

GILLIAN

U

UNDERGROUND

MICHAEL

J

ASPER

, T

IM

P

RATT

, G

REG

VAN

E

EKHOUT

In the year since she'd dropped out of college, Gillian had hitched her way all over the South, from the waterfront elegance of Savannah to the wrought-iron decadence of New Orleans. She'd visited Dr. King's church in Alabama and looked for peacocks in Flannery O'Connor's yard in rural Georgia. Now after four straight days of hitching by sunlight and sleeping rough, fleeing a bad scene at a country bar in West Virginia, she'd fetched up in the North Carolina mountains, on the road near the outskirts of a town. The spring sky above was stern and gray, a wind howling down from the weathered peaks, threatening rain.

Welcome to Dearborne, the sign by the roadside read. From what she could see Dearborne was a big town trying to burst the boundaries of its valley and become a city. The name sounded familiar. There was a college here, maybe. She shouldered her patched camouflage bag and walked past the sign, wincing whenever she stepped on her left foot, where a blister had burst on her heel.

Gillian desperately wanted a cup of coffee, and downtown looked very far away. She stopped at a bench on the side of the road and looked at the schedule nailed there. A bus would be along in a few minutes. She sat down to wait, wondering if the sky would open up and drench her, if she should muster the necessary motivation to get the poncho out of her bag. A good cold rain would

wake her up as well as a few cups of coffee, but she couldn't afford to risk getting pneumonia. Opening the bag would mean looking at the cowboy hat again, though, and that would bring back too many bad, bizarre West Virginia memories. Plus, there'd be the temptation to put the hat on, that dangerous urge against self-interest that Edgar Allan Poe called the "imp of the perverse."

Her chin dropped to her chest the moment she allowed herself to relax. She promised herself she wouldn't nap, that she just needed some mental downtime.

Feeling herself begin to nod off, she snapped her head up, and found the lady sitting next to her on the bench.

"You again," Gillian said.

The lady smiled. "Me, always. And you're still doing the hobo thing, I see, my little bindlestiff. Are you eating well? Getting enough vitamin C?"

"I'm doing okay." Gillian ran her hand over the rough wood of the bench. The texture was so real. So present. Everything in these dreams with the lady always seemed so right and normal, except for the lady herself.

Gillian had first encountered the lady while still in school, in the balcony of her college's largest lecture hall. The lady had whispered mysteries and promptings in her ear while Gillian dozed to the drone of an anthropology lecture. The next day, acting on urges as inexplicable as they were irresistible, Gillian had left school and become a wanderer. She'd seen the dream-lady half a dozen times since then, while watching her clothes spin around in a Laundromat, or drinking hot chocolate alone in the booth of an all-night diner, or waiting out the heat of the afternoon in a small-town library reading room. Gillian could never quite remember their conversations afterwards, but she always woke with a renewed urge to move, to put distance between herself and the site of the latest dream.

Today, the lady wore a green raincoat and a big lighthouse keeper's hat. She could not have looked more regal had she been wearing ermine-trimmed robes and a diamond-encrusted crown. "Wander as you will, my pea blossom," she said. "All roads lead to me. I've enjoyed the chase, but you can't run forever. You belong in my story." She reached out to stroke Gillian's cheek.

A hiss of air brakes woke Gillian, cutting the dream short.

A gleaming white and blue bus waited in front of the bench. Gillian tried to shake off the sleep, pulling herself to her feet. The world spun for a second, and Gillian had to grip the bench to keep from falling.

The bus doors opened, and an old man in a denim ball cap with "Dearborne" emblazoned on it in bold black letters nodded to her from behind the wheel. He didn't bat an eyelash at her peroxide-streaked black hair, or the six silver rings all

around her ear and the one in her eyebrow, or her mostly-shredded jeans. Definitely a college town, Gillian decided.

She dropped a dollar in the fare box (trying not to think what percentage of her total wealth that constituted) and sat down on a hard blue seat. The only other person on the bus was a ratlike man in the back. He wore a shapeless brown sweater and clutched a dirty canvas tote bag with bits of yarn and wire spilling out. He stared fiercely at the floor and didn't look up when Gillian got on.

"Staying in town for spring break?" the driver asked, friendly.

He'd mistaken her for a student. Well, she had managed a shower at a truck stop a couple of days before, so she wasn't as road-grimy as she might be otherwise. She didn't bother to correct him.

"Yeah," she said. "I, uh, haven't ridden this route before. Do you go near a coffee shop?"

He looked at her in the wide mirror over the dashboard for a moment, and then said "We stop down the block from Virgil's Café. I think they're open over the break."

"Great," she said. "I'll get off there."

Gillian looked out the window with interest. The bus turned down neatly laid-out streets, past thrift stores, pawnshops and used-book emporiums in old brick buildings made sad-looking by the cloudy skies. The historical district, she gathered, probably the college part of town. The streets were mostly empty. The tourists would come in force during ski season, she figured, and in autumn to watch the leaves change, and in summer retirees would stream in to escape the Florida heat.

She'd arrived at a real down-time, especially since the students were all living it up on beaches far away. She couldn't decide if she liked that or not. There wouldn't be any good parties or shows, and it would be harder to find friendly strangers to crash with, but it could be pleasantly peaceful.

The bus stopped at a corner, and the man in the back of the bus stood up. Gillian glanced at him. He wasn't much taller standing up than he was sitting down.

"See you tomorrow, Rufus," the driver said. Gillian thought his jovial tone sounded forced now...

Rufus paused by Gillian and peered at her. He smelled of dry rot, and he was fumbling in his bag for something. Gillian wondered how long a person would have to go without bathing to smell like that.

"From the lady," the man whispered.

He had her attention now. Gillian sat up and the small man shoved something into her hand. "How do you know the lady?" she said, but as soon as he let go of

the object, he hurried off the bus. She started to follow him, but the bus lurched forward, rocking her back in her seat. She looked out the window, but the little man was nowhere in sight.

"Hope he didn't bother you too much," the driver said, looking at Gillian in the mirror. "Rufus is like that sometimes."

Go after him, she told herself. But then her thoughts bounced back to the West Virginia bar, the white cowboy, and the hat in her bag. She quickly lost the urge to pursue further oddities. Instead, she remained still, staring at the object in her hands.

The driver frowned. "What's that he gave you?"

Gillian held the object up for the driver to see in the mirror. His eyes widened. "He gave you that? The radio?"

"Radio?" The object was little more than a ball of tangled copper wire, some of it with candy-striped insulation, most without. Two thin wires stuck out, like insect antennae. "It doesn't look like a radio."

"Well, it's not supposed to be an actual radio, miss. It's just analogous to a radio. Sort of." The bus drifted to the curb and jerked to a stop with a pneumatic squeal. "It can be useful, but... well. It's not my place to meddle." He passed her a folded bus schedule. "I can't break my schedule, but if you ever find yourself on my route, and the timing works out, the ride's free."

"Um. Thanks?"

The driver nodded. "Least I can do, miss. Though you shouldn't have fibbed about being a student. I know you aren't from around here. Sort of by definition you aren't from around her." He pulled a lever and the doors parted. "Virgil's is just down Knight Street. I'd take you right up to the door, but I can't break my schedule. My advice is, have yourself a good cup of coffee, get some nourishment, and see if you can tune your radio."

Gillian hefted her backpack and exited the bus. Once down on the sidewalk, she turned to face the driver. She gestured with the wire bundle. "Does this thing actually... do anything?"

The driver's eyebrows went up. "I daresay. It lets you talk to the lady, not through the fuzzy wall of dreams, but directly." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, almost forgot. Drink your coffee black, miss. Drink it black."

He gave her a smile—a lovely smile, Gillian thought, grandfatherly and warm and so, so sad—and pulled away in an oily cloud of diesel exhaust. Gillian watched the smoke dissipate like a fading memory. She waited a bit to see if this was also a

dream—why else would the bus driver’s talk of the lady have seemed so natural?—but when she didn’t wake up, she moved on.

Virgil’s Café squatted between a two-chair barbershop and a coin-op laundry, one block off the main drag. Its cinderblock face was painted with a faded mural of a forest, the trees whimsically bulbous, like something from a Yes album cover. The whole street had the kind of charmingly druggy 70’s vibe that Gillian had encountered in at least a dozen different college towns during her wanderings. But she’d never seen one so empty of life. Spring break had turned this place into a ghost town. Even the birds in the trees seemed to chirp in whispers. The silence as she approached Virgil’s made her own footsteps too loud, and she was relieved to find the café open.

After buying a large mug of the house drip from the gnomish, stubble-chinned woman behind the counter, Gillian contemplated the condiment bar. Coffee was something she liked in large quantities, provided she could suppress any hint of coffee flavor with liberal additions of cream and sugar and cocoa powder and cinnamon and vanilla and anything else she could find. But reaching for a thermos of half-and-half, she paused. Drink it black.

“Girl,” said the counter woman. “You left this.” In her yellowish mummy claw, she held the wire “radio.”

“Oh, right,” Gillian said, frowning. Hadn’t she put it in her pocket? “Do you know what it is?”

“Looks like a wad of wires and crap to me,” she said, handing it back to Gillian.

Gillian nodded, taking the radio. The antennae were different, now, wound around one another in a knotty spiral, where before they’d stuck up straight. Had they gotten twisted in transit? Did it matter? Maybe it was just a bundle of wires and crap.

Gillian tucked the radio into a pocket went back to her coffee cup. She took a sip and winced. It was thick and bitter, like it had been sitting in the pot for the best part of the day.

“Sorry the coffee’s so shitty,” the counter woman said. “I own this place, but I don’t usually do any of the prep work, and I’m no good at it. My staff’s all out of town, though, so I’m all you get. Just be glad you didn’t order an espresso. I always burn it.”

“As long as it wakes me up, I’m happy,” Gillian said, taking another sip.

“It’s not bad if you pour enough cream and sugar in it,” the woman said, leaning over the counter so her belly pressed against the wood, and for a moment she seemed oddly monstrous, like some sort of centaur, human from the waist up, scarred wood from the waist down. “Go on, doctor it up.” Her eyes gleamed, and she seemed far too interested in Gillian’s drinking habits.

“No, that’s okay,” Gillian said, backing away, taking a seat at one of the small tables by the front window. “I like it black.”

The woman slumped, sniffed, and said, “Suit yourself.” She picked up a crinkled soap opera digest and flipped the pages.

Gillian took out the radio. What had the bus driver said? She should tune it, to talk to the lady? But there were no knobs or dials or anything. She touched the twisted antennae and began to unwind them, but it was difficult, because they were twisted thoroughly, bent, even tied together in places. How could that have happened in the brief transit in her pocket? And how had the counter woman gotten hold of it?

“Drink it while it’s hot!” the counter woman yelled, startling her. “It only gets worse when it’s cold!”

It’s a town full of crazy people, Gillian thought, but she nodded and took a sip.

Gillian got the antennae unwound, each wire sticking up straight. She set the radio on the table next to her coffee cup and looked at it, but it didn’t hiss or crackle or burst into song or do anything at all. Gillian sighed, shook her head, and decided to forget it.

She looked down at her coffee cup, where her face was reflected in the black fluid. Then the coffee rippled, concentric circles spreading out from the center. At the same time, the bundle of wires began to hum like a swarm of distant bees. Suddenly, Gillian no longer saw her own face reflected in the coffee, but the face of an older woman—the lady!—tired and knowing, wearing a glittering crown. The lady’s mouth moved, and a second later the distant hum resolved into faint words that didn’t quite synch with the lady’s lips.

“You’re a slow learner,” the voice said. “But better now than never. Watch out for—”

Then the coffee cup exploded.

It splattered Gillian with warm (but, thankfully, no longer hot) liquid, and chunky bits of broken porcelain bounced on the table. Gillian shoved herself back from the table, leaping to her feet, brushing coffee off the front of her clothes, shaking drops of it off her forearms. She looked up.

The counter woman stared at her, frowning, and in her left hand she held a sleek black-and-silver crossbow. Gillian looked down and saw the shaft of a crossbow bolt and most of a glittering steel head embedded in the wall beside the table, the bolt still wet with coffee from where it had passed through the cup, shattering it.

“I told you to take cream and sugar,” the counter woman said, and began loading another bolt into the crossbow.

Trouble and Gillian were well acquainted these days, and no matter how far she hitchhiked, she couldn't seem to leave trouble behind.

Take that night at the Red Eye, thirty miles southeast of Charleston, West Virginia. That honky-tonk had been like an oasis at first, a gravel parking lot full of pickup trucks surrounding a weathered gray warehouse, the outside lit with bright floods, the sound of a raucous country & western band thumping through the walls. Gillian brushed against the bouncer in his too-tight black t-shirt and black fifty-gallon hat and got out of paying the cover charge. She eased up to the bar and ordered a bottle of Bud, but it came warm, so she didn't drink it, just sat on her stool and picked at the label with her fingernails. She'd expected to be glared at for her dyed hair and road-worn clothes (from the thrift store they'd come, and to the rag bin they'd someday go), but the crowd was surprisingly cosmopolitan. In addition to the expected denim-jeans-and-embroidered-Western-shirt crowd there were plenty of people her own age, dressed much like she was—though they were paler and more sallow, because they hadn't been wandering out in the open sun for so long, she supposed.

The bar had peanut shells on the floor mixing with spilled beer, a band at one end of the boxy room and a mechanical bull at the other end, and worst of all, line-dancing in the middle. Gillian had a more-or-less clear view of either the band or the bull, depending on which way she swiveled her stool. The band was lively, with drums, upright bass, steel guitar, and a demon of a flutist, whose high notes and eighth-note runs seemed to shriek right through the rest of the band's amplified sound. There was a cowboy up in front of the band, hammering on a rhythm guitar and singing, dressed all in white, from his boots tucked into his glowing white jeans to his starched white shirt and white hat, and he looked right at her and winked. Gillian found that wink disconcerting—mostly because she'd felt the urge to wink back—so she swiveled the other way to watch people get tossed from the mechanical bull for a while. That bull was souped-up or something, because no one stayed on it for more than four or five seconds at most before they flew off and landed on the water-stained mattresses and pillows piled around it to soften landings.

Gillian had watched half a dozen people get bucked off—including a couple of black-clad hipsters she wouldn't have thought of as bull-riding types—when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She swiveled and faced the white cowboy from the stage, who'd abandoned his post, though his band played on.

"Wan' dance?" he said

"Sure," Gillian surprised herself by saying, and in spite of her sore legs and what felt like the start of a blister on her left foot, she spent the next enchanted hour turning around the floor and crunching on peanut shells with the man in white, whose name was Travis, and their movement together was so perfect that she never

once thought of her blistered foot.

The dancing might have led to something even more interesting, but some loud-mouthed guy on the bull interrupted them with his ear-ringing shout. This guy made the bouncer look tiny. He even made the mechanical bull, which was slowly bucking underneath him, look like a miniature Holstein.

"Time to ride!" he bellowed again. "Get your asses off the dance floor and get on the beast!"

"Shit fire," Travis whispered as he pulled Gillian off the dance floor, toward the bar. "He's back."

"Travis!" the bull man roared. "Your turn, boy!"

Travis stopped, hung his head for a moment, then sighed.

"You don't have to do this to impress me," she said.

"Wish it was that easy," he said. "But it doesn't have a thing to do with you. Unless I want to play on that stage ever' night for the rest of forever, I have to try." He took off his hat and handed it to Gillian. "If I don't come back..." He shook his head. "Nah, never mind, you don't need to worry about that." He tipped an imaginary hat, because Gillian was now holding his hat to her chest. "Be back in about eight seconds, darlin'"

Gillian watched him mount the mechanical bucking-machine while the big bull man stood off to one side, grinning, his eyes mean little black spots in his beefy face. Travis held on to the bull doggedly as it began to buck, and even managed to look like he was having fun as it became more violent in its rocking. Smiling, proud of him, Gillian settled his hat down on top of her head.

The vision before her changed. Travis was the same, and so were the people in the bar—some of them, anyway—but the warehouse had become a cave, or some under-hill coal mine, maybe, with great timbers bracing up the low ceiling. And Travis wasn't riding a bull at all, but wrestling one. At least, he was wrestling something with a bull's head. The head had ragged longhorns the color of earwax streaked with pus, but the body was human, with the gleaming muscles of an Olympic weight lifter. People were watching, cheering, holding up cups of wine where they'd had bottles of Bud before, and Gillian was suddenly glad that she hadn't taken a sip of her beer, because she thought if she had, she might never make it out of here alive. Somewhere nearby that demon flutist was still shrilling away at those eighth- and sixteenth-note runs, only now the sound seemed to worm into her brain and wrap her mind up in wires.

Terrified, Gillian pulled the hat from her head, and the scene changed back to a honky-tonk, with Travis on the mechanical bull again, everything back to normal. But a moment after she took off the hat, Travis lost his grip on the bull and went

flying. The vicious bucking of the bull was stronger than before, though, and he sailed over the safety-zone of mattresses and pillows to land head-first on the shell-covered hardwood floor. There was a crunch loud enough to hear over the band, and then Travis just lay there, head bent back nearly at a right angle, all life gone from his eyes.

The big bull man was laughing. Gillian knew that, if she put Travis's hat back on, she'd see a minotaur standing there, hands on hips, bellowing with mirth at the white cowboy's death. She also knew that, if she hung around too much longer, the bull man would turn on her.

Gillian ran for the door, still clutching Travis's hat, and she hit the gravel parking lot at near top speed, and didn't stop running until she had to bend over and puke, and once she was done puking, she started running again.

She caught a ride out of West Virginia that night, but now she'd fetched up in Dearborne, where crazy women shot at her with crossbows, which wasn't much of an improvement, not in the broader scheme of things.

The coffee shop owner came closer with the crossbow. "I don't appreciate that," she said. "Using my place to talk to her. In the name of all the gods that were, of all the places you could've dragged your bones into, you come into my place, and talk to her?"

The owner sat across from Gillian, first pushing a broken chunk of mug off the dripping chair. She pointed the tip of the crossbow bolt at the radio. Gillian noticed the woman didn't touch the wiry mechanism, which had changed shape once again. It now looked like a multi-colored dragonfly in loops of wire, something an extremely precocious child might make.

"I don't want trouble," Gillian said. "If you want this radio, ma'am, it's yours. I'm not looking for a situation here. Just some coffee and maybe a scone—"

The woman lowered the crossbow and squinted at Gillian. "There's something about you," she muttered. "You're mixed up in something more than the usual nonsense she likes to mix people in."

Gillian blinked, and in that instant of darkness as her eyes closed, she saw Travis turned into a man-shaped white missile shot free of the mechanical bull, launched toward the ceiling of the honky-tonk. Was that "something more"? "I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean."

"Let's have us a little confabulation, miss," the coffee shop owner said. She dropped the bolt from her crossbow onto the table. It hit with a dull thud.

"Sure," you crazy witch. "What do you want to talk about?"

"You know the lady," the witch said. "That much is clear, I heard her treacled-and-bullshit voice. But do you know the cowboy?"

Gillian's heart thumped. "Travis?"

The witch waved her hand impatiently. "Travis or Thomas or whatever, I don't know or care. He plays music, probably, or maybe just does that god-awful cowboy poetry with all the rhyming. He's got more charm than sense, and thinks more about what would make a good story than about what would keep him safe. You know him?"

"I... saw him die. At a honky-tonk in West Virginia."

"Well," the witch said, her eyes fixed on Gillian's own. "There's dead, and then there's dead. There's dead to the world, and there's dead in the world, and they can look the same to the uneducated observer."

"I know what I saw. He died. But before that, he gave me his hat," Gillian was seized by the urge to open up to this woman, though she'd been shooting at her just a moment ago. She began to reach into her bag.

"Stay your hand!" the witch said. "Good lords and ladies, I don't want you putting on that hat and looking at me with clear eyes. Let me have my pride.

Listen. That lady has been jerking you around, sticking her fingers in your dreams, telling you sweet lies or else making sweet suggestions, and she drew you to her, to that honky-tonk, but you didn't do quite what she expected. That cowboy took a shine to you, or else saw something shining in you, and passed his hat on to you. But you managed to escape, which is why you aren't capering for the lady's amusement right now. I don't think you can walk away—once the lady starts tugging, it's hard to pull free, and we've got a town full of absent children to testify to that fact—but you shouldn't go down there unarmed. Here. Take this." She passed Gillian the crossbow, then lifted the bolt to her whiskery lips and kissed it.

"Take my blessing. My curse. Put on that hat, and aim that crossbow, and bury that bolt right in the lady's lying, shriveled-up heart." The witch nodded briskly, as if her work was done, and put the bolt by Gillian's hand. "You should head outside and wait."

Gillian picked up the crossbow, bewildered. "Wait? For what?"

"The lady won't let a busted cup of coffee keep her from you," the witch said.

"She'll be sending along an emissary, and I think I know which one. I'd rather he didn't come into my place, if it's all the same to you. Now, shoo. Shoot straight, and bring the lost ones back up to the light." Then she sighed. "Or else don't. You can put on that hat and walk out of town, and maybe the dreams of the lady will fade, in time. You can get back on the bus, ride it to the edge of town. Go on your

way, go back to school, get a job, live a life.”

Something, maybe a fragmentary memory from one of her dreams, made her ask a question: “But ... what kind of life? Will I be happy?”

“I can’t speak to that. But if you don’t run away, you might see your Travis again, if he’s not dead in the world, and only dead to the world. Is that worth a look, do you think?”

There are moments in life, thought Gillian. Hinge-points. The fulcrum at the frozen moment of a level teeter-totter. Charleston. The honky-tonk. Did she want to live with that for the rest of her life? Is that what her long road odyssey had turned into? Running from the memory of a dead cowboy and a glimpse of something stranger than the rest of her life?

“Yes,” Gillian said. “It’s worth a look.”

“Then get on out of my café,” the witch said.

Gillian stood outside the café, holding the crossbow, the bolt tucked into her belt. The sky was slate-gray, no puffy clouds, no star to light her way. The witch had told her to expect a representative, but no one had shown up yet. The witch came out after a while, carrying a white to-go cup, which she handed to Gillian.

“Since I shot your last cup apart,” she said.

Gillian took the coffee, sipping, wincing. Still bitter and black, but it helped wake her up.

“There, child,” the witch said. “You need your wits awake.”

“She’s no child, witch.” Rufus, the ratlike man from the bus, approached them. He’d appeared from the far side of a dumpster, and Gillian wondered if he’d been there all along. “But she’s not yet grown, either. She’s a cuspling. An in-between. That’s good. She can slip through cracks that are closed to everyone else.”

The witch hrumphed. “Your guide’s here. Remember, shoot straight.” She went back into the café, and turned the sign in the door over to “Closed.”

“Follow me,” Rufus said, shifting in his coat as if his body fit him badly. “I’ll take you as far as I can, and then you have to decide whether to go on, and what to do after.” He set off down the empty street, and, for want of any other option, Gillian followed, sipping the coffee, trying to wake up her mind, thinking she should feel more absurd than she did, following a vagrant down an empty street, carrying a crossbow.

Something buzzed behind her, and Gillian turned, raising the crossbow with an instinct she didn’t even realize she had. But it wasn’t a swarm. It was a dragonfly

made of twisted wire—the wire that had been the radio. It zipped past her, to Rufus, who caught it in his hand and then stuffed it unceremoniously in his coat pocket.

“Almost forgot the radio,” he said. “But I don’t want to answer it right now. The lady means well, but sometimes she micromanages.” The dragonfly buzzed in his pocket for a moment, then fell silent.

“Where am I going?” Gillian said. “What’s going on?”

“No one knows every piece,” he said, shuffling along, eyes on the road. He bent to pick up a piece of discarded foil, sniffed it, and stuck it in his pocket. “We all do our little parts, and that’s enough.”

“So what’s my part?”

“Wandering. Road of trials. Gauntlet, maybe. Passing through, until you arrive someplace. This is someplace, your someplace, your sometime. Your rite, your passage. But it’s not just about you. Every act has consequences, every choice affects everyone else, however minutely.”

“Great,” Gillian said. “My guide is a sphinx who’s read Joseph Campbell.”

“Campbell oversimplifies,” Rufus said. “But he was right about some things. Recurring images. Archetypes, maybe. We live in a republic, but our stories are still full of kings and queens, witches, counselors, knights, squires. Ladies. Villains. Jesters. Hop Frogs.” He gave a desultory little half-leap, then kept walking. “Those things aren’t the whole truth about the human condition, but they’re a way of getting at the truth. There are other things that come up again and again. Stories about dark places. About stolen children. Sometimes they’re true. Surely you must know something true, about dark places.”

Gillian nodded, and though Rufus had his back turned to her, she thought he was aware of the nod. Of course she knew about dark places. Anyone who watched the news or read the papers, anyone who had ever struck up a conversation with a stranger in a park or at a bus stop or in a hospital waiting room, everyone knew about such things. “So, what? The white cowboy is a king? Or a knight, sent to slay the minotaur? Or is he Thomas the Rhymer? And I’m... a squire? Or am I the knight? Or he’s Eurydice, and I’m Orpheus? Or...”

“That’s the problem with stories,” Rufus said. “If you think about them too much, you start to think they’re the same thing as real life.” He turned down another street, and they were on the university campus, passing imposing brick buildings, low stone walls, bicycle paths. They passed a row of brightly-painted frat houses, and every window was dark, every house silent.

Even during spring break, Gillian thought, there should be somebody here.

Gillian frowned. "Hey. What month is this?" She hadn't kept close track of the passage of time while she'd been on the road.

"April," Rufus said. "Almost May. And later every day."

"Isn't spring break usually in March?"

"It's in April, some places," Rufus said. "But around here, yes. It's always in March around here."

Gillian stopped and looked at an empty frat house. One of the windows was broken, and there were beer bottles lying on the front porch. She approached the frat house, knelt, and looked at one of the bottles.

A thin film of dust covered the brown glass.

"The students aren't gone for spring break at all," Gillian said.

"No," Rufus said. "They're not. And it's not just the students. Every child in town is missing."

"What, everyone under age eighteen? Under twenty-one?"

"It's not that simple. Some of them are older than you, but the ones who stole them considered them children, or they considered themselves children, or they acted like children, didn't take responsibility, didn't think about the consequences of their actions beyond the sphere of their own gratification." He shrugged. "By those criteria, the town had more than its share of children. Come on. We have to go."

"Crap," Gillian said. "I don't even know these people. Why shouldn't I just go to the nearest bus stop and get the hell out of Dodge?"

"I don't know. Why shouldn't you?"

Gillian thought about that. About the difference between being a child, and being grown-up. "Crap," she said again. "Lead on."

Rufus took her across the deserted campus. Gillian felt like she was in a bad sci-fi movie, one of those last-man-in-the-world-except-for-the-zombies ones, though she'd prefer zombies to whatever she was going to face. At least in zombie movies, you knew who your enemies were. At the edge of the campus, behind a three-story brick building with an amphitheater attached, Rufus went up a wooded hill, his breath puffing, and Gillian followed, branches scratching at her legs and catching in the crossbow's string.

"This is a wilderness area," Rufus said, pushing farther up the steep hill, deeper into the pines. "The University has built right up to the edge of the protected land,

and they've been trying for years to get this land rezoned so they can expand onto it, but so far the environmentalists are winning."

"It's a wild place."

"Another motif," Rufus said. "Dark forests. Wild woods." He glanced back at her, paused, then said "The place where you hunt the Questing Beast. The place where you get lost." He stopped. "Here," he said, and gestured at a rough outcropping of stone that protruded from the face of the hill, a jut of rock higher than Gillian was tall, and seven or eight feet across.

"Here, what?" Gillian said. She put her hand on the rock, which was cold, with lichen growing in the cracks.

"Here is as far as I go," Rufus said. "But you can go farther."

Gillian thumped the rock with her knuckles, thinking of fairy stories and myths, bits of disconnected narrative, the only things she had to guide her, despite Rufus's suggestion that stories weren't to be trusted. Stories and dreams were all she had, even if they gave a flawed, simplistic picture. She just had to remember that the map was not identical to the territory.

"I have to go underground," she said. "Under the hill, into the underworld. That's the next part, right? That's where the pied piper took the stolen children, into a mountain. Where people go to get their dead loved ones back. Underground. Into the dark."

"Close enough," Rufus said. "Go on, if you're going."

"I don't know how."

"I think you do," he said, and faded back into the trees, leaving her alone. Gillian looked at the rock. "Open, sesame," she said. Nothing happened. Frustrated, she punched at the rock, and hurt her fingers.

"Shit." She put the bleeding knuckles in her mouth and sucked. She took her knuckles out of her mouth, looked at her hand, looked at the rock. She shook her hand, hard, and a few drops of blood flew from her torn skin and dappled the rock.

The rock soaked up the blood like the earth soaks up rain, and the stone before her opened like the mouth of a dragon, stone grinding together with a sound like the rusty gears of a great machine.

"Dark in there," Gillian said, to no one in particular. She heard a buzzing, and

the wire dragonfly zoomed from out of the woods, escaped from Rufus's pocket, or else set free. The filaments of its body glowed blue, and it flew into the darkness inside the mountain and hovered, casting just enough light to make Gillian aware of how dark it was in there.

From somewhere inside the mountain there came a faint sound, like a hoof scraping against a rock.

And a moment later, even quieter and more distant, something like the snort of a bull.

Gillian drank the last of her coffee and set her cup on the ground. She took a breath, adjusted her backpack, clutched her crossbow, and stepped into the dark, looking for the white cowboy, for the missing children, and for whatever else might lay beyond all the roads she'd traveled, that had finally brought her here.

She expected the rocky entrance to snap behind her once she came inside, but it didn't, which was reassuring. The cave floor was slick under her worn shoes, and the air inside felt twenty degrees colder than outside. In the flickering glow of the dragonfly's wings, she could see the faint boundaries of the cave, as well as a passageway in the far wall. She smelled something musky below the odor of mold on the wet rocks.

Gillian took one step, then another, just as she'd done every day for the past year of her travels. She thought about putting on the cowboy hat, but she suspected this wouldn't look much different—a cave was a cave was a cave. Even if it was also a labyrinth with a minotaur wandering its mazed byways, or a passage to the underworld, or the foyer to the pied piper's Xanadu for stolen children. After ten minutes of creeping down the passageway by the dragonfly's light, Gillian heard faint sounds. At first she thought it was crying, but as she walked and the sounds grew stronger, she realized it was singing, and music, and the occasional burst of laughter.

Did the children laugh after the pied piper stole them away? Did the dead laugh in the shadows of the underworld?

Then she heard a boisterous "Yeehaw!"

Gillian ran toward the voice, through a rocky tunnel and down three steps, emerging at the mouth of a shining cavern, like the inside of a geode, all sparkling crystals reflecting firelight from torches. The dragonfly buzzed and shot across the cavern, faster than her eye could follow, but she didn't need its light anymore.

There were people here, a crowd of them, dancing and milling and laughing. A toddler was squalling not three feet from her, while a gray-haired woman in a faded sundress bent over her, a ringed hand inches from the child's face. A trio of teens snoozed next to them, while an entire class of uniformed parochial school students played Duck Duck Goose. A crowd of bored twenty-somethings leaned against

rocks, sipping pints of beer and looking at the crowd with jaded eyes. There were men and women in what Gillian thought of as “costume drama” clothes, too, frock coats and hoop skirts and bustles, all laughing and dancing.

Gillian wondered what she’d see if she put on Travis’s hat, but decided she wasn’t ready to do that yet.

Then she saw him, on the far side of the cave—Travis, his big hands held out in front of him as he laughed, trying to fend off a chocolate-smearing little girl bent on soiling his white duds.

This didn’t look like a hell or a prison. It looked like a party. Like being in the honky-tonk again. Even the band was here, the flute player blowing away, children looking up at him, enraptured. She was about to yell for Travis when someone touched her elbow.

“Hey baby,” one of the formerly sleeping teens said. He wore a tight, light blue T-shirt with the word “Starfucker” written on it, but with yellow stars in place of the “a” and the “u.”

“Don’t you mean ‘Save me?’” Gillian said. “Don’t you mean ‘Lead me out of this horrible darkness?’”

“Honey,” the guy said, looking at her with a mix of compassion and pity. “This is the place to be. No one wants to leave.”

“But,” Gillian began. But I saved you all, she wanted to say. Didn’t he know there was a minotaur? A demon flutist? Didn’t he know... what? This guy had an expression that said he knew it all.

“No buts about it,” the guy said. “We can leave whenever we want. But why would we want to?”

“There’s a whole world out there to see,” Gillian said. “Roads upon roads...” She trailed off. The guy yawned, sat down on the floor, and seemed to go instantly to sleep again.

Gillian retreated a step back into the mouth of the passageway. She looked around for Travis, but now he was nowhere to be seen. She could always step forward and look for him, be swept up in the flow of the party, to have fun everlasting. It was tempting, but she didn’t have to put on Travis’s hat to know that endless frivolity was an illusion.

“Wan’ dance?” Travis said, and she turned to find him grinning at her, thumbs hooked in his belt. He looked oddly vulnerable without his hat, and he was even paler than she remembered.

"No I don't want to dance, cowpoke. I thought you were dead!"

"I am dead," Travis said, face guileless and a little hurt. "See?" He took her hand and pressed it to his chest. She'd danced against him four nights ago, felt his heart pulse against her, but now there was no motion in his chest at all. "But that doesn't matter now. Let's dance. I just got here, and I ain't hardly danced a step yet."

"You've been dead four days, Travis."

"Naw," he said, frowning. "Naw, can't be, maybe five or six hours at most, I'm just gettin' started. I used to pretend I liked it here, I played my guitar and looked for a way to escape the lady, but I don't know why I bothered. Ever since I gave you my hat, I've been so happy here, everything's so beautiful and sweet..."

Gillian pulled her hand away from his chest. "Even the minotaur?" she said.

"The bull-man who wrestles people to death, maybe eats them for all I know?"

Travis shrugged. "That old bull can't help it. He just does what he has to. He killed me, and look, I'm happier than I've ever been!"

Gillian shook her head and took a step back, trying to break free of the strange gravity she felt when she touched Travis. She still had the crossbow, the witch's revenge, and she thought the lady must be down here somewhere, presiding over her under-hill ball while her pet bull-monster wandered the tunnels gobbling up any kids who strayed too far from the dance floor. Gillian could pull away from this honky-tonk version of Orpheus-and-Eurydice, away from this cowboy who'd gotten his fool neck broken, and she could slip into some other story. Because this was like the primal soup of stories, minotaurs and mazes, underworlds and dead lovers, faery reels and eternities passing in a night, and vice-versa. But Rufus had told her she wasn't bound by those stories. She'd almost forgotten that.

"I want to see the lady," Gillian said.

Travis slumped. "She wants to see you, too. I was supposed to bring you to her straightaway. I just wanted to dance first, before she pressed you into service. Oh, well. She's that way." He pointed toward the far end of the cave, where the sparkling crystals were brightest.

Gillian pushed her way through the crowd, until the press of jostling bodies parted, revealing a raised dais, with a carved wooden throne set on top, and the lady from her dreams seated there, regal even with her lank gray hair and her diamond-encrusted crown sitting all askew.

There were men and women all around the lady, dressed in bras and panties and boxer

shorts. They moved with dazed expressions, carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres, scattering flowers on the floor, fanning the lady with palm leaves.

"My last handmaiden," the lady said, and beckoned to Gillian. "You're late, but I've held a position for you. I know you almost got sidetracked by young love, but we don't need to talk about that, we both know he's not worthy of you. Come, my dear, let your wanderings be at an end, and be here, happy, with me, forever."

Gillian realized that the reflected brightness at this end of the cave came from the lady, who shone with a soft light that flowed into the crystals and came flashing back, and she was beautiful, and just being in her presence would make for a worthwhile life. Gillian imagined her blisters healing, her feet never hurting again, never sleeping rough again, never playing psychopath-roulette by hitchhiking again, never worrying about anything again—

Gritting her teeth, Gillian jammed the point of the witch's crossbow bolt into her palm, and the pain shocked her out of her enchantment. There were a lot of stories swirling here, and Gillian didn't want to get caught up in this one.

The lady sighed. "I always pick the willful ones, because it's so much nicer when they go down on bended knee and serve me. What have you got there, dear? Is that a crossbow? I can't be hurt by a crossbow, and neither can my flute player, or my bull."

Gillian's eyes widened. She hadn't noticed before, but in person, the resemblance was obvious. The lady was the witch's sister. The lady was as beautiful as the witch was ugly, but they were family—their eyes were the same. "Your sister kissed this," Gillian said, and loaded the bolt into the crossbow, as if she'd done it a thousand times before. "She cursed this."

The music stopped. Somewhere behind her, a bull snorted. Gillian mounted the dais. Everyone watched as she lowered the crossbow and pointed it at the lady's chest. The lady stared, not at Gillian, but at the bolt. With her free hand, Gillian reached behind her and fumbled in her bag for the cowboy hat. With that on, she'd be able to see where to put the bolt, to kill the lady, to strike her heart with her witch-sister's curse.

A snort, off to the side. Gillian glanced over and saw the bull-man, only now he'd done away with his glamour, letting his bull's head show, his great horns, his liquid dark eyes. "Don't rush me, bull, or I'll pull the trigger," Gillian said.

"It's not too late to love me," the lady said. "This doesn't have to be your story —you want to be a regicide, a queen-killer? There are other options. You could take your dead lover out of here, or you could rescue the children—with that cursed bolt you could even slay the monster, that's what Travis was trying to do at first, he was hunting the minotaur, a cowboy paladin after a monster bull!" There was a note

of desperation in her voice.

The bull made a disgruntled noise, unhappy at being suggested as a victim. The noise made Gillian glance at him again... and this time she noticed the ring in his nose, a little iron hoop disappearing into his nostrils. That's where the leash would go, she supposed, to tug him around, to lead him by the nose.

Just as Gillian had been led around by her own leash, this double-damned leash of stories and tropes and archetypes. She'd escaped from being Travis's savior, and from being the lady's handmaiden, and from being the rescuer of children who'd just as soon stay lost—but now she was on another leash, being pulled into the story of the witch's revenge, made the resolution of some fey family drama she didn't even understand. Gillian didn't want to inhabit that story, either.

She stepped forward and pressed the crossbow bolt against the lady's chest, making her gasp. Gillian looked around at the people gathered silently on either side of the throne, and was not surprised to see the witch, and the bus driver, and

Rufus, and even the bouncer from the honky-tonk.

"Same old story. Never my story," Gillian said. "No thanks." She reached out and plucked the lady's crown from her head, drawing a gasp from the crowd. Gillian was not surprised to find the crown was made mostly of wire, rhinestones, and paste, not diamonds and gold.

Gillian placed the crown on her own head. The view before her didn't change, though the lady looked a little lost, now, and smaller, somehow. Her handmaidens were blinking and muttering, covering their half-naked bodies, snapped out of their thrall.

"Here," Gillian said, and settled the white cowboy hat on the lady's head. The lady stared at her for a moment, looked around the cavern—and what must it look like to her now, Gillian wondered?—then stood up.

"Gillian," she said. "Traveling girl. Do you mind if I go?" She took a step away from the throne. "It seems my story's changed."

Gillian waved her hand, weariness crashing into her, the coffee-and-adrenaline buzz wearing off. She dropped into the throne and watched as the lady walked across the room, toward Travis, and spoke to him in low tones. Travis made to reach for the hat, but the lady—only she wasn't the lady anymore—smacked his hand away. Travis lowered his head, chastised. The lady-no-more took Travis's hand, like a lover, and led him to the tunnel that led toward the surface, taking him out of the underworld, ridding this under-hill place of one of its stories, at least.

The minotaur approached Gillian, nodded at her, then sat on the steps beside her. He was so tall that the top of his head came up to the level of the throne's armrest. Gillian placed her hand on top of his warm, furry head, letting her fingers

rest between his horns.

The revelers—children and slackers and line-dancers, bewildered college girls in their underwear, lords and ladies of times gone by—watched her expectantly. Somewhere up above, thunder rolled, echoing down into the cave. The rain had finally come.

“Anybody here want to leave?” asked Gillian.

A girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen, raised her hand. “My mom forgets to turn off the gas burner after she makes coffee,” she said. “I should check on her.”

Gillian nodded. “Good. Anyone else? It’s not mandatory. Stay or leave, it’s almost all the same to me.”

A few more hands went up. Gillian waved them away. “Go on then. The bull won’t get you, and the flute music won’t call you back.” After they were gone, Gillian looked over the people left behind. They’d lived under the lady’s roof, at her whim. Now they were in Gillian’s hands, and she had better plans for them.

“Now, children,” she said, relishing the words, scratching the spot between the bull’s horns. “Let me tell you a new story. And when I’m done, we’ll leave these damp old caves behind, and take this show on the road.”