

Lord Weary's Empire by Michael Swanwick

Michael Swanwick assures us that he would update his biographical information for the following story if it were it not for the fact that my frequent requests for this data have reduced him in size to two and a quarter inches. He says he is being held captive in a terrarium on the desk of Gregor Samsa in a demented research institution. (Of course, this obviously isn't true, since if it were, we'd have to look for Robert Reed with a microscope.) Much as we may sympathize with Michael's plight, this predicament has nothing to do with his latest story. Consequently, Will, a continuing character from "The Word that Sings the Scythe" (Asimov's, October/November 2004), must explore, without preamble, the treacherous subterranean reaches of . . .

Like a leaf before a storm, Will fled. The basement corridors of Babel careened and reeled nightmarishly by and still he could not lose his pursuers. Three times the lancers had a clear line of sight and fired, each shot a blow to Will's ringing ears. But then, just beyond a row of overflowing garbage cans, Will saw a steel access door, chained shut but slightly ajar in its frame. He stooped and, grabbing the lower edge of the door, yanked with all his might.

A bullet burned through the air over his head.

The door lurched open, wrenched out of true.

Frantically, Will squeezed through the triangular space and tumbled down a short flight of metal steps. As he stumbled to his feet, he heard the lancers, too large to squeeze through themselves, trying to break down the door.

Blindly, he ran.

Rats scurried away at his approach. Roaches crunched underfoot. He was in a great dark space punctuated by massive I-beams and lit only by infrequent bare bulbs whose light struggled to reach the floor. Somehow, he had made his way into the network of train tunnels that spiraled up through Babel Tower.

Careful to avoid the third rail, Will followed one curving set of tracks into darkness, listening for approaching trains. Sometimes he heard their thunder in the distance, and once a train slammed past, mere inches from where he pressed himself, shivering, against the wall, and left him temporarily blinded. When he could see again, the tunnels were silent. He had lost his pursuers. He was safe now.

And hopelessly lost.

He'd been plodding along for some time when he saw a sewer worker—a haint—in the tunnel ahead, in hip waders and hard hat. "What you doing here, white boy?" the haint asked when Will hailed him.

"I'm lost."

"Well, you best get yourself unlost. They's trouble brewing."

"I can't," Will began. "I don't know—"

"It's your ass," the haint said. He faded through a wall and was gone.

Will spat in frustration. Then he walked on.

He knew that he'd wandered into dangerous territory when his left hand suddenly rose up of its own volition to clutch his right forearm. *Stop!* he thought to himself. Adrenaline raced through his veins.

Will peered into the claustrophobic blackness and saw nothing. A distant electric bulb cast only the slightest glimmer on the rails. The support beams here were as thick as trees in a midnight forest. He could not make out how far they extended. But by the spacious feel of the air, he was in a place where several lines of tracks joined and for a time ran together.

Far behind him was a lone set of signal lights, unvarying green and red dots.

He was abruptly aware of how easy it would be for somebody to sneak up behind him here. Maybe, he thought, he should turn around and go back.

In that instant, an unseen fist punched him hard in the stomach.

