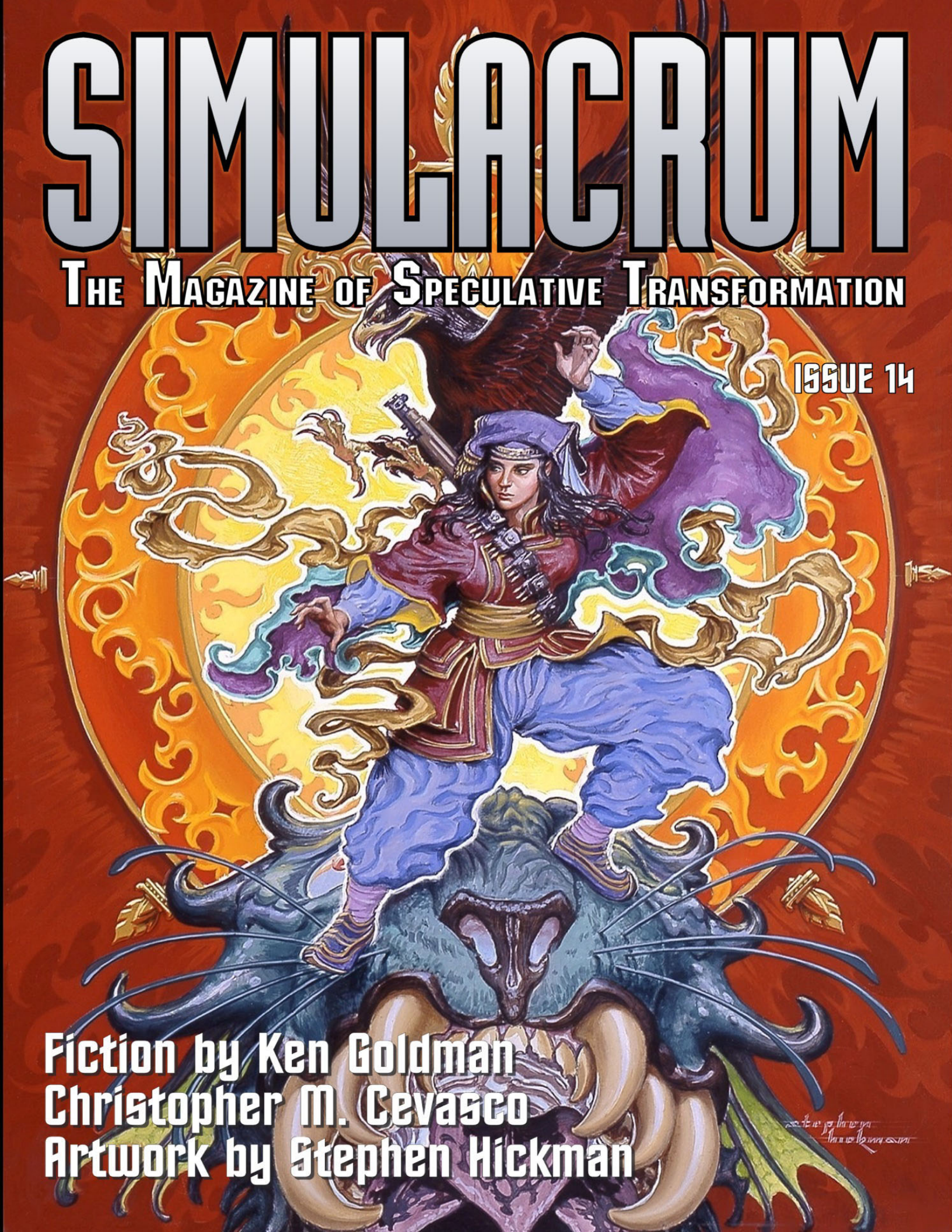


SIMULACRUM

THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

ISSUE 14

Fiction by Ken Goldman
Christopher M. Cevasco
Artwork by Stephen Hickman



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THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE EDITOR'S DESK 4

FEATURED FICTION

THE NOAH HYPOTHESIS – Ken Goldman 5

A CERTAIN VERY ANCIENT BOOK – Christopher M. Cevalasco 38

THE THIRTEEN STEP – Steven Marshall 54

STATIONS – Pattie Lawler 75

FEATURED POETRY

SLEEPER – Jane Gwaltney 109

FEATURED INTERVIEWS

ARTIST – Stephen Hickman 111

RECOMMENDED READS

THE GREENWOOD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SF & FANTASY (3 Vol.,) 118

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES 121

THE EDITOR'S DESK



It's been awhile since I played God with the magazine. The last editorial I wrote was for issue number 6—*an eternity ago*. Now, I have issue 14 entirely to *myself* (maybe not a good thing) while Lynne takes a small break to finish a novel. Believe me, I have the more pleasurable task of only birthing a few hundred words, instead of thousands. HA! HA! Lynne—*have fun!*

Issue 14 features fiction by SpecFicWorld.com's Annual Speculative Fiction Contest winners and one honorable mention. I won't go into details about the contest, or blather on about which author won the top prize, other than saying every writer listed in our featured fiction section deserved to win and had to go to great depths to impress 'thy' editor to place in the contest.

So the fiction in this issue is superb—*without a doubt!*

I wish I could take credit for the artwork and poetry found in this issue as well, but Lynne weaved her usual magic and found two more talents that will be added to the ever growing list of fantastic artists and writers that have appeared in previous issues of the magazine.

This will also be our largest issue ever clocking in around 45,000 thousand words. So enjoy!

-- Doyle Wilmoth

THE NOAH HYPOTHESIS

KEN GOLDMAN

Wine is wont to show the mind of man.

--Theognis (circa 570-490 B.C.)

In wine there is truth.

--Pliny (A.D. 23-79)

Roland Bickersford could not help but smile. Comfortable in his 18th century Louis XV armchair whose black Italian crushed velvet he had selected from an exclusive Milan fabric maker, he allowed another sip of the wine to swirl along his tongue. The dark wine seemed especially sweet, and he savored his creation because he knew the Times critic's words were an understatement.

'The Bickersford Levant ebony proved something of a tease. Its bouquet seemed timid, yet this rather herbaceous wine quickly turned audacious on my palate and refused to relinquish its diabolically sweet gooseberry aftertaste . . .'

Audacious . . . Diabolically sweet. More ridiculous phrasing from another journalistic quack, but nonetheless it beat reading about another terrorist bombing or some madman's battering his own child to death. Besides, the old man enjoyed the reviewer's praise, even if here was another fool who could not see the truth any better than he could write it.

More accurately, here was a fool who could not taste the truth.

Truth proved a bitter pill, that was damned certain. Having a beautiful young wife who could not keep her eyes off their rope-muscled grounds keeper, now there was one truth Roland had a hard time swallowing. He had decided to fire that wetback before Katherine got any funny ideas.

Company was coming, and it was about time. Lately Bickersford's clientele had proven less than expert and infuriatingly tight-fisted with its check book. He half expected some idiot to demand a cheaper price for his aged wines because their having remained so long on his shelf suggested no one wanted to buy them. If society

were judged by its understanding of the finer things, Man was going to hell, all right, and likely he wouldn't even know the proper wine to bring along for the trip. But this new buyer, this Prentice Blake, showed promise. If Blake didn't realize that much about himself, at least Bickersford's ebony Levant did.

The phone rang on cue. The connoisseur felt no rush to answer it.

A young woman spoke Roland's name . . .

Prentice Blake dared not risk going home empty handed on the eve of his anniversary. Last year Megan had pretended it didn't matter that he had forgotten, even managed a flickering smile for a full ten minutes before locking herself inside their bedroom for the night. Things in bed lately had gone from bad to shit. Blake knew he had best put thought into this year's gift selections, and the diamond chip earrings from Biddles were safely tucked inside his vest pocket. All that remained was to purchase some good bottles of wine and he was home free, at least for a little while.

No store-bought jug of merlot would do for Meg's refined palate, no swill sold over the counter for a woman to whom everything often was not enough. Only a private collection could provide what he needed. The new temp had made the call for him, Sally with the long legs whom his horn-dog golfing buddy, Hal Henning, so badly wanted to fuck. Fortunately the Bickersford Estate's wine cellar was just a little off the Throughway, not much out of his way on the drive back to White Plains.

Blake had heard about Bickersford's collection during some table talk with a client who mentioned Manhattan's Carlyle Hotel's excellent bistro occasionally tapped Roman Bickersford's cellars. That, and an article in the Times were endorsements good enough for Blake to pay the old wine connoisseur a visit.

Along the estate's long driveway the grounds were not as manicured as the owner's reputation warranted. Blake stopped at the gate, announced his arrival into the speaker, and proceeded along the gravel driveway to the main entrance, expecting that when he left the property he would be doing so with a considerably lighter wallet.

In the fading twilight the estate's means of ingress could have done with better illumination. The smoothed greystone architectural style was of the Gothic Revival period of the early 1900's complete with turrets and dimly lit circular windows along its second story that made it resemble some Old World English castle. In the early fading daylight of this crisp autumn day the effect gave a visitor the uneasy feeling of being watched by the mansion itself.

Leaving his BMW in the cul-de-sac he walked the path towards the entrance, the crunch of gravel announcing his arrival. The large front door opened before he approached it, and Roman Bickersford himself greeted Blake at the entrance with a firm handshake accompanying a warm smile as if he were welcoming an old friend. His was a face that, although aged, did not suggest old age. His hair, whitened as a snow cap, remained thick and properly combed, and the lined face could never be called wrinkled. Like the famous wines Bickersford had kept securely racked and cooled beneath this mansion, here was a man who had aged well.

“Mr. Blake, I’m gratified that you are a punctual guest, neither too early nor late. Anyone who tends these cellars learns the importance of time, whether it be measured by the clock or the calendar.”

Blake returned the old man’s smile. “No wine before its time . . . like the commercial.”

“And like the old proverb says, ‘Wine improves with age. It gets better the older I get.’ Come.”

The mansion’s simple interior revealed little of the fortune the old man undoubtedly possessed. Blake saw no servants, and although rumors mentioned a young wife, no woman cooked dinner nor offered the amenities of their home. There was only the elderly man himself, and the lack of ado seemed refreshing enough to put Blake at his ease. Inside his study Bickersford decanted an exquisitely ornate bottle he had at the ready, suggesting to his visitor that the warmth of a good Ramos Pinto Evamoria, a modest ten-year-old port, would assuage the chill of the cellars.

The old man waited for Blake to sip, waited to receive the nod of approval at his selection before he poured a small amount for himself, swilling the liquid inside his glass before he drank. “Did you have anything specific in mind for your wife? Your secretary told me nothing regarding your preference. I would be more than happy to offer suggestions, of course. My vaults are quite extensive.”

“So I’ve heard. Tell me, from what far corners of the world does one accumulate such a massive collection as yours?”

The old man welcomed Blake’s curiosity. “Often from auctions, from others’ collections after the owners have died. Regarding my personal collection from my own vineyards, it’s an interesting story, but I won’t detain you with the long version. Are you familiar with Genesis 9? It refers to the origins of wine following the period of the Great Flood.”

Blake shook his head. His interest in bible study had peaked back in Sunday School the day he realized that several of the girls in the choir were giving him a hard-on.

Bickersford recited the passage from memory. “And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and was drunken.’ Did you know that some claim God spoke to Noah only while the old man was drunk?”

The notion amused Prentice. “It’s not much of an endorsement of our species to be descended from the first recorded lush in the Bible, is it?”

“Well, the hypothesis goes that many years ago the wild Eurasian grapevine was taken into cultivation and became domesticated in only one region of the world, the wine masters painstakingly creating the considerable varieties of the wines we know today. Of course the vines eventually were transplanted elsewhere—Greece, Italy, France, even to California. They were transplanted from the first known vineyards on Mount Arafat by Noah himself, following the biblical flood that covered the world. It is that very mountain from which all wines originate and from which the grapes are cultivated into the wines you will find in my personal section of the cellar.”

Blake smiled again while picturing old Bickersford himself in the role of an inebriated Noah planting his vines around the world like some biblical Johnny Appleseed. “You’re saying your wine comes from the first wild grapevines, from Noah’s own vineyards? That’s quite a pedigree indeed. A more skeptical man might have a difficult time believing your collection’s lineage, Mr. Bickersford.”

“Please, call me Roland. And my account is entirely the truth, I assure you, although the purest wines I keep generally for my pleasure alone. The wine I offer for purchase does not always come from my own vineyards, of course. That would appear immodest to a discerning buyer. Regarding that wine I drink for my own enjoyment, however . . . well, let’s say I prefer not to reveal its biblical ancestry to many people for fear of ridicule. But in no way does that diminish its authenticity. Fortunately, my reputation in the collectors’ community speaks for itself, and that community shares quite a grapevine, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

Now Blake’s smile blossomed into a full grin. He had gained the old collector’s confidence even if the man enjoyed yanking his chain. More likely here was just another eccentric millionaire given to grand delusions, having earned a degree of distinction among his peers.

“In any case, Roland, I’m open to purchase whatever wine you may suggest. I should warn you, though, Megan—my wife—regards herself as quite the connoisseur, and she has more than a nodding acquaintance with the best vintages.” The truth was that Prentice Blake also knew quite a bit concerning those vintages, both foreign and domestic, and he felt curious to determine whether Roland Bickersford’s cellars were as impressive as the man implied.

“I doubt your Megan will be disappointed, Mr. Blake. And I promise quite a treat for your palate as well. So, shall we go and have a look?” Finishing his port Bickersford, brandishing a fistful of keys, escorted his visitor to a securely locked antechamber that led to a small elevator—locked also—and to the vaults below.

Like distant ghosts their footsteps echoed within the drafty chamber of the entrance way to a cellar that ran the subterranean length of the mansion itself. Regarding the storage of his collection only temperature rivaled time in the proper care of various ports and sherries, whether the wines in his keeping were reds or whites, dry or sweet. The lights were kept dimmed near the containment cells, for Roland Bickersford admitted he was a perfectionist in the nurturing of his wines and believed too much illumination might affect the tartaric acid of the grapes, creating an undue bitterness. Here were racked the sparkling reds and rosés, the entertaining little currants and gooseberries that might nicely accompany a sumptuous meal.

This first cellar was done in rich redwoods. Cooled with its own refrigeration, its walls were lined with lush murals of the collector’s mountain vineyards.

“That painting is by Pietro Cavallini, and over there is Duccio da Buoninsegna. Thirteenth Century, I believe. Exceptional artists. The wine from those vineyards has always been exceptional as well, dating from biblical times to the present. I’ve extensively researched the origins of my wines. The vintages now seem to me like old friends. Come.”

“I studied French Literature in college, you know,” Blake said, aware their echoing footsteps begged for further conversation. “Your name, like your wines, has its origin in religion.”

Bickersford grinned, knowing where his guest was leading. “‘The Song of Roland.’ Twelfth Century, or thereabout. The emperor Charlemagne’s nephew, Roland, became a martyr in the spread of Christianity in Spain. Unfortunately, the legend is just that, and the story much exaggerated. And as his namesake I would hardly call myself a religious man. I would never presume my wines contain the blood of Christ, just some damned fine grapes.”

They walked in silence when Bickersford abruptly stopped and stood motionless as a marble sculpture. He looked about, worrying the air like a forest animal that had picked up a remote sound in the wind.

“Do you hear? Do you? Listen for it. Shhhh . . .”

Blake remained still but heard nothing.

“I don’t—”

“Shhhh!”

Blake listened again, or pretended to. The vault remained as still as a crypt. “I’m sorry, but what am I listening for?”

Bickersford looked around as if apprehensive he might be overheard, a ridiculous notion considering they stood isolated in the bowels of the earth. The elderly man turned with a dramatic flourish toward his guest, “Why, you’re listening for the stories, of course. The many stories each of my long-necked children has to tell. Wine remembers, Mr. Blake, love, hate and everything in between. If you listen closely, you can hear each bottle whisper its own special tale.”

The walls echoed the old man’s words, his voice resembling a very bad imitation of Peter Lorre.

“Lee-sen closely . . . Whees-per eets own special tale . . .”

And then Bickersford broke into raucous laughter like a mad elf.

“I’m sorry, my friend, but I couldn’t resist,” the old collector apologized. “I know how sequestered and genuinely creepy these vaults seem during one’s maiden visit. Forgive my little charade, will you?” He gently removed from its rack a long and thin necked bottle ensconced in straw containing a blood-red wine. “Will you share with me this small token of my appreciation for your humoring the vicissitudes of an old man?”

Blake maintained a forced smile and read the hand-printed label. It was a 1957 Chianti Classico Frascati from Tuscany, a dry Italian table wine he counted among his favorites. Its thin container suggested the possibility it had been recanted from its original bottle.

“And this wine, does it have a story to tell?”

The mad-elf smile reappeared, this time with teeth showing. “Indeed it has. A story as robust as itself. A good wine never disappoints. But you must drink it with me to hear its story.”

Blake checked his Movado. He had a decent window before Megan paced the floor, but to assure no interruption he turned off his cell phone.

The gesture served as the connoisseur’s confirmation to proceed and another pass key reappeared from the jumble. Clearly the wine gourmet had concerns about keeping his belongings secured even deep inside his cellars. He opened a nearby cabinet, producing two long stemmed crystal glasses and a gleaming corkscrew. With a surgeon’s precision he removed the cork from its bottle. He poured a small amount and waited for his visitor to sniff its bouquet.

“Here’s one you and your wife might enjoy. Just a little bit in its glass,” Bickersford said, addressing the crystal into which he poured the liquid. “We must allow this full-bodied Chianti to breathe, you know. It has mellowed with its age, as must we all. Thirty years its age is, similar to your own, eh? That makes you and this Chianti kindred spirits.” He caught his guest’s eye. “Now, Mr. Blake, please listen again and tell me if you hear the whispers of this daring little wine?”

Prentice held the glass close and sniffed. Its aroma was reminiscent of violets. He sat upon a small bench and closed his eyes while he tasted it, remaining silent for a moment, allowing the wine to work on him. And then, an amazing thing.

“Why, yes. I think I can . . .”

[. . . a couple, strangers to him, sit inside a small café . . . an Italian mandolin plays while a bottle of Chianti glows blood red in the flickering candlelight between them.

. . . the dark haired woman is very young and very beautiful . . . they are holding hands and whispering, yet they do not appear happy . . .]

Roland Bickersford’s eyes never left his guest’s.

“Good, Mr. Blake. That’s very good.”

* * * *

The 1957 Chianti Classico Frascati

Tuscany, Italy

A Full Bodied, Daring Red

. . . in the café they are holding hands and whispering, yet they do not appear happy . . .

“Then it is settled, Rosa? You are certain you can do this?” the young man asked.

“Certain, Giovanni, as best I can be. I wish only there were some other way to—”

He stopped her words with a finger to her lips. The gesture would have certainly raised eyebrows had anyone seen this, for here was a man who worked many of Tuscany’s vineyards emboldened enough to touch the flesh of Donna Frascati, the young wife of the wealthy Signore Roberto Frascati.

“There is no other way unless your desire is to sell fish in the markets of Rocca d’Orcia for the rest of your life. Roberto is a powerful man, and we can hide our love from him no longer. We act tonight or risk losing all.”

He prepared to pour the young woman another glass of the Chianti, a bottle purchased by the café from her husband’s own vineyards, but she stopped him, covering her glass.

“Then no more wine, Giovanni. Of all nights, tonight I must think clearly.” Her dark eyes met his and she knew he understood. He pushed the bottle aside.

The mandolin player approached their table. Giovanni waved him off. He returned to Rosa, again speaking in whispers.

“It will be extremely hot tonight. In Roberto’s vineyards the men gathering grapes wear moistened towels on their heads. Their work is made slow in such heat, and several fires have had to be put out. Your husband will not be in good temper returning from his inspections of their harvest, and his thirst will be great. You must greet him at the villa with wine and be certain he has more with his dinner. At midnight I will come. Remember to leave the latch open for—”

He stroked the moisture from her cheek. Although her tears belied a woman’s frailties her voice remained strong.

“I love you Giovanni. Enough to do this terrible thing!”

“It is not so terrible if you do not love the man you call husband. Age has not mellowed him. It has only made him more bitter.”

“I do not hate him. You know that. I can never blame Roberto because I was young and a fool. I saw only the Frascati Vineyards and believed ‘Yes, this is enough for happiness.’”

“And will you remain a fool, Rosa?” He handed the woman a small packet containing a fine powder. “Place some into his wine at dinner. Pour more into other glasses later, enough to make him sleep. Tomorrow he goes to Villa Petrolo to sell his wine. With so much drinking his drive along the treacherous curves of the Monte Amiata shall be his last. I shall see to that before he awakens. Unless, of course, you have no stomach to do . . . ‘this terrible thing.’”

“I love you, Giovanni. That is all you need to know.”

Giovanni managed a smile. “I need also to know what to do with the remainder of this excellent Chianti Classico. Adriano serves a fine wine here. Such a pity to waste the fruits of your husband’s labors.”

“Adriano shall not waste it, I assure you. He will dress it up in a spanking new bottle and sell it to some other fool willing to pay full price. I have seen him do the same with a half emptied Lambrusco not one week ago. It might explain why the proprietor of café Rivoli is so rich. If ever I decide to leave you, Giovanni, I shall have my eyes set on him.”

Her young paramour might have tenderly kissed her then, but already they had taken the great risk of having been seen speaking together with such intimacy. Instead, they shared a moment of laughter that passed all too quickly.

* * * *

Giovanni had been correct. Stinking from the scorching heat Roberto Frascati returned from his vineyards that evening in as foul a mood as Rosa could remember. Although her husband had never once struck her throughout almost three years of marriage, on this night he certainly seemed capable of it. During his angrier nights he often climbed upon her in bed and inflicted such terrible pain inside it seemed much worse than any beating he could administer.

On this evening a chilled glass containing a thirty-year-old Frascati Port awaited him, a favorite taken from Roberto’s vineyards. Awaiting also was a smiling wife as per her lover’s instructions. She had placed the powdered substance, a tasteless and odorless sedative, into the wine, although she took a gamble attempting to fool a palate as skilled as Roberto’s.

The sedative soothed the man’s anger, and following a large meal of tender veal accompanied by assorted fresh vegetables and potatoes—and punctuated by much more wine. Roberto fell into a thick slumber over his dessert at the dinner table. Fast asleep, the man snorted like a bull. Rosa had her husband’s servant place him into his bed, then dismissed the remaining serving staff to their quarters. The man’s body heaved and swelled with thick, heavy breaths while, alongside him in bed, Rosa awaited her lover’s arrival.

Giovanni was punctual and slipped the latch at twelve. He entered the bedroom without turning on the light, for had Roberto awakened, explanations would have been impossible and the plan aborted. But the man slept soundly and Rosa climbed from the bed to embrace her love.

“He has been like this for hours,” she told him. “He drank much this night, and the sedative only hastened the tiredness he felt following such a difficult day.”

“Good. The mountain roads will be isolated. It shall be simple to accomplish Roberto’s unfortunate accident within this hour. The wreckage will not be discovered until morning.”

Roberto farted but did not awaken. Still, Rosa kept her voice low.

“His van is loaded with the wine samples for the Villa Petrolo. It is an hour’s drive, so you must follow the road through Montevarchi as if your intended destination were the Villa.” She located the keys to the vehicle on the dresser and handed them to Giovanni.

Pulling the man from his bed Giovanni managed a weak smile. “Such a pity to waste his fine wine in the mishap. Ah, well, no plan is perfect, not even ours. Grab the legs and help me carry him.”

It would have been less difficult hauling a Brahma Bull down the staircase to the van, but the couple succeeded. The serving staff’s quarters had gone dark and the two were not spotted. With their plan proceeding nicely, Giovanni took the risk of kissing Rosa in the pale Tuscan moonlight.

“Rosa, there can be no contact between us for many days. Act properly shocked when you receive the news. Now go to bed and think only of me.”

Rosa watched the van pull away until it was out of sight. She took her lover’s advice but sleep proved impossible. Tossing and turning, she pictured the events developing between the man she had married and the man she loved.

Now Giovanni is pulling the van to the side of the road, making certain Roberto still sleeps . . .

Now he is hauling my husband to the driver’s seat, releasing the brake and pushing the vehicle from the tallest peak of the mountain road . . .

. . . and now perhaps Roberto is awakening to discover he is trapped, the van rolling over and over upon itself like a child’s discarded toy, bursting into flames, and Roberto, he is screaming, oh Mother of God! he is screaming . . .

Remaining awake until daylight shone through her window, she waited for the phone call from the authorities that she knew must come. An hour or two passed. Then a third. When the call did not come she began to worry.

Had something gone wrong? Had her husband awakened and, insane with the sweltering heat and his drunkenness, struggled with Giovanni at the wheel? Perhaps Roberto, speeding down the mountain road to his own death, had come to his senses in time to escape? Or, maybe her lover had been fool enough in this heat to stop the

van along the side of the Monte Amiata to quench his thirst with the wine he knew he must destroy? And then, perhaps in a drunken stupor of his own, had he driven off that same road?

Such a pity to waste so much fine wine, that's what he had told her . . .

No, no, Rosa repeated to herself a hundred times over, shaking her head to dispel thoughts too horrible to consider. She made some tea to settle her nerves. Too upset to drink it, instead she paced the floor.

Noon arrived, but there was no call, no visit from the polizia. She watched the television expecting an announcement of the tragedy, but there was nothing. Late afternoon came and went, then early evening during which time Rosa had consumed almost an entire bottle of merlot. Of course, she could ask no questions of her servants nor act in any way different from her usual manner. She had been practiced in deception since her affair with Giovanni had begun, but nothing matched the panic-driven confusion she now felt. Rosa lay upon the divan of the great drawing room of the villa and felt warm beads of sweat trickle down her forehead.

Just after the late summer sun sank behind the western slopes the door opened. Barely awake Rosa saw only the blurred outline of the massive figure who stood above her.

"*Gio—?*" She stopped herself before saying more, pretending to turn her lover's name into a meaningless mumble.

"My beautiful Rosa, asleep here on her divano living a life of luxury when she should be preparing her husband's dinner."

At first she thought she must be dreaming, but no, Roberto stood before her and he was laughing. Always he returned home in good spirit whenever he made another important sale to a wealthy client, and Villa Petrolo was among his wealthiest. Rosa understood her husband well enough to recognize his more favorable temperaments. This evening he was even holding flowers for her.

"These violets were for sale in the Rocca d'Orcia and they whispered your name to me. I could not resist buying them for you." He placed the bouquet in a vase, stooping to kiss his wife's forehead. "You are warm, Rosa. Have you a fever?"

Impossible . . . Impossible . . .

"I feel a little tired, is all, Roberto, and I have had some wine. Perhaps too much." She made her way casually to the window, stealing a glance through the drapery to study the van he had parked near the entrance for the manservant to later secure inside the large autorimessa. Although darkness was falling she could see the van

clearly enough. It did not appear to have a scratch. Nor did Roberto in any way resemble a man who had been engaged in a life or death struggle.

Impossible!

Rosa prepared her husband's dinner, waiting for—expecting—something, anything to indicate her indiscretion with Giovanni had been discovered and dealt with. But her betrayed husband displayed no suggestion of anything remiss, nothing at all. Roberto, in truth, had never seemed more pleasant.

That was it! He was toying with her, trying to exact some guilt-ridden confession. It must be! He would take her to bed, showing his teeth like a snarling animal when he smiled, then remove his thick leather belt and beat her without remorse until her flesh puffed crimson with welts! Rosa expected nothing less.

But it did not happen, not that night, nor during any of the days or nights that followed.

Giovanni had told her he would not call for a while, and Rosa did not anticipate hearing word from her lover. But a week passed, then two. She looked in the vineyards for him, stopped several times at the café Rivoli, even chanced walking past the small apartment in which he lived on the outskirts of Rocca d'Orcia. She dared not ask for him, not of anyone, for in a small village there are many eyes and many mouths, and there were none who could be trusted. But Giovanni remained nowhere to be seen. It was as if he ceased to exist.

Maybe that was exactly the case!

Day into night the thought haunted her, of Giovanni shoved from a tall cliff, his body twisted and bones broken, his flesh slowly eaten by birds. Or perhaps Roberto had overpowered his wife's lover, dousing the startled suitor in gasoline and igniting him like a human torch to burn until all that remained was a blackened swatch of scorched muscle and tissue resembling nothing human.

But in the woman's mind there were images so much worse . . .

. . . of her Giovanni paid off handsomely by a smiling Roberto sending the young man off with a pat on the back.

. . . and of her robust paramour traveling somewhere far away and even now drinking wine and laughing while in the arms of another.

The waiting for answers was agony, and not knowing, torture. Endless scenarios played out in vivid detail inside Rosa's head, each new variation worse than the one before. Days became weeks, weeks months, and still no answers came. All the while

Roberto revealed nothing, uttering not a single word of anger nor aiming a suspecting glance in his wife's direction. This only increased Rosa's torment.

Once in the night she called out to her lover in her sleep, "Giovanni! Giovanni!"

She awakened certain that Roberto must have heard, although her husband continued to sleep soundly.

But years passed and the memory of Giovanni faded. There were times Rosa doubted the man had ever really held her in his arms at all, never had been anything other than a wonderful creation of a miserable young housewife's fevered imagination. Sometimes it was easier to think of him in these terms than as a living and breathing creature; doing so, she could fashion her memories in any way she chose. During these reveries the eternally young Giovanni desired no woman other than the radiant young girl donna Frascati once had been, and even as old age threatened, the woman forever remained that beautiful child-like temptress. When reminiscences did not come of their own accord, a little coaxing with wine always did the trick.

"Giovanni!" she called through wine soaked stupors, and still her husband said nothing.

The more she consumed, the more the wine brought mysterious smiles to the woman's face, smiles only she understood. The wine whispered to her, shared with her all the truths she needed to know, or more accurately those truths she needed to believe. If the wine stretched those truths at least it convinced her that Giovanni lived and loved her still, loved her always with all the raging passions of a young man's heart.

The wine whispered those secrets it wanted the woman to know, and even if the explanations fell short of complete certainty, for the remainder of her days donna Rosa Frascati listened and believed . . .

* * * *

" . . . Good, Mr. Blake. That's very good." Bickersford's voice seemed distorted and distant.

"Roland, I'm so sorry. I must've nodded off for a moment."

Prentice checked his watch. Only a few minutes had passed since he had dozed but it seemed so much longer. His mind felt clouded, as if the disturbing aftertaste of the Chianti had affected his brain.

Lusty Italian lovers . . . a full bodied woman, a cuckolded husband . . . murder, wine . . . something, something . . .

Like the taste of the wine's sweetness on his tongue, already details were fading, but the dim memory of a husband betrayed lingered with the tenacity of a bad headache.

"No need to apologize, Mr. Blake. This Frascati Cabernet often sneaks up on you like that. The 1957 Tuscan vintages originate from a particularly rainy season that was followed by intense heat, during which the area's grapes grew plump and unusually sweet. Sadly, fire from that summer heat destroyed a large portion of the Frascati vineyards. Ironic, eh? Grapes nourished by flood die by fire. Perhaps there is some sort of biblical lesson there? But the wine's effect is quite temporary. Come, I may have something more to your liking for you and your wife."

He led Blake to a separate chamber of the wine cellar, this one barely illuminated and finished in a much darker redwood, so somber it appeared almost black as if burnt. The refrigerated chill was palpable, suggesting rich wines that required closer tending.

"Another red wine?" Prentice asked.

"On the contrary, Mr. Blake. A white. The Riesling grapes create the finest German whites and are among the longest lived. They ripen late with a racy acidity as the wine ages. Here, try some." Bickersford pulled a thick bottle from the racks that had none of the long necked delicacy of its companions. Oddly, the bottle's label was unmarked, as if its contents were especially mysterious. Bickersford procured another long stemmed crystal glass. Obviously quite valuable, its texture gave the illusion of having been pieced together from broken shards painstakingly smoothed over. He poured, and offered the glass to Blake.

The wine was practically golden in color. Prentice sniffed the aroma. The fruit bouquet had a strange undercurrent that was not entirely pleasant, but with wine first impressions were often misleading. He took a sip.

It tasted bitter and he almost spit it out. Allowing the liquid to slide across his tongue it became more palatable, and then, a miraculous thing. The wine turned delicious and went down smoothly.

[Excellent . . . Excellent . . .]

"This wine has many personalities, Roland. What is it called?"

"You're drinking what Germans call Qualitätswein mit Prädikat—quality wine with added distinction. The German whites are packed according to ripeness, and yeast added by the wine maker acts on the sugar in the grape juice and converts it to

alcohol and carbon dioxide. Further elaboration of the fermentation, however, may be unsettling to hear.

“This wine is too excellent to change my opinion of it.”

[Absolutely excellent . . .]

“Mr. Blake, you impress me as a true connoisseur, so I *will* share the process with you. You see, under certain climatic conditions, the grapes may be affected by *Botrytis cinerea*, a flavor enhancing fungus known in Germany as *Edelfäule*. You are drinking parts of that fungus in a Rheingau white, although the wine’s unappealing origin is not what is most fascinating about that particular family. No, I think you will find a much more interesting story in that wine’s original owner. Unfortunately, the hour is getting late . . .

“Tell,” Prentice said, as if the words came independent of his will to speak them. Drinking more, he shut his eyes to savor the spicy taste.

“This bottle has a history too. I procured it at an auction of the Edgar Kornman estates. Maybe you’ve heard of him? He was considered a mediocre sculptor with the exception of one particular work . . .”

The sculpture. It was of a very beautiful woman. Blake’s eyes had closed but he could see it.

Roland Bickersford did not have to utter another sound.

* * * *

The 1979 Rheingau
The Rhine River, Germany
An Aged and Firmly Structured,
Spicy White

“Excellent . . . Absolutely excellent . . .”

Bernhard Krunstadt had created his masterpiece. This time he was certain of it. The white marble sculpture of Frieda Goldstein would be his testament, and more important than that, his salvation. He had only a bit more to do around the neck, some fine chiseling to achieve the unique feminine delicacy that had been Frieda’s; afterwards, he would not need to sculpt one additional chip from a new stone to attain his immortality.

Inside his studio Krunstadt had created the sculpture entirely from memory of the woman, no mean feat for even the most talented artist. He had managed to salvage a faded old photograph of her taken at the peak of her beauty, and the likeness provided inspiration enough to turn a block of marble into a work of genius.

Of course, it would have been impossible to perfectly capture the flesh and blood Frieda in stone. It seemed miraculous that even God had created such a woman. Not so miraculous was the ease it took for one man to destroy her, and Krunstadt had spent a lifetime doing penance with his hammer and chisel. He had traveled miles from his homeland to achieve his atonement, making a new life for himself in America to start fresh, and today it seemed his retribution would finally be paid in total. It had taken him almost fifty years to attempt capturing Frieda's likeness in stone, although his nearly completed work was more a testament to the woman's ageless beauty than to his sculpting skills.

[Yes . . . she's magnificent.]

A glass of wine would go nicely now, just before he completed the finishing touches. A few sips, and when he was done with his creation he might do justice to the rest of the bottle of Rheingau as a personal celebration of his triumph. He poured himself a small amount of the white wine, holding it to the light and studying the clear liquid inside the glass as if some lost image might appear in its luster.

["How easy it is to say you love me, Bernhard . . . so easy to say the words . . ."]

Krunstadt raised his glass to the woman in marble, his homage to the young nurse plucked from her hospital duties by the invading army during one night in a besieged Warsaw ghetto a thousand lifetimes ago.

"To you, Frieda, and to the brief happiness we were never meant to share."

He drank the wine in rapid gulps, and its potent bitterness caused his head to spin so suddenly he had to sit. Bernhard closed his eyes and remembered when the world was different, when life itself was unlike any other time.

And he remembered the girl . . .

. . . the dark haired girl with the spicy temperament who secretly shared the bed of a handsome young officer. On a winter's night, their last, while her eyes spilled with angry tears, love and hate had somehow combusted between the two to create something indefinable. A raging fire does not extinguish itself, and on that night Bernhard could not allow its flames to consume the both of them.

"Frieda . . . Frieda . . . You ask too much of me."

“Too much, Bernhard? Too much? I have witnessed the Pogrom beatings and rapes in our streets. You are a powerful officer in the Wehrmacht. You know of the executions and disease here. It is not too much to ask that those in your charge allow my family to leave Warsaw and remain unharmed! My mother and father gather the remnants of their belongings even as we speak. There is talk of refuge in Hungary for the displaced families. You have the authority to find them safe passage, Bernhard. You say you love me, but you show no love outside of this bed. Are you like the others, as much a man of stone as the figures you sculpt?”

Perhaps she truly hated him, and what passed for passion was only a despicable means to an end. He had considered this, of course. She had been given no choice when he selected her to come to his bed, and she was a shrewd enough woman to turn her circumstance to her family’s advantage. Now her dark eyes locked with his, and the soothing words that should have come easily stuck inside his throat.

“Frieda, you cannot possibly understand the complexities of—”

He stopped himself. How could the woman comprehend the duty he had to his country? She was a Jewess, too arrogantly proud to recognize that destiny belonged to him and to his race. Krunstadt found the quality of her defiance oddly exciting because he admired her strength, but that same defiance also made him despise her. It was as if some odious poison grew within his heart whenever he held Frieda in his arms, and he did not know whether to make love to her all night or beat her senseless. He could never allow anyone in a position of authority to discover she shared his bed. There were none among the Geheime Staatspolizei, the Gestapo, who would have permitted Krunstadt the luxury of loving her.

“There is talk of the camps, that Warsaw is but a holding place for all of us until—”

“Enough!” he interrupted. “You ask too much! There are things which should not—and can not—be changed. Your family will be fine.”

“Like all the others who are taken to Umschlagplatz?”

“Yes. Fine. All of them.”

That was not exactly the truth. Umschlagplatz was the plaza to which the Warsaw Jews were regularly herded for deportation to Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen.

The camps.

He expected the girl was too smart to believe him even if she so desperately wanted to, and when he reached for her, Bernhard felt certain she would spit in his face. Instead, she turned away while saying nothing, and this was much worse. Krunstadt

could deal with her anger more easily than her withdrawal. In later years the officer often asked himself if the girl's refusal of him that night had determined his decision.

Frieda left Officer Krunstadt's bed, insisting on joining her aged parents during this most treacherous of nights. She put on the crisp nurse's uniform whose arm band displayed the six pointed star prominently exhibiting in bold letters the word JUDE. The uniform had kept her safe until now, for medical persons were a valuable commodity among the higher ranking officials and none questioned the woman's frequent visits to officers of the S.S. Still, the star let no one forget what she was.

Bernhard did not stop her from leaving. It would have been foolish to try.

After midnight Krunstadt smoked the first of many cigarettes, taking the short walk to a poorly lit cross street near his quarters. From a distance he watched as soldiers pulled Isaac and Anna Goldstein from their home. The old woman was screaming, but her husband remained silent and did not resist. Under the Warsaw moon Frieda's elderly parents were herded at gunpoint, along with many others, into the crowded streets.

He saw Frieda push her way into the crowd, toward the soldiers standing closest to her mother. The girl was no longer wearing her nurse's uniform but instead the drab gray clothing of a factory worker worn by practically every Jew in Warsaw. Had she worn the nurse's dress a soldier would have spotted her, would have pulled her away from the herded rabble. But this the girl clearly did not want.

"You do not have to do this, Frieda," Bernhard muttered to himself. "There is no need, no point . . ."

Amid cries and shouts Krunstadt stood too far off to hear the young woman's protests to the tall soldier holding the rifle. Her wild gesticulations suggested first pleading and then anger directed at the man who poked the weapon repeatedly into her mother's back.

Krunstadt's mind supplied the words he knew Frieda must have spoken.

"No! Don't take them, please! No! No!"

And then . . .

"Damn you! Damn all of you!"

Krunstadt saw her pound the man's shoulder, watched him push her aside and set his rifle's aim on her. Anna Goldstein noticed and threw herself between her daughter and the man, pulling at the officer's arm with such determination he almost dropped his weapon. He struck her shoulder with the butt of his rifle, and the old woman

toppled near the curb. The tall soldier turned and waited for her to stagger to her feet, then shot the old woman in the head.

Hearing the crack of the gun Isaac Goldstein looked behind for only a moment, then pulled his daughter from the tumult. Perhaps he did not recognize the supine body of his wife that lay twisted in the street, her drab clothing freckled with blood; perhaps he did not see the others step around her as if only a fallen bird lay on the ground. From afar the old man's expression remained unreadable, and his only reaction was to quicken his pace, tugging Frieda's arm to remove her from danger.

Because the girl was not wearing her medical clothing she would also be shot had she attempted to leave the filing mass of people. Bernhard Krunstadt thought of running to Frieda's side, revealing that this young woman was his personal nurse, that she had a permit to remain behind. But he did not move.

The girl's mother was dead, and Krunstadt knew Frieda would never abandon her father even knowing the mass of ragged workers, both young and old, was being led to the trains at Umschlagplatz. There seemed no point to rescue one who chose not to be rescued. He watched father and daughter become swallowed by the moving herd.

Bernhard remained in the streets, the crowds still shambling past him while his cigarette burned to ash. Occasionally the flash of gunfire stabbed the darkness like a sudden crack of lightning. The night had turned especially cold, and the officer tightened his collar against the harsh wind. He waited until two soldiers carried off the remains of the old woman. By then the chill had become bitter, and Krunstadt badly wanted to return to his quarters. But there remained something he had to do.

The door to the Goldstein home had been kicked open. Krunstadt climbed the staircase to the second story and located the girl's room. As he had imagined, it was a dismal place whose plaster ceiling was badly damaged and whose gray paint was peeling everywhere. He rifled through several drawers. There was no money, of course, nothing of any value, but Krunstadt looked for only one thing.

Inside the parents' room he found it. The photograph of Frieda must have been taken on a warm summer's day, and there in an open field she was smiling more radiantly than Bernhard had ever seen. He quickly shoved the portrait into his pocket.

This was the woman he wished to remember. Her astonishing smile had already been significantly altered in the ghetto of Warsaw, a smile soon to be recast into something horrible. He did not want to think about the human skeleton she would become at Buchenwald, nor imagine what living atrocity into which she would have been transformed when death finally took her.

He never was given that choice. As years passed, during the darkest hours of the night Bernhard Krunstadt lay awake imagining the girl's final days in the camp, imagining her haunted eyes hollowed like black sockets and wondering if Frieda Goldstein's last words had been screams.

The sculptor held the faded photograph in his palm, losing himself in it.

Of course, the name no longer was Krunstadt, not since he had left Germany almost fifty years past, but Bernhard could never think of his identity as anything else. He cared little if the title associated with his art bore the ridiculous American name of Edgar Kornman. He knew who he was.

The '79 Rheingau had proven more effective than he had anticipated. Curiously delicious, it had diverted him from his purpose. He placed the photograph alongside the wine glass and took hammer and chisel in hand.

The girl's likeness in white marble had astounded its creator. His heart raced just looking at her reborn smile, recaptured from a moment of happiness somehow miraculously plucked from the past. Krunstadt had no idea his hands possessed such ability. But there remained the neck of his sculpture to complete, and one misguided tap of the hammer could easily annihilate his finished work. He held his chisel before him to steady his hand, then began.

"Tonight, Frieda, the burden is lifted. Tonight you release me."

He stopped himself before his hammer struck the chisel. Something was different, something not quite right. The change in the sculpture was not readily apparent, and at first Krunstadt believed it a trick of his vision. The figure had altered only slightly, and he could not put his finger on the peculiarity. Bernhard studied his work closely before he saw.

The woman's cheekbones had hollowed somewhat, turning her face gaunt. The arms and legs also had lost muscle tone and seemed rawboned. The marble's luster had dissipated and the stone grayed, giving the woman's likeness a wan and sickly appearance. The smile now was uncertain and tentative.

Krunstadt stepped away from his work as if from some diseased thing.

This was not the Frieda Goldstein he had sculpted!

Rationality quickly returned. The wine had been especially potent and he had consumed an entire glass of the Rheingau rather quickly. Good wine often played nasty tricks. That had to be it. It was the wine!

But when he turned again to Frieda's marble likeness she had grown thinner still! Her eyes had vanished inside twin darkened pits and her body approached emaciation.

Krunstadt's lips formed a scream, but he could not make a sound nor could he move one inch, his legs encased in concrete.

“ . . . and are you as much a man of stone as the figures you sculpt?” she had asked.

“Frieda, you ask too much!”

Like some filth ridden infection the disease had spread. The woman's chiseled smile now was gone completely, and with movement almost imperceptible her thin finger pointed toward the sculptor in accusation. Bernhard's mouth opened, but he could do nothing more than listen to the shrieking inside his head.

“No, Bernhard . . . You are the one who has asked too much!”

The gray stone of the figure crunched with movement and the bony arms reached out to him, the sculpture a monolith of human scale struggling to be born. He could not move, could not even turn away so as not to see.

Krunstadt needed no further explanation for what seemed so unthinkable. He had not sculpted this grotesque creature he saw before him. But the lesson came a little late. The marble figure fell upon him, her bony fingers pulling him to her. Skeletal arms wrapped around him crushing him in a lover's embrace that suggested anything but passion. He felt his bones turn brittle like dried twigs as his marble creation drew him closer while wrenching his breath from him and sapping the last remnant of his strength. Trying to push her he caught a brief glimpse of his own hand, saw his fingers mutate before his eyes, withering as if with sudden advancing age and turning matchstick thin. He wanted to scream, wanted to howl so the whole world might hear, but his lungs retained only enough wind for him to hack and wheeze.

Frieda Goldstein pulled Bernhard closer while every bone inside him splintered, then snapped . . .

* * * *

Prentice shook the spider's web from his brain. He hadn't fuzzed out like this since his Ivy League days getting wrecked with his frat buddies. He was lit, and Bickersford had been watching him the whole time, probably laughing in his sleeve.

“You are a true connoisseur, Mr. Blake. I must admit, at first I had my doubts.”

“ . . . dizzy . . . ” He glimpsed his watch, saw he hadn’t been there an hour. Too much wine could mess with your head.

“So the wine told its story, did it?”

The old man’s comment no longer seemed so crazy.

“It’s a little cloudy now. Bits and pieces. Incredible . . .”

“This Rheingau proves quite a jolt to the uninitiated. But the true gourmet comes to appreciate it in time. The trick is to allow a good wine to do its work.

“A man’s humanity—or lack of it—may be judged as much by his inaction as by his actions, don’t you think? And one must tend to the needs of his lover as a wine master must tend to his grapes, otherwise grapes may turn bitter. This proved the sculptor’s most egregious mistake.” Roland allowed a moment for his guest to absorb his implications. “The media reports stated police broke down the door to the art studio of Edgar Kornman, the name the sculptor had assumed. The man had been dead several days and there was this terrible smell and many flies. It seemed Kornman . . . Bernhard Krunstadt . . . had starved himself until he had the appearance of—well, the appearance of one who has lived inside a concentration camp.”

Bickersford’s shrug served as his only explanation. If he knew more, he had chosen to make certain that particular vault remained shut.

“What became of the sculpture of the emaciated woman?”

“Emaciated? His Frieda? Quite the opposite. Krunstadt’s creation appeared perfectly robust in every respect and might have earned the man a small fortune had he lived. The woman in marble appeared so magnificent she was exhibited posthumously around the country. I don’t know where the statue wound up. Rumor has it she’s in a museum somewhere along the Rhine.”

Prentice shook his head with dissatisfaction. There were too many pieces missing.

“Wine keeps many secrets, Mr. Blake, and in this case it isn’t telling. Tending to the aged vintages as long as I have, one learns only bits and pieces of the mysteries these rare collections hold. Perhaps darker secrets are best kept hidden. But enough about truth and conjecture, eh? So little of what we think we understand is set in stone.”

Along another of the cellar’s corridors the collector’s wines had presented him with insoluble riddles, and Blake felt like the butt of jokes only the old man understood. The drinks had sent his brain reeling with imaginings he would have attributed to a mad man an hour earlier.

With an unsteady gait he followed his host, descending a small staircase into the deepest subdivision of the cellar. While the two walked in silence, Prentice's thoughts ricocheted under the influence of the alcohol, and an unlikely memory struck him :

“We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs . . . ”

Bickersford turned. “What?”

“Strange. I recalled this passage from an Edgar Allan Poe story. I had to memorize the lines in high school. Something about a wine cellar and a man who is tricked by his host to enter it.”

Bickersford smiled. “‘The Cask of Amontillado.’ Yes, I’ve always enjoyed that one, its being so appropriate to my circumstances. I assure you, Mr. Blake, there is no Fortunato rattling his death chains behind these walls. However, if you are honestly curious regarding my personal collection . . . ”

“From your secret biblical vineyards?”

“Come. We’ll share a little of my finest, you and I. And I promise I’ll perform no imitations of Vincent Price.”

Blake half expected the collector to pull two flaming torches from the walls and usher him into some rat-infested dungeon, cackling maniacally in the firelight every step of the way like Poe’s dark villain. Despite the refrigeration, Prentice was beginning to sweat. The wine had kept him warm, all right, just like the old guy said. He was not as certain he had kept himself sober. Megan would have a lengthy list of new complaints when he returned home tonight late and half-intoxicated. But he had come for a bottle of the best wine money could buy, and he was not about to show up on his anniversary night without it.

“And is there a wife to accompany you into your golden years?” Blake asked.

The old man grinned. “Quite a beautiful one, in fact. I prefer my wine aged, but my women are another matter entirely. I’ve married several times, which is, I suppose, the hazard of wealth. Money attracts the women, of course, but it takes so much more for them to stay. Katherine is about here somewhere. Young women are rarely content when confined even in a mansion of this size, but I have to admit my wife has no complaints remaining close enough to attend to my many needs. And yourself? Your careful selection of the proper wine for your wedding anniversary suggests you have a good woman at home as well.”

“Perhaps it suggests that I’ve learned how to jump through the proper hoops.”

Too much of a gentleman, Bickersford chose not to pursue that point and returned his attention to his wines. In the farthest recess of his cellar he paused before rows of triple-tiered racks containing many bottles, unpretentious vessels compared to the others, an assortment that ran the entire expanse of the wall. These were the ebonies originating from the collector's own vines, wines that exceeded a deep blood red hue, approaching black. The old man selected one.

"Mr. Blake, I believe this is what you have come for. This wine's origins are the Mount Arafat vineyards, its fermentation process dating centuries back to Noah's time and popular throughout areas of the Middle East. The Levant gooseberry is a rather expensive vintage, well aged and properly worth its price for a discerning collector. Of course, if you intend a wine merely for your drinking pleasure, then may I recommend this other—"

"I'll have a taste of this one," Prentice said, not to be diverted from the better choice. Anticipating his host's concerns, he produced his check book. "I insist you write the figure down for this bottle and allow me to sign."

Bickersford, again, was too much the gentleman to quibble. Blake glanced at the figure the man had written and tried not to gasp. Then he scribbled his signature. Another pair of wine glasses appeared and Bickersford poured. He lit a thick candle and placed it in a golden holder upon a small table, staring at the jiggering flame as if it contained some secret meaning. This time he held up his glass to propose a toast.

"I drink to your utmost enjoyment of my finest wine, my friend."

"And I drink to my most gracious host, whose exceptional hospitality will likely result in my wife's divorcing me."

Glasses were clinked, bouquets inhaled, and the wine tasted in the flickering light. Prentice responded with a huge grin.

"Roland, you were right on the money. This is the one. Megan will love this."

[. . . and will most likely polish off the entire bottle in one sitting too.]

It was past 5:45. Perhaps he should call, tell his wife he had been unavoidably delayed, show Meg that he still gave a rat's ass, even if he were no longer certain he did. Hadn't Roland made a strong point concerning the terrible events resulting from a man's inactions regarding his mate? Well, then . . .

He put down the wine glass and punched the speed dial of his cellular.

"This will take only a minute," he assured Bickersford, raising the glass to his lips.

The wine took its effect before his wife's phone reached its third ring.

* * * *

Well past noon Mrs. Megan Blake arrived in downtown Westchester and swung her T-Bird into the Summerfield Suites lot. There were many spots closer to the building proper, but a classic '56 model with the MEG-1 tag was too easily remembered. Parking some distance from the main entrance she wondered if all women carrying on affairs were this paranoid.

Megan would have to remember to turn the cellular back on later. She couldn't expect to sound like herself should her husband call while she was doing . . . *this*. Maybe she should have stopped for a glass of wine just to steady her nerves, stopped to smell the Rosé, as it were. That cheap swill Hal always brought would never do it for her.

A new headache kick boxed her frontal lobe. Swallowing a Tylenol dry she rubbed her temples, then slipped on the kerchief and donned dark glasses. Today's liaison would have to be a real slam-bam because she had planned a candlelight dinner to celebrate with Prentice, just the two of them, and a decent duck l'orange took time.

She had misgivings meeting Hal on her wedding anniversary, but guilt hadn't stopped their Wednesday trysts before. The previous week, following her spinning class, she had joined Patsy Henning for lunch at the Carlyle, spent a pleasant hour ridiculing the fall fashions over Caesar salads and wine, then took the elevator to the seventeenth floor and fucked Patsy's husband raw. Hal admitted he would never divorce his wife, and Megan had to restrain herself from laughing. She had no desire to marry Hal and would have hated losing Patsy's friendship.

She passed the desk manager like a nervous teenager and walked the two flights to the room Hal had reserved.

"You're late," he said removing her glasses, then kissed her. Megan always considered the simulated romance extraneous, but she supposed it was required. The truth was, in appearance Hal Henning couldn't hold a candle to Prentice. Already his middle aged gut had spread and his hair was thinning. But as her lover, Hal had two distinct advantages over her husband. He was a different man and he wanted her.

"Hutchinson traffic. Sorry." She loosened the kerchief, allowing her golden hair to spill to her shoulders. Hal read that as his signal to kiss her again. She let his tongue explore hers, felt him grow hard when he grabbed her ass and pulled her close. This was foreplay by the clock, but still Megan's panties grew moist.

He poured a chilled California Chardonnay whose bottling date probably was last Tuesday, but few men knew wines like she and her husband. Megan dutifully drank

and nodded politely through the requisite banter, something about Hal's kid having made the soccer squad. He was already removing her blouse before she finished her drink.

"Let me tell you what I'm going to do to you," he said as she climbed into bed.

"I'd rather you didn't tell me this time, all right?"

She didn't mean to sound like such a magabitch, but her head hurt and she was already woozy having drunk the wine so quickly. She kissed him, but the effort was dry and passionless. She kissed him again, trying harder. Same thing.

"Something wrong, Meg? You seem distant today."

"Sorry. I'm having a little trouble getting in touch with my inner slut."

"Need some time?"

She did, but so did the duck l'orange.

"It's just that my Catholic upbringing kicks in whenever I'm sleeping with another man on my wedding anniversary. I think Sister Mary Rose is in bed with us. But I suppose I cashed in on my Catholicism the first time I put your dick in my mouth."

Hal stared at her like she had spoken Swahili, but humor was always lost on Patsy's husband.

"I'm okay, really," she said.

Megan decided she could have used some romance after all, even if it were simulated. She wanted to be held more than screwed, but she hadn't much time for either. Hal reached for her and kissed her neck, making his way down to her breast, and in another few minutes he was inside her. His face glistening with sweat, he pumped his body as if he were on an exercise machine at the spa.

She moaned.

He grunted.

Another grunt, very loud, followed by another much louder. Too loud.

He gasped, puffing for air.

"Hal? Are you all ri—?"

"I—I can't—can't breathe . . .!"

Hal managed to sit up, hands suddenly turned into claws clutching at his chest. His body jerked as if he had been hot wired, then stiffened. He slumped sideways into Megan's lap.

"Unnnghh . . .!"

“Hal??”

The woman’s jaw unhinged.

“Hal!!”

Megan maneuvered his head to look at him. Hal’s flesh had gone ashen and she could locate no pulse. She propped him up and felt for a heart beat, then pounded at his chest, fists balled together. She had seen George Clooney treat a heart attack like that on “E.R.” but she had no idea what she was doing. Letting go of him, she allowed Hal to slump from her. The realization hit hard.

I’m sharing this bed with a dead man!

Megan got to her feet, pacing naked about the room, her brain on fire.

Have to call for help.

Have to do something.

Can’t let him just—

She picked up the house phone, quickly returning it to its cradle.

“Shit! Shit!”

She took a few minutes to breathe deeply, forcing on herself a semblance of calm. Megan’s headache had become a percussion symphony, but she had to think. There was a way to handle this. There was always a way, some manner to solve even the most perplexing—

It came to her that moment. There seemed no other clear choice. Hal was dead and she could do nothing to alter that. The man had died fucking her, and there was no altering that either. But did anyone need to know she had precipitated his heart attack? She hadn’t really caused Hal’s death; she had merely been unfortunate enough to have been present when it occurred, even if she were thrashing under him at the time. No crime had been committed, had there? This was merely a case of some poor guy who died with his pants off. What to do seemed blessedly simple when her dilemma was understood in simple terms.

The best decision was none at all.

Megan dressed, then stuffed her hair beneath the kerchief so not one strand showed. She returned the dark glasses to her face and took a last look at Hal. Upright in the bed, the man seemed almost peaceful, and why not? He had died doing what he enjoyed best. She half expected him to be smiling. Megan closed the door behind her.

The desk manager was talking to someone registering, and Megan easily made her way past him unnoticed, starting up her car amazed with the simplicity of her getaway. Pulling the T-Bird from the lot she remembered the wine glasses were still inside the room.

Fuck it. This wasn't a crime, nothing worthy of fingerprinting, and it wouldn't do to start worrying about burning in hell right now. Better to remain in control, to consider other pressing matters and focus her thoughts elsewhere. She could do nothing about what had happened at the motel, but soon she would be back in White Plains. It seemed best to concentrate on the now.

Megan turned to some easy listening on the FM dial. Streisand was bitching to Neal Diamond that he didn't bring her flowers any more.

Yeah, that was pretty much how this whole damned thing started.

Today was her wedding anniversary. There was the duck l'orange to attend to for dinner, there was that to worry about. Right now she desired only one thing to get her through this. She wished she could get rid of this damned headache. Megan fumbled inside her purse for another Tylenol, but there was an abundance of shit and she had to poke about for it, going in deep. She found her cell phone and decided she had best turn it on. It immediately chirped.

"Shit!" she muttered, dropping it. "Shit!" she said again louder, and fished for the ringing cell that had disappeared beneath her seat.

Too late she saw the traffic light on Corporate Park Drive had gone red.

But she did see the van that came screeching towards her.

* * * *

Fuzzy. really damned fuzzy.

Megan's T-Bird. The image was unclear but Blake kept seeing his wife's car in flickering bits like a badly sprocketed film. Roland's wine was up to its old tricks again, but this time the story it told played hide and seek with his psyche. He dialed her number again.

"This is Meg and I'm out, so you know what to do . . ."

Prentice received Megan's voice mail. Something wrong there, but maybe she had stepped out for some last minute dinner ingredient. She didn't often prepare such elaborate meals for him, not any more. What was it about marriage during mid life

that turned everything decent to dog shit? He gave Bickersford the ‘wait a minute’ digit and punched the speed dial to his wife’s cellular phone. This time nothing.

Megan often had forgotten to turn on the cell when preoccupied or when she didn’t feel like talking to him. Prentice approached his host. “We should wrap up this transaction, Roland. Let me write another check for two more bottles. I ought to head home or my wife will serve me my own balls l’orange.”

He finished what remained inside his glass. The stuff was potent enough to knock a Brahma Bull on his ass and maybe he downed it a little too quickly, but it was certainly a magnificent wine. He had made himself one hell of a purchase. Still . . .

Dizzy. Maybe drank a little over my limit.

Bickersford pocketed the check and located a handsome leather carrying pouch, placing the bottles carefully inside for his guest. “A genuine pleasure, Mr. Blake. I know you’re in a rush, but if you would indulge me a moment longer . . .”

“I have only a few minutes.”

“Then I’ll be brief. Mr. Blake, you have a keen understanding of my wines. I’m an old man with a failing heart. Soon I’m going to die. But my wine, it endures. Many of the bottles you see here were fermented before I was born. Many will remain after you and I are dust.”

“An interesting observation, Roland, but I still don’t see what you’re getting at.”

“I have one more request, Mr. Blake. One additional wine I’ll ask you to try before you leave. I ferment the wine right here and I’ve offered it to only a select few of my visitors.”

Bickersford pulled out his tangle of keys again. The collector slid a long-pronged key into a lock concealed behind a single bottle selected among dozens exactly like it. The entire barrier, racks and all, swung aside revealing a large hidden vault beyond the false panel. The darkness inside made it impossible to see anything clearly. Blake could make out walls lined with wine racks and some oak barrels, but nothing else.

“Fermentation in oak is a slower and more complicated process, but infinitely more rewarding.” Bickersford entered the cell and removed a fresh bottle among dozens along the wall rack. Its appearance was ordinary, even cheap. “I’d like you to try this one.”

“Roland, I’ve had so much to drink already—“

“Only a sip.” He located a glass inside the vault, stepped out, and poured for his guest.

“None for yourself?” Prentice asked. “I hate drinking alone.”

“This wine, Mr. Blake, is meant to be drunk alone.”

The liquid looked like an ordinary store-bought Chardonnay. Lacking luster, its appearance seemed murky. Blake sniffed the bouquet, but it proved not worth the effort. This wine clearly wasn't up to Roland Bickersford's high standards. He looked back at his host to see if some mistake had been made.

Roland simply nodded, and responded “Drink.”

Blake sipped. Sipped again out of politeness. The taste was much too acidic. This wine clearly was California swill, but he kept that opinion to himself.

“Interesting.” He could say nothing else that would not appear insulting.

Roland stood staring at him as if awaiting some kind of reaction.

“This wine has a story to tell too. A genuine connoisseur can distinguish the false from the true, not merely with his palate, but with every sense he possesses. Tell me, Mr. Blake. Can you discern the truth in this wine's story?”

Prentice needed a moment.

He certainly could tell the difference. Hell, yes.

Something coming into focus.

Hal . . . Megan . . . a half emptied bottle of wine . . .

Blake could see Hal pour and Megan dutifully drink, nodding politely as Hal babbled about his kid having made the soccer squad. He was already removing her blouse before she finished her drink.

“Let me tell you what I'm going to do to you,” he said as she climbed into bed.

“I'd rather you didn't tell me this time, all right?”

“Jesus, Roland! What in Christ is going on here . . .?”

“Just the truth, Mr. Blake. Nothing more.”

[Something wrong . . . something very wrong . . .]

“Hal?” Megan said. “Hal!”

An image of Megan's car appeared for a millisecond then went black. A second and longer image flashed inside his head and he could see her through the windshield, her face contorted as if she were about to scream. Blake's fist covered his mouth.

“Some more wine?” Roland offered without losing his smile.

“I've seen all I want to see! Jesus, Roland! What kind of sick shit is this?”

Blake pushed past his host, stumbling towards the elevator. The old man would have to show his guest out, of course. A true gentleman never forgot his manners.

Besides, Bickersford held the keys to the conveyer. But there remained something he must do first.

In his haste Mr. Blake had not finished his drink.

Roland lifted his visitor's glass to his lips and sipped.

Patsy Henning figured it out first. After Hal's burial she confessed to Prentice with a phone call, admitting to her third glass of wine. She told him how she had been to the motel room to identify Hal's body, discovered the wine glasses, and spotted the lipstick smear on one of them. Meg's favorite shade smudged the glass, and Patsy's having heard of Meg's nearby accident on Corporate Park Drive pretty much sealed it. From well meaning friends Blake heard how the bereaved woman began her period of mourning on phone calls while blowing the lid off the whole sordid mess. It was one thing to be fucked over by her husband, she told anyone who would listen; she suspected Hal had been sniffing skirt for some time. But she had always considered Megan Blake her friend.

Megan's funeral was agony. Hidden behind their condolences Blake read both pity and rebuke in the mourners' eyes, secret stares that asked "How could you have not known?" Sympathies were expressed, of course, offers of kindness proffered, all the expected niceties of human behavior that amounted to absolutely nothing. Blake smiled through most of it, collapsing on the couch at day's end.

Prentice hadn't really mourned. He waited for tears, expected they would come. It was a sad commentary on his marriage, but he had none to shed for the woman who had shared his life.

The sky had appeared ominous the entire day, distant thunder grumbling for the past hour. Blake stood by the window watching lightning flashes dissect the sky. The leather pouch lay on the end table. Blake pulled out one of the bottles of ebonies. There seemed no point in letting expensive wine go to waste.

"Hello darkness, my old friend."

He poured a glass for himself, savored its aroma, and drank the whole thing. Leaning back he closed his eyes. If he polished off both bottles tonight he owed no one any apologies.

[The trick is to allow a good wine to do its work.]

Prentice needed to rest. He hadn't really slept since the night of Megan's accident. Perhaps one more glass would help him nod off. Blake hadn't enjoyed many ebonies,

but this one was unusually superb. He finished the second glass, kicked off his shoes, and spread out on the couch.

The rain pelted his windows in unrelenting sheets, but hopefully the downpour's rhythm would help bring on sleep. It was raining very hard now, and Blake wanted it to continue all night. This storm looked to be a real gully washer.

Let it rain . . . and rain . . . and rain . . .

* * * *

At 11:00 p.m. Roland Bickersford decanted a Bordeaux, deciding to check the weather forecast before bed. But first he would have to suffer through the news.

There had been another terrorist attack on a bus outside Tel-Aviv. Six dead, and three were children.

In Newark some fool had strapped a bomb to himself, then paced the streets wearing a hand painted sandwich board proclaiming "FOR THE GREAT DAY OF HIS WRATH HAS COME, AND WHO IS ABLE TO STAND' (Revelation 6:17)." Some priest with a bull horn managed to talk the fanatic out of blowing an entire city block into ping pong balls.

Roland sipped his wine, savoring the taste. It was a daring little wine, but surprisingly bitter.

Megan Blake was buried today, and her husband appeared on screen pushing past reporters. The event would have never been news worthy except that the woman had left a dead lover inside a motel room only minutes before her small sports car was crushed by some college kid driving a van. The scandal made for some good reality television during a run of otherwise slow news days.

Roland took another sip, let the liquid play on his tongue, and shook his head.

The Yanks blew it in the 9th, a real heartbreaker.

The weather report called for severe thunder storms to continue into the middle of next week.

Centuries ago an old fool had built his ark in preparation for such an event, instructed to do so by an enraged God who, according to the hypothesis, spoke to the old man while he was stinking drunk. But Noah didn't have the fortunes of Roland Bickersford nor a massive subterranean wine cellar. There would be no groups of animals led two by two to repopulate Roland's new world. For that, the wine connoisseur required only one species, and its name was Bickersford.

The world was going to hell, but he didn't have to stand around and wait for it to happen. He refused to become another loon with a sandwich board preaching the end was nigh to chortling non believers. He would happily allow that crowd to go off with the next Haly Bop Comet. People laughed at Noah, and even Noah's wife had thought the old man crazy. Hell, you go around preaching the end of the world is coming, of course people are going to think you've burned out a few bulbs. But wine speaks the truth, and a connoisseur always recognizes false from true. No one was going to laugh at Mr. Roland Bickersford.

From within the cellar's hidden wine vault four of Roland's young wives would attest to that, had they been able. Stuffed inside small oak barrels kept cool in Bickersford's temperature controlled rooms, fermenting them would have been a tricky business in less competent hands. Roland had loved them all and hoped each would age well, but Katherine wasn't looking so good.

The old man finished his Bordeaux. He turned off the t.v., then put out the light by his bed. There would be other buyers like Prentice Blake, maybe even tomorrow. He expected lots of them before the end and he would have an interesting wine for each of them.

He couldn't say when it was going to happen, but The Great Day of His Wrath was coming, all right. And there wasn't going to be any flood, no forty days and forty nights of rain.

This time there would be fire.

And this time it wasn't going to be God who finished the job.

THE END

KEN GOLDMAN resides in Pennsylvania and the Jersey Shore. His stories appear in over 390 publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, Ireland, and Australia. Contests he has won include 2nd place in the Rod Serling Memorial Foundation Writing Contest (1993), 1st place in the Preditors & Editors 'Best Poem In The Universe On The Internet 1997' Readers Poll Contest, 2nd place in the Harrow Murder Contest (2001), 2nd place in the Preditors & Editors Horror Short Story Contest (2003), and 1st place in the UK's Titty Biscuits Literary Competition (2005). His stories appear in the anthologies *The Blackest Death 1 & 2*, *The Witching Hour*, *Chimeraworld 1 & 2*, *Spooks*, *Vicious Shivers*, *Raging Hormones*, and *Potter's Field*, among others. He received honorable mentions in the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* 7th, 9th, 16th, and 17th editions.

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A CERTAIN VERY ANCIENT BOOK

CHRISTOPHER M. CEVASCO

At a time when I was giving a good deal of attention to such matters, Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford, a man skilled in the art of public speaking and well-informed about the history of foreign countries, presented me with a certain very ancient book written in the British language. This book, attractively composed to form a consecutive and orderly narrative, set out all the deeds of these men, from Brutus, the first King of the Britons, down to Cadwallader, the son of Cadwallo. At Walter's request I have taken the trouble to translate the book into Latin . . .

From the Dedication to the *Historia Regum
Britanniæ* by Geoffrey of Monmouth

The year was 1133 and the early-autumn afternoon one that seemed loath to part with its mistress summer. Geoffrey enjoyed this crisp, pleasant time of bright sun and long shadows more than he did any other in England's short reprieve from winter's cold and damp. It was for just such days that he'd taken up residence in the old cottage on the outskirts of Oxford town; his daily walk home from the College of St. George reminded him of a time closer to the dawn of the century when he'd played blind-man's-bluff as a child among the hawthorn of his birthplace in Monmouth's hills. The son of a Breton father and a Welsh mother, Geoffrey felt tied to the land in a most intimate manner; it was his home, his birthright, a prize as precious as life itself, hard fought-for and protected by his ancestors for untold generations. It had endured countless invasions by foreigners—many successful—but through it all, his people had remained and flourished.

In Oxford, Geoffrey was affiliated with a burgeoning center of learning he felt sure would soon rival any on the continent, and he took full advantage of everything his position as secular canon had to offer. His duties entertaining visiting scholars and nobles—a constant source of distraction and an ongoing interruption of his own research—infuriated him to no end, but he reminded himself repeatedly that each visit meant the delivery of new editions to his growing personal library—books requested specifically by name in the very letters he sent out to invite those guests. In truth, all extant knowledge in the western world was readily at his disposal, and he

rushed home at the end of each day from the main library at St. George to bury himself happily among the stacks of his own private collection. There, he would take careful notes and compile precise genealogies of all those men and women whom history taught had been responsible for shaping and ruling his island for nearly two and a half millennia—since the days when ancient Greece had still been the center of the world. In time, when he was satisfied that he'd filled as many gaps in that chronology as scholarly research permitted, he would publish his opus so that others might some day study from it alongside Gildas's rather harsh *De excidio Britanniae* and Bede's ecclesiastical history. For the time being, however, those gaps were entirely too great in number and size to satisfy Geoffrey.

This evening, as he crested the rise of the low hill overlooking his home, his little cottage was bathed in the almost supernatural salmon hues of a fat, setting sun—a light that capered along the surface of the winding Thames visible in the distance and again put him in mind of his early childhood. He smiled as he recalled swimming happily in the icy waters of the River Wye and then running naked to his mother's waiting, outstretched arms as she held aloft his little smock. It seemed so long ago now, and Geoffrey's smile turned to a grim frown as he contemplated the relentless passage of time and all that it carried away in its downstream eddies.

When Geoffrey strolled into his garden, he discovered his faithful hound, Beocc, standing rigidly alongside a hedgerow, staring back and forth between his master and his master's house. That he was not off chasing coney in the forest told Geoffrey immediately that something was afoot, and indeed, the reason for Beocc's curious behavior was readily apparent when Geoffrey noticed that someone stood waiting for him beneath the overhanging eaves atop his front door. The figure was deep in shadows cast by the setting sun but recognizable nonetheless and no cause for alarm; or so Geoffrey believed.

"Easy, Beocc!" Geoffrey laughed at his dog and then turned to his guest. "Is that you, Walter?"

"It is, Geoffrey," came the answer in a familiar voice that confirmed Geoffrey's squinting suspicions.

"Well then, to what do I owe the pleasure of finding an archdeacon on my doorstep?" he asked. "And pray tell me how it is you've beaten me home when I only just left you at the college not an hour gone."

Walter paused for a moment before answering, and Geoffrey sensed that his friend was in no mood for jesting pleasantries. "There is a matter I wish to discuss with you Geoffrey."

"And so you shall," Geoffrey answered, fumbling in the pockets of his long tunic for his key. Using the ungainly instrument to unlock his front door, he stepped aside and motioned for Walter to precede him. "Come inside, and we'll have some wine."

Walter complied, and Geoffrey wondered idly when his friend had acquired a new, light blue cloak—hardly the sort of thing Walter was wont to wear. Matters of dress were pushed firmly from his mind, however, when he found his study unaccountably occupied by an old man with a long, white beard. Actually, old did not begin to describe him—ancient seemed more the word—for this man looked as old as the Mendips. And of all things, he sat back comfortably among Geoffrey's scattered research, thumbing through a copy of *The Mabinogion*, a fanciful collection of folklore and oral tradition from Wales that had just recently been set to paper by a friend of a friend.

"Wonderful stuff, this," the stranger spoke and looked up from his reading to wink conspiratorially at Geoffrey. When no response was forthcoming, the man sighed in obvious disappointment and closed the book, tossing it negligently onto the desk so that it nearly toppled a stack of volumes Geoffrey had just finished cataloguing the night before. Then the fellow simply sat back and stared at Geoffrey expectantly, reaching up with a gnarled hand to tame the wisps of gray hair that wreathed his head like cobwebs.

"Here now! What's this?" Geoffrey finally demanded once he'd had a moment to gather his wits. "Where ever did you come from, and what are you doing in my home?"

"Where did I come from?" the stranger repeated. "Most recently, the future."

"What's that you say?"

"Not the far future—not this time—but a future some dozen years hence."

Obviously a lunatic, Geoffrey decided. "You speak in impossibilities, my aged fellow, for the future has yet to happen!"

"Oh, but it has happened, Geoffrey. It's happening right now; you just haven't arrived there yet. Time does not move; we move through time, which is a rather static thing only observed to be moving backward given our own forward momentum. It's all a matter of perspective; don't you see?"

For a moment, Geoffrey was taken aback anew at the distorted echo of his own recent thoughts of his mother and the eddies of time. "No, I do not see. I see nothing but that you speak in riddles and that you're quite obviously mad! I demand again to know where you've come from—though the sound of Demetia is thick enough on your

tongue to tell me clear enough—and what business you have in my home. Identify yourself at once, or I shall raise the hue and cry!"

Geoffrey had nearly forgotten that his friend Walter was present until a hand gripped his shoulder reassuringly from behind. "Be at ease, Geoffrey. Merlin is here with me, or rather, I am here with him as his guest."

"*His* guest! This is *my* home, Walter, if you've forgotten." Then it struck him. "Did I hear you say *Merlin*? Is this old man's lunacy contagious then?"

"He's not mad. Nor am I, dear Geoffrey, though I too thought as much when he first appeared to me yesterday. But it wasn't yesterday I suppose; more like twelve years from now." Geoffrey's eyebrows shot up questioningly, and Walter sighed. "Allow him to explain, and like me, you will come to understand after a fashion."

"Very well," Geoffrey sighed. "I'll play along for your sake, Walter." He turned back to face the stranger and tried to approximate the tone he used with his students. "Explain yourself, aged one."

"I will," the man smiled and reached out to trace a finger playfully across the cover of *The Mabinogion*. "I know you consider yourself an historian, Geoffrey, and indeed you are in your own way, though you really have no understanding of what the word means. As such, I will give you a cursory lesson on history and time. But first, you must put it out of your head entirely that history is merely a thing of the past; accept it when I tell you that history refers to the past, the present, and the future, all tied neatly in a single bundle."

Geoffrey laughed. "If this is some jest concocted at my expense, I promise I'll have my revenge." But seeing no change in Walter's sober expression, he decided to trust his friend a little longer and nodded to the stranger to proceed.

"Think of a thistle," the old man continued, "but imagine its purplish flower to be a perfect sphere with its spiny petals extending outward in every direction. Now imagine those thin petals were infinite in number and each one represented a timeline of history where the events nearest the center of the flower were the earliest events—what you would think of as the ancient past—and those at the very tips of the petals the far distant future. You might think of it as time moving outward from the center—from the past into the future—but as I have already told you, time itself does not actually move. It is we who crawl along the petals like insects trying to escape the flower's clutches all together. An imperfect model to be sure, for time is never ending, and our thistle would need petals that extend infinitely, but for now a thistle will suffice."

"I'm truly glad that you find God's floral handiwork adequate for your purposes." Geoffrey chuckled over his shoulder, but Walter was still not in a joking mood.

"Quite," the stranger responded, pulling Geoffrey's gaze back toward him. "Now, in the model I have described for you, you would agree that if I were to carve out a perfect sphere of a given size with its center overlapping the center of the flower and its surface somewhere midway along the petals, the points at which the petals touch the surface of the sphere would all represent a single moment in time."

Geoffrey took a deep breath, deciding that if he had to suffer through this man's games, he might as well try to pay attention. Maybe then Walter and his new friend would leave him alone to catch up on his research. He considered the fellow's model for a moment; it sounded as though he'd been reading St. Augustine. "The center of your flower marks the beginning of time, when God created our universe?"

"If that helps, then yes," the old man answered, "for time had no meaning before the universe was created. Though as I said, the petals must extend infinitely, since time and the universe are endless."

"Most Greek of you to say so," Geoffrey quipped with a wry grin. "Aristotle would be pleased."

The stranger ignored the backhanded compliment and pressed on with his explanation. "Now let us crawl back along a petal to a moment just before the one represented by the sphere's surface. Let's say our little insect—call him Geoffrey—has a choice at that earlier moment either to read a book or to sleep. Regardless of what choice he makes, that choice takes him to the next moment represented by the surface of the sphere."

"Yes, I see that. And I chose to read the book." Geoffrey snatched *The Mabinogion* from under the man's fingertips and mimed reading it.

"Fine! Then as you move to that moment on the petal, an observer would see Geoffrey just beginning to read the book. I put it to you, however, that we may also see you in slumber."

"How so, if I have made my choice to read?"

In response, the man smiled an infuriating, knowing smile that had already begun to grate on Geoffrey's nerves. He stared back into the stranger's twinkling eyes and hoped there was a point looming somewhere in all this hypothetical rubbish. Dust motes sparkled in the air behind his strange guest, suspended intermittently in a bright beam from the setting sun outside the window, and Geoffrey imagined that the man himself was somehow exuding the iridescent particles. "Before I answer your question, allow me to ask you another. Do you believe in predestination, Geoffrey?"

Do you believe that your path in life is already laid out before you at the moment you are born and that your choices are really inconsequential—really nothing more than the illusion of choice where choice does not exist?"

"Certainly not," Geoffrey snapped and meant it. "I have read the works of philosophers and theologians who suggest as much, but I find their arguments rather unavailing. Man is a creature of free will, responsible for his actions in the eyes of God, and God punishes those who abuse that responsibility by choosing to do evil. We were all cast out from the Garden for just such a choice. If man really had no choice in the matter, than how could he be held responsible? Indeed—dare I say it—in a world of predestination, God Himself would be responsible for all those evil things men find themselves doing."

"I agree with you most whole-heartedly, my good Geoffrey. But then consider this: we know that in the example through which I just led you, there is a point on the thistle petal at which we see Geoffrey beginning to read his book. But had you chosen to sleep, that same point would have to reflect a different result, and rather than opening a book, we would see Geoffrey resting his head against a cushion. I tell you, however, that the moment at which you began to undertake your chosen action already existed when you were debating which choice to make; you simply had yet to reach that moment. If only one possible outcome existed in the future, then you would necessarily have to make the choice leading to that outcome."

Geoffrey furrowed his brow, surprised for a moment when he thought he'd begun to follow the man's reasoning. But then it all came unraveled again. What did he mean by claiming time does not move? Of course it does; one can observe its passing. And the sphere—what did that represent again? A moment in time on the petal? "Then how?" he asked aloud. "Surely we cannot look at your cross-section of the petal and see Geoffrey both reading *and* sleeping. One would need two separate universes to see such divergent realities. Where would such a second universe. . .?" The answer to his own unfinished question became clear in a moment of insight, and he closed *The Mabinogion* with a triumphant snap. "A different petal?"

"Very quick, Geoffrey. I must say I'm proud of you. And of course you realize, then, why our flower must have an infinite number of petals. Even in our rather simple choice between sleeping and reading, there are far more than two possible outcomes. For example, you could chose to read the history of Gildas or that of *The Mabinogion*."

He gestured toward the book in Geoffrey's hands, and Geoffrey nodded slowly. "I agree my choices and the acts of others may have many possible results, but I take exception to your characterizing *The Mabinogion* as history. Its stories are well suited

for telling around a fire, but hardly the stuff of history; one must distinguish between myth and truth."

Merlin looked momentarily amused before continuing. "Truth is not always measured in absolutes, Geoffrey. At any given moment in time, there are necessarily an infinite number of simultaneously existing versions of that moment. When our choices or the choices or actions of those around us lead in one direction, they also move us in an infinite number of different directions. We exist infinitely and thus have the ultimate sort of free will, for not only do we have an infinite number of paths to take in life, but somehow, somewhere, we actually travel down every one of those paths."

Geoffrey burst out laughing. "What a delightful proposition! Absurd to be sure, but delightful." He extended his hand in friendship to the ancient stranger, who took it and pumped it in his own, surprisingly strong grip. "I thank you for a rather invigorating bit of mental exercise," he continued more soberly, "but I'm afraid I must now demand that you answer my initial question. Why are you here, and why was it necessary to invade my home to share your rather unique theories?"

Merlin grinned. "Always impatient to get to the heart of the matter, aren't you Geoffrey? Well, I shall tell you. I am one of those rare persons whose awareness extends beyond his own timeline. We all exist simultaneously in an infinite number of histories, as I like to call them, but certain deficiencies of the human mind prevent most of us from ever being aware of more than one path of history at a time. We all see glimpses occasionally—the uncanny sensation that we have experienced something before, for example—but only a very few of us have the ability to be truly aware of alternate histories. What's more, my skills allow me to move freely both among the petals and backward and forward along them by bending one spherical moment in time until it touches another and then hopping off to remain in the latter."

"Truly?" Geoffrey mocked, his skepticism returning in force. "Then you must be Merlin indeed!" He chuckled through his nose and wondered whether the man was drunk.

"Oh, but I am, dear Geoffrey! And if you'll think for a moment on what you've learned of me from your dusty tomes, you'll see that it must be so. Surely you are aware of the prophecies I revealed to Vortigern nearly seven hundred years ago. I know those prophecies were recorded in one form or another and passed down through succeeding generations of people who marveled at the accuracy of my words as the prophesied events came to pass."

"Yes, I've read as much," Geoffrey admitted.

"Can you provide any alternate, satisfactory explanation as to how I managed to foresee what I foresaw? I was there, Geoffrey, jumping back and forth in time and reporting on a future others had not yet reached. Though of course, each time I returned, I necessarily made not only a backward jump, but also a lateral one among the thistle petals to avoid the paradox of changing future events I'd already witnessed. With infinite petals, it is always possible to find one so similar to the one from which you've just departed, you'd never know you weren't still in the same historical line. The difference might be as subtle as a single leaf on a single tree falling one moment sooner or later. That's the beauty of infinity!"

Geoffrey put his head in his hands and dug his palms into his brow as Merlin chuckled contentedly. He'd grown increasingly lost during that last bit and tried desperately to focus on the last thing he'd heard that made any sense. "Back and forth in time?" he asked weakly. It had been rather unnerving finding a stranger in his study, and he was beginning to feel decidedly faint. Merlin? Could it be? He chided himself silently for even considering the possibility and realized that he needed to sit down. Since Merlin showed no sign of moving from his usurped stool, however, the edge of his own desk had to suffice.

"Very well. You say you are Merlin, and I will not contradict you. At the very least, you provide an explanation—albeit a rather convoluted one—for the manner in which prophecies are made." He wiped a cold dampness from his forehead and stared at the mark it left upon his sleeve. Merlin or no, if this man could travel in time, perhaps he could bring a message to his dearly departed mother. Geoffrey looked up at Walter where he lurked in a shadowed corner across the room and wondered if perhaps Merlin could even bring his mother here to him—back from the grave of history. Suddenly, he thought he might be ill and cupped a hand over his mouth until his heaving stomach quieted itself.

"Geoffrey, be at ease," Walter's comfortingly familiar voice broke in as he stepped away from the wall and into the last light of the setting sun, allowing Geoffrey to see him clearly for the first time since he'd arrived home. His colleague removed his new cloak and wrapped it affectionately about Geoffrey's own shoulders.

"Perhaps you should keep it," Geoffrey suggested. "You're not looking at all well, Walter. In fact, you're positively drawn." He reached out to convince himself his friend indeed wore a leather vest. "And this is hardly the attire the faculty of St. George's would expect on the back of their provost. You look less like a deacon and more like a mercenary."

"Indeed, Geoffrey, for I am not the Walter you remember from this afternoon. In my timeline, I am not a deacon and was certainly never affiliated with the college you

mention, though you're still the same Geoffrey I know, and we are still fast friends. The year for me is 1145, and I am a soldier of God, my friend. In my world, I have made ready to answer the call of Pope Eugenius III—to make my way to *Outremer* in the footsteps of my father. I will help avenge the recent fall of Edessa, which our soldiers won in the First Crusade, and I will make that desolate land remember the strength and dignity of the ancient Britons who emigrated from the region thousands of years ago to follow Brutus from Troy." Walter's voice had risen steadily as he spoke of the Holy Land but returned to a more modulated tone before he continued. "But first, Merlin convinced me to accompany him on this little excursion and guaranteed he could return me a moment after the point I left, so that no one will even know I've been gone. He thought you might be more likely to believe what he wants you to know if it came from a friend."

Geoffrey had turned an ashy shade of gray by this point, such that even Merlin finally realized the poor man was about to faint. He and Walter helped the shaken historian into his comfortable, low-backed stool. "To make them remember Brutus, eh?" Geoffrey finally asked. "At least you still seem to know your Nennius, even if you do not know yourself. Or even the year!" A dozen years in the future? It wasn't possible. But Geoffrey found himself studying his friend carefully, and the first true seeds of doubt—or was it belief—took root in his brain. Surely those crow's feet at the corners of Walter's eyes had never been there before. And his hairline seemed to have receded like the ebbing tide since earlier that same afternoon—the waves of hair themselves surely more flecked with gray sea foam than the bright red wisps he was used to seeing. Could they be telling the truth?

"Nennius, faugh!" Walter scoffed, popping the cork from a bottle of Geoffrey's wine and pouring it into three goblets. Geoffrey snatched his immediately and gulped it down in one long draught as Walter continued. "*Historia Brittonum* is a competent piece, I suppose, though lacking in detail to be sure. No I speak of *our* Brutus—the people's Brutus—as he is described herein." At that, Walter produced a bound leather tome from behind his vest. He looked first to the old man—Merlin?—and when the man nodded his permission, held forth the book as an offering to Geoffrey.

Now what? Geoffrey was always eager to get his hands on a new book, but coming from these two, he was not so sure he wanted to know what lay between its pages. Finally, a scholar's curiosity proved stronger than a coward's fear, and Geoffrey grabbed the book determinedly, opened to a random page, and began skimming. It was a history of Britain, he soon realized, written not in Latin but in the British tongue—a history with which he was not entirely familiar. He recognized some of it, of course, but the rest? What did it mean?

After several more pages, he could contain himself no longer. "What is all this about Brutus rallying the enslaved Trojans in Greece?" he demanded, but before his guests could answer, he pushed on. "And what ever is this bit about Corineus? Goffar the Pict? How have I never seen these details of Brutus's journey? This is some charlatan's fancy, pure and simple." He thumbed quickly through another dozen or so pages, choking and sputtering like a rabid dog. "This entire chronology before the coming of the Romans. . . ." he struggled for words to express his confusion. "A thousand years of history and ancient kings of whom I've never even heard. Not a word! Not even a passing reference in any of the histories or annals. . . ."

Merlin cleared his throat. "You may be particularly interested in the middle and later portions relating to Arthur. That's a favorite part of mine, as you might well imagine."

Geoffrey looked up briefly from the tome but dropped his eyes again when he caught sight of the old man's infuriating grin. "Arthur?" he asked. "Who rallied against the Saxons?" He skimmed ahead even further—past the middle of the volume—and his paroxysms renewed themselves. "How now? It does seem Arthur's tale has grown rather considerably in this telling such that he defeats the Romans at Saussy! The Romans? Under Lucius Hiberius? Ha! And what calamity is this? It claims you Merlin brought the Giant's Ring wholesale from a site on Mount Killaraus in Ireland." He paused to read further and nearly swallowed his own tongue. "Good God All Mighty! Do I understand this to intimate Gwenhwyfar lived in sin with a nephew of Arthur called Mordred? But who could believe such swill? Frankly, I feel *The Mabinogion* has already taken far too many liberties with our noble *dux bellorum*; but this!"

"Oh it all happened or will. Even the bits in your *Mabinogion* are happening somewhere in our wonderful thistle flower of a universe."

Geoffrey's patience had reached an end. "Enough! Out with it!" he bellowed. "Why are you here?"

"To give you this." Merlin calmly indicated Walter's book.

Geoffrey grunted. "A book of lies that no sane man would believe? Even after your lessons on the nature of time, I cannot say I believe this midden heap. So what good does it do me?"

Merlin reached out to close the book lying open before Geoffrey and then tapped the cover meaningfully. "I suggest you look at the title page for your answer."

Geoffrey flipped open the cover violently and stared at the elaborately illustrated frontispiece and the facing page with its title in a bold hand. "*Hanes Brenhined*

Prydein," he read aloud. "History of the Kings of Britain—very descriptive title." He glanced down further to the by-line, and his breath caught in his throat. "Geoffrey of Monmouth? What trick is this? Who has dared to use my epithet and attach it to such an abortion? I've written no such thing!"

Merlin laughed gleefully. "Oh, but you have, you are, and you will."

"I see where this is going," Geoffrey retorted. "One of my alternate selves, I suppose you'll tell me next. Then he is a liar, not an historian, and a Geoffrey of poor penmanship as well, by the look of this outrage!"

"Would you disbelieve yourself?" Walter asked. "Would you disbelieve me?"

I do not know you, Geoffrey wanted to say, but instead he looked at his friend who was not quite his friend and spread his hands in supplication. "How, Walter? Tell me how."

"If you've been listening to all that Master Merlin has said, it should be simple, Geoffrey. One of the easiest answers for you lies in the fact that, according to what Merlin has told me, the great library at Alexandria was ravaged by fire on at least three occasions during the days of the Roman Empire alone. Sadly, during one or more of those fires, much of the history of Brutus's early exploits and of his leading the enslaved Trojans across the Mediterranean, through the Pillars of Hercules, and north to Albion, were all destroyed. That is, they were destroyed in your world—in your history. In mine, there were no fires in Alexandria, and all its accumulated knowledge survived for later generations to discover. Indeed, my own father was one of those responsible for recovering much of what we know of Brutus when he journeyed eastward during the First Crusade. Those works were delivered to you in my history by my father—at your invitation, I might add—and were compiled and incorporated herein." Walter placed a hand reverently on the *Hanes*.

"Then it's all true?" Geoffrey asked, scarcely daring to believe but wanting to with all his heart and mind.

"Much of it," Merlin answered. "Oh there may be some minor differences here and there, but the bulk of Brutus's journey occurred identically in both histories."

"And the rest?" Geoffrey pressed. "Ebraucus? Leir? Bellinus and Brennius? Arthur himself? These are more than mere fable and myth?"

"Well now," Merlin chuckled, "I will tell you that my own counterpart did transport the bluestones of Giant's Ring from Mount Killaraus even here in your world, so as to erect a monument for those men who died in the massacre at Salisbury—you can read all about it in detail at your leisure. As for the rest . . . well, you can't have everything, Geoffrey. You are right to think that much of what you'll read herein did

not happen in your own history, though I can assure you it happened in Walter's and in many, many others."

"You continue to give me a sore head—both of you, but you especially, old man," Geoffrey complained. "In your mad universe, I grant that all these events may have happened. And I admit that many of them may even have happened in my own world but that a record of those events was prevented from reaching me due to any number of unfortunate occurrences. I'll not pretend to understand half of what you've told me, but I must confess some of it sounds rather tempting; at this point, I'm so confused you could probably convince me of anything. I do, however, begin to feel that you present me with riddles and dance about only to amuse yourself further at my own inability to keep up. What would you have me do with such a book?"

"Why, haven't you guessed that by now Geoffrey? Use it to finish your research of course—to fill in the gaps so that you can publish your work to your world. Supplement what you believe you know to be true with what I tell you is equally so."

And the light dawned. Indeed, it may well have dawned much earlier in some dark recess of Geoffrey's mind, but his subconscious had kept the idea buried until Merlin had pulled it blinking into the light. He could do it. The chronology would be complete—totally complete! Each branch on the genealogic tree of his island's rulers could bear fruit. What a wonderful sense of continuity that would provide—not only to himself, but to all the people of Britain. Imagine! One continuous line of history—generations of men and women all struggling to deliver the Britain he and his countrymen had inherited. The concept was wondrous beyond belief to Geoffrey. But was it fair? Would he be hoodwinking himself, not to mention the rest of the world? Could he justify such a lie?

"Can I do it?" he asked Merlin, revolted at himself for having transformed the old man from a doddering lunatic into his own moral measuring stick. "It can't be right for me to tell this history to my countrymen if it is not entirely ours."

"Oh but it *is* yours, Geoffrey!" Merlin answered. "It is everyone's! And the time has now come for me to give you your final proof." He rose and approached, and Geoffrey found himself cringing before the old man's suddenly looming presence. He seemed to have grown somehow, so that Geoffrey's study now felt too small to contain him. Walter also stepped forward, undaunted, and took Merlin's hand in his own. Then they reached out to Geoffrey, inviting him to complete the circle.

Tentatively, Geoffrey took Walter's strong, reassuring grip and then that of the old man—a vice of thickly knuckled fingers. As soon as his skin made contact with Merlin's, the room around them grew dim and began fading altogether as though made of nothing more substantial than mists blown clear by a sudden wind. With a

lurch, Geoffrey felt as though he were being lifted upward into the ensuing darkness at an unfathomable rate of speed, and it appeared as though they were jumping up and away from a broad beam of a million swirling colors and lights. The beam stretched on in both directions as far as the eye could see, and all around the three men, similar beams emanated outward from what looked to be a common central point. It was like nothing Geoffrey had ever imagined—a faerie place of sparkling iridescence and impossible textures—and he had only the merest sliver of a second, the blink of an eye, to take it all in before they began their lurching descent toward a different beam than the one from which they'd departed.

"Consider this, Geoffrey: as we speak, you are not only Geoffrey of Monmouth, canon of the College of St. George, but you are King Geoffrey of Britain making love to your queen." A lavishly decorated bedchamber solidified around them, and there he saw himself in a rather compromising position with a young woman on whom he'd never before laid eyes. Shocked and embarrassed, he averted his gaze, but Merlin only chuckled mischievously.

"They can't see you Geoffrey. I'm holding us back from wholly arriving in this history as this exercise is merely one of demonstration; we are no more than ghosts—ephemeral, detached." Nevertheless, Geoffrey refused to look at the coupling pair, focusing instead on the interesting assortment of books on a chair near the bedside, already beginning to fade as Merlin pulled them away once again to the sparkling place and then back into a churchyard that seemed from the view of the Thames in the distance, to stand directly where Geoffrey's cottage should have been.

"In this history," Merlin explained, "you are long dead of a plague that struck you down as a child." Sure enough, the nearest, tiny gravestone bore Geoffrey's own name, and he shuddered, thinking of his poor grieving mother as Merlin whisked them off once again, this time to a sprawling metropolis beneath a baking sun. Geoffrey recognized Rome at once from the configuration of architecture and monuments, though he had never actually visited the place outside of the covers of books. Merlin pointed to a gathered crowd. "Here, you are Geoffrey the Heretic being hung by the Pope." The sound of the rope breaking his neck followed them through the corridors of time and space back to the land of his ancestors, where Geoffrey was the Archdeacon of Oxford and it was Walter writing a history of Britain; then it was off to a version of history that seemed virtually identical to the one Geoffrey remembered as his own, but in which he wore a ridiculously long, braided beard in lieu of the clean-scraped cheeks he knew from his reflection in the rain barrel.

"There are differences, both great and subtle, and you are experiencing them all Geoffrey, if only you had the ability to perceive them. Shall I go on? There is another

history I have visited where the closest thing to a human being in this time you call 1133, *anno Domini*, is a certain breed of carnivorous ape that rose from the muds of Babylon to dwell in Bithynia and Phrygia." Still reeling from the disorienting lurch of travel, Geoffrey thought he might be sick as he watched a group of impossible, twisted man-beasts loping their way across a darkened plain. "There is still another history where the world itself ceased to exist fifty years ago—during the reign of William—when it collided with a comet the size of the moon." Geoffrey stood alongside the Norman conqueror himself and watched in shared terror as a flash against the horizon shook the ground. Seconds later, the great king was snatched away by a wind that yanked trees and rocks from the earth as though they were no more substantial than scattered papers caught by a breeze through an open window. Geoffrey covered into a fetal position and hid his face beneath his arms, though the wind could not touch him in his ghostly state.

"All of the histories are real!" Merlin yelled over the sounds of apocalypse. "We experience them all—infinite permutations! Your mind can only perceive one at a time, but that does not mean these unseen histories are any less real!"

"Enough!" Geoffrey cried. "Your message is clear! Bring me back to my own history—the one I remember!" Merlin complied, and with a final lurch, the three men were back in the familiar study immediately after having last vacated it, the sudden silence nearly as frightening as the tumult of the previous moment. Geoffrey dragged himself onto his stool and grabbed for the nearby bottle, not even bothering to transfer the last of the wine to a goblet before quaffing it with trembling lips.

"Is my message clear, Geoffrey? Do you see that each of these histories is equally valid—equally true? Do you see that it is only by recognizing all of these possible histories that we can even come close to grasping the true history of mankind? Choice is infinite, and everything that can happen *does* happen—*is happening!* This is your history, Geoffrey, and when I say 'you,' I mean the 'infinite you.' When you write this history, you will be transcribing a piece of the infinite history of man's true place in the universe."

Geoffrey did not understand, but that was becoming increasingly less important. Merlin provided an explanation—a justification for incorporating this new work into his existing research. It would be the first complete history of Britain ever set to paper. And better yet, if he made clear he'd merely translated parts of an existing book into a scholar's Latin, he could effectively insulate himself from blame. Any challenge to the authenticity of the less familiar parts of his resulting *Historia Regum Britanniae* would be directed toward the author of the antecedent text—never mind that he *was* that author; no one would ever know! "I can rely on this book?" Geoffrey

barely whispered, and his lips stopped trembling. "This book that I myself wrote?" He reached out for it, his mind still filled with the kaleidoscopic images of Merlin's tour.

"You may indeed," Merlin answered. "Then again, you might equally chose to create portions of your *Historia* wholesale—a work of pure fancy—and you can rest assured that among the infinite possible histories that might exist—that *do* exist—your story will represent at least one of them."

"A fictional account like *The Mabinogion*? Then history truly does become meaningless!" Each time Geoffrey thought he'd come to terms with his visitor's message, an unseen fist struck him down. "Why not write anything? It will mean nothing!"

Merlin raised a knobby hand to tell Geoffrey he should remain calm. "I admit, there is some value to recording actual events within a single, given line of history, if for nothing else than to help persons living therein understand how they were brought to the world they perceive. But there is room for creativity as well, dear Geoffrey. What you call fancy or dream and some might call creativity or inventiveness, I tell you is Vision—true Vision in which the mind of the creator and the dreamer is glimpsing some part of the infinity of time and history. I told you that everyone possesses the innate ability to some extent, and one day it may be man's destiny to achieve the full awareness I know. Most in your time do not even come close to the skills I possess, but the truly creative come far closer than others."

"Yes, yes, I think I understand." Geoffrey's eyes had slowly begun to sparkle like those of Merlin, and he found himself laughing with a joy hitherto unknown and un hoped for. "Why did you not come to me sooner? Then again, why did you come at all? Why now?"

Merlin added his own laughter to that of Geoffrey. "For one, I find such journeys amusing, but I do have another purpose. In those timelines in which man has not yet honed his ability to perceive all of history, I feel it is my duty to guide him along the way. Occasionally, I give a push here, a pull there. . . . It is a slow process to change the thinking of an entire world, but it is possible. Many misunderstand of course, and my visits set things back even further; others take what I have said and extrapolate brilliantly." Merlin smiled. "I remember one marvelous little boy named Albert, a descendant of the House of David living among the progeny of Alamanni and Teutons some seven and a half centuries hence. . . . But I'll not burden you with knowledge of your world's future; for now a glimpse of its past will be more than enough."

"Yes please!" Geoffrey agreed. "I don't think I could stand knowing what the future holds. But Merlin, if you can travel to the future, than surely you must know if your

wish has come to pass. Will mankind one day achieve an awareness of the infinite—what you call our collective history?"

Merlin winked conspiratorially at Geoffrey as he had upon first meeting him. "Perhaps I do know the answer. But perhaps I also know that such a thing will only come about by my making these little visits. Perhaps a necessary first step is for your world to embrace as history that for which it has no independent record or proof—even that which may seem at first glance no more than the invention of an historian like yourself."

"I see we're back to riddles again," Geoffrey sighed and held his goblet out to Walter, who refilled it with wine. "Maybe I should write a chronicle of your exploits, Merlin—a *Vita Merlini*. . . ."

Merlin gave a modest waive of dismissal and reached for his own goblet. "Really, you needn't. But if you must, you certainly shouldn't feel constrained to limit yourself to the partial autobiography I've narrated. Remember, what you call fiction is often more interesting than what you call fact—particularly once you've come to understand that it too is real. Be as inventive as you like, and know that nothing you imagine can ever transcend the permutations already devised by infinity. When the universe first came into existence, it could have taken any number of different paths than the one you know. The very laws of nature and science could be different in such worlds. And they are. If you write it, it has happened, is happening, or will happen somewhere in some flow of historical time—if not in the past that you've personally seen or the future you will, then in another Geoffrey's."

Geoffrey raised his goblet to toast his guests. "I'll remember that."

THE END

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THE THIRTEEN STEP

STEVEN MARSHALL

Ice.

Avril Woundsday loved the sound as it fractured under the encroaching warmth of bourbon or rum; loved the tinkling melody it played upon the glass, and the cool contrast against his lips as fiery liquid was released into his throat.

That was good ice.

The best.

Then there was bad ice; the kind that wrapped you car around a tree, if you weren't careful. As the blizzard ripped at the Pontiac's overworked windshield wipers, Avril cursed his stupidity for leaving the highway.

Did you really think you'd stumble across a nudie bar in the boonies, moron?

He switched on the blower to clear the rapidly steaming windows and searched for elusive patches of night beyond the hypnotic whiteout.

A sign reared out of the blizzard like a cobra, offering sanctuary with a twist of venom.

The Harmony Comfort Hotel.

Avril's stomach knotted with guilty excitement.

Hotels; home of the Three B's.

Booze.

Broads.

Bed.

Connie was somewhere in the mix, too, pleading him to try just one more AA meeting. Then there were the others; scrutinizing him as he spoke at the podium, their sad eyes filled with bogus sympathy. Sometimes, when Avril recalled those jumbled nights, he fantasized about tossing a bottle of bourbon into the crowd; shouting, "Scramble", just to see what would happen.

One day at a time. Trust in your higher power.

Yeah. Sure.

Unplowed snow crunched beneath the tires as the car crawled into the hotel parking lot. "Storm's getting waaaaay bad," he whispered to himself.

You're full of it, Wounsday. You ever gonna stop playing Russian Roulette with your marriage?

A room would be a safe haven until the first light of morning. Connie would understand.

Connie's been 'understanding' for too long, Avril.

He winced, remembering the newspaper he'd found last week, folded at the lonely-hearts column. Stepping out into the blizzard, Avril allowed the bitter wind to freeze all guilt and rationality.

* * * *

Avril's body protested the temperature change as he entered the surprisingly tasteful bar, ruled by a majestic log fire. A rodent-faced, forty-something woman sat propped against the bar while a squat bar tender, who reminded Avril of the actor Bob Hoskins, served her cocktails.

"Please, try this drink, Mrs. Conway."

Rodent Face accepted the proffered drink with a giggle. "What's in it, Mr. Shroudly?"

The bar tender tapped his nose with an errant finger. "That is, as they so often say, a trade secret. I call it a 'Bow Bells.' Luuuuuuvley!"

Avril gazed longingly at the bottles hanging in a neat line, and the remembered taste of liquor, hot and comforting, rose in his throat. Rodent Face swallowed her mysterious beverage and the bartender, whom she had identified as Shroudly, beamed at Avril. "Well, well, well, another weary traveler. Come in and park your arse. What can I do you for, me old China? Need a room?"

Avril recognized the accent as British, though the words may well have been alien.

"Very wise, if I may say so, Sir. Tonight's forecast says the storm's going to get a lot worse."

Avril closed his eyes, but even in darkness, he could feel the liquor bottles staring him down. An image of Connie haunted him and he momentarily considered leaving.

"That was delicious, Mr. Shroudly," cooed Rodent Face.

"Please, Mrs. Conway, it's Trent.

“And what about you, Sir? A little something to warm your cockles before you shuffle off to your room?”

There was a certainty in Shroudly’s words that bordered upon smugness, and it gnawed at Avril. How did this jerk know that he wouldn’t just turn and walk back out the door?

“You’re not in control, Sir.”

Avril was startled. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not in control when you drive on icy roads. It’s a fact. Once that tarmac freezes over, the highway controls you, and it can pull your tires out from under you in the blink of an eye,” said Shroudly, grinning infectiously. “You look like far too sensible a gent to continue your journey in such a nasty blizzard, if I may say so, Sir.”

The urges were overwhelming.

“Now, about that drink. What’ll it be?” asked Shroudly.

Avril relented and peeled off his overcoat.

“Bourbon, straight up,” he mumbled. “And I need to use your phone.”

* * * *

Avril rested his hands either side of the tumbler. The blazing, brown liquid eyed him from its glass prison, and he could hear Connie urging him to get some sleep; wait for sun up before hitting the road again. No subdued sadness or subtle recrimination in her voice, but something else that bothered him intensely.

Avril pictured the neatly folded personal column.

Wondering if she’s glad to be rid of you for a night? Wondering if she’s feverishly dialing the number of some fella? Could you blame her?

“Everything okay, China?” chimed Shroudly, returning from, Avril assumed, an excursion to the cellar. The two men were alone in the bar since Rodent Face had staggered off to her room.

“Fine, thanks. Why do you keep calling me ‘China’?”

Shroudly laughed. “It’s cockney rhyming slang. China Plate means Mate.”

Avril was baffled.

“Never mind.” Shroudly extended a hand. “I’m Trenton Shroudly, by the way. You can call me Trent.”

Avril shook the man's icy hand. "Nice to meet you, Trenton Shroudly By The Way. You can call me 'China.' China is just fine."

"China, it is. Now, drink up. The next one's on me."

Avril shrugged. Why not? He was an adult, after all, and Connie obviously didn't give a shit.

How can you even think that?

Avril touched the glass against his lips, tipped his head and allowed the bourbon to scorch his throat, taking a religious moment to savor the experience.

So very good.

He slammed his glass jubilantly on the bar. "Another."

And another.

Four shots later, Avril slid off his stool and headed for the lobby. "I need the washroom. Hit me up while I'm gone."

Shroudly gestured to the hallway. "Left then left again."

"I'll find it."

Avril wandered down a narrow corridor, noting how the carpets were a little plusher than your average cookie cutter hotel chain. Strange how, despite his sleazy expertise, he'd never noticed this place before.

So many hotels; never the same companion.

After a heavenly piss, Avril zipped up and loped back into the hallway where he was greeted by an unusual noise.

A low moan.

He wrinkled his brow in confusion. The door to one of the rooms was ajar, releasing a thin stream of light. Avril was about to mind his own business when he heard it again.

He strolled toward the open door and rapped gently against the wood, figuring he'd call Shroudly if there were a problem. "Hello?"

Nothing.

"You all right, in there?"

Still no answer.

Cautiously, Avril pushed the door open a little further and peered around the edge. "Hello?"

A thick river of blood oozed through the carpet fibers. Sprawled beside the bed, the twitching body of Rodent Face, huge chunks of flesh stolen from her savaged torso. Her livid hand stretched toward the door, though any life still flickering through her remains was tenuous at best. Avril cupped his mouth in horror.

“Oh my, that was impromptu. What to do now?” echoed a familiar voice with a raspy edge.

Avril spun around to find Shroudly, or something ghastly that once resembled him, grinning like a Jack-O-Lantern from the end of the hallway; eyes burning orange, teeth splintered like jagged bones. His squat frame blocked both the foyer and main exit.

“Now I’ll have to deal with you too, China. No offense.”

Shroudly hunched over, his knuckles becoming a second pair of feet, and he prowled closer. Panic-stricken, Avril searched for an escape.

A closed window opposite Rodent Face’s bed.

Shroudly charged.

Avril ran through the sickening mess, used the bed as a springboard and lunged at the window, exiting the room in a cascade of shattering glass. He landed in a snowdrift, got up and staggered into the icy blizzard, praying that he might be near his car.

A quick glance over his shoulder.

Shroudly, crouched in the torn window frame.

“Hold on, China! I’m coming!”

Like a childhood nightmare, it was difficult to gain ground in the snowdrifts. The car remained hidden by the whiteout, but a towering silhouette loomed amidst the storm and he stumbled toward it.

“I’m cooooooming, China!!!”

The shrieking wind ravaged him, but with every sluggish step, the darkened shape gained clarity.

A building.

Avril lost his footing and plunged, arms waving, into the snow; a death frenzied snow angel. He lashed out for a metal rod that broke the ground and quickly pulled himself up. Then he noticed another spike.

And another.

A fence.

“Gonna getcha, China!!!” crowed Shroudly as he barreled down upon Avril.

Avril scaled the railings, tearing his jacket as he leapt into the grounds beyond. There was an intense flash of light as Shroudly slammed into the fence, followed by a roar of pain. “Bugger! Consecrated ground! I bloody well hate consecrated ground!” Shroudly thrust his hands into a snowdrift and a look of relief crossed his features.

Consecrated ground?

Avril squinted against the storm to better perceive the looming structure.

A church.

Shroudly let out a good-natured laugh. “Fair’s, fair. I guess you won that round, China. But you can’t stay in those grounds all night without freezing to death. This weather don’t bother me, Matey!”

Avril backed into an archway until he was pressed against the church’s main doors, never taking his eyes off Shroudly. He rattled the handles.

Locked.

Another booming laugh from Shroudly, who had assumed a meditative posture in the snow. “Have fun, China. I’ll take a load off and wait for you to make a dash for your car or something.”

Avril tried not to think about it.

* * * *

Despite the mild protection of his stone cubby, Avril could barely feel his limbs. The bourbon in his stomach was losing its fire. He peered around the arch.

“Yes, China. I’m still ‘ere.”

Avril’s face reddened as rage chased away rationality. “Get lost!!! Go ‘way, ya fuckin’ vampire!!!”

“I take offense to that,” laughed Shroudly. “Vampires are wasteful creatures. Suck out the juice then throw away the orange, they do. Me? I love everything. Blood, flesh, bone and brain.”

Avril clasped his hands against his head in a desperate attempt to block his leaking sanity. It had to be a dream. Intense and very messed up dream, but any minute he’d wake up on the couch next to an empty bottle of J.D. Or maybe he crashed the car on the way home, and was lying in a hospital bed, heavily medicated.

“This is so not happening.”

“Sorry, China, but it so is. The supernatural . . . It’s real. All those creatures you laughed at on late night cable. A man who’s pure of heart and says his prayers at night *can* turn into a wolf, and when there’s no more room in Hell, the dead may, and very probably will, walk the Earth.

“All true, except the part about me being a vampire. So if we can just keep the ethnic slurs in check, I’ll be a happy camper.”

Avril was awash in a sea of insanity; nothing left to do but swim. “So . . . What are you?”

“Plain old demon, China. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“And do all denizens of Hell speak with a British accent?” sneered Avril, still unsure that he wasn’t hallucinating.

“Well I wasn’t always a demon, was I?” said Shroudly, indignantly. “Matter of fact, I used to be a florist in Bethnal Green.”

“From florist to demon,” said Avril, beating his arms about his body to keep warm. “Quite the career change.”

Shroudly’s posture took on a conspiratorial edge. “To be honest, China, I was probably much better in my last occupation. I’m really not much good at this demon lark. Let’s face it, I couldn’t catch you, could I?”

Avril shrugged. “First time I’ve felt lucky to have a church on hand.”

Shroudly shook his head, deep respect in his eyes. “Luck? Don’t sell yourself short. Skill and survival instinct, China. You saw your chance and you took it. I was the stupid one for letting you get within twenty feet of this bloody place.”

Shroudly let out a hefty sigh then continued: “Truth is, I’m something of a joke within Lucifer’s ranks. Trenton ‘Chowley’ they call me.”

“Chowley?”

Shroudly seemed embarrassed. “I have a bit of a problem, you see. In this day and age, with humanity’s occult awareness at an all time high, Lucifer—or ‘The Gaffer’, as I’ve got my self in trouble, more than once, for calling him—would have his minions conduct themselves in a more . . . Discreet fashion.”

“Discreet?”

“As in ‘Don’t invade hotels and eat the guests.’”

A smile crept onto Avril’s lips. “Are you saying that you’re an eataholic??? I’m going nuts. I really am.”

Shroudly twitched. “Well I don’t like that term but, yes. I suppose you might be forgiven for saying that.”

Avril let out a thunderous laugh at the absurdity. Shroudly was clearly unimpressed. “I really don’t see what’s so funny, China. You should understand if anyone does.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

It was Shroudly’s turn to laugh. “Oh come on! I may have a problem, but at least I’m honest. Think I don’t know what you’re all about?” He rolled his eyes and mimed picking up a phone. “‘Hello, Connie? Sorry darling but I won’t be home tonight. I have to stay at a bar . . . Err . . . Hotel, because the storm is just too bad for me to travel for another half hour on the well plowed highway.’ Sad part is, despite what’s happened tonight, you can still feel that bourbon swooshing around in your stomach, and that’s really all you care about. If I was to let you go, you’d be straight on to the next convenient watering hole. Truth is, you’d probably use this experience as another pathetic excuse to get sloshed out of your skull.”

“Fuck you!”

“Oooo . . . Touch a nerve, did I? Maybe you’ll think twice before laughing at the problems of others.”

The echo of car pulling into the parking lot, followed by giggling, chattering voices; female voices.

Shroudly turned into the blizzard. “Ello, ello, ello, what have we here? Waitresses Three! Luuuuuvely!!!”

Avril could see nothing.

Shroudly’s joviality returned. “I do believe I hear the supper bell! Listen, China, I’ve got nothing personal against you. Get back in your car and go home to wifey. Sort your life out, and we’ll call it quits, alright?”

Avril gazed on in horror as Shroudly marched back toward the hotel.

“Wait!!! You can’t ask me to trade myself for those poor women!!!”

“So come and get eaten with them. Stay or go, it’s your choice.”

“But . . . But . . .”

“But, what? You’ll gallantly offer yourself in place of the fair maidens? A doubtful show of character from a man who can’t even admit he has a drinking problem.” Shroudly continued toward his meals-in-waiting.

Avril ran at the railings. "Is that what it'll take, Shroudly? An admission that I'm an alcoholic?"

Shroudly stopped in his tracks, circled around and approached Avril, once more. There was something unreadable in the demon's eyes.

"Thing is, you don't really believe it, do you, China?" Shroudly chewed his bottom lip. "Tell you what, I'll make you a new deal. Come back to the hotel and prove to me that you can spend a night without hitting the booze. If you do, I promise you those ladies will walk away safely in the morning."

"As if. I come back there and you'll eat the lot of us!"

Shroudly hushed him. "I'm a man of my word, and I'll walk back into that hotel right now and leave you to drive away in your car, if you like. I'd not stop you. But the ladies. . ."

"I get it," said Avril, weighing up Shroudly's challenge. "So you're telling me, they'll be safe, and I'll be safe, just so long as I stay away from the drink?"

Shroudly held up a two-fingered salute. "Scouts honor."

"Aren't you guys big on hidden clauses and stuff?"

"Why would I bother mucking around, when I could go into that lot, smash your car to pieces and leave you out here to freeze while I tuck into the waitresses?"

There was a perverse logic to his words.

After a pause, Avril nodded, reluctantly. "Alright. I'll do it."

"My, my. For a man who couldn't resist a few shots of bourbon, you seem awfully controlled."

"I am controlled," asserted Avril. "I could have resisted earlier. I didn't want to."

"Whatever you say," continued Shroudly. "And since you mentioned clauses, I'll underline a rule to this arrangement; one that I suggest you think about before committing yourself."

"Go on."

Shroudly stared sagely down his nose at Avril, pausing for dramatic effect. "The maidens will remain safe ONLY if you can stay away from the sauce. Break this rule, and I'll match each drink you take with a tasty treat of my choice. You do understand what I'm saying, don't you, China?"

Avril's heart raced; his mind exploded with horrific imagery. Finally he nodded acknowledgement.

“And you don’t want to get in your comfy car—which you’re still entitled to do—and head on home to Connie? Leave me in peace with my luuuuuuvely late night snacks?”

Avril visualized a news story about three mutilated waitresses, and winced. He shook his head. Shroudly clasped a hand upon his shoulder and declared: “Let the games begin!”

* * * *

“Ladies, ladies!!! My apologies for not being here to sign you in quicker, but our friend here has had a spot of car trouble, and will be gracing us with his presence for the rest of this evening.”

The three waitresses introduced themselves and removed their coats.

“We thought the place was deserted,” said Monica, a stunning, strawberry blond who looked to Avril, as if she belonged on the pages of a Victoria’s Secret catalogue.

“Yes,” agreed Chelsea, a not-so-stunning brunette; the victim of at least two branches during her plummet from the ugly tree. “We were lucky to find you.”

“I’ll say,” said Torrance, the personification of the ugly tree. “We were heading for Woodstock when the storm hit.”

Shroudly signed them in, exercising his unholy charm as he ushered them toward the bar where, he insisted, their first drink would be on the house.

“Going to join these lovely ladies for an ice cold beer, are we?” Shroudly grinned. “Or maybe a fiery shot of bourbon, to stave off the frostbite?”

Avril salivated.

Bastard!

“I think I’ll turn in,” said Avril.

The giggling women protested and Monica placed a hand upon his arm, gazing with those lascivious brown eyes. “Aww, you’re not a lightweight, are you?”

Avril shifted, uncomfortably, as his body responded to her touch; to the heady scent of her perfume.

“Any chance you could help me grab a couple of crates of beer from the cellar, mate?” asked Shroudly.

“Sure,” said Avril, faking a smile as he followed the demon.

When they were out of earshot: “Okay, first of all, I’m not your ‘Mate’ and second. . . What the Hell are you playing at?!?! You know I can’t drink with them! You said this game would be fair!”

Shroudly laughed. “Yes, I pushed that one. Tell you what, in the spirit of fairness, I’ll let you have a beer with the ladies.”

“You’ll . . . What?”

“I said I’ll let you have a beer. That situation was partially my fault, but you’re still in control, right? You can switch on and off at will, so it’s hardly bending the rules if the outcome is the same. I don’t think one beer will hurt.”

Avril wanted to protest, but the words refused to form on his lips. Perhaps taking Shroudly up on his offer was a sound strategy to win the game. It might stem the cravings that were already tugging at his tattered strings.

One beer.

Ice cold.

Smooth.

“Are you playing me, Shroudly?”

Of course he’s playing you! Don’t be such a loser!

The demon threw his hands up. “I swear. Besides, I can’t let you shuffle off to bed after the way blondie was giving you the come on. Did you cop an eyeful of the chest bollocks on that bird?”

“Speak English, Shroudly. Chest bollocks?”

Shroudly rolled his eyes, laughing. “Knockers! Bristols! Boobs! Y’know . . . The size of her melons! Enough to crank a man’s todger, if I do say so. Certainly the first time my winkle’s twitched in a few decades.”

Avril reddened slightly.

Shroudly slapped him on the back. “What Connie doesn’t know, won’t hurt her, right? Isn’t that your philosophy of the past few years? Come on, China. We’ll enjoy a brief respite from the game. There’s an icy froth with your name on, if you can handle it, of course.”

Say ‘NO’! It’s a simple word. As in ‘Sesame Street was brought to you today by the letters ‘N’ and ‘O’ . . .

It would give him stamina to last the night.

Sesame Street is a production of . . .

Besides, he was in control.

The Children's Television Workshop . . .

"Okay," said Avril. "One beer."

You . . .

Silly . . .

Bastard . . .

* * * *

Avril lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Except for the beers and spirits screaming at him from the downstairs bar, the hotel was silent. Sleep was held at bay by terrible gas, and each time he burped, Avril could taste those smooth betrayers that would bring death to the waitresses.

The cheating demon had said one beer, not two.

Why blame him? You the powerless idiot.

Shadows flickered across the wall like Monica's cute, fluttering eyelashes. He visualized her dark red lips whispering for him to stay for one more.

If only she knew.

You've messed up, big time, Woundsday!

Avril rolled onto his left side and pounded his head twice upon the pillow.

The bar would be unattended now. Maybe if he . . .

Forget it!

He climbed out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom to take a leak. Much as he needed to unburden his bladder, he felt reluctant to evacuate the used beer. Once flushed, it was gone, never to return.

Solemnly, he followed nature's command.

"Should be home in bed with Connie, listening to her drone on about AA meetings and higher powers."

But there's probably someone else sharing her bed tonight. I'll bet she's being bounced like a rubber fuck-doll, as we speak, and loving every minute of it.

"I love her, I really do."

So why do you treat her like shit? Why are you here?

“I’m here out of choice . . . MY choice.”

But that doesn’t answer the first part of the question. Because you’re too damn scared to admit that you need help.

Avril continued his elongated piss and, as the liquid splattered against the porcelain bowl, gazed at his worn features in a mirror that hung above the toilet. His leathery skin looked at least five years older than forty-two.

Ravaged skin.

Rodent Face.

He cringed as he remembered Her mutilated body in a downstairs room. The door was open when he escaped. Did Shroudly close it?

Quickly, Avril stuffed his cock back in underwear and went to retrieve his sweater and pants. He had to check. If one of the women stumbled across the body, Shroudly would have no choice but to. . .

He shuddered.

The lights were dim as Avril crept along the landing. There was no sign of his demonic tormentor, though he felt sure the creature was lurking. Carefully, he tiptoed down the master staircase into the lower hallway, concentrating on the task at hand as he passed the bar.

The hallway was darker than the rest of the hotel, probably by Shroudly’s design. Were there half eaten bodies in the other rooms? Oddly, the thought hadn’t occurred to him earlier.

Avril edged closer to the room where Rodent Face had been slain. Surely the hall would be freezing from the shattered window, if the door were open. Still, he had to check, even if it meant seeing the body again.

His stomach muscles tightened.

Difficult to catch a worthwhile breath.

The door.

Just ahead.

Closed and locked. In a twisted gesture, Shroudly had hung a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign from the handle. Thankfully, Shroudly’s ungodly appetites would go unnoticed, for now.

Too much stress. One quick shot and he’d sleep like a baby.

Forget it! Go back to your room, lock the door and stay there until sunrise!

He hurried back toward the stairs.

Don't look at the bar.

Beads of sweat tickled his brow.

Don't look!

Teased his nose.

Don't . . .

"One day at a time, Avril. One day at a time. Believe in your higher power."

Look . . .

Avril paused at the entrance to the silent bar, and he saw it all. The wines and spirits; sordid maidens that winked at him from their backlit brothel, while shiny, neon beer pimps beckoned for him to sample the forbidden wares. Pornography for the parched, and nothing was caged in this red light zone.

A torturous itch seared beneath his skin. So easy to just grab a bottle from the shelf. Damn Shroudly for not locking them up!

Avril gazed at the bottles, empty inside, as though he were attending the wake of lost friends. The maddening itch increased as the alcohol in his blood stream tried to puppeteer him.

Shroudly had to be somewhere.

Watching.

Avril tore his eyes away from the provocative liquors and hurried across the lobby. An antique clock guarded the main entrance, ticking away the seconds of the game.

2:28 AM.

Not so terribly long until sun up.

You can do this! Somewhere deep down, Wounsdlay, I know you have the strength. I believe in you, so does Connie.

Avril climbed the stairs, and as he approached his room, a door creaked from behind. "Looks like I'm not the only one who can't sleep."

Avril turned to find Monica posing herself sensually against the doorframe, her voluptuous form clad in a wispy negligee, perpetuating his lingerie catalogue fantasies.

"Uh. . . I thought you'd be asleep by now." He tried to avert his eyes from her cleavage.

“I’m restless.” She arched her back, pushing her breasts outward. “Wanna come in? Talk for a while?”

Avril felt a familiar stirring as his blood emigrated south.

Here you go again . . .

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

Monica ran her fingernails over the front of her negligee, teasing her erect nipples. She gazed at the bulge in his pants and giggled. “‘Someone’ seems to think it’s a great idea.”

Why not? It really might be a sound plan. Maybe the distraction would kill the remaining hours and, in the process, keep Monica and her friends alive. Besides, Connie was probably having the time of her life with some sleaze she’d met through those lonely heart ads, anyway.

I take back what I said about your strength. You’re pathetic.

Avril visualized Connie naked in their marital bed, being screwed from behind by some faceless stranger.

Nice image, huh? Can you imagine how she must have felt, all those nights?

Monica adjusted her skimpy attire, revealing a dark hint of her areola above the lace. The hardness in his pants became unbearable, but at least the primordial urges had temporarily diluted his yearning for booze.

“If you really don’t want to . . .”

Avril slouched guiltily toward Monica.

They entered her room and closed the door.

* * * *

Avril undressed, somewhat self-conscious of his potbelly, but the hungry look in Monica’s eyes stroked his ego.

“Mmmmm . . . I like that,” she purred.

She slipped out of the negligee and stretched out, face down across her bed. “Wanna give me a massage?”

Avril crawled onto the mattress beside her and rubbed his hands over her calves, her thighs, smooth buttocks. His mouth watered for all the goodness hidden from view.

The jeering liquor bottles became a dull hum in the background.

“You have nice hands. I’ll bet your wife likes them.”

“My wife?” He started to defend his actions, but Monica rolled over and pressed a finger against his lips.

“I have someone, too,” she whispered.

She kissed him passionately, slipping her tongue beyond the boundaries of his lips. Avril could taste the wine she’d been drinking. He caressed her body, trying to concentrate on how good it felt, but the taste . . .

Driving him insane.

Monica pulled away, mischief in her eyes. She fumbled in a bag beside the bed and plopped a bottle onto her night table, beside two flickering candles. “Let’s have a party.”

Bourbon.

Shit!

“Monica, put that away. Please.”

“It’s okay. We’re the same, you and I, I see that. In the bar, you were restraining, trying to, anyway.”

“You don’t understand . . .”

“Yeah, I do. Bet your wife pushes you to all those bullshit AA meetings, just like my boyfriend.”

“She does, but . . .”

“Drive ya crazy, all that crap? Listening to the stories of other fuck-ups; watching them weigh up whether you’re better or worse than they are. Like any of it makes the cravings go away.”

Monica poured a measure into a plastic water tumbler on the table.

“Tomorrow, we’ll go home and tell our partners that we’re feeling great. One day at a time, right? But tonight, Baby, nobody has to know.”

True. Behind locked doors, no one could see. Not even Shroudly.

Are you In-Freakin’-Sane?!?! Don’t even think it!!!

Monica lay back and seductively poured liquor over her breasts. Avril gazed hungrily as the liquid swooshed over her dark peaks and into the tanned valley between.

He could stand it no longer.

He lunged forward, licking and sucking at her nipples, following the delicious trail over her breasts and down to her firm tummy, circling her belly-button and lower.

So much lower.

Monica murmured orgasmically as he lapped at her.

Goddamit!!! So A-1 fuckin', finger-lickin' good!!!

"More," hissed Avril, and Monica responded, tipping the glass to allow a second hot flow down its heavenly path, and as she did so, the bedroom door exploded into a thousand wooden shards.

Avril gasped and stared up from his vantage point between Monica's thighs.

"YOU LOSE, CHINA!!! HAHAAHAHAHA. . . LUUUUVELY!!!" roared Shroudly.

"NO!!! SHROUDLY, DON'T . . ."

Too late.

The demon threw him across the room and leapt upon the shrieking figure of Monica, mauling her naked flesh. Avril scrambled from the floor and tackled Shroudly about the neck, but was thrown clear, this time landing in the shattered doorframe. With a sudden, triumphant motion, Shroudly ripped off Monica's left leg and held the bloody appendage high.

"ONLY THE CHOICE CUTS FOR ME!!!" he laughed, and bit a huge chunk of flesh from the thigh.

Avril vomited.

And again.

The mutilated woman flailed and sent the candles upon her bedside table crashing into the curtains, which subsequently ignited. The room would soon be engulfed. Too late for Monica, but not the others.

Avril lurched into the hallway and smashed the fire alarm. "WAKE UP!!! EVERYBODY!!! WAKE UP!!!"

Sleepy figures peeked out as two rooms opened up. Torrance rubbing her eyes, Chelsea tying the belt of her hotel robe. Avril ran toward them, desperate to usher an escape.

Torrance raced past him, spurred by Monica's screaming.

"NO!!!" shrieked Avril.

A clawed hand lashed out from the room, grabbed Torrance by the throat and dragged her into the inferno.

"I DO LOVE A FLAME-GRILLED, UGLY BIRD!!!" laughed Shroudly.

Avril grasped Chelsea by the wrist and yanked her toward the stairs, leaping flames that snaked onto the landing.

"But Torrance . . ."

"MOVE!!!" yelled Avril, as he swung the woman and almost catapulted her down the stairs.

Clammy fingers clasped his ankle, and Avril went sprawling to the floor. Chelsea turned to assist, then froze as her eyes caught Shroudly's demonic image for the first time.

"GET OUT!!!" screamed Avril, struggling to dislodge the demon's grip.

Chelsea was happy to oblige.

"Where do you think you're going, China?" asked Shroudly, his mouth caked with blood and torn flesh. "You weren't going to DESSERT me, were you?"

Shroudly's jaws gaped wide.

Avril kicked outward, slamming him in the face. Again and again he struck the fiend, rotating his legs like an insane cyclist.

"Unlucky!" laughed Shroudly as the assault continued. "'Fraid it'll take a lot more than that to. . ." A look of confusion adorned his twisted features. Then he glanced backward and saw his left leg on fire. "BUGGER!!!"

Shroudly released Avril and frantically beat at the flames.

Seconds.

All that was needed.

Avril scrambled to his feet, raced down the stairs and out through the lobby, not daring to look back at the screaming and cursing demon. The blizzard had eased up, and while there was no sign of Chelsea, his car was clearly visible across the parking lot. He whispered a silent prayer that he'd left a door unlocked so that he could use the spare key he kept in the glove compartment. He grasped the handle of the driver door, closed his eyes and pulled.

The door swung open.

Avril leapt inside, slammed the door, fumbled for the spare key, found it, fired the ignition, slammed the stick into drive and jammed his foot on the accelerator.

Then his luck took a turn for the worse.

As he sped past the entrance, a flaming shape charged out of the doors and into his path, waving its arms wildly. Avril swerved to avoid a collision, but the demon leapt onto the hood and locked its claws on either side of the windshield. He motioned the car left and right, as best as he could in the thick snow, but Shroudly held on tight like some hellish version of 'T.J Hooker'.

The charred demon glared at Avril through the glass. "YOU LOST!!! AND NOW YOU THINK YOU CAN WELCH ON OUR AGREEMENT??? THINK AGAIN!!!

"SOONER OR LATER YOU'RE GOING TO NEED A DRINK, CHINA, AND I'LL BE THERE!!! D'YOU HEAR ME?!?! I'M GOING TO BE THERE, AND I'M GOING TO MAKE YOU EXTREMELY SORRY!!! I SWEAR!!!"

Avril jammed on the breaks, blindly hoping that the deep snow would prevent him from hurtling into a spin.

Shroudly shot off the icy car.

Avril wasn't about to allow him time to renew his assault. He pressed the gas pedal again, and with the smoldering figure of Shroudly and the hotel inferno in his rear view mirror, sped off toward Highway 401 . . .

* * * *

Connie sat pensively upon the couch, gazing at the lonely-hearts section of the newspaper, thankful that she'd never again need it to contact a man. She glanced at the wall clock above the fireplace

9:30 PM.

Avril's AA meeting would be over in half an hour, then her husband would be home. Sober.

Just enough time to get rid of Gerald. Time to get this over with before Avril finds out.

A bizarre scratching at the back door, followed by three sharp knocks, disturbed her. Nervously, Connie went out into the kitchen. Slowly, she opened the door.

"BOO!!!" yelled a squat figure with glowing eyes.

Connie stifled a shriek with her hand.

Regaining her composure, she reached out and slapped the creature on the shoulder. "Why do you do that, Shroudly. You and your twisted sense of humor!"

"I'm sorry, Connie. That always gives me a chuckle," said the demon, sheepishly.

She clicked her tongue and cast a furtive glance into the back yard. "You'd better hurry inside. Avril will be home soon."

"Ah yes. How is my old China doing?"

"Three months! He hasn't touched a drop in three whole months!" she beamed. "I don't know how you did it but . . ."

"I'd love to take sole credit Mrs. Wounsdlay, but outside of some inter-dimensional manipulation, I have a few players to thank, not least of all a good friend named Monica who has a very special talent indeed. Let me show you." With a grin, Shroudly placed up an index finger denoting a pause, then, like a stand-up comic, asked: "I say, Mrs. Wounsdlay, do you know what our Monica calls her limbs?"

Connie shrugged.

Shroudly twitched his body, causing one of his arms to drop onto the floor. "DEEEEE-TACHABLE!!!" he laughed, ghoulishly, causing Connie to stifle yet another shriek.

Shroudly picked up the arm, locked it back into place and pulled out a sheet of paper from his pocket. "Now you really are a charming lady, Mrs. Wounsdlay, and I hate to bring business into such luuuuuuvley conversation, but there is a small matter of payment. You've made four installments so far, leaving just one more."

"Yes, of course," said Connie. "This way." She beckoned Shroudly toward a locked cupboard, wondering momentarily what would happen if she refused to pay for the demon's services. The possibilities sent a shudder through her.

Connie unlocked the door, allowing Shroudly to peer in at the drugged, unconscious form of Gerald.

"Wonderful!" declared Shroudly. "Our business is concluded. Now remember, my dear, if you do have any friends in need of my special services, I offer rewards for referrals, you know."

"Yes, you've mentioned."

Shroudly closed his eyes and sniffed at Gerald.

"Mmmm . . . German descent. 1949, I believe. A very good year." A huge grin split Shroudly's face from ear to ear. "You spoil me, Mrs. Wounsdlay, y'know, you really do . . ."

THE END

STEVEN MARSHALL is a horror writer, originally from London, England. His prize-winning stories have appeared in the magazines *Writer's Journal* magazine and *Thirteen Stories*, and in the paperback anthologies *Scratchings on the Moon: Stories from the Edge* and *Writers Undercover*. He is currently hard at work on his first novel, *Gallico*. He also teaches a horror writing course at the Centre for the Arts in Cambridge, Ontario, where he lives with his two young boys, Jared & Connor.

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STATIONS

PATTIE LAWLER

“Stop the car! Stop the car!” Sandra pounded on the door.

Jerry downshifted, slammed on the brakes—throwing everything in the car forward to the screech of tires—even as her hand was on the latch. As he turned to demand an explanation, Sandra was halfway out of the car.

“Call 911!” she called over her shoulder.

He threw the Porsche into park, pushed the OnStar button and gave the operator their location.

“. . . I don’t know, she just started screaming call 911,” he concluded, leaning over to look out the still open passenger door. “I don’t know, there’s a lot of construction . . .” He said that yes they would wait, and unlocked his seatbelt.

Opening the door, Jerry swung his foot out and placed it squarely in a pool of frigid slush. Cursing as the thick water slopped into his shoe, he extracted himself from the car and stood looking towards the train station. Wan streetlights barely cut the dark night.

Sandra was on her knees, bent over a prostrate figure that lay on the curb beside the vacant taxi stand. Alarmed, Jerry hurried to her side.

“What happened?” he demanded, raising his arm to shield his eyes from the slobbering mix of rain and snow.

“The front tire kicked up a rock and hit him! There’s an awful lot of blood and . . . what are you doing?”

Jerry had hooked a hand under her armpit and was lifting her.

“I don’t need to be tomorrow’s headline news,” he grouched as he carried her to her feet. “There’s no one around so let’s get back in the car and get out of here.”

“Are you insane?” she barked, jerking her arm free and glaring at him. “He’s unconscious; it’s snowing; and you’re going to leave him?”

“I called for help, Sandy,” he replied catching her arm again. “There’s nothing more we can do! The police’ll be here any minute!”

“You called OnStar! If they check, you’ll be ticketed for leaving the scene of an accident!”

“No,” he murmured, dragging her away from the prone figure, “I’ll just have taken my hysterical fiancée home. No one can blame me for taking care of my own problems first.”

“Jerry . . .” Sandra stammered in tones of disbelief. She was struggling to free herself as he continued to hurry her around the piles of snow.

“Just get in the car, damn it! The lawyers’ll handle anything we can’t. That’s what we pay them for.”

His grip on her arm brooked no argument. As he hauled her towards the car, Sandra cast a glance over her shoulder. Looking at the unconscious man, she gasped back tears of mortification as Jerry pushed her down into the car’s warm interior.

* * * *

“He would have been brought in by ambulance last night,” Sandra repeated to the third volunteer at the reception desk. “With an injury to his face, by the eye.” She pointed towards her own face as if to illustrate, realized how foolish she must look, and dropped her hand.

All of the women she had spoken to appeared well beyond retirement, and none were interested enough to actually check the patient list for her.

Frowning, Sandra tightened her grip on the bouquet, marched past reception and made for the emergency ward.

Enough of this stupidity, let’s cut to the chase.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light, and Sandra saw herself at the train station, kneeling beside the wounded man. The rest of the station was hidden by darkness; there was only the two of them in a halo of light. It was as if she was looking through a telescope.

And then she was back in the hospital.

Staggering, Sandra groped for the nearest wall. The bouquet fell from her hand as she reached to scrub her eyes and banish the afterimage. Indistinct voices questioned her, and a hand was under her elbow, supporting her as she murmured, “I’m alright. I’m good . . . I just, I just need to sit . . .” She felt a slight pressure at the back of her knees, and someone gently pushed her down. Slumping into the wheelchair, she heard the crinkle of tissue paper as the flowers were dropped onto her lap, and then felt someone lifting her feet onto the chair supports.

“Thank you, miss. If you would, please, bring her to my room.”

It was a mellow, masculine voice, with a slight accent Sandra couldn't place. Groggily she looked up at the seething wall of pink and sea-green forms and fought to focus on the several attendants who fussed over her. She rocked back as the wheelchair lurched forward, felt a wave of nausea as her body swayed with the motion, and clamped her eyes closed. The sharp scent of disinfectant, and the insistent calls for errant doctors to answer their pages, assaulted her senses as she was rapidly moved to her destination. Sandra tried to imagine what had prompted the strange flashback, and why she had seen it all from such an impossible angle.

After a few minutes the chair glided to a stop, and the nurse who had wheeled her was thanked and dismissed by the smooth voice.

"We're quite alone," he assured her. "If you'll wait a moment, I'll get you some water."

"Thank you," Sandra whispered and cautiously opened her eyes to look around the room.

It was typical of the venue, being all bland colors that were sure to offend no one and to calm troubled souls. It was also quieter than she expected, which made it an oasis after the bustle beyond the door. Bemused, she raised her head, searching for her host. The sound of running water betrayed his location. Twisting slightly, she was in time to see a tall, lean man exit the bathroom, cup in hand. Sandra took a second to examine him.

Her first impression was that he was lovely. It was hard to think of a man, any man, as lovely, but the man who knelt beside her now, offering her the Styrofoam cup, was unlike anyone else she had ever seen before. There was a dressing over the right side of his face, obscuring one eye. The other was pale blue and incredibly clear. His hair, what she could see beneath the bandage, looked powder soft and was dove gray. She couldn't hazard a guess as to his age. His features were strong, pleasing, and he appeared on the verge of a smile as he handed her the cup.

"Do I know you?" she murmured, looking at him over the edge of the cup.

"We met last night," he replied. "Though I believe you have the advantage over me, as I was quite unconscious at the time."

Sandra gasped, lowering the cup. "You're the man from the train station!"

He smiled in reply, inclining his head slightly.

"But how did you know who I was?"

“Your perfume gave you away,” he said as he rose. “Am I making a presumption in assuming these are for me?” he gestured to the flowers in her lap and thereby changed the subject.

“Oh,” she laughed, searching for a place to set the water down. “Yes, they are. I came . . .” she glanced up as he lifted the cup from her hand. He was watching her, and under his gaze Sandra felt the emotions of the previous evening return. She could feel the heat of her cheeks as she wrestled with her embarrassment. “I came to see how you are and to apologize.”

“Why apologize? Were you the one who threw the rock?”

“It wasn’t thrown; Jerry’s car kicked it up. I saw you falling and told him to stop. He called for an ambulance . . .” her voice faded but then she drew in a deep breath, sat up straight and met his wondering gaze. “It was wrong of him to leave, and even more so for me . . . I saw it happen. I’m very sorry I didn’t wait with you until the ambulance arrived. You could have frozen to death on the ground, and all *he* was worried about was his reputation!”

“Jerry is your fiancé?”

Sandra hastily dropped her gaze to the colorful bouquet in her lap and to avoid the admission lifted it up, scowling at the battered lilies. “I’ll make arrangements with the hospital to cover your bill, please don’t worry about that. If there was damage to your clothing . . .”

“Thank you, miss . . .?”

“I’m sorry, how rude I’ve been. I’m Sandra Pares.”

Knowing that they could potentially be in the Pares wing of the hospital, Sandra hoped no more explanation was necessary. The man bowed in reply, a hand over his heart.

“I am Philip Ioannidis, Miss Pares, and while I thank you for your generous offer, you’ve done more than most people would by approaching me, and I’m satisfied.”

He put his hand out to help her up, and Sandra understood that she was dismissed. Knowing there was nothing more she could say, she allowed him to pull her to her feet and she set the flowers on the wheelchair.

“Thank you, Mr. Ioannidis.”

“Good day, Miss Pares.”

* * * *

But it was *not* a good day.

She returned home and found that her father's secretary, Ms. Blass, had called more than a few times, reminding her of the several receptions planned for the approaching weekend. Jerry, too, had left countless messages on her voice mail as well as her cell. He was desperately trying to apologize, to make her understand his motives, to point out that she would have done the same thing, and when all of these attempts garnered no reply, his last message was simply a warning of his impending arrival.

Looking for any little excuse to hide from him and her father, she used preparations for the upcoming benefit as her cover, hurried back to the car, and fled.

While en route to the garage, she answered what messages she felt she had to. She called her father, to put his mind at ease. Dropping into the car, she called his secretary, and petulantly told the voice mail that she changed her cell number and could now be reached at—she made up the number as she rattled it off—and then snapped the phone closed. With a snarl she threw it over her shoulder and smiled with satisfaction as it bounced off the leather seat and plunked onto the floor.

Backing the car from the garage, she quickly drove the half-mile to the end of the driveway. Pausing, Sandra opened the sunroof and let the cold air suck all the warmth from the car. She'd start the day fresh, she decided, breathing in the crisp air and forcing herself to smile. Before her stretched a private straightaway, a communal driveway really, that was frequented by the rich and famous alone, so she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and thrust the gas pedal to the floor. The Mercedes leapt forward despite its protesting tires.

Less than half a mile later, Sandra's foot stomped down on the brake. The ABS fought for control of the car as it slid, sideways, for another quarter mile.

The flash had come almost as soon as the car started forward. Looking into the circular opening that blocked all else from her vision, Sandra gazed at her smiling self . . . dancing in the arms of Philip Ioannidis.

The car came to a swaying stop on someone else's lawn. Sandra sat for a moment, heedless to property damage on either side, panting and hanging on the steering wheel. Another minute passed before she looked up to see if anyone had witnessed her automotive minuet. Throwing the car in park, she launched herself into the backseat, searching for the cell phone.

In a moment she was connected with information, only to hear that at the subscriber's request, Philip Ioannidis' number was unlisted.

She called her father, and got his voice mail. She called Ms. Blass and all but commanded the woman to locate the phone number and address of her mystery man.

“I don’t care who you have to pay off,” she barked.

“At what number may I reach you?” Ms. Blass asked tersely.

“This one,” Sandra snapped before she hung up, dialed information again, and waited while they put her through to the hospital. She was not surprised to learn that Mr. Ioannidis had discharged himself and that no, they couldn’t give her his address, no matter what kind of flowers she wanted to send him.

Growling, she urged the car back out onto the road and made for town.

By the time she reached the city, Sandra had an address and was dividing her attention between the GPS, and the street signs. Mr. Ioannidis lived in a well-to-do part of town, but not one she was familiar with. When she rolled the car to a stop before the Art Deco apartment building, she sat for a moment, gazing at the chrome and wood doors. The doorman’s hand was upon the car door and silently offering to help her out as the flash came to an end.

Staring into the hole in Time that only she could see, Sandra caught a glimpse of herself and Mr. Ioannidis in the throes of a climatic moment the likes of which she had never experienced. The afterimage, of their fingers laced together, left her weak and panting. For a charged moment she gaped at the doorman’s hand without comprehension.

“Miss? Are you all right, miss?”

“Thank you, Andrew,” Mr. Ioannidis said as he caught Sandra’s limp hand and gently pulled her from the car. “Would you please park Miss Pares’ car?”

He didn’t wait for an answer as he scooped Sandra into his arms and hurried to the lobby.

“This is my fault,” he whispered as he carried her through the warm foyer and into an elevator. “I’m sorry, Miss Pares. It’s the wound, I’m sure. I’m sorry, truly sorry.”

Convinced she had no clue what he was talking about, Sandra simply relaxed into his arms and said nothing.

* * * *

His apartment was populated by furniture from a more genteel era. Sandra couldn't help but be impressed by her surroundings as they swept into the living room and her host carefully lowered her onto a chaise longue.

"Please, rest, Miss Pares. You poor thing . . . what you must be suffering." He excused himself, promising wine, and hurried for the kitchen.

Alone for the moment, Sandra forced herself upright, and her gaze raced around the room. She hoped to recognize something, anything, from her few glimpses into the void, but the room and its furnishings defied scrutiny. The sounds of her host, busy about his task, reached her from the kitchen and she weakly rose to her feet and staggered towards what she hoped were the bedrooms.

Stoically she told herself that if Mr. Ioannidis felt he was the cause for her recent blackouts, then he owed her an explanation. This hostile reconnaissance of his home was only meant to confirm, or disprove, his involvement, and so she threw herself into the search.

She looked in on a pair of bedrooms, a study, library, bathroom . . . none of them familiar.

"I believe," Mr. Ioannidis murmured from the living room, startling Sandra, "you'll find what you're looking for behind *this* door."

Whirling, Sandra found him beside a closed door she hadn't explored. She didn't pause as she hurried to his side. As she neared, he leaned on the door, opening it, and then stood back as she raced past him.

The massive wooden bed was exactly as it had been in her vision.

Shaking her head in denial of this fact, Sandra backed out of the room.

"If you'd be so kind as to indulge me for a moment, Miss Pares," Mr. Ioannidis murmured as he moved to the open wine bottle. "I owe you an explanation."

She looked at him, a puzzled frown on her face.

He poured two glasses and set hers across the table from where he settled himself.

"I didn't put on perfume this morning," she whispered from where she stood.

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I was watching you."

Mentally reeling, Sandra's mind flew through her morning routine, and she imagined worse case scenario while aloud she demanded. "What do you mean? How were you watching me?"

"In the same way you've been seeing my thoughts when they involve you. Random flashes into someone else's mind. I didn't set out to watch you; it just happened. Just like it's happening to you."

Comprehension hit her like a slap. "You were imagining. . . ."

"Yes."

So it wasn't the future, per se.

She was almost disappointed.

"But how?" she managed to stammer.

"I'm not human," he replied as blandly as possible. "I'm from a race of creatures that are almost as old as the Earth. My species is magical in nature and owing to my weakened state last night . . . this magic touched you. An unstable link formed between us. Please accept my sincere apology, Miss Pares.

"I'm also sure you won't believe a word I'm saying. You'll conclude that you met a certifiable eccentric and will move on without further thought on the matter. This is as it should be and cannot be helped. Again, Miss Pares, I'm . . ."

"Sandra."

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Sandra. Please call me Sandra."

Bemused, Mr. Ioannidis could only blink at her.

"When we were dancing," she went on, "what were we dancing to?"

It was a moment before he managed to whisper, "Biber."

"Hmm."

Silence reigned for a full minute before Sandra moved to her glass and lowered herself onto the sofa. Another minute passed as she sipped her wine. When she set the glass down, she looked into the lone eye of her host.

"Is it permanent?"

"The link?"

"Hmm."

"I don't believe so."

Sandra looked across the room and softly concluded, "That's too bad."

The sound of his glass dropping onto the table made her smile.

II

Mr. Ioannidis leapt to his feet as the tide of wine raced across the leather-top table. Sandra cried out in alarm, and together they sprinted for the kitchen. She paused long enough to locate the sink and then a sponge, before turning to retrace her steps. Her host was barring the doorway, his hand out for the sponge.

“Please let me handle this. You’re my guest . . .”

“And while we stand here, the wine is making for the carpet.”

She was grinning as she slipped past him. Dropping to her knees beside the table, she made short work of the task, squeezing spilled wine into the empty glass. Mr. Ioannidis completed her efforts, drying everything in her wake.

“Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t thank me,” she chuckled, rocking back. “I’m the one who caused the spill! You should throw me out for all the grief I’ve caused you, and yet here we are, playing house.”

He looked up and smiled weakly. “You’re right,” he agreed, his voice rife with misery, “and so I must ask you to leave.”

Hurt and surprised, Sandra met his gaze, silently demanding an explanation.

“I believe the link will only be in place as long as my wound lasts,” he continued, ignoring her implied request. “Rest assured that I will police my thoughts more closely than I have over the last few hours . . .”

“Why?” Sandra croaked, her eyes sparkling with tears. “What did I say?”

“Sandra,” he soothed, “you’re a very beautiful woman, from a very powerful family. You’re also engaged and orbiting in spheres I don’t aspire to. You’ve suggested that my fantasies haven’t offended you, but encouragement on your part will only lead to my eventual unhappiness. Surely you can see this. I’m truly flattered you found me even remotely attractive and went to the trouble to locate me as well, but this is the end. It has to be.”

She opened her mouth to protest, to point out just how . . . right he was. Bemused, she sat on her heels while he called the doorman and asked for her car to be brought around. It seemed mere moments before she was again behind the wheel, and her host had disappeared into the elevator.

Fighting off tears of disappointment, Sandra moved the car into traffic.

* * * *

"I called you a dozen times today," Jerry hissed in her ear as they made their way around the dance floor. "I know what you think of me, but could you at least make an effort to *pretend* you like me? It'd make your father happy."

Sandra allowed her gaze to languidly drift across the room as she ignored the question. They had covered this topic more times than was necessary, and now was not the time for another screaming match. Jerry tightened his grip on her hand, silently demanding her attention, and Sandra continued to disregard him.

Her mind was in a midtown apartment, endlessly cleaning up spilt wine.

"Do you think the band knows anything by Biber?" she suddenly asked, blinking at Jerry as if she had only just woken up.

"Who?" he hissed with annoyance.

"Biber. I guess not."

"Are you feeling all right?" he frowned, confused by her disinterest.

"Hmm?"

"You've been acting weird since last night."

Sandra paused, pulling Jerry to a halt. "No," she announced. "I'm not. In fact, I'm leaving. I have a headache, and I'm going home."

"I'll take you . . ."

"No, you won't. You'll stay here and flirt with whomever daddy's talking to. It's what you do best."

Without another word, Sandra disengaged from his clutches and made for the bar. She didn't doubt her father would be there. He always lingered near the one place in the room everyone visited at least once.

Anthony Pares was there, entertaining the usual audience of sycophants. As with all toadies, they only wanted the Pares' money and would laugh at her father's jokes until the wee hours. This crowd appeared better behaved than most she observed, but then, the night was young.

Gripping her father's arm to get his attention, she flashed him a weak smile and leaned to his ear.

"I'm sorry, darling, but I'm leaving. I have a brilliant headache."

Without missing a beat, or dropping his smile, he softly countered, "What did he do this time?"

"Almost killed a man with the Porsche. I'll forgive him in a month or two, but until then, I have a headache."

"Princess, you have a lot to learn."

"Yes, but not tonight, daddy, not tonight. I love you."

"I love you, too," he said aloud, kissed her cheek, and won a ripple of approving coos from those watching.

Sandra drove directly to Philip Ioannidis' apartment building, parked the car in a nearby lot and prowled the street before the lobby, hoping for a glimpse of a man who lived fifteen stories above her. She couldn't think of a reason for this side trip, other than a consuming desire to be near him. It was selfish, she knew, and disrespectful, but no matter how she scolded herself, she didn't move towards the car.

When the biting cold finally claimed all the warmth from her feet, she decided to enter the lobby, warm herself, and leave. Clearly he was in bed, where he should be, and she was behaving like a schoolgirl with a crush.

As she neared the building, she was surprised to be greeted by the doorman.

"Miss Pares," he called cheerful. "I'm afraid Mr. Ioannidis isn't back yet. Would you like to wait inside?"

Recovering quickly, she smiled in reply. "Yes, please. It's Andrew, isn't it?"

He nodded, pulling the door open for her. "It shouldn't be much longer; they went out just before nine."

"They?"

"Mr. Ioannidis and Mr. Danas. They usually go to the Aegean for dinner on Friday nights. I didn't think Mr. Ioannidis would go, owing to his accident, but he called for a car at his usual time."

He guided her to a chair on the far side of the reception desk where a small space heater valiantly struggled to accomplish the impossible. As she folded into the seat, he looked towards the door.

"That's probably him now," Andrew offered helpfully and hurried to his job.

Torn between fright and flight, Sandra suddenly felt the full weight of her infamy. Mr. Ioannidis had kindly asked her to keep her distance, and she hadn't lasted five hours.

Blocked from the door by the desk, she turned away and vainly hoped to remain undiscovered. She heard Mr. Ioannidis speaking to someone, gently insisting that he was fine and could make it to his apartment unaided.

“Would you help Mr. Danas to the taxi please, Andrew?” he concluded.

As the door thumped closed, he raised his voice. “Your perfume gives you away.”

Sandra’s eyes rolled closed but she faced her mortification and rose, turning towards him. “Did you watch me put it on tonight?”

“Go home, Miss Pares.”

She didn’t move, and he sagged slightly. “Please don’t make me insist. Andrew hasn’t thrown someone out in years.”

Her eyes widened at the implication, but still she didn’t move. She couldn’t.

Recalling the vision of them together in bed, she met his gaze and gasped with alarm.

He was gripping the desk, his lone eye wide and his pupil a mere pinpoint.

“Philip!” she shrieked, hurrying to support him.

Andrew was suddenly at her side. “Mr. Ioannidis! Should I call an ambulance?” he demanded, draping the stumbling man’s arm across his shoulder.

But Mr. Ioannidis raised his head enough to find his unwelcome guest as he hissed.

“Go home, Sandra!”

Tears were threatening again as she wailed, “I can’t leave you!”

Struggling to stand on his own, the ailing man looked at Andrew. “Please call the police.”

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, Sandra cried for an hour. Guilt and disappointment battled within her heart and poured down her face in a steady stream. When she was too exhausted to go on, she rolled onto her side and thought of how weak he looked as Andrew helped him to the elevator . . .

With a gasp her eyes flew open. He looked like she must have when she suffered from their shared thoughts. She had just imaged them in bed, looked up, and he was reeling!

Their shared visions worked both ways!

Panting and numb from the implications, Sandra tried to think of what to do. Could she seduce him with her mind? Should she call him and let him know *she knew*? Or, should she do as he asked and leave him out of her life?

Her miserable life.

For a moment, all thought of Philip Ioannidis evaporated as her mind flew back through her life. Thrust into the horrible recollection of her sister's suicide; her mother's excruciating battle with, and eventual loss to, cancer; and her father's eternal task of proving his self worth, Sandra moaned aloud and pushed herself up and out of bed. She wanted a drink. She wanted to wash her face. She wanted to be another person . . .

Halfway across the room she landed in a heap on the floor, unable to walk any farther. For several minutes she lay still and sobbed her heartache into the carpet.

And then he was caressing her shoulder, carefully raising her up. Warm arms wrapped around her, engulfing her in a delicate mist of cologne, and shielding her in a protective embrace. His hand gently drew her head down against his chest and stroked her hair as he cradled her. Twisting, she pressed her face against him to hide her tears.

Sandra wondered, when the flash was over, if *she* had created it, or him.

'Philip?'

Sleep, Sandra.

And she did.

When she awoke the next morning she was in bed with no idea how she had gotten there. Her thoughts flew to Mr. Ioannidis, wondering if he was awake yet. He didn't seem the indolent type, and she imagined him in his kitchen, cautiously preparing breakfast as he learned to work with his new handicap. She wondered what he did for a living, and if he had to work on Saturdays. Did he have a girlfriend? She guessed not, owing to the doorman's reaction to her. Andrew hadn't acted like she needed to be hidden from a jealous lover.

Careful to keep her thoughts on him alone, she indulged in a few minutes of reflection. She saw him kneeling beside the wheelchair as he handed her the cup of water, she saw him hurrying to the kitchen to get her some wine, and then he was opening his bedroom door . . .

Hastily she forced her mind away from this train of thought. Instead she wondered just how much of her day he was seeing, and if there was some way she could approach him, some token she could present him that would prove her sincerity.

Her first thought was the most obvious, and it was the one she had been hoping for a reason to carry out.

She would break off the engagement.

Rolling across the bed towards the nightstand, she found the clock and reached for the phone. It was just after nine, which meant that her father would already be at the office. She dialed his private line and was surprised to get his voice mail. Hanging up, she redialed and got Ms. Blass on the second ring. "Good morning!" she gushed at the secretary. "Is my father in?"

"He's in a meeting. May I take a message?"

"I'm not sure. Would you see if he has any plans for lunch?"

"The only free time he has today is from 10:30 to 11."

"Pencil me in, please," Sandra laughed, throwing off the blanket and sitting up. In a minute, she was out of bed and had turned on her computer. While it warmed up, she stripped and made for the shower.

Her internet search on Philip Ioannidis informed her that he was one of the curators at the Met. He worked in the Classics Department.

"Ioannidis, Danas . . . dinner at the Aegean," she mused, and thought of his accent. "He's Greek! Am I blind or what?"

At 10:20 she relinquished her car to the valet and hurried for the elevator. As she entered the anteroom to her father's office, he was coming out to greet her.

"Feeling better?" he asked, kissing her cheek.

"Hmm."

"Hold my calls, Meryl, would you please?"

Turning to his daughter, he smiled and drew her into the office, closing the door behind him. "Did your gown arrive?" he asked amiably, placing her in a chair near the sunlit window.

"Yes, I'm all set for tonight, thanks."

"You don't need anything from the vault?"

"I got everything I need, daddy," she assured him with a smile. "Look, I know you're busy, and I want to say what I have to say quickly so we can move on, okay?"

A look of concern creased his features. "You're here with bad news?"

She turned to look out the window, her voice soft and measured as she declared, "I'm breaking off the engagement, daddy."

"No, you're not, princess."

Shocked, Sandra turned to face her father. His eyes were closed, and he was shaking his head.

"But . . ."

"No buts. Jerry is the perfect match for you, and that's the end of this discussion."

"Daddy . . ."

"No! You'll marry Jerry or you're out on the street. Do I make myself clear?"

"But I don't love him! Hell, I don't even *like* him!"

"Love and marriage have nothing to do with each other."

Her eyes narrowed as her back straightened. "You can't marry me to someone I don't love because you think it's what's best for business! I should be more important than the bottom line!"

"Of course you are! You know you are! But Jerry's personality and situation are exactly right for you. Trust me, princess, I know."

"I am not a princess, daddy, I'm your daughter. And I'm *telling* you, I'm not asking. I will *not* marry Jerry Fleischman. Period. Throw me out, I don't care. Maybe on the street I'll find someone who'll love me for *me*, and not for my father's money!"

"Someone like Philip Ioannidis?"

Surprised, she frowned at him. "What about Philip Ioannidis?"

"You had Brenner look him up yesterday. Why?"

"He's the man that Jerry hurt with the Porsche."

"That's not what Jerry tells me."

"And you'd rather believe him . . . I see." She paused to consider the implications. Rising, Sandra turned towards the door. "Thank you, Mr. Pares, for your time. I won't trouble you again."

III

The message from her father, that he was sorry and that she was free to do as she pleased, was delivered amidst two dozen pink roses.

Happily, Sandra pulled the ring from her finger, called Jerry and told him it was over. She welcomed him to come collect the preposterous diamond and said that yes, she would listen to his pleas, but what was the point?

“Jerry, I told you that I would marry you, but I never said I would like you, and as you pointed out last night, I can’t even pretend. Why torture ourselves?”

Sounding completely miserable, he told her to keep the ring and hung up.

Sandra called her chauffeur, Dave, gave him the ring and told him to deliver it to the Fleischman house. As she watched the car drive away, she felt better than she had in months. Scooping up the phone, she called the florist and sent her father four dozen red roses with the simple message: I love you.

Preparations for the evening commenced four hours before the charity opera. The emotional high Sandra was on continued as she told the hairdresser to weave pink roses, and her mother’s pearls into her hair. While she had her makeup applied, her personal assistant reviewed the guest list with her. Back at the house she dressed in her new, pink silk gown and then hid it beneath a cream satin cape. Fortified, she climbed into the limousine, called her father and asked him to meet her.

As her car pulled up before the opera house, her father was waiting for her. In the press of people, her mind was once again across town with thoughts of how she longed for Mr. Ioannidis to be watching her now!

“I have a surprise for you,” he father purred in her ear as she slipped her arm into his and willingly trailed beside him.

Smiling to the crowd, she leaned towards him. “I don’t need surprises, daddy. I only need you.”

“But you’ll like this one.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ll tell you at the intermission, how’s that? This way you can think about it and maybe guess.”

“Is it something I *can* guess?”

“No,” he chuckled as they entered the theater.

The first hour was spent smiling for the cameras, shaking hands, and putting faces to the names on the guest list. When the house lights announced the eminent beginning of the opera, her father again collected her arm, and they made for their box.

“Did you see everyone you needed to?” she asked as they mounted the stairs.

“Almost. I’ll have to be. . .”

“At the bar during intermission,” she concluded for him, laughing as she squeezed his arm. “How many people will be in the box with us?”

“Actually, I have to sit with the Pinzers.”

“Daddy!”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “It’s *Turandot*, princess. You know how you cry during *Nessun dorma*. Wouldn’t you rather be among strangers?”

“No!”

He continued laughing as they lingered by their box, talking to people and greeting friends. When the house lights flashed again, Sandra kissed her father as he handed her into the box and took his leave.

The usher held the door and the curtain as she entered the dim room and came face to face with Philip Ioannidis.

She was sure her astonishment was equal to his. For a moment they stood, staring at each other.

“Mr. Ioannidis!” Sandra stammered at long last, her gaze sweeping the room for other people, only to confirm that they were alone.

“Miss Pares,” he replied, bowing.

As he straightened, she saw that he had replaced his dressing with a simple black eye patch. Colorful bruising marred his cheek, but otherwise, he appeared fine. Very fine in fact. The gray hair she admired was gathered at the back of his neck. His tuxedo was the current fashion and fit him perfectly.

At a loss, Sandra forced herself to smile. “What an unexpected pleasure. I hope you aren’t doing too much in coming out tonight. You should be home, resting . . .”

“The museum received several tickets for this evening’s performance, and *oddly* my name was on the guest list. I freely admit I was more than a little surprised when I saw where *my* seat was and thought I detected your hand in my placement. I have since revised this assumption. You look as bewildered as I am.”

She met his gaze and nodded. "Forgive me, please, Mr. Ioannidis. I used a private detective to obtain your address yesterday, who in turn informed my father of my request. I'm sorry for forcing myself upon you in this way. My father said he had a surprise for me; I can only assume he meant you. Please, Mr. Ioannidis, if you would like to leave, I completely understand, and my car will take you home. I can't imagine what you're thinking, but I'm sure it can't be flattering, and I know it's deserved . . ."

"I was actually thinking," he interrupted her, looking up as the lights finally faded, "that if we don't take our seats we'll trip over each other in the dark."

He reached out, caught her hand, and bent to press his lips to her knuckles. "You look magnificent," he murmured against her skin.

His touch sent an electric current through her body and his kiss turned her legs to rubber. Sandra whispered her thanks and submitted to his direction as he drew her towards the ledge.

"I always cry during *Nessun dorma*," he softly confided as he placed her in her seat. He took a moment to make sure she had a program and glasses before he settled himself on her left. Sandra couldn't help but watch him, though she tried to not openly gawk. It was unfathomable that he was seated beside her, and would be for almost three uninterrupted hours.

"Sandra?"

Startled, she blinked at him. "Mr. Ioannidis?"

He chuckled and took her hand. "Call me Philip, please." His thumb brushed across the back of her hand, trailing fire, and gently pressed against the place where her engagement ring would have been. "I wanted to tell you . . . I thought you were very brave today."

For a lingering moment, the statement simply hung between them.

"You saw?" she finally whispered.

He nodded and made a soft noise of agreement.

"How much did you see?"

"You spelled my name wrong twice and have a birthmark on your left hip. . ."

Suddenly he moaned and hoarsely apologized as he released her hand and leaned heavily on the ledge.

This time she welcomed the blinding flash of light.

She saw them on the floor of the box, kissing with a passion that forced the air from her lungs. He was on top of her, and she looked down at the couple in the vision. Pink petals were scattered on the carpet, and her hands were wound into his hair.

Philip moaned again, and the vision faded.

“Miss Pares . . . Sandra, I’m so sorry. Forgive me, please, I beg . . .”

Closing her eyes, Sandra imagined herself dropping to her knees before him and stretching up to kiss his lips. The same flash came, and he gasped in response.

In the vision, he caught her in his arms, and their kiss deepened.

‘Yes!’ she mentally cried. ‘Please, Philip! Please!’

His burning mouth seared a path down her neck and she leaned back, granting him access to whatever he cared to kiss. Suddenly his hands rose up from her waist, lifting her breasts from below as he forced them together and dropped his face down to sweep his tongue over her skin.

I . . . must . . . stop!

‘No!’ she pleaded in his mind. ‘Please, Philip, please don’t!’

His vision self tugged at her dress, frantically trying to expose more of her skin to his ravenous mouth.

Sandra! I . . .

‘Please, Philip!’

He finally reached into the silk and caught a hardening nipple.

The Sandra of their vision cried out as an orgasm washed over her.

Drawing her out of the dress, Philip pushed her down between the seats and spent the remainder of the first half making love to her skin.

At the climax of the act they grudgingly agreed that they were going to have to stop or risk discovery. In the vision, they kissed until the final notes died away and then released each other.

Trembling and weak, the couple determined that circulating was out of the question, but drinks were mandatory. Sandra summoned the usher, ordered for them both, and prepared Philip for the inevitable meeting with her father.

“He *chose* Jerry for me,” she explained, fanning herself with her program. “He insisted. Like he said earlier, he thinks we’re an excellent match. I had no reason to protest, other than I thought Jerry was loathsome. But I love my father enough to have put up with him . . . until last night.

“You have to be aware of the fact,” she went on more earnestly, “that the second daddy learns I’m interested in *you*, which I am, by the way, *very* interested . . . but when he sees this, you’ll be placed under a microscope.”

He nodded gravely. “I understand.”

She gazed up at him, her eyes full of wonder. “Philip?”

He reclaimed her hand and kissed her palm. “I’m interested in you too,” he murmured.

This time she did slide from her chair and drop to her knees before him. Philip immediately leaned down to press his lips to hers. His arms were around her, drawing her closer as he slowly bent her back.

Sandra.

‘Hmm?’

Stay with me tonight.

‘Hmm . . .’

The meeting between father, daughter and Philip Ioannidis was mercifully short. Her father had been detained at the bar longer than he intended, and so there was very little time before the house lights were dimmed a second time. He smiled at them both, told Sandra he would see her sometime the next day, kissed her cheek and left them alone.

Back in the box, the couple sat and watched the opera while they sipped their drinks. When the long-awaited aria began, Philip imagined them standing together, his arms around her, and he sang along with the tenor, but for Sandra alone. As her father predicted, she did indeed cry, but these tears were unlike any she had ever shed before, and she reveled in their heat.

Once the song was over, and they had recovered from the flash, Sandra ordered her car. “Why wait for the crush? Let’s just go now.”

Philip agreed with a bow and offered her his arm.

In the lobby, Sandra left a note with the usher for her father—thanking him for her surprise—and wishing him a good night. While she did this, Philip claimed their coats and helped her with the yards of satin cream. He complimented her once again on her fairy tale appearance and escorted her to the waiting car.

When they were settled, Philip twisted to face Sandra. His expression was sober enough that she waited for him to speak.

“I have to ask you, Sandra Pares, why it is that you so easily accepted my explanation as to our link. Most women would have viewed me, at best, as a psychic stalker and run for their lives rather than calmly sip wine.”

She nodded in agreement. “You work in the Classics Department of the Met, correct?”

He inclined his head slightly.

“How many times have you been at a reception where you were approached by someone who shyly admitted that they were Cleopatra reborn? Or Caesar in other life? While I give you credit for a creative explanation, I don’t believe you can come close to the people I’ve met who claim to be from other planets, other universes or different planes of existence. When your father is a philanthropist, Mr. Ioannidis, you encounter all types. Your admission of being magical, and from another time, was nothing more than I expected.”

“Are you saying you don’t believe me?”

“I’m saying I don’t care where you came from. It’s not important to me. Feel free to tell me your mother was a jackal and your father a ball of wax; I don’t mind. What I am interested in is sitting in the car beside me. The rest is academic.”

“So if I tell you my father was a Unicorn and my mother a Roc, you’re willing to simply let it go?”

“Hmm.”

“And that in my natural form you would call me a Pegasus? None of this bothers you?”

“In what way will it impact on my regard for you?”

He heaved a sigh, shaking his head. “Who can say before you actually see me revert?”

“Do you have reason to revert? You seem to be a well-established curator with little or no reason to suddenly sprout wings and fly. Am I right? Seriously, when was the last time you were in your ‘natural form’?”

“Last night.”

Surprised, Sandra blinked at him. “Why last night?”

He looked down the length of the car. “I didn’t want you to sleep on the floor.”

Several minutes passed in silence as Sandra struggled with this intelligence. It was, truly, the last thing in the world she expected to hear, and she wasn't sure how it made her feel. He plainly believed he was telling the truth, and was offering proof. In her experience, the crackpots she encountered always found excuses to change the subject when pressed for evidence of their claims. Philip Ioannidis was practically challenging her to doubt him.

Sandra was suddenly on fire with the thought that he was indeed insane and where did that leave her? "How old are you?" she whispered fearfully.

"Just shy of four billion years old."

"Stop the car! Stop the car!"

IV

Grabbing his hand, she pulled Philip from the car and made for the park. The nearest entrance was a little way up the street, and she didn't hesitate as she marched towards the opening in the wall.

"May I ask what you're doing?" Philip ventured, righting himself and moving closer to her.

"I'm offering you a chance to prove your claim. If you can indeed make yourself into a Pegasus, then we can move forward; but if you can't . . . I'm calling you a taxi and we will never see each other again." She stopped and looked up at him. "All right?"

He smiled, nodding in reply.

"You don't want to talk me out of it?" she demanded with no little surprise.

"I'd rather warn you about what to expect."

"Okay, warn me," she commanded as she resumed walking.

"In my beast form, I'm of average equine height, gray, like my hair, with white wings. My wings fold like raptor wings, so I can keep them against my sides, but to actually fly, I need either room to run, or to drop from a height. Vertical takeoffs are for foals."

"How did you do it last night?"

"My apartment is high enough."

She snorted. "Even I know that city apartment windows are jumpers. You couldn't possibly. . ."

“With money, all things are possible.”

“Are you rich?”

“I could buy and sell your father about three times.”

“And yet you go to work?”

“I want to be close to my home. Working with antiquities allows me to be, vicariously.”

“Then why live in New York?”

“Because I find the political climate in America more to my liking.”

They turned into the park, and he immediately pulled her towards the wall.

“It’s hard enough to find private space in Central Park,” he mumbled as he stepped over a mound of snow and lifted her up with the chuckled command, “Jump.” He carried her as easily as he might a child. “Let’s move over here,” he continued as he pointed into a tiny grove. “I glow slightly; if we’re in total darkness, I’ll be obvious.”

Sandra’s mind was reeling as he moved her around several trees, into the fringe of the golden streetlight. He was so confident and convincing was she was actually beginning to believe him, yet she was also positive that he was going to murder her. What choice did he have?

Placidly, she followed and struggled to make sense of it all.

When he was satisfied with their location, he turned to face her and dropped her hand.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he gently urged.

“I’m thinking I’m about to die,” she replied frankly.

Shaking his head, Philip laughed away this assertion. “Are you sure you want me to do this?”

“Are you sure you can?” she countered.

Philip Ioannidis of the Ranking, Phi, reverted to his Pegasus beast form.

In appearance, he was indeed equine, with the inexplicable exception of his massive, glowing, white wings. Sandra didn’t know enough about horseflesh to put a breed name to the magnificent beast before her, but she could admire his delicate legs and arched neck. His mane and tail were paler than his hide and looked invitingly silky. His coat was glossy in the wan light and it flashed as, birdlike, he preened under her regard.

Philip spread and lifted his wings, displaying them for her, then turned his pale eyes on Sandra Pares.

“Now tell me what you’re thinking.”

When Sandra regained consciousness, she was back in the car. Philip was seated beside her. The frown of concern on his face confused her.

“What happened?” she whispered, looking around in an effort to place herself.

“You fainted.”

She mulled this over for a moment. “Hardly what one would expect,” she wryly mused, “when one learns that the man she desires is actually a horse.”

“Pegasus, please. It’s rude to say horse.”

She blinked at him, her mind a tempest. It wasn’t until she realized the car was moving that she was able to grasp something tactile. “Where are you taking me?” she demanded.

“Home, Miss Pares. I believe you’ve had enough excitement for one night.”

“But I don’t want to go home,” she whined, rounding on him.

“I want you to. You need time, Sandra,” he soothed, stroking her hair. “You can’t do it all in one night.”

“I told you,” she insisted, struggling to sit up, “I don’t care where you come from!”

“You say that now, but what happens in a month? A year?”

“You tell me,” she murmured.

His expression turned soft as he smiled at her. “I’ve been married countless times in my long life, Miss Pares. I know the sorrow that comes with being ageless, and yet, after billions of years, I still find myself unable to resist when Love turns her eyes on me.”

Elated, Sandra tried to clamp down on her excitement. “Do you love me?” she asked breathlessly.

“I *could* love you, Sandra, very easily.”

She reached for him, and Philip sat forward, drawing her against his side. Sandra wrapped her arms around his neck and dropped her head onto his shoulder.

“I’ve never felt like this before,” she softly confided. “I thought I was in love once, and what I feel when I’m near you makes me think that I couldn’t have been more wrong.”

"You don't love me, Sandra. You desire me; that much is clear. Love, true love, takes time. Believe me."

"I do," she breathed with conviction. "Completely."

The car stopped before the front door, and she sat up, reaching to let them out.

"Please come in," she pleaded, throwing herself from the car in her haste and turning to make sure he couldn't just close the door. "You can stay as long as you'd like. My driver can take you back to the city whenever you're ready."

"I don't need a car, Sandra," he reminded her as he willingly followed.

Eagerly, she hurried him towards the house, afraid that he would take flight before her eyes, and she would never see him again. In the foyer, she relinquished his hand only long enough to remove her cape before turning to confirm he was actually staying. Philip smiled at her sudden insecurity and said he would keep his coat.

"If I have to leave from another exit, it's better to have it close so I don't leave anything behind."

She digested this information for a moment and then looked up at him. "You *really* are magical," she murmured thoughtfully.

"Yes, I *really* am," he agreed with a grin.

"And your wives believed you too?"

"Of course. I don't believe in secrets."

She laughed as she led him up the wide staircase to the second floor. "And they married you anyway?"

"So far I have a perfect track record."

"That's because of your dashing good looks," she teased. "You should always wear an eye patch. Women respond well to rakes and pathos."

"What makes you think I don't?"

This question made her stop and laugh as she turned back to face him. For a moment she stood on the stair above him, gazing into his eye. Slowly her gaze dropped and she leaned forward even as he tilted his head. As their lips met, she melted against him.

'Philip.'

Sandra?

'I want to stand here and kiss you for the next six years.'

And after six years?

'We should move up a step and repeat.'

He smiled against her mouth and reached his arms around her waist. *I'll do whatever you'd like, if it'll make you happy. But I should warn you. . .*

Instantly wary, Sandra drew back and searched his face for a hint as to his *next* confession. "What?" she asked aloud.

"I have a lipstick fetish," he responded in kind, chuckling at himself.

She snorted at him. "Is that all? I have a developing equus complex. I think I win."

Turning, she caught his hand and pulled him towards her room. "Come on. You can pick the color."

Sandra fluidly opened the door, reached in to snap on the light and spun back to say something to her guest. Her bright eyes mirrored the smile on her lips.

Looking past her, into the still dark room, Philip suddenly stiffened, threw his arms around her, swung her around and pinned her against the wall beside the door. Sputtering, Sandra indignantly demanding to know what he was doing.

"Sandra, you can't go in there," he hissed, but then better modulated his voice. "Please, trust me. Call your father and the police."

The color drained from her face as she stared up at him.

"Philip," she whispered fearfully.

He smiled weakly, placed a kiss on her forehead and stayed pressed against her as he whispered soothingly. "It's okay, Sandra. You're all right; I'm all right." Reaching into his pocket, he drew out his cell phone and handed it to her. "Call your father and tell him to come home. Please."

She dialed the number, put the phone to her ear, looked up at him, and burst into tears. Philip quickly pulled her trembling body against his chest and held her while she sobbingly asked her father to come home.

"I don't know, daddy," she panted. "Philip saw something in my room, I didn't see it. He says I should call the police." She nodded to whatever his reply was and then held the phone out to Philip. "He wants to speak to you."

"Philip, Anthony Pares. Can you tell me what you saw?"

"Not without causing trauma." He kept his voice neutral, staring down into Sandra's wide eyes.

"You think it was Jerry?"

"Doubtless."

“Can you take Sandra to your home?”

“Of course, but I believe the police will want to question me.”

“Don’t worry about the police! I’ll give them your address. It’s not like you’re leaving the country. Just take her somewhere safe!”

“I’ll call you again when we’re at my apartment.”

“Fine, fine.”

“Should we call the police?”

“I’ll take care of that, the commissioner’s right here. Just take Sandra and go!”

Philip urged Sandra away from the door, gently pulling her back towards the stairs. As he did, he dialed his apartment building.

“Twin Mirrors, Russell speaking, how may I help you?”

“Russell, it’s Philip Ioannidis . . . where’s Andrew?”

“Mr. Ioannidis! Thank heaven! Andrew’s in the hospital. A bunch of punks with baseball bats came in looking for you and beat Andrew pretty badly. He managed to lock down the elevators . . .”

“Are the police there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please give them my cell number, but let them know that very likely the men who are responsible know it as well. Tell them I have Sandra Pares. I’ve already spoken to her father, who’s with the commissioner. Miss Pares and I are heading back into Manhattan. When we’re settled, I’ll contact them.”

“Yes, sir.”

He hung up, looked down at Sandra and kissed her damp cheek. “I believe that seeing my natural form has been eclipsed by Jerry’s petty revenge. And I vainly thought that I was enough for one night.” He hugged her tightly and then started down the stairs. “It’s humbling to be so thoroughly upstaged.”

“You’re trying to make me feel better?” she whispered, tripping along beside him.

“I’m not?”

“I’m scared, Philip,” she murmured.

“And you should be,” he firmly agreed, “which is why we’re taking your car. The less staff involved, the better off we’ll be.”

“Hmm.”

He paused to kiss her again, flipped open his phone, and started dialing.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“Trenton.”

“What?”

“Car, two cells, two cards.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, you could say hello occasionally, Douglas. It won’t kill you.”

“Don’t call me Douglas. My mother calls me Douglas.”

“Maybe this is your mother.”

“Then her voice got a *lot* more feminine.”

Philip scooped up the satin cape as they hurried through the foyer and made for the garage. “Where is the staff?” he asked, mildly surprised that they hadn’t seen anyone.

“Off. We should have been at the opera until midnight and then the reception at the Dodge Foundation until 3 at the earliest. When we’re out like that we typically give them the night off.”

He grunted and quickened his pace.

As they drew near the door that connected the house to the garage, Sandra slowed. Instantly alert, Philip slowed as well. “What is it?”

“The lights in the garage are out,” she whispered fearfully, retreating a step.

“And they shouldn’t be?”

“Not with daddy’s car still out . . . and where’s Dave with *my* car?”

“Come on,” he hissed, turning them back towards the front door.

His phone was back in his hand, and he hit redial.

Douglas picked up right away. “When?”

“One hour.”

“Where?”

“Jersey City.”

“What?”

“The same.”

“Two.”

“One!”

“Are you crazy? I can’t get that together in one hour.”

“Yes you can. I know you can, Douglas. One hour.”

“Are you flying in?”

“I’m afraid it’s my only option.”

“You amaze me.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Philip dropped the cape back in the hall, swept his coat off and wrapped it around Sandra.

“Can you ride a horse?” he demanded as he closed the buttons.

She blinked in confusion. “Not well.”

“Good enough,” he murmured as he reached into the pockets, removing gloves, which he watched her put on. “Sandra, listen to me. I’m going to revert and fly you out of here. It’s going to be unbelievably cold, so we’ll take it in stages, but right now I think it’s our best option. Are you all right with this?”

“Hmm.”

“You have to concentrate, Sandra, all right? Promise me.”

She nodded again and threw her arms around him, hugging him hard.

Philip smiled and returned the embrace briefly before making for the door.

Out on the lawn, he reverted in the shade of some bushes, kept his wings tucked and called her to mount. He knelt, allowing her to scramble up with greater ease. Sandra discovered that his wings were practically at his shoulders so her options were to perch astride the base of his neck, or sit behind the wings all together.

“Sit forward,” he cautioned her. “You can’t ride behind the wings, they’ll knock you off.”

Sandra squirmed forward and declared herself as ready as possible. Philip ordered her to wrap her arms around his neck and hang on. He trotted out onto the driveway, and felt her bouncing uncomfortably. He knew it couldn’t be helped and broke into a canter as soon as possible. Unfolding his wings, he threw them wide and quickened his pace. In the distance he could hear the approaching police cars so he pumped his wings twice. Sandra screamed with alarm and tightened her grip as he skipped, forced his wings down, skipped again, and swept into the air.

V

Philip flew as low as he dared and alighted after only twenty minutes. Sandra was barely responsive, which didn't surprise him, and he needed to judge how she was managing the cold.

There was very little snow on the tarred roof, but whole lakes of water, with their countless tributaries, had collected in every depression. Philip quickly moved into the inky shadow of a decorative water tank and reverted, twisting to catch Sandra as he did.

"My God, you're frozen!" he hissed as she slumped against him. Her lips were blue and she was valiantly fighting the chattering of her teeth.

Quickly opening the coat, he reached in and crushed her to his chest.

"My father's element is fire," he breathed in her ear, "so I can do a little fire magic," and he ignited his internal furnace. Warmth flooded his frosted limbs and Sandra moaned softly, turning her face against his neck.

"And your mother?" she whispered.

Grateful that she was alert, his grip on her tightened. "As you would expect, air. We most closely resemble our father, but emulate our mother."

"That's a very pretty thought," she murmured dreamily. "Philip . . . I can't feel my hands."

He leaned away from her, pulling his gloves off and placing her hands on his chest. "No more flying for you. I'll warm you some more and then we'll go down to the subway. We need to get on the Path to Jersey City. Douglas will meet us there."

"It sounds like you've done this sort of thing before."

"Not for a very long time, but like Douglas, I've *helped* others. You can think of us as a sort of Underground Railway for magical creatures. Once we're in Jersey City, we'll be safer."

"But you wanted to go to Trenton," she sighed, snuggling against him.

"I wanted distance between you and Jerry."

She moaned softly. "You're not going to tell me what you saw, are you?"

"It would only upset you, darling, so no."

A nervous giggle escaped her lips, and she rubbed against him. "You called me darling. That's sweet."

His cell phone started vibrating then, and they both scrambled for the pockets of the coat. Sandra found the phone, glanced at the caller ID, and flipped it open.

"Hello daddy," she said, casting Philip an apologetic glance. She listened for a second and then held the phone out. "He wants you. He's frantic."

"Then he's either seen your room, or has been told," Philip affirmed as he took the phone back.

"Anthony," Philip began before the other man could speak, "It's very likely that this number is known. You should be careful of what you say."

"We've had a call from the police at the house," the older man replied with a note of panic in his voice.

"I assumed as much."

"Do you *know* what you saw?"

"Enough."

"I'm counting on you to take care of my little girl!" His voice was laced with desperation as he fought his fear.

"I promise, Anthony," Philip assured him. "When we're safe, I will call you again . . . in a round about manner."

"I understand. Hurry, please."

Philip handed the phone back to Sandra. "Talk to your father, darling. Let him know you're all right. He desperately needs you right now."

Her eyes filled with tears as she nodded and did as he suggested. She forced herself to smile as she spoke, telling her father how she loved her surprise, how wonderful the opera was, and that she did indeed cry when he said she would. Laughingly, she complained that Philip was no gentleman, as he hadn't yet asked her if she wanted anything to eat. She ended with assurances of her trust in her present company, and the promise that she would see him again soon.

When she hung up, she cried for a moment, and Philip simply held her during her breakdown. After a minute, he warned her that they needed to move again so she nodded, sniffing back tears, and pushed herself upright. As she rose, she worked on buttoning the coat again.

Then came a sound she had never heard before. She imagined that it was like the scratching of a thousand ravenous rats. Philip gasped, scooped her up, and ran for the edge of the roof.

“Trust me, and don’t scream!” he snapped in her ear as he reached the edge and leapt off the rooftop.

Sandra saw his wings—but still felt his arms—as she blacked out.

Shock kept Sandra asleep for the duration of the train ride. Philip carried her from station to station and when he reached Jersey City, he was thrilled to see Douglas waiting on the platform.

“She looks exactly like Josephine,” was Douglas’ greeting as he lifted the sleeping girl from Philip’s arms.

“Yes, she does—with the same spoiled nature.”

“Well, you’re nothing if not consistent,” the large man chuckled. “I like the patch. Is that new, or are you finally giving in and copying me?”

Philip smiled, but went on in a business-like manner. “We were chased.”

“Goblins?”

“Who else?”

“Damn scabs.”

“You know I agree.”

“Any word from Danas?”

“I’d rather not involve him.”

“You’re the boss. The car is over there.” Douglas gestured with his chin towards a black, Mercedes sedan. The fog of exhaust told Philip the car was running, so there would be no delays.

“And the cell?”

“In the car, charging.”

“We’re going to need clothes,” Philip went on, opening the back door so that Douglas could slip Sandra into the warm interior.

“You’ll be staying at the Hyatt; the GPS will show you, and I’ll send over what you need.”

“You’re not coming?”

Douglas laughed as he closed the door. “Please! I’d be a third wheel. Everything you need is in the glove compartment. I know you’ll call if you need.”

“Thanks, Douglas.”

“Always a pleasure to see you, Philip. Now go get some sleep.”

Once he put Sandra to bed, Philip took the cell and settled himself in the bathroom with the door open so he could watch her. He called the precinct closest to his apartment and was amazed to be put through to the commissioner at once. The man on the line grunted that they were expecting his call and there was a pause while Anthony Pares was summoned. During the lull, Philip leaned out to make sure Sandra was still sleeping. The link between them was quiet so he concluded she was and tried to relax. When he finally heard her father’s voice, however, he was instantly alert.

“Anthony? Philip. We’re in Jersey City, at the Hyatt. Sandra’s asleep. She’s had a long night.”

“I’m back at the house,” her father said, “and can’t believe what that monster did! I’m just glad Sandra didn’t see any of it.”

“If I remember correctly, the rumor was that Sandra found her sister’s body.”

“Yes, she did, and of course Jerry knew about it. He did quite a job recreating it all.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that again,” Philip whispered with feeling. “All I could see something hanging from the light fixture, and it was enough. I’m sorry, Anthony, very sorry for your loss.”

“I blame myself,” the man moaned. “My wife was dying and I didn’t spend enough time with the girls.”

“You did what you had to, I’m sure. To look back and say you’d do things differently is only torturing yourself.”

“Judy was the only who was allowed to call Sandra, Sandy. They were inseparable.” Anthony finished miserably, his thoughts lost in the past. There was a moment of silence and then he sucked in a deep breath. “I’d love to get my hands on his neck! That *bastard!*”

“They’ll never pin this on him,” Philip commiserated.

“I know! He’s already made a statement to the press from his family’s house in the Hamptons. He announced the break up so we’d all know he was *far* from the scene.”

“I’d like to do likewise, if Sandra is amenable, Anthony. I have a villa outside of Athens . . .”

Again there was silence. Finally, Anthony made a noise of agreement. “I’ll send Sandra’s passport to Kennedy.”

“You can check with the Twin Mirrors, they have all my contact information. I’ll let them know to expect your call and have them send my documents as well.”

“I can’t believe this has happened,” he moaned once again, “but I’m grateful for your help, Philip.”

Philip rose then, moving to look down at Sandra. “I’ll take care of her, Anthony, I swear.”

“I don’t know why, but I believe you, Philip. Call me when you get to the villa.”

“We will.”

He closed the phone, placed it on the nightstand and carefully lowered himself onto the bed. For a lingering moment he simply watched Sandra sleep. Finally, he whispered aloud the keening of his heart.

“You’ve found me again, human child. It’s been eighty-three years, dearest, and I’ve missed you so very much.” He bent and kissed Sandra’s cheek. “So very much.”

Sandra stirred, blinking at him. “Am I dreaming?”

“Yes, darling,” he whispered, smiling as he stroked her cheek. “It was all a dream. Go back to sleep and you can tell me about it in the morning.”

She smiled, snuggling deeper into the pillows.

Reaching up, Philip picked crushed petals from her hair.

THE END

PATTIE LAWLER is the editor in chief of *Craved in Stone: Armchair Egyptology* and a former staff writer for *A Druid’s Progress* and *Metro Druid News*. Her debut in *Simulacrum* marks her successful foray into fiction.

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SLEEPER

JANE GWALTNEY

An uppermost window sustains the wake
panes cross-hair divided
rattled by baritone fists—

Booming volleys advance
(Flashlit stingrays
bewildering the dawn)

One blink

Clouds dump their payloads
of loose liquid change
the Suncatcher's scorched jewels spinning
from the rim of the blackest of holes

Inside that vacuum
exists the eye of each and every storm
A pupil of God . . .
or *demon*

The house shrugs
pulls in a breath
flapping its shutter walls—
lifting . . .

A nod

and the Suncatcher re-covers
his lens of white hot coal

He dozes

JANE GWALTNEY lives in St. Louis, Missouri and is a member of the Midwest Writers of Horror. Her poetry, fiction, and art appear in *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Wicked Hollow*, *Whispers From The Shattered Forum*, *Science Fiction Poetry Review*, *Scared Naked Magazine*, *EOTU*, *Redsine*, and more. She has twice received Honorable Mention in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.

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FEATURED INTERVIEW

STEPHEN HICKMAN



VITAL STATS

Age: 56

Country: US of A

On The Web: www.stephenhickman.com

Medium: Oil color for painting, poly-form sculpting compound for 3-D work.

Training: The elements and principles of design—Mr. Fletcher Proctor, of the Alexandria School System. From there on, self taught.

Influences: Too many to list but a fraction—primarily the Roy G. Krenkel and Frank Frazetta covers on the 60's reprints of the Edgar Rice Burroughs books, Alphonse Mucha, Jose Segrelles, MOST of the Orientalists, several of the Pre-Raphaelites such as Waterhouse and Millais. Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac, Sidney Sime and Harry Clarke. Several Russians, notably Ilya Repin and Ivan Shishkin.

How long have you been working as a professional illustrator?

I've been making a living from my artwork for about 35 years at this point, counting the five years or so I spent doing T-shirts for THE SHIRT EXPLOSION in the early 70's. I started doing cover paintings for paperback reprints of the classic SF reprints in 1975, and I've been doing cover illustration ever since.

At the same time, I've always done paintings that had nothing to do with illustration as such, but were more personal, and so probably more fine art than illustration—these are generally images that come to me, and that I do in sketch form which end up as a finished painting sometimes years later. These paintings are more classical and elaborate, but primarily visionary and imaginative in inception.

And in between these two categories, as it were, are the scenes from certain writings that are so ideal for fantasy scenes that I just have to do them—Tolkien is a wellspring of beautiful imagery, and then there is Clark Ashton Smith, A. Merritt, Bram Stoker, H. Ryder Haggard, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Do you prefer working in traditional mediums like oils as opposed to computer art?

Oil color is what I personally regard as a 'serious' medium, and all the major work I do is in oil. For a long time, about half of my cover work [generally the SF subjects] was done in acrylic. If you look at the Man-Kzin War covers, you can see where I made the transition to oil at number VI, and started doing ALL my work in oil.

Jim Gurney and I have a term for artists that hold out for traditional mediums—THE PRE-DIGITALITES. This is not to say that I do not enjoy scanning a painting now and

then and working it over in Photoshop, if the subject matter suggests it. The most extreme example would be the cover for *The Magazine of H. P. Lovecraft* in the Lovecraft section of my website—it is from a story called *The Colour Out of Space*, and what better way to suggest extra-dimensional colors than with a computer?

About '93, Baen Books issued two versions of a Jack Chalker cover painting I did for them, *The Changewinds*, where the magical nature of the subject matter lent itself to a really weird color treatment.

So—whatever keeps my interest levels up. Nothing digital will ever replace the presence of a really first-class oil painting, however.

What are some of your favorite Fantasy/SF things—movies, books, conventions, TV? What could they be doing better . . . ?

In all of these fields of endeavor, what it comes down to is Artistic Vision. Movies are the ultimate fusion of light, music, performance art, and art design, and there s nothing more embarrassing than a movie that has everything going for it but Vision—generally it is the script that is the most crippling detriment, but whether in the script of the direction, the Vision HAS to be there if the movie is to be an artistic statement.

I use movies as the most dramatic example, but this holds true with everything that can be called Art—writing, painting, music, acting, everything. SO, the answer to the question is: I can't tell anyone what they could be doing better, except do the absolute best they can on whatever it is they are doing. I could say what I might have done differently, but then it wouldn't be their Vision any more. But, the obvious things like Try To Avoid The Obvious, Leave Out The Canned Laugh Track, Don't Rely On Digital Effects To Get By, Don't Skimp On The Script—things like that would really help.

Oh yes, here's a good one—overdoing something does NOT necessarily make it better.



Tell us about your creative process—where do you find inspiration and ideas for a new drawing?

This is very difficult to answer. I think that ideas come out of long periods of intense work, and in my own case sort of float to the surface as an emotion, and a more or less complete image that I can see in my mind. The good ones seem to just stay with me, and I put them down into sketch form, and eventually into a finished painting. This enduring quality is how I know, in most cases, whether or not the image is worth the effort needed to produce a painting from it.

This is for my private work, you understand—on assignments, you have the deadline to inspire you. And, perversely, the inspiration for a cool painting will pop into my mind in the middle of a project where I don't have the time to put it down, and I have to anyway, before the image fades.

But inspiration never seems to occur the same way twice—sometimes a great painting is the result of following a hunch down a long process of sketches, sometimes it comes as a flash, or any combination of these two extremes.

How would you describe your work—thematically, and in terms of style?

This is a much easier question—what I want out of a painting is for it to be beautiful in such a way as to be reinforcing to the psyche of the viewer of the picture. I do this from the viewpoint of the strength of design and elegance of color and design, and the choice of elements [subject matter] in the painting. I have made list of things I find fascinating, and out of these lists, paintings appear. Interestingly enough, this is exactly the approach that Carl Jung used in his



process of what he called Actualization, which is to access the psyche through the use of personal imagery for the purpose of personal development. I found all this out later, you understand.

Capturing a beautiful and elegant image is much more of a challenge for me than any other type of image. Of course beauty can take an almost infinite variety of forms—for instance, in the rare examples of horror subjects that I have done, I find this type of subject is much more effective if done elegantly, than is the gratuitous gross-out is employed.

And there is a strength to beauty, and a therapeutic value to this strength, that makes a beautiful vision a worthwhile challenge to try and capture. Contrasted to other types of 'Fine Art', such as Realism with its social commentary, beauty is a solution, and not merely a whining commentary. Beauty is strength, whining is weakness [jeez, I'm starting to sound like Nietzsche here—better get off the freaking soapbox!] Beauty has a shock value in this day and age that I find amusing.



Also, you get extra style points for Elegance and Beauty, because it is the hardest goddamned type of thing to do right. That is just what makes it a worthy challenge.

Would you encourage other artists who want to illustrate professionally to make a career out of it?

This kind of art is so much work that it is a sort of calling, like a mild form of shamanism—you are either going to go into the profession, in which case nothing will stop you, or you aren't going into the profession.

If you DO decide that you are going to be an illustrator, I would recommend reading *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell—this is the best practical spiritual advice for artists that I know of.

Is there a favorite sketch or painting among your work that holds special significance for you?

The pictures that hold a special significance for me are the ones that seem to paint themselves, in effect—they are good from the sketch phase, I know they are going to be good, and they appear with very little effort. AND, the great thing is that I get a much better response from people on these paintings.

The Black Rider, The Lion Pavillion, Jhereg, the statuette of Cthulhu, the *Shadow and the Tiger*—in fact virtually all of my private commission work, and the Pharazar mythos paintings in particular, fall into this category.

Do you have any interesting projects in the pipeline you'd like to tell us about?

A new art book [see website for developments on this], a sequel to the Lemurian Stone novel, sculptures, several paintings, and a model of the nautilus from *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Tons of stuff.

Would you want to branch out in fields such as television or film animation one day?

This would depend entirely on the project—this kind of thing can absorb all of an artist's creative energy for six months or a year with absolutely NOTHING to show for it. A great project would be very rewarding—it all depends.

Where do you see Science Fiction and Fantasy art going—is there concern that the traditional ways of illustrating will completely fall prey to digital mediums?

I love that old bugaboo—The Digital Medium. If you mean mediocrity, yes, I see that as a possibility. But when publishers re-discover that they can sell more books and make more MONEY by having painted covers by certain artists, the trend will swing back.

But digital media are in fact just that—media. Photoshop is like the ultimate paintbrush. Every media has things that only it can do, and the limitations that go with it. No media is ever a substitute for talent and vision. But I've seen brilliant things that were digital from people with talent and vision. But there will never be any substitute for being able to draw and paint—which translates directly into being able to do the best digital art.

What do you want to achieve with your art in the future?

Actually, just more of the same. When I first started out, I wanted to paint pictures, and was puzzled about what to paint. NOW, I've got so many ideas I don't have time to do half of them.

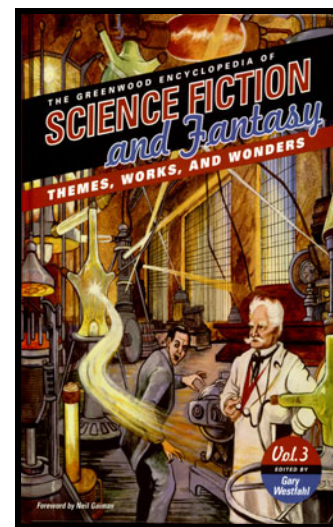
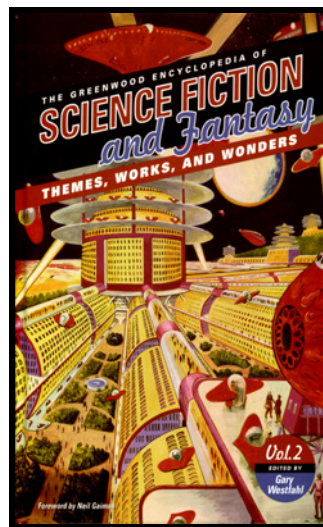
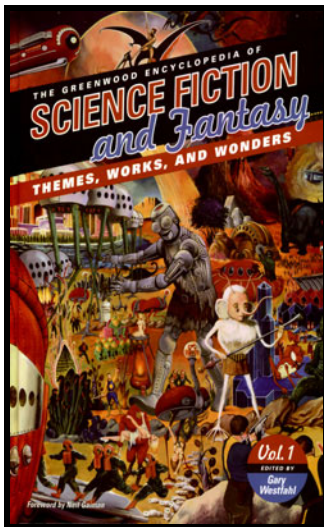
I guess the gallery venue is the place for my personal work—the traditional oil painting.

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RECOMMENDED READS

The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders [Three Volumes] (Hardcover)

By Gary Westfahl (Editor)



This collection of three magnificent hardcover volumes is a veritable treasure trove for any reader or writer who has ever wanted to expand their knowledge of Science Fiction and Fantasy in various mediums.

Editor Gary Westfahl—who teaches at the University of California, Riverside—has done a fantastic job of compiling three reading companions on topics far and wide, contributed by some of the best known and relevant writers of our time in the genre.

A quick, simplified breakdown of the individual volumes:

Volume 1: Includes entries on themes such as Dragons, Androids, Feminism, Dinosaurs, Curses, Ghosts and Hauntings and Black Holes.

Volume 2: This volume addresses themes of the genre such as Lost Worlds, Religion, Sexuality, Politics, Mad Scientists and Race Relations.

Volume 3: Detailed consideration is given to 200 alphabetically arranged classic works of science fiction and fantasy, including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Doctor Who* and many more.

The contributors to the volumes include Darrell Schweitzer, David Langford, Andy Sawyer, Fiona Kelleghan, Neil Easterbrook, Elizabeth Barrette, Lucy A. Snyder, Paul Kincaid and others.

The list of themes covered are too numerous to mention. Cyberpunk, Dark Fantasy, Absurdity, Machines & Mechanization, Hubris, Blood, Books, Colors, Androgyny, Fables, Exploration, UFO's, Water, Weaponry, Steampunk, Supernatural Creatures, Elder Races...These are but a drop in a bucket of what gets covered.

Volume 3 is the ideal way for those new to the genre to acquaint themselves with some of the most important and influential sf and fantasy works and authors of our time. For longtime sf and fantasy readers and writers it is the unique opportunity to familiarize themselves anew with those works that have been influential in shaping their tastes and talents over the years. They're all here and more: J.R.R Tolkien, Kurt Vonnegut, Lewis Carroll, Anne McCaffrey, Oscar Wilde, Robert Henlein, Star Trek, Arthur C. Clarke, Ray Bradbury, William Golding, Sheri S. Tepper, Jules Verne, Dracula, Ursula K. Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, Philip K. Dick, Edgar Allan Poe, Mad Max, Star Wars, Superman, The Wizard of Oz, C. S Lewis...Too many to mention.

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how well versed you are on the topic, you're sure to learn something new between the collective 2 600 pages. Greenwood Press has designed beautiful, glossy volumes that will look attractive on any bookshelf. As both reader and writer of the genre I highly recommend *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy: Themes, Works, and Wonders*. You'd be very hard pressed to find anything similar in book form that covers this much ground, and in such fine fashion.

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SIMULACRUM



THE MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE TRANSFORMATION

Submission Guidelines

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- Needs: Fiction\Poetry\Artwork—most speculative genres (H/F/SF/MR). (Quiet, gothic horror as opposed to gore and violence.)
- Will look at articles, reviews and interviews on request.
- Pays in copies and one-year subscription to the magazine. Format—pdf.
- All work submitted will also be considered for our Best of the Best print and pdf issue.
- Fiction—between 1000 and 8000 words.

Aim of the magazine is to expose new talent in writing and artwork alongside established writers. No fan fiction. Professionally formatted manuscripts only, please.

Established and new artists\writers welcome. Prefers snail mail subs, although email subs will be accepted in MS Word .doc/rtf. file format. 1.5 Line Spacing. Please scan attachments for viruses before sending. For further information, please contact me at the email address above.