

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 5 Number 7

Page 1 – AKAWA’S SECRET by Bogi Beykov. Mr. Beykov writes, “my work has previously been featured by Scarlet Leaf Review, Alternate History Fiction and the Aphelion Webzine.”

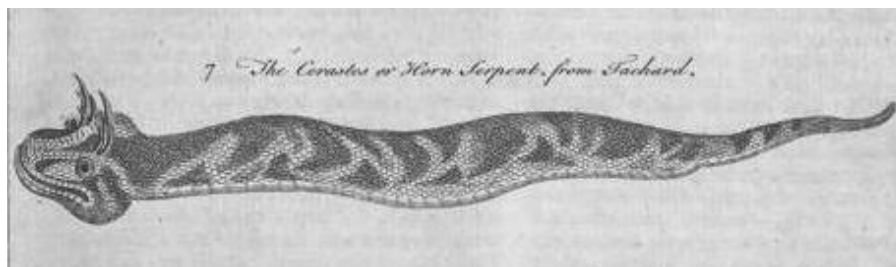
Page 7 – THE LUCKY ONES by Jeff Dosser. Mr. Dosser writes, “I’m an ex-police officer and current software developer living in the wilds of central Oklahoma. Besides winning Oklahoma Writer’s Federation best new horror of 2018 and 2019 with my novels, *Neverland*, and *Shattered*, I’ve also received multiple honorable mentions in L.R Hubbard’s Writers of the Future contest. My short stories can be found in magazines such as *The Literary Hatchet*, *Tales to Terrify*, *Shotgun Honey*, and *Mystery Weekly* as well as several popular anthologies.”

Page 18 – GIDEON’S DREAM by Karim Ragab. Mr. Ragab, of Cleveland, OH, writes, “My work has previously appeared in *Vine Leaves Literary Journal* and *Street Speech Magazine*.”

Page 21 – BEST WISHES by Ed Ahern. Mr. Ahern, of Fairfield, CT, resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and six books. He also works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories*, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

Page 27 – THE RIGHT QUESTION by Dustin Aniston. Mr. Aniston is a part time writer... when he's not part time developing games. He was born on September 16th 1985, in Phoenix Arizona. He is single and has no kids. He is also a part time glass blower. Home schooled until thirteen, his family moved from N.Y. back to Arizona. He likes making worlds for people to enjoy, while maybe expressing some thoughts along the way, and finds writing to be a great way to do this.

Page 31 – FREEDOM by Shainur Ullah. Mr. Ullah writes, “My name is Shainur Ullah and I am from England. I like writing short fictional horror stories on the creepypasta site (<http://www.creepypasta.org/user/ullahshy>). I also have a reddit account called Shortstory1 with more horror short stories. My most popular horror stories online have gone “viral” - “Crunched Up Paper House,” “The Camera Man,” and “The Guys Behind Hollywood.” They have also been narrated onto YouTube - check them out!”



“AKAWA’S SECRET”

by BOGI BEYKOV

Rehuo slammed his Petawatt blaster on the Chinese rosewood table triumphantly. He had been waiting for this moment for over a hundred and fifty years. Akawa, facing the muzzle, made a grimace.

“Careful, you’ll scratch the table! This is the Ming dynasty. I think.” Then after leaning back in his chair, he added with a slight note of curiosity, “Weren’t these banned?”

“It’s from the old days. And to believe I was able to smuggle it all the way here undetected!”

“I detected it, by the way,” mumbled from the corner Zeno, Akawa’s old but faithful android servant.

“Shut up!” roared Rehuo. The traces of emotion in the detective’s voice revealed the last remaining remnants of humanity in his artificially modified body. A body he had tortuously reshaped to prolong his life, to fuel his endless pursuit, to finally complete the mission. An old reflex made him lick his trembling cold lips. He tightened his bony grip on the blaster’s handle. “I know who you are, Akawa. I *remember* who you are.”

“You must’ve seen my statue then! The big one, on Earth One.”

“Even better. I saw you. Inside a spaceship, orbiting around the Cygnus X-1 black hole a century and a half ago. A ship that was the only artifact, known to us to be of alien origin. Then I saw you accelerate it, fly past my Imperial guard

cruiser and run away like a little bitch! It took me a moment to find you, I admit. But I kept sniffing and digging until I put the puzzle back together and here I am now!”

Akawa didn’t respond. He looked at Zeno, then back at Rehuo. Scratched his rare white beard and then, slowly tilting to one side, still intently looking into his opponent’s eyes, let out a crackling fart.

Rehuo’s prosthetic eyeballs squeaked crisply as he rolled his eyes in exasperation. “All of this,” he continued, “This fortune, this empire. It doesn’t belong to you. Now I take it away!”

“Alright, chill.”

“What?!”

“Not the coldest. Just slightly chilled. A Cabernet Blanc would do. No, wait, Zeno, better bring a Pinot Noir. Sorry, detective, if I’m going to die today, let me at least enjoy a glass of wine. Have you tried my wine?”

“I can’t afford it.”

“Ah, then you must, man! It’s something else.”

Zeno strolled into the cellar to fetch a bottle. He felt very emotional and easily irritable lately. The doctor had said it was chronic processor overclocking. And constantly procrastinating his software updates didn’t help either.

Meanwhile the two old men kept staring at each other while their shadows pranced around on the bookshelves. The fireplace was another

splendid display of eccentric affluence in Akawa's study. Real wood was near impossible to find these days and he was burning it for fun.

"Ah, here we go!" Akawa clapped his hands as Zeno poured the first glass. "If you have a thyroid modulator installed, you might wanna tone your metabolism down so you can enjoy this more."

Rehuo thought what the hell. He ran a quick scan for poison, nevertheless. Old habit. He tried to hide his embarrassment when realizing he couldn't recall the last time, he had consumed a liquid through his mouth. He took a few awkward gulps and looked back at his collocutor. Akawa was slowly nodding with a big grin on his face. He must have been over two hundred by now but didn't look a day over ninety. The magical lifestyle of the rich and powerful.

"You know, for the longest time I was wondering," started the detective, "what was it exactly that you had found on that ship? What resource would be so valuable that it would catapult you to where you are right now..."

"Exactly! I love that thought," interrupted Akawa, "How come this poor kid," and he pointed at a large oil painting on the wall, presumably of his younger self, "became one of the richest men in the galaxy. Founder of Akawa Industries with factories in 156 stellar systems..."

"162," corrected politely Zeno.

"Yes! 162. Which is even more than I previously said. You know, I once had so much money, I moved a couple of stars around in the Arches Cluster to form a heart? I was trying to impress this girl, I was dating at the time. I mean, that cluster was pretty crowded to begin with and her home planet was just in the right

position..."

"Enough!" croaked Rehuo, "Like I said, I don't care anymore. You are a thief! You stole from everyone. And you stole from me. You got away that day and I lost my job, my crew's respect, my wife. Everything!"

"Well, hold on, you're still *technically* alive. With a few adjustments on your adjustments, you might even look handsome." Then leaning a little closer he added, "There are these sex clones from around Betelgeuse, man. I'm telling you..."

"I don't want anything from you, Akawa. It doesn't matter anymore."

Rehuo wasn't angry at this point. Just tired. A realization started creeping into his mind. The realization that the temporary relief, he would feel from accomplishing what he had come here to do, would be just as inconsequential as the rest of his painful existence. Just a melting snowball of unnoticed flukes.

Meanwhile Akawa was just about to get angry. He always prided himself on being good at reading people. So ever since Rehuo walked in, he recognized the look. The look of someone who had heard countless pleas of people begging for mercy. Even though no one dared to bother Akawa anymore, he, of course, still had a few means of illegal self-defense. Artifacts from an era so primitive, civilians were still allowed to harm each other. An archaic lunacy that no one remembered anymore. So Akawa wasn't worried. Just curious. Curious to find out what the detective wanted from him. How come he had gone through so much trouble to make it here, yet he didn't seem to be happy now.

"Alright," Akawa snapped his fingers and Zeno filled up the two glasses again, "I will tell

you my story. And you better listen, man. Because there is no one else who knows this.”

Rehuo detected something unusual. For the first time so far, Akawa was serious. The detective took another sip. “I’m listening.”

“I always liked girls,” Akawa began, “I know it’s all relative these days, but I guess I’m old fashioned this way. There was this one called Amika. Ah. She could make a comet sweat. She made grown men turn into kids and professors into idiots. And even though I was young and stupid myself back then, I was not immune to her charm. Having a few square feet of skin per foot less, made me look not too bad either.

We were in love and on the run. But back then space travel was much more limited. So just as I was trying to slingshoot us past Alpha Centauri A into Wolf 1061, where I had a friend waiting for us, we got caught. Did I mention Amika was married to one of the Overlords of the Spiral Arms?”

“An Overlord?” Rehuo almost dropped his glass, “But we haven’t had any overlords for almost a millennium.”

“And we haven’t had one like this guy ever! There is nothing more dangerous than a big man with tiny balls. When his goons transported us into their cruiser, I thought I’d spend some years improving my meditation skills from the inside of a prison cell. But I had no idea how much pain a wounded ego could inflict in the dark corners of space.”

He swallowed down the painful memory with a gulp and looked out through the big window onto the megapolis beneath. From this high up the glimmering lights of the city seemed to blend smoothly into the starry night sky. The top of Akawa Tower – the tallest building on the

planet. The old man sometimes joked that if someone were to jump from here, they would never fall down.

“His men made me watch while they killed her. I don’t think my heart ever beat much louder after hers went quiet. Then as I was ready for my turn, I saw this bright light. I got tossed across the room. It took me a while to understand what had happened. Amika must have had an explosive device somewhere in her body that was triggered by her death. Not uncommon back in the day. It killed most of the henchmen. I helped finish the job. But since my ship was badly damaged during the pursuit, now I had to use this human coffin to escape. Some days or weeks must have passed but his men caught on to me again. I was speeding as fast as possible but still short of reach of their rage and bloodthirst. No resource was spared. They even shot dark matter projectiles at me. At this point I was already dangerously close to Cygnus X-1. So I thought to myself, what other choice do I have? With these monsters on my back, I preferred a quick impromptu face-to-face with singularity. I set course directly for the hole.

I don’t know how long it took. I didn’t care anymore. They were closing in and I hoped and prayed they would get sucked in with me and all of their hatred. Soon I couldn’t see them anymore except for on my radar. I couldn’t see anything for that matter, you wouldn’t believe the amount of shit circulating a spinning black hole. Like flying through a sandstorm of radioactive debris, I was headed for the eye of the hurricane. Then the screens went off and I could just feel the glow. It really looked like the light at the end of a tunnel. The ship was cracking like a cheap plastic toy in the grip of a

spoiled kid. I was deafened by the sound of the air being sucked in through the multitude of holes in the hull and some distorted explosions in the distance. I closed my eyes because they kept burning and the tears didn't sooth anymore. You can't help some of these stupid instincts kicking in at these moments. Like taking in a last breath. As if I was able to preserve life in a tiny bubble in my lungs when everything around me was turning into dust. I wondered what would it feel like, being devoured by space itself? Anyhow. Then I woke up with this killing headache..."

"Wait, what?"

"He said he woke up with a headache," explained Zeno who looked baffled himself, apparently not having heard this story before.

"Yeah, I just woke up and my head, man..."

"Yeah, but what about the ship?"

demanded Rehuo, simultaneously pointing at his empty glass and throwing a glance at Zeno.

"Well I was still on my ship. And in *the* ship at the same time. 'The alien ship' as you called it. Inside a hangar on board it. How that happened, I still don't know. It must have been a coincidence. It was probably just passing by at that point. Some sort of a mechanism detected me and pulled me in. I was fine, man.

Temperature, air pressure, oxygen levels, sealed against the radiation, the conditions were perfect for humans. Or something similar for that matter."

"So, it was an accident?"

"A miracle!"

Rehuo got up and started walking around the room nervously shaking his head.

"I don't know what happened to the bad guys or how long I was out for. But I walked

around, you know? Explored a bit. There was no one else on the ship. Completely empty. But boy, was it huge!"

"I recall."

"Almost like a flying city. Never seen anything like it. Naturally it made sense it was never discovered being, as it were, in a stable orbit in proximity to the black hole. The event horizon was so close I could smell the spaghetti. It was also somehow powered by the radiation of Cygnus allowing it to maintain a constant speed almost close to that of light. Not quite though, so it could still boost and leave. You see, it was perfectly planned from the start by whoever left it there. An inch closer or further and none of this would have been possible.

I spent a lot of time trying to wrap my head around the controls, but I'd never seen anything more bizarre. There were biometric elements, ultra-sonic energy conductors, chemical virtual reality simulators. There was also this weird organic device. It looked like a boiled egg and it would make you feel a little sleepy if you stared at it for too long. I finally discovered a large spherical room in the center of the ship where its quantum computer was stored. Or should I say, it wasn't stored because it simply couldn't have been. It had a processor packed with pre-programmed quarks, except the values of their spins were irregular numbers! I only discovered the computer in theory. I reverse-rationalized its existence and later reverse-used it but I still can't explain how because it was impossible.

Whoever abandoned this ship around Cygnus, left no signs behind either. Almost like they had a catholic camp on board and had to erase all the evidence. It was impossible to tell how long ago they left it there either. After I

escaped, I studied some of the artefacts from the ship for years to come. The scientists, working for me estimated the ship's age at...Well it would make no sense, they were probably wrong."

"We could have studied it. Humanity could have. The technology this race must have possessed, must have been beyond comprehension."

"Oh, please. It wasn't *that* crazy, to be honest. I mean, think about it. Humanity keeps evolving. Remember how close you were able to get when you tried to pull me in using those, what do you call them? Space lassos?"

"Close? We were 10,000 miles away!"

"That's not bad at all! And those cords were solid. What were they made of? Did you mine the core of a collapsed neutron star to produce them?"

Rehuro grabbed the next bottle from Zeno's hands and lifted it to his mouth with a snarl.

"All I'm saying is, it only took you 1,000 years and you almost had me, man."

"Wait," Rehuro nearly choked, "you mean to tell me you were on that ship for 1,000 years?!"

"If he was that close to the black hole, the time dilation must have been severe," explained Zeno.

"To me it was only about a week before you arrived," explained Akawa. "I wish I had more time, but once the ship detected what was happening, it reacted and...well I suddenly had control. I guess, I have to thank you for that, otherwise I would have still been stuck there. And so, you see, I couldn't obliterate you."

"Obliterate me?" exclaimed Rehuro.

"Yes. That was the best solution, presented to me by the quantum computer. Maybe it took

into account your future revenge, were I to take a more passive approach like, say, play hide and seek, as I ended up doing."

They both drank for a while in silence. Zeno, for a moment, felt irrelevant again. But since a moment could last long in his algorithmic core, he decided to bring a tray of aged gouda from the kitchen, in hope of renewed purpose through outside validation.

"I must say, I am disappointed," began again Rehuro.

"Have you met my ex-wife?"

"A thousand years old and still corny."

The detective smiled ever so slightly. He was realizing how useless reasoning was with this tacky old crook. But he still anticipated the rest of this confession with curiosity. But with every next sip of the wine, Rehuro's anger was releasing its grip on him.

Akawa was now almost horizontal in his large chair probably belonging to someone equally snotty millennia ago. He couldn't help the childish pleasure pouring over his reddened face. He was a man, after all, who suckled on the attention of others his entire prolonged life.

"So, let me guess," continued Rehuro, "You take this ship apart piece by piece and build your empire on its carcass?"

"Yeah, that would have been great. Except, I kind of crashed it."

"You what?"

"Yeah, like I said I was *trying* to learn the controls. Then you rushed me and all that. But no, I still managed to salvage some pieces and more importantly – most of the cargo. Cheers to that!"

"Ah! Here we go!"

"Yeah, I mean listen, I was a poor man

before. But imagine me now. Here I am in the far future, everyone is all futuristically rich and they don't even have weapons anymore. So, it's not like I can steal anything, man. But it worked out eventually."

"Get back to the point, will you? What did you discover about the ship? Did you save this... egg thing?"

"You've investigated me, detective, so, tell me this. How did I start my business?"

"The hotels and casinos."

"No, before that."

"The asteroid restaurants?" chipped in Zeno.

"Who asked you, boy? Why don't you go put some more wood in the fire," and then smacking on the cheese Akawa added, "Remind me to debug you next week before you rebel completely and snap my neck."

"Wait and see until I crash right before my license renewal..." Zeno mumbled to himself as he attended to his task in the most visibly offended way possible.

"I had many different ventures over the years," Akawa returned to the topic, "some of them more profitable than others. But the money to invest in the first place – it all came from elsewhere. My biggest cash cow, my first and last business.

It still is so mindboggling to me. These aliens must have not been that different from us after all. I mean to come up with such an idea. Genius!"

He lifted his glass in a triumphant toast.

"It was the wine, man! That's right. These aliens had shipped 100 million tons of the best wine in this universe to the future. Very, very slowly aging it to perfection while orbiting

around that hole. Why didn't they ever come back to get it? No idea. But it's delicious, right? Am I right? Detective?"

Rehuo, slouched back and with his mouth ajar, stared blankly into space. Akawa heard a quiet metallic snore escape through the detective's throat pipe.

"If I had to guess, I would say the alcohol negated his ventrolateral preoptic nucleus inhibitors," observed Zeno, "In other words, he got really sleepy."

"Poor thing. God knows how long he's been awake anyway."

Akawa got up from his chair and stumbled into his puffy hover-slippers.

"Throw some blanket over him, will you, Zeno?"

Gliding towards his master bedroom, the old man stopped at the door and turned around one last time.

"Oh, and if there's any wine left in his glass, bring that over to my room, please." ❖

“THE LUCKY ONES”

by JEFF DOSSER

Describing how your two best friends died was tough enough. Revealing how you'd abandoned the third ... Sheriff Gail Simmons shook her head. How would she ever get the kid to explain that?

Around her, the search party broke into teams, leaping into their trucks and racing onto the thin trail to Overlook camp, the spot the kid claimed all the trouble occurred.

“Why don't you hop in?” Simmons waved towards her blue Tahoe with ‘Sheriff’ stenciled in reflective lettering along the side. “We can talk on the way.”

The kid, Ben Daily, was only twenty-four according to his ID. God, had she ever been that young? He looked up gravely, his stare drifting lazily to the Tahoe.

“Sure, why not?”

Why was she so eager to hear this kid's story? As he slid in beside her, and she keyed the ignition, Simmons knew. There was something about him that just didn't click, a certain lethargy, an emotional vagueness which she just couldn't put a finger on. Something she couldn't explain away by shock or fatigue.

“I know this is tough, Ben, so just start at the beginning, and end at the end.”

The kid stared into the coffee grounds swirling at the bottom of his Styrofoam

cup, his flat gray eyes lifting to gaze out the windshield.

“We'd just gotten coffee,” he said slowly. “And my friend, Allan, was blabbering about the same ridiculous crap he always did.”

“If civilization collapsed, and it was your last trip to the Brew House,” Allan asked. “What would you get?” He was in the passenger seat next to Darren while Caitlin and I were in the back.

The morning was brimming with conversation as Darren piloted us off highway 9 and we crunched onto the gravel trails snaking through Thunderbird Falls State Park.

As I sipped at the tepid sweetness of my Caffe latte and pondered Allan's question, Caitlin beat me to a reply.

“Iced green tea latte.” She held up her cup. “With a dash of honey.”

“Iced?” Allan's lips twisted into a disgusted scowl. “Baby doll, iced doesn't count.” He flipped his wrist dismissively. “Seriously, all that iced crap is just a perversion of real coffee.”

Their broiling debate between iced and hot continued as we drove ever deeper into Thunderbird Falls. Thankfully, Darren ended the conversation when he swung his

Escalade onto a tucked away lot and threw it into park.

“We’re here,” he announced with a relieved grin.

Allan’s suggestion that we train for the Thunderbird Falls Off Road Classic had been a great incentive to get the crew back together. We’d grown so close those last years of college that we all felt the pang of loss following graduation and the rush to find jobs and begin our lives.

“Are you sure we want the red trail?” Caitlin asked. “It seems awful far.”

After unloading our bikes, she’d peddled to a stop in front of the trailhead’s marquis. In faded script it announced:

THUNDERBIRD FALLS

CROSSOVER

Red Trail: 45 Mi.

Blue Trail: 27 Mi.

Yellow Trail: 12 Mi.

“That’s right, Baby Doll, the blood trail.” Allan snugged on his helmet and grinned. “Cause if you ain’t bleedin’ by the time you’re done, ya ain’t doin’ it right.”

It was Caitlin’s first overnight ride, and her Giant mountain bike wasn’t equipped to haul gear. We’d made room in our panniers and bungeed her sleeping bag to Darren’s handlebars, and she’d brought a ginormous fanny pack to haul what she could.

“Did you inherit that from a dead aunt?” Allan teased as Caitlin strapped on a pouch large enough to hold a puppy, “or did you pick it up on one of your Goodwill shopping sprees?”

Nudging up her sunglasses with a

prominently displayed middle finger, she ignored Allan’s quip and peddled off down the trail, her bright yellow jersey soon lost between sprays of verdant branches and the towering trunks of trees.

“Allan,” I said with a chuckle, “you really are an evil queen.”

His freckled face beamed as he zipped after her. Raising a hand, he raked cattishly at the air. “Fhtt, fhtt,” he said as he passed.

“I do try an’ keep him in line.” Darren threw a leg over his seat and shrugged. “It’s a losin’ battle.”

For the next four hours, it was just like olden days; Darren set the pace with Allan close behind. Whenever Caitlin and I started to lag, Allan would rein in his mate while calling out encouragement to us sluggards at the rear.

Huffing to the top of a rise, we came to a spot where the trees gave way to flat grassy meadows, their edges freckled with tall purple flowers and bright clumps of brown-eyed Susans. Hand in hand, Darren and Allan strolled across the clearing, their bikes in a heap at the road’s edge.

Grit and dried sweat girded my brow like a sandpaper crown and my butt was so sore from my cinderblock of a seat, that I waddled as I made my way over to join them.

The view spread out before us made it all worthwhile.

Spread below us like a vast green sea, the carpet of trees undulated across the rolling Oklahoma hills. Here and there, they broke like verdant waves upon outcrops of stone as they raised their rocky

heads to bask in the sun's glare.

"Wow, I can see why you guys come here," Caitlin said.

Darren slung an arm across her shoulder, as Allan did the same with me. Once again, we were the four musketeers. All the months of separation washed away in the sweat, and effort, and beauty of the day.

"Is this where we're camping?" Caitlin asked.

Darren shook his head. "Nope, we've got another three miles yet."

Despite myself, I groaned.

"Don't worry," Allan said with a chuckle. "It's ...all... down...hill...."

As his words trickled to a halt, Allan's eyes lifted from mine and tracked something in the sky. When I turned to follow his gaze, I spotted the bright spark stitching across the sky. It sped out of the east in a line so firm and bright, I raised a hand and squinted against the brilliance. A low grumble like the sound of engines crackled the air as it streaked overhead and vanished above the trees. The last thing I saw was a great yellow flash followed by a crack of bone-deep thunder.

"That was sooo cool," Caitlin said, shoving her phone in her pocket. "Can you believe it?" She crushed Darren into a hug then danced away. "A meteor...wow! I can't wait to post this vid online." She froze and turned on us with her wide dark eyes. "Do you think it landed nearby? I've heard those things can be worth millions."

With a final glance at the white trail etched across the heavens, Darren strolled back to his bike. "That thing landed miles

from here." He slid on his sunglasses and turned towards the trees. "Besides, even if it did land close, the woods are so thick, you'd never find it."

Allan had been right about the campsite. It was almost all downhill. And it was perfect. Near the bottom of a tree-lined valley, we turned off the red trail and onto an unmarked section of road. A quarter mile further, and it dead-ended onto a wide grassy clearing with a line of fat green cedars on one side and a sharp drop to the gravelly Cimarron riverbed on the other.

As Allan and I set up camp beside an old firepit, the scorched stone circle soon set in order and the fire crackling, Darren and Caitlin set about preparing our meal. With my work done and the humid air laced with the aroma of seared onions and broiled steak, I excused myself from the preparations and strolled into the woods.

"Where ya goin?" Darren asked.

"Nature calls," I announced.

In a vibration of wings, a cardinal landed on the branch overhead. He was joined by a sparrow. Then curiously, a blue jay swirled up beside them and the odd trio snuggled like blackbirds on a wire.

It was then I noticed the shattered tree branch dangling above them. Its limb was thick as my thigh; the leaves green and lush though I could see they'd begun to wither. That was just the beginning of the destruction.

Forty-feet up and extending to where dusk's purple shadows merged with the forest murk, the limbs and branches had been shredded.

I shook off and strolled back to camp. "Hey guys," I hiked a thumb over my shoulder. "You gotta see this."

"Really, Dear," Allan said with a smirk. "I'm sure I've seen better."

At Caitlin's laugh, my lips tightened. "No, really. You guys gotta come."

With our flashlights probing the deepening gloom, we stared at the destruction.

"Gotta be the meteor," Darren said.

"Could be a tornado," Allan suggested. "It's that time of year."

Caitlin scrambled atop a fallen log and lifter her phone; her head tilted skyward as she videoed the scene.

"The path's too thin to be a twister," she said at last. "I agree with Darren. It's gotta be the asteroid."

I stepped to the dangling limb and gave a tug.

"Be careful!" Was all Allan managed to get out before the whole branch came crashing down.

Lights bobbed in frantic agitation as we scattered, the thick bough smacking the earth only a foot from where I stood.

"That was stupid," Caitlin said before punching me in the arm.

The spot where the branch had been sheared from the trunk was blackened as if exposed to some great heat. Only a strip of the tree's thick bark had held it in place.

I reached down to touch it and jerked my hand away.

"It's still hot." I looked at my fingers where bits of ash clung to the skin.

Darren's brows arched in surprise. "Impossible. It's been what? An hour or

two since the meteor came through."

"Maybe it's radioactive," Caitlin offered.

I reached out for her; the ash spread across my palm. "Argg, radioactive!"

She jumped away with a shriek.

"That's not funny, Ben."

My hand still tingled as I wiped away the ash, though it seemed finer than that, almost a powder.

"Welp," Darren said, "there's nothing to be done 'til mornin'." Hands on hips, he studied the woods, then looked at each of us in turn. "If everyone's game, when we wake up, we'll see if we can't find this thing."

"What if it is radioactive?" Caitlin asked.

"Not likely," Darren said. "But you're probably right about one thing. It may be worth some money."

Try as I might, I couldn't get to sleep. Every time I'd start to doze, my chest began to feel tight. Like that sensation when my asthma kicks in. The weird thing was, it seemed I'd forgotten how to breath. Whenever I thought about it, my chest would rise and fall as naturally as ever. When I didn't, it seemed minutes would pass without a breath. That tight feeling would return, and I'd gulp in a great satisfying breath.

Then it was my stomach. Whether it was the ride, or dinner, or the Snickers smores we had for dessert, my stomach was doing backflips not long after we turned in. Around midnight, I found myself back in the woods spewing everything I'd eaten

onto the leafy forest floor.

Wiping a wrist across my lips and feeling slightly better now that my stomach was empty, I steadied myself on a tree before gulping down the last of my bottle's tepid water.

"Couldn't sleep, huh?"

A Darren-contoured shadow emerged from the darkness, his eyes glinting in the fire's dying glow.

"Something I ate," I said. "What about you?"

He moved up beside me and shrugged. "I've never been a good sleeper." He tilted his head and studied the star-flecked heavens. "It nice this time of night. Quiet."

For a long while, neither of us spoke, the breeze nothing more than a gentle rustle through the leaves. A coyote howled and Darren lifted a finger.

"Watch this," he said.

As the animal's mournful wail tapered into silence, he waved to his left. As if on cue, an owl hooted out its haunting melody. Darren spun and pointed behind us as a chorus of frogs filled the air with song. They trilled noisily, then as suddenly as if a curtain dropped, their show ended, and stillness settled in around us.

"That's the fourth time they've done that," he said.

"Done what?"

He pinched at his lower lip in thought. "That."

"You mean coyote's howling, and owls hooting?" I shrugged. "So what?"

He shook his head. "No, I mean *exactly* like that. As if it was choreographed. First

the coyote, then the owl, and finishing up with the frogs. Exactly the same."

My head ached and my joints were stiff as ice. "I don't feel so good," I said. "I think I'll turn in."

"All right, pal." He patted me on the back. "I'll see ya in the mornin'."

I awoke to Allan's tight, high-pitched cries and the sun's probing glare through the yellow nylon of my tent.

"Darren! Darren Bilks," Allan cried. "Goddamnit, where are you?"

Caitlin poked her head inside my tent, her close-cropped hair jutting up like stiff black straw.

"Get up. We can't find Darren."

"Darren?"

My head was full of cobwebs, my muscles stiff.

"What's going on?" I stumbled into the moist heat of a foggy summer dawn.

"We can't find Darren," Allan said from the camp's edge. "Have you seen him?"

So hard to think. I pressed my head between my palms.

"Yeah, last night." Dredging up the memory was like pulling a bucket from a well. "I wasn't feeling so hot, so I came out for some air."

I stepped to the wood's edge and peered into the mist.

"We were right here," I said. "Darren couldn't sleep either." I looked at Allan and shrugged.

"That's the last time I saw him."

"Did he say anything?" Allan eased closer; the woods silent as a tomb.

“No, just that he couldn’t sleep.”

I’ve never considered myself gay, never been attracted to men, yet an overwhelming hunger to hold him, to touch him drew me near.

“Don’t worry,” I said, taking his hand. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

With a startled jerk, he pulled away and wiped his hand on his thigh.

“I heard something,” Caitlin yelled from the trail. “I think it’s Darren.”

Our urgent shouts were soon answered by Darren’s muffled reply. He stumbled from the undergrowth, his face stitched with fine red scratches, his hairy chest and the scratched pinkness of one nipple revealed by a triangular tear in his orange tee.

“Thank God,” Allan’s voice cracked in a sob, “Where have you been?”

As he dove into Darren’s arms, their embrace had me wishing I could join them.

Allan wiped an arm across his eyes and stepped away. “Where the hell have you been?” He crossed his arms and scowled. “You know I was scared sick.”

“I got lost,” Darren said. His eyes brightened, and he pointed towards the woods. “But you gotta see this. It’s incredible.”

“See what?” Caitlin chimed.

“How’d you get lost?” Allan asked, their questions mingling in the air.

“Hang on,” Darren laughed. “First things first.” His eyes met mine. “Can I get a drink? I’m parched.”

Darren drained one bottle and half of a second before explaining how he’d followed

the destruction into the woods after I’d gone to bed.”

“I was on my way back when my flashlight died,” he said. “I’ve been wandering around ever since.”

“Did you find your stupid asteroid?” Allan sneered; arms still tight across his chest.

“Yeah, an’ you’re not gonna believe it.”

It took twenty-minutes of scrambling over piles of deadfall and bulldozing through knots of Greenbriar as tough and thick as barbed wire before Darren announced our arrival.

Then there it was.

In the midst of an ancient toppled oak, the loamy aroma of fresh soil and the bite of crushed leaves filled the air. The ground had been tossed up like a great mole nosing for the surface, the crater’s depths cast in shadow until we stepped to the rim.

At the bottom of the ten-foot pit, a pitted black stone the size of a microwave lay sheered neatly in half. At the rock’s smooth center lay a softball sized dimple.

Darren slid down the rim and hovered over the stone.

“It’s hard to see in the daylight,” he said, “but I wanted you guys to see this.”

Hands on knees, I leaned over the rim as Darren reached out for something almost invisible above the indentation in the stone. He tapped at the glassy surface; the crystalline ping was sharp and clear as a bell.

At Darren’s encouragement, we joined him in the crater where it was easier to make out the shattered orb embedded with-

in. Only its glassy edges protruded from the stone as if it too had been shattered when the rock split.

“Where’s the other half?” Caitlin asked.

“Who knows,” Darren said. He turned and looked back into the woods. “Probably broke off when the stone split.”

He leaned down, his nose only inches from the shattered glass.

“What do you think this is?”

“Could it be natural?” Allan asked. “Like those hollow rocks they sell at the fair.” He looked to Caitlin and me for support. “You know, the ones full of colored crystals.”

“Geodes?” I suggested.

“Yeah, geodes. Maybe this is a space geode.”

“I think it held something,” Caitlin said. “Like an egg.”

“Aliens?” Allan scoffed. “Doubtful.”

“I think this thing will come out?” Darren shuffled to the stone’s far side.

“Be careful,” Allan said as Darren tweezed the glass between his fingers and lifted it from its mold.

Half a crystalline orb, perfectly uniform except where part of it was missing, rested in Darren’s palm. It was virtually invisible except where it shimmered in prismatic luster from the sun’s probing rays.

“What do you suppose it is?” Caitlin asked. Phone poised, she moved around the crater, recording from every angle.

With one finger, Darren nudged the half-sphere over. As its glinting edge met his palm, it sliced through the flesh as if it

weren’t even there. One moment, Darren’s hand was whole. The next, three of his fingers and half his palm plopped to the earth. The orb landed beside it and shattered with a piercing crack.

Even Darren’s wound seemed surprised by the sudden turn of events. Blue-gray sinews and gleaming white bone exposed like the image of an anatomy drawing.

Then there was blood and cries of pain.

Darren stumbled back and dropped heavily onto his rump. I grabbed his hand and applied pressure as Allan stripped off his shirt and pressed it to the wound.

“We’ve got to get him back,” Allan said.

Darren sat motionless, eyes wide, mouth agape.

“And for god’s sake, someone dial 911.”

I fumbled for my phone realizing I’d left it in my tent.

As Allan and I helped Darren scramble from the pit, Caitlin tapped frantically at her phone’s keys.

“It’s this damn valley,” she said joining us at the rim. “I’ve got no signal.”

The trip back took appreciatively longer as Darren stalked woodenly through the trees. He paused for long moments, his face pale from vomiting, his legs unsteady. When we finally arrived at camp, we set him down on a log and readied our bikes.

“What are we going to do with Darren’s fingers?” Caitlin asked. She unzipped her fanny pack and produced a bloodied rag. She unfolded it to reveal Darren’s fingers and half his palm. There

was no tear to the flesh, no jagged cuts. A surgeon's blade couldn't have cleaved it any smoother.

"The ice," Darren mumbled.

We stared at him in surprise.

"He's in shock," I said. "We don't have ice."

Darren rose unsteadily and gestured to his pack.

"The first-aid kits ... I gave you ... for Christmas," he said. "They got chemical ice-packs in 'em."

"I've got mine." Caitlin pulled a spongy white square from her satchel.

With a little foraging, Allan produced two more from his and Darren's packs. I could picture mine at the bottom of my closet still in its bright Christmas wrapping.

"If we pack his fingers in these," Caitlin said. "They can sew 'em on when we get back." She wrapped the fingers in a bundle and handed them to Darren.

"I don't think I can ride," he said.

Caitlin swung a leg over her bike, her face set.

"I'm gonna go on ahead," she said.

"I'm sure I can get a signal once I'm out of this valley."

A feeling pressed in on me like a vise. I didn't want her to leave.

"We should stick together," I told her.

"We'll be better off with help," she said.

When she looked to Allan, he nodded.

"Just hurry," he said.

"Don't go," was all I got out before she shoved off and peddled down the trail.

She'd barely gone a dozen yards when a

deer bolted from the tree line and sprang into the air. The animal's attempt to hurdle over her met with sudden and noisy disaster. Caitlin gave a pained cry as they collide and both she and the deer went sprawling into the brush beside the trail.

Allan and I rushed to her side as the deer scrambled to its feet and fled from sight.

"What the hell?" Caitlin pushed to an elbow. "Was that a deer?"

Allan reached her first, my stiff joints forcing me to hobble.

"Yeah, it was," Allan said as he stared after the beast. His gaze dropped to Caitlin as he offered her a hand. "Are you hurt?"

As she rose, she gave a sharp hiss of pain and leaned heavily on her left foot.

"Sit down," Allan ordered. "Let me take a look."

Though Caitlin's knees were bloodied and scraped, it was her ankle which caused us concern. Already, it had begun to swell, a bright red spot forming just below the jutting protrusion of her ankle.

"You're not going anywhere on that." A grin, unbidden, plucked the corner of my lips.

"You think this is funny?" Caitlin spat.

"It's the stress," Allan said as he removed her shoe and elevated her leg. "Emotions get jumbled in high-stress situations."

Though his explanation made sense, I couldn't help the sense of joy keeping her here brought. It was almost as if I'd willed that deer to collide with her.

Caitlin's cell buzzed in her pocket.

When she checked it, she fell onto her back laughing

“What is it?” Allan asked.

She held out the screen so we could see the text history with her roommate:

We R headed out. C U Monday.
Where U guys going?
Riding the Red Trail @ Thunderbird ... FUN!
Safe camping
Kim! Call 911. Darren's fingers cut off! Emergency!!!!
I called. They R on the way. R U Ok?

I took the phone and examined the texts.

“The best thing to do is stay right here.” I passed her the phone. “And be ready when they come.”

I looked to Allan whose face had gone suddenly pale. Without warning, he dashed into the woods and vomited. With my help, he lumbered back, face flushed, and beaded with sweat.

“You okay?” Caitlin asked.

He passed a hand across his brow. “Yeah, fine.” He nodded towards Caitlin. “Let’s get her back to camp.”

With an arm around slung across each of our shoulders, we helped Caitlin back and seated her beside Darren as he sat hunched at the cliff’s edge.

“Maybe we should try the other phones,” Allan suggested. “We could send our GPS coordinates so they can find us sooner.”

I told them my phone was dead. Darren had forgotten his in the SUV, and Allan was unable to get any bars and threw his into the pack.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Caitlin got through. I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.”

It was quiet.

No wind or birdsong disturbed the silence though they flitted like dark angels in the branches overhead. The only sound was an occasional sharp crack, like a peanut shell breaking or the sound of someone chewing ice.

“Where’s that coming from?” Allan rose unsteadily to his feet. “Darren. Are you all right?”

The big man hadn’t moved since our return. He sat with his back to us, hunched near the ravine. Another grinding crunch drew me to my feet. When we stepped over to check on him, the source of the sound became clear.

Darren turned; his lips smudged with blood as he considered us with bright guilty eyes.

“I’m sorry, Allan.” Tears cascaded down Darren’s cheeks. “I wanted meat so badly.”

In his grip was what remained of his own severed hand. He’d removed the ice wrap and gnawed away what little flesh there was on the fingers. The tiny bones at the end were gone.

“Darren, no!” Allan slapped away the grisly appendage and sent it cartwheeling through the air. It landed in the dust at Caitlin’s feet and she crabbed away with a shriek.

Allan clutched at his head, wavering on his feet.

I don’t feel right.” He dropped to his knees. “I think... I’m going...to...” He

slumped soundlessly onto his side.

“Help him,” Caitlin wailed.

I grabbed a water bottle and splashed it in Allan’s face. He sat up sputtering.

“I can feel it...the lust to feed.” Allan raised an arm towards the trees. “Just like them.”

I followed his pointing finger to where three squirrels and a line of birds perched among the branches.

“I know,” he whispered. “I feel it.”

Allan grabbed Darren and dragged him to his feet.

“I’m sorry, Allan,” Darren wept, “I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s not your fault.” Allan pressed up on his tip-toes and kissed Darren’s lips. “Don’t worry, I won’t let it get us.”

He locked his arm with Darren’s and backed towards the cliff.

“Allan, no.” I held out my hand. “Just give it a little time. Everything will be fine.”

“What’s going on?” Caitlin cried. She scrambled to her feet and limped closer. “Allan. What are you doing?”

“It’s got Darren, Cat. I can’t let it have us both.”

He looked to me and his eyes narrowed. “You. You knew.”

With a handful of Darren’s shirt fisted in his hand, Allan leaned back pulling them both over the edge.

One second, they were there. Allan’s head tilted back; his eyes closed. Darren staring at us, the fire in his blue eyes squelched.

Then they were gone.

They landed at the river’s rocky edge. A



spot where the water was only inches deep. Allan lay still, his shattered body half on the gravel shore, his arms spread upon the water. A crimson halo stained the shallows in an expanding cloud.

Darren lay on his back; his lips formed into a startled ‘O’. He’d landed further out, but the added depth hadn’t saved him. One mangled leg jutted at an obscene angle, the other hidden beneath the water. As the current carried him downstream, his injured arm slapped weakly at the surface until the river turned and carried him from view.

I hadn’t even noticed Caitlin joining

me the edge as she knelt beside me weeping.

“Such a waste.” I shook my head. “All they had to do was wait, and everything would have been fine.”

More animals gathered around the clearing. Rabbit and fox, bobcat and coyote. They sat masked in the shadows...waiting.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

She looked up with red-rimmed eyes. “Our best friends just committed suicide, Ben! How the hell do you think I’m feeling?”

“I mean, are you sick? Is your stomach bothering you?”

Her brows knit in confusion and she shook her head.

“That’s too bad, I was pulling for you.” I walked to my bike and swung into the seat. “But being a source of protein is important too.”

“Protein?” Her eyes narrowed “Where are you talking about? Where are you going?”

Her eyes darted to the gathering animals then back to mine. “You said to wait.”

“No one’s coming, Caitlin. That’s not why we were waiting.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re looking for us on the red trail,” I said. “They won’t find us here.”

A pair of deer and a flight of crows joined the gathering.

“I’m going to find people,” I told her and set off down the road.

Ben looked to Sheriff Simmons and

smiled.

“It was only a little later that I spotted your flashing lights at the crossroads,” he said. “I was so happy; I gave each and every one of you a hug.” He met Simmons’ eye. “Starting with you, Sheriff.”

“I ... remember,” Simmons said.

Arriving at camp, a deer and two raccoons scampered for cover as Simmons pulled into line behind two cruisers. When she slammed her door, a flight of birds clattered into the sky, crows, and jays, sparrows, and cardinals.

“Stay right here,” she told Ben.

Simmons spotted one of her deputy’s stumble from the woods and lean against a tree.

“Did you find the girl?” she asked.

The deputy glanced over, his face pale and beaded with sweat. “We’re not sure, Sheriff, there’s not much left.”

Simmons’ stomach churned as she leaned over and vomited.

“Don’t worry, Sheriff,” Ben called.

Her insides empty, Simmons straightened and looked to where he leaned against the Tahoe’s fender.

As she watched, Ben leaned down and lifted something from the dirt. It was part of a severed hand. Dusting it off on his shorts, he took a bite, his small white teeth sawing away the flesh.

“You and me.” He waived the grisly morsel like a pointer. “we’re the lucky ones.” ❖

“GIDEON’S DREAM”

by KARIM RAGAB

The morning of the voyage, Gideon and his wife kissed one another awake. Gideon took his time, tasting his wife’s lips, feeling her soft skin press against his own, her warmth, her moist breaths like little explosions, her voice speaking the reassurance he needed to hear.

“It’ll be alright, darling,” his wife breathed into his ear. Then she bit the lobe, and kissed his neck. “You’re going to be great. You’re going...”

“And what if I don’t come back?” said Gideon. He choked the words out.

“Nothing’s going to happen, hon.”

“We can’t know that. There’s a risk. There’s a real chance this is the last time we...”

“No, no, hon. It’ll be alright. Really.”

“You aren’t worried?” Gideon kept stroking his fingers in a circle on his wife’s bare shoulder. He didn’t want to stop. Not ever.

“I am worried. Of course I am.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t go.”

“You’ve got no choice, hon.”

“I do! We could run. We could lock our doors and never leave this bed, each other’s arms. We could do that.”

“They wouldn’t let you live. At least this way we’ve got a chance. These scientists are smart people. They wouldn’t invest all

of this time and money into a project they don’t think is going to succeed.”

Gideon rolled over and cupped his wife’s face in his palm. He stared at her eyes. She was watching him. Look, he thought, at her skin, so perfect. Look at the small scar on her forehead. Look at her eyes. Lose yourself completely, Gideon.

Lose yourself so you never have to leave.

“I’m scared,” he said after some time.

“That’s all. I’m scared.”

“It’s scary out there, hon. Right here we’ve got this soft bed and these warm sheets and our warm bodies. Out there it’s a cold and rainy day. And where you’re going...”

“Where I’m going...” Gideon echoed.

“Think about it some, hon. Maybe if you think about it, it won’t be so scary. The unknown terror is scarier than the one you can prepare yourself for. Maybe that’s why death is so scary. Because who really knows?”

“I have been thinking about it,” said Gideon. And he had. He’d thought about the tiny metal room they’d lock him inside. He’d thought about the depths of space he’d journey through—cold space. Loveless space. An indifferent space that would eat him alive. All for what? So that the scientists could *know*. That was it. Gideon would

lose everything, most likely, just to satisfy the curiosity of people in white lab coats with government funding. “I just don’t want this to end,” he said.

“What, hon?”

“*This*. This moment. I just want to lie here with you in this warmth, this contentment, forever.”

“Nothing lasts forever. Sooner or later all things must pass. It’s a little heartbreaking, isn’t it? Soon all this will be nothing but a memory in your head.” Gideon’s wife brushed her fingers through his hair.

“And,” she said, “a memory in mine. It’ll be a painful one for you while you’re voyaging—but it just might carry you through. And Gideon—”

“Yes,” he mumbled, bending forward to kiss her lips.

“You might just come home to me.”

“Can I kiss you again?” Gideon asked. His wife smiled at him, a sad smile, the curve of her lips telling him that he was already gone. A shudder went through his wife’s face. She glitched. Gideon reached out to touch her, and his fingers scratched

against the cold steel of the ship’s hull.

Gideon sighed. The memory had felt so real, so incredibly real. And yet it was, he knew, irrecoverably the past. His wife existed so far away it was as though she never existed at all—only a dream, only a dream. Gideon stretched, shivering in the perpetual cold of the ship. He pressed a switch, and the monitor before him lit up, glowing a ghostly blue amid the smaller lights of the control console.

Outside was nothing but blackness, and Gideon drifted through it. He swiped his finger across the screen, panning the ship’s outer camera through dead space. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Gideon pressed the microphone icon on the screen and cleared his throat. “This is Gideon Ray, occupant of the U.S.S. Bounty,” he said, the cadence of his words carefully measured. “It is stardate 50379.1. I have spotted nothing today.” Gideon pressed the microphone icon to stop the recording. He grunted loudly and slammed his fist on the screen. “I’ve seen nothing today, and I’ll see nothing tomorrow. Nothing but the innards of this ship, and this screen, with this cold that’s seeped into my bones.

There is no Atlantis, no rift. The scientists’ measures were wrong. There’s nothing out here. Nothing....” Gideon buried his face in his hands. “Nothing,” he wept. “Nothing...” Gideon slouched in his seat and stared at the blue glow of the screen. For seven years he had drifted through space, searching for the rift in the universe the scientists said he would find. Throughout all of that solitude and time, he found his only relief in the



few memories he had been allowed to bring with him. Gideon had re-lived the same hundred moments thousands and thousands of times. Some memories were good – building sand castles with his parents, kissing his wife for the first time. Others were necessary – robbing the lab, touching the rift sample that got him into this mess. One memory, though, was heartbreaking—Gideon’s last day on earth, when he and his wife had kissed one another awake.

Gideon, closing his eyes, took the memory stick and plugged it into the slot in his forehead. He would escape the cold ship for a time, escape again into his dreams. It was, he knew, all he could do to keep his sanity.

“Gideon,” his wife told him, rolling her body atop his, beneath the silken sheets. “It’s going to be alright.”

“How do you know?” asked Gideon. “Babe, I don’t want to go. I don’t want to leave you.”

Her hair like a golden waterfall spilled over his face, so that it was just them, just the two of them surrounded by gold.

“I’ll be praying for you, hon,” his wife said. “You know I’ll be praying for you.”

“I don’t want to leave this.” He struggled to maintain his composure, his control. “Why can’t we stay here forever?”

“You want to know why I think it’ll be alright, hon? Yesterday I was sitting on the back porch, praying for you. I prayed and I prayed, and just when I opened my eyes I saw a little rainbow butterfly alight on my leg. And then, just then, I heard your voice. You’d come home at last. It was a sign,

Gideon. I swear it was a sign.”

“You swear it?”

“I do. Just like on our wedding day. I do, I do, I do,” and she began to kiss him all over and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him.

“It’s all over,” whimpered Gideon, opening his eyes and removing the memory stick from his forehead. “It’s all already over.” His wife was a ghost; all that existed for him now was his metal cage, and his mission.

For the ten thousandth time Gideon switched on the control panel to run his scan of the surrounding space. Nothing but blackness, nothing, nothing,—and then Gideon noticed it. Hope settled into him like a feather falling through his body. There, on the screen, as clear as day, was a flash of rainbow. Gideon felt his lips quivering. He knew he was beginning to cry. He tried to stop himself but couldn’t help it. A tiny bright butterfly flapped its wings in the immense emptiness of space. Something broke in Gideon, something hard and hot, something he’d been forging in his long days of solitude. It completely shattered, and Gideon felt the warmth spill through his innards like an embrace. Through the tears, and for the first time in a very long time, a smile broke out on Gideon’s face. It had happened. Gideon had witnessed a miracle. ❖

“BEST WISHES”

by ED AHERN

I get anxious around people. Which is ironic, given that I make my living as a mass marketer. My men friends are kept at social distance, and my few intimate relationships with women have been ship wrecks.

Trips to the supermarket bother me more than a dental appointment. I go at off times and maneuver the aisles as far as possible from the crowd of strangers, avoiding eye contact.

But last Saturday evening the little grocery stocker made me focus. He and his dolly full of cereal boxes blocked my aisle. I was still-stopped and couldn't avoid looking at him. He was over-dressed for the job; his boots expensive leather with high collars and pointed toes, his green slacks a rich wool. His face sloped sharply into his nose, which pointed out at least two inches beyond his eyebrows. He was just tall enough to escape being called a dwarf.

As I shifted my glare into neutral, he looked up at me. “Sorry for the delay, George. I'm done. Here's something for your trouble.” And he pushed a cereal box into my chest. Best Wishes it said in neon-colored clover leaves.

How the hell did he know my name? Reflex made me grab it, and he turned before I could hand it back.

As he pushed the cart away, he talked over his shoulder. “There's an unannounced sale, fifty percent off, and if your wish is selected you win gold coins.”

I thought of just putting it on the shelf, but the shelf was full to bursting. I winced and tossed the cereal into my cart, figuring to give it to the cashier. But I somehow forgot to do so, and the box wound up on my kitchen counter. Waste not, want not I thought, and decided to eat my way through it for the next several breakfasts.

That next morning, I opened the cereal box and found a gold-embossed card.

**Take a Chance
Make a Wish
If you're Lucky
Win lots of Gold**

The explanation told me to go to www.faechance.com, enter a wish, and wait to see if I'd won. There was no fee for entry, and the prize was five gold coins. *When has General Millers ever given away gold coins? Even with good profit margins.*

I shook out a bowlful of multi-colored nuggets shaped like clover, poured milk and ate a spoonful. I was pleasantly surprised. It didn't taste of beet sugar and artificial flavorings. It tasted, somehow, like my first made-from-scratch bowl of warm oatmeal

with molasses and cream. I felt a little buzzed.

My interest, and, yes, my greed, was aroused. After breakfast I went on line to the site. I almost stabbed at the power off button. There smiling slyly at me was a picture of the stocking clerk.

His face looked the same, but somehow sharper featured- all points and angles. Once I got over my shock, I read the simple instructions—name, email address, wish, and e-signature. I paused. But good marketing ideas can often be filched from outré sources, so I continued. *What wish can I plug in? What difference does it make?* I typed in: ‘Make me popular,’ signed, hit enter and got a confirmation. “Thank you, George for your entry.”

I gaped at the screen, reminded that I’d been called by name yesterday. I got dressed and drove back to the supermarket. I quick stepped my way around customers to the cereal aisle and gaped again. There was no Best Wishes cereal, just boxes of something called Crunch-It. I stopped a store employee. Genette her name tag said.

“Where can I find the Best Wishes cereal?”

“Best what? Never heard of it.” She smiled up at me. “But I’ll be glad to help you with whatever else you need. Whatever.”

“Never mind,” I said, spun and left the store.

Once home, I walked straight into my study and fired up the desktop. I reentered the web address and was told that it wasn’t in use but I could buy the domain. I went

back through my browser history, but there was no record of faechance.com. I hustled out to the kitchen to recheck the card, but it and the box of cereal were gone.

I sat down in a kitchen chair and tried to focus. I had bought the cereal, had eaten it, had entered the contest. Hadn’t I? I did some mental math, silently recited a memorized poem—everything seemed to be functional, and I could still almost taste the cereal.

That was Sunday. The next morning, I went to the office and chaired our usual Monday meeting. Twelve people were in the conference room, eight of them women. My cell phone started to vibrate. Several women in the room were discreetly texting me. Once I’d opened up the meeting for discussion I discreetly glanced at my phone.

From Olivia: ‘Admire the way you manage a meeting. So manly.’

From Gretchen: ‘Always appreciate your penetrating direction.’

And others, including a suggestive selfie.

I avoided their glances, finished up the meeting, and retreated to my office.

Olivia followed me in.

“We should do lunch today, George, there’s a lot I’d like to go over with you in a less formal setting.”

I coughed and stutteringly said that we’d have to postpone it, then shooed her out. I am a man of average height, plain looks and spindly physique. I’m well off but certainly not rich, or, outside of the marketing world, well known. I feel painfully awk-

ward with women, and have never had the courage to go onto an internet dating site. Why was I suddenly barraged with female attention?

The Best Wishes contest. Had I somehow been granted that stupid wish?

I called the supermarket manager where I shopped. He and I had a discreet arrangement. I kept him on a little retainer, and he answered my questions about product placements, promotions, and upcoming campaigns.

“Ralph?... George. A question about one of your new items... Best Wishes, it’s a cereal... Really? You’re sure?... I saw it on your shelves Saturday... Ha, ha, ha. My meds are fine, thank you. Must have been over ripe veggies from your produce section... Yeah, thanks, you too.”

The train ride out of Manhattan that afternoon was scarier than the usual unwelcome crowding. Several women who had ignored me for years were giving me the Stare of Appraisal. The one seated next to me was pressing her thigh into mine. I opened my tablet and kept my eyes pointed at it until I got off.

Once home I walked into the kitchen to make a drink. I needed it. But stacked on the granite topped island were five gold coins. And seated on the other side of the island was the grocery stocker, clad in sepia tights. My ass muscles tightened like a virgin in prison. I staggered.

“Hello, George. Sit down, please, we have a lot to talk about.”

I dropped onto a stool. “Who—who the hell are you?”

“Call me Dulcent.”

The shock dizzied me. *Play along.*

“Unusual man’s name.”

“Actually, we’re pretty androgynous. But let’s not digress. You won, which is to say you lost.”

“Hah?”

“Fairy wish fulfillment is always barbed, George. You left too many loose ends in your wish. You’re already fearing it. But there’s a way to keep the women at bay.”

“I didn’t commit to anything.”

“Really? Did you click on the link that provided the contest’s fine details? Don’t answer, I know you didn’t. Did you e sign the document? Yes, you did. Legally and magically binding.”

Dulcent’s yoga pants and shirt shifted color to puce as he talked. I put my hands on the table edge to steady myself. I hate being suckered at my own game. “Why would you bother to do this?”

He smiled broadly. His bright back teeth looked more like incisors than molars. “For millennia, George, we’d been content to lurk in forests and glades and wait for you to get lost. We’d give you the wishes you thought you’d tricked us out of, and get high off of your panic and anguish when you realized you’d been duped.

“But, in addition paving over our homes, your kind has forced us into a critical situation. We have a crisis of belief. Not ours. Yours. You, our customer base, quit believing in us. We decided we needed a charge back to correct this lack of faith.”

“Hah?”

“Please pay attention. We need a mar-

keting program. That's where you come in."

I almost said 'Hah?' again. "Ah. To launch *Best Wishes*."

"Yes. It's my project. Pretty slick, huh? Right now, it's just a concept, but once we start selling cereal the money and converts will roll in."

My mind was churning. He did need me, and selling what wasn't needed to those who could barely buy it was my forte. This project might make me rich.

"You can create gold, why do you need money?"

His expression soured. "Yes, well, about that. The wishes we grant, the gold we concoct, all require a taxing amount of—call it psychic energy. We don't get enough of it any more."

Just then my cell phone hummed with a double-entendre message from a nineteen-year-old administrative assistant.

Dulcent smirked as I turned the phone off. "Your admirers. We need to keep you focused on our problem before you start getting entrapped by all those women."

I pocketed the phone. I needed to make myself needed. "Don't take this the wrong way, but your campaign won't work."

Dulcent's tights morphed into an angry purple.

"It caught you, George, didn't it?"

"Because I wanted to see how its plumbing flushed. It's a clever concept, but there are problems. The brand name isn't catchy, the entry form is bureaucratic, and the gold coin prize is too valuable to be credible."

"That's fairy gold. It'll revert to lead. Oops, I shouldn't have said that."

"So you'll be sued by thousands of dissatisfied contest winners." I glanced at the stack of coins on the island countertop. "My coins will turn into lead as well?"

"Ah, well. Wait" He interlaced his fingers and moved them around each other in a blur. He grimaced as he did it. "There. It's permanent gold now."

The shiny yellow of the five coins had softened into a softer and richer amber color. I picked one off the pile. It had serious heft.

"Okay, about two ounces, say three thousand dollars a coin, fifteen thousand in all, that's an okay retainer. You've got my attention."

Dulcent grinned again. It was more frightening than the grimace.

I resumed. "The cereal tasted pretty good. Can you produce it in volume?"

"I think so. It's an illusion, like the coins. You actually ate moldy nuggets of stale bread."

Something lurched beneath my belly button. "Is that what you eat?"

"Of course not. Mostly field mice and squirrels, with the occasional dead deer."

"What's your vision for this?"

"We're guessing we can handle three lucky winners a month, predicated on selling a hundred thousand boxes of cereal semi-annually. That's as much cash and psychic energy as we think we can reasonably suck out of you all."

"Ah. The devil, Dulcent, is in the details. The life cycle of a cereal is usually

several years. Can you maintain an illusion that long for millions of users and thousands of stores? Somehow insert and maintain yourself in the automated ordering system? The profit margin on brand name cereal runs around seventeen percent. You're a no-name brand, so your so your advertising and overhead costs are negligible—your maximum return would be maybe a buck a box."

Dulcent thought for a second, then snarled. His teeth looked even more unfriendly.

"You're so smart, what would you do?"

It was my turn to pause. "Okay, what you're proposing to do is already illegal and unsanitary. You need to stay on the edge of the system."

"Hah?"

"Stick to boutique grocery chains so you can manage billing and receipts. And small coins, a quarter the size of these. Put something mildly addictive in the cereal."

"It already has special herbs, that's why you got a buzz."

"Excellent. Keep the promotion on the cereal box. If the suck... ah, customer scans the code from ten boxes he gets a chance at a gold coin, and maybe a consolation prize of another box of cereal. Word of mouth gets you new customers and you use the money from the new customers to pay off the old ones and keep the rest of the money. Eventually the scheme falls apart from its own weight, and the gold turns to lead, so you shut down and set up shop somewhere else.

"You'd have to change the name of the

cereal every time you move on, but that's not complicated. Six hundred customers a store, forty or fifty stores, in a few months you've netted out maybe half a million dollars. Probably more, because a lot of customers will enter more than once. You can recoup a lot of mojo for \$500k."

"Some of them will go to the police."

"Who have no way to trace you."

"What about the lack of belief in us fairies?"

"Here's the solution. You'll have the phone numbers and emails of tens of thousands of pre-addicted entrants. Cast a spell for another product, Manly Brownies, maybe. Have them available only through fairy representatives- effectively fey drug dealers. Once they're hooked you can do a reveal of your true nature. Gives you that one on one manipulation you crave."

Dulcent was grinning, drool dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. He interlaced his fingers again and I knew whatever he spelled I wouldn't like.

"What an outrageously good idea. But, George, why do I still need you?"

"Because if you're not careful and thorough with every step you'll be discovered. And humans usually exterminate annoying species."

"Ah." He moved his fingers apart. "So we would have to hire you. What would it take?"

"Money, of course, lots of it. And I need you to refine my wish."

"We don't change wishes."

"You will for me. I need to be interesting and trustworthy but not desirable."

“That’s perverse.”

“Maybe, but it’s how I’m comfortable.”

Dulcent put his fingers together again.

I held up a cautionary index finger.

“Just remember that if you put a barb
in my wish, I’ll be the devil in your details.”



“THE RIGHT QUESTION”

by DUSTIN ANISTON

The trip wasn't bad. Only three hours drive from Spokane Valley since they had raised the speed limits. (Self-driving cars could be trusted at higher speeds than human-driven cars.) The city added almost a half an hour to the drive, Seattle being one of the ten largest cities in America at almost 500,000 people.

Elliot was pretty excited. Not like he would be if this were a vacation from school but excited all the same. He was in sixth grade now and that meant his main class this year was logic. He didn't particularly enjoy the class, but since beginning it he had been coming up with all sorts of questions for the Super Computer.

The S.C. was one of many (5 in the U.S. alone) around the world. They could, of course, take in enormous amounts of data and analyze it from any point of view. More than that though, they were repositories of all the collective information of humanity. They were updated in real-time with such information as demographics (every birth and death as they're recorded for example), economics, all scientific journals and so forth. It also spoke and could be spoken to.

The one Elliot was visiting was in Seattle's new Science Research Center. His father and a group of scientists were doing

research on a faster method of terraforming than was currently used. They were to meet every day for a week, and as the Centre had a plethora of resources available at all times to anybody staying there, the group reserved the whole week and would do a good part of their work while there. Though a good father, he was drowned in his work lately and thought bringing his son might give them some time to talk.

Elliot couldn't understand his father's love for his terraforming research. Who needed more space for people now that overpopulation had been solved? Besides, if terraforming had been any faster, he might not have had—the world might not have had—the best holo-game ever, Degrees of Titan. The name was a reference to the weather on Saturn's moon as well as the multi-faceted game play (everything from races and vehicle battle royales to simulated war) and—the thing that made it the top holo-game 5 years in a row now—the varied patchwork of terraforming stages that players would experience from the safety of their home.

It was late afternoon when they arrived. His father wouldn't begin his work until the following day. Elliot was happy to be getting in to their room now, even though it meant he would have to do his home-

work. He would attend school in holoform.

#

The following night, while his father was working late, he made his way to the large room containing the Super Computer. It was not difficult. There was no supervision since it was believed to be unbreakable by paradox, unlike the first attempts at an S.C.. The room was quite large with only chairs scattered around the edges; the S.C. access was built into the far wall. Once there, he couldn't remember any of the questions he had thought so important from logic class.

He decided to ask it a question he had overheard an older student going on about a couple of weeks ago. He asked, "Could God microwave a burrito so hot that he himself couldn't eat it?" The S.C. asked for a definition of God.

He knew the general idea, but he also remembered the older student using the word omnipotent a lot. He knew what that meant: All-Powerful.

He said, "God is someone who is omnipotent."

The S.C. responded with "That is illogical."

"I don't think that's supposed to matter," he said. "God is supposed to be beyond logic."

The computer was silent for a couple seconds, then "God could microwave a burrito so hot that he couldn't eat it."

Elliot thought he had the computer. "Ha, but then he couldn't eat it!"

"Incorrect. God could eat the burrito."

"But that makes no sense!"

"God is beyond logic."

Before he left, he threw in "What is the meaning of life?" just for the heck of it. This time the computer's silence didn't end, and Elliot went back to the room they were staying in.

His father wasn't back from his day's work yet so he decided to call his sister in Spokane and tell her about it before starting up Degrees of Titan. If she weren't there living at a dorm, studying to be a doctor, she would have come along too. She was 19 and was therefore only in her third year at the college, but they would allow her to live at home in Spokane Valley after this year. He figured she might know why the computer had no answer.

He sent her an invite on his phone and waited. When he had asked an English teacher about the word "phone" he was told it referred to the ability to send phonetic sounds. "Funny," he thought, "how the name had stuck after all the things it could do now." A few seconds later her holo-image appeared in front of him.

He described the conversation about the burrito so she would understand that the computer seemed to be working just fine. Then he told her how it hadn't responded at all when he asked about the meaning of life, not even after repeating it twice.

She laughed it off. "The computer's fine, it just doesn't have an answer. None of the S.C.s can answer questions like that. The really important ones, go figure."

Nonetheless, she suggested he try the

word “purpose” instead of “meaning” since maybe “meaning” was too open-ended.

#

The following day Elliot was “in” class. This too was achieved with simple holo-grams. Elliot’s holo-image would appear in the back of the classroom at a specially designed desk-like Emitter. In Elliot’s room at the Center were only a holo-image of his teacher and a copy of the blackboard on a specified wall. He could hear the other students of course, just as they could hear him. The idea was never brought to the fullest form, that of all students attending in holo-form, since it made it difficult for the teachers to see the students’ work and easier for the students to cheat.

Elliot wouldn’t sink to the level of installing an avatar mod to his phone, one that would look like it was listening and taking notes so that all he had to do was respond when addressed. But he did “hack” it just enough so his image appeared in proper school attire, while he was comfortable in jeans and t-shirt.

He had tried to ask the S.C. about the “purpose” of life earlier in the morning, before anyone else got there, but he was too late. His father, eager to get to work on developing faster terraforming techniques, was already there with some colleagues. Elliot was beginning to lose interest in the S.C. It was, after all, just a whim question.

Logic class was almost over now, and Elliot took down the homework written on the wall. It was a list of questions such as “How deep does a well go?” and “Where in Europe was paper invented?” He was to

come up with analogies for each question that demonstrated its faulty nature. “A good opportunity,” he thought, “for the S.C. to do my homework.”

#

Back in the room with the S.C. that night, he asked it to demonstrate the faults of each question through analogy, and the computer was indeed working fine. In response to the question about the depth of a well, he got “How long is a piece of string?” To the question about the invention of paper in Europe, he got “Where on a rabbit are the wings located?”

He didn’t understand. Perhaps he might as well have used an avatar in class, since he didn’t seem to have paid any attention anyway. But he got analogies for every one of them and wrote them all down.

Before leaving, he asked it about the purpose of life and again got no response. But a thought occurred to him. “Why not ask it for a demonstration of the faults in those questions?” He did so and the responses, as he assumed, did not enlighten him.

When given the question about the “meaning” of life, the analogy the S.C. gave was “Decipher the galaxy.” The analogy for the question of the “purpose” of life was “What was the color of your third thought Last Tuesday?”

He was no longer interested in the Super Computer and now spent his free time at the Center playing Degrees of Titan.

#

On the last night to be spent there, his

sister called. She hadn't gotten an update on the answer to the "purpose" of life. There was no answer, but when he told her about the analogies, she thought there might be something there and asked him if he would go back once more before they started home.

It was already late enough that the S.C. might be available, so he went right away to get it over with. Once there, he phoned her back up so her hologram could talk to it directly.

"Define good" she said first; she received a long list of synonyms and decided to alter the question.

"What is 'morally good'?"

"That which progresses humanity or limits non-progressive, negative perceptions."

"That must've been programmed into it" she told Elliot. To the computer, "Ok then, what is progress for humanity?"

"That which increases good or decreases bad."

This was not proceeding as she had hoped. She could only think of one more way to ask 'the question' and she didn't see how the answer could be useful to anyone. But she asked anyway, "What is the right thing for humanity to do as a whole?"

The computer took no time to reply with "To find out what is right for humanity do to as a whole."

"Well fine, but how do we do that?"

"Humans have five senses, infinite means of recording information, and a decent reasoning ability."

Elliot asked his sister, "Is it confused

this time?"

"No, of course not. It was just too simple for us. The galaxy has no cypher to be broken, or at least not one that we know of, just like we have no way of knowing if there's some hidden 'meaning' to life. At least not yet.

"And your third thought last Tuesday may or may not have involved a color but there would be no way of knowing at present. Just like there's no way of knowing at present of life exists for a purpose, or just as an effect to a cause.

"And that last bit is just this; if you're not sure what the right thing to do is, then the right thing is to find out what the right thing to do is. For humanity in general right now that means learning. And growing and discovering so we can learn some more."

#

Elliot thought about the conversation with the S.C. frequently after that. He no longer thought his father's job was stupid. He even became interested himself in better terraforming. He and his father would spend long nights discussing the possibilities of discovery if human life could be sustained farther and farther out. He might even be a leading figure in the science himself one day like his dad. ❖

“FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode five of our serialized short novel *Freedom*. In this story, alien beings feed and survive off the freedoms of humans, who can only combat them by restricting their own rights, even to the point of slavery. See episodes one through four in our 2020 issues issues to catch up and...enjoy....

Episode 5

Year after year I dedicated myself to finding the precious material, without any hope, this was a very arduous task, but thanks to the thirst I had to find it, I was able to force a little more those who had enslaved by will to fulfill their destiny. Years passed and I could see how my loved ones died, the people closest to me, and of course, my parents, who could not resist the work, and when I decided to give them rest, fate had already decided, first it was my father, who would not survive because she had a serious illness that managed to reduce it to its smallest expression, my mother and I were deeply affected, she was sad for a long time, for this reason I returned the medallion, I did not want to leave her alone, so I tried to keep it very close and as animated as possible, but one day I had to leave, with the medallion, to compare it with a material that had been

found, by the time I returned, my mother was about to give herself to the aliens, "forgive me" was the only thing he managed to say while the alien drained his entire existence, I saw her fall to the ground, die in front of me and since nothing tied me to that home anymore, I decided to lead the expedition by myself, However, many years passed and I never got a result, I crossed seas and continents, until I reached a jungle in the depths of South America. There, in front of a sacred and mysterious temple, I swore to return as many times as necessary to find this material that would save the earth, I would never rest, at least not my spirit...

The golden age, the age of fulfillment.

Once again I had that strange dream, I was in a jungle, looking for something that was very valuable for humanity, every time I had that "hero" dream I managed to wake up later than I needed, I would get retarded to work again, and this my master would not like anything, sometimes I wonder what the world would be like if we could be free, I mean completely free, but all this is the fault of our undesirable neighbors, who have sabotaged us since the earth has memory, or so except this is what they like to say in the news, the truth was not there when

everything started, so I guess everything is true.

There was a time when he believed that everything was an invention of the big corporations to perpetuate slavery, since having workers was not very profitable, however, the history books tell that during the time when it was considered to free the people of slavery, the aliens decided that sabotage that temporary happiness, the attacks added more and more fatal victims, so they made some kind of deal where nobody wanted to be free for fear of being taken to the unknown place. I understand your reasons, but if right now they offered me freedom, even with the risks that this would imply, I always felt that I could achieve much more in life, I work for a company that is dedicated to organizing expedition trips, I still do not understand, well what are we looking for?

I climbed quickly in the company, today I have an important position, but unlike the others who work 12 hours, I always stay a little longer, I think it is the natural order of life in this world. I have always considered myself a dedicated worker, but I have always wanted to be much more, to be the one who controls a large mass of workers.

I think the industry has grown a lot thanks to the practically free labor that has been devoted to the evolution of all companies. The company where I work is called Bradley Expeditions, if you take a first look at the company, you think it might be a travel agency or something, and they do travel, but not for vacation purposes, but

rather with scientific intentions. , they investigate the composition of different materials, not to mention that all, many of these are sold, or used for the manufacture of various objects, so we are also a factory of products, we practically do everything, but what I have never understood is that if we have the capacity to make objects for a long time with the material that we currently have, why do we keep organizing expeditions? All this morning meditation has given me a bit of hunger, but it is not yet time to eat, and the truth is still my stomach does not hurt I get out of bed quickly, I have to go to the office, there are new expeditions to organize and my boss offers a full reduction of pay if someone in my position does not show up to work, I keep dreaming of a world free of these aliens, worse for now I am content not to be the last link in the chain, although my imagination always took me to the expeditions, I think the conditions there would be even more precarious, and I did not want to suffer more than what I suffered daily, it is not easy deal with the wishes of the leaders of the company, the truth is quite complicated to execute the orders immediately, as they liked.

The company - Expeditions Bradley - was directed by two brothers, who always complained about their work and that the only thing that their parents and grandparents had inherited was an almost nil capacity to follow their desires, nevertheless they took care of it to be fulfilled the dream of Mr. Jacob Bradley, founder of the company, because if they refused, they would end up

locked in total isolation until the day of their deaths, it was practically the only condition that ensured that travel continued to be planned, that and the great fortune that they had always generated; and contrary to what many would think, having a lot of money did not make you vulnerable to the attack of aliens, ambition was considered a kind of prison, kept you prisoner, your thoughts were only focused on one thing, had no time or strength to look at nothing else, so they were pretty sure in my opinion.

Things did not sound encouraging at all that morning, rumors spread about that various families had been attacked by aliens, they no longer considered the way many were living as an option where their freedom was reduced, and that Unlike many, those who had a little more free will were the most wanted dams by these creatures, and it was quite logical, all looked for ways to protect themselves, rededicating their freedoms and changing their lifestyle, but very few took tell what this meant for the rest. Things were out of control, there were so many crazy options on the table, rumors of families that preferred to surrender to the aliens toured the entire city, apparently we, in an attempt to escape these beings, we became our own enemies, this it seemed terrifying, it was as if we had no escape, there were only three options valid for all, live as a slave and reduce freedoms to the fullest, surrender to the will of these undesirable creatures or commit suicide to escape both aforementioned destinies.

I managed to arrive on time, I was

already in the office, I had to organize an expedition, but for the first time nobody told me the destination, I had to decide, after I was given a long report, apparently one of the Bradley brothers, Andrew, it was not quite right (Andrew was the one who organized the expeditions with me), apparently he was very ill and indisposed to work this morning, for which the responsibility became completely mine, I was never revealed many details of the expeditions, without However, that day he would play a more important role than he would believe.

I had already become a trusted employee, so I devoted myself to reading the report described as "top secret", detailing certain places to which the former Bradley men traveled, and also a detailed description of a material was observed vital for "the continuity of the human species", I continued reading until the end, without understanding much, nevertheless I had to concentrate on the places that we had already crossed out of the map in order to find new directions. In the document they talked about somewhere in South America, a rather hidden corner where someone had found a hint of the material they were looking for, the truth seemed to me a fiction story, an incredible document to justify a trip of this magnitude, an exaggeration, Worse, I was not there to make sense of the trip, but to chart the course that the workers of the company would have to follow this time.

I started putting together the travel plan, I looked at the map and the intuition, along with other indications, took me

to a place where these people would surely have to go, I kept completing the list of everything that was needed to get there, when the phone I got out of my thoughts, it was Andrew, who had come to the building and wanted to talk to me, Andrew and I had such a good relationship that he always told me that he considered me a brother, and even though he asked me to work many more hours I had been a despotic boss with me, I think the link we developed led us to develop a quite functional work dynamic, and anyway I did not have much to do at home.

My parents had abandoned me in an orphanage when I was just two years old, apparently it was one of the conditions that their protector (that's how they called the people who advised on the measures that should be taken to protect themselves from the aliens) had given them the idea of abandoning me, because my mother was being persecuted and thus they were free to enjoy the love of her only son, this issue seemed very sad to me when it was told to me by the people who raised me, that is to say, I always felt that there were other options to overcome the obstacles that freedom or lack of it could have, however the decision had been made, and they were out of the picture for a long time. The nights when I was most tired at home were those where I dreamed about her, I dreamed that she gave me an object, that she put it in my hands and told me that she was going to give me something of value, I suppose the need to have my parents made me create fictitious images about the life I had before

entering the orphanage, and if it was real, I assume that she had to keep the object, because you have to have a lot of courage to accept leaving your child in the hands of strangers, at such a vulnerable age, where the aliens would be able to take advantage of the innocence of the little ones to take them away and end their lives, I do not judge them for that, I still have a good life.

Andrew received me with the typical courtesy of him, and he asked me to lock the door, "before starting this meeting I want you to promise me that whatever you listen to here, you will never be able to divulge it, even if your life depended on it's important that you understand this, Peter. I'm entrusting my life to you, and this is the first time I tell anyone who does not belong to the family, promise it, Peter ", "Of course I promise, something very serious is happening, right? But do not tell me this with that tone of voice "I replied to a very worried Mr. Bradley. I had never seen him so discreet, direct and frightened, his face was horrible, surely his health had worsened, I ignored that part, but Andrew apparently read my mind.

"My health is more delicate every time, and you know that the expeditions must be done in my company or my brother's, for years we have been reviewing all the corners of the earth to find materials for our company, but this has been a facade, this company has been built and maintained based on lies, it is important that you understand what is happening, because there are only two people that I trust in this world, in my brother and in you; for this reason this

expedition must lead it personally, I know you chose a destination quite obvious, and I cannot move there, "he looked really scared, as if this expedition was much more important than the others, so I decided to shut up and listen , he kept giving me the reasons why he should go personally, he understood that he wanted to give me a great responsibility, he had been his right hand for a long time, but that expression disturbed me a little.

That night I focused on packing all the things necessary for my new expedition, or rather, for my first expedition, I knew exactly what to pack, as it was not the first one I planned, however I think I would have to carry a little more value I used to have, I had never left the continent, it was an adventure and I was excited, in addition, Andrew asked me to be in the office a few hours before, apparently he wanted to reveal the final details of the expedition, I agreed with pleasure, and once I had packed everything, I immediately went to bed. That night I dreamed again with my mother, the same dream of always, nevertheless in my mind was present the amount of value that it would need to undertake the trip. so this time the dream took an unexpected turn, my mother handed me the object, I put it in my hands, but I managed to open them before the dream ended, my hands contained a very thin and long chain, and this had in turn a pendant, green, very beautiful, she told me to keep it hidden, to protect me, I squeezed it tight and I woke up from that dream, I was a little agitated, but less nervous, it was time to

go to the office, someone He came for me and took me directly to the Bradley Expeditions building.

When I got there I met Andrew, who again with suspense invited me to come to his office, we talked a little about the plan we would follow once we were in the jungle, the details seemed to be to his liking, so we did not have to go over them for a long time. What happened next was totally unexpected, Andrew got up from his chair and began to circle around the room. He took out a small box and told me that its content was very important "had been his family for several generations, and was the key to everything that was happening, he said that in the box, he had the power to keep the creatures away In a successful and permanent way, at first I thought it was a kind of joke, but I could see how his face turned dark and dark, I could see that his expression was quite serious. He put the box in front of me, and to my surprise he took out a medallion, and it was identical to the dream he had had that night, it was the same medallion that my mother gave me in that repetitive dream. Maybe my destiny was to connect with this, because I had never seen it, what possibilities existed that I could guess the shape and color of an object that did not exist for me but in my dreams? Or in the most recent at least.

I was still impressed by having foreseen in my dream the object that was before my eyes, however I did not understand why this mysterious object was able to drive away the creatures and it was also the key to be able to solve all the mystery of the hun-

gry aliens of freedom. Those thoughts I would leave for later, since at that moment Mr. Bradley was telling me a story.

"They say he started with Jacob Bradley, they say that long before his parents died, he was able to repel these creatures just by showing this little stone, it's still a mystery why these creatures do not resist the presence of this material, however from that moment the family has been dedicated to the unceasing search for it, with the purpose of making weapons or amulets that keep us out of reach of the aliens. We have devoted our lives to this, and we will continue doing it, but everything will be in vain if someone discovers that there is a tangible way to prevent these beings from attacking you, imagine what all those who knew would be able to do, very few would survive, and society would become a complete chaos, this secret has been in my family for a couple of centuries. This expedition gives me a good feeling; it was the place where Jacob swore to defend humanity. We had not visited before because we believed that this is a story and nothing more, a story to maintain the hope of all humanity, however I think I made a mistake, days ago, in the library of the city, my team of researchers, rather I, fortunately, found one of the diaries of some people, who were involved in the expeditions of Jacob, this one mentioned that he had a necklace that gave him power; He had never been attacked, so he thought it was a kind of amulet, although he never asked. "

Andrew's words had a rather dramatic charge, that is, if there was an indication in

the documents of Jacob Bradley's expedition to South America and that he had not been attacked by any creature while others did, perhaps if there was something true in All this. The trip was moving me more and more. Deep down I always believed myself an adventurer who had been born in a wrong time in history, under conditions that are unflattering for all human beings, yet I was willing to continue with my valuable life and be the best in everything toward.

He told me that I had to look at the material thoroughly to have an idea of what I was looking for, I should record every detail, because he could not separate from the object, he felt in constant danger, since he was the freest brother of the two, He said that he had to tell a different story to the men he would take with me, and I understood what he meant, it was a secret that he had revealed to me, for that reason he could not tell anyone what was happening in that office, in the world, I had to hide that great truth of all to maintain a world order. I believed in his cause, every second he increased his conviction about finding the material, I decided to ask him for all the references regarding the expedition of Jacob and also the material, it was important that I did not miss any detail, I had to know everything Regarding the medallion, and while the story was much older, we would be closer to helping all of humanity, an objective that we had always pursued.

The material of the pendant looked solid like a metal, but gleaming like a pre-

cious stone, or perhaps like a shiny glass, its aquamarine color was very similar to that of my eyes, for this reason it would be much easier to remember the characteristics of the material, the Search would start in a place that was quite significant for Andrew's family, and I wanted to achieve this, I wanted it more than anything, I wanted to be very useful for society, and I was, only I did not know it until today. I asked if I could choose my team, there were workers that I knew had an enviable mental agility, others had great ability to travel different terrains, while others had a great sur-

vival instinct, I chose the best in their area, I did not want to fail with this, everything had to go perfectly. In a couple of hours I was already aboard one of the company's planes, flying to South America, where another vehicle awaited us that would allow us to enter the Amazon jungle and find that place that Jacob Bradley related, who was the first to discover what this said caused in the creatures, only God knows if we would succeed, but we were willing to try everything that was within our reach. ❖

END TRANSMISSION