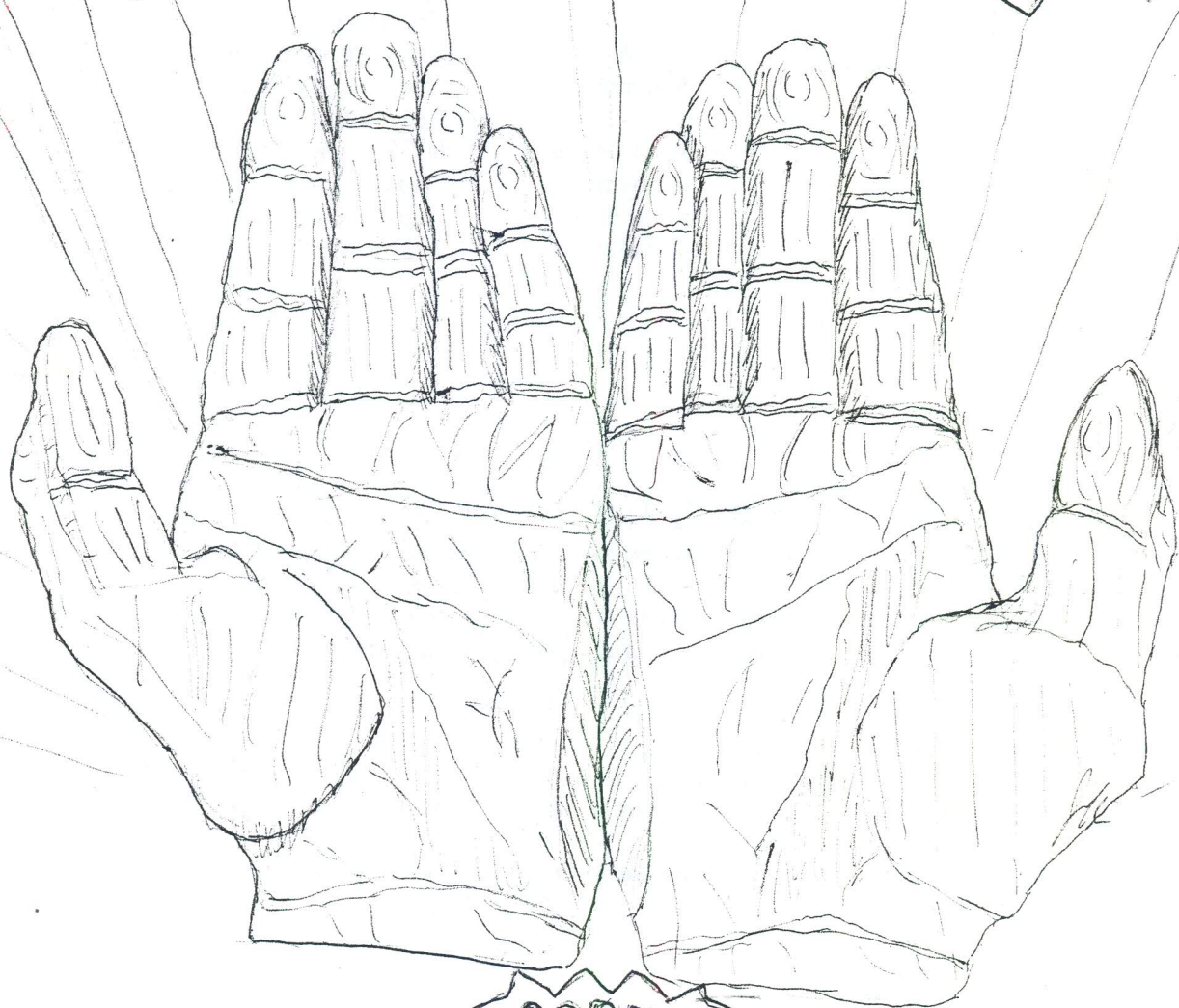


LANRUOJIFICS



SPRING
1999

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SCI-FI
CLUB

The Alfred University
Science Fiction Club
presents
Lanruojifics: Chronicles of Reality
Volume III

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Editor's Note:

The completion of the third issue of Lanruojifics marks another accomplishment regarding the imagination and creativity of our members. This issue is by far the longest and arguably the most diverse collection of science-fiction and fantasy stories that we have published in one issue. We hope to continue to improve with every issue by including as many submissions made by members and non-members alike.

If you wish to view past issues check out our website:

<http://campus.alfred.edu/organizations/auscifi/index.html>

We also donate a copy of every issue to Special Collections, located in Herrick Library.

As always, we welcome new members, either to our regular meetings or as writers/artists for the SciFi Journal.

I hope you enjoy our latest issue.

Free Will: A Physics and Time Travel View Andria C. Schwartz

What is going to happen tomorrow? Do you sometimes think you know? Some people claim to be able to see into the future. Is it fixed? What does tomorrow bring and how can we tell? According to the Greeks, our fate was predetermined, as in the tragic story of Oedipus killing his father and marrying his mother. In the very attempt to alter his course, he caused it to happen. Is our fate predetermined, and if so, what happens to free will?

In the classical view of physics, as long as the initial conditions are known, the characteristics of any other time can be determined. For example, suppose you throw a ball in some direction or other. The question is, where is the ball at a given time? That depends only on the initial conditions: where it was shot from, in what direction, at what speed, and what sort of outside forces are influencing this experiment. Given enough information about the starting system, any point in the future can be determined. In Isaac Asimov's Foundation series, the genius Harry Seldon discovers the equations which can predict the future of a civilization. Not with any detail, claims Asimov; we couldn't say what an individual person would do in future, but we could tell you what forms of government would be most prevalent, and perhaps even tell what would happen to a certain country.

If we could somehow know every last detail that there was to know, then physics, sociology, biology, whatever, could tell you *exactly* what would happen in the future. So the next question is, is there free will? Do we really choose whether or not to do something, or is it predetermined by what has already happened or how it all started? Given the exact initial conditions of the Big Bang, couldn't we tell what you'd have for breakfast tomorrow, who you're going to marry in ten years, and when the next world war would be? You only *appear* to have free will in so far as we cannot determine the initial conditions with enough precision. (I will talk about this more.) But if we had a time machine, we wouldn't need to, we could go forward and backward and just see what happens. Once again, we are left with a dilemma of free will. If we can go to the future and see what we will do, then we cannot change what we will do because we already did it or we wouldn't have seen ourselves do it! This is the quandary with the block universe. If we accept that all moments in time already exist (as in the block universe), or that

everything is determined by the initial conditions (as in classical physics), then we have no free will. Unfortunately, quantum physics states that (1) we can never know the conditions at a given time with exact precision, (2) whenever a decision must be made, there is no way we can determine the outcome, and it theorizes that (3) all other possible choices are made as well. Thus, the theory of alternate universes or altered histories. Somewhere (or *somewhen*) out there, there is a universe in which every time you flip a coin, it has always landed heads up. And somewhere/when, it has always been tails up. (And maybe, just maybe, there's one where the coin has always landed on its edge!) It's not like the coins *have* to land one way up or the other in this hypothetical universe—they still have an even chance of landing heads or tails the next time—it's just that it always has landed that way before. (Think of what *that* would do to a society!)

"Why not?" asks Trimble in Larry Niven's *All the Myriad Ways*. What does it matter which path you choose, when you actually choose to go both ways? It doesn't matter. Nothing you do makes any difference. Free will? How can you have free will if you don't really chose to go one way or the other but actually take both, nay, *all* possible paths? Is all appearance of free will actually random chance? Maybe God doesn't play dice with the universe, but in this model all possible outcomes occur. Any possible paradoxes caused by time travel would be solved with the creation of yet another universe. If you could travel to all these alternate histories, travel sideways in time, then we could see that there is no such thing as free will. In the infinite alternate universes scenario, the illusion of free will disappears to be replaced with a reality of chaos.

When dealing with either of the main theories for time travel, it appears that there is no such thing as free will. In the block universe, your free will takes the form of being free to choose what must happen. In the alternate universes theory, the closest approach to free will is to choose which path one particular form of your consciousness will travel, but other forms of it travel the other paths. I think free will is merely an illusion formed by the nature of our consciousness and that the only true way to maintain this illusion is to never build a time machine. Should one be built, all that will be learned is the precise nature of our lack of free will.

Author's Bio:

Andria Schwartz is a physics and math double major. Check out her web page at: <http://merlin.alfred.edu/~schwora/>

Tit for Tat

Sean Rook

Kenneth Brand pulled his pickup truck next to 33 Green Drive and gave a tap on the horn. A few seconds passed before a stunningly graceful cat-woman stepped outside and walked straight towards the truck. Kenny grinned, leaned over, and pushed the passenger door open.

"Nice costume Jen."

Jenny Tilson licked her fingers and lightly massaged her glued on whiskers before answering. "Yours isn't half-bad either, Long John."

"I'm going as Ahab, precious."

Jen flashed a none-too-pleasant grin and pulled her tail inside the truck before slamming the door shut. "If you didn't sleep through all your classes you'd know Ahab wasn't a pirate!"

"You aren't exactly an 'A' student yourself sweet cheeks."

Jen crossed her arms across her ample chest, pouted her lips, and stared straight ahead. Kenny, not liking how this date was going, gave a yawn and stretch to "subtly" put his arm around his girl. She immediately shrugged it off.

"Look," Ken started, in his most apologetic voice, "I'm sorry. Who cares whether I'm going as Ahab, Long John, or Columbus. Can we forget this and go have some fun at the dance?"

Jenny turned her head to glance at Ken and immediately her expression softened.

"You really sorry?"

"Sure I am," he chanced his award winning grin.

She moved her hand over to his leg and gave him a little rub. "I forgive you." Kenny eagerly moved his head closer and ignored the wiry whiskers as they French-kissed. Finally the apology was accepted and Kenny zoomed off to Menner Fields 1955 Halloween Dance.

20 minutes later

Jenny stormed out of the high school, her costume being ruffled and slightly stained by fruit punch. She turned and glared at the doorway while Kenny was none-too-gently escorted through it a second later.

"I can't believe you acted like that. Just look at this costume, it's ruined!"

Ken didn't seem to notice his prime date was unhappy, he was busy glaring at the front doors to Menner High. "Buttheads," he muttered. Finally, he turned toward Jen, to find a very unhappy kitty.

"What was going on with you and Stutter?"

"He asked to get me some punch."

"And...?", Ken tightened his tone up a notch.

"What? He got me some punch, you didn't have to dump it on him."

"He was hitting on you. No one tries to steal my girl," he emphasized his point with a punch into his palm.

Jen threw up her hands and turned away.

"He wasn't hitting on me Ken, he was getting me some punch; like a gentleman."

"No geek hits on my girl."

Jen twisted her head towards him. "And I'm so sure you had to punch out the chaperone, Mr. Tungsten, or are you jealous of him too?"

"He..."

"Just take me home." Jen had an amazing talent of mingling nagging and whining tones into a single sentence.

The drive back to Jenny's house was made in silence. Ken obediently kept his eyes forward until they reached the amazingly deserted part of I 94, where he put his truck in park.

"Look hon..." his sentence was cut short by a bright light that forced the two of them to shield their eyes. When they opened them...

...They were staring at a two-headed bird standing as tall as Ken's waist, wearing what looked like a green tuxedo.

"Greetings", one of its heads chimed in singsong english.

"Son of a bitch!" exclaimed Ken, slapping his hand to forehead. Jen stared opened mouthed at the creature, unable to speak.

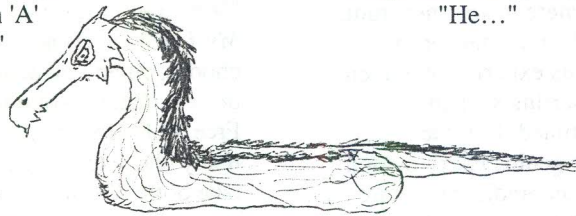
"Don't be alarmed," continued the other head, "all can be exclaimed if you sit tight."

Ken turned towards Jen, "I think we bought the farm."

Jen snapped out of her reverie and gave Ken an angry look, "Don't be a goof! Of course we're not dead." She seemed to lose her confidence for a moment, "There's got to be a reason for all this."

Ken brightened, "I got it, hon, we're dreaming."

Whether annoyed that he thought of such an explanation first or because the punch was still



soaked into her tight fitting costume, Jen did not seem ecstatic at his explanation.

"I can assure you that 'you did not buy the farm' and this is not a sub-conscious REM interpretation of external information." Both human heads snapped back towards the birds' attention. "My name is Ro'Nax and you are on board a spaceship."

The bird gave them a moment for the revelation to sink in and then continued, "At this moment we are heading towards a temporary outpost set on the light side of your moon. My species, the KacAws; a highly advanced and enlightened race, are holding a get together of less technologically advanced species." Ro'Nax glanced at his audience, not knowing how to interpret the rolling eyes on the male or the hushed noises escaping the females malleable lips. He continued, "We have gathered approximately two dozen species who have either achieved rudimentary space flight or are close to doing so." He started to pace, "Naturally we needed a place to gather all these creatures so we decided to use Earth's moon-since you yourselves are on the path towards space travel. I..."

Ken pointed his thumb at Ro'Nax and turned his head to Jen. "Now I know we're dreaming. This crap is straight out of *Astounding*."

Jen managed to stop laughing just long enough to ask, "So why would such an advanced species pick up two people at random?"

One of the heads stared straight into Jen's eyes for several seconds. Jen faltered a little but continued.

"You didn't just pick people at random for your guest list, did you? I mean, we don't know anything about spaceships or aliens-we don't know anything that could be useful to you."

The bird looked back towards Ken, ignoring Jenny's question. "You are not dreaming."

Ken reached out to rub Jen's shoulder but she swatted him away. "Whether or not you're the dream Ken or the real Ken, I don't want anything to do with you."

Ken raised his index finger and was just about to make a sharp reply when he felt a stab in his other wrist. The stupid bird had bit him! "Why you little..."

Ro'Nax backed off, "There! That proves it you see. If you were dreaming you wouldn't have felt that pain." He nervously backed up some more as the human still approached, a very annoyed look on its face.

Jen pinched herself and then gave a disgusted look. She slapped the back of Ken's head. "Hey!"

"Oh shut up. The thing is right, this isn't a dream."

Ro'Nax gave a curt nod. "I'm glad you finally see the truth."

Just then a whistle sound came from hidden speakers. Ro'Nax bobbed both heads and then spoke, "We have finally arrived at the base." He turned and headed for a wall that moved out of his way.

"This way."

After extensive walking the three of them arrived to a much more decorated doorway. Ro'Nax turned around, a little nervously.

"Beyond this door we have set up a huge gathering that you might find startling..."

"Really?" Jen moved to pass the annoying bird but was quickly cut off.

"As you will notice, I have attached translators to both of your garments." Both humans predictably looked at their costumes to spy the tiny metallic devices attached to them.

"I must warn you that many of these species are very different from you in appearance, but don't do anything rash," one of the heads glanced nervously at Ken, "I will introduce you to as many as you wish and be ready for any questions you may have. Now, let's enter."

The bird pressed a button and the doors obediently opened, revealing nothing either teenager had seen or imagined before. The sights, the smells, the sounds-what kind of music could that be called? In a way it reminded both teens of the party they had left not too long ago, except for everything being totally bizarre.

Their avian tour guide motioned them to follow and they did so. They wove past several groups of aliens-some mixed, some just one species (reminded Jen of her school's own little cliques). Finally the bird stopped short at a triangular table and turned around.

"Well? Why are we stopping here? When do we get to talk to some of these aliens?" Jen snapped.

One beaked face stared at her again, this time though she stared straight back, the other face gave short nervous looks at Ken. "Stay here. I'll bring you appropriate companionship." And the strange little alien darted off.

Jenny watched Ro'Nax run off, a frustrated frown blemished her face. She turned to find Ken examining the bowls full of food and drink, or rather what she thought might be food and drink, on the table.

"Babe, check this out."

Jen had other things on her mind. She folded her arms over her chest and started to pout. "What a waste of time." She threw up her hands into

the air, "And just look at this! The stain has set, my costume is ruined!"

Ken came up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders, "Hey babe, it's all right. Let me make it all better."

Jenny shook off his hands and turned around jabbing a finger into his chest. "If you think I'm going to let you touch ME after all I've gone through you've got another thing coming mister!" She started to step forward, finger still jabbing into his chest. "I've had about enough of you." Ken had been backing up until his back rested against the table.

"Babe..."

It was too late; Jen turned around and marched off towards one of the alien groups at the other end of the room. Ken was just about to contemplate why his girl had gotten so pissy when a raspy voice spoke right behind his ear.

"You seem to be having some troubles with your mate."

Ken turned around, saying as he did so, "And what business is that of yours?" Before him he saw a small furred creature, standing about a head shorter than Ken. Lots of straps, pouches, and gear covered its body-though slick fur peaked out wherever there was space. A large sword, almost as big as the creature itself, was strapped to its back.

Ken almost laughed, the thing looked like a giant otter. "Bug off, twerp. I'm not interested in talking."

The creature narrowed its gaze for a split second, then let it go. "On my world a females' show of such aggression would be seen as a challenge-a very profitable one, if you happen to succeed."

Ken faced the creature with as best a skeptical look as he could manage, he fingered his chin, "Really?"

The otter was about to say something when they were both interrupted as a huge snake approached the refreshment table. Ken stared at the thing, it's neck arched almost twice his height above him, a huge bony skull-which hardly appeared to be natural, covered its head-only its all black eyes could be seen through two holes. Its skin looked like incredibly smooth leather, almost a pale blue color with a line of stringy black hair running down its entire length.

"Excuse me, if you please." The voice boomed inside Ken's head, not like the slightly offset translation that sounded in his ear like with Ro'Nax or the otter.

The otter moved off to the side, and Ken followed his lead. The otter spoke into Ken's ear as the snake began to settle itself in front of the table. "That's a Marowak. I can't tell whether it's the male or the female, but I met them earlier."

Ken was transfixed on the head of the thing, it was huge! He found his voice, "Friendly?"

The otter gave a toothy grin, "Aye, but you'll want to give them a wide area-they're both telepathic and telekinetic."

Ken snapped out of daze, "What?"

The otter stared at the table, "Watch how it eats."

Ken turned to look at the snake, which did nothing more than stare at the table. He turned his gaze to the table and couldn't believe what he saw. A large bowl of red punch started to turn transparent, from red to pink to perfectly clear. Ken gawked, unable to believe what he just saw, "Hey, how did he...?", he turned his head, the otter was gone. He looked back to the snake, which was on its way to another table.

Ken stood, pondering what he just saw. He finally came to a conclusion that suited him, "What a lame-ass party." He was about to look for Jenny when Ro'Nax returned with a large furry creature. The thing had a bony tube/snout attached to its head, from which a large tongue flicked out, Ken had never seen anything that fat before, well, except maybe for his uncle.

Ro'Nax seemed pleased to find Ken where he left him, but then its heads started to go in all directions as it realized only one of the two humans it left was there. "Where is your companion, uh, Ken?"

Ken rolled his eyes, then a thought grabbed him. "Hey, where can I get a huge sword like that otter?"

"Otter?" Ro'Nax started to preen its feathers, trying to figure out what the human was talking about. It's heads shot up, "The Tavi! No, no do not hang out with that creature. It is very dangerous," in a side note to itself it whispered, "And I have enough trouble with you alone."

It's last train of thought popped back into its skulls, "Please human, tell me where your companion went!"

"She felt like wandering around. I think I'm going to go look for her."

Both heads shot straight at Ken, its wings flapped a bit nervously, "NO! That won't be necessary. You stay here, talk with Rheeepa while I go look for your companion."

Ken gave a tight shrug as he watched the bird shoot off in a hurry. A short burst of flutey music filled his ears before the translator took over. "Are all of your kind as ugly as yourself?"

Ken shot the thing an angry look, it didn't seem impressed. He came very close to ripping the things beak out but then calmed himself, let himself ignore the comment. He poured himself a glass of red juice, gave a sniff, and then finally decided to add

a bit of the good stuff from his lucky flask-which he always brings to parties. He took a small sip, the stuff almost made vomit as soon as it hit his tongue. In disgust he spit it back in the glass, then started to look for a place to dump it. The flutey alien stared awkwardly at him, if only he could dump it down that things throat! In no time he spotted a potted plant next to a wall, just a few feet away. Nonchalantly he moseyed on over to it and dumped the contents of his drink into its soil-the thing immediately started to shake violently, he stared at it for a second then went back to the table.

Musical notes filled his ears, followed by the translation, "Ill-bred savage! Have you no consideration for other guests? You belong in a zoo, barbarian!"

Ken turned to face the fat thing, which sat on its back legs glaring up at him. Ken's hand shot out and grabbed the things flabby neck, which was almost non-existent. "Listen fatty, I've had a pretty shitty night. I don't need any more shit from something as stupid looking as you!"

The thing squeezed out some strangled notes, "I was merely stating an opinion.", it's eyes rolled, "I saw your companion earlier," Ken started to lift the thing up to eye level, for something that fat it weighed next to nothing.

"Where?"

"Kaa...", it couldn't seem to breath so Ken dropped it on its ass. It shook its head a couple times and a constant, low-pitched note, which the translator couldn't understand, escaped it. Finally it caught its breath and then glared at him, "She was talking with the Kaahn," Ken could feel the smirk in its voice, "They seemed very interested in her choice of garments."

Kenny scratched his head, "Garments? Oh, you mean her costu...", he looked at the furrball, "Why were they interested in her costume?"

The thing pointed a long, thin claw out towards one of the groups and Ken squinted at the few aliens in it. Yeah! There was Jen, talking to a bunch of tiger looking people, maybe a half-foot taller than her. He saw her whisper into one their ears and then they all started laughing.

The anger swept over Ken like a tidal wave. He started marching right towards that group of aliens, most of the aliens saw him coming and parted before him. One thought repeated itself in his mind, *I'm gonna kill them, I'm gonna kill them, I'm gonna...*

Jenny laughed at the colonel's joke, she couldn't believe her luck in actually finding someone as interesting and important as him at this party. At first she felt a little strange when they approached

her, but later on they explained their interest in her clothing. They actually seemed very interested in her as a person, well maybe not completely, but it was much better from what she got from Ken.

The three aliens were all about a head taller than Ken, wore very formal attire-military uniform they explained. The high collars came up to their cheeks, and looked a bit uncomfortable to her, but it seems that men of any species had to play their little games and look important. They had a very feline appearance, smooth fur covered their faces except for their muzzles which were a darker skin color but furless except for their whiskers-which tickled her the last time Gregorik leaned in to talk to her. The colonel did most of the talking, which he seemed fairly good at, the other two, who he said were his subordinates, mostly just kept an eye on the crowd around them.

"That's so true colonel, I..."

Squawks, hisses, and other protests alerted Jen's attention. She turned her head to find Ken pushing past a lot of aliens and coming straight for her. The two Kaahn subordinates positioned themselves in front of Jen and the colonel, preparing themselves for conflict.

Ken finally stopped in front of the two cats. "Outta the way buttheads."

One of the cats hissed, the translator did its job and Ken heard, "Turn around and leave before we are forced to hurt you."

Ken tried to smirk, but his anger was still too hot, "Is that a fact."

"Ye...", the aliens' words were cut short as Ken punched him in the gut, the Kaahn immediately fell to the floor gripping itself in pain.

The other Kaahn couldn't believe what it just saw, unable to react he just stared at his comrade. Ken slugged him in the chin, knocking him out almost immediately. He looked down at the two Kaahn, "Punks."

The colonel stared at Ken, finally he regained his composure. "The lady is with me," he stepped to face Ken, only to be forcibly pushed into the table behind him. He fell on his backside and gripped his side in pain. Ken grabbed Jenny's arm and started to pull her away from the big cat.

"What do you think you're doing you big jerk!", Jen freed herself from Ken's grasp.

"What do you think I'm doing Jen."

Jenny ran over to the colonels' side, he gave her a flash of his fangs. "Away from me, bitch!" Jenny looked at him as if she had been slapped, she backed away from him.

"Why you ungrateful bag of hair! I'm gonna...", she heard a grunt and turned her face just in time to see Ken chuck one of the larger

punchbowl in the incapacitated cats' direction, unfortunately, he threw a little too hard and it hit some of those in the crowd behind the Kaahn.

"Ken! Stay out of this! I'm sick and tired of you butting..."

"Shut your mouth!" Jen turned to face the speaker, the large furry flute snout alien was speaking to her, "I've had enough of your tuneless babble! You uncivil..." the rest of the exchange was cut short as Ken grabbed the things snout. He gave a short nod to Jen, who looked at him for a second before giving a short indifferent shrug. He turned to face the alien, whose eyes were wide open, gave an award winning smile and then started to spin around with the alien's beak still in his grasp. When he picked up enough momentum he released and watched the thing sail across the room, emitting a very beautiful, but piercing scream.

Ken looked at Jen, "Look hon, I'm real sorry I..."

"Prepare to die whelp!"

Both teenagers turned to see the very angry and very drenched Tavi brandish his huge sword at Ken. Jen stepped in front of the alien, "What do you think you're..." The alien bared its teeth and then grabbed Jen's shoulder, pushing her out of his way.

"Out of the way female!" it growled.

Ken bared his own teeth as the thing started to swing its sword in a slow arc in front of it. "Now you die"

It raised the sword above its head and Ken stood still, waiting for the strike. A loud thud resounded from the creature. The Tavi opened its maw all the way a low strangled noise escaped from its mouth, Ken looked at the creature. A foot was sticking out from between its legs, Jen had kicked him in the nads from behind! The thing fell over sideways and let go of its sword so it could fold itself into a fetal position and continued to make low mewling noises.

A smile flashed across Ken's face, "Babe." He opened his arms to embrace his woman. Ro'Nax suddenly appeared out of nowhere, he took in the carnage with quick nervous looks with both heads, he then looked up at Ken and Jenny who were in each others arms.

"PROTECTION SQUAD!!!" it screeched at the top of its lungs.

An immediate silence filled the room full of aliens, then screams and protests filled the room from farther down-but coming closer. Finally a small force of aliens pushed their way into the clearing Ken had made a few seconds earlier. Both the humans laughed at the sight of them. They looked like four-foot tall bunnies in military form. The only thing that seemed to distinguish them from earth bunnies was

the fact that they stood on their two feet, had long tails, and weird ultra-blue coloring to their fur.

Whatever their appearance, the things immediately saw the humans and walked straight towards them, an unmistakable look of hate filled their eyes. Ken let go of Jen to face these "security" guards. He casually walked straight towards the group, which waited for his approach. He leaned over in front of the lead bunny and reached out to pet it.

"Awww, aren't you a cute fe..." almost immediately he was lying on his back. Before he could figure out how he got that way, and more importantly, get up, one of the rabbits did a flying backflip while screaming some strange high-pitched battlecry. It landed right on Ken's stomach, forcing the breath out of him and making him jerk in pain-a sharp pain to the face came out of nowhere. In a second he was surrounded by most of the squad, who started to hit, kick, and bite him.

With a rush of anger and adrenaline Ken managed to throw the little things off of him, leaving only one directly in front of him. He managed to get his fists up, "Okay, you wanna fight? Let's fight."

The sidekick to his stomach forced him to bend over, gasping for air. He turned his face up towards the dangerous alien. It took a second to ready itself, then bounded at him. One of its feet pushed off Ken's knee to give it some lift, the other one did a spin that Ken only saw as a blur. The spinning kick hit him square in the jaw, and he fell onto his face, unconscious.

The blinding light woke him out of his daze and the first thing he noticed was the pain in the back of his head, he grabbed it without thinking.

"Ooooh" Jen was waking up next to him, they both looked around. They were both back in his truck, on I94.

Ken gave a look at Jen, she looked a little confused also. "Was that a drea...?" Jenny touched her finger to his lips.

"Shhhh, forget about that baby. You got pretty beat up back there." She rubbed the back of his head.

Ken shrugged and gave a smile, "Well, I couldn't let them insult you, could I?"

Jen gave Kenny a full smile, which he returned-but ended up being interrupted by Jen's lips pressing against his. He decided to wait until later to see if Jen had gotten past that little problem they had back there. "Hey," he thought, "if she's not going to bring it up, why should I?"

He returned his full attention to Jen, snuggling takes a lot of attention to do it just right you know.

Author's Note:

The driving force for me to write some of my favorite stories can be described as an "inspiration", and that is what drove me to write this story. I often have little "inspirations", though the actual finished product usually doesn't live up to my expectations-I did enjoy writing this story for the most part. I'm sure we've all had these kinds of "inspirations", where something triggers your imagination and you have to write, draw, paint, or whatever to keep from forgetting it. I guess you could call the experience like having a good dream, it's too good to forget, but what do we do the moment attention is snatched away?, forget it. Ok, I've rambled enough, now for a little about the story.

Tit for tat is a saying, I think, often used in economics, it basically comes down to little vengeance-such as doing something to piss someone off who just pissed you off, a crude interpretation but that's the guideline I used for this story. I tried to make it absurd, I tried to make it amusing, I hope you think I succeeded-or at least came close. The two main characters are intentionally two-dimensional, though Jen came off to have some intelligent comments at times-which couldn't be helped. I really like human-like animals, hence the fact that many of the "aliens" didn't really seem that alien, but more cartoonish. I figure if you're going to have aliens in your story they'd either be really "monstrous" or the kind of creature you would love to meet. One of the creatures missing: a slug who uses enzymes for communication, enzymes that have the added bonus of acting like hallucinogenics to a human. None of them had as much depth as I'd hoped to give 'em. All in all, I hope you enjoyed story-the one



probably won't be anything like this one.

Author's Bio:

First I want to give you the address to my webpage:
<http://students.alfred.edu/rooks/index.html>
Let's see....My home town is Red Hook, NY.

I'm a junior accounting major. I'm a weekend supervisor for Herrick Library. I've worked at the Alfred Phonathon as well as Ade Dining Hall for a semester each in my time here at Alfred. I've been, and still am, treasurer of AUScifi; I'm a founding member, Co-President which then turned into my current status as President of The Gamer's Guild; this semester I've been Secretary of RHC, after a year and a half as just a lowly rep; I've been Senate Rep for the AMA for the last two years now; I'm a member of the IMA hmmm...I think that's it. Ok, I think I've bored you enough. ☺



Prologue

Lee Schmir

The steady tone of the alarm clock jars me awake. If I were not still half asleep, I probably would have conjured up a fireball which would have blasted the offending clock. And the night stand, there would be a pile of ashes which I would have to clean up. And in the wall behind the night stand, there would be a two-foot hole which would never hold the paint right after being patched up. No, it is good that I am still half asleep.

It's amazing how I can be asleep, sense something is not right in my presence, and wake up, ready for action in less than half a second. On the other hand, if I am awoken by more conventional means, it takes me several minutes to clear the cobwebs out. Not very healthy in my line of work. Neither is talking to myself every morning, trying to justify why I do what I do.

I roll out of bed and stumble towards the bathroom. Once there, the cold shock of the tiled floor drags me further out of my stupor. I go through my normal morning routine and walk out feeling much better and much more aware.

Lucy, the maid, has commented how opening my closet is like looking in on a den of shadows. She's right, but what can I say? I like black. My work tends to involve shadows anyway. I put on my usual outfit of a dull, black bodysuit, lightly laced with Kevlar. Then comes a pair of boots. Over all of it goes a military-grade flak long coat, rather illegal for the average citizen to have. The average citizen doesn't have my connections.

I go back into the bathroom because the mirror is better lit, and I start to comb my hair back. My hair has that annoying semi-metallic sheen that all of my kind have, and it's white to boot. Perfect for sneaking around. I pull my hair back past my long, pointy ears and tie it off close to my head with a piece of black silk. Then I check the black, fox-head-shaped tattoo over my left eye for any irregularities. As usual, it's as flawless as the rest of my elven skin. That's right, I said elven. Don't look so surprised. As if the pointy ears weren't enough of a giveaway.

That tattoo is my symbol, my trademark. It took me over a hundred years to get people to recognize that symbol on sight and know about the man it's connected to. They fear me now. It'll have to do. I would have preferred respect, but how many people respect someone who is an assassin and a thief?

Fox Tales: The Legend Begins

Thief, con-man, assassin, even murderer, but never hero, he had been called many things in his whole infamous career, but he had never been called hero.

"Oh, well. Time to think about the current mission before I move onto the next one," he whispered to himself.

He moved stealthily down the long and richly decorated hallway, glancing only briefly at the paintings that hung on the walls. Some of them must have been close to two millennia in age. As valuable as they may have been, the paintings were not his target. For them to be easily transported, he would have to risk damaging them. That was something he would not do, regardless of the value. *After all, something must hold value for me in this world, since my life only partially counts.*

He moved past a window, and reflected light from the street lamps highlighted his long, silver-white hair and pointed ears. The thick carpeting absorbed his footfalls when he came to a sudden stop. He shifted his vision from the visible light spectrum to infrared. Dozens of laser beams crisscrossed the hallway, as though a pile of glowing, red sticks had been tossed there. He had been approximating how much of the hallway he had traveled for just this reason. The thief could not see a way through



the beams without breaking one, and it would be better not to wake the residents by trying to go through a room.

He made a mental coin toss, which of course he won, and he reached into his long black coat. His black gloved hand withdrew a knife painted a dull black except for the barest of the edge, so as not to give him away. The edge shone with an unusual light. He stabbed it into the floor and parted the carpet silently and effortlessly. The monofilament edge of the blade also cut through the synthwood board underneath.

"Ooohhh, this will be tight. Good thing I'm not claustrophobic," he remarked, seeing the narrow space between the upright supports for the floorboard.

Fortunately, the supports were aligned in the direction that he wanted to go. If they hadn't been, the coin toss would have been a moot point, and he would have had to go over instead. He wedged his lithe frame in between the supports and carefully replaced the cut section. If someone should come down this way, with any luck they wouldn't notice the damaged carpet in the poor light. *Or they will still be too sleepy to notice or care.*

He slowly wiggled his way down the narrow passageway, trying to keep track of his distance. After he had judged that he had gone about ten feet, he used his knife to cut another hole in the floor. When he sat up, he saw that he hadn't judged quite as accurately as he would have liked. An inch less, and he would have broken one of the beams. Not as much leeway as he usually liked. The thief berated himself for his carelessness as he replaced the section of flooring and continued on his way.

When he reached his destination, he noticed that the lock was a triple-bolted, multi-phasic tumbler. His victim must have thought that the lock would have been deterrent enough, but it was the door that was the liability. Being made of synthwood, like most of the house, the door had to be mounted the old-fashioned way, using hinges. It also helped that the architect was genius enough to have the door swing into the hall, meaning that the hinges were on the outside. The thief simply drew his knife and sliced off the hinges. He pulled the locking bolts of their corresponding slots and entered the room.

The elf walked behind the desk to the computer and sat down. He withdrew a black, rectangular box with a tab protruding from one side from inside his coat. The thief inserted the tab into the datacard slot on the computer and turned on the screen. Several lights changed from red to yellow to green as the memory-breaker hacked into the computer for him. He retrieved the data that he needed from the computer. Then, for a finishing

touch, he retrieved one piece of data from the memory-breaker and let it run on the computer. Soon the screen blanked to a fox on a white background with a message flashing at the bottom of the screen. It read:

CONSIDER YOURSELF OUTFOXED

The thief smiled at his calling card and grabbed the memory-breaker. He moved to a nearby window and quickly disarmed the security system. Raising the suspicions of whoever might be monitoring the security system did not matter now, since he was on his way out. He leapt out of the second-floor window and rolled with the fall, coming neatly to his feet. He telescoped out a stick, that had been holstered on his hip, from a foot and a half to six feet and vaulted over the outside fence.

As he calmly walked away, he thought he heard the sound of footsteps trying to pace his own. He slowed down and then broke into a run. Now he definitely heard a second set of feet running to catch up with him. He turned left into a dimly lit alley and whirled around to face his pursuer.

A man jogged around the corner and stopped short, surprised to find his prey ready to confront him. The would-be hunter stepped forward into the area of one of the alley's lights. His skin was colored a deep bronze and rippled with muscle.

The man smiled and spoke. "We had been tipped off that it would be you. Didn't you realize that it was somewhat easy to get in? You only saw the security measures that we allowed you to see and were monitoring you the whole time. It was rather clever of you to go under the laser grid instead of trying to disarm it. So now you would face the hunter?"

"Ah, but you forget, I am the fox and the fox always hunts."

With that the thief carefully removed his black trench coat and keyed the memory-plastic in his gauntlets and knee-high boots. They tightened around his wrists and ankles, and he stood in a fighting stance with his fists curled in front of him, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet.

"So that's your game, is it?" the big man said with a laugh, pulling a large pistol out from behind his back.

In one smooth motion, too quick for the eye to follow, the thief dove into a forward roll. While doing so, he grabbed the stick off of his thigh and extended it. He used it to vault over the big man at the completion of the roll, landing behind him. A shot was fired at empty space. The thief spun around, collapsing the bo staff as he did so and broke the stick in two with a twist of his wrists. The halves

of the stick were connected to each other by a length of chain. The thief wrapped the nunchakus around the big man's throat and squeezed. The big man resisted only briefly before falling into an unconscious heap. The thief retrieved his coat, picked up the gun, and inspected it. His eyes flared in anger.

"Now for the loose ends," he said as he exited the alley.

The thief stepped off the bus and walked the two blocks to the Redtail bar. As he walked in, he nodded to the contact for his next contract. He then proceeded to the corner, where his current contact, Staril, usually sat. Staril was a thin, balding man who specialized in black-market items and info. The thief slid into the seat opposite Staril.

"Hello Staril."

Staril blanched, his normally white pallor turning almost transparent. He sweated and stammered for a moment before regaining his composure. "Why hello, Fox. Did you get the data?"

"Yeah, all of the data you could want on Duke Evnet is right here," the thief said placing a datadisk on the table. "Do you have my payment?"

"W-well that's the problem. My contacts won't pay me until they get the disk."

"So pay me out of your own pocket. I'm sure you have the fifty grand in your account. Besides, you're friends with the management here. They should be willing to cash it out for you."

"Fifty grand? We had agreed on forty grand." Staril suddenly looked worried.

"True, but there were unforeseen complications in the operation." He pulled the gun out and laid it on the table. "This is an Aurora heavy laser pistol. It's been heavily modified to have increased power output. Recognize it?"

Staril kept his face neutral. "No, should I?"

The man smiled. "Your mouth says no, but your eyes say yes. They dilated slightly when you answered my question. Two days ago, after I took this contract with you, I followed you. You see, I have never entirely trusted you, Staril, and I have always followed you after agreeing to a contract."

This time you went to meet a certain large, very tanned man. He had a pistol just like this. Coincidence? I think not. I wasn't too interested in the meeting you two had until I ran into him while leaving the Duke's mansion. He was kind enough to tell me that I had been expected, that I had been set up. Now tell me, Staril, why would a smart man like you do something so fucking stupid? I ought to kill you right here and put you out of the world's miser right now."

"No, you won't, because as you said, I am good friends with the management here, and this bar

has some of the best bouncers in the city," Staril said, as he waved two of the said bouncers over. "I'm sure these two gentlemen will be more than happy to convince you that trying to hurt me would not be in your best interest."

"Oh, hi Billy, hi Max," said the thief. "No problems here. Just go back to covering the door."

Staril's jaw landed in his lap as the bouncers walked away.

"You see, Staril, you're not the only one who knows management here. But, I have one trump card here that you don't." The thief leaned over the table and whispered to Staril, "I own this bar."

"You-you mean that Redtail isn't named for a hawk, it's named for--"

"-me. Like the red tail of a fox. Now if you'll give me you credit chip, we can conclude this business transaction."

While Staril put his credit chip on the table, the thief picked up the pistol and shot Staril in the head. He smiled slightly as another betrayer's body fell over, dead. Then, he picked up the credit chip and walked over to the bar.

"Mac, add this to the bank account and dispose of the late Mr. Staril over there," he said to the manager, who also doubled as the bartender.

"Sure thing, boss," replied Mac. "Oh, those other 'investors' are here. I directed them to the meeting room."

One thing the thief had done when he had first been suspicious of Staril was to find out who his contacts were and make his own agreement with them at a slightly cheaper price. Now that he had Staril's money, this operation had made him at least triple what it was supposed to.

When he entered the meeting room, two women and one man turned to look at him. One of the women was absolutely beautiful. While the others were conservatively dressed and had sat in the seats provided, this woman sat on the end of the table in a rather short skirt designed to show off her flawless legs while her lovely face was framed by whorls of dark hair. Based on the rather average appearance and businesslike demeanor of her two associates, the thief had already figured out that she was meant to be a diversion and a damned good one at that.

He sat down at the opposite end from the woman he came to call Legs and propped his feet up on the synthwood table. "Okay, people, let's get down to business shall we? Do you have the agreed-upon payment?"

"Of course, Mr. Fox. We have the fifty thousand that had been agreed upon at our last meeting. Do you have the information?" the other woman asked. Legs had climbed off of the table and

was now sitting in a chair, pouting at having failed in her task.

The thief took the datadisk out of this pocket and put it on the table. "Now show the cash."

A large, black case was laid on the table and was opened to reveal the ten five-thousand credit plaques lying inside. The trade was made quickly and smoothly. The thief escorted the other three to the door, pinching the rear of the one with the great legs as she walked by. She slipped a small piece of paper into his hand.

Once the three were out the door, he picked up the phone. "Hello, is Duke Evnet there? Busy, huh? Tell him that I have some info on a recent, late-night visitor that he had. Since he is busy, though, I will contact him in two days about a finder's fee. Goodnight." *Click*

He pulled out a small television monitor from a drawer in the table and watched as the blip moved off the screen. The tracer that he had put into the datadisk was working perfectly. "Playing both sides can be so much fun and so profitable," he said.

He left the meeting room, walked out to the bar area, and sat down with his next contact. "Okay, what's the job?"

"Um, sure. What should I call you? Mr-," the girl stammered.

"Black Fox," he said with a smile.

Half-Silvered

Adrienne Robbins

You've heard of these motors, of course. They're on wheels, with identical appendages and monstrously assorted sensory devices. Each is governed by a unit with unique hardware, sensciened with a unique game. I don't know who dreamt it up, this idea to build a machine that is of no greater purpose than a player of solitaire. Look, I'll show you. This one's simple; every sensor and line of code is somehow pertinent to the task of collecting those small, blue disks of plastic you see strewn about. The chore seems simple, but the simplicity brings their greatest troubles. The rest of the robots, like that big slow



one there, sometimes pick up the chips by accident, or for some other purpose. See that one? It's sort of like the first one, but subtly different; it also tries to get the plastic disks, but the programmers taught it to

only get them from the ones like the first one. It's more efficient to get a bunch at once and let the others suffer the tedium of picking them off the floor. This one here is trying to plot lanes of sand from one wall to the other, all the way across the room. I've never seen it get very far without having to retrace and repair the lines that the other ones have rolled over. There are a few of those around, it's awful when they cross paths: each trying to go back and repair the line where the other just crossed, in the process ruining the other's work. They eventually wind up just bumping and pushing against each other until one of their gears gets so full of sand it just grinds to a stop, buzzing and smoking, and the other continues on. I've seen a couple that do the same thing, but with spirals. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if by some freak of probability one of the sand-drawers finished its task. Look! Did you see that? That one came to a freshly laid column and turned around. Watch, it'll do it again when it gets to the next one...there. I don't really know what its game is, but it will probably never cross a line of sand. Come and put your hand on this one. It's warm? It probably is working on some pattern of infra-red light to summon one of the reciprocal variety. This machine can't see in the infra-red, but there are some that can. One kind plays to make finer and finer patterns of differential radiation, and the other to find the most intricate pattern available to it. Some of them do that with sound, but there aren't any here right now. A lot of these machines are mysterious to me. Some day I'll come in and watch them until I figure out each one's game, just to satisfy my own curiosity. Like, why do you think that one just sits still? It's been there since we arrived. There's a tiny light blinking there, see? So it must be working, but what is it doing? Well, whatever, I guess the whole thing's just somebody's idea of Art.

Author's Note:

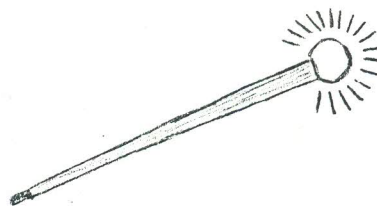
'I urge the reader to take this story for what it is: the written analogue of an artistic photograph.'

A Kender's Tale

David Seymour

"Kender? Just a bunch of thieves." , the bartender said.

"They're a menace to society and should be wiped out", the warrior said.



"A sneaky bunch they are. Would never know that your purse is gone until you look for it and start to hear their giggling.", the dwarf said.

"Kender stew. Yummy.", the ogre said.

"I'm sure that they are just misunderstood.", the cleric said. "Where's my purse?"

"Aye, I'm more than familiar with Kender. They have a certain, let's say, curiosity, when it comes to magic.", the mage said.

* * *

Kender. You love them or hate them. You love them for their innocence or you hate them for running away with your ring. Never heard of Kender before? Well then, some will call you lucky. Perhaps I should explain them to you. In case you run into any of them.

Well, they look like small Elves (don't tell them I said that). They stand about 4 feet tall and have pointed ears, which they like to wiggle. They always have a smile on their face. For some reason, the gods blessed Kender with the ability of never being afraid. Nothing scares them. They could walk up to a dragon and dare to ask "Why are you so ugly" and not cringe the slightest.

This "ability" of theirs gives them their personality. They are so curious about everything and not afraid to investigate it all. This same ability also what gets them into so much trouble. Because what they find the most interesting of everything is someone else's pockets! I suppose if someone wants to get technical about it, one could call Kender a race of kleptomaniacs. While this is true (they are attracted to shiny things), I don't think it's really fair to the Kender.

Let's see, oh yes, of course, their taunting. A Kender can do the oddest thing. They can make a person so mad, that all they want to do is kill the kender. They call it "taunting". The Kender starts to call the person names and the taunted person will do everything in his power to come after the Kender. How Kender came to develop this ability, I do not know. Perhaps they learned to use all the best names that they themselves were called and call other people them.

Never call a Kender "thief". They think it is a great insult. Instead, call them "handlers". They believe that this name, while not being the best name to be called, is OK. Never call them "liars" for that matter as well. (They do tend to 'stretch the truth', though).

Well, that's about all the warning, I mean explaining, that I can give you about Kender. Maybe if I told you a story about a Kender, you might get a better understanding of them. Yes, I can think of one Kender in particular that seems to stand out among the rest. But since there are so many stories about him already, let me tell you a story about another Kender. His name, Trapfinder.

* * *

The door blew open to the old tavern and a kender came flying out. "AND STAY OUT", the bartender said.

The kender landed hard on the ground outside. He stood up and dusted himself off. "That was rather rude of him. And here after finding his ring for him.", he said.

The door opened again and two men stepped out. One was an elf in his 233rd year and dressed in white robes. He was a wizard of Krynn. The white robes indicated that he was a wizard of good.

The other was a human in his late 20's and dressed in leather armor. He was a mercenary who came from Solamnia. His father had been a knight of Solamnia, a righteous order of knights that protected the land from evil.

"Kender, your going to get us killed one of these days", the mage said.

"Well, can I help it if this is how he shows his gratitude for finding his ring for him.", Trapfinder said.

"Maybe if you weren't the one who made him lose it in the first place, he would have acted differently".

"Are you calling me a thief, Quelest?"

"No, I'm calling you a Kender."

"Oh, OK then," Trapfinder said and began to pick up his pouches that got knocked off during his landing.

The mage shook his head in disgust. "Qoulaer", he swore in Elven.

The fighter had been watching the people on the street. Then he turned his attention back to his friends. "It's not all that bad, Quelest", he said.

"What do mean. That was the last inn in this town. The Kender got us kicked out of all of them, remember Deran?"

"Yes. You did out do yourself this time, Trap.", Deran said.

"I did? Thank you", Trapfinder said as he walked over to meet him.

"Well, I guess the only option open to us now is to set up camp in the woods. Unless you know of any Elf settlements around here, Quelest?"

"No elf in his right mind would live around here. This place is full of thieves. And Kender."

"I'm glad to hear you are starting to understand the difference between Kender and thieves, Quelest.", Trapfinder said.

"Well, the difference is subtle at best."

"I think we better get going now before it gets any darker out.", Deran said.

"I agree.", Quelest said.

And they started walking toward the forest together.

* * *

They had found a clearing in the forest and set up camp. Deran was in the forest gathering firewood and Quelest was preparing to cook dinner. Trapfinder was growing bored. (There are few things more dangerous than a bored Kender). Trapfinder began to wonder what being a mage was like. He thought about all the wonderful stories he had heard about mages. How they could fly, conjure up things, and (his favorite) turn into other things. So he thought that maybe he could be a mage as well. It didn't look all that hard. Just wave your hands in the air and mutter words right? But he didn't have the things one needed to be a mage. Like a staff. He was sure that Quelest wouldn't mind him becoming a mage because then they would be able to do mage things together. Like discuss magic, cast spells on each other, and swap spells. So if he didn't mind him becoming a mage then he would certainly understand him needing a staff to become a mage.

It was then that Trap sneaked over to borrow Quelest's staff for a while. He got it and went behind a group of trees. There he tried swinging his arms around and muttering nonsense words trying to cast magic. He then remembered a word that Quelest said a lot when they were fighting some creature. Trap aimed the staff at a large oak and shouted "Derofeaton".

Suddenly, the tree light up with fire. The explosion knocked Trap off his feet. Quelest came running around the corner and saw the Kender on the ground, holding his staff.

"Trap, if you don't hand me back me staff right now, I swear, I'll turn you into a goblin.", Quelest said

"Really?!", Trapfinder said as he got up. "You can do that!"

"Alright then, if you don't give me back my staff I'll never turn you into anything.", Quelest threaten.

"Why not?", he asked.

Quelest calmed down and thought. "Because I'll need to use the staff in order to change you. That's why."

"OK then," Trapfinder handed back the staff to Quelest. He grabbed it from the Kender's grasp. Then, turning his back to the Kender, Quelest went about putting out the fire. He cast a magic spell that created a mass of water above the tree that put the fire out. All that was left was a blackened tree.

Once Quelest was finished with that he turned his attention back to the Kender. Trapfinder was standing there muttering about what he wanted to be turned into.

"A goblin wouldn't really be all that interesting. A bird would be great! I could fly all over the place. An Elf would be nice. Their rather tall. It would be nice to tall for a change. Well a giant is even taller. Maybe...", Trap went on.

A smile grew on Quelest's face. He was about to do what he had wanted to do for a long time.

* * *

Deran came running back to the came.

"What was that light, Quelest?", Deran said, when he had enough breath to ask.

Quelest was cooking when he returned. He smiled. "The Kender got a hold of my staff and caste a fireball on a tree."

"Your awfully happy about it. Where is Trap by the way?"

Quelest's smile grew.

Deran was shocked. "You didn't kill him did you?"

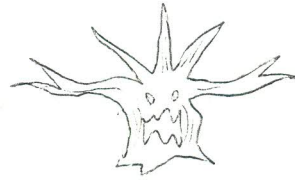
Quelest sighed. "No, I wanted to, badly, but I could never bring myself to do that." He chuckled. "But I did think that he deserved a lesson about touching my staff".

He lifted up a pouch for Deran to see. "I reduced him and placed him in this," he said and then broke out laughing.

Deran started laughing as well. Trapfinder had a way of getting on people's nerves every once and awhile. So he knew the feeling of wanting to place Trap in a bag.

When Deran could bring himself around to speak again, he said, "OK. I think he has learned his lesson. As well as he is ever going to learn it."

Quelest toyed with the notion of sending the pouch to some far off land but decided not to. "It wouldn't be very fair to the other people", he thought. So he opened the pouch.



"He's gone!", Quelest said.

Deran turned his attention away from the food. "What? How can that be?"

"He ripped open a hole in my pouch! Qoulaer!", he said.

"Begin looking for him around here. He's too small to get very far", Deran said. He began by looking at the bottom of his shoe, in case he stepped on the little guy. Quelest checked his other pouches in case he crawled into one.

"Where could he be?"

* * *

Trapfinder had grown bored in the pouch and decided to leave. He found that his dagger had grown small with him which made him giggle because it was small to began with and now it was even smaller. But it would do to make a small hole in the pouch. He wiggled his way through the hole and landed on the ground.

Now that he was out of the pouch, he wondered what he should do. In answer to his question, a squirrel ran by him and up a tree. Trap decided that it'll be fun to follow it in a game of chase. So Trap ran up the tree after the squirrel. (Kender happen to be very good at climbing things. They've found that most of the really interesting things are behind things you have to climb over. Like walls.).

When Trap got to the top he lost track of the squirrel. It was then that he heard Deran's voice. He walked across a tree limb that went over the camp to get a better view. He watched the two talk and giggled when Quelest held out the bag thinking that he was still in it.

Then he heard a hoot of an owl near-by. It was only a few branches over. Trap remembered how he had wanted to fly like a bird earlier. Now was his opportunity he thought. Using the stealth of a Kender (It's easier to hear grass grow then a Kender sneaking), he walked up to the bird. Then he leapt on it's back. The owl let out a startled "HOOT" and took to the air.

It flew over and out of the camp. It tried to shake off Trap but he held on tight. They were soaring over the treetops now. Trap laughed at the ride. The owl tried doing dives and quick turns to get Trap off but that only made the ride only more fun

for him. He always thought that flying would be like this.

The owl finally grew tired of trying to get Trap off and flew straight for a while. Trap had the best view of the sun setting that he ever had. The owl landed on a tree branch and Trap hopped off. When the owl felt the weight off his back leave it flew off hoping that it wouldn't get back on again.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. Owl. It was the most fun I had in a long time." Trap called after the bird.

Trap was happy. Even for Kender standers, he was happy. There was a campfire below him. "Oh, look at that. He even set me down by the camp site," he said. He was about to go down and tell his friends of the wonderful trip he just had when he heard voices. Strange voices.

"No. I say that we go through this wall here," one voice said.

"Don't be stupid. It'll be much easier to go through a door," another voice said.

"Maybe your right," the first voice said.

"Of course I'm right," the second voice said.

Trap walked around on the branches until he saw the source of the voices. There was a group of 20 or so ogres sitting around a campfire. They were eating some sort of half-cooked animal (he hoped it was an animal and not some poor villager) and drinking barrels of ale. When each was done with their bones they threw them over their shoulders. When they were done with their barrels, they smashed them with their bare hands and laughed.

"Well what about this wall here. It looks pretty weak," the first ogre said.

"What is it with you and breaking walls?" the second ogre said.

"I just think it's a lot more fun."

The second ogre slugged the first across the face. All the ogres laughed. The first ogre slumped backwards. Even Trapfinder laughed at how silly they all were.

When the laughing died down, the second ogre (which Trap nicknamed Slugger now) began to speak again. "Good. Then its decided that we'll use a door to attack the town." He laughed again and took a large gulp from his barrel.

Trap didn't laugh. He knew that the town didn't stand much of a chance against so many ogres unless they had a warning of some kind. He was too small to run back there in time. He wouldn't even make it to his camp in time to tell his friends of the danger. Besides, they probably wouldn't even believe him anyway.



Whenever he tried to tell them something they would always nod

their head yes and say, "Of course we believe you" and they would return to what they were doing.

It was decided then. He stood up on the branch and punched his fist into his palm in the most heroic fashion that a Kender could muster. He, a four-inch tall kender, would have to fight the ogres by himself.

Just then an ogre threw a bone over his shoulder and hit Trap's branch. Trap lost his balance and fell right on top of an ogre's head.

"Hey, watch it. Your suppose to throw the bones OVER your shoulder. Not at me," said an ogre wearing a black eye patch.

"I did," said a very ugly ogre.

"No you didn't. You hit me right in the head."

"Are you calling me a liar?!"

"Yes. You hit me in the head just like this."

The ogre wearing the eye patch picked up a bone and threw it as hard as he could at the ugly ogre. Being as drunk as he was, missed the ugly ogre completely and hit another ogre.

"Arrgghh," the ogre shouted and threw the bone back.

Of course, you can see where this was going. Soon all the ogres were throwing bones at each other. When they were out of bones, they started punching each other.

Trapfinder was still in the hair of the ogre with the eye patch. He did his part of angering the ogres by yelling insults at them. Of course, being so small, the ogres didn't see Trap and thought that the ogre he was standing on was insulting him and took his anger out on that ogre. Trap also jumped from ogre to ogre yelling insults and pulling hair, whatever it took to anger the ogres.

Soon, most of the ogres were knocked out. Those that weren't knocked out were on the verge of being unconscious and left the group that had only gotten together to raid the town.

Trapfinder was smiling away. "What a day!" he said. His hair was in tangles and he had a few cuts and scrapes on him but nothing very serious. Luckily all his pouches were still with him (A kender's (and other's) most prized possession).

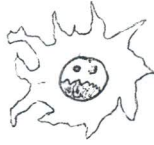
Trapfinder began his way back to the camp to tell the others. It was going to take awhile for him, being so small. He wondered if they would believe him this time.

* * *

As Trapfinder left, one of the ogres stirred. It was the first ogre that Trap had heard. He sat up and looked around him.

"Why is everybody sleeping? Aren't we going to raid the town?"

Author's Note: I wrote this story purely for entertainment. It is a story that is supposed to let your mind relax and enjoy the adventure of a kender.



Judgement Day

Joshua Arzt

Introduction

The story begins in the later half of Raven's quest. But before we can continue, perhaps you should be made familiar with the cast.

Raven: Marcus Andrew Winters, age 19. Unknown to him, Marcus was born into a family of great power. His father, Calibus, was once the guardian of Earth. But upon Calibus' death in 2014, Raven began to feel different. His ancient powers began to emerge. In September of 2019, after a brutal car accident, Raven learns the truth of his ancestry, and the legacy he must continue. He is the current guardian of Earth.

Calibus: Alexander David Winters, the original guardian of Earth. Created when Earth was born, Calibus had protected the Earth from his evil brother Armageddon. But in 1014 AD, Calibus and Armageddon simultaneously destroyed each other. An ancient prophecy caused their distant ancestors in 1995, to realize their past. And so Alexander Winters became Calibus once again. He protected the Earth until 2014, when he died stopping Armageddon from destroying the planet. His son Marcus had been told that his father died in a plane accident. Marcus learns the truth five years later.

Excalibur: The majestic sword of truth. Though it would seem strange, this sword is alive. To communicate with its master, Excalibur hums certain metallic tunes to express its opinion. Excalibur was created shortly after Calibus became the guardian of Earth. Forged from metals unknown to man, Excalibur is the most treasured sword in history. Though believed to be only a legend, this sword was passed down to the legendary Arthur Pendragon of Camelot, shortly after Calibus' death. In 1995, Calibus found his sword in an old burial ground in

the far reaches of Scotland. After his death, the sword was once again lost. But when it learned of Raven, it sought him out in his dreams. Raven located the sword, and has been in possession of it ever since.

Armageddon: Matthew Wallace, once a guardian, once a destroyer. Like his brother Calibus, Guardian Victorian was created when the Earth was born. Though created to be a protector of Earth, Guardian Victorian soon desired otherwise. Because his brother was completely pure, the "Laws of Equilibrium" caused Guardian Victorian to be completely opposite. Victorian soon after, abandoned his duties, and fled the Earth. In 1009 AD, he returned to destroy all that his brother protected. Taking on the name of Armageddon, he battled his brother for five years, until one day in 1014, both simultaneously killed each other. Armageddon returned in 1995 inside his distant ancestor Matthew Wallace. And until 2014, he attacked the Earth. Calibus faced him once again, and died in a brutal battle. Armageddon disappeared after that day.

Meridian: The sword of evil. Meridian was created by Guardian Victorian shortly after he abandoned his duties as the guardian of Earth. While in his travels, Victorian forged this sword from metals identical to those used to make Excalibur. And just like Excalibur, this sword is alive as well. It always hums the metallic song of sadness when in contact with its master. Soon after, Victorian took on the name of Armageddon, and returned to Earth. In 1995, Armageddon reclaimed his sword from the depths of the Sahara Desert.

Prologue

Pull me out... of the air crash. Pull me out... of the lake. Cause I'm your su... per - hero. And we're standing on the edge.

No... It's the same dream again...

That was the song I heard on the radio when our car hit the tree. It just played on and on. It was like a broken record. But now... I can't hear it anymore. I can't hear anything at all. All I can feel, is a bright, white light shining down upon me. *Is it heaven?*

I think about that to myself. I am unsure if I am dead. *Am I truly at the end?*

No... Not again. I can't believe this is happening again!

As I crawl out of the car, I can make out a figure approaching me from the light. It is my father! He reaches down to help me out of the wreck. He begins to say something, but I can't make out his words. I stand up and begin to brush myself off. I look up at his illusive face.

What are you saying to me?

I focus on his moving lips to hear his inaudible words. And then, I know exactly what he is trying to tell me. For the first time in months, I can finally pull some sense out of this delusion. *"You are needed..."* he says.

For what?

"The people need a hero again. You must appease their needs." He looks at me with an empty stare on his face.

Why? Why me?

"Because my son, it is our way. Earth needs a hero again." He then turns away from me, and begins to return to the light.

No, Please don't leave me...

I try to follow, but I can't move my legs. *"It is not your time to follow,"* he says. *"But you will understand soon enough."* And with that, he disappears into the light.

I then begin to feel a loss of focus in my surroundings. I know the inevitable is about to happen. I wake up.

The Approach

Date: December 31, 2019

Time: 4:52 p.m.

The evening begins to approach. In the sky, the sun threatens to disappear behind the pink and red horizon. Below lies the town of Midvale. The rich orange light from the sky only touches the very top of the highest buildings there.

On top of one of these buildings, stands a figure. If one were to look closer, you can see that in fact it is a man. He is looking off into the distance, following the sun in the sky. The sun's rays gleam

from the man's extensive red cloak. He is unmasked. On his left side beneath his cloak, the almighty sword Excalibur rests in its sheath. It hums, telling its master that he mustn't delay. This man standing here is Raven: The Guardian of Earth.

That dream races through his head. Every night he has it. And every time, he is fooled into thinking he is really there, and that he can make his father stay with him. But even after five years, Marcus still cannot let go of his father.

Recently, his senses have been going off the wall. A great evil is here. From the feel of it, only one thing can be true. Armageddon has returned. Raven knows he must confront him. He must avenge his father's death. The time will be tonight.

Raven has already foreseen the destruction of Earth. At exactly 12:00 a.m. the world will come to an end. *Why does he always pick New Year's Day?*

From on top of this building, Raven can hone his senses to Armageddon's location. Moments ago, he located him. But for now, Raven will wait. He will strike when the sun has gone down, and the people all over the East Coast gather, to do their New Years ritual.

Send-Off

Date: December 31, 2019

Time: 6:13 p.m.

Before leaving to face Armageddon, Marcus found it to be within his best interests to say goodbye to his mother.

Marcus flies into his bedroom window on the second floor of his home in the suburban area of Midvale. He closes the window, checking first to ensure no one saw him enter the house. He then pulls the shades, and changes out of his costume. It is still warm from being in the sun for the last two hours. He then places Excalibur on his bed, and leaves his room.

As he heads downstairs, he can see that the light in the kitchen is on. "Mom, I'm home," he says.

His mother, pulling dinner out of the oven turns around to see her son.



"How did the patrol go? Did you find anything?"

If you were wondering, you heard correctly. Marcus' mother knows his secret. She has known since he admitted the truth to her two months earlier. A logical person would think that she would have been surprised. She wasn't. This is because she had spent twenty years married to a super-human. She had questioned the possibility that Marcus may have received his father's sacred powers. So naturally when Marcus told her, she was prepared.

Marcus enters the kitchen, and approaches his mother. She puts down the turkey, to hear the results of his patrol. He looks at her with a worried stare.

"Well, what did you find?" She is now concerned.

He still doesn't answer her. He turns to the left, and places his hands on the kitchen windowsill. He looks out the window, trying to find meaning out of the darkness in front of him.

"Marcus! What's wrong?" She now stands there insistently tapping her foot.

He answers her in a dark, quiet voice. He only says three words. "He has returned."

His mother falls back suddenly in shock. She staggers to sit down at the kitchen table. Marcus still stays positioned by the window. "You know I have to face him..." His voice trails off into the windowpane.

"No Marcus, you don't," she protests. "Your father died because of him. I won't lose you the same way!"

"I'm the only one who can stop him, and you know that. You won't be able to stop me from going." He turns around, and rests his back on the windowsill. He can feel the cold glass through his shirt. His mother just looks up at him. Her face is pale.

"I just wanted to say goodbye, should I not succeed." He begins to walk towards the kitchen door. His mother gets up and grabs his arm. He looks down, and is still met with her pale, pleading gaze. He gently removes her arm from his.

He continues to leave the kitchen, but stops momentarily. He turns his head to the side. "I love you, Mom." Those are the last words he speaks to her. He then returns to his room, and gets back into his costume.

Excalibur hums as he returns it to its sheath. Raven now turns towards the window. He carefully opens it, and inspects the area, making sure no one is watching him. He then steps onto the sill and prepares to take flight. For a brief moment, a thought goes through his mind. What if this is the final night for Earth?

Raven takes to the sky, and heads toward his designation. He is going to find his uncle, and he is going to prevent him from destroying the Earth. He is going to find Armageddon.

Disturbing Truth

Date: December 31, 2019

Time: 8:43 p.m.

Raven approaches an old shack in the middle of the woods. He inspects the area to make sure this is the right place. His senses tell him that Armageddon should be in this shack. He decides to sneak in (not that it would do much good against Armageddon).

He delicately lands on the roof of the small shack. He can see that there is a skylight on the north side. He quietly creeps towards it, and kneels down to look through. He can hear a lot of yelling and threatening inside. He peers through the glass to get a closer look. A large, dark figure in armor stands above a helpless man. Apparently the large figure wants something from the man, but Raven is unsure as to what the large figure wants. Raven is certain the dark figure is Armageddon.

The dark figure stands above the helpless man, making him crawl backward in terror. "I'm going to destroy you, little man," the dark figure growls.

"No, please... you're crazy," the man pleads.

"I'm going to make you pay for all the trouble you have caused me all these years." The dark figure then draws his sword, which makes a dark, sad hum. He then attempts to strike down the man, but before his sword can get lower than a foot from its raised position, he feels an immense tug on the tip. He quickly spins around to get a look at the third-party member.

"Drop it," Raven commands, holding the tip of the sword. "You've picked the wrong place to go to, Armageddon."

The dark figure laughs a deep, evil laugh. "You are a fool to believe I am that ancient excuse for a villain." The dark figure pulls his sword free, and returns it to its sheath. He apparently has lost interest in the cowering man on the ground. "I am far greater an evil, young hero."

"Where is Armageddon?" Raven is confused.

"Right here," he says. He turns and points down towards the cowering man. "There is your great evil. Pathetic isn't he?"

"This is weird." Raven rubs his forehead, not believing what he just heard.

The dark figure loses patience quickly with Raven. "Well, I really must be going. I have much to do before the evening is up?" And with that, the dark figure disappears into the shadows.

Raven turns, and prepares to go after him.

"Wait," the man yells on the floor. "What he says is true!"

Raven stops dead in his tracks, and turns back around slowly. He walks over to the man, and kneels down beside him. Raven then takes a closer look at the man's face. The man has calmed down. Raven is in shock. "Uncle Matt!" he exclaims. "It really is you."

"Hello, Marcus," the man replies.

"Apparently much has happened in the last five years."

"Who the hell was that?" Marcus questions with concern. The man now crawls to the other side of the room. Raven tries to help him, but the man waves him off. On the other side of the room, the man crawls into a wheelchair. He wheels it back to the other side of the room where Raven is standing.

"I don't know," the man replies slowly. "But you are probably wondering why I am human again."

Raven shakes his head in acknowledgment. "Start from the beginning."

"Ok...", he says rubbing his head for a second, to loosen the memories. "Well, five years ago, your father and I fought each other to the death at the old clock tower in Midvale. I'm sure you know that." He waits for Marcus to shake his head again, before he continues.



"Well, I almost succeeded in beating him. But then he tricked me with a fancy sword technique, and before I knew it, his sword was through my stomach. As I keeled over and began to die, Armageddon's evil spirit left my

body. I became Matthew Wallace once again."

Raven's eyes are wide with amazement. "You see Marcus, unlike your father, I was possessed, by my ancient ancestor. Calibus was awakened, inside you father. So he was the real deal, and I wasn't." He pauses for a moment. "Are you getting all of this?"

Raven nods. "Go on, please."

"Alright... well... as I was lying there dying, your father sensed that I was Matthew once again. So, he knelt beside me, and whispered something in my ear. I swear I will never forget those words until the day I die. He said: 'One final deed.'..."

"What did he do?" Raven insists.

"Don't rush me boy, I was just getting to that. Like I was saying, he whispered into my ear, and before I knew what was happening, your father did the most amazing thing: He saved my life. I watched him turn into an energy form, and place his hands onto my chest. Within moments, I was restored into my human form with Excalibur resting next to me. When my strength returned, I crawled over to your father. He was already gone. He had risked his whole life to restore mine. And so I crawled away from his lifeless body, and managed to get away from there."

"You just left him there?" Raven is shocked.

"There was nothing I could do, boy." The man is annoyed with Raven's statement. "I was paraplegic before I became Armageddon in 1995. Because of my transformation, I was able to walk again. When I became human again, I lost my legs once again. So there was nothing I could do for your father. I crawled away, and managed to get an old wheelchair, which you see before you. I never told your mother about me, because I thought she would blame me for this. I guess his death is my fault."

"I never imagined to see you human again," Raven replies, pacing around the room.

"Well, I don't know who that guy was, but if he is doing what I think is going to do, you'd better find him, and fast!" The man has a deeply serious look on his face.

"I was just leaving," Raven heads towards the door.

"Raven," the man calls out.

"Yes, Uncle Matt?"

"Good luck to you."

"Thanks," Raven replies. And with that, Raven exits through the skylight. He can feel the bite of the cold, bitter air as he exits the insulated shack. It's time to save the world.

**It's the best of times, It's the worst of times,
It's the end of time**

Date: December 31, 2019

Time: 10:47 p.m.

The moon shines bright in the sky. The immense clock tower casts a long shadow over the Midvale cemetery. The dark figure stands on the top platform of clock tower, waiting for Raven. He has been expecting him for some time now.

He can suddenly sense Raven's presence behind him.

Raven speaks. "I don't know what your game is, stranger, but I want to hear your story."

The dark figure turns around to see Raven standing in a fighting position, with Excalibur poised in front of him. Excalibur hums. The dark figure now steps out of the shadows. He is masked, but wears a familiar costume. Raven knows he has seen it before, but he cannot place as to where. The dark figure then unsheathes his sword to meet Raven's stance. The sword makes a dark, mournful hum. Raven recognizes the sword.

"The dark sword, Meridian," he exclaims. "Only Armageddon is capable of using that weapon."

The dark figure raises Meridian to eye level. "Sometimes, things change."

And then suddenly, without warning, the dark figure lunges at Raven, bearing his sword down upon him. Raven absorbs the blow with Excalibur. He slowly falls back, as the dark figure pushes down on his sword. The figure's strength is incredible.

Raven feels a sudden burst of energy, and he manages to overpower the figure. This tosses the figure backwards. He then returns the challenge, by bearing down on the figure with his strength. The figure falls back, but not easily. The force is so great between the two of them, that their swords fly out of their hands. Seeing they are unarmed, the dark figure

takes a swing at Raven. Raven catches his fist, but before he can return the blow, he is overpowered with an intense mental shock. The dark figure experiences the same.

Everything around Raven seems suddenly cloudy. All Raven can see is his father lying dead at the clock tower five years earlier. In the distance, Matthew can be seen crawling away. Raven wants to help his dead father, but he realizes that this is only imagery, and he is helpless only to watch.

Off to the side, Raven can see a dark cloud circling towards his father's fallen body. *'That's Armageddon's spirit!'* Raven thinks to himself. The spirit then enters his father's body. Within seconds, his father stands up and brushes himself off. He inspects his body as if he were just created, and laughs a low, resonant laugh. He then flies off out of view. Before Raven can react to this, he feels himself fall backwards onto a hard surface.

He looks up to see he is back in reality again. He sits up quickly to look at the "now identified" figure that sits opposite him. Apparently he has had the same experience that Raven did.

Raven slowly stands up, and removes his mask. The dark figure does the same. "Father!" he exclaims.

"Marcus." The dark figure seems slightly surprised.

"I thought you were dead!"

"You thought wrong," he says coldly. "I never thought you would actually rise up after all these years. So, *you* have been the one that has been getting in my way?"

"Yes," Raven replies quietly. Raven now changes the subject. "What are you like this Dad? You were Calibus once: The Guardian of Earth. Why turn evil?"

"Ever since I received this dark soul, I have never been more powerful."

Raven is shocked by his response. "Power never mattered though," Raven protests. "It was always about saving the Earth. Not greed and conquest."

"Times change, little bird," he snaps back. "I am better than I have ever been in my whole life. Earth will suffer as my warning to other worlds. They will learn that I, Alexander, will rule the Universe!"

"And what about Mom?" Raven asks quietly.

"Your mother?" He replies angrily. "Andrea...", suddenly he has weakness in his voice. "My Andrea..."

"Yes, father, you still love her, don't you?" Raven pleads.

"I... I... NO!" he shouts. "You are trying to confuse me." He now faces Raven, and returns the focus in his eyes to his original emotions. "I am going to destroy the Earth, little man, and you aren't going to stop me."

Raven returns the glare, angered that his father has been lost to this evil man that stands before him. "My father, or not... I will kill you, if that means it will save the Earth."

"So be it," Alexander exclaims, blasting Raven with an intense blot of lightning.

Raven falls backwards and lands on his back. He quickly gets up, and dodges the next energy blast. With a quick maneuver, he gets past the third bolt of lightning, and lands his sword against Meridian. Alexander falls back for a second, but then moves to the side, and begins to swing his sword wildly at Raven. The swords can be heard clashing from three miles away, as their sound cuts through the cold night air.

After about five minutes of fighting, Alexander out-maneuvers Raven, and sends Excalibur about ten feet behind Raven. He then presses the tip of his sword into the left side of Raven's neck. "You are beaten," Alexander states in a dark angry voice. Raven kneels down from the pressure of the sharp tip.

"Not quite," Raven exclaims, quickly rolling over, kicking Meridian out of Alexander's hand. He then rolls backward, and retrieves Excalibur. He then springs forward in a great burst of fury. Alexander retrieves Meridian, and attempts to receive the blow with a strike from the right side. Raven quickly deflects the attack with his sword, and spins to the left, burying Excalibur into Alexander's gut.

Alexander keels over the blade, and slowly begins to fall to the ground. Raven falls with him. Kneeling on the ground, Alexander slowly looks up into his son's eyes. "You have... beaten me. You have

killed... your own... father! You should feel... guilty my son."

Raven gives a cold hard stare back to Alexander. In a dark, hurt voice, Raven replies to his query. "My father is dead, and so are you!" He then stands up, and slides Alexander's body off of Excalibur. Excalibur hums in approval.

Raven then loses his cool, and falls to his knees. He buries Excalibur's blade into the wood of the platform. He is quiet for a few moments. But then, in a quiet whisper, he speaks. "It is done."

Suddenly without warning, his whole surroundings are blanketed in a bright light white. Raven gets up, from the sudden change in the environment. "What is going on?" he wonders.

Then he is hit with a wave of disorientation... he suddenly feels as though he is falling...

Pull me out... of the air crash. Pull me out... of the lake. Cause I'm your su... per - hero. And we're standing on the edge.

"Nooooo...", he yells.

He is now surrounded by nothing but blackness. Then, without warning, a bright white light blares into his eyes. He can barely see where the source to it is, but he can faintly hear voice.

"His eyes aren't dilating. Lets get another EMT over here," a voice calls.

Epilogue: The Truth

Date: Unknown

Time: Forever

Marcus' mind suddenly begins to falter. He feels really sleepy. Maybe a nice long nap would be nice.

The voice calls again. "Come on, hurry. We're losing him."

Marcus falls asleep. But for some reason, he is now wide-awake.

Pull me out... of the air crash. Pull me out... of the lake. Cause I'm your su... per - hero. And we're standing on the edge.

No... It's the same dream again... Is this a dream?

That was the song he heard on the radio when the car hit the tree. It just played on and on. It was like a broken record. But now... He can't hear it anymore. He can't hear anything at all. All he can feel, is a bright, white light shining down upon him. *Is it heaven?*

He thinks about this to himself. He is unsure if he is dead. *Am I truly at the end?*

No... Not again. I can't believe this is happening again!

As he crawls out of the car, He can make out a figure approaching him from the light. It is his father! Alex reaches down to help him out of the wreck. He begins to say something, but Marcus can't make out his words. Marcus stands up and begins to brush himself off. He looks up at Alex's illusive face.

What are you saying to me?

I focus on his moving lips to hear his inaudible words. And then, I know exactly what he is trying to tell me. For the first time in months, I can finally pull some sense out of this delusion. *"You are needed..."*, he says.... No, that's not what he says at all!

"You are now here with us."

"What?" Marcus questions.

He can now hear his father clearly. The confusion is somewhat over. "You are now here with us, my son."

Marcus stares at his father with disbelief and utter confusion. "Look behind you my son," Alex says, pointing behind Marcus. Marcus turns around to see a bunch of EMT's crouched over a body hanging out of a crumpled car. Marcus walks closer to get a good look at the victim. It is himself!

Alex walks up behind him and gently places a hand on Marcus' shoulder. "As you can see, you never survived that crash."

Marcus wheels around to look at Alex. "How can this be? I survived that crash."

"I'm afraid not, Marcus. You died on September 22, 2019."

Marcus protests. "But what about me becoming Raven, and saving the world? What about my powers? What about our fight to the death?"

Alex smiles, and places his hands on his son's shoulders. "It was all in your head," he says, tapping Marcus on the forehead with his index finger. "Sometimes before we die, we experience an intense memory lapse, where we believe certain things happen, when in reality they do not."

"So what you are saying, is that my life flashed before my eyes, but chose to take an exaggerated path?"

"In less complex words, I would say that is it."

Marcus is in disbelief that the last three months of his life lasted mere seconds as a delusion.

"What is going on?" Marcus is still a bit confused.

"You always ask so many questions my son," Alex says, smiling.

"I have been sent to retrieve you from the living world. I am your guardian angel."

"Wow," Marcus exclaims. "Really?"

"Indeed," Alex answers. "Come, we will talk about this more, later." Alex motions with his hand towards a bright light in the distance. Marcus and Alex begin to walk towards the light.

"So where do we go from here?" Marcus questions.

"To the rest of your existence." Alex answers, smiling.

"What's that like?"

"You'll see," Alex answers, not wanting to ruin the surprise.

They both now approach the light, and are about to disappear into it. Alex looks over at Marcus. "By the way..."

"Yeah dad?" Marcus replies.

"I got your letter, thanks."

The End

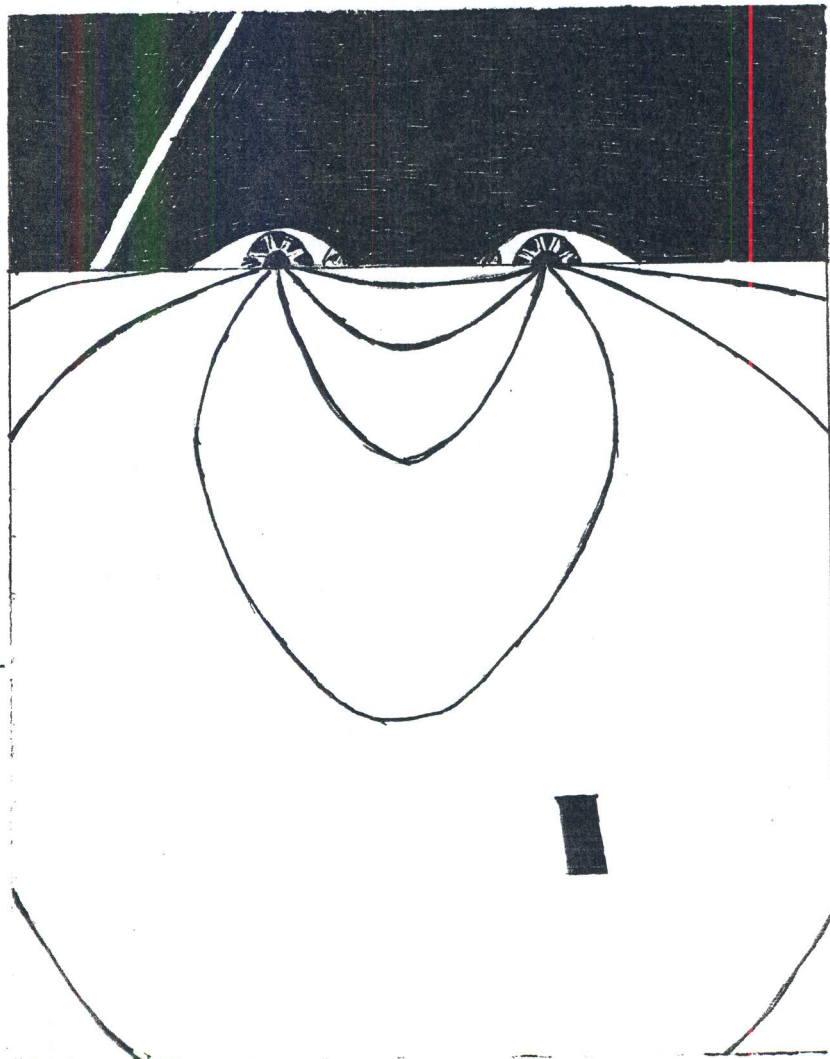
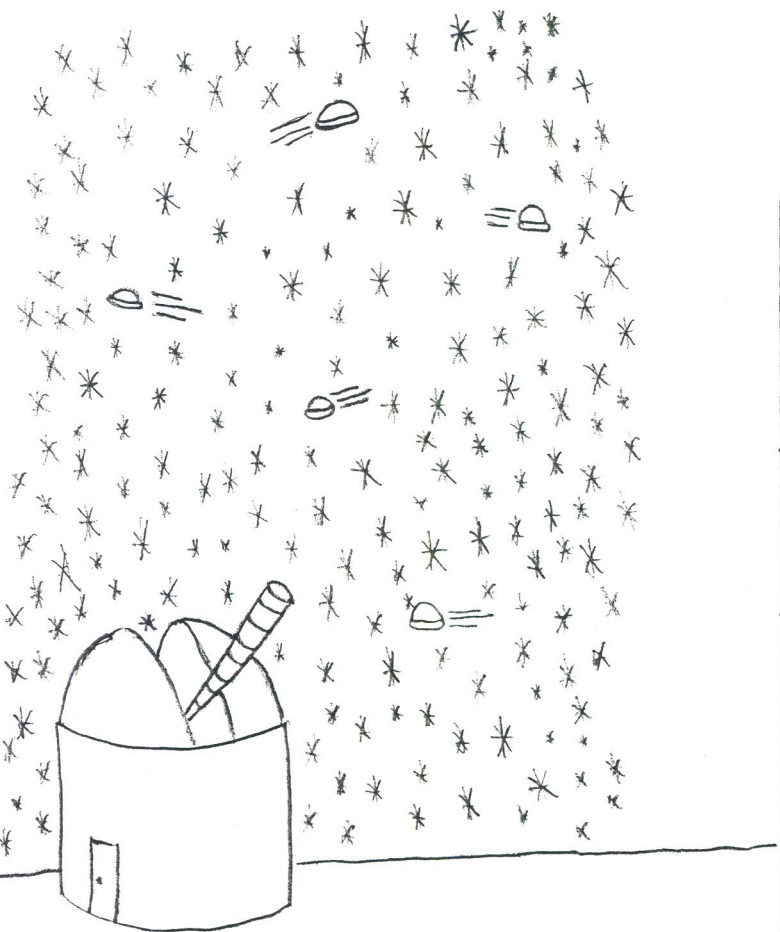
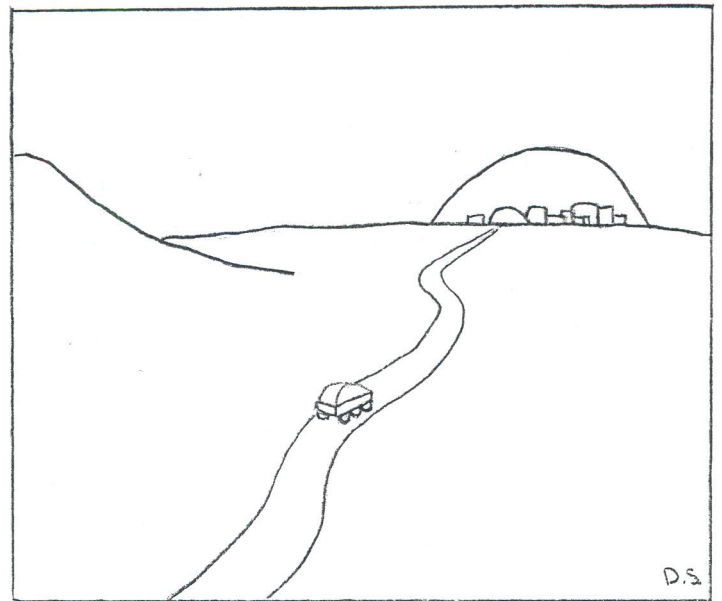
Author's Note:

I have been writing science fiction stories for the last 8 years, most of which are based on the story you just read. The story "Judgement Day" is a possible sequel

to the novel "Rising Tides", which involves the life of the hero, Calibus. However, "Rising Tides" was very difficult to write, and I eventually scrapped the project. But I still kept the cast alive.

So now, I am writing a new novel titled: "The Eyes of the Delta," which is about the same man, existing in three different realities. Each becomes superhuman, but in doing so, the fabric of reality becomes compromised. How it ends... Well I wouldn't want to spoil it for you. But Calibus will get a chance to tell his story in this novel, and perhaps even Raven will come into play.

I hope you enjoyed my story. So until we meet again... farewell.



Ophelia, Part I

Nancy Sullivan

"You must."

"Why?"

"To appease the people."

"This isn't a democracy."

"You think that the people won't revolt just because you say that you're king?"

"What's the point of being king if there's no power. I am the gods' anointed one; the people have nothing to do but obey me."

"You are not the anointed one," Sebastian said with a slight snort. He lowered his voice and said, "You have killed the king, your brother; taken his throne; and married his widow. Don't you think the heir to throne will have something to say about this?"

"She's not here."

"She's coming."

"What?"

"I had an intelligence report this morning. The princess left school yesterday; we can expect her in a week."

"What happened to the quarantine?"

"It kept her there for three months. They had to lift it; there are no diseases with incubation periods even half that."

"Why didn't you tell me she was coming?"

"I just did."

King Bernd narrowed his eyes. Sebastian was a jerk, but he was valuable. He was also dangerous. "Can't you think of any other way?"

"No."

"But it was following your advice that got me into this situation," the king shouted.

"You didn't follow my advice; you didn't follow it at all." Sebastian didn't shout. He was always in complete control of his three emotions. That was the most infuriating thing about him. If Bernd could have seen him laugh or overreact or exhibit any emotion other than cool anger, suspicion, or conceit, perhaps they could have worked together. Even those three feelings were just part of the greater thing that drove Sebastian to do anything: ambition. At least, that was how Bernd read him. He continued, "I told you to annul Drusus and Monica's marriage and to declare Zoe a bastard and *then* to marry the queen; but you wouldn't wait. The result is an insecure throne."

"What about an attainder?"

"An attainder has never been placed on the heir to the throne before. The House probably won't allow it. Besides, you've no good reason." Sebastian wandered about the room. He stopped at the window with his back to the king, removed the tint and looked out onto the skyline of Ophelia's capital and third largest city, Angelica. "She was very popular with the people before she left; she still is. You have to compromise. Announce her to be your heir," he said turning around. "At least while you and Monica remain childless. That will buy you enough time to get rid of her."

"And how shall we do that?" Bernd asked eagerly, taking a few steps forward.

"I don't know, but I'll think of something. You're expected to meet the ambassador from King Helvetius in ten minutes."

"Oh, yes, of course." The king gathered up a few papers and left the office. Sebastian followed him out, and they separated going down the hall in opposite directions.

Sebastian walked at a slower rate than was normal for him. Finding a way to be rid of Princess Zoe would not be easy. She had been gone nearly three years, and it would take at least a few months to find a weakness in her that could be exploited. Then he would still have to figure out how, and then there was the execution. The whole thing would certainly take over a year if it was going to be done neatly. He wondered if Queen Monica was even able to bear children any more. She was 52. Sebastian was perhaps the only person other than the queen herself who knew her exact age. Monica's mother had gone insane years before (it was not likely that she was ever completely healthy), and Sebastian doubted she remembered. Very few people knew that madness ran in Monica's family, the Comnenians, one of the most powerful on the planet. Whether or not the queen had gone through menopause was one of the few things

Sebastian did not know about members of the government. The only person he knew less about was the princess.

It was not until evening that Bernd saw his wife.

"Why is she coming back here? There's nothing for her here!" Queen Monica was famous for her tantrums. Bernd had always known about them, even before she became his sister-in-law. He wasn't exactly sure yet how to deal with them (this was only her second one since their marriage), but Bernd's main skill was dealing with people. So, he calmly replied to his wife.

"She supposed to have the throne of Ophelia."

"Well, she can't have it!"

"Of course, she can't. But she's already on her way; we'll have to do something," he said vaguely. He still wasn't sure what Monica would be willing to do. Certainly she had no affection for her daughter, but it was against nature for a mother to plot the murder of her child, or suffer her husband to. On the other hand, marrying her husband's brother two months after his death showed that she had no regard for social or religious customs. "Sebastian fears that the people will revolt in her favor. He wants me to declare her my heir, to buy sometime until we find a way to get rid of her."

The queen stopped pacing the room and turned angrily on her husband. Like most people in the palace (members of the royal family, their close friends and advisors, other high ranking officials, and two to three servants for each non-servant, total: 1084), she hated Sebastian. She despised him because he was ambitious; she hated him because he was usually right.

"Do you just follow blindly whatever he says?" she asked spitefully. Monica was beginning to think that she liked Bernd even less than she had liked Drusus, and she hadn't thought she could dislike anyone more than him.

"No, I don't. When I don't, things usually mess up. I don't like him either, but I need him to get through this crisis."

"And then they'll be another, and another. He's engineering these emergencies to keep you dependent on him. You are king. You have to take the government into your own hands."

She was leaning over him now, staring directly into his eyes. "This will be the last crisis," he said. "I swear."

The queen left the private sitting room and went into her own bedroom. They had been married for a month and had slept together once. Oh well, he had other women he preferred anyway. It was a good deal.

When the queen was gone, Bernd sent for Sebastian. He knew his councilor would be with him in just a few minutes, and he spent the time preparing for the meeting. He hated Sebastian, too and knew that he would have to get rid of him. Bernd was too afraid of him.

A tone sounded, and Bernd pressed the door controls. Sebastian stood in the doorway for a moment before entering. Bernd left the parlor dim while the hallway was forever saturated in white-white light, so the king had a good opportunity to examine Sebastian's silhouette which was unimpressive. There was little that distinguished him physically. He was of average height, somewhat on the thin side. As he stepped into the dim study and the door shut behind, Bernd examined his face.

There was almost nothing extraordinary in the face, either. His hair was sort of blond, and he wore still in the style of the working class out of which he rose. Bernd thought it was to rub it in to all the gentry, aristocracy, and royalty that a plebeian was getting them out of all their problems. Sebastian had risen through the ranks quickly, and no one seemed to know exactly where he had come from except that it was not from among them. No one even knew how old he was. His birth records seemed to have gotten lost in some sort of computer glitch.

"Your Majesty?"

Bernd paused a little longer before responding, searching his assistant for some clue of age. Sebastian could have been anywhere between 25-65. He had no wrinkles certainly and no gray hairs, but that didn't mean anything these days. If he had the right beauty doctor, he could even have been 85; but Bernd doubted that. He could be quite young; there was a certain softness about his face that could have been baby fat that never melted or the beginning of sagging and puffiness of middle age.

His cheekbones puffed out of the soft flesh; he had a round nose and chin. It was an entirely uninteresting face but for the steel blue eyes that Bernd could almost see in the dark. They stared out of his head always superior, always sarcastic. The closest they came to laughter

and happiness was gloating. Bernd wondered if he ever had a thought that didn't involve his own advancement, and came to the conclusion that he never had.

"Well, Sebastian, have you found a way to get rid of my niece?"

"The princess is now your daughter, I believe, Your Majesty," Sebastian said in his smug way.

"Yes, of course. Have a seat," he paused while Sebastian sat across from him. "So, what are we going to do?"

"I can only see two possibilities, Your Majesty, since it would probably be of little use to declare her bastard now."

"Why?"

Sebastian did not hesitate to say, "Because the people hate you more than they hated your brother, and they love Zoe. They would make her queen regardless."

"So what do we do?"

Sebastian sighed impatiently. "The first thing we could do is marry her off."

"To whom?"

"To Helvetius's son. Perhaps she would give up her claim to Ophelia if she could be queen of Taxlar instead."

"Would she?"

"I believe Your Majesty would be in a better position to answer that. I've never actually spoken to the princess."

King Bernd was thoughtful for a moment. "I don't know," he said at last. "I don't think she would give up being queen to be queen consort, not if she has any of her mother in her. What's the second choice?"

"The second choice is more definite but also more risky, and less moral," he said with a sly smile knowing how little that mattered to the king.

"What?"

"We could drive her insane," he said simply.

"Why don't we just kill her?"

"Because that would be too suspicious coming so conveniently. The House and the people would immediately blame you and revolt."

"How could we, her insane?"

"The easiest way would be drugs, but all the drugs that would do it would have to be administered to her for the rest of her life and they are all detectable. We might be able to infect her with something, but I think we could still get caught. The other way would be to truly drive her mad, confuse her into it, tell her up is down, etc. To do that I would have to know a lot more about her and bring in outside help."

"You know someone who could do that?"

"Yes, but it will cost a lot, and I can't guarantee security."

"Then we'll try marrying her off first," the king said. "I'll talk to the Taxlarian ambassador tomorrow."

"And that should kill two birds with one stone."

"How do you mean?"

"A marriage with Prince Maxen might prevent him from invading."

"You don't think they're serious about that, do you?" the king asked wishing desperately that he had the sources Sebastian had.

"Of course they're serious about it," the councilor answered somewhat impatiently.

"All right, I'll talk to the ambassador tomorrow. We have a few days before she comes."

The next day, King Bernd III of Ophelia declared the Princess Zoe Dionysia Bouddica Ammon his heir. A substantial minority in the House grumbled that she ought to be crowned queen as soon as her ship landed. One even stood to argue on behalf of the absent princess, but he was shouted down by the majority who would rather have a king under the control of an unscrupulous advisor than a civil war and an untried queen who had not been on the planet for more than two weeks at a time in three years. Others, who would rather have an unknown but rightful monarch on the throne than one who was, they claimed, a poor king, demanded to know what Bernd intended to do about the movement of Taxlarian ships so close to the borders of their space. The House was divided into Hawks and Doves as well.

Bernd called for silence and felt himself very lucky to get it.

"We can assure you that Taxlar will not be invading. There is no need to fear a war. Of course, we shall take certain precautions, but there is every reason to believe that peace between the two systems will continue."

The representative filed out of the hall in uneasy silence.

Sebastian sat in his private quarters. He avoided House meetings because he realized that it was already suspected that he ran the planet. It wouldn't do to demonstrate it to the representatives. It wasn't true that he controlled the planet. Officially, Desiderius Sebastian was the head of Ophelia's vast civil service. He had no title although Bernd had offered to make him "First Councilor to the King" hoping that he would take it and be happy. So, certainly he had control of the civil service, which was no small thing. He had no authority over the House except for a few representatives in his pay. As for the king, "Dominance" was the word most people whispered, but it wasn't really accurate. Sebastian had influence over the king, a lot of influence, but it was comparable to the influence a mother has on a small child. The child sit and listen, but then only follow about one-half of the mother's directions. Bernd only heard about one-half of what Sebastian said, and out of that he only followed half. So, the planet was headed for civil war.

Bernd wanted to be king, and he had gone to the right man to get him there. Sebastian played the government like a game of chess, seeing into the future and predicting his moves far in advance. Bernd couldn't follow; he couldn't see; he couldn't wait. He couldn't then, and he wouldn't wait now. Helvetius had accepted for his son the offer of marriage with Zoe. Now Sebastian hoped that the princess would accept. She was a variable. Was she a pawn or a queen?

Finally, Ophelia came into view. Zoe Dionysia Boedecia Ammon wondered if there wasn't more pollution in the atmosphere than the last time she had been there. I suppose I've just idealized it in the past year and a half, she thought.

Ophelia was the second of the three planets that revolved around the star Kali. It had a population of twelve billion most of which lived in about two dozen major urban areas. Ten percent worked on farms. A handful lived on self sufficient, isolated homesteads. There were poverty and crime, but for the most part the people were satisfied in most things. The government had always had its share of corruption, but it was fairly clean on the local level, which is what mattered to most people. It had been nearly two hundred years since the last usurper held the throne. She, Livia II, managed to remain queen for two years before the rightful heir, Nikko I, her brother, removed her. In total that civil war lasted five years. It was, not surprisingly, the most destructive war in the planet's history.

Zoe exhaled and watched the condensation of her breath grow out in a circle (more or less) and then collapse upon itself. She wondered if Bernd's speeches after the death of her father had been enough to convince the people. She was too young, too uncertain, and she had been away too long.

She wondered how much the people, her people, believed. Then she wondered how much she wanted she wanted to be queen. She hated Bernd. She had met hundreds of people of all types in her 23 years, and she had only come across one that she hated. But did that mean he was a bad king? No. She suspected it, none the less.

"How do you know she'll be any better?"

"She can't be any worse."

"Of course she can," said a third voice. "What has she been doing for the past three years?"

"Yeah, and why did she leave," the first voice asked.

"Who cares? I don't want the usurper ruling me. Now, with Taxlarians on their way right through our space; I can safely say I'd rather have Zoe on the throne than Helvetius."

"We'll wait."

"No..."

"We'll wait! There's no point risking our necks now. We'll wait till we hear from our contact."

Unfortunately for Bernd, Ophelia possessed a small but well organized and well-hidden group of professional revolutionaries who had been waiting for just such a chance as this. Sebastian knew they existed, and from time to time he managed to get one or two. He had not been able to infiltrate the whole organization; although, to be fair, he had never really tried.

Bernd was visibly nervous. He walked about the throne room checking everything. He wanted it all to be imposing and stately. He wanted the reality (in his mind anyway) of his power and consequences to hit anyone who walked in (well, not anyone, Zoe) immediately.

Monica walked in, gave her husband a contemptuous look and then seated herself on her throne. She sat unmoving, staring ahead to the tall doors at the end of the hall. All she thought was, "I will not be dowager."

The hall was two hundred paces long and only fifty paces wide. Benches lined either side. They were never used, but no one had ever ripped them out. Every ruler had the right to

make whatever changes she or he wanted in the palace, but the Great Hall was never altered. The walls were white but mostly covered by blue and red curtains. Where the walls were visible, there were symbols of the different titles held by the rulers of Ophelia. Two thrones stood at one extreme end, and behind them was a picture of Ophelia taken from space. It was all quite impressive to someone who walked for the first time.

Sebastian stood behind the two thrones and a little to the left. He followed Bernd with his eyes as he ordered about the servants and wished he would just sit down. Sebastian had spent quite sometime debating whether he ought to be present. He figured that the princess hated him. There was no demonstrated proof of this, but it was a safe assumption. Certainly she would be angry enough seeing her uncle on her throne, but to see the hated Sebastian flanking that throne could ruin any chances Sebastian had for surviving. The chief civil servant's mouth twitched slightly he estimated the possible amount of time he had left before she walked in. He decided the night before to overlook the objections to his presence because he wanted to know what he was up against. He gave into curiosity.

One of the several soldiers standing along the walls suddenly lifted his hand to the small sphere in his ear. Sebastian was the only person out of the thirty or so in the room who noticed. He quickly gave some last minute instructions. The soldier spoke as Sebastian stepped into his proper place behind the thrones.

"Your Majesty, Her Royal Highness has entered the palace."

Bernd wiped the sweat off his brow and waked across the hall. He sat next to his wife and nodded a few times to himself.

The doors opened.

At first there was nothing. The passage that led to the throne room was the only corridor in the palace that was kept dark so that one would have to shield one's eyes upon entering. The plan failed in this case because the princess was her own impressive and stately figure as she walked in wearing the traditional Ophelian mourning outfit, the dubh ciannonne, the dark skin. Her dark blue dress that covered every inch of her, even her hands, swept the floor around her. Over her face and shoulders, she wore a grey veil of one-way see through fabric. She could see her uncle and mother, but they couldn't see her.

She walked down the length of the hall in such a stately manner that all Bernd's plans and worries were in vain. Her tall, dark figure out shone any jewel or fabric or glass. Princess Zoe walked right up to the thrones and stopped.

Bernd was scared. Monica tensed. Even Sebastian discovered a queer feeling in his stomach when he saw her, but he was glad he had come. Now he wouldn't waste time trying to marry off to Maxen.

Two slender dark blue hands reached to the veil and lifted it.

Sebastian had seen numerous pictures of the princess, but he had always assumed that they had been touched, just as all the pictures of important people were. Apparently, her pictures had not been touched. There was no need for computer enhancement. She was a rarity of royalty; she was beautiful. Somehow all the recessive genes missed her.

Zoe was in the traditional mourning garb of an Ophelian noblewoman, which was so traditional that no one ever wore it. The tight, uncomfortable, hard to get into dress that made women sweat like men was topped by a ridicules veil that was attached to the head with a complex system of wires that forced the woman's hair to be worn down. It took an hour to get into the whole thing. Even a woman could deal with all of that, no woman of noble birth would wear her hair down and completely exposed like a peasant. Yet here she was the most important person on the planet with her brown wavy hair flowing over either shoulder.

No, plan A was put to rest before it had a chance to live. Sebastian tried to think of another plan but he only thought of her.

The princess looked only at her mother. Properly, one should, of course, wait until addressed before speaking to the king and queen; but this was an exceptional situation.

"I am pleased to see that my mother had not been too overcome by grief for my father."

"One must move on."

"I don't know if I believe that proverb."

"Oh, of course one must move on," said Bernd. "It's written in ... somewhere. In one's own time. However, mourning to prolonged can be unhealthy," the king said almost as a warning.

Zoe glanced around the room not pausing to scrutinize anything and at the same time appearing to take in everything. She turned finally to her mother again, pointedly ignoring Bernd.

"Where is my father?" she asked.

"Your father is right in front of you," Monica said with clenched lips.

Zoe walked away to the mausoleum which lay directly along the side of the Great Hall. Monica sighed and stood up to follow her reflecting on the fact that she'd always thought the mausoleum should be away from anywhere living people might be.

The crypt kept the deceased rulers of Ophelia's six hundred years as an independent planet. Well, a couple were missing here and there. She walked past the sarcophagus that lay on a seven foot high pillar. It contained Ophelia's first ruler Weena the Great who had led the original rebellion against the Taxlar. All the corpses were related in life, some more than others. The Ophelian royal family had practiced official incest until four hundred years previously when the family converted to the new religion of Oghma, which strictly forbade any sexual relations between people related anywhere within five degrees, including relatives by marriage. The coffins were laid out in nine rows; each had approximately fifty dead monarchs stretching down the long room.

The princess's dress moved magnificently around her and her soft unseen shoes made a "pat-pat" noise as she walked through the mausoleum until she spotted the sarcophagus that had not been there before. She looked down on her father's pale, unmoving face.

"Come away, dear," Queen Monica said.

"Leave me alone."

"Perhaps that is the best thing we can do," Bernd said leading Monica out and whispering to her, "she'll get over this sooner if we don't interfere."

"I can't believe this!" Monica shouted in the private study. "She is openly challenging our position. What do you intend to do about it?"

"I have a plan. I have a few. It will take sometime, but she'll be out of our hair."

Monica gave him another contemptuous look and left. Bernd turned to Sebastian who had been standing quietly against the opposite wall. "Is it open rebellion? She is an odd girl, just the type to walk around in full mourning. Of course, she's not pleased, but that doesn't mean she's going to seize the throne."

"By appearing in mourning three months after her father's death, she is calling attention to the speed of your marriage with Queen Monica. By following the directions for mourning as described in the Leabhar exactly, she is calling attention to the fact that Monica was your dead brother's wife and that your union is therefore incestuous. By wearing the gray veil of the eldest child, she is calling attention to the fact that she is your brother's heir, not you."

"Then how do we stop it?"

"First we have to watch her."

"What for?"

"To see what she does. If Your Majesty will excuse me."

Zoe reached her room at last and collapsed on her bed.

"It's good to see you again, Your Highness," said a young woman in the red livery of the royal household. She was about the same age as the princess, a little shorter, and upside down. Zoe turned over.

"Helena, get me out of this," she said with a desperate look. As the two women helped Zoe out of the costume, the princess continued, "It's all so confusing."

"Sure it is. Everything is different."

"I was prepared for different. Different would've been hard but not confusing. It's confusing because it's all wrong."

Helena was silent. She had known the princess her whole life, and figured that she knew what was going on in Zoe's head. She hoped that she could use it.

"I realized that I would be coming home as most exiles do -- unwelcome. Unwelcome," she continued, "to that beast on my throne, married to his own sister! I knew that was waiting for me." Zoe spun around to face her maid confidently since she was finally free of the veil and cumbersome dress. "But, no one in mourning. No one even thinking of my father. No one even blushing at an incestuous couple on the throne." She paused, and then said in a quieter, puzzled tone, "And that man. That ... Sebastian, he's been promoted, has he not?"

"Sebastian? Yes, your uncle promoted him," Helena said carefully watching for the princess's reaction.

"Yes, I remember him," she said as she climbed into her nightgown. Her head poked out of the top. "I remember him because I didn't like him. What happened to Gorge?"

"He's gone, Your Highness."

"Gone from the palace or gone to Tir na nOg?"

"I don't know, Lady."

Zoe sat on her bed and tried to clear her mind. It was all too much to think about, and too much not to think about. Helena folded the veil and hung up the dress. Then she put a new candle in her long empty candlestick.

"Is that all, Your Highness?"

"Yes, Helena, thank you. I'm glad you haven't changed."

"And I'm glad you've come back. Good night, Lady." The slid shut over her silhouette.

Zoe got off her bed and lit the candle. She turned out the lights and stared at the flame until she fell asleep.

The next morning she woke up, blew out the candle, washed, and again dressed in her "dark skin" and gray veil. Then she wondered exactly what she was supposed to do. The thought of leaving her room didn't appeal to her, but neither did the idea of staying locked away like a coward. Before she could make up her mind, someone came to her door.

"Come in."

"Good morning, Zoe."

"Naill! It's so good to see you, really see you." The princess said walking up to him. She couldn't but touch him, his arms, his face, his hair, in an attempt to convince herself that he was real and standing right before her.

"Are you back for good now?" he asked placing his hands on her hips and glancing over her out fit.

"I ... I don't know. What exactly is my position now?"

"Same as it was before, you're heir to the throne."

Zoe stepped away from him and began to walk around the room. "I was heir before my father died. Now my father is dead, and I'm still heir. Don't you think there's something a little odd about that?"

"Perhaps, but there's an even stranger thing going on here. What is all this?" he said indicating her costume. "You were never religious."

"I've been in a religious house for three years," she said as an explanation, but she was thinking, what do you know about me? What did I ever tell you?

"And will you wear this for the full year?"

"I will wear it for as long as I mourn my father; and since I seem to be the only one who does so, I suppose I shall be wearing it for some time. If you'll excuse me, I have a lot of things to do."

"Certainly."

Naill walked back toward his own quarters at the other end of the palace wondering if it was worth getting back together now. He didn't notice Sebastian coming down the hall in the opposite direction until he was stopped by the civil servant. "I would like to speak to you for a moment, if I may, sir."

"What is it?" Naill asked annoyed because his train of thought had been interrupted and because Naill saw Sebastian as an annoying person.

"I'd like to speak to you in private, sir. Will you come into my office?"

"Fine." They walked to the elevator in silence, and they rode it in silence. They entered Sebastian's office, and Naill sat down in front of the undecorated desk indignantly. "What is it, Sebastian?"

"You were just speaking to the princess?"

"I was just having a private conversation with Her Highness."

"Of course, excuse me. I wouldn't be asking if it weren't of the utmost importance to security."

"Do you think Her Highness is going to steal the crown jewels?"

Sebastian didn't even pretend to laugh. "This is quite serious, sir. Perhaps you should talk to your father."

"My father? How does he fit into this?"

"I'm sorry for wasting your time, sir."

"What in the name of the goddess is going on here?"

"I suggest you ask your reverend father, sir," Sebastian replied quietly and turned back to his work.

Naill left the office and went in search of his father, the High Priest.

After Naill left her room, Zoe sat in front of her window. Her room faced the city. She would have preferred the cliffs and the sea on the other side, but these were the semi-official quarters of the heir. It looks as if I'll be here until Monica and my uncle have a child. How could that be allowed? An incestuous couple on the throne, and the product of a union between a brother and a sister to succeed them?

Somewhere in her head someone said, "You have to do something about this! You can't expect anyone else to get your throne back for you." But she was too tired. She would've fallen backwards onto her bed and slept, but the wires that held her veil in place made that impossible. She decided to get up and walk about the palace as if she had something to do.

She had not been walking long when she ran into Naill's father.

"Ah, Your Highness, I was hoping I would see you," he said changing his direction and putting his arm across her shoulder. "It is good to see such a young and prominent figure as yourself following the traditions of our faith. It is very commendable, very commendable indeed, yes. But," he said, slowing his pace, "your most sublime father Drusus died three months ago. The nation has gotten on with its affairs. We all must do so. It is an essential part of grieving."

"Not grieving is part of grieving?"

"Yes, of course, 'all things must come to end;' that's Book V, line 238."

"What does the Leabhar have to say about a man marrying his brother's wife, Pious Sir?" She watched the priest through her two-way veil.

"Your Highness," he said very quietly, pulling her aside gently, "there are times when it is best to keep one's mouth shut about individuals' behavior for the good of the many. Excuse me."

The Reverend Pater left Princess Zoe and walked down the hall to the horizontal transport that took him to the opposite end of the palace. Here were all of the offices and living quarters of the religious administration. Someone was waiting in his study.

"What's going on?" Naill said standing up. "Why was I just questioned by Sebastian?"

"Sit down, son; I'll explain," the Pater sat behind his desk and took a deep breath. He wished his son were not quite so self absorbed and little more observant. "His Majesty believes that the princess may attempt a coup."

"What? That's not what Zoe's like," Naill said simply. "Violent coups aren't in her personality."

"His Majesty believes that by continuing to mourn for her father she is committing treason."

"Treason! She's being a little neurotic, that's all. How can you support this?"

"I don't want to, and I fear the gods' revenge. But, I fear civil war as well. Naill, you must realize this: the office of the Pater is very important, but it is not hereditary, and you have shown no interest in entering the church. Zoe is the heir to throne. She has an obligation to marry for the benefit of the state."

"So, I sound inform on her?"

"No, not at all, but get her off Ophelia. She must either marry Maxen or go back to school. If she stays here, she will not live much longer. Cooperate with them before they begin to suspect you, but try to get her away."

Sebastian actually cared very little about the future of Princess Zoe. Whether she died, went mad, married Maxen, or went back to school two sectors away, she meant nothing to him so long as she didn't threaten his position. Sebastian reflected on this as he walked toward the private section of the palace to confer with Bernd. Somewhere in the back of his mind a small voice pointed out that the princess was beautiful, but he disregarded it. The never surprised Sebastian took in an involuntary breath when he turned the corner and nearly walked in Zoe.

"Excuse me, Your Highness."

Zoe was just surprised as he was, but she had an additional feeling of nausea. "Good morning, Sebastian." She was going to continue walking, but it seemed that he had more to say.

"May I offer my condolences on the death of your noble father, Your Highness."

"Thank you." She could see that he wanted to say more, but Zoe decided that she didn't want to listen to him. She walked away.

Further down the hall she was attacked by an eleven-year-old girl. Busy hallway, Zoe thought.

"Zoe!"

"Lena! You're two inches taller than when I last saw you," the princess remarked while giving the girl a big hug.

"Yes, and I can beat up all the boys in my class! Have you seen my brother?" asked the exuberant girl.

"I have, and your father." They continued walking together.

"Where are you going?" Lena asked.

"To the Cathedral," Zoe replied. She hadn't really been going anywhere, but the Cathedral seemed just as good a place as any. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

"I snuck out of phys. ed. to find you."

"Maybe you should sneak back in. I can't let them pin contributing to the delinquency of a minor on me, too."

"Will you come visit me later and help me with my homework?"

"I will. Give me another hug." Lena hugged her and then ran off down the hall.

Finally, Zoe reached the Cathedral of the Goddess Winona. She walked through it, underneath a mural of the goddess giving the Leabhar to the First Pater; and entered the chapel. The chapel was dedicated to a minor deity Maris, god of the oceans. She laid down on a hard bench, no longer minding the wires that stuck in her head. On the ceiling of the chapel was a depiction of the creation. Before the Revelation, the people of Ophelia believed that when a person died, his or her consciousness joined the infinite universe. She wished she could do that, just fade away, body and spirit. She wondered if the gods paid any attention to what happened on the mortal plane. Then she fell asleep.

Zoe was shocked back into reality by shrieks. She sat up and entered the main part of the Cathedral. At the front of the dim hall was an older woman, shaking, drooling, twitching, and shouting. The woman was Brooke, the Priestess of Winona, the guardian goddess of Ophelia. On the ninth day of every month, Brooke went into a drug induced trance and spouted out prophecies for the next month. Sometimes they were accurate, but they were mostly unintelligible. There was a point in Ophelia's history when the sayings of the High Priestess of Winona were used to make major decisions of state, but now people usually listened to them only to know whether or not to redo the ground floor or plant a vegetable garden. Now Brooke was in the beginning of her trance. Her hands tore at her clothes and hair, her saliva foamed around her lips, and a gargling growl rose out of her throat.

In the center aisle of the Cathedral, Zoe's feet were stuck to the ground with fear. Nervously, she lifted the veil and revealed tight lips, flared nostrils, and wide eyes. It wasn't the ninth.

The Pater ran in from his office. "What's going on?" He looked to Zoe who couldn't answer for a moment, but finally said,

"I don't know. I was just in the chapel and I heard her."

Bernd rushed in having been called by the Pater, and Sebastian soon followed having been summoned by the king. The Cathedral began to fill as people came from all parts of the palace while Brooke continued to spit and shriek for several minutes.

"Do you know what this is about?" the king asked Sebastian after the Pater made it clear that he did not know what was happening. The drug was kept in a sealed chest on the right side of the altar that could only be opened by the Pater and only on the ninth. Monica clutched Bernd's sleeve unconsciously while on the king's other side Sebastian replied,

"I have no idea, Your Majesty." Sebastian was not a religious man, but like everyone else present he was in awe of this display. Also like everyone else, Sebastian associated it with the arrival of the princess.

Naill entered the Cathedral and walked up to Zoe. "Come sit down," he said.

"No," his father said sternly. "She must stay where she is. The message is for her."

"Why her? Who's she?" Monica asked indignantly.

"She was the only one here when Brooke went into the trance."

The argument was cut short when the priestess flung, her arms out wide and called out,

"Ophelia!"

She stretched her arms out in the direction of Zoe. Brooke began to walk forward through the crowd that automatically parted for her. She walked up to Zoe and placed her hands on the princess's shoulders. The priestess's eyes burrowed into Zoe's brain, and she said quietly, "Ophelia is rotting inside. You cannot see it. Only a proper daughter of Winona can save it. Only a proper daughter of the Goddess can destroy it." Then she pulled the princess up to her violently and whispered in her ear, "Beware of the incestuous union." The priestess collapsed.

After that day, Sebastian was sure that the princess would waste no time in planning her coup d'etat. For three weeks he waited and watched and interviewed everyone who had any discussion with the princess. But he found no plot. Zoe continued to walk about the palace in her dark blue dress dove gray veil when she wasn't sleeping. He tried to find a toehold in her head, something he could exploit, but he found none. Sebastian decided two things: one, that no one else was going to give him the information he needed; two, that no one knew any more about what the princess was planning than he did. So, he decided to take the situation into his own hands.

Zoe lay on her back and stared at the candle on the other side of her room. Naill breathed steadily beside her. Earlier she had been wondering why she was sleeping with him and wishing that he had never asked, but now she just stared at the flame and wished that it was the only thing in existence.

Presently, she got out of bed and wrapped herself in a loose robe. She left her room and walked to the other side of the palace, the side where she had always wished her room to be. As Zoe walked out onto the balcony she remembered for the first time since she had been back how she used to stay up all night in the chapel wishing a long lost sister or brother would somehow show up and take her place as heir. She was nine when she suddenly realized that she would not be the Crown Princess forever; one day she would be queen.

Many things were running through her head as she looked out over the water. Her mind was brought back from across the sea by some movement behind her.

"Oh, excuse me, Your Highness. I didn't realize there was anyone out here. I was just going to shut the door."

"I wasn't aware that you had access to this part of the palace, Sebastian." She stared at him with an intensity that Sebastian wasn't used to. She hated him the same way everyone did; that was evident. But missing from her face was the fear that everyone else had for him but refused to admit.

"Many things have changed since Your Highness went to school," Sebastian replied deciding to drop the whole pretense of respect since it didn't seem to be working anyway. If the princess noticed, she didn't respond.

"That's true," was all she said.

"What is Your Highness doing out here so late?" he asked walking over to the edge of the balcony. He stood quite strait and formally a few feet away from her as was proper, and he couldn't help but note how good she looked out of mourning.

"Looking at the sea," Zoe replied unemotionally.

"Naill must be quite lonely," he was unable to keep a little jealousy from creeping into his voice; but Zoe didn't recognize it for what it was. Something that had been playing in the back of her mind now came to the front, and she realized that this was no chance meeting. For the first time since her father's death, Zoe really came back to reality. It was as if all the nerves in her body were suddenly switched on. She began to wonder about her own safety, but she wasn't sure how much she cared.

"He doesn't know I'm gone," she said calmly as she became determined that she would not be the first one to leave the balcony. "I came out here to be alone."

Sebastian was forced to retreat.

He sat in his quarters all night reflecting on the conversation. He had accomplished nothing besides alerting the princess to the danger she was in. She would not marry Maxen, and she seemed to have no weakness. As of now she was harmless except as a figure head for the growing revolutionary movements. How long would she stay that way? How long would Bernd wait?

Sebastian tried to stall; he tried to explain that it would take time. But, the popular disturbances were increasing. The mayor of Insbrook, the fifth largest city on the planet, had been killed. Pictures of Zoe were being sold in increasing numbers, and Bernd was scared. In

the following weeks he managed to outlaw individual pictures of the princess larger than pocket size. He waited for the princess to do something.

Helena walked around the city for hours before finally entering a travel agency. She nodded to the older woman behind the counter who nodded back and pressed a button on the side of her chair. A door in the back opened, and Helena walked into a small dark room furnished only with a plain table and a few chairs. There were five people in the room already, four men and one woman. Helena pulled a chair up to the table and looked nervously around at the anxious faces; she knew that she wasn't going to say what they wanted to hear.

"Well?" Marcus asked. He was the highest ranking person there and the most important.

"She's still doing the same things."

"What? After what the priestess said?" Marcus exploded. "Why are we waiting for her? If we start the rebellion, she'll have to go along with us."

"Higher up wants to wait. Dympha says we won't get far enough without the immediate support of Zoe."

"And I don't know if she would support a revolution even then, or if she could. Sebastian is keeping a close eye on everyone. I don't think it's safe for me to come any more," Helena said.

"How will we know when she's willing to cooperate?" Marcus asked.

"We'll have to work out a sign of sort."

The revolutionaries waited.

And Naill waited, and every day he told her that she would be better off with the priestesses at school, three sectors away.

And Monica waited.

"What is going on here? Why is she still in the palace?"

"Sebastian says he'll get rid of her; he just needs more time."

Monica grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. "You get rid of her."

And Sebastian waited, more anxious than everyone else. He had given up on Zoe, she had become static. Now he worried about Bernd. He knew that the king would not wait much longer. So he decided to set things in motion.

Zoe was still having trouble sleeping. She had managed to avoid Naill that day, but she still couldn't stay in bed. She was standing on the balcony again when Sebastian came through the half-open door. This time, there was no pretense at ignorance or respect. He walked across the balcony and stood next to Zoe, leaning over the rail just as she was. They were only a hand's width apart. The princess had never been so close to Sebastian, and she never wanted to be as close again. She couldn't put her finger on it, but he was repulsive. He had something that made her skin crawl.

"What have you been doing for the past five weeks?" he asked.

She turned to him and decided not to bring up his pointed disrespect. She said, "Nothing."

He didn't seem to be as impressed by the answer. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small glass vile that was half filled with a clear colorless liquid. "Do you know what this is, Princess?"

"No," she answered hardly looking at it.

"It's called silicon phalinate. It's odorless, colorless, and tasteless; it's also poisonous. This is what your uncle used to kill your father," he said as the princess stared at the sea.

"And you helped him?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, after your uncle failed to gain the throne through you, he came to me for help."

"You killed my father."

"Well," Sebastian said putting the vile back into his pocket, "I helped." He turned toward the princess and leaned on his left arm. He was in an odd mood, and he only thought of how beautiful her hair was.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked backing away slightly.

"Because Bernd doesn't need me anymore. My time is up as far as he's concerned. You know his position isn't secure. The throne you deserve could be yours easily."

"With your help?"

"Yes..."

"And what do you want?"

"To stay alive. Princess, after I'm gone, you're next. This is the only chance for both of us," he said grabbing the princess's arm.

She pulled herself out of his grip. "Remember to whom you're speaking." The princess walked back to her room. She sat on her bed and tried to think rationally about what Sebastian had said. But her father had been murdered. That had not really occurred to her. There must be some sort of revenge for that. How could she accept help from her uncle's accomplice?

Sebastian stayed on the balcony and wondered if he had gotten through to her. He desperately hoped he had. That evening he had found traces of a clumsy poison in his dinner. The princess would never fully trust him, but perhaps the thought of revenge on the man she hated most would allow for some cooperation. He would have to wait till he saw her again.

The next morning the princess shed her skin.

End of part one



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