

The Frozen One

by *Tim Pratt*

Wait, don't run away, really, it's okay. No, I don't come from the future. The future isn't a place. I know I look exactly like you, but there's a reason—well, hell, it's because my stupid bosses thought it would make things simpler, if we showed you something straight-up impossible right up front, it would save time trying to convince you I'm telling the truth. But it turns out seeing an identical twin, right down to the blemishes and nose-piercings, just freaks people out. We won't try that again next time. If there is a next time.

Sit down on that park bench. Don't give me that, you don't need to get back to class, you were planning to cut class all afternoon and hang out smoking in the park. Don't you want to hear what I have to say?

So it's pretty complicated. Like, ten semesters of intensive lecturing just to give you the background, and we don't have that kind of time. I've only got about ten minutes to talk to you. Nine minutes, now. I wish I could lay everything out, because I know when I was your age there was nothing I hated more than some bullshit declaration from on high, being told to do something a certain way just because. But the best I can do is try to give you some guidance, tilt the probabilities a little closer toward you doing the right thing if and when the time comes. And the people in charge, who know more about these things than I do, they did a bunch of tests and they say the best way for me to do this is to tell you a story. I'm not supposed to call it a parable, but I'm not going to mess around with you, here, you're a smart kid: it's a parable.

A parable is like a story about some little thing that's supposed to teach you something about a big thing. Yeah, like the good Samaritan, that's a great example. And you know you should take me seriously, right, because I just appeared out of nowhere by those bushes and I look just like you, right down to the pimple on your forehead and the weird hair? Good.

No, it's not a parable about God, it's got monsters and heroes and swords and shit, because we know you like that stuff, you play that fantasy computer game all the time.

Look, don't interrupt me, I've got this thing memorized, it's like a spiel, so just let me go. Okay:

Once upon the time there was a great city that had many names, but most of the people in this story just called it The City. Nobody had ever seen the whole of The City, because you could start walking from one end to the other and die of old age before you explored every basement and tower. Inside some of the oldest buildings, space and time didn't work the way they did elsewhere, and you could get lost forever just walking down a dusty hallway. The City filled a valley, surrounded on all sides by mountains, and the mountains were inhabited by monsters that had lots of names, but most people called them the Halfway People. They looked like ordinary people, most of the time, except when they attacked you, and then they sort of grew extra arms and legs and wings and claws and sometimes even tentacles, and that's when you realized they *always* had those teeth and spines and stuff, you just hadn't been looking at them the right way before.

All the best craftspeople and artisans and engineers and magicians and thieves lived in the The City, because it had all the best schools and restaurants and great dusty warehouses full of ancient stuff, magic and technology and cursed things and treasure. The City did most of its trading with the rest of the world

by airship, and the citizens didn't go out into the mountains much. They had good high walls and guards who were especially good at recognizing the Halfway People, and since those were pretty much the only kind of people who ever tried to enter The City on foot anyway, the Halfway People were kept out almost completely.

There were a bunch of heroes who lived in The City, swordsmen and fighting monks and necromancers and this one woman with green skin who could shoot fire from her eyes and fly, but only for short distances. They'd all done lots of adventuring and pillaging and mercenary work, and they mostly hung out together and drank and told stories. This one bar they liked was called The Frozen One, because there was a giant block of magical ice right in the middle of the room—the bar had been built around it, because the owner realized having a giant block of magically unmelting ice meant he could keep his beer really cold for free. There was a guy frozen inside the ice, and even though the ice was kind of foggy, you could still make him out—he was about seven feet tall, big broad shoulders, face all scarred, marked with tattoos all over his body, draped with magical amulets, holding a huge axe with a blade shaped like a crescent moon. Nobody knew his name, just that he'd been some big-shot hero hundreds of years before, when The City was just a village, and that he got frozen in ice for some reason. People used to speculate about why the guy was frozen, but then one day the Mayor turned up holding some old scroll with a prophecy that said the guy was The Chosen One, and would remain frozen until The City was threatened, at which point the ice would melt and he would emerge, axe swinging, to kill the enemy. He would succeed when all the other heroes had fallen, been butchered and eaten, et cetera. The Mayor said the prophecy was certified genuine by the magical scholars, and he was pretty happy, because he was able to cut down the number of guards on the walls. Why worry so much about invasions when a legendary nameless hero was ready to kick invader ass?

But then a war started in a neighboring kingdom, and refugees started streaming in from that other country, way more refugees than the Halfway People could kill and eat in their mountain passes. Soon there were hundreds of refugees banging on the gates to The City, begging to be let in. But the guards didn't want to let them in, because they were afraid Halfway People were hiding among the refugees, pretending to be ordinary humans so they could get inside and kill and eat the fat, prosperous city folk. So the guards asked the city council if they should let the people in, and the council started polling citizens, and the citizens were kind of divided on the issue, so the mayor asked his advisors, and meanwhile days and days passed. Eventually the refugees became numerous enough that they just knocked down the gates and came pouring in by the hundreds, filling the streets, breaking windows, knocking over apple carts, what a mess.

The guards tried to get the gates back up, but by then it was too late—the refugees were hiding everywhere, deep in the deserted parts of The City. And in a couple of days it became apparent that lots of Halfway People had slipped in, too, because they were attacking citizens, even in the well-lit districts, approaching with smiles that turned into bites. In a few days, everything was chaos. The airships had been set on fire, so all communication with the outside was cut off, and burning wreckage littered the ground. The guards were overwhelmed, attacked by teams of Halfway People working in tandem. And then the Halfway People started stealing the guards' uniforms . . . well, things got pretty bad. The Mayor stayed holed-up in his mansion, issuing proclamations and trying to direct the guards, trying to keep the populace calm, but it was a losing battle.

And all this time, the heroes stayed barricaded in the bar, watching through the slits in boarded-up windows, waiting for the hero in the block of ice to wake up and save The City. For a while they told themselves the guards must be winning, or that things weren't as bad as they seemed, because if they were, the hero would have burst from the ice to rescue The City. Every once in a while they thought about going out to help people fight, but they weren't sure what to do, exactly, and then there was the prophecy, nailed up on the wall in a place of honor, describing how all the heroes except the chosen,

frozen one would be slaughtered and eaten if they tried to fight the invaders. They tried to chip away the ice with their daggers and hatchets, to speed up the process, and the green woman shot fire from her eyes at the ice to try to melt it, but none of that worked.

Then one day a man came in through a concealed side entrance none of the heroes had even known about. They recognized him instantly: long dirty gray hair, grimy clothes made of animal skins and strange leathers, and those incongruously clean magical boots. This was the legendary, infamous Howlaa, the walker over worlds. He stared at the heroes, and the heroes stared at him, and Howlaa shouted, "What are you idiots doing in here? I thought all The City's heroes were dead!"

They looked at each other, and coughed, and mumbled, and finally the green woman said, "We've just been waiting for this guy in the block of ice to wake up and go fight. We were going to help him, once he did."

Howlaa scowled, and beckoned, and the heroes gathered around him, because the chance to hear Howlaa speak was a rare one. "You stupid bastards," he began. "Let me tell you a story. I was once walking through the many worlds of the sky, and I came to a great city—not so great as this one, but more impressive in some ways—called New York. There was a woman there, named Kitty something, and one night she came home very late and started toward her apartment. Before she reached her front door, she was attacked by a man, who stabbed her. The man went away and left her bleeding, but after a while he came back, and followed the trail of blood she'd left as she crawled away. Once he found her again, he did unspeakable things to her, and stabbed her to death. This woman Kitty had neighbors, and some of them heard her calling for help, and some others saw her get stabbed, but none of them called the city guards, and none of them came to her aid. For a long time, people thought this was proof of how horrible and jaded and uncaring the people of that city were, but the truth is more complicated. Some scholars performed experiments later, where they tricked people into thinking another person was in danger. They discovered that, when people are alone, they usually rush to help a person in distress. But when people are in groups, they don't rush—instead, they seem to expect that someone else will do the rescuing, or the calling for help. That's what Kitty's neighbors did—they waited for someone else to do the hard work, as if there were some Chosen One waiting to swoop in and save the day. I've got a hard truth for you, sucklings—there is no Chosen One. There's just you, and the things you choose to do."

And the heroes sputtered, and protested, and pointed to the prophecy, and said, "Look, it's there, it's been certified, the frozen one is the chosen one."

So Howlaa took down the scroll, and turned it this way and that, and squinted at it, and snorted, and said, "No he's not, he's just some dead idiot who got frozen. This isn't an ancient prophecy. It's written on the back of a restaurant take-out menu." And he showed them the scroll, and now they could all see it, and couldn't imagine how they'd ever been fooled—except they knew it was some trick of the Halfway People, who were skilled at such illusions.

"The mayor must be told!" the green woman shouted, and the heroes set out, with Howlaa in the lead, toward the mayor's mansion. The streets were filled with Halfway People, who didn't bother to disguise themselves anymore. Many of the heroes died on the trip, including Howlaa, which was a shock, because in spite of themselves, they'd believed he was somehow truly the chosen one. Eventually the green woman and a couple of others made their way to the mansion, and inside. The Mayor was there, but to their horror they saw he was actually a Halfway Person too. He'd come into The City secretly years before, pretending to be human all that time, finally rising to a position of power, just waiting for his chance to let his fellow monsters in. The heroes hid in an adjoining room and listened to the Mayor talk to his councilors, and discovered that he'd created the false prophecy, and that he was ordering the few remaining human guards into ambushes. The heroes despaired, but finally the green woman rallied

them—they might die, but at the very least they could kill the Mayor, and hope that without his guidance the Halfway People would lose their grip on The City. And so they steeled themselves, and went into the office, and did battle.

No, that's it. That's the whole story.

No, for the last time, I'm not from the future, I'm not *you*. I'm from . . . someplace else. Sort of a kingdom next door. And there's some bad stuff happening there, way more complicated than heroes and Halfway People, but there might be some . . . refugees, you could say. Things might spill over here, to this world. And if they do, and if you're in the right place at the right time—you might be, but we're not sure, it's not like you've got a destiny, you're just some *guy*—we hope you'll try to do the right thing. Don't stand there. Don't wait around. Don't look at your buddies and wait to see what they'll do. There's no such thing as fate, but all kinds of tremendous shit seems to keep happening anyway.

I can't tell you exactly what you'll have to do, because I don't know what's going to happen. None of us do. So we're coming over, talking to as many of you as possible in the few moments we have. It's like, if you teach a kid to play chess, he doesn't just learn how to play chess, he learns how to think a certain way, how to look ahead, think of things in combination, and that's what we're trying to do, we're trying to *show* you.

Damn. Time's up. Here I go. Just remember—

About the Author:

Tim Pratt's stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, and other nice places. Tim received the 2007 Hugo Award for his short story, "Impossible Dreams," which appeared in the July 2006 issue of *Asimov's*. His most recent novel, *Blood Engines*, was published in October 2007 by Bantam Spectra (under the not-quite-a-pseudonym T.A. Pratt). For more about him and his work, see his [web page](#). To contact him, send him email at tim@tropismpress.com.