

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 7 Number 7

Page 1 – CORNUCOPIA by Braden Weaver. Mr. Weaver is a writer from Chatsworth, GA.

Page 5 – IN MANY WORLDS I LIVE by Mike Sharlow. Mr. Sharlow writes, “Recently, I moved from my hometown, a small city on the banks of the Mississippi to a big city in the desert. I traded the subzero winter temperatures in the Midwest for the oven hot summer in the Southwest. As far as I’m concerned, both are surreal.”

Page 14 – JOIN THE SLOPE-BACKED SOCIETY TODAY! by Charlotte Willow Detjen.

Charlotte Willow Detjen is a Georgia native with a passion for art and writing. She dreams of one day owning an indoor hammock and a houseplant or two that doesn’t die from her glance. She is currently working on a collection of short essays and a vampire romance novel she’s certain will still be trendy by the time it’s finished.

Page 17 – THE SPIRAL by David P. Rogers. David P. Rogers' poems, stories, and articles have appeared in various print and electronic publications, including The Comstock Review, Atlanta Review, Sky and Telescope, and Astronomy magazine. His latest work is *Roots of the Dark Tower: The Long Quest and Many Lives of Roland*, available from Amazon. More about David and his work can be found at [Davidrogersbooks.wordpress.com](http://Davidrogersbooks.wordpress.com).



# “CORNUCOPIA”

by BRADEN WEAVER

I wake up and I'm sitting upright and I mean straight up in bed with my hands wrapped around my throat thinking I am choking to death. I start to look around for help or for something to slam into my chest to dislodge whatever is stuck in my windpipe, and I realize I'm not even in a bed I'm on the floor of I don't know where and that's when I realize I'm not even choking to death I'm just hungry, I mean flat out starving. Stomach bile was coming straight up from my gut and making a run for my mouth. I manage to get some spit worked up in my mouth and force myself to swallow it and I swear I can feel it going down my throat in this big lump just like in the cartoons, all that was missing was some comic book GULP with a huge exclamation point at the end. I try to remember the last thing I ate, but all I can think of is the sour taste of acid in my mouth.

I stand up and look around for the kitchen, because why wouldn't there be a kitchen, but there isn't a single piece of furniture in this place, just walls and empty rooms where stuff might go. When I got up I trip over this whiskey bottle and the glass rings out ding-ding-ding across the hardwood. Now I can't taste the stomach acid anymore because of the burning

sensation of whiskey in my nose and in my mouth. I feel like I'm breathing straight into my nostrils, and I start to change the way I breathe, kind of out of the side of my mouth with my head turning the other way. The whiskey is all I can think about until I find these cabinets, and I sling them open, but they're completely empty, not even a roach is in there or nothing.

I bought the whiskey at J's. J's is this fancy bottle shop that I love going into. It's pretty much the only place I'll buy my booze anymore. There's always these fat people with big winter coats that make them look even fatter and maybe they've got scarves on, and they've got full bellies, and then there's a bum like me standing behind them in line buying a bottle of whiskey. The whiskey costs the same here, don't you know? Of course they don't, but I'll walk out behind them, and they'll get in their Chryslers with their fat, pale kids in the backseat while I get on my bicycle.

I followed one of them home one time. Some fat woman. She was wearing this god-awful hat that looked like a squirrel had climbed to the top of her head and decided to stay there for the winter. She had a car full of kids, I mean two rows full of them, just as fat and white as she was. She lived so close to J's that I didn't even follow her

really, we both just happened to be going that way. She pulled into her house, and that's when it hit me that today was Thanksgiving, because she had all of these cars parked outside and the inside was all lit up so much that, I shit you not, I could see her husband bringing this turkey to the table that looked like it weighed damn near fifty pounds. I could tell he was her husband because they had been together so long that their fatness and paleness had started to seep into the other 50/50 not to mention their snot-nosed kids somehow looking just like both of them at the same time. I watched the woman carry the bag of alcohol inside and the kids file in behind mother duck, and they all kissed their daddy on the cheek like some sort of Hallmark commercial.

That's when I got so upset that I decided to break in and not cause any harm but maybe steal something or something like that. So I went around and jimmed the back door and if I'm being honest, I'm not even certain the door was locked in the first place. The first thing that hit me was the smell. My God did it smell good in there and it was so warm that I took off my hat and just stood there for a minute. But I could hear all these dishes clinking together and people talking in the next room, and I got scared and just grabbed the first thing that I saw which was this tall paper grocery bag, then I slipped back out the door. I sat underneath this big tree that was right in the middle of their backyard where I could see them eat. All I could see was the dad at the end of the

table. He looked like a king, turkey drum for a scepter and bald spot for a crown. I poured the bag out on the ground and spread everything out so I could see my haul. There were like four kinds of Cheetos and boxes of single-packaged Little Debbie's and a pack of gum. I picked up the gum first and unwrapped and popped like three pieces into my mouth and swallowed the wad as soon as I tasted the cinnamon. Then I went after the Cheetos and I would eat a handful of them then eat a Twinkie or an Oatmeal Pie or a Swiss Roll whole. All the while, I watched inside as they went through their courses and broke the wishbone. I tried to eat everything, but I thought I would throw up, so I smashed what was left into the base of the tree and scattered all the wrappers and the paper bag out there in the backyard so they would think their fatso kid did it or maybe the family dog I was sure they had. I walked back to my bicycle and was surprised to see the bottle of whiskey in the basket. I guess I forgot that I had bought it.

It has to have been days since I last ate. I still don't really know where I am, but I get this feeling like I have been here before almost like *deja-vu*. I start to really look around now. This place has obviously been abandoned, because there isn't anything in the other rooms either. Just places that things should go, empty space. I find what has to be the bathroom and there's a sink in there, so I think some water will go a long way for my stomach, but of course water doesn't come out when I turn the handle.

I walk back to where I was and that's when I see him. There's this silhouette standing outside the door. I can't tell if it's maybe a cop or another bum, but they're standing right up against the door and it looks like they're staring in here. Nobody's home I think and slide down behind this counter to wait for them to leave. I sit down there for a while until my stomach grumbles so hard that I start to cramp. That's when I decide OK, I have to find some food. I look back at the front door, and, I can't believe it, but this guy is still standing there. I decide to just slip out the back, but I don't remember seeing another door and the only windows are right there next to where this guy is standing. I'll just leave, I think, walk right by the guy. But

what if he's a cop or mad at me for being here or something and he decides to get violent. I look back and the guy is still standing there. OK whatever, I think, and slip my fingers around the top of the whiskey bottle and edge my way along the wall until I've got my fingers around the doorknob. I push open the door, and I think the guy is coming right at me, so I swing the bottle at his head and bam I knock this guy's head off. I don't mean I just hit him real hard, I mean I actually knock his head clean off his shoulders. I see it go rolling and skidding across the ground, and that's when I notice there's even more of them like five of them and a few of them are little kids, too.

I'm in so much shock and horror that I



don't think of anything but run, get out of here. Everything around me is a blur, but I slow down and realize I'm not outside somewhere like I figured I would be, no, I'm in a warehouse or something with these big high ceilings and dim flood lights shining down. I see these decks with grills and chairs and fire pits on them and I see whole bathrooms and bedrooms just out in the open. Bathtubs and king-size beds with fifteen pillows on them just out in the open. Mannequins are sitting around cardboard fires and standing above stoves checking the temperatures of their plastic hams. I am in some sort of showroom. I must have broken in to get out of the cold.

I walk back to the house I woke up in, now nothing more than plywood walls

advertising vinyl siding and gutters and twenty-two different brands of shingles. I pick up the guy's head that I knocked off and place it back on his body. I step back and the mannequin family is complete and the whole family is waving at me. I get it now, I say out loud to them and find the exit.

The sun is coming up, and it is cold. I see a 24 hour diner that I know the waitresses at. They'll usually spot me a meal if I need one. But I have worked myself up too much. I no longer have much of an appetite. ❖



# “IN MANY WORLDS I LIVE”

by MIKE SHARLOW

Annoying David Alvarez was the shift lead for the gig today at the consignment warehouse, so he was responsible for relaying the clock in code to the other gig workers. I did my Covid health check questionnaire on the kiosk, went through security, then walked over to him and interrupted his rambling nonsense about the eggs with salsa and cheese he ate for breakfast. “Do you have the clock in code?” I asked.

“Yeah, bro,” he said then got a blank look on his face. “I forgot it.” He put on his readers, then looked at his phone to find the code on the gig app. The codes were always four digits, and he had already given it to the other five gig workers in the waiting area. He was a moron, and before he found the code, a woman I had worked with before said, “It’s 4262.”

“Thanks.” I walked away to wait for the warehouse supervisor.

David had an audience of three other gig workers, all young men. He was telling them about the concessions gig at the convention center. “At the end of the night there was all this food left. Burgers and hot dogs. They let me take a bunch home. You have to work fast, but the people were cool. And the girls, so hot, oye mamacita. Not like the girls here.”

The woman who gave me the code was

staring at her phone and acted like she didn’t hear David, but even with her mask on I could tell her face turned pink.

I worked about two shifts a week at the warehouse to supplement my retirement. David worked there every day that he could, and over the last few months I had seen him here more than I wanted. His lack of self-awareness was cringe worthy, and his very existence had become a pet peeve to me. “Why do you verbalize every moronic thought that comes into your head?” I asked.

A couple of the guys who had been listening to David laughed out loud. The woman, who had given me the code, looked up from her phone for a second and smiled big at me. I could see it in her eyes. I looked over at security, but they were too busy checking in the regular workers to notice to what was going on over here.

“What you mean, bro?” David asked then said something in Spanish that I didn’t understand.

“Forget it,” I said.

“No, homey. Tell me.” David stood and faced me. He was one of those people who wore their mask with their nose sticking out above it. It was more thing he did that bugged me. “You talk shit, now nothin’, pendejo?” he said.

I knew what pendejo meant. When I was thirteen years old my best friend was Mexican American, and his family spoke Spanish in the home. I learned a few curse words from him.

“Look at you,” I scoffed. “A sixty-year-old guy, gut hanging out. You’re no catch, pendejo.” David was a little taller than me, but there was nothing physically intimidating about him. He had skinny legs in baggy jeans. His shoulders and chest were broad, not massive. He looked like a guy who might have been an athlete in high school. Now he had the body of a blue-collar guy who had spent his life working at unskilled jobs. But when it came to fighters, I knew appearances didn’t necessarily equate to the ability to punch or take a punch. Most importantly, fighting was scary. Did he have a mean bone to tap into? Was his mean bone greater than his fear?

Before David had a chance to respond, the supervisor swung open the door to the warehouse. “Good morning, everybody! Let’s go to work!”

I was the first one through the door behind the supervisor. David slid up beside me. “I’ll be waiting for you outside after the shift. You don’t know who you messin’ with.”

“Okay, I’ll see you then.” I smiled and winked at him, but inside I felt unnerved and regretful. A long time ago I read an article that people who tend to get into a lot of arguments and confrontations were more likely to die violently. Road rage incidents were a perfect example of this. Just last week, not far from where I lived, two

guys pulled off the road to settle the dispute and one guy shot and killed the other. The premise of the article was probably obvious to most people, but it was an epiphany for me who found it difficult to avoid confrontation.

I wondered if David had a gun in his car. After work he might be outside in the parking lot ready to shoot me.

*Really? Is this what it’s come to?*

As we walked through the huge warehouse, I asked the supervisor, “Am I in the packing department today?”

“Yeah, you can head over there,” he said like he had more important things on his mind.

“Sounds good,” I veered off, while everyone else was led over to the picking department. I liked packing. You got to stand in one place on a padded mat instead of walking around all day on the concrete floor. It was also a bonus that I wouldn’t be working with David.

As I sent the packages down the conveyor to be shipped, I usually listened to podcasts, but I was too preoccupied with the impending fight to listen. I thought about telling the supervisor about the confrontation, but I didn’t want to ruin my chances of working here again. By the end of the day, the whole thing with David might just blow over anyway.

At my morning break I went to look for David. He was picking clothes for orders. It took a while to find him among the rows and rows of clothes that covered an area the size of a football field. He stopped what he was doing when he saw

me walking up. I stopped about six feet away, the arbitrary social distance and a cease fire zone. My legs were rubbery, and I could feel my heart in my throat. Even before I walked up to him I had no idea what I was going to say. All the options that offered a truce or an apology from me was unacceptable. If I capitulated I could never come back to this gig. Then again, if I lost the fight I still couldn't come back here, not without wanting a rematch.

A voice inside me kept telling me that it was stupid to fight him. but it also felt like there was something bigger at stake. It wasn't that David insulted the woman who had given me the clock in code. Yeah, what he said bugged me, but most things that came out his mouth bugged me.

I couldn't even say it was an ideological difference that I was fighting for, since I didn't know him well enough to know what he believed, but it was obvious that David spent little time thinking about what he held true. David was one of those men who behaved viscerally, instinctually, like an animal. Me? I examined everything. The dissection of every facet of existence was on my agenda daily. I was an ever evolving, albeit slightly neurotic, human being.

Still, was David's obliviousness a reason to fight?

David was fighting for pride. I had insulted his manhood, and he was defending that. Although it was simple and pure, it was also idiotic. Pride had a way of creating a greater good than there really was. I think it was that way for a lot of people who found it difficult to walk away from a

fight, like me.

I had my first fight for the greater good against Jeff Casperson on the playground during recess on March 8, 1971, the same day Ali and Frazier fought for the first time at Madison Square Garden. In the classroom, all the kids were talking about the fight and choosing sides. Ali's refusal to be drafted for the Vietnam War made him anti-establishment and represented those who opposed the war. Frazier, by default, in my opinion, became the opposite, and Ali exemplified this by calling Frazier an "Uncle Tom."

My dad, being an Ali fan (which made my brothers and me Ali fans), liked Ali because he was an incredibly skilled fighter with a brash and entertaining personality. The fact that Ali stood up for his convictions was respectable. And this was why about half of the general public hated Ali and rooted for Frazier.

In the morning Mrs. Ernst, our fifth-grade teacher asked, "Does anybody know what big event is happening tonight?"

"Ali Frazier boxing match!" someone blurted.

"Raise your hand if you want Ali to win," she said. Hands shot up, but before she had a chance to ask who liked Frazier the class erupted in opposing sides shouting each other down.

"Ali is going to knock out Frazier!"

"Frazier is going to knock out Ali!"

Then louder than everyone else, Jeff Casperson yelled, "Ali is a big mouth draft dodger!"



Even though Jeff Casperson had no idea what he had done. Mrs. Ernst saw the political divide in her class and immediately silenced her fifth graders and deescalated the situation by moving on to reading time. "Open your books and read quietly!"

It didn't bother me that much that some of my classmates wanted Frazier to win, but Jeff Casperson's personal attack on Ali incited me. At recess I told him he was an idiot for calling Ali a draft dodger. "What do you know?" he asked.

"I know Ali didn't run to Canada. Draft dodgers run to Canada. So, you should take it back," I said.

"Take what back?"

"That Ali is draft dodger." I was frustrated trying to think of the word that described Ali.

"He is a draft dodger," Jeff Casperson spit back.

Dawn Nichols who was playing near us and listening in said, "Ali refused to fight in the war. He protested it."

"Yeah, he's a protester," I said then smiled at Dawn nervously.

Dawn smiled back, and I watched her skip away, her short blue dress fluttering from the crisp March breeze. That must be chilly, I thought.

Jeff also watched Dawn for a moment then said. "Frazier is going to do this to Ali." Jeff awkwardly shadow boxed directly in front of me.

This made me even angrier. Right back at him I mimicked an Ali flurry in front of him, my punches coming within inches of his face. "This what Ali is going to do to

Frazier."

"Fight! Fight!" some kids yelled and formed a ring around us.

Jeff Casperson put up his fists. I circled him, and he turned with me on a patch of wet blacktop where the sun had melted the snow. Jeff Casperson giggled nervously, as we did a slow dance. I wanted to smack that big buck toothed smile off his face, but I was afraid to throw the first punch. He held a posture like he would not. Maybe he had one of those dads that told him. "Don't start a fight, finish it." Or Jeff might have been as afraid as I was.

Neither of us were wearing mittens or gloves, and our knuckles were white from the cold. The tension, like gravity, drew us closer.

Morning recess was only twenty minutes long, and Jeff and I hadn't encountered each other until recess was almost over. The bell would probably ring any second to call everyone back into class. At the moment the bell rang *ding-ding-ding!* I was like a boxer punching at the bell which was typically frowned upon and considered "dirty." My left hook struck Jeff Casperson in the cheek with a meaty *Crack!* followed by a harmonious *Ooh-Ah!* by the group of boys watching at ringside.

Jeff Casperson's eyes teared up, then he rushed me. I stumbled backward and landed on my back in the snow. In panic I struggled to get him off, but he was physically bigger and stronger than me. It was like fighting my big brother. Before Jeff had a chance to pummel me, Mr. Erickson, the principal, grabbed Jeff by the collar and

yanked him off. "What's your problem, Casperson?!" he yelled.

"He punched me!" Jeff cried.

"You attacked me!"

"Because you hit me!"

"Shut your big mouth, Casperson!"

Then Mr. Erickson grabbed both of us by the arm and dragged us to his office, our feet barely touching the ground. The rumors of heinous punishment doled out in his office reeled through my mind. As Mr. Erickson sat down behind his massive wood desk, I looked around his office for the infamous wooden paddle with the holes drilled in it. Rumors of it were legendary, but I didn't know anyone who had felt it or even seen it. My mom used a wooden spoon on my brothers and me. It stung and left small welts, but it couldn't compare to the damage a paddle the size of an oar could do in the hands of a gargantuan man like Mr. Erickson.

"What are you boys fighting about?" he asked.

"The boxing match tonight," I said and told my side of the story, and then Jeff told his.

Mr. Erickson quickly cut to the chase. "You guys aren't Ali or Frazier, and the playground isn't a boxing ring in Madison Square Garden either." Then he sternly lectured us for another five minutes about the dangers of street fighting. "Someone could hit their head on the hard blacktop and be seriously injured or even die." Then he sent us back to class.

At the end of the school day, we were sent home with a letter about our fight.

Our parents were instructed to sign it and send it back to school with us. This was our warning. Anymore fighting could result in suspension, or even expulsion.

My mom's reaction was, "What are you fighting about?"

I wondered how many times today I would have to answer this question. "Jeff Casperson said Ali was a draft dodger. He's not a draft dodger. He protested the war," I explained, remembering what Dawn Nichols said.

I was usually afraid of my dad's reactions. He was unpredictable, but in this case he sided with me. "He's right," he said. "Some things are worth fighting for."

"He shouldn't be fighting, especially at school," my mom argued and posed with her hands on her hips. "Thank God no one hit their head on the blacktop."

"Whose side is God on?" I asked.

"Sounds like you won, so it must be you," my dad said then laughed.

"Don't tell him that!" my mom walked over and slapped the letter on the kitchen table. "That just encourages him to fight."

"Never know, the boy might be the champ someday," my dad laughed then signed the letter. "Don't fight at school. And if you have to fight, fight on grass, so no one can hit their head on something hard."

I stood there quietly staring at David. He saw my nervousness, and he looked at me like a predator sees the weakness and vulnerability of their prey. "What's up, homey?" he asked with a condescending

grin, not unlike Jeff Casperson before I hit him. But after, for the rest of the fifth-grade school year, he avoided me on the playground, kept a wide berth in the classroom, and refused to make eye contact when I looked at him.

David's cockiness vanquished my nervousness and re-ignited my desire to hurt him. "After work let's meet in the drainage wash next to the parking lot."

"Works for me," David said.

"No weapons."

"I won't need no weapons, homey!"

David's laugh echoed loudly through the warehouse.

At that moment I saw red, and my face felt hot. It was the kind of anger that made me fearless, and I wanted to destroy him where he stood. I thought about how some weigh ins go between two fighters who dislike each other. They belly up and talk shit. Sometimes tempers flare and there's a push or punch. Immediately the two fighters are pulled apart by their teams. There was no one here within the immediate distance to stand between David and me. There were cameras everywhere, but by the time security got here the fight could be over.

I looked David in the eyes, as I pointed my finger at him.. "I'm going to fucking kill you." I didn't care if he attacked me, and the fight took place right now, but he didn't make a move and the look on his face changed from confident to concerned. The violent and chaotic energy bombarding between us suddenly crashed into him. He walked away and continued to pick clothes.

For the rest of the day, I visualized my

strategy. I saw each moment from the time I walked out of the building until the instant I walked up to David in the sandy wash among the Palo Verde trees. I knew the punches I would throw, and the sequence I would throw them.

When I was in my twenties I trained with George "Tiger" Markos, former light-weight contender, in a gym in an old grade school back in Wisconsin. I had a few amateur fights with a record of 4-0, and Markos said I showed professional promise. But then the old school was condemned and subsequently razed to make room for an apartment building. George never reopened another gym and my boxing aspirations died. I never really regretted it, because as a boxing fan, I saw what taking punches to the head did to a lot of fighters. They called it "punchy" which was really slang for Traumatic Brain Injury.

Now, at sixty-two I had been going to the Chavez Boxing Gym two times a week for the last three months. I pounded the heavy bag, drilled the speed bag, jumped rope, and lifted some weights. Every now and then one of the pros working out at the same time gave me a few pointers about throwing combinations and increasing my power. They called me "Sir" when they addressed me. The respect made me feel like I belonged, even though they knew I wasn't there to step into the ring.

At two o'clock the packing department took their afternoon break. After it was over, there would be about two hours left in the shift and time to fight David. As I left the breakroom to go back to my work-

station, I heard the lead guy from the picking department yell across the warehouse, “Heart paddles! Heart paddles!” to the supervisor who was near the packing department a few feet away from me. I knew the lead guy meant “the heart defibrillator” which was hanging on the wall just outside of the breakroom in a glass case. The supervisor grabbed the defibrillator and ran across the warehouse. I wondered who had the heart attack and how the lead guy knew it was a heart attack.

Well, apparently David approached the lead guy in picking department and complained that he had chest pain. A couple of seconds later he collapsed. When the paramedics arrived, they raced him out of the building on a stretcher with oxygen on his face. On one hand I was glad he was suffering, but I felt kind of bad that the stress of the impending fight might have triggered his cardiac event. I didn’t want to crush his heart, but I did want to punch him in the face.

At the end of the workday, I walked out of the building into another blinding sunny day in the desert. I put on my sunglasses and looked over to the wash where I was supposed to meet David for the fight. There were a group of workers from the warehouse gathered there in a circle. Most were men, but I noticed a few women, including the one David had insulted.

I walked over and asked, “What’s going on?”

Before anyone answered I saw David and wondered how this could be. Did I misunderstand who had the heart attack?

Was there someone else with the name “David” working in picking department today? The moment of confusion was made worse when I saw myself standing in front of David.

*How is this possible?*

No one looked at me or acknowledged me. “Hey!” I yelled. I reached out to firmly grab the shoulder of the guy next to me, but my hand touched nothing. It was like grabbing air, and I fell forward through him. The people were like holograms.

It all looked so real, but I wondered if I might be imagining it. Was I having some kind of break from reality? Did I snap under the stress of the impending fight that was about to play out in front me?

“C’mon.” David put his hands out and waved the other *me* towards him.

As I watched myself step forward, David balled his hands into fists, both held at shoulder height, his guard wide apart. I could tell that defense wasn’t on his mind. I knew exactly what I was going to do, and I watched myself do it. I stepped slightly to my left, his right, and threw the combination I had been rehearsing in my mind all day, the same combination I threw at the heavy bag in the gym. I flicked a right jab at his face to set him up for the digging left I hurled to his body. My punch landed with a *thud!* I felt his ribs bend to my fist, and he let out a groan that sounded like a cow. He stepped back and instinctually dropped his right to protect his side, but my next punch wasn’t going there. With his guard down, I launched a left hook to his jaw. It was reminiscent of the punch I landed on Jeff

Casperson but much harder and more technically correct. Spit flew from David's mouth, and his body fell in the same direction. It was a soft landing onto the sand.

The crowd was awed, and I felt good.

David laid there, unmoving.

"Get up," I told him, but he still didn't stir.

Someone bent down and shook him gently. Blood trickled from David's mouth. His eyes were half open. A woman put her Covid mask on and kneeled at David's side. She put their ear near his mouth to see if he was breathing.

"Is he breathing?" someone asked.

"I don't think so," she said, and she held his wrist to feel a pulse. "I can't feel his pulse either."

"Oh my God!"

"I called 911," a young woman said.

"Does anyone know CPR?"

I stared at myself standing near David. I had a look of fear and dread on my face. I had read about people who had unintentionally caused the death of another person in a street fight and were charged with manslaughter.

"I'll get the defibrillator!" someone yelled. I watched him run towards the warehouse, and as he stepped onto the parking lot he disappeared. When I turned back around, everyone else had disappeared too. There was no sign that anyone had been here except me, only my footprints where I was standing.

I walked to my car, and when I got there it was 4:38, about the same time it always was after I walked through the ware-

house and got into my car at the end of a workday. After the fight it should have been much later. Was it all a figment of my imagination, a hallucination of some kind? Did I have a break from reality? Maybe it was all in my head. But how did I see a life another *me* was living? It was one where I inadvertently caused the death of another man. It was a life that had suddenly turned tragic for another *me*. I felt grateful for the life I was living, the life where David had a heart attack, and I wasn't near him when it happened.

I drove, and for a moment I didn't know where I was going or where I was.

This had happened to me before.

Sometimes I would get lost in my thoughts while driving to a place I had been a hundred times before, and autopilot would take over. When I got to my destination, I didn't remember anything about the drive.

But sometimes autopilot goes awry. Once I found myself driving to a job I had for many years, except I didn't work there anymore. I was over halfway there before I realized that I left the job months ago.

This time autopilot failed, as my thoughts took me down a rabbit hole, and I drove miles past my destination, which was the Chavez boxing gym, the same gym I had going to almost every day for years. I found myself in the industrial part of town where there were manufacturing plants and warehouses.

My phone rang and broke me out of it.

"Hey, Dad," I answered then made a left at a sandy wash with Palo Verde trees

that looked familiar for some reason.

“How’s it going, Champ?” My dad had been calling me this since I was a boy after I got into a fight with Jeff Casperson, on the playground on the same day of the first Ali vs Frazier fight. My dad believed that I knocked Casperson out, but actually when I punched him, he fell down and hit his head on blacktop and got knocked out for a few seconds. Soon after, my dad took me to get boxing lessons from a local legend, former lightweight contender, Tiger Markos.

“I’m heading to the gym. It looks like I missed my turn.”

“Who are you training today?” My dad always took interest in my fighters.

“Some new kid.”

“As good as you were?”

“I don’t know, but I had the strangest daydream just before you called me. I was working at some warehouse, never fought as a pro. The really weird thing is that Davey Alvarez also worked there. He never became a pro either. We got into a street fight, and I think he died.”

My dad paused. “So, you did hear that Davey Alvarez *really* died today in Vegas?”

“No, I didn’t. That’s weird.” I felt a moment of panic. “How did he die?”

“The article didn’t say exactly, but it did say he was at a gym training some fighter when he collapsed. Sounds like a heart attack. The story was on one of those boxing news sites. That’s why I called to see if you heard.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You okay, Champ?”

“You ever think how your life might be different if you made different decisions?” I asked.

“Oh sure, who doesn’t.” He probably thought I was ruminating about my loss to Alvarez, so he said, “I still think you won that fight. It was close, but you had the belt, so you should have gotten the decision.”

I retired at twenty-eight years old with a 24-1-0 record. I won the lightweight title when I was 22-0 at twenty-six years old. After two successful title defenses I got beat in a split decision by Alvarez. It was twelve punishing rounds for both of us. I didn’t like Davey Alvarez. He was a big mouth moron, but he could fight. He hit so hard, harder than any fighter I ever faced. That fight took so much out of me, that when I healed and went back in the gym, I soon discovered I wasn’t the same fighter I once was, so I retired. There were moments when I regretted it, like when Davey Alvarez was called, “the fighter who ended Kid O’Shea’s career.” Those regrets were assuaged as I witnessed the physical and cognitive decline of other fighters that refused to hang up the gloves well after their prime, like Alvarez.

“I think you could have beaten him in a rematch,” my dad said.

“Well, maybe I did.” ❖

# “JOIN THE SLOPE-BACKED SOCIETY TODAY!”

by CHARLOTTE WILLOW DETJEN

Listen! We are the folk of the future, the Slope-Backed Society, the Look-Down Clan! We are the latest innovation in human evolutionary technology, able to live our whole lives in electrified little boxes without food or drink. We are hunchbacked monkeys who have replaced our tails with USB-C ports, modified for the singular purpose of looking down on this creaking world from the virtual inside-out. We are the rejects, the disappointments, the looker-downer progeny of a detestable lot.

Who?

I'm speaking (of course) of the ones who came before! The elders! Enemies! The final generation of analogue straight-standing cooters, straights in straight lines straight from the 70's, who writhe with outcry over our tattoos, our piercings, our colors— holy war vestments in the battle against age! These dull enemies fear such modifications even as we refine them with each ticking moment; new drugs, new treatments, new technologies are all developed to serve the ultimate mission: to create a generation of biomechanical android shut-ins so slope-backed and snake-ish we gobble withered humans whole. That'll show them! And so we will slither, this apocalyptic army of forward-minded

individuals, to bring society to ruin under our fearful banner: *Millennials!*

Oh, do not groan and shrink now! It is the manifestation of our enemies' fear in a word! Celebrate our power in an utterance! *Millennials!* It is invoked in response to a threat, to ridicule and declaw certain annihilation with propaganda and lies. Ridiculous imagery is tacked to this word to mask an uncomfortable reality. For you see, we are the reapers of a dying era, come to collect the heads of stragglers, the foreshadowed Worst of passionate intensity, the ticking bombs who will end proper society— *Millennials!* Yet to hear it from our enemies' lips, we are a clownish wave—vegan transgender atheist homosexual homosapiens from the planet Mars who cannot drive a stick shift within a rank of one-hundred. Thusly we're mocked, reviled on Sunday television, cartooned in Hallmark stores, and likewise painted with strokes of silly fragility in all remaining asylums from the young. Ha! How are we to interpret such mewling declarations as anything but fear! They fear the name! *Millennials!* Will we not be the ones who breathe this browning air the longest? *Millennials!* The last word of the dying codger, whispered with a weak fist in the air against the backdrop of a thunderclap—

“Those goddamned *Millennials!*”

Hit the ground, follow my lead!  
Swallow, slither, gobble, eat! We are the  
natural byproducts of a consumption  
culture; who can blame us that we turned

out to be cannibals? Consume, consume,  
consume! They’ve wired us to eat whatever  
they sell, but how could we be satisfied by  
baubles or empty promises? We are the  
consuming public, so consume we must!





Come, curl hunchbacked bodies 'round wrinkled skin and squeeze for all they're worth! Swallow, slither, gobble, eat! After a lifetime of chomping air, let us set our teeth to something solid!

What, exactly?

All that was promised and more. We'll swallow their jobs, swallow their homes, swallow their riches. We'll swallow churches and swallow courthouses until we've eaten our fill of ancient principles and wiped them clean. We'll swallow their legacy and swallow their history, we will seethe over the earth and swallow anything in our periphery, and we will charge forward with open mouths to tear off arms and legs with our teeth until the final old fool fills our stomachs.

We are coming now— this shambling mob of interweaving, sloped-down bodies— marching with our heads down, without touching elbows. Enemies, try to run if you'd like. Dry land to run on is vanishing fast— who's to blame for that? Enemies, stake out a fight if you'd like. We are electrified under the skin with copper wires and crackling anger— our energy is fresh and renewable. Enemies, surrender if you'd like. Give us this world you've so thoroughly ruined— how could replacing rotten wheels with more rotten wood help the world turn? Surrender this dusty hellscape, or not. It makes no difference.

We are coming to eat you.

After, at the end of it all, with our enemies dead and our hunger sated, with fury pacified and humour restored... what will be left for us? Will we turn our

sharpened teeth into smiles at a new age, and see how far we can stretch in the dirt without obstruction? Anarchists by our very calling, what will be left for wandering slope-backs without a cause? Will we decide to construct a real, proper Slope-Backed Society governed by excellent principles of progress, rage, and rabid indulgence? Or will our passions turn us upon ourselves, to tear fellow slope-backs apart in bloody arenas for sport? Should we eat ourselves and end the cursed human line here, or raise a new generation to continue our work? How long can we weather time until collapsing into paradoxical conflict with our own children? To look vindictively at their alienness, for our minds and bodies to rust and slow, to be eaten the day after next ourselves?

The Hippies are memories, the Swingers are dead, the Naturalists are trees themselves by now. What is the point of progress but to prepare one's life as a ritualistic sacrifice for the young? We are dying, dying with each breath of poisonous oxygen to invade our lungs. If we plug our skulls into databases, will we become immortal? If we do, does an immortal consciousness live? What if we don't? What if we fail worse than the last? What if we are the final scream before the end of all of mankind?

Listen! We are the folk of the future, the Slope-Backed Society, the Look-Down Clan. Listen to our nervous heartbeats as we worry through the wires in our walls. ❖

# “THE SPIRAL”

by DAVID P. ROGERS

Let’s get one thing straight. I’m a thief. Or was, anyway, before my adventure in the Spiral. I’m not embarrassed about what I did for a living.

Many—including the Prophets, the Moshedrin, the Jesada—would say I’m still a thief, whatever role I now play. Well, who isn’t? Everybody steals. The actor steals words from the playwright. The audience steals words from both. The reader steals words from the writer. You paid a copper penny read the book, see the show, hear the poem? A lifetime of work, joy, or agony went into those words. You could not begin to pay for them. Bankers steal from lawyers who steal from, well, everybody. And everybody steals from plants and animals to get the energy to survive. Animals even steal from each other. Stealing was the necessary invention without which evolution would have been impossible.

Don’t get me wrong, I was—and am—as fair and ethical as the next economic vigilante. Maybe more so. I stole only from crummy people who had more than they needed. That’s two criteria, mind you. Crummy. Rich. No necessary connection between the two. Looks can be deceptive on both points, but if you pay attention, you know what people are like. I’m also generous. Widows and orphans don’t go

hungry on my watch, not if I’ve got an extra dime. These days, I have plenty of dimes to spare.

I was taught how to survive by a kindly benefactor, an older lady named Gnessa. She was the closest approximation of a mother to me. I was an orphan before she took me in. My earliest memories are of scavenging in alleys, looking for food and anything of value. While I grew up, I never knew my parents or their fate, whether they were killed, died of some disease, or simply abandoned me.

I clearly remember the day I met Gnessa. One of her girls came in the alley to empty trash and found me about to make off with a half-eaten sandwich. I might have been seven or eight years old, possibly as young as five or six. Assuming the girl would try to take the scraps from me, or worse, as often happened, I took out my one weapon, a rusty-bladed knife, and waved it as threateningly as a starved waif like me could.

The girl, of course, had no intention of taking my morsel or harming me. Eventually, she coaxed me inside with a promise of a whole new sandwich, all my own. Since I had no name that I knew of, Gnessa, after hearing the tale of my discovery, decided to call me Rusty Blade.

Rumors sometimes whispered that I was the son of one of the girls Gnessa took in and looked out for. Looking out for them meant seeing that customers were respectful and paid a handsome but fair price for all services. It also meant seeing that none of them became mothers unless they chose to, and any child so conceived would have been equally well cared for, not abandoned as I was. So I know those rumors were false.

Gnessa taught me to be smart, to make certain rules and not deviate from them without good reason. First—and most important: no unnecessary violence. Redistributing wealth is one thing; stabbing and cutting are another. Knives and daggers should be employed only as a last resort. Bluffing, however, is allowed, even necessary. A good bluff prevents bloodshed. In some quarters, of course, weapons are best kept out of sight, lest someone take them as a challenge. Context is everything.

Gnessa herself condoned violence only in self-defense or defense of the innocent—for instance, if a customer attempted to physically abuse one of her girls. Such transgressions were well known to result in swift loss of certain small but significant items of the male anatomy; incidents were therefore extremely rare. Women also numbered among Gnessa's girls' customers, but they were never the violent ones. Never.

My second rule was, know your marks: did they have wealth that actually needed to be redistributed? If not, find a new mark. Rich people with ill-gotten wealth abounded, then and now. Consider the

risks and rewards, and choose accordingly.

A third rule was—and is—never forget the people who helped you, whether it's a guard who looked the other way, even for a small fee, or a scavenger who remembers nothing when questioned by the Jesada. I have a phenomenal memory, for faces, words, streets, places, so knowing who to trust has always come easily to me.

Finally, of course, work only at night. This one I adhered to religiously. On a planet where days each last for months, that means you'd better be ready for dawn when it comes. At least, if you want to eat and stay out of jail.

On Amalthea, each day and night is months long because the planet rotates at a leisurely pace. The moons, in contrast, pass much faster than the distant sun seems to. The brighter of the two moons, Persephone, orbits the planet in a couple of dozen hours. Demeter, the larger but more distant, and therefore dimmer, moon, takes a week, more or less. About one trip for Persephone's seven.

#

Sometimes the cards just don't fall your way, rules or no rules. The last night had been rough. One good heist, and a couple of cases where I had to abandon the job with nothing to show. This one was supposed to be easy, low-risk, just grab a rich jeweler who sold fake or stolen diamonds to other rich people. He'd gotten lazy, complacent. Or so I thought. I watched for a week and saw that Orson always took the same shortcut from his shop to the bank, through dark alleys in the part of town fre-

quented by drunks, ladies of the night, and, well, people like me.

It turned out he was not complacent after all. Orson had been recruited by the Prophets, for a specific purpose: bait. They must have paid him a lot or known some very juicy secrets to persuade him. For all he probably knew, I could have been dangerous, one of those unethical thieves who are just in it for the money, happy to stab an uncooperative mark. They promised him he wouldn't get hurt, I'm sure, but even Orson must have known that promise, like the jewels he sold to rich fools, would not bear close scrutiny.

On the fateful night, I heard Orson's approach and stepped from the shadows, into light calculated to gleam on my dagger's polished steel. Details are everything in a job like this—the brighter the shine on your weapon, the less likely you are to have to use it. At least, such is the case with a quivering bowl of jelly like Orson. But four of the Prophets' black-robed henchmen, formally known as the Jesada (and, informally, as thugs who will do anything to accomplish their masters' bidding), also stepped from the shadows. Their gleaming blades, already drawn, shone bright as mine and twice as wicked.

I was surrounded. Orson nodded at the Jesada and made his way down the alley, his part in my story finished. The thugs took me away without a word or struggle and tossed me unceremoniously into a cell with three incontinent drunks, a flatulent donkey, and a parakeet that could (or would) recite only doomsday prophecies

and threats of damnation for sinners. Of these companions, the donkey was by far the most pleasant.

Next morning, I was hauled before the Mosedhrin, the Prophets' Court, which in theory is subordinate to the civilian courts. In practice, the Mosedhrin is given almost complete free rein, especially in dealing with minor misdemeanors such as my alleged offenses, which amounted to petty larceny. Given the amount of gold Orson took from his gullible clients, I could have been charged with much more serious felonies, a discrepancy that puzzled me until I heard the choices I was given as my sentence. The trial, of course, took a leisurely ten minutes, including the reading of the charges and the affirmation of their truth by the four Jesada who claimed to have been there the night before. Then I was given two options: I could serve three months in jail while an investigation into my history was launched, after which I would be tried for any additional crimes I might be found likely to have committed. I doubted not for a moment the enduring unpleasantness that would ensue. The alternative was to undertake a secret mission for the Prophets, one that would require my specialized professional skills. Upon its successful completion, all would be forgiven and I would be rewarded handsomely and set free.

Since I'm not in jail, you can guess which I chose.

The mission, I was told, consisted of retrieving a weapon of some sort. Its nature was unclear, according to the Prophets, but

the auguries were certain—the weapon would yield to its possessor power beyond imagining. This prophecy, produced by various rituals and ceremonies, interpretations of signs in the heavens, readings of cards, visions in crystal balls, and other arcane practices, was enough to convince the Prophets that it must not be allowed to fall into any greedy, power-hungry hands but their own.

The obligatory threats were made before I departed on my mission. If I did not return with the weapon, should I choose to flee or dispose of the item in some other way, vengeance untold would be visited upon every widow and orphan who had ever benefited from my sympathies and charity. Even Gnossa, whose enterprise in worldly pleasures the Prophets usually ignored (or secretly patronized), would not be exempt from their wrath, should I fail to return. Even if I fled to the ends of the world, said vengeance would fall upon me and prove itself a most unwelcome and persistent guest.

Finally, I was told the reason no other had been chosen for the mission. The signs all indicated that the weapon was to be found somewhere far up the Spiral.

#

I was given a week to prepare, whatever that might mean. How does one make ready to do what has never been done before a task that involves dangers beyond mortal knowledge? My own acquaintance with the Spiral and its lore was sketchy and haphazard, despite having lived in the city as long as I can remember. It was just a fact

of life, like the different kinds of clouds. They have names, but most people don't know what they are.

I did know that the best telescopes, employed over the objections of people who held the Spiral in religious awe, showed only a column that stretched up and up, toward the vanishing point. Telescopes fascinated me—then and now. They are physical objects that can be manipulated and understood, rather than mere objects of speculation, and they let the user know things most people do not know. And knowledge is the ultimate survivor's tool. The smaller, easily portable scopes also had fair market value, and so were of obvious interest to an honest thief like me.

So far, attempts to build a better telescope to see farther up the Spiral had failed. The best had a lens of just over twelve inches in diameter. Larger lenses and mirrors for bigger instruments had been attempted, but they cracked while they were cooling, or they warped and gave an image blurrier than smaller scopes. There was one way to find what was needed, as far as the Prophets were concerned. Someone must climb farther than anyone had ever gone before.

In short, as far as I had could tell, despite shrill insistence from certain quarters like the faction of Prophets into whose hands I had fallen, no one actually knew what the Spiral was, where it came from, or where it led. It was simply there. None knew how high the spiral went, what lay at the top, if top it had, or what dangers

might be encountered along the way. Explorers proceeded at their own risks. I had heard hints of a few people who climbed the Spiral and returned, none bearing artifacts or other physical evidence to substantiate their story. Still, I needed to learn as much as possible. I went to see Gnossa, who, if she didn't know much about any given topic, knew the person likely to know more.

We sat in her private quarters on the second floor of her three-story establishment. Red velvet curtains were open to cast light on pink velvet cushioned chairs and blue silk sheets. The scent of roses, cinnamon, and fresh coffee mingled pleasantly. I was momentarily filled with nostalgia, remembering how it had been to grow up here. Or rather, I reviewed, reliving the past. With a capacity for memory as good as mine, it is harder to forget than remember.

"It's been too long since you came home," Gnossa said. "Three days." Days, of course, being many months long.

"I know," I said, not questioning aloud her use of the word *home*. "It's been a tricky couple of months. Prophets and all." I shrugged and gave a crooked grin. "But you know I never forget you."

She nodded. "Yes, I heard of your troubles. But I assume there is more to the story, which you will now tell me."

I briefly summarized the situation, including the Prophets' threats against all I held dear and their conviction that what they wanted lay somewhere up the Spiral. "I've heard stories, but never bothered to

verify them or make an exhaustive inquiry. But now I need to know everything possible about the Spiral, including the challenges I may face in climbing it."

"Unfortunately, little is known beyond the obvious that anyone in the city can see. The Spiral is there. Many who climb do not return. Beyond that, stories differ."

"If there are no certainties, I should at least consider as many theories as I can."

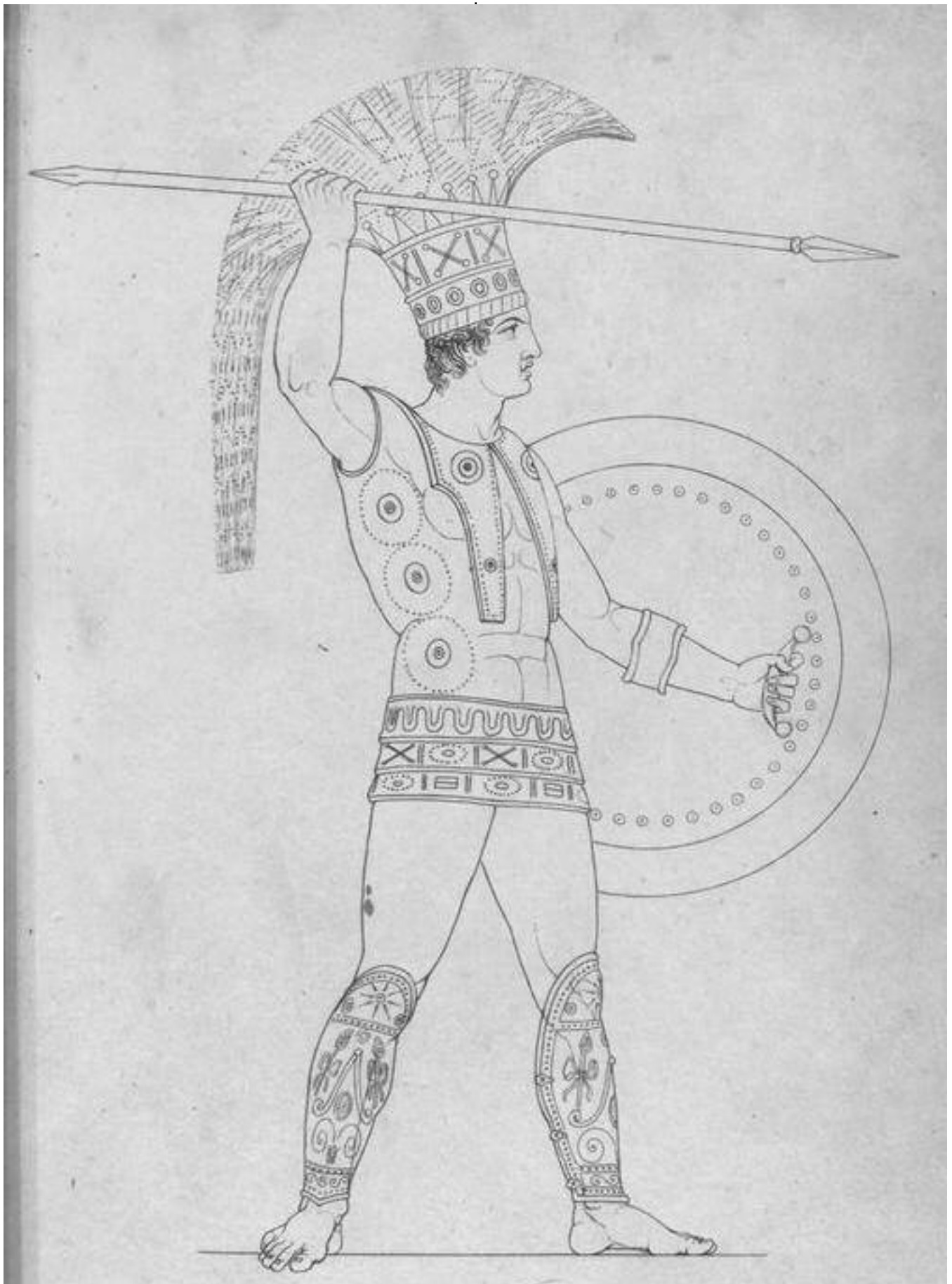
"*Theory* is too respectable a term for most of the incoherent rumors. But I will tell you what I've heard. More coffee?"

I nodded.

"Once upon a time," Gnossa began, after refilling both our cups and settling back in her chair, "before the city grew around it, the Spiral was surrounded by jagged rows of cliffs, which have since been quarried and flattened to build roads and houses. I doubt the Spiral itself has changed much in centuries. One point the historians, folklorists, and ones who just like to tell stories agree on: some of the cliffs were scaled before reliable records were kept. Weathered and cracked enough in the right places to make hand- and footholds for those who dared climb, the cliffs yielded no secrets about the Spiral itself. For miles around the cliffs had lain forests, also mostly all cut long ago in the interests of what passed for civilization."

"If this happened before the city was built, before records were kept, how do we know? And who were the climbers?" I asked.

"People from the swamp, I expect" she said. "Prehistoric people leave their marks,



even if they are not intended to preserve history—remains of a campfire under a rock shelter, a spear, a knife, that sort of thing. The occasional bone or skeleton.”

Beyond the forest, south of both the city and the Spiral, I knew the swamp remained, since draining its brackish waters would have produced no valuable logs or quarried stone. A few hardy souls who dislike the city still live there, making their way on small boats or rafts, living in tree houses over the water, surviving on fish and whatever else they can forage for food.

“No one remembers a time when the Spiral did not exist,” Gnessa continued, “nor does any book or historical record confirm its actual origins. One myth—just another story, except to the religious fanatics—says it was built by the ancients, in an attempt to reach heaven, til the gods somehow put a stop to their blasphemous plans. Superstition in some quarters still holds that it is heresy to climb higher than the lowest levels. Not the Prophets’ superstitions, apparently.”

She paused to sip coffee and went on. “But people have been stoned to death for daring to go above the levels easily seen when the whole thing is not shrouded in fog. A corollary to this story says the upper levels of the Spiral resemble a Mobius strip, with a one-way entrance, so if the heretical traveler climbs beyond a certain point, he will do nothing but circle endlessly over the same path, til thirst, exhaustion, and starvation take their toll.”

“So there are taboos, long-enduring ones,” I said. “Which suggests maybe some-

thing to hide, a secret to be discovered, something worth concealing.”

“Perhaps,” Gnessa nodded.

“Mercenaries and visionaries have occasionally started the climb, taboos notwithstanding, but most who return—and not all *do* return—can say only that they found nothing but more of the same Spiral, up and up. A few have told stories of El Dorado or Shangri-La, but they brought no proof, only wild tales, easily dismissed.”

“Those who return?” I interrupted, leaning forward. “Are any of them still alive? Do you know where I could find them?”

“But to many,” Gnessa said, seeming to ignore my question, “the Spiral’s regularity, the steps that looked just like quarried stone, were taken as proof of its mundane origin, its construction by human hands, however far back in the forgotten past.”

I settled back in my chair. Gnessa would tell the story in her own way, at her own pace, or not at all.

“Conversely,” she said “some of the Prophets point to other miracles of regularity in nature—the rings in trees, the fractal patterns of trunk and branch that can be described by the same numbers that describe the shapes of clouds and waves washing up on the beaches. These observations, say some of the Prophets, prove the Creators were mathematicians. They quote Pythagoras and claim the study of geometry and its secrets brings humans as close as they should dare to the minds of gods.”

“Another form of taboo,” I said.

“Yes. Oh, everybody has a pet theory,” she continued. “Another myth holds that a



different swamp, this one not inhabited by peaceful, reclusive fisherpeople, lies at the top of the Spiral; or an ancient city, perhaps a town of vengeful ghosts; or a kingdom of monsters, whose land the gods quarantined in the sky, leaving the giant hole the swamp waters fill. Some self-appointed experts claim no other world is up there, that the Spiral goes on forever, a true physical manifestation of the Infinite.”

“The Infinite should contain—well, an infinite number of worlds, shouldn’t it?”

Gnossa twitched her left eyebrow. “You’d have to ask those who claim to know the unknowable about that one. I’m just telling you the stories I’ve heard.”

“Are there others?”

“Certain cults of doom say the Spiral stands as a trial or warning to humans, that it will last only ‘til the gods tire of human greed, sin, and malice. The first sign of the Apocalypse, they say, will be the crumbling of the Spiral, which, when it comes crashing down, must bury the city under a mountain of debris. That stone, they predict, will provide a foundation for the newer, better world, which somehow the cultists imagine they, and they alone, will be invited to inhabit. Wishful thinking on the part of misanthropists,” she said, waving a dismissive hand.

I nodded and sipped my cooling coffee. I knew she wasn’t finished.

“Some see the Spiral as a natural formation. Scholars and scientists have theorized various forces, from volcanism to magnetism, even gravitational anomalies or whirlpools of wind and water in a bygone

age, that might have been responsible for its unique form. Perhaps it contains the hollow axis or geometric point, a vanishingly small one, to be sure, around which the world turns.”

She paused to let that sink in, I guess, and took a drink of her coffee.

“I’ve heard stories about sounds that sometimes supposedly come from the the Spiral,” I said. “Chords of music made by stringed instruments, trumpet blasts, the delicate siren song of flutes.”

“I’ve heard those rumors, too,” Gnossa said. “The ominous rhythm of drums. Or a grinding noise, as of great gears and machinery. The noises, if they are real and do indeed come from the Spiral, never seem to last long enough for more than one or two to hear.

“So it seems there are a lot of stories and very few facts about the Spiral.”

“That about sums it up. But I can also send you to one source of good information. Most rumors about adventurers who came back from the Spiral are probably false, invented to bolster someone’s reputation, or just stories to trade for free drinks. But I do know one woman, neither mercenary, mystic, nor Prophet, not even a scientist of any conventional sort, who went higher than anyone else, yet managed to return.”

“Then I need to talk to her.”

#

The adventurer was named Dair.

No one was to know of my attempt. If I succeeded, the Prophets wanted no one to hear of the powerful new weapon they

planned to possess. If I failed, it would do their reputation no good for it to be known they had coerced me to go on a fool's errand. So I went to see Dair in secret, easily leaving behind the Prophets' minions assigned to watch me. I remembered the streets, every corner, every narrow alley and loose board that led to a shortcut, far better than they did.

Her room was on the side of town closest to the swamp, around the corner of a noodle shop. Her door was at the end of a passageway so narrow I almost had to walk sideways. The alley was dark, even at noon, tall buildings blocking the light.

I knocked on the worn boards, unpainted but smooth and silvered with age. No answer. I knocked again. A curtain was pushed aside from one tiny window, a foot square, beside the door. A beam of light struck my face, a lock clattered and clicked, and the door opened.

"Gnossa said you would be coming. You must be Mr. Blade," Dair said, stepping aside and gesturing for me to enter.

"Rusty. Nobody calls me Mister unless they're scared. Or being ironic."

"Well, I'm neither of those. Have a seat." She gestured at a table and two armless wooden chairs by a small fireplace. I sat.

She looked about forty, short dark hair, dark brown eyes, almost black. High boots of scuffed leather, brown cloth pants, a gray sweater, as if she were ready for another adventure herself. A scorched enamel pot hung over the fire. The room smelled pleasantly of fresh garlic and onions and coffee.

She poured two large steaming mugs and handed one to me. I accepted it gratefully, though I was still inspired by Gnossa's magical brew. I never turn down free coffee.

"I'm told you went up the Spiral," I said. "Farther than anyone else who managed to come down."

"Well, probably farther. It's not as if there are well-known milestones. Or detailed histories in the libraries." She paused a moment and stared at me with those brown eyes until I really wished they would blink, then added, "Gnossa asked me to talk to you. She said you were trustworthy and explained your problems with the Mosedhrin and the Prophets. I trust Gnossa. That's the only reason I'm telling you any of this. I don't need a lot of busybodies and religious fanatics hounding me for secrets."

"Anything you tell me goes no further. So there's no one to compare stories? No Secret Society of the Spiral?"

"There was one old-timer I knew before I went. He died ten years ago."

"You climbed farther than him?"

"Probably."

I sat and sipped and burned my tongue. "How far up did you go?"

She sat on the other side of the table, waiting for her coffee to cool. "Wrong question."

"Well, that's why I'm here. What is the right question?"

"How long. How many days and nights of climbing? You could count steps, where stairs exist, or you could count your own steps, where the path is a smooth incline,

but the determining factors are food and water. You have what you can carry with you. The temptation is to climb too long, so you will not have enough for the journey down.”

“There is no food or water along the way, then.”

“No. Why would there be?”

“One would not expect food,” I said, “but what about rain? Not even a brackish puddle or two?”

“If there are openings where any significant rain would come in, I never reached them. Small windows, yes, but the roof goes up and up. You are always inside. Soon you are above the clouds, anyway. There would be no more rain from there on up.”

“What did you see? Anything of interest?”

Dair paused so long I was afraid I had offended her somehow. Finally she said, “I saw the world from above. Clouds, and where they cleared, the swamp, the distant forests, the plains beyond them, the place where the land rolls around into the unknown. And mummies.” She stared into the fire.

I waited for her to continue. Finally I asked, “Why do you suppose there were mummies?”

She looked back at me, her eyes dark as the coffee. “Because the Spiral wanted them. Once you go above the clouds, it will not want to let you go. And you will not want to turn back. You will long only to climb, higher and higher, like an eagle, a hawk on an updraft, a wind stronger, more

powerful, more beautiful and terrifying, all at once, than anything you can imagine. You will forget to eat, you will feel no thirst, at least not for water. You will hunger only to climb.”

“So the mummies? They were ones who starved?”

“Yes. Probably. Or died of thirst, because they were seduced the Spiral. Hopelessly. A few even still had food, and probably water, when they died, though the food had turned to dust and the water dried up long before I passed by.”

“You said you thought you went higher than anyone else. Why do you believe that?”

“After a certain point,” Dair said, “I saw no more signs of human life. No bones, no discarded packs or pottery. No mummies.”

“So anyone else who went as far as you did—they probably made it back alive.”

“Right. Or else they—or their remains—are still there, farther than I went. I know only what I saw.”

I wanted to know what she thought about theories of the Spiral’s nature and origin. “What do you think about the stories people tell, of music, voices, another swamp somewhere beyond the clouds, monsters and so forth?”

Dair had a pragmatic disdain for taboos and notions of apocalypse, and was unimpressed by bar-stool adventurers. “Foolish tales from know-it-alls,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “People who would rather talk than do. The Spiral is the Spiral. Ones who dare ask more than that can go and see for themselves. The only monsters I encoun-

tered were ones I took with me. I suspect it will be the same for anyone else. No swamp. No city. No pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.”

“And no terrible new weapon?”

“Not that I saw. Gnossa mentioned the Prophets’ little fantasy about that. But who can say? Maybe, if I had gone a bit farther around the last curve before I found the will to turn back, I might have found more than mummies.”

I stirred, as if to go. Dair said, “I do have one favor to ask.” She pushed a small box across the table. “Go ahead, open it.”

The box contained a heavy silver chain, links each as long as my thumbnail, thick as the second year’s growth of a twig. The chain looped through a pendant, an oval a couple of inches across, with a crooked bar, also silver, that reminded me of a lightning bolt. I held it up to catch the light. It was long enough to fit over a person’s head and dangle comfortably without being unclasped, though there was a clasp, presumably so the pendant could be changed.

I looked at Dair, eyebrows raised.

“I’m not giving it to you,” she said. “Though what you do with it is ultimately your decision, of course.”

“So—you’re giving it to me, but not giving it to me?”

“It’s not mine to give,” she said. “Not really. I took it off one of the mummies, when I went up the Spiral. Seemed like the thing to do, at the time. But I’ve felt for a long while that it should go back where it came from.”

“You want me to give it back—to a

mummy? How would I even know which one?”

“Like I said, it’s up to you. You can follow your instinct, pick a mummy, assume it’s right. Or leave it here, carry a few extra ounces of water instead.”

“I’ll take it up,” I said, and asked if she had any advice for me.

“Yes. Don’t go. But you will anyway. So wear comfortable shoes. Carry nothing but food and water.

Be ready to face your monsters. Turn back before it’s too late.”

#

Time came for me to go. It was a clear noon, Persephone just rising, Demeter setting. The sun beat down hot as ever. The cool arch over the entrance to the Spiral looked dark and inviting by contrast. I stepped under almost unnoticed, as the Prophets were still not anxious to advertise their plans. I saw none of their minions, the Jesada, but knew they were watching from dark corners, as they would still be doing when I returned.

If I returned.

A few passersby noticed the man carrying a heavy load of food and water and little else. Some jeered or muttered to themselves about fools born every minute, while other shouted wishes of good luck, some sarcastic, some sincere, then went about their business. I was soon around the first bend, and the noise of the city faded.

For fifteen minutes I climbed too rapidly, knowing I must pace myself, yet spurred on by adrenaline. I paused to look out one of the small windows (or crevices, to those

who believed the Spiral a natural formation). The view looked as you'd imagine. Rooftops, chimneys, streets. Beyond lay the swamp, distant forests, and plains, just as you'd imagine. Yet the novelty of the view was fascinating. Soon I turned away, however. Time was passing, and so must I.

Soon, the air began to grow cold. Chill wind whistled through windows. Dair had not mentioned that part of her experience, but it stood to reason it would be cooler. I was now above the thick blanket of smoke, fog, and clouds that covered the city half the time and held in heat.

Before long, or so it seemed, I passed the first of the mummies Dair had described. A man, about my size when he lived and breathed, lay stretched out, arms extended beyond his head, or rather below, as he was pointed downward, toward the city he would never see again. His skin was dried and brown, limbs thinner now, surely, than they had been before ages of dry air had shriveled his flesh. A leather satchel lay beside him, but I felt no urge to look inside. Whatever he had, let him keep. I saw no other living beings in the Spiral, not a bird, a rat, a mouse, nor even a worm or ant. Only me and the lonely voice of the wind.

#

As I stepped round and round the never-ending curves of the Spiral, excitement turned to monotony, which quickly became boredom, which turned into a form of self-hypnosis. Or call it sleepwalking. Dreams merged with memories. Nightmares took on substance.

I'm going to cheat, now, and omit gory details of my monsters. Dair had warned me the Spiral would unleash them. She spoke the truth. But living those stories twice—once when they happened, again when I met them in the Spiral—was enough. Perhaps I had experienced them a third time, on some level, when I repressed them. The mind must know what it is doing when it chooses to forget. If you long for details like I won't give you, I understand they are found in books kept behind the counters in shops where ones younger than a certain age are not allowed.

The brief summary goes like this. When I was very young, as the Spiral showed me, no more than three or four, my parents, traveling musicians who had come across the plains and through the forests, in search of fame, fortune, and adventure, encountered some of the city's worst thieves and murderers. My mother was a dark-skinned, dark-haired woman, stronger than her slight build would suggest. My father's bulk made him an occasional target of bullies, ones who assumed reputations could be built on intimidating someone larger than themselves, until his quick wit and gentle smile disarmed their bravado and won the sympathies of any audience. Given no choice, he would defend himself and us, of course. My parents were by no means rich, but neither were they unskilled as musicians. They earned at least a little gold and silver whenever they played, perhaps enough to make them targets of the violent kinds of thieves.

The thieves in one particular gang were

also killers, and worse, if anything can be called worse than murder. As travelers and adventurers, both my parents were handy with a dagger, always in self-defense, but the killers outnumbered them and wielded longer weapons.

For whatever reason, the Fates decided to let me survive that night. Perhaps as a test, if the Fates are cruel enough to take interest in whether death might sometimes be preferable to survival. But as the Spiral showed me, I hid, unnoticed, behind the trash bins in the alley and watched while my parents, both beautiful people, were robbed, bugged, and slaughtered.

Exactly how long before Gnossa took me in, or how I lived until then, was not made clear. Of course, those memories would have paled in contrast to what happened to my parents.

After this, you might think the driving obsession to keep climbing would pass. But Dair was right. I longed for nothing more than to keep climbing, even after I had passed through the memory and become, for how long I cannot say, once again a terrified child.

#

Eventually I heard music.

By now my pack had grown too light, more than half my food and water gone. I must turn back soon, if I wished not to join the mummies. I had lost count of how many trips the moons had made across the sky. Nothing mattered now, except how much food and water were left. But as Dair had warned, I longed to keep climbing as I had never longed for anything. I had seen

no mummies for months. The Sun was passing the halfway point between zenith and horizon, yet I kept going.

I slept only when exhaustion forced me to my knees, and rationed food and water until spots began to appear before my eyes. Then I would sit down, sip an ounce of water, take a morsel of bread and a few raisins, and go on. This happened over and over.

I have said I noticed nothing living in the Spiral. Yet when I heard the music, I knew someone or something must be alive, above me, or else I had begun to hallucinate. If so, my condition, coupled with my dwindling supplies, would make surviving the descent impossible. Why not keep going, then, I reasoned? At least I might have one more answer before I died.

The music, a haunting melody that must come from a flute, grew more clear as Persephone made her way across the sky. The sun had passed three-fourths of the way from zenith to horizon. Twice, the music stopped, once when I paused to eat, spots dancing before my eyes, making me wonder again if the music were not all in my head. Another time, it paused when I stepped off the last of a set of steps and onto a smooth incline, my footsteps ringing out as I almost stumbled. I stood still a moment, and the notes resumed, much louder now.

One more curve, into the shadows on the side of the Spiral opposite the sun, and around to where late afternoon light shot through a window. The floor smoothed out, became flat. I could see it curve back

downward a few feet in front of me.

I was at the top of the Spiral. Don't ask me to explain the geometry, or where the path on the other side of the Spiral led. I can tell you only what happened to me.

My exhausted, untrustworthy eyes took a moment to adjust in the brighter light. At first I thought he was another mummy, that at least one other climber from our side had come this far. Imagine my terror when the mummy spoke.

I froze, a scream caught in my dry throat. This surely must be a hallucination.

He spoke again. "Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you." He sat, leaning against the stone wall, propped on one elbow.

"You're real," I said.

"As far as I know, yes," he said, not getting up. "You know something I don't?"

"It's just . . . It's been a long, strange trip. I've been climbing a long time. Hungry. Dehydrated. Spots in my eyes."

"You should have brought more food and water."

"I brought all I could carry."

"So did I," he said. "Still got over half left. Guess I could share some."

"You climbed here, too, then."

"Sure wasn't born here," he said, rummaging in his pack.

"I mean, you climbed ahead of me? From the city?"

"I came up that way," he said, pointing where the path curved down, opposite the way I'd come. "Yes, there's a city below, too, but not the one you came from." He

stood and handed me a chunk of bread, dry and crumbly, and a bottle of tepid water. The bread was darker, with bits of what I hoped were nuts or seeds mixed in, but otherwise it was like my own dwindling supply. Nevertheless, it tasted like the finest thing I'd ever eaten.

"Nice view from here, isn't it?" he said, looking out the window. "One honest thief to another, what do you think is out there?"

"No telling," I said. "But if I had to guess, another Spiral." Hallucination, ghost, or real flesh and blood, he seemed friendly and non-threatening.

"So it's Spirals, all the way out, you think?"

"Just a notion," I said. "If you figure it out, let me know."

"You must have a name."

"Call me Rusty," I said.

"No last name?"

I was too tired to tell the story. "Rusty will do."

"I'm Robin. Some call me Puck, but I prefer Robin. Or Rob," he said.

I had questions. So many questions. Tired legs reminded me there was no point in standing if we were not going anywhere. I sat and leaned against the stone wall opposite him.

He sat back down and leaned forward, propped on his elbows.

"Thanks for the food and water," I said, trying not to chew with my mouth open.

"No problem. Just glad to see you. I've been waiting awhile."

I swallowed and took a closer look at

the stranger. Hair the color of wet sand, dark blue eyes, a wispy beard. Old work clothes and a satchel.

“So,” I said after a sip of water, “You came up that way. There’s another city down there. You’ve been waiting for me.”

He nodded. I wanted more water, but I didn’t need to get cramps. Besides, there was still no surplus.

“That means we must be at the top of the Spiral, then,” I said.

“Top, midpoint, intersection. It has many names, based on various assumptions about the geometry of the universes,” he said.

“You sound like Gnossa. I’ve heard enough theories to last me a lifetime, so maybe you could just tell me why you were waiting for me? I don’t recall sending a message ahead.”

“Who’s Gnossa?”

“Old friend. Are you avoiding the question?”

“No, no. Just curious. You are the thief, right? The other thief, I mean,” he said.

“A thief. Don’t quite know about ‘other,’ though.”

“Pleased to meet you, then. I’m one thief, you’re the other. Or I could be the other, and you can be the one, if you like. Potay-to, potott-o. Point is, we’re both thieves, and we’ve come to steal something from each other.”

The more he talked, the more questions I had. “What are you planning to steal? I have nothing of value, except bread and water.”

“Oh, come now. The necklace.”

“So what did I come to steal from you?” Refreshed by the food and water, I decided just to try following the logic of conversation, wherever it led.

“The book, of course,” he said, inclining his head to the right. “More of a trade, really, but as we are both thieves, no point being unprofessional about it, is there?”

I looked in the shadow under the window and noticed a small table, just wide enough to hold a hefty volume bound in what looked like old wood and leather.

“Okay, but I don’t have any necklace.”

He smiled. “Pendant, then. Call it what you like, but we’re both tired and ready to go home, so if we skip the formalities, this will all go more smoothly.”

“Then tell me how you know all this.”

“I read the book.” He tipped his head toward the volume on the table. “While I was waiting. Some of it, anyway. Early chapters are all about people you never hear of and couldn’t care less about, who’s related to whom, so on, and the language is archaic and way too formal. But we’re in there, toward the middle.”

“We?” I questioned.

“You and I. The two thieves who climb the Spiral.”

“Well, that’s all very interesting,” I said, not that I believed it for a moment, “But I was blackmailed into coming here to retrieve a weapon, not a book.”

“Give it time,” he said. “Your brain is still running in low-blood-sugar mode. The book is the weapon.”

“So you brought the book here? Or has it always been here?”



“Nothing’s always. But yes, I brought it. Brought it back, I should say. I understand my predecessor took it down. Apparently there’s some sort of periodic exchange.”

“That book for this pendant?” I said, withdrawing it from my pack. The silver chain and oval with the lightning bolt glittered in low afternoon light.

“Looks right. The Council said there would be a silver chain and an oval of some sort, according to their divinations and holy books and so on. Apparently they believe the pendant has certain talismanic powers. Which, of course, they are not going to explain to a thief like me. Anyway, if it’s what you brought, it’s what they’ll have to be satisfied with, isn’t it?”

“Assuming you take it,” I said, closing my fist over the pendant and wrapping the chain around. “Tell me more about this book. And this Council of yours.”

“They call themselves the Council of Elder Wizards and Seers. A lot of people just call them the old busybodies. You know, morality police and meddlers in things that are none of their business. Or should be.”

“I know the type. Sounds like the Jesada and the Moshedrin.”

“Take a look at the book,” he said. “I marked the page.”

I needed to stand before my legs stiffened, anyway. I stepped over to the little table. The cover said *Book of Times* in flaking gilt letters on old, dark leather. Beneath the title was a symbol like the pendant. A brittle page was turned down, about halfway through. I half expected the spine

to crumble when I opened the cover.

Creasing a page, even a corner, seemed wrong for a tome like this, but when I laid the book down, open, the corner seemed to unfold and smooth itself.

I read. The apparently handwritten ink told the story of my trip up the Spiral, my meeting with the other thief, and our exchange, pendant for book. It identified me by name and further purported to tell what would happen when I descended.

The page ended mid-sentence. I turned to the next, and the next, and the next. The story continued. Not just my story, but the story of the city. Past, present, and future. The history of a future that hadn’t yet happened.

“How can this be? I asked. How does anyone down there—I nodded toward the other side of the Spiral—know anything about me?”

“You’d have to ask the Council.” He shrugged. “Not that you could trust their answers on something like that. Might as well ask why there’s a Spiral. Me, I’m just an honest thief. I try to leave magic to wizards as much as possible. And I believe you just said you’d had enough of theories for now.”

“I see how the book is a weapon, now. But not the kind the Prophets were hoping, I’ll bet.”

“Oh, it’s a weapon, all right. Knowledge is power,” he said. “Anyone who knows the contents of that book—not just what happened, but what is happening, and what will happen—would be nearly invincible. On your side of the Spiral, that is.

Regarding the future on my side, it is remarkably uninformative. Which is why the Council was ready to let it go, I suppose.”

“So we have a deal—I steal the pendant, you steal the book?”

We shook hands, and Robin took the pendant and started down. He turned back just before disappearing round the curve on his side. “Good luck,” he said, and waved.

“Same to you,” I said, waving back.

#

I read the rest of the book—several hundred pages, scanning as quickly as I could comprehend. My memory might be running on low power, but it still made a permanent record of everything I saw. Then I read the first part of the book, archaic language and all. My brain reeled from the knowledge, but memory seized it all and filed it away, page after page, as the sun drifted lower and lower.

I finished the last page, closed the cover, hefted my pack over my shoulder, and started down, leaving the book just where it was. The Prophets weren’t going to like it. Let one of them come and get the book, if they thought they were up to the task.

The shadows were growing deep, patches of light shining through crevices and climbing fast up the walls. That was okay. It wasn’t like the way down was complicated. As long as I didn’t trip over any mummies, I would be just dandy.

It felt good to be the most powerful man on the planet.

#

I do not remember descending the last mile or two. That, given the faith I usually put in my memory, is as terrifying as any part of the experience. I must have been truly delirious. Later, I was told I staggered from under the arch and collapsed.

But I remembered the book, and what it said, cover to cover. That, I remembered very well.

I awoke in the Mosedhrin Hospital. “Bring me the Boss,” I said, to the orderly and the nurse, when they came to check on me. “I’ve got a few things to tell him. For starters, he’s not the boss anymore.”

They gaped at me.

“Get moving,” I said.

They went. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**