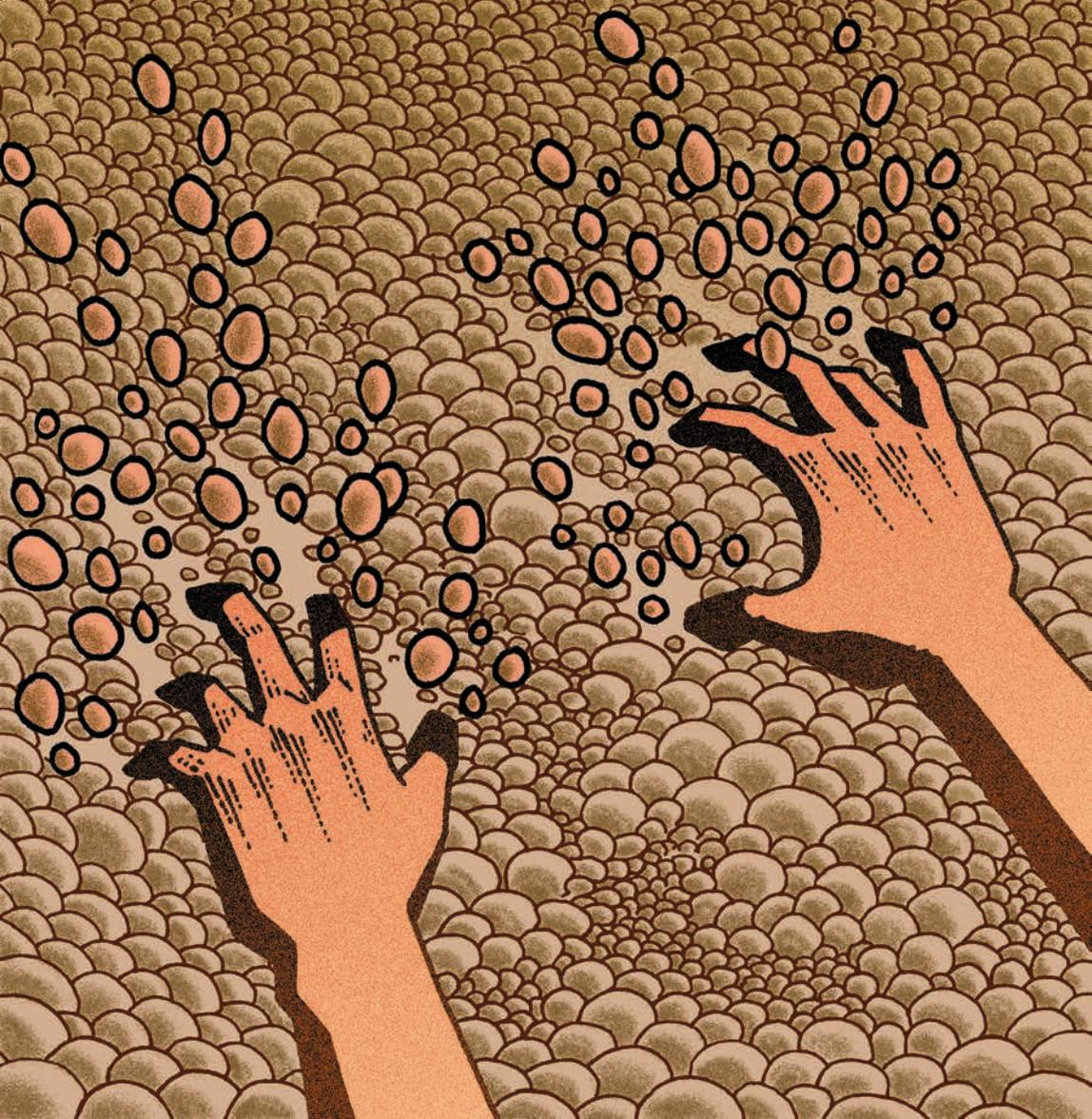


SCREE

a novel by MATT HOWARTH



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howteck industries

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Special thanks to Lee “the Claw” Bentley (for post-production assistance).

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1.

Sooner or later, acute angst might make her suicidal, but so far it had only made her reckless.

From the onset, grief had hit Katy pretty hard, and that pain continued to intensify with each passing day, growing more pungent, more insufferable. Andrew was dead. And nothing was going to change that.

It was 2015; drugs were a fashionable means of escaping reality. But Katy'd never really been into pharmaceuticals; okay, in her college years she'd dabbled with speed, mostly to cope with juggling a job and her studies—and that fingernails-scratching-across-a-blackboard high was *not* what she needed right now. So she picked alcohol to squelch her pain. Booze was an old friend, albeit one she hadn't spent time with in a while. But it was easy to get and tasty to imbibe...but a standard inebriation failed to do the job. Only in excess did the vodka make the grief go away...along with everything else. Where she would wake from her latest binge was always a surprise, not always a pleasant one, either.

She'd found herself collapsed in a bus station restroom, splattered with various bodily fluids, not all of them hers.

She'd come to on her feet walking through Washington Square with the sun high in the sky.

She'd awoken in just her underwear in a strange apartment with no sign of the place's obviously well-off inhabitant.

And this time? It was an alley, dirty and smelly and all gray the way things were sometimes at night.

And—as usual—the grief was still there, only now her misery was augmented by the worst headache in the world.

What did I do to deserve all this? It wasn't fair. There was nothing special about her, she had no dark secret hiding in her past that warranted karma dumping all this torment on her sad little shoulders. And they were little shoulders, delicate and frail. Her entire physique was slight: lengthy coltish legs reached up to narrow hips and a wasp-waisted tight little torso. Her arms were slender, like her legs. Her hands petite with tiny fingers. A long neck supported a heart-shaped face framed by jet black straight hair that hung to her shoulders. Prominent cheekbones accentuated her already enormous gray eyes, further diminishing her tiny nose. In contrast, her lips were wide, and opened on a mouth of large teeth. Her smile was heartwarming...although it had been some time since she'd had reason to bend her lips in such a fashion.

lck.

The ground was icky to her touch. Sitting up in the gloom, she found herself sprawled in grimy raw garbage half-covered by slabs of rotting cardboard. Around her, mounds of plastic trash bags formed an urban grotto. A metal dumpster sat against the far wall. A hint of light came from the right, presumably from the mouth of the alley. That would be the rest of Manhattan—a bustling metropolis full of cheerful people going about their lives—damn them.

None of them were Andrew. But...many of them had their own Andrews. Katy didn't hate them for that. It wasn't their fault they were happy. She hated life in general...life without her Andrew.

Why did you have to go and die?

But—as usual—no answer was forthcoming.

She'd known right away that he was the one—her true love, her soulmate. There'd just been something about him that had charmed the pants off her—literally.

And now she was alone and her pants were dirty with god-knew-what and a nuclear explosion was going off inside her head...but there was still something left in the bottle she clutched. Even passed out, she'd retained a firm grip on that—just in case she wanted a snort once she woke up.

And boy, did she need some hair of the dog...

She unscrewed the bottle's cap, but never lifted it to her lips.

A man dressed in a frogman outfit stepped into view. Complete with oval facemask and double tanks of air riding on his back. His flippers made squishy sounds as he tromped through the muck. He seemed to be searching for something. As he moved along, he poked at the piled rubbish and periodically bent close to root beneath the surface trash. Raspy hisses marked each breath he took.

Katy didn't feel drunk...but she must still be—to see something like this.

The frogman pulled a broken DVD player from the garbage. Holding it high, he switched on a pair of lights mounted on either flank of his facemask so he could examine the apparatus. He cast it back and continued rifling through the collective rubbish.

Unperturbed by this alcohol phantasm, she watched his search.

Eventually, the frogman turned around to search her side of the alley, and his twin lights revealed Katy sitting there covered in vomit and filth. He jerked with surprise. She winced in the glare.

"I'm looking for a piece of equipment, Miss," the frogman addressed her. "It looks like a black cube...about this big...?" He held his hands up, as if cradling something about the size of a toaster. He had expelled the mouthpiece connected to his air-tanks so he could speak to her—not that it mattered to Katy. She made it a habit not to engage with her booze figments; nothing good ever came from talking with hallucinations. He

held out his invisible black cube as if proximity might loosen her lips. All she could do was shrug.

For a long moment he stood there, looming over her: all spooky looking in his black rubber suit, all safe and anonymous behind his shiny facemask, with his breathing hoses draped hissing around his neck. If Katy hadn't been soused, she'd have cringed away from the man. He was so intense.

Then his hands came apart, lifting his palms out in a the-hell-with-you gesture. The frogman was turning away when a spotlight suddenly fell upon him. The glare captured his panic as tiny explosions disturbed the muck about him. Someone was shooting at him! He leaped to escape the barrage of light and lead.

"No no no!" declared Katy. She scuttled back as the creepy frogman dove into her safe little trash bag grotto. Ignoring her, the man pulled something from his belt and bent to fiddle with it. She thought it was a gun, but he never lifted it to shoot back at his attacker. Instead he just tinkered with the thing and cursed somebody called Darcy.

Meanwhile, the spotlight remained transfixed on the mouth of her trash bag grotto, revealing in unnecessary detail how fresh salvos of bullets were shredding the garbage mounds.

Hysteria mounted in Katy. This was the worst hangover ever!

By this point, she had to concede that these were not delusions conjured up by her alcohol abuse—the frogman, the spotlight, and whoever the hell was shooting at him—all of this was real! Dammit!

Why me?

Meanwhile, the frogman was still fiddling with whatever he'd pulled from his belt. His back was to Katy, she couldn't see it. Well, whatever it was, it wasn't working and that really pissed him off.

Under fire and trapped in an alleyway, the frogman seemed to have forgotten that Katy shared his hidey hole. He edged back as further gunfire chewed away another layer of the garbage mounds that protected him. And in doing so, he stumbled into Katy.

He reacted with shock. Recoiling, he staggered from the shelter of the trash bag grotto and was riddled with bullets. For a moment he stood there, twitching and jerking in the spotlight as the slugs tore through him, then he collapsed in a dark heap.

A device fell from his hand and bounced over to land *plop* in Katy's lap. She barely noticed this, though; she was too busy screaming her head off from watching the poor frogman get shot to pieces right in front of her. She'd seen people get shot in movies—but this was different—this was vivid, revolting, *real!* She was horrified.

And if she didn't stop screaming, she might be next. Whoever had killed the frogman wouldn't want to leave behind any witnesses. Any minute now, the shooter was going to storm the trash bag grotto and end her life.

Under different circumstances, Katy might have welcomed death. It would be a way of ending her suffering. In death, she could be reunited with Andrew.

But the circumstances had flooded her bloodstream with endorphins, and fear had conquered her mind. Survival instinct kicked in, forcing her mind to seek a way out of this perilous trap.

But there was no way out. The piles of garbage walled her in. If she tried to flee down the alley, the spotlight would reveal her flight—and a barrage of gunfire would catch her in the back. She didn't want that—that was what she was looking to avoid. But—there was no damned way out of the trash bag grotto.

The device in her lap was blinking. She noticed it as a figure stepped into view at the mouth of the grotto. The shooter raised his arm and pointed an Uzi at her. The gun's nozzle flashed bright—and she squeezed her eyes shut in dreadful expectation.

And suddenly she was underwater.

2.

Disorientation and terror fought to commandeer Katy Claye's mind, straining to stifle every one of her survival impulses and plunge her into a bottomless pit of despair.

Perhaps the absurd novelty of her sudden plight kept Katy from casting off her sanity. One second she'd been cowering in a dark alley, facing imminent death from a gunshot she recalled seeing flash from the weapon pointed directly at her—the next instant she was sucking water into her lungs instead of air tinged with over-ripe garbage. And filling her mouth and throat wasn't her only wet sensation. She blinked repeatedly, but couldn't clear her vision, her surroundings remained translucent. In fact, every square inch of her body felt the pressure of a semi-solid environment. At the same time, she experienced a buoyancy; she was actually floating free in this murky realm.

Any sane person would've immediately wondered how the hell they'd gotten here, but this entire experience had stressed Katy's sanity, leaving her quite shell-shocked. Besides—gasping for breath kind of took precedence.

She thrashed about in her panic.

Her hand brushed something solid in her gloomy proximity. She reached out to grab whatever it was—but it came apart in her frantic clutches. Searching more carefully, she found another strand and her fingers identified the leafy stem as an underwater plant. There were more of them, the sinuous tendrils surrounded her.

Clawing its way through her hysteria, Katy's common sense finally got a word in: *Up!*

The wisdom of that advice was blatantly valid. Her lungs ached for fresh air. If she was underwater, there should be a surface, beyond which presumably lay air. All she had to do was swim *up* until she reached that surface. Her arms reached above her head and she kicked her legs...but didn't seem to go anywhere.

Vegetative strands were tangled around one ankle. The underwater ecology itself was preventing her escape. She bent over to tear at the tendrils that had snared her leg. Those earlier strands had been soft enough to fragment under her touch—but the ones that bound her ankle were stronger. The just wouldn't rip apart.

Her entire viewpoint was shadowy enough, but now a denser darkness began to encroach on the periphery of her vision—even her mind experienced an imposing pressure. Her need for oxygen had reached a critical stage.

Any second now, she was going to gasp for air that wasn't there—and water would fill her lungs and that would be that.

Fueled by desperation, her frantic clawing succeeded in loosening the strand from her ankle. She was free!

Up!

Katy scrambled, but had no idea whether her motions were propelling her anywhere. Completely immersed in water, she had no reference point to judge her position relative to her surroundings. All she could do was thrash her legs and drag handfuls of water from above her—and hope for the best.

At one point her shoulder brushed a solid vertical surface. It was slimy but hard. She dug her fingers and toes into the ooze in order to lend some traction to her movements. Seconds later she encountered a rectangular indentation in the underwater wall. Crouching on the lower sill, she kicked off with as much force as her oxygen-starved physiology could muster.

Her consciousness was at its wit's end by the time Katy broke the surface. Unaware that she'd reached her goal, she continued to thrash and flail, as if striving to swim higher into the air.

Finally, she could hold her breath no longer. She gasped, spitting out water and—surprise!—gulping in fresh air—luscious welcome invaluable air!

Going limp, she floated on the surface, panting like a—well, like someone who'd almost drowned.

Now she had time to puzzle over how she'd gotten here and where here was. Above her hung what appeared to be a night sky. Stars, wisps of cloud...and two moons.

What the—

Suddenly a spotlight stabbed out of the darkness, fully illuminating her floating form. Considering what she'd seen happen when that frogman had been exposed to a mystery spotlight, Katy's reaction was completely understandable: she dove out of sight. But when she resurfaced, the spotlight swiftly found her again. She was too exhausted to keep this up.

Fine...if you want to shoot me, go ahead...

But no shots rang out, nor did any slugs splash the water around her.

A voice called out, "That's not Donny!"

Someone else argued, "Has to be. Ain't nobody else out here."

"Whoever they are, better get them outta there before those sharks come back," remarked the first.

Sharks? Katy fretted. *Strangers shooting at me—and now sharks?!* She began thrashing with renewed panic.

"Hey," called one of the voices. They were both gruff, hoarse, hard to tell apart. "Quit that, you fool!"

That's right, she reminded herself. *Splashing around attracts sharks.* She remembered that from *Jaws*.

Something came flying out of the dark and hit the water near Katy. She recoiled from the spot, suddenly fearful.

"Don't make me throw it again, Missy!"

"It's a girl?"

"What's a girl doing out here?" There must have been three of them, whoever they were.

Heeding the first one's advice, Katy swam over to snag the life preserver they'd thrown to her. It had a strange shape: an inflated X instead of a loop. Not caring what shape it was, she wrapped her arms around the thing and held it as close and tight as she could. A tie-line trailed from it into the water.

"Hokay—she's got it!"

A moment later Katy was being hauled through the cold water. Eventually, her destination loomed out of the night: it looked like the top of a building. Standing on the balustrade, a pair of husky men reeled in her line by hand. Crouching nearby was a third figure; he leaned down to help pull Katy from the water. She squirmed over the concrete barrier and sprawled on the rooftop.

After a few minutes, she managed to quiet her gasping and was able to utter, "Thanks."

"Who the hell are you anyway?"

They barraged her with questions.

"What you doing out here?"

"Where's Donny?"

"Yuh! Wha'd you do with Donny?"

But Katy had questions of her own. "Where am I?"

The three moved aside for a private confab, but the night was empty and their whispers carried.

“She don’t belong here,” one asserted. He was the tallest and widest of the trio. And the hairiest, too, for a thick mat of dark fur covered the backs of his hands. He wore tattered white pants and a dark blue sweatshirt with its hoodie limp around his neck. The hair on his head was long and braided into several tassels front and back. His face featured a conglomerate of apish features—weathered but stalwart.

“You’re right. Look at her clothes,” announced the second burly one. He was blonde and far less fuzzy than the other. He wore similar attire, but his heavy sweatshirt was more colorful—so much so that she wondered if someone had cannibalized a garish Hawaiian floral shirt to fashion it for the man. Like his companion, his hair and beard were long and braided.

What’s the matter with my clothes? Katy grumbled to herself. But then, she had to confess: circumstances had gotten the better of her clothing. Her skirt and blouse were smeared with mud from the alley. Her underwater ordeal hadn’t helped. Her garments clung to her like a soggy second skin. Her ebony hair was in utter disarray. Heaven-only-knew what her drunken binge had done to her makeup. Luckily, she was pretty without cosmetic assistance (at least, so Andrew had always claimed), but overcoming the drowned puppy look was an entirely different matter. No wonder these guys weren’t taking her seriously—she looked exactly like a waif washed up on a deserted beach.

Unable to subdue his enthusiasm, the beefy blonde exclaimed, “Y’tink she’s from over there?”

“Why would Donny send her here?” The third fellow was smaller, thinner, less muscular. He looked to be younger too, maybe in his early twenties like her, while the others were almost twice that. His hair sprouted in stubby tufts; his beard was cropped close but the mustaches drooped into the braids that apparently constituted the hot look in these parts. Despite his silly hairdo (well, *she* thought it looked silly), he was not unhandsome...straight nose, sincere eyes, thick lips, high forehead. Like his companions, he was dressed against the chill night in heavy pants and a hooded sweatshirt.

While Katy eavesdropped, she surveyed her surroundings.

In the distance, a double dose of moonlight picked out other buildings, all of them partially submerged. Those two moons were the real kick-in-the-head. They told her she was no longer on Earth. (Later, Katy would learn that her assumption was both right and wrong.) No dream was this vivid—all of this, fantastic as most of it had been, was really happening to her. Somehow she’d become displaced from her own world and had been dumped into another world. But—if that were so, then why were some of those drowned building-tops familiar to her?

The trio were debating what to do with her.

“We should throw her back!”

“We gotta get her to tell us what happened to Donny!”

“Can she be trusted?”

Piled nearby was an assortment of equipment. A lot of it consisted of hi-tech apparatus with glowing green screens, but some of it looked like diving gear.

Katy took a chance and guessed, “Donny was the guy in the frogman suit?”

They turned to stare at her, frowning.

“What’s a ‘frogman’?”

“It’s slang from her world,” the younger man grunted. “Y’know, because Donny looked like a frog with his flippers and all.”

She nodded, playing along. If these guys were seriously considering “tossing her back,” Katy needed to befriend them real quick. She had no desire to be dumped back into shark-infested waters.

“So—Donny was the man in the frogman suit,” she repeated to confirm things.

“You saw him!”

“Yes,” she admitted. “He—uh—he got shot...”

All three men groaned.

“I saw him—he was rooting through the trash in the alley. Then somebody started shooting at him.”

“Why didn’t he use the WayBack unit?”

“He was fiddling with some kind of device—small—hand-held—he was cursing...so I guess he was trying to use the—whachamacallit—but it must not have been working...”

“If it didn’t work—how’d you get here?” accused the younger man.

“He dropped it when he got shot,” she told them. “It bounced over to where I was.”

“For *you* it worked,” the hairy man’s comment was drenched with skepticism.

All she could do was shrug.

“Where is it?” demanded the burly blonde.

“I...I don’t know...”

The three men scowled at her.

“Look,” she started babbling, “when your guy Donny dropped the device, it bounced over into my lap...but I didn’t know what it was! I just woke up from a drunken binge—I’m lucky I can remember my own name! I’m not used to running into guys dressed like frogmen prowling through Manhattan alleyways, rooting through garbage—and then somebody starts shooting at them! That’s some weird shit, okay? And whoever shot your guy Donny, they came after me! They pointed their gun right at me and fired—I saw the flash—but no bullet ever hit me! Your Donny’s device—what’d you call it—a WayBack unit?—it must’ve kicked in when it

landed in my lap! I didn't even touch it! I was too scared by everything that was happening!"

The younger man pensively scratched his bearded chin. "Donny dove down so he could examine the alley in her world. If the WayBack brought her here, that'd account for her appearing out in the water."

"She came back down there," remarked the hairiest one, "and had to swim to the surface."

"Tough girl."

"The unit's probably still down there," supposed the burly blonde. "She must've lost it when she swam up."

Privately, she had to confess: that sounded probable. She'd been all freaked out, finding herself suddenly underwater. In her panic, she'd never noticed the device.

"Now that I've explained to you guys how I got here...could you tell me where the hell I am?"



The men declined to respond to her earnest inquiry. Instead, they engaged in another not-so-private confab.

"How do we know she can be trusted?"

"Dunno."

"She could be a spy!"

"Let Chris deal with it."

"Gotta take her back to the bridge, then," was the final determination voiced by the younger blonde man.

They turned and advanced on her. She scooted back from them until the balustrade halted her retreat. "Wait—" she pleaded.

They gave her objections no heed. The hairiest man flipped her on her belly and held her down as the other two bound her ankles and wrists. Once she was trussed up, they left her there and turned their attention to other matters. By twisting her head around, Katy was able to observe most of their bustling actions.

The burly blonde shed his clothes, then the bigger man helped him to strap on a single scuba-diving air tank. Meanwhile, the younger blonde consulted the screens of some of their machinery.

"Yup," he finally called out to the others. "Getting a clear signal. It's down there."

The new frogman sat on the raised ledge and pulled flippers onto his feet. The hairiest one handed him a facemask. With a curt nod, the diver swung his legs over the outer edge and pushed himself off. He fell from sight, followed by an immediate splash. The building they were atop stood only roughly ten feet above the water level.

The younger blonde remained transfixed on the machinery, moving only to shift his steady gaze from screen to screen.

The hairier man lounged back against the balustrade, his elbows propped up on its inner edge. He glanced over at Katy and grunted, “Better hope we find it, Missy. We only got four units like that. We can’t afford to lose one of them.”

“You could’ve asked *me* to dive down and retrieve it,” she grumbled. But it was a hollow sentiment, for, given the choice, she had *no* desire to return to that underwater scene.

“Can’t trust you, girl.”

“Of course you can. I—“

“Stop jabbering!” the younger blonde snarled. “Trying to concentrate here!”

“He’ll find it, Ank,” retorted the burlier man. “Relax.”

“Just better...” He twiddled a control dial and peered closer at one screen.

Moments passed. Katy wanted to resume trying to convince these guys that she was no threat, but the one time she had started to speak, the hairier man had shushed her. She fell silent.

Finally, the younger blonde proclaimed, “Ha—the signal moved! He’s got it!”

The two men launched into action: disassembling the machinery and carrying it beyond her field of vision. When she rolled over, Katy saw them hoisting the gear over the far edge of the building-top. The younger blonde had descended to an unseen surface; the burly man handed the equipment down to him. She could only assume they had a boat berthed there.

They’re packing up to leave, she reflected.

Splashing sounds from behind her marked the diver’s return to the surface. The burly man came over and threw a line over the balustrade. Seconds later, the diver clambered over the edge and stood dripping beside him. Pulling his mask up onto his forehead, he announced, “Got it!” He held up a small device; from where Katy lay it looked barely bigger than a cellphone. He hurried across the rooftop and gave the retrieved WayBack unit to the younger blonde. Then they climbed over the far edge and disappeared.

The burly man approached Katy. Moving without hesitation, he bent down and scooped her from the weathered tarpaper. “Hey,” she protested. “No—wait—oof—“ He tossed her over his shoulder and carried her across the rooftop. At the far side, he flopped her past the balustrade; she dangled head-down. “What’re you doing—hey—stop—“

“Sshh!” someone warned her.

Katy had feared they were just throwing her off the building. Bound as she was, she would swiftly drown in the water. But no—the men had a boat docked to the side of the partially submerged building. She was being handed down to those already in the vessel. They took Katy and stashed her between two piles of machinery; when she tried to sit up she

discovered she was firmly wedged in place. From there, she watched the burly man jump down into the boat.

The vessel was a small Zodiac, fairly crowded now by all the equipment and four people. The younger blonde manned the controls, and its motor barked to life. With a gut-wrenching surge, the Zodiac raced off across the dark water.

Huddled in the rear of the lurching conveyance, Katy watched other submerged buildings pass by. She knew them; this was New York City—but a flooded out NYC. Every once in a while, she cast a nervous look at the sky. Twin moons didn't belong in any Manhattan sky.

Where the hell was she?

I suppose right now I should be more worried about where I'm going. Not that knowing would do her any good. There were rudimentary similarities between this place and the Manhattan she knew, but this wasn't her world. She was a stranger here...a prisoner too. Her continued existence depended on the kindness of these men.

If they were "kind," though, Katy grumbled to herself, they wouldn't have tied me up.

The three men shared concerns over the loss of their comrade.

"So—Donny's dead.

"But who knew he'd be there?"

"This is Darcy's doing."

"Bastard's everywhere."

"More likely his agents."

"Not a good sign."

"You think maybe Darcy's got the black box already?"

"Let's hope not..."

A shape emerged from the darkness. It was too thin and spindly to be another building. One of the moons had crept behind some clouds, diminishing the amount of lunar illumination falling upon the drowned city. It wasn't until the Zodiac drew closer that Katy could assemble the visual fragments into a single picture: a bridge! The roadway and most of the bases of its pylons were underwater; the remaining columns and suspension cords reached high into the night. She thought she detected a blockish structure up top, attached to the crown of the dual columns. The suspension cords seemed to radiate from this junction like a spider's web, but that was just a trick incited by her low perspective as the boat approached the bridge.

She expected the younger blonde to navigate the Zodiac around this new obstacle, but instead, after circling the concrete column once, the boat spiraled in to dock at the monolith's inner flank. The men tied their vessel in place, then began offloading their machinery.

At first it seemed to Katy that they were just dumping the gear overboard. From her position, she couldn't effectively see past the vessel's bow. When it came her turn, nobody warned her what to expect.

“Hold on—wait—” she squawked as the burly man grabbed her by the waist and pitched her out of the boat. “Hey!”

She fell in water, but it was only a few inches deep. She sprawled there, astounded that she hadn’t sunk into the liquid expanse. Next to her, the piled machinery floated there, refusing to sink out of view. Although bound, her hands could still feel about and she soon discovered that a platform lay hidden just beneath the surface. Her fingers hooked through the metal grid. A secret pier! Without prior knowledge of this jetty, no one would ever spot it.

Peering around, she now saw a series of metal rungs implanted in the concrete; they ran up the column, disappearing into the night’s gloom. As her eyes followed the ladder into its heights, something came tumbling down out of that darkness.

“Look out!” she yelled. She scuttled back against the algae-slimed surface of the column. Whatever it was, it landed with a dull splash nearby. The burly blonde reached out to snare a line that draped from on high. He dragged it in and drew a small metal grate from the waves. The men began lashing some of the machinery to this platform. Once they had two pieces of gear secured to the grating, they flashed a small light into the heavens—and the line lifted the cargo out of sight.

Moments later, the grate returned to be reloaded for another ascent. It took three trips to transport all of their machinery to whatever lay above in the darkness. The younger blonde added himself to the third load.

When the grate dropped again, the burly man gathered up Katy. “Hey now—” she protested. “Hold on—wait—” He sat cross-legged on the panel with her draped across his lap. And away they went. This journey wasn’t as smooth as its predecessors had looked. Frequent jerks accompanied their ascent.

“I don’t like heights,” she moaned. “How safe is this?”

Her captor didn’t respond to her fretful worrying. She was forced to shut her eyes and suffer in darkness.

At the top, the line ran through a large pulley wheel that was attached to a hand crank. Two guys manned the crank. A third snagged the grate and swung it and its living cargo over to land atop the concrete column. Her captor rolled Katy unceremoniously from his lap onto the windswept cement. As soon as he climbed from the grate, the entire pulley setup was disassembled and whisked off to some secret hideaway.

For an instant, Katy wondered about the other man, but then she heard the Zodiac’s motor roar far below and guessed he was taking it off to a secret berth.

Everything about these men screamed Black Ops (not that she had any actual familiarity with such teams, but she’d seen how they acted in countless movies and television shows). They came and went like shadows, leaving no traces of their furtive presence. Their actions were

businesslike, aloof, unsympathetic. Katy was feeling less and less safe in their hands.

Squatting down, the hairy brute produced a small knife and cut the plastic-tie binding her ankles. “Nowhere to run to, Missy,” he advised as he escorted her across the top of the column. He was quite right. The top of the concrete bridge column offered barely enough room to park two cars—although heaven-only-knew how you’d get the cars up here. Beyond each edge lay nothing but empty air. A few wisps of cloud curling overhead, almost in reach—had her hands been freed.

“You’re not going to release my hands?” whined Katy. “You just pointed out, there’s nowhere for me to run.” Run? She didn’t even want to *look* beyond the edges of the concrete tower; just thinking of that altitude made her queasy.

“No chance, Missy,” he grunted. “Still dunno how much you can be trusted.”

“Do I really look dangerous to you?”

“Not my call, Missy.”

Katy expected that she looked frightful right about now. Haggard from her drunken binge and stressed out by the incredible sequence of events that had brought her here, she felt like someone who’d just finished a four-hour rollercoaster ride. Her clothes were still sodden from her immersion in water. The altitude’s chill winds ran shivers along her nylon-clad legs, then pumped that cold under her skirt.

The blockish structure she’d barely discerned from below was attached to the side of the concrete column. In fact, the contraption was built around the arch that connected this column with its partner. “Contraption” was the best word she could think of. It was a mishmash of disparate shapes and materials. Drywall, wooden planks, corrugated metal, some areas comprised nothing more than cloth sheets stretched to form surreal tetrahedrons. Perched at the arch’s central apex, sections of chainlink fence had been coiled together to form a spider-shaped cage. She couldn’t be sure in the dark, but it looked as if men sat within the heraldic enclosure. There were even a few of those big storage containers you saw stacked by the hundreds near seaports, they were lashed and/or welded into place along with the rest of the misshapen collective. A series of fragile-looking catwalks were strung along the archway, weaving in and out of the chaotic add-on structures.

It was along one of these that her captor led Katy. Her plaintive “I don’t like heights” went ignored by the hairy man, he simply prodded her along. Closing her eyes, she inched out onto the catwalk. Conventional metal mesh swayed beneath her weight. If only her hands were untied, then she could grasp the two ropes that served as siderails. As it was, even if she hadn’t feared heights, the catwalk was too unstable for the uninitiated. Panic drove Katy to her knees on the aerial walkway.

With a snort of disgust, the burly man dragged her erect and threw her over his shoulder. He carried her along the catwalk, moving with the adroit speed of someone who was comfortable moving about at such high altitudes.

She didn't see where he took her; her eyes were squeezed closed with fear. She missed the route he took through the mishmash configuration, his winding path between ramshackle huts and sheet metal cubbyholes. The night wind tore at her damp flesh, teasing her discomfort into near hysteria. Above all, however, she was too afraid to squirm in the man's grip, lest she wriggle herself free of his clutches and plummet into the dark waters far below. Or maybe she wouldn't hit the water; her descent might send her crashing against the concrete towers or intersecting with one of the taut pylons that hung from the column. Or worse—and completely irrational—maybe her fall would go on and on forever.

Fear did scary things to a person's mind.



It took Katy long moments to realize she no longer hung over the man's shoulder with the high wind in her face. She found herself seated on an old plastic shipping crate. As her head cleared, she took in her crowded surroundings. She was in a chamber whose walls seemed made of sparkling paisley fabric. The air was heavy with a perfumed odor. A single neon lamp provided eerie illumination. In that soft glow, Katy saw two people watching her. One was the Hawaiian sweatshirt blonde from the boat. He conferred with a much younger individual who perched behind a rickety desk constructed out of piecemeal shards of aluminum. This new individual wore denim coveralls strapped over a dingy white T-shirt. A noise behind her made Katy glance over her shoulder to find the hairy brute poised in the doorway; beyond him lay the twin-mooned night.

"What's your name?" asked the young boy. For that's what he was: a preteen lad, lanky and pale-skinned. His yellow hair hung like a shawl around his beatific face. His nose was small, pert. His eyes twinkled with intelligence. His thin lips were pursed with anticipation. He looked like Christopher Robin from the *Winnie-the-Pooh* cartoons. Unable to cast off this first impression, she inherently trusted the boy.

"Katy," she whispered. "Katy Claye."

"Hello, Katy. I'm—" She knew it before the word escaped his mouth. "—Chris."

"Hello, Chris..."

He smiled and her heart melted. Not with passion, but with brotherly affection.

Chris asked her to tell him her story, how she had come to this world. Katy told him everything, leaving no detail unvoiced.

And when she finally ran out of story, Chris nodded pensively. He leaned forward, splaying his elbows on the piecemeal table, and asked her in a quiet voice: “You aren’t some Darcy spy, are you?”

She shook her head. “No...I don’t even know who this Darcy is...”

Chris sat back and folded his arms across his chest—a very adult pose that made him seem more authoritative. “She’s telling the truth.”

“You’re sure, Chris?” rasped the hairy man blocking the exit.

“C’mon, Sal, you know better than to question Chris’ judgment,” declared the other blonde.

“This is bad news, Chris,” Sal hissed to the boy. “Donny didn’t find the black box. And now we know Darcy’s got agents over there looking for it.”

Chris nodded but offered no comment. His eyes, pale blue and bottomless, were fixed on Katy’s, and vice versa; she couldn’t look away—didn’t want to.

“We gotta find it before they do!” grated Ank.

“You don’t like it here, do you, Katy?” asked Chris, his voice smooth as honey. “You wish you were back home, eh?”

She nodded, mesmerized by the infinite azure of his gaze.

“If we could take you home, Katy, you’d know we were your friends, right?”

Again, a mute wide-eyed nod.

“And you help out friends, right, Katy?”

“Of course,” she whispered.

Unmindful whether or not Katy could hear his remarks, Sal grunted, “You bewitched her, didn’t you, Chris?”

“Didn’t have to,” replied Chris. “Katy’ll do anything for her friends.”

“I’ll help you any way I can,” she murmured.

Leaning forward again, the boy inquired of her: “And which of us is your bestest friend?”

“You,” cooed Katy.

“Of course,” he chuckled. “But I can’t go along. You gotta pick somebody else.”

She pouted.

“I gotta stay here and make command decisions,” Chris assured her. He nodded at the man standing beside him. “What about Ank? He’s a good friend to have. Smart and quick.”

Katy shook her head. She didn’t trust Ank. He’d been the one who’d suggested they throw her back in the water.

She twisted around to peer at the burly man perched in the doorway (which was actually little more than an exit portal). “Him?” she whispered.

“Sal?” Chris responded. “You like Sal best, huh?”

She gave a slow nod, then turned back to bask in the boy’s compelling presence. “Sal carried me here. He kept me from falling from the catwalk. He’s my BFF.”

Chris arched his juvenile eyebrows. “BFF?”

“Best Friend Forever,” she explained.

“How about that, Sal,” laughed Ank. “Now you’re a BFF!”



Chris advised her to rest.

She lay back on a cushion the boy unveiled for her. He and the others conferred while they thought she dozed.

“What’s all this BFF biz, Chris?”

“You’re the one she trusts, Sal. So you get to be her traveling companion.”

Someone guffawed at this.

“Don’t laugh, Ank—you’re going along too.”

“Going where?”

“Back to her world.”

“You really mean for us to just take the girl home?”

“As you pointed out, Ank, we need to find the black box before Darcy.”

“I can do *that* on my own!”

“Not likely, Ank. But together—you and Sal might pull it off...with the girl’s help.”

“Aww...”

“It’s her world. She knows it better than you guys.”

“Aww...” but weaker this time.

“You got a point, Chris.”

Lying on the threadbare cushion, Katy smiled to her. *You’re going home, Missy.*



After a while, Katy did drift off. Her ordeals had exhausted her more than she’d known. Once she believed she would be going home soon, her tension evaporated and fatigue soon dragged her liberated mind into peaceful slumber. It was day when she woke up.

She was alone in the paisley chamber. When she peered outside, Katy found it was raining. Despite the downpour, though, enough daylight penetrated the cloudcover to reveal a tableau that struck terror in her heart. She immediately recoiled into the safety of the room. The chamber hung out from the vertical side of the conglomeration of habitats grafted to the bridge’s archway. Her brief glimpse had revealed how *high up* she was...how *far down* she would fall...

Dread swiftly dominated her mind; she found herself doubting the safety provided by the paisley chamber. How securely was the room attached in place? For that matter—as a breeze rocked the chamber ever

so slightly—how strong was its fundamental construction? Was it liable to fall apart at any second, torn asunder by a stray gust of wind? What material lay beneath these paisley shrouds? Her wild imagination convinced her the room was made of cardboard.

I can't stay here! she fretted. *I have to reach solid ground!*

But there was no solid ground in this new world—at least, none she'd seen. Some horrendous flood had drowned the city in water so deep that only a few building-tops jutted forth like manmade islands. This bridge formed a concrete archipelago among the submerged skyscrapers.

Regardless of the futility of seeking solid ground, Katy no longer trusted the stability of the paisley chamber. She needed to vacate it and go somewhere else. There had to be some part of this bridge colony that offered even an illusion of security. Her problem wasn't just finding that safe spot—it was getting there.

For all her need to evacuate this flimsy, paisley-lined cardboard box, Katy was unable to face the great altitude she'd have to pass through to reach a more stable location. Her head ached as these opposing fears struggled to motivate her to take some action...but one way or the other, fright blocked her from selecting either course of action. Stay or leave—Katy struggled with these impossible choices, but she couldn't decide which to do, for both options put her in hazardous situations.

She jumped and squealed in terror when the paisley curtain blocking the chamber's exit parted to admit someone. Once inside, the figure threw back his hoodie, and she saw it was just Chris. Relaxing, Katy sank back on the worn cushion, suddenly exhausted despite her long rest. What little stamina sleep had given the girl had been depleted by her newfound fears.

"You're awake," announced Chris. After a moment he saw her agitated condition and gave her a sympathetic smile which helped to subdue her stress.

Appearing behind Chris, Sal the hairy brute perched in the opening. He wore the same clothes as last night, but his hoodie was pulled up, hiding his face in wet shadows. Katy knew it was him, though, from his impressive physique. He studied them for a long moment before he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Something's scared her," replied Chris.

"She's afraid of heights," Sal commented. "She mentioned that before."

Chris turned and addressed Katy. "Don't worry, honey. You're safe. Nothing's gonna hurt you. Hokay?"

Grudgingly, she nodded.

Reaching out, he massaged her neck.. "Just relax."

She tried to nod, but moving her head made her dizzy. Her vision ran away down a long dark tunnel and she fell asleep.



When she woke, Katy found herself being lowered from the heights to the base of the bridge's support column. Squatting as before on the metal grate platform, Sal held her close during their descent. All around them churned a tempest. (Technically, it was just a moderate rainfall, but to Katy's elevated tension the shower became a storm.)

She moaned.

"Back to sleep, girl," he advised her.

She closed her eyes, but slumber wouldn't come. Her quick waking glimpse had revived her fear and it forced her mind to curl up in a tight ball inside her head. From that vantage, external stimuli were cut off. She forgot what she'd seen. She didn't feel the platform's swaying as it was lowered through the hurricane. She rejected the sensation of rain pelting her face, it incited too many unpleasant memories for her. She didn't hear the waves splashing against the concrete monolith.

The next time Katy dared to open her eyes, she found herself being transferred from the hidden pier into the open hatch of a squat metal egg that floated in the water. It was dark inside, but dry. Sal followed her into the gloom and closed the hatch behind him. "Good to go," his voice echoed in the close confines of the darkness.

"Where are we?" she ventured to ask.

"En route," he replied. "Not there yet."

She waited for him to add further elucidation, but when he didn't, she inquired, "Where are we going then?"

"Taking you home, girl. Remember?"

Now that he'd reminded her, yes, she *did* remember. Chris had promised to send her back to her world...because they were all friends...and that was what friends did...they helped each other. They would help her...and then in turn she would help them. It was all quite vague, but she dismissed that haziness to her overall shell-shocked condition. The details would come once she relaxed.

A convulsion lurched her environment, then she felt movement. She was in some kind of enclosed boat, and it was moving through the water. Ahead of her in the vessel's nose, she saw a man-shaped silhouette tending to a glittering control panel. Beyond that, a window showed the rain-swept bay outside—but seconds later that view was swallowed as the water level rose. The ship was sinking—no, it was a submarine! Down they went, deeper and deeper into Neptunian darkness.

Katy fairly bridled with new questions, but she held her tongue. These people had promised to get her home, she was reluctant to harass them with excessive inquires.

What had caused the flood that had drowned this world?

How had these guys managed to hold onto technology in the face of such a devastating disaster?

This WayBack device of theirs was incredible! Where had it come from?

And what about this mysterious “black box”? They wanted to find it pretty badly.

But then...she didn't actually know anything about them. What were their motives? Could they really be trusted?

But—of course I can trust them, Katy reminded herself. *Christopher's my friend, and you can always trust your friends.*

She suddenly realized that Sal was talking to her. Distracted by her own thoughts, she hadn't caught the beginning of his remarks.

“—but it was different here. The climate went wack years ago, back in the Fifties. All those atomic tests screwed up the ecology and the polar caps melted. Ocean levels rose, flooded everywhere. Governments collapsed, and civilization got wiped out. Everybody's everything was underwater.”

As they talked, the pilot navigated the submarine through nautical canyons formed by the corpses of submerged buildings.

“But—not you, right?” she interjected. “You have technology—and you're organized. So you must belong to some faction that managed to preserve the old ways.”

“Yeah...if there's one thing you can call the Bat Pack, they're survivors,” muttered Sal.

Different worlds... Well...that explains the double moons. She couldn't imagine how one could devise a way to travel from world to world, but she wasn't a nuclear physicist. These guys *had* found a way to do it, though, visiting *her* Earth.

Lights drew her attention back outside her head. Framed in the front portal, a series of glittering lights emerged from the murky depths. For an instant their twinkle made Katy think the sub had somehow journeyed beyond the atmosphere and she was looking upon stars. But then a fish swam past, reminding the girl where she was. As the submarine approached, the lights grew bigger, clearer, and fell into rows marking the outlines of a large domed structure—a waterlogged planetarium—surrounded by lesser buildings. A network of naked girder towers clustered protectively around the underwater base.

The pilot expertly guided the sub to a docking station located along the rim of the planetarium's dome. A series of strange clanking sounds came from outside the hull of the small submarine vessel. Sal unbolted the exit hatch and threw it open, revealing a plastic tunnel that had telescoped out and attached itself to the sub's fuselage.

Katy and her burly BFF climbed from the sub and crawled along the tube to reach another open hatch. Once they passed through this portal,

Sal shut the hatch and tightened a large wheel to secure its seal against outside pressure.

“Welcome to Base Nemo,” Sal declared as he led Katy from the airlock and through a network of narrow corridors. They passed others in those passages, all were dressed in skimpy shorts, all wore their hair tufted in ludicrous sculptures. Katy began to feel self-conscious with her own hair hanging limp around her face.

Sal took her to a cramped conference room where others waited for them. There was Chris. And Ank. And two older individuals.

Rising from the long table, Chris came forward to welcome Katy. Gone were his coveralls and his hoodie sweatshirt; now he wore cotton shorts and his dingy white T-shirt, his Christopher Robin outfit—Katy liked him best this way. He introduced the strangers, but lost as she was in the sapphire vortex of his eyes, she entirely missed his presentation. Chris settled her into a seat at the table.

“We appreciate your assistance in this matter, Miss Claye,” one of the strangers addressed her. He was older than the rest of them, well into his sixties. Sparse wisps of white hair decorated his scalp; he wore his beard in braids adorned with satin lanyards and glittering gems. This one had an air of authority about him. His eyes were stern but kind, like a country grandpaw.

She smiled at him. “Uhh...sure...”

“We just wanted to meet the brave girl who volunteered to lead this sortie,” declared the other stranger. He was thin and surprisingly hairless compared to everyone else Katy had met in this drowned world. His face was long and serious. His naked chin jutted out like a rudder. A series of small rubies were glued around his mouth in a pattern that gave him a permanent frown. Something about this man made Katy dislike him.

“Huh?” she grunted.

“Putting yourself in danger to help us accomplish our goal,” the thin man continued. “You don’t expect courage like that from a stranger.”

“Danger?” she softly murmured.

“Oh, stop it, Rand,” chuffed the grandfatherly one. “Your’re embarrassing the girl.”

“Nobody said anything about any danger,” she muttered louder.

Chris stepped in. His warm smile charmed her into a daze.

Once he was confident that Katy was glamoured, Chris’s boyish face twisted into a mask of stern disapproval. “I didn’t mention any danger because it might’ve interfered with convincing her to help us. Besides, there shouldn’t be much danger—long as they steer clear of Darcy’s minions.”

“Gonna do my best to avoid them,” announced Sal.

‘But—how fair is it to enlist her help under false circumstances?’ the grandfatherly one wanted to know.

"If we don't move soon, Darcy's gonna get that black box before us," asserted Ank.

Chris added, "She's our ace in the hole, Klein. It's her world. She even comes from the city our instruments tell us is where the box is. Having her on our side'll be invaluable!"

"So—it's come to this, has it?" Klein growled. "Misleading innocent girls."

"The stakes're *that* high!" shot back a flustered Ank.

"It's a fair trade," Chris insisted. "We get her home—she helps us find the black box. It isn't self-serving if both parties profit."

"We Elders disapprove of your methods, lad," hissed Klein. "But we'll reserve judgment till we see how successful they are."

Not entirely tuned-out, Katy heard their exchange. Learning she was being used should have infuriated her...but she was deep in Chris' glamour. He would never do anything to hurt her...not Christopher Robin...



If there was more to the meeting, Katy didn't remember it. She floated in a blue haze until rousing to find Sal offering her a black scuba outfit. Gazing about stupidly, she realized she was in a different location; it looked—and smelled—like a locker room.

"Why do we need these?" she asked.

"It's wet here, but not in your world," explained Sal.

She hadn't thought about it, but now that Sal mentioned it she saw the need for the scuba gear. In this world, her world's ground-level was situated under watery depths. If they used their WayBack device to cross over from a boat, they'd appear high in the air and fall to their death. They needed to swim down to the bottom of their ocean to safely arrive on a street in her Manhattan.

Once she took the scuba-gear, Sal backed away. He was halfway through a doorway that obviously led to an auxiliary locker room when she stopped him with a question.

"Should I put this on over my clothes? Or strip down first?" Katy wrinkled her nose as she examined the rubber garments.

The burly man avoided meeting her gaze as he replied, "The suits're designed to fit snugly on the wearer. So, a layer of clothing in the middle would be kind of problematic."

"We're going to need clothing in my world, though—to blend in," Katy pointed out. "We can't walk around the street in frogmen outfits."

"Course not," remarked Ank as he stepped from the auxiliary locker room. Stripped down to just his slacks, he displayed a handsome hairless chest. "We carry our clothes over in plastic bags and change into them after we've crossed over."

“That makes more sense,” announced Katy. “Once we arrive on my world, we ditch the scuba-gear and change into our street clothes.”

The two men disappeared into the auxiliary locker room, giving Katy some privacy. She stripped off her tattered skirt and dirty blouse. She saw no point in getting rid of her panties or bra, so she donned the dark wetsuit over them.

Eventually, the men reappeared, wrapped now in rubber suits of their own. Their movements were stiff, a problem she’d already noticed.

She looked them up and down, then up again. Frowning, she muttered, “You need to do something about your hairdos.”

“What’s the matter with our hair?” Ank retorted with indignance.

“They’re ridiculous.”

“Among our people, hairstyles are personal emblems,” Ank tried to explain. “Undoing them would screw with our heads.”

“You wanna blend in, you’re not gonna do it with those outlandish do’s. Even the punks in Soho will laugh at you.”

Ank and Sal exchanged nervous looks. Clearly the idea of changing their hair styles violated some deep taboo—probably some stupid macho ranking system. They were acting as if unbraiding their tresses was going to emasculate them. For all Katy knew, maybe it would.

“Okay, maybe you don’t need to *completely* change your hair,” she sought compromise. She waved her fingers in an ambiguous manner. “Just a lot less flamboyant, okay? Limit yourselves to a single ponytail...and play down the decorative ‘stache braids.”

They flashed her looks full of angst.

“Otherwise,” she proclaimed with hopefully adequate authority, “you’ll stand out like naked crazies. I’m not kidding.”

They both released sighs of resignation. The men shared a furtive glance before they commenced to undo their assortment of braids.

Katy remained quiet at this point. Sensing how traumatic it was for them, she turned away and pattered with one of the air-tanks.

Finally, Sal spoke from behind her, “Hokay...” As she turned, he pantomimed a theatrical pose and sighed, “Better?”

The two men were transformed. Their ridiculous hairdos had made them seem foreign—more than “foreign,” almost alien...which they technically were, since they’d been born on a completely different world than Katy. But with their manes unbraided and allowed to hang loose, they appeared more conventional...almost handsome, at least in Ank’s case. Sal was still a brute.

When Ank brushed some strands from his face, he unconsciously lifted the hair to stand erect from his head.

“No,” she scolded him and reached out to smooth it back down. “If it gets in your way, tuck it back behind your ears.”

He gave a look of utter befuddlement, as if she had just suggested he wash his hair in mud.

Stepping back, she scrutinized the pair. She nodded slowly and passed judgment: “Okay, I guess you’ll do. It might help if you trimmed your beards a little...” Sal’s eyes flashed with outrage. “—but,” she hastily continued, “no, okay, let’s not push the envelope too much...”

The men stood there, looking forlorn. As far as Sal and Ank were concerned, they’d drastically compromised their manhood in heeding her advice. The least she could do was compliment them.

“You look good,” she pronounced.

At that moment, Klein the Elder poked his head into the locker room. “I wanted to wish you good luck on—“ His sendoff choked into a gurgle that bloomed into a surprised chuckle. “What the hell’re you two playing at?”

“Don’t pick on them!” barked Katy. “They’ve changed so they can blend in on my world.”

The grandfatherly man struggled (badly) to hide his amusement.

“We’re doing this for the sake of the mission,” Sal growled.

Klein threw Katy a sardonic frown. “The men of your world—they really look like this?”

She gave him a firm nod.

He shook his head with mystification and turned to leave, muttering to himself, “Way-wack peoples...”

In an attempt to rebolster their battered egos, Katy declared, “Well, I think you’re extra tough guys for letting your hair down. It takes guts to—“

Ank cut her off. “Can we not dwell on this?”

“Sure.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Sal.

They proceeded to strap air-tanks on each other. Ank gave Katy a quick primer on using the equipment. She was a quick learner.



Next, they departed the base through an airlock.

Chris was there to see them off. He explained to her: “You’ll be traveling a bit before you cross over. That’s to make certain nobody can trace you back here. We gotta maintain secrecy when it comes to the base’s location.”

She nodded, slightly starry-eyed. That made sense. The two worlds were different, but their environmental differences were projected on nearly identical physical manifestations.

Chris’ people needed to guard the location of Base Nemo...from this Darcy fellow who supposedly had minions everywhere. He sounded like a super villain.

Friends help each other hide their secrets from super villains, Katy reminded herself.

“Now, remember—you’re gonna help Ank and Sal find the black box...”

She nodded again. “Sal’s my BFF.”

Ank failed to stifle a chuckle. Sal punched him in the arm.

“But in a pinch,” continued Chris, “Ank’s in charge, hokay?”

She shrugged.

“Sal’s along as the muscle,” Chris outlined. “Ank’s the brains.”

“And I’m the tour guide,” she remarked. Her comment could’ve seemed snarky, but she spoke it in such a dreamy manner that no one took issue.

“We *really* need to get that black box before Darcy does. Savvy?”

“Savvy.”

“Good girl.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze.

There was gear to carry: two plastic bundles contained the street clothes they would wear in her world, while a dark valise presumably harbored the stuff they would need to complete their mission. Katy and Sal took a clothes bundle each. Ank guarded the valise like it contained a baby.



Outside, they swam for quite a bit. Unused to scuba-diving, Katy tired easily. The experience spooked her—everything was so murky. Hazy buildings emerged from the darkness like architectural phantoms draped in phosphorescent aquatic algae. Layers of muck covered the roadways and pavements; humps in the underwater landscape marked the locations of abandoned automobiles. Fish dove in and out of sight, promptly veering away once they perceived the three swimmers. At one point, she spotted a dog-sized octopus clinging to a long dormant lamppost. From the street sign, she discovered they swam through a section of Brooklyn.

More experienced when it came to scuba-diving, the two men seemed tireless. Fortunately, Sal was surprisingly patient with her quick fatigue. On several occasions, he held back to wait for Katy to catch up, as Ank ventured on ahead alone. Sal waited at one point beside the corner of a submerged building, and when she swam over to join him, he scratched the word “soon” in the slime coating the nearby wall.

This supportive news infused Katy with a fresh burst of energy. She kicked on ahead of her bodyguard.

Off to her right, a light flashed in the murky water. It was Ank, signaling them his location. She swam in his direction, followed by the burly Sal.

A row of solid edifices loomed out of the gloom: a block of building fronts. The facades had succumbed to decay and waterwear; they were overgrown with aquatic weeds and humongous clumps of algae. Ank

waved them over to a shadowy gash in the imposing bulwark. Once she kicked near, Katy saw it was just an alleyway between two buildings.

Exaggerating his movements, Ank gestured to them collectively, then emphatically pointed at the alley. She immediately understood and signaled her approval of his choice. The alley would hide them from passersby when the three of them crossed over to her Manhattan. Their sudden appearance out of thin air would be surprising enough, further complicated if they showed up in Brooklyn dressed in scuba gear.

She followed Ank deep into the drowned alley. Even though there was nothing exceptional about this alleyway, it seemed so unearthly to Katy. Slime and silt covered everything like a furry green patina. A school of tiny silver needles darted out of nowhere to disappear overhead. A crab brandished its claws at them, then scuttled into hiding. Darkness gathered and seemed to increase the pressure of the surrounding water. Even though she knew the impression was purely imaginary, the underwater alley made her feel claustrophobic, as if everything was closing in, squeezing her, choking her.

Hurry up, she mentally urged her companions. *I don't know how long I can cope with this...* If something didn't happen soon, Katy knew she was going bolt, abandon these men, flee in search of her fugitive sanity.

Out of the darkness came a black hand. It touched her forearm, and she recoiled as if a monster had grabbed her—a monster of the deep, some creature unknown to her but unique to this drowned world. Then cold logic kicked in as she realized the arm belonged to one of her associates. There was nothing actually threatening about it. The arm looked ominous because it was sheathed in a black scuba-suit. The fingers were blunt, so they must've belonged to Sal. They closed on her arm and drew her into a surprise embrace.

Aw, c'mon, she privately complained. *Now is not the time to get amorous.*

Initially she resisted her captor's clutches, but his hold on her was too strong. A single arm hugged her close, but there was nothing sexual about the embrace. A facemask loomed in her murky view; she gazed into Sal's deadpan eyes.

A burst of light cast aside the darkness.

3.

The pressure around her vanished. Katy fell from her partially horizontal position and would've sprawled in the rubbish if Sal hadn't held her aloft. Forewarned somehow, he had firmly planted his flippered feet on the ground prior to the transition. Once assured that she could stand

on her own, the burly man released his hold on her. As she staggered back from him, she caught a glimpse of Sal retracting his other arm from a similar embrace with Ank. The latter paid no attention to them, concentrating on the small device he held.

The water was gone, replaced by air. Daylight spilled into the alley from above, expelling the submerged gloom. Noise filled in the silence, familiar sounds: traffic, car horns, the rumbling passage of a nearby elevated train.

Pulled her facemask from her head, Katy gawked at her relatively dry surroundings. Gone were the algae and mire, replaced by more conventional waste. Plastic garbage bags overflowed from battered trash cans. A stack of collapsed cardboard boxes was lashed into a sodden cube. Weeds poked through a terrain of urban debris: crushed soda bottles, crumpled styrofoam fast-food containers, candy wrappers, wads of old newspaper. Withdrawing the air gauge from her mouth, she tasted the grit and malodors of the city. The hose draped loosely around her neck, hissing as it vented oxygen into the already tainted air.

I'm back, she rejoiced. Chris had promised to return her home—and here she was! Her initial urge was to run off, find Andrew and tell him of her fantastic adventure...but he'd have no reaction. He was dead and gone, leaving Katy alone to face incredible circumstances.

"Everybody hokay?"

"Hokay here," replied Sal. He touched Katy on her shoulder. "You hokay, Missy?"

She nodded, then voiced a soft "yes."

She couldn't look away from the far end of the alley where the passageway opened upon a busy street. She was mesmerized by the miracle she had experienced. Moments before, that avenue had been deep underwater and covered with aquatic growth and slime; now it bustled with urban activity. Cars crawled past the alley's mouth. Pedestrians strolled to and fro. Nobody paid any attention to the frogmen crouching in the depths of the byway.

They were lucky: no one had witnessed their arrival.

She was home again.

By the time Katy tore her gaze from the nearby thoroughfare, she found that Ank and Sal had already stripped away their scuba-gear and donned their "street clothes." They hid the wetsuits and tanks behind a mound of bagged trash that looked as if it had sat there for decades. While they busied themselves, she swiftly shed her own frogman outfit and took her clothes from the waterproof plastic bag. It might've been nice if the Bat Pack had provided her with fresh garments, but they hadn't. All she found in the plastic bag were her old garments. At least they had given her new sneakers; they were slightly oversized, but she simply tied the laces tighter so the footwear would stay in place.

Pulling up her skirt, Katy turned to survey her traveling companions.

The two men looked like drowned rats. Apparently the bundle containing their costumes had leaked during the swim from Base Nemo. They wore soggy sweatshirts with their hoodies pulled up. Dark glasses further masked their features in the cowls' shadowy recesses. They even wore gloves, which Katy thought was a bit excessive.

Ank still held onto that valise as if his life depended on it. Maybe it did. She presumed the bag contained every item they'd deemed might be necessary to carry out their mission. He stashed the WayBack unit in a pants pocket, carefully buttoning closed the pocket to ensure the treasure stayed with him. Of all the equipment he carried, it was the most valuable; without it there was no way back to the drowned world.

Unprotected by any caps, their long hair was soaked. It clung to their faces, necks and shoulders like leakage from their scalps. When they pushed it back from their faces, their fingers instinctively squeezed the errant tresses into tufts sticking from their cranium like stalks.

"No," Katy gently scolded them. "Not like that. Pull it back and down." She lifted her hands to sweep her own damp hair from disarray, pressing it against her temples and gathering it at the nape of her neck. "You want to blend in, right?" It was bad enough that their beards made them look like ZZ Top rejects with a penchance for Viking braids. In the end, though, their hoodies hid most of their unconventional hair, so who cared if they wanted it up in tufts?

"Okay," she announced. Then quickly she had to halt them from boldly leaving the alley. "Wait—!"

"What now?" grumbled Ank.

She pointed at the pistol that protruded from the waistline of his brown slacks.

"You can't go around openly carrying weapons," Katy informed them. She nodded disapprovingly at the machete Sal had strapped to his outer thigh over his pants. "Like that."

"How we supposed to defend ourselves?"

"If you can manage to pass for normal New Yorkers, you won't have to," promised Katy.

Neither of the men were convinced. As far as they were concerned, enemies lurked everywhere. "Hey," asserted Ank, "we've already established that Darcy has exhaustively infiltrated this world with his minions. We're risking our necks just showing up here. Without an arsenal, we're sure to fall prey to the first Darcy spy that spots us."

"You don't have to ditch that stuff," she counseled the disgruntled men. "Just tuck it all away under your clothes."

Ank rolled his eyes. Sal wearily shook his head.

Frustration percolated in Katy too. Why couldn't these guys understand that their eccentric ways would never pass unnoticed among the inhabitants of this world?

She briefly lost her patience. "Chris appointed me to be your guide here," she snapped, "but you persist in challenging my advice! If you don't look and act like I tell you to, you'll never last long enough to find your precious black box!"

This accusation served to embarrass them into heeding her guidance. Ank took the pistol and shoved it into his valise. Sal pulled down his pants and strapped the machete to his hairy thigh. Afterwards, they presented themselves to her, slowly rotating so she could examine them front and back for any additional discrepancies.

Their shoes were heavy-duty work boots, scuffed from years of use. Overall, the two men could pass for metal-heads.

As for herself, Katy was stuck with the dress and blouse she'd worn since her drunken binge. Those clothes had suffered from her experiences. Smearred with alien muck and sporting a few tears, her dress could still pass; she might raise a few eyebrows, but most people would simply think she was on a walk-of-shame. Her jacket was similarly soiled and tattered, but that only made it what designers called "distressed." High society bimbos paid extra to look the way Katy did right now; she could deal with their jealousy.

She was still a little overwhelmed by everything that had happened to her, but she couldn't let Chris down. He was depending on her...the way all BFFs relied on each other. Good to his word, he had returned Katy home; she would wholeheartedly aid his associates in tracking down some silly box.

"Okay," she proclaimed. "I think we're safe to head out."

Together, they strode from the alley and stood for a moment on the pavement. Sal and Ank gawked at the trappings of an undrowned cityscape. Everything astounded them, from the gleaming metal cars to the towering skyscrapers denuded of any underwater slime. The simplest aspects of her world were probably unfathomable to them. Hot dog stands, storefront displays, streetlights, fire hydrants. They marveled at the excessive variety of attire worn by the populace, and sneered at the simplicity of everyone's hairdos. A kid on roller-skates brought furrowed brows to both of their aghast faces. Completely mystified, they warily studied a street mime as the man pretended to be trapped in an invisible cage. They were equally confounded by a dog-walker as he pranced by surrounded by over twelve leashed canines.

The odors alone must've been an ordeal for the guys' novice noses. The street was alive with the enticing smells of a variety of ethnic foods, smoked, seasoned, drenched in spicy sauces, wholly unlike anything the guys had ever encountered. Not to mention the chemical stench of pollutants. The atmosphere was tainted by decades of industry. While fresh automobile exhausts sullied the ground-level with carbon monoxide.

Personally, Katy welcomed these familiar odors. In the drowned world, a palpable humidity had saturated every breath she took, fostering

mildew everywhere. And the air quality down in Base Nemo had been thick with stale sweat and burned food. She was glad to be assailed by customary scents.

The cacophonous bedlam of an urban soundscape made the men wince. Car horns and a murmur that was the product of a hundred unrelated conversations going on at once. The ratta-tat of a distant jackhammer undoubtedly sounded to them like the mating call of some giant unseen insect creature. And music—a diverse selection of different tunes fought for sonic dominion—not just mismatched songs but clashing musical genres, as rap battered down bouncy pop melodies and death metal bullied aside classical strains. (These last contrasts were beyond the men’s familiarity; they couldn’t even tell one song from another. They must’ve thought the street hosted a troupe of dueling banshees.) Overall, the two were subjected to an devastating barrage of alien sensory input—it was a miracle they didn’t collapse into comatose heaps; more to the point, their resilience was a testament to their discipline in the face of such loud unknowns.

Meanwhile, Katy busied herself with ascertaining their present location. She knew they were in Brooklyn, but exactly where? At the next corner, she failed to recognize the streets named on the signs hanging at the intersection. Nor did she spot any landmarks past the immediate buildings. At first she was reticent to ask a stranger for directions; that would certainly tarnish her reputation as the mission’s guide. But after fifteen minutes of fruitless guesswork, Katy broke down and consulted a fruit vendor who not only told her where she was, but offered instructions on how to reach the subway line that would take her back to Manhattan.

“Okay,” she called to her two traveling companions. “Let’s go.”

They trailed after her, still awed by every novelty they passed.

Following the vendor’s directions, she turned a corner and saw the stairs that led up to the subway stop. (Here in Brooklyn, the trains ran on elevated tracks; back in the Big Apple they scurried through underground tunnels.) It wasn’t until she started up the steps that Katy thought of the fare—“fares,” to be precise, for now two men traveled with her.

Somewhere along the way, Katy had lost her purse. She wasn’t even sure she’d had it back in the alleyway before Donny the frogman had shown up and got shot. It wasn’t the first time she’d misplaced her purse while on a drinking binge. (She needed to quit boozing around. Not only wasn’t the alcohol helping her to forget Andrew, it was really screwing up the trivial life she had left.)

Dammit, she fumed. How am I going to pay the fares to get us back to Manhattan?

Stopping dead on the stairs, Katy turned and herded the guys back down to the sidewalk. “We have a little problem,” she confided, then explained their penniless plight. They understood currency, but carried

none—from here or their own world. No one had thought to include money in their provisions.

“So we walk,” Sal announced.

Katy rolled her dark-rimmed eyes. “It’s a reeeally looong walk...”

“I think I can handle this,” muttered Ank. He urged them back up the stairway.

The steps let out onto a small concrete foyer. A glass booth and a row of turnstiles separated the group from the train platform. Ank stood aside, so Katy and Sal joined him. He watched another person ascend the stairs and cross to the token booth. He studied the brief interaction between the traveler-to-be and the booth attendant. When that traveler had fed their token into a slot and slid through the clanking turnstile, Ank approached the booth.

“Three,” he told the man in the booth. Reaching out, he deposited a pebble in the cash receptacle. The booth attendant frowned at the pebble, then looked up to direct his scowl at Ank. Ank locked on the man’s gaze. A vacancy momentarily clouded the attendant’s eyes. Maintaining that vacant look, he took the pebble and dropped it into the coin box under the counter. He slid three subway tokens across to Ank, who accepted them with a nod and turned away.

“What did you do?” Katy whispered to Ank as he distributed the tokens among the group.

“Just a little trick,” he replied. Then he chuckled and added, “It’s all a matter of attitude.”



They only had to wait five minutes for a train to come. Strangers in her world, the men mirrored Katy’s actions as she stepped aboard and took a seat against the carriage’s far side. They were the only people in the long vessel; the person ahead of Ank in line had entered another car.

“This will take us back to Manhattan,” she told them. “That’s where you guys found me...” Even though they were alone in the subway car, she lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. “...back in your flooded world.”

“Girl, you think that place is our home?” chuckled Ank. “The flood wiped out most of that world’s population. We’re from another world entirely.”

“Another world...?” Katy gawked. “There’s a third world?”

Sal sighed. “Lots more’n three, Missy.”

“Damned solar flares killed our world, turned it into a desert,” grumbled Ank. “Ever since, we been hopping from Earth to Earth, looking for a new home.”

“The whole planet...? A desert...?” Katy continued to gawk. Their world was a burned out husk. That other world had drowned most of its indigenous inhabitants. Only *her* world was normal.

“That flooded one’s nice...” Ank seemed to be talking to himself more than to her. “Once we have Hot Sauce, we can put all that water to good use...”

“Hot Sauce?”

“It’s—uh—a codename for what’s in the black box,” Sal confided to her.

Katy was still puzzled, but the two men fell silent, lost in their brooding.

She shifted her attention to the here and now. Which stop did they need to take? What station would get them closest to their destination? As the train entered a tunnel, Katy realized she had no answers for these questions.

She’d been drunk out of her mind the other night. She had no recollection of what bars she’d used to inebriate herself so excessively. Consequently, she had wandered into a nearby alley and collapsed there...to later encounter Donny the frogman. According to Ank, that particular alleyway was supposed to be the location of their lost black box. But Katy had no idea where that alley was.

“So—where are we going?” Ank asked.

Katy didn’t know what to say.



Sooner or later, she had to tell them.

Just not right now.

She was too embarrassed to confess she couldn’t help them.

So she got off at Union Square. At a loss for where to go, she instinctively headed home. She would take the men back to her apartment and...give them something to eat, anything to distract them. If Katy could buy time, maybe she could remember the alley’s location.

She knew that was impossible, though. She couldn’t remember something she hadn’t known in the first place. She’d been blotto when she’d stumbled into and collapsed in that alley. All she remembered of the drowned version of the alley was her panic. And she’d seen a few building-tops poking out of an expanded ocean. How was she supposed to correlate that to the unflooded city in her world? She knew the city fairly well, but from street-level, not several hundred feet in the air.

The guys were getting suspicious. Soon, they were going to challenge her. What was she going to tell them?

She felt doubly humiliated—first for never realizing she didn’t know the location of the alley, and then for disappointing Chris and the others. Okay, she didn’t much like Ank, but Sal was supposed to be her friend. It hurt to let her friends down...or lie to them.

“I need to stop home first,” she finally told them. Before they could barrage her with protests and questions, she feigned a scowl and hissed,

“Female stuff.” That was as good an excuse as any; in her experience, men usually recoiled from that dreaded subject.

Ank and Sal, however, were not men from Katy’s world. The term “female stuff” elicited no phobic reaction in them. Stubbornly stopping, they refused to take another step until she explained herself.

Half a block away lay the entrance to her apartment building. So close... If Katy could just get them indoors, she was certain she could find a way of softening the blow. There had to be some way to candycoat the crisis...

She kept walking, hoping they would follow her rather than be left alone on the foreign street.

Their resistance was strong, but so many aspects of her world still puzzled the men. The noise, the crowds, the flamboyant fruits of technology, all things that presumably did not exist back in their world. Eventually, the men broke down and hurried after her.

Luck was on Katy’s side when it came to getting past the locked foyer. Again, stress had muddied her thoughts, and until now she’d forgotten that her keys were lost with her purse. But her moment of arrival coincided with the departure of another tenant—one that knew her, albeit only slightly, but enough to recognize her as someone who lived here. The fellow held the door for Katy and she was able to duck inside before the doors eased shut.

As she and her companions crossed the lobby, she offered them another handy excuse: “We’re going to need money to get around the city.”

Ank objected as they all stepped into the elevator, “Money’s no problem, and you know it.” He slid his dark glasses down his nose and scowled at her over the black lenses.

“You have to *trust* me,” she insisted. “This is *my* city. I know it *better* than you do—and money’s *important* here.”

“Money’s important everywhere, Missy,” Sal chided her.

“You’re stalling, girl,” accused Ank.

Having reached the third floor, the elevator opened and Katy led them from it and along another hallway. “I’m not stalling,” she whined.

As they approached her apartment, Katy realized the key to unlock this door was lost with the others. Barring breaking down the door, there was no way she could get into her own home.

“You’re lying,” Ank growled. “We don’t belong here. We should be out looking for the black box.”

“We will, we will,” Katy gave an exasperated sigh. “Can I at least change into some clothes that aren’t torn and muddy?”

“Hold on—” Ank pulled her away from the apartment door.

“Huh?” Sal sounded confused.

With a stiff arm, Ank pushed Katy back into Sal's custody. "I don't trust her," he declared. He reached out and grabbed the apartment's doorknob. He gave it a twist, and the door swung open.

"Wait--!" she choked. She wanted to tell them that something was wrong. Her door shouldn't have been unlocked—but she never got the chance.

Ank was halfway through the door when a violent explosion rocked the building. A fireball ejected his brutalized body from the apartment amid a gout of charred debris. Sal had stepped between Katy and the doorway; consequently his bulk shielded her from the brunt of the blast, but the concussion wave flung him back against her.

Up became down and sideways tumbled to and fro. Katy's head throbbed, and the explosion rumbled over and over in her dazed ears. A chorus of aches made themselves known throughout her body. How she held onto consciousness was miraculous to her, much less that any coherent observations managed to penetrate her overall numbness.

While Sal had certainly suffered more direct exposure to the blast, he was quick to recover and scoop her from the floor. Claspng her protectively to his broad chest, Sal dashed away. From this vantage, peering over the man's shoulder, Katy got a clear view of the explosion's aftermath. Billows of smoke chased them down the corridor. A large hole gaped where her doorway had once been. Sunlight spilled into the hallway, implying the blast had atomized the entire apartment.

My home, she fretted. All my stuff—gone!

And a second later, so was Katy. Racing down the corridor, Sal shouldered open the door to the stairs. He didn't halt until he'd stumbled down to the first mid-floor landing. There, he set the girl on her feet and collapsed gasping against a wall.

"An ambush," Sal managed to utter between heavy breaths.

"That was my apartment!" lamented Katy.

"Darcy's minions must know about you! They set a trap!"

"Somebody tried to kill me...?" Astonishment colored her dazed confusion.

"We need to get outta here before—"

But the time to flee was past.

The sound of feet slamming onto steps rose from below. Someone was coming.

Thank god, she rejoiced. A rescue crew—

Her guess was wrong. As figures came into view, ascending from the next lower landing, she saw they were unsavory-looking individuals who brandished knives and guns—not the kind of gear that would be of any use in a rescue mission. These ruffians weren't here to save anybody—they'd come to make sure the explosion had done its job—and to eliminate anyone who'd survived the blast.

"Dammit!" swore Sal.

As the enemy opened fire, he grabbed Katy and bounded back up the stairs. His fleet pace kept them at least a landing ahead of the gun-toting mob, but just barely. Shots rained about them as they fled, chewing holes in the stairwell's drab walls. Each impact raised a frightened squeal from Katy.

The building had only five floors. Inevitably, they reached the last exit and stumbled out onto the roof. There was nowhere left to run.

"Find someplace to hide!" Sal ordered her. "I'll hold them off!" He shoved her away.

She stumbled across the roof and took refuge behind an array of mushroom-shaped ventilation caps. From there, she watched the burly man defend the exit against the enemy horde. Having drawn forth the machete he'd hidden beneath his slacks, Sal wielded it in deadly fashion. Soon, a litter of severed hands, limbs, and even a head built up at his feet.

The gory display made her sick. When she eventually raised her vomit-spattered chin again, she saw that Sal's combat had come to an end. He was still standing—that was a good sign. He'd staggered back a bit from the exit door; through the latter echoed a series of gunshots.

If they're not shooting at Sal, Katy wondered, who are they shooting at?

When Ank appeared in the doorway, a startled cheer escaped Katy's lips. Then shock choked her outcry in her throat. He meticulously stepped around the gruesome anatomical clutter that propped the door ajar. The explosion had caught him full-on—he should be badly burned...not strutting around with a pistol. Okay, wisps of singed hair dangled from the mouth of his hoodie, so he'd obviously gotten burned, but the cowl's shadowy confines hid his face, so she couldn't tell how badly...but really... How was Ank conscious, much less active?

"Nice to see you catch up, Ank," grunted Sal. "What kept you?"

Sal lifted his arms to display unsinged clothes. "The blast burned away most of my clothes. So I grabbed some new stuff from the guys I shot." His grin was exceptionally dazzling against his scorched face.

Conscious, active—and jaunty! Was Ank some kind of superman?

"More coming," he advised his burly comrade. "Too many to fight."

"Time to hit the WayBack button," suggested Sal.

"I guess so." Stuffing his gun into the valise (which was charred and tattered—the way Ank should've been), he began to fumble with unbuttoning the pocket where he'd stashed the WayBack device.

At that moment, a swarm of minions erupted from the gaping doorway. They brought bedlam to the rooftop. The horde fired their guns wildly. They bellowed with rancor and hostility. Sal waded into them with his agile machete. More blood stained the tarpaper. Katy cowered back from this pandemonium. The air overhead was alive with angry lead

hornets. Having dropped his valise, Ank was struggling with both hands to unbutton his pants pocket.

Amidst the thunderous din, she barely heard Ank's coarse exclamation: "Dammit—"

He lumbered close to her hiding place. Now she could see how severely burnt his face was hidden away in his borrowed hoodie. Her stomach lurched at the horrific sight. Sections of flesh were missing, exposing part of his cheekbone and half a mouthful of grimacing teeth. His left eye was gone. With his chin bristling with tufts of singed hair, he looked like a Viking zombie. She couldn't believe Ank was still conscious, much less continuing to wrestle with his pocket's obstinate buttons. Then the man's body jerked as several bullets tore through him. He loomed over her; Katy had a ringside seat to witness the slugs tear holes in his chest. She was already screaming when he toppled over and fell on her. From underneath his corpse, she caught a glimpse of Sal dancing amidst the gunfire. His cavorting brought him in her direction.

No no no—not this way, she bemoaned. You're supposed to be my bodyguard—don't draw fire in this direction—

But then Sal arrived. Stumbling over the ventilation caps, he sprawled atop Ank's bullet-riddled cadaver. At the bottom of the body heap, Katy's screams were muffled into wheezing gasps.

Katy squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't want to see death coming, but she couldn't avoid hearing its advance. A cavalcade of shots rang out, heralding the imminent affliction of hundreds of lethal wounds.

Then everything went silent.

4.

Something had changed—and the sudden silence wasn't Katy's only clue.

Besides the abrupt cessation of gunfire, no oppressive weight pinned her down. She could once more gulp air into her collapsed lungs.

What had happened?

Where were the minions? They'd had her and the Bat Packers cornered. Why had they stopped shooting?

And where had the guys gone? The three of them had been sprawled in a heap on the rooftop of her apartment building—where could they go?

For that matter, the surface that pressed against her flesh had lost its coarse grittiness. Now, a smooth contour kissed her cheek. The palms of her hands cupped a curved surface instead of a coarse flat plane. Gone was the warmth of sun-heated tarpaper, replaced by a cool mass.

She cracked an eyelid to examine her surroundings.

Where the hell am I?

Her mystification was entirely justified. Katy no longer sprawled on the roof of Manhattan apartment building. Now she lay spread-eagled atop a large rock. Venturing to fully open her eyes, the girl found herself perched on a ledge halfway up an escarpment of granite. The whole edifice wasn't all that big, measuring roughly twenty feet in total height. At some point directly below her, liquid seeped from the wall to trickle down the embankment and form a clear pool of water. Twin streams wound away from the shallow pond, only to plunge over a nearby precipice. Beyond the edge of that cliff spread the expanse of an emerald ocean. What she could see of the rest of the landscape looked destitute—an arid prairie stretching away to distant orange mountains set against a pale blue sky. Even the plant life seemed wrong: the grass was an unnatural shade of yellow and stood robustly high; a stand of super-fat bamboo-like stumps featured thick rubbery leaves; there were only a few trees, but they wore aggressively corrugated bark and their frond-like foliage sprouted skyward in robust tufts. No buildings (or, for that matter, any constructions of man) were visible anywhere.

Below her, a startled Sal clambered into a wary crouch. He stood knee deep in the pool of water where he'd fallen.

A groaning Ank wallowed in the shallows. He laboriously rolled himself ashore and sought refuge in the shade under an outcropping of rock.

From her high vantage, Katy gawked at this improbable tableau.

"Damn, that was close," Sal exhaled his pent-up tension.

"A successful abort," croaked Ank from where he lay.

Climbing down, Katy approached him. "How—how are you still alive?" she gasped.

"Oh, he'll be hokay," Sal grunted with a cavalier tone. She stared at him, befuddled by his sudden lack of concern for the safety of his comrade.

But when she reached Ank, he pulled away from her. "I'm hokay, dammit!" he growled at her—literally *growled* like a wolf. She withdrew, more than a little afraid of his abrupt hostility.

He looked awful, even with his hoodie up and hiding most details. The rest of his body was scorched and scarred, his new clothes bloodstained and torn. His burns were quite severe, wisps of smoke still trailed from his cowed head. Her apartment had blown up right in his face, the minions had shot him several times, then he'd tumbled down this rocky embankment. Katy couldn't believe he was alive, much less conscious.

Having scaled the rocky escarpment, Sal stood tall and studied the countryside. For a while he scanned the prairie that stretched to the mountains' foothills. Finally, he rejoined them.

“So,” Sal grunted, standing over his comrade’s recuperating figure. “I don’t think this counts as a ‘successful’ abort, Ank.”

“We got away intact,” Ank retorted.

“Away to where?”

Ank winced as he shrugged. He reached down to his leg pocket. The fabric was torn, he was able to easily take out the WayBack device. After a brief glance at it, he held the unit up for Sal to see. Peering close, Katy saw that it was dented and cracked; it had stopped a bullet.

“Oh great,” sighed Sal. With that, he stomped off, returning to brood on the hill.

“It’s broken,” murmured Katy. “Isn’t it?”

Again, Ank gave a cringing shrug. “It got us here...wherever here is.”

“So...you didn’t send us here...?”

“Girl, why would I send us *here*?”

“Well, at least you got us away from that murderous mob before they hurt anybody.” She stopped, suddenly flustered by her lack of tact. “Oh—right—sorry, I didn’t—“

“Forget it.”

“I saw you get shot!” she gasped. “How can I forget that?”

“Don’t worry about it, hokay?” He squirmed deeper into the shadow cast by the stone mantle.

“But—“

“I’m a fast healer.”

“So...” She stood back and looked around. “Where are we?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?” Ank snapped back. “I couldn’t get the WayBack outta my pocket. A slug triggered it, not me. A bullet sent us here, not *me*. You satisfied? We’re all stranded here and it’s *my* fault.”

We’re really stranded? she thought. *I’ll never see Chris again...?*



By the time the first dinosaur showed up, Katy was so bored she welcomed the diversion. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration.. She’d never really been a big fan of country life. Sitting on a rock and watching water dribble into a pool held little appeal for her, but there was nothing else to do. Ank remained surly and withdrawn, Sal had settled into permanent residence atop the rock embankment. Leaving her to mull over their prospects.

Their prospects weren’t good...and their plight was all her fault.

With little to do but brood, Katy figured out how Darcy’s minions had learned of her involvement in all this. Back in the pre-flooded alley—after killing Donny, the shooter had advanced with the intention of silencing her too. Only the WayBack unit’s malfunction had saved her from certain death. But—the shooter must have caught a glimpse of her! Or maybe

he'd found her lost purse, the contents of which would definitely have led Darcy's agents back to her apartment.

The bastards had broken in and rigged the door with explosives. If Ank hadn't pushed her aside, Katy would've been the one caught by the blast. No wonder he was angry with her; his injuries should've been hers.

At every stage, I've screwed up. I couldn't even take them to the right alley to find their lost whachamacallit. And now we're—

"Incoming!"

Looking up from her dejected slump, Katy saw Sal bounding down from his high sentry position. He hopped from ledge to ledge and landed with a big splash. He was a big guy.

Since their arrival here, Sal had pulled his hair back from his face, restoring it to a series of tufts protruding from his scalp like random antennae. Blending in with the populace of her world no longer mattered. If anything, his original style fit this arid wasteland better than any "civilized" hairdo. She still thought it looked silly, though.

"On your feet, Missy!" he urged her. As he approached, Sal unsheathed his machete and held it ready.

"What the hell are you doing with that?" squawked Katy. Leaping from her spot, she danced back from his threatening advance. "C'mon, you can't blame me for—"

As he stepped near, Sal gave her a critical frown. He lifted the long blade and pointed out into the prairie.

"Huh?" She ceased her retreat and peered out into the grassy plains. Something moved out there. Something big. And it was headed this way. "What is that?"

He didn't bother to answer her. Within minutes, the beast had lumbered close enough that she could tell what the thing was. She just didn't want to believe it was what she thought it was.

"What is it?" called Ank. Presumably his weakened condition prohibited him from crawling from his shadowy retreat and seeing for himself.

Moving over to hide behind Sal, Katy gasped, "That—that's a goddamn dinosaur!"

"Stegosaurus," remarked Sal. "There's a whole herd out there." He pointed at the prairie, but she couldn't see anything but dust clouds racing across the terrain like a powdery flood.

"No worry," grunted Ank. "They're herbivores. Don't hassle it, it won't hassle us."

"It's so biiiig!" cooed the girl.

Indeed, the beast was mammoth, over two car-lengths long. Rows of bony plates wobbled along its humped back as the creature stomped forward. Its legs were as thick as tree trunks with blunt toes that gouged the soil. Those spinal plates became nine-inch spikes as they reached the tip of its stout tail. Compared to its ponderous body, its head was

comically puny. Its limpid eyes gave the creature an innocent air—a sentiment immediately contradicted by its terrible beak. The thing could've swallowed a Great Dane whole. For some reason, she thought all dinosaurs were gray or brown...but this one was a dusty yellow with orange-and black jaguar markings along its flanks.

The Stegosaurus was definitely headed in their direction. Katy did not look forward to scurrying about to avoid getting trampled by the behemoth. There was nowhere to hide. None of the shrubs were substantial enough to offer cover. And she lacked the energy to climb the rock face and hide on higher ground.

Fortunately, the monster wasn't interested in attacking them. Ignoring the humans, the beast trundled over to the pool and hung its beak over the water. Its agile tongue scooped volumes of refreshing liquid into its mouth.

"He's just thirsty," announced Katy. Her voice rang with palpable relief.

When she glanced at Sal, though, the serious cast of his brow alarmed her. He fingered his machete thoughtfully.

"No!" she exclaimed.

He turned his frown on her, but continued to caress his blade. "It's meat on the hoof, Missy."

"You can't—" sputtered Katy.

"Sooner-later, we're gonna get hungry."

"You wouldn't—no!" she groaned. "I'll figure a way out of this mess..."

This brought a smile to his face, but it was more acerbic than amiably amused. Wearily, he shook his head. "Yuh—lemme know when you come up with your brilliant idea, hokay?" With that, he walked away.

He remained nearby, though, at least until the beast had drunk its fill and ambled off. Only then did the burly bodyguard return to his high-ground sentry post.



When night fell, Sal gathered what would have to pass for wood and built a fire. They huddled around it: the forlorn girl and her burly bodyguard. Ank remained in seclusion under his rock outcropping.

They had no food, nor any tools that might be used to repair the WayBack device. Ank had lost the valise, so they no longer had a reservoir of helpful gear. They were limited to what they wore or had in their pockets—like Ank's butane lighter. Sal's machete was their sole weapon, unless you wanted to stretch definitions and count the pebbles Ank carried—but then, even if they could construct a crude sling, his small stones would do no real damage to any of this world's gigantic denizens.

At least they had water.

That was little compensation, trapped as they were in a prehistoric world populated by fierce beasts and bugs as big as her hand.

She recoiled from one such insect that buzzed close to her head.

The fire was supposed to ward off bugs and predators, but it wasn't doing all that good of a job. Huge mosquitoes gathered in a constant swarm, all attracted by the glow, all ending up feeding the campfire as they witlessly flew too close in their investigation of this strange nocturnal beacon.

Oblivious to this buzzing invasion, Sal sat mute and stared into the fire as if searching for an answer amidst the flames.

Earlier that afternoon, the man had been willing to carve a meal from the flank of that darling Stegosaurus—but here and now, he wouldn't even swat these pesky bugs.

Some bodyguard, Katy grumbled to herself.

Surprised at her contemptuous attitude, the girl shook her head to clear out any negativity. They were all trapped here, they needed to rely on each other if they were going to survive. She suspected that hunger was inciting her foul mood. She couldn't remember her last meal, it predated the ill-fated drunken binge that had landed her in that stupid alley. Hunger, coupled with her overall sense of despondency, was prompting the girl to be overly critical of her traveling companions. She shouldn't blame them. They'd done everything they could to keep them all alive.

But really, c'mon...

The least Sal could do was swat some of these annoying pests. Normal sized mosquitoes were bad enough, but *these* ones were big enough leave a bruise when they bumped against her head.

Instead, Sal reached out and snatched one of the bugs out of the air. He methodically plucked its stinger, wings and legs, then twisted off the thing's head. Lifting the chitinous body to his lips, he sucked out the contents.

"Oh, gross!" she choked.

With a shrug, he pointed out that insects were actually highly nutritious. "If you'd let me slaughter that Steg today, we'd have steak for dinner. I'm settling for bugs—cuz that's all that's left."

She pointed at the sea. "There's got to be fish out there—"

"Oh," he chided her with another of his sardonic smirks. "So—it's hokay to kill fish, but not steak. You're not some crazy vegan, are you?"

"No...I eat meat."

"Just not Steg, huh?"

"He was cute..." she mumbled under her breath, but he heard her and guffawed.

"Cute? Why, that critter'd smack you down with its tail if you tried to pet it."

She thrust out her jaw and declared, “Yeah well—eating bugs is gross!”

“So, you don’t want any?” Tossing away the empty husk, he plucked another mosquito from the air.

“Eee-yew—no!”

“Suit yourself, Missy.”

After a few minutes of silence, Katy asked, “Aren’t you going to offer any bugs to Ank?”

“Naw.”

“Is...he going to be okay?”

“Sure.”

“How’s that possible? He got hit full-on by that explosion, and I saw him get shot—several times!”

“Ank’ll be hokay.”

“I’m hard to kill,” Ank called from his hiding place.

Once again, Ank surprised Katy. She’d thought he was asleep, recuperating—or maybe slowly slipping away. But apparently his robust constitution was blessed with extra-good hearing.

“Maybe by the time Ank’s all better, you’ll have figured a way to get us outta here, Missy,” Sal teased the girl.

She hung her head. The two of them were obviously ignoring Ank’s mortal injuries; they acted as if he were going to heal—but behind those brave masks, they had to know better. Without medical attention, Ank wasn’t going to survive—he should’ve been dead long ago...

And I’m never going to think of a way to get us out of here, she told herself. Eventually, we’re all going to die here.



The mosquitoes weren’t the only creatures attracted by the fire. Fortunately, the majority of the curiosity seekers turned out to be small and timid enough that Sal could chase them off with a shout. Even knowing he was there to protect the integrity of their modest camp, general stress kept Katy awake. Eventually, though, despite her reluctance to relax, sleep finally conquered the girl.

Dawn woke her. Cresting over the far-flung ocean, the sun bathed the precipice with its radiant warmth. Shucking off her jacket and the sweatshirt Sal had given her against the night’s chill, she crawled over to the pool and splashed water on her face. As Katy lifted her head to bask in the morning breeze, a growl made her heart jump into her throat. Her eyes flew wide and revealed a dinosaur not six yards from her.

The beast wasn’t another Stegosaurus. This creature was built like an armored turtle, its shell all lumpy with bulging bone plates. Its head was blunter, too, with chunky lips and protruding eyes. Its tail (the sight of which caused Katy to skitter in retreat) sported a spiky mace at its tip, a

deadly-looking feature as big as a wrecking ball. This critter's shell wore a green-and-yellow camouflage pattern, while its hide was elephantine gray. That nasty tail, though, was dark red—she was reluctant to learn if that coloration was natural or the residue of some grisly stain. As Katy moved away, the beast swung its ponderous head back to continue drinking from the pool. She'd spooked it when she crawled over to wash her face. She was lucky the thing hadn't been ill-tempered and had confined its reaction to her sudden intrusion to a simple growl.

She spotted Sal atop the rock escarpment, calmly studying the far prairie.

I can't believe he didn't rouse me with a nasty-looking brute like that around. But there'd been no need. The beast had shown no aggression. Maybe Sal already knew that. Even now, the burly man showed little concern about the creature's proximity. He was much more engrossed in watching something out in the grasslands.

Did Sal harbor untoward knowledge about this world? Or was it simply a matter of boys knowing more about dinosaurs than girls do?



Already the day was hot, and the sun had barely gotten halfway to zenith. How bad was the afternoon going to be?

When Katy sought refuge in the shade, Ank hissed at her from the shadowy depths beneath the rock outcropping. She hastily withdrew.

"Leave him be," Sal called down to her.

Advice she intended to follow. Ank had sounded like an animal.

She crawled under another outcropping in the embankment. It offered less shade than Ank's spot, but it would have to do.

A review of her clothing didn't make Katy very happy. Her experiences had left her blouse and skirt badly tattered. Besides modesty, she was reluctant to shed them...then she'd be facing perilous circumstances in her underwear, and that just wasn't right. Anyway, being a fair-skinned city-girl, Katy would have to worry about sunburn if she discarded her garments. Her jacket had fared better. She'd appreciated its warmth last night, but would bake in it if she kept it on during the day. The condition of her clothes would only get worse, each surprising development subjecting her to physical extremes the likes of which she just wasn't accustomed. Her arms and legs were marked by cuts and scrapes, fortunately none of them very severe. A glimpse of herself in the pond's reflective surface had shown Katy the wild condition of her normally willowy hair. *I look like a witchy woman*, she bemoaned to herself, knowing that her decrepitude could also be counted on to worsen.

The day ground along with unbearable tedium. Animals big and small approached the watering hole throughout the afternoon. None showed much interest in the humans. Sal never voiced any warning

concerning their presence, and for the most part his judgment proved valid. The beasts came, lapped water from the pool, then returned to the prairie. A few threw wary glances in Sal's direction, but his immobility eased their bestial suspicions, and they proceeded to hydrate themselves and leave.

As dusk descended, Katy ventured from her shelter and availed herself of a drink. Then she climbed the escarpment to join Sal atop the mound. He seemed to take no notice of her when she sat beside him.

After a few moments, she asked, "So...is this all we're going to do every day?"

"I thought we were waiting for you to figure a way outta here," he replied. His tone was remarkably civil considering the snide nature of the comment.

"You *could* help, y'know," she threw back.

"You heard Chris. I'm just the muscle. Ank's the thinker."

She issued an exasperated exhalation. "You could *try* to be helpful."

As they sat there, a group of shadows slithered through the high grass, approaching the waterhole. Katy happened to be looking away from Sal at the instant they broke from the edge of the prairie and raced across naked soil. The girl may have been generally ignorant when it came to paleontology, but she knew a predator when she saw one, especially since these creatures had achieved such notoriety from their bloodthirsty roles in the *Jurassic World* movies. She sat erect and held her breath.

"Incoming carnivores, Ank," Sal announced in a normal conversational voice.

How's Ank supposed to hear a whispered warning? fretted Katy. She was about to repeat the warning with proper volume when Ank grunted, "Gotcha," from below.

She marveled at Ank's supernatural hearing.

But— "We have to help him!" she rasped to Sal. "He can't climb up here, not in his condition. You need to go down and rescue him—"

"No need," was Sal's solemn response. His steely gaze tracked the velociraptors as they circled the pond to conduct their final approach from its far side. He nodded, muttered to himself, "Real crafty...keeping the cliff at their back so nothing can sneak up on them."

"Well, if you're not going to help Ank, then I—" She moved to slide from the uppermost rock to a lower ledge, but Sal reached out and, grabbing her arm, pulled her back. "Urk!"

"Stay put" snarled Sal in a whisper. "And be quiet!"

Two of the four raptors had lifted their heads to sniff the air while the others drank. The alert ones peered about, suspicion evident in their tense postures—or maybe these creatures stayed tense all the time. Considering their reputation in the movies, that didn't surprise her.

They were lean and muscular. Subtracting their long whip-like tails and their sinuous necks, their bodies were a little bigger than a healthy man's torso. Their scales were battleship gray in the waning sun. Their legs were tawny appendages whose sinews rippled as the raptors moved. Oversized feet ended in nasty-looking claws. Their arms were undersized (although not as drastically puny as those of a T.Rex—another beastie Katy remembered from movies), and sported equally wicked talons. For all the lethal prospects of those claws, the creatures' teeth were a grandiose testament to malignance: each jaw sprouted hundreds of needles as long as her fingers! The jaws themselves were mightily muscled; she would not have been surprised if the beast could topple a tree with a single bite.

In an even lower voice, Sal confided to Katy, "Not sure how good they are at climbing...and I'd rather not find out." As if to silently emphasize his remarks, his free hand strayed to grip the handle of the machete where it lay beside him.

She shrank back from the reptilian threat, pressing against him.

For long minutes they watched the raptors drink their fill. The beasts kept switching their roles every fifteen seconds, so there were always two sentries as the other pair slurped away.

A leathery membrane abruptly unfolded from the neck of one of the sentries and the creature released a shriek. Lowering its head, it sprinted off, its entire body pointed like a sinewy arrow toward...Ank's outcropping! The sentry's companion dashed after it.

A scream rose in Katy's throat, but before it could spill from her lips, Sal's hand closed over her mouth, stifling any outcry. His other hand gave her arm a warning squeeze.

The raptors disappeared from view as they reached Ank's hiding place. A series of growls and hisses exploded from below. Katy winced at the awful noise. A mighty battle was going on—as the two carnivores fought over who got to eat Ank...poor burned shot Ank...he was a goner for sure this time.

After a moment, one of the beasts was flung from beneath the outcropping. It landed near the pool of water and did not get up. It was difficult to see clearly as the sun sank behind the western mountain range, but Katy thought the creature's neck looked as if it had been twisted like a taffy. Somehow that didn't seem natural to her...but what did she know.

The sounds of conflict continued under the outcropping, much to Katy's bewilderment. Was the remaining raptor arguing with itself?

Then the fight took itself from the hidey-hole and Katy saw that Ank was struggling with the raptor. More than struggling—Ank was the one on the offensive! She gasped as he ripped out the creature's throat—with his bare teeth! Blood spurted everywhere.

A horrified Katy watched as Ank buried his face in the raptor's torn throat. Slurping sounds rose to her ears. She retched, but her empty stomach relinquished nothing but a little bile.

The remaining pair of raptors had abandoned their drinking to follow their predecessors. Their approach was cagier, though. Having seen what the prey had done to two of their brethren, these beasts were wary—but still bloodthirsty. They advanced on Ank where he was bent over his reptilian victim. The sly pair danced about and approached from opposing directions. Ank seemed unaware of them...until they pounced.

Springing erect, Ank reached out and grabbed the open jaws of the attacker on his right. Then he swung that beast around to collide with the raptor coming from his left. The blow sent that creature staggering back—right off the edge of the cliff.

The details of Ank's fight with the remaining predator were hidden from Katy by the gathering gloom. All she could make out were two figures locked in combat. She was spared the grisly particulars: how the raptor's spike-like teeth stabbed into Ank's hands as he grappled with the beast's jaws; how he strained to force the raptor's jaws open wider and wider...until the lower mandible snapped and was torn from its place. But the girl's ears were unhampered by the murky lighting and she clearly heard a gruesome *crunch*, followed by victor's lusty rasp as he tasted the fruits of his labor.

"Told you he could take care of himself," announced Sal.

"Oh...my...god..." Katy wheezed.

"Looks like we're having lizard steak tonight, Missy."



Sal kept her on the hill until Ank had finished draining all three cadavers.

And when they did descend, Katy avoided Ank like a plague. She was horrified still, acutely frightened by the man. And not a little bit freaked out, either. As the evening wore on, Ank's decrepit condition seemed to heal himself. The process was so pronounced that Katy could actually see new flesh surfacing to replace the charred flakes. Gradually, his singed hair fell away and soon a fresh, healthy crop of blonde hair covered his scalp and chin. His enfeebled posture straightened; he stood tall now, sated, triumphant and proud of it. Not only did these changes scare Katy, but his new demeanor made her very uneasy. More than once, she caught him eyeing her with an unabashed hunger. Since Ank had just dined, the girl could only imagine that this new appetite wasn't dietary in nature.

While Sal busied himself starting a new campfire, Ank dissected the raptors, stripping flanks of juicy meat from their corpses. Katy sat and watched, but was reluctant to be the one to decry the elephant-in-their-

midst. But eventually, in light of the wild theories that passed through her mind, each of them more loathsome than the last, she could no longer contain her curiosity.

“What the hell is going on?”

Ank gave a smug grin (made all the more unnerving by the raptor blood that stained his chin), but remained silent as he loaded flanks of meat on twigs he had shaved into slender-but-sturdy skewers.

Having finished coaxing the smoldering roughage into plentiful flames, Sal sat back from the campfire and issued a weary sigh. “What do you think’s going on, Missy?”

“Basic survival,” Ank grunted under his breath.

But Katy was having none of their evasive behavior. “Quit screwing around, you two. Tell me what’s going on, or I’ll...”

Ank barked a caustic laugh. “Or what, girl?” Catching the flames, his eyes sparkled scarlet.

“Hokay, Ank,” Sal remonstrated his comrade. “Stop teasing her.”

“Bah!” spat Ank. “Chris thought she was one of the smart ones. But she’s no better’n the waterworld savages.”

“”Maybe she’s freaked out cuz her world ain’t got none of your kind.”

“What ‘kind’?” moaned Katy.

“Vampires, girl!” Ank snapped. “We’re all vamps.”

Katy gawked at him, then turned her slack face to Sal. “Vampires?”

“He means everybody from the burned-out world,” Sal qualified. “Not me.”

“What do you mean, not you?”

He shrugged. “You and I, girl, we’re not like the Bat Packers. We’re from other worlds.”

“You’re from my Earth?”

He laughed. “Naw. You and I are from different other worlds...where everybody mostly normal. But in Ank’s world, everybody’s a vamp.”

“But—“ she blurted, “—he’s a monster!”

Ank gave a low growl.

“Don’t be rude, Missy. Being a vamp’s normal for Ank and his kin. From their viewpoint, *we’re* the monsters.”

“That’s absurd!” she protested. “If—if everybody in his world’s a vampire—who do they feed on?” Katy was basically ignorant about paleontology, but when it came to vampires she knew her stuff (having spent her tween years obsessed with romantic tales of horror)—or so she thought. “Each other?”

“That’s disgusting,” chafed Ank. “Do your people eat each other?”

“Ee-yew—no!” squealed Katy. “So—whose blood do you drink?”

“Mostly animals,” admitted Ank. “Only deviants drink from intelligent beings.”

After a moment, Katy sought to hide her embarrassment by switching to another subject. She turned on Sal with: “So—if you’re *human*, what’re you doing working for a bunch of vampires?”

“A real genetic libertarian, this one,” chuckled Ank. He rose from his crouch and wandered away from the fire.

“I’m working *with* the vamps—not *for* them,” Sal told her. His tone was testy.

“Okay okay!” she grimaced. “You don’t have to snap my head off.”

“Maybe if somebody did, you’d learn some tact, Missy.”

She fell silent. Meanwhile, Sal tended their meal, rotating the sticks holding the flanks of meat so they would cook evenly.

She felt bad. *Everybody’s all surly and picking on me.* It took her a few moments to remember that earlier she had been just as bitchy. Was their desperate plight getting to her traveling companions as it had affected her? Or was there some deeper element prompting their resentment? Did they blame *her* for their getting stranded here in a prehistoric world?

That wasn’t fair. *I had no control over what happened. Those minions were the ones who attacked us, forced us to flee to the roof, shot at us and busted the WayBack device...not me.*

But then...if Katy had remembered the location of their target alley, they’d never have been there for the minions to attack them in the first place. *Maybe it is my fault.*

While Katy and Sal had talked (or more precisely *argued*), Ank had gathered the inedible remains of the raptors he’d slain. He tossed the carcasses over the cliff’s edge. By the time the vampire wandered back to the campfire, Sal proclaimed the meat had cooked enough.

Using his machete, he chopped a flank into three juicy sections. Ank snatched up the biggest piece and withdrew to his hidey-hole to consume it. Sal offered Katy a hunk, but the girl refused to take it.

“I wouldn’t eat a bug, and no way I’m eating dinosaur,” she declared. But her rejection lacked much conviction. She was starving...and the damned meat *did* smell tantalizing.

With a shrug, Sal took a hefty bite out of another serving. He chewed rather industriously, finally swallowing the prehistoric protein. After a second, he remarked, “Not bad, actually.”

“It isn’t gross?” ventured Katy. “You’re not just yanking me to get me to eat dinosaur—that’d be really uncool...” She was so hungry!

“We’ve had worse,” Ank added from his niche. “Those slugs on that swamp world—*they* were disgusting.”

Sal nodded. “Yuh.” And took another bite of meat.

Her hunger won out over her reluctance. Katy snatched up the last piece and took a hesitant nibble of it. As she was trying to make up her mind, she reminded herself: *It’s this or nothing. Don’t be so picky.* To her surprise, the meat was quite palatable, albeit a little stringy. Between

swallowing that bit and taking a bigger bite, she commented, “Tastes like chicken.”

The men laughed at this. Katy didn’t get the joke.

“So do people,” chuckled Ank.

The men laughed harder at this. Katy got this joke, but didn’t think it was funny at all.



Later, using a raptor femur, Sal dug a shallow short trench by the edge of the cliff. “Latrine,” he announced. Wielding a stout branch whose tip he’d swaddled in spongy leaves, the burly man showed them how they should defecate into the trench, then use the stick to scrape the waste out over the cliffside.

“What about pee?” asked Katy.

“Do that in one of the streams,” Sal replied. “Near the edge, so the current’ll wash it away.”

She nodded, then asked them to look away while she put his suggestion to use.

The men laughed at her puritanical attitude...but they acquiesced to her request. At heart, the bodyguard and the vampire were gentlemen.



The next morning, Katy felt better—almost human. Her sleep had been deep, uninterrupted. A full belly had helped to lessen her stress—if not restore her optimism. After all, they were still stranded here.

Again, it appeared that Sal had kept watch during the twilight hours. Did he never sleep? Being a vampire, Ank was the night person—why hadn’t he taken a stint at sentry duty? After all, now that he had healed himself, he was clearly the strongest of the three of them. If any dangerous beast had ventured near their camp, Ank should’ve been the one to face it.

Here we are starting our third day here, she reflected, and already I’m thinking of this as our “camp.” That’s a bad sign. I’m supposed to be figuring out a way we can get home...not settling in to my new life as a cavewoman. Wilma Flintstone I am not!

As the sun rose, Ank remained in seclusion in the shadows of his outcropping hidey-hole. At least now the girl understood why.

Once Katy had completed her morning ablution, Sal climbed down and fed her. During the night, he had cooked the remaining raptor flanks and wrapped them in broad leaves—the best storage he could devise under the circumstances.

A steak breakfast put Katy in an even better mood. Even Sal appeared more amiable with food in his belly.

She decided to try some casual conversation.

“So...what’s your world like?”

Her inquiry evaporated Sal’s cheer. His apish features took on a wistful, faraway look. He stared off at the distant seascape for a moment before he responded.

“Not much different from yours.”

Somehow, Katy had expected Sal to describe a world of fantastic marvels...flying cars, or least talking dogs. His answer didn’t offer her much in the way of follow-up inquiries. So she switched to another topic.

“However did you get mixed up with a bunch of vampires?”

“We share a common enemy.”

“That Darcy guy,” she guessed.

He gave a grim nod. His gaze wandered from the ocean to stare out across the prairie. Even now, she assumed, while talking with her, Sal was keeping watch for any dangerous beasts. He was the quintessential bodyguard.

She’d intended to ask for more data about this Darcy villain, but thinking of Sal as her bodyguard had reminded Katy that Chris had appointed him to that role. Christopher Robin, her BFF...who she’d never see again.

“Is Chris a vampire too?”

Sal turned to look her square in the face. “Of course.”

“He’s not really my BFF...is he...?”

Sal shrugged. “Something like that is a personal determination, Missy.”

“He bewitched me, didn’t he?”

Sal remained quiet.

“He did—dammit! I’m not here because I want to be. He glamour’d me—that’s what it’s called, right, ‘glamouring’ me—into believing it was what I wanted to do.”

“Retrieving the black box before Darcy gets it is really crucial,” he insisted.

“To *you*—not to me!” she shouted.

“Noisy,” Ank complained from his hidey-hole.

Twisting around to face the outcropping, Katy snarled, “Oh, shut up! You’re just as guilty! You delivered me to that bastard. Is that why you rescued me from the water? Because you thought I could lead you to your precious black box? You didn’t care about me. The only reason you guys took me back to my world was so your could exploit me! Well, the joke’s on you—because I have no idea which alley you’re looking for! I was drunk out of my mind—I couldn’t find that alley again if my life depended on it!”

“We got you home,” Ank snapped back.

“But not permanently!” she moaned. “Look where we are now! Does this look like my homeworld to you? I’m stuck here because you bastards tricked me into helping you!”

“We’re all stuck here, Missy,” lamented Sal.

But Katy was furious. All along she’d thought she was helping her BFF—where in truth her BFF had bamboozled her into joining his cause. Her prior fascination with Chris faded, replaced by a deep resentment. He had duped her!

She moved over to shout directly into the crevice beneath the outcropping.

“You almost got me killed! Those madmen wouldn’t have blown up my apartment if I wasn’t with you!”

“If you’d taken us looking for Hot Sauce the way you were supposed to, we wouldn’t’ve run into them at all,” argued Ank. He raised his voice to shout past her. “I told you something was wrong, didn’t I, Sal? She was stalling! She couldn’t help us at all—she was lying the whole time! She conned us into taking her home!”

“Calm down, both of you,” Sal tried to defuse their dispute. He remained seated by the campfire.

“You shut up too!” she yelled back at him. “You’re no better than them! Some bodyguard you turned out to be!”

“Must not be as bad as you think,” he grunted caustically. “After all, you’re still alive.”

“*This* is a life?” she shrieked. “Trapped in a prehistoric world without any food or television or *anything*—nothing except you two bastards!”

“You make it sound as if we stranded you here on purpose, Missy.”

“Something’s coming,” announced Ank.

“Maybe not,” she grudgingly admitted, but her ire made her add: “But it’s still your fault!”

“Wait—” Sal jumped to his feet and peered about.

“No!” She stamped her bare foot on the earthen ground. “You can’t distract me with any—”

“Hush, girl,” Ank advised in a terse tone. “See anything, Sal?”

“Which direction?”

“Out on the plains,” replied Ank. “From the left.”

“Stop screwing around—” Katy complained.

“Whatever it is, it’s noisy.”

“I see some smoke...” murmured Sal.

“A brushfire?”

“Naw...this is more like a...plume...”

It exasperated Katy that the two men had so callously dismissed her rage. She felt insulted that they’d pulled a feeble “look over there” to sidestep her argument with them.

But when she ventured a peek at the southern prairie, she saw there was something there. As Sal had accurately described: a single trail of

puffy smoke rose from the grasslands. She stared, and it grew bigger. No, it was drawing closer.

“I hear machinery,” proclaimed Ank.

She heard it too: a mushy clanking, like pistons propelled by leaky pressure.

“Machinery means civilization,” Sal pointed out.

“Civilization?” parroted Katy. “Here? What sort of society could exist in a prehistoric world?”

“This world ain’t prehistoric, girl,” Sal muttered to her. “It just looks that way, with the dinos and all. But this world ain’t chronologically dislocated from yours. It’s the same year here as it is back in your world.”

She watched as the smoke plume approached. Finally, it got close enough that she could discern the vehicle producing the billowing vapor. The thing’s design was completely alien, but its purpose was fairly evident: it was a steam locomotive. A weirdly shaped “engine” pulled two flatcars; the rear car was piled with crates covered by a brown tarpaulin, tall side walls hid the contents of the middle car. The engine, though, was a thing of bizarre beauty: all crystalline and comprised of sultry, sweeping curves. It looked like some exotic example of blown glass, a huge chemistry beaker designed by some LSD-inspired artist. The noise she’d heard came from a selection of translucent cylinders located at the rear of the beaker—this had to be the actual motor. The contraption shuddered mightily, threatening to fly apart with each subsequent chug. For all its incredible nature, the clearly crude apparatus was hard-pressed to perform its main function without a fuss. A small platform was mounted on the left side of the beaker, and it looked like a man rode there, manipulating a set of throttle controls.

“You’re gonna have to be the envoy, Sal,” Ank counseled from his hidey-hole.

“Why me?” groaned Sal. “You’re the one with the first contact training.”

“And I’m trapped under this rock—at least until nightfall,” Ank shot back. “You wanna try and stall them till then?”

“Not really...”

“Hokay, so you’re it.”

“What about me?” protested Katy. “I can—“

“You’ll just get us killed all the quicker, girl.”

“I wouldn’t—“

“You barely believe in alternate worlds,” Ank hissed angrily. “You know nothing about first contact protocols. Do us—and yourself—a favor and keep your mouth shut!”

Katy’s face flushed with indignation. But when she looked to Sal for support, the burly man only shook his head and echoed his comrade’s advice. “He has a point, Missy.”

Maybe he's right, she told herself. *Traveling between different worlds is their game, not mine.* This way, if anybody made an improper remark and got them all slaughtered by the natives—it wouldn't be *her* fault.

"Hokay?" Sal repeated, squinting hard at the girl.

"Hokay," she grumbled.

The train must have been riding a set of rails hidden by the tall grass. That track seemed to follow the cliffside. As the machine drew near, she saw the driver struggle with uncooperative controls and with an escalation of vented steam, the train began to slow down. By the time it reached the waterhole, it had stopped.

The driver remained where he was.

A pair of individuals climbed down from the walled flatcar. As they approached the campsite, she saw several more faces peer from the confines of the carrier.

Katy wanted to go over and stand beside Sal, but she worried that any sudden moves might upset the natives. It was a good thing she hadn't commandeered the role of representative, for the actual meeting rendered Katy speechless.

They looked like men...but they weren't really.

Two legs, two arms, one head—yes. But the proportions were off: the arms too long, the legs too short. Their torsos were stockier above waists that a runway model would've killed to have. Their faces, though, were what numbed her bravada. "Ape-like" was a dramatic understatement. There were apish aspects to the basic construction of their heads, but...it was almost as if evolution had taken a different physiological path than it had on her world. Here, their brows had flared into bony ridges that continued around their temples to form bony crests rising from the back of their scalps. Hairlines configured differently, while no facial hair was in evidence. The eyes were huge—*really* huge—and bulged out like bulbous orbs. Their lips ran from ear to ear, so that when they opened their mouths they looked like children's puppets. Their ears were elevated, but not all the way to the top of their temples; their shape was different, too, hanging down instead of jutting up, with extended, almost dangly lobes. They had no noses, just a single nostril positioned horizontally above the mouth. Their foreheads were pronounced, indicating expanded cerebral development...but then their chins were receding, making them look like inbred hillbillies.

Their weirdness didn't stop with their physiology. Their clothing was *bizarre*. One wore a bright yellow jumpsuit, but its material was more a wide mesh than a solid fabric; consequently, his reproductive organ hung free and exposed. The garment's cut followed no Earthly design: one pants-leg was longer than the other, while only a single arm was sleeved, the other left bare. While his companion wore a bright orange tuxedo with a purple top-hat. But "tuxedo" was a misnomer, for here the tails were

located at the hips, not the rear, and the lapels formed an upside-down V, sweeping down and out and disappearing behind him. Scattered haphazardly across the jacket's surface were rectangular and triangular holes, each measuring a few inches. Both individuals went barefoot, revealing blunt pads that split into three articulated toes.

They looked quite bestial, yet possessed technology...so they must have been intelligent, despite their ridiculous sartorial sensibilities.

Her biggest surprise came when they spoke—and whom they chose to speak to.

As they approached, Sal lifted a hand in peaceful greeting. They ignored him, however, and came over to address Katy.

“Your Majesty.” Both of them bowed to her.

“Huh?” she grunted. The alien ape had spoken English!

“Surely this little vacation of yours has lost its charm by now.”

“What?”

For a moment, the apes conferred. Then the one in the fishnet jumpsuit ran back to the train. When he reappeared, he carried a dark green sheet. Rushing up to Katy, he whispered to her, “You must maintain proper decorum, Your Majesty.”

As he draped the sheet around her shoulders, Katy turned what-the-hell eyes on Sal, who was clearly amused by all of this.

The pair of apes began to double-team her.

“Please, Your Majesty...put an end to this vacation.”

“Your loyal citizenry misses you ever so much.”

“Huh?” This had to be a joke.

Sal leaned close. “You hear that, Your Majesty? Your loyal citizens miss you.” He cocked his head to confide to the apes, “Why, just this morning she was talking about how much *she* missed all the people back home. Hi—” He thrust his hand at the nearest ape and grinned. “Name’s Sal. Me and my pal—” He jerked a thumb in the direction of Ank’s hidey-hole. “We’ve been watching out for Her Majesty.”

The top-hatted ape blinked at the burly man. The bulbous size of his eyes made the blink all the creepier. He clearly considered Sal’s hair to be evidence of a primitive heritage. He offered no verbal comment, though; at least, not to Sal. He turned his protruding stare on Katy and inquired, “Are these *hoodlums* bothering you, Your Majesty?”

“We are *not* hoodlums, sir!” Sal struck an insulted pose.

“Stop aggravating them,” hissed Ank from his shadowy lair.

Both apes tightened their extra-wide mouths into impressive scowls.

Katy managed to muster the guts to declare: “They’re my traveling companions.”

“Traveling companions...” the top-hatted one muttered with evident skepticism.

Their disapproval rankled Katy. How dare they get judgmental about their Queen’s choice of traveling companions! Katy knew she wasn’t

really their regent, but she felt compelled to be insulted by their presumptuous opinions—on the real Queen’s behalf. Adopting a regal attitude, she proclaimed, “This is Sal. He’s my bodyguard. A girl needs a bodyguard out here—it can get very dangerous.”

Her haughty tone made them cringe and lower their gaze.

“I’ve grown bored with the wilderness,” she decreed, “It’s dirty and hot. It’s high time I return to my kingdom.”

This made them beam with toothy relief.

“Now, go prepare a suitable spot aboard your quaint little steam train for myself and my traveling companions.”

They bustled off, back to the train’s carrier car.

“Your Majesty?” grunted Sal with an arched eyebrow.

Katy shrugged. “I’m tired of roughing it. Is it my fault they think I’m their Queen?”

“That part confounds me...”

“How weird is it that they speak English?”

“Not as weird as you’d think. Some things are widespread...in the weirdest way. There was one Earth we visited, mammals never reached any prominence, it had a society of sophisticated lizards...yet they had Coca-Cola. Instead of English, they spoke German. There are some weird mixtures out there.”

While Katy and Sal spoke, they wandered over to Ank’s hidey-hole.

“Who knows? Maybe they know of a way out of this world.”

“Unlikely. Missy.”

“So—are you in?” she asked them both. “Or would you rather stick it out here with the dinosaurs?”

“Gotta hand it to you, girl—you got stones. At least this time your lies might do us all some good.”

“You in or not, Mr Snooty Vampire?”

“I’d play along if I could,” Ank replied with a sardonic chuckle. “Unfortunately, accompanying Your Majesty is kinda problematic for me right now...broad daylight and all...”

She handed him the green sheet. “Will this be enough protection against the sun?”

The sheet disappeared into the shadows. A moment later, a draped figure crawled forth and stood to test his cotton armor.

“Seems hokay so far,” Ank attested.

“Let’s get moving then,” she remarked.



Aboard the train, four additional apes nervously avoided interaction with Her Majesty and her traveling companions. Dressed in solid jumpsuits dyed with grass patterns, they carried long knives and wicked-looking truncheons. Katy guessed they were soldiers accompanying the

two dignitaries on their mission to retrieve the Queen from the nasty wilderness.

Mr Top-Hat eyed Ank's covered figure with acute suspicion.

"Mr Ank is very shy," Her Majesty announced sternly.

Mr Top-Hat's pensive nod lacked conviction.

Mr Yellow Jumpsuit quickly produced another sheet (a yellow one) to cover Her Majesty. Apparently her tattered clothing chagrined these apes more than it did her.

The train lurched as it commenced its return journey. Initially it moved backwards along the rails, and soon the tracks veered inland to cross the prairie. They (Katy, her traveling companions, and their quasi-apisish rescuers) rode for several hours in silence. At one point the train encountered a Y junction with sidereal loops that enabled the vehicle to turn around so it could rumble along with its nose forward.

I'm too trusting, Katy grumbled to herself with self-reproach. I trusted Andrew, and he died on me. I trusted Chris, and he lied to me. I put my life in the hands of Sal and Ank, and associating with them put me in danger after danger. And now she was relying on these quasi-men to rescue her...how would they reward her dependence?

She knew she needed to become more self-reliant. Seeking validation through the attention of others was a sign of weakness. Katy had always thought of herself as a strong modern woman, but horrific crises had melted away the layers of self-deception, revealing her true demeanor. She was nothing more than a helpless child adrift in perilous waters. For her, safety only came in the company of someone who could protect her. And so she had spent her entire life entrusting her security to others—all of whom had ultimately taken advantage of her needy nature.

Today could be a turning point for Katy Claye. By assuming the identity of this realm's Queen, perhaps she would finally be rewarded for all her years of suffering. All she had to do was change her outlook: *think only of yourself*. But that was easier vowed than accomplished.



Eventually, the city came into view. Even from this far vantage, its colossal size was evident. Many of its elegant towers aspired to touch the sky with their grandiose peaks. Delicate flumes connected the upper regions of these majestic pinnacles. Vast domes of a translucent material enveloped portions of the peaked sprawl. A jumble of squat concrete rectangles surrounded the metropolis. As the train chugged closer, Katy saw that these bunkers were windowless, but featured horizontal slits through which protruded the barrels of huge guns. This concrete perimeter was defensive in nature, obviously intended to guard the city against any bestial incursion.

For the prairie was populated by a diversity of reptilian monstrosities. None of these beasts grazed near the train tracks, but their hulking shapes could be seen far out on the prairie. To be visible at all over such a distance, they had to have been behemoths. She could understand the city's wisdom in employing aggressive measures to protect the settlement from the hostile curiosity of these monsters.

To the right (north of the city) spread a large inland body of water. Industrial buildings rose from its serene surface, spouting volumes of dark steam into the atmosphere.

To Katy, the spectacle was awesome and bewitching. To her rescuers, it was their Majesty's domain. For now, the girl must adopt a homecoming attitude if she wished to maintain her masquerade.

"Home sweet home," she murmured, just loud enough for the others to hear her comment.

At her side, Sal nodded and remarked, "Impressive."

She gave a low hum of agreement.

Cautiously lifting his protective sheet, Ank peered out at the approaching spectacle. He lowered his covering without comment.



Their train entered the city through an armored gate that clanked closed behind them. It didn't stop at any of the offload stations (where clusters of waiting locals watched it pass), but continued on into a private tunnel that took it deep beneath the city proper. At a subterranean terminal, the train hissed to a halt and discharged its passengers. The soldiers took up positions flanking a steep set of marble steps that rose into the darkness. Mr Purple Top-Hat and Mr Yellow Jumpsuit escorted Her Majesty up these stairs. Sal and Ank made to follow, but the guards blocked their way.

"Eh!" Sal protested.

Pausing her ascent, Katy turned and sighed aloud to see her companions' predicament. "What's the matter?"

"They are unsanctified," Mr Top-Hat explained in his best pontifical voice. "They cannot accompany you into your palace, Your Majesty."

"You've got to stop this nonsense," exclaimed Katy. "I told you—Sal is my bodyguard. How's he supposed to guard me if you keep trying to separate us?"

"But—Councilor Fenn is correct!" coughed Mr Yellow Jumpsuit. "Only sanctified personnel are allowed in your presence, Your Majesty..." He wrung his three-fingered hands in universal misery.

"We were out in the wilderness together for—" She faltered, unsure how long to claim they'd been together out in dinosaurland. She had no idea how long ago the real Queen had embarked on her quirky little vacation.

“A long time,” suggested Sal from the foot of the steps.

“Right—a long time. Trust me, I sanctified them. They’re fully authorized to stick with me.”

Mr Top-Hat (who had now been identified as “Councilor Fenn”) returned her defiant pout with an unsympathetic scowl.

“I so decree it, dammit!” she yelled and stamped her foot.

Visibly fuming, Councilor Fenn eventually signaled the troops back. Sal and Ank joined the Queen as her entourage finished climbing the stairway.

Now that they were indoors, Ank had shrugged off his covering. He retained the sheet draped around his shoulders, though, just in case. There was nothing horrific about his appearance; he looked quite un-vampire-like and completely recovered from his ordeals and injuries. At some point before dawn had confined him to his hidey-hole, Ank had washed away all trace of his bloody endeavors.

Now they were in a grand chamber lined with massive pillars. The surfaces of those columns had been sculpted with entwined figures, all reaching upward in supplication. High overhead, the ceiling arched to form a shadowy enclosure. The scale intimidated Katy, that and the knowledge that the train had delivered them far beneath the city. The floor glittered with such perfection, it looked as if it had been fashioned from a single huge gem. Banners and draperies hung everywhere, displaying a variety of garishly colorful emblems. Illumination came from a series of skinny tubes running along the floor containing neon or some alien phosphorescent gas.

As Councilor Fenn ushered Katy through the hall, she glimpsed enormous sidereal chambers past the pillars, each more fantastic than the last...

A vast dining room where the tables and chairs hung from the ceiling.

A grotto complete with an idyllic waterfall.

What looked like a garden (an *underground* garden?) filled with lush foliage and exotic blossoms.

A medley of gigantic crystalline shafts, all jutting forth at different angles to form a complex maze.

At the rear of the grand hall stood an assortment of personnel. The Councilor must’ve signaled ahead, for Her Majesty’s entire palace retinue awaited her arrival. *Home from her silly vacation*, although no one possessed the insolence to actually voice that sentiment in her presence.

Councilor Fenn presented Her Majesty to these individuals with some flourish, clearly taking credit for her overdue return. As expected, he made no mention of her traveling companions, forcing Katy once again to defend their integrity in the face of these folk.

“These two men are my friends. I hereby grant them full access to my palace,” she announced. “Let no one treat them with anything but the utmost respect.”

Her decree bewildered the retinue, but no one challenged it. Councilor Fenn openly chafed.

At some point, Mr Yellow Jumpsuit and his squad of soldiers had disappeared into one of the side chambers.

“My journey home has been long and bumpy,” proclaimed Katy. “Take me to my private chambers. I wish to rest.” Throwing Mr Top-Hat a smug look, she added, “My friends and I wish to rest—alone!”

The Councilor glowered at her, but nodded and withdrew.

Two female attendants escorted Katy and her traveling companions up a long and winding stretch of stairs to higher levels. Larger-than-life statues decorated the passages, all frozen in the act of climbing the walls.

As they ascended, Katy studied the pair of servant girls. The native female physiology was equally as strange as their male counterparts. Their torsos were inverted, with wide hips and skinny chests. If they had breasts, they were kept well-concealed beneath baggy clothing. For that matter, maybe their torsos were normal and the “dresses” were so strangely shaped—it was impossible to tell which. Their necks were noticeably overlong. Their eyes were far less bulbous. The overall shape of the female head was more elongated, drawing the jaw into an overbite and bringing the back of their skull to a point. Unlike the males, their ridged brows did not sweep back to become cranial crests. Their hairstyles were designed to accentuate their pinheads. From their cumbersome garb, Katy got the impression that women here all dressed like monks. Drab earth-tone robes predominated. Tan cuffs and a frilly collar were examples of daring couture.

At one point, Katy paused to examine a series of paintings lining a narrow corridor. They appeared to be portraits of a royal lineage. Only Queens were depicted, though; no Kings. The apes’ society was matriarchal. Yet a degree of puritanical mores prevailed in their culture. No wonder Mr Yellow Jumpsuit had been so upset by her tattered blouse and skirt, much less her long naked legs.

Lingering before the last painting in the hallway, she whispered to Sal, “That’s supposed to be me.”

None of the portrayed Queen looked even remotely human.

“How can they be mistaking *me* for *her*?”

“We’re lucky they are,” grunted Ank.



Her Majesty’s private chambers were more magnificent than anything Katy had ever seen (except maybe in movies). Walls of pink marble were decorated with satin banners bearing elaborate abstract

designs. A foyer offered visitors plush couches and ornate tables laden with sweetmeats, while Her royal boudoir lay beyond a gilded archway. Superlative columns framed a gigantic circular mattress set atop a surprisingly high dais. Silken curtains hung in artful arcs around the bed; when pulled down, the curtains would provide the sleeper with intimate privacy. The floor featured an astounding pattern of triangular tiles describing waves that converged on the dais. Flanked by rich drapes, a balcony was visible off the foyer. The chamber's air was flavored with an alien floral scent that came from smoking incense braziers.

The perfumed atmosphere made Sal sneeze.

Ank recoiled from the open balcony, seeking shelter under his green sheet.

Katy ordered one of her attendants to close the drapes and shut out the late afternoon glare.

Once the curtains had been drawn, strings of quasi-neon tubes automatically sprang alight. They circled the chamber, ascending the domed ceiling in a spiral formation.

Safe again, Ank threw off his cover and settled onto one of the couches.

"Your Majesty's been eating nothing but berries and dino meat for weeks," Sal informed the attendants. "She's hungry. *Real* hungry."

One of the attendants ducked her head and rushed off to fetch food for the hungry queen. Scarce minutes later she reappeared, leading a troupe of servitors who piled the table with plates of succulent meats and dishes of steamy pasta. A flagon of wine was deposited there too, but upon sniffing it, Ank announced, "Your Majesty wants water—cold, fresh water." The servitors snatched away the container of wine and were back almost instantly with a large crystal pitcher of clear liquid.

Until now, Katy had succeeded in sublimating her hunger, but the smells and sight of these delicacies shattered her unconscious resolve—and she pounced on the food with a ravenous appetite.

Even Sal sampled some slices of meat.

Showing no interest in the feast, Ank remained sprawled on the sofa. His hunger required more exotic sustenance.

Once the servitors had left, the pair of attendants took up positions just inside the grand threshold. They stood there with their hands clasped at their waist, mute, solemn, reverent. It was apparent these servants intended to stay.

Pausing between mouthfuls of deliciously seasoned venison, Katy commanded, "You can go."

But they remained immobile. They didn't even flinch when Sal sneezed again.

"I—we want to rest," Katy addressed them sternly. "Leave us."

Reluctantly, the attendants withdrew, sealing the door behind them.

“Did—“ she gasped and took a step toward the door. “Did they just lock us in?”

“Sounded that way,” grunted Ank. He remained relaxed on the sofa.

Sal went over and tried the door. The handle wouldn't toggle. The door was locked. Crouching down, he examined the handle. “No worry,” he announced, rising to stroll away from the door. “When we wanna leave, I can pick it.”

He circumnavigated the room, moving from brazier to brazier and extinguishing the incense. Approaching the curtains, he carefully slipped past them. A moment later, Katy joined him.

The balcony looked out upon the spectacular city. Her boudoir was located in one of the tallest structures, affording her a breathtaking view. Spread below was a thicket of spires, the cityscape of Her Majesty's kingdom. Most of these skyscrapers sparkled as if made of jewelry. These crests hid the concrete bunkers that surrounded the metropolis. Overhead, the underside of the dome was all but invisible against the dusk heavens. Beyond stretched the golden prairie. To the left, part of the lake was visible, blazing deep magenta in the setting sun.

“I have to agree with you,” Sal stated. “You don't look anything like their Queen...but they think you are—or at least, they're acting as if you were her. There's some intrigue at play here, some local agenda unknown to us.”

“It got us out of the wilderness and into some pretty elegant accommodations, though.” She flashed him a smile.

But he didn't return it. “Gilded traps are always more effective.”

“You're too suspicious.”

He shrugged. “That's my job, Missy.”

“Okay—so what do you suggest we do?”

“Right now, we have no choice but to play along. You have to play the Queen.”

“But how?” she whined. “I have no idea how to act. Everybody's a stranger, I don't know anybody's names—I don't even know what *my own name* is supposed to be! I have no idea how their society operates, its customs, its taboos—I could scratch myself the wrong way and get us all thrown into the dungeon—if they even have dungeons here. Oh—see what I mean? How can I pull this off?” By now she was sobbing.

At first, playing along with the Royal Advisors had been a convenient way of escaping the prairie, but Katy hadn't really thought it through. She'd acted impulsively, to save them from being baked by the sun or eaten by some big nasty dinosaur—and now she was mired in the thick of her own scheme.

Once again her actions had put them all in danger.

“Jeezus, calm her down, Sal,” came Ank's gruff voice from the other side of the curtain. “If anybody sees Her Majesty crying, we're all dead meat.”

“He’s right, Missy.” Sal put a hand on Katy’s shoulder, but she shrugged it away.

“I’ll be okay,” she grumbled. She wiped her face on the dirty sleeve of her jacket. “Just give me a minute...”

Sal ducked back inside to give the girl the chance to compose herself.

Refusing to have them think she was a wussy, Katy stifled her tears and sought something to distract herself from her worries.

(Ank’s expletive use of “Jeezus” implied that Christ played a crucial role in his world’s history, just as Jesus did in hers. But in his world, everybody was a vampire—so that meant... The notion of a vampire Jesus chilled her blood. Later, if she got the opportunity, she would have to question Ank on what kind of role Christianity played in vampire society. Was there a Commandment governing whose blood was taboo to drink?)

Finally mustering a staunch poise, she burst back into the boudoir with a semblance of aplomb.

Sal was telling Ank: “Impressive view.”

“I’ll check it out after the sun sets,” his comrade replied. Then he turned to address Katy. “I’ve been thinking about your problem—and I think I might have a solution.”

Katy’s eyes lit with expectation.

Ank waved her over to sit next to him on the sofa. “Your lack of knowledge about this place is guaranteed to spoil your masquerade. By the same token, you can’t ask around to find out what you need to know. But—we *can*.”

“You?” she chirped, mystified.

“We’re your special guests, remember? You publicly gave us free rein around here. We can circulate and ask all the questions we want. As strangers, our curiosity won’t raise any suspicions.”

Sal prowled the boudoir, so far offering no comment.

“What do you think?” Katy asked him.

With a shrug, Sal reminded her, “Ank’s the thinker. I’m just the muscle.”



For several days, Her Prodigal Majesty remained in seclusion: recuperating from her sabbatical, letting the royal seamstress remeasure her for new clothes (for Her Majesty had returned from the wilderness “changed”), contemplating her future in Troy.

For that was the name given Her Majesty’s capital city, that grand metropolis beside Anchor Lake.

This (and more) the strangers learned through casual inquiries among its citizens.

Clearly belonging to some otherworldly bloodline, Sal and Ank raised no one's suspicions with their inquiries (except Councilor Fenn, but then he already distrusted the two). Many citizens, in fact, believed their unnatural anatomy to be clear evidence of divinity. In the eyes of the people, Sal and Ank were Her Majesty's guardian angels.

Despite the undisguised displeasure of Councilor Fenn, these blessed individuals who had accompanied Her Majesty's out of the wilds were allowed unrestricted access to every niche and basement in Troy. While Sal picked the lock to slip from Her Majesty's boudoir and openly mingle with the populace, Ank relied on more mysterious means to circulate throughout the city, each of them gathering invaluable information in their own ways, assembling a history and worldview for the pretender to the throne.

The people called themselves Oops. Apparently, no giant asteroid had collided with their world in its dim past, so no mass extinction had rid the plains of the thunder lizards. Mammalian life-forms had evolved with extreme caution in the omnipresent shadows of these savage beasts. Caution had developed into cunning, which had led to intelligence, tool-making, and eventually global supremacy for the Oops.

Spared the long-term repercussions of any cosmic collision, tectonic drift had not been as pronounced here as on other Earths, resulting in only two continents poking through a worldwide ocean. Gels (the smaller landmass) was little more than an island formed by ancient volcanic activity. Jadala, the larger, occupied almost a third of the planetary surface (at least, that was what old maps depicted; there was no way to gauge the accuracy of these antediluvian cartographers). Located on the eastern coastline of Jadala, Troy was the capital city of a vast empire stretching from pole to pole, all ruled by the Royal Family of Bokoo.

Katrina Bokoo was the current sovereign. Careful questioning of the palatial staff produced an intimate picture of the social and political artifices of Queen Katrina's court.

Of all the schemers, Councilor Nehru Fenn was clearly the most ambitious, and hence dangerous. His family had long coveted the throne, but no Fenn suitors were ever chosen as royal concubines—the only way an outsider might infiltrate the Bokoo clan. While plebian citizens were allowed to marry and freely breed, royalty was forbidden to enter into permanent relationships and their offspring were often slain if the infants failed to meet genetic standards.

Ank discovered that Queen Katrina's "vacation" had been masterminded by Councilor Fenn. Despite the hazards of such an excursion, Her Majesty had been encouraged to journey out into the wilderness with only a token retinue of guards. That had been nearly half-a-year ago. Since then, there'd been no word of her—until her recent reappearance. The people of Troy celebrated her safe return. Apparently, Queen Katrina was beloved by her subjects. This devotion was sincere,

not prompted out of fear, for Katrina had ruled with compassionate wisdom, treating even her lowliest civilian with respect. While her palace enjoyed the fruits of expensive pulchritude, she made sure that many of these extravagances were shared by all her subjects, regardless of their financial standing. (Neither Ank nor Sal could fathom Troy's financial set-up, for it seemed based on achievement rather than on currency.)

Clearly, the nefarious Councilor Fenn had sent Queen Katrina beyond the safety of the city in the hopes that a terrible fate would befall her. He might even have orchestrated an "accident" for her once the Queen was out in the wilds—but why bother? The prairie was full of any number of hungry reptilian predators that would do the job for free...and probably had already done so, considering the real Queen's enduring absence.

Without an heir, the throne would go to the nimblest schemer—but any successor would still have to belong to the Bokoo lineage. How did Fenn intend to circumvent that limitation?

Furthermore, Katy was baffled: "After going to all the effort to remove Katrina from her rightful throne, why did Councilor Fenn bring me back to Troy in the guise of the missing Queen? What role does he expect me to play in this diabolical conspiracy of his?"

"For that matter," Ank remarked, "how did Fenn know you were out there for him to take advantage of?"

"Good point," grunted Sal. "I hadn't thought of that."

"Maybe it's time we learned some of the facts behind our girl's false reign," muttered Ank.

Sal was curious. "And how do you plan to go about that?"

"Leave that to me." With a sinister grin, Ank ventured out onto Her Majesty's balcony. By the time Katy and Sal had followed him out there, the wiry blonde was already disappearing around the curvature of the palatial bulwark. His talons left gouged niches in the crystalline surface. Ever since exchanging the streets of Manhattan for this prehistoric Earth, Ank wore his hair the old way: tied in numerous stumpy tufts. As a silhouette against the nocturnal skyscape, it made him look as if a giant spider perched atop his head. Soon, night swallowed the vampire.

The Queen and her bodyguard remained on the balcony, watching the towers of Troy glitter under a canopy of foreign constellations. For all its alien implications, the view was quite spectacular. While the Oops had never mastered working with metals, their expertise with crystals was astounding. She wasn't sure how they managed to mold these translucent silicate components to their will, but the results were quite attractive—and durable too, to erect such vertiginous spires in the face of boisterous natural forces like wind, storms, or the baking sun.

The evening's chill didn't bother the girl. Her new clothing more than protected her from the cold. Even in the attire of a regal personage, the Oops' puritanical mentality dictated swaddling the female form in folds of

drab fabric. Her new clothes were itchy and heavy and bulky. She no longer had any of the stuff she'd worn when she'd arrived on this prehistoric world. Her ordeals had reduced her skirt and blouse to tatters, and her jacket hadn't fared much better. While her underwear had generally survived the rigors of her exploits, they were gone now, too. She'd asked her attendants to wash them, but neither bra nor panties had been returned to her.

Katy was worried that Ank was going to do something to tip their hand and blow her entire masquerade. When she shared this concern with Sal, the burly man pointed out that Fenn was already complicit in her fraud; the longer the Councilor waited to blow the whistle, the greater his guilt became. These points did little to assuage Katy's nervous demeanor.

Ank returned sooner than they'd expected. He came scuttling across the vertical wall, dragging with him the esteemed Councilor Fenn! The villain was trussed and gagged. Ank threw Fenn onto the balcony, then joined his companions as they stood over the cowering Councilor.

This was an unexpected turn. For Ank to brazenly kidnap Councilor Fenn and bring him here for questioning. But then, Sal'd had a point earlier: Fenn knew Katy was a fake, they risked nothing by confronting him in person.

Adopting her regal persona, Katy addressed him, "There are some matters I'd like you to explain to us."

"But first," added Sal, "to avoid you wasting our time, allow us to share with you what we already know."

"We know *you know* Missy here *ain't* Katrina Bokoo," announced Ank.

"We know *you're* responsible for the real Queen's *ill-fated vacation*," added Sal.

"And *everybody* knows you want to steal the throne for yourself," accused Katy.

Councilor Fenn glared up at them. His bulbous eyes excellently communicated his defiance.

"We wanna know *why!*" asserted Ank.

He moved to menace Fenn up-close. After a moment, he yanked the gag from the Oop's mouth. As Fenn's lips parted in preparation for a yell for help, Ank pinched the lower flap of his single nostril. "Keep your answers brief, succinct—" He viciously twisted the Councilor's nostril. "—and in a soft, polite voice. Remember, you're in the august presence of royalty." He gave the nostril another nasty pinch and added, "Yell and I toss you over the railing before anybody can show up."

The Councilor winced with pain. Tears bled from his oversized eyes. His furious arrogance had waned.

For a moment (more like a fleeting instant), Katy pitied the pathetic Oop. His kind were spindly, sinewy but not brawny. Under normal conditions, Ank outweighed Fenn; in his present vampiric state, he was

downright deadly. Ank could whittle him down, bite by bite, without breaking a sweat. The poor little Councilor...but then he'd brought this on himself, with his schemes and secret agendas. He wanted to use Katy as a pawn in some covert conspiracy to gain himself the throne. He was responsible for sending Queen Katrina away, out to her death on the dinosaur-infested prairie. *Some vacation. Dammit—you deserve worse than a bruised nose, you scrawny bastard.*

"Why *what?*" Fenn finally spoke, his voice raspy as he tried to feign bravado.

"Don't yank us, Fenn," growled Sal. "All this stuff's tied together."

"One explanation fits all," quipped Katy.

"Start with our girl here—wha'cha got in store for her?"

"She's the Queen," Fenn responded. "I live to follow her orders—ow!"

Ank had stretched the nostril until it started to rip. A trail of blood trickled down Fenn's sloping cheek. Leaning close, Ank sniffed the blood and bared his fangs. "I can smell your lies."

"I—I don't know what you want," pleaded Fenn. "Tell me what to say and I'll agree to anything you—"

Sal interrupted him, "If he's gonna play games, then he's no use to us. We might as well throw him from the balcony. None of his schemes'll matter for shite once he's dead."

Ank grunted in agreement. He hoisted Fenn to his splayed feet and bent him back over the balustrade.

"Wait a minute—" Katy gasped. This had escalated too far too fast. Threatening and inflicting minor pain was an acceptable method to apply in interrogating this scumbag—but killing him—that was off-the-chart wrong! She started to move to intervene, but Sal extended an arm, blocking her. He shook his head; she withdrew, unwillingly forced to curtail her sympathy.

"No! Nonono!" the Councilor shrieked.

"Ah ah—" warned Ank. "Noisy liars go over the edge."

"I'm sorry—" Fenn rasped in a desperate whisper. "Don't throw me over—please, I beg of you—I'll give you anything you want—please—"

"We share all of the Queen's luxuries, buddy," chuckled Sal. "What can you offer us that we don't already have?"

Ank gave the Councilor an outward jerk. "Maybe some straight answers might buy our good will."

"Okay—yes—anything—just don't push me over—" sobbed Fenn.

"Why'd you accept Katy as Queen Katrina?" asked Sal.

"But—" Fenn choked out between hysterical gasps. "—that's who she *is.*"

"Maybe he really believes that," grunted Sal.

“More likely he’s a pathological liar,” Ank grated harshly. “Hokay—enough of this shite. Time to just glam him.” He pulled the Councilor’s face up to his and stared fiercely into his bulbous fear-widened eyes.

“Is he doing what I think he is?” Katy whispered to Sal.

The burly man shrugged. “Mesmerizing him? If he can.”

“Why didn’t he do that right off?”

“It’s not normally one of Ank’s better skills. Not like Chris, he’s a master at—”

“Yes,” she cut him off with a brittle tone. “I know all about what a slimy master of deception Chris is.”

“Right...sorry,” Sal muttered, then fell silent.

She returned her attention to Ank and the captive Councilor. Fenn had gone limp under the vampire’s strenuous gaze.

Speaking in a harsh whisper, Ank finally began his interrogation. “Why’d you accept our girl as Queen Katrina?”

“Furgo instructed me to,” Fenn responded in an emotionless voice.

“Who’s Furgo?” grunted Katy.

“Who’s Furgo?” Ank shot the inquiry at his prisoner.

“High Priest Furgo is the mouth of God,” came the Councilor’s feeble reply.

“What does this Furgo plan to do with her?”

“She will be the Queen Reborn, transcended from mortal Oop to a deity.”

“Why?”

“Queens must adhere to tradition...” Fenn’s voice was growing more and more strained, as if it was a struggle to utter these words. “Deities can...change...the rules...”

“More,” insisted Ank. “I wanna know how that affects the girl?”

“She...she’s a...deity now...can only be...communicated with through...ecumenical channels...” Each snatch of words eked out as if forcing its way through molasses.

“He’s not making sense,” Katy whined. “Make him explain it better.”

“I’m losing him,” snarled Ank. As soon as the vampire voiced this declaration, Fenn slumped loose in his grasp.

“You glamour’d him unconscious,” groaned the girl.

But Ank disagreed. “Dead, not unconscious.”

“What?”

Ank released the Councilor; his body collapsed at their feet.

“You overdid it,” snorted Sal.

“No...” Ank lifted a hand to massage his temple. “Getting anything outta him was near impossible. His mind was all tangled with restrictions.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means somebody else glammed him first,” confessed Ank. “Better than I could. I had to force him to tell us what little he did...and before he could reveal too much, his programming killed him.”

“Another vamp?” gasped Katy.

Sagging against the crystal railing, Ank shrugged. “Dunno...but whoever did it, they’re way more powerful at it than me.”

“So...” Sal sighed. “We didn’t really learn much that way, did we?”

“Just hold on,” remarked Ank. “Gimme a minute to center myself...”

Turning to Katy, Sal shrugged. “It was worth a try, at least.”

“All that babble about deities.” She shook her head. “He wasn’t making any sense.”

“I think I can piece it together,” Ank announced.

“Huh?”

“What he told us kind of makes sense if you factor in some of the stuff we learned sniffing around the palace. Remember how the Oops were calling us ‘blessed’? That wasn’t just because we rescued their queen—it has something to do with our *anatomy*. For some reason, the Oops think we got some direct connection to divinity.”

Sal chuckled, “Haw—a divine vamp!”

“Yeah yeah, laugh hard and get it outta your system. Getting back to biz, though—if we accept that the Oops think human anatomy is a sign of being holy, they’d think our girl here is divine when she finally shows herself...right?”

Katy and Sal nodded mutely. The girl looked puzzled, but understanding was starting to twinkle in Sal’s eye.

Ank continued: “This is where that Furgo guy fits in. Remember—Fenn claimed deities could only be communicated with through official channels. That’d be *him*—Furgo, the mucky-muck High Priest. He’d be the Queen’s public voice!”

“This isn’t about *Fenn* trying to steal the throne,” exclaimed Sal. “The real villain is *Furgo*!”

“I don’t get it,” muttered Katy.

“As your official spokesperson,” Ank elucidated, “Furgo could tell everybody anything he wants.”

“What’s to stop me from calling him a liar?”

“But—nobody’s allowed to listen to you. Their religion won’t let them!”

“That’s silly...”

“Most religions are.”

“Messing with religion’s a dangerous biz,” remarked Sal. “If we oppose Furgo’s scheme, he’ll just accuse us of being heretics. He’s got more credibility with the populace than we do.”

“We’re overlooking a possible crucial factor in all this.” Ank cocked his head and met Katy’s eyes. “What do *you* wanna do?”

“About what?”

“Do you wanna be Queen?”

“What?!” His question shocked her.

“You’ve been enjoying living the high life, girl. Maybe you’d rather settle in and let Furgo do the ruling. After all, you don’t know shite about this society.”

“Leave her alone, Ank!” Sal squared his shoulders and snarled, “If she did that, she’d be living a lie!”

“She’s already living a lie. Look, all I’m trying to do is ascertain whether she wants to be a queen or not. Because if it’s what she wants, that kind of changes what we’re gonna do.”

“I definitely do *not* want to be Queen!” insisted Katy. “Right now, okay—cuz it got us out of the wilderness. But—long-term? No damned way!”

“Hokay,” Ank grunted. “Everybody unruffle your feathers. Now that we’re all agreed on what we don’t want—let’s figure out how we can make it not happen.”

“Hokay.”

Throwing the Councilor’s corpse over his shoulder, Ank climbed onto the balustrade.

“Where’re you going?”

“Gonna put Fenn back in his bed, so it looks like he died in his sleep.” With that, Ank scuttled away across the glassy wall.

After a moment, Katy muttered, “He’s going to drain the body, isn’t he?”

Turning away, Sal sighed, “Least he has the decency not to do it here.”



“What do *you* think we should do, Sal?”

They were catching a late-night snack while awaiting Ank’s return. The burly man turned to look at Katy; he munched and swallowed his food before he answered: “Our smartest move would be to get the hell outta here.” He paused a moment to cut a fresh slice of meat, but continued before taking a bite of it. “Definitely before this Furgo guy starts telling everybody you’re a deity. Once you give people a god, they don’t wanna give it up.”

“But—where can we go?” whined Katy. “Anyway, don’t we want to stick around and see if we can get the Oops to rebuild the WayBack device?”

“Takes a lot more than messing around with steam to achieve trans-dimensional technology, Missy.”

“Then...” She hung her head with vivid dejection. “We really are stranded here...”

“Probably.”

Katy no longer mourned that she’d never again see Christopher Robin. He’d turned out to be a lying scumbag. Now, however, Katy

grieved that she couldn't go home. Her life there might've been crappy, but suddenly she missed all those annoyances. She'd never again have to worry about losing her dreary job...or the constantly malfunctioning heat in her apartment on cold nights...or finding a bug in her Chinese food...or dodging homicidal taxi-drivers on streets filled with pickpockets and vestigial rapists. The only unpleasantry she'd retained from that lost world had been her anguish over losing Andrew—not the healthiest memento.

Sal's laugh distracted her from this maudlin train of thought.

"Unless," he cackled, "we run into some secret group of local scientists who are decades ahead of the rest of Oopkind."

Lifting her head, Katy gave him a blank stare. Was that supposed to be some kind of joke? As usual, Sal's sense of humor completely confounded her.

"That sort of thing happens all of the time in comic books and movies," he feebly tried to explain his witticism.

She was going to question how Sal knew what went on in popular entertainment (he was supposed to hail from a different world than hers—did that mean they had comic books and movies in his world?), when the oversized door to Her Majesty's boudoir flew open. A squad of soldiers swarmed into the room.

Katy gave a little squeak of surprise, but Sal remained composed. Munching his food, he watched the Oops take up positions that surrounded the two humans. They all held crossbows, cocked and aimed.

These troops wore yellow jumpsuits, just like Mr Top-Hat's associate during Katy's cliffside encounter with them. (That meant that Mr Yellow Jumpsuit had probably been a Church representative.) The cut of the jumpsuits was the same: fishnet material with their privates completely exposed. With these warriors, though, there was a difference. While these apes' members hung huge, none of them had any scrotums. Eunuchs! Yes, there was historic precedence for using eunuchs to guard ecumenical concerns—but that applicable history belonged in her world, not this one. (As Sal had once pointed out to her: some things were universal.)

Once the soldiers had surrounded Katy and Sal, a figure crossed the threshold to confront the humans. His attire was the same yellow, but with a thicker weave, so that the fishnet pattern covered more of his hairy skin. He wore what Katy could only call a "silly" hat. His features were Oopish and fundamentally alien to Katy, yet some aspects were unmistakable: the suspicious cast of this newcomer's bulging eyes; the fierce scowl of his wide lips. His stride expressed great arrogance. His bearing conveyed absolute authority.

Before he announced himself, Katy guessed his identity.

"I am High Priest Furgo!" he proclaimed. "And I know what you have done!"

“Is that any way to address your goddess Queen?” Sal barked right back.

“Do not waste my time with bravado!” snapped Furgo. Heavy lids closed on his bulbous eyes until only narrow slits showed of the corneas and pupils. “I know everyone’s secrets!”

“What secrets might they be now?” Sal replied with an even tone, still firm with confidence. “That you wanna pass off Missy as your own personal puppet deity Queen? Or that she ain’t Queen Katrina in the first place? Maybe you don’t wanna discuss these things in front of witnesses, huh?”

“Sooo...” Furgo faltered momentarily. “You squeezed some secrets out of Councilor Fenn before you killed him. Interesting...” He stroked his chin like some Oriental villain in an old movie (another universal trait?).

He showed no reticence about talking openly in the presence of his ecumenical police. Did he trust their loyalty that much? But no— Until now, she hadn’t noticed, but each of these yellow-clad soldiers had no ears. Not only had their lobes been removed, but their auditory canals were sealed over. Neither sexual urges nor the truth would interfere with them following orders.

“Neither of you are sensitives,” Furgo was still speaking. “How did you manage to break Fenn’s mental blocks?”

“That’s for us to know and you to find out.”

“Easily done,” grunted the High Priest. He stared at them with his bulbous eyes. “There—all the answers I want—taken directly from your minds.” He lifted his head, cocked at an angle to regard the humans. “So—you are not of this world. I have encountered your kind before.”

Sal’s composure fled, replaced by a cautious scowl. “What the—“ He half-rose from the couch, only to settle back down when the eunuch soldiers all pointed their crossbows at him. “You’re a telepath!”

“You know the term? But yes, you would—for your other associate is one himself, albeit (I see in your thoughts) by his own account, not as talented a telepath as myself.” Furgo peered about the chamber. “Where is he? Has he returned to your other world?—to summon reinforcements?”

“We won’t tell you!” shouted Katy.

Furgo nodded. “But—you already have.” He turned to the soldier nearest the door and made a series of speedy hand gestures. This was how the High Priest communicated with his deaf thugs—some form of sign language! The soldier immediately departed. Turning back to the humans, Furgo announced, “Another group of warriors will catch him in Fenn’s chambers.”

“What—how—“ Katy fumed. “You’ll never catch him!”

“I see Her Majesty has fire,” Furgo muttered. “That will not do. She needs to be more docile.”

At that, Sal laughed. “If there’s one thing Missy ain’t, it’s docile.”

“Yes...” Furgo bent forward slightly, peering intently at the girl, probing her. “I can tell she will not cooperate of her own free will.” He stood erect. “I will simply have to destroy her mind and replace it with a more accommodating model.”

“That’s no way to treat your goddess,” quipped Sal. But as he spoke, the burly man pushed Katy to the floor. At the same time he unsheathed his machete and leapt over the coffee table laden with tonight’s feast to assault the eunuch soldiers. His blade cut a wide swath in their ranks. As the others fired their crossbows, Sal dropped to the floor and escaped every arrow. He quickly rolled toward Furgo, but the High Priest was more nimble; forewarned by his psychic ability, he’d danced back through the door an instant before Sal had launched his attack. Several soldiers rallied to blockade the doorway.

Abandoning any hope of throttling Furgo, Sal jumped to grab Katy and drag her toward the balcony. Wielding his machete one last time to ward off the surviving Church police, Sal left its blade embedded in an Oopish skull. Satin curtains masked the balcony. As Sal dashed through them with Katy cradled to his wide chest, he snatched up two things that were hidden by the heavy drapes. Through the curtains he went, up and over the railing, leaping from the balcony like his life depended on it—which it did. A throng of bloodcrazed eunuchs crowded the balcony in pursuit. Their weight was more than the structure had been built to support. With a crunch, the balcony came apart and fell from the wall. Many of the soldiers fell with it, more followed as they stormed through the curtained bay doorway. They all pitched to their doom...but not Sal.

One of the two things he’d grabbed was a rope attached to the balcony’s railing. Looping his arm through the prepared handhold, he fell—not just fell, but swung from the balcony as it crumbled. The line was measured to reach the turret of a nearby tower. Once in its proximity, Sal released the rope and landed atop the spire. Holding Katy tightly in place, he scampered around to the far side of the spire. Dropping from the turret, Sal disappeared across the rooftops.

The second thing he’d grabbed was a satchel of Oop manufacture. It contained the few devices the humans had retained since arriving in this world, along with some additions the burly man had borrowed from Her Majesty’s toiletries.



After ten minutes, Sal stopped to catch his breath. Traversing the complex cityscape had exhausted even him. He picked a spot that offered a niche hidden from any windows. There, he dumped Katy and adopted a wary crouch, scanning for any signs of danger.

Numerous taller towers surrounded their hiding place, all of them possessed of some inner luminescent quality, in which windows showed

as brighter glowing portals. Pastel colors seemed to run like oil in water across these crystalline surfaces. Seen up close, the flumes that connected many of these spires were revealed as tubeway conduits for phosphorescent fluids, as if the buildings were transfusing blood or feeding each other liquid proteins. Below and around the fleeing humans' hiding spot spread a glittering landscape of turrets and domes and tetrahedrons, as if they crouched in some enormous ice cavern. The structures were strangely devoid of any bird-nests or even traces of avian life-forms, possibly because everything lay sealed beneath a gigantic translucent dome. So massive was the dome that it hosted its own series of air currents whisking about within the enclosure. Outside the dome, clouds pressed up against its barrier surface, oozing slowly across its curved apex.

None of the Church police had been able to follow them from Her Majesty's boudoir. If Furgo had issued any alert, so far no troops had detected Sal's escape route.

"You saved my life," Katy whispered.

Sal shrugged. "That bastard forced our hand. Now we're on the run—and separated."

"Ank!" she gasped. "Furgo dispatched soldiers to ambush him in Fenn's chambers!"

Sal gave a low chuckle. "No amount of Oops're gonna ambush Ank. He'll hear them coming—and if he doesn't, he'll tear them to pieces when they pounce on him. Ank's not my worry right now. You are."

"You too," she protested.

"Furgo doesn't care about me. You're the one he needs if he's going to pull off his deity scam."

"You can fight them off..."

"Ha! With what? I lost my machete back there. Their arrows'll reach a lot further than my fists."

"But—you're smarter than they are..."

"Smarts don't mean shite against Furgo's telepathy. He can reach out his mind and locate us wherever we are. We need to get out of Troy."

"How will Ank find us if we leave the city?"

Sal gave a weary smile. "He'll find a way."



Sal restricted his rest to ten minutes, after which he was eager to keep moving. Initially, Katy accompanied him on her own, but the topography grew more complex (i.e.: hazardous), forcing the girl to let Sal carry her down steep inclines and across canyons between structures.

As they neared the dome's inner wall, Sal paused to survey the "terrain." Many of the buildings here merged with the dome, coexisting

within and outside of its barrier. Sal pointed out a cube set against the dome's wall unattached to any other tower.

"An exit," he told her. "For use by crews that need access to the city's roofs."

She nodded.

"It's bound to be guarded," he announced.

"So we find another exit."

"Missy, by now they're *all* going to be guarded. Furgo's no fool. He needs to keep us contained within Troy if he expects to reclaim you."

"Then...what're we going to do...?"

With a grim smile, Sal explained, "You're going to stay here, while I go clear the way for us." With that he was off, scampering across a roof and disappearing beyond its edge.

Wait, she wanted to call after him, *what do I do if you don't come back?* But in her heart, she knew the answer to that. If Sal failed to return, she'd better hope Ank found her...otherwise she was on her own. And she wouldn't last long that way.

She told herself not to worry. Sal was a capable fighter. He outweighed the smaller Oop soldiers, was much stronger than them. She felt confident that he could overcome any opposition.

She wished he didn't have to kill whatever Oops guarded this exit. It wasn't fair. They were only following orders. They had no idea how corrupt Furgo was. They were just innocent dupes. But...they had been indoctrinated into violent zealots; there was no way to convince them otherwise—they couldn't even hear any arguments to that end, for the Church had sealed their ears against any blasphemous facts. So—in the end—Sal would be forced to fight them. To prevent them from killing him, he might have to use lethal force. While abhorrent to a civilized person, such violence had become part of her life. It was revolting but necessary—at least if Katy wanted to survive the ordeals she found herself facing.

She took small solace, though, in the fact that she wasn't the one doing any of the killing.

Her thoughts had drawn her attention inwards, so that at first she didn't notice Sal signaling her from the liberated exit. Finally, however, he shouted and broke her withdrawal. She waved to convey that she'd heard him. He waved back, indicating it was safe for her to approach the exit.

Crawling across the rooftop, she peered over its edge, but saw no available route to go farther. Sal had gone this way, but his brawn had enabled him to leap to a nearby tower. She was not that athletic—or self-confident (or, as her paranoia put it, "suicidal"). Overcome by her fear of heights, she cringed there at the crystal precipice.

Eventually, Sal appeared, scrambling through the forest of spires. From a nearby tower, he urged her on.

"I can't," she moaned. Fear squeezed her eyes shut.

She could hear his exasperated sigh across the (to her) impassable distance. A moment later he was next to her, grumbling. He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. She opened her eyes for an instant—found herself looking down into a crystal chasm, deep and wide, as Sal crossed the gap with a mighty leap—and immediately reshut them in escalated panic. She fought to block out the external world, to submerge her consciousness in the safe oblivion inside her head. Even then, it was difficult to ignore each jerk and sway as Sal jumped from tower to tower and scuttled around each slippery spire.

When he had reached the exit structure, he needed to slap Katy several times to get her to cast off this fugue and return to reality.

“You’re like a child,” he grouched.

If growing up means jumping from building to building like some lunatic frog, she fretted, then I hope I stay young forever!

From a distance, the exit aerie had looked like a simple cube attached to the dome’s wall, unconnected to any neighboring buildings. Up close, she could see that the structure’s surface was actually corrugated—with the crest of each ridge honed to be as sharp as a razor. From the main balcony, she could see that a few open stairways were attached to the dome, following its curvature and connecting the exit with nearby buildings. She noticed that some of those stairways ran along the inside of the translucent wall, some along its outer surface.

The inside of the exit aerie was a simple lobby. It led to doorways that opened upon the outdoors. As she followed him through this lobby, Katy noticed four Oop bodies (Church soldiers from their yellow fishnet jumpsuits) crumpled on the floor. When she tore her gaze away from them, she found Sal watching her.

“Not dead,” he told her. “Just unconscious. Hokay?”

She gave him a mute but grateful nod.

“Should be easy from here on,” he commented. But he was wrong.

At the actual exit from the dome, Katy’s fear of heights halted her. From this vantage, the dome swept down a long way before it met the stone bulwarks that served as Troy’s outermost defensive perimeter. The staircases descended this steep camber, clinging to the glittering dome—and exposed to the open air. Brisk winds lashed at her where she stood.

There was no way Katy could force herself to descend those steps. There wasn’t even a railing to generate any false illusion of safety. Her fear froze her in the exit doorway; she couldn’t even muster the coordination to shut her eyes or stagger back from this terrifying spectacle. All she could do was moan wordlessly.

“Again?” snarled Sal.

With his usual sigh, he hoisted the frightened girl over his shoulder and carried her down the stairs. His pace was unhampered by hesitation or apprehension. Despite his bulk and baggage, Sal had no trouble resisting the blustery winds and maintaining his balance.

Although her eyes were locked open, Katy disconnected from her vision, her hearing, all of her sensory impressions, and retreated into herself. She entirely missed the descent.

And what came next.



Later, Sal would fill in the details of the final stage of their escape from Troy.

How he'd carried her catatonic body through a maze of stone bunkers and giant crossbow emplacements, all the while dodging Oops manning those weapons stations. Apparently Furgo's alert had not reached these outer fortifications, for these guards wore red jumpsuits, not the yellow fishnets of the Church police. They were alert for threats from beyond the city, not escapees from within.

How he'd shimmied down a weapons installation strut with her draped across his shoulders like a deer at the end of a hunt. (He didn't tell her about the part where he'd almost dropped her, but that was for the best.)

How he'd spotted and managed to sneak aboard a steam train departing the city.

How he'd wrestled a mighty driver for control of the train. According to Sal's account, this Oop individual had been a brute, packing nearly as much mass as him—and most of it had been muscle. Their battle had not been an easy victory for the burly human. "My first worthy adversary since getting stranded in this prehistoric world," he remarked with a touch of regret.

"Good thing you beat him," she replied.

"I can't honestly claim that I beat him, Missy. In the end, I scored a lucky kick that sent him flying from the control station mounted on the engine."

He'd roused her aboard one of the carriages towed by the train. This one was enclosed by walls like the car they'd ridden to Troy. Another carriage was attached to the rear; it was a refrigerated vessel, he told her, and contained a good amount of frozen meat.

"This train must be headed for one of the city's outposts, to restock its larder," he guessed.

"We not only escaped Troy," she cheered. "We have food to sustain us!"

He gave a wry smile. "Yeah...now, if we only had some place safe to go..."

Her enthusiasm waned.

"Sooner or later, the driver I ejected will make his way back to Troy," Sal ruminated aloud. "He'll report that his train was hijacked...and it won't

take long for Furgo to deduce that it was us, that we slipped through his guards.”

“He’ll send troops after us.”

Sal nodded. “And by that time, we’d better be long gone.”

“Gone how?”

“Well, we have a steam train. It’ll take us wherever the tracks go. Our primary concern is: go where? We need to figure out how to navigate these tracks so we skirt any of Troy’s outposts.”

“A map?”

Sal pursed his wide lips. “Good idea. You look here. I’ll search the engine control station.”

He bounced to his feet and headed for the carriage.

Peering after the man, Katy saw him climbed past the engine’s chugging crystal pistons. He’d left the train running while he tended to his unconscious charge. Fields of brittle yellow grass flew past as the train rumbled along. A cloud of gray steam billowed from the engine’s smokestack and churned overhead. Far to the east, the sun hung low on the morning horizon.

She proceeded to inspect the carriage. A row of wooden lockers lined each lateral side of the car. They contained an assortment of Oop clothing, stone tools to fix the motor should it malfunction, a collection of small rectangles decorated with fingertip-sized depressions. She couldn’t get the blocks to do anything, so ignored them and continued her search. Another locker offered an array of glass bottles filled with clear liquid. Thirst drove her to unscrew one’s cap, but she recoiled from the released stink. Whatever the liquid was, it wasn’t water. In another locker she found two pairs of boots. Another locker was filled with boxes that seemed to be made of some local approximation of cardboard, but they were all empty. No maps or any form of printed matter. Could the Oop culture be paperless? She hoped Sal fared better in his search.

Meanwhile, Katy was already sweating in her frumpy Queen outfit. It would get worse as the day progressed from dawn to noon. She desperately needed attire more suited to her current environment. So she rooted through the selection of Oop garments in the first locker. Everything was fitted to Oop physiology, though: far too small to accommodate even her lithe figure. A pair of oversized (for an Oop) boxers probably belonged to the brute driver Sal had mentioned. These served to buffer her privates from her scratchy robe. She found a pair of pantaloons that were probably baggy on an Oop, but were far too short for her. Tearing off the legs, she ripped out the crotch. It took a bit of squirming to get the remains past her shoulders, but once she did it became a tight little halter top. At least now she could shed her regal robe while maintaining some sense of modest decorum. Remembering how cold the nights were here, she decided against discarding the robe; it

would make a warm blanket. Those boots turned out to be way too big for human feet.

Feeling better now that she had cast off her royal trappings, Katy went to the carriage's open front. Fiddling with the control levers, Sal did not hear her call over the steam motor's thunderous hiss. She was forced to climb ahead to get his attention. It wasn't all that perilous. An abundance of rungs and ledges were positioned so that a person could easily move between the carriage and the control station mounted on the side of the large crystal engine.

The control station (itself little more than a platform with no rails) was sturdily attached to the fuselage, but the engine's monstrous shudder turned it into a wild bronco ride. Katy chose to cling to the rungs protruding from the hull. She marveled at how Sal maintained his balance on the relentlessly trembling platform.

"No maps!" she yelled to him.

Glancing at her over his shoulder, he arched an eyebrow. Assuming he hadn't heard him over the roaring steam engine, Katy converted her statement into body language and sharply shook her head. He gave a curt nod, signaling that he understood.

Riding the steam train in this fashion gave Katy an unique perspective on the passing scenery. The view from the mouth of the carriage had been confined to a partial forward vantage. Next to the control platform availed her the entire scenic panorama.

Unsurprisingly, most of the countryside consisted of prairie. This grassy terrain persisted into the distance on both sides. To the right, however, remote foothills guarded a hazy mountain range; the morning sun transformed their crags into colorful pinnacles, not unlike a Maxfield Parrish painting. To the left, the prairie seemed to stretch out forever, but she knew that was just a visual trick. Far beyond her view lurked the continental coastline and a massive ocean.

It seemed to Katy that the optimum direction for their flight was west. Those mountains must hold a plethora of caves and crevasses that would make perfect hiding places.

Dotting the prairie (in all directions) were shapes that had to be dinosaurs. The grasslands were their domain. She dimly recalled the variety of dinosaurs who had once ruled her world. Presumably this world's dinos were of similar ilk. There were the predators, which she'd encountered back at the cliffside waterhole. But they had been small creatures, man-sized; but those *Jurassic World* movies had featured larger carnivores too, great monsters whose jaws could swallow a car whole. So far, she had not met any of those—and she prayed she never would. She felt far more comfortable around the herbivores. The ones she'd seen at the waterhole had been large and fearsome looking, but pussycats at heart. Hopefully, most of the humps she saw grazing out in the prairie were like them. The movies had shown other, even bigger

behemoths, but they tended to stick to wetlands; if those beasts were here, they lay to the east, near the shore. Another valid reason that west was the way to go.

There was no way for her to communicate any of these considerations to Sal. The engine's din drowned out any attempts at conversation. She sought to convey with gestures that he should shut off the engine, but when he pulled the brake it was for another reason.

He pointed ahead.

Hanging out at arm's-length from the side of the train, Katy saw what had caught his attention and spurred him to stop the locomotive. About a mile ahead, the track forked into two paths. One led straight ahead, the other veered off to the left, seaward.

Pulling the brake caused the train to lurch as clamps scraped on the ties to slow down the vessel while the engine still strained to drive the wheels. Sal fumbled with the available levers, yanking this one, then another, searching for the correct maneuver that would stop the steam engine...or at least reduce its speed by lowering the pressure behind the chugging pistons. Finally he hit on the proper combination that made the engine's roar dwindle into a dull hiss.

Not fifty yards from the junction in the tracks, the train ground to a halt.

Sal jumped from the control platform and started loping forward along the tracks.

"Wait," Katy called after him. "What're you doing?"

"Gonna check the switch gears," he yelled back to her. "See which way they're set."

A graveled belt lined the trail of train tracks. Hopping down, Katy chased after Sal. She caught up with him as he was crouching down to examine the toggles that would guide whatever traveled along the ties one way or the other. A tall level stuck up from the gearbox that powered the toggles. Sal grabbed the lever and yanked it back and forth, all the while studying the toggles as they flipped left then right, then left again. With a satisfied grunt, he manipulated the lever to the left and released it, leaving the toggle angled toward the east.

"Well?" inquired Katy.

He lifted an arm and pointed east. "We're going *that way*."

She disagreed and told him so. Then she tried to explain why: "The only thing in that direction is the coast. Without a boat, we won't get far. If they chase us—"

"Oh, you can be sure Furgo will chase you down, Missy."

"—then they'll be able to herd us into the ocean."

Sal frowned. He gestured ahead where the tracks continued in a straight line. "But the track was set to take us that way...to deliver a shipment of meat to an outpost. We don't want to end up there. The troops stationed there will capture us and return us to Troy."

He had a point. The dilemma stymied the girl.

“By the way,” Sal finally noticed, “nice costume change. That Queen dress *really* wasn’t you.”

She gazed off at the distant mountains. “We should go west.”

“You suggesting we hoof it?”

She shrugged. “Not really...but...I dunno what to say...”

Unsympathetic to their quandary, fate enriched their plight with some immediate danger.

They felt it coming before they saw it, for its mighty footfalls made the ground tremble. Katy and Sal grunted, stumbled, and gaped—all at once—as they spotted the onrushing shape. Neither of them hesitated a second; they were instantly racing for the steam engine. It was the only cover available.

Tearing through the high grass, an angry dinosaur was headed their way. This was the type Katy had earlier prayed she’d never meet—the big bad wolf of lizard kings. It was as big as a house! Its legs were like tree trunks corded with rippling sinews. It held its stout tail aloft to balance its madcap rush. Its puny arms flailed with frantic impotency; they were too feeble to do much damage. But this deficiency was compensated—*overcompensated*—by the scale of its jaws and the nastiness of its teeth. It held its head low as it came, plowing its way through the tall grass. Its mouth yawned wide to reveal a tangle of fangs as big as her forearm. In the movies, this monster had been brown; here, it was a mottled orange and black. Its bellow, so close, so *loud*, almost made Katy pee herself.

She had never run so fast in her life.

Naturally, Sal reached the train first. He clambered onto the control platform, grasping wildly at the levers. A lucky grab took the motor out of idle and restarted the steam engine.

Understandably, Katy headed for the more stable carriage. It had walls, unlike the engine’s crystal beaker whose fuselage offered insufficient protection from the monster. She hadn’t really thought this out in much detail, though. The circumstances hadn’t availed her the chance to do more than turn and run: a blind flight response. But once she scrambled aboard the carriage, she realized her mistake. The first carriage had no roof, and the beast was big enough to tower over the car. It could easily bend down to bite her in half. Those jaws were so huge—they could swallow her whole!

The refrigeration car, she thought. *It’s enclosed!* Katy started to sprint for the rear of the carriage. If she could make it back there, she could hide among the flanks of frozen meat. Her panic blinded her to the fatal flaw in this plan, but she never got the chance to realize that when fleeing a carnivore, hiding among raw meat was a very stupid move.

At this point, the engine had mustered enough steam to start the train moving along the tracks, slowly, but gradually building velocity.

Then something massive struck the train, rocking it so drastically that several of its right-side wheels lifted from the tracks on the ground. The carriage teetered under Katy's running feet—she went tumbling. Landing on her ass, she caught a glimpse of the monster's assault on the steam engine.

Ignoring her, the beast had gone after Sal where he clung to the exposed control platform. Recovering from smashing into the train, the carnivore hungrily snapped at Sal with its gigantic jaws. He scrambled aside, the teeth gnashed barely inches from his trailing foot. Up and over the crystal beaker Sal climbed. Furious at this escape, the dinosaur reared back and kicked the engine with a colossal foot. When the engine failed to stop its hissing, the beast slammed its head against the vehicle's flank, its teeth gouging the crystalline surface.

Again and again, the entire train shuddered on the tracks as it inched forward.

Katy's relative safety aboard the carriage became problematic. With each violent lurch, lockers fell open, spilling their contents upon the girl's panic-stricken form. Boxes and boots and tools pelted her where she sprawled. With each impact she groaned anew.

Somehow, one of her moans penetrated the engine's mounting cacophony and distracted the dinosaur from its futile battery. It swung its great blunt head to pin one of its beady eyes on Katy. Looming tall, it released a monstrous roar.

The train was moving, but far too slow to provide a timely escape from the menacing beast. As the vehicle crawled forward, its movement drew the stationary dinosaur closer to Katy's precarious sanctuary. She recoiled, desperately scuttling back through the train-workers' littered gear. The train's lazy progress brought the beast's fierce head into view over the carriage's side wall. It stretched its mouth wide to issue another roar, and the air it expelled bathed Katy with the stench of rotten meat. With an impotent shriek of terror, she threw an Oop boot at it; the footwear bounced off its imminent nose like a nerf ball.

She shut her eyes on the fetid maw as it descended toward her. It would be awful enough to feel those fangs grind her to a pulp—she had no desire to see the gruesome evisceration.

But no jaws closed on Katy Claye. Instead, a bedlam of a different sort ensued. A fresh series of roars rang out as the beast howled with indignity and pain. The train rocked as if shaken by a frantic giant. A thunderous *crunch* invaded the pandemonium. Katy had to know what was going on, so squinted open her eyes—

To witness a tableau of almost surreal drama.

The dinosaur had climbed aboard the carriage, one leg crushing the right-hand side wall. Wooden debris fell away as the train swayed with increased speed. The monster's top half was twisted around to snap at something riding the mighty steam engine—no, *someone!* Perched atop

the crystal structure, Sal battered at the creature's head with a lever he had somehow managed to yank free from the control station. Their combat seemed like a bizarre fencing match: the beast would lunge and try to catch Sal in its closing jaws, then as it retreated to conduct its next surge, the human would bludgeon his adversary with the broken lever, only to squirm aside again to avoid the creature's next wild bite. Thrust and parry and battery and sidestep and thrust—each cycle growing more frenetic as the dinosaur's bestial fury intensified with each subsequent failure. The beast's ponderous tail lifted in the air over the train like some perpendicular horn. The monster's emphatic struggle transmitted a constant teeter to the train's now speeding length. The dinosaur bellowed with rage. Sal yelled with defiance. Behind it all, the steam engine's hiss rose like the disapproval of some gaseous spirit.

Buried in this din, Katy's hysterical screams were trivial expressions.

Time and again, Sal pummeled his reptilian opponent with his bludgeon, with little effect other than infuriating the beast. Its hide was too corrugated, too thick, to be bruised by the simple truncheon.

Unknown to the visiting humans, the lever Sal had broken free to use as a cudgel was made of bone. Lacking metalworking facilities, the Oops had instead mastered the curing of bones to provide themselves with materials of near-metallic strength. (Indeed, the very tracks upon which the train traveled had once been part of a brontosaurus skeleton.) So, Sal effectively sought to bludgeon his adversary with a distant relative's carved-down thighbone cured to exceptional tensile strength. Still, the club was insufficient to daze or harm this massive beast, especially considering the creature's present furor.

Equally frustrated that none of his blows inflicted any discernible damage to the dinosaur, Sal changed his strategy. Abandoning the rungs that enabled him to clamber across the engine's fuselage, he leapt at the creature as it lunged for him. Now straddling the beast's head, Sal stabbed at its eye with his weapon. He drove the lever deep into the monster's eye socket. The beast's response was exorbitant.

Bellowing afresh, the dinosaur waggled its head with such ferocity as to fling Sal from his cranial perch. The beast reared up to howl at the sky, and in doing so unstabilized its equilibrium on the shuddering train. Its enormous legs flailed to regain balance, destroying the carriage's remaining side wall in the process. Its puny arms reached fruitlessly to steady itself. Almost in slow motion, the behemoth toppled back, away from the engine, tumbling from the speeding train. It disappeared from view, lost in the wake of the locomotive.

Panting from her terror, Katy gawked at the dinosaurless engine. Sal hung there, having snagged a strut when he'd been tossed from the wounded beast. He too gasped from his exertions.

Eventually, Sal regained his composure. Before joining Katy aboard the now-flatbed carriage, he administered to the control station, reducing

the engine's intensity. As he approached her, the train's velocity slightly decreased and the motor's mighty voice softened to a low roar. They could talk without shouting now.

"You hokay?" Sal inquired.

Katy managed to nod. Shock stifled her tongue.

"I'm afraid we're headed for the coast," he told her. "The switch was still set to turn the train onto the eastern tracks."

She stared at him without comment.

"There's no turning back now," he continued. "I know the train can run in reverse, the driver did it when we were fetched from the waterhole. But...I don't know how to set the controls to do it."

She continued to stare at him, understanding his words but unable to configure a reply.

"Besides," he grunted ruefully, "if we went back, that Tyrannosaurus Rex'd be waiting for us...angry and wounded and eager for payback."

"So...we're trapped..."

"Not necessarily," Sal countered. "We have a good head-start."

"But—Furgo can trace our escape route by just following the train tracks."

"Perhaps..." He nodded gravely. "But we can be sneakier with the next junction we encounter. We'll divert from the main route, but stop after going through the junction and reset the switcher so that it'll look as if we went the other way."

"Will that fool them?"

He gave a weak shrug. "Hard to tell. That depends on how far Furgo's telepathic range is."

"You mean..." Her eyes, suddenly turbid with fear, darted to and fro. "—he could be reading us right now?"

Sal's mouth grew tense. Clearly, he was unwilling to honestly address her suspicion. That alone worried her. While Sal had supported Chris' overall scam, the burly man had always been straight with her when it came to the predicaments they found themselves facing. That he was reluctant now to show optimism implied that their current freedom was liable to be short-lived.



As the steam train rumbled east, Sal helped Katy root through the carriages. Of the items which had failed to fall overboard during the T.Rex's assault, few were of any use to the escapees. A lone oversized boot. A few crumpled quasi-cardboard boxes. A handful of bone tools whose function confounded them both. A complete Oop jumpsuit had snagged on a torn piece of wood, but it was far too small for either human.

Sal still had the satchel filled with sundries he'd stolen from Her Majesty's chambers. Although he confessed his doubt that they'd ever come in handy, he added the surviving tools to their stash of belongings.

He also broke off the remaining shards of the wooden side walls and stuffed as much of this debris as he could fit into the hobo-sack he fashioned by bundling the Oop worker's jumpsuit. He tied two sleeves together, creating a strap so the bag could be slung over a shoulder. "Stocking up on kindling in case we want to build a fire but can't find dried plant material," he explained when she asked him what he was doing.

Wary lest she lose her regal robe, Katy tied its arms around her waist. Now if some peril befell them, the bulky garment would stay with her. The nights were cold here; she would sorely regret having no blanket.

They paused to watch as the tracks entered the gentle curve that brought them running parallel to the shoreline. The terrain sloped down to an expanse of marshlands before giving way to the open sea farther out.

Several creatures basked in this swamp, among them a brontosaurus herd. In the movies, these dinosaurs had seemed large but tranquil; in real life they were *huge* and intimidating because of it. Granted, these beasts paid the train no more than a cursory glance as it chugged past, but their very scale was enough to worry Katy. She doubted that creatures of that size could run very fast, so it wasn't that she feared one might chase after them. It was their daunting immensity! They could roll over and flatten half a city block. That scared her. For some reason she couldn't shake the notion of her asleep in a log cabin and one of these behemoths coming along and deciding to roll over on the hut and use its ruins as a cushion for a good long nap. Crushed in her sleep—but aware that it was happening.

Why a log cabin? Katy asked herself. Did that mean she subconsciously expected to be stranded here forever? Long enough to build a log cabin and settle into a rustic life in this prehistoric hell. The prospect made her shudder.

Intellectually, she knew there was no way for them to escape this world. Their WayBack device was broken. The best this place had to offer was steam technology, which, according to Sal, was too primitive to build a trans-dimensional machine. They'd come here by accident; nobody knew where they'd landed. Ever seeing home again was an outright impossibility...she knew that.

But that didn't stop her from hoping for the impossible. *It could happen*, she insisted. *Look at all the other impossible things that've happened to me during the last few days... What's one more impossibility in the greater scheme of things? Just a tiny miracle...*

Other species populated the marshlands, but Katy's dread left her focused on the enormous brontos. She missed the beasts that stood on

their hind legs so their duck-like bills could pluck leaves from deformed trees. She never saw the smaller creatures snuffling about in the muck.

Later, she spied pterodactyls drifting on thermal winds far out over the ocean. That was what Sal called them, although again he was quick to point out that this world's evolution might have tweaked the reptilian fliers over the centuries. Although they resembled dinosaurs from the dim past of other worlds, they could harbor drastic differences here.

"Much the same way," he offered an example, "the Oops and humans can probably be traced back to common ancestors."

Lacking any anthropological acumen, Katy took his word for such things. She was more concerned with now than the dim past.

Ever since that fateful evening in that unknown alleyway back on her world, Katy felt as if she had toppled from a high hilltop and had spent the intervening days slipping and sliding down an embankment of crags and scree, bruised and harrowed, but so far still kicking. Each new ordeal was akin to hitting a new rocky ledge that knocked air from her lungs and left her gasping to meet this fresh challenge.

It was fortunate, Katy knew, that she did not fall alone. Without the company (and protection) of Sal, she would surely have perished from one of these perilous encounters—the destruction of her apartment, the rooftop shootout, the velaciraptor attack, Councilor Fenn's devious machinations, High Priest Furgo's diabolical intentions, his Church police, the crystal rooftops of Troy, the T.Rex attack—upon each occasion, the burly bodyguard had been there to rescue her (from evil threats or her own cowardice). Had she fallen alone, death or worse would have claimed her time and again. She owed Sal her life.

Indeed, her future survival depended on his continued supervision.

A nudge from him interrupted her reverie. He pointed ahead of the train.

They were approaching the cliffside waterhole that had been the location of their arrival on this world. A collection of figures loitered beside the small pool of water.

"Trouble," announced Sal as he climbed from the open carriage to take position on the engine's control platform.

"Are they hunters Furgo sent after us?" she gasped. "How did they beat us here?"

"Look closer, Missy. Those aren't Oops—they're human beings." He wrestled with the control levers.

Katy exclaimed, "A rescue party!"

The steam engine's hiss boomed louder.

"I doubt it. If they belonged to the Bat Pack, they wouldn't be out in daylight."

The train's velocity increased.

"Right—because they're all vampires. Then—who—?"

Having noticed the train's approach, the figures bustled about in obvious agitation. They produced guns and began firing at the onrushing glass locomotive.

Sal scuttled around so the engine shielded him from the gunfire.

Likewise, Katy sought cover. The best she could do, though, was flatten herself on the carriage's wooden floor.

As the train barreled past the waterhole, the men stopped shooting and chased after it. Sal abandoned the engine and ran past Katy. He climbed atop the refrigeration car and crawled along its roof.

Chancing a peek around the edge of the carriage, Katy saw Sal hanging from the top of the rear carriage. In their wake, the men chased after the speeding train. Sal wrestled with these invaders as they tried to board the vehicle. Only two of the men succeeded in getting past him. One, armed with a knife, pounced on him. The other scurried along the carriage roofing, headed in Katy's direction; he too carried a knife and an evil glimmer in his hungry eyes.

"Oh shit!" she moaned. She hurriedly searched for something she could use as a weapon. Her fingers groped but found nothing but junk.

Past the advancing assassin, Sal battled his own adversary. Despite his usually superior strength, he was at a disadvantage. The invader had caught him before he'd been able to roll from his belly; now the attacker straddled him, holding him down with a knee gouging into his spine. Sal squirmed and bucked and cursed, but he couldn't free himself. With a gleeful cackle, the attacker stabbed down, but his victim's writhing made him miss. Well, *almost* miss. The knife cut a shallow slice in Sal's shoulder, then the blade slid free and impaled its bloodied tip into the carriage's wooden roof. The invader tugged and tugged, but the knife was firmly stuck. Sal used this distraction to swing his legs to the rear and up, driving his heels into the back of his adversary's head. The blow dazed the attacker enough for Sal to rock himself free. He immediately punched the guy right in the face, following up with repeated blows to his kidneys as he fell back. Another right hook sent the man tumbling out into midair.

Wincing with the pain, Sal grappled the edge of the roofing to prevent himself from falling from the train. He dragged himself back onto the slightly peaked surface and hung there, gasping.

Ahead, the other invader loomed over Katy. He brandished his knife in serpentine coils as it descended toward her cowering figure. His grin was mirthless, sadistic, expectant. His eyes squinted with evil intentions. He made a nonverbal sound, a low growl.

"No no—please—" she moaned.

But suddenly, that growl cut off as if someone had slammed a door in the man's throat. His lower jaw jutted out in consternation, destroying his smirk. The evil gleam left his gaze as his eyes rolled back into his head. He teetered, then fell.

If Katy hadn't scrambled aside, he would've fallen right across her.

Protruding from the back of his head: a knife, thrown hard enough to embed itself to the hilt.

Her terror was too rich to promptly dissipate; it held her there, gawking at the corpse. Whatever had occurred had happened too fast for her to fathom. All she could remember were the *start* then the *finish* of the attack. Seconds ago, that man had been threatening to cut her throat—then suddenly *he* was the dead one!

You asked for a little miracle, Katy reminded herself.

Then Sal stepped into her immediate range of vision...and things started to make sense. He stooped over to pull the knife from the man's head, but it was firmly stuck in there. He had to yank it back and forth and twist it to loosen the blade. Relieved but sickened, she looked away before he got it free.

"Hey!"

She turned back to find him peering worriedly at her.

"You hokay, Missy?"

She nodded. Lately, she was being stricken speechless a lot, only capable of responding with a nod. *He must think I'm an idiot.*

"Th-th-thanks," she finally managed to articulate.

"Well, there's good news," he announced. "And bad news."

There always is, Katy privately fretted.

Sal held aloft a revolver in one hand and two knives in the other. "We've upgraded our arsenal."

Again, she gave one of her pathetic mute nods.

He shoved the knives and the revolver into his waistband, then showed her a wallet, obviously taken from the attacker. "The bad news: he's one of Darcy's thugs."

"They tracked us here?" she blurted with confused excitement.

Someone had managed to track them here! That was wonderful! Except...it wasn't a rescue party—they were Darcy's hoodlums, not Chris'.

"Apparently," he admitted. "Although I can't imagine how. Darcy's brain-trust must have made some startling advances in trans-dimensional technology."

"They aren't here to rescue us," Katy groaned the obvious.

He shook his head. "Capture...more likely kill. After all, they were shooting bullets at us back there, not tranq darts."

Again with the vapid nod—cut it out, girl! Say something constructive—

"They must have their own WayBack, right?"

He shrugged. "Probably..."

"Then all we need to do is steal it from them," she declared, "and we can get ourselves home!"

Sal laughed at her. He laughed so hard he fell back on his butt. Squatting there, he couldn't stop laughing.

Moments later, when he had run out of amusement, he sighed and announced, “Missy, your suggestion is crazy and suicidal.”

“If you have any better ideas,” snapped Katy, “let’s hear them.”
A surly silence ensued.



Half-an-hour later, the engine ran out of fuel; the train could take them no further. It coasted to a stop.

Beyond the cliff lay limitless volumes of water for the taking...but there was no way to descend to the ocean...and no bucket with which to fetch anything back.

They were stranded.

“What the hell,” grunted Sal. “maybe your suggestion is crazy enough to work. They’d never expect us to try anything so audacious as a frontal assault.” He shrugged. “Beats sitting around waiting to be gobbled up by some dinosaur.”

“So—what’s your plan?” she asked.

“What’s *my* plan? Hey, this was your idea. Now you’re dumping it in my lap...”

She flushed. “But—you’re the warrior. You have battle experience and—“

“Hokay, hokay.” He waved her silent.

They sat on the edge of the de-walled carriage, facing the horizon that would soon swallow the setting sun.

After a while, she ventured, “So?”

“Gimme a chance to think, huh?”

Another batch of quiet minutes passed. Katy spent them squirming and fidgeting...until finally she burst out, “How about this—we hide in the tall grass and sneak up on them...”

Blinking away his irritation, Sal gave her a dirty look. “Umm, well, that might work...”

“If we wait until dark to attack, we’ll catch them all sleeping!”

“We’re not even sure they’ll camp out by the waterhole.”

“Sure they will! That’s our entry point, right? If they think we came here intentionally, they might believe we have some attachment to the spot.”

Suddenly Katy was the one concocting a battle strategy. She had no idea where these tactics were coming from, they were just springing into being in her head. But it all sounded plausible to her.

And apparently to Sal too.

“Okay, but it’s the part about us overcoming them that I have issues with,” he told her.

“We have weapons now!” she reminded him.

She hopped down to the graveled apron that ran alongside the tracks.

“Let’s hit the road,” she chirped. “We have a ways to go to reach the waterhole.”



It was a long trek.

Night fell. Wary about getting lost in the dark and walking off the edge of the cliff, they stuck to the rim of the grasslands. Soon, though, an astounding display of stellar grandeur threw down adequate illumination for them to progress with some confidence. Now they could easily follow the edge of the scrub and avoid any stupid accidents. Eventually, it would lead them to the waterhole.

To both their surprise, Katy’s night vision proved to be more efficient than Sal’s. When she spotted the glow given off by the enemy encampment, she nudged him and pointed ahead. They retreated into the high grass for their penultimate approach.

Now that the moment of truth was imminent, the pinnacle of their plan, Katy found herself unable to muster the courage to join the attack. More precisely, she realized, her bloodthirsty nature was in question, not her bravery. The idea of killing anyone was abhorrent to her. She knew she could never creep upon a sleeping man, no matter how villainous he was, and stab him.

This whispered confession came as no surprise to Sal.

“Your recent extrovert behavior was really out of character, Missy. I assumed it was a byproduct of the adrenaline rush from the T.Rex attack. Now that your high’s faded, so has your bloodlust.”

“I can scheme to massacre the enemy squad, but doing the dirtywork’s where I draw the line. I’m sorry...”

“Somehow,” he muttered to himself, “I knew all along this was going to be a one-man assault.”

And it was—only Sal wouldn’t be the one doing the attacking or the slaughtering.



They carefully scrutinized the campsite from the tall grass.

The enemy had erected a tent on the edge of the precipice. They’d set up an electric grill where Sal had built his campfire next to the waterhole. Three men were gathered around it, chattering among themselves. With steam as this world’s sole industrial pollution, the night skies were a breathtaking glory to behold. Up on the hill, a single figure stood silhouetted against the magnificent starscape, in the same spot Sal had used to survey the neighborhood.

Over a span of half-an-hour, Katy and Sal saw two others exit and return to the tent. Pausing at the open flaps, one of the men stared off in the direction of the hidden observers. Katy tensed; had he spotted them? Beside her, Sal shared her concern; his hand drifted to rest on his stolen gun.

Somewhere behind them, a beast released a guttural bellow as it prowled the nocturnal prairie in search of a mating partner—or a meal.

With a shrug, the man turned away and disappeared into the tent. If something had made him suspicious, the creature's yell had assuaged his apprehension.

"I think you should start with the guy on watch," she suggested.

He directed her to study the hill where it sat beside the waterhole. "That was my initial idea, too, but see?—there's no cover. I can't sneak up on him."

"You have one of their guns now. You can shoot him."

"That would alert the rest of them. A crucial part of a sneak attack is not giving away my presence with my first move."

Dammit—he's right.

Her adrenaline buzz had faded, Katy was supposed to be even-tempered now. Where was all this hostility coming from? *I should shut up and let Sal figure out his own strategy. He's the one who'll have to do the—uh—killing...*

"It makes more sense to tackle the three guys first," muttered Sal. "Then I can shoot the guy on the hill."

"And the last two as they come rushing out of the tent to see what all the fuss is."

He gave her a worried look.

She hoped it was dark enough that he couldn't see her redden with embarrassment. All this aggression was a surprise to her. Was it some weird kind of overcompensation for her unwillingness to kill?

She bridled. "Just stating the obvious..."

He shook his head and peered back at the encampment. "I'll have to move efficiently with the trio, cutting them down fast before they can sound an alarm."

When the attack came, though, all Sal got to do was crouch in the tall grass and watch it happen.



It started on the hill.

A second dark shape joined the guard's silhouette. A brief and silent struggle was enacted against the canopy of vivid stars. The guard slumped to the ground, and the shadow moved on. For a moment the triumphant figure seemed to vanish, but then it reappeared (as if coalescing from the night itself) directly behind the trio cooking their

dinner. Talons flashed and the men sprawled in bloody—but silent—disarray. Only the distant braying of some nocturnal creature disturbed the twilight. Eventually, the shadowy figure approached the tent. In keeping with the exorbitant brutality of its assault, the dark figure grabbed the tent and flung the entire thing over the edge of the cliff. One of the inhabitants went with it, their scream ending abruptly as their body bashed itself lifeless against the craggy rock-face during its plummet. The other managed to avoid getting tangled in the tent's flapping tarp; he landed on solid ground—but only briefly. Pouncing, the dark figure remained hunched over his victim long after the man had ceased struggling.

A stunned but mesmerized Katy and Sal watched all this happen...as best they could.

From beginning to end, the assault had lasted less than ninety seconds.

"Told you Ank'd find us," muttered Sal.

With a grunt of surprise seasoned with celebration, Katy started to push her way out of the shoulder-high stalks, but Sal bid her to wait.

"Let him finish his meal," he advised her.



Sal warned her to stay in the grass, but Katy insisted on accompanying him as he climbed the hill to examine the sentry's remains.

Darkness and distance had obscured what they'd seen of the hilltop guard's struggle with Ank, but the condition of the carcass left little to the imagination. The body's left arm hung still-attached but dislocated from its shoulder. Barely a cluster of tendons connected the head and neck. Ignoring the gore, Sal relieved the corpse of its weaponry. He tucked the knives into his boot, but kept the deadman's revolver ready. Katy just stood there and stared, soaking in every ghastly detail.

After all her squeamish excuses, Katy found she actually *needed* to see these men's dead bodies. She'd helped Sal plan to kill them, but someone else had stepped in and done their dirtywork. She knew Ank had acted for the benefit of the group—himself, Katy and Sal—but she couldn't suppress her regret that lives had been taken. She needed to see their bodies—it was the price she imposed upon herself for her complicity with their murders.

Next, Sal descended and disarmed the trio of campsite cadavers. He shoved the additional handguns into his waistband. The knives he collected in a pile to the side. The slaughter of these three had been better visible, lit by the flames dancing in their electric grill. Up close, though, the carnage horrified Katy. This was too much. She turned away, desperately trying to erase what she'd seen from her memory.

But scenes this appalling were never going away.

The base of all three of their skulls had been ripped out, as if by some glancing-but-devastating swipe of a chainsaw. One head was completely detached; it lay nearby, its shock-widened glassy eyes watching Sal as he rifled through all of the corpses' pockets.

Sal appeared at her elbow. "No sign yet of anything that might be their WayBack unit." He glanced toward the cliff and muttered, "Hope it didn't go over the edge with the tent."

Ank was still feeding.

Looking away, Katy found herself staring at the enemy's electric grill. What had the men been cooking? It smelled delicious, and she was very hungry—but her stomach was still in turmoil over the violent mutilations she'd just forced herself to see.

Following her gaze, Sal remarked, "Steaks. They smell good."

"Maybe later," she choked out. *Maybe never!*

With an unconcerned shrug, Sal plucked one of the steaks from the grill and put it on a ceramic plate. "Look, they even brought utensils. These guys came prepared to camp out for a while." He settled down on a rock and greedily attacked the food.



Sal's steak was barely half-devoured before all hell broke loose.

At some point, having finished with his first meal, Ank had dragged off the headless corpse as a second course. Hunkered down over the cadaver as he drained its blood, his back to the ocean, Ank failed to detect the figure that rose from the precipice and crept upon him.

Judiciously averting her eyes from any of this bloody mayhem, Katy remained oblivious to this new threat.

Even though Sal was engrossed in his meal, every few minutes he would lift his head and scan their surroundings. Ever the bodyguard. Consequently, he was the one who first spotted the attacker.

With a yell, Sal leapt to his feet. As he came erect, he yanked a pair of revolvers from his waistband. He immediately started firing at the newcomer.

Sal fell within Katy's range of vision, so she saw and was surprised by his sudden action. She wheeled about and saw a figure looming over Ank and his meal. Several of Sal's shots caught the attacker, making him twitch like he was electrified.

But he didn't go down.

Alerted now to the threat, Ank abandoned his dinner. He whirled on his stunned almost-assailant. They grappled.

This'll be short, mused Katy. Ank will tear him to pieces. She told herself to look away, but ignored her own advice.

But the battle was anything but short. Inexplicably, Ank's paranormal might was equally matched by his opponent. They exchanged blows that

would have shattered the bones of a normal man—but Ank was no normal man...and apparently, neither was this adversary! For the longest moment, their struggle immobilized them in place like some statue commemorating a classic moment of combat. Ank held his enemy's left arm from striking, while the other had a firm grip on his opposing wrist. Each of them flexed and strained and grimaced and growled—but to no avail.

Sal put a few more bullets in the stranger, but they didn't hurt him any more than the previous shots had. The impacts, however, made the man stagger back. This might've given Ank a brief advantage, except that he hadn't expected his enemy's abrupt recoil. Ank fought to force his foe down, so that when the man stumbled back, resistance vanished, and Ank toppled forward to sprawl in the dirt.

"Dammit!" snarled Sal. He discarded his now-empty guns and rushed the combat zone. As he ran he twisted the handmade satchel around so he could root through its contents. By the time he arrived, he was brandishing a pointed shard of wood.

What good's that supposed to be if bullets didn't stop him? fretted Katy.

Meanwhile, the attacker had fallen upon Ank and was tearing at him with suddenly elongated fingers tipped now by nasty claws. Ank fought back, but his prostrate position hindered the effectiveness of his valiant blows.

Hurling himself into the fray, Sal stabbed at the stranger. The shard pierced the man's shoulder. He threw Sal away and staggered back a step. A wicked grin bisected his sallow face as he withdrew the spike from the wound.

This time Ank took full advantage of the situation. Kicking out, he knocked both of his adversary's feet out from under him. As the man fell, Ank was on him. With both hands he grasped the man's grip on the wooden skewer. They trembled as each strained to control the shard and turn it on the other.

Katy bit her lip as she watched their conflict.

Leaning close to his foe, Ank bit the man in the face. At some point during the struggle, Ank's teeth had grown into long needles. These fangs ripped away half of his opponent's face. Blood sprayed everywhere. Ank lapped at it. And his strength seemed to aggrandize. His became the winning grip on the man's hand that held the shard. Ank drove the wooden spike deep into his enemy's chest.

They fell apart: Ank panting, the stranger smoking.

What the— gasped Katy.

The stranger flailed, his talons scrabbling to pull the stake from his heart, but his agony was too great. His dissolution weakened him. His flesh darkened, then cracked to release jets of compressed steam. He was cooking from the inside out! Although no flames were visible, the

man became a cinder...then his body collapsed to ash. His clothing, unburned by the internal conflagration, slumped empty on the ground.

Katy moved to approach Ank, but he warded her off with a raspy exclamation, "Get away, girl!"

"Don't get too close to him," Sal advised. "Not while he's still in kill mode. He's liable to unintentionally tear your head off." He busied himself rifling through the stranger's garments.

Ank sat on the ground, tipped forward with his head hanging between his knees. Gradually, his breathing lost its pant. His fingers lost their talons. His overall demeanor lost its twitchy animosity. When he looked up, his face belonged to the Ank she knew, not the monster he was.

"Sorry, girl," he sighed. "Needed to...y'know..."

"Yes," she answered.

Sal came over. Extending a hand, he helped Ank to his feet.

"Since when's Darcy got vamps working for him?" asked Sal.

"This is a new twist," Ank replied. "Where'd he come from?"

Sal nodded toward the nearby precipice. "Came crawling up the cliff. He must've been the one who fell over with the tent."

"Find anything useful in his pockets?"

Sal shook his head. "Nothing."

"No WayBack unit?" moaned Katy. "They gotta have one...how else could they get here?"

Sal and Ank exchanged a fatalistic look.

"Maybe Hot Sauce."

"If Darcy's found the black box," came Ank's dejected response, "it's all over."

"What's 'Hot Sauce'?" she asked. "You mentioned it before, but never explained anything..."

5.

As with so many great scientific breakthroughs, the discovery of alternate universes was an accident.

Winston Pastorius was an astrophysicist. His resume included MIT, the Hadron Particle Accelerator, and Livermore.

In 1995, Pastorius' wife, Frieda, died of a brain aneurysm. Her passing was sudden but painless—at least for Frieda. Winston, however, suffered severe bouts of grief, which eventually interfered with his work enough that he was given early retirement.

Abandoning his home, for every room and piece of furniture and knickknack tormented him with memories of his dead wife, Winston fled to

an estate in New Orleans. This old house had been in the family for ages, but its last inhabitant, Winston's uncle, had passed away in the late Seventies. After years of neglect, the property required extensive repairs by the time Winston took possession, but he left most of it untouched, concentrating the restoration to only a few rooms and the basement. He saw the latter equipped with an impressive selection of scientific hardware, all of it purchased on stolen credit cards. For not only was Dr Pastorius a respected man of science, he was also a skilled amateur pickpocket. His pension hardly afforded him the funds necessary to outfit his private laboratory.

Winston never considered himself a criminal. It was his firm belief that his research would greatly benefit mankind. If no corporation was brave enough to finance the project, then he would resort to questionable means to do so. In the end, his discovery would win him such fame that all of his sins would be overlooked.

Inspired by Frieda's spiritualist interests, Winston had convinced himself that an afterlife existed—and accessing it was only a matter of applied science.

Proving the existence of alternate dimensions was the easy part of his research. Many scientists had long theorized that parallel universes probably existed, worlds where different circumstances had created offshoot timelines that continued on independent of the original. It was Winston Pastorius' contention that Heaven was actually one of these other dimensions.

Compiling the mathematical proof was child's-play compared to testing the premise in a quantifiable manner. That required years of building potential transmitters that refused to do anything but suck power.

When Winston finally *did* open a portal to another universe, the achievement was an utter failure in his judgment, for the trans-dimensional connection did not lead to Heaven...only a mirror version of this world. A world so similar to his homeworld that he never did discover the factor that made it different. Portal after portal he concocted, hunting for the afterlife but finding only alternate Earths. As he progressed, he refined the hardware, ultimately miniaturizing it into a handheld device.

Years later, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the flood easily annihilated the dilapidated Pastorius property. No traces of any bodies were found among the wreckage. Rescue workers could only presume that the eminent scientist had evacuated before destruction visited his home.

On and on Winston went, witlessly traveling through alternate universes and failing to appreciate his real accomplishment. Gradually, the Earths he visited began to warp drastically from his norm. Apocalypses and natural disasters devastated several worlds. In some, the differences were more deeply rooted in the dim past: worlds where mammalian life had never achieved intelligence, Earths that were still

locked in deadly ice ages, places where even the continents had followed divergent geological movements over the eons.

While these wildly different Earths were intellectually interesting, Winston refused to let these enticing realms distract him his original goal. He had set out to find Heaven so he could be reunited with his beloved Frieda—and nothing was going to sway him from that devout course.

It was only a matter of time before Winston ran into other versions of himself who were dimension-hopping like him. After one or two such meetings ended badly (each Winston arrogantly proclaiming *himself* as the real Winston Pastorius), he tended to avoid any Winstons who crossed his path.

Sooner or later, one of those Winstons was bound to run afoul of individuals who coveted his miraculous device.

Confiscating Winston's trans-dimensional device, a government agency on one world misidentified his invention, believing it was a time machine. While the scientists of that world could not fathom the workings of his device, they were able to duplicate it. Consequently, hundreds of Black Ops crews were dispatched to alter the past so that the present would be more to the liking of certain entitled parties. All they were really doing, though, was changing the paths of entirely separate worlds. They never did grasp what was actually going on.

A proliferation of Pastorius' technology ensued through a variety of circumstances: Winston foolishly shared his secret with the wrong people, or he misplaced one of his devices, or he gifted needy people with the hardware. On one occasion, a Winston made a quick fortune mass-producing the devices, turning half of that world's populace into trans-dimensional gypsies.

Nefarious parties used them to pillage foreign realms. Others harbored more beneficial ambitions.

4. (resumed)

"Now you're talking about yourselves," Katy interrupted. "Sal told me how your world was blasted by a solar flare and turned into a barren wasteland. Your Bat Pack is hunting for a new world to relocate all the survivors. Right?"

They confirmed her guess with mutual nods.

"So—" she continued, "that makes Darcy one of those 'nefarious parties' who want to use the Pastorius devices to pillage other worlds. Right?"

This time only Ank nodded.

Not noticing, Katy wanted to know: “But what about Hot Sauce? You promised you were going to explain that, but none of what you told me has anything to do with Hot Sauce!”

“Hot Sauce is an improvement on trans-dimensional technology,” explained Sal.

Ank added, “Somebody out there—we dunno who—has been tinkering with the Pastorius process. They developed a drug that duplicates the effect.”

“Hot Sauce!” Katy chirped. Okay, now their little history lecture had some context. This poor grief-stricken mad doctor was hunting for his dead wife, and a bunch of no-goods were stealing his dimension-hopping technology and putting it to their own uses. Somebody had improved on the process, synthesized it into a drug—and now everybody was fighting over that compound.

If Darcy got Hot Sauce, his thugs could spread infamy everywhere. She’d seen enough of Darcy’s minion’s antics to know they were bad guys.

If the Bat Pack got the drug, they would inoculate their people so they could escape their burnt-cinder of a home and emigrate to a better world. That was a good thing.

Except...the people of the burnt-cinder Earth were all vampires. How smart was it to unleash a horde of vampires on countless unsuspecting worlds? By the inherent definition of their condition, they were parasites who lived by victimizing others. Granted, from what Katy had witnessed of Ank’s behavior, he seemed like a good guy. He hadn’t hurt or threatened her. His violence had always been directed at those who tried to hurt the group. But then...how representative of his kin was Ank?

In her own world, people practiced all sorts of ethics. There were altruists and there were greedy sons of bitches. Decent folk tended to live quiet lives, while the bastards got in everybody’s faces, working their self-serving agendas and seeking to swindle everyone in reach.

Only in retrospect could anyone’s worthiness be vindicated or vilified—and by then it would be too late.

Would the vampires settle peacefully on a new Earth? Or would they prey on that world’s indigenous species, feeding and rampaging until everyone was undead like them?

Was it possible that Darcy’s minions *weren’t* evil-doers? Could the motives that drove them be righteous?—even laudable? What if their ambition was only to extinguish what they saw as a vampire threat?

What if Darcy’s minions had tried to kill Katy because of her allegiance with the Bat Pack? By simply being in undead company, was she now considered a vampire sympathizer?

That was a sobering thought...a scary one, too. For, if that were the case, there was no way for Katy to prove her innocence. Any claims she made that she’d been glamourised into becoming a vampiric ally would fall

on deaf ears. For, in truth, Katy *had* been bewitched into joining forces with the Bat Pack.

But then, her experiences with people on both sides revealed a more objective evaluation. So far, the Bat Packers had saved her life time and again, while Darcy's minions had done nothing but try to kill her.

Her loyalties lay with the vampires—they were the ones keeping her alive.

Unexpectedly, her introspection led her to an unrelated hypothesis.



"I betcha I know why you didn't find any of these guys carrying a Pastorius device," exclaimed Katy.

But her traveling companions hadn't heard her. They'd wandered off during the girl's contemplation. Down on his knees, Ank was inspecting the dead men's clothing with more attention to detail. "Maybe Darcy's techs found a way to miniaturize the hardware," he muttered, half to himself. He tore apart several seams, but found no circuitry hidden in the fabric.

Staring off at the darkened prairie, Sal announced, "We got bigger problems, Ank."

Looking up from his fruitless search, Ank growled, "I hear them."

"What?" Katy tensed, peering to and fro into the darkness. "What's going on?"

"Get her to safety," commanded Ank.

But Sal was already in motion. Grabbing Katy, he threw her over his shoulder and in a series of agile jumps ascended the rock-face beside the waterhole.

"Hey—" she protested.

"Shh!" He set Katy down and forced her to take one of the knives he'd collected. Adopting a defensive posture, he brandished two long knives against as-yet-invisible adversaries.

They didn't remain unseen for long.

Out of the tall grass came a swarm of streamlined figures. Their scaly hides glittered in the vibrant starshine. Their hungry growls rose to fill the quiet night. Drawn by the smell of blood: a pack of velociraptors! They rushed the campsite.

Ank had moved away from the corpses, but drenched as he was in blood, he was just as strong a lure to these prehistoric predators. He retreated more, almost to the edge of the precipice, but this posed no deterrent for the creatures. The scent of blood and viscera attracted them with little concern for ease or danger. Most of the raptors were willing to settle for dead meat, but a few took keen interest in this meat-on-the-hoof and angled their advance to target the vampire.

A raspy growl from her immediate right made Katy gasp. Fear kept her from jerking in panic. Her eyes rotated in their sockets; she turned her head a fraction. And there, cresting the western hill that rose from the prairie, crept a shadowy figure. Its eyes were locked on hers. Its fangs flashed in the moonlight.

“Sal...” Katy strained to prevent her urgency from adding volume to her whisper.

“I see it,” he replied, low but guttural in his throat. “Get behind me...”

As she moved to comply, he warned her, “Don’t step in the blood.”

Katy looked down, and a shudder ran along her spine. She’d almost stepped on the sentry’s corpse where it lay on the ground. Edging past the body, she squeezed between it and Sal.

Once she was behind him, Sal advised her, “Keep moving, back to the edge and then to the right, away from camp. I’m hoping it’s more interested in the body than in either of us.”

By the time Katy reached the precipice, though, additional raptors had ascended the hill. They blocked any northern escape.

“Dammit,” Sal cursed. “Yuh, I see them. Stay where you are...” His knives twitched as he nervously fingered their handles. He shifted his feet an inch, slightly widening his stance. “Gonna try something...” He began to crouch down, bending his knees but keeping his torso erect.

The first raptor leaned forward a bit without moving its legs. Sal immediately halted and hung there halfway to a crouch. “Dammit,” he hissed between clenched teeth.

Her position granted Katy a clear view of the waterhole. Most of the raptors down there were busy fighting over dead scraps. Two beasts, however, were harrying Ank back to the cliff’s edge. As she watched, the raptors closed in on him, pouncing in tandem. He fended off one with a broad swipe of his arm. The other hit him with enough force to make him stagger back, just a single step, but the ground didn’t extend that far. One of his heels came down on empty air. He teetered, straining to shift his weight forward, but the raptor straddled him now, its weight pushing him back...

—And over the edge!

A scream wanted to explode from her mouth, but Katy fought it down. Any sudden noise like that was sure to stampede the raptors that menaced her and Sal.

She couldn’t believe Ank was gone—but she had to focus on her own plight...or she’d be following him into the afterlife.

In all honesty, Katy saw no way out of this trouble. The beasts effectively surrounded her and her bodyguard. The only open flank was at her back: the same precipice that had swallowed Ank. To be gnashed by teeth or smashed on the rocks? Somehow, the latter seemed less gruesome.

Sal's low voice summoned her back to the night: "Hokay, listen up, Missy. I'm gonna make a move and you gotta react as fast as you can. When I drop my knives, you run toward me. Don't pay any attention to whatever's going on—just keep running. Past me and down the hill, then head north. Stay outta the grass. Dunno how many more of the critters're hiding out there."

"What about you?" she insisted.

"Don't worry about me. Just follow orders and you might get outta this alive."

"Okay..."

"On the count of three. One...two..."

On three, Sal dropped his weapons and dove for the ground.

As if heeding the same cue, the first raptor lunged at the humans.

Katy gulped a desperate breath and took off. As far as she could tell, she was fleeing right into the beast's mouth...but she trusted Sal. (Anyway, if she stayed where she was, the other raptors would certainly advance and push her from the cliff.) Following the man's directions was the lesser of two evils.

As she dashed past Sal, Katy saw him grab the sentry's corpse and hoist it aloft. He flung the headless cadaver right into the onrushing raptor's ravenous maw. With the beast distracted, Sal scrambled past it and chased Katy down the hill.

The plan might have worked, might've delivered them to safety—except for the second wave of velociraptors that burst from the high grass.

Adhering to Sal's advice, Katy was already skirting the grass, so the majority of the reptilian swarm lay to her left. The fringe runners, though...if they continued on their present course, they'd intersect with her frantic trajectory. She angled her bearing to avoid them, but they veered to pursue her. Now they had her running back toward the cliff.

A gunshot behind Katy almost startled her into stumbling, but she managed to stay on her feet. The next gunshots weren't as surprising, still each one made her wince.

It had to be Sal. He was the only one left with guns.

Her guess was correct. Swooping in beside her, the burly man continued to fire shots at the devils that chased her.

"Left!" she heard him yell. She didn't have to be told. Turning right would take her back to the hilltop feeding frenzy. Straight ahead lay a long suicidal drop. Only going left offered the promise of a safe escape route.

If they ran far enough, they'd reach the stalled steam engine they'd abandoned earlier. Katy was suddenly tormented by the futility of it all. Stranded on a foreign world populated by prehistoric monsters, all she was doing was running back and forth, retracing her prior steps. From the waterhole to the spectacular city of Troy, than back again along the same

railway system. Following this warped logic, she was destined to end up back in Troy. Were these bloodthirsty lizards going to chase her all the way there?

If one of the many attempts to kill me had succeeded, I wouldn't be going through all this distress.

Where did that thought come from? Katy was stressed out, but certainly didn't feel tempted to throw in the towel. So—what had inspired this sudden flash of pessimism? Was she getting tired of fighting to stay alive? The threats never stopped coming. She was hungry and exhausted and achy and so very tired of this nightmare. Her torment seemed to go on forever. Her few respites only served to keep her hyper-tense as she dreaded the next peril. All of which sounded like the perfect argument for surrender.

No! she swore. *I've spent my whole life deferring to the whims of others, doing what was expected of me, and now that the stakes are the highest they've ever been, I refuse to submit! You took away Andrew—and I won't let you take me!*

It had been a while since Katy had heard any shots behind her. Had Sal run out of ammo? Or had the raptors caught up with him? She dreaded doing so, but had to look back and see what was going on.

To her surprise, no raptors loomed in her wake. For that matter, neither did Sal.

Bad sign, she told herself.

Against her better judgment, Katy eased back on her throttle. She slowed down, stopped, and peering behind her. The edge of the cliff ran unbroken on her left. The grasslands on the right framed an expanse of dirt that stretched away into the darkness. A breeze rustled the tall weeds, but nothing else moved in her range of vision.

"Sal?" she asked, her voice tiny and fearful. After a moment, Katy called his name again, much louder.

Awww, this isn't fair. I survive—but I'm all alone?



Day broke and still there was no sign of Sal. Fortunately, no more raptors (or beasts of any importance) bothered her.

She'd welcomed the warmth of her royal robe in the night's chill, but here and now, she stripped it off and let the wind cool the sweat that covered her body. It was going to be an unpleasantly hot day. She detected nothing within sight that might offer protection from the unmerciful sun.

She knew of two places that might provide her with shade. Neither one inspired much confidence though. She could seek shelter in the train's refrigeration car, or she could return to the campsite. For all she

knew, the latter could still be overrun by fevered raptors. The train seemed like to smartest choice.

It wasn't.



When the locomotive came into view, Katy slowed her pace. She scanned the surrounding terrain for signs of any danger, but detected nothing. Breezes wafted across the prairie, transforming the grassy plains into an undulant sea. Stronger winds disturbed the ocean to her right, but that green surface lay far below the cliff, too far away for her to make out the crests of individual waves. Overhead, turgid air currents moved any clouds swiftly on their way, removing any obstacles that might soften the sun's relentless zeal.

For all she knew, the tall grass hid an entire army waiting to ambush her. *Hokay*, Katy told herself. She drew the knife Sal had given her and held it at her side. Her knuckles were white as she held it tight.

For the hundredth time, the girl wondered if she had it in her to use the weapon on anyone. She was capable of defending herself if attacked, but how much force would she put into her stabs or slices? In order to stop an onrushing monster, she would need to plunge the blade deep, through reptilian hide that was more armor than skin. Simply wounding a hungry dinosaur wasn't going to stop the creature from tearing her to pieces. On the other hand, she shouldn't curtail her aggression if her assailant was human; doing so would only injure her opponent and leave them with enough strength to overpower her. And so Katy resolved to unleash her inner rage equally on prehistoric and mammalian threats.

Her decision turned out to be moot.

She was drenched in perspiration. Repeatedly wiping sweat from her forehead did little good, for the furnace heat forced her body to produce a constant tide of salty liquid. It stung her eyes, constantly impairing her vision. Dehydration made her dizzy.

The refrigeration car would put an end to her suffering. She would collapse in its icy interior and bask in the delicious chill. She wouldn't even care that slabs of meat surrounded her. The only thing that would matter was the cold—the wonderful cold!

By the time she reached the train, Katy skirted the dormant engine and the decimated flatcar, hastily heading for the cool succor of the refrigeration carriage. She climbed up to the small landing platform and her hand closed on the lever that would open the car's doorway. And when she pulled the panel open, not only chilled air spilled out into the sunlight.

Along with the chilled mist came a swarm of Oop soldiers. They forced her back into the hot sunlight, pushing her from the train with their sheer numbers. She was given no chance to regain her composure. As

she fell, surprise sent the knife flying from her grasp. She landed on her ass in the gravel, and the accumulate weight of apish warriors crushed her down and held her there.

Her efforts to escape were futile. There were too many of them, these scrawny apes in their yellow fishnet jumpsuits. They brandished clubs and were not reluctant about using them. The pile became such a melee that their truncheons indiscriminately clobbered her and each other.

She lost consciousness at the bottom of this brash heap.



Struggling to make sense of the tactile impressions that chase her into the darkness, her somnambulant mind plunges Katy into a murky environment comprised of matching sensations.

No light penetrates her dream, but she knows she's not alone. Nothing as subtle as breathing or foreign smells betrays their cloying presence. Pressure pushes in on her, first softly, then gradually squeezing her more and more until she cannot breathe. She expects panic to set in, but it does not. The most she can muster is a detached sympathy—the feeling you get while looking at a picture of a sad puppy dog. She knows she should be more concerned—she's suffering physical distress!—but her emotional condition is frozen at a level of ambivalence.

Now, noise and smells join the oppressive milieu. Guttural grunts that sound more like they come from a bestial throat. And the stink is definitely zoological; a fundamental animal odor without any fecal undertones—just pure beast.

The pressure builds, eked on by growls and stifling redolence.

She tries to moan, to express her discomfort, but the pressure is so omnipresent that it has sealed her mouth shut.

Finally, the pressure squeezes awareness from her mind, consigning her to an even deeper darkness.



Katy woke briefly to darkness. Her surroundings exhibited a sway that she recognized from her previous rides aboard the Oop steam trains.

Restraints held her fast.

Before she could voice any objection to her captivity, a blow from the darkness returned the girl to her inner oblivion.



This time, her dream is a madcap melange of recent events, but they're all scrambled up, out of order and featuring elements that do not belong.

She's stuck in that paisley aerie atop the drowned bridge. More than just her fear of heights cripples her mind, she dreads the sunlight outside. Its rays will burn her, scorching away her flesh and boiling her eyes in their sockets. Her brain will melt and dribble from her ears and nostrils. Her mouth will be filled with her agonized screams. Maddened by these false sensations, she tears her way free of the enclosure and plummets through the searing sunlight. Cold dark water envelopes her at the bottom of her fall. Although the liquid quells her imaginary burns, immersion threatens asphyxiation so she thrashes about in a panic. But then she encounters solid ground. She crawls onto this muddy shoreline...

And finds herself in the lost alley. She seeks refuge from an unseen sniper, crawling into a gap between mounds of plastic garbage bags, but she's forced to flee her hiding place by tiny raptors. They nip at her ankles and clutch at her legs as she scrambles to escape them. The gunshots persist, but either the dinosaurs are immune to bullets or the shooter is intentionally avoiding hitting them. Hands appear from beyond her view, grabbing her and pulling her through an open doorway.

It's Andrew! He's arrived just in time to rescue her from this terrible ordeal. She falls to the floor at his feet. He stomps the few raptors that still harry her legs. But when he's finished crushing these miniature reptilian pests, he starts tromping on her! His kicks grow more savage. She bleats in pain and despair. Why is he hurting her? She thought he loved her! As if heeding her protests, Andrew stops kicking her. He hauls her from the floor and pushes her down a steep staircase made of sculpted crystal. Darkness hides the base of the steps. Before she can recover, a multitude of hairy hands bear her away and lash her to something in the dark.

A brilliant light blinds her. When her vision clears, Katy discovers she's tied to a wooden cross that looms over an audience of polar bears. They jeer at her, calling her rude names in their indecipherable bestial dialect. Mosquitoes as big as her hand flock around her weary head, stinging her face again and again, draining her blood through their long needle-like snouts. When she looks close, she sees that these giant bugs all have human faces—faces she knows! There's Sal—and Ank and Chris and Andrew and Joey, her brother who died when Katy was only a kid—and some guy who works at a deli in her neighborhood...she doesn't know his name, has never spoken to him—so what's he doing in her nightmare?



The next time she came to, Katy was being hauled along a gloomy passage. Something protected her knees as they dragged on the floor. At some point, somebody had untied her royal robe from around her waist and dressed her in the scratchy garment. The yellow-clad soldiers who carried her showed no reverence for their Queen, treating her no better than a sack of flour. She gave a low groan and was promptly rewarded by a cuff to the side of her head that almost pitched her back unconscious. Fearing a return to her unpleasant dream, she fought to stay awake.

The corridor led to a steep staircase. Her captors dragged her up these steps and into the light. Beyond the staircase stretched an auditorium of vast proportions. Immense pillars supported a domed ceiling that was actually a translucent skylight. The staircase entered the chamber from high on a side wall and ascended to reach a platform that formed the base of another gigantic column hanging from above. Waiting for her there were High Priest Furgo and a retinue of his devoted church police.

And a large bone cross.

Seeing Furgo made Katy apprehensive. Sight of the cross brought on a major panic attack. Part of her nightmare was manifesting here in the waking world! She moaned and flailed and fought and squealed, but her captors held her fast. She was summarily gagged, lest her complaints ruin the ceremony. Her anxiety brought a smirk to Furgo's inhuman face. He could have easily peeked into her mind and gleaned the reasons for her sudden terror, but he chose to assume that *he* was what inspired such fear in her.

She knew what was going to happen, but none of her struggling stopped them from lashing Katy to the cross. Once they had securely tied her in place, the cross was raised on winches until it levitated ten feet above the platform, dangling slightly forward over the edge of the stage, so that those gathered below could see her.

No polar bears this time, the crowd was purely Oops.

Another priest came forward to address the audience.

Her terror was so acute that Katy missed most of the priest's introductory speech. The parts that penetrated her distress seemed to summarize a long pilgrimage she had taken...braving the wilderness...where a holy transmogrification had occurred...so that the Queen Katrina who had returned to Troy was now a goddess...as verified by her transfigured physiology...the Oops of Troy were honored now to witness her grand ascension...

"But fear not, loyal citizens," avowed the spokespriest, "for Queen Katrina will not be abandoning you! Her Majesty has appointed *High Priest Furgo* to act as a heavenly conduit for any and all of Her proclamations once she ascends!"

The pieces forcibly fell into place for Katy. Against her will, she realized what was happening. Furgo had devised a way to usurp the throne that did not require her cooperation. He was claiming that she was going to ascend now—clearly a euphemism for *die*. With her out of the way, Furgo, as heavenly conduit, would be her astral mouthpiece. His word would be her law.

Or should that be Her law, she mused in near delirium. *Don't goddesses get their personal pronouns capitalized? That's what Furgo's about to make me.*

As a flesh-and-blood person, Katy undermined Furgo's power grab. Dead—or “ascended”—her actual voice would be silenced, but the goddess' decrees would live on through Furgo's mouth. It was a diabolical scheme—and Katy was trapped in the spotlight of its climax! There was nothing the girl could do to stop it. Lashed as she was to this cross, the only escape in store for her would come when death drove her spirit from her body.

Upon his introduction, Furgo had come forward to address the gathered citizenry of Troy. He was telling them how Her Majesty, in Her boundless compassion, had decreed “that Her sacred blood be spilt and spread among her loyal congregation, in order that they all may share Her blessed divinity.” He showed them the mighty blade that would provide “the nudge necessary to launch Her Majesty on Her celestial ascension.”

A tumultuous cheer rose from the crowd.

Panic made Katy retch, but all her empty stomach could produce was spittle and a trickle of bile...an early gift from their goddess to her earnest disciples.

The first gunshot was lost in the din of the crowd's frenzied hurrah. Two more followed.

One of them took out the spokes-priest, who toppled from the stage. His body plummeted into the audience far below, inciting a mixture of blind applause and horrified screams. The other shots bit chips from the crystalline platform.

Deafened by her hysteria, Katy failed to hear the gunshots that heralded the arrival of her cavalry. From her position on the dangling cross, though, she could see the priest fall. Something was happening. She twisted her head, but was unable to get a clear view of what was going on behind her on the stage.

Oop voices shouted warnings, and then she heard Furgo order his personal warriors to protect him.

The ruckus on stage erupted into bedlam. More shots were fired.

This isn't fair! she fretted. *Something's happening—and I can't see what it is—*

The cross holding her shuddered as the winch drew it back to the platform.

What's going on? Did Furgo change his mind about killing me?

Hands reached out for her—they were *human* hands! Hairy human hands! And Katy gawked as Sal cut her bindings with one of his innumerable knives, liberating the girl from the calcium bars. She fell into his strong arms.

Now Katy faced the stage and what she saw seemed incredible. The bodies of Oop soldiers littered the platform. To one side, she saw Furgo turn and flee.

But he didn't get far.

Dropping from above, a figure landed on the staircase, blocking the High Priest's escape.

Katy gasped. Although the newcomer was wrapped in clothing like a mummy, she recognized him. But...it couldn't be *him*...

All of this was too fantastic to be real. Minutes from death, Katy's mind had obviously snapped under the stress. *I'm imagining a last-second rescue. Look, there's Ank facing off with Furgo. But Ank is dead—I saw him fall from the cliff. Yet here he is, returned from beyond the grave to put an end to the High Priest's villainy. And Sal's come to free me. He's such a good bodyguard...*

She could accept or spurn this fantastic delusion, but if she rejected it all she'd be doing was throwing herself back on the cross to await Furgo's vicious deathblows. She couldn't face that—the anxiety, the pain. Better to wrap herself in a cocoon of deceptive phantasms and ignore the horrible fate awaiting her in the real world.

Well, she told herself, if I'm choosing this rescue scenario, I might as well appreciate the fruits of my broken head.

Every one of the church police had been taken down. Bullet holes marked some of them, others sported lethal gashes. Clearly, Sal had been ruthless in dispatching Furgo's thugs.

As for the villainous High Priest, his sneaky escape had been cut off by Ank. Although not as bulky as Sal, Ank was bigger than the puny Oop. He towered over him, his arms spread to prevent Furgo from dashing past him. But Furgo wasn't unarmed; he still held the long blade he had intended to use on the Queen. The High Priest swung his sword to ward off his attacker...but Ank did not retreat. He swatted aside Furgo's sword, ignoring the cuts it scored in his arms. Slowly, Ank's resolute advance forced Furgo back up the steps.

Katy remembered that Furgo had claimed to be a telepath. Weren't vampires reputed to possess similar abilities? Even now, Ank could be using that psionic compatibility to threaten the High Priest. She hoped so. The bastard deserved a dose of fear; he'd certainly exposed Katy to more than her fair share of terror.

She hoped Ank was going to hurt him too. No ethical consideration argued with her bloodthirsty anger. Furgo deserved to be terrorized and then hurt—hurt bad, before being slaughtered. Having seen some of Ank's victims, she entirely expected he would inflict agonizing wounds to

the damned bastard. She'd suffered enough in Furgo's hands, now she wanted to hear his howls of pain.

But the wicked High Priest refused to accommodate her wishes. He understood the uselessness of his blade against an undead foe like Ank. He may have never before encountered a creature like this, but his telepathic probes certainly verified that Ank's invincible attributes were no masquerade—vampires *did* exist, and here one was. Furgo could never hope to defeat an enemy who was already dead.

And so, flinging his sword at the vampire in a final act of defiance, Furgo leapt from the staircase. As he fell to his death, he shouted, "The Queen is a false goddess!" Even in defeat, Furgo sought to further punish those he had abused.

As if Katy cared about her reputation among the Oops of Troy. Soon, her saviors would carry her away, far from this dreadful place of torment. Granted, her emancipation would be an illusion, but she planned to enjoy every moment of it before reality crashed in and ruined her happy ending.

It disappointed her that Furgo had evaded his deserved measure of punishment, but she supposed even fantasies had their flaws. She'd have to settle for his self-inflicted downfall.

But Sal was in motion, so Katy abandoned her reflections to appreciate this next stage of her delusional escape. This would be the part where her traveling companions finally carried her away—she didn't want to miss that.

There wasn't much to the climax of her escape, however. Both Sal and Ank had ropes attached to their belts. Once Katy was secured and Furgo gone, they simply scrambled up those lines to where they'd broken a panel in the skylight. They emerged in daylight. Ank's heavy clothing protected him from the sun's fatal kiss—besides, this was all just Katy's wishful dream, so nothing could hurt him here, for he was no more real than Sal or Furgo's death.

Shying away from that reality, Katy relished the sun's warmth on her face. A breeze cooled the sweat on her brow. The guys crawled across Troy's lofty cityscape, but she didn't let those heights ruin her bliss. Sal was telling her something, but she was too lost in exultation to hear him.

Eventually, they reached a gap in the rooftops. Here, Sal and Ank would undoubtedly leap this chasm to a nearby spire. She'd been through this in real life; it shouldn't disturb her dreamstate. But as Sal launched himself (with the girl draped over his broad shoulder), Katy's phobia of high places ruined her fantasy by bullying its way to the forefront of her thoughts and pitching her mind into a dark abyss.

As she sank into oblivion, Katy assumed this was death. In the real world, the villainous Furgo had finally slaughtered his goddess...bringing to an end her fanciful delusion...



Waking up was a real shocker for Katy.

Her immediate perceptions hardly matched any afterlife she'd heard about.

When she peeked through cracked eyelids, she saw only darkness. *That* was wrong. Every legend she knew had bathed Heaven in a bright white light. The surface she lay upon was hard, not the cottony softness of clouds; and this ground swayed to and fro in a gentle fashion. There was a breeze, and it smelled of scrub and dirt...and an acidic odor she could not identify.

These discrepancies made her grunt aloud.

"Finally awake, aye?"

This voice jolted her eyes wide. Compounding her incredulity, the face she saw belonged to Sal.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, lil goddess."

Was he real? Was she really with him and not dead?

A hesitant smile curled her lips. Then she lunged for him. Flinging her arms around his neck, she hugged him with all her might.

He was *real!* She was *still alive!*

"You really did rescue me! It wasn't a dream!"

With a chuckle, Sal disengaged her grip and settled back where he straddled a lumpy but rock-hard surface.

At first the gentle sway of her surroundings had confused Katy, but upon seeing Sal, the girl had supposed that her rescuers had again hijacked one of the Oops' steam trains to flee Troy. But a closer examination of her vicinity revealed another great surprise. She and Sal rode atop the back of some huge beast!

Gradually, her vision adjusted to the meager illumination provided by the crisp starscape that stretched across the night heavens. She recognized the creature: one of its kin had quenched its thirst at the waterhole days ago. Not the one Sal had called a "stegosaurus," but the squat armored herbivore with the deadly-looking mace at the end of its tail. Katy twisted around and spotted this beast's spiked tail, confirming her guess. The broad back she rode consisted of coarse armor plates, segmented like the shell of a turtle.

Beyond the beast, she saw they traveled through high grass. Darkness hid any distant details, but she assumed their escape had taken them deep into the prairie. Something moved through the tall weeds like a shark—no, *someone*.

"Ank!" she yelled. "You were in my dream too!"

He waved up to her. "So, girl's with us again."

"But—how the hell are you alive?" she demanded.

The vampire turned a cocked head to peer at her. "Huh?"

"I saw you fall off the cliff," she insisted. "Back at Darcy's men's camp. You were fighting off a pair of raptors, and—"

"Oh that." Snagging the edge of the beast's shell, Ank pulled himself up to perch with his traveling companions. "Yuh, it probably looked like I was a goner. I just grabbed the first ledge I hit and held on." He raised a hand, extended his long talons and flexed them. Katy had seen him use them to gouge handholds across a wall of sheer crystal. "Then I just climbed back up. But by the time I reached the campsite, you were all long gone. I had to track you down. That's when I saved Sal's life."

Sal nodded gravely.

"And you!" Katy yelled at the burly man. "You were right behind me, running along the cliff edge—and then you were gone!"

"As you'll recall," Sal reminded her, "I was fighting off a horde of raptors, keeping them from gobbling your heels, Missy."

"For which I'm very grateful," she told him. "Without your guidance and help, I'd never have made it out of there alive. I just didn't expect to find myself all alone!"

Sal shrugged. "Wasn't by choice, sorry. One of the raptors caught up with me. Took me down. I was outta bullets by then. Couldn't reload. Had to fight it off with my bare hands."

"Sal's a holy terror fighting people, but he ain't up to tackling dinos," quipped Ank. "Lucky for him, I am—and I showed up just in time to drag that beastie off him." He pantomimed prying something apart, ending the stretch with a sharp jerk. "Snapped its jaw."

"Saved my life," repeated Sal.

"Why didn't you come get me?" Her question was a sad sob.

"But we did!" asserted Sal. "We knew you'd run back to the train. But we couldn't find it. We figured one of Furgo's hunting parties grabbed you. They must've refueled the train and used it to ferry you back to Troy. So we followed the tracks. They led us back here to the city."

"You *do* remember us showing up and saving your ass back in Troy," Ank added. "Right?"

"I thought it was a dream," she confessed. "A fantasy I concocted in denial of my plight."

"All real," Ank assured her. "You should've seen Sal—he was a force of nature. Tearing his way through those ape soldiers like they were cardboard figures."

"And you," she gasped. "You went after Furgo...and the bastard cut you..."

Glancing ruefully at his gashed sleeves where the High Priest had caught the vampire with his holy sword, Ank gave a half-smile. "I heal fast."

She shook her head, but it remained cluttered with all these fantastic revelations. She was having a hard time piecing them together. "How did we get...here...?" She gestured at the beast and the nocturnal prairie.

“Whole city went ape-shite once we snatched you away,” revealed Ank. “Chaos everywhere. It was easier sneaking out then it was sneaking in.”

“Soon as we got outside the city, we headed off on-foot into the prairie,” Sal explained. “We figured that’d elude anybody trying to hunt us down.”

“We were wrong. Seems these Oops’re expert trackers.” Ank tucked his talons out of sight in his armpits. “Lucky they ain’t expert fighters.”

“What happened?” she insisted.

Sal told her how a hunting party had caught up to them scarcely two hours after their escape. As dusk had crawled across the prairie, the trackers had expected to surprise their prey when they pounced, but Ank’s vampiric senses had thwarted that scheme. He’d detected their approach in time to warn Sal and devise a crude defense strategy. Sal had hidden Katy in the weeds, then adopted a seemingly naive position elsewhere, standing all alone with his back to the Oop hunters who crept upon him. Hiding nearby, Ank had pounced on the hunters seconds before they moved on Sal. He’d slaughtered them all, except one.

“I slept through all of this?” gasped Katy.

Ank had glamoured the survivor in order to learn why a search party had been so speedily dispatched. And what were the hunters’ intentions? To retrieve their stolen goddess?—or slay her?

From the glammed Oop hunter, they had learned that Troy was presently locked in a political power struggle for the throne now that Queen Katrina was dead.

Apparently, the details of Katy’s emancipation had undergone careful revisions. Official reports from all warring factions agreed: the invaders had stolen the goddess and slaughtered Her to gain Her blessed essence. Poor High Priest Furgo had perished fighting to save Her Majesty.

As for these political adversaries: there were two.

The first consisted of the remaining ecumenical disciples whose fealty still belonged to the dead High Priest. They fought to see their Church retain honor in the face of Furgo’s numerous indiscretions, which forced them to defend the cover story that Katrina had indeed selected Furgo as Her appointed holy mouthpiece. With the goddess slain, the throne now fell to the Church by default.

The second faction was the Bokoo clan. Now that the Queen was dead, power-hungry cousins had rallied to declare that the throne rightfully belonged to their aunt, Juuso Bokoo. Katrina’s deification was unimportant to the Bokoos, their claims were based entirely on the royal genealogy. Because of Juuso’s advanced age and infirm health, the cousins nominated themselves as the obvious spokespersons for the sickly new Queen.

While these political rivals fought for dominion, Troy's citizenry (indeed, the entire population of the nation of Jadala, as word of the blasphemous atrocity spread across the continent) floundered in confusion. All they knew was: assassins had invaded their Queen's holy ascension and murdered Her! Katrina had been beloved as Queen, and as a martyred goddess those sentiments had bloomed into zealous worship.

By saving Katy, Sal and Ank had become Jadala's "most wanted." Everyone craved their heads on sticks.

"But—" Katy exclaimed. "I'm not dead! You didn't kidnap and kill me! You rescued me!"

"Details like that ain't important to the mob," Sal grumbled. "Unfortunately, now we're dupes in somebody else's scheme."

While Ank and Sal had avoided discussing it, Katy could guess the fate of the Oop hunter who had told them all this.

All this killing, all to save me, Katy moaned to herself. *Is my life really worth that much?*

She put such unpleasantries out of her mind. Sal and Ank were her saviors. On occasion, their enemies forced them to resort to violence; sometimes blood was shed in the pursuit of survival.

"We didn't kill him," Ank remarked.

"What?" Katy blinked, then met his firm gaze. "Who?"

"The hunter I glammed. Wasn't any need to kill him. He was completely under my control. I just ordered him to go home and forget he ever saw us."

She stared at him, suddenly suspicious. Vampires had some telepathic capacity. Had Ank been eavesdropping on her thoughts? Was that why he'd suddenly switched topic to assuage her concerns? *If that's true,* she thought, *stay the hell out of my head!*

But Ank's expression didn't change. He continued to face her, his features stern, his eyes red in the dark.

Or is he just that good at judging people?

"I just thought you'd wanna know," Ank finally commented. "You're always going on about the sanctity of human life and all."

She couldn't tell if he was being sincere—or toying with her.

"Right," chimed in Sal. With a jocular edge to his voice, he declared: "And we didn't have to kill anybody to snag this sweet ride, either."

"Neal's been a real help," added Ank.

"Ank calls him 'Neal,' but I think he's more like a 'Barry,' y'know."

She swiveled her head from one to the other, trying to comprehend their words. More and more she felt they were teasing her.

"Turns out these beasts got just enough brainpower for me to enthrall. Sal was getting tired of carrying you. So I glammed Neal here and domesticated him as a beast of burden. He's helped us outrun the other hunters."

“Other hunters?” Katy twitched and searched the darkness for hidden threats.

“The group we encountered—they ain’t the only ones out looking for us.”

“But Barry’s doubled our speed.”

“I ain’t sensed nobody for a few hours. I think we gave them the slip when we started riding old Neal here.”

There seemed nothing left to say. For a while they rode Neal/Barry in silence. The beast’s snorting breath was the only sound to break the night’s serenity.



“Where are we headed?” asked Katy.

It was a valid question. No safe place existed for them here, not within the boundaries of Jabala. Every Oop citizen thought they’d murdered their goddess.

Mutely, Sal pointed ahead. There, an enormous jagged silhouette rose against the lush starscape. The mountain range.



At the edges of the foothills, they bid farewell to Neal/Barry. The hills had become too steep for the beast to maneuver, the gullies too narrow for his wide girth. They continued on-foot.

By this point, the mountains blotted out half the sky. Behind them, the eastern horizon was honeyed by an imminent sunrise.

They needed to find some shelter soon...for Ank’s sake. He’d wrapped himself in extra garments to be able to join the raid that had liberated Katy from Troy, but those fabrics were insufficient to protect him from prolonged exposure to direct sunlight.

They moved hurriedly through the valleys, climbing rise after rise. The gradients grew bigger, steeper, slowing their progress. But they continued to tackle this unfriendly terrain in the dark. On more than one occasion, Katy slipped and scraped patches of skin from her knees and shins.

Ank foraged ahead, his undead condition affording him more agility—and night-vision. Their only landmark was the mountainside, and that spanned from horizon to horizon. Sal was careful to keep Katy close. He and Ank played “Marco Polo” to prevent them from getting separated in the murky geological maze.

Even as dawn threatened their backs, the foothills retained a residual darkness. Ank was able to scurry from shadow to shadow.

At one point, a ruckus suddenly broke out ahead of Katy. Ank must have run into some beastie lurking in the ravines. It sounded like a fierce

struggle, filling the air with squeals and hissing and claws scrabbling on basalt. Then, just as abruptly as it had begun, the bedlam ceased.

“You hokay?” Sal called.

“All good here,” responded Ank.

Sal guided Katy forward along a different route, avoiding the ravine that had hosted the brief combat.

They found no caves nor any crevasses that would serve their needs.



Eventually, they had to face the unavoidable crisis.

By late morning the sun had risen to a height that cast few shadows among the foothills. Ank had run out of places to hide. His clothing offered no long-term solution. The prehistoric sun was too severe. His extra layers of fabric only forestalled a gruesome conflagration.

“You’ll have to bury me,” Ank announced.

“What?” squealed a repulsed Katy. “No—“

“No, he’s right,” grunted Sal. He crouched to help Ank hack at the leeward base of a mound. The hills were mostly rock, but an amount of dirt had accumulated in the valleys. Sal used knives, Ank his naked talons. Together they dug a trench roughly two feet deep.

“Missy and me, we gonna keep climbing,” Sal warned his digging partner.

“I’ll catch up,” Ank assured him.

With stunned horror, Katy watched Ank stretch out in the shallow grave. Then Sal pushed dirt into the hole, covering him up.

Sal took her arm to lead her away, but she shook him off and recoiled as if his touch burned her.

“We can’t just leave him buried like that,” she moaned.

“For the next twelve hours, he’s safer than we’ll be, Missy.”

“But—“

“Vamps get buried all the time. C’mon.”

“He’ll suffocate—“

“Only if he bothers to breathe.”

He dragged her away.



The terrain grew more jagged, the valleys shrinking to gigantic fissures that swept up to form the base of the mountain. What little scrub she’d seen earlier couldn’t survive here. Their trek left horizontal topography behind, taking them up precipitous slopes. A few hours’ climb brought them to a region where the incline leveled off to form a miniature butte. They rested there.

The rock shelf was about the size of city block. At its rear, the mountainside resumed its ascent. The going looked daunting to her; it was mostly vertical and sheer. The afternoon sun painted the bedrock a golden hue. Two large canyons lay nearby, one to the immediate left, the other to the far side.

When Katy pointed them out to Sal, he nodded and informed her he'd noticed them.

"It's already too damned hot—and it's only going to get worse," she moaned. Heat prostration threatened to destroy her. "Some shade would be a real lifesaver..."

"Okay," he grunted. He got up, helped her to her feet, and off they went, leaving the ledge behind. "Some shade would be nice."

Earlier, Katy had donned her royal robe to protect herself from the sun's cruel radiance. She'd jury-rigged a shawl to cover her head. She felt a brief empathy for Ank's sensitivity to sunlight. As uncomfortable as it got, at least the sun wouldn't burn *her* to an undead cinder.

Sal too had flipped up his hoodie's cowl to shield his broad face from a vicious sunburn.

Swaddled as they were to ward off the sun's burning rays, both of them sweated like broiled pigs underneath their protective garments. The notion of finding some shade was more than a casual whim.

He chose the nearer canyon. Past its V-shaped mouth sprawled a chasm that gradually expanded into a large open grotto. Steep granite walls hemmed in this hollow. A waterfall spilled from above, tumbling into a deep pool of crystal-clear water. The pond leaked away through several small streams that carried away excess spillage to lower regions of the mountainscape. The maw of another chasm opened the far side of the grotto, leading deeper into the hills.

For now, though, both Katy and Sal only had eyes for the pond. Heedless of any modesty, they stripped off their clothing and dove into the pool with grateful excitement.

The water was barely cool, but to Katy it felt freezing after so many hours straining and sweating on the mountainside. It refreshed her. It washed away her perspiration and grime. It made her feel good—almost optimistic. She was surprised to hear laughter echoing in the grotto—and to realize it was hers.

Nearby, Sal's splashing signaled his own appreciation of the hidden pond.

For an hour, Katy cavorted in the pool, exploring its limits with laps and dives. The pit wasn't very deep, maybe twelve feet, with a roughly equal diameter. Eventually her fatigue returned, draining stamina from her limbs. Treading water, the girl spotted a ledge where Sal had spread out after his swim. She kicked over, but was unable to find a secure enough grip on the smooth stone edge to haul herself from the pool. A second later, Sal reached down, clasped his large hand around her delicate wrist

and hoisted her up onto the shelf. She collapsed beside him, breathing hard for a moment before she thanked him.

A selection of ledges surrounded the pond, but Sal had chosen one situated beneath a higher protuberance whose shadow cooled this spot.

He really was a wonderful bodyguard. Through all of the ordeals they'd shared, he'd constantly put her safety before his. He'd defended her often-misinformed opinions. He'd consoled her when the horror had grown too much to bear. He'd even rescued her from certain death at the hands of that power-mad Oop High Priest.

It was still afternoon, but the sun had passed beyond the crest of the mountain range, plunging the foothills into an early twilight.

Propping herself up on an elbow, Katy regarded his supine form. He was very hairy, but the strands were soft rather than kinky. His furry pelt failed to conceal the mighty sinews that corded his body. His broad face was rugged, but craggy with character. Still wet from his swim, his cranial tufts and braided beard clung to his well-formed skull and athletic neck—and didn't look as ridiculous. His lips were generous, wide...and inviting. His eyes were closed as he rested.

Granted, if she'd met him in a bar, Katy wouldn't have shown Sal much interest. Her taste in men liked them leaner and less hairy. But she'd gotten to know this man, and she liked the person inside this brawny frame. Maybe even more than just "liked"...

She found herself leaning down. As her face neared his, his eyes popped open. Surprise glittered in their murky depths, but then they softened and sedately closed. She paused her descent. Barely an inch separated their lips. He lifted his mouth to meet hers. They kissed, long but gently. As her tongue found its way into his mouth, his arms rose to embrace her. She felt him stiffen against her belly.

Before their passion could intensify, a voice spoke and shattered the mood.

"Enough of that!"

Katy frozen. So did Sal, but only for an instant. He immediately rolled atop her and adopted a protective crouch.

"No more sudden moves," the voice warned. "Next time I shoot first."

"You have us at a...disadvantage, sir," Sal addressed the man.

Katy could see him now, past the tensed muscles of Sal's arm. The stranger stood in the mouth of the second chasm that converged on the grotto. His very presence, much less his archaic attire, was startling enough under the circumstances. He was not an Oop—he was a human being! An old one, too. His face was tanned and weathered so severely that his wrinkles looked more like deep crevices in his flesh. White stubble decorated his chin, and wisps of white hair surrounded a bald pate. His tan clothing was immaculate down to his creased jodhpurs. The fabric at his hips flared out in triangular extensions. Wide pockets covered the baggy thighs. Below his knees, the pants tightened and disappeared

into high black leather boots. His jacket sported similar voluminous pockets. It was unbuttoned halfway to his waist, revealing a scrawny brown chest dusted with white fur. A strap around his neck supported a wide-brimmed helmet that hung against his back. This man was perfectly dressed for an African safari, yet here he stood in a prehistoric grotto, pointing a shotgun directly at her and Sal.

After all of Katy's grief and remorse over losing Andrew, after all the drunken one-night-stands she had declined, she'd finally suppressed her angst and made a move to rejoin the living by sharing herself with someone she might care about—only to be interrupted by a gun-toting stranger. Katy was mortified.

"Got you at a disadvantage, aye," grunted the old man. "And I aim to keep you that way until I've decided whether or not I like who you are."

Indeed, the appearance of this stranger had completely stunned Sal. Even now, his brow was still furrowed with something more troubling than concern.

"I'm Sal...and this is Katy. We—"

"Names don't mean shit. I can call myself Lamont Cranston, but it don't mean I am."

"Well...we're—uh—strangers to this land."

"Of course you don't belong here. Mammals never evolved into human beings in this world. So—what *are* you doing here?"

"We're stranded," offered Katy.

"Our trans-dimensional device was damaged," Sal added. "It delivered us to this world by accident."

"More lost travelers," spat the oldster.

"Would you mind if we got dressed?" Sal ventured a nod toward their piled clothes.

The stranger waved the nozzle of his shotgun. "But steer clear of those satchels...and it goes without saying: no weapons."

Sal handed Katy her garments and gallantly used his wide frame to shield her from elderly eyes as she squirmed into her halter and briefs. Only once she was decent did he move aside to don his own tattered pants and T-shirt.

"Push the rest of it into the water," instructed the old man.

With an exaggerated sigh, Sal kicked their satchels and remaining garments (his hoodie and her royal robe) into the pool. He pointedly left his extra knives and revolver sitting on the ledge.

The shotgun jerked aloft a few inches, then relevelled itself. "Up."

Rising cautiously, Katy joined Sal as they maneuvered along the ledge. The old man's shotgun remained fixed on them as they moved. He stepped back into the chasm and urged them to enter. Then he fell into place behind them. "Keep going."

"Listen," Sal tried to strike up a conversation. "You're clearly not from here, either. So that means you've got access to your own trans-d unit."

“Bear left up ahead.”

“Am I right?”

“Watch your feet. There’s a tripwire. Step over it.”

Sal stepped over the indicated spot. Once he wasn’t blocking her view, Katy spied a cord strung across the floor of the ravine. She carefully avoided disturbing it as she followed Sal deeper into the system of caves.

“Can never be too careful,” muttered the oldster as he accompanied them.

“Look,” Sal shared, “we really aren’t any kind of threat to you, okay?”

“Where’s the rest of your party?”

“What makes you think there’s more than us?”

“If your trans-dimensional device was with your gear, you’d have raised a stink when I made you dump it all in the water. Ergo: one of your other team members is carrying it.”

“What does it matter?” griped Katy. “It’s broken.”

“There was no reason to keep it,” Sal added. “Being broken and all.”

“I don’t believe you. Broken or not—it’s your only way off this world. You’d never discard it.”

“Maybe we lost it…” Katy ventured.

“Your girlfriend’s a terrible liar,” accused the old man.

“Yeah,” Sal sighed. “She needs to work on that...or learn to keep her trap shut.”

Katy smacked him. She’d only been trying to help; no reason to insult her so, especially not after they had come close to sharing more than the taste of each other’s tongues.

“So—” the old man insisted, “the rest of your party?”

Stopping, Sal turned to face the old man. “Dead and buried,” he responded. “There was a rock-fall. He was carrying the device. No way to dig him out.”

“Now *you’re* lying. At least you’re better at it than she is.”

“I can make it more colorful, if you’d like. How about...a T.Rex got him. Ate him whole. No way to track the beast and retrieve the unit from its dung.”

Katy winced. What was Sal doing—taunting their captor like this? He had a gun on them. She expected the codger to respond to Sal’s flippancy by threatening them with the weapon...but instead the old man smiled.

“About as bogus as you being a lost traveler, huh?” Sal accused him.

The oldster’s high brow wrinkled with suspicion.

“Nobody knows trans-d better than you, Doc. You’re far more than a ‘traveler,’ and ‘lost’?—never you.”

As he spoke, Sal took advantage of the stranger’s disconcertion to snatch the shotgun from the man’s grasp.

“Your years alone have made you rude, Doc. After all, we introduced ourselves...but you never did.” Holding the shotgun dangling by his leg, Sal lifted his free hand to gesture from Katy to the stranger. “Missy, meet Dr Winston Pastorius.”

Katy's surprise was matched by the old man's surly grimace.



What a fantastic twist of luck!

Stranded on a world not their own, they had stumbled upon the inventor of trans-dimensional technology! If anyone could help get them home, it was Dr Pastorius!

At least, so it seemed to Katy.

She wasn't aware what a curmudgeonly bastard he was.

But wait—there were more surprises waiting in the wings.



“You're just crazy,” the old man proclaimed. “Nobody knows what Pastorius looks like.”

“If anybody does, it's me,” Sal asserted. “I'm his son.”

Wo! Katy's head was reeling. “First we run into Dr Pastorius out here in this prehistoric wasteland,” she muttered to herself. “And now—” She wheeled on Sal. “—it turns out you're his *son*?” She smacked him again. “I don't know if I can handle any more surprises!”

“I believe we'd all like to hear who this lad thinks he is,” announced a newcomer. Another person stepped forth from the shadows. The shotgun he held was raised and aimed at Sal. “But I think you'll be more convincing without the gun.”

Dr Pastorius took his shotgun back from Sal.

Katy gasped.

This newcomer was...another Dr Pastorius! Identical faces, same wispy hair, same unfriendly scowl. They were even dressed alike, although this new one's jacket was buttoned to his neck.

“Two of you!” grunted Sal. “Didn't expect that...”

The first Dr Pastorius herded Sal and Katy at gunpoint into a cave. This was where the other had come from. Two bedrolls were spread out. A pair of knapsacks sat next to a long rock shelf. Several tunnels converged on this underground chamber. It was obviously their campsite. The second Dr Pastorius kept a prudent distance from Sal, but his aim never wavered from the burly man.

“I gotta agree with Doc Number Two.” declared yet another new voice. “Can't wait to hear everybody's epic stories. Only this time, *I'll* hold the guns.”

A pair of arms reached out from the dark mouth of one of the tunnels. Each hand held a revolver pointed at a Dr Pastorius.

Katy's head threatened to explode—too many surprises!

Once he had collected the shotguns from the old men, Sal bid them to have a seat on a narrow shelf that lined one flank of the cave. He used his feet to nudge their knapsacks out of their reach.

Now Ank stepped from the shadows. He was smeared with dirt—but alive. (Well, technically *undead*.) He lowered his revolvers, but did not put them away.

"Ank!" Katy cheered. "You're okay!"

"Yup," he assured her. "Soon as the mountains blocked the full rays of the sun, I dug myself up. Tracked you up the slope to the grotto. Got there just in time to see Doc here march you off at gunpoint. I followed—via a different route. These hills are honeycombed with tunnels."

"See?" Sal remarked to Doc Number One. "Part of what I told you was true. Our missing associate was dead...and buried, to protect himself from the sun."

"You're vampires!" the Doc huffed.

"Just me, Doc," Ank assured him.

"Vermin!" hissed Doc Number Two. He glared at Katy and Sal, accusing them: "If you sympathize with *them*, then you're *traitors* to your own species!"

"That's pretty harsh, Dad."

"Screw their prejudices, everybody's entitled to them," Ank commented. "I wanna hear about this 'dad' biz."

"So do I," both Docs proclaimed in tandem.

"Yeah!" Katy felt a little foolish being the last to chime in, but she was still having difficulty assimilating all the twists and secrets being unveiled.

Now that he was the center of attention, caught in a triple crossfire, Sal flushed with embarrassment. "I really don't like talking about this..."

"You kept it secret from everybody in the Bat Pack," grumbled Ank.

"But I suppose," Sal continued, "the cat's out of the bag, as it were..." He glared at the two Docs. "There are so *many* alternate worlds. No matter how far I traveled, I never expected to run into *you*...much less two of you together."

"We've joined forces," muttered Doc Number Two.

"That's an understatement," laughed Ank. He threw Sal a knowing look. "You gotta see the gear they got stashed back in these caves. Real high-tech stuff. They even got a gas generator for electricity."

Sal perked up. "You're still tinkering with the process!"

The Docs sullenly refused to comment.

"Interesting enough," Ank interrupted. "But let's get back to you being their kid."

“Well, technically, they’re my dad, but I’m not their kid. My dad’s dead. But he was a Dr Winston Pastorius. Let me explain...”

He proceeded to do so: “In my world, Mom never died.” This brought both Docs erect with anxiety, but Sal ignored their passion and continued. “Eventually, the Pastorius family in my world had a child—me. Because my Dad never lost his wife, his trans-dimensional research was never misguided by spiritualism like other Dr Pastoriuses. The trans-d technology he invented was far superior to other versions. And he understood what it did. Unfortunately, a terrorist group discovered his work and wanted to steal it. They broke into his lab, killed him, then made off with his invention. Later, using a unit Dad had hidden at home, I went hunting those terrorist bastards. They murdered my father. I swore to see them punished for that.”

“Darcy!” gasped Katy. “He was the leader of the terrorists who killed your father!” Suddenly Sal’s fierce hate for Darcy made sense.

Sal nodded. “That’s why I joined the Bat Pack. Stopping that bastard is one of their primary concerns.”

Katy cocked her head.

Ank whispered a brief explanation, “Bat Pack’s *primary* goal is finding a new world so our population can emigrate there. Two years ago, we found the perfect world—fertile and empty of any intelligent species—but Darcy tried to claim it for himself. The bastard poisoned that world so we couldn’t have it. Ever since, Darcy’s been high on our hit list.”

Meanwhile, Sal had turned his account into a personal plea to the dual Docs. “But fate has screwed with my chances of bringing Darcy to justice. Because of a run-in with his minions, I’m stranded here in this prehistoric world, unable to get back where I can aid in the bastard’s downfall. But—you can help me! Ank says you’ve got trans-d gear nearby. You can repair our WayBack unit!” In his excitement, Sal was actually slobbering.

“We’re not going to help you!” snapped Doc Number Two. “You’re in league with these depraved vampires!”

“But—“ Katy blurted out. “They’re *good* vampires!”

“No such thing!” growled the Doc.

“All they’re trying to do is find a new home. Their world’s a scorched wasteland.” She turned to Ank. “Tell them!”

With a shrug, the vampire dismissed the matter. “Not my job to de-bigot them.”

She rolled her eyes with exasperation.

Sal was right. Suddenly there was hope of escaping this world...but it depended on convincing the two Docs to put aside their hatred for what they thought Ank’s kin were like, put aside that prejudice and aid the Bat Pack in their battle against Darcy—whose villainy far outshined any the Docs could attribute to the Bat Pack. It was a question of which one was the Greater Evil—Darcy or the vampires? Having been tormented by

Darcy's agents, then befriended and repeatedly rescued by members of the Bat Pack, Katy's sympathies were understandably wholly pro-vamp.

Ank could help convince the Docs to change their minds, but he was too proud—or snooty. Whatever his reasons, Katy wished he'd start thinking about the survival of the group and speak up on their own behalf.

"Maybe you guys can use their equipment to repair the unit yourself?" Katy proposed. But she knew she was grasping for straws. The Pastorius device was an incredibly sophisticated piece of hardware. For all of Sal's and Ank's skills, it seemed implausible that mechanical engineering would be among them.

"Please..." Sal implored the Docs. "Don't you want to see the man who murdered you pay for that crime?"

"Nobody murdered *me*," Doc Number One responded with a blatant edge of mocking disdain in his denial.

"You're on your own, kid," declared Doc Number Two. "You and your filthy undead bedfellows."

Suddenly, Ank wheeled about and adopted a wary crouch. "Company," he hissed.

What now? moaned Katy. *I can't cope with any more surprises—*

"They're Oops," Ank announced. "Must be another hunting party."

"You're on the run from the indigenous apes?" barked Doc Number Two.

"And you led them *here*?" the other Doc complained. "Dammit! You've ruined every—"

"Everybody up," ordered Sal. When the Docs remained seated, he jabbed them with a shotgun barrel. They reluctantly rose to their feet. Meanwhile, Sal had turned to consult with Ank, "Where are they?"

The vampire inclined his head in the direction from which the old men had escorted Katy and Sal. "Back at the grotto."

As the Docs reached to grab their knapsacks, Sal kicked the bags away. "Uh uh—no gear for us, no gear for you."

"Maybe they'll go away?" ventured Katy.

Sal gave a curt snort. "Fat chance. Those Oop hunters are sharp fellows. If they don't spot our stuff in the pool, they're bound to sniff us out."

"Sal's right. They're coming." Without looking away from the crevasse that led from the grotto, Ank pointed at one of the other tunnels. "Go that way. After the cave they're using for a lab, go right, then right again, then left—you'll come out on the mountainside. Keep moving. I'll catch up with you."

Katy groaned, "You're not coming?"

"Somebody gotta slow them down."

"Your 'good vampire' just wants to slaughter them," Doc Number Two exclaimed.

Ank turned to face the uncooperative Docs. His eyes flashed a vivid scarlet in the gloom. A snarl curled his lip. "Get these old farts outta here before I throw them to the apes as a distraction."

Sal urgently herded everybody from the cave. In his haste, he let the two Pastoriuses go first, followed by Katy. He brought up the rear.

Stumbling into the Docs' laboratory brought a gasp to her panting mouth. Bigger than the prior one, this cavern was shaped like a lozenge the size of a subway car. Machinery was piled everywhere, connected by a tangled nest of thick cables. A bulky turbine motor purred as it generated power for the accumulated apparatus. One card-table was littered with various pieces of hardware in states of disassembly; the other was relatively empty but scorched black.

Sal showed up just in time to see one Doc grab Katy and fling her at him. The other Doc was busy rifling through the loose equipment scattered on a folding table. As Katy fell against Sal, the Pastoriuses dashed away down another tunnel. Not the one on the right which Ank had advised them to take.

Cursing under his breath, Sal paused for a dire moment to decide between hasty escape and catching the fleeing seniors.

"Sal!" she yelled, forcing him to abandon his debate unresolved. "C'mon!" She headed down the tunnel recommended by Ank. Grumbling aloud, the bodyguard followed her.

They raced along a narrow passageway, and at the first branch Katy took the right end of the fork. Minutes later, she dove into a left chasm that led upward. Sal faithfully remained on her heels, guarding their rear.

This ascending crevasse delivered her to the outside of the mountain. Night hid most of the view, but the gloom wasn't thick enough to conceal the precipitous drop that yawned beyond Katy's toes. A brisk wind clutched at her, making her hair dance out vertically from her scalp. She immediately scuttled back into the crevasse. "Can't," she gasped to Sal. He edged past the girl to survey the next leg of their flight. "We have to find another route," she hoarsely added.

"No time," he called back to her.

"I *can't* go out there," she whined.

"You're gonna have to, Missy." He returned to where she had retreated deeper into the fissure. "There's a ledge out there, but it's too narrow for me to manage while carrying you. You're gonna have to do it on your own."

"No!"

"I'll be there. I'll steady you. I won't let you fall."

A bevy of panics preyed on Katy's concentration. Her fear of heights; dread of falling into Oop hands; not to mention a general overall hysteria generated by the last half-hour. All fought to dominate her mind. But none of these choices offered any hope of survival. Sal was forcing her to pick which way she wanted to die. And once she realized that, it was added to

the turmoil of anxiety filling her head. She knew she had to decide—and fast—but terror locked her into indecision.

She cowered against the side of the crevasse. She was too afraid to even tremble. And when Sal grabbed her and dragged her toward the opening, she didn't resist his superior strength, but she remained frozen in position like a mannequin. Hanging in the mouth of the fissure, with the wind tearing at them, Sal slapped Katy's face—hard. And again. "C'mon!" he shouted above the howl of the gale. "You need your wits about you, Missy!"

And Sal was pushing Katy from the dubious safety of the crevasse—out into the void. Coming alive, she scrambled to seize hold of him...but he deftly avoided her fingers...leaving only the side of the mountain for her to grab. She hung there, breathless and terrified, for what seemed like an eternity—before Sal poked her side with a stern finger.

"Get moving!"

Her feet found purchase somehow. She hugged the wall. The wind battered her, but failed to dislodge her precarious equilibrium.

She stole a peek downward and wished she hadn't. The side of the mountain swept away, vanishing into stomach-wrenching depths—down, down, *down!* Her naked toes rested on a diminutive ledge that ran away into the twilight distance. Flattening against the rock-face, she squeezed her eyes shut. Her fingertips sought the tiniest deviation in the rock's texture to clutch.

The cold gradually numbed her fingers, endangering her hold, which was tenuous to begin with. Pressing against the rock-face, she flexed the digits of one hand. She dreaded that this brief release of a single handhold would upset her stability, so she forced herself to flex quickly and regain her trifling grip. She counted twenty seconds before repeating the maneuver with her other hand. In truth, neither flex brought her any relief; the gesture was too fleeting to stimulate any fresh bloodflow into her distressed fingers.

"You're doing okay, Missy. Now, inch along the ledge, nice and easy..."

She tried to heed his helpful advice. The fingers of her right hand released the microscopic projections they'd found and moved aside, searching for another crack or crevice they could clutch. Her hand traveled across the rock-face. All the while she prayed that her remaining grip was strong enough to hold her in place. But her fingers weren't finding any handy ridges. The stone surface was coarse, but decades of high altitude winds had polished the grain too fine for her to even catch a fingernail. Her hand continued to creep to the side, her fingers hunting for secure purchase. Hell, she'd even settle for unsecure purchase. Her arm was almost entirely extended laterally, and still no handhold offered itself. She feared for her overall balance. She was about to withdraw the arm and return her fingers to their original niches—if she could find them

again!—when her fingertips grazed a deviation in the rock’s curvature. A vertical crack. She wedged her fingers into its modest depths.

Now she had to move her main body along, following her outstretched arm. She did so slowly, pressing her belly and moderately sized bosom against the rock.

She could only imagine how much more difficult this was going to be for Sal. His massive body had a higher center of gravity, and God only knew how his big feet could find any purchase on the almost nonexistent ledge.

One foot slid fractionally along the ledge, followed an instant later by a similar advance of her other foot. Her toes ached as they dug into the sparse surface area afforded by the tiny ridge

Her left hand eagerly sought the niches her right hand had recently vacated.

She had moved roughly twelve inches along the ledge. And the entire frightening process had only taken fifteen minutes. At this rate, she’d be a spinster before she crossed the mountainside and reached safe ground. (She had to believe “safe ground” lay out there somewhere. Ank wouldn’t have recommended this route if it didn’t lead somewhere...)

Don’t think about how long it’s taking, Katy cautioned herself. Concentrate on what you just did. You’ve got to do it again and again, over and over until it gets you somewhere. Keep your cool and focus on the rock-face...

She found this helpful. By shutting out most external elements, she reduced her entire world to herself and the ledge crossing a section of vertical rock. The wind receded. All her senses honed in on her immediate position. In fact, she even fancied that the mountain itself had ceased to exist, that she crawled along a ledge only inches off the ground. That really helped.

With all the causes of her stress removed, Katy was able to relax and feel a bit more confident. She sought to speed up her progress.

And one foot lost the ledge and dangled free. In an instant, panic abolished all her recent calm. The impulse to thrash her leg was strong.

But suddenly she felt Sal’s hand in the small of her back. “Chill,” he whispered. “I got you.” He pressed her against the rock-face and held her there.

She lifted her loose leg, sliding her inner thigh along the cold stone. Her toes twitched as they sought the ledge. There it was! Once again, she was able to support herself where she clung like an insect to the steep mountainscape.

“I’m okay,” she told him.

“Take a minute to collect yourself,” suggested Sal.

“I’m *okay!*” she insisted. This time her voice sounded more emphatic than just reassuring.

It took her a few minutes to shake off the meager tension his concern had inspired in her. Then she had to concentrate on editing the unpleasant aspects of her predicament from her mind so they wouldn't influence her capacity to do anything. She'd never realized how difficult it was to forget something; it wasn't easy to cancel something from memory without naming it, which tended to undermine the whole "forgetting" process. The entire affair might have been easier for someone with a modicum of familiarity with zen meditation, but she'd never gone in for any of that hippy stuff.

I used to be so pragmatic, she thought. And here I am running around an alternate Earth in the company of a bona fide vampire.

Slowly—ever so slowly—Katy maneuvered herself along the paltry ledge. Inch by inch, scraping her fingertips until they were slippery with blood. She doubted she had any intact fingernails left. And her toes ached as if aflame.

But I'm doing it, she congratulated herself. I'm actually do—

Something snagged Katy in both armpits and hoisted her from her precarious stance. For a second she dangled free of the face of the mountain. Her fingers and toes desperately clutched for the rock. A scream rose instinctively in her throat.

And suddenly she was dragged onto a solid horizontal surface. She spread her arms to hug this ground—but whatever had hold of Katy continued to drag her across this level plane. Seconds later, she was enveloped by sweaty hairy arms. Somebody was saying something, but she couldn't hear it past her screaming. She hadn't even noticed she was still bellowing with terrified surprise. Before any of this made sense, the arms deposited her on her ass with her back pressed against a solid wall.

Her hands fluttered before her, warding off any further contact. She needed to suppress her fear and find out what had happened. Her head swam, her heart pounded in her chest. She forced herself to stop shrieking and open her eyes.

She sat at the rear of a wide embankment of stone. The wall against her back reared into the heights to be swallowed by the night. Squatting nearby, Sal was talking to her, his voice emerging amid the dwindling echoes of her scream. Beyond him, the embankment dropped off abruptly.

"—now, so calm down, girl..."

She could barely manage to rasp out "What?" Her throat was sore from all her screaming.

"You hokay now?" he inquired.

She nodded, but the movement was more a jerk than any smooth motion.

"Where are we?"

“On the mountainside.” Sal’s expression grew more concerned. “You do remember what’s going on, *right?* The grotto, encountering the two Doc Pastoriuses, escaping from another Oop hunting party...”

“I know all that stuff. But—how’d we get *here?*”

He smiled. “I spotted this bigger ledge above us. I climbed up to it, then reached down and hauled you up. I tried to warn you, I called down to you, but you didn’t seem to hear me...”

Of course I couldn’t hear you, she reflected. *You were part of everything I had to block out to conquer my fear of heights.* A glance at the edge of the wide ledge brought a hitch to her chest, and Katy knew that she hadn’t really *conquered* anything, just sublimated it for a few moments. But now it was back, and knowing where she was fed terror back into her system.

Intellectually, she knew her present location was completely safe. Sitting on stable ground, a solid wall against her back. If she fell now, it was only a matter of tipping over and bumping her shoulder.

But the part of her brain that responded to fear refused to be fooled by the facts. She was *still* way too high above the ground. If the mountain ledge wasn’t there, she’d be perched hundreds of feet in the air. A fall like that would kill her for sure—if she didn’t succumb to a heart attack on the way down.

Sal was still talking, seeking to reassure Katy that everything was alright.

“Okay,” she mumbled. “Okay okay...” She wished he’d shut up and give her a chance to acclimate herself to this new development. She knew he just wanted to help, but part of “helping” was giving her the chance to adjust to—

The ground under her shifted. The wall at her back shuddered. The entire mountainside shook. A muffled explosion rolled through the night.

A fresh scream sprang to Katy’s lips. She spread her limbs, as if that maneuver would save her if the mountain was collapsing. The sudden tremors even toppled Sal on his butt. He scrambled to prevent himself from sliding too near the edge.

The quake didn’t last long. She prayed there’d be no aftershocks.

Minutes later, a trail of smoke billowed up from below.

“Damn them,” Sal growled. Venturing close to the brink of the rocky mantle (far too close for Katy’s taste), he peered beyond into the dark depths.

“Wh—what the hell was that?” Katy gasped.

“Explosive of some kind,” he replied without turning back to face her. He continued studying the lower mountainside. “Those bastards must’ve rigged their lab to blow—destroying all their gear so nobody else could use it.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Sal...but your father is a dick.”

“Technically, neither of those guys were my father,” he mumbled. “But I can’t argue with your evaluation. Most of the Dr Pastoriuses running around out there are dangerous assholes.”

“Are there really that many of them?”

He shrugged and rejoined her away from the edge. “Supposedly...although these are the first ones I’ve ever encountered. Besides my own dad, that is—and *he* was a decent person...nothing like those pompous bigots.”

“That doesn’t seem right, does it? That a dickhead ends up inventing alternate worlds...”

“Pastorius didn’t ‘invent’ alternate worlds, Missy. He simply discovered how to break down the barriers separating different dimensions.” He gave her a wry smile. “But you have a valid point.”

“I wonder how many other famous inventors were pricks outside the labs?”

Scanning the heights, Sal remarked, “I think it’d be advisable for us to put some more distance between ourselves and this area. Who knows how good those Oop hunters really are...”

The wide ledge swung around to lead deeper into the mountains. Here, the gradient parted into a pair of divergent peaks. Just beyond its mouth, the separating crevasse widened to become a gorge. The valley contained an assortment of boulders fallen from the heights. The result was a jumbled morass, offering countless hiding niches and easy climbing. Sal led Katy up a ragtag incline to an almost horizontal slope, which in turn brought them to a canyon hidden within the mountainside. Here, only hints of starlight trickled past the chasm’s steep breach to illuminate the cleft. Holes dotted the walls, some scarcely big enough to fit a person if they curled into a fetal ball, others larger and penetrating to hidden depths into the mountain itself.

Sal selected one of these deeper cavities. Once he had ascertained that the burrow harbored no lurking beasts, he helped Katy up and into it. Inside, ten feet along the tunnel, Katy settled down. Exhaustion hit her hard and sleep came easy.



When she woke, Ank had joined them in the cave.

He offered her food and drink, which he’d appropriated from the hunters who had tracked the group beyond the foothills. Of the hunters’ fate, he offered no comment, and she asked no questions. She’d learned by now to avoid subjects she didn’t have the stomach to hear about. It was enough for Ank to assure Katy that she had nothing to fear from those stalkers.

The food was dried jerky, and the drink was stale water—but she welcomed both. It seemed like days since her last meal; it might’ve been,

too, but she shied away from memories of her time in Troy. It disturbed her to think that the entire time she'd munched delicacies in Her Majesty's royal chambers, High Priest Furgo had planned her death.

Ank and Sal conferred in hushed tones—hushed enough this time that she could not overhear their discussions. Not that it mattered much to her.

A sense of ennui had seeped into Katy's dazed consciousness. She'd experienced a lot lately, much of it harsh and hostile as far as she was concerned. It seemed that ever since she'd agreed to help the Bat Pack, everybody else had rallied to harass or slaughter her.

She took to sitting at the mouth of the cave, staring off into space. One might've suspected she was lost in her thoughts, but her mind was usually empty during these periods. One might've hoped she was seeking mental stability through meditation, but her state of mind was headed down darker paths. Despair had conquered Katy Claye.

At one point, Sal left the cave. He was gone for several hours, and had nothing to say about his whereabouts when he returned.

The man's comings and goings meant nothing to Katy. The accumulate effects of all of her ordeals had finally crushed her spirit. She had no more hope left in her. Never again would she see her own world. None of her friends were very close, so her disappearance might go unnoticed for months. If anybody ever missed her. It was possible the authorities would presume she had perished in the explosion that Darcy's minions had set to catch her. Consequently, there were no belongings for her to worry about, the few things she'd owned had been atomized in that same explosion. (Not that she *really* cared, for she still had not forgiven Chris for glamouring her into this mess, but he was someone else she'd never see again.) Everything she had liked (and disliked)—all of it was gone—a world away, quite literally. She had a lot to mourn for.

Do I really?

That thought offered a whole new avenue of depression.

Her life before had been pretty...drab. Okay, for a short time, her life had been wonderful, but then Andrew had died...and everything had stopped being enjoyable. Worse, her grief had made each moment torturous. She'd been happy, but fate had swiftly taken that away. Was it any wonder she'd sought solace in a bottle? And even that escape had been distasteful. She'd been a sloppy drunk. Look where alcohol had gotten her—

Days passed. While the sun traveled across the sky, Ank retreated to stygian safety in the depths of the cave network. By night, the two men went exploring, collecting sundries from what was left of the Docs' secret hideaway. They confiscated everything they could find (to the victors went the spoils, after all), the Docs' bedrolls and backpacks and hidden storage lockers, which offered a surprising selection of amenities—like toilet paper.

Katy *really* appreciated that piece of booty. It actually raised her spirits enough that she was lucid for a while.

Being lucid turned out to be a very dreary thing.

There was nothing to do—except sit around and stare off into space.

It rained one evening: a nice diversion...but even that quickly lost its appeal as an oppressive humidity settled into the canyon of caves.

The guys avoided her, engaging in their scheme-fests just out of earshot. When she accused them of cutting her out of things, they sullenly agreed with her. No, they weren't being "sullen"—they were *crestfallen!* She wasn't the only one assailed by despair. While Katy'd been moping, the guys had earnestly attacked the problems facing the group...and after days of analysis they'd come to an unavoidable conclusion:

"We're screwed."

Sal concurred. "We scoured every passageway the Docs were using. We found some stuff—trivial things, like plates and eating utensils and toilet paper—" She wanted to interrupt and point out that toilet paper was *anything but* trivial, but Sal picked up his pace, his words tumbling out as if powered by a visceral need to vocalize the details of his despair. "—but nothing *really* useful—nothing that'll help us get out of here. And by 'here' I mean this world, not just this barren mountain range. The bomb those bastards set really wiped out their lab. We'll never know what they were working on there. The entire cavern collapsed, burying everything. Even if we could dig the cave out, there'd be nothing salvageable among the pulverized ruins. We're trapped here."

Sal released a heavy sigh and continued, slower this time. "I'll never get the chance to track down Darcy and punish him for murdering my father."

"We all got stuff we'll never get the chance to do," grumbled Ank.

She gave a sad pout. *Except none of my undone stuff matters...*



Later, Katy learned that while she'd been zoned out, Ank had thwarted two more teams of Oop hunters. Sal had helped. Gratefully, neither went into any detail when relating these incidents. At least this explained the constant supply of jerky and bottled water. She figured Ank was getting what he needed from the hunters' corpses.

The Oops' relentless pursuit of their prey worried Sal.

"They aren't going to give up. Somebody—either Furgo's surviving disciples, or the scheming Bokoo clan—has riled the city into a bloodthirsty frenzy. They're hell-bent on hunting down the heathen assassins who murdered their glorious goddess. It doesn't matter how far we run or how deep we hide, they're going to track us down. And one of

these times, their numbers or arsenal or just plain fervor is going to overwhelm us—and that'll be it."

"There must be something we can do—" But even as the girl spoke, she knew the answer.

"You wanna go back to Troy and try and set them straight?"

"God—no!" The very idea made her sick to her stomach.

"Didn't think so."

"But—we have to do *something!*"

"They got their probs, we got ours. Bitch of it is: they're contributing to our probs."

"If only we'd found the WayBack device Darcy's men had used to follow us here," groused Sal.

"Wasn't anything for us to find," Ank pointed out.

"The unit could've been in their tent," argued the burly man. "It probably went to the bottom of the cliff when you pushed the thing over the edge."

Why did this topic bother Katy? It wasn't the obvious reason: without a WayBack device, there was no way for them to escape this prehistoric hell. No, it was some other aspect that initiated Katy's distress. An itch crawled through her cortex, triggering memory synapses as it went...how uncomfortable the Queen's royal wardrobe had been...how Ank had acted more aggressive after drinking raptor blood...how Sal had tried to convince her to eat bugs...how dinosaur steak had tasted a lot like chicken... But none of these recollections satiated the itch. There was something else, something she knew but had forgotten.

"Not likely. If they had half-a-brain, they'd've kept it close." Ank's hand strayed to touch his hip pocket where he kept their own broken unit. "It was their lifeline—their only way back home."

"If we'd found the black box," sighed Sal, "then we'd have Hot Sauce and we wouldn't be stranded anywhere."

"Wait—" Katy cried aloud. "That's it!"

So fierce was her outburst, the two men recoiled.

"What?" ventured Sal.

"You were worried that Darcy had gotten hold of some Hot Sauce! If he did, then maybe that's why that pack of thugs didn't have a WayBack device!"

"They didn't need a device..." Sal fingered one of his mustache braids. "...because they were all inoculated with Hot Sauce?"

"Even if that's the case, it don't help us," grumbled Ank. "They're all dead."

"But—" Katy pointed out with raw urgency. "You drank from some of them!"

"Not something I'm proud of..."

Sal shrugged. "I don't see the—"

“Wait...” grunted Ank. “I think I see her point... If any of those guys were inoculated with Hot Sauce, then it’d be in the blood I took from them.”

“And now it’s in *you!*” Katy squealed.

“Uhh...”

“We don’t need to repair the broken WayBack device.” She jumped to her feet. “*You’re* one big WayBack machine now! You can get us back home!”

“That’s a real stretch, Missy,” confided Sal.

“Maybe not...” Ank muttered. He stood and began to pace back and forth in the mouth of the cave. Beyond him, a torrent of rain generated a shimmering backdrop. “It all depends on how potent Hot Sauce is. How big a dose is necessary to give a person trans-d capabilities...is the effect permanent?...or does it wear off? If it’s a viral element, does it replicate in the bloodstream?...or was the virus designed to be sterile, limiting the length of the infection?”

“A lot of ‘ifs,” remarked Sal with a touch of fatalism.

“Even if her suspicion’s correct, I have no idea how to activate the process,” Ank confessed wearily.

“But—“ she insisted. “It’s a possibility! A few minutes ago, we were stranded without a shred of hope—*now* there’s *hope!*”

“Hope don’t fill the zeppelin,” Sal grunted.

The guys both laughed at this. Once again, Katy didn’t get the joke.



Later, she saw them conducting another of their private confabs. She felt resentful. Why were they still excluding her? She’d offered a viable suggestion—a way that might get them back home. Admittedly, they had considered her clever deduction, but then they’d dumped skepticism all over it. That wasn’t fair. They understood far more than she ever could about trans-dimensional technology. Why weren’t *they* coming up with some brilliant scheme to save them?

Stupid boys club, she grumbled to herself.



The next evening, Ank surprised them all with a feast.

“I was looking for more stuff in the caves, and I came upon a goat. Spry bugger, ran me a healthy chase before I caught it. But—it led me to a cave we missed on our previous reconns.” He had two bulging satchels with him. Now he opened one with flourish. “Docs had a garden going! How’s some fresh veggies sound?”

Katy would never have expected the thought of vegetables to make her mouth water—but it did.

Sal rooted through the sack's contents. "Onions, carrots, potatoes. Nice haul, Ank."

"A vegetable stew," cooed Katy.

"Ha—a *meat* stew, girl," Ank corrected her. "Don't forget the goat."

Days earlier, Sal had scouted the lower foothills and returned with a supply of twigs. He used that collection to build a fire. A stout cooking pot was produced from the Docs' kitchenware. While Ank dressed the goat, reducing its meat to bite-size chunks, Katy chopped vegetables with her back to the vampire's grisly chore. Visiting the grotto, Sal returned with a full pot of water for cooking. Ank still had his butane lighter; he used it to set the twigs aflame. They positioned three oblong stones around the fire to support the cooking pot. Then the three sat around the campfire and told stories while the blaze converted the ingredients into a thick stew.

Ank's tale was sad. In it, he was an adolescent vampire. His world was only recently scorched by solar flares and reduced to a planet-sized cinder. Vampires were tenacious creatures; portions of the burned world's populace survived by moving their civilization underground, away from the sun's now-deadly ultraviolet radiation. Most had stubbornly remained aboveground, to slow-burn or devolve into scavenger packs who raided their subterranean kin. Life was hard for the undead. Food supplies were scarce, for most of the species the vampires had relied upon as sources of blood had been wiped out by the lethal radiation storm. Back then, Ank had a sister, Soth, a lovely girl two years his junior. Blonde and lithe, her spirit had been crushed by the downfall of society. She would never grow up to party and date and start a brood with a handsome mate. Her life now was confined to gray tunnels crowded with other claustrophobes. In an attempt to cheer Soth up, Ank had taken her camping. They hiked through miles of dreary passages until he brought her to a massive cavern that opened upon the outside world. He had hoped that seeing how truly desolate topside was, Soth might develop more tolerance for her new subterranean life. It had the opposite effect. Sight of the barren, literally-scorched earth had filled her with utter despair. Escaping his custody, she had fled the safety of the cave's recessed shade—out into the full glare of the deadly sun. Her flesh had bubbled away, then her skeleton had degenerated to ash. The radiation was so intense that she would have perished even if she hadn't been a vampire. But then, at that point in time, since Ank's people were all vampires, they had no concept of sentient non-vampiric human beings. The animals they bred as sources of blood, those creatures had been able to survive normal sunlight, back before the outburst; but now, all life hid from the ruptured sun's toxic output. It wasn't until the Bat Pack got trans-d technology that they encountered people who were not vampires. That took some getting used to—people who weren't undead but were intelligent. Some radical groups became intoxicated by the idea of feeding on sentient life-forms, in flagrant opposition to ancient doctrines that forbade feeding on people—it

was a matter of common decency. No sane vampire would drink human blood any more than they would drink the blood of their vampiric brethren. Ank suspected that members of these human-eaters were the ones who had defected to Darcy's mob, for no respectable vampire would condone Darcy's wanton bloodthirsty pursuits.

Toward the end, Ank's tale wandered; he was no storyteller. He almost forgot to point out the moral of his story (at least, what his mind perceived as a moral pertinent to their present circumstances). Ank believed that, although his sister had been faced with absolute despair, her suicide had been an overreaction. No matter how hopeless a situation seemed, you never knew what tomorrow would bring. It was worth sticking around—just in case things got better. Or at least different. Years later, the acquisition of trans-d technology had introduced hope into the lives of every vampire condemned to spend their nights prowling cold underground tunnels. If only Soth had waited...

Sal was also a poor storyteller. Instead of wandering, his tale required constant sidenotes to explain something he felt was germane to his central thread...although his sidereal explanations often served to further confuse Katy. She'd been led to believe that Sal's Earth was reasonably similar to hers, but his tale repeatedly referenced things of a fantastic nature that had no parallel in her world.

Dissecting away enough his verbal jumble, Katy determined that his actual tale had involved some family trip to see Santa Fe's giant Space Beanstalk. A marvel of modern science, the structure linked the planet with an orbiting space station. Apparently, Sal's father had contributed to the design of the monument, so the Pastorius family was granted a VIP tour of the facility. This occasion had cemented the boy's fervent respect for his father. Dad was a famous scientist and a great dad. He was nothing like the two Dr Pastoriuses they had encountered in the caves. Sal's dad would've moved heaven and earth to help them find their way home...if he still lived...

Another point against Sal's storytelling skill: while the fundamental nucleus of his convoluted tale had celebrated a boy's love for his dad, it had veered off into a distinctly sad mood for the ending.

Katy's story seemed trivial in comparison to these two epic tales. How could "I had a really tasty ice cream cone one day in the park" compete with "the death of a world, followed by my sister's suicide" and "what I did this summer with my awesome dad"? She didn't even know why she bothered to tell it. She was self-conscious the entire time, and toward the end became almost defensive in trying to justify how good the ice cream was. It'd been a *really* hot day, and she was all gussied up for a job interview (which had gone terribly) and her clothes were uncomfortable and sweaty and itchy and she hadn't had any breakfast because she'd woken up late and had to hurry through dressing-to-impress and she'd completely blown the interview and they'd probably

never even call her to tell her no...and at that point buying that ice cream cone had just seemed like a long-overdue treat that she desperately needed. Sitting in the park, eating that treat...all of her stress and tension had evaporated away, vanishing with each subsequent lick.

If this was the best thing Katy could remember from her old life, her existence had indeed been hollow and uninteresting.

Why do I want to return to it so badly?



After the stew had been bubbling for a while in the pot, Sal and Katy slopped healthy portions into bowls, then spooned the chunky liquid into their faces. Her first mouthful was too hot, so she waited a few minutes before trying another taste.

Meanwhile, Sal finished his serving and started on a second.

Ank even sampled some of it.

It was runny and undercooked and particularly bland.

It was the best thing she'd eaten in...a looong time.

6.

Katy slept deeply that night, her head full of dreams she couldn't remember when dawn woke her. All that was left was a residual exhaustion, as if she'd dreamt of running and woken with achy thighs. Except her fatigue felt centered in her heart (her emotional one, not her vascular organ). She missed home. She couldn't bear to get up and face another day in this dreary cave. So she rolled over and went back to sleep.

This time she didn't dream of home...



Katy wakes up cold.

And baffled.

She's still in the cave, but its walls seem coated in ice. Crawling to the mouth of the tunnel, she gazes out at the canyon—and gasps. Ice covers everything out here too. No wait—she finds she can see the sky through portions of the rocky edifice. Everything isn't covered in ice—everything has become ice!

“Hey!” she yells. “What happened?”

But no reply comes. Both of her traveling companions are gone. As is the crude campsite they'd built...and any other supplies they'd gathered from the Docs' secret hideaway.

Had winter crept upon the mountain range while she slept? But that wouldn't explain the missing gear.

Unless Sal and Ank packed up and ditched her.

No...they wouldn't do that...

She descends into the depths of the cave, where it links up with the network of tunnels that honeycombed the mountainside. She follows the route back to the grotto (which is frozen like a giant glass sculpture) and the Docs' hideaway (but there's no evidence of any habitation). More surprising: the cavern that had housed their laboratory isn't caved-in. Here too, no trace of the Docs' remained.

She has woken to a different world.



What am I supposed to do for food? she frets.

Oh hell, I'll freeze to death before I die of starvation.

Maybe the winter was confined to the mountains. Down on the prairie, the climate might be more tolerable.

Katy sets off right away. Her memories are hazy concerning the exact route Sal followed during their ascent...but she makes the best of what she can recall. Anyway, down is down.

But "down" proves to be more daunting than she expected. When Katy approaches the first precipice, she immediately backs away, a fist of fear squeezing her heart. Spread below is a sheer drop of dizzying proportion. Way way down there, the foothills glitter in the sunlight. She can never cope with climbing down from that vertiginous elevation.

Not that it will do her any good. From this altitude, she can see the prairie far below...and it's an arctic wasteland. Ice floes as far as the eye can see.

Her despondent mood and the oppressive cold makes her shiver. She retreats from the open ledge.

"I don't want to freeze to death." Her sad entreaty echoes through the caverns, a pixyesque plea repeating over and over, taunting her with her own anxiety.

"Where are you, girl?" comes a voice from a great distance.

Glancing around, Katy finds she is alone.

She feels a hand touch her shoulder, but still no one is there.

"This is no place for you," the voice speaks more imperatively.

Closing her eyes, Katy wraps her arms around herself and moans. Alone and cold, now insanity chitters to invade her psyche.

4. (resumed again)

“Hey!”

Jerking awake, Katy found herself staring up into Ank’s pale face. A frown clouded his features.

She shivered, but it wasn’t his annoyance that caused her to quake. She was cold. Somehow, the frigid temperatures of her dream had accompanied her into the waking world.

From the half-light that spilled through the mouth of the cave, Katy guessed the sun lay west of the mountain range, making it early evening.

“C’mon.” Releasing her, Ank turned away. “Time to go.”

“Huh?”

“We’re leaving.” He gathered some parcels. Sheets of fabric (salvaged from who-knew-where) had been wrapped as hobo-sacks around the things they’d salvaged from the Docs’ camp. Standing erect with his load, Ank pointed to another, smaller pile of stuff. “Get that stuff and follow me, girl.”

As she collected her share of the satchels, Katy resented Ank’s robust attitude. How was he maintaining his spry health? But then, she guessed he was dining in seclusion, preying on whatever beasts he could find roaming the mountainside. The vampire was always tactful about his grisly diet. With a small shudder, she wondered if he was feeding on the Oops hunters he fought off. He swore that only deviant vamps drank from sentient beings, but he’d done exactly that when he’d slaughtered Darcy’s minions. Granted, present circumstances fostered unpleasant choices in the name of survival. How far was Ank willing to stretch his ethics?

“Where’s Sal?”

“Waiting below for us.” With that, Ank disappeared into the cave’s depths.

She gathered her wits and followed him deep into the rocky vault. Their companion was not waiting there, so they ventured further into shadow, all the way to the grotto.

The waterfall filled the gorge with its wet thunder. Katy was relieved to find the water unfrozen. All of that had been nothing more than a dream, incited perhaps by her first substantial meal in days. She was back in the real world, a prisoner again of this prehistoric realm.

Sal waited beside the crystal-clear pool of water. A variety of satchels were lashed to his broad back, presumably containing additional supplies.

“Ah,” he grunted as they appeared.

“What now?” moaned Katy.

“Ank thinks it’s time we returned to the prairie.”

“Why?” Her abrupt awakening had left her churlish.

“Because it’s the next leg of our journey,” Ank replied.

“And where are we going to go, huh?”

“Right now? Away from here before any more packs of Oop hunters converge on these caves.”

“And what about later on?”

He gave her a serious frown. “I got something in mind for later on.”

“Care to tell us about it?” Katy inquired

“I’m still working out the details.”

“Maybe we can help...”

He turned away and muttered to himself, “Less you know, the better your chances of survival.”



Their descent from the mountainside was laborious, taxing both stamina and patience.

Burdened as they were with gear, every maneuver called for major exertions.

But their *real* problem was Katy—more specifically her troublesome fear of heights. Time and again, her panic attacks forestalled their descent. Sal tried to accommodate her incapacity, while Ank’s reaction was to curse her stupid frailty. Neither approach instilled the girl with much self-confidence.

By the time they finally reached the foothills, dawn was creeping across the prairie. As before, the lowlands offered no adequate shelter from the sun; they were forced to bury Ank again. Once he was safely in the ground, Sal led Katy out into the grasslands.

“Ank wants us to head east,” Sal told her. “He’ll catch up once day is past.”

She nodded and trudged on beside him. She wore a shawl (little more than a scrap of cloth) to protect her head and shoulders from the sun’s glare. Katy wished she still had her royal robe, but Ank had cannibalized it to fashion some of the hobo-sacks needed to carry their gear. She had to suffer the weeds and scrub that clawed at her naked legs.

A few hours later, they paused for a break. While they rested, Sal administered ointment (appropriated from the Docs’ camp) to the scores of scratches covering her ankles and shins.

A touch of fatigue made Katy punchy. “I had this pair of slippers when I was fifteen. They were *really* comfortable. I wore them *everywhere*. Eventually they fell to pieces.”

Pausing his doctoring, Sal peered up at the girl’s blank face. “You hokay?”

She stared off for another few seconds, then blinked and shook her head, shaking off her momentary daze. “Huh?”

“Here...” Sal pulled off his high boots and offered them to her.

“They’re way too big for me,” she muttered.

“Just put them on, okay? They’ll prevent any further cuts.” He met her prompt protests with: “This isn’t just for your comfort, Missy. Otherwise you’ll be leaving a trail of blood that’s bound to attract some predator. We don’t want that, do we?”

In the end, Katy accepted his gift.

They set off again, maintaining an eastern course across the prehistoric landscape.

Protected now by his cumbersome boots, her tiny feet slid back and forth with each subsequent step. It was inconvenient, Katy told herself, but a small price to pay if it spared her any more lacerations.

She tried to probe Sal about Ank’s secret “plan for later on,” but the burly man confessed his ignorance on that subject.

“Surely you must have *some* idea what he’s got in mind,” she protested. “What were the two of you talking about all those times you didn’t want me to hear?”

“Basic survival stuff,” explained Sal. “Did you think all that gear just appeared for us to use? It took a lot of comprehensive searching through hundreds of tunnels to unearth that stuff. The Docs were quite obsessive about hiding things. Lord only knows how much they had stashed away that we never found.”

“I could have helped you look,” she grumbled.

“Ha! You were far too out of it, Missy. Sitting for hours just staring into space. You could barely take care of yourself. We weren’t about to bother you.”

“You mean you weren’t about to *trust* me to do anything.”

“Okay, if you want to look at it that way. Yeah, you were so shell-shocked, we didn’t even trust you to fetch water without falling in the pool.”

A part of Katy wanted to bluster and defend her competency...but she knew he was right. She’d withdrawn from them to wallow in self-pity and despair. She’d have starved if they hadn’t put food in her hands. What good would her help have been?

Pursuing the topic would only remind her how useless she had been.

She fell silent.

They waded on through the weeds, many of which stood taller than Sal. Periodically, rustlings warned that unseen creatures moved among the high grass. Fortunately, nothing ventured close enough to reveal whether or not it was a threat.

Eventually, the sun fell behind the mountains at their back. While this brought an early dusk to the foothills, late afternoon lasted longer out on the prairie.

For some time now, encroaching exhaustion had slowed Katy down. She wasn't used to such extended exertion. On her previous journey across the prairie, she'd ridden most of the way on the back of a dinosaur.

She dimly recalled that her traveling companions had each given the beast a different name, but she couldn't remember either one. Neither had been "Dino," though—of that much she was fairly certain.

How could anyone name a dinosaur anything other than "Dino"? she pondered. *I mean, there are differences between my Earth and Sal's, but surely his world produced its own version of The Flintstones cartoon. How could he fail to make the connection?*

I wonder if Ank's world had its version of the cartoon before their sun went wonky and made it a wasteland? That would be weird—a vampire Flintstones. What would they substitute for the huge rack of mastodon ribs that tips over Fred's car in the opening scene? A big bucket of blood? Somehow, that doesn't seem as funny. Maybe I just don't get vampire humor.

A mild delirium had set in as Katy tramped through the tall grass.

Sunset blurred her surroundings, transforming the tall weeds into surreal curtains that rippled in the wind. For some time she caught visual snippets of hallucinatory shapes moving about amid the weaving stalks. When one breached the tapestry and addressed her, she gawked with vacant insensibility instead of screaming in shock. Very little could penetrate the psychic numbness that fatigue had imposed upon her mind. If and when she *did* notice something, even then her reaction was placid, docile.

She heard the ensuing exchange, but the words registered as little more than palpitating drones.

"Took you long enough." She vaguely recognized this voice as belonging to Sal.

While the ghost that had oozed from the tapestry of weeds was Ank. "I couldn't dig myself out as soon as the sun dropped behind the mountaintops. There was a cleft in the rocks that let enough light through to keep me buried...until the sun finally sank lower." A pause, followed by Ank asking, "Is she...?"

"Lost inside her head again. Don't worry. I doubt she hears us, but even if she does, none of it makes any sense to her."

"Does she...suspect anything?"

"A little. She knows we're keeping something secret from her, but she doesn't know what it is. She's pissed at us, but uncertain how pissed off she should be."

"So far, so good. The city's only a few miles farther. We should reach it way before dawn."

"You're sure we can pull this off without putting her in any danger?"

"Getting attached to her, are you, Sal?"

“You’re the brains, Ank. I’m the muscle. I’m just doing what Chris told me to do: protect her from harm.”

“Chill, man. I promised I wouldn’t tease you about what I saw you two doing by the poolside—and I meant it.”

“*Almost* doing.”

“Whatever.” A pause, then: “Don’t worry. She’s a sweet kid. Maybe a little skittish, but likeable. I don’t want to see anything bad happen to her any more than you do. But...this needs to be done.”

“I know. We owe it to the Oops. They don’t deserve to suffer any civil unrest because Furgo’s scheme went bust.”

“We straighten them out...then we can—“

A ruckus cut off their conversation. Ank yelled in pain, and an instant later the night air reverberated with warbling war-cries. This pandemonium roused Katy from her waking numbness.

“What—hey! Ank! Where’d you come—“ she blurted. A gasp swallowed the end of her inquiry. The shaft of an arrow protruded from Ank’s chest; hitting high, it had narrowly missed impaling his heart.

The night was alive with noises and furtive movement. Shapes dashed around them, masked by the tall grass. Sharp *whooshes* drove more arrows zipping through her proximity.

One caught her in the left shoulder. She squealed with pain.

And Sal flew into action. Shucking off his burden of satchels, the burly man drew a long knife and plunged into the surrounding weeds. As Katy sank to her knees and clutched her wounded shoulder, she was dimly aware of the sounds of combat in the tall grass. Time and again, something sang through the air, slicing brittle grass stalks and monkey meat alike. She really didn’t pay much attention, her agony dominated her hysterical focus.

It all happened so quickly.

Someone was by her side, acting as a shield against further arrows. It was Ank. He twitched repeatedly as arrows meant for her dug into his undead body. Paying no attention to his new injuries, he examined her shoulder.

“Sal! Time to go!” bellowed Ank.

In an instant, the burly man burst from a nearby wall of weeds and crowded close. “Is she okay?”

“She’s okay; it’s just a flesh wound,” Ank attested. “But if we stay, we die. Nobody benefits.”

“I guess the Oops’ll have to sort out their civil unrest on their own.”

“It’s their own damned fault. They sent these hunters, forcing us to flee—and now we’ll never get the chance to take the girl back to Troy and show them she ain’t dead. That’s all it’d take, y’know—one good glimpse of her alive and the fight for the throne would be over.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” muttered Sal. He bent down and wrapped his arms around the two of them.

As he did so, Katy caught a glimpse of an Oop hunter step into view from behind the weaving curtain of weeds. The ape was clad in a brown jumper. (If he'd been wearing yellow, she would have known he worked for Furgo's surviving disciples. Brown, though...he could be hunting for anybody.) Another hunter appeared at his elbow. The first pointed in Katy's direction, then touched its own shoulder—as if in sympathy for her wound. But no, he was just bringing her injury to the attention of his comrade.

That's right, she thought, I bleed...I'm not a goddess...I'm flesh and blood, just like you...

"Ready?" asked Ank.

"Good to go."

And with a *whoosh* of a different color, they disappeared.

7.

Their new environment offered a plethora of differences, some more hazardous than others.

Gone was the prairie. No tall grass surrounded them. No arrows shot through the night.

And night—that was gone too. An afternoon sun blazed high in the sky.

A more immediate heat source made Katy recoil. Pushing herself free of the masculine arms that protected her, she scuttled across a surface of compacted dirt.

Sal too had abandoned his group hug, but not to retreat. Grabbing Ank by the scruff of his hoodie, he hauled the vampire's smoking form from the middle of the road and into the shade provided by a copse of elm trees. There, Ank's torture abated and he sank into a harried heap. His clothing had protected most of his body, but his face and arms were severely burned red with blisters starting to puff up across his forehead.

Gaping at this, Katy did not resist when Sal scooped her up and deposited her in the same patch of shaded grass. She continued to stare at Ank, understanding his plight but still unable to accept it. A pincushion of arrow shafts protruded from his back.

She remained unaware of Sal's examination of her own wound—indeed, in all the flurry she had momentarily forgotten her injury—until he warned her to grit her teeth, "This is going to hurt," and a sharp pain exploded in her shoulder. The sudden paroxysm made her yelp, but it was fleeting, and in a moment her discomfort ebbed into a throbbing ache. She looked away from the blood that ran down her arm.

Keeping her gaze fixed on Ank, Katy watched (and winced) as Sal plucked the arrows from his companion's body. Unflinching. Ank was unconcerned about the gaping holes left across his back...for they gradually puckered, diminished, and the violated flesh resealed itself.

"Well," Ank finally gasped. "It worked."

"You assured me it would," snarled Sal. "Should I be surprised that it did?"

The healing vampire shrugged. "This is as new to me as it is to you. The only way to learn is by trial and error."

Sal lifted his head and surveyed the neighborhood. "So this is her Earth?"

"It should be..."

My Earth? The phrase pierced Katy's daze. *Home?*

She peered about. What she saw was conventional enough, but it didn't look like Manhattan to her. The grassy prairie was gone, replaced by an idyllic farm. A pasture lay across the dirt road; cows grazed there, maybe twenty of them, spread out across the green expanse. The copse that shaded her (and her traveling companions) stood beside a modest homestead; a red barn loomed behind the brown house. The sky was a familiar blue; scattered clouds drifted overhead. Birds chirped and swooped through the air. Somewhere, a dog barked, followed by a child's laughter,

"We need to find shelter," Sal advised Ank. "Not just for you, but for all of us. In our present condition, we don't exactly blend in."

He was referring mainly to Katy's state of undress. Her crude halter and briefs might've passed on a beach, but not on a farm. Besides, they were all splattered with blood: she and Ank their own, Sal drenched in blood she suspected had run through ape veins until recently. They looked like refugees from a war zone.

"There." She pointed to where the copse extended away from the farmstead. A thicket of shrubbery stretched out to merge with a denser stand of trees. A hill, covered in woods, rose beyond that.

"Good enough," Sal decided. Picking up Katy like a bride about to cross the threshold, he carried her off. Ank followed, dragging along the baggage the girl had dropped in her shock.

They reached the safety of the woods without being noticed by anything bigger than the sparrows that fled the leafy canopy upon their approach.

Prowling among the stout tree trunks, Ank sought a spot under the boughs that would provide him with greater security from the sun's deadly rays. Ultimately, he found a tree whose base featured a hollow where two immense roots parted to venture out from the foundation before disappearing into the loam. Crawling into this cleft between timber and earth, he settled down to doze, to rest, to heal, to sleep.

"Where are we?" Katy demanded. "And how did we get here?"

“Settle down,” Sal advised her. Having cast off his hobo-sacks when he set out to defend the group back on the prairie, the burly man rooted through the other satchels in search of medical supplies. “Let me dress your wound.”

“Fine.” Katy issued a grudging sigh, then sat cross-legged on a patch of grass. As Sal knelt beside the girl to treat her shoulder, she told him: “Now—I know you can do two things simultaneously; I’ve seen you do it a hundred times. So you can patch me up and answer my questions at the same time.”

“Fair enough.”

When he offered no more, she repeated her inquiries. “Where are we? How did we get here, dammit?”

“You want to take this one, Ank?”

“I’m trying to recuperate here,” the vampire growled from his hidey-hole.

Sal shook his head as he washed her wound with rubbing alcohol. “Ank’s the one who got us here.”

“I was right!” She twisted to face the shadowy cleft where Ank hid. “You got a taste of Hot Sauce—ow!—from those thugs Darcy sent after us.” Her contortion had jabbed Sal’s fingers into her wound.

“You were right,” Sal assured her. He pulled Katy back into position, then continued to wash the cut.

“I didn’t want to tell you until I had time to master the process.” Ank squirmed around in his hole so that his head and shoulders emerged from the darkness. “There’s no handbook for this kind of thing, so I had to figure out how to do it on my own. It involves a lot of mental focusing. You need to conjure a really exact image in your head of the world you want. Then I had to devise a way to convert my mental pictures of places into the imaginary math that defines alternate worlds. A single errant number—or for that matter a hazy mental picture of your desired destination—can result in unexpected deviations.”

“So...” She peered about her. “You say this is my world, but you’re not really sure.”

“I tried my best,” complained Ank. “I was under undue pressure at the time, as you might recall—oh wait, you were out of it again, you don’t remember what happened.”

Katy bridled. “I remember...there was an attack.”

“What kind of attack?”

“I...I don’t know... There were arrows. And I spotted one of those Oop hunters.”

“Yes. Apparently, a troop of them had been stalking us for a while before Ank showed up,” remarked Sal. He applied ointment to her wound.

“I didn’t notice them,” muttered Ank. “Their thoughts were shielded.”

“Their attack forced Ank to evacuate us on the spot.”

"Why the hell did you wait in the first place?" Katy grumbled. "Why didn't you just trans-d us back on the mountain?"

"Relativistic physics," came Ank's so-you-think-you-know-everything reply. "The Oops' world experienced an entirely different geophysical history from your Earth. There were mountains there—but that didn't mean there would be corresponding mountains back in your world. If I'd trans-d'ed us from the caves, we might have arrived hundreds of feet up in the air. Splat! I wanted to avoid that. I intended to wait until we reached the prairie and hope that the groundlevels of the two Earth's matched."

"Oh..." She couldn't argue with that. She barely understood half of it.

"It was night back there, but it turned out to be day here," Ank continued to elucidate. "One might have presumed the worlds would have minutes equal to each other—but apparently not. Clearly, each world's chronology is different from the others."

"When did you turn all scholastic on us?" she muttered.

"He's the brains, remember?" chuckled Sal as he taped gauze across her shoulder.

"This is what you were keeping secret from me back in the caves," she grumbled. "When you went off and talked in private."

Sal nodded.

Ank shrugged.

"Well..." Again she looked around her. "I don't know..."

"What's wrong now?" sighed Ank.

"Why aren't we in Manhattan?"

"Same reason: relativistic physics, Missy," explained Sal as he repacked their medical supplies into a satchel. "When we came from your Manhattan before, we ended up on a seaside cliff. This time, our departure point lay farther west, so our arrival here is west of Manhattan."

That made more sense to her than portions of Ank's lecture.



When night fell, the guys took off to reconnoiter.

Sal came back with clothing he'd swiped from a neighboring farm's clothesline.

When Ank showed up, he was freshly bathed. He led them through the forest to a stream. There, Katy and Sal washed away the grime and gore they'd accumulated during their travels. Afterward, Sal changed her shoulder dressing. All clean now, Katy donned the overalls and "Corn-Fed" T-shirt Sal had given her. He'd also brought back garments to replace his and Ank's tattered garb. Now, she reflected, they looked like typical farmhands, at least the ones she'd seen in movies and on television.

She returned Sal's boots to him. Here, she could go barefoot without discomfort. In fact, she rather enjoyed the feeling of dew-damp grass

between her toes (a luxury she hadn't experienced in years, from teenage forays in Central Park).

Ank produced an envelope he'd snatched from somebody's mailbox. Its contents outlined eleven reasons why you needed a credit card in the modern world. Katy didn't recognize the company, but then she'd never looked twice at junk mail. "The address is the important part," he pointed out. "It tells us we're in 'Derby, Pennsylvania.' Is that a place in your world?"

She nodded.

"There's a 'Pennsylvania' in my world too," muttered Sal. "So this doesn't necessarily confirm that this is your world."

"I guess I won't be certain this is really home until I get home...back to my apartment in Manhattan."

"Umm...your apartment got blown up, remember?" Ank reminded her.

"Oh...right...damn..."

"Besides—it's potentially dangerous for you to return to your old stomping grounds. Darcy's minions will still be looking for you—for all of us."

Sal grunted. "He has a point, Missy. They have no idea where we are—so they'll be looking for us everywhere."

Katy's face sagged with grief. "I...can't go home...?"



The guys were gone again, off scouting the countryside.

Abandoning the woods, Katy wandered out to recline under the night sky. The heavens here were modest, almost empty, compared to the resplendent starscapes of the Oops' world. There, no pollution had accumulated to mask the glory of the sky, while here few stars were visible, their twinkle anesthetized by airborne toxic elements. Only now that Katy had witnessed these diverse skies did she comprehend how polluted her own world was. (If indeed this was her Earth.)

The differences between worlds abounded. Human beings and apish Oop creatures. Mountains and prairies. Cliffs in one world, a metropolis in hers. It even seemed to Katy that the air here tasted chalky on her tongue. She'd never noticed that before—or was it just that after the other world's untainted atmosphere, anything else tasted unseemly?

The breeze was nice, though, cooling and carrying with it the songs of crickets instead of distant reptilian outcries. In many ways, this world certainly felt like the one she had lived in all of her life. At least it offered conditions which calmed her into believing that. She shut her eyes and relaxed; stress-lines disappeared from her face.

The serenity of the night saturated Katy. It rose from the ground, cradling her like a cherished babe. It sank from the air to immerse her in a pacifying coolness.

She slipped into a peaceful sleep, untroubled by dreams or dawn.



What finally disturbed her slumber was an excited outcry: "Paw! Come lookie!"

Her eyelids slowly withdrew to allow the day to flood in on her. The sky was a lovely blue, the sun hanging low on the morning horizon. As she stared up, a few birds flew by high above her. She felt a verdant surface against her back. Her fingers curled, digging into the grass and the soil that supported it, seeking to confirm that she had woken up in the same spot in which she had fallen asleep.

"Paw! Paw!"

Only when the voice squealed again did Katy remember what had originally roused her. She lifted her head and peered about. Nearby, half-obscured by a bush, stood a child: a boy about eight or nine years old. Propping herself up on her elbows, Katy studied the lad. He was very tanned in contrast to his straw blonde hair, which looked as if it had been cut to form a uniform cap atop his overlarge head. But then, a lot of kids' heads seemed large before puberty fleshed out the rest of their bodies. This one was skinny, as evidenced by the spindly arms that stuck out from his baggy denim overall. He half-stood, half-crouched behind the bush, as if caution made him hide but curiosity drew him into view.

"Hello there," she remarked.

At her greeting, the kid ducked back behind the bush...only to peer around its leafy fringe a few seconds later.

Before Katy could speak again and coax him forth, an adult arrived.

This man appeared to be a full-sized version of the boy. He wore a denim overall with no shirt. His skin was bronzed by the sun. His hair was the same, only slightly darker. He wore a straw hat with a wide, tattered brim. His feet were shod in work-boots, the leather dusted by a patina of dirt. His hands were large, weathered.

When he hurried into view, he carried an axe at the ready. Upon spotting Katy, he relaxed and let the tool hang loosely at his side.

"Wha's this?" he grunted.

The boy sprang from behind the bush to dance around the man. "Lookie, Paw! Lookie!"

"H'it's awright, Donnie." The man reached out his free hand to clasp the boy's shoulder, calming his exuberance. "'H'it's jus' a lady."

Katy slowly sat up, then rose to stand erect. She maintained a warm smile the entire time.

“Ah don’ rightly know yee, do Ah?” It was difficult to read his expression, his dark skin further shaded by his hat, but the man’s inflection remained easygoing, even his curiosity seemed casual. “New to Derby, are yee?”

“Uh...yes.” That seemed the safest response.

“All ‘lone?”

She cast pensive eyes at her surroundings before she shrugged and replied, “I guess so. I was...traveling with some friends...and we became separated in the night...”

“Po’ lassie.”

“Can Ah keep ‘er, Paw?”

Paw tussled his son’s hair. “She’s a person, Donnie, not a puppy.”

“Ah found ‘er—Ah should get to keep ‘er.”

With a terse chuckle, Paw took refuge in every parent’s pacifying response: “We’ll tawk ‘bout this later on, boy.”

Facing Katy, the man addressed her, “Yee ‘ungry, lassie?”

His offer strengthened her smile.

“Come ‘long then.” He turned to lead his son away. “H’ain’t sure if’n there’s anythin’ left a’ breakfast, but Ah’m sure Marie can whip up sum’tin’ fer yee.”

“I appreciate that, Mr...?” She scurried after him.

“Ah’m a Derby,” he called back over his shoulder. “Long line a’ them ‘ere’bouts.”

“My name is Katy.” She fell into step beside the man. The boy eyed her strangely, almost as if suddenly resentful of her presence.

“Well, Katy...” Paw Derby escorted her out of the woods and across the dirt road to another dirt path that wound up to the homestead. “...welcum’ to Derby Farm.”

Glimpsed yesterday, the farm had seemed rustic and humble. Seen up closer, those impressions were reinforced by the house’s simple wooden facade, its friendly porch complete with swinging lounge. Even the smoke trailing from the brick chimney had a homey feel. Peeking out from around the back of the homestead was a concrete structure, clearly a smokehouse for meats. Further on, the red barn loomed over pens that were currently empty; all the cows were out grazing in the pasture (Katy had seen them en route, placidly munching grass and swishing flies from their shanks with their agile tails). Other livestock wandered freely: a bevy of clucking chickens and a few portly swine.

As Paw Derby escorted Katy up the walk, she noticed a metal rooster weather-vane atop the two-story house. The cock gave off a painful creak as the wind turned it to regard this newcomer. As they drew near, the front door swung open and a figure came out to lean against the porch railing and hail them.

This had to be Maw Derby. Her peasant dress covered her from neck to ankle. A simple belt cinched her stout waist, for Maw Derby was a

chubby little farmwife. Her face was puffy and cherubic. Her hair the same dirty blonde as her husband. She waved and called out to them as they approached, "An' who's this yee be bringin' 'ome, Paw?"

"A lil lost lassie," Paw Derby informed her.

Donnie made sure his mother knew: "Ah found 'er, Maw! Ah found 'er, so's Paw sez Ah can keep 'er."

Paw gave his son's blonde mop a playful tussle, then sent him off ahead of them. By the time Paw brought Katy to the porch steps, Donnie was already clutching Maw's skirt and gibbering about how he'd found the lassie all on his own.

Paw conducted introductions and gave his wife a simplified account of the lassie's plight (and Katy had thought the version she'd given him had been bone-thin). Maw took to Katy right away, hugging her and assuring her how welcome she was here on Derby Farm.

The lassie was ushered indoors, where Maw promised to whip up something that would stick to Katy's ribs. Outside, she heard Paw summon Donnie to help finish the chores, followed by the kid's complaints that he wanted to play with his new pet. Their exchange faded in the distance as the man took the boy back out into the fields.

Kids say the darnest things, Katy chortled to herself,



Maw "whipped up" a huge stack of buttermilk flapjacks with side orders of sausage and mashed potatoes. There were copious amounts of creamy milk to drink. It was the heaviest meal Katy had had in...weeks...certainly long before she'd become embroiled with the Bat Packers.

She'd hoped to use eating as an excuse to ponder her next move, but Maw kept chatting, probing for details of Katy's travels. As far as Katy could figure, Derby was located in eastern Pennsylvania, just south of Amish country. The farmwife had clearly never ventured beyond Derby's city limits; she was starved for exciting tales of life in the big city.

Katy wasn't about to tell the woman about her trans-dimensional travels, but her life before that offered nothing that could be called "exciting." So she told the farmwife the plot of an episode of *Friends*, casting herself as Rachael.

After the meal, Katy found herself overwhelmed by drowsiness. Passing it off to delayed exhaustion from her adventures, she accepted Maw's offer of their guest room. As she was escorted there, Katy got a fleeting glimpse of the Derby household's interior decor. Everything looked so clean, dusted spotless, scrubbed so vicariously that few pieces of furniture retained their lacquer veneer—if they'd ever had any, for upon closer examination she might've discovered that each table and chair was

homemade. Every knickknack was hand-carved and overly simplistic. There was a television, but its bulky design marked it as decades old.

Alas, Katy was too tired to adequately notice these things. Even the minimalist provisions offered by the guest room registered only vaguely on her waning senses. Weariness made her retire promptly to the bed's feather-soft mattress.

As she lay there with sleep pushing aside her consciousness, she hoped the guys were okay, wherever they'd gotten to. If she hadn't been so tired, she might have worried about them.

But then sleep devoured the girl and her thoughts switched from concern for her traveling companions to a dark melange of past tribulations. Her dream mashed up each attack and assault, producing absurd recombinations—the way dreams do—like Darcy's minions riding on dinosaurs as they lay siege to her apartment building. One thing that was strange: everybody seemed to know about her dead boyfriend and they all taunted her that she couldn't hang onto a man.

Katy was still groggy when Maw woke her and guided her back to the kitchen for a lavish lunch. Without complaint, she dug in—she was ravenous. Paw and Donnie ate a lot too, but they were working lads. Maw barely picked at her serving of glazed ham nestled between mashed potatoes and creamed corn. There were pitchers of sweet lemonade to wash it all down.

Katy ate with gusto, wolfing down two-and-a-half heaping servings before fatigue suddenly swamped her again.

Mumbling apologies, she dragged herself back to the guest room. She was out before her head hit the pillow. This time, if Katy dreamt, she remembered nothing of her somnambulant misadventures.



Maw roused a still-drowsy Katy for dinner, which proved to be even more lavish than the noon meal. A richly basted roast was served with an onion-and-corn dish liberally seasoned with snippets of bacon, and again there were heaping bowls of mashed potatoes. The adult Derbys drank a pungent red wine, while Donnie and Katy were given large mugs of frothy milk. She never discovered what dessert was, for once more her copious appetite triggered another wave of sleepiness. Maw Derby took her back to the guest room to rest.

As the woman pulled the blanket over her, Katy mused, *It's almost as if I've been drugged...* But what earthly reason could this farmland family have to tranquilize her?



When Paw came to fetch Katy as the sun set, she stirred and mumbled, but did not completely awake. He made a mental note to chastise his wife for miscalculating the dosage. He remained unconcerned, though, for he was certain he could overpower the girl if she woke.

Throwing aside the covers, Paw Derby stared down at her lithe form. He licked his lips. He ran a hand along her leg, lightly pinching her thigh. He smiled and once more ran his tongue over his damp lips. He hoisted Katy from the soft mattress and carried her from the room, through the house, and out the kitchen door at the rear of the building.

Only partially conscious, Katy perceived all this as part of a dream. In it, she was Rachael, and Ross had come to carry her away from the nefarious High Priest Hannibal Lector.

Paw Derby was especially gentle as he carried Rachael out into the night, treating her like a child-bride. He did not head for the barn, instead striding confidently for the smokehouse, where Maw waited at the heavy door set into the concrete add-on.

“Ah still feel we should’a fattened ‘er up sum’ mo’,” grumbled Maw as her husband approached.

“Need to do this now, ‘fore Donnie gets any mo’ attached to ‘is new pet,” Paw intoned. “She’ll hafta do as she iz.”

“Do...?” Rachael mumbled. “Whutummaye’posedtodo—?”

“Hurry now,” Maw urged him. “If’n she wakes up, this’ll only be messier’n h’it needs to be.” Her hand went to a string attached to her belt; plucking it, she drew a cumbersome key from her pocket. Moving methodically, she inserted it into the door’s antique lock and opened the heavy panel.

Paw entered, bearing Rachael into the dark interior. Maw followed him. By the time she had resecured the door, her husband had deposited the girl on a long table.

Rachael sprawled on this cold surface. Her head lolled, and she bleakly saw that the shiny table had a raised lip...like the examination tables in all the forensics TV shows. That wasn’t right...this was a sit-com dream, not a cop show. What was Rachael doing on an autopsy table? This worried her, but her mind lacked the verve to fight the rest of the way to wakefulness and act on her newborn apprehension.

“That whelp gettin’ to be mo’ an’ mo’ willful,” grumbled Paw from somewhere on Rachael’s left. Then she heard the clatter of metal tools in the dark.

“Mebbe time to add ‘im to th’ larder,” Maw muttered. “Like’n we did with Daisy.”

A sharp click heralded a flood of light. A series of quite modern fluorescent lamps hung from the ceiling. But these fixtures weren’t the

only things dangling from above. Even though her groggy state-of-mind blurred her vision, Rachael recognized the gruesome shapes—and screamed herself fully awake. The illusion of Rachael evaporated and she was Katy again.

Meat—slabs of beef hung on hooks. But...only some of these shanks had come from cattle. Most of them had once belonged to people! Legs, arms, a few torsos—all darkened, but not by decomposition—no, these limbs had been cured in a cooking fire. They waited their turn to contribute to the Derbys' culinary repasts.

Katy screamed loud and hard, her voice rasping with absolute terror. "Shad 'er up," Maw growled.

Turning from his worktable, Paw held a butcher saw aloft and grunted, "Ah'm gettin' dere..."

Hysteria squeezed Katy's eyes shut. Coiling into a fetal ball, she knew a horrific death loomed in her immediate future. Fear constricted her throat, choking her outcries into a hoarse squawk. At any moment pain would sear her, followed by—

A boisterous *crash* resounded in the dreadful enclosure. The noise literally jolted Katy's eyes open, revealing everything that happened in shocking, even gruesome, detail.

The door had exploded into a thousand shards as *something* burst through the barrier. The figure, blurred by speed, knocked Maw aside as it headed for Paw. The man barely had the chance to half-turn, snarl "Whut—'oo yee—?" before his startled indignation became a short-lived expression of pain that ended in a horrible gurgle.

The invader had crossed the smokehouse in an instant, yet had managed to stop on a dime just before colliding with Paw Derby. Then its arms had flashed out: one to twist the saw from Paw's clutches, the other to tear out the man's throat.

As her husband collapsed, spurting blood everywhere, Maw shrieked with denial, then outrage. She clambered to her feet and brandished a sledgehammer at the intruder.

He turned to face the farmwife. Blood drenched the front of his borrowed overalls—none of it his. His scowling features were distorted by the massive gape of his maw. Enormous teeth—no, *fangs!*—protruded from his mouth. The crimson glow of his eyes rivaled the glare of the fluorescent lights. His inhuman countenance brought a fearful gasp to Maw's lips.

"Ank!" yelled Katy; at least she tried to, but all that came out of her raw throat was a raspy wheeze.

And suddenly Ank loomed beside the woman—he'd moved so fast this time that not even a blur had been visible. Grabbing the sledgehammer from Maw, he used it to cave in her skull. As she tottered, her body fell against his; Ank shrugged off her posthumous nuisance. He stood there, red-eyed and panting like a ravenous beast.

Silence reigned inside the smokehouse, broken only by the squeak of a few swaying shanks of meat.

Another person entered through the shattered threshold and, stepping gingerly past the cadavers, immediately rushed for Katy.

“Sal!” she exclaimed. This time her voice managed to squeeze some phonetics into her breath. A wild grin broke out on her face and she reached to embrace her savior.

“Gotcha, Missy.” His mighty arms encircled her. “You’re safe now.”

“Where the hell did you come from?” she gasped. *Oh, does it really matter? He’s here and he saved me from a terribly unappetizing demise.* She began to giggle at her unintentional pun, and that amusement hurriedly spiraled into lunatic cackling.

“She hokay?” grunted Ank.

“Just hysterical,” Sal assured him.

Ank gave a dismissive snort.

“Give her a break, Ank. If you’d waited another thirty seconds, these bastards would’ve chopped her up for lunchmeat.”

“Well, calm her down. We gotta split.”

Sal began to coo softly to calm her down, but Katy stifled her madcap mirth on her own and whispered to him, “I’m okay. Almost lost it there for a sec...but I’m okay now.”

“It’s completely understandable,” he responded. “Under the circumstances...”

“I’m okay!” insisted Katy.

“Then let’s get outta here,” Ank called from the doorway.

Lifting Katy from the dissection table, Sal carried her outside.

There, the cool air helped to rouse her from near-death stress. She remained mute, however, stunned into silence by what followed.

A series of spotlights stabbed down from the heavens. Accompanied by a thunderous roar, something descended from the darkness to settle on the ground between the homestead and the big red barn. It had a bulbous body with a long tapered tail, like a whale...or a large insect. No—it was a helicopter! (And not some news station’s cheap traffic chopper, but an armored *military* copter.)

“What the hell—“ Katy gasped, her face half-buried in her savior’s embrace.

As Sal approached the copter, a panel slid open and light spilled from its interior, followed by someone reaching for her. Sal handed the girl to this man. She whined, “No no—wait—“ but settled down once Sal climbed in after her.

Outside, Katy saw Ank cross the yard to join them aboard the chopper. The bay door was slammed shut.

Everybody took seats along a bench at the rear of the compartment: Sal on her left, Ank on her right. The crewman moved forward to advise

the pilot that everybody was safely onboard. From her vantage, Katy could see out the chopper's front canopy.

With a robust shudder, the copter lifted into the air. It lingered roughly fifteen feet above the ground, its nose swiveling around to face the homestead. There came a guttural *chuff* and something fled the aircraft to race for the building. A second later, the blaze and roar of a tremendous explosion tore the smokehouse to bits. The chopper hovered for a long moment, as if relishing the ball of fire.

Eventually, the helicopter rose above the farmyard, but continued to hang like a vigilant vulture over the mayhem. The inferno had spread to the house, lighting up the entire farm, and visible in that fiery radiance, a tiny figure fled the pyre. The chopper methodically followed the survivor across the nearby pasture.

A blast of machinegun fire cut down the escaping boy.

"Dirty ghouls," growled the pilot.

Its business done, the chopper ascended and, heading east, disappeared into the night.



A million questions bubbled in Katy's mind, impatiently waiting for the chance to be delivered down to her mouth. But the roar of the copter's engine rendered any such Q&A pointless. Eventually, all would be revealed. For now, she counted herself blessed to have been saved before Paw Derby had started chopping her into bite-size bits. All she could do for now was sit tight and wonder what would happen next.

And indeed, Katy would get some of the answers she wanted—but not before fate threw her and her traveling companions into peril once more.

With its lights extinguished, the helicopter was a dark bullet racing through the night sky.

Katy changed seats with Sal so she could peer out a side portal. As the copter flew steadily on its mystery course, she watched the landscape flutter by far below, although there wasn't much to actually see except house- and street-lights scattered across an inky tapestry. With a dash of whimsy, she could imagine they were flying through outer space, traveling from the Earth to an orbiting station. How clever of the Bat Pack to have a space base here in this world—or *off* it, ha ha.

At least that was one thing she knew with some certainty. This chopper belonged to the Bat Pack, for neither Sal nor Ank would partner up with strangers to rescue her. Or (more realistically) no agency would loan strangers an armed helicopter to go save a lost girl. Somehow, Sal and Ank had managed to contact an enclave of their people assigned to monitor Katy's Earth. *Guarding it against Darcy's villainous deviltry*, she guessed.

Some of her assumptions were accurate, but she would not learn which until later.

Now: the chopper wobbled, as if experiencing turbulence. The aircraft swept left into an ascending arc. This was no turbulence; the pilot was intentionally engaging in aerial gymnastics. Katy's stomach lurched as "down" swayed to and fro and their course took abundant sharp turns. Pieces of gear fell from their storage caches to clatter about the compartment.

Reaching down, Sal made sure Katy's and his seatbelts were secure.

Meanwhile, Ank crawled forward to consult with the pilot.

But Katy was only peripherally aware of her companions' actions. Her attention had been riveted outside from the onset of the pilots evasive maneuvers. Staring wistfully out the window, the girl had caught the first shooting star. She smiled, for shooting stars were supposed to be lucky. *Oh look, there's another one. And another!* The third one came much too close, while only the pilot's drastically weaving flight spared the copter from getting hit by the fourth. His spastic navigation made it impossible for Katy to spot all of the subsequent meteorites that rained down upon the fleeing helicopter. There were a lot of them. The chopper was caught in the middle of a meteor shower!

Was it paranoid of Katy to think this calamity might have been orchestrated by their enemies?

The copter's luck ran out as Ank rejoined Katy and Sal. A monstrous *crash* rocked the chopper. In the aftermath of this impact, the roar of the rotors changed pitch. The entire vessel began to rotate clockwise. The jarring motion threw Ank across the compartment, he crashed against the bay door and clung there. Momentum pulled at Katy, but her seatbelt held her in place—to be carried along on the copter's spin.

Another *crash* shook the wounded helicopter. The vehicle continued to rock, but more gently now. Water lapped at the fuselage; Katy could see it through the portal next to her head.

We crashed in a lake! she told herself.

The crash had shattered the canopy and water poured through the gaping front of the copter. Tipping forward, the metal aircraft quickly filled with water as it sank.

Sal lunged to unfasten Katy's seatbelt, but she got to it first. Released from the seat, she tumbled into what had once been the forward section of the compartment; cold water already formed a two-foot-deep pool there. She floundered her way over to Ank where he clung to the bay door handle. Behind her, she heard Sal come splashing down to join them.

The bay door operated by pulling down a handle to release a catch, then pushing out to pop the panel so it could slide open. The water outside would have prevented any normal person from popping the

panel—but Ank was anything but normal. His vampire strength enabled him to easily pop the door and yank it open. Consequently, more water flooded into the aircraft, accelerating its sinking.

Remaining just inside the compartment, Ank grabbed Katy and flung her from the chopper. She gulped air just before water engulfed her. She thrashed and kicked, but the sinking copter's sucktide was stronger. Then a thick arm snared her in the murky darkness, and Katy was dragged from the churning froth surrounding the downed helicopter. Seconds later, she was hauled to the surface. Katy and Sal treaded water and watched the chopper disappear into the depths. Its rotors still spun, albeit at a fraction of their functional speed, chopping the waters barely ten feet from where they were. Promptly, Ank surfaced, followed by the pilot. They all converged to assess their situation.

"Where's Billy?" Ank wanted to know.

The pilot shook his head and with a sad expression told them, "Dead—real death. When the canopy broke, a big chunk of it cut his head clean off."

"Where are we?" asked Sal.

"We were flying over western New Jersey when the meteor storm hit. Pure luck we ended up going down in a lake."

"But...there aren't any lakes in New Jersey," panted Katy. She was still breathless from her underwater ordeal.

"Not in *your* Jersey," Ank remarked.

"My Jersey?" she squeaked. "That means...this isn't my world?"

"Not by a long shot—but we'll deal with that later on." Ank craned his neck and peered about. His night-vision penetrated the darkness. "That way." He pointed left, and when Katy looked that way, even she could see a nearby landmass, its silhouette standing out against distant city lights.

They all swam for shore.



Once they'd all crawled from the lake to sprawl or sit (depending on their exhaustion), Katy demanded, "What do you mean this isn't *my* New Jersey?"

Ank waved a dismissive hand at her. "Later, girl. We have more immediate worries."

"That meteor shower," grunted Sal.

"Was no meteor shower," the pilot asserted. "They were missiles, not meteors. From the jet I was trying to evade."

"Darcy?"

The pilot shrugged. "He's definitely in cahoots with some of the locals—the unsavory ones."

"Like those ghouls who took Katy prisoner," muttered Sal.

They'd come ashore to a small beach, more an embankment, actually. Shrubbery crowded its perimeter. A distant glow through the trees marked the proximity of nearby civilization.

"We had no idea, though, that his influence went so high—high enough to enlist a fighter jet to blow us out of the sky."

"But," Sal interrupted, "you were able to requisition a military chopper for this rescue run, so why does it surprise you that Darcy could pull a fighter jet out of his sleeve?"

"I just told you—we had no idea Darcy's influence went that high. We're new here; his crews have been here longer."

"Stop making excuses and offer some advice, okay?" snapped Sal. "We're strangers here, *you've* been stationed here for a while. What do we do?"

"Obviously, we head for the nearest Bat Pack base," chuffed Ank.

"That makes sense," Katy added, but nobody paid her remark any attention.

"Not according to protocol," pointed out the pilot.

"Screw protocol," Sal growled.

"We've been compromised," protested the pilot. "If we seek shelter anywhere, we'd be potentially leading Darcy's men there. We can't endanger the other Bat Packers stationed here."

"That's ridiculous!" bellowed Ank. "Where are we supposed to hide? We don't know this world. Was that family back there an aberration?—or are ghouls widespread here?"

"They're all cannibals here."

"So—everywhere we go, the locals'll be trying to eat us?"

The pilot shrugged.

"What a sick place," Katy muttered.

"In fact, protocol dictates that we split up," commented the pilot. "That way—"

"We've got a civilian here." Sal gestured at Katy. "Chris entrusted her safety to me—and those orders dictate we stay together."

"Besides, we have important news that the Elders need to hear!" proclaimed Ank. "About Hot Sauce. They sent us out looking for the black box—we told you about that—well, we found Hot Sauce—and we need to report in."

"You never mentioned that you found—"

"Our primary concern was rescuing Katy," Sal declared.

"Now that's done, we need to reach the Elders!" Ank blustered.

Duty and empathy tugged at the pilot's loyalties. He chewed his lip and paced back and forth on the small beach.

"At least *tell us* where to go," pleaded Sal. "Then you can go your separate way."

"You'd never last an hour here," the pilot muttered. "I can't let you endanger any of our bases...but maybe I can arrange a comm-link with one of them."

"That's a start," conceded Ank.

"Do you think we can find some dry clothes?" Katy asked with a shiver. "Before I catch pneumonia?"



The pilot led them through the woods (which only occupied a patch roughly forty feet wide) to the edge of a suburban settlement. Row after row of single-story ranch houses stretched off into the twilight. Fluffy leafed trees were positioned in repeating patterns throughout the yards. Streetlights lined the tarmac roads that separated the blocks. The cookie-cutter community seemed to go on forever, covering the rolling hills that gradually sprawled beyond the group's immediate view.

They moved along this outer edge, passing lit and darkened houses alike for fifty yards. Then Ank signaled that this one would do. They crept through the backyard. The house wore sheets of pale weather siding. There was a back patio that consisted of a few lawn chairs and a classic maroon-stained picnic table on a cement platform. A large glass bay door provided access indoors. Every aspect of this homestead was identical among the neighboring houses on the block.

As they reached the concrete patio, Katy moaned, "You're sure nobody's at home?" After her experiences with the Derby family, she was loathe to run into any more of this world's cannibal population.

"It's empty," whispered Ank. "I scanned it with my extra senses."

Sal did the honors jimmying open the glass door. They all slipped inside.

"Leave the lights off," Ank cautioned Katy.

"All well and good for you," she complained. "You can see in the dark. I can't."

"Find a couch and stay outta the way, hokay? We shouldn't be here long." He cocked his head to squint his red eyes in the pilot's direction. "Long enough for you to make a phonecall, right?"

The pilot gave a curt nod, then left the living room, going in search of the house phone. Ank remained standing in the center of the darkened room. Sal was nowhere in sight, so Katy settled on the sofa and sat there, mute, with her hands clasped in her lap.

A moment later, Sal appeared and summoned her to follow him to another room. There, in what was clearly a couple's bedroom, Sal drew her to an open closet. Enough streetlamp light filtered through the open curtains to reveal him make a sweeping gesture toward the closet's contents. With a curt nod, the burly man retreated from the room, to give her the privacy to change into dry clothes.

A cursory examination disclosed that the lady of the house was somewhat plumper than Katy. Consequently, anything she selected would be baggy on her. She didn't care. Stripping off her sodden garments, Katy stepped into the attached bathroom and ran herself a hot shower. Once she was bathed and toweled off, she rooted through the closet until she found garments that didn't make her curl her lip too much. The lady of the house kept a hideous wardrobe. She settled on a pink cashmere sweater and a pair of athletic sneakers that surprisingly fit. All of the pants were clownishly loose; she chose slacks a shade of tan that reasonably complimented her pink top. Surveying herself in her reflection in the windowpane, Katy decided she looked more like someone from Arabian Nights than a clown reject.

Rejoining the men in the living room, Katy discovered she wasn't the only one who had borrowed new clothes from the house's missing owners. Sal had discarded his wet clothes in favor of jeans and a blue workman's shirt. Unbothered by damp, Ank still wore his tattered hoodie.

She settled on the sofa, again clasping her hands in her lap. A moment later, Sal sat beside her. He patted her leg with his expansive hand. "Time for catch-up, Missy," he whispered. "How the hell did you end up being captured by those ghouls?"

It took little time to relate the events that had delivered Katy from their woodland shelter to Derby Farm. The Derbys had welcomed her into their home, shared food and hospitality with her. Believing this to be her world, she hadn't anticipated any duplicity on the part of the family, but circumstances had not borne out that presumption.

"The food was probably drugged to keep you there," muttered Sal. "They were fattening you up. It's kind of odd for them to decide to slaughter you so soon, though." He glanced at her, traces of exterior light illuminated just the edges of his expressive features. "Don't take this the wrong way, Missy, but there isn't enough meat on you to make it worth their while."

She gave a shrug that was half shudder. "I think their haste had something to do with their kid. The boy wanted to keep me as a pet."

"So they wanted to add you to their larder before the kid got too attached to you..."

Katy nodded.

"This world's people are a sick lot." Sal wearily shook his head, then perked up to gently slap her leg. "But we showed up in time to thwart their plans."

A warm smile crept across her lips. "I owe you a big thanks for that." She tilted her head in Ank's direction. "You *and* Ank."

Across the living room, Ank stood by a window where he studied the street through cracked curtains. He swiveled his head to give the girl a nod of acknowledgement, then turned back to sentry duty.

"Fair exchange, Sal," she chirped.

“Huh?”

“The two of you went off scouting last night,” she remarked. “How did *you* link up with Bat Packers here on this world of cannibals?”

“That was all Ank’s doing,” Sal replied. “He should be the one to tell you what happened.” He looked in the vampire’s direction; Katy followed suit. They both waited for him to comply.

Ank sighed, but remained by the window as he spoke, “We followed the dirt road to town, looking for a public phone. At that point, we still thought this was your world—although I had my doubts. I’m not surprised that we went astray, all things considered. I really didn’t have much time to prepare to move us all trans-d. My mental image of your Earth isn’t as good as yours. You were supposed to be the one to focus on our destination—but the Oop hunters’ attack rushed me into handling it on my own.”

“All things considered,” Katy commented, “you saved our lives.”

“And landed us here,” he countered, a slight surliness to his tone. “But—getting back to my story—Sal and I made it to town without incident. But it was really a small-town place. We couldn’t find any public phones, and all the shops that might’ve harbored one were closed by that late hour. I wanted to break into one to gain access to its phone, but Sal talked me out of it.”

“A burglar alarm could’ve brought local police down on us,” Sal defended his stance.

Ank continued: “So we prowled around town, looking for an opportunity. It was late, but taverns should’ve been open. All bars have phones; if we could find one open, that would solve our problem.

“I should mention—the reason we were hunting for a phone was to try to contact our people. We couldn’t be sure any were here, but there are standard procedures when the Bat Pack sets up a presence on other worlds. We establish a phone line for agents to contact base. If our people were here, a simple call would initiate a rescue party to bring us in.

“We never did get the chance to make that call,” Sal stated with visible regret.

“Yeah. Before we found a phone, we stumbled upon some midnight cookout the town was hosting. Over a hundred townfolk were gathered in a park. There were big open grills installed there, and they were...cooking *people* on spits over the coals. Which fairly confirmed my suspicion that this wasn’t your world, girl.”

“We definitely don’t belong here,” sighed Sal. “The townfolk could tell; they spotted us right away—and attacked.”

“But—you fought your way free...” Katy ventured.

“I was willing to fight them off,” Ank asserted, then added with a caustic tone: “But Sal wouldn’t let me.”

"The two of us against a few hundred?" spat Sal. "They'd have cut us down and added us to the grill."

Ank raised a hand; his fingers stretched into gaunt claws and clenched into a tight fist. "Not before I would've sent half of them to their graves. But no...Ank reminded me that we had higher priorities than destroying a colony of profane ghouls."

"So we ran," Sal announced.

"Yeah. We ran...and they chased. Some of them were fleet and caught up to us. I got to kill them, at least." He wheeled away from the window to face Katy. "But—I did *not* drink from any of those unclean creatures!"

"Okay..." muttered Katy. She drew back a bit from the ferocity of his declaration.

Sal leaned over to whisper to the girl, "No respectable vamp would drink the blood of a ghoul. Of all the creatures of the night, ghouls are the worst. Most of them eat dead flesh raw. They don't refrigerate their leftovers, preferring it rank and putrefied. They encourage diseases to flourish among their food, claiming such contaminations spice up the meat. As a result, your average ghoul is a hotbed of virulent pestilence."

"Yuck!" she grunted...and wondered: *Did I catch anything during my time spent in the Derby household? The house itself looked clean enough. The food—* She shuddered. *—at least most of the food was recognizable: pancakes, ham, potatoes, corn...but what about the roast at dinner? Was that meat from a cow?—or a—* No, the alternative was too horrific! Katy couldn't even finish the speculation. She barely remembered dinner, though, after all the knockout drugs she'd consumed with the earlier meals.

Sal had picked up the tale: "There were hills on the other side of town. We hid there, in caves."

"I hid in the caves," growled Ank. "Sal didn't have to worry about the sunlight. He went exploring."

"Good thing I did, too," exclaimed the burly man. "I snuck back into town and broke into a bar in the morning hours, while it was closed. All bars have phones. I was able to call the Bat Pack emergency number...and it worked! I explained who I was and the nature of our problem. I gave them the location of the cave in the hills north of Derby. Then I hightailed it back there to let know Ank know the good news."

Ank cut in: "Apparently, the local Bat Packers have managed to get a few men into a military base located somewhere out east. The retrieval team—the pilot and Donnie, the man we lost in the crash—they borrowed a helicopter to rescue us. But when they arrived, they found the area still thick with Derby townsfolk who were still searching for us. They posed as hikers to get past the lynch-mob cordons. By the time they found us, night was falling, making it easier for all of us to sneak out of the region. Sal and I were supposed to be flown to safety, but he refused to leave without

you, girl. He convinced the rescue crew to venture deeper into enemy territory, back to the woods where we'd left you."

"But you weren't there," groaned Sal.

"Fortunately, by now I know your energy signature," Ank told her. "When I scanned the area, I spotted you in the farmhouse. Sal and I were conducting a quick recon when we saw the farmer carry an unconscious you out to their smokehouse."

"By that point," Sal continued, "we both knew that Derby's townsfolk were ghouls, so it was pretty obvious to us what was going on. We moved in for an immediate intervention. You know the rest."

Katy released a pent-up breath. "This world is terrible."

"There are worse," muttered Sal.

"Well, hopefully we won't be here much longer. " Leaving the window, Ank crossed the room to peer beyond the archway that led to the rest of the ranch house. "That pilot's taking a long time to make a quick phonecall." He disappeared into the depths of the residence.

Sal went over to stand by the archway. As he moved through the gloomy room, she saw he now held a knife in each hand.

An instant later, Ank reappeared, but from the room's other doorway. He'd made a quick circuit of the rest of the house. "Bastard's gone," he announced.

"What?" Katy piped.

"How the hell did he sneak past your vampire senses?" Sal argued.

"Sly bastard—he smeared some of his blood on a chair next to the phone...enough to fool me into 'feeling' him there while he ran off."

"Why would he abandon us?" demanded Katy.

"He was pretty vocal about adhering to protocol. He wanted each of us to go our separate ways. I'd say he decided to do just that."

"We're stranded?" she moaned.

"No, we're—"

But a flood of light cut off Ank's denial. Unnaturally bright, it spilled through the front windows with a fury, etching everything inside into harsh shapes and stark shadows.

Sal moved to get Katy on the floor, while Ank recklessly went to the window. As he peered outside, gunshots erupted, shattering the windowpane and shredding the window frame. Several of the slugs tore through Ank. All of this—especially the gaping holes punched through Ank—were acutely visible in the whiteout glare that pumped in from outdoors. As Ank staggered back into the living room, bigger *booms* heralded the gradual disintegration of the front of the house. Artillery shells punctured the abode, their detonations atomizing whole sections of the structure. With most of the walls gone, the living room's unsupported roof groaned and sagged overhead.

By the time the roof collapsed, though, Sal had hauled Katy to safety in the kitchen. But under this heavy barrage, even the rear of the house

was coming apart, leaving them no place to hide. As Sal scrambled for the door that opened onto the backyard, something grabbed his leg and halted his desperate retreat. He twisted around to find Ank's talons encircling his ankle. The vampire struggled beneath a mound of fallen architecture.

"Why did you stop?" screamed Katy. "We have to get out of here!" But her cries were lost in the artillery bedlam.

Abandoning Katy, Sal fought to unbury Ank. The rubble was too heavy, large wooden beams pinned him under the debris. For all of Sal's might, even aided by the vampire's superhuman strength, they couldn't budge the wreckage or pry Ank from beneath the ruins.

"What are you doing?" she bellowed. "Leave him—he'll be okay—he's always okay—" But the pandemonium persisted in drowning out her entreaty.

Seeing that Sal wasn't going to give up, the girl squirmed her way through the miasma. Pieces of house continued to rain all about them. The air was thick with dust and pulverized plaster. She joined Sal and added her own muscles to the strain of freeing Ank. To no one's surprise, her efforts didn't help a bit. Ank was rigorously stuck.

One arm was free; he used it to clutch Sal's shirt and bring him close. Ank shouted in his ear—at least it looked as if he was shouting; it was difficult to be certain in all of the chaos.

Sal suddenly whirled on Katy and drew her into a bear-hug. Startled, she resisted, "What—" but her strength proved far too puny to pry herself free from the man's burly embrace. He pressed Katy against the heap of rubble piled atop Ank, who in turn reached out and snagged the sleeve of her cashmere sweater with his talons.

"Hey!" was all she got out before what was left of the house collapsed on the trio—and darkness enveloped everything.

8.

"She passes out a lot," someone remarked.

"I've noticed, yeah," someone else replied.

"I do not!" objected Katy, but she couldn't argue with the men when they laughed at her defensive outcry. *But hey, who wouldn't keep passing out, subjected to ordeal after torturous ordeal?*

No trace remained of the rubble. The air was free of any dust. The entire house had vanished. In its place spread a vista of desolation.

The landscape consisted of a dark plane littered with chunks, large and small. Closer scrutiny revealed these masses to be a jumble of natural rocks and manmade ruins, as if God had used boulders to bowl

down a cityscape. A layer of smoke clung to the ground. Night held sway overhead, but an eerie green radiance saturated the eastern horizon.

The guys had propped Katy against a rock, retreating to confer atop a nearby hillock. One of the figures supported the other; the wounded one was thinner, obviously Ank.

“You trans-d’ed us!” squealed Katy.

“She wakes,” chuckled Ank.

“You want to tell her what happened?” Sal asked him.

“I haven’t the strength...”

“Okay.” He helped the battered vampire settle on the ground, then descended from the hill to join Katy.

“He trans-d’ed us,” she gasped. “Didn’t he?”

“It was the only way out.” He crouched beside her. “The house was coming down, it would’ve buried us.”

“It was Darcy’s minions, wasn’t it?”

He shrugged. “Technically, no. But they were involved. Ank picked up enough hints from the attackers’ minds to piece together what happened. It turns out that the pilot didn’t call the Bat Pack’s emergency number—he called Darcy’s crew and told them where we were. They contacted the locals and advised them to send an Army squad to take us down.”

“The pilot?” gasped Katy. “But—he was one of your own...”

“Apparently Darcy’s lured more than a few vamps to his side.” Sal gave a weary sigh. He tried to explain things to her.

Ever since Darcy had gotten his hands on Pastorius’ trans-d technology, he had worked to conquer all of the alternate Earths. As each new world fell under his influence, his power had grown. He had operated unopposed—until his forces encountered the Bat Pack. While the vampires’ original (and still their primary) ambition was to find an untainted world to replace their scorched Earth, the Bat Pack had quickly realized that Darcy posed a monstrous threat—for them, for everyone. Darcy’s expansion was unhampered by decency or empathy. Anyone that stood in the way of his ultimate domination faced imminent destruction. The Bat Pack was not the first group to stand against Darcy’s forces; they were simply the only ones left doing so.

“He destroyed all the others?” gasped Katy.

“Destroyed...or assimilated.”

While Darcy’s enemies (if any remained alive) would denounce him as a power-mad lunatic, most of those corpses would also confess that he was a cunning bastard. Over the years, Darcy had learned that destruction might be the easiest way to win, but it was not the only road to success. While destruction might tickle the bastard’s morbid urges, it was an expensive and wasteful way to win. Countless alternate Earths existed, more than enough to spare a few as gifts—to entice potential enemies to join his cause. Sadly, despite the fervor that drove most

freedom fighters, every man—human, vamp, and all the other diverse assortment of evolved species—could be victimized by greed if the offer was big enough. Only the true-at-heart could resist the temptation of gaining their own world to lord over...and the ranks of such heroes grew smaller every day.

“Is that what we are?” Katy inquired. “Heroes?”

“That’d be you and Ank,” grunted Sal. “I’m in this for personal vengeance, remember?”

“Heads up,” Ank called down to them.

Sal scaled the escarpment to join his comrade. Katy scrambled after him. She arrived in time to witness Ank pointing north, to the left of the lucent horizon.

There, a series of tiny yellow lights danced amid the distant mists.

“What are they?” she whispered.

Ank replied, “Armored vehicles.”

“Belonging to...?” Sal questioned.

“Doesn’t matter. Nobody’s friendly here.”

“Where the hell are we, anyway?” piped Katy. “I mean, I’m really grateful to you for saving our necks and all, Ank—but where did you take us?”

“Not a nice place,” the vampire admitted ruefully. “I didn’t have much of a chance to properly concentrate. I’m afraid all the pain I was in somewhat influenced my subconscious focus. I was here...years ago...”

“This,” Sal explained, “is one of the Earths that tried to stand up to Darcy...and suffered for it.” He turned to Ank to ask, “Are you healed enough to move us somewhere else?”

“I can relocate us,” came Ank’s reply, “but I can’t vouch for our destination.”

Sal expelled an exasperated huff.

“Hey—“ Ank bridled. “I’m still learning as I go, okay? Hot Sauce gave the ability to penetrate dimensional barriers, but believe me, it isn’t easy. Targeting is still something I haven’t mastered yet.”

“Apparently not,” chuffed Sal.

For a long moment, they watched the lights shimmer in the remote haze. If Ank was right and they were armored vehicles, then it looked as if there were a host of them...at least six, depending on how many spotlights each tank carried. Those were bad odds. Armed as they were with just a few knives, the three travelers wouldn’t stand a chance against even one tank.

“Okay,” sighed Sal. “You do what you can to speed up your recovery.”

“Ha!” Ank scoffed.

Rising to stand erect, Sal announced, “We’ll handle them.”

“Wait a minute—what do you mean ‘we’?” whined Katy.

Scooping up Katy, Sal descended the hillock in cogent bounds.



With her protesting figure slung over his broad shoulder, Sal raced through the ravaged landscape.

Now that Katy understood that a war had ensued here, the terrain made more sense to her. She could detect blast waves among the slagged ruins, where iniquitous forces had pulverized buildings and rendered them into molten monuments to destruction. What she had mistaken for giant boulders were most likely the heat-blasted carcasses of once-proud skyscrapers. Without a doubt, the remains of any prior inhabitants were now part of the soil underfoot, their ashes infused with common dirt.

“That green glow on the horizon,” Katy remarked at one point. “That’s radiation, isn’t it?” She had seen enough sci-fi films to recognize the lingering residue of mighty battles that no one had won.

“Yup,” grunted Sal.

“Am I—are we in danger from exposure?” She presumed that Ank, being undead, was probably immune to sanguinary radiation.

“Possibly,” he replied. “Hopefully we won’t be here long enough for it to do any real damage.”

His answer didn’t really reassure her.

Nor did his instructions once he dumped her atop the crest of a blast wave.

“No matter what happens, don’t move, don’t run away and try to find a hiding place. It’s important that you stay here. You’re the bait.”

“The what?” she squeaked with fright. “Wait—”

But he was gone, swallowed by the night...leaving her entirely exposed perched on this high ridge of slag. Suddenly, she regretted choosing a vivid pink sweater. She must be like a neon beacon in the gloom. But then, that probably enhanced her role as bait.

Bait for what? But Katy knew that was a stupid question.

The advancing tanks were indubitably products of advanced technologies. They would be scanning the area with all sorts of detection devices, including infrared. Her body heat would show up like a flare in the otherwise cold background. And as the armored vehicles drew near, her pink cashmere sweater would give them a visual target they could not ignore.

“Why me?” she moaned to herself. Again, she realized the idiocy of that question. She was the normal one of the trio. Ank was exempt because he needed time to recuperate. Of the remaining pair, *of course* Katy had to be the bait. Although she was loath to admit it, this had nothing to do with her being a “girl.” Sal was a warrior; *she* was just Katy Claye, urban waif and part-time drunk. If Katy tried to assault these approaching tanks, they’d roll right over her, crush her bones into the dirt,

if she wasn't chewed to pieces first by machinegun fire or blown apart by artillery shells. No...her place was here, acting as bait...so that Sal could tackle these adversaries. But—at best, all he had were a few knives—what good would they be against armor plating?

The tanks advanced, coming close. Gradually, their murky bulk coalesced, offering a modicum of shape and form. Being unfamiliar with the local factions, she could not tell who they belonged to, friend or foe; the banners they flew featured symbols that meant nothing to a girl from Manhattan. What she *could* discern, however, brought no relief to her apprehension. Twin artillery barrels protruded from the turrets atop the tanks; they swiveled to bear on her as the vehicles lumbered out of the mist. A selection of smaller gun nozzles jutted out from every surface of the armored vessels. The things looked—and undoubtedly *were*—deadly and hostile.

She had to consciously restrain herself from fleeing in the face of these menacing vehicles. Sal had warned her to stay put; she would have to trust him. He had something in mind. Soon, Katy would witness Sal's victory...or gruesome defeat.

Don't be so negative, Katy remonstrated herself. So far, Sal had met each deadly challenge with triumphant results. But...one man against a squad of armored tanks? Those were overwhelmingly bad odds.

As the tanks rumbled into view, she could see there were five of them.

Suddenly, the one second on the farthest left faltered; its massive treads shuddered, and the vehicle came to a halt. The other tanks continued on, unmindful of their stalled compatriot.

She wouldn't run, but she couldn't bring herself to stand erect, providing these enemies with an easy target. Trembling with fear, she crouched down and hid behind a stone ripple in the mound of slag.

A loud boom made her flinch. What had happened? Had one of the tanks fired at her? If so, their shot must've gone far awry, for no explosion shook the hillock. Curiosity goaded her into peering from her hiding place.

The top of the stalled tank had swiveled to bear on the other vehicles—one of which was now a ruin, flames gouting from its ruptured hull. As she watched, the stalled tank fired another artillery barrage on its own ranks. Another boom, followed by an explosion so vivid her eyes squeezed shut to prevent the glare from burning out her retinas. When she peeked, she saw another tank grind to a halt, its fuselage ripped open and burning.

Two down, she mused. *And one commandeered*. For that was the only credible explanation. Somehow, against impossible odds, Sal had attacked one of the tanks and taken control of it, turning its guns on its companion vessels. Time and again, he had surprised Katy with his courage and accomplishments. He was bigger than life—and that was more than a commentary on his muscular girth. The man possessed a

seemingly bottomless reservoir of valiant stamina. While Ank's vampirism empowered him with paranormal abilities, Sal was the real superman.

The pair of metal pyres amply illuminated the scenario.

Looking on with fascination, Katy saw the two surviving tanks halt their advance on her. Both of their turrets turned to aim their barrels at the renegade vehicle. Their combined salvos disintegrated the vehicle.

But seconds before they had fired upon the turncoat tank, Katy had spied a figure furtively evacuating the vehicle. Sal moved swiftly from boulder to crag, concealing his presence as he approached the two remaining tanks.

He nimbly scaled one of the vehicles. With speedy determination, he pried open the top hatch and disappeared through it.

Apparently, Katy wasn't the only one to notice Sal's invasive maneuver. A hatch on the other tank popped open and an armored figure crawled from the turret. He looked like a character from some space action videogame. Bulky metallic plates covered his physique, their smooth contours bristled with nozzles and antennae. He carried no space-age firearm, but he didn't need to—his forearms featured a massive array of cannons. A sturdy helmet bore menacing flourish. A trio of angular fins unfolded from the cap's apex, above and on each flanking side. This mobile defender clambered from the vehicle; his metal boots clanged loudly as they struck the ground.

Meanwhile, both tanks' turrets were in motion, pivoting around until their artillery barrels were aimed pointblank at each other. In unison, both tanks blasted each other's heads off.

But not before Katy caught a glimpse of a figure slipping from a side hatch and fleeing the invaded vehicle.

She shouted to Sal about the armored soldier, but the dual explosions drowned out her warning. Unfortunately, in doing so, she half-rose from her hiding place, revealing herself, albeit only briefly. But an instant was all it took for the enemy soldier to spot her neon pink sweater among the blackened brown terrain.

He headed right for her. Crouched behind the rocky protuberance, Katy could hear his heavy boots as they clomped toward her.

Now, she thought, *is the time to run!* Sal's instructions to remain in hiding were valid when she was playing the role of bait, but now the tanks were all destroyed. Anyway, the surviving soldier posed an immediate threat to her now; if she stayed where she was, he was certain to find her and—hurt or maim or kill her, whatever he intended to do. Flight, in violation of Sal's directive, was her only hope under the present circumstances.

But as she fled down the incline of the ridge, the soldier reached the crest and pinned her in a spotlight that stabbed out from his helmet. She threw herself to the side, but the beam of light unerringly tracked her. Knowing that flight was futile, she turned to face the man. The beam

blinded her, completely occluding his figure, although she imagined he stood up there in a posture that conveyed resolute hostility. She held up her hands, showing they were empty. She didn't know if he could hear her—or even understand English—but she moaned aloud, “Please—don't shoot me! I'm unarmed! I'm not—”

And abruptly the beam of light was torn away from her cowering figure, swinging wildly through the heavens as the soldier toppled from the desolate ridge. Without the glare in her eyes, Katy could now see that the soldier struggled with another person atop the ridge. She assumed it was Sal.

For all of Sal's bravery and agility, she knew he stood no chance against an armored opponent. Even Sal's mighty bulk was dwarfed by the warrior's augmented size. And yet, the burly man seemed to be holding his own against this foe. The figures were thrown into silhouette by the glow of the burning tanks that lay beyond the ridge. Their dark shapes grappled and lashed at each other—and suddenly a gusher of liquid spouted from their clash—blood!—and viscera! The warrior had gutted Sal!

A gasp blossomed in Katy's throat at this horror—then escalated into a shriek as someone touched her shoulder from behind.

The hand on her shoulder tightened into a soft clench.

“Calm down, Missy. It's just me.”

She recognized Sal's voice, but still she screamed—and pointed up the hill.

“What?” grunted Sal. “What's the matter?”

Atop the crest, the gutted figure slumped, fell, and slid down the slope. The body came to a stop barely meters from where she quailed with fear.

“But—“ she moaned, “that's not you...”

“Of course not,” responded Sal. “I'm right here.” His fingers gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

The corpse belonged to the enemy soldier! Something had torn through the armored plates of his suit, ripping a large gash across his torso. The jagged metal edges framed the ghastly wound where the man's stomach had been. Blood still leaked from the hole, but the ground was too hard, allowing none of it to soak into the soil; instead it trickled down to form a macabre puddle at Katy's feet.

She gawked at the figure that remained atop the ridge. The silhouette raised a hand and waved to her. Its fingers were long and gaunt.

“Ank?” she whispered. It had to be him.

The victor skidded down the incline to join his traveling companions.

“Six armored vehicles—and barehanded,” the vampire declared. “I'm impressed, Sal.”

“Once I got inside the tanks, I used my knives,” Sal told him.

“Even so...”

“I didn’t count on anybody leaving the safety of the tanks to face me out here.”

“You’re lucky I showed up.”

“You’re recovered?” asked Katy.

“Not really, and brawling with this guy didn’t help any,” Ank admitted. “But we got bigger problems right now.”

“Again?” she moaned. Did the problems *never* stop?

“As you expected, Sal, the tanks’ infrared scans failed to detect my undead anatomy. They drove right past me. And when they did, I probed their minds with my extra senses. I maintained contact with their minds as they continued on to reach you guys. They were looking for someone to massacre. They weren’t a scouting party, they were conducting an extermination sweep of the area.”

“I don’t see the problem,” remarked Sal.

“Initially, they were arrogant about their superiority—but once you started turning their own weapons against them, they panicked and called for a tactical strike.”

“They what?!” croaked Katy.

“As soon as I picked that up, I came as fast as I could. I got here just in time to stop this guy from blasting Katy...or maybe not...maybe he was just going to hold her at gunpoint until the missiles arrive.”

“And when’s *that* going to happen?” Katy squealed.

Ank extended his hands (whose fingers had retracted to their normal size, but were still bloodstained) to clasp Sal’s and Katy’s hands. “Let’s not stick around to find out, huh?”

As they took his hands, Ank drew them close.

“Can you try for a nicer environment next time?” Sal requested as they moved trans-d.

9.

Everything was green.

Fields of grass covered rolling hills. Verdant copses dotted the pastures (later examination would reveal that the bark of these trees was green). A sparkling brook of lime-colored water wound its way through the valleys. An emerald sky featured a pale whitish-blue sun. Even the clouds were tinged green.

The air possessed a startling purity, as if every unnecessary element had been extracted from the atmosphere. Green-furred creatures ambled through the grass, pausing to graze here and there. They moved in packs, and paid no attention to the travelers.

Upon their arrival here, Ank had immediately sought shelter from daylight, diving for the protection of a nearby stand of trees. But his haste proved to be needless, for it seemed that this sun gave off a negligible amount of ultraviolet rays (the component of sunlight that was virulent to vampires). For once, he could endure daylight.

Katy loved the place. She especially adored the cuddly wildlife.

Sal remained ambivalent, but he welcomed the lack of any visible immediate dangers.

Ank acted like an adolescent on laughing gas. Enjoying the sun's warmth on his skin, he capered about. He shed most of his garments in order to feel this novel tingle all over.

Sal was forced to put an end to this frivolous frolicking. Reminding Ank that he needed to rest and convalesce, he advised the vampire to find a comfortable spot in the shade and start recouping his acumen. "This sunlight might not be lethal," Sal pointed out, "but you're not used to *any* sunlight. If you're not careful, you'll end up with a nasty sunburn—and then you'll have to recover from that. Remember our primary goal: finding the Bat Pack and reporting what we've discovered about Hot Sauce."

Grudgingly, Ank acquiesced. He apologized for giving in to the novelty of running around in broad daylight, confessing: "The experience was just so damned intoxicating!"

"Then you'll enjoy it even more once you're healed," asserted Sal.

The day seemed to go on forever. The sun moved across the heavens, but so slowly as to defy detection. At this rate, it would tomorrow by the time dusk arrived.

Sal and Katy scouted the region, but there wasn't much to see. Rolling green hills, scattered green copses, grazing green shags (as Katy christened the cute creatures). They spotted some airborne critters that looked like a cross between a flying squirrel and a snake; these flitters were, of course, green and consequently nearly invisible against the emerald sky. Fortunately, the flitters showed no interest in the humans.

Everything in this world was like that: not just unhostile, but utterly indifferent.

This world appeared to be an idyllic paradise. It was peaceful, apparently uninhabited (although who knew what lay beyond the immediate region). The air was hospitable, the water eminently palatable. The fauna posed no threats. The flora offered a selection of fruits and berries.

They could've stayed here indefinitely. But Sal and Ank were eager to reconnect with the Bat Pack. While Katy...

The girl no longer ached to return home. In fact, no home existed anymore for her to return to. Darcy's minions had blown up her apartment, destroying all of her possessions. She doubted that any of her "friends" had even noticed her absence. The only thing of real importance in her life had been Andrew...but he was gone too. *What would I do if I did*

return there? she admitted to herself. *Spend my days in drunken binges trying to forget how empty my life is?* The shine had definitely faded from that pursuit.

When evening finally came, Katy retired to a comfortable bed of grass that Sal had gathered for her beneath a canopy of foliage. When she woke it was still dark. All of the animals were deep in their burrows (or wherever they slept). The countryside was quite peaceful, but this pastoral monotony offered nothing in the way of diversions. She found herself dozing off, but each time she woke the night prevailed.

Ank was more mobile during these nocturnal hours. Presumably he fed out of sight, for he showed no interest in the succulent fruits that were available. He was particularly tactful about not flaunting his bloodsucking dietary habits around Katy, a gallantry she appreciated. She knew what he was and that blood served as his daily bread, but the reality of it still disturbed the girl.

As usual, Sal remained stoic, silent and patient. He never checked on Ank's condition, fully expecting that the vampire would let everyone know when he had recuperated. He failed to rise to any of Katy's attempts to engage in conversation. She would tell him about things from her past, but he never reciprocated. She suspected he was brooding. It had become obvious that Sal's goals differed somewhat from the rest of the Bat Pack. He was willing to help them search for a new world, but his true objective remained steadfast: he hunted the man who had murdered his father—a man who happened to be the villainous mastermind behind an army looking to conquer multiple Earths. It was a daunting ambition. She could understand the inadequacy he must be feeling about now.

Katy had grown very attached to Sal. The man had started out as her bodyguard, but his dedication to protecting her had grown almost obsessive. She believed he had developed feelings for her—a suspicion reasonably confirmed by their brief carnal encounter back in the grotto. A consummation would have cemented the bond between them, but their tryst had been interrupted. Another opportunity had not yet presented itself for a repeat performance.

She tried again and again to draw him out, to share their troubles, their hearts, their bodies...but Sal remained tenaciously intractable. If Ank hadn't been around, Katy might have gotten more aggressive about the matter. She was completely willing to jump his bones if that was what it was going to take.

Life-threatening ordeals were still relatively new experiences for the girl. She did not recognize her itchy sexuality as a direct consequence of surviving so many dire plights. Glad to still be alive, Katy yearned to put that vitality to enjoyable use.

But the object of her attention remained oblivious to her intentions. *No, she mused, nobody's that stupid. He's just distracted by the mission.* That had to be it. Protecting her, and seeking out the Bat Pack, and

achieving vengeance against the murderous Darcy. These imperatives occupied his immediate attention. Consequently, Sal was blind to the passion that burned in her heart.

She would have to wait to satisfy her erotic urges.

But patience did not come easy to Katy. She'd always been an impulsive girl. If there'd been any alcohol available, she'd have speedily sought solace there—but this green world was a booze-free place. No bars here, no liquor stores, no secret stashes of bottles. She was left to stew in her own horny juices.



Soon after dawn made its gradual appearance on the horizon, Ank returned from the wilds to announce that they needed to locate the Bat Pack. He would tolerate no further delay.

“You feel up to it?” asked Sal.

“Not really,” he confessed. “But we have to reach them. Don't you realize what we've found here?”

“Ummm...”

Even Katy was at a loss for a response.

“This world was supposed to be just a steppingstone en route to an Earth where we can contact the rest of the Bat Pack. But it's much more. Much much more! Don't you see it? *This* is the new world my people have been searching for all these years! It's perfect!”

Slowly, Katy understood his excitement. This world's sun was not deadly to vampires—naturally that would be of extreme interest to the Bat Pack. They were hunting for a world to replace their scorched Earth. What better place could they find than a world whose sunlight lacked the ultraviolet rays that were lethal to their kind? And—to all appearances—this alternate Earth possessed no indigenous intelligent population. The vamps could move in without any hassles or strife—other than whatever harassment Darcy might pull. No wonder Ank was all wired up with enthusiasm. His people had been searching for a new home for years—and here it was! Ank had found it—completely by accident.

But Sal's response did not equal Ank's ebullience.

“Hokay hokay. Congratulations,” the burly man nodded. “You'll be a hero. They'll erect a statue to you. But we mustn't forget that we need to get Missy here back to her own world. And our discoveries concerning Hot Sauce need to be conveyed to your Elders. That will revolutionize our war with Darcy.”

Katy tried to tell them she wasn't all that eager to get “home” anymore. Word of this new vampire home and Hot Sauce were both more important. But the two men ignored her as they faced off in disagreement.

“No!” Ank protested. “Once we have a new world, there's no need to fight with Darcy.”

“Don’t be naive,” countered Sal. “That bastard isn’t going to leave the Bat Pack alone just because you’ve found a new world for your people. His conquest will continue, on and on until it finally encroaches on your new home world. You know that Darcy won’t stop until every Earth is under his thumb.”

“You’ll say anything to keep the conflict going. You’re obsessed with killing Darcy.”

“There’ll never be any peace of mind anywhere as long as Darcy’s out there—“

Pushing her way between the men, Katy shouted at them: “Stop it, you two! You’re both being stupid!”

“Stay out of this, girl,” snarled Ank.

“You’re excited about this new world—but Sal wants to tell the Bat Pack that you have Hot Sauce. Both subjects are tremendously momentous.” Katy stood her ground. “Arguing over which one is more important is just silly. They’re not mutually exclusive! What you need to do *first* is reconnect with the Bat Pack, then you can tell them about *both* pieces of news—and let *them* decide which one takes precedence.”

“She has a point,” mumbled Sal.

“I suppose so...” Ank conceded.

“So...you think you can handle trans-d’ing us?”

Ank shrugged. “I’m not sure—but we can’t put this off. The Elders need to know about this world.” He raised a hand to placate Sal’s rising objection. “*And* that we have Hot Sauce.”

“Hokay. So you need Missy’s help to focus in on her Earth, right?”

“But I don’t want to go home,” she whined.

In unison the two men bleated: “What?”

“I tried to tell you before, but you wouldn’t listen. There’s nothing back there for me anymore. I have no—“

Ank cut her off. “Hate to put it this way, girl, but you don’t get a vote in this. We need to go back to your world because that’s where the Bat Pack expects us to be. That’s where they’re waiting to extract us.”

“They’ll take us back to the drowned Earth,” Sal explained, “and we can summon the Elders from there.”

“Why?” groaned Katy. “Wouldn’t it be easier to just trans-d directly to the Elders?”

Ank gravely shook his head. “Trans-dimensional travel weakens the barriers between universes. Not enough to be hazardous, but these weak spots can be detected by the Pastorius hardware and serve as a trail for others to follow. We can’t risk Darcy finding our home world. We only access it through the drowned Earth, which acts as an interim reality that hides the route to our world.”

“Oh...”

Sal grunted sympathetically, “I know—it sounds unnecessarily complicated, but it does work...at least so far. The more Earths we pass

through en route to the Bat Pack's home world reinforces the secrecy of that destination."

"Okay..."

"So listen, girl," Ank instructed her. "This has to be a joint effort. I need you to concentrate on your world. That'll leave me free to concoct the impossible math involved in initiating trans-d movement."

"Okay..."

"We need to gather in close. Bodily contact is necessary to include you two in the scope of my trans-d equations."

Sal moved in to gather them in a bear-hug.

Katy shut her eyes and focused her thoughts on home. For a moment, everything that came to mind made her wince with regret: home, her apartment, her clothes, her belongings, Andrew. None of these things existed anymore. Everything she had cared about had been taken away from her, leaving the girl alone and emotionally destitute. She tried to ignore this sadness and concentrate on more basic aspects of her world: cars and traffic and tall buildings and people walking dogs on leashes and fluffy clouds in a blue sky and hot dogs and mustard and taffy and ice cream and vodka—she swiftly deleted that last kernel, for it played into her addictions and thereby reminded her of sad things—pop music and television and famous people she admired or envied and politicians, most of whom she ignored or couldn't believe the depth of their callous stupidity... Her head swam with aspects, colors, smells, tastes, sights, moods, distractions, imperatives.

Nearby, she heard Ank release a sigh, but its sentiment was far removed from impatience—in fact, it sounded almost celebratory.

With her eyes closed, Katy failed to visually detect the transition point—but the change in air quality was immediately noticeable. Suddenly the crisply delicious air became gritty, assaulting her nostrils with acrid undercurrents. And with each subsequent breath, that taste grew more vivid, more unpleasant...more industrial. Having spent the last few days in worlds devoid of pollutions generated by industries, she recoiled from this abrupt taint.

She opened her eyes, as if expecting to see a palpable discoloration of the air around her, and everything was no longer green.

10.

Peering past Sal's encircling embrace, Katy spied automobiles. For an instant she tensed, fearing they had materialized in the middle of a crowded highway—but no. All of these vehicles were immobile, arranged in rows that stretched off in all directions. Squirming in Sal's hug to get a

better look, Katy realized the rows didn't continue on forever. In fact, it was a medium-sized parking lot. A redbrick building stood nearby with large display windows covering much of the wall facing the parking area. To the left, isolated trees were arranged to generate the illusion of thick woodlands. To the right lay a span of highway that *did* stretch off toward both horizons; numerous vehicles zoomed along this concrete elevation. The sky was gray with heavy dark clouds, promising a thunderstorm. There did not appear to be any people in their vicinity, although hazy figures moved about within the Home Depot.

A scorched smell suddenly joined the gritty melange she breathed in. She scowled.

The men hastily moved away from her. She looked down at herself, fretful. Was the smell coming from her?

No—it was Ank. Even though masked by thunderclouds, daylight burned the vampire. Trails of smoke drifted from him. Sal covered him as best he could as they crossed to the nearest car. Ank swiftly slithered under the automobile. Meanwhile Sal produced a thin wire and picked the car's lock. Once he had opened the driver's door, he reached inside to pop the trunk. With similar speed, Ank climbed out from beneath the sedan and crawled into the empty trunk. He pulled it closed on himself.

"C'mon," Sal called to her from the sedan.

It began to rain as she joined him inside the car.

"Well?"

She knew what he wanted to know, but couldn't honestly confirm that this was her Earth.

Bending down (as much as his large bulk would let him), Sal fiddled with the steering column where it disappeared beneath the dashboard. He waited until he was done, then sat back as the engine coughed to life. Only then did he turn to frown at her. "What do you mean you can't tell?"

She shrugged, trying to stay demure. "Okay, it looks like a store from my world...but that farm looked normal too, but it was infested by cannibal ghouls."

"Do you want to go inside?" He nodded toward the Home Depot. "Check for further details there?"

"I've never been in a hardware store in my life. There's no way I'll be able to tell anything by looking inside."

"Hokay." He shifted gears and put the car in reverse to withdraw from its parking spot. He slowly maneuvered through the lot, seeking the exit.

She appreciated him not pushing the matter. Glancing out the window, she could see even less of the countryside now. The drizzle had blossomed into a downpour.

How was she supposed to identify her own world? The differences between many of the worlds she'd visited had been extreme. Here, though, things looked normal...but she knew how deceptive outward

appearances could be. The shoppers back in that store could've been giant stuffed teddy bears for all she knew. Even if they'd been visibly human, their souls or inclinations, secret and openly worn, might involve anything from standing-room-only orgies in the park to vegetarianism.

To even come close to making a valid evaluation, she needed to examine familiar territory.

"We're way out in the boondocks," announced Katy. "You need to get me back to my home turf in Manhattan. There, it'll be easier for me to verify that is my world."

"Fine," Sal grunted. "Just tell me where to go."

"I...I don't know..."

"Swell."

"I don't know where we are!" she snapped at him. "How can I tell you where to go if I don't know where we are? I'm a city girl..." The rain didn't help. With dark clouds masking the heavens, it was impossible to even guess where the sun was in the sky. There was no way to gauge east/west from the sun's movement.

Sal had piloted the car out of the parking lot and idled now at the exit. "Pick a direction."

"I don't—" she started to snarl.

"I know, I know," he cut her off. "But neither do I. If we had a coin, we could flip it. So—just pick a direction."

"East," she mumbled. Then in a normal tone: "Turn right."

Jerkily guiding the sedan onto the highway, he kept to the outer lane, where less cars zoomed along.

"Have you ever driven before?" she asked him.

He grimaced before answering, "Yeah...but only a few times. The weather was better and there was less traffic...but I can handle this..."

"Good," she told him. "Because I've *never* been behind the wheel of a car, so you're the designated driver." She shut up so he could concentrate.



After ten minutes of driving in silence, Katy spotted a exit sign and excitedly pointed it out to Sal. "There—it says '48 East.' We want to be heading east."

He caught the ramp. The traffic was lighter on this new route, so Sal could relax. He was getting the hang of driving.

"I thought you didn't want to go home," he remarked.

"I don't...not really..." replied Katy. "There's nothing there for me anymore."

"Hokay..."

"But I need to be in familiar surroundings to judge whether or not this really is my Earth."

“And then?”

“And then what?”

“Exactly.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s assume this is your world, hokay? Once Ank and I make contact with the Bat Pack, what are you going to do?”

“Oh...”

That part had somehow eluded Katy’s thoughts. All of her fretting had been centered on the things she’d lost. Her ruminations had not ventured past those sorrows. What indeed did she intend to do with the rest of her life? Everywhere she went, forces rallied to torment her, to end her life. Would she even survive this latest adventure?

More than her life had changed as a consequence of encountering the Bat Pack. Her outlook had undergone drastic revisions. The scope of the “world” had expanded, becoming “worlds.” Time and again Katy had witnessed things she would have previously dismissed as fantasy or hallucinations. But now she knew better—drowned worlds and vampires and talking apes and dinosaurs and multiple insane scientists and war-torn wastelands and green skies—oh boy, did she know better now. That knowledge should have fried her brain...but it hadn’t. Hadn’t, because everything she cared about had been taken away, her only desire now was to survive.

One thing Katy *had* learned so far: she was not very good at taking care of herself. Without Sal’s staunch protection, she’d be long dead. She was too timid, too squeamish to fight. All she was good at was running away. With a start, the girl suddenly realized how big a burden she had been to her traveling companions. Without her slowing them down, they’d have skirted several perils and would probably already have reconnected with the rest of the Bat Pack.

This weakness bothered her. She’d never thought of herself as “weak,” but then her urban life had not properly prepared her to face such outrageous monstrosities. Muggers and pickpockets she could handle, but not vampires and dinosaurs and ghouls. Any person would crumble under these conditions. But something had kept Katy going...and it had been Sal—ever vigilant, ever valiant, ever tenacious Sal.

With her old life abolished, Katy found herself caring about the Bat Pack’s plight—but then, now that Ank had found the green world, that enterprise was complete. Leaving her with the desire to help Sal avenge his murdered father.

“I think I’d like to stick with you,” she finally declared. While this part of her revelation was strong-willed, uncertainty reduced the next part to a squeak. “If that’s okay...”

Sal gave a grave nod, but offered no comment.

“What’s the matter?” she whined. “Don’t you like me? I can change. I won’t be a burden.”

“Let’s wait and see what develops, eh?” He didn’t sound all that optimistic, though. “Remember, I have my own agenda.”

“But that’s what I want to help you with,” persisted Katy. “Don’t forget, Darcy sent his minions to kill me. After all the pain and suffering that villain has perpetrated, the bastard deserves payback. I want to be part of that.”

“Ah.” But again, his voice remained neutral.

“I can learn to fight. You won’t always have to—”

Although the rain persisted, the downfall had lessened, revealing the advent of evening. Through the haze, tall shadows outlined by lit windows could be seen in the murky distance. They were passing near a city. Sal took the next exit and found a gas station. He warned Katy to stay in the car.

He didn’t want the girl in the way for what he planned.

He popped the trunk before climbing out into the drizzle. He lingered for a moment at the rear of the automobile, then he dashed over to the gas station booth. The attendant, a callow youth with buckteeth, looked up from his skin magazine. As Sal mumbled that he wanted gas, he fumbled about in the empty pockets of his jacket and pants. His search bored the attendant; the kid sat back and returned his gaze to the magazine’s glossy pink pages. A shadow moved from the rear of the sedan and approached the booth from the side. The kid peed his pants when something ripped the booth’s door from its secure hinges. A gust of wind sprayed him with additional moisture. A dark shape reached across the threshold and plucked him from his seat. The shape was a gruesome exaggeration of a humanoid figure: gaunt with overlong arms and talons wickedly extended. Its face was a horror to behold: dagger-like fangs in a gaping mouth, eyes bulbous and glowing scarlet. It was all too loathsome to be a disguise. Ank had intended to bludgeon the attendant, but that proved unnecessary—the kid fainted. Ank left him slumped on the floor of the tiny glass enclosure. He activated Pump Number One. While Sal returned to the car to fill its tank with stolen petrol, Ank rifled through the booth, snatching up anything he thought might be handy. He emptied the cash register. He grabbed a roadmap and a billing receipt. He filled a paper-bag with stale cupcakes and other junkfood. He took a handful of soda bottles from the refrigerated unit and added them to the bag.

Once Sal finished refueling, he climbed into the backseat. Ank settled into position behind the wheel. The sedan took off with bold haste.

Apparently Ank was more adept at driving cars than Sal. He deftly navigated along the city’s outermost avenues, seeking a route back onto the highway. Meanwhile, he tossed the roadmap and receipt to Katy and grunted, “The invoice will tell you where we are. Figure out which way we want to go.”

It was a map of New Jersey. The billing form was stamped with an address in Trenton. Now she knew where they were. She opened the

glove compartment, then unfolded and studied the map in the light of the compartment's tiny bulb.

Once she had determined a course for Ank to follow, he let her pillage the bag of goodies. She shared them with Sal; they were both ravenous. Ank munched a jerky stick like a cigar as he drove.

Soon, Sal settled down to nap.

Eventually, the silence in the car became too oppressive for Katy and she told Ank how she had decided to team up with Sal.

The vampire was unresponsive for a long moment. Then he grunted, "Yeah. I heard you tell him."

"You were in the trunk..."

"Extraordinary hearing, girl."

"Oh."

"A ballsy decision," remarked Ank.

"I'm a ballsy girl." Katy squirmed tall in the passenger seat.

Turning briefly to eye her, Ank chuckled, "You look especially ballsy with icing on your upper lip."

She hastily wiped her lip as Ank returned his attention to driving.



They arrived in Manhattan well before dawn. Katy guided Ank through the dark streets. Traffic was marginal at this hour, but a fair amount of people were out; it was, after all, the City that Never Sleeps.

A nervous tension had settled into the girl as soon as they'd hit the Big Apple. To basic appearances, this was her home. It wasn't until they reached her neighborhood, though, that her subliminal unease made sense.

The building that harbored her apartment was unmarred by any explosion. Its facade rose unbroken into the urban darkness. No debris littered the avenue.

"Dammit," growled Ank.

They'd roused Sal once they exited the Holland Tunnel. Rolling down the back window, he studied the building. "That blast caused a lot of damage, but there's no trace of it. Could a construction crew have repaired things?"

"That's doubtful," Katy had to admit. "This isn't a high enough rent district to warrant such speedy repairs." And yet...the rest of the street looked exactly the way she remembered it. There was the Thai restaurant across the street, the newsstand at the corner manned by chubby Danny (a neighborhood fixture), even the abandoned store that used to be a bookshop with a poster still plastered to the otherwise soaped-over window advertising a medical thriller by Robin Cook (she'd even read that book...in her own world). The overall familiarity argued with her gut

judgment. Except for the absence of a gaping hole in the building, everything looked the way it should.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she spotted one of the pedestrians.

The man was in his early twenties. His hair was moderately long and tethered into a stumpy ponytail. His chin and cheeks were stylishly unshaven. His nose was blunt, his lips charismatic. Katy was too far away to see his eyes with any detail, but she assumed they twinkled with the same boyish charm that had captured her heart. He dressed in shiny slacks and a tight brown leather jacket. He moved with a confident stride, like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Throwing open the passenger door, Katy flung herself from the sedan. She dashed down the sidewalk, her eyes locked on him as he ascended the steps and entered the apartment building. She was too shocked to call out to him.

Behind her, Sal had followed her out onto the street. “Hey!” he yelled after her.

She paid him no heed and ran on.

That was him! she told herself. Despite the impossibility of that circumstance, Katy knew she wasn’t mistaken. This was *real*, not some drunken hallucination.

She pounded up the steps. Tearing open the outer threshold, she reached the inner door before it closed and locked. Across the foyer, the elevator door had just opened for the man. He stepped into it. Katy raced across the dingy lobby. As the elevator door slid shut, she shot through at high velocity. She hit him, and her arms enveloped his athletic shoulders. A squeal of glee erupted from the girl. Her grinning mouth sought his lips, and she kissed him long and hard.

It was him—it was Andrew! She knew his taste, his smell, his feel. This was her deceased boyfriend, her lost soulmate! Only—he wasn’t dead! He was alive!

Why—of course! An explanation surfaced in her frantic thoughts. *This isn’t my Earth! Here, Andrew didn’t die! He’s still breathing and moving and smiling...and kissing.*

While taken aback by her amorous behavior, Andrew accepted her tongue into his mouth. In fact, his embrace became viselike, pressing her against him, squeezing with undue aggression.

For an instant she wondered if he was trying to crush her...but then he relaxed. She slumped against him, panting. Her head swam, her vision blurred. Her mind brimmed with exclamations, both celebratory and stunned, but her tongue refused to articulate any words. She couldn’t believe he was here—alive—with her again.

The elevator was moving, shakily ascending.

She took a half-step back from Andrew in order to look him in the face. But he reached out and grabbed her upper arm in a hurtful grasp. His grip was so tight she groaned. He pulled her close, and his other

hand wandered across her torso, harshly cupping her diminutive bosom, cruelly tweaking her already-erect nipple. He made an animal noise deep in his throat...unlike any sound she had ever heard from him.

"Where's my beer?" he hissed at her. His voice conveyed irritated dissatisfaction, while he hand took liberties with her.

And suddenly she realized: this wasn't *her* Andrew. Looks were more than deceiving, especially in this situation. *My Andrew is kind and gentle...was kind and gentle. He never hurt or molested me this way. He'd never speak to me in such a harsh, degrading manner.*

"If you forgot my beer, you little tramp, I'll..." His strong fingers forced their way into her pants and closed on her crotch, painfully pinching her.

She moaned.

Mistaking her discomfort for ardor, Andrew pinched her harder.

She yelped.

The elevator shuddered to a stop.

Yanking her arm free of his clutches, Katy pushed him away. He staggered back and hit the elevator door as it began to slide open. He bounced off it, then stood large and furious. He backhanded her across the face. She crumpled in a rear corner of the elevator booth.

"You'll pay for that, bitch," growled Andrew. He took a moment to straighten his leather jacket and brush a lock of hair from his face, then turned on his heel and stomped off the carriage into the third floor hallway. "We'll settle this when you show up with my beer!"

Definitely not my Andrew...

As the elevator door started to shut, Katy heard a voice call out to Andrew from down the hallway: "What're you shouting about? I got you beer. It's in the fridge." That voice was disturbingly familiar, but Katy couldn't place it.

The door closed on Andrew as he turned a shocked face back to gawk at the Katy he'd just struck.

And then Katy realized who the voice belonged to. *You think you know what your own voice sounds like, but when you hear a recording of yourself, it never sounds the way you expect it.* (That was because when you listened to your own voice, you were hearing the sound waves conducted directly from your throat through your body to your ears. But when you listened to a recording, that same voice sounded different because the sound was traveling through the empty air to reach your ears. Environments of different density changed the pitch of sound waves. She'd learned that in high school, from a very cool science teacher who'd brought a karaoke machine and tape recorder into class and had each student sing to display the lesson.) Katy had failed to identify this new voice by sound, but simple deduction gave her the obvious answer.

In this world, Andrew hadn't died. But the differences didn't stop there. His personality was all warped and misogynistic. It baffled her why

a Katy Claye would tolerate such heartless companionship. For the voice had belonged to *her!* At least, the Katy that lived in this almost-normal world.

Katy ached all over. Her face stung from Andrew's slap, her privates were probably bruised. And her heart ached...from her brief reunion with her Andrew— *No, not my Andrew, another Andrew who's an asshole.* To have been reunited with her lost soulmate, only to discover it wasn't him—oh, it *definitely* wasn't him. Her heart also ached for the Katy who was stuck with that brute.

She was tempted to get a gun from Sal or Ank and go back upstairs and put that poor girl out of her misery. This world would be a better place without the likes of its repulsive Andrew. She never got to chance to act on this uncharacteristically violent notion.

The elevator took Katy back to the groundfloor, where an irritated Sal waited. With a muttered curse, he scooped her from the floor of the elevator and carried her across the drab lobby. The inner door dangled from a single hinge; it had been battered open by something...more likely *someone*. Halfway across the lobby, a mammoth vibration shook the chamber, followed by ponderous thunder. Plaster dust trickled from the ceiling. As Sal carried Katy from the building, chunks of concrete, brick and mortar rained down on the sidewalk around them. He shielded her from the bigger pieces of debris, but took a few nasty hits on his back and broad shoulders.

Panicky pedestrians bustled about as they fled for cover. Cars squealed to a halt so their drivers could gawk.

The sedan was parked right there. Ank waved them aboard. As soon as Sal had hurried Katy and himself into the backseat, Ank gunned the engine and their getaway car did its getaway thing.

Or tried to.

While the thoroughfares were relatively empty of traffic at this predawn hour, enough vehicles were out and about to impede their escape. Ank did his best, recklessly weaving through an obstacle course of law-abiding cars.

"Somebody's following us," Sal called out.

"Probably the guys who pulled up after you ran inside," remarked Ank as he navigated the sedan through a narrow gap between a building and the rear of a delivery van trying (and failing) to pull into an alley. "They pulled out a bazooka and blasted the building—presumably your apartment up there, right, girl?"

Katy squeaked from under Sal.

Behind them, a crash sounded as their pursuers tried to squeeze past the truck and became lodged in place.

"Hokay, you lost them," grunted Sal. "Some of Darcy's men, huh?"

"They're still watching the girl's apartment. That's a bad sign. They're counting on us bringing her back home. That turncoat pilot

probably told them we know something about Hot Sauce. So they *really* want take us down.”

“They know we’re on the move, so they’ve expanded their surveillance network to other similar Earths.”

That’s the second time Darcy’s agents have blown up my apartment, fretted Katy. *Only this time...it wasn’t empty.* She had mixed feelings about that. Elation if the explosion had hurt that asshole Andrew. Remorse if this world’s Katy had been injured. Then it hit her: *she* had Sal and Ank to watch over her, but all the other Katys had no one; they were all unwitting victims as Darcy’s minions struck out to hurt her. *How many more Katys are going to suffer in my place?*

Ank continued to drive like a maniac. Even though no cars pursued them, he refused to slow down. He wanted to put as much distance as he could between them and their adversaries.

Sal sat back, allowing Katy to uncurl from her spot on the floor of the sedan’s backseat.

“What the hell made you run off like that?” he demanded.

She blushed, embarrassed to confess her blunder.

“You saw somebody,” accused Sal. “Somebody you recognized...your old boyfriend, wasn’t it?”

“How do you know about him?” she whined.

“All of those pointless anecdotes you tell about your life—he’s the only other person in any of them.”

“Yes...I saw Andrew...”

“But he wasn’t *your* Andrew,” guessed the burly man. “This isn’t your Earth.”

Katy nodded wearily. She mumbled, “He was mean.”

“That was an enormously stupid move, Missy. Don’t do anything like that again.”

She grunted her assent.

“Dammit!” Ank slapped the steering wheel. “That’s why we ended up in the wrong world—because you had your lost boyfriend on your mind! Your focus was off.”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to—”

“Straighten out your damned head, girl!” snarled Ank. In the rearview mirror, she saw his eyes flash crimson. “This ain’t some game!”

“Hokay, back off, Ank,” Sal cautioned his associate. “She’s under a lot of stress.”

“We all are, dammit! If we don’t keep our wits about us, we’re going to end up dead!”

“Give her some time to calm down,” suggested Sal. “Anyway—dawn’s coming. You need to find a parking garage for us to hide in.”

“Yeah yeah,” grumbled the frustrated vampire.



Ank found a secure spot in a basement parking garage.

As soon as he shut off the motor, he was out of the sedan and disappearing into the shadows.

Sal tried to calm Katy, but his platitudes sounded contrived. There was no denying it: Katy's antics had put them in danger again. He wanted to bolster her spirits, but his underlying exasperation showed through, sabotaging his efforts. This only reinforced the decay of Katy's self-confidence, for she already knew she was to blame.

Minutes later, Ank climbed back aboard the sedan.

"Any luck?" asked Sal.

Ank shook his head.

"What?" Katy chirped.

"I found a payphone and tried the emergency number," explained Ank. "Not in service. No Bat Pack in this world."

"What do we do now?"

Ank twisted around in his seat to face her. His fangs were out and his eyes blazed angry scarlet. "We could use the day to rest and try again come nightfall..." His face darkened. "...but that'd be stupid—and suicidal. Darcy's minions know we're here, they'll be looking for us. Besides, we need to connect with the Bat Pack *fast*. They need to know we have Hot Sauce. So...we won't be sitting around here for twelve hours. We're leaving *now!*"

"But—" she moaned.

Pointing an extended talon at her, Ank growled, "You need to concentrate on your Earth like your life depended on it. Because it *does!*"

11.

Three Earths later, Ank was losing what little patience he had left.

His displeasure intimidated Katy, further impairing her ability to competently focus her thoughts. Her "help" was inadvertently sabotaging his trans-d efforts. She whined, then cried, then rallied her dignity and sought refuge behind angry recriminations, blaming Ank's Gestapo tactics for her inability to accurately recall her home world.

Even Sal was growing churlish.

Their bad humor was understandable. Two of the three worlds had put them in harm's way; Darcy's agents were everywhere.

Even now, enemy forces were breathing down their necks. The sedan was getting banged up pretty bad. They were lucky—so far—that nobody'd tried to take them out with a bazooka, like they'd done with Katy's apartment.

“On the count of five, girl,” Ank yelled over the bedlam.

“You have to be joking—“ gasped Katy.

Another volley of gunfire strafed the rear of the sedan. Its tires shrieked as Ank swerved the car into an alley to escape any subsequent barrage.

“They’re right on us, girl! If we don’t trans-d soon, it’ll be too late!”

“Okay...” she moaned.

“Five...four...three...two—one—“



This time the city was empty of any people.

They freely wandered the streets, hunting for any signs of life. Most shops were open, but without customers or clerks. Several still-fresh meals were laid out on tables in a restaurant occupied only by ghosts.

The empty city bothered Katy, but one thing in the restaurant *really* creeped her out. A big aquarium tank separated the dining area from the bar and checkout. She spied no fish swimming around in that water. She wasn’t sure the guys noticed this.

What did it matter?

This clearly *wasn’t* her Earth. They all knew that, but it didn’t stop them from showing morbid curiosity regarding this empty world.

“What could have done this?” she wondered aloud.

“Toxic gas? Germ warfare?” muttered Sal.

“There’d be bodies,” Ank pointed out.

“Alien abduction?” ventured Katy.

The men laughed.

They left the restaurant and returned to stand on the street. The sky overhead was dark and cloudy. A desolate breeze blew trash along the barren avenue.

After a moment, Ank headed off down the block. “I hear something.” His acute senses guided them through a maze of empty streets. As they progressed, Katy heard it too: the distant blare of music.

They finally came upon the source of the noise. The scene had all the trappings of a porch party: coolers of chopped ice (partially melted now) nestling cans of beer; an array of lawn chairs set up on the sidewalk; and a boombox hooked up to a speaker the size of a small refrigerator. It was the latter that had drawn them across town. A vacuous pop tune thundered from the mammoth speaker. It was so loud this close that the bass rattled Katy’s teeth.

Braving the sonic assault, Sal climbed up on the porch and turned off the boombox. Suddenly there was silence, but echoes of the din pulsed inside her ears for a few minutes. Sal stepped indoors, reappearing soon after to report what they all expected: nobody home.

“Where *is* everybody?” Katy whined.

Ank drew their attention to an ashtray set on the porch railing. Smoke still trailed from a thin cherry-flavored cigar in it. "Whatever happened here happened just before we arrived," he muttered, half to himself.

"Another empty world for the Bat Pack," remarked Sal.

"I don't think so," Ank replied somberly. "Something bad happened here...bad on a Biblical level...and we should leave before whatever it is catches up with us..."

Katy echoed his sentiments. There was something *off* about this world. Whatever had depopulated it had left a maleficent residue behind that raised hackles on the back of her neck.

She hoped that fear of that unknown menace would charge her concentration with an extra dash of focus.

It didn't.



For Katy had holocausts on the brain, so subsequent Earths they landed in were ravaged by a variety of cataclysms. They saw:

A Manhattan whose buildings were scorched derelicts.

A Manhattan covered in ice.

A Manhattan where giant sea monsters sloshed through the waterlogged avenues.

A Manhattan with a huge smoking crater where Central Park should have been.

A ruined Manhattan whose sky was filled with immense objects of extraterrestrial origin.

A Manhattan in the midst of a momentous earthquake—they moved on with utmost haste to the next world.



The next Manhattan showed all the now-familiar signs of chaos—streets clogged with abandoned cars, skyscrapers ravaged by fire, a heavy pall of smoke that blotted out the sun. This time, some ripe cadavers slumped inside sealed automobiles, and human bones were scattered on the pavement. The presence of these remains did nothing, though, to help explain the nature of the catastrophe that had befallen the City That Never Sleeps.

"What's going on, girl?" Ank accosted Katy. "These worlds aren't getting closer to yours—they're getting farther away, weirder, darker. *You're* to blame, not me. What I contribute to the process are the basic trans-d mechanics—*you're* the one handling the targeting."

Glaring at the vampire, she told him to go to hell, but her denouncement lacked any fire. For she knew Ank was right. Ever since

her encounter with the anti-Andrew, Katy's disposition had grown increasingly dismal. The shock of being reunited with her lost soulmate had initially skyrocketed her mood with a blast of impetuous bliss, but then that joy had been dashed down into the mud by the discovery that he was *not* her Andrew—more than simply unlikable, this Andrew had been a complete asshole. She'd never imagined Andrew any other way than the loving self he'd been with her. To meet one who was so different, so awful—the experience had left a lasting impression on the poor girl...and not a good one. Add in the stress caused by Darcy's minions' relentless harassment and her state of mind was far from upbeat.

Although Katy knew she wasn't intentionally misdirecting Ank's trans-d efforts, she assumed that her despondent mind-set was contributing to its general malfunction. But...she could think of no easy way to shrug off this dark mood. She'd never been very good at controlling her emotions. And lately: nothing but bad things were happening to her, which made it even more difficult for Katy to center her thoughts.

Suddenly, everything was too much to handle. Her general confusion, being at a loss for worlds, getting hollered at by Ank...her distress pinnacled into a burst of hysteria.

And Katy found herself fleeing through this dead version of Manhattan. She couldn't remember running off, but clearly she had. Running was pointless—and dangerous. She was in a strange city, had no idea what she might run into.

Besides, she told herself, I can't outrun my own panic.

At first her body refused to follow instructions. She continued to run, scampering down alleyways and hurdling trash and bodies that got in her way. Literally running on automatic. It took a fair amount of concentration to convince her legs to cease pumping. When Katy finally succeeded in halting her pell-mell flight, she staggered and collapsed against a lamp-post in sudden exhaustion.

Where are Sal and Ank? she wondered. Did they just let me dash off on my own?

She had a dim memory of them chasing her. By bolting when they weren't looking, she'd gotten a headstart on them. But surely the guys were more spry than she! How had she escaped them? She vaguely remembered squeezing through a few spots too narrow for them to follow.

Now she had to find the men...for she had no desire to be stranded in this desolate place.

She wasted time remonstrating herself for running off in the first place. *What an utterly stupid thing to do! What was I thinking?* But then, therein lay the problem: she hadn't been thinking—she'd panicked. No single factor could be blamed for her panic attack; an assembly of oppressions had driven her to the breaking point. *And now I can add being lost to those miseries.*

Once her gasping reduced to normal breathing, Katy was able to take stock of her surroundings. To her surprise, she recognized the area. This intersection was only two blocks from her apartment. The realization motivated her to head in that direction. Home...

Would this world's Andrew be there? Would fate have spared her beloved from whatever apocalypse had hit this Earth? Had that same benevolent fate guided her madcap run to bring her here?

If anything, there seemed to be fewer bodies littering the street outside her apartment building. That was a good sign.

The outer door had been torn from its frame; its crumpled panel lay in the small entrance, propping open the inner door. She carefully picked her way through the debris cluttering the foyer. Someone had gone on an insane rampage here, smashing furniture and even ripping down the light fixtures.

The elevator didn't work. She took the stairs.

With each step her mind played pingpong with her expectations. Andrew would definitely be there, upstairs, awaiting her arrival with his endearing smile and loving arms. More likely the apartment would be empty: no Andrew, no Katy, no hope, no salvation. No, Andrew would be there. No he wouldn't. Yes, he would. No, the apartment would be full of Darcy's minions waiting to cut her throat. (That last one made her pause for a second. She was desperately afraid of running into Darcy's killers. But no, that was absurd. There was no way they could know she was coming here. Until moments ago, even *Katy* hadn't known she was coming here. She resumed her ascension of the stairs, step by step.) Andrew would be so happy to see her. And she'd be ecstatic to see him. If he was there...

By the time she reached her floor, Katy's head hurt from all this back and forth. Too much thinking. She needed to let her heart guide her. And her heart assured the girl that her lost beloved waited just down the hall.

The rug lining the hallway looked the same. The walls were the right color. The lights weren't working, but she knew the way. The building was quiet as she maneuvered along the dark passageway.

When she reached the door of her apartment, Katy stopped and stood there. *Moment of truth*, she told herself. But still she couldn't bring herself to test the doorknob. What if the apartment was locked? Should she knock? What if someone else (other than her Andrew) answered? What if it was this world's Katy Claye? How could she explain her presence? Did she even want to try?

This is stupid, Katy criticized herself. *I came all this way...and I'm not going to check? What if Andrew really is inside?—waiting for me?* Intellectually, she knew that was unlikely...but her heart was in the driver's seat. And her heart pointed out: *If you turn away now, you'll never know...*

A floor creak dragged Katy out of her head. It had come from the other side of the door. Someone was in there! Was that snuffling she heard? This world's Katy had a dog?

Her hand lifted to try the doorknob, but before her fingers could close on the metal fixture—

The door swung open—fast!—revealing a bulky shadow just inside. Much too big to be a dog. With a hoarse growl, the shape crossed the threshold and pounced for her.

But Katy wasn't there anymore. Something had jerked her aside, sparing the girl from the claws that gouged the hallway's opposite wall. The growl exploded into a bestial roar as the thing turned to face Katy. It came at her—but couldn't reach her. Sal pulled her behind him and squared his mighty shoulders to protect her. Being closer, though, it was Ank who stopped the creature's advance.

She gasped as the two clashed. Ank had already unleashed his vampiric manifestation, but his tenfold strength appeared matched by his adversary. He clawed at the creature—and in turn it raked him with its own talons. The thing was huge, a foot taller than Ank, its arms as thick as tree trunks and covered with fur. Its six-inch claws trumped Ank's normally wicked talons. Its head was more wolf than man, its long snout opening to reveal a wicked array of fangs, its eyes burning a feral yellow in the gloom. A pair of pointed ears twitched atop its canine skull. She couldn't see its legs to discover if they too were more animal than human. But she *could* see the tattered sweatshirt the beast wore—and immediately recognized it as Andrew's favorite shirt.

She gasped anew as she realized: this was Andrew! This horrible creature, this fierce beast was her lost beloved! *I was right*, she moaned to herself. *He was here...waiting to eat me...*

For the first time in Katy's experience, Ank faced a superior foe. It outweighed him, its claws were deadlier than his, why even its rabid temperament overwhelmed the vampire's brutality. Ank matched the werewolf's growl with his own snarl. Their struggle rocked the hallway, cracking walls and shredding the rug.

Sal drew a revolver, but did not fire it.

"Shoot it!" yelled Katy. The creature might have once been Andrew, but now it was just a monster. This was worse than the last one—that Andrew had just been an asshole—*this* one wanted to bite her face off. Destroying it was necessary for the girl's survival—and the guys' survival too.

"Ank's barely holding his own," Sal replied. "If I shoot him by accident, that beast'd tear him to pieces." But he held the gun at the ready, waiting for a clear shot.

But the combatants remained locked in close contact. They thrashed to and fro, neither of them immobile for a second. The beast tried to close its jaws on Ank's face. He blocked the move with his arm. The fangs dug

into his forearm, and tore away chunks of meat when the creature worried the arm with a savage shake of its wolfen head. Ank gouged out the beast's left eye—and *finally* they came apart as the furry oponent lurched back to howl in pain.

Sal immediately pumped three shots into the beast's chest.

"Don't waste your ammo," Ank advised through a grimace. "Unless your packing silver bullets, which I doubt."

"Werewolves," grunted Sal. "So that's what wiped out everybody here."

"Apparently."

As werewolf Andrew clawed at his wounded head, Ank moved in to take out his other eye with a well-placed jab of one of his own talons.

"Okay," sighed Sal. "It can't attack what it can't see."

"It can still track us by smell," Ank remarked. Drawing forth his own machete, he proceeded to hack off the beast's nose. Once the creature was missing its snout, Ank danced back from its furious outburst. The monster flailed and thrashed and clawed the walls.

But the group had moved off down the hall, leaving the wounded creature to vent its agonized rage on an empty corridor.

"What about its ears?" Katy asked. "Don't wolves have great hearing?"

Suddenly the werewolf ceased its tantrum and turned to gape its ravaged face in their direction. Its pointed ears pricked tall. With a bloody yowl, the beast bounded after them.

"Dammit, girl!" Ank cursed her.

Sal pushed Katy into the stairwell. Ank followed, but stopped to hold the door closed against forceful pursuit.

"Get outta here!" he snarled at them. "I'll catch up."

Without hesitation, Sal hurried Katy down the steps. After two landings, they heard Ank's barricade give way, and a horrible ruckus erupted above. The bedlam distracted Katy, but Sal maintained his focus on their hurried descent. If anything, he escalated his haste. Consequently, Katy stumbled at one point, but Sal grabbed her, preventing the girl from suffering a bad fall. To avoid any additional tumbles, the bodyguard threw Katy over his shoulders and carried her down the remaining flight of steps. He did not, however, rush out onto the street, but stopped in the rubble cluttered lobby and set Katy back on her feet.

"What about Ank?" she gasped.

"He'll be okay. He always is." But this time a touch of uncertainty shaded Sal's optimism. He too had seen how the vampire was outclassed by his werewolf adversary. Even with most of its sensory organs mutilated, the creature kept coming. Already wounded by the beast's ferocity, how was Ank supposed to overpower this opponent?

She started to mutter “I have a bad feeling about this,” but her remark was drowned out by the pandemonium coming from the stairwell. Even through the closed door, the sounds of furious combat rumbled—and got louder.

Seconds later, the stairwell door exploded outwards. Surrounded by shards that had once been the wooden panel, the pair of combatants pitched into the lobby. Neither their tumble nor their new surroundings interfered with their struggle. They kept fighting, oblivious to their environment, unmindful of their mounting injuries, concentrating solely on slaughtering each other. Blood splattered everywhere as their battle forged through the lobby’s clutter of debris. Their passage reduced broken furniture into ignoble chaff.

“Dammit,” grumbled Sal. He hustled Katy out onto the street, away from the mayhem. He took quick stock of the avenue. Satisfied that no threats lurked anywhere near, he herded the girl into a nearby car abandoned on the roadway. “Lock yourself in—and stay there!” he ordered her before returning to the apartment building’s stoop. Safely inside the car, Katy witnessed the gruesome climax to the vampire-versus-werewolf melee.

They came bursting through the building’s front doorway with the same savagery and disregard for their surroundings. Glass and metal frame were pulverized by their brusque appearance. Their exodus even dislodged chunks of concrete from the wall around the door. They tumbled down the stone steps, clawing at each other and yowling with wrath. When the combatants hit the sidewalk, the impact momentarily separated them. They sprawled on the cracked pavement, gasping and hissing.

Before either of them could recover their wits, Sal stepped in and chopped off the wolf’s head with a single two-handed swing of his machete. He moved off as the body continued to thrash about. Even the head, now completely separated from its hairy neck, snapped what was left of its jaws.

From where he lay on the sidewalk, Ank rasped, “Not good enough.” He was badly battered and bloodied. “Told you—has to be silver...”

“Well,” Sal replied, “I don’t have any silver...so I’ll just have to compensate with a touch of overkill...”

Kicking the severed head away from its flailing body, Sal proceeded to hack at it. His muscles bunched with each subsequent cut. He didn’t stop until he had reduced the head to slivered mush. At which point, the body ceased its spasms and slumped inert.

Stepping back, Sal stood ready to continue his assault...but that wasn’t necessary. The beast’s body had ceased its spasms and lay inert now.

Abandoning the safety of the car, Katy dashed over to crouch next to Ank. He was in real bad shape. Numerous chunks of meat had been torn

from his anatomy. His right leg lay like a wet noodle, all of its bones shattered. There was a ghastly dent in his head that forced one eye shut. His hoodie had been shredded during his fight, revealing that his torso and shoulders had been equally lacerated.

"I'm no authority on werewolves," mumbled Sal as he continued to stare down at the limp mound of furred sinews, "but I think this one's finally dead."

"And Ank's not far behind him," Katy moaned. "We need to get him to a hospital!"

"What good would that do?" snarled Sal. "Any hospital we find is gonna be deserted—like the rest of the city."

"No," choked out Ank. "Hospital good idea..."

"But...no human doctor can help you," Sal threw back.

"Hospitals have blood banks..."

With no further discussion, Sal holstered his machete and scooped Ank's wretched body from the pavement. He barked at Katy: "Which way?"

"What—?"

"Where's the nearest hospital?" he shouted.

For an instant, she gaped up at him. Then she came to her feet and pointed up the street.

Not waiting for any more specific directions, Sal raced off up the avenue.

Katy stumbled in his wake. After two blocks, she shouted ahead, "Left!"

Sal veered left.

By the time Katy reached the intersection, he had disappeared into the hospital that stood halfway along the block. She followed him indoors, but there was no sign of anybody. In the lobby, she consulted a wall-mounted directory to determine the blood bank's location within the building.

But the corridors were unlit and she soon got lost.

She was about to yell for help when Sal appeared at her side.

"Is he going to be okay?" she moaned.

"He's pretty banged up," he confessed. "But with a blood supply and time to rest, he'll be okay."



To give Ank the opportunity to recuperate in peace, the two humans had taken leave of the hospital and gone in search of something to placate their own grumbling stomachs. It took them a while to find a restaurant that hadn't been trashed since the onset of this world's werewolf apocalypse. Katy refused to dine in any place with corpses rotting behind the counter. In one kitchen, they found a body stuffed in an

industrial-sized oven. Lavishly dressed with garnishes; all the cadaver needed was somebody to switch on the stove. They kept looking.

“You’ve got to stop running off on your own, Missy.”

Katy gave a weary sigh. She knew this was coming, was surprised it had taken him so long to criticize her reckless actions.

“Each time you revisit your apartment, nothing good happens. Last time your ex-boyfriend slapped you around; this time he got to tangle with Ank. Will it be my turn next time? No way—because they ain’t gonna be a next time. You hear me?”

“I...didn’t mean to run away...”

“You never do,” growled Sal in reply. “But you keep doing it.”

“I’m sorry...” But her apology sounded hollow even to her own ears. He was right: she knew how stupid it was to run off, but she kept doing it. No conscious thought had motivated her flight, pure panic had been to blame each time. But Sal wouldn’t understand that. Without a doubt, the man had never felt panic in his entire life. If Katy confessed to such a weakness, he would only think less of her. And she definitely didn’t want that.

Twice during their search, Sal took interest in establishments that were not restaurants. The first was a police station. Inside, he found fresh guns and ammunition which he stuffed into a pair of backpacks. The second was jewelry store. There, he filled a carryall with an assortment of hair pins and tiaras.

Outside, they ran into a werewolf on the prowl, and Katy learned why the man had collected the jewelry.

As soon as the beast caught sight of them, it attacked. Bending low, it loped toward the humans on all fours. Its head lifted high to reveal its gaping hungry maw. Its nasty claws scarred the asphalt as it came at them.

Moving calmly but assuredly, Sal made Katy take his backpack, then urged her to step behind a nearby deserted car. He rooted in his carryall, then drew forth an oversized broach and a tiara. Armed with these, he faced the creature’s ravenous assault.

With the beast inches away, Sal deftly sidestepped its juggernaut charge. As it rushed past, he swung the tiara and raked its elaborate and pointy crest across the beast’s face. The monster roared as it bounded headfirst into the side of a panel truck. It wildly pawed at its torn snout.

Moving with astounding speed, Sal closed with the creature. Tipping the beast’s head forward, he drove the broach’s long glittering pin into the back of its neck, right at the base of its lupine skull. With a massive twitch, the werewolf ceased its agonized fuss. It slumped to the ground and lay there, unmoving.

As Sal approached Katy, she blurted out, “Silver! You took silver stuff from that jewelry store—to defend us against these werewolves!”

He gave the girl a curt nod, then retrieved his backpack from her. Turning away, he marched off. She scuttled after him.



“Let’s try that deli,” Sal suggested as they strolled along Manhattan’s thoroughfares.

“Huh?”

Since the skirmish, he’d been taciturn and moody. She’d expected him to resume chastising her for running off—that werewolf attack was certainly a prime example of why she shouldn’t run off on her own—but instead of using the incident to reinforce his argument, Sal had dropped the topic.

She followed him into the delicatessen.

The place was empty of any bodies—living, dead, or dangerous.

While all the meat in the display counters was rank, fresh foodstuffs were found in the establishment’s storage freezer. Sal assembled cold-cut sandwiches, while Katy rooted through the rear wall of dead coolers for suitable beverages. When they settled down to eat at a card-table in the deli’s backroom office, the girl approved of Sal’s culinary handiwork. But he poo-poo-ed her choice of warm sodas. He fetched two six-packs.

With her personal history with alcohol, Katy was leery of inbibing. Her tendency to overindulge would kick in. Getting drunk in a world overrun by hungry werewolves was more than foolish—it was downright suicidal.

But then, what could a few beers hurt? Nothing bad would happen to her while Sal was around. He was here to protect her. He was exceptionally good at that.

Accepting the bottle he handed her, Katy took a sip from its brown neck. That sip turned into a gulp, then a second glug. After all the water she’d had in the last few days, the warm ale was bitter but a refreshing change as it slid past her tongue and down her throat. Within moments, the beer generated a warmth that spread from her stomach to her head, a mild buzz, one she could certainly handle.

For a while, they ate in silence. Her sandwich was dry, but she consumed it without complaint. Sal, though, made his disappear in three big bites, then started on a second one.

“This break could be exactly what we needed,” Sal finally announced. “You’ve been all wired up, Missy. You need a chance to calm down, to soothe away your worries, and rid your head of this apocalyptic mood that’s taken hold of your mind.”

She gave him a dirty look, but refrained from denying anything.

“We need to replace your subconscious dread with something more pleasant,” he added. He encouraged Katy to reminisce about the good times in her life.

“Not many of those,” she mumbled as she discarded her empty bottle and pulled another from the sixpack.

“Nostalgia might help you relax.”

Katy held her scowl. But he was right. She understood that her phobic reaction to cataclysms had targeted the series of disaster Earths they had just visited. Sal’s desire to relax her was not just for her peace of mind—calming her down was necessary if they were ever going to locate her homeworld. An agitated Katy Claye was an unreliable trans-dimensional compass.

Good times, she mused. *Happy thoughts*. But rooting around in her brain, all Katy could find in the way of “happy thoughts” involved Andrew...and she felt weird telling the guy who might be her new boyfriend about the good times she’d had with her previous lover.

So Sal got to hear once more about the absolutely delicious ice cream cone in the park.

The beers lubricated a stream of equally boring anecdotes. In the end, the booze won the relaxation game, only to concede victory to passing out...which, in its way, was certainly more relaxing than trying to relax.



When Katy woke, she found herself ensconced in a hospital bed. Had someone found her passed out in an alley and delivered her to some detox center? For a moment this development added confusion to her hangover, but recent circumstances gradually trickled back into her memory and she figured out where she was and why.

She drifted back to sleep.

Upon her next rise from slumber, she found Sal dozing in a bedside chair. She watched him for a few minutes, the slow expansion and fall of his broad chest, the relaxed cast of his hairy features. He wore his hair tied into vertical tufts again; Katy still thought it looked stupid, just not as stupid as her original judgment. Ever since she’d kissed him in the grotto, her attitude toward his weird ways had undergone softening changes.

Katy was indebted to him for her ongoing survival during this outrageous adventure. Time and again, Sal had rescued her from certain death. And he continued to do so, as evidenced by his recent battle with that werewolf on the street. He had proven himself to be far more than just a bodyguard. She was—

During her reverie, Sal had awoken but remained immobile sprawled in the chair next to her hospital bed. He studied her through half-lidded eyes.

She smiled to let him know she had noticed his covert regard.

His lips stayed taut, but his head tilted in a slight nod to acknowledge her greeting.

"You got me drunk."

"No," grunted Sal. "*You* got yourself drunk, Missy."

She lowered her gaze and mumbled, "I...umm...used to have a drinking problem..."

"Seems to me you still do."

"I'm...working on it..."

"Fair enough."

"I—uhh—guess I passed out..."

"At which point I moved you to a safer location."

"This is a hospital...the one where we left Ank?"

He nodded.

"How's he doing?"

He shrugged. "He's coming along."

She could think of no reply. For a few minutes, silence reigned, giving her the opportunity to scrutinize her surroundings. But there really wasn't much to see. Daylight trickled through a window, revealing the room's sparse decor: eggshell walls, white ceiling tiles, a bland landscape painting, an assortment of warning and instructional signs posted near a few pieces of medical equipment. A second bed lay empty. From the view outside the window, she could tell the room was on a high floor.

"Are we really safe here?" she ventured.

Finally a trace of a smile cracked his deadpan face. "I've set a variety of traps downstairs. If anything gets past them, the stairwells are all blockaded." He inclined his head toward the bedside table, where (she suddenly saw) sat his collection of silver jewelry-cum-weapons. "If anything is unlucky enough to get this far, I've got a suitable arsenal to deal with them."

Katy bobbed her head, relieved that Sal had the situation in hand—as she'd known he would.

"You're safe," he remarked. "So just relax."

"Okay."

"Truth be told, I did get you drunk," he told her.

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you had a problem with alcohol. My intention was to calm you down. You were all wired. You needed to relax."

"I...uh...appreciate your concern for my wellbeing..."

"A relaxed you has a better chance of accurately concentrating on your home world." As he spoke, Sal rose from the chair. "Get some sleep," he advised her, then plodded from the room.

She stared after him, unsure what to make of things.



With Andrew, Katy had always known where she stood. He'd been honest and forthright about his feelings.

With Sal...one minute Katy thought she understood him, then the next he would say or do something that made her doubt her every presumption. He was an enigma whose surface she had barely scratched. But so far, she liked what she'd found.

She had to wonder, though, if she could ever achieve a state of affinity with Sal as pure as the one she'd had with her Andrew.

But, Katy reminded herself, my Andrew is gone.

Thousands of other Andrews were out there in other worlds...but the ones she'd seen so far had not been *her* Andrew. Was there any reason to doubt that the others would be equally different? Really—what were the chances of her finding an Andrew who was a loyal copy of her lost soulmate? She could search for years and fail to find a suitable Andrew. That hardly seemed worthwhile.

Meanwhile, Katy doubted she could handle another disappointing reunion with her lover...much less a *series* of heart-wrenching fruitless rendezvous. She wasn't that strong. She'd barely survived losing Andrew once. To lose him over and over would tear her soul apart.

She wanted him back, but couldn't face the prospect of any more unacceptable Andrews.

Besides...she couldn't abandon Sal.



It took Ank almost a week to heal completely. During that time, Katy saw no sign of the wounded vampire. Sal kept her apprised of his condition. Apparently Ank was sequestered away somewhere in the hospital, presumably in the blood bank. She suspected he was taking liberal advantage of the hospital's supply of pain killers to ease his recovery.

After two days, however, Katy was all slept out. The hospital room seemed more and more like a prison cell. There was nothing to do.

At one point, Sal brought her a selection of magazines from a reception lounge, but many of the current events were foreign enough to confound her. Granted, she was not all that familiar with her own world's international affairs, but some things—like the ethnic cleansing going on in the sovereign nation of Hawaii—had no correlation with what little she did know about home. Even the scandal pulps left Katy bewildered. Most of the celebrities were unknown to the girl, while the few she recognized were drastically different from what she was used to. One actress known to Katy for her Oscar-level dramatic roles was apparently a ribald radio personality here. There were issues of a golf magazine, but knowing nothing about the sport, she couldn't judge the extent of how alien their content was. Some of the hair styles shown in the fashion magazines made her wrinkle her nose.

A morbid curiosity drove Katy to study the literature, though. These magazines told of a different culture—a dead culture. A werewolf outbreak had destroyed this civilization. This Hawaii’s obsession with racial purity was a moot intolerance now. All of those unknown celebrities she read about, they were all dead...or turned and prowling the ruins for prey. There was no one left to care. No one except her (and the guys—but they probably didn’t give a damn). Katy wasn’t sure if she should either. After all, it wasn’t her world.

The variations that differentiated some of the Earths she had visited had been quite obvious, like in the case of the Oops’ prehistoric land. On the other hand, she had seen numerous Mannhattans that had initially seemed identical. Had there been no werewolf outbreak here, she might not have been able to tell this city from her own hometown. Only upon deeper review were the local idiosyncrasies revealed.

This realization made Katy want to learn more about the culture that had been destroyed by a lupine taint. With so few survivors left, her own memory became the only way to preserve the knowledge that that civilization had ever existed.

But when she told Sal about wanting to venture outside and visit a library to learn more details of this world’s lost culture, the burly man forbade it. “Too dangerous,” he proclaimed. Ignoring her incensed bluster, he stood guard to ensure that the girl stayed put.

Before this matter could develop into a serious rift, though, Ank appeared. Healed and full of revitalized vigor, he was eager to resume their hunt for Katy’s world. He made it sound as if his goal was to return the girl to her proper place, but Katy knew the real purpose that drove him. He wanted to get word to his people about the new world he had found, a new home for the Bat Pack. Any further delays were unacceptable.

In complete agreement, Sal promptly began to load their sedan with fresh supplies and ammunition appropriated from a police stash he had located.

Leaving Katy no recourse but to abandon any interest in local dead culture.

And off they went.



It was a frustrating process. Each time they arrived in a new Manhattan, they had to visit the neighborhood of Katy’s building for her to judge whether or not this was her Earth. Almost every time, though, not only were they disappointed, but they were chased off by hostile forces who sought to kill them. They had to flee and hide once they eluded those crews. So that when they trans-d’ed to the next Manhattan, they arrived

across town from her neighborhood and had to drive back across town again.

When daylight prevailed, Ank took shelter from the sun's deadly rays in the trunk of the sedan. After their third altercation, the trunk became so riddled with bullet-holes that it no longer provided him with a safe haven, so the vampire huddled on the floor in the backseat, covered with a heavy blanket they bought off a street vendor.

On those occasions, Sal took the wheel. His driving had improved, but only blind luck enabled him to outmaneuver their hunters.

Throughout all of these excursions, Katy was a hapless passenger. Her knowledge of the city was no longer necessary. They'd made the trip to her apartment so many times that both Ank and Sal knew the way. This familiarity aided them when they conducted hasty retreats under fire.

As for ascertaining whether or not each world was hers or a variant, by now the men were as capable as she was of making a determination. Most times, the telling clue involved the absence of a hole blown in the apartment building. On other occasions, drastic telltales—like dirigibles instead of automobiles or the twin towers still standing—told them they were in the wrong world.

So far, the weather had been relatively uniform in each alternate Manhattan. Day or night, clouds masked the sky. Once it was raining.

Clearly, their personal resources were taxed by these constant failures. Exhaustion dragged at Katy. Frustration left Ank in vamp mode all the time. Even Sal was getting grouchy.

Each time, she prayed the next trans-d would take her home...although, in her heart, it was the last place she wanted to be.



Eventually, a gaping hole showed up in the facade of the apartment building.

"Is this it?" asked Ank.

"This is it," Katy assured them. She was finally home.

Having narrowly survived ambushes too many times, they knew not to stick around once a judgment had been made. This evening, Ank piloted the battle-scarred sedan right past the building and headed for the river.

After a few blocks, confident that no one was following them, Ank parked the car under a buttress supporting an elevated train. They all climbed from the car and stretched their achy limbs. En route to a corner diner down the block, Ank spotted a public phone. "You go on ahead," he told them. "I'll catch up with you."

While Sal ordered coffee and pastries for three, Katy visited the little girl's room for a long-overdue release. By the time she finished her business and joined Sal at the booth, the shriveled waitress had delivered

a plate of plain powdered donuts and a pot of java. Katy quickly consumed a pastry, then washed it down with a hearty slurp of coffee. The donut was wretched and the coffee tasted like soap—*home sweet home*, she thought.

Soon, an excited Ank scrambled into the diner. It had started to rain outside. He slid into the booth next to the girl and drummed his fists on the table.

“The number worked?” inquired Sal.

“You bet. I got an address.” He recited it.

“I know where that is,” remarked Katy.

“A retrieval team will meet us there.” Ank plucked a donut from the plate, took a bite, then spat it back out. “Terrible.”

“You’ll be dining on delicacies soon enough, you bloodsucker,” joked Sal. He munched a donut without wincing.



The rendezvous was only two blocks away, but Sal wanted to drive there. “In case we need to make a fast escape.”

Ank scoffed at his overcautious nature. “We’re home free.”

“Yeah,” piped Katy. “This is my Earth, and Ank made contact with the Bat Pack, and they’re sending men to bring us in. Everything’s finally going right.”

“Then I’ll be proven wrong. Until then, indulge me.”

With a shrug, Ank took the wheel. Sal rode shotgun. Katy settled in the backseat. Two blocks later, she pointed out the building they wanted: a bowling alley. There were no immediate open spots, so Ank let them off and drove on to find parking. She mentally waved goodbye to the battered sedan; it had served them well and she did not expect to see it again.

Minutes later, Ank reappeared, and the group entered the bowling alley. Inside, the noisy cityscape was replaced by an erratic series of rumbles and pin topplings punctuating a ten-year-old pop song droning over crackly speakers. It was an active place, almost every lane was in use. Gaggles of teens and older reprobates hung in clichés. The air was blue with secondhand smoke. The floor was sticky. Hot dogs sizzled on a rotating grill.

As they stood there, taking all this in, two figures moved away from the luncheon counter and approached.

Ank and Sal both smiled and raised hands in greeting. Apparently they knew these fellows.

The retrieval team wasted no time on pleasantries. After curt “hello”s, they escorted the travelers to the men’s room. There, a trans-d device was produced and activated.

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Within seconds they were in an abandoned version of the bowling alley. Katy noticed that these chambers were meticulously sealed off: all niches, windows, doors and ventilation ducts had been closed by gobs of plastic sealant. When they reached the roof, she understood. Beyond the rooftop stretched the drowned world's ocean. The bowling alley was located on the ground floor of the sunken building, in order to provide the Bat Pack with a safe transfer spot, the rooms had been sealed against the ingress of water.

The escorts led them up a stairwell to the roof, where a Zodiac waited to ferry them to the half-submerged bridge in the drowned world. Safe, secure, and wet.

It was raining here too.

Things happened quickly from this point on.

Once the Zodiac delivered them to the conglomerate of structures adhering to the bridge's tall archway, the group was promptly hurried aboard a submersible that would take them to the underwater planetarium that housed the Bat Pack's base.

Chris welcomed them back from their torturous assignment. Katy was polite and demure; she no longer resented his manipulative glamouring, for she had come to understand how crucial were the goals held by the Bat Pack.

The travelers were allowed to shower and change into drab but comfortable hoodies and sweatpants.

A meal was ready by the time they had freshened up. Ham-and-cheese sandwiches, and a thermos of warm blood for Ank.

Members of the Elders trans-d'ed in to hear Ank's news. Katy was present for that meeting, along with Sal. She recognized Klein and Rand from before.

Ank's claim that he had Hot Sauce in his veins met with some skepticism. He had to take two Elders (one at a time) on trans-d journeys to prove himself. Once they understood the nature of his success, Ank was praised for his resourcefulness.

"They ain't heard nothing yet," muttered Sal at Katy's side.

She chuckled along with him, drawing scowls from Elders she did not know.

Then Ank dropped his real bomb: he had found a suitable world for them to colonize—an Earth whose sunlight was devoid of any deadly ultraviolet radiation. He gave a basic description of the green world, but when they bombarded him with questions, he advised them to send specialists to determine such environmental minutiae. After escorting the

same inquisitive Elders there to show them the veracity of his assertion, he made a special third trip, carrying a trans-d unit to record the precise dimensional coordinates. Now the Bat Pack could find the green Earth without relying on Ank to get them there.

Everybody cheered. The vampires had found a new home for their people, a world where all could walk in the light of day without fear or dissolution. Now they could forsake their scorched world.

And—once blood samples were drawn from Ank so the Hot Sauce serum could be analyzed and duplicated—the Bat Pack had a new tool to aid them in foiling Darcy's extravagant conquest.

For days after the meeting with Elders, Katy lost touch with Sal or Ank, for all three of them were busy adding to the Bat Pack's database. While Ank's news clearly trumped all else, the information held by the girl was of no lesser interest to the freedom fighters. Each Earth she had visited offered a fresh perspective on things.

Particular interest (manifesting as endless inquiries) was given to her group's encounter with the two Dr Pastoriuses, for sightings of the elusive father of trans-d were few and difficult to validate. But here, she was one of three individuals who had shared the encounter. Each of their accounts supported the credence of their tale.

In turn, Katy learned that most of the various Docs shared a similar disdain for people in general, a sentiment that was entirely justified once one gleaned the full picture. What Katy had perceived as aloof arrogance was in fact the Doc's dedication to continuing his research. Doc Pastorius had discovered long ago that other people only served to abuse the technology he had vanguarded. People were prone to usurp that technology for their own purposes, often imprisoning the inventor in order to force him to refine the process for their own agendas.

Many worlds had "appropriated" Pastorius' trans-d technology—but not the Bat Pack. Upon learning of the state of their scorched home world, a kindly Doc had given them the process so they could search for a new world. (So—not all of the Docs were reclusive misfits.)

Katy grew to understand that trans-d technology was no different from any other science in that it could be used to benefit evil as well as the needy. Left in the hands of the Docs themselves, it was clearly wasted. Alas, the Docs were so secretive and unsociable, few of them were willing to share their discoveries with anyone. Stealing it was the simplest manner to gain the knowledge. But then...theft was theft, regardless of the thief's rationale.

Everything depended on what was done with the technology.

The Bat Pack applied trans-d to free their people from a world that had turned lethally hostile.

While Darcy used the technology to spread suffering, mayhem and death.

Presumably there were other factions out there, using and abusing trans-d to further all sorts of ambitions, from conquest to pure exploration. None of them mattered to Katy; her loyalties had already been forged. Sal's kindness had endeared the girl to him and the Bat Pack's goals, while Darcy's constant efforts to kill her had cemented his role (in her mind and in reality) as the ultimate villain.

Every hostile act Katy described was met with a solemn, knowing nod. Her inquisitors were all too familiar with the brutality practiced by Darcy's minions.

Yet, when she told them that she wanted to join their battle against Darcy, they smiled and gave her a patronizing nod. They didn't take her seriously.

She went looking for Sal, for certainly *he* would set them right. But he wasn't in the underwater barracks. "Ain't seen him for a few days."

So she went hunting for Ank. He proved to be equally elusive. It turned out that he was presently off-world with a recon crew visiting the green Earth. She had to wait.



"What am I supposed to think of this, girl?"

She must've dozed off.

Sitting up, Katy found Ank looming over her. His hand rested casually on the edge of the upper bunk. Behind him, the rest of the barracks was just a blur of shadows. The vamps preferred low-key lighting.

"I thought you had a thing for Sal," teased Ank.

Ignoring his taunt, Katy mumbled, "You're a difficult person to find. So I camped out here, figuring that sooner or later you'd show up."

He grinned. "I'm a real popular guy lately."

She cocked her head as she peered up at him. He looked thinner, almost gaunt...which seemed wrong to her. After days of subsisting on catch-as-catch-can, now Ank was back home (of a sorts) and had access to all the food (blood) he could ever want. He should've gained weight, not lost it.

"How are you holding up?" she inquired.

He tried to dismiss her concern with a shrug.

"You don't look good," she shared.

He sighed. "Yeah, well, they keep taking blood samples. Suddenly the fang's on the other neck. But...I'll survive."

That made sense. Now that the Bat Pack had Hot Sauce, they'd be eager to analyze and replicate the serum. And Ank's blood was the only source they had for it.

"I'm looking for Sal," blurted Katy. "I can't find him anywhere."

"Oh?" Ank sat on his bunk beside the girl. "He didn't say goodbye?"

Her eyes widened with shock. “Goodbye? What—why would he—“

Ank put an consolatory arm around her shoulder. “I’m sorry, girl. He’s a hothead. He refused to wait for the Bat Pack to organize a strike against Darcy.”

“He—he didn’t—“

“He went after the bastard on his own.”

Katy rocketed from the bunk. “No!” She stamped her foot with denial. “He wouldn’t— He knew I wanted to go with him!”

Or did he?

Had she actually told him that she wanted to help him? Or had she *wanted* to tell him...but never got the chance? She couldn’t remember. Her memories were clouded by all the trivial anecdotes she had told him in an effort to draw him out and get him to talk about himself. She’d told him almost everything about herself, yet she had learned nothing about him.

Even the parts Katy had known—like his hatred for Darcy—she’d underestimated. It had never occurred to the girl that he would abandon her and run off after Darcy on his own.

I’m sure I told him, she fumed.

She stamped her foot again.

“Damn him!”

“Look,” remarked Ank. “He’s headed for heavy danger, right into the belly of the beast. Leaving you behind was probably his way of trying to protect you.”

“If he’s in danger—then he needs my help!” she moaned.

Ank had to laugh. “Girl, when have you ever known Sal to need help?”

She gave him a blank stare.

“Be realistic. If anyone can storm the enemy’s stronghold and make it out alive—it’s Sal. Danger’s just foreplay to him. The part I have my doubts about is his getting Darcy. That bastard’s too slippery. There are even rumors that he can’t be killed. At the first sign of Sal’s assault—*any* assault, for that matter—Darcy will be out the backdoor. Oh, you can guarantee that Sal will tear the place to pieces and deplete the enemy’s ranks—but he’ll never catch Darcy.”

“You let him go!” Katy suddenly yelled. “You’re using him—to soften up Darcy’s stronghold! Then the Bat Pack can step in and commandeer Darcy’s resources with little resistance.”

“Nobody told him to go!” Ank defended himself. “We all warned him he was being reckless! But no—big angry Sal couldn’t wait! Don’t blame us for how stubborn your boyfriend is!”

She trembled with furious frustration. She needed to go after Sal. He would definitely need her help.

“Anyway,” Ank shrugged, “if he gets in trouble, he can just trans-d to safety. He got inoculated with the Bat Pack’s synthesized version of Hot Sauce. At least he was smart enough to get that done before he left.”

Before he left on his suicide mission! fretted Katy. She had to rescue him—and Ank had just told her how.

“Where do I get a shot of Hot Sauce?”

“Huh? What makes you think you—“

The girl blustered in his face. “After all we’ve been through together—are you telling me I’m not one of you? I’m at the top of Darcy’s hit list! If *anybody* deserves a shot of Hot Sauce, it’s *me*, dammit!” She turned to leave. “Oh, the hell with you! If you won’t get me a shot of Hot Sauce, then I’ll have to steal one of your trans-d devices and—“

“Wo!” Ank’s hand snagged her arm before she got far. He pulled her back to sit next to him on the bunk. “Now you’re just acting crazy, girl. You’re right, we’ve been through a lot together, and from what I remember you’re worthless when things get dangerous. You can’t fight worth shite, and you’re afraid of heights. How long do you think you’d last in a full-scale battle? We’re talking about trained commandos here—what, do you think Darcy’s guarding his stronghold with wussies?”

She winced in his grip, and glared sullenly at him.

He sighed and released her. “But you don’t care about any of that, do you? You’re dead set on running off to get killed.”

She got up from the bunk and made to stomp off. “Sal needs my help!”

Pushing himself erect, Ank trailed after her. “I just know I’m going to regret this...”

13.

With a headful of mixed feelings, Katy perched behind Ank and squinted into the night. They were on a ledge poised high (oh, so very *high!*) up the face of a mountain. Swirls of falling snow danced on fierce nocturnal air currents, pelting the two figures, while those high altitude gusts plucked at them with vaporous fingers hungry to tear them from their position and fling them into the massive abyss that yawned between mountain peaks. The wind more than her fear of heights forced her to cringe away from the ledge. With the stone edifice against her back, its cold was palpable even through the heavy parka she wore.

Vaguely visible across the snow-peppered gulf, a craggy mountain range loomed against a gray ceiling of wintry cloudbanks. According to Ank, Darcy’s citadel had been carved directly into one of those distant jade peaks. He’d given her binoculars so she could see what he meant,

but the view had been obscured by clouds of airborne snowflakes. She took his word for it.

So far, none of this had gone the way Katy had hoped it would.

The Bat Pack had flat-out refused to share any Hot Sauce with her. Chris had scoffed at the notion of wasting any of the serum on a human. He had gone so far as to question why the girl hadn't been put back where she belonged. Katy had emphatically declared her loyalty to the Bat Pack and the war with Darcy, but her pleas were ignored.

The serum was too well-guarded to swipe any. "But," Katy had suggested, "you've got the stuff in your veins. You could inject me with some of your blood—" To which Ank had been quick to point out that his blood carried more than just Hot Sauce, his cells were undead and passing any of them on to the girl might attune her to trans-d transfer, but it would also surely vampirize her. "I want to stay human," she had confessed. He hadn't challenged her decision.

So in the end, Ank had agreed to accompany her on "this suicidal excursion." If the Bat Pack wouldn't give her trans-d capability, then he would personally provide her with it. "Sal would kill me if I let you blunder into this mess alone," Ank had told her. But—in order to gain his help, Katy had to pledge to follow his instructions to the letter.

Privately, though, the girl knew she would break that vow if the need arose. She wasn't going along just to be a spectator. She wanted to help Sal. If his life was in danger, she would act to save him—just as he had repeatedly done for her during their travels.

Then she had endured a series of apparently random trans-d jumps to a variety of worlds with striking differences. One had been a battleground of trenches immersed in noxious yellow gases. Another, a field of wheat. Another, a pastoral countryside populated by galloping zebras. On and on, each drastically unique, yet with no common thread linking them (at least none that Katy could fathom). Admittedly, Ank was getting quite adept at trans-d maneuvers—unless these different Earths were just wild stabs in the dark. These side-trips had puzzled Katy, but Ank had declined to explain anything.

This secretive streak annoyed Katy. It seemed to her that it went deeper than a behavioral trait in Ank. Every vampire she'd met had been taciturn and sneaky; none of them liked to explain their actions. So...it was a racial characteristic. It still pissed her off.

All of these delays frustrated the hell out of her. She was swept away by forces that dictated her life, forces completely beyond her control. Not for the first time, she felt as if she was climbing a hill, but couldn't make any headway because she kept slipping in the scree. All she could do was keep fighting, if only to keep from losing ground. This mood had prevailed ever since she'd roused from her drunken binge in that dank alley.

Here on the ledge, though, it was cold. Even with goggles protecting her eyes, Katy's cheeks and forehead stung from the icy bite of each snowflake that pelted her. The parka helped, but not enough to still a recurrent shiver from the cold...or were these tremors signs of worried nerves?

For all of her bravada, Katy knew how ineffectual she would actually be in a combat situation. She was too squeamish, skittish and clumsy to help; her presence would only serve to distract Sal from his goal—if she ever caught up to him.

The burly bodyguard had more than a day's lead on her reckless pursuit.

Ank had exerted excessive caution in their approach to Darcy's stronghold, and each scrupulous step had irritated Katy. She was impatient, blindly eager to get to this foolish fate she had enforced on herself. No, "eager" was the wrong word..."itchy" was more like it. She understood the stupidity of playing out this wild quest, but it was an itch she had to scratch, regardless that doing so would only worsen matters.

Perched on the windswept mountain ledge, Katy suddenly realized that she wasn't here because by *love*. She knew "love," her bond with Andrew had been vivid and true. What she felt for Sal was...more a sense of honor. He had covered her back, she felt compelled to do the same for him. Especially now, for Sal's objective was one Katy wholeheartedly applauded. Punishing Darcy was *okay* with her. Thumbs up—or rather, thumbs *down* for the murderous bastard.

Katy's involvement in all of this had been entirely accidental. Yet from the onset, Darcy had sicced hit squads after her. Hordes of bloodthirsty minions to torment her and chase her and try again and again to kill her. It was hard not to take that personally.

So...in all honesty, her overwhelming (seemingly irrational) urge to join Sal in his assault on Darcy's stronghold was a matter of payback for the girl. It was partially rooted in her loyalty to Sal, but revenge played a significant factor. It was this vengeful spirit that drove her to this current foolhardiness. She needed to cast off her weaknesses and muster the brass to face what lay ahead for her...because, like it or not, it was imminent.

Tiny flashes of light twinkled in the distance. They were not stars, but instead explosions suffered by the jade stronghold. She saw them clearly with her binoculars. "I'd hoped to connect with Sal before he launched his one-madman assault," Ank sighed. "But it looks as if he snuck right past me."

"He needs our help!" She flung an arm out toward the distant mountains. "We have to get over there!"

"Okay okay, calm down, girl." Ank settled back on his haunches and faced her. "I planned for the contingency that we wouldn't catch Sal

before he hit the citadel. I've devised a simple way for us to get over there."

"How?" Katy shivered as she gazed out at the vast gulf separating the two mountain ranges. "You don't expect us to fly there, do you?"

"Remember those other worlds we visited before I brought us here? You complained about me wasting time, but there was a logic to my actions. All of those worlds were versions of this one. Different Earths, but the same location in indigenous geographies."

"Okay..." she mumbled. She understood what he was saying, but didn't get how it gave them wings.

"So all I have to do is trans-d us to one of those other Earths—let's go with the wheat fields one, that's probably the gentlest terrain. We walk precisely 1.03 kilometers due east, then I trans-d us back here and we're inside the jade citadel." As he explained his scheme, he held up a small device with a blinking red light. She recognized it (from TV commercials) as an electronic measuring tool; it threw off a laser beam and calculated the distance from the unit to the spot it hit—he'd used it to determine how far they would need to traverse the wheat field to guarantee that when they returned to this arctic world they didn't appear in midair outside the stronghold.

"You call that a 'simple' plan?" she grunted.

He shrugged and replaced the measuring unit in one of the many pockets that covered his hooded jumpsuit. An assortment of weaponry (handguns and knives and strings of tiny grenades) was strapped to him; Katy carried weapons of her own, but her arsenal wasn't as prolific as his. She'd been amazed that he trusted her with any of these weapons, especially a belt loaded with the cherry-sized bombs.

"Ready?" he asked.

Katy gave him an emphatic nod.

14.

The trans-d transfer from an arctic mountainside to a world of flourishing wheat fields was drastic. The snow and the wind and the cold all vanished, replaced by temperate breezes under a purple night sky. Katy no longer perched on a vertiginous ledge, now she stood waist-deep in golden stalks.

Releasing her arm, Ank headed off across the field in the direction of a mountainside citadel that existed in another world. She followed.

It was warm here, but when Katy started to shed her parka, her traveling companion advised her, "Unzip it, but keep it on. This'll be a short hike, and you'll want it once we go back."

“Even inside the citadel?”

“Afraid so, girl.” But he offered no elucidation of this cryptic remark.

As they waded through the rippling field, Katy spied things hiding among the stalks. Their furtive presence worried the girl until she finally saw what they were. Elves, dressed in crude leather garments and peaked caps. Their pointy noses made them look rodent-like, but there was an innocent intelligence to the rest of their faces, especially in their over-large eyes. Katy smiled at one elf that was brazen enough to approach to examine her. It smiled back. She unwrapped a candy bar from her stash of supplies and took a tiny nibble, then handed it to the little fellow. He took it and sniffed the brown cylinder before taking a hesitant bite of it. His eyes lit up like floodlamps (literally), illuminating the immediate area. Then he scampered off to share this treat with his brethren. She watched the radiance fade in the distance, only to flare anew as other elves tasted the candy bar.

When she turned her attention back to trudging alongside Ank, Katy found him eyeing her with an amicable grin. “What?” she chirped. He only shook his head and continued pushing his way through the stalks of wheat.

Finally, he stopped.

“Here we are,” he announced.

Zippering her parka closed, Katy pulled the hood up around her head. “Okay! Let’s go!”

“A few last-minute instructions...”

She scowled.

“If you think ‘instructions’ sounds too bossy, consider them tips on how to stay alive.”

Stifling her impatience, Katy nodded.

“First and most important: if I tell you to do something, you *do it!* No hesitation, no arguments. You have to trust my combat instincts over yours—which we both agree are pathetic.”

She had to nod; his familiarity with battle situations gave him experience she could never rival.

“Next, no impulsive heroics. We’ll be going up against trained warriors; don’t forget how impotent you would be against such ferocious opponents. In real battles, your primary concern should always be your own survival. If attacked, defend yourself—or defer to my intervention. Heroic activity can only occur when you’re safe enough to rescue somebody else. Most of the time, heroics result in everybody dying.”

She didn’t agree with that logic, but objecting would only postpone him moving them to the citadel where she could fight at Sal’s side. In her opinion, anybody could be a hero. In fact, everyone cheered hardest for the underdog who overcame personal hang-ups to conquer adversity. Sometimes the meek inherited the Earth by force.

“Above all,” Ank continued, “remember that Sal is a force of destruction onto himself. He rarely needs help in battle. You’d be advised to hang back and let him do his thing, lest you get caught in the backlash. He will function best if he doesn’t have to worry about your safety.” He stared hard at her, his eyes narrowing to slits and blazing crimson. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.” But again, she privately disagreed with the vampire’s judgment. Granted, Sal could normally take care of himself. But these were far from normal conditions. Here, he was going against an army led by the villain that had murdered his father. No matter how determined Sal was, could he maintain his focus when the moment of truth finally came?

If *it comes*, Katy reminded herself. According to Ank’s prediction, Darcy would flee this stronghold long before Sal could reach him. *Is that why I need to be at his side?* she wondered. *To console him when he inevitably fails?*

“Can we get going?” she snarled. Every minute Ank wasted with these invaluable tips for survival sent Sal deeper into danger—and for naught! For all the righteousness of his quest, it was doomed. She needed to be with him, to help him accept his failure.

“This is serious business, girl. I’m not telling you all this just to hear myself talk,” Ank snapped back at her. “I may not be able read your thoughts with much accuracy, but I can certainly sense your basic emotions. You’re doing nothing but giving me lip service. You have every intention of ignoring every bit of guidance I’ve given you.”

Seeing no reason to deny the obvious, Katy shrugged.

“I could very easily strand you here until Sal’s finished his attack,” threatened Ank. “If he survives, I can tell him where to find you. If he doesn’t, well...you better like wheat.”

“You want to help him as much as I do,” she accused. “Stop wasting time. Let’s go!” She jerked her head at the vampire.

13. (resumed)

Initially, the citadel looked none the worse for wear.

As far as sound went, though, explosions and screams freely echoed through the jade corridors, evidence that destruction and mayhem lurked deeper into the complex.

Ank led her down a passage. It let out onto a medium-sized concourse, a junction of several corridors. Here, things were anything but normal. Bodies littered the chamber, most of them sprawled in pieces on the bloodstained floor, a few hung from balconies and light fixtures...but

none of them were whole. Weapons, discarded and crumpled, lay here and there. Katy had a hard time holding down her gorge.

Even Ank gave a low whistle of surprise.

Katy had seen Sal in battle—*this* was not his handiwork. He was savage and ruthless when necessary, but whatever had done this to these defenders had lacked any trace of efficiency or finesse. This slaughter was wanton, bloodthirsty.

It reminded her of remains left behind after Ank had torn into foes. But he'd been at her side this entire time.

Crossing the concourse, Ank chose the noisiest passage. His decision was valid; they were, after all, seeking Sal, who was presumably causing the ruckus. The vampire progressed with a gun in each hand. Katy followed suit, although she wondered if Sal was going to leave anyone for them to shoot.

They moved slowly, matching caution with hair-trigger readiness. The bedlam grew louder—and suddenly chaos erupted around a corner and rushed toward them.

A wall of men surged forth. Many of them bore severe wounds, some were missing limbs. The air stank of blood and fear. Screams and shouts of futile defiance provided a thunderous soundtrack. And lurking in that melange of horror were inhuman hissings and bestial growls. As the tangle of routed defenders stumbled forward, their ranks broke and some fell and disappeared underfoot...revealing the threat that pursued them.

But the architect of this mayhem wasn't Sal.

Velociraptors!

Now the violence made sense!

But—what the hell were these monsters doing here? Were they native to this Earth too?

More concerned with escaping than explaining the fierce carnivores, Ank clumsily grabbed Katy and literally threw her through a doorway. Diving after her, he failed to close the door fast enough. First a fleeing minion lurched into the doorway, blocking the door from closing. Ank shot him in the face, but as his corpse flopped aside, a raptor bullied its way into the room. More followed.

The room appeared to be some kind of storage area. Metal shelf units lined the square-footage. Boxes and cartons of all shapes and sizes crowded those shelves.

Frantically dashing the length of the chamber, Katy found a door at the far end. She yanked it open and fled through it, completely unmindful of whatever lay ahead. Behind her, a swarm of maddened dinosaurs chased Ank in retreat. Their scaly sinews rippled as they scabbled after him. Snapping at their reptilian ken, often spilling each other's blood, they pursued the vampire with a mindless fervor—except it wasn't really "mindless," but steeped in ravenous bloodlust. Ank emptied his guns at them, toppled shelves to block their progress, even kicked a few in the

face—but they kept coming. As the boxes fell, they spilled their contents; reams of paper split open and spewed loose sheets across the floor. Both vampire and beasts skidded wildly on this slippery mire.

This confusion pursued Katy into the next room. A larger area had been sectioned-off with partitions, creating an array of secretarial cubbyholes. For a fleeting moment, she wondered why Darcy's army needed a clerical staff—but she quickly resumed her primary concern: avoiding getting chewed to pieces. She raced past the empty cubicles with madness on her heels. The reptilian swarm trampled the partitions and desks in their frenzied advance. Ank fought them off as he stumbled in retreat. Having thrown away his empty revolvers, he now wielded his own extended talons against a surging wall of teeth.

The secretarial pool had another door, but it was located in the far left corner of the chamber. Unable to trample through the cubicles like the rampaging raptors, Katy had to race down the manmade walkway. Upon reaching the end of the room, she veered along the rear wall. She ran parallel now to the onrushing tide of chaos. Raptors leapt and cavorted, snapping their bear-trap mouths and snarling in frustration as Ank eluded those jaws. His claws ripped open bestial ribcages and scaled throats, but the slain simply sank under the imminent wall of demoniac predators. With each passing second, that merciless turmoil loomed closer. And when she finally reached the exit door, it was locked.

Cowering in the corner, she faced her pursuers and blasted away with both of her guns. Her salvos were impetuous, unaimed, and did little more than add noise to the bedlam. The reptilian bulk drove Ank into the corner.

"What's the problem?" he bellowed over the bloodthirsty ruckus. "Open the damned door!"

"It's locked!" yelled Katy.

"Shoot it open!" he shouted back.

Why didn't I think of that? she chastised herself. *Because I suck at this!*

She turned her guns on the barrier and atomized the doorknob. The tide of massed raptors forced her through the liberated threshold. She landed on her ass.

"Run!" called Ank. Now that the swarm had to funnel their assault through the doorway, he could fight them one by one instead of fending off a seething mob of ravenous raptors.

Scrambling to her feet, Katy ran. Her flight was blind, she had no idea how the citadel was laid out. Her only conscious imperative was to get away from the dinosaur horde. (Once more, the question crossed her mind: *What were these damned dinos doing here in Darcy's citadel?* But more pressing matters—like survival—took precedence.) After twenty feet of mad progress, she stopped to test one of the doors arranged along this passageway. Locked. She hastened on to try the next one. Locked.

The fourth door opened to her clumsy hands. She paused for an instant to peer back along the hall. Ank still defended the hallway. She shouted to him, then plunged through the open door—and found herself in a claustrophobic chamber lined with closed doors. None of them would open for her.

A dead end! fretted Katy. As she whirled to flee the way she'd come, Ank came stumbling through that open door. A raptor pounced on him. Tearing open its throat, Ank flung it back at the remains of the pack. Before the beasts could clamber past this obstacle, he slammed the door.

A host of squeals resounded as the raptors assaulted the other side of the door with teeth and claws. It was sturdy, though, this wedge of jade, and did not shatter under the creatures' combined onslaught.

For a moment, Ank stood there, weaving on his feet, panting, staring at the closed door and listening to the swarm's feverish frustration. His blood flowed from a number of nasty-looking wounds, spattering the smooth green floor.

Across the small circular closet, Katy slumped in hysterical exhaustion.

His breathing finally returned to normal, and Ank turned to her.

"Gotta hand it to Sal," he grunted. "He recruited his own vicious army to storm Darcy's keep."

"What?" The word came out as more a hoarse rasp than a word, but Ank sensed the mystification she had intended to express.

"Those creatures, they're not Darcy's," he explained. "They come from that prehistoric Earth ruled by the Oop apes. Sal must have brought them here and set them loose within the stronghold. A clever scheme." He paused to chuckle to himself. "Even Darcy's undead minions are no match for their ferocity. Unleashing those beasts created the perfect distraction for Sal. While the raptors ran loose through the citadel, slaughtering everyone in their way, he could sneak in unnoticed in the confusion."

What--? Katy thought. *The Bat Pack vampires are the undead ones, not Darcy's minions.* But her breathless state couldn't handle so many syllables, and all that came out were a series of hoarse croaks.

A shadow darkened Ank's features. "The problem is—they're as much a threat to Sal's friends as they are to his enemies. But then, he didn't anticipate having any allies, so there was no reason for him to worry about friends getting hurt." His face contorted with barely restrained anger—his eyes filling with blood and his fangs inching out from his gums—as he snarled, "I warned you we'd only get into trouble by following Sal here. He doesn't need our help. We're just endangering ourselves by being here."

He stepped in her direction. "It's time we got out of here—and left Sal's plan to play out the way he intended..."

But Katy recoiled from his reach. She'd heard him over the commotion of the raptors as they sought to rip their way through the jade barrier. Although she hadn't understood all of his remarks, that last bit had been clear—and it utterly contradicted her own ambitions. She wasn't leaving, not without Sal.

"What's the matter?" Ank growled as the girl moved away from him. "Oh, don't start with all that 'I have to fight at Sal's side' nonsense. His dinosaur army will gut us as eagerly as they'll—"

Twisting away from his clutches, Katy grabbed the latch of one of the doors that ringed the small chamber. To her surprise, the door came open. As she fell through it, she guessed that some system kept all other doors sealed shut while one of them was open; once the door she'd used to enter this junction closet was closed, the others were free to open. To prevent Ank from following her, Katy kicked the door shut behind her.

And found herself in another small round chamber lined with doorways. On impulse, she yanked open a door across the way. She hoped that doing so would secure the portal through which she had passed, preventing Ank from pursuing her. Her spontaneous presumption proved accurate. That first doorway remained tightly secure.

A battering sounded from its far side: Ank pounding and cursing his inability to catch her. Powered by vexation, his metamorphic fists created a thunder that reverberated within the confines of the tiny chamber.

Instead of diving through the newly opened doorway, she looked before leaping. She had learned the wisdom of practicing a modicum of caution when dashing haphazardly about this place. Darcy's stronghold was under siege by a horde of bloodthirsty prehistoric carnivores. The beasts could be anywhere, spreading havoc and wantonly doling out death. She had no desire to jump into their midst. For that matter, she'd find no succor in the company of anyone defending the citadel against these invading raptors. Darcy's minions would kill her in an instant, either as one of the invaders or because their master had called for her death long ago. Her only friends for miles were Sal and Ank...and the latter was probably more inclined to smack her down and carry her off now that she'd run off on her own.

While as far as Sal was concerned, under no circumstances was Katy leaving this citadel until she found him.

It was with some trepidation that Katy peered at the chamber beyond the doorway. It was massive, and appeared to be some sort of banquet hall. Details were difficult to make out, for an opalescent mist masked the bottom half of the chamber. Rows of picnic-sized tables seemed to lurk within that haze; more of the same were attached to the walls like old style bunk-beds. An imposing staircase descended like a fan from the vaulted ceiling to the dining depths. Baroque statues of heroic figures flanked the sweeping steps, holding aloft spears and scepters or

pointing dramatic hands toward whoever was dismounting the steps. Right now, those stairs were empty.

So was the rest of the banquet hall, but she couldn't be certain. There were so many places someone could hide—in the mist or under those tables or behind the seemingly floating stairway. Positioned high and equidistantly around the chamber's circumference were ventilation grills; it was from these that the heavier-than-air translucent smog seeped to pool below. Katy studied the chamber for long moments, alert for any movement or furtive sound. But silence generally reigned here; only hints of the bedlam from the rest of the citadel leaked through the translucent walls.

And (according to Ank) all of this had been carved directly out of the jade mountainside. (That alone was incredible—entire mountain ranges made of solid jade.) Fashioning a crag into a fortress was impressive enough—but digging into the peak to create all of these tunnels and rooms was a breathtaking accomplishment. From what she could tell, even the staircase and its attendant figures had been sculpted from raw gemstone. She had to wonder: had Darcy commissioned the aerie's fabrication?—or just stolen someone else's grand palace?

The cold was intense enough here that her breaths misted upon leaving her mouth. Ank had warned her that she'd be grateful for her parka's warmth even inside the stronghold, and he'd been right. If anything, it seemed colder indoors than it had been perched on that distant rocky ledge with the snow pelting her. That didn't make much sense to Katy. Perhaps one of Sal's earliest vandalisms had knocked out the citadel's heating system, plunging the interior into frigid temperatures.

Her doorway opened upon the banquet hall's stately expanse. It led out onto a modest balcony with utilitarian steps that ran down the wall into the soupy mist. Again, (as far as she could discern) nothing was glued or bolted in place; everything had been chiseled from primal precious stone.

It was the muffled din that finally motivated her to enter the banquet hall, for with each subsequent shudder the explosions seemed to draw closer and closer. Whether this was an acoustic trick of the citadel's limpid construction or just a product of her shell-shocked nerves—Katy didn't care. She was well aware of the dangers that surrounded her. Remaining in one spot would only allow these threats to converge on her. Besides, sooner or later these violent detonations were bound to weaken the citadel's structural integrity. She needed to find Sal before the entire stronghold collapsed upon itself and cascaded down the mountainside to shatter into crystalline shards in the abyss.

She stepped through the doorway, but left it open in case something precipitated her prompt withdrawal. (Plus, leaving it open locked all the other doors in the junction closet, barring Ank from chasing after her and interfering.) It only took standing at the balustrade for a moment to force Katy to recoil from that precipice. The drop, scarcely more than twelve

yards—the equivalent of three building stories—hardly equaled heights she had previously endured, but added to her present unease it was enough to swamp her with mind-numbing fright. She retreated until the wall pressed against her back.

The girl twisted around with surprise, for she should have backed through the open doorway, not into a solid surface. The door was gone; not just closed, but sealed so tight that no trace of a seam betrayed its prior existence. There was no latch or handle.

This development left Katy no choice but to brave the open steps...or stay where she was until everything crashed down around her.

Or she could wait until Ank caught up with her, but then he would grab her and trans-d them away from this place—and she'd never get the chance to find Sal. No, she refused to leave this hellhole with Sal.

Despite her sudden conviction, she eyed the steps with trembling suspicion. They were nothing more than narrow slabs of jade jutting from the wall. No banister or railing offered a sense of safety to anyone climbing or descending the path. She couldn't decide which aspect troubled her more: the terrifying height or the steps' seemingly superficial configuration.

But standing here frozen with indecision was counterproductive. Instead of letting dread waste valuable minutes, Katy needed to get moving. If she hesitated too long, she'd never be able to conquer her fear. And this time, Sal wasn't here to rescue her.

Approaching the open end of the balcony, she slid one foot onto the first green step. She tentatively eased her weight onto that leg...and the step didn't perceptibly give or sag or creak. That was promising.

With her back pressed firmly against the wall, Katy inched her way along.

Just don't look down, Katy counseled herself. But doing so was unavoidable. She *had* to look down to guide her feet from step to step. The trick was to focus on her boots and ignore the dizzying distance that stretched beneath the soles of her feet.

It wasn't easy. In fact, it was quite torturous. Her overcautious efforts required a monstrous amount of concentration. Her descent was taking too long, exasperating her impatience. Time and again, she had to suppress the urge to hurry down the steps, for she knew that giving in to panic was a sure way to lose her footing.

It took a long time...

But at last she reached a point where the mist churned around her thighs. The steps delivered Katy to a raised ledge that ran around the room. The actual floor lurked vaguely within the haze.

Once she'd clambered down from the ledge, the vaporous sea lapped at her shoulders. The tables hidden in the mist ran in tight rows; there was barely enough room to walk between them. There were no evident seats. She waded through the banquet hall.

As she went, proximity clarified some details regarding what lay hidden in the mist. Not all the tables were empty, but the things she spied weren't dishware or cutlery—they were *bodies!*

Each table supported a human figure...or what was left, for some of them were missing limbs. A few were so desiccated that only brittle mummies remained.

She had stumbled into some huge morgue!

Now the extreme cold made sense. The frigid temperature was to preserve these cadavers.

But why?

In all honesty, Katy didn't want to know why. It probably involved some blasphemous ceremony—for anything utilizing a score of corpses was guaranteed to be unsavory.

Understandably uncomfortable among so many corpses, she hurried her stride.

She headed for the grand staircase and its noble sculptures; it was the easiest escape route from this jade ossuary.

Considerably wider, these steps were like miniature landings. She felt no vertigo ascending them.

The statuary simultaneously fascinated and intimidated the girl. Each figure was super-sized, standing twice as tall as normal men and sporting physiques that Hercules would've envied. Katy marveled at the exquisite craftsmanship, each sinew was so expertly carved. The jade contours glittered in some phantom light. Each figure shared another bizarre aspect: they were all faceless. If their heads had once borne features, those noses and brows had been chiseled away, leaving empty visages staring down at her. That creeped her out.

She hastened up the grand stairway, eager to escape the blank regard of these hewn ciphers. At one point she stumbled, not from losing her balance, but because it seemed to her—for a fleeting instant—that one of the statues had moved, indeed threatened her with a jade spear. But it was only a trick of the light gleaming off the articulated sinews of the figure. Katy paused and closed her eyes to empty her head of these fearful fancies. The statue was lifeless, immobile, incapable of activity or hostility. It could not hurt her.

When she opened her eyes, her mind was momentarily liberated of any apprehension. She exhaled an anxious sigh; the expelled air plumed before her face. And when that fog cleared, an entirely new horror was revealed.

Shapes moved about amid the vapor below. But that couldn't be, for the only things in that mist were corpses and their resting platforms. Yet, as the girl held her breath and stared, murky shadows became distinct forms immersed in that gaseous soup. Something—*things!*—stirred in the milky haze! As she watched, frozen in terror, those shapes lurched erect and grotesque heads and shoulders broke the surface of the sea of mist.

As if *that* wasn't disturbing enough, the bodies that waded through the mist were putrefied! Only shreds of flesh clung to their viscous muscles and tendons. Patches of pale bones showed through the gray, decayed tissues.

"Walking dead!" she rasped. *No*— she immediately rejected that identification. The dead didn't walk. Such things were impossible...like vampires and living dinosaurs...

Then she realized these figures weren't staggering around without purpose—they were all headed in her direction! She edged away from them. Then, whirling on her heels, she speedily ascended the broad staircase. With stiff determination, the zombies followed her, mounting step after step in their jerky stride.

More than once in her frantic retreat Katy stumbled. Only the oversized statues prevented the girl from toppling from the elevated pathway where it narrowed to converge with the ceiling. Regaining her poise, she hastily resumed her climb. Each time, she resisted the urge to peer back to check on her pursuers. She didn't want to know how close they were or how many had joined the chase. *They shouldn't even be up and moving about in the first place. Why are they coming after me?*

But she could guess why. In his infinite depravity, Darcy had obviously recruited an army of zombies to help him conquer multiple Earths. And now that army had risen to defend the stronghold against an intruder—*her!*

Upon reaching the apex of the stairway, Katy found she could go no farther. Large, ornately carved doors blocked her way. Lacking latches or knobs, there was no way to open them. She pushed against the green panels, but they refused to budge.

"Dammit—" she whined under her breath.

Now she had no choice but to turn and face Darcy's army of reanimated corpses.

They had pursued her with steady diligence, moving slowly but unfaltering in their advance. There were about twenty of them in various states of decomposition.

They don't look all that strong, she told herself. But the notion of physical contact with them...her fists sinking into moldering tissues with each blow...made her shudder.

But there was no need for her to pummel these opponents with fists. She had weapons: guns and knives—and grenades! Fumbling with the belt slung over her shoulder, her clumsy hands knocked several of the tiny bombs loose. They clattered away down the wide steps. A moment later, she twisted the triggers of grenade after grenade and lobbed them at the rising zombie tide. Her initial aim was frantic; some fell awry. But several landed amid the shambling cadavers.

A series of sharp detonations rattled Katy's ears as the bombs exploded. A second later, ragged bits of meat, broken limbs and fractured heads spewed across the ramp's wide steps.

She continued until there were no more grenades to throw. They were all gone.

The subsequent blasts blew a wave of zombies to pieces...but more promptly crawled over the twitching organic rubble of their compatriots, all striving to climb the steps in pursuit of her. Past them, she could additional ranks rising from the milky mist, lurching for the stairway.

She drew the two revolvers Ank had given her. Squaring off with her back pressed against the barred doors, Katy blasted away at the mob of corpses. She wasn't a very good shot—but she didn't need to be. The slugs tore chunks from the putrefied figures. She quickly realized that if she aimed at their legs, she could stop them. Or so she thought. Her salvos shattered femurs and tibias, sending the warriors crumpling to the steps. They stayed down, but they didn't stay still. The fallen commenced crawling up the stairs, while the others swayed in their wake. With each sweep of her gunfire, the zombies were reduced to dragging themselves aloft with their spindly arms. But they kept coming. She'd shot down so many, yet they continued to emerge from the mist.

Sooner or later, she started to fret—but reality got the jump on her and both of her guns stopped barking and started clacking with impotence. They were empty. She had to holster one of the revolvers in order to free a hand to fish for fresh ammo clips. By the time she'd ejected the empties and slotted new clips into place, the horde was only two yards away. She could no longer spare the bullets to slow down the staggering dead—she needed to concentrate her shots on the zombie frontline. Any minute now, they were going to reach her and start clawing at her with their bony fingers. Already some of them were snapping their lipless teeth in anticipation of gnawing on her. She began targeting the heads of the nearest ones. That much she remembered from the few zombie movies she'd seen. (She'd never been much of a fan of horror films, and look at her now: living one!) Headshots were the trick. A bullet in their brain stopped them dead.

But targeting was more time-consuming than wildly spraying the crowd of corpses with hot lead. She was taking them out, but one at a time instead of disabling batches of the creatures with a single sweep of her arm.

Quality over quantity, she told herself.

But sooner or later, they were going to swamp her. She couldn't kill them fast enough. The creatures kept on coming, undaunted by the fate of their comrades, unbothered by most of the wounds she inflicted on them.

Where are you, Sal? she bemoaned. *I really need rescuing this time—*

Suddenly: the doors behind her swung open. Katy had been leaning against them, and now she tumbled back—into whatever chamber lay at the top of the jade morgue. As she fell on her ass, the doors swung closed before any zombies could clamber past the threshold.

“Spunky little bitch, aren’t you?”



With a start, Katy scrambled to her feet. At a glance, she took in the room: medium-sized, an antique oak desk separated her from a seated man, his back was to her as he studied an array of video screens that filled the back wall. The room itself was jade, but the desk, chair and surveillance hardware were not (besides those corpses, these were the first things she’d seen in this citadel that *hadn’t* been made of jade). A few loose sheets of paper sat atop the desk.

She leveled both of her revolvers at the man behind the desk. She was ready to blast him to bits if it wasn’t Sal—or Ank. But then, what would either of them be doing manning the citadel’s control center? No, this man was an enemy—it might even be Darcy himself! Or at least someone Darcy trusted to monitor the stronghold’s security.

Another thought crossed her mind while she impatiently waited for the man to turn and face her. *If those screens are covering this entire citadel, I could use them to track down Sal!*

“Hey you!” demanded Katy. She was tired of waiting for him to notice her. She was tempted to fire a warning shot—just to get the bastard’s attention—but was worried that she’d destroy a screen she might need to find Sal’s location in the jade complex. “Turn around—nice and slow! No sudden moves—I’ve got you covered!”

The man turned his head slightly to peer at her over his shoulder. His face remained hidden. “Don’t take that tone with me, child. I could easily reopen the doors and let the troops in.” He returned his gaze to the control panel. “I’ll get to you once I’m finished here.”

The man’s audacious haughtiness flustered Katy. She was the one with the guns, yet he remained completely unthreatened. His confidence was so severe that it actually intimidated her.

This *had* to be Darcy. Only that villain would act like this.

“Just stop whatever you’re doing,” she yelled back. “Or I’ll shoot you—I swear I will!”

Releasing an exasperated sigh, the man swiveled his chair so that he faced Katy. His brow was furrowed with disapproval, the corners of his wide lips drooped in a scowl. A sense of recognition blossomed in Katy’s mind, but then he distracted her. “Spunky...and mouthy,” he snarled. “I warned you.” He reached out a hand toward the controls.

And Katy shot him. Worried that her aim might be defective, she emptied the clips of both revolvers at the man. His body jerked and

twitched under several impacts. Rogue shots chewed holes in the back of the leather chair and exploded screens behind him. She continued to squeeze the triggers long after her guns had ceased expelling bullets.

He was going to open the doors and let his zombies in, she told herself, desperate to justify what she'd done. She'd never killed anyone before, and even though she'd done it to save her own life, she felt no satisfaction or relief. If anything, she felt *nothing*.

"I...I didn't mean to..." she heard herself whine. The weight of her empty guns dragged her arms down to her sides. A moment later, her fingers slackened and the revolvers clattered to the jade floor.

"No harm done," croaked the man. Moving slowly, he unslumped and sat erect in the tattered chair. The leather cushions weren't the only tattered thing—the man's chest showed a gaping wound from overlapping shots. Another slug had torn away the left side of his weathered face. Other shots had disabled his right arm, it hung limp as he leaned forward to sneer at Katy with his half-face.

"You—" she gasped. "You should be dead!"

"I am." He grinned a particularly gruesome grin, his missing cheek revealing a full span of his molars. Reaching out, completing the motion he had started before she'd shot him, he flipped a switch.

The doors swung open and a mound of corpses spilled into the control room.

All of this was too much for Katy to cope with. Gawking at everything, she stood where she was as the zombies swarmed upon her.

But—they didn't pounce on her. Instead of ripping her to pieces, they hurried past Katy as if she didn't even exist. Numbed in body and mind, she saw them clamber across the wooden desk. They gathered around the seated man with reverence, not hostility. As she watched, they began to tear parts from their own bodies and offer these chunks of decomposing meat to the man. Horror and disgust flooded Katy's mind.

The man took these putrid gifts and stuffed them into the wounds created by Katy's gunshots. Most ghastly of all, he lifted a particularly viscous lump of flesh and pressed it against the meatless side of his face—and then proceeded to mold the dripping morass like putty, smoothing it out to form a new cheek.

As he commenced to squeeze forth a lump on his temple and fashion it with his gray fingers into an ear, revulsion overwhelmed Katy and she passed out.

As she tumbling into darkness, she remembered where she'd seen the man before.



Katy wasn't surprised to wake and find herself tied up. She was surprised to wake at all.

Multiple strips of silver electrical tape bound her to the tattered remains of the leather-cushioned chair. A closer examination revealed that, other than the binding electrical tape, she was naked. Someone had stripped away her clothes before putting her in the chair. Besides wrapping her in place in the chair, several extra loops encircled her arms and legs, locking them in place beneath the round-and-round strips of adhesive. When she tried to struggle, the tape stung but held her fast.

Her bindings did little to ward off the cold that permeated the citadel.

That's where I am, she remembered. The stronghold's control room...and I killed the man I found there...or tried to...

For there he was puttering about at the control panels beneath the ranks of video screens that filled the control room's back wall. His back was to her, but he looked none the worse for all the bullets she'd pumped into him. An amount of the screens, though, bore evidence of her shots, darkening a ring of them among the still live monitors.

The chair to which Katy was strapped had been moved to the other side of the desk. A crew of corpses stood guard in an arch that ran behind her. These zombies were mostly whole, not as decayed as the ones that had chased her from the morgue.

Finally, the man turned away from the screens and faced Katy. He planted the knuckles of both fists on the desktop as he leaned forward to address her. His clothing (a dark blue tunic with gold trim) was torn and scorched by her gunshots, but his flesh showed no signs of any wounds.

"Girl—you have interfered with affairs far beyond your puny comprehension," he snarled. "And I do not tolerate such nuisances!"

"You'd be surprised what I know," she replied. Her voice surprised her, it was far more stable than she felt. There was even a hint of defiance in her words. "I know who you are."

"I am Darcy, Lord of—"

"You're Winston Pastorius," Katy interrupted his burgeoning tirade.

He stared at her for a moment, startled by her accusation.

"Well," she added, "at least a Doc Pastorius. I know there are several of you running around among the alternate Earths. And I know that none of you are very likable people."

Darcy threw back his wrinkled head and laughed hard with contempt. His wispy white hair danced as he cackled. After a few minutes, his mirth faded and he inquired, "And how could a drunken slut like you know what Pastorius looks like?"

"I've already met a few of you."

His superiority switched off like a lightbulb. His heavy brow furrowed. He glared at her for a protracted period—and in turn she feigned smug defiance.

Finally, he pushed off from the desk and stood tall, crossing his arms across his chest. "None of them are *me!*" he declared. "Anyway, whatever

you think you know, you'll take it to your grave, bitch. The only reason you're still alive is to serve as bait."

Bait? For what? But she knew instantly: it had to be Sal! Darcy/Pastorius planned to lure Sal into a trap, using Katy as bait!

Katy had to laugh. "You old fool, Sal's too cunning to fall for any crude ambush!"

Again, Darcy scowled, her remark slightly deflating his pomp. But he quickly regained his arrogance.

"Spunky, mouthy, and too smart for her own good," he announced. A wicked grin crept across his leathery face. "Let's see which one of us is right." He strolled out from behind the oak desk and stood before her. With a wave of his hand, he chortled, "Will your hero come to your rescue?—or to his certain death?"

"You don't know him," she mumbled. The villain's blustering confidence was supposed to infect her with doubt, but she had too much faith in Sal. "He'll overcome any threat or obstacle to save me. And then he'll kill you."

"Like you did?" He stood back and touched his gaunt fingers to his unbroken chest. He wagged a stern finger at her. "I can't be killed, girl, because I'm *already* dead—more than that, I'm *self-repairing*. Like von Neumann machines that are programmed to cannibalize their environment to repair any damages they suffer—only I can do it on an organic level!"

"With dead flesh from corpses..." She shuddered, or tried to, but her electrical tape bindings held her tight.

"With flesh from other me's," he countered. "And yes, it's all dead meat, but the process only works with corpses. I had to kill myself before I could achieve this talent."

Katy shook her head. This was all too horrific for her. *The villainous Darcy is really a Doc Pastorius—who killed himself to become a zombie so he could replace his parts as they wear out. Is that why he's crazy? Because he'd been dead so long his brain's starting to rot? And he keeps an army of Pastorius corpses for spare parts? Was there no hellish depth of depravity this maniac wouldn't embrace?*

"My peers called me mad for pursuing spiritualism in search of my dead wife," Darcy was ranting. "Those fake mediums and phony spiritualists were of no help, but they *did* lead me to study the darker side of mysticism. Voodoo, necromancy, and finally mastery of self-reanimation! That's when I cast off my original identity and became Darcy, for I had evolved into a superior being! Now—worlds may crumble and species go extinct—but *I* will survive! Eventually, I'll outlive the entire universe! But first, somewhere out there a world exists where my precious Frieda never died, where she still lives—waiting for me to show up and rescue her! And once I've found her, she'll join me in my special brand of undeath—and together we'll rule everything!"

A zombie with a god complex, she mused. And I used to dismiss monster movies as being too absurd...they never even came close to Darcy's delusions.



An hour later and Sal still hadn't shown up.

Darcy spent most of that time pacing back and forth. He would stare long and hard at the open doorway beyond the line of zombie guards, then he would retreat to study the screens monitoring the citadel. He tweaked dials and consulted gauges. As the hour ticked to a close, he began muttering to himself, too low for Katy to overhear him, but she could easily imagine his irritable complaints.

Where was Sal?

What was taking him so long?

Why hadn't he come to save his maiden?

These same questions ran through Katy's mind as she sat bound to the tattered chair. At first the girl had taunted Darcy that Sal would never fall for this blatant ambush...but now she wondered why her hero hadn't found a way to foil the trap and rescue her from this madman... Her prior faith in Sal was wearing thin as the minutes trickled by.

And when he *did* show up, would he be a match for these unfeeling guards? Or would Sal arrive with guns empty and vitality exhausted from destroying the rest of the citadel?

A loud grunt disturbed Katy's fretful reverie.

Standing at the wall of screens, Darcy leaned forward to stab an angry finger at one particular monitor.

The last hour had given Katy ample time to study the surveillance screens. They all showed portions of the jade citadel, most of the rooms and corridors were littered with mutilated bodies. As the hour progressed, fewer figures bustled about on the screens, until eventually the only ones moving around were the bloodthirsty raptors who, having slaughtered everyone, searched for fresh prey. Having grown bored of watching the carnivores prowl, she had withdrawn in introspection—until the madman's sudden outburst had roused her.

The screen indicated by Darcy showed a human figure fighting other humans. Katy craned her neck for a better view. "That's Sal!" she blurted. It had to be him. Only he—or Ank—were out there fighting the citadel's personnel.

Darcy turned a scornful scowl on the girl. "Of course it's him! Nothing happens here without my knowledge. I've had him under observation ever since he—and his reptilian storm troopers—breached my stronghold. This way, I'll know when he comes to save you. Except..." He glanced back and feebly smacked the screen with a fist. "...he's been busy killing a roomful of my minions...over and over again for the last fifteen minutes.

He thought I wouldn't notice—but I did! He's rigged the surveillance camera to play a looped tape. Your boyfriend is damnably resourceful. Now...I have no idea where he is. He could be anywhere in the complex. He might even have left already..."

"Can't leave until I finish what I came to do," proclaimed a voice from behind Katy—a voice she immediately knew.

Darcy whirled to gape at the doorway. Katy tried to look, but her bindings would only allow the girl to turn her head eighty degrees, granting only peripheral glimpses of what ensued behind her back.

Rushing to attack the newcomer, the zombie guards disappeared from Katy's range of vision. The sounds of conflict issued from behind her: meaty thumps and squishy ones too; the swish of blades slicing air and then gristle.

"Is that you, Sal?" she whined.

When he finally stepped into Katy's field of vision, Sal paid her no attention. But there was no way she could ever fail to recognize that impressive span of shoulders. Her hero stood tall but battered. His form-fitting articulated ceramic armor was chipped and charred. A piece of his forearm plate was missing, exposing a nasty abrasion. Wires and tubes dangled around his neck, leading her to suspect that upon a time he'd had a helmet, but had lost it in some mighty skirmish. His face was a mess: spattered with blood and ash, all of it running in sweaty rivulets. His expression was stern. His hair lay plastered to his scalp, pulled back and tied into a ponytail, undoubtedly to accommodate his lost helmet. Walking past the girl, Sal approached the desk to confront Darcy. In one hand he clasped a serrated hunting knife, in the other a machete; both bore dark stains.

"Very impressive," remarked Darcy in a cocky voice. "You're quite the killing machine. I could use a man like you."

"So—the rumors are true," Sal snarled. "Darcy is nothing but a rogue Doc Pastorius."

"Oh, I'm a very *special* Doc Pastorius...or I used to be, before I became Darcy."

"You killed my father!"

"Did I?" chuckled Darcy. "A lot of people got in my way, so I had to kill them."

"My father was one of you—a Winston Pastorius!"

"Ah, well...I've slaughtered every one of *them* I could find."

Lunging forward, Sal drove his shorter knife dead-center into his enemy's chest.

Darcy laughed and, grabbing Sal's wrist, pulled the blade deeper until its hilt pressed against his brittle ribcage.

For all of Sal's hardcore determination, this self-destructive action came as a complete shock. Releasing the knife handle, he staggered back from the cackling maniac.

“He’s already dead!” yelled Katy.

“Already dead?” Sal mumbled.

“He’s a reanimated corpse, like those guards you just fought!”

“What the—“ The loose pieces of those zombies were clutching at Sal’s legs. Kicking away their advances, Sal danced back from the twitching pile of body parts.

“Your aim was too hasty. You missed my heart.” Darcy twisted the knife in his chest, dragging it to the left. “See? It’s over here.”

A look of shock swept across Sal’s face. “My God, you’re right...he’s already dead...”

Pulling the blade from his chest, Darcy flung it aside and barked, “Just another way of saying I can’t be killed.”

Sal bent down and retrieved the knife. As he rose, his face darkened; he bared his teeth. His entire body tensed and leaned slightly forward. “I like challenges,” he grated.

A second later he leapt at his father’s murderer.

Hurdling the desk, Sal swung his machete in a wide two-handed arc. His broad shoulders blocked Katy’s view, but she could tell what happened. A *chunk* sounded, then Darcy’s head flew from his shoulders.

As Sal stood back, the villain’s body spasmed, then toppled from view behind the oak desk. The head landed on the control panel, bouncing across a span of switches, causing several screens to flicker and change from visible light to infrared to computer enhanced views of the citadel’s massacred defenders.

“That wasn’t difficult at all,” Sal commented caustically.

The head grinned up at him and announced, “Don’t be so quick to congratulate yourself, fool.” Its lips curled back, exposing rows of yellow teeth. An unnatural light twinkled in its eyes.

Sal recoiled with a gasp—then grabbed Darcy’s head and smashed it again and again against the metal control panels. Once the villain’s skull caved it, Sal drove the head face-first into a live video monitor. The screen exploded and sparks cascaded as the circuitry fried Darcy’s brutalized brain.

Stepping back, Sal spat on the smoking head and growled, “How’s that, you bastard?”

“Excessive,” called Darcy’s voice from across the room, “but fruitless.”

Sal spun around, his expression again dumbfounded. Katy jerked her head to the left where the floor was littered with zombie limbs and torsos. By now, the girl shouldn’t have been surprised by Darcy’s posthumous tricks, but she couldn’t help it.

One of the mutilated guard bodies hoisted itself up on its undamaged elbows. Its head cocked at an unnatural angle, one arm broken between the elbow and wrist, the reanimated corpse had no hips or legs. Reaching out, it grabbed the chair that held Katy, then dragged

itself over and climbed into her lap. Her gorge rose as the putrid thing pressed against her. Viscous fluids leaked from it and seeped past the bands of electrical tape to moisten her stomach. The abomination's tugging had jostled the chair; now Katy faced sideways with a stunned Sal on her right and the open doorway on her left. Darcy cupped her aghast face in one hand, while its other arm encircled her neck, drawing her head down until her lips almost touched the corpse's rotting mouth. It whispered to her, "I'd be a lot more impressed by your boyfriend's ferocity if he actually achieved something."

Before Darcy could plant a gruesome kiss on her grimacing lips, Sal was there, tearing him from her lap. The legless cadaver tumbled to the carnage on the floor. Sprawling there, it flailed its arms in the air and cackled like a hyena.

"Are you okay, Missy?" Sal asked Katy. "The bastard didn't hurt you, did he?"

"You came for me," she cooed.

Carefully employing his hunting knife, Sal cut the electrical tape where it attached Katy to the chair. Once she was free, he slit the strips that bound her legs together and her arms to her sides.

"You aren't even supposed to be here, girl. I came for *him!*"

"You can't kill him," she insisted. "He's already dead!"

"Yes, I've noticed. He can move his consciousness from body to body."

"They're all dead versions of him!"

He stared at her with wide, fevered eyes. "What?"

"All these zombies you fought—they're all dead Doc Pastoriuses! He kills them to use their corpses as spare bodies!"

Astonishment made Sal stagger back a step. His face slackened with shock.

A new zombie stepped into the doorway and stood there, arms spread to rest hands against the frame of the threshold. "I'm over here now, Want to try to kill me again?"

An enraged Sal stormed over and staved in the zombie's worm-eaten skull with the hilt of his knife. Expending further ire, Sal kicked the now-really-dead body from the doorway. It tumbled down the stairs.

Katy came over to stand beside Sal. "Killing him is going to be impossible."

"No," he grunted. "It's just going to take longer."

From down in the morgue, a voice (now unwelcomely familiar) called out: "Still waiting for that deathblow, young Pastorius!"

Sal moved out onto the first step. Katy followed.

Below, an assortment of corpses waded through the milky misty. Darcy had roused a score of his selves. One of them, at the rear of the chamber, waved at them and taunted, "Has it occurred to you, sad little

orphan? Any one of these reanimated corpses could belong to your father. You may get the chance to rekill your father trying to avenge him!"

"How did you get here?" Sal hissed to the girl at his side.

"I came with Ank," she told him.

"Where is he?"

"I...don't know. I had to give him slip—he was going to trans-d me out of here before I could find you."

"If I could spare the time, I'd do exactly that."

"I want to help!"

"Having to worry about your safety is a damned distraction, Missy."

"That's not fair—"

"But it's accurate," he declared. "Take this." He drew a small device from a pocket; Katy recognized it as one of the Bat Pack's WayBack units. "It's set to your Earth. If things turn bad, use it to get out of here."

She took the device, but protested, "Wait—"

"Stay here." He stepped away from her, descending the stairway at a slow pace.

"What are you doing?" she called after him.

"I have to finish this...no matter how long it takes."

She knew that nothing she could say would dissuade Sal from this horrific task. He was determined to avenge his father. If he had to massacre a hundred reanimated corpses to do so, so be it.

And he was right: her presence was just an unnecessary distraction. She was less than useless in combat. The idea of killing anyone repulsed her. Granted, she'd blown up and shot down several zombies, even shot Darcy himself—but all of them had already been dead. Killing corpses was pointless, especially when they refused to die.

At no time did Katy's squeamish nature change her desire to see Darcy punished for his crimes—against her and against the hundreds, thousands who had perished because of him. The bastard deserved to die—painfully...but Katy lacked the gumption to be the executioner.

At least she could rely on Sal to do it.

I'll wait up here like he told me to...

With that Katy retreated back into the jade control chamber. She found her clothes in a pile behind the desk. Peeling the bands of electrical tape from her body, the girl winced as each adhesive strip came free. She quickly donned her jumpsuit and parka, gritting her teeth as the coarse material abraded the stinging welts left behind by the tape's removal. She was one gigantic ache.

All of the ammo for her guns had been spent getting here, so she discarded the revolvers. At least the knives offered her a sense of security. After a long moment examining the WayBack unit Sal had given her, she slipped it into a pocket.

Dressed and armed, she felt a little better. Maybe not "normal," but definitely less victimized. She settled down in the chair to wait.

Regarding the carnage on the floor, she shook her head. Katy had no desire to spend any additional time in the company of ravaged cadavers. She got up and rooted among the things on the desk. Most of it was trivial stuff: papers, a pen, a plastic ruler. The ink-blotter would serve her needs. Plucking from the desk, she used it as a shovel to move the piled body parts across to the doorway. There, she kicked them out into space.

Before coming back inside, she paused to survey Sal's progress. Down below, the burly man was churning up the viscous fog with his mayhem, making it difficult for her to follow his exploits. She returned inside.

A few scattered pieces remained: a head, a couple of detached arms, a vile lump of internal organs. She'd get to them in a moment.

The ink-blotter was too flimsy to shovel away the headless corpse behind the desk. Although revolted by the prospect, Katy realized that she was going to have to physically haul that body from the chamber. She rooted through her pockets until she found a pair of gloves.

As Katy came around the desk, the remaining cadaver reared to its feet and grabbed her in a neck-lock. She gasped—in surprise and for air—as the zombie's clutches strained to cut off her airflow. She struggled, but despite the body's decrepit condition, it won out. Her blows went ignored by the dead meat. Holding her fast, the zombie dragged her from behind the oak desk. There, it flung Katy aside, then stumbled among the loose pieces of remnant carnage. Lifting the lone head aloft, the reanimated corpse affixed it to its shorn neck.

Scuttling away from the creature, Katy drew her pair of knives and brandished them in feeble defiance.

Darcy jeered at her bravada. While the new head melded with his body, his leaky neck made the cackles come out as multiple whistles. He waited until the dead flesh had sealed itself before he addressed her.

"By now you've certainly learned how useless those are against me. You're not stupid—but you are misguided. There's no hope of defeating me. You know that. Why do you continue to resist? Isn't it obvious that your only hope for survival is to swear fealty to me?" He stepped over to peek at the conflict going on in the lower morgue. "You're a pretty little thing. I can tell young Pastorius likes you. I'd prefer to keep you around for his amusement, but you have to curb your hostility and be more docile."

"Never!" she swore.

The corpse sighed.

"You're a homicidal sick deviant *bastard!*" Katy yelled at him. "You're a blight on the world—on every world!"

Still watching Sal fight below, Darcy remarked, "He's a remarkable warrior. Look at him hack away at those husks." He threw a smirk back at Katy. "That's all they are, you know—just empty husks. When I kill them, I

erase the Pastorius personalities from their dead brains. It makes it easier for me to commandeer their bodies.” He returned his gaze to below. “Let him destroy as many as he wants. The ones I’m throwing at young Pastorius are wasted cadavers, too far-gone to be of any use to me. For now, this broken body will have to serve. After this is all over, I’ll take residence in a more robust corpse. I have a decent stash of them. And if my supply runs low, there’s always more where they came from. An endless stream of Winston Pastoriuses spread throughout an infinite array of alternate worlds...all waiting to be conquered.”

He wandered back into the control room. “Sooner or later, your boyfriend will realize the futility of opposing me. When he does, his only option will be to join me. He’s a ferocious warrior, I can put him to excellent use. He’ll become my army’s vanguard, an undefeatable fighting force. Hundreds of dead Sal Pastoriuses fighting for the glory of their father—albeit a refined version of that man. For I am far more than just a Winston Pastorius now—I have evolved into a superior being!”

“What are you talking about—dead Sals—?” she choked.

He gave her a deadpan look. “My army grows bigger every day, but I’m very selective about who gets to serve me directly. But one condition is mandatory: everyone in my hierarchy must be dead.” He started for Katy, his arms lifted to collect her. “Might as well take care of that detail now. Come to Poppa Pastorius, girl...I’ll end your pain and suffering...”

As he loomed near, Katy slashed at him with one of her knives. His brittle fingers closed on the blade and he twisted it from her frantic grasp. She stabbed at him with her remaining knife, but he swatted aside her strike with his forearm. Suddenly, her own knife, clutched awkwardly in his gnarled hand, came at her. She squirmed to avoid the attack, and the blade only tore the hood of her parka. For a desperate instant, Katy was dreadfully aware of the shiny dagger an inch from her cheek—then she recoiled from its sinister proximity. Her sudden withdrawal ripped the parka hood in half. She scrambled away, leaving Darcy to stab the wall. Hitting the jade surface with considerable force, the blade snapped from its hilt.

Crawling across the bloodspattered floor, Katy strained to think of a way out of this plight. None of her weapons had any effect on the bastard. If she tried to outrun him, where could she go? Down into the corpse-infested morgue? Yeah—run into the clutches of many dead enemies to escape one—that was stupid. Maybe she could lure him out onto the stairway and then push him off. But—what good would that do? If the fall damaged his body, he’d just move his consciousness to another Pastorius cadaver, and then come after her anew.

Other people have to cope with problems like awful jobs or cheating husbands, she fretted. Why can’t my problems be as simple as that?

Then she remembered the WayBack unit that Sal had given her. “If things turn bad, use it to get out of here.” *Where is the thing? I put it in a*

pocket—but which one? Her hands flew over her hips, slapping thighs and butt, testing each pocket's contents and finding no device. *Where is the damned thing?* She expanded her search to the parka's pockets, and— *There it is—in an inside pocket, where I stashed it for safekeeping.*

By this point, Darcy had come after her. His death-grip closed on her ankle. Katy squealed aloud and kicked to free herself, but his grip was unnaturally strong. He drew her toward him. Rolling on her back, she kicked out at him with her free leg. Her boot hit him squarely in the gut—and (*Oh, gross!*) sank into the glutinous mess. Now he had both her legs pinned! The corpse bent down and reached a desiccated hand for her face.

Immediate action was called for! She didn't even bother to pull the WayBack device from its pocket repose. Her fingers found the launch button and hit it with emphatic vigor.

The jade room vanished—

15.

—to be replaced by green surroundings of a different nature.

Woodlands. Lush bushes clustered under majestic elm trees with verdant canopies like fluffy emerald clouds fallen from heaven. A well-groomed grass lawn spread under her.

But the maddened corpse still loomed over her. Its grip on her ankle remained steadfast. Her other foot was embedded in the corpse's pulpy stomach. Its hand still reached for her face, its fingers fleshless and wet.

The WayBack unit had trans-d'ed Katy to another Earth—but had brought Darcy along with her.

That wasn't much of an escape, really.

She still had her other knife and used it now, stabbing at his outstretched arm, hacking at it...until its worm-eaten elbow came apart and the detached forearm fell away.

She took a vicious swipe at his face and Darcy danced back. Her foot came free of his guts with a squelchy sound. Releasing her ankle, he stood back and looked around him.

"Where are we?" he snarled. "Did you do this?"

Katy used the break to get back on her feet. She held the knife with confidence.

Now that her life wasn't in immediate peril, Katy noticed a few more things about the area. A graveled walkway circled the grassed plot. To one side, a dirt expanse featured the tall A-frame of a swing-set and a row of seesaws; next to them stood a jungle gym, its metal bars gleaming orange and yellow and red in the noonday sun. She had landed near a

playground. Fortunately no children were there to witness her out-of-thin-air arrival.

Sal had told her he'd set the WayBack unit's destination for her Earth...and that might very well be so...or not. It was impossible to tell from these immediate surroundings. The trees and shrubbery looked normal, so did the kiddie playground, but who knew what weirdness might lie beyond those woods?

For the moment, Katy had other priorities. She'd managed to injure Darcy. She should strike again, quickly, taking advantage of her small victory. She took a step toward him—and he scuttled back from her.

"You stay back," muttered the corpse. His tone betrayed an edge of caution, an emotion formerly unheard of in the villain's proclamations.

Katy hesitated—and the corpse lunged at her. He knocked the knife from her grasp. His spindly mass forced her to the grass. His remaining hand scrabbled for her neck, but her parka got in his way. She battered him with frenzied fists. She kicked at him. He pressed her down, not by weight but by intimidation. His arrogance was a palpable force hammering her like an anvil. The stench of his putrefied tissues made her gag.

"How you did this doesn't matter," Darcy snarled at her. "Once you're dead, all of your secrets will be mine!"

And suddenly Darcy was yanked from her. The corpse flailed as he flew across the park to crash into a stand of thorn bushes. Before he could compose himself, Sal was on him, dragging him from the nettles.

"I come looking for Missy," growled Sal, "and I find *you* trying to kill her."

"You're in the right place, but at the wrong moment," Darcy snidely remarked. He took a swipe at the burly man—and Sal ripped off that arm at the shoulder.

"Slaughtering that batch of listless zombies you left me with was too easy. But it gave me a chance to analyze your ability—you know, how you move your consciousness from corpse to corpse. They're all alternate versions of you, so you're genetically and spiritually compatible. By collecting so many of these other yous, you established a limitless selection of escape routes for yourself."

He stomped on Darcy's right leg, shattering the femur. He kicked away the loose shin. Then he continued:

"I had to wonder how Hot Sauce fit into your agenda. The Bat Pack knows you have it. But so do they now. How do you think I invaded your stronghold? They inoculated me with the serum. The girl's clean, though. She wasn't supposed to follow me. I gave her my backup WayBack unit. When I returned upstairs and found the girl gone, I knew where she'd be, because the unit was preprogrammed to take her home. Finding *you* here is a welcome bonus."

Drawing his machete, Sal chopped at the corpse's hips until its remaining leg came loose. Darcy's battered remains sprawled on the lawn.

The corpse cursed him with haughty vehemence.

"You wanted Hot Sauce because it's more cost effective to inoculate your troublemaking minions with it; doing so saves you the cost of manufacturing thousands of WayBack units to equip them. Then I got to thinking: does the serum work on corpses? My medical knowledge is pretty limited, but I suspect that bloodflow is necessary to spread the formula throughout a subject's body. But—the dead have no bloodflow, do they, Darcy? So I'm guessing your zombie horde can't enjoy the benefits of the serum you fought so hard to acquire. You can't trans-d yourself out of here, can you?" He paused to smirk down at the incapacitated cadaver. "The fact that you haven't already answers my question. You're stranded here."

"I have forces everywhere," the ravaged corpse ranted. "They'll find me and—"

Sal brought his boot down hard on Darcy's chest, caving it in with a gruesome *crunch*.

"Another notion occurred to me," Sal announced. "And now I get to test that theory. It involves dimensional barriers. This should interest you, considering that you fathered trans-d technology—you and the hundreds of other Doc Pastoriuses. Those barriers do more than separate different universes, they contain things within their boundaries. Matter or energy doesn't naturally pass from universe to universe. So I got to wondering whether your ability to transmit your consciousness was just as limited. Shall we find out? This part requires your participation, Darcy."

He began to stomp on the corpse's head.

"Go ahead—jump to another Pastorius corpse—try real hard, don't hold back! This is your last chance for survival!"

He stomped and stomped.

"Gurgle," rasped the corpse's now-toothless maw.

"Oh good," Sal cheered. "You're stuck in this body. I was right. With no other Pastorius cadavers in this world, there's nowhere for you to go. Your transmission can't penetrate dimensional barriers. You really are stuck here."

He stopped stomping only when Darcy's head had been reduced to a sticky puddle on the lawn.

"*That* is how you kill someone who's unkillable."



Katy had strangely mixed feelings about what had happened.

On one hand—hell, on *both* hands: she was glad Darcy was dead—*really* dead and gone. The man had been a monstrous villain, a madman

responsible for widespread murder and mayhem. Katy knew his brutality, for she too had been targeted by his indiscriminate hostility.

And Sal had finally gotten to avenge his father's death. That was a good thing.

What really disturbed her—the “other hand”—was the glee with which Sal had exacted that vengeance. There'd been a point where it had truly seemed as if Sal was enjoying punishing Darcy, as he whittled away at the villain's last corpse, piece by piece. Sal's sheer zeal had been quite unnerving. Katy was fully aware how ferocious Sal could be—he was a warrior—but this time his determination had been tainted by a cruel gratification.

And—in all honesty—Katy had to confess that she too had shared Sal's harsh delight, watching him punish the bastard. It hadn't brought her pleasure, but she *had* felt a degree of satisfaction. She was guilty of the same sin as Sal. They had both *relished* Darcy's suffering. Decrying that “his crimes warranted extreme punishment” only sought an immoral justification for Darcy's violent end. He had earned a painful penalty—and Katy was glad to have witnessed it.

There was no denying that the Earth—*every* Earth out there—was better off with Darcy dead and gone. His crimes *had* been monumental, spanning worlds and destroying entire civilizations. His necromantic methods only made the whole affair more disturbing.

Even so, Katy felt guilty for celebrating his demise. But...without a doubt, once others—like the Bat Pack or anyone defending their world against the madman's bloodthirsty incursion—learned of Darcy's downfall, there'd be *widespread* celebration. *Everyone* would cheer the bastard's death.

Countless Earths could rest easy now that Darcy's diabolical empire would crumble and disperse without him at the helm.

After considering the matter from several different directions, Katy could not deny the satisfaction she felt to have contributed to the villain's annihilation.



Katy could tell that no ethical qualms undermined Sal's own satisfaction with the blood on his hands. From his perspective, by killing Darcy Sal had avenged his father's murder. Sal's destruction of that bastard would benefit billions of people, not just the masses he had tormented, but even those who had yet to suffer the madman's devilry. As far as Sal was concerned, his accomplishment was righteous and necessary. Whatever relish he had experienced during meting out the villain's destruction had been transitory; it had perished with the object of his vivid hatred.

She envied Sal's stoic attitude. She wished the entire affair didn't stir self-doubt in her. Time and again, Katy would struggle to overcome these feelings of guilt, but they would always return, haunting her dreams and idle moments. No amount of repentance would appease her self-condemnation.



Sal, though, remained unburdened by such guilt.

Within minutes of Darcy's destruction, Sal had turned away...as if he'd already forgotten his violent outburst.

"You did it," Katy gasped.

Brushing aside her praise, he inquired about her health. "Did he hurt you?"

"He tried to—but no...I'm not hurt," she assured him. "It'll be a while, however, before my heart stops pounding in my chest..."

He helped her to her feet. Katy was still unsteady, so he walked her over to the playground and got her seated on one of the swings.

"Where are we?" she asked, gripping both chain supports.

"I programmed the WayBack unit to take you home. Did you change the setting?"

Katy shook her head.

"Then this is your Earth."

Peering at their surroundings, she was still puzzled. "But—*where* on my Earth?"

With a chuckle, Sal shrugged. "It's your world, Missy. Don't expect me to know it better than you."

She gave him an ironic smile, "It's not like I spend a lot of time hanging around kiddie playgrounds, Sal," but the joke went right over his head.

He stood beside her, first staring at Katy where she rocked in place on the swing, then gazing off at their arboreal environment.

"I need to go back to Darcy's stronghold," announced Sal. "I hate to ask this of you, Missy...but it'd be helpful if you accompanied me."

"Back with all those zombies?" she squealed. "No way!"

"Don't worry, with Darcy gone, there's no one to command his army of reanimated corpses. What few are left will just amble around without purpose."

"I'm not comfortable going—"

His tone changed suddenly, becoming harder, more authoritative. "We need to go back and find Ank, Missy. The only reason he's at the citadel is that *you* coerced him to bring you there. Then you ditched him. You owe it to him to help me rescue him."

"Rescue him from what?" she whined. "You just assured me that the zombies weren't dangerous anymore."

“Yes, but the same cannot be said about my dinosaur attack horde. I intended to leave the raptors there, hoping they might pick off any minions who report in...but now I’m worried they might gang up on Ank and harm him.”

“You really brought those beasts to the citadel? How did you convince them to help you?”

He laughed. “There’s no ‘convincing’ a dinosaur to do anything. I riled up a pack of raptors and got them to stampede through an open trans-d portal that unleashed them into Darcy’s stronghold. I just relied on their bloodthirsty nature to turn them into an invasion force.”

“So...Ank might be in danger...?”

“I need you to show me where you left him. If he’s not there, we’ll need to track him down.”

Reluctantly, Katy had to admit: Sal was right. If Ank was in trouble, it was *her* fault he was there in the first place. Helping Sal rescue the vampire was her responsibility.

“We need to go back to Darcy’s control center,” she sighed, “where he had me prisoner. I can backtrack from there. I came through a doorway down in the morgue.” She glanced up at him with a flicker of a worried expression. “You’re positive none of those zombies will bother me...us...?”

“I’m positive.”

Hopping from the swing, she stood before him. “Okay.”

He reached out to take her hand, but she pulled it back.

“Wait—if this is really my world, you can find it again once we’ve left?”

He nodded.

“How *did* you find it? I spent all that time trying to help Ank find it...without any success...”

“Ank was working from your memory,” Sal explained. “Once we got back to Base Nemo, I was able to look up the coordinates of your home Earth in the Bat Pack’s database. They had it on file from their search for the black box. Remember, Donny went there and you came back in his place.”

“Hold on—I renounced any interest in returning home, but you went to the trouble of finding it for me. Did you really doubt my dedication to your cause? Especially now that I tracked you down to fight at your side—I even helped you defeat Darcy! How can you remain unconvinced of my loyalty?”

“I don’t dispute your enthusiasm, Missy. Can we discuss this later? After we’ve found Ank?”

She gave a grudging shrug of assent. He took her hand and made use of the Hot Sauce in his blood to trans-d the two of them—

13. (resumed)

—back to the jade control chamber.

Together, they strode out onto the elevated stairway. Katy gazed down upon the morgue...and saw with some apprehension that figures still milled about in the milky mist.

“You told me they were all dead,” she complained.

“No, I assured you they were no longer dangerous. At some later point, maybe they can all be put down; I suppose they deserve a peaceful rest...after all, their involvement in this was Darcy’s doing, not theirs.”

“Well,” she remarked, “it looks to me as if some of them still have some fight left in them.” She pointed down to the tiny figures in the mist. There, two scuffled. When one of them toppled in defeat, the victor pounced on the nearest corpse and assaulted it with fresh ferocity.

“It’s Ank,” muttered Sal. As he descended the steps, he called down to the vampire, “Ank! Save your energy. They’re no longer a threat.”

“There you are,” declared Ank. He shoved a zombie from its unstable feet. “I see you found the little runaway.”

“Later on, I’m going to ream you a new asshole for bringing her here. You knew how important this was to me, storming his citadel.”

Ank shrugged. “Looks like she didn’t stop you from taking care of things.”

“I helped him kill Darcy,” exclaimed Katy as she came down behind Sal.

Ank took a step back and folded his arms across his chest. He cocked his head and asked in a low voice, “Darcy’s really dead?”

Ank nodded.

Katy fluttered her hands. “I told you he needed my help!”

“You really did it...damn.” Ank shook his head with awe. He came over to give Sal a comradely punch in the arm. “Got yourself one helluva bar story there, my friend.”

“There’s nothing left for us to do here,” announced Sal. “Let’s go home.”

Ank nodded vigorously. “Right! Gotta tell the Bat Pack—they’ll rejoice when they learn that Darcy’s gone!” And he was gone, trans-d’ed away.

After a moment, Sal spoke: “So...where do you want to go?”

Rising on tippy-toes, she whispered against his chin, “Wherever the two of us can enjoy some privacy...” He lowered his head so their lips could connect. A long kiss ensued, and a little bit of groping.