



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – AND EVERY DAY A PARADE by Tom Koperwas. Mr. Koperwas is a retired teacher living in Windsor, Ontario, Canada who aspires to write short stories of horror, crime, fantasy, and science fiction. His work has appeared in: *Anotherealm*; *Jakob's Horror Box*; *Literally Stories*; *The Literary Hatchet*; *Literary Veganism*; *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*; *Corner Bar Magazine*.

Page 4 – WANT NOT by Alyssa Beatty. Ms Beatty holds an MFA from UT Austin. She works in a veterinary clinic. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and three cats.

Page 7 – THE GORGON by Emma Deimling. Emma Deimling is a queer writer who currently works as a writing tutor in the Ohio State University's writing center. She has been published in numerous magazines, the most recent being *The Broadkill Review*.

Page 9 – LONGING by Reuben Rivers and Darren Rogers. Avrohom Goldgrab - writing as Reuben Rivers - lives in New York, where he studies writing and wants to eventually make a living of it. Darren Rogers is a writer based in Texas where he edits *Imaginary Worlds* magazine.



# “AND EVERY DAY A PARADE”

by TOM KOPERWAS

The first things Pops noticed when he jumped off the end of the Grand Ohio & Michigan maglev freight car, as it meandered slowly through the Greater Detroit Transport Marshaling Yards, were the unfamiliar sounds and smells of exotic animals. Curious, the old man gripped the worn-out satchel stuffed with his life's belongings and walked past the yard's graffiti-spattered equipment and cars, toward the roaring of lions and trumpeting of elephants emanating from the Hamtramck Space Port.

The Port's warehouses were abuzz with activity: supervisors barking out orders to android teamsters, robot cranes hauling cages filled with restless leopards and sleepy-eyed lizards, sharp-eyed inspectors affixing seals to space-bound cargo containers. In the midst of this swirling activity sat an enormous 500-pound man on a portable floating chair, wearing a black velvet suit and tie, his commanding face marked by a bold forehead and a trim Van Dyke. The big man calmly directed the various undertakings through a pair of red retro smart-glasses. On the ground next to him lay his companion, a ten-foot, slate-gray dog-like beast with prominent fennec-fox ears and a mark in the middle of its forehead shaped like a four-pointed star, flanked by large, electric-green eyes.

Pops walked up to the big man, smiled, and extended a gladhand, like he'd done a thousand times before to a thousand strangers. "Excuse me, sir," he said humbly. "Could you help a man who's down and out? Don't get me wrong, I'm not looking for a handout. What I need is work. Any kind of work. Pops is the name."

The big man raised his smartglasses and examined Pops' hand with its yellowish nails and fingers. Then he looked at the bluish-black lips that had smoked a million cigarettes, the jaundiced facial skin with its deeply furrowed cobblestone wrinkles, and the bloodshot eyes that looked like a pair of soggy lifesavers adrift in a sea of whisky.

"I may have some work for you," he replied shrewdly. "If you help me, I'll help you. How does that sound? Theodore Tempest is my name." And with that he extended a gloved hand to Pops. "You approve of my transaction, don't you, Enig?" he chuckled, seeing the four pointed star on the beast's broad skull swell up with blood so that it resembled a bright, crimson sun.

"All the animals in the port are being loaded into ships bound for our customers on Algol 6," continued Tempest in a low voice. "That's where Enig's from," he said, affectionately rubbing one of the beast's

immense ears with his sausage-like fingers. “Now, it just so happens that one of my maintenance robots is in for repairs, and I have several space containers in urgent need of cleaning. Take care of them for me, and I’ll provide you with all the food and refreshments you could possibly want.”

Moments later, Pops pushed a mop and bucket toward the empty containers, taking little notice of the water splashing on his shabby clothes, and went straight to work. As he dragged the wet mop across the floors, he sang happily to himself,

*“In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
There’s a land that’s fair and bright,  
Where the handouts grow on bushes  
And you sleep out every night  
Where the boxcars all are empty  
And the sun shines every day  
On the birds and the bees  
And the cigarette trees  
The lemonade springs  
Where the bluebird sings  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains...”*<sup>1</sup>

The sun was setting when Pops came to the final container. Inside it, a small table and chair awaited him. Tired and hungry, he drew up the chair and sat down. Biting off a piece of bread from the day-old loaf sitting on a plastic plate, he took a moldy cigar from an open box and lit it, then he poured himself a glass of cheap corn whisky...

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Harry McClintock, 1928

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It wasn’t the first time Pops had woken up after a drunken binge, not knowing where he was. But this was.... *different*. He lay in a luxurious king-sized bed in the middle of a bright, pastel-yellow room, surrounded by paintings of crystal fountains and shining mountains. Sitting up abruptly, he stared with disbelief at the young, vital face reflected in the large mirror on the wall. “I must be at least thirty years younger!” he cried aloud.

Leaping out of the bed, he peeled off his silk pajamas and donned the dark blue suit, herringbone pink tie, and Park Avenue Oxfords he found spread out on the room’s dresser. Walking into the kitchen, he sat next to the prepared table and took a bite out of the Platinum Club Sandwich sitting atop a golden plate; then he took a Montecristo cigar from the teak humidor, and poured himself a glass of Angel’s Envy Bourbon.

Pops had a broad smile on his face when he strolled out of the kitchen into the bright blue sunlight, glass and cigar in hand. Walking down the gently sloping ground toward the large, ornamental gate at the end of the yard, he passed rows of fruit-bearing trees, miniature ponds brimming with liquor and lemonade, and bushes sprouting king-size cigarettes. Giraffes and zebras grazed peacefully on the far side of the tall fence enclosing the property.

A crowd milling about outside the gate sang out to him, “We love you, Pops!” and, “It’s a beautiful day now that you’re here!”

A colourful parade rolled slowly past on

the street, the costumed people on the floats cheering and waving.

Pops pinched himself.

Wincing, he said, "I'm awake, all right. And for once in my life, I have everything I could possibly want and need: a home, wonderful food, fresh smokes, plenty of liquor, and people who love me. I couldn't be happier."

Overjoyed, Pops raised his hand to wave at the cheering crowds.

Then he froze, as the figures on the street began to shimmer and waver as if he were looking at them through water. High overhead, a reddish-orange orb passed before a bluish-white sun, imbuing the sky with a wan purple light. All at once, the happy street scene became a denuded, battered landscape filled with dark, cold shadows. The floats in the parade were primitive carts drawn by massive boars; the people, tiny quasi-human beings dressed in torn and faded cloaks. Looking about anxiously, Pops saw a tumbledown shack where the attractive house had once stood. And the beautiful yard he'd strolled in was nothing more than a dirt run enclosed by a wire cage and a rusty gate.

Pops dragged himself back to the shack. Pulling open the creaky door, he entered and fell down onto a pile of hay.

\* \* \* \*

Pops opened his eyes and looked about at the familiar pastel-yellow room. Sitting up abruptly in the king-size bed, he stared at the solitary glove with the extra-large fingers sitting on the dresser next to his posh clothes.

"So," he said angrily, with a grimace on his face. "Tempest left me a calling card. It's his way of bragging that *he* came out ahead when he added *me* to the sales order."

Donning his plaid wool lounge robe, Pops strode out of the house into the bright blue light, waving exuberantly at the happy people congregating at the gate and on the floats rolling past. Then he looked up into the sky where he imagined Earth might be and shouted, "But *I'm* the one who came out ahead, big Mr. Business Man. All I have to do is close my eyes and sleep when the darkness comes."

Pops bent over and howled with laughter.

"Then when I wake up," he said, wiping the tears running down his face, "I find myself in a world of sunshine, friends, bourbon, and cigars. And every day there's a parade..." ❖

# “WANT NOT”

by ALYSSA BEATTY

For weeks now I can only lie in my bed, in the dark. I try to sleep or feign sleep as much as possible. The moment my eyes open the screen before me will begin an endless stream of content that I am meant to generate into product as reaction, emotion. My output has been sparse, inefficient. Mitera has become concerned.

She spins into the bedroom, headlights piercing twin tunnels into the dark. It may have been vindictive, storing her in an Old Earth remote control toy - not that I can control her. When The Authority gave me her Memory-Personality download, they offered an array of elegantly simplistic storage options. The toy truck puzzled them, but they didn't understand enough to see it as an insult to her memory. They don't understand me at all - that's Mitera's fault to begin with, so she deserves my small punishment. The whirl of her wheels used to make me smile, but lately those muscles have frozen into a pained rictus.

She flashes her lights at me, which means “Awake?” I declined to give her a speech program. Some people want to hear their mother's voice again. I am not one of them.

“Yes,” I say.

Mitera whirs around to face the AuthContent screen, and communes with

it via a nimble exchange of light. Those lights used to be beautiful to me.

A swarm emerges from the screen, med-nanos flying to my rescue. They enter through my useless tear ducts, the most efficient route into my body. You can't feel the nanos, but my human brain is still wired to be uncomfortable.

The AuthContent screen turns blue, her gentle voice echoes through the room.

“Are you still there? Are you still watching? Are you all right?”

“I am here. I am watching. I am all right,” I reply.

The med-nanos swarm through me, searching. Something is wrong, but they can never puzzle it out. They know that the problem is in my head, so they go to war with the bacteria in my sinuses, re-calibrate the fluids in my inner ear. They stream out and wait for me to return to optimum efficiency. I can smell everything. My balance is superb. But I am still broken.

The AuthContent begins its stream, pouring out news, entertainment. Mitera watches expectantly, waiting for my response. Fear, outrage, pleasure - even boredom would be useful. I can't even muster that. The generator next to my bed barely lights up. My emotional output isn't enough to power the lights in my room, let

alone the section of building I was assigned. The med-nanos hover uncertainly.

I almost pity them. The thing that Mitera left in me when she “birthed” me, the last sprinkle of seasoning in my petri dish womb, was an old, illegal flaw. A quirk of neurological wiring that somehow poi-

sons the soul. It is such an inefficiency the med-nanos cannot conceive of it, and so cannot fix it. Mitera thought it made her what she was, so she passed it to me. It was hers, now it is mine, and I wonder sometimes if the only reason she wanted to reproduce was to pass this flaw along the



line. Once her human body was recycled and all that was left of her was downloaded she ceased to understand the damage she had done. She exists now in a state of confusion over my condition that I used to find amusing.

I slow the AuthContent to watch the latest political recap, hoping that this at least will spark some response in me. We are still at war, it seems. I can't remember who our enemy is supposed to be. I close my eyes.

"Are you still there? Are you still watching? Are you all right?" I know AuthContent cannot sound concerned, but the low uncertain hum of Mitera's engine stirs sympathy from me. We are, the three of us, just trying our best to be efficient. Nothing must be discarded, nothing wasted. It was The Authority's primary programming, and since we let them take over that directive has permeated every aspect of our world.

"I am still here. I am still watching. I am all right." I force some certainty into my voice.

The AuthContent screen pulses gently at me before returning to the stream. Mitera's engine purrs. The med-nanos swirl back into the screen, satisfied: I have been repaired. It pleases me that I can lie to them, and pains me how easily they are fooled. The generator next to my bed hums, fed for the first time in weeks. It does not differentiate between my pleasure and my pain. None of them do, I realize.

I turn over in bed. I have not let myself fully feel my body for so long that the pain

of the sudden movement is a joyful shock. For just a moment I remember that I am more than a conduit for product, more than the switch that closes the loop.

AuthContent becomes alarmed. I am no longer processing the stream.

"Are you still there?"

I close my eyes.

"Are you still watching?"

I feel the rictus grin on my face relax.

"Are you all right? Are you all right?"

AuthContent's voice gets louder and louder.

I have decided, this time, not to lie.

"No. I'm not all right."

The med-nanos stream out again.

Mitera circles the bed, her motor a high distressed whine.

I open my eyes to let the nanos in. Nothing is discarded, nothing wasted. They will strip my flesh, atomize my bones. I wonder briefly if my damaged brain will cause them some infinitesimal moment's concern before they repurpose what is not useful and download the rest. I wonder what vessel will carry this sanitized version of myself, and who will choose it for me. The last thing I see is twin beams of light, tunneling through the darkness. ❖

# “THE GORGON”

by EMMA DEIMLING

Rose Burden was not having a good work day at the antique shop. First off, the swan cloaks had made a mess in the closets fussing with their plumage and spraying feathers all over the place. Then there had been the gaggle of hobgoblins she had found sleeping in the phoenix nests in the rafters. Upon discovery, they had promptly began hurling down all the snippets of gold and silver they had accrued from around the shop onto her head until she sent them scurrying away with a barely functional candle lighter.

And finally, there had been the gorgon.

Rose had been in the armory room impatiently shining the shields (even the ones the size of thimbles) when one in particular had caught her attention. The image engraved on the untainted silver was of the head of a woman. Her face was in an agonized scream imbued with hatred and heartbreak. Her hair was a tangle of hissing snakes twisting about her brow.

A gorgon.

Rose wondered if the shield was on the sphinx’s “do not touch” list. Although she thought it most likely was, since everything in the shop seemed to be on the “do not touch” list. She moved closer to the weapon, transfixed by the woman’s monstrously beautiful features. Her eyes were

outlined in gold, and the snakes’ heads were carved so precisely they seemed to be moving.

She froze.

That was because they *were* moving.

Rose jerked back just in time as one of the serpents’ heads came alive and lunged for her. Scrambling back, she reached for one of the swords and swung it at the snake’s neck. The blade snapped in two when it connected with the serpent’s body. She groaned and shut her eyes as she remembered the stories of the foolish mortals who looked into the gorgon’s eyes and were turned to stone.

More snakes began to protrude from the shield as the woman’s face came to life—her mouth opening wider. She sucked in a breath before letting out a scream that split the air. The sound echoed tumultuously off the weaponry. In her haste to get to her feet, Rose slammed her head into a crate full of cannon balls. Unconsciousness plunged down around her.

When she came to, she felt the presence of someone standing over her. Thankfully, she had enough common sense when it came to meeting monstrous gorgons to keep her eyes closed. “Are you going to kill me, then?” she croaked. Her head felt like it had been stuffed with sodden cotton.



"I am not in the mood, actually," an angst-tinged voice replied. "If you keep your eyes closed, you should be fine. Do you need any help getting up?"

"That would be great," she grunted, fumbling for the gorgon's hand. A second later, the gorgon lugged her back onto her feet.

"I'm Medusa," the gorgon supplied.

"Rose," she answered, clumsily reaching out and shaking Medusa's hand.

"Thanks for getting me out of there, by the way."

"How long were you stuck in that shield?" she asked. Secretly, she wondered if the gorgon was toying with her.

"Centuries. Those damned Greek boys always trying to be heroes, you know."

"You mean Perseus?" she said, recalling the myth. "*Gah*, was that his name? I did not have time for pleasantries since he decided to take a sword to my neck. It is not like I meant to turn any of those people to stone, anyways. They should have blamed Athena—she is the goddess who cursed me in the first place."

Rose's mind raced. "Hey, I have an idea—something that could help you. Do you see my book bag lying over there near the door?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Inside, there is a pair of what the people of this century call sunglasses—you can put them over your eyes."

"You are not going to try to cut my head off when my back is turned, are you?"

"My eyes are closed," she retorted.

"That didn't stop Perseus."

"I promise I will refrain from beheading you."

"Alright," Medusa sighed. A moment later, Rose heard the telltale sounds of the gorgon rummaging around in her bag. "Why is everything so dark now?" she asked.

"They're sunglasses," explained Rose, "they block out the sun and hopefully those stoning powers of yours as well. Oh, and put this on." She shrugged off her hoodie and handed it to Medusa. "Make sure you pull the hood over all those snakes."

"I know."

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"It's your funeral if it doesn't work," the gorgon retorted.

Hesitantly, Rose opened her eyes. A girl about her height stood in front of her, all curves and deeply bronzed skin. A few stray black curls peaked out from under the hoodie where the shadow of writhing snakes hid underneath the cloth. A pair of Mickey Mouse sunglasses that she had found earlier that day in a crate mixed in with a bunch of girdles and outdated Grecian footwear perched on the edge of the gorgon's thin nose. She sucked in her breath, but thankfully she didn't turn to stone.

Medusa grinned. "It worked."

"I guess it did," Rose said with a smile. "Why do I feel like we are going to be great friends?"

"We already are," the gorgon replied. ❖

# “LONGING”

by REUBEN RIVERS AND DARREN ROGERS

Maxwell sat on a hard bench in Central Park, watching a couple kissing. Couples strolled and roller-skated by, their faces illuminated by the bright lamps. The air was stale and humid, oppressing even, but it was better than being back home; anything was. He turned and guzzled down a Coke, mumbling. Shouts of laughter and play reached his ears, scattering and disturbing his thoughts like a gust of wind. If only he had a girlfriend, then he wouldn't be here moping around.

But he didn't. His worn sneakers scuffed the gravel beneath his feet. All those kids out there, they had it easy, never had to deal with heartbreak, or taxes, or the electricity turned off because the company hadn't been paid in two months. Ever since Dad had died. It had been Dad who had helped him make friends, get him over his fears, kept their small family together. It isn't fair. Life ain't fair, deal with it, Dad used to say. But that had been before the car crash. He had been the breadwinner, and now, now it's me. Working at a coffee shop for minimum wage, instead of going to school like any other sixteen-year-old should be doing.

He squinted through his thick glasses, trying to make out if he knew anyone there. No one paid him any heed; they were all

intent on having fun. It was as if he were invisible.

Good for nothing.

A quick, bright white light flashed over the bushes, momentarily blinding Maxwell, then was gone as quickly as it had come. Maxwell looked around, but no one else had noticed anything. Probably just a beat cop running couples out of the bushes from making whoopie, he decided.

As he got up to throw away the coke can, he saw a figure stumble out of the bushes, look both ways then walk to the north side of Central Park. Strange.

The park was emptying, soon it would be dangerous here. Better to just go home.

As Maxwell turned to go, the large bushes again caught his eye. Where in the world had the man come from? The bushes were thick and thorny; he couldn't think of a reason why someone would enter them willingly. He cautiously peeled them back and gasped.

Strange, gleaming metal, reflected the moon's light; rusted yet sturdy, it made up a large sphere. There was no noticeable opening in the sphere but Maxwell felt sure he knew what it was.

That had not been a man who had walked out of the bushes, or at least, not a regular man.

Maxwell peered after the retreating figure. The man walked quickly, yet in an unnatural way as if he had a slight limp. A cloak was thrown over his tall shoulders, showing little skin. In every aspect, he seemed normal. But there was something, something known to anyone who had ever walked planet earth that they exerted automatically, that, although he followed every other classifying factor, this man lacked.

The man's fast gait carried him further from Maxwell, and he was nearly gone from sight when he shimmered. For a second, he seemed to be something from another world—the dimensions were all wrong—as if Maxwell could only see him in three dimensions when the creature was really contained in four or five. What could be seen was horrifying enough, strange tentacles so hideous, and the arms—Maxwell shuddered. It was too strange to contemplate. Already the thing had turned back into a human. The brief vision was faded and hazy, its details gone with the wind.

Maxwell felt giddy. This was something he had to find more about, no matter the cost. He would trail this alien, he decided, see where it would go.

He broke into a run, trying to keep the alien in sight.

“Oof!”

Something crashed into him, and his feet were knocked out from under him.

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” A tall, pretty-looking girl stood there on skates, looking to be about his age. Maxwell rubbed his bruised knees and looked up at her. She wore blue denim jeans, torn, but not artificially, and

she had a hard look about her, something that didn't match up with her kind face. Her blond hair flowed through the breeze.

He was conscious of his face beginning to warm. The girl was talking. “And then, kind of lost control, you know?” She giggled.

“I— I'm Maxwell,” he managed, realizing as soon as he said it that it was possibly the dumbest thing to have said in the situation.

She looked at him strangely. He could imagine what he looked like to her: overweight, glasses, oily hair, round face with a strange stubble growing out. A geek. Why couldn't I have stuck to that exercise program I started?

He knew why. Didn't want to think about that right now. The answer could be expressed in one word: Mom.

Someone called to the girl, and she looked relieved. With a “Well, sorry again for disturbing you,” she skated away from him and was gone as quickly as if repelled by a magnet.

He considered going home. It was late, Mom might get worried.

Yeah, right, Mom didn't get worried till the whiskey pantry was empty, and even then, not about him.

Maxwell stood there, watching the girl skate away, rubbing his stomach as a warm pitted feeling overcame him.

He gazed longingly towards home, but a shiver ran down his body at the dreaded thought of facing his mother.

He finally turned, deciding to try again to follow the stranger. Who knew? This

could be the best thing that could happen now in his life.

He walked with a purpose, trying to find the cloaked stranger. Several times, he ran into fellow New Yorkers as they mumbled, cussing him out for running into them. He shook his head and continued, anxious at the thought of losing the stranger and never finding out who or what he was.

After a while, Maxwell stopped walking and stood there, looking around. He felt tired and hungry. His curiosity was depleted, and all he really wanted to do was to go home and crash in front of the TV with a stack of Oreos.

As people rushed past, he glanced over at Chiggy's Electronic Depot across the street on E. 28th Street; the stranger was standing there in front of the glass window, staring intently at the TVs displaying through the glass. A lot of people gave him strange stares as they walked by him.

He quickly crossed the street amid loud car horns and people yelling at him. The stranger was talking to himself loudly. People stared. They think he's just another lunatic, thought Maxwell. If only.

The stranger glanced up and looked towards Maxwell, then took off at a brisk pace. Maxwell tried to keep up but lost the stranger again in the mass, chaotic crowds of New York streets.

Winded and tired, Maxwell stopped near a vacant lot in between two apartments. His breathing was ragged and short. He leaned over, trying to catch his wind when he heard voices coming from the

empty lot.

He sped over to the empty lot and saw the stranger on the ground, surrounded by a couple of thugs kicking him over and over.

Maxwell paused, unsure if he wanted to intervene. He'd always wanted to be a hero, ever since reading those comic books. More than that, it was his duty, he felt, to protect this mysterious stranger. He had been the first to find him, after all.

But he had never been in a real fight—he avoided pain like the plague. If these thugs started whaling on him, he'd probably cry like a baby.

The stranger lying on the ground gurgled and groaned. Even if it wasn't human; it still had feelings, pain receptors. It might die.

He clenched his fists. That was it. He was going to help this stranger, no matter the pain. He stood up straight, puffing his chest out and flexing his arms, which, on further reflection, looked rather wimpy.

Maxwell attempted to deepen his voice. "What's going on here?"

A man with greased back black hair with beady eyes turned to Maxwell. "This ain't none of your business, kid, so beat it."

Maxwell looked at the tall, well-built man standing in front of him and gulped. "I think what you're doing to this defenseless man is a crime. If you don't stop, I'll report you to the cops."

The shorter, rounder bald guy finally stopped kicking the stranger and turned around to face Maxwell. "Oh, really now. Like I said, puny kid, this is nonna your

business. Now scam before we whale on you.”

Maxwell glanced at the two men who were both making a fist and pounding it with their hands. Maxwell felt some of his newfound courage vanish. His heart thudded, and every instinct told him to listen to these men and run away while he still could. He said lamely, “I’m sorry to bother you, but I don’t really like confrontations. So, if you would please leave this man alone, I’d really appreciate it.”

Both men threw their heads back and roared with laughter, which echoed around the empty lot.

Black greaser hair guy spoke. “This wimpy kid doesn’t like confrontation. Then go home to ya mama and let us be.”

The bald guy turned back to the stranger, who was sitting up. “Hey, where do you think you are going?” He started kicking him again.

The stranger fell back down on the dirt, whimpering, curled up in a fetal position.

Maxwell looked at the stranger moaning on the ground and looked at the bald guy. His face contorted with anger and he rushed the bald guy.

Bald guy looked up in time to see Maxwell running towards him with his fists up. He dodged easily. Maxwell tripped and fell over the stranger, landing in the dirt on the other side of the stranger. The bald guy roared with laughter.

Black-haired greaser walked up to Maxwell and landed a powerful punch to the side of Maxwell’s jaw. “I.” The man landed another blow. “Told.” He punched

Maxwell again. “You.” Another punch to the jaw. “To leave.”

Blood oozed out of Maxwell’s mouth. Tears formed in his eyes.

The bald guy walked up to the other side of Maxwell. “Aww. Itty bitty baby here is crying. Well, I hate babies.” The bald man began to kick Maxwell in the stomach.

“Oof. Ouch! Ow, stop! I’ll report you—OW! That hurt!—to the freaking—ow!—cops.” Maxwell groaned. Every part of his body hurt. Especially parts which he didn’t think were supposed to be kicked at. They collected in a maelstrom of pain and agony, sharp and—ooh!—dull.

Maxwell felt himself losing consciousness.

It was then that the black greaser hair guy briefly looked over at the stranger, and his eyes widened in fright.

The bald guy stopped kicking Maxwell. “What’s the matter? Cops?”

Black-haired guy pointed towards the stranger. “Did you see that? The guy lying next to this wimpy kid, one minute he was human, next, I don’t know what he was, kind of like blob-like stuff.”

The bald guy turned to look at the stranger. “I don’t see anything but a homeless dude and some wimpy kid. Besides, the homeless dude had no money on him. Let’s just get out of here before someone actually does call the cops.”

Black-haired guy stood up, brushing himself off. “Yeah. I think you’re right. Let’s get out of here. No way I’m going back to the slammer.”

The guys ran out of the empty parking

lot and back onto the crowded night street, acting nonchalant.

The stranger slowly pushed himself up from the dirt, wiped away green blood, and glanced over at Maxwell who was still unconscious. He spoke in a strange language and crawled over to Maxwell. He waved his hand over Maxwell's body and sighed. Slowly his hand repeated the motion and a white light emanated. After a few minutes, he lay back down on the dirt beside Maxwell, looking up at the night sky.

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Maxwell woke and looked around him. He uttered a muted shriek when he saw the man sitting in lotus position, staring intently at him. "So, it wasn't a dream, then?" he asked.

"For the best dreams and sleep, Altice Mattresses, when you have that one punch of a day, gives you the best dreams and sleep."

Maxwell stared at the man bewilderedly. "I got punched—" he prodded his face—"here, and here, and here. Now I feel fine. Strong. This can't be real. Are you real?"

"Mike Tyson has the one-two-three punches that will knock anyone right out."

"What?"

"How I say? My language is complicated, hard to pronounce. Language from your world easier."

Maxwell and the stranger walked out of the empty lot and walked back towards Central Park.

"Why aren't you dead? Those guys sure were whaling on you pretty hard."

"We have what you call... self-forming

synthesis, transforming inanimate matter, regenerating. We achieved this what you call millennia ago."

"Where are you from?"

"A long ago, in a far far away galaxy, I come from."

Maxwell looked towards the stranger and snickered.

The stranger gazed over to Maxwell and cocked his head from side to side. "Lines are open right now, but we are having difficulties."

This just made Maxwell laugh louder. "What are you?"

"I am a living thing, not of this world,"

Maxwell smirked. "Well, duh."

Maxwell looked up at this alien who looked human. It was easy enough to understand him, despite his broken English. He'd evidently learned English from radio and television transmissions sent from Earth. Maxwell felt his lip again. No pain.

"You healed me?"

The stranger bowed humbly. "You saved my life."

"But how?"

The alien waved his arm in a way surprisingly human. "It is nothing, as you say. Simply a few transmutations of molecules, and it is done."

Maxwell flung his arms up in the air. "Okay. Don't expect me to understand that."

The alien did not respond. He just kept walking alongside Maxwell. Like it or not, this alien was the first person to treat him nicely in a long time, the first to treat him

as an actual human.

Maxwell and James walked in silence for a while. They reached the entrance of Central Park.

Maxwell turned to the stranger. "Come on," he said, "we need to find a place for you to sleep if you do sleep, that is, but to spend the night, anyway. You can bunk at my place."

A high-pitched yelp emitted from somewhere on their left side. Maxwell turned to see the pretty looking girl from earlier flying toward them. She smacked into Maxwell for the second time that night, knocking him off his feet and on to his rear end. "Hey, ow!"

She looked down with bashful eyes and reached out a hand to him.



“Danger. Danger, Will Robinson,” the alien warned.

Maxwell grabbed the girl’s hand as he stood up.

They spoke at the same time. “I’m so sorry.”

Maxwell blushed. “No. I should be sorry. I wasn’t looking where I was going. I was talking to...” Maxwell looked over at the stranger with bewildered eyes.

The stranger just stood there with a blank look on his face.

“My friend, uh, James.”

The pretty girl reached out her hand to James. “Hi there. Name’s Allissa.”

James looked down at Allissa’s hand and looked at Maxwell.

“In nature, one does not always know the customs of the people.”

Allissa looked James in the eyes and busted out laughing.

“Your friend here has one sense of humor.”

Maxwell looked over at Allissa, butterflies dancing in the pit of his stomach; but, seeing Allissa laughing, he couldn’t help himself as he joined in.

James looked at the two of them standing there laughing and shook his head.

Maxwell reached behind and rubbed his bottom. “Man, I think I scraped my butt when you knocked me over.”

James walked over and reached out with his hand and touched Maxwell’s butt.

“Whoa, whoa. What do you think you’re doing?”

Allissa giggled.

“I need to heal you again.”

Maxwell violently shook his head back and forth as he grabbed James’s hand and removed it from his butt. “No. I just meant that as a figure of speech. You know, to impress.” Maxwell glanced over at Allissa.

“At this time, we are having technical difficulties,” James said as he stepped away from Maxwell.

Maxwell turned to Allissa. “I’m sorry about my friend, James. I think he had a little too much to drink tonight. I’m taking him home.” Maxwell turned to James. “Come along now, James. Let’s get you home.”

“Home is where the heart is.”

Maxwell turned and guided James down the sidewalk. “Okay, buddy. Let’s get you home.”

Maxwell and James left the park, walking towards Maxwell’s apartment. Maxwell paused and turned, watching Allissa as she stared at him with lonely and sorrowful eyes. Then she turned and skated off down the sidewalk.

Maxwell looked after her and placed a hand over his heart, prompting James to turn and stare at him.

James reached out towards Maxwell’s chest. “Mayday, mayday. You are in pain. Let me help you.”

Maxwell slapped James’ hand away. “No. I’m not. Just... feeling.”

“Feeling what? Pain, hurt?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

Crickets sang in loneliness, in sorrow. The summer heat was a slow kind of sweltering.

They reached an old, familiar, scrappy



apartment building with paint flaking off. Maxwell turned and looked at the apartment building sighing.

James turned to Maxwell. "Is this home?"

"Yes, James. This is home. I gotta warn you, though. My mom is not all that pleasant. She can be...well, mean."

James cocked his head from side to side. "Don't understand: mean."

Maxwell walked towards the apartment building. "You'll see."

Maxwell entered the semi-dark lobby and made his way over to the stairs, James in tow. Inside there was no respite from the heat—it has been years since the AC has been used. The carpet was dark and patterned and stained.

Maxwell looked up the stairs and sighed again. James stood in front of the open elevator doors with a yellow tape slung across the opening.

Maxwell turned and walked over to James. "Sorry. The elevator is out of order."

"For a small fee, we will fix anything."

"Sorry, buddy. Nothing is going to fix this garbage elevator. We have to take the stairs."

They began to walk up the creaky stairs. They finally made it to the fifth floor, where Maxwell tiptoed down the long, dirty hallway. Raised voices could be heard coming from behind closed doors.

Maxwell padded down the hallway as James followed behind. He stopped in front of a faded door. James peeped around Maxwell, looking at the number on the door.

Maxwell touched the door handle, and it opened slowly. He walked into the dingy and unlit apartment. He noticed that James' nose twitched at the stale smoke odor wafting throughout the apartment.

Maxwell walked in and plopped down on the worn couch. James sat down next to Maxwell.

A familiar screeching voice came from the kitchen. "It's about time, young man. Where's my beer?"

Mom came out of the kitchen, looking worse than ever. Ever since Dad had died, she'd wasted away, rarely going out, drowning her sorrows by staring at the television with a beer and a cigarette. Her eyes had taken on a glassy look, yet somehow remained fierce. She couldn't take solace in the son that survived. No, that would be too reasonable. Instead she stored her last reserve of purpose to make life miserable for Maxwell.

She stopped in her tracks when she saw James sitting on the couch. "Who in the world is this?" Then, to James, "You think we're a shelter?"

"Mom, this is my friend, James. He's just here for the night, and I thought I would let him stay with us."

"A friend? Don't make me laugh." She marched over to the couch and gave James a once-over. "He's gotta go. I'm not feeding another mouth around here."

"But Mom, I told him he can stay here for one night only. Then he's going back tomorrow." Maxwell turned and looked at James. "Isn't that right, friend?"

"Howdy, Ma'am. I'm just passing

through.”

Maxwell’s mom turned and sat down at the kitchen table. “Ha. He talks funny. You brought me my beer? I didn’t think so, useless son of mine. I sent you out three hours ago to get me some more beer, and instead, you come back with some stranger who can’t even talk right. Just like you, boy.”

This wasn’t going to go well. Maxwell got up from the couch and walked toward her. “Come on, Mom. Be nice. James is a good guy.”

Maxwell’s mom stood up. “I don’t care if he’s mister goody two shoes, he’s not staying here.” She pushed Maxwell. “Now, both of you can go and get me my beer.”

Beer. The word stirred up such hatred in Maxwell. If only she would take a break for just a week...maybe... He straightened, but looked down at the worn, dirty rug. “Look, Mom, you don’t need your beer.”

Mom rushed over and got in Maxwell’s face. She reeked of cigarettes and alcohol. “What did you say, boy?”

Maxwell met his mother’s gaze. “I said, you don’t need your beer.”

Maxwell didn’t see the slap coming. “Like hell, boy. To live with you, I need my beer. Especially after your father left me, and I have to face you each day.”

Maxwell’s hands balled into fists at his sides. “You can do without it, Mom. You don’t understand what it does to you.”

His mom pushed him again. Maxwell just clenched his teeth, grinding them.

James stood up. “What we have here is a misunderstanding of communication.”

Maxwell’s mom gave James a glaring

look and pointed her finger at James. “You need to shut up. This is my boy, and I’ll talk to him any way I want to.” His mom looked back at Maxwell.

She slapped Maxwell again. “Now, go get me some beer.”

“I said no, Mom. You’re an alcoholic, and you need to stop drinking so much.”

His mom put her face up to Maxwell’s, her face contorted with anger. Her eyes were on fire, a reflection of Hell itself. She shoved Maxwell backward. Hard.

“I said enough, Mom.” Maxwell got back on his feet and pushed back. His mother teetered, fell like a tragic domino on the coarse wooden floor.

She lay there, disbelief in her eyes as she scooted to a corner in the kitchen. Tears appeared. “Why, Maxey?”

“I can’t take it anymore. You wanna know why I’m always out late? I don’t want to come home to you. A drunk mother. I do my best to come home when you’ve passed out, and I know I can sleep without you hitting me.”

James stepped in between Maxwell and his mother. “Dr. Altman is a psychologist, and he can help. So, give him a call at...”

Maxwell pushed James out of the way. “Please, let me handle this, James.”

James stepped back near the couch.

Maxwell was breathing hard as he turned and walked toward the door.

Maxwell’s mother slowly got up from the floor and grabbed an empty whiskey bottle, raising it over her head menacingly. “You can go to Hell.” In a second, she had traversed the five feet that separated them.

An inferno of hatred burned in her eyes.

Maxwell flinched, closing his eyes, preparing himself for the pain. But none came. He opened his eyes just as the bottle suddenly exploded into shards. He saw James, a half guilty look in his eyes as he lowered his hands.

Maxwell's mother looked at the remnants of the bottle in her hands and started crying. From surprise, helplessness, confusion? Maxwell didn't know.

"You just get out of here and never come back. You hear me, boy?"

"But Mom. I didn't do anything." His tone was pleading. He could feel tears appear, for the first time in months, warm and wet on his cheeks.

Maxwell's mom smashed the remaining glass shard onto the floor and sat down at the kitchen table, her face a mixture of rage and pain. "Get out, you no good of a son!"

Maxwell turned and grabbed James' arm. "Let's go," he said, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

They left the apartment and slowly walked down the five flights of stairs. Neither of them spoke.

#

The streets were quiet this time of night. Maxwell stepped silently across the road, toward Central Park; there was nowhere else to go. He did not check to see if James was behind him.

A voice spoke from behind him. "This was your mother? I did not know mothers hit their children."

Wearily, Maxwell replied, "Not all mothers are created equal, James. The

world isn't perfect, and it never will be. And I happen to be on the unlucky side."

"My name is not James, although I do think that you know that. Do you wish to call that woman, not your mother, just as you call me James?"

"Huh?"

James spoke in a surprisingly soft tone. "Do you wish she wasn't your mother?"

"What? No, it's just... complicated. I just wish she would be happier and nicer."

James shrugged. "I do not quite understand, but that is okay. Human ways are unfathomable."

Maxwell cracked a smile. "That's a good line. You should copyright it."

"I do not understand 'copyright.'"

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect you too, us being unfathomable and all that."

They had reached the square from earlier that night. The air was moist and ripe with the smell of forgotten fruit. Maxwell was not sure of what exactly to do now. It was not like he had any plan, and if the thugs came back, that would be, well, bad.

Maxwell paced back and forth. His stomach churned at the thought of spending the night in the park alone.

James pointed towards Maxwell's stomach. "Ex-Lax will help that constipation." Well, almost alone.

Maxwell turned and stared at James. He laughed. It felt good, to laugh like that. "I'm not constipated. Worried, yes, but no constipated."

"I am not understanding yet." James rubbed his stomach. "If not so-called constipated, then what do you say, what is

wrong?”

Maxwell sat on the bench. “I can’t go home. My mom kicked me out. I mean, we can try one of the shelters, but they’re probably full for the night. And I don’t know where else to go.”

“Then let’s follow the yellow brick road and see where it takes us.”

“Okay, then. Let’s see what happens.” Maxwell smiled at James.

They got up and started walking east out of Central Park towards the Neighborhood Coalition for Shelter.

Someone’s footsteps could be heard not far off. A savior? The thugs? Maxwell grabbed James and peered around the next line of bushes.

The girl, Allissa, he remembered, stood there, looking back at him.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“But how could you, if you are the one being asked?” James said, confused.

“She means that she could ask what we’re doing here,” Maxwell said uncomfortably. “Anyhow, I asked you first. You were here three hours ago; do you want to be mugged?”

“I don’t need your pity,” Allissa spat.

“I’m not giving you pity, I’m just curious why you’re still here.”

“Curiosity did kill the cat. This is another thing I have not understood. Are feelings so dangerous that they can kill?”

Allissa shook her head, nodding toward James. “Who is he?”

“I’ll tell you when you tell me who you are.”

“Me?” Allissa laughed mirthlessly.

“There isn’t much to tell. Mother died when I was a kid, father’s always in jail for something or other. My foster family never cared about me, so I ran away. Shelters are full, so here I am.”

Maxwell spoke quietly. “That sounds like something to tell.”

“Yeah, well, what about you?”

Maxwell shifted his feet, looked down at his feet. “Me, well I’m a regular cool guy, good at sports, you know—”

“Cut it out. Tell me the truth.” Allissa pointed at James. “Tell me about him.”

James answered before Maxwell could react. “I am what you earthlings call an alien. I have come to restore happiness to my people.”

Allissa turned to Maxwell. “Huh?”

Maxwell shrugged. “Beats me. He’s always saying stuff like this.”

“For those of lesser intelligence, I am a being whose society is far more advanced than yours. But we are too advanced. We no longer have any emotions, we do not crave happiness since all our needs are satisfied. Is this sufficiently simple?”

Allissa giggled. “I think he’s calling you dumb.”

“Hey! You had no idea what he was saying either!” But Maxwell couldn’t help smiling. Could it be that James had a sense of humor?

He looked over at James. No, nothing on his face that implied laughter. It was straight as a stick. James was trying to be helpful, nothing more.

“Let’s go,” Maxwell said. “This isn’t a

safe place to spend the night. I'm sure the guys we met before are still out there, somewhere."

"Yes," agreed James. "Yes, yes. Let us, therefore, brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years, men will still say 'This was their finest hour.'"

Allissa looked up. "Whuh?"

Maxwell couldn't stop a grin from appearing. "Don't worry about it."

They walked side by side. Maxwell glanced over at Allissa every so often. At one point, Maxwell began whistling. Allissa looked at Maxwell and glared at him.

He stopped whistling.

They reached a city street filled with cars lined up and down one side and the other. Maxwell stopped suddenly in his tracks, and Allissa ran into him.

She pushed past Maxwell. "Why the hell did you stop?"

Maxwell pointed across the street where two men were trying to break into a car.

"So, I've seen guys break into cars all the time."

Maxwell put his fingers against her lips. "I think those are the guys that beat up James earlier."

Allissa pried his fingers off her lips. "Get your hands off of me or so help me, I'm gonna scream."

"Don't you mean they beat the both of us up?" James asked Maxwell.

Allissa looked Maxwell up and down and busted out laughing. "I can see why they kicked your ass."

Maxwell made a coughing sound.

"They didn't kick my ass. They just overtook me. Yeah. That's what they did."

Allissa bent over, laughing so hard she gasped for breath. "You kill me."

James stepped in between Maxwell and Allissa. "I don't see Maxwell killing you because you are holding out for a hero, me." James pointed to himself.

Allissa and Maxwell looked at James and burst out laughing together.

James turned and looked at Allissa and then at Maxwell. "I do not understand what is so funny."

The two men turned their attention across the street and saw Allissa and Maxwell laughing.

One of them yelled out. "Hey, you. Get out of here. This is none of your business."

Maxwell stopped laughing. "Uh-oh. I think we need to leave now!"

The taller guy yelled at them. "Hey. Aren't ya the ones we beat up earlier? Yeah. I think it is." He turned to the other guy. "I think it's whoop ass time. What do you say, Benny?"

The men started walking across the street. "Yep, definitely. Plus, we got some nice eye candy we can have later."

Allissa looked up and down the street. "Guys. Get to that abandoned warehouse down the block. I'll distract them so you can get away."

Maxwell looked into Allissa's eyes. "I'm not leaving you. We can do this together."

Allissa gave a half-smile to Maxwell. "I've been living on the streets a long time. I know how to handle myself. Just go."

Allissa walked towards the two men and stopped halfway in the middle of the street. “Hey, you assholes. You’re nothing but pigs and worms whose momma shoulda never been born. Go back to the scum pond you came from and leave us.”

The two men stopped in their tracks and looked at Allissa.

“Now, that’s not a nice thing to say to two men who were going to treat you like a princess.”

Allissa raised both of her hands, showing both middle fingers to the two men.

Maxwell stood there, wanting to help Allissa, but she just looked at him and shook her head. Maxwell grabbed James’ arm, and they both took off running down the street.

The two men watched Maxwell and James run down the street.

The tall guy pointed after them. “You go after them, Benny. I’m going to have my dessert first, then I’ll catch up with you in a little while and we’ll have some fun.”

Benny took off running down the street, chasing Maxwell and James.

The tall guy licked his lips. “Now, princess, where were we?”

Allissa turned and ran like the wind. She zig-zagged left and then right to throw the tall guy off as she ran down an alley.

#

Maxwell ran, tugging James alongside him. His breath was ragged; he had never run for more than a minute at a time. Behind him, the thug shouted taunts and jibes. He may have been big, but he was fast.

Maxwell’s feet pounded the asphalt. He smelled the copious sweat that ran off him. The only thing that kept him going was his sense of self-preservation. James seemed to be doing fine; he was skimming lightly across the ground, occasionally slowing, hence Maxwell tugging him.

“What we have here is a misunderstanding of communication,” James called nonchalantly over his shoulder.

“Get over here an’ I’ll show you lack of communication.”

“What...” Maxwell wheezed, gasping for breath, “is... your dumb obsession... with lack... of communication? And don’t listen to him!” he said, seeing that James had been about to turn around and take the thug up on his offer.

James shrugged and sighed, continuing to run.

They reached a litter ground, broken bottles and cans; the smell of cigarette butts and spoiled milk filled the area. Maxwell tried to skirt around it, but there was no time.

He tripped, falling to his knees. His hand fell into something sharp, glass probably; pain and blood filled his hand.

The thug grinned, stopping short. “Well, well. What do we have here. An itty-bitty baby who fell from his cradle?”

Maxwell grabbed the nearest weapon that he could reach. He looked at it. A beer bottle, how ironic. He raised it over his shoulder.

The thug realized what was happening just as a sharp-edged bottle crashed against his thigh. He yelped in pain, starting for-

ward, but Maxwell was ready for him, and another bottle found its mark.

“You’ll pay for this,” the thug shouted, retreating, although the pain distorting his face took away some of the threat.

Some, but not all. “Let’s go,” said Maxwell. “That was easier than I thought. We’ve got a date with Allissa at that storehouse.”

“Date? I do not understand date.”

#

Allissa was in big trouble, and she knew it.

She flew through dark streets and deserted alleys, engaging dozens of short-cuts and hidden passageways, but the tall guy was still behind her.

He wasn’t talking now, just kind of grunting and running along, meant he was getting tired. But Allissa was getting tired too, and her legs were shorter. Her heart beat loudly in her chest, and she wished she wouldn’t have volunteered for this job. If only she wasn’t alone, if Maxwell were with her or something. She remembered how protective Maxwell was of James back when she first met him. She had assumed that they were best friends, turned out that he had known him for barely an hour, and still he took care of him.

But Maxwell wasn’t there, she would have to take care of herself. She shuddered to think what would happen if the tall guy caught her. No. Focus.

Fear lent new strength to her weary limbs. She had pretended to be confident, cocky. It was all a lie. The scared little girl who got bullied by her foster siblings, did

all their chores, and was their veritable slave, was still there. Still there, and more tired than ever.

A cramp developed in her side, and she staggered, trying to force herself to keep running. Trying, only partially succeeding. Then she heard what seemed like sweet music to her ears, the footsteps of the tall guy were getting fainter. The storehouse couldn’t be far now, maybe only a thousand more feet.

With her last remaining energies, she sprinted off toward the storehouse, her sneakers slapping against the gravel and kicking up a cloud of dust, a bitter smile of victory on her face. She had been saved, for now.

The door was open. “Maxwell,” she called. “James.”

“We are heeere, princess,” a familiar voice leered from the dark.

She started and fled. Heavy footsteps thumped behind her. Maxwell and James hadn’t shaken off their pursuer, apparently. The idiots.

“Ready or not, here I come,” said the voice.

Allissa leaped up some crumbling stairs, breathing heavily. She hoped she was safe for the time being.

The door of the warehouse creaked open again, and someone stepped in, slamming the door behind him. The police, maybe?

“Ah, Raymond. You’re here. We’ve got them cornered like mice.” Maybe not.

“Mice don’t usually get cornered, Benny.”

“Course they don’t, idiot. That’s why it’s all the better now that we have cornered them.”

A grunt. “Ah. But they aren’t mice, though.”

There was no light in the warehouse. Allissa snuck forward. The thugs continued to argue among themselves, paying no heed to who was creeping above their heads. She turned a corner and there they were, Maxwell and James. Maxwell put a finger to his lips to shush her, duh, she wasn’t dumb. Of course, she wasn’t going to make any noise. Then again, she had made the mistake of shouting their names in the first place, although that was only a problem because they had led one of the thugs to the storehouse.

Maxwell pointed to the window. Allissa nodded. It was a long way down, but not that long, fifteen feet probably. Hopefully, there would be bushes. Worse came to worse, James would probably be able to heal them. It would hurt, though. A lot.

Allissa looked over at James. He looked scared, in a kind of pathetic way, like a kid who doesn’t know what’s going on. As if James finally realized what kind of danger he was in, realized that life on Earth wasn’t all sweet-smelling roses.

The thugs were quiet now, their voices muted to focus their attention on the hunt. Still, from their footsteps, it was clear that they were far off, they had not thought of, or seen, the stairs yet.

James moved away from the window to make way for Maxwell, who was creeping forward. Maxwell walked, silent, stepping

onto several heavy-looking boxes. Then it happened.

As he stepped off the boxes, he set his foot down on a rotting plank of wood that was not quite part of the floor. The plank snapped, filling the air with the sound of a gunshot. At least, that’s how it seemed.

The thugs fell silent for a minute, then whooped and ran in the direction of the stairs.

“Idiot, idiot, idiot,” Allissa couldn’t help murmuring to herself, her words an attempt to calm her leaping nerves.

Clomping footsteps sounded on the stairs, growing louder by the second.

Maxwell swore and tried to tug the window open. It was stuck fast. He grunted, trying again, but none of his efforts came to fruition.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” The tall guy stood casually with his hands in his pockets, facing Maxwell, James, and Allissa in amusement.

The other guy gave a cluck of annoyance. “I wanted to say that. We had a deal.”

“Never mind that now. You can have first with the next thing. Meanwhile...” he ran his tongue across his teeth, then looked at Allissa.

Allissa spoke, tried to at least, although it came out as a squeak. Her heart seemed to be jumping out of her chest. Of all times, her courage had to fail her now? She avoided his eyes and tried to skitter away.

Not fast enough. The tall guy reached out a hand and grabbed her arm in a painful vise. She struggled, but he stopped her, pulling a knife and holding it against



her throat. A spot of blood appeared, although she barely felt it. “You’ll do,” he said.

#

The tall guy held Allissa roughly, a knife was in his hand, a centimeter away from Allissa’s jugular. A drop of blood appeared. “You’ll do,” he said.

Maxwell felt trapped, trapped, in fact, like a mouse. But he was not thinking about that now; blood pounded in his ears and fury overtook him. He stepped forward. “Now you just—”

“You make one more step, and this girl,” tall guy motioned with his head, “dies. Now you wouldn’t want that on your pretty little conscience, would you?”

Maxwell stopped in his tracks.

“That’s what I thought. So, what you’re gonna do is you’re gonna give up right now and admit that we’re in charge and we’ll think about letting her live after we’re done. Otherwise, she dies for sure. How does that sound?”

Maxwell clenched his fists, his thoughts awhirl, but he kept his outer expression under control. Allissa needed him. This wasn’t a question of his own life anymore. He had stopped caring, really caring about that a while ago. Yet this was a question of fairness, of an injustice, which, for some reason, was a more significant injustice than any Maxwell had witnessed before. He no longer cared about physical hurt. That was nothing. He dimly wondered if James had any of the same thoughts. Probably not; but it didn’t matter, not at all. The color of red obscured his vision.

Allissa’s life is in danger.

He lifted his eyes. “Sounds good,” he said, walking forward.

The tall guy stood smiling, but alert. Smart enough to realize that it might be a trick.

Maxwell walked with a lowered head. At the last second, he lunged forward, using his head as a battering ram, and plowed into the tall guy’s stomach. Maxwell caught the knife just before it dug into Allissa’s neck. The blade sliced into his fingers and he winced. But Allissa, Allissa was alright, just a little dazed.

Then the tall guy was up again, and his friend with him. A punch thudded against Maxwell, then another. Maxwell felt his body being battered from all sides, until the pain slowed to a slight dulling as the thugs vented their wrath against him. He groaned.

Through a haze of pain, he saw James standing there, an inscrutable expression on his face—was he confused? Allissa was getting up from the ground, determination written over her face. Benny looked over at her and shoved her, nonchalantly, but hard. She collapsed like a sack of potatoes.

But Allissa didn’t give up easily. She sprang to her feet, giving Maxwell time to roll a few feet away.

“Now, now. Don’t get any big ideas here.” The tall guy chuckled, pointing a gun at Maxwell. “You gonna come quietly, or are we gonna go bang bang?”

His grim-faced partner apprised the scene. “He ain’t gonna go quietly. It’s too late for that, this kid’s given us too much

trouble. I say just blow him to kingdom come. We'll worry about what happens later."

"I say, that's one of the smartest things that's ever come out of your mouth—"

"Thou shalt not kill." James seemed to be coming back to himself, whatever that was.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, forgot about him, the weird one. He was just quiet the whole time."

"So, we shouldn't kill, eh? Well, too bad, you should've spoken up when you had the chance, too late now, the verdict is in. Heh, heh."

"If no, then you give me no choice. Is what you want that?"

Tall guy swiveled the gun to James' direction. "Weird kid, if you wanna say something, then say it. Meanwhile, we have some unfinished business to attend to."

"Yeah," his partner echoed stupidly, eagerly. "Unfinished business."

Maxwell watched as James raised his hands, and for a second, he flickered, as he had done twice before, into something inhuman. Otherworldly.

"What the—" Tall guy was shaken for a minute, unsure of where to turn his gun. Then a box came out of nowhere, flying through the air and went crashing into his face. Tall guy fell to the ground, his eyes wide in shock and pain. The gun went off several times, and bullets flew in all directions. Maxwell and Allissa ducked for cover. Maxwell felt a thump on his hip, then acute pain. He collapsed again, groaning. He had to get shot, too?

But then the shooting slowed and stopped as more projectiles whizzed by.

The boxes in the corner were no longer mere boxes; now they were weapons. James' eyes blazed; his raised hands formed some magical power, causing the boxes to launch themselves at the two thugs. They cowered and hid, but somehow, the boxes always found their mark, thudding heavily against their faces and arms.

A moment more, then all was silent. Maxwell decided to convince himself he was dreaming. A good dream, then. Nightmarish, but somehow it felt good anyway.

Allissa ran over to him and did the unthinkable: punched him in the bullet wound.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"You dummy. I could have taken care of myself. I don't need anyone's help." Allissa's voice quavered, but she looked at Maxwell angrily.

Maxwell stared into her eyes. "But...but I'm your white knight in shining armor. I'm here to rescue you."

Allissa grabbed both sides of Maxwell's face. She seemed to be trembling in some sort of rage or insanity. "I. Don't. Need. Your. Help." She let go and raised her hand again, then seemed to think better of it. Instead she settled for a hard glare, breathing loudly.

"Yeesh. Okay. Whatever you say. Just don't touch the wound again, it really hurts."

"Oh, sorry." Allissa seemed to come back to herself; her face flushed a pretty

shade of pink.

They sat there on the floor, looking at each other.

James made a distinct coughing sound and walked over to Maxwell. “Would you like me to heal you, or as they say, do the both of you need a room?”

Maxwell looked up at James. “No. Thanks. I think it’s just a flesh wound, and besides, now I have a battle scar I can show off.” He gazed over at Allissa.

“Not in a million years, buddy,” she said, getting up.

But she reached down, ripped a part of his shirt off, and tied it over the bullet wound. Maxwell leaned in closer to her, taking in her scent. He closed his eyes, and puckered his lips as he leaned in—

She saw his movements and slapped him across the cheek.

“Are you crazy? What was that for?”

“You know good and well what for. You perv.”

“I’m not a perv. I just thought...”

“Thought what? Kissing you would be like finishing the action story. The guy saves the girl and the girl gives him a kiss for a reward?”

“Well, so what if I did?” Maxwell said defensively. He looked over at James who was ... smiling?

He hadn’t seen James smile before.

Maxwell couldn’t help smiling himself. Things had turned out alright after all, even if he had been hurt much too many times than he’d rather. He had made two new friends, even if one of them alternately hated him—there was still plenty of time for

that, for the relationship to grow. And James—unemotional James—had saved them. James finally understood how to feel, to be human. Maxwell turned to Allissa, who, upon seeing his face, (what was so funny about it? he wondered) burst out laughing.

James started laughing as well, although his became a howling laugh, like a deranged coyote.

They both looked over at James, then looked at each other and laughed even harder.

After a few minutes, James grew quiet. “Thank you, my friends. I have finally found what I have been looking for. I can now save my people thanks to you and your girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” Allissa objected. “Hold on a minute here, I never—”

But it was too late. A bright light surrounded James, and he disappeared into it, swallowed by the abyss.

The rays from the morning sun shone through the window as Allissa helped Maxwell up. “Well, this definitely has been a weird night.”

“Thank you. Yes, it has, and James has been even weirder.”

They looked at each other and started laughing again.

Allissa gave Maxwell a small peck on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for what?”

“Now, don’t go reading in too much of that, but thank you for being there for me.”

Maxwell blushed. “Sure. No problem. I guess we’ve both been subconsciously longing for something or someone. Now let’s

get out of here before those thugs return.”

“Darn tooting.”

There was a long pause.

Finally, Allissa spoke up. “I’m sorry about...you know...before. My life hasn’t been a bouquet of daisies, and—”

“Bouquet of daisies? What type of—Ow! What was that for?”

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is...I have these moments...Like, I didn’t really mean it when...”

“I got it. My mother...well, let’s just say she makes you look nice. Ow! You really

have to stop doing that. But still, I’m lucky to have her.” He took a deep breath, made a decision.

“Come on. Let’s head to my place. We could crash there. Besides, I’m sure my Mom is worried about me by now; and it’s time it’s we made amends.”

He reached out to grab Allissa’s hand. She smacked it away, playfully this time. They walked out of the abandoned warehouse together, the rising sun warm against their backs. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**