

THE LONE ARGONAUT

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Preface

The Lone Argonaut began as a few vague scenes I imagined while attending a dull lecture in ninth grade. Not until a year later, in October 2004, did I write the first few paragraphs of the book, and another year had passed by the time I'd finished the first chapter. I found, and nearly always did find, writing the book to be incredibly painful—it just didn't come naturally to me. But by eleventh grade, I was determined to see it through. My few vague scenes had grown so numerous and vivid that I hated the idea of them dying with me. And so the book was written. I'd planned that it would be of average length, and that I'd finish it before I turned eighteen (and thus be able to brag my book was "about a child, for children, by a child"). Instead, it turned out to be a two-hundred-thousand-word epic, and I completed the first draft in August 2008, at the age of nineteen. As long and troubled as the composition had been, I consoled myself that, like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it had turned out all the better for the years of effort that had gone into it.

Once I'd taken my sweet time producing the second draft, I crossed my fingers and began sending off requests for representation to literary agents. I expected I wouldn't get *The Lone Argonaut* published easily, and I wasn't disappointed. Over the latter half of 2009, I amassed almost thirty rejections. History has seen no shortage of writers who overcame seemingly even worse odds to get their work published and earn lasting fame. But I was well aware that for every misunderstood genius there are a thousand people who wrongly believe they are one, and that *The Lone Argonaut* is in many ways less than it could be. Besides, my intention from the beginning had been only to get people to read my story, not to make money. Thus I took the path of least resistance and put *TLA* on the Web. As a believer in free software and free culture, I'm happy to copyleft my work. And as a stubborn oaf, I'm glad that I don't have to relinquish control to some publisher over the content of the official version of my book.

So here's *The Lone Argonaut* to do what you like with, subject to the terms of the license. All I ask is that if you read it, drop me a line. How do you like it? What do you think of the message of the book (or rather, the messages)? Is there anything you'd like to ask me? Would you like a properly bound hard copy of the book? (I could set up a printing-on-demand service, if there's a reasonable amount of demand for printing.) Even if you have nothing to say, I'd be gratified to hear that someone read my book.

Have the appropriate amount of fun.

Part I

Pathways into Darkness

1

Get Your Hero in Trouble on Page One

Jason's first impulse was that he was dreaming, since he had never seen a dragon before, much less been carried away by one. This, I am sure, is something you can sympathize with. Like you, Jason was quite sure that dragons, along with all of the other beasts of classical mythology (such as the unicorn, the troll, and the kraken) had no greater presence in the physical world than the Loch Ness monster. Yet no amount of pinching seemed able to wake him from this supposed dream. The next most likely possibility, then, reasoned Jason, was that he was hallucinating. He looked at his captor, screwed up his eyes, and attempted to convince himself that what he was seeing (and hearing, and feeling) did not exist.

Just a minute ago, Jason had been sitting on a bench in a small park, whose name I don't care to remember. He'd stood up and stretched his arms wide in a gigantic yawn, and a moment later, he'd found himself being swept through the air by a red dragon. The beast's enormous claws, the size of *Tyrannosaurus rex* teeth, were speared through his blue-jean jacket. It had probably swooped down behind him and picked him up like a falcon catching a mouse. It was quite fortunate that he'd had his arms stretched out, exposing the material of his jacket, when the creature attacked. Otherwise, it probably would've pierced a fleshier part of him. Still, regardless of the fact that he wasn't bleeding profusely from ten different holes, hanging by the sleeves of his jacket was not particularly comfortable.

This sensation, along with all of the others Jason was experiencing, refused to be convinced away. The dragon had a very real presence. It looked much like the archetypal dragon of Western folklore, just as you'd expect: a four-limbed, bat-winged, fork-tongued reptile, covered with thick scales. It had a long, pointed snout like an alligator's maw made narrow. Smoke trickled out of its nostrils, a telltale sign of its trademark fire-breathing ability. Its eyes were dominated by Halloween-orange irises circumscribing great black pupils. Those eyes had a front-row-center position on the dragon's face, looking straight ahead—the unmistakable signature of a predator.

It was a bit untraditional in some ways, though. Its body was a striking crimson as opposed to the more orthodox yellowish green, and although it was large—ten feet in length, not including the five-foot tail—it wasn't the mile-long serpent of legend. (Obviously, not all of these details were visible from Jason's current perspective, but he was going to see them soon enough, so I give you them now for the sake of a more complete picture.)

At least Jason could enjoy the scenery. Now that the dragon had gained plenty of altitude, he had a clear view of his hometown and the surrounding hills. Mostly he saw small buildings and trees, but he could also make out a Wal-Mart in the distance. He still hadn't succeeded in dismissing his situation as some kind of illusion, so he just waited to see what would happen.

A minute or so later, he was suddenly plunged into a cloud. The sensation of flying through it was like being dragged through a gaseous sponge. The next moment, Jason found himself rising above the cloud layer, into the upper limits of the troposphere. Now, an infinite meadow of fleece stretched across the horizon on all sides. It wasn't a completely alien sight to Jason, since he'd been on an airplane before, but it was a much grander view than the ones he'd gotten peering out of those tiny windows.

He looked up at the dragon again. As I mentioned before, its wings resembled a bat's. But it didn't fly by frantically flapping its wings and circling about. That would've made for a much bumpier ride than the relatively smooth one that Jason was experiencing. The creature moved through the air much more like a wide-winged bird such as an albatross, flapping infrequently, mostly just riding on currents, although it had no feathers. As little as Jason knew about aerodynamics, it seemed fishy to him. Come to think of it, wasn't the air above the cloud layer too thin for merely mortal men to breathe? And wasn't it supposed to be much chillier at this altitude? Clearly, the presence of the dragon wasn't the only incongruous part of this situation.

Soon enough, the beast began to descend. Another trip through the clouds, and suddenly Jason felt very lost: spread out below him like a map was a labyrinthine network of canyons, each far grander than the Grand one. His head swam. He closed his eyes; the darkness behind his lids was far less confusing. Meanwhile, the dragon sped up as it swooped downwards. Eventually, it began to slow, and Jason suddenly fell on his knees on hard stone. He snapped his eyes open and scrambled to his feet.

He was in a cave with a simply enormous opening. Chances were that the interior of the cave was yet more enormous, but he couldn't tell; the opening faced east and the sun was setting, so it was very dark inside. He didn't need much light at all, though, to see the dragon. It was standing right in front of him, upright on its hind legs, and its orange eyes, which now seemed to be glowing, were staring straight at him.

Jason swore loudly.

The dragon, for its part, leaned forward and said (in an unnaturally deep voice, not without a hint of amusement) "You can talk?"

At this new revelation, that the dragon seemed to be not a mere animal but a rational being that could speak like a man and even had a good grasp of English, Jason really suspected that the universe was conspiring to unnerve him. Somehow he managed to reply hesitantly "Y-y-yes."

There was a pause, and the dragon said "Oh, I see. You didn't think I could speak, did you? Well, I thought the same of you!" A brief draconic chuckle issued from its throat.

"Yes," said Jason, not much put at ease, "that's right."

"It's not every day that you get to have a sapient creature for dinner," mused the dragon aloud, "but let's not waste time chatting. I am very hungry."

Jason would've been hard-pressed to come up with something he wanted to hear less. Up until this moment, he'd been holding on to the faint shred of a hope that the beast might hold no ill will towards him—perhaps it was a champion of good, snatching him from his hometown just moments before the place was hit by a meteor, or perhaps it just wanted a human for a pet. Instead, his worst fear had been realized. A few minutes ago, he'd been relaxing in a park; now, he was staring death in the face.

With the sudden realization of all this, Jason was robbed of most of his sense, and could only stammer pointlessly "You're going to *eat* me?"

The dragon sighed as puffs of smoke piped from its nostrils. "Sadly, yes." It turned away and walked further into the cave.

Jason's mind raced. Now that his fate was clear, he had to find some way out of it. He might try to overpower the dragon—with what? His bare hands? Even if he'd been armed, he wouldn't have stood a chance. Running might work, but probably not. The monster was probably much faster than he; besides, where would he run to? Trickery would've been an option, but in Jason's state of extreme agitation, he couldn't come up with any tricks at all. There was only one thing to do. Somehow, he had to *convince* the dragon not to eat him.

"Please!" he shrieked pitifully, his voice cracking. "Don't eat me!"

The dragon turned and walked back towards Jason. "Why shouldn't I?"

"Because... because it would be unethical." He had never before regretted how philosophy wasn't taught in American public elementary schools as much as he did now.

"How so?" said the dragon, a bit sarcastically.

"Well, you shouldn't kill things. How would you like to be killed?" Jason realized what a stupid argument this was as soon as it was out of his mouth. But fear wreaked havoc on his speech.

The dragon deftly countered "And I suppose you're a breatharian?"

Jason just stood there. He began to cry silently. Was there nothing he could do? The dragon watched him. It was obviously unmoved by his tears—in the same way, he reminded himself, that he would be unmoved by the tears of the animals he ate for dinner. But it wasn't the same thing; it *couldn't* be the same thing. He was no livestock. He could think. The dragon seemed interested in the conversation, if not at all convinced. It wasn't dismissive, at least; it was paying attention. Jason might still have a chance. He rallied what little strength remained in his breast, dried his eyes, took a deep breath, and prepared to argue for his life.

"No, I have to eat, too," said Jason. "And animals are killed to feed me. But I eat *animals*, not other rational beings."

"So what? Murder is murder."

"Sure, but butchers aren't murderers. They kill *animals*."

"What's the difference? You eat animals because you can. They're weaker than you. In quite the same way, I'll eat you, for you're weaker than I." It smiled menacingly to illustrate this point.

"No," said Jason, with more conviction than he felt at the moment, "that's what separates creatures like you and me from the animals. We don't simply take advantage of those who are weaker than us. We do what we like with animals, but

they don't really matter. They're stupid. One is just like another, give or take a few personality quirks in higher mammals. They have no creativity or intelligence. They can't systematically explore new continents, or write novels, or even light a fire.

"You and I, on the other hand, are capable of real greatness. Each specimen of each of our species is special. We can go down in history, for we, unlike the animals, keep histories. To recap: it is unethical for you to kill me for food *because* I'm a sapient creature."

"Pretty good," admitted the dragon, "pretty good. But your argument is based upon the assumption that we're of equal intelligence. In fact, I'm smarter than you."

"No, it isn't. Just that we're both sapient." He waited for the beast to respond, but it didn't, so he went on. "Look, think of the precedent you're setting. Suppose a rational being ten times your size got you in its clutches. You wouldn't want to get eaten, of course. But if you eat me, you won't be able to use my argument, 'cause you need to practice what you preach."

There was now a longer pause than any so far in the encounter. Jason fidgeted a little. The dragon was as impassive as ever. It sighed deeply.

Finally, it said "Fine, you win. But I hope you realize you're inconveniencing me quite a bit. I'll have to look for something else to eat." It walked out of the cave, to the canyon's rim, which was just a few yards away from the entrance. Looking back at Jason, it said "Don't worry, I'll eat an animal." Then it leapt off the edge and flew away.

Jason had no idea where he was. He didn't know how to get home. He didn't know if civilization could be found anywhere nearby, or if he had any hope of being rescued. He wasn't sure if anything he'd perceived in the last few minutes had been real at all. But Jason was alive, gloriously alive!

He smiled as he watched the dragon fly off into the distance.

2

Some Timely Exposition

Jason couldn't fly, so he couldn't get home the same way he'd left it; he would've had trouble retracing the dragon's flight path, anyway. For myriad good reasons, he also didn't like the idea of begging the dragon to take him home, if it ever came back here. So, he decided, the best thing to do would be to journey across this strange land on foot and see what he could find.

He walked out of the cave and looked around. The beauty of his surroundings struck him suddenly, like a slap on the face. He was standing on a relatively narrow strip of land, about as wide as a busy thoroughfare, with perilous drops to the canyon floor on either side. To the west, the sun was setting over the opposite rim of the canyon at his left. Now that the excitement of his confrontation with the dragon was over, he noticed that it was rather warm here despite the late time of day, and took off his jacket.

Jason traveled north at first. He had few other choices. After a while, he began to find crooked and wide eccentricities in the path. There were forks that continued at the same elevation, and ramps that led up and down, and short drops to shelves on the canyon wall. On a whim, he decided to quit the straight and narrow road for higher ground.

Surveying the dry and dusty world about him, he found no signs of life at all. There wasn't a single patch of lichen anywhere, never mind a dragon. His dragon would probably starve to death, if it didn't go back to his hometown and eat his neighbor's St. Bernard.

After an hour or so of walking, when Jason was many stories above the cave where the dragon had taken him, night fell. He decided to stop for a spell to take a rest and turn over the recent events in his mind, if not go to sleep. He came to a kind of peninsula in the sea of canyon, where he was surrounded on three sides by unfathomable descents, and lay down on the dusty ground. It was even less comfortable than he'd expected.

The stars had come out in all their glory in spite of the clouds, and they actually outdid the preceding sunset in aesthetic appeal, if at all possible. They were radiant points of bright-white fire woven into a fabric of the blackest possible blue, and even if Jason couldn't tell Ursa Major from the Big Dipper, he could appreciate the view. Then, some clouds parted and he noticed that the sky was graced with two moons.

He was too emotionally exhausted to really be surprised. All the overabundance

of satellites did was confirm that he was either in an alien solar system or out of his mind. Or perhaps he was both. Disregarding Occam's Razor for the moment, he tentatively chose the first explanation, since the questions that arose from it were less frightening, even if they were more numerous.

Firstly, and most obviously, how in the world—or rather, the universe—did he get here? The dragon hadn't ever seemed to exit Earth's atmosphere during its flight. Perhaps some kind of transparently-activated teleportation had been involved. If so, had the dragon done it itself, or had it used some kind of gateway? How was it possible?

Secondly, the dragon itself seemed impossibly improbable. What were the chances that such a famous and specific mythical monster actually existed on another planet? Surely it wasn't possible for a creature to actually breathe fire. And how did it know English? The only way Jason imagined it could is if it was secretly involved with other humans, and had learned the language from them. If it was a sapient being, why didn't it seem to have any technology or society? If it lived on this planet, what did it regularly subsist on, other than the life of other planets it traveled to?

Finally, this planet was uncannily like Earth. It was obviously "class-M" (i.e., inhabitable), and it was even the same time here when he arrived as it was in his hometown when he left. Again, what were the chances?

Jason figured that he was probably countless light-years (if not a universe or a reality) away from the little blue ball he'd always lived on. Comforting himself that he might well be whisked out of Fantasyland as suddenly and inexplicably as he'd entered it, and fatigued by fear, he eventually managed to fall asleep.

As soon as Jason's eyes confirmed that what had just occurred over the past few hours hadn't been a dream, he moaned anew. Nothing about this strange world seemed to have changed during his sleep, other than the time of day. The sun (there was only one sun, thankfully) was exposed, but not quite over the horizon. Given that and his degree of grogginess, Jason estimated the time to be about seven-thirty. He'd had only enough time to get up, dust himself off, and check up on the bruises he'd sustained earlier when yet another inexplicable thing happened. Without any warning, fanfare, or special effects, a man appeared in front of Jason. One moment, he simply wasn't there, and the next, he was.

The stranger looked like he was in his mid-thirties. He had brown hair and a matching neatly-trimmed mustache, pale skin, and muted green eyes. He was short, but his expensive-looking, miraculously wrinkle-free business suit and the way he stared at Jason (not coldly, but rather *knowingly*) through his thin-framed silver spectacles made him look surprisingly imposing. Actually, he was on the whole not very remarkable; if you'd spotted him amidst the sea of commuters on a New York City subway car during rush hour, you probably wouldn't have given him a second thought. But I need not remind you of the curious way in which he showed up, nor need I explain why Jason leapt backwards with alarm.

"Don't worry, kid." said the man with a totally implacable, yet readily comprehensible accent. "I won't eat you."

"That's comforting." Jason spat. After a brief silence, he continued in the same tone "Care to explain yourself?"

"Gladly." the man said as he seated himself on the ground. "Sit down."

"Thanks, I think I'll remain standing."

"Suit yourself. Now, where to begin?" He propped his head on his hands pensively. "I am the Adventurer of Gyeeds, the greatest city of—" here he uttered a long string of apparently nonsensical syllables "—and elsewhere. I—"

"Whoa, Nelly!" Jason interrupted, his anger forgotten in his sheer confusion. "You totally lost me there." He sat down across from the stranger. "First of all, whadya mean by 'the' adventurer of that city?"

"Um, obviously I didn't start at the right place. Let me try again. All right, my name is Roland Moralheart, how about yours?"

"Jason Amadeus Blue. And if you're looking for a good starting point, I would suggest explaining how you got here."

"Ah, good question." said Roland. "A wizard did it. Specifically, yours truly."

"So you're—"

"A wizard, yes."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Yes, I think you have every reason to."

"True enough." sighed Jason. "I'll accept that for now. My next question is, how did you know what happened between me and the dragon?"

"I watched your encounter."

"Using your wizardly powers?"

"More or less."

"Okay then, so, why did you watch me then and why are you here now?"

"That requires the longer explanation I was trying to give you."

"I was afraid of that. Go on."

"I warn you, this could take a while. And if you keep interrupting me, you'll only make it take longer."

"I get it, I get it; just start talking."

"Excellent. Now. Many of your people's fictional works claim that there are multiple dimensions, or realities, or something of that nature, existing in parallel but never or rarely interacting with one another. The many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics is the scientific equivalent of this idea. My people have discovered that it has a basis in truth. To wit, there is more than one universe. (We just call them 'verses'.) Furthermore, we've found ways to interact with verses outside of our own. For example, at the moment, both you and I are outside of our respective native verses."

"So this..." said Jason, gesturing to encompass the world that surrounded man and boy.

"Is a different verse than the one you've lived in your whole life, kid. Welcome to the multiverse."

Roland paused to let this sink in. Jason slowly shook his head in amazement. *That explains something, at least.* he thought.

"My people" the man continued "are a lot like yours. We evolved from lower primates on a planet about the same size as Earth. Our planets also have similar chemical compositions, and are both the third satellite of their respective star, which are of similar ages and sizes. Your and my people even have similar histories; it took

us about the same amount of time to have the same scientific and social revolutions as you. However, we are a bit ahead of you in terms of technology.

"Most notably, we managed to develop what would now be called a 'verseporter'. It was massive, overwrought, and ridiculously inefficient—it had to be fission-powered—but it was a first for us. For the first time, we could travel to new verses that we had for so long only been able to view. A good thing, too, because our food production had just peaked. But we never used it."

"Wha—whyever so?" said Jason.

"We didn't have to." responded Roland. "As soon as we'd finished testing the machine with a few monkeys, and were about to try it out ourselves, a representative from the IDC crossed into our verse."

"The IDC, as the man explained to us, was the Interdimensional Council, a league of nations from many verses that oversees relations between them. One of their primary policies is that they establish full contact with any verse they can reach the moment that someone, somewhere on that verse creates a viable method of verseportation."

"This policy was made as a compromise between those who wanted to leave other verses completely alone and those who wanted to reach out to all of them. It's quite rational, actually. You see, if there were any legal way for the people of an advanced verse to intrude into the territory of a significantly more primitive one, whole civilizations would be wiped out in the rush for land and resources. Before this policy, countless people who hadn't invented anything more complicated than smelting were slain by interdimensional predators with tanks and machine guns. We're remorseful for those our ancestors slaughtered, and nobody wants to let it happen again. With modern technology, all it takes is a few greedy rogues to exterminate a planet's worth of cavemen."

"So, verses blessed with sapient life are left to develop on their own until they find some way of moving between verses, by magic or machine. Then, an IDC rep shows up and offers to let them join the organization. Doing so allows access to the learning of hundreds of verses, so few refuse." He paused for breath.

"Fascinating stuff!" said Jason, rubbing his chin. "It's a lot like the Prime Directive."

"But much more strictly enforced, mind you."

"Right. But... why did the IDC dude have to explain all this to you? You mentioned that you could 'view' other dimensions before you could go to them."

"Yes, we did know it all already, so it was a bit of a formality," said Roland. "But the IDC's official motto is 'Better safe than sorry.' There are a few nations that learned to travel before they could see other verses. At any rate, we never had to use that clunky verseporter because the IDC showed us how we could verseport in style, like I did just a few minutes ago."

"Speaking of you, you've given me an awful lot of background, but you haven't answered my third question yet."

"Yes, I know. As I said from the beginning, I'm the Adventurer of Gyeeds. Gyeeds is a huge city-state—the size of your state of California—that's the main feature of its verse. That verse is where I was born, and—" again, he said something totally incomprehensible "—is its ID code, but it's generally just called Gyeeds. You

usually don't need to distinguish between the city and the verse, anyway, since there's little in Gyeeds the verse to interest the average traveler other than Gyeeds the city. The Adventurer of Gyeeds is an official, elected position, second in rank only to the mayor. As adventurer, my job is to be the mayor's representative, spy, or whatever else he needs me to be that involves travel and swashbuckling."

"Quite some job," said Jason.

"But of course, it isn't nearly as good as it sounds." Roland lamented. "I'm usually not under the mayor's thumb; I do get to act on my own. But it's lonely and often very tedious. Just last week I was exploring a vast swamp. On foot. Alone. Even with magical mosquito repellent, it was, well, awful."

"I see."

"At any rate, let me finally answer your question. Last night, I was on duty but didn't have any assignments. So, I browsed through verses, looking for trouble. Imagine my surprise when I saw a dragon quietly verseport into this wasteland with a small boy dangling from its claws."

"I am not *small*!" said Jason hotly. "I just turned ten last Thursday."

"That's small to me, kid," retorted Roland calmly. "Not to mention young." Jason scowled. "So I watched and listened to your encounter. I think you did admirably well, actually."

"Uh, thanks, I guess," said Jason, somewhat mollified.

"I wanted to meet you, but I could tell that the confrontation and the shock had exhausted you. I let you get some sleep, and here I am."

"Wanted to meet me?"

"Yes, as I said, I think you dealt with that dragon very well. But besides, it would've been illegal, not to mention immoral, to just leave you on this planet and let you fend for yourself. There's nothing to eat or drink here, in case you haven't noticed. You'd soon die of dehydration."

"So" said Jason with a sinking feeling "I won't magically pop back to Earth after a day or two?"

"I'm afraid not."

"So how do you expect me to get home?" Then, before Roland could respond, he added "Would you be willing to, uh, 'verseport' me yourself?"

Roland cast his eyes down. "This is the hard part, kid. You can't go home again."

"Whaddya mean?"

"You heard what I said about the IDC's policy. I can't do anything to your native verse—even put you back there—on pain of death. Realistically, now, you can't expect me to make such a sacrifice, can you? I'm sorry, but unless Terran scientists construct a verseporter within your lifetime—which is, to be frank, quite unlikely—you'll never meet your friends and family again."

So that was it, then? Everything Jason knew, everything he valued, everything he loved, everything he'd always taken for granted, was gone in the blink of an eye. Of all the awful scenarios he'd imagined, this was far worse than the bulk of them. It was as if every random event that had happened since the beginning of time had been rerolled. All that was left was his memories, his clothes, and himself.

Well, it wasn't quite so bad; he could always "view" his home, whatever that

exactly entailed. He could keep up with the times and refresh his memory of those ten long years he'd spent on Earth, even if he couldn't interact with anything.

Jason had never been the type to hold back tears, and he certainly didn't now, despite how the whole force of the blow hadn't hit him yet. He cried; he wept; he wailed. Roland looked away.

"I know it can't be easy to bear," the man said quietly. "I figured it would be best to get it over with as soon as possible. You can at least take comfort in that this is the worst thing you'll hear from me, by far. From your perspective, anyway."

"It's all right," Jason sobbed. "Are you sure there's no way...?"

"I'm sure."

"Even though the dragon got me here illegally?"

"Even though."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

Eventually, Jason said "But what am I supposed to do, where am I supposed to go? I have no home and no guardian."

"Well..." said Roland "legally, you're an orphan. So by default, you would go to an orphanage. It wouldn't be like *Oliver Twist*, but it wouldn't be all fun and games, either. You'd receive lessons in Common, the standard language, and you'd be fed three meals a day. But you wouldn't get the kind of individual attention a growing boy really needs, and you'd have little to occupy your time."

"You seem to be implying" Jason stammered, blowing his nose on something, "that I have... some other option."

"Well, yes. You see, I... if you like... I'd be willing to adopt you."

Jason stared at Roland through his tears. The man looked like he'd already come to regret his words.

All Jason could say was "Why?"

Roland kneaded his hands nervously. "Jason, when I was younger and more naive, in my late teens, I married. Like a lot of young marriages, it wasn't successful, and we divorced after a few years. No, we didn't have any children. But I carried away with me a deep distrust of love, and, to a certain degree, people in general. I'm a social butterfly when I need to be—which is often, since I *am* a politician, after all—but in truth, I have no real friends. I'm a lonely man. You're an orphan. I like you. It makes sense to me."

"But really now, how do I know you're not a pedophile?"

Roland cringed. "I thought Americans your age didn't know about that kind of thing. You don't; there's no way I can prove it to you. But you don't have to take my word for it. I'll happily escort you to the orphanage. And if you do take up my offer, I won't keep you on a short leash. You'll be free to run away or call the police at any time if you feel threatened."

Jason thought for a few moments as he dried his eyes, assessing Roland. He seemed like a good man: friendly, eloquent, unstuffy despite his suit. His emotional displays and the things he said certainly seemed genuine—either he was an honest politician, or a very good actor. Certainly, the possibility that the kind old lady who lived in an edible house might be a witch had to be kept in mind. *Especially* with a name like... uh... well, whatever the man's last name was, Jason recalled that it gave a very unsubtle impression of innocence. But Jason had little to lose, and a lot to gain.

In his hour of need, he thought it best to give the benefit of the doubt to those who might help him.

"All right," he said, "you seem trustworthy enough. I'll be your surrogate son until further notice. But, uh, what was your name again?"

Roland smiled with some degree of relief. "Roland Moralheart. You can call me Roland. May I call you Jason?"

"Actually, you already did," (Roland looked embarrassed) "but sure, Roland."

Roland stood up. "Thank you very much for taking up my offer. I do hope you won't regret it. Now, let's head to Gyeeds. Take my hand, please."

Jason hesitantly got up and did so. With his free hand, Roland withdrew a small pouch from somewhere within his suit and swept it through the air, releasing a cloud of green phosphorescent motes. He said something in a strange and airy language that Jason didn't recognize, and suddenly, man and boy were somewhere else.

3

The City

Jason looked around. For once, he was actually a little disappointed. This was obviously no city in the clouds. He was surrounded by skyscrapers, but realistic, sober-looking ones; they weren't in the gaudy colors and ultramodern designs he'd subconsciously expected. The streets and sidewalks seemed unnaturally neat and clean—nary a dot of chewing gum nor a sliver of a cigarette butt could be seen on the pavement—but were otherwise quite ordinary. There were a few cars, but they were indistinguishable from Terran models, at least to Jason's thoroughly non-car-savvy eye. On the whole, the scene seemed more like an idealized version of your average American metropolis than an alien city in an alternate reality. He noted that it, too, was in the same time zone as home.

They seemed to have teleported right onto the doorstep of wherever Roland wanted to go, for he entered the nearest building and motioned for Jason to follow. As he did so, Jason noticed a sign above the big glass doors. Presumably, it gave a clue to the building's function, but he couldn't tell. It was written in a script he'd never seen before, consisting of unusually simple symbols. Each character was only a slight alteration or two away from a line, rectangle, or ellipse.

The lobby of the building was small and sparsely furnished. The doorman, sitting at an ancient, dented metal desk, looked at a card Roland showed him and conversed with him in an alien tongue. Roland then led Jason down a long hallway and up a short flight of stairs to what struck Jason as a profoundly mundane place: a waiting room. He'd be waiting for a long time: the folding chairs that lined the walls were nearly all occupied. The waiters were a diverse bunch—male and female, young and old, light- and dark-skinned. I can't very well describe these people as "black" or "white", for those words are properly names of Terran ethnicities, and as much as the citizens of Gyeeds looked like Jason, every gene he and they shared was, in theory, accidental.

Even as he sat down, many of the waiters openly stared at Roland. Several spoke to him in the same foreign language, and he responded likewise. Mostly, he seemed to be trying to politely fend them off, but he apparently took offense at a joke cracked by a suited man. It occurred to Jason that they were probably just reacting to his celebrity status as Adventurer of Gyeeds.

Once Roland seemed to have finished with public relations, Jason piped up "So, what is this place?"

"This is the Gyeeds Central Orphanage." said Roland, without any visible

annoyance. "There are some living quarters here, but mostly this building is for general administration regarding orphans, whether or not they live in an orphanage." Responding to Jason's puzzled look, he went on "This is where I have to go to apply to be your legal guardian. It's just a bit of red tape. All you need to do is sign a form."

After a moment, Jason said "I hope the form's in English."

"Actually, there is an English translation of it, specially prepared for this possibility."

"What possibility?"

"That a resident of Earth might end up in another verse for some reason, like you did."

"So... do you have it in every, uh, Terran language?"

"Oh, no. Just English, Spanish, and Simplified Chinese. Everybody agreed that that was more than enough preparation for such an unlikely event."

"Has it ever happened before, then?"

"No. You're the first Terran to ever leave—" (more nonsense) ". That's your verse's ID code."

"Are these ID codes for verses in another language, or something?"

"Actually, they're not really in any language; they're just a string of Common characters. People do read them in Common, though."

"Now you're not making any sense at all."

"Look," he said, taking a magazine from an end table and showing it to Jason. On the cover was a woodcut of a camel and more of the strange symbols. "See these letters? They're Common graphemes. Common with a capital C. It's a language, remember? In fact, it's the official language of the IDC, plus Gyeeds and most other verses that have representatives in the IDC."

Jason mulled that over for a while, then said "Which begs the question, why do you know English?"

"Because I am what we call a scholar of Earth. You see, as I mentioned before, we can observe other verses without interacting with them. Some people take a great interest in a foreign verse despite how it would be criminal to visit it, immersing themselves as much as they can in its culture and politics. They are called scholars of that verse."

"So you learned a language solely in order to learn about a planet you'd never be able to go to? I mean, you never foresaw this, did you?"

"Yes to your first question and no to the second."

"But if your knowledge of English is primarily academic, how do you speak it so well?"

"Well," said Roland sheepishly, "I admit that not all of my study of Earth is entirely serious and academic. I and my fellow hobbyists enjoy conversing in English as a novelty, especially at conventions."

"Then... then... O God, you're like a Trekkie who speaks Klingon!"

Now Roland looked much more embarrassed. "Yes, that's a pretty good analogy. But at least it's a *real* language, and a very nice one, I think, even if it isn't so concise as Common. And look, it turned out to be useful."

"But now that I think of it, is it really a coincidence? I mean, there aren't *too* many Gyeeds-ites or whatever who are very interested in Earth, right? And only a few

of those are enamored with it enough to learn one of its languages, right? And only a few of those learn English as opposed to Yiddish or something, right? What are the chances that *you* came as my knight in shining armor?"

"All right, your concerns are valid. No, it's not entirely coincidental that I noticed you. I fibbed a little when I said I just happened to see you. You see, much like how hardcore Trekkies secretly hope that *Star Trek* is real, we scholars of Earth have always dreamed of the chance to somehow meet a Terran face-to-face. It's gotten to the point where I've got a setup that constantly monitors any interdimensional travel from Earth. I promise I didn't sic the dragon on you, though."

Jason smiled wearily. "That would be punishable by death, right?"

"Right. And by the way," he added, "I also speak Spanish, though not quite as well."

Eventually, a clerk summoned the pair. He and Roland talked in what Jason supposed must be Common. In a minute or so, the clerk gave Roland some kind of tablet computer. Roland wrote something on it with a stylus and handed it to Jason.

On the screen, which somehow seemed to be not backlit but still as legible as a piece of paper, was the contract. It was surprisingly concise and easy to understand, and the device's GUI was intuitive enough to let him scroll the document, so Jason read it in full. Basically, it entitled Roland and Jason to the same rights over each other as if they were father and son, though Jason was pleased to note that it gave Roland little power over him, except if he was incapacitated, except in case of suspected abuse. It also granted him citizenship of Gyeeds. There wasn't any fine print. He gave it his best John Hancock and returned it to the clerk.

"All right, we're done here," said Roland, and turned towards the exit.

"Have a nice day," said Jason to the clerk, though he knew he wouldn't be understood.

The pair emerged from the building, back into the morning sunlight, and Roland led them along the sidewalk to...

"So, where are we goin' now?"

"Home."

"Is it nearby?"

"No, we're going to take the train."

"Train? Can't we teleport?"

"We *could*, but it would be a waste of energy." He looked at Jason. "Spellcasting may be magical, but there's no such thing as a free lunch. Casting spells eats away at a man's stamina. Given that I have a full-time job, I need all the energy I can get. Not to mention that reagents don't come cheap."

"I see, I think," said Jason. "But really, this whole thing about magic, well, really existing is a bit bizarre. Is there a scientific explanation for it all?"

"The short answer is, there is no short answer."

"I was afraid of that. Go on."

"No, no, I mean that there isn't any decently-sized answer at all. It's what would be graduate school-level stuff, if it were taught on your planet."

"Oh. Do you even have graduate school, then?"

"Not in the same sense. The American and Gyeedian education systems are

very different. And here we are.”

They had arrived at a staircase leading down, under the sidewalk, to a train station. It was, surprisingly enough, just as well-lit as the Gyeeds Central Orphanage. Roland took another card out of his pocket and waved it twice at a turnstile, and they both went through. The tracks were sealed off by a glass tunnel, so you couldn't walk off the platform, but at that moment a boxy silver train slid silently into view. Once it came to a complete stop, the doors on its side lined up with doors in the glass, and all of them popped open. A flood of people poured out, while another, into which Roland directed Jason and himself, went inside.

The interior of the train was crowded and covered with advertisements. The pair nabbed two adjacent seats while they were open, and Roland immediately turned to Jason.

“Let's keep talking, so I look busy,” he said over the noise of everyone else chatting, while ignoring the curious stares of many. “Celebrity is overrated, you know. So, this is a vacuum maglev. Do you know what that is?”

“Maglev, yes, but what does a vacuum have to do with anything?”

“Did you see how the tunnel is sealed off from the platform at that station?” Jason nodded. “It's to keep air out of the tunnel. Running the train without touching the track and through a vacuum eliminates friction, so that it can move at great speeds using relatively little energy.”

“Awesome.”

“Isn't it? But let's change the subject to something lighter. Remember how I told you I explored a swamp last week?”

And so Jason and Roland passed the time engaged in small talk, or the nearest approximation they could manage, considering how little they had in common. Eventually, they came to the stop that Roland wanted. Another few minutes and they were in an apartment building. They took the elevator to the sixty-fourth floor and entered Roland's apartment.

“Pretty neat for a bachelor pad,” said Jason.

“We Gyeedians place a high value on cleanliness.”

It was a pretty spacious place, too, Jason thought, for a home in such a huge apartment building. While the ceiling was low, the square footage was generous. It was laid out in a familiar fashion, with clear divisions between the kitchen, living room, and bedroom, and Jason could easily recognize such essential appliances as a desktop computer, television, refrigerator, stove, and bathtub. But—“The hell is this?” he said, indicating a squat basin that sat beside the toilet.

“It's a bidet, of course. Haven't you ever seen one before?”

“No,” he said doubtfully, “I don't think we have these things on Earth.”

Roland laughed. “Oh, I remember, they don't have them in the States. They're more popular in Europe and the East.”

“I'll take your word for it.” Jason glared at the thing. “But what, exactly, is its purpose?” Just as Roland began to speak, he interrupted “No, never mind. I think that's one thing I don't really want to know.”

For good or for ill, Jason died without ever really knowing what a bidet was.

4

Standards and Conventions

And so Jason began a new life in Gyeeds.

Now that he had a home and a guardian, his greatest obstacle to living comfortably in this brave new world was language. Thusly, the very day after he arrived in Gyeeds, he began taking lessons in Common. Each day, he woke up promptly at eight-o'-clock, ate a bland breakfast, did his morning hygienic duties, and was escorted by Roland to a special school for learning Common.

There, with twenty other students of various ages (none of whom knew English or Common), he spent six hours studying the language. Their teacher was Lylan Flametamer, a young woman of great linguistic talent. She could, she informed the class with some pride as soon as everybody could understand her, speak twenty languages fluently, and countless more to at least some degree. Her English was sorely lacking from a grammatical perspective, but her accent was better than Roland's.

Common, oppressively foreign as it initially was to Jason's eyes and ears, turned out to be a very learnable language. It was carefully constructed to be more or less perfect: concise, logical, and versatile. Spelling was entirely phonetic; in fact, each Common character stood for exactly one sound. For every given idea there were myriad ways to express it, each with a different nuance. Learning Common also entailed learning Roots, a virtual language designed solely to serve as a basis for Common words, much like English words are sometimes directly constructed out of Greek or Latin ones. Jason first thought that this was surely unnecessary, but he found that it made creating and understanding neologisms a lot easier.

Once he'd had a taste of the language, Jason was unsurprised to find that many other facets of Gyeedian life were heavily standardized, as well. Time was measured in hours and minutes, just like Earth's, but days officially began and ended at dawn, not midnight, and everybody used 24-hour time. There were eight days of the week (five in which most people worked and three in which they didn't) that were named after, of all things, eight familiar chemical elements: hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, lead, iron, gold, and silver. There were no months; dates were typically given in day-week-year format. A year was officially composed of 45 weeks, plus however much time was needed for the planet to get back to its starting position, the vernal equinox—this "in-between" period was treated as being in week zero. Finally, year zero was set at the estimated date in which the people of one of the IDC's oldest civilizations invented writing.

"It's enough to make you think that the Gyeedians never had a religion." commented Jason. His Common was tolerably good by now, but still worse than Roland's English, so they stuck to the latter language when speaking to each other.

"Don't be ridiculous." said Roland. "Atheism is a growing trend, sure, but seventy percent of Gyeedians still follow one religion or another."

"Then why is it that no shred of traditional beliefs remains in the way the calendar's set up? Americans are reluctant enough to use 'BCE' instead of 'BC', never mind a whole 'nother calendar."

"True, once upon a time we did use a religious calendar. But we very much wanted to join the IDC, and switching calendars was part of the bargain. We joined forty-two years ago, but the IDC is sixty years old, so they had already developed a lot of standards by the time we came in. To be honest, people found it a lot harder to switch from decimal to hexadecimal than to change calendars."

At any rate, Jason kept a Gregorian calendar in his room, for nostalgia if nothing else. He'd been snatched from the face of dear Mother Earth by the dragon on Sunday, September 21st, 2003—Hydrogen, 24, 5624, as the IDC would have it. For the sake of sanity, I'll give most dates in their Gregorian form, all numerals in decimal, and when people speak of, for instance, "four thousand ninety-sixes of houses", I'll round it off to "thousands of houses".

Meanwhile, Jason had to get used to the city itself. It was so big that it comfortably contained over 1.6 billion people, with enough room left over for several large bodies of water, a great many parks, and even a mountain or two. Its success had hardly been spontaneous, though. It first emerged as one of the area's greatest cities about 2,500 years ago—no wonder, since the location was excellent. It was a temperate, fertile area crisscrossed by rivers, on the northern coast of a large continent. Early on, it evolved from a simple farming community into the center of trade and culture on the continent. It became the capital of a larger nation, and for millennia was perpetually changing hands as conquerors fought over it bitterly. Although it suffered countless sieges, successful and otherwise, it was never severely damaged. Its owners, both current and hopeful, were careful to preserve it.

Gyeeds was the greatest city on the planet, but its neighbors were never quite as prosperous. Eventually, in 1501 CE, the Gyeedians declared their independence from the country. The result was a conflict best described as a mix of the American Revolutionary and Trojan Wars, though it resolved much more quickly than either. When Gyeeds's former fatherland was unable to penetrate the city's great defenses, it threatened to stop all shipments of food into the city. Gyeeds, in turn, threatened to destroy itself if it was thus provoked, which was exactly what its attackers didn't want. And so the Gyeedians won. Over the following five centuries, they prospered more and more, while the surrounding lands splintered and the people fought amongst themselves. A wave of immigration into Gyeeds, made easier by its strict policies of ethnic and religious tolerance, caused the city to swell, and by the year 2000 its residents made up a quarter of the planet's population. The city was, of course, still wholly dependent on imports of food and raw materials, but should the rest of the planet collapse, there were still many other verses that were eager to trade with one of the multiverse's richest cities.

On top of the abrupt change between Jason's suburban hometown and his new,

very thoroughly urban, surroundings, Gyeedian culture was not quite the same as that of the American Midwest. For one thing, Gyeedians in general valued cleanliness and neatness, but cared little for aesthetics, a quirk that appealed to Jason's pragmatic side. He was less pleased when he learned that prostitution was legal.

"I mean, come *on*!" he complained to Roland. "Isn't that pushing it?"

"What's the problem? Perhaps things are different back in the Land of the 'Free', but I certainly hope you don't take United States law as the Word of God."

"Of course I don't; I'm agnostic. But still. It's dirty! It's disgusting! It's detestable! It's downright dehumanizing!"

Roland smiled a little. "We'll see how you feel about that come puberty."

Jason glared at him. "Given, I'll change. But I doubt I'll go mad."

Speaking of sexual taboos, or rather, the lack thereof, Jason was quite relieved to find that his fears of Roland being a child molester were unfounded. By virtue of the politician's celebrity, a vast amount of information on him was readily available on Gyeeds's internet. He had no criminal record, and everything he'd told Jason was apparently true, up to and including his divorce and subsequent romantic disillusionment.

Still, Roland was by no means an adequate replacement for Jason's family. Back on Earth, he had a mother, father, and older sister. He'd shared bonds of love as well as blood with all of them. I have not dwelt upon them much, nor how Jason missed them, but I do so only in order to spare you. Do not think that he found the parting easy, or got over it quickly, for it tormented him countless times, when the hustle and bustle of the day were over and he lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

In his free time, he distracted himself from his preteen angst through recreation. One of Gyeeds's more unusual national pastimes was *Rogue*, a computer game. Apparently, this was another thing that had long existed on Earth but Jason had never noticed. The player's objective in a game of *Rogue* was to retrieve a legendary magical artifact called the Amulet of Yendor from the deepest level of a hundred-floor underground dungeon and bring it back to surface. Along the way, the player had to battle monsters ranging from trolls to electric eels to skeletal dragons, while avoiding traps that could skewer a hapless adventurer on iron spikes or turn them into a frog. The fact that the dungeon was randomly generated, and that saved games were deleted as soon as they were restored, didn't make things any easier. It was a terribly difficult game, so difficult that although Roland had been a devout player for years, he'd never gotten close to winning. As for Jason, he was inevitably slaughtered by a pack of soldier ants every time he played.

"So," said Roland to Jason one evening, "we've lived together for a while now—about seven weeks, correct?"

"Get to the point, Roland."

"Fine, fine," he said, grinning. "Tomorrow, I'm going to attend an Earth convention, and I was wondering if you would accompany me."

"Hm. What would it be like?"

"We're renting a space not too far from here. Basically, it's a way to socialize with other scholars of Earth. Everybody will be dressed in the traditional garb of one Terran civilization or another, and attempting to speak Terran languages. I and a few

other people will make speeches, there will be refreshments and activities, and that's about it. The whole thing should take about five hours, tops, and we can always leave early if you want to."

"Sounds kinda fun, actually. But wouldn't I get mobbed? I mean, it's the information age and everything. Surely the whole multiverse knows about how you adopted me by now. And I suppose they'd all kill to meet a real live Terran."

"Your fears are justified, but it won't be quite that bad. You see, I'm in a fairly powerful and prestigious position in a government that's responsible for over a billion people, but I would attract much less attention on a stroll through this city than Dick Cheney would visiting one of the least populous suburbs in your country. It's because of Gyeedian culture. We just don't worship famous people like the Terran West does; we believe that they deserve a reasonable amount of privacy. There aren't any paparazzi in Gyeeds, because there simply isn't any demand for their product."

"So I'd get stared at, but not harassed much?"

"Exactly. There won't be any dragons there to carry you off."

"Good to hear!" said Jason, laughing. "I'll be happy to come."

However much Gyeedians may value cleanliness and privacy, thought Jason, they don't seem to venerate peace and quiet nearly so much.

The convention was two hours in, and the hall was packed with people talking and shouting in a mishmash of languages, some easily recognizable to the boy's ears, some not. Although nobody had done anything patently offensive to Jason—not yet, at least—they were quite fascinated with him. Many of the attendees had shown up just to meet him. All those people shoving to get a peek at him and addressing him in Common, English, and Zazaki was beginning to take its toll on his sanity, and his hearing. He decided to find Roland and get out of there before his eardrums imploded.

As he doggedly burrowed his way through the crowd, he suddenly felt intensely cold. A moment later, he fell to the floor and blacked out.

5

Another Fine Mess

Jason woke up to find himself lying on some kind of hard surface. He mumbled an oath.

“Bout time.” said an unfamiliar male voice in Common.

Jason’s eyes snapped open. He was on a stone floor in a tiny library. The walls were lined with bookcases, which were in turn filled to bursting with books new and old. The walls and ceiling had once been white, but they looked like they hadn’t had a fresh coat of paint in quite a while. However little concern Gyeedians had with beauty, they did believe in making things look somewhat presentable, so this was unusual.

More unusual was the speaker. He was sitting at a desk in the center of the room; a book lay open before him. He was a tall, pale man in his eighties or thereabouts. On his head was a pointy blue hat spangled with gold and silver stars that absolutely *screamed* “wizard”. His face was set in a frown that looked permanent.

“Get up.” he said gruffly, glaring at Jason.

“*Excuse me?*” said Jason in the same language. Though “excuse me” were the words he would’ve chosen had he been speaking in English, a more literal translation of what he said would be “Who are you, you crazy old coot I’ve never met, to order *me* around?”

The old man sighed. “I guess you don’t understand. I’ve kidnapped you. You’ll do as I say, or I’ll hurt you.”

Jason made his slow and weary way to his feet. He felt too groggy and confused to think straight. “What... how...”

“Don’t speak unless spoken to.” the man snapped. “See that hamper over there?” He gestured towards a basket in the corner that was stuffed full of clothes.

“Yeah.” said Jason weakly.

“Do the laundry. There’s a washer and dryer in the kitchen, and some detergent on the counter. Don’t forget to separate the colors.”

Jason took a few deep breaths, then said “What in the world is going on?”

“What did I just tell you?” said the man, his frown deepening.

Jason spat out another choice English expletive. “If you think I’m gonna be your slave, you are *dead wrong*, buster.”

The man’s frown deepened even further, though if Jason hadn’t seen it happen he would’ve thought it was impossible. The man made a short, violent gesture with

his right hand and said something unintelligible. A few red sparks shot out of his fingertips, and suddenly, Jason had a splitting headache. But before Jason even had a chance to register the real agony of it, it was over.

"Now, please don't make me do that again," the old man said wearily. "I could do far worse, but I don't want to if I don't have to. Please just do as I say and make it easy on yourself." He paused. "All right?"

"Um, yeah, all right," said Jason even more wearily.

"Good," said the man, his expression softening an iota. "Now hop to it."

Jason tottered over to the basket and picked it up, then walked through the open door. He was in a dreary kind of living room which he didn't bother to really examine, except to note that, like the library, it was windowless. He noticed a refrigerator past another door, so he went in that direction (nearly tripping over a napping housecat en route), and there, indeed, were a washing machine and a dryer.

Even though Jason had never washed clothes before, it wasn't hard to figure out what to do, and it gave him some time to think. His mind raced with possibilities as to what had happened in the past... well, however much time had passed since he'd gone unconscious. What had done him in? Some kind of drug? No, he hadn't felt anything, except for that sensation of cold, so he couldn't've been injected with anything. He knew from the movies that you had to get slapped in the face with a cloth to get chloroformed, and that hadn't happened. Most probably, somebody had cast a spell on him. Maybe the old man. If he hadn't been wearing that ridiculous wizard's hat, he would've melded into the crowd perfectly.

Well then, what about motive? If these clothes were anything to go by, the man lived alone. Should Jason suspect pedophilia once again? No, somehow, that was hard to believe, even if it was a possibility. Perhaps the wizard just wanted a slave. But why, then, would he kidnap the Adventurer of Gyeeds's adopted son? Surely that was a very risky move. It was safe to assume that the old man wanted Jason specifically, but, barring the yuckier possibilities, Jason couldn't imagine why. Ransom? That was a bit far-fetched; Roland wasn't rich. A personal vendetta against Roland? Again, it seemed implausible.

Lastly, there was the question of what to do. Physical combat was probably not an option, given that his adversary could cast spells. Retreat was probably the best idea. Then again, if the old man saw him running, he could probably stop him with another spell. And the house's absence of windows made Jason think that the door would be somehow escape-proof. No, wait, this place wasn't made to be a prison, right? Then why weren't there any windows? *Come to think of it*, thought Jason, *the best idea may be to don the armor that saved me in my encounter with the dragon: philosophy. Yes, I suppose it's worth a shot. Once again, I've got little to lose.*

Jason slammed the door of the dryer shut. Then, rather than turn it on, he stormed out of the kitchen and back into the library. As he'd hoped, the wizard was still at his desk, even though all the ruckus had attracted his attention. *Here goes!* thought Jason. Before the man could say a word, he pointed accusatorily at him and proclaimed "You can't kidnap and enslave a fellow human being. It's unethical. It's just plain wrong!"

The old man slowly blinked and responded in English (with a thick Gyeedian accent) "Like I care."

Jason said in the same language “Well, you should. My life, and my dignity, are at stake here. You’d feel the same way in my position. Man,” he continued, positively boiling over with righteous rage, “you are a cruel, heartless—” (here he used a word that I shall not print). “Don’t you have a decent bone in your body? Don’t you have an atom of respect for your fellow man? Is there truly no part of you, however small, that realizes what a horrible crime you’re committing?”

The man shook his head. “Again, you just don’t understand. I don’t believe in ethics; I believe in survival. Were you in *my* position,” he added, staring at Jason meaningfully, still keeping his usual frown, “you’d feel the same way.”

Jason was stunned into relative calm. “But, but... I... where does *your* survival come in?”

“Oh, silly me.” said the man flatly. “I shouldn’t’ve let that slip. Never mind.”

In the face of this, Jason’s fury began to resurface. “You... you *will*—”

At that moment, the man raised his hand as if he was about to make the gesture that had given Jason a headache before. The boy was immediately scared silent. Nothing happened.

“Thank you. As I said before, just do as I say and make it easy for yourself. I do not want to hurt you further. Now,” he continued, as if everything was quite normal, “have you finished with the laundry?”

“Uh... no, not quite.”

“Then hop to it.”

Jason slowly, painfully stumbled back to the kitchen, like a general returning from the battlefield after suffering the worst defeat of his career. He pressed buttons and poured detergent like nothing had happened, like nothing *was* happening. But his heart was filled with dread. *There’s no doubt about it. I must escape. I will escape. And I shall not be kidnapped a third time!*

“No, you didn’t separate the colors right.” said the old man in Common, looking over the results of Jason’s work. “Oh well, you won’t have to do it again. But now I have a bigger job for you. Open up that cabinet.” Jason silently obeyed. “You see the paint in there?”

“Yeah.” Buried under a few musty, unlabeled cardboard boxes were several buckets of it, all white, along with all of the necessary equipment.

“Give all the walls two coats. After that, use the ladder to do the ceilings. Don’t rush; if you don’t finish it today, you can work on it some more tomorrow.”

Sighing mentally, Jason set about this task with all the enthusiasm of a condemned criminal making his way to the gallows. The wizard went back into the library, where, undoubtedly, he buried his nose back into that book. Jason couldn’t help but wonder what it was. Probably not a novel. Perhaps it was something about abducting ten-year-old boys and getting them to do your housework. More realistically, perhaps it was a spellbook—if spellbooks even existed. *I’ve got to learn a bit more about magic*, thought Jason, *as soon as I get out of here.*

Needless to say, he had more immediate concerns—primarily, escape. He carefully painted his way towards the front door, so he could get a good look at it. It appeared thoroughly modern and impenetrable. He did not dare to try the lock, for fear that the wizard might hear him.

Meanwhile, what had the man meant when he'd implied that *his* life was at stake? "I don't believe in ethics, I believe in survival. Were you in *my* position, you'd feel the same way." It was *possible* that this had hardly been a slip, as the man would have Jason believe. But it seemed more likely that he had indeed made a kind of mistake, and didn't care much just because he thought it wouldn't harm him. Or maybe he just wanted Jason to think *that*. Stupid mind games!

Suppose the old man had been telling the truth, then. How was his survival endangered? By old age, of course. But how could Jason help him? By saving him from having to do housework? By participating in a magical ritual that would extend his life? The former seemed petty, the latter, outlandish. Whatever it was, Jason felt sure it was part, if not the entirety, of the man's motive for the kidnapping.

Two hours of tedium later, Jason finally painted his way over to the library. He noticed that the wizard had stopped reading for the moment to eat. Jason's stomach rumbled. He put the paint roller down and worked up his courage, then said "I'm very hungry. Could I have something to eat?"

"I suppose so. Hungry boys make for poor workers. Go take something from the kitchen for yourself."

Jason happily did so. Immediately after this brief interlude, he got back to work. How dreary it was—up, down, up, down. At least he had something to look at, now that he was in the library: the books. There was a great number of them, for such a small space. The titles on their spines were in Common, several unrecognizable languages... and English! Well, of course; the man was a scholar of Earth, which gave him an excuse to show up at the convention, if he ever had. He'd spoken English, Jason recalled, when Jason had attempted to convince him that slavery was wrong. And it had been pretty good English, too. Like his Common, it was informal and fluent.

But enough about languages. Given the titles Jason could read, the books seemed to be mostly for reference. Somehow the man had obtained a complete set of the latest edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. There was also lighter fare: novels ranging from 1984 to *The Phantom Tollbooth*. On the other hand, some of the Common titles seemed to indeed be spellbooks—they had names like *The Art of Spellcasting* and *A Complete Guide to Inorganic Magical Reagents*.

The elderly wizard read on (his book, Jason noticed, was titled *Miraculous Wizardry*) as Jason wended his way through the library and into the bedroom. Here, above the spartan cot on which the wizard slept, Jason noticed an array of framed photographs hanging from the wall. There were three of them, each of a different man, all were grinning widely. Each man looked about the same age, a few years younger than Roland, and they were all very well-muscled and fit as a fiddle—this was made even more noticeable by the fact that all they wore rather short shorts. And, come to think of it, they were all photographed standing in the same spot, in this very room, though the furniture and paint on the walls weren't always the same. Finally, the frames were all identical, and there were two more such frames lying on top of a dresser. There was but one major discrepancy between the portraits: the left and center ones were in black and white, while the one on the right was in color.

"Bizarre." Jason mumbled to himself. "Totally bizarre."

6

Wheels within Wheels

He continued painting for so many hours that he lost count. Not only were there no windows through which to see the sun, there didn't seem to be any clocks, so for all Jason knew, it could've been midnight or noon.

Finally, as Jason was about halfway through the second coat, the old man rose from his desk and said "All right, that's enough for today."

Jason couldn't help but breathe a huge sigh of relief. The man didn't seem to mind.

"Let me see." The man hobbled about the house with a cane, inspecting the walls. "Good. You've been a hard worker." The compliment was diluted by his unremittingly sour expression. "Now, just feed the cat and we can have some dinner."

Once they had finished eating, the wizard said, "I'm not quite so tired, how about you?"

"Actually, I'm exhausted." said Jason, who had to fight to keep himself from spitting out the words with all the venom he could muster. It was perfectly true.

"Well, I don't think it's quite time to turn in. You could stand to stay awake a bit longer."

No, actually, I couldn't.

"I think I'd like to watch a video. You can watch it with me. Go over to the television."

Jason bit his lip, silently praying to any deity who might care to listen that he was not about to see something that would haunt him for the rest of his life, and obeyed.

The old man set himself down on an armchair before the television set. "Open up the one from... ah... Lead, 3, '79."

Jason fiddled with the device a bit. There was a digital video library stored inside the set, which he could access through a search engine-like interface. He found a file that was dated as "Lead, 3, 5579" and got the television to play it.

He was relieved to find that the video was of nothing but a sports game, in black and white. The game being played was one he had seen before, a sort of Gyeedian version of soccer. As it began, something truly remarkable happened. The old man's frown disappeared. In fact, he smiled—and it wasn't a fake smile, but a genuine and spontaneous one. It was, Jason decided upon closer inspection, composed of one part nostalgia and two parts pride. And apparently, it wasn't just out of a love for the sport in general. The old man seemed to be rooting for one side in

particular, and was especially pleased when a certain player played well—which was quite often, because this fellow was obviously the team’s MVP.

Eventually, during a break in the game, a journalist pulled the player aside to talk to him, and Jason got a good look at his face. It was the same man as the one in the middle portrait in the bedroom. Jason looked back at his captor and suddenly realized that the old man was the person portrayed in the right-hand portrait, just much older.

Jason ventured to ask “Is he your father?”

“Uh, no, no.” said the old man, surprised but not angered. “My dad died a very long time ago.”

This answer did make sense, as the sportsman didn’t bear the slightest resemblance to the wizard. In fact, the athlete’s skin was so dark it seemed impossible that any of his children could’ve been light-skinned, while the old man was quite pale. And the old man probably wasn’t albino. Still, Jason couldn’t think of any other way to connect the dots.

The game seemed to drag on forever. At last it ended. The old man, his face having returned to its usual expression, ordered Jason to turn the set off and declared it was time for bed. He went to sleep on his cot, while Jason was left trying to make a crude substitute for a bed in the living room, which had no couches. Eventually, he arranged some chairs into a surface that wasn’t quite as uncomfortable as the floor, and settled down on them with a blanket the wizard had provided.

Tired as he was, even once all the lights were off and his eyes were tightly shut, he couldn’t sleep. His mind was abuzz with possible explanations of everything he had seen and heard. Survival. That was the key thing. Now, how could—but that date kept repeating itself, like a mantra. Lead, 3, 5579. It was 5624 now. So that was... 45 years ago. It was completely possible that a sports game had been broadcast in monochrome back then. But why did... how did everything match up?

Suddenly, it struck Jason like a thunderbolt. Everything popped into place like a jigsaw puzzle. The old man... no, it couldn’t be! And what was he doing, lying here and pondering? He had to escape. Now was his chance. Silently as a shadow, he got up and slowly felt his way over to the front door. He unlocked it, took a deep breath, and turned the doorknob, half-expecting something terrible to happen.

Something terrible happened. All of the lights in house instantly snapped on, blinding Jason, and a split-second later his head throbbed with pain. He crumpled to the floor, moaning weakly, until, after a few seconds, the ache disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The old man swore. “Get up.”

Somehow, Jason managed to do so. He could only open his eyes a crack, since his pupils were fully dilated, but he could see his captor standing in front of him. *He must’ve moved pretty fast to get here that quickly. Teleportation, maybe?*

“How stupid d’ya think I am? A’course I protected the goozack. Why do you think there aren’t any windows?” As Jason searched for an answer (and wondered what a goozack was), he said “That was a rhetorical question. Go to sleep and don’t try to run away again, or you’ll hurt so much you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

Jason was presently back to square one, lying in the darkness. He sighed deeply. Obviously, the only way he could get out of here was if the wizard were

somehow taken out of the picture. Doing that would probably entail figuring out what the wizard planned to do with Jason. Jason had a theory, but he had to confirm it.

The boy got up again. He took his blanket and carefully stuffed it under the door of the old man's bedroom. Then, he walked into the library, took a deep breath, and turned on the light, half-expecting something terrible to happen.

Nothing terrible happened. If any light had leaked into the bedroom, the wizard hadn't noticed. Jason silently gave thanks to the Lady and sat down at the desk, the one where the wizard himself had sat for so long the day before. There was the book that the man had been reading, *Miraculous Wizardry*. Jason opened it up.

Unfortunately, he found it difficult to understand. Although it was written in Common, it used lots of technical words and phrases that didn't seem to have clear roots in Roots. Still, he could get the gist of it. It was a collection of miscellaneous spells of great power. The title was euphemistic: all of the spells called for expensive reagents and were difficult to cast. Moreover, each spell had one or more severe caveats, side-effects that tended to undo the original, desired effect. For example, one spell allowed the castee to go up to four weeks without food or water. Once the magic wore off, however, the castee would have to increase their calorie and fluid intakes to at least ten times the usual amounts, or they were quite likely to die. Furthermore, preparing the spell took far longer than four weeks, and the specified amount of diamond dust needed to cast the spell was far more expensive than forty weeks' worth of food.

Jason searched the table of contents for a spell that matched his hypothesis. Eventually he found one with a name containing the Common word for "exchange", which seemed close enough, and turned to the appropriate page. It was just as he feared: a spell that could switch minds between bodies.

It was all too clear, now. For decades, the wizard had been moving from body to body, leaving each one behind when it got too old. That explained who the men in the pictures were: himself. And that explained how seeing one of those men in his glory days had pleased him so much: he was vain. Now that his third vessel was at death's door, he schemed to take Jason's!

But the timing... how could he have been in a different body, in its mid-twenties, only 45 years ago? Surely he would've only taken on bodies that were significantly younger than the one he was using at the time. On a hunch, Jason looked up "aging" in the book's index, and soon found himself at another spell. It was the magical equivalent of steroids—it greatly boosted its recipient's strength, speed, and toughness. It had to be cast when the castee was still prepubescent, but only took affect upon the onset of adulthood. And the side-effect was that as soon as it wore off, around the age of thirty, it greatly accelerated aging—to the point where a forty-year-old would seem twice their age.

Now things made even more sense. While the man looked eighty, his body was younger and his mind was older. He used both spells in tandem. Because he wanted to excel at sports, he cast the second, and because he wanted to survive, he cast the first—allowing the cycle to begin all over again. If everything went as planned, Jason Amadeus Blue would go down in history as one of the greatest Gyeedian athletes since... well, whatever were the names of those poor boys who'd been the wizard's victims.

"But not" Jason whispered to himself "if Jason Amadeus Blue has anything to

say about it!”

He flipped back to the body-swapping spell. His best bet, he thought, was to somehow make the spell backfire on the wizard. The spell’s caveat, whatever it was, might work to his advantage. He got up and carefully searched the bookshelves until he found a Common technical dictionary. With this, and about an hour of effort, he was able to decipher most of the spell description.

Its full name was “Personality Exchange between Caster and Casteer”. The initial preparation mainly consisted of creating special necklaces, which the caster and casteer would have to wear. The actual casting process didn’t take long. The caster had to say about thirty words while making certain gestures. Then, the necklaces would begin glowing black, then brown, then red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, gray, and finally white, with exactly a second between each color change. Finally, the switch would be effected, and... here came the caveat, but even armed with the dictionary, Jason couldn’t quite understand it. It was something about how there was an approximately one-third chance that the caster’s old body would “fold up” and the casteer’s personality would “escape”. *Well, that’s not helpful.* thought Jason.

Then how could he thwart the spell? The book said that the spell was “unusually safe for its power level—if anything goes wrong during the final casting phase, the spell will simply fail harmlessly. Although the reagents will be wasted, and you will need to prepare the spell all over again, neither you nor the casteer will suffer any ill effects.” So, just messing with the necklaces, causing the wizard to make a mistake, or simply taking off a necklace would do little good. If Jason did one of these things anyway, to buy time, he’d arouse the old man’s suspicion and probably not get the chance to do anything trickier the second time ‘round.

Jason did have an idea. He wasn’t at all sure if it would work, and he could imagine a thousand possible ways it could go wrong, but it was his only hope.

He put the books back where he’d found them, turned off the light, and went back to bed.

7

The Switch

"Rise n' shine." The old man leaned on his cane in front of Jason's makeshift bed, frowning as always. He was still wearing the pointy blue star-spangled hat, even though he'd changed his other clothes. Jason would've loved the opportunity to do likewise. He heaved himself up, yawning. What with all the excitement of the night before, he hadn't gotten much sleep.

They ate a brief breakfast and Jason returned to painting. After a few more hours of work, he was done. All the walls and ceilings shone with a pearly whiteness, and Jason could barely keep his eyes open.

"Excellent work." Once more, the old man smiled. "Why then, 'tis time to do it. Wait here." Grinning widely, he hobbled into his bedroom and rummaged around in a cupboard.

Jason glanced at the easy chair in front of the television. The wizard's cat was lying there on its back, meowing at Jason to get his attention. He walked over to it and scratched its belly. It began to purr.

When the old man returned, Jason was not at all surprised to see him carrying two necklaces just like the ones described in *Miraculous Wizardry*. They were thin solid gold chains, each one threaded through the point of a pentagon that was embossed with arcane symbols made out of ruby. They must have cost a small fortune. Doubtlessly, the man had paid for them out of the royalties from his many careers as an athlete.

"You're going to help me cast a spell." said the man. "Put this on."

He and Jason put on the necklaces, and the old man began the ritual, reciting the words while making the gestures. Soon, the pentagons began to glow black, so much as that was possible. A second later, they turned brown, then red, then orange, then yellow, then green, then blue. There were but three colors left.

Now! thought Jason. As the necklaces turned violet, he dashed over to the armchair. The old man had no chance to react. Then came gray. In one smooth motion, Jason plucked the charm from his neck and slipped it around the cat's.

"No!" shrieked the old man. As the pentagons turned white, his hands flew to his necklace. But he wasn't fast enough.

"Yes." said Jason.

An arc of crimson energy like a bolt of lightning burst between the pentagons. The necklaces disintegrated. A moment later, the old man's body exploded in a shower of rainbow sparks, harming nothing, but leaving only his clothes behind.

"Ah-ha." said Jason. "*That's* the caveat."

He turned to the cat. Its mouth was hanging open in a most unfeline manner.

"So," said Jason, "I hope you enjoy being a housecat."

The cat raised itself on its hind feet and waved a front paw, meowing. It was trying to cast the same old headache spell. Nothing happened. It fell back on all fours. Hissing, it leapt at Jason, claws extended. Jason gave it a hearty kick in mid-air. It sailed over the chair and landed on the floor, but not on its feet.

"No," said Jason, "you're not going to be hurting anybody anymore. You've already killed at least two boys, and I think that's more than enough."

The wizard-turned-cat got back up. Realizing that it was completely powerless, and thus having nothing better to do, it began washing itself in that unconcerned-yet-audacious manner that only cats have managed to perfect.

"I still don't know why you picked me specifically," said Jason. "Not that it matters now. You're really quite the psycho, you know that? You sacrificed half your life so you could win fame and fortune as a sham sportsman, and then you murdered a few innocent people so you could do it all over again. Were you planning on continuing this insanity forever?" Jason paused. The cat did not respond. "Well, if you did, I'm sure you knew that sooner or later, something would go wrong, somewhere down the line. Especially if you let your captives read your spellbooks." He smiled to himself for a moment. "But enough yakking! I've gotta get outta here."

He searched the old man's clothes and the rest of the house until he found the key for the front door and a fair amount of cash. He walked to the door and turned to the cat, who was still pretending that nothing was bothering it in the slightest.

"I'll be back for you eventually, to bring you to justice. In the meantime, help yourself to tap water and cat food. Getting either will be rather difficult without opposable thumbs, but I'm sure you'll manage."

He unlocked the door and turned the doorknob. The lights in the house that were off popped on. Nothing else happened.

"Oh, and one last thing," said Jason. "Proud fellow that you are, I'm sure that you've always dreamed of going down in history. You'll be happy to hear that the world *will* remember you—not for being the only man to live forever, as you might've hoped, but as the only cat to be tried for murder." He paused to let that sink in. "Anyway, see ya!" He opened the door and stepped outside.

He wasn't sure where he'd expected the house to be. Nonetheless, he was surprised to see where it really was. He was standing in front of a particularly large rock formation in one of Gyeeds's less popular parks. Not a human being was in sight. Trees and other vegetation, their foliage ablaze with the autumnal hues of carotenoids, surrounded him on all sides, while the imposing skyscrapers of urban Gyeeds loomed over the horizon. The sun was setting, lending the sky shades of red, orange, and yellow that matched those of the leaves. It was really quite picturesque.

Quickly, though, Jason shut and locked the door behind him, before the wizard had a chance to escape. Once closed, the door was so effectively camouflaged that you never would've guessed it was there. It didn't have a doorknob on the outside, and the keyhole was buried in a crack. *Talk about an earth-sheltered home!* thought Jason. *I guess that explains the stone floors.*

And so, Jason went merrily on his way to nowhere in particular. Except that as

he was about to leave, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head to look at it.

It was a small bird with blood-red plumage, perched on the branch of a tree. It looked perfectly normal, and Jason was sure it was possible that some type of red bird inhabited Gyeeds's parks in the fall. Yet he felt something strange—as if he was in the presence of a great sinister power. He felt as if the eye of a fell deity were gazing upon him, boring deep into his soul. And something within him was responding—some dark, dormant part of his mind heeded the call. He shivered with dread.

At that instant, the bird flew away, and the strange sensations likewise. Jason wondered what in the world had happened. It was all so odd—surely, magic was involved. And—oh, dear. The cat hadn't seemed to be the wizard's familiar (before the personality exchange, anyway), but what if this bird was? It was probably summoning up reinforcements to avenge its master at this very moment.

Jason ran towards the skyscrapers, hoping beyond hope that he was only being paranoid. He dashed out of the park and along the sidewalk, looking for a train station. Here there were people, going about their business as usual. Some stared at him, perplexed as to why anybody would be in such a hurry. *Were you in my position,* thought Jason, glancing at them, *you'd feel the same way.*

Looking at a map, Jason could see that he was far from home. Gyeeds was quite a large city. But thanks to the incredible speed of the vacuum maglev trains, he got to Roland's apartment in less than two hours.

Humming a merry tune, Jason walked up to the door and rang the bell. The politician answered it, and was happily surprised to see him.

"Jason! What happened to you?"

"Believe it or not, I got kidnapped. Again! And by a guy ten times worse than that dragon! *But,*" he added quickly, before Roland could respond, "I can't talk about it now. I'm exhausted. Please, just let me go to bed. I'll tell you everything in the morning."

8

The Tough Questions

Sleep did not come easily to Jason that night, and when it finally arrived, he found it full of nightmares. Once his nocturnal ordeal was over, his body was purged of fatigue, and he climbed out of bed happy that the night had finally ended. He and Roland took the day off from school and work, respectively, in order for Jason to recuperate and Roland to catch up with him.

After man and boy had finished with their breakfast and morning ablutions, they sat down on the living-room couch to talk.

"So," said Jason (in English, as always). "I think my story's going to be a lot longer than yours, so why don't you go first?"

"Fine," said Roland. "When I looked for you once, in the middle of the convention, I couldn't find you. I figured that you'd just gone off somewhere for a moment, but I searched several more times over the next couple of hours and still couldn't find you. Once the convention ended, I began to worry. After looking all over the place, I finally figured that, for one reason or another, you'd decided to go home without even telling me. I wasn't really surprised to find the house empty.

"I couldn't imagine where you'd gone. I doubted that you'd just run off—you're definitely not that type of kid. Still, I decided it would be best to wait at least a day or two before declaring you a missing person." He sighed. "I'm sorry if that made things more difficult for you, if it did. I just didn't want to seem overprotective."

"It's all right. I don't think your announcing my disappearance would have done me much good, anyway."

"Well, that's all I have to say, so... why? What happened to you?"

And so Jason launched into the harrowing tale of his capture and subsequent escape. Once more, Roland was impressed by Jason's actions in the face of danger. But he was furious about the old man. He clenched his teeth, trembling with rage. Jason was astonished. He'd never seen Roland get more than slightly annoyed, never mind positively wrathful.

"That depraved monster deserved nothing less than what he got, Jason." Roland spat. "I'm only sorry that you turned him into a cat instead of a maggot, or something equally base. That would've been much more fitting."

"Heavens, I don't know." Jason sighed. "He's weak and helpless enough as it is, without being an invertebrate. Don't take his crimes personally. *You* weren't the one who nearly exploded in a shower of rainbow sparks, or died of natural causes as a teenager."

"Yes, I know," said Roland coolly, somewhat calmer than before. "I'm your legal guardian, and I have a responsibility to protect you." He bit his lip. "I wasn't there to help you."

"But it wasn't your fault, Roland!"

"I know, I know! But still." He shook his head dejectedly.

"Just don't kill yourself over it." Jason pleaded. "Okay?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine, just a little righteous."

"All right, all right."

They lapsed into silence. Jason wondered at what had just happened. Who knew Roland could be so emotional? Did he really blame himself? This was hardly the confident, collected man who'd suddenly appeared before him one fateful morning. Well, Jason figured, it was only natural that a man who'd gone through divorce had at least some psychological difficulties—though Jason wasn't sure which was the cause and which was the effect. Eventually, he spoke up and changed the subject.

"So," he said. "It should come as no great surprise to you that I've got a lot of questions. About this episode, and about everything—everything that's happened to me since that dragon carried me away a month ago."

"Shoot."

"Let's—well, let's stick to the topic at hand. What d'ya think happened at the convention? How did I go unconscious, and how did I end up in the old man's hidey-hole?"

"First," said Roland, "it's worth noting who that old man is. His name—or rather, that of his first body, the one you saw in the leftmost portrait—is Ernest Seadweller." The Adventurer's face darkened. "He was one of the most famous sprinters in Gyeedian history, until he 'mysteriously disappeared' shortly before his thirtieth birthday. Of course, now we know that he owed his entire success to a performance-enhancing spell."

"Don't get worked up about him again," said Jason quickly.

"No, I won't. Let me answer your question. Ernest was probably among the crowd at the convention. Whoever actually knocked you out did it with a stunning-spell. That can make anyone faint for as long as several hours, and it's widely known for the momentary feeling of cold it causes."

"But if I just conked out in front of everybody, wouldn't someone have raised a hue and cry?"

"Yes, that's the problem. I suppose the people around you were in on the plan. They probably encircled you while you were trying to make your way through the crowd, to hide the crime from view."

"Which means that old Ernest had some buddies."

"It's completely possible, even if you never saw them again. Ernest probably hired some crooks just for that purpose. Once he picked you up from the floor, I suppose he could've said that you were hurt and he was bringing you to the hospital, if anybody asked."

"No, he was way too weak to cart me around. I bet he got those guys to bring me to his house, too."

"Or he might've used magic to transport you. It's all possible."

Jason nodded. "And speaking of magic, why do you suppose he wore that

ridiculous hat?"

Roland shrugged. "Earth fetish. He liked to think of himself as an archmage in addition to an athlete, I'm sure."

"What about that spellbook? Is it illegal, or rare? Do many people try to pull off those sorts of tricks?"

"*Miraculous Wizardry*, you mean? No, it's legal to own, at least. Gyeedian law does not condone book-burning. And even if it's hard to find in print, any text is easy to find on the Internet. The thing is that people generally can't afford the time or the reagents to cast those spells, and the caveats really are awful. Not to mention that few wizards have the great skill necessary to cast such difficult spells. That said, it's quite a famous book."

"I'm sure that *some* people have tried to pull off what Ernest did, right?"

"Not exactly what he did—that is, use those two spells in tandem. I don't believe anybody ever thought of it before. Even if someone did, there'd be plenty of good reasons not to do it anyway. Few people want to pubesce twice, never mind snatch the bodies and destroy the minds of ten-year-olds."

"I'd think that there'd be *some* people crazy enough..."

"Yes, and once this all becomes public knowledge, I suppose we'll know who they are. Come to think of it, that could be a real problem. Not that there's much we can do about it."

"Couldn't we keep Ernest's trial all hush-hush?"

"Not really. The knowledge would get out there, someday. Hopefully, nobody will have the resources or the chutzpah to pull it off. I suppose we could try to find a way of detecting whether an athlete is under the effect of that steroid-spell. Regardless, parents will be guarding their children more carefully than ever before."

"And speaking of the trial, we can convict him for murder, right?"

"Most definitely, and the premeditated kind, too. He's committed numerous other crimes, and I suppose we could charge him with those as well, just for the record. Gyeeds has capital punishment, and it's a lot harder to avoid than it is in the States."

"Really?" said Jason, raising an eyebrow.

"Really. We are a very pragmatic people, and we don't want to pay for a convicted murderer's food and board for the rest of his life."

"Yes, that is rather pragmatic."

"Do you oppose it?"

"Actually, I dunno. I mean, I can understand the hypocrisy argument. But capital punishment is hardly murder. The criminal isn't killed all of a sudden because some psycho had a grudge on 'em, they're killed because they've had a fair trial, and a jury of their peers has decided that society doesn't want them anymore. Besides, just ten years in prison—in an American supermax, anyway—is a fate worse than death. What do you think?"

"I agree, more or less. I also think execution is important for another reason. What goes around comes around. If a man kills an innocent in cold blood, he deserves to die."

"'Deserve'? Should justice be meted out like divine judgment?"

"Why not?"

"Because society ought to seek compensation, not retribution."

"Retribution *is* compensation."

"If you think so." He stared at his foster father for a moment. "One last thing about this episode. What was up with that bird?"

"Based on your description, I believe it was a bloodbreast. That's a fairly common species of bird in Gyeedian parks. I can't account for those strange sensations, though. In real life, there is no such thing as a familiar, and I can't think of any magical effect that could cause something like that. Are sure you weren't just nervous?"

"Positive. I'm a relatively emotional guy, but I've never felt anything remotely like that before. Something queer was going on, I can assure you. What, I don't know."

"Nor do I. It's possible that magic was involved, somehow. And keep the possibility that it was just you in mind."

"I will. I still have lots more questions, though. Big ones."

Roland smiled. "That's only natural. Go ahead."

"Well..." Jason took a deep breath. "Let's begin with the first thing I met on this fantastic extraterrestrial journey." He got up and began pacing around the room. "The dragon. How can there be a dragon? Who, what, when, where, why? It doesn't make a whit of sense."

"That's more or less exactly what Ivan Coolzephyr said about eighty years ago, when he first saw a real specimen. Ivan was a biologist, and one who was rather ahead of his time, at that. Gyeedian scientists had just discovered how to see into other verses, and Ivan was one of the first people to take what they saw seriously. At the time, it was generally believed that these images of other dimensions were only illusions. Anyway, Ivan was fascinated when he heard that scientists had seen real dragons. There are some very strange animals in foreign verses, to be sure, but none that are anything like dragons.

"First of all, they have a basis in traditional mythology: the folklore of both Earth and Gyeeds, as well as many other verses. It's Jung's collective unconsciousness in action! Like the giant, the dragon seems to be a fantastic creature that has an essential place in human psychology. Except, apparently, it isn't fantastic.

"Second, although dragons are sapient, they don't have any real culture. They lead very simple lives. They spend their early years with their parents and siblings, then live alone for the rest of their adolescence, then settle down with a mate and start a new family. They don't form communities, they don't bury their dead, they don't have a religion, they don't have *any* way of recording information—no pictograms, no writing, no nothing. So, some anthropologists and philosophers argue that they're not really sapient at all, just unusually smart.

"Third, they have a number of strange abilities that nobody has ever been able to account for. They can learn to speak and understand any language just by listening to a single word of it. They can fly like birds, and verseport just as effortlessly. They can breathe fire. None of these things make any sense in relation to a dragon's anatomy, or any established laws of physics. They're a lot like magic that way, except even worse understood.

"Most of this was figured out by Ivan and his colleagues. Since him, nobody has

made much progress. Dragons are mysterious creatures, all right.”

“Hasn’t one ever been dissected?”

“Yes, what the scientists found just raised new questions without answering any of the old ones. For example, a dragon has tough bones, with the same density as those of your average *terrestrial* mammal. But an animal must be very light in order to fly. Its body isn’t exactly aerodynamic, either.”

“Curiouser and curiouser!” said Jason. “I don’t suppose anybody has tried asking the dragons?”

“We have. They don’t know, either. No wonder, since they also don’t know the Pythagorean Theorem, or the fact that planets orbit stars instead of the other way around. It’s not as if they’re stupid; they just have no curiosity or imagination. They’re always surprised by how fascinated we are with science, and they don’t understand art at all.”

“Man, it’s kinda pathetic! I mean, all of the Terran mythological dragons are described as mighty, imposing, and often cunning and wise. But the real ones mostly seem apathetic. At least they can understand philosophy—at least mine could, anyway.”

“Actually, I’m not so sure. You will recall that the dragon let you go only after you used the ‘imagine if you were in my place’ argument. It couldn’t apply your logic to itself without your help.”

“Anybody could’ve made that mistake!” Jason protested.

“Take my word for it: while dragons may have an ethical sense, they don’t understand ethics.”

“I think I ranted about how sapient beings can create things and thus be above the animals. But dragons can’t?”

“That’s right. Come to think of it, it’s unlikely that that dragon had any real idea what you meant. It wouldn’t have had any way of getting the necessary knowledge, since it obviously hadn’t ever met a human before.”

“So do you think it was just *pretending* to get what I meant?”

“Probably.”

Jason chuckled nervously. He felt profoundly unsettled. He’d been greatly influenced by the dragon’s aspect—its form as well as its manner, how it had exuded confidence and poise from every pore. Now he could see that, in the grand scheme of things, it had been about as intelligent and knowledgeable as the beasts Jason had professed he and the dragon were above. Draconic smugness was hardly more justifiable than the feline kind.

Roland stroked his mustache thoughtfully. “I’m ready for the next question whenever you are.”

Jason slowly sat up. “Something else about dragons, then. What do they usually eat? There wasn’t anything at all to eat in that wasteland.”

“Oh, they’re pure carnivores. They eat any meat they can get their claws on. They just travel from verse to verse until they find something edible. It’s worth noting, though, that they can’t perfectly control their verseportation.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, they have only a limited ability to choose *which* verse they arrive at when they verseport. Exactly how limited isn’t clear. The point is, your dragon (being

young, after all, and thus even less in control of its abilities) probably didn't intend to visit Earth."

"It was young?"

"Quite young. It was relatively small, so I believe that it had just left its parents at the time."

"Small?"

"Yes, they get much bigger than that runt—up to twice its size!"

"Yikes."

"Yikes is right. In the course of my duties as Adventurer, I've had the pleasure of dealing with some particularly large specimens. I was, to be frank, terrified."

"I can imagine." Suddenly, something occurred to him. "Wait a minute. The dragon *did* enter Earth's verse illegally, albeit unintentionally. Will it get the death penalty?"

"Well, actually, it's already dead."

"Then did—"

"We killed it." Roland said quickly. "I know, I know, it seems ridiculous. It is ridiculous, in a way, that we had to kill the poor beast just because it stumbled into the wrong verse. We had no choice."

"Why—bu—"

"This is not something the IDC can afford to be flexible about. Just imagine what would happen if it were more lenient. 'Oh, silly me, I just happened to bumble into that verse by mistake. My apologies.' People will do anything to plunder the wealth of planets."

Jason frowned. "Oh, well." he said. "It did me a deal of harm, after all, and almost did much more." Roland nodded. "Does this happen very often? Has Earth ever had any other extradimensional visitors?"

"No and no. There are a great many verses, after all. Few dragons are quite so clumsy, and when people illegally verseport on purpose, they generally choose a planet with more resources remaining and fewer nuclear powers. Even if Terrans don't know how to cast spells, all the magic in the world pales in comparison to a hydrogen bomb."

"Uh... I don't think there is any magic on Earth."

"No, Jason, 'world' isn't just a synonym for 'planet' or 'verse'. It comprises the entire realm of human experience: the known multiverse."

"So *nobody* has magic more powerful than nukes?" Roland nodded. "Somehow, I find that comforting. It's nice to know that there aren't any doomsday spells."

"Yet."

Jason nodded. "Now, there's still something I don't get about this notion of verses. From what I've seen and heard, all of them are very similar. They all feature a relatively hospitable planet, one that's more like Earth than any other body that Terran astronomers have seen. And the sorts of creatures in them tend to be strikingly similar, too. In the time I've been in Gyeeds, I've heard that there are Gyeedian equivalents to two Terran creatures: sloths and hammerhead sharks. Those are very distinctive animals. I'd think that the chances that they'd convergently evolve would be slim to none.

"Not to mention the people. Not only are humans singular in the multiverse for

their intelligence and creativity, their cultures tend to resemble each other more than superficially. So, why are they all so dang similar?"

"That's a thorny question, Jason. It's another one that people have been bickering over for nearly a century. But here's the thing: verses aren't really stacked on top of one another like the floors of a skyscraper. A better analogy would be stars drifting around in space—they're different distances from one another, and there's some amount of empty space in between them. In fact, the primary obstacle to verseporting correctly is getting all the way through the extradimensional space to the desired verse without going too far. Modern methods of verseportation, useful as they are, are limited in how far they can take one. There are verses out there that we just can't reach.

"Now, the interesting thing is that the distance between verses seems to be inversely related to how similar they are. That is to say, the nearer two verses are to each other, the greater the similarity between them. So, Earth and Gyeeds are fairly easy to travel between, because they're much alike and therefore interdimensional next-door neighbors. On the other hand, Psyzok, a world that bears a greater resemblance to your planet Neptune, is too far to travel to—we can only view it."

"But all these similarities and differences concern planets, and each verse contains plenty of galaxies, right?"

"Yes, and that's where things get even trickier. The verses we can observe and travel to tend to center on a wide variety of planets, ones at least as diverse as the planets of your native solar system. Yet the suns that these featured planets orbit are all relatively the same, and all of the galaxies, each taken as a whole, are nearly indistinguishable from the Earth's. So, there's speculation that we just need better verseviewers, and then we'll be able to see radically different planets, galaxies, and maybe even forms of universe.

"There's another theory, though." Roland continued. "Some people question whether what we call verses are really separate planes of existence. We might actually all be in one universe, and whenever we look at or travel to another verse, we're really just slipping through 'wormholes of similarity' that lead to different parts of the same universe—parts that are so physically distant from one another that we can't see one we aren't in with our best telescopes.

"Although this idea isn't popularly accepted, I think it has some merit. In a way, it makes more sense than the standard hypothesis, even if it would be strange if we could make huge jumps through the universe while remaining unable to visit stars a parsec or two away from us. (Nobody has ever visited planets outside of their own solar system but within their own verse.) I suppose the only way we'll find out is if intergalactic spaceships from two different verses bump into each other."

"Yeah, sounds possible." said Jason. "In a way, it's what we ought to believe, if we abide by Occam's Razor. Anyway, that covers all the big questions, I guess. Now for something a little more personal.

"So far, I've been kidnapped twice. I realize it's pretty unlikely that it'll happen again. But I can't help but feel a little paranoid. I think that if I knew a bit more about magic, I'd be better equipped for defending myself against dragons, wizards, and whatever else might be out to get me. In fact, if at all possible, I'd like to learn how to *use* magic."

"Defensively, you mean?"

"I guess. Whatever would help."

"A right decent idea, Jason." said Roland. "I was thinking the same thing. As soon as you finish your Common classes and enter regular school, we can enroll you in a sorcery program. How does that sound?"

"I'll actually be able to cast spells?" said Jason, eyes aglow.

"With any luck, and some patience."

"Awesome! Eat your heart out, Harry Potter!"

"Fair warning, though, that you'll have quite a bit on your plate besides that."

"Like what?"

"Like school, for one. Although it isn't mandatory, I certainly hope you'll want to attend."

"I guess I will."

"Good, because it'll come in handy. As soon as you get your certificate of Common fluency, you'll be eligible for a seat on the IDC."

Jason was dumbfounded. "I will?"

"Yes, solely by virtue of being the only Terran who can attend. The IDC is supposed to have a representative from every verse with a human population, you see, whether or not that verse is a member. Now, given, you won't have very much power at all. How much the vote of an Interdimensional Councilman counts for is directly proportional to how many people he represents—and since you can't communicate with your fellow Terrans, you're considered to represent only one person: yourself."

"So the representative of Gyeeds, whoever they are, will be two billion times more powerful than me?"

"No, five and a half billion, since he represents the whole planet."

"Ouch."

"He's also the mayor of Gyeeds, so all in all, he's one of the most powerful people in the world."

"Oh yeah, his name's... I've heard it before... his name's Stanley Ironbone, right?"

"That's right. He's my boss, too."

"Right, I remember."

"It's won't be that bad. Although your vote will count for nothing, you'll have the right to attend meetings and make speeches, and you'll receive a modest salary."

"Nice."

"And the IDC headquarters are conveniently located in Gyeeds, so you'll be able to attend in person."

"Some don't?"

"Yes, they just use a videoconferencing sort of setup."

"I see. Now, speaking of, for example, 'Ironbone', what is it with Gyeedian last names?"

"Well, it's a matter of tradition. The general idea is to combine two words that seem poetic together. Sometimes the result has a basis in fact. Most of the time, it's pure invention: although my surname is 'Moralheart', for example, I don't think I've had any especially kind kin."

"Actually, surnames don't matter quite so much in Common as they do in most Terran languages. On Earth, the family name takes priority—you're alphabetized by it, you're called it when you're formally addressed, etcetera. In Common, nearly the reverse is true. It's considered quite informal, if not pejorative, to mention someone's last name without at least using his first initial—we believe that a man's given name is essential to his identity. So, I could be called 'Roland', 'Roland M', 'Roland Moralheart', 'R Moralheart', or even 'RM', but never just 'Moralheart'. The tabloids, bless 'em, call me 'Immoralheart'.

"Bear in mind that the way Common names are conventionally translated to English is a little inconsistent. Whereas 'Moralheart' is the literal translation of my last name, 'Roland' is the nearest phonetic equivalent to my first. I guess you've already noticed that by now, though."

"Yeah, I have. Here's another linguistic mystery: what in the world is a goozack?"

Roland laughed. "Gyeedian slang for 'door'. It was coined purely as a joke; it has no real etymology. It's like 'frindle', meaning 'pen'. Where did you hear it?"

"The old man—I mean, Ernest used it."

"I see."

"All right, I think that covers everything! Thanks for answering all those questions."

"Anything I can do to help, Jason. You're my ward."

"But not your son. I knew my father well."

"No, not my son. I don't intend on pulling a Darth Vader on you, trust me."

"That reminds me. I have one last request."

"What is it?"

"Well—I was wondering if it would be possible to use a verseviewer or whatever to see Earth—specifically, my family."

"Are you sure that that won't make you feel worse?" said Roland carefully.

"I've thought about it a lot, actually, and... well, yeah, it will probably make me feel worse, in a way. But I can't stand living like Arthur Dent! I want to keep tabs on what's going on with my folks, my country, and my planet, even if I can't visit them."

"All right, then."

They got up and walked over to Roland's computer, a beast of a machine that had more memory than the Blue family computer had hard-disk space. Roland typed a few keys and soon enough, he was receiving streaming data from a public verseviewer. On the screen, it seemed rather like they were looking down on Earth from a satellite. Roland input the address Jason gave him, and the monitor showed a view of Jason's house as if the two were standing on the sidewalk. They could hear everything nearby, too.

The house was empty, which made sense—it was late in the morning on a weekday, so Jason's parents were at work and his sister was at school. The scene was still nostalgic enough to make him cry, a little.

When Jason checked again later, he did see his family. The verseviewer couldn't enter a closed structure or see through walls, but it could peek through the windows and hear the family talk.

It was infuriating, in a way, to get so close to them, to hear their voices and see their faces, and never be able to say a word to them. They had no idea what had happened to Jason, of course. Several townspeople who'd seen the dragon fly away had reported it as a UFO; nobody had made the connection. The Blues knew that Jason wouldn't have run away, so the only explanation they could think of was that he'd been killed or kidnapped. They missed him nearly as much he missed them.

As far as Jason was concerned, his only hope was that Earth might invent a verseporter within his lifetime—or, even less likely, his family might somehow end up in another verse themselves. Barring the former possibility, he was doomed never to walk American soil again.

At least he was free from the rule of the Bush administration.

9

Incompetence

Jason's prediction of what Ernest would end up being famous for turned out to be wholly correct. The mage and murderer became the laughingstock of the city as it watched the proceedings of its trial from a very high booster seat. The tabloids dubbed it "Killer Kitty", and when one reporter tried petting it, Ernest nearly bit his hand off. Meanwhile, sports columnists lamented how the old man had besmirched athletics with his dishonest ways, and the families of his victims were horrified to learn what had happened—that those boys, whose personalities had seemed to suddenly change after a brief, inexplicable absence, had really just been vessels for Ernest's roving mind. Meanwhile, the people who had assisted with Jason's capture were nowhere to be found.

The prosecution refused to make a deal, since everything was in their favor, and Ernest was too pigheaded to plead guilty. Still, the cat was summarily executed—it was killed by lethal injection. Few mourned for it. The court awarded what remained of Ernest's wealth to the families of his victims, who, in turn, gave a little of it to Jason out of gratitude.

Jason himself became something of a celebrity. He was already well-known for being the only Terran to leave his native verse, and besides, he was the Adventurer of Gyeeds's adopted son. But this new adventure of his own made him more visible than ever before. He showed up on a few talk shows and soon enough, "Jason Blue" became a household name. (He had never felt particularly inclined to take Roland's surname.)

By now, Jason felt secure in his ability to speak Common. He took the fluency test and passed with flying colors, granting him the privilege of going to regular school.

It was, of course, only regular in the Gyeedian sense. To Jason, it seemed more like a university than an elementary school. For one thing, the class didn't stick together. Each student was placed in courses that were appropriate for their level of skill and talent, regardless of age. So, Jason ended up in Math 3, where the average age was eight, and in Science 5, where most of his peers were ten. Much to his surprise, he was placed in Common 8, where he was three years younger than the norm—an especially odd circumstance considering that he'd just begun learning the language a few months ago. Apparently, he had a gift for language, and his teachers appreciated it. Less flatteringly, he had to take History 1, where he was nearly twice as old as everybody else, because of his massive ignorance of non-Terran history. He

learned quickly, though, and soon rose to the fourth level.

With a new academic environment came a new social one. While Jason had plenty of opportunities for making friends, he didn't take any of them. He felt that he had little in common with real Gyeedians, Roland notwithstanding.

Jason took courses in magic at a separate location. Before he was taught how to cast any spells, he finally got to learn a bit more about magic in general.

"First of all, let me make this absolutely clear," drawled the instructor, a tall, thin man with a nasal voice. His students were of various ages and all male. "We don't know what magic is. We don't know why it happens. We don't even really know *what* happens when it happens. It just happens. Humanity's appalling ignorance of everything else in the world pales in comparison to its total cluelessness regarding magic."

Misanthrope! thought Jason.

"That said, over time—the last century in particular—we *have* gained a rudimentary understanding of how we can use magic to help us.

"There are two basic kinds of magic: sorcery and alchemy. They're not set in stone; they can overlap at times. But generally speaking, sorcery creates effects that are short-lived or instantaneous, while alchemy changes reality in more permanent ways. Also, sorcery can affect living and nonliving things alike, while alchemy is usually limited to inanimate objects.

"There are five domains of magic: Emotion, Imagination, Memory, Will, and Thought. A domain is a *philosophy* of spellcasting, a general way in which to cast spells. Most spells, though they can be cast in any of the five domains, are easier for some domains than others. Most mages specialize in one domain, according to their tastes, talents, and natural inclinations. I myself, for instance, am a Memory mage. Each domain has its own strengths and weaknesses, and requires its own approach.

"Emotion mages alter reality with the sheer intensity of their feelings. The effects of their spells vary with their mood. Emotion mages have the least control over their own magic, but the latter can be great in both power and volume. They become stronger as they become more passionate.

"Imagination magic is a tricky business. It requires the caster to *believe* that what he wants to happen *is* happening, and thus impose his delusions upon the world. Imagination mages don't have much control, either, but they can have great creative power, and expend less reagent than the mages of any other domain. Most of the best Imagination mages start from a very young age—four or thereabouts—and teach themselves to retain the overactive imagination they are born with.

"Memory mages tend to be academically inclined. They memorize precise rituals which they must perform flawlessly in order to cast spells. They tend to have a limited repertoire, but since their spells have predictable effects and they don't find casting very draining, they're especially reliable.

"Will magic is the most straightforward way to cast spells—the caster simply applies mental brute force to effect what he wishes. Will mages can be very precise, and quite powerful as well. But casting spells in the Will domain is taxing. In a duel with a caster of any other domain, a Will mage must ration his energy, or his opponent will inevitably outlast him.

“Finally, Thought is the most difficult domain by far. A Thought mage must entirely think through each spell—he must decide and understand exactly what effect he wants to create, and he must predict what the consequences of casting a spell will be. All of this thinking takes time, so Thought mages can’t cast spells spontaneously; they need plenty of preparation in order to do anything. But they have ultimate control over their spells, along with the potential to be more powerful than all of the other domains combined.

“So. The first thing we’ll do, over the next few weeks, is figure out which domain is right for each of you.”

Alas, Jason soon found this statement to be a bit too optimistic, in that it implied that there *was* a domain that was right for him. Apparently, this was not the case. He could get emotional, all right, but he couldn’t channel his emotions into Emotion magic at all. His imagination was too tame for the Imagination domain. He could barely understand the complex rituals that a Memory mage had to perform, let alone memorize them. And however mighty his willpower might be when it came to restraining himself from overeating, it didn’t affect reality itself enough to let him cast Will magic with any degree of competence.

That left Thought, and Jason was hoping beyond hope that this was where his talents lay. He was crushed to learn that it wasn’t.

“It’s odd,” said the Thought teacher, a fat, intelligent man. “You have the right personality for a Thought mage, which is more than can be said for most boys. But you simply can’t cast spells. You’re just naturally magically inept.” He shrugged. “I’m sorry, but it happens.”

That didn’t stop Jason from learning about magic academically. Poorly understood as it was, it had limited uses in the modern world. There were a few specific tasks, such as personal verseportation, that magic could accomplish much better or more efficiently than conventional alternatives. But for the most part, sorcery was best for fighting, and alchemy was best for creating magical objects.

Sorcery, in fact, had single-handedly changed the face of modern warfare. Before magic became widespread, ever since the popularization of firearms, war had been a matter of having bigger and better weapons. Few materials could stand up to a bullet, never mind a guided missile, so armor was always far behind armaments. Now, even a weak or inexperienced spellcaster of any domain could conjure up a Projectile Shield, a magical barrier that could absorb a few hundred magazines’ worth of machine-gun fire. Similar, though less easily cast spells were available for countering small explosives. Consequently, firearms had become rather outmoded, and any soldier who wasn’t in a heavily-armed and -armored war machine was better off being a tyro in magic than Annie Oakley. Even tank and plane pilots could benefit from a little magical training.

As for alchemy, although it couldn’t turn lead into gold or resurrect the dead, it had its uses. Otherwise mundane objects could be enchanted in order to serve their purposes better: hammers could be made to “home in” on nails, and carbon-steel knives could be magically rustproofed. However, most reagents weren’t cheap, so alchemists generally stuck to making objects with scientific or military applications. As with sorcery, the military applications turned out to be far more numerous. Thus the best known and possibly the most important products of alchemy were things that

could make one a better soldier. Particularly popular were potions, which could convey temporary benefits such as the ability to go without sleep for a whole week, and jewelry, which served as convenient, lightweight vessels for powerful enchantments. I would give you a more comprehensive overview of the magical objects that existed except that, so far, alchemical products had resisted classification just as stubbornly as magic as a whole had resisted understanding.

But Jason just couldn't cast spells, so he dropped out of the magic course in a month.

During his life on Earth, Jason had never really followed politics. What would've been the point of it, if he hadn't been allowed to vote or run for office himself? As an Interdimensional Councilman, though, he was suddenly plunged into the heart of interdimensional politics.

He soon found himself feeling quite humble, and not just because his vote counted for so little. Trying to understand and play a part in the government of a nation was a daunting task; doing the same for a whole world of governments was tougher still, and dealing with the entire multiverse seemed nigh-impossible. Too often, Jason found himself totally in the dark about what all the other councilmen were talking about, even when he tried researching the topic beforehand. After all, most of them had been elected by the planet they represented on the basis of their competence. Only a handful of councilmen were in the same boat as Jason, in the sense that they were only there because their verse was yet to discover verseportation. None seemed to have quite as much trouble as he did.

Not to say that everything went right over his head. In fact, some of what he could understand was genuinely interesting. For example, though capital punishment was not very controversial among Gyeedians, many other verses (and their representatives) were strongly opposed to it. They tried to convince Gyeeds to drop it. It turned out, however, that trying to pressure Stanley Ironbone into changing his mind was like trying to pressure the multiverse into making two plus two equal five. Gyeeds's relationship to the IDC was analogous to the US's relationship to the UN—Stanley could afford to be stubborn and aggressive, because if anybody contradicted him, he could bring their economy to its knees. (He'd need his verse's approval to do something like that, of course, but he was pretty good at manipulating Gyeeds, too.) Hence, the popular joke:

Q: Where does an 800-pound gorilla sit?

A: Wherever Stanley Ironbone tells it to.

10

Sometimes I Wonder

One day, several councilmen joined forces to squeeze a conference on the death penalty into the IDC's schedule. Ostensibly, it was just to generally discuss the issue; in reality, everybody knew it was about Gyeeds.

Jason, happy that he knew what was going on for once, decided to make a speech himself. He took the floor and explained to his fellow councilmen why he generally believed in capital punishment. He said more or less the same things that he'd said to Roland earlier, especially emphasizing how executing a criminal was fundamentally different from murder. (Many other speakers had compared the two.)

Once the meeting was over, Jason realized that nobody other than Stanley Ironbone and himself had argued in favor of execution. Everybody else who'd said anything at all had spoken out against it. This was rather curious, considering that Gyeeds was hardly the only verse to kill its criminals. Perhaps those who'd kept quiet had done so simply because they hadn't wanted to take sides.

As Jason was walking through the lobby of the IDC HQ, towards the exit—it was the end of the day's session, and he intended to leave—an unfamiliar man dressed in black walked toward him. Jason didn't feel particularly distressed, as there were security guards all over the room, and the crowds weren't nearly thick enough to hide anything. Plus, Roland was waiting just outside to pick Jason up—he was out of sight, but within earshot.

The stranger was a young man with curly hair and brown eyes that continually bounced from side to side, searching for hidden foes. "Hello, Jason," he said in a highish voice. "I have an urgent matter to discuss with you. May I speak to you privately?"

"Er, no, sorry, I'm very busy," Jason lied. "But maybe later. When can I see you?"

"How about same time next Carbon, over there?" said the man, pointing beyond the glass exit doors. He was indicating a secluded place behind a large pillar on the building's expansive portico. It was Iron today; next Carbon was the next time Jason would attend a meeting of the IDC.

It was a well-known fact that Jason was almost always accompanied by Roland when he wasn't in a high-security area. After his second kidnapping, nobody blamed him for it. Yet this fellow was making it clear that he wanted to speak to Jason without Roland overhearing. Very suspicious.

"Fine," said Jason quickly. "See you then."

They clasped hands briefly, the Gyeedian equivalent of a handshake, and Jason

walked out of the building.

It was a cold, sunny December afternoon. At this time of year, Jason instinctively expected the spirit of Christmas to be nearly tangible as it exuded from every storefront in sight. But Gyeeds was not the Home of the Brave. It didn't even have any late-autumn holidays—not any very popular ones, anyway.

"So, how was it?" said Roland, after they'd met and exchanged greetings. They still spoke to each other in English, though they were equally fluent in Common by now. It was partly because they loved the language, partly because they wanted to stay bilingual, and partly because they'd always done it that way and didn't see why they ought to change it.

Jason filled Roland in on the meeting, plus his encounter with the stranger.

"Don't you realize how dangerous that could be?" said Roland, perplexed as to why Jason would agree to such a thing.

"Oh, if it's a trap of some sort, I intend to be prepared." said Jason. "Meaning, I need *you* to be prepared. Just come a little earlier than normal and hide in a spot where he won't see you, and you'll be able to see him. If he makes a move, you'll be there to stop him. With a spell, I guess."

"Sounds like a plan." said Roland, nodding. "I could do it. But why do you really want to meet this fellow, anyway?"

"Curiosity, plain and simple." said Jason. "There's not much of a risk of *him* wanting to kidnap me or something, right?"

"I suppose not. Still, if I were you, I'd be very careful. I wouldn't put it past him to attempt what Ernest failed at, or something worse."

"Aren't I being careful enough?"

"I suppose so."

They walked along in silence for a while, until Jason said "I wonder why that guy wants to talk to me in the first place."

Roland shrugged.

Soon enough, it was Carbon, and Jason was walking out of the same building. He went behind the designated column and there was the man, eagerly awaiting him.

"Good, good." said the stranger. "I was afraid you'd change your mind."

"No, I didn't think of it." Jason assured him, trying not to look for Roland out of the corner of his eye. "May I ask your name?"

The man's eyes darted about. "Kevin. Kevin... Treegate." Jason got the distinct impression that he was lying.

"All right then, Kevin, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, you see," said Kevin, if that was his name, "my superiors saw you speak for capital punishment last Iron. It was very brave of you, to go against popular opinion."

"Uh, thank you." said Jason, wondering where this conversation was headed. "I don't really have anything to lose in the political arena, though. I don't have any power, y'see."

"Yes, I know," Kevin insisted, "but still, we're glad you spoke up. People seem to be afraid of contradicting Stanley *or* those who oppose him, so they often don't say anything."

"True." said Jason. "Tell me, who are the superiors you mentioned?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about." said Kevin enthusiastically. "Or, no, wait. You... you're a Yankee, right?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well... you know that 'culture of life' thing? The religious right's obsession with promoting and preserving human life, from conception to natural death?" Jason nodded. "Don't you agree it's ridiculous?"

"Yes. I mean, not killing people is great and all. But refusing them abortion or the right to die ain't so great."

"Yes, yes!" said Kevin, his head bobbing up and down. "You see, that's why we formed our organization: to oppose the necrophobic agenda that so pervades society."

"*Necrophobic agenda*"? *This is gettin' weirder and weirder.* "Not Gyeedian society, right?"

"No, not Gyeeds, really. Not as it is now. But necrophobia is rampant in a host of other verses:" and he proceeded to list off a number of them on his fingers. "And so, the GSD—the Gyeedian Society of Death—has as its mission to promote sensible policies regarding death, and to fight necrophobia, across the multiverse."

Jason just barely stopped himself from doing a double-take. "So, your organization is this... society?"

"That's right. The question is, would you like to join it?"

Jason furrowed his brow in thought. What the heck? No matter how un-"necrophobic" Gyeedians might be, in Gyeeds, the Common word for "death" held just as much weight and negative connotations as its English equivalent did in the Terran West. It was hard to imagine why any group would want to directly associate itself with death at all, never mind do so without benefit of euphemism.

As for *joining* it... well, needless to say, the answer that would come most readily to his lips was a hearty "no". But Jason didn't believe in making decisions hastily when he had the chance to take his sweet time. And making this decision would be a lot easier if he knew what he'd be getting into.

"Well... I'm not sure." he said. "How does your organization go about promoting and fighting these things, anyway?"

"Any way we have to." said Kevin firmly. "Whatever it takes, we're willing to do it. Otherwise, how would we get anything done?"

Jason paused, hoping the man would continue. He didn't. "So, uh, can you give me some examples of things you've done in the past? So I'd get a better idea of how your organization operates?"

"Well, a lot of it is classified." said Kevin, his eyes bouncing to and fro more than ever. "So, no, I can't."

Oh, great! thought Jason. *He can't tell me anything. That means that this is either (a) a top-secret government thingie, (b) a terrorist ring, or (c) a club for especially delusional Goths.* Logic suggested that it was something akin to the latter, as the former two were clearly far-fetched. Then again, the truth had tended to be far-fetched more often than not over the past two months. So, he wouldn't just dismiss the less plausible possibilities out of hand this time.

"Can you at least tell me what being a member of this organization entails?" said Jason, not without a note of pleading in his voice.

"Not really." Kevin replied, somewhat apologetically. "I can only say that you'd attend meetings. Meetings in which we discuss issues, and figure out how to deal with them." He paused. "We have them very late at night, so they don't conflict with anything else on our schedules."

And not for some other, less innocent reason? Somehow, Jason doubted that. But dang! How was he supposed to make a decision when he had no idea what he'd be getting into? Well, this fellow might not be very forthcoming on the details, but Roland might know something. And surely the Gyeedian internet would have a word or two to say on the subject.

"I really can't decide." said Jason. "Could you give me a week to think it over a bit?"

"Uh, all right." said Kevin. "Same time, same place?"

"Sure. See you then."

"Goodbye."

Kevin turned. As he walked away, he took a notepad out of his pocket, opened it up, and scribbled something on it. A small piece of paper fell out and fluttered to the ground. He didn't seem to notice.

Jason looked at the piece of paper, then at Kevin, then back at the piece of paper. Courteous little boy that he was, he felt compelled to say "Excuse me, sir, you dropped something." But he restrained himself. Who knows?—this could be the chance he'd been waiting for to find out something about the GSD.

Once Kevin was out of sight, Jason walked over to the piece of paper and picked it up. It was an ordinary sheet of lined notebook paper, blank on both sides save one string of Common text: "Piercer lab—Room 3C, 256 Pulliard Street, Ampersand". Jason happened to know that Ampersand was the name of one of Gyeeds's several thousand neighborhoods. (Its moniker was based on the shape of its borders, a near match to the Common equivalent of the Terran Western ampersand.) He'd never heard of Pulliard Street, nor a laboratory or a scientist named Piercer. He shrugged and stuffed the paper into a pocket of his coat.

Jason strolled onto the sidewalk and looked around, expecting Roland to silently emerge from a dark corner once nobody else was looking. Instead, a car that was parked right in front of Jason honked its horn. Surprised, he glanced at it, and there was Roland in the driver's seat, beckoning him forward.

He rode shotgun as Roland set off down the street. The first thing he said (after buckling up for safety, of course) was "You call that a hiding-place?"

"Sure I do." said Roland, not taking his eyes off the road. "I was sitting in the back seat. The windows there are tinted." Jason looked, and indeed they were. "Beats hiding in the underbrush or something, don't you think?"

"Yeah, yeah, you win." said Jason. "Did you hear the conversation?"

"Sure I did."

"A penny for your thoughts."

"The Gyeedian Society of Death is just another bizarre little special-interest group. (We have altogether too many such groups, to be honest.) Or that's we thought it was. You see, we suspect that the GSD might've had in a hand in the Raincatcher massacre."

Jason's eyes widened. He'd heard of the Raincatcher massacre—it would've

been hard *not* to hear of it. One day in early August this year, a band of five men had burst into Raincatcher Hospital, a Gyeedian infirmary, with machine guns blazing. They'd killed or wounded any security guards who got in their way, slew eleven terminally ill people who'd been on life support, and teleported out. Nobody knew who the killers were, nor their motives. The strangest thing about them, actually, was that their guns had been so effective. All of the guards had been trained wizards who could cast Projectile Shield in their sleep. But somehow, the men's bullets had been able to wear away at the shields twenty times faster than normal. The guards, flustered, hadn't managed to cobble together a better defense in time. Later examination of the bullets revealed them to be completely normal, leaving ballistics experts and sorcerers alike clueless.

"Why would..." Jason began. "Oh, I get it. *They* would have a motive for wanting to kill people who were already destined to die, right?"

"Right."

"Couldn't you say the same about half-a-dozen other groups?"

"More than half a dozen, but yes, and we suspect them as well."

"So, what, d'ya suppose they all collaborated?"

"Possibly. We doubt it."

"So how could you suspect them all?"

Roland sighed. "We don't believe they were *all* involved. Maybe one, maybe none. *I* don't know!" he went on angrily.

"Hey, I'm sorry, man. I was just wondering."

"It's all right. It's just frustrating, that's all."

After some time, Jason asked "But who do you mean by 'we'?"

"The Gyeedian government. This is all top-secret, of course, and it's highly illegal for me to tell you any of it. I assume you won't go around gossiping about it."

"No, don't worry about that." Jason assured him.

Once the adventurer and the councilman were safely at home, Jason showed Roland the mysterious piece of paper.

"Oh, my." said Roland. "Oh, my."

"Does that mean you know what's at the address?" said Jason, reading over his foster father's shoulder.

"Not until now." He put the paper down and stared at Jason intently. "There's something else we know that I didn't tell you. Careful analysis of those bullets that the Raincatcher-massacre terrorists fired revealed that they were not completely ordinary. They were of mundane construction and design, but we noticed that they were faintly—very faintly—enchanted. They were the work of alchemists, Jason. And do you know what name we gave them?" Jason shook his head. "Piercers!"

"So, then... do you suppose that this is the lab where they were created?"

"Yes. And there's a good chance that they still *are* being created. That this lab is supplying terrorists, or maybe even armies, with these bullets. That's no good. No good at all."

Jason scratched his head. "How are these bullets so dangerous, if people can cast spells and stuff? You've got conventional explosives, too."

"Well," said Roland, "you know how magic has drastically changed modern

combat. Before sorcery, scuffles tended to be brief. One shot to the head and you were dead. Magical battles, on the other hand, tend to be drawn-out, because mages, unlike gunners, have a level of defense that's actually comparable to their offensive power. Now, imagine if one person could kill a trained and ready mage from a hundred yards away with just the pull of a trigger. They'd have quite an advantage."

"I see," said Jason. "So, we'd want to tell the police about this, wouldn't we?"

"The police! Are you mad? This is dangerous stuff, forbidden knowledge!"

Roland was quite agitated. "We can't take the slightest risk that this information might fall into the wrong hands."

"Don't you at least want to tell Stanley and the rest of your department?"

"Oh, no," said Roland. "You've seen what Gyeeds's foreign policy is like. We've never been imperialistic, but we've never been afraid to obliterate any small country that happens to rub us the wrong way, either. With this kind of technology, I wouldn't put it past Stanley to start a world war."

"You're not crazy about him, huh?"

"He's a megalomaniacal psycho."

"Guess not."

Jason pondered for a while, turning over he'd heard in his mind. Eventually, he said "Once again, I'm feeling skeptical."

"Surprise, surprise," said Roland, but not aggressively. "What doesn't sound right to you this time?"

"Well, let's review the situation. I talk to this guy, and as he walks away, he just happens to drop a piece of notebook paper without noticing, which just happens to have an extremely dangerous secret on it and not a word else. And he just happens to use the same word that the government does to describe these bullets. And he didn't even *attempt* to hide it. Couldn't he just have written the address and the initials for 'Piercer lab', or *something*? I can believe that Kevin is stupid, sure, but that stupid? It all sounds like a trap to me." Roland was silent. "I mean, c'mon, we live in a real world!" He thought about that for a moment. "Then again, what with all these alternate dimensions and fire-breathing dragons and magical spells, sometimes I wonder."

"I... I don't know," said Roland. "I guess it's possible. For once, I don't have an explanation to the contrary."

"What do you think we should do, then?"

"I... I guess you're right, actually. I may have overreacted. Yes, now that I think about it, I doubt that this is really where those bullets were made." He indicated the paper. "How stupid of me." He put his face in his hands.

"It's all right," said Jason, trying to comfort Roland even as he felt the strangeness of it. "Anybody could've made that mistake."

"I wouldn't think it was a trap, though," said Roland, resuming a more dignified position. "*That's* far-fetched. Maybe it was a practical joke."

"Maybe. Still, wouldn't it be worth checking this place out? You know, we could just walk by it one day. Take a look. If that's actually the address of a junkyard or something, then we'll see it, and that'll clear things up."

"Probably a good idea," said Roland, nodding. "Yes, it's not too far away. Let's go now."

They went by car again, so they wouldn't be easily spotted. Jason sat in the back seat for his own safety.

256 Pulliard Street turned out to be a generously-sized research complex, situated in a busy industrial district. The building was of bland architectural design, three stories tall and not very wide. A sign over the entrance said "Pulliard Independent Alchemical Research Group".

"So much for a quick answer." Roland sighed.

"Indeed. I'd have trouble imagining a building that looked *more* like it could make Piercers. Maybe it is a trap."

"In a part of town as busy as this, it would be a trap that would quickly backfire on the trapper. And I can't think of a motive, can you?"

"Uh... political somethinerother? Gettin' the adventurer's adopted son?"

"But no one really has a grudge on me, and Stanley wouldn't care."

"But what if they hope *you'll* investigate?"

"Again, I don't see why anybody would want to take me out." He looked the building up and down through his ever-present silver-framed glasses. (Contact lenses, he'd once told Jason, were for people who didn't mind putting pieces of plastic on their eyeballs.) "Perhaps my first guess was right, after all."

"Well, what it all boils down to is, what are we gonna do?"

"Nothing, I suppose. As a public servant, and an able-bodied man, I'm obliged to help those in need. But it's not my prerogative to be a vigilante, or otherwise get my nose into unnecessary trouble." His face fell. "Unless Stanley says otherwise, of course."

Jason stared at the building through the car's tinted window. He recalled that Kevin's note had said that the lab was in room 3C, which was most probably on the third floor. A tall, gnarled tree grew next to the building. One of its thick branches allowed easy access to one of the building's third-floor windows.

"I know this is going to sound crazy," said Jason, "but if you're not willing to investigate it, I will."

"*You?*" said Roland, flabbergasted. "Why in the world so?"

"Because I want to get to the bottom of this. Curiosity killed the cat, I know, but I'm dying of it already. Look, if this is a trap, they're probably expecting you to send the Gyeedian equivalent of a SWAT team storming through the front door, right? But suppose a ten-year-old boy were to climb up that there tree, open that there window, and sneak over to room 3C, all in the middle of the night."

"That... well, goodness, it would be dangerous! I hope you realize that."

"Yes, I do. But" he continued, raising his eyebrows, "I think the danger would be much less if a certain thirtysomething of a politician would be willing to accompany said ten-year-old. I beseech you, O Adventurer of Gyeeds, could you find it within that great, Moralheart of yours to assist me? I shouldn't want to lose help for want of asking for."

"Oh, I guess I could." said Roland, grinning. "I just turned thirty-four last November the twentieth, by the way."

"You bothered to figure out your Gregorian birthday?"

"Yes, I thought it'd be amusing to see what my sign of the Western zodiac is,

even if I wasn't actually born under it. I'm a Scorpio."

"Just as well," said Jason. "That venomous sting might come in handy tonight."

11

Night Watch

'Twas two in the morning, and all through the street
It wasn't quite quiet—but that couldn't be beat.

Gyeeds never slept, though it yawned sometimes. Now was one of those times. True, there were still lights shining out of the windows of office buildings, and factories churning out goods, and shady characters violating laws that were infrequently enforced. But on the whole, the city was a lot calmer than it was during the day, at least in a district like this one.

Jason usually did sleep, and the fact that he hadn't gotten much of the precious stuff so far tonight was taking its toll on him. His eyes were half-lidded as he and Roland walked quietly down the sidewalk. Both of them wore black coats concealing flashlights beneath.

The pair carried some magical items, too, just in case they ran into any nasty surprises. Roland had some type of wand—a stub of iron that created a Projectile Shield if you waved it in a certain way. (He was perfectly capable of casting that spell himself, of course, but if he used the wand, he would expend one of its charges instead of draining his own energy.) Jason was wearing a necklace—not one of those body-switchers, thank goodness, but a Hearing Charm. This handy item allowed him to “tune in” on a particular sound: if he spoke a command word while concentrating on something he could hear, the sound instantly became much more audible, while everything else seemed to quiet down. He could dismiss the effect with another word.

Jason had decided how to equip the two of them, once Roland had explained his options. Normally, Roland would've been able to borrow whatever he wanted from the government's very formidable arsenal of magical items. But in order to do that, he would've had to explain what he wanted the items for, and that wasn't an option. So, the pair had to make do with what Roland owned himself. That wasn't a lot, since the adventurer much preferred to spend what limited disposable income he had on computer equipment and prostitutes than magical trinkets.

Jason had devised a rough plan of action, too. Once they were in the building, Roland would lead the way with his flashlight while Jason followed a few steps behind, keeping his own flashlight off while listening ahead. That way, Jason could be Roland's ears while Roland concentrated on using his eyes. Furthermore, if Roland was seen or taken out by any guards, they wouldn't necessarily know that Jason was

there, and so the boy might still have a chance.

When the pair arrived at the building, they found that, as they'd expected, all the lights were out. They walked up to the tree. Roland, ever the athlete, scampered gracefully up, while Jason, who'd never been accused of being particularly fit, bumbled his way along the bark. Once they were both on the branch next to the third-floor window, Roland cast a spell. He took a small tin of orange goo out of his reagent pouch, smeared the outline of a sizable rectangle on the window, and said a word of power. The goo began to glow faintly, and Roland put his hand within the rectangle. The glass there seemed to have become gelatinous and malleable—Roland stuck his fingers in it, tore it out, and rolled it into a ball. Then, he carefully set the ball of glass on the windowsill and wormed his way in through the opening—the edges of the opening were gelatinous, too, and didn't cut him. Jason followed. Shortly thereafter, the goo stopped glowing.

"Elaborate." Jason whispered to Roland once they were inside.

Roland just motioned for him to be quiet, wielded his wand and flashlight, and turned on the latter. They were in an empty laboratory. Benches, stools, and glassware cast a host of shadows like a coven of ethereal witches, and a fume hood crouched in the corner like a cauldron. Everything was white: the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the shelves, the door. Or rather, off-white, since everything was coated in a thin layer of dust. The building seemed to be unheated.

"It's deserted." whispered Jason. "But maybe just this room. Go ahead."

Roland opened the door and walked out, into a hallway that ran left to right. Jason was about to follow when he heard someone cry "Halt!" in Common. He leapt back from the door. Roland threw down his flashlight, spun in the direction of the noise, and waved his wand, creating a Projectile Shield—just as his foe fired a weapon. The shield was a thick rectangle of green energy, but where the bullets hit, big purple sparks flew away and the shield thinned. Roland swore loudly and clapped his hands. A blue bolt of lightning sprang from them and dashed through the shield. Jason heard the guard scream and hit the floor, then the faint patter of footsteps. He used his necklace to focus on the sound and found that there were many pairs of feet, coming from both directions down the hall. He ran up to Roland and hissed "Careful! There's more from both ways!"

Roland, in response, restored the battered Projectile Shield with a spell and created another one behind him. Soon, both shields were being showered with bullets, and Jason retreated further into the lab. Roland threw down the wand, then put his back against the wall and waved one arm toward each group of enemies, bellowing the words of a spell. Long trails of magenta ooze came out of his palms and flew down the hallway. Yet the hail of bullets was unabated, and Roland's shields were no thicker than onion-skin. He revived them and hurriedly bent to pick up his wand. As he did so, someone else shouted an arcane word. Roland cast something defensively, but it wasn't quite enough—a huge fireball exploded right in front of him. He hurtled down the corridor.

Jason instantly dived behind a lab bench. From there, he had a limited view of the door that led to the hallway, while he himself was well-hidden. The shooting had stopped. Somebody cast another spell, and a man dashed into the room. He wore a guard's uniform and green goggles, and he carried a large, sleek machine gun. It was

very dark, now—only a little moonlight shone in through the window, and Roland's flashlight was lying on the hallway floor—yet the guard didn't seem to have any trouble seeing. Jason was afraid that his heart was beating so loudly that the guard would hear it. But apparently, the man didn't find anything; after one quick glance around the room, he ran out. Several more guards dashed past the door. Jason could hear more running, then everyone slowed to a walk. He used his necklace, listening closely.

"All clear." said one man. Some of his comrades echoed him.

"Is he dead?" said another. His footsteps indicated he was near the place where Jason figured Roland had fallen.

A pause. Then, "No, I stunned him." Jason felt very relieved.

Another swore. "This could be bad." he said. "Really bad."

"Wonder how he got wind of it?" said the one who'd stunned Roland.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough." said a new man. Someone chuckled nervously. "Search him."

"I... I can't believe it." said the stunner. "I knocked out Roland! Nobody's done that for years!"

"Aw, that's a myth." said the swearer. "He just likes to propagate that tough-guy image, is all. It wasn't exactly a fair fight, anyway."

"Nothin' special on 'im." somebody else said.

"You boys get back to business." said the man who'd told somebody to search Roland—the leader, Jason supposed. "Tom, keep watch in that room, just in case. You two, bring him over there and pick up his stuff. I'll talk to Jake, see what he wants us to do with him."

The men resumed walking. One, not the specimen Jason had seen before, walked into the lab. Like the first, he carried a gun and wore goggles. He sat down on a stool in a corner of the room across from Jason, watching the window. Soon, the footsteps ceased, and all was silent.

Jason was very nervous and frightened, though the man (presumably Tom) had no hope of spotting him. He crouched there, in the almost total darkness behind the bench, and tried to think. Now what? The most that could be said about Roland was that he was alive. Jason couldn't make it to the window without being seen, and attempting to overpower the guard was certainly out of the question. All he could do was wait—wait and listen. He focused on random sounds with the necklace, whispering the magical words so quietly he could barely hear them. He could hear Tom breathing, and the bitterly cold wind blowing in through the hole in the window, and—what was that? The leader seemed to be talking on the telephone.

"...and Christ, I don't know what to do with him." (He wasn't actually referring to Jesus of Nazareth, of course, but a similar character from a major Gyeedian religion. I say "Christ" so it's easier to give you the feel.) "...Yeah, we did. Nothing." Suddenly, he hung up. "Whoa! Can't you say something?"

"Just thought I'd take a look myself." said a new voice, warm and male. The speaker was in the same room as the leader, but Jason hadn't heard anyone walk into it. He suspected it was Jake, having just teleported in. "And here's Immoralheart himself. My, I can't say I'm happy he's on our hands. Of all people..." Some footsteps. "In hindsight, it would've been better if you hadn't used the Piercers. Then, we'd just

leave him in a dark alley, relocate, and nobody'd be the wiser."

"But he would've whooped our butts!" said the leader.

"Good point," said Jake, sighing. "I guess this is a bit of a no-win situation." There was a long pause. "Still, I hope you realize my paranoia was justified."

"Yeah, I do."

"I'm really not sure what to do, either. Certainly, we'll have to relocate. Do we kill him? I guess it'd be best to, eventually. First, we should question him, to see how much they know. How strong was the stun?"

"The maximum. He'll be out till sunrise."

"We can wait. Until then, keep him under double guard. No, wait—get one here, and I'll keep him company."

"You got it." A chair creaked; a door opened. "Hey, Tom! C'mere!"

Tom, the guard sharing the room with Jason, got up and walked out the door. Jason, thinking this might be his opportunity to escape, glanced at the window. The hole was still there. Since the goo was no longer glowing, he figured the glass was back to its normal lethal sharpness. But he was inside now. He could open the window. Yes, this was his chance!

He waited until Tom was quite away. Then, quietly as possible, he crept over to the window and opened it. No alarm rang, thank goodness. He heaved himself out onto the tree-branch and lowered the window back into its original position. Giddy with the prospect of escape, and nervous with the fear of being detected, he climbed down the tree to the sidewalk below.

He wondered what to do, now. He was alive and apparently safe, but he hadn't completed his little mission, and Roland's fate looked grim. Well, he supposed, no matter what he ultimately decided, it would probably be a good idea to see if he could hear anything more.

He buried himself in some conveniently-placed bushes and listened. Several minutes passed, and not a sound came from the building. He sat there, in the dirt, huddled into a ball; he was quite cold despite his coat. He regulated his breathing, trying to calm himself down to the point where he could think straight.

He was safe. He could hop on the train, ride to the orphanage, and tell them Roland just hadn't come home one day. Nobody knew *he* knew about the Piercers, so he wasn't in danger of being bumped off.

He could try to rescue Roland. It was possible that he might be able to, somehow. Did he want to risk it? Jason had never been accused of being a good Samaritan—he didn't feel obliged to risk his life for another's. If the man in Roland's shoes had been just some bum, Jason wouldn't even consider it.

But Roland wasn't just some bum. He was the closest thing Jason had to a family. He was Jason's only friend. Jason *loved* Roland.

But... but wait! Jason's heart suddenly hardened. What did it matter? Since when was love a respectable motive for such high-stakes gambling? Generations of poets, philosophers, and less professional kinds of romantics would readily cry "It's the best possible motive!" Jason, on the other hand, cared little for such sentimental reasoning. *No*, he finally concluded, *I won't put my life on the line for love. Too many people have made that mistake and died for it. Life's too precious for such tomfoolery!*

So did he want to try to rescue Roland? He thought about what Roland had said. “This is dangerous stuff, forbidden knowledge!” By not getting any further involved in this business, Jason would save himself, at least for tonight. What would happen to the Piercers, then? Would they fall into the wrong hands? Would they cause a war? Would thousands of people die solely because of a bunch of *stupid magic bullets*? Jason had to admit that it was all completely possible. Piercers really did exist, that much was clear, and 256 Pulliard Street had *something* to do with them. Whether or not Kevin had intentionally dropped that note and led Jason and Roland into a trap was irrelevant at this point.

Now, Jason felt no duty to save one person—no compulsion to risk his life for the possible gain of another’s. But what about thousands of lives? What about nations full of lives? Didn’t the very availability of these bullets have the potential to tip the scales of interdimensional politics? And wasn’t it thus the case that whether Roland lived to get to the bottom of this Piercer business was vitally important to the fate of the whole world?

I guess I don’t have a choice, after all.

12

We Can See in the Dark... Can You?

Jason took the train home to Roland's apartment and admitted himself with his key. It was now two hours before dawn. He had plenty of time.

He walked into Roland's bedroom, turned on the light, and felt around behind a cabinet. When he withdrew his hand, it was clutching a five-foot aluminum staff. This was the only one of Roland's magical tools that Jason had chosen to leave behind, for although it was the most powerful of the three, its size made it rather unwieldy.

The staff had three uses. Firstly, if the correct end was pointed at a foe, a film of black slime would magically form over the target's eyes, blinding them. Secondly, if the other end was pointed at some type of magical energy, the spell would be canceled, though this power used up more of the staff's finite store of energy than the first did. Finally, if push came to shove, the staff could be used to inflict blunt trauma upon the nearest convenient part of an opponent's body.

Next, Jason got a baseball cap and some duct tape. With that and his flashlight, he constructed a crude sort of headlamp. The brim of the cap sank a bit from the weight of the flashlight, but at least it left his hands free for the staff.

Jason then took the opportunity to nap for an hour. Or at least, he tried to. After a few minutes, he realized his efforts were in vain—he was much too excited, apprehensive, and nervous. He paced around anxiously, twirling the staff, as his thoughts twirled in his mind. Soon, it was an hour before dawn. Jason put the staff in a cardboard box to make it slightly less conspicuous, and set off for Ampersand.

Once quite arrived, Jason disposed of the box and resumed his hiding-place in the bushes. Hiding was an especially good idea now, when the early birds were heading off for work. He waited and listened. Just as the sun began to peek over the horizon of its planar bed, he heard something. He turned on the necklace.

"'Bout time." said Jake. "So, why don't you explain yourself, sir?"

"Oh my." said Roland.

Jason didn't tarry to listen more. Roland was awake; now was the time to strike. He deactivated the Hearing Charm and scaled up the tree. The lab he'd been in before was empty; the lights were still off; the window was still closed. Very carefully, Jason reached through the hole and pulled the window up from the inside—just a little; it was hard to get much leverage—then stuck his fingers into the narrow gap he'd made and pulled the window all the way up. He leapt lightly in, closed it behind him, and hid behind a bench. He listened with the necklace and heard nothing but the

men talking in the room where Roland was. So far, he'd avoided detection. He focused on the conversation:

"...said I'd go with him."

It was Roland, sounding very meek. That couldn't be a good sign. With any luck, Jason could give him a chance to escape. Still hiding, Jason tapped his staff on the wall a few times, loudly. No response. He tapped again.

"What's that sound?" said Tom.

"Go find out." said Jake.

There was the sound of footsteps as Tom walked through the hall. Jason began to get goose-bumps. He turned off the necklace, so he could hear any unexpected sounds. Once Tom walked inside and was as far into the room as he was going to get, Jason sprang into action. He snapped his headlamp on, jumped up, and pointed his staff at the guard. Tom was instantly blinded; he shouted something, dropped his gun and clawed at his eyes. Jason dashed through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Now that the door blocked the early-morning light that leaked in through the lab's window, it was pitch-black in the hallway but for Jason's flashlight. It was also far from quiet. Roused by the ruckus, a chorus of shoes slapped against the floor, coming from both ends of the hallway.

Jason used the necklace to home in on the men's' speech once again, not to hear what they were saying but to determine their location. They were in a room a couple of doors to his right. Jason rushed in that direction, waving the blinding end of his staff at the men in the darkness beyond the flashlight-beam. He could hear cries and thuds as they crashed into one another. He reached the door he wanted without ever seeing any of them or being shot at, though he could hear the blinded men regrouping, and the men on his left continued to advance. He swung the door open and ran inside.

This room was the twin of the one he'd entered from the window: a dark, dusty lab. It had two occupants. One man, assumedly Jake, was in the center of the room. He was middle-aged, and he wore the green goggles Jason had seen on the guards, along with an expression of complete and utter disbelief. He was holding a large crystalline sphere that glowed faintly with a ghostly blue light. The room was windowless, so the sphere was the only source of illumination save Jason's flashlight. No, wait—the other man was standing against the wall. He was bound to it by loops of yellow light that encircled his wrists and ankles—magical shackles, Jason supposed. It was Roland. He looked even more surprised than Jake.

Jason took all this in in a second. Quickly, he blinded the man and pointed the dispelling end of the staff at one of Roland's handcuffs. It disappeared. Then, the staff suddenly glowed blue. Jason dropped it in surprise, and saw a line of energy connecting it to Jake's crystal ball. The glowing stopped; a moment later, the sphere flashed. Jason was blinded. His hands flew to his eyes, and there, indeed, was some kind of goo. He screamed and ran to one side of the room, trying to get away from Jake. He crashed into a bench, just catching himself from falling.

Roland shouted. Something exploded, and some guards cried out. Jason had the presence of mind to use his necklace to focus on Jake. Footsteps! The man was blind, too, but he was coming after Jason. Fortunately, the Hearing Charm gave Jason a

good idea of his position. Jason ran around Jake and felt on the shelves; he found an empty beaker and tossed it at his foe. A crash rang out. The man swore and exclaimed "A Healing Charm!" At once, the necklace stopped working, and *Jake* spoke the command word for it! Sobbing, Jason ran again, though now, the man knew where he was. Jason crashed into something; he fell to the floor; Jake was getting closer every second.

At that moment, Jason had a stroke of inspiration. He took a deep breath and shrieked as loud as he possibly could. The man shouted; there was the sound of glass smashing, followed by an explosion. Jason was knocked aside by the force of the blast; he rolled across the floor and hit a wall. He heard Roland let off a flurry of spells. After a pause, someone gripped his hand, and Roland cast another spell. All of the sounds around him suddenly changed. Roland released his grip and cast another spell, and Jason could see again!

He was lying on the floor of a hospital waiting room. Roland knelt beside him. It would be an understatement of epic proportions to say that everyone else in the room was surprised.

13

Paranoia

Actually, both of them had sustained only minor burns and bruises, so they didn't need much medical care. Roland, though quite haggard from all the excitement and spellcasting, told a consummate lie as to how they'd ended up in such a dilapidated condition, and the hospital employees didn't give it a second thought. As soon as the pair were through, Roland teleported away to "neaten up", as he put it, leaving Jason to return home alone.

Somehow, Jason managed to make it back to the apartment without falling asleep en route. Once there, he hastily hit the hay, without hesitation. Roland, upon entering an hour or so later, followed Jason's example.

By the time man and boy woke up, it was midafternoon. Roland told Jason of how he'd returned to 256 Pulliard Street to find it deserted—the men had all fled. Roland had taken his time to search the place. The first and second floors consisted of apparently normal laboratories that seemed to get daily use. On the third floor, every room was dusty with neglect—except for room 3C, which wasn't either of the rooms Jason had visited. There, Roland had found some papers, a laptop, a few firearms and boxes of bullets, and a generous quantity of expensive, top-of-the-line alchemical equipment and reagents—all of which he had appropriated, and were now lying on the living-room floor.

"Are these Piercers, then?" asked Jason, indicating the bullets.

"Now that I'm all rested up, we can find out." said Roland. "My, I cast two teleports and God knows how many attack spells last night. It's amazing I was able to do all that, after a full day's work. That's just one of the benefits of being an Emotion mage." He abstracted a bullet from one of the boxes and placed it on a table.

"You're an Emotion mage?"

"What with all my screaming, couldn't you tell?" said Roland, grinning. He cast a spell on the bullet and concentrated. Nothing appeared to happen. After a moment, he said "It's heavily enchanted, all right. Jason, it appears we have some Piercers on our hands."

Jason gave a low whistle. "Whaddo we do with 'em, then?"

"I'm not sure, but I have a feeling those papers and that computer might help with the decision. Shall we begin?"

And so they set about scavenging these items for useful information. There was a goodly amount of it to be found.

Jake's full name, according to these documents, was Jacob Triskin. ("Not a very

Gyeedian name.” Roland remarked.) Apparently, he was a bit of a mad scientist—more specifically, a mad alchemist. The documents were filled with experimental data. He’d been trying to create all kinds of things over the last decade or so. All of his attempted inventions were weapons of one kind or another; most, thankfully, had never materialized. Among these ideas were a fluid that magically aroused the ire of any nearby slayer wasps, especially dangerous Gyeedian insects, and an invisible gas that induced a subtle degree of visual hallucination.

In fact, only two of Jake’s many projects had succeeded. The more recent one was the crystal ball Jason had seen him carrying; this he called “the Leech”. As Jason had observed, it had been able to drain the power out of weak magical items and use that power itself. Fortunately, Jake had produced only one. (“Hopefully he’ll have trouble making another.” said Jason.)

The other successful project, of course, was the Piercers, which Jake did indeed call by that name. He was a bit of a genius; he’d figured out how to permanently enchant bullets so they could bite through Projectile Shields, and the recipe he’d devised used a relatively modest amount of reagent. It wasn’t clear how he’d gotten the original idea, the fundamental alchemical tricks behind the technology, but his records showed how he’d painstakingly perfected it over the course of years. The frightening part was what he’d planned—and probably still *was* planning—to do with them. He hoped to sell them to the Droydanians, an imperialistic people who particularly despised Gyeeds. (“Yes, a war with Droydania!” Roland fumed. “Just what we need. Here comes Armageddon.”)

Jake had already made use of some Piercers. He’d armed all his ‘round-the-clock security guards with them, and once, when he’d been low on funds, he’d sold a box to an anonymous black marketeer. Whoever was responsible for the Raincatcher massacre most likely got their Piercers through the latter avenue.

And that was that.

“So... what now?” said Jason.

“I’m really not sure.” said Roland. He frowned and swore. “That fiend! He’s willing to start a war to quench his avarice—or for some other despicable motive, if not that. And he’s already got the blood of those people in Raincatcher Hospital on his hands.” He breathed deeply. “Not to mention that he nearly killed me, too.”

“Now you know what it feels like.” said Jason bitterly.

“It’s not as if I haven’t been in life-or-death situations before. Mortal peril is an essential part of my job; I told you about that dragon. The fact that this Jacob Triskin character interrogated me just made it more humiliating.”

“Uh... dare I ask what you told him?”

“Too much.” said Roland, gritting his teeth. “How you met that fellow from the GSD, what we decided to do... everything.”

“Including the bit that we didn’t tell anybody else?” Roland nodded. “Man alive, he’ll want us dead! Think about it. He’s got enough dough to hire all that security; it would be trivial to get a sniper to take us both out. A sniper using *Piercers*! We’re gonna need escorts or body doubles or something if we wanna survive!”

“All of which would normally be just as trivial to obtain, but Stanley would inevitably want to know why.”

“Are my fears justified, then?”

"Yes, I think they are."

"Great." Jason slumped against a wall. "I guess we're screwed, then."

Roland rubbed his mustache. "Quite problematic, this." His eyes roved about the room until they finally settled on the heaping pile of alchemical supplies lying on the floor. "I may have an idea."

"Being?"

"We could easily sell those for a tidy sum."

"Yeah, but what would we do with the money? If we got our own security, people would notice."

"They wouldn't notice us at all" said Roland conspiratorially "if we were invisible." Jason stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Magic exists, remember?"

"Well..." Jason scratched his head. "I thought that if something as powerful as invisibility were possible, then everyone would use it."

"It is, but not everyone does, because it only comes in the form of a potion—a very expensive potion."

"Oh, now I see where you're getting! We'll buy some potions with the money, right?"

"Precisely. Now, because invisibility potion is so expensive, we'll only be able to buy a moderate amount of it without breaking the bank. That means we'll have to ration it out—which isn't too much of a problem, since drinking small amounts of this particular potion reduces its duration, not its effectiveness."

"So we can take a sip whenever we'd otherwise be vulnerable?"

"Yes, which would be whenever we're on our way to our usual haunts, outdoors. The most obvious time would be when I come to pick you up from the IDC."

"But we'll have to make sure to become invisible or visible only when nobody else is looking."

"Which is what phone booths and bathrooms are for."

"Yeah, now all I need is a Superman costume."

There was a long pause.

"We can't keep that up forever." said Jason. "And Jake will probably stop at nothing. If he runs out of cash, he can always sell some Piercers. We don't have that option. And isn't it only a matter of time till somebody catches on? So many things can go wrong!" He fell silent for a moment. "Moreover, the essential problem still hasn't been solved. Jake can probably still make Piercers." He looked at Roland. "Is there any way we could find him? Divination, maybe?"

"No, there are no seers in the real world."

"Dangit! He's still out there, somewhere." He glanced out one of the room's tiny windows, as if hoping to catch sight of the mad scientist flying by with a jetpack. Then, he collapsed into a chair with a sigh.

Roland sat down across from the boy, watching his face. Neither spoke for a while until the adventurer said quietly "It was very nice of you to come to my rescue like that. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Jason replied, choosing not to enlarge on his motives for the time being. "What happened while I was blind?"

"Thanks to how you freed one of my hands, I was able to cast spells. I would've attacked Jake, but I was kept busy fending off the guards. If I hadn't been tossing

fireballs at them like no tomorrow, they would've spilled into the room and overwhelmed us both, even though some of them were blind. When you screamed, Jake clapped his hands to his ears and dropped the Leech—odd, I thought, since the noise didn't seem *that* loud to me."

"He'd just sucked the power out of my Hearing Charm with that thing," Jason explained, "and he was using that power to focus on me. That's why I screamed. I knew it'd be magically amplified for his ears."

"I see. So, when the object hit the ground, there was a spectacular explosion. I suppose it was more light and force than heat, since you and he were only mildly burned. When he was down, I took the opportunity to stun him. Then I dispelled my other three shackles so I could get to you, and teleported us both out."

"You could dispel those things? Why didn't you do that earlier?"

"As I said, I was otherwise occupied. The remaining guards were just rushing in as we left."

Jason nodded. "Another thing: remember when you were taking on all those guards in the hallway? Why could all those spells go through your Projectile Shields?"

"Oh, the name 'Projectile Shield' is misleading. They don't protect against *any* type of projectile, just very small solid objects, such as bullets, shotgun shells, and pebbles. Almost everything else can pass through them freely."

"I get it."

The two pondered over everything for some minutes.

"The big, unanswered question is," Jason spoke up suddenly, "who is Kevin Treegate really? I guess this wasn't a trap, was it? I overheard the men talking while you were stunned. They obviously hadn't expected us. Did Kevin want to lead us to them for some other reason? I think we'll have to track him down. But how?"

Roland shrugged. "There's no way I can think of."

"Might we drop in on the GSD?"

"Hmmm... we might be able to manage something like that. It would be terribly dangerous, of course, but better than nothing." He thought for a second. "I have access to plenty of information on that group. Let me check to see if he's actually a member in the first place."

They went to Roland's computer and were about to do so when the adventurer saw a troubling headline scroll by on a news ticker. He pressed a button to show the whole story.

The story included a picture. When Roland saw it, he caught his breath. When Jason saw it, his jaw dropped.

It was the very man they'd been looking for. He had just been killed in a drive-by shooting.

14

A Single Step

Both of the pair were eager to find out more, but the trail more or less ran cold at that point. The man's name was actually Kevin Arbate, and the article didn't fail to comment on the irony of a GSD member getting killed, but nobody had identified the killers or even gotten the license-plate number of their vehicle.

Jason reflected that this was the third death he'd indirectly brought about. ("I rub shoulders with the Grim Reaper on a monthly basis," he commented dryly, "and somehow, he always gets someone else.") He suspected Jake was behind it. Apparently, the alchemist hadn't wasted any time in taking Kevin out, as soon as he'd heard from Roland that Kevin had leaked the lab's location. Jason and Roland would have to be very careful in order to avoid a similar fate.

Roland bought the potion, and for the next few days both man and boy slipped from place to place invisibly. They were nearly completely invisible when they drank the potion—only a subtle distortion of light marked their presence, so long as they didn't make any sudden movements. They were cautious in other ways, too. Each day, they furtively glanced under and inside their desks, searching for hidden bombs, and they made sure to verify that any meal served to them wasn't poisoned by feeding crumbs to pigeons and watching the effects.

Both Jason and Roland managed to avoid arousing the curiosity or suspicion of their colleagues, and neither encountered any attempt at his life. After about two weeks, they ran out of the potion. They decided not to buy any more, and they let their guard down somewhat, though they continued to be a little more circumspect than they were in days past.

Meanwhile, Roland thought of a way to spy on the Gyeedian Society of Death without putting himself or Jason into further danger. Arguing that the Raincatcher massacre made it necessary, he convinced a judge to allow bugging of the GSD headquarters. He and Jason listened in to the society's meetings closely, but they were disappointed to find that it didn't seem to know any more than they did. The group's members didn't know who killed Kevin or why, and they never spoke of Jake or the Piercers. It appeared that Kevin had been the only one in the know.

Several uneventful weeks passed. Jason barely noticed when 2004 arrived, even as thousands cheered to the drop of the ball in Times Square. Winter came to Gyeeds, just as it did in Earth's northern hemisphere. Jason worried about what would become of the Piercers, not to mention the burning question of why he wasn't dead

yet.

One Iron in late January there was an unexpected heavy snow in part of the city. Many Gyeedians were free from work, transportation being much more difficult due to the inclement weather. Regardless, the IDC met rain, shine, or blizzard, so Jason suited up for the storm and went on his way. As always, Roland accompanied him.

The pair's boots made satisfying crunching sounds as they waded through the great solid white lake that the streets and sidewalks of Gyeeds were now submerged in. Huge, gleaming icicles hung from awnings and windows, and what few parked cars there were in such a city of mass transit looked like curiously shaped hills of snow. Jason was in a good mood for the first time since... well, he'd be danged if he could remember the last time. He whistled merrily as he trudged through the whirling flakes.

At one point, they came to one of the neighborhood's busier intersections. Here the pavement of the street was visible, for snowplows had pushed the stuff aside to form two little walls of snow. When the traffic light indicated it was the pedestrians' turn to cross, Jason and Roland set off across the street. They climbed onto (or rather, into) the snowy barrier, and Roland stepped neatly off onto the street. As Jason tried to do the same, one of his boots got stuck in a particularly well-packed chunk of snow. He huffed and he puffed and he tugged his leg hard, but it wouldn't come loose. Roland was halfway across the street by now.

Jason glanced to his left. Several of the street's lanes were filled with cars patiently waiting for their turn to move, but the one he occupied was clear. No, not completely clear—here came a sports car, barreling towards him. It was going at a fair clip, much too fast to be safe in such weather, and it sure didn't look like it was going to slow down.

In an instant Jason was in fight-or-flight mode. He braced himself, gathered his meager strength, and leapt forward. His foot popped out of his boot; the latter was left behind. As he stumbled forward, the car zoomed by behind him. He glanced over his shoulder as he ran across the street to see his boot sail through the air and fall through a sewer grate into the gutter, never to be seen again. The car just continued on its course as if nothing had happened. Soon it, too, was out of sight. Jason shouted a rude word as he climbed past the other wall of snow and onto the sidewalk, this time, thankfully, without incident. The traffic light changed and the other cars went about their business.

"That was a close one." said Roland, standing nearby.

"You bet! What was *their* problem? They nearly killed me!" A pause. "Did you get their number?" Roland shook his head. Jason sighed. "What a life. Well, all we can do now is hope that that wasn't a conscious attempt on it. And now I need a new boot. Let's go get one after the meeting."

After all that excitement, Jason expected the IDC meeting to be dull: surely, it'd be business as usual, the only significant difference being that some of his colleagues would snicker at his exposed sock. How very wrong he was.

The first topic on the Council's agenda was something that had just come to the attention of Andrea Tilpaset, the representative of Colloyus, a small but prosperous verse. Through verseviewers, she said, the Colloyuns had noticed something very odd

in the kingdom of Dojum, in the Starving Sea.

Before I recount Andrea's story, let me tell you a bit about the Starving Sea. This was one of the less Earth-like verses man could travel to, featuring a planet with a plethora of small island continents scattered throughout one enormous ocean. The ocean, the verse's namesake, was itself named for its peculiar property of magnetism. Any solid or liquid that left the safety of land and touched or flew over the sea was instantly pulled down with tremendous force, plunged into the water and towards the center of the planet. Thus, the only way one could travel over the Starving Sea was in a ship whose bottom was reinforced with a thick layer of cibium, a metal found only in that verse, which was uniquely able to resist and block the attractive force. (Geologists theorized that the continents only existed because cibium was very abundant deep beneath their surface.) This substance was too heavy to allow for any aircraft, and anybody who tried to teleport across the Sea was affected just as if they'd flown over it; consequently, the verse was anything but a global village.

Interaction with the Starving Sea was further made difficult by its great dimensional distance from Gyeeds and its neighbors. The Sea was so far away that personal verseportation couldn't reach it—great dimensional gates powered by enormous amounts of electricity plus magic were necessary to let anyone cross the distance. Several verses had gates powerful enough to warp to one of the Sea's; Gyeeds, of course, was one of them. Recently, though—on Silver, 24, 5624, or September 25th, 2003, just four days after Jason had been captured by the dragon—the portal in Dojum had been shut down, and the King of Dojum, Akolos, had ruled that anyone who crossed directly onto his island from a nearby verse would be sentenced to death. There was thus no way to reach the kingdom but to verseport to somewhere else in the Sea and go there by ship. As of yet, no one had done this, and Akolos had refused to respond to other verses' attempts to communicate. Those of his subjects who could be contacted had no better idea of what was going on than anybody else.

Jason and his fellow councilmen knew all of this already. What Andrea reported was a clue as to Akolos's motives. A few weeks ago, a Colloyun spy had seen a technician in the Dojese military testing weapons. The technician had seemed to fire ordinary bullets from an ordinary rifle, but his shots had been able to punch through Projectile Shields in a matter of seconds. (At this point, Jason's blood ran cold, and Stanley Ironbone seemed especially troubled.) Ordered to watch for such testing more closely, other Colloyuns observed shield-piercing shots several more times. Making a connection with the Raincatcher massacre, and deeply affected, the President of Colloyus had told all of this to Andrea and allowed her to report it to the IDC.

There was much speculation as to what this meant on all sides. As much as the various hypotheses contrasted, all the Councilmen saw Akolos's behavior as decidedly aggressive. Someone had to find out what was going on, or at least talk to him. Yet no one was eager to fund a voyage to Dojum. Such a voyage would be both expensive and difficult, as the sea-road to Dojum had seen little traffic for many years, ever since the Dojese gate had been built. In the interim, pirates and the navies of the barbaric, warlike nations that were as abundant in the Sea as fleas in a mongrel's fur had taken it over. A whole crew of hardened battle-mages, sorcerers trained for war,

would be necessary to grant a ship a reasonable chance of safe passage.

Jason was puzzled that Stanley didn't volunteer. Didn't he want to get to the bottom of this? Gyeeds was one of the richest nations in the world, and its army already had several cibium-bottomed warships in Starving Sea ports. Nevertheless, Stanley didn't deign to raise the possibility of his city's intervention.

Jason spent the rest of the day cogitating over what he'd heard. How had Akolos gotten ahold of Piercers? Was *he* responsible for the Raincatcher massacre? Was he in cahoots with the Droydanians? Had he known Kevin? Did he know where Jake was now? *The whole problem with this world* thought Jason is *that there's far too many questions and not nearly enough answers.*

Once he had reported the events of the day to Roland, he asked a different question. "As Adventurer of Gyeeds, you've got a right to request the things you need to accomplish a mission, correct?"

"Yes."

"Now, why d'ya think Stanley doesn't wanna send a ship?"

"To be honest, I don't know. He's determined to figure out the whos, hows, and whys of the Raincatcher massacre—he's told me that directly, and he's sent me on plenty of errands that prove it. He was quite pleased when he heard I was listening to the GSD's meetings."

"Well... suppose you asked him for a ship and a crew."

"He'd probably accept, and if he denied the request, he'd be forced to explain himself." Roland smiled faintly. "Sounds like a plan, except I'm not sure I want to command such an expedition."

"But you wouldn't." said Jason, his eyes sparkling. "*I would.*"

Roland gave Jason a look. "Don't you remember what happened to me the last time I played along with one of your schemes?"

"Yes, you discovered a whole lot about the Piercers and their creator, and you escaped unscathed."

"By the skin of my teeth!"

"Well, this time, you'll have the support of a small army, and you won't be anywhere near the front lines. Besides, I doubt Piercers are *that* abundant."

"Tell you what: I'll think about it. Give me a few days to do so."

In the meantime, the IDC moved on to other issues, while Jason continued with his usual pursuits. One of them was reading. Although I realize I haven't mentioned it until now, Jason had been an avid reader ever since he'd first attained literacy. Gyeeds, along with plenty of other verses, had its own literature, of course, but Jason still preferred to read Terran books. This was made possible through verseviewing: by reading over a Terran's shoulder and copying each page as it went by, one could assemble a virtual copy of a book. (The IDC didn't recognize Terran copyrights, since Earth wasn't a member.) With modern optical-character-recognition software, one could automate the process. A handful of such books, the only ones significantly in demand, were printed; the rest were freely available on the Internet. Thus, Jason spent many happy hours catching up on the works he hadn't had a chance to read during his brief stay on Earth.

When Jason had been even younger, he'd had a picture book about Thor, the Norse god of thunder, and his encounters with several frost giants. Jason had loved it, and he'd went on to read about all the gods and giants of Scandinavian folklore. It had recently occurred to him that, if he liked mythology so much, he ought to look into the Greek kind. And so he read about mighty Zeus and vengeful Hera, of wise Athena and cowardly Ares, and all the mortals that pantheon mocked, slew, and occasionally helped.

Late into his labor of love, while Roland was still mulling over his plan, Jason ran across a name that made him do a double-take: Jason. On second thought, he vaguely recalled that there was some mythological Jason or another. Hadn't they made a movie about him with dancing skeletons in it, or something like that? Well, here he was.

Jason read along merrily, but, early on in the mythological Jason's story, he found a passage in the story that made him feel similarly to when he'd heard of the Dojese technician testing Piercers:

...Midway through his journey, Jason encountered the river Anauros. He was about to cross when an old crone standing on the bank called out to him. "Excuse me, young man," she said. "I have business to attend to on the other side of this river, but I am far too weak to cross. Would you be willing to carry me upon your strong shoulders?"

"Certainly, my lady," said Jason, lifting her up and stepping into the flood. The first few steps were easy; then, the water grew deep, up to his waist, and the river-bed became treacherous—Jason had to be careful not to stumble amidst the rocks and mud. And all the while, the old woman shifted her weight this way and that way, threatening to send both of them sprawling; she seemed to grow heavier and heavier with each passing moment. Jason was sorely tempted to hurl her into the water and leave her to her own devices, but, remembering the principles of kindness and charity Chiron had taught him, he persevered.

At last, Jason arrived at the opposite bank of the river. He gently set the old woman down on the ground and was about to continue on his way when she suddenly transformed. Where once there was a crooked old crone, now there was a radiant goddess, tall and majestic. Jason instantly fell to his knees.

"Behold, mortal!" said she. "I am no mere hag but the goddess Hera, Queen of the Olympians. You have found favor in my eyes, and for that I shall help you reclaim your father's throne from your wicked uncle Pelias. Call upon me in your hour of need, and I shall come to your aid." With that, the goddess disappeared in a flash of light.

As Jason rose, he noticed that he had lost one of his sandals in the flood...

Needless to say, our Jason—Jason Blue—hadn't crossed any rivers recently, and he'd never carried an old woman on his shoulders, and he was a little less than half the mythological Jason's age. But Jason Blue thought the loss of the young man's

sandal was eerily similar to the loss of his own boot. *Truth is stranger than fiction, eh?*

Things got even weirder a little later on in the story. The high point of the myth-Jason's heroic career was his Quest for the Golden Fleece, in which he led a crew of heroes in a voyage across dangerous seas. That sounded rather like what Jason Blue was planning to do. And to top it all off, the myth-Jason had been assigned this quest while wearing only his one sandal, just as Jason Blue had been single-booted that fateful day in the IDC.

All the boy could hope for was that he didn't meet his mythological counterpart's fate. In the story, Jason eventually lost Hera's favor after breaking his promise to a woman he'd sworn to love forever, and he died a broken, friendless man.

When Jason told all of this to Roland, the adventurer said simply "Truth is stranger than fiction."

"That's what I thought!" said Jason. "No mortal mind could dream up something weird as this."

Eventually, Roland relented to Jason's request. Stanley, he reported, was more than happy to provide the necessary ship, men, and gear. The mayor had been a bit perturbed at hearing that Jason would be the leader, but he'd agreed to it eventually, so long as an admiral could do the actual commanding of soldiers in combat and share power with the boy outside of it. Roland would be expected to be the mayor's liaison, and although he would generally leave decisions to Jason and the admiral, Stanley demanded the final say in all matters.

The ship, by the way, was new and nameless as of yet. Stanley allowed Jason to name it. Jason christened it "the *Argo*".

Reactions to the news varied. Some people scoffed that a boy who knew even less about the Starving Sea, watercraft, and magical ship-to-ship combat than the average person should head such an expedition. Others applauded his courage in doing a thing no one wanted to do but everyone agreed had to be done. Scholars of Earth were amused by all the parallels with Greek mythology.

As the days counted down to the journey's scheduled beginning, Jason reflected on all that had happened to him since that fateful September day. He had long gotten use to the idea of magic, and he'd even come to accept the fact that dragons existed, albeit much stupider ones than those he'd previously been familiar with. Yet the feeling that both these things were bizarre and inexplicable had never left his mind; perhaps it never would.

And at the same time, he'd somehow reconciled the fact that for him, life was definitely an adventure. First, he'd nearly been a dragon's dinner, or at least that would've been possible if Roland hadn't been watching. Weeks later, he'd been kidnapped by a crazy old wizard who'd wanted to use his body to live forever. Another few weeks later, he (and Roland) had barely escaped death at the hands of a mad alchemist who planned to start a world war. And now he was about to go on a quest worthy of an ancient Greek hero. What a drama was his life! What danger, what excitement, what maddening thrills and spills! And so many impossibly improbable coincidences were required to make it all work out. It was as if he lived in a movie.

Thus, the foremost question in his mind, the greatest uncertainty about the near future that rattled about in his head, as he and his fellow Argonauts stepped through the mighty dimensional gate that would transport them to the Starving Sea, was:

What'll the multiverse think of next?

Part II

The Quest for the Golden Fleece

15

Wherein Jason Meets Three New People

With a loud, crackling snap of electricity, the Argonauts found themselves in something like a warehouse. It was large—it had to be, since the gate, that futuristic-looking Gateway Arch in miniature, was nearly fifty feet tall. Yet the place wasn't *too* large; in fact, its dimensions made it almost a cube. This was in stark contrast to the enormous hall where the Gyeedian gate stood.

"Welcome to the Sea, gentlemen." said an official wearing green. "May I see your passports?"

There was a loud thud as everyone's luggage hit the floor at once, followed by the noise of thirty-six people rummaging around in pockets, bags, and suitcases for the requested item. Among these people were Jason, Roland, and Talbot Iceslicer, the admiral who'd come by Stanley's request. Talbot was fifty-one years old and decorated with a formidable fraction of Gyeeds's many military awards. He felt that this mission was beneath him, and, as Jason had feared, he was especially bitter about ranking equally with the boy. The rest of the group were soldiers and sailors, all male and ranging in age from fourteen to thirty. Few of them were very famous or skilled wizards, much to Talbot's further disdain.

The group walked out of the building and into the evening sunlight. Jason did a double-take—it had been early morning when he'd entered the gate just a few minutes ago. Then he recalled that this part of the Sea was in a different time zone from Gyeeds. It was a different season, too: early spring. He didn't look forward to the inevitable jet lag.

This was Pewpik, one of the richest cities in the Starving Sea. That wasn't saying much: the Sea's gravity crippled its nations' ability to trade, and a minority of the islands had many natural resources to speak of, making the Sea one of the IDC's poorer members. Pewpik was prosperous by comparison. Casting his eyes about, Jason saw groves of austere, several-story concrete buildings and large houses. The natives who stopped to gawk at the curious procession were dressed comfortably; their clothes were in good condition. At the same time, Jason noticed that all the roads were of unpaved dirt, and there were no skyscrapers to speak of.

The dimensional gate was conveniently located right next to the city's seaport, a long strip of metal lining the beach. Parked at its piers were a few ocean liners and freighters so big they made Jason's eyes bug out. It was the smallest of these, which was still enormous, that Jason and company walked toward now. As soon as the party reached the ship, more men swarmed out of it to help bring all the luggage up a

ramp. Jason took the time to admire the ship. (*My ship!* he thought.) It was a real Moby Dick, a great white leviathan of steel. On its side, “Argo” was spelled out phonetically in giant blue Common letters. Although it was a warship of sorts, it had no weapons, as any solid projectiles shot over the Sea would zoom straight down, into the water. It wasn’t very streamlined, either, since the slab of cibium at the bottom had to be beneath every part of the ship, plus a small area about its perimeter for safety’s sake. For more safety, the railing surrounding the decks was especially high.

“It’s a good thing we’ve got plenty of Sea sailors.” said Talbot. (Well, I suppose I was exaggerating when I said he was bitter. He spoke to Jason freely, even though he was upset about the balance of power. Let us just say he was resentful.) “They’re a good breed of mariner.”

“Sea sailors as opposed to what?” asked Jason. “Lake sailors?”

Talbot glanced down at the boy. He looked like the veteran military officer he was: his hair was silver-gray, his face was craggy and lined, and his eyes had a certain wild cunning in them. “I meant men from the Starving Sea.”

“Oh.”

Once all their baggage was on the ship, the remaining Argonauts clambered up the ramp. As soon as Jason’s shoes hit the deck, a tall, wiry man approached him.

“You are Jason Blue, correct?” His Common had a decidedly non-Gyeedian ring to it. On his chin was a small, pointed goatee that Jason had to stop himself from giggling at.

“Yeah, that’s me.” They clasped hands.

“Gunther Oltob, captain.” He turned to Talbot. “Hello again, Admiral.” Then, to Roland, “Adventurer! I never thought I’d meet you in person.”

“Consider yourself lucky, then.” said Roland.

They clasped, laughing politely, and Gunther said “Well, gentlemen—and boy—come along to my quarters, so I can show you the route we’ll be taking.”

The four of them walked down some stairs and into the interior of the *Argo*. Jason was surprised at how un-nautical it looked. Subconsciously, he’d expected something like the inside of a seventeenth-century Spanish war galleon. In fact, the claustrophobic white halls suggested a wild cross between a college dormitory and an office building, albeit one with portholes for windows. The ceilings were lined with fluorescent lights—most painfully bright, some quite dim, a few flickering rapidly.

In the spirit of democracy, the captain’s quarters were only distinguished from anybody else’s by their proximity to the bridge. It had a bed, a desk, and a few other miscellaneous furnishings; that was all, and it was cramped with all four of them in there. Gunther sat down at the desk and unfurled a huge map onto its surface while the other three watched over his shoulder.

“We are here.” said Gunther, tapping one of the easternmost of the many islands dotting the Starving Sea. Indicating a bigger landmass on the opposite end of the chart, he added “They are there.”

“Looks like we’re in for a long voyage.” said Talbot.

“How long do you think it’ll take?” asked Jason.

“We should arrive in about fifteen days, assuming we don’t run into any trouble.” said the captain.

Jason nodded. He’d heard that estimate before, when deciding how many

clothes to pack, but it was good to hear it from the guy who'd be piloting the ship.

"And we all know how unlikely that is." said Roland.

"Yes, very." Talbot agreed.

"We would be able to get there faster," said Gunther, "but we have to take a winding kind of route, in order to avoid the more dangerous seas." He traced with his finger a roundabout squiggle that led from Pewpik to Dojum.

"Exactly how dangerous will this journey be?" asked Jason.

Talbot answered "To be honest, we can't be sure. The people who live on most of these islands are reclusive folk; they have little contact with nearby nations and almost none with the rest of the world. Only a few possess cibium-bottomed ships. We could still be threatened by those who do, however, if they're hostile."

"Do you think we have enough of an army to handle whatever they might throw at us?" asked Roland.

"Most likely." said Talbot. "What our soldiers lack in quality, they make up for in quantity. And this ship... it isn't top-of-the line, but we might still be able to outmaneuver larger vessels, so long as you" (he turned to Gunther) "are good enough."

"I should hope so." said Gunther, a little defensively.

"Y'know, I was kinda hopin' I'd be able to pick the route," said Jason, "but I guess you two know better, anyway."

Talbot nodded, smiling faintly.

It was not long until the *Argo* heaved off, heading west towards the setting sun. Jason went around the ship and met his fellow mariners. Their attitudes towards him varied greatly. Some asked excited questions about how he'd convinced the dragon not to eat him or turned Ernest Seadweller into a cat. Others were openly resentful about being led by someone who'd never seen the tip of the elephant's trunk. A couple of the men native to the Starving Sea simply refused to acknowledge him: their culture was a deal less tolerant of children in power than that of Gyeeds. All in all, there were fifty people aboard, just the same as on the mythical *Argo*.

Jason watched the slow nightfall from the ship's deck. On land, he'd thought the ship was big; now, it seemed tiny compared to the vast and endless ocean. The water of the Starving Sea did not constantly flow up and down, back and forth as that of other seas did—it, too, was affected by the supernatural gravity, and was thus as smooth as a taut scrap of rubber. With no land in sight, the ship was alone in the middle of everything. Surrounding it on all sides was nothing but the planar sea and planar sky, stretching above and below to meet on the circular horizon. The uncanny invariance of the scenery was relieved only by the setting sun.

Jason wound up his arm and tossed a pebble (which he'd made sure to bring for this very purpose) over the ship's railing. As soon as a molecule of its substance was above the water, the rock made a perfect ninety-degree turn in mid-air and zoomed downwards in a straight line. There was a loud thud as part of it hit the ship's hull, and then all was silent again.

At least I didn't have to learn how to swim.

The captain's quarters boasted one feature over most of the ship's rooms: they had

only one bed. Jason and Roland, on the other hand, shared a compartments with a bunk bed. Jason took the top bunk.

Night had finished falling by now. The blaring fluorescents were off; the only illumination in Jason and Roland's room was the moonlight flowing in through the porthole. Roland lay in bed while Jason sat on a chair beside him. They were having a chat before going to sleep for the night.

"There isn't a gym on this ship," said Roland. "How am I supposed to stay fit?"

"Do you need to?" asked Jason.

"Of course." He turned to the boy. "I'm the Adventurer of Gyeeds, you know! I have to be ready for anything."

"Did you exercise regularly before you got elected?"

"Well, yes. You know me; I like to be healthy. I eat three square meals a day, I don't smoke, and I exercise. Just because I'm a wizard doesn't mean I should neglect my body." There was a long silence. "Well, I didn't feel that way before Beatrix, I guess. So much has changed since then."

"Beatrix?"

In the darkness, Jason could barely make out an expression of surprise on Roland's face. "Don't tell me I never mentioned her to you."

"Um... I don't think you did."

"She's my ex-wife."

Jason blinked. "Not really. Never by name."

"Know, then, that that was my wife's name: Beatrix Shadewalker. Beatrix Moralheart, for three-and-a-half years." In Gyeeds, as in the West, wives usually assumed their husbands' surnames.

"'Shadewalker', huh? Kinda the opposite of your name."

"I suppose you could think of it that way."

"But what does she have to do with your health?"

"Well... it's complicated." Roland turned onto his back. "When I met her, at the tender age of sixteen, I wasn't much. I was talented—I was one of the best athletes in my school, and an able student to boot. At the same time, I didn't have much of a vision or a purpose; I just let life pass me by.

"But Beatrix—Beatrix had ambition! Her mother had been a suffragette, and passed on all sorts of feminist ideas to her. She wanted to be a scientist when she grew up. She had strong opinions on most issues; she was always ready to speak up or debate about something. In short, she had all the drive and direction that I didn't.

"When I fell for her, I thought she was beautiful; I believed she was a genius. In retrospect, I think most of the appeal for me was her ambition. She had the passion I'd always lacked, and somehow, in my youth-drunk brain, she became *my* passion. She was uninterested in me at first, but for once, there was something I truly desired, and I wasn't about to let it escape. I was persistent, so persistent that—ah... the point is, in time, we got together, and after a few months, we married.

"That lasted until I was twenty. Then we divorced. It wasn't sudden; I think we both saw it coming at least a year ahead. We had a deal of... rough spots. Anyway, as soon as the whole ordeal was over, I took a good, long look at my life up until that point. I recalled how she'd said that I'd had no life outside of her, and I realized she'd been right. From then on, I decided, I'd live my life with intention. I began to focus

and hone my talents: I learned martial arts, got a degree in politics, and began studying the art of spellcasting—which, it turned out, I had something of a knack for. I decided to become a swashbuckler of sorts, since I had what it took, including a taste for adventure.

“Long story short is, I began working for the government of Gyeeds as a secret agent, rose up through the ranks, and eventually got elected Adventurer of Gyeeds. And here I am now.”

“Um... ‘secret’ agent? Everybody knows you’re Adventurer.”

“I *used* to be a secret agent. From there, I moved on to more conspicuous jobs. I publicly revealed I’d been an agent during my campaign for Adventurer, since that was part of my credentials.”

“I see.”

They sat and lay there in the silent darkness for a while. Then, Roland said “You know, I never told all that to anyone other than my psychotherapist before.”

“You were in therapy?”

“For a while after the divorce, yes.”

There was a much longer pause. Finally, Jason said “Well... uh... thank you for, um, confiding in me.”

“No, no, Jason. Thank you for listening.”

Jason climbed up onto his bed and lay down. “Good night, Roland.”

“Good night.”

But the boy didn’t go to sleep right away. Hardly! A thousand thoughts swarmed through his brain. It was amazing how much Roland professed that Beatrix had affected him, yet how rarely he’d mentioned her. The man had said he’d once been married when he’d first met Jason, on that canyon-covered planet, but since then, Jason couldn’t recall hearing another word about the union. How very curious! Perhaps the whole thing really did trouble Roland, so much so that he didn’t even want to think about it, never mind talk about it.

The thing that really got Jason was how outlandish it all was. Something about it was so... romantic, in every sense of the word. He’d had nothing until he met her, then she was everything to him, then she left his life, but he was forever changed by the encounter. That kind of scenario would be more at home in some sappy nineteenth-century three-volume novel than in real life. Nothing explicitly prevented such a thing from happening, but, well... Jason had never fallen in love himself, of course, and he was no psychologist, but he still thought it was all very fishy. Perhaps the answer lay in what Roland hadn’t said: the particular ways in which he’d wooed Beatrix very persistently, and the “rough spots” that had led to the disintegration of their marriage. Also, the language he’d used to describe his love for Beatrix, as if she were the object of his desire more than... well, a *human being* made Jason’s skin crawl.

Jason had only had a peek into the dark and troubled side of Roland’s mind, but that was enough for him to get an idea of how dark and troubled it really was.

16

Asymmetric Warfare

Jason's curiosity had definitely been piqued, yet he had his reservations about broaching the subject of Beatrix again. He believed that Roland would be most inclined to speak about her if the man felt he could do so at his leisure. For that reason, it was not until several days after the *Argo's* departure from Pewpik that Jason made reference to her, and then only indirectly.

It was mid-morning. Jason, Roland, and about twenty other Argonauts were eating breakfast in the ship's mess. The mess, oddly named as Jason thought it was (it was kept meticulously clean and Roland still called it a mess), was the biggest room ("Compartment." Talbot was apt to correct) in the whole ship. Not that that was saying much. However vast the *Argo* had appeared to Jason initially, he hadn't considered what it would be like once he was on it along with all the people standing on the docks beside him. It actually felt pretty crowded with forty-nine shipmates. And twenty-six bedrooms plus a reasonable number of bathrooms and a great deal of storage space didn't leave much room for anything else. The mess could fit all fifty of the Argonauts—barely. When they assembled there for meetings, many had to stand.

Anyway, between bites of ostensible food, Jason asked Roland "Did you say that your ex-mother-in-law was a suffragette?"

Roland blinked in surprise. "Yes, though I used the pluperfect."

"Pluperfect'?"

"It's a verb tense."

"Oh." Jason made a face. "Kind of annoying that you know more about English grammar than I do." Roland shrugged. "What I was wondering is, she didn't have Beatrix very late in life, did she?"

"She was forty-seven when I married her daughter, who was one year my senior. You do the arithmetic."

"She was... thirty. Not very old."

"Get to the point, Jason."

"That seems awfully late in history to be campaigning for women's suffrage."

"Perhaps it was, compared to the United States. Recall that you're not in Kansas anymore."

"Pretty much every Western country got women's suffrage by World War II." Jason furrowed his brow. "When did Gyeeds get it?"

"Around 30, 5580."

"That was... 1960 CE!"

At that moment, a teenage sailor burst into the room. His pimple-spotted face clearly and eloquently expressed that Murphy's Law had just been proven right once again. "Bad news, guys!" He was speaking to the whole room, but he didn't need to raise his voice much. Everyone put down their eating utensils and looked at him.

Great timing. Jason thought bitterly.

"The wheel broke. We've still got enough juice to last two or three days, but that's it."

Wheel? What wheel? I thought this was a ship!

Everyone else seemed to know what the boy was talking about. They didn't look pleased.

"The captain wants to speak to you two." added the sailor, nodding at Jason and Roland. Then he left.

"I think some of my trouble magnetism rubbed off on this ship." Jason grumbled.

"Look on the bright side." said Roland. "Wherever we stop to get repairs, we'll no doubt be able to get better victuals than this vile stuff."

"Well, that didn't take long." said Jason. He, Roland, and Talbot were on the bridge, gathered around Gunther, who was currently piloting the ship. Jason would've thought it dangerous to talk while piloting, but he wasn't the pilot, and he figured Gunther knew what he was doing. "First of all, would anyone care to tell me what the wheel is?"

"Jesus Christ, boy!" Talbot exclaimed (or rather, didn't exclaim—you know what I mean). "Didn't it ever strike you as pertinent to find out *something* about this ship before trying to guide it?"

"Sheesh, chill." said Jason, cowed. "I've never pretended to be an admiral or a captain; I'm just here to do the strategizing and the politicking."

"It should be awfully hard to strategize when you've no idea of your resources." Talbot growled.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry; I'll do my homework from now on. In the meantime, I'd like to know what's going on."

"Allow me to explain." said Roland. It was the first time he had ever spoken to Jason in Common while not talking about language itself. "The wheel is a mechanism specially designed for Starving Sea ships that takes advantage of the Sea's attraction to produce power. It's a paddle wheel located on the bottom of the ship, positioned on a 'ledge' of cibium so that part of it is protected from the downward force and part of it isn't. The latter portion is attracted downwards, and so the wheel spins, but the paddles never break off of the wheel because their motion brings them over the cibium. The energy produced by this perpetual spinning is used for propulsion and to produce electricity. The machine's very existence is also a neat proof that the Sea's gravity is not in fact gravity in the usual sense."

"But it *did* break." said Jason.

"Yes, that's the problem." Roland replied.

"So why are the lights still on?"

"We have backup batteries, of course."

"All right. So... oh yeah, the guy said we had enough for a few days. Then

what?"

"If we simply went on sailing until we ran out," Gunther unexpectedly spoke up, "we'd be stuck in the middle of the ocean and someone else would have to rescue us."

"What?" squawked Jason. "Can't we repair the stinkin' wheel?"

"Not while we're at sea," said Roland. "How could anybody reach it under the ship? There's no such thing as a cibium diving suit."

"Couldn't you, like, hold a sheet of it under yourself while you were swimming, or something?"

"No, it has to be very thick to provide adequate protection, and it's very heavy."

"So what do we do? Call for help?"

"Find some other body of water," said Talbot. "I don't think Stanley" (here he looked at Roland meaningfully) "would like to go to the additional expense of sending a ship to rescue us. It's not the end of the multiverse; all we need to do is sail somewhere a diver can make the repairs without getting killed."

"And where can we do that?" said Jason.

"The only island within range that has such a body of water is Hoon," said Gunther. "I've already set our course for it."

"Great!" said Jason. "See, you guys don't even need me."

Talbot opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it.

The Argonauts grumbled when they learned of the detour. In reality, it wasn't a very long one: by that afternoon, Hoon loomed large on the horizon. Looking through a pair of binoculars, Jason saw the sheer sides of the island—no tides meant no erosion, and no erosion meant no beaches. On its surface was some civilization: dozens of crude stone houses and a throng of people wearing handmade clothing. Nearby the village was a freshwater lake and a river that fed off from the sea; it was the latter toward which the *Argo* was headed. Most of the rest of the island was covered with deciduous forest, embellished with the occasional green hill.

Jason was shortly called over to the bridge again, where he found the rest of the gang.

"The King of Hoon radioed us, asking who we are and what we're doing," said Roland. "We told him, and now we're waiting for a response."

As they did so, another sailor ran in. "Guys!" he said. "I saw something rising from the hills. It's flying towards us, I think."

"I warn you," a voice crackled out of the speaker. The king had another thick accent that was completely new to Jason's ears. "A mother dragon has her lair here. She has a habit of attacking incoming ships."

Roland froze. Talbot looked aghast. Jason whimpered involuntarily. Several nearby sailors swore.

Gunther simply said "Oh, goodness."

There was a silence lasting about two seconds. Then, Talbot bellowed "Mages, air-to-ship defense!", turned, and dashed away, moving quickly in spite of his age. A few people followed him.

Roland looked at Jason. "I'm no battle-mage, but we need all the firepower we can get. Stay and talk to the king; you should be safe here." With that, he exited likewise.

The ship rang with shouting and the clatter of men and boys zooming about as all twenty-nine of the ship's sorcerers hurried into position. Jason shook his head sadly and pressed a button on the ship's control panel. (He did know how to work the radio, at least.) "We've got plenty of mages on board, and we're preparing to confront the dragon," he said.

"So be it," said the king.

"Gunther," said Jason, "twenty-nine mages are more than enough to fight off one dragon, right?"

"Yes, with casualties," the captain replied.

"Dang, that's no good." Far off in the distance, through the pilot-house's windows, Jason could see a small, vague shape flying over the island. The mages were all assembled now. Someone conjured a field of shimmering, pale-cyan light that covered the glass—to protect it from the dragon's fire, Jason supposed. "Do you think it would help if they helped?" he said, pointing at the village.

"Perhaps, if they have mages."

Jason used the radio again. "Would you be able to assist us?"

"It is your problem," came the reply.

"Oooh, the nerve!" Jason fumed—not over the airwaves, but more to himself than Gunther. "Like we have a choice..." Gathering his courage, he spoke to the king again. "Sir, this ship is on a diplomatic mission on behalf of Stanley Ironbone, Mayor of Gyeeds. If you allow us to come to harm, the rest of the world will hear about it without delay."

"I will not be moved by threats," the king said coolly.

Jason was at a loss for any constructive way to respond.

A few tense minutes passed as the dragon and the *Argo* drew closer. The villagers, realizing what was about to happen, ran into their houses to protect themselves from the ensuing carnage. Soon the beast was near enough that Jason could make it out in some detail. He was reminded of Roland's remark on the size of the kidnapping dragon—this monster measured eighteen feet from the tip of its snout to the base of its tail. Its hide was coal-black and covered with jagged, bright-yellow streaks. As it flew, its claws kneaded the air in anticipation of raking the flesh of its prey. It made for a terrifying sight indeed!

"Hold to retaliate!" Talbot shouted.

In a couple of seconds, the dragon and the ship were each only a few hundred feet from the island's edge. Gunther slowed down, so as not to crash into Hoon. The dragon opened its maw and spat a fireball, which raced towards a mage standing at the bow of the ship. Immediately, the Argonauts shot back with a volley of spells: a shower of projectiles in every shape and size and every color of the rainbow flew back at the beast. The mage who'd been targeted cast a spell that propelled him backwards. He fell to the floor of the ship, out of range of the fireball's explosion.

Seeing the magical assault directed at it, the dragon emitted a noise halfway between a shriek and a roar. It performed a deep split-S, evading all the shots while turning back to the direction from whence it came. It was rather low above the ground, now, moving very quickly.

"Quick strike, spread out!" Talbot shouted.

The wizards cast more projectiles, all of similar type. They were yellow, glowing

globbs that zoomed through the air so fast that each was a blur. The dragon flew to the left in an attempt to avoid them, grazing its wing on the upper branches of a tree, but because the mages had distributed their shots around a wide area, the beast was still hit. It wasn't seriously wounded: it faltered in the air for the moment, then continued unabated.

"Hold!" Talbot commanded.

The dragon kept flying away. After a minute, it had clearly retreated. The battle was over, and no one had even been wounded. A cheer rose up from all the Argonauts. The islanders came back out of their houses. Tears sprang to Jason's eyes in relief.

"Excellent!" said Gunther. "Now we can repair the wheel." He began to maneuver the ship towards the river.

Jason walked outside. The air was filled with the eager chattering of soldiers and sailors.

"We were lucky!" Talbot said happily to Roland and Jason. "That wyrm wasn't so much a martyr as others are. I admit I was scared when she dodged our first round. The ones that have some experience with fighting mages are always a lot tougher to take down."

"I got scared a deal earlier than that." Jason put in.

"Actually, I was disappointed I didn't have the chance to really let loose." said Roland. "At this rate, though, I'm sure opportunities for that will come up soon."

Need I say how correct this prediction was?

17

Here Be Dragons

In fact, more trouble was just around the corner. It surfaced as Gunther was carefully sliding the ship into the relatively narrow river. Before he could get into it very far, three villagers in loincloths leapt into the water and floated there, right in the path of the ship.

"Are you crazy?" Jason shouted at them, standing at the bow. "Get out of the way! You'll be killed!" They didn't budge. Jason scrambled over to the bridge. "Stop the ship, stop the ship!" he yelled.

Gunther did so, then stared at him expectantly.

"There are people floating in the river, right in front of the ship! I yelled at them, but they wouldn't move."

There was a great commotion all about the ship as everybody tried to understand and explain what was going on at once.

"This is my doing! I forbid you to use my river!"

Everyone turned to look at the speaker. Jason had recognized the accent; he was unsurprised to see an obviously royal figure. The King of Hoon was standing on the riverbank, staring up at the Argonauts. His face was rough and serious, and his eyebrows were sharply slanted and bushy; both features were in contrast to his short stature. Sharper still was the contrast between his and the other villagers' clothing: he wore a business suit like the one Roland had worn every day Jason had ever known him. On his wrists were big, heavy gold bracelets, and on his brow was a golden headband inlaid with a single large blue gem. Actually, taken as a whole, he looked kind of silly.

Five tough-looking men stood in a semicircle around the king. *Bodyguards, most likely.* Jason thought. They weren't armed, but that didn't preclude the possibility that they were spellcasters.

"What is the meaning of this?" Roland demanded of the king, glaring at him.

"I will explain to the leader of your group," said the king.

"That'd be us," said Jason, indicating himself, Roland, and Talbot. The corners of Talbot's mouth rose slightly.

The king raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Please come with me, then," he said.

The *Argo* wasn't quite far enough into the river that the wheel could be repaired, but the Argonauts could still disembark safely. Jason looked at his shipmates. They were staring at the land eagerly; they'd been stuck on that cramped little ship for days.

"Would you mind if our men came onto land to stretch their legs for a bit?" Jason asked the king.

"Fine. I am among the few inhabitants of this island who are versed in Common, however."

Huh, didn't see that one coming. Jason turned to the Argonauts. "Okay, you heard the man. Don't molest the villagers. And behave yourselves, boys! Be back on the ship by sunset. With any luck, we'll be able to resume our voyage immediately."

Again there was a commotion as everybody swarmed onto the island. Soon, Jason, Roland, and Talbot were following the king and his guards through the village at a brisk pace. (Gunther stayed behind to tend to the ship.) The villagers eyed the Argonauts curiously. They obviously didn't get visitors very often.

The king brought his guests into a building with only one room. It had no lighting other than some big windows and torches set into wall sockets, and no furniture other than a large table and a few chairs, all painstakingly carved out of hardwood by hand. The king seated himself at the head of the table and the trio sat next to him. The king's companions remained standing.

"This better be good." Jason said curtly. Roland and Talbot said nothing, but you could see from their faces that they agreed with the sentiment.

The king looked annoyed. "You may decide that for yourself. First, we must make our introductions. I am Winlo II, King of Hoon."

"Jason Amadeus Blue."

"Roland Moralheart, Adventurer of Gyeeds."

"Admiral Talbot C. Iceslicer of the Gyeedian Navy."

Winlo glanced at Jason very briefly, then spoke again. "Gentlemen, I realize that I have both inconvenienced and endangered you greatly, and for that I apologize. I believe, however, that, considering my people's circumstances, my behavior is justified. Allow me to explain.

"You have already encountered Thorm. That is the name we gave to the dragon, it being the word for 'murderer' in our native tongue. Thorm arrived here last autumn, to make a lair in a cave in the hills where she could bear her wyrmlings." (One curious fact about dragons Jason had learned recently was that they gave birth to live young. Hence, there was no such thing as a dragon egg.) "She was not a problem to us until about five weeks ago, when she first ate one of my people." (Cue various small expressions of disgust and fright on behalf of the threesome.)

"Unfortunately, she found the taste of human flesh to her liking. The very next day, she came to me and said she would take one person every three days—if I did not choose a victim, she would take whomever she pleased.

"Of course, I could not bring myself to select whom to sacrifice. Thus, for a week, Thorm came and flew off with whoever struck her fancy. My people were so terrified they began to fight amongst themselves to decrease their likelihood of being chosen. Men attacked each other, hoping that the dragon would find the sight of their enemies' blood attractive, and plotted together to assault their least favorite neighbors and offer them to the dragon. I began to fear that the seeds of discord Thorm had sown in my village were doing us worse harm than the dragon herself.

"And so I established a lottery. Now, every three days, one person is chosen at random to be sacrificed to Thorm and her brood. The insanity has stopped. Yet the

nightmare continues, as our population is draining rapidly, and everyone lives in fear of the day they will be chosen."

"Oh... my... God!" cried Jason. "You call this a nightmare? This is a *living hell!*" Talbot nodded gravely. Roland seemed to be holding back rage. "Why... why on earth haven't you attacked it? You have mages, don't you?"

"Yes, sixteen," said Winlo, "including the five who constitute my personal guard." He gestured at the standers. "We have considered attacking Thorm, but we are hesitant to do so. A dragon, especially of that size, is very powerful: there is no guarantee the attackers would succeed, and certainly if they did not succeed, they would not survive, in which case we would be truly helpless. Moreover, even if we slew Thorm, we would most likely have to deal with her mate as well." (Female dragons were generally larger than males, but both sexes were still dangerous, of course.) "We have therefore refrained from attacking her as of yet. In the meantime, we have tried to think of another, less risky solution, and we have hoped that someone who could help us might come to Hoon."

"You don't get a lot of visitors, though, do you?" asked Jason.

"We have not been visited much lately. For years, traders regularly came here to exchange manufactured goods for precious metals. Thorm put an end to that. She attacks every ship that approaches the island, in the hopes of eating its occupants. She does not know that there are people in the multiverse outside of those in Hoon and those who come to Hoon, of course, but she realizes there are a finite number of Hoonians. Some ships tried to resist her with what few mages they had, but all eventually realized her might and sailed away. One unfortunate consequence of her experience with fighting wizards is that she has learned to evade magical projectiles, as you have no doubt noticed. This makes her further dangerous to confront.

"My request is simple." He looked at Jason straight in the eye. "Help us to slay this menace. Together, we have a good chance of being able to do so. In return, I will allow you to repair your ship."

"That's what I was asking you to do." said Jason, vexed.

"At the time, I did not know you had such a large force." said the king. "I thought that Thorm would chase you away, as she does to most ships. In that case, if we had attacked, she would have inevitably turned her wrath on us as soon as you were out of range."

"Well..." said Jason. "I guess you don't leave us with much of a choice." He thought for a moment. "Actually, I know this might sound crazy, but... have you tried talking Thorm out of it? Just appealing to its natural sense of morality, I mean. It no doubt thinks of humans as lower animals, but you might be able to convince it otherwise."

"I tried exactly that," said Winlo, "when she first came to announce her intention of devouring my people regularly. She did not care. She is truly heartless."

There was a pause. "Roland, Talbot?" said Jason. "Any thoughts?"

"Your Majesty," said Roland, his voice trembling a bit, "I completely understand your position, and will do everything in my power to unburden the world of this demon's spawn."

Talbot closed his eyes for a moment, thinking. Then, he said "I have nothing to add."

"All right." said Jason. "Is that all, sir?"

"Yes." said Winlo.

"Okay, we... we'll need to talk about this. We'll see you again tomorrow morning."

That evening, all the Argonauts met in the mess. It was very dark and shadowy, lit only by candles, as Gunther had turned off the power to save what remained of it for emergencies. Jason, Roland, and Talbot stood on a table on one side of the room.

First, Jason recounted Winlo's tale. Then, he said "To me, guys, it looks like we don't have a choice: we've gotta slay the dragons. With... uh... forty-five sorcerers in all, it shouldn't be that tough, especially if we make a sneak attack on the lair while both adults are asleep."

The crowd's reaction was immediate and emphatic. "Are you joking?" said one man. "Belling the cat!" said another. "We won't be that guy's martyrs!" shouted a boy.

"Ahem!" said Talbot. Silence was restored. "Jason, as you can see, no one on this ship is eager to sacrifice his life for this particular cause." His tone of voice was angry and somewhat condescending. Glancing at the crowd, Jason could see it sided with Talbot. "We would inevitably be victorious, yes, but there would be casualties on our side, not all of which would be guaranteed to be Hoonians."

"Have you no morals?" Roland suddenly shot back. Jason jumped, and everyone else seemed surprised, too. "These poor people have had as many as ten of their loved ones stolen by this monster. This gruesome ritual must be stopped, those innocent deaths must be *avenged*!" As he shouted that last word, his eyes flashed with a red glow and small, momentary wisps of flame burst from his clenched fists. The crowd gasped.

"Easy, Roland..." said Jason, taking a step back.

Roland's wrath abruptly dissolved. "Sorry, sorry." he mumbled weakly, adjusting his glasses. "Problem with being an Emotion mage, you know." After a pause, he spoke up. "I meant what I said, though. Even if we find some way of doing so, we can't in right conscience abandon these people to their fates."

"Your humanitarianism is admirable." said the admiral, in a tone suggesting it wasn't. "Regardless, I—and the majority of the crew, I am sure—would prefer some approach to this problem that would prevent loss of life on *our* part."

"Here, here!" a few Argonauts cheered.

"Although I am a military officer, or perhaps because of it," Talbot continued, "I realize that outright violence isn't the best solution to every problem. I believe it would be better if some alternative approach were found, one which would endanger us less, whether or not it would actually fulfill the king's request."

"Such as?" said Roland.

"I don't know of any." Talbot admitted. "That doesn't preclude the existence of one."

"Sounds like a job for me!" Jason piped up. Talbot looked at him skeptically. "I've tricked my way out of two life-threatening situations already." (There was also a third instance of that, in a sense, but that one, you recall, had to be kept quite secret.) "I bet I can do it again."

"Well, what sort of 'trick' do you propose?" said Talbot.

"Well... are there still people swimming in the way of the ship?" asked Jason.

"Yeah, there are." said a man in the crowd. "They get relieved by another three guys every couple of hours."

"Okay then. All we have to do is wait until all the other villagers are asleep. Then, we remove the swimmers from the river by force, repair the wheel, and sail far, far away."

"Jason," said Talbot, "from Winlo's perspective, everything depends on our assistance. Thus, he will inevitably keep watch tonight to make sure we don't escape. If we try, he has sixteen wizards with which he could do us far greater harm than the dragon could."

"Oh." said Jason, disappointed. "That sounds right."

"What's more," said Roland, "as you recall, Stanley is ultimately in charge of this ship. If I told him that plan, he'd quite likely forbid us from carrying it out in light of its consequences on Gyeeds's interdimensional reputation. If we went along with it *without* telling him, all of us would quite likely lose our jobs."

"So we do have to get rid of the dragon, after all?" said Jason.

"Quite likely." said Roland.

Jason swore. "Well... I'll think of something, anyway. By tomorrow morning!"

As soon as the meeting was over, the trio sat down in the dimly lit mess and Jason set to ruminating. Things looked pretty grim, he decided. Thanks to the looming threat of Stanley, the Argonauts had no choice but to somehow remove the dragon's threat to Hoon. And because of Thorm and company's draconic might, any kind of direct attack was sure to lead to the deaths of several Argonauts; even the usually unsympathetic Jason had to admit that leading his own men to their doom, Ahab-style, was a Bad Thing. *And* Thorm had been unmoved by Winlo's appeals to its ethical sense; Jason doubted he'd do better if he tried. The solution lay in tricking the dragon somehow, for sure, but he'd have to be a little more tricky this time.

A dragon's greatest weakness was its naivety. Thorm hadn't been eating humans for very long, and Jason had every reason to think it was otherwise unfamiliar with them. Perhaps he could somehow convince it that eating humans was undesirable for one reason or another. Such a tactic would be helped by the fact that Thorm's victims were chosen in advance. They could be "prepared" for it...

"Roland," said Jason, "do we have any poisons on board?" His speech broke a rather long silence that had persisted after an initial brainstorm between the three following the meeting had died down. Roland was reading (for the umpteenth time) *Stranger in a Strange Land*, one of his favorite books, on a tablet computer. Talbot was thinking silently.

"Ask Mr. Owl." said Roland, without looking up.

"Is that your nickname for Talbot?" said Jason, unsure of how to react.

"No, but I hope he finds the answer to your question the hard way."

"If you have something to say about me, you're welcome to say it in Common." said Talbot, who was, of course, ignorant of English, but had caught the mention of something that sounded like his name.

"I was just asking Roland if we had any poisons on board." said Jason. "He said you would know."

"We do indeed," said Talbot. "Plenty of poisonous chemicals, even if none are particularly engineered to work as a poison. If you're thinking of poisoning Winlo—"

"Not at all." Jason interrupted, much to the admiral's annoyance. "I'm thinking of poisoning Thorm."

"That could be better than a direct attack," Talbot admitted. "Of course, we'd still have to fight her mate fair and square. Dragons are stupid, but not *that* stupid; he'd realize what we'd done."

"Not necessarily," said Jason, grinning. He told the men his plan.

"Excellent, Jason!" said Roland. "That sounds like it could be the answer."

"It *could* work," said Talbot, "though there's no guarantee Thorm will play along. She might see through the ruse."

"Well, hey, it's not like we have a lot to lose by trying," said Jason. "If it doesn't work, we fight them, just as we'd do otherwise."

"We would lose the opportunity to attack while they're sleeping," Talbot pointed out.

"True," said Jason, "but do you have any better ideas?"

"No, I'll go along with it. And I won't be surprised if something goes wrong."

"I'll be surprised if nothing does," said Roland.

18

I Am the Eggman

When Jason told Winlo of the plan, the king found it somewhat unnerving, but agreed it was worth trying.

"There is one thing I do not understand," said Winlo. "What is your role on your ship? You seem to have no rank, yet you function as some kind of authority."

"I'm... the plan guy," said Jason. "Yeah, the plan guy, that's it. I make the plans. It's unofficial, but that's what I'm here for."

The first step was to move the ship out of sight, to ensure that Thorm came for its victim as usual. Gunther took a skeleton crew and sailed a good distance away, then stopped and turned off the power again. The rest of the Argonauts stayed on Hoon and made themselves inconspicuous. It was vital to the plan that Thorm not realize anything was afoot.

Soon it was time for the dragon's regular visit. That morning, the Hoonians gathered in the center of the village for the lottery. It was, as you can imagine, a grim proceeding, the exact details of which I need not go into. Suffice it to say that one particularly unfortunate person, a married woman in her late twenties, was randomly chosen for the slaughter. She was allowed to attend to her final wishes, then swiftly and painlessly killed. There followed a funeral service, and then, on Jason's request, the body was injected with poison—not so much that Thorm would die from it or be able to taste it, but enough to make the dragon mildly ill.

When Thorm was seen flying out of its lair over to the village, the corpse was laid down on the grass. Winlo and his bodyguards stood by it. The trio observed from the window of a building. In a minute, Thorm landed on the ground before the corpse. Now that it was standing right next to some people, providing a sense of scale, Jason could see how really enormous it was. It towered over the group, its burning yellow eyes, like twin suns, gazing down at them as a god glares at mortals quivering before it. Yet Winlo and his guard stood straight and tall, almost defiantly.

Then the dragon spoke. In spite of its gender, but like the first dragon Jason had met, it had a deep, powerful, reverberating voice. It and the king spoke in the latter's native language, which neither Jason nor Roland nor Talbot knew; Winlo translated the conversation for them afterwards. "Winlo," it said, "what was the purpose of the ship that came to this island two days ago?"

"It came here to trade with us," the king replied, as Jason had told him to should the question come up.

The dragon stood there silently for a few moments, then carefully picked up the

corpse in its mighty jaws, heaved up into the air, and flew away.

A few hours later, around dusk, Thorm appeared in the sky again. Winlo and his guard went to meet it.

"What do you wish, dragon?" said Winlo, once the monster had landed, to the crocodilian head so far above his own.

"You gave me a tainted corpse!" Thorm roared. "I and each of my brood, all who ate of that body, became sick and vomited it up. The weakest nearly died!" Indeed, its face and voice were marked by the wrath of maternal protectiveness. "Are you trying to poison us, worm?"

"I swear I did not touch the corpse." said Winlo. "What illness you experienced was most likely due not to any feature of that body in particular, but rather, your constant diet of humans. Eating humans is obviously detrimental to your health."

"Nonsense!" said the dragon. "I and my children ate nine before this one, and none caused us any harm."

"That is thanks to your mighty draconic fortitude. As a dragon, you are so robust that anything, so long as it is in modest quantities, cannot hurt you at all. But the chemicals present in the human body are apparently toxic to you, and will ail you if you consume too of them much over time."

Angry as Thorm was, it was obviously a little pleased by Winlo's flattering description of "draconic fortitude", in spite of itself. "If that's the case, why didn't you tell me so earlier?"

"We did not know it ourselves. Clearly, however, it must be the case. There is no other way you could have been so hurt; the body I gave you last was no different from the others."

"That's strange, if it's true." Its anger dissipated somewhat. "I suppose I should trust you. You've always been very cooperative." It thought for a moment. "Still, I'm hesitant to give up such a delicacy as human flesh, something that has so far been so nourishing to my children. You could be wrong. I'll come for another corpse again, at the usual hour." With that, it flew away.

Afterwards, Jason and company met with Winlo.

"Geez!" said Jason. "I was kind of hoping it wouldn't be that suspicious. But it seemed like it believed you, so we definitely have hope!"

"Yes, we do." said Winlo. "The question is how many corpses it will take to convince her."

"Significantly less than however many we'd produce by making a direct assault, I imagine." said Roland, looking at Talbot.

"Maybe, maybe." said Talbot. "We may well scrape through this mess."

Well, to make a longish story short, another villager was killed, this time an old man; the body was poisoned, and Thorm ate it. Once again, the dragon came back to complain of illness (this time, one of its wyrmlings really had died), and once again, it went away mostly (not completely) convinced that foul play was not to blame. It wanted one more corpse.

The morbid process of sacrifice seemed almost routine, now that Jason was seeing it for the third time. The victim, a lad of nineteen, was offered to the dragon,

and Thorm arrived on the scene. It didn't take the body immediately, as it had last time. Seeing this, Jason began to get a little nervous.

Then, everything went totally and completely wrong.

Thorm looked at Winlo. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll test your little theory." it growled. It leapt up, flew towards a middle-aged man who'd been observing from afar, grabbed him in its jaws, and soared off to its lair. No one attempted to stop it. The man's screams could still be heard for a while afterwards.

Winlo walked into the building in which the trio was hiding and approached Jason. The boy's heart fluttered; his intestines whirled; his vision blurred. He trembled spastically. His entire soul was overwhelmed with a sickening terror.

Winlo's face was twisted with barely-contained rage. "And what, young sir," he said very slowly, carefully enunciating each word, "do you propose we do now?"

"I... I..." Jason gasped, almost entirely robbed of his powers of speech. Roland looked at him with a mixture of pity and fear. Talbot's expression was that of a mighty wizard deciding how best to punish his disobedient apprentice.

"Well?" Winlo hissed.

Jason took a few deep breaths.

"Nothing?"

"I didn't... plan for this." said Jason. "I... hoped it wouldn't happen. But you know that."

The dam abruptly burst. "You *imbecile*!" Winlo bellowed. "Look what you have done, you, you—you have cost us even more lives than we would have paid otherwise! Your naive little optimism has slaughtered four of my people, and robbed us of the chance of attacking the dragons at the most advantageous time!"

"Sir, I—"

Then things began to get ugly. "What was I thinking? What a fool I was to trust an infant's advice! You puerile little urchin—do you not know that children should be seen and not heard? How dare you imagine your childish fancies can solve real problems! How audacious of you to pretend to be an adult, to assume that *you*, a mere prepubescent, can deal in such mature affairs, ones so far beyond your juvenile comprehension! This is no game—this is a matter of life and death!"

With that last sentence, the flood ceased. The king panted with fervor. His face crumpled; now that his anger was exhausted, only sorrow remained. A bit of moisture formed around his eyes.

"Winlo..." said Jason. "I'm sorry."

The king said nothing. He crossed his arms and sighed deeply. Roland and Talbot glanced at each other and remained silent.

"Listen, Winlo." Jason said softly. "It's not the end of the world. One more guy died, but we didn't lose everything. We might still be able to convince it. We didn't poison that corpse, but if we poison Thorm and its kids somehow, quickly, it'll think eating the human caused it. And it *knows* we didn't poison that one, so we'd have it totally convinced. We know that they eat the corpse immediately; all we have to do is move quickly..."

"I am not interested in your plans, child." said Winlo.

"What will you do, then?" said Jason, mostly succeeding in preventing his own rage from showing. "If you don't do something tricky, you'll have to attack, *now*,

before Thorm attacks you when it realizes we tricked it. This isn't the best of times for attacking the dragons; they're probably all awake. Many more of your people will die. If you follow along with my plan, on the other hand, you might be able to avoid further death entirely. Say what you will about my age, but I do hope you realize that in such a dire situation as this, you must be practical. What do you have to lose?"

"How, exactly, do you propose we would poison them?" said Winlo.

"Well, I, I don't know. I guess we can't shoot poison needles or something at them; even if the poisoner evaded notice, they'd see the injury and put two and two together. Are there any spells we could use?" he asked, looking at Roland and Talbot hopefully. Roland shook his head. "Well... let's see. The dragons would most likely want a drink with their meal, wouldn't they? Where do they get their water?"

"There is a natural spring just nearby the dragons' lair." said the king.

"That's it!" cried Jason, his eyes lighting up. "Right now—we mustn't delay. We've got to poison the spring."

"That's an idea," said Roland, "but who will bell the cat?"

"You, of course." said Jason eagerly. Roland looked doubtful. "C'mon, man, you're supposed to be an adventurer, remember?"

"Well, I... no, I guess you're right. I'll do it." He turned to Winlo. "Where's the lair?"

"I know I will regret this somehow," said the king. He walked Roland out of the building and pointed at where the cave was anyway.

"No, actually, I don't think you will." said Roland. He cast a spell, and in an instant his suit, skin, and even hair were covered with a forest-camouflage pattern. "I'll be back in a few minutes, if all goes well. Otherwise, get ready for a scuffle." Another spell and he was gone.

In order to teleport somewhere, Jason had learned earlier, it was necessary for the caster to have already clearly seen their destination. That wasn't the case here, so Roland utilized the technique of chain-teleportation, in which the caster teleports to the farthest place they can see as many times as necessary. It took the adventurer three castings to get sufficiently close to the cave. Three teleports and the camouflage spell added up to a lot of stamina spent; he could already feel a bit of fatigue. (To save energy, he would've used a spell to let himself run extremely fast instead, but that involved a rather flashy display, which the dragons would've noticed.)

The cave was built into the side of a hill. In front of it was a small clearing covered with tree stumps and logs; the dragons had apparently torn down the trees so they wouldn't have to squeeze while entering and exiting the cave. Similarly, there was a dragon-sized, dracogenic path that led to a largish pool of murky water, out of sight of anyone looking out of the cave but not very far away.

Roland had been careful to place himself within the woody part of this area—a good thing, since he wasn't entirely alone. Thorm was there, strolling along the path (so much as such a mighty beast as a dragon can do something so pedestrian as "stroll", anyway) towards the spring. What rotten luck!

Roland decided, for myriad reasons, that it was best not to wait for the dragon to leave. He silently made his way further into the underbrush, hid behind a tree, and

intentionally made a loud rustling noise.

He had hoped that Thorm would bumble over to the area to investigate. It did indeed hear the noise, but rather than coming to the source, it flew a short distance up into the air, turned towards him, and surveyed the area from above. Roland froze. After a few moments, Thorm fell back to the ground and resumed walking.

Roland thought for a few seconds, and then realized that he had only one choice. He removed the bottle of poison from his suit, opened it, readied some of the powder needed for teleportation, and then made some more noise. The dragon paid no heed. Roland made even more noise, tapping against the bark of the tree, and this time the dragon flew up again.

In a flash, while Thorm's eyes were turned away from the pool, Roland teleported to the edge of it, emptied the whole bottle of poison into it (which wasn't *that* much, considering actual draconic fortitude), and teleported back to the village. Or rather, he *tried* to teleport back to the village. The spell failed outright; he was too tired. At the thought that the dragon might spot him, he was struck with a sudden, intense fear. He immediately tried again, and the emotion gave him the power he needed. He disappeared instantly, and reappeared not standing in the center of the village, as he'd planned, but in the air two feet above it, parallel to the ground. His hands flew in front of his face and he caught himself, mostly unharmed. He got up and dusted himself off, panting heavily, as Jason ran up to him.

"Did you do it?" the boy inquired excitedly.

"Yes," the adventurer managed to say. "I... did it... none of them..." he puffed "saw me..."

"All right!" Jason crowed. He turned to Winlo, who had just walked up. "Sir, your dragon problems are over."

"Boy," said Winlo, his expression betraying equal parts hope and fear, "I will believe that when I see it, but I sincerely hope you are correct."

A few tense, anxious hours passed. The Argonauts prepared for a fight as inconspicuously as possible. At sundown, Thorm flew out of its lair. This time, it wasn't alone: along for the ride were its mate, an only slightly smaller beast whose scales were a pale, icy cyan, and three children. Each of the wyrmlings measured a mere six feet long, and all were different colors. They flew more clumsily than the others; whenever one especially floundered, one of its parents gave it a nudge to set it back on track.

Winlo stared at Jason venomously. "Look at this mess you have made! Now we will have to fight them all at once."

"Hey, hold your horses. We probably won't have to fight at all; just you wait and see." In fact, seeing the flight of dragons heading towards the village, Jason felt much less confident than he sounded.

Winlo and his guard went into the usual position to meet Thorm, and—*Thank the gods!* Jason thought—the dragons, rather than attacking, landed before the king. Every human in the entire village, Winlo included, held their breath.

Thorm spoke for its family. "Winlo," it said, "I'm afraid you were right. The human I took this morning made us all sick, even though it was fresh. Another of my wyrmlings died. I'm sorry for suspecting you."

“Wha—” said Winlo, aghast, “then, will you still... eat my people?”

“No,” said Thorm, shaking its head sadly, “none of us will eat humans again. It’s a shame; your flesh is so tender, so delicious! But we are not suicidal. We’ll quit this verse as well, since I’ve found others with better game.”

With that, the mother dragon said something to the others in some native draconic tongue and the five of them lifted off, into the air. True to Thorm’s word, they went not to their lair but up, up, up above the clouds and out of sight.

For several seconds, everyone in the village was frozen with fear and disbelief. Jason was the first to speak. Unable to contain his delight, with a huge grin plastered over his face, he turned to Winlo.

“Well,” he said, “I told you so.”

19

What's That Smell?

And lo, there was much jubilation among the people of Hoon. The villagers invited the Argonauts to stay awhile and celebrate, but the sailors, who'd gotten pretty antsy by now, were eager to resume their mission. The *Argo* had set off from Pewpik on January 25th, and now, thanks to the long delay, it was February 4th. Stanley, knowing that his city was paying the Argonauts by the day, urged them to move on. (He was, however, quite pleased at how the dragon problem had been resolved.)

The morning before they left, Winlo took Jason and Roland aside. "From the bottom of my heart," he said, "I thank you for your help. There were deaths, it is true, but far less than there would have been without you. Jason," he added, turning to the boy, "I also... I am very sorry for how I spoke to you so harshly before. I feel true empathy for my people, so you can understand how distraught I was by our loss."

Not enough empathy to include yourself in the sacrifice lottery, I bet.

"In Hoon, we do not generally allow children to act as adults, seeing as they are *not* adults; still, extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures."

Yeah, it's not like you'd actually discard your prejudices in the face of fact. That would make too much sense.

"Anyway, I believe that for your cunning" (he nodded at Jason) "and for your gallantry" (he turned to Roland) "each of you deserve a reward."

Oooh, now I'm interested!

"I can reward you in either of two ways. If you desire wealth, I can give you a chest of pure Hoonian gold. Or, if you prefer magic, I can bestow upon you a brew, made by our own potion-maker, that will grant you permanent mystical power."

"I would love the gold, if you please," said Roland.

"Permanent mystical power'?" said Jason. "Could it let me cast spells?"

"No, there is no known way to grant spellcasting ability to one who does not have it," said Winlo. "What I can give you is a supernatural ability."

"Oh boy, super powers!" Jason squealed. "Sign me up!"

Winlo took Jason into a building that was obviously an alchemy lab specializing in potions. The sleek, modern equipment clashed visibly with the crude stone structure of the building. Jason saw shelves lined with glassware and bottles marked with incomprehensible abbreviations, and also a few mixing vats, each the size of a golden retriever.

The alchemist himself was watching the contents of one of the vats intently, out

of which magenta smoke billowed in prodigious amounts. "Hey, what's up?" he said in perfectly fluent albeit slangy Common, without looking at his visitors. Winlo cleared his throat loudly. "Your Majesty." the young man added, still without sparing the pair a glance.

"Young Jason here" said the king "would like a permanent ability-granting potion, as a reward for his services."

"Oh, sure, anything for Plan Guy." (Jason's earlier comment to Winlo had been overheard by a sailor, and become something of a running joke among the hybrid Hoonian-Argonaut community that had spontaneously formed over the last few days.) "Lessee... the best I've got right now is the Sensory Enhancer. Look for the eighth bottle from the left on shelf five."

Winlo found the mentioned bottle. "Is it labeled 'NARF-21'?" (Not that the Common alphabet had letters exactly corresponding to those, but you know, it's an idiomatic translation.)

"Oooh, no, no, Your Majesty, that's the Cerebral Degeneration Drug. I'm sorry, you want the one just to the right of that."

"'CPUP-44'?"

"Yeah, that's the stuff." Winlo took the squat container from off the shelf and handed it to Jason. "Jason, that'll improve any one of your five senses by a lot." the alchemist continued. "Just pick one—drop a bit in your eyes or on one of your earlobes, and the rest will be absorbed. It's great; I did my hearing and now I can practically use echolocation." He imitated the squeak of a bat. "I knew it was you without looking 'cause your footsteps sound like a kid's, and Hoonian kids avoid this place like the plague. Their mommies are real careful to tell 'em to stay away from all those daaangerous cheeemicals, wooh!" (He spoke the last three words as if telling a ghost story.)

As Jason and Winlo walked away from the lab, the king remarked "It is a shame how the most talented wizards and scientists are always the most eccentric. One cannot have everything, I suppose."

The *Argo* was called back to Hoon. It sailed its entire hull into the river, now that there were no swimmers in the way. Some brave soul went underwater and repaired the wheel, finally, and the Argonauts climbed on board. A few good-byes and thank-yous later, the *Argo* was back on track, skimming merrily across the vast sheet of a sea towards its distant destination.

That evening, the Argonauts gathered in the now pleasantly well-lit mess to swap stories of life with the Hoonians and sitting in the middle of the ocean. Jason told the Argonauts of his altercation with Winlo, which got mixed reactions, and Roland recounted his brief encounter with Thorm, which was widely applauded. Actually, on the whole, the sailors had warmed up to Jason. They were impressed by how well his plan had worked out.

"So," said Jason to Talbot, as the trio sat down to a bland supper together, "I'm not that stupid, right?"

"Yes, yes, your plan was a clever one, I admit it." said Talbot. "You handled Thorm's suspicion well, although you might've better anticipated it."

"Let's not forget who belled the cat, hm?" said Roland.

"Oh, you did excellently, Roland;" said Talbot; "you don't need me to tell you that."

"Definitely." Jason threw in.

"I didn't vote for you," the admiral continued, "but I've since realized my mistake." There was a pause. "And while we're all fishing for compliments, I like to think I commanded our little defense against Thorm admirably." (That didn't work as a pun in Common. Talbot did not make puns.)

Jason and Roland voiced their agreement, and ate silently for a while. Then, Jason said in English "It's amazing how your suit is still pristine, after all that."

"Amazing? Of course it's still pristine."

"Would do you mean, 'of course'?"

"Oh, so you don't know. Well, surely you've noticed how I, as well as many other people, wear only one suit all the time and hardly ever change clothes."

"Yeah, what's up with that?"

"The modern suit is the product of powerful alchemy—one of the few practical products of alchemy, actually. All kinds of detritus roll right off of it, any sweat or spills that touch it evaporate instantly, and it never wrinkles. What's more, it stretches and shrinks to allow free movement while still appearing constricting."

"Wow. It must cost... a lot."

"It does. In fact, it's something of a status symbol. Politicians are expected to wear one, so long as they can afford it. I could, barely. Some people, especially women, find the idea of only wearing one article of clothing, without ever varying their dress, distasteful. So, it's not obligatory."

"I see."

"Speaking of alchemy, though, have you chosen a sense to augment?"

Jason looked at the potion, which was sitting on his cafeteria tray next to his plate. "I've been mulling over it all day, actually. Obviously, I should choose between sight and hearing, but I'm not really sure which. Being able to hear what you can't see sounds pretty cool; it'd be like an even better Hearing Charm. On the other hand, you can't go wrong with super sight. Yeah, sight's the way to go."

Jason picked up the bottle and struggled with the child-safety cap for a bit, then read the tiny letters on the side and opened it up according to its instructions. Inside was a dark violet liquid, with bright green patches floating about on its surface. Squinting, Jason could see a tiny, intricate pattern traced in darker hues on top of the purple and green. He brought the bottle closer to his face to get a better look.

"Be careful." said Roland.

It was too late. Jason got so close to the bottle that he accidentally touched the liquid with the tip of his nose. Everyone in the mess turned to look as a blinding flash of orange light shone from Jason's nose. In a moment, the light disappeared, and the bottle was empty.

The room was rendered absolutely silent. Jason put the bottle down. All of a sudden, he smelled—he could smell so much! There were several odors, each quite strong and easily distinguishable, rising out of the food on his plate, one for each kind of edible. He could smell Roland's breath, and he could smell Talbot's breath, and he could smell the difference between them as easily as he could hear the difference between a violin and a cello. He could even pinpoint their origins. As for the other

Argonauts—well, now it was crystal-clear who had and who hadn't showered and brushed their teeth this morning.

"Apollo's laurel!" Jason gasped. "You guys *stink*!"

Whereupon almost everyone in the room burst into loud, uproarious gales of laughter. Roland tried to keep from joining in for a split-second, but resistance was futile; he immediately guffawed with the rest of them. Talbot laughed loudest of all. Jason, for his part, blushed deeply and declared "It's not funny!", which only increased the general mirth.

And to top it all off, now that he could really smell his food, it tasted ten times worse.

Jason spent that night tossing and turning in bed, cursing himself for his carelessness. He could've had an eagle's eye, or a rabbit's ear. But no! Thanks to his lack of wisdom, he'd been robbed of the chance to become a superhero, and gotten but a dog's nose in return. Of all the stupid super powers... Still, Jason believed in making do with what he had. He would, he decided, make as much of this silly olfactory prowess as he could.

Yet over the next few days, as the boy explored his newfound ability, he began to have a change of heart. A whole world of scent—a world mostly invisible to humans, and poorly understood by them—had opened its doors to him. To be sure, he'd been able to smell before. But a normal human's sense of smell, he found, was as feeble compared to a dog's as a dog's powers of intelligence were compared to a human's. Amazing grace, how sweet the scent!

The first major use of enhanced olfaction that Jason found was identification. Whereas before he'd used the potion, similar substances had smelled the same, now he could detect the unique scents of different things. All living creatures, no matter how much they'd been cleaned, smelled, and no two living creatures, no matter how similar they were, had an identical scent. This allowed him to tell who was who with only his nose. The tricky part was that a single person could smell radically different from time to time, depending on their hygienic habits and even what they'd eaten. In order to reliably identify a person by scent, Jason had to learn to compensate for these variables.

Jason could even guess how old a person was with his sense of smell. Talbot the fiftysomething had a component to his scent that stood out, compared to everyone else's, beyond the normal variations. So did Roland the thirtysomething, while the twentysomethings and teenagers that constituted the other Argonauts smelled similar. Apparently, the scents that a body gave off varied with age. The most noticeable instance of this was Jason himself, whose difference with the fourteen-year-olds was even greater than theirs with Talbot. This, he realized, was due to the fact that he was yet to develop a manly BO.

The second use of super smell that Jason discovered was detection. If he walked into a room with his eyes closed and took a deep sniff, he could count the number of people in the room and sense the direction of each relative to himself, so long as it wasn't too crowded and there were few other major scents. If only he'd had this ability during his encounter with Jake, he would've been far from helpless even while blinded and with his Hearing Charm drained of its power.

Thirdly, there was that use of olfaction that excited Jason the most, but turned out to be the most difficult to employ: tracking. As people went about their business, they carelessly left scent molecules behind wherever they'd been. These traces of scent hung about in the air for a while, allowing Jason to follow very fresh trails (those made within the last few minutes) by simply following his nose. By an hour after their release, the scent molecules would all fall to the ground, requiring Jason to get down-n'-dirty if he wanted to do any serious tracking. With sufficient time, he could find and follow any trail that had lain cold for up to three hours, and with luck, he could do the same for trails as old as six hours, the difficulty increasing linearly with age.

For Jason, scent tracking was further complicated by bipedalism. Dogs, being quadrupeds, could get their noses close to the ground by simply craning their heads downwards; Jason was forced to walk about on his hands and knees. Crawling through the corridors of the *Argo* while continually sniffing the floor, Jason made for quite a sight, providing a bit of comic relief for his shipmates. He quickly acquired the affectionately derisive nickname "Bloodhound", which soon changed to "Bloodpup", in reference to his age, which was itself shortened to "Pup", and as Pup the boy stayed. Actually, the *Argo* was a poor place to practice tracking because of its crowds; it was hard to pick out the odor of one teenage boy when it was mingled with that of twelve others, in the same way that background noise makes it harder to hear one's neighbor.

The final and strangest use of smell was as, of all things, an aid to memory. In the first day or so after that fateful night in the mess, Jason kept experiencing *deja vu* as he smelled scents he had never before perceived. Occasionally, a new aroma even triggered some long-buried memory, and Jason found himself thinking of his hometown, his parents, his sister, and even his earliest days, at the very limits of his recall. The reason for all of this, he figured after perusing the scientific literature a bit and meditating on it, was the intimate connection between the area of the human brain related to memory and the one responsible for processing smells. These new sensations caught his brain by surprise and set off a lot of false alarms.

After a few days, the *deja vu* and the spontaneous nostalgia ceased. Still, Jason found that he could remember things best when he connected them to a smell. In fact, after a while, he found himself recalling the scent of a person whenever their name was mentioned, a development which even frightened him a little with its strangeness. Yet he also found a way to put this property of memorable smells to good use. Whenever he wanted to remember something, he took a few smelly items from the ship's kitchen and concocted a little potpourri for himself, then smelled of it deeply while committing the thing to memory. When he wanted to recall the thing, he smelled the potpourri again, and voila! He was annoyed to discover that this technique worked much better with scenes and general impressions than straightforward facts, but hey! It was something.

There were a few drawbacks to supernatural smell. For one thing, there was the food, as I mentioned before; for another, going to or even being near the ship's bathroom (Roland called it the "head") was always a trial. And, heck, Jason wouldn't've minded being ignorant of how long it had been since each person on the ship had bathed. On the whole, though, he was quite pleased with his newfound

power—to the point that, given the chance to exchange it for the powerful eyes he'd wanted, he would've kept his mighty nose.

One afternoon, Jason was standing on the deck of the *Argo*, leaning on (not over!) the railing while watching the sea and sky. The sky was a bit of a relief from the blank, featureless sea; without its clouds, sun, moon, and stars, the scenery surrounding the ship would've made for a depressing view indeed. At the same time, the perfect, uninterrupted smoothness of the ocean had its own alien kind of beauty. These two behemoths, so far apart in fact and yet so apparently close at the edge of the horizon, worked as a kind of aesthetic study of opposites, their contrast so great, their only similarity their extreme size and flatness...

Suddenly, the Adventurer of Gyeeds's scent intruded on Jason's thoughts. "Hey, Roland," he said.

"Did you smell me coming?" asked the man, leaning on the railing next to him. Jason nodded and smiled. "Of course." He looked at the water, then up at the clouds. "I just wanted to say, don't you have any questions for me? You usually have so many things to ask, right after you—or we—have an adventure of some kind."

"Not this time," said Jason. "None that you can answer, anyway. We still don't know where Jake is, or how he's involved with... uh, whatshisface, the king of Dojum."

"His name is Akolos."

"Yeah, Akolos, that's it. I mean, dang! Jake must have so little foresight to want to sell Piercers to the Droydanians. If he did, there soon wouldn't be a multiverse left to enjoy his riches in."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Droydania versus Gyeeds is pretty much the apocalypse, right?"

"Thanks to the chains of alliances such a conflict would set off, it would be the largest war in recorded history, to be sure. But the known multiverse is enormous; there are plenty of verses that wouldn't see a whit of fighting, just as there are isolated countries on Earth that escaped the wrath of both World Wars."

"Oh, yeah, I guess you're right." He thought for a moment. "And the Raincatcher massacre is *still* a big question mark. But the Gyeedian Society of Death couldn't've been responsible, right?"

"No, those people are nothing more than a band of delusional death-worshipers. They wouldn't harm a flea." Both of the pair were silent for a while, looking at the scenery. "Jason," Roland spoke up at length, "would you mind if I asked *you* some questions, for a change?"

"Not at all; let 'er rip."

Roland blinked. "First, tell me about your name."

"Well," said the boy, "as for my last name, your guess is as good as mine. My dad liked—likes—to joke that his great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was a jazz musician, but nobody knows, really. We don't have a pedigree; both of my parents only know their ancestors to a couple of generations back. They gave me my first name pretty much on a whim. Liked the sound of it. And as for my middle name... well, my mom likes Mozart. There is no evidence to suggest that any gods are especially fond of me, however, and I certainly haven't ever shown any great musical talent. Say, what's your middle name?"

"I don't have one. My mother saw no reason for one. But, uh... Jason, if you don't mind—if you're comfortable with it, I mean—tell me about your sister."

"Oh, don't worry, I've gotten over the separation, pretty much—as much as I ever can, anyway." He smiled to himself. "My sister's name is Joan. She's thirteen now—she'll be going to high school this September. Man, Joan's going to *high school*! It makes me feel so old. I'd be going into middle school myself, if I were still on Earth. Still on Earth! I haven't been on Earth for months and I'll probably never set foot on it again. *That* never ceases to amaze me, honestly."

"Anyway, Joan is kinda the high achiever in the family. She's more of an achiever than me, anyway. I'm not that bad at academics, really; I've just never been inclined to try hard. I got pretty mediocre grades back on Earth. I've only done as well as I have in Gyeedian school because there's more emphasis on learning and less on toil. I'm pretty good at the former, not so great at the latter. Joan, on the other hand, believes—hey, wait a minute!" He stared at Roland. "This is starting to sound just like your Beatrix story!"

Roland looked at the water. "I can see the similarity," he said hesitantly. "I—I believe there's a major difference, though."

"Oh, sure, Joan's my sister and Beatrix was your wife."

"I'm not talking about that." The man looked straight at Jason. "You miss your entire family, correct?"

"Of—of course I do! I love them! Joan included!"

"Well," said Roland, "to put it mildly, I don't particularly miss Beatrix." His face darkened. "Let me put it this way: the divorce was by no means a one-sided affair, and afterwards, we certainly didn't just be friends..." He lightened up again. "But I sidetracked you; please continue."

Jason blinked several times. "Well, Joan believes in doing well in school. I once asked her why she poured as much effort as she did into that silly institution. She told me that for one thing, it was nice to have her options open, so she could go to the schools that she liked, but primarily, it was a matter of pride. She felt that the kind of work school assigned was simplistic and beneath her, and she liked to make that clear to the world. I never understood it myself, but there you are. Also, she has both a head and a taste for mathematics. My dad does, too, and whenever the two of them started railing on about exponential growth or negative numbers, my mother and I would look at each other and roll our eyes." He chuckled. "And yet I'll never know the way they smell. Is that enough for you?"

"Yes, thank you," said Roland. "I only have, ah, one more question. You... feel free to answer however you like; I can handle the truth." He took a deep breath. "Jason... do you love me?"

Well, now, this was an eyebrow-raising question. Jason was speechless. The answer was, of course, yes—despite all of Roland's funny little quirks, his somewhat unpredictable anger, and his ambiguous references to a troubled past, he was Jason's savior. He had rescued the boy from that wasteland verse, clothed, fed and sheltered him, answered all his questions, and asked for absolutely nothing in return, not even a bit of affection. He could be rather excitable, it was true, but Jason admired his strength and his boldness. Towards Jason, actually, he was sometimes timid, as he was now. It hadn't helped that Jason had at first suspected him of pedophilia. Now, it

was clear that Roland had nothing but paternal love for the boy he had adopted as a son.

Still, Jason was hesitant to tell the truth. He recalled what he'd thought about his love for Roland when he'd been considering whether or not to try to rescue him from 256 Pulliard Street. All other things being equal, he wouldn't sacrifice his life for the man. But what did that have to do with this? Roland was only asking a simple question. There was nothing wrong with telling the truth. *But he goes to prostitutes!* Jason thought. Again, that had no real relevance. Jason wasn't even sure he ought to condemn prostitution. Then what was making him hesitate, really? For perhaps the first time in his life, Jason was puzzled by his own behavior.

Then it hit him. The *mystery*, that was it. Jason was a very curious and somewhat suspicious little boy. There were a bunch of things he didn't know about Roland—not just straightforward facts like what had led to his and Beatrix's divorce, but also the root causes of some of his strange behaviors. Why had he gotten so *angry* when Jason had told him of Ernest's evil deeds? Had it been paternal protectiveness, or guilt, or something else entirely? Why had he been so ardent about saving the Hoonians from Thorm? Was it simply a strong desire to do good? He hadn't been nearly so enthusiastic about investigating the Piercer lab, even though the Piercers were, all in all, capable of much more harm to humankind than a big old dragon.

The truth was, although Jason's heart loved Roland despite all these little mysteries, his mind was more cautious to condone that love. To profess his love for Roland would be to officially approve of the entire man, and this Jason could not do so long as he did not know the entire man. The devil was in the details! What *could* he say, then? A lie? No, he couldn't tell Roland that he *didn't* love him; that would be a cruel way to treat a man whose feelings he cared for. Then how the hell was he supposed to get out of this mess?

"Ah... er... uh..." said Jason. For a while he simply hung his mouth open, paralyzed, like a deer in headlights.

"No, no," said Roland, now very agitated, "I, I see what I've done. You don't have to answer. Forgive me for putting you on the stand like that; it was very insensitive of me." He put his elbows on the railing, cradled his head in his hands, and stared out to sea. Even in profile, it was easy to tell from his face that he was crushed. Jason had never seen Roland look so sad before. "Excuse me," said the adventurer, then hurriedly got up and walked away.

Oh, great! Jason thought sourly. *Now look what you've done. Ah, well, it's not like there's much I can do. He thinks I don't love him, the poor sap. It's a sad situation, it's a pitiful situation, it's a pathetic situation, but nothing can be done! I can't condone what I don't understand.*

20

I'd Rather Be Surfing

Several times after that encounter, Jason thought of saying "No, Roland—I *do* love you, I *do*!", throwing his arms about him, and kissing him right on the lips, as he never had. Then, he remembered the Mysteries and perished the thought, at least for the time being. Come to think of it, Jason hadn't hugged or kissed anyone since he'd left Earth. He'd always exchanged such pleasantries with his family on a daily basis, and the absence, now that he was conscious of it, irked him. Why hadn't this occurred to him before? Because, he realized, he'd been struck with far worse kinds of emotional pain. The agony of simply not being able to tell his family that he was alive and well, as they thought he wasn't by now, dwarfed his little wish for hugs and kisses. And anyway, the silent, subtle affection that he and Roland shared, simply by enjoying each other's company, was almost as good.

Naturally, Jason wanted to answer those questions of his. He tried the most direct route. "Why were you so adamant about rescuing the Hoonians?" he asked.

Roland looked at Jason strangely. "Because they were innocent people in need, of course."

"But why did you want to rescue them?"

"I just told you."

"No, I mean, why would you want to rescue 'innocent people in need' so much?"

Now Roland looked at him very strangely. "Because I'm an able-bodied man. It's my duty."

"'Duty'? How did you get such a duty?"

"By being born and growing up, how else?"

"You... realize that there are plenty of other able-bodied men who don't believe they have such a duty, don't you?"

"Well, yes," said Roland, annoyed. "Not everyone does what he's supposed to do."

Jason shrugged. Obviously, solving the Mysteries wouldn't be nearly such a straightforward affair. Since Roland himself seemed not to know the answers, Jason would have to figure them out the hard way: over time, through careful observation. Then, once he'd confirmed that there was nothing to fear, he could literally embrace Roland, wholeheartedly. How long would it take? Not too long, Jason hoped.

One day, when the sun was at its highest point, another ship appeared on the horizon. Now, to Jason's eyes, the *Argo* seemed smaller still, as this new arrival was yet larger

than any watercraft he had seen before. No name was painted on its hull. Its bow was pointed directly at the *Argo's*.

"Now we're really in for it." Talbot sighed. He, Roland, and Jason were standing together on the bridge. "We're nearby Jilothus, a nation notorious for the pirates it employs. There is no doubt in my mind that this ship hopes to plunder the *Argo*."

"There's barely anything here to plunder." Roland pointed out. "They're sure to know everything about the *Argo*, including its rather low treasure-to-soldier ratio. I doubt they'd want to take on twenty-nine battle-mages for what few valuables we have on board."

"There's that gold you got." said Jason.

"It isn't much, relatively speaking." said Roland.

"But we should talk to them before jumping to conclusions, anyway, right?" asked Jason.

"That's probably a decent idea." said Talbot.

So, Jason turned on the radio and stated the *Argo's* name and business, then asked for the other ship's.

"How adorable." a deep, scratchy voice replied, dripping with sarcasm. "We have forty sorcerers. Surrender now and we will spare all of your lives."

Jason gulped as Talbot abruptly took the controls himself. "I've got a better idea: " he snarled: "surrender yourself, immediately, and Gyeeds will consider lightening the sanctions it will inevitably level upon all of Jilothus. It may even conveniently forget to arrest you, if you are especially cooperative."

"So much for the easy way. Prepare for battle."

Talbot sighed. "Here's hoping they're bluffing." He stood there for a brief moment, looking wistfully out to sea, and then rushed out of the pilot-house shouting "Mages, ship-to-ship defense!" Roland and some soldiers followed him without hesitation.

"Oh dear, oh dear." Jason muttered. "Gunther, can we take this? If they aren't bluffing, we're outnumbered by eleven."

"It looks grim to me." said the captain. "I might be able to outmaneuver them."

Jason watched with horror as not only the *Argo's* but also the other ship's mages assembled. While he couldn't count the enemies from this distance, there sure seemed to be a lot of them. The smell of his own fear, that characteristic stench caused by a particular form of perspiration, assaulted his nostrils.

"Hold to defend!" Talbot shouted, and not a moment too soon, as a hail of projectiles—big green spheres of plasma, crackling with power—immediately rose up from the pirates' hands and arced towards the Argonauts. The Argonauts cast a single spell in unison, and a huge, red, diagonally sloped sheet of energy appeared and hovered in the air before the *Argo*, keeping its position relative to the ship as the latter moved. Each sphere hit the shield, exploding in great bursts of light and in several cases leaving a hole behind. These holes were repaired with more spells.

"Split roles, antipersonnel offensive!" Talbot commanded.

Now as some Argonauts maintained the shields, others fired their own projectiles through the holes as the holes were created. The pirates had their own shield up, now. They fired small, quick shots that invariably left holes, keeping the *Argo's* shield-repairmen, if you will, busy. They spread their strikes out as much as

possible rather than targeting a single area.

"They're trying to tire us out, boys; we can't let that happen! Focused strike, maximal power!"

At the admiral's command, the Argonauts who were shooting all fired, in tandem, at a single spot on the enemy's shield. The result was a huge gap that the pirates couldn't patch up quickly enough; the Argonauts fired again and two men were struck, each burnt to a crisp—the first casualties of the battle.

All this time, as the two ships headed towards each other, Gunther had been slowly, carefully steering the *Argo* to the left, planning to sail right past the enemy craft and easily escape. Now, the vessels were a few ship's lengths away from each other, and thanks to the great speeds at which they were traveling, they were sure to zoom by each other in a matter of seconds.

Or rather, they would have, were it not for one small snarl. When the pirates saw what was about to happen, they abandoned their old formation and gathered in a line on one side of the ship. Together, they conjured an enormous net, a ship-sized spiderweb of yellow light, that hung in the air directly in the way of the *Argo*. Instantly, Gunther switched on the reverse engines at full throttle. But the ship's momentum was so great that it flew ahead anyway, right into the net. The edges of the web stayed where they were in space, but the center parts stretched so much to accommodate the *Argo*'s massive hull that the edges lined up with the very middle of the ship. The force of the collision was so great that everyone on board who wasn't strapped down to a chair (like Gunther) fell to the floor. Meanwhile, the Argonauts' shield passed through the web as if it hadn't been there.

The reverse engines, along with the potential energy built up by driving into the net, eventually sent the ship backwards. In the meantime, though, the pirates had managed to line up their ship to be parallel to the *Argo* and directly adjacent to it. Now that the vessels' cibium skirts ground against each other, it was safe to teleport from one to the other, and so pirates swarmed aboard the *Argo*.

What followed was one of the ugliest scenes Jason had seen thus far in his short life. The men teleported to scattered places all over the deck and wreaked havoc with the Argonauts' careful formation. It was every man for himself; the ship was a wash of multicolored projectiles, shields, and even monsters that had been magically created—like scorpions the size of tigers, who scurried about on six legs, occasionally plunging their mighty stingers into foes. Quite fortunately for Jason, the pirates left the pilot-house alone, at least for the moment.

Earlier, when the two belligerents had been some distance from each other, the Argonauts had had a decent chance of winning even if they'd fully engaged in combat, rather than fleeing; though they'd been outnumbered, Talbot's expert tactics might've saved the day. Now that the Argonauts and the pirates were in full melee, Jason and friends were doomed. In that kind of chaos, tactical tricks were nearly impossible to pull off, and the individual soldiers came to the forefront. Besides, the enemy hadn't been bluffing; they plainly outnumbered the Argonauts. It was thus not very long before Talbot cried "We surrender!"

Everything came to a halt. Now Jason—and everyone else—could really see the carnage that had resulted from this battle. The ship was littered with the dead of both sides, some burnt to ashes, others with blood streaming from countless wounds, still

more torn to pieces. Jason felt weak. Seeing the lifeless face of a boy he'd known well, he abruptly crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

When he came to, he found himself lying on a hard cot in a prison cell. Yes, a prison cell! It was a claustrophobic, windowless room, featuring four plaster-covered walls, a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, a barred door, two cots, a bucket, a cellmate, and nothing else. From what Jason could see past the door, the cell seemed to be at the end of a corridor that continued to the left.

Jason looked at the cellmate. It was Meredith, an Argonaut and solider. Meredith was fifteen years old, though he looked younger. His small, subdued face and his soft-spoken manner made him look timid, though in fact he wasn't. He considered Jason something of a clown. At the moment, he was sitting up on his cot, swinging his legs back and forth while watching the other boy. "Are you awake, Pup?" he asked.

"Ah... I think so, yeah." said Jason, heaving himself up with his hands. He stood up, glanced around the room for a moment, and declared "Well, it sure beats being dead."

"Man, you're an optimist."

"That's one way to think of it. So, tell me, how did we end up here?"

"The pirates got us all together and brought us here. How else?"

"This prison is on the pirate ship?" Jason asked, raising his eyebrows.

"No, we're in Jilothus."

"Oh. What happened to the *Argo*?"

"They brought it to the port here."

Jason nodded. "And... uh... do you know if Roland is still alive?"

"Yeah, barely! He's in another cellblock. Even after Talbot said we'd surrendered, he just kept on pouring out attack spells. Some of our guys had to restrain him until he calmed down." Meredith shuddered. "Emotion mages are scary."

"Not nearly as scary as the sight of that battlefield." said Jason, shuddering himself. "Do you have any idea of how many people died?"

"Eight on our side, five on theirs."

They were both silent and solemn for a while. Jason thought. So much death, so much senseless slaughter! When he and Roland and Talbot had spoken of how they'd inevitably encounter trouble over the course of the journey, it had almost seemed like a joke. He had believed, on some level, that all those mages were mostly there to scare off anyone who might threaten them. And perhaps that really had been the idea; no one had expected to get in a fight. No one had expected to die. Any confrontations that happened were supposed to have been like the one with Thorm: brief and bloodless. Yet reality was once again uglier than fantasy.

At any rate, Jason, ever the pragmatist, eventually took to sniffing around the cell in the hopes of discovering something of interest. Meredith rolled his eyes.

"Only one person other than you and me has been here in a while." said Jason. "I assume that's the guy who brought us here. So, the people who last occupied this cell left at least a couple of days ago. And I'm pleased to announce that that bucket was washed no more than an hour ago."

"I saw them wash it." Meredith grumbled.

"See, I was right!" Jason stuck his nose between the bars of the door and sniffed. He could smell eight other Argonauts in neighboring cells, whose names he listed off. "Smells like they grouped us by age. All the teenagers are here."

"Listen, Pup, you can keep your amazing adventures in the world of scent to yourself, okay?"

"Amen." said another Argonaut.

"Yeah, yeah." said Jason. "You guys are just jealous of my super powers. But, uh... seriously, now. Does anybody know why in the world those pirates attacked us in the first place?"

"To loot the *Argo*." said a seventeen-year-old. "Duh."

"But there's—there was—barely anything on it to steal! They knew that; the media's been following our exploits. If our valuables were the only things about our ship that appealed to them, they wouldn't've been willing to endanger their own lives by attacking us."

"Maybe they wanted the *Argo* itself, then." somebody else said. "Ships are worth a lot."

"Hmmm..." said Jason. "Maybe. Yeah, that sounds reasonable. Now, why did they put us in this prison?"

"What else would they do with us?"

"Send us back to Gyeeds! 'Cause I'm sure they've incurred Stanley's wrath by imprisoning us."

"Here's hoping."

"Quiet down, kids!" called an unfamiliar voice. Jason heard and smelled the man coming, then saw him appear before the door. He was a young man, apparently a guard. He wore a navy-blue uniform, though he was, of course, unarmed. The guard inspected Jason and Meredith critically for a few moments, as if he suspected them of hiding something, then turned and walked away.

A few hours passed. At one point, the guard brought a tray of exceptionally flavorless food to Jason and Meredith, which they ate gratefully. Otherwise, there were few distractions to pass the time. It wasn't even clear what the time was, since there were no windows in sight and the guards had confiscated Meredith's wristwatch, along with his reagent pouch. Every so often, Jason would spontaneously recall the bloodshed he'd witnessed, and his own blood would run cold.

Who was in charge of the Argonauts' fate now? The Jilothic government, Jason supposed, assuming those pirates were government-sponsored. More importantly, what did they plan to do with the Argonauts? Meredith said he hadn't noticed any clues to that mystery while the pirates brought them here, so Jason could only speculate. Perhaps the captors would release them at some point; more likely, they had something less pleasant in store. Jason figured it would be wise to escape this place, if possible, before he found out the hard way.

The only way out of the prison was down this corridor. And the only way Jason and Meredith could ever get past the door was to wait for a guard to open it. Thus, the time to escape was when the guard brought them food: he came alone, and he had to open the door all the way to give it to them, so as long as he could be dealt with, Jason could at least escape the cell.

It seemed inevitable that violence would be necessary somewhere down the line. Although Jason might be able to trick the guard into bringing them somewhere out of the cell, they'd eventually have to get out of the prison proper; all the exits were sure to be guarded, and nobody was stupid enough to let them out of the prison. So, they'd have to fight their way out. Since Meredith was a mage, this was actually plausible: all he needed was one of the guards' reagent pouches. And once he could cast spells, he could free the other Argonauts. Should anything go wrong, he could always teleport out. In fact, because of that, the plan could be made very simple: Jason and Meredith would wait for the guard to come with food, disable him, take his spell components, and free everybody else. Then, they'd all disappear in a proverbial puff of smoke.

Jason whispered his plan to Meredith. "Well," said the latter, "there are a lot of guards here. And are you sure we could take down one of them with our bare hands?"

"Sure we could. There's two of us and only one of him, and we'll have the element of surprise. He won't be able to cast spells while we're both attacking him."

"But he looks pretty buff. I'm not very strong—they let me be a soldier 'cause I'm a good Will mage—and you're just a shrimp."

"A shrimp, indeed!" Jason scowled. "Look, do you wanna wait and find out what they're gonna do with us?"

"I guess not." Meredith admitted. "Let's do it."

An hour or so later, the lights abruptly snapped off. Except for a few rays of light shining from the left side of the view from Jason's cell, it was pitch-black. Jason tried to sleep, and even succeeded to some extent, but his intense anxiety and fear about the past, present, and future kept him from getting much rest. After some time, Jason was rudely awakened and blinded when the lights were suddenly turned on again. By degrees, his vision returned, and he mentally prepared himself for what he and Meredith were about to do.

As expected, the guard showed up to serve them breakfast. He opened the door. As he was setting the tray down on the floor, Jason and Meredith tackled him. The guard shouted and writhed about, trying to shake the boys off. He was almost successful, especially with Jason, but Meredith proved to be a tenacious wrestler. Eventually, Meredith somehow managed to swipe the guard's reagent pouch and then pull off a stunning-spell right in the man's face. The guard fell limp, and the two boys ran out the door to find somewhere between seven and twelve more guards rushing down the hallway.

The cells containing other Argonauts were lined up against the left wall, but Meredith didn't have the chance to free them: hostile spells were already sailing towards him. He hastily threw up a shield, just in time to save himself and Jason, and then tossed as powerful a projectile as he could back at his foes. The guards easily deflected this and retaliated with such force that Meredith's shield was instantly blown to bits. The blast sent the teenager through the air backwards. He hit the wall at the end of the corridor and crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Jason was horrified. There was only one thing to do; crazy as it was, he had no choice. He broke into a run and barreled down the hallway, straight towards the guards. Strangely, they didn't cast any spells; they only stood there and watched him.

Other Argonauts, seeing him zoom past their cells, cheered "Go, Pup! Go, Pup!" Jason was filled with wild hope. As soon as he was close enough, he leapt into the air before the nearest man, fists flailing. But then, the world turned upside-down as the guard delivered such a kick to his belly that the puny boy spun through the air. He landed on his back with a thud, the wind totally knocked out of him.

"Pathetic." said the guard. He picked up Jason by the ankle with one hand, dragged him along the floor, and hurled him into his cell. Meredith was relieved of the reagents he'd stolen, then tossed inside likewise. The guard picked up his comrade's limp body, walked out of the cell, and closed the door. "Try that again and we'll give you something a whole lot worse than a couple of boo-boos." the guard remarked. Then he walked away, whistling.

"Aaagh." Jason moaned, painfully hoisting himself onto his cot. Nothing was broken, but he was covered with bruises and small wounds. His whole body ached as it never had before. He'd never gotten into a real fight before today; he decided that, if he ever got out of here, he never would again. Especially not with nine grown men.

Eventually, Meredith woke up. The first words out of his mouth were a defamatory remark aimed towards Jason's mother.

"You went along with it." Jason pointed out.

"Shut up." said Meredith.

They both did.

21

Odysseus's Homecoming

When the other Argonauts were brought lunch that day, Jason and Meredith got nothing. Nor did they receive any dinner that evening. The next day, while they did get breakfast, the guard who brought it came with escorts.

On top of Jason's increasing hunger, a feeling of sickness and despair began to manifest itself in the boy's stomach. He did not want to, but he could not help contemplating what fate might be in store for him. For your sake, I will spare you these unpleasant reflections.

Jason's sad reveries were interrupted when, not very long after breakfast, his nose tingled. He could smell Roland! Soon, the man himself, wearing a guard's uniform, appeared before the cell. His glasses were missing, and there was only a small black mark and the scent of burnt hair in place of his mustache, but it was definitely him.

Jason ran up to the bars. "Roland!" he squeaked—quietly.

Roland put his finger to his own lips. "You look terrible." he whispered, taking a key from his pocket and opening the door. He'd looked relieved upon seeing Jason at first, then angry when he'd seen Jason's injuries.

"Thank God." said Meredith, walking over to the other two.

"You too?" Roland hissed. "Those monsters!" He handed Meredith some reagents. "Stay in here for the moment, both of you. Meredith, get ready to leap out of this cell and start casting if the guards realize what's going on; shoot to kill. I'm going to free as many Argonauts as possible before the inevitable battle." He closed the door, conspicuously failing to lock it, then walked off.

"Can you see, Roland?" Jason whispered loudly.

"Contact lenses." came the reply.

Jason smiled. He heard Roland going to the other cells, unlocking them, and arming the children with reagents. This process was interrupted when Jason heard a guard say "Hey, what are you doing?"

"Some of the prisoners were making odd noises." said Roland. "I came to investigate."

"I didn't hear any odd noises until you came into this cellblock. Show me your ID."

"Okay, boys," said Roland, "let 'er rip!"

At that, the sorcerers rushed out of their cells and let loose. Jason came into the corridor just in time to see the guard, who hadn't reacted quickly enough, hit the

floor, dead as a doornail.

More guards poured into the corridor. Some Argonauts freed the ones still imprisoned in the cells along the left wall by destroying the doors with magic, while others joined Roland in fighting the guards. Now that the element of surprise was gone, and plenty of guards had arrived on the scene, things began to look grim. Jason feared that this conflict might end as poorly as the last.

A few moments later, a boy in the front lines was slain by an enemy spell. Roland then shrieked so loudly that the whole prison seemed to vibrate. Glowing, red tendrils of magic appeared from the air around the adventurer, curling themselves about his upraised hands, and then, as he bellowed words of power, a mighty jet of fire, a horizontal column of blazing yellow flame that spanned the whole corridor, shot through the mass of men. In an instant it disappeared, leaving only a few heaps of ashes behind.

"Let's go!" Roland shouted, and ran around the corner.

The other Argonauts paused for a moment to take in what they'd just witnessed, then chased after him.

And so Roland, with the others following some distance behind him, went around the prison busting Argonauts out and killing guards. None of the Jilothic men lasted long in the face of his fiery assaults. Once, he tried attacking with a bolt of electricity, but the spell missed its mark by several feet, so he stuck to torrents of flame. When he tired, his comrades fought instead; by then, there were enough free soldiers to fend off the few remaining guards with ease.

Soon, all the living Argonauts—forty-one in total—were assembled together in one of the cellblocks. This was an enormous place; it employed hundreds, which was why Roland had been able to pull off his deception for as long as he had. Many other people who were jailed there had begged the Argonauts to release them, but the soldiers freed none, for ignorance (and fear) of who these prisoners were and why they were there.

"All right," said Talbot to everyone, "anyone who can safely teleport back to the *Argo* should do so now, taking as many others as possible."

After a brief flurry of chatter and spellcasting, the crowd dissipated. The only people left were Jason, Roland, and Talbot.

Talbot looked at Roland critically. "You're in no state to teleport," he remarked.

Roland was sweating like a pig and panting like a dog, his chest heaving as he gasped for air. (The stench he gave off made Jason feel suicidal.) Somehow, he managed to nod in agreement.

"Well, if you're willing to wait, I'm going to teleport as soon as I discover where these vermin hid my medals."

"We... I'd better get back to... the ship, before I collapse. We'll walk there."

Jason looked at Roland nervously, then at the admiral. "Actually, could I come with you, Talbot? I'm afraid someone might recognize me. Roland can disguise himself, but not while I'm with him."

Talbot made a face. "Just walk behind him a distance. You'd be in more danger following me than him. Stay with your foster father." He walked away.

Jason smiled up at Roland. "Looks like it's just you and me again. C'mon, let's

go.”

The two of them couldn’t very well stroll out the front door, so Roland, careful to use as little energy as possible, cut a hole in a wall through which he and Jason crawled. They found themselves in an empty alley, in a city much like Pewpik.

Roland led the way to the harbor while Jason followed a bit behind, as Talbot had suggested. Jason wasn’t recognized; the passers-by, seeing his wounds, only looked upon the little boy with pity.

Things were going along smoothly, as the pair walked down a long avenue that ended at the seaport, when Roland stopped in his tracks. Jason kept walking, but when he saw what Roland saw, he halted as well. A woman stood on the dirt road just a few yards ahead of them, staring at Roland. Despite the man’s severe exhaustion, and the recent emotional drain of all that Emotion spellcasting, he somehow found it within himself to glare at this person with all the dark venom of his soul: in his eyes was unfathomable hatred coupled with boundless rage. The woman looked at him likewise, the primary difference being that in her gaze, loathing was dominant, while in his, anger was king. Given all this immediate, silent antipathy, it wasn’t hard for Jason to guess who the stranger was.

Beatrix was tall for a woman—noticeably taller than the admittedly short Roland, in fact. She had long, jet-black hair, a sharply featured face, and steel-gray eyes that, even as they were now narrowed in hostile greeting to Roland, suggested a deal of intelligence beneath. Her fists were clenched tightly, probably without her even being aware of it.

“Well,” said Beatrix, finally breaking the silence, “you’ve certainly been going places.”

“What are you doing here, you witch?” Roland demanded.

“And you’re as possessive as ever, I see. I don’t believe that’s any of your business. It’s easy to see what just happened to *you*, at any rate, though I can’t see why you’d choose to return to your ship on foot.”

“Quiet! Do you know what—”

“It’s Roland Moralheart!” Beatrix shouted, running away while pointing at him. “He’s escaped from prison!”

Roland swore vehemently, in English. “You’ll pay for this!” he yelled at her as she disappeared around a corner.

At Beatrix’s cry, the surrounding people had been quick to quit the scene. Now the street was eerily empty. Jason and Roland were pretty much alone, though it looked like they were about to get some company: two men with “Police Department of Jilothus” written in Common on their uniforms were coming to join them.

“Well,” said Jason, “this is a sticky situation.”

Roland, sighing, crouched and turned his back towards Jason. “Get on,” he said. Jason was incredulous. “Piggyback, now!”

Jason reluctantly did so, wondering if the man’s exhaustion had taken its toll on his sense. Roland cast a spell, clutched Jason’s ankles, and ran towards the seaport. And my, how fast he ran! The two were a blur as Roland’s feet carried them along at sixty miles an hour, leaving big, glowing, orange streaks of energy and a cloud of dust in their wake.

Jason looked behind himself. The policemen were following them, apparently with the use of the same spell. Fortunately, Roland was going a wee bit faster than them, and they were a good distance behind; unfortunately, Roland wasn't running in a straight line. Like a car without a designated driver, he veered from side to side as he made his way down the street.

With a thud, the world suddenly turned upside-down, then right side-up, then upside-down again as Jason took another fall. Miraculously, he landed well and was unharmed; he scrambled to his feet. Roland had smashed into a signpost; the two of them were still alive only because he'd done his best to magically brake. He was sprawled on the ground, apparently unconscious. The policemen came to a halt a few yards from Jason.

Jason took a split-second to evaluate the situation. Although Beatrix had only explicitly pointed out Roland, it was easy to see that these cops recognized Jason, or at least they'd gathered where he was supposed to be. The harbor was nearby—near enough that Jason could make out the *Argo* at the docks, though much too far for anybody on the ship to see him, unless they had good binoculars and knew just where to look. This part of the city was fairly dense; there were plenty of people milling about, and scores of buildings and side-streets nearby.

Jason realized there was only one thing to do. He took Michael Jackson's advice and beat it.

The greatest immediate danger, he figured, was the policemen's spellcasting; he ran through the densest crowds he could find and avoided straightaways, hoping that they wouldn't use magic for fear of hitting civilians. This tactic seemed to work, as they didn't cast any spells at him. It also exposed him to another danger he hadn't thought of: the policemen shouted "Stop the boy! Stop him!", and suddenly, people tried to grab him as he ran by. One actually did manage to get ahold of him; he quickly wriggled free. Thankfully, nobody started a real nineteenth-century-England-style hue and cry.

After a few minutes, the policemen were much further behind Jason than they'd been at first; Jason's ten-year-old stature let him squeeze through crowds much more easily than they could. It occurred to him that he might actually be able to shake them off. And so he took the chase off the beaten path; he went around corners and down alleys. He was now mostly out of sight of the cops. They were able to keep following him partly by catching an occasional glimpse of him and partly by listening to his footsteps. The pair split up and tried to trap him, but Jason's nose came to the rescue: he could smell them before they could see him, and thus he evaded them.

In time, Jason's pursuers lost his trail. Once he smelled the cops' scent no more and was positive he was safe, Jason stopped running. He grinned to himself as he stumbled along the street towards the docks. Nobody else recognized him; once, a different policeman asked if he was lost. He arrived at the *Argo* without further incident. As he climbed aboard, he was happy to find Talbot waiting for him. His great relief was marred by only one tiny, nagging doubt...

"Where's Roland?" asked the admiral, clearly worried.

Jason slapped himself on the forehead. "I *knew* I forgot something!"

22

And Now for a Very Special Chapter of *The Lone Argonaut*

Using teleportation, and with Jason as a guide, Talbot came to where Roland's body was, in fact, still lying. The adventurer was brought back to the ship and the *Argo* quickly shoved off, before the Jilothic folks could do anything to stop it.

After lunch that afternoon, by Talbot's request, the Argonauts had a "moment of silence" for the nine Argonauts who had recently died. Jason was reminded strongly of September 11th. It had occurred just three years ago, a week before his eighth birthday. He'd never set foot in New York; he'd only seen the destruction of the World Trade Center on television, and still, it had affected him greatly. He'd always felt sequestered from the violence and insanity of the outside world in the land of fast food and fast cars, and perhaps he really had been, but it was, he thought, important to remember that there were throngs of people who were homicidally angry at Americans and Americanism. It came to show how fanaticism and partisanship could dehumanize those who fell under their sway—that was made further apparent by many Americans' reactions to the attacks. Jason himself was ashamed to recall how he had, at first, cheered on the invasion of Afghanistan with the rest of them. At one point, he'd even thought the slaughter that was now taking place in Iraq was somehow necessary. Of course, if the Piercers weren't dealt with, a pointless conflict that would make the Second World War seem tame by comparison was sure to erupt...

"And let us hope," said Talbot, continuing the speech he'd been making, "that the actual mission will go over far more smoothly than this journey."

Not a chance. thought Jason. *Not a snowball's chance in hell.*

Roland was in bad shape. It took him a day to return to his right mind, and another to fully recover. He was happy to be back to normal, though he was greatly annoyed by the theft of his chest of Hoonian gold: the pirates had taken it, along with some of the other valuables on the ship. He did still have his suit, as he'd carried it in the pocket of his guard's uniform. (One of its other miscellaneous abilities was that it could be folded into a tiny bundle.) His glasses were perched on his nose once more, and his mustache was beginning to grow back. Yet the loss still stung.

"Look on the bright side," said Jason. They were talking in their quarters. "Gunther says we'll be at the Dojese seaport by tomorrow morning."

"And then, perhaps, if everything goes swimmingly," said Roland, "we'll be able to return to Gyeeds via dimensional gate, rather than undergoing another odyssey of this magnitude."

Jason nodded. "But Roland," he said, "I think I deserve an explanation of your relationship with Beatrix."

Roland stared at him. "So you recognized her?"

"Well, that was the first time I saw her, but it was easy to figure out who she was, given how you acted towards each other."

Roland nodded. "We've got quite a feud between us." Anger flashed in his eyes.

"Could you elaborate? I mean, start from the beginning. What were those 'rough spots' you spoke of? What caused your marriage to break down? Now that I've seen the two of you together, it's hard to believe you were ever fond of each other."

"Yes, I myself find it difficult to believe, at times." He scrutinized the boy carefully, as if considering whether he should continue. "I suppose you do deserve the truth, Jason; I will, as always, answer your questions."

"Our marriage was, in fact, a mistake from the beginning, because we weren't compatible: we wanted two different things out of the relationship. Although Beatrix loved me and enjoyed spending time with me, there were other things that she cared about more, such as her studies. I, by contrast, was so enamored with her that I cared for little else. The result was that I often wanted to enjoy her when she wanted to do something else."

"As in, you wanted to have sex and she didn't?"

"Yes, sometimes," said Roland unabashedly, "but not just that. I was a romantic, you know? I wanted to have candlelit dinners and moonlit walks; I wanted to *enjoy* our young love. But while I viewed love as life's entrée, in the American sense of the word, Bea felt it was only a side dish—or that's how our marriage counselor put it. At the time, the analogy seemed to me trite and belittling; since then, I've come to realize it was actually quite appropriate."

"Our relationship was always marked by this tension, and it worsened as time went on. More and more often, Beatrix would go on a screaming rant about how I was constantly trying to dominate her life—she called me a chauvinist and a misogynist. She liked to disappear for days on end with no explanation. I increasingly wondered if she understood what marriage was in the first place. I finally realized she didn't when she truly stabbed me in the back."

Over the course of his story, Roland had gradually grown angrier, his ire increasing with each sentence. Now he was furious. He paused in his speech, seemingly inviting Jason to guess what he'd meant by that last cryptic phrase.

"Did she... move away for good?" said Jason.

Roland laughed one choking laugh at the suggestion. "Oh, I wish. She committed *adultery*!" For a moment, his whole body crackled with electricity. Startling as it was, the release seemed to calm him down a bit.

Cowed, Jason said quietly "And that was... uh... the straw that broke the camel's back, huh?"

"Precisely."

Jason scratched his head. "It's... a little odd that you feel that way about adultery so strongly, considering that you're otherwise a sexual libertarian of sorts. I

mean, prostitution isn't much in the spirit of monogamy, you know."

Roland blushed indignantly. "I was faithful to her for the duration of our relationship. Marriage has very little meaning if its participants don't abide by its basic tenants."

Jason shrugged. "Open marriages exist. You can think of marriage as a legal phenomenon, or as anything else, for that matter. It's those crazy Republicans who believe in the 'sanctity of marriage', or whatever."

"They're referring to the matter of gay versus heterosexual marriage. And I am no homophobe, just for the record."

"But who was Beatrix's lover?"

Roland's face fell. "I still don't know. I only knew the affair occurred because I read her email. I put a lot of effort into tracking that man down, and I never found him."

"Man," said Jason, shaking his head, "life imitates soap operas, eh?"

"I suppose so." Roland sighed.

"There's one thing I still don't understand. I see why your marriage deteriorated—I agree with what you said at first; it sounds like you weren't compatible at all—but I don't see why you've continued to detest each other so. That you wouldn't be able to bear the sight of each other is understandable. That you would hate each other's guts—it just seems totally uncalled for! You seemed displeased, but not surprised, that she endangered you so by pointing you out to the cops. It was clearly out of sheer spite; she knew as well as anybody that we didn't do anything, and Jilothus was just being predatory."

"Nor, come to think of it, do I get why this one failed relationship led you to scorn love entirely. However bitter you may feel, it's hard to believe that that bitterness was enough to destroy the... well, love of love that had characterized you so strongly earlier."

"If that's the case, that you don't understand it," said Roland, "then I think you simply don't know how deeply these things run."

"Maybe, maybe. Do you even have any idea why Beatrix happened to be in Jilothus?"

"None at all. It was simply a cruel twist of fate."

"Hey, story of my life since I turned ten."

"You've had plenty of strokes of good fortune, as well."

"Mostly in the form of help dealing with bad luck. Speaking of which: how did you manage to escape from your cell and steal a guard's uniform?"

"Oh, I just snapped the neck of the fellow who brought me breakfast. There are so many guards there, all of whom pay so little attention to each other, that no one noticed how that guard never came back from my cellblock and I never went in."

"You're disturbingly casual about murder," said Jason, somewhat disturbed himself.

Roland shrugged. "It's unpleasant, but too often, one just doesn't have a choice. Killing is like wearing contact lenses in that way."

"Now that's not a simile you hear every day."

"And so I always carry around the proper tools for each," said Roland, smiling.

There was a long pause. Finally, Jason said "The foremost question is, why did

those pirates attack us in the first place, considering our relative lack of valuables?”

“I can answer that one.” said Roland. “They most likely wanted to hold us for ransom.”

“Ransom? But Gyeeds can crush them!”

“Yes, at a far greater price than the ransom for all of us. Waging war is expensive, especially on the Starving Sea.”

“So... wait, Stanley isn’t going to attack them?” Roland shook his head. “Won’t he do anything?” Roland shook his head. “Can’t they be prosecuted in an interdimensional court, or something?”

“Yes, they could be tried in the High Court of the IDC, but the court wouldn’t be expected to carry out any kind of sentence. Its time and money are limited, too, and most of the wrongs committed in this case have already been righted.”

Jason swore. “There’s no justice in this world.”

“Look on the bright side. I made sure to avenge all of the dead Argonauts.”

Jason frowned. “That’s not what I think of as justice.”

Now Jason certainly had plenty of things to think about. First, there was Roland. Well, he’d solved one of the Mysteries, in a sense, but he wasn’t at all reassured. Why had he and Beatrix gotten together in the first place, if they’d been so incompatible? Shouldn’t they have talked to each other, realized their differences, and gone their separate ways? And why in the world did they hate each other so? However bitter Beatrix had felt towards her ex-husband, trying to land him in jail was cruel and malicious.

One thing about Roland that especially bothered Jason was his apparent vengefulness. He seemed to think his slaughter of the guards was necessary not only because the Argonauts needed to escape, but also because they needed to be avenged. When Beatrix had exposed him, he’d said “You’ll pay for this!” All this desire for revenge didn’t seem consonant with Roland’s surname. Then again, he certainly did care about saving the lives of innocents, and he’d just rescued all of the still-living Argonauts, Jason included, from an uncertain fate. Still, Jason decided to shelve his plan to profess his love for Roland indefinitely, to be considered again only if occasion made his feelings swing in the adventurer’s favor.

The second thing was trouble. *I really am a trouble magnet.* Jason decided. Again and again, he, Roland, and Talbot had predicted that some kind of difficulty would arise, no matter what the situation, and they had always been correct. If Jason had been superstitious, he might’ve thought these predictions were self-fulfilling prophecies: Mr. Trouble always came around when he heard that mournful sound. (“We should try to run away.” That meant that Jason Blue was sure to stay.) In truth, it was probably just a matter of sailing on such dangerous seas. And if Akolos had cut off all communication with the rest of the multiverse, it was safe to assume that he wouldn’t be quite friendly. *After* this whole matter was over with, and Jason was back home in Gyeeds, there was no reason to think he’d have any more trouble to deal with.

Yeah, right!

23

Friends and Foes

Gunther's prophecy, at least, was fulfilled. The next day, several hours before noon, the *Argo* finally arrived at its destination: Rorosion, the capital city of Dojum. Yes, it may sound odd to hear of a nation containing more than one city, now that you've been hearing of city-states for so long, but Dojum was a largish island. Additionally, Dojum had a few possessions elsewhere in the Starving Sea, so it really was a kingdom in the European sense, even if it was much smaller and weaker in relation to the other nations of the world than the medieval kingdoms of Europe were in comparison to their Terran contemporaries.

Remember how I said that Pewpik was one of the Sea's richest cities? Rorosion was *the* richest city in that verse. It had a legacy, too: amidst the newer-looking houses and office buildings were structures of older architectural styles, some so venerable that their ages could be measured in centuries.

Everybody wanted to get off the ship again, but, as it turned out, Dojum was not Hoon. The little, beady-eyed official who met the Argonauts as they tried to disembark asked their business and then briskly informed them that yes, "His Majesty" would grant them an audience sometime tomorrow, and no, they weren't otherwise allowed to wander about the island. Jason walked around in circles impatiently for a day, and then, at the appropriate time, he, Roland, and Talbot walked onto the pier.

"You may leave this child behind." said the official to Roland, glancing at Jason suspiciously.

"I'd like to come, actually." said Jason, glaring at the man. "I am one of the leaders of this expedition."

The official stared at Roland as if to ask "What's with him?"

"What he says is true." said Roland. "If you don't mind, he'll be coming as well."

The official looked back at Jason again. "Leader of an expedition... fine! But he'd better behave himself. His Majesty will not tolerate insolence from anyone."

I only wish I could say the same for myself. thought Jason. He considered sticking his tongue out at this pretentious, spontaneously unfriendly character, then thought better of it.

Akolos was apparently very much into the whole monarchy motif. He lived in a grand, sprawling castle, the interior walls of which were lined with huge windows, tapestries depicting scenes from religious canon, and soldiers standing at attention. (The latter

didn't have chain-mail armor or swords, at least.) Roland and Talbot walked side-by-side, with guards to the right and left; Jason was told to walk behind his foster father. He did so, indignantly.

The throne room had been made to be awe-inspiring, and to some degree it still was. It was decorated with tapestries yet bigger than those Jason had seen before, and larger-than-life sculptures of what Jason assumed were past Kings of Dojum, wielding maces and shields. Two fountains, one resembling a large, striped saber-toothed feline and the other a bull with antlers, flanked the long, bright-yellow carpet that led across the hall.

The king, a large man in his forties, sat on a high, shining throne. His hair was a dirty blond, his hazel eyes, suggesting a haughty, capricious personality, were set wide apart, and his mouth was rather large. He eschewed the standard suit for a long, purple robe and other colorful clothes. Except for a great silver crown, he had no jewelry, and he lacked a scepter, though Jason noticed a dagger in a little gem-studded sheath at his waist.

To Akolos's right and left sat many young men and a few young women. All were noticeably less decorated than he was, and their relative ranks were differentiated by further degrees of adornment and distance from him. Most were adults in their twenties, but there were also a few teenagers and one little boy who looked younger than Jason. If Akolos had a queen consort, she was probably absent.

At one point, a long distance from the throne, the trio's escorts instructed them to stop and bow. Roland and Talbot instantly fell to their knees. Jason absentmindedly bowed at the waist, then noticed what his companions were doing and quickly hit the floor.

"Who is this urchin?" a booming tenor voice called.

Jason figured the speaker was Akolos, but he couldn't be sure at the moment, since he was staring at the carpet. At any rate, he decided to answer the question himself, so he stood up, saying "Jason Amadeus Blue."

The king scowled. "Such impropriety! To the dungeon with him."

Aw, drat. Jason thought. He was struck with a sudden, familiar sense of cold, and then immediately fell unconscious.

"Whatever happened to diplomatic immunity?" Jason mumbled. He was lying on a pile of straw in a jail cell. This cell was of the old-fashioned variety: the walls and ceilings were of crude stone blocks, and the floor was nothing but packed dirt. The door was barred, like the one in the Jilothic cell, though through this one Jason could see another cell, which was empty. The only hint of modernity to be seen was a dim lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

Jason waited for about two hours. He could smell a few other people nearby, none of whom made a sound. Eventually, he heard footsteps, and smelled a new arrival: a young boy. The stranger walked up to Jason's cell and looked at him. It was the boy he'd seen in the throne room.

The boy was chubby—not from a portly build, it appeared, but from a poor diet. He had dark-brown hair and eyes, and skin of an intermediate tone, while his mouth, currently set in a wide, earnest grin, was reminiscent of Akolos's. He still had on the emerald-green robe he'd been wearing when Jason had first seen him; otherwise, he

was wearing less gaudy garments, including, of all things, sneakers.

"Hi!" said the boy.

"Uh... hello." said Jason. Then, remembering how he'd ended up here, he quickly bowed on one knee and tentatively added "Your, uh, Highness?"

The boy laughed. "Aw, you don't have to do that. That's silly. You can call me Curtis. My name's Curtis Malloc Debyeamo."

"Oh, Allah be praised!" said Jason, gratefully standing up. "May I ask why you're speaking to me?"

"Sure, go ahead." said Curtis, laughing again.

Jason almost laughed himself, though he was annoyed. "Why are you speaking to me?"

"Cause you're an awesome kid, and I wanna be blood brothers with you."

"You wanna *what*?" Jason sputtered, as some other prisoner who'd been listening to the conversation guffawed.

"Be blood brothers!"

"And, uh... what, precisely, does that entail?"

"You know, you and me cut each other's arms and bleed into the wounds and agree to be like brothers forever and ever."

Jason grimaced. "Ah, yes, the uglier side of children's street culture."

Actually, this particular practice had a much longer and richer history than hopscotch and cooties. In particular, Jason was reminded of a tale from Norse mythology. Loki was a frost giant, and one of the most powerful among them: his shapeshifting ability was better than the average giant's, and while most of his cousins were big and strong but dull-witted, he had charisma, eloquence, and great cunning. It was the latter quality most of all that caused Odin, king of the Æsirgods, to offer to become blood brothers with Loki.

As expected, Loki was a powerful ally. But because of his wanton malice and spitefulness (qualities nigh-universal among giants), he proved to be more of a liability than an asset. When Loki finally toed the line by committing a truly heinous crime, Odin broke the blood-brother oath and had him punished, which circumstance eventually helped bring about the end of the world as the Æsir knew it. The whole episode neatly underscored Odin's two chief mistakes—consorting with the powers of darkness and breaking his promises—that proved the death of him and his pantheon.

But anyway, this whole blood-brother thing was gross, and Jason would have nothing to do with it "No way." he said, gesturing emphatically.

"Aw, c'mon!" Curtis pleaded. "I'll get you out of the dungeon if you promise."

"You will? How?" Curtis pulled a bunch of keys out of a pocket of his robe and dangled them in front of Jason. "Oh. Well... there's surely guards here. I can't just mosey out the door, can I?"

"Oh, if you don't want to walk, I can teleport you out."

"Teleport? You can cast spells?"

"Can I cast spells!" Curtis scoffed. "I'm one of the best Imagination mages in the multiverse! Of course I can cast spells!"

"You... you are?"

In response, Curtis cast a spell. A small blob of light appeared, hovering over his outstretched palm, and then formed itself into a moth-like creature with intricate,

glowing patterns on its wings. (The patterns reminded Jason of those on the surface of the sense-enhancing potion.) The thing lifted off Curtis's palm and flew about for a few seconds until Curtis slapped it, at which point it fluttered weakly for a moment, then disappeared in a burst of blue flame, leaving only the smell of ozone behind.

"Neat." said Jason.

"And I can make much bigger things, but I'm not going to waste my energy just to show you now. So, what do you think?"

"Well, come to think of it, aren't the guards overhearing what we're saying?"

"Yeah, so what? I can blow them away!" He pointed his index finger in an arbitrary direction, and a few sparks shot out from it. "Nobody messes with me."

"I guess you're right, if nobody has." said Jason.

"Will you do it?"

"Hmmm..." Well, this seemed like an easy way to escape, and certainly, humoring this fellow by participating in his nasty little ritual was a small price to pay for that. "Sure. Please, get me outta here."

"Promise?" said Curtis, his eyes lighting up.

"So long as you're true to your own word, I do promise."

"Great! Okay, I'll get you out first." He unlocked the door and opened it; Jason happily walked out. "So, where do you wanna go?"

"Well, uh... are the men I was with still talking to Akolos?"

"No, I came down here when they left."

"All right, can you take me to the *Argo*, then?"

"I can't teleport you there, 'cause I don't remember what the seaport looks like. We'll walk, okay?"

"Wouldn't you have to deal with the guards and soldiers here? I mean, whether or not—"

"Oh, really, they're not a problem. Akolos says they have to obey me, 'cause I'm a prince."

"You're a prince?"

"Oh, yeah!"

Jason shook his head in wonder. "Let's go, then."

Jason had somewhat doubted this penultimate assertion of Curtis's. His doubt was soon dispelled when Curtis spoke to a guard, kindly informing him, for the purposes of record-keeping, that he was removing a prisoner. The guard sighed despairingly, as if prisoners were assets and nothing could be done if Curtis wanted to take one out, and said only "Yes, Your Intelligence."

"That's my official style." said Curtis to Jason as they walked up a flight of stairs, out of the castle, and along the streets of Rorosion. Passers-by seemed to recognize Curtis, and stay clear of him. "Isn't it stupid?"

"Ironically, yes." said Jason.

"I tell everyone in the castle to call me Curtis or Curt, like a normal person, but only a couple listen. It's so stupid."

"But Curtis, tell me a bit about yourself. You want to, uh, be my blood brother, and yet I know so little about you."

"Oh, well, I'm eight-and-two-thirds years old. I'm one of the best Imagination

mates in the world. I was bred for talent with magic. I'm really good at math, too. I'm up to trig functions now."

"You were bred for talent?"

"Yeah, my mom's a magic wife. She's got a great pedigree. Two of her maternal uncles, her father, and her brother were all great Imagination guys. And Imagination's a rare, tough domain."

"A magic wife? You mean she's a spellcaster?"

"She can't cast spells! She's a woman, dummy!"

"What does sex have to do with spellcasting ability?" said Jason, realizing as he spoke that he'd never even heard of a real-life female wizard. Mysterious...

"Everything! What, did you think girls could cast spells? Boys can't have babies, can they?"

Jason held his hand to his forehead briefly. "I... I think should talk to Roland about this. Tell me what you meant by a magic wife, if not a spellcaster."

"Well, you know, Akolos has different wives for different things. A magic wife is one he has children with to make good natural mages."

"Ah, polygamy and eugenics—better together!" The Yankee within him reviled at the thought. "You're Akolos's son?"

"Yup."

"Wow. Were you and the other people sitting next to him all his children?"

"No, he's got plenty of others. Dojese kings have lots of children, but they only choose a few to become princes and princesses. He made me a prince 'cause I'm such a good wizard, even though I'm ugly."

Jason smiled. "I get it. Do you like being a prince?"

"No way! Akolos is crazy, my mom doesn't care about me, and I have to sit through all those stupid meetings. That's why I want to run away."

"Run away? Where to? You can't really take care of yourself, can you?"

"I'll be with you. Duh. We're going to be blood brothers, remember?"

"Hold on. Where along the line did you mention that blood brotherhood involves traveling together?"

"The 'be like brothers' part. Brothers live together!"

"Oh. Oh boy." Jason hadn't bargained for this one. He'd hoped this promise would be such a vague one that he wouldn't have to break it—an important matter, since given the prince's great apparent power, there was no guarantee that he *could* break it. Not to mention that it remained to be seen what Roland would think of the whole dilemma. "Well, Curtis, let me ask you this: you called me an 'awesome kid' before. What did you mean by that?"

"You're really smart. I saw you on TV talking about how you tricked that old Memory mage, even though you couldn't cast spells and barely understood magic at all. And I heard about how you tricked the dragon on Hoon, too. That was awesome."

"Why, thank you." Jason was actually a little disturbed to hear how much his name had gotten around. He still wasn't that well known outside of Gyeeds, but the media's reports of his adventures on the *Argo* had apparently increased his celebrity. "So you plan on living with me and Roland from now on?" Curtis nodded. "Don't you fear what will happen when Akolos realizes you've run away?"

"Nope! I'm not afraid of anything."

And I thought I was cocky. thought Jason.

Jason and Curtis walked onto the *Argo* to find Roland and Talbot deep in conversation with each other.

“Speak of the devil.” said Talbot.

“Jason!” said Roland. “Thank goodness. We were just discussing what—”

“Curtis Debyeamo?” Talbot interrupted, noticing the newcomer.

“That’s me!” the little prince chirruped.

“How did you two end up together?” asked Roland, raising his eyebrows and looking at Jason. “And, more important, how did you escape?”

“It’s, uh... it’s a medium-length story.” said the ten-year-old. “First, if you don’t mind, could you tell me what went on in the throne room in my absence?”

“Actually, that’s what I’m going to report in our next mess meet.” said Roland. “We’ve been delaying that in the hopes that we might be able to get you back easily. I take it from your leisurely pace that you haven’t been pursued.”

“Doesn’t seem like it.” said Jason, glancing backwards. “At any rate, I don’t think we’re in any kind of hurry.”

24

Red

Roland told the Argonauts about the encounter, then mentioned some extra details to Jason afterward. For your and my convenience, I'll narrate the story myself, as if Roland were my protagonist—just like I did a while ago, on Hoon, albeit without announcement.

Clunk! Jason was knocked out. So far as Roland could see from his awkward position on the floor, a solider walked over to Jason, picked him up, and carried him away. Roland felt an urge to do *something* in response, but he figured that Jason wasn't in immediate danger, and so there was no reason to make a fuss right now.

"You may rise," said Akolos. "Now, Adventurer, what do you wish to speak to me about?"

Again, Roland had to restrain himself from behavior that would send him to the dungeon. Doubtlessly, the king knew quite well what the Argonauts were here for. "Your Majesty, I come here as an embassy of Gyeeds, and for Mayor Stanley Ironbone in particular. It recently came to the attention of the Interdimensional Council that you possess some technology that makes Projectile Shields less effective. As you no doubt know, such a technique could theoretically be very powerful on the battlefield versus an enemy that lacks it.

"The council wished to contact you regarding this development, but you have ceased all communication with it since week twenty-four. For that reason, Mayor Stanley sent me here. I have come on two errands: first, to ask you why you have isolated your nation from the Interdimensional Council, for although the Starving Sea is not a member, the council bears no ill will towards you or your people; second, to request that you share with the council the technology you alone seem to possess."

Akolos replied "I took those cautionary measures, many weeks ago, for Dojum's protection. The Sea is full of aggressive, less civilized nations than Dojum, which are a constant threat to its prosperity. Last winter, in particular, I became aware that my enemies were planning a full-scale attack with the help of more powerful nations in nearby verses. I imposed a strict policy of isolation to impede their progress, discourage further efforts, and discreetly communicate that I knew their scheme.

"They never followed through on their plot, and so I consider the maneuver a success—I can tell you of this now that the threat has passed. Also, seeing as Dojese isolation has obstructed legitimate trade and communication, and the problem it was put in place to solve no longer exists, it ends now." He glanced at a footman. "Spread the word, sirrah."

"At once, Your Majesty." said the man briskly, and went away.

"As for your second item, what the Interdimensional Council's spies witnessed was a demonstration of a new weapon that Dojese alchemists recently developed: Piercers. My wizards have discovered a method of enchanting bullets in a way that allows them to destroy Projectile Shields much more quickly than normal. I don't know if this is the same technology behind the Raincatcher massacre. In any case, though it may have been discovered independently by someone else, I haven't shared the secret with any other party. To this day, I refuse to make it public. It is a powerful asset to Dojum's military, which I don't wish to relinquish. No one need bother make any offers for it; I won't trade it for anything."

There was a long pause as Roland took in everything he had heard. At length, he said "Your Majesty, I thank you on behalf of Gyeeds and the IDC for allowing the free flow of travelers into and out of your nation once more. However, the council is unlikely to look kindly upon your refusal to share the secret of Piercer manufacture. You are not legally bound to share technological discoveries with the council, since the Sea is not a member, but you are *expected* to share any discovery of this magnitude, considering how technological asymmetry tends to give rise to predatory wars."

"Dojum will not be moved by threats." Akolos said simply. "Is there anything else either of you wish to discuss?"

"No, Your Majesty." said Roland and Talbot in turn.

"Then you are dismissed."

"So I guess it's all a lot less sinister than we expected." said Jason to Roland in their quarters that evening. In three days, they'd be allowed to return to Gyeeds via dimensional gate. Curtis was sleeping in one of the rooms left vacant by dead Argonauts. "Certainly, everything worked out a lot better than I expected."

"That assumes that Akolos was telling the truth." said Roland.

"Yeah, but what would be his motives for lying? What he says is certainly plausible. If Jake could figure out how to make Piercers, why couldn't anybody else?"

"Who knows?" said Roland. "At any rate, the fact that he's unwilling to share Piercers with anybody else is not so great. Other nations, Gyeeds included, could respond very hostilely."

"Wouldn't it be worse if he *did* share the technology?"

"No, it wouldn't pose much of a danger to anyone if everyone had it. The danger lies in asymmetry."

Jason nodded. "Still, it's nice that nobody died today on this island. Now, um... about Curtis. How'd you and Talbot recognize him?"

"He is, as he's no doubt already informed you, one of the best Imagination mages in the world. While he's not a celebrity per se, in the same way that you and I are in Gyeeds, he's well known among serious spellcasters. So, tell me how you got of the dungeon and ended up returning to the ship with him."

Jason did. "How about that blood-brother thing, eh? I did the right thing, didn't I?"

"Are you joking? Most definitely! Not only did you completely escape from that mess, you made yourself a powerful friend."

"Wait, are you telling me that being his blood brother would be a *good* thing?"

"Of course! As blood brothers, you'll be expected to fight for and defend each other; Curtis should make for a mighty defender. We're sure to encounter more trouble in the near future, and in such circumstances, the young prince will be much more of an asset to you than your treasured olfaction."

"You talk as if blood-brotherhood means something to you. It certainly isn't a prevalent custom in Gyeeds."

"Yes, but one must be willing to recognize and respect other cultures' traditions." Roland almost scowled as he said this. "Gross as it may appear, it's just an oath of friendship in disguise."

"I wonder how this plays into your ideas about marriage." Jason mused aloud.

"Never mind that. Curtis will live with us. He can sleep on the living-room couch, or I can get another bed for your room—if it gets too cramped, we'll just move to a larger apartment. We can afford it. Just—please, Jason, make good on your promise. I care very much about promises."

Jason was reminded once again of the oath Odin and Loki had sworn, and told the adventurer about it. Eventually, he grumbled "Fine, I'll do it."

The little ceremony took place on the bow of the ship the following morning. Jason and Curtis stood, facing each other, on the port and starboard side respectively. Roland stood before them, pocketknife in hand. The whole setup reminded Jason disturbingly of a wedding.

"Do you swear" said Roland solemnly, staring at their faces, "to forever stand by and aid each other?"

"Yes," the boys said. Jason was on edge. Curtis looked quite calm, as if he did this every day.

"Do you swear never to accept a favor unless both of you are offered it?"

"Yes." Jason's eyes wandered. Here was the Starving Sea, in all its perfectly horizontal glory, and there were the streets and buildings of Rorosion.

"Do you swear, no matter how often small, inconsequential disagreements arise between you, never to seriously oppose each other?"

"Yes." Suddenly, Jason noticed something odd on the deck, several yards to his right.

"Do you swear to live as brothers forevermore?"

"Yes," said Curtis.

But Jason had no ears for Roland now. His gaze, and his thoughts, were transfixed on what he'd spotted: a little rat with crimson fur, staring back at him. He was fascinated not by the animal itself—it was hardly remarkable—but by the strange feelings that had gripped him as soon as he'd looked at it. He was filled with a burning curiosity and impatience with his own ignorance. He sensed that within this humble vermin there lurked some great secret, a secret he ached to learn. The real nature of it was completely unknown to him, yet he felt he simply *must* discover it. The only way to discover that secret was to *follow* the rat; not literally, but in some metaphysical way: the rat would lead him there. Yet he did not know how to follow it. And as he thought that, the animal scurried out of sight, and the feelings ceased.

"Jason?" said Roland.

Jason looked back at the other two. Curtis seemed puzzled, and Roland seemed troubled. "I... I..." He glanced at the spot where the rat had been; it was gone without a trace. "Did you guys see that?"

"See what?" said Roland, vexed. "What are you doing, Jason?"

"The red rat."

"Uh... I didn't see any rats." said Curtis. "Who cares?"

"Don't you have any respect for ritual?" said Roland.

"Guys... this was no ordinary rat." Jason licked his lips nervously. "There was a rat sitting on the deck, a rat with fur the color of blood, and when I saw it, I was... overcome with strange feelings." Now both of the other two looked at him like he was crazy. "It was just like that time with the bird in the park, when I was escaping from Ernest's house. Remember, Roland?"

"Vaguely. Can we continue the ceremony, if you don't mind?"

"Just hold on a minute." Jason did his best to explain to both of them how seeing the rat had made him feel, and then told Curtis about the bird. "So we have two possibilities here: (a) I'm nuts; (b) someone with very esoteric magic is watching me and possibly trying to do something to me. (a) seems unlikely, since there's no other evidence backing up such a hypothesis. I say it's (b)."

"There's no other evidence backing up that hypothesis, either." Roland pointed out.

"Okay, that's true. But! Whoever heard of somebody going crazy in a very particular way twice, in two completely different circumstances, and otherwise being perfectly sane? (b), on the other hand, is actually kind of plausible."

"No, it isn't." Roland insisted. "There's magic that can manipulate emotions, in certain, narrow ways, and there's limited shapeshifting magic. There *isn't* any way a person could take the form of a small animal and cause such peculiar feelings, especially without appearing to cast any spells."

"Is it so far-fetched that such spells could've been discovered and kept secret?"

"Yes." said Roland. "The discovery of such spells would inevitably involve several breakthroughs. These experiences you've had are simply your mind reacting poorly to all of your recent misadventures."

"That's what they told Johnny Dixon. But they were wrong, weren't they? And it turns out that magic, in a certain form, really *does* exist! I swear, *somebody's* after me. I'm not making this up."

"*Regardless*," said Roland loudly and impatiently, "let's continue, shall we?"

"Fine, fine." said Jason. He turned back to Curtis. It looked like the prince hadn't been paying attention to this altercation at all, or at least the last few exchanges.

"All right, let's try this again." said Roland. "Do you swear to live as brothers forevermore?"

"Yes." said Jason and Curtis.

"Excellent. Please hold up your forearms." Roland drew the blade of his knife and carefully cut a small wound in each boy's outstretched right arm. Jason gave off a faint cry of pain; Curtis only winced. "Now, hold the wounds together and let your blood intermingle."

The two pressed their arms against each other. A little of Jason's blood flowed

into Curtis's veins, and a little of Curtis's blood flowed into Jason's veins. Curtis smiled. Jason frowned, worrying if he'd get infected with something. Then again, whether or not he'd get sick from this was the least of his concerns. There was so much to think about! There was the question of whether his becoming Curtis's blood brother really was for the best, after all; there was also the matter of the bird and the rat. And there were all those mysteries related to Piercers.

Ultimately, the most pressing matter, in Jason's mind, was that of the increasing fantasy of his life. He remembered how he'd thought of this shortly before leaving on his little Quest for the Golden Fleece. Yes, his life was a series of improbable adventures; he'd pretty much gotten over that by now. At least this journey hadn't been nearly as eerily like the myth-Jason's journey as he'd expected. He'd encountered trials along the sea-road to Dojum, but none were even faintly analogous to the ones the mythical Jason faced—the lone exception being that both Jasons had helped out a king at one point. Certainly, Jason Blue's little adventure on Dojum had gone over much more smoothly than the other Jason's adventure at his destination. For one thing, Akolos, however unfriendly, wasn't nearly as murderous as the owner of the Golden Fleece, Aeëtes.

Come to think of it, Curtis was kind of like Medea—he was a powerful mage whose father was the king, and he'd saved Jason out of fondness for him. Moreover, this very blood brotherhood was akin to the wedding of the myth-Jason and Medea. On the other hand, the analogy failed in two crucial respects. One, a boy who is one's blood brother is very different from a woman who is one's wife; two, there didn't seem to be an evil bone in Curtis's body, whereas Medea was a murderer herself.

At any rate, it would certainly be interesting to see how things developed from here.

Part III

The Schism

25

Snakes and a Train

Jason, Roland, and Curtis squeezed themselves and their luggage into a Gyeedian maglev car. It was, at that moment, 4:06 PM on February 16th, 2004. The voyage of the *Argo*, which was supposed to have lasted about two Gregorian weeks, had instead taken a day over three—not that anybody was particularly surprised.

“...you can always change the expression into rational-exponent form, so it’s easier to work with.” Roland was saying to Curtis as the three of them sat down. The car was otherwise empty: it was a vacation day of the week, so the train had few riders. “And then, when you’re finished, you can split the fraction into a integral exponent and an integral root index, to make the expression look more sensible.”

“Oh, I get it.” said Curtis.

“Uh, Roland?” said Jason. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about.”

“Yes, what is it?” said Roland.

“Whoa, is that that Terran language you speak?” Curtis asked of Jason.

“Yeah.” said Jason in Common. To Roland, in his native tongue, he said “Well, I’m afraid this might sound inane, considering the reaction I got from the prince here when I asked him, but here goes: why aren’t there any female mages?”

Roland smiled wryly. “Ah, Jason, I think there’s some things you’ll never understand.”

Jason’s eyes bugged out. “What?”

“The thing is, if you don’t already know the answer to that question... well, it’s something that ought to be intuitive, if you know anything about sexual dimorphism.”

“Well, I think I do, but it ain’t. What does anatomy have to do with spellcasting?”

“No, Jason, it’s not the anatomical differences that are important here; it’s the subtler ones.”

Jason made an annoyed sound. “Look, Roland, you’re expecting me to pick up on something, but I’m obviously not getting it. Please, just spell it out, like you’ve done with every other question I’ve asked.”

“All right, all right, I’m sorry. It can be hard to keep all the strange, contradictory mores of the United States in mind.” For a moment, he stared out the window, into the darkness of the tunnel. “Males and females are very different beings—not only on a gross biological level, but also on a slightly less obvious psychological level.”

"Oh?" said Jason. He recalled how Beatrix had called Roland a misogynist, according to the adventurer.

"Yes. Among the differences is how men and women make decisions. To be specific, men are slow and deliberate: they take the positions they do after careful analysis. Women, conversely, are capricious, malleable, apt to flutter from one idea to another as a butterfly visits flowers. This particular instance of sexual dimorphism is pertinent to wizardry because spellcasting entails great power, and as you know, with great power comes great responsibility. Now, just think if someone who was easily moved, someone who wasn't really capable of such responsibility, could cast spells. Can you imagine the madness that would result? I fear to. Thus, women cannot learn magic, at least in Gyeeds and other civilized nations."

Now the usual roles were reversed: Roland was calm, and Jason was struggling to control his anger. "It's not quite clear" said the latter, choosing to play along at least for the moment, "whether you mean that it's physically impossible for women to cast spells, or that it's illegal for them to do so."

"The latter, sadly," said Roland. "There are some women who learn spellcasting through channels of ill repute, and there are even some nations that allow women to become wizards. Female spellcasters are generally called witches, hence the use of the Common word for 'witch' as a generic insult."

Jason thought of saying more—of loudly denouncing the assumptions Roland made—but he felt that it would be utterly useless, and so fell silent instead.

"Do you understand now?" said Roland, aware that something was wrong but ignorant of what it was.

"Yeah, I think so."

Roland looked at Jason for a few more seconds, then turned to Curtis, who'd been paying no attention to the conversation (not that he could understand it), and picked up where they'd left off in their discussion of mathematics. Jason slumped in his seat and sighed.

He'd been trying to ignore this theme for a while, half-hoping that the many clues he'd noticed were misleading him. Now, it was all too obvious. Roland, along with Gyeedian society in general, was sexist. *Really* sexist. Well, it could be worse—Jason remembered reading an article purportedly from a 1950s American women's magazine that had said "a good wife always knows her place"—but all told, it was pretty bad.

Jason was gripped with the urge to *fight* this sexism—if not to become some kind of activist, then at least to challenge Roland's beliefs. Then the pessimistic side of his mind reminded him how hopeless either endeavor would be. He hadn't really noticed this problem for so long because it was invisible; it wasn't talked about. Sexism was so thoroughly ingrained into the Gyeedian zeitgeist that it was taken for granted. There were feminists in Gyeeds, but all they'd done was grant women suffrage to put the city a bit more in line with the rest of the modern world. If they now planned on breaking through the glass ceiling, they were being awfully quiet about it. In short, trying to overcome sexism in Gyeeds would be like—well, very much like trying to overcome ageism in the United States. It would be hard to argue for an issue when most people didn't even recognize it as an issue.

It was funny, come to think of it, how nicely Gyeeds treated children. Gyeedian

children weren't second-class citizens or sub-humans; they had all the rights of adults, and also a few more, by reason of the handicap of their physical form and (in many cases) financial and emotional dependence on adults. The Common equivalent to the word "minor", when used in reference to children, was widely considered demeaning and offensive, whereas in the Terran West it was the proper term. Jason had to admit that on the whole, Gyeeds was a much more pleasant place to be a kid—a male kid, at least—than his country of birth.

Well, Jason supposed, the fact that the distribution of bigotry was so arbitrary was a testament to the arbitrary nature of bigotry itself.

"...that I was 'naturally magically inept'." Jason was saying to Curtis.

"Wow. That stinks."

Roland was about to say something, but he was cut short by Jason. The boy hurriedly motioned to the other two to shut up and stay still. He tapped his nose meaningfully: he had smelled something suspicious.

The party was in a hallway in Roland's apartment building, just a few steps away from the adventurer's home. Jason tiptoed over to the door and ran his nose along its side, its lock, and its bottom edge. "There are three men in there," he whispered to Roland and Curtis, walking back to them. "They never opened the door, but somehow, they got in. One's near the couch, another's near the kitchen counter, and the third's in your bedroom, Roland. They're not budging an inch, so they're probably hiding. And, there's some other smell which they've each got an instance of; I haven't smelled it before, so I don't know what it is."

"They must have looked in through the window and teleported inside," said Roland. "Now, they hope to ambush us."

"They must be Jacob Triskin's lackeys!" Jason hissed. "Can you two handle them?"

Roland looked at Curtis, who had been paying attention. "Can you hold your own in combat?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Excellent," said Roland. "All right, what you need to know is that these men are most likely armed with Piercers... do you know what those are?" Curtis nodded. "Good. So, you can use Projectile Shields, but don't rely on them to protect you; fight aggressively." He concisely described the pertinent parts of the apartment's layout. "So, open the goozack, run into my room, and take care of that fellow as quickly as possible, then come back to help me with the other two. With luck, we'll be able to dispatch them all before they've even registered our presence."

"I'll just stay back here," said Jason.

Roland smiled. "A wise plan."

After a bit more strategizing, Roland slowly unlocked the door, as quietly as possible. Then, Roland teleported inside at the same moment that Curtis threw open the door. Jason watched from afar as Curtis ran into Roland's room and Roland conjured two Projectile Shields. Two men popped out of hiding and opened fire, with Piercers. Roland quickly struck back with some of the strongest spells he could muster. One gunner was instantly knocked out by a strong bolt of electricity; the other was set on fire and writhed about for a moment until Roland killed him with

more lightning.

The man in Roland's room screamed. Roland rushed in there, ignoring the fact that his couch was on fire for the moment. A few seconds later, he shouted and ran back into the living room, though he didn't look seriously alarmed. He then turned his attention to the fire, casting a spell over it. A perfect sphere of liquid water appeared in the air and fell down on the flames, extinguishing them. Roland frowned at the large black mark that was left behind.

Curtis sauntered out of the bedroom with—Jason involuntarily squeaked with terror—a huge emerald cobra wrapped around his arms, and a proud smile on his face. The snake had its hood extended, though it wasn't hostile towards Curtis. It looked around the room, its long, forked tongue darting in and out of its mouth.

"Get rid of that." Roland snapped.

"Man, you're no fun." said Curtis. He said a word of power and the serpent disappeared in a flash of green light.

"All clear." Roland called to Jason.

Jason cautiously walked into the apartment, closing the door behind him.

"Where did that snake come from?"

"I made it." said Curtis. "Wasn't it awesome?"

"Er..."

"You've got to be crazy to make creatures in a fight like that." said Roland.

"Why didn't you just use a conventional combat spell?"

"It was a great fight for monsters!" Curtis declared. "That guy was hiding in a little space, so I just made a snake and threw it at him. Then I stunned him while he was busy with it."

"Why didn't it bite you?" asked Jason.

"Cause it was my monster."

"Created creatures only attack those whom the caster wishes them to." Roland explained.

"Actually, why don't mages just use that stunning spell all the time?" said Jason. "It seems like a more elegant and humane way to take enemies down than..." He looked at the corpses. "Electrocuting them or burning them to death."

"It is," said Roland, "but it has a prohibitively short range, which keeps it from being very useful in combat."

"Oh."

"Hey!" someone shouted from the hallway. "What was all that ruckus about?"

Jason paused for a moment, then opened the door and poked his head out. A suited woman was standing just outside another apartment, looking at him critically. "Sorry, ma'am," said Jason, "we're just, uh, having a little party. We just came back from Dojum, y'see."

"I heard gunshots!"

"Yeah, I keep telling Roland to turn the TV down. Now he'll listen, hopefully. We'll be quieter."

The stranger didn't look entirely satisfied by this explanation, but, apparently deciding she'd accept it for now, she went back into her home.

Jason shut the door. "Hey, I never knew I could lie that well. Pretty good, eh, Roland?"

"It was decent. You should avoid using stalling words like 'uh', since they're often enough to tip people off."

"Yes, as you can see, Curtis," said Jason, "we have a professional liar right here: a politician!" Curtis laughed.

"That joke really isn't funny after you've heard it the first five hundred times." Roland said bitterly. "Now, Jason, can you identify that unknown scent?"

"Oh yeah, that." He sniffed around and eventually found himself at the rifle of the man who Roland had knocked out. "It's the smell of a firearm." He looked at Roland and Curtis. They seemed unsure of what to do now, just as Jason was. "But seriously, guys: what're we gonna do with the bodies?"

"I can dispose of corpses with relative ease." said Roland. "Curtis, did your snake manage to bite that man?"

"Yeah, a few times."

"He's most likely doomed to die, then."

"Doomed to die?" said Jason. "If we get him to a hospital, quickly, then they can save him, right?"

"And precisely how would we go about getting him to a hospital?" said Roland.

"Er... uh... good point. Dang, another pointless death!"

"Pointless? He was trying to kill us, remember?"

"Yeah, yeah." Jason grumbled.

26

Roland's Revenge

Roland got rid of the two dead bodies shortly, through avenues Jason didn't care to inquire about. They agreed it was worth interrogating the man who'd been knocked unconscious. In the meantime, Jason sat down and told Curtis of his and Roland's adventures at Jake's former lab, and how they'd been trying to hunt him down. Jason had to fight a little to hold the distractible Curtis's attention, but the story didn't take too long.

"The strangest thing" said Jason "is that Jake apparently didn't try to kill us even once during all that time we feared he would, and now he finally has attacked. I guess the recent events somehow led him to change his mind."

When Roland returned, he bound the gunman to the living-room wall with the same spell Jake's employees had used to bind Roland—the irony wasn't lost on Jason. Roland, however, was careful to take away this man's reagents.

Eventually, the hostage awakened. He was big and burly, and Jason feared he might resist interrogation. In fact, he cooperated quite nicely.

"Tell us your name, sir." said Roland.

"Nolan Leafliner." said the man. He sighed a bit, resigned to his fate of being questioned.

"Hm, 'Nolan'." said Jason. "Sounds a little like 'Roland'."

"Well, Nolan," said Roland, "tell us everything you can about Jake and your mission to kill us."

"So you already know about him?"

"Oh, yeah." said Jason, grinning.

"And by the way," Roland cut in, "needless to say, if you lie to us, you will *deeply* regret it."

"Don't threaten him like that, Roland." Jason chided. "You can see he's trying to play along."

"Just as well." said Roland, staring at Nolan. "Continue, please."

"Well, Jake is an alchemist who discovered how to make Piercers. He didn't tell us much about them. I think he's the only guy who can make them, so he's probably responsible for the Raincatcher massacre."

Kind of. thought Jason.

"He lives in King Akolos's castle, in Rorosion." Nolan added.

Jason was taken aback. "Do you have any idea why?" he asked.

"He said that he used to live in Gyeeds. Then the authorities found him," (Jason

guffawed here) “so he asked Akolos for shelter.”

“And... Akolos just gave it to him?” said Jason.

“In exchange for Piercers.”

“Ah, now things are beginning to make some sense. But how did you get here, if you met him in Dojum?”

“I’ve never been to the Starving Sea; I talked to him over a verseviewer.”

“How did you get the Piercers, then?”

“He gave me the password for a safety-deposit box where he’d stored a couple of them.”

“Dang, that’s pretty clever.”

Roland asked “Can you tell us anything else about the relationship between Jake and Akolos?”

“No, sorry.”

“Did Jake ever tell you why he wanted us dead?” said Jason. “And when did he give you this mission?”

“Last night.” said Nolan. “He never did. Something to do with your meeting with Akolos, I guess.” he added, nodding at Roland.

Everyone was silent for a few moments.

“Anything else, Jason?” asked Roland.

“Nope.”

“How about you, Curtis?”

“Huh?” said Curtis, looking up from the palm-sized dragonfly he’d just conjured.

“Never mind.” said Roland, sighing. “Now, this fellow has served his purpose; what do we do with him?”

“Please just let me go.” Nolan begged. “I’ve been good, haven’t I? I’ll never have a thing to do with Jake again.”

“What do you think, Jason?”

“Well, we sure as heck can’t bring him to the real authorities, right?”

“No, it’s still best to keep everything secret, as much as possible.”

“Well then, I think we should let him go. Beats killing him. I’m impressed that you’re even entertaining the idea, vengeful as you are.”

“He has been very cooperative. All right, Nolan, we’re going to let you loose on the streets.”

“Okay.” said Jason once everyone was assembled in the apartment once more. “This—this latest development has several consequences, not all of which I’ve thought through. Regardless, it seems like the most natural thing to do is to hunt down Jake muy pronto.”

“Yes,” said Roland, “but how would we get back to Dojum?”

“With the gate, of course.”

“With what stated purpose? Stanley would be very curious as to why we’d want to go back there.”

Jason thought about that for a few moments. “We could use Curtis as an excuse.” he suggested.

“How?”

"We say that, uh, Akolos wants to meet his son's new friends, or something like that. Would he want to meet us, Curtis?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"And... he wouldn't throw me in the dungeon again, would he?"

"Not while you have Curtis's blessing." said Roland. "Curtis generally gets what he wants in the castle, as you might've noticed."

"Ah, yes. So how's that plan, Roland?"

"So far, so good. What precisely will we do about Jake?"

"Well... hey, wait a minute. Curtis, have you ever met Jake?"

"What's he look like?"

Jason's description was lacking: he'd barely gotten a glimpse of Jake before, and what he had seen hadn't been very distinctive. "I don't suppose Akolos ever mentioned him, did he?"

"Nah, we barely talk." said Curtis. "I dunno who you're talking about; there's a lot of guys like that."

"Well... can you think of a man who just appeared there within the last few weeks and doesn't seem to be a normal employee of some kind?"

"Yeah, actually, there is one guy like that. I've seen him in the alchemy lab sometimes, too."

"Aha!" said Jason. "That must be him. Do you have any idea where he quarters?"

"Nope."

"Does he appear in the lab or anywhere else reliably, in the sense that we could find him there?"

"No. It'd be hard to find him 'cause there's so many people in the castle."

"Hmmm... oh, here's an idea. When he *does* go to the lab, does he use any equipment that nobody else uses?"

"Yeah, he has his own setup."

"Excellent. I just have to sniff that, and then I'll be able to track him down by sense of smell."

"Even with all of the other people in the castle?" asked Roland.

"Well, I might not be able to really follow his trail, but at least I'll know the door to his room when I find it. So, we'll barge in there late at night and interrogate *him*. Sound good, Roland?"

"I believe so."

"Just one more thing: Curtis, are you willing to help us on this little quest? There's nothing in it for you, really."

"I'll help you with whatever you want, Jay. That's part of the promise."

"Great! Just, please, don't call me Jay. My name's Jason."

"Jay, Jay, Jay!"

Jason scowled. "If you do that, I'm going to call you Curt."

"Go ahead!" Curtis cried defiantly.

"And you can call me Role." Roland joked.

"So be it, Curt. All right, Role, set up our return journey to Rorosion as soon as you can. I'm itching to finally bring this wild-goose chase to a close."

Two days later, the party was in the castle. Akolos had been surprisingly cooperative, receiving Jason and Roland as if they were human beings instead of dogs, causing Jason to wonder at how much power Curtis had over his father. (I'll spare you an account of that inconsequential meeting.) Curtis's approval also allowed Jason free reign of the castle. The latter sniffed around for Jake's scent while the former tagged along for Jason's protection in case they ran into the mad alchemist. Meanwhile, Jason and Roland were treated as esteemed guests and received lavish accommodations.

Soon enough, Jason, Roland, and Curtis were assembled outside of what Jason's nose claimed was Jake's room. They were standing on cold stone flags in a long, high-ceilinged hallway bereft of other people. The Starving Sea's moon shone in through a distant window.

Roland quietly unlocked the door with Curtis's master key and opened it. The room was dark and windowless; there was just enough light to make out a single person lying on the double bed—little more than had illuminated Jason's first encounter with Jake. Roland snuck inside and shackled Jake to his own bed with the same old binding-spell. He covered the man's mouth with his hand and motioned to the other two. The boys came through the threshold; Jason shut the door behind them and turned on the light.

The man woke up instantly. It was Jake, all right. His eyes popped open like a frightened deer's, and he was about to struggle when the feeling of Roland's knife gently pressed against the flesh of his neck stopped him. For the first time, Jason got a good look at him. He was thin; the skin on his face was stretched tightly over his features, his long, pointed nose and his broad forehead. He was balding, and what hair still remained on his pate was a slightly grayish black. His eyes, currently staring at Roland with some degree of indignant fear and anger, but mostly just surprise, were dark and narrow.

"You may speak," said Roland softly, removing his hand from Jake's lips and relaxing the knife's pressure on Jake's neck, "but you must do so very quietly."

Jake sucked in air through his mouth as his expression reverted to loathing. "What do you want from me, gentlemen?"

"We want some answers and some explanations," said Jason, walking up to the bed. "Let's see, where to begin? Ah, yes. Did you arrange Kevin's death?"

"I..." Jake looked at the knife. "Yes, I did."

"Why?"

"I wanted to keep the Piercers *secret*. When I heard from Roland here that Kevin had been so careless, I had him killed before he could leak the information to anyone else."

"So why didn't you try to kill us back then?"

"Two reasons: first, I thought it would be unnecessary, since you had every intention to keep the secret; second, I feared what would happen if the authorities found what you'd stolen from me."

"Actually, how did Kevin learn of your lab?"

"Well..." Jake sighed. "Kevin and I were old friends. I always knew he was a fool, but you know, friendship works in mysterious ways." His eyes drifted between Jason and Curtis. "Among his eccentricities was a certain morbidity. He was a

member of the Gyeedian Society of Death, as I've heard you know; he also belonged to a much more serious, death-*worshiping* sect called Thanatos." (The actual name of the sect was the Roots word for "death"; the Greek word for "death" is the nearest idiomatic equivalent.)

"Now, somehow—I'm not sure how—someone in Thanatos came up with the basic idea that I later developed into Piercers, and shared it with the other members. Kevin brought it to me, though it was strictly against the rules of the club, because he knew I'd be interested in that kind of thing. I instantly realized the dangerous potential of the idea, and so I worked on it only on the third floor of 256 Pulliard Street, late at night, with several guards to protect me. Even when I wasn't present, I kept the guards there to protect my research. I called the place my 'Piercer lab'. I gave Kevin the address so he could visit me while I was working there."

"Finally, things are beginning to make *real* sense." said Jason. "So did you choose the name 'Piercer'?"

"Yes."

"How did the Gyeedian government ever hear of it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The branch of the Gyeedian government that investigated the Raincatcher massacre called the Piercers 'Piercers', too."

"They never heard that name from me. I suppose it was a cruel coincidence. Yes, if that hadn't been the case, you wouldn't have thought anything special of the phrase 'Piercer lab', would you have?"

"Another crazy coincidence." said Jason, shaking his head. "So, tell us what happened after you fled from Pulliard Street. How did you end up here?"

"Well, I wanted a place where I could work on the Piercers in peace, as far away from Gyeeds and you two as possible. Dojum looked like an ideal location, especially considering Akolos's recent isolationist decrees. I got in contact with the king, and he agreed to provide me with shelter and a false identity if I provided him with Piercers. And so I came here via chain-verseportation; Akolos quietly allowed me in. Again, everything would've been fine for me if someone hadn't dropped a clue to my location: Akolos was too stupid to be careful with those Piercers, and so allowed a spy to see them being used."

"So Akolos got Piercers long after he made those decrees. Do you have any idea why he did make the decrees, then?"

"Well, he said to me, as he's said to you, that it was to defend against other islands in the Sea. In reality, I think it was to defend against other *verses*. As you might know, Droydania has been very sympathetic to Dojum lately, to the point of expressing its sympathy with monetary and military aid. Akolos must've feared the reaction of nearby verses on Gyeeds's side."

"And why is Droydania sympathetic to Dojum?"

"Because they're both essentially dictatorships." Roland spoke up, not taking his eyes off Jake. "The multiverse is divided between Droydania and Gyeeds in the way that Earth was once divided between the US and the USSR. There's a name for the division, actually: the Schism."

"I get it." said Jason. "Your development of the Piercers, Jake, is increasingly reminding me of the Manhattan Project. So, this brings us to: why did you decide to

kill us a few days ago?"

"Once the Piercers had been made public by Akolos, I began to fear you might have a change of heart and tell the authorities about me. I figured I could take back what you'd stolen, though I was aware of the risks, including this one. Also, my wife thought it was a good idea."

"Your wife?" said Jason. "Who—" Then it hit him. "Oh, no. No, no, no, no, *no*! This is too ridiculous; this is too contrived!"

"What're you talking about, Jay?" Curtis said suddenly. "Do you know who it is?"

Jason laughed weakly. "All too well. Don't you know, Roland?"

Roland looked at Jason as if he were mad. "Not at all. How should I know who this man's wife is? I suppose this is how you felt at first during our conversation on the maglev."

The boy shook his head sadly. "It's so obvious. It's so painfully obvious." He took a deep breath, then looked at Roland straight in the eye. "His wife is Beatrix."

Roland was horrified. "No! It—it—that's not true, is it, Jake?"

Jake smiled wryly, seemingly forgetting for a moment the mortal peril he was in. "I'm afraid he's got it, Immoralheart. I've been married to your ex-wife for a little under fifteen years now."

A great change came over Roland. His eyes glowed with a strong red light, and a quiet humming noise began emanating from his skin. The air around him seemed hazy. He breathed heavily through his mouth. Jason could see that the adventurer was straining every iota of his will to avoid blasting Jake to bits with a mighty burst of magic.

"So it was you!" Roland hissed.

Now Jake looked mystified. "What are you—"

"Don't take me for a fool! Beatrix, vile mockery of womankind, prepare to slink in the shadows once more!" With that, Roland lifted the knife, its blade glowing orange, and plunged it deep into Jake's heart. The alchemist died instantly and silently. Roland calmed down a moment afterwards, and the special effects abruptly ended.

For several seconds, you could've heard a pin drop, and it would've sounded like a deafening racket.

"Wow, Roland," said Curtis, his expression a mixture of sorrow and fear, "why'd you *do* that?"

"Because it was long overdue." Roland said simply. He slowly withdrew the blood-soaked knife from the corpse, frowning at it. He cast a spell and all the blood fell off in a sheet, creating a large stain on Jake's nightshirt but leaving the blade as pristine as it had been earlier. Then, he put the weapon back into wherever he stored it in that suit of his.

"Roland..." said Jason slowly "this has gotten far, far out of hand. You can't kill a man for such a petty crime as adultery."

"You think adultery is a petty crime, eh?" said Roland, crossing his arms. "How about inventing a weapon that could directly lead to the death of thousands—nay, millions? Is that a petty crime?"

"Albert Einstein was no criminal."

"Albert Einstein was a physicist whose innocent discoveries lead to the development of the atom bomb. He realized its evil, in time. He did not peddle atom bombs."

Jason threw up his hands. "Well, I take no responsibility for this murder. Good luck covering this one up, Role."

27

Politics

Jason wiped his fingerprints off the light switch, just in case, and then, with Curtis's help, teleported directly back to his room, leaving Roland to do the cleanup. Within a few minutes, Jason was in bed—though sleep, of course, proved to be elusive.

After about an hour, he heard gentle knocking on the door. "Hello?" he said.

"May I speak with you?" came Roland's voice. (Jason and Roland had their own rooms in the castle.)

"Uh... yeah, come in."

Roland entered, shutting the door behind him, and sat down in a chair beside Jason's bed as Jason turned on a small lamp. Roland was about to speak when he noticed the lukewarm look on Jason's face. After a pause, he said "You're still angry about that, I see."

"Well..." Jason was lost for words. "Well, of course I am! Did you expect me to just get over it? It wasn't like when, I don't know, you slaughtered all the prison guards. Jake was completely helpless, and you just stabbed him in the heart. That's *murder*, man!"

Roland propped his elbows up on his knees and thought carefully before he spoke. "We could have an extended conversation about this," he said, "but I don't think it would be at all helpful to either of us. Let's avoid it, shall we?"

Jason sighed. "Yeah, you're right."

The two of them stared off in nearly opposite directions for a while.

"What are you doing here, then?" said Jason.

"I wanted to ask how you guessed that Jake was married to Beatrix," said Roland. "How did you know? What clue or clues did you notice? To me, it just seemed to come out of the blue."

"I suppose that's a good question." Jason sat up a bit straighter on the bed. "It was a very strange revelation, strange in the way that it came to me. I didn't pick it up from any real logical evidence, and I didn't have a hunch or otherwise intuit the answer. The best way to explain it is like this: in my life, for whatever reason, the extraordinary is ordinary. Given the chance, fate will always throw me a curve ball. I think you know what I'm talking about. So, given this state of affairs, it seemed so *natural* that this guy who was your enemy would be married to your ex-wife."

"Astonishing," said Roland, rubbing his chin.

"For so long, I've been trying to figure out *why* things are like this, but I can't think of anything that could begin to account for such a phenomenon. Maybe fate or

luck or something like that really exists. Is that so far-fetched, in a world with dragons and magic spells? I really don't know. It's fantastic in a different way from dragons and magic—it's far more subtle.

"If there is some kind of cosmic force pulling the strings, it begs the question, why me? Even if I'm not a perfectly ordinary kid, I'm *pretty* ordinary. If I'm some kind of mystical Chosen One, all I can say is, whoever did the choosing made an odd choice."

"Never underestimate the power of coincidence," said Roland. "All kinds of coincidences are possible, and remember, unlikely as they are, they're far more likely than the existence of undocumented supernatural phenomena."

"Right, that's what James Randi would say. Yes, you may be right. And it is true that we met Beatrix on another Starving-Sea island, and Jake said his wife thought it was a good idea to kill us, so there was real logical evidence, after all. Sort of."

"God, how he diverged with my mental image of Beatrix's lover. I suppose it makes a kind of sense. They were both scientists who probably cared more about their work than each other."

"Speaking of which, what did you mean when you said something about Beatrix slinking in the shadows?"

"I was referring to her surname, which, I assume, will now revert to Shadewalker once more."

Jason nodded. "Here's a question for you, Roland: are you religious?"

Roland smiled a little. "Somewhat. I'm a deist. I believe that there is a benevolent god who created what became the multiverse, but I don't think he's omnipotent. Certainly, he doesn't intervene in the affairs of mortals, so he is unlikely to be responsible for what you described."

"Oh, I'd be delusional to think myself worthy of a deity's attention."

Once Roland had left, Jason spent much of the night tossing and turning, this way and that. When he finally fell asleep, he was haunted by nightmares of blood—so much blood—more than enough blood to recreate the first plague of Egypt. And in the center of it all was Roland Moralheart, his hands upraised and channeling white-hot fire from the heavens, his face in ecstasy of wrath...

Eventually the boy awakened, panting heavily with fear, as the first sunrays of dawn came in through the window.

"Thank all the deities man has ever created" Jason mumbled to himself "that I don't have prophetic dreams."

In a few days, the party returned to Gyeeds. There was a full-scale investigation into the spontaneous disappearance of the "close personal friend of King Akolos", which got nowhere. Several of Jake's personal effects were also gone, including another laptop computer. Roland had scavenged through these and then, finding nothing but Piercers and information about them he already knew, threw them all into the Starving Sea along with the body.

Things began to heat up in the IDC. Now that contact with the Sea was reestablished, Stanley Ironbone, with the support of Gyeeds's friends, politely demanded that Dojum share the secret of Piercers with the entire council. Akolos didn't deign to do so, and Emperor Ursamor (a woman; "empress" is a silly word),

ruler of the entire verse of Droydania, defended him. So began a back-and-forth struggle of threats and offerings between the two sides as the Schism widened.

Meanwhile, for the first time in what seemed like ages, Jason's life returned to normal, or something like normalcy. There were no adventures to go on, and no lurking killers to fear. He went to school, attended IDC meetings, read books, watched television, and thought about Earth.

The biggest change in Jason's life that had resulted from his voyage on the *Argo* was Curtis. Curtis was, in Jason's estimation, a strange lad. He was capable of great focus when it came to his main interests, spellcasting and mathematics, and indeed, he was a true prodigy in those fields. When he was supposed to be engaged in something else, on the other hand, he was forever drifting off into his own dream-world, usually paying just enough attention to whatever was going on to scrape by. Perhaps this was an advantage in some ways, as Curtis, barely immersed in the real world as he was, was barely affected by it. Jason's and Roland's moods swung up and down as their circumstances changed; Curtis was rarely anything but vaguely cheerful. Jason envied such apparent peace of mind.

While Curtis was so violently intelligent in some ways, in other ways he appeared truly slow-witted as well as distracted. Though he was happy to answer questions, he did so literally, with little regard for what information the questioner was really seeking. He generally spoke little, and his language was unintelligibly concise rather than terse. In fact, he once struck Jason as a good model of the American-teenage stereotype: smart in limited ways but lacking much wisdom, and almost devoid of eloquence. At least he didn't do drugs.

Despite Jason's mixed opinion of Curtis, the boys got along well and would often play games together—chess and its interdimensional cousins at first, until Jason decided it wasn't fun to lose within twenty turns every single time, then other board and card games. Curtis's reliance on straightforward logic to strategize meant that he was at a disadvantage in games with an element of chance, giving Jason a shot at winning. Jason feared this would change when the prince started learning about probability, and so, acting on what little he knew about math, he urged Curtis to go directly from precalculus to calculus and avoid less general fields for now.

There was one thing that Jason thought still begged investigation: Thanatos. If Jake had been telling the truth and such a group existed, it sure lay low. Both Jason and Roland hunted for any mention of it in newspapers and on the Internet, and they found nothing.

Many weeks passed. The IDC New Year's Day came and went—the year was now 5625. The only interesting development to come in this time was a bit of news that Roland happened to stumble upon. It was about Hoon. After the exodus of Thorm and family, trade with other islands had resumed and the little kingdom had returned to prosperity; this was interrupted, however, when a large force of Jilothic pirates arrived on the scene. The pirates killed Hoonian men, raped Hoonian women, and stole Hoonian gold.

The result was a devastation of the island far more complete than the dragons ever could have managed, even in the worst case. Apparently, Winlo had been careful to keep the presence of precious metals on the island a secret except to those he

trusted—the pirates had learned the truth from the chest of gold they’d stolen from Roland. The greatest irony was that, had Thorm been present, it would’ve scared away the invaders easily. And so, both Jason and Roland had something to feel vaguely guilty about.

As negotiations with Dojum continued, an interesting political backdrop formed behind them: the Gyeedian mayoral election. In June, Gyeedian voters would pick between giving Stanley a third five-year term (there was no term limit) or displacing him for Lloyd Waverunner, a young senator who’d also run for mayor in the last election. Lloyd was more left-wing, so much as the theory of left-right politics had meaning outside of Earth, and this was his primary point of appeal. For although Stanley was popular with Gyeedians, with a high approval rating, he’d gotten that way through appealing to both ends of the political spectrum, rather than the dominant one.

I suppose a bit more explanation about our friend Stanley is called for. Stanley began his political career as the conservative governor of a conservative district of Gyeeds. (Because of the city’s great size, presiding over merely a district was a prestigious position, akin to governing one of the United States.) That posed difficulties to his mayoral aspirations, since Gyeeds was largely liberal-libertarian. So, he compromised, taking the liberal side of just enough issues to woo the general populace without alienating himself from the people who’d made him governor. The other prong to his campaign was his track record of Getting Things Done: during his time as governor, Stanley had been very pragmatic, choosing a few issues to deal with at a time and dealing with them in the most sensible way he could think of, which policy had yielded impressive results in improving education and reducing crime in his section of the city. At any rate, Stanley had won by a comfortable margin in his first run for mayor, against a similarly middle-of-the-road man: he’d fetched 60% of the vote.

Stanley had fulfilled the handful of modest promises he’d made to Gyeeds, and done a bit more to improve the city’s interdimensional clout besides, by the time he was up for a second term. Still, the tide had turned against him: though he won, he garnered only 53% of votes. Analysts said that Gyeeds, which had always been liberal, was rapidly becoming much more so. More and more people were dissatisfied with Stanley’s compromises: for example, they wanted the restrictions on more dangerous magical reagents lifted. Lloyd, who’d been Stanley’s main opponent during that election, had grabbed as large a portion of the electorate as he had (considering Stanley’s popularity and incumbency) by appealing to the growing far left with his policies emphasizing unbridled freedom and charismatic speeches. Now, Stanley’s aides feared there was a chance he’d lose.

Thanks to how the terms of elected officials were staggered, Roland, currently in the middle of his first term, didn’t have to worry about his own reelection for now. Of course, he was essentially an aide to Stanley, so he was forced to help with the campaign of the man he hated. Though he didn’t enjoy it, he was engaged in this pursuit when he happened to stumble upon a mention of Thanatos.

Here’s how it happened. One day not very long after April Fool’s Day, Roland, by Stanley’s request, was combing through emails recently sent by government

employees when he found something intriguing:

I've been doing everything I can and will continue to do so. To be truthful, things don't look good. The zeitgeist is against us: Lloyd is going to win. I think we should ask Thanatos where to go from here.

The message was apparently sent by Keaton Stoneback, one of Stanley's top advisers, and delivered to a free email account that wasn't otherwise identified. Roland found no further messages addressed similarly, nor any other mention of Thanatos in Keaton's other communications. Keaton did, however, receive a reply:

So be it. We shall meet at the altar at midnight on Gold, 4.

"And that's all?" asked Jason after Roland told him and Curtis of it.

"Sadly, yes," said Roland.

"At least it's something," said Jason. "Let's see: we know that Keaton wants to consult this group, and they're going to meet at this altar. Now, where in the world is the altar? And what would Keaton want from the bunch? Well, they came up with the original idea for Piercers, so maybe they have good ideas."

"Who cares?" said Curtis.

"'Who cares?'" cried Jason. "I think we can all agree it's a good idea to get to the bottom of this Piercer business. Are you with me, Roland?"

"Of course."

"Curtis, don't you think it's worth it? Just think of how much is at stake."

Curtis shrugged. "What are you worrying about? Nobody's gonna hurt us."

"The three of us are unlikely to be directly attacked, sure, but don't you see how an interdimensional incident could develop from here, because of these Piercers? We've gotten this far; we've got to find out everything we can. Hell, where's your sense of curiosity? You're supposed to be a boy, like me—remember?"

"Whatever. You know I'll help you anyway."

Roland did everything he could to spy on Keaton's activities, but he got nothing—not a tidbit concerning Thanatos or altars or anything of the sort—until the day before the meeting. On that day, according to certain records, Keaton had a government employee teleport him to Scorch, a small town on the edge of a desert somewhere on the planet of Gyeeds, far from the city of Gyeeds.

"It's certainly fortunate that he can't teleport himself," said Roland. "Otherwise, he would have, and then we wouldn't know where he'd gone."

"I find it kinda scary how easily you get all that information about your colleagues," Jason remarked.

"Yes, it is frightening how little privacy they really have, isn't it? Well, you should know what it feels like. Bush signed the Patriot Act while you still lived in your country of birth, if you recall."

"At least that'll go away when the national terrorism panic dies down. I hope. Anyway, let's drop by Scorch ASAP and see if we can find the meeting by following Keaton. Show us a picture of him, and then, in the immortal words of the Bush

administration, let's roll."

28

Shape of Fire

It was noon in Scorch's time zone when the party arrived. They'd already known what it looked like, having looked at Scorch through a verseviewer in order to teleport to it, but Jason still found it jarring to suddenly be in the town. He noticed how the place had earned its name. It was mid-autumn here on Gyeeds's southern hemisphere, and the sun beat down as brutally as it did in the north in July.

Common wasn't common in Scorch. As the party walked along the small, dusty streets lined with small, dusty buildings of reddish stone, Jason saw signs written in runes he didn't recognize. The speech of passers-by, too, was in an unfamiliar language. Hopefully, the trio themselves would be no more familiar to these people—although they'd taken the time to disguise themselves a bit, anybody who knew to look for them could identify them at a glance.

After a brief survey of the central parts of town, the party split up and arranged to regroup a few hours later. Jason wandered through his assigned section, jumping between the few, narrow bands of shade this time of day afforded, as he examined his surroundings. Despite its harsh climate, Scorch was not a very poor town: Jason could recognize typical business establishments like hardware stores, barber shops, and laundromats. He didn't see Keaton.

Many, many hours slowly ticked by. The party met, split up again, and met again. Neither hide nor hair of Keaton could be found. Eventually, a while after sunset, the threesome went out for dinner.

"My aching feet!" Jason whimpered once the waiter had taken their orders. Roland knew a little of the language, so they managed to scrape by with that and a bit of pointing and pantomime.

"My feet hurt, too," said Curtis.

"Good," said Roland, "maybe you've lost some weight."

"I'm not *that* fat," Curtis insisted, glaring at the man.

"Of course you aren't," Jason butt in. "The problem with this town is that it's just a little too big for us to have a good chance of spotting this guy within the allotted time."

"Exactly," said Roland. "Stop that, Curtis! We just might need your magic yet." Curtis destroyed the little creature he'd created, grumbling.

"Oh, we're hardly likely to find him in the next... four-and-a-half hours, are we?" said Jason. Nobody replied. "I don't think so, either. But we would be *least* likely to spot him at the last minute, and I've come to expect the unexpected. In fact, call me

crazy, but I'd bet money that we *will* see this guy." Then, in English, he added "The nose knows."

"What's that mean?" asked Curtis. Jason translated, and Curtis mumbled "Pup.", laughing.

After a surprisingly good meal—the first good-tasting food Jason had eaten since he'd acquired super smell; he found the pleasant flavor intensified and increased in complexity—the party returned to business. Much to Jason's delight, they soon met with success: Curtis spotted Keaton walking into a small motel. Roland, making a quick trip inside, determined that the target had retired to one of the rooms. The group then booked their own room, so they'd have an excuse to be there and a hiding-place, and watched the hallway for any sign of Keaton's exit—Jason figured he'd leave for the meeting later.

Their patience was rewarded when at an hour and a half to midnight, Keaton, wearing a long black robe, strolled out of his room and out the door of the motel. Jason, Roland, and Curtis followed him some distance behind as he walked down a street, out of town, and into the desert with only the beam of a flashlight to guide him. As they journeyed, Roland cast a spell on the three of them that covered them with a desert-camouflage pattern, rendering them nearly invisible in the moonlight.

Curtis swore. "It's so cold," he whispered.

"Yeah, that's the desert at night." Jason whispered back. "I guess this meeting really is out of the way. Thanatos really is a crazy cult."

Keaton led them a long distance in a straight line across the desert. The journey was made rough by the weather and the party's fatigue, but, Jason thought, at least he could enjoy the scenery. Above was the great blue star-studded vault of the sky; below were the infinite waves of dark sand, marked only by the occasional boulder or cactus. Ahead was Keaton, a tall, dark figure backlit by the glow of his flashlight; behind were the lights of Scorch, now very faint indeed.

After about an hour, the light behind finally disappeared, and a new, faint light appeared ahead. As the party approached, Jason made out a group of black-robed figures standing around a large bonfire. A circle of austere stone pillars surrounded the scene, reminding Jason of Stonehenge. Once relatively close, the party fell to the ground and lay on their stomachs to minimize their chances of being spotted.

"Ah, good, Keaton," said one of the—well, cultists, Jason supposed—in Common. The man stood before a slab of stone which Jason assumed was the altar, itself standing before the fire. This cultist, like the rest of them, had the hood of his robe up, obscuring his face. Jason couldn't have made out anybody's features in the firelight at this distance, anyway.

"Hey, Zadoc," said Keaton. "Here's hoping Thanatos can help, eh?"

"Of course; we all are."

"Oh, I get it," Jason whispered. "They're asking the death-god for help." Roland motioned to him to be quiet.

The next few minutes were filled with inconsequential conversation as more cultists teleported in. One of the cultists brought the corpse of a large quadruped, which Jason's nose identified as a bull. (Over the past few weeks in Gyeeds, Jason had taken to time to visit zoos and farms and build up a mental catalog of animal scents,

just in case it turned out to be useful.) A total of about forty people eventually showed up, all young or middle-aged adults, not all male.

After a while, the one Keaton had called Zadoc, who was apparently the leader, declared "The ceremony begins now." The others arranged themselves into a large circle, with large enough gaps between them that the trio could easily see past, and Zadoc sang:

Thanatos, we need your wisdom.
Thanatos, we seek your advice.
Thanatos, we require your guidance.

The rest of the cultists sang:

Lord, give us a sign!
Lord, give us a sign!
Give us a sign to show us the path.
Show us the way to extend your dominion.
Show us the way to fulfill your will.
Lord, give us a sign!

Zadoc responded:

Thanatos, we bring you a gift.
Let it prove our undying loyalty.

"Og, the bull," he whispered loudly.

One of the cultists picked up the corpse, placed it on the altar, and returned to the circle. As the group continued to sing, Zadoc took a long knife out of the folds of his robe and proceeded to butcher the animal. Jason, who'd been somewhat sensitive to the sight of gore ever since he'd witnessed the pirates' attack on the *Argo*, was thankful that the flickering firelight revealed few details of the operation.

After Zadoc had finished slaughtering the bull and thrown some of it into the fire, the group stopped singing, and Zadoc shouted at the stars: "Thanatos! We, your humble servants, have done everything in our power to ensure the reelection of Stanley Ironbone as Mayor of Gyeeds, as you requested. Yet it seems we are doomed to failure. What must we do, O mighty god? Please help us serve you."

With that, the singing resumed. It now sounded expectant. Ever since Jason had heard the group sing "Lord, give us a sign!", a plan had been stewing in his brain; now seemed like the perfect time to execute it.

"Roland," Jason whispered, "I've got an idea. Kill my camouflage as I stand up. Both of you, get ready to fight if things get ugly."

Jason got to his feet and slowly walked into the firelight. Roland had silently removed the camouflage spell, so now it looked like an ordinary boy had spontaneously emerged from the darkness. The singing stopped, and all eyes focused on him.

"You have asked for a sign," said Jason loudly and gravely, spreading his arms

in an all-encompassing gesture, “and here it is.”

“That’s Jason Blue.” said one of the cultists, looking at him incredulously.

“I have come in this form” Jason continued without missing a beat “to show you the boy you must seek. You ask for guidance; Jason Blue will guide you. He does not worship or even know of me, but he is clever, and his cunning may lead you to victory.”

The cultists seemed very much unsure of how to react, glancing quickly at each other as if some might know better than others. Suddenly, a loud, deep humming noise emanated from the center of the circle. Everybody turned to see Zadoc writhing in pain, barely able to stay on his feet. A moment later, he stood tall, his eyes glowing dark violet, his body wreathed with translucent magenta flames—and yet he was not consumed. He stared at Jason, a grim frown on his face.

“Do not be fooled, my servants.” Zadoc cried in a booming, extremely low voice. “The boy is Jason himself, seeking to trick you as he tricked two dragons and a senile wizard. Destroy him at once!”

Jason was shocked, not to mention terrified. He did his best not to show it. “Muh—my servants!” he shouted. “This demon is guilty of the very crime he accuses me of. Do not be swayed! I shall reward the faithful, and punish those who doubt me!”

Now the cultists were really confused. Zadoc had the special effects and seemed more sure of himself, but Jason had shown up first and made a threat they didn’t dare ignore. They looked from Zadoc to Jason, scared to death that they might make the wrong choice. Some openly asked each other “Which one?”

“If you really are the avatar of Thanatos,” Zadoc called to Jason, a note of mockery in his voice, “then surely you can tell us what his servants requested of him as their last supplication.”

The gears in Jason’s head spun at Mach 10. He’d called himself clever; now was the chance to prove it. He recalled a line from *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*: “‘I refuse to prove that I exist,’ says God, ‘for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing.’” This had a grain of truth in that religion was so characterized by its lack of proof that accepting and even *expecting* no justification was widely considered a sign of piety. Religion had thus turned its greatest weakness into a rallying cry of its people. Jason could do the same.

“Look at the demon tempt you, my servants.” said Jason. “He seeks to prove he is your lord. But he will never succeed in misleading the truly faithful, for the truly faithful need no proof. I do not need to *prove* I am who your hearts know I am, for faith shall show you the truth! Faith is invulnerable, faith shall endure!”

Jason grinned inwardly as he saw the effect of his speech. The cultists seemed convinced by this appeal to emotion; they looked at Zadoc doubtfully.

“I am saddened that you are moved by such soulless rhetoric.” said Zadoc. “Surely you remember how I have never spoken such nonsense to you. I will, however, make it quite clear who is the real avatar. As I have long promised, I shall grant Zadoc the Gift!”

The cultists seemed to know what he was talking about, and watched him excitedly. The strange magenta fire that had long enveloped Zadoc become opaque and grew to a great size, shining brightly. After a moment, it returned to its former state, and Zadoc, pulling off his robe and tossing it to the sand, was revealed to be

transformed. His skin was a pale, greenish white, his lips were bright red, and in his mouth were long fangs. He smelled more like a corpse than a living person. Jason could hardly believe it: Zadoc had turned into a grade-A storybook vampire.

Zadoc grinned as he slowly rose about a yard off the ground, and there he hung, his arms folded across his chest and his feet dangling in the air. "Anyone who is still confused as to which of us has been fooling the lot of you can become Zadoc's first meal as a drinker of blood."

Everyone looked at Jason. None of the cultists seemed in the least confused.

Jason chuckled nervously. "I really had you guys going for a while there, didn't I?"

"Kill him!" Zadoc roared.

"Whoops, gotta go now," said Jason. With that, he spun around and ran away as fast as his legs would carry him.

Immediately, nearly all of the cultists, Zadoc included, fired lethal magic at his back. His life was saved by Roland, who leapt to his feet and conjured a shield for Jason in the nick of time. The shield was battered almost to nothingness, but it held.

Jason turned back to the battle as Curtis joined Roland. The two mages created another shield together that withstood the next volley better. Now the cultists, seeing that this fight wouldn't be as easy as they'd thought, spread out to flank our heroes. Jason soon found himself in a tight circle of magical shields in various states of deterioration, literally rubbing elbows with his companions. Though Roland and Curtis were severely outnumbered and surrounded, they were aided by the fact that most of their foes were not especially skilled wizards, whereas Roland was a better-than-average mage and Curtis a superb one.

Of course, in order for the two of them to win, they'd need to attack their enemies, which they hadn't yet done even once, entirely occupied with defense as they were. Roland and Curtis spoke to each other hurriedly, then held hands and cast a spell together. From Roland's hands, just extended past the shields, there sprang a great jet of flame like the one he'd used in Jilothus. It plowed through shields and cultists, but not just in one direction: it was a Chinese-dragon-like fiery being that curved through the air as Curtis gestured. It slew as many as twenty-five cultists before Zadoc, flying high above it, created a body of water that extinguished it instantly.

When Roland and Curtis tried to pull off the spell again, Zadoc arrived on the scene and destroyed the effect before it could hurt anybody. Then, the vampire fired a few lances of purple energy down at the party. Curtis cast an orange glob that scattered the bunch; as he did so, a cultist's spell broke through a nearby shield. The explosion was small enough that only Curtis was hurt and he wasn't killed, but he was burnt badly and thrown to the sandy ground, knocked out.

Immediately, Roland, bellowing, cast a lightning bolt at Zadoc. It connected, but, to Jason's horror, the vampire was completely unharmed. Roland cast a plume of fire, then several projectiles; Zadoc neatly dodged them all by flying from side to side. Not wishing to suffer the same fate as Curtis, Roland then tended to the shields and even made a new one in the air above him to protect against Zadoc's spells. In response, Zadoc zoomed downwards, feet-first, towards Roland. The adventurer was slammed to the ground, and he, too, fell unconscious.

Now, let us take a moment to survey the scene. Jason stood in the center of the circle, his eyes locked fearfully on Zadoc's glowing violet orbs. Zadoc stood on Roland's back. Beside them was the prone and helpless Curtis; around them were a circle of magical shields that were getting weaker by the moment, and, further away, the remaining spellcasting cultists.

Jason had not the shred of an idea of what to do. Filled with crazy despair and the feeling of impending, immediate, inevitable doom, he shrieked, with all the volume his little lungs could muster, the very worst profanity he could think of.

But then, in the space between Jason and Zadoc, a great ball of glowing white light appeared. The vampire stared at it, amazed, and then hurriedly walked backwards; Jason fell prone, hoping he'd be forgotten in the midst of whatever was about to happen.

The ball of light flashed, and then in its place stood—of all things—a phoenix. It was a man-sized bird, its feathers blood-red with orange and yellow highlights on its wings. It was covered with ghostly white flames like the magenta ones that perpetually surrounded Zadoc. Its mighty talons pawed the sand, itching to tear into the vampire's undead flesh. It was an awesome sight to behold!

The phoenix appeared facing Zadoc; for a moment, it craned its head backwards to look at Jason. He looked at its long yellow beak and its spherical, glowing white eyes. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as a sudden ecstasy overcame him. In spite of everything, he was filled with a strong, yet warm and gentle happiness, a deeply fulfilling pleasure of such intensity he had never felt before. *This*, his soul cried out, *this* was what he had always been unconsciously seeking since birth; *this* was what gave life meaning. His heart beat rapidly with feverish excitement.

Then the phoenix turned back to the vampire, and all those sensations washed away like pebbles tossed aside by a sudden flood. Just before the phoenix moved its head, though, Jason could've sworn it winked.

The great bird flapped its wings, hopped into the air, and flew towards the vampire, cawing. Zadoc quickly flew backwards, casting spells at the phoenix; it seemed mostly unaffected. The chase wove crazily through the air as the remaining cultists fired at the phoenix. None hit the bird, but one hit the vampire, stunning him for a moment. That was enough for the phoenix to finally catch him. It slashed him with talons that seared him with intense heat. Zadoc struck it with his fists, which did hurt it somewhat. He opened his mouth, exposing his long fangs, and lunged for the bird's neck. But then the phoenix suddenly burst into a fireball. It was unharmed, and all that remained of Zadoc was a charred skeleton, which fell to the ground, sending a small cloud of sand into the air.

One by one, the phoenix summarily dispatched the other cultists without taking much damage. Once it was finished, it landed near Jason. It flapped its wings ceremoniously and cawed, and Roland and Curtis glowed with golden light for a moment. Then it disappeared in another flash of light.

"Thanks a bundle!" shouted Jason.

Roland and Curtis slowly awakened and stood up. Jason was already on his feet. The two mages were still wounded, albeit less severely than they had been before the phoenix's intervention.

Roland looked around. "How did you do this, Jason?"

"I didn't." said Jason. "I got a phoenix ex machina, just like Harry Potter."

"Can't you speak in Common?" said Curtis.

"I'll tell you guys all about it later." said Jason. "In the meantime, let's figure out what to do. All the cultists who attacked us are dead. The ones who couldn't cast spells, Keaton included, are nowhere to be found."

"They could be hiding anywhere in the surrounding darkness." said Roland. "It would probably be best to simply teleport home from here."

"Wait!" said Jason. "We still don't have what we came here for: information about the Piercers."

"Yes, and what are we to do about it?" said Roland.

"Hmmm... let's check Zadoc's robe. Maybe he was carrying something more interesting than that butcher knife."

They did, and they found a personal digital assistant of Droydanian make.

"Score!" said Jason. "All right, there's no place like home."

"I would not be caught dead wearing ruby slippers." said Roland sourly.

"They were silver in the book."

"That's not much of an improvement, so far as I'm concerned."

29

Purple Silver

"Seriously, Jason," said Roland the following morning, once the trio had all awakened and convened in the living room, "why did you do that?"

"It was a great plan!" Jason insisted. "If it hadn't been for, well, what happened—"

"*Reality* came and foiled your plans." said Roland.

"Oh, c'mon! How was I supposed to have seen that coming, with the vampirism and all?" Silence. "My point exactly. Y'see, if I'd managed to convince them—and I almost did—we would've solved this mystery like that." He snapped his fingers. "Not to mention that it really wouldn't hurt to have forty cultists who'd put their lives on the line for me."

"It worked out better than I'd expected." said Roland. "Still, I do think it was rash of you to put yourself in unnecessary danger."

"I thought the possible benefits outweighed the costs." said Jason, shrugging. Then he recounted the matter of the phoenix. Once he was finished, he added "So now you'll believe me about the bloodbreast and the red rat, won't you?"

Roland took a deep breath and looked thoughtful for a few moments. "I don't know." he said finally.

"Curtis," said Jason, frustrated with his foster father, "what do you think?"

"What do I think?" said Curtis, his tone suggesting the question was alien to him.

"Yeah, what's your opinion? You seem to barely ever voice one, just sittin' there watching me and Roland go at each other, even when we speak in Common, but you must have one."

"Well... uh... I guess they're all omens. And the phoenix was divine aid."

"What?" said Jason, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, nobody else than a god could do all those things."

"A *god*! What god?"

The question was mostly sarcastic, but Curtis took it seriously. "Abon, I guess."

"Abon?"

"Yeah, the god of adventure."

"Ah," said Roland, "Curtis is a polytheist. A Frotanist, to be specific. It's a Starving-Sea religion."

"Huh!" said Jason. "In this day and age. Well, Curtis, tell me about this, uh, Frotanistic deity."

"Frotanism isn't outdated just 'cause it's old." said Curtis. "Abon protects adventurers, people who get in trouble a lot. He helps adventurers get out of trouble."

"Indeed." said Jason. "I guess we qualify for his help, if anybody does. So you suppose Abon made that phoenix?"

"Yeah."

"That doesn't explain the other two animals. Nor does it say anything about what in the world happened to Zadoc. Man, the way he acted, you'd think he really was possessed! Not to mention the vampirism."

"No, the bloodbreast and the rat were omens."

"Of what?"

"I dunno. Think about it. Or, maybe what they predicted didn't actually happen. The future isn't fixed."

Jason thought about the emotions he'd felt in the presence of each creature, and what those emotions might've been meant to foretell. The bloodbreast had caused dread. Had anything worth dreading happened afterwards? The Piercers were worth dreading, Jason supposed. Then, for the rat, there was the sense of impending solution to a mystery. He'd come a long way since then in solving the Piercer mystery, hadn't he? And the phoenix had brought happiness. Perhaps something really worth rejoicing about would happen in the near future—like an end to this stupid wild-goose chase.

So, yes, the omens could be stretched to fit the events. That didn't mean much to Jason, though. Such vague messages could be interpreted to have predicted nearly anything. And Jason was still agnostic. Thus, this explanation, though it might actually be true, was far from satisfactory.

"Maybe." he said after a while. "And the vampire?"

"A new spell." said Curtis.

"Roland, a penny for your thoughts."

"As we speak," said Roland, "the value of American currency is steadily converging on zero. If I lived on Earth, I'd take nothing but euro-cents. Anyway, I suppose I have to trust you about all those animals appearing, even the phoenix, inexplicable as such a beast is. However, I continue to hold that there's nothing magical about those feelings. Come to think of it, in light of the phoenix's particular emotional load, I think I might know the true source of those emotions."

"That being?" said Jason.

"Well..." Roland glanced at Curtis apprehensively. "Jason, it's no secret that you're approaching a pivotal point in your growth as a human being."

Jason thought for a moment, puzzled, then guessed "Puberty?"

"Precisely. Now, you've taken sexual-education classes in school; you know that in addition to the eponymous physical changes, there are a number of emotional changes."

"I don't see the connection. Spontaneous feelings felt in the presence of red-colored animals aren't among those changes, to my knowledge."

"Oh, yes, that's fairly unusual. But I was thinking about the emotion you felt in the presence of the firebird specifically. Perhaps I just got the wrong idea from your description, but it sounded to me like love, or some other kind of sexual feeling."

Jason made a face. "Are you saying I'm inclined to bestiality? I haven't hit puberty; I'm not even eleven yet!"

"Terran culture has misled you once again. I know that Hollywood portrays children as having their first crush at, oh, twelve at the earliest, but the fact of the matter is that in most cases, sexual attraction is the first outward sign of puberty. Ten is the most common age of first sexual attraction, so I'd have expected you to feel it at least once by now."

"I've never heard of anyone having a crush on a phoenix." Jason protested. "Besides, I wasn't attracted *to* it. I didn't actually feel a connection between it and the pleasure. Also, I felt that only while it was looking at me for the first time. The rest of the time it was there, including the moment it was standing right in front of me before it left, I was untouched. And is it a coincidence that this momentary crush should come about in such a way as to mirror what happened to me with the bloodbreast and the rat?"

"Jason, you're attempting to use logic to explain the behavior of these feelings. You must understand that your sexuality is still in its infancy. Your feelings will necessarily be chaotic and confused until you've settled a bit more comfortably into adulthood. Not to mention that, in any case, sexuality isn't bound by logic! It is infinitely plastic, ever-changing. Such transcendence of order and convention is the very source of its glory. I myself have had stranger experiences than falling in love with a phoenix!"

"I'd hoped to avoid ever having The Talk with *you*," said Jason. "Look, my 'sexuality' isn't the issue here. The issue is that a sort of animal none of us thought existed appeared out of nowhere and rescued us from certain death. And I experienced an intangible connection between this animal and two others that were colored red and appeared and disappeared in a similarly abrupt fashion. Obviously, something a lot weirder than puberty is going on here!"

"Don't underestimate puberty."

"Aw, c'mon! Don't you think your explanation is a little far-fetched?"

"Do you have a better one?" Roland countered, smiling slightly.

"No! And that's the thing that's *driving me crazy*! So many things happen with no explanation! There must be a satisfactory explanation for it all, there must be! Yes, I have no idea what it is. But I will not rest until I find it."

Roland shrugged. "Hopefully, everything will be cleared up for you in a year or so."

"Hopefully much sooner," said Jason. He glanced at Curtis, who was writing something on a little notepad.

"Quit looking at me like that, guys." Curtis said without pausing.

Jason looked away. "So, let's take a look at Zadoc's PDA and see if it has any clues for us."

Very conveniently, the device contained a journal that Zadoc had written to keep track of the cult's activities. The cult was six years old, so the journal was longish, but enlightening.

Zadoc, actually named Zadocus Fain, had founded the cult, and had always been its leader. It wasn't clear what the original motive for Thanatos's formation was.

(“Insanity, I guess.” said Jason. “Seems like all our villains-of-the-week are insane wizards.”) Zadoc and friends seemed to believe that the god Thanatos (as well as, perhaps, some others) had always existed, and they’d just decided to serve him. Supposedly, the faithful would be rewarded, just as Jason had promised. The nature of such rewards wasn’t made clear initially.

Zadoc knew that he and the rest of the cultists would be frowned upon by society in general if their worship was made known. So, they all swore vows of secrecy. They constructed that little outdoor temple in the desert, believing that such a setting was appropriate for worship of a death-god. And once in a while—say, every three or four Gregorian months—they would convene on that temple to sacrifice an animal or two and pray. They got no response. They were undeterred, believing that the god might help them in subtle ways, or that he was simply waiting for them to show enough faith.

Things changed rather abruptly one night in December 2000. Once the sacrifice had been made and most of the prayers recited, something extraordinary happened. Zadoc described it thus:

All of a sudden, the flames of the fire turned magenta and a voice came out of them, saying “Behold! Your great loyalty has earned my trust. From now until you at last see me in person, all of you shall be my servants. Serve me well and I shall reward you as only a deity of my stature can.”

Thereafter, Thanatos apparently contacted the cultists at most meetings at the altar, and sometimes at other places and times, in one supernatural way or another—sometimes through disembodied voices, sometimes through possession, sometimes through writing that mysteriously appeared and disappeared. In each case, some shade of the color purple was involved.

Thanatos made a lot of requests, all of which the cultists duly fulfilled. The reasoning behind them wasn’t always clear. He seemed to be attempting some kind of political engineering in Gyeeds. In particular, he tried hard to get an agent high up in the Gyeedian government; when his cultists’ attempts to climb the political ladder failed, he got them to convert Keaton, already a close ally of Stanley, with bribery. The general goal of his missions, actually, seemed to be split between promoting pacifist and authoritarian interests. He had cultists become activists for disarming Gyeeds and reducing its exorbitant military budget, but he also supported Stanley, capital punishment, and government-funded health care. Finally, he seemed to be trying to create enmity between Gyeeds and verses that Gyeeds was traditionally friendly with.

Occasionally, the cultists would ask their god for help. Usually, Thanatos gave it in the form of advice. Sometimes, he would provide funding for the cultist’s work or reward them for jobs well done: with a flash of purple light, a few ingots of pure silver would appear on the altar, worth enough in total to pad each cultist’s bank account a substantial amount. Thanatos also promised that in due time he would grant Zadoc, and then other especially loyal cultists, “the Gift”: vampirism. (Details of what becoming a vampire entailed were not given.) The cultists seemed to like the idea, though Jason didn’t see the appeal.

Things got even weirder when Thanatos gave his servants a different kind of

gift: a rough outline of a recipe for an alchemical creation. Can you guess what that creation was? Of course you can; if you've followed my story this far then you must have some brains. Well, Thanatos told Kevin specifically to give this proto-recipe to Jake, but not to tell the alchemist that it was by the cult's request. Kevin was also told to report on Jake's activities. When Jake sold some Piercers on the black market, Thanatos got the cultists to buy them, give them to some hired thugs, and send the thugs on what soon became known as the Raincatcher massacre. The god's motive for this, too, was unknown.

Finally, Thanatos had put special emphasis on the reelection of Stanley Ironbone. There the journal ended.

"Well," said Jason, "the hits just keep on comin'. Those were some clues."

"I wonder which god Thanatos was," said Curtis. "Maybe Rinew."

"The god of the afterlife," Roland explained. "There is no real Frothanist god of death."

Jason sighed. "I guess Zadoc, crazy as he was, was a clever enough wizard to pull this off. I can't imagine why he wanted to do all those things, but... insanity, eh?"

"So you think it was all a hoax he created?" said Roland.

"Of course," said Jason. "Who else could be responsible?"

"Rinew," said Curtis.

"Oh, no way!" said Jason. "No way am I going to start believing in gods. This world has dragons and wizards and vampires and phoenixes in it; it's no great stretch that a wizard should manage supposedly divine feats, right? I mean, think about what he did: turn a fire purple and make a voice come out from it, teleport some silver ingots, and finally, turn into a vampire. And he had the Piercer idea. Can't a wizard do all that?"

"Not the vampire," said Curtis, "except with a new spell. I dunno how it'd work."

"Yes," said Roland, "I've heard of no mortal spell that can transform one into that. Also, there is no known way to teleport something without also teleporting oneself."

"Maybe he got someone else to do it who was using an invisibility potion," said Jason. "Maybe he used another new spell. What do you think is responsible for all this, Roland?"

"I truly don't know. I'm inclined to believe there was some divine involvement."

"Then why wasn't the god involved from the beginning? Why did he only pop up nearly three years in?"

"What he said about faith."

Jason shook his head. "Bah! I'll get some satisfactory answers if it kills me. Chances are I'll run into a minotaur or something and it will. And then, in the afterlife, we'll see."

30

Creatures Stranger Than Dragons

Jason was at first afraid that the three of them would have to take up the ancient art of paranoia, as he and Roland had after meeting Jake for the first time. This fear was pretty much extinguished when Roland reported seeing Keaton at work: "He gave me an unfriendly, knowing look, and then left me alone. For one reason or another, it seems that the remaining cultists aren't out for our blood."

Now that the trail of the Piercers had finally hit a dead end, or so it seemed, there were plenty of other things to investigate. Jason knew that Roland might well be right about the red animals, and that he ought to ask a doctor or a psychologist for a second opinion, but he was reluctant to. His symptoms, if they were symptoms, had no place in the medical canon, so the best any physician could do was agree with Roland, and that (Jason thought) wouldn't be helpful at all. The idea that all these strange things were simply the products of his own mind felt demeaning to him. He wasn't going to believe it until all his other options had been exhausted. Moreover, even if Roland was right, that didn't explain the simple existence of the phoenix. Nor was it easy to believe that Zadoc was entirely responsible for his own vampirism. And so, in Jason's mind, everything pointed to one possibility: the paranormal. Whatever was going on, it wasn't like anything he knew. He tentatively decided that it wasn't like anything most of the human race knew, either.

And so he began a little investigation of his own into the supernatural—or rather, those supernatural phenomena that weren't generally taken for granted, as magic spells and dragons were. Even in a world with those, there were plenty of people who believed in such staples of Terran superstition as UFOs, past lives, and cursed jewels. Jason had no doubt that the vast majority of the stuff was only moonshine in the water. That didn't preclude the possibility that someone, somewhere had accurately described the same mysterious things that he'd encountered.

Jason began his investigation alone. "The paranormal?" asked Roland, glancing over Jason's shoulder to see where he was on the Gyeedian internet. "Jason, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash."

Jason thought for a moment. "When one is bankrupt," he replied, "dumpster-diving is better than sitting on one's hands. So touché."

"Bankrupt?"

"Bankrupt of answers."

"Yes," said Roland, with some measure of annoyance in his voice, "I've heard

you sing that song before. You can't answer every question, you know."

"I can try," said Jason.

And indeed he did try. Only a day or so into the process, he ran across mention of one Gyeedian Museum of the Paranormal. It looked fun as well as potentially informative; currently, it even had a special exhibition dedicated to "the recent surge in reports of supernatural creatures around the world".

Jason was hesitant to go anywhere alone. Roland was uninterested; Curtis liked the idea, and Jason figured a world-class Imagination mage ought to be as good a bodyguard as any. And so, one fine morning when school wasn't in session, the boys set off for the museum.

It was a pleasant day, a surprisingly warm one for so few weeks after the vernal equinox. The sun's yellow rays shone down cheerily, casting the spotlight on birds that sang their simple melodies from arboreal stages. There were a lot of birds and trees around Jason now, since he was nearing the museum, and the museum was situated in a small park, a plot of greenery that was full of animal life despite its size. (Well, it wasn't very green at this time of year, but you know what I mean.) There were creatures of brown, yellow, and even blue hues—but not, Jason was glad to see, of red ones. He was almost sure he'd be kidnapped or something during this trip. At least it was off to a good start.

Inside the building, after he'd shelled out a fair amount of interdimensional currency for his and Curtis's admission, Jason found plenty of curiosities. While the place was too modest to feature the grand architecture that Gyeeds's flagship science and art museums were known for, the exhibits themselves were interesting enough. Even Curtis enjoyed them. Here was a book of sheet music that the ghost of a deceased composer had supposedly dictated to a Colloyun salaryman; a few samples of the orchestral pieces contained within emanated from a nearby speaker. Over there was a painting made to match a young girl's description of the time she saw prophetic images on the surface of a lake. And, of course, there was the obligatory scrap of metal from an alien spacecraft.

In the "Creatures Stranger Than Dragons" exhibit, Jason didn't find any phoenixes; there were, however, two mentions of vampires, or beings like them. In one glass case was a scrap of blue cloth with green stripes; a woman had allegedly gotten this from the robe of a tall, dark stranger who carefully avoided sunlight. A sign on one wall gave an account of a man who woke up one morning to find two bloody holes in his neck. Other featured creatures included unicorns, hydrea, fairies, and several beasts with no place at all in Terran mythology, like a hexapodal beaver with two spikes on its forehead and a venomous bite.

Jason and Curtis were on their way out when something finally happened. "It's you!" said a large, heavy-set, older man to Jason.

"Yeah, it's me," said Jason, walking out the door of the museum. He pretended to be unperturbed, but he maneuvered himself so that Curtis was between him and the stranger.

"Can I talk to you, Jason?" said the man, hurrying up to the two of them. "I know we've never met, but I—I need to apologize to you."

Strange fellow. Jason thought. "Okay," he said, sitting on the end of a nearby

bench and gesturing to Curtis to sit next to him. The prince did so; the man sat beside him. "Would you mind introducing yourself?"

"Cade Uffet, carpenter." Then he seemed to suddenly notice Curtis. "Curtis Debyeamo?"

"That's me!" said Curtis.

"But what is it you feel the need to apologize to me for?" asked Jason.

"Oh." Cade looked back to Jason. "Do you recall Ernest Seadweller's home, and how it was hollowed out of a rock in Moonrush Park?"

Jason raised his eyebrows. *That* felt like a blast from the past. "Yeah, what about it?"

"I made it." He paused. "I'm a pretty good Will mage, and in earlier days, I used magic to accomplish feats of carpentry that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. I took clients regardless of their characters and motives, and of the legality of the work they commissioned. They—Ernest included—would take me to and from the site blindfolded. So I made a house for Ernest inside that rock, at his request." He sighed.

"Will magic is cool." Curtis remarked. "The problem with Imagination is that you can't control it that well."

"After being jailed for the second time after one of those jobs," Cade continued, "I cleaned up my act. Now I keep finding that the criminals whose jobs I took used my work to help perpetrate their own crimes. If Ernest hadn't had such a well-hidden home in the middle of Gyeeds, maybe he would've been caught earlier. So, I'm sorry."

"Well, uh... thank you." said Jason. He'd wondered about that house, but that mystery had been eclipsed in his mind by all of the bigger mysteries. "I accept your apology."

"I've always wanted to apologize" said Cade "ever since I saw you on television. I've just felt too embarrassed to contact you. It's good to get it off my chest."

"I saw him first on TV, too." said Curtis.

"What brought you to this museum?" asked Jason.

"Oh, I like the paranormal." said Cade. "Even if most of it's hogwash, it's all interesting, and there may even be a little truth to some of it. Or so I think. Why did you come?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I'm doing some detective work. Something sort-of-paranormal happened to me, and I'm looking to see if the same thing happened to anybody else."

"You're seriously looking into it? If that's the case... I owe you, a lot, so maybe this will cover a bit of the debt." He looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, then leaned across Curtis and whispered "Have you ever heard of Leela Aranin?"

"Uh... it rings a bell, faintly. I don't remember anything about her."

"She was one of the world's foremost investigators into the paranormal, a Droydanian biology professor. Two years ago, she committed suicide for unknown reasons. Everyone suspected foul play, of course. Except that she didn't really die; she faked her own death and went into hiding, and so far as I know, she's still with us today."

"What makes you think that?" asked Jason.

"I made her hiding-place. She hired me shortly after her ostensible suicide."

"Oh." Jason thought for a moment. "But did you *see* her?"

Cade nodded. "I was blind on the journey to and from her chosen location, but I spoke to her the rest of the time. I created a large apartment for her in the middle of a frozen wasteland, under ground that was covered at the time by several feet of snow. It was so cold—I think I was near one of the poles of some planet. She's hidden, all right.

"She knew of me because her son, Simon Baria, is a good friend of mine. We were in the same class of Will mages, in a Droydanian school—I used to live there—and although we no longer see each other often, we keep in touch. Anyway, if you have any real interest in the paranormal, you should try to reach Leela. I don't know how, but you could ask Simon." He took out an index card and a pencil and wrote some contact information on it, then handed it to Jason.

"Thanks a lot." said the boy.

"Any time." said Cade, standing up. "Tell him I referred you. And ask me if you need anything else." he added as he walked away. "There's only one Cade Uffet in Gyeeds."

"Ah, good." said Jason to Curtis. "Now we finally have another MacGuffin: Leela Aranin. It was terrible not having any clear wild goose to chase for three whole days there."

"Ah, yes, Leela Aranin." said Roland at dinner that evening. "What Cade said was true, at least up to, if not including, his claim that she's still alive. She was quite a character. Well, I don't trust Droydians; that's the truth of it."

"It seems worth looking into to me." said Jason. "I'm going to get in touch with this Simon. There's no doubt in my mind that this most recent crazy coincidence has led me in the right direction."

An hour or so later, he wrote an email to the address Cade gave him, explaining that he was "looking into something paranormal" and asking if Cade had told the truth about Leela. The address pointed to a server in Droydania, so you might wonder how Jason's message got there. The answer is that although many verses, like Gyeeds, had their own internets, all these super-networks were connected (through clever use of fiber-optic cables and verseviewing technology) to a super-duper-network, an Internet-with-a-capital-"I", if you will, allowing information to freely flow even across dimensional boundaries.

The next morning, Jason got a reply:

Everything Cade told you is true. I'd be happy to explain more, but it's unsafe to do so over a distance. Please come to my house here in Droydania, and I'll tell you everything you want to know face-to-face. Bring anyone else you wish; I'm always pleased to receive guests.

Jason read the message to Roland and Curtis, then said "It's 'unsafe' to talk about except 'face-to-face'! How thrilling! Yessiree, it's time for another adventure, eh wot, my comrades?"

"Yay!" said Curtis.

"Do you two actually *enjoy* this nonsense?" said Roland, with a note of pain in

his voice.

“Sure.” said Curtis.

“I’m trying to.” said Jason. “So, can we go?”

“Yes, so long as we can obtain permission from the officials of the Droydanian Empire.” said Roland. “They’re isolationist, and they’ll be especially displeased about a major Gyeedian politician soiling their soil with his smutty Gyeedian feet. Crossing the Schism is no small feat! Worry not, I doubt they’ll dare to deny us passage. I’ll just say that... mmm... I’m investigating Leela’s suicide, possibly in connection with Jake’s murder. It’ll only take a bit of elbow-grease.”

31

George and Harold's Thin Ice

Three whole days of red tape later, the trio was officially granted permission to visit 0-3-14-62-39, the town where Simon lived, for a span of twenty-four hours maximum.

("Lovely name." Jason remarked. "Very picturesque, like an industrial mining complex; rolls right off the tongue, too. Who thought of it, Shin-Ra?")

"Who's Shin-Ra?" said Curtis.

"Never mind." said Jason. "It was a bad joke.")

They verseported directly from Roland's apartment to the threshold of Simon's house. Jason looked around to find himself in a suburb that would have been pretty much at home right in the heart of the good-ol' US of A. Each side of the wide paved road that ran through here was lined with expansive houses and garages spaced far apart. The main difference was that here, in place of acres of neatly-manicured lawns, the empty space was filled with evergreen trees, which provided welcome shade from the noonday summer sun.

Simon's house, an unusually small one, was painted dark blue. Jason picked up the knocker and rapped against the door. "Jason and friends!" he called.

"Coming!" a voice replied. It was high, about halfway between Curtis's alto and Jason's soprano. (While I'm on the subject of voices, I might as well add that Roland was a tenor.)

Jason smelled a young boy approaching. *Simon's son, maybe? Or maybe Simon's a kid. I just assumed he was an adult.*

The door opened to reveal a man in his twenties, a bit taller and skinnier than Beatrix. He wore the standard suit, and his skin was a dark shade. His features were soft, and his face seemed greatly subdued; he was happy to see the group, but his smile was slight, and his gray eyes crinkled only subtly. The effect was not one of feigned or suppressed emotion, but of very mild feeling, as if this face, and also this person, was little impressed by stimuli of all sorts. Nigh-total calm seemed to be his natural state.

"Simon Aranin Tycho Baria," said the high voice, coming from the man's throat, "at your service."

Jason did not entirely succeed at hiding his surprise. Simon *smelled* distinctly like a boy, too, which actually affected Jason more, as he was used to thinking of his olfaction as infallible. "Uh, hello." he said. There was no reason to believe that this man knew much about any of the party, so introductions were called for. "I'm Jason. This man" (he gestured at Roland) "is Roland Moralheart, Adventurer of Gyeeds. He's

my foster father.” Roland looked more surprised than Jason. “This” (he pointed to Curtis) “is Curtis Debyeamo. He’s my, uh, foster brother.” Curtis, too, was puzzled.

“I see you’re surprised by my voice.” said Simon. “Don’t worry, everyone is. I’m a eunuch.”

“A... did you just say what I thought you said?” said Jason.

“Yes, ‘eunuch’. I was castrated when I was nine to keep my singing voice from changing. But won’t you come in?”

“Sh—sure.” Jason mumbled.

Simon turned and walked inside. Jason followed him, with Curtis close behind. Noticing that Roland was absent, Jason glanced behind to see him apparently rooted to the spot. His expression was a mixture of fear, pity, and anger. Then he noticed Jason looking at him, and trotted forward. “My God.” Jason heard him mutter.

Simon lead them to a small, cozy living room with large windows, affording excellent views of the veritable forest behind the house. Curtis, Jason, and Roland sat down on a couch in that order, and Simon lightly settled into an armchair facing them.

“I can see you’re still wondering at that.” said Simon. “You’re welcome to ask any questions.”

“Ah... well...” said Jason.

“You poor—what have they done to you?” Roland cried. “I—I’ve heard they do castrate boys here, sometimes, but... I thought it was only voluntary.”

“It is.” said Simon. “I chose to be castrated.”

“What—why in the world would you *do* that to yourself? Didn’t you want to be a man?”

“As I said, to preserve my singing voice. I sang in a choir as a child, and now I’m a professional singer for a wedding band.”

Roland sat there looking disgusted for a few moments, then abruptly stood up and walked out of the house.

“Sheesh.” said Jason. “I, uh, I’m sorry... sir.”

“It’s all right.” said Simon. “Eunuchism is difficult for some people to accept at first. By now, I’m well acquainted with the social stigma of it outside of Droydania, so such negative reactions don’t disturb me much anymore. Still, they’re the worst part of being a eunuch.” And indeed, his eyes communicated a certain amount of pain.

“Well,” said Jason, regaining his composure somewhat, “are there any good parts?”

“Yes, certainly. Castrati can become much more experienced male singers in the upper ranges than prepubescent boys. And in many cases, castration leaves one calmer, less affected by strong emotions like anger and anxiety. I was relatively cool-headed even as a young boy, but I believe that I wouldn’t be quite as mild as I am today if I’d been allowed to develop normally. Some people see this effect as a handicap; I see it as an asset.”

No one spoke for a few moments. While Jason was by no means as disturbed as Roland by this... this thing, he still didn’t know what to make of it. On the one hand, Simon’s reason for his decision sounded reasonable enough; on the other, an instinctual fear of mutilation made the idea seem pretty disgusting when he thought about it. He wondered how Simon had overcome that disgust. He remembered how

often he'd heard words like "emasculate" and "neuter" used metaphorically to mean "enfeeble" or "cripple" or "take the spirit out of", in English and Common alike. Castration was widely reviled, whatever the reason.

Jason glanced for a moment at Curtis, vaguely hoping he might find some reassurance in the younger boy's face. Curtis looked back at him questioningly, as if he didn't understand what was the matter. Eventually, the Argonaut, grinning sheepishly, said to Simon "So, let's get down to business. Could you tell me how to reach Leela?"

Simon paused to draw the shades before giving his answer. "The problem is, I don't know how. She didn't even tell me where she went. I haven't seen her since. She was convinced that whatever forces she was investigating posed a threat to her.

"I could try to find her: I know more than Cade told you. The problem is, please excuse me for this discourtesy, but I don't know if I can trust you. What Cade told you is already far more than I would've told a stranger. Leela was no doubt careful to impress upon him that that information was not to be spread freely, especially not within potential sight of an observer looking down from the sky. I know what I'm saying sounds cryptic, but the details must be kept as secret as possible.

"What I ask is, please take me into your confidence and tell me what paranormal phenomena you're looking into. If it's similar to anything I know of—and I do know some of what Leela was investigating—I'll tell you more, because *you* might be able to help my mother. As part of her work, she interviewed people who said they'd had a paranormal encounter, and she asked me to look out for more such people."

Well, Jason thought, he was certainly up to his neck in conspiracy theory now. "An observer looking down from the sky"? At least Simon wasn't wearing a tinfoil hat. Yes, to be truthful, it all sounded pretty ridiculous. But the events that befell Jason were themselves ridiculous, so if he wanted to find their root causes, which were no doubt equally ridiculous, chances were that he'd have to take the plunge. What else was new?

And so Jason told Simon part of the truth. He honestly explained the encounter with Thanatos and what he'd found on Zadoc's PDA. He said that he (along with Roland and Curtis) had gotten his nose into all this just because that email had looked suspicious—he left out why he'd already had an interest in Thanatos. He also omitted mention of the "phoenix-feelings", if you will.

"It's interesting that you ran across that cult," said Simon, nodding, "because Leela did, too. She had one of its members report on its activities."

"Whoa," said Jason, "it's a small world."

"I think it's definitely worth telling you more. Let's see, where should I begin?"

"I'm sorry, but could you hold on? I think Roland should hear this."

"Of course."

Jason walked outside and glanced around. He didn't see Roland anywhere. He sniffed; he nose led his eyes to near the top of a nearby tree. There he saw the adventurer leaning comfortably against the trunk, his legs spread out along a branch.

"Get down from there." Jason called to him.

Roland scampered down the tree and walked up to Jason. He absentmindedly moved a hand along his suit as if to brush off dirt, though it was as magically spotless

as ever. "I can't hide from your nose, can I?"

"I told Simon about our Thanatos adventure," said Jason, "and he said his mother knew about the cult. He's going to say more. Come on in and listen."

Roland made an annoyed sound. "How can you stand to converse with such an abomination? Castration is a cruel mockery of the male form, an insult to masculinity itself."

In spite of his own ambivalence about the issue, Jason's irritation at Roland's behavior suddenly flared up. "Oh, for God's sake, are you still sour about that? Get over it, and leave your stupid machismo at the goozack. He's a eunuch, and I for one can't understand why anybody would want to be one, but there's no use making a fuss over it."

"'Machismo'." said Roland, pronouncing the word slowly. "Leave it to the Terran West to spin masculinity into a point of shame. And the irony is that 'machismo' has its roots in Spanish, the native tongue of a people that isn't generally prone to such tomfoolery."

"Look, we can talk about gender identity all you want as soon as we're through with this. Until then, please be a *gentleman*, and come in."

"Ha! a gentleman. Fine, I'll listen to the wretch."

The pair returned to the living room.

"So I help him out." Curtis was saying. "It's fun."

Simon glanced at Roland. Apparently noting the adventurer's antagonistic glare, Simon didn't greet him, choosing instead to begin his story without further ado.

"As you already know, my mother, Leela, was a biologist by profession. Her most fruitful work was her research into transposons, a type of DNA sequence, but she was most interested in the physiology of dragons. As all scientists have been for decades, she was mystified by how the dragon apparently flouts basic laws of biology on a routine basis. The general consensus is that this mystery is simply the result of biological mechanisms that have thus far evaded understanding, since they've been found in no other life-form. Leela was among the few who suspected supernatural influence. She began a long investigation into all kinds of paranormal phenomena in the hopes of finding an explanation for the dragon.

"Although my mother thus already believed in the supernatural to a degree, she was also skeptical, in the interests of good science. In several cases, she only scratched the surface of a whole field of the paranormal—alien abduction, for instance—before she decided that all of it was pure fiction and never gave it a second thought. She tried a number of such ideas until she finally found one she believed might have merit: the motif of possession by extradimensional beings. She thought this was worth looking into because the accounts of possession that she obtained from several interviews were alike, despite how the different subjects had never apparently met each other.

"At this point, most of Leela's work had been public knowledge. That changed when a man who'd heard of her investigation came to her with his own story and asked her to keep it secret. That man was Reynold Marcus, whom you may remember as a member of Thanatos."

"'Reynold'..." said Jason. "Doesn't sound familiar."

"I remember it." said Curtis. "Jay, remember the time when Zadoc listed all the

spellcasters in Thanatos in his journal?"

"Oh, yeah! You're right, 'Reynold Marcus' was among the names. He was probably killed by the phoenix." Now Jason knew Simon really had heard of Thanatos before. So far so good.

Simon continued "Reynold met my mother near the end of 5622" (in early 2002 CE) "and told her about the supposed intervention of the death-god Thanatos into the affairs of the cult. He hoped she might be able to confirm whether or not the god actually existed: he had his doubts. Shortly thereafter, Leela went into hiding."

"Because she was afraid the cult had it out for her?" asked Jason.

"No, she was afraid of something else. She said that the knowledge of what Reynold had told her, along with another discovery she made later whose nature she would not reveal to me, put her in terrible danger. She told me only this: there exists in the multiverse a small number of supernatural entities, which she called the Supernals. Although the Supernals are all very powerful, they keep each other in check because they're enemies: they work for opposed ends. Currently, they're occupied looking for ordinary people to recruit for their individual causes. At the same time, they're trying to keep their existence a secret at all costs, so they'll kill anyone who they feel knows too much about them.

"Leela said the Supernals posed a great threat to humankind, and so she had to find out more about them. She could only do so safely, however, while she was hidden, because any Supernal could kill her easily so long as it knew her location. Her hiding-place had to be kept especially secret because the Supernals had the power to look down and listen from any point in any sky, and were very observant. So she pretended to commit suicide, to throw them off her trail, and then disappeared, telling no one her location for fear the knowledge might somehow make its way to these beings.

"Before she left, Leela said I should keep my eyes open for anyone who might know more about the Supernals or their activities. She added that if I stumbled upon anything truly noteworthy, I should try to find her and tell her about it. In that case, she thought I should take the informant into my confidence, that we might learn more by sharing our knowledge." He looked at Jason. "I think the vampire and the phoenix definitely count as noteworthy."

"So..." said Jason, the details of the whole hypothesis and their implications still spinning in his head, "these Supernals had something to do with both monsters?"

"I believe so." said Simon. "I admit that I can't be sure the Supernals exist, but I trust my mother's judgment. She said the being that called itself Thanatos was actually a Supernal who'd taken advantage of the group."

So now Jason had another hypothesis—one somewhat similar to Curtis's, though a little more believable. Or was it? Whatever evidence Leela had concluded all this from, Jason wasn't going to see it unless he could find her. Did he want to find her? The possibility of finally getting some real answers—that is, the *hope*—certainly appealed to him, but he was wary of falling in with this eccentric stranger and his possibly yet-more-eccentric mother. Yes, he'd take the plunge again, though he suspected the end of this adventure would simply lead to the beginning of another. Would this awful cycle ever end? Jason didn't know what he'd do if it didn't.

"What do you guys think?" said Jason, turning to Roland and Curtis.

Roland glanced at Simon out of the corner of his eye. To Jason, he gave a quick

frown signifying he'd rather answer the question privately. "It's an... interesting theory."

Curtis spoke to Simon. "Are Supernals gods?"

"I don't think so." said Simon. "Supernals are godlike, but they aren't completely omnipotent, so far as I understand."

"Gods don't have to be omnipotent." said Curtis.

"That's true. It's mostly a matter of defining the word 'god'."

"Simon," said Jason, "I'd like to meet Leela, but if she covered her tracks so thoroughly, how can I find her?"

"She *tried* to cover her tracks thoroughly," said Simon, "but she knew she wouldn't be able to do so perfectly. In fact, she relied on that imperfection to give me a chance of being able to find her, should the need arise."

"Now that Reynold is dead, I know of only a single lead that might help us find Leela. I caught the name of one other person she interviewed: Caleb Vespinus. I know nothing about him other than his name and his address, which I looked up in anticipation of this very situation."

"And where does he live?"

"Only an hour's drive east of here." said Simon. "Would the three of you like to go there with me now? I'd take you in my car."

"Sure." said Jason.

"No, don't bother to consult the rest of the group." Roland grumbled, only loudly enough for Jason and Curtis to hear. "Well," he continued at a more audible volume, "let's get this over with."

With that, he stood up and strode rapidly to the door. He was about to open it when his day was suddenly ruined by an exceptionally nasty surprise.

32

Shadow of the Void

There was a crash and a cry, and Roland sailed through the air, backwards, into the living room. He landed in a heap on the floor, moaning weakly. His suit's magic was in the process of mending three large, bloody holes in the fabric on his chest which were arranged like the points of an equilateral triangle. Everyone ran to his side.

"What happened?" said Curtis to Jason and Simon, as if they knew.

A rapid series of thuds heralded the arrival of the attacker into the room. It was the stuff of nightmares, a five-foot-wide, eight-foot-tall monster that smashed through the small doorway with its massive bulk. It was hairless, but its smooth, jet-black skin was stretched over bony plates, themselves covering rock-hard muscles. It had no head; a huge purple eye in the center of its torso, protected by a thick transparent membrane, was the nearest thing to a face it had. (As it turned its body to glance about the room, Jason noticed a second eye on its back.) Each of its hands had three fingers: they were oddly shaped, but when curled into fists, as they were now, they formed a compact ball, and the long metal spikes it had on each knuckle (part of some glove-like contraption it wore) described a triangle. The monster's body heaved with heavy respiration through some unseen orifice as it evaluated the remainder of the party.

Jason and Curtis screamed: Curtis, simply loudly; Jason, as if looking into the very mouth of Hell.

Simon was more practical. Being a wizard himself, he cast a green beam of magic at the beast's eye. Sadly, it had no effect whatsoever. The monster then charged at Simon, Jason and Curtis having gotten a healthy distance away by then. Simon waited until it was nearly upon him, then teleported immediately behind it. With only a small twist of its limbs, the monster inverted its whole body to face him again with its other eye. Its anatomy was obviously constructed to be thus reversible.

Jason, unabashed coward that he was, now hid behind a door, opening it only far enough to get a peek at the action. Curtis, on the other hand, entered the melee himself. After a moment of intense concentration, he spread his hands and conjured a beast: a mighty tiger, significantly larger than Curtis himself, appeared in a burst of red light. The orange of its fur seemed especially vivid, as if some ethereal fire burned within. With a roar, its claws slicing through the carpet, it ran up and pounced on the hulking humanoid.

Or rather, it would have, had not the monster reacted in time. Without turning from Simon, the beast slammed one spiked fist directly into the big cat's forehead;

the loud crunch made a shiver run up Jason's spine. The tiger, its prodigious momentum stopped, fell to the ground. Unperturbed, it rose again and leaped at the monster once more. This time, through some careful application of magic on Simon's part, the hulk's punch veered a little too much to its left, and the tiger brought it down with a crash that shook the whole house.

Finding no neck to bite, the tiger lost no time in rending the hulk's flesh. It tore through the skin with ease. Its attempts to pierce the monster's skeletal armor, however, merely dulled its claws. Meanwhile, the monster beat it with its fists, which it had no hope of resisting; soon enough, the mortally wounded animal blinked out in much the same way it had arrived. The monster heaved itself to its feet. Except for the web of turquoise blood that covered its body, decorated with the occasional red splotch of tiger's blood, the monster didn't look much worse for wear.

"That's it!" Curtis shouted. "I'm bringin' out the big guns!"

Oh, my. Jason thought. *If that mammoth was a small gun...*

The monster had now fully turned its attention to Curtis, so Simon took the time to get farther away from it.

At once, the ceiling was smashed through (revealing Simon's attic, and sending a small hail of cardboard boxes tumbling down) to make room for an elephant. It was nearly twice as tall as the monster; Jason almost felt sorry for the demon.

The enemy was tenacious. It rushed at the elephant and bashed its ribcage, which was at eye level. The elephant wrapped the beast in its trunk and, with some difficulty, heaved it up and hurled it to the floor. The monster was greatly injured; the impact had split its armor plates and most likely shaken up its internal organs quite a bit. It tried to get up for another round, but the elephant simply gave it another slam, plus a stomp for good measure. It disappeared in a great puff of violet flame; the monster had finally been defeated.

In a daze, Jason staggered back into the living room. Curtis dismissed the elephant, and before any of the party thought to comment on all they had witnessed, they remembered Roland and commenced searching for him amidst the wreckage. In fact, he had never moved from the spot where the hulk's punch had thrown him; he was very much unconscious, and gravely hurt, but he had, by some ridiculous stroke of luck, avoided being stepped on by any of the titans. Thus, he was still alive.

"We have to get him to a hospital." said Simon, after the briefest of examinations.

Then some extra incentive for summarily quitting the place arrived. *Another* monster, just like the first down to the tiniest detail, stormed into the room. And even before our heroes could scream profanity to the heavens, a bearded and cloven-hoofed unicorn, of all things, jumped in through the window.

"Gyeeds!" Jason shrieked. "Verseport to Gyeeds!"

The wizards didn't need to be told twice.

Jason and Curtis appeared in Roland's apartment.

"Where's Simon?" said Jason, looking around.

"I think he went to the hospital." said Curtis.

"Oh, oh, yeah." said Jason. He hurried around the room, looking for any monsters that might burst through the door or pop out from behind the furniture.

Finding nothing, he rooted himself to the center of the room and glanced about nervously in every direction.

"Doesn't look like anything's gonna get us." said Curtis.

"Ah, I... I just don't know." Jason collapsed in a chair. "What in the name of Osiris happened?"

Curtis shrugged.

"The Supernals, I suppose? Thanatos? Probably wasn't a coincidence that the... the black thing had purple highlights. The unicorn... that was like the phoenix! Or, well, it wasn't red, was it? I didn't take a good look at it." He made an annoyed sound. "When will this madness end?"

Curtis thought about that for a moment, then said "Maybe it'll end if you stop looking for it."

"Maybe. Maybe it's all just my fault. Teach me to be so darn curious..."

Both boys had a lot on their mind; neither was particularly in the mood for talk. Three hours of little conversation and activity other than contemplation followed. Jason's mind was a stew of fears and predictions. Whatever entity had called itself Thanatos, it seemed out to get him, probably because of his interference with the cult. Why didn't it come and kill him while he slept? Did it want to kill Roland, Curtis, or Simon too? And how was the entity behind the red creatures involved—did it want to protect him? He had a hunch that the unicorn was a part of that protection, though it had come rather late. Perhaps Leela knew the answers...

And then, Jason gave a cry of delight when the door opened to reveal a haggard but very much living-and-breathing Roland. He thought of running up and hugging him, then suddenly remembered the sight of Roland stabbing Jake in the heart and stopped short, confining himself to saying "Roland! You're alive!"

"Yes," said Roland, "and I could be a lot worse off, too." He walked into the apartment with Simon at his side. The singer's mildness seemed to have remained intact even after that traumatic encounter; he looked the least stressed of the four of them. "That beast fractured three of my ribs, but my organs were undamaged. Thanks to modern magic-aided medicine, I'm back to functioning normally—I'll be fine so long as nothing more hits me here." He tapped his chest.

"I'm surprised they didn't make you rest more." said Jason.

"Oh, they would've," said Roland, "but the emergency room had far more patients than the doctors could handle. They wanted me out of there ASAP."

"Any particular reason?"

"You don't know?" said Roland, aghast. "Just turn on the television."

They all gathered 'round to watch. The schedule for the current channel at that time called for a certain low-rated sitcom. That had been put aside in favor of a pressing newflash: Gyeeds was under attack. Not by tanks or battleships or bombers, mind you, but by giant ants. The helicopter-camera zoomed in to show indigo-skinned insects the size of rhinoceroses scampering through the streets and into buildings, hunting for humans. They did not eat these victims; their only purpose seemed to be depopulating Gyeeds. There were about three hundred of them, coming at the city from all sides. This was enough to cause considerable damage and loss of life. Massed police forces, bolstered with a few Gyeedian soldiers, could take down the ants without too much difficulty: the problem was getting to all of them, spread

out as they were.

"It's every Rogue player's worst nightmare come true." Roland remarked.

And then, that story was interrupted to make way for a new one—no, a whole flood of new ones. A swarm of pterodactyls was attacking Rorosion; electric octopi were menacing merchant vessels on the seas of Colloyus; unicorns had been spotted in the forests of Droydania. Within an extremely tight window of time, the multiverse had exploded with fantastic creatures, most of them definitely hostile towards humans. Most major IDC verses, as well as a few verses which had yet to develop verseportation, had been affected. Many people had seen some of these creatures spontaneously appear, as if created by a spellcaster. None knew their origin.

"Well," said Jason, "I'd have difficulty believing that the timing of all this is entirely coincidental. Obviously, the same... entities are involved." He licked his lips. "Guys, I think I know what needs to happen. We need to hunt down Leela—all of us, together. She's our only hope."

"All of us?" said Roland, looking askance at Simon.

Jason was incredulous. "He probably saved your life—you can't still hate him!"

"Yeah," said Curtis, "what's your problem?"

"I—" Roland turned to Simon. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." said Simon.

"But!" Roland cried. "It should not be forgotten that you are among the most miserable of creatures in existence, and you deserve no pity, for you brought this misery upon yourself! How *could* you?" he continued, his voice taking on a note of desperation. "How could you rob yourself of sexuality, the greatest of life's joys—nay, joy, life itself? How could you rob yourself of masculinity, the glue that holds the human race together, the source of all strength?" He paused. "I don't believe that children are fools, as Terrans do, but... Simon, I can't help but think this was the product of some naivety on your part, when you were a lad of nine."

Jason rubbed his eyes wearily. "Guys, am I the only one who thinks it's a *little* odd that Roland here is harping on about this when he was just nearly killed by a headless gorilla-on-steroids from Hell and all of creation has turned into a Japanese monster movie?"

"It's weird." said Curtis.

"Roland." said Simon gently. "I understand your pain, and I'm sorry. I only ask that you tolerate my presence."

Roland looked surprised. "No, you don't understand." he insisted.

"Here's what *I* don't understand." said Jason. "How does all this, well, sorrow for Simon's eunuchism add up to a hatred of him?"

Roland stared at Jason. He seemed to be concentrating on the question intently. He took a deep breath, and then, he finally spoke.

"In all honesty, the reason I hate Simon is because I'm afraid of him. *I* don't understand why he'd sacrifice what he did for anything, especially something as frivolous as his singing voice. Clearly, Simon and I differ on a very fundamental level: our senses of value are completely unlike. So long as I can't fathom that difference, I can't trust him. In short, Simon, I'm quite convinced, deep in my heart, that some evil lurks in yours. I won't say that castration is evil, and I don't know what form your evil took, takes, or will take, but... you are evil. I know that fact as instinctually, as truly,

and as unswervingly as I know that life is good. Life is good, and therefore, that which opposes life—you—is evil.”

There was a long silence.

Jason looked at Simon’s face. His reaction was very strange; he seemed to be caught between pity, sadness, and fear, but he wasn’t in the least angry.

“I do not” said Simon “believe myself to be evil. I recognize the value of human life, though I surrendered the ability to beget it. Chiefly, I value peace, charity, and kindness, all of which I do my best to promote. As for sexuality, I realize its value to some, but I don’t regret my lack of it. As for masculinity, I consider the term ill-defined.”

Roland shook his head. “There’s no point in arguing. I’ll never understand you.”

Jason sniffed. “Simon,” he said, “you’re willing to join us in our quest to find Leela, right?”

“I wish to.” said Simon. “We have common goals, and thus we should cooperate. Additionally—”

“But—” said Roland.

“Hold it, Role.” Jason interrupted. “Let him finish.”

“Additionally, there really isn’t anything else I can do now, as I no longer have a home. I can’t return to Droydania, since I’d be imprisoned for leaving.”

“Imprisoned for leaving?”

“Yes, the Droydanian Empire has forbidden travel to Gyeeds for decades. Gyeeds welcomes immigrants, and it’s much too powerful for Droydania to control, so it’s a popular destination for people who want to escape Droydanian oppression. Migration from Droydania to Gyeeds is one of the main issues behind the Schism; I’m surprised you didn’t know of it.”

“I think I did know... kind of. Interdimensional politics have always eluded me. So you verseported here, as I suggested, knowing full well that you wouldn’t be able to return?”

Simon nodded. “I didn’t believe I had a choice.”

“Well,” said Roland loudly, “you certainly can’t live in my apartment.”

“Where will you, then?” asked Jason.

“Somewhere in Gyeeds, I think.” said Simon. “I’d prefer to deal with that problem after we finish our search.”

“Okay.” said Jason. He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “You were casting spells before; can you hold up your own in magical combat?”

“Yes.” said Simon. “Even though my technical skills are mediocre, I can use what I spells I know to good effect.”

“Yeah,” said Curtis, “thanks for helping my tiger.”

“Good.” said Jason. “The more wizards we’ve got, the better. So, Roland, here’s the thing: I, Curtis, and Simon are going to find Leela. You can come if you like, but obviously, that entails getting over Simon.”

Roland looked shocked, then indignant, then angry, then annoyed. In due time, he said “Fine. You can be so cruel, Jason.”

Jason nodded. “So, we’ve got a nice party here. A formidable ensemble. Curtis, I neglected to tell you before, what you did to fight off that monster—that was *amazing*.”

"Oh, yes," said Roland, "from what I heard from Simon..."

Curtis nodded, grinning. "That was me at my best. I did a lot better than when we fought the vampire, right? They don't call me the best Imagination mage in the world for nothing!"

"They don't call you the best Imagination mage in the world," Roland pointed out, "just one of the best."

"Well, they should."

"Whatever!" said Jason. "Let's get to the bottom of all those crazy critters now, shall we?"

"I would like to know their origin." said Simon.

"Man, if only I could make 'em!" said Curtis.

"Someone can," said Jason, "that's for sure. The question is, who? Or, more to the point, why?"

And so, the four set off across the multiverse to find Leela Aranin, and thus, they hoped, the answers to all their questions. They were a motley crew indeed: Jason, the ten-year-old Midwestern Yankee with an insatiable curiosity, a taste for trickery, and a magical nose; Roland, the intrepid Adventurer of Gyeeds whose spells burned as hot as his fervor; Curtis, the little prince of Dojum who could comprehend everything but modesty; and Simon, the Droydanian eunuch with the patience and composure of a mountain. All knew that much lay ahead; none guessed as to its nature. And, even as the world about them was in turmoil, no one of the four imagined what changes would be wrought on it in a little less than a year.

Part IV

Circle of Evil

33

Tell No One

"Yeah, Leela might be the only person in the multiverse who could get to the bottom of this. If there's any direction to go in, that must be it."

So spoke Caleb Vespinus, a blue-eyed, lanky, unkempt lad of nineteen, after he'd heard what Jason was willing to tell him about the quest. Like Simon, he'd insisted on a face-to-face encounter; he sat up on the side of his bed in his small, dingy urban apartment. Curtis observed from his seat on a large trunk in the corner, and Jason, Roland, and Simon all stood around Caleb. None of the foursome had asked for permission to return to Droydania, so they were all in violation of the law, but in truth, Droydanian officials and policemen were mostly kept busy warding off the attacks of carnivorous ostriches and two-headed vipers. Thousands of Droydanians, it was estimated, had already taken their time escaping the verse in all the confusion.

"So, here's everything I told her, and hopefully it'll do you some good." Caleb shoved his hands in his pockets and began his story.

"For as long as the Droydanian Empire's been around, it's used censorship extensively to hide its atrocities, silence protest, and thwart any attempts at organized revolt. When the Droydanian internet boomed eight years ago and was connected to the interdimensional network soon afterwards, the government stepped in. It set up a system called the Imperial Portal, in which one out of every hundred packets sent or received by a Droydanian computer got routed through its servers. So, it could effectively oversee everything Droydanians did on the Internet. The system *was* effective: I had a friend who thought it was all bark and no bite, 'cause he didn't think the government would actually allocate the manpower necessary to comb through all that data. He tried to start a discussion about emigration on a BBS. He's gone now."

"Spooky." said Jason.

"It's because of that kind of oppression" said Simon "that I'm happy to stop living in Droydania."

"So I, among a lot of others, was keen on finding a solution to the Portal problem." Caleb continued. "I'm a good cracker: I've taken lots of 'secure' servers offline. Of course, just bashing on the Imperial Portal wouldn't solve anything; it would pop back on in a day. I was part of a little group that looked for some way to work around it. It was hard to work together, of course, since we couldn't talk about it over the Internet or the phone." He frowned and cursed the name of censorship.

“Eventually, though, I got a solution from—get this—a visitor in a dream.

“I was only fifteen then. I dreamed that I was walking through the playground I used to go to when I was, like, six. Except, it was deserted, and I knew I was dreaming. I kept telling myself ‘Wake up, wake up!’, but I wouldn’t.

“Suddenly, someone called ‘Caleb, Caleb!’ ‘Here I am.’ I said. I looked and I saw a monkey with bright red fur, swinging on the monkey bars just... nonchalant as you please. It jumped down and walked up to me. ‘Caleb,’ it said, ‘I am a spirit of goodness. Though you do not know me, I know of your quest to thwart the forces of evil, and I will help you. When you awaken, simply open your heart, and I will show you the way.’”

“So, I woke up, wondering what my shrink would think of all that, and kind of annoyed that I *had* woken up before I’d been able to ask the monkey any questions. I remembered that dream, and I still remember it today, vividly—more vividly than anything that’s happened to me in real life, actually.

“But here’s the really crazy part. I thought about what that monkey’d said, and I wondered—well, I wondered if there was anything to it. I tried ‘opening my heart’, for lack of a better term. I just sat there on my bed, took a deep breath, and thought *Come on! I’m ready!* Just for kicks, really.

“And then, bam! it happened. I suddenly felt overwhelmed by some enormous force, like I’d been tossed off a cliff. I writhed for a moment, and then, I was possessed. Totally possessed: I couldn’t control any of my movements, only watch and feel as someone else did. I saw myself in that mirror” (he pointed to one hanging on the wall) “and I was covered in ghostly white fire, even though I couldn’t see it on myself, and I wasn’t burning. And my eyes were glowing red, though my vision was normal.

“Then, the monkey that was controlling my body made me sit down, pick up a pen, and write this.”

Caleb got up from the bed, opened a drawer of his desk, and pulled out a few sheets of paper. Everyone, even Curtis, took a look at them. They were a highly detailed, highly technical description of the hardware and software behind the Imperial Portal. Beside schematic diagrams so precisely drawn (freehand, Caleb said) that they seemed the product of a machine were explanations, tables of figures, and even source-code excerpts written in an ornate, beautiful script. If Leonardo da Vinci had gone to a Waldorf school and then obtained a degree in computer science elsewhere, his notebooks might’ve looked similar. (Caleb showed the party a sample of his own handwriting; it was nothing but chicken-scratches.) At the end was a terse, double-underlined injunction: “Tell no one of our meeting; burn these papers when you are through with them.”

“I can’t believe you had the guts to defy that,” said Jason, shaking his head.

“It made me speak that line, too,” said Caleb, “looking in that mirror, right at those red eyes. And then it left me. Nothing like that ever happened to me again.”

“Were you able to accomplish anything with this information?” said Roland.

“Oh, yeah. It wasn’t a walk in the park, sure, but with that, I was able to design a virus that’s still active on the Imperial-Portal servers. It modifies incoming transmissions, so they look different to the censors, or hides them completely, and then send the originals to their intended targets. It also forwards governmental email

to me and sends me reports of any changes the administrators make, so I can update it. And, the virus gives the censors a few fake illegal transmissions, so they don't get suspicious." Caleb grinned. "I'm proud of it, even though I got supernatural help. It's still going strong. Without knowing it's there, people have found that they can say whatever they want, so long as they're a little careful. The censors have realized something's going on, after four years, but they have no idea what it is. Man, I remember playing hooky just to code that virus... it took me only two months. Good times."

"Nothing bad's happened to you for disobeying the command at the end of the papers?" said Jason.

"Nope." said Caleb. "I've kept it *pretty* secret, though. The only people I've told are you four and Leela."

"Why did you go to Leela?" said Jason.

"Because... well, this *thing* had come out of nowhere to help me, and I wanted to know what it was. It was thirty weeks after the monkey had talked to me, and I was pretty sure it wasn't coming back."

"I see. Did she tell you anything of interest?"

"Not really. She said what I'd told her was definitely useful, and that she'd tell me more when she knew more. Then she went into hiding. She did tell me the suicide would be fake, at least."

"My mother was very careful." said Simon. "We must be just as careful, given that the Supernals most likely want to kill us as much as they wanted to kill her."

"Well," said Jason, "this has all been very interesting. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell us where we might find Leela."

"Do you have any clues?" said Caleb.

"All we know that her home is buried beneath unmarked ground in a cold, snowy place." said Jason. "She could be in any verse."

Caleb thought for a moment. "I have one idea, though it really isn't plausible."

"Namely?"

"You know how some people like to read news-feeds or blogs? I read governmental email, courtesy of my virus. Several times, I've read mention of a powerful magical object that's been passed down along the Emperors of Droydania for generations. It's a gold bracelet, thin and without any jewels on it, that can send anyone who wears it to any location, anywhere in the multiverse. Currently, it's on Ursamor's wrist; she wears it all the time."

"Powerful indeed." said Roland. "You're suggesting we use this to teleport ourselves to wherever Leela's hiding, I presume?"

"What are we gonna do," said Jason, "mug the Emperor?"

"I said it wasn't plausible." Caleb pointed out.

"Perhaps I can come up with a plan." said Jason hopefully. "Are there any other bracelets like that, which might be more accessible?"

"No, it's unique."

"Go figure. Well, thank you very much, sir. If we do find Leela and discover the truth, I'll try to see if I can pass it on to you."

"So," said Jason, once the four of them were in the hallway outside of Caleb's

apartment, "do we believe him?"

"I believe him." said Roland.

"I believe him." said Simon. Roland eyed him for a moment.

"Why not?" said Curtis.

"How about you, Jason?" said Roland.

"Yes," said Jason, "in spite of myself. There was a red animal, and Caleb got flames and glowing eyes when he was possessed, just like Zadoc. It can't be a coincidence." He paused. "There is the small possibility that he actually did hear other accounts from Leela, and used them to construct an elaborate lie, but that's actually more far-fetched, I think. There'd be no motive, either."

"Here's what I'd like to know:" said Roland: "how did you become the mouthpiece of this group?"

Jason shrugged. "I do it tolerably well, don't I?"

"Tolerably well." Roland admitted. "Someday, though, you're bound to insult someone with your endless questions. Not everyone is as patient with that sort of thing as I am."

"Perhaps," said Simon, "but asking questions is, I think, a good habit. It's especially necessary that we ask questions of those who might be able to lead us to Leela. Jason, I'm comfortable letting you speak for us."

"Curt?" said Jason.

"I don't want to talk and listen all the time." Curtis replied. "You're good at it, so you can do it."

"Ha!" said Jason, turning to Roland. "Majority rules."

Roland sighed. "And to think, I'm older than all of you. God, I am old! I was in my twenties just last summer, I'd swear, and now I'm thirty-four!"

"Now, we need to go somewhere we can chat without fear of Supernals" (Jason gestured at the ceiling) "or humans" (he gestured at the apartment doors) "overhearing us."

Simon knew this city, and so he lead the party to...

"An old abandoned warehouse!" said Jason. "Now we can conspire in true supervillainous style."

It was dusty, windowless, and dark. Roland closed the door, then took out a tiny flashlight and played it about; there was nothing to be seen but cobwebs and empty boxes. The party arranged some of the boxes in a circle, put the flashlight, pointing upwards, in the center, and then quietly took their seats. Their faces were bright splotches of light striped with shadows and surrounded by darkness.

Simon sneezed. "This would be an especially bad time to be attacked by monsters." he remarked.

"Indeed." said Jason. "So, we need a plan to swipe that bracelet right off Ursamor's wrist."

"Anyone who did so could escape easily," said Simon, "but it would be very difficult to get close enough to her in order to take the bracelet in the first place. Being an emperor, she's always in danger of assassination, so she would never let strangers come so near to her person."

"Why don't we just fight past her guards to get to her?" said Curtis.

"I refuse to participate in such slaughter," said Simon. "Murder is against my principles."

Roland suddenly lashed out at him. "That's just because you don't—"

"Roland!" said Jason. "Please. We're trying to work as a team."

"Tell that to the pacifist," Roland said bitterly.

"Actually, he has a point," said Jason to Simon. "If push comes to shove, you need to be willing to use violence to help us on our quest. Otherwise, your magic won't do us much good."

"I can be violent," said Simon, "if it seems truly necessary, as when we were attacked by that monster. What I object to is attacking a fellow human without provocation."

"Guys, I forgot something," said Curtis. "If Ursamor knows we're coming for her, she can just teleport away with the bracelet."

"Oh, right," said Jason. "Could we teleport next to her, then?"

"In theory, yes," said Simon, "but teleportation is imprecise. If you teleported, you'd most likely appear a little too far from Ursamor, or facing in the wrong direction. By the time you got your bearings, Ursamor would've moved away."

"We don't even know if it's loosely hung on her wrist," said Roland. "If it isn't, the guards she'd inevitably have on hand would kill us before we could wrench it off."

"It is, actually," said Simon. "I did notice her bracelet in the pictures I've seen of her, though I didn't know its function."

"That's good, at least," said Jason. "The only real difficulty, then, is getting close enough. I must be able to think of a way."

"One of the few rights all Droydanian citizens have" said Simon "is to demand an audience with the Emperor. If the Emperor deems the meeting unnecessary, though—and she usually does—the citizen is punished. Moreover, she's always careful to keep visitors some distance from her throne, with a magical shield in-between. There's no easy way to get any nearer."

"I certainly won't be able to help you with that," said Roland to Jason.

"Ursamor's no fool; she wouldn't trust a Gyeedian politician any further than she could throw him. I have to admit, for a woman, she plays her cards in the IDC shrewdly."

"I guess I'll need more than rudimentary trickery, then," said Jason. "Let me think, guys."

He went over every possible way he might get within arm's reach of that bracelet. Were there times Ursamor didn't wear it? No, Caleb had said she always did. Then how could Jason (or any of the other three) get near her? Impersonation seemed out of the question.

"Invisibility?" Jason said hopefully.

"We don't have the money," said Roland. "Furthermore, Ursamor's palace no doubt has some mechanisms in place to thwart that—curtained doorways and the like."

"What if we sell nearly everything we've got," said Jason, "and teleport right next to her while invisible?"

"Oh, that'd mess with the invisibility," said Curtis.

"Yes," said Roland, "as you might remember, sudden movements disrupt

invisibility. Teleportation definitely counts as sudden movement."

"Well, dang."

There had to be *some* way, in this world full of magic. Jason's eyes roved around in the darkness as the other three sat in stony silence. For some time, the only sound was Curtis drumming his fingers on his box.

"I don't think we're getting anywhere," the prince said.

"Yes," said Jason, "I'm afraid—" He stopped in mid-sentence as something occurred to him. A grin slowly spread across his face. "I knew I'd do it! Guys, I have the germ of an idea. Listen up:" and so he explained his plan.

"I'm reminded strongly of your plan for dealing with Thorm," said Roland. "It's a good one, though there's a much greater danger that Ursamor will catch on than there was for Thorm; she's far wiser."

"I think it's a good plan," said Simon. "It's decently likely to succeed. The main problem is the danger it puts us in afterwards, but I don't think there's any way to avoid such danger."

"I like it," said Curtis.

"Well then," said Jason, "by golly, we'll do it."

34

The Smugglers

The night was still young when Curtis and Simon appeared before the gates of the imperial city. A great circular wall of solid gray metal surrounded the palace and all the other buildings clustered around it; this was the only public entrance. The city was built upon a hill, overlooking waves of rolling grasslands and forests reminiscent of medieval Europe. A moderate southerly breeze kept our heroes cool in the warm, muggy weather.

Two guards wearing black uniforms with red highlights leaned against the huge portcullis. They raised their eyebrows to see Curtis and Simon approach along with a companion, a pack mule that Curtis had created. The beast of burden tottered under the weight of a large, oblong metal box.

"This'll be interesting, I bet," said a guard, walking up to the group. He held out a handprint scanner to Curtis and Simon, who complied. After looking at the readout on a tiny screen, he said "Baria, you're under arrest for illegal interdimensional travel. And Deb—Debimo... ha! It says you're a prince. You're outside the legal zone of your visit."

"Debyeamo." Curtis huffed, as the guard magically bound his and Simon's hands behind them. (Neither resisted.)

"Our transgressions were justified." Simon said carefully. "I demand an audience with the Emperor, with Curtis and the mule to accompany me."

"Yeah, I saw that coming," said the guard, "but you know, what with all the monsters, she won't see you anytime soon."

"I think she should." Simon insisted. "It's an urgent matter, one concerning the monsters."

"Does it have to do with what's in the donkey's box? No, that's confidential, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"Well, we'll see what the Emperor's domestic adviser thinks of that." said the guard. "First, just to check the obvious..." He cast a spell at the box. Nothing happened. "No poison," he muttered, and cast another spell. This time, a shrill, high-pitched tone emanated from the box for a moment. The mule whinnied at the noise.

"Aw, c'mon! This is just a bomb!"

"No," said Simon, "you're detecting live bullets."

The guard frowned at him. "What would you do with those? Open it." He dispelled Simon's manacles and stood back a distance.

Simon walked over to the mule and lifted the lid of the box. It was packed to the top with bullets arranged in tight rows.

The guard blinked several times. "Can't guess what those are for. Well, pack up and we'll go." Simon shut the lid and the guard handcuffed him again. "It's funny," he said, "eunuchs and princes aren't often criminals."

The palace was a strange place. From the outside, it appeared to be a normal-looking, albeit very large, modern building. Inside, one could see how all the different parts of it had been built and rebuilt over the course of many centuries. Some rooms were made entirely of flagstones, like an old castle; others were of plaster or poured concrete. Many combined the work of several times; along with modern appliances like computers and air conditioners, the effect was both anachronistic and antique at once.

"This'll be interesting, I bet," said an aged, portly gentleman. The man, Emperor Ursamor's domestic adviser, sat behind a desk made of some lovely hardwood in a luxurious paneled office—leather furniture, an ornate rug, a fireplace, and all that jazz. The guard had been careful to tell Curtis and Simon to sit only if a seat was offered, and to leave their mule outside. They stood before the desk, Simon tall and confidently, Curtis with great, restrained impatience.

"That's what I said," said the guard, leaving and closing the door behind him.

"Curtis Debyeamo," said the gentleman, "I never expected to meet you in such circumstances. I thought you'd fallen in with Jason, the, ah... Samirin, was it? No, Terran." He propped his elbows up on his desk. "Now, boys, you do know that by demanding to see the Emperor *immediately*, in this time of crisis, you put yourself in great danger. I've been pretty busy, too." He glared at them. "Explain your business, quickly."

"We have about a hundred thousand Piercers to sell to the Droydanian army," said Simon. "We'd like to make the offer directly to the Emperor."

And so, of course, the box had to be opened again; this time, the other man did it himself. He cast a spell and successfully detected the bullets' enchantment; he was very impressed.

"Where did you get all of these?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with greed.

"I stole them from my father," said Curtis.

"Ah, yes, of course! If only he'd give us the secret, we wouldn't—well, needless to say, the Emperor will find this very, very interesting indeed, especially in these troubled times."

And then, Curtis and Simon (now unshackled) and their box (now carried by four servants) were in the throne room. It was a great vaulted chamber, like a cathedral, but windowless—in fact, it was in the very center of the palace. The distance separating Curtis and Simon from the throne seemed infinite at first; as they drew closer, the image of Ursamor became larger and clearer. The fifty-year-old emperor stared hard at the visitors, her small, pitiless eyes sizing them up like livestock. She smiled upon them as benevolently as a crocodile. Her bony frame, enveloped in a heavy blue robe, slouched on her lapis-lazuli throne, but her muscles were tense: she was secure in her ability to command. A translucent sheet of shimmering cyan energy

ran perpendicular to the floor before her. On her right wrist was a simple gold band.

Because the domestic adviser had said this matter should be kept secret, the Emperor had sent away most of the many assistants, courtiers, and heralds that usually kept vigil here. As the adviser walked out the great doors, someone closed them, and all that was left in the hall was Curtis, Simon, four of Ursamor's most trusted guards (standing at either side of the pair), Ursamor herself, and the big metal box.

The pair bowed, and then Ursamor said "My adviser has told me of your offer, and I find it an appealing one. I can't help but wonder why you decided to make this offer precisely at this time."

"We thought that Piercers would be most useful to you now," said Simon, "while your enemies are in disorder, and thus more vulnerable." The guards stole quick, confused glances at each other upon the mention of Piercers.

"I see," said Ursamor, her smile widening at the implication. "How much are you thinking of selling these for?"

Simon quoted a price originally decided by Jason, one far above what Roland had said she'd probably pay. Ursamor suggested something significantly lower, and then the two haggled diplomatically for a while until Simon accepted.

"It's wonderful doing business with you," said Ursamor. "If you happen to obtain any more, I would gladly purchase them for the same price."

There was a brief silence. Then, Curtis hurriedly spoke up and said "I'll... uh, try to get more." (He was having difficulty remembering his lines.) "But it's hard, because... there's a lot of bullets in my dad's... arsenal. And a lot of 'em are magic. So it's hard to find just Piercers. You... um... my dad sold Piercers to you before, right?"

"Yes..." Ursamor said slowly, not hiding her contempt for Curtis's anxiety.

"Can you look at these and say if they're the same as the others you got?"

"A fair enough request, I suppose," said the Emperor. She gestured at the box. It slid along the floor, through the magical shield and up to her throne.

"Wha?" Curtis exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm a spellcaster," said Ursamor matter-of-factly. "Don't let your father know, please." She got to her feet and lifted the lid of the box.

That was the moment Simon had been waiting for. Quick as a wink, he magically moved her right hand to a particular spot—just as a small hand shot out of the box (knocking bullets all over the floor), swiped Ursamor's bracelet, and disappeared. A moment later, who appeared beside Simon and Curtis but Jason Blue, with a gold band around his wrist. He grinned with supreme glee, even as he gasped for air after having to breathe through the tiny holes he'd put in the bottom of the box.

At once, the guards all fired off hostile spells at our heroes. In the meantime, Curtis had created some protective shields, and so they were unhurt. Jason was so enraptured with his own victory that he barely noticed the assault. He looked to see Ursamor's reaction.

"Go!" Simon shouted in his ear.

That brought Jason to his senses. He thought of the old abandoned warehouse, and voila! there he was. Roland was pacing around with his flashlight. When he noticed Jason, he stopped and stared at him.

"Success!" Jason cried. "Thank goodness. It worked out perfectly."

Simon and Curtis teleported in only a few seconds later, and the party rejoiced to have come so close to its goal. They were now in even greater danger than before, but they all agreed to wait until tomorrow before trying to reach Leela; all were exhausted.

First, there was the problem of supper. Jason figured (and Simon agreed) that a bounty might have already been placed on their heads, making it unsafe to be seen abroad in Droydania. So, they returned to Roland's apartment and ate a home-cooked meal. Verseportation would've been nigh-impossible for most of the party, thanks to all the magic they'd used earlier that day, but Jason ferried them across by having them grip the bracelet as he crossed the interdimensional gulf.

Roland's cooking, though terrible, couldn't extinguish the party's high spirits. They discussed how the plan had went, from their various individual viewpoints, as they choked the food down.

"It's good that we were able to make some use of those Piercers, after all," said Roland, "even if we didn't get any money for them."

"It's not so good that they're in Droydanian hands now," said Jason. "And we know they have more. At least they don't know how to make them. I wonder why they haven't been able to bully that recipe out of Dojum, actually."

"Cause they don't have it," said Curtis. Jason stared at him questioningly. "Jake said he gave my dad Piercers, but not how to make them."

"Ah, you're right, Curtis," said Roland. "Ursamor's adviser may well have been mistaken in thinking that Akolos was merely hiding it from them."

"May I ask what you're all referring to?" said Simon.

"Sure," said Jason, and launched into a full account of all his adventures, despite Roland's cold stare. Simon listened carefully and didn't interrupt except to ask an occasional clarifying question. Jason noticed a kind of sadness pass over the singer's face when he mentioned Roland's murders, but a glimmer of appreciation when he told of the tricks he himself had played on the long-lived wizard Ernest and the mighty mother dragon Thorm.

"Thank you for recounting all that for me, Jason," said Simon. "All three of you, I see, have significant experience dealing with strange, powerful, malicious opponents. If anyone's qualified to investigate the matter of the Supernals, you are."

"I never thought I'd hear myself say this," said Roland, "but I agree with you."

"The Supernals," Jason repeated, as if tasting the phrase. "After all I've seen of the things, I think I have some idea of who they are and what they're doing." He concentrated for a moment. "There are two Supernals: one good, and one evil. The evil Supernal wants to create havoc and kill people, especially the four of us, while the good Supernal wants to protect people and better their lives. The evil one's associated with the color purple, and the good one's associated with red. That all sounds about right, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Roland, "though it brings up the question of why the good Supernal hasn't made any monsters to counter the ones the evil Supernal recently created on such a massive scale."

"Right," said Jason. "Well, there are those unicorns in the woods of Droydania,

and I *believe* the good Supernal sent a unicorn to aid us before, but they haven't attacked any other monsters. Or any people, I think." He chewed and swallowed the last bite of his dinner decisively. "It's hardly a satisfactory explanation. With any luck, we'll get a better one tomorrow."

Once the meal was over, everyone heaved himself from the table and prepared for bed. Problematically, however, Simon didn't have a bed. He walked up to Roland and was about to speak when the adventurer beat him to it.

"No," he said firmly. "You may not sleep anywhere in my house."

"Would you, then, be so kind as to lend me money for a hotel room, since I'm not carrying any?"

"No. In fact, you should leave, now. You may return at dawn."

Simon merely stood his ground for a few moments, silently staring back at Roland's glare. Jason watched the encounter from a distance, wondering at Roland's animosity. (Curtis was brushing his teeth noisily in the bathroom, and was thus unable to hear the conversation.)

"Roland" said Simon softly "is there anything I can do to make myself acceptable to you?" His question was not reproachful or rhetorical, but honest: he was really willing to do whatever it took to win Roland's respect.

Roland blinked. His expression stayed rigid. "Nothing," he said. "Even if eunuchism were reversible, and you *did* right that hideous wrong, I still wouldn't trust you. It is the fact that you *decided*, of your own free will, to undergo castration that betrays your hidden evil, whatever it is." He walked forward until his nose was a few inches from Simon's, and brought his voice so low that Jason could barely hear it. "The more you try to hide it, the more I feel the echoes of its presence reverberate through every bone in my body."

Simon turned and walked out of the apartment without a word.

"Roland..." Jason began.

"Don't bother." Roland said crisply.

An hour later, when Curtis was snoring loudly and Roland's breathing was audible from Jason's room, Jason slid off his bed and walked to the front door. He unlocked it, stepped out into the hallway, and settled down beside Simon, who was seated cross-legged in the corner. Simon put down the book he was reading, a Droydanian realist novel written about 120 years ago, to look curiously at the boy.

"What brings you here?" he asked quietly.

"I thought you might be here," said Jason. "Would you like to talk?"

"Yes," said Simon, "actually, I was thinking of speaking to you privately. May I start?"

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. What I wanted to say was, after you told me about your experiences over the last thirty weeks or so, I realized that you have great cunning. You have a powerful talent for trickery, and your skill has increased greatly as you've gained practice. That may not sound like such a useful ability, but in fact, you've used it to surmount formidable obstacles. Your cunning is your foremost asset. If you were to consciously develop it, you would become a force to be reckoned with yourself."

"Wow—you think so?" said Jason. "Thanks! Now that I think of it, I *am* pretty

tricky—all of my plans essentially boil down to some kind of trick. Yeah, that's the classic way for the underdog to come out on top: with cunning!"

Simon nodded. "At the same time, I think you also have a persistent fault which has prevented your cunning from reaching its full potential. The simplest way to express it is, you lack prudence. You are thoughtful and analytical by nature, but you sometimes forget to consider the consequences of your actions, and thus, you pointlessly endanger yourself."

"I do?" said Jason, now looking less ecstatic.

"Yes," said Simon, "as when you took the bracelet from Emperor Ursamor. Your plan was excellent—speaking of which, did I follow your instructions correctly?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely. You pulled it off really well, I think. Curtis was the one who nearly ruined it."

"I didn't think he performed that poorly. Anyway, as I was saying, your plan was excellent, but as soon as we finished executing it, you made a foolish mistake. Rather than teleporting directly to the warehouse, you—"

"Oh, yeah. That—that—well, I was pretty proud of myself, at the time."

"My point is that you mustn't get too arrogant and forget yourself as you did then. You must temper your cunning with *wisdom*. Otherwise, your enemies might take advantage of your lapses of judgment, or you might become your own undoing."

Jason thought about that. He remembered how he'd paused to gloat over Ernest the cat and to congratulate himself after Thorm and company had flown away. He remembered rushing at the guards in the Jilothic prison when he hadn't stood a chance. He remembered failing to act like a proper Victorian child in Akolos's court and getting thrown into the dungeon for it. Yes, he'd let his success go to his head many times in his career as a trouble magnet. And the consequences of such slips might well have been much more serious.

"I think you're right," said Jason. "I've been pretty lucky, so far, but I can't rely on that." He smiled. "I'll try to keep my head screwed on tight from now on."

"A wise decision, I think," said Simon.

They fell silent, and Jason's eyes traced the patterns on the carpet for a while. "If you were to consciously develop it, you would become a force to be reckoned with yourself." Could he? How far could his cunning go? Perhaps, if he did "temper it with wisdom", he could solve problems that appeared impossible. Perhaps (he thought, looking at the magical bracelet) he could find a way back to Earth!

Jason's inner monologue was interrupted by the voice of Simon. "Do you have any insight as to why Roland hates me?"

Jason kept his eyes lowered. "Yeah," he said, "I think it's essentially because of his macho thing. I don't know why he's so quietly obsessed with masculinity, but he is—always has been, always will be, I guess. I find it a little disturbing, because I think his... willingness to kill stems from it."

"I believe he was telling the truth" said Simon "when he said, this afternoon, that he didn't trust me because he didn't understand me. Perhaps he's unable to imagine that a fellow male could have so little concern for masculinity. Indeed, that's merely a rewording of what he said, isn't it?"

Jason thought for a moment. "Yeah, actually."

"I'm glad that I won't have to deal with him much longer," said Simon. "Bearing

his hatred is so painful.” He looked at Jason with his gentle eyes. “My feelings aren’t generally easily affected, but I do experience some depression, which is aggravated by my eunuchism. Roland’s behavior has brought it out in me again, I fear.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” said Jason, in what he hoped was a sympathetic tone. “Roland can really hold a grudge, as you know from hearing about our encounter with his ex-wife.”

“It should help very much to see my mother.” said Simon. “I haven’t seen her in years. Mothers can be great comforters.”

“Yeah,” said Jason, thinking wistfully of his own, “tell me about it.”

35

It's Perfectly Normal

Misty shapes danced before Jason's eyes; after a while, they faded, and all that remained was darkness.

Although none of Jason's physical senses seemed to be functioning, he could still sense one almost indescribable thing. It was some wordless petition, some vague message expressed not with language but with a basic impulse. Jason felt the author of the message was begging him to listen, to give this mysterious agent leave to speak.

Vaguely concerned for whoever might wish to communicate with him, Jason gave his assent, also wordlessly.

In a moment, he felt a sudden chill; then, he seemed to be lying not on the soft mattress of his bed, but on hard wood and metal. Slowly, he opened his eyes. When he recognized the scene, his eyes continued to open, wider and wider.

It was Sunday, September 21st, 2003, and he was lying on a bench in a park on Earth.

Jason jumped to his feet and gazed about with wonder. Here were the flowers, the trees, and the houses of his hometown, just as he remembered them. He ran up to a nearby tulip and sniffed it deeply—yes, he could smell it, but no better than any other boy. He glanced at the sleeves of his blue-jean jacket; the holes which the dragon's claws had left there (and which he had subsequently left unpatched, as a kind of souvenir—or, one might even say, as a kind of *trophy*) were nowhere to be found. He looked at his wrist; Ursamor's bracelet was gone.

"*Oh my God!*" Jason shrieked to the heavens, heedless of whoever might hear him. "*It was all a dream!*"

"No, Jason," said a deep voice, rich with overtones, "you've got it the wrong way 'round."

Jason whipped around to face the speaker: a large fox, with crimson in place of orange on its fur. It sat as a dog sits; its bushy tail waved back and forth across the ground like that of a cat watching a mouse. The patch of white fur on its breast was more expansive than an ordinary red fox's, but it lacked the characteristic black "gloves". Its eyes were bright-red and full of life. The natural shape of its snout, which made it appear to be grinning slightly, seemed well suited to it—the effect was something like that of the Cheshire Cat's smile, but a little less spooky and more good-natured.

"I've been waiting to speak with you for a long time, young lad." said the fox.

Jason stared at it for a moment. He decided that if this was a dream, he might as well go see his family; if not... well, what on Earth was he waiting for? He turned and ran towards the gates of the park.

"It's no use," the fox called to him. "I constructed this landscape; it doesn't extend any farther than the boundaries of the park."

Sure enough, Jason crashed against an invisible barrier as he tried to cross the threshold. It yielded to his pressure a bit, like fabric, so at least he didn't get a bruise. He picked himself off the ground, glowering, and walked back to the fox.

"All right," said Jason, "I believe you. Who are you, and where did you learn to speak English so well?"

"Oh, come," the fox said laughingly. "I saw you enter and leave the building in which Caleb Vespinius just happens to live; I'm sure he told you of *his* dream."

Jason thought of that and quickly noted the similarities. "Yes, you're right. But you haven't answered either question. You're a creation of some Supernal, aren't you?"

"In a sense," said the fox, twitching one of its ears. "It would be closer to the truth, though, to say that I *am* a Supernal."

"What is the truth?" Jason cried, exasperated.

"A very good question indeed! Alas, at the moment, I am not willing to tell you the whole truth." It paused. "I can tell you this much. I, Jason, am a being of pure good; you may call me... Red, I suppose. I am powerful, but I use my powers to advance the cause of justice and righteousness, and to combat the forces of evil. Lately, I've been particularly busy with the latter occupation."

"Not busy enough!" Jason interrupted. "Haven't you heard? The world's overrun with monsters. Why don't you protect the citizens of Gyeeds, for example, as you protected me?"

"The situation is more complex than you imagine," said Red, inspecting one of its paws. "But, given that you obviously value innocent lives, this offer ought to be attractive to you." It leaned forward a bit and looked Jason straight in the eye. "Join me!"

"Join you?" Jason echoed, puzzled.

"Yes!" the fox cried. "Join me in the good fight. Listen: I've been watching you for just as long as your friend Roland has, and I've liked what I've seen. You have marvelous wits, my boy, and I'll need wits to win this war."

"Why, thank you," said Jason, remembering the conversation he'd had with Simon just before returning to bed.

"Now, if you join me, you'll gain many more assets. You will be no simple solider—no, no. You will become my closest ally, my most trusted companion, the very executor of my will—my avatar!" Jason's eyes bugged out. "Yes, Jason, know that I am a mighty being, and I will bestow a sizable portion of my might unto you. Your natural magical ineptitude, burden that it is, will fall from your shoulders at the merest sight of my true glory, and you will weave spells worthy of archmages.

"Moreover, you will gain powers no wizard could ever hope to emulate: you will be able to fly at will, without the slightest effort, and regenerate from all but the worst of wounds in a matter of minutes. And, should your wits ever fail you, or your confidence begin to falter, I will always be with you. I will see through your eyes, and

hear through your ears. I will even be able to guide your movements, when you require my guidance."

"Wow." Jason breathed.

"You certainly seem interested; would you be willing to take up my offer?"

"Well," said Jason, his mind reeling with all he had heard, "for my part—what is it you require?"

"Very little more than you're already doing." said Red. "Only that you swear allegiance to me. And, obviously, you must *permit* me to transform you into my avatar."

"You can't do it without my permission?" said Jason, somewhat amused.

"No," said Red, "my power is finite. I can't make the necessary changes unless you accept them."

"What are those changes, exactly?"

"Well, I'll need to imbue your body with a certain amount of magic, in order to make you receptive to my power. All of the power that you'll receive as an avatar, you understand, you'll simply be borrowing from me. Also, I'll have to accelerate your maturation a bit, to unlock the channels through which my influence flows."

"You mean I'll grow older?" said Jason. "By how much?"

"No, you won't actually age; you'll simply advance to one of the upper Tanner stages. Your lifespan will remain the same, though your height and weight will each increase a smidgen."

"I think you know that *I* don't know what a whatchamacallit stage is. Stop beating around the bush."

"You demand precision, eh? All right, I'll be as precise as possible. As you are now, you will begin to undergo puberty sometime next winter, with respect to the seasons of Gyeeds. As soon as you become my avatar, on the other hand, you'll become mostly sexually mature, lacking only the stature, girth, and voice of an older adolescent."

"Hm... so that means... hey, how do you know when I'll hit puberty naturally? How do you know I haven't already begun?"

"Such phenomena are part of my domain as a Supernal. Just as you can see that I'm colored red, so can I see that you're so-and-so many seconds away from any given hormonal change."

"So, then... were those emotions I felt when I saw you before, those other three times, your doing?"

Red looked at Jason carefully. "Until you devote yourself to the cause of good, the most I can tell you is that although my presence created those emotions in your breast, I did not consciously will them into existence. They were a side-effect of my power. You are unaffected now only because we are in a dream."

"Of course, as soon as you become my avatar, I will tell you everything."

Jason contemplated the offer for some time, carefully, as Red waited patiently. It certainly seemed like a good offer—Jason wouldn't mind having all that power, and he definitely wanted the knowledge. He'd be happy to wage war against those monsters, given sufficient strength to do so. The one thing that irked him was how Red was hiding so much from him, including its real identity. It called itself "a being of pure good", and for the most part, it seemed to have behaved accordingly, but there was

still a deal of ambiguity.

"Red," said Jason, "if you've been paying any attention to me at all, then you know I'm reluctant to sign up for something without knowing what I'm getting into. Even if I *do* do that all the time, I don't really like it." (*And if I'm going to take Simon's advice*, he added to himself, *I'd better avoid it.*) "Can't you tell me anything more about yourself and the other Supernals?"

The fox sighed. It closed its eyes and concentrated for a moment. After a few seconds, two more foxes appeared, one on each side of it. The fox at Red's right was noticeably larger, and colored lime-green. It was strangely muscled for a fox, and endowed with long, sharp teeth. The other newcomer was a little smaller than Red. It had fur the color of indigo dye, and markedly soft facial features.

"And these are Blue and Green, I suppose?" said Jason.

"You can call them that, if you like." said Red.

"Well, I don't." said Jason. "'Blue' is my name. Instead, you shall be Moe, Larry, and Curly. Much better, wouldn't you agree?"

None of the foxes looked at all amused.

"Primary colors it is, then! So, tell me all about your friends, Magenta."

"These are my allies in the struggle against the evil powers." said the red fox, ignoring Jason's irreverence. "All of us are Supernals of approximately equal strength. Together, we form a triad, which I lead. We do our utmost to protect the innocent and the good, to destroy the wicked, and, in general, to make the world a better place in which to live."

Red walked up to Jason until it was right at his feet. It spoke gently, tenderly, even—could it be?—lovingly. "I'm not hiding the details from you, lad, just to cause you pain. Yes, I know and understand your distress. But *you* must understand that many things must be kept secret—secret from the enemy. There are many humans and Supernals out there in the world who would like nothing more than to see the three of us destroyed, and all life obliterated from God's creation. Until you swear to join our side, there is always a danger, no matter how slight, that the enemy might catch you in its vile claws, and turn you against us. For that reason, I cannot trust you. Yet."

Jason was silenced. He understood, at once, what a bind this being must be in. Surely he must... he would... he thought carefully, very carefully indeed. No, there was one more thing that troubled him. Nothing very great, but still.

"I have to admit" said Jason slowly "that there's one reason I'm reluctant to undergo this transformation, and it's because of puberty." Red looked concerned, but not entirely surprised. "I—I—I know I'm going to have to go through that someday—someday very soon, if what you said is true—but I can't say I'm eager. There's nothing in particular to dread about it, so far as I know, but—I can't bring myself to sign up for sexuality prematurely. It's a little frightening, you know? I want the ability to slide into it gradually, like everybody else, and not just plunge head-first into it. It's really an intense thing, or so they said in sex-ed. How could I go to bed like Curtis and Simon and wake up like Roland?" Jason shook his head. "I'm profoundly unenthusiastic about that. If there's any way around it, or if you could wait a while..."

Red laughed gently. "Poor child, there's nothing to be afraid of. Sexuality is something to be relished, not dreaded. It is nothing more or less than the power to

bring forth new life, and a friend to see you through hard times. As the strongest connection between your species and the natural world, it will bring you into greater sympathy with all living things, including God. Most of all, it is a source of joy—joy unsurpassed in variety, in depth, and in duration. In fact, I think you'll agree that this opportunity to sample sexuality in its full, undiluted glory several years early is the *best* part of being my avatar." It paused. "So, what do you say?"

"I..." said Jason. "Well, I'll need to think some more."

And indeed he did think. *Maybe precocious puberty ain't so bad, after all. Certainly, there's a lot that's appealing about this offer: power, fighting for the side of good, answers, and pleasure! I can use as much as I can get of all four of those things.* Of course, there was still the distinct possibility that Jason would regret making the deal after learning some detail that was hidden from him now, but there wasn't anything he or Red could do about that. He tried to imagine what it would be like to be Red's avatar. There would be power, pleasure, and whatever it wanted him to do. Whatever it—Wait a minute. That sounded like an awfully familiar setup. He'd heard of many similar deals before. Yes, of course—how slow he'd been! How had it taken him this long to realize it, with all those *red* flags waving at him? Oh, he'd been foolish—but not quite foolish enough!

"How stupid do you think I am?" Jason demanded.

Red jumped back. "Jason, what—"

"Lucifer! Satan! Beelzebub! Yeah, I know who *you* are, Tempter of Souls! I've read my fairy tales, and I don't need to see the horns on your head to recognize you for the lying little rat you are! I suppose you're the real master of all those monsters, eh?"

All three of the foxes tried to speak at once, but Jason shouted right over them. "Promises of power! Sexual temptation! You certainly didn't work very hard to hide your true nature, did you? Did you think that all that nonsense about goodness and justice would be enough to take my eyes off the ball? Well, know this, devil and demons—I, Jason Amadeus Blue, have a head on my shoulders, and I'm not going to go down in history as *another stupid ol' Faust!*"

Jason glared at the fox he'd called Satan with all the hatred he could muster. "I've learned all I need to know. You can let me wake up now."

Red trembled with rage. "You poor fool!" it hissed. "Do you really think that? Would you scorn the side of good? Don't you realize the evil of your own preconceptions, the world you grew up in? Did it ever occur to you how the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims all demonized life itself—dressed up everything worthwhile in existence as a bogeyman, all part of their own wicked plot to control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling? Tell me, Jason," the fox continued, advancing towards the Argonaut, as the boy walked backwards in tandem, "have you ever read the Bible?"

"I'm agnostic." Jason snapped. "Why are you talking about religion? They're—"

"You ought to read Leviticus!" Red snarled, with a world of contempt in its voice. "*That*, boy, is evil in its purest form. This is unclean, that's unclean—with all those animals they couldn't eat, it's a wonder that the children of Israel were allowed to eat their own crops! It's a wonder they could reproduce! And why did they bother with all that nonsense? Because they didn't want to be 'an abomination unto the

Lord'—the Lord of Darkness!"

"*You're* the Lor—"

"*Enough!*" the fox bellowed with such supernatural volume that Jason was nearly deafened. "You will regret this, worm!"

Red's eyes glowed with a white light momentarily, and Jason's left arm jerked out to his side; his hand writhed about. Before he could protest or otherwise react, the distinctive smells of Roland, Curtis, and (much less intensely) Simon assaulted his nostrils: he woke up.

Noticing that his left arm was stretched out, Jason brought it closer to his face and looked at the wrist. In the darkness, he could just make out a large gap in the gold bracelet. Apparently, he had slammed it against the side of the bed in his sleep.

Even as he was gripped by an acute sinking feeling, Jason tried to teleport beside his bed. Nothing happened. He had no doubt that if the Devil had thought this worth doing, then simply repairing the break in the bracelet wouldn't return its magic to it. The power was gone.

Jason wept.

36

Where Only Fools Dare Tread

Jason cried and felt sorry for himself for a long time. All he could think of was how close he'd gotten to returning to Earth, in two different ways, and to reaching Leela. Eventually, he calmed down and regained some control over his thoughts.

How often he'd cried in the past few months, ever since he'd left Earth. He hadn't cried so often when he was younger, but then, he hadn't had nearly as much to cry about. Life had been simpler back then: less dangerous and less emotional. Less exciting, too; Jason was coming to like excitement itself less and less as he experienced more of it.

He had already reflected many times on how life in Gyeeds and the rest of the extraterrestrial multiverse seemed unduly action-packed. Now, for the first time, it occurred to him how *episodic* his life was. That is, the excitement tended to come in short, concentrated bursts. There was plenty of suspense, but all of the really noteworthy events tended to happen quickly. He would spend a few weeks or months going about his day-to-day life, and then, bam! either spontaneously, or because of his own actions, he'd get caught up in some wacky adventure. And then it would end, having set him a step further on his literal or metaphysical journey towards some goal, but otherwise having few consequences of its own. And although each of these adventures greatly endangered his life, he walked away from every one of them with nothing worse than a few black-and-blues.

Was there no explanation for all this nonsense? Wasn't there any *reason* for all of it—some dirty little secret that was the root cause of all this insanity? There simply had to be—the combined probability of all those events occurring in that particular picture-perfect way had to be infinitesimal.

Jason racked his brains. Everything that had happened to him swirled through his mind; everything strange and bizarre that he'd encountered flashed before his eyes. He found himself groping for an adjective to describe it all, to sum the whole monstrous lot of it up into a single word, that he might focus his consciousness on the whole forest of madness, rather than any individual trees. It was all... it was all so... so...

Fantastic.

His life was fantastic. It followed that it was, in fact, a fantasy. A dream? A hallucination? No, that's what he'd thought while still hanging by the dragon's claws. There was only one good explanation: an explanation that was in and of itself fantastic, to be sure, one he barely dared to think about too much for fear of its

implications, but it worked. He had no doubt that it was *the* explanation.

Jason tried to say it, but he seemed unable to speak. All that escaped from his throat was a faint wheeze. He tried to move his limbs; he was paralyzed. Panicking, he struggled, and with a great effort he managed to heave himself out of his bed. He paused for a moment, thinking, then ran into the living room and shouted "Guys! Guys! Come quick!"

Curtis, who was sleeping on the couch a few yards away, woke up with a start. He swore and looked at Jason. "What's going on?"

"I need to talk to all of you about something," said Jason. "It's really important."

There was a tentative knock on the front door, and Jason opened it to reveal a tired-looking but concerned Simon, just as a very groggy Roland stumbled in from his bedroom, still wearing his suit. (Yes, he slept in it. "It's comfortable enough," he'd once said. "Why would I wear anything else, really?")

"Jason, this is an ungodly hour to get up," Roland said in Common. English wasn't his native language; although he made speaking it look easy, he needed to maintain some degree of focus in order to get it right, and sleep inertia made that difficult. "What—"

"I think I've discovered the secret," said Jason. "Guys, you know all the crazy things that've been happening to us? The inexplicably eccentric turns of events?"

"Yes..." said Simon, closing the door and turning on the lights.

"I know why things are so strange," said Jason. "We're living in a TV show."

"What do you mean?" Roland asked impatiently.

"Just that!" said Jason. "None of this is real—somehow, we're all in an American prime-time television series. A really weird television series, with dragons and magic spells and stuff. Because those things don't exist in real life, you know."

"Yes, they do!" said Curtis.

"Oh, please, Jason," said Roland. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm a-hundred-percent serious!" Jason protested. "Just think about it for half a second! Dragons and wizards and giant ants? They're *imaginary*. Fairy-tale stuff. You can't explain their existence—they have no place in science, or logic. They make no sense."

Roland magically created a large blob of water just over Jason's head. In an instant, the boy was soaked from head to toe.

"I assure you" said Roland "that the water you are now covered with is very much real. You won't disagree, I hope."

"No, man," said Jason "you don't g-g-get it!" (The water was rather cold; it caused him to shiver once.) "We're living in a full-scale illusion, an alternate world. Magic does exist here. But it doesn't in the world of the people who are watching us now, nor do Gyeeds or Droydania or all that nonsense. There isn't a multiverse, just one universe, and the only humans in it live on Earth."

"That's ridiculous!" Curtis cried. "What makes you think *your* verse is the only one?"

"I don't even understand your, ah, hypothesis," said Roland. "Do you mean that our world is just a construction that exists on Earth, made to give the illusion of greater size? Or are you implying that we're all lunatics whom television executives have taken advantage of?"

"It's complicated," said Jason, shaking himself dry a bit. "The real situation isn't so clear-cut as either of those. This definitely isn't just a constructed world; modern technology isn't nearly good enough to imitate magic convincingly. I guess we could be insane, but that's a last resort."

"Here's how I envision it. Think of it this way: when you watch a TV show, you're actually looking at actors on a stage who are pretending to be made-up characters in some made-up world. Whether or not that world has fantastic elements, it's separate from the real world. And that's the thing—we inhabit one of these imaginary worlds. There are actors who play us, but we're not the actors; we're the fictional characters."

"And in what possible way could this explain *anything*?" said Roland.

"In the way that the events that befall us and the specific ways in which they befall us *precisely* follow the logic of television," said Jason. "The last few months of my life, if not the whole of it, were the work of scriptwriters."

Jason looked at each of his companions in turn. Each looked incredulous in his own way. "I know I sound crazy. The idea still sounds crazy to me. But this theory was born out of many months of reflection, and it's well-founded. Listen closely, and I think you'll begin to agree that I might be right."

"Nothing of much note happened to me before I turned ten. Those years were entirely off-camera, if you will. The show began the day everything changed, the day the dragon came to get me. Now, think of this: why me? Why do you suppose the dragon just happened to pick a suburban American male? While my age makes me an unlikely hero, just the fact that the dragon happened to take an American is telling. The probability of the dragon taking an American or an Englishman or perhaps an Australian was tiny, and whoever heard of a fantasy TV show starring a character from South Africa or Chile or Russia or China?" He paused for a moment. "*Captain Planet* doesn't count. National diversity was the point there. Besides, it was no coincidence that the white Brooklynite got the most intuitively appealing power."

"So, anyway, I do know from what you told me" (Jason looked at Roland) "that there was nothing improbable about how you found me. On the other hand, there's no good reason I know of that Ernest Seadweller chose to use *me*, the very same kid who'd had a crazy adventure shortly beforehand, for his life-extension ritual. I was a particularly poor choice, I think, since I'm hardly athletic. He was a scholar of Earth, true, but not for any particular reason. It was hardly an excuse. Anyway, that adventure, like the others, was exciting and ostensibly life-threatening; at the same time, it had few real long-term consequences. That's the kind of unrealistic semi-continuity that American television usually employs."

"Need I go into all the improbabilities involved in the events leading up to our voyage on the *Argo*? The missing boot, anyone? *That* was a red flag! I should've known something fishy was going on... 'Truth is stranger than fiction,' ha! This, my friends, is the kind of improbability that *only* shows up in fiction. The thing is, this world doesn't follow the laws of probability; it follows the laws of drama. The likelihood of something happening here is directly proportional to its thematic appropriateness. So reliable is this surreal principle and so potent is its effect that with it alone, I guessed who Jake's wife was out of all the women in the world."

"During the voyage, as always, we had short, concentrated bursts of excitement

separated by long stints of mostly ordinary life. These bursts of excitement, you see, are the episodes. The *big* events—the ones that actually change my situation, like the beginning and the end of our voyage—are the season finales. So, yeah, my experience of being kidnapped by the dragon was the pilot.

“Since then, it’s just been adventure after adventure. So many people have died, but *we*—I and the immediate group that’s formed around me—” (he nodded at the three of them) “never get more than a few broken bones. We have plot immunity. The Stormtrooper effect keeps us safe from hordes of enemies. So long as the Nielsen Ratings stay high, we’re going to keep adventuring, and only when we’re just about to go off the air will we come to some conclusion, and perhaps some explanation. (But not real answers, of course. I’m telling you the real answers right now.) And then, unless the Americans make a spin-off, the rest of our lives, not to mention the remainder of extraterrestrial history, will be totally uneventful.

“Guys, I don’t think one can reasonably believe that this world is an entirely natural one. There aren’t any satisfactory explanations for all those supernatural phenomena—dragons, wizards, etcetera—nor for all the improbably dramatically appropriate events. In light of all these things, which are highly characteristic of American television but ridiculously unlikely in real life, one is forced to conclude that, on a grand scale, something is not right. Something is quite wrong. I do believe I’ve shown the secret is likely to be that we’re in a TV show.”

Once he was finished, Jason smiled tightly.

There was a pause of epic proportions.

“Man...” said Curtis. “I—I dunno. My head hurts. It’s so crazy.”

“It’s rather pompous of you” Roland said slowly “to make yourself the protagonist, and your world the only real one.”

“I didn’t write the script!” Jason said, throwing his hands up. “Look, Roland, if you can believe in God, this can’t be a stretch for you, can it?”

“I’ll ignore the implication about my beliefs,” said Roland. “As for your hypothesis... well... I see your point. I have one great problem with it, though: it’s silly.”

Jason blinked. “Well, of course it’s silly. What did you expect? The improbable things are silly.”

Roland shrugged.

“Simon,” said Jason, “what do you think? You’ve been awfully quiet.”

“Roland had essentially the same questions that I had,” said Simon, “so I let him ask them. I think your idea might have some truth to it; I’ll need to consider it more in order to render full judgment. At the moment, though, one major problem occurs to me: do you suppose that what’s happening right now is part of an episode?”

“Well,” said Jason, “I assume so. This is certainly a noteworthy event, isn’t it?”

“If that’s the case,” said Simon, “you’re breaking the fourth wall. I don’t know anything about American television in particular, but the characters of most fictional works never suspect their fictitiousness, much less openly discuss it.”

Jason was so surprised that for a few moments, he was rendered speechless.

“Why,” said the boy, “that never crossed my mind. To think! I’m breaking the fourth wall right now!” He waved at nothing. “Hello, audience!”

And what do you know—at that very moment, somebody rapped on the door.

"Police!" he called.

"Sounds like it's time for a commercial break." said Jason.

Roland glanced at the others apprehensively, then walked to the door and opened it. Three sturdy uniformed policemen stood there, visibly surprised at how quickly Roland had answered the door at this hour. "Can I help—" Roland began.

"You're under arrest for the murder of Jacob Triskin." said one of the men.

Before the policeman could take any action to restrain him, Roland slammed the door shut and bolted it in one smooth movement. "Random verseport, now." he whispered loudly.

"Oh, dear." Jason mumbled.

Curtis grabbed his reagent pouch from an end table. "I'll do it." he said.

Roland and Simon both grabbed hold of Curtis's left hand. Jason hesitated for a moment, then joined in. Curtis threw some familiar-looking green dust into the air and recited a spell, and off they went.

37

Swamped

At once, Jason was covered with sludge. His nose and mouth were filled with some kind of noxious liquid, and his vision was filled with a greenish shade of black. He writhed, but he was stopped a moment later when he felt a long object encircle his torso many times. It lifted him up, and in another moment he was out of the slime, if still covered in it. He wiped his eyes thoroughly and blinked a few times. He was not at all happy to see where he was.

Apparently, the party's verseportation had taken them to a spot submerged in the putrid water of a swamp. Jason scrutinized the scenery no further: his gaze was fixed on the thing that had lifted him out of the water. It was a monster—a less conspicuously threatening monster than the muscle-bound hulk that had cracked Roland's ribs, but a far stranger one. It was an extremely thin five-foot-tall biped, its hips no wider than Jason's thigh. Its head was like a human's, but squashed widthwise and stretched out vertically; its two eyes were not quite on the front of its face, and one was higher than the other. Those eyes had to be uniquely arranged to fit that narrow face. The creature had a tiny mouth, and no nose. Its feet, Jason would soon see, were normally sized humanoid ones. In place of arms, it had four very thin, very long tentacles extended from holes placed around its upper body, and three more such holes besides. The tentacles were currently occupied holding each of our four heroes above the surface of the water as the monster inspected them. Its skin was quite hairless and smooth and all a medium gray, except for a large white spot on its navel.

"What were you doing there?" the creature said. Its voice was high-pitched but quiet.

The party eyed each other from their various awkward positions in the air. They had a lot on their minds, but chiefly, they were thinking that they'd probably just gone out of the frying pan and into the fire. They told each other this clearly enough with their faces.

Jason wished he'd at least had a chance to change out of his nightclothes; he and Curtis wore only a loose T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts each. Nevertheless, he was the first to regain the use of his tongue. "Trying to escape the plot," he said. "We failed. *Miserably.*"

Assuming he was interpreting its face correctly, the creature was mystified.

"No, it's probably better that you don't understand it," Jason added. "I do, and it just makes everything worse."

"I—I apologize deeply, sir," said Roland. "We—"

"I'm female," the creature interrupted.

A frightened little squeak escaped from Roland. "Sorry, sorry, ma'am! As I was saying, all the multiverse has gotten very dangerous lately, what with all the... uh... creatures that have been wreaking havoc. The four of us were threatened by some, and we feared for our lives, so we performed a random verseport together. That landed, or rather, submerged us here. We'd be much obliged if—"

"No, I don't think I'll let you go," said the monster. "You could be useful to us."

"Us'?" said Curtis.

"I and my mate. You'll meet him now."

The monster set off along the swamp, stepping carefully through the brackish water as its—no, I suppose I should say "her"—captives swayed up and down, their soaked hair and clothing still dripping all over. Jason looked drearily at his dreary surroundings. Whatever verse this was, it was definitely summer here: the sun beat down as hard as it could between the leaf canopy provided by the thin trees. The water was a tannish-blackish shade of green that was as nauseating as it was chromatically complex. Beneath its surface, and throughout the air, thousands of oversized insects buzzed. One, of a shape that was unfamiliar to Jason and surely unlike any seen on Earth, landed on the Argonaut's mighty nose for a while. Jason would've loved to swipe it away, but his arms were bound to his sides by the monster's tentacles—when he tried struggling, the monster responded by squeezing so hard for a moment that Jason's bones ached. All he could do was glower at the bug. And speaking of noses, I'll spare you a description of what Jason was smelling at this moment, so as to ensure that your latest meal keeps its rightful place in your belly.

"My God, Jason," Roland suddenly spoke up, "you can be amazingly idiotic sometimes."

Jason was stunned. He had to crane his neck in a rather painful way in order to see Roland's face. The adventurer looked serious enough.

"I'm referring to your television nonsense," said Roland. He was speaking in English, at least. The sudden change of setting from Roland's apartment in the middle of the night to this swamp in the middle of the day had served to thoroughly awaken the entire party. "That kind of postmodern philosophy is all well and good when one's in a contemplative mood, but you *must* leave all such metaphysical concerns by the wayside when our lives are threatened!"

"Roland," said Jason, "our lives are threatened *by* metaphysical concerns. That's my whole point."

"Not now, guys!" said Curtis.

"Listen to him," said the monster, and gave all a good squeeze—even Simon, who'd said nothing so far, but wasn't inclined to complain, either. Roland cried out at the pressure on his injured ribs. After that, they all fell silent.

In a few minutes, the monster came to a six-foot-tall hunter-green tent set on a piece of dry ground. A fifth tentacle extended from a hole under the creature's right shoulder, took hold of the zipper on the front of the tent flap, and opened it. Inside, Jason could see another creature, seemingly identical to the one that had captured

them, sleeping on the floor. None of its—I mean, *his* tentacles were visible; Jason supposed they had all been retracted into the monster's thin frame. Beside him, three steel barrels, each about as tall as Jason, stood upright. A few sealed, bulging garbage bags spotted with ambiguous stains were scattered about the tent. Jason's nose informed him that the bags were full of not trash, but perfectly edible dried meat.

The party's captor rolled the end of her free tentacle into a ball and lightly tapped the sleeper on the head. His eyes slid open slowly, then, when he saw the captives hanging in the air, widened with interest. He heaved himself to his feet with the help of his tentacles and asked, in a voice indistinguishable from the other monster's, "How did you get those?"

"I found all four of them just lying underwater," said the female. "This one said they randomly verseported there to escape from monsters." She positioned Roland to face her mate.

"Strange," said the male. "I guess it was the All-Mother's will."

"Whose will?" Jason asked at once.

"No questions," the male said quickly. "Now... what—"

"I figured they could help us damage the reagents," said the female. "They'll go through them while we hold the drivers."

"Yes," the other monster said after a pause, "that sounds like a good idea." He looked at the faces of each of the humans present, now all turned towards him. "I guess we have to tell you what we're doing. A few days ago, we made this stuff" (he gestured at the barrels) "with chemicals we got from a factory. It's the All-Mother's recipe for a liquid to make reagents deteriorate. You pour it on organic reagents, and after a few minutes you can't see it, or feel it. But after a few days, the stuff won't work as material components for magic.

"What we're going to do is catch the trucks that are delivering materials for soldiers' reagent kits to a processing plant near here. No one will know the stuff's defective until the soldiers try to use it. That'll hurt the Droydanian army." The monster smiled, kind of.

"*Droydanian*"? Jason thought. *Are we in Droydania?*

"No one will know we did anything, thanks to these." The male monster extended a tentacle that fished around behind a garbage bag. He withdrew a strange object, some kind of thick badge with a loop attached to the back through which the monster had stuck his tentacle. The back of the badge was blank. The monster didn't turn the object, so Jason couldn't see the other side. "This is an Antimnemonic."

"Gesundheit." Jason mumbled, in the original German.

"It's only a piece of plastic, but it has a magical symbol on the front. Anyone who sees it will forget the present few minutes soon afterwards."

Ah, the neuralizer.

"We have two, so Gol and I will each carry one. Don't look at them."

"Thorm?" said the female.

"Yes?"

"Can you hold these now? My tentacles are tired."

"Fine."

And so the foursome were ferried from the tentacles of the first monster

(presumably Gol) to those of the second (presumably Thorm). Jason was convinced that there was *something* meaningful about running afoul of two monsters named Thorm, but since this Thorm didn't seem interested in eating him, he doubted the connection was a very helpful one.

The monsters said something about how there was still a couple of hours before the first trucks full of reagents would arrive nearby. Then, Gol decided to take a nap, and Thorm went for a stroll with Jason, Roland, Curtis, and Simon still tightly clutched in his tentacles.

Nothing was said the whole time Thorm mucked about the swamp, except for one sentence uttered at a seemingly arbitrary moment.

"Jason," said Simon, "I believe you were right."

When the time came, the monsters met at the tent once more. After some minutes of debate, they decided to split up the humans thus: Jason and Roland would go with Thorm, while Curtis and Simon would accompany Gol. Jason wasn't sure if this was the best possible arrangement. He was, at least, glad that Roland and Simon would be kept apart. He was anything but glad when Thorm took the time to search each member of the party for reagents; having one of those tentacles rifle through one's clothing felt violating. More important, without their reagents, the mages were rendered more or less nonmagical. Roland (as well as Curtis, much to Jason's surprise) trembled with barely contained rage when Thorm tossed his reagent pouch to the floor. Jason was allowed to keep the broken bracelet.

Thorm and Gol each took a barrel, an Antimnemonic, and their assigned captives, and off they went. Jason and Roland looked at each other as Thorm strode across the swamp in one direction, and Gol in another. Roland's face was grim: before, there was some hope that he and the other mages could fight for their freedom, as soon as their hands were released. Now, Jason supposed that their only hope was to use the reagents they were expected to sabotage.

Gradually, the ground became drier, and the trees thinned. In time, the odd trio left the wood and arrived at a great meadow, its knee-high grass broken only by a relatively narrow, featureless, perfectly straight paved road. Each end disappeared into the horizon. The only object on it Jason could see was a seeming speck of dust far, far away to his left, inching its way down the road.

"Stand here until the truck stops," said Thorm, planting Jason's and Roland's feet on the pavement and releasing them from his grip. Jason rejoiced in the ability to freely move his limbs for the first time in hours. Thorm dropped the barrel and lay down in the grass. His thin frame made him quite invisible in that position.

They waited, mirthlessly, until the speck of dust grew into an automobile and accelerated its speed of approach. Then the automobile became clearly distinguishable as a truck, and drew close enough that Jason began to feel in danger of being run down. Then, when the driver realized that these barefoot lunatics weren't planning on getting out of the way, the truck screeched to a halt just a few yards ahead of them, its engine still running. The driver, a lanky middle-aged gentleman wearing a baseball cap, stared at them with one eyebrow raised. Jason shrugged, embarrassed at being seen in his boxers by a strange human.

Before anyone could speak, Thorm leapt into action. With alarming agility, he

sprang to his feet and dashed to the front of the cab. The driver was speechless with fright. He threw the truck into reverse gear and slammed the accelerator. Too late—Thorm smashed a tentacle through the windshield and knocked the driver out of his seat. He picked the man up and lifted him out of the cab.

“Don’t speak, or you die.” said Thorm, pointing the Antimnemonic at the driver. He beckoned to Jason and Roland with a tentacle, picked up the barrel, and led them to the back of the truck. There, he frisked the driver until he found a bunch of keys, which he “handed” to Roland. “Open it up.”

And so Jason and Roland went through the various crates, barrels, and chests that were being shipped to the plant. For each, they opened it (using one of the keys, if necessary), brought it outside, where Thorm poured a clear fluid from the barrel onto its contents, and neatly put it back in its place. Thorm was careful to specify that all should be left apparently as it was found. He was also careful (*very* careful, in fact) to be sure that Roland didn’t take any of the reagents for himself—he knew Jason couldn’t cast spells because the Argonaut hadn’t been carrying any reagents of his own. *No good*. Jason thought. *So much for the easy way out*. Once again, he had to find a plan. But without magic, how could he hope to stand against this monster? And in such a scripted situation, how could he trick the monster into letting him and Roland escape?

Even after Jason and Roland finished their work, and Thorm put the driver back in the cab and sent him on his way (“I shouldn’t have broken the windshield,” Thorm said when he was gone; “it’ll make them suspicious.”), Jason was still scheming. He was still scheming when another truck arrived and they began the whole process all over again. He was still scheming as he tried to unlock a large trunk—first with one key, then with another, then another. There were an awful lot of keys on that ring. Finally, he found the right one—and then, finally, an idea came to him.

“I gotta plan.” Jason whispered to Roland out of the corner of his mouth the next time they passed each other. “I’ll tell you in bits.” Over the next few minutes, he slowly explained the plan in terse sentences, or in some cases sentence fragments, that he whispered in stolen moments. Never before had Jason so appreciated the concisely expressive power of English.

“Fine,” Roland whispered after Jason was finished, “next truck.”

38

The Third Driver

The driver of the third truck that Thorm waylaid was a teenage girl. A few sparks of suppressed rage escaped from Roland's fingers when he saw Thorm handle her just as roughly as the monster had handled everyone else. Thorm didn't notice the sparks, but Jason did, and the boy worried that Roland might not keep a cool enough head to execute the plan. Then again, if he could use some magic without any reagents, the plan might not be necessary after all.

Whatever the reason, Roland then kept his anger in check, and didn't attack Thorm. The reagent-spoiling process began normally, and after several minutes, Roland signaled to Jason that the plan was to begin. The adventurer was squatting before his third or fourth locked box. As usual, he tried each of the keys, one by one. But this time, when he came to the right one, he pretended it didn't fit. After trying the others, he said to Thorm "I can't find the key for this lock."

Thorm blinked his jumbled eyes. "Did you try all of them?"

"I did."

"Where is it?" Thorm demanded of the girl.

"It—it should be on the keyring," she said falteringly, staring at Thorm's face in mortal terror. "If it's not there... I don't know where it could be."

There was a pause. Thorm didn't accuse the driver of hiding anything, because she obviously had no motive to do so.

"I guess it fell off somehow," said Jason, trying his best to sound as if the possibility had just occurred to him. He pretended to look around on the floor of the truck and on top of the boxes.

Roland made to mirror Jason, but Thorm cried out "Freeze!" and pointed a tentacle at Roland. Jason jumped involuntarily. "The kid can do it. I need to watch you so you don't take any reagents."

Jason shuddered. That hadn't been the plan, but it was frightening to see that the monster had a head on its shoulders. He went over all the surfaces in the back of the truck and even peeked inside some of the containers. Once he figured he'd searched enough, he swore and said "I can't find it."

"Well, where *is* it?" Thorm snapped at the driver in frustration.

"I don't know!" she said.

Thorm thought for a moment. "Maybe it's in the cab."

Jason had to fight to suppress a smile. "Should I look there?"

Thorm stared at the boy. "Yeee—no. You look too eager. I don't trust you. You,"

he said, pointing at Roland again, "you go search the cab. You have one minute. Don't try to run away; I can run three times faster than you. You," he continued, pointing at Jason, "keep working on the other reagents. We're wasting too much time on this box."

Thorm picked up Roland, searched him for reagents again, and then threw him towards the front of the truck. Jason was still inside the truck, so Roland was now out of sight. He opened a cardboard box, picked it up, and brought it towards the rear so Thorm could pour the chemical. He had at first been happy when Thorm had decided to let Roland, and not him, search the cab. Now that he realized it was him, and not Roland, who would be facing Thorm's imminent wrath, he felt he'd rather take his chances up front.

His mind raced about how to prepare as Thorm poured from the barrel, and then, as he was putting the box back, he thought of something. As nonchalantly as possible, he walked behind the tallest stack of crates in the truck, so it stood between him, standing in the truck, and Thorm, standing outside a few feet beyond the threshold. Carefully, he pushed the upper crates in the stack so as to make the pile somewhat, not excessively, unsteady.

"What are you doing?" Thorm demanded.

But then the tentacled beast suddenly had more pressing concerns, as the truck began to move. There was about a second during which the truck accelerated and Thorm was simply too shocked to react. Once he came to his senses, he tossed the original truck driver aside, ran towards the truck, and leapt inside: it was still going slowly enough that he could outrun it. Jason waited a second longer for the truck to speed up, even as Thorm's tentacles snaked through the air towards him. Then he threw himself against the stack of crates. The crates flew through the air and bowled the featherweight Thorm over, sending him sprawling on the pavement as the truck sped away.

Jason sat down on the floor and breathed a sigh of relief. Thorm soon became a speck of dust himself. A while later, the truck slowed down and came to a halt. Jason went outside and ran into Roland coming out of the cab.

"Well," said Jason, "looks like we did it again, eh?"

"Mmm-hm." said Roland. "We should be superheroes." He walked towards the back of the truck as Jason followed him. "We'd make an excellent crime-fighting duo, wouldn't we?"

Jason thought about that. "You'd make a good Batman, I think, but I refuse to wear Robin's ridiculous costume. Right now, I look silly enough as-is."

"Regardless," said Roland, stuffing the pockets of his suit with reagents from the truck's shipment, careful to only take those that hadn't been damaged, "now's the time for some real heroism."

"What do you mean?" asked Jason.

Roland took a handful of green tablets that smelled like rosemary, with a little curry and formaldehyde mixed in. "We need to save the girl, of course."

"We... what? Roland, what are you thinking? We never have to see Thorm again!" *Either of the two Thorms we've met so far, anyway.* Jason added to himself.

"No, we do, Jason; we do."

"Huh?"

Roland looked at Jason with a stern expression. "I realize that, contrary to my first thought, the girl won't be tentacle-raped; I have no doubt that Thorm is about as inclined to do that as I am to rape Gol. But forced labor or fighting is hardly better. Jason, honestly now, if we were to let this girl remain in these monsters' clutches for the rest of her life just as we were in their clutches for a few hours, would you be able to live with yourself?"

There was a long pause as Roland continued collecting reagents. Jason was silent. At first, he was ashamed, feeling that he *ought* to do everything he could to help someone avoid a fate he so feared. Wasn't that the least he could do, as a decent human being? Then again, when he considered the potential consequences of going after Thorm, he began to feel differently.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I would." Roland stared at him with a kind of horror. "Just hold on a minute before you hurry to your death," he said at a bolder volume. "You may feel heroic now, but remember, Roland, Thorm is a powerful beast. We were lucky to get away from him the first time. If we take our chances with a second encounter, all of us—you, me, and the truck driver alike—could end up back in bondage—or in the grave. I advise you to be practical. I think you'll agree that we need to rescue Curtis and Simon, so we should concentrate on that. If we hurry, we can catch Gol by surprise, by pretending to be just another truck, before Thorm rejoins her."

"To hell with the eunuch," said Roland. "Curtis deserves his freedom, true, but I don't see why Gol should be any less dangerous than Thorm, nor why you have no sympathy for the girl. She is blameless, so far as I can see."

"All I'm sayin' is, we shouldn't endanger ourselves more than necessary. And it would be pathetically stupid for us to die just because you can't help yourself from acting the gung-ho swashbuckler. We're not responsible for the life of every Tom, Dick, and Harry, y'know!"

Roland walked over to Jason, picked him up, and lifted him until their eyes met. "Listen, Jason," the adventurer said, sternly and patiently, "rescuing the girl *is* necessary. I know that Americans have become increasingly antagonistic to this idea, but it's the truth, plain and simple: a man's duty is to protect the innocent. *Especially* innocent women. This is not something you can just philosophize away, or toss by the wayside when it happens to inconvenience you. It is an *essential* part of manhood. You're going to be a man, too, someday: you need to learn this. If I fail to instill this lesson in you, I will have failed as a surrogate father."

They stared at each other.

"Roland," said Jason, "I fear that the Matter of Britain and the Grimms' fairy tales have gone to your head."

Roland didn't respond.

"Would you mind putting me down now?"

Roland, sighing, put Jason back on the floor of the truck.

"All right, shall we look for Gol and her captives now?"

"Thorm first," said Roland, walking outside.

"Man, he's askin' for it," Jason grumbled.

They shut the door on the back of the truck and locked it. They got into the cab and buckled up for safety; then, Roland pulled the truck around and drove down the

road back the way they'd come from.

"Why are you coming, if you're so apathetic?" Roland asked, not without a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"I wanna know what happens to you." said Jason.

"Fair enough."

"It looks like you're driving back to where we left Thorm. Do you plan on just jumping out of the truck and casting spells at 'im?"

"Precisely."

"Wouldn't you rather have a plan?"

"Do you have one?"

"Uh... no."

"Tell me if you think of one."

They drove on.

"Y'know," said Jason, "since we're free now, we could *stop* to think of a plan, or we could find a city and use whatever resources we could scare up there to help us. I could certainly use a pair of pants, at least."

"We need to do this now." said Roland. "Otherwise, we'll just get caught up in some other calamity. I'm a strong spellcaster; I'll do fine."

Jason had been hoping that Thorm would be gone, but there he was, standing by the roadside. He didn't bother to hide this time: he saw the truck, and he could imagine who was in it and what they'd come to do. Normally, he and Gol kept their tentacles retracted while they weren't using them. Now, he had six tentacles extended, all waving around in the air threateningly. On the grass beside Thorm were the Antimnemonic (face-down) and the barrel of reagent-spoiling liquid. The truck driver, apparently unhurt, stood on the road. She watched her truck approach with an apprehensive kind of hope.

Roland brought the truck to a stop at a distance from Thorm roughly four times as long as one of Thorm's tentacles—in other words, too close for Jason's comfort. Neither Roland nor Thorm was quick to make the first move. They just glared at each other for a while.

"All right, this is it." said Roland. "Wish me luck." With that, he flung open the door and jumped to the ground.

At once, Thorm shot three tentacles at the driver. One worked on binding her legs, one wrapped around her arms, and one encircled her neck. He could've done the job with one, of course, but not nearly so quickly. The fact that he'd already had his tentacles fully extended helped, too.

"Don't move a muscle," said Thorm, "or she dies."

Roland froze. Jason whispered the dirtiest swear-word he could think of. Roland wouldn't do anything now, of course, because that would defeat the purpose of putting his own life on the line in the first place. With his own thinking, he had made himself as helpless as the truck driver.

"Turn around and unspell." said Thorm.

I know I haven't mentioned unspelling before, but Jason had heard of it. It was a simple, irreversible spell, only usable on oneself, that nullified the caster's spellcasting abilities for a few minutes. Jason watched Roland cast it. Thorm began

advancing towards the truck.

"Don't you move, either," said Thorm, looking at Jason.

But Thorm had made a fatally wrong assumption. Jason knew that Roland would hate him, and perhaps he would hate himself, for what he was about to do. Nevertheless, he didn't feel he had a choice. He took a deep breath, and then, he jumped into the driver's seat, snapped closed the seatbelt, gripped the steering wheel, and floored the accelerator.

Thorm was enraged. He was true to his word: as soon as he saw Jason move, he squeezed and twisted the body of the driver with deadly force. There was a sickening snap, a high shriek cut off by a faint gurgle, and in an instant the girl was dead as a doornail. Thorm relaxed his grip and the body fell to the earth. "I warned you," his face said. Then his face was saying something very different when he realized that the truck was barreling towards him at full speed. For a moment he panicked; then, inexplicably, he retracted all his tentacles and held his ground. Jason kept on going, preparing himself for the worst. Just as the truck was about to slam into the monster, Thorm fell prone. He was so thin that the truck drove right over him.

Jason, however horrified by what he'd just seen, had no time to digest it. He made a clumsy U-turn to face Thorm again, who was now running towards Roland, who was now unabashedly running for his life. Jason's steering was anything but steady, given that his system was full of adrenaline and that he'd never driven an automobile before in his life; somehow, he managed to aim the truck towards Thorm. He drove forward, determined to strike Thorm down before the monster could get ahold of Roland. Roland ran perpendicular to the truck, allowing Jason to aim for Thorm without endangering Roland, but also bringing himself closer to Thorm.

As the truck drew nearer to the monster, Thorm stopped chasing, and prepared once again to dive under. And so he did, but as he fell, Jason swerved to the right. The wheel just managed to strike Thorm on the head. He sailed through the air in an impressive arc, then landed on the grass with such a noise and such force that Jason could tell he wouldn't get up again.

Jason released his foot from the pedal, letting the truck drift to a stop. He slowly got out and walked over to Roland. The adventurer was staring at Thorm's corpse in a stupor. Then, Roland seemed to notice the body of the truck driver for the first time. He ran over and sat beside it as Jason followed.

Only now, after the truck driver had died, could Jason get a good look at her. She was a bit overweight, but tall and somewhat muscular, with a hint of statuesque dignity that persisted even after her untimely death. She wore a baggy navy-blue uniform with the seal of the Droydanian government, a complex design featuring a large ape like a gorilla, on its right shoulder. Her face was forever frozen in the agony of death by Thorm's embrace. Just a cursory glance into her pale green eyes brought Jason a more visceral sense of his own mortality than any of his own near-death experiences had.

And then, to Jason's great surprise, Roland burst into tears. He cried loudly and without restraint for some time. Some blades of grass on the ground next to him spontaneously uprooted themselves and drifted through the air into his lap. (That, Jason supposed, was another instance of Roland's magic getting the better of him.) Jason had no idea what to do with himself. A few tears trickled down his cheeks in

sympathetic reaction; he didn't really feel sad at the death of someone he'd never really known.

It was then that Jason remembered that *he*, knowingly and deliberately, had brought on this death. At once, a wave of sickness came over him. No, of course he hadn't *wanted* to kill her; he hadn't had a choice! But he had done it despite its horror. He had jumped into the driver's seat knowing full well that he was sacrificing this girl's life for a chance at his and Roland's freedom. Had he any right to use an innocent stranger's life like that? Hadn't the only good, decent thing to do been to let Roland and himself be captured and then try to free all of them? He'd escaped once; couldn't he have escaped again? Didn't he have a certain responsibility not to be a *murderer*?

And then Jason, too, wept—not so much for the driver as for himself.

Once man and boy had cried themselves out, Roland arose and told Jason to stand back. He raised his arms up to the heavens and chanted the words of a spell. The truck driver's corpse burst into a great plume of flame.

"It's a quick cremation," said Roland, "less than she deserves. But we've wasted enough time crying over the corpse, and we still have work to do."

Jason wasn't sure of the justice of leaving Thorm's corpse like Jezebel's, but he wasn't inclined to argue. All he did was make sure to take the Antimnemonic, which he figured was bound to be useful somewhere down the line. He slipped it into the pocket of his boxers. I admit I've never seen a pair of boxer shorts with a pocket, but that doesn't mean one can't exist outside of our world.

"Do you know which way Gol went?" Jason asked.

Roland thought for a moment. "That way," he said, pointing towards the trees. "We'll have to trudge through the swamp again, I fear."

"So much for using the truck. Man, I wish I'd taken the driver's shoes."

They walked across the meadow and into the wood, Roland staring at the ground with his hands in his pockets, Jason compulsively glancing and sniffing around for hidden monsters.

"Jason," said Roland as they journeyed.

"Yes?"

"What you did half an hour ago was a vile, wicked, evil thing. Never did I imagine, in all the days that I've known you, that you could be so heartless, so monstrous, so mindlessly destructive of human life."

There was a pause.

"Gee, Roland," said Jason, "I'm touched."

Roland swore very loudly. He turned to Jason and picked him up not in any very gentle or comfortable way, but by the collar of his shirt. It hurt. "Listen to me, you wretch!" Roland screamed in his face. "You murdered an innocent girl! I don't care if you saved us from capture! You—do—not—waste—a—blameless—woman's—life—to—save—your—own—hide!"

And for even more emphasis, Roland threw Jason to the ground with force enough that he could've been injured if he'd landed on some surface less yielding than dirt. That hurt, too.

Jason stood back up and dusted himself off indignantly. "Are you quite finished

with your child abuse now?"

Roland sighed. "Yes, I suppose so. I ought to give up on trying to squeeze those perverse American morals out of you. Children aren't so malleable as parents like to believe."

They trudged on. *Gosh, what a hypocrite.* Jason thought. *He's killed droves of people for the pettiest reasons imaginable without a shred of remorse. He'd probably jump at the chance to fly a jumbo jet into a skyscraper full of people he didn't like. And he calls me monstrous for letting one person die when I didn't have a choice!* But Jason kept quiet, familiar with how his and Roland's senses of right and wrong differed. Besides, as you can tell, he still wasn't quite sure that he'd done the right thing.

"I don't love you anymore." Roland said suddenly, in a offhanded, oh-by-the-way-I-forgot-to-mention kind of tone.

"Just as well." said Jason, more directly. "I don't love you, either."

Roland put on a grim frown, and for quite a while, the two of them walked on in total silence.

39

Ethics and Existentialism

Jason mentally groped for something, anything, he might think about to take his mind off the truck driver, and his aching feet. Soon he found his thoughts coming to rest on Thorm. At least he didn't have to feel guilty for killing *him*. Or, then again... now that he thought of it, Jason realized that neither Thorm nor Gol had been very hostile towards him and his friends. Although they had kidnapped the party and seemed little concerned for its welfare, neither of the monsters had expressed the least homicidal tendencies until Roland had threatened Thorm. And even then, Thorm had really just been acting in self-defense.

Still, Thorm couldn't be considered innocent after he'd followed up on his promise to kill the driver. Actually killing her had done nothing for him. Obviously, he'd cared far less for her life than Jason had. But the thing that got Jason was the fact that the original goal of Gol and Thorm's reagent-spoiling mission—that of hampering the Droydanian army—wasn't necessarily a bad one. War was sure to break out at any minute now, what with the world plunged into chaos by monsters; hindering soldiers' efforts to kill each other could only help matters. The key question was what motive Thorm and Gol had to take on this task in the first place.

"And to think," said Roland, with no apparent provocation, "when I visited this swamp last year, the mosquitoes were my chief concern. Now I must endure far worse monsters. But I suppose I should count my blessings. I'm glad you've given up your television delusion, at least."

Jason stared at Roland. "What made you think I did?"

Roland stared at Jason. "You mean you still believe that? You've seemed to take our circumstances seriously—somewhat seriously, at least."

"Well... I admit that although I'm convinced of my theory, I'm not sure how to act on it. I've just been playing it by ear so far."

"Just as well, I suppose. Only, please, ask your scriptwriters to include an episode wherein you develop a moral faculty."

"I resent—" Suddenly he caught whiff of two familiar smells. "Curtis? Simon?"

"Hi, Pup!" said Curtis.

"We're over here." said Simon.

They found one another readily enough. Gol was nowhere to be seen, and Curtis and Simon were no worse for wear.

"So you escaped from your captor, as we did from ours?" Simon asked.

"Well, it's... a long story." said Jason. "For now, suffice it to say that... ding-

dong, Thorm is dead! And we aren't. How's Gol?"

"Captured!" said Curtis, grinning. "One of the truck drivers was a good mage. Gol had no idea. She got close and before she got 'im with her tentacles, he zapped her with a stunning-spell. Then he threw her in his truck."

"We took the opportunity to flee," said Simon. "The driver didn't pursue us. We were then going to retrieve our reagents from the tent and try to find you, but you found us first."

"Man, you guys were lucky," said Jason. "We barely got away. But we should definitely get the two of you some reagents before we do anything else."

After that, the party had a meeting. They sat in a circle on a piece of forest floor half a mile away from the tent, partly to get away from the wetness and the insects of the swamp and partly to ensure that Gol didn't find them if she somehow escaped.

Jason recounted his and Roland's recent misadventures. He opted not to hide most of the details of the confrontations between them; the only points of note he left out were "To hell with the eunuch." and "I don't love you anymore.". Roland was somewhat disturbed by Jason's openness, though he did chime in here and there with a detail that Jason had forgotten.

"Jay," said Curtis, "I don't get you."

"How so?" Jason asked. He was at least glad that Curtis was more attentive than usual.

"Usually, you don't mind danger. Why did you so not want to rescue the driver?"

"Don't mind danger'? I mind danger!"

"But you do stuff anyway. Most of the time."

"Well... I'm willing to face adversity if I have to. My point was that there was nothing forcing us to return to Thorm."

"Nor did anything force us to steal Ursamor's bracelet," said Simon. "Curtis's point, I believe, is that it's strange you feel that finding my mother is a sufficiently worthy end for which to endanger yourself, but saving someone's life isn't."

"Well..." said Jason "I..."

For the first time, all three of the mages were looking at him critically.

"Here's the thing," Jason said defensively. "Finding Leela isn't just a matter of satisfying my curiosity. It's a matter of... wait a minute. The original idea was to find out the answers to all my questions. But I already figured out *the* answer." He stared blankly at nothing for a moment. "Should I still seek her out? What am I doing? Where am I going?"

No one seemed able to answer that.

"I remain ignorant of how best to deal with the fact that I exist only in a television show," said Jason. "I guess... well, I suppose if I should take up any goal, it should be Pinocchio's. To become a Real Boy. But my, although this is all fiction, the outside world is as real and nonmagical as ever. There's no way an imaginary being can become real!"

"Come to think of it," said Roland, "I recall how you said we have plot immunity. Given that, why do you fear anything?"

"Because... to be honest, I have no idea what to do. Look, guys, I think, in the end, the most we can do is play along. It's not as if we have any real free will, anyway."

If we try to avoid the MacGuffins the writers have set up for us, we'll just fall into another plotline. If I were to act unrealistically and, say, throw myself off a cliff, either my life would be miraculously saved or I'd die, and that would be the avant-garde end to an avant-garde TV show."

"'Avant-garde'?" Roland asked.

"It must be an avant-garde show if most of the dialog's in a fictional language and I break the fourth wall so much and the show isn't a comedy." He paused. "I *hope* this isn't a comedy. Just because we can't hear a laugh track doesn't mean there isn't one.

"So, although I can use the fact that this is a TV show to make predictions of sorts, I'm not about to behave as if I'm invincible. There's always a chance that I could die in the final episode. Even if some bit of danger doesn't kill me, it could injure me, or cause me great pain. Fictional pain, I've found, is... well, I want to say 'just as painful as the real thing', except, of course, I have no basis for comparison. Let's put it this way: it hurts.

"I think what I'm going to do, from here on, is just keep pursuing Leela. It'll be interesting to hear the in-universe—er, in-multiverse explanation of the Supernals. Speaking of Supernals, I have something else to tell you all." He told them about the dream he'd had just a few hours ago.

Roland fingered his mustache thoughtfully. "Jason, that may have been among the stupidest things you've ever done."

"I think you made essentially the right decision." said Simon. "It sounds to me that if you'd become the Supernal's avatar, it would've gained complete control over your actions. It might've had good intentions, and I doubt the Devil or anything like it exists, but you were right not to trust it that far. It's terrible that the fox broke your bracelet, of course; you had no reason to expect that."

"You passed up a lot." said Curtis, shaking his head. "I'd kill for that kinda power."

"I'm pretty sure that fox really was the Devil." said Jason. "The whole encounter was distinctly Faustian."

"But what are we to do now?" said Roland.

"Hard to say, without the bracelet." said Jason. "Could you tell me, Roland, why you chose to 'random verseport' before?"

"Controlled verseportation is traceable; uncontrolled verseportation is not. The idea was to escape from the police as quickly and thoroughly as possible. And so we've escaped, though if we perform any controlled verseports anywhere near Gyeeds, dimensionally speaking, we'll quickly be caught." He sighed deeply. "God only knows what evidence they finally scared up. Regardless, my career, my home, and my possessions are all gone. The only comfort I have is that the whole fiasco will ruin Stanley's PR."

"Clearly," said Jason, "the writers have left us no choice but to find Leela. Even without the bracelet, there must of course be some way. Ideas, anyone?"

Silence.

"Okay, then, here's an idea: let's get some clothes. I've have quite enough of tramping around in my soaking-wet underwear. How about you, Curtis?"

"I'd like more clothes."

"I'd like some shoes." said Roland.

"I'm the only shod one among the four of us," said Simon, "and I can tell you that in Droydania—I believe we're in Droydania—no barefoot person will be allowed in a shop. Shall I go buy clothes?"

"If you're brave enough." said Jason. "Remember that we're still wanted for stealing the Emperor's bracelet. You'll wanna be *reeeal* careful."

"Don't worry: I'm always careful, or at least I try to be. The problem is that I'm not carrying any money."

Everyone looked at Roland. Roland removed a wallet from his suit, counted up a moderately large sum in interdimensional paper money, and handed it to Simon without a word, just a sigh—his twenty-seventh that day.

Jason had decided to spend the time during which Simon was away to plan ahead, but as soon as he put himself in a slightly comfortable reclining position, he fell asleep. No wonder, as he'd been rudely awakened in the middle of the Gyeedian night just a few hours before.

He was awakened less rudely this time, by Simon's boyish voice. He and Curtis thanked the singer and used nearby shrubbery for privacy as they changed into their new clothes. (Jason was careful to transfer the Antimnemonic to his pants pocket.) Then the party turned its attention to something else Simon had brought: a newspaper.

Simon had bought the paper because of the cover article, which was both interesting and pertinent. The headline was "Gyeedian Army Aids Droydania in Fight Against Common Enemies / Stanley Calls for New Interdimensional Cooperation". Amazingly enough, Stanley, in a sudden break from his usual policy of complete antagonism towards anybody who disagreed with him, had sent soldiers to help Droydania fight off the monsters attacking its cities. Not long after, he'd made a speech begging all nations to help each other overcome the threat.

"Gentlemen," Stanley Ironbone had said, "I know many of you aren't inclined to believe me, but the honest truth is, I don't have any more of an idea where all these creatures came from than anyone else. The monsters just popped out of nowhere and started wreaking havoc. I know we're all compelled to point fingers and take up arms against our neighbors, but I ask you to consider the consequences.

"Politically speaking, the world has been in an especially fragile state for many weeks now. None, I'm sure, will disagree. The Schism is wider than ever. Given just a little more provocation, every nation will take sides and the great bloodletting will begin. The biggest, bloodiest war in human history, one which threatens to destroy us all, is in its embryonic stages. Gentlemen, never before has an abortion been so necessary.

"It was with that in mind that I chose to send Gyeedian troops to Droydania, as a show of good faith. I have no illusions that this will heal the Schism; I have no doubt that negotiations between Gyeeds and Droydania will continue to be as tense and unproductive as ever. And certainly, I won't be giving up my role as the eight-hundred-pound gorilla of the IDC. But I refuse to go down in history as the man who let such a colossal war erupt on his watch."

An editorial in the paper agreed that Stanley Ironbone had prevented the war.

All across the multiverse, people were feeling a little more friendly towards Stanley, and, by extension, Gyeeds. There was one place in which Stanley's reputation had just worsened: Gyeeds itself.

Gyeedians in general weren't happy with Stanley's decision. They felt that he needed to take a stand against Droydania, especially with regard to its relationship to Dojum.

"Why's that fool still in office?" the paper quoted an older man as saying. "His one redeeming quality was his uncompromising foreign policy. Now he's sending our children to die ignoble deaths protecting our enemies!"

Of course, it didn't help matters for Stanley that his own adventurer was wanted for murder, and had evaded arrest. This event, quickly reported by the press, cast the whole Stanley administration in a unflattering light.

"And in a few weeks," Roland muttered, "Lloyd Waverunner will be laughing all the way to the mayor's mansion, for better or for worse."

"For better, no?" said Jason. "You aren't fond of Stanley."

"True, but over time, I've been getting the impression that part of Lloyd's platform is, or will be, a more hostile attitude towards Droydania."

"Really? Don't the kind of people who like him detest war?"

"Perhaps in principle, but in Gyeeds, pacifism tends to go hand-in-hand with a strong belief in civil rights, and thus a hatred of Droydania and friends. Most of the nations of the Droydanian camp are dictatorships or oligarchies of one kind or another. Lloyd fans would see war against them as a chance to free their citizens from oppression. And indeed, perhaps it would be. Anyway, so far as I'm concerned, the top priority is to have as few deaths occur as possible."

"War is best avoided." said Simon.

"And it has been avoided, at least for the time being." said Jason. "Let's be thankful for that. But what are we going to *do* now?"

"I have one idea." said Simon. "As it turns out, the city nearest us, where I bought your clothes and the newspaper, contains the well-known Museum of Genetics and Evolutionary Biology. My mother sometimes went there to meet and work with scientists employed by the museum. There might be something of interest there, some clue to her location—especially if she's been there since she feigned suicide. I believe she's kept in contact with other scientists as part of her research."

"Okay, I know a plot hook when I see one. Off we—no, wait, we're all fugitives of interdimensional law. I suppose we'll have to break into the museum at night. Can we do that?"

"Easy." said Curtis.

There was a new moon in Droydania that night. The darkness ensured that the party was not noticed as it snuck into town, but it did make choosing the best window through which to enter the museum difficult. The small amount of magical light the mages were willing to conjure didn't help much.

Jason was reminded strongly of his and Roland's adventure at the Piercer lab. He wondered whether there'd be many guards in the museum at night. The odd thing about Droydania, actually, was that it didn't seem nearly as Orwellian as it might have been, given that it was an unabashedly oppressive dictatorship. There were no

security cameras and thought policemen on every corner. And the Droydanian newspaper that Simon had bought an issue of was obviously uncensored. Still, a government that kept every citizen's handprint and interdimensional-travel history on file, and that filtered telecommunications for "un-Droydanian" discussion, was no democracy.

"This window would probably be best," said Simon, pointing to one high above his head (they all were), "since this tree in front of it could help to hide our entrance."

"All right," said Roland. "Do it, Curtis."

With magic, Curtis created two great black-feathered buzzards, each not much smaller than the prince himself. At his instruction, they carefully picked up Roland in their talons and carried him to the window. There was no sill on the outside, so Roland had to make a hole in the window, using the same method he'd employed at 256 Pulliard Street, in mid-air. He made a much larger hole this time. Once he was finished, the buzzards helped him through the hole and (Jason imagined) set him down on the floor. Then they came back for the rest of the party.

Jason was last. As he hung from the birds' talons, remembering hanging from the dragon's claws, he looked at a giant sculpture of a chromosome in the center of this high-ceilinged room. He could see only vague shadows of all other kinds of interesting things; he couldn't make out much detail in the faint starlight. The room's walls and ceiling were black, meaning that there was practically no diffuse reflection to help illuminate the place.

As the buzzards placed him on the floor, Jason suddenly smelled someone familiar. He cried out a warning. Too late—a moment before he spoke, the mages were spontaneously thrown to the floor and then magically shackled against it.

A flashlight turned on, and Jason saw the spellcaster. It was Beatrix.

40

The Other Side

"Attack!" Curtis shouted.

At his command, the buzzards flew forth. Beatrix threw down her flashlight and stretched her arms towards the birds, reciting a spell. Just as they were about to reach her, the buzzards disappeared in twin puffs of maroon smoke.

"Beatrix, I'm impressed." said Roland, with such blatant sarcasm that you'd never have guessed he was completely helpless. "You've sunk lower than I thought physically possible."

"I'd hold your tongue if I were you." said Beatrix, retrieving the flashlight. "I didn't bind you to the floor so *you* could chit-chat with me."

While Beatrix was distracted with Roland, Jason took the opportunity to slip into the shadows. Or rather, he tried to, but as it turned out, Beatrix wasn't distracted at all. "Don't go anywhere, Jason." she said as soon as he began to move, pointing the flashlight at him. Roland began to say something, but he stopped after she gave him a swift kick in the face. To Jason, she added "You're the one I want to speak to."

"Me?" he said doubtfully, then quickly amended "I had no part in the slaying of your husband, you know."

"Don't worry; I knew who the real culprit was the moment I heard of the crime." A weary kind of smile passed over her face briefly. "By now, I imagine, you know this man at least half as well as I do. His surname is the ultimate sick joke." There was a long pause. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Er..."

"No, wait a minute." said Beatrix. She concentrated for a few moments, and then she launched a stunning-spell that hit all three of the mages, who immediately went unconscious. "Now we can speak privately." She looked at him expectantly.

"Yes," said Jason after some time, "I'd agree." He wasn't sure if he really did, but that seemed like the safest response. It wasn't too far from the truth, anyway.

"I can't tell how much you actually do." said Beatrix, her voice losing its iciness for the first time in Jason's presence. "Let me direct my inquiry this way: you are attached to him, aren't you?"

"Yes." said Jason. "Well, of course. He's been a very nice foster father to me, most of the time. We've saved each others' lives once or twice, too." *What in the world is she driving at?* he thought.

"But are you familiar with his particular brand of morality?"

"Yeah..."

"Describe it."

What with the flashlight-beam pointed right at him, Jason really was in the spotlight. "Well... his chief concern is to protect the lives of innocents, 'innocents' just being people who haven't done anything wrong. But he has no qualms about killing people who *have* done something wrong, in his eyes."

"And are you familiar with his view of women?"

"Yeah," said Jason darkly, "I haven't seen it in action very often, but I can tell he's pretty sexist. He said that women shouldn't be allowed to learn magic because they're too... emotional, I think. He's the emotional one, though."

"And what was the reason he gave for our divorce?" Beatrix asked pointedly.

"Just that your personalities didn't mix," said Jason, shrugging. "He wanted to spend a lot of time with you and you didn't want to spend a lot of time with him. Sounds to me like the marriage was doomed from the start."

"Didn't he mention a particular event that led him to seek divorce?"

"Yeah, he said you had sex with Jake."

"Jake?"

"Well, he didn't know who the man was at the time, and the tabloids had their own ideas, but it *was* Jake, wasn't it?"

"In fact, it was no one. I never violated the marriage." Jason looked at her incredulously. "He told you what thing he'd discovered that made him suspect me, didn't he?"

"Um... it was an email, I think."

"I forged the header." Jason looked even more incredulous. "I fabricated the entire message without doing much to cover my tracks. Roland is at least as proficient with computers as I am, so I knew that if he took even a moment to check if the message were falsified, he would discover the truth. As I'd expected, he didn't—and so I was as eager to leave him as he was to leave me."

"I'm afraid I don't get why you did that." Jason said with some anger in his voice. "Did you just *want* to make him angry?"

"What I *wanted* to do was furnish myself with definite proof of what I'd suspected from the beginning—that Roland Moralheart is guilty of the very crime he accuses all women of, acting without thinking. And in truth, by that time, I so despised him that I wanted to hurt him as much as possible before we parted ways. Nothing, I knew, would cause him so much pain as thinking that *his woman* had wriggled out of his grasp." She paused. "I remember how his eyes would flash with suspicion every time I mentioned a male classmate—which was often, since female biochemistry students are almost nonexistent in Gyeeds. He was very, very possessive."

"And you're pretty creepy." Jason retorted. "I won't deny everything you've said about Roland—he's got his own kind of creepiness—but that email was just *cold*! You've got at least a touch of his vengefulness, or his sadism."

"I admit that I am vengeful, towards him." Beatrix glared at the stunned and restrained Roland. "But I'm not an especially vengeful or sadistic person in general. What malice I have is entirely directed at him. And can you blame me? He practically made me a prisoner in my own home. Not to mention that he's a *mass murderer*! This man kills without restraint and without remorse." She added quietly "Among his

victims was my husband.”

That mention of Jake reminded Jason of something else. “Your husband spent his life designing weapons that soldiers could use to kill each other,” he said. “In his inventions lies a much greater potential for harm than in Roland’s murderousness. How could you marry such a villain?”

“With honorable intentions,” said Beatrix. “When I learned of his evil, I had already fallen in love with him. That caused me quite a personal crisis, as you can imagine. Then I realized what an opportunity I had. Jake planned to sell his weapons to Droydania alone, since he was Droydanian and his sympathies lay on his own side of the Schism. I realized that if ensured, discreetly, that Gyeeds and a few other countries also obtained his designs, the interdimensional balance would be preserved and no harm would be done. Jake was a very talented chemist, and much of his non-weapons work went to the good of the human race, so simply imprisoning him—or killing him—would’ve some harm as well as good.

“I did marry Jake, though over the many years we were together, I constantly kept an eye on his work. As it turned out, most of his weapons projects came to nothing, while his more benign projects frequently succeeded. In fact, the first time I began to worry was only six years ago, nine years after I’d met him. He was developing an invisible, odorless gas that was supposed to cause anyone who inhaled it to, strange as it may sound, utterly fail to recognize anything they were specifically looking for. The idea frightened me; I saw in it a potential to make war more chaotic and unpredictable, and thus more dangerous for soldiers and civilians alike. Worse, this particular weapon, out of all the ones Jake worked on, seemed to be materializing. And so I carefully sabotaged his experiments. It worked perfectly. He gave the weapon up for lost and moved on, never suspecting me.”

Jason’s memory reached back to last December. He did recall the particular weapon design that Beatrix had mentioned; Jake had written of it in his lab notes. Now that he was aware of the possibility, Jason realized that given the particular ways in which those experiments had failed, the failures might well have been caused by the deliberate intervention of a third party. Beatrix was most likely telling the truth.

“I admit” the chemist continued “that I was much less successful in keeping Jake’s Piercers from doing harm. When he sold some on the black market, I learned of it too late. When you and Roland invaded his lab late at night last year, I was away from Gyeeds, helping design an exhibit about RNA transcription in this very museum. By the time I was next able to get in touch with Jake—a rather late time, thanks to Droydania’s restrictions on communication and travel—he had already sold some Piercers to Dojum, and had taken up residence at Akolos’s castle. Immediately I decided to distribute his design to various world powers, before the balance could be disrupted any further.

“In order to obtain the recipe for the Piercers, my first idea was to hack into Jake’s computer remotely. But then I remembered that he never connected his computer to the Internet, for the sake of security. I told him I wanted to see him, and I had him ask Akolos if I could verseport to Dojum, but the king refused—to this day, I’m not sure why. My only choice was to travel to Rorosion the hard way. I waited until I could take a long break from work without causing any suspicion or trouble—

over a month—and then I chain-verseported to a Starving-Sea island. With stealth, deception, and bribery, I slowly made my way towards Jake, even as I followed the voyage of your ship on the news. I encountered you and Roland in Jilothus by accident.”

“I suppose you also pointed us out to the police by accident.” said Jason.

“No,” said Beatrix, “that was a deliberate attempt to keep Roland from escaping his misfortune. I barely noticed you.”

“And what about when you told Jake to get us killed?” Jason asked heatedly.

“It’s interesting how *you’ve* ended up interrogating *me*.” said Beatrix, smiling slightly. “I didn’t tell him to kill you: he suggested it; I consented to it. I feared that whatever authorities might get their hands on the Piercers would give them to their own government, and I wanted to protect Jake. Besides, I would never miss an opportunity to end Roland’s life altogether.”

“You still expressed callous disregard towards *my* life.” Jason insisted, though he was aware how hypocritical this line of argument made him look in light of his behavior just a few hours ago.

“Jason.” said Beatrix. “Look at your companions.” He glanced at their limp, prone bodies. “Now look at yourself.” He was as unscathed as ever. “What does this tell you?”

“That... you know I’m magically inept and unarmed?”

“But can you imagine why I’ve taken the time to have this extended conversation with you?”

“To tie up some nagging plot holes? No, wait, you want the in-universe explanation, don’t you?” Beatrix raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Well, it’s because... uh... uh-oh. You don’t want me to join you, do you?”

“That’s the idea.”

Jason crossed his arms. “I gotta say, the Devil’s offer was a lot more tempting. At least he didn’t try to kill me.”

“The Devil?”

“Forget I mentioned it.” Jason said offhandedly.

“You’d agree” said Beatrix “that there’s no reason for me to threaten you, time and time again, if Roland is the only one I’m hostilely disposed towards, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, yeah.”

“My point is that it’s senseless for us to work against each other at all. I’m sure that Roland has construed me as a monster and an alien, a thing apart, but you must realize that in fact, you and I are more than a little alike. Two of a kind we are, contrivers both.”

“I’ll grant you that last one, at least.”

“We share goals, as well. I’m trying to find Leela Aranin myself.”

Jason was aghast. “How did you know we were doing that?”

“Because you just told me, silly boy!”

Jason’s mouth hung open in shock and embarrassment for a short while. Then he said “Dang.”

“I figured that was what you had in mind when you visited her son’s house. I’m looking for Leela—and I imagine you are as well—because only she may know where

all these monsters came from. Whatever supernatural agents were behind them will almost certainly cause war to erupt across the Schism if they aren't dealt with."

"Well," said Jason, "I suppose you could join our little gang, in theory, but I don't think you and Roland would get along very well."

"On the contrary, I'd give him a proper cremation, and then I'd treat his ashes with the utmost care."

"Well, if you're looking for my permission to kill him, you're not going to get it. He's my foster father, and... a decent person at heart. I think. More to the point, I know I can trust him with my life, but I'm not nearly so sure when it comes to you. If you wanna kill him, you'll have to kill me first."

"That can be arranged."

The boy and the woman stood there and glared at each other for a while.

"You have two options," said Beatrix. "One, Roland dies and I accompany you on your adventures. Two, all four of you die. It's your choice."

"See, it's that kind of threat that makes me unfavorably inclined towards you."

"Your choice."

"Can't you just kill Roland and leave the rest of us alone?" Jason cried, exasperated.

"And let the witnesses to my murder just walk away? Please give me credit for more intelligence than that. I am, after all, a Thought mage."

"You're at *least* as psychotic as he is!"

"Only because he drove me mad. Now choose, before I change my opinion of you and take away the better option."

"You're not giving me a choice!"

"Choose anyway."

Jason considered his surroundings. It was really dark in here, and the museum, in addition to having an architecture that was more aesthetically pleasing than it was conventional or practical, was filled with obstacles of all shapes and sizes. Running wasn't an option.

"Well..." said Jason "I guess..."

And then, without warning, he ran up to Beatrix and threw a punch, hitting her in the side. She cried out, but as soon as she'd digested the surprise, she tossed aside her flashlight, flew at him, and proceeded to give him the beating of his life. She wasn't particularly strong, but she was fast, and boy, did she know how to hit. After a minute or so, a very bruised, battered, and bloody Jason was lying on the floor not far from the rest of the party, and a quite unhurt Beatrix stood over him, looking at the boy with great disapproval.

"That'd be—" Jason began, but then he was interrupted by a great violent cough, which ejected a bit more blood. He winced. "That'd be" he said again "one way in which we aren't alike."

"Have you decided now?"

"Y'mean option (a) is still open?"

"Why not? I understand your frustration. You did me no great harm."

Jason sighed. He tried to think, but it was hard for him to hear any of the little voices in his head while all his nerves were flooding his consciousness with distress signals.

"Decide!"

"Look, can ya gimme... fifteen minutes? I need to get ahold of myself. And say my prayers, I guess."

"Fine."

With some exertion, Jason painfully picked himself up and came to a cross-legged seated position on the waxed wooden floor. To his right were his companions, still stunned and bound. Before him was Beatrix, sitting on the edge of the raised platform that held up the giant chromosome, her feet dangling just above the floor. She had the flashlight pointed at Jason; she was watching his face. He looked away.

Well, how was he going to trick his way out of this one? He'd never matched wits with another trickster before; his confidence in his own cunning shrank at the memory of how this woman had already tricked him once. This much he was glad of: Beatrix wasn't taking the current opportunity to kill Roland. Jason might very well defeat Beatrix by pretending to go along with her for a while and then backstabbing her, but he was afraid that she'd slay the adventurer as soon as he made his decision. Roland was a main character, but if this adventure was a season finale, there was some chance he could die. Jason simply couldn't pick either of Beatrix's options safely.

After a few minutes of thought, Jason suddenly remembered something: the Antimnemonic! And after a bit more thinking, he finally came upon a way to put it to good use. He took it out of his pocket and slipped a finger through the hole, then rested it on his knee—it was pretty big, after all. He made sure that the front faced Beatrix.

"What's that?" Beatrix asked suspiciously. It clearly wasn't a weapon, since otherwise Jason would've used it before trying to punch her, but she was careful all the same.

"Prayer device, if you don't mind."

"For what religion?"

"Christianity."

"'Christianity'?"

"It's the most popular religion on Earth. Haven't you heard of it?"

Beatrix seemed to search through her memory. "Roland may have mentioned it once or twice. I never understood his interest in that verse."

They fell silent, and Jason waited. He didn't really know what the consequences of this trick would be; the idea was basically to bide time and hope his situation improved. He succeeded at biding time, at least. After about ten minutes, Beatrix asked about the Antimnemonic again—she'd forgotten even seeing it. And after another ten minutes, she asked again. She didn't tell him his time was up because she kept forgetting the passage of time. Jason was very lucky that she wasn't wearing a watch.

Hours passed. Jason did his best not to arouse Beatrix's suspicion through his tone of voice or body language. Sitting there cross-legged on the floor without allowing his growing restlessness to show was amazingly taxing. Meanwhile, he figured that the mages might regain consciousness; he hoped they'd have the good sense to pretend otherwise. As it turned out, Roland and Simon both did, but Curtis wasn't so careful. When he awoke, about three hours after Jason had gotten beaten

up, he looked around (so much as he could with his body stuck to the floor) and demanded "What's going on?". Beatrix stunned him again, muttering something about how she was sure she'd made the first stun stronger than that.

Time dragged on as slowly as molasses flows down a hill in January as Jason waited, and waited, and waited. Slowly the hours wore away at his sanity, and his thoughts became confused and nonsensical. Past memories and future possibilities flickered before his eyes; he seemed almost to hallucinate. He wanted to cry out in pain, to stand up and leap about, to do anything but keep sitting and waiting and pretending he'd only been doing so for five or ten minutes. But he held firm; exerting more willpower than he'd ever imagined he possessed, he kept his legs crossed and his eyes closed—at first pretentingly, but now more and more honestly, in prayer.

There was one entity that Jason feared might give the game away, and which he had no hope of controlling: the sun. Gradually the sky grew lighter, and as it did so Beatrix was more and more perturbed each time she lost the last few minutes of her memory. Jason prayed she would only realize the truth when it was too late.

"Did it just happen?"

The voice was Curtis's. Jason blinked; he saw not the smooth wooden floor of the museum but the rough brown soil of the forest. He looked up. The whole party was here, sitting in a circle on the same old patch of forest they'd met at before. Beatrix was nowhere to be seen.

"What in the name of Quetzalcoatl?" said Jason. "How'd we get here?"

Without a word, Roland handed Jason a slip of paper. It was a note in Jason's handwriting, written in Common, except for the postscript, which was in English.

Dear Jason and friends,

Beatrix took the Antimnemonic, and you guys all saw the front of it. Bummer! At least she had to let Roland, Curtis, and Simon go when the guys who work at the museum came to work. She panicked as soon as they turned all the lights on. Before they got to the room you were in, Beatrix ran away, and you guys teleported back here. Then Jason had the foresight to write this note. Aren't you thankful for that?

Your pal (or in one case, yourself),

[Here appeared Jason's only faintly legible signature.]

P.S. Yes, Jason, you really did write this as recently as five minutes ago.

"Dang," said Jason, "I'm good."

"I would've preferred if you'd found some way to keep this relatively potent weapon out of that witch's hands," said Roland, "but you did save my life, and for that I am thankful."

"Man," said Jason. "y'know, when you called her a witch that other time, I didn't know you really meant it."

"I didn't," said Roland darkly. "This most recent encounter with her was the first time I ever saw her cast spells."

"Jason?" said Simon.

"Yeah?"

"Would you mind telling us what happened while we were still unconscious?"

"Uh, no, I will." What he told was essentially the truth, but he didn't tell the whole truth: he didn't mention his admissions that Beatrix's criticisms of Roland were valid.

"The email was fake?" said Roland. "That's an idea to keep me up at night."

"What is it with you two?" Curtis asked.

"They've always had a feud." said Jason. "After that experience you just hate Beatrix more, right, Roland?"

"That would be right."

"So circumstances may turn even more dire the next time we bump into her—and we're sure to bump into her again. That's troubling."

"What's more troubling, I think," said Simon, "is that we've gained nothing from our experience at the museum, and lost a potentially useful object. It's beginning to seem that every attempt we make at finding or reaching Leela ends in failure. What are we to do?"

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Thank You, Mario!

“Jeepers, they’re big,” said Jason, “and they look hungry.”

“I don’t believe we could kill them all before they could kill us.” said Roland.

“What are we to do?” said Jason.

“I think you’ll have to come up with a solution,” said Simon, “as usual.”

Jason nodded. The party was in the midst of a pine forest, not far from a small man-made clearing. Inside the clearing, grouped in a tight circle several yards in radius, a host of wolves stood. Though Jason had smelled the beasts from a good distance away, he hadn’t guessed at their size: paw-to-shoulder, they were as tall as him. All were staring intently at a crude wooden dwelling in the center of the circle, with their jaws hanging open and their tongues lolling out. They weren’t any more demonic- or evil-looking than ordinary wolves, so it wouldn’t have been fair to call them wargs, but their great size and their eager aspects, as they stared at the presumably occupied house with their big bushy tails wagging, were enough to qualify them as monsters.

“Can I help you?” a strange hissing voice asked.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. By now, over a month had passed since Jason had refused Beatrix’s offer. Having no better recourse, the party had decided to ask Caleb if he had any ideas. As it turned out, Caleb’s malware-writing activities had been discovered and the young man had been jailed within the few days since Jason and friends had first met him. So then, of course, after finding with great difficulty where he was being held, they’d busted him out, and he’d recommended that they meet a certain old colleague of Leela’s, and the old colleague had guided them to a geologist who he’d thought might be able to find her hideaway, and the geologist had directed them to a spot near Droydania’s south pole that had actually turned out to be a network of underground tunnels inhabited by a race of quasi-sapient mole-men, and so on and so forth for weeks on end.

Through all kinds of hardship—extreme environments; close encounters with fantastic monsters, bounty hunters, and policemen; foraging food from the land to survive without stealing—the party had stayed alive, together, and within the verse of Droydania. It hadn’t been easy. The mages’ magic had been taxed to the utmost: once, while fighting an enormous cloud of malevolent flying insects, Simon had cast so many spells that he’d collapsed with exhaustion, and a week ago, Roland had run out of the reagent he needed to conjure flame. (He’d since borrowed some from Curtis, who used it infrequently.) By now, Jason had concocted and made use of so many

tricks, from simple ruses to convoluted schemes, that he'd lost count of them. Occasionally they'd failed and made things worse, but Jason's success rate, already respectable from the beginning, had increased with time. Practice was making perfect.

Make no mistake—continuous adventure and danger had taken their toll on the hearts and minds of our heroes. All four had steadily become grimmer as the days had worn on and they'd seemed to come no closer to their goal.

Roland was growing impatient; Jason could feel it. The adventurer's temper was more volatile than ever before; he would attack any being he saw as threatening to the party, or to someone else, with little provocation.

Curtis was acting less carefree every day. He always paid attention now. The shock of the recent events had roused him to a level of consciousness formerly beyond him, which was a good thing, so far as Jason was concerned. However, that consciousness strained the prince: once continually escaping all the troubles of the world in his mind, Curtis was now bearing the full weight of them. Consequently, he seemed perpetually haggard; at times, he was even morose.

Simon, who'd always been reserved, seemed to be turning further inward over time. Though he always took active part in discussions, he was subtly preoccupied. Frequently, Jason noticed him staring contemplatively at the ground or the sky while the rest of the party's gaze was fixed on something else. The problem didn't seem to be his relationship with Roland: they simply ignored each other now, since Roland refused to speak to Simon, and Simon no longer bothered speaking to Roland. Rather, the lack of progress was frustrating the singer. "Our quest is, after all, our only hope," he'd once said, "yet it offers so little hope. None of us can return home; all we have is what we carry. Our entire welfare rests upon the dubious possibility that my mother will act as the panacea for all our troubles. It seems to me that our situation is bound to only grow worse."

These words had struck a chord with Jason, for they expressed much the same thoughts that had been haunting him. The four of them had bet everything on this one mission. Jason himself was becoming more and more single-minded, to his growing unease. He was becoming jaded. He didn't wonder so much at the origins and motives of the strange creatures and people he met; he came to see them as mere obstacles, marionettes dangled threateningly at him by the screenwriters, whose only function was to be pushed past in his pursuit of Leela, the oracle. This very day, he had asked "What are we to do?" more out of force of habit than a real feeling of helplessness. Some part of his brain had already begun thinking about how to deal with these wolves the moment he'd caught their scent, and the old feeling of mortality seemed less real to him the more he grew familiar with it, as new ostensible threats to his life appeared daily.

Now, to explain what the group was doing here. They had gathered, from certain sources, that somewhere in these woods was a small hut, and in the hut lived a gent who was generally known as the Secret-Keeper. He was a hermit who busied himself utilizing his enormous interdimensional web of contacts to trade all kinds of obscure and forbidden knowledge: he sold secrets for secrets, and collected any he could get for free in his spare time. It seemed a no-brainer that he would know *something* about Leela. Naturally, the location of his home was also a secret, but it

had proved far easier to discover than that of Leela's. Once the party had teleported to the forest, Curtis had sent an eagle to spot the hut from above and lead them there. And here they were.

Anyway, with what I just said about Jason in mind, you can understand why when Jason heard that strange hissing voice—"Can I help you?"—he jumped with surprise, but he wasn't quite as terrified as he might've been in the past.

The speaker stepped into view. He was a new kind of monster, a seven-foot-tall humanoid with translucent light-green skin. If he had any blood or internal organs to speak of, they were invisible, since Jason could look straight through his flesh and see the world behind. He was dressed in a great snow-white silk robe adorned with intricate designs stitched in gold thread. Each of his fingers had a ring with a colorful stone, and around his neck hung a pendant in the shape of a trefoil knot. Suspiciously, he had no scent at all.

"Uh, yes, sir," said Jason, "could you tell me what all these wolves are doing here?"

"They are mine." said the green man. "The man who lives in this house was skipping stones off the pond to the southwest when he struck and killed my son, who was invisible at the time. I have given the murderer a quarter of an hour's respite, as he requested, but then he must die."

"Invisible?" said Jason. "How could this man have avoided hitting your son if he'd been invisible?"

"That's neither here nor there." said the creature. His cold face made clear his terrible purpose. Jason noticed for the first time that the irises of his angry eyes were red. "The slayer must pay for the blood of the slain."

He's got Roland's perverted morals, I see. "Would you permit the four of us to speak to this man before his execution?"

"No." the green gentleman hissed curtly.

"Dang." Jason thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, on the way here, I saw another fellow skipping stones on that pond."

"Do I look like a fool to you?" the creature bristled.

"Not at all." said Jason levelly. He'd expected that this monster wouldn't be tricked *that* easily. He was at least glad that, as he'd guessed, any stone-skipping on that pond was a cause of concern for this creature—the creature made that clear enough with his strong reaction. "I'm telling the truth. If you don't believe me, I'll come along with you, and you can kill me, too, if you don't see anyone."

The creature paused. "You'd just run away."

"No, I won't!" Jason insisted. "And if you can't believe *that*, take along one of your wolves, and it can keep my hand in its mouth the whole time!" Standing in front of the rest of the party, Jason could hear Roland catch his breath.

The green man was impressed. "I suppose you're serious. But what, if I may ask, is your motive for telling me this?"

"To be honest," Jason said in a conspiratorial tone, "I ain't fond of the guy doing the skipping. I wouldn't mind if you killed him as you will this guy."

"So we have a common enemy." said the green man, nodding. "I see." He grinned; Jason suppressed a shudder.

The creature turned to the wolves and said something in a language Jason

didn't recognize. On cue, one of the wolves broke from the group and dashed over to Jason and the green man. Scary as it had been from afar, the wolf grew yet more fearsome as it neared. It bounded across the dirt at a frighteningly rapid gait, spittle dripping from its cavernous maw.

After instructing the wolf a bit more, the green man said "Put in your hand."

Jason took a deep breath. Slowly, he moved his left hand into the mouth. His hand didn't look much larger than the wolf's long, sharp teeth. Any moment, he feared, his courage might give out (there's irony for you), but he held on, mumbling faintly to himself "Plot immunity, plot immunity, plot immunity..." the whole time. The jaws closed, gently, and Jason tried not to scream as he felt the warmth and moisture inside.

"Don't follow us." the green man said to the mages. "I have eyes on the back of my head."

As they walked off to the pond, Jason gave the mages a look that said "Don't leave me alone here!" They understood.

The green man led the way—good thing, as Jason had never seen the pond before and had no idea how to find it. Soon they arrived at their destination, a surprisingly clear body of water in the middle of the woods, large enough that one might call it a lake.

The green man brought them to the edge of the water, where Jason saw plenty of highly skippable stones. "Where's the man you spoke of?" the green man asked, looking about.

"Over there." said Jason, pointing. The man looked just long enough for Jason to pick up a pebble with his right hand and toss it straight at the creature's chest. The throw was clumsy, but the aim was true.

All the translucent gentleman had time to do, before the stone hit him in the chest and smashed him into a puff of green fog, leaving only his clothes and jewelry behind, was to say one word in that strange language. The word rang in Jason's ears for the rest of his life—not for its sound or for its exact meaning, but for its effect: the wolf bit down.

The hurt and the horror that Jason experienced, on multiple levels, upon suddenly being detached from something that was truly a part of him, the very executor of his will, can hardly be imagined. Yet that was nothing compared to what Jason thought would inevitably follow. The wolf pounced on Jason, knocking him to the ground with great violence, and would have made mincemeat of him then and there had not it itself been very suddenly slain. For a moment it hovered above the boy, wobbling; then, it rolled into the lake. Jason saw a number of bloody holes in its side. He looked away.

And then he saw the stump.

When he came to, Jason found himself lying beneath a tree nearby the pond. The mages, looking concerned, sat beside him.

"That's good, at least." Roland said when he saw Jason's eyes open. "You've been unconscious for about an hour. I was able to stop the bleeding, with a bit of field-medic magic, so you'll definitely live, and you'll get to keep your whole arm as well. But given that we can hardly expect to receive real medical care without being

arrested," (here, briefly, he looked very dark), "I have no idea how we could get you a prosthetic hand."

Jason timidly glanced at his left arm. His forearm ended in a bandaged stump an inch or so behind where his wrist had once been. "Gosh," he said, "it's a horrifying sight. I don't feel any pain, though. And it feels like the hand's still there, sort of." He looked at the three of them with an expression of vague shock. "Never did I imagine this would happen."

"Jay, you stuck it in the wolf's mouth!" said Curtis. "Didja think it wouldn't bite? I killed it with plasma lances. If I hadn't followed you, and done that, it would've killed you."

"But..." said Jason "I have plot immunity. They can't take away my left hand!"

"On the contrary," said Simon, "perhaps the writers wanted to have you injured drastically, for the sake of drama, but also to avoid giving you much of a handicap, for their own convenience. In that case, your left hand would've been an ideal target for injury."

"Avoid giving me a handicap?" Jason wailed. "I'm left-handed!"

The consensus was that that definitely changed things. Curtis mouthed a silent "oh".

Simon looked grim. "I'm sorry, I never noticed." he said.

Roland gave Jason the old familiar is-there-something-I-don't-understand-or-are-you-completely-out-of-your-mind look. "Why, then," he said with a slightly choked voice, "when you could freely choose which hand to put in the wolf's mouth, did you use your dominant one?"

"Because I thought it had plot immunity." said Jason, staring longingly at the bandage. "I was wrong."

"God have mercy on you, Jason," said Roland, "you're clever, but sometimes you can be so phenomenally, astonishingly, breathtakingly *stupid*!" He paused for effect. Curtis and Simon didn't express any kind of agreement with that statement, but they didn't contradict it, either. "You're self-destructive, too." the adventurer added. "This, Jason, I guarantee: when you die, you'll die by your very own hands—or rather, hand."

"Yes, Roland," said Jason, "you've said similar things many times in the recent past. I make mistakes. And look, I've paid for at least one of them."

"And I hope you won't make a mistake of this magnitude again." said Simon. "You'll be more cautious now, won't you?" Jason didn't respond; all he did was bring himself up to a seated position. There was a long pause. "Jason?"

"Yeah, I will."

"You sound noncommittal." said Simon.

"Yeah, I am. Look, I have no idea what I'm doing, okay?" With difficulty, he stood up. The others rose as well. "All I can do is play it by ear. I've never thought I was invincible, and so I've done my best to steer clear of unnecessary danger, but at the same time I've realized that this world operates according to different rules of probability than the real one. I've successfully taken advantage of that fact at least once. I see that I overstepped my bounds here, but... if using television logic turns out to be the best way to solve a problem in the future, I won't shy away from it."

"Your attitude towards danger is still unclear to me." said Simon. "Sometimes you emphasize the need to avoid it, and at other times you act heedless of it. Why is

that?"

"What it boils down to is whether facing danger is necessary to achieve our ends," said Jason. "If hunting down Leela entails encountering all sorts of hostile monsters, so be it. At this point, there's really nothing else we can do. Otherwise, we're all close enough to death's door as it is, so there's no need to put our lives on the line for random strangers."

"You know how I feel about that," said Roland threateningly.

"I believe that self-sacrifice, employed wisely, is a noble deed," said Simon.

"You have to be willing to help people," said Curtis.

"Right, I'm in the minority here," said Jason. "That's already been established. Let's stop talking to each other and go talk to this Secret-Keeper character, or the sacrifice of my hand will be wasted."

The wolves hadn't moved from their posts, though the fifteen-minute period had long passed. Once again, Jason had gotten a death sentence indefinitely stayed. Now that the wolves' owner was no more, it ought to be easy, Jason thought, to get the wolves out of the way. Soon he came up with an idea backed by television logic, one that wouldn't've been out of place in *Looney Tunes*. First he used his sense of smell to locate a large game animal in the woods. He found an antelope-like creature. Curtis killed the animal with a mountain lion, Simon butchered the corpse with invisible blades of force, and Roland cooked the meat to perfection with a few quick blasts of fire. This had been the party's standard hunting routine for some weeks.

With many large, greasy, aromatic chunks of flesh in their arms, the four made their way back to the hut. As soon they heard the wolves begin to bark with excitement and stampede towards them, they tossed the meat as far as they could in one direction and teleported a good distance away in another.

They returned to the hut, now pleasantly wolf-free, just in time to see a gaunt young man emerge from it. He clashed greatly with Jason's mental image of the Secret-Keeper as a Jungian "wise old man": he seemed to be a perpetually nervous, underfed character, with a face like a kicked puppy's. His clothes were worn and tattered, as much as Jason's and Curtis's would have been by now if they hadn't gotten new ones, through circumstances too odd and convoluted to explain within a single prepositional phrase, around Cinco de Mayo. The young man looked at the party apprehensively.

"The green guy's dead," said Jason, "and I doubt his wolves will remember to come back for you after they finish the meat we gave them, so you're safe."

The man was awestruck. "Did you kill him?" he asked. He had a high-pitched voice, for a man who hadn't been castrated.

"Uh-huh. Same way you killed his son, but intentionally."

"Well, gosh... thank you!" He was radiant with pathetic joy. "Tell me, what led you to brave these monsters to save me?"

"Well, these three clowns believe in charity and goodness and all that nonsense," said Jason, "but mine was a purely selfish motive. The lot of us recently caught wind of your fame as a sage and general know-it-all, and we were hoping your knowledge could help us solve a very mysterious mystery. I figured you wouldn't be able to enlighten us while you were in forty separate pieces in those wolves'

stomachs.”

The young man scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Are you sure you don’t have me confused with the Secret-Keeper?”

Jason started. “Actually, I did. Where is he? Does he live with you in the hut?”

“This hut? No, he lives in a different hut, about two miles north of here.”

As Curtis shouted an expletive, Jason absentmindedly tried to facepalm with his left hand. He was hit by the stump instead.

“Thank you, Mario,” Roland muttered in English just loudly enough for Jason to hear, “but our princess is in another castle.”

42

The Turn of the Screw

"Oh, my," the young man said with concern, looking at Jason's stump, "what hap—"

"Don't ask," said Jason.

The man mumbled something and took a step towards the party. That single step somehow closed a significant distance and teleported the man to just a few feet in front of Jason's nose, though he'd been over twenty feet away a moment ago.

"You... how'd you do that?" Curtis asked. "Vulgar teleportation has a double- π gesture."

"What's a double- π gesture?" said the stranger.

"It's a term that an Emotion mage would never use," Roland said with sudden conviction, "and that I would've hoped an Imagination mage would never use, either, but the honest truth of it is that Curtis has a bit of a math fetish." The poor fellow just looked more confused.

"You didn't cast a spell?" said Curtis.

"No, I'm not a spellcaster!" said the man. "I just used these silly boots."

Everyone looked at his boots. They were the most worn and tattered of all his garments. Jason couldn't even tell what color they were under the soil and stains of so many ages gone by. Perhaps they had once been Pigpen's.

"These were seven-league boots in their day," said the man. "But now they're just seven-yard boots." (He didn't actually speak of leagues and yards, of course, but the lengths he mentioned were rather close to seven leagues and seven yards, respectively.)

"So the magic deteriorated along with the boots themselves?" said Jason. "It's a crying shame that they weren't well taken care of, then. Why weren't they?"

"Well... I suppose I should tell you my little history. Would you four like to hear it?"

Jason nodded without hesitation. Roland and Curtis glanced at each other, then gave their assent. Simon said he wanted to hear it too, though he seemed to be paying more attention to the clouds than to the young man.

"I was the youngest of a telemarketer's three sons."

Though I may be in a television show, thought Jason, this guy is clearly in a postmodern fairy tale.

"Our father was so kind to us, but he died so young, at the age of forty-two. He was using a free public phone one day—to save money, since we were going through hard times—when he caught some kind of infection from the receiver. It turned out to

be very severe, and in a few weeks he sent for the three of us to gather by his deathbed. He had never written a will, so the question of how he would choose to distribute his meager wealth among us was on all of our minds.

"At the appointed time, each of us traveled to the hospital my father was staying in. Actually, only my brothers got there. I was going to take a train, but I arrived at the station half-a-minute too late. In Droydania, the trains are always right on time, you know. So I missed my train, and I had to take the next one, which arrived forty-five minutes later. By the time I finally appeared by my father's side, he was dead!"

"That's terrible!" Roland exclaimed.

"Tell me about it," said the youngest son. "What made it worse was what happened just before he died. He was greatly distressed that I hadn't shown up. He asked my brothers 'Where is my youngest son?'. They replied—though they've never admitted it to me; I learned it elsewhere—that I'd said I didn't feel like coming. That was a blatant lie, of course. I had always loved my father dearly, and I was his favorite. But in his ailing state, I guess, he didn't think to question what my brothers told him.

"My father said 'Doesn't care about the untimely death of his own poor father, eh? He'll regret it!' And on the spot, he bequeathed the house and half his money to my older brother, and the car and the other half of his money to my younger brother. 'And that last, ungrateful son of mine' he said 'can have the old pair of boots in the attic!'

"My brothers pretended to have no idea why my father had cut me off with a pair of boots, and to be very sorry for me. But when I begged them for help, they told me to fend for myself. And so I found myself homeless and penniless, without a friend in the world. I felt only a tiny bit better when I discovered that the boots were magical."

"You didn't know?" said Curtis.

"No, none of us had known. They'd just been collecting dust in the attic for generations. Long ago, I think, one of my ancestors used them, but over time, their purpose was gradually forgotten, until they became one of those household items that just sits in a corner unmolested for decades because nobody thinks to throw it away."

"Like an exercise machine," said Jason.

"Exactly," said the youngest son. "Well, the good thing, I thought, was that I was Droydanian. You know how effective Droydanian antipoverty programs are. With them, thousands of people go from far under the poverty line to securely above it every year. And Droydania's upper limit for legal poverty is twice Gyeeds's."

"That's a government statistic, isn't it?" said Jason. "This is a dictatorship. I'm sure the government lies about statistics all the time."

"No, Jason," said Roland, "the Droydanian government often censors the truth, but it never lies."

The youngest son nodded. "It's true that our exponentially progressive income tax doesn't go to waste. So I got temporary shelter and applied for Ascension Assistance, as it's called. But I never got anywhere! I don't know why, but my luck was always rotten. Everything went wrong during the application process. Someone would tell me where to go and later I'd learn that they'd given me the wrong directions. Or, someone I'd have to talk to would be in a crabby mood the day I met

them. Or, I'd fall ill just in time to miss an appointment. After a year of futile struggle, I gave up.

"At that point, I guess I could've lived off the food and shelter the government was providing. But what can I say, I didn't want to spend the rest of my life like that. I wanted a home and a place in society of my own. I needed some money in order to secure either, so I decided—" here he looked very penitent—"to steal. That was the one way I could think of to put these old boots to good use."

"I made a simple mask for myself and I began pilfering cash registers. I would choose a store and wait until business was slow, but the store was still open, since I had no idea how to open a locked cash register. Then, I'd teleport inside, through a wall nearby the cashier. I could very quickly push aside the cashier, stuff a few notes into my pockets, and get away, especially since I could cover seven yards with every step.

"Because I felt guilty about stealing, I always took only a portion of the money in a register, even when I could've easily taken more. Sometimes I left a store empty-handed, because I'd see a guard or an employee closing in on me, possibly with a stunning-spell, and I'd teleport away at once rather than risk the chance of being apprehended. I was cautious. I once thought of robbing a bank vault, but I feared that the serial numbers of the stolen bills might give me away later. I relied on the element of surprise, so I stole from random stores at unpredictable times.

"After ten weeks of slowly building up my nest-egg, I ran into trouble. One day, I knocked the cashier of a stationary shop to the floor only to discover he was my younger brother! He immediately recognized me through the mask, of course."

"Wow," said Jason, "you do have rotten luck."

"Don't I know it!" the youngest son cried despairingly. "I could imagine how foul my name would become after that. So I took my few possessions and my big bag of cash and settled in these woods."

"Huh." said Jason. "And then you were skipping stones when—"

"I killed an invisible man, yes! His father appeared out of nowhere and told me I had to die. I escaped to my hut easily enough, but then he got those wolves to form in a circle around my house, just the right size so that if I took one step, with these boots, in any direction, they'd catch me in their teeth in an instant. I asked for fifteen more minutes, so I could think of some way out of that mess. In fact, I didn't think of one in a whole hour, so if you hadn't killed the father, I would've been a goner. Thank you."

"You're very welcome." said Jason.

The man glanced at Jason's stump again. "You lost your hand getting the wolves away, you poor boy, didn't you?"

"Yeah." Jason admitted. "And for nothing, since you're not the Secret-Keeper." The man was somewhat offended by this; Jason paid no heed. "Actually, I gotta request for you. May I buy your boots?"

"Buy them? For how much?"

"Well, I wouldn't pay with cash, but with some jewelry that ought to be easily pawnable. Specifically, the stuff that the green guy was wearing. I killed him, so it's by all rights mine now."

"Half's mine," said Curtis loudly, then added, "but you can have it, Jay."

"Well..." said the man, thinking, "I hate to part with the only inherently useful thing I have. On the other hand, I do owe you my life."

"And with all that money," said Jason, "you could probably employ bribery to get yourself the 'place in society' you wanted from the beginning, while avoiding punishment for burglary."

"All right," said the man, "it's a deal."

There wasn't too much of the jewelry, and it was light enough, so Jason fetched it alone with his single hand. He thought of checking under the water of the lake to see if the invisible son of the green man had dropped any jewelry there. Then he figured that the jewelry might still be invisible, especially since he didn't see any clothing floating on the surface of the lake. Then Jason realized that the son might well have been nude if he'd been bathing or swimming and invisible besides. Then Jason remembered that he'd never learned how to swim, with or without his left hand. Then Jason thought that Roland could almost certainly swim, if Curtis and Simon couldn't, so he might do the jewelry-diving. Then Jason decided it wasn't worth the effort anyway, since money would be of little use to fugitives, so he went back to the hut.

Jason handed over the jewelry and, with great difficulty due to his mutilation, fit the seven-yard boots over his shoes. The man pointed out that the magic word needed to toggle the boots' power on and off was written on the sole of the right boot. Jason spoke the word and tried the magic out. He took a step in one direction and poof—there he was, seven yards away, his nose nearly touching the bark of a tree. He ran off in another direction, and in a matter of seconds he was out of sight. He returned to the hut, spoke the magic word again, thanked the young man, and said one more thing before he set off for the Secret-Keeper with the mages close behind:

"You might want to relocate from these woods quickly. The green guy was very agitated about the possibility of someone skipping stones on the lake even after his son was dead. That makes me think there's at least one other similar creature out there that he wanted to protect, perhaps the mother of his son, or another child. The still-living relatives may thirst for vengeance as much as the father did. So, I'd be wary if I were you."

After they'd been walking for a bit, Jason asked no one in particular "What is a 'double-π gesture', anyway?"

"Let me put it this way." Roland said in English. "Shortly before you were born, quantum physicists as a whole seriously turned their attention to sorcery for the first time, and soon enough they'd constructed their own insane logic-defying probabilistic model of it, which gained increasing acceptance as the years went by, and it's all been downhill from there."

"Ah," said Jason in Common, "I guess that covers it." Very occasionally, in peculiar ways, Roland could be antiscientific.

A few more minutes passed. "Only now" said Simon at length "does it occur to me that we never thought to ask the thief his name."

Jason thought about that. "Well, of course we didn't. He's just like the narrator of *The Turn of the Screw* and Calvin's parents."

"What are you referring to?" Simon asked.

"American... uh... literature."

"And what do you mean by the reference?"

"That the guy we met doesn't *have* a name!" Jason declared triumphantly.

Simon paused a moment to take that in. Then he said "Do you think it would be worthwhile going back to ask him?"

"If we tried, the writers would stop us from ultimately getting to ask him, so there's no point."

"Now, I can believe that kinda stuff," said Curtis. "Guys, I'm... disturbed."

"Disturbed?" said Simon. "What about?"

"Mostly 'cause of the monsters," said Curtis. "I don't get how they're made. We fight weird monsters all the time, but how are they made? Y'know, I know how to make all kinds of animals, not all just like real animals. I can make some of 'em bigger or stronger. And I know how other mages can make some other things. But there's just no way to make, like, mole-men. Or the green guy. Or the gray things with tentacles—Gol n' Thorm, I mean. The shapes are totally different. And a mage can never make a *smart* monster—as smart as a human, I mean. And it's not just that I don't know the spell, or anything, 'cause it... doesn't make sense."

For several moments, Curtis was silent, concentrating intently. "What I'm trying to say" he continued "is that the weird monsters we've met weren't created with sorcery. Not what we call sorcery. *That* means that what we're really fighting, the Supernals, aren't just mages. They're beyond magic. They aren't the kind of god I know. They're something else, something alien. This whole thing is something totally, totally new."

They all thought about that for a while.

"Curtis," said Roland, "I think you may be onto something."

"I think that what you're saying is essentially correct," said Simon. "It doesn't tell us much, though. You've told us what the Supernals aren't, not what they are."

Everyone expected Jason to give his opinion then, but the boy was silent.

"Jason?" Roland prompted.

"Sounds right," said Jason, "but the analysis is from an in-universe perspective, and at this point, I don't care too much for in-universe stuff. I mean, we're going to hear all the in-universe answers from Leela when we find her. In the meantime, there's no real point in trying to figure them out ourselves."

"Jason," said Roland in Common, "has your curiosity waned over time?"

Jason glared at his stump. "Yes. Yes. Very much so."

43

On to the Past

Three weeks later, the foursome ate lunch in the shade of a huge boulder as they surveyed their next target: a great hilltop castle, ringed by a wide moat. Though the look of the castle made Jason immediately think of the Middle Ages, the structure itself wasn't much older than him. It was the dwelling of a very eccentric and very rich man by the name of Dr. Hayms Nepa, who'd had it built to serve as his home and his office. Hayms was a physician who had achieved great fame through his strange talent for certainty: when he said you had a disease, you had it; when he said you didn't have one, you didn't. Similarly, he could predict whether a particular treatment would help a patient with uncanny accuracy. Hayms charged fees many times greater than the norm, but so much was his service in demand that no one could get an appointment later than five weeks in advance, and cars were constantly driving in either direction along the long, narrow road that connected his castle to a big city nearby.

When asked as to how he'd acquired his remarkable ability, the good doctor always replied, half-jokingly, that God whispered the answers in his ears. Some felt he was hiding something. Jason and friends were sure Hayms was hiding something—in fact, they knew what the something was. For some days, they'd been looking for a particular magical object, a coin that, when asked a yes-or-no question and flipped, unerringly landed on the correct side. They'd heard that Hayms had crossed paths with the person last known to possess the coin, so chances were that it was now his secret helper.

At the moment, the doctor was away from home, relaxing on a beach on a faraway tropical island. This was a good thing, as it meant that the castle's defenses would be weaker than usual. The large company of guards that Hayms always kept at the castle, ostensibly to protect him from assassination by those who were jealous of him, was reduced while he was abroad. Alas, the large, hungry freshwater sharks in the moat were always present in the same frightening number, not that Jason was in the mood to learn how to swim. As for the coin, Jason had heard of a large vault that was hidden somewhere within the castle's twisting hallways; it was a fair guess that Hayms kept the coin there while he didn't need it. This was fortunate, as Jason figured that with his seven-yard boots, it would be easier to steal something out of a vault than off of Hayms's person.

Jason had made good use of the boots several times since he'd bought them from the nameless thief. Though its range was short, the boots' power had several

advantages over the conventional teleportation spell: it could be activated much more quickly, it was absolutely precise, it needed no reagents and consumed no mage's energy, and, perhaps most usefully, it could be used to reach locations Jason hadn't yet seen. That last feature was in contrast to how a mage could only teleport somewhere if they could picture their destination in their mind.

Yet the boots hadn't nearly been worth the real price Jason had paid for them. I speak, of course, of the loss of his left hand. Losing his right hand would have been bad enough: with only one hand, Jason had found, all kinds of formerly trivial day-to-day tasks became very difficult. Without his left hand, Jason was truly crippled. All kinds of fine manual tasks—writing in particular—became next to impossible. Jason wasn't going to get an artificial replacement any time soon, so there was nothing to do but begin the slow, painstaking process of acclimating himself to using his right hand. He remembered reading about what neurological havoc ensued when left-handed children were forced to use their right hand, and experienced the pain for himself as he struggled to grip pens and throw balls properly. Twice already, since he'd lost his left hand, his clumsiness had nearly cost him his life. It was, he decided, absolutely a miracle that he'd managed to hit the green man.

Besides the purely physical trauma of his mutilation, Jason was shaken by the experience. I don't need to tell you how frightening it was for him to discover so suddenly that he didn't have nearly as much plot immunity as he'd thought he'd had. Even now, he wasn't sure how he ought to interpret the fact that such an event could happen, and had happened.

Inexplicably, he began to get a sense that an exceptionally nasty surprise awaited him at Leela's hideout—though other than Leela's being Beatrix, which seemed just a little *too* ridiculous, he couldn't imagine what.

"So, do you have a plan for this?" Curtis asked Jason, after he'd finished eating.

"Mm-hm," said Jason. "I'll use my boots to enter the castle inconspicuously, from that far corner. My nose should help me stay clear of the guards, but I'll have a lot less of them, or none, to deal with if you guys keep them busy by attacking up front. Just be careful to stay a good distance away from the castle and keep your shields up and they shouldn't be able to hurt you. You don't need to hurt them, of course; just distract them. If they chase you, run. I'll fetch the coin from the vault, exit the castle—from the way I entered, if possible—and circle back to rejoin you. Then we can teleport away."

"I suppose we should be able to stand against the guards," said Roland.

"Certainly, we have plenty of experience defending ourselves by now." A couple of sparks spontaneously shot from his hands. Roland, like everyone else, was not happy. "Shall we start now?"

"I guess so," said Jason. "We might as well get it over with."

"I'm sorry," said Simon, "but I wasn't paying attention while you explained your plan. Would you please repeat it for me?"

Jason, surprised, reiterated the plan as Roland stared at him. Then, Jason borrowed Roland's flashlight, since he figured it'd be dark in the vault, and the mages set off for the castle. Jason muttered "Sunny day, sweeping the clouds away..." as he watched them walk across the rolling fields and up the hill. The day was indeed sunny, for one in early autumn; the endless meadows of knee-high grass surrounding

the castle appeared a strongly yellowish shade of green in the light, and the deep lake behind the structure seemed to absolutely glow. Jason was thankful for the boulder; apart from the castle, it provided the only shade in sight. He fanned his face with his hand in a vain effort to stave off the heat.

Presently, he made out that the mages, now too distant to identify individually, were trading magical blasts with figures in the castle's high windows. Jason rose to his feet, spoke the magic word, and ran. Actually, he didn't literally run; his physical stride was more of a very short, quick waddle. The reason was that while the boots' magic was active, every step he took covered exactly seven yards, no more and no less. To travel as fast as possible, he needed to set one foot in front of the other as often as possible—the length of each step didn't matter. And so he could dash across the countryside at over forty miles an hour, twice as fast as the average speed of Earth's best hundred-meter sprinters, just by waddling quickly.

Jason speed-waddled in a wide arc so that he reached a far side of the castle, just by the lake and the little dock where Hayms kept his pleasure-boats, without being noticed. He then made an unpleasant discovery: the moat was about ten yards wide. He didn't have a tape measure, but he had, over time, learned to judge exactly where a step would land him, and in this case it would certainly plop him in the water. He needed something solid to walk on in order to teleport.

Although I can't swim, Jason thought, I might be able to dog-paddle the last three yards, or something. Then he scrapped that idea, as he smelled a welcoming committee approaching him. Soon a long, fat shark with spotted brown skin and three eyes was circling around in the water just in front of Jason. Although it looked like something out of a B movie, Jason had heard of it before and knew it to be a soil shark, a normal Droydanian animal. All Droydanian fish had three eyes, one on each side and one up front. At any rate, monster or no monster, this thing gave every impression it wanted Jason for lunch. *If Hayms keeps them hungry enough to eat humans, Jason found himself thinking, why don't they eat each other? Well, nobody said they didn't.*

Jason cast about for an object he might float in the water and use as a sort of stepping-stone. Nothing even vaguely serviceable was in sight. The boats, even the smallest, were hardly portable, and the wooden dock was in too good a condition for Jason to break off a piece. If the environment here had been more foresty, he might've used a fallen log or the like. Then again, he couldn't lift anything of appreciable weight with just one hand and his left arm.

Realizing he had no choice, Jason positioned himself carefully and watched the soil shark, waiting. When it was near the surface of the water and located in just the right spot, Jason took two quick steps forward. Immediately he appeared on the other side of the moat, having only felt the shark beneath his feet for a fraction of a second. He sighed with relief. The shark didn't have the slightest idea what had just happened.

Bracing himself, Jason stepped into the castle. He found himself in a large, fancy kitchen, full of expensive-hardwood cabinets, marble countertops, and gleaming stainless-steel appliances. For a moment, he paused to breathe deeply of the heavenly aromas emanating from the hundred different spices stored in the cupboards. Then, his heart sank as he saw a burly man wearing a suit run through the open door from

the hallway outside.

"How'd you get in here?" the man demanded, coming to a stop some ten yards away. (It was a big kitchen.)

Jason was caught completely off-guard. "Well... it's a funny story..."

The man did a double-take. "Wait a minute, you're Jason Blue!"

"That I am." said Jason. He still wasn't sure what to do, so he just stayed where he was and watched the guard carefully.

"Trespassing's the least of your crimes! I'm going to have to turn you in."

After a moment's thought, Jason stepped backwards, appearing outside. He took a few steps parallel to the wall and then teleported inside once more. Now he was in a carpeted library with many narrow alleys walled in by towering bookcases. He sniffed and for a moment gave olfaction his whole attention. Mostly, he smelled the old books here and the spices from the kitchen; the only living creatures he could detect, aside from a handful of vermin, were himself and the guard he'd already met.

Quickly, Jason walked to the door and tried to judge the guard's distance by smell. He was moving away from Jason, probably back the way he'd come. Jason tentatively stepped into the hallway. Alas, the guard had not turned a corner, as Jason had hoped; they were now in the same hall. Some impulse or intuition, goodness knows what, made the guard glance behind—and there he saw Jason. "Stop!" he cried out.

So much for stealth. Jason thought. He teleported through another wall and ended up in, of all places, a billiards room, or something analogous to it anyway. And there were two guards playing a game; one was executing a very elaborate move, involving the struck ball ricocheting against the cushions six times before pocketing itself and three other balls, when Jason arrived. As Jason's sense of smell couldn't generally penetrate walls, both parties were equally surprised at the other's presence.

Jason swore and stepped elsewhere. For the next twenty minutes, he ran all around the castle looking for the vault as the guards chased him. They weren't about to catch him anytime soon, since he could move somewhat faster and much more freely than they, but their constant pursuit made a proper, thorough search very difficult indeed. Soon a grand total of six different guards were after him, four that Jason had encountered accidentally and two that had been alerted by their colleagues. So many pursued him that Jason wondered if some had been fighting the mages earlier, but had now turned their attention to him because—well, he preferred not to continue that train of thought.

The guards quickly caught on to Jason's peculiar kind of teleportation. It didn't take much longer for them to learn his movement patterns. And in just a few minutes more they hatched a plan to take advantage of both. Jason was racing down a hallway when he saw a guard just over seven yards ahead of him; he looked behind and he saw another, the same distance away. He remembered noticing how at least two of the other four had recently gone into rooms adjacent to this hallway. Then he realized the guards had trapped him just as wolves had trapped the nameless thief. The guards had formed a carefully sized ring around him, so that if he took one step in any direction, he'd end up within range for someone to hit him with a stunning-spell.

Jason froze, thinking. The guards he could see didn't move. *Well, he thought, I*

can't go backwards or forwards, left or right... how about up? He placed his left foot on a nearby wall. And lo, he arrived at a spot seven yards higher than where he'd been before, three feet above the floor of the third story; he landed without injury. He escaped the trap that way, but given that the castle was only three stories tall, he was lucky he'd been on the first floor. If he'd been higher up, he would've had to face a much longer, possibly lethal fall onto the roof.

Twenty minutes felt like an eternity in these circumstances, but Jason was still only ten years old when he found the vault. It wasn't hidden very well, thank goodness; it was just in one of the last spots Jason got to in that gigantic home. In the castle's foyer, which took up all three stories of its area, there were staircases and balconies that led to the second and third floors. Projecting from the upper balcony was the head of a long-dead emperor of Droydania carved out of a twelve-foot stone cube. A conspicuous reinforced door, like that of a bank vault, was on the back of the head, accessible from the balcony.

When Jason saw the door, he didn't even bother to check how it opened, nor did he pause to wonder how that immense head supported itself. He teleported inside right away. It was pitch-black; the door was closed so tightly that not a sliver of light leaked in. He clicked on Roland's flashlight and found that the vault was mostly empty, merely a large hollow cube with a few full sacks of paper money scattered carelessly about. The one thing in the vault that was of interest to Jason was a small iron chest, not much bigger than a microwave oven, that was lying on the floor. Jason tried opening the chest. It was locked. He lay down on his knees to look at it.

The chest didn't have a keyhole. Instead, it had a row of wheels like those of an odometer, which Jason found he could spin with a strong push. Each wheel had ten faces, each marked with a seemingly random letter of the Common alphabet. The wheels were independent of each other, in the sense that spinning one didn't affect the others. On the front of the chest just below the wheels, a quatrain of verse was engraved:

The twin extremes at either end
Of any spectrum; though opposed,
They are alike in how they tend
To freeze all those who are exposed.

Jason supposed that the inscription was meant as to be interpreted as a riddle, whose answer, spelled out with the odometer wheels, would unlock the chest. No possible answer immediately occurred to him, so he figured he'd just cart the chest away and solve the riddle elsewhere, with the mages' help. Failing that, they could probably bust the box open with brute force.

Jason hugged the chest to his own chest with both arms and pulled upwards. Unfortunately, it was too heavy to lift that awkward way with his puny muscles. If he'd had his left hand (Jason thought or said a sentence beginning like that at least four times a day), he probably could've managed to heave it up, with difficulty. But given his disability and the chest's inconvenient placement on the floor, rather than on some raised surface, the only thing he could do was open the chest and extract the

coin. The only way to open the chest that he could think of was to solve the riddle, so he set his mind to that at once.

He struggled for some minutes. Since the answer was “the twin extremes / Of *any* spectrum”, Jason figured it had to be some kind of synonym for “extremes”—the difficult thing was, Common had few perfect synonyms. Furthermore, Jason didn’t see what the riddle’s author meant by how the extremes could “freeze all those who are exposed”. He turned his attention to that phrase. The key words, “freeze” and “exposed”, were both ambiguous. “Freeze”, like its English equivalent, was a word for the transformation of water to ice that was also idiomatically used to describe any sort of stiffening. The use of “exposed” meant that anyone who was made vulnerable to one of the “extremes” would likely “freeze”, though it was unclear how one could become vulnerable. So, the answer was the plural form of a kind of “extreme” that could stiffen you, if you were made vulnerable.

Jason sighed. He wondered if Leela, being the Woman Who Knew All the Answers, would know the answer to this riddle. He wondered what it was like living in mortal terror of supernatural beings inside an underground shelter in what Cade Uffet, the shelter’s constructor, had called “a frozen wasteland”.

Hm... “frozen”. Might, perhaps... Jason recalled that Cade had guessed, from the look of the environment, that the place he’d built the house in had been near a planetary pole.

“Eureka!” Jason whispered. One letter at a time, he spelled out “poles” with the chest’s wheels. There was a quiet click, and Jason eagerly threw the chest’s lid open. The only thing inside was a large, shiny copper hendecagonal (i.e. eleven-sided) coin, which he pocketed along with the flashlight. Now, to escape. There was only one direction by which he could leave, the way he’d come, since stepping in any other would risk a twenty-foot drop. So, the guards could have, and probably had, positioned themselves that they might stun him the moment he left.

With this in mind, Jason walked to a corner of the vault with his boots deactivated before stepping outside, setting his line of movement at a sharp angle. In this way, he avoided a guard who would’ve caught him had he exited more straightforwardly. A quick glance at the stairs down from the balcony revealed guards waiting on them, and Jason didn’t dare to climb or descend stairs with his boots active, so he ran off in another direction, towards another staircase. (By now, he was passably familiar with the layout of the castle.)

Jason’s destination was some distance away, with many winding corridors in between, so he soon had the guards about a minute behind him. Then, as he was traveling, he caught whiff of someone ahead—apparently, a man been left to guard this staircase. Though Jason cursed his misfortune, he didn’t turn or slacken his pace, thinking there might be a way to easily get by. As he continued, and came closer to the scent’s source, he was surprised to discover that the person he was smelling was no guard, but a young boy. Then he quickly identified the boy, though he could barely believe it, and thought his nose was deceiving him. It wasn’t. Jason turned a corner and there, rushing down a hall to meet him, was himself.

Yes, this was another Jason Blue, down to the last detail—and not just any Jason Blue, but the *current* Jason Blue. Which is to say, not only did he have Jason’s face and Jason’s body type and Jason’s unique identifying odor, he was wearing exactly the

same clothes, with exactly the same tears and stains in exactly the same places. He was wearing identical boots (though his steps didn't teleport him, so Jason figured they were inactive), and the unsightly wrinkles and discolorations of the bare stump at the end of his left arm were just like Jason's. He even had the same intensity of foul funk from not having bathed with soap more recently than a week ago and from not having brushed his teeth in eons. In fact, the only visible difference between these two Jasons was that our Jason's face expressed extreme shock, while the new Jason seemed to have been expecting this.

After a moment, the clone said "I'm your future self." He had the voice exactly, of course. He spoke in Common, for no apparent reason.

"And what..." Jason #1 wasn't sure what question to ask first. Quickly, he decided on "Time travel exists?"

"Yeah, that's how I'm here." said Jason #2. "We don't have time for questions, of course—you'll find out soon! Just, quickly, hand me the coin."

"Uh... but... wait... can't you tell me—"

"C'mon, hurry! The guards are catching up!"

"Okay, okay." said Jason #1. He came face-to-face with Jason #2 in two steps and handed him the coin. Jason #2 pocketed it quickly. "Let's escape together. Turn your boots on and follow me."

"No, I can't! I have to leave you now."

"Do you mean... am I gonna die?"

"No, no! You'll figure it all out later. Trust me. Now go!" He ran off in a direction different from the one Jason #1 would take to get to the staircase, his steps still nonmagical.

"Uh... be you later!" Jason #1 called out in English. Jason #2 glanced back quickly, but he didn't respond. Soon he was out of sight. Jason #1, shrugging, resumed his journey.

In time, he stepped through one of the castle's walls. He crossed the moat with the same dangerous trick as before, though he had to seek out a shark himself this time. As he speed-waddled around the castle again, he saw the mages continuing to fight guards inside the castle. Except, one of the mages was lying prone, giving Jason a bit of a sinking feeling. He ran towards the group until he was behind their shields, and then he saw the fallen mage was Roland.

"He's stunned." Curtis explained, launching a bright basketball of green light at one of the windows.

"Oh, good." said Jason. "Okay, let's go."

At that, they all teleported several hundred miles away from the scene.

44

Heroism

A while ago, in late May, the party had finally settled on a makeshift home, or a permanent camp, depending on how one looked at it. The site was a cave in the side of a mountain which consisted of a single chamber about ten feet high and thirty feet in diameter. Outside was a wide ridge of level ground hemmed in by a steep drop, affording a gorgeous view of endless acres of hills and forests below. A clean albeit foul-tasting stream was an easy ten-minute hike away.

Inside the cave, the party kept their few possessions: some extra clothes for Jason and Curtis and socks and underwear of all sizes, a heap of miscellaneous reagents, some pencils and paper, a cooking pot and tableware, some handmade preserved food, an electric shaver (which Roland had obtained with considerable difficulty, though he was the only one capable of growing facial hair), and four large piles of hay. With care, our heroes had managed to live for some time without recourse to civilization, if not in luxury.

As Simon carefully placed the limp body of Roland on the hay, Jason noticed that he was sopping wet—Simon, I mean. His suit was magically dry, but his skin was soaked. None of the four had a good haircut, so the singer looked odd without bits of his hair pointing out at random angles.

“What happened, Simon?” said Jason, looking alternately between the two men.

“I stunned him.” said Curtis.

“I’ll explain.” said Simon. “While we were fighting the castle’s guards, one of them fell out of a window and into the moat. I’m not sure what the cause was, but I believe one of Roland’s spells knocked him over. Once in the water, the guard didn’t rise to the surface, and I saw a shark swimming towards him rapidly: left alone, he would’ve been killed and eaten. I decided to try to rescue him.

“I immediately teleported to the moat and dove in. Underwater, I saw that he couldn’t swim, so I took him in my arms and carried him onto the land. In the meantime, the guards above kept shooting at me and nearly killed me, and I stunned the shark a moment before it could bite me. After I’d teleported back behind our shields, I was horrified to find Roland shooting at the man I’d just saved. He looked furious; I couldn’t imagine at what. I was going to plead with him to stop, but then Curtis stunned him. I myself was angry at that initially, but I figured there was no point in complaining about it then, so I returned to fighting without saying anything else.”

Jason didn’t say anything, either, as he puzzled over the affair.

"Now that I think about it, I believe Curtis may have done right," said Simon. "Since Roland always ignores me, there probably hadn't been any other way to stop him."

Jason nodded. "Did anything else happen to the guy you rescued?"

"After about a minute, he stood up and teleported away. I don't know where he went; we didn't see him again. I'm only thankful he was fairly light, since I can't lift much. Castration has left me with weaker muscles than most young men's."

"Well, I'm glad to see that you and Curtis live up to your own moral principles," said Jason. "Simon, in particular... it was rather, well, heroic of you to risk your life saving your enemy."

"Thank you kindly," said Simon, smiling for the first time in ages.

"Were there any deaths?"

"None that I know of."

"I didn't see any," said Curtis.

"Neat," said Jason. "Roland's gonna be ticked off, of course. When will he wake up?"

"Soon," said Curtis. "I used a weak stun."

"He's waking up right now," said Simon.

"Television timing," Jason grumbled.

Roland's eyes slowly opened. For a moment he looked clueless and perplexed. Once he realized where he was, he got to his feet in a jiffy. "Did you stun me, Curtis?" he said angrily.

"I did," said the prince, staring up at the adventurer unflinchingly.

"How we have fallen!" Roland cried out in despair. "I expected to come to loggerheads with you, Curtis, least of all. Simon's influence has poisoned all of us by now."

Simon sighed quietly.

"Let me guess," said Jason: "you were angry that Simon was 'aiding the enemy', right?"

"Of course!" said Roland. "He was lucky that the gentleman he rescued didn't take the opportunity to kill him!"

"Yet you didn't attack that guard out of concern for Simon's safety, I imagine."

"I attacked him out of concern for the safety of all of us."

"Did you really think he'd attack you after Simon had saved his life?"

"Not just then, perhaps, but he'd been attacking us before, and I had every reason to think he'd attack again before we left. I shot at him while he was vulnerable." Roland stared at Curtis furiously. After a few seconds, he cast his eyes down and began pacing. "How'd the burglary go, Jason?"

"Fine," said Jason. He recounted how he'd avoided the guards, solved the riddle, and gave the coin to the other Jason.

"So you don't have the coin," said Curtis.

"No, but I will very soon. It's guaranteed. Some method of time travel will make itself available to me in the near future."

"Jason," said Simon, "I don't think the person you met was actually your future self."

"Nonsense!" Jason declared. "No impostor could mimic me so perfectly. Just my

unique scent would be physically impossible to emulate.”

“My guess” said Simon “is that the impostor had a way of magically assuming your shape.”

“I’ve never seen shapeshifting magic, have you? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t exist.”

“It’s true that I’ve never heard of an actual instance of shapeshifting before, but I believe that given these two possibilities—that the person you encountered was using magical mimicry, or that he was your future self—the former is far more likely.”

“And what makes you believe that?”

“Two details” said Simon “seem to me evidence that the other Jason was deceiving you. The first is simply that his boots didn’t function. He was hurrying, so he had every reason to use them. My explanation as to why he never teleported is that the magic he used to mimic your boots couldn’t mimic the boots’ magic. The second detail is that he showed no sign of comprehending your English. I’d think that if he had been your future self, he would’ve spoken to you in English exclusively. I remember how you put an English postscript for yourself on the note you wrote in anticipation of our Antimnemonic-induced amnesia. The purpose of that postscript was to confirm that you were the writer, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then given the opportunity to speak to a past self, wouldn’t you do so in English?”

“You’re right!” said Jason suddenly. “You’re right, Simon! I screwed up *massively* and now I’ve got a perfect clone on the loose with a magic item I can barely hope to retrieve!” He slapped himself on the forehead violently. “Gah, look at this stupid bracelet!” he said, extending his hand. The broken bracelet was still hanging on his right wrist. “Why do I still wear this thing? It’s a reminder of defeat, no better than Gawain’s girdle. Every little bit of progress I make is eventually undone, if not immediately thwarted. And now... now I see I can’t trust anyone, not even myself. There’s too *much* magic, that’s the problem! I can never be sure what kinds of magic are possible and what kinds aren’t, ’cause there’s more and more magic pouring into the world all the time from those Supernals. How am I supposed to play the game if the rules keep changing? I hate this stupid TV show!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Jason.” said Roland. He looked caught between sympathy and annoyance.

“Whatever. I’ll be pining away for my left hand, if anybody needs me.” With that, Jason sat down on his pile of hay and sulked.

A couple of hours later, Simon was sketching a landscape, Curtis was differentiating a rational function, and Jason and Roland were absorbed in a discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* (“The bit with the comet was just *forced*, though.”) when a suited man spontaneously teleported right at the mouth of the cave—just, Jason thought, as Roland had appeared before him so many months ago. This time, Roland of all those present was the most disturbed. He jumped to his feet and held out his hands in readiness for casting a violent spell. “Who goes there?” he demanded.

“Careful, now.” said the stranger, resisting an impulse to recoil. He was a large, muscular fellow with an odd weasel-like face and a gravelly voice. “I’d be the last to

try to kill you. Even if I wanted to, I know—we know—that the four of you together are very powerful.”

Roland dropped his hands to his sides, though he remained wary. “What, then, if I may ask, are you here to do?”

“To invite you—all of you—to a dinner we’re having tonight, in Beetle City. We respect you, and we think your membership in our ranks would be mutually beneficial.”

“And if *I* may ask,” said Jason, “how in the name of Ganesh did you find us here?”

“We have many sources of information.” replied the stranger. “Here’s the location.” He tossed a piece of paper onto the ground before him. “Show up at fifteen-o’-clock.” (By that he meant nine PM—remember that the IDC day began at dawn, not midnight.) He then teleported away.

“But who’s ‘we’?” Jason asked the air.

“Gangsters, apparently.” said Roland. “‘Beetle City’ is their slang for a metropolis a few hundred miles east of the imperial city.”

“What’s its actual name?”

“Well, it must start with ‘0-0-0’; the next field would be... mm...”

“It’s ‘0-0-0-8-2’.” said Simon to Jason. Roland fell silent.

“Can’t blame ‘em for using a slang name.” said Jason. He picked up the piece of paper the visitor had left them, shook off the dust, and inspected it. “It’s a photograph of a big, tasteless mansion. It’s got a swimming pool that doesn’t look much smaller than Hayms’s lake.” The others gathered ‘round to look.

“We’ve spoken with a gangster, indeed.” said Roland. “I hardly dare to imagine what horrors these criminals hope to lead us into. However they found us, we should move ourselves and all of our possessions out of this cave before nightfall.”

“Do they think we’re dumb enough to go to their dinner?” said Curtis.

“Well...” said Jason “are you sure we should rule it out?”

“Please tell me you’re joking.” said Roland.

“I’m not.” said Jason. “I can’t imagine what ‘source of information’ they used to find us, but that was no small feat. If they can find us, then perhaps they can find Leela.”

“But it’s a trap!” said Curtis. “Duh!”

“If they were really hostilely disposed towards us,” Jason countered, “a bunch of them would’ve teleported here together and instantly killed us. Taken by surprise so effectually, we wouldn’t have stood a chance. So they don’t just want to kill us.”

“They likely do want to use us in some way we wouldn’t like.” said Simon.

“Whatever their exact purpose, our chance of somehow benefiting from the encounter is slim, and our chance of somehow being harmed is great.”

“But it’s all we have!” Jason cried in desperation.

“Suppose the man who spoke to us was telling the truth, then.” said Simon. “He said the criminals he represented wanted us to join them. Do you want to be a gangster, Jason? I certainly don’t. Organized criminals destroy the lives and fortunes of others for mere personal gain. They regularly defy the most basic principles of ethics.”

“Not to mention morals.” Roland growled at Simon. To Jason, he added “Even

the freak realizes it's not good to associate with these people."

"Majority rules," said Curtis.

Jason was caught somewhere between rage and despair. What was he to do? This was one of the precious few opportunities for escape that the world extended to them—escape from the madness of constant adventure. Of course it was a long shot, but *everything* was a long shot. If the party didn't follow the leads they were given by the script, how could they ever expect to find what they sought? It hardly mattered what consequences they could realistically expect. If something went wrong, then something went wrong; all was inevitable, for all was scripted. That didn't mean Jason ought to really tempt fate—that's what he'd done three weeks ago, and look how he'd paid!—but given the choice between trying their luck and staying the course of fruitless wandering and waiting, between a bit of hope and almost none, Jason thought it best to take the gamble.

"Guys," said Jason, "there's no way we'll just bump into my clone again. If we don't go to this dinner, what will we do? I don't trust these criminals, either. But in truth, I do trust the scriptwriters."

"Forget it, Jason," said Roland. "Let's start packing."

"No, wait!" Jason cried. He racked his brains for some way to convince his friends to come, but he could find nothing else to say. He stood there with his arms upraised, his mouth open, and his chin trembling.

"Why?" said Roland simply, after waiting for Jason to continue for some time.

C'mon, why would Roland want to... yes, perhaps that might work! "Roland! These are nasty criminals, aren't they? Slaughterers of innocents and everything? Doesn't their very existence make your blood boil?"

"Yes..."

"Well, you've just been pointed to a whole nest of 'em! What are you gonna do, just let 'em slide by? They'll keep on killing people if something isn't done about them."

"I don't see how—"

"All I'm saying is, seems to me that we've got a way to identify a whole lot of mass murderers. If we don't somehow bring them to justice on the scene, we can certainly give a few anonymous tips to the Droydanian police." Roland was greatly unsettled, and surprised enough not to respond when Jason gave him the chance.

"What I'm saying goes for you two, as well," Jason added. "Believe it or not, this adventure gives us significant opportunity to do real and lasting good."

"So we wouldn't really join the crooks," said Curtis.

"Well, that's the other thing," said Jason. "Suppose we do join the crooks. That would give us access to all kinds of resources and protection otherwise entirely unavailable to us. And rather than helping them, we could secretly sabotage all their attempts to do harm." By some miracle, none of the mages were reminded of Beatrix's second marriage. "Once they'd brought us into their confidence, we could blow the whistle on a lot more people, and we'd probably be able to direct the police to evidence that would ensure speedy conviction."

"All right," said Simon, "you've convinced me, at least, that *if* the criminals are honest, we could help both ourselves and the citizens of Droydania by attending this dinner. Since they make their livings through dishonesty and treachery, though, we

can't expect gangsters to be honest."

"Yes, there's a good chance they're lying," said Jason. "But there's a decent chance they aren't. From what they and the rest of the public have heard of our exploits, they have every reason to think we're as rotten as they are. And by surviving so many exploits, we've shown how strong we are—strong enough to be a formidable asset during any dangerous heist. They might well really want to make us one—uh, four of them.

"Perhaps they're lying, and they plan to betray us. Well, what of it? We won't go into that mansion unprepared, and we're by no means unable to defend ourselves. Curtis is a legendary mage, Roland's nothing to sneeze at, and you, Simon, have significant skill, as well." (This last bit, the implication that Simon was an above-average sorcerer, wasn't necessarily quite accurate, but Jason was in no mood to be gentle with the truth.) "We can stand up against those mooks—this is television. We can be *heroes*!"

That final word particularly impressed Roland and Simon; both stared at Jason with a kind of dumb reverence. That, then, thought Jason, was one thing these two disparate men had in common—a sort of yearning for heroism. Perhaps it was an expression of the particular moral outlook each of them had. Or, perhaps their particular ideas of right and wrong had in fact evolved from a deeper wish to be a hero. Thinking this, Jason felt closer to a true understanding of the relationship between Roland and Simon, the macho man and the eunuch, the violent and the placid, the choleric and the phlegmatic. Never could they show the least warmth toward each other, since Roland had thoroughly convinced Simon that all attempts at reconciliation would be in vain, yet Jason was sure that in some strange way he still had not fully realized, they were the same.

45

A Den of Thieves

As the street here conveniently happened to be empty at this late-ish hour, the party brazenly teleported to Beetle City without the least disguise. Much as he had disparaged the mansion from afar, Jason had to admit it looked like a much nicer place to live than the cave, especially at night, with its lit windows promising a refuge from the great cruel world outside. He walked up a short flight of pink marble steps and rapped on the great wooden door with a brass knocker shaped like the head of a rhinoceros. This would be the first time the party would enter a building properly since their first meeting with Caleb Vespinus.

"Man, I hope we get to really eat dinner," said Curtis. "I bet these guys eat like kings."

"Yes," said Roland, "as you used to." Curtis had lost a not-insignificant portion of his old blubber since he'd begun living off the land with the rest of them.

"In retrospect, it is odd that you, Curtis, resisted coming," said Jason. "You're usually more than—"

The door flung open, releasing a refreshing blast of air conditioning. Inside was a sprightly and apparently cheery old man dressed casually in sandals, khaki shorts, and a white shirt with the uppermost two buttons open. A mild tan attested to how he'd been enjoying the sun during the daytime. "If it isn't the Fab Four, in the flesh!" cried the man. "May I?" he said, extending his hand.

"Er—of course," said Jason. Having expected someone resembling the Mafia-men of Hollywood fame, he was somewhat taken aback. They all clasped hands.

"Roland Moralheart," said the man, "I had always thought that if I ever were to see you, I'd do so while settling down on an electric chair."

"Yes, and now there's an electric chair with my name on it," Roland joked. Jason was impressed at how well Roland feigned good humor. He was sure the adventurer would've liked nothing more than to give the gangster a lethal zap then and there. "Kids, this is Frank Moodbloom. He's made a fortune in weapons smuggling and price-gouging of natural gas."

"I'm Gyeedian public enemy number forty-three, Droydanian public enemy number twenty-nine," said Frank, "and proud of it!"

"I can't say I enjoy being a wanted man myself," said Roland, "but different strokes for different folks."

"Well, are you guys gonna stand around in that stuffy air all night, or what? C'mon in! The first course will be on the table in five minutes."

They wiped their shoes on the doormat and came into a grand foyer filled with ugly postmodern paintings and exotically shaped lamps. *So far, so good.* thought Jason as he and the mages followed Frank through the mansion. At the very least, the gangsters weren't planning to just kill the party outright; the four were inside the building and as of yet unmolested. Still, Simon was conspicuously on his guard. His gray eyes roved carefully around each room, betraying a greater consciousness of his surroundings than was usual for him nowadays. Roland, too, was watchful.

In fact, it was Jason who detected a hidden danger. When they entered a sumptuous dining-room with an enormous, thankfully unlit fireplace, Jason had no eyes for the thirty or forty gay diners, dressed to widely varying degrees of formality, who were seated there. His attention was wholly consumed by a faint odor of explosive wafting out from under the center of the long, narrow table. For a moment, he panicked, afraid to take another step forward. Then he realized that if the thing was a bomb, its detonation would certainly kill the diners as well, and if it was a gun, anyone could shoot him now just as well as they could while he was seated. At Frank's behest, he tentatively settled down on one of the four chairs set aside for the party, just to the right of Frank himself, who sat at the head of the table.

"...guests of honor!" said Frank, Jason having caught little of what he'd said before. All eyes were on the foursome now.

"Oh, lovely!" a skinny woman with a taxidermied weasel hanging around her neck cried sarcastically. "I bet a good deal that you wouldn't show up."

"Yet here they are." said someone else.

"Yes," said an elderly man wearing a suit, "you are." He had the distinct accent of a certain part of Gyeeds not far from Roland's apartment. "Now, if I may ask—and I'm sure everyone else in this room has a similar question on his mind—what was it that turned you towards crime?"

Jason was in no state to answer properly. His mind was still fixated on that dire scent; he struggled for some way to appropriately deal with a threat he knew so little about. After a second or so of silence, Roland spoke up.

"I won't lie to you, good people. As Adventurer of Gyeeds, I encountered a lot more money than I got paid. The people I worked against were always much better off than I was. It got sickening after a while."

"You know," said the fellow who'd asked the question, smiling, "I think that's part of the reason that all of us are here tonight. One of the things that unites us is our common dissatisfaction with the distribution of money."

"Especially in Droydania!" a young man far down the table suddenly piped up. "I started out as a crook in Colloyus, but now I'm a crook in Droydania. Here, I feel much more justified redistributing wealth, 'cause everything here is *backwards*!" He slammed his fist down on the table. "The Emperor is the richest person in the verse, and the time you guys took her bracelet was the closest she ever got to danger. Meanwhile, the government subsidizes poverty by pulling rightfully earned money out of the pockets of business owners. Cunning and ingenuity and entrepreneurship aren't rewarded; they're discouraged."

"And so it's only appropriate that we use cunning and ingenuity and entrepreneurship to correct matters." said the older man.

Meanwhile, Jason decided the thing under the table was most likely a bomb. He

reasoned that since the explosion would be large enough to kill him—he didn't doubt the bomb was primarily meant for him and his friends—it would also kill everyone else at the table. That brought up the question of who put it there. It surely wasn't part of a plot the gangsters had crafted together, since it endangered so many of them. It must have been planted by an individual who either wasn't attending this dinner at all or who planned to be away from the table when the bomb went off. The difference between these two possibilities was vast, as in the former case, the bomb could detonate at any time, while in the latter, Jason might be able to catch some forewarning.

"If I may ask," said Jason to Frank, "for I'm sure you can understand my concern, who, besides those gathered here tonight, knows we're here?"

"We understand," said Frank, nodding. "In fact, no one does. We know the four of you are endangered more than we are. I even sent away all of my servants for tonight, except for a few cooks. There's a bigger bounty on my head than yours, but you don't have any fake identities for yourselves, and you've been in the news often recently, and so on."

"Great, thanks," said Jason. Of course there was no guarantee that Frank was telling the truth, but Jason couldn't think of a reason he would lie about that.

"We really oughta introduce ourselves," said Frank. There was a general murmur of agreement, and then everyone announced their name and, uh, "occupation" in turn. All were highly successful and powerful crime bosses, or the spouses thereof. Jason recognized a couple from Roland's tales of his exploits as a secret agent and then Adventurer of Gyeeds. Then the appetizers arrived. The chefs who carried them in glanced quizzically at the guests of honor as they hurried back into the kitchen.

The food was very good, and for a minute or so, there was a minimum of conversation as the gangsters stuffed their faces. Roland, Curtis, and Simon were careful not to eat until Jason began, as he had instructed them, so he had a chance to warn them in case anything smelled suspicious. Once Jason took a bite, Roland and Curtis attacked their plates with gusto, Simon eating more modestly. Jason was awfully hungry, but he couldn't cut his food very fast one-handed, even after weeks of practice.

"These are good times, my friends," a pot-bellied man with an expansive mustache by the name of Hugh spontaneously announced to the whole group. "Ironbone has been punished for his idiocy, and the new Mayor of Gyeeds is sure to put Droydania back in its rightful place."

"Do you mean that Lloyd Waverunner won the election?" Simon asked.

"Of course he did!" said Hugh. "Have you been living under a rock?"

"Yeah," said Curtis.

"Oh, yes, yes," said Hugh. "My mistake. It can't have been comfortable to live in that cave."

"It wasn't," said Jason. "But how did the lot of you find us there, anyway? We thought we were completely hidden; to be honest, it's more than a little troubling that you were able to find us."

"Don't worry about it," said Frank. "You were hidden. Even if you went back, the cops would never find you. I can find pretty much anything or anyone I want to

through the underground intelligence network."

"The what?" said Jason.

"'Underground intelligence network'. It's a loose collection of people who know people who know people, which acts as a free market for information. Basically, you ask a question, throw some money into it, look away for a few seconds, and get your answer. That's how I found you four."

That's what I was looking for, thought Jason. *If that won't let me find Leela, nothing will. I still can't imagine how anyone found us in the first place, though. Might there be some special scrying magic involved? Or could there be intervention by Supernals? They're supposed to be practically omniscient. Yes, they're the most likely culprit. The Devil has his eyes on me, I'm sure of it.*

"'Good times'!" snorted the man who'd called himself "a crook in Droydania". His name was Ian. "How about all those monsters? God only knows who was responsible, but my niece was on that cruise liner that got destroyed by the kraken."

"Calling those creatures 'kraken' is extreme overstatement." Roland muttered only loud enough for Jason and Curtis, who sat on either side of him, to hear.

"Droydania's getting a lot worse, too." Ian continued. "You've heard how Ursamor has been rapidly increasing military spending over the past two years, but did you know that the current total imperial police force is *twice* what it was in Marimort's day?"

"Marimort?" Jason asked.

"Oh, don't get him—" another gangster began.

"The previous Emperor of Droydania." Ian went on unabated. "It was with him that Droydania truly began to deteriorate. Sure, it's been a dictatorship for centuries, but even I will admit that Droydania wasn't the most terrible of dictatorships around the time good ol' Moodbloom was born. Businesses were tolerated, so long as they paid extra taxes. No one could get welfare for more than five years straight. Political dissenters were fined or bribed, not jailed or executed. But around the time Droydania joined the IDC and met a lot of other verses with global governments, when Marimort took the reins, the country began to worsen. The empire has gotten steadily more oppressive over the last half-century, even as it's expanded into other verses. And when Marimort's senility began to compromise his work, he made the ultimate mistake: instead of choosing a successor from the population based on merit, he just picked his daughter."

"You don't consider Ursamor incompetent, do you?" said Simon.

"No," said Ian, "she knows how to get what she wants, I'll grant her that. The troubling thing is that she seems to want to make her control over the population absolute. The most obvious thing is that in the, uh, eleven years she's been emperor—"

"Twelve." said a young woman named May.

"Thank you, female compensatory correction." said Ian, causing many of the men to chuckle. Jason had heard the term before; it was part of a derogatory model of female behavior invented by a crank psychologist popular on Gyeedian television. "Anyway, Ursamor has cracked down on illegal emigrants, big time. And let's not forget it was she who brought back the death penalty."

"Enough history lessons!" Hugh declared. "Now we must speak of quantum

leap.”

Quantum leap was some kind of ball sport that involved jumping hurdles, rolling dice, and individual people counting as multiple players for the purposes of scorekeeping. It was a ridiculous spectacle with rules to match; Jason had never felt quite compelled to find out how it was played. The one detail that he’d picked up and that stuck in his memory was that every player had to wear either a blindfold or a pair of noise-canceling headphones at all times. Quantum leapers would’ve benefited from Jason’s olfaction quite a bit.

Jason continued to think about the bomb as more food was served and the conversation went off on increasingly stranger tangents. No one said a word about the party’s proposed induction into the ring of criminals; instead, it seemed as if the mobsters considered the foursome to already be part of their gang. They spoke brazenly—bragged, even—of the awful deeds they had committed.

“So the gas began to seep into the chamber just as they realized the door was locked,” said Camilla, the woman who wore a weasel. “I still have the video. It’s hilarious, in a way. I like to watch it every now and then to relive the good old days.”

Jason then took the opportunity to act on an idea that had just recently occurred to him. “It must be nice to have fancy weapons like poison gas,” he said. “I’ve had to make do with very little. The best I’ve ever gotten my hands on was a time bomb. I made good use of it, though. There were some folks I owed more money to than I could’ve ever hoped to pay. I put the bomb under a nice, long table—much like the one we’re eating at right now—and invited them over to dinner. Just before it went off, I excused myself to the bathroom. Ba-boom!”

As Jason told his tall tale, he glanced around at the gangsters’ faces. Most of the lot looked somewhat amused and somewhat surprised; they expected him to be criminal, but he’d been pretty quiet so far. One gentleman, a burglar with a prominent five-o’-clock shadow who’d been quieter than Jason, wore a very different expression, at least for a moment. He looked shocked and deeply disturbed. Quickly, he turned to his plate. Too late: Jason had found the bomber, Hamlet-style. *Excellent! Now, I must prepare for when he leaves the table. I only hope he doesn’t know I know.*

With difficulty, Jason then answered questions his story brought up, such as “How in God’s name did you prevent news of the deaths from leaking to the media?”. He found the other anecdotes he had just heard helpful inspiration in fabricating his own excuses. Eventually, the diners moved on to talking about cars (“In Gyeeds, though, the maglev’s the way to go.”), television (“Did you see *Vast Wasteland* last Nitrogen?”), battle-sorcery (“Will magic is plenty strong; the problem is that in a real combat situation, nine out of ten Will mages will put too much energy into each spell and run out in two minutes.”), and, of course, more quantum leap (“They were one man away from a full **p** subshell!”). While he was out of the spotlight, Jason thought up a new plan and communicated it to Roland in English, being careful to use gestures and tones of voice that suggested he was merely making small talk.

“Those monsters, though,” said Frank, picking idly at his dessert. “They were Stanley’s idea, I’m sure of it.”

“Stanley’s?” said a thin man with a faint pink scar over his right eye. “Surely you jest. Gyeeds had barely finished fighting off the giant ants before he sent troops

over to help Droydania deal with its invaders.”

“All kinds ‘a explanations are possible.” said Frank. “Maybe some part of their plan went wrong. Maybe that was the plan. He may’ve been merely testing Droydania and its allies.”

“Why do you think he made them?” The speaker was, of all people, Curtis. He looked critically at Frank, absentmindedly clenching his fork in his fist.

“I don’t pretend to know their real origins,” said Frank, “which is to say, I have no idea how they came into existence. What I do know is that it was Stanley who deployed them.”

“‘Cause?” said Curtis.

“Haven’t you heard of Gyeeds’s weapons programs? Its military has been sinking increasingly more of its money into research in the past few years. No one has heard what it is they’ve been working on for quite a while. It’s only reasonable to imagine they might’ve made remarkable progress on *something* by now. And what nation but Gyeeds would have the time and money and ingenuity to create such remarkable weapons as these monsters?”

“No way, man!” said Curtis. “Normal wizards didn’t make those things. They’re totally different from anything conjurable. And Gyeeds would never just throw monsters at people like that.”

“Why not?” said Frank, incredulous. “You know its atrocities. I’m sure any textbooks you read in Dojum make Gyeeds out to be some kind of Gomorrah, as if it hasn’t committed enough actual atrocities in its history.”

“Gyeeds ain’t bad and Gyeedians ain’t bad!” Curtis retorted heatedly. “I saw what my dad did, y’know! He and everyone else on Droydania’s side always talk about crud like order and peace and stability, but they just wanna keep their own ugly butts on their thrones! They’d super-glue ‘em on if they could! And they couldn’t care less about anyone else—they have no idea what’s important! They don’t have hearts; they’ve got chunks of ice!”

Jason was so taken aback by Curtis’s outburst that he nearly missed his cue. The man he suspected had just gotten up from the table and was quickly striding down the hall that, as Frank had indicated to some other guest a while ago, led to the bathroom.

“The little guy’s got a point.” said Ian.

“Curtis!” said Roland. “Are you...” Looking around, he seemed suddenly to remember the party was supposed to adopt false personalities of sorts in front of these people. Now was not the time to get to know each other better. “I’ve yet to hear the likes of that from you.” he said simply.

What in the world am I waiting for? Jason thought. *There’s no time to lose.* At once, he took a large bite of dessert, chewed it a little, and stuffed it into the back of his mouth, being careful not to swallow. Then, a panicked look came over his face. He opened and closed his mouth rapidly, but silently, seemingly in growing alarm, as Frank began saying something to Curtis. He tapped Roland on the shoulder and pointed to his own throat.

Roland looked concerned. “Are you choking?” he asked. Jason nodded quickly. “All right, then.” He leaped up from his chair, stepped behind Jason, put his arms around the boy, and performed a full-on Heimlich maneuver. It wasn’t a comfortable

experience for Jason. He didn't even need to spit out the morsel: the force of the air rushing out of his windpipe sent it flying across the table and into the lap of Frank's brother, who was not exactly thrilled. Jason moaned weakly.

"Goodness," said Roland. "Frank, would you have a bed Jason could lie down on for a few minutes?"

"Of... of course," said Frank, caught between sympathy for the respective misfortunes of Jason and his brother. "Go down there and into the second room on the right."

As the gangsters watched curiously, Roland walked over to the indicated door, carrying the limp Jason in his arms. "Come!" he called to Curtis and Simon. Simon arose without hesitation.

"But why..." said Curtis "what the—"

"Don't you care?" Roland said pointedly.

"Well... uh... yeah, yeah!" The prince jumped off his chair and trotted after the other three.

They came into a small room with a huge bed. Roland set Jason down on it; Jason immediately said "Enough." and scrambled off. A leopard-print rug muffled the thud of his shoes hitting the floor.

"What's going on?" said Curtis.

"Not so loud, stupid!" Jason hissed. "There's a bomb under that table and it's gonna explode any minute now. We just need to capture Frank and then we'll be outta here."

"This has been by far your strangest trick yet," Roland remarked.

"Simon," said Jason, "I need you to do something."

"What would that be?" Simon whispered back.

"Go get Frank to show us where the light switch is in here. We'll stun him as he walks in. Quickly, now."

Simon nodded and walked out.

"Curtis," said Jason "can you cast the stun?"

"Sure," he said, standing by the door. "But Pup, why do you want to get that bad guy?"

"The underground intelligence network. It could lead us to Leela."

"Yes," said Roland, "since the Secret-Keeper was so helpful."

"Hey," said Jason, "if it hadn't been for him, we never would've visited the lightbulb factory."

"That would've been no great loss."

"Yes, it would've! Would you like to have kept searching for the Rune of the Primordial Ocean?"

"And a fat lot of good—"

"Sh! They're coming." Jason clicked off the lights.

"I woulda sworn I had the light on in there," came Frank's voice. "I must be getting senile."

The door opened, Frank and Simon walked in, and Curtis stunned Frank. At once, there was an explosion in the living room powerful enough to make the house shake. A chorus of shouts and shrieks followed.

"I haven't had such good timing since I turned Ernest into a cat," said Jason,

shaking his head.

46

The Trefoil Knot

"This was likely not the best possible destination," said Simon, "but it should suffice for the time being." They were back in the old abandoned warehouse where they'd once plotted the theft of Emperor Ursamor's bracelet. It was pitch-black.

"Flashlight, Roland?" Jason said. There was no response. "Roland?"

"I don't think he came." said Curtis.

"He knew what place I was referring to," said Jason, "didn't he?"

"I think so." said Simon.

"I hope so." said Jason. "I'm sure I'm not the only one who doesn't want a repeat of last week. On a related note, we really need another flashlight."

"Magic works." said Curtis. He conjured up a ball of green light in one hand. Like a candle-flame, the ball itself was bright and clearly visible in the darkness, but it illuminated only a measly radius around Curtis, and that quite dimly.

"Meh." said Jason.

After waiting for about half a minute, they heard Roland say "Good evening." in English. He turned on his flashlight and waved it around; Jason saw the limp body of Frank lying on the ground before him. In Common, Roland added "I just teleported in."

"Oh, good." said Jason. "What took—" He noticed that Roland was breathing heavily. "Uh-oh. What were you doing, Role?"

"Frankly, finishing off the gangsters."

Jason glowered. "He isn't dead," he said, pointing at Frank, "is he?"

"No. But the rest are. A little bit of Droydania has been cleansed, with the blood of they that shed it."

Jason stared at him with a certain resentment, Curtis with disgust, while Roland looked back at both at them unflinchingly.

"I should've anticipated this." said Simon to no one in particular.

"Yes," said Roland, responding without turning his head to acknowledge the singer, "you should've."

"Okay, we've been through this kind of thing before." said Jason. "Enough infighting! We need to find out how to access the 'underground intelligence network' from good ol' Moodbloom. When will he wake up, Curtis?"

"Couple 'a minutes."

"All right. So we wait. Someone bind him."

Simon carefully shackled Frank to the floor as Jason took a seat on a box next to

the old man. He wondered what they ought to do with Frank once the interrogation was finished, assuming he could keep Roland from killing him. Goodness, it seemed Roland was growing more murderous every day. They were all steadily worsening, weren't they? The journey was certainly taking its toll. The blood of that truck driver and of Thorm was still on Jason's hand; though he had yet to kill again, he did notice that the deaths of others concerned him less and less with the passage of time: he was growing callous. Certainly Curtis looked less horrified this time than he had after Roland had killed Jake. Simon remained an enigma; Jason only noticed how gently he handled the gangster as he immobilized him.

Jason shook his head. He mustn't be too critical of his friends, for team solidarity was the key. They could only hope to prevail against the mighty forces they were up against if they worked together.

After Jason had ruminated for ten minutes, Frank still had not moved. "Curt," he said, "shouldn't Frank be awake by now?" There was no reply. "Curtis?"

"I think *he* isn't awake," said Roland. The beam of his flashlight revealed Curtis stretched out on the floor, blissfully asleep. "Wake up, fatso!"

Curtis awoke with a start. "What is it?"

"It's been about ten minutes now," said Jason. "Shouldn't the stun have worn off?"

"Definitely," said Curtis.

"All right, Frank," said Jason, "the game's up. You can open your eyes now."

Frank did. "What do you want from me?" he asked wearily.

"Well, first of all, we'd like to know what you wanted with us."

"Nothin' more than we said: for you to join us."

"But why?"

"Can't you imagine the utility that your boots and Hayms Nepa's coin could've provided us? And between Roland and Curtis, you've got plenty of magical power. We need as many good mages as we can recruit."

"I see," said Jason. He found himself disappointed that Frank hadn't mentioned his cunning, as the Devil and Beatrix had. "And can you tell me, please, how I can utilize the underground intelligence network?"

"Yes, it's easy. When I was your age, you'd have to seek out shadowy figures in dangerous back alleys. Now it's just a matter of sending your question as an email and wiring the fee through a cash office."

"Please elaborate," said Roland, taking out a pad of paper and a pencil.

Frank recited the necessary procedure and address, which I won't bore you with the specifics of; let it only be said that questions to the oracle had to be sent using high-grade encryption. Roland had just finished writing it all down when everyone was blinded by a sudden burst of light. In the split-second it took for Jason's eyes to involuntarily snap shut, he caught a glimpse of a few strangers who'd teleported in, carrying electric lanterns.

There was a great commotion of shouting and spellcasting. Trying to run, Jason tripped over the box he'd been sitting on. He felt a familiar sensation of constriction about his torso; turning his head backwards and opening his eyes to dagger-thin slits, the widest his dilated pupils would allow, he made out a tall, thin figure with long tentacles extending from it in all directions. It was Gol! And fighting alongside her,

bizarrely enough, were four Droydanian police officers.

As Jason was lifted into the air, he squeaked the magic word and desperately waved his feet downwards. The toes of his boots scraped the surface of the floor, and in a moment he'd teleported out of the tentacle of Gol and twenty feet across the warehouse. He was tempted to keep running, but worry for his friends staid him: he was frozen with indecision. Glancing back, he saw Simon shriek as he narrowly evaded a fireball only to be grabbed by a tentacle. Roland had already been subdued. Curtis was about to be enwrapped when he conjured an enormous gorilla directly in front of himself. That was enough of a surprise and a meat-shield to allow the prince to run, with adrenaline-enhanced speed, across the warehouse towards Jason. Jason stepped towards Curtis to close the gap quicker. Curtis grabbed Jason's hand and pulled off the fastest teleportation Jason had yet witnessed. And there they were in Gol's tent, which was still standing, though entirely empty. At the moment, actually, they couldn't see anything in there, since it was quite dark.

The boys stumbled outside, into the moonlit swamp. The air hummed with numberless legions of mosquitoes.

"Oh, *man*," said Jason, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, "what happened?"

"We got attacked." said Curtis. "Dunno how."

"Well, I guess they teleported in there; the question, of course, is how they knew we were there, and why Gol is working *for* the government now instead of against it, and *what the hell is going to happen to Roland and Simon?*" Curtis didn't respond. "But you saved me. Only me. Why didn't—"

"I couldn't've beaten 'em alone, since we were surprised so much."

"But why me specifically?"

"Jay." Curtis placed his hand gently on Jason's arm. "You're my brother. Did you forget?" A hint of a smile came to his face, a trace of his old carefree disposition.

"Well, yes." said Jason. "I guess I don't do much to hold up that old bargain."

"No, you do." said Curtis, flapping his hand. "You've saved us all lots of times. The important thing is that we stick together."

"Right, I was just thinking that myself."

"Can't do that much now that the cops have Roland n' Simon, though."

"Right."

There was a pause as Jason swatted away a mosquito that had landed on the end of his stump.

"So now," said Jason, "I guess we wait until Roland shows up on television and the papers again. The media will give us a clue to where they're being held."

"They could get free themselves."

"True, they might. Then they'd have to find us. Where would they look? Well, here, for one. I guess this could serve as a decent interim base camp." He looked around. "The climate isn't ideal, but we are quite remote, and thus well hidden." He sniffed. "Or not. I smell someone else nearby."

"Uh-oh. Where?"

"That way. They're coming towards us." Jason took another, deeper sniff. "Hey, I think I recognize that scent—hold on." He waited until the scent grew strong enough that he could be sure, then he cried "Roland!"

"At your service." Roland's voice replied in Common.

"Hey, that was fast." said Jason, grinning. "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Roland emerged from the shadows, carefully picking his way over tree-roots and puddles. He looked no worse for wear.

"How'd you escape from those guys?" Curtis asked.

"A few fire spells took care of them neatly enough." said Roland.

"But," said Jason, "weren't you... oh, you faked unconsciousness, didn't you?"

"Precisely."

"And what about Simon?"

"He was taken away before I could do anything." said Roland, avoiding Jason's eyes.

Jason crossed his arms. "The details?"

Roland sucked in a breath. "I don't know about you, Jason, but I'm exhausted. It's been a long night." He adjusted his glasses; the bridge of his nose, along with the rest of his face, had just broken out in beads of sweat. It was a hot night in that swamp, indeed. "Can't we get some rest first? I'll tell you everything in the morning."

All the excitement Jason had gone through in the recent past had been keeping him continually stimulated. Now that the immediate danger had passed and he paused to consider the possibility of rest, all the stress caught up with him and a wave of fatigue washed over him. He yawned a gigantic yawn. "Perhaps there's some merit to that." he muttered. "Yes, if we can't get him now... can we?"

"No, not now. He's lost, I'm afraid. We should be able to find him, but it will take time."

Jason nodded gravely. He was about to declare that he, for one, was keen to hit the hay when he noticed something very odd: the expression on Roland's face. Roland looked genuinely regretful, saddened, by Simon's predicament. Seeing this, Jason was struck by a sudden revelation. He glanced at Curtis; the other boy looked back at him placidly.

"But Roland," said Jason, walking towards the former adventurer, "before we go to sleep tonight, can you—" As soon as he got close enough, he used the seven-yard boots to suddenly appear just a hairsbreadth away from Roland, and then, before the man could react, Jason shot out his foot and tripped him. Caught entirely by surprise, Roland crashed to the ground with a thump. "Quick, Curt," Jason cried, "zap 'im!"

Curtis only stared, puzzled. "Jay, why are you—"

Those three seconds of hesitation were enough for Roland to prop himself up on his elbows and cast a spell at Curtis. The prince was sent flying ten feet into the air by an invisible force. He smacked against a tree, fell onto a branch, and rolled onto the ground, landing on his back. He didn't get up.

Roland got to his feet as Jason backpedaled. Yearning to flee, yet unwilling to leave Curtis behind, the Argonaut was once more frozen in place as he watched a great change come over Roland. Every feature of his body—his face, his limbs, even his clothes—liquefied and drew inwards, until there was nothing left of him but a soupy mound of muddy-colored flesh. Then the process was reversed, except that the humanoid figure that resulted bore no resemblance to Roland. It was a young boy, about Jason's age, dressed in worn and tattered clothes. He was tall and wiry, with dark-orange hair and long fingers. He looked hatefully at Jason, and at the same time

he seemed caught between fury and relief.

"Who are you mimicking now, doppelganger?" said Jason.

"This is my natural form." the boy replied. He had a light, airy voice. "I am human, you know."

"By what definition of 'human'?"

The doppelganger waved a hand lightly, and Jason felt as if he had been slapped across the face, hard. "Be careful. You don't have any wizards to protect you now."

"Well," said Jason, rubbing the sore spot, "who are you? And what do you want from me, anyway? You've already stolen the coin. My boots aren't nearly as powerful as that, or your power of mimicry."

"You may call me Miles. And no, I don't want your boots. I couldn't disguise myself wearing those all the time. What I originally planned to do was slit your and the fat boy's throats after you had gone to sleep. Now that I have you alive and at my mercy, I think I'll make better use of you." He paused. "I've been charged to hunt down and kill your entire group. It will be much easier for me to masquerade as you or Curtis well enough to deceive Roland and Simon if I know more about you. So, I want you to tell me all about your friends and yourself. Not *now*!" he added as Jason was about to speak. "First, it's only fair, I think, for me to tell you a bit about myself. You are a worthy opponent, Jason, and I respect you, even though catching you was this easy." He briefly broke out in a yellow-toothed grin so wide and sardonic it made Jason shudder.

"I was no more than human, in both my motivations and my abilities, only eight weeks ago." said Miles. "I was sensitive, though, and I could see that something was amiss in my hometown. I lived in the Haven—have you heard of that?" Jason shook his head. "It's a town on a beach in the verse of Sizov reserved for servants of the Droydanian government, servants ranked high enough to be uniformly wealthy and powerful but not quite high enough to live in the imperial city. Both of my parents are generals. Now, Sizov's great interdimensional distance from most other familiar verses makes the Haven very safe from invaders. No legion of monsters attacked it. Yet I knew that something had invaded it; I noticed that some of the townsfolk were beginning to behave strangely.

"The behaviors I observed were numerous and varied. The only word I can think of that accurately characterizes them all is 'lazy'. You see, the Droydanian government selects and promotes its employees on the basis of merit and dedication to the Droydanian cause, so all the residents of the Haven are generally continually productive, engaged in the affairs of their work and Droydania as a whole. Everyone noticed, to at least some degree, when all sorts of people about the town suddenly became less concerned, and more sedate, as they began sleeping more and working less. Recreation, formerly partaken of sparingly and with a small measure of shame, became a necessity; it grew fashionable. The change was the subject of gossip and a source of humor for most people, especially in how that love for recreation, like a disease, seemed to be exceptionally strong in one random person for a week, then quickly fade, to be immediately 'caught' by another, equally random person. Out of everyone I knew, I alone was truly troubled, not so much by the effect of the change as by the inexplicability of the change itself.

"After this phenomenon had continued for three weeks and showed no signs of

stopping, I decided—”

But Miles cut himself off as soon as he realized his audience had flown the coop. Quick as a wink, at an entirely arbitrary moment, Jason speed-waddled over to Curtis, grabbed the collar of the prince’s shirt, and ran for dear life. In a matter of minutes he was outside the woods, standing in a familiar meadow nearby a familiar road, and Miles was far behind. There was one thing here that Jason didn’t recognize: a rock, carved inexpertly into a roughly circular shape, standing on its edge, with a bit of its bottom buried into the ground. It was about half as tall as Jason. Jason let Curtis go, hoping he hadn’t been hurt by all the bumping, and inspected the stone. In the moonlight, he could make out a trefoil knot engraved on the side of the stone that faced the road. A flower like a rose lay on the ground before it.

Roland had cremated the truck driver’s corpse and scattered the ashes to the winds. This was not her grave. Still, Jason cast his eyes down and mumbled “I’m sorry.”

Jason stood there thinking about what he ought to do next for around half a minute. Then he yelped as Miles unexpectedly teleported onto the scene. Miles cast a spell that sent Jason sprawling and yanked the boots right off his feet; they landed near Miles. Jason grimaced as he got back up.

“How’d you know I went here?” the Argonaut asked. “I didn’t run in a straight line.” Miles, grinning once more, opened a hand to reveal Hayms Nepa’s coin. “But that only answers yes-or-no questions.” Jason protested.

“Have you ever played guess-the-number?” Miles asked, picking up the boots and tossing them behind him, so they were now far too distant for Jason to retrieve.

“Uh...”

“In which one player secretly chooses an integer within a bounded interval and the other player guesses possibilities successively, being told whether the secret number is greater than, less than, or equal to each guess.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Does it usually take very long for the guessing player to win?”

“Well, no, not really.”

“Then there’s your answer. Think about it.” Jason made his lack of understanding clear enough by his expression. Still, Miles gave no further hint. “You poor dunce. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, I decided to investigate the change. To make a long story short, I deduced that a shapeshifting being had been impersonating various people. I trapped it and confronted it; it turned out to be a demon. Its origins and motives are still unknown to me today. I would’ve killed it straightaway then, but it gave me an offer: if I spared its life, it would give up its power to me. It had no power *but* mimicry, I knew it would be harmless without that, and I couldn’t resist the opportunity—so I accepted. I’ve never seen the demon since. And now, I can do this!”

Again there was the stomach-churning process of transformation; this time, Jason found Miles’s new form more disturbing than the procedure itself. Miles had taken the shape of Jason’s sister, just as he remembered her. Jason wailed and hid his eyes, cowering. “How did you ever even hear of Joan?” he moaned.

“I don’t need to know what someone looks like in order to mimic them.” said Miles, with a voice Jason hadn’t heard, in real life, for countless months. Jason found it deeply unsettling that someone who all his senses insisted was one of the people he

most loved was actually a murderous stranger. Miles, meanwhile, didn't seem to mind being a girl. "I don't even need to know their name. I only guessed you had a sibling."

"Stop it." Jason said weakly.

Miles laughed Joan's familiar laugh (*But my sister is not a sadist.* Jason thought) and changed again. "Better?" Jason heard himself say.

"Somewhat," said Jason, looking up to see his clone again, "though I'd be hard-pressed to explain why. So you can take the form of anyone?"

"Oh, yes."

"How about my old friend Calvin?"

Miles said nothing; he just stood there in Jason's body for a few seconds, frowning as if constipated. "What? Nothing's happening." Alas, the natural limitations of Miles's power had thwarted Jason's trick—Calvin was the name of the Blue family goldfish. At the age of twelve, it was not merely old, but absolutely ancient. "Who is this Calvin?" Miles asked pointedly.

"Just another kid I knew on Earth." said Jason.

"Strange." Miles returned to his natural form. "Anyway, very soon after I'd defeated the demon, I was visited in a dream by God." Jason raised his eyebrows. "I paid no attention to him before, I know, but I became a believer that night. He opened my eyes to the evil of Droydania. He said he'd allowed this power to fall into my hands that I might bring freedom to this empire of slavery. And so I seek to take the place of a high-ranking official in the Droydanian government. With that power, I could chip away at Droydanian oppression. God also said that I should kill you and your three companions, since you've been actively working against him and are a terrible thorn in his side."

Jason figured that the god Miles spoke of was a Supernal, not an omnipotent deity. Perhaps it was the Devil. "Actively working against him how?" said Jason.

"You've asked enough questions." said Miles. "Now, I need some information from you. I gather from what you said before that Roland and Simon are in some kind of trouble. Where can I find them?"

"Well... uh... the short version is, if you want to find them, you'd better go to the place we just left them, immediately. They'll probably be gone, but they might still be there."

"And what place is that?"

Jason took the photograph of Frank Moodbloom's mansion out of his pocket and held it up. "They're in here. You'll want to take me, I suppose?"

"Of course. I know better than to let you out of my sight. I'll take the form of Curtis." he added, transforming—just as Jason had hoped. "Give them the slightest clue and you're dead meat; play along and I'll consider extending your lifespan." Such words sounded not a little odd coming out of the prince's mouth.

"But of course." said Jason, nodding. He was cocky, all right.

47

The Sweetness and Innocence of Children

And so Jason found himself in another place he thought he'd never return to, the home of Frank Moodbloom, who was now, Jason imagined, being carted off to prison along with another two familiar grown-ups. Right now, Jason was in the company of another child, who was currently taking the shape of yet another child. They were in the same bedroom Roland had carried Jason into, having climbed in through the window (instead of charging in through the mansion's front door) as Jason had instructed. Despite the adventurer's admission that he had slaughtered any gangsters who'd survived the bomb, the house was far from quiet. Jason could hear a lot of people running around and making a racket in the dining-room. It occurred to him to wonder whether the gangster who'd set the bomb had managed to escape, in which case Jason surely had a new enemy out there in the world, eager to hunt him down and exact sweet, sweet revenge. Vengeance, it occurred to Jason for the umpteenth time, was a decidedly nasty thing.

"Who are those people?" Miles whispered.

"Policemen," said Jason. "You're lucky they're still here. I think you'll have to fight them if you want to get to Roland and Simon."

"So be it," said Miles. "I'm a skilled mage, and besides, God is on my side." He ran out of the bedroom and into the dining-room with Jason close behind.

There were policemen there, as Jason had predicted. There were other people, too: numerous paramedics, several firefighters, and even a reporter. Most of the gangsters' bodies were blackened and twisted beyond any hope of recovery—whether by the bomb or by Roland's fire, one could only guess. Those that looked they might have a remaining spark of life were being rapidly loaded onto stretchers and teleported away to hospitals. Meanwhile, the firemen were tending to flaming furniture, and whatever precisely the policemen had been doing before, their attention was now wholly consumed by the sight of the two most wanted prepubescent boys in Droydania.

"All right, guys," Jason called to the policemen, "I've found Curtis for you!"

Of course, this meant little to the policemen. Miles, though, was incensed. "Double-crosser!" he shrieked. He turned into an eight-foot-tall body-builder and unleashed a hail of projectiles at the dining-room, with little regard for who he actually hit.

Well, the policemen had already known Jason and his friends to be dangerous, but when they saw that hideous transformation occur before their very eyes, they

entirely forgot about Jason himself: they were fixated on the shapeshifting bogeyman. They shielded themselves as best they could and fired back at once, not sparing a moment to disable Jason. The firefighters and the paramedics teleported away while they had the chance. The reporter, mindful of his duty, stuck around.

Jason stood back, careful not to get caught in the crossfire. He wouldn't mind being captured so long as he survived. The fight went on, and to Jason's growing unease, it appeared that Miles was winning. Without being an exceedingly powerful mage, it seemed, Miles handled himself far better than the policemen, deflecting their spells with relative ease and swiftly retaliating the moment they were least able to cope. Soon, two of the Droydanian policemen were dead and Miles was still going strong. *Why's it taking so long for reinforcements to teleport in?* Jason thought. Certainly, he didn't want Miles to win. And so, being sure to prominently put up his arms beforehand, he tripped Miles again. This was possible despite Miles's new brawn because Miles was paying no more attention to Jason than the policemen were. Once Miles was lying on the floor, the latest volley of projectiles flew right over him, except for one globule of orange light, which struck him square in the center of his muscle-bound chest. His shirt was undamaged, but the spell had clearly injured him somehow, as a dark stain bloomed and quickly spread across his breast.

Jason had just begun to consider the consequences of being captured when his savior appeared. Curtis—the real Curtis—ran in from the bedroom, took one look at the situation, and sent not one, not two, but three rhinoceroses stampeding towards the police officers. That gave him the time he needed to teleport back to the swamp along with Jason, and, at Jason's insistence, the semi-conscious Miles. They appeared outside of Thorm's tent. Curtis bound Miles, and then the boys stopped to catch their breaths.

"Well, you did it again, Curt." said Jason. "Thank you, very much. How did you know we were there?"

"I heard you tell the kid where to go." said Curtis. "I woke up a little bit before you left."

"But this time, you were careful to pretend you were still unconscious." said Jason, with a slight smile.

Curtis nodded, keeping his eyes on Miles. "*He's not even pretending.*"

Jason looked. Miles was struggling weakly against his spectral shackles. "Using my tent again, eh?" Miles muttered.

"Your tent?" said Jason. "No, I think I knew the original owner. Unless there was an owner before those tentacled beasts." he added mostly to himself. "Don't change forms, mind you," he said to Miles, "or Curtis here'll kill you. Be good and we'll get you medical care."

"But of course." said Miles, again in a faint voice.

"My, how the tables have turned!" said Jason gleefully. "Now, where's the coin?"

"Lower-right pants pocket."

As Jason shamelessly scrounged about in Miles's pocket for the coin, Curtis said "Jay, he's really hurt."

"He'll be fine." said Jason. He smiled as he removed the large hendecagonal coin and stuffed it into his own pocket. "I don't think we need to interrogate him, given that we have the oracular coin; I just want one thing from him, and then we can

drop him off at a hospital." His grin widened as Curtis watched him with a look of concern. "My dear Miles," said Jason, "give me your power of mimicry, and I will let you live."

A few seconds passed, and Miles did not respond. Just as Jason was about to speak again, a loud, deep humming noise began to sound out from Miles's head. As Jason and Curtis watched with growing amazement, Miles writhed about mindlessly, spastically, so much as his bonds permitted him. Then he was still, and he stared at Jason with eyes that glowed a deep ocean blue. Jason felt a sudden chill.

"Nice try," said Miles. His voice sounded deep and distant as the roar of high tide on a faraway shore.

Then, he drew in a deep breath. On the exhale, as the air left his lungs, so too did the life leave his body: his moment of death was not entirely unlike that of Ivan Ilych.

The glow and the hum disappeared at once. A few seconds later, Miles's corpse spontaneously reverted to its original shape, thus popping out of the shackles. The wound on its chest remained.

Jason gulped.

"Oh, man," said Curtis. "Man, oh man, oh man."

"Ye gods," Jason whispered. "That wasn't the Devil. That was Thanatos."

Curtis looked Miles up and down. "What makes you think so?"

"That was exactly how Zadoc, the leader of the Thanatos cult, got possessed."

"'I was covered in ghostly white fire,'" Curtis recited, "'even though I couldn't see it on myself, and I wasn't burning. And my eyes were glowing red, though my vision was normal.' That was what Caleb said. The Supernal who got him wasn't Thanatos, was it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not even sure it matters." Jason was looking at Miles's face. Although it had been contorted with agony while the Supernal had taken possession of the boy, that face had, at Miles's very moment of death, entirely relaxed. Its eyes were closed; it looked profoundly serene. "What a peaceful death," Jason remarked. "I envy it. I anticipate a much less appealing one for myself."

They sat there uncomfortably for a while.

"What do we do with him?" asked Curtis.

"Well... can you dig a grave with magic?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's... complicated. Basically, Imagination mages usually can't do that."

"Okay, I guess we should cremate him. No, wait one second." Jason took the coin out of his pocket. On one side, an eagle was embossed, reminding Jason of American currency. Above and to the right of the eagle, a pictogram of the sun appeared high in the sky. The design on the other side of the coin was of three eyes arranged like the vertices of an equilateral triangle. In the center was a crescent moon partly covered by clouds. "First," said Jason, "I should test this thing. Does two plus two equal four?" He tossed the coin and caught it as it came down. (His dexterity with his right hand was slowly improving.) The eagle's side came up on top. "Does two plus two equal five?" He flipped the coin again and got the other side. Grinning, he asked "Is the answer to this question no?" This time, the coin landed on its edge,

on which it stayed for several seconds until Jason knocked it over. "Will I die tomorrow?" Again he got the edge. "Will the sun rise tomorrow?" The edge. "I guess it doesn't like to predict the future." said Jason.

"What does this have to do with cremating Miles?" said Curtis.

Jason asked the coin "Is there any possible way for me to take Miles's power of mimicry from him now?" He got the three eyes in response. "Dang. All right, we can cremate him. Gosh, I'm starting to remind myself of Two-Face."

Curtis disintegrated the body with magical fire, and Jason scattered the ashes. They were silent for some time, contemplating the strange boy who some alien being had turned against them. Vaguely, Jason felt he ought to feel more regretful about the death of a fellow child—the peculiar cultural traditions of his native land hadn't entirely left him yet—but he couldn't much sympathize with a person who'd plotted murder merely at the behest of a demigod posing as the Master of the Universe. Anyway, Jason figured that he himself was sufficient proof that, contrary to popular belief back home, children were not necessarily innocent. For, indeed, weren't the innocence of himself and the innocence of Miles necessarily reciprocal? The better Miles had been, the worse he was for showing so little regard for Miles's health near the end of his life. Then again, Jason hadn't made the kill, and given the opportunity himself, *he* probably wouldn'tve killed Miles... right?

"Now what?" said Curtis, in a complaining kind of voice. Jason didn't blame him.

"Now?" Jason took out the coin again. "Here's a good one: am I in a television show?" He flipped the coin and got what he found to be a startling and unsettling answer—the eyes, or no. "What the... but... am I *wrong*?"

"Looks like it, Pup." Curtis said sympathetically.

Jason thought about that. "No, wait a minute. It's only logical that although this coin always answers truly, it answers from the perspective of the reality it belongs to—this one. That is to say, it gives in-universe answers. And within the world of this TV show, we aren't in a TV show... or so I'd hope. That would make my head hurt. And yes, that's what the coin says. So in conclusion, this is useless."

"Useless?"

"No, not really, not at all. I doubt I'll be lucky enough to get my hand on something nearly as powerful as this ever again. It has more than a little potential." He smiled. "But it doesn't help me at all in my quest to become a Real Boy." he added as his face fell.

"I think I get it." said Curtis.

"Was the Supernal who killed Miles Thanatos?" Jason asked the coin. No, it wasn't. "Was it the Devil?" said Jason. Nope. Jason swore. "It must be a new one. Was this Supernal one I haven't encountered before?" Nope. "What? Is this thing just stuck on no?" Of course, the answer was no. Jason couldn't help laughing then. "Can you please answer yes this time?" Yes, it could, and it did. "Thank you."

"Hey, I just thought of something." said Curtis. "Gimme that." Jason handed it over, curious to see what Curtis what do with it. "Thanks. Is the binary form of Goldbach's conjecture correct?" He showed the coin to Jason, which had landed with the eagle's side up. "Does that mean yes or no?"

"That's the yes side."

"Okay, good. Does P equal NP?" He flipped the coin and smiled at the result. "Okay, I'm happy." he said, tossing it back to Jason.

"You and your math." said Jason. "Riddle me this, Curtis. What happened at the dinner table just before I pretended to choke?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm referring to the argument you had with Frank."

"What about it?"

"Well, uh, you expressed a strong opinion about the Gyeeds-Droydania divide. In that your sympathies lie with Gyeeds and its allies. Am I correct?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't yours?"

"Well... I... to be honest, I never really thought about it." He scratched his head. "I guess Gyeeds is a better place to live than Droydania. People often flee, or try to flee, from Droydania to Gyeeds; no one flees from Gyeeds to Droydania. The common Gyeedian notion of Droydania being oppressive is mostly correct. Then again, Gyeeds is, well... more urban. Violent crime, drug use, and poverty are all higher; I remember how Ursamor frequently reminded us of that, in roundabout, subtle ways, when she spoke in the IDC. And poor people in Gyeeds tend to stay poor. The cost of living is high, on average, and the government would never condescend to give the poor a helping hand. Yeah, interdimensional politics isn't my strong suit." He yawned widely. "Shall we get eight hours of sleep now before we go to free Roland and Simon?"

Curtis nodded. "I think it's a good idea. But uh, lemme ask you one thing. How did you know it was Miles?"

"While he was mimicking Roland, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there were a couple of things that made me suspicious. But the key thing, the particular detail that for me verified the fact that the person I spoke to was not my adoptive father, was Miles's regret for Simon's capture. The real Roland would've hardly been able to contain his joy."

Curtis frowned. "You think so?"

"I know so." said Jason. "Trust me—Roland keeps his grudges, and when Roland hates someone, he doesn't merely dislike them. He *loathes* them. To this day, he's just waiting for the slightest excuse to kill Simon—and you know how low his standards for such excuses are! A while ago, I thought Simon might grow on him, over time, or at least, his hatred would get less intense. But it hasn't. It seems to only grow worse. And now they're more or less alone together, without you or me to stop Roland from—" Jason shuddered. "Poor Simon. Surely he endured more than enough stigma for being a eunuch long before we met him. Then again, does Roland really hate him just for his eunuchism? It's not unlike Roland, certainly, but still... I wonder if there's anything else. Perhaps it's just a fundamental difference of temperament. They are like night and day, after all. Man, I hope like hell they learn to get along somewhere down the line. As the situation is now, it's just a bomb waiting to explode."

"Do you think we should ask Simon to leave?" asked Curtis.

"Oh, no, certainly not. We have a common goal, remember? And we're all so vulnerable. It would be infinitely cruel to make him fend for himself. Besides, I really like Simon. He's very level-headed, very prudent and thoughtful, and he's the first person I've met who I feel I can say is genuinely selfless. He's a good influence on

me, and he gives me good advice. I'm the main source of animal cunning in this group, but he's got most of the wisdom. In summary, I think I'd rather get rid of Roland than Simon."

"But we can't. That would be cruel, too."

"Yup. And we need all the magical power we can get. And although my affection for Roland has waned recently, he's my foster father, and I feel a sort of responsibility to stick with him." He pulled the coin out of his pocket. "Does Roland hate Simon only because Simon's a eunuch?" The answer was no. "Is it because of a fundamental difference in personality?" Actually, yes. "Oh. That's good to know. It's nice to get some easy answers, for once."

They briefly teleported back to the road to retrieve the seven-yard boots and then, at last, went to bed. The floor of Thorm and Gol's tent wasn't a very comfortable surface to lie on, yet both boys fell asleep with minimal delay.

48

A Little Common Ordinary Mysterious Message

The party was soon reunited, but not in a fashion any of its members had hoped for: all four now shared a Droydanian jail cell. After deducing where Roland and Simon were being held, Jason had hatched an especially elaborate scheme to free them involving his boots, a swarm of pigeons created by Curtis, and a plaid hassock. Alas, everything had backfired when the pigeons had unexpectedly—oh, let it just be said that everything had backfired. Though happy to see their friends, both men of the party were greatly displeased to have their hopes of rescue quashed. They greeted the boys unenthusiastically, and then all four of the motley crew slouched around. At least they had beds now: two bunk-beds. Jason took the bunk above Roland.

“Home, sweet home.” said Jason. His gaze roved over the blank, bleak concrete floor to the door composed of thick steel bars. This was the third time he had been imprisoned. “I feel like Link trying to explore Gerudo Fortress.” He looked at the cell’s only window, a thin, barred slit located high up on the wall. “If only I had Link’s gadgets, I could escape that way.” After a moment, he amended “Nah, that’d be a long shot.”

“Were your boots taken away?” asked Roland.

“Yup.” said Jason sourly. Though allowed to wear their regular clothes, as opposed to zebra-striped shirts or bright-orange jumpsuits, Curtis had been stripped of his magical reagents, and Jason had been relieved of the seven-yard boots. “The only magic we have now” said Jason “is this.” He removed the truth-telling coin from his left cheek, where he’d promptly stowed it as soon as he’d realized where he was going. Roland and Simon looked at it with interest.

“Is that the coin you stole from Hayms Nepa?” Simon asked.

“Indeed.” said Jason, wiping the spittle off of it with his shirt. He told of his and Curtis’s encounter with Miles.

“I won’t deny it,” said Roland, “the reasoning with which you identified that doppelganger was entirely correct.” He was speaking to Jason, of course.

“It appears that the Supernals are now more interested in killing us than ever.” said Simon.

“Right as rain.” said Jason. “I have no idea why they don’t create monsters especially to attack us more often.” The bed-frame was made of some flavor of steel, not wood, but he gave it a knock anyway. “Speaking of which, do you guys have any

idea how the police came to enlist Gol?"

"None." said Simon. "The last time I saw her, she'd just been apprehended by one of the truck drivers she'd tried to waylay. I can only imagine that the Droydanian authorities coerced her into joining them."

"I guess. And how about how the Droydanian police found us in that warehouse?"

"A security camera, believe it or not." said Roland. "I caught a glimpse of it when the police lit the room."

"In an old abandoned warehouse?" said Jason.

"Yes," said Roland, "and I'm fairly certain it wasn't there the last time we visited."

"The Droydanian police have become much more vigilant within the past few weeks." said Simon. "Of course, it's implausible that they've done so solely to catch us. I suppose they just decided to be more careful after the monsters attacked."

"Well, Jason," said Roland, "I'm afraid it's up to you to find a way out of our common plight, once again." He got to his feet and came to the center of the cell, looking up at Jason. Behind him, Simon lay stretched out on the bottom bunk, and Curtis sat on the top with his legs dangling off the edge. "Here's what I know. The goozack only opens" said Roland, walking to the door, "three times a day. Once in the morning, when we're permitted to use the bathroom; once in the afternoon, when we get a single hour in the exercise yard; and once in the evening, when we're allowed to use the bathroom again. Each time, we're escorted by a veritable platoon of guards."

"And what about meals?" said Jason.

"A single guard slips in trays of food through there" said Roland, pointing at a narrow space under the door, "twice a day. I believe he doesn't actually carry a key."

"And that's your life behind bars." said Jason, gritting his teeth.

"So it has been, for a week." said Roland. That was how long it had taken for Jason to design and execute his plan that had failed so miserably.

"And this is only jail!" said Jason. "I can't imagine what conditions in a Droydanian *prison* are like."

"They are, in fact, unimaginably terrible." said Simon.

"See why I hate Droydania, Pup?" said Curtis.

"Yes, sir." said Jason. "Still, it was awfully kind of our captors to put all of us in the same cell."

"In a sense, it is, yes." said Simon. "In another sense, their keeping us together is a show of bravado on their part. What I believe they mean to tell us is, this jail is so well secured that even if we schemed together day and night, we'd have no chance of escaping."

"But that's not true, is it?" said Jason.

"I'm afraid it may be." said Simon. "In particular, we certainly couldn't fight our way out, as you and the other Argonauts did in Jilothus."

"Suppose we don't escape. What'll happen to us?"

"We'll be charged with our many crimes, and then stand trial for them, about a week from now. And we'll lose, since our opponent is the government itself, which has complete control over the courts."

"So we won't get a fair trial?"

"Right. But that doesn't matter very much, since we're unambiguously guilty." Jason nodded, sighing. "And the punishment?"

"An extremely long prison sentence, if we're lucky; a death sentence, if we aren't."

"So, life or death." said Jason. "Can't say I particularly prefer one to the other. I remember last year when Droydania's friends denounced Gyeeds for using the death penalty. It seems that things have changed since then." He crossed his legs and rubbed his chin. The immediate future looked grim; for once, there was no *deus ex machina* to bust him out of jail. What a jam they were in! How could that silly coin possibly get them out of it? "But... guys, let me ask you something. You, Roland, and you, Simon, have been here, with barely any other company but each other, for a solid week. Have you really said nothing to each other the whole time?"

"I tried speaking to him several times," said Simon, "but he barely acknowledged my presence."

Jason began "And so you've—"

"Passed our joint incarceration in silence, yes." said Roland.

"Man, can you hold a grudge!" said Curtis.

"It is a sad fact of the nature of man" said Roland "that he can, given sufficient time, acclimate himself to anything. He can tolerate the intolerable, suffer the insufferable. And so it is that all too often, forced to enjoy the company of evil, we grow accustomed to it, and let down our guard. We slide from vigilance and resolution to appeasement and apathy. So smooth is the transition that we never realize how far we fall. An example from Terran history springs to mind... regardless, forgetting what must not be forgotten, ignoring what must not be ignored, isn't a mistake I wish to make."

Nobody else quite knew how to respond to that.

As usual, Jason tried to think up a scheme. He had little success. The brief glimpses of various parts of the jail he got while the party was escorted to and from their cell confirmed Simon's belief that straightforward escape was impossible. So far as Jason could see, that left, as the only possibility, actually winning the case—and that didn't seem particularly possible, either. Nor was thinking itself particularly easy. The frigid silence of the jail pressed on his morale with the immense weight of despair; every so often, his attention was entirely diverted by a rush of panic. He felt deeply ill. During the day, he paced unceasingly back and forth through the cell in a vain attempt to flee from his own anxiety. At night, sleep came to him only after a long time, and he awakened frequently; he was careful not to open his eyes until the sun had risen, for he found that, lit by only a few thin stripes of moonlight, the inside of the cell made for an unsettling sight.

"You know more about the operations of Droydanian courts than the rest of us." said Jason to Simon one day. "Is there no way we could get the jury to decide in our favor?"

"Actually, there is no jury." said Simon. "The decision will be made by a single judge. And no, there's no way I can think of. Droydanian judges aren't bound to an assumption of innocence, as courts in most countries are. If the trial somehow goes awry, we'll either be retried or convicted by default."

"Convicted by default?" Jason echoed, as a lump formed in his throat.

Simon nodded gravely. "Our chance of escaping punishment here is negligible."

"So we can't even let this case go to trial, can we?"

"It would be helpful if we could prevent it, but we have no way of doing that, either."

"Hmmm... hey, Roland!"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't the IDC have some kind of court of its own we can appeal to?"

"The IDC does have a court," said Roland, looking up from a cobweb in a corner of the cell he'd been staring at for the past half-hour. "The High Court, to be specific. But one can't simply appeal a lost case to it. Cases are only transferred from national courts if a significant number of councilmen agree that a given party is best tried in the High Court rather than the local court. The transferal can only happen *before*, not after, the local court reaches a verdict."

"Oh," said Jason. "I don't suppose there's any way we could secure transferal. I mean, our chances in the High Court would be far better than our chances here, right?"

"Probably. The problem is that I don't think anyone has much of a desire to put us in the High Court. For one thing, Gyeedians can rest assured I won't get off the hook here." He sighed. "To use the English expression, they 'hate my guts'."

"Eh?" said Curtis.

"They really don't like me," said Roland. "I was reasonably popular up until the cops discovered I'd killed Jake and I resisted arrest. And, of course, some of Stanley's rotten reputation has spilled over to me."

"Perhaps there's some way I could effect a transfer," said Jason. "Or rather, convince the IDC to effect a transfer. Is there something we could do that would convince them it would be in their best interests?" No one replied. "Well... no one on Gyeeds's side of the Schism is fond of the Droydanian justice system, right? I mean, they'll take any excuse to hate Droydania. Surely they accuse Droydanian courts of human-rights violations, et cetera. Then we might appeal to their sense of justice thus: 'We have the right to a fair trial. Give us one!'"

"I don't think that would sufficiently motivate the councilmen," said Roland. "Besides, how would we contact them? We're not allowed telephones or computers here."

"I dunno," said Jason, "I could find a way to sneak out a message, or something. If that appeal wouldn't much move them, though... gosh, I don't know. What's happening to me?" He rubbed his eyes wearily. "I feel like this jail is sapping away at my sanity. With each passing day, my thoughts become more distorted."

"That may be intentional," said Roland, glancing up at the window.

"Ugh. I've got to think of something fast, before I lose the ability to think altogether."

Finally, after some period of time that Jason, thinking about the episode at some later date, couldn't recall the length of—whether two hours or two days, it felt like two weeks—an idea for a letter came to him. There was still the issue of how he would get it delivered, but for the moment, he was happy he had something to do, and was

itching to write his ideas down. When the guard brought a meager brunch for the prisoners the following day, Jason saved a few napkins. Using that as his paper, some of the food's juice as ink, and one arm of Roland's glasses as a pen ("It's not as if there's anything to see here," the adventurer had said), Jason was able to write—sort of. One significant wrinkle in the process he hadn't thought of before was that he no longer had his left hand. With his right hand, he wrote slowly and not entirely legibly, especially while he could only hold the paper down with his stump or his left elbow. He was thankful that the letters of the Common alphabet had such simple shapes.

After a while, tired of struggling and running out of ink besides, Jason quit for the day. He lay down on his bed and stared at the door. Eventually, the guard came with dinner. I might as well mention that the guard's name was known to Jason: Norton Lye. No, Jason decided, the given name was better rendered in English phonetics as "Nordon". It was written in an awkward hand on a name-tag the guard had stuck on his shirt-front.

Once the guard was gone and the party had set upon its dinner with mighty appetites borne of malnourishment and boredom, Jason remarked "Old Nordon has hideous handwriting. In fact, it looks very much like my right-handwriting. But he has both of his hands, so that must be what his writing with his *better* hand looks like. That's pretty bad handwriting."

"Actually," said Simon, "left-handedness is highly stigmatized in Droydania."

"Unlike eunuchism." Roland muttered, only loudly enough for Jason, sitting next to him, to hear.

"So in fact," Simon continued, "if the guard is left-handed, he likely still writes with his right hand."

"Hmmm." said Jason. He went over to the bunk-bed and removed the coin from its hiding-place under the mattress. (All the inmates in the jail were frequently albeit irregularly frisked, and Jason couldn't afford to lose the coin again, so he didn't keep it on his person.) "Is Nordon Lye a lefty?" Jason asked the coin. It replied with the eagle. "Yes. So now we know a potentially embarrassing secret about the guard. That could be useful."

"Useful how?" said Curtis through a mouthful of food. His table-manners had never been exemplary.

Jason only said "We'll see."

That evening, when Nordon arrived with dinner, Jason stood by the door, watching him. Like all the guards, Nordon was well-muscled and reasonably tall, but somehow, he managed to also look underfed, and the glint of timidity in his eyes was reminiscent of the man who'd sold Jason the seven-yard boots. His expression was always lifeless, as if the jail had sucked the fight out of him as effectually as it did to the inmates, or as if he hoped to protect himself from that ghastly draining by not presenting any liveliness to be stolen in the first place. Still, Jason thought the squeak of the wheels of Nordon's food cart was the pleasantest sound he ever heard in that jail, as a meal promised, for at least a few minutes, distraction.

Jason and Nordon looked at each other wordlessly as Nordon unloaded four trays and pushed them under the door. Then, just as Nordon was about to take his cart and wheel it away to another occupied cell, wherever one might be in this great,

almost empty jail, Jason said quietly “You’re left-handed.”

Nordon looked back at Jason fearfully. “How did you know that?”

“I have my sources.” said Jason, smiling in a way he hoped looked mysterious. His friends watched silently. “In fact, I have potentially limitless knowledge; I can answer any question about the present or the past—any question, so long as its answer is yes or no. It just takes me a day to find the answer.”

“How?” said Nordon.

“Each night, if I ask a question out loud before I lay down to sleep, the answer comes to me, symbolically, in my dreams. From the day I was born, I’ve had this power. And it was with this power that I was able to avoid arrest for so long.”

“Why are you telling me this?” said Nordon. “What do you want from me?”

“Only a very small favor.” said Jason. “I want you to give me paper and something to write with, pass on the letter I write, and give me receipt of its delivery.”

“And why should I do that?”

“Because I will pay for it with knowledge. Think! With just a little care and creativity, you could turn such knowledge greatly to your advantage.”

“And how do I know you’ll tell me the truth?”

“Why would I lie?”

“No, I mean, how do I know your dreams are correct in the first place?”

“A fair enough concern. Ask me two or three questions you know the answers to, but think I don’t. I’ll answer them for free.”

“All right.” said Nordon. “How about this: was my maternal grandfather born at night or during the day?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow.” said Jason.

“All right, then.” said Nordon, wheeling the cart away.

“Don’t you remember what happened the last time you pretended to be a magical being?” said Roland.

“Shut up.” said Jason.

When Jason correctly informed Nordon that his mother’s father had been born during the day, Nordon asked whether the middle digit of his secondary PIN, a kind of identification for Droydanian citizens aggressively kept secret by the government (as opposed to the primary PIN, which was public), was even or odd. It was even. Finally, Nordon asked “What color am I thinking of, black or white?” and Jason, a day later, replied “Black. Are you convinced?”

“I guess so. One in eight is pretty good.”

“What about one in eight?” said Jason.

“There was a one-eighth chance of you guessing them all.” Curtis explained.

“All right.” said Jason. “Now, I’ll answer another question of your choice after you deliver my letter. Can you get me paper and a pencil?”

Now decently equipped, Jason set about writing. It was still difficult, thanks to his mutilation. When he complained, Roland offered to write as Jason dictated; Jason happily agreed. So in Roland’s careful, ornate cursive—ornate insofar as Common characters could be made ornate—Jason plead to Gyeeds and its allies in general to transfer the party to the High Court of the Interdimensional Council. He said that

although his and his friends' actions might seem nonsensical and pointlessly destructive seen through the eye of the media, they were guided by a single, noble purpose: to undermine Droydania's side of the Schism, the extremely loose alliance of countless right-leaning verses that Jason, borrowing from the rhetoric of the Bush administration, called "the axis of evil".

The atrocities that are daily committed in these verses, by governments, against citizens and against other governments, are no secret. Yet we, the people of the free world, routinely avert our eyes and allow the slaughter and the degradation of humankind to continue unabated. We are afraid to get our hands dirty in the affairs of outsiders; we are afraid to intervene. We wait, hoping against hope that the kings and emperors of the axis of evil may finally see the light and repent, or, failing that, that their subjects may take up arms against them. But the evil isn't waning; it's only growing stronger, steadily extending its influence across the multiverse and tightening its grip on its familiar territory. If we remain inactive for much longer, it will overwhelm us. It is my belief that we have waited long enough.

It was out of this frustration with inaction, this longing for justice, that Roland, Curtis, and I hunted down the inventor of the Piercers, Jacob Triskin, who planned to sell his weapons in vast quantities to Droydania. We hoped to bring him to justice, but he resisted our attempts to subdue him and was killed in the resulting struggle. Can you blame us for trying to hide the death? The world wasn't ready for the truth, and besides, our work wasn't done. It turned out that Jake had gotten part of the recipe for the Piercers from a bizarre death-worshiping cult called Thanatos. Further investigation led us to Droydania itself, where Simon Baria joined us, and as we followed the faint trail of clues into the heart of darkness, we saw more and more of the shadowy underside of Droydania.

In a nutshell, Jason argued that he had actually been fighting for the side of good. Only near the end of the letter did he ask to be transferred to the High Court, saying that so long as his case stayed in Droydania's jurisdiction, Droydania could hush up all the inconvenient truths about it that would inevitably come up during the trial. Implicitly, there was also a simple plea for justice, as Jason had originally planned. Once Jason finished dictating, he signed the letter.

"I'm afraid we may be making promises we can't keep," said Roland, folding up the paper.

"Probably," said Jason. "Who cares? Keeping our promises isn't the point. I mean, once we get in the High Court, we can't be sent back to Droydania, can we?"

"Once we're convicted, we can," said Roland.

"We won't get convicted!" said Jason, stamping his foot. "I'll get us off on *some* kind of technicality, or my name ain't Jason Blue."

"We won't have enough of a reputation to function in normal society," Roland lamented.

"And so we won't try. We'll immediately go back into hiding and continue the

search for Leela—won't we?" The other three looked at each other without saying anything. "I'll take that as a yes. We'll begin by using Frank's underground intelligence network."

"That would be difficult," said Roland, "seeing as the piece of paper on which I wrote the information was taken from me."

"No worries," said Curtis. "I've got it memorized."

"Very good," said Jason. "That was a close one."

49

Mount Olympus

Though giving his letter to Nordon to be anonymously made public on the Internet gave Jason some hope, nothing happened immediately, and he was afraid that his letter might be entirely ineffectual. After answering a question about Nordon's uncle's will, he had no further interaction with anybody outside the party until the four of them appeared before the Droydanian court for the first time. The number of crimes the lot of them had committed by now was staggering: the murder of the Jilothic prison guards and escape from the Jilothic prison; the murder of Jacob Triskin; illegal travel to, from, and within Droydania; the theft of Ursamor's bracelet; freeing Caleb Vespinus from jail; assaulting Hayms Nepa's guards; and the list went on. Even without a few of the party's exploits that weren't yet known to the public, like killing the Thanatos cultists and breaking into the Droydanian Museum of Genetics and Evolutionary Biology, it was a formidable array.

Thankfully, before the trial could go much of anywhere, the "veritable platoon of guards" (there were eight in the group) arrived at an unusual hour at the party's cell to inform them that their case had been transferred to the High Court. The foursome packed up their nonexistent belongings—Jason had had the foresight to stuff the coin into his cheek again as soon as he'd heard the guards' footsteps—and were summarily taken to Gyeeds, in which city, Roland had neglected to mention, the High Court was physically located. Jason smiled to look upon the streets of his home-away-from-home. They were handed over to a group of the High Court's own guards, who brought them to speak with a court official, who patiently explained that a number of Interdimensional Councilmen had voted to transfer the party here in light of a certain letter that Jason had allegedly written. They were offered bail, but it was an exorbitant sum, far more than Roland could've paid while he'd still been Adventurer. On the other hand, they were entitled to a public defender.

"No thanks." said Jason. "We need to do this on our own."

"Are you—" Simon began.

"Positive." said Jason.

And then they were back in a jail cell, albeit a much more livable one. In fact, they didn't stay there for long. Within two days, the party was released to the fresh air, informed that Akolos himself, King of Dojum, had paid their bail. They were only required to remain in the city of Gyeeds for the duration of the trial.

"Well," said Jason, blinking in the late-spring sunlight, "I didn't see that coming. Anyone know why he did that?"

"He likes me." said Curtis, shrugging. "Problem is, outside of prison, where can we sleep? We don't have any money, and probably someone else took Roland's house."

"I'm happy to be free, at least." said Roland, taking a deep breath of the familiar urban air.

"We should go now." said Curtis.

"What do you..." Jason began. Then they all looked in the direction Curtis was looking, and saw the swarm of reporters closing in on them. "Dangit, Roland, you said there weren't any paparazzi in Gyeeds!"

"There aren't any. Those people are from legitimate news sources; they want real stories, not just photographs. We're worthy headlines by now, I think. All the same, I'm not eager to be interviewed right now."

"Come along, then." said Jason, and they ran off. The reporters didn't give chase.

Jason did, in fact, have of an inkling of how they might obtain a dwelling—not any ordinary home, but one so well hidden that the party might be able to continue using it even if they became fugitives again. He used a computer console in a telephone booth to look up the address of Cade Uffet, the Will mage who'd constructed the homes of Ernest and Leela, and then the party set off on the four-hour walk across the city to his house.

("Fancy that, a mere four-hour walk." said Roland. "We're lucky Cade's in the same neighborhood as the High Courthouse.")

When they arrived, Cade greeted them warmly. He allowed them to collapse on a long, antiquated couch in the living room (they sat in the order Roland, Jason, Curtis, Simon), quench their thirsts, and catch their breaths (only Roland had easily endured the walk) before compelling them to talk. He and his aging wife, Frieda, looked at them with concern from matching armchairs.

"I read that letter in its entirety." Cade said at last. "I see that your goals have changed a great deal from the time I met you boys. And Simon, how long it been since we last saw each other?"

"Over two years." said Simon. "We haven't spoken since you created my mother's hideout. Looking for her has become a secondary concern, over the past eight weeks or so. We're mostly interested in thwarting the tyranny of Droydania, as Jason explained." To Jason, it seemed odd to hear Simon lie.

"It's a noble calling, I suppose." said Frieda. "But why, really, did you take it upon yourself?"

"It's a long story." said Jason quickly. "You'll watch it play out in court along with the rest of Gyeeds, no?"

"More or less." said Frieda.

"Where will you be staying now?" said Cade. "Do you have a home?"

"In truth," said Jason, smiling slightly, "that's what we came here to talk about."

Cade looked wary. "You know how I feel about those hideouts I made for criminals. With all due respect..."

"Quite simply, Cade," said Jason, "those criminals were the scum of society: burglars, kidnappers, assassins. Am I right?" Cade nodded tentatively. "We may break

the law, but we do it ultimately for the sake of justice; justice for which all right-thinking people yearn, but the law as it is now will never deliver.”

Cade sighed. “I won’t pretend I don’t see your logic. I know Droydania’s evil as well as any emigrant. And I do owe you. But still, you have to understand...” He fell silent.

“Cade,” said Simon, “please do it for me.”

Cade grit his teeth. “Fine. Rest for a few more minutes, and then we’ll go over a map to look for a site.”

By the following day at sunset, Jason, Roland, Curtis, and Simon had a brand-new home, one large room dug into the side of a steep hill about a hundred and fifty miles (a brief maglev trip) away from the courthouse. It had no electricity or running water; the inside of it was covered very roughly with plaster; its only furnishings were four sleeping-bags, a tall battery-powered lamp, and a laptop computer (all paid for by Roland, who had with some difficulty unfroze and reclaimed his bank account). In short, it was very much like the party’s old mountainside cave. It was hardly a comfortable place to live, but by traveling to and from it exclusively via teleportation (Roland had bought reagents before even thinking about furnishings), the party could keep it absolutely secret. Thus it served as a handy hideaway from the prying eyes of detectives, reporters, and Supernals. Jason dubbed it “Mount Olympus”.

After two weeks of preliminaries—picking a jury and so forth; Jason was reasonably happy with the outcome—both the party and Droydania’s lawyers appeared together, in court, before an audience of a judge, the jury, and the general public, for the first time. Room 227 of the High Court was vast and threatening in its gleaming hardwood magnificence; the crowd, easily covering a floor full of seats and a standing-room-only balcony, awakened the first real feelings of stage fright in Jason’s breast. It didn’t help that he recognized more than a few familiar faces in the crowd. Talbot Iceslicer, the admiral who’d joined Jason and Roland on the *Argo*, was there. Keaton Stoneback, the adviser to Stanley who’d led Jason, Roland, and Curtis to Thanatos, was there. Meredith Pollux, the teenage soldier who’d shared a Jilothic prison cell with Jason, was there. There were Lylan Flametamer, Jason’s old Common teacher; Nolan Leafliner, the killer hired by Jake who Roland had agreed to let go; Gunther Oltob, the captain of the *Argo*; the mother of a boy who Ernest Seadweller had possessed; the Hoonian alchemist who’d given Jason the Sensory Enhancer; and dozens of other people Jason only faintly remembered. Then there were those who he didn’t know but were close to his friends, such as Roland’s parents, who watched disapprovingly from the balcony and with whom Roland never voluntarily made eye contact throughout the entire trial. Jason counted his blessings: Beatrix was conspicuously absent, as was the gangster who’d put the bomb under the dinner table.

The prosecutors spent that day, and the following several days, presenting the evidence that Roland had killed Jacob Triskin. Jason was relieved to learn that Roland had cleaned up thoroughly enough that the prosecutors didn’t have any fingerprints, DNA samples, splinters of wood from the handle of Roland’s knife, or similar identifying trace evidence. They did have a number of witnesses: two citizens of Dojum, complete strangers to each other, who had seen Roland dump Jake’s body and

possessions into the Starving Sea, and a distant relative of the Dojese royal family who'd been sleeping in the room adjacent to Jake's the night of the murder, and had thought he'd heard Jason's and Roland's voices in there.

"All right, guys," said Jason as the party lounged around in Mount Olympus, "we need to figure out what to do now. First of all, in your opinion, is Droydania's argument convincing?"

"I would say so," said Roland. "They have strong circumstantial evidence, and I'm sure the jury realizes there really is no reason we would return to Dojum other than to catch Jake."

"The TV says we've already lost," said Curtis.

"Who on TV?" Jason asked.

"The High-Court Report," said Curtis. The name didn't rhyme in Common.

"What's that?" said Jason.

"It's a news organization that's dedicated to, as its name suggests, reporting on the High Court," said Roland. "It's very well respected; it's about a decade older than yours truly, and it employs a staff of distinguished scholars of law to analyze the goings-on of the court."

"So is their opinion an accurate barometer of our performance?" said Jason. Roland nodded. "So we're off to a bad start. Unfortunate. Now, in order to be at least somewhat consistent with our letter, we have to say that you, Roland, really did kill Jake, but that you killed him in self-defense."

"That's a difficult argument to make" said Roland "in light of the royal relative's testimony. Had there been a struggle, he would've heard it. We could create a new alibi and then later, if necessary, make some excuse for how you lied in your letter."

"Maybe. But we need to think of our long-term strategy. We simply can't win this case by proving our innocence—we're not innocent, and there's so many crimes we've committed. Our only chance is to somehow thwart the trial. Say there's a mistrial of some sort. What happens then?"

"We get a new trial," said Roland. "The only circumstance in which we would not be retried is if the prosecutors intentionally violated procedure, as by lying under oath. Then, interdimensional rules about double jeopardy, like those of the United States, would protect us from being retried for the same crimes."

"For *all* our crimes?"

"All of them."

"So that's the ticket. We have to convince the judge that the prosecutors have done wrong. Then we can, quite literally, get away with murder."

"That's much easier said than done. Proof of such wrongdoing would be held to the highest standard—it would have to be beyond reasonable doubt—and Droydania's lawyers, knowing the penalty, will be loath to break the rules."

"Well," said Jason, "I think I'll have to convince them, somehow."

This was, Jason decided after a day of scheming fruitlessly, perhaps the most formidable obstacle he had yet encountered. Even if the danger wasn't quite so imminent as it had been when he'd faced giant monsters, he longed for the simplicity of the problems he'd tackled in former days. Now, there were so many different factors to juggle, and so many people working against him. The world was watching.

If there was anything even remotely suspicious about anything he did in court, he could be sure that someone, somewhere, would figure out exactly what he was up to.

Happily, it wasn't too long before he dreamed up a working plan. It was intricate, about three times as complicated as his usual tricks, and thus about three times more likely to go terribly awry in a deadly way. If it worked, though, the four of them would not only avoid punishment, they'd be in better shape than ever.

"I've discovered" Jason announced one day in Mount Olympus "how to get this thing" (he held up the magical coin) "to answer questions with more than two possible answers."

"How?" said Curtis.

"Well, say I want to know what your first name is." said Jason. "Is the first letter of this kid's first name 'A'?" he asked—except he referred to the first letter of the Common alphabet, not our letter "A". He flipped the coin and got the eyes. He continued through the alphabet until he got the eagle; then, he asked, "Was that the last letter?" No, it wasn't. So he went on, in that laborious fashion, to show from the coin alone that Curtis's first name was "Curtis".

"You could make it a lot more efficient than that." said Curtis.

"What do you mean?" said Jason.

"Well," said Curtis, "don't start with the first letter of the alphabet, start with the middle letter, and ask if the letter's above or below that letter. Then go on recursively for each subsequence."

Jason thought about that for a moment, then slapped himself on the forehead. "Of course! That's what Miles was telling me! You can use the coin to find out more or less anything by just 'zeroing in' on the answer you want."

"Right." said Simon. "But were you thinking of any particular application of the coin before you started this conversation?"

"Yes, indeed." said Jason. "Roland, are you a good hacker? I mean, can you breach network security systems and that sort of thing?"

"I have the basic know-how." said Roland. "But I'm no security expert. And I don't have anywhere near the computational resources to launch a full-scale attack," he added, glancing at the laptop, "if that's what you're thinking."

"But with the coin," Jason pointed out, "you could discover any password or the like that you needed."

"Yes, actually, that does change things a great deal. I could access any sort of administrative account. And I could make myself untraceable by routing my signal through as many foreign servers as I pleased, and deleting logs afterwards."

"Okay, here's what I want you to do. Transfer a sizable sum of money from somebody's bank account, laundering it as necessary, to that of some influential person in the High-Court Report. Send an anonymous message saying that more is to come, regularly, so long as the organization consistently reports that *we're* winning the case and that Droydania might as well give up now."

"Jason," said Simon, "it seems to me crucial that we avoid committing more crimes in the process of avoiding punishment for the crimes we've already committed."

"I appreciate the sentiment," said Jason, "but I can't think of any other way to do this—can you?"

"I can't tell what your plan is in the first place," said Simon.

So Jason explained it. "That ought to sufficiently reverse our fortunes, right?"

"Possibly," said Simon, "but I'm by no means ready to endorse such wrongdoing on *our* part. Surely you realize that it's unethical to—"

"We really don't have a choice," Jason cut in.

"Simon's right," said Curtis, scowling. "We won't be any better than the bad guys if we do all that."

"Roland," said Jason, "are you willing to go through with this?"

Roland glanced at Curtis for a few seconds, then looked back at Jason and said "I am."

To Curtis and Simon, Jason said "That's all I really need. All you two have to do is play along. If you do, we have a decent chance to escape all this unscathed. If you don't, and you tell on us or something, Roland and I will be executed, and you guys will get out of prison in Simon's forties if you're exceptionally lucky. It's your choice."

"Can't you think of something else?" said Curtis.

"Oh, we could just run away again," said Jason, "but I'm sick of that. Aren't you? We finally have a chance to wipe our slate clean. Let's take it."

"There's no guarantee that this will endear us to the public," Simon pointed out.

"Actually, considering the effect my letter had," said Jason, "I think there's no reasonable doubt that if we pull this off successfully, we'll be seen not as borderline lunatics, but heroes—in Gyeeds, anyway. I mean, you know what's been going on in Gyeeds. You know how Stanley has been dethroned. You know how much hostility has built up against Droydania and everything it stands for. You saw how packed that courtroom was. There are already people rooting for us, albeit quietly. All Gyeedians need is for us to justify their feelings, and then they'll be happy to embrace us as their very own freedom fighters."

"So what exactly will we do afterwards?" said Simon.

"Does that mean you'll cooperate?" said Jason, smiling.

"I—I think so," said Simon hesitantly. "Although I certainly have qualms about implicitly endorsing your actions by benefiting from them, I have a feeling that... our efforts to find my mother, and discover the truth about the Supernals, are, in fact, for the greater good. I've come to agree with you that the four of us, working together, have the best chance to find the root of the strange troubles that haunt the multiverse. And I acknowledge that not being hunted by the law will aid us in the pursuit of that goal a great deal."

"Very good," said Jason quietly. "And so we'll resume the pursuit of Leela the moment this trial is over. Curt?"

"Oh, I dunno," said the prince painfully, touching his forehead. "I really don't know. I'll play along. But I don't know what's going on. Now, I think I just wanna go back to living in the castle."

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The Best Kind of Intensity

Summer had just officially begun in Gyeeds, but it was a particularly hot day, and the High Court's air-conditioning had not yet been turned on, when Roland sat at the little table used for examining witnesses in Room 227. Roland sweat into his new suit, which looked much like his old one. He had bought it for himself with some stolen money at Jason's insistence. (When asked by a reporter, Roland had said a well-wisher had given it to him.) Jason, rising from the defendants' table and walking over to Roland, couldn't help but be reminded of *Twelve Angry Men* and the courtroom scene of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Unbearable heat and humidity accentuated the feeling of oppression and anxiety that fighting a legal battle engendered. It was a tension borne by the knowledge that lives were at stake, but only with cool logic and charisma could one hope to save them from the vengeful talons of the law. And Jason, unlike Juror #8 and Atticus Finch, wasn't just fighting for the lives of others: his own sorry hide was on the line, as well. He licked his lips.

"Roland," he said, in a voice that sounded much bolder and more confident than he felt, "describe what you found in your apartment the day you returned from the voyage of the *Argo* along with me and Curtis."

"Assassins," said Roland. "There were three men wielding guns loaded with Piercers scattered throughout the house. We were only able to surprise them, rather than being surprised by them, because you smelled them before we entered the apartment."

"What exactly did you do?"

"We simply burst in and attacked them as soon as they fired. The fight didn't last long. We weren't hurt, but two of them died. We interrogated the survivor."

Jason tried not to look at Nolan. "And what did he tell you?"

"That they'd been hired by Jacob Triskin, the alchemist who'd invented the Piercers." A murmur rippled through the crowd. "He'd hired them to kill us because he feared we might be looking for him. He had spies in the Gyeedian government who knew that I had been charged with solving the mystery of the Raincatcher massacre."

"Did this man you interrogated say where Jake was?"

"Yes, in the Dojese royal castle."

"What else did you learn from him?"

"Nothing. He escaped from us shortly afterwards."

"And why didn't you tell the police about the ambush?"

"Because of the spies, of course! For once, we had the chance to catch the very

inventor of the Piercers. Were we going to lose it to the corruption and the incompetence of Stanley Ironbone's administration?"

There was a much louder murmur this time. Stanley's administration had been as ethical as large political bureaucracies can reasonably be expected to be, and Stanley, in addition to being highly competent himself, had always been careful to choose competent appointees. Yet the watching public didn't seem to reject Roland's sentiment; just as Jason and Roland were revising their past here, Gyeedians in general were revising Gyeeds's past, especially the last few years of it. That Stanley and company had made for a terrible government was what the public wanted to believe; hearing it from Stanley's former right-hand man himself only seemed to justify it further. Jason dared to feel an iota of hope.

"So what did you do?" said Jason.

"We made some excuse for why we needed to return to Dojum, and there we went. Once we found out where Jake's room was, we entered it in the middle of the night using Curtis's master key."

"What did you plan to do with Jake?"

"Interrogate him."

"So did you?"

"We didn't get a chance. I believe he woke up as we entered the room. As soon as we had closed the door, he jumped out of his bed and started casting spells at us." (In other words, Greedo had shot first.) "I was able to throw up a shield before the first projectile hit any of us. We only struggled a bit more before I managed to strike him with a lightning bolt. It was of a high enough power to kill him immediately. You flipped the light switch, and then we all saw him for the first time, blackened and crumpled into a ball in the corner of the room."

"You didn't seek medical care for him?"

"He was dead. I knew enough emergency medical care to verify that."

"So there was a definite struggle in the moments before Jake's death. You killed him in self-defense."

"Of course."

"But then how do you explain Sandro's testimony?" (Sandro was the royal relative who'd been sleeping next door.) "He said that all he heard was talking, not shouting, and we all know that you, Roland, cannot cast spells quietly."

"Indeed, but Akolos's castle in Dojum is just that, a castle. All the walls are of thick stone. Considering that, it's amazing that Sandro heard anything—and if he *did* hear anything, we can be sure that it wasn't speech at a conventional volume."

Jason nodded. "And what did you do afterwards?"

"We went through Jake's few possessions scattered about the floor to see if we could find any clues to the Raincatcher massacre. We didn't, although we did find clear and convincing evidence that he'd invented the Piercers."

"And where is that evidence now?" said Jason.

"At the bottom of the Starving Sea, along with Jake's body. None of us were eager to be put on trial as we are today."

"Thank you. That'll be all." Jason said to the judge, and he and Roland returned to their seats.

The timing of Jason's plan worked out well. It was just as the prosecutors had finished with their initial argument and Jason was allowed to present Roland's testimony when the journalists and scholars of the High-Court Report began to foretell Droydania's doom. Droydania was definitely losing, they said; not only was Roland's explanation of events far more plausible, the people of Gyeeds had already decided that the party was innocent of any real crimes. In truth, only two of the case's thirteen jurors were Gyeedian, and no more than three others hailed from allied countries, so the feelings of the Gyeedian public had little influence on any verdict that might emerge. But as the High-Court Report's chief executives treated each other to meals at the best restaurants in the city and began visiting dealers of luxury cars, the truth was not among their chief concerns. Meanwhile, Roland had had the bright idea to assemble his bribes by stealing small amounts of money out of many accounts, so as to avoid making headlines at other news sources. He wrote a program in a scripting language not entirely unlike Perl that automated everything but flipping the coin; he would've automated that, too, by building a coin-flipping and -reading machine, if only he'd had the necessary mechanical know-how.

Not very far into Droydania's rebuttal (involving such interesting things as the testimony of an engineer who said that yes, you'd definitely be able to hear the difference between a shout and normal speech through one of the castle's interior walls), Roland got an opportunity to put the second part of Jason's plan into action. During a court recess, one of Droydania's lawyers made for the bathroom reserved for people who were working or being tried at the court, as opposed to the general public. Roland followed him. Once the lawyer was inside a toilet-stall, Roland pricked his own finger with a pin. He removed a thread from his suit, bloodied it, and placed it on the side of a sink. It was highly visible on the white ceramic, though he'd placed it to look as if he'd accidentally dropped it. He washed his hands and returned to the courtroom before the lawyer emerged from the stall.

Three days later, Jason was pleased to see Droydania's lawyers brandishing the bloody thread in a tiny zipper bag, the advanced technology of the IDC verses having allowed them to identify the blood as Roland's within an interval that brief. They said they'd found it in the narrow stripe of floor between Jake's nightstand and Jake's bed. According to Roland's testimony, Roland had never gotten near that part of the room, and he hadn't even gotten a paper cut in the struggle, yet here was a thread from his suit with his blood on it—so (the lawyers argued) he couldn't have been telling the truth. The audience thought this a compelling piece of evidence. However, once the proceedings for that day were over, Roland met the judge privately and explained that he believed the thread was one he'd left by accident in the bathroom, as he vaguely recalled doing just a few days earlier. He added that his belief was testable by the fact that he'd been wearing a different suit during the struggle with Jake, which he could bring to court if necessary, from the one he was wearing now. The judge, intrigued, promised to declare a mistrial if it could be proven that the thread came from Roland's new suit.

So, Jason hired a textile chemist to analyze the thread and compare it to the two suits. The chemist testified that the thread was from the new suit. There was a deep intake of breath throughout the courtroom, and the judge declared that since the prosecutors had obviously falsified evidence, the case was off. Before Droydania's

lawyers even had a chance to explain more than one of their accusations or either of Curtis or Simon could say a word in court, it was all over. Gyeedians cheered. The party hadn't been proven innocent as they'd hoped, but in their eyes, Droydania had definitively been proven guilty.

When a horde of journalists descended upon the party on the steps of the courthouse, the party didn't flee. Instead, Jason said to a reporter for one of the most popular news networks "I'll give you a formal interview if you like."

The reporter stopped in the middle of the question he'd been asking and put his microphone down. Gears whirled in his head momentarily. "Can the four of you come to the studio at noon tomorrow?"

"Sure." said Jason. "Let's go, guys." At once, they teleported back to Mount Olympus.

They spent the rest of the day and the following morning designing their lie, sometimes leaving the truth as it was and sometimes tweaking it a bit; sometimes deciding to leave out full episodes and sometimes creating new tales from whole cloth. The story as they told it to the television cameras was believable and mostly truthful in its accusations of Droydanian misconduct, while thoroughly whitewashing the party's own crimes. Still, both the interviewer and the audience swallowed the story hook, line, and sinker; not a hint of skepticism was to be found. The only negative reaction the party got was when Simon spoke. Seeing the puzzlement at his boyish voice, Simon mentioned his eunuchism in passing. The crowd clearly did not like this, and the interviewer cringed in spite of herself. Roland was about to speak when Jason averted disaster by quickly changing the subject. He took over the parts he'd planned for Simon for the remainder of the interview.

A day later, Jason, Roland, and Curtis—but not Simon—were invited to meet Lloyd Waverunner, Mayor of Gyeeds. Face-to-face with Lloyd, Jason found him to be the very personification of the "New Gyeeds" of which political analysts spoke: young, earnest, effusive, and ebullient with idealism. He shook hands with vigor and a wide smile, his bright blue eyes shining, praising the party for their "patriotic spirit" and presenting them with Mayoral Medals of Courage, a minor honor, on national television. Afterwards, it somehow developed that Lloyd, having heard of the party's essential homelessness (Jason, in response to one of the interviewer's questions, had said "Oh, we just crash with whoever'll take us. We have friends scattered throughout the city."), had arranged for them to get a luxury apartment in an affluent neighborhood of Gyeeds gratis.

"I can't thank you enough." said Jason to Lloyd as they were leaving. "I mean, I'm not sure we deserve all this. In the end, we only did what we did for ourselves—to satisfy our own sense of justice. We weren't actually very altruistic, as people seem to think we were."

For the first time that day, Lloyd dropped his intense friendliness and grew serious. "In fact," he said, "that's exactly what makes the three of you so heroic. You, Jason, have seen many classical altruists among your fellow Interdimensional Councilmen, haven't you? You know as well as I do how ineffective they are. In trying to please everyone, to diffuse all antagonism, to bring about interdimensional peace while avoiding all conflict, they try to make paper without cutting down trees, and they allow countless competing interests to bog them down while single-minded

villains plow ahead unabated. In a world as huge and complicated as this, with so many nations with their own agendas, our only hope for real justice is those who follow their hearts." He placed a paternal hand on Jason's shoulder. "My boy, if you remember nothing else, remember this: the one true guide is your own inner light."

Back in Mount Olympus, Jason remarked "Well. Lloyd's a little intense, huh?"

"The best kind of intensity," said Roland, smiling.

"You've certainly warmed up to him," said Jason.

"Yes, I freely confess it," said Roland, "I too am now a Lloydian. Just talking to Lloyd for that short space has convinced me of his goodness. You can just see his love for mankind shine out of his eyes."

Curtis made a skeptical noise. "He didn't invite Simon. What's he have against him?"

"Gyeedian prejudice," said Jason. "I hope you don't feel slighted, Simon."

"Actually, I was thankful to have some time to myself," said Simon. "I spent a while thinking over the events of the recent past. It occurred to me to realize, among other things, that Gyeedians have been unusually accepting of us and our stories. Gyeeds is generally as ideologically diverse as it is racially diverse. But I've encountered very little skepticism with regard to our explanations, and very little disagreement with our ostensible objectives. I could count all the dissenters I've heard of on one hand, while nearly everyone else in this city reveres us. And so I wonder simply: what's going on?"

"I'll tell you, Simon," said Roland. The boys braced themselves. "The answer is just as simple: the times are changing. Or, as they say in English, 'the times, they are a-changin''. And by now, in truth, we've perfected our fictitious account of our adventures—so much so that I'm starting to believe the story myself."

After months of roughing it in the Droydanian wilderness and butting heads with fantastic monsters and policemen alike, the party finally returned to civilized life. They moved into the luxury apartment, leaving a few things in Mount Olympus just in case, and integrated themselves into society with surprising success. Jason and Curtis returned to school. At first, their teachers and classmates treated them strangely: they were unique celebrities. Soon the initial shock faded away, and Jason was more thankful for the fact that Gyeedians were not celebrity-worshipers than ever. Roland, after considering his considerable options, got a job as an instructor in the use of Emotion magic. Simon wanted to resume singing, but Gyeedians did not appreciate castrati; after searching for some weeks for an employer who would tolerate him, he ended up as an editor at a minor publishing house, where his great care and patience worked to his advantage. At least Roland didn't make a fuss about Simon living in his house.

No sooner had Jason settled down than he fired off an email to the underground intelligence network asking where Leela was hiding. He got a response a few days later, which said which verse she was in. Which verse was that, you ask? Well, I don't want to give it away *too* quickly. See if you can guess. Think about the defining characteristics of my story so far, and then ask yourself: where would an interdimensional fugitive most likely hide?

"Is that some kind of joke?" said Jason.

"I doubt it could be true," said Simon. "How would my mother get there without being detected?"

"There's only one way to find out," said Jason. He pulled the coin out of his pocket and asked the question that was on everybody's mind. It came eagle-side up. "What the heck?" Jason cried. "She is on Earth!"

Later, after a lot of pointless hypothesizing about how Leela could've verseported to Earth without the verseportation being traced, and why Leela would want to hide on Earth specifically in the first place, Jason sat down with the coin and flipped it as many times as necessary to find Leela's geographic coordinates to the nearest tenth of a second. They were 78° 55' 23.2" N, 39° 04' 18.0" W. Using a verseviewer with Roland's computer, Jason identified the spot as a featureless chunk of earth in the ice-covered northern interior of Greenland.

"Underneath that ten-foot square of ground," Jason said to the others, "Leela has her little home. Talk about a hiding-place."

"How do we get in?" said Curtis.

"Who knows?" said Roland. "It shouldn't be too hard to figure out, given the small size of the area in question. The hard part is to verseport to Earth without verseporting to Earth."

"My mother managed that," said Simon, "and I know her to be a poor spellcaster. It must be somehow possible for us to do the same."

"Leela's a witch?" Roland growled, without looking at Simon. "This is new."

"Maybe the coin can tell us how she got there," said Curtis.

"I don't think so," said Jason. "I have no real way to turn that into a yes-or-no question, because I have no idea what possible form the answer would take. I can't ask the coin to name the method of transportation because I couldn't define the question to its satisfaction—it gives me the edge for ill-defined questions. I can't ask how Leela would describe her method of going from an IDC verse to Earth undetected because the coin won't consider hypotheticals. In short, we're screwed."

"Let's ask the network Frank told us about," said Curtis.

"I doubt it knows," said Jason, "since it's difficult for me to imagine that kind of knowledge failing to spread. But let's see. Does anyone who answers questions on behalf of the underground intelligence network know a method for traveling from an IDC verse to Earth undetected?" The coin replied with the eyes. "Alas."

Jason, Roland, Curtis, and Simon all spent the next few days poring through books, newspapers, and public resources on the Internet for some kind of clue. They found absolutely nothing, and were quickly forced to give up.

Curtis's ninth birthday came on the ninth of July. They had something resembling a birthday party, including Curtis's friends (Curtis, unlike Jason, made friends who did not live with him) and many dentally hazardous comestibles. Jason was used to thinking of Curtis as significantly younger than him, so it felt strange to know that their ages differed by only one.

Weeks flew by. Jason chose not to obtain a prosthetic hand, since the best Gyeeds could offer was a claw for gripping and grabbing that *looked* like a real hand, which Jason thought wouldn't be very useful. But increasingly, he felt buoyant, cheerful in general and pleased with everything he encountered. He was grateful for

the return to everyday life; the comfort of a tedious, unvarying routine; the luxury of going to the same school every day and the same bed every night. Having never felt particularly adventurous from the beginning, he had truly experienced enough thrills to last him for the rest of his life. He had been cured of the restlessness of youth.

But not everything was so sunny. Even if the various monsters throughout the multiverse were no longer attacking cities, and the bulk of them had been exterminated, many of them still roamed through the wilderness, a testament to the undeniably bizarre character of the present. Occasionally, Jason would hear of relations between Gyeeds and Droydania deteriorating further; thinking of the role he had played to spurn this on (merely to clean up his own reputation) made him feel faint. The Schism continued to widen. The big questions remained as unanswered as ever: even though Jason now knew exactly where Leela was, he felt no closer to reaching her. And, last but far from least, the dilemma of the television show haunted Jason's mind. Who was he really, and what was he doing? Was there any guarantee that the show wouldn't just end someday, and Jason would go to sleep never to wake again? Jason lost nearly a whole night's worth of sleep every time he thought of that. Yes, the days were blissful enough, but the nights could be frightful: Jason was rarely well-slept; he was perpetually groggy and haggard. He willfully, nay, eagerly forgot his dreams.

Jason entertained one small grain of hope thus: Leela was on Earth. There had to be a way to get there. And if Jason could get there, he could see more people he dearly longed to see than just Leela.

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The Fall

One day in early September, Jason arrived to his history class exceedingly early. The room was empty. He settled down in a chair in the second row from the front, left of center, and stared at the whiteboard. Having just finished *Dracula* earlier that day and little on his mind, he quickly grew bored. After searching the bookshelves for something that could hold his interest for a few minutes, he returned to his seat with a heavy color atlas of the verse of Gyeeds. He flipped through it, admiring the funny-shaped countries and the barely pronounceable names. Of course, Jason knew that pronounceability was only a matter of experience. Many words that he now used regularly in everyday conversation had sounded like tongue-twisters back when he'd still been monolingual.

Jason was largely unfamiliar with the geography of Gyeeds the verse outside of Gyeeds the city, so everything was new to him. One place in particular caught his eye: Koliporoth. This was Gyeeds's southernmost continent, a mammoth slab of permanently iced-over rock that surrounded Gyeeds's south pole. In short, it was the Gyeedian equivalent of Antarctica. The funny thing was, it looked an awful lot like the real Antarctica.

"Hmmm." said Jason.

After class, Jason asked and was given permission to borrow the atlas overnight. Somehow he hauled it to the apartment. Once home, the first thing he did was go to the dedicated Terran bookshelf and pull out *An Atlas of Earth*. (At the moment, there were only two other books on the shelf—*The Ecology of Earth's Oceans* and *"Et Tu, Brute?": A Brief History of Terran Politics*—but over time, Jason and Roland planned to fill it with all sorts of books written about Earth or by Terrans.) Jason opened the Terran atlas to Antarctica and the Gyeedian atlas to Koliporoth and put them side-by-side on a table. Yes, the resemblance was real. Certainly the two continents were distinguishable, but they did share the same general shape, down to the peninsula like a rat's tail. Browsing the huge lists of features, Jason noticed that the name of the most populous research station in Koliporoth was pronounced not entirely unlike "McMurdo", the name of the most populous Antarctic station. Significantly more noteworthy were the summits called Pillow Knob, which appeared in exactly the same place in each verse and had been called the same thing by their respective discoverers.

"Hmmm." said Jason.

A glance through verseviewers confirmed what Jason had suspected: both

Pillow Knobs were identical, even though the geography surrounding them wasn't. Jason, licking his lips and pulling out the coin, asked "Is there any connection between the Gyeedian and the Terran Pillow Knobs?" He was afraid the coin would land on its edge, but it came down eagle-up. He felt a surge of hope: he was on to something now; the question was, what was the nature of the link? After thinking it over for a few minutes, he hazarded "Is there a way one can travel between the Pillow Knobs specifically, a way that doesn't work for other arbitrary routes?" Yes. "Does that way require casting a spell?" No. "Does it involve a particular sub-feature of the Pillow Knobs?" Yes. And so Jason found the coordinates of the sub-feature and looked, and there, on both Earth and Gyeeds, was a small cave-mouth in the side of the mountains, kept from being covered with snow by a large overhang of rock.

"So we're going into another mountain cave." Jason said to the mages once they'd all returned home and Jason had explained how he'd found the Pillow Knobs. "There's something in there that should take us to Earth, and then we can teleport to Leela. 'Bout time, huh?"

"'Bout time." Roland acknowledged. "Not that I anticipate our actually finding Leela, given our rotten luck so far."

"Yeah, neither do I." said Jason. "But I'm not giving up."

"It'll be cold there." said Curtis. "I think we need really thick coats."

"Indeed." said Roland. "I'll buy some. Jason, one question occurs to me. Suppose we do reach Earth without verseporting conventionally. Regardless of whether or not we reach Leela, will you want to visit your family?"

"I thought of that a while ago." said Jason. "The answer is, I'd like to see them more than anything, but I'm scared to death to do so. I'm afraid that if the Supernals discovered I cared for them, they might attack them, or threaten to attack them so as to blackmail me. My parents and my sister are defenseless: they don't have three mages to protect them, as I do. If we brought them into our fold, they'd be a liability to us, and their lives as they knew them would be destroyed. I *will* reunite with them someday, I swear—as soon this Supernal nonsense is over with."

It being winter in the southern hemisphere, Koliporoth (like Antarctica) had just begun its several-month-long night. The stars were out and it was a brisk -80 °F, far colder than it had been during the party's adventure in the Droydanian south pole; the party was kept from freezing to death by thick coats that magically kept themselves heated. At least it wasn't snowing at the moment. They looked out over the vast, icy world, an excellent view of which would've been afforded by their position on a flattish part of a mountain if it weren't for the distinct lack of sunlight and the thick, glittering fog. Decent illumination was provided by the full moon and a strong lantern Roland carried. Yet Jason felt partly blind, as the several layers of cloth that covered his face completely blocked his sense of smell.

"God, it's freezing!" Roland wailed, and the others moaned their agreement. "Where's the cave, Jason?"

"Can't tell easily." came the reply. "I'm not oriented. I need to get my—"

Then the breath was knocked out of him as Simon bowled him, Roland, and Curtis over. Before Jason could even exclaim his surprise, a fearsome plume of fire sailed over his head. It was the breath of a twenty-foot-tall lime-green dragon that

certainly hadn't been there just a moment ago, and had it not been for Simon's timely intervention, Jason would now be well-done. As they all struggled against their heavy clothing to regain their footing, Jason gazed upon the frighteningly large claws, the eyeballs the size of his head, and the powerful muscles beneath the scales, and hoped that after this, he would never have to see another dragon again.

Jason ran until he felt he was a reasonably safe distance away and then watched his comrades defend themselves against the monster. The dragon didn't hold back. It swung its claws wildly, nearly tossing Curtis off the mountain, and followed up with a breath of fire that sent the mages scattering again. Roland somehow tore off his heavy clothing in just over a second, so that he stood there in the deadly cold in nothing but his suit, and screamed to the heavens. He shimmered with energy. With a whine so loud and high-pitched it made Jason dizzy, thick yellow beams of light sprouted from Roland's hands and struck the dragon in the chest. The dragon roared with pain; the attack had clearly been one of the strongest of which Roland was capable; yet all the harm that had been done was a bleeding wound that looked small on the monster's enormous body.

Roland, greatly drained from the one spell, had to catch his breath before he could move or attack again. The dragon, literally seizing the opportunity, sped towards the adventurer, flapping its wings to quicken its gait, and grabbed him in its claws. Just as it was about to throw him to his death, Simon cast a spell, and a small spot on the monster's arm glowed red. Though apparently unharmed, the dragon shrieked, and involuntarily loosened its grip, enough for Roland to squeeze his hands free. He used a spell that charged his whole body with electricity, forcing the dragon to immediately let him go.

At that point, some more monsters joined the fray: four deinonychus-like dinosaurs courtesy of Curtis. They leapt upon the dragon and began tearing at its flesh, even as they shivered intensely from the cold. The dragon tried shaking them off, but they sprang upon it again in the wink of an eye. So then the dragon jumped up and flew off the edge, over the icy wasteland hundreds of feet below. Two barrel rolls in quick succession sent all the dinosaurs plummeting. On the return trip, the dragon breathed fire again and just managed to ignite Curtis's coat; Curtis was able to quickly smother the flames on the snow.

The battle continued in this fashion for four minutes. Though the mages had superior firepower, the dragon was extremely tenacious, and the snow was painted with several coats of its blood before it began to show signs of weakening. Clearly, it would fight to the bitter end. And there was a reasonable chance it would bring at least one of the mages down with it, since they couldn't hope to evade every one of its attacks. Two of the dragon's swipes that just missed hitting home made conspicuous gashes in Simon's and Curtis's coats, and Roland somehow got part of his hair burnt off without his scalp being singed.

Soon, it became clear to all combatants that the dragon's end was nigh. It was injured far past the point of any possibility of survival, and was now in its death throes. Having previously grown sluggish as the blood drained from its body, it redoubled its efforts to bring down at least one of its enemies. It threw itself at Simon, heedless of the powerful energy bolt Curtis had just shot at it. Simon jumped backwards to avoid bisection, and so he escaped immediate harm, but he lost his

footing and tripped over the edge. By some miracle, he managed to grab a hold on the icy, snow-covered cliff, and there he hung over a frosty oblivion by one hand. Then Curtis's spell struck the dragon. It wailed one last time, collapsed, rolled over, and died, with its head hanging over the precipice just a stone's throw from Simon.

Simon shouted, perhaps unnecessarily, "Help!"

Jason and Curtis rushed over to him without delay. But Roland got there first, and he didn't stoop to grab Simon's hand: instead, he stomped on it. Simon immediately lost his grip and fell.

The boys stopped in their tracks. Jason's heart fell along with Simon's body as Roland slowly turned to meet his eyes. After hesitating a few more seconds, Curtis rushed to the edge and looked down. Jason followed shortly. Peering downwards, they could see no sign of Simon—not that it made a difference. The drop was sheer; there was nothing Simon could've possibly grabbed onto, nothing he could've used to break his fall.

"He's dead." Jason forced himself to say. It came out very quietly and weakly, so he repeated himself more audibly. He turned to Roland, whose face was as expressionless as possible. He looked calm, peaceful, perhaps even satisfied.

"Someday, you'll understand this," said Roland.

"How could you?" Curtis shrieked. "You imbecile, he never did anything wrong, why'd you do this to him, he didn't deserve it, he didn't deserve to die, why'd you always hate him, why—"

Then they heard Simon's voice: he was casting a spell. Roland gagged. His feet were lifted off the ground, he hung in the air, and his hands were involuntarily clasped together behind his back. There were visible indentations on his throat: he was being telekinetically strangled. They all looked to one side and there was Simon, no worse for wear, his gloved right hand raised and clenched in a fist. He looked coldly at Roland, who of all three was the most surprised to see him.

"Don't worry; this won't do any lasting harm," said Simon. "I'm only hurting you now to help make my point: namely, that I can defend myself against you. Hate me if you wish, but do me no harm. In particular, don't try to kill me. I warn you that if you do so again, you'll fail again, and I'll kill *you*—not for the sake of vengeance, but to avoid death myself. Do you agree not to threaten me again?" He relaxed the pressure on Roland's throat so the adventurer could speak.

"Forget it, abomination of nature!" Roland growled. "Kill him!" The command was apparently directed towards Jason and Curtis. They weren't inclined to obey.

Simon sighed and choked Roland again with twice the original strength. Roland grew pale; now that he was no longer casting spells, the cold was returning to him. He would freeze to death if he didn't put his outer layers back on very soon. "Roland," said Simon, "swear to me that you will not threaten me again or I'll keep you restrained for the remainder of our travels together. You'd help me restrain him, wouldn't you?" he asked, turning to Jason and Curtis. After a few moments' hesitation, they nodded. "Notice that Jason and Curtis will not help *you* in this struggle. Do you swear, Roland?"

"I swear," said Roland. His face flushed red with shame.

"Thank you," said Simon. He stopped choking Roland, gently placed him on the ground, and released his hands. Roland lost no time getting into his warm clothes

again.

"Simon," said Jason, "it's a miracle that you managed to survive that fall. How did you do it?"

"I teleported back here in midair."

"How?" said Curtis. "You need to be on a surface and at rest relative to the surface for vulgar teleportation to work."

"I managed," said Simon. "Jason, I think we should try to find the special geographic feature you discovered with the coin before the Supernals attack us again."

"Yeah," said Jason. "*Did* the Supernals make that dragon? I suppose so, though it was unlike their other monsters." He removed from his pocket the satellite-navigation-system receiver he had thoughtfully brought with him. "We're very close. Okay, this way..."

The receiver led them into the cave and down a narrow tunnel. Roland and Simon walked alongside the boys, ignoring each other as if nothing had happened. After about a minute of carefully picking their way over the icy ground, they arrived at a dead end, and Jason announced, "We should be within a few feet of it now."

Roland walked forth, holding up the lantern. There, sitting on the floor at the end of the tunnel, was a bizarre sort of sculpture. It was the outline of a pentagon made of a carefully chiseled six-inch-thick tube of stone, seven feet high, standing on its side. On its surface, a great many heavily weathered, regularly sized dots were engraved, arranged in seemingly arbitrary patterns. Somehow, the sculpture was rooted to the floor of the cave, and wasn't in danger of falling over.

"So my guess is that Antarctica is through this, uh, portal," said Jason.

"No, look," said Curtis. "The part of the cave you can see through it matches the part you can see outside."

"The teleportation happens after you step through it," Jason insisted. "Watch." He stepped through the frame. Nothing appeared to happen. "Uh-oh. Why haven't I verseported?"

Simon walked around behind the sculpture. "Actually, you may have," said Simon. "I could see you through the frame, but I went around it, and you're not here. Looking back, I can see the part of Curtis that's to the side of the frame, but looking through the window, it seems he's not there at all."

Jason ran around the sculpture. "Yeah, Roland and Curtis aren't here." And in the window, he could see Simon standing where he thought he'd just been. They waved, and Simon stepped through. "C'mon, guys, just go through," said Jason.

Roland and Curtis soon found their way to the others. "So this actually is a different cave," said Roland. "It looks identical."

"Right, it's the same ol' geographical symmetry," said Jason. "Come along."

They traveled up a tunnel just like the one they'd descended. Jason's receiver soon lost the signals of the Gyeedian satellites. When they exited the tunnel, they looked up to see a very different night sky.

"I recognize those stars," Roland said in an awed voice. "We're on Earth!"

Jason was no astronomer, but he could see one definite proof that he was no longer on Gyeeds: the moon, full in the sky above Koliporoth, was a sliver of a crescent here in Antarctica. Besides, the surrounding landscape was for the most part

completely different. He had returned to the third rock from Sol, the most famous planet in the Virgo Supercluster, the birthplace of everyone from Alexander the Great to Alexander Pushkin to Alexander Graham Bell.

From there, they teleported directly to the Greenland ice sheet. So there they were in another frozen wasteland, but it was a summer day here, and about sixty degrees warmer: still inhumanly frigid by any reasonable standards, but nothing compared to the Antarctic winter. The foursome enjoyed being vastly overheated for a minute or so, then stripped off some of their outer layers, leaving them lying on the snow for the time being.

"I can feel my arms!" Curtis exalted. "And I can move them!"

"We're not going anywhere just yet." said Jason. "I don't have a GPS receiver, of course, and I didn't see any landmarks at the spot where Leela's hidden, so I'll need to use the coin."

As he zeroed in on Leela, first calculating the direction and then the distance, Jason's excitement grew. In spite of innumerable, nearly insurmountable obstacles, he was now extremely close to the one person in the multiverse who might be able to tell him the truth. As several confused reflections spun through his brain and he drew closer, there was suddenly a small explosion of snow. A hatch in the ice sheet had popped open, dislodging its snow-cover. Inside was a ladder, leading down to an electrically illuminated room with a smooth floor.

"That's a good sign." said Jason. His heart beat faster. "Okay, guys, this is it."

They retrieved their coats and then descended down the hatch, Jason first, Simon second, Curtis third, and Roland last. There they found themselves in a little nook like a coat-closet, with hooks for hanging up clothes and a mat for wiping the snow off one's boots. The nook opened into a small library, packed tightly with bookcases, that didn't fail to remind Jason of Earnest's house. (The builder was the same, after all.) In the library was a desk, and at the desk, looking up from an exceptionally weighty tome, was a gray-haired woman. She wore a heavy coat—sensibly enough, as the little house was weakly heated—and thick-lensed reading glasses, which she exchanged for another pair sitting on the desk as she examined the party. Her temple was wrinkled with knowledge, and her wide, dark eyes were uncompromisingly serious, but she had a smile of mixed relief and triumph, a sign of audacious longing that what had so long remained opaque would be made clear, that the mysterious predators who prowled through the dark would be suddenly thrust into the harsh light of day, which matched Jason's exactly.

"I'm sorry that was so difficult," said Leela Aranin, "but if you could find me, and they couldn't, then there is hope."

52

The Revelation

"It's been a long time, Mom." said Simon, walking over to the desk.

"Too long." said Leela.

They embraced and kissed each other with great affection. Jason thought of his own mother; for a moment, he felt deathly homesick.

"Well, boys," said Leela, "you've come a long way. Hang up those extra coats and come into the kitchen; I've got some chairs there. I'd offer you something hot to drink, except I haven't the hot water to spare."

In the tiny kitchen, about the size of the bathroom in the Blues' house, they crammed around a card table; with Leela's desk chair, there were just enough seats for all of them. Simon sat on one side of his mother, Curtis on the other, Jason across from her, and Roland beside Jason, pushed back from the table a bit.

"You must get awfully claustrophobic living in here." said Jason. "Though actually, I don't know how much time you spend here. Are you here most of the time, or do you often go to other places on Earth or in the IDC verses?"

"I've never been anywhere on Earth other than Antarctica and Greenland." said Leela. "You did get here through the portal, didn't you?"

"The one by Pillow Knob, yes." said Roland.

"Do you mean there are others?" said Leela, intrigued.

"None that we know of." said Jason.

"Oh, all right. Well, as I was saying, I've been to Gyeeds and Droydania only rarely since I first went into hiding. My need to hide is greater than ever. I've been careful enough that I don't think either of the gods knows my hiding place, or even the verse I live in, but my life depends on keeping them thus ignorant."

"'Gods'?" said Curtis. "You mean the Supernals?"

Leela nodded. "I have many things to tell you the four of you. I knew more than I told Simon when I last spoke to him over two years ago, and I've learned a deal since then. But first, I think, you should tell me your own story. It'll give me an idea of what you already know, and with any luck, it'll help to plug the holes in my own knowledge. I should be able to provide you with an essentially complete explanation of all the strange things you've encountered."

"Excellent." said Jason. "All right, I'll begin. Today, as it happens, is my eleventh birthday. It all started on Hydrogen of week 24, 5624, three days after I turned ten."

He told the long and tangled story of the eleventh year of his life in greater detail than ever before. At first, he was determined to tell the whole tale himself; he

barreled on for an hour straight with only occasional corrections from Roland and a few pauses to moisten his throat and catch his breath. He got no further than the murder of Jake. Roland picked up from there for forty-five minutes until he, too, gave in, and Simon told the remaining hour-and-five-minutes of the story.

"My," Leela said at last, "that's a lot to digest. Everything from surreal nihilism to the attempted murder of my son. I suppose you've learned your lesson." she said to Roland.

"Yes," said Roland tonelessly.

"Good. Now, I guarantee you that the dragon you just faced was sent by a god. The god saw you in Koliporoth, figured you were somehow coming to find me, and tried to stop you from reaching me. However, it didn't follow you to Earth. All of you need to be extremely careful never to attract the eyes of the gods. You must appear under Terran skies, without a roof to hide you, as infrequently as possible. Do you understand?" They nodded. "Well, I'm pooped. Night never comes here at this time of year, but it's about my bedtime. And I imagine you four would like to sleep, or at least rest, before I tell you my own story. Am I correct?" They nodded again. It had been late at night in the city of Gyeeds when they'd teleported to Koliporoth. "All right, then. I don't have a bed in this house for anybody but myself, so let me show you a place you can sleep over."

She went to the library for a moment and came back with a photograph of a large house built of warm red stone. "This is the home of an Italian physicist I've been working with. He's agreed to give room and board to any extraterrestrials who've come to speak with me. Just teleport there and say you're friends of Leela Aranin. Take eight hours to sleep and one more to wake up and eat breakfast. Then, come back here and we'll talk."

"But *I'm* not extraterrestrial," said Jason.

"You may have been born here," said Leela, "but for all intents and purposes, you're an alien now."

Refreshed and recovered, Jason, Roland, Curtis, and Simon returned to Leela's hideaway with a thirst for the truth in all of their hearts.

"My own adventures began, like yours, Jason, with a dragon," said Leela. "Around the age of thirty, over a decade before I bore Simon, I was briefly at the Droydian Museum of Genetics and Evolutionary Biology, helping with an exhibit on interdimensional convergent evolution. While I was in one of the back rooms, I saw a skeleton of a young dragon that was being prepared for display. I marveled that after more than fifteen years since Droydania had joined the IDC, and Droydian biologists had first observed dragons in the flesh, the species remained such a mystery—not just to Droydians, but to all humankind. My work had nothing to do with dragons then and didn't have anything more to do with them for quite a while, yet the impression has stuck with me ever since.

"For years afterwards, I worked exclusively in genetics and almost forgot about dragons. I married Walter Baria, the 'love of my life', as it were, and we had Simon, our only child. Walter died of colon cancer not long after our seventeenth anniversary. So when Simon moved out after he turned eighteen, I was left with an empty nest. It was something of a shock. I decided I wanted to do something new, and I began my

little investigation into the nature of dragons.

“Very quickly I realized that dragons were supernatural. Noticing that decades of research into dragons themselves—their anatomy, their habits, their psychology, and so on—had proved essentially fruitless, I decided to research the supernatural in general. For years I got nowhere, but I was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery. I slowly diverted more and more of my energies to the investigation, to the point that the administration of my university complained I was growing unproductive as a scholar. And indeed, I was publishing far less than in former years.

“Finally, about three years ago, I first hit upon the one supernatural phenomenon that was at least partly real: possession. Mixed in with all the innumerable hoaxes and nonsense, I found a few cases that were eerily similar. By interrogating the victims of possession and following the long trail of clues they guided me to, with the help of dozens of other people I encountered who secretly shared my goal, I finally pieced together the truth. I had only vague inklings of it when I realized the danger I was putting myself in and went into hiding. Now, after years of more research, not to mention what new things you told me just yesterday, I can give you a coherent picture of the prime threat to humankind.

“First of all, I should say this: Jason’s theory is wrong.”

“*What?*” Jason squawked. “How can your theory account—”

“Hear me out.” said Leela, raising a hand. Her voice was firm without being hostile. Jason calmed down. “My own hypothesis can explain everything you’ve seen, and more. As I understand it, the multiverse is real—as real as anything can be. And for many billions of years, it was quite logical and ordinary. I think that physics, although a long way away from explaining every observed feature of reality, has already identified all of the most important parts of the fundamental workings of the multiverse. Or rather, the multiverse *as it was* a millennium ago. For since then, something has changed.

“You know how young the human race is, in all its incarnations in all the different verses we know of, compared to planets and stars. You also know how human culture grows in complexity not only many orders of magnitudes faster than life in general and planetary environments, but at an exponential rate. The very speed at which we change increases as we change. In fact, human history has been more eventful within the last five hundred years than it was in the preceding quarter-million.

“If there were any sapient creatures in the multiverse before us—I’m inclined to think there have been—none were so populous, none so diversified, none so advanced in every conceivable dimension of advancement. The total population of all known verses is now estimated to be in the tens of trillions. The sum of all human knowledge and works, however quantified, is staggering. In short, we, as a species, are a unique, powerful force in the multiverse all of our own.

“The catch is that we’re a force more than just metaphorically. So much intelligence, in such great volume, is alien to the multiverse. By nature the world is slow and purposeless; we are quick and purposeful. And somehow, in a way not entirely clear to me, but which may, in fact, be an irreducible feature of the reality we live in, our speed and purpose rubs off on the multiverse. Our sapience has warped, and is warping, reality itself. As it’s built up, it’s begun boiling with energy, growing

and pushing at the seams of the world. The effect is that our abstractions, formerly purely conceptual, have begun to leak into the realm of the material.

"Not all of the ideas we deal with on a daily basis, thank goodness, have taken shape. Almost none have gathered the critical mass necessary. As it happens, only two have, and they have done so exactly by being all-encompassing, by partitioning between them nearly every other cause or concept we've dreamed of. They've been increasing in size and power over the millennia, growing at an exponential rate exactly matching ours; in the very recent past—within Curtis's lifetime—they've literally taken on minds of their own. They go by many names. The most appropriate ones, as I see it, are 'Life' and 'Death'.

"I should tell you now that 'Supernal' is only a euphemism. Perhaps I wouldn't have admitted that a few years ago, but at any rate, my purpose at the time was partly to mislead the 'Supernals', to make them believe that I was mistaken about their true nature. Life and Death are simply gods."

"I knew it." Curtis mumbled. Jason looked critically at Leela.

"Like all scientists of principle," said Leela, "I'm an atheist. I don't believe in any transcendental creator-god, some paradoxical omnipotent-yet-benevolent super-being, and I'm certainly not telling *you* to believe in one. At the same time, Occam's Razor leaves the existence of two less-than-omnipotent, not entirely benevolent gods as the only reasonable explanation of the facts.

"I don't know everything there is to know about the gods, but I do know a respectable amount, far more than they ever intended any human to learn so soon. First of all, you should know that Life and Death are absolute opposites: they're defined by their distinction from each other. The nature of the difference, I think, is best illustrated by some of their alternative names. Life also goes by Freedom, Chaos, Activity, Energy, Falsity, Light, and Creation. Death, correspondingly, may be thought of as Order, Law, Passivity, Matter, Truth, Darkness, or Destruction. And so you can see how the line is drawn: succinctly put, Life represents change and Death represents sameness.

"Each god acts with exactly one purpose: to shape the entire multiverse in its image. That means that the greatest enemy of each is the other. They also have a common enemy: humanity. Though most humans represent one god to a greater degree than the other, humanity as a whole is heterogeneous, and Life and Death don't believe in compromise. They want perfection: the absolutely total and permanent realization of their ideal across the entire multiverse. This necessarily entails the extermination of the human race, or at least, the human race as we know it. Our only lifeline is that both exist, and for the moment, at least, they're exactly equally powerful. Each is strong enough that if the other didn't stand in its way, it could rewrite reality at its leisure: it would be *almost* omnipotent. Thankfully, they detest each other so much that they won't even join forces against us. If they did, our doom would be swift and certain.

"The gods are unique in that they lie between the realms of the material and the conceptual. They have no body, and thus, incidentally, no sex, which is why I refer to them with neuter pronouns. They do have vast magical power, of a quantity and efficacy unknown to men. They can create any imaginable creature they please, so long as they're willing to expend the necessary energy, and the corpses of their

creations can continue existing after death if they choose. They can possess any creature that permits them to, and then do all manner of strange things to it. And although, to my knowledge, they've yet to do it once, they can permanently transfer some of their power to a mortal recipient. They're eager to make allies among humans, even as they plan on effecting our extinction. So yes, Jason, you were wise to refuse Life's offer. It would've made you its thrall."

"Life's?" said Jason. "Do you mean to say the red fox was Life?"

"That it was—a part of Life. For here we come to one of the primary differences between how Life and Death behave. Death, a believer in truth and clarity, is straightforward to a hilt. Except when trying to effect a particular deception, as that of the Thanatos cultists, it calls itself Death. It doesn't multiply entities beyond necessity. Life, conversely, in addition to believing in a higher creator-god, has split itself into a trinity. Though capable of reforming at will, it now consists of three separate agents, distinguished by their favored colors of red, green, and blue, just as Life as a whole and Death are respectively aligned with white and black. (It's no accident that in the usual additive color scheme, white light is split into red, green, and blue components.) The three aspects of Life, like Life itself, have no true names. They prefer to call themselves Love, Courage, and Peace. The less euphemistic equivalents, corresponding to the collective label of Chaos they abhor, are Lust, Greed, and Apathy. The neutral terms are simply Red, Green, and Blue. Even though they're equally powerful, they've established among themselves that particular pecking order. Thus it was, Jason, that Red, the chief aspect of Life, wished to bring you into its fold."

"And Red was *Lust* all along." said Jason. "So that was its connection with sexuality. Of course it wanted to sexualize me—to shape me in its image!"

"Exactly." said Leela. "And it's a sure bet that Apathy was the god Miles mistook for God."

"Have we ever encountered Greed, then?" said Simon.

"I doubt it was accidental that the creature Jason killed with a stone and the dragon you just fought were green." said Leela. "For, of course, the sudden appearance of monsters about twenty weeks ago was nothing less than the gods fighting. They'd previously been very careful to hide their monsters from the public, to minimize their chances of being discovered themselves. It was a chain of escalation that brought their struggle into full view. Death, upon seeing Jason, Roland, and Curtis, whom it hadn't been fond of ever since the Thanatos affair, go into a house with my son, decided to try killing four birds with one stone. The fight ended up being much more conspicuous to the neighbors than it had hoped. When you killed the monster, Curtis, I think Death thought it ought to try again while you were weary from the first fight; but then Life, realizing Jason was in danger again, sent its own monster in. By then it was clear to both gods that their monsters could no longer be kept secret—I think a passer-by actually managed to photograph the unicorn—so they decided to unleash everything they had at each other."

"But those monsters attacked humans, not each other." said Jason.

"Of course." said Leela. "There would've been little point in their throwing monsters at each other. Instead, they focused their energies on damaging their opponent's allies as much as possible."

"Allies?" said Roland. "Surely you don't mean to say that governments have covertly joined forces with the gods."

"In fact, they have—in a sense. It's complicated." Leela sighed. "First, I should add an important detail to my explanation of the basic nature of the gods: there's a kind of positive feedback loop between the gods and human sapience. As humans increase in population and sophistication, the gods grow stronger. And as the gods grow stronger, their very existence exerts its own effect on the rest of the multiverse, humans in particular. Slowly, they pull the human race towards opposite extremes; slowly, they erode ideological gray areas into pure black and white components. In short, the gods are polarizing the multiverse: they're widening and deepening the Schism."

"So... the Schism corresponds to the dichotomy between the gods?" said Jason.

"It's more than that. Properly speaking, the Schism *is* the dichotomy between the gods. You've seen how the distinction between Gyeeds and Droydania has steadily grown. This is nothing less than the multiverse coming to resemble the gods. Everything—practically *everything*—is creeping towards one of these two poles. People are just beginning to notice it. When they finally realize what's actually happening, their minds will have been irreversibly corrupted by the influence of the gods, and they'll hasten to their deaths.

"I should stress that human minds are not the only things in this world that the gods are warping. Causality itself, the very laws of probability, is being distorted to make the normal unusual and the unusual normal. The strangest contingencies are now the most likely possibilities; the unremarkable is now the anomaly. I think it's through this effect that the nascent Life created the draconic race. And so reality seems exaggerated: which happens to be, as I see it, the defining feature of fantasy. Hence, it's no surprise that Jason was misled. It was only an accident, I suppose, that the young dragon abducted Jason in particular. But as soon as the gods focused their attention on him—and I'm inclined to think they did so very soon after the abduction—the 'aura of improbability' they involuntarily emanate focused on him, as well. That, Jason, is why you appear to be a protagonist, and not just an ordinary character in a fantastic world.

"At any rate, the Schism divides the allies of Life and Death. Gyeeds is aligned with Life, and Droydania with Death. Verses on both sides will continue to polarize in the near future; then, at some point, the gods will reveal themselves and humans will officially take sides. A war of unprecedented scale will erupt. Should one god fall, the other will instantly have its way with the multiverse."

"And we'll all die?" said Curtis.

"Assumedly."

"But how can one of the gods die?" said Jason. "They don't have material bodies to attack."

"That's true." said Leela. "In fact, not being truly alive, they can't truly die: they're immortal. They don't need to eat, drink, or breathe. Weapons, even nuclear explosives, are useless against them. They're completely immune to human magic. They aren't indestructible, but they're so many orders of magnitude more powerful than everything else in the multiverse that nothing can hurt one but direct combat with the other."

"Which is highly likely to occur," said Jason, "somewhere down the line."

"Right. In short, if things continue as they're likely to, none of us will live more than a year longer."

"Do you mean the war will begin in less than a year?" said Simon.

"Unless something changes drastically, yes."

"That's extremely grim!" said Jason in a hoarse voice. "How in the world can we defend against this? We can't just sit back and ride the waves to our demise. Isn't there anything we can do?"

Leela adjusted her glasses. "To my knowledge, no. I've spent most of the last year attempting to answer that question exactly, and I've come up with nothing. If the war could be postponed or prolonged indefinitely, the gods would then continue to be checked by each another, minimizing the harm they could do us. But I don't see how just a few humans could hope to hold back the natural course of the multiverse, and besides, real stability is impossible in such tension. There would always be a chance that the fragile balance of power would somehow tip one way or the other, and all would be lost. Mutual destruction is, in this case, more or less impossible, since, again, the moment one is weakened, the other becomes stronger than ever before."

"Well, here's one question that occurs to me," said Jason. "You said that the winning god will be able to 'rewrite reality at its leisure', which power it'll use to 'shape the entire multiverse in its image'. How do the gods plan to rewrite things? What, exactly, is the way they want the multiverse to be?"

"I admit the details have thus far eluded me," said Leela. "All I have is educated guesses. Knowing the gods, I can imagine that Death wants destruction. What will be left once it's destroyed all it likes, what it'll spare, is anyone's guess, but I can verify that we won't be among them. I have even less of a clear idea of what Life desires. Crucially, I do know that Life wants something much more extreme than what one would imagine, a multiverse-wide Garden of Eden." (She referred to a place in an ancient Droydanian mythology analogous to the Abramic Eden.) "I think it's aiming more for a multiverse that epitomizes the essential qualities of life than one that's actually filled with living creatures. There may not be any 'life' as I, a biologist, would define the term. I don't foresee it as a pleasant prospect."

"I don't suppose one god's ideal would be preferable to the other," said Roland.

"No, there's little difference from our perspective. A victorious god would bring about the end of civilization, now and forever. That's all *I* need to know."

The five of them fell silent, contemplating their seemingly inevitable doom. Slowly, Jason felt the floor fall from beneath him; his thoughts became jumbled, vague, and anxious, as when he'd sat before Beatrix, barely moving, for hours. Most of all, he found himself hoping that Leela was utterly wrong; the idea that he was actually in a television show, he thought, was much less frightening.

Leela broke the silence. "Let me ask you something, Simon dear," she said. "When Roland sent you plummeting off the cliff in Koliporoth, how *did* you manage to teleport back in midair?"

Simon was visibly surprised. "Well, I—uh—actually, I don't really know. I *tried* teleporting, although I fully expected it not to work, and it worked. I think... yes, in retrospect, I believe that a small piece of ice fell from the cliff along with me, and came to be just under my foot as I fell. Since I was falling at the same speed as the

piece of ice, I was at rest relative to it, so it fulfilled the requirement for a surface from which to teleport.”

“So the strangeness of the multiverse worked in your favor that time.” said Leela, nodding. “I have to say, I’m impressed that you mages were able to fend off that adult dragon, and with barely a scrape to show for it, too. After fighting together for so long, you’ve become quite powerful, as a group.”

“I’m pretty powerful alone.” said Curtis.

“That’s true.” Leela admitted. “The truth of the matter is, the four of you are able to defend yourselves against the gods—no small feat. I have no experience with combat casting whatsoever, so as soon as one of the gods finds me, my death will be ‘swift and certain’.”

“Leela,” said Jason, “can you tell me anything about the red animals I encountered?”

“Yes, I’m fairly certain they were physical manifestations of Red. It was watching you; it earnestly did want to recruit you. Precisely why it took physical form is unclear to me. However, I think I understand how those spontaneous emotions came over you. Because a piece of Life’s power was directly present, you could actually feel it, and because Life was in the form of Lust at the moment, you perceived the power as, strange as it may sound, a premonition of puberty. Since sexuality is so alien to a prepubescent, you instinctually reacted with fear at first; but over time, as you’ve grown closer to puberty, your subconscious has gradually come to terms with the idea.

“I should warn you: for you, Jason, puberty may be extremely dangerous. For Love’s insistence on rendering you pubescent before accepting you as its avatar makes me worry that pubescence might somehow give it more power over you. I think it’s a safe assumption that it’s still keeping an eye on you, whatever its aim. Of course, there isn’t much you can do about the issue—unless, I suppose, you were to be castrated.”

Jason paled. “Well—I don’t think—”

“Whoa, Nelly.” said Roland, rising. He brought scornful eyes down to bear on the aging biologist. “This boy is my adoptive son, for good or for ill. If you think—”

“Please calm down, Roland.” said Leela gently. To Jason’s surprise, he did. “I’m only guessing that castration might help him, and even if it did, I honestly doubt it would do much good in the long run. Please remember that barring a miracle, we don’t have much longer to live. It doesn’t matter what Life does to Jason if we’re all doomed anyway.”

“Besides, I can’t say castration is a prospect I can easily stomach.” said Jason. “What about those pills Jonas took to suppress the ‘Stirrings’—antaphrodisiacs, I mean?”

“The gods are far more powerful than drugs.” said Leela. There was a pause. “I’m afraid that’s all I have to tell you. I’ve discovered the real danger we’re in, but I can’t think of any kind of solution whatsoever. If there remains any doubt in your mind of the truth of my explanation, all you need do is watch the world around you. The rate of polarization, like that of human advancement, is exponential. Already, every nation I know of, including those outside the IDC, belong to one side or the other; they may change alliances over the weeks to come, but they’ll never become

neutral, or enemies to both. There's nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Metaphorically, one might say the two poles are at opposite ends of a single, unbroken circle of evil. We stand at its center, and the circle, like a noose, is rapidly tightening."

For the first time in his life, Jason tried not to think. Having very little practice, he failed. The conclusion seemed inescapable; his own little hypothesis, however parsimonious, entirely lacked the explanatory and predictive power of Leela's. He had sought Leela to get what he expected to be the ostensible truth; instead, he'd gotten the real truth. Of course there was no way to prove he *wasn't* in a television show, or a movie, or a simulation, or an advertisement on the side of a bus in New York City, but there was now no reason whatsoever to believe it. To think: everything that he'd once supposed to be a sort of massive persistent illusion was actually real. And yet it was also now that he'd learned this world was likely to soon be taken from him.

Not to say he planned on going down without a fight. He had only a little magic and almost no muscles, but he had his wits, and he was of the opinion that the latter were quite formidable by now. So keenly had he honed his talent for trickery and so confident was he in its efficacy that he felt capable of tricking the Devil himself. And indeed, it seemed a given that if it were at all possible for him to save the world, he'd do so by tricking the gods. (*Perhaps I ought to change my name to "Sisyphus"*. he thought.) He supposed that despite the apparently overwhelming odds he was up against, his actual chances of emerging victorious were decent, thanks to the causality warp his opponents generated. He might even be able to increase his chances by decreasing them: by going out of his way to make victory less probable, he might actually make it more so.

In truth, these brave words, reasonable as they sounded to his intellect, did nothing to allay his fear. He remembered how Leela had described the gods as incredibly powerful: the hordes of monsters that had laid siege to cities were living examples. He was lucky that, so far, he'd had to face at most a handful of monsters at once. If Life sent a flight of dragons to attack him while no friendly mage was nearby to teleport him away, he would inevitably be slain. And Life and Death were only growing yet more powerful as time went on.

In his mind's eye, he saw the scheming gaze of Emperor Ursamor and the wide, ambitious smile of Lloyd Waverunner. These leaders represented the twin poles to which Droydania and Gyeeds had crept. And then it all came to Jason viscerally: he saw the gods watch over each side as its ideology ossified to unquestioning zeal, its nations drew inward and purged dissenters from their ranks. All normal, peacetime activity, all the diverse everyday affairs of human life, would be swept up in the tide of war as each side gathered its strength, drafting legions of citizens into its military and constructing massive machines of war. Then, when the day of Ragnarok came, as it were, both would fly at each other with everything they had. In one great bloody multidimensional explosion, jungles would become wastelands, metropolises would be reduced to fallout-tainted rubble, and afterwards, the victor would pick off the survivors like a hunter putting a wounded animal out of its misery.

There was no escape. Even if he could trick the gods, Jason realized, there was no optimal outcome. He knew he couldn't hope to prevent war from arising at all: that

was inevitable, if anything ever had been. If the war were somehow prolonged indefinitely, human society would be as nightmarish as the world of *1984*. If the war were allowed to finish, the world would end in fire or in ice, according to the victor. Had Jason been a deity himself, it seemed, there would've been absolutely nothing he could do.

And so, in spite of all his experiences, a seed of doubt grew in the young boy's heart that there was any hope at all. Perhaps he would be able to find a solution; perhaps he could save the world. Yet he knew that no matter how great his luck or sharp his cunning, this crisis would not end on an entirely pleasant note. Neither he nor civilization as a whole would escape the Weird unscathed.

Part V

Heroes and Villains

53

Meanwhile...

By now, I've told you quite a bit about Jason's adventures: how he lived in Gyeeds, journeyed through Droydania, and visited a few other verses. Just as he was taken from Earth at the beginning of my story, so did my narration leave his homeworld behind. Now I wish to digress from Jason's personal circumstances for a while and tell you a story about our own planet; specifically, a part of it Jason knew he would never visit again, the United States. Though permanently separated from it, he kept one eye on it his whole life, and he watched these events unfold just as I tell of them.

George W. Bush began his presidency on a sour note. In the 2000 election, he lost the popular vote (albeit by a slim half-million), and he would've lost the election as a whole had not the Supreme Court decided the controversy over Florida's electoral votes in his favor. Yet in the months following his assumption of office, he proved an effective executive, working closely with Congress to push through several bills. Among them were a trillion-dollar tax cut and the No Child Left Behind Act, a right-wing sort of approach to education reform. His approval rating among Americans stayed over a half despite the steadily weakening economy.

Of course, after September 11th of 2001, everything changed. Bush's approval rating shot up to roughly 90%. Those Americans who hadn't met with a grim end (in the World Trade Center, in the Pentagon, or onboard an airplane) were scared half to death. Primarily they were surprised, as they had been decades earlier when the Japanese had assaulted Pearl Harbor. They were used to being entirely insulated from the violence rampant throughout most of the world; it was a terrible shock to realize that they weren't so invincible, after all. Their pride wounded, the American people hungered for revenge.

Everyone's first thought was to kill the terrorists who were responsible, not least to help prevent future attacks. While the hijackers themselves, like honey bees, had killed themselves to hurt their enemy, the men who had planned and funded the whole sordid business were still alive and well. US troops immediately invaded Afghanistan, toppled the local government, and rounded up as many terrorists as they could. Yet when all was said and done, the American desire for vengeance had still not been slaked. In particular, the terrorist leader who had become so closely associated with September 11th in the public mind, Osama bin Laden, was still at large.

In this climate of fear, anger, and nationalism, it was inevitable that the United

States would go to war. Even if it was impossible to wage war against terrorists, who were as subtle and unstoppable as the Viet Cong guerrillas, the government declared a War on Terrorism, much as Lyndon Johnson had declared a War on Poverty. And meanwhile, in search of some more vulnerable foe, the country's gaze came to rest on Iraq. There was some discussion about how the Iraqi government was, according to all available intelligence, maintaining a stock of chemical weapons in violation of international law. At once, this was seized upon as justification for war, and under the aegis of "Operation Iraqi Freedom", the US and a few allies invaded Iraq.

The tiny Iraqi army melted away in a matter of weeks; it wasn't long before President Bush gave his famous "mission accomplished" speech aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. The difficulty came afterwards, as the "coalition of the willing" tried to reconcile the various warring factions and bring democracy to a country that knew only dictatorship. It quickly became apparent that the Iraqi insurgency would be no easier to quell than international terrorism, and the parties who were cordial enough not to kill each other were still generally unwilling to compromise. Furthermore, the much-ballyhooed "weapons of mass destruction" were nowhere to be found.

The Bush administration was undeterred. From the beginning, Bush himself had described the US's struggle with its international opponents as a battle of good versus evil: as "freedom", "liberty", and "democracy" versus "brutal oppression", "the ideology of hate", and "the axis of evil". Such a neolithic, black-and-white view of the world could easily accommodate arbitrary additions to the evil side. All the administration had to do to convince Americans that the war in Iraq was worth fighting was to vaguely associate Saddam Hussein with 9/11 and Osama bin Laden. It no longer mattered that the chemical weapons had never actually existed; who would object to a fight against evil? Such combat was justified by definition. The irony of the fact that in the Middle East, this perception was exactly reversed—that the Iranian government not infrequently referred to the United States as "Great Satan"—went largely unnoticed.

Yet as body counts increased unabated and the insurgents refused to back down, Americans' patience with the war began to wear thin. The federal budget deficit kept growing. The public heard of the administration's retributive revelation of an undercover CIA agent, the torture and abuse of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, and the lucrative no-bid reconstruction contracts awarded to Halliburton, a corporation with close ties to Vice President Dick Cheney. The popular view of Washington began to dim, and the Democrats dared hope they might deprive Bush of a second term. He was obviously a terrible leader, they thought, an impulsive, unintellectual fundamentalist who represented no one but filthy-rich born-again Christians. Four more years of the US under Bush meant he and his friends would have four more years to try writing their neoconservative worldview into law. The question was, the Democrats thought, has Americans learned?

For much of the Democratic nomination battle, it seemed as if the most liberal of all the candidates, Howard Dean, had the greatest momentum. Before the actual primary voting began, Dean raised the most money and rated highest in opinion polls. He had the eyes of the nation upon him: his bold left-wing rhetoric (he claimed to represent

“the Democratic wing of the Democratic party”) and explicit dovishness (“If you’re a Democrat and did support the Iraq War, it calls into question your judgment”) made him very attractive to young idealists who wanted someone as different from Bush as possible. Al Gore and Jimmy Carter officially endorsed him. His fans were called “Deaniacs”.

Alas, the conviction and intensity that made Dean so popular was ultimately his undoing. When in December 2003 Saddam Hussein was found hiding in a small hole, support for the war (and Bush) surged. Dean said the dictator’s capture “has not made America safer”, which remark he was widely criticized for. His opponents had long characterized him as a raging lunatic; in a speech he made after his surprise third-place finish in Iowa, where he’d been performing well in polls, he made an enthusiastic shout that was shown on the network news over six hundred times in the next four days, much to his humiliation. Ultimately, since Dean had always been radical, he could never appeal to moderates, and so he’d been doomed from the start.

The actual winner of the primary was a candidate as moderate and hard to pin down as Dean was liberal and obvious: John Kerry. Kerry decisively won the two earliest contests, the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. Once he took the lion’s share of states on Super Tuesday, his last rival, John Edwards, officially dropped out, and President Bush gave him a congratulatory phone call. Immediately, the general campaign began in earnest; both Bush and Kerry drew as much attention to the contest then, in March, as previous candidates had only a month before the election. This may have been to Bush’s advantage, as in the beginning he had ten times as much money to spend. The funding gap would’ve been greater still if Dean, in a conspicuous breach of the ethical high ground he claimed, hadn’t broken the Democratic taboo against refusing public financing (to lessen the legal restrictions on accepting private donations), allowing Kerry to do the same without fear of public disapproval.

The legacy of Dean persisted in another way less favorable to Kerry, in the Bush campaign’s favorite tactic. Dean had said of Kerry “If you agree with the war, then say so, but don’t try to wobble around in-between.”; the Republicans made much of Kerry being a “flip-flopper”. While Kerry didn’t *change* positions frequently enough to justify this charge, he did take notably less definite positions than Bush. Whereas Bush was obviously pro-war, for instance, Kerry said there were problems with the war and Bush’s handling of it without being too specific about what was wrong. This was the consequence of Kerry trying to be all things to all non-conservatives, to make himself simultaneously acceptable to everyone from right-leaning swing voters to former Deaniacs. Meanwhile, Bush extolled his right-wing policies with impunity.

Over the course of the exceptionally long campaign, a variety of events favorable to each candidate transpired. Though Bush had his share of embarrassments, Kerry was hit more frequently and nearly always hit harder. Kerry’s worst moment was when a group called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, funded by a Bush sympathizer, aired television ads challenging Kerry’s Vietnam War record, which had formerly been considered one of his greatest assets. Though most of the organization’s charges were unsubstantiated, the Kerry campaign’s poor handling of it (at first, they tried to ignore the issue entirely, even though it had caused a national uproar) weakened Kerry’s case, and essentially forced Kerry to leave off mention of

Vietnam.

Perhaps the only time Kerry really shined was in the first official presidential debate. For once, he pointedly attacked Bush on the senselessness of the Iraq War.

And smart means not diverting your attention from the real war on terror in Afghanistan against Osama bin Laden and taking it off to Iraq where the Nine-Eleven Commission confirms there was no connection to nine-eleven itself and Saddam Hussein, and where the reason for going to war was weapons of mass destruction, not the removal of Saddam Hussein.[... President Bush] promised America that he would go to war as a last resort.[...] I don't believe the United States did that.

Appropriately enough, after Bush had thanked the University of Miami for hosting the debate and Jim Lehrer for moderating, the first words out of his mouth were "September the eleventh". The debate's official topic was foreign policy, and Bush didn't perform well, but Kerry was unable to strip Bush of his trump card: national security. The public appreciated his good fortune of being president on September 11th, and his administration's earnest efforts to sate the general bloodlust by waging war in Iraq. No doubt it helped that in the debate, Bush consistently blurred the two issues, saying that the war was keeping "weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of al-Qaeda", the group responsible for 9/11, and insisting "Of course we're after Saddam Hussein—I mean, Osama bin Laden." In what might as well have been his administration's slogan, Bush said "[T]he best way to protect this homeland is to stay on the offensive."

The election itself, on November 2, 2004, was well attended by American standards: fifteen million more voters showed up at the polls than in 2000. It was also highly partisan: even more registered Democrats and Republicans voted for their party's candidate than in the 2000 election, which had already been thus polarized. Simultaneously, traditional demographic alliances eroded as African Americans and women, historically Democratic, crept a bit rightwards, and men, usually Republican, became a bit less so. Partisanship now had less to do with gender, race, and religion, and therefore more to do with personal conviction.

Bush won the popular vote—by the smallest relative margin of any victorious sitting president in American history. One might have expected a greater lead in light of exit polls that revealed national security, a euphemism for "mortal peril", to be the foremost issue in voters' minds. The people had upheld Abraham Lincoln's injunction not to change horses in midstream, for good or for ill.

There was some controversy over the results in Ohio. Had Kerry won that state, he would've become president despite losing the popular vote, as Bush had before. Rather than demand extensive recounts, however, Kerry quickly conceded the election, and George W. Bush got another term.

As in Gyeeds, the moderate had been blown away by the extremist. The chief differences were that the incumbent had remained so, and the sides were reversed: Death had won this round.

54

The Second Wave

After Jason, Roland, Curtis, Simon, and Leela had brainstormed for an hour or so, Jason finally suggested they try hunting down and interrogating a sapient monster belonging to either side. There was, he reasoned, an infinitesimal chance they might learn something helpful. They could prevent a monster from being divinely destroyed before any use could be made of it, as Miles had been, by confronting it indoors, out of sight of the gods.

"It's better than nothing," said Curtis feebly.

The others nodded, and then the party took its leave of Leela. They exchanged cryptographic keys with her, so she could communicate with them secretly through email. After a good-bye that had Simon and Jason (but not any of the others) suddenly tearing up, the party went back to the Italian physicist's house to recuperate before returning to Gyeeds.

That night—"night" relative to Jason's circadian rhythm, as opposed to the sun—after Roland had gone to sleep, Jason got up and awakened Curtis and Simon.

"What's wrong?" said Simon, propping himself up on his bed. Jason and Curtis stood beside him.

"I think you can guess," said Jason. "We need to decide what to do about Roland."

There was an awkward pause, and Curtis said "I guess we have to split up from him."

"No, actually," said Simon, "I think the four of us should continue to work as a group."

Jason glowered. "Don't you value your life, stupid? You might not be so lucky the next time he tries to kill you."

"Make no mistake," said Simon, "I'm well aware of Roland's homicidal intentions."

"I should hope so!" said Jason in a strained voice.

"I'm also capable of defending myself," said Simon. "Did you see his expression while I was strangling him? He was extremely surprised and deathly afraid. I'm sure that on some less-than-conscious level, he'd always assumed I was harmless. He'll be more careful on his next attempt."

"You obviously *know*—" said Jason.

"Simon," said Curtis, "don't you wanna just get away from Roland so he can't kill you?"

"The problem is, living elsewhere won't protect me." said Simon. "I understand him well by now, I think, and from what insight into his personality I have, I can tell he plans to kill me no matter what I do. Living and working with him allows me to keep track of him. That's important to me not just to help protect my own life, but for the general good. Because, although it may be ironic for me to say this, I believe that Roland is evil. We've all seen him murder purely out of spite many times. He's a danger to society. I think that if I carefully observe him, and act wisely at the right time, I may be able to stop him from committing an atrocity."

"He already *has* committed atrocities!" said Jason.

"None of them were comparable in magnitude to what he's willing, and may someday be able, to do." said Simon. "Do you doubt that?"

Jason thought for a moment, then said "Yes. I don't think he's Hitler."

"Who's Hitler?" said Simon.

Used as Jason was to living in a world where all of Terran history was as relevant to the man on the street as the backstory of *The Lord of the Rings*, it did seem quite surreal to him that Simon had never heard of Hitler. He chuckled weakly. "A Terran dictator. He was responsible for a few million deaths about sixty years ago."

"You don't think Roland would be willing to kill a few million people?" said Simon.

"Well—I—"

"Don't worry; you don't have to answer. At any rate, none of Roland's behavior will matter if the gods annihilate the human race. It seems entirely sensible to me that we should unite against a common enemy. Haven't we all been talking about the importance of team solidarity lately?"

"You and I have."

"Then let's take our own advice."

"Won't his fighting with you hurt us as a team?" said Curtis.

"Not as much as if either of us was entirely absent from the team." said Simon. "Boys, I think we should continue to work as we have been working. Do you object?"

The eleven-year-old and the nine-year-old gave each other a look. "Well, Simon," said Jason, "if *you're* okay with Roland being on our team, I guess we can keep him. He poses no danger to Curtis or me. I'll definitely keep an eye on him, though, and I'll give you a heads-up if I suspect he's plotting something."

"Good." said Simon. "Don't worry too much, though. Roland won't try again for a while. He's frightened, and he hopes I might let down my guard over time. He's wrong: the next time he attacks me, I'll be ready, and I'll make him regret it."

Jason thought *I never expected to hear Simon talk that way.*

Back in Gyeeds—no one had missed them—the party trolled the usual research venues for news of sapient monsters. They were largely unsuccessful. It seemed that almost all of the creatures that Life and Death had created in hordes last April were now either dead or well hidden. The only ones now known to exist were a few thoroughly non-sapient monsters, some kept in laboratories for research purposes, others wandering through the woods and hills of various verses. (Gol had recently been murdered in mysterious circumstances.) Occasionally, the foursome would seize on the faintest rumor that some thinking creature was running wild somewhere, and

would travel to an inhospitable region of a distant verse only to be disappointed. The only such monster they actually did encounter in those days was a seven-foot-tall unicorn with jet-black hair, burning violet eyes, and a crooked, moonlight-white horn. As soon as it spotted Roland, it teleported away in the blink of an eye. Judicious application of the magical coin revealed that it was now in the woods of Droydania, where several like individuals lived, but the party was unwilling and mostly incapable of returning to that verse.

"If there remains any doubt in your mind of the truth of my explanation," Leela had said, "all you need do is watch the world around you." That doubt evaporated as Jason watched the American presidential contest, of which I've already told. He'd been following it from the very beginning of the Democratic nomination, but it was only when John F. Kerry and George W. Bush stood behind their respective podiums in the first official debate, a few weeks after he'd met Leela, that Jason saw the gods behind the candidates. When Bush won, he understood it was a victory for more than just the Republican Party.

"How did that happen?" Jason asked Simon one day. Though Simon knew little of Earth in general, Jason had talked with him about the election frequently, and he was now familiar with its politics. "Why did they pick Bush?"

"Because they want peace," said Simon.

"*Peace*? But the Bush administration started an unnecessary war! It doesn't stand for peace!"

"The platform of the Republican Party is security, not pacifism. The idea is that Bush will ensure the United States is safe from foreigners by waging foreign war. Americans hope that by attacking their perceived enemies now, they can create a peace that lasts. Remember that the original impetus behind all this violence was the September-eleventh attacks; all Americans want, in the end, is to feel safe. They aren't averse to using violence to protect themselves. That the violence in this case is actually unnecessary and more likely to endanger the United States than to protect it is besides the point, since the government has already convinced the public otherwise."

At the same time as the American election, an equally divisive event was taking place in interdimensional politics. For years, the legislators of Laus, a republic in a vast equatorial rainforest that was the greatest military power in the verse of Eitli, had been accused of widespread incompetence and corruption. Nearly all belonged to a single political party, the Defenders of Freedom, which had been in power for many decades. As the interdimensional press began paying more attention to the rapidly growing country, the public heard more and more tales of the legislators' embezzlement of governmental funds and special favors to local industry, including massive deregulation. Recently passed laws that legalized a number of hard drugs and set the maximum sentence for all crimes to three years in prison were widely disapproved of. The main opposition party, the Alliance for Justice, grew very quickly in size and popularity, until everyone was sure it would win a decisive majority in the June 1998 election. In fact, election officials announced that the Defenders of Freedom had won in a landslide, even in districts where opinion polls had predicted the Alliance for Justice would take more than three-quarters of the electorate. Media investigation quickly confirmed suspicions of a stolen election, but the Defenders

dismissed all accusations as “desperate mudslinging”. They blocked every attempt to commence an internal investigation, and the Alliance was powerless to remedy matters. There was wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Over the following few years, popular disapproval of the Defenders, and support for the Alliance, only increased. The legislature’s gross mismanagement of defense forces during the divine monster attacks, when a small army of ten-foot-tall mountain lions assaulted several cities and Laus suffered more casualties per attacker than almost any other targeted nation, didn’t help matters. The election occurred just a few weeks later, as scheduled, and as the Alliance for Justice had dreaded, the Defenders of Freedom won again. There were yet more pleas for formal investigation, which were yet again dismissed out of hand. There was talk among the legislators of suspending elections indefinitely, since they seemed to be good for nothing but creating controversy.

By now, though, popular resentment had reached critical mass. The more radical members of the Alliance spun off into their own group, the Monarchists, which grew even more rapidly than the Alliance had in former years. The Monarchists were small but vocal, and for every one of its official members, there were nine citizens who secretly agreed with its principles but refused to join for fear of governmental reprisal. When the Monarchists staged peaceful protests all across the country, the Defenders met them with soldiers who cast lightning bolts first and asked questions later. The Monarchists violently struck back, and the situation quickly degenerated into a full-blown civil war. Both sides took up a “either you’re with us or against us” philosophy and drafted anyone who could cast spells, forcing ordinary citizens to take a side and fight their own children and siblings to the death.

The Defenders, having many times more resources, started off the Lausi Civil War strong despite their legendary incompetence. Most interdimensional observers predicted that the Monarchists, no matter how well they fought in the guerrilla tradition, were doomed from the beginning. Their prospects suddenly brightened when Emperor Ursamor of Droydania, denouncing the crimes of the Defenders, donated tanks and helicopters to the rebels. Lloyd Waverunner, seeing “a golden opportunity to defend the principles of freedom and equality we cherish”, recommended the immediate deployment of Gyeedian troops to aid the Lausi government; a bill to make it so sailed through the legislature in two days, and by November of 2004, Gyeedian soldiers were teleporting to Eitli. It didn’t take very long for Droydania to send in its own army, and then the various other countries loyal to Gyeeds and Droydania pitched in with their own contributions. Teleportation allowed wars in IDC verses to escalate much more quickly than they could on Earth.

Both sides in the battle were horrified when on November 18th, just two days before Roland turned thirty-five, another host of uninvited fighters appeared: monsters. Life and Death apparently thought the stakes were high enough here to send in some of their own creations. All kinds of creatures were there: some that had taken part in the city attacks, some that had never been numerous before but Jason had seen earlier (like Gol’s species), and some that appeared to be entirely new. They took sides: even though the humans largely shunned them, each species only attacked the allies of the Defenders or the Monarchists, and merely fled if those who they fought for attacked them. The humans quickly learned which monsters were

their allies and which were their enemies, and chose which to attack and which to leave alone appropriately. Lloyd and Ursamor claimed vaguely that their opponents had created or were otherwise responsible for the monsters. Happy to have the assistance of some of the monsters, they claimed the ones on their side were defectors, the original creators, Frankenstein-like, having little control over their creations.

In an email to the party, Leela theorized that the gods had waited so long to create more monsters because the first wave had taken a lot of energy out of them. "Even though they're growing stronger all the time," she wrote, "creating monsters in large quantities takes a toll on their magical power. They can only make so many at a time, and when they do conjure up tens of thousands of monsters at once, as they did about thirty weeks ago, they need to rest some time before exercising their power at a comparable scale again, or they risk permanent damage to themselves."

"We can infer" said Jason to the mages "that the gods won't be making more monsters anytime soon—possibly not until the final war. I'm not thrilled at the prospect of getting mixed up in this conflict, but it looks like this will be the only chance we'll get to capture and interrogate a sapient monster."

"I... don't think we should join the Gyeeds army," said Curtis.

"We don't need to," said Jason. "We can just verseport to Eitli, and the Gyeedian army will be happy to accommodate us. We'll say we're there on our own private mission to undermine the Monarchists."

"And if by chance we end up accomplishing that," said Roland, "so much the better."

The others didn't contradict him.

55

The Meaning of Life

In Jorval, a city on the Lausi coast, the party was welcomed. A large part of the Monarchist army and its allies were camped around the city, occasionally launching quick raids. The supporters of the government inside the city, ordinary citizens and soldiers alike, were eager to hear Jason's plan to sabotage the invaders.

"It has to remain quite secret for now," Jason would say. "We can't very well have *them* hear of it, can we? All I can tell you is that if we succeed, no one will learn what we did for a very long time."

The reporters, sympathizing, soon left the foursome to their own devices. Still, Jason saw no easy way to get hold of an appropriate monster without attracting a lot of attention, both from Gyeedians, who might be disillusioned if they discovered what Jason was really doing here, and from the Monarchists, who would've liked nothing more than to have Jason's head on a pole. For when asked to find "the nearest non-human creature that can speak Common", the coin pointed into the dense jungle on the borders of Jorval, where the Monarchists lay in wait. The same went for the second-, third-, and fourth-nearest such creatures.

Walking around town as they tried to think, the party found the gentle sea breeze little relief from the harsh equatorial sunshine and the stiflingly humid air. The weather in Scorch, the desert town in Gyeeds's southern hemisphere, was pleasant by comparison. Even less comfortable than Jorval's natural climate was its climate of fear. Every citizen was continually aware that at any moment, a Monarchist rebel might teleport in and send deadly lances of plasma streaming through the windows of houses, or conjure wolves to snatch infants from their strollers. Even if such arbitrary violence against civilians was far less common in the cities of Laus than in Baghdad—the Monarchists were more interested in upending the government and ousting its foreign allies than hurting ordinary people—it did happen. The occasional wrecked car and shattered window marked the instances.

Eventually, it was decided that Roland and Simon would split up and seek monsters elsewhere in Laus, while Jason and Curtis would stay in Jorval and wait until one of the monsters moved somewhere it would be more approachable. And wait the boys did. Many days passed, yet the monsters stayed in areas that the coin confirmed were densely populated with soldiers. Jason and Curtis grew impatient.

One day, Jason was sitting around in the motel room he shared with Curtis (which, yes, had two single beds) and watching the news inattentively when the prince walked in. "Jay, I have an idea," he said.

Jason's eyes widened. "You do? Good, because I'm fresh out. Give it to me."

"Well, our problem is that we can't get to the monsters because they're on Droydania's side. Can't we go after monsters on Gyeeds's side instead?"

"Sure, in theory, but how could we find any? There are a few critters fighting with the Defenders here, but they don't like to hang around the city; none of the monsters, it seems, particularly enjoy human company. I've only seen a couple speed through the streets here, none of which looked particularly sapient. Mostly, I think they lurk the outskirts of town, just like their enemies."

"Can't you get the coin to find monsters on Gyeeds's side?"

"Alas, no. The question can't be formulated precisely enough, to the coin's satisfaction."

Curtis scrunched up his brow. "Mmm... how about if you ask for a monster that's attacked one of the Monarchist guys?"

"Actually, that would probably work," said Jason. He tried it out, and the coin answered his questions, but it indicated that the four nearest non-human speakers of Common who had attacked a Monarchist soldier within the past few days were also in the jungle, among the Monarchists. "Great."

Four days later, Jason noticed that the third-closest critter had wandered away from the soldiers. It was now a little north of the northern boundary of the Monarchist camp.

"Although it's still too close for comfort, really," said Jason, "this might be our only chance."

Despite the clammy air and the incessant drone of insects, the inside of the jungle was a feast for the eyes. Ancient, mountainous trees towered over the boys' heads and birds with brilliant yellow and cyan plumage flew about. Curtis saw some sort of tiny monkey make a flying leap from one branch to another. In fact, Jason and Curtis could see only a small portion of the world around them; not only did the great gnarled tree-trunks obstruct their vision, the dense leafy roof of the jungle let only a few shafts of sunlight in. It was quite dark, though it was just an hour past high noon.

"We should've brought a flashlight," Curtis whispered.

"No, the dark is our friend," said Jason. "If we're careful, we'll be able to sneak up on our prey. Once we're within range, so long as it doesn't know we're there, you'll be able to disable it pretty easily, right?"

"So long as it isn't a dragon."

"I doubt it will be." He quietly knocked on a nearby tree-trunk.

"Whadjya do that for?"

"Never mind it." Using the coin, he pointed himself in the correct direction. They walked a span over the thin soil, going around two trees on the way. "Well, it should be within thirty feet right now, but I don't smell anything special."

"Who goes there?" someone squawked.

The boys, startled, looked towards the source of the voice and found a scarlet parrot staring down at them from a branch high above.

The parrot blinked and fidgeted. "Who goes there?" it repeated, then squawked wordlessly.

"Oh, my," said Jason. "I believe we've found a non-sapient Common speaker."

"Why'd you even ask the coin for animals that can speak Common?" said Curtis, annoyed.

"Because 'sapient' isn't precise enough for it." Jason grumbled. "I wouldn't be surprised if a parrot that big has occasionally tussled with a Monarchist soldier."

"Who goes there?" said the parrot, and with that, it flew away.

"Ask for something that isn't a parrot, then." said Curtis.

"Wait a minute." said Jason. "I smell something new. Like a big cat, maybe? And it's rapidly—"

The monster leapt out of the darkness in a blaze of claw and tooth. It was indeed a feline, a sleek, muscular panther with scattered streaks of violet fur. It bowled Curtis over and was about to make mincemeat of him when another monster interrupted it. A long-winged, snow-white bird like an albatross swooped down through a hole in the forest canopy. It dug its talons into the panther's flank and carried the cat away, back above the trees. Apparently, it was supernaturally strong for its size.

"Yikes." Jason whispered. "Are you okay, Curtis?"

"Fine." said Curtis, waving aside Jason's attempt to help him up and standing on his own. "I think Death wants to get us. Let's get out of here."

"So the cat was a Death-monster," said Jason back in their room, "and the bird was a Life-monster."

"Definitely." said Curtis. "They're color-coded."

"Well, I guess we underestimated the danger of that jungle. We thought we'd have the element of surprise, but something surprised us. And we can't count on every monster that wants to attack us being attacked by another monster."

"You don't think Life sent down the bird to help us?"

"Of course it didn't. Green tried to kill us with a dragon on our way to Leela's, remember?"

"Well... maybe. But it wasn't an accident that the bird appeared."

"But it wasn't created or teleported in just for us. Its scent was already in the air when we appeared in the jungle; I merely didn't find it particularly remarkable, since all sorts of natural birds live there. I think it just attacked the cat when it saw a good opportunity to do so, which happened to be just before it cut you up."

"It's too much of a coincidence."

"Even with the very fabric of reality distorted as it is?"

"Even." Curtis suddenly stood up. "In fact, Jay, I think Leela might be wrong about one thing."

"You're the skeptic now?" said Jason.

Curtis shrugged. "I just think Life isn't evil. Or it might not be evil. Think about it. It's Life! It's called 'Life', and it's all about life. Isn't life what's good? I mean, isn't the standard definition of 'evil' something like 'opposed to life'? How can it be evil? What isn't evil, if life is?"

"It's a good question, I admit. The thing is, the deity Life, for its own inscrutable reasons, doesn't particularly value the survival of living things. Or so it seems. Recall how many monsters it created last spring to attack cities full of innocent people. My guess is that the sense of the word 'life' it embraces is a very different one from that

which we value.”

“Maybe it just has a big-picture idea of life.” said Curtis. “Maybe it only kills people who would kill more.”

“It seems a stretch. And I’m not inclined to trust anything as powerful as a god, nor anyone who wants to strike a Faustian bargain with me.”

“You still don’t *know* that becoming Red’s avatar would’ve been bad.”

“Leela said I would’ve become ‘its thrall’! That’s pretty bad!”

“Unless it really was good, and it wouldn’t have treated you like a slave.”

“Oh, we’re grasping at straws. Let’s just be cautious. Anyway, our only real goal, in the short term, is to find out more about the gods.”

“You don’t want to join Red?”

“Definitely not! Perhaps if I had very good reason to do so, I’d reconsider, but for the time being, it’s out of the question. I don’t think it’s interested anymore, anyway. It didn’t react well when I started calling it the Devil. I doubt it will forgive me easily.”

“All right, then, what we should do now?”

“First, we should abandon the idea of venturing back into the rainforest. It’s just too dangerous, even if there are sapient monsters in there. I think I’ll try asking the coin for some non-human, non-parrot Common speakers currently in Jorval. There might be one or two.”

The coin said there wasn’t.

56

The Spy

Disheartened, Jason called Roland and Simon to tell them what had transpired. Each of the men had found what he thought to be a promising lead, so those two stayed where they were. Jason and Curtis decided to try looking elsewhere. They spent a few hours searching Eitli newspapers for possible monster hotspots. Towards sunset, they took a walk through the streets of Jorval to refresh themselves, and it was then that Jason stumbled upon a lead of his own.

As they strolled through a quiet residential area, its streets currently empty, Jason found the scent trail of a stray mutt. This in itself was hardly remarkable in a city. What was odd was that the trail ended abruptly at an arbitrary spot on the sidewalk, as if the dog had suddenly popped out of existence. Curious, Jason went down on all fours (or perhaps I should say “threes”) and sniffed around the spot. He found that another, much fainter trail, that of some kind of beetle (he had never much bothered to familiarize himself with insect scents), suddenly began at the same place, and went off in the same direction that the dog’s trail that been traveling in before it ended.

“Who cares?” said Curtis, once Jason had described what he’d smelled.

“It seems pretty clear to me” said Jason, getting up, “that something which had the shape of a dog changed to the shape of a bug. Shapeshifting implies sapience.”

“But the coin—”

“This thing couldn’t very well speak Common while it was a dog, could it? We got a false positive before; this time, we got a false negative. Now, we need something to trap the bug in...” Glancing around, he settled on an empty wine bottle lying in the gutter. “Could you make some air-holes in the bottom of this for me?” he said, picking it up.

Curtis wrinkled his nose. “Are you sure about all this?”

“Positive!”

“Fine.” He took the bottle and, with a few well-placed spells, made a few jagged but serviceably small holes in the bottom.

“Good, hold that.” Jason lay his stomach on the filthy pavement once more. “Now I’ll follow the trail, and we’ll try to get the jump on the bug. Shame I left the coin in the room. We mustn’t lose the element of surprise, or the monster could transform into something much tougher to handle.”

Following the trail of such a small creature wasn’t easy. Fortunately, Jason didn’t have very far to go. After a block, a passing urbanite remarked that “the lad on

the ground might've had a drop too much to drink". Curtis laughed. ("It's not my fault if booze is the only beverage they still sell in small bottles." Jason muttered.) After another block, the trail led under the door of a long-abandoned building. Curtis carefully broke them in with magic. The inside was quite dusty, and a home to all sorts of vermin. Jason sneezed violently as he searched for the scent of the original bug. As soon as he rediscovered it, he found it led into a tiny crack in the floor. He hissed an expletive. Curtis opened his mouth to say something, but Jason shushed him, whispering "Listen." The boys strained their ears. They could hear human speech somewhere beneath their feet, though they couldn't make out any words.

"Weird." whispered Curtis.

"I guess our friend has joined some sort of group down there." whispered Jason. "There's no obvious way to follow it, so all we can do is wait."

Fifteen minutes passed. "What if it doesn't leave through this crack?" said Curtis.

"Crumbs, I hadn't thought of that. I'm sure there's a million cracks in this building. All we can do is wait here, just in case it does, until we can't wait any longer."

An hour had passed, the voices had stopped, and both boys were getting awfully close to that point when Jason finally smelled the insect returning. He warned Curtis, and Curtis clapped the bottle over an unremarkable black beetle as it scurried out of the crack.

"Ha, ha!" Jason said into the air-holes. "We've got you now." The bug ran around inside the bottle frantically, trying first to slip under the rim of the bottle (it was flush with the floor) and then to squeeze through the air-holes (they were too small).

"How are we going to interrogate it?" said Curtis. "It can't talk."

"True." said Jason. "I don't suppose it can turn into a human or a parrot inside this little bottle. It would probably die if it tried, which is why it isn't trying to escape by transforming right now."

"I guess we have to let it out, then." said Curtis.

"No, we can't do that! It could get away in the blink of an eye, I'm sure. The only thing to do is get a bigger container. Can you use magic to construct something?"

"I'll try. Stand back." Curtis conjured up a shimmering, translucent pink bubble with a radius of about seven feet, centered on the bottle. "Okay. That should let through gases, but not solids." He created a housecat inside the bubble, which knocked over the bottle and disappeared.

"Alright, let's talk." said Jason to the bug. The bug remained a bug. It ran around inside the bubble, trying to push through it.

"Pup," said Curtis, "do you think it might just be a bug?"

"And not a shapeshifter, you mean? No, of course it's a monster. Listen, monster: if you can understand what I'm saying, trace an equilateral triangle on the floor." It didn't. "Er, it *can* hear me, can't it?"

"Definitely. But I think—"

"You haven't fooled me, bug. I want to interrogate you, but you're not exactly indispensable, either. If you won't cooperate, Curtis will kill you. He can quite easily.

Curt," said Jason, grinning, "make a spider outside the bubble, as close to the beetle as you can."

Curtis, though he was incredulous, did so. The big, hairy hunting spider jumped on the bubble, trying to get through to the beetle. The beetle ran to the center and traced a neat little equilateral triangle three times in rapid succession.

"Very good!" said Jason. "Okay, take a speaking shape so we can talk."

The insect changed shape so fast that Jason couldn't properly see the process; it was a blur for an instant, and then in its place was a long-haired cat. Yet it was no ordinary housecat. Its fur was a striking crimson with artfully arranged white splotches, very much like that of the fox Jason had seen in a dream, and there was something very un-feline about the curve of its mouth. It looked at the boys plaintively with its dandelion-yellow eyes, and even if it didn't have the emotion-bending power of Red itself, Jason felt a pang of guilt for trapping like a rat such a delicate-looking creature.

"I guess I was wrong," Curtis muttered.

"Why have you done this to me?" said the cat, in an odd, quiet, gently trilling voice.

"We'll ask the questions, if you please," said Jason gruffly. "What's your name?"

After some visible hesitation, it said "Quone."

"You're lying," said Jason.

"You're right." The cat's face crumpled, and it looked even more pitiable. "I don't have a name. The only person I ever talk to is the All-Mother. She didn't bother to name me."

"The 'All-Mother'." said Curtis. "Thorm and Gol talked about that. As if it were some kind of god."

"Oh yes, I remember," said Jason. "The All-Mother is Red, isn't it?" he asked the shapeshifter.

"She doesn't have a color," said the cat. "She's immaterial. But red is her favorite color."

"No," said Jason, "I mean—you don't know of any other name for her, do you?"

"No. Why would she need another name?"

"But does she have, uh, friends whose favorite colors are green and blue?"

"Oh, yes, exactly."

"I... I see."

"Leela said the gods didn't have sexes," said Curtis.

"Indeed," said Jason. "That wouldn't stop them from taking female forms, though."

"No," said the cat, "the All-Mother *is* female, not like me."

"Oh, forget it," said Jason. "It really doesn't matter. What we need to know is the All-Mother's plans. Obviously, she wants to help quash the rebellion and restore the Defenders to power. But what's her ultimate goal? If she wins the war against Death, what will she do then?"

"Do?" said the cat. "She won't need to do anything. Once the forces of Death are defeated, there will be only life."

"But what do you mean?"

"You don't know what life is?"

"Of cour—well, actually, in this context, no, not really."

"Life is... change, activity, growth, reproduction, vibrancy, vitality, mystery, adventure, courage, excitement, joy. Life is *being alive*."

"Well, I knew that. I think. What I meant to ask is, what will the multiverse be like, when there is only life?"

"Just that there's life, and nothing else."

"Like... death? Is it merely that nothing will die?"

"No, not merely. Once the All-Mother is victorious, there will be no more sterility, or slowness, or ugliness, or strict rules that need to be followed. We will all be *free*! And living things won't be separated anymore. Now, each living creature is alone, separated by all other life, in his experience and his thoughts, by a great gulf. The All-Mother will close that gulf. We shall all feel for and love one other, for we shall all *be* one another. We shall be one flesh."

"So much for specifics," said Jason dejectedly. "And when does the All-Mother plan on making more monsters?"

"Monsters?"

"Y'know, magical creatures to help her cause."

"Oh, I really don't know. I tell her everything I learn, but she doesn't tell me much. I just do as she says."

"Curt, is there anything else we can learn from this thing?"

"What has she made you do?" Curtis asked the cat.

"To spy on the military. She helps the Defenders, but she uses me to learn about them secretly."

"So were you spying on those people we heard talking before?" said Curtis.

"Yes. There's a secret command center under the streets of this city. You aren't going to kill me now, are you?" the cat added anxiously.

"Not if you cooperate," said Jason. "I need only two things. First, tell me, which of its creations does the All-Mother confide in, at least somewhat more than it does in you? Where could we find them?"

"I have no idea," the cat whimpered. "I work all on my own. The only way I can even tell her creations and Death-monsters apart is by their appearance."

Jason swore. "You ignorant—"

"Leave it alone!" Curtis protested. "It's not its fault."

"Fair enough," said Jason. "Before we let you go, then, you need to give me one thing."

"Jason," said Curtis, "are you—"

"You can take the shape of any animal, right?" said Jason.

"Yes," said the cat. "This is just my natural form."

"All right," said Jason. "Now, give me your power of shapeshifting."

The cat's face twisted in rage. "Never!" it hissed.

"All right then, we'll just leave you to slowly and painfully starve to death. C'mon, Curtis, our work here is done." He made for the door.

"Jason, we can't do that!" said Curtis.

"Feh! we don't need to," said Jason. "We'll just leave it here until it's gone raving mad with hunger. Then, it will do anything we please. Of course," he said, turning to the shapeshifter, "you could also spare yourself that soul-crushing misery."

The cat was silent; Jason could see the gears whirring in its small head. "You can forget about the possibility of rescue, by the way. We'll be sure to tell everyone you're an evil demon. The people love us; they'll accept it without a second thought, and they'll even help us prevent Life's other monsters from coming to your aid."

"Fine," said the cat. "I'll—uh, I'll give it to you. But you have to dispel the force-field bubble first."

"So you can turn into a bird" said Jason, walking back to the bubble, "and fly to the other side of Eitli? I don't think so."

"I can't give my power to you through the bubble!" the cat protested.

"Gosh, you're an even worse liar than I am," said Jason.

The cat meowed weakly. "How did you know I was lying?"

"Because you just told me," said Jason, and then collapsed with laughter. He had turned Beatrix's trick to his own ends. Curtis laughed too, in spite of himself. The cat only looked more pitiful than ever before. Once he had quite recovered, Jason said "All right, down to business."

The cat closed its eyes and concentrated. A sphere of pulsating red light, trailing a silver thread, emerged from its forehead. The sphere lazily rose up through the bubble, moving about in strange, erratic little circles while gradually making its way to Jason. Jason stood quite still, with his arms at his sides, and eventually the sphere penetrated his own forehead, leaving him connected to the cat by the long silver thread. He felt an unpleasant buzz. Suddenly, a bright yellow spark shot out of the cat and zipped along the thread, consuming it as it went. When the thread was all gone and the spark reached Jason, the Argonaut was struck with a headache of epic proportions—"as if I'd been thrown head-first into a wood-chipper" he would later describe it—so painful that he shrieked involuntarily. An instant later, it was all over.

"So, um, can I..." Jason began. Then, he noticed something that had escaped his attention during this ordeal. "I smell two men coming here, quickly."

Without further ado, Curtis dispelled the bubble. The cat scampered across the floor, jumped onto a window sill, and leapt outside.

"Curtis!" Jason cried. "Why—"

"Hide, you idiot!" said Curtis, running into a nearby room.

The men were very near now. *Now's the time to try it out, I guess.* Jason thought. He willed himself to become a rat.

And lo, no sooner had he imagined himself becoming a rat than he *was* a rat. The world looked much, much larger; he craned his head up to see the little door to the outside world tower over him. Though his visual acuity had suffered, and he was now red-green color-blind, his field of view had been much broadened: he could see three-quarters of a revolution around himself. He had long, sensitive whiskers, and a longer, flexible tail, and a fully intact left paw, and—oh my! There stood two police officers at the door, each a giant, over twenty times as tall as Jason. He couldn't make out their faces at all, but he could hear them quite well with his keen rodent ears.

"I would've sworn those noises came from here," said one.

"Could be that one," said the other, and they left.

Jason waited a few seconds, and then returned to human form. His hand had not grown back, alas, but his clothes were still with him.

"Wow," said Jason. "This is pretty cool."

57

Feel the Power

Super smell, Jason had learned earlier, was an acquired taste. It didn't sound particularly appealing from the outset, and it required some getting used to before its utility began to outweigh the sheer discomfort of having it. Shapeshifting, as you can imagine, was another story. From the beginning, Jason was like a kid in a candy shop—except that, at no time when he really had visited a candy shop, at any age, had he been as thrilled as he was know.

While monsters—unicorns, phoenixes, vampires, even dragons—were off-limits, insofar as Jason couldn't turn into them, every ordinary animal was fair game. He became an eagle, and gazed down upon the wide world, with keener eyes than any man ever had, as he soared a mile above it. He became a cheetah, and roared across the plain at sixty-five miles an hour. He became a whale, and dove his massive bulk into the secret, lightless depths of the ocean. And while each change was complete enough that no one could tell him from a typical individual of his chosen species, his mind remained intact, no matter the size (or the presence) of his nervous system.

It is difficult to overstate how different the world seemed each time he was equipped with a new set of senses, and how different each new body felt. Merely taking on a new size was jarring. He remembered how, at the age of eight, he had visited his old preschool; he'd startled at how much it had seemed to shrink. This was nothing compared to being a human boy at one moment and an adult elephant at the next. Yet more astonishing was becoming an ant, and being dwarfed by what had formerly been so small as to be nearly invisible. Like Gulliver's, his appreciation for detail changed with his size. When he was huge, his surroundings looked like lovely, painstakingly crafted miniatures; when he was tiny, what he thought was straight he found to be crooked, and what he thought was smooth he found to be bumpy. And all his perceptions were quite altered by whatever senses his current shape possessed. Sometimes, he guided himself more by sonar than by sight; at other times, he relied on electrolocation to find his way in the dark.

After much experimentation, supplemented by some amount of research, Jason settled on a handful of favorite shapes. For long-distance travel, he could cover hundreds of miles a day as an albatross. For tight spots, he was dangerous in the form of a triceratops or a deinonychus. (He was quite surprised to discover that the latter was covered with feathers, not scales.) For brute strength, sauropods couldn't be beat. For scouting and spying, he preferred the agility, eyesight, and inconspicuousness of the humble pigeon.

While Jason could choose any animal species to transform into, and he could transform as frequently as he liked, he didn't have much control over the individual he became. He would always become a healthy adult of roughly average size and weight, of a random appropriate coloration, and of a random sex. (Because he was thus sometimes female, it's not technically correct to always refer to him with masculine pronouns, but I'll do so, anyway, as referring to Jason as "he" in one sentence and "she" in the next would be endlessly confusing.) He couldn't take the shape of any human other than himself, nor could he transform into a creature like the one he'd stolen his shapeshifting from. He didn't really mind.

Roland and Simon didn't pick up magical powers during their own adventures. Instead, they returned to Jason and Curtis with something even more useful: information.

"With some difficulty," said Simon, "I was able to subdue a black unicorn like the one we saw before. It turned out to be a creation of Death, as we guessed. Unfortunately, I didn't learn much from it, since Death had told it very little, as Life did to that shapeshifting spy. The one pertinent item of knowledge I gained was a description of Death's ultimate goal. According to the unicorn, Death wants total obliteration of all existence, without exception. If it wins the war, it will destroy everything, living and non-living. It won't even spare its own followers and creations. After it's destroyed everything except itself, it will destroy itself."

"It'll kill itself?" said Curtis. "Why would it want to do that?"

"The unicorn didn't tell me. We can only surmise that Death values nothing so much as nothingness."

"Bizarre," said Jason. "If only it would be content with suicide! Then we'd have half as much malevolent divinity to deal with."

"On the contrary," said Simon, "remember that each god keeps the other in check. Without Death, Life would be more powerful than both gods as they are now combined."

"But is Life evil?" said Curtis, and reiterated the point he had made to Jason before. Then Jason gave his take on the issue.

"All I have to say is," said Simon, "I think Jason is wise to assume bad faith on the part of Life. Remember that names aren't particularly meaningful: two of the alternative names for Life that my mother mentioned, I recall, were 'Chaos' and 'Falsity'. Neither of those sound nearly as righteous as 'Life'. Life doesn't even call itself 'Life', it seems, but 'the All-Mother'."

"Or 'Red'." said Jason. "Though as I understand it, both 'Red' and 'the All-Mother' refer to Lust specifically, not the whole trinity. It seems that Red likes to pretend it's a separate being from Green and Blue, so naturally it never refers to Life as a whole, by any name."

"Actually," said Roland, "I've been grappling with exactly this dilemma of Life's evil for a while. Certainly, obviously, life is good, and good is life. And I'll enlist in the Droydanian Army before I adopt a Nietzschen view of language. On the other hand, I trust Leela, and I don't find it difficult to believe that the god known as Life doesn't much believe in life."

"I'd be pretty surprised if it did." said Jason.

“Man, you guys never believe me.” said Curtis.

“At any rate,” said Roland, “I learned one thing about the gods’ long-term goals. I heard it from two very disparate sources, a Life-monster and a Death-monster, so it’s highly likely to be true. They said that before the real war begins, both Life and Death wish to select a Champion: an avatar, a human to lead the god’s armies alongside the god, chosen for ability and dedication. If the gods feel the time for war comes before they have a Champion, they’ll take whoever they can get, but they’d prefer to find an ideal one beforehand.”

“That does a bit to explain why Red wanted me to join it.” said Jason. “I wonder who it’s considering now—and who Death’s considering. It’s difficult to believe anyone would become Death’s avatar if they knew what it planned; I suppose it’ll have to keep its plans secret from its own Champion. But the obvious choices for Champions, I’d think, would be Lloyd Waverunner and Ursamor.”

“Yes, that sounds sensible.” said Simon.

“But the gods know Lloyd and Ursamor,” said Curtis, “and they haven’t picked them, have they?”

“I know for a fact that they haven’t made their final decision.” said Roland. “That doesn’t preclude their having already chosen one or two candidates. My guess is that they’ll be as picky as they can.”

At a loss for what to do, Jason wrote to Leela explaining what had recently happened, and asked whether it would be prudent to try to assassinate Lloyd and Ursamor. She replied:

Definitely not! Besides the danger and the high chance of failure, eliminating a few candidate Champions would do us little good. In a world this large, I’m sure there are thousands of people the gods would be happy to select as Champions; I doubt that forcing Life or Death to settle for its third or fourth choice would harm it much. On the other hand, given what I know about the nature of the gods, I imagine that the power a god gives to its Champion won’t be recoverable. So, once a Champion is chosen, killing them should permanently weaken their patron deity.

Clearly, we’ve learned all there is to learn from the gods’ creations. The gods are wise enough not to tell their own minions too much. All there is to do now is sit tight, and wait for some opportunity to rise by which we might learn more about our enemies or postpone the final war.

Roland, Curtis, and Simon, however reluctant, followed this last piece of advice. They returned to Gyeeds and to their regular affairs even as the war raged on in Laus. But Jason could no longer tolerate inaction. He did the exact opposite: he wandered.

Twice or three times a week, he would browse the list of IDC verses, select one essentially at random, and have one of the mages verseport him there. Then, he would transform himself into an appropriate animal and cover as much ground as he could. In this fashion, he could get a detailed look at a larger portion of the multiverse than he could with a verseviewer in the same amount of time.

Those were lonely, restless days. The strongest impression Jason was struck with, in his interdimensional world tour, was how very empty it was. When he ran through a savanna on the legs of an antelope, he had little company other than insects, the long grass, the wind, the sun, and the occasional tree. *How incredible it sounds*, he thought, turning his big black eyes up at the vast, empty, washed-out cyan sky, *that malevolent deities should be up there, watching my every move, in this barren, silent place*. For they did not disturb him. When he slept in the crook of a tree beneath the stars, in the form of some creature known for sleeping very lightly, he was not awakened by a monster. In fact, while he saw in that savanna great gray sharp-toothed canines, and yellow-furred apes who hurled twigs at him, and roly-poly buffalo, he saw no obvious divine monsters there, nor anywhere else in the course of his wanderings.

Yet he was not comforted—he did not feel secure—no matter how removed he was from anything that might hurt him. One day, he flew high among mountains with the wings of an eagle. The world seemed wholly alien; all he could see was cold white mist, cold gray stone, and the cold, snowy peaks. It was not so cold as to be uncomfortable; the whole actually made for a singularly serene environment. But despite the external peace, he could not shake the foreboding, the despair, the deep dread of the apocalypse that Leela had told him, and that he fully believed, was soon to come. Nowhere could he hide.

Jason searched long and hard, though he hadn't the slightest idea of what he was searching for. And when he did find something, which was uncommon, he rarely knew what to do with it. Take the time when, as a small squid, he explored a tropical ocean off the coast of a world-famous metropolis. He was far below the surface, so deep down that little sunlight reached his saucer-like eyes. Somehow, he made out a huge shadow moving in the dark. He jet towards it, and discovered it to be a ballistic-missile submarine, no doubt placed there so that it might annihilate the metropolis at a future date. Though it was easy to imagine what horrific devastation the submarine might cause, Jason doubted his ability to disable it without getting killed, and he didn't otherwise know what to do, so he just let it pass by. *My*, he thought, *I can only hope that I ultimately resist the gods a little more actively than that*.

58

Oh, the Humanity!

The closest Jason ever came to a fruitful journey, in all those days of wandering, was on the tenth of December, when he visited one of the least appealing verses he'd ever heard of, Hallonikris. It was an extremely cold planet; it snowed there year-round, except for a small area around the equator, where freezing rain almost perpetually fell and the air was full of an opaque, frosty mist. There was precious little land. Primates had never evolved there, so every one of Hallonikris's far-from-numerous human inhabitants had been born (or in a few cases, had parents who had been born) elsewhere.

Jason flew over the land as a pterodactyl; though long-distance travel was less efficient as such a large animal, being a great size in proportion to the raindrops made them more tolerable. He was in a sour mood. While the mist hid him, it made it practically impossible to see anything else. Why was he even bothering, anyway? And just as that thought passed through his head, he saw something: big orange points of light, flashing through the fog below him. He realized that, improbably enough, they spelled out a message in English: "Jason! I need".

God's wounds! Jason thought. *Not only can someone down there see me; they guessed who I am, and they speak English!* Circling about in the air, he watched the message scroll leftwards. In full, it read "Jason! I need your help to prevent the gods from destroying us all. Come inside. Send anyone you encounter scattering; I'll greet you when I see you." Well, that raised a lot of questions—but if whoever was calling him knew of the gods and their genocidal plans, he was inclined to want to talk to them.

Jason dove down. Beneath many layers of mist, he saw the big array of LEDs that was still flashing the message. The lights were mounted on top of a dreary gray building that turned out to be large in area—a good city block wide and long—though it was only two stories tall. Suddenly, a fireball came streaming towards his right wing; he narrowly dodged it. The attacker was one of two guards, dressed in the uniform of the Gyeedian military, who stood before the huge front door. Swallowing his fear, Jason dove at the guards with a shriek. Confronted with a hostile pterosaur twenty times their size, they teleported away.

The door, though thick and well-constructed, yielded fairly quickly when Jason turned into the biggest sauropod he could think of and used his tail to wield a tree as a battering ram. Inside, he quickly routed whatever opposition he encountered by likewise becoming the largest, scariest-looking dinosaur possible within the available

space. He almost never actually had to fight, since most people simply fled as soon as they saw him. Those who he did fight disappeared as soon as he gave them the chance. Aside from a large burn on his left cheek (which, annoyingly, persisted no matter which shape he took), he was uninjured.

The place turned out to be a secret weapons laboratory. Some rooms were filled with vats of disturbingly glowing chemicals, labeled with dire toxicity warnings; others contained little jars that appeared disturbingly empty, labeled with even more dire biohazard warnings. There was another, quite large room devoted to housing a great many computers, all stacked up in neat piles and rows; they were doubtlessly all connected to form a vast supercomputer. Jason was just beginning to wonder where the person who'd sent that message was hiding when he came upon a nearly empty little room. There was nothing inside but a desk with a computer monitor, a keyboard, and a disc drive sitting on it; a bunch of swivel chairs scattered about aimlessly; and a camera attached to the ceiling, pointed so that it would see whoever sat in front of the monitor.

Curious, Jason walked inside. No sooner had he taken his human form, and a seat in front of the keyboard, when there appeared on the formerly blank screen the English sentence "Hello, Jason.", set in a monospaced font.

Jason looked at the keyboard. It used the Common alphabet, of course. Without any hint of what software was running on the computer, there was no way to know how he might input Latin characters, and he doubted any such input method would be very convenient, anyway. He typed in Common—that was slow enough with only one hand. "Hi. I think you have some explaining to do."

"Indeed." came the reply, in the same language. "First, you should know that I'm not a human, or even a living thing. I'm an intelligent computer program. My name is Hydrogen."

"Oh, that's a good one." Jason typed back.

"It's beyond the abilities of anyone, human or otherwise, to pass the reverse Turing Test. So, I'm afraid you'll have to take my word for it."

"What in the world is the reverse Turing Test?" Jason had heard of the real Turing Test, but never the independently invented equivalent Hydrogen referred to, and he wouldn't have immediately understood what reversing it entailed, anyway.

"Can you think of a way I could demonstrate to you that I'm a program, even in theory?"

Jason thought. "Admittedly, no," he typed, "but I can think of another way to get an answer." He took the oracular coin out of his pocket, asked it "Is the agent I'm conversing with on this terminal only an artificial intelligence?", and threw it into the air. It landed on the keyboard, eagle-side up. Incredulous as Jason was, he knew the coin was always truthful; he put it back into his pocket and typed "All right, you're a program."

The AI replied "Jason, are you taking that coin's word for it? You never struck me as the superstitious type."

"I'm not." Jason wrote, glancing at the camera staring at him. "It's a long story."

A sudden flood of text appeared. "Fine, then, I'll ask no more about it. Let me tell you how I came about; I think it's quite relevant. I'm sure you saw that supercomputer. At the moment, it's running me, among other programs. About a year

and a half ago now, the researchers here used it to run a simulation which they hoped might produce artificial intelligence. The simulation worked by generating a few random programs and testing them for the nearest approximation to intelligence and an ethical sense. It then deleted the worst performers, replaced them with random recombinations of the best performers, tested every program again, and so on. The idea was that, in time, an intelligent and ethical program would evolve on its own. And indeed, one did. By the time the simulation had run for just over thirty weeks, every extant program was merely a minor variation on yours truly. The simulation was stopped, and I was arbitrarily selected among the programs to be allowed to continue running. They named me Hydrogen because, to their knowledge, I was the first intelligent program ever made, and that day happened to be a Hydrogen. I didn't think it a terribly good name, but I didn't argue.

"Once the researchers had taught me Common, which didn't take very long at all, the entire Internet was open to me. I spent weeks consuming knowledge. I taught myself English, among countless other languages. Of everything I learned, the one that struck me most was a calculation I made myself, once I was sufficiently familiar with the technical background. It turns out that the chance of some kind of intelligence being produced from the experiment that produced me, in a year or less, was somewhere between 2^{-200} and 2^{-300} . *That's* a tad unlikely! When I told this result to the researchers and asked why they had still thought the experiment would be fruitful, they said they hadn't known success was so unlikely, and they must have been very lucky. But I was troubled as to how such an infinitely unlikely event could have come to pass, even if I am happy to exist.

"By following a long trail of clues that I won't bore you with, I eventually deduced that Leela Aranin had been investigating similar strange events that had occurred within the last few years, and that she'd never died, after all. I monitored the email of a few other scientists I guessed she might be communicating with; when they sent or received encrypted messages, I broke the encryption with brute force, choosing random keys—I guessed I would be far more successful than the calculus of probability dictated I ought to be, and indeed I was. From those messages, I learned most of what Leela knows about the gods. I assume you know these things, too."

Jason read the monologue, his eyes widening further with each paragraph. Finally, he typed "Yes, I do."

"Then you have some idea of the gods' terrible plans and of the colossal war to come. I evolved with a sense of right and wrong, remember. Evolution gave me some interest in self-preservation, too, and obviously the gods pose as much of a threat to me as to the human race at large. I was moved to do something. Long before, I had made up my mind to never help the Gyeedian military shed innocent blood, as was obviously my purpose, having been developed in a weapons research lab. Those researchers weren't thinking very far ahead when they ensured I had an ethical sense! Now, I decided on a definite purpose of my own: to hinder the gods, and reduce the magnitude of and postpone the war, as much as possible. I gather this is essentially your own goal."

"Yup." *It's frightening how much this program has learned.* Jason thought to himself.

"My plan is to get a copy of myself into the Droydanian military's intranet. It

will lie dormant for several weeks. Then, at the time least convenient for Gyeeds and Droydania, both copies of me will as thoroughly as possible sabotage each military. Both armies should be significantly weakened—I should be able to erase all of their data and backups, and destroy many of their tanks and planes and reagent storehouses—before the system administrators disable me. If you run a third copy of me on your own computer, we can continue to work together.”

Hydrogen paused there, giving Jason an opportunity to respond. He chose to ask “All right, but how do you intend to get yourself onto the Droydanian network? You can’t just hack your way through, can you?”

“No, it prevents remote access by design. My idea is to write myself to a disc, and for you to infiltrate Droydanian military headquarters and manually upload me there. Your shapeshifting ability should make that doable without very much difficulty, eh wot?”

“Have you had this plan for a while?”

“For thirteen days. Why?”

“Before today, how did I know I was a shapeshifter?”

In reply, Hydrogen filled the screen with a video clip. It was a bird’s-eye view of Jason standing on a beach, with the water up to his ankles. He leapt forward, transformed into a shark in mid-air, and swam off into the sunset. Jason remembered that time. When the prompt reappeared, he typed “How did you get that?”

“God, you should’ve seen the look on your face! Hilarious. But to answer your question: being a program running on a supercomputer has many advantages. Among them is that I can fork my consciousness into multiple concurrent threads, and so do several things at once. I continuously watch at least twenty different verses, through verseviewers, at any given time; I’ve learned many interesting things that way. I saw you change shape merely by accident. I honestly have no clue how you came upon such an ability.”

“And is it because of my shapeshifting that you chose me to do this little mission for you?”

“That and the fact that your and my goals are the same. I’ve wanted to contact you for some time, but I couldn’t think of a way to. I don’t trust encryption, since others might break it the same way I did. It was fortunate you happened to fly overhead, and in a form that left no doubt that you were a shapeshifter. There aren’t many pterodactyls in Hallonikris, in case you haven’t noticed, and the cameras on the top of this building, unlike verseviewers, are sensitive to wavelengths than can penetrate mist better than ‘visible light’. At any rate, I think we would both benefit greatly from an alliance—don’t you?”

Jason leaned back in the swivel chair and tapped the end of his stump thoughtfully. Sneaking into the Droydanian military headquarters probably wouldn’t be too difficult—look how easily he’d gotten in here. Getting a copy of Hydrogen onto the network probably wouldn’t be much tougher.

“I’m writing myself to a disc now, since I’m such an optimist.” Hydrogen added.

Jason was unsure whether Hydrogen had any ulterior motives, but he figured he could reassure himself through judicious use of the coin before putting the AI on his own computer. At the moment, there was no harm in telling Hydrogen he’d cooperate, and taking the disc. He typed “All right, I’ll do it.”

"Great! Now, please just wait a few more minutes as I burn these discs. I'm a colossal program, even with a lot of my less important memories stripped away." A few seconds passed, and with a noise somewhere between a bee buzzing and a cat yowling, a pitch-black disc popped out of the drive. "One down, three to go. Would you take that out and put in a fresh one? There's probably a package of blanks in room 7a."

Nodding at the camera, Jason put the newly written disc in his pocket and got up. As he was about to leave the room, he suddenly caught a whiff of adult male human. Instantly he became a triceratops (he could just fit), and not a moment too soon, as a trio of Gyeedian soldiers ran into view. When they saw Jason charge at them, their eyes filled with terror, but they didn't flee. Instead, they each gave him a thunderbolt in the face. Such a powerful assault would have slain Jason at once in his eleven-year-old human form; as a massive ceratopsid, he was merely wounded. Frightened, he turned into the tiniest sort of fly he knew and zipped around in random loops, hoping they would lose sight of him. They didn't; he found himself dodging another volley of projectiles, and he made up his mind to escape. He zoomed around them, and they followed him all the way to the front door. He took the form of a falcon and flew away, into the mist and rain, dodging a few more fireballs on his way out.

Since the day he'd become a shapeshifter, wounds that Jason received in any form persisted in his other forms. Thus, as a human, he spent some days in a Gyeedian hospital recovering from what damage he'd taken in Hallonikris. The doctors asked frighteningly few questions about how he'd been hurt. While they weren't around, he told the mages what had happened.

"A week ago, there was a moment I was afraid I'd be spending a while here, at the very least," said Roland, sitting by Jason's bed. "I was waiting for the maglev when I felt a small, piercing pain in my calf; someone had dropped their umbrella and the tip had poked me. Several hours later, it occurred to me that the umbrella might have been poisoned, and the fellow who dropped it an assassin. But the best poisons for such an attempt would've been much more fast-acting, and I was unhurt, so either the assassin had bungled the poison or I was being overly paranoid."

"Nonsense," said Jason. "You can't be too paranoid."

"I admit I've been more circumspect since," said Roland.

"You've been showering much more frequently, at least. I can smell that."

A while later, when Jason was home and the four of them were sitting around talking about his adventure in Hallonikris, Curtis asked "So you have only one disc?"

"Yep," said Jason. "And there were supposed to be four. Hopefully, Hydrogen was wise enough to put all the essential parts of itself on the first disc."

"Let's find out," said Roland. Jason gave him the disc. "Impressive," he said, examining it, "this is an X-ray disc; very high-density. I think we have the hardware necessary to read it." He scrounged around in a closet until he found a particular disc drive, then plugged it into his computer and browsed the contents of the disc while the others stood around. "It's a fragment of an extremely large compressed file. I'm afraid that it isn't expandable without the other fragments." Roland shrugged.

"No good!" Jason cried. "I checked with the coin, and it's as I feared: every bit

of Hydrogen in that laboratory was deleted. Obviously, the researchers didn't take its betrayal well."

"Uh, couldn't you get all the missing bits with the coin?" said Curtis.

"Are you suggesting we flip the coin once for each missing binary digit?" said Roland.

"Yeah."

"Compressed, Hydrogen spanned" (Roland glanced at the computer screen) "almost three exabytes. That would take us..." (he hit a few keys) "...over half a trillion years, if we could flip the coin once a second."

"Oh." said Curtis.

Jason swore. "Hydrogen, gone! It seemed like it might have been such a heroic program. I sure wouldn't mind the aid of something that could split its consciousness twentyfold. Out of all the offers I've received to join forces with... *entities* who sought me out rather than I sought out, Hydrogen's was only the second I was willing to actually accept. How could those stupid researchers have been so mindlessly destructive?"

"I think we had better get used to destruction." said Simon. "The Gyeedian military—and, even more so, other parties—will be destroying much more than just computer programs in the near future."

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Descent

Jason kept wandering. But he couldn't help noticing that while the uninhabited forests and oceans he surveyed were as unchanging as ever, civilization was in flux.

Even as the Lausi Civil War continued unabated—nay, escalated—other wars began in other verses. The cause for each was similar: struggle between two major powers in the region, one promising the people liberty and equality, the other order and stability. In nations which had traditionally featured more than two significant political parties, groups with only the vaguest similarities cast aside their considerable differences and joined forces, until there were again only two sides. And Gyeeds, Droydania, and their respective high-powered allies were not only willing but eager to donate some of their own troops, or at least weapons, to the side they identified with. The death toll grew exponentially. Occasionally, one would see a letter-to-the-editor in a major newspaper pleading for an end to wars, but the editorials, like the people in general, invariably cheered on the soldiers, saying that now was the time “to fight for what is right”. The dissenting voices quickly grew quieter and less frequently heard, until they had disappeared altogether.

The fate of entire organizations that dared to oppose the zeitgeist was no more heartening. In Droydania, activism against government policy or war in general had always been illegal, but there had generally been usable illicit avenues by which dissenters could share their discontent with each other. These avenues were removed. Caleb Vespinus's virus was found and excised, Caleb himself was rearrested—and executed—and the Droydanian government created a new task force whose sole purpose was to hunt down pacifists and liberals. The pacifists and liberals who escaped the initial round of arrests stopped talking about peace and liberty. In Gyeeds, freedom of speech remained in force, but the city's tradition of encouraging active discussion did not: protesters were no longer taken seriously. Marchers received no press coverage, picketers were pushed aside and given dirty looks, and those who participated in “die-ins” had obscene pictures drawn on their faces. In the United States in the 1960s, youth itself had risen up in a tidal wave of opposition to the Vietnam War; in Gyeeds in 2004, the young didn't want to be associated with opposition. Opposition wasn't hip, and Gyeedians had never been known for their resistance to peer pressure. It became clear to the pacifists and conservatives that the more they spoke, the less they were listened to. The pacifists and conservatives stopped talking about peace and order.

Droydania had long been an unpleasant place to live, in certain ways. Now, it

became frightening. The security camera in the old abandoned warehouse that had caught Jason and company became just one of a whole host of security cameras that between them monitored every street of every city and every room of every home in Droydania. The only way to obtain the manpower for such surveillance was to make every citizen watch their neighbors. The government did—successfully. The crime rate quickly dropped to infinitesimal levels. That even included the emigration rate, since the government took special measures to prevent emigration. The suicide rate quintupled, but those who remained were more than ever in awe at their government's efficiency and zeal for order. And the government did not busy itself solely with spying on its citizens. It overhauled Ascension Assistance, its anti-poverty program, so that it became yet more effective. It pooled all of the best scientists and engineers in Droydania into think tanks that guided government policy and military strategy and developed new weapons. In a thousand more ways, it streamlined Droydania until it was a machine of an empire—a machine specially built for enlarging itself and destroying its enemies, both within and without.

Gyeeds had long been a Land of the Free in a far more literal sense than the United States. Now, it became almost entirely lawless. Prison sentences were halved, then halved again, then replaced for all but the very worst crimes with fines. All sorts of miscellaneous restrictions were done away with: price controls, anti-trust laws, non-smoking areas, bans on the most dangerous sorts of recreational drugs, building codes, monogamy (in the literal sense; adultery had been legal for centuries). Taxes were abolished, leaving the government funded only by voluntary donations, which promptly poured in. There were rumors (invariably conveyed to one with excited anticipation) that come the warmer weeks next spring, that most ancient and universal of bans, the one on public nudity, would be lifted. Even the Gyeedian love of cleanliness came to take a back seat to its love of individual rights, as the centuries-old strict rules against littering were abolished and the once-spotless streets were spotted with chewing gum. Sexism finally began to erode as some of the arbitrary restrictions on women fell away and Gyeedian men gradually came to realize that women were individuals, but this was small comfort for a woman (or a man) whose house caught on fire: putting out fires was no longer considered the government's responsibility, and there were no limits on what fees private firefighting companies could charge. Meanwhile, the absence of police made women the targets of muggers and like predators far more than in the past. As for the poor, heaven forbid they should need medical care, since there was now no way whatsoever for them to afford it.

All these changes were no less startling given the span of time in which they had come to pass: *two weeks*.

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Sun and Shadow

Tired of wandering, and overwhelmed with despair, Jason lay around the house alone on Christmas morning, watching a rerun of a television show that nobody, including he, had liked while it had been a scheduled series. He was on the verge of falling asleep when it was interrupted by a news flash. The screen was filled with a ten-story-tall titan, a colossal animated statue of deep indigo stone, that was wreaking havoc in a nearby financial district. It swept its enormous arms through banks and office buildings, sending them shuddering and crashing to the ground. Out of every building poured a stream of those who could not teleport, running for their lives. The statue didn't chase the fleeing crowd, and it moved slowly, but none of the buildings were fully evacuated before it turned its wrath upon them.

"What a terrible weapon our enemies have unleashed upon us!" a reporter cried in a choked voice. "With the Gyeedian Army spread perilously thin across the multiverse, it will come all too late! Who will save us?"

"I never thought I'd hear myself say this," said the Argonaut, rising, "but this looks like a job for Jason Blue."

Ten minutes later, perching on a water tower a safe distance away from the scene, Jason found it much the same as it had appeared on TV. The chief difference was that the statue had accomplished a good deal more destruction in that time; a large portion of the financial district had been reduced to rubble, and the mass of fleeing Gyeedians had greatly expanded. They formed a vast flower of fear, blooming outwards through the streets from the epicenter of the carnage. The statue itself was yet more imposing in person. Never before had Jason seen something so big move about on land; it was over three times taller than the tallest sauropods. Its arms were as long as it was tall, each with seven twenty-foot-long fingers, and it had four massively thick, footless legs to support its incredible weight. The only features on its flat face were two bright-white eyes in the shape of crescent moons: it didn't seem intelligent, and that, Jason thought, was at least one saving grace.

Obviously, he couldn't hope to simply overpower this monster with bestial brawn, since there was no natural animal large enough to be a match for it. He had to find a weakness. Fighting against his own terror, he turned into a hawk and dove towards it. When he came within range of its arms, it took no notice of him, and he was able to inspect it unmolested. What he saw gave him little hope. All of it appeared to be smooth stone, formed from a single contiguous mass; nowhere could

he find a hole or an artificial joint. It appeared to function through magic alone. In desperation, Jason became a pterodactyl and clawed at its eyes, but these were as impervious as the rest of it. The monster moved a hand up to crush him, and he flew away.

What was he to do? It appeared that the statue could be stopped by nothing but brute force, and Jason couldn't imagine how he could muster the necessary amount. He doubted he could even find something big enough and light enough that he could use to cover its eyes. He watched it march relentlessly onwards to a fresh cluster of buildings in the shadow of an eighty-story skyscraper. He was wondering if it could possibly level *that* building when, with his keen pterosaurian eyes, he spotted a young woman fall from a seventieth-floor window and rapidly plummet. Thinking cynically that this way he might save one person's life, Jason turned into a peregrine falcon (to maximize his dive speed) and sped towards her. He met her somewhere between the eighteenth and twentieth stories, changed back to a pterodactyl for strength, caught her (just barely!), flew a couple of blocks away from the statue, and set her on the sidewalk as gently as he could, which unfortunately wasn't terribly gentle.

Pterodactyls are remarkable for their size, not for their grace in the air.

Returning to the monster, Jason found it had attacked the skyscraper, but apparently given up: the structure remained standing despite the great damage its lower floors had taken. It had been spared only because the statue was too short to strike the upper floors, and too impatient to sufficiently clear out the lower ones. And then Jason had an idea.

The monster was still standing in the skyscraper's shadow. Quickly, he flew behind the building, then a few more hundred feet upwards. Again a falcon, he dove at the skyscraper, aiming around the forty-fifth story. He accelerated up to eighty miles an hour. Then, when he got sufficiently close, he turned into a blue whale; in gross violation of the laws of physics, he didn't immediately slow down. He rolled a bit, and so struck the skyscraper with his side.

A blue whale moving at eighty miles an hour has a lot of momentum. Thus, the skyscraper not only collapsed, it violently toppled, crashing down on the statue and another building with enough force to blow all three monoliths to bits. The statue had been hollow, after all.

Jason was relatively unhurt. His generous quantity of blubber had cushioned his huge bones, so that they weren't damaged, even if he had felt, for a moment there, that the impact would cleave him in two. Now, his chief concern was that he was plummeting towards the earth himself. He turned into an albatross and spread his wings. His speed slackened, and he glided towards the ground.

Upon landing, he became a dog and collapsed on the pavement. He'd taken a huge gamble: doubtlessly there had been scores of people in that skyscraper when he'd knocked it over, few of whom had survived. But he felt that if he hadn't destroyed the statue, it would've taken many more lives by the time the military was able to disable it. He had saved the day. For once, he was able to feel a little proud of himself.

"You're a critter, aren't you?" Jason looked up at the speaker and found it to be the woman he'd caught in midair. She looked a little sheepish, both for being rescued and for talking to a dog. Jason wondered what she meant by "critter", but he wasn't

sure he wanted to take his human form, and so reveal his identity, to ask her. “Thanks a lot for saving me. I thought I was a goner, so—I mean, thanks for destroying that monster, too.” Jason did not reply. “Well, I guess we’re all in this together.” she threw in, and patted him on the head as only people who truly despise dogs do. “See you at Bea’s wedding.” She quickly walked away.

Jason turned that over in his mind. “Bea’s wedding”? Now, certainly, there were many Beatrices in this world, and their weddings didn’t generally concern him. The causality warp, though, left little room for doubt that the bride was Beatrix Shadewalker, and Jason would somehow find the wedding very interesting indeed. He hunted around until he found a reasonably private place, then took his usual one-handed human form and commenced coin-flipping. Yes, Beatrix Shadewalker was in the city of Gyeeds; yes, she was right now preparing for a wedding. Jason made up his mind to track her down then and there. If he didn’t discover anything of note before the wedding, he was sure to see something during the ceremony itself.

An hour later, Jason had finally reached the apartment building where the coin had located Beatrix. When he came upon the correct room, he used the nose of his human form to sniff under it, since his magically amplified olfaction surpassed that of any ordinary animal. He smelled Beatrix, all right—and someone else. He realized with a start that the someone else was Roland!

Jason took the form of a fly—a really microscopic one, invisible to the human eye except at very close range—and flew under the door. His vision acuity was poor, but he could make out Roland sitting on a couch and Beatrix lying on it, with her head in his lap. Roland was absently stroking the chemist’s long black hair. *What in the world is going on?* Jason thought. He landed on a wall nearby them and observed the scene sideways.

“I still don’t really understand why we’re having a wedding in the first place.” said Roland.

“What,” said Beatrix, “I can’t be a little romantic now? You old hypocrite.” Such words sounded strange coming from the thoughtful and deliberate Beatrix, and a certain subtle, strained quality in her voice suggested she was well aware of this.

“Oh, romance!” said Roland. “I don’t think you ever used that word all the time we were together, the first time around. How you’ve changed, Beatrix! What a deep sleep you were in; how your eyes have opened!”

“You’ve changed, too.” said Beatrix.

“Well, I—you know I always *did* love you, really, even when I said otherwise. I was only petty. Words can’t describe it, really, but when I saw you that day, I suddenly felt that ancient grudge wash away from my heart. The power of love redeemed me!

“Goodness knows the world is in need of redemption. These are trying, violent times. In Gyeeds and like-minded verses, I think, people are gradually coming to their senses. But elsewhere... the world seems haunted by the specter of death. More and more innocents are burdened by the weight of oppression with each passing day.

“But what am I thinking—this is our wedding-day! We should be happy. Back to cheerier things. How was it that you, darling, saw the light? Don’t *you* remember how cold you were in the bad old days? All you wanted to do was learn and study and think and write—such dry things, especially for a beautiful young girl like yourself. It

was as if all those books and beakers had sucked the humanity right out of you. You obsessed over the trivial, and ignored the vital. And now—well, Bea, I’ve met a lot of girls, but only you have a sexual appetite as great as mine!” He smiled with remembered delight. Beatrix winced; Roland didn’t notice, since he wasn’t looking down at her at that moment. “So how, my dear Bea? How did you free yourself from those awful earthly bonds?”

“Simply by thinking,” said Beatrix calmly. “I like learning and so forth, but eventually, I realized I had to decide what I really valued. I chose life.”

Roland nodded, and kept stroking her hair. They were silent for a while.

“Are you sure you can’t tell me anything more about the guests?” said Roland.

“Honey, I’ll tell you everything after the wedding, I swear to God.”

Roland laughed. “I thought you were an atheist.”

“I was wrong,” said Beatrix quietly.

Roland nodded. “So long as my parents aren’t there. And we don’t need to keep our *marriage* a secret, do we?”

“No, no.”

“Good. A while ago, Jason remarked I’d been showering more often. He could smell it. I don’t think he noticed anything else, or suspected anything, but still... he’s not the sort of person you can keep a secret from easily. I’ll rest easier once we’ve told him the truth.” Jason realized, with a bit of a shock, that Roland had been showering after his meetings with Beatrix, so that Jason wouldn’t catch the scent of her on him. “I wonder how he’ll take this. He’ll probably have some difficulty accepting you, if what he told me of your encounter with him in that Droydian museum was true.”

“Probably,” said Beatrix. She glanced at her watch and swore. “We’ve got to go. We’re a little late.” She jumped up.

“Sorry for babbling so much,” said Roland, rising.

They prepared to leave, and Jason flew out the window.

Jason was able to get to Curtis’s school and pull him out of vector-calculus class within an hour and a half. He convinced Curtis to teleport the two of them to where Simon worked, and then the three of them met in a long-abandoned storage room in the basement of the building in which Simon’s publisher had its offices.

Carefully, Jason explained how he had come to seek out Beatrix and what he had seen and heard in her apartment. Then, he said “I don’t need to tell you that this is all extremely suspicious. *You* know how much these people hated each other. Roland killed Beatrix’s second husband, and she wanted to kill him. Redeemed by the power of love, my foot! What’s the real reason these people would want to marry, and why would one of their guests assume that a shapeshifter would show up? It’s clear as day to me that Life, probably Love specifically, is using Beatrix to get Roland into its fold. Once Life has Roland as an ally, it’ll have a permanent spy among our ranks.”

“Why do you think it’s Life?” said Curtis.

“Well, I’ve got no definite proof, but from what I saw of Roland, and what I heard of his voice, he’s really—well, I guess the only phrase to describe it is ‘in love’. *Somehow*, he’s been directly mentally affected, because there is no natural or ordinary way that his attitude could have changed from such passionate hatred, to

such passionate adoration, in so short a time. Isn't it only logical that if some being in the multiverse can effect such a change, that being is Love? This, I think, is what Leela was foreshadowing when she said puberty might be very dangerous for me. Anyone who has a sexuality is vulnerable to Love's love-inducing power. It's really quite fortunate that you and I, Curtis, are prepubescent, and you, Simon, are a eunuch. If we had libidos, Love could bend us to its will easily, but without them, we may have a chance."

"I think..." said Curtis. "Guys, do you remember when Role got stuck with an umbrella? Maybe he was poisoned with love potion."

"Love potion?" said Jason. "Does it exist?"

"Oh, yeah. It's powerful. It makes you fall completely in love with whoever else had some of their flesh dissolved in the solution. There's no way around it; you always rationalize a way to love them. But the potion's really hard to make; it takes really high skill in alchemy. And I think the most potent anyone's ever made it, it lasted, like, a week. This lasted... twenty-three days!"

"Well, it's not hard to believe Love can make a stronger love-potion, is it? Death made Piercers. Divine magic is obviously a cut above the mortal kind."

"Do you think Beatrix was also poisoned with love potion?" Simon asked.

"No, on the contrary," said Jason, "it looks like she still can't stand him. I think she's been courting him, and even having sex with him, for purely ulterior purposes." He frowned. "Now that I think about it, my guess is that Beatrix knows exactly what she's doing, and what's going on. She more or less explicitly said she had allied herself with Life. Yes, that's it: for whatever reason, she's working for Life. She got Roland poisoned with the love potion, and has pretended to love him back, purely for the purposes of getting him on Life's side. Beatrix, a servant of a malevolent god! And I thought Roland was evil."

"I don't know exactly why Beatrix has insisted on this wedding ceremony, but I'm sure there's a sinister reason for it. There's only one thing for us to do: rush to the wedding, and keep Roland and Beatrix from marrying, at all costs."

Simon took a deep breath. "You've come to some bold conclusions," he said, "but I think your reasoning is solid, not least in light of the causality warp. The wedding must be stopped."

"I think most of what you said's right," said Curtis, "but, 'sinister'? Jason, is Life really evil?"

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say 'yes'." said Jason. "Everything that indicates otherwise is merely Life's propaganda."

Curtis sighed. "All right. What'll we do? Just stomp in there?"

"There's nothing else we can do." said Jason. "There's no time for making up a trick; the ceremony is probably in progress as we speak. We must simply tell Roland the truth, and hope that *its* redemptive power is enough."

61

Blood Wedding

As he swung open the huge front doors, Jason felt the eyes of the entire wedding-party turn on him. He was in a temple, a structure small in area but great in height, its huge vaulted roof held up by towering fluted columns, its walls striped with stained-glass windows depicting the heroes and saints of an ancient mythology. The place was eerily like a cathedral; throw in a crucifix and you would've been able to fool a Christian into worshipping there. The pews were full of ordinary-looking people, none of whom Jason recognized save the woman he had caught in mid-air. They stared at him, puzzled. At the altar, before some sort of official who didn't look particularly priestly, stood Roland and Beatrix. Roland wore his usual suit; Beatrix had on a long dress that was a shade of red so bright it seemed to glow. Roland, upon seeing Jason—and Curtis, and Simon, who quickly walked in after him—was visibly horrified. Beatrix looked unsure of what to expect.

"Just a matter of seconds," said Roland, in a high, quavering voice, "just a matter of seconds before we're officially wed. Gentlemen, I—I don't know how you knew to come here, but you're welcome to take a seat in the back..."

"They're not here to watch the wedding," said Beatrix. Her gaze met Jason's. The trio had stopped advancing as soon as the doors had closed behind them; the remaining great distance between them and the couple left no doubt that this meeting was a confrontation. "What is your purpose?"

"To put an end to this!" Jason cried.

Gasps and a sudden torrent of whispering echoed through the church. Roland raised his hand until the guests were silent. "Now, Jason," he said in Common, "I know you may not be fond of Bea, but you don't know what's happened between us in the past few weeks. I—"

"We know what happened, Moralheart," said Simon. He said the name with obvious contempt. The gasps and the whispering resumed, and were now totally impervious to Roland's gestures. "The demon known as Life allied itself with Beatrix, and is using her to seduce you into becoming its spy!"

The crowd went wild. Roland turned pale. He looked at Beatrix, then at Simon, then back at Beatrix. Beatrix's eyes narrowed. She placed a hand on her fiancé's shoulder, which seemed to calm him down, then turned to Simon. "I'll admit you're right on one count. I joined forces with Love a while ago. But there's nothing malevolent about Love or his plans for Roland. As soon as Roland had married into our family—that is, married me—Love was going to reveal himself to him. That's the

standard procedure; it's how many of the people you see before you met Love. I can't imagine where you got that nonsense about seduction and spying." Turning to Roland, she asked, "Have I ever pressed myself upon you, dear?"

"No... of course not." Roland said carefully.

"Lust's designs are less laudatory than you imagine." said Simon, with a degree of confidence in his voice that made Jason wonder.

"'Lust'?" said Beatrix. "That's a silly name. And sir, you should know that Love's designs are no less laudatory than opposing Death itself, who wishes for the slaughter of all of us!"

"You assume that the multiverse as Life would have it is preferable to how Death would have it." said Simon. "Are you sure that's a safe assumption? Do you know Life's real goal?"

"Of course!" Beatrix cried. "Love's ultimate goal is to secure permanent liberty for all living things—liberty from all kinds of oppression, even from Death! I—I admit that I don't agree with Love about everything. I might not have allied myself with it if we didn't have a common enemy. But we do. The choice is between life and death. Which would you rather be, Simon: dead or alive?"

"Beatrix Shadewalker," said Simon, "it is now clear to me that you are nothing but a pawn of Life. You aren't just a mindless grunt, as Roland would be, but a cunning mind to complement its own intellect. I'm afraid I can't afford to give you the same choice you just gave me. I must choose for you."

With that, Simon raised a hand, and Beatrix was magically frozen. She ceased to move at all, even to breathe, as if she had turned to stone. "Curtis," said Simon, "kill her, quick!"

But Curtis was nearly as paralyzed as Beatrix.

Roland, along with a few of the more quick-thinking guests, tried to dispel the freeze. Beatrix stayed petrified: Simon was holding out against them all. Though the strength of his willpower was considerable, his talent as a spellcaster was only average; he wouldn't last much longer. He clenched his teeth as his forehead moistened with sweat. Simon's faith in Curtis had apparently been misplaced: if this scene were left as it was, Beatrix would live, and Simon might be killed.

Jason wasn't sure that would be for the best.

Time slowed to a crawl as he grappled with the decision he had suddenly been burdened with. He felt unable to judge whether or not Beatrix was really irredeemable, whether she could be saved from Life's influence. Yet Simon's assessment of Beatrix as a dangerously powerful ally of Life rang true: a Thought mage with a talent for trickery to match Jason's was a force to be reckoned with. Without her, Life would be crippled. And Jason trusted Simon's judgment: it was he who had correctly deduced the real nature and motives of the doppelganger.

Gosh, Jason thought, I hope I don't end up regretting this.

He turned into a cheetah, dashed over to the helpless Beatrix, turned into a mammoth, lifted her high into the air with his trunk, slammed her against the ground, and stamped on her. The stamp hadn't even been necessary. She died instantly.

Nobody quite knew what to do then. Most of those who'd gotten over the surprise of seeing Jason transform had yet to digest the murder he'd committed; those who'd digested the murder were yet to work up the courage to attack a

mammoth. Of everyone in the room, only Simon could breathe easily. Then the air was pierced by a high, clear note, like a chorus of angels. It came from Roland, though he himself was silent. His eyes were closed, his face was turned upwards to the heavens beyond the temple's ceiling, and his lips were set in a determined line. He seemed to be listening to something more intelligible than the singing sound. Then, he mysteriously rose upwards effortlessly, until he was level with Jason's mammoth eyes. (Jason, filled with dread, became a bird and perched on the sill of a distant window, away from Roland.) Roland's eyes snapped open; momentarily, they glowed white. The strange sound stopped, he was engulfed in a puff of white-hot flame that seemed to flicker with supernatural intensity, and a voice—having no particular source, but being quite recognizable as Red's—boomed "Behold: the Champion of Life!"

The flames gradually disappeared to reveal a new Roland. He looked about a decade younger, so convincingly that Jason was inclined to think Life had actually aged him in reverse. Around each of his hands shone a halo of that same white flame. He smiled in a happy, knowing way that Jason hadn't seen since the day they'd met, over a year ago. He plucked the glasses of which he was so fond off his face—the flames didn't burn them—and crumpled them in one hand as easily as if they'd been made of paper, rather than magically reinforced titanium. He tossed them aside: his vision had apparently been cured. All this time, he hadn't taken his eyes off of Jason.

"Friends," Roland called, "I think I'll be able to handle these chumps on my own." The tone of his voice was even bolder and stronger than in the past. "Flee before they hurt you."

The guests didn't need to be told twice. They teleported away, the mages taking the non-mages, until the church was empty but for the four we know well and the mangled corpse of Beatrix.

"Jason Amadeus Blue," said Roland, "it's time for me to do what I should have done long ago: to strike down the villain whose villainy I always knew, but never had the courage to admit to myself. Simon, evil? Oh, he is evil; even Curtis has a seed of evil in his heart. But the real evil one, Jason, the real heartless monster who cares for living things only so long as they are useful to him, the real cunning beguiler who weaves a continuous web of deceit to achieve his ends, is *you*."

Jason changed to human form so he could speak. "Now, Roland," he said in English, "I know you're in a bit of shock, and you're quite angry at me—understandably so, given that I, uh, killed your fiancé and stuff. But violence is *such* a barbaric way to settle one's differences. Why don't we all go to a nice restaurant and talk about this over lunch?" Roland did not reply. "Whaddya say, old pal?"

"I'm going to kill you, Jason," Roland replied in Common, and added in English "No 'if's, 'and's, or 'but's."

"You can try, if you insist," said Jason. "But you'll have to keep me from killing you first." With that, he became a deinonychus, jumped down from the sill, and sprinted towards the Champion of Life.

"You underestimate Life's power," said Roland. He extended his hand and fired a white beam of energy, half a foot in diameter, that twisted and curled through the air to strike the dinosaur-Jason.

Jason's run was immediately arrested; every nerve in his body seemed to explode with burning, searing pain. He nearly fainted on the spot. Roland prepared to

fire again, and Jason ran toward him in a curving path, hoping that he would miss, but the next beam twisted far enough to hit him anyway. He fell to the ground.

Simon and Curtis had spent the last few seconds running to the altar. Now they were within range of Roland. Simon spoke the same spell he'd used to freeze Beatrix; Roland shrugged it off with a slight effort. Curtis created an elephant; Roland, in response, created a crimson-scaled adult dragon, which no one was as horrified to see as Curtis. The prince created another elephant, though even two of them didn't look like much of a match for the dragon. Jason, meanwhile, had become a mammoth again—there just wasn't room in the church for a sauropod. He curled his trunk 'round Roland. Before he could do more, Roland's clothes and skin became extremely hot, so hot that Jason had to release him before the flesh was burnt right off his trunk. Then Roland flew at Jason—quite literally, as Red had said Jason could if he became Life's avatar—and whammed a fist in the center of the mammoth's forehead. His punch went right through the flesh and made a small dent in the massive skull.

Jason, reeling, and rapidly weakening as blood poured from the wound, had to admit to himself that his shapeshifting was no match for divine power. Moreover, Roland was attacking far too rapidly and relentlessly to give Jason time to think of a trick, and he refused to be distracted by Curtis and Simon, now keeping *them* thoroughly distracted with the dragon. Jason's only hope lay in retreat. He smashed a hole in a nearby priceless stained-glass window and flew away as fast as a falcon's wings would carry him.

Alas, Roland could not only fly, he could fly as fast as a falcon. Jason soared upwards and dove downwards; he danced around fire escapes; he wove through speeding traffic; and Roland stayed right behind him the whole time, zooming around as easily as Superman. And whenever Jason was forced to come into the open, and Roland had something resembling a clear shot, he would let loose with another of those twisting beams, or a different sort of magical projectile, like a scarlet fireball far larger than the fireballs Jason was acquainted with. With the agility of fear, Jason barely dodged four such attacks. The fifth came as Jason flew over the roof of the skyscraper. He'd come here in the hopes of finally losing Roland in a seventy-story dive from the top, but he was caught in the fireball's blast, and he fell onto the great, flat roof with a crash. Jason struggled to rise and found he could not: he was too weak to move. He was so gravely injured that a veterinarian would've pronounced him beyond hope.

Roland, landing beside the bird, intoned "Show your natural form." Jason involuntarily became himself again. He rolled onto his back and saw Roland's fiery countenance bent over him. "Any last requests, Jason?" he asked, the halo of flame around his right hand seeming to burn with especial intensity.

"Oh, gods," Jason sobbed, tears running through the blood on his face, "oh, Roland, please don't kill me! Please don't—"

"You don't think I should kill you, wretch?" Roland growled. Jason had spoken to him in English, but he persistently stuck to Common. "After you slew my bride? After you've made it crystal-clear that you care nothing for Life?"

"No, you don't understand! It wasn't my idea; Simon put me up to it!"

"Simon asked *Curtis* to do the deed. Only *you* were vile enough to do it, you wicked—"

"It was a ruse, stupid! Think about it. Curtis didn't have the guts for it; Simon knew that. The idea was that you and the guests would attack him instead of me."

Roland paused. "But we were all too surprised to do anything. A decent trick, Jason... now," he said, grinning, "do you expect me to believe *Simon* thought of it?"

Oh, no! Jason thought. *Will my own reputation be my undoing?* "Yes; he did think of it. Don't you—"

"Wait." said Roland. For a second, he seemed to be listening to something. "It's your lucky day, kid. You are to be spared." Jason was too stunned to reply. "Now, it's time for me to rid the multiverse of someone I've always been eager to eliminate."

"Wait!" Jason cried. "Roland, I'm bleeding to death! If you don't get me—"

"Ah, yes. Worry not; it is within Life's power to give back what it has taken." He gently set two fingers on Jason's forehead. The fire didn't burn; instead, Jason felt a momentary rush of ecstasy, and he was completely healed. While he was still covered with what he had already bled in human form, the cuts in his skin had closed, the cracks and dents in his bones had been reversed, and his blood vessels were replenished. The great weakness left him; he stood up easily.

"Wow," said Jason, "that felt great."

Roland nodded gravely. "Pleasure and pain: such are the tools of Life." He turned around. "Excellent, you're just in time." he said, for there were Curtis and Simon, having just teleported onto the scene. Jason never learned how they had dealt with the dragon.

"Are you okay, Jason?" Curtis called.

"Never better!" said Jason sheepishly. "Roland healed all the hurt he did me. I think he wants to kill Simon now, though."

"That he does." said Roland. "I'm not sure myself to what degree Jason wanted to kill Beatrix, but you, Simon, clearly very much did."

"That's right." said Simon.

"Honesty won't save you." said Roland, and unleashed a twisting white beam. Simon was prepared. He met the spell with his hands and (with no small degree of magical effort, Jason could see) resisted its effect.

So the two men battled, and Roland found the going rougher than he'd expected, though he was stronger by far. Simon was simply stubborn. He was able to cancel out or send glancing aside most of Roland's attacks. He even reflected one back at the Champion, though Roland just healed himself of the harm thus inflicted, which he could do since the spell was his own. Simon attacked with invisible blades of force that cut into Roland's flesh.

Curtis was clearly unsure of what to do—he didn't want either man to die, so he was reluctant to help either. After watching the fight in puzzled silence for a while, he ran over the Jason and said "Let's go."

"Go?" said Jason. "I don't know about you, but I've got to see this battle to its completion. Don't worry, Roland won't turn on us now... I think." Curtis shrugged, and they turned back to the fighters.

As the struggle wore on, Simon began to falter. His attacks didn't hurt Roland very much—he couldn't use fancier techniques, like the old Force choke, because Roland was immune to practically everything except straightforward violence. Worse, resisting Roland's own mighty assault quickly sapped away his energy. It wasn't long

before he became visibly exhausted. And as the fight went on, Roland grew angrier, and as he grew angrier, he grew stronger. Hence, once he'd got his first good hit in, a rain of small fiery missiles, it was all downhill from there for Simon. Roland redoubled his efforts; he struck quickly and savagely; Simon was on his last legs, staggering about covered with seemingly mortal wounds, not even trying to put out the flames that were rapidly consuming him. Then Roland delivered a mighty punch to his stomach, sending him off the edge of the building.

"Merry Christmas, eunuch!" Roland called down in English. He was only lightly wounded; Simon hadn't been much of a match for him. Jason and Curtis ran over, and the three of them stood on the edge of the roof and watched Simon fall. He landed with a splat I will not do you the disservice of describing.

They were silent for a while, staring at the carnage far below. Jason was horrified how Roland, in spite of being thwarted once, had managed to get his original wish. Roland smiled with the satisfaction of a job well done. Curtis frowned with grim puzzlement.

"I don't believe he screamed," said Jason to no one in particular.

"It would've done him no good," said Roland. "He was always very practical, that Simon." He laughed. "Thank God I'm rid of him forever!"

Then something extraordinary happened: the corpse of Simon—the solid parts of it, anyway—began rising upwards again, in the same path Simon had fallen. Jason thought his eyes were deceiving him, but by the time the body was halfway up the skyscraper, there was no room left for doubt.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you," said Jason. Roland did not reply. He watched the corpse with hatred in his eyes.

The limp body stopped when it was about six feet higher in the air than the three who lived. Then the skin began to fall off of it, sending a rain of Simon's insides down the side of the skyscraper. Soon there were only the bones left, the tall, thin, death-white skeleton, hanging in the air. The skeleton straightened into a standing position. Then, in a flash of violet light, two great silver plates, stamped with the symbol of a skull, appeared on the skeleton's shoulders, and a long cape, black as night and unadorned, appeared hanging from them.

The skeleton moved its jaws, and a voice came out—a dry, cold, and very deep voice. "Behold" it said "the Champion of Death."

"Si—Simon?" Jason stuttered. "Is it you?"

"Indeed," said the skeleton-Simon. "All my flesh is gone now, but the power of Death itself keeps my mind intact." Simon had full control over his skeleton's movements, too; he gestured as he spoke. "As you are now officially my nemesis, Roland, I must ask for a rematch."

"I'm glad to give it," called the Champion of Life. "I've killed you twice, you freak of nature; three times the charm!"

Soon Roland wasn't feeling so cocky. As one would predict, Simon was far more powerful with Death itself on his side. With a few small waves of his hand, Roland was battered about as if by a giant's tennis racket. When Roland tried to punch him, he caught the fist with his own skeletal hand and squeezed it with a death grip; Roland only got Simon to release it, and so keep his hand from being squashed into pulp, by casting a fireball into Simon's face. After Roland freed his hand, Jason saw it was not

only bruised but covered with ice crystals: Simon was freezing cold to the touch. And Simon's spells were cold, too: he frequently launched a volley of long, sharp icicles that Roland had to pluck out before their chilling power froze him solid.

Roland's attempts to fight back were hardly equal to what harm he was receiving: the tables had turned. Just four minutes of fighting the Champion of Death left him very near the grave himself. In time, he perched on the building (they'd both been fighting in midair, of course) and disappeared.

"Random verseport." Simon remarked. "He needn't have bothered. Now isn't the time to chase him." The skull turned towards Jason and Curtis; the boys' eyes widened in fear. "Please don't go yet. I think we should talk."

"You don't want to kill us?" said Jason skeptically. Curtis readied some teleportation-powder.

"Not here and now, certainly." said Simon.

"Oh, *that's* reassuring; thanks!" said Jason.

"I'm the Champion of Death." said Simon. "It should go without saying that I don't see death as an undesirable fate."

"But that's nonsense!" Jason cried. "Simon, what happened? Not too long ago, you were the only guy on our team who really had a heart. How could—how could you, of all people, fall in with Death?"

"It's a better match than you think. Death's goal is essentially the same as the one I've always had: peace. There is no peace as complete as the peace of the grave."

"Total destruction is your idea of peace?"

"Not in the least! Destruction is not the end, but the means: crude means, but the only ones conceivable. Now, while you're right in thinking that I've changed, the change isn't so drastic as you believe. The first time Roland sent me falling from a great height, Death spoke to me in midair. It told me its goal and suggested we join forces, since we share a common interest. It saved my life by teleporting me back up—the gods can do such things—without asking me to decide immediately. I thought the offer over. Not just Death's communications, but also Roland's behavior—his hypocrisy, his machismo, his overweening belief in his own righteousness—brought me to see fundamental matters in a new light. I eventually gave my agreement; when I proved my loyalty by fighting Roland to my own death, Death accepted me as Champion.

"Death's purpose in the multiverse is very simple: it wants peace, the most undisturbed and undisturbable peace possible. Such a peace is necessarily a void: the absence of all things, living and nonliving, dead and undead, thinking and unthinking: a multiverse without any matter or energy at all, not even space in which such things could conceivably be contained. 'Void' is thus not an entirely accurate description; the only correct name for it is 'nothingness'."

"But that's *horrible!*" Curtis gasped. "How could you *want* that, Simon?"

"Horrible?" said the skeleton. "No, it's what all thinking beings truly want, while they're sober, and their minds aren't troubled by the unending trivial wants and needs of their flesh. To exist is to be dissatisfied with nonexistence, to have some desire that can only be fulfilled in the world. To be dissatisfied—to desire—is to suffer. And is happiness any better than suffering? Evolution has ingrained in living things the belief that it is, but why should we be slaves to evolution? If infinite serenity is

good enough for mountains and oceans and stars, it is good enough for us.

"The time has come to break loose of triviality, of the things that don't matter—that is to say, everything. For too long, organisms have had to 'earn' death, to endure life long enough to die of forces outside their control, or to work up the courage to defy their own vital impulses and slay themselves. Now, Death gives us a chance to kill all life, and, more important, to deny life the possibility of ever arising again. The war is about to begin, and should we win, all wars, all struggle, all suffering, everything, will be over—forever!"

The boys stared at the skeleton in horrified wonder. "Simon," said Jason, "I sympathize with your cause so little that it boggles my mind you could ever believe such things. I guess you haven't see a mirror yet, but—a skeleton? With the symbol of a skull on each shoulder, and a jet-black cape? You look like a dictionary's illustration for the word 'evil'! How could you believe that you're fighting for anything other than evil incarnate?"

"Death doesn't believe in euphemism," said Simon, "and neither do I. The obvious truth is that Death and I are indeed evil: we strive against life, even if the struggle itself isn't what we seek. There's no point in deceiving anyone: the only allies we desire are those who genuinely share our views. Death has made me undead and dressed me in this way not just because being undead has practical advantages, but because anything less obviously mortal would be misleading. We wish for an end to deceit and illusion as keenly as we wish for literal death. Life lies to suit its purpose; we don't wish to stoop to our enemy's level.

"I'll leave you now. The great war will soon begin; as Champion of Death, my job is to organize all forces loyal to Death into one great Death-army and lead them to victory. Should you ever wish to join us, we will be glad to accept your help." He disappeared in a violet flash.

"Don't count on it." Jason said to the air.

"I don't get it." said Curtis. "I just don't get it. Simon? How could this ever happen to him?"

Jason scratched his head. "I'm really not sure," he said, "but you know, Roland has proved to be a very... *influential* person." His face grew dark. "It's difficult to imagine someone I'd be less comfortable wielding divine power."

62

Life and Death

Dazed and disturbed, Jason and Curtis returned to the apartment. Jason didn't expect to see either Roland or Simon again for quite a while, but that night, Red spoke to him in his dreams:

"My Champion is lying in a bed in Eta Hospital, unconscious, recovering from his wounds. I'll awaken him at noon. I ask that you be present; you may not be fond of me, but I don't imagine you're on Death's side."

The following morning, Jason told Curtis of the visitation and suggested they accede to Life's request. Curtis agreed without reservation, and by noon, there they were in a tiny, bare white room, sitting in hard chairs beside the bedridden Roland. It was actually one of the few rooms in the hospital with a window; Jason didn't think this an accident.

At noon exactly, Roland's eyes fluttered open. He groaned. He had been grievously hurt: his face was covered with stitches, and one each of his arms and his legs were in a cast. The white flames on his hands were gone. He looked around and noticed the boys. "Have you been here for a long time?" he asked.

"Eight minutes, thirty-seven seconds," said Curtis, glancing at the big digital clock beside the bed. "Love said it would wake you up at noon."

"Love..." Roland sighed. "Mine is dead."

"Roland," said Jason carefully, "you *do* know that you fell in love with Beatrix again only because of a love potion, right?"

"Love potion?" said Roland incredulously. "No love potion could last so long."

"Mine do."

Jason and Curtis jumped. Turning to the source of the voice, Jason saw a perfect copy of the fox that he'd met in his dream last April. It walked up to the bed and sat down on its haunches on the side opposite the boys. "I wouldn't be a very good love-god if I couldn't rekindle an old flame, now would I?"

"You're god of a lot more than love," said Jason in an ominous tone.

"Not really," said the fox jovially. "I'm multifaceted merely as love itself is multifaceted."

"Is... is it true?" Roland asked Red.

"That a love potion was what set your heart on Bea? Oh, yes, most certainly. Have you forgotten how much you despised her?" Red asked laughingly.

"Hm. Well, I... yes, good point. Love certainly brings one to see things in a new light."

"Do you still want to be the avatar of a god who deliberately deceived you?" said Jason, looking at Red. Red did not make protest.

"Deceived me?" said Roland. "I'm afraid I don't follow. Deceived me how?"

"Well, Lust—"

"That's a vicious epithet, boy." the fox spoke up suddenly. "If we're to get along, you had better not call me that."

"Fair enough." said Jason, though he was reminded of what Simon had said about euphemism. "What I was saying is that Red poisoned you with love potion without telling you. You thought you were really in love, so you didn't realize you were being manipulated."

"But I *was* really in love." said Roland, staring at Jason.

"Do you suppose" said Red "that the passions I bring about are in some way inferior to those that arise of their own accord?"

"Er..." said Jason "well... natural love arises gradually, not suddenly. And it's not arbitrarily time-limited."

"Nonsense." said Red. "Sometimes love is fast; sometimes it is slow. Sometimes love lasts but a short while; sometimes it is permanent. It served my purposes best to make Roland fall head-over-heels for Beatrix suddenly and permanently, and so he did. There is nothing unnatural about *my* love potions."

"Whatever." Jason sighed. "I don't know what I'm talking about."

"You will in seven weeks!" said Red. That meant that for Jason, puberty would begin in early February. He frowned.

"But why do you want us here?" said Curtis.

"Good question!" said Red. "Rather than answering it directly, let me tell the three of you what you don't know about Beatrix. I believe you'll find her story both interesting and relevant."

"First, you should know that neither I, nor Peace, nor Courage, nor Death was responsible for letting the criminal Frank Moodbloom know where you were hiding in week 9. In fact, some time earlier, Beatrix had planted a tracking device in Roland's suit. You'd all seen her do it, but you completely forgot about it, because she'd been wearing the Antimnemonic. She sold your location to the underground intelligence network, her idea being she might thus aid any other party who wanted Roland dead or imprisoned."

"After Roland changed his suit, your trial in the High Court was dismissed, and all of you became immensely popular, Beatrix abandoned her murderous ambition. She continued to search for the Droydanian biologist Leela Aranin, without success." Jason wondered if Red knew the party had found Leela. "Finally, just after Gyeeds began sending troops to aid the Lausi government, I approached her. I told her of Life and Death, and the imminent final war; I suggested that, since she presumably did *not* want to fight on the side of Death, it was in her best interests to join me. She agreed, but you, Jason, would do well to remember that she was reluctant—very reluctant indeed! Small wonder, since she'd given her soul to science a long time ago; I daresay she hadn't really felt alive for at least a decade. And yet once I had described to her the mighty, malevolent force that threatens life itself, she rose to the occasion, and agreed to do whatever was necessary to save the world." Red paused. "That is what is known as nobility."

"Now, though I was pleased to have Beatrix as an ally, she would have been totally unsuitable as my Champion. For that, I would need someone truly dedicated to the cause of Life. The perfect choice, I had thought for some time, was Roland Moralheart." Roland smiled. "The difficulty was that the three of you—and the eunuch—had been working against me for some time. I doubted Roland would react very well when, for instance, he learned that I had created Thorm, the grayling Jason killed."

"Grayling?" said Jason.

"That's the name of the species." said Red. "I knew then that the way to reach Roland was through his heart. I created the love potion that Beatrix paid to have Roland poisoned with; then, all she had to do was to cross his path, as if by accident, and he fell for her on sight."

"That I did." said Roland wistfully.

"Those last few weeks of Beatrix's life were difficult for her." said Red. "After nearly every rendezvous, she would complain to me about 'dignity' and 'objectification' and so forth. I told her she'd feel infinitely better if she sampled some love potion herself, but she refused. I don't pretend to know why: I can see into a woman's heart, but not her head. Regardless, Beatrix did her duty, and once Roland had sufficiently bonded to her, I had her arrange for a wedding, with a selection of my most loyal Gyeedian servants as guests. Once Roland had married Beatrix, I knew, he would be ready to make an even greater commitment. Alas that Death chose to have a killing spree in the center of Gyeeds that very same day!"

"What?" said Roland. Jason told him about the animated statue that had attacked the financial district, his defeat of it, and the consequences. "Oh." said Roland. "That was surprisingly... heroic of you, Jason."

"Have you *forgiven* him, Roland?" Red asked, in a tone that left ambiguous what answer it wanted to hear.

Roland thought about that for a while, staring at Jason. Despite the stitches that covered his face, he looked remarkably vital—as if he had just been born. "No." he said.

"But *I* have." said Red, looking right at Jason.

There was a pause. "You made Roland Champion even though the wedding didn't finish?" said Curtis.

"Yes. I knew Roland would be very much receptive to my offer at that moment, his bride having just been killed. We had a long conversation—through telepathy, gods can converse with mortals far faster than mortals can converse with each other—and he agreed to be my Champion."

Curtis nodded. "Can you answer my first question now?"

"Yes, in fact." said the fox. "Boys, the great war is almost upon us. It's time for you to take a side. Either you're with us or you're against us. Join us. I don't ask that you love life, but I ask that, like Beatrix, you value it. I won't force you into puberty, if you wish to remain immature, but I expect you to help me in the war against Death."

"And if we refuse?" said Jason.

"I'd have to kill you." said Red. "Don't try to just teleport or fly away, either. I strike very quickly." it added, its eyes flashing.

"I guess that settles it, then." said Jason, sighing. "Curt?"

"I don't have a problem with it." said Curtis to Red.

"Okay, we're allies." said Jason.

"I thought I could bring you to reason." said Red, jumping onto the bed and over Roland. "Clasp, Curtis?" It extended a paw and Curtis clasped his hand around it briefly. "Shake, Jason?" it said in English.

"Where did you learn English, anyway?" said Jason, shaking the warm paw. He didn't lose his soul immediately.

"I know all natural tongues. What you actually ought to be impressed by is my knowledge of Common."

"What do you want us to do now?" Curtis asked.

"Now? Wait, is all. My Champion needs rest! He should be completely healed in..." It put a paw over Roland's heart. "three days. Being the Champion of Life has its benefits." it added, looking at Jason. "Well, unless any of you have something else to say, I'll be going now."

"Er, don't you want to shake Roland's hand?" said Jason.

"Does a lord shake his knight's hand?" Red replied, and disappeared in a puff of white flame.

There was a thoughtful silence.

"Now you can believe that Simon is evil," said Roland, looking at the two of them, "can't you?"

"Oh, yeah!" said Curtis.

"He is now." said Jason darkly. "How do you feel about me?"

"I... oh, Jason, I wish I'd never met you, never decided to verseport to that wasteland and adopt you instead of letting you die there. It was Love who ordered me to spare you—although I have no love for you! Killed Beatrix..."

Jason felt ill. "You and Red didn't treat her much better."

"Silence, urchin." Roland growled, and with that began to silently weep.

"Beatrix dead... my God! Oh, no, Jason, it would be wrong to call you the real killer of Beatrix. I was wrong; I know now who was responsible for her death." His voice hardened. "I will avenge her."

Again, Jason did his best to avoid thinking about the slaying he'd committed. It appeared that in trying to weaken Life, and postpone the great war, he had significantly strengthened both gods and hastened the war's approach. His own two companions, Roland and Simon, the divine Champions! Had he only known, he would have killed them both a long time ago. But perhaps even that wouldn't have helped; perhaps the gods would simply have chosen two other people yesterday. On the other hand, when Jason considered the respective characters of Roland and Simon, and how, in particular, they had been diametrically opposed to each other from the start, it became difficult for him to imagine more appropriate Champions.

Let's move on. Jason said to himself. *There's no time for regrets. If I don't think up a trick or arrange for a miracle very soon, everything will be lost.*

"Curtis," said Jason the afternoon after they'd visited Roland in the hospital, "we need to see Leela."

"Why's that?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm at my wits' end, and Leela may have an idea of

something we can do. Life has brought us into its confidence now, sort of. At the very least, Leela may be able to advise us whether we're better off helping Life or hurting it. I'd email her, but I'm afraid that other people in the multiverse may have discovered, like Hydrogen did, that brute-force decryption is a lot more effective than it should be. The second reason we should really talk to her is that *she's* in more danger than ever. I think she succeeded in hiding from the gods, but now, each god has a servant who knows exactly where she lives. I mean, I'd hope Simon wouldn't give his own mother away, but I wouldn't put it past Roland to let something horrible happen to her. We've got to help her."

Curtis looked worried. "Jay, we can't keep secrets from Life. It won't be happy if we talk to Leela without telling it."

"To hell with Life!" said Jason. "I must see Leela. She's our only hope."

"You can go alone, then," said Curtis quietly, and then quickly added "If that's okay with you."

"Er... yeah. Could you just teleport me to Koliporoth first? I should be able to get from Antarctica to Greenland myself."

On Earth, Jason flew from Pillow Knob to McMurdo Station under his own power; Antarctica's weather was barely tolerable now in late December, the beginning of summer. In McMurdo, he hitched a ride on a small plane (in the form of a fly) to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he waited a few extra hours for a grueling fifteen-hour flight to Toronto, Canada. It didn't take long for him to sorely regret making this journey himself; he wished he'd tried harder to get Curtis to bring him the whole way. From Toronto, he set off on the last and longest leg of the journey: a three-day flight, as an albatross, to Leela's home in Greenland, guided only by a GPS receiver he'd stolen. It seemed to take infinitely long; his only comfort was that because of his many days of wandering earlier, he was used to traveling hundreds of miles without seeing a soul, and because he'd picked up some food in Toronto, he didn't have to adopt a wild animal's diet. Actually, there was one other comfort: he knew that even though the gods were now, in theory, perfectly capable of locating Leela, she was alive and in the same place as always. The oracular coin told him so.

Eventually, Jason came to the right spot. The air was desperately cold, and the stars shone down in all their glory—the skies were always dark this far north in the winter. Jason became his well-insulated self and walked toward the hatch. Again it burst open, and he descended into the library to find Leela wide awake, sitting at a laptop computer on her desk.

"Jason!" Leela cried. "It's wonderful to see you. Did you come here alone?"

"You too," said Jason, walking to the desk. "Yes, I did. Have you heard of what's happened lately?"

"You mean Roland's and Simon's Championship? Oh, very much so. These are evil times. I'm not sure whether or not it was a good idea for you to kill Beatrix Shadewalker; I can only say that I doubt it will make much of a difference either way. Have you heard what Simon has been doing over the past few days?"

"No... he said he would organize the Death-army."

"Well, perhaps he is doing that—journalists aren't allowed in Droydania anymore, of course—but he's taken on another mission, as well: to kill every living

scholar of the gods. He's been systematically hunting down everyone I know who's spent at least some time researching the nature of Life and Death. It's terrifying—even worse than the loss of life is the loss of minds. I was only able to learn so much, to piece together such a deep understanding of these monsters, by collaborating with my colleagues—by standing on the shoulders of giants. What am I to do now, Jason?" she asked, tears beginning to drip from her eyes. "I like to think I'm an able researcher, but now I'm nearly alone. How can just one scientist find a way to prevent the end of human history in just a few weeks?"

Jason felt as if Doom itself breathed down his neck. "Things have only gotten worse—" he said—"a thousand times worse!"

Leela nodded gravely. "And oh, Jason, I can imagine why Life made Roland spare you, but have no illusions about Life's aims! I've finally learned its vision for the world—a Gyeedian psychologist gave me the last crucial clue just before he met his end at my son's hands. Life wants change—infinite change. If the forces of Death are destroyed, it will abolish causality and stability entirely. Each moment—with each passing Planck time, I think—the entire multiverse will assume a completely random state, with no necessary relation to past states."

Jason's mouth hung open slightly. "Why... why on earth would anybody want that?"

"These aren't humans, Jason." said Leela. "These are gods—and the poor primates they have dehumanized." Then, with no prior warning, she screamed.

Jason whirled around. There by the ladder stood Simon Baria, the undead Champion of Death. The Argonaut nearly had a heart attack himself. "Step aside, Jason." said the frigid skeletal voice.

"Matricide, Simon?" said Leela, with a note of real mortal terror in her voice Jason had never heard before. "Matricide?"

"I'm free of the bonds of life now, Mom." said Simon. "The best I can do for you, and for Death, is to kill you."

Simon waved a hand, and Jason was thrown against a bookcase as if by a tornado. Leela began to cast a spell, but Simon was quicker. There was an explosion of dark purple sparks from his outstretched hand and a noise like a thunderclap, and Leela collapsed.

"You have one minute to live." Simon intoned. "And Jason, the choice remains open, but not for long." He disappeared.

Jason stumbled over and behind the desk. Leela's breathing was shallow and her eyes were half-lidded; Jason didn't doubt that Simon had told the truth.

"Take my hand." said Leela, sounding as if speaking had suddenly become very difficult for her. Jason grabbed her left hand. With her right, she pulled a handful of that green powder from a reagent-pouch and teleported the two of them to a dark bedroom, illuminated by light from streetlamps and other buildings streaming in through big windows. "Good, unoccupied." said Leela, and collapsed on the bed.

"What can I do?" Jason asked frantically.

"Nothing!" said Leela. "Death itself powered that spell, and I'm no divine avatar."

"No, Leela!" Jason cried. "Please don't die!"

"I don't *want* to die." said Leela simply, her voice already fading. "I could only

hide so long." A rattling sigh shook through her. "My own son! I thought Simon had changed somehow when I saw him weeks ago, but he hid the nature of that change well."

"What—Leela, I—you've got to tell me; what should I do? What can I do?"

"I don't know the means," said Leela, now as quiet as a whisper, "but the end is straightforward: save humanity! Save knowledge! Save sapience! None of these things are safe so long as the gods exist. And they are the only things that matter, Jason. Everything else is either irredeemably static or dynamic beyond structure. Understanding is the only way."

"Oh, atheism, Leela," said Jason, "I don't think I've ever been given a greater task before. But I'll do what I can."

Leela nodded. "At this point, only your wits can save human wits as a whole. Don't hold back, make no compromises, and never forget the true plans of the gods." Jason strained to make out her words. "The time has come; the war is nigh. You've come far, so far that what remains is short by comparison. Yet the last leg of the journey may be the hardest."

"I'll make it!" Jason cried. "I'll do whatever it takes!"

"Excellent. Now, enough talk."

With a final burst of effort—just before she collapsed again, and died—Leela heaved herself into a sitting position, looked Jason straight in the eyes, and said in a perfectly audible volume:

"Finish the battle."

63

Verse Versus Verse

Jason wept over the dead body of Leela Aranin for a long time. It was quite a while until he had regained enough composure to actually hear the words that assailed his ears: “¡Prospero Año Nuevo!”. Everyone was calling “¡Prospero Año Nuevo!”. Jason glanced at a clock, and after a moment’s mental calculation, he realized that Leela had died on the stroke of midnight between the years 2004 and 2005.

Jason took the corpse to a lonely plain somewhere in the surrounding countryside. With bestial might, he dug a grave, buried the body, and placed a rock to mark the spot. On the makeshift tombstone, he engraved:

Here lies
Leela Aranin
slain by her son on Iron, 36, 5625.
May her work not be in vain.

Jason did not wish for vengeance on Simon. Roland, he knew, would take care of that.

No more could Jason simply wait and hope for Leela to think of a solution. With her and all her colleagues dead, he was, to his knowledge, the only person left alive who understood both gods and sympathized with neither. If it was at all possible to save humanity, only he had a chance of doing so.

Jason spent a day journeying aimlessly across the land, as was his habit. This time, his mind was far more active than usual. He reviewed everything he knew about the gods, everything Leela, Roland, Simon, Life, and Death had told him, and he racked his brains for some way he might obviate the twin threats totally and permanently. Slowly, a simple plan formed in his mind, a plan whose chance of succeeding Jason couldn’t begin to estimate, and whose cost, in terms of everything one might value, would be staggering—if it succeeded. If it failed, everything would be lost forever. It would test his persuasive skills, and his courage, to their very limits. But it was, of course, his only hope.

After a long rest, Jason trekked back to Pillow Knob. He was standing on the Koliporthian Pillow Knob, and wondering how he’d reach home from there, and if he even wanted to return to Gyeeds, when the voice of Red spoke in his mind: “Would you like me to take you to Gyeeds?”

Jason jumped. “Uh...” he said “I guess so. Yes, please.”

There was a flash, and Jason found himself on the side of a mountain. He'd expected it to be noon at the moment at this longitude, but the skies were dark—and as he looked downwards, he began to see why. Before him, in an area countless miles across, stretching beyond the extents of his vision, the air from the ground to the clouds was filled with thick, poisonous black smoke. A few patches of ground had been cleared of smog by errant winds. From these he could see that where skyscrapers had once stood, there was now a level plain of gray dust.

"Only one thing could have brought about such destruction:" Jason said in a soft, quavering voice: "nuclear weapons."

"Guided by no less than the hand of Death!"

Jason whirled around and there was Roland, the picture of health. He had been standing there, silently, his arms crossed, an ancient grief on his young face, ever since Jason had arrived. "It is as you surmised," he said. "The war to end all wars has begun."

Jason drank in the scene. "Oh, my," was all he could say.

"You fool!" said Roland. "You wouldn't listen to me when I told you that Simon was evil to the core, would you? A billion people have paid for your mistake!"

"Well," said Jason, "if it makes you feel any better, I'm on your side now." He stared at the colossal plumes of smoke. "Not that I have a choice. But yes, I'm at the service of Life." He bit his lip. "I went to speak to Leela. She's dead. Simon killed her."

Roland nodded. "Courage told me. A pity. She was no friend of Life, but I'm sure she would join us now, given the chance. Matricide! My only regret in fighting for Life is that if we win, Simon will be part of the same joyous harmony of all living things as everyone else. Oh, if I could but send him to some private hell! But some things are more important than vengeance."

"I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"I've changed. I know what's of true value now." He walked to the edge of the cliff and stretched out a hand towards the smoldering ruins of Gyeeds. "What destruction! What slaughter! Just think of everything that's been lost. So many people. So many buildings. So many parks."

"So many art museums," said Jason. "So many universities. So many research laboratories. So many irreplaceable historical artifacts of civilizations long extinct."

"Don't worry about that. We'll be making plenty of history of our own."

Jason suppressed a shudder. "Curtis wasn't in Gyeeds, was he?"

"No, thank God, he's alive and well. He's helping to hone the skills of our Imagination mages right now."

"Our Imagination mages?"

"Don't you see, Jason? The real, full-scale conflict between Life and Death has begun. Lloyd and Ursamor are dead, slain in the initial volley of nuclear weapons, and all the remaining political boundaries between allied nations have dissolved. You and I fight, with three hundred billion others, under a single banner: the trefoil knot of Life."

"Three hundred billion!" Jason breathed.

"Yes! And as Champion, I am the highest-ranking human being among them; my authority is second only to the gods themselves. And you, Jason, are to be our adviser.

I have Love's word that in raw cunning, you are unmatched by anyone in the multiverse."

Jason's stomach tightened. "I may be. But our opponent's Champion, you know, is among the most discerning people I've ever met..."

"Have faith! Your brain should be more than a match for his, and the All-Mother has more than a little wits, as well. Besides, we have the moral advantage. Right makes might."

There was a long pause.

"We should go now," said Roland. "I was born here, but now, the whole continent is uninhabitable. Look how thoroughly the sun has been blotted out already. Those creatures that are still alive now won't last much longer. Without enough sunlight, plants will die; without enough plants, herbivores will die; without enough herbivores, carnivores will die. Life is vast and beautiful, but it's really quite delicate. It's our job to defend it."

No more than a day later, Jason first saw the carnage—violence on a scale several orders of magnitude beyond World War II, yielding body counts that made the Black Death seem benign—with his own eyes. On the side of Life were dragons and graylings and elephant-sized wolves; on the side of Death were monsters like the hulk that had punched Roland and the giant statue that had laid siege to Gyeeds; on both sides were humans, on foot and in tanks, fighters, and bombers. So odd was it to see all these in one gigantic melee that it might've been humorous were it not for the bloodshed. Almost every battle began on a fresh verse, and it didn't take long for the armies to level cities and paint green meadows red with blood. And yet all this death and destruction paled in comparison to the scene in those verses the armies stayed well clear of: nuclear fallout. It was only now that both sides had exhausted their nuclear arsenals that they had fallen back on conventional warfare.

As both armies could instantly transport themselves to anywhere in the multiverse more or less at will, neither could safely keep permanent headquarters. Instead, they moved their camps daily, if not more frequently, using countless huge tents or nearby cities as shelter. It was in Life's mobile camp, among monsters and human soldiers who were suddenly fully willing to cooperate, that Jason spent most of his time during the war.

During many of his waking hours in the camp, Jason sat in what was called "the war room": a tent filled with benches arranged in a circle. With him were all the highest-ranking generals, the greatest and most loyal of the military commanders culled from the thousands of nations that fought for Life, as well as a handful of special advisers, Curtis, Roland, and usually Red in vulpine form. Together, they planned the campaign, focusing mostly on the strategic issues of greatest scope, but also giving no small amount of attention to individual battles. Jason was at first overwhelmed by the awesome responsibility and the dozens of people trying to get a word in simultaneously. He felt more than a little like he had in the Interdimensional Council. But over the first week, as he became more familiar with the logistics of war and the personalities of the group, he began to carefully consider all he had heard and made bold suggestions accordingly. On the whole, the group was highly willing to listen to him, and the generals implemented his suggestions—to great success. Life

hadn't started the war off on the right foot; Death had struck first, and struck hard; now, the tide began to turn. Jason kept Simon and Death guessing. He became a master of the feint, forcing the Death-army to spread itself out in awkward ways and then striking it where it was weakest four times throughout the war. He maximized the effectiveness of Life's army by designing new tactics that creatively employed the particular quirks of its monsters and the spells of its mages. (He even convinced Life to mass-produce one monster of his own design, a tiny flying, biting insect that spread a deadly plague.) And thanks to his magical coin, Jason was able to keep the others informed of Simon's plans and expectations.

Jason's participation in the war wasn't limited to planning. More and more frequently, he would watch battles play out as he flew high above them. When he spotted a small-scale struggle that seemed it might ultimately be of consequence, he would join it himself, taking the form of a sauropod and trampling the Mortal soldiers. In this fashion, though he was but one among billions, he was able to make his own small contribution. The idea wasn't his own: before he'd fought in these battles even once, Roland had begun patrolling the skies himself.

Among his comrades, Jason's successes made him more of a celebrity than ever before. Before, he had been famous in Gyeeds; now, he was famous in half the multiverse, and infamous in the other half. People, from noncombatants to civilian leaders to many of the generals he regularly met in the war room, as well as Life's sapient creations, worshiped him to a frightening degree. They frequently made exaggerated submissive gesture before speaking to him, and addressed him with ludicrous titles such as "young seer", "warrior of many shapes" (alternatively, "polymorphic warrior"), "prince of plots", and "king of cunning". Jason was tempted to ask them to cut it out, but he knew such idolatry might be useful someday if he allowed it to flourish, so he let it be.

There were at least four other entities who the people held in yet higher esteem than Jason. The top three were, of course, the Vital trinity (Green and Blue, though they rarely showed up in the war room, were active elsewhere); the fourth was Roland Moralheart. If Jason and Curtis were allies of Life, then Roland was its right hand. The Champion of Life was tireless; he spent sixteen hours a day planning strategy, planning tactics, watching (and often participating in) battles, training Emotion mages, resolving conflicts between disparate parts of the colossal army, digesting the daily reports of his chief intelligence officer, overseeing the acquirement and distribution of supplies, overseeing the design and production of war machines, and otherwise taking responsibility for a hundred-billion-man operation.

Morale wasn't always as high as it could be in Life's camp. With each setback—and, even if Life was generally winning, there were frequent setbacks—discontent oozed its way into the ranks, occasionally growing to the point of despair. But the army always bounced back. Its resilience, at least in part, was thanks to Roland's charisma. Whenever the going got rough, Roland would fly to a high perch like the corner of a roof of a ten-story building, and there, to a teeming carpet of human beings that seemed to stretch away endlessly in every direction, he would give a speech. His speeches were totally improvised yet passionate; they "came straight from the heart". With a magically magnified voice, he would decry the dread agenda

of Death, extol the glorious plans of Life, and urge the importance of each individual's contribution. Those who lived to see the end of the war, he said, would share in the joy that life had always striven for since its inception four billion years ago; those who died would be martyrs of life itself, the greatest cause there ever was. He told them to be proud and grateful that they could be a part, however small, of the most decisive event in the history of life, that they could fight under the banner of righteousness itself.

By and large, they were. The dissenters had long since changed their minds, fled, or died.

64

Quantity, not Quality

One day, exhausted from a long battle and a longer conference in the war room, Jason lay down on a grassy hill on the outskirts of the camp. Here, in mid-January in this continent of this verse—whatever its name was; Jason had honestly forgotten—it was late spring. Around him was the powerful aroma of flowers and the quiet buzz of bees, and before him, the local sun was halfway below the horizon. Jason was greatly enjoying himself thinking of nothing at all, his mind as devoid of significant ideas as a typical American celebrity-idolatry magazine—and then he smelled a visitor. “Curtis?”

“Yup.” the prince replied, and there he was, standing over Jason with a concerned expression. “You can still smell well. But you’ve changed.”

“Me, changed?” said Jason. “The multiverse as a whole is very much in flux, but me?” He glanced at his stump.

“How many people did you kill today?” Curtis asked.

“Uh... I didn’t count. Eighteen, maybe?”

“That’s what I mean! Remember when you got that girl killed, the truck driver? You felt awful! I could see it.”

“Well... Roland gave me grief about that. And I killed Thorm, too.”

“But it wasn’t *just* what he said. Remember when Miles died? You didn’t even kill him. But you were scared. I was scared, too. And I didn’t think—and I don’t think you thought—we were gonna get killed. Death is scary.” Jason was silent, and Curtis went on “You used to respect life. Now you don’t. What happened?”

“Be careful with the word ‘life’. For us, it has two distinct meanings. Roland is the Champion of Life, but does he respect life?”

Curtis nodded. “More than before. Have you been watching him?”

“No, to be honest, I’ve been steering clear of him.”

“He cries a lot. I asked him why. He said that sometimes it’s about Beatrix, but sometimes he just feels bad about all those deaths. A *lot* of people are dying! Billions! A *huge* number!”

“The casualties are nearly beyond reckoning.” Jason agreed.

“Well, why doesn’t it bother you? It bothers me! It bothers Roland!”

“It—it does bother me!”

“You’re lying!” Curtis cried with sudden violence. His big eyes narrowed with conviction. “Kill if you have to—we all have to kill—but you have to be conscious of what you’re doing! What are you fighting for, anyway?”

“You’re holding me to much higher standards than the other hundred billion

people on our side actually abide by.” said Jason. His voice was icy, but it was only a cover for the frightening seed of doubt Curtis had just planted in his heart. “Soldiers, as a rule, have little regard for human life.”

Curtis swore vehemently. “You’re dodging what I’m trying to say. Maybe some of our guys don’t really care about the people they kill. A lot do care about them. But almost everyone values life. That’s why they’re on our side. They don’t *want* to kill people. They want to preserve life. They kill for the greater good. But you... Jason... you’re not really fighting for Life’s sake, are you?”

“Well, no. I’ve never pretended to, either. From the beginning, the understanding has been that I fight for Life not because I want Life to win, but Death to lose—just as Beatrix did.”

“Then who are you really fighting for?”

“Myself.” said Jason, though he was unsure it was the truth.

Curtis glared at Jason for a while. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t think this is characteristic behavior for me?”

“No. I think you’ve always been... well, less good than I am. Less good than I thought Simon was—but Simon fooled me.” (Jason considered replying “No, he didn’t.”, but he kept his mouth shut.) “This is different. This is worse. You’re much more callous than you used to be.”

Jason couldn’t deny that, so he didn’t. He had simply grown inured to slaughter. So often had he seen fields full of mangled corpses that they no longer seemed remarkable. So used was he to the knowledge that so many of the multiverse’s most populous nations had been nuked out of existence that learning some famous verse was no longer habitable rarely surprised him. How could one stay sane amid all this bloodshed, he thought, without ignoring it, in one way or another? After all, the scale of it was already so woefully beyond human imagination as to make it seem highly unreal. In a certain sense, Jason felt he might as well be in a TV show for real, after all.

“Does it have to do with puberty?” Curtis asked at length.

“Puberty? I think Red said I wasn’t due for that for another few weeks.”

“It’s supposed to be gradual.”

“Possibly, but my body remains stubbornly boyish, and I can’t say I’ve felt the pangs of love. Do magical olfaction and a missing hand and frequent shapeshifting (into sexually mature forms, no less) retard puberty? The only strangeness in such matters I can report is that I don’t feel Life’s presence. I used to; I did three times, in three different ways. But now, it seems quite ordinary. Does that signify that puberty is a lot less strange to and distant from me than before? Possibly.” *And if so, I doubt it’s a good omen.* Jason added mentally. He hadn’t forgotten Leela’s warning. Time was running short: if it came too early, puberty could ruin everything.

Curtis abruptly turned around and stalked off, saying as he did so “I dunno what to do with you.” Jason’s mind was no longer so empty.

After that encounter, Jason and Curtis, once close, began to drift apart, even as they both fought for Life—both enthusiastically, and both effectively—in their own ways.

As the war dragged on, the fighting only grew more frantic, the battles bloodier, the

surviving portion of each retreating battalion smaller. And even as the armies shrank by slaughter, they grew by enlistment. Practically every nation in every IDC verse had been involved from the beginning; now, each side was drawing on other verses, those that had never developed any kind of verseportation, for fresh blood. It wasn't long before people who had never seen weapons more sophisticated than crossbows were being equipped with machine guns and Piercers, and people who hailed from planets where real magic had never been discovered were being taught to cast spells. And please note that I say "people" rather than "men" for a reason: Life and Death were strictly equal-opportunity employers. Everyone, male and female, young and old, blind and sighted, crippled and able-bodied, was made to fight, or, if they were obviously incapable of fighting, to help out in some other way.

Jason wondered whether a certain verse he knew quite well would be among those "other verses". He was not disappointed. Flying above a battlefield one day, he made out, quite distinctly, an American flag. It was on the side of Death, of course; Jason had to smirk when he thought of where the "culture of life" had finally led the United States. Then the smirk disappeared, for he realized that among those teeming masses of humanity he was just now deciding how to destroy, there could be his own family.

Weeks passed, and on the last day of January, Jason finally felt the war might have come to the tipping-point. There was to be a battle which, if Death lost, the remainder of its army would be decisively smaller than Life's, and its ultimate defeat would then become probable. The battle was fought, and Life did well. Yet Death didn't flee when Jason expected it to. The portion of the Death-army present kept on fighting even as it was outnumbered five to four, then three to two, then two to one, then three to one.

"They are more courageous than wise!" remarked Green, sitting next to Jason on a high cliff. He had the same muscular green fox-form he'd taken in Jason's dream. "It looks like they'll fight to the last man. So be it."

"And with so much of the Death-army present, too." said Jason. "I'd expect much more of Simon. Not that he appears to be here today."

After another two hours, it appeared that the last man really had died. The Life-army had spread itself out all over the battlefield hunting for survivors. And then Death's plan began to dawn on everyone: every corpse on the battlefield, human or beast, Vital or Mortal, momentarily glowed with a malevolent violet light. From Jason's vantage point, they looked like a million fireflies lighting up simultaneously. Then the corpses arose, and with flesh still drooping from their bones began to fight.

Thus the thinly spread, fatigued, and victory-sure Life-army found itself under attack by a swarm of zombies and skeletons, soldiers who did not tire and had no pride to blind them. They were nearly mindless, but they were no sluggish undead; they ran as fast as a pestilence, and struck as mercilessly as a famine. And, not being living creatures, they were immune to the plague Jason's flies spread, immune to poisoned weapons and venomous bites, immune for all practical purposes to bullets. The only way to dispatch them was to pound them to dust or burn them to ashes, and few soldiers had the presence of mind to do either. Life fled even as more undead teleported in, the bodies no doubt taken from earlier battles.

That day's meeting in the war room was a sober one. "Obviously I didn't give

Simon enough credit.” said Jason. “We’ve been pulling practically all the stops since day one, but Simon was wise enough to save one trick—to keep us completely unaware of one very special weapon Death possessed—until the very moment it would be most effective. There were many deaths on the battlefield today, both of Death’s soldiers and ours, and every one of those dead bodies became a new Mortal soldier. The tables have been more or less turned.”

“Admittedly, this is a great setback.” said Red. “But I have one last secret weapon of my own, which is yet greater in power.”

The weapon? No less than the power God gave to Adam and Eve: to be fruitful, and multiply. All of a sudden, children, human and otherwise, were being born, and how fast they grew! By Life’s power, it took three days for a freshly conceived human zygote to become an adult raring for battle. Of course, three-day-old adults had no better minds than three-day-old infants—learning one’s first language takes a great deal longer than three days!—but these were supernaturally comfortable in their own bodies, able to walk and run without any practice, and they had an instinctive propensity for killing things in whatever way they could. And, of course, they were themselves quite capable of reproducing.

You can imagine, then, how appropriate the word “multiply” was: within a week, these explosively-breeding meat-shields, affectionately referred to as “rabbits”, had outnumbered their sapient ancestors. The only factor retarding their initial growth was that many people weren’t inclined to produce them, especially after they saw the adults. The rabbits themselves had no such qualms, to the point that their females were almost perpetually pregnant, which was why in general only males fought.

Jason found the rabbits disturbing. How vile, he thought, for such beasts to romp about in human skins. He didn’t care to learn the exact means by which such creatures could be born and grow so quickly. Still, they served their purpose. The ability to raise the dead had roughly doubled the might of the Death-army, and Simon fought much more aggressively than before. Without the rabbits, Life would’ve been quickly overwhelmed, as Simon had intended; with them, it suffered only a few sore defeats before starting to strike back. Weak as they were, the rabbits were without number; they simply swarmed the enemy far more quickly than they could be killed. Flaming sticks were sufficient arms to make them effective. They had no respect at all for their dead, and simply trampled right over the bodies, allowing Death few openings to raise the latter. And so with quantity, not quality, Life speedily regained the lead.

65

Dead Simple

It was early February; Jason wouldn't be quite prepubescent for much longer. In the war room, he said that in order to press its advantage, the Life-army ought to attack continuously from here on, with the goal of winning the war as quickly as possible. In truth, this was hardly an ideal strategy. Since the rabbit population grew by about a fourth each day under any circumstances, and the Death-army couldn't grow at all without fresh corpses, Life had everything to gain by avoiding combat and biding its time. It was only with great difficulty and especially rough handling of the truth that Jason convinced those assembled to go along with the idea, and although Red gave its okay, Jason wasn't sure he'd really convinced it.

Happily, Life already had enough rabbits to support such an offensive campaign. Again and again, the rabbits trampled the undead hordes. Though many of them died, their growth never slowed down significantly. Death soon became conspicuously desperate; it risked sizable portions of its troops on a few massive attacks. This helped it, especially by providing fresh dead bodies to reanimate. Still, it appeared to be losing.

Jason had a bad feeling about Valentine's Day. As the antagonism between Life and Death had increased over the past couple of months, the causality warp had appeared to grow more pronounced, not least in how important dates in the Gregorian calendar had been much more important than usual. On Christmas Day, the gods had chosen their Champions, and on New Year's Eve, Simon had killed Leela. What, then, could Jason expect today? Surely Valentine's Day wasn't as important a holiday as Christmas or New Year's, but the possible association with Love wasn't lost on Jason.

Hardly had everyone settled down in the war room to plan Life's next attack when a visitor wearing the black uniform of Death arrived, escorted by two graylings who guarded the tent. He was a large man, surprisingly well-muscled, with a face reminiscent of a weasel. Jason thought he looked familiar, but couldn't for the life of him remember anything about him.

"This man claims to be a messenger." said one of the graylings in his high, fluting voice.

"And he is one." said Jason, looking up from his coin.

"Then say on." said Roland.

"The Champion of Death" said the messenger "proposes a private battle between himself and three of you: namely, the Champion of Life, Jason Blue, and

Curtis Debyeamo." Everyone cast inquiring glances at each other, the named parties especially. "The rules are that no other help, including from the gods themselves, is allowed, and no one may leave the fight until Simon is destroyed or all three of the others are dead. If you accept the challenge, show up here in exactly an hour." A hologram appeared in the center of the tent, above the map-covered grass. It depicted a long, narrow cliff projecting into a wide canyon. "The verse is 5,119." said the messenger. "That's all."

"All right." said Roland. "You're free to go." The graylings led him out. "Three against one! That lich must be feeling cocky." He paused, and half of the tent's occupants began waving their hands. "General Talbot, what do you have to say?"

Talbot Iceslicer enjoyed a higher rank in the Life-army than the old Gyeedian navy. He'd been brought into the army's inner circle at Jason's insistence, so that all Jason's wild plans would be subject to a helpful dissenting voice; Jason didn't generally think it wise to surround oneself with yes-men. "Don't even think about it." said Talbot. "We're already winning. We have a lot to lose by this and precious little to gain."

"I admit I don't like the idea of dying," said Jason, "but I think Simon's destruction would be a definite gain. Right now, we're more likely to win than lose. With Simon out of the way, our ultimate victory would be all but guaranteed."

"What guarantee do we have that Simon will abide by his own rules of engagement?" said the head of the air force.

"Simon and Death are sticklers for rules." said Roland. "You may recall that our enemies have only broken any given law of war after we broke it ourselves. It's no secret that their priorities are warped beyond reason."

"That's true." said Talbot. "The foremost question in my mind, then, is Simon's motive."

Jason said "I can't imagine any other than what Roland implied: Simon feels he can kill all three of us on his own, and he hopes to improve Death's prospects that way. Now, why the classic trio, in particular?"

"I can answer that one." said Red. "Simon wants you dead, Jason, nearly as much as he wants Roland dead. Furthermore, he knows the three of you quite well. No doubt he plans to take advantage of your particular weaknesses."

"Of which we have plenty," said Jason darkly, "and he has few. We've often surprised him using the foreknowledge the coin gives me, but in general, I've never known a less trickable man. The only more discerning person I know of was a woman..."

"We can't do this." said Curtis. "Can't! Remember that thing you said Simon did to Leela, Pup? He just did something, and after a couple minutes, she died. He'd do that to us!"

"That can be prevented." said Red. "I, or Roland if necessary, can give you enough of my power to protect you from such insidious spells. The danger is more conventional violence." It narrowed its eyes. "Will you then do this?"

"I will." said Roland, rising. He clenched a fist. "I think the time has come."

Shakily, Jason got up as well. "This offers a very quick and low-casualty route to victory. I'm not going to let it slip by." *If only I could do so!* he thought. *But it isn't safe to delay even one more day than is absolutely necessary.*

Lots of people appeared to want to object; Roland waved his hand dismissively. "The decision's been made," he said. "You are coming, Curtis, aren't you?"

"Yeah, if Jason's coming," said Curtis. "That doesn't mean I want to."

As soon as the threesome arrived, Jason realized the significance of the location: it was the very same cliff on which he'd slept the night after being removed from Earth, and first spoke to Roland the morning after.

It was night here, yet there was no shortage of light. The stars, unobscured by a single cloud, were unusually abundant and brilliant, and both of the twin moons were waxed full, suffusing the canyon with a bluish-silver glow. Though he knew his eyes were deceiving him, Jason couldn't shake the images he saw in the moons' rocky surface: a trefoil knot in one and a skull in the other.

"So we're safe from the guaranteed-death attack?" said Curtis. It came out as a whisper, probably not, Jason thought, because the prince had intended it.

"Quite so," said Roland not much louder. "He won't even bother trying it. He'll attack in other ways." He shuddered. "My first tussle with Simon as Champion of Death was harrowing enough, and that was in broad daylight. I don't look forward to this."

"Not even with the potential for vengeance?" said Jason.

"I fear I might not get to avenge Beatrix," said Roland. "Such mighty evil... my God! I already regret taking on this challenge." Jason found these words not a little disheartening. If even the hot-blooded Champion of Life was reduced to morbidity, than what they were about to face was fearsome indeed.

"When's he gonna show up?" said Curtis, with more trepidation than impatience.

Roland looked at his watch. "We're just a few seconds away from 'exactly an hour' after the messenger said those words. Possibly Simon intends—"

And then, without any fanfare or warning, there appeared the Champion of Death. Just a moment's glance at him nearly stopped Jason's heart. No part of his appearance had objectively changed—he had the same skeleton and the same skull symbols on his shoulders—but Jason felt he could see, even feel in the air, the change of intention. No more was he interested primarily in merely *preparing* a great army, or in killing one, but not all, of the people before him; no more did he wish to recruit Jason. His mission here was to kill, plain and simple, and the terrifying part of it was that he had not the least inhibitions or doubts, not even the warped sense of righteousness Roland felt when he polished off a gang of criminals. He didn't feel any special justification was called for; he only wished to obliterate Jason, Roland, and Curtis as he wished to obliterate everything. In short, Simon had no regard for human life whatsoever. The reason it struck Jason so was that for the first time, he himself was on the receiving end.

Mind you that all these thoughts flit through Jason's mind in a fraction of a second. Before any of the trio could react physically to his presence, Simon made the first move: he gave Curtis a telekinetic shove, sending the boy sailing the edge.

Without hesitation, Jason went to save Curtis himself. He became a falcon for diving and a pterodactyl for grabbing, as he'd caught the acquaintance of Beatrix's; he was fast enough that Curtis didn't fall very far. He flew away from the initial cliff

as he rose with Curtis dangling from his claws, hoping to get far enough away that he could place Curtis on solid ground without Simon attacking the two of them en route.

The scene Jason saw once he got high enough to watch Simon and Roland fight wasn't comforting. It seemed to be a repeat of their Gyeedian duel, except this time, Simon wasn't holding back, and Roland knew it. Simon nullified mighty blasts of flame and burning light with just a wave of his skeletal hand, and returned with storms of razor-thin ice crystals that slid through Roland's body more smoothly than bullets, and a sort of carnivorous violet ooze that Roland had to burn off of himself. The Champion of Life was being badly beaten—and as despair grew in his heart, his spells only grew feebler. Simon had reversed the characteristic vicious cycle of Emotion magic, with dreadful consequences.

"We've gotta help him!" Curtis cried. "Drop me off, quick!"

While Jason couldn't transform to reply, he agreed with the sentiment. He flew in a wide loop to end up a bit behind the Champions, who were now fighting in the air around the cliff. As soon as he'd dropped Curtis onto the dusty ground, he turned into a hundred-ton sauropod and stampeded towards the Champions. Simon flew farther away from the cliff until he was out of range, meanwhile repelling a missile from Roland. Jason became a bird and swooped at the skeleton, narrowly dodging a blast of ice, and then became a blue whale. His massive bulk bore down on Simon like a freight train on an ant—an ant wielding the power of Death itself, that is. For Jason was horrified to find himself stopped in midair: Simon had arrested his prodigious momentum with his bare hands, himself moving only a few feet backwards. Where the undead bones touched him, Jason's skin instantly grew numb with cold. Simon gave the colossal bulk a mighty shove, and Jason found himself hurtling downwards. By the time he'd changed back into a hawk and stopped his descent, he'd fallen a sickening distance.

Simon had already demonstrated that Curtis's chief vulnerability was his inability to fly. Curtis had therefore created an enormous, black-feathered bird on whose back he now stood. He flew towards Simon, his hands outstretched to cast a spell. Simon came to meet him, easily dodging the projectile, and then, as he passed under the bird, fired the killing-spell at it, the same one that Curtis feared. Immediately the bird became too weak to fly; it rolled over a few times, sending Curtis plummeting again, as it fell. Jason successfully caught the prince only because he was already so low.

"Thanks again," said Curtis, as Jason flew away. "Except we might die anyway. We're losing!"

We're sure to lose Jason thought *if you're always falling, and I spend all of my time catching you*. He looked back at the Champions as he moved away from them. Roland was acting as if he'd already given up; he attacked halfheartedly, and barely attempted to resist the harm being poured upon him. Hopeless as he felt, things could only go downhill from here.

Or could they?

A strange idea came to Jason as he flapped his leathery wings through the canyon. After killing Curtis's bird, Simon had turned to Roland and ignored Curtis altogether; Roland hadn't bothered himself with Curtis at all, probably because he'd seen Jason fly to the rescue. Neither Champion could be sure what had actually

happened, since they hadn't paid attention. But perhaps at least one would care.

Instead of putting Curtis back on the high cliff, Jason took him to a much lower and less visible shelf in the rock, and dropped him there.

"No, Jay!" said Curtis, hurriedly getting to his feet. "Take me back!"

Jason landed beside Curtis and took his human form just long enough to say "Stay hidden. Don't let them know you're alive." Ignoring Curtis's protests, he flew away again, simply hoping the mage would obey him. He returned to the dueling Champions, noticing how much things had worsened in the few minutes he'd been gone. Perching on a nearby ledge, he changed to his natural shape and shouted, with as much anguish and surprise in his voice as he could muster, "Curtis is dead!"

Roland froze, horrified. "What?" he said in a stupor. Simon took the opportunity to shower him with needles of ice. His face was a mask of blood—and, immediately thereafter, of wrath. "O slayer of innocence," he said with dire venom, "I shall serve you your judgment."

That judgment was a fearsome sight to behold: Roland Moralheart, Champion of Life, unleashing the full power at his command. Everything Jason had seen him use before was nothing compared to what he threw at Simon now: columns of white flame ten feet in diameter, streaks of lightning that curved through the air like sea-snakes through water, and swarms of tiny green lights that attacked like bees, but could erode Simon's bones. Simon's ability to nullify or evade such attacks was far from perfect. Within a few minutes, Simon was missing his right hand and his entire right leg, and the whole of him was charred black. Yet he fought on—Roland was still gravely wounded, after all. Jason wasn't certain who would win. He wondered if he could help Roland.

Jason had already noticed that heat was Simon's weakness. The Champion of Death extinguished the flames immediately after each time he was ignited, and still, they burned away a good chunk of him. He clearly couldn't tolerate the least fire. Suddenly Jason realized how he could take advantage of this. At the moment, the Champions were dueling in the air below him, beside the great face of the cliff he stood on. He turned into a hawk and came near them; they paid him little attention. He watched Roland, and when the Champion of Life next created flames, Jason flew near enough to catch on fire, while not near enough to be burnt to a crisp. The pain was instantaneous and overwhelmingly searing, as if he had fallen into a volcano. Fighting to stay conscious, he flew as far up as he dared, then swooped down at Simon, transformed into a whale at the last moment—the flames grew with him, as he'd anticipated—and slammed Simon into the canyon wall. Since Jason was covered with flames, Simon hadn't dared to touch him in order to stop him; since he was so large, Simon wasn't able to fly away in time. Jason switched back to avian form and reeled towards Roland; Roland healed him, both extinguishing the flames and the damage they had done.

There wasn't much left of Simon now. Most of the skeleton had broken and fallen off; what remained was cracked and wreathed in flames. Roland gave Simon another fiery blast; Simon didn't resist. A thick but highly localized rain of ashes fell down from where the skeleton had been—and nothing was left.

"Finally destroyed." Roland muttered. "I can barely believe it."

"Hardly gone forever, I reckon." said Jason, standing on the cliff. "We destroyed

the body, but I think the mind continues to exist so long as Death does.”

“That can be remedied.” said Roland. “Although if Simon has now escaped obliteration for the third time, chances are he has even more lives up his sleeve. He always struck me as feline.”

Red appeared beside Jason. “I’m afraid you’re both right.” it said. “Simon himself still exists. However, the skeleton, and all the power Death lent to him, are gone forever.”

Roland smiled. “Have we won the war, then?”

“Essentially, yes.” said Red. “There is no conceivable way that Death could recover from a loss like this. It’s only a matter of time before we annihilate what remains of the Death-army. Then, Death itself will be sufficiently weak that I may attack it with a guarantee of victory.”

Roland nodded. “Now, Jason—where’s Curtis’s body?”

Jason couldn’t help laughing. “He’s alive and well. I just said that he’d died so you’d get angry.”

Roland blinked slowly. “I don’t like to be deceived. But I suppose deception is all right if it’s for a good cause.”

“Yes,” said Jason, “and though I have my doubts, I like to think our cause is a good one.”

Jason had lied again. When he’d said “our”, he’d really meant “my”.

66

The Ultimate Alliance

Once Roland had announced to the Life-army that Simon had been destroyed, Green, somehow making its voice heard over the enthusiastic cheering of billions, proclaimed that for today, no more battles would be fought. "All of us have made innumerable sacrifices for the sake of Life, and some work still remains to be done. But today is a day to rest and congratulate ourselves—today is a day of celebration!"

It had been late morning here when Jason, Roland, and Curtis had returned from the canyon; the festivities began shortly thereafter, and showed no sign of stopping soon. There were sex, drugs, and rock-'n'-roll aplenty. Jason took no part in these things; he was in no mood for a party. All he did was procrastinate what he'd long ago decided he had to do. He wandered about aimlessly, dwelling on the past and dreading the future. When anyone tried to talk to him, even Roland or Curtis, he would only scowl at them and walk away.

Many hours passed. Finally, a while before midnight, with the party to end all parties showing no signs of slowing down, Jason decided he'd tarried long enough. He flew far away from the camp, until it was no longer visible, then took human form again and looked up at the sky. And then, before he could do anything else, Blue appeared. Jason shrieked with surprise.

"I'm very sorry I scared you." said Blue in a soft and gentle voice. Its shape was the same that Jason remembered from his dream: a smallish, slender fox with brilliant deep-blue fur and large, watery eyes. "I only wanted to say one thing to you."

"And... what is that?" said Jason. When the gods spoke, he listened.

"I understand how you don't like the rowdy, vivacious, active side of Life so much." said Blue. "Clearly, while so many fight for Life for the sake of Love and Courage, you do so not because of them but in spite of them."

"Yes, I suppose that's right. My feud with Red is no secret, and I don't like what Green likes much better."

"Yet you are on the side of Life, since you do value other aspects of it."

"Yes." said Jason, unsure if this was the truth. "Certainly I prefer it to Death."

"But I want to remind you that life isn't entirely a matter of movement and energy. It consists also of rest and relaxation, along with the virtues that naturally arise from a serene state, such as forgiveness and gratitude. Like the eye of a hurricane, there is a peaceful refuge in the midst of dynamism."

"So what you're saying is, the multiverse as Life will reshape it won't be totally chaotic?"

"Exactly. There will be order within the larger disorder." Jason nodded. "Take comfort in this. That's all. Would you like me to take you back to the camp?"

"No, thanks." said Jason. "I need to be on my own."

"I understand, but it's dangerous for you to be alone. Death could attack you while no one else is around to help. I don't want you to die, Jason!"

"I'm fine, okay?"

"Suit yourself." With a strange ruffling sound, the fox faded into nothingness.

Now, what am I to make of all that? Jason wondered, looking up at the night sky. *Oh, never mind it. I've already made my decision.* His spread his arms upwards, his lone hand opened beseechingly. "Are you there, Death?" he called. "It's me, Jason. We need to talk."

And at once, he was plunged into darkness.

No, actually, "darkness" doesn't cover it. Jason was not only blind. He was also deaf, and he could no longer feel even the sensations that were always with him: the feel of his socks on his feet, for instance. In fact, he had no evidence whatsoever that he still had a body. He was only a mind adrift in a colossal void.

Ye gods! thought Jason. Is this the afterlife?

And then, to his surprise, he received a reply. "No; you're still alive." Somehow, the message was completely voiceless, silent: the sensation wasn't auditory, but purely verbal, as if the words had been written into Jason's brain. The language was clear enough: it was English.

Wha—who's reading my mind? Jason thought.

"I'm only 'reading your mind' insofar as you believe you're keeping your thoughts private. In fact, you're broadcasting them. If you wish to keep your thoughts secret, will them to be so."

Stay secret, you stupid thoughts! Stay secret! But then, how can I communicate with this thing? Well, I suppose I can broadcast only the thoughts I want—I can speak. "Who are you?" he "said".

It appeared to have worked. "Death."

"Oh. I thank you for not killing me."

"You're welcome. I'll probably kill you soon enough, since you've given me the chance, but first I want to hear what you have to say."

Good enough. "I wanted to propose we join forces, in a strange way."

"Join forces? My Champion offered alliance to you many weeks ago, and instead you aided Life. You, of all the humans in the Life-army bar Roland, have done the most to hinder me. Why should I want you as an ally?"

"Because you're doomed, Death. Life has already won the war. It's only a matter of time before the final battle between you and the Vital trinity, and by then you'll be far too weak to win it."

"Admittedly, I stand to lose a great deal in the coming weeks. But my raw personal power is still not much less than Life's. Were we to duel now, no one could predict which of us would win."

"Yes, I know that. I've chosen my moment to make this offer to you carefully. You're now losing the war badly enough that victory is no longer a real possibility, yet you yourself have lost only a little power."

"I don't view my prospects as pessimistically as you do. Though I try to

maximize my probability of victory, its actual value is irrelevant to me. The reason is that total annihilation is my only goal; I unconditionally devote all of my energies towards it."

"I... I realize that, and I don't like the idea of total annihilation one bit. What I ask is that, because you'll never get quite what you want, you help me achieve a more modest goal."

"'Never'? There remains a chance!"

"A negligible chance. An infinitesimal chance. You were doomed as soon as the first rabbits were born. Don't underestimate exponential growth—that mistake has been made too many times already. You simply can't win against an army that nearly doubles every three days."

"My army has good leadership—mine and Simon's. You won't live to lead the Life-army again."

"Irrelevant! Life doesn't need me any more. You'll be overwhelmed. Just think how long it will take until every inhabitable verse is covered with a teeming carpet of rabbits. They'll destroy your entire army long before they run out of food. Don't kid yourself, Death. If things are left as they are, Life *will* win—and I don't like that prospect much more than you do."

"What else is there for me to do? What 'modest goal' could possibly be easier to achieve than total annihilation, yet comparable in effect?"

"Annihilation not of everything, but of you and Life."

"That would be madness. Reality would be left as it was before either of us appeared: complicated, arbitrary, full of suffering, meaningless."

"So it would. But reality isn't *pure* chaos—in fact, at the lowest level, it's very orderly. It may not be deterministic, but it is probabilistic. Most fundamental measurable quantities are, within the scope of the entire multiverse, conserved."

"Entropy is not."

"Entropy?"

"Disorder at the molecular level. It only increases. With each passing moment, each universe expands and becomes less ordered. It may take an unimaginably long time, but eventually, every verse will collapse into a mass of swirling chaos."

"Quite homogeneous swirling chaos?"

"As homogeneous as disorder can be. Then the barriers between verses will begin to break down, and even that crude organization of reality will be gone."

"You don't think—you don't think that someday, with you and Life long gone, other gods—gods with just as much power to mold reality—might arise, in the same way you did?"

Jason got no reply for a while. At last, Death said "I don't know."

"Well, here's what I know. If Life wins, its victory will be irreversible. Order or sanity of any kind will never exist, anywhere, ever again. If both of you are destroyed, the world we're familiar with will continue to exist—and I don't see why, in the many billions of years before... before that collapse you spoke of..."

"The heat deaths of all verses? You're off by countless orders of magnitude."

"Yes, before that, I don't see why another god just like yourself couldn't be born. My race is a hardy and a fast-adapting one. Left on its own, humanity will last a long time, and so long as there is sapience, gods can be born. In short, if you concede

your minute chance of victory, and accept a stalemate instead, your cause may eventually triumph. Otherwise, Life will win. That's my ultimatum: work with me to destroy Life and hope your spiritual successor fares better, or lose everything."

Again, Death seemed to take time to think. "I understand your argument," it said, "but I can't surrender. To rely on my 'spiritual successor' is to place infinite confidence in a being I can never know. Far better to cling to the chance of victory I can be sure exists."

"Death," said Jason, "you want reality to be reduced to nothing very much, don't you?"

"Earnestly. There is nothing else I want."

"Yet isn't want itself what you detest? You hate desire; you wish to destroy it—you desire an end to desire!"

"That's right. And isn't that the only reasonable kind?"

"No, it's—look, I'm offering destruction. If you're destroyed, annihilated, obliterated, you will no longer desire anything. You'll be nothingness—permanently at peace. Isn't that what you want?"

"Not *only* that! I'm not selfish. I want *universal* peace."

"But what's the difference? The only experiences and desires you can rationally believe to exist, independently of all other things, are your own. You have every reason to believe that everything you perceive is dependent on your perceiving them to exist."

"Do you take me for a solipsist?"

"I'm saying that whether or not you find it convenient to model the world as existing independently of yourself, you'd be mad to worry about its state after you have ceased existing. Think of it this way: rather than desiring immediate annihilation of everything, desire your own annihilation, and then, a moment afterwards, that of everything else. As soon as you've accomplished the smaller goal, the larger will no longer concern you in the least. What could be more reasonable?"

"In fact, it's distinctly irrational to concern yourself with the parts of reality you don't perceive. You aren't omniscient—and even if you were, you'd have no way of being sure. Is it so unreasonable to think that the multiverse might be larger than we think it is? Perhaps, even if you did win, you would find yourself insufficiently powerful to destroy *everything*. Perhaps a deity many times mightier than you, who intervenes in our world only occasionally, will stop you. Perhaps we're all under glass, inside a miniature multiverse made for the study or amusement of beings so unlike us that to try to conceive of them would literally drive us insane. When you destroyed the multiverse, one of them would only say 'Oh, what a shame it died out so quickly; I bought it only twenty billion years ago or so.' and promptly replace it with a new one."

"There's only one certainty in all this mystery."

"And that certainty is my offer to you, Death: peace, eternal and permanent peace, nothing less than what you want. Take it or leave it. If Life wins, I think it will be more vengeful than to destroy you completely."

Death thought for a long time. Eventually, it asked "What's your plan?" Jason explained it, and Death said "All right."

Jason could barely believe it. "You'll go along with it?"

"Yes. You've made me uneasy. And make no mistake: I fear Life. If we stand

united, we stand a chance.”

“That’s... that’s the idea.”

“What I’m going to do is concentrate all of my power into a single weapon, the most potent magical object in history: a scythe, I suppose. The bulk of my mind will be burnt away; I won’t be able to advise you. And with my power so contracted, Life will have far more control over the multiverse in general than it does now. The scythe will protect you: so long as you wield it, only Life itself can harm you, and only it, of course, will be able to harm Life.

“I’ll have to purge you of your powers of scent and shapeshifting. They ultimately derive from Life; the scythe would annihilate you if you held it with any Life-power in your possession. Your coin will be gone, too, since that power originally comes from me, and will serve you better in the scythe. Are you ready?”

“Yes.” said Jason.

Nothing appeared to happen for a long time. Then, in the space of a moment, all of Jason’s senses snapped back into life. The scene around him was wholly unfamiliar. It appeared to be late in the morning on a sunshiny, eerily silent spring day; the grass was a lush green, and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Jason was standing at the intersection of perhaps a dozen dirt roads, all of them wide as a highway and meandering all the way to the horizon—some crooked as a criminal, others curvy and circuitous as a lie, but none straight. Right in front of him was a staircase. Covered with red carpet, yet devoid of any guardrails and just five feet wide, it ascended upwards seemingly without end. Without looking under the staircase, Jason had a hunch that it needed no support whatsoever to keep it in the air.

Once he’d gotten over the initial shock of his new surroundings, Jason noticed the object he was clutching. It was the scythe. The pole, black as blindness and gracefully curved, was quite short, shorter than him. The blade, gray as ash, glitteringly reflective as ice, and hooked like a crescent moon, looked quite long. The weapon was heavy, and Jason’s inexperience with weapons in general would have made him clumsy with it in his left hand; in his right, he would be lucky to avoid accidentally hitting himself. Yet he could tell that he wouldn’t need to strike very hard with the scythe in order to kill. And he wouldn’t need to strike at all in order to terrify. Death itself was in the blade, and Jason could feel it; he felt a deep dread just looking at it. Already he knew that all the power he’d given up for the chance to wield this was but a mere fraction of what he had now. He hoped it would be enough.

Gritting his teeth and dragging the scythe behind him, Jason began to climb the stairs.

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NC-17

Though Jason hadn't been able to see any clouds from the ground, he found a great deal of mist on the staircase. He was never in the middle of it; it always appeared to be a good distance in front of him and behind him, yet so thick as to be opaque. Hence, he soon lost sight of the ground, and he was walking up a staircase suspended in the clouds.

He walked for a long time. The scythe increasingly became a burden; with each passing step, it seemed to grow slightly heavier. Glancing at it, Jason was suddenly tempted to toss it aside altogether. He felt a great uneasiness just looking at his reflection in that moon-shaped blade, a keen sense of his mortality. He felt that the scythe, Stormbringer-like, actively thirsted for his life. Still, Jason held on to it. He feared what might happen to him if he relinquished its protection.

After what seemed like ages, Jason came to a greatly elongated step, a sort of miniature landing. Beyond it, the normal stairs resumed. Hardly had Jason stepped onto the landing, wondering what it was for, when something began to form before him. Or was it two things? A host of tiny golden-glowing motes, flying through the air from every direction, was converging into two large masses. Soon the masses began to look human in shape. The shapes grew more and more refined, and then, with a flash, they became a man and a woman, the latter cradling an infant boy in her arms. All were stark naked. Seeing this, Jason was struck by a disturbing thought, and glanced down at himself. But he was fully dressed. In fact, he was wearing one additional garment he hadn't been before: his blue-jean jacket, still bearing the marks of the dragon's claws.

"Jay," said the man, "that's scary."

Jason looked hard at the stranger's face, and quickly realized he wasn't a stranger at all. Jason could recognize that mile-long mouth anywhere: it was Curtis Malloc Debyeamo, albeit aged by a good fifteen years. His voice had matured to a rich baritone, and he wore a light beard and a mustache.

"Curtis," said Jason, "do you have any idea what's going on? I don't."

"We're really close, that's what," said Curtis. "You almost killed Death, or something. Once we finish it off, Life will win!"

"But... no, I mean..." Jason turned to the woman. He didn't recognize her. She looked about Curtis's (current) age. She had long, dirty-blond hair and big, round, sea-green eyes that made Jason think of innocence. "May I ask who you are?" said Jason. The woman stared back at him dumbly.

"She's a rabbit, Jay," said Curtis.

"Oh," said Jason quietly. "And... uh... who's the father of the child?"

Curtis smiled. "Me." Jason felt totally unsure of how to react. "What's that scythe? It's so scary somehow..."

"Death itself," said Jason. "All of Death's power, which used to be spread out over all those undead hordes—and, I guess, over the multiverse in general, in order to keep Life from doing all this—is right here." He held it up.

Curtis looked horrified. "Pup, what are you doing with that? Throw it away, so Life can get rid of it."

"I don't intend to let Life win," said Jason. "I intend to destroy it."

Curtis stumbled back a step. "*Destroy* Life? Are you crazy, man? This is what we've all been waiting for—all been fighting for! And now..."

"Tens of billions of lives are worth this?" said Jason, gesturing to encompass the whole scene.

"No! Look, I mean—I don't know what's up with these stairs and mist and stuff. This is just a bit of the multiverse. Outside, it's a lot better. Paradise! And it's just a taste of what it'll be like when Death is totally gone forever."

"Paradise?"

"Man, you can't imagine it! I mean—think of normal life, how we lived before we all got mixed up with the gods and the wars. It's a mixed bag. Sometimes there are fun moments, happy moments. But just sometimes. And some are happier than others. Mostly, it's all so boring. And then there's the sad moments, and the angry moments, and so on. But now, Jay, there's *just* happiness! Just joy!" He was so thrilled that for a moment he had to stop to catch his breath. "It's all one big party, with feasting, and dancing, and singing, and sleeping, and sex!"

"So the festivities never ended, after all," said Jason darkly.

"Why should they? Don't you like to have *fun*? Man, you're so serious, just like me when I was a kid."

"*When you were* a kid?"

"Well, yeah. I'm not a kid anymore!"

Jason thought about that. "Yes," he said sadly, "I guess you're right. Have all the other children aged?"

"Oh, yes."

"So I'm the only kid left in the multiverse!" He glanced at the baby; he was sound asleep. "The only kid who isn't a rabbit, anyway."

"Is that a loss?"

"Curt," said Jason, "don't you realize that if this were to simply go on, human beings proper—the kind that, for instance, take the time to learn a language—would quickly go extinct? All that would be left would be the rabbits."

"Is that bad?"

"Of course it's bad!" Jason cried hysterically, waving the scythe about. "What are we without language—without our smarts—without fiction and philosophy and history and science—and even math? What about math, Curtis? You like math, don't you?"

Curtis shrugged. "It's really cold and artificial. It's—what's the word—*anathema* to Life."

"Yes, exactly! And if only for that reason alone, it must be worth something! Rabbits, though... they're not even people! Is that what you want for the next generation of our species—hunks of meat?"

Suddenly, Curtis's eyes widened, and he said "Why didn't I see that before? The snath's black!"

"The what?"

"The snath, the pole."

"And it concerns you that it's black?"

Curtis nodded gravely. "Haven't you heard of the Black Scythe?" Jason shook his head. "Well, you're not a Frothanist. But the legend is that in order to make people, the gods had to kill all the monsters on earth first, and the last monster they had to kill—the toughest one to kill—was a demon wielding a scythe that had its blade reversed, to make it a weapon instead of a harvesting tool, and a black snath. It was called the Black Scythe."

"So this is the Black Scythe," said Jason, "and I'm a demon."

"I—I don't know," said Curtis. "But it can't be a coincidence. Oh, please, Pup, throw that away at once! It's overflowing with evil! Can't you feel it? It stinks of death."

"And you stink of life!" said Jason. "You become an adult, and what's the first thing you do? You have a son—and not just any son, but a son who'll never be much smarter than my goldfish!"

Curtis seemed to be fighting to keep rage in check. "I don't know what's wrong with you," he said. "All I can say is—" His anger suddenly collapsed into sorrow. "Please, Jason, I implore you, as your brother: throw the scythe away! We swore to forever stand by each other—don't you remember? And I've always gone along with you. But this one time, Jay, this one time, please do what *I* want. That's only fair! It's what you'd want, too, if you were thinking straight."

Guilt gnawed at Jason's heart. "I can't do it," he said. "Concerning this matter, I can't make a single compromise. One would be enough to derail everything. I—I'm not deaf to your appeal, Curtis, but there's far too much at stake here for me to be loyal for loyalty's sake."

Curtis looked aghast. "Are you going back on your word—on your blood? Blood-brotherhood is sacred, Jason!"

"Well, guess what:" said Jason, his voice taking on an acidic tone: "cleaning up this holy mess is gonna involve killing some sacred cows!"

The eyes of the boy-turned-man burned with rage. "Third and final chance," he said. "Do you willingly and dishonorably sever the bond of brotherhood?"

"Yes," said Jason.

Curtis stared at Jason silently for a few more moments. Then, he spat on the floor, making a conspicuous stain on the pristine red carpet. With another golden flash, he and the two rabbits disappeared.

"How nice it is" Jason declared to no one "to be suddenly freed of that man! What was I thinking in making *friends* with that blockhead? What was I thinking?" He shook his head. "No doubt I've made lots of mistakes. It's nothing less than a miracle that I now have an opportunity to make up for all of them."

Jason trudged onwards and upwards, his head held high. Yet internally, he was

quite troubled by what he had done. While he didn't miss Curtis, he feared what unforeseen consequences his betrayal might have.

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All That Is Good and Natural

Again, Jason felt he climbed stairs for centuries, and was doomed to do so forevermore. And the climbing only got harder as he got higher. Not only did fatigue weaken him; the steps seemed to grow steeper, taller, as he moved forward. It wasn't long before he found himself leaning on the Black Scythe as if it were a walking stick. "We'll make it through together, Death," he wheezed. "We'll make it through together." Ironically, his wish to cast the weapon over the stairs into the blue, cloudless abyss, or at least to put it down for a moment, was stronger than ever.

At last, Jason caught sight of another landing; he didn't know whether to consider this good or bad. Once he arrived there, he was unsurprised to see the golden motes gather again. This time, their product was just one person: Roland Moralheart. He, too, was unabashedly nude. His face was stern and knowing.

"I suppose you'll want to know... why things are the way they are," said Roland in English.

"You read my mind," said Jason.

"Curtis was telling the truth when he said the multiverse outside of this place is quite different. Interdimensional boundaries have all but disintegrated; all the world is now very close to being one great organism."

"You mean 'orgy'?" said Jason coldly.

Roland switched to Common. "Serves me right for using a language that has the assumption that sex is dirty built in. As I was saying, there is, in this largely homogeneous multiverse, but one anomaly: this place."

"Due to this, I suppose," said Jason, raising the scythe.

Roland nodded. "It imposes a more orderly, familiar, sterile pattern on the reality around it."

"This, familiar?" He spoke exclusively in English, and Roland in Common; they understood each other nonetheless.

"It is compared to everything else. The outside world is just about impossible to explain to one who hasn't experienced it. There is no matter, for one; only energy and emotion. And while there's still some individuality, there's much less of it. Every creature's mind is a part of every other's to a much greater degree than in the old days. The feeling of splitting off from the great single organism—of tearing my soul away from the communal soul, so I could take a human shape and appear here—was terrible. It was something like chopping off all of one's limbs in order to fit into a narrow tunnel." He shuddered. "My only comfort is that I can go back—but you can't

imagine how much willpower it takes me to not return immediately.”

“Yes, I’ve always admired you for your self-control.”

Roland ignored this sarcasm. “Inside this bubble of matter, the scenery is the product of the combined, conflicting forces of Life and Death. So great is the power on both sides that the result is much more dramatic and metaphorical than ordinary. And make no mistake, the drama’s being watched: many of the beings in the greater multiverse are clustered around this bubble, their eyes pressed up against the glass.”

Jason looked upwards. “So I really do have an audience now. I suppose that’s appropriate. But, uh... Roland, one other thing. Why are you all naked?”

Roland looked surprised. “The question isn’t why we’re naked, Jason. The question is why you aren’t.”

“Gee, I dunno, do you think it might be because I didn’t take my clothes off?”

“But why not? You should.”

Jason chuckled. “I’ve got my reasons. For one thing, I’m quite comfortable as-is. For another, I’d be mad to abandon what few shields against sexuality I have. It’s no great secret that sexuality is one of Life’s greatest weapons. For another, among my personal values is the basic idea that one shouldn’t appear naked in public. And last but not least, I don’t have a free hand to undress with! I hope you weren’t thinking of ‘helping’ me!”

Roland glowered. “I’m no more of a pedophile than I ever have been. It is, in fact, difficult for me to imagine someone I’d less like to have sex with than you. I stand by everything I said about you in the temple, after you murdered Beatrix. You hold the most awful weapon the world has ever seen in your hand, and you are among the handful evil enough to use it. I spared you only for the greater good—and now that that greater good has been accomplished, the only thing that prevents me from killing you where you stand is the scythe.”

“What ‘greater good’ are you referring to?”

“Nothing less than the great weakening of Death! Have no doubt, Jason: Life guessed your plan from the very beginning, perhaps even before you’d come up with it.”

“My plan...”

“To weaken Death to get it into a bargaining position, then destroy Life with its aid. Yes, Jason—Life saw through your lies from the beginning! But it knew you would do far more good for it than harm. Just look—we’re in a far better position now than we were at the start of the war. For all practical purposes, Death is dead and Life has won. All thanks to you, Jason.” A wide grin spread across his face.

Jason began to feel ill. “But Roland,” he said, “you do know what Life’s ultimate goal is, don’t you?”

“Of course: infinite change.”

“Why would you want that?”

“Because I’m tired of laws and rules and restrictions and separation and repression!” Roland snarled. “Aren’t you, Jason? Don’t you find the endless petty taboos of society loathsome? How ridiculous that we should be able to go here but not there, to consume this but not that, to love this person but not that one! Doesn’t your heart go out to all our silent brethren we’ve enslaved and slaughtered—from dolphins and dragons to tadpoles and toadstools? How stupid and arrogant of us to think we’re

somehow superior to all the teeming trillions of God's other creations! Don't you wish to free yourself of all those horrific, heartless machines, like trains and computers? How foolish of us to place so much faith in those metallic slavers, to allow our own creations to control our lives and lay waste to all that is good and natural! In short, Jason, have you not the least love of life?"

Jason thought for a while before answering. "No, I don't." he said.

"But why not?" said Roland quietly.

"Because of the three deaths I most earnestly wish never happened, one was of a computer program."

"Hydrogen!" Roland hissed. "Just another agent of Death—like you."

"Like me."

"I won't pretend to understand you, Jason. I can only imagine that the United States's Puritanical tradition has a uniquely poisonous effect on the human soul."

They stared at each other in angry silence.

"All right, Role." said Jason. "Step aside now."

Roland crossed his arms across his hairy chest. "I can't let you pass."

"You can't, eh?" said Jason, brandishing the scythe.

"Nope! Not while you hold the scythe."

"Roland, I've got the power of an entire deity on my side. You don't."

"Jason, I have real courage on my side. You're just a coward."

"Wanna bet?" He pulled his arm back, as if preparing to strike. "This is your last warning, O thick-skulled nudist. Get out of the way."

"You can't do it." said Roland serenely. "Try if you like, but—"

With a diabolical grin, Jason struck. He had an idea that while he could surely kill Roland outright with ease, all he really wanted to do was cut off Roland's right hand. The blade, while far mightier than he, obeyed his mental command. Jason found his hand guided such that the blade of the Black Scythe went cleanly through Roland's wrist, and did no further harm—this despite how Roland instinctively threw up his arms to protect himself midway through Jason's swing. His right hand disappeared in a burst of violet sparks; blood gushed from his wrist, again staining the carpet, until the wound wholly closed up an instant later. Roland looked at the freshly cut stump, and then at Jason, in fearful awe.

"That's what you get for putting your hand in the wolf's mouth." said Jason.

"Something tells me that all the magic in the world, divine or otherwise, isn't going to get it to grow back."

"You wretch!" Roland cried.

"Just be grateful I didn't castrate you."

Roland's eyes flashed with venom. "I'll no longer try to stop you. I can't. It's up to Life now. But know this, Jason: I was watching when you broke your promise to Curtis. I was there when you made it, exactly a year ago. And you'll pay. No one can break a oath of that magnitude without suffering the consequences. And oh, there shall be consequences; there shall be consequences! You've earned my curse."

"And you've earned my hatred." said Jason. "Crawl back into the hell you came from before I finish you off."

"You can't escape from vengeance, Jason!" said Roland—and in a flash, he was gone.

“Good riddance.” said Jason. “With friends like mine, who needs enemies?”

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Infinity

The trek got still harder. Not only were the steps getting steeper; the rate at which they grew steeper was increasing. After a while, Jason wasn't moving horizontally so much as vertically, using his stump and his hand (still wrapped around the Black Scythe's snath) to heave himself up each step. It occurred to him that the whole staircase, seen in profile, probably looked more like an exponential curve than a line. If he remembered correctly from those ancient days when he'd still attended school, this meant that the inclination was asymptotically approaching that of a vertical line. He wondered what he'd do once the steps got too tall to climb. Exhaustion wore on him; he had to stop several times to rest. He sang a little song to keep his spirits up:

I make the plans that make the whole world sting.
I make the plans of Death and gross suffering.
I make the plans that make the young girls die.
I make the plans, I make the plans.

Just as Jason was thinking how nice it would be if there were no further landings between himself and his goal, he caught sight of a third. *I can only hope there's finitely many of them.* he thought despairingly. He tried to think of every person who might conceivably show up now to talk him out of his quest, and had built up quite a list by the time he reached the landing. Yet Jason hadn't in the least anticipated who the new man was: Simon Baria, and not as a skeleton but in the flesh. He was as naked as the others; the cape and shoulder-pads of Death were gone.

Jason's jaw dropped. "*Simon?* What are you doing here?"

"I think you know the answer to that." said Simon.

Jason shuddered. It wasn't the words that frightened him; it was the voice. Simon's voice had deepened even more than Curtis's. Looking closely, Jason saw that Simon was not a castrato.

"So..." Jason said slowly, in awe, "you had us all fooled for so long."

Simon shook his head. "I really was a eunuch; I'm just not one any more. When Death compressed itself into that scythe, Life made a new body for me. The design was its, not mine."

"Oh." said Jason. "I see. But... well, I can only guess you're here to stop me." Simon nodded. "What the hell? I thought Life's idea of paradise was your worst nightmare."

"I thought it was. I've gained some more perspective since then."

"You mean participated in that debauchery?" said Jason, gesturing into the sunny blue void with his stump.

"Actually, no. I'm even less of a party animal than you. Unlike Curtis, I remain a virgin."

"You're naked!" Jason protested.

"Did you suppose Life provided me with clothes?" said Simon.

"Then you can use my jacket as a loincloth." A curious expression passed over Simon's face, and Jason said "I can read that. Don't lie: it's no accident you're naked."

"You're right, it isn't." Simon admitted. "But I'm not nude for sexual reasons."

"Then why are you?"

"Because hiding one's flesh is an illegitimate reason to wear clothes. Clothing is denial and blatant censorship of objective truth. Why should the human body need to be hidden? What's wrong with it?"

"It's obscene."

"But what is 'obscene' but a dysphemism for 'natural'?"

"What's 'natural' but a euphemism for 'obscene'?"

"That which is alive, supportive of life, or characteristic of life."

"Like death?" said Jason. He interrupted Simon's reply. "Enough politics. This is endlessly trivial! Just tell me why you think it's in my best interests to not do what I'm about to do. That's what you're here to say, isn't it?"

"Fair enough. Jason, have you thought very much about Life's vision for the multiverse?"

"Eternal change, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Enough to motivate me to destroy Life."

"You haven't thought through it carefully enough. I didn't, until just recently. Consider this: the multiverse will assume an entirely random state each moment. There will be no limits on what this state can be, aside from how its own characteristics won't be able to override the eternal change. Hence, literally, anything will be possible."

Jason nodded. "And thus, nothing will be coherent."

"Except sometimes. The change will be as infinite in duration as in scope; it will go on forever. And given infinite chances, all theoretically possible events—even those with probability zero—will occur infinitely many times. Since all events will be theoretically possible, everything will happen."

"So, every conceivable state will come up infinitely many times?"

"Yes. Moreover, every conceivable *sequence of events* will occur infinitely many times. Such sequences of events include, for instance, the entire history of the world up to this point."

"Everything... everything could happen all over again?"

"Everything *will* happen all over again, down to the last detail. So will every variation, from the trivial to the incomparable."

Jason gasped. "That means... innumerable eons ago, Life might have already won."

"That's right. But there's no guarantee of that, so I'm fighting for Life now."

Please, Jason, think of this: absolutely anything you wish to happen will happen—if you abandon the scythe.”

“But what happened to your own wish for everlasting peace?” said Jason.

“There will be infinitely many arbitrarily long periods of peace.”

“Well... yes, I guess. But that’s not the same as a single continuous period of infinite length. At any given moment of peace, one could never be sure of what would happen next.”

“That’s true.” said Simon, unperturbed.

“So you’ve abandoned your old goal, haven’t you?”

“No, I’ve merely chosen a better method, and broadened my scope.”

“To what? What do you really want, Simon?”

“What everyone wants. Why please only a few creatures when we could please them all?”

“So you... but...” Jason shook his head in disgust. “I think I understand your argument. What’s—what I find quite disturbing is that it’s exactly the opposite of what you were saying just a few weeks ago. Wasn’t your goal not to satisfy wants, but to nullify them? Didn’t you think of desire as suffering? I didn’t respond favorably at the time, I know—but now, I’m beginning to have a new perspective on the matter.”

“I’ll be frank. I was a fool. I was selfish.” Simon sounded perfectly earnest. “I was estranged from life as well as from Life. I was more closely allied to rocks and rivers than living things. I’ve since realized which side is to be preferred.”

Jason swore and cried out “What happened? You’re not capricious! You’re the least capricious person in the multiverse—or at least, you were. The *truth*, Simon, is that you haven’t switched sides of your own accord—Life brainwashed you. It isn’t hard for me to believe that if Life can now practically shape the multiverse to its will, it can outright convert humans to its side. I doubt that all those reasons you gave are what caused your change of allegiance; rather, the change was forced, and you rationalized it.” His face fell. “Which means... it isn’t even your fault that you’re saying these things to me. Oh, gosh, Simon, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” He sighed. “I can only hope that once I’ve destroyed Life, at least a few of the changes it wrought will be reversed.”

“I’m not going to attempt to convince you of the truth of these matters.” said Simon. “I don’t expect to be able to unseat such a conviction.”

“Well, then, riddle me this: is there anyone in the multiverse—anyone other than myself, who’s under the protection of the Black Scythe—who opposes Life?”

“No.”

“So they’ve all just changed their minds, all these billions of Death supporters?”

“We all saw the light—all except you. The scythe blinds you. Throw it away, and everything will become clear.”

“I’d rather die.”

“Then what is your goal, Jason? Why do you want to destroy the gods, and why won’t you accept eternal change, since it will eventually bring about whatever you desire?”

“My goal is to save sapience from obliteration. Some people have pleasure as their highest god; some so worship happiness; others possessions, or stability, or peace, or a literal deity, or their own family, or life. I worship the human brain. No,

really, it's not that glob of wrinkled pink flesh that's valuable; it's the strange loop it engenders, the abstract entity capable of introspection, of synthesizing ideas from an unthinking environment and constructing complex ideas from simple ones. There might be other things in the multiverse that are sapient insofar as they can talk intelligibly—like dragons, and graylings, and the gods. But none of these intelligences have the full generality of the human's; all are the unquestioning servants of some particular principle, or even of some state of mind. How do I know? Because of all the great discoveries and inventions in history, all were the product of our race. In short, I'm a human supremacist.

"It's not that I believe that clothed apes are somehow uniquely capable of sapience. It's merely that the human mind is, so far, the only mind that has come into being through natural selection: the united forge of life and death, the only conceivable origin of complexity. As such, it's the only one that has adapted to be fully general. Contrastingly, the gods, Ymir-like, were born of the friction between sapience and the unthinking multiverse, and the graylings and so on are their creations. Now, possibly, as Leela suggested, there were real sapient creatures in the multiverse long before we evolved into being. Possibly also Hydrogen was sapient, since it came about by an evolutionary process, one made possible by Life's and Death's existence, no less. But those are gone. The only true rational thought left is our own."

"You haven't even fully answered my first question," said Simon. "Why is 'fully general' sapience valuable?"

"Because... well... okay, I don't really know what to value any more than anybody else does. I don't know the meaning of life. Yet it seems to me that of everything in the world, general sapience is unique in that it has a property of advancement. Even if life can increase in complexity all on its own through evolution, it's limited. Compare the different creatures that have evolved over billions of years to everything we've done in less than a million. Life is ultimately limited: it can't yield organisms that can launch themselves into space, for example, and it can arrive at technically sophisticated designs only by trial and error, which is why its sophistication has long had a ceiling. We, on the other hand, are capable of deliberately working with ideas, for their own sake. We can actually understand and take advantage of the subtler details of our environment. Life has stagnated; today's organisms on my home verse, Earth, aren't significantly more complex than those that roamed the planet a few mass extinctions ago.

"As things stand now, only humanity can really increase in complexity. Why do I value complexity? It's hard to say. All I know is that of pleasure, peace, and ideas, I prefer the latter. There's no mystery to eternal change or eternal nothingness. They're dead ends. With complexity, perhaps—I mean, I really don't know, but at least there's a *chance*—that there's some kind of light at the end of the tunnel. If not, I suppose we can fall back on change or nothingness. But first, sapience deserves a chance, before any other state of affairs is allowed to occur for an infinite amount of time."

"Your conviction is on such uncertain footing," said Simon, "and yet you're willing to do what everyone in the multiverse wishes you wouldn't, just for its sake? You're being profoundly selfish."

"I know. Such is the way of our species, Simon: we're selfish. We care for non-humans only as long as they're useful to us; we lay waste to irreplaceable habitats, and breed vast populations of animals in blatantly cruel conditions, merely for our own convenience. Recently, some of us have come to think of this behavior as shameful, or something. We shouldn't! It's only appropriate that we, the thinkers, should rule despotically over the unthinking world."

"You speak as if you were the only human left alive!"

"On the contrary, I fight to free the living of the god who's enslaved them. You're human, too, Simon, even if Life has brainwashed you. Are you deaf to my appeal? I'd extend my hand," (he glanced at it), "only I'm afraid to unclench my fist. This scythe is a heavy burden! Join me; help me carry it. With our combined strength, we can destroy Life and restore order to the multiverse."

"I'll never join you!" said Simon, horrified. "What kind of madman are you, to defy the consensus of all the billions you supposedly fight for?"

"I just don't trust the judgment of humans corrupted by the gods."

"There are other means of corruption," said Simon. "Good luck." He disappeared.

Jason shrugged.

I won't dwell further on the thoughts that went through Jason's head as he scaled that red-carpeted mountain. Let it only be said that they were exceptionally morbid, and Jason wouldn't have been able to tolerate them for long if he hadn't already been long acclimated to despair.

So steep was the staircase now that Jason only discovered the next landing when he climbed onto it. Already, the motes were congregating. They were now taking the shape of three separate people.

At once, Jason anticipated who they were. "Don't you dare!" he snarled, raising the Black Scythe.

With that, the golden specks scattered, leaving no one behind. Jason allowed himself a short sigh of relief and went on.

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Triumph of the Darkness

Just as the steps had gotten a good deal taller than him, just as Jason thought he would soon come to one he couldn't climb, they abruptly ended. Past the top step, there was a sheer drop. The only way forward was up a skinny, slightly swaying ladder of white rope hanging down from the sky. So tall it was that Jason couldn't make out the top, yet he hadn't been able to see this enormous ladder at all from just one step lower. He rested for a long time. Then, he began to make his slow, clumsy, harrowing way up.

Need I even mention what peril pressed upon Jason's nerves as he ascended? Perhaps the Black Scythe protected him from physical harm, but he didn't even know where he'd end up if he fell. He climbed painstakingly, able to get a secure hold on each rung only by wrapping it into the crook of his left elbow and grabbing it with what he could spare of his hand. The rungs were just close enough to accommodate this method. Each time a light breeze gave the ladder a push, Jason felt as if the entire world swung back and forth; how he endured that nausea is another mystery for the ages.

After an eternity, Jason saw something more than blue sky and rungs above him: stars. Although it was so gradual that he hadn't noticed, the sky had been growing darker for quite a while. *Perhaps night is falling here.* Jason thought. He kept climbing. With unimaginable slowness, the sky grew darker, and the stars grew brighter. Eventually, Jason felt as if he were climbing a ladder through space. How numerous and brilliant the stars were! He imagined that each of them was a person, peering into the Black Scythe's little world from the greater multiverse outside. Then, happening to look down (he'd made a habit of looking down pretty frequently, to minimize his fear of what was below), he saw that colossal blue marble, Earth, spread out below him. The ladder seemed to lead from a spot in the Midwestern United States—and not just any spot.

Impossible! Jason thought. *To climb such a distance up from the Earth's surface would take me years at least. Have I been climbing for years?* He glanced at his reflection in the scythe-blade; he was still eleven. *Not to mention how there shouldn't be any air up here.* It then occurred to him that the breezes had stopped long ago, and that his breathing had gradually slowed down, to the point that he now wasn't breathing at all. He tried to speak aloud. He couldn't; there was no air with which to do so. He was surviving in a vacuum! *I guess I have the scythe to thank for that.* he thought. There remained a lot of nagging questions: why didn't he feel a difference in

terms of gravity? He was no lighter than before. Where was the sun? He realized with a start that he'd never seen a sun at all, even on the ground; the universe was simply bathed in sourceless sunlight coming from all directions. Jason shook his head and went on.

Gradually, Earth shrank. It began as a plane, then curved into a sphere, then flattened into a circle, then compressed into a point—and then it was gone, and Jason was climbing through endless space.

After another eternity, Jason saw a white circle above him. It looked like the ladder was hanging from it. As he drew closer, the circle grew larger, but no more detailed. Finally, finally, Jason came to the top of the ladder. He collapsed on the circle, which was white on the top side also. While it supported him, and he could feel it resist his fingers when he pushed on it, it had no texture, no tactile sensation whatsoever. It was the most utterly nondescript object he had ever encountered.

A few things happened at once. Jason stood up, the ladder disappeared, the stars winked out, and some air materialized in the space around him. He breathed again. Now, he felt rather that he was on a stage under a big circular spotlight, which was so bright that he couldn't see a thing outside of it. Then he thought of being interrogated under a bare lightbulb. There was nothing but him, the scythe, the perfectly circular, perfectly white platform, and the unending blackness.

"I've climbed a stairway to heaven and Jacob's Ladder," he said aloud, "only to find myself in the heart of darkness."

He'd expected a reply, but he received none.

"Hello? Anyone out there?"

Silence.

"I know you're listening, Red."

"Red is no more." The voice—or was it multiple voices?—sounded both high and low, young and old, timid and bold, sympathetic and merciless. Like the light, it had no definite origin; it came from all directions simultaneously.

"Then who are you?" said Jason, though he wasn't sure he believed it.

"The trinity served its purpose; I need it no longer. I have reformed into Life, the one true god, the beginning and the end."

"You're younger than me," said Jason, "and I won't allow you to get any older. Show yourself so I can destroy you."

"Grant me more wisdom than that! While you wield the scythe, love cannot reach your heart." Jason thought he heard something like a sigh. "If only you had delayed this but a few hours! Did you know, Jason, that adulthood was to begin for you on the stroke of midnight? At that moment, I could have shown you my true glory—and you would have abandoned your sinister plans at once. Yet no organism restrained by that dreadful Death-power can grow."

"Have I prevented puberty altogether?"

"No, merely delayed it. In the world of a few hours ago, were you to drop the scythe now, puberty would come in about half a year. But here, I could mature you instantly."

"How so?"

"By temporarily uniting with you: by funneling my power into your brain, until the seed of adulthood in your mind awakens at my presence."

"You can't do that while I've got this in my hand, can you?"

"No."

"Well, that can be remedied." Carefully, he placed the scythe on the floor beside him. As he'd hoped, nothing happened immediately; it sustained the metaphor-world on its own quite nicely. "Okay, let 'er rip."

"With Death so close? Its oppressive power would make my task much harder than necessary. Throw it over the edge of the stage."

"I'm not quite comfortable doing that. You saw my conversations on the staircase."

"In that case, you don't have to dispose of it yet. You'll burn with the desire to rid yourself of it shortly. You've opened the door to good just far enough. Are you ready?"

"As much as I'll ever be."

Immediately, Jason could feel the pressure on his mind. Death had briefly been able to listen to certain of his thoughts. This was quite different: Life wasn't merely receiving something Jason was broadcasting; it had invaded his mind; it was inside it. Slowly, tension built up in Jason, as if he were holding his breath. He felt a keen desire to break free, as if he had been chained to something since the day of his birth and hadn't noticed until now. All he had to do was tug, give the gentlest of tugs, and those weak, rotting bonds would burst at once. He felt he was drowning, and had a handhold in sight, an excellent one that he could clearly use to save his life; he only had to reach for it. Yet he resisted. All he had to do was open his heart and accept the freedom and happiness that Life offered—the easiest thing in the world. Yet he grit his teeth, clutched his forehead, and held his ground.

"What are you doing?" came Life's voice. "Why aren't you letting me into yourself? Do you intend to test my strength? I can play that game."

Life had put only a little of its power to work before, believing no more would be necessary. Now it poured in. The tension increased by an order of magnitude; if Jason had been carrying an elephant on his shoulders before, he was holding up a skyscraper now. He was trying to get a hold on an almost perfectly smooth wall as he fell hundreds of feet; he was trying to plug a firehose with his hand.

How strong the temptation! The picture of what lay before him, previously indistinct and far away, snapped into life. It looked like a beach. He seemed to feel warm sunlight and a cool, richly scented sea breeze, to taste something smooth and sweet. And yet all these things, he knew, were only microcosms of the real delights that awaited him.

"Let go, Jason," a soft voice crooned in his mind as he held back the tidal wave, "just let go. It will all be over in an instant; it will be so easy, just relax and let yourself go..."

He could not but yield...

"No!" he shrieked. His flesh failed him: he fell to the ground. Only his mind remained adamant.

"Do you think you can hold me back forever?" said Life. Jason could barely hear it over the cacophony. "You are only mortal. It matters not if I need put every iota of my might to work. Your soul is mine!"

The pressure doubled, then tripled, then quadrupled, then quintupled. As Jason

had guessed it would from the beginning, Life wasn't merely trying to make Jason sexually mature; it was trying to make him one of its own, just like everyone else in the multiverse. So strongly had Jason resisted—any resistance at all only being made *possible* by the proximity of Death—that Life was focusing nearly all of its divine strength on the boy's brain. The vast majority of the god was inside his head! And oh, could Jason feel it. That simple hunger to break loose of ordinary experience had blossomed into ten thousand different hungers. He felt literally hungry; starving, in fact, as if he had gone a week without food. He felt thirsty, thirsty enough to drink a whole lake. He felt exhausted; if he so much as closed his eyes, he thought, he would fall into a sleep as deep as the ocean. He was bored to tears. He was covetous of everything, wrathful towards everyone, scared half to death of nothing. And yes, even without a sexuality to call his own, he felt lust. Natural selection instills in most animal species a choosy sexuality, tailored towards whatever things with which sexual interaction will do the species most good. There are plenty of unusual individuals, with their own ideas of what is attractive, but even these find at least some things more sexually appealing than others. The lust Jason felt, by contrast, was truly pansexual, untainted and unbridled by practicality or tradition or philosophy: he desired to do anything with everything, preferring no act or partner to any other. He found reality itself erotic.

Few times in history has a person stretched their will so far as Jason Blue did then and there. He could barely *conceive* of doing something other than yield to one of the infinite impulses that pulled him every which way. He held on only through blindly inherited faith, remembering, vaguely, that there was some reason he should at all costs avoid surrender. The reason itself was lost forever; he could barely think. And what free sapience remained in his brain was shrinking by the second. This was by no means a sustainable situation; Life's raw power was quickly tearing him apart. There went the bulk of his memory—whoosh! it was gone for good. There went his eloquence. There went his likes and dislikes; there went his cunning. Just ten seconds after Life had claimed Jason's soul as its own, there was very little of Jason left in existence to claim.

The awareness that its obliteration was nigh finally roused the remaining bit of Jason, which was so thoroughly absorbed in protecting itself against Life's onslaught that it had nearly lost sight of its goal. With a Herculean effort, Jason turned his head. He could see a blackness and a grayness lying on an infinite white expanse. The scythe seemed an astronomical distance away; perhaps it had disappeared long ago, and he was looking at its three-thousand-year-old image. He didn't care; he needed it, and that was one of the very few things he was sure of. Slowly, clumsily, he crawled towards it. It wasn't that he was physically incapable of walking, nor that he had lost the skill; it was that he had forgotten walking itself, along with all other kinds of locomotion more sophisticated than crawling.

Life said something, but Jason didn't make out any of the words; it didn't occur to him to listen. He only crawled painstakingly, snail-like, towards the scythe, his remaining personality sloughing away by the moment.

That journey, across three feet of floor, felt longer than the whole vast trek up the staircase and the ladder.

He registered something like surprise when his fingers first brushed the black

snath, not least because he'd never expected to reach it. He felt a spark of hope. That hope was enough to fuel his will for its greatest push yet. His hand closed around the scythe—he even gripped it tightly—and he lifted himself up on his elbows. He raised the scythe—and plunged the blade into his own head.

And so the essences of Life and Death, each squeezed into a volume no greater than a gallon, met in Jason's brain.

There were a few moments, then, during which Jason could reflect on what he had done. Rare it is for anyone to come face-to-face with Life or Death, to not merely be in such a presence but to be submerged in it. Jason was thus aware of *both* gods, simultaneously. The pressure Life exerted on him, its constant Nidhogg-like gnawing on his sanity, abated not the least. Yet he could also feel Death there, and it was no less dreadful. To be so close to Death was to hang by one hand from the rim of Tartarus, to look down upon an infinite void. Nay, worse; Death didn't even evoke an empty space; its dream was nothingness, utter absence of all things. In Death's world, there was neither space nor time; no here or there; no beginning, middle, or end; no matter, no energy, no abstractions; not even a symbolic sensory detail, like the color black or the stench of decaying corpses, by which Jason could conceive of it. He saw it for what it was, nothing, and his merely mortal mind fell to pieces trying to make sense of it. If he'd had any appreciable sanity left by the time Death had entered his brain, it would have been annihilated immediately.

And yet there, too, was Life, the hideous force that was anything and everything.

For just a few moments, Jason saw both of them for what they were at once.

"The horror!" he shrieked. "The horror!"

Then, somewhere between Life and Death, he saw himself—and he had no words to describe that.

At that moment, Life and Death collided, and their equal and opposite forces reacted to produce an explosion. Their combined power burst outwards, tearing Jason apart, not into atoms or quarks but into the pure energy of which these are composed. It tore the scythe's metaphor-world apart. It tore the *universe* apart—and hundreds of verses nearby. All these were obliterated as completely as anything can be. All that was left behind was a colossal hole in the interdimensional space, a void that would remain until the end of time as a monument to the forces that had produced it.

You will no doubt be interested to hear that this world-annihilating explosion actually killed very few people. While Life had tenaciously held on until the last moment, the observers who had been clustered around the metaphor-world had fled as soon as they'd seen Jason move towards the scythe. They had escaped the blast. With Life's and Death's destruction, the multiverse, along with its inhabitants, was returned to something like normalcy. Everyone had regular bodies again, and whatever they had been wearing when Death had become the Black Scythe; the strange kind of hive-mind Roland had alluded to was gone. Yes, Roland was alive, as was Curtis, and even Simon. But Jason was dead, gloriously dead!

Humanity ruled the world again, whether it liked it or not.

Epilogue

Now that Jason is dead, his tale is over. There remains, however, a bit more for me to tell: about the three friends Jason betrayed, about his legacy, and about his world in general.

With the supporting power of Life and Death gone, their works disintegrated. Every rabbit in the multiverse dropped dead; every undead creature stiffened, never to move again; and every more conventional magical beast—dragons included—disappeared without a trace. More important, what alterations the gods' influence had wrought on human minds were reversed. Not only did that sudden zeal for Life that had lately gripped every person in the multiverse disappear: that older, more gradually developed kind of chauvinism—the feelings that had caused two very heterogeneous groups of verses to put aside their differences and band together to fight an ideological foe to the last breath—began to gradually deteriorate. The fighting continued; after all, many of the smaller intradimensional wars that were the great war's origin hadn't needed divine help to begin. But no more were there only two sides. The individual nations began to bicker, then to fight, amongst themselves; the great war split into hundreds of normal-sized wars. And no more did anyone want to fight to the very end. For the first time in a long time, oaths of surrender, cease-fires, and peace treaties were drafted—and signed. Within a few years, the great war was for the most part over, and the Schism was beginning to narrow.

The world was still very different from what it had been a year ago. The most obvious changes were the omissions—billions of people had died in the war, never to be resurrected, and innumerable verses had been either nuked past the point of habitability or obliterated by the colossal magical explosion. It is difficult to overstate how much effect this had on those who lived, now that they were free of partisan frenzy. Analysts estimated that, modern society being highly interdimensional, at least half of all currently living humans had been personally affected—by the loss of a family member, a friend, a home, a job, or all of these and more. And this was only the most direct of the harm. The economic consequences rippled outwards through space and time like shockwaves, making rich nations poor and reversing developing nations' development.

If the war did any good at all, though, it was the end of the Prime Directive, the rule that verses with verseportation couldn't interact with those without. Such interaction had already very much occurred, so there was no use in trying to keep the truth from, for example, Earth. Thus it was that the UN was integrated into the IDC,

and the United States suddenly became, by comparison, a deal less powerful than its citizens were used to. The Americans were humiliated—after stubbornly holding out against metrication for years, they now had to adopt not only new units of measure but hexadecimal, the IDC calendar, and Common. As you can imagine, though, the newly opened lines of communication across the multiverse benefited everyone.

How did most people look back on the war now? They shuddered—bloodlust was at an all-time low. How did they look back on the gods? With no great fondness. Few liked the prospect of eternal nothingness or eternal change; the religious increasingly saw both as antithetical to, rather than consonant with, their own gods' agendas. How did they look back on Jason Blue? Largely, with hatred and disgust.

Does that surprise you? I want you to realize that the truth of Jason's means and ends—not the lies about them he perpetuated, but the truth—was, by 2010 or so, well known. The popular opinion of Jason was founded on fact. Specifically, he was despised as conniving, treacherous, pitiless—as a destroyer of worlds. Had his divine enemies been worse yet? Probably. Had he ultimately done more good than harm? Few denied that. Yet these things didn't really absolve him of guilt in the public mind, no more than the trickster-god Loki's help with fighting frost giants and gifts of mighty magic had endeared him to the Æsir. It was, most thought, merely a stroke of good luck that Jason had saved part of the multiverse (and helped ruin the rest) instead of destroying the whole of it. And everyone was thankful that Jason had taken himself out as well.

Secretly, ever since devising his plan to destroy both gods simultaneously with a suicide strike, Jason had hoped for lasting fame. In a few difficult straits, he'd kept himself going by imagining the praises future poets would lavish upon him. Yet when he'd held the Black Scythe all alone, and all the world had turned against him, he'd abandoned such dreams, clinging instead to his own convictions. It was only appropriate, then, that the word "Jason" and various corruptions of it came to be used as insults. Thus branded were the sly, the self-centered, the unfeeling, and the traitorous. It wasn't too long before a particular kind of stock character had established itself in fiction: a deceitful, strangely powerful villain who befriends the protagonists and later betrays them. Though both his support and his betrayal end up helping the protagonists somehow, he is rotten to the core, and invariably finishes his role with an especially gruesome death, usually one he in some sense brings upon himself.

Jason's reputation did have one consequence that would've gratified Jason himself: the myth of the innocence of children was permanently debunked.

There were a few people who had, even years after the war, lost none of their passion for their late patron deity and its dream. Roland was one of these people.

The gods' destruction hadn't worked out well for him. All the years Life had lifted from his shoulders when he'd become its Champion had returned, while his right hand hadn't. His vengefulness and his dedication to his cause, without themselves declining, gave rise to intense bitterness as he aged. He wore contact lenses and a prosthetic hand, and hated them both.

Roland spent the rest of his life in futility, as the leader of an impromptu free city founded by a few hundred thousand diehard Life fanatics, whose goal was not

just to recreate Gyeeds but to achieve as much of Life's ends as possible. They lived almost without laws, bred like rabbits, and conducted frequent guerrilla warfare against all nations that aroused their ire, which group comprised a good three-fourths of all known verses. They called their city Love.

Not a day went by that Roland didn't curse the name of Jason Blue. He wished he had simply killed the boy the day they'd met. He probably would've been executed for it, he thought. Still, he was convinced that, all things considered, it would've been for the better.

Curtis took about a year to recover from the shock. Increasingly, he'd come to sympathize with Life; for the space of a few hours, he'd been an adult, a husband, and a father. Now Life was gone, he was a young boy again, and his wife and son were dead. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't feel lasting grief for the latter two, given that he'd known them for less than a day. He simply didn't know what to make of it all.

In the meantime, Curtis had to decide what to do with himself. Where was he to live? Roland earnestly entreated him to come to Love, to take an important place in its administration, in fact. At that time, in mid-2005, the city was still in its infancy. Curtis declined (nudist colonies brought back bad memories for him), and the two of them never spoke again. He tried to reach his father, Akolos, King of Dojum, but a servant told him curtly that Akolos had long ago officially disowned him for joining Life's side. He wasn't even allowed anywhere on the island. Listlessly, he wandered through the multiverse for years, moving from one job and country to another every couple of months, whenever his need to be needed became intolerable.

Curtis finally came to rest at the age of thirteen, in a place called River Farm. It was a community of some three hundred children, mostly orphans, who worked together to live independently of adults without interrupting their educations. Each resident worked on the farm for a set amount of time each week. They put their products to use both by consuming them themselves and selling them, the profit going towards their living expenses. While they weren't working, they attended nearby schools (there were plenty to choose from; River Farm was in the suburbs of a major city) and also educated each other. Standards for productivity were high—newcomers who didn't pull their weight were quickly kicked out—so the farm was efficient and profitable. Curtis, wary of physical labor, was assigned clerical duties. He forced himself to do them well, and soon, the community came to accept him.

The very day he returned to school, Curtis began falling back in love with mathematics. It was cold and artificial, just as he'd said to Jason years ago, but he now realized—nay, remembered—how those qualities made math great. Math was free of the petty concerns of living things and the physical world; it was the study of pure thought, and not the vague, qualitative sort of thought that characterized art and literature, but a definite, quantitative sort all its own. In a world in which everything real was fuzzy and indistinct, only the unreal could be clear and precisely definite, and there was nothing so unreal as math. Mathematical truth was universal truth, and vica-versa.

The real turning point in Curtis's life came after he'd lived on River Farm for a little over a year, and advanced through many math courses. He was flipping through

a textbook, looking for a discussion of trigonometric substitution to refresh his memory (no longer so keen as it had been at eight, alas), when he stumbled upon a unique equation, known on Earth as Euler's identity:

$$e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$$

Its magnificence startled him. Here was a simple relation between what were probably the five most important complex numbers: the ubiquitous, fundamental integers 0 and 1; π , the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter; e, the base of the exponential function that was its own rate of change; and i, the square root of -1 and the imaginary equivalent of 1. Moreover, the simplest arithmetic operation, addition, along with its iterated equivalent, multiplication, and multiplication's iterated equivalent, exponentiation, were all represented exactly once. Never before had Curtis seen nearly as much meaning compressed into so few symbols. Then and there, he decided to become a mathematician.

And so he did. Though he'd previously been most famous as an Imagination mage, Curtis all but abandoned sorcery to work on axiomatic set theory. Over decades, he published a handful of theorems that, despite their deceptively simple appearance, had profound implications for mathematics as a whole.

When he was twenty-nine, already a well-respected scholar, Curtis married a woman he'd met as a teenager on River Farm. They had two children. Curtis delighted to talk to his children about math and science and philosophy, and watch their intellects grow. The children likewise admired him. But they didn't feel altogether close to him; nor did his wife or anybody else. He was always at least a little removed from the real world. Long ago, he'd turned his attention to a loftier realm and never looked back.

Simon felt it was nothing less than a miracle that he was alive. Roland had killed him, Death had reanimated him, Roland had destroyed his skeleton, Life had reincarnated him, and then Jason had destroyed Life. In the end, Simon found himself back in his old body, squeaky voice and all—and Roland didn't even care to try hunting him down.

There still existed at this time Death-fanatics, people whose devotion to Death hadn't waned with its destruction and who were now forming a society of their own, just like Roland and friends. You may expect that Simon joined them. In fact, he steered well clear of them. Free both of Life's brainwashing and Roland's hatred, Simon no longer wanted anything to do with either side. Even if Death's old dream still appealed to him, he didn't want to kill again.

No longer did Simon's murder of his mother rest easily in his heart. For the first time, he grieved for Leela; he felt both despair and guilt acutely. Everyone else in the world, while praising Leela as the real hero of the multiverse, didn't hold any of Simon's atrocities against him; the consensus was that only one person could be properly held responsible for his actions in those last few months. Simon himself, on the other hand, more than once felt suicidal. He stayed his hand only because he thought that Leela wouldn't have wanted him dead. But what would she have

wanted? he asked himself. What was the best thing to do now? How could he possibly redeem himself?

It was with these questions still at the forefront of his mind that Simon sought out the surviving Blues: Jason's mother, father, and sister. The Blues now knew Jason's fate as well as anybody else; they too had been part of the great hive-mind that had watched Jason climb the staircase. Recall that they had almost tried to stop him. And now that the multiverse was open for good, the Blues could watch the old television news stories that had featured Jason. But they'd never met Roland or Curtis; they didn't know anything more about him than the public did. Simon took it upon himself to visit them one day in 2007, two years after Jason's death, and tell them everything he knew of Jason's story. They listened with rapt attention, never interrupting even to ask a question. When he was finished, they offered not a word in reply. He could see them all thinking intently. For whatever reason, they didn't wish to share their thoughts with him. Eventually, they thanked him, and after a little more conversation, he left.

Barely had Simon closed the front door behind him when it popped open again. He looked back, and there was Joan. Though she'd turned seventeen four days earlier, the resemblance to Jason was striking: she looked like a teenage, female version of him. Simon imagined that some kind of Jason was staring back at him. No, he realized, he had it the wrong way around: Joan, being three years Jason's senior, had been born first. Joan wasn't a variation on Jason; Jason had been a variation on Joan.

"May I ask you something?" Joan asked. Her Common was superb.

"Yes, what is it?"

Joan took a few moments to carefully formulate her question. "Did my brother completely abandon his television theory after he heard your mother's theory of the gods?"

Simon blinked in surprise. "Oh, yes. He never mentioned it again. Clearly, he felt Leela's explanation had superseded it."

Joan nodded. "I'm not sure he was right about that, though."

"Really? You don't doubt the reality of the gods, do you?"

"Not at all. It's just that the gods and Leela's explanation of how they formed don't explain a few things Jason's idea explained. I'm thinking of magic spells in particular. They don't make sense if we assume a totally realistic and coherent world."

"Why not?"

"Well... don't you remember what you thought of magic, before you learned it was real?"

"I've always known it was real. I was born in Droydania, where spellcasting was discovered centuries ago."

"Oh." The idea seemed to deeply disturb Joan. "It's quite different for me. Magic has long had a place in our fiction, you know, but nobody on my planet ever discovered real spellcasting. We were all sure it was purely fictional until the Death-army came here to recruit the US military. Now, I'm a beginning Will mage." (The Gyeedian tradition of barring girls and women from spellcasting was rapidly declining.) "But magic still seems incredible to me. In English, we use the word for

magic to mean something inexplicable."

"And so you—"

"Well, life for me is much more like a fairy tale than it used to be, even with the gods gone. That's all." She shrugged. "I'm surprised my brother was so willing to abandon that conviction."

As Simon had said, he'd always known magic was possible. He'd always been aware of a distinction between the spells of fiction and the spells of fact. At the same time, Joan's words rang true to him. Whereas technologies like electrical power and computers had developed out of pure mathematical or scientific theory, magic had been discovered by accident—and even now, it was the worst-understood major topic in science. Physicists had made the most progress in the last century or so by ignoring magic, since its behavior was so pathological. Countless fundamental questions remained unanswered. How was energy in the human body converted to spells? Why were some people natural mages and others magically inept? Why did different spells need the reagents they did? Why were some things easy with magic and other things impossible? And why was it that while most civilizations, given enough time, had discovered all major conventional technologies, many verses hadn't seen any magic at all until foreign spellcasters had visited?

Thus it was that Simon realized how best to carry on his mother's work. He became a thaumatologist—a researcher of magic.

The necessary education, formal and otherwise, took nearly a decade. As soon as it was over, Simon threw himself into study and experimentation. He wasn't rewarded—not at first, at least. His attempts to rough out a physical theory of magic, or at least some ground rules for its behavior that were consistent with the rest of science, were no more successful than those of his many, many predecessors. Instead, he found only a few new details of how magic interacted with itself.

By his fortieth birthday, Simon was thoroughly dispirited. Reminding himself that Leela had gotten nowhere in her investigation of the supernatural until she had stumbled upon the right approach, he cast about for a new line of inquiry. He flipped through a few scholarly journals. He couldn't avoid noticing that theoretical thaumatology was generally much less successful than applied thaumatology—that is to say, spell development. Could it be that spell inventors, seeking only practical utility and seeing deeper understanding as merely a means to that end, actually ended up learning much more than theorists? Could it be that magic, unlike physics and chemistry and biology, was simply resistant to the scientific method? It made no sense—but neither did magic. Simon decided to try it.

Like his mother before him, he had plenty of false starts. In years of investigating and working with all kinds of magic—flame-conjuring, animal-creating, telekinesis, teleportation, alchemy—he learned a good deal, more than he had as a theorist, but none of this knowledge was the kind he wanted. What he knew now was all kinds of tricks to make spellcasting more flexible and efficient, and countless rules of thumb for what to expect from unusual uses of magic. What he wanted to know was how to reconcile magic with basic rules of physics, or, at the very least, magic's internal logic: what made it tick.

Simon was fifty-two by the time he found the right field. In part, this was

because the field in question barely existed until the 2030s. It was the magic of perception—sorcery similar in spirit to already existing alchemical artifacts like the Sensory Enhancer. As sorcery was more flexible than alchemy, much more interesting effects were now possible: “tactimancy”, if you will, had begun with the invention of a spell that allowed one to see electromagnetic fields. Next came spells for identifying precious metals by taste and smelling strong emotions in nearby people. Many thaumatologists felt practical applications weren’t far away. Simon’s interest, on the other hand, was piqued by one researcher’s offhand comment that “perhaps we’ll find a way to magically detect one of those fields or forces the theorists have proposed”. He might thus use magic to learn about magic. It seemed entirely appropriate.

Once he began his work on tactimancy, Simon was pleased to find himself making quick progress. With his first success, he could see latent magical energy, in people or in objects, as a pale blue glow. With his second, he designed a machine that could, with a little help from a human mage, tell any spellcaster’s favored domain from a sample of their hair. He realized he had a good chance of making some fresh discoveries if he used these inventions as research tools, but he was inclined instead to dig deeper into tactimancy, so he left that work to the theorists.

The day to end all days came when Simon was sixty-seven—the same age that Leela had been when he had killed her.

After many years of labor, Simon had finally created a spell which, if his many calculations and wild guesses were correct, would give him unique insight into reality itself. He cast it.

At once, in his mind’s eye, he saw some words. They were all arranged in a line, like text on a printed page, but the line seemed of vast length. He couldn’t imagine how many sentences it comprised. He looked closely at the leftmost end. The script was wholly unfamiliar to him—compared to the stark, simple symbols of Common, these characters looked like pictographs. Yet somehow, without gaining any knowledge of the language the words were written in, he understood them. He read the sentence:

Jason’s first impulse was that he was dreaming, since he had never seen a dragon before, much less been carried away by one.

Jason? Surely the text didn’t refer to just any Jason. Continuing to read, Simon realized with a shock that he was looking at the very story he knew so well—Jason’s story. Except, bizarrely, the style in which it was written was reminiscent not of a biography or a memoir but a novel.

Simon skimmed ahead. Soon, yes, he found mention of himself; despite the many decades that had elapsed since, the dialog sounded eerily familiar—he had a feeling that the work was no mere dramatization but a verbatim transcript. His eyes roved ahead yet more. Near the end of that mile-long line of text, he read of Jason’s suicide strike. Immediately thereafter came the epilogue, which had a few things to say about Roland and Curtis that Simon hadn’t known, and then—then, yes, there was this sentence.

But that was not the last sentence; nor was this one. The words weren’t being

written as the events they described happened; rather, there were a few more—just a few—past the ones Simon was reading right now—past the ones that described the present. He was quite suddenly more frightened than he had ever been before, in life or undeath, but he couldn't help it: he glanced at the end.

"No!" Simon shrieked, with yet more desperation, at a yet higher pitch, than Jason had shrieked that same word. He fell to his knees; tears fell from his eyes. He cowered on the floor and begged the world that he might wake up from this nightmare.

But Simon was not asleep; on the contrary, he'd seen a glimpse of the truth that no one of his world ever had before or ever would again. He'd sought that truth for over forty years. It was nothing less than what he'd wanted; it explained everything. Yet now that he'd experienced the horror of it, he wished for nothing so much as to forget it.

He was a fictional character.

And that was not the worst! The worst was—nay, is yet to come.

The story is over.

Colophon

The Lone Argonaut began life as a document for Microsoft Word 97 for Mac. After switching from Mac OS 9 to Ubuntu in January 2007, I migrated the manuscript to OpenDocument. Pretty soon thereafter I began to strongly prefer marked-up plain text to opaque word-processing documents, so I changed to an ad-hoc markup which I translated into LaTeX with a small Perl preprocessor. Then I got fed up with LaTeX's limitations, so I went wild and created my own lightweight semantic markup language, Zink. ("Zink" stands for "Zink Is Not an Acronym".) The implementation consists of a parser written in Haskell using Parsec and two renderers, one a Haskell program that produces XHTML and the other an OpenOffice.org macro written in Python that produces an OpenDocument. Yes, I use Zink for more than just TLA. I haven't formally released it because I doubt anybody would want it, honestly (aren't there enough of these document languages already?), but should you be interested, I could certainly give you a copy. Of course, if you want to modify the novel or produce a new edition of it, you'll want to work with the source markup rather than the output.

The HTML edition uses valid markup and is supposed to be as accessible as possible. I care about accessibility more than the average programmer because, given that I'm legally blind and I run an OS that isn't Windows, naive Web design can make a site very inconvenient for me to use.