

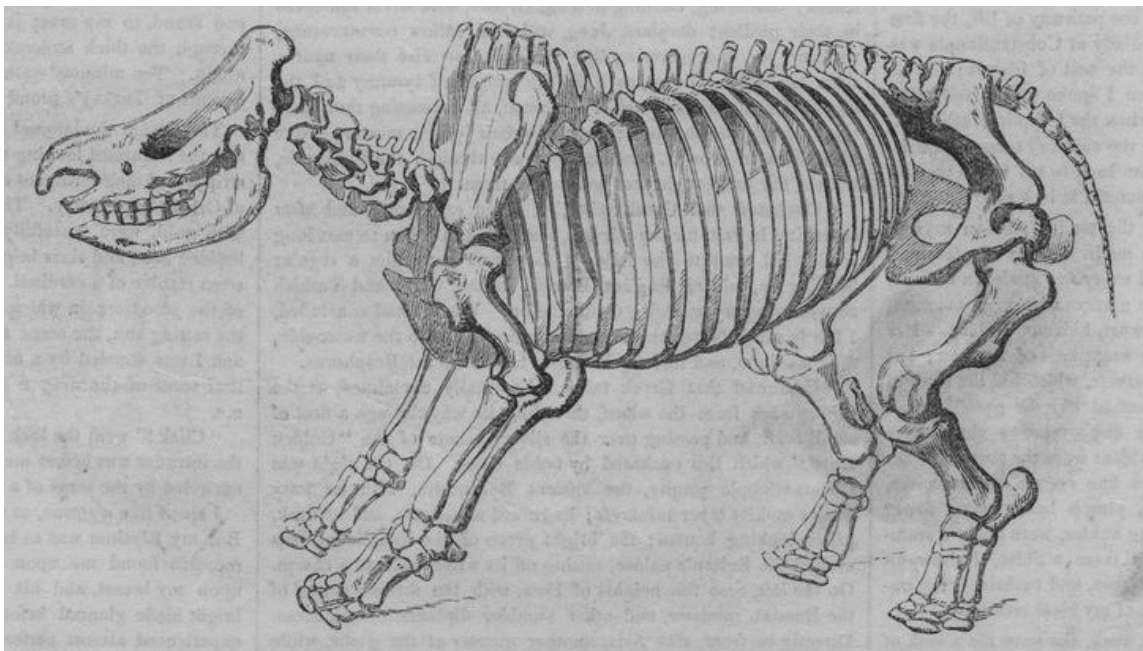
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 3 Number 1

Page 1 – PROMISES OF SCIENCE FICTION by Jesse Toler. Mr. Toler is a program creator for Game Changer, a non-profit in association with the Orange County library system. He produces a podcast called Wubbalubbadubcast, a Rick and Morty close watch. It can be found on Itunes and Soundcloud. He is currently furthering his education at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida.

Page 15 – ASTRAL ESCAPE by Jason Bougger. Mr. Bougger, of Omaha, NE, writes, “My short stories have appeared in over twenty-five markets, including *Devilfish Review* and *Mad Scientist Journal* and my YA novel, *Holy Fudgesicles*, was published in 2015 by Wings ePress. In addition to my own writing, I’m the owner and editor of *Theme of Absence*, an online magazine of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. I also run *WriteGoodBooks.com*, a blog and podcast for new and aspiring writers.”

Page 18 – TOO CLOSE TO THE FLAME by J. M. Williams. Author, teacher, historian, veteran. J.M. Williams is a Fantasy and Sci-Fi author who writes stories centered on interesting characters. He has been writing since childhood, studying the short story form in college. He has been accepted for publication in over a dozen indie and online publications, including *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Bards and Sages*, and *New Realm*. He was also the winner of the Fiction Vortex StoryVerse Contest for Winter 2017. He currently lives in Korea with his wife and 10 cats—teaching, writing, and blogging at JMWWriting.wordpress.com.



“PROMISES OF SCIENCE FICTION”

by JESSE TOLER

The Coca de Paradise cafe can be found on an inevitable crossing of roads. It holds up three stories of slum housing while catering to the tastes of yoga enthusiasts, Dada deconstructionists, screenwriters, singers and artists, armchair philosophers and the occasional business student; all satisfying the ever-present need for free Wi-Fi and caffeine.

Genny Grisen walks into the paradise at nearly four o'clock, orders an orange spice almond milk latte, no whip, but with a touch of honey and a triple berry, low fat, wheat muffin. She takes her seat at a table made to look like some bulbous fruit from an impossible rainforest. The muffin deposits crumbs on wax paper when she takes a piece in her hands.

Later, she'll remember that she watched the young man cross the street from the park, but she won't be able to remember where he came from. It wasn't until he introduced himself that he became of consequence.

“Hi,” he says.

“Oh...hello,” Genny says. “Can I...?”

“This-this is going to sound strange, I mean I can't...I didn't even know you'd be here. I'm sorry, this isn't coming out right. I'm not talking like a normal person.”

She's smiling in spite of herself. She

likes the color of his hair, yellow like the brightly dying leaves of the fall. His dark blue jumpsuit has a patch reminiscent of her mechanics. Dollops of sweat gather in the folds of his suit.

“We can't all try for super cool on a first impression. It would raise the bar way too high.”

“Uh...yeah, of course. They told me the displacement field would fry my nerves. Stay right here OK. Don't, please don't go away.”

He leaves to join the line. Genny opens her new age spiritual magazine, *Near Shambhala*. It's printed on tree bark and soy making it entirely edible with a high fiber content. The smell of raw Brussels sprouts and lit incense sticks wafts up into her nose.

She considers leaving. The young man is manic about something for certain. Later, she thinks it was the sudden smells from the magazine that made her stay though, she never remembered *Near Shambhala* to be one of those scratch and sniffs.

The boy finishes the cup of water before he makes it to the table. He sets down the cup and drags a chair over.

“The thing is, is that I know you.” He sits down and the tips of his goatee brush

the back of the chair.

The folds of her memory return with a giant void in place of any eventuality they could have ever possibly met, in any given set of circumstance.

“I have this picture of you on my wall,” He continues. “It could be you. It might not be.”

She turns to an article titled ‘7 proper ways to recycle your excrement’. “Got it. The creepy stalker opening usually work out?”

“This isn’t...no, I’m not picking you up. I just saw you and thought that it was you all this time on my wall. I hoped, I might run into you.”

“Obviously this picture is important for you, but I don’t have the same attachment-”

“I know that. I’m not...It’s just-you’re looking out at something in the picture. There were times that I look at it...I like to think your reading. It’s weird, I know it’s weird.”

“Isn’t it status quo to change out the picture that comes with the frame with something of yours?”

“I...” He put his arms at shoulder level with palms facing outward. Tooth picks that came to soft digits at their ends. “I couldn’t ever do that.”

There is something inside this man, she thinks. A hunger devouring him from the inside out. Both become aware of the sudden halt in the conversation like it’s a hot sweater you take off on a day of cool breezes.

“I knew a photo-nerd in college. He

took a crap ton of pictures of me. That could be one of them. I hope it’s tasteful.”

“It’s beautiful,” he says.

That makes her smile. “I’m Genny, really Genevieve, but everybody calls me Genny.”

“Oh...Paulio.” He places a hand over his heart. “Paul.”

“My favorite grandfather was named Paul after the saint.”

His picks at the edge of the table with his thumb nail while he laughs. She feels as if they are dancing, but he doesn’t know the steps.

“So, what do you do Paul?”

“Oh, I’m-I’m a writer.”

“Anything I might’ve read?”

He rolls his eyes when he shrugs.

“Mostly science fiction. One Hail Mary attempt at non-fiction I sold to a paper in Turkey. Wouldn’t happen to read Turkish?”

“Maybe with a gun to my head.”

“Then you haven’t read anything of mine.” He takes a small section of the Formica off the table with his picking. “Yet.”

“They frown here when you scar their tables, Paul.”

He looks around and wipes his fingers on his overalls.

She sips her latte. “Is it like Star Trek? All that is big again. Beam me up Scottish?”

“It’s Scotty. Because his last name is Scott.”

“But with the accent?”

“He just happens to be Scottish.”

“I was testing,” she says. “I knew that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s poor man’s science fiction. Cheap seats. I’m more speculative and technical.”

She closes her magazine. A final reminder of home. “Doesn’t sound like the new movies. Cowboys in space, that’s what a friend of mine called them. They’re fun things to do on a Saturday night.”

“Science fiction is supposed to be aimed to make you think.” He points to his temple. “To jiggle free that door in the brain where the imagination can roam free. It’s supposed to make you wonder.”

She shakes her head. “I just don’t go to movies to think, Paul.”

“You’re supposed to enjoy the story when you’re in it, of course that’s how it’s supposed to be. It’s after the flick and you’re leaving the theater, then you’re supposed to see the whole universe in a whole new light.” He adds. “Like dysentery, the water in Mexico was refreshing to drink, but then you got home...”

She laughs. “See, you can have fun.”

He rubs the sides of his face while she takes another sip of her latte. The seconds can now fall away indifferent to the importance of the moment. Suddenly, as if shocked by an errant static pulse, he asks, “If you could travel backwards in time, to any point in history...where would you go?”

“Paul, I honestly don’t have many thoughts that start with that sentiment.”

“The piece I’m working on right now is about a student who gets a night job cleaning the floors in a lab and befriends a doctoral candidate.”

“Good Will Sciencing?”

“Lacking in the misplaced inner-city anger, yeah, but not completely. One of them shows off a drug called Promise 7. They’re developing it.”

“Promise 7?”

“Projected Relocation for Open Minded Integration into Specified Eras, Seven.”

“That’s a mouthful.”

He shrugs. “It’s a work in progress.”

“Sounds like the ingredients in TV dinners.”

He laughs and it reminds her of a game show buzzer, just like Rich’s would. “The guy tells our hero how it works. The drug allows you to physically travel through time. But to get that you have to understand Dr. Sturks eighth law of Perception, being all time is now.

“Anything that can happen, will happen, is already happening and has happened, all right now. We perceive it going as a liner sequence of events, like the earth rotating around the sun. That’s your nervous system gumming up the works.

“Promise 7 deadens that part of your system, floods your brain with omega waves by stimulating a bunch of glands and BAM,” He smacks his hands together. “You’re whenever you want to be. For an instant time folds around your point of view.”

“You came up with all that?”

He shrugs.

“I take it all back. What can you do with this wonder drug?”

“Caught you thinking.”

She crosses her eyes and sticks her

tongue at him.

“There’s a few catches, like you can only go to a place you have strong genetic ties to, or in special cases, know really well. Like, if your great-great-great grandfather fought in the civil war and you knew about it you could visit him. See Lincoln and all that. Or if you’re,” He rubs his goatee. “Say you know everything that can be known about the pyramids, you could go when they were building them because you have so much of it modeled in your memory.”

“All the best stuff has to be in the future.”

He shakes his head. “They haven’t tested going forward on the current temporal sequence we’re on.”

“I mean, what’s so good about the past that you can’t read in a book?”

“Easier to test the drug by going into the past. How traveling affects the overall temporal matrix by building umbilical bridges to different possible realities through altering past events.”

Her head starts to hurt. “None of that is actual English.”

Paul takes her magazine. “Imagine this flat surface is time. Representing all of time.”

She nods.

He takes the wax paper from her muffin and rolls it up in a ball. “This is you.”

She looks at the paper. “Why am I crusty?”

“You take this drug, Promise 7 and you go back to your favorite moment in your past.”

She doesn’t hesitate. “South Shore beach, July 4th. I had this cute American flag top from the Gap, got it on sale. Just graduated high school. My friends and I smoked a little by the shore and I looked at the ocean, like utterly wowed by how much of my life I had left to live.”

“Good moment.”

Her mind wanders to the day.

Recalling all the events as they played out on the day in fast forward. Nostalgia is the bridge upon which the time traveler takes their first steps.

Her mind slows on a moment coming out of the beach bath room. Her friends were behind her, talking about getting the stuff to smoke from a friend. She was only half listening. In front of her was a man hugging a woman tight. The sun’s glare shined out most of his face, but she could tell he was young. Except his eyes, they’d been finely aged in caskets of pain. Genny felt a stab of longing to be someone worth hugging with such abandon. This longing could have always been there, drifting around the background, but the way the couple embraced anchored it to a point of reference in her memories.

She’s shaken from the moment, by Paul’s speaking as he’s moving the wax paper across the surface of time. “You go back to South Shore, and you watch this moment for yourself. You watch, but you are warned that you cannot meet yourself, so all you do is watch. At one point, you bump into a...a bike messenger. The bike messenger falls over and drops his package in the water. The package never gets where

it needs to go.”

“What’s in the package?” Genny asks.

“Doesn’t matter. What matters is that now we have a bridge to another reality, a connecting point where you have changed the course of events.” He takes the wax paper and drags it on a 45-degree angle from the spot it was, leaving his finger where it started. “We call it an Umbilical bridge. Those two-time lines are connected by that singular moment.”

“Doesn’t that break time?”

“It can alter the possibilities of our personal experiences. Like, you can say it’s highly improbable that I will sprout wings and fly, but after forming a connection like I’ve described, I might be air born. From your point of view, it would be completely natural though. You wouldn’t tell.” He adds. “At least, that’s what the scientist told me.”

“There’s something else.” She finishes her latte. “I got the all time is now stuff. If we know that, can’t we already see these bridges? Wouldn’t the connections already be connecting?”

“We’re diving into string theory-esque, but for the sake of this conversation; it’s the difference between knowing that a bridge is conceptually real and then driving over one, feeling it, the sounds of the tires over the asphalt, the way a heavy wind can shift the cables, how the water looks or the sun setting on the horizon.”

“But I know the bridge is there.”

“It’s not like you take the drug and can see the threads of time stretching on infinite directions. You actually have to meditate hard on something, a point of focus, and then jump. Fall, really, to whenever your new whenever is. You join that linear sequence as it goes along in your presence.”

Genny looks out the window.



“Now this is going to occupy my mind for the rest of the day.” The binary suns blaze an orange fire, spinning counter clockwise on the bright blue canvas that is the sky. She’s thankful the suns are orange today because she left her glasses at home. It’s murder on the cornea when they’re in red phase. “Tell me, what do you do with it?”

He flicks more at the Formica. “My protagonist, he steals Promise 7 to go back in time.”

“Why?”

“It’s not like he wants to go far. He lost...someone. We all lose people. He wants to go back to see her.”

Genny gets goose bumps. “Does he see her?”

He rests his head on his arms. There is a slight upwards turn of his lips and Genny thinks she is watching him smile.

“I’m not telling you.”

“Now that I’m hooked you take away the carrot.”

“What if you read it someday? I don’t want to spoil it.”

“Oh please, you could always change it. It could be something totally different when you’re done.”

“I hope not. I hope to God it’s not, because it’s a doozy.”

#

On the street, just outside the Coca de Paradise, Abraham Lincoln jumps in front of the Pharaoh Sneferu’s cab and sneaks through the opposite door as the Pharaoh struggles with the clasp on his multi-phased recon umbrella. Five stars in radiation proofing, but they can’t make a decent

clasp.

Lincoln takes off his hat. The Pharaoh damns his rudeness and kicks the door closed on his side. It jars the top hat from Lincoln’s hand. He closes his door without reaching for it. He’s already late for his presidency and there’s this address he has to give and he has no idea what he’s going to say. The exhaust port kicks it onto the winds where it never finds the time to come back down. Lincoln watches the hat go from the back window. He misses it, but he’s glad it’s finally free.

#

“You see,” He makes his hands big with fingers that pluck the words from the air, “First it was cyber-punk and then steam-punk which made way for clockwork. God-punk came later when the church of Scientology created a publishing firm with the Vatican fronting the capital. The whole genre circled the toilet.”

Genny skips yoga because she doesn’t want to leave Paul. His ideas are big nets that capture her. Snakes entranced by pipers’ song cannot imagine what their life was without the melody. He leads them from the coffee shop and out into the harsh lights of the twin suns.

“Gone are our fathers. Asimov and Clark and Huxley; they’ve taken that starship to greater locales and been replaced by lesser demigods and kings with invisible robes. Heinlein and Card-it’s supposed to be science fiction, not science fantasy. Inherit within speculative fiction is the truest hope that we, as humanity, have a future.”

She follows him toward the park. Empty shops invite the trickle of street traffic with open doors. Late-lunchers dine with early cocktails of vodka and cellular regenerating supplements to avoid the daily rush hour radiation spike. Tree's synthetically grown to feed on the electromagnetic fields swell with surgery sap. Suburban animal life will risk suicide across the hot asphalt death trap just for one sticky taste. Researchers now think that the sap is the cause of squirrels developing ability to communicate *en francais*.

"Listen buster, those authors you fired off don't hold a monopoly on hope. Jane Eyre has hope. Anything can have hope. We experience the world through a character and our lives are better for it."

He never takes his eyes off her, even as they walk. "I'm trying for higher ideals."

He's cute. Genny came to terms with that, but not in any sense that provoked her into romance. He's nice and looks at her when he talks and she likes that. She thinks that means he's listening and she can't remember feeling that before.

#

The international press collectively refer to the suns as Romulus and Remus. Brothers, raised by wolves, bewitched by the moon; they flew into the sky trapped in her embrace. They burn so that mother sky feels their pain. The moon just laughs and laughs. Her white smile is ever present.

In their orange phase, they burn the color spectrum so everything is laden with a dense hue. Blues become purple. Greens fiddle in that warm middle between

tan and brown. It fills the spaces of the world with the substance of dreams.

That's also the radiation feasting on your brain cells.

#

"The Doctor gets a pass." Paul tells Genny.

"Doctor who?"

"Exactly. The longest running science fiction show in the world, of course it gets a pass. Well over a hundred years."

"TV hasn't been around a hundred years." Genny rubs the sides of her head. "We should get inside...the radiation.

"Sonic screwdriver be damned, he's allowed to float in between fantasy and fiction." His mouth swallows a bitter pill when he says fantasy.

"Paul," She grabs his arm to stop him from moving. "You get so involved. Do you have anybody? A girlfriend?"

"I don't do relationships...I mean, it's not something I can talk about with you. Not that..." His hands come up to shoulder level and she lets him go.

"I didn't push, did I?"

They're in front of a small staircase leading up to large doors. A pair of stone cups with gold trimming at the edges are set in each door. The universal symbols for Mary Magdalene tilting forward for offerings. Somebody had put fresh cinnamon sticks and orange peels in one cup and berries in the other.

"No, you didn't push. It's OK...can I-I tell you something a little personal?"

"I wish you would." She smiles.

"My mom-she was pregnant with me

and my twin brother when she was hit by a car.”

Genny places her hand over her mouth.

“We weren’t three, maybe four cells at the time. Didn’t even have gills. It’s how she found out she was pregnant, in the hospital. The accident destroyed her leg. Eight pins and two steel bars held it together, this was way before they settled the cloning laws, but that doesn’t—they told her that if she’d went over the hood of the back of the car, she’d be dead. She was lucky she went forward.”

Genny nods and blinks to hold back her tears.

“She said that she wasn’t feeling well when the car hit her. It’s why she didn’t see it...she’d felt like she was going to throw up. My brother and I...we were making her sick.”

“You saved her.”

“That’s what she always said, but I saw pictures of her, who she was before the accident. She was active; yoga, dancing, kick ball. She was never like that with me. She didn’t thrive.”

“What about your brother?”

Paul shook his head. “He didn’t, I-I grew up alone. Books, we had a library and TV was the only way...before they beamed entertainment directly as waking dreams, I was swallowed up by stories in which I was bound by nothing. Stories that made me believe I could go to the almost impossible-ness of alien worlds. Anything became possible if the story was good enough to imagine it. That’s why I want to

write things that matter.”

“I get it. Not everybody needs that though. Sometimes, it’s natural to shut the brain off for a little mindless TV.”

Paul shakes his head. “That isn’t living. Trust me.”

Genny wants to argue, but there is pain in his eyes. Suddenly, the overwhelming feeling of reaching out, to embrace him as if he is drifting away in the space between them takes over. Out of habit, she hits her leg and the feeling subsides. Later, she’ll hate herself just a little for not reaching out when they had time.

#

At the park, a little boy wants his mother to hold the tub so that he can scoop sand into it with a red plastic shovel. She rubs her leg. Her head shakes and she limps over to the bench. He pounds tiny fists into the packed sand, yelling at her, but neither Genny nor Paul can hear what he’s saying. The mother lights up a cigarette. She turns her eyes toward the street. The smoke snakes a gray cloud around her head. Her large girth slumps on the bench. The boy cries by himself, behind a tree, so she can’t see him. He makes sure nobody can see him.

Genny and Paul watch and she doesn’t know why. This means something, she thinks, but the moment passes and the child fades away like a dream and they’re both standing there watching it go.

Paul says, “That was my mother.”

They are both silent for a while after that.

#

“He was unkind with his hands. That’s how I told my mother we broke it off.”

They swing on plastic seats with feet kicking high above their heads. The metal squeaks with each swing.

“My Ex, he was a painter. I have wonderful taste in men. My tongue confuses rat poison and honey.”

“I didn’t know...how....” Paul whispers.

“In the beginning, it was a joke. ‘HA HA, I’ll give you five across the eyes.’ He’d say that crap in public and pinch my leg. In private, it was a love tap. I don’t know when it became a signal that I was out of line, I just knew that’s what it meant. I’d probably moved in by then.”

She pumped her legs harder until they went vertical with her body. Paul found that he didn’t have it in him to swing. His momentum eaten by the entropy of each pass.

“He’d mash his knuckles into my left thigh. Every time the same spot. A little bit harder. Last April, I couldn’t walk without limping.” She kicks one last time and let go of the chain, allowing her body to fly. She nails the dismount with both feet and turns toward Paul with an exaggerated Olympian flourish. “Nailed it.”

Paul struggles for the right words.

“I’m not saying this to make you feel bad for me. Paul, we all have our black spots, but they pass eventually. Everything does. It doesn’t have lord over us.

“With Rich, the work was the only important thing. Everything else was in the way. I wasn’t important and that didn’t become abuse until it was way too late. I’ll

hate him for that until...”

Paul comes to a stationary position. He watches her as her eyes drift to what her mind is playing out. She is worlds away and the worlds are bad.

“Are you...” He reaches out as if the distance could be closed with an arm’s reach.

“In your story. The time traveling...what’s that law called?”

“Dr. Sturcks eighth law of perception? It means that-”

“Everything is always going on. Even the past, like a broken tape.”

“That’s not-”

“That sonofabitch is hitting me right now.” She gasps as if the memory struck her. “Oh, Christ that’s a horrible thought. I’m trapped. I’m never going to get past...he’s got a paint can!”

“No.” Paul goes.

“I can hear his voice, he’s telling me how I’m stealing time from him. There this priority list on the fridge door of things that are more important than me. It’s so long. How can a list like that be so long?”

“It’s not real, it’s not. It’s over...”

Genny cradles her face in her hands. Her mind playing this tape over and over again, stuck on an infinite loop like a flick of dust caught in the event horizon of a black hole. “That mother fucker...”

She collapses.

Paul jumps from the swing and runs to her, but she pushes him away. The squirrels stop and judge them for carrying on in public.

“Go for broke, Genny. You’re not the

only one to go through a bad time. Something like one in three woman have been sexually abused. Think about having to go through that.”

“Your bedside manner sucks, Paul.”

“That’s not all.” He goes to his knees in front of her. “John Lennon is being shot in the face right this second, by some nut bag who likes shitty fiction.”

She whispers. “I loved John Lennon.”

“Good, because...he’s being born right now, too. His parents got together about nine months ago and right now his mom is squeezing his head out her vagina. And also, he’s imagining something so perfect, the hope of a utopia that could only be expressed in song.

“Don’t forget, right now some misguided fool is blowing himself up in the middle of a crowded...whatever. He’s just killed a few hundred people.” Paul snaps his fingers. “A hundred lives, snuffed out. Like nothing.”

Snap.

“And nothing again.”

“You’re insane!” She cries.

“What else? Call the last eight or nine American presidents.”

“I liked Clinton.”

“Tell me something so horror-show-bad that it makes you puke to think about it.”

She feels oppressed by him and the world, the thickness of it closing in. His words attack her mind and she coughs up the first word she can think of, if only to stay his advance. “Slavery.”

“Which time? Jews, Blacks, or those sad Sontonians from the Blegarg nebula?”

“Blegarg?”

“It’s not supposed to stop.”

“What’s a Blegarg?”

“Every time the Yankees won the World Series. What are they up to? 37, 40?”

“How is that bad?”

“Is for Boston fans. Drunk drivers? Who likes them?”

“And artists.”

“And every time you sniffed sour milk.”

She sticks out her tongue. “Ugh...walking in on your parents having sex.”

“Seeing that fourth Alien movie for the first time.”

“Or that third Transformers movie.”

“Ahh,” Paul puts both hands over his heart. His chagrin tells her he’s playing.

“Don’t I can’t...take much more....”

“Waiting in lines at the DMV, forever.” She finds a smile on her face.

“Cheesecake.”

He puts his hand on the earth for mock support.

She refuses to stop. There is a joy in exposing the horrors of the world for what they are, like picking at a scab. “Muscle cramps and the Berlin wall and OJ Simpson’s still alive, but we had to lose Lauren Bacall.”

“Car...chases... Broncos.” His hand finds a daisy in the earth.

“The challenger exploding, the Korean and Vietnam wars.”

Paul tries to steady himself and plucks the daisy. “Police actions...”

“Clearly, you weren’t there,” she giggles.

He falls to his back. The fresh daisy stands straight up by hands resting over his chest.

“Paul. All this means is that I’m never really free of him.” She puts a hand over the daisy.

Paul touches her leg. “The bridges may be there. That doesn’t mean we’re forced walk them all at the same time. The gift of liner perception is that we aren’t stuck.”

“I don’t understand you.”

He shakes his head and lies to her “It’s only a story.”

#

Rich is his name, as in ‘too rich’ or ‘that’s rich’ or ‘Dick.’ In a diner, a block from her old apartment they fall in love over a piece of New York style cheesecake. Genny watches it happen from the sidewalk. The gold on the Old English font frames the picture. She hits the glass and the flat of her palm smacks on the D of deli. Nothing can penetrate the scene. Sometimes you only get to watch the train from the tracks.

“This is me, that’s our first date. How did we get here?”

Paul tries to put his hands on her shoulders.

“No!” She pulls away. “It’s only a story. You told me that! This is not how it goes.” Her finger shoots into his chest. “You did this. You’re tearing open pieces of my life.”

“It’s a residual time distortion. It’ll pass in a moment. It only happened because we were talking about him.” Paul leans his head against a capital A. “Is that why you hate Cheesecake?”

Genny looks younger through the window when she laughs because Rich is making her laugh. There is a reckless abandonment in her eyes. She wants to give it all away, like that couple at the beach. Rich rubs the sides of his chin as his casts his eyes slyly away from her eye line, as if to say I have a secret.

“Who the hell are you, Paul?” Genny turns to him. “Nothing is what it’s supposed to be anymore.”

“I’m just...writing a story. That’s all.”

“Can we stop it?”

“See,” He taps the glass. “They’re just carrying on. I don’t think we’re even here.”

“How are they more real than we are?”

He rubs the sides of his face. “That’s not what’s happening. It’s like we’re on TV in the background.”

“No! I’m not going through this again.”

Genny pulls on the front door of the diner. Even with foot pressing on with for leverage, she can’t make it budge.

“No. Please.”

“We’re here and they are, I mean...she’s there. There is too much in between the two events for you to interact with it. Too much happens.”

“It’s a goddamn glass door!”

“I..it’s years ago. Look it’s already ready fading.”

They both see the image of the new couple gathering themselves to leave fade like a desert mirage. Genny knows what happens next. She knows every moment over the next two years like a scar on her lungs she can feel when she exhales.

#

Twin green fibrous stalks brush against Genny's hands. They are petting plants. They are fed through consumption of strong emotions. It is said that the brave soul that eats a petting plant, raw or cooked, takes in the deepest river of pure emotion which runs under the shared singular root system of the world. Every petting plant is connected at this source.

Genny giggles. "They tickle. Come over here Paul. Check it out."

The plants run to and fro across the lines of his palm. They sway with an intangible wind running counterpoint to a song that can only be heard on contact. Even then it's only a whisper that can easily be

ignored.

Genny giggles again. "After all that, it's so nice to just laugh."

"We are here now. But we will always be here," he says.

Genny shakes her head. "Don't try to make it better. It's not better."

"Would you still go back to the beach?"

It was heartbreaking to see herself in the deli, watching the wave of Rich that would crush her for two years. Yet, the beach called for her. It reached out from the places of pain in her heart. "Yes, I would, if only not to forget what the future could have been like."

"I don't understand." He lets the fibers of the plant tickle his palm and there



tears in his eyes. Finally, there are tears.

“On the beach, my whole life is ahead of me. Today, given the hell of past two years, it’s the same. My whole life is ahead of me in spite of what’s behind it.”

She takes her hand from the plant and her heart’s pain returns, but Genny can view it through a lens of perspective if she chooses. “Maybe it’s better to go into future the normal way.”

#

The sky is as blue as a Dali painting, but Romulus and Remus have left the stage. It’s time for night and the fall of things. Genny and Paul walk to the edge of a boardwalk. The water of the ocean is a flat mirror of the horizon.

“I grew up here. This is South Shore.” Genny opens her eyes. “I can tell from the smell. No other beach smells like this one. But this is so far away from where we were. Where...”

Paul rubs his finger in geometric shapes on the wooden railing. Crumbs of sand fleck out from the splinter cracks in the dry wood.

“Where are we?”

“I think...distance is losing its meaning. It’s not only the probable flowing out, but now the physical meaning of things is melting. I have to go soon. I don’t want—they didn’t tell me it would be like this.”

“Like what?” Genny grabs his arm. “This, like what?”

He pulls her in. The hug is fierce. She is squeezed into his warm center. Red eyes open and he sees a young girl coming out of the bathroom. Blond hair made into

thick cornrows. Her bathing suit top is the stars and stripes of the American flag. She is frozen by Paul and Genny. The primal pain bottled in his eyes will etch into her memory.

“We have to walk.” Paul pulls Genny so that she doesn’t see the girl. She’s too young to see the truth, he thinks. She has her whole life ahead of her.

#

They are back on the sidewalk near the coffee shop. Genny moves her hand through the air. There is a distortion that flows behind it, an undulating wake from passage of her fingers. She is playing with gravity and nobody has the right to play with the gravity of things. It’s the first law we all agreed on.

“So many things are not what I expected them to be.” The tears are still dry on her face. She feels puffy.

“That’s my fault. I think I changed your temporal perspective. It should all right itself when I leave. That’s what the time travel stories always get wrong. They assume one man can change the flow of time in a meaningful way, but nobody is that powerful. I’m only a hiccup.”

“You’re saying you’re leaving like it’s a promise, but I don’t want you to go.”

He kicks a chunk of concrete. It floats in the air in front of them, pausing, then turns counter clockwise in centimeter increments before it slingshots into space, propelled by all the probable versions of Paul that could have kicked it in that moment. By the time it passes a flying top hat, it’s broken the sound barrier. They both look

up and follow its trail in the stars.

This time she reaches for Paul's hand. He smiles and as his mouth opens to say something, his eyes glance ahead, jarred by events in his peripheral.

Genny sees the car further down the street coming toward them. It's a brown square box on small wheels. A different Genny, on the correct implied linear sequence, exits the coffee shop alone. She's thinking she can still make her 5:15 yoga class if she hurries.

"That's me."

"It's today? How could-oh....," Paul looks at her stomach. "Of course, it's today."

"What's today?"

The Genny from an earlier time takes a step off the curb.

Paul grabs his Genny by the shoulders. "I have to know something. Right now!"

"What?"

"I believe it when you said you wouldn't change your relationship with Rich, but would you ever let somebody you love go through the same thing? Would you try to make their life better even if you know you'd fail?"

She doesn't think. "Yes."

That night, she'll think she said yes because his eyes pleaded for it. He needed permission.

The different Genny stops in the middle of the road, overcome by a sudden onset of nausea. Her mind had drifted to the yoga class with the cute instructor when the world started to spin on a shiny new axis and her stomach flipped in the oppo-

site direction.

Paul's Genny shares the thoughts and feelings of the Genny she is watching. She wades through the soup of nausea. She can see the brown smudge in her peripheral and she can see the brown car with the driver's head buried in the dash board. Life occurs at a split image. The car runs the red light invading the first cross walk. The driver has determined that finding the perfect song for the moment weighs heavier than the spectrum of events beyond his window.

The things you think about seconds before a crash stay with you long after the impact.

Paul is behind her. His hand lifts her from the small of her back and off her feet. Her leg brushes the bumper of the car gentle as a summer breeze. It's then that Paul's Genny and the Genny they were watching fuse into one single point of view. His touch brings both probable sequences to one finite point. For one moment, he is the bridge between them.

The sound behind her is the horrid war cry of brakes screeching on asphalt. There is dull thud and then the breaking of glass. Genny turns. Paul face rolls across the hood. The density of the human skeleton breaks into bread dough, shaped by new oddities by force and unyielding metal. It's the sound of ten twigs snapping when he lands on his neck, the rest of him following as if connected by a shoestring.

Genny's nose hairs tickle from the burnt rubber. She runs to him skirting around the car. His eyes have given space

to a distance that has no measurement. His neck is set at a harsh L shape. Even still, Paul's smile is that of the satisfied. He leaves her happy. She'll hold onto that for the rest of her years.

"What the hell lady?" The man gets out of his box. He's shaped like his car.

"Call an ambulance!" It's long past mattering. She only wants a few precious seconds alone with Paul. She pets the dying leaves from his brow. Her nails brush his eye lids down. She leaves him with his smile.

#

A single sun crowns the sky. The trees have names like pine and spruce. There are no plants that pet the folds of your palm. Genny will only remember these possibilities as a dream that almost didn't let go. They will never be real to her again. She'll tell her son the story of why she named him Paul omitting these fantasies when he asks, as children are want to know their origins. She'll tell him of the stranger that saved her life by sacrificing his own.

This will hang over the young Paul as he grows to wonder if he can measure up to such a man. The obsession will consume him from the inside like a hungry beast that devours. When his twin brother gets accepted as a doctoral candidate, they will talk of a new drug that shows much promise in testing. That will mark beginning of the end for Paul's story. Only the past will remain in front of him. ❖

“ASTRAL ESCAPE”

by JASON BOUGGER

Stu had been sitting in front of his laptop for about five hours when he finally decided that he'd had enough. It was time to go for a walk. He had also drunk an unbearable amount of alcohol and thought maybe the fresh air would do him some good.

He stood up from the table and took a final glance at the couple of paragraphs he did manage to type. Shaking his head, he highlighted them and clicked 'delete'.

"Utter crap." He grabbed a pack of Kools and headed for the door, pausing briefly to put on a jacket; it can get fairly chilly in the woods at night in the middle of September.

He had been staying in the cabin just over a week, but it didn't help. He still couldn't shake the writer's block. The manuscript was due at the end of the year and his plan was to isolate himself in the cabin until it was finished. The stay hadn't been a complete waste; he'd get twenty pages here, twenty pages there, but on this particular night, he hadn't been able to type a damn thing. He lit a cigarette and walked toward the campgrounds.

Most of the people would have already retired to their tents and campers by 10:30, but he hoped there would still be a few people out by the campfires. Sometimes

eavesdropping was a cheap way to get the so-called creative process flowing again. And if no one was talking, maybe they'd be fucking. That's more fun to listen in on anyhow.

He stumbled through the campground. Just as he assumed, it was a ghost town made up of tents and campers. He couldn't hear any giggles or moans, either. *Oh well.* He put out his cigarette and snuck behind a tree to piss.

The breeze was a little chilly, but bearable, so he decided to stay out a little longer. A little more time might help clear his mind. Maybe he'd even sober up a bit.

After walking for a good fifteen minutes, he did hear something: laughter.

A girl. She sounded young, but not too young to be out. He could hear the murmur of her voice, but couldn't tell what she was saying. He stopped walking and listened for more voices. Maybe he'd get to hear some fucking after all.

The laughter stopped suddenly. Stu held his breath and waited. Did they see him? With no source of light other than the stars, he doubted it.

He couldn't see any figures or sense any movement coming from where he heard the laughter, but decided to wait anyhow.

Eventually he gave up. Whoever they were, they were apparently gone.

He reached into his pack of Kools and pulled out a cigarette. He placed it between his lips, but put off lighting it. Better to wait until he was a little closer to his cabin, just in case.

He turned around to head back, and that was when he felt the hand grab his shoulder.

The cigarette fell from his mouth as he gasped, taking a step away from the stranger behind him.

With his heart pounding he faced the girl. She was young, early twenties at best, late teens at worst.

She looked into his eyes and placed her index finger to her mouth, signaling for Stu

to remain silent.

He nodded.

She moved in toward him. Before he could react, she took his hand.

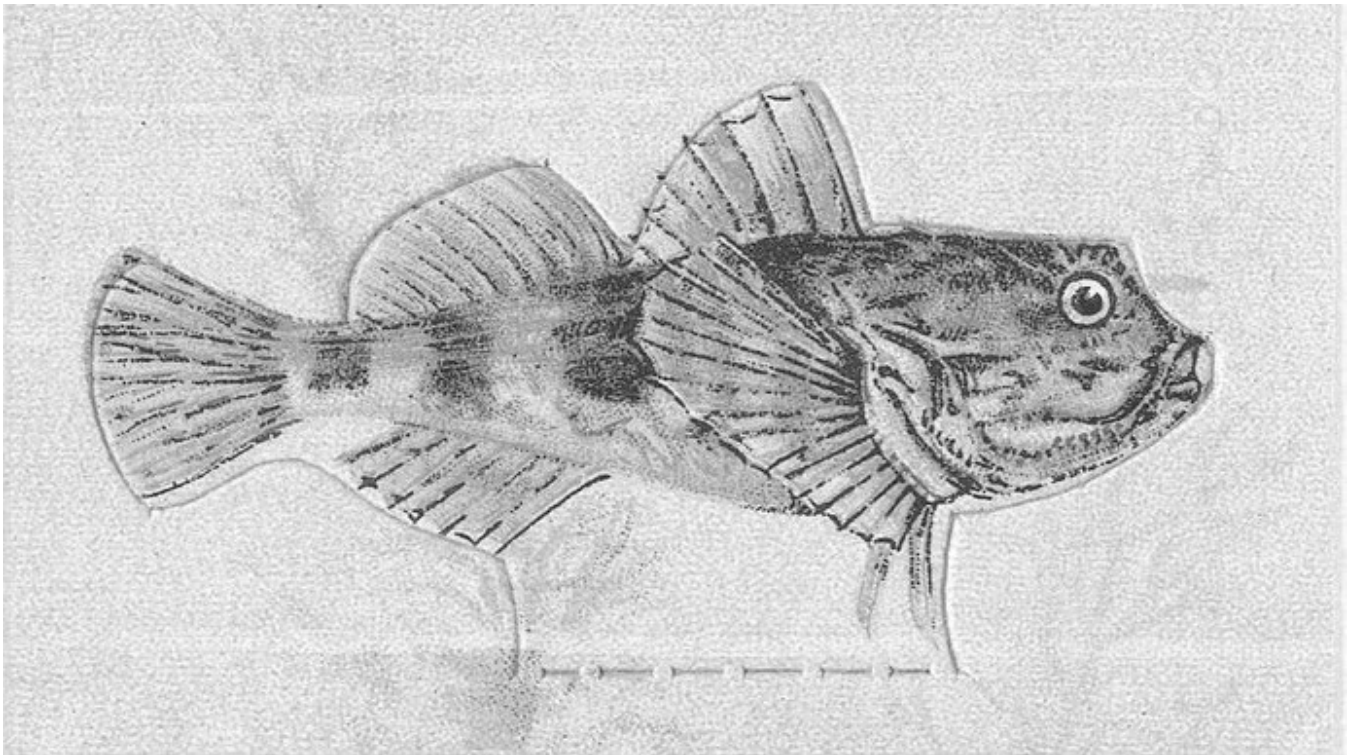
Her skin was soft—softer than any woman Stu had touched in the last two decades. He tried to push away the thoughts that he so much wanted to entertain, but couldn't. He let her lead him deeper into the woods down a trail of broken branches.

Neither said a word. Stu wondered if he'd be able to speak even if he tried.

She led him with such a certainty that it was obvious to him she knew the woods well.

Finally, she stopped.

“What do you want from me?” Stu



whispered, feeling compelled to keep his voice low. The words came hard, as if he were waking from a deep sleep.

The girl leaned toward him. She moved in so close to Stu that he briefly felt her lips touch his ear.

With a voice so soft Stu could barely make out the words, she said, "I need your help."

Stu pulled away—only he didn't. He could feel himself moving in his mind, but his physical body remained standing, frozen next to the girl.

He felt her tongue circle his outer ear, slowly, diligently, and then in the blink of an eye, she was standing in front of him.

He tried to repeat the question, "*What do you want from me?*" but this time was completely unable to produce a sound.

Still, his abductor answered his question. "You'll know when we get there."

"*Get where?*" Stu asked, telepathically. "*What are you doing to me?*"

"*You'll understand soon,*" she answered in his mind.

Stu's body relaxed and he could suddenly move again. He sized up the girl. She was tiny and looked to be in great shape; if he tried to run, she'd no doubt be able to catch him immediately. But if he could take her down—

"It's okay to have *naughty* thoughts about me, just not *that* kind of naughty thoughts." Again, she took his hand. She gently caressed his palm with her fingers, and then pulled him along.

Stu followed without resisting. He could no longer tell which one of them was

in control of his body. "*Where are you taking me?*"

"*I'm taking you to a safe place,*" she said, continuing to lead him further into the woods.

"*Say it out loud.*"

"I'm taking you to a safe place," she said, confirming their shared telepathy. Silently, she added, "*Are you happy now?*"

He had no answer to that question.

#

The path led to the edge of a small creek.

The girl mentally instructed Stu to stand still as she released his hand and knelt down. She removed a small pouch from under her belt, then sprinkled its glowing contents onto the water.

Stu watched in amazement as the water parted outward away from the place the girl had sprinkled the magic dust.

"*You're not human, are you?*" he asked, faintly aware that he didn't even consider saying it out loud.

"Is anyone *really* human?" she answered, surprising Stu by using her voice.

The water finished clearing away from the creek, revealing an object underneath it. A door.

Stu swallowed hard. "*Where does that go?*"

"*Don't worry.*"

Again, she took his hand led him toward where the water had been.

The door opened as they approached, and inside, Stu saw a tiny, dark stairway.

He froze. "I'm not going down there."

"*Hush.*"

“You don’t understand. I’m..I’m claustro—”

He was stricken immobile before he could finish the sentence.

“Please,” he silently begged.

“Just come,” she said, reaching around Stu’s waist.

Against his will, and unable to stop, he followed the girl down the steps into the hole.

As they descended, he could see the light from the world above them dim and eventually disappear. The walls grew tighter and tighter as the steps grew steeper.

“Are you taking me to Hell?” Stu asked.

“Of course not.”

A door so tiny Stu wondered if he’d even be able to crawl through it met them at the bottom of the steps.

The girl moved her hand away from Stu’s back, causing him to regain control of his body. He turned around to run—

The stairs were gone. In their place, solid dirt.

“A dream,” he said. “It’s a dream.”

“It’s no dream. Now come.” She knelt down on the floor close to the door and tapped it three times. It opened.

Stu watched her crawl through, disgusted by the fact that even while experiencing this—whatever this was—he could still admire her looks. With no obvious way to escape, he decided his only option was to follow her.

He got down on all fours and squeezed through the door.

The door closed behind Stu. He stood up in the tiny cavern, his head just an inch

from the top.

He could see the area clearly, but was unable to determine the source of the light. Examining the nearest wall, he saw a type of hieroglyph underneath the seemingly ancient layer of dust.

The symbols covered all five walls of the pentagonal room. Using his shirt, he dusted off a twelve inch patch. A winged serpent. A long-haired lady.

He turned toward the girl.

She sat motionless on a circle in the middle of the room. Her eyes, shut. Her body, covered in dust, just like the walls.

“What’s going on?” He squatted next to her and grabbed her shoulder.

She remained motionless.

“What’s going on?” he repeated—only this time silently—hoping she would hear acknowledge him.

No response.

He turned toward the door. It opened as he approached.

With a sigh of relief, he crawled through the tiny opening.

The dirt wall that had replaced the stairway still remained.

Stu pressed his hands against the wall, feeling the cold dirt, hoping for something—anything—that might make the stairway reappear.

As he pushed, he realized the wall had begun to change in stature. It increasingly took on a more spongelike texture. No longer hard. No longer...solid.

He pushed toward the wall, desperately forcing his weight into it. Through it.

Seconds passed and he was once again

in the presence of the dimly lit stairwell.

He immediately began climbing the stairs. Taking the steps one, two, three at a time. Running from the disgusting hieroglyphics remaining in the five-sided room.

He ran. He panted. He stopped to take a breath.

His thoughts returned to the girl. She had been there for a long time. Years. Maybe longer. But how?

As he lost focus, the steps on which he stood began to give way. His right foot sunk into the step it came down on. His left, sinking into the one it balanced on.

No longer stone, the steps transformed into a tarlike substance, pulling Stu down further into it.

“No!” he telepathically shouted to no one but the empty room he found himself sitting in as he opened his eyes.

#

Stu hadn't moved for as long as he could remember, at least not physically. Not since the girl left him in her place so many years ago

He sat cross-legged in the center of the five-sided room, mediating. Breathing in, holding his breath, and waiting.

He craved no food. Or drink. Or sleep.

The room fed on him. Or maybe he fed on it.

Whatever the energy was that shared the space with him, he felt like he absorbed it in one way or another.

His spirit stood, leaving his body in place, and he walked toward the tiny door. It opened for his astral form as it always did.

Again, he walked through the dirt wall and forged the stairway with his mind.

“*This time,*” he told himself, “*I will break free.*”

With intense focus, he climbed the stairs. He knew deep inside that breaking free from the ground was only the first step toward regaining his freedom. Upon opening the hatch at the top of the stairs, he must still find a body to lead down into the cavern to take his place, just as he had taken her place so many years ago.

He climbed, and climbed. Finally, he saw the top.

He reached for the hatch. Prying it open—

He fell. His will wasn't strong enough. *Practice. He just needed more practice.*

From the center of the room, Stu continued to hold his breath and focus. ❖

“TOO CLOSE TO THE FLAME”

by J. M. Williams

“Alright, listen up!” Sergeant Vott’s voice boomed through the watchhouse break room, the walls resonating out of respect. “Be on your toes! This isn’t gonna be easy. We’ve tracked down the thieves who raided the mining company warehouse two nights ago. They grabbed so many crates of copper ore because they have a smelting operation in the southwest alleys of the Lows. But we don’t stand for thievery, right?”

A chorus of fiery grunts sounded in reply. Most of the men were seated at the large meal table in the center of the room. Those who arrived too late to get a seat stood. Vott stood on the table, bearing down on them all.

“Now, we are gonna to hit them fast and hit them hard,” Vott continued. “If anyone raises a blade to you, drop ‘em. Is that clear? For this operation, young Iric will be Bjorki’s replacement on my team with Frige and Pyri. We will go in first.”

Iric straightened up at the unexpected mention of his name. *He was going with the lead team on the raid? Why hadn’t Sergeant Vott told him?*

“Gunnr’s team from the Central Watchhouse will hold the perimeter while we are inside,” Vott said. “So, give them some thanks for the help.”

Some of the men nodded and shuffled about, slapping their new comrades on the back.

“Any questions?” Vott asked. “Good. Then get dressed.”

As the other men wandered off to the armory to get their weapons and armor, Iric quietly slid to Vott’s side, the big man crawling down from atop the table with an audible groan. The others had a fire in them that Iric did not. To the contrary, Iric was growing anxious by the moment.

“Sarge, why me?” Iric asked.

“Why not you? You’re a watchman, ain’t ya?”

“Yes...but there are other guys with more experience than me.”

“And how do you think they got that experience? Twiddlin’ their thumbs in the break room? You gotta start somewhere.”

“What’s up with Bjorki?”

“Something happened to his wife. I don’t know the details, just that he needed to go...Yes, as watchmen we take care of this city. But we also take care of our own. Right?”

“Yes, Sarge.”

“So...go get your sword. I imagine you’ll get a bit of practice today.”

After several minutes of preparation, the watchmen—six men and two women—were ready and armed. They broke into two groups of four each and headed down the road towards their destination. The whole time Iric’s thoughts were occupied with the question of how only a handful of men could haul off crates of ore in just a few hours of night. It didn’t seem possible.

As they neared the target, Frige pulled Iric to the side. She was taller than him, one of the bulkiest women he had ever seen. Perhaps only Vott was more physically intimidating. She had a scar along her jawline that was more feminine than any other part of her face. She grabbed at the straps of Iric's breastplate, checking if it was secure.

"You alright, kid?" she asked in a surprisingly deep voice.

"Yeah, I think so. It's not my first fight."

"But your first raid, right?"

"Yes."

"The trouble with raids is they tend to go bad real fast. Keep your wits and stay with me. Let Vott draw their attention like the bear he is. That will allow us to move and strike more freely."

"Got it."

The watchmen crept down the narrow alley, stopping just before the old wooden door of the target building—which was sandwiched between two taller structures. Gunnr sent two of his men around to the back of the building. This required going back the way they came, through the alleys and around the cluster of buildings. A bird-like whistle echoed in the morning air and Gunnr gave a nod to Vott.

The big sergeant kicked the door in, which—instead of swinging inwards—fell straight down off its rotten hinges. Vott and the three watchmen in his team charged into the building, swords drawn.

Immediately past the door was a

large room with several tables in the center. A stack of crates took up much of the space to the left, and a large smelting fire burned to the right. Four roguish faces turned to the door in surprise.

"I am Sergeant Vott of the City Watch!" the beastly man growled. "Lay down on the floor and surrender!"

The four men wasted no time in rejecting the order, grabbing swords and tossing the tables on their sides to make an improvised defensive



position. Vott kicked the table closest to him, which sent it skidding across the ground. He and Pyri met their still shaken enemies in melee, while Frige dragged Iric to the right.

The clang of clashing steel filled the hot room. The two vanguard watchmen traded blows with their opponents over the tipped tables. Frige gripped her sword in both hands, readying a thrust to one of the unsuspecting men. Suddenly a side door swung open; Iric hadn't even noticed it was there. The door slammed into the crates at the side of the room and a man stepped out holding a staff. With a flash of light, Frige was lifted off her feet and thrown towards the fire. There was the hiss of a burn and a deep scream.

This left Iric alone, staring at one of the rogues, the man's attention now fully fixed on the young watchman. The grungy man stepped forward and swung his sword at Iric in a sideways arc. Iric jumped back, avoiding the blow, and readying his sword to parry the next. It came, followed by another, and another. It was all Iric could do to keep standing as the furious strikes pressed his own sword back against his breastplate.

The man drew back for one final strike. Iric stepped back again, trying to fix his stance, but instead tripped on a loose object on the ground. His foot flew forward and his body back, hard into the ground. But the rogue was already too invested in his attack to stop, the momentum of it spinning him around and to the floor. Iric seized the chance, rolling on top of the man and pummeling him until he stopped moving.

Through the corner of his eye, he saw Vott and Pyri strike down their opponents. Then he saw Pyri fly through the air into the far wall. Iric

tried to get to his feet but a firm hand held him down. It was Frige, the side of her neck and face burned, fury in her eyes. Pushing Iric down with one hand, she hurled a blacksmith's hammer with the other, letting out an animalistic yell. The flying chunk of iron smashed the staff-holding rogue in the face, dropping him to the ground.

Iric heard the loud stomp of footsteps entering the room. It was Gunnr and his man coming in for support, but they were too late. The fight had been started and ended in a matter of seconds, faster than the men waiting outside could respond to.

"Everyone alright?" Vott asked.

"The bastard with the staff messed up my face," Frige said. "So I returned the favor."

That made the big sergeant smile. "You're prettier this way," he said.

"Fuck you, Sarge," Frige said.

"Not that pretty," Vott said.

Vott signaled to Gunnr to take care of the two wounded rogues who were still breathing, while the sergeant's weary team gathered in the center of the room.

"Well done, lads," Vott said.

"Sarge, they used magic on us," Iric said.

"Yeah...I was guessing they had a staff or something," Vott said. "How else could they carry all that ore out of the warehouse in one night?"

"You knew and you didn't tell us?" Iric said, growing angry.

"I didn't tell *you*," Vott said. "Pyri and Frige knew. I didn't want you spooked on your first raid."

The other two watchmen nodded at Iric, then slapped reassuring hands across his back.

“You did good, kid,” Frige said.

“Good thing you caved that magic thief’s head in,” Vott said to Frige, putting a big arm around her shoulder and leading her out of the room. “Otherwise he would have been left waiting weeks for it to be cut off. The council doesn’t play around with unregulated magic use. Now, let’s get that face of yours looked at, eh?”

Vott looked back at the rest of the watchmen in the room. “The captain will call in the council inspectors later today. For now, let’s have a break. Beers are on me.”

Another chorus of cheers echoed back to the grizzly man. But Iric was still too shaken to cheer. He quietly followed his seniors out of the dark and bloody room, into the sunrise shaded alley, happy to be leaving the place unscathed. Frige couldn’t say the same. ❖

END TRANSMISSION