

SNAIL STONES by Paul Melko

Paul lives in Ohio with his beautiful wife and three fairly wonderful children. The youngest was born last September and has been a handful from the start. The elder two are already teaching him how to sass back. Paul enjoys gardening in the summer, and employs his daughter in the pursuit and capture of garden pests, including Japanese beetles, ladybugs, and, indeed, snails. None of the latter have been as large as the one in this story, but if one were, it might go a long way to explain the huge slime tracks and missing fencing. Paul's last story for us, "The Walls of the Universe," appeared in our April/May 2006 issue.

"Who's that wagger?" Edeo asked. He was so distracted by the cloaked figure he missed the ball Haron had bounced off the wall of the abandoned building, and it rolled across the sewer grate, bumbling like a pachinko ball before disappearing into the foulness below.

"That's great, Edeo! That was our only ball."

But Edeo's attention was on the grey-coated man who couldn't have looked more conspicuous, head darting left and right, arms clutching a bundle of sackcloth.

Haron scooted on his belly by the grate, finger brushing slimy water, trying to find the ball.

"Who cares who he is?" Haron said. "Unless he has some more balls."

Edeo, oblivious to Haron's effort to extract the ball, edged between the two warehouses to get a better look at the figure. He climbed a pile of rubble.

"It's Fruge, the jeweler," he said. "My new dad bought my mom a ring from him. Then he hocked it for ringseed ale."

"It's Fruge, so what?" Haron said, certain that Edeo should be the one fishing for the ball. His fingers touched something furry. He pulled his hand out with a squeal.

Fruge, some hundred meters away, turned, searching the broken buildings for the sound. Edeo dropped down among the rubble pieces. "Shush, now. He'll see us, you breather."

"So? He ain't the muni."

Haron, angry that he had screamed like a little kid, stuck his hand back in, now searching for the rodent and the ball. Either would be fun to play with.

Fruge stared at the derelict buildings. He was clearly doing something nefarious, Edeo thought. He fumbled in his pocket with one hand while the other clutched the cloth to his chest.

"Holy Captain. He's got a gun."

Haron turned his head, hand still in the grate. "A gun?"

"He's coming this way."

Something brushed Haron's hand and he squeezed. "Hey, I got the ball!" He tried to pull his hand out, but his fist was too thick to fit between the bars of the grate. Something chittered in the darkness.

Haron watched Fruge advance on them. He was still a long way off, and he had no doubt that they could outrun the pudgy man in the ruins near the spaceport. He and Edeo were small and knew a lot of good

hiding places they shouldn't have, given that their moms had forbidden them to come to the old abandoned firstfall zone.

Edeo was mesmerized by Fruge's gun. He'd never seen one; they were illegal. Why was Fruge carrying one? It was obvious after a moment; Fruge was a jeweler. He had to carry a gun for protection.

Haron, having banged his fist against the bars a dozen times, was convinced he couldn't bring the ball through the grate while holding it. He peered down into the sewer. Stupid ball. Edeo had picked the biggest one on the ball tree, of course.

"Who's there?" Fruge cried. "I have a gun." He waved it. "Don't come near me."

"What's he squawking on about?" Haron asked.

"He's afraid," Edeo replied. "We'd better go. He might mistake us for robbers."

"Not without my ball."

"We'll get another one."

"Not until tonight!" The ball tree was in Mr. Hebway's garden. Any balls that fell, he burned in his incinerator instead of giving them to the kids. No way he'd let them have one, even if they asked. They'd have to climb the fence and tree in the dark.

"Come on," Edeo said. He scrambled down the rubble pile.

"No way!"

Haron reached in with his other hand, cupping the ball. He let go and then pushed it through the grate. "I got it."

Edeo peered around the rubble. Fruge was running at them.

"Come on!"

The sound of thunder erupted above, and radiant heat basked them in warmth. The cargo ship sprayed orange flame as it drove into the sky. The boys paused, watching the rocket climb. They'd come to watch it anyway, but then been distracted.

"Wow," Edeo said, forgetting Fruge for the moment. It was off to Highpoint, where the bigger spline ships docked. Edeo couldn't imagine that the spline ships were hundreds of times bigger than the simple rockets that launched from the spaceport.

When the rocket had finally become just a blur of red, they remembered Fruge. But when they turned, he was gone, perhaps scared by the sound of the rocket.

"What's that?" Edeo asked. Where Fruge had been standing, something twinkled in the sunlight.

Haron and Edeo ran for it, Haron edging Edeo out by a hair. He scooped the glittering thing up, then dropped it as if it were a snake.

Edeo skidded to a stop, his hand frozen. The shape and size made it obvious, but he'd never seen one so big. The boys looked at each other. Then Edeo reached down to pick it up.

"Snail stone."

* * * *

Haron was at Edeo's door five minutes after dinner.

"You got it?" he whispered.

Edeo's mom was busy on the vid with her friends, all six faces on the screen showing a similar head covered with a checked cloth. His step-father was collapsed on the couch sipping a ringseed. That left just his older brother Gremon to arch a brow and say, "Got what?"

"Nothing," Edeo and Haron said in unison.

"I bet," Gremon said, standing up from the table to block Edeo's way out of the kitchen. Edeo had the snail stone in his back pocket, and he knew Gremon well enough to know he'd search him until he found the artifact in question.

He sighed, as if in resignation, then tipped Gremon's plate of food out of his hand. While Gremon juggled the plate, Edeo slid under the table. Edeo and Haron were almost to the stairwell firedoor when gravity finally won the battle and Gremon's plate clattered to the floor, breaking in pieces.

They shared a quick grin, though Edeo knew he'd pay later. It was worth it.

"You got it?" Haron asked again.

"Yeah," Edeo said.

Instead of heading out into the courtyard, they kept going down, sliding between boxes in the space under the last flight of stairs. Haron switched on his flashlight as Edeo pulled out the snail stone.

It felt like a rock in Edeo's hand, cold and heavy, but it didn't look like a rock. It shimmered with orange light, cutting the flashlight's beam into prisms. Edeo turned his hand, and the prisms danced on the wall.

"You sleep with it under your bed and your willy gets longer," Haron said.

"Does not!" Edeo replied, though truth be told, he wasn't sure. People said the snail stones did all sorts of things, that they powered rockets, caused cold fusion, cured colds. Why else did the government decide they owned them all?

"How much you think it's worth?"

"We can't ask Fruge, that's for sure," Edeo said.

"Lotta jewelers," Haron said.

Footsteps on the stair, and Haron snapped off the flashlight. The steps stopped, as if the soft click had been enough to alert the stepper.

With extra-fraternal senses, Edeo knew it was Gremon. He held his breath, willed Haron to do the same. Haron sensed his friend's fear and remained silent, waiting.

Finally, the steps continued and the courtyard door swung open and closed.

They waited. It wasn't above Gremon to fool them from their hiding places with a fake door opening. Then a chatting couple came in, and that was enough for the two. They slipped up the steps and, with an eye for Gremon, headed for the Guild district.

Most of the shops were closed, the gemologists and dealers off to their homes. Fruge's shop was closed tight. None of the shops displayed any snail stones in their barred windows.

"Tomorrow?" Edeo asked. He was thinking he'd slip the stone under his mattress for safe-keeping.

"Nah," Haron said. "Here."

The place was a pawn shop. A few rings lined the front display windows. A neon sign flickered, revealed that the shop was open twenty-two hours.

They pushed through the revolving door into the cluttered shop. Junk lined the walls; space suits hung next to stringless violins. Two rows of trikes sat covered in dust, one of them a Keebler Three-X.

"We'll be able to buy two of those with this," Haron whispered.

"You think?"

"I ain't buying anymore trikes!"

A head had popped up through a glass partition at the back of the store.

"We don't got no trikes," Haron said.

"Well, you don't look like you can buy one, either of you. What you want?"

Edeo nudged Haron forward in front of him. They stepped to within two meters of the pawnbroker. He was old enough to be second generation. Wispy white hair medusaed around his head.

"Snail stones," Haron said. "How much one of those go for?"

The man's eyes narrowed. "You trying to trick old Kort? You working with the munis, seeing if I'm on the up and up?" His voice rose as if he were addressing someone beyond the room, listening in. "I don't traffic in restricted items, no sir."

Haron was annoyed. "Yeah, but how much would it be worth if you did?"

The pawnbroker peered down at Haron. His eyes had a devious look to them, as if he'd just made a decision to do a bad thing for his own good. "What you find in your granddame's attic? Something that should have been turned in years ago? Something forgotten?"

Edeo backed away, hand deep in his pocket, cupping the snail stone.

"We didn't find nothing!" Haron said, standing fast.

The booth the pawnbroker sat in flew up to the ceiling with a whoosh, leaving the old man standing in front of Haron. He reached out with a fist and took hold of Haron's shirt, dragging him forward with one hand while the other dug into Haron's pants pocket.

"What you got there, pinter? What'd you find?"

Edeo ran, abandoning Haron for the gem's safety. But when he slammed into the revolving door, it held fast.

"Maybe *you've* got the stone," the man cried.

"We don't have nothing," Edeo screamed. "It was all Gremon's idea. He sent us in to ask!"

The old man's strength seemed to flag, and Haron's feet touched the ground. He pulled away and huddled with Edeo in the pie-shaped slot of the revolving door.

"A trick? You playing a trick on old Kort?"

The old man spat at them, then kicked a lever with his feet. The reluctant door whipped them around and spat them onto the street. They ran, then, ducking between two women window shopping in the dusk.

Edeo ran only as far as the first turn, then he sagged against a solar shield booth, rusted and left over from before the atmosphere was thick enough. The thing was covered in graffiti, but the seats were relatively clean, so they sat there under the lead shielding and took deep breaths.

"They're on the munis' restricted lists," Haron finally said.

"Yeah."

"We staying out?" Haron asked after awhile.

"Ain't going home," Edeo replied. Gremon was sure to beat the crap out of him when he got there, unless he planned it right.

They sat there until the sun was long gone.

"Look there," Haron said. "Fruge."

Indeed the jeweler had stepped out of his dark shop and was glancing left and right as he locked his door.

"Looking mighty suspish, ain't he?" Edeo said.

"Mighty."

Without a word, they left the confines of the solar shield, ambling with precise nonchalance in the same direction as Fruge, but on the other side of the street.

"He's going back to the spaceport," Edeo said, when he took a sudden turn.

"Sell his jewels off planet. Only place he can, I bet, if they're on the restricted lists," Haron said.

Edeo glanced at his friend. Sometimes he made a lot of sense.

Fruge kept throwing glances over his shoulder, and finally Edeo pulled Haron aside into a dark side street, certain Fruge'd see the duo soon.

"We know where he's going," Edeo said. "Come on." They ran through the side streets for the spaceport, trying to reach the corner where they had seen Fruge earlier in the day.

Panting, they found a crumbled doorway that gave them a view of two streets.

"There he is," Haron said.

In the dark, he was little more than a stumbling shadow, but clearly it was him, edging down the street, looking over his shoulder.

"Probably has his gun," Edeo said.

Fruge stopped before he reached the intersection, slipping into a doorway. They heard the jingle of keys, then the scrape of a door opening.

"I thought all these warehouses were abandoned," Edeo said. When the new spaceport terminal went in on the far side of the landing fields, there'd been no need to keep up these old buildings. Old Firstfall had crumbled into decay.

"Not," said Haron.

Light flickered from within the building, barely visible through blinded windows in the basement. Edeo and Haron shared a quick grin in the darkness and slipped from their hiding place.

Fruge had gone to some trouble to cover the windows, using tape to wedge a curtain across all of the glass. But at some point, the tape had dried up, and a corner of the curtain had drooped to reveal the inside of the building.

Haron was there first, kneeling and pushing his eye into the space. Edeo danced around him, tried the other two windows to no avail.

"Watcha see?"

"Shhh," Haron said, not because he was afraid Fruge would hear them but rather because he had nothing to report. All he saw was an empty, cement-block-lined basement.

Then Fruge appeared, coming down steps on the far side of the basement. He carried a bag. He laid it on the ground and drew from it a crowbar. Then he pulled open a door and thrust the crowbar into the small dark space beyond. He wiggled it, urging something forth. He reached in and grabbed a rope and pulled.

Something moved forward in a huddle, sliding across the floor. When Haron saw what it was, he jumped back, which was enough for Edeo to take his place at the window.

Edeo gasped. He turned to his friend and said, "He has a snail."

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It was just stuff everybody knew, stuff from school, stuff from parents, stuff from older brothers. The colony ship arrived with eminent domain. There was no way the ship was going back! That would have been outrageous.

And the snails weren't even that intelligent. No tools, no language, no cities. Not really molluscs, but they looked enough like their namesake, if two meters tall instead of two millimeters. How can a snail be sentient?

And when humans figured out you could pry the pretty gems off their carapaces and they'd grow back, well. That was just another resource to be used. The fact that the crystals had different compositions depending on what you fed the snails, that was just grease for the herding and round-up of twenty million slugs.

By the time Edeo and Haron were born, there wasn't a snail on the northern continent, and only a handful on the southern. But Fruge had one in the basement of that abandoned building, and he was prying the gems loose to sell. And now Edeo and Haron knew.

They shared a horrified glance, and then they ran. They ran home as fast as they could in the face of this unfathomable perversion, all the way home.

They skidded to a halt outside Edeo's building, their chests heaving, their legs leaden.

"We should tell...." Haron started, then stopped.

Edeo shook his head, then they swore each other to silence and promised to meet the next day. Haron asked for the stone, but Edeo swore it would be safe with him. He snuck it upstairs to the room he shared with Gremon without seeing his brother and slipped it under his mattress. Perhaps Gremon would forget all about the indignity Edeo had foisted upon him. But probably not.

Haron, sworn to secrecy about their snail, was not so sworn on snails in general.

"Mom, any snails around here?" he asked.

"Snails all gone, sweetie," she replied, her head mounted unmoving in front of the vid.

"Yeah, any still around?"

"In the zoo, maybe. Maybe on the south continent. Shush now. My favorite part."

Haron shrugged and went off to bed, sleeping fitfully on his mattress that protected no stone. Edeo slept just as poorly, but they both met ready the next morning.

"What happened to you?"

Edeo touched his tender eye. "Gremon."

"Yeah. Got it?"

"Got it."

"We should go to the zoo. See if there's any snails there," Haron said.

Edeo shook his head. "Naw. Zoo's three buses away. Take all day."

"What then?"

"Where's Fruge right now?"

"In his store."

"He's there all day, right?" Edeo said. "He's not with the snail."

"What are you saying?"

Edeo said, "Let's go look at the snail right here."

Haron shook his head, but he already knew he'd be going with Edeo. They walked back to the spaceport ruins, hiding in their doorway, waiting until they were sure the building was empty, then they sauntered across the road and tried the door.

"Locked," Haron said.

Edeo knelt down and jiggled the window they'd looked through the night before.

"Locked too," Haron said.

Edeo surveyed the street; he walked along the length of the building. The building to the left was in a much worse state of decay than Fruge's. Its door hung off its hinges and it looked like squatters had camped there not too long ago. Both buildings were the same height.

"Roof," Edeo said. They pushed their way through the door, blinking in the darkness. Right there, steps led up. Edeo took them first, testing each one with his weight. On the first landing, rats scurried away into dark shadows.

"Cool," Haron said.

They found a ladder on the top floor that opened onto the roof. From there they had a fabulous view of the spaceport. A dozen rockets stood beside gangways, ready to ride fire into the sky. They paused to write the numbers on their fins in Haron's book.

Though the two buildings had looked the same height, Fruge's in fact was a couple of meters lower. Edeo jumped down, rolling on the gravel-tar. Haron shook his head and dropped down after hanging by his arms first.

The roof door was locked, but the lock was so rusted that it gave when Edeo pulled on it. Down they walked, eyes alert for snails in dark corners.

"Whoa!" Haron said. He had nearly stepped into darkness. The entire first floor was demolished, leaving a view into the basement from the second floor. All that was left was a narrow path to the basement stairs.

They fell to their stomachs and looked over the edge. The door behind which the snail was caged was invisible in the darkness.

"No way down," Haron said.

"Rope," Edeo said.

"No way, man," Haron said. "It's just a snail."

"Fruge is *using* it," Edeo said. "Don't you see? We have to help it."

"This isn't about getting more jewels?"

"No!"

"Quiet!"

The door of the building opened, and Fruge entered. Light filled the basement as he hit the switch. He carried a bundle.

Fruge took the steps carefully, then threw his bundle on the ground. It clattered and clanked, revealing that it was metal parts: junk.

He opened the door and used the rope to pull the snail out. In the dim bulbs of the basement, the snail's carapace glittered with rainbow iridescence. There were no jewels, though Fruge hunted for any that might have formed. He shined a flashlight around the edges of the snail, which tried to slide away from him, but appeared to have no purchase on the floor.

"Nothing!" Fruge muttered. "Nothing growing on you today."

He crossed to the bundle and pulled out what looked like a handful of steel ball bearings.

"See what this will do, eh? I lost one, so I need another fast."

The snail's head disappeared under its shell as Fruge approached, but he reached right in and grasped it by the swirling antennae, of which the snail had three. The head popped out, and Fruge wedged its mouth open with a knee. He dropped the ball bearings in, and then held the mouth closed.

"I've been trying to find cobalt, but who carries that? It costs more to feed you than I can make in gems off your back. Can't get but a tenth what they're worth due to the munis."

The snail shook its head, trying to dislodge its food, tossing its head and grunting. Fruge took a handful of nuts and bolts, pulled open the snail's mouth again, and forced them in.

It slurped and burbled, choking, but the snail was unable to dislodge what was forced into its mouth, unable to vomit. It grunted and twisted, but Fruge held it steady with a grip on its tender antennae.

Edeo and Haron watched as Fruge again filled the snail's gullet with bits of metal, even some glass and rocks, all sorts of junk, waiting until the material disappeared from its mouth. When the bag was empty, he pushed the snail back into its cave and left.

Edeo said to Haron, "See? We have to help."

Haron nodded slowly.

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The rope they stole from Edeo's house. For a time, his father had held a job as a painter, until he'd started showing up too drunk to climb a ladder. But he still had a neat coil of rope that Edeo snuck from his "workshop" one night while he was passed out on the couch. They gathered lillweed seeds and scattered them all over the street outside the building. As every child knew, a lillweed seed had a bit of compressed air inside that it used to blow itself far from its parent; but, before autumn came, the seeds made excellent noise toys, or, in this case, early warning systems. The third thing they gathered was native plants.

This proved rather difficult. The colony ship had brought fine strains of plants that ousted the local varieties with little effort. There didn't seem to be a tree in Old Firstfall that wasn't an oak, maple, or elm.

Finally Edeo said, "Ball trees didn't come from Earth."

"No?"

"No way." They looked over the fence at Mr. Hebway's garden.

"Look at that," Haron said. In addition to the ball tree, Hebway had lillweed plants, rotordendrends, rozes, and blue-eyed susies. Instead of stealing balls, that night they took handfuls of the native plants, ripping them up by the root or breaking their stems.

The next day, after they were certain Fruge was well ensconced in his store, they scattered the lillweed seed up and down the street. Then they climbed the building, knotted the rope every foot, and lowered it down to the basement level.

Edeo glanced at Haron, and Haron shrugged his shoulders. They did stones with their fingers and Edeo lost. He reached for the rope and descended hand-over-hand into the basement, some six meters down.

"Toss it down," he whispered, then louder, "Toss it down."

Haron dropped the bundle of native plants, and they fell with a thwack on the basement floor.

"Come on."

Haron descended, and they turned to face the snail's door.

"Maybe we can just toss it through the door," Haron said.

Edeo shook his head. The door was wooden, painted grey, and peeling. It shut with a simple latch. He took a step toward it, then another, and finally reached forward to undo the latch before backpedaling away. The door squeaked, then slowly tilted open thirty degrees before scraping on the concrete floor. Darkness lay within.

Edeo peered into the space. The snail peered back with its floppy antennae. It emitted a chuff, its mucous membrane rattling above its maw. A whiff of iron, blood-like, washed over him.

"Phew."

"Maybe it's saying 'Hi,'" Haron said.

"Or 'Where's Fruge?'"

Edeo took the bundle of native flora in his hands, reached toward the snail with it. The snail twisted its three antennae, craned them in three directions as if to get a trinocular view of the proffered vegetable matter. Then it jumped forward with more speed than Edeo had thought possible, slurping the material into its gullet.

Edeo fumbled backward, surprised by the speed. Its face was grey and eyeless. The antennae swarmed and danced, taking in the boys and their food. Its mouth, shaped into a perpetual underbite, was twenty-five centimeters wide and opened into its flabby, sack-like gullet.

Haron said, "We certainly didn't have to force feed the thing like Fruge."

"No," Edeo said, mesmerized by the massive snail. It was taller than he was by twenty centimeters and he was taller than Haron.

The snail chuffed again, then burbled. It advanced, then stopped with a jingle. Haron realized that the snail's shell was chained to the wall of its cave.

"That wagger welded him to the wall!"

Edeo picked up the rest of the bundle and fed it piece by piece to the snail. When the last of the material had disappeared, the snail sent an antenna slithering around Edeo's palm, leaving a trail of mucous.

"Ick," he said.

Haron laughed, then jumped as another antenna entered his pocket faster than he could back away.

"Hey!"

But then the feeler had withdrawn, holding the ball that he'd picked from Mr. Hebway's ball tree. The snail ate it.

"That was our last ball."

"Yeah," said Edeo. "We're going to need a whole bunch more."

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They couldn't keep raiding Mr. Hebway's garden; he'd have noticed pretty quickly at the rate the snail consumed plants. But with the flora in the garden as a guide, the two managed to find small sanctuaries of native plants within a few kilometers of the building. In fact, the fields around the spaceport housed a dozen prairie fields of gila grass, bleet weed, and curdleberries. Of these, the snail showed a distinct bias toward the gila grass, eating this first before anything else.

They visited the snail every day, determining Mr. Fruge's schedule quickly. He came every other day with a load of metal to feed the snail. At the same time, he scoured its shell for any new jewels that were forming, and if they were large enough, he pried them off with a crowbar, causing the snail to erupt in mucousy, blubbery moans.

Watching Fruge feed the snail nauseated Edeo. Finally, after one such feeding, Edeo immediately descended when Fruge left, stuck his hand down the snail's throat, and retrieved as much of the metal as he could.

"What are you doing?" Haron shrilled.

"Getting this crap out of our snail!"

"Our snail?"

Edeo dumped a pile of nails on the floor. His arm up to his shoulder was covered in slime.

"Yeah. We treat him way better than Fruge," Edeo said.

The snail sat obediently as Edeo emptied its gullet, then it slid forward and rooted through the pile of junk. It took several blue-colored ball bearings in its tendrils and scooped them back into its mouth.

"It wants those, apparently," Haron said. The rest of the junk it left on the floor.

Edeo's head whipped around at the sound of popping on the street.

"Fruge!" he cried. "He's coming back!"

Haron jumped for the rope, scurrying up onto the second floor. "Come on!"

Edeo looked around the floor at the piles of slimy junk. Fruge would know for sure that someone had found his snail. Edeo grabbed a handful of the metal and threw it behind some barrels.

The popping sound grew louder.

"Come on, Edeo!" Haron said. "Leave it."

"No! Pull up the rope."

He took another handful, tossing the junk atop the rest with a clatter. He pushed the snail back into its cave and grabbed the last of the metal, hiding himself with the junk behind the barrels.

A key rattled in the lock of the door.

He searched the floor for some sign of them, then made sure Haron had pulled up the rope. Nothing in sight.

Then he saw the half-ajar door!

Cursing issued from the front door, as Fruge searched for the right key. Edeo bounded forward, slammed the door shut, slid the bolt, and dashed back to his spot just as the light flashed on.

Edeo listened and Haron watched from above as Fruge creaked down the steps. His bag jingled with scrap. Edeo crouched lower as he saw his shadow pass on the floor not far from him. Fruge opened the gate and dragged the snail out.

"You need more junk, I think, if I'm going to get more jewels," Fruge said.

Edeo listened, his anger growing, as Fruge stuffed their snail with heavy metal. After he had left and the last sounds of the lillweed seed popping under his feet had faded away, Haron descended again.

Edeo turned to him. "We have to get our snail out of here."

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They tried a hacksaw that Haron had swiped from a trike repair shop while Edeo distracted the owner, but the blade didn't even scratch the chain that held the snail in its cave. The far end was embedded in the rock wall, not into plaster, but into granite with spikes that must have been twenty centimeters long. The only thing that had any effect on the chain was a rasp file that Edeo stole from his step-dad's workshop, but it was soon clear it would take days of muscle-numbing work to get through the metal.

"This is useless," Haron said.

Edeo was bent over the back of the snail, rasping. The snail was sniffing at Haron's pocket for the ball he had hidden there. He giggled as the tendril plunged in and pulled it out. The snail was far better than a dog.

"Is not."

"Snail won't eat anything but curdleberries today. We'll have to go get some more."

Edeo looked up. "Not even the lillweed roots? He loved those before."

"Naw. Balls and curdleberries is all he's eating." Haron looked around. "And a kilo of copper wiring."

"Sheesh."

Haron's head tilted. "What was that?"

They pushed the snail back into its cave.

"It's way early for Fruge." After a week they had his comings and goings down: every other day to feed the snail and check for new jewels. And sometimes he brought a second load of metal, so they had to be careful.

Just as Haron was going for the rope, it jerked up into the air.

Someone laughed above them.

"Gremon," Edeo whispered fiercely.

"What you little boys doing in the basement all alone? Comparing sizes?" His head appeared over the edge.

"None of your business," Edeo said.

"Yeah? You think?" He slid down the rope, one hand out raised. "Let's see what you're doing down here."

Edeo moved to stand in front of the gate, casually with one hand on the wall. Gremon looked around the basement, smiled once at Edeo. "What's behind the door?"

He pushed Edeo out of the way, pulled the door open.

"Marbles? Dirty pictures? Rock co--" His voice shriveled inside him, as he backed away. He pushed Edeo in front of him. "What!" He tripped over his own feet as the snail slid forward waving its antennae. A weird trilling sound came from the snail, one that Haron and Edeo had never heard before.

Gremon ran up the steps, his face white, his pants wet. He slammed against the locked door, turned the lock with fumbling hands, and disappeared into the street.

The snail's trilling turned to a heavy chuff.

"I think he's laughing," Haron said, rubbing under the snail's mouth.

Edeo watched the door swing shut. "Huh," he said.

* * * *

"You know what you got there?" Gremon was hanging over the top bunkbed, his head dark against the grey ceiling.

"No."

"Hell! It's a snail, Edeo. A snail! You know what that means?"

"No. What?"

"Snails grow gems on their backs if you feed it the right crap. You hear me? Gems."

"I know."

"You feed it iron, it grows emerald. You feed it copper, it grows diamonds. You feed it--"

"They're not really diamonds and emeralds," Edeo replied. What the snails grew weren't found naturally.

"We could be rich."

"We?"

"Yeah, we, little boy."

Edeo stared up at his brother. "You breathe a word, little boy," he said softly, "and Nelli Ione learns you pissed your pants."

Gremon was silent. This was all Edeo had over him. He hoped it would work.

A dark shape dropped from the top bunk. Pain shot up Edeo's arm, and he stifled a gasp.

"This isn't yours to keep, stupid. It's to use."

Then Gremon climbed back up into his bunk.

* * * *

The next day, the snail thrashed around in its cave when they came to see it.

"Is it sick?" Haron asked.

"I dunno," Edeo said. He was still concerned about what Gremon would do. Perhaps he'd try to take the snail for himself.

The snail slammed its carapace against the stone walls of the alcove, again and again.

"What's wrong with it?" They dared not go near the thing. It weighed twice as much as they did together, and its shell was hard. They'd be smashed.

Finally it stopped and something tinkled inside its grotto.

"What was that?" Edeo asked.

The snail slid forward and Edeo leaned into the darkness. Something sparkled on the floor. He reached for it, but jerked his hand back.

He stuck his bleeding finger in his mouth.

Haron shined the flashlight. "It's a gem."

This was the first gem they'd seen the snail grow since they'd started feeding it a week earlier.

"It's sharp."

Edeo reached for it again, carefully. It was metallic, not a gem stone at all. It was heavy, like lead. One edge was rounded and had indentations in it. The other edge was sharp. It looked like a clamming knife the divers at the ocean used to open crustaceans.

The snail shook itself and its chain jingled.

Edeo and Haron shared a look. Edeo then bent down and started sawing at the chain with the stone. In the light of Haron's flashlight, they saw the stone had chipped the metal. The stone was cutting the chain.

"It grew a saw!" Haron said.

Edeo worked until his arm was too sore to continue, then Haron took a turn. By noon they were halfway through the link, and so engrossed in the process they failed to hear Fruge's arrival until he flung open the door.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Edeo and Haron backed away from the snail. Haron eyed the rope, then the gun in Fruge's hand. No way he'd make it.

Fruge took the steps, his eyes riveted on the two kids.

"This explains what happened to my supply of gems. You two have been feeding my snail the wrong stuff." He kicked at the pile of curdleberry leaves. "Do you know what you've cost me?"

"You can't do this to a snail," Edeo said, his voice cracking halfway through.

"Just shut up," Fruge said. "I can do whatever I want with *my* snail. And that includes feeding you to it."

The snail charged at Fruge, coming up just short on the end of the chain.

"Look what you did!" Fruge yelled. "You made it crazy!"

The snail lurched again, pulling the chain tight.

"If I have to get a new snail because of you," Fruge said, "I'm going to chain you both to the wall and feed you iron scrap."

The snail backed up into its cave.

"That's right. Back in your cave."

But the snail wasn't submitting, it was getting some distance.

It charged.

For a moment, Edeo was certain the chain would hold, but the weakened link gave way with a snap and the snail was on top of Fruge.

"He's going to eat him," Haron said, with some amount of relish.

Fruge screamed and the gun flew from his hand as he tried to fight off the snail. The snail rolled right over him, covering his head, then backed up so it could roll over him again with its giant foot.

"He's not going to eat him," Edeo said. "That's not his mouth down there; it's his foot."

"He's sliming him," Haron said, which was better.

The snail rolled off Fruge, found his gun and stowed it in its gullet with a slurp.

Fruge stood, his body dripping snail slime in huge dollops. He coughed.

"I'm going to kill you with my bare hands."

The snail lunged at him then, and Fruge backed up. Fruge tried to move around it, but the snail was far faster than he. Fruge backed into the cave.

Edeo slammed the door shut and Haron threw the bolt.

"That'll never hold him."

But the snail had apparently realized that and was pushing barrels in front of it, as well as crates and other bits of junk that lined the walls of the basement.

Surveying Fruge's cage, Edeo said, "Let's get out of here."

Haron looked at the snail. "What about him?"

Edeo looked up at the rope, wondering if they could haul the snail out, but he need not have worried. The snail slithered up the steps, its flexible foot molding itself to the stairs. It was up to the landing in seconds, pushing open the door.

It hesitated there, its antennae waving around.

"It's probably never been outside," Haron said.

"It's scared."

Edeo and Haron walked around it and stood out in the middle of the street, waving it on.

Finally the snail scooted out of the building and into the open.

Edeo grinned. "We'll take it to my house. It can live in my room. Then Gremon can't bully me anymore. It can make me gems whenever I want. We'll be rich...."

Haron looked at Edeo, his eyebrows raised.

Edeo caught his friend's look.

"I mean--"

"We'd be no better than that wagger," Haron said with a nod toward the building. Edeo paused, sipping at his dream one last time.

"No," Edeo said. "I guess not. Then where?"

"He likes curdleberries." He pointed to the spaceport, where the tarmacs were surrounded with native flora. "Of course, we could take the long way."

By the time they reached their street, they had quite a parade: dozens of children, the mailman, shop clerks, a team of street cleaners, even Gremon followed.

The snail slid happily along, unperturbed by it all, as if it was expecting a parade.

A magistrate caught up to them on Jury Street.

"What is this? Where did this snail come from?"

Edeo was brave enough to answer.

"Fruge had him chained in a vacant building by the spaceport." He showed the magistrate the soldered end of the chain. "We're taking him to the spaceport so he can eat."

"Fruge," the magistrate said, with undisguised venom. He sent a muni to the vacant building, then accompanied the parade to the spaceport where he had one of the bumbling maintenance men open the gate so that the snail could crawl into the fields of lillweed and curdleberry bushes. In the distance, on the far side of the spaceport, a rocket roared into the sky. The snail cocked one antenna at it as it munched contentedly on a tuft of vegetation.

It chuffed once at Edeo and Haron, then ambled off into the prairie.

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