot of Keitel, who looked very young. It was perfect. It was also only ten bucks. Turk paid the man and went on his way, thirty bucks lighter, but the soon-to-be envy of the dorm.

Burt was in shock. Prior to meeting Turk and Larry and D.J., he had very little contact with the worlds of comic books, fantasy, and science fiction. Sure, he watched *Star Trek*, read the *X-Men*, and bought the occasional action figure. But it was all self-taught. His worldview of one became a worldview of four upon making friends with Turk. Now, his world had become infinite.

Everyone here would understand him if he made a *Star Blazers* joke. Everyone here had seen the special edition of *Star Wars* and most likely agreed that Greedo would never have shot first. It was amazing. Burt wandered in a daze through them all, noting their T-shirts, their backpacks, their buttons, and their hats. He saw references to *Spider-Man*, *Red Dwarf*, *Star Trek*, *V*,

Battlestar Galactica, Buck Rogers, Planet of the Apes, Forbidden Planet, The X-Men, and something called The Legion of Super-heroes. D.J. would doubtless be able to translate that one for him. No one gave him a second glance, as all eyes were focused on the booths full of merchandise.

Burt saw the dealer wedged in between a video pirate and someone selling trading cards. He hurried over, quickly perused the wall, and pointed. It was a Repo Man T-shirt, a reproduction of the movie poster with the logo in glowing green. "I'd like one of those, please, in XL."

"Eighteen bucks," said the dealer, lobbing a pre-wrapped shirt at him. Burt gratefully handed the man cash, then slipped away to the bathroom so he could change into his new shirt.

They met at the other side of the room and gathered to admire the first pass worth of loot.

"Hey, Burt's joined the team," said D.J., noting the shirt.

"What's in the backpack, Deej?" asked Burt.

"Bunch of fifty cent books. I'll go through 'em later," he said nonchalantly. "Larry, how you making out?"

"Super sweet!" he crowed, displaying a plastic sack loaded with stuff. "Scored some old LegendMasters modules, all out of print. Look, I got a couple with artwork by Erol Otus!"

"Never heard of him," said Turk. "But check this: a Duelists lobby card, and a Star Wars rarities tape!"

"The Duelists?" said Burt. "Sounds lame."

“It’s early Ridley Scott, you uncultured fool. Say, Larry, that reminds me, this guy,” he said, shaking the VHS cassette, “has some old Wizards and Warriors episodes on tape.”

“No shit? Cool!”

“Yeah, he’s that way,” said Turk. “Anyone see any Buckaroo Banzai fanzines?”

“Dude,” said D.J. “you gotta let go of that. They don’t exist. It was just one movie.”

“No, they do, I’m sure of it—”

Burt held up his hands. “Don’t get him started, D.J., please, I have to live with him for three days.”

“Eff you, Meat,” said Turk.

“Speaking of which,” said Larry, “is anyone hungry?”

“Larry, man, we just got here!” D.J. pounded Larry on the back. It sounded like a bass drum. “We have to do this room before someone else buys up the good shit. You know that, man.”

Larry groaned. “Aw, all right, but after this we have to get something to eat, or I’m liable to pass out.”

Everyone split back up, each one taking a different aisle than the one they started on, with each of them contemplating what Larry passing out would entail.

Oh, Shit

After the initial pass through the dealer’s room, they broke for lunch. Everyone stowed their convention loot in the room,

except for Larry, who was too worried that he might miss lunch. He kept his backpack with him. It wouldn't be far from him the entire show. In addition to over three hundred dollars worth of gaming books and supplies, the backpack held the entire character record sheet of Omicron Nightsliver, and one could not put a monetary value on that. No, that backpack wasn't leaving his sight. Not three blocks from the Radcliffe was a favorite eating spot of the convention-goers, the Green Onion. Ask any of the fans in attendance that weekend why everyone chose the Green Onion for at least one of their meals, and you'd get a variety of long-winded replies ranging from the quality and caliber of their double-XL T-shirts to the fact that the owner of the establishment is Irish and carries a fine selection of stouts and ales from the British Isles. No one ever deigned to mention that it was (A) the closest place to eat from the Radcliffe, and (B) it was the cheapest place to eat that wasn't a Burger King. Truthfully, the place was a run-down dive, one step up the culinary ladder from a greasy spoon.

Larry ordered his usual Green Onion meal: the double meat, double cheese chiliburger basket, with onion rings instead of fries and a Coke. He wasn't really all that hungry, what with all the snacks he had on the way to the con, but it was tradition, and Larry was very big on tradition. Everyone else ordered a bit more conservatively, particularly Burt. "Man, I'm telling you right now," Larry cautioned, "you have to make sure you eat during these



things. I've seen pregnant women faint on the convention floor because they forgot to eat, they got so caught up in stuff."

"I'll try to remember," said Burt, watching in horror as

D.J. ate the Scotch egg that came with his Ploughman's lunch.

Larry felt the first rumblings in his bowels as they walked

back to the convention, a slight roll in his stomach that turned

into a fist, then finally an unbearable pressure that trembled with

every step. He cursed his nervous stomach; it always did this

when he traveled. Actually, it did it all the time, but if Larry could

foist the blame off on something other than the amount and qual-

ity of food he routinely ate, then he would.

"Okay," D.J. said, as soon as they had cleared the revolv-

ing doors, "round two. Since there's no major events happening

today, we'll take off and meet back up in the room at, say, five

o'clock?"

Everyone nodded. "Cool, let's go," he said. D.J., Turk and

Burt made for the dealer's room. Larry slipped away to the bath-

room. Everyone else pretended not to notice.

Stercutus lived, formless and forgotten, in a liquid state.

The fields he once overlooked were gone, all of his worshippers

dead, his beautiful consort, Cloacina, now a distant memory. His

sphere of influence had shrunk down to no more than a fifteen-

foot radius. He was sad and bitter, and in the still of the night, he

would let his energy expand and remember happier times when

the citizens of Rome would anoint his likeness in the hall of the

gods and send impressive offerings, with the grace of Cloacina,

to him along the Cloaca Maxima. Farmers gave up their virgin daughters to him in an attempt to curry his favor. He was the god of manure, and he was a just god.

There was a time when those who displeased Stercutus would dry out from within and wither like a gourd in the heat of the sun. Now, everyone displeased him and he could do very little about it. When his body faded into nothingness, all he could do was float through the water, keeping his mass together, but unable to swim or guide his movement. He existed in that fashion for hundreds of years. It was blind chance that he ended up being pulled into the San Cibola bay. At first, he was pleased with the surge of energy he felt; perhaps it signaled a comeback, maybe even with worshippers. But all it meant was that it was now easier than before to move about. He went from floating sludge to slithering sludge, trapped in the pipes of the shattering chaos that the humans dared to call a city. Metal, rusted, narrow pipes were no way to run a sewer, and he should know. The festival of the harvest moon used to be his favorite of all holidays. The farmers would send entire flotillas, heaped high with fresh dung, into the grand tunnels of Cloacina's beautiful and orderly sewers for them to both admire. The tunnels ran for miles, and he and Cloacina frequently romped and frolicked in the grand causeways. That was a sewer, he reflected.

He was nearly powerless now. Only hate and sadness and a host of negative emotions kept Stercutus from dissipating into

cosmic slush. In the pipes he lived, and he could roam freely, for what it was worth. What little power and influence he still had was directed towards his escape from his current form. As people sat down to offer silent, meaningless tribute to whatever passed for divine intelligence, their minds would empty like their bowels. Some were only too willing to listen to Stercutus' directions. Others were harder to convince. They never stayed very long. None of them remembered their contributions to Stercutus' plans. It had taken years to complete. But at last it was complete. A simple, direct prayer. A summoning.

Carved, written, and scratched, letter by letter, like a scatological ransom note, men sitting in the last stall of the restroom of the Radcliffe hotel had taken dictation for Stercutus on the bathroom wall. Five long years spent protecting the last stall of the men's room from janitors and other graffiti artists from erasing his escape message were about to pay off. This morning, the last letter of the message was in place. Today, he would make good his escape and reclaim the streets of San Cibola for the Roman pantheon.

It was the box of Cakensteins that did it. Larry, on the other hand, wasn't much for such contemplations. All he knew was that he had to go. His backpack, already heavy, was now a boat anchor that made every step sheer agony.

Larry shouldered open the restroom door and automatically headed to the last stall in the line-up. There were a number of reasons for this. It was usually the one reserved for handicapped

people and therefore much larger, which suited Larry just fine. It was also out of the way, and since Larry rarely knew how long he would be, he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Then there was the one time back in the third grade when he sat down in the first stall in the restroom, and some of the popular kids forced the stall door open and made fun of him until the teacher came in and broke it up. That was what started the habit of hiding in the last stall. The other stuff came later, to cushion Larry's psyche against enduring trauma.

He sat down hard, pants around his ankles, and let his muscles go. The relief was so profound that it caused Larry to shudder. He held his breath, pushed hard, and felt his bowels contract. All of the junk that Larry had eaten earlier in the day queued up, waiting for their chance to contribute to the relief fund. Larry relaxed, knowing that this was just the beginning. He wiped the sweat off his brow with a wad of tissue and looked around.

Ah, graffiti, the boon companion of the man on the crapper.

Larry cast his eyes around the stall, looking for something of interest. At eye level, on the right hand wall, over the toilet paper dispenser, was a single line:

*Stercutus, accipere ma spreco modo que tibi poterli vivere  
otra vez.*

Larry read it slowly, trying to get a feel for what it might be. It looked like a bunch of different people had written the sentence. The word at the beginning looked cool. *Stercutus*. Maybe

he could use that for a character name . . . He cocked his head to one side, double-checking that no one else was in the bathroom.

“Stercutus,” he said aloud. “Stercutus. Ster-cu-tus.”

All at once the sentence leapt from his lips, unbidden.

“Stercutus, accipere ma spreco modo que tibi poterli vivere otra vez.”

Something splashed in the toilet, and Larry jumped, because it wasn't him. Then a cramp hit him, and the second wave poured forth—and Larry felt a sharp, sudden pressure down below. It wasn't that something was trying to get out, but rather that something was trying to get in. He screamed and tried to stand up, but found that he could do neither. His jaw was locked in a grim rictus, his tongue thick in his mouth, every muscle in his body tensed and strained to prevent him from standing. He could only breath deep, fast, panicky breaths through his nose.

As soon as Larry did so, he smelled a horrible, abominable stench that he knew couldn't have possibly come from him.

There was heat and froth in the toilet, and the strain of it all was too much for Larry. He slumped sideways in a dead faint.

Friday Night with the Guys

The guys had occupied the room less than four hours and it already looked like a snow globe that someone had turned upside-down and shaken. D.J. sat cross-legged on the first unmade bed, sorting a stack of bagged and boarded comics into numerous

smaller piles. Turk sat on the other unmade bed, flipping channels on the hotel television. Burt had his laptop set up on the desk in the corner and was currently looking up things on eBay. Their bags and packs were strewn around the floor, most of them open and with contents spilling out. The bathroom light was on, as well as the four lights in the hotel room.

“I wonder where Larry is,” Burt said idly.

“Fuck him. He knew the schedule,” said D.J, his head down, sorting comics.

“Ah, he probably found someone he knew in the gaming area. Hell, he may be running a game, for all we know,” said Turk. “Dammit! HBO, Showtime, and Skinamax, but no Sci-fi channel!” He threw the remote down in disgust.

“Well,” said Burt, “maybe we should go look for him in the game rooms?”

“NO!” said D.J. and Turk together.

That got Burt’s full attention. He turned around. “Why not?”

D.J. said, “Burt, there are certain things that one does not do when one goes to a convention. The number one thing one does not do is associate with the gamers.”

“Yeah,” said Turk, “think about a room full of Larrys, all talking about their Omicrons . . . now multiply that times a hundred.”

Burt smirked. “Uh, I know I’m gonna get rapped in the

mouth for this, but you two dipshits both game, right?”

“Superman I, Miss Tessmacher to Lex Luthor,” said Turk.

Burt smiled in acknowledgement. It was a little game the two of them played; slipping dialogue from their favorite movies into casual conversation, just to see who would catch it.

“Well, so do you!” said D.J. shrilly.

“I know! But what’s the big deal? We’re all here together, right? I mean, brothers in arms or some shit like that.” Burt looked at both of them. “What’s your problem?”

“Meat, there’s a pecking order, okay?” D.J. stood up to lecture and pace. Both Turk and Burt rolled their eyes, but D.J. kept talking, oblivious. “It’s like, okay, here you go: Top level is the professionals, right? The fans that made it. Second tier is the big name fans. Guys with a few credits, some followers, but no real across the board success. Then there’s the rest of us. You know in Magic: The Gathering how each color has two associate colors and two opposite colors? Well, that’s the nomenclature of fandom. Every group has two associate sub-groups and two groups that oppose it. Take Star Trek,” he said, warming up to the subject. “Most Trekkies . . .”

“Trekkers,” Turk corrected.

“Whatever. Most Trekites,” he continued, “also like Blake’s Seven and Quantum Leap, but can’t stand Doctor Who and Star Wars. You get it?”

Burt scratched his head. “I think so. So, how big is the circle of fandom stuff?”

“Pretty big. No, wait, don’t think of it that way, I was just trying to illustrate . . .” D.J. said.

Burt held up his hand. “Yeah, I got you, I got you. Where do the gamers go?”

“Well, on one side you have the SCA people . . .” said D.J.

“And, what? Filkers?” Turk scrunched up his nose.

“Probably,” nodded D.J.

“What’s a ‘filker?’” asked Burt.

“Don’t worry about it, just avoid them at all costs.”

“Uber-Nerds,” said Turk.

“That still doesn’t explain why you game, but aren’t a gamer,” said Burt.

“Very simple,” said Turk, cutting D.J. off. “It’s something that we do every once in a while, like bowling or video games.

Larry does it whenever he can, to the exclusion of all other things.”

“Except eating,” said D.J.

“Well, he can do both, then, can’t he?” grinned Turk. “One hand to hold the dice, one hand to shovel pizza into his mouth.”

“But Larry also reads comics,” Burt pointed out.

“Yes, he does,” D.J. held up his hand to shush Turk; this was his area of specialty. “But unlike you, who read Hellboy comics for the story and art, Larry reads comics so he can lift plot elements for scenarios or look for cool names and strange magic items. Gaming is a borrowed culture. Those who can, do. Those



who can't, swipe and game.”

“Okay, oh Wizen Sage, who do gamers not like?” said

Burt.

“Well, they can't afford to not like anybody, can they?”

muttered Turk.

“Oh, I guess if you had to pick someone they didn't like, it would probably be the book readers and, uh, the fanfic writers.”

“So, basically,” said Burt slowly, “what you're saying is, the difference between a geek and a nerd is someone who eats more paste than you two?”

“Yeah . . . hey, fuck you, man!” D.J. hurled a pillow that Burt caught and threw back.

“Hey, asshole, I have a laptop over here!” Burt shouted.

D.J. and Turk laughed.

“Well, as much as I've enjoyed this, I'm going to wander,” said Turk, stretching.

D.J. sat back down. “Where you going?”

“The Asian Cinema room has a Jackie Chan film fest going on. Drunken Master II and Armor of God.”

“That's the one where he almost broke his neck, right?”

said Burt.

Turk looked at D.J., a mock-proud expression on his face.

“Oh, DeeJ, just yesterday he was a babe in the woods!”

“They grow up so fast!” D.J. sniffed and wiped an imaginary tear from his face.

“Later,” Turk said, slamming the door.

It was quiet for a minute. Burt typed on his computer. D.J. sorted comics. Finally, Burt broke the silence. “He’s going for tentacle porn, man.”

“Yup,” said D.J.

In the Wee, Small Hours of the Morning

The evening settled over the Radcliffe Hotel in uneven waves. Nigel St. John and Oscar Kuykendall stayed at the front counter, awaiting the night shift. In addition to his natty suit and tie, St. John had added a small vial of water on a silver chain. Kuykendall didn’t ask him what it was for. He just smiled and nodded at St. John while he ranted and raved.

“How you managed to keep this hovel in one piece, I’ll never know,” St. John snarled at Kuykendall.

“It’s always gone pretty smoothly before, Mr. St. John,” Kuykendall said.

“Smoothly? Vampires running about, dueling in the main ballroom, gods and heroes in disguise, and no combat sorcerer on-staff? I’d like to see what your definition of ‘roughly’ is, Kuykendall. The gates of Hell opening up in the lobby, perhaps. Oh, I know, Ragnarok-a-go-go!”

“Mr. St. John, they’re not so bad. You should walk around and see for yourself.”

“Oh, no, nothing doing. Walk about and get ambushed by

God-only-knows-what. They're bringing hairy gnolls to the hotel, you prat! What deal with the devil did you make?"

"I gave them a break on the rooms, that's it." Kuykendall held up his hand as if he were swearing an oath in court.

"Aces. Smashing. Thanks to your generosity, we're all dead. Those gnolls will eat up and stink up everything in sight! And you can't kill them, either, because they're immune to ordinary weapon—Good Evening!" St. John's venom turned to sugar as the slim, slight, pale and attractive young woman walked up to the counter, her dyed-black hair swooping low over one eye. She was looking at them both from over the frames of her sunglasses. Everything in the woman's ensemble was black: black and dull, black and shimmering, black and shiny. Her mini-skirt was tight and cut to mid-thigh. Her black leather jacket bore the signs of extreme wear, but looked well cared for.

"Spare me your tedious gamer-speak," she said, chewing gum rapidly. She poked a pink-coated tongue through pouting ruby-red lips and blew a perfunctory bubble. "I'm Jane Callow. Featured author of this little soiree."

"Miss Callow!" St. John nearly vaulted over the counter.

"Oh my, welcome indeed to the Pa—Radcliffe, yes, the Radcliffe."

She smiled with everything but her eyes. "Charmed, I'm completely sure. My room key?"

"Certainly, certainly, I have taken the liberty of preparing everything in advance for your arrival, and may I just say how very thrilled we are to host new talent such as yourself . . ." St.

John pushed the plastic punch card at her, along with a chocolate mint.

“Have you read my book?” Jane asked.

“Ah, sadly, no. I lack the aptitude—”

“Then you must not speak to me again, in spite of your marvelous fawning, until you have.”

St. John laughed heartily. “Your wit is priceless, madam,” he said.

“I know. But I wasn’t kidding.” She turned to Kuykendall.

“Anything else for me?”

Kuykendall smiled at her. “We have a reception in progress for the other guests. The bar on the top floor. Just tell them you’re a guest, and you can drink for free!”

“How brilliant. Thank you, gentlemen. I’ll be sleeping during the day, and so help me, if the maid comes in my room before seven o’clock at night, I’ll raze this building to the ground. Toodles!” She waved her hand in a shooing motion and walked into the elevators, her heels clicking on the tiles.

St. John turned to Kuykendall. “Whatever happens, no matter who dies, I’m taking you with me.”

Larry woke up with a terrible pain in his neck. His head was resting on something hard and metallic. For a brief, dizzy moment, he thought he was having a dream. Then he sat up, straightened his cricked neck, and remembered what had happened to him.

He was on the toilet, and something was hanging out of his ass. In sudden fear and panic, he pushed hard, trying to expel whatever it was. It moved for a second, then stopped, and started to push back. Larry yowled and started screaming, "Help me! Help me!" Let them kick open the door and find him. It didn't matter. There was a sewer alligator crawling up his ass and he wanted, no, needed their help to get it out.

He screamed until he was hoarse and exhausted, panting and smelling the ancient polluted foulness that wafted out from beneath him. Something caressed the inside of his brain, and he fell instantly to sleep, slumped forward, his fedora crushed between his head and the bathroom stall door.

Meanwhile, in another part of the hotel, Turk sat in a darkened room, made hot by the amount of bodies crammed into the tiny space and by the amount of mouth breathing that was going on, watching a flickering animated image. The schoolteacher suddenly exploded, and in its place was a red-horned demon with writhing tentacles. The big-eyed schoolgirl screamed, and then the tentacles were upon her.

Someone next to him in the dark said, "Cool. It's like Lovecraft, but with tits."

Burt surfed the Internet, disinterestedly paging through the MagicCon website for want of anything better to do. Behind him, D.J. was snoring with the force of a diesel engine. Half asleep himself, he clicked on the OFFICIAL MAGICCON CHAT ROOM. He noticed right away that the room was full of guys,

and none of them were talking. What did you expect, he asked himself. Burt typed:

BVAUGN82: Hey guys, newbie to the con, here. Anyone want to give me any tips for survival?

There was a slight pause, then:

MoRpHeUs4ReAl: You're at the con? Cool! Wish I was.

Horn\_O\_Plenty: Yeah, don't go.

RankRandall: Sell soap, you'll make a fortune.

These messages went on for half a screen, and Burt was about to back out of the room when a Personal Message window popped up on the screen:

SamithaWoo: Ur at the con? So am I.

Burt blinked rapidly. It was a name that wasn't on the list.

Maybe they were lurking. He replied:

BVAUGN82: Cool. It's my first show. It's a little overwhelming. You?

SamithaWoo: My third. I came with friends. Are you in the game room?

BVAUGN82: ??No, I'm in my room. Why?

SamithaWoo: Just curious. They have Internet access down there. I'm in my room, too.

Burt clicked on the name and got a profile. It was a girl.

College age. She watched X-Files and Classic Star Trek. Her name was Samitha Arvigio. What a name, he thought. She typed something, interrupting his perusal of her profile:

SamithaWoo: I see Ur a computer major. What are you on right now?

Burt smiled and proceeded to tell her all about his laptop while D.J. tried to break the sound barrier with his snores.

Saturday

Foreshadowing

Everyone awoke, bleary-eyed, when the alarm went off at 8 o'clock and happy, shiny pop music blared out into the room.

Burt and Turk each rolled over to their side of the bed and began fumbling for a clock that wasn't there. D.J. turned off the alarm on his side of the nightstand and bounded out of bed. "Saturday, gents, rise and shine! Dibs on the bathroom!"

"Whoth fucksstopin ya?" mumbled Burt.

Turk held up a single, significant finger in response.

Twenty minutes later, D.J. came out of the bathroom, and the amount of steam that billowed forth from his shower immediately set off the smoke alarm. Burt and Turk burrowed deeper under the covers while D.J. hollered and fanned the steam away with a wet towel. He eventually had to climb up onto the bed and pull the cover off the smoke alarm, but by then there was knocking on the door.

D.J. spent another five minutes dealing with the hotel management, explaining that the steam set off the alarm and that

there wasn't any fire. When he came back into the room, two bleary-eyed college students were murdering him with their stares, hunched over in the bed.

D.J. smiled. "Oh, good, you're up. We'll draw straws to see who goes to Burger King for breakfast."

They looked at each other, then at him again. D.J. correctly interpreted the hostility billowing out at him and said, "Tell you what I'll go today, how's that?"

By the time D.J. returned with sandwiches for everyone, Burt and Turk were up and acting reasonably human. Both had showered quickly, used to the dorms at Berkeley, and were getting dressed. As the bringer of food, D.J. was more or less forgiven for his transgressions earlier in the morning.

"So, Larry didn't come back," said Burt, his mouth full.

"Dude, I'm telling you, Larry can go on gaming for days, with nothing more than Mountain Dew and pizza," said D.J. Turk nodded in agreement. "Don't worry about him. He's got a room key. He knows where we are. He won't strand us."

"He wouldn't dare," said Turk with malice.

"Okay, fine," said Burt, wadding up his paper wrapper. "I wash my hands of it."

"So, what's on the schedule for today, DeeJ?" asked Turk.

"Let's see . . ." D.J. flipped through his already well-worn program book. "There's autograph sessions, so, Turk, if you want Richard Hatch, you better get on the stick early. Stanley



Weissman is on a panel at 3:00 that I will not miss, and I suggest you don't, either . . . ”

“The guy that does Mjolner?” asked Burt.

“Yeah, he does the story and art and I keep telling you you're a fool for not reading it,” said Turk.

“Dude, loan them to me, and I will!”

D.J. waved them quiet. “Burt, just come to the panel. If talking to him doesn't convince you to check it out, then nothing will.”

“What else?” asked Turk.

“I'm looking,” said D.J., his nose in the book, “Jane Cal-  
low is giving a reading. I may go see that. She's pretty hot. That's just before the costume contest.” He looked up and smiled.

“Costume contest?” said Burt.

Turk was smiling, too. “Attendance is mandatory, Meat.

You have to go to at least one.”

“Christ,” Burt muttered.

“Don't sweat it,” D.J. said. “We'll go with you, it'll be great!”

“I cannot wait,” said Burt.

“Other than that, there's some panels that look okay, not great, but I'd say Weissman and the Costume debacle will be the only 'have-to-do' events.”

“That reminds me,” said Burt, turning to Turk, “how was the Jackie Chan fest last night?”

Turk shrugged. “Oh, it was cool. No biggie.”

“Uh huh,” said Burt. D.J. snickered, and Turk pretended like he didn’t hear.

### Turk Meets his Future

Once again, the group separated just inside the dealer’s room with promises to rendezvous for lunch. Turk could already see many more people here today than yesterday. The Saturday push was on, and the show had just started. It would make things difficult.

Turk made a sharp left turn, skirting the clots of people in the middle aisles, and made for the dealer in the far corner he spied yesterday. The man stood behind his table tending to large stacks of photographs and several overflowing black notebooks. Turk scanned the table until he found the Richard Hatch pictures. The man had three to choose from: Apollo in action, gun drawn, a head shot of Richard Hatch, and a picture of Hatch with his co-star, Dirk Benedict. He picked up that one up by its edges. “How much?”

“Fifteen,” the dealer answered, his head down, digging through a box of photos behind the counter. Turk paid the man and slipped the photo gingerly into his program book. Hatch now, Benedict later, Turk thought. He checked his watch. The signing started at 11:00. It was 9:20. He’d better go get in line, he thought. And he was right, as the line for Hatch already ran down

the side of the wall inside the East Ballroom. Half of the room was sectioned off for the Magic: The Gathering tournament and the room was already heating up from the number of people inside. The other half of the room was reserved for autographs. Several shorter lines were moving for various comic book writers and artists, local celebrities, and the guy in the werewolf make-up. Turk hurried to the back of the line and watched ten people pile in behind him inside of a minute. He counted heads and saw that he was the fifty-first person in line.

Several of the people in line wore approximations of the flight uniforms from the television series. Others were laden with books, comics, and magazines. One older fan was carrying a replica of the helmet from the flight suit. Another had an intricate mobile with a miniature Colonial Viper being chased by three Cylon Raiders, all made by hand. Almost everyone in line was older than Turk. He was used to that, though. What made him feel very out of place was the fact that he had only one thing to get autographed.

“So,” said a sibilant voice behind him, “what was your favorite episode?”

Turk turned to face the taller, older, balding and bespectacled man and said, “Probably the one where they think they’ve Earth but figure out at the last minute that it’s really a Cylon stronghold.”

By the time Hatch sat down (five minutes late, to much muttering from the fans) and the line started moving, Turk was

ready to throttle his line-mate, Jeff. He was one of those fans who just wouldn't shut up and kept rehashing old episodes, complete with incorrect dialogue and spittle-flung sound effects. When he had exhausted the various episodes that were "way cool," he moved on to collecting, which amounted to asking Turk a bunch of questions.

"Do you have the Marvel comic series?" Jeff asked.

"A few. The ones with Walt Simonson artwork," said Turk.

"Oh." Jeff had no idea what Turk was talking about. "I've got the whole set. Do you have the board game?"

"No," said Turk.

"Oh. I do. It's not mint, but I've played it. Kinda lame. Do you have the action figures?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Turk.

"Oh. I do. All on card, which was really hard, because there weren't a lot of them. It's not like Star Wars, you know?"

"Yeah," said Turk.

And so on and so on. Turk saw this as part of the price he had to pay in order to complete his hunt. He had watched the show, even had some on tape, but that was about it. The autographed picture was more of a trophy than a personal keepsake. He had a lot of autographed photos from genre actors. Most of them were bit players and guys under helmets and masks, but that wasn't the point. It was about getting close to someone who had made art out of film and a wooden ray gun. Science fiction.

That was where the real storytelling magic was to be found. And Hatch was right there in the thick of it, in the seventies, when science fiction was in a kind of a renaissance: Star Wars, Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon, and Battlestar Galactica.

The other reason why Turk was in line was simple. He had a copy of his script with him. Hatch was looking to work on a new Galactica movie. That meant he had connections, and that meant Turk had a chance at getting Space Avenger made. Right place at the right time. Glen Larson was a punk. Dino De Laurentis was a doddering old codger. Richard Hatch was young, healthy, and exactly seven people away from him right now.

Turk pulled out his script and the photo of Apollo and Starbuck, all the while nodding as Jeff prattled on about the model kits and how he planned to build them all one day. It didn't pay to be rude to these people. They were his audience, too.

### St. John's Chill Pill Finally Shows Up

St. John walked on unsteady legs from the restaurant, clutching his cup of tea protectively, his other arm lightly brushing the wall for support. He was dead tired, and the poor excuse for tea in the cup was of no help whatsoever.

Up ahead of him, two backpacked and bespectacled youths sat cross-legged on the floor, a quantity of colorful cards spread out between them. St. John heard one of them say, "Sorcery? What does that do?"

“Raises one creature from my graveyard,” the other one said. “Say hello to the Zombie Master, chump.”

“Ah!” St. John broke into a run. “I see you there!” The kids looked up, puzzled. “I said no dueling in the hotel, and I meant it! That includes sorceries, curses, cantrips and blastings!” He stood over them, shaking his finger at them while they hurriedly gathered up their cards.

“Relax, Ringo, we’re going,” one of them said.

“Militant Duelist Convocation bastard,” the other one added.

“You’re making that up!” St. John screamed. “There’s no convocation here! I would know about it!”

The teenagers beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the convention area. St. John smoothed his shirt and coat, looking this way and that for witnesses to his loss of control. Behind him, one of the cleaning staff was staring at him, her eyes wide. “What is it?” he asked.

“Esa diablo!” She made an evil eye sign at him, then crossed herself and backed away until she found an Employees Only door to dart through.

“What an odd woman,” St. John murmured, hurrying back to the front desk.

Kuykendall and the morning staff were in huddled conference as St. John rounded the corner. Kuykendall spotted him and dismissed the staff, saying, “Remember, we’re all watching

you!” He shook his fist at them, then beamed at St. John. “Keeping them in line, sir, just like you said.”

St. John sipped his atrocious tea. “Oscar, you may indeed go far here,” he said, smacking his lips. “Now, if your cleaning staff can just get rid of that God-awful smell in the bathroom . . .

” A sudden crackle of energy over the revolving doors stopped any further praise St. John might have bestowed on Kuykendall.

Blue-white light filled the lobby and got everyone’s attention. St. John actually sighed with relief.

A figure emerged from the flare. He was riding on a board-stiff, gold-tasseled Persian rug. It was difficult to determine his age. He had a young, dark-complexioned face, but there were streaks of gray in his goatee and long, straight hair. He wore a loose-fitting, purple shirt fashioned from silk, white pantaloons tucked into black knee-high boots, and a single golden amulet at his throat. His arms were crossed, and he wore a foreboding countenance. “Skaldrian is here!” he boomed and was visibly surprised to hear whistles and claps at this announcement. He landed the rug in front of the desk, where it rolled up neatly on its own. The light faded. All of the convention-goers in the lobby immediately fell to talking about how he did the trick and whether or not he was sanctioned by Wizards of the Coast.

“Thank God!” St. John said. “Where the hell have you been?”

“I told you, St. John, I went griffin hunting in Romania.

It’s the start of the season. We talked about this. I put it on my

schedule.”

“Oh, right, right, yes, now I remember. Listen, I wouldn’t have called you back if it wasn’t an emergency.”

Skaldrian sniffed. “I’ll expect time and a half, for this.

I’m not really prepared, you know.”

“Fine,” St. John gritted his teeth, “you’ll get it. But I’ve got real problems here.”

“So I can see,” he said, raising an eyebrow at his surroundings.

“We’ve got a group of gnolls coming, there’s already several sorcerers here, it’s an alchemical nightmare in the back, and I have no idea what these savages are paying for their glammers, but it’s too much. I need protective spells up in both ballrooms as soon as you can get to it. Oh, and can you turn this into something resembling tea?” St. John held out his cup.

“Not a problem.” Skaldrian stuck a gold-ringed finger into the cup and swirled it around, briefly. The liquid darkened, heated up, and smelled all at once of English Breakfast.

“Thank you,” St. John sighed again, sipping contentedly.

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” Skaldrian genuflected and walked away.

“Now,” said St. John to Kuykendall, “we’ll be all right, no thanks to you and your staff.”

“Excuse me,” said one of the guests, a woman wearing an impossibly large straw hat that was almost as big as her ass, “will he be signing autographs later? Because I have a friend in Canada



who would just die if I sent her a picture of that!”

“No, he won’t be signing autographs later,” St. John said.

“He’s the staff sorcerer, for Pete’s sake! If he takes the time to sign an autograph during the fighting, we’ll all go up in a burst of flame, you daft woman!”

She stared at St. John, her eyes cold. “You know, there’s such a thing as taking this far too seriously.” She walked away.

St. John put his cup down and took a room key.

“Kuykendall, I’m going to take a nap now. I want you to wake me in two hours.”

“Yes, sir!” Kuykendall smiled. St. John laid his key ring down and walked out. “Thank you, Jesus,” he said. He may have been a yes man, but he was no fool. There was no way St. John was getting less than eight hours of sleep, and that was that.

## Deej Has a Brush with Death

D.J. had found the mother lode. A dealer with more com-ics than sense, trying to liquidate a bunch of stock, bought two tables and piled boxes on top as well as on the floor. He had no idea of what he had in his stock; he was selling everything for a dollar a pop. It was in the boxes on the floor, under the tables, that D.J. found a half-box of Green Guy comics from the 1970s. Classic stuff, all. Every issue had Green Guy on the run from the army, smashing up tanks and fighting with memorable villains like Dr. Grimace, Rampart, and the Pachyderm. Every one of these issues

listed for six to eight bucks in the guide, and this dumb bastard was blowing them out at a dollar a piece. D.J. actually chortled as he piled books beside him on the floor.

He wasn't paying too much attention to anything. He was absorbed in the cover to Green Guy #168, the story title emblazoned across the bottom of the comic: IF THIS BE MY DENSITY! He remembered all at once that it was the first Green Guy comic he'd ever seen. His mom bought it for him at a flea market in the late seventies. He couldn't remember any comics before that. This must have been the first one he read. His eyes watered for a minute. The start of it all, he reflected. D.J. looked down in the box, scarcely believing his luck. There were two of them! He could buy one for himself, and one for his mother . . .

A foot appeared in his peripheral vision, and the stack of Green Guy comics went cascading into the aisle. D.J. cried out and scrambled after them before an unseeing and uncaring foot stepped on them. When he had recovered his pile, he turned back to the table. There was a man standing right where D.J. had been sitting. "Excuse me," D.J. said, tapping the man on the shoulder, "you're in my spot. I was looking through the books . . ."

The man was of medium height and build. His blond crew cut was perfectly at home on his Midwestern face. Black-framed glasses couldn't hide his frowning eyes or the set of his jaw. "Your spot? Sorry, kid. You snooze, you lose."

"Yeah, but you knocked over my books. I was on the floor,"

D.J. said.

“Well, that’s what you get for sitting on the floor, then, isn’t it?” The man turned away and addressed the dealer. “Got any Green Guy?”

“Hey, man!” D.J. said, all politeness gone. “I was here first, you flat-headed fuck!”

“Hey, guys,” the dealer started.

The crew-cut man turned around. “What did you say to me?”

“I called you a ‘flat-headed fuck,’ you flat-headed fuck.

What’re you, blind and deaf? You obviously didn’t see me, and now you can’t hear me. Now push off, I’m digging for some old-school shit, and your speculating ass is in my way.”

The man’s face went from red to purple. He hissed through gritted teeth, “Do you have the slightest fucking idea who you’re talking to?”

D.J. made a show of looking up and down. “Middle management, from the looks of you. Now, are you going to move, or am I going to move you?”

“Hey, guys,” the dealer said again.

The blonde man actually dug his heels in. “I ain’t moving from this spot, Norman.”

“Fine,” said D.J. He bent down and deftly yanked the rest of the Green Guy comics from the box, knowing full well he was duplicating a lot of the numbers in his collection. “I’ll take these,” he said to the dealer. “There’s fifty five of them. Here’s my cash.”

The blonde man was aghast. "I needed those!"

"Sorry, kid, you snooze, you lose," said D.J. He grinned.

"Your spot, Chief. Stand there as long as you like. I'm going to go read my Green Guy comics."

The blonde man raised his hand so suddenly that both D.J. and the dealer thought he was going to throw a punch. His fingers were bent in a peculiar way, and he said something that neither of them caught. Then he looked surprised, as though something should have happened, and looked around wildly. "Skaldrian," he mumbled and walked away. At the end of the aisle, he paused and turned around. "This isn't over. Enjoy those while you can."

"What a loon," said D.J. to the dealer.

"Whatever. Look, I don't know you, got it?" the dealer said. "Go on, get out of here. You got off lucky, man."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever, chappy." D.J. was glowing as he swaggered off, the comics in his arms. It was almost a fight, and he had won it!

Mike Bretz strode up to the front desk and looked for a bell to hit. Oscar Kuykendall appeared, sliding into place. "Yes, sir?" he boomed. "What can I help you with?"

Bretz regarded the friendly face with suspicion. "You're not St. John," he said, mispronouncing the name.

"No, sir, I'm Oscar Kuykendall, the hotel manager." The smile didn't change.

"Is St. John here?"

“Yes, Mister St. John is here,” said Kuykendall, correcting the pronunciation, “but he’s indisposed right now. Can I help you?”

The answer seemed to be enough for Bretz. He nodded with satisfaction. “So, this is a Neighborhood gathering,” he said.

“Well, we get people from all over,” said Kuykendall modestly.

“Can I leave a message for St. John?”

“Certainly,” said Kuykendall, producing a pen and paper.

Bretz leaned in and wrote in big block letters:

ST. JOHN

TELL YOUR GAY MAGIC MONKEY SKALDRIAN NOT  
TO CROSS ME AGAIN. I AM NOT PLAYING AROUND.

MIKE BRETZ

Bretz threw the pen down. “See that he gets that, will you?”

He walked away, out the revolving doors.

“You can count on me, sir,” said Kuykendall, smiling. He read the note, smiled bigger, and put the note in an envelope, which he stuck in his pocket.

In this Chapter, the Asterisk is a Metaphor...

Stevie Fleckner walked into the bathroom, moving at full speed, breezing by the two gamers who were on the way out. He didn’t notice the peculiar expressions on their face; he was far too busy breaking down his schedule for the next five hours. His

workload had doubled overnight because one of the regular local guests had backed out at the last minute due to an illness, leaving no one to moderate a block of panels for Saturday. That meant Stevie was going to have to trust an unknown or do it himself, and he had learned long ago to fear the unknown.

It wasn't until he stepped up to the urinal, his head tilted

up and back in concentration, that he smelled it. Someone had

metaphorically died in here. He instantly switched to his Day Three Convention Breathing technique, which was in through the mouth, out through the nose. It actually deadened the smell for him, but now his concentration was broken and it would be a minute be-

fore he got it back. He thought of dripping faucets, waterfalls,

squirt guns . . . Finally!

Before washing his hands, Stevie bent down to peer under

the stalls. In the last one, he saw a battered red backpack and a

pair of Converse tennis shoes. He got up, shaking his head. It

never failed. Every convention, there was always one fan who

seemed to get the trots and totally foul up the men's bathroom.

He ran his hands under the water and left quickly.

Larry heard the door close again, and he knew he was

alone. It was fine with him, now. He was ready to die. He knew it.

There were, he supposed, worse things than dying at a conven-

tion. He just wished he had gotten to game one more time before

he went. Omicron needed a suitable death. Yes, something with

the screaming Ork Hordes of Nestford Downs or maybe one last

battle against the Lich-King of Everdark. Something big and gran-

diose. Omicron didn't deserve to die on a toilet.

The pain and humiliation and fear worked on Larry's mind and made a host of funny, random things pop into his head. He would periodically burst into great, hoarse giggles that dissolved into huge, wracking sobs. He remembered being eight years old and his mother having an Empire Strikes Back birthday party for him. All of his friends came, back when he had a bunch of friends, and they all got plastic Halloween masks for party favors. Larry got to be Boba Fett because he was the birthday boy, and everyone jumped around and hooted and hollered.

He remembered going stag to his senior prom, all dressed up in a gray tuxedo with a pink cummerbund. No one talked to him for the whole night, not even the people who had been at his birthday party when he was eight. He came home later that night and lied to his parents and told them he'd danced with a bunch of girls. His father looked at him proudly, for the first time that he could remember. That night, after his parents had gone to bed, he called Gumby's pizza and met the driver at the door so he wouldn't wake them up.

He remembered the first time he went to MagicCon and sat in on a gaming session. No one made fun of him, no one called him lard-ass. They laughed at his jokes and praised his quick-thinking. Larry knew he had found his place. Two years later, he was running games for MagicCon, and he could look out over the players and find other Larry Crofts, sitting there, looking nervous and scared. He would help them, as he was helped. That was when he met D.J.

He remembered Tricia Johnston, the girl he had a supreme crush on in junior high. He couldn't help staring at her. She would look at him, never smile, and look away. He had to let her know how he felt. Larry did the only thing he knew to do, he wrote her a note. It said, "Tricia, I think you are beautiful, Larry Croft, age 13." It was all he could think of to write, so he drew her a picture to help fill the page up. He didn't have any idea what she liked, so he took a wild stab at it and found a picture of a horse to copy. As he carefully transferred each line from the picture to the page, he couldn't resist adding a set of wings to make it into Pegasus. Just so she would get it, he wrote under the drawing, "This is a Pegasus." Then he folded it up and slipped it into her locker. Later that day, he saw her in the hallway with a gaggle of her friends. They were looking at something in Tricia's hands. It was Larry's note. He tried to turn around, but one of them saw him and started giggling. The others looked up and joined in. Tricia's face was a mask of hate. She wadded up the note and threw it at him. The paper bounced off his barrel chest, but it may as well have been a bullet. Larry ran all the way home, his face blood red with embarrassment. It was two years before he even spoke to a girl again, and that was only because he had to talk to them in marching band.

Larry remembered all of these things, reflecting on his life, and decided that he didn't like his life very much. It sucked to be him, and now it was too late to change that. He was going to



die today. I'm sorry, he told himself, I'm so sorry that I didn't ow  
that hurts what is  
going  
on  
here . . .  
\*

Stercutus was in!

The battle was hard fought, and Stercutus was no stranger  
to combat, but it looked during the night as if he wouldn't get in.  
Someone, another entity perhaps, named Omicron, which was the  
Greek word for small. Stercutus didn't understand it. Maybe it  
was meant as the letter of the alphabet? In any case, Stercutus had  
no love lost for anything Greek and redoubled his efforts to gain  
access to the mortal's mind. As Stercutus struggled physically  
with this giant, he was assaulted by a barrage of confusing im-  
ages: horseless chariots, boxes with windows that acted out pas-  
sion plays, or maybe they were oracles, a flat food smeared with  
tomatoes and cheese that he knew was called "pizza," and many  
drawings of women with the proportions of goddesses, wearing  
little and saying much. This world was colorful, if nothing else.  
The gods of today were a strange lot that they would let so many  
different things vie for this man's attention. Where would he fit  
in? At least they still ate. That meant that there were still farmers.  
Stercutus would find them first.

It was a crowded fit inside the human. He had no room to

maneuver or even turn around. He made his new body stand, but as soon as it was upright, he sat back down again. His legs from the waist down were asleep. Stercutus sent blood moving in that direction and was delighted to feel the pinpricks all down his legs as they came to life again. But he was still uncomfortable.

He might very well be in this form forever, he mused.

This was not some temporary abode. When his followers reconvened, their belief in him would tie him to this form forever. No, before he revealed himself, he would have to clean house. Looking down at his new body, he could see the swells of fat beneath the stretched and sweaty T-shirt. "By Jupiter," he said, in Larry's hoarse voice, "I shall have to start from scratch!"

He felt around in Larry's mind until he found the controls for his metabolism and deftly cranked everything up to maximum.

The stored fat in Larry Croft's body jumped to life and was converted back into chemical energy, fuel that Stercutus sent to Larry's arms and chest. He flexed the muscles in his upper torso, feeding them a constant supply of blood and minerals and oxygen and nutrients. Stercutus flexed and converted, and the waste poured out of his new body like sheets of rain.

### Sustenance Comes in Many Forms

Burt stood nervously by the lunch wagon that was set up outside the hotel. This could either be very cool or a frigging disaster. He paced in place, one eye on the revolving door and one eye on the feeding frenzy at the lunch wagon behind him. Fans were piled four deep all around the cart, buying foil-wrapped tacos,

eggrolls, calzones, and god-only-knew what else in tortillas and fried shells. The guy manning the cart kept saying, over and over, “No Soda! Oudda Soda!”

As it was, Burt almost missed her. She tapped him on the shoulder. “Burt?” Her voice was high and thin.

Burt turned around, then looked down. “Yeah?”

“I’m Samitha,” she said, smiling. She held out her hand, and he shook it. She was short, five feet tall at the most, and the low center of gravity gave a nice flare to her hips that Burt pretended not to see. She had dark, wavy hair that looked like it was growing out of a bob. Her eyes were big and the same color as her hair. Next to her pale skin, they jumped right out at him. Her nose was Roman and complimented the curves of her body perfectly. Taken together, her features gave her the appearance of a classical painting.

“Hey,” he said, swallowing the lump in his throat. “I’m Burt.”

They grinned, and then looked at the ground. “Kinda weird, isn’t it?” she asked, scrunching up her nose.

“Yeah, it is,” he answered. “Ever met someone off-line before?”

She nodded. “Couple’a times. It was a toss-up. Thankfully, you just tipped the scale.”

He smiled, puzzled. “In what way?”

“Well, for starters, you have a human head . . .”

Burt laughed. “Good! So do you!”

“Yeah, weird,” she said, more for place-holding value in the conversation than anything. “Um,” she began.

“Well,” Burt cut in, “are you hungry?”

“YES!” she cried, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Sorry. That was poor form. But I didn’t eat breakfast.”

Burt frowned. “Doesn’t the hotel serve a complimentary thingie? Continental, or whatever they call it?”

“Well, ordinarily, sure, but see, there’s gamers in the building, so when the food was put out at six a.m., the gamers that had been up all night got to it first, so by six-oh-five, it vanished like a plague of locusts had hit the building.” They started walking.

“I get the impression that you don’t like gamers,” he said.

“Well, I dated a guy who used to play Call of Cthulhu religiously. And I mean, religiously.”

“What?” said Burt. “Sundays and Wednesdays?”

She laughed a great snorting laugh that made Burt smile.

“No, God, no, if it had only been two days a week.” She stopped.

“Oh God, you’re not a gamer, are you?”

“Well, I do game,” he said and enjoyed the look of horror that came over her face, “but I was told last night I’m not a gamer, so the answer to your question is no.”

“I am so embarrassed,” she said, holding her hands over her eyes like blinders.

“No, really, it’s okay. I play with the guys maybe once or twice a month. It’s no big deal. I enjoy it, but I’m not married to

it.”

She dropped the blinders. “Whew. Me too. I mean, I still game, but my group only plays the Storyteller stuff. Most of the time, we don’t even use dice.”

Burt shook his head. “You lost me. You game without dice?”

“Say, where are we going to eat, anyway?” she said.

“Huh? Oh, well, our options are the Green Onion . . .”

“Blah.”

“Burger King . . .”

“Double blah.”

“And . . . I don’t know what else.”

“Samitha’s eyes lit up. She jumped in front of him. “Do you like Chinese?”

“I go to Berkeley; it’s part of my scholarship requirement,” he said.

She snort-laughed again. “Come on, there’s this cool Chinese place on Brewer’s Street. But we have to hurry, because I didn’t tell the girls where I was going, and they’ll be looking for me when they get out of their panel.”

Burt smiled and let Samitha drag him down the street.

“Oh my God, quick, turn around!” Turk nudged D.J. who

was busy flipping comics to and fro in a long white box. He glanced up. Two gorgeous blondes in shiny silver tank tops and old school Star Trek skirts walked by, smiling and handing out buttons for some sort of dot-com enterprise. Turk took a button and bathed in their smiles. D.J. went back to the boxes of comics.

“Goddamn!” Turk said, admiring their retreating forms.

“It’s not fair, man. Have you seen the chicks walking around this place today?”

“Honestly,” said D.J., his head down, “I haven’t been paying a lick of attention.”

“You’re an idiot. The Eruptor girls are so hot!”

D.J. looked up at his friend. “And my answer to that is, ‘so what?’”

“What do you mean, ‘so what?’”

“I mean, so what? So there’s a pretty girl in a thong and carrying a sword around. Big flipping deal. I’m here to buy comics and to interact with my fellow fan. This,” he handed a comic to the bearded and bespectacled dealer behind the table, “is overpriced. A lot.”

The dealer scowled, took the book, and started flipping through the latest issue of Wizard, the monthly price guide magazine.

“These girls walking around handing out buttons, flyers, and mints, are all out of work actresses, strippers, and who knows what else. They are being paid to be here, like a clown that your mom hires for your birthday party. If they weren’t making money at this, they wouldn’t be within a thousand parsecs of us, ever, in a million years. If they can’t see through such superficialities, I have no interest in them or whatever they are booth-weaseling, and I refuse to torture myself thinking about how pretty they are.”

He went back into the boxes.

“So, are you telling me that when a good-looking girl

comes into Comix Cubed, that you don't give her an appraising look?" Turk leaned on the boxes, while D.J. made a stack beside him.

"Sure, I look, but not when she's looking at me. And I sure don't act like a dithering fathead. I mean, I know I'm not her type. If I come on strong, I might scare her off."

"Here," said the dealer, handing the book back. "Now it's dead-on guide."

"Oh, I didn't want it," D.J. said, "I was just helping you out." The dealer scowled and moved away, presumably to find a rock to crack D.J.'s head open with.

Turk was not to be derailed so lightly. "Dude, she's coming into your store! If she's coming into your store, then she's got to be all about comics. And you are more all about comics than any man I know."

D.J. sighed. "Comic shop clerk rule number seventy-nine: when chicks walk into the store, always assume they are married or ugly."

"But why?"

"Because they usually are one or the other. It's a fact. If there really are these mythical 'fangrrls' out there, they sure as shit don't come into Comix Comix Comix. Oh, we get the plus-size girls looking for Elfquest, but they don't consider that comics, and frankly, either do I."

"Why not?"

“No capes, man.”

Turk caught a glimpse of two women walking, one in a Batgirl costume and the other in a Catwoman costume. “Okay, check that out. Fans. Sisters, probably. Not sent here as part of a company gig. And hotties. Look at them, man!”

D.J. glanced up. “Decent costumes,” he noted, then went back to the boxes.

“It’s all about tits and ass, not the costumes.” Turk smiled as they passed by. They returned his smile. Catwoman waved her whip at him.

“Yeah,” D.J. said, “and that begs the question: why on earth would these two reasonably attractive women put themselves on display like that? What kind of low-self esteem issues are they battling, that they need to dress up as fanboy totems and walk around?”

“Maybe they really like the animated series,” Turk said, stroking his chin.

“No, I guarantee they don’t. Get that look out of your eyes, Turk. They just thought the costumes would make them look sexy.”

“I think you’re just scared to talk to the girls, is what I think.”

“Think what you want, man, but I’ve seen better men than you try and fail with the booth bunnies. You ain’t got no chance. You’re better off trying to get laid on campus.”

Turk shook his head in sorrow. “Deej, you’re a joyless, sad little man, you know that?”



“No,” said D.J. “I just have a different set of priorities than you. You have con-goggles on, my friend, and are looking at anything with tits as some sort of fertility goddess. Perfectly understandable, considering how many men are here right now. But I prefer to keep my need for pornography and my need for comics separate. So, while you’ve been ogling every set of knockers in Spandex that walks by, I’ve been snarfing up this whole run of John Byrne X-Men at half guide.”

Turk’s mouth fell open. “You bastard! I need those! That’s what Singer based the movie on!”

“Cheer up, Turk. I may not need all of them. I could sell you the ones I don’t need.” He signaled the dealer to come back over. “How much for all of these, and that Days of Future Past reprint on the shelf over there?”

Well, it was an Honest Question

The largest meeting room of the hotel was the Bayside Room, and by three o’ clock in the afternoon, the place was packed to the gills. Ordinarily, the panel discussions at MagicCon were theme-oriented, such as “My Favorite Dinosaur Movies of all Time,” and the guests and experts would lead the fans in a discussion. It was very give and take. Every once in a while, however, the con would host a special guest, and it was always a sure bet that they would host at least one panel where the fans could ask

questions for an hour. Today's such panel was called "Meet Stanley Weissman."

Stevie Fleckner was finally on common ground. He had bombed moderating the "Star Trek as Political Theory" panel, and barely acquitted himself during "Fact vs. Fantasy: Spellcasting in RPGs." But this one was a no-brainer. He had every Stanley Weissman comic ever written and/or drawn, including his earliest work in the early eighties, an updating of the pulp character, The Green Skull. The man was already a legend in the field of comics, and Stevie Fleckner would be moderating his panel. Sometimes, life was really good, he thought as he hurried up to the front of the room through the heated hordes of fandom that had

assembled to speak to their favorite creator.

At the front of the room, the hotel had erected a temporary platform and placed a skirted table and three chairs behind it. A pitcher of water and several cups were placed to one side, away from the microphones. Stevie brought his own bottle of RC Cola with him and also carried an espresso, which he knew was Weissman's drink of choice.

He sat down behind the table and looked out at all of the fans. Many of them were looking at him, their eyes shining in expectation, but most of the fans were talking amongst themselves in little knots. "Hello, folks," said Stevie into the microphone, pleased that there was no feedback this time, "I'm Steve Fleckner, I'm moderating this panel discussion, and we're just waiting on

the guest of honor to arrive, so please bear with us.” Fleckner backed off, secure in the situation, and nodded to one of his helpers standing by the door: go find the man, quick.

“Okay, now, this guy, Weissman, he wrote that graphic novel, Time’s Up, right?” Burt sat between D.J. and Turk in the middle of the third row of chairs. It was the perfect angle to look right up the nose of whoever was sitting on the risers in the front.

D.J. leaned in, “Yes, he wrote Time’s Up, and also The Knight of Nights, which completely redefined The Psi-Knight.”

Burt nodded. “Those were pretty good.”

“Pretty good?” Turk cried. “They were awesome!

Weissman brought people back to comics in a way that hasn’t been seen in years!”

“Right, right,” said Burt. This was standard rhetoric among the customers at Comix Cubed, due in part to the fact that any deviation from that story would be roundly shouted down by D.J. and whoever else happened to be on staff that day. Scorn and invective would follow, and then, slowly but surely, you would notice that when they pulled the comics on your subscription list, certain issues would conveniently be forgotten in the shuffle. No, it was best to toe the party line when missing an issue was the penalty at Comix Comix Comix. “So, what’s so special about Mjolner, Son of Thor?”

“It’s like,” said D.J. “being at the birth of the comics medium all over again. He’s taken these ideas which have lain dor-

mant for years, dusted them off, applied a new coat of pop-culture varnish, and presented them for the public all over again.”

“Yeah, and best of all,” said Turk, “he’s not British.”

“You lost me,” said Burt.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ve had enough to absorb for one day. Besides, it’s show time.” While D.J. and Turk schooled Burt in the ways of the comics world, a short, tousle-haired man had stepped up to the table and sat down.

“Okay, everyone,” said Fleckner, “I presume this person sitting beside me needs no introduction.” Polite chuckles from the audience. Fleckner gave a brief, flattering sketch of Weissman’s career that ended with his current pet project for Impressive Comics, Mjolner, Son of Thor. The mention of the comic was enough to send the fans into a clapping, hooting fit. Through it all, Weissman smiled deprecatingly. After everyone had settled down and every single set of eyes was on Weissman, Fleckner said, “I thought what we’d do for our time is just field some questions from the audience. I have a few of my own questions that I’ll throw out if no one out there covers it. That work for you?”

Three score hands shot into the air at the same time, with the same force and intensity of the walking dead struggling to free themselves from the packed earth.

“On one condition,” Weissman said in a nasal drone. “I don’t want to talk with any of you about plot points or who could beat up who, nor do I want to discuss any indignation you may

feel at the death or re-imagining of a character who is some particular favorite of yours. I have to hear that shit all the time, and I'm sick of it." One third of the hands wilted and died and sank back down into their owner's laps. "So, we can discuss my current body of work, or we can talk about other things, but I don't want to keep rehashing the same old things."

"Ah, fair enough," said Fleckner, surprised at the demand but really grateful for it, because he didn't want to hear that stuff, either. "Okay, first question. You there," he said, indicating the short black man in the corner of the room who appeared to be having a seizure.

The man put his hand down, stepped out, and in a clear, strong voice, asked, "Where do you get your ideas?"

Fifteen minutes into the panel, the electricity raced through the room and charged everything. All the fans knew that they were witnessing something truly unique and special. After haranguing the fan for five minutes about how that question should never, ever, upon pain of death, be asked of anyone anywhere, the very next person to ask a question stood up and said, "How does it feel to be kicking the corpse of Jack Kirby for your commercial success?"

There was a gasp in the room. Several of the fans stood up themselves to get a good look at the infidel who would not only insult their hero but invoke the name of the greatest comic book creator to ever walk the earth in order to do it. The room waited

breathlessly for Weissman's answer.

"My friend," he said, his face downcast, "everyone in the industry kicks the corpse of that man, because there's more creativity in his half-finished projects than most people can muster up in a lifetime. And because the fans keep expecting me to churn stuff out, I am only too happy to keep 'kicking his corpse,' as you put it. God knows you people don't want anything more than that from me."

"Oh, that's interesting," said Fleckner, quickly, to fill the shocked silence in the room, "you mean to say that some of your less commercial projects have been failed attempts to broaden the idea of what comics are?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm saying I tried to do something without muscles and punches in it, and the critics said 'It's okay, but we'd rather he do a Green Skull sequel' and the fans send me hate mail because I have given up on super heroes. So excuse me if I save my better ideas for a medium that cares about its creators." Weissman folded his arms.

"You sound as though you hate comics," said a fan from the front row.

"I do."

Uneasy murmurs rippled across the crowd like sheets of lightning in a cloudbank. "Oh, come on, now," said Fleckner, smiling valiantly, "you can't mean that?"

"Why can't I mean that?" asked Weissman, offended.

"You're not me. You don't know."

“Then, could you explain it to us?” Fleckner bit the inside of his cheek to keep from coming out of his chair. As a moderator, he had to act as a buffer between the guest and the audience, even if he was right there with the rest of them in wanting Weissman strung up at that particular time.

“Comic books,” began Weissman, “are the step child of pop culture. They are unwanted and unloved by everyone else. I got into them because I couldn’t get work for any of the syndicates in New York. The people that owned the rights to the Green Skull wouldn’t let me work on their character, and I wanted to write novels, see, because they’d sold the rights out to Charlton, who was doing Green Skull comics at the time. That’s how I got into comic books. I never wanted to do them. I never liked them. They ruined two of my marriages. If I could do it all over again, I’d do it completely differently. Nobody ever got what I was trying to do with my stories . . . yeah, you, what?”

Another fan stood up. “Let me get this straight: the collection of your work, that I’ve spent five years putting together, you could care less about?”

Weissman flared. “Did I say that? Did I say that? No, I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you implied you’d do it differently if you could.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I’d tank a comic. I have some pride. Jesus, give me a little credit here.”

But the fans weren’t giving Weissman an ounce of credit.

They were angry and confused that someone who was so important to them couldn't love the thing that brought them all together in the first place.

D.J. noticed it, too. He said to the other two, "I've got to do something. This isn't good."

"Au contraire," said Burt, "I think it's a scream."

"You would," replied Turk.

D.J. stood up and announced, "I have a question for Stanley."

Weissman turned and pointed his finger and barked, "Don't call me Stanley! My mother called me Stanley when I was a fat kid in the fourth grade with big Coke bottle glasses. I'm an adult now. You call me Stan or Mister Weissman."

D.J. was stunned. What the hell had he done to earn that rebuke? Weissman said, in calmer tones, "Now, what was your question?"

As D.J. sat down, his face crimson from embarrassment and anger, he said, "I just wondered if MISTEr Weissman could be doing something else, what would it be?"

"Anything!" he directed his answer to the audience. "TV, movies, novels. Whatever. It's still shit work, but it's a hell of a lot more respectable than this industry."

The mutters were becoming voices and the occasional curse word. Fleckner was appalled. His panel, his sure thing, his one good turn was gone, and in its place was a squinting kangaroo court in ill-fitting T-shirts. There would be a riot, and maybe



a lynching.

From the back of the room, someone shouted, “Why are you here, man?”

Weissman ignored the question and told a fan in the front row that he’d written three screenplays for the Green Skull movie, and none of them were used, and that’s why the movie sucked.

Again the voice boomed out, “Then why are you here?”

People were looking, now. D.J. craned his head around and saw with horror it was the same guy who’d given him shit earlier in the dealer’s room. He was standing by the door in the crowd of fans, and as people turned to see who was making the noise, everyone in the speaker’s vicinity parted like the Red Sea, leaving him to face Weissman’s wrath alone. But Weissman continued to argue that no one in Hollywood had been able to produce a satisfying super hero movie ever, and if he were given a chance to write a character like the Blue Bolt, for instance, he would show everyone how a real super hero movie could be done.

Through it all, the angry-looking blonde haired guy kept repeating, “Why are you here?”

Finally, Weissman could stand it no more. “Look, pal, don’t interrupt me when I’m talking, okay? I don’t interrupt you when you’re talking, so you don’t interrupt me.”

“Well, why are you here?” said another fan, and the sentiment was echoed with a dozen indignant “yeahs” throughout the room.

“I’m here because I was invited to this convention, but that doesn’t mean I have to take a bunch of shit from you people because I made—”

“Bad career moves,” said Turk, loudly. Snickers from those around him, and a few thumbs up.

“No, just because I wrote some comics, that doesn’t mean you people get to dictate my career or my feelings about it.”

Weissman stood up. “And you obviously don’t know anything about the business end of things, or you’d feel the same way I feel.”

“I’ll trade places with you,” said a fan near the back.

“Yeah, you wanna be a CPA? I’ll write your book. I’ve got an idea for Mjolner already . . .”

“Might as well let him have it,” said the angry blonde with the crew cut, “he’s used up all of Walt Simonson’s plots already,” and with that, he walked out, slamming the door behind him.

“Well, I see we’re out of time,” said Fleckner, talking close to the microphone to cut off Weissman’s string of profanity that followed the fan out the door. “I’d like to thank Stan Weissman for stopping by, I know I sure learned a lot about . . .” he trailed off.

There was weak applause. Weissman stalked out of the room. More than one fan said, “Good riddance,” or words to that effect.

D.J. stood up. “That motherfucker! Son of a bitch!” he thundered. “Every single goddamn one of his comics for the first

five fucking years of his career were signed 'Stalwart Stanley Weissman' or 'Staunch Stanley Weissman.' It's not as if I called him 'Mister Cream-of-Wheat' or something, it's his fucking name!" Fans in the immediate vicinity, many of them D.J.'s customers at Comix Cubed, gathered around in a support circle to listen to him rant and offer suggestions on how to have Weissman killed in such a way that it would not delay the monthly schedule on the Mjolner comic book.

Burt steered Turk out of the cluster of fans. "You were right, this was great!" he crowed.

"I can't believe it," Turk said, stunned. "That guy's an asshole!"

"Yeah, I've got to go check out his stuff," said Burt.

"Save your money. You can have all of mine. I wash my hands of him. If Stanley is so hell-bent on not doing comics, I'm going to help him break out of that prison cell and not give him a dime of my money. I'll give you everything when we get back to the dorm"

"For real?" Burt was shocked and gleeful.

"Yeah. Well, everything except Time's Up and the Knight of Nights," Turk amended. "Those are first editions."

Lo, the Children of the Night

D.J. left the Turk and Burt to their own devices for an

hour, promising to meet them at the costume contest. He went back up to his room and offloaded his backpack of deals: that run of Green Guy he'd snarfed up from the asshole with the crew cut and the glasses. D.J. smiled briefly before feeling the stinging slap of Weissman's rebuke across his face again.

Don't call me Stanley . . .

Then the same asshole D.J. had burned earlier had stepped up and put Weissman in his place. It was nice, D.J. reflected, that fans could, no matter what their differences, band together against the common scourge of money-grubbing professionals and hacks. He regretted his earlier stunt in the dealer's room, but it was too late to take it back now.

As D.J. sorted through his con loot, he glanced into his bag and saw the hardcover book he'd brought with him. He picked it up. *The Spell of the Blood*, by Jane Callow. D.J. always made sure to research every guest that was listed at MagicCon, in case he had some hidden treasure he could get autographed. Occasionally, the list would lead him to someone that he wasn't aware of. He saw her name on the pre-show flier, and since it didn't set off any bells of recognition, he was duty-bound to go check her out. D.J. had hopped online and dug around until he found [JaneCallow.com](http://JaneCallow.com) The first thing that came up was a picture of her, the same picture on the back cover of her book. She was wearing a black tank-top, looking over the tops of her black sunglasses, and smiling with her eyebrows raised. Her jet-black hair was cut in an attractive pageboy, and a single red ribbon was wound around

her throat. She was so pretty she made D.J. swallow his gum. He bought her book the very next day, venturing out across the bay to Dark Carnival bookstore in Oakland. It was a delusional purchase. I'm just going to read it and see if someone that pretty can actually write, he told himself. Otherwise, it's not fair, then, for someone that attractive to have a book deal and not do anything with it.

He read the book in two nights. Each night, he'd go to sleep and dream of Jane Callow. She came to him wearing a tank top and jeans, her head on the body of Monica Grisham, one of the customers at Comix Comix Comix that he also had a crush on. Together they drove around in Larry's van and talked about Neil Gaiman's Sandman for hours. She agreed with everything he had to say. Then they crawled into the back of the van and made out until the alarm sounded.

D.J. was in love with her, that much he knew for certain.

He got a twinge in his heart every time he looked at her picture. If that wasn't love, then D.J. didn't know what was.

He went out and researched her life, dug up every single thing he could about her. He even found out the name of her high school and talked to some former classmates of hers (under different pretenses, of course) via the Internet. He was, without a doubt, Jane Callow's biggest fan. Saying to the guys that he might check out her reading was as close as he would ever dare admit to anyone that he was totally smitten with her. Her reading! In the

highs and lows of his day, he'd totally forgotten about it! It was about to start, he saw, glancing at the clock. D.J. grabbed the book and scurried out of the room.

The room was full, Jane noted, of her fans. Obviously.

Everywhere she looked was black cloth and white pancake make-up. Splashes of scarlet dotted lips, necks, and wrists. They stared at her with god-like fascination, which was exactly how Jane liked to be stared at. The problem was, they were a bunch of geeks.

The girls in the room wore some fabulous dresses, grand velvet numbers that showed off ample cleavage, or elegant formal dresses, stylish and simple. The boys wore tacky cloaks over white poet's shirts, black jeans, and combat boots. A few stand out males made the effort to wear silk shirts or leather pants, and one of them even carried a cane. The fashions weren't the problem. Everywhere Jane looked, she saw badly applied mascara, acne in abundance, excess hair, fat, and sweat, and lots of glasses.

The girls in particular were the worst offenders, with their marvelous dresses that only accentuated the hugeness of their girth.

The boys, she noted, needed guidance more than anything. They were just pathetic, and that could more or less be fixed. Among the assembled, however, there was no hope.

"If this is the future," she said aloud, "I might as well fall on a wooden stake right now."

The room laughed knowingly. Jane smiled. "Very well, children, you have come for a reading, and you shall have it. Afterwards, those of you with the taste and breeding to bring a copy

of my fabulous novel ahead of time shall be favored with an autograph. Those of you who hear the reading and know you will have to buy a copy may do so as well.” She shrugged out of her leather jacket, down to the black tank-top underneath, and someone in the back of the room gasped. Whatever, she thought. Jane turned around and began reading.

“Chapter Three. I stayed in town just long enough to see my parents buried in the ground. I was half-tempted to wait and see if either of them would emerge from their grave three days later, but in my secret heart, I knew they were just too boring to even make an attempt at eternal life . . . ”

Jane read the chapter, pleased to see that they all understood the plot, even the subtext that she had deftly woven into her narrative.

“ . . . he told me he was undead, but one look at his lack of fashion sense told me different. Someone who has been around for over a hundred years simply does not wear yellow in August. It took all of five minutes to lure him into a booth near the bathrooms and drain him. Even his blood tasted common . . . ”

Jane finished the reading to thunderous applause and a few shouts of “Blessed be!” She accepted their praise with a curtsey, then pirouetted around to behind the table and sat gracefully.

“Now, I will sign your books.” She brought out a red gel pen with a flourish and was pleased to see everyone get dutifully in line.

As Jane signed and sold books, they bombarded her with

questions. “Will there be a sequel to the book?” asked one of the large girls in a burgundy dress.

“As soon as I do more traveling, yes,” she said. Inside the book, Jane wrote, Cleavage isn’t enough, Jane Callow.

“How much of the book is based on your own experiences?” asked one of the boys. This one had fangs in his mouth and a thick layer of pancake make-up on his face that in no way hid his acne scars.

“Well, my parents are still alive, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said. Inside his book, Jane wrote, Stop drinking Cokes, Jane Callow.

“Do you play Vampire?” asked one of the waif-like, skinny girls.

“Darling, I live Vampire.” Eat some meat, Jane scribbled.

“Oh, you must come LARP with us tonight!” squealed the fat girl in the emerald green dress behind her. This was echoed throughout the crowd.

Jane looked up at her audience and for one second, felt the contempt for them ebb. They were so desperate to be something other than who they are . . . In the back of Jane’s mind, she could remember that feeling. She sighed. “Someone write down the when and where, and maybe I’ll show up to observe.” Cheers. “But no promises,” she wagged a finger at them. “Many of you still have serious hygiene issues.”

When Jane had signed everyone’s book and they had all kissed her hand or touched her arm, she gathered her small purse



up, along with her reading copy of her book, and headed for the door. Standing between her and fresh air was another fan. He was wearing a black T-shirt with a flaming skull on it and jeans. He was broad, short, and stocky, like a cinder block, and was holding out his book to her with an amazed expression on his face. "Could you . . . would . . . I mean . . ." he stammered.

Jane was taken by two things: his obvious reaction to her in the flesh and the fact that he wasn't wearing a cape and plastic fangs. "Certainly," she said, "a final autograph before I enter the evening."

"Could you personalize it?" he had found his voice now, and Jane decided she liked it better when he was stammering.

"Make it to D.J."

She smiled at him. "As you wish," she said. For D.J., she wrote, My dark horse fan, XOXOX, Jane Callow. She handed the book back to him.

"Thank you," he said. "I love . . ."

"Yes?" She locked eyes with him. Go on, she thought, say it, tell me you love the book.

"Um . . . is it true that you and Hazel Medrick used to ride around on Friday nights, making lists of all the famous vampires of history you'd want to lose your virginity to?"

Jane blinked once, then said, "No, that wasn't me." And she walked around him and disappeared in the milling crowd.

The sense of how completely he'd blown it embraced him

like a mother. “Shit,” was all D.J. could think to say.

Time to Stomp!

The ballroom was crowded, but not so bad that Turk and Burt couldn't find seats near the front. Turk sat across two seats, saving one for D.J. They talked as they scanned the crowd, looking for their friend.

“So, where'd you disappear to today? A panel or something?” asked Turk.

“Oh, uh, I met someone for lunch,” said Burt dismissively.

“Yeah?” Turk was still looking behind them. “Get any good deals?”

“Not yet, but I'm working on it,” said Burt.

“Oh, hey, there he is. Yo, DeeJ!” Turk stood up and waved.

D.J. sat down between the two of them, thoroughly despondent.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Aw, man, it's just been a sucky day,” said D.J.

“Hey, man, you're not still sweating Weissman, are you?”

Turk scowled. “Fuck him, man, he's a talentless hack who can't plot his way out of a wet paper bag with a straight razor.”

“I thought you said he was a genius . . .” Burt began but he trailed off when he saw Turk shaking his head at him.

“It wasn't that. Well, yeah, it was, but it was something else, too. Look, I don't want to talk about it, okay?”

Turk slapped D.J. on the back. “Well, my friend, the train

wreck is about to start. If this parade of Mos Eisley cantina rejects doesn't cheer you up, I don't know what will."

In spite of himself, D.J. smiled ruefully. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

"That's the spirit!"

"Excuse me," said Burt, "but you said this would be cool?"

"Well, Meat, it's cool in the way that Plan Nine from Outer Space is so bad, it's good," said Turk.

"Ah. I see. Great. Thank you. Excuse me." Burt stood up to leave, but the lights dimmed. He sat down heavily. "Trapped in hell with you two, when I could be hanging out with a girl," he pined.

"You met a girl?" Turk said, but the emcee stepped out from behind the curtain. Burt could only grin and nod. Turk fumed. D.J. put his head in his hands.

"GOOD EVENING, ladies and gentlemen, lords and ladies, mutants and mutantettes!" The guy wore an ill-fitting tux jacket over a too-tight Superman T-shirt. He introduced himself as Bob, some local storeowner, and talked briefly about how he had been emceeing the costume contest ever since MagicCon I. He punctuated the speech with a lot of inside jokes that little pockets of people laughed at or shouted boisterous rejoinders to. Many of the large women in flowery shirts and big hats nodded sagely, elaborately, to show that they too got the references. Finally, the emcee introduced the judges.

“First up, a convention favorite, you all know him, put your hands together for three-time winner and permanent judge of MagicCon’s costume contest, Rolando the Wolf!”

The guy who had been walking around for two days in werewolf make-up stood to polite applause and waved.

“Next up, a last-minute addition to our little party, first-time author and all-time beauty, Jane Callow!”

More applause. Jane stood up and smirked, then sat back down.

“Oh my god, I’m in love!” said Turk. “She’s so hot!”

“If you like that kind of thing, I guess,” grumbled D.J.

“Finally, last but certainly not least, a man who needs no introduction, but I’m going to say it anyway, you all know him as Commander Apollo from the hit T.V. show, Battlestar Galactica, put your hands together for Richard Hatch!”

Hatch stood up to thunderous applause, smiling like a movie star, and waved to everyone. Now it was Turk’s turn to grumble. “Mister Big-Shot-doesn’t-read-unsolicited-scripts. Hah!

What the hell else does he have to do with his time?”

“So, the signing wasn’t the networking op you thought it would be?” asked Burt, grinning.

“My script is better and he knows it, that’s the trouble with that.”

“Shush!” said D.J. “Here they come.”

Indeed, here they came, one after the other. Large women in larger dresses. All of them had elaborate names taken from

various folklore books about famous queens and fairies. One of the women was larger than Larry, her dress resembling little more than yards of shimmering material wrapped around a Volkswagon Beetle.

“Wow,” said Burt.

“Yeah,” said Turk.

“And yet, on the other hand, it is a very good dress,” said D.J. The other two looked at him hard until someone came out dressed as a Stormtrooper. In homemade armor. There was also a homespun Boba Fett, a made-from-scratch C3PO, and a do-it-yourself Han Solo and Greedo combo. The last two performed the scene from Star Wars, letter perfect, then devolved into a “Who’s On First” kind of banter in which they both argued who shot first. Finally, a third person came onstage dressed as George Lucas, and they both shot him, to howls of approval from the audience.

“That wasn’t funny,” said Turk.

The next guy out of the wings wore an exact replica of Snake Plisskin’s outfit from Escape From New York, right down to the assault rifle.

“Is that real?” whispered Burt.

“No, they can’t bring real weapons, but damn, it looks good.”

“Yeah, if that guy were about thirty pounds lighter, he’d be spot-on.” As if he had heard them, the portly Snake Plisskin

glowered at the audience, head tilted, in a perfect imitation of Kurt Russell.

It was then that D.J. saw his chance to balance the bad Karma of his day, all in one fell swoop. He cupped his hands together and shouted, "I heard you were dead!"

The audience cracked up, and the steely glint became a grimace, then a laugh, from Snake. He shook his head, his concentration blown, and staggered off the stage. D.J. glowed with pride. At any convention, the number one rule of engagement was, if you're going to be an ass and shout something from the audience, make damn sure it's funny.

"Nice to have you back, DeeJ," said Turk.

After Plisskin came a parade of Star Trek costumes, both Federation and Klingon. They all did a large skit involving the crew of the Enterprise beaming down to a comic convention. There was polite laughter.

"That guy looks like he has a lobster tail taped to his head," said Turk, indicating one of the Klingons. "Make fun of him, DeeJ."

"Nothing doing," said D.J., not wanting to press his luck.

"He's doing plenty on his own. Look, he's wearing sneakers."

"God," Turk tsked. "Can he be any more lame?"

When the media costumes were done, the comic book characters came out. There was a Batman who was, if nothing else, height-weight proportionate, a Joker, the Catwoman and Batgirl team that Turk saw earlier (he clapped and cheered for them), and someone who was dressed as Rorschach from The

Watchmen.

“They aren’t doing any skits like the media people did,”

said Burt.

“Well, duh,” said Turk.

Burt was about to ask why when the emcee said, “And

here’s Optimus Prime!”

The fan came walking out, smiling from ear to ear. Every-

one sucked in their breath. He was large, at least six four, and

easily 350 pounds to the ounce. Strapped to his body were large

pieces of scored cardboard, painted red and white. Some sort of

Styrofoam packing insert sat sideways on his overlarge head. He

had even painted his beard red and white. “I am the leader of the

Autobots!” he shouted.

You could almost hear crickets chirping in the audience,

it was so quiet. “Is that a muffin pan on his stomach?” Burt asked.

“I can’t tell,” Turk said.

Optimus Prime drew a flimsy cardboard sword. “Who

among you is a Decepticon agent?” No one answered, so he raised

his arms and turned around slowly, the triumphant gladiator, while

Bob the emcee read from his note card “This costume was made

entirely by hand. No real metal was used in the construction of

this robot.” Optimus waddled off to dim, shocked, applause.

“Wow,” said D.J. “My bad day just went completely

away.” He turned to Turk. “I mean it, I have problems, but I have

never, ever strapped cardboard to myself and called myself the

leader of the Autobots.”

“Yeah,” echoed Turk, “suddenly my virginity is not such a big deal.”

Burt looked at them both. “Can we go now, please?”

“Hold up!” D.J. scanned the stage. Familiar music was playing.

“It’s the Green Guy theme from the seventies cartoon,” said Turk helpfully.

“No shit, Terkington,” said D.J.

The audience gasped as a blond guy with glasses and a crew cut came on stage. Right behind him was Green Guy. Huge, seven feet tall, emerald green, and wearing the trademarked purple bike shorts. He was perfect, from the physique right down to the walk. All the fans clapped and whistled.

“It’s him!” D.J. almost stood up. “The guy! From earlier today!” Son of a bitch, thought D.J. What have I done to so thoroughly piss of the convention gods at this show?

“Yeah, yeah, sit down!” said Turk. “That’s some serious prosthetics!”

“Dude,” said Burt, awestruck.

“Up next is Mike Bretz, the biggest Green Guy fan in the room,” said Bob the emcee. “Literally.” Laughs from the audience, still clapping and shouting.

“Green Guy not understand,” said Green Guy to Bretz.

“You said there would be someone to stomp, but there is only the people who are clapping.”



“That’s because you’re the coolest, Green Guy,” said Bretz.

“They are clapping for me?” Green Guy’s face was an unfamiliar mask of surprise.

“Yeah. Now, can you give them the yell?”

“But Mikebretz, there is no one to stomp. I cannot make the yell without someone to stomp.”

“Can you pretend, Green Guy? For them?” Bretz gestured at the audience.

“Okay, Green Guy will try.” The audience quieted down.

“TIME TO STOMP!” he roared.

The applause was deafening. Bretz led Green Guy off the stage, a shark-like grin on his face.

“I’ve got to talk to that guy,” said D.J. He had figured it out, where it had all gone wrong. He should have just let that Bretz guy have the spot, then volunteered the bin with the Green Guy comics in them when he heard Bretz ask the dealer about them. That way, Bretz would have felt bad about treating D.J. so poorly. Bretz would have received the bad Karma, and D.J. would be having a pleasant convention experience. Now he had to apologize to Bretz and make it all right again. He stood up. “I’m going right now,” he said.

Turk restrained him. “Wait until after the contest. You won’t get back there now.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.” D.J. reluctantly sat down.

Everyone who was participating in the contest got to take

a final stroll across the stage, but from the looks on their faces, everyone knew who would win. As soon as Snake Plisskin re-emerged, half the audience shouted, "I heard you were dead!"

"Yeah, you and everybody else," he retorted.

D.J. smiled. "Well, it was the only way to save face," he said.

"I completely agree," said Turk.

Everyone else trudged across the stage, brave faces against the groundswell of support for Green Guy, whoever the hell he was under that make-up. Then the judges left the room to work up the scores. While they were gone, everyone chatted, and Bob tried some lame attempts at humor, but thankfully, the room was spared because the judges were back in record time.

Green Guy took first prize, which surprised no one.

Catwoman took second prize, and Snake Plisskin, much to everyone's amazement, came in third. Bretz pocketed his one-hundred dollar check with glee. Catwoman and Plisskin each received gift certificates to the dealer's room. After the prizes were awarded, the crowd scattered. Many of them went to a late dinner, but quite a few stayed around to chat with the contestants.

"Well, that was a colossal waste of time," said Burt.

"What?" said Turk. "Can't you appreciate the artlessness of it all?"

"No," said Burt. "It's a little sad, is what it is."

"Speaking of that, you said you met a girl?"

"Guys, I have to go do this. My con-Karma depends on

it.” D.J. patted them both on the shoulders and walked into the crowd.

A huge clump of people surrounded Bretz and Green Guy.

Green Guy just looked confused at everyone who wanted to touch him. Bretz was talking to another fan. D.J. stepped in cautiously and waited until Bretz caught his eye.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Bretz.

D.J. took a deep breath. “Yeah, hey, listen, I just wanted to tell you there was no hard feelings about today, and also to say thanks for jumping in on Weissman’s shit like that. And, uh, wow, that’s a hell of a costume your friend has, there.”

Bretz scowled. “One, it’s not a costume, how fucking dense are you people? Two, I didn’t jump in Weissman’s shit for you, I did it for me. He wrote that run of Green Guy comics a few years ago that just about ruined the character. And three, I accept your apology, but don’t expect me to take anything back.” Finished, he turned his back to D.J. and resumed arguing with the fan in front of him about which issue Adamantus debuted in the comic book series.

D.J. was stunned. He just couldn’t win today. Fuck this, he thought, I’m going to bed right now. He looked for Turk and Burt, but they were nowhere to be seen. Maybe they were up in the room, he thought, heading for the elevators. And what the hell did he mean, “take anything back?”

Meanwhile, three floors away, the stack of Green Guy

comics on D.J.'s bed faded slowly away, to be replaced with an identical stack of Archie and Betty and Veronica comics. The Green Guy comics reappeared in the boot of the green Jaguar belonging to one Mike Bretz, parked outside the Radcliffe hotel. And there wasn't a thing Skaldrian could do to stop it. He wasn't expecting inanimate transfigurations and had no shields up prevent it.

Free at Last, Free at Last!

The door to the farthest stall cracked and buckled and finally slammed into the wall. Stercutus emerged, heat and sweat pouring off of his new body. He stopped only long enough to snatch up the red backpack before striding the length of the bathroom. Something told him it was important to the form he now occupied, and Stercutus was in no position to second-guess anything in this strange new world. He walked by the mirrors over the sinks, stopped, and admired himself.

He was still large, but now it was Stercutus that made the bulges, not stored up fat. He turned sideways, left and right, admiring his bullet-like shape. What strange garments! The outer coat rattled and clanked in an unseemly fashion. Over a hundred round metal disks were affixed to it, each with some sort of saying. "Perhaps they are battle cries?" he asked his reflection. "The names of those Omicron has slaughtered in times of war?" Nevertheless, it was part of what was making Stercutus so hot and

uncomfortable. He shucked off the jacket and it hit the floor with a clatter and a thud. Stercutus felt much better after that. There were also peculiar lenses in front of his face, hanging on his ears and across his nose. He took them off, and the world blurred.

Damnation, he cursed, is there no end to the defects on this model? He made adjustments in his eyes until he could see normally again, then threw the lenses down with the jacket. Much better. Looking down at his reflection in the mirror, he concluded there was no real hope for the rest of his attire, but he had no suitable robes to change into, so he let it go. He was eager to see how the world had evolved in his absence.

He emerged into a short hallway that opened up into a large grand room. People walked around in groups of threes and fours, some of them in clothing similar to his own. Some wore even stranger garb. Another group of people wearing a similar type of uniform stood around, complaining about someone called "Green Guy." Probably soldiers, thought Stercutus, noting the strange devices on their belts. Something in his borrowed brain thought to name them Trekkies. One cluster of people dressed in formal wear stood quietly, making strange hand signs to each other and talking in low tones. Again he came up with a name: LARPer. A revolving series of glass panes on the other side of the large room led outside. As much as Stercutus wanted to explore the world in-depth, he was still very unsure of himself. Best to stay here for now, he reasoned, and try to piece the greater aspects of

society together from these people. He joined a larger group of oddly-dressed people, all walking in the same direction. They were talking about something called “Rocky Horror.”

They entered a darkened room, crowded with people. Giant, flat pictures played across a wide screen on the far wall, and the audience talked back to it. If this was an oracle, it was the strangest one Stercutus had ever seen. The older, heavysset man on the screen said something, and the audience shouted at him. Then the oracle showed a different picture, a man and a woman, walking in the rain. His other brain found names for them.

“Asshole!” he yelled at the screen. “Slut!”

“Hey, man, wait for it,” said a guy standing next to him.

Someone threw a toasted piece of bread at him, and it bounced off his wide forehead.

“Who would dare assault Stercutus with breadstuffs?” he thundered.

“Shut up, Stercutus,” someone from the crowd offered.

More toast was thrown. Stercutus caught some of it in his hands.

“This had . . . better be an offering . . . ” he gasped, backing up under the onslaught of toast.

“Get out of here!” a woman shouted. “You’re ruining the whole thing!”

He stepped back and the door closed. So, then, it was a religious service he had disrupted. He would have to announce his intentions to the god Rocky after it was over. Munching on the toast, Stercutus strolled down the hallway, watching the people

as they hurried to their destinations. Many of them went into darkened rooms similar to the one he had just come from. Sticking his head in the door, he saw more people clustered around smaller screens. Apparently, size still mattered. He would have to get a screen of his own.

He now understood what this place was. It was a temple, where people could come and pay homage to their gods. One of the last rooms he came to was unoccupied, albeit recently. Gods fell out of favor quickly here, he noted. Crushed drinking cups and pieces of paper and empty metal cylinders were strewn across the table. This would be his new temple! He went to the blank slate on the wall, picked up the plastic marking device, and wrote his name and his credo across the top:

Temple of Stercutus

Within his Bowels, there is Life for All

He stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. The letters he had retrieved from Omicron's mind. It wasn't bad, although his penmanship was atrocious from lack of use. That's what priests are for, he thought, chuckling. Looking as the board made him wistful. What of Cloacina, his consort? Did she escape the hand of time as well? Where was she? These thoughts and others fired curious appetites in Stercutus' broad chest. He wanted food, in abundance. And companionship. There was nothing like a good

old-fashioned orgy to make a god feel right at home. The temple would keep. Desire, as always, came first.

Stercutus retraced his steps to the lobby. Then after a moment of figuring out how the door worked, he stumbled through the sections of glass, and his nose kissed the open air for the first time in a thousand years. "Ah! Free at last of that stifling place!"

"Amen, brother," said a dark-skinned man. He was standing by the door, wearing an elaborate red coat, gilded with gold thread, epaulets, and a matching hat.

"Ho, General," said Stercutus, addressing him by his obvious rank, "I seek food and women in abundance. Can you direct me through the thoroughfares?"

"Well, you want to go to Brewer's Street, then, and it's about four blocks up that way."

"Many thanks, sir," said Stercutus, walking away in the direction indicated.

## Everyone Finds Their Niche

D.J. had tried to go to sleep, but after tossing and turning for a full hour, he sat up, disheveled and sweating. Now, he stared in mute horror at the stack of Archie comic books that had mysteriously taken the place of the Green Guy books. He knew it wasn't the maid; the room had been tidied long before he dropped them off. He ransacked Turk and Burt's stuff, hoping one of them had played a trick on him, then ransacked the room. He found a Bible



in one of the dresser drawers but nothing else. Who would leave a Bible in their room, he wondered, pulling the extra pillow down from the top of the closet. No, the Green Guy comics were no longer in the room. But it was the way the Archie comics were there that bothered D.J.: two stacks, just like he set them down, the top issue on the left-hand side canted just so. Whoever took the books made sure that he replaced the Archie comics so that the new stack was identical to the stack of Green Guy comics. And as for who took them, there was only one explanation. It was Mike Bretz.

Unfortunately, there was no way to prove it. Bretz was at the costume contest the whole time. He knew that because Bretz had to sign in at the same time Jane Callow was giving her reading, if the times in the program book were to be believed. How did he do it, then? The sleepless minutes ticked by, and as D.J. became more tired and more unable to sleep, more outlandish thoughts went through his head. Mike Bretz had bribed the front desk. Mike Bretz was a cat burglar. Mike Bretz had the power of invisibility and super speed. Mike Bretz made a deal with the devil to switch the comics for him. Mike Bretz cast a magic spell to switch the comics. Mike Bretz told Green Guy to scale the building and enter through the window and take the comics . . . These thoughts and others eventually lulled D.J. into a fitful sleep, where he dreamt of a world full of no one but Mike Bretz.

Turk sat in the room, his back against the wall. In front of

him sat nine women and three guys. Most of them wore medieval tunics or dresses. One of the guys had a guitar and was trying to figure out the chord changes to “Stairway to Heaven,” with little success. While he strummed, the group around him sang the words to “The Ballad of Gilligan’s Island,” with little success. However, both songs matched up, and most of the people seated took great pleasure in the singing of the song.

Turk’s object was not the filksinging, but one of the girls in the circle. She was sitting next to the guitarist, occasionally glancing in his direction and offering him a half smile. Turk valiantly returned it, then went back to concentrating on the size of her breasts, which were well in keeping with the rest of her in their hugeness. But she had a pretty face, Turk kept telling himself.

Next to Turk was the girl’s younger brother, as skinny as his sister was fat. He had been talking about his D & D character for the past hour, non-stop, in Turk’s ear. Turk had long ago perfected the art of feigning interest in gamer-speak from hanging out with Larry. If he could only get her away from her brother and this room, he might have a chance . . .

“So, do you believe in God, man?” the brother asked, suddenly.

“Huh?” Who could switch gears like that? From gaming to God in one step. Turk was stunned into giving a real answer.

“Yeah, sure, why?”

“Well, I worship the devil, but, I mean, you know, not

religiously,” he replied. “I mean, it’s like, just a thing, nothing serious.”

Turk looked from brother to sister and suddenly decided that no, it wasn’t worth it to stay in the room, not at all. He stood up and walked out without a word to anyone.

Burt and Samitha walked down Brewer’s Street, hands clasped in furtive affection. During dinner, they had talked about each other’s peer groups. She had told Burt about her dorky friends, and he had told her about D.J., Turk, and Larry. Afterwards, they discussed the possibility of catching one of the kung fu movies in the Asian Cinema room. Now they were just walking and talking, young people out on the town, with little to distinguish them from anyone else on the busy street.

“I didn’t tell them where I went,” Samitha giggled. “They will so freak out if they knew I was on Brewer’s street with a guy!”

“I would have thought that you had plenty of offers from guys at this convention,” he said gallantly. “Why would they be so surprised?”

Samitha made a face. “Well, there’s that old quote from Groucho Marx, you know the one? ‘I wouldn’t belong to any club that would have me as a member?’”

“Yeah? I don’t get it,” said Burt.

Samitha let go of his hand to gesticulate. “Think about some of the people you’ve seen at this show. Would you really

want to spend a lot of your free time with them outside of the con?”

“Not really,” said Burt, shaking his head.

“Exactly. My first show ever, I had a guy run up to me, not five minutes after I’d walked in. He’s wearing a full suit of chain mail, but he still looks like a big goofball. He ran up to me and says at the top of his voice, ‘My God, you have great breasts! You must join the SCA!’”

Burt was stunned. “Not really?”

“Yes!” Samitha grabbed his hand again. “I almost left, then and there. Can you imagine?”

“No, I can’t.”

Samitha made an abrupt turn and yanked him sideways.

They were in the mouth of an alley, out of the way of traffic, but still well lit from the neon signs and imitation gas lamps on the opposite side of the street. She leaned in close and whispered, “I like you because you’re not like that,” and followed that statement with a kiss that cut off his response. They stayed like that for a long time.

Nigel St. John drummed his fingers on the counter top, torn between firing everyone on staff and quitting altogether. That damned buffoon Kuykendall either didn’t set the wake-up call or St. John missed it, so his nap turned into a regular bout of sleep. He awoke, hungry and confused, at 10 PM and called down for Kuykendall, but he’d already gone home for the night.

Now St. John manned the front desk and watched the bi-

zarre parade of people walk through the lobby, on their way to whatever wizardly meetings were scheduled for the midnight hour, and marveled at the number of truly awful robes and cloaks in evidence. This had to be the bottom of the barrel of the Neighborhood. Pathetic. There ought to be some standards. St. John glanced at the crumpled note on the counter from Mike Bretz and shuddered. If only they could take him out, the Neighborhood would be a much nicer place.

Someone on the kitchen staff walked by, caught sight of St. John looking at her, and crossed herself and ran out the door. Bloody superstitious peasants, he thought. Just then, Skaldrian strolled across the lobby, an ample-bosomed woman under each arm. The two girls wore the shirts and skirts of medieval serving wenches. They all looked quite drunk.

“Hsst! Skaldrian!” St. John hissed.

Skaldrian excused himself from the women and walked over, a put-out expression on his face. “What now, St. John?”

“I assume you know the vampires are still up on the second floor?”

“You told me as much,” Skaldrian said, “And I put up shields, as you instructed. None of them will pose any further threat.” He turned away and winked at the girls.

“I thought you were going to get rid of them.”

Skaldrian leveled his gaze at St. John. “You know the rules as well as I do. They haven’t broken any of our laws. Not a single

one of them has fed, and until they actually attack someone, I can do nothing to stop them.”

“Oh, well, then, jolly good, I suppose. And to think, I was worried about nothing. Why, I’ll just pop up there and have a pint of bitters with them, then.”

“You could do that,” Skaldrian mused. “They’re not doing much more than talking amongst themselves. I checked.”

“And, where do you think you’re going now?” said St. John, eyeing the women.

Skaldrian smiled. “Considering you interrupted my vacation, I think I’ve earned a little break, don’t you?”

“But what about your spells?” St. John yelped. “All those shields?”

“Daplock and his ilk are tending to things. They’ll let me know if there’s a problem.” He walked back to the girls.

“Your imps?” St. John was outraged. “I’m not paying them a cent, you hear me? You reimburse them yourself!”

“Yes, yes,” he said absently, tucking the wenches back under each arm again. “Now, how did that song go again?” he asked them.

The girls giggled, then sang in unison, “You don’t know what we will fiiiind. Why don’t you come with me, little girl, on a magic carpet ride . . .” They kept it up all the way to the elevator. St. John fingered the vial of holy water at his throat and wondered why no one else was taking this weekend seriously.

Sunday

The Money Crunch

The alarm went off, spilling happy cheerful pop music into the room and across the three stony lumps in the beds. D.J. hammered on the clock radio to make it stop singing. It was quiet for five minutes, then started blaring again. Bang bang went D.J.'s fist, until it was silent again. The third time, Turk called out from underneath his pillow, "Christ, D.J., just turn it off!"

Bang bang. Silence.

"Dude," said Burt, raising his head. The clock said 8:20.

He had been asleep for four hours. This would not do. He burrowed back under the covers and elbowed Turk. "Fred, go get breakfast."

"Fuck you."

Pop music. Bang Bang. Silence.

"Go, man, just do it," Burt followed his command with another elbow.

"Ow! Jesus!"

"Raiders of the Lost Ark, Indy to Marion," Burt said, dreamily.

"Fine. Fuck it. I'm up." Turk theatrically threw off the sheets and blankets and stomped into the bathroom. The shower came on.

Pop music. Bang Bang. Silence.

“What do you want?” asked Turk, emerging from his shower, rubbing his head with a towel.

“Anything,” Burt mumbled. “Two of anything. And a coffee. Huge coffee.” Burt turned over. “I’ll be up when you get back.”

“Deej?” Turk said. No answer. “Okay, but I don’t want to hear any bitching about what I get you.”

On the way back from Burger King, Turk had plenty of time to consider his financial situation. After breakfast this morning, he had exactly thirty dollars to last him today and the rest of the week. Thirty bucks. He could eat on campus, that would cover his three meals, but Wednesday was new comics day, and his Nightmare Before Christmas Jack Skellington as The Pumpkin King action figure was coming in, along with his usual stash of comics. He grimaced. It would be a tight week.

Back in the room, the scene had changed. Burt was up and haphazardly dressed. The television was on, but the sound was down. D.J. was still in bed. Periodically, the alarm would sound. A fist would emerge from the lump of D.J. and pound on the alarm. Then the fist would withdraw and all would be silent again. Burt cracked up every time he did it.

“I’m almost afraid to ask what he did last night,” said Turk as he ate his sausage and biscuit.

“No kidding,” said Burt, far more civil with coffee under his nose. “What did you do last night?”



“Nothing,” said Turk quickly. “Not a damn thing. What did you do?”

“Oh, just hung out.” Burt fished out a five-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Turk. “Here, this is for breakfast.”

“Thanks,” said Turk gratefully.

Burt glanced through his wallet, looked at the credit card receipts he had acquired in the past two days, and saw that he was sitting at thirty-six dollars. Where did it all go? He didn’t buy that much, only one of everything from his various lists. Then he remembered lunch and dinner with Samitha. “Hey, that reminds me, let’s meet for lunch at one o’clock, okay? There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Who is it?” Turk wiped his mouth.

“You’ll see. Meet me at the lunch cart outside the hotel, okay?”

“Sure man, whatever.”

The alarm went off. D.J. sat bolt upright, his hair sitting sideways on his head. “What time is it?” he shouted.

“Nine-thirty,” said Turk.

“Welcome back to life,” smiled Burt.

“Oh my God!” D.J. jumped up out of bed and ran for the bathroom. “The con started thirty minutes ago! You assholes! Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Is there even anything going on today?” Burt said.

“Don’t think so.” Turk finished off his coffee. “For Deej,

it's mainly the principle of the thing to not miss a second of the convention."

When D.J. came out of the shower, he found two ham and egg croissants and a large Coke waiting for him, along with a note to meet for lunch at 1 PM out front. Fair enough, thought D.J. as he fell into his breakfast. At least I didn't have to go get food, but there would be a serious lecture on con-etiquette on the way home today. He ate everything, even the leftover tater tots from Turk's value meal. Not having dinner will do that to you, he supposed.

Thankfully, the guys hadn't seen the Archie comics, or they would have commented on them. D.J. blushed as he remembered his line of thought. It was a real good thing the guys weren't here, then. He would have been compelled to share some of his theories with them and would have never lived it down.

As D.J. got ready for the day, he flipped open his wallet. It was empty. In a blind panic, D.J. dove for his other pair of pants and came up with the wad of cash for the room that the guys had given him on Friday. It was supposed to go to his mother. D.J. looked again at his stack of comics, both the ones he had intended to buy, and also the Archies.

Okay, he said to himself, tucking the money into his wallet, time to make some deals. I'll only spend this if I absolutely have to. Reassured with his plan, D.J. turned to his comics to weed out those he intended to keep and those he hoped to sell to dealers or other fans. The Archies went into the backpack first.

## He Came, He Saw, He Drank a Lot of Beer

Stercutus came staggering up to the Radcliffe, dazed and happy. What a night! The music, the lights, the women, the food . . . and the drinks . . .

He looked very different now. The shirt he had on now was loose-fitting and proclaimed, "I Went Around The World at Trapper John's Bar and Grill." Underneath that questionable sentiment was a vintage Risk game board with the names of different beers scrawled in every country with a black marker. His other shirt, the one that said, "Character is What You Are in the Dark," was given to the lovely woman who kept bringing him different bottles of beer all night. The crowd cheered him on as he guzzled one of everything that was written on the map, then hoisted him high in the air when it was all over. He had given them some of the currency in his pants pocket, but after he finished the beers, they gave it back. After that, everyone came by to pay their respects. All of the beer, coupled with the amount of food he ingested, served to work up an impressive gift for the management of the establishment, which Stercutus left in the sink of the bathroom for everyone to see. Let them know that Stercutus has chosen to favor this place, he had said.

Ten minutes later, they threw him out. It didn't matter.

Some of the crowd went with him and led Stercutus to another

tavern, and when the doormen saw the shirt he was wearing, they let him in free of charge. It was a glorious evening; women kissed him, men clapped him on the back and called him a hero, and his hand was never without some sort of refreshment all evening.

Stercutus, moved by their welcome, made them all priests and priestesses of his new church. Finally, the streetlights dimmed in the onslaught of the morning sun, and the few who had accompanied Stercutus on his pub crawl decided to call it a night, leaving him alone to walk back to his temple for some much-needed rest.

“Good Morning, General,” he said, saluting the black doorman who had helped him out last night. “Are you due to be relieved any time soon?”

“Well, I get off in about five minutes, if that’s what you’re asking.” said the man. He had already had more than enough of these people.

“Indeed. Well, you must put more subordinates out on watch next evening, and we will carouse together.”

The old man smiled and said, “I’m stuck on the evening shift, but I do appreciate the invite.” He tipped his cap to Stercutus, who walked in through the revolving door. The man was a loon, but he was the most pleasant loon the doorman had encountered all weekend.

The garish costumes of the evening were gone, replaced with more conservative (and far uglier, in Stercutus’ opinion) clothing, but the people looked much the same as last night. Was there no pride in this new world? “None of you would make acceptable

senators!” he shouted.

They paused, looked at him briefly, and resumed their activities.

Stercutus snorted and made for his temple.

In the night, someone had come and removed the debris from the table, and also erased his name and credo. No matter, he thought, hurriedly rewriting everything. Soon, this place will bear the mark of Stercutus, and then no one will dare oppose me or my place of worship. With his name back in place on the board, Stercutus slipped the backpack off of his back and lay down on the wooden table. Using the backpack for a pillow, he shut his eyes and let sleep come.

“Hey, man! Omicron! You gotta wake up, man.”

Stercutus opened his eyes. Hovering over him was a youth, old enough to join the legions, but not old enough to warrant a command.

“Man, Omicron, are you all right?”

“This had better be important, knave.” Stercutus sat up and rubbed sleep out of his eyes. “I have not yet recovered from this evening’s revels.”

“I’ll say,” said the lad, grinning. “Went to Trapper John’s, eh?” His face clouded. “Or are you just supporting Risk?”

“Risk? I take no chances like the one you are taking.” He grabbed the boy by his T-shirt and pulled him close. “Why are you interrupting me?”

“Um, you signed up for the Deity-level LegendMasters game. They sent me out to make sure you were at the show because no one has seen you this weekend.”

Stercutus released his hold on the boy. “Deities? Here?”

“Yeah, you and five other guys.”

Stercutus beamed. So, the news of his return had spread!

Perhaps he would have a screen quicker than he had thought.

“What is your name, lad?”

“Ravenclaw,” he said promptly. “I play rogues.”

“An actor, eh? Well, I’ve no grudge against your profession, even if you’re all filthy bastards.”

“But—Lord Omicron—?”

“You will address me by the name Stercutus,” he said sternly. “Omicron is no more.”

The boy gaped. “Omicron is dead?”

“Killed by mine own hand.”

“So, you aren’t coming to the deity-level campaign, then?”

“Of course I’m coming!” Stercutus was beginning to think this actor was the city’s simpleton. “Am I not Stercutus?”

“Okay, okay,” said the boy, backing away, “I’ll go tell Jerry.”

“Wait, Ravenclaw,” Stercutus said.

“Yes?”

“Where is this congregation of gods?”

The boy grinned. “Come on, I’ll take you.”

Stercutus picked up the backpack that was his pillow and

companion and trundled off after Ravenclaw.

“So, then, this is just a name change?” Jerry “God”

Markham was holding the stapled set of battered character sheets and regarding them through thick glasses, much in the same way that a scientist would focus the lenses on a laser.

“Name change?” Stercutus was outraged. “Understand this: the only way I would step into Omicron’s shoes is if they were full of manure.”

Jerry sucked in a breath. “Oooh—kay, then. Tell me this: you’re using this character sheet, right? No other changes?”

Stercutus glanced briefly at Ravenclaw, who was nodding.

“That’s correct, Jer-rie,” he said.

“Great. Fine, then. I’ve got this on file with your entry form, I’ll just make a change . . .” Jerry was one of those game masters that talked every accounting action out to himself. “Okay, uh, Stercutus, you’ve got thirty minutes. I suggest you lay in your food and drink for the next few hours because we have a lot of ground to cover.” Jerry turned away from the pair and began writing furiously on a yellow legal pad.

Stercutus clapped the boy on the shoulders. “My thanks, Ravenclaw, for your assistance. You are a clever youth, and there will be a place for you in my realm when I have re-established myself.” Not only did Ravenclaw know what a character sheet was, he was the one to suggest it might be in the backpack Stercutus had been toting around all this time. And he was right. For an

actor, he was pretty bright.

Ravenclaw nodded. “Does that mean I get to game with you guys on Saturday nights?”

Stercutus squinted, thinking it over. “Provided that I have no affairs of state to attend to, then I don’t see why you can’t accompany me in my revels.”

Ravenclaw beamed. “Cool! I’m gonna get on the net and post that I’m going to be in your campaign!” He raced off.

“Ravenclaw!” Stercutus shouted. “When you return, bring me a sandwich!”

Let the Games Begin!

Stercutus peered at the other people sitting with him at the table. They didn’t seem very god-like, but then, Stercutus was in no position to judge from his current incarnation. They had all greeted him warmly and called him by the name Omicron, but Ravenclaw had corrected their mistake quickly enough. He had also fetched some kind of pastry filled with meat and sauce, called a calzone, which Stercutus fell to and devoured.

The other players gathered at the table stared back. Larry Croft, or Omicron, whichever you prefer, was known to stay in character all through a gaming session, but they had never seen him come to the table in character before. Much less, as anything resembling this character. Larry played Omicron not much differently from the way he normally behaved, except that Omicron



spoke in complete sentences. Otherwise, Larry was content to eat, drink, and fiddle with his dice until combat occurred, at which time, he would lean into the table and utter war cries in a majestic baritone. Or as close as Larry could muster with his mouth full of pizza. Almost always, the first words out of his mouth at the start of combat were, "I had an arrow nocked the whole time," which would ensure that Omicron got to attack before anyone else. This had earned him the nickname 'Omicron the Ever-Nocked' amongst his peers, but never to his face.

This was not the same man they had been playing with for years sitting before them. True, he had the same table manners as Larry, but after consuming his calzone, he stopped eating altogether and asked what each of them were gods of, exactly. He looked different, too. Gone was the too-tight gaming slogan T-shirt. This white, loose-fitting T-shirt had nothing to do with gaming, unless Larry was suddenly supporting Risk. He smelled like a bar. One of them whispered to the others that Larry was out on Brewer's street last night, drinking pitchers of beer while the crowds cheered them on. Larry wasn't a beer drinker, and he damn sure wouldn't take it up if it would cut into his gaming time. His posture was different, his speech was altered, even his eyes flashed with a keen intelligence that they had never seen before. In short, they had no idea what had happened to Larry.

Jerry noticed their apprehension and tried to gloss over it.

This deity level game was sanctioned by LegendMasters, which

meant that any experience points awarded would be tallied at the league headquarters in Tempe, Arizona, and applied to each player's national ranking. In spite of that, Jerry kept telling them to have fun. This would be a kick, he promised them. He hoped.

"Okay," said Jerry, his one-word signal that it was time to begin. "You have all been summoned to the Drinking Hall of Vardelath, the Viking god of battle . . ." The players leaned forward, eyes wide, each of them picturing the scene in their mind. One player took notes while another began spinning his lucky twenty-sided die absently. "It seems that Krune, the god of deceit, has stolen Vardelath's war axe and placed it in the land where no gods may roam."

Stercutus frowned. What was this man talking about? He felt no gates open. There was no god before him. What was he talking about? And weren't these people gathered around him also gods?

Jerry altered his voice. "I have had my eye on you heroes for some time now. I must ask you to be my champions, if I am to thwart Krune. I need my battleaxe, and only learned veterans such as yourselves may venture into the Underworld to retrieve it for me. As you know, no god can enter the Underworld so long as he can take breath, and Krune has paid Paaryn, the goddess of death, very well to make sure I don't come after it myself. You, on the other hand, have a chance to slip in undetected. And I will reward you all handsomely."

"Cool," said Vince, sitting on Stercutus' left, "I'm par-

ticularly fluent in the legend lore of LegendMaster's pantheon.”

“Good,” said Roy, sitting on Stercutus' right, “because I'm sketchy on it.”

Vince piped up, “My character says, ‘We would be honored to quest for Kaaningore for you,’ and then he bows.”

“Paladins,” said Roy, rolling his eyes.

The light came on in Stercutus' eyes. Finally, it all made sense! They were gods, just as he was. Jerry was an oracle, the old-fashioned kind, since he kept peering down behind the cardboard screen and rolling the funny, plastic stones. Each of these gods had chosen a mortal, a hero, and was making that hero interact within the world that only the oracle could see. He relayed the results of the god's whims to the group. “By Jupiter, I get it now!”

Stercutus thumped the table. The dice and drinks jumped.

“Wait, was that in character?” said Roy.

“Okay,” said Jerry, “so, Stercutus, what do you do?”

Stercutus folded his arms and said, “Although it's a pity that this Viking god hasn't the power to find his own axe, Omicron will help him, nevertheless.”

“Wait, you're Omicron again?” cried Vince.

“Yeah, man, you have to pick one,” said Jerry. “I can't keep erasing your name on my character sheet.”

“No, I am not Omicron, I am Stercutus. My champion is Omicron. Is that not the way of things here?”

He looked from player to player. They all shrugged or

looked away. Jerry made a face, then scribbled something down behind the screen. “Okay, then, so Omicron is in, right?”

“Yes,” said Stercutus, confident now that he knew exactly what was going on.

Not quite an hour later, Stercutus was ready to slaughter the whole room and damn the consequences. First, Omicron sustained damage during an ambush from demonic hordes because none of the other characters spotted the set-up. “Why didn’t Omicron spot the set-up?” said Stercutus.

“You didn’t ask, man,” said Jerry. “You’ve got to ask to check for traps, you know that.”

“Now I know that,” said Stercutus. Thereafter, every five minutes, he announced, “Omicron checks for traps.”

After the fifth time, Jerry held up his hands. “Enough already, I get it. But look, it was a wandering monster, okay? It was random.”

“Random?” Stercutus frowned. “Does chaos rule in this other world? Does not everything happen at the whim of the gods?”

“Look, man, it’s in the rules, okay? Jeez. Let it go. It’s not like you don’t have enough hit points.” Jerry got that ‘don’t-fuck-with-the-GM’ look in his eyes.

“Yeah, and besides, I can heal you,” offered Vince.

“Oh, well, never mind then,” said Stercutus, but he was still miffed.

Fifteen minutes after that, Stercutus informed the party that Omicron would forge ahead to look for the river to take them

to the underworld.

“Hold up,” said Vince. “The way to the underworld is in the basket that hangs from the moon.”

“Yeah, and you really don’t want to go off on your own,” added Roy, glancing at their GM. Jerry was famous for punishing harshly any players who tried to grandstand by going off on their own.

“A basket on the underside of the moon?” Stercutus was aghast. “How ridiculous!”

“Hey, don’t knock the world, man,” said Jerry.

“What is your problem today?” asked Vince.

“My problem? Our heroes are meandering around when we should be getting to the task at hand! Are we not gods? Give them the power to transverse great distances. Let’s fly them to hell and retrieve this cursed axe and be done with it!”

“Lar—Omi—Stercutus, man, you’re passing up a shitload of experience points if we do that,” said Roy.

“Dude, I’m just about ready to level, here. I’ll fight kobolds if it’ll give me another hit die,” said Vince.

“Fine, stay and do battle like a common soldier,” Stercutus snarled. “The rest of you? What of it? You, you said your hero knew magic. Lend him your divinity and get us past the three-headed dog, or whatever passes for a guardian in this accursed world.”

“Uh, I didn’t memorize any dimension doors,” said Toby,

the young kid with the weak chin. “No one told me we’d be doing that.”

“What?” Stercutus was beside himself. “Are you a god or aren’t you?”

“I’m terribly sorry if the pace is not to your liking,” said

Jerry, his voice shrill. “Perhaps you need a few more wandering monsters to deal with . . .”

“No!” said the rest of the players.

“So, you’re not an oracle at all, are you?” said Stercutus, his head lowered, his eyes bright. “You’re manipulating things to your own ends here.”

“Well, duh!” said Jerry. “It’s all scripted here, you asshole.”

Stercutus drew himself up. “Heretic!” He yanked the screen aside with a single swipe of his hand. The table gasped. Touching the GM’s screen was a violation of even the most basic role-playing protocol. There was no worse transgression. Jerry was mortified. “As I thought! More papers and bones! You don’t even have a screen! You are the trickster god! This is all a plot to keep our heroes from the axe! Well, Omicron will not be a puppet in your comedy! I withdraw him from the quest!”

“You do, and I’ll kill your character, no saving throw, no resurrection,” said Jerry, his voice almost a falsetto. “No one walks out on a game I’m running, not even fat slobs who run combat monsters.”

“Fat? Monster? You dare to mock Stercutus?!” With a single hand, he lifted the table high into the air and tossed it be-

hind him. Paper and dice went everywhere, along with five panicked gamers, who were half-running for their life and half-diving for their lucky dice.

Jerry shrieked as soon as the table went flying. “Don’t come near me! I’ll sue!” But Stercutus was already coming. He grabbed Jerry by his shirt and pinned him to the wall. Jerry kicked and screamed like a trapped animal.

Stercutus frowned. What was this reaction? Fear? Crying? This behavior was most unseemly for even low-ranking gods. “Why do you not challenge me? What is your area of influence?” he yelled into Jerry’s contorted face.

“Let him down, Larry!” shouted Roy, now that all of his dice were safely back in their leather pouch. “It’s just a game, man!”

The words crept slowly through the fog of Stercutus’ anger. Just a game.

He looked behind him at the overturned table, the character sheets, the dice and the players. They were scared and shocked.

Jerry continued to wriggle, forgotten, in his iron grip. Now it all made sense.

“You’re no gods,” he said, his voice dripping with contempt. “Children! Insects! Playing cosmic make-believe in worlds that never existed!” He let go of Jerry, who dropped to the floor and folded like an accordion at the waist and knees. “I have been misled by Ravenclaw. He shall feel the brunt of my wrath. Be

thankful my influence is scant, or I would dry your guts out where you stand. You would fertilize the ground beneath my throne with your rotting corpses. I shall not forget you, any of you. But it is still not too late to curry my favor. Leave offerings at the Temple of Stercutus, and you will be spared my wrath. Leave nothing, and I shall spill my morning water into your empty skulls!” His speech finished, Stercutus stomped through the wreckage of the gaming session and knocked the door off its hinges.

It was quiet for a long time. Jerry was the first one to speak.

“If he thinks he’s getting a single experience point for this adventure, he’s sadly mistaken.”

“So, what happens after we all set up camp for the night?”

asked Roy.

It’s the Burt From the Mirror, Mirror Universe...

D.J. walked into the lobby first, followed by Turk, with Burt bringing up the rear. They moved with uniform aimlessness, making a slow circle through the lobby, weaving through the pockets of fans, trying to figure out where to go and what to do. D.J. stopped short and broke the silence.

“Meat, what the hell was THAT?”

“Yeah, man, an ambush?” added Turk.

“What? No!” Burt was mad. “I might ask you what your attitude was during lunch.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to meet any girl-nerds. I just thought



we were going to lunch to discuss the con,” D.J. held his head high.

“When did you meet her anyway?” said Turk.

“Friday night, when you were wanking off in the cartoon porn room,” said Burt.

“I was not wanking . . . I went to Jackie Chan, man!”

D.J. pointed his finger at Burt’s chest. “Look, Burt, if you want to pick up girls at a comic book con, that’s fine, that’s your business. But don’t expect us to come along and back you up with some blind date action.”

“I noticed you got the cute one,” said Turk.

“You two are so fucked up!” Burt exploded. “Me and Samitha just thought it would be nice to get our friends together and talk. Not a date, not a set-up, just hang out and chat.”

“Burt, they were SCA girls!” said D.J.

“Hear you nothing that I say?” asked Turk.

“You two didn’t even try!” Burt turned on Turk. “The reason you’re still a virgin—”

“Keep your voice down, goddamn it!”

“—is because you are so hung up on actually doing it that you can’t just relax and be a person. If you would just back off and not try to hump every leg you see . . .”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’ve had sex.” Turk managed to make it an insult.

“And you,” said Burt, turning to D.J.

“Don’t say anything you’ll regret later,” warned D.J. in a low voice.

“You’re so goddamn uptight and repressed, it makes me sick. You over-intellectualize everything from super hero comics to ordering a Whopper because you don’t really know how to deal with people. Grow up! And dude, it doesn’t help that you live with your folks, either.”

“Ouch,” said Turk, quietly.

Burt continued. “I put three girls in front of you, all of whom read comics and watch Star Trek, and you manage to piss them off and scare them off in equal parts. Yet you’ll both go on and on about what a joy it would be to date Devin Grayson because she writes the Batman books and is also a babe! Listen to yourselves! Fucking grow up!” Burt turned on his heel and left D.J. and Turk standing in the hotel lobby with a crowd of people staring at them.

“I’m, uh, going to go back to the dealer’s room,” said Turk.

“Me too,” said D.J. They hurried off together.

Once they were safely ensconced in the anonymity of the Sunday crowd, they found their voices. “Fucking ingrate,” muttered Turk. “He wouldn’t even know about Farscape if it wasn’t for me!”

“What did he mean, uptight? Am I uptight?” D.J. asked.

Turk avoided answering the question. “I’m sorry I’m a virgin, okay? God, what does he want from me?”

“Am I uptight, Fred?”

“Just because he’ll put his dick into the first SCA chick that bats her fat eyelashes at him . . .”

“She was pretty cute,” D.J. corrected. “Not Jane Callow cute, but still.”

“I thought you didn’t like that type?”

“Turk, I’ve been in love with Jane Callow from the moment I saw her picture on the Internet.”

“Wow, really?” A personal anecdote from D.J. Will miracles never cease, Turk thought.

“Yeah, and yesterday, I went to her reading and really fucked up my chance to talk to her because I was so . . .”

“Uptight?” suggested Turk.

“So you do think I’m uptight!”

Turk shrugged and looked the other way. They walked the periphery of the room, each keeping their own thoughts. Turk spoke first. “Not uptight, exactly. But you do take everything too seriously.”

“Not everything.”

“Everything.”

“Geez . . .”

They turned the corner again and found themselves back at the entrance to the dealer’s room.

“What do you want to do?” asked Turk.

“Let’s go find Burt,” said D.J. in paternal tones. “He’s probably all broken up and feeling guilty about the way he talked

to us. We'll let him dangle for a bit before letting him off the hook."

"Good idea," said Turk.

"GOD! Thank you! I needed that." Burt rolled off of Samitha, panting, and collapsed on his back.

Samitha snuggled under his arm, her head on his shoulder. "You should get mad at your friends more often."

"Ah, the hell with 'em," said Burt, "they've been making me nuts all weekend."

"I know exactly what you mean." Samitha kissed him.

"Thank you for paging me," he said.

"Thank you for coming. Literally." They laughed the laugh of young lovers. "You know, lunch wasn't a total disaster."

Samitha said, tracing her fingers over Burt's chest.

"How so?" Burt had to hear this.

"Well, Melinda thought Fred was cute before he started talking about his screenplay."

"Did she?" Burt was surprised. "I never caught that."

"That's because you're not a girl, and you don't know Melinda. But she could like Fred, if he would shut up for a minute."

"Huh. Who'da thunk it?"

A rattle and click sounded at the door. Samitha jumped up as if the bed were on fire. "Shit! Get dressed, hurry!" she hissed.

"What's wrong?" said Burt, leaping out of bed, the condom swinging between his legs like an errant pendulum.

"This isn't my room!"

“Oh shit!”

The door opened just in time for the cleaning lady to catch sight of Burt’s naked ass jumping up and down as he tried to step into his shoes and pull up his pants at the same time. She screamed, said a string of rapid-fire Spanish, and backed out, leaving the door open. Burt and Samitha screamed too and broke into a half-clothed run, out of the room and down the hallway toward the elevators.

### Meet the Sisters

Her name was Holly Schenkle, but nobody ever called her that. More to escape the dreary nature of her life than anything else, she took the name Holly Day, and that became her fan name. It was chosen with some care, but owed much to the movie *Cool World*, which she saw on cable when she was ten years old. She was known as Holly Day on the various message boards, around the local shops, and most importantly, at MagicCon. This was her show, and she was the reigning fangirl supreme.

Holly and her three cohorts were known collectively as “the Sisters.” They lived and moved in the hazy upper echelon of fandom that was not-quite big-name-fan, more than staff, and less than professional. It wasn’t fair to call them “groupies” because it implied too much. First off, they didn’t sleep with every professional at the show. That would be gauche. Instead, they each kept

lists of who they had slept with and why, and tracked their careers the way gamblers watched the health of racehorses. In a way, the Sisters were collectors, too. That wasn't the main reason to be at MagicCon, however. For the women, it was a social event. They got together, swapped stories of the mundane world, partied, and made themselves available for viewing to the general (male) public. A weekend of sex, booze, and shameless adulation from total (if weird) strangers made Monday morning data entry at the bank a lot more palatable.

Sunday morning found Holly sitting in the restaurant on her third cup of coffee. The rest of the Sisters were due to meet her, so they could discuss the dirt of last night before the usually quiet Sunday. Provided that any of the girls had unfinished business with a guest or whatnot, plans would be hatched to ensure that everyone went home happy.

The first one to the table was Linda. She was slight where Holly was full, blonde where Holly was brunette, but Linda did the leather look really well and, in the right pair of pants, had the best ass in the world. Linda was jealous of Holly's tits; Holly wanted Linda's long legs. They were best friends.

"Well, how was it?" said Linda, sliding into the booth.

"Dreary," said Holly. "The pro suite has become more and more lame over the years, I swear."

Linda smirked. "Yeah, it's been a downer in that way. I am just not going to sleep with Rolando again, you know?"

Holly nodded. "I cannot blame you. Does he still wear the

stuff . . . ?”

Linda nodded, her eyes wide. “Tried to bite me the last time with those damn fangs. Asshole.”

“Oh my, we’ve got a situation,” said Rhonda, the second sister, sliding in beside Linda. “Rhonda has scoop.”

“Give,” said Holly.

“Yeah, dish,” said Linda.

“Okay, some gamer last night went into the Gaslight and actually managed to go around the world at Trapper John’s.”

Rhonda tossed her artificially colored hair back off her shoulders and hunkered down so she would appear to have more cleavage.

“Impressive,” said Holly, “but so what?”

“Ten minutes later, he got kicked out for taking a shit in the middle of the bar!”

“Eew!” said Linda.

“Pretty gross,” said Holly, yawning. “I’m sorry, I thought you had gossip.”

“Well,” said Rhonda, miffed, “sorry, I thought it was amusing. I was busy last night.”

“Anything to report?” said Linda.

“Not a damn thing,” said Rhonda. “Jane Callow was flatly not interested.”

“Aw, that’s too bad.” Holly clucked her tongue.

“Rhonda feels so betrayed,” said Rhonda. “All of the other vampire authors were bi. What’s her problem?”

“You need to do some converting,” said Holly, dumping more sugar into her coffee.

“Girls!” Leslie rounded the corner and skidded to a stop.

“You won’t believe it! It’s like the seven seals are being broken.”

“Sit down, Les,” said Holly, sliding over, “and tell us what the fuck.”

“You bagged Weissman?” said Linda.

“Yuck, no. Not after that stunt at his panel yesterday.”

Leslie joined the others and leaned in. “I just bumped into Stevie ...”

“Awwwww,” the girls said in unison.

“Shut up! We’re just friends! Anyway, this guy calling himself Stercutus just tore one of the gaming rooms to shit and stormed out. Knocked the door off of its hinges. He even broke a guy’s arm!”

“Not that breaking a gamer’s arm would be that difficult,” sighed Holly.

“Probably that guy who was dressed as Green Guy last night,” said Linda.

Rhonda lit up. “Stercutus? That was the guy in the Gas-light who . . .”

“Yes, thank you,” said Holly, cutting her off. “We know.”

“The guy’s on a rampage,” said Leslie.

“Evidently,” said Holly. “So, have any of you heard of this guy before?”

All of the Sisters shook their heads.



“Okay, then, ladies, we’re going on a fanboy hunt.”

Leslie groaned. “I suck at this.”

“We’ll team up, then.” Holly winked at Linda. “Me and Linda, Rhonda and Leslie. First team to find out where this Stercutus guy is and make contact has to come away with a souvenir of some sort. Get it? Anything will do, so long as it’s from him. Then we call the hotel security and the convention staff and get him out of here. It’ll be a scream.”

“Better than the usual Sunday bullshit,” said Linda.

“Okay, cool,” said Rhonda.

The girls left the restaurant in pairs, going in opposite directions.

The first thing Holly and Linda did was track down Stevie Fleckner and get his story. He took one look at the women smiling at him and spilled his guts. “I was walking through the gamers nests, minding my own business, when this big guy grabs me and nails me to the wall . . .”

“Big,” said Holly, “how big?”

“Gamer big,” said Stevie. “All directions, you know. He grabs me and asks me something like who do I answer to. It freaked me out! I don’t remember what I said, but it kinda threw him off, so he asked me who my ruler was, because he wanted to, and I quote, ‘resume his place in my pantheon,’ or something like that.”

“Fucked up,” said Linda.

“Yeah, well, by this point, I figured I’d walked into a LARP

session or something, so I told him my god was Stanley Weissman and that he was in room 912.” Stevie started laughing. “Then he made me show him how the elevator worked and let me go.” He wiped his eyes under his glasses. “I forgot about it. I mean, I just figured he’d knock on the door or something . . .”

“What did he do?” said Holly.

Stevie looked really worried. “Never mind. You’ll hear about it soon enough. I just hope he doesn’t say who told him where Weissman was, or I’ll be in deep shit.”

Holly and Linda went back to the gaming rooms, where they never ever ventured, and surveyed the damage to the door. Holly pulled Stercutus’ real name from one of the gamers who survived the attack. Larry Croft. No wonder he chose Stercutus, Holly thought. From there, she and Linda went to Betty at registration to check him out, but there was no Larry Croft in attendance, nor Stercutus, for that matter. Finally, Holly tried the front desk, and while there was no Larry Croft on the computer, she did catch the British guy behind the counter talking to two disheveled security guards.

“This person, this Stercutus, he dragged you both backwards?” asked the British guy.

“Yeah, one of us under each arm!” said one of the beefy guys, rubbing his neck.

“I see. Young man, was it? And now, tell me why I pay you anything at all, since you obviously belong in the kitchen with the dishes and the foreigners instead of protecting the ho-

tel!”

Holly and Linda made a beeline for the elevators. When they got to the ninth floor, several fans were out in the hallway chattering excitedly. “It had to be the guy playing Green Guy last night!” gushed one fan. “I saw him do it, he was huge!” Further down the hall, a man and a woman from the hotel were talking to a hysterical Stanley Weissman. They could see that the door had been torn from its hinges. Pieces of the lock lay at the man’s feet. Holly shook her head in admiration, and she and Linda walked casually by Weissman’s door to hear what was being said. “. . . don’t know, he told me I wasn’t a god, I was just some guy. Goddamn fans. He’s strong as an ox and fucking crazy, and I expect some sort of remuneration . . . ”

“We’ll take care of it, Mister Weissman,” said the woman.

“Take care of it? He shit on my fucking floor, lady! A lot!”

“That, uh, that is a lot of, uh, fecal matter,” said the man, staring into the room. The woman looked away. “Are you sure he didn’t have that in a sack or something when he came in?”

“No! He kicked open my door and starting blabbing about how he was a god and he wanted me to do it to him . . . ”

“. . . a god . . . ” said the woman, writing it down.

“I threatened to call security and he told me he would prove it to me. I just turned my head for a second to talk on the phone . . . ” Weissman broke off as he caught sight of Linda and Holly.

“Hey, you frigging gawkers, get out of here! I don’t need this!

This is a private moment of stress!” He shooed them with his hand. The man broke off from comforting Weissman and walked towards the girls.

“Come on, you really don’t want to see this.” He looked further down the hall at the group of excited fans. “All of you need to clear this hallway!” he said loudly. The fans began the slow shuffle to the elevators. Holly and Linda were the last ones in. “Whoever he is, I’m starting to like him,” said Holly.

“He probably shit on the floor to teach Weissman a lesson,” said Linda.

“He shit on Weissman’s floor?” one of the fans gasped.

“Yeah, but hey, don’t tell anyone, okay?”

“No, of course not,” said the fan. The doors opened on the ground floor and the fans scattered like mice.

“Linda, that was mean,” said Holly, who knew the fans would all head straight to the dealer’s room to tell everyone.

“I know, but that prick yelled at us, so he deserves what he gets.”

An hour later, they had been through every floor of the hotel, back into the gamer’s area three times (they found a room with his name written on the board, along with a disgusting slogan underneath it, but nothing else), and finally ventured into the dealer’s room. No luck. But everyone was talking about him.

Rumors were getting tangled up now, and depending on who you talked to, Stercutus was either the guy who had pulled a gun on

Weissman at his panel yesterday or the winner of the costume contest last night: real name, Mike Bretz. Holly and Linda had more information than the fanboys, but not by much.

“Well, I give up,” said Linda.

“Me too,” said Holly. “This wasn’t even fun, except for the rumors.”

“Hey, Holly,” said Linda, but before she could finish her sentence, someone grabbed both of Holly’s ass cheeks and squeezed.

“At last, my love, I have found you!” said the booming voice behind her.

Holly Would if She Could

Holly turned, enraged, while she ran through her prodigious catalog of insults to throw at the fanboy who dared lay a hand on her ass. Standing in front of her was a large guy, in his mid-twenties. He was thick all over, but his mass looked solid. His hair was long and thin, parted on either side of his wide forehead. But it was his eyes that jumped out at her. Never before had she been so caught up in anyone’s brown eyes, so deep and penetrating. There was something going on behind them, and you could actually see them twinkling.

Then Holly looked down and saw the shirt from Trapper John’s. “Stercutus, I presume?” Holly asked, a half-smile on her

face.

His face lit up. “Cloacina! You remember me!” He fell to his knees and clasped her leg. “It has been so long, my love . . . forgive my unseemly appearance,” he choked.

Linda watched the scene impassively. “Is that from a movie or something?” she asked Holly.

“I don’t know, but I liked it.” Then to Stercutus, “On your feet, Stercutus.”

He stood up and took Holly in his arms and, before either woman could do anything, kissed her fiercely and passionately.

Holly’s shock and embarrassment quickly turned to acceptance while Linda gaped at her. Stercutus finally broke the kiss.

“No,” he said sadly, “alas, you are not my beloved Cloacina.”

“Hold on there, Tiger,” Holly gasped, “I can be Cloacina, just tell me how she dresses.” Holly was mentally pulling off his T-shirt and flack pants and replacing them with a black silk shirt and leather pants. In her mind’s eye, he now resembled Meatloaf from the Bat Out of Hell 2 Tour, and that was plenty all right with her. She idly wondered if he could sing.

“No, I’m sorry, but you are just another mortal.” Stercutus ran an appreciative hand over Holly’s shoulder. “But you are the closest thing I’ve seen to my lost goddess.”

“Oh, my,” said Holly, totally caught up in those piercing eyes. It was bullshit, she knew, but it sounded really good coming out of his mouth.

“But now, I have to go,” said Stercutus, dropping his hand.

“Wait!” said Holly, as surprised at herself as Linda. “You can’t just go.”

“I don’t belong here,” he said, his eyes woeful. “I am a god among the mortals. I am forgotten and alone.”

“Are you kidding?” Holly put her hands on her hips.

“You’re the talk of the dealer’s room.”

“Goodbye, beautiful woman. Were it a different time, another place, we would enjoy supreme congress in the accepted fashion of worship for my station. This body, I fear, would collapse before the fertility ritual was done. I cannot. And so, farewell.” Stercutus turned from them.

“Not so fast,” said Holly, stepping in front of him again.

“Here.” It was a business card with her name and phone number.

“Only the pros get this. Consider yourself lucky, Chief. Now, call me. Got it?”

Stercutus smiled. “Perhaps.” He walked into the men’s restroom.

Holly stood there, her hip cocked, arms folded across her chest. “That was arrogant. No one ever gave me the brush-off before.”

“What the hell came over you?” screeched Linda. “You kissed a gamer!”

“He may have looked like a gamer, but he kissed like a god!” Holly grinned. “Come on, let’s go tell the girls the contest

is over.”

“We didn’t get anything from Stercutus, though.”

Holly put her finger to her lips. “I think the kiss should count. Plus, he copped a feel. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Stercutus walked to the last stall and sat down heavily. It was no use. The gods were dead. Weissman, Jerry, and probably even Ravenclaw were the masters of this world, now. He was all that was left from the old days, the real divinity, and it was a pitiful, miserable existence indeed without his consort, Cloacina, at his side. Stercutus had toyed with the possibility of taking a human consort, but considering how little respect he had for them, and apparently, they had for him as well, he wisely decided against it.

His time was done. It was no longer his world. The mortals no longer wanted or needed divine guidance. Without them, he was nothing. And so, that’s what he would be.

He let himself go, detached himself from Omicron’s consciousness and felt a curious scream in his mind. Someone called Larry. No matter. Larry or Omicron or whomever could have the vessel back. Stercutus slipped out from the host body, which took a lot less time than trying to force himself in, and swam back down the pipes, heading for the sea.

All at once, Larry was awake. He was back on the toilet, and everything felt very strange. His body ached all over, like he’d been exercising. Looking down, he saw that his shirt was gone, along with his blue jean jacket with his button collection on



it. He smelled sharply of stale beer and cigarettes.

What happened to me? Larry wondered, looking down at the shirt. Then he realized that he had no stomach. At all. His skin hung loosely, like a deflated balloon, at his waist. Then a collection of intense memories fired all at once in his brain, and he remembered Stercutus, the rampage, the shitting, everything. The enormity of what he did and what was done to him was too great. He passed out again.

### The Shit Hits the Fan

Burt ran into the men's bathroom, still breathing hard from his sprint down the hall and various other exertions. Once the door closed, he cracked up, laughing hysterically at the situation. Oh, man, he thought, wiping his eyes. That was rich. He took two steps into the bathroom proper and almost gagged. The smell was overpowering and terrible. Holding his nose, he moved to the sink, where he took a huge gulp of air, held it, and quickly washed his hands. As he was drying them under the blower, it occurred to him that he had to pee. Holding his mouth under the hot air blast, Burt got another gulp of air and danced over to the urinal.

"Dude," Burt said, walking back to the sink to wash his hands again. "Déjà vu."

From the back of the bathroom, someone groaned. Burt grimaced; that explained the smell. The groan came again, then a

shuffling sound, followed by the flushing of the toilet. Burt busied himself at the sink. The door to the last stall swung open and Burt saw the offender come staggering out, holding his stomach. He looked up.

“Burt?”

“Yeah, what do you want?” Burt looked hard at the guy,

wondering who it was. The face was familiar, but he couldn't place it . . .

“Burt, it's me. It's Larry.”

“Holy shit!” Burt could only gape and stare. It was Larry, minus the glasses and what looked like a hundred pounds. He was wearing a T-shirt from Trapper John's, a shirt from a bar, at that. His blue jean jacket was gone. The buttons were gone. His stomach was gone. His clothes were baggy on his still-large frame, and his skin around his stomach hung loose and limp.

“You gotta help me, man. I can barely walk.”

“Larry, what happened,” said Burt, taking his arm. Underneath the skin, Burt felt sinewy muscles. “What did you do?”

“I don't know,” Larry lied. “Look, we just need to go, okay? I need to get to a doctor.”

“Are you dying?”

“No, I don't think so, but there's something wrong with me. I'll be okay. But can we go? Where are the guys?”

“I don't know. Come on, let's go look for them.”

Larry hung back. “I can't.”

“Why? Are you in pain? What’s wrong?”

“Um, there’s people looking for me. We’re gonna have to make a break for it.”

?

Burt came running out of the bathroom and barreled into D.J. and Turk.

“Guys!” said Burt.

“We know, it’s all right,” said D.J. kindly.

“What happened to letting him dangle for a while?” said Turk.

“What? Wait, never mind, listen up: I found Larry. He’s in the bathroom right now.”

“Huh, there’s a shock,” said Turk.

“Turk, shut up for a second,” said Burt. “He’s in serious fucking trouble. Hotel security is looking for him. Lots of damages. Weissman is going to sue him if he can find him.”

“Weissman?” D.J.’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Larry said something that doesn’t make any sense to me: he says he’s been Stercutus for the last two days.”

Turk’s eyes got wide. “They’re talking about that guy in the dealer’s room!”

D.J. said, “Hold up, Larry said he was Stercutus?”

Burt nodded. “Look, he just explained a little bit of it to me, but oh boy, we’ve got to get him out of here. Wait ‘til you get a look at him.” He fished car keys out of his pocket. “First thing

we do is load up the van and park it around the corner where we can get to it quick and easy. Come on.”

As Burt bounded away, D.J. looked at Turk. “Who put him in charge?”

“Hey, maybe he found his niche?”

All of their luggage had been stored with the concierge, since they couldn't find Larry and had to be out of the room by noon. They retrieved it, tipped the concierge a dollar (he rolled his eyes), and lugged everything out to Larry's van, all very mindful of the three security guards in green blazers talking excitedly to the British guy at the front desk. D.J. then took the wheel and not-so-skillfully found a parking space about a half a block away from the front door.

When at last they re-entered the building to collect their friend, they drew up short. Standing next to the security guards were two police officers. They were all talking and writing things down. “Oh, this will be fun,” said Burt.

The trio stepped into the bathroom. “Goddamn,” said Turk, waving his hand in front of his face. “What died in here?”

“A god,” said Larry, stepping out of the far stall.

D.J. and Turk stared. “Holy shit, you've got cancer!” said Turk.

“No, but every single muscle in my body is sore. Even moving my eyes hurts.” Larry had to hold up his pants, even with the great flap of his stomach and his T-shirt tucked into the waist.

“Okay, Larry, we've got trouble,” said Burt. He filled Larry

in on the situation outside with the cops and the security guards.

“Oh, shit, I’m going to go to jail,” Larry moaned.

“Relax,” said D.J. “I have a cunning plan.”

“Black Adder,” said Turk. “Edwin to Baldric.”

D.J. yawned, one eye on the cracked bathroom door, just barely visible from where he was standing in the foyer, and one eye on the front desk with its congregation of authority figures.

He was fidgeting in a very un-espionage-like way, but in the coming and going of fans, he was scarcely noticed.

Finally, the cops and the security guards all turned their backs to the lobby so they could pore over some sheet of paper on the counter. D.J. made the Vulcan “Live Long and Prosper” sign and started ambling towards the bathroom, intently watching the front counter. His job was to keep an eye on them and signal Turk, Burt, and Larry if they were spotted.

They walked as quickly as they could, the three of them, with Larry in the middle and Burt and Turk doing their best to block him from view. D.J. walked sideways beside them, watching the front desk like a hawk. So far, so good, he thought.

“We’re gonna make it,” said Burt.

From the far side of the lobby, at the entrance to the restaurant, they heard a woman yell “Stercutus! You better call me!” The words rang out over the four guys and chilled everyone’s blood. They looked. She was a curvy, busty brunette in a white blouse, wearing black Spandex pants and matching leather boots.

Holly Day saw them, then saw D.J. looking in horror at the front desk and clapped her hand to her mouth.

“Go,” said D.J. to the other three, looking at the cops who were now looking around. “Go, go, go on,” he urged, but it was too late. The cops were turning towards the group. One of the security guards pointed right at Larry. Larry, Turk and Burt quick-stepped, and D.J. turned to run ahead with them when he saw someone familiar emerge from the revolving door.

“YOU!” screamed D.J. “You stole my Green Guy comics, you dick!”

Mike Bretz turned, shock and anger on his face. “Piss off, fanboy,” he said, “you can’t prove shit!”

The two cops stopped, torn between grabbing Stercutus and nabbing a thief. After a quick exchange of looks, they split up, one each per altercation.

D.J. charged Bretz, caught up in the moment, but in the back of his head, he hoped to make enough of a ruckus to distract the police.

St. John took one look at Mike Bretz, crouched to meet D.J.’s charge, and panicked. “He’s come for me! Code Blue! Code Blue!” He dove under the counter.

Skaldrian opened a blue-white gate in the ceiling and dropped down, hovering in mid-air, energy crackling in his palms.

Bretz saw the other sorcerer and dodged D.J.’s clumsy tackle.

“Not this time, Monkey-Boy,” said Bretz, pointing at Skaldrian.

“Bollocks,” said Skaldrian as Bretz’s blast caught him and

tumbled him end-over-end behind the counter, where he rolled to a stop under St. John's feet.

"What are you doing here?" St. John hissed. "Put a screen up!"

"That's about all I can do," said Skaldrian, shaking his head to clear it. "He threw a hex on me."

D.J. saw the flash of Bretz's spell go off and said the first thing that came to mind. "Look out! He's got a gun!"

The few scattered people who had been watching the exchange with interest now screamed and dropped to the floor, hands over their heads. Both cops turned now and drew their pistols.

"Freeze," said one of them, to Bretz. "I got him," he said to his partner, "go get the big guy."

Holly and the rest of the sisters who had come up behind her during the start of the melee looked on as the other policeman closed on the panicked forms of Larry, Turk, and Burt.

"We have to do something," said Holly. "This is all my fault."

"Charge the cop," said Linda. "Fan-panic."

"Good one," said Rhonda. "Let's do it."

Bretz held up his hands, smiling at the cop. "Relax, pal, I don't have a gun."

"Then what are you, a Skrull?" demanded D.J.

The cop was already shaken from the pyrotechnics and the shouting. "Nobody move!"

Skaldrian climbed up over the counter and raised his hands.

“Don’t do it, Bretz!”

“Get bent, Skaldrian.”

“I’ll call the Pentacle. They know you’re back in town?”

Skaldrian threw up a defensive shield around the cop that Bretz batted away with a glance.

“You can’t beat me when I’m ready for you, you ponce.”

Suddenly, four screaming girls shot through the battle zone screaming “Vampires! Here in the hotel!” They spoiled the aim of the cop with his gun on Bretz, and two seconds later collided with the second cop who was just about to nab the guys, who were going through the revolving door one by one. The cop pushed the girls this way and that while they hollered about the undead in the dealer’s room. Holly and Linda both lurched backwards into the revolving door. The cop put his gun back down, only now he was pointing it at Skaldrian. Bretz had switched places with him in the instant that the girls ran through.

“What the hell?” said the cop, looking around to see what happened to Bretz. As the cop looked, Bretz pointed a finger at Skaldrian, smiling.

“Aw, no,” said Skaldrian.

“I warned you, Monkey-Boy,” said Bretz. He said a word, and Skaldrian’s body turned instantly to liquid. There was a pause, then the fragile molecular bonds that kept Skaldrian’s body in its shape let go and the slush poured out over the floor in a foul-smelling, slippery mess.



The cop turned at the sound of Bretz's voice and was unprepared for the deluge of goo that sluiced over his feet and shoes.

The cop dropped his gun in a panic and tried to get away from the slime. The effort sent him skidding into the other cop, who had just gotten free of the other two sisters and was heading for the door again. They fell down and the sisters followed, falling on top of the cops. "Get your hand off my tit, buddy!" said Rhonda loudly.

Outside, Holly and Linda watched the action inside while Turk, Burt and Larry limped towards the van. Turk skidded to a stop at the van door. "Where's D.J.?"

"Hey, Holly!" yelled Larry. "Is my friend coming?"

Holly smiled at him, then she looked inside through the glass. "Yeah, I think so!" she called back. "Call me!"

Larry blushed, said nothing, and climbed slowly and painfully into the car.

Back inside, D.J. took a step, screaming in blind panic, and fell down in the soup. He shook his fist at Bretz, screaming,

"How did you do that, you mother fucker?"

Bretz flipped D.J. off and floated up through the ceiling.

"He was a Skrull," said D.J. crawling backwards to the revolving door. The cops looked at each other and both headed for D.J. as he made his way through, staring at both of them in wide-eyed horror. Neither of the cops got very far, falling back down into the mess after a couple of steps.

Holly and Linda pulled D.J. up and out of the revolving door. “You okay?” Linda asked him.

“ . . . Fucking Skrull,” muttered D.J. in a daze.

“Shit. Come on, let’s get him in the van,” Holly said, propelling D.J. forward. Linda grabbed an arm, and they steered him into the cargo door, then jumped in themselves. Larry peeled out, and they were gone.

The security guards who had been hanging back now charged the revolving door and only succeeded in piling up in front of it along with the others. Finally, everyone got to a standing position again. “You two, stay the hell back,” the cop barked to Rhonda and Leslie. “You, follow us, let’s get these sonsabitches.” The men started moving, a careful, deliberate walk towards the door.

That was when the plumbing exploded.

### Larry’s Charisma Goes Up Two Points

Under Holly’s navigation, the van crept through the Gaslight district and into the Financial District, then up into the Campus, the Rue Livre, over to Arcadia, then back down into the Gaslight again. The meandering was to determine whether or not they were being followed, but also so Holly could try to get a handle on the situation. Sitting in the passenger seat, she gave Larry the once over.

He was definitely the same guy, but not as big as she had

thought. His arms were solid muscle from the looks of them, but the thick stomach was gone. She couldn't decide if she liked that or not. There was a wild glint in his eyes, and a pained expression whenever he made a turn. He was obviously hurt, but Holly couldn't see where. And he never looked at her whenever they talked, even though it was simple directions and questions about where they were going. She wanted to see that look again in his eyes again. Maybe he's just worried about the cops, Holly thought. His friends, on the other hand, were nothing special. Linda and the kid called Burt kept a lookout from the back window for pursuing patrol cars, while the guy named Turk kept his full attention on Linda's ass. The one she and Linda had helped just held his knees to his chest, sullen. Every once in a while he'd mutter something about the improbability of super-powered aliens on Earth, then lapse back into silence again.

Linda and Burt talked easily, excitedly, fellow criminals caught up in the thrill of the chase. Eventually, they fell to discussing the wanted felon driving the van and began to compare notes. As Linda recounted the tale of Stercutus' rampage, Burt, Turk and eventually D.J. all gathered around to gape in wonder.

Holly noticed his pained expression. "What's wrong, Stercutus?"

"Larry," he said, embarrassed. "My name is Larry."

"I know," she said. He cut his eyes at her. "I got your name from Jerry Markham."

“Right,” said Larry, his face flushing. How was he going to explain it to the guys? He’d never role-play in this town again.

“You don’t game a lot, do you?” asked Holly hopefully.

“Not anymore,” he answered, wincing as he made a turn.

“Not after what happened this weekend.”

Thank God, she thought. “So, what was the rampage all about?”

Larry looked at Holly and felt a hot surge of anxiety well up in his chest. She was pretty and very much one of those hands-off kinds of people at the con, someone who was seen in the company of the professionals. And yet, she was sitting right beside him in his van, asking him questions like it was the most natural thing in the world. She sat with one leg folded under her thigh, and she swung the hanging foot absently as she played with her hair. She shouldn’t be here, even if she didn’t know it. Larry decided to try honesty.

“Would you believe me if I told you I was possessed?”

“It’s really the only thing that makes sense, knowing Larry,” said Turk from the back.

“Not necessarily,” said D.J., now recovered from his shock.

“He could have just snapped under the strain of being a geek.”

Larry held an upturned middle finger out behind him for D.J.’s inspection. Holly smiled. “When you say ‘possessed’, do you mean literally or figuratively?”

“Um . . .” said Larry, trying to figure out the answer to that. Without thinking, he said, “Which answer will keep you in

the van?”

Turk’s mouth dropped open. Burt shook his head and put his finger to his lips.

“Well, you’ve got my card, stud. I was serious about calling me. Okay, stop right here.” Larry pulled over to the curb and put the van in park. They were four blocks from the Radcliffe, but they could see the police cars and fire trucks parked outside. “Holy shit.”

“What happened?” said Larry, leaning in.

“I don’t know,” said Holly. “Hold on.” She pulled her cell phone out of the leather carrying case on her hip and dialed a number. “Rhonda, is it safe?”

“Holly? Omigod, they just let us go. Where are you?”

“Close by. Listen, can you go around to the back entrance and let me and Linda back in? We have to get our shit out of your room and split.”

“Okaysure. What about Stercutus?”

Holly held the phone to Larry’s ear. “Say hello to Rhonda.”

“Hey,” said Larry, blushing again.

Holly took the phone back. “YOU SLUT! Rhonda is so jealous!” Rhonda screamed.

“Calm down, we haven’t done anything . . . yet. Go open the door, okay?”

“Okaybye,” said Rhonda.

“This is where we get off.” Holly gave Linda a meaning-

ful look. Linda stepped out of the cargo door and three sets of eyes followed her. Holly leaned in and kissed Larry on the cheek.

“Thanks for the most memorable Sunday ever.” She scooted out of the van. “Call me, okay? Maybe you can tell me more about your possession.” She grinned at him, one eyebrow arched.

“Okay,” said Larry, trying not to let his voice crack.

“Hey, when Larry comes up to visit, maybe you guys can tag along and we can hang out?” said Linda.

“That would be cool,” said Burt.

“What makes you think Larry is going to come visit?”

demanded D.J. Everyone turned and looked at him.

“That,” said Burt, “is exactly what I’m talking about, right there.”

“Linda, come on,” said Holly, pulling on her arm. “We have to go.”

“See you Burt. Later guys.” She smiled at them and closed the door.

“What?” asked D.J. “What did I say?”

“What is it about you?” said Turk, thumping Burt on the back of the head while climbing into the front passenger seat.

Burt shrugged. “Hell if I know. Hey, I’m hungry. Can we get something to eat before we go?”

“Uh, we still have to get out of town,” said D.J.

“In a minute,” said Larry, watching the women walking towards the hotel, a weird smile on his face. Stercutus would be pleased, he thought.

## Epilogue

No matter how hard he tried, Stercutus could not will himself to dissipate. He tried thinking about it, not thinking about it, and simply extending himself in the filthy pipes to the thickness of a few molecules. Nothing worked. In fact, it felt like something was keeping him anchored to the plumbing of the hotel.

Stercutus reformed himself and tried to figure out what it was. He threw his consciousness up and out, straining his senses to figure out what was going on.

They were talking about him up above! Somehow, his deeds and exploits were being passed from person to person, just like in the old days. He sighed and drank it all in, feeling their belief and admiration wash over him. He drew that power up into himself, a hungry sponge, and felt a new and destructive energy surge through him. Chaos. Havoc. Retribution. Fighting for the fans. Mischief. Could it be, thought Stercutus, that there was no god of mischief for these people to believe in? He flailed his will about, seeking the one person who could provide him with answers, the one mind he trusted in the swarm of cattle up above: Larry Croft.

Stercutus found him quickly enough at the front gates of the temple. He could feel Larry's panic, taste Larry's fear. He was being chased, hunted by the guards. Three people were try-

ing to help him, but they would be caught. Stercutus sensed weapons and felt powerful magic being used. If Larry were caught, they would find out the truth about Stercutus. That was not acceptable.

He sent himself through the plumbing, the pathways to the pipes a familiar memory for him. Focusing all of his willpower, he expanded himself until no water flowed through his form. After that, it was a simple matter for Stercutus to turn on all of the faucets in all of the rooms and flush all of the toilets at the same time. He let the pressure build up for as long as he could, then he got out of the way.

Old, rusted pipes exploded, taking sinks and toilets with them. Some joints cracked and split, the force of the water sending the pipes up through the floor or out of the walls, spraying foul, rancid water in indiscriminate directions. Fans and professionals ran everywhere, and dealers scurried to protect their paper goods from the flood. To help aid Larry's getaway, Stercutus activated the sprinklers in the lobby, but only after rerouting the septic tank so that it sprayed the contents on everyone present.

Within minutes, people were streaming out of the hotel, trampling the cops and security guards. Stercutus smiled and listened to the people talk amongst themselves. They were talking about him. Maybe it would be all right to stay here, at the temple, for a while. It wasn't as if he had anything better to do.

St. John hung up the phone in Kuykendall's office. "They wouldn't let me quit."



Kuykendall smiled sympathetically. “You shouldn’t blame yourself, Mr. St. John. It was a, what do you call it, ‘act of god.’ Plumbing breaks.”

St. John leveled his gaze directly at Kuykendall. “Let me be very direct, here, Oscar. Plumbing does not just break. Accidents do not just happen. Not in my line of work. No, this was a sign that I have been here for too long. Or,” he said reflectively, “it could be a sign that this place should be leveled by heavy machinery.” St. John played that scenario out in his mind for a few seconds before snapping to attention. “Either way, someone was trying to tell me something, and it is this: I don’t belong here.

This is your insanity, and yours alone. You seem to be well-suited for it.” He stood up and stretched. “I wouldn’t have imagined saying this to you three days ago, but you are the better man for this job than I. So, here’s what we are going to do: I am going to go back to my beloved Pacific Vista, where I control everything and nothing is ever out of line, and you will manage this loony bin, and ne’er the twain shall meet again.”

“But Mr. St. John, what about the new owners?”

“I’ve told them that you have been given the full brunt of my knowledge, and that you may call on me whenever you need help or advice. That, of course, was a lie. I never want to see or hear from you again. If you call me, either at the hotel or at my home, I shall pretend I’ve never met you before. Call me back and I shall call the police. Are we absolutely clear?”

“But—but . . . Mr. St. John, are you mad at me?”

Kuykendall was confused. “What did I do?”

“No, Oscar,” said St. John, his face as kindly as he could make it, “I’m not mad at you. But you possess a certain low character that fits in nicely around here. I am the anomaly. Therefore, I am returning command of this Titanic over to you.” He ceremoniously dropped the keys on Kuykendall’s desk. “May you go down with the ship, fiddling merrily away.”

“Well, Mr. St. John, it’s been a pleasure,” said Kuykendall, extending his hand.

“Has it?” asked St. John, taking it. “I wouldn’t bet on that. Anyway, Heiber and Hawkins will take care of whatever repairs aren’t covered by your woefully inadequate insurance. That Weissman fellow isn’t suing the hotel, and the stench of the sewers will go away soon enough. I, on the other hand, can’t leave soon enough, and so, goodbye.” St. John not-quite-slammed the door as he made his exit.

Kuykendall sighed, then walked around and sat down behind his desk. He looked at the puddles of standing water and smiled. “Thought he’d never go,” he said.

Stevie Fleckner wept.

Jane Callow woke up when the water hit her, and for a minute, she was back in New Orleans again. The sensation so freaked her out that she bolted out of her room before coming fully out of her sleep. When she finally figured out where she was, the hallway had filled up with other guests who were also

ousted by the exploding plumbing.

After a long discussion with her agent and a short discussion with the convention staff and the hotel, she let them put her in the penthouse suite for the rest of the day, gratis. This worked out quite nicely, she thought, drawing the curtains tightly so that none of the waning sunlight came into the room. Then she called room service and ordered eighty dollars worth of food, which was also gratis.

While she waited for food, she called Hazel Medrick and yelled at her to never, ever talk about her to anyone on the Internet for a million years, no matter who they said they were. That made her feel a lot better, and she ate her rare filet mignon with gusto.

Somehow or another, the goth-children from last night's signing found out where she was now encamped and by dusk, the forces of pseudo-darkness had gathered outside her door, praying that she at least make an appearance, if not let them in altogether.

Jane took one look outside the peephole at the shivering, pasty-faced kids in their Goodwill hand-me-down suits and elaborate dresses and decided that she wanted nothing to do with them.

She flung open the door.

"Mistress Jane," one of them began.

"Silence!" she barked. "Moment of truth time, children. I have decided I don't like any of you. You are not fit to lick my boots clean, nor do you possess even the tiniest spark of intelligence or savvy to be undead. I wrote a book. You read it. Techni-

cally, we're done. Following me around like a love-sick puppy will only earn you my scorn. I am not British. I don't need your fawning. Now, beat it!" She slammed the door and fixed herself a drink from the stocked bar, then walked over to the television to see if she could still catch the X-Files. Eventually, she turned it up loud enough to drown out the insistent knocking.

The ride back to San Francisco was strained and strange.

Larry told them bits and pieces about his adventure, but steadfastly refused to tell them how he came to be possessed. There were just some things you didn't tell other guys about, and that was one of them. Eventually, they came to accept that what had happened was all a physical side-effect of Larry's imagination and that they would just have to accept this as one of his eccentricities.

Larry himself could see the crossroads in front of him. If he worked hard and tried his damndest, he could get back in touch with the gaming guys, mend the fences, and maybe be allowed to play again. Then he looked down at his lap where his stomach used to be and thought about Holly Day. He didn't want anyone to see him like this, but maybe, just maybe, if he could get a doctor to fix him, he'd have a chance with her. He could still feel her kisses, warm and wet, on his face and lips. The sensation excited him more than anything had in a long time. Even gaming. Stercutus, he thought, wherever you are, whatever you are, thank you for a hell of a weekend. Well, a cool Saturday night and Sunday, at least. Friday sucked.

D.J. kept his mouth shut, saying nothing to anyone until he managed to convince himself that Mike Bretz had a large water gun that shot goo all over the floor and the guy in the turban actually ran away down the hall to the restaurant and didn't turn into liquid. It took some doing, but D.J.'s mind laid out the events until it all made sense. Only then did he come alive and show the gang all of the comics he bought and told them about all of the comics he was forced to sell in order to have food money for the week.

Burt and Turk chatted quietly in the back, ribbing each other and displaying their loot in lieu of a flat-out apology. The camaraderie they displayed was enough, and no further words needed to be said about it. Burt wisely decided to keep his tryst with Samitha a secret, at least for a while, until the heat blew over.

"So, how did you like your first con?" asked D.J.

Burt thought about it for a second. "Are they all like that?"

"No," said Turk, "actually, this one was kinda lame."

Burt laughed. "Then it was pretty cool. I didn't have a lot of expectations about this one. But seriously, no more costume contests, okay? I mean it. That was a big pile of ass."

"Hey, now that we've broken your con-cherry, you're on your own," said Turk.

Burt thought about Samitha. "Cool," he said, smiling.

And so it went. The legend of Stercutus was carried back

to everyone's hometown where stories circulated, leapt across the country and back via the Internet, and entered the halls of fandom history. Stercutus, the mischief-maker, would take on many forms over the years, possessing suitable candidates and imbuing them with godly abilities, such as the power to travel through the plumbing of the building with the speed of thought in order to elude pursuers. Attendance at MagicCon swelled to the breaking point, and more than once the convention was tempted to move to a larger hotel, but Oscar Kuykendall wouldn't hear of it and continued to cut them deals as an incentive to keep the show at his hotel. He always found some way to cheaply double the security force, make the repairs to the hotel, and smooth things over with the owners after it was all over. The Radcliffe was finally famous, or at least notorious, and that brought a slight overall increase to their regular business, as well.

They eventually got the smell out of the bathroom, too.

Author's Notes

## Introduction

I got the idea for this story during Clockwork Storybook's first ap-

pearance at AggieCon. While attending AggieCon, I was reminded of all of the other conventions I've attended in the last ten years, and certain truisms once again emerged to remind me how bizarre the world of fandom truly is.

For years, now, I have wanted to write down some of my more un-

usual, pathetic, and funny convention stories, if for no other reason than they really need to get out of my head. I was always reluctant to do so, because they are largely anecdotal, and would require a certain amount of set-up to make them work. Then I got the idea for this story, and, well, let's just say that from this point on, all the names have been changed to protect the innocent (and occasionally, the guilty).

### Just Don't Call Him Late for Dinner

RPG is short for Role-Playing Game. There are a million of them.

The most famous example is TSR's Dungeons and Dragons, which is obviously what LegendMasters is based on.

"Character is what you are in the dark" is a line of dialogue from

Buckaroo Banzai that has been appropriated by the gaming culture.

Larry is an amalgam of every single gamer I've ever known, including myself. While not based on any one person, we've all seen that guy before with the vest full of buttons and smug look on his face. I wanted to write my story about that guy and his friends.

### It's Pronounced "Sin-Gin"

Nigel St. John is one of my favorite characters because he's such an asshole. It's difficult to use him because of his limited station, i.e. the Pacific Vista hotel. I was originally going to have the convention be at the Pac-Vis, but it's too posh and upscale. It took a bit of juggling to figure out how to get him involved, but I am glad I did it. The story wouldn't have been the same without him.

### Some Would Call it the Jedi Mind Trick

Werewolf by Night is a real comic book series, published by Marvel Comics Group in the 70's and noteworthy for Mike Ploog's artwork. Once again, D.J. isn't based on any one person. For his tirades and Alpha-Maleness, he is equal parts Chris Roberson and I. We both can get carried away at times. As for the only child tricks . . . well, I was the oldest of three, and that trick did work once or twice. Never for a comic book convention, though, my parents weren't THAT dumb.

### It's Two, Two Conversations in One

Traveller is an old, classic sci-fi role-playing game. It made a comeback a few years ago.

The Magic Tournament is obviously a reference to Magic: the Gathering. If you've ever seen one in action, it's only mildly more entertaining than watching pigeons roost. A real magic tournament would have been much more interesting.

Whovians are Doctor Who fans. Doctor Who was a long-running television series in the UK with a

minor, but rabid, following in the US.

Blake's Seven was another BBC show, similar to both Star Trek and Star Wars, only with far less money for special effects.

Vampire: the Masquerade is both a role-playing game and a live action role-playing game, published by White Wolf.

Stevie Fleckner was a last minute addition to my cast of characters. I needed someone hapless to help the story along in parts, someone to represent the face of the convention as a whole. The conversation with St. John was my favorite part, and the addition of Jane Callow to the proceedings came from me wanting to include an author, and also wanting to make fun of the Crow

fans and goth girls. Bill Willingham coined the term "spider farmers" to describe the pale, all-black wearing female Sandman fans. I tried to work it into the story, but it never quite made it.

### Another Hilarious Episode of Turk and Buzz

I culled Turk from all of the RTF students I dealt with when I worked at the comic book shop. They were a twitchy, opinionated lot and I thought one of those guys would play well off of the others. Turk was initially supposed to be the "voice of reason," but that quickly got scrapped when I wrote the next chapter.

### The Fourth Man is Revealed

Ah, Burt.

Burt is based on me at seventeen with regard to the first-timer list

maker at the convention. His character is equal parts Matt Sturges and me. Matt is just not as steeped in the geek lore as Chris and I, so he ends up asking a lot of questions. He and I also throw movie quotes at each other and have communicated complete thoughts more than once by mixing and matching from different movies. This Geek-Code is something that we all do instinctively. For a more pointed example, go rent the movie Free Enterprise.

### Everyone Signs In

If only fans were really this organized.

Lots of people in fandom use their character names or make up nick-names for themselves that they swear everyone calls them by. I see more guys named "Raven" and more girls named "Cat" at conventions than anywhere else on the planet. I can't write on a badge half of the nicknames the guys call me, and they like me! The other nicknames, because they are actually nicknames and not some name I made up for myself because it sounded cool,



aren't nearly as flattering as "Cat" or "Raven".

### I Love the Smell of Comics in the Morning

I tried very hard to capture what a real dealer's room is like. Unfortunately, I failed in that there is no way to describe it. You have to go see for yourselves.

Buckaroo Banzai fanzines really do exist; I have several Xeroxes of them, thanks to a fellow fan. I'm not going to share them with Turk, however. I also own the Duelists lobby card that Turk buys. And yes, I've seen the movie, too.

Oh, Shit

This is it: the germination of the whole story.

I am always asking myself questions, and the answers I come up with lead me to stories I write. The particular question I asked in this case was, "Why is there always one bathroom at every con known to man where some bloated gamer goes in at noon on Friday and proceeds to die over the course of the weekend and totally foul the place up?"

At AggieCon, the only answer that made sense at the time was that he was the god of shit. I never said I was a genius, folks.

By the way, the translation of the Latin gibberish (part Spanish, part Italian, part Latin) on the bathroom stall is, "Stercutus, accept my waste so that you may live again."

Gross, huh?

### Friday Night With the Guys

Friday night at a three-day show is the tame night for fans. There's a lot to do, but most of them turn in because all of the really good stuff happens on Saturday. For con veterans such as D.J. this would be the night to get a lot of sleep.

The difference between a geek and nerd was a definition coined by

my long time friend and collaborator, John Lucas.

In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning The incident in the Anime room is a true story, with the following

exceptions:

Neither Me nor my buddy Shane Campos knew what Legend of the Overfiend was when we stepped into the darkened room. We just saw the first part of the movie, with the demon talking (this was a

bootleg tape with no subtitles or dubbing, so we had to try to work it out).

Then another demon showed up with all of the . . . ah . . . tentacles . . . and the fan sitting next to me said, “Cool! It’s like Lovecraft, but with tits!”

I turned to Shane. “We have to leave, right now.”

“Why, man? This is getting good.”

“Because if we don’t go now, I’m going to murder the stupid asshole beside me for not knowing anything about anything.”

To this day, I can’t take any of the “adult” anime very seriously.

### Foreshadowing

Chris Roberson seems to think that I’m D.J. in this chapter. I don’t know where he gets that idea.

When I lived in the Bay Area, my buddy Weldon Adams and I shared an apartment where the smoke alarm was positioned right outside the bathroom. Weldon always got up first and ran scalding hot showers. The first three weeks of us living there involved working out a way for one of us to jump out of the bathroom, grab a couch pillow, and fan the steam away from the smoke alarm before it went off. More often than not, it was my alarm clock, a signal that the bathroom was free.

So we’re at a convention in Pennsylvania, when we’re both awak-

ened in the middle of the night by the smoke alarm going off. Both of us on automatic pilot, we get up and start fanning the smoke alarm with the pillows.

It’s still screaming at us. “Kill it!” I yell. Weldon grabs the plastic case and rips it off the wall. Problem solved. We both go back to sleep.

The next morning, everyone was talking about the fire alarm last night.

“Thank God it was a false alarm,” one of our traveling companions said. The absolute danger of the situation dawned on us and we laughed hysterically (in the nervous, panicky way) for the rest of the day.

### Turk Meets his Future

I’ve never met Richard Hatch, but I have stood in many an autograph line exactly like the one Turk is standing in. There are very few media people that would get me all squirmy, and frankly, the movies that I like have little to do with the actors involved. Nevertheless, I can understand how, say, Star Trek fans would be jazzed at meeting Leonard Nimoy.

The fanboy pissing contest (comparing the size of their collections) is something I saw too many times to count. Size always matters.

## St. John's Chill Pill Finally Shows Up

The kids on the floor are playing Magic: the Gathering. The Duelist Convocation is the name of the organization that records all of the official tournament results and keeps a national tally on who the best M:TG player is.

I'm not kidding.

Regarding Skaldrian's appearance: Fans are, by nature, an analytical bunch. This is one of the tenets of media fandom; breaking down dialogue and gestures into meaningful subtext. They are also a bunch of nit-picky whiners who tear at everything with the same gusto.

I'm very bad at tearing into special effects. I flirted briefly with be-

coming a special effects make-up artist and took great delight in deconstructing every single horror and fantasy movie I watched. That being said, I think if fans saw a display of "real" sorcery, they would automatically assume it to be nothing more than a special effect, since their mind leaps in those directions already.

Fans, I've also noticed, wear a lot of hats. I have no idea why.

## Deej Has a Brush with Death

The Green Guy comic title, "If this be my Density" was cribbed from *Amazing Spider-Man* #31, titled, "If this by my Destiny."

As soon as I fashioned the idea of a comic book convention, I knew it had to have a cameo by Bretz and Green Guy. As usual, Mike is a greedy bastard and took over more of the story than I had originally intended.

I never bought comics for my mother, but I know someone who did.

In this chapter, the asterisk is a metaphor . . .

I loved building the character of Stercutus. It's a lot of fun as a writer to look through innocent eyes and make wrong assumptions about things.

One of our online readers was actually present when I called Dibs on all of the Gods of Shit at AggieCon. She laughed, and Chris and Matt looked askance at me. I don't think any of them thought I'd really do something with it.

## Sustenance Comes in Many Forms

Con-goggles: Similar to beer goggles, in that if you stay at a convention long enough, certain girls become very attractive to you. This is because you are comparing them to men.

“Capes” is a slang term for super heroes.

“Days of Future Past” is a famous (for comic fans, anyway) X-Men story, written by Chris Claremont and drawn by John Byrne, arguably the most famous creative team to work on the book.

I was reminded of the ratio of guys to girls at Wizard World in Chicago this year. That convention was packed to the gills with girls just like the ones described in the chapter and guys just like Turk in the chapter. We are truly a delusional group.

Well, it was an Honest Question

While Weissman is totally made up, the panel discussion is based on a true incident.

Howard (don't call me Howie) Chaykin was at a Dallas Fantasy Fair as part of a panel called “The Banality of the Independents”, a panel that also featured Steve Bissette and Texas creator Jack Jackson. Chaykin did indeed go nuts, telling the people who came to see him that he didn't like comics, they broke up his marriages, and all kinds of similar crap. I was just trying to help him when I said “I have a question for Howie.”

The “Why are you here?” question came from my buddy William,

who was pretty tipsy (okay, he was hammered) and angry at Chaykin for spewing his bile on everyone.

Steve Bissette at one point during one of Chaykin's lulls leaned into his microphone and said, “Gee, Howard, I feel sorry for you; I'm having a ball.” That got him thunderous applause.

And curiously, Howie hasn't really been on my list of favorites ever since.

Lo, The Children of the Night

Neil Gaiman's Sandman series is one of the most successful comic

book series ever produced by DC Comics. It's a favorite with the goth crowd and women in general. The reason? No capes.

LARP is short for Live Action Role-Playing game. It's a bit of a misnomer, in that there's not much live action going on, unless you count strange hand signals and murmured conversations. I've seen a lot of different kinds ofLARPs in progress in my time, but Vampire: the Masquerade rules the roost.

I never understood the appeal of pretending to be undead. Ever. Sure, when I was a kid, I played Dracula by running around with a cape and hissing (Mom still has a twitch in her eye, by the way), but that was then.

These days, the technology and dental supplies used to make vampire teeth are just too commonplace. Anyone can have them, and the goth-crowd exercises no judgment whatsoever.

Here's what I think: If you're going to pretend to be a vampire, that's fine. Sleep during the day, and only go out at night. That way, I never see you.

Because if you walk up to me in broad daylight with those damn fangs in your mouth, you are missing the point entirely.

You either want me to call you on the fact that you have the fangs in your mouth, which gives you the attention you so desperately crave, or you want me to pretend that nothing is amiss about you, thus acknowledging your chosen weird lifestyle. It's a lose-lose situation. There's no way to correct

your behavior publicly without playing into your hands.

I really don't like the goth movement.

Time To Stomp!

Again, based on a true story.

Fellow geek Rob Kelley and I yelled, "I thought you were dead!" to a Snake Plisskin at a Dallas Fantasy Fair and cracked everyone up. When he came back out, the whole audience yelled it. We were so proud.

As a general rule, unless the judges are all female, the winner of the costume contest is always whichever shapely woman shows the most cleavage or ass. No one said it was fair, but there's always a crowd to watch the costume

contest.

Free at Last, Free at Last!

The notion that Stercutus thought of the hotel as a temple came to me while detailing this chapter. I had to put a Rocky Horror nod in, as well. I just think throwing toast at someone is funny.

Everyone Finds Their Niche

Filking is a bastardization of Folk Singing. Usually, one or two guitarists will provide the music and everyone will sing novelty songs or SCA ballads. Inevitably, however, The "Ballad of Gilligan's Island" meets "Stairway to Heaven" will get brought up, and then it's all downhill from there. You only have to do it once to know that you never want to do it again. And yes, some nut actually told me he worshipped the devil. I had a bitch of a time avoiding him the rest of the con. It is possible to be too friendly

to people at these shows.

The Money Crunch

I always, even to this day, make a survey of the contents of my wallet on Sunday. I don't know why; I never bring enough cash to these things. If I brought ten thousand dollars, I'd find eleven thousand dollars worth of stuff to buy.

He Came, He Saw, He Drank a lot of Beer

I wish there really was a bar like Trapper John's. This is an oblique

reference to the television show, M.A.S.H. I was looking for a sufficiently Gaslight-sounding name for the bar where Stercutus gets pissed and while mentally thumbing through my Mc-Something names, I hit MacIntyre. That

made me think of Trapper John, and, well, there you have it.

Let the Games Begin!

This is one thing I've never done myself, even when I was a rabid

gamer. However, I have watched the games in progress and I know deep in my heart of hearts that I don't want to play with most of the people who would sign up for a game at a con.

Every old gamer knew at least one guy who always claimed to have an arrow nocked, or a sword ready at all times. Mine was Hal Lynch, and a more ferocious human Cuisinart I've never met.

Me: "Okay, you've beaten him senseless, he's the only guard left conscious . . ."

Hal: "Not for long! I club him again."

Me: (rolling dice and shaking my head) "Okay . . . he's hurt bad, you're doing damage to him, but he looks like he could still talk . . ."

Hal: "We'll see about that! Special attack the mouth."

Me: (rolling more dice) ". . . Fine. He's spitting teeth out and shouting, 'I'll tell you where she is! Don't hurt me! I'll give you the secret plans!'"

Hal: "Still awake, eh? THIS time I kick him."

By the way, the character that Weissman is writing about, Mjolner,

Son of Thor, was the very last character I played in a Villains and Vigilantes

Second Edition playtest game that included Bill Willingham, Jeff Dee and Jack Herman. Those of you who used to game will think that's pretty cool. The rest of you will just have to trust me that I probably

eat more role-playing paste than any of you.

It's the Burt from the Mirror, Mirror Universe . . .

I knew guys like this, who could meet and have relations with girls at shows. Drove me nuts.

### Meet the Sisters

While I am not naming any names, there is a sub-class of fandom that does this with alacrity in their hearts. God bless them.

Holly Would If She Could I had to pull back from this chapter a bit and not get too campy. The temptation for Stercutus and Holly Day to just get crazy, or at the very least carried away, kept trying to overpower the point of the chapter, which was Stercutus giving up the ghost. Eventually, I decided to write that part first and add in all the banter later. It helped me to focus on what I was doing. For the record, I like Meatloaf and hate Jim Steinman.

### The Shit Hits the Fan

Skrulls are shape-changing aliens found in the comics of The Fantastic Four, published by Marvel Comics. They are my favorite FF villains.

These kinds of action sequences are hard to pull off, because it's a

chain-reaction, and you have to see it as a big picture all at once, rather than follow characters around. I hadn't planned on bringing Bretz back into the fray, but I was told that my fellow writing partners would murder me if I didn't wrap things up more neatly. In the end, it helped the action of the scene out a lot.

### Larry's Charisma Goes Up Two Points

The chapter title is a reference to player character ability scores in

Dungeons and Dragons.

