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Page 1 — THE PRUFROCK PROPHECIES by T. R. Long. T.R. Long is a writer living in Baltimore. He has been published in *Everyday Fiction, The Horror Zine, Literary Garage,* and *The Freak.* He sustains himself on local beer and his wife's Madrileña cooking. His writer's website: https://trlong339.wixsite.com/long

Page 10 — GETTYSBURG REVISITED by Walt Trizna. The author writes, "My name is Walt Trizna and I am a retired scientist having spent 34 years in research and have been 25 years as a writer. Most of my stories have been horror and science fiction. My publications include a novel, New Moon Rising, published by Mélange Books. This publisher has also published my novella, Elmo's Sojourn, as an eBook and in a print anthology, Curious Hearts. I have also had 24 short stories published.

Page 14 — DEMI-HUMAN by Jake Alexander Gellar-Goad. The authro writes, "I'm a new writer. I went to grad school to study nonprofits and have been working with nonprofits ever since. These days I work at a museum. And because I believe most things done well are done in community, I want to give a shout out to the folks who helped me make this the best story I could. I offer appreciation to my husband T.H.M. (Latin/Greek Professor at WFU) who helped me make sure my Greek myth was on point, to my sister-in-law & her wife Samantha & Amber (writers & owners of Protagonist Books), and to my dear friend Mary Beth (retired high school English teacher). Although I have not had any official professional editing done for this story, I couldn't ask for a better team than a language professor, a couple of published authors, and an English teacher to help me make this story shine!"



"The Prufrock Prophecies"

by T. R. LONG

Governor Susan Doyle didn't release a drop of sweat as I held a double-gripped, laser-sighted *Ruger* at her head. She was sitting at a diner booth with an untouched plate of flapjacks, an all-American prop for her press conference. Her calm didn't transfer to the reporters who stumbled backwards, still pointing their cameras and microphones in my direction.

Governor Doyle's calculating eyes looked into mine, still the same portals to every region of desire and wonder in my soul. In my peripheral vision, I was aware of her blue suited security detail pointing guns at me. What a comfort death would have been, Prufrock.

She addressed her bodyguards, "Put the guns away, all of you. Now! I have this, I promise. Have a seat, Mr. Gorski."

I followed her command, but held my weapon firm, as firm as a sixty-two-year-old man with neurological degeneration can. My lungs were filled with ice.

"I miss our conversations, Mr. G...Nick. We sucked the marrow out of all those books, traveled the universe, made mathematical equations of history, and yet, we never really came to any conclusions, did we?"

I shouted to the surrounding crowd, keeping my gun pointed at Suzy, "Put the cameras away. Move back!"

The camera crew ignored me. Suzy repeated my demand, and they complied.

"I know why you're doing this. You're a good man. You think you're doing the only thing you can."

"Prufrock can't be denied," I whispered.

The governor took a sip of coffee.

"Should I have them bring you some coffee, or perhaps some water?"

"Suzy..."

"Can you just rest that thing on the table? It looks so precarious in your shaking hands, and you'll still have time to pull it up and shoot your favorite student in the head. I figure you aren't planning on leaving this diner alive. And might I say, martyrdom looks good on you."

Why did you first throw that bomb into my life those many years ago, Prufrock? It was my seventh year of teaching at Bierce High School. The night custodian was the fourth person I had asked about the anomaly. He too failed to see the digital gravestones on my computer screen.

They had appeared on the first day of school that year when I opened up *Schoolage*, my Learning Management System, A.K.A, my digital gradebook. They were there if I scrolled all the way to the right, past the list of student names, I.D. numbers, and blank assignment percentages. Gray rounded squares with dates.

They appeared for me when I tested my *Schoolage* on three different laptops. When I took pictures of them with my cellphone, I saw them, but others still did not. I decided to forget about them. Maybe they were some kind of joke. Perhaps everyone at Bierce High was in on the prank and had made a pact to feign ignorance of the phenomenon.

Joey Vittori was my awakening to the truth of the gravestones. It was after the homecoming dance, his belly full of backdoor vodka, that he wrapped his motorcycle around a tree.

He had been in my first period class. The Monday after homecoming, I took a break from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to let the students express their grief. We spent the class sharing stories about Joey, laughing and crying. Two students left class to see the grief counselor.

That night, while catching up on my grading, I reached Joey's name at the bottom of the roster. For the first time in months, I scrolled right. I was hoping my digital gravestones were an unexplainable glitch that had resolved itself and been rectified by the accepted rules of reality. No such luck. Next to Joey's name was a gravestone, but one set off from the others by a degree of transparency. Even with its diminished brightness, the date of homecoming, October 3rd, 2*** was burnt into my incredulous eyes.

Joey Vittori's untimely death twisted me into an existential pretzel. I was condemned to isolation. I could never share the knowledge that had upended by life. Who would ever believe me, and how could I negotiate daily existence alone when confronted with such a reality defying enigma?

I chose mental distraction as a ward against the incomprehensible. I willfully ignored your death dates. But you grabbed me by the balls, Prufrock, pulled me out of my neglectfulness. I was at Bernie's Cave, my favorite local haunt, a half-dozen shots and three beers in. I was giving some comatose barstool comrade a rambling lecture on Shakespeare's Scottish play when Deonte Richardson's picture flashed up on the screen, him in his graduation tuxedo. He'd been shot while working the local 7 Eleven, up on the corner of Edgar, two blocks away.

Before willfully suppressing any thoughts of the death dates, I had taken notice of Deonte's because it was much sooner than the others. Now his digital death day had been verified.

I took the news with a marching line of shots. I don't remember making it home that night. I retain dissolved images and sounds of a window being smashed and household objects being tossed, as if they were someone else's memories implanted inside my brain. A week later, Melissa had filed for divorce, and I was living in a rented attic above a Korean laundry.

The next two years nearly cost me my job. I burnt away my sick time with three-day-weekend benders. I rarely prepared for my classes anymore, becoming the worksheet and movie teacher I used to despise. In the school parking lot one morning, a woman accosted me with a cacophony of profanity, apparently feeling I didn't fulfill my side of a financial transaction, one I didn't remember making.

In between spells of liquid oblivion, I became obsessed with comprehending the incomprehensible. I binge read science fiction, esoteric religious texts, new age spirituality and fringe science journals. But you remained a torturous enigma to me, Prufrock.

It was during those hazy years that Suzy Doyle was assigned to my freshman English class. Before class had even started that first

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day, she looked up at me through her coke-bottle glasses and asked what novels we would be reading. Some kid in the back of the class made a gargling sound. Another groaned with masturbatory miming. Suzy's enthusiasm for the words printed inside musty, reissued schoolbooks might have brought opprobrium from her classmates, but it was pure teacher cocaine to me.

Her rust-colored hair nest offset her bookish brilliance. She dressed like a fortune-500 intern, making the most of off-brand, mended clothing, the best her working-class parents could provide. She smelled of soap and raspberry perfume.

Shut up, Prufrock! Teacher-student love is not of an impure nature. I'm no Humbert Humbert.

In truth, I pray that I never made any unforgivable transgressions. I was still an 80-proof mess that year, and some days were a poorly articulated dream of early morning gin nips and precarious recoveries from the previous night's binge.

I remember fragments of our conversations, after class and after school. I saw her as the daughter I never had. The daughter I would have loved more than an oaken bar counter full of whiskey shots.

I hit bottom just in time to avoid loss of life and job. The Baltimore Addiction Center started my redirection. I also give credit to my two days a week at the Buddhist Meditation Academy on Park Avenue. My time there let me accept the human truth that I don't know crap. I will never know crap. I'm not supposed to know crap.

Daily mindfulness meditation gave me an edge on my onery impulses. I dedicated myself to a healthy diet of sobriety. I renewed my devotion to teaching.

Suzy Doyle returned as my student that year. She requested my 12th Grade AP English class as a junior, on track to graduate a year early. I could barely hide my ecstasy and embarrassment as she entered my class in her tailored business attire, immaculately outlining the frame of a young woman.

As a sober teacher of advanced students, I basked in her nascent genius. A younger teacher might have felt threatened, as they pecked away at night on their great obtuse novel, envious of her untutored powers. I had long ago given up on being remembered by posterity. I relished in a future of hand ground coffee, reflective solitude, morning reading, vacations in Vermont, and an unremarkable death while sleeping. I was more than happy to be a simple plank on the stairway that would raise Suzy Doyle up to her place in the canon of human history.

Scenes from my memory crash together as if decades were smashed pieces of a life-sized mirror. I'm in that diner, my hands precariously griping a gun, and Suzy's eyes are drinking up my soul.

Her words were so poignant, so full of intimate truths that I couldn't even muster a grunt of acknowledgment. And yet, I knew what I would have to do.

She would die a shining goddess. After my life was ended by her goon squad, my beautiful Suzy would be immortalized. I would be some pycho perv, and she would be an American Princess Diana with flowers thrown on her grave until they reached heaven. I wanted nothing less as I laid the gun on the table, my finger still inside the trigger guard.

Calm as a teenage girl flirting, Suzy caressed my gun hand. And while I was lulled into the intimacy of her touch, she jumped up and pressed her weight on it. She shouted to her stunned security crew who took over from there.

My failed attempt to save the world brought me to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Half a year into my incarceration, I sat across from the only visitor I'd received here, the governor and vice-presidential candidate, my beloved Suzy Doyle. She convinced her security detail to leave the visiting room. That they needed convincing was silly considering my state-doctor-approved drug regiment had reduced me to a drooling old man in a straitjacket. When we were alone, she took a tissue from her suit pocket and wiped away the stream of spittle dripping down my jowl crease.

"I wanted to continue our conversation from the diner. Unfortunately, in your current state, I think it will be rather one-sided. I would have visited sooner, but my schedule is nearly unmanageable."

Only one labored word escaped my mouth. "Suzy."

"You know, I thought about changing my name a few years ago, something more politically resonant. But then, I remembered the way you used to say it, with such sweetness.

"Suzy Doyle, Suzy Oil, Suzy Gargoyle. My political opponents still use the nicknames that tormented me during my ninth-grade year. But it's catchy enough a name, easy to remember, and it let me build on my hometown popularity."

After wiping away another stream of saliva, Suzy folded the drool-dampened tissue and pushed it to the side of the table separating us.

"Do you remember that day, a week or so before winter break? That first year. I came to your coach class, waiting out the slacker kids trying to court you for enough blah-blah work to get them a 'C'.

"I knew you kept that gin bottle in your frayed messenger bag. I once saw you taking a swig when I came early to class. We were reading *Of Mice and Men*, but you had given me a Steinbeck reading list beyond what you gave the other kids. You never disparaged other students in front of me, but I loved how you saw me as an antidote to them.

"We discussed *Cannery Row,* my new favorite novel that year. You told me how it led to your literary ambitions before you were sidetracked by a teaching career. And then you looked at me with those big, gin-soaked vampire eyes for a little too long. I thought you were going to put your arm around me, perhaps try to kiss me. A girl can hope, can't she? I would have hated you for it, but that hate would have taken a few years to ferment. At the time, I anticipated it like a dream."

My stomach filled with bile, fearful that her next words could cast me into a purgatory of regret.

"Instead, you told me you had something to show me. Your breath was sweetly stale, and you occasionally slurred a syllable or two. My father was also an alcoholic, so I just took it as adults being adults.

"You opened your laptop and logged into your grading program. You scrolled all the way to the right and asked me if I saw them.

"What was I looking for? I saw the inflated grades of my peers. I saw their I.D. numbers and learning plans, the stuff a student shouldn't be privy to. And then I saw the tombstones with numbers. I thought they might be projected graduation dates, but that didn't seem right. I sat there, puzzled, feeling your expectant eyes on me.

"'What do the tombstones represent, Mr. Gorski?' I asked. I could see the bomb go off behind your eyes as I formed the words. 'Death, death, beautiful death' you replied, in your poetic drunkenness. How could I understand the significance of that moment? I was the first, perhaps the only one who ever saw what you saw. Isn't that so?

"You were so overcome with awe and joyousness when I read aloud the dates next to each of my classmates' names. You hugged me at one point, but even as a drunk, you were so damn honorable. Still, if someone had looked into the classroom right then, such impropriety would they have imagined. And my date? I wasn't on the class list. You gave some gin-ladened mumble about a guidance oversight, but you had seen my date, hadn't you?

"When you got up to find something on your 'enrichment' bookshelf, I took a picture of that screen of destiny with my phone. My young mind understood the importance of those dates, but how could I comprehend the damage such knowledge could do to an adult mind.

"You were a drunken mess, so why would I have put credence in those symbols at the end of the rows? But my teenage mind thrilled in the possibility of secret knowledge, in the existence of a world full of mystery – a world about which I had inside knowledge. Three weeks later, after Kelly Selleck's suicide, exactly on her tombstone date, I had confirmation of Prufrock's prophesies.

"Most of the other dates were scattered in the years after graduation. Being the diligent person I am, I did an average of the dates – 64 years old. Your class that year was very unfortunate when compared to the average American life span.

"After Kelly Selleck's date, Elliott Bender's was next, in November of my sophomore year. You were no longer interested in discussing the tombstones, so it fell upon me to save his life. Was it total selflessness, a genuine expression of wanting to save another human being? Well, it was that too, but the power over life and death was like heroin to a bookish girl who was ignored by peers and adults alike. Ignored by all but my alcoholic English teacher."

Suzy wiped away another bubble of drool forming around my mouth.

"Elliott was an asthmatic, bespectacled member of the Dungeons and Dragons club. Becoming his first girlfriend wasn't much of a challenge. In October, I swooped in, playing a feminist druid in his fantasy club. He gladly chose to spend that Thanksgiving with me.

"His family died in a Jersey Turnpike crash. I had just saved Elliott's life. I was a damn hero, a secret hero, because no one would ever know. I remained Elliott's girlfriend until February. Got him through Christmas and relocation with his grandparents who were local. But he was so desperate, so clingy.

"My days were consumed with ways to break up, to free myself from his mewling self-pity. I exploded one afternoon while we were in the food court at Golden Pond Mall. He had just shared some hideous poem about me being a candle inside his insufferable darkness. To this day, I have the image of his puffy, wide-eyed face staring at me through granny glasses as I showered him with cruel rebukes.

"I was proud of myself, ripping the bandage off with an act of unparalleled courage. Perhaps I would make a better man of him. Turns out he didn't become a man at all, isn't that so? Ended it with his grandfather's hunting rifle. Elliott had more resolve than I gave him credit for."

The nurse stuck her bulldog head into the visiting room. "It's dinner time, Madam Governor."

Suzy laughed, "I'm no madam, dear." She looked at me and spoke as if I could reply, "You don't mind waiting for dinner, do you, Nick?"

Of course I didn't mind, but the nurse was adamant. She loved having a bit of officious power over the Governor.

"It's mandatory, Miss Governor. Not feeding a resident could have legal ramifications."

"And we certainly don't want legal ramifications. Bring his dinner, can you do that? He can eat it while we continue our conversation."

"Now, where were we? Yes, Elliott's suicide. That was a hard lesson for me. I needed to work on saving the world, not the individuals in it. To do that, I needed real power.

"Fast forward to my last year of high school. Did you think I didn't understand the inappropriateness of my English teacher asking me on an excursion to an exhibit of first editions? But you insisted, and I wasn't going to refuse. I told my parents it was a class trip. I was convincing enough to escape a dreadful family weekend at Sunshine Beach."

The nurse entered the interview room with my dinner, a gray tray with sectionally divided spaces of culinary dread. Suzy started cutting the gravy-soaked chuck patty with a plastic knife. She waited for the nurse to leave before pushing it into my mouth.

"I don't suppose this tastes all that great. Seeing you here breaks my heart. Maybe I can get you a private room and an upgrade in the cuisine. No promises. When you live in the political world, every action carries implications."

Suzy's expression quickly changed from concern to contemplation.

"My escape from Sunshine beach. Yes. So, we spent the day in the museum drinking enough coffee to induce a coronary. My adorable drunkard of an English teacher was now a sober killjoy. I wonder what that day would have been like a year or two earlier. As it was, we went pretty deep. We both bonded over the thrill of seeing all those quintessential first editions under the glass. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Invisible Man*, and the 1915 edition of *Poetry Magazine* with 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.'

"You were embarrassed when I reminded you how you read that poem to me as a freshman, and how we named your stuffed octopus Prufrock. You used it in your class discussions, throwing it to the kids who were picked to answer your questions.

"There was a pep in your step that day. It was as if you had accomplished something grand. You let me lead you back into our shared mysticism.

"Prufrock became the metaphor, the name for something that couldn't be spoken, the unknowable, our eight-legged, purple god, the creator of the tombstones that only you and I could see. We talked into the evening. I had burrowed through your defenses, and we openly speculated about the origin of our forbidden knowledge.

"We used our powers of analysis to attribute that knowledge to aliens, perhaps Tralfamadorians, scientists sending messages from the future, divine insight, a complex joke perpetuated by a tech company, and of course the possibility of a shared delusion. However, the relevancy of the latter had been weakened by the mutual confirmation of our experiences.

"I stayed at your apartment that night, you on the couch and me in your bed. I felt like a

radioactive isotope that could destroy your life if my existence there were even hinted at. I don't know which was stronger, my hope or my dread that you would transgress the wall of propriety."

I sluggishly opened my mouth as Suzy brought a spoonful of peas towards it. She dumped them back on the tray before they reached their destination.

"You damn bastard! Why didn't you save my family? You saw my tombstone date. That's why you had my name deleted from your class roster. Did you even consider my family? My mother and sister survived the collision on route 54, although Cindy has never walked since. I would have been on my father's side of the car, as always, and shared his fate."

She scooped up another load of peas.

"I've come to forgive you for your short sightedness, your focus on me and not the other people in my boat. Sometimes, I wish I had been your daughter. Sure, Prufrock made you a drunk, but my father was a drunk for no damned reason. He drank a bunch of beer at a diner when my family was returning that night. Perhaps I could have stopped him from having that fifth or sixth beer if I'd been there.

"After a month of grieving, I returned to school with a mission. I came early to your classroom one morning, asked you to make some copies of a student government flyer. I'm sure you would have logged out of *Schoolage* if any other students were present. In went the flash drive, as soon as you left, and out came a digital tomb of Prufrock's forbidden knowledge."

Suzy held a spoonful of yellow goop close to my mouth before bringing it to her own.

"Mmm, banana pudding, right out of the can. Reminds me of the cafeteria pudding," she said. She brought the second spoonful to my mouth. "But Prufrock has hardened my heart a little towards nostalgia."

Licking a spot of pudding away from her lips, Suzy continued, "Remember that time I returned to Bierce? You invited me as a guest speaker for graduation when I was first elected to city council.

"It was before the speech, bagels and coffee in some side room, that we talked. You warned me about going into politics, how it eats away one's soul. You reminded me of my love for literature and how I should pursue the creativity in my soul. You were so sober, so wise, so full of crap. I knew what you were getting at. I knew you saw the flip. You saved my life when you kept me from a disastrous family outing. But our little lost weekend put a horizon of early dates on everyone's tombstone. Perhaps you thought you could dissuade me from politics, from a position of humanity ending power.

"Prufrock embedded his secret knowledge in *Schoolage*. So, why was it only you and I who could see it? Like you, I showed people I knew, and I polled 100 people I didn't know using a random, online sampling. I had them confirm that only I could see the tombstones. In college, I had a techy friend modify the program to add names. I gave her strict directions not to change the code at all, just give me the option to add names.

"She thought my request was odd, never guessing at the treasure she was giving me. In the end, I had Prufrock giving me the death dirt on anyone I wanted. Well, everyone but your favorite student here. Somehow, I could never enter my own name.

"It was code, a series of numbers and symbols, something I could transfer to my office desktop, pad, phone. But there was a ghost inside those numbers that defied explanation. You and I gave that ghost the name Prufrock.

"Prufrock has certainly helped my political rise. Knowing when positions would open up, when the ranks of political seniority would leave space for an ambitious young redhead, well that was gold. I won't burden you with a few manipulations I made to make those tombstone dates more convenient for me. I do know that, if things go as current polls predict, future President Montgomery will die two years into his first term. I will become a vice president full of heartfelt tears who will reluctantly take Montgomery's place as commander and chief."

Suzy wiped away a glob of pudding from my lips.

"My poor Nick, how it must have eaten you alive. Less than three years from now, all your students, and everyone else for that matter, will have translucent gravestones. You must have seen the apocalypse that Monday after you saved my life. If you had let me die, life would have gone on as expected. All those digital tombstones would have continued to explode into the future with an acceptable randomness of death dates.

"The tombstone apocalypse went away a few years ago. Then I got a call on my voice mail from my old English teacher asking me to be careful during the upcoming weekend. I cancelled an Amtrak ride. Sure enough, the tombstone apocalypse returned.

"You and I are special, Nick. It seems our actions alone can postpone Prufrock's prophecies. We are wildcards in some bigger scheme of things. Well, you were until I had you committed. Two wildcards are one too many."

Suzy wiped my mouth clean with a wet nap. She grabbed my cheeks so hard that I suppose I'd have felt pain if I weren't numb.

"Is May 15th, 2***, really the end? I will fix the world! I have faith in Prufrock. Why would he make us privy to the death dates of humanity? Sometimes I wonder if you passed some psychotic delusion on to an impressionable young girl. But I suppose it doesn't matter. If it is merely insanity, it has wondrously diverted the course of my life."

Suzy was standing over me, still gripping my inarticulate face. It was the first time I'd seen our fine governor, most certainly to be president, break through her perfect composure. She took a deep breath and smoothed an errant strand of her hair back into place.

Suzy gave me a kiss on the side of my lips, accompanied by an unbearable look of pity. She signaled to the nurse waiting outside the security window. I was left trying to suck a stream of slobber back into my mouth. Was this the beginning of the end? Perhaps Suzy had the answer and would thwart Prufrock's ultimate prophecy.

A selfish thought passes through the sludge of my mind. Suzy is as worthy of living as the entirety of humanity. Suzy knows my death day, but I know hers. Three Tuesdays from now she will die. It might be a car crash, food poisoning, or a bullet. Humanity will continue. No one will ever know how close we came. Maybe my silence just gave a doomed world a few more years of life.

"You weren't very talkative with your guest, Mr. Gorski," Ms. Kesey says as she pushes my wheelchair back to my room. She's an orderly working her way through college. I like her a lot, even if she has only a fraction of Suzy's wit. She let me use her laptop last week after I helped her study for a poetry test. I logged into my old *Schoolage* account. After retiring, I discovered that I still had access to Prufrock's prophetic dates. By some butterfly-effect cluster screw, my

diner fiasco made Suzy's death date reappear well before the tombstone apocalypse.

"Don't you like the governor?"

"I love her, dear."

"Oh..." Ms. Kesey said with a hint of embarrassment, "anyway, can you help me with this English paper I need to do for the college?"

"Sure, dear. I bet I still have a good year or two left before I'm a drooling zombie." ❖



"Gettysburg Revisited"

by WALT TRIZNA

Gil McCoy, age twenty, had a wife and baby daughter and dreamt of a bright future. He loved his family, but duty called and could not be denied. He left Martha and the baby and found himself going to a state he had never visited, Pennsylvania, and a town he had never heard of, Gettysburg.

As Gil was leaving Martha said, "Stay safe." She had heard of and seen the casualties of war.

Now a union soldier as a member of the 20th Maine, he crouched on a small hilltop, named Little Round Top, under the command of Joshua L. Chamberlain. Looking down, McCoy observed preparations for a Confederate attack. He said to the soldier standing next to him, "Looks like Johnny Reb is itching for a fight. We'll give them one." Joining his fellow soldiers, he began stacking rocks forming a low stone wall. The Confederate troops charged the hill and were repelled. After a series of attacks, in a move of desperation, Col. Chamberlain shouted, "Fix bayonets." And then ordered his troops to charge.

McCoy made his way down the hill with the 20th Maine, and somewhere near mid-hill, he lost all thought and memory.

GENERATIONS LATER

Frank Weber's wife, June, and two daughters, Joyce age four and Rita age two, were a close-knit family and always on the go. Frank enjoyed a life of purpose and reward as an engineer and felt he was contributing to the company where he worked. He was also an avid reader, and his study was crammed with books which had long past filled the bookshelves with more volumes now creating stacks teetering on the floor. June was constantly complaining, "Enough books already," but she knew he would never stop haunting used bookstores and yard sales in search of the next great find. The subject of a great deal of volumes, the Civil War, was the subject he found extremely interesting and felt a strong tie to its history.

One day June, suggested, "Let's plan a visit to Gettysburg." The thought of visiting Gettysburg intrigued Frank because he once heard he had a distant relative who took part in that battle.

Setting out on the early evening of July 1st, they reached their motel just before dusk. Early the next morning, they secured a map of the battleground and went off to explore the area. The morning was beautiful – a hint of the nighttime chill hanging in the air, the sky a clear vivid blue. Yet entering the battlefield Frank noted the sound of thunder softly rumbling. Frank asked June, "Did you hear that thunder?"

June answered, "No. How could there be thunder? Look at that sky."

Joyce asked, "What are we going to see,

dad?"

Frank answered, "We're going to the site of Pickett's Charge. I've been looking forward to visiting the site for quite a while. Its where massive amounts of casualties occurred to the Confederate army, and some consider it the end of the Confederacy."

June gave Frank a look that said, "Enough with the massive casualties in front of the girls." Frank caught the look and understood it.

On the way to the site of the charge the family drove past monuments honoring the dead of the various units of both armies who were engaged in the battle of Gettysburg.

Arriving at their destination they stood where the Union Army with cannon, formed a line of soldiers behind a low stone wall. Before them was a vast field, maybe a half mile wide, with a solitary building off to the right. Frank said, "The Union troops won the battle that day." He was about to mention the massive casualties again but stopped himself.

In the distance, a tree line marked where the Confederate soldiers gathered to march, many to their deaths. Looking out at the open expanse of grass, Frank could only imagine the apprehension filling the soldiers' minds. His eye caught the glint of the sun reflecting off metal along the length of forest where the Confederate Army, over 12,000 strong, stood ready to advance. He could almost make out a line of men, but the image began to fade into the background of the trees. Before he could point out the men to his family, the image was gone. He credited what he saw to an active imagination and the feelings the site created in him.

After viewing the site of Pickett's charge, they pressed on to see as much of the battlefield as possible before night overtook the day. Passing a field surrounded by cars and buses, they parked to see what had gained everyone's attention. June said, "Let's stop and see what's going on." Soon the reason for the attraction became apparent.

Rita said, "Look at all the men walking in those funny clothes." Marching on an open field was a group of men dressed as Confederate soldiers demonstrating battle tactics. Frank thought perhaps this explained what he had seen earlier at the tree line. The park was full of reenactors. Frank thought. That's what he kept on seeing.

Big Round Top was their next stop. From the corner of his eye Frank detected distant movement and viewed a mass far too great to be tourists moving up the hill. The reenactors must be there too.

The family continued their drive, and Frank tried to explain to the girls the importance of what they were about to see. Their next stop was Little Round Top and the battle which occurred there. But the girls were getting cranky. Rita said, "I'm hungry."

The family drove looking for the location of Little Round Top, the battlefield site on which Frank was most interested. It was there that Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, with his troops from Maine, held the Confederates at bay. The Southern soldiers charged repeatedly only to be turned back by Chamberlain's men. Finally, with his men exhausted and sure the next Confederate charge would overwhelm his position, Chamberlain decided to mount a charge down the hill into the enemy army, and the strategy worked. The Confederates retreated.

As they searched for Little Round Top, the shadows lengthened, and the sky's brilliance began to fade. Happening to see a small parking lot, they pulled in. At the edge of the lot, they found a sign marking the trail up to Little Round Top. They began climbing the steep trail through dense forest. It had been a long day and for the girls this climb took some coaxing. They were halfway up the hill and found the line held by the Union Army marked by the low stone wall the soldiers had built in haste. The original wall built by the Maine troops was still there. The forest was thick; the trees spread down the hill no more than a few feet apart. Frank had never been here before, but something did not seem right. That's it, he thought. The trees had grown since the time of the battle.

He stood with his family that quiet July evening with his thoughts, trying to picture the heroic event which once took place before him. To read the stories was one thing, but to walk the land where the battles took place yielded a reality a book could never accomplish. The sun was now low on the horizon. June and his daughters were tired from the long day of sightseeing and had lost all interest in the history they were seeing and wanted to return to the motel. Frank told June, "Why don't you go to the van and get a drink for the girls? I want to stay here a while longer."

Once his family had left, the solitude of the hill was complete. Frank stood there thinking of the accounts he had read of the battle when he heard the unmistakable sound of men laden with gear approaching from the top of the hill. Soon he was surrounded by a large number of men dressed as Union soldiers. They hastily added to the stone wall. Not acknowledging Frank's presence, then the soldiers knelt behind the wall and waited. The wait was not long for soon the stillness was broken by the sound of cannon coming from below. Frank thought, "Now I know what the sound of thunder was." What followed immediately was the unmistakable sound of the rebel yell. Below, a wall of men in gray uniforms slowly made their way up the hill. The trees wavered, gone from sight. The men in Union dress began to fire. Suddenly, some of the men appeared to be suffering horrible wounds. Frank thought that it was a great job of stage makeup and the disappearance of the trees was overwhelmed by the action. And because everything looked so real he was held by the spell of battle. Frank gave them credit for what they created. He thought that he was now witnessing more staging by the reenactors in preparation of another battle for the tourists to witness. The air was full of the sound of bullets ricocheting off the trees. More special effects. But the realism was getting to Frank, he had seen enough. He did not know how the reenactors had accomplished what he had witnessed but wanted to linger no longer and to return to his family. Just as he was leaving, he looked to his left. There stood a man wearing the uniform of a Union officer. He turned and looked Frank in the eye. Chamberlain's expression was the saddest, most forlorn look he had ever seen a man possess. To his horror, Frank recognized him. The officer turned away and he yelled, "Fix bayonets!"

Frank made his way down the hill through the dense forest, and it did not take long before the sight and sounds of the battle were lost. All that remained was a distant rumbling, it's source now identified. He didn't say anything to his family about the events that occurred before him on Little Round Top.

The last stop before leaving the park was the gift shop. Off to one side, Frank noticed the book section. There was something he wanted to check and soon found a book about Chamberlain. Opening the book, he found pictures of the troops of Maine. With trembling hands

and growing recognition, his eyes caught site of a figure standing next to Chamberlin in the shadows of the grainy photo. Frank closed the book, his mind full of mystery.

* * *

Years went by and Frank's visit to Gettysburg continually haunted him. June noticed a restlessness in her husband for some time and she suggested, "Why don't you take a trip somewhere to relax? The girls and I will stay home." They were older now and their lives were full of activities. They were not interested in leaving home, so June would stay behind with them. Uncertain about what lay ahead, Frank decided to return to Gettysburg.

The fact that he was once again to visit the battleground filled him with awe and no small amount of anticipation but at the same time, trepidation. Frank retraced his earlier visit, trying to stay as close as possible to his initial route and timetable. His last stop was Little Round Top.

He stood in silence at the site of the famous encounter between Chamberlain's Union troops and the soldiers of the South. The sound came first; men laden with equipment approached him from behind. Soon soldiers in Union blue surrounded him, but this time he knew they were not reenactors. Looking down the hill, he saw the scene waver and change. The landscape was now transformed once again to how it was on that fateful day, bare of trees.

Cannon thundered from below and bullets began to fly. Frank realized somehow what he was witnessing was not a performance but was real. Again, he saw Chamberlain with his forlorn expression, but this time he also gave Frank a subtle knowing nod.

Frank's hands were no longer empty, for they gripped a rifle; coarse fabric covered his bare arms. He looked down to see the blue sleeves of a Union uniform with the yellow stripes of a sergeant. Once again Chamberlain commanded, "Fix bayonets!" The next command was, "Charge!"

Now the essence of Frank prepared once more to answer the call to advance.

His body experienced the adrenaline of a young man going into battle. His mind was confused, but his purpose was firm.

Frank followed his comrades down the hill into the raging battle. There was no turning back, only forward, along with the men pictured in that grainy photo. ❖

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"Demi-Human"

by JAKE ALEXANDER GELLAR-GOAD

Editor Note - Welcome to a new year of Corner Bar Magazine. If you are a regular reader of ours, you may already have guessed that we appreciate long form speculative fiction. A good cup of coffee and a fully charged tablet battery, and we're happy-happy. So here you go with a lovely novelette, serialized for your reading pleasure. Enjoy part one.

Sing through me, O Muses,
not of any common story of a common boy,
who discovers he's half-divine, magic, or otherwise noble.

Flip the coin, and sing through me of a divine young woman
who discovers
she's a daughter not only of nymph but also man,
and therein finds her troubles.

Sing of her who leaves her celestial home, to seek the foreign
ordinary,
who walks with courage and wonder between two worlds,
and who finds her experience at odds with co-opted stories.

Tell the tale of her who struggles to discover
if belonging might be found among familiar gods,
or else among once-distant mortals.

Chapter 1

Jenny? No way in Hades!, Diplogeneia thought. But Philodryopion had insisted Diplogeneia take a human name if she wanted to travel safely through the Mortal Realm. And Philodryopion was the only person in the Dryadic Village who knew both the path to the mortal lands and her recently discovered secret. It had been weeks in the planning, and the time to transit realms was here. "Fine," Diplogeneia said, giving in. "Jenny it is."

I've never been this far off the main trails, Diplogeneia thought. *At least not in this particular direction.* Like many nymphs, she was skilled at navigating natural spaces. She listened for the sound of Converging Creek in the distance. She sorted through the reverberations of birdsong in the air, a snake slithering through the soil far off to the north, and other wildlife going about whatever daily traditions best suited them. She then locked in on the sound of running water. She had splashed about in that creek often as a child. It was remote, now, but she knew that familiarity and comfort was but a pivot and a hike away, if she wished to turn back. As they walked, Diplogeneia noticed Philodryopion's oaken skin and remembered how he always felt so at home in the woods, even when they were kids. *It's no surprise he would know every path and secret in these woods.*

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Aside from her vivid green hair and eyes to match, she hoped she could pass for human better than most in her community. Her fellow villagers were largely bipedal, but had appearances that ranged on a spectrum from somewhat human to those who were altogether more botanical. A satyr sighting at the town market was not unheard of, either, though they were more common in the hills to the east.

Diplogeneia clung tight to the Amulet of Remembered Words she had obtained from the local Hermes shrine. It coiled around her neck like snake scales. She traced the grooves of the faded omega on the timeworn pendant that hung from the center. She pushed down her nerves about the many challenges she would face in her journey. She knew the amulet would be of great aid, allowing her to recall any language she'd ever studied. *This would be so much easier if I were an Olympian or major deity, or if I even just knew one of them well, she thought. It's not fair that they can travel between the realms at will and take people with them, when all us minor divinities are stuck hoping to find the Crossroads Portal and waiting for it to open during the solstices.* The portal never seemed to emerge at the same place for more than a couple years at a time. *If I don't go now, who knows when I'll have another chance?*

"Don't think I don't see you holding that amulet," Philodryopion said. "Are you sure it's a good idea to steal from the god of travelers before going on such a journey?" He asserted all the maturity he could muster from being 10 months her senior.

"Well, he is the god of thieves and tricksters, too, so maybe he'd give me style points," Diplogeneia retorted. "Besides, I'm just borrowing it. And I prayed to Hermes to help me get it. He's the god of translation. I'm sure he'd understand my need for it."

"I get that it'll help you speak with the humans, but that's still a bold move," Philodryopion said.

"Speaking of, thanks again for helping me practice my English," Diplogeneia said.

"No problem," Philodryopion said. "I've studied it much longer than you, and you already sound like a natural with that amulet around your neck. I know you've been hurting, and I hope you find the answers and experiences you're looking for when you cross."

Philodryopion stopped short. "Whoa!" Diplogeneia exclaimed. She nearly crashed into him.

"We're here. This is where I saw it six months ago, during that snowstorm. I remember that rocky outcrop. There's not much time now. Do you feel it on your skin? Can you hear the faint crackling sound in the air? Somewhere around here, the Crossroads Portal will open." Philodryopion sighed. "I didn't want to tell you, or encourage you on this risky venture, until you'd made up your mind, but I've got some information and a few items that may be of help on your journey. You've got water though, right? It may be even hotter there than it is here."

"Sure do!," Diplogeneia replied. "I've got a couple simple outfits that I hope won't draw much attention either."

"And offerings for the gods?," said Philodryopion.

"I got the good wine from my patér's cellar, some laurel leaves, and some clay animal figurines I've been working on," Diplogeneia said.

"Okay, first, here's some human money." Philodryopion extended a fistful of pale green-and-white paper rectangles. "I don't know if it's enough to last you until the winter solstice, though. It's a couple decades old, but the merchant I exchanged with said he thought it would still be good. I don't know why they don't just use coins there, but I thought you'd like it, since it's green. The second thing I have for you is a Delphic Vial. This spring water is said to have aided Apollo's Oracles in their prophetic visions, which helped leaders of old in making important decisions. It's really rare, so don't waste it. It should only be consumed in a moment when you most need guidance."

"Aww, you're the best," Diplogeneia said. "You've done so much for me. I won't forget my promise. I'll be sure to bring back any interesting plant seeds I find. Maybe something exotic, like cranberries? Your garden will be the envy of the whole village when I get back."

"You should know you have a demi-human cousin, Jason, who lives in the Mortal Realm already," Philodryopion said. "People don't like to talk about such things, but your uncle had a little too much wine at the last big Dionysia festival and let it slip. His information is all here." Philodryopion passed Diplogeneia a folded piece of papyrus, just as the Crossroads Portal opened directly in front of where she was standing.

It stood nearly seven feet tall and was much too dark to make out anything on the other side. It appeared more like an endless layer of overlapping dark curtains, with some fleeting hint of light on the other side, than the clean circle that Diplogeneia had imagined countless times in recent weeks. She leaned forward for a closer look and tried to wrap her mind around what she was seeing, only to discover the portal was still growing. She phased through before getting to say goodbye.

* * *

Crack! A twig snapped beneath her feet, and Diplogeneia tumbled down a steep slope. She hadn't expected to phase from flat ground to the side of a valley. When she found herself at the bottom of the sunlit gorge, she was greeted with the kind but concerned voice of a stranger.

"Quite the tumble you took there. You need any help? I'm Lizzy," the woman said. "You shouldn't be hiking the gorge without a hiking stick. Hold on, I've got an extra extendable rod in my pack you can use."

Jenny accepted the shiny metallic pole. "Thanks. I'm Jenny," Diplogeneia responded, grateful the Amulet of Remembered Words was working. Other than the lack of glimmerwood trees, this place didn't look so different from the Enchanted Realm, she thought. She appreciated that her path down had not fully mirrored the rocky outcrop from the other side of the portal.

"You don't see a lot of folks with no real hiking gear in Linville Gorge," Lizzy said. "It's an old-growth forest you know."

"Oh, yeah," Diplogeneia said, "I'm usually better at this whole nature scene."

"I wouldn't mind a hiking buddy, if you're heading in the same direction," Lizzy said. Do you hike here often? If not, you really have to come back and see it in the fall."

"First-timer," Diplogeneia said.

"My friend Willow loves to hike with me in the mountains in the fall," Lizzy said, "but she never joins me on my annual summer solstice hikes. She always says she can't join because she's busy for some reason or another, but I suspect she just doesn't like the heat. Do you have any hiking buddies, or prefer to fly solo?"

"My friend Philo and I love summer hikes when the glimmerwood trees are in full shine," Diplogeneia replied.

"Oh, you must be Cherokee. I haven't

heard that name for any local trees before. I always tell people if I was Cherokee, my spirit animal would probably be a plant instead of an animal." Lizzy laughed robustly.

"What's that?," Diplogeneia asked.

"You don't have those?," Lizzy replied. "Maybe that's a Lumbee thing. It's like where if you have an animal, but it's for you."

"Oh, a pet," Diplogeneia said. "I've never had one, but I think I'd want a large pet that would be fun to hug, like a lion that grows as large as they do in Nemea, or maybe a bear."

"No, I mean like, well, it's not that funny, never mind." Lizzy scanned the horizon. "Looks like the big incline is coming up, you ready for a workout?"

I can't believe I've met my first human!, Diplogeneia thought. They ascended the steep terrain. *She's older than I expected for a hiker on such a strenuous trail, though.* Lizzy boasted long white hair, a backpack covered in flower patches, and a hiking vest that gave an air of competence among wild spaces. Diplogeneia especially appreciated her brightly colored clothing. *She'd fit right in back at home.*

"It looks like you need a ride?," Lizzy said, catching her breath. "The only car I see out here is mine."

"I'm trying to get to Charlotte, if you know where that is?," Diplogeneia said.

"I don't think you're making it that far tonight, kiddo," Lizzy said. "But I can take you as far as Asheville. It's the kind of place where someone with green hair would feel right at home. I've got a place on the outskirts of town, and there's an empty cabin on the grounds, if you need a place to crash for the night. Or longer, if you're between places right now?"

"Yes, I'd like that," Diplogeneia said. "I'm excited to ride in your car."

"High five," Lizzy said, raising her hand into the air. "Everyone loves a Subaru!"

Diplogeneia brought her hand up slowly and softly for a gentle touch.

"You look like you could use some rest," Lizzy said. "Feel free to get some shuteye on the drive back."

They climbed into the elongated sky-blue vehicle and set off on the dirt road. *If only I hadn't snuck in and read my méter's diary a few weeks ago, I could be having a picnic in Philodryopion's garden right now, not fighting a losing battle against sleep in a stranger's car*, Diplogeneia thought. *Or perhaps she's not a stranger. Perhaps this is my first mortal friend.*

* * *

They had been on the road for nearly an hour. The road shakily turned from pavement to gravel. Diplogeneia stirred. They were out in the countryside now. "The Open Path Retreat Center," she whispered, reading from the moonlit archway sign they were about to drive under. They passed a covered produce stand on their way deeper into the grounds.

"We've made it, home, sweet home!," Lizzy said, pulling up to a small A-frame cabin. "It's not the most spacious, but you'll have it all to yourself. Do you want any dinner, or just to crash?" She turned on the kitchen light, piercing the deep dark of night, a kind of darkness only truly known to those beyond the reach of municipal services and taxes.

"I'm ready to get a full night's sleep," Diplogeneia said. "And you're sure it's okay if I stay here?"

"For sure! We're always glad to have new faces around here. The bedroom is in the back. I'll come find ya in the morning," Lizzy said on her way out.

This bed is pretty comfortable, but it's so dark here, Diplogeneia thought. She found herself developing a newfound appreciation for even the diminished shine given off by her timeworn glimmerwood bedframe back home. *This pine frame doesn't hold any light at all.*

Chapter 2

Diplogeneia woke the next morning and exited the bedroom. *This natural light is great*, she thought, admiring all the windows in the cabin's A-frame wall. *It's my first full day in the Mortal Realm, and it's time to figure out where I am, and find out if there are other humans here.*

Before she could exit, Lizzy knocked and entered, without waiting for a response, exclaiming, "I brought breakfast! I've got scrambled eggs from our free-range chickens and veggies from the garden. You know, a lot of people pay pretty good for this stuff. We sell all kinds of produce at the stand by the road. Some of the fruits and flowers are more seasonal, but we've got great seeds for sale out there, too, year-round."

I should borrow some seeds from there for Philo the next time no one is looking, Diplogeneia thought. "I was too tired to ask last night," she said, "but what is this place?"

"It's home to me and my friends and my chosen family, a place to garden, and find oneself, while surrounded by Mother Earth," Lizzy said. Several of us live on the grounds, and we even have a small conference center we rent out to nonprofits. There are a few cabins we rent out to hikers, like the one you're in now. Not as many hikers when it's this hot, luckily for you."

"And what about you?," Diplogeneia asked.

"I live in the blue house just across the way. A few of us founders have our own houses, like me, Diane and Willow, and Cass did, until she left. But most folks just live over in the hostel-like space that we affectionately call the Hall. It really is a nice property, and I could go on about it all day," Lizzy continued, "but I do think we've already missed today's sunrise yoga session, and I'm sure you're hungry. I'll leave you to eat your breakfast, but come find me when you're done."

I'm surprised humans can grow veggies so fresh and crisp, but I already miss the food at home, Diplogeneia thought. She opened her pack and pulled out her méter's diary, which she had borrowed before leaving the Dryadic Village. She reread the passages that had sent her on this journey. *I can't believe I'm a demi-human, it still doesn't feel real.* Admiring her méter's gifted penmanship in High Hellenic, she came to the passage about her birth.

Hector was a good man. Gods, I miss him, even all these years later, even surrounded by family. But it's not so heavy anymore. Being with a mortal always meant outliving him. I'll always have a part of him, in my little Diplo. My sweet Diplo, my adventurous Diplo.

> *Praise to Eileithyia, O goddess of childbirth, that Diplo emerged as a seed, as little nymphs sometimes do. As much as we loved each other, he wasn't ready to be a father, and I wasn't ready to be a mother, especially not in the Mortal Realm.*
>
> *Waiting and planting her in the Enchanted Realm, and watching her grow into the verdant young woman she is today, has been the best decision and best blessing of my life. I love her so much.*

It isn't fair, Diplogeneia thought. *In all the ancient tales, whenever a mortal discovered they were half-divine, they were called demi-gods and celebrated as great heroes. But these days, in the Enchanted Realm, whenever anyone discovers they aren't as divine as they thought, they're called "demi-human." There's no celebration for that.*

Diplogeneia exited the front door. *My quest will not be one of seeking a long-lost father figure. I'm sure Hector was a nice man, but he's not who raised me. My patér will always be my patér. I just want to know more about what it means to be human, and why I've always felt a little different than the other nymphs. And the Open Path Retreat Center seems like as good a place as any to learn what it means to be human.*

"You must be the new person Lizzy was talking about," said a woman with a nametag saying Heather. Diplogeneia immediately noticed her rainbow-painted nails and pink ponytail. "I'm Heather, I run the morning yoga sessions atop that hill you see just over there behind the quad. You missed today's, but you should come by tomorrow."

"I am new. I'm Jenny. And I'll try for sure," Diplogeneia said.

"You really should," Heather said. "Have you met Cory yet? He's about your age. And he's bringing his friend Jessie tomorrow. She's Latina, like you."

"Oh, okay," Diplogeneia said. "Well, I'm supposed to go find Lizzy. Bye."

Lizzy emerged from her home across the quad and approached Diplogeneia. "I saw you coming," Lizzy shouted. "You're welcome to stay at the Open Path until you're back on your feet. We practice *xenia* here, or hospitality to strangers, but we also expect reciprocity, everyone here pitches in a little. Whatever you're comfortable with, it's up to you. I can take you around and introduce you to some people, and maybe you can pick a few of them to shadow and figure out how you want to contribute, if you decide to stay."

"I'm so psyched to meet more people," Diplogeneia said.

"Let's see, there's Willow and Diane Trent-Nolan, and their son Cory. Willow is my best friend, and Diane is her wife. The three of us, along with Diane's friend Cass, started this place together a long time back. Willow does a lot of the gardening, just over there." She pointed towards the gardens. "She's always a hoot to hang out with. Diane helps, too, but doesn't have as much of a green thumb. Diane is going on another serious antiquing trip soon and may be gone a couple weeks, so if you're handy in a garden, I'm sure Willow would appreciate the help. Cory goes to college at UNC-Blue Ridge, but he helps out at the produce stand in the summer, and still pitches in on the weekends during the school year. It looked like you already met Heather. She leads the outdoor sunrise yoga sessions, the Mother Earth evening prayer circles with all kinds of great-smelling incense, and the drink-and-draw activities on Friday nights. A lot of locals from Asheville come out and pay to join in on that. It's always a good time. And I'm sure Mark would also be glad to have help in the kitchen cooking and cleaning dishes. There's a lot of mouths to feed here, especially with all the little ones!"

"That's a lot of people," Diplogeneia said.

"That's not even half of them. You'll meet a lot of folks at community dinner, if you want to join us in the dining space at the end of the Hall this evening. Just stay away from the old stone building on the north end of the property. Sophie is working with some contractors on renovating that place, so we'll be better equipped for more homeschooling. We're hoping not so many of our members will feel a need to send their kids to the Buncombe County Schools if we can get a good setup here. There might be nails on the ground, and who knows what the basement looks like with the support beams needing to be reinforced. Just stay away."

"Got it," Diplogeneia said. "I'm really digging all the Mother Earth symbols I'm seeing around the property. It kind of reminds me of home."

"I'm so glad you said that," Lizzy said. "Mother Earth, Mother Nature, Gaia, whatever you want to call her, is actually a big part of why we started this place. I actually met Willow and Diane at the local Unitarian Universalist fellowship hall many moons ago. We got on so well. We realized we all had a passion for nature and worshipping Mother Earth. And with the state of the world, we all thought, shouldn't we have a place to get away from it all? To get back to nature? To bring together artists, and environmentalists, and nonprofit activists, and other old hippies like me," Lizzy said, laughing. "We wanted a place for those of us who felt especially close to Mother Earth."

"Why is she always presented in a cross-legged pose, though?," Diplogeneia asked.

"We have a pretty new-age vibe around here, if you couldn't tell, so it just seemed right," Lizzy said.

"It's just weird to see her cross-legged," Diplogeneia said. "Honestly, it's weird to see her represented with legs at all."

"You're not calling my beliefs weird, are you? They're sincerely held and important to me," Lizzy stated. "And besides, we've been at this nineteen and a half years, probably since around the time you were born. I think we know what we're doing."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean any offense," Diplogeneia said. "It's just that one time when I was little I actually met Gai... guys who know a lot about this, is all."

"Well, there's three things you can't always rely on in this world. Guys, the weather, and technology," Lizzy said with a small laugh.

"You laugh at your own jokes more than anyone I know," said a woman with short red hair. "Hey, Sophie! Didn't see you come up behind me. I thought you were working on the reno still," Lizzy said.

"Just got to meet with this permitting guy from the county who is coming out to take a look," Sophie said. "Don't worry, the basement is cleaned up. I've got a little time to kill until he gets here. He called to say he's running behind."

"Would you mind taking Jenny, our latest recruit, over to meet Cory, then?," Lizzy said.

"You got it!," Sophie said. "You're always the best at finding new folks to bring into the fold."

"I need to move the laundry over in the Hall real quick, and Cory can show her around the produce stand before the lunchbreak traffic comes by. I think he only has one morning class today, so he's probably back at his house by now. The summer session classes never seem to last very long." Lizzy turned to Diplogeneia. "Jenny, can you believe someone who was just a freshman in college has his own house? I think Diane set him up that way because she doesn't want him to move away after college. It used to belong to Cass." Lizzy walked toward the Hall without another word.

"So, where are you from?," Sophie asked.

"A little village, only about an hour's drive from here," Diplogeneia replied.

"But like, where are you really from?"

"What do you mean?," Diplogeneia said.

"Like, what are you?," Sophie asked.

"Human? At least on my dad's side," Diplogeneia said. She attempted to mask her panic, worried that she had said too much.

"You're too funny," Sophie said. "I meant like, what race or ethnicity? Greek, right? Or Arabic? I can usually guess."

"Race? Oh, we don't have that where I'm from," Diplogeneia said. "Not in the same way you mean it, anyways."

"Ah, you don't see color. I get it. Wouldn't the world be better if everyone was like that? Once we get the new classroom spaces set up, we'll be better able to help all the kids have more enlightened views. You know, I'm not really white myself, I'm Irish, and believe it or not, we didn't always count as white." Sophie looked past Diplogeneia, then turned to point out someone walking across the grounds. "Oh, look, there's Cory, heading towards the stand. If you run, you can catch up. I'm sure Lizzy has texted him about you, he's always so good with the newbies. I need to go meet the permit guy."

Diplogeneia hustled to catch up to the young man. "So, you're the famous Jenny I've been hearing about," Cory said. He sported a clean-shaven look, short hair, and a tight UNC-Blue Ridge Bears t-shirt.

Why do so many people have writing on their clothing?, she wondered. "So, this is the famous produce stand I've been hearing about," Diplogeneia said.

"The one and only," Cory replied. "She's old, but sturdy. Mark did a good job putting her together."

"The produce stand is a she?" Diplogeneia gave Cory a curious glance.

"Willow named her Pomona. Willow likes to name things," Cory explained. "We've still got a few minutes until the lunch traffic comes through. I have to warn you, though, if Hank and Rosie come by, they'll talk your ear off. They've been dealing with empty nest syndrome for about a decade by chatting up anyone they can for as long as they can. But they're always good to buy something, at least."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Diplogeneia said. "I've met a lot of interesting people around here so far."

"I bet," Cory said. "I saw you talking to Sophie. And yikes! Has she tried to guess your ethnicity yet? She does it with everyone. She started to try with me, asking about my ancestral country of origin when she moved into the Hall about 5 or 6 years ago, and I shut that right down. She got misty-eyed, too, like she was waiting for me to comfort her. I don't know how someone can be so good at wrangling little kids—she has some serious skills there—and so bad at basic social skills at the same time. It's not like that information is just available at the county clerk's office. Plus, she knows I'm adopted, what records does she think I've got?"

"She sounds like a lot," Diplogeneia said. "It seems like a pretty loving community, at least. I saw Lizzy had a sign in her yard that says 'love is love,' and I'm not exactly sure what it means, but it seemed like a nice sentiment."

"Did you ever notice how that sign is kind of tilted, pointed not so subtly towards my moms' house?," Cory said. "Diane is not a fan of the sign, but she won't tell Lizzy. She always thinks signs are hollow gestures in place of real action, and don't even get me started on what she thinks about the concept of social media activism. She's so direct about literally everything else, I'm honestly surprised she hasn't said anything to Lizzy. Maybe it's because she knows how much Willow smiles whenever she sees the signs. She'll fiercely protect Willow and anyone else she loves. You never want to get on her bad side, ever. I guess what's good for the goose, isn't always good for the other goose, or whatever."

"She seems tough," Diplogeneia said. "In a good way, I think."

"Oh look," Cory said, "it's our first customer." The woman slowly approaching the stand had more of a limp than Diplogeneia expected for a human of that age. Her gait had outpaced her wrinkles.

"Have you done retail before?," Cory said. "It's not so different. The famous Jenny should take the lead!" He nudged Jenny towards the customer.

"Well, Hank couldn't make it today," the woman said.

So this must be Rosie, then, Diplogeneia thought.

"You know how his back gets when he does the mowing," Rosie said. "I keep telling him he should just hire the kid down the street. You know how I'm always telling him that. But he won't do it. It was different back when Lindsay was still here, and she could pitch in a little. Now that she's having twins, she probably won't have time for her old mom any more. But that's how it goes, isn't it? I am excited to be a grandmother, though. I think I'll have the kids call me 'GR,' for Granny Rosie. New girl, what do you think?"

"I, that's, um, yeah. It sounds like your daughter is doing well," Diplogeneia said.

"Being new around here, have you found your church home yet?," Rosie asked.

"I don't go to a church," Diplogeneia said.

"You really ought to," Rosie said. "You don't have to believe the same as anyone else, but you got to believe in something right? That's what I always say. And it's actually very diverse around here. We've got Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and even Episcopalians, I mean, if you're into that kind of thing."

"Oh, I guess I wouldn't call it a church, but I do go to the temples back home sometimes," Diplogeneia said. "The decorative metopes have always been my favorite."

"Temple? That's lovely. My friend Shelby actually married a Jew. Really nice fellow," Rosie said.

"So, did you want fruit or a flower or something else?," Diplogeneia asked.

"I'll just take my usual, dear," Rosie said.

"What's your usual?," Diplogeneia asked.

"Same as I always get" Rosie said.

"One usual coming up," Diplogeneia said. "What's her usual?," she whispered to Cory. Cory said nothing, but began to laugh. "What's her usual?," Diplogeneia repeated, with more urgency. "It'll just take a moment," she said to Rosie.

"No worries, I saw you coming, Ms. Rosie," Cory said, pulling a bag out from beside the stand. "I've got it packed up for you right here."

"That's a ten and a five," said Rosie, handing him two paper bills. "Now you keep the change, and buy this young lady something nice. I'll tell Hank you said hello." Rosie ambled back to her car, humming quietly to herself.

"You enjoyed that!," Diplogeneia said, exasperated. "You let her go on and on about grandkids and yard care, and didn't tell me you already had her order ready!"

"I especially liked the fruit or flowers question," Cory said, stifling a giggle. "That's definitely the only two things we sell here."

"Just for that, I'm taking some seeds as my

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wages for today," Diplogeneia said, starting to laugh, as well. She was delighted to find cranberry seeds in the mix. "And I'm not telling you which ones."

* * *

The day passed quickly. The sun dipped behind a nearby maple tree and, not yet ready to surrender to nightfall, left a smattering of pink and gold sky in its wake.

"I'll tell you if you promise not to laugh," Cory said.

"I promise to try," Diplogeneia said.

"I want to work at a national park, or maybe a state park, maybe lead hikes, maybe be like a youth event coordinator," Cory said.

"Aww, that's so sweet," Diplogeneia said.

"Hey, you weren't supposed to make fun of it," Cory said defensively.

"No, I'm being sincere, you'd be really good at that, I think," Diplogeneia said.

"I like working with kids. I do have a passion for environmental stuff, but I feel like I can talk to kids without them making it all cringe. And I like helping them learn," Cory said.

"How do you mean?," Diplogeneia asked.

"Well, it's like, we host all these local environmental group chapters for their monthly meetings at the retreat center, right?," Cory said. "The Sierra Group, First Warning NC, Emerald Harmony, you name it. And they say all the right things about environmental racism, but then they all turn to me, looking for kudos or feedback, or I don't even know what. Or say something like, 'we're doing this for a future for people, like Cory here,' and just put me on the spot, and take away my agency. It's not like that with kids."

"I hear you," Diplogeneia said.

"I also think working at a national park might be a chance to see a little bit more of the world," Cory said. "I could start off at a park somewhere nearby, maybe, before moving up and on, or maybe I'll try to go straight to something with redwoods out on the west coast."

"That sounds amazing," Diplogeneia said. "I'd be the first to visit you."

"It's also like, when I'm out around town, and outside of those environmentalist spaces, sometimes people poke fun at me for being a vegetarian or sounding like I was raised by hippies," Cory said. "Can't win either way, sometimes. Anyways, it'll be getting dark soon, time to pack it in if we want to make it to community dinner." He began to stash away items and close compartments in the produce stand.

"I can't believe it's almost dark. How did the time fly by so fast?," Diplogeneia said while she assisted with the cleanup. "I actually had a lot of fun. When Lizzy said I needed to pick some tasks to help with, I was sure it would be gardening, but you've made the produce stand a serious contender."

"I really am the best," Cory said.

"I will say, I always felt a little out of place back home, a little different than the other kids growing up, but something about this place feels special," Diplogeneia said.

"I get that," Cory said. "Being the Black kid in a community of mostly white environmental activists hasn't always been the easiest. Don't get me wrong, I believe in the path and Mother Nature, and how important all this is. But sometimes it's just nice to go to campus for the day and not feel like I stick out so much. Not to have to be perceived all day."

"You said you were adopted, right?," Diplogeneia said. "I recently learned my patér wasn't even my bio dad."

"Oh, like you've got a stepdad?," Cory said.

"Yeah. And if I'm being honest, and you promise not to tell, Jenny isn't my real name. It's just a nickname. I don't usually even like how it sounds."

"For real?," Cory said.

"I'm Diplogeneia" she said.

"You're gonna have to say that one more time. I want to put all due respect on it the first time I say it," Cory stated.

"Diplogeneia," she repeated.

"Diplogeneia," Cory said. "That's pretty cool. I like Jenny, too. Which do you want me to call you?"

"I don't want everyone to get weird about my name. I'll stick to Jenny for now," Diplogeneia said. "Besides, I like the way Jenny sounds when you say it."

"Jenny it is," Cory said. He looked around at the stand. "All packed up, let's go eat! If you're up early enough tomorrow, come up for the sunrise yoga. My friends Jessie and Taylor from campus are coming. Jessie comes all the time, she's down for anything, but it's Taylor's first time, and they're a total noob at yoga. So, if or when you suck at it, at least you won't be alone." He laughed.

* * *

"I see we've got some new faces today," Heather said. "We'll get started in a few minutes. For those who brought them, don't forget to put your crystals out on the table to charge. It's going to be a sunny one today! And do any warm-up stretches you want to now. There's no better way to start the day."

"You'll be great at this," Lizzy said, walking



by Diplogeneia to grab a spot at the front.

Diplogeneia admired the colorful layout of the checkered picnic blankets and various blue, yellow, pink, and lilac yoga mats spread across the hilltop. The array of colors reminded her of the of wildflowers she had seen growing around the Mortal Realm. They were so much more colorful than the white asphodels that were common back home.

"Taylor, what's up! You finally made it," Cory said.

"I don't know why y'all want to get up this early. I think I saw a literal rooster still sleeping down there," Taylor said. They sported a peach fuzz-length buzzcut.

"Jessie, good to see you here again, and with your latté, surprise, surprise," Cory said. The blonde highlights in Jessie's otherwise brown hair seemed to shimmer in the morning sunlight.

"Hey guys," Jessie said, giving a hug to Cory. She then proceeded to hug half the other people in attendance, one by one. Her red earrings and matching red glasses fetched many compliments along the way.

"This is Jenny. She's our latest resident to join us here at Open Path," Cory said to his friends.

"Y'all always take in every stray and runaway you come across don't ya?," Taylor said. "And I'm here for it. Hi, I'm Taylor."

"Jenny," Diplogeneia said. "Did Cory rope you into this too?"

"He's downright diabolical sometimes," Taylor responded. "But in a good way, ya know?"

"I like your shoes," Diplogeneia said. "The blue matches your eyes. And I like that jacket, too."

"Taylor always has the best styles," Jessie said. "It might get too warm for a jacket soon, though."

"I call it thrift shop swagger," Taylor said. "Honestly, they have more sizes and styles than a lot of the expensive boutique places downtown that cater to impossibly thin people. That just isn't me. I'll take you sometime, Jenny, if you'd like."

"Cory's friends seem nice," Diplogeneia thought. "And they're about my age too, or maybe just a couple of years younger. I've always heard humans age a little faster than regular people."

"Alright, folks, let's introduce the new faces," Heather said. "There are no strangers at Open Path. Cory, I see you brought Jessie Montez with you again, always nice to see you, and is that Taylor? This is the third time I've heard you were joining, I'm so glad you were able to make it this time. Do you want to introduce yourself?"

"Hi everyone, I'm Taylor Thompson, I'm a first-year at UNC-Blue Ridge, well, rising sophomore, I guess, they/them, and my major is still undecided. Although I'm thinking maybe communications, or sociology, or something like that to build the skills to be an effective activist or social worker, or maybe even a journalist."

"Welcome, Taylor!," Heather said. "Everyone, give them a big Open Path round of applause." An intergenerational cohort ranging from middle-schoolers to retirees began to clap. Various words of welcome echoed across the hilltop.

"And Jenny, I know we've met already," Heather said, "but we're so excited to have you here, too. Everyone, let's give Jenny a round of applause, too. You're on the path, the right path, and no one goes alone. Let's get started."

Chapter 3

"I swear, I'm still sore from yesterday," Taylor said, after the waiter left with their orders. Diplogeneia had joined Cory and his friends for an evening outing in town. "Mornings are a scam."

"You always say that, and I still don't know what it means," Cory relied. "But dinners out are still cool, right?"

"Anything in the PM," Taylor said. "PM is the best M. But also, and I say this as an openly white person, what's up with there being not one, but two white women with dreads at the yoga session? That's whack. And what's up with how Heather pronounced 'Appalachian?' The word 'lay' is nowhere in Appalachian." Cory nodded in agreement.

"Jenny, I'm so glad you could join us!," Jessie said. "This place has the best enchiladas, at least for what you can find in Asheville. They're still nothing like back home. And Cory likes all the vegetarian protein options here."

"You said you were from Wilmington, North Carolina, right?," Diplogeneia asked. "Is Wilmington known for its enchiladas? I've never had enchiladas before."

"No, I mean my mom's. She's not afraid of going spicy," Jessie said. "Not like a lot of restaurants around here. La Resonancia was really good, it was a whole vibe, but they closed. My mom comes up a couple times a semester and makes a big meal for me, and friends, and always brings my little bro up, too. She'll come up for parents' weekend at UNC-BR in a few months. You have to join us!"

"I'd like that. So, how did a cool sophomore like you end up stuck hanging out with freshmen like Taylor and Cory last year?" Diplogeneia cracked a grin.

"Taylor kind of brought us all together," Jessie said. "I was the RA for the first-gen student dorm last year. I love being an RA and helping people, and the free room and board is a very nice perk. That's why I do it for the summer sessions, too. It's an easy gig, campus is so much less crowded during the summer. Although, I'm thinking I might move into my sorority house in the fall. Anyways, I really connected with Taylor at the start of the academic year. We did everything together."

"I was the shy kid," Taylor said. "At least back then. And Jessie was the extrovert that adopted me." Taylor laughed.

"I already knew Taylor a little," Cory said. "We're both local, we'd had some classes together growing up, but we weren't like besties or anything back then."

"Yeah, I think the friendship dynamic really clicked once Jessie came along," said Taylor. "I believe the first time all three of us were together was at that PFLAG meeting in the fall that your moms had dragged you to. And I'd brought Jessie along with me for support, so I didn't have to check it out alone."

"And the rest is history," said Jessie. "I didn't know anyone out here when I first moved for college. Which, I suppose, was kind of the point. I'm just glad to have found my people out here in the mountains."

"Mountains for life!," Taylor said. "I still can't believe you wanted to come here, though, instead of staying in Wilmington. You were so close to Wrightsville Beach. I could never give up the mountains, but the vibe shift is real if you get outside of Asheville by about 10 miles in most directions."

"How do you mean?," Diplogeneia asked.

"The yard signage just becomes a little less 'science is real' and more 'the south will rise

again,' if you catch my drift," Taylor said. Diplogeneia didn't.

"I love my family, but I wanted space," Jessie said. "This was about as far away as I could get and still be paying in-state tuition. And it's close enough that they can still visit, and that was important, too."

The waiter passed out dishes to everyone and left to check on the next table over. "That smells so good," Cory said.

The savory smells enticed Diplogeneia as well. She admired the enchiladas, fajitas, burritos, and vegetarian tacos. *This is so many new shapes for food to take*, she thought. "I'm so excited to try this," Diplogeneia said. "And that. And that. And also that. I'm going to need to try bites of everyone's orders. Oh, I forgot to ask the waiter, do you think I could get a block of feta on the side?"

* * *

"You're a natural," Willow said. "I don't know what I'd have done without you, with Diane gone these past weeks." Willow leaned over to inspect one of her plants. She brushed her shoulder-length brown hair away from her eyes. Her arm was covered with tattoos of various flowers.

"Thanks!," Diplogeneia said. "Some of these plants are new to me, but I've always had a way with plants. By the way, I cannot help but appreciate all the cool flowers on your arm." The thorns on the lavender rose tattoo reminded her of the thorns that sometimes popped up on the faces of growing teenagers back home. She was grateful to have been spared that particular hormonal affliction.

"I get a new one every year," Willow said. "I got my first one the year we opened this place. I'm due to get my next one this December, if you have any ideas? Picking out new ones is always so much fun."

"There are so many options!," Diplogeneia said. "But I don't know much about tattoos. Maybe Diane would know what would look good on you. Does she have any tattoos?"

"She likes them on me, but she's never been much of a fan of them for herself," Willow said. "And it's not that she's scared of needles."

"I can't imagine much of anything scaring her," Diplogeneia said.

"I did talk her into getting a tattoo one time," Willow said. "She got a small crescent moon on her shoulder. She's got this one stunning sleeveless dress, that's as raven-black as her hair, that shows it off so well. I like mine to be visible all the time, even if it means running through more sunscreen, to keep them from fading. Speaking of, I should get this one of Emma touched up. Her petals have seen better days."

"I think it looks fine. I'd actually be happy if we could get the flower garden looking half as good your arm," Diplogeneia said.

"I still don't know how you brought Martha back, I was sure she was dead," Willow said. "If you can work your same magic for Lilith, it'd mean so much to me. I've been growing her for years, but the drought this summer has been hitting us hard."

"I'll try," Diplogeneia said. "She's the one by Sammy, right?"

"See, I knew you'd learn the names," Willow said. "Diane always rolls her eyes at me when I name the plants, but then she ends up using the same names for them too, every time. She's supposed to be back this evening."

"Isn't that her car pulling in over there?" Diplogeneia heard the now-familiar sound of tires on gravel.

"She's early!" Willow flushed with excitement. "Her trip must have gone well. She only comes back early when she feels happy with her finds. She loves antiquing. Almost as much as I love plants. Almost."

Diane exited the hybrid and gave a wave to Willow before approaching the garden.

"Someone's happy, you're grinning so big," Willow said. She gave her wife an enthusiastic welcome back kiss.

"I found it," Diane said. "Finally. This has to be the right one, I'm 80 percent sure, maybe 90 percent. After so many fakes and false starts. Cass had a great lead this time." Diane gave Diplogeneia a sidelong glance. "Oh, Jenny! I didn't even process you were there. I was just so excited. I just had one of the best antiquing runs of my life. So many good finds. I'll show off a few of them at community dinner tonight. Someday, when you're ready, Jenny, maybe you'll join me on one of my antiquing trips." She turned back to her wife. "Willow, honey, would you help me get these into the house safely. Don't want any of these precious artifacts to get damaged in transit."

"Of course, Willow said, "you are my moon, and your gravity tugs at me always, where you go, I go." She followed Diane back to the car.

The coast is clear, Diplogeneia thought. She poured out some of her offering wine, from a bottle she'd been concealing in the pocket of her new thrift-store cargo pants she had purchased for gardening. She turned her palms to the sky and spoke the words, "O Demeter, who loves all things that grow, let not this plant follow your daughter to Hades, but find its way again to the warm embrace of Gaia and Helios." She grasped Lilith's stem. The wilted green-and-purple leaves of the coleus were spotted with dark browns and blacks.

Diplogeneia's hand began to glow faintly, and Lilith became verdant once more. *She didn't see that, did she?*, Diplogeneia wondered. She noticed that, in the distance, Willow had paused while unloading Diane's car. *Maybe she saw the hand gesture, but no way she saw the glow from that distance, it's too dim. Maybe she just needed a break from all the lifting? Besides, how could simple hand gestures stand out in a space full of such eccentric personalities?*

Diplogeneia saw Willow and Diane start speaking at a distance, but she couldn't quite make out what they were saying. She dismissed it and returned to her chores.

* * *

"Take care now, and you watch your back, don't throw it out again!," Diplogeneia said playfully, as Hank and Rosie departed with their purchases.

"And to think, you used to worry when you saw Rosie driving up," Cory said.

"I've had a lot of practice," Diplogeneia said.

"I think she likes you better than me now," Cory said. "I think Willow maybe likes you better now, too, ever since you helped her with the garden."

"She's pretty great," Diplogeneia said. "I just don't get how Diane disappears away from her for so long antiquing."

"Honestly, I think half the time, she's actually going to visit Cass," Cory said. "Cass was her best friend, until Cass and Lizzy had a kind of falling out about 10 years ago or so."

"That's so sad. Lizzy is so nice," Diplogeneia said. "I can't imagine her fighting with anyone."

"Yeah, they just had different ideas on how

to run this group, and what it should be for," Cory said. "Diane says we're not really supposed to talk about it."

Diplogeneia's eyes widened. "What happened?"

"Obviously don't repeat this, but Cass started getting more into mysticism, talking about visions, and dreams, and needing to take a more proactive approach to creating change in the world, even if it required conflict, rather than just hiding away in nature on the commune."

"Conflict? That does not sound like the vibe of this place, like, at all," Diplogeneia said. "I'm surprised to hear you call this place a commune, though."

"I know what this place is. I go to school. I've seen it from the outside. But I also see it from the inside, and I know what it has to offer." Cory spread his arms wide, as if to embrace the buildings and grounds surrounding him. "Community that you don't find in a lot of places these days. Maybe that's why it caused so much turmoil when Cass left and broke up the community. A lot of the younger people left with her, at least the runaways and ones who didn't have other family tying them down here. You ever notice how there's kind of a generational gap around here, not many people our age or a few years older? She started her own group, called the Daughters of Hecate, somewhere deeper in the mountains, and started recruiting people to it. Somewhere in the Great Smoky Mountains, I think. That's probably why everyone here is in such a rush to get that school built on the grounds, so the kids will feel more connected here, and no one will want to leave. They don't want another youth exodus."

"Wow, you must have lost some friends when that happened, I'm so sorry," Diplogeneia said. "Do you ever see anyone who left?"

"One time, when I was about 12 or 13, Diane took me with her on one of her so-called antiquing trips," Cory said. "And we did actually stop at a lot of antique shops along the way, until we got to the campgrounds where Cass was staying. I don't remember exactly how to get back there, or know if they're still even there, but it was nice to see some of the old gang again. There were some new faces, too."

"What was that like?," Diplogeneia asked.

"Fun, but odd, too," Cory said. "They were all wearing purple. I know our community has our ways that outsiders might find odd, but we've never done matching robes before! Also, Diane and Cass didn't think I was paying attention, but I heard them talking about trying to find an artifact, and how all the ones Diane brought were wrong. Maybe Cass just wanted a nice old one as a symbol for their group? Maybe she was tired of seeing Gaia in yoga poses everywhere, like we have for our symbol."

"That's a lot to process," Diplogeneia said.

"We should pack up Pomona early today, anyways," Cory said. "Taylor and Jessie will be here soon to pick us up. I still can't believe you've never been to the movies before." Cory and Diplogeneia began closing up the produce stand. The motions felt automatic, smooth, familiar. She'd done them all many times before.

"Well, where I'm from, they're just much bigger on theater," Diplogeneia said. "Just don't tell Jessie and Taylor I've never been to the movies. I don't want to feel like the odd one out today."

Taylor drove their jeep right up to the produce stand. "That's them!," Cory said. "Taylor, Jessie, what's up?"

"Y'all ready for this?," Taylor said. "Check it, the back seat of the jeep has all kinds of snacks. Everyone has to help sneak them in."

"Shotgun!," Cory yelled.

"You can't call shotgun when I'm already in the front seat," Jessie said. "But, luckily for you, I wanted to sit next to Jenny, anyways, to tell her about the party." Jessie moved to the back. "My sorority is participating in the Greek Row mixer on Thursday, to mark the first week of the semester, and you all have to come."

Taylor pulled their jeep out of the retreat center, making a left onto the pavement from the gravel road.

"Jenny, you've got to join us!," Cory said. "You're always going on about Greek myth stuff, and this party has a 'dress Greek' theme, you'll love it. There will be dancing too, you've got to go."

"What would I wear?," Diplogeneia asked. "I didn't exactly come to this place with a huge wardrobe. But I suppose I can raid the thrift store downtown, I've gotten some good finds there before."

"Let's goooo!," Cory said. "And I'm sure Diane will let you borrow some stuff if you want. She's a big clothes horse."

"Like a centaur, but with a lot of layers?," Diplogeneia said.

Cory laughed. "See, always going on about Greek myth, this party is going to be perfect for you."

"Will you ask Diane if I can rummage through her closet?," Diplogeneia asked. "She's always so fashionable, but she can be kind of intimidating, too. I'm afraid to ask."

"Bet," Cory said. ❖

(End of Part One)

END TRANSMISSION