

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 5 Number 8

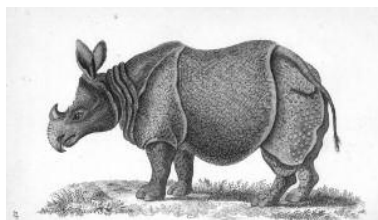
Page 1 – COMPATABILITY by K. A. Williams. Williams writes, “I have been published in various print and online magazines including The Creativity Webzine, Calliope, Nuthouse, Black Petals, and The Rockford Review where I won the Editor's Choice Award for prose in 2009.”

Page 2 – DARKNESS INTO LIGHT by J. R. Gershen-Siegel. Ms Gershen-Siegel writes, “I’m a Lambda Literary Award nominee (2014, Untrustworthy, under SF/F/Horror <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/current-submissions/>), and I won the 2013 Riverdale Avenue Books NaNoWriMo award. My work is published by Riverdale Avenue Books, Hydra Productions, JayHenge Publishing, and Writers’ Colony Press.”

Page 7 – ALL KINDS by Marina Barakatt. Ms Barakatt is a West Coast native living in Washington, DC. She loves writing anything, from sci-fi to creative non-fiction to romance, often drawing inspiration from the frequent travel required by her day job. When she’s not writing, you can find her hosting bar trivia, baking something involving peaches, or bothering her extremely patient dog, Daisy. You can read more of her work at [marinabarakatt.com](http://marinabarakatt.com) and find pictures of Daisy at [twitter.com/marinabarakatt](https://twitter.com/marinabarakatt).

Page 16 – GLASS BICYCLES by Judson Blake. A New York actor, director, and emerging fiction writer, Judson Blake, has been published internationally in many journals, including: *Whistling Shade*, *Ariel Chart*, *Adelaide*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Lamplit Underground*, *Red Fez*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Bewildering Stories*, *CC&D Magazine*, *The Literary Yard*, and *Freedom Fiction Periodical*. Two of his stories were selected for the 2019 *American Emerging Writers Series*, and his full-length play, *Perversion*, ran for five weeks in the West Village.

Page 27 – 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!”



# “COMPATABILITY”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

“I’m getting cloned in the morning,” Jared said.

I sprayed my mouthful of drink at him and coughed. “What?!”

He wiped his face with a napkin. “Cloned. You know I’m in love with both you and your twin and I can’t decide between you.”

I knew that and was irritated that he’d never chosen me over her and had dated us both for months.

A silver robot with six appendages cleaned the table next to ours. After it swept everything into its cylindrical body and rolled off, I got a clear view of the table on the other side. My twin Darla sat there with a very handsome man.

Jared was sitting with his back to them and talking about double wedding plans; I was only half-listening “... outside in a gazebo or inside in a church, whatever we all agree on. You and Darla can wear traditional white or - “

I interrupted, “I hope you didn’t pay for the cloning procedure in advance, Darla might have other plans.” I pointed toward their table.

He turned to look, choked on a mouthful of food, and knocked over his water. The attentive android waiter immediately brought him another glass of

water, wiped the table, and removed the glass. “She’s with another man,” Jared sputtered.

“Yes.” I was envious. “And she’s enjoying herself.”

They had left their table and were now dancing to disco music, colored lights on the floor flashing in time with the beat.

Jared didn’t dance and he didn’t like disco music either. “Can you believe that? Don’t they look ridiculous? I still can’t understand why you wanted to come here; this music is awful and it’s over a hundred years old.”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I turned my head. “Can I have this dance?” asked the man who was either a twin or clone of the man now dancing with Darla.

“Yes.” Delighted, I jumped up.

“Hey! Wait! Carla! What are you doing?” Jared’s face wore an expression of utter disbelief.

“I’m going to have some fun, something you don’t seem to know how to do. The wedding is off, Jared.”

We joined Darla and her man on the dance floor. Maybe there would be a double wedding someday - just not with Jared. ❖

# “DARKNESS INTO LIGHT”

by J. R. GERSHEN-SIEGEL

“Darkness into light,” the worker said to Susan.

“Darkness into light,” she replied reflexively. Every government-mandated statement was so common that Susan didn’t even think about them anymore. She walked into her office at the Smith Hospital, the lights turning on in obedience to her movements. “New files,” she commanded, and a blank wall was filled with a grid of names and faces and identification numbers. There were dozens of people in Smith County in Smith State who were all expecting children, and the projection on the wall told the tale. She glanced at the faces briefly. Nearly all of them were already the correct, uniform shade and shape, dimensions perfectly aligned and proportioned as per the law. A pair of faces stood out, darker than the others by a few shades.

Susan shook her head, frowning. That was not supposed to be possible anymore. She tapped on the projection, her finger a millimeter or so from the actual wall, and a signal instantly transmitted from her finger to the record and then the communications system in her office, and finally to the receptive communications system located in the couple’s dwelling, in Smithburb. “Come in today,” she commanded, without

so much as offering a greeting.

A female voice, sounding a little defeated, replied, “In one hour.” And then the line was cut and Susan returned to her task.

Every other couple was of the correct shade. Their names were all perfect – there were Joneses and Millers and Robertsons, with first names of Ann or Todd or John or Cindy, all properly approved by the government. With the limitations on names, perfect matches often repeated, and so there was more than one couple named Edward and Harriet Bell, and so one had the number 71 attached to it while the other couple was designated as 38. Therefore, Susan knew there were at least 71 such couples in the states, and maybe even more. Given the fact that two such couples were assigned to have their children in the same Smithburb hospital, it was a fair assumption to extrapolate the data. Maybe there were Edward and Harriet Bell couples in Davis State, North State, Young State, or any of the others. She shook her head; nobody paid her to draw conclusions or extrapolate or even be curious about anything other than getting infants started on the path to the good life in the states. Darkness into light, indeed.

She still had some time, so she left her

office and walked to the observation area for the first conditioning room for newborns. Susan peeked through the window at the tiny faces, all uniform and utterly perfect. The day's births were all in their pink or blue bassinets in neat and orderly rows. The babies were all asleep, so she knew they had been tranquilized already. A technician waved at her from behind his glassed-in booth. He then turned a dial and the infants in the conditioning room were bombarded with skin-altering radiation, evening out their color to a good and uniform peachy orangey pink. A few seemed to need extra treatments, so the technician and a helper moved some of the bassinets out and switched a few around in order to complete their task and then the technician and his helper retreated and the radiation was applied once more.

Susan would have continued to watch, but she heard her name on the hospital's communications system. It had already been an hour? She could have sworn that time was shorter than normal. There never seemed to be enough time for anything anymore. But the clocks belonged to the government and so, by definition, they had to be right.

When she got back to her office, there was a couple inside, still bundled against the winter's chill. Or at least that was, most likely, the pretext, although they did brush snow off each other's shoulders. As Susan sat down at her desk and watched the couple unwind scarves and remove hats and gloves, she greeted them. "Darkness into light." And then she realized her records

had been tampered with. These people weren't a few shades darker than the designated norm. Instead, they were a lot darker.

"We need full confidentiality," the man said, as he helped his rather pregnant wife with the last of her scarves.

"I can't guarantee that," Susan admitted. "However, this room is somewhat secure. Tell me, how did you ...?" She gestured in the general direction of the couple's skin. "This is not supposed to be possible anymore. You should have been found out at your places of employment immediately."

"I am a writer," the man said, "and my wife here is an artist. We do not have to go to places of employment."

"Then what about the streets of Smithburb? Or anywhere else, for that matter?" asked Susan. Even if the couple had a reasonable explanation, and even if they were exceptionally clever, how could they have fooled all of the street cameras, all of their curious and loyal neighbors, and any physicians or teachers or anyone else they had ever met in their entire lives?

"I think," the wife said, and her voice had a bit of a forbidden accent which hinted at tropical islands, "that this meeting is about our baby and not about us. Let us stay focused."

"All right," Susan replied. "But the authorities will be most interested in your methods all the same. Still, let's start with your names. My records must be wrong."

"No, they are correct," the husband replied. "I am Philip Dominguez, and this is my wife, Lakeisha Carter Dominguez."

“All of that is wrong,” Susan said. “You must have approved names. Here,” she said, tapping at a flat panel on her desk. The desk’s top changed from the look of wood to that of a list, readable from any orientation. “Let’s start with surnames. We can forget about your maiden name but the married name has got to go. The closest approved names to your original one are Davis and Dawson. Pick whichever one you want.”

The Dominguezes looked at each other skeptically. “What if we refuse?” he asked.

“You can’t,” Susan said. “You must pick one, or I shall pick one for you.”

“Maybe Dawson,” Lakeisha whispered. Her husband nodded, his face grim. “I hate this,” she added.

“Everyone else changed their names and their shades when all three of us were small children,” Susan reminded them as she took notes on a small tablet computer. “If your parents had taken care of this then, I am sure you wouldn’t have noticed. And they would have done something about your skin coloring as well. Now here,” she tapped again on her desk top, and a new list appeared, “let’s work on first names. Blue list for you, Mr. Dawson, and pink for you, Mrs. Dawson.”

“Of course,” Mr. Dawson muttered. He scanned the list with his eyes. “What’s wrong with my first name?”

“It’s not on the list,” Susan explained. “Honestly, you should know this by now. I can give you Paul or Peter if you don’t want to change any monogramming. Or you could go in a different direction. How

about Dennis or Andrew?”

“Why is there a Davis surname but no David first name?” he asked.

“Unapproved religion,” Susan snorted. “And you, Mrs. Dawson? I can interest you in Louise or Laura. Laura is close; you could get used to it in no time.”

Lakeisha sighed. “And our baby? What will she have to get used to?”

“She?” asked Susan, who looked at them quizzically. “My records say you’re having a boy.”

“Our own doctor didn’t even tell us that,” Philip said. “I’ll go with Paul, I guess.”

“Who is your doctor?” Susan asked. That would be excellent information for the authorities. The Dawsons looked at each other. “I can keep quiet about this late name change,” Susan offered, “so long as you tell me the doctor’s name, all right? Will that suit you?”

“Bennett; his name is Alfred Bennett,” Paul reported.

“Another pair of illegal names. That’s rather concerning,” Susan said as she took more notes on her tablet. “And you, Mrs. Dawson?”

“Laura, I guess.”

“Excellent,” Susan praised as she noted the changes. “You will be the Paul and Laura Dawson couple number 62. And your son?”

“Do we have to decide now?” asked Paul.

“You can wait a little longer,” Susan said. “But you will need to undergo radiation conditioning. We’ll put you under,

naturally. However, Laura here will not be able to receive conditioning until she gives birth. We'll hold a room for her as she can no longer be seen in public. The cost will be charged to you, of course. States credit?"

"We don't use it," Paul admitted.

"How is that even possible?" Susan asked, raising an eyebrow skeptically. "There's no other way to buy food or manufactured goods, you know."

"We, we manage," Laura replied, glancing at her husband and holding her belly.

"I can take one-third off the price of the room if you tell me how you have been surviving without states credit," Susan offered.

"We can't tell you that," Paul said. "I won't betray the others for thirty pieces of silver."

"This is states credit; it's not silver," Susan replied, oblivious. "Here, I can make it one-half. Mr. Dawson, you have got to admit, this is a rather tempting offer unless, of course, you want to be in debt to Smith State for the rest of your life."

"Do I have to be in the hospital for the next few months? I feel fine."

"That's not the point. You simply cannot be seen in public any longer. Mr. Dawson, don't you want Laura and your son to have the best possible life? It won't be a good one if your son starts it off in debt to Smith State." Susan tapped on her tablet and then on the desk again. "Here. Two-thirds off. You will have to agree that this is an exceptionally generous offer. Your wife and son will receive the best care we can provide, and you will enjoy radiation

conditioning with full anesthesia and our greatest skill to minimize discomfort and complications. I cannot offer you anything better than this, and I know that no one at any of the other hospitals, either in Smith State or River State or Mountain State can. Or," she threatened, "I could simply go directly to the authorities and implicate you both for withholding information and supporting this sort of underground lifestyle. It's your choice, Mr. and Mrs. Dawson. Tell me how it's going to be."

The Dawsons glanced at each other. "We'll take your offer," Paul said. "Thank you; we know you've been very generous."

"That's very wise of you," Susan praised. "Now, I have meetings to go to, and I need to get Laura here set up in the isolation room and make the arrangements for your radiation conditioning."

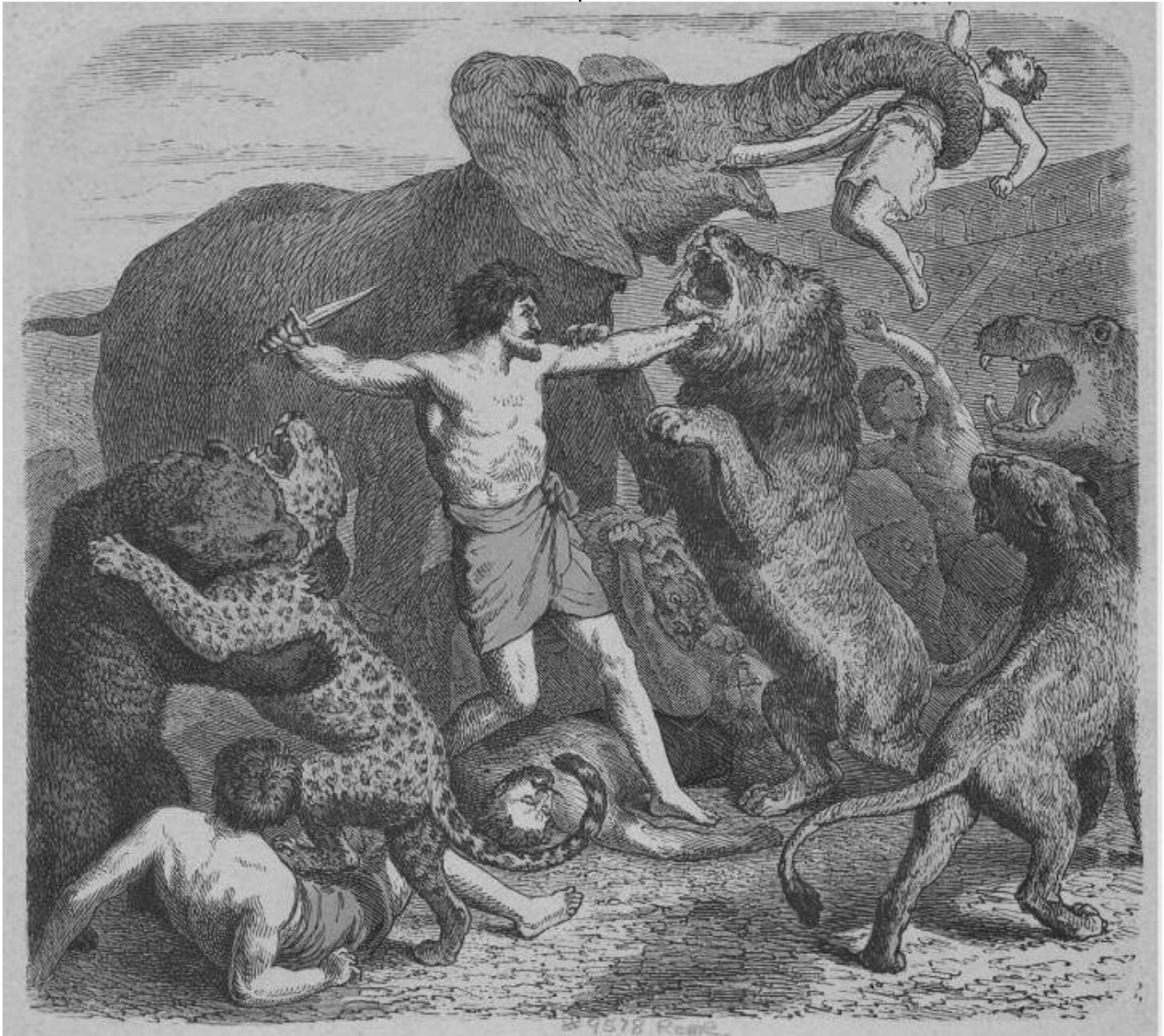
"Can we go home and pack a bag or two?" asked Laura. "I don't have anything with me."

"Yes, of course," Susan smiled. "But keep in mind, the authorities know about your upcoming stay and the treatments." She nodded at her tablet. "So we will be expecting you both in three hours. Don't be late."

"Understood," Paul said, getting up. Laura took his hand as she, too, stood up. "We will do as we have agreed."

"And don't forget to provide the names of the others in your circle," Susan reminded them as the Dawsons bundled themselves up again. Once they were thoroughly wrapped up, she smiled at them. "Darkness into light!"

As she watched them leave, Susan absently scratched at her chin, feeling the slightest bit of stubble. She shook her head, realizing she would need another round of radiation conditioning and, as she watched the snow fall, harkened back to a time when she was a very small child named Steven. ❖



# “ALL KINDS”

by MARINA BARAKATT

A light drizzle hit Eleanor’s face as she rounded the final corner. She lengthened her stride and brought her purse up over her head in a futile attempt to protect her curls. Head down, she squinted through the rain and stopped just short of slamming into a slight figure who lightly sidestepped her and continued down the sidewalk. Her arms fell to her side as she watched the man, clad in a red tank top and ladybug wings, turn lazily in circles, arms out in the style of a toddler playing airplane. He was soon enveloped into the mist.

“Huh,” she said, her eyes fixed on the empty street, as she dug through her purse for her wallet.

“All kinds tonight,” the bouncer said. He glanced at her ID and waved her in.

Through the patio and into the bar, small groups of people clustered around tables dotted with hookahs that wafted smoke across the room. Eleanor moved deeper into the room, inhaling its usual scent of sweet rose, strawberry, and mint tobacco. She pulled out her phone - one new message, from Anna.

*Upstairs, outside.*

Eleanor looked up from her phone and stepped out of the way to avoid colliding with several girls in glittery tulle skirts

floating down the stairs. She paused to let her eyes follow them, transfixed by the colors and feeling of pure happiness that washed over the room in their wake. Her eyes lingered on the last girl, whose face was turned back in quarter profile; her skin flashed from brown to gold. Eleanor craned her neck for another glance, but the front door closed behind them. *Maybe they’re going to a costume party*, she thought as she hurried up the stairs to the second floor. *I wonder where she got that highlighter.*

Eleanor pushed through the upstairs bar area and onto the covered back porch. She found her friends sitting next to a heat lamp, the tall table already covered with small glasses.

“Sorry guys,” she said, slinging her purse over the back of a chair, “the Red Line’s fucked up again.” Sympathetic nods from around the table. “Hey did you see those girls in the glitter and skirts? I just passed them on my way in.”

Anna nodded, her manicured eyebrows rising with the glass she tipped all the way back and then thunked down on the table. “Yes! They looked so cool! But they were speaking a language we couldn’t figure out, Pablo thinks it was Serbian for some reason.”

Pablo rolled his eyes and unrolled his



long limbs to stand up from the stool. “You need to catch up, my dear. As the richest bitch here – ‘he punctuated each word with a finger jab at his companions’ - allow me.”

Eleanor watched him approach the bar, well into the strut that presented after his third drink. He slipped past the few people waiting and turned his smile on the bartender, curling himself around the edge of the bar. Eleanor turned back to Anna, eager to discuss the fairy girls, as she realized she had named them in her head. “Did you see their makeup? One of them had this gold highlighter or something, I want to find it.”

Anna raised her eyebrows again, thumped her drink down again. “Okay! I didn’t notice, but if that’s what gets you into highlighter, let’s go shopping tomorrow. I’ll find it for you.” She plucked a cigarette from the pack in the middle of the table and put it between her lips without disturbing her red lipstick, a motion perfected over years of practice, as Pablo made his way back to the table. His brow furrowed in concentration as he balanced three pink concoctions.

“Is it darker than usual in here tonight? I feel like I can barely see anything,” he said.

Eleanor looked around. Other than the neighboring alley, the only light came from the heat lamps and strings of white lights wound around the deck railing, blurring and softening edges. “I think it’s pretty normal, but-”

Pablo pushed a small glass into her hand. “Bottoms up!” Bottoms went up.

Eleanor watched her friends fish maraschino cherries out of the bottoms of their glasses for several seconds. “Okay, I got next round,” she said.

She squeezed in between two tall figures at the bar, on tiptoes on the foot rail to make herself visible as the bartender made her way over.

“Three more of whatever he got, and a gin martini, please, lots of olives,” Eleanor said. She glanced around as the bartender bent to retrieve glasses. Her eyes only got as far as the man next to her. He stood head and shoulders above her, somehow simultaneously tall, wide, solid, and delicate. Her eyes didn’t arrive at his face, though, because she was immediately transfixed by his white vest the texture and size of a long shag rug. Each pile was as long as her index finger, of an indiscernible fabric, and glowed bright white. She stared at it, her fingers twitching.

“You want to touch it?” Eleanor’s head jerked upwards to a kindly, smiling face, which she barely registered because above that face was a hat made from the same material as the vest.

“I—what? Oh, sorry, I was just-”

“That’s ok, I get this all the time. It’s softer than you think, go ahead.” The man held a corner of the vest out, the pile moving slightly in the breeze. Eleanor softly patted the bottom of the vest, trying to decide what it was made of, settling on cloud before realizing that was ridiculous.

“Wow, that is soft,” she said. She looked up at the man again, looking closer at his face. The hat cast a shadow over his

face, but from what she could tell his skin was the same color as the vest. “Sorry for staring. What’s it made of?”

“That’s alright, I’m proud of it. Made it myself. It’s a cumulus, wrassled the whole thing down, just me and my boy.” He smiled proudly and picked up his beer. “Scuse me.” He walked towards the door that led to the indoor bar.

Eleanor stared after him, noticing after a moment that the bartender had set her drinks down and asked if she had a tab open.

“Oh, um-” she looked back at the man. “Did he say cumulus?”

“I don’t know, honey. You want it on Pablo’s tab?”

Eleanor looked back at her friends, leaning across the table towards one another, glasses edging dangerously close to the side of the table as they spoke over each

other. “Yes, thank you,” she said.

She looked again at the table closest to the door, where the man in the vest had stopped and was sipping his beer.

The bartender followed her gaze and chuckled. “All kinds tonight.” She walked over to the other end of the bar.

#

Eleanor balanced the shooters in one hand and the martini in the other as she wove her way back to Pablo and Anna. As they tipped the drinks back, the glowing white vest caught Eleanor’s eye again.

“Hey guys, be chill, but look at that guy over by the door,” she said.

Anna swiveled 180 degrees on her stool, pretending to drink out of her empty glass, her eyebrows traveling further towards her hairline as she caught sight of the man.

“What!” She continued in her circle



until she was once again facing the table.  
“What the fuck is that vest!”

“He caught me staring at the bar and I touched it.”

“You what!”

“Ellie!” Pablo threw his head back in laughter, nearly fell off his stool. “You can’t run around touching random men!”

“Calm down, he’s going to hear you,” Eleanor said. She snuck a glance, but the man was still sipping his beer, smiling placidly and tapping his hand on the table to the beat of the music coming from inside.

“Seriously though, what’s that even made of.” Anna had swiveled back around the other direction, a steadying hand on the table, neck craned. “And he’s huge, right?”

“Very,” Eleanor gulped the martini, the olives pushing into her nose. “It’s a weird crowd here tonight. That guy, the girls in the skirts, and I saw this guy with ladybug—“

Pablo and Anna jumped up, cutting Eleanor off. The muted bassline had changed just enough to recognize. “Let’s go dance! Pablo, go get another round,” Anna said.

Pablo disappeared to the bar. Anna stood and pulled her jean jacket off the back of her chair.

“Ellie, dance?” She said.

“Yeah, but it’s weird here tonight, right?” Eleanor said.

Anna shrugged, wiggling her eyebrows up and down. “Who knows, maybe there’s some cute weirdos in there.”

“Here, have your drink.” Pablo reappeared to distribute three glasses.

They brushed past the man in the vest, sipping his beer, tapping on the table, as they moved inside to the dance floor.

#

The three lingered just inside the door, letting their eyes adjust to the even lower level of light. A bright flash of gold caught Eleanor’s eye.

“Anna! Look, it’s the fairy girls!”

Anna brought her lips to Eleanor’s ear so her voice could cut through the thudding bass. “Fairy girls? What are you talking about?” She yelled.

“Those girls we were just talking about!” Eleanor realized “fairy girls” sounded absurd when spoken out loud but felt emboldened from the warmth of the martini radiating from her center.

“I’m gonna go ask them where they got that highlighter,” she told Anna, who was focused on keeping Pablo in her line of sight. He hadn’t noticed Eleanor stop and was unsteadily but determinedly making his way to the direct center of the dance floor.

“Ok, hurry up!” Anna said over her shoulder. She grabbed Pablo’s hand before he was lost to the crush of bodies.

Eleanor squeezed in between two large men in long leather dusters loitering near the door and watching the dance floor fill up. The sweat that had already accumulated on her skin from the humid room smeared on the smooth surface. She stood at the bar, but the fairy girls were turned away from her. Their attention was focused on a plain-looking, slightly

awestruck woman. Eleanor leaned over the bar to catch the bartender's eye and ordered another martini, hoping to extend the warmth further through her body as she realized her heart was beating strangely fast and her stomach had begun to twist. Once she had her drink in hand, she turned back towards the fairy girls. They were still turned away from her, this time talking to another woman with wide eyes and a dumbstruck smile on her face. There were four of them, however, and the one closest to Eleanor didn't seem engaged, so Eleanor took a deep breath and tapped her on the arm.

"Excuse me?"

The fairy girl's face turned and dipped towards Eleanor. Eleanor took a step back, momentarily breathless. She dropped her eyes to the floor and scanned along the bar, expecting to see wedges or spikes, but instead was met with only bright, glittery ballet flats that matched her blue skirt. She looked back up at the fairy girl, who was smiling in a way that Eleanor later, when describing the encounter, could only describe as *benevolent*. "I've only heard people say that about Jesus and dictators," her coworker would say on Monday morning as Eleanor was recounting the night, and Eleanor would agree that both comparisons seemed appropriate for some reason.

"Hi!" The fairy girl said with a wide smile. Her skin was the darkest of the four, and Eleanor found herself moving her head slightly back and forth to catch the shimmer between brown and gold. Looking

down the bar, she noticed that the other three girls were each one shade lighter than the last, but each shone with the same gold, except for the one at the far end.

"Hi! I just - sorry, do you mind, I just wanted to tell you that I really like your makeup and was wondering where you got your highlighter? It's so pretty and I've never seen anything like it." Eleanor forced her gaze down to her own dirty boots for a moment, shook her head for clarity. "Is it from Mac? I've been looking for one and my friend said she'd help me find it so I thought if you—" she cut herself off as she noticed the look of confusion spread across the girl's face. She suddenly felt hot, ashamed, and the need to apologize for putting anything but a smile on that face.

"I'm sorry?" The fairy girl leaned down towards Eleanor, washing her with a wave of fragrant florals. "Highlighter? Can you repeat?" She smiled apologetically. "Everyone here seem to speak English, and mine not so good."

"Oh, sorry!" Eleanor exhaled in relief. She was very aware of her own lack of perfume and the clothes that she'd been all day. She gestured to her own face, repeating, "your highlighter—makeup? The gold? It's so pretty."

The fairy girl's face brightened again and Eleanor felt her own face lighten along with it. "Oh! Makeup! Yes," she glanced down towards her sisters—Eleanor felt suddenly sure that they were sisters—and called, "Ola! Come!" She turned back to Eleanor. "She is so proud, she does not do this before, and likes so all of the things

here.” The furthest fairy girl was looking down at them now, and the one next to Eleanor gestured for her to come over. Eleanor’s mind was working, afraid to ask for clarification.

Ola appeared next to them, leaving the other two fairy girls speaking to yet another starry-eyed woman. She was the lightest of the four, her gold muted and visible only once she was close to Eleanor. Her makeup had been expertly applied in a way that Eleanor tried and failed to emulate from YouTube videos.

“Ola, tell her about your makeup.” The first fairy girl said, and smiled at Eleanor expectantly. Ola frowned.

“Eh?”

“Oh-” the first fairy girl quickly spoke a few quiet words that Eleanor strained to catch, then turned back to Eleanor. “Sorry I forget, she does not speak so well. She is youngest of us, and does not have as many years at school.”

Ola was smiling broadly and digging excitedly in a pink purse that matched her shoes in color and sparkle. She produced a plastic CVS bag and dumped the contents on the bar, waving at Eleanor to inspect them with her. She chattered for a moment at her sister, then stood quietly like a proud child next to an art project, waiting for her sister to translate.

“You see, we go today to a store because she loves your television and wants to do her face like your gossip girls.”

Ola nodded vehemently, adding, “yes, gossip girls! You know?”

Eleanor nodded, forgetting that she

had never seen an episode of Gossip Girl.

“Yes, I love the gossip girls. But-” Eleanor looked at the makeup spread across the bar, a combination of cheap concealers and eyeshadows, poorly chosen for someone of Ola’s skin color and tone, then looked back at the first fairy girl. “You’re not wearing any?” She asked.

The first fairy girl tipped her head back and a few lilting notes of laughter tripped out of her mouth. “No, our mother say we must never cover our skin. But Ola,” she shook her head indulgently at her sister, who was rolling her eyes at the mention of their mother, “she loves your gossip girls. So we are here, and she tried...regardless?” She looked at Eleanor for confirmation of her word choice. Eleanor nodded.

Both fairy girls beamed. Eleanor stared down at the makeup again, then at Ola, then the first fairy girl. She still didn’t understand, but an urgent need to know more about them overrode her confusion about the makeup.

“Where are you from? Are you all sisters?” She asked.

They nodded in unison. The oldest put her arm around her sister. “Yes, sisters! Ola is youngest, then Greta,” she pointed down the bar at the one furthest from them with a yellow purse and slippers, who had her hands on a woman’s shoulders, staring deeply into her eyes, speaking confidently as the woman struggled to hold back tears, “then Kai,” in deep purple, who had five drinks lined up in front of her, each a different neon color of the rainbow, clapping excitedly at the bartender who was

pouring a final drink in bright purple, “and me. I am Jule.”

“Wow. I’m Eleanor,” Eleanor said.

Ola gave a shriek. “Eleanor! Ela! Ola! Ela and Ola!”

She leaned down and wrapped her long arms around Eleanor, pulling her close. Eleanor felt a rush of warmth and a sudden calm, and leaned into Ola, overcome with total bliss. She was floating on a pool heated to the perfect temperature. The sun shone in her eyes and warmed her face. She closed her eyes as the sun brightened, then squeezed them tighter and raised her hands to her face as the sun seemed to grow closer, blocking out all other sights and sounds, enveloping her.

“Ola!” Eleanor squinted through the darkness and tried to remember where she was. She saw a blurry outline of Jule pull Ola away and push her towards the bar. Eleanor’s vision cleared as Jule bent down to her. “Ela, please accept my apologies. Ola is not - she is young. Forgive her,” she said.

Eleanor watched as Jule corralled her sisters, catching a few snippets as they briefly paused facing inward in a tight circle. Speaking in a language Eleanor couldn’t understand or identify, Jule scolded her sister as the two others stared at Eleanor with fear in their eyes. Two bright lines glowed from Ola’s face as tears burned through her new makeup. After a moment of conference, the four wisped through the crowd and disappeared down the stairwell. Eleanor steadied herself against the bar, feeling the bass of the

music in her knees. She grabbed a drink that Kai had left on the bar, neon pink surrounded by glasses with dregs of the rainbow, and threw it back in an attempt to steady her head. She gasped at the strength of the sugary alcohol, then pushed her way through the crowd to the bathroom. She shoved her way to the front of the line and in past the woman exiting, ignoring angry shouts from the people around her.

Eleanor locked the door and turned left, towards the sink. She collided with the wall. “What the fuck,” she said.

She turned around and found the sink against the right wall. She looked up, around the cramped room. Everything was mirror image of how she remembered it. “What the *fuck*.”

She leaned in towards the mirror to examine herself. A small pinpoint of light held steady in the center of her pupils, no matter which way she held her head. She closed her eyes tightly, but instead of seeing darkness, she felt blinded, a searing light blazing from her eyelids. Loud pounding at the door broke her out of her daze. She splashed cold water on her face and smoothed her hair down in the mirror, breathing deeply. *It’s just the martinis*, she told herself.

*Just the martinis*. She looked back into the mirror in time to see the pinpoints fade from her pupils, then left the bathroom.  
#

Eleanor slowly wove her way to the center of the dance floor, where she found Anna and Pablo with their eyes closed, hand above their heads, hair plastered to

their cheeks with sweat.

“Anna!” Eleanor grabbed one of Anna’s hands and twisted her around so they were face to face.

“Ela! Where have you been! You missed all the best songs...” Anna’s eyes began to close again as she bopped her head to the beat.

“What do you mean where have I been? I was five minutes, I was just talking to those...” Eleanor turned back to the bar. The feeling of being enveloped by the sun came rushing back, and she shook her head hard and pulled her phone out of her purse. 12:31. “What? I wasn’t that late, was I?” She pulled up the last text she had received from Anna - *Upstairs, outside*. Received at 10:14.

“What the fuck?” She grabbed Anna’s arm again. “Anna, what’s going on?”

Anna cupped Eleanor’s face in her hands. “Ela, calm. This is the best song, just dance with me!”

Eleanor squeezed Anna’s wrist hard. Anna’s eyes open wide enough for Eleanor to see her dilated pupils. “Anna, you’ve never called me Ela,” she said.

Anna shrugged and dropped her hands to her sides. “But it fits, don’t you think?” She said. Her eyes drifted closed again.

Eleanor turned to Pablo, who was inching closer to a tall, burly man wearing only slacks and suspenders with blue-tipped blonde hair.

“Pablo! What did she take?” She said.

“Nothing!” He said. He glanced quickly around to sure the man hadn’t moved. “Ellie, I promise, I’ve been with her the

whole time. You know she wouldn’t.”

Eleanor nodded, unconvinced. “She’s just really feeling the music tonight. Come on Ela, dance with us!”

“Pablo, why did you-” Eleanor reached for his hand, but he had turned to the large man and she knew she had lost his attention. She turned back to Anna, stepping closer to avoid bumping the people around her. She took Anna’s hand, Anna’s eyes coming down to focus on Eleanor’s. *Oh wow, this is a great song*, Eleanor thought as she intertwined her fingers with Anna’s and raised them above her head.

The bass thudded through the wood floor up through Eleanor’s legs, moving her hips with the beat. The lights behind the DJ booth flashed blue and white through the crowd and bounced off sweaty faces and urgently moving hands. Eleanor and Anna danced together, occasionally knocking into those around them, moving their bodies as the music and the lights dictated. Eleanor opened her eyes enough to follow the lights that zoomed across dancing heads of all colors and sizes. She tried to focus on individuals but could only catch blurs of blue and violet and a strange moss green that kept appearing on different sides of the dance floor. She watched Pablo tire of the man with white and blue hair and dance by himself in a small empty pocket in the exact center of the room. Songs came on that she knew, but she couldn’t think of what they were or when they started. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she began to feel thirsty. She danced

with this feeling until she could no longer ignore it, then reluctantly left Anna to go to the bar. Once she'd drained a glass of water, Eleanor pulled out her phone again. 2:56.

"Fuck!" She yelled. She ran back to Anna and Pablo. "You guys, I have to go."

They shook their heads. Anna took Eleanor's hand. "No, Ela, stay with us," she said.

Eleanor stood for a second and let herself begin to sway to the bass once again before she pulled her focus back. "I have to go see my mom tomorrow, early. Will you take care of each other?"

The two giggled and entwined themselves together in a tangle of arms and hair. "Ok, I love you. See you tomorrow." She wasn't sure which of them spoke.

They each gave her a soft kiss on the cheek before she made her way downstairs and out onto the patio. Eleanor's eyes snapped open and she stopped short as she walked into a wall of cold air. She stood still for a moment, adjusting to the harsh streetlights and noises of the few cabs out, tires kicking up moisture from the street. She inhaled a cloud of sweet rose smoke from the hookah next to her and headed towards the bouncer, still sitting on the stool outside of the entrance from the sidewalk.

"How is it in there?" The bouncer smiled at her.

She paused for a second. She struggled to parse her memories of the last several hours before allowing them to fade into the recess of her mind reserved for barely-

remembered dreams. "Good, I guess. Weird," she said.

He chuckled. "All kinds tonight," he said.

Eleanor stepped past him. His green eyes shone out from underneath the brim of his hat, and she stared as his eyelids blinked together vertically. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head against the fog of alcohol. "All kinds, sure."

Eleanor turned left out of the gate and into the mist. ❖



# “GLASS BICYCLES”

by JUDSON BLAKE

Cici coursed through the endless city till she came to the shadow of the viaduct. Giant pillars arose out of the earth meant to rocket to the sky and end somewhere she could not see. Beneath them the houses were lower and more humble than in the city's depth. Here too the streets branched and divided but in places brush and trees pushed around broken chunks of pavement.

Slowly there came a sound she had not heard before. At first it was a whisper as of wind through sheaves of grain, but then it grew to a thick whirring that filled all the air around her. She turned and watched stern-faced men speeding down the path on bicycles made of glass. Behind them their wheels trailed glistening glass threads like fine hair. She listened and breathed in the whine of their spinning wheels. The faces of the riders bent low, alive with intensity and joy at their speed and their work. The button-black of their pupils promised power in their purpose. Where did they go? If she followed them she might find the secret that would help her on her own racing search. This chance excited her even more than the vibrance of their piston knees and flying glass strings. Each bicycle let out fine threads that went on and on with an intention only they could know.

Cici stepped on a thread and the bicycle screeched to a stop. The rider screamed.

“Oh! Oh, no. You must never do that,” he cried.

“I only stepped on a thread. Is that so bad?”

“It's everything. It's the Rule of Glass. If you step on a glass thread you bring the whole business to a stop. You must never, ever do that.”

“Well, I certainly won't do it again. But see, there are glass threads that come off and lie all along your trail.”

“So you make us lose more. You think that makes up for what you've done?”

“Well, I guess not, now that you say it. But you should tell me where you all are going, going so fast. You must have a very big reason to be so intense.”

“We're racing, racing. Can't you see?”

“To see who's fastest.”

“No, no, no! This isn't a silly race like that. Oh, you're one of those who don't understand.”

“I'll understand if you tell me.”

He was off his bike now and the sweat of his face was mixed with sudden tears at her incomprehension.

“You see,” he went on, “this is not the contest. No, no. We're racing to the contest.”

Other cyclists whizzed by, all with the same intense look, with never a glance to left or right. Clearly nothing else mattered. Glass threads flared behind them and whipped the air.

“Take me with you.”

“Well, it’s beneath the viaduct,” he said uncertainly, “and it’s on the other side of Coelenterate Street.”

“Wherever. I want to see.”

“Get on.” He was already on and had the pedal cocked. Cici leaped on the back.

“And don’t make a fuss,” he cried. In a minute they were racing like the others and some he even passed. Cici felt the joy of wind blasted over her face and arms and neck.

Gradually as they rode, the landscape became more sparse; there were houses with yards. The streets still wound and divided, but here and there was scrub and more trees. It was so different from where she’d been, the dismal part of the city she feared would swallow her up. Here Cici felt invited by the greenery and peacefulness and the sight of little houses with neat white fences surrounding textured lawns.

As the race grew long Cici looked down the far end of their path. On the horizon there seemed to be a gathering storm. Hulking beneath it was a green mountain that pulsed and fumed with soft vapors high in the air. From what she could tell, the mountain had nothing growing on it but gray lumps and smaller hills. After a long stare through the wind Cici realized this structure appeared like a giant frog.

“Stop!” cried a voice and over the

cyclist’s bent shoulder she saw a man in black with his arm raised. “Where are you going?”

“To the contest of course,” said the biker. Cici saw that other cyclists were arrested in the same way. Opposed to them were more men in black, each with an arm raised up.

“The contest isn’t free,” said another of them. “You have to pay the Frog.”

“Yes,” another piped in and Cici saw they wanted to second each other.

“There is no contest until you pay the Frog.”

He nodded significantly and it was obvious to Cici that there were things she had never heard of but which they all in unison expected her to know. A third man advanced and gestured to what had before seemed only the strange green mountain. Cici saw now it really was a frog.

“There. There. To see it is to know its power.”

“Power of the frog?”

“The Great Frog,” said the first. “Only administrators like us, Collectors we’re called, only we can name it and call it the Frog. That’s who we are since you seem not to know. Collectors for the Frog. To you it’s The Great Frog. Don’t forget that. You’ll be sorry if you do.”

“So you have to pay,” said one who had been silent till then.

“With money of course.”

“With money,” chimed in another who had an unspeakably broad grin. He held out a cup and jiggled the coins already in it. More Collectors crowded close to the

cyclists, each with a metal cup extended.

"I didn't bring much," said the cyclist in front of Cici.

"They just want a little," said Cici. "Here."

She dropped some coins into the cup and the grinning man looked into it and shook the can again. Cici shrugged with a sad smile. The man gave a regretful nod and backed away.

Another cyclist who seemed very boyish was not so compliant.

"Did you say payment?" he cried. "We have to pay to see the contest? Pay to a frog? To a measly frog?"

"He isn't measly. Look."

"All right. But we're on the way to the contest. Did you know that? It's the contest that matters, not... this. And you stop us for a... a frog?"

"Oh, you're wrong," said one. "The contest only matters because of us."

Several nodded but no one said more.

"The Great Frog," muttered the man in black nearest Cici. "That boy should know by now. We told him. We tell them all." His voice was resentful and sad at once.

All of a sudden the cyclist who complained simply vanished. In an instant all were gone: man, bike, glass threads and all. What Cici could see was a blank spot and the other cyclists all staring where their companion had been. There was no sound; it was simply a sudden transit to invisibility of the man who had plainly been there a second before. One might think he had been turned into instant air. Then above the crowd a sound came, a thunderous

slurp, and after that the air went strangely quiet. No one wanted to speak. The cyclist and his bike had disappeared into transparent mist and the mist to funnel itself into nothing.

-This is awful, thought Cici.

But there was no blood or brutality to mark its awfulness. It called for awareness of something that was not even there.

Another cyclist exclaimed: "He was only a boy."

Cici looked high up the mountain that she admitted now was a frog and she could just make out the handlebars of the bicycle, like a tiny trinket, hanging from its mouth. The lightning tongue had reached out to the boy and swallowed him like a fly.

Cici stood stock still and reflected: well, the bicycle is made of glass, so that can't matter. But the boy is flesh and blood.

The implication and the horror sank into her frame. She wondered if she could become paralyzed by what she had seen. The whole setup portrayed a puzzle that might be deceiving her by pretended to have a solution.

Cici looked around. The Collectors glanced over their shoulders but seemed at first to little notice this casual catastrophe. One smiled nervously but averted his face from the frog. Others did something similar. One by one they all turned back to their work of canvassing with their tin cans and avoided Cici's eyes.

-Do they think I will be next?, she wondered. But no; there was no righteousness or schadenfreude in their expressions.

Rather, they were intent on their work, for work, they all knew, would calm any disquiet. Cici reflected that maybe it would be natural for them to be unsettled, living in the shadow of this huge creature and the arching viaduct, but if they could forget it, wouldn't that be all the better for them?

"Of course," said one of the Collectors when he saw her look of concern, "he was an outsider." He grinned with the ease of knowing more than she about the reality of the world and of being weathered to its cruelties.

"Well, well. Of course," laughed another. They regained their composure and their voices cascaded into a general muttering and swaggering about with their cups.

"You'll see," said the first. He bent toward her with avuncular sideways closeness. "The contest you're going to is only to compensate for us. This. Where you are. The rest is really of our devising. Oh, it's an important event you're going to. Of course. As you will see. But it's important because of what it takes the place of. We only permit the contest so they, all of these cyclists and many more, will forget about the Frog. In fact we encourage it. Why not? We want them all to have fun."

He gestured up at the frog where Cici saw through the distance how its eyes withdrew into its skull, came out again, and its throat undulated with a satisfied gulp.

"So the frog is your mission?" she asked.

"Oh," said another, "don't even say that. You, you outsiders, it's better if you never even mention the frog. You aren't

going to say that word, are you?"

"Certainly not."

"Yes and so that's why we have the contest, you see, so people will talk about something else."

"You run the contest that all of us are running to?"

"Well, not quite. We don't run anything. The others run it. We only let them. We only collect." He rattled the can as a shaman might a necklace of amulets.

He gestured up toward what looked now like a green mountain with the long line of its mouth and its yellow eyes the slits hardly showing. Taking in this aspect, Cici saw that swirls of vapor were layered in sheets around its huge shoulders. It seemed an impossible creature to rise above such placid plainness as these quiet homes. It made a towering mountain that rose higher than birds could fly, up from the nothing levelness of the city like a tectonic outcropping above the naked plain. As her gaze settled before this huge visage Cici noted again how fine was the line of the frog's mouth and how indifferent its bulbous eyes half closed in sleep.

-It hardly looks alive, she thought, and yet it showed that it was. The nearest collector saw her admiration.

"It must be fed."

"People."

"No. Money." He rattled his can. "I can understand your consternation. It must have been upsetting what you saw. But that occurrence a moment ago was only an aberration. Frogs will be frogs. Why, he, that poor fellow who came with you, he was too

voluble, too out of control. He was, you know, into his own ideas, which he couldn't keep to himself. He wanted to undermine the Great Frog, while we, who cater to it, know it means harmony and well-being, hateful to every malcontent. He was against, well, against the basics, against feeding. We can't have that. For the bigger the frog is, the more it must eat."

"Of course. Until he gets to be a big frog."

"Well, you don't understand. The frog only grows. He doesn't stop. He's big now but he will still grow more."

"And not stop growing? Ever?"

"No."

"Really?" Cici wondered if letting the conversation take a turn to visceral assimilation was going to be polite. She gestured up at the hugeness of the animal. "You mean he can never stop growing?"

"No. He will never stop."

"Amazing."

"Yes. It is, isn't it? Oh, that's the beauty of it. The more you feed, the more it wants, the more it wants, the bigger it gets. It just goes on and goes on." He had the familial drawl of a man who knew more than he said. Yet the smile he made expected her to smile with him.

"Well," said Cici, "with all of you working so hard, the frog, I mean the great one, if he just gets bigger and bigger, then one day, I mean someday, it must be that he will just... burst."

She spread her hands to show what a surprise that would be. But the other man froze in astonishment. His buddies nearby

leaned close in alert concern.

"She's using the word we told her not to."

"Doesn't matter. This is worse."

"Yeah, worse."

"Burst?"

"Did she say burst?"

"Like explode?"

"It can't burst."

"Well," said Cici, "if you keep feeding it and it keeps growing and doesn't stop, in the end bursting is all it can do."

"Burst? Hey, she said burst. You must never say that word."

"Another word I mustn't say?"

But none of them was listening to her now. The man's face became so contorted in anger and revulsion, so enflamed that Cici backed away. Beneath his eyes circles of flesh deepened and took on a bluish discoloration. She saw she had gone too far and if she wanted things to get no worse she had better simply retreat.

She ran to the cyclists who were beginning again their trek for the famous contest. Once among them Cici felt relieved. She hoped that the contest, whatever it was and sponsored by whomever, would be more amicable than what she had just seen, or at least less scary.

The cyclist who had brought her was walking his bike.

"It's only a stroll from here. After that row of houses there's the square."

Even so, others flew by, enjoying their speed. A boy she saw was obviously excited and carefree. Cici wondered if school might have just let out and the boy would be

enjoying his first burst of freedom for the day. But she was instantly afraid for him, since he was running down the street open to the giant frog. Perhaps the animal is satiated now, Cici decided, and it's not really a big deal, and the cyclist believes the frog is no danger to himself.

Cici ran ahead.

-There has to be something better that can happen, she felt as she ran down the open street which in places was not even paved. She tried to wipe from her memory what she had seen. To help her forget she kept her eyes straight ahead down the open gallery of the giant columns of the viaduct that promised not to end.

She was glad at least for the Collectors, who seemed to be safe from the frog, perhaps because they were its servants and wise enough to stay in the shadows. As she ran Cici glanced at her feet where swirls of the glass threads trailed out and wafted in the air.

Cici reached Coelenterate Street where she came to the open plaza of Redding Square. There was a great crowd before the platform where a high bunting was being unfurled with the blaring caption: The Great Debate Is On!

In several places workers and lighting crews were making adjustments and coordinating with cameras high on stilt scaffolds. Everywhere there was activity and the energy of anticipation. Cici was glad to see something new and vibrant which, she hoped, would be a pleasant diversion.

Just to the side she saw a man perched

on a platform in front of a large tablet. His electronic brush he held poised in the air with thought.

"You have a beautiful scene to paint," she said.

"It will be," he said. "But you, you look like you've traveled a ways just to see."

"Well, um... I've come from the frog. You know. The big frog. Doesn't it frighten you?"

The man wouldn't answer and she had to ask twice.

"Hm? Frog?"

"Yes, look there," said Cici. But the man would not look, so intent was he on his brush and his canvas of pixels, but Cici could see that the scene he was painting was entirely blank.

-Perhaps that's the point, she thought. Blankness is what he wishes to paint. So of course he would not see the frog. She tried again to capture his interest.

"I came with the cyclists. One of them brought me all the way."

"Cyclists?" said the artist. He never looked away from his painting.

"Yes," she said, "they ride glass bicycles and glass strands come off the wheels wherever they go. That way you can always tell."

"Oh yes. Cyclists."

He leaned closer to the tablet. The matter needed no more discussion.

"The light is pale today," he said after a moment, never glancing away, and Cici thought that must be the right idea, the way a proper artist would behave and discuss his work. The man suspended his brush and looked at her for the first time.

He nodded, half in compassion and half in indolent wryness.

“And you know, the light, well, it’s darkly pale today. This kind of light, on these special days, is very promising.”

Cici nodded, disappointed that he could only talk about the light, but she didn’t want to say so. As if he had heard things she did not say, the man gave Cici a tired smile which spoke of decades of an artist’s struggle, as if with his smile he wished to warn Cici of the hardship and frustration to be faced were Cici to go down that same path. It seemed the man was so wise, so winnowed in the depths of his experience, that he had absolutely nothing more to say. But, she reflected, he couldn’t be that wise if he didn’t know about the frog.

“But about the contest, have you seen this before?”

“This? Oh, this is once only. They can’t do it twice. If they can reach a decision they’ll never do it again. There you see them. The two sides. Rhetor on the left, the big guy. And that’s Decameran over there.”

Cici looked closer at the high stage where two men, each on opposite wings, stood with authoritative demeanor. Around each were his assistants, with portable desks and devices for prompting the orations. On the left, in a brown suit, as the artist had said, Rhetor stood, a large man with a bulbous paunch. To the right side was a tall angular man dressed in black. Cici asked what the debate was about.

“About? Well, it’s to find the truth. It’s

about contention, that’s what contests are, the way to the truth. And about words themselves. The vocabulary of the future. For without the right words no one will know how to think or how to talk. And then how will they live? Only through contention can you get that far. One side has to lose. And the other side wins. And then it will all be decided.”

He nodded with quiet satisfaction. Cici wondered how anything could be so decisive. But the artist’s manner was so assured that she withheld her doubt.

“Now,” he went on, “Rhetor there, well, he’s for the Marsupials.”

“Un-huh,” Cici nodded as if that made sense. “And the other?”

“That’s Decameran. He’s arguing for the Placentals.”

“Hm. Who do you think will win?”

The man softly shrugged.

“Well,” he said with sadness, “a lot of people here are Placentals. You’re a Placental, I can tell. A lot of people say that Placentals have the edge.”

Cici settled back to listen, thinking that in the end that was probably right. Placentals should win.

Soon the workers came down from the stage. With waves and messages on their phones they indicated that all was ready. The crowd, which had been milling without direction gravitated toward the stage. A band made a fanfare and a moderator introduced the proceeding. It all mashed into self-congratulatory verbiage for Cici who found the people themselves more interesting. Then the debate began.

Decameran, in his argument, focused trenchantly on the evolutionary lateness of Placentals, their higher development, which demonstrated their superior right to exist. He listed many accomplishments of Placentals, in jurisprudence, science, medicine and the like. Placentals had produced mathematics and technology that was the marvel of the world. They had changed history and had knocked asteroids out of the sky. In a demeaning tone he remarked that nothing of the sort had ever come from Marsupials who, he pointed out, spent most of their time in a coma eating eucalyptus leaves and bouncing in the air.

As the debate went on, however, it appeared that not all the cards were on the Placental side. Rhetor countered forcefully that Placentals, having developed their bizarre anatomical anomaly out of the mother's immune response to her offspring, were inherently hostile to their own progeny and were probably even, he hinted darkly, congenitally prone to belligerence if not infanticide. The Placental mother, he pointed out in a mournful tone, scorned to carry her baby in a natural pouch and could, at a whim, drop it on the street, deny it food and warmth, and so induce psychotic tendencies well suited to destructive acts. For this, he said, Placentals were well known. It also had to be acknowledged that Marsupials, coming earlier, were the way life was really meant to be. Through exegesis of Marsupial chromosomal codices the true meaning of life and the intentions of God were to be found. Placentals, coming later, were revisionists who overlaid the

ancient truths of primeval DNA with genetic tricks that made childbirth more complicated than it was ever meant to be.

Obviously, given the checkered history of Placentals, Rhetor went on, this kind of thing had festered for eons and was culminating now in Placentals' automated violence, destruction of the planet and denial of life on all sides. Placentals, with their conceited obsession with gadgets and zeal for control, caused only trouble, Rhetor maintained. On the other hand, Marsupials, he reminded them all, had sparked no wars, no engineered disease, nor the intentional starvation of anyone.

Decameran, having previously listed all the advantages of Placental beings, was for a moment taken aback by Rhetor's attack. He tried to recover by repeating what he had said but the Marsupial faction hissed and shouted him down. Rhetor joined in and they went back and forth, each insisting that his own anatomical configuration was the right one and should be promulgated to the abolition of the other. Heated words were exchanged. The moderator had trouble stemming the emotions that flew across the stage. Soon the arena was alive with shouts and shaking fists. The orators, each at the head of his following, were joined by assistants who shouted too.

Soon the debate had descended into ad hominem vituperation of the most vicious kind. Both Rhetor and Decameran left their rosters so each could more directly attack his opponent. The Placentals insisted that the world was meant to be Placental, and Placental principles should



prevail universally, particularly to the exclusion of boorish Marsupial dogma.

Marsupials clung to the conviction that the old ways were best and Marsupials represented the pinnacle of a golden age. Their idea was just as intransigent, all the more because through much of history Marsupials had been downtrodden, dismissed and treated as an evolutionary detour. It was a time for redress.

The more logical each side's attack, the more illogical came the requital. The discussion became loud and filled with technical words Cici did not understand.

As it went on, Cici found that the debate was not merely words nor only academic. It became more than anyone had planned. People were bent on decision and what was being decided would show its effects sooner rather than later. With alarm she saw how these people, male and female, had blood in their eyes. Emotions ran high. On every side it emerged that the matter had no resolution by words alone. What each faction intended they meant to have devastating effect. The crowd joined in and each person championed the debater closest to his own anatomy. A surprising conclusion was seen to be crystallizing all around: whoever won the debate would get the right to irreversibly alter the others' anatomy and genes. There would be permanent change in each person's mode of reproduction.

Cici realized that many in the audience were themselves Marsupial, perhaps not the minority, and they were ready with hypodermic syringes and glistening instruments

they sprung out of surgical coats. They had portable body halters for the Placentals they intended to convert, and quickly some were seen enclosing a hapless Placental in preparation for the operation.

The Placentals, for their part, were hardly unprepared. Many had brought their own equipment too. Surgical tables were unfolded with trays of instruments on prehensile arms that doubled as grapples for the unlucky Marsupial who might be caught unawares. Some of these devices could be administered at a distance, zapping the Marsupial in the most tender spot so as to reform his or her atavistic proclivity. Yet wherever she looked Cici saw such intensity, such greed in the faces, such desperation—at once fearful of destruction and eager to bring it about.

-They like this, she thought with astonishment. They have even hoped for it. It is valuable to them to hate the others, it's even precious: they hold it in their hearts. For an instant she felt compassion for each of these strangers caught in their inability to do anything else.

-They are trapped too.

As the clamor built it became a melee on all sides. The original debaters were championed, drawn in a vortex of each faction to make him its leader. Flags were raised and loyalty proclaimed. Chants were invented or arose spontaneously and were quickly learned by all adherents. Doubters were thrust into the front lines so they'd be the first to face the enemy's plan. Hesitancy now could mean bloody transformation. Males and females on both sides fell to the

grasping hands and instruments of the other. Unlucky Marsupials caught on the Placental side were surrounded, entrapped, and their reproductive makeup swiftly fixed. Even parts of their brains were excised and replanted with the proper dendritic matrix. Genetic rigor was enforced. Placentals caught among Marsupial zealots fared no better. Many were seen writhing on the ground in the agony of their transformation, parts of their anatomy allowed to dribble on the street. Some, it seemed apparent to Cici, would be lucky to survive, even in altered form.

Quickly Cici saw she would need to fend for herself. A circle of Marsupials gathered around her, glowering and hungry for their next conversion.

“She’s a Placental. I can smell it.”

A caressing hand reached out.

“You, Sweetheart, you’ll be juicier than the rest.”

The voice oozed with the indolent right of the oppressed. Arms reached out and appraising digits felt along her shoulders. They looked greedily at her crotch, intrigued with its alien structure all the more enticing because hidden under her dress.

“No!” she cried. She flailed her arms so some of them stopped just for an instant. “You all know-you all know about the frog.”

“The what?”

“The giant carnivorous frog. It lives over there. Don’t you care?”

“Oh, that one,” said one, his hand flung in the air.

“We know but we can’t be bothered about that.”

Another yelled above the horde.

“How can we? We’re in the midst of a battle. We’re fighting for truth.”

“And freedom,” yelled another.

Cici straightened in front of them, the intensity of her gaze causing some for once to pause.

“I’ve just come from the frog,” Cici cried out. “The Giant Frog. Do you know? I saw it eat a man. Do you want to be like that?”

“Yes,” came a shout and a woman appeared where the crowd parted before her. She walked with stolid gait carrying a placard that read:

Amniotes Unite. You have nothing to fear but the frog.

Some yelled a slogan they had only just learned. Others gasped.

“A reptile!?”

“No, it’s worse. Far worse.”

“An amphibian.”

“Who are you calling....?”

“She’s a Marsupial for sure,” someone yelled and where before the Marsupials were on the attack, now their ranks swayed and rabid Placentals swarmed around the placard-bearer. She became enveloped and her screams garbled in the fury of arms and instruments.

Faces rose around Cici, distorted in confusion. Before they could compose themselves and remember their intention, Cici ducked under the churning crush of bodies. Other Placental victims were found. She fought her way through arms and feet

and visages too furious to mind her escape.

When she got near Placental coteries, she found them just as violent. They immediately assumed that Cici would fight on their side. Local leaders rallied their faction and Cici had to pretend for a moment she would join in. Chanting resurged and called them all together. Angrily she fought her way past sweating faces and hands that tore at her clothes. She stepped through blood flowing from where she could only see a leg and the shred of a dress. She ran for an open space cleared by people who stood back watching, uncertain what to do.

Breaking further, Cici ran down a narrow street. She weaved among vague faces of people standing stock still, made dumb in their attention to the conflict. As she got farther away, the shouts and screams continued, promising the battle would not be over soon. Cici heard a whirr behind her and a boy on a glass bicycle raced past, intent on escape from what could envelope him as well. He had separated from other cyclists who sped on like a ribbon on the wall, hastening their flight. They were furious too. These riders seemed not just to ride, but at instants to strike the crazy pose of a dance suspended in air above the bike with no need for even the glass wheels to reach the ground.

Cici rested in an alley, panting. Alone, she decided the whole matter, the strange debate and the frog before that, it all left a very dark suggestion. Her tears flowed outright. She thought:

-I don't like contests. It means there will be a crime. A loser and a crime that

makes him lose. And perhaps those people, the Marsupials as well as the Placentals, they could easily avoid conflict but in fact they want it and they seek it out.

She had no basis in logic for thinking this, and yet it seemed somehow obvious from the chaotic encounter she had been through. She ran on down the stony streets, glad of the shadows and the shadowy solitude. Her thought was an evanescent cloud with nothing to support it. As she fled further down the narrow paths, she found again fine glassy threads strung over the stones, whispering in the aimless wind. The strands swirled and twisted at her feet like drifts of snow. But the riders were gone.

The threads led her on to other threads that, she knew, had flown with delight from wheels that spun alive, flung out by the Rule of Glass.

-Where are they, Cici thought, with their whirring glass wheels? I don't see them now at all. Wherever they have gone they must have come this way, for here I see....

And then she hurried on. ❖



# “FREEDOM”

by SHAINUR ULLAH

**Ed. Note:** Welcome to episode six 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 five in our 2020 issues issues to catch up and...enjoy....

## Episode 6

We arrived in the jungle and began to read the plan before going through a map that Jacob had drawn long ago; I was very much asked what the expedition was about and I had to lie saying that the Bradley brothers, in one of their eccentricities, were looking for clues to a treasure that one of their ancestors had kept in this place, anything could be a clue, it was important to find the signs and know how to interpret them, they wished to recover each one of the valuable ones of which the gentlemen Bradley who came before Andrew and Barry were owners, of course that this explanation was enough, after all we were practically slaves of all the Bradley Corporation, so we had to comply with all their caprice and desires in a timely manner, there was no way to escape these responsibilities, we had no choice, then we

began the search, with the newspaper as the first sign of the adventure that awaited us.

We started to leaf through the pages of this old newspaper, and began our analysis about what was written there, everything was in a kind of key, like a poem, I could not understand much, I assumed that this was Jacob's mind when he came to this place, quite confused, surely felt dejected because he did not have a concrete answer about the whole amulet affair, or the charm, whatever it was that he called him. I concentrated to the maximum, I did not want to be away from the city for a long time, maybe something very bad could happen to all of us if we were slow to find the supposed treasure, or maybe the aliens could come and attack us, we knew that no place was safe and that we had to set certain standards to keep at bay the freedom that could be felt in an expedition that was very different from the ones we had lived before, I used all my concentration, and I kept reading the newspaper. We continued walking among trees, avoiding creatures that were also dangerous (wild animals).

In the newspaper mentioned the roads we had to avoid, first we had to go through a turbulent river, a very treacherous, then we had to cross a place that was no longer forest to become a tropical rain forest,

which mentioned that creatures lived in the highest and lowest part of the place, without touching the half, that is, the height of an average man, and after traveling a little more, we were supposed to arrive at the sacred place where Jacob made the oath of get away with these creatures that stole human lives, the expedition really seemed easy enough, but we knew that life was not, so we should be attentive to everything that would happen around us, we had to be alert.

We walked the road in our vehicles for a few hours, in a straight line we went deeper into the thickness of the trees, as it was described in the book, and a few kilometers later we had to run into the river and we had to cross it very carefully, avoiding every obstacle that could arise. We continued the tour and after a while we were in front of the imposing river, it was much more terrifying than what was described in the newspaper, of course this I did not mention with my men, they were already nervous enough to see that next to this river, there was a huge natural bridge that invited us to pass in a very simple way, I thought it was a trap and I completely distrusted it.

My fellow adventurers took some tools out of their vehicles and tried to test the bridge, they needed to make sure that they had the minimum resistance for the vehicles to pass or at least for us to walk along with our luggage, one of them was eager to participate actively in the adventure, so decided to be very practical and cross on foot, and carefully, did not want to wait for everyone to deploy their equipment to

organize and test them. Personally, this young man's decision seemed logical enough, but the truth is that in practice he did not know the procedures carried out during the trips, at that time he was only trying to absorb all the information necessary to achieve the survival of all.

The boy tied himself to another of the participants of the expedition and began to walk across the bridge, always trying to stand firm, as the luggage weighed, I was not even sure that the vehicles would get through, so go on foot It was the best option so far, the young man was stepping slowly along the entire length of the bridge, and he saw that it really was safe to pass by, so we took the vehicles and parked them very close to the bridge, and then we crossed one by one with all our tools, and also our hopes that everything would be just as easy. The team came forward while I decided to read a little more of Jacob Bradley's diary, then I felt chills, this forced me to look back, and I could see a man, or rather a flash of it, he did not say anything to me, I just He stared, I thought maybe it was one of the creatures, and I stood firm, I did not want to let them cross the bridge and sabotage the important expedition, however he did not approach me and he did not say a word either, just looked at me , with some approval, maybe it was someone native to that place, or maybe I was beginning to hallucinate, anyway I felt I would discover it very soon, I closed the newspaper and approached the group without trying to tell them anything, I did not want them to lose the pace, the direction

or the hope, I wanted them to stay firm in the objective we had at that moment, and for now everything was going according to plan, nothing was affecting the plan.

After crossing the bridge, we were a bit tired, because we had to carry a lot of very heavy equipment because we did not want to risk the integrity of the equipment when going over the bridge, one of the guys said he was hungry, that we should eat; We had a practically unperturbed schedule for meals, but that day they felt very far from strict norms, it is probable that they were also taking advantage of my inexperience in these trips. I did not mind the fact that they ate a little before continuing, so I gave them the freedom to do it, I assumed it would not be bad, so we started eating, and then we decided to rest a bit to continue our journey, it was the better idea.

During our break, one of the boys, Simon, was telling about his experience with the creatures, said that these beings were persecuting his family for a long time, his parents had told him their stories, in the past if family was dedicated to art in many of its aspects, music, dance, and many other forms of expression, these refused to abandon their way of earning a living, for which they were always vulnerable to the attacks of creatures, the boy told how a creature he had taken his sister, and he also told us that these aliens were unable to maintain their "human" form when they were feeding, that is, just at the time they were taking people, he described these beings as some forms strange and horrendous, and I definitely believed him.

There was something quite curious about this whole thing with the aliens, they could not take their lives with just wanting them, not with a simple touch, or with another type of attack, they needed that by their own will the people would give their freedom, all the cases of those I had read included phrases such as "I agree to go with you", "I want to be out of this world", "Yes, I want to end my suffering", and other similar ones, that is, if someone rejected their offers, the most What they could do was to besiege them until they no longer resisted and wanted to abandon their lives and their bodies. This was confusing for me, you had to go through a lot to want to take your own life, or to think about giving yourself to the creatures, maybe you would never understand it, and it does not matter that much at this time or in any other, I always considered that it was a person of strong mind, difficult to bend and to convince, nevertheless the society already had imposed the norms of coexistence that would protect us of everything and of all, and against that could not argue, would not know how to do it.

We had had enough rest, we had to continue with the mission, we walked for many more, and we crossed a place that although it was quite striking, it did not correspond with the description that Jacob had given to the tropical forest. We continued walking and the landscape became much flatter, this disturbed me, towards the horizon there were no large trees, much less small, there was nothing but plain, but something curious we had observed, the

soil that was in that moment to our feet, it was quite irregular, the lawn definitely did not have the shape of one, they were rather groups of piled leaves that created a cushioned floor. We kept walking and suddenly one of the boys fell through it.

We thought it was a kind of trench or burrow dug by any of the animals that lived there, but we never imagined what was really happening. We decided to observe through the hole in which Samuel fell (Samuel was the youngest of the boys of the expedition, was sold by his parents to the company when an alien came for him, of that a few months ago.

We saw all the same scene, Samuel fell on a pile of dry leaves, they were so many that they supported his fall of more than five meters, at that distance we were on the real ground, I wish the newspaper had prepared us for that impression, however I think that it was written so that it could not be deciphered easily, at least in this second part of the journey, since the first one seemed to be quite easy.

We shouted to Samuel to know if he was okay, and to know if the fall was dangerous, because if not, each one of us had to take the same path as this boy. Samuel was fine, so one by one we decided to throw ourselves on the dry leaves, the fall was incredibly soft, hard to believe if you are not able to witness it. We looked around us, and the imposing trees formed a kind of circle, it almost seemed like we were locked in a cage, I could not place myself well, however the boys had a clear idea about our position, thanks to the most

up-to-date technology company was allowed to acquire, the expeditions were always important and never was spared in expenses for the tools of the expeditions, these had priority before the manufacture and distribution of products and precious stones, and of that group, only I knew the reason. One of the boys pointed out the path we should follow, it was evident that the route would continue in a straight line, we hurried a little and we continued with the expedition.

We took a few steps away from the pile of leaves into which we had fallen and suddenly this made strange noises, we stopped to observe what was happening, the mountain of leaves began to move, first the movement was smooth and random, but As the minutes passed, the movement became stronger and more uniform, from the pile the head of one of the most feared reptiles, a snake, appeared and this was much larger than any we have seen in the past, for about minutes we saw how the animal looked around the place, one of the men said not to move a muscle and much less make noise, and we tried, but at that time one of the equipment rang, it was Andrew trying to communicate with us, we ran in a straight line to where we were supposed to go from the beginning, we ran so fast that we did not even stop to think if the serpent was really chasing us Only this product of our imagination, in any way we continue, for a long time we walked with a hurried step forward, but when we felt that our breath ran out, we stopped to hydrate and rest.

The others were not as terrified as I was to see that creature, but apparently I feared the aliens less than they did. Someone asked what was the next destination, and if any warning or reference appeared in the book, I told him that the only reference I had was about a sacred place and that we should continue on the way if we wanted to get there before nightfall. Our heads, after the experience of the snakes I thought it would be very difficult to sleep, I preferred to go as far as possible in a day, only then we could make the most of the time it took us to find the "treasure" in the sacred place, that is why I encouraged the men to continue going deeper and deeper into that forest.

We walked without stopping for more than an hour, the tall trees began to disappear, they were reduced in size, until we were again in a kind of plain, but this time, when looking at the horizon, we could see a kind of sculpture, one that I had a pattern and a very difficult way to describe from that distance, it immediately occurred to me that it was the sacred place that Jacob talked about in the newspaper, and it was my duty to get there.

The closer we got, we could see that next to that place there was a kind of limit with a big river, I did not know if it was related to the one we left behind and I definitely was not going to dedicate myself to find out at that moment, I just wanted to get there and to end the mystery of the existence of the material that managed to alienate the aliens, it was my main mission, the only one.

We got closer and when we were a few

meters away, a man appeared, was dressed in very old clothes, and I thought that it could be a man who was part of the tribe that we had left behind on the bridge, however He did not have natural gestures, so I knew immediately, it was one of the creatures that had managed to get there, maybe he had chased Jacob and killed him there, I warned the boys not to be carried away by these creatures, they had to reject any proposal that they could offer, however they took out their weapons, before they had not done so because perhaps they did not feel threatened, but this situation had changed everything.

The creature stood in front of me, but did not even look at me, but quickly approached Samuel, he was in a trance, and other of the boys too, we were 10 in total, and 7 could not stop looking and listening to the creature. This one was agile, that is, physically, more than what were the others of which I already knew, we tried to call the 7, so that they ignored the words of this alien, none responded, we were only far from his spell Simon, Noah, and me.

Noah was a believing boy, and he tried to pray for everyone; At that moment he took a small cross out of his pocket to make a desperate prayer, but when we realized it was too late for Samuel, who had decided to leave with the creature, he tried to approach us again, then, in an attempt to defend himself, Noah he showed him his cross, the face of the creature changed to its original form, it had claws, and with them it laced its body, and it hid behind some bushes. The others left the trance suddenly



we decided to enter the structure, it was open and had the same shape as the trees in the forest that we had previously gone through, it was circular, but each stone had a different size and shape.

We drag the body of Samuel into the structure as well, we did not want to leave him in that inhospitable place, maybe we have lost freedom, but not humanity, Noah stayed alert watching that the creature did not come near us while we managed to revise the Instead, the creature looked at us again and tried to enter, but could not, there was a kind of shield that did not allow its presence in that place, and it had not only to do with the cross of Noah, but rather with the place itself.

In the huge stones that made up the temple, there were some scriptures, we assumed that it was a kind of instructions to locate the treasure more easily, but I could not understand anything, there were phases without meaning, I could not get anything clear we were tired and impressed by Samuel's death, and besides it was getting dark, the creature disappeared so we decided to camp inside the sanctuary that day. One by one we would keep watch all night, however it was very difficult to sleep, so we did not even bother to know who would be the first and the last.

Being a little calmer I asked Noah to show me his cross, he took it out of his pocket, while he told me the story about it, "my family gave it to me when I was little, they thought I could cure diseases or something like that, I always carry it with me, as a reminder that someday I was happier

than now. God saved us this day, the cross has moved away from us ", when I took the cross, I could recognize the color, I took it in front of me, in the direction of the bonfire that we had lit to keep us warm, and Noah told me" it's the color of your eyes, "then I knew it, it was the same material, and I felt it my duty to confess to these men who were risking their lives, what was the real purpose of all this expedition, it was decided, and even more when I looked around and there were 7 creatures.

We were all very scared, so I decided to speak, "this is the real reason for our arrival here, and I think everyone deserves to know, there may be a way to keep the creatures away, with this material from which Noah's cross is made, it was not your faith that drove the monster away, for some reason these beings do not resist the presence of this. That is why we are here, Jacob would have discovered it and for this reason he dedicated his life to expeditions, for this reason we are here, our duty is not to leave this land until we can find a source of this material that helps us with the manufacture of some objects that allow us to defend ourselves from all the evil that has come from another world. To my surprise, two of the boys told me that they had heard these stories of their grandparents, which was something they wanted to believe, but that over time would become a kind of legend that would help to maintain the hope of a better world that would help everyone to cope with the life they lived, but after what they witnessed today, would mark a before and after, they would believe

in everything that this expedition implied.

I did not want to reveal that the brothers had a jewel of these, so as not to endanger their lives, and I also made them promise not to expose Noah once we left the temple, for now we should rest to be able to think of a possible solution for the apparent riddles that were carved in the stones of the temple. It was important to succeed in this mission, the lives of many depended on what we were doing at that moment, we decided to sleep a little, and the dream was overcoming our tired bodies, in the morning we would bury Samuel, and we would think about the solutions that we needed, pro now we would not even take guards, it had already been determined that the creatures could not cross the temple, we had no idea why, but at that moment we were not interested at all.

I dreamed again with my mother, this time she was in front of the creature, and I in the middle of the two, this alien extended my hand, and the necklace I was wearing it away, it gave a horrible scream and I just turned to see to my mother once again before waking from the horrible nightmare in which I felt that I had surrendered forever, or at least that was what it seemed. The necklace had saved my life, the same necklace that Andrew showed me in the office. The next day we got up and tried to act with a little logic, first we had to try to communicate with Andrew and inform about the situation, however this was not possible, because none of the teams had a signal to transmit, we were in a bind, but we had our minds to solve everything that

we presented, I knew that all these guys were pretty smart, so we would definitely achieve something good with all this.

We all woke up and around us were no longer the seven creatures we had seen the previous night, we ate a little and got hydrated, and decided to bury Samuel inside the structure, it was quite broad despite its circular shape. Then we would decide what to do about the riddles. In the corner farthest from where we had entered, we decided to bury the boy, it was a pity that we could not know him better and that he had to die so young, but we could not help it, we did not know that in this place there would be creatures waiting for us, It was not even written in the newspaper and I was wondering why; perhaps Jacob had been left alone there, and because he had the medallion, he was able to escape unharmed, but perhaps his ingenuity was not enough to discover a place where the material could be found. There were many suppositions, the truth was that he had returned, because after this expedition he had his first son and was present at birth.

We started looking at all the stones, they were too many, but only 8 were marked, only eight had a message, many of them had incomplete letters so it was really difficult to differentiate what each phrase said, only one of the stones had a legible writing, something that at first sight could be understood, "only through the weapon you will be able to reveal the truth, the key will be yours, the true look will reveal the truth". Weapon? How we were supposed to

see through a gun, we all read the message, and Noah was the first to say something, "you told me that the material we were looking for was a kind of protection, that is, a weapon", and I did not let I finished talking when I asked him to point if I cross to the rocks to see if he could visualize some hidden message, for a moment we all felt extreme happiness, however Noah went all over the place, but could not see anything, one by one the boys They took turns, so in the end I was just left, and I placed the cross near my eyes, I did it because it was my turn, but in reality I had no hope of seeing something that eight people before me did not see. Then he revealed to me a message on the biggest stone, he was impressed and everyone could see it.

"You have become a warrior to the place where you will find salvation, you and your faithful knights will find the help they need, they should only raise their hope together, only in this way they will reach the heart of the weapon", this was the phrase contained in the biggest stone of the place , then I looked at all the stones and in some you can see the numbers from 1 to 9 in a clockwise direction, these numbered stones were separated by others that only said, the garden of hope, I immediately understood it, we had to put each one in front of one of the stones, and look for some kind of button, or something that could trigger or trigger a reaction, or could show some secret place, we all search without stopping any sign of these, but unfortunately we find none, even so we had come very far to stop at that moment. Simon

stumbled and pressed the place where the number was with the palm of his hand, the huge rock made a noise, like a crack and changed size, was in a much higher place than before, this was the inscription when He said we should raise our hopes.

Each one was placed in position and one by one was working the stone, in order, as was described in each of these, then the process started, we saw how the creatures that had returned felt great fright, they fled as soon as the stones they began to move. It was a very good sign, but suddenly, one by one the boys were transforming into a beam of light, and I was left completely alone, I was afraid of suffering the same fate, but I had reached where no one had before, I saw as all my companions disappeared, and when I thought it was my turn, a louder crunch from the center listened to the structure. The earth was opened, revealing in its hole some stairs that led to the depth of this temple. I had no fear, I felt safe and had the cross that Noah had lent me to read the phrases carved in each stone.

I went completely to the hole, and decided to go down the stairs, inside my tool bag had a flashlight, I decided to use it, so I started to descend, five minutes later I found myself before a door, it was unlocked, I turned the goatee and my eyes lit up when I saw a rock, medium size, aquamarine green, like my eyes, like the medallion of Andrew and like the cross of Noah, I took the material and put it in my backpack, I had to go back to the surface in order to find some way for the boys to

come back, I did not want to leave this place alone, they wanted to find some way to make them come back, I looked for inscriptions again in each of the stones, and something showed before my tired eyes.

"You have returned, warrior to your place of origin, you have freed yourself from this curse, and now it is your duty to fight for your convictions."

And that was the only trace that remained of the brave people that came with me, I was trying to think how I would explain to their families that they would never see their loved ones again, although most of the people who took this job were

loners, and They had lost everything, they wanted to make sense of their lives or to be completely distracted from the cruel reality that was coming every day for us. Being on the surface, I went back to check my backpack, I could not believe I got the material, I took out the stone again, but this time I wrapped it in a better way, so that it could not be mistreated or lost, I did not understand why my companions They had left and I had not, so I started my trip back, alone, or rather, in the company of the cross that Noah had given me, and a huge desire to survive. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**