



New Fiction by:
CJ Henderson, Ralan Conley,
Pat Thomas & others

COSMIC SF

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Do You Believe?

By CJ Henderson

"Do you believe in fairies? Say quick that you believe. If you believe, clap your hands."
—J.M. Barrie

"Com-on, fellas," the newsman shouted pitifully, "Gimme a break!"

It was the horrible sincerity the figure before him could muster, with his pitifully outstretched arms and quickly moistening eyes, that made the balding man grin so. Turning to his friends, he shuddered in mock horror, then asked;

"Well, what'daya think? Can we tolerate his presence?"

"I don't know," added another at the table, a tall, thin gentleman with intense blue eyes, "I do hate it so when his lower lip starts quivering."

"Did I mention," offered the newsman with practiced timing, "that the next round is, of course, on the network?" —Cont. pg. 2

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So Much for Breadcrumbs

 By Patrick Thomas & Diane Raetz

I was staring at some code on my computer when the phone rang. The sight wasn't making me happy; something was wrong with the program and I couldn't put my finger on it. But my nose twitched, a sure sign for me that I couldn't sign off on the release yet. This security system was due weeks ago, and it was already Friday at three, so there was no way around another weekend at work. "Anderson," I answered the phone absently. —Cont. Pg. 7

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"Now I could be seein' my way to forgivin' the lad his indiscretions," offered an aromatic type of extremely disreputable note. "Considerin' his warm proposal of a proper makin' of penance, as it were."

"Oh, good," chuckled the balding man, "now I'm in the dubious position of not only supportin' the local pariah, but also havin' it known that I agreed with Darby on somethin'."

Most who were gathered there that night got the joke. The newsman was Marv Richards, head anchor and main producer of *Challenge of the Unknown*, the only network news show dedicated to covering the strange and the supernatural. He was also one of the only media personalities ever to be allowed within the walls of the Narkane. On every world, there was one spot where all dimensions met. In some it appeared to be a marketplace. In some a temple, some a school. Often it was a library. Whatever the shade of a particular reality, however, that same set of square footage was always a place where people gathered, reverently, to engage in social discourse.

In the reality where they called the third planet from the yellow sun in their Sol system "the Earth," that spot was the Narkane, Manhattan's most exclusive nite spot, and a focusing point for all manner of things. It was known across the widest band of the dimensional spanway as quite possibly the most interesting club experience in the "Hip" universe. Within its walls, any two creatures, entities or semi-mobilized philosophies could bump up against each other.

The Narkane was, of course, a natural haven for scoundrels determined on transporting illicit goods across inter-dimensional boundaries. Which meant on any night there you might be rubbing elbows with smugglers bent on moving anything from Romulan ale to the square eggs of the Andes. In a nutshell, it was the ultimate Spe'keasy—a place where on any night anyone and anything could take to the dance floor. Which was more than proved by the crew at table 15.q who were finally waving Richards over.

The oldest was Professor Zackery Goward. Doctor of philosophy and theology, he had spent the better part of his life in the search for the strange and the bizarre. Paul Morcey, the balding man next to him, was not nearly as cultured as "the Doc," but, as a detective working out of the London Agency, he had come across enough of the strange and the bizarre to last most men several lifetimes. And, com-

pleting the trio, was one of the least reputable beings for miles around wherever he went. A storyteller known simply as Darby, he was the last word in "odious," the kind of person that made those rare strains of sentient toilet scum feel good about themselves.

As Richards turned the threesome into a quartet, he indicated to one of the bartenders that the table should be hit once all around by pointing to the claw hammer hanging above it. Sliding into one of the table's two vacant seats, his ears leaped into the conversation as Darby growled;

"Oh, auk now — it t'weren't so bad."

"Not so bad," sputtered Goward. "You had sex with a blind nun by telling her you were Jesus."

"Well and sure, now hasn't every young scamp played a merry prank or two in his time?"

"Yeah," drawled Morcey, grimacing as anyone would who had to admit to knowing Darby, "but you made a tape of the evenin' and sent it in to 'America's Most Embarrassing Videos.'"

"That was you?" All heads turned toward Richards. His eyes filling with admiration, he said, "they won Sweeps hands-down with that. Forced ad revenues up for their network three points. Nice work, dude."

"Sweet bride of the night," groaned Morcey. "Now we got two of 'em." The detective's mouth actually hung open for a moment, as he listened to a chuckling Richards say;

"I'm telling you, oh, when you told her 'this is my body, take therefore of it and eat,' oh, oh my God ..."

The anchorman broke down into hysterics at that point, first at the memory of Darby's carnal comedy, then at the pun of his own calling on the Almighty during that story. Pounding the table with his fist, waving his other hand, he choked out a few words—

"And then, then ... oh, and then, when ... when you blessed her with your 'holy water'... ah-hahhahahaha..."

And then fell into a tittering fit that left the professor and Morcey looking at each other askance, and Darby simply sitting back, enjoying his pipe. Richards was saved from death-by-fluster, however, in a timely fashion by the arrival of a medium-sized carnivore of some sort or another management had somehow stuffed into a tuxedo which had brought the new round of drinks, including a Scotch for Richards, his usual, and a complementary bowl of house mix—a random mangerful of goodies in

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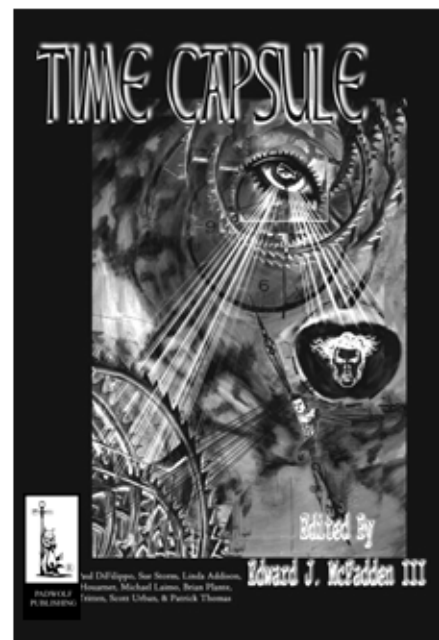
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Time capsule

which one could find anything from Rasinettes and Crunchy Frog to golden apple chips or bits of the True Cross.

"So," said Goward, tossing a noncommittal fragment of conversation into the air, "It seems the theme tonight is something of an Art Deco by way of Kate Hepburn/Flash Gordon."

The others agreed. It was one of the more fascinating, yet subtle things about the club, the fact that the decor and design changed on an almost nightly basis. For instance, if Monday the band was blowing big band cool, Tuesday was just as likely to be a combination of jitterbugging and hip hop as it was to be superheroic polkas. The management had long before decided that the easiest way to keep any one faction from dominating the clientele policies was to maintain an ever-changing atmosphere. Thus, if Wednesday the universe's best Klezmer band was on stage, then Thursday might be Jazz James Bond Night, Geeks-Rule Eve, Barbie Nite, or who knew what.

"All right, fine—the decor is swell," responded Richards, never one to let an interesting conversational opener interfere with his primary objective of self-promotion, "but who's got something good for me?"

"Hey, Marv," answered Morcey, setting down his bourbon, "give it a rest, will you?"

"Com'on, you guys," the anchor pleaded, "it's a cold, cruel world out there. I've got my third season justification pitch coming up. I need something new. Something with a little pizzazz. Some kind of shambling creepie, or slinky hell babe—"

"Well, responded Morcey, grinning, "Truth told, I could go for a slinky hell babe myself."

"Yes, quite," said Goward. His fourth Rob Roy firmly in hand, he added, "what a provocative idea. Make that two, would you?"

"Go on, yuk it up," groaned Richards. "I'm still desperate here. Doesn't a finders fee interest anyone anymore?"

"By the by," said Darby drily, "I might have a tale you could spin them." Goward and Morcey turned with interest. Foul and repugnant and just downright cootie-a-fied as Darby was, there was no doubting that when it came to storytelling, he was the king of kings. Richards also flashed his interest at the lumpy Irishman, but his was powered by a need far more powerful than the desire to be entertained. Turning the full intensity of his personality upon the storyteller, Richards signaled for a waiter while saying;

"Do tell? What kind of story?"

"Well now," answered Darby. "Have you ever heard tell of... the cockroach fairies?"

"Hey, that sounds grea—" the anchorman cut his cheer short as his hearing caught up with his enthusiasm. "What?"

"You heard me...the cockroach fairies. Do you know of them?"

"I've heard of fairies," said Morcey. "And bein' a New Yorker, it's obvious I know about roaches. But what do the two of them have to do with each other?"

"Let me pose a question," said Darby. Draining his glass as the waiter approached, he indicated he would like three more of the same, then said, "you're all men of substance. All of you over a hundred and fifty pounds, at least. Now, you tell me--is there a man among you who, in his time, that hasn't stepped on a roach, tryin' your best to eradicate the wee beastie's mortal existence?" All three of the others affirmed that they had.

"Of course you have. Now, tell me, how many times have you done so, to then lift your foot and watch the blessed thing run off with nary a harm done to it?" Again, all three affirmed that such was the case.

"I thought so," answered Darby. "That's because there are roaches in this world, and there are fairies—true is true. But the thing most have nary a clue over is the secret of the cockroach fairies."

As Darby downed a full-throated swig of his Bag-gins Brew Dark Ale, Harry Hausen, a skeleton in a tuxedo complete with top hat and spats, ambled out onto the Narkane stage to introduce the members of the band. Realizing this meant it was time to order last rounds of drinks for the moment, the club's clientele went into an uproar calling for everything from Pan-Galactic Gargle Fizzes to Cherry Rolling Rocks. Once the commotion died down, and the Narkane's All Cephalopod Dancers had taken to the stage, to mambo to the haunting strains of Kip Bisseldorf and his Elegant Lads, Darby returned to his story.

"Now, as I was sayin'... the cockroach fairies... well, first you have to understand, I'm not tryin' to tell you that all cockroaches are fairies, or that all fairies are cockroaches. No. You see, a long time back, there was a group of fairies, the Kel'derna, that, well, I hate to cast aspersions, but they were, shall we say, not appreciated amongst their own kind."

"Why's that?"

"They had what some judged to be, bad habits. They weren't as interested in helpin' kindly cobblers or paintin' rainbows as they were stealin' the milk from cows and runnin' away with human babies and the such."

"Fairies from the wrong side of town, like?"

"Oh, aye, Mr. Richards, that they were. And they caused the rest of the fairy community no end of trouble—that they did. Well now, it wasn't long before they weren't welcomed in any neighborhood, district or region by any type of pixie, sprite or other winged imp. Their brand was as unwelcome as an undertaker at a wedding. Why, they made the traveling Jews of the fourteen century look like the Prodigal Son, they did."

Darby drained one of the various mugs before him, then hoisted another with a wonderfully smooth motion, as he continued.

"Now, it was around about the time of the Greeks, I mean, when they were the big kahunas, philosophically speaking, that things came to a boil for the Kel'derna. Gettin' a bit full of themselves, don't cha'know, they managed to upset just about every branch of the magical world. I mean, if you think the fairies were mad at them, oh and now, I'm tellin' you true as dew in the mornin', there wasn't a harpy, hydra or demi-god that wouldn't swat one as soon as give 'em a glance at their sun dial. They were in it, sure'nd true."

"So that's when they turned into cockroaches?"

"Don't interrupt him," cautioned Morcey. "That'll just cost you more drinks."

And, indeed, the balding man was correct. Darby had the anchor signal another waiter who was given the order to simply start bringing random drinks of any type in any quantity to the table. Morcey smiled, saying;

"This ought to be good. I want to see you drink a mint julep right after a Coconut Pepper Zombie."

The storyteller's only response was to instruct the waiter to combine the drinks just mentioned in one pitcher, add a can of Foster's Lager, a raw egg and two chicken bouillon cubes and to then bring it to the table with a stalk of celery he could use as a stirrer. As Goward turned a touch green, Darby continued telling the history of the cockroach fairies. And fascinating it turned out to be.

Over roughly the next forty-five minutes, while consuming an Eclipse, a Dubonnet Fizz, a Thunder, two Ninitchkas, a Bulldog, a Bronx Terrace, three Fallen Angels, two Pink Whiskers and a small tub of Pousse Café, along of course with his initial special order, Darby told those assembled the remaining history of the Kel'derna.

Gathering all their remaining clansprites in the forests of Gaul, the outcast pixies debated as to how best protect themselves from a hostile world. It was decided that the simplest way for them to survive

was to disappear. The Kel'derna would be no more. It was decided they would retreat back into the most inaccessible reaches of Gaul, and create a society for themselves alone. Impossible thoughts such as "hard work" and "moral responsibility" were bandied about, but the clan had brought such down upon themselves, and there was no getting around it.

Now at the time, the common cockroach was not the fearsome and hated creature it is today. A simple, sturdy survivor from prehistoric times, the Kel'derna began to breed them along specific lines. One thing, Darby emphasized, was the importance that they become both delicious and indestructible. If the creatures were to be the cows as well as the horses of the race, they would have to become tasty as well as sturdy.

The Kel'derna bred the race of cockroaches in secrecy for centuries, for both size and speed for when they would be used as steeds, as well as for their further applications after life. The clan increasingly enjoyed the taste of the cockroach, of that there was no denying, but they also found myriad other uses for them, as well. Their wings, especially, became not only shields, but the basic building blocks of Kel'dernian industry.

Homes were made from them, as well as boats, umbrellas, cutting edged tools, serving bowls, et cetera. The roach became marvelously useful to the Kel'dernian community, but their greatest use was yet to be discovered.

"Indeed," said Darby, his voice low and eyes glistening, "that moment dinna come until the Kel'derna had been breeding roaches for nearly a thousand years. By then, Gaul had been overrun with people, and as the Kel'dernian population was finally startin' to show a bit of an explosion, itself, it was decided that some of the younger, more adventurous of the clan might set out on their own. And, dinna they have the marvelous luck then that the Pope, in his infinite greed and deviltry, called at that time for the first of the Crusades."

Richards' hands flew through page after page of notes as the storyteller related how the movement of people out of the cold and damp north into the southlands and back again, over and over for the next few hundred years became the catalyst for the spread of roaches across the face of the world. Morcey and Goward looked at each other a trifle askance, but did not interrupt, wanting to see just where Darby was going with his tale.

And where he wanted to go proved interesting to both of them. As he told it, wanting to see the rest of

the world, or at least some of its drier segments, the Kel'dernians decided to venture out from the protection of the dark wood. It was then, as they began to move about in the world at large once more, that they noticed the greater aversion humans had to their friends, the cockroaches, than they did other insects.

The reason, it was assumed, was the roaches habit of invading the homes of man on a far more permanent basis than the occasional fly or bee that might wander in. Even ants always went home after they found what they wanted. But, the human reaction to roaches was so much greater than these it was soon decided the Kel'derna would become as closely associated with their livestock as possible. Soon cloaks were added to the utilitarian function to which their cattle were put. The clan also soon began experimenting with a form of rudimentary genetics, breeding themselves to darker and darker shades.

Over the hundreds of years of the Crusades, the clan became more and more adept at mimicking their mounts. They learned to run across floors like them, run in wild circles to avoid destruction, and to vibrate at just the right frequency while standing still in a sudden burst of light so as to appear to be insects. Truth to tell, the secret the Kel'derna learned was the more they pushed their way into the homes of the aristocracy, the less people bothered to look at them.

"It's a sad commentary on folk, but it's true," Darby sighed, stirring a half keg of General Harrison's Egg Nog with his celery stalk, "We live in an age now where Kel'dernian magic has the world completely under its spell. You know as well as I do, some folks, as soon as they see a roach, why they grow completely irrational, slammin' and bangin' away at the poor dears with anything at hand, while others go completely in the other direction and will turn the lights back out and just tip toe away."

"But, I don't get it," said Richards. His face showing his puzzlement clearly, he said, "when there aren't any fairies around, why do people get so upset over just simple roaches?"

"It's the magic—the magic that the Kel'dernians used to breed their roaches, it's in all of them now. The clan is in every city in the world; they still find it easier to live off what they can steal from human society. Even after spending near an entire millennia on their own, as soon as they came out into the world again...well, sigh—I guess it's just in their blood, the little devils. But as I was sayin', the magic

they used to breed their roaches has infected the entire species. Now, people can't be around them without reactin' far different than they do with any other bug."

Darby sat back, taking a long swig of no one knew what. Morcey hooded his eyes and gave Goward a what-do-you-think look. The professor smiled, not quite knowing how to answer. Not noticing the non-verbal conversation on the other side of the table, Richards jerked his head back involuntarily once he realized the storyteller had finished his tale, and barked;

"That's it? That's the big story? I shelled out ..." he did a quick bit of mental calculating, then shrieked, "nine hundred and eighty-five dollars just for *that*?"

"Did you be wantin' more?" As the anchorman's glare blasted its way across the table, Darby moved a bit in his seat, reaching inside his coat, saying;

"Auck, you TV people and your visuals. Well, mayhap this might be of some assistance."

Darby withdrew his hand from the moldering tatters of his overcoat, bits of thread and other debris clinging to it. Then, putting his loosely-closed fist down in the center of the table, he opened his fingers to reveal a large number of roaches. Everyone else's immediate reactions was to grab their drinks and move back a bit. Then, the previous conversation sinking in, they all leaned forward again to find they were not looking at roaches at all—or, at least, not merely roaches.

Several of the figures Darby had set to rest next to the table's candle and the wicker basket of half-eaten house mix were indeed roaches, but two were not. Richards leaned in even closer, at first not believing his eyes, then not believing his good fortune. Morcey and Goward leaned in as well, joining him in his former disbelief if not his latter joyfulness, for there on the table were two miniature human beings, fairies if either had ever seen one, but of a type they had never previously beheld.

Tall and thin, one male and one female, the pair were as brown as mahogany and as spiteful as an old testament deity. They wore helmets adorned with long antenna, vests and cloaks made of cockroach wings, and leggings and boots fashioned from some other part of roachian anatomy no one wished to question. Two of the roaches which had been set down along with them stood calmly aside their masters, obviously outfitted with saddles and reigns. Rubbing his eyes, Richards stammered;

"But, but... I can see everything so clearly. When they're in my kitchen, I only see... I mean—"

"Ah, an' that's easy to explain," answered Darby casually. "When you snap on a light and you see one of these fellows, your mind thinks 'roach,' and so that's what you see. But, now that you know what you're looking at, well, you see what you know. You know?"

The anchorman nodded absently, his eyes studying the two figures on the table with a growing fascination. He asked a score more questions, but everything Darby told him about the Kel'derna only made him more and more desperate to take the two pixies away with him that night. Finally they made a deal for a figure that choked the working stiffs at the table. After the storyteller and Richards shook hands, however, Darby added;

"Of course, this is all moot if the Kel'derna won't go with you."

"Go with me," questioned the anchor. "I thought they were, I don't know, pets, or something."

As tiny hands went for their swords, Darby leaned forward quickly, shaking his hands and speaking in a bastardized elven that hurt the ears. After making Richards' apologizes for him, then calling for another round of too-many-drinks, this time including a set of thimbles so the Kel'dernians could help themselves, the storyteller asked;

"So, what say you two? You've been with me a while, and there's all the fun in that, but this fellow, now... he wants to put you on the tellie. What do you say... would you like to be exploited for ratings?"

"Did I mention," offered the newsman with practiced timing, "that practically anything you might want is, of course, on the network?"

The offer brought a chorus of high-pitched giggles that seemed to delight Richards and Darby equally. Indeed, negotiations went so swimmingly after that point that it was but a matter of seven minutes before the anchor was on his way to the front door with his new stars, and Darby was signaling furiously for a waiter.

"That was a remarkable bit of history, Mr. Darby," offered Goward as a waiter approached. The storyteller asked for a heavy duty first aid kit then responded to the professor.

"What, oh, heh heh, sorry, but you might not want to be repeatin' any of that for one of your classes."

Morcey groaned, pulling a hand down over his face as he said, "Owwwww, suckered again."

"Now, now," said Darby as he removed a great wad of blood-soaked linen from beneath his coat,

"it was just a harmless bit of fun either of you might have pulled. I mean, well and sure, now hasn't every young scamp played a merry prank or two in his time?"

"You mean to say, sir, that there are no cockroach fairies?"

"There are," said Darby with assurance. "Two, to be exact. Fred and Maxine, and you just met them, may the devil take their hindquarters, the ungrateful little bas —"

Morcey started to laugh as the waiter returned with the first aid kit. In moments, Darby was washing out his left arm pit with hydrogen peroxide while the waiter prepared to sew shut the ragged holes in his arm still dripping blood and loose bits of flesh. While the storyteller groaned at the first threading puncture, he explained;

"I might have promised the two of them a place to stay after a Halloween party a couple of years back. They went as cockroaches. I lost some sort of bet. I can't be too certain of the details, all I know is after drinkin' perhaps a wee bit too much, I woke up with those two livin' in me armpit, and no way in hell of gettin' them out except comin' up with a better deal for them."

"So," said Goward, his knuckles turning white as he unconsciously gripped the stem of his Rob Roy far too tightly, "you're telling us that for several... years, *years*... you've had a small horde of cockroaches and fairies... livin' in your armpit?"

Darby nodded sadly, pleading that anyone can get themselves into a spot of trouble now and again. The waiter bit off the last piece of threat knotting closed the last of the wounds in the storyteller's arm. Gathering up his kit, he removed it along with twenty-some of the empty glasses, mugs and thimbles, the emptied house mix basket and the remaining roaches. As he left, Goward sighed;

"I'm sorry to hear the tale was a fiction. It did explain a great deal about cockroaches. I've always sworn the damnable things were magic on some level or another."

"Oh," responded Darby absently as he tested his arm, "but they are. Dinna you know? It was one of the outer gods or the other, created them just to cause trouble, it did."

"Do tell..."

Darby looked up, discovering Morcey and Goward looking at him with interest. Finding his arm reasonably repaired, the storyteller told them;

"Oh, indeed. What a tale I could tell you, if it weren't for my terrible thirst..."

The two men looked at each other for a moment, shrugged, and then signaled for a waiter while Darby said;

"It was the Daemon Sultan, itself, the primal chaos men say sits in its court at the center of the universe ..."

And, while his story went on, drinks were served, vampires mingled with insurance salesmen, fairies stole mints from the bowls at the bar and cephalopods danced, as they did every night at the Narkane.

Continued from page 1:

"Holly, I need you in my office, stat," Prof's slightly accented voice didn't sound happy, not that I could blame him. Dexter Industries was not known for being a patient client. The Professor was a fishing fanatic. If he had to spend the weekend in the office, instead of on a boat, we'd all suffer. I suggested we install a stocked pond in the office for such occasions. It's not like Templar-Mason didn't have the space or the money, but Prof refused. Said it took all the sport out of it.

"Prof, it's not ready," I said flatly. "And all the begging in the world won't make me release it if it still has bugs in it." I had a feeling there were scenarios where the protection spell that was built into the software would fail. I just couldn't find the problem yet. Since I wasn't anywhere near the best in the company when it came to techno-magic, it was taking a lot of time for me to figure out what was wrong. I had a sneaking suspicion I knew why Prof had assigned me to this job. My skills in this one area were sub-par. Never mind that I excelled in so many others, because an agent of Templar-Mason had to be the best in everything. Prof knew there was no way I'd devote my free time to learning tech spells. Which meant if he was stuck here, it was his own fault and he shouldn't bitch about losing a weekend at sea. It was a tad hypocritical.

"No Holly." He didn't bother to disguise the annoyance in his voice. "It's a new client. They are in my office. I suspect that their problem will require some of your... *expertise*." The pause and his tone of voice told me he wasn't talking about my computer skills.

"Oh, I'll be right in." I slid my feet into the three inched heeled lavender Jimmy Choos I'd kicked off hours earlier. "Is it bad?" I had to admit that, contrary to my words, there was more excitement than concern or fear in my voice. It was the same excite-

ment you hear in a news reporter's voice when something bad was happening. They don't want it to happen, but since it is, they want to be involved. Helps get that adrenaline fix.

"I suspect it's very bad," he replied grimly. The phone was not exactly slammed down, but it came close.

I shrugged my Kate Spade black suit jacket over the black silk shirt I was wearing and instinctively smoothed down the matching skirt. I took one moment to admire the shoes. I loved doing a non-matching shoe; it added a touch of rebel to my otherwise relentlessly professional image.

In the Prof's office were two people I recognized from the tabloids instantly, Robert Wade and his latest wife. Wade was an extremely attractive corporate genius who owned, among other things, uranium mines in South Africa, forests full of hard wood trees in Germany and Canada and most importantly, the most productive oil refinery in the United States. Plus, he was one of the few people who had a direct access to Mexican oil and the ability to ship it out of the country. All of which made him among the ten or fifteen most powerful men in the world. Presidents, Prime Ministers and kings listened when he spoke. But, the overwhelming impression I got was not of power, it was sadness.

Candy Wade, trophy wife number three, was a would be fashionista who continually lived on the tabloid "Worst Dressed Lists." Staring at the rhinestone detailing on her hot pink mini dress, which made her look, shall we say, less than slim, I had total sympathy for Mr. Blackwell. Whoever was her stylist should be fired, immediately. She was trying for Flash, instead she got Trash. Worse, she looked like slightly tubby trash. Ick.

I figured, unless she got pregnant and produced the Wade heir number three, she was going to hold her position as wife number four for less than another year. Gossip had it that wife number one was a love match; it had lasted ten years and two children, before she died tragically in a car accident. Mr. Wade had been trying to replace her for the last twelve years. As I stared at the current wife's over processed blond hair and the make up of an 'over thirty' who was trying to look 'under twenty' I figured he was looking in all the wrong places. Part of me wondered if he was trying to punish himself or something. Because she was just all wrong. And unlike her husband, I could get nothing off of the current Mrs. Wade at all. It wasn't my natural empathy that failed. It was as if the woman had no emotions.

Prof on the other hand was dressed for a day on the pier. His 'Old Fishermen Don't Die, They Just Wade Away' tee shirt I thought was particularly inappropriate given our new clients. But, I suspected Mr. Wade wasn't fooled by the Prof's balding head, pot belly, short stature and fishing garb. Prof, a senior agent in the oldest and most secretive security firm in the world, was no one's fool.

I came forward and shook their hands. "What can I do for you?"

Prof answered for them. "Heidi and Gregory are missing." There was no need to ask who Heidi and Gregory were. The Wade teenage children spent almost as much time in the tabloid press as Mrs. Wade did. At least until recently. I realized I hadn't seen a picture of them in a magazine for weeks.

"How long?" I asked skipping the whole sympathy thing for the moment.

"Three days," Mr. Wade replied, keeping his voice even with an obvious effort.

My brows wrinkled, "Kidnapping?" It wouldn't be the first case in Templar-Mason's history, but normally I wasn't brought in for those cases. We had numerous ex-FBI and Interpol agents who were very well trained in that type of crime.

Mr. Wade gave an indecisive shrug, "There hasn't been a ransom note, or any demands."

I took a seat at the mahogany table in the office. I didn't understand yet why the Professor wanted me on the case, but for the moment I'd roll with it. "Is it possible that the children are away with friends?" I asked as gently as possible. I didn't want to accuse them of being bad parents, but as seventeen-year old Heidi and Greg, fifteen had been photographed skiing in Switzerland, yachting in Fiji and shopping in LA solo, I figured there was a chance they'd just decided to go on vacation for a few days. Besides, in this business it's best to eliminate the obvious answers first.

"Oh for heaven's sake," Mrs. Wade pouted. "What a ridiculous suggestion." Her voice was whiny and her manner bored. There was no pretence of a loving step-mother offered. I downgraded her chance of lasting a year to six months tops.

I made a mental note to start a search for any legal activity that might signal that Mr. Wade preparing for divorce, more out of curiosity than for any other reason. I was sure that the Wade Industry lawyer had put together a cast iron prenuptial, so Mrs. Wade probably wasn't at the top of the suspect list where it came to the children. No motive. Still, no reason to take her off it either.

"I can assure you that the kids didn't leave voluntarily. They have to have been kidnapped..." Robert Wade's voice cracked as he finished, "or worse."

Prof stepped in. "I've started a file on the case. Access name Wade1. In the mean time we'll run through the sequence of events. Mr. Wade, Mrs. Wade, please correct me if I miss anything, okay?"

The couple nodded and he continued, "Approximately three months ago Heidi and Gregory disappeared for two days."

"But they came back?" an obvious and foolish question. I bit my lip, wishing I hadn't asked it.

"They'd gone to a concert," Mr. Wade started, not allowing the Prof to answer.

"A rave to be more accurate," Mrs. Wade interjected. "Which they should have never been at. Totally passé." That was her concern? Lovely.

"They claimed to remember the concert," there was a warning in Mr. Wade's voice that I heard when he said the word concert. He didn't want to think of his kids as doing something as outrageous as a rave. I wondered if Candy was dumb or arrogant for pushing it. I was willing to bet on arrogant. No one dumb could land the international bachelor catch of well, ever, even for a short period of time. "...starting. They both agreed that they remember nothing after the second song. Their memories were complete blanks." He took a deep breath and added, "I employ some of the best non-violent interrogation specialists in the world. I assure you that if the children had seen or heard anything, we would have been able to come up with the information."

"Drugs?" I asked keeping my voice neutral.

"My children don't do drugs."

"Not all drugs are administered voluntarily." I thought of the date rape drugs that are so common at clubs around the world. "They could have been given something in a drink or perhaps injected?"

"There were medical examinations conducted after the children returned home. There were no traces of drugs."

I shared a look with the Professor. I was beginning to understand why I was chosen for the case. That single glance also let me know that Prof would let me ask all the questions. Then we'd discuss the case afterwards. Probably not what he'd planned, but it was pretty obvious that Mr. Wade wasn't allowing him to brief me the way he'd wanted. "Do your doctors have any of the blood or urine samples left? I'd like to have our laboratory rerun the tests." We'd be looking for the standard drugs, but we also have ways of testing for stuff that other labs didn't.

"Why? I assure you..."

I cut off the man. "Your children are missing," I said as gently as I could. "And obviously your security people can't find them. T-M is the best in the business at these kinds of things. Let us do our jobs, okay?" In the background I could see my boss nodding and smiling.

Wade nodded his head as well. "You're right. I know you are." I didn't fill in the blank for him. The one that went *And I'm a control freak*. But the unsaid words echoed in the room.

"How'd you find the children the last time?" My question brought us back to the case.

He sighed. "We didn't. Greg found the way home."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"This is going to sound..." He raked his brain for a word before coming up with "...unusual."

"I've heard some pretty bizarre stories." Wade had no idea. His world didn't include the kinds of things I'd seen.

"The kids went to a concert in Miami Beach. They were with friends, all of whom were well known to me." I made the translation in my own head. They were all debutants from the richest families. "None of their friends saw them disappear. One minute they were sitting next to each other; the next Heidi and Greg were gone."

I thought about what Candy Wade had said about the event being a rave. If she was correct, there were a couple of things wrong with his story. Granted, I didn't frequent events like that, but even I knew that there were no seats, and people tended to be jammed in together. Add to the mix that drugs, alcohol and herbal refreshments which tend to be present and it was doubtful any of their friends would have noticed an explosion, let alone a kidnapping. If it was more of a traditional concert with seats and tickets and such, a disappearance would have been harder to arrange. I'd check the file Prof had set up and see what the truth was. I did have a question though, "Bodyguards?"

"Saw nothing," was the answer. "One minute they were there... the next, gone."

"So how did Gregory get them back home?"

"When the children woke up, they claimed to be in a one room cottage in Montana, in the middle of the woods. All their possessions were gone, except for the clothing they were wearing. All of Heidi's jewelry, her pocketbook, keys and of course cell phone was gone." Robert's voice got hard. "Whoever had done this to my children didn't recognize Greg's watch."

"His watch?" I couldn't help echoing.

"It's one of those five zone time pieces that are so popular."

"Was it fenced?"

"No, the scum who took my children didn't recognize the value so they didn't take it."

I was lost. How did a watch, even an expensive one help get the kids home? Before I could ask the question, Robert Wade continued his story. "It also had an internal GPS system inside of it. Greg used that to get them out of the woods and to a police station."

I shook my head at the obvious discrepancy in the story. "Wait a minute. If the watch had a Global Positioning Device in it, shouldn't you have been able to locate it? During the two days the kids were missing, I assume you were looking for them, right?"

The billionaire in front of me became stiff. There was no emotion in his voice when he said, "The GPS didn't produce a signal while the children were missing."

I nodded my head. Granted the things were supposed to work everywhere, but I'd heard stranger. "Did you go back to the cabin afterwards? The GPS should have kept the coordinates..."

"There was nothing there," he cut me off harshly.

"Nothing?"

"It was woods. No cabin. No clearing. Nothing."

"Were you in the right place? Maybe the GPS was wrong."

"No we were in the right place. The kids' footprints, *leading out* were easy enough to find."

"How'd they get there?"

"I have no idea. No footprints leading into the woods were found. No sign of cars, trucks, motorcycle or even a horse. No indication that they were dropped from above. NOTHING!" He screamed the last word in frustration.

I stood and hugged the man. Maybe it wasn't terribly professional of me, but he needed it. Since Candy was filing her nails as he spoke, I could tell that he certainly wasn't getting that kind of support from his wife. "I understand," I muttered softly. "I believe you." It sounded like magic to me, which was a specialty of Templar-Mason's. Most of the world didn't believe it the stuff. We dealt with it regularly. Somehow it had found its way into this man's life. Our job in this case was to make it go away.

His arms tightened for a moment, before he pulled away. "Thank you," he said softly wiping tears away.

I turned away, knowing that a powerful man wouldn't like a moment of weakness being observed by anyone. My eye caught Candy Wade's and I knew

we'd be having words, because the look she gave me was full of anger, and if I wasn't mistaken, hatred.

"I assume you increased security after the incident?" I asked as coolly as I could.

"Doubled." I thought there might be gratitude in his eyes as he spoke. Probably for me saying I believed him. I imagine he'd gotten a lot of disbelief in the past few months from those around him.

The Prof interjected for the first time in what seemed like an hour, "We have all the security reports for the past six months in the file. You can read it when you're done."

I nodded in response to Prof's words and asked my question of Mr. Wade, "So how did they disappear this time?"

"From the house."

"From the house?" I seemed to enjoy repeating things he said. The best time to kidnap someone was when they were out and about, shopping or partying or something.

"From their beds. They'd gone to sleep. I was home and I kissed them goodnight myself. They'd been staying in a lot more than normal, since the first kidnapping. For security purposes of course."

"Makes sense," I agreed.

"The next morning when they didn't come down for breakfast, no one was worried. Teenagers you know. But, when there was no sign of them by lunchtime the housekeeper went up to check on them."

"And?"

"The beds were slept in, but both Heidi and Greg were missing. No clothing was taken. No money or jewelry was missing." I didn't want to know what it cost him to keep his voice even.

"Security cameras?" Part of me wanted to say something sympathetic, but I didn't know what. So I stayed professional.

"Nothing. No sign of inappropriate entry, or of the children leaving. There were no cameras in their bedrooms, of course, but there was no sign of them in the hallway film."

"A person who knows where the cameras are could avoid them," I guessed but I know my voice sounded doubtful. On television, people were always skulking around avoiding cameras, but in reality, a good system was designed so that you couldn't do things like that. Maybe a conceal spell to fool the cameras.

"Not bloody likely," Wade cursed. "Not with the system I had put in. Bank vaults have less footage."

I glanced at the Prof who nodded in agreement. Great, I thought, two kids who disappeared impos-

sibly from their bedrooms. No wonder I was called in on it.

"Bodyguards?" was my next question.

"Outside their rooms. Same as every night. They saw nothing."

"I'll want to interview the guards. And I want blood tests on them as well."

Mr. Wade started to say something, and then visibly stopped himself. I smiled in approval. Prof was the one who said, "We'll get that set up."

Instead of directly questioning my methods, Mr. Wade asked, "What do you expect to find with the guards?" Oh powerful men, they just can't help themselves.

I smiled to myself, "I'm sure your people did a good job interrogating them. But I just want to make sure..."

"Of course," he quickly agreed. He hesitated for a moment and then added, "A friend of mine in the FBI recommended that I come to Templar-Mason. They are working on it too, but they don't have jurisdiction outside of the United States. He said that just in case it was an inside job, or the kids were taken out of country, there aren't jurisdictional issues..."

"And we agree completely," Prof broke in with a professional smile. He stood the two people up and ushered them to the door. "As soon as Holly and I have an opportunity to review the rest of the case file, we'll establish a team. In the mean time I'll have one of our agents escort you to your hotel. Please have her stay with you at all times. There's no saying that," his glance took in both of the Wades, "one of you won't be the next target."

Mrs. Wade gasped and her hand moved in a fleeting motion across her stomach. It took only a moment, but both the Prof and I caught it. I'd put money on her being pregnant. Which moved the woman up from annoying to top of the suspect list in less than one second flat. Now I saw that she had a crystal clear motive for getting rid of the children. Prof put his arm around the woman in a compassionate manner, and moved the couple to the door. "Don't worry about a thing, dear lady," he all but drawled, in a much more courtly manner than I usually see from him, but I'm just a lowly agent, not a paying client. It seemed to work, because she smiled warmly at him. "Morganna, one of our agents will interface with your security team," he was saying as they walked out.

I smiled to myself as I saw that Mrs. Wade had left her pink satin clutch on the leather chair. No doubt she'd done it on purpose. It'd give her an opportunity to come back and speak to us on her own. But in the

meantime, I had a moment or two to rummage through it. No real surprises; a cell phone, make up, a hairbrush, keys, and a small wallet with two platinum credit cards and a drivers license still in her maiden name. Trusting that the Professor would keep them busy long enough, I jotted down the name and ID number on the license and palmed the cell phone. There was too much potential information on the phone to give it back without examining it. I'd call her in an hour or two and tell her that I found it dropped on the floor.

I'd just put the clutch back when Candy Wade marched into the room. "I want you to leave my husband alone." I had to give her credit for getting straight to the point. There was no beating around the bush with this woman unless maybe it involved a baseball bat. "Your phony sympathetic, poor you routine won't work. He's mine. Got it? Not available. Do I need to spell it out any clearer?"

"If you think you can get the letters in the right order, you're welcome to try," I said. Let's say I don't always respond well to criticism. "Sound it out if you have trouble."

"A smart mouth won't carry the day. My husband's had a lot of women throw themselves at him, but I'm the one he decided to catch."

"A better argument for Prof's catch and release program I've never heard," I said. Candy was getting repetitive and she seemed easily riled. Maybe I could make her angry enough to give me something else. I put one Jimmy Choo clad foot forward to show her that I considered myself a player, and yawned as if I was bored. "Seems to me that you're just a number, Mrs. Wade the fourth. Since he replaces his wives more often than his cars, I figure he's about ready to turn you in for a new model once the lease is up. And looking at you, I'd say you have mileage on you. I give you six months on the outside before he goes shopping again." I gave her a contemptuous once over, lingering on her harsh yellow hair and slightly protruding stomach before heading down to her sequenced sandals. "Maybe I can convince him to trade up sooner and go for a luxury model this time."

That did the trick nicely. After calling me every name in the book and couple even I'd never heard before, her hands dropped down over her stomach and she screamed, "Not after the news I have to tell him. He'll be tied to me forever."

"Pregnant?" I asked, still sounding bored. Inwardly I wanted to shout BINGO. "That was clever. It'll buy you at least another year. And some decent

child support." I let my eyes dwell on her shoes again. "You might even be able to afford something better than Payless." They were probably expensive, but the three inch pink satin platform shoes were tacky enough to pass as cheap.

"Payless!" Her shrill scream echoed around the room. "My child will be the Wade heir. I'll be able to have all the top designers creating just for me."

I wanted to ask why she wasn't having that done now. After all, she supposedly had access to the Wade fortune. But there were far more important points to make. "Don't you mean one of the Wade heirs. After all, isn't the reason you came to us was to find the other two children and bring them back alive?"

Alarm bells went off in her head and after an instant of panic, Candy calmed down. "Yes, of course, one of the Wade heirs is what I meant."

I smiled like I believed her. "Tell me about your stepchildren." I wanted to keep her off balance, so I played the game like it was her court. "After all, Robert is probably a doting father. Blind to their flaws. I'm sure you've got a clearer view of the kids." I made my tone coaxing. "It'd make my job easier to know the truth about them."

She actually smiled at me. It was a calculating smile, but it was lovely. For a moment I could almost see how she'd attracted her billionaire. "They are teenagers and therefore, by definition, brats." I nodded my head as if in agreement, and she continued. "I'm much too young to be their stepmother-something that Robert's always agreed with." It's nice to know billionaires humor people too. "I always tried to be their friend instead."

"And as their friend?" I cajoled her.

"I can tell you that they aren't the angels Robert thinks they are. Greg is a computer criminal. The police started investigating him for hacking at twelve."

"What'd he do?"

"He broke into the DMV and gave himself a driver's license."

I couldn't help laughing. One of the richest kids in America and he had the same dreams as any other teenager in the world. A car.

The woman moved on to a more serious topic. "The so called concert *was* a rave. Gregory has been going to bars since he was fourteen. Can you believe that! Fourteen. I mean sure, sneak a drink from your parents bar-we've all done that. But heavy duty clubbing? Some of those places are little more than orgies. Even I wouldn't go there." There was an outrage in her voice that told me she wasn't lying. The kid probably was a handful and a half.

"And Heidi?"

"That child is even worse. Can you believe she was pregnant this summer? I mean at sixteen years old. You'd think any teenage girl these days would use a condom. I mean, hello, AIDS."

My brain went ka-ching. Another reason for her to want to get rid of Robert's children. After all, Heidi's baby would be another heir. "What'd you do?"

"Talked her into an abortion of course," she said it as though it was obvious. She tried for a winning smile. "And it wasn't easy to get her to agree, let me tell you. I just wanted you to know that the kids could be anywhere. And very easily gone of their own free will. After they disappeared the first time, Robert kept them on a very short leash and they weren't used to it. Worse, they hated it. I could totally see them slipping out on their own. You should consider that during your investigation. They were probably drugged out of their minds on some crap or another last time they disappeared. It makes a hell of a lot more sense than their silly story about a magically disappearing cabin." She sniffed contemptuously, "I could have come up with a better cover story when I was ten."

I nodded my head in agreement, not bothering to point out that the very improbability of the story meant it was true. I had too much to think about anyway. If Candy's version of the kids' activities was correct, the suspect list could be endless. Not that she was off the list, just that there were tons of others that could be added.

Prof came in with Morganna and Mr. Wade interrupting our conversation. A few minutes later, they were out of the office and the Professor and I were alone. I filled him in on everything Candy had said. The Prof agreed with me that it was imperative to find out whether the woman was telling the truth about her stepchildren's lifestyle, since it would help us determine motive.

"She's a solid suspect. I'll get the call history out of the phone; see if there is any suspicious numbers on it. Then I'll coat it with clary sage and see if I can get a vision off of it. At midnight I'll try a scrying spell on the kids. Morganna can get me a couple of personal items. Maybe if we're lucky we can have them home by morning. It'll probably take longer to figure out who is responsible, but the kids have to be the primary concern. I feel bad about anyone having to spend time with her. Talk about a wicked stepmother."

"Tell me about it," he agreed. Then he repeated the word, "Stepmother" again. "Hmmm..."

"You don't think?" I asked my heart pounding and my blood pressure shooting up.

Prof, his face pale as death, responded with a single word, "Fable."

"Damn." It was the type of case that we all dreaded. Fables are real entities that can come to life and try to live out their stories again. Despite hundreds of years of opposing them, there were plenty of things about them we still didn't know. Still, we fought them wherever we encountered them. It was the reason the Knights Templar, who are the Illuminati now, founded the agency in the first place. I'd had a fraction of Prof's experience with them and I knew enough to be scared.

"I'm not sure, but we've got a couple of the elements in play."

"The wicked stepmother," I agreed, "A classic part of literally hundreds of fairy tales and fables. But what else have we got?"

"Worldwide impact," Prof stated calmly. "Wade Industries is as important, in its own way, as any kingdom of old."

"An industrial empire," I agreed, "And the heirs are at risk. Also classic." I headed over to a bookshelf in Prof's office and found one of the greatest treasures our company had, a first edition copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales. My office had a more modern printing, but Prof had managed to get one of the four original remaining books. I lusted after it with all my heart. "But, if you're right, which one are we dealing with?"

"You know the drill," he ordered. "Put together a list of fables that deal with missing heirs. Maybe we can get a better handle on it. In the meantime, I'll call Morganna and tell her to get us the children's blood, ASAP. You'll need it as a base for some of the spells you're going to have to cast."

I nodded my head in agreement, but at the same time I put down the book of fairy tales. "I'd better play with the cell phone first. I want to have it ready before Mrs. Wade realizes that she 'lost' it."

Prof nodded agreement, but his hand shot out over my wrist as I tried to walk out of his office. "Work the fable aspect," he warned. He was as panicky as I'd ever seen him. Which wasn't much, but his hand trembled on mine, his skin was pale, and his eyes were huge. "They get more powerful the longer they go unchecked."

"And this one has gone on for months already," I said glumly.

I was out the door when I heard him say, "We almost weren't able to reverse mine. And if we hadn't..."

I went back in and took his hand in my own. Prof had been one of the seven "dwarves" who'd saved an incarnation of Snow White. He looked really good for at least a hundred. But being touched by serious magic can do that to a person. And Prof had been more than a little touched. As a matter of fact, it had been the Professor who'd figured out how to put the princess in cryogenic sleep while the wicked queen/stepmother had poisoned the girl. The story had run surprisingly true to the classic tale; Pre-World War I there had been a lot of small kingdoms. "Snow White is one of the most powerful of all fables. The story went on for several years, and in the end you were still able to get the curse reversed," I reminded him. "This one shouldn't be nearly as bad."

"True," he agreed bleakly. "But in the meantime, with the false queen ruling the country, a war started that never should have, and hundreds of thousands died as a result."

I didn't know what to say. He still blames himself for WWI. In the end I promised Prof I'd do my best, and I went back to my office. My first priority was still the phone. I downloaded into my computer every contact and the call log. I shot the info over to one of the computer techs. In half an hour or less, I should have anything of value from the phone neatly analyzed. I asked another junior associate to run through every known fable and send me a file listing possible fairy tales we could be dealing with in the order of likelihood. There were literally hundreds.

I had a small collection of specially prepared herbs and crystals in a locked drawer in my desk. I cast a circle in the middle of the office, and inside it I prepared the phone with an ointment made of clary sage and sandalwood. Then I put the phone on a large piece of quartz.

I took my shoes off, and placed them carefully on the edge of the circle. I flinched as I sat down cross legged in front of the phone. I couldn't help it, Kate Spade suits deserve more. I sent a quick prayer to whomever might be listening—I knew it was someone, but I didn't know who—and opened myself up for a vision. If permitted, the phone would tell me what it knew.

"A package will arrive in the mail for you," I heard a male voice say. "You know what to do with it."

Candy's voice answered, "But what about... I can't afford to be caught."

"It's perfectly safe. No one will suspect you."

"I'm not so sure. There's plenty of money for all three children." It sounded like Candy was having second thoughts.

In response, the male's voice became menacing, "You're already in too far or would you like your husband or the police to find out what you've already done?"

"No," Candy capitulated, "What am I looking for?"

"Gingerbread vitamins. Make sure that the heirs take one each. The rest will be taken care of one way or another."

The vision, or more accurately the hearing, disappeared. I came out of my trance, and looked around the office. Somehow the room seemed dimmer. Darker. And a chill passed through me. Or perhaps it was fear. The spell had left me with a certainty in my gut. It wasn't a person we were dealing with. The man's voice had been tainted by outside forces. The Prof was right, it was a fable. It was our and more directly my responsibility to make sure that it reached "The End" before it finished. I was scared and I'm embarrassed to admit I liked it. It was the adrenaline junkie in me.

I called the Professor's office, but he wasn't answering. So I paged him over the office intercom. By the time he walked in, I'd put my shoes back on and my jacket was hung neatly over the back of my chair. The professional image was firmly in place. But my voice was too high, and a little thready as I said, "Hansel and Gretel. That's the fable." I found some confidence in my Jimmy Choos. What every well dressed, professional witch should have adorning her feet. I could do this. Forget about saving the world—there was no way I was going to let anything, even a Fable, hurt my wardrobe. I ran down the story for Prof.

His face grew grim, although he patted my hand. "A job well done." Then he growled into the intercom, "Get me the analysis of the damn cell phone, now."

A nervous voice replied. "I'm still waiting for transaction records from the phone company. I'll send it over as soon as possible."

Prof and I said simultaneously, "Get the records for the home phones too." Prof added, "Wade should be happy to agree, so we'll have no problems with the getting permission." The police in most of the countries we dealt with needed a warrant. As a private firm, we have to work with the authorities in most cases and go around them without being caught in the others.

Minutes later we got hold of Morganna. "Get a team over to the house. Make it look as though they are searching for possible clues. But what I'm specifically looking for is *anything* by Gingerbread anything. Gingerbread Industries, healthcare, whatever. Even check the clothing for a Gingerbread label."

"Got it."

Prof added, "Go through both the husband and wife's possessions." I shot a look at Prof, but he shook his head, indicating later. "We'll get Mrs. Wade out of the house so that she can't try to stop you."

We hung up and I asked, "Mr. Wade? Do you suspect him?"

My boss shook his head. "Not really. No. But," he went over to my bookshelf and took down my significantly more recent copy of Grimm's Fairy Tales, flipped it to the right page and read aloud, "'Oh you fool,' said she. 'Then we will all starve; you had better get the coffins ready' and she left him in no peace until he consented."

"Then you do suspect the father." I had to admit I was shocked. I couldn't see Mr. Wade doing such a thing.

Prof shook his head. "We can't ignore the possibility, but no, I don't really see it. I'm more afraid that Wade is the next target. If she really is eliminating the heirs, then why not take him out too? That guarantees her unborn child control of the family assets."

I nodded my head. That felt a lot more likely. The next call was to Mrs. Wade, telling her that we'd found her cell phone. Since it was in a diamond encrusted carry case, and had some of the famous movie stars phone numbers in it, her desire to get it back wasn't surprising. I asked her, to come back into the office to get it. I hinted that I had some more questions to ask about her step-children's bad behavior.

"She'll be here soon," I told Prof.

We got the list of people who'd spoken to Mrs. Wade during the last four months. There was a large number of what would be defined as normal contacts for her; family members, famous people, known charities, personal trainers and two stylists. None of the numbers listed seemed unusual to either me or the Professor. Unfortunately. "On television it's always the tennis coach," I said trying to make a joke of it as we stared at the list. "Maybe we should start with the personal trainer?"

Prof shook his head. "I'll have Morganna get another team to work on it. You go concentrate on the magical angle. Regular security can work on the rest." He paused and then said hopefully, "The good thing about the Hansel and Gretel fable is that the victims weren't killed immediately."

"They rescued themselves," I reminded the Prof.

"You can pretty much count on the fact that in more than one incarnation, the kids died," Prof said

grimly. "But one of the key elements of the fable is that the children are kept alive for a reason. Let's work on the assumption that the same will hold true here."

"I'd like to use some of the kids' blood in the location spell," I said.

Prof nodded. "Do it."

"One thing is bothering me. Whatever is doing this has significant power."

"I'd say that the non-working GPS and the disappearing cottage more or less confirms it."

"Then why'd they let the kids go in the first place?" I asked. "I mean if they could hide them this well..."

"The superficial answer is that they underestimated the kids."

"And the non-superficial answer?"

"In Hansel and Gretel the kids found their way home once without trouble. I think that it is a key element of the story, so even the Fable couldn't stop it."

"Makes sense," I agreed.

The next few hours were basic police work. On the good side, the Wades returned to the office and I interviewed them again. We didn't get anything new, but Mrs. Wade didn't seem suspicious at all when I gave her back the cell phone. The blood was delivered and we found trace amounts of things that a normal crime lab wouldn't be likely to find or understand. Agrimony and anise, both herbs used for sleeping, were in the sample. More disturbingly, we detected hellborne, an herb that can grant invisibility, but has enough stimulant in it to cause serious heart damage. Since the mystic detector beaker glowed a very malevolent orange we had proof of two things. One, magic was definitely in play. And two, the bad guys weren't terribly concerned about doing permanent harm to the Wade children.

Morganna found the bottle of Gingerbread Personal Health and Well Being vitamins in Mrs. Wade's locker at the private club. Unfortunately there was no address, or contact information on the bottle. There was a bar code, so in time we'd be able to find where the manufacturer shipped them from. We split the pills up; I sent some down to the lab for analysis. I took the rest to use in the spells I needed to cast.

Midnight found me in the middle of the woods at a resort Templar-Mason owned, wearing traditional witch's robes handed down to me from my grandmother, no make up and bare feet. I was about as far away from the professional woman I tried to be during the daytime as anyone could imagine. And I was

going to need a pedicure in the worst way after this case. Luckily, in my last contract I had negotiated for it to be an acceptable charge to my expense account.

I'd cast a pentacle, the traditional star surrounded by a circle. In the center of it was a small copper cauldron steaming, not bubbling, with a potion that I'd brewed made up of rue, dandelion, lavender, hemp, three drops each of Heidi's and Gregory's blood and just a pinch of the Gingerbread vitamin. At midnight I swallowed the potion, which tasted every bit as disgusting as it sounded.

My eyes rolled back, I made a choking sound and for one long moment I wondered if I'd managed to poison myself. I felt a surge of power from somewhere else as I collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

I awoke in a cinderblock room with a concrete floor. It was damp and dark, but balmy. Not cold like you think of most dungeons. Balmy. My first thought was that I was in a prison of some kind. My second that my spell had definitely not acted the way I'd planned. It was supposed to show me where the missing children were, not bring me to wherever I was. But now I had a clue as to how they'd kidnapped their victims. Somehow the Fable or its pawns had figured out how to develop a translocation spell. I understood the theory, but had never met a person, or a coven, strong enough to pull one off. The magical energy that would need to be expended was mind boggling. Obviously the Fable was supplying the mystic juice that my spell had accidentally taped into it. The vitamin had probably been charmed to react with the physiology of anyone who took it and let the spell find them. When I swallowed the potion with it and their blood, I became it's victim too.

The room I was in wasn't locked. I probably wasn't expected, which could be a good thing. Time for some recon. If the kids were stashed nearby, maybe I could get them out. If they had been transported here and driven away, I was screwed.

I skulked around in the dark for a while to find out what I was dealing with. In action adventure movies there is always an opportunity for the hero or heroine to steal a security guard uniform, a weapon, rescue the helpless victim and escape, usually in the nick of time. Instead, I found a warehouse full of Gingerbread brand cosmetics, vitamins, moisturizers and supplements. The packaging alone told me that the product line was expensive. I wondered why I'd never heard of them. I mean the moisturizer

I use is nearly one hundred dollars a bottle. It isn't as if I buy drug store brand merchandise. And there were just too many jars and bottles for it to be a front. We were talking millions of dollars worth of product.

Outside I found a barb-wire fenced parking lot with half a dozen cars with Tennessee license plates in it. The gates were locked and there was no way I was going to be able to get under or over the fence. In a pinch, I might be able to find a way through it, but that would probably lead to lots of loud alarms going off. Maybe even a few jolts if it was electrified. It fell into last resort category.

I found a hallway that was guarded by two well armed men. Since it was the only place that I'd seen security people, I figured that there was a good chance that Heidi and Greg might be there. But, as I glanced down at myself I had to admit that there was a zero chance of my being able to brazen my way past the guards. In a designer black business suit, sure. In ceremonial white robes, not a chance.

I snuck back into the warehouse area, hoping to find something to help me. I was desperate with no weapon, normal clothing, cell phone or idea where I was. I needed help from a higher authority, but it doesn't always seem to answer when I need it.

I hit the jackpot when I found ten bottles of chicory baby powder. Chicory grants invisibility and inaudibility, but usually it has to have been harvested at midnight on the night of the summer solstice, with a golden knife in perfect silence. The odds of finding perfectly prepared ingredients were slim to none, but it was what I had. Besides it wasn't as though these people didn't use magic. They might have prepared it properly. Slim hadn't left town yet.

I walked a simple circle in the middle of the warehouse, praying the whole time that no one would come and check on the stock. I could tell from the way the room was getting lighter, that it was dawn or a little past. That meant people were going to start showing up for work shortly, hopefully later than sooner. My only break was it was Saturday and hopefully they only had a skeleton crew on.

I sprinkled the body powder all over myself and the robe chanting in Latin the entire time. I had no way of telling if the spell worked or not. I crossed my fingers for luck, and walked down the hallway where the security guards were. I held my breath, and forced myself not to let my concentration fail, as I slid by them.

One guard stood up, and I was sure I'd failed when I heard some truly wonderful words, "Frank. I'm going to get a cup of coffee. You want one?"

While Frank tried to find his wallet, I invisibly slinked past.

I skulked down the hallway, trying to hide in any shadows and praying that the spell I'd cast would hold. I stopped to look into the small window on every door. The first two were empty, but in the third room I saw a girl—no a woman—who looked amazingly like Heidi, but an older version in her mid-twenties. The look-alike was staring mindlessly at a commercial for younger skin. As I watched the commercial looped and started again. Although I had problems believing she was the girl I was looking for, I slipped into the room and whispered, "Heidi?"

There was no response. I cursed to myself, figuring that the invisibility spell was interfering with her hearing me. I wasn't sure whether I had Heidi or not, but I wasn't about to leave any prisoner behind.

I came closer and noticed that there was an electric cable that went from the television to a computer. A second cable went from the computer directly into the woman's arm; something like an IV. I had a very bad feeling I knew what that meant. I tapped on her shoulder and was completely unsurprised when the woman didn't respond at all. She was under a spell. Evil, techno magic. Damn.

The next room held Greg who was also bespelled. The boy was staring at a television screen of his own. This one held an athletic competition. And while he still looked like a fifteen-year old, he was emaciated. No way on earth could a person lose twenty or thirty pounds in three days. He was in much worse shape than Heidi. At least she had years to age before whatever was being done to her was finished. If I didn't get the boy out, he'd be dead in a week.

The Fable was draining his vitality and her youth, but for what purpose I was clueless.

I looked at the program on the screen. I'm no techno-mage, but I had enough basic skills to create a repeating loop. All I had to do was convince the computer that the last image it received was still going on. It took me about ten minutes to write the code. I wasn't sure it would work, but since Greg was wasting away in front of me, I didn't have much of a choice. I launched the program and unplugged him. I stifled the, "What the..." with my hand, and pulled him under my robe. He realized I was naked quite quickly, even if he couldn't see me. I prayed that the "Woe Momma!" that he whistled was muffled by the invisibility spell. I had to slap his hand down when he tried to cop a feel. Twice. At least I knew he hadn't been drained of all his energy.

The longest five minutes of my life later, there was no obvious sign of an alarm having gone off. I managed to get the kid into the next room where his sister sat, still staring at the same commercial. "Geez, Heidi looks like crap."

"Yeah, they've been sapping her youth," I whispered back.

I explained what I was going to do and the kid's eye lit up. "I can help," he said. "I'm a techno-geek." Before I could stop him, he was over by her computer and typing away. "The endless loop is a good idea. I'm keeping that, but add a little random movement. Eyes blinking, body twitches things like that."

I nodded. Since I'd found myself someone light years ahead of me in terms of computer mastery, I let him do the metaphorical heavy lifting. "Know anything about fences and security systems?" I asked. "We still need to bust out of here."

"You broke in here without a plan to get back? Way to go super genius."

For one fleeting moment I had sympathy for Candy Wade. The kid was a brat. Still, my answer should blow him away. "I was trying to cast a location spell to find you, when I accidentally tapped into the transport spell and was gated in here by mistake."

He nodded his head as though my words made perfect sense. "Like someone on the SciFi channel. Cool. Can you spell us out of here?"

I pointed to the computer. "Not if you can hack us out of here. It's much safer."

The kid sighed. "I want to see a spell before today is over," he warned. "Otherwise I'm going to be very disappointed." It wasn't my problem. Most people learned about disappointment long before Greg's age. I guess money does as much harm as good, but now wasn't the time to try to de-brat the punk. His loop worked, so I disconnected Heidi. "You take care of sis, and I'll work on getting us out."

I'd calmed Heidi down, and cast an invisibility spell on all of us, before Greg was done with the security system.

"Finished," he announced. "At eight o'clock the gates will automatically open for exactly two minutes. I fooled the system into thinking that an authorized car will be entering at that time. We should be able to walk out free and clear."

The kid was right. Pity they knew enough that they took his GPS watch. So much for breadcrumbs. Luckily we didn't need them. Once we got past the open gate, we walked a few miles and found a payphone. Ten minutes after a collect call, the Tennessee police came screeching down on us. Three hours later

I was on my way home courtesy of the Wade private jet.

When I came into the office on Sunday morning Prof greeted me with a smile, and a "Well Done."

When I disappeared the security team at Templar-Mason confronted Mrs. Wade with some very nasty threats. And the transcript of the phone conversation I'd scried hours earlier. Add in the hell-borne and the rest of the stuff in the so called vitamins and Mrs. Wade had broken. That and we don't exactly worry about Miranda rights when one of our one is in trouble. She'd sobbed out her part of the plot. At the same time she told Wade about her pregnancy, and tried to hold onto him through her child. He demanded a paternity test. It seems that his vasectomy was an enormous surprise to her. She was being held on conspiracy to commit kidnapping. Somehow I don't think that the Wade family lawyers were going to act in her defense.

When the police wanted to know how I'd found the kids, Prof told them good detective work. They hadn't believed him, and wanted to question me. They also wanted to know how Heidi had aged so quickly and how Greg got so thin. I had no idea what I would tell them. The truth is usually a bad idea in these cases.

I suggested that we offer Greg a job. He was a little young, but had the makings of a techno-mage in him. After what he'd experienced I knew he would try and figure out magic on his own. If we didn't head it off, I suspected he would become a rogue and then who knows what the kid would come up with? Better we get him into the agency quickly. Prof agreed, but felt that it should be done on as a traditional apprenticeship. I guess that's why he's the boss. That and who Greg's father is won't make a difference in T-M. Seven years should be enough time to undo the damage a lifetime of privilege did.

Prof's face darkened. "I think we may have vanquished the Fable, but we have to be sure." Bringing the story to an abrupt halt usually forces the fable from the mortal plane for a time, but they tend to rant on the way out.

"Gingerbread Products?" I asked.

He nodded. "There is still work to do."

I sighed and looked at my Gucci stiletto heeled shoes. A thousand dollars a pair—the most expensive in my collection. I'd only worn them because I thought I deserved the feeling of a job well done. "I'm going back to Tennessee?"

"Yup," he agreed. He pulled his fishing hat over one eye and pulled a rod out of the closet. "It'll take the associates a couple of days to get everything you need so you aren't walking in blind, so you'll have time to finish up with the Dexter program first. I've got three calls in my voicemail looking for it to be released."

"Where are you going?" I asked suspiciously.

"Fishing," he replied walking out the door.

"Great. I find the kids, rescue them, maybe beat a Fable and I get to work through the few hours of weekend I have left. That's real fair," I said.

Prof shrugged. "Never said life would be fair. And you knew how this story would end. Let's just hope you ended the other one."

Fruits of Multiplication

by Ralan Conley

In a blaze of light Aaron flashed into oblivion.

Using his comrade's dust as a screen, Marcus ducked behind a rock to scan the highlands around him. He spotted nothing on the visual level. On audio, he could only hear the incredible yellow leaves fluttering in the breeze.

Marcus knew his friend's demise had probably made him the last human alive on the planet, but he was beyond caring. He'd already lost too much ... too many.

Where's your 'Be Fruitful and Multiply' now, Rokan.

He tweaked the gain on his amplifier as he switched his goggles to ultra violet. The leaves flipped to purple, and under their whispering he heard something else. His fingers jiggled with the noise filters and the rustling faded until he could make out the double thud of one of the enemy's ... well, whatever organ they used to pump that thin white blood around their spindly bodies.

Coconut milk, Rokan had called it. Whatever a coconut was.

Two, no ... three of them. Two up-front, he noted their position behind a bush on the hilltop. The other was attempting to sneak up on him from behind. Marcus didn't turn. Let that bug go on thinking he hadn't noticed.

The two in front of him had blasted Aaron, but he felt no anger toward them, just cold resolve. Did they deserve to die? Probably not. They were just doing the same as he was—trying to survive. And

for what? This was simple revenge now. No point to it at all. But he'd kill them, deserved or not.

He thought of Zusana as he flipped back to normal vision and sound. Her exquisite body blasted apart a few minutes before Aaron got his. That image burned in his head as he raised his weapon and fired.

A brief, 'burr-up' erupted from the muzzle of his M-85. The bush and aliens exploded. One of the creatures managed a sound—a scream, or something like one anyway—as it was ripped apart by several thousand splinters of titanium alloy. In his earpiece the double thuds of their blood-pumping organs terminated.

Marcus heard the sneaker behind him stop to utter a different kind of sound. He sneered, wondering how his translator, if it still functioned, would have interpreted that outburst. "Shit," or "damn" maybe. Something like that, anyway. Did these creatures have any feelings?

The sneaker resumed its hunt toward his position. Marcus darted to his right and veered around a bush. Ducking under a tree, he whirled to fire a long, level burst across his back trail. The barrage mowed the landscape down, but no 'scream' issued from 'Sneaky.'

He crouched behind the tree trunk, listening; calming his breath. Switching from visual to infrared, then to x-ray and ultraviolet, he detected nothing.

Maybe Sneaky had suffered a case of the willies and backed off.

The tree trunk flared red and vanished.

Nope!

Marcus dove into a gully to his left, rolling down the embankment to land at the bottom, on his feet by some miracle. He high-footed it through the shallow water and yellow shrubbery until the banks grew less steep. Scrambling out, he holed up behind a rock outcropping that commanded a view of the gully; in case Sneaky was still able to pursue.

Marcus checked the ammo in his last clip. Four rounds. Damn. He switched to semi-auto and propped the weapon on top of the rock, aiming down into the gully.

The breeze picked up. His fingers worked the audio controls to filter out the noise. The salty, sour taste in the air increased, courtesy of the nearby inland sea. He took a swig of water. Even with the minerals extracted by his field kit, a sour taste lingered.

He thought again of Zusana, her thighs spread, naked on a rock under the orange sun, small breasts bouncing as he pumped his barren seed into her.

"Be fruitful and multiply," Rokan had always said. A feat he was incapable of with Zusana. Even if they could have multiplied, the enemy subtracted too fast.

First they took Larin, the only female he could be fruitful with. Now they'd even taken poor Zusana, most likely the last human female he'd ever know, much less go through the motions of procreation with.

Aaron could have impregnated Zusana. They'd made the attempt often enough. Even in combat it was impossible to ignore your lifelong breeding/training/reason-for-existence. But it didn't matter now. They were both dust. Like Larin.

The first time they met, Marcus had stared at Larin with his toddler's mouth wide open. She was the first human he'd ever seen, outside of a mirror.

"Yes, lovely, isn't she?" Rokan had said. "She is female. You are male. The two of you will make dozens of beautiful children someday. Be fruitful and multiply."

In their years of training together, they'd become friends as well as lovers. Exclusive friends, like no one else. Rokan and his assistants encouraged variety in all things, unless it involved his two 'prizes.'

"Your seed, Marcus, is only for her. Your egg, Larin, is only for him. The others can reproduce with anyone they choose, but you two are divergents."

He later taught them that the constant shifting of their genetic codes assured the viability of the company's otherwise tiny gene pool.

"Your children will implant new DNA strains into that pool, keeping it vigorous. But your own seeds and eggs are as foreign to the others as if you came from another planet."

A distant howl broke Marcus's reveries. The sound came from behind him and to the right. It didn't sound like the enemy. A native inhabitant maybe; not intelligent, or even dangerous. He risked a glance. This whole planet was a haven from violence, except for what others brought to it from the stars.

His gaze returned to the gully. Sneaky stood there, aiming a blaster up at him. Marcus pulled his trigger.

Nothing.

Down in the gully, Sneaky appeared to have a similar problem. The alien jerked its weapon around, examined it, then threw it into the brush. Drawing a blade, it advanced up the bank.

Marcus tossed his own useless rifle away, drew his knife and stepped out to wait, dropping into a defensive stance.

Sneaky came up at a run, knife held out carelessly. Marcus prepared for an easy victory, then caught himself. The alien's clumsiness might be a feint.

The wind kicked up. Clouds of yellow dust filled the air. Marcus shuffled to his left, switching his visuals, trying to regain sight of his foe.

The starship neared its destination as the crew finished their training.

Rokan pointed to the yellow and blue planet floating in the view screen of the great hall. "There is your heritage. Under my care, your parents have sent you four hundred light years from Earth to colonize and grow strong. To spread the seed of humanity to the stars, as is its destiny. For two thousand years I have watched over you, first as frozen embryos, now as young gentlemen and ladies."

A shout rang out from the crowd as an unknown starship drifted into the view screen. Its braking jets suddenly flared, slowing it into orbit around the planet. A craft, as huge as their own, but with an alien look to it.

"Someone has beaten us to our planet."

"What will we do?"

Rokan stood before us, stroking his metal chin. He grinned. That big toothless, mechanical grin everyone hated.

"Break out the weapons."

The enemy charged into Marcus. An accident... maybe. In this swirl of dust, he doubted if it was capable of seeing anything. The contact was brief as a gust blew them apart.

Marcus ran smack into a tree, the jolt knocking the knife from his hand. On his knees searching, the wind died. The air cleared. Still, he couldn't spot his knife.

Across the hilltop, he spied the enemy. Stooped over, it ran six appendages over the ground. Feeling his gaze, the alien rose to approach him—its own blade also missing.

As they neared each other they stopped. For the first time, Marcus noticed that these aliens had faces: six faceted eyes, a line of nasal holes, and three long mandibles. So strange.

His mind struggled to find something similar—and spider was all that came. He felt certain that if you stood them side by side, the alien would appear as remotely related to an arachnid as it did to him.

One of the alien's arms snaked out to seize his shoulder. Another stretched forward to grasp his other side. It pulled Marcus to it.

He sensed no anger from the alien. No fear; just a kind of curiosity. The smell of it filled the air. A sweet, somehow familiar, muskiness. It smelled like... lust. His stomach heaved in disgust at the thought.

He looked down to see two grasping appendages emerge from the alien's lower belly. Two of its arms tugged at his combat suit, ripping pads and fabric. The graspers took hold of him. The odor of the alien overwhelmed him. He fought back nausea.

Loathing himself for it, Marcus became aroused. He couldn't help it. The alien lowered itself and pried open a slit in its belly. Hundreds of eggs spilled out in a pile.

The graspers moved. Marcus stared into the strange face and found something soft in it, almost feminine. Something that reminded him of Larin. He knew the alien was controlling his emotions. He hated it even more for that.

As Larin's image filled his mind, release engulfed him. The alien shuddered as the graspers let him go.

Marcus stumbled away. That thing! How could I? He fell to his knees, retching.

When he came back to himself, he faced the alien. She—yes, she now—had covered the eggs with her long torso. She glanced up at him. He felt from her the same revulsion he had first experienced, but also something else, recognition of a necessity, resignation, and a warmth of shared responsibility.

But he only felt the need for revenge. A desire to kill this creature.

She remained draped over the eggs for many days. Out of respect for that, and curious to see what would happen, he left her alone.

On Rokan's lander, Marcus and Larin donned full battle array.

Rokan laughed at them. "You look the part, but those combat suits are only for protection. I want you two as far from the action as possible. You are too valuable to risk."

Marcus glanced out the window at their besieged starship. Alien fighters buzzed it as a section took a hit and flared into mononuclear dust. Yet some parts held on, for now.

He and Larin were too valuable to leave behind, and too precious to risk in battle on the planet. He hung his head.

Larin stroked his hair.

Later Marcus recovered his weapon. It worked again, but he couldn't bring himself to use it on the alien. Not while she was hatching his offspring. He recovered a clip that one of his comrades had dropped the day before, when they were on the run.

He hunted the dull, placid native animals. Half his easy bounty he fed raw to the alien. The other half he roasted over a fire for himself. As he ate he swore he'd have revenge soon.

In two weeks the eggs hatched. The infants had four arms and legs. They stood right away, more upright than their mother, less than their father.

Aside from the four eyes and multiple nose holes, their faces bore faint human infant features.

Now I can kill the alien, he thought. But she was nursing the children, teaching them, loving them.

Rokan had always told him that sexually he and Larin were as different aliens to other humans. He didn't know how right he was.

Be fruitful and multiply.

Rokan leaned out of the hatch as the lander rose.

"You two, remember to stay out of it. I'll be back from this raid in an hour or two."

They never saw him or the lander in action again.

Two days after Rokan's departure, Larin took a blast full in the chest. Marcus will never forget the look on her face as her molecules ripped themselves apart and her beautiful body dissipated to the winds, blowing toward the sea.

When the children grew sturdy enough to travel, Marcus led them down into the coolness of the valley. They settled by a stream, near a crashed lander.

Marcus cleared human bodies from the intact fuselage, burying them on a nearby hill. Rokan's inert form he stood up in a clearing. He forced the face into that mechanical grin his people had all hated. Around Rokan's broken steel neck he hung a sign that read, "Be Fruitful and Multiply." It became the town statue.

Every night for weeks, Marcus scanned the night sky in search of orbiting lights. A spotting would mean one of the two starships had survived, perhaps sheltering friends... or enemies. He finally gave up looking.

The children spoke both their parent's languages. Through them, Marcus came to know the alien's history. It was the same as his. She, Våktæh, was also a genetic divergent, unable to reproduce with any of her kind, except her one special mate. Her Larin.

Marcus made his home in the lander's hull. His repulsion of the alien never faded. His hatred didn't waver, but he couldn't refuse her. So their family grew. He couldn't kill her, because the children needed her, and they were his children too. The only ones he'd ever have.

The morning had the first hint of cold in it. Marcus had wondered if winter would ever come. He pulled some blankets he'd found in the lander around him and closed his eyes, hoping for another hour of sleep.

It was the quiet that forced him up and out. The kids were never quiet in the morning.

He grabbed Våktæh's blaster as he brushed through the hangings covering the open hatch. Outside, a low fog covered the ground, but the sun was up and shining in a cloudless sky. His eyes darted across the compound. Where were the kids?

A scuffling sound to his right sent him diving. He hit the dirt and rolled behind a rock, blaster muzzle poking out. Old instincts die hard.

"Who's there?"

No answer. He scrambled to a larger rock and peered around it. Nothing. Then he heard the scuffling again.

"Våktæh?" Scuffle. "Kids?" Scuffle. "Don't play tricks on your old man, okay?"

"Old man?" The voice, a human one, came from behind a bush across the compound. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" His squinted and aimed the blaster at the bush.

"Irean and Halee from beta squad, group seven."

"Humans? You're humans?"

"Last time we checked, yeah."

"I'm Marcus, headquarters staff."

A face stuck itself out from around the bush. "Truce?" A human face. Female.

"Oh shit, yeah. Truce!" He rose up, flicking on the safety.

A dark-haired female stepped out in the open, followed by a blonde. They were grimy, but seemed physically sound.

"Thought we were the last. It's been months. Good to find you." The dark-haired one looked him up and down. "A male too. We might get this colony going after all."

Marcus hated to dash their hopes, so he ignored that. "How?"

"How'd we survive? Lucky I guess. We watched each other's backs until there were no more bugs to kill. I'm Irean." She nodded at the blonde. "She's Halee. Can't talk anymore, but otherwise functioning ... and how."

Halee blushed and smiled at him. Marcus wiped his brow. Human females. A dream come true. Of course, he couldn't impregnate them, but sex with his own kind again—

"What is this place? Looks like a settlement. Are there others?"

Others? He remembered the kids. Where were they? At the thought he saw several of them clustered in a gully to his left, still out of view of the females, but they were approaching with caution.

"That's a long story. There are no other humans, but—"

He watched Halee as she caught a glimpse of the kids and shouldered her weapon.

"No!" Marcus flipped off his safety. "It's okay. They're... my family."

The kids came into full view now. The females gaped at them. Irean shouldered her weapon too.

"Your family? What in hell you talking about? What are these things?"

"I told you, my family. Listen, there was no one left. Just me, and one alien, Våktæh. Her race is called jætrk. These are our children."

The females swung their weapons around wildly as more children came into view.

"Don't be afraid, Irean. They won't hurt you, Halee. They're just curious."

Våktæh hurtled up the gully and climbed out to face the humans. Both weapons swung to her.

"Wait! She's not armed. It's Våktæh, she's peaceful."

"A peaceful bug? No way!"

As if switched to slow motion, Marcus saw them decide to fire. Two human females. His own kind. He glanced at Våktæh, her spider-like body facing them down defiantly, protecting her children. Their children. He still hated her, but his children needed her.

He thought of soft, round, human breasts, firm thighs, moist red lips...

Marcus pressed the stud, firing from the hip. The blast took both females at once. Their faces whirled to him as their molecules unglued. Irean's mouth formed the word, "why," before fluttering into molecular confetti and being carried away toward the sea by a sudden breeze.

He turned the weapon on Våktæh, his finger itching to press the firing stud. It eased as the children ran to her.

The family grew. The children matured faster than pure humans. In just a few years they began to

breed among themselves—in their own unique fashion. Being the children of divergents, they were genetic individuals. Like adopted brothers and sisters their offspring showed no signs of mutation. The gene pool widened.

He taught the children to hunt with handmade bows and arrows. As per his instructions, they bought back to him all the rifles and blasters they found on their sojourns. Marcus stacked the weapons in a pile.

Once a week—the Saturday Night Spectacular he called it—he used Våktæh's blaster to reduce the heap of weapons to monatomic dust. The wind always blew the cloud away toward the sea. He watched it and remembered Larin. And Zusana, Irean, and Halee.

Marcus never understood what had happened that first day of his new life. How his and Våktæh's weapons had refused to fire at the same time. How the wind had keep them apart until they'd lost their knives, then blown them together. He sometimes wondered if the planet itself, devoid of life forms capable of evolving into intelligence, had wanted all this to happen. He'd never know.

The only thing that mattered was the children. Half human, half jætrk. Jæman. They laughed, cried, made love, grew, and learned. He reckoned they'd be sending their own colony ships out into the galaxy in a few hundred years or so.

At his last Saturday Night Spectacular, Marcus, hunched over and gray, hobbled over to the town statue.

Våktæh, looking no older than when they first met, nodded to him. A gesture she'd learned from the kids. He turned to stare at Rokan. The sign still read, "Be fruitful and multiply," but the words were faded.

"You bastard." He studied the hateful grin he'd formed on the android's face so many years ago. "It was you I should've hated all these years, not her. She just wanted to survive. To live and extend her life through these children. Now I know that's what I wanted too."

He stared at the impassive face, thinking how it hadn't changed that much from when it was animated. Not alive. Just animated.

"She and I did this together; without you. I'm only sorry I wasted so much hate on her. But you made it impossible for me to do anything else. Damn it, because of you, I still hate her."

He turned to Våktæh and raised the weapon. She knew. He was too old to conceive any more babies. She approved. He was too old to continue. She hated him too. He bowed and tossed her the weapon.

As every Saturday night the children began to dance around him and the statue. Marcus clapped his hands at the familiar sight, smirking from time to time at the robot's mechanical grin.

He laughed and laughed, until Våktæh's blaster, discharged its final burst.

In a blaze of light Marcus flashed into oblivion. His monatomic ashes floated off on the breeze, toward the inland sea.

The Lion of Uruk

By Woody O. Carsky-Wilson

They call him the Lion of Uruk. Because of him, the name Gilgamesh will doubtless pass into legend for a second time. Other planets may have their Theseus, Alexander, Sneferu, Ramses or Caesar, but none of these well-named moderns possess half the verve of their ancient namesakes. Not so our leader.

He's lean, he's mean, he's the big, bad king, but has Gilgamesh gone too far? Many citizens of our great planet think so. He keeps wives from their husbands, and sons and daughters from their homes, just like in the legends. But in all fairness, we must discuss his good deeds first.

Look at the great Sea Wall protecting our coastal cities from the parabolic cyclone twisters. Is any other human artifact so tall, wide or strong? Peer into its broad face. See any stress fractures? No, because that wall is built damned well! How about Uruk's many sprawling cities, her fine bazaars and universities, her world-spanning Information Web, is this not cause for celebration?

It is, truly, however...

Gilgamesh keeps our young people constantly linked into that same Web, plumbing its depths for trade advantages. He forces automata to toil endless hours making artifacts for offworld sale, overburdening our resources and irritating the Trans-stellar Market Committee.

And let's not forget his sexual appetite.

He claims all women from supermodel to homely sow. Can any other man compete? Gilgamesh is brilliant, good-looking, and stocked to the gills with charm. Sixty-six percent of his genes are god-coded. Half the kids on this planet bear a remarkable resemblance to him. Why else nickname our firstborns the Royal Gift?

Let us clarify. We do NOT want another king, who might carry a grand name, but lack the means

to earn our respect. Gilgamesh is the best man for the job, so perish the thought of removing him; we just want him pre-occupied. Therefore, we officially beseech the gods and goddesses who protect our fair planet and rule humanity from the gulf between solar systems:

Please send Gilgamesh a distraction!

—thoughtfully penned by the editors of Uruk Tribune

I am a stalker who sets traps upon the fertile belly of the Wilds, and trades his catch for almond beer at the Barrier. Last night, I found a trap intentionally sprung. That trap was one of my best; gene-matched to attract red-tailed slothbears in an area teeming with the brutes.

I checked my other traps and pits, but the same empty sight greeted me, so I rushed home, pressed the key code into the door panel and entered our prefab.

"Father!" I growled. "The bastard sprang my traps!"

"The Beast Man again?" He looked up from a paper copy of the Uruk Tribune. Reading that rag was his one vice, and I had not the heart to deny it to him. He'd been a fine stalker in his day.

"Who else?" I hissed. "He runs with the animals. For all I know, he sucks the udders of a marsh cow for milk. He'll kill my livelihood!"

My father nodded and stroked his beard, then set his paper down and picked up the talkboard, adjusting the microphone.

"Get me the Uruk Tribune," he said.

Who is this Beast Man wilder-than-the-Wilders who lurks in the darkness between cities? A local stalker (and his retired father) make many claims:

That the beast man runs with the animals and communes with them, that he fearlessly springs traps and fills in pits, that he drinks milk straight from the udders of marsh cows!

King Gilgamesh, here is a foe from beyond the Barrier that no one reckoned on, a distant swimmer in the chaotic Wilder gene pool that's been unregulated for millennia. Perhaps he is a threat. How will you respond? Are you up to the challenge?

—respectfully penned by the editors of Uruk Tribune

Two nude women lay on a bed, one of them beautiful with wild raven tresses, the other homely, with straight, lank hair. A very male companion admired

himself in the mirror. He was tall, sun-darkened and broad-shouldered enough to carry the weight of the world without flinching.

"I am Lord Shamash's most loyal servant. I speak to him often," he said, half to himself, half to the women. His massive shoulders slumped. "But my life is without challenge. What about this man-beast they mentioned in that rag, the Uruk Tribune?"

The women shrugged. The gods inhabiting the interstellar spaces were far above daily concerns, and the Wilds were fodder for fairytales, nothing more.

"I must see this beast of a man for myself." He let his eyes rove the feminine bodies. "And I know just how to lure him in!" He rose once more to the act of love.

The stalker frowned, reading a message on the talk-board. "The king wants me to hire a servant of Ish-tar and parade her in front of the man beast. Father, I cannot be party to this! It's... its so vulgar!"

The old man's eyes were focused elsewhere and he chuckled. "When horses rut in a meadow, are they vulgar? It sounds like a good plan. Trust the king and do his bidding. He knows the hearts of men."

The stalker shook his head and stomped out the door, toward the Barrier and the beckoning flesh-pots surrounding Ishtar's temple.

I see stalker and human bitch. They see me eat berries. Stalker back off. He fear me.

Bitch take off clothes. I smell body. Make me angry.

I yell, pound chest. She run. Stalker run, too.

They stupid. Pfahh!

They try again. Woman with black hair, no good. Woman with red hair, I laugh. Woman with blond hair, thank you no. Fat woman, thin woman, tall woman, short woman, all in a row, and none pleases me.

I get mad, knock them down. Stalker not come back for half a moon.

Then stalker return with pretty one. Pretty one come close, and move side to side... nice walk. I forget berries and watch. Pretty one talks. Pretty one touches.

Pretty one stay.

Then pretty one go. I follow, through Barrier, and for first time in life I step through, follow him with his pretty walk into big, big city.

"King Gilgamesh, my name Enkidu. I come from Wilds, get educated in temple of Inanna, but don't

like you none, no, not at all! You make city kids be slaves of Information Web. Robots work hard, too, make worthless shit to sell off planet. Loads of donkey crap they make. No purpose.

"So I don't like it. I said that already and I meant it.

"You better stop or we fight, you and me. If you got the balls, that is. But I don't think you do, because you never ran with animals like me. It make me stronger.

"So I'm gonna kick your ass and let everybody watch big, strong king get beat up."

—excerpt of interview with The Beast Man by the editors of Uruk Tribune

Bhariq: ...live at Uruk Stadium in the capital, and the punches are flying in a flurry. It's a right and a left against the king's jaw. Man ol' man, who'd have thought we'd see this day!

Marsu: The king returned Enkidu's punches with a barrage of his own. The Beast Man reeled into a door post and you could hear the snap!

Bhariq: Ow, hope it wasn't his back!

Marsu: Look at them go! The king tripped. He's down! Now he's back up and grabbing Enkidu in a bear hug, raising Enkidu's hand. The king is speaking.

Gilgamesh (amplified): Let it be known that this man is victor. He cannot be beaten in battle! We are brothers from this day forward!

Bhariq: The Beast Man is hugging Gilgamesh. The fight is over. Gilgamesh finally has a worthy companion!

Marsu: (hand covering microphone) Oh, thank the gods! We'll finally get some rest around here.

Some people take quick trips to the mall for adventure. Or they spend the night reading a romance. Not so our king.

He has embarked on his gutsiest escapade yet, attempting to penetrate the Shamash Star, the seeder starship which founded our world and now sits on the south polar cap. Until now, no one has dared contact the vessel. Two platoons of Viper Control hover tanks will accompany him. He and Advisor Enkidu will fly the Uruk Lion.

Be prepared for some quality military footage.

The commander-gunner's right hand touched a red button marked CYCLE SUPER-MAG, next to another button marked CYCLE DET ROUNDS. She wore a green, fire retardant suit. The embroidered

nametag on her left breast read VIPER CONTROL. On her right was stenciled SYTHIK.

She pressed her head to the nightscanner. A green image of the grounded seeder starship loomed ahead. Leading the formation was a sleek craft with royal emblems. The speed tracker in the corner of the display read 400 KPH LOCKED.

"Driver, keep Uruk Lion in your sight. If we get separated from the rest of the platoon, follow him."

"Roger that."

Gilgamesh's voice. "This is Uruk Lion, lasing the target."

Sythik's saw the splash of laser light marking the roof of the starship-turned-fortress. Her finger tightened.

"Fire!" She squeezed.

Plasma rounds spat down the railgun tube. Seven streams from other hovertanks battered the huge roof of the fortress, slicing into meter-thick steel like a flaming knife through ice cream. Uruk Lion decelerated, and she heard King Gilgamesh's voice again.

"The new weapons are doing their job. Follow me!" Uruk Lion pushed through the wreckage of the roof, scattering broken beams of polarized steel.

Sythik followed, struggling to see through the maze of swirling steam. The view cleared. Uruk Lion had halted in a long hallway and disgorged its two pilots. Sythik's hovertank blew retros, its turbines whining to stabilize the massive vehicle. Twisters whirled around the great hall. The tank commander-gunner saw the two heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, stand victorious above another man who knelt in defeat. Sythik tapped the outer audio pickups and fiddled with the directional dial.

"—know secrets of the gods that you've lost. I can give them to you! Please..."

She tweaked the optical dial to lock it in. The kneeling man was Shamash's guardian, with tubes and metallic devices protruding from his body. Small cables snaked away from his chest into a nearby blinking console.

Gilgamesh frowned. "Be at ease. I didn't come here to murder a helpless creature. We'll take you back to the capital as our honored guest, but I expect to have those secrets you just promised."

Enkidu eyes were hard and cold. "No. Kill him and be done with it, then rip the secrets from his dead memory banks." His diction had improved over time, but he had gained crudity, not shed it.

"Have mercy on him, buddy," said Gilgamesh. "He's been a loyal servant of Lord Shamash for more than a thousand years. Our show of force has

served its purpose." The king lowered his arm, aiming the man-portable railgun at the floor.

The cyborg's chest exploded in a spray of blood and plastic. The corpse fell back, a large pool of blood staining the floor.

Gilgamesh turned to Enkidu, whose weapon still smoked. The king growled, "I told you he was one of Lord Shamash's servants. I would not have done that!"

"No, you wouldn't have." Enkidu casually reslung his rifle and spat on the corpse.

One by one, the other Viper Control hovertanks landed like vultures to secure the interior, and the king bit off an exceptionally angry reply.

Ishtar's drone servant finished briefing the latest news. Its sleek black manipulators waved in harmony to its words. "King Gilgamesh and his new companion have fought terrorists, scaled the An Mountain Range and piloted submersibles to hunt sharkwhales in the deep ocean rift. The two heroes are quite popular on Uruk, and even the other worlds have heard of their exploits. Many people are interested to see Shamash's reaction to the murder of his guardian cyborg."

Ishtar licked her lips. "That old fart doesn't care about obsolete cyborgs from the colonization phase. Now listen. Place this fortress on automatic until I return. Prepare a body for my animation. No, wait, I'll select one myself."

The drone bowed and left the hall, its manipulators folded toward its chest. Ishtar snapped her fingers and a gleaming personal conveyor took her to the voluminous closet of habitable bodies, where sweet garments of feminine flesh were always ready for her consciousness to inhabit. She parked her familiar, durable matronly body in its niche and descended into the body of a seventeen year old with bright green intelligent eyes, full red lips, curves in all the traditional places and nano-firm breasts. Grounded in her new attire, she observed herself in the mirror, slapping the garment's ass with open palm, leaving a faint red palm print on alabaster skin.

"How could any man possibly deny me?" she wondered aloud.

She dressed herself in fashionable translucent shimmer silks that accentuated more than they concealed, and hurried to the starpod launching bay. A bevy of drones cheered her through the halls, bowing and averting their optical receptors, attending her while she boarded her luxury starpod.

Time passed in the transport vessel. She spent it in sim-sex with creatures only partially human. Her favorite was the grizzly bear. She only wished the simulation could be a bit rougher, but the damned safeties prevented it.

Three days later, the starship slipped out of transit space and hailed the planet. Viper Control fighter escorts were immediately scrambled from the capital as an honor guard, but Ishtar shot two of them down when they methodically scanned her craft.

"Gilgamesh, dear, you plumb our secrets a bit too aggressively." She mounted her royal descender.

When her red-nailed toes touched the ground, a flick of her hand ordered the transparent craft to follow at a discreet distance. It floated off even as the crowds gathered. The citizens bowed low and greeted her with questions, which she ignored.

"Where's Enkidu?" she asked.

A gray-haired priestess soon arrived. "Goddess Ishtar, we have eagerly awaited your triumphant return. Set us on a path of righteous--"

"Dammit, where's Enkidu? My loins throb for this man beast." She bit her lower lip, and whispered huskily to the priestess. "Will he take me from the rear like a jackal, or will he do some unknown animal thing I can barely guess at?" She shivered.

The priestess blushed. "You want Enkidu for, um, mating?"

Ishtar's tongue lay thick in her mouth. "I want a good, hard romp with him like they sing about in the temples. When it's over, I want to know I've been screwed." The best sex always left her fleshy garments half dead. She often was forced to throw them away after a single hard session.

The priestess coughed. "You wouldn't be the first woman who tried to seduce him."

Ishtar snorted, flashing her eyes. "I am no woman! I am a goddess. It will be an easy conquest."

The priestess winced. "But rumor has it that he and the king's affection extends a bit beyond brotherly love."

"I understand." Ishtar smiled a dazzling, white smile. "It's not for me to interrupt the erotic love of comrades, but I will seduce him. Queer or not, he will grace my bed and lick my bare heels like a puppy."

The priestess smiled hesitantly. "Um, as you wish."

They walked through the city, followed by crowds milling at a respectful distance. Ishtar waved, speaking to the priestess from the corner of

her mouth. "So how are things for the faithful these days?"

The priestess frowned. "Oh Holiness, it's been three hundred years since last you manifested! Our faith has declined. We live by the mercy and largess of the state. Our treasuries are--"

"Oh shut up, you'll get your money." The goddess keyed a pad on her wrist. "There, that should pay for a few more Doric columns, or whatever's in fashion in the Mesopotamian Sector."

The priestess looked at the account numbers which had just been sent to the temple fund manager and thanked her goddess profusely, but Ishtar wasn't listening.

They stopped in front of a large building. Frescoes of muscular men and women adorned the walls. Inside the gym, machines were arranged in every possible muscle-flexing configuration, while blue-suited colossi in Uruk Royal Gym t-shirts rushed around offering suggestions and spotting rich patrons. Counterweights slammed, cables creaked and slid across tiny pulleys, and force fields pressed against raised palms. Patrons grunted and chugged like steam locomotives.

It was easy to locate Enkidu. Clad in white loin-cloth, he was being crushed to death by shimmering force columns. Veins popped out on his broad forehead and muscles stood out like steel cables.

"Well I'll be mounted and stuffed! Mmmmm." Ishtar bypassed the line of waiting people.

The beast man tried to ignore her presence, but finally snarled, "Get your own machine, sister!" His quadriceps bulged as he stood with legs splayed and arms wide, pressing tight against the colored walls of force.

"Push it, push it!" yelled Gilgamesh. "By Shamash's throbbing one-eye, I've seen harder workouts in Ishtar's palace of pleasure!"

Enkidu roared and the walls of force slowly separated to the cheers of the growing crowd. Gasping for air, he stepped down and high-fived with the king. They butted heads and locked in a wrestling embrace, scattering the jubilant crowd.

Ishtar called out, "Oh, man who is a beast, I hail you!"

Enkidu did not deign to look. "Machine's yours, like I said, sister." He picked up a small blue towel and rubbed his back.

"I don't want to use the machine," she answered. "I want to use you!"

He turned, squinting. "Are you one of Ishtar's whores? Go back to your temple and lie on your back, slut."

"Careful what you say!" Gilgamesh whispered, catching his friend's elbow. "It's the goddess herself. No mere courtesan wears a lapis lazuli tiara."

"You speak the truth, fair king." The goddess lifted her creamy arms high, addressing the crowd. "Citizens of Uruk, from my mount on high perched like an eagle in the darkness, I have watched my temples fall into ruin. Until now, I've been too busy to act. I have been petitioning the Assembly of Gods for Uruk's right to additional trade connections." A lie, but so what. She raised an eyebrow at Gilgamesh, watched his reaction.

He nodded enthusiastically. "That's how we won the last contract over the Babylon Consortium! I knew we had divine assistance."

Enkidu waved it off. "She lies."

The king clapped a strong hand on Enkidu's shoulder. "Let's show a little decorum, buddy. She is a goddess, after all, and we must respect that."

Enkidu snorted.

Ishtar pretended not to notice his disrespect, and once more addressed the crowd. "Fair citizens, I shall allow a ceremony of bonding between Enkidu and myself, for I have found no man so untamed and unrivaled, so... bestial."

Gilgamesh bowed gracefully. "We are honored, dear goddess, but I think the proper recipient of your fine gift should be the king, for I am the conduit through which political, divine, and even genetic power flows to the people." He winked. "And I'm rather fond of the process, too."

She glared. "Every temple harlot and housewife on this planet has tasted you at least once!" She shook her head. "But no woman has had Enkidu."

Enkidu shook his head. "Look, sister, I don't do girls."

"But I can offer riches beyond belief," said Ishtar, only a little flustered. "Your own personal androids. Unlimited rights of space travel. You can have tailor-made boys to please you, if you like. But once your hands get a grip on these—" The goddess clasped perfectly formed, grapefruit-sized breasts. "—and once your manhood enters this heavenly gate—" She touched herself lower. "—then there's no turning back. I'll be the wildest thing you ever mounted on two or four legs."

"Don't get an offer like that every day," said Gilgamesh. "Gotta admit, she's pretty hot."

Enkidu remained unimpressed. "Pfah! She's older than the dirt under my feet."

"How dare you!" protested the goddess, stamping her perfect foot. She took a deep breath, and re-

plastered the sociable smile on her face. "Don't underestimate the distractions available in my home. There are virtual simulations you can't conceive of. You'd see things no one in Uruk could imagine."

Enkidu laughed without humor. "If it's such a wonderful place, why are you down here sniffing around like a bitch in heat?"

She closed her mouth. The crowd moved back. Gilgamesh tried to get Enkidu's attention, but his friend would not be stopped in his headlong pursuit to condemn the goddess.

"I've read the public record. Let me recite what happened to your last animal lovers," he continued.

"That is enough, Enkidu!" said Ishtar.

"You've had your say, buddy," insisted Gilgamesh. "Let it go. She's a goddess."

"First, you did the nasty-nasty with a drugged lion," said Enkidu, oblivious to his friend's entreaties. "You promised to set up zoos to commemorate your rutting, but I've yet to see a single zoo bearing the name of Ishtar on it. Second, you screwed a horse, swearing from that moment on to keep his range lands free, but those range lands became overflow parking for the capital, hardly an equine delight."

Ishtar clenched her fists. "Fine! I'll leave you to your little boys rather than be insulted in public. Now shut your mouth."

Enkidu's face twisted into a cruel smile. "First the lion, then the horse. I'm your newest fad fuck, because I'm a man beast. I wonder, do you have friends up there in space, Ishtar? It must be difficult for the queen of whores to love anyone, especially when she's a used-up whore herself."

Ishtar's green eyes glossed with fury. Smoke curled at her fingertips and she raised a lethal hand. Gilgamesh stepped in front of her, shielding his friend.

"Step aside, king." The weaponry concealed within her skeletal frame was primed and ready to fire. With one wave of her hand, she could level the entire gym. "Oh, do you cry into your pillow every night for a real lover?" continued Enkidu. "You pathetic, mewling alley cat, scrabbling at the back door for scraps of pity. I don't envy you a bit."

Enkidu mock bowed, as the other patrons of the gym dispersed, embarrassed and fearful. Ishtar's weaponry sputtered to a halt. The goddess sat on a nearby bench, her mouth slack and her dignity deflated.

Gilgamesh knelt quickly, taking her hand. "Dearest Ishtar, provider of temples and succor, my

advisor spoke carelessly, for which I offer the deepest apologies. Goddess, I beg you to leave us in peace and put this incident behind you."

Her eyes suddenly focused. Gilgamesh glimpsed lovers lost, and an immortal woman once human, now drowned in her own vast, unforgiving power. She was something far beyond human, and yet in her core, she was a girl who just wanted to be loved.

Ishtar composed herself and spoke softly. "What do you know of the real universe, my dear little king? And I don't mean the convenient lies we tell our subjects out of necessity. The truth."

He shrugged. "We live out myths from humanity's past. It's some kind of experiment. I don't pay it much attention. Ishtar, I'm asking you to forgive Enkidu. He's got a lot of issues when it comes to animals and women. You pushed his hot buttons."

She chuckled. "I am a spoiled, brash brat with too much power for my own good," she admitted. "As he said, I am lonely and no longer quite human, but, damn him, I am still a goddess and I will not be mocked!" She leaned forward, green eyes glowing. Her whisper was the killing heat of high summer across the vast plains. "My sweet, compassionate little king, I have bad news. Within one week, a starship called Anu's Breath will destroy five cities on this planet. Your Barrier will be useless."

His eyes grew wide. "Goddess, is your personal honor worth all that misery?"

She did not hear him. "And after the cities die, Enkidu will die. Oh yes, he'll not walk out of this firestorm unscathed. That is my promise."

She left, looking neither left nor right as she padded through the now deserted halls.

Gilgamesh pondered her words with mounting fear, but something inside him rebelled against her threat. "Don't think we'll take this sitting down. You may be a goddess, but I am a king. And I have my own weapons."

It began with a flash of light. Birds dropped from the sky and joggers collapsed on the fitness path. A woman pushing a baby carriage fell soundless. The baby carriage rolled on.

Later, inside the Viper Control command center, General Amir Basha al-Farouk hung his head. "The neutron barrage killed seventy-five thousand people, sir, with more than one hundred thousand seriously injured and half a million wounded. Every hospital on the planet has been mobilized, but it's not enough."

Gilgamesh rose from his chair, wearing black flight fatigues. "We can't build shelters fast enough, and if we evacuate the cities, our people will starve in the Wilds. I want the entire air force to overfly the cities."

"Yessir," said General al-Farouk. "We prepared a special bunker for you under the An Mountains that can withstand a direct bombardment by--"

The king shook his head. "I'll be flying the Uruk Lion over the capital." He shot an angry glance at Enkidu. "And my advisor who got us into this whole mess will copilot."

High above the capital, the Uruk Lion streaked through the clouds. In its cockpit, two men sat side-by-side wearing pressure suits. They'd been aloft three days awaiting the return of the starship. Their eyes were red and an IV drip kept their blood streams hydrated and saturated with stimulants.

Gilgamesh cleared his throat. "We need to talk, buddy."

His copilot did not answer.

Gilgamesh spoke again. "What exactly is it you want in life, Enkidu? Have I not given you everything you could possibly wish for?"

Enkidu shifted in his chair, still silent.

"I gave you riches, adventure, countless personal victories. I gave you my love." He chuckled. "Do you know how many sly winks I get from those who think we are physical lovers?"

Enkidu chuckled despite himself. "You're hardly my type."

Gilgamesh nodded. Enkidu had a not-so-secret following of young, lithe boys traipsing into his chambers at all hours of the night. These he treated tenderly. All others saw only his harsh side.

"Why are you so filled with hatred, my friend?" asked the king.

Enkidu blew out a gust of hot air. "You would not understand."

"You think I'm an imbecile?" There was a warning tone in his voice.

"I do not." Enkidu turned, his face stolid behind the flight mask. "I think you are blessed above all others. I think you do not see misery in plain view."

"What misery?"

"Mine!" roared Enkidu, half rising. "Do you know who my father was?"

Gilgamesh shook his head. "I always assumed he was a Wilder."

"No. I never knew him. Neither did I know my mother. I have read enough of the myths to know exactly what I am."

Gilgamesh felt his blood go cold. "Which is?"

The black-gloved fists tightened. "An experiment of the gods, a toy for their whims, bred in the darkness of interstellar space and released like a caged bird to do their bidding. I am a thing, brother, a mere thing. An instrument."

A long silence reigned. Gilgamesh finally spoke again. "Do you think I can do as I please, that there are no bounds for me?"

"You are king, exalted above all else."

"No, never that!" Gilgamesh shook his head. "I am nothing without my people. I love them, as I love you. When one of my subjects is slain, it is an arrow in my heart. Do you comprehend that?"

Enkidu frowned. "No, I do not."

Gilgamesh was about to respond when the radio crackled. "Radar indicates unknown object hovering over Nesh."

The cockpit holoscreen lit with the picture of blue sky over Nesh. A single pilot operated the controls. He veered hard left and punched the thrusters. A huge hovering ship swung into view. He centered the nose of the plane on the bulk of that massive vessel.

FUSION REACTOR OVERLOADING!! blinked red on the heads-up display.

"Enemy vessel powering up weapons. Viper ground forces engaging," said the pilot calmly. Streaks of fire leapt from the ground to slash at the sides of the hovering vessel. The pilot stayed on course as the reactor edged up past the red. Just before colliding with the starship, he punched the engines hard.

The image blinked out.

"Lion One, we lost contact with our ground radar station and the pilot. Switching to long range orbital sensors." A long wait. "Heavy casualties reported in Nesh, but we have positive confirmation that the starship Anu's Breath is destroyed!"

"Roger. That pilot is a hero. I want his family flown to my palace for the highest honors." Gilgamesh shut off the radio and turned to Enkidu, his eyes narrow and grim. "We got lucky, but there are tens of thousands of my subjects who were once living, breathing human being. Now they are mere corpses, stacked like bloody arrows still quivering in my heart!"

Enkidu shifted in his seat, but said nothing.

Gilgamesh continued. "I begged the goddess on bended knee to undo your thoughtless goading. I, the king, humbled myself, but you act as though I were a fool for doing it. Dammit, Enkidu, talk to me!"

His companion looked straight ahead, face unreadable and mouth clamped shut. The journey home was very unpleasant.

Weeks later, in a dark, windowless room, a ragged voice cried out. "Curse the stalker and curse the boy who lured me from the Wilds! Let them be open books whose words are written with piss. Look at me! Boils on my once fair face. My strong body lies ruined. My hair is falling out. What beautiful boy could desire this withered man? Shamash! You were Gilgamesh's protector. Why not defend me now in my time of need?"

Another voice spoke, very loud and strong, but kind. "Enkidu, I came to you at the king's behest to offer advice, and here it is. Curse neither the stalker nor the pretty boy. Curse instead the man truly responsible for the mess you're in."

Enkidu roared. "Who is that man that I may grip his throat and squeeze until blood boils from his very ears?"

Shamash made a sound deep in his throat. "You have only to look in the mirror. You are the fool who shamed Ishtar and brought down her justified wrath."

"There is no justice!" cried Enkidu, tearing a fistful of lank hair from his own scalp. "We're puppets on your stage. You hold the strings and make us dance, then blame us when we trip, but it's your fingers doing the tripping."

"No, Enkidu!" said Shamash. "We let the myths run their course as they will. It's all part of an experiment to regenerate the lost spark. Soon enough, humanity will throw the so-called gods like me down in an orgy of violence, but not until we rekindle something vital to the human spirit."

A harsh laugh from the man beast. "Bah! I'm a walking corpse, dead in two weeks if the doctors are to be trusted. I should never have crossed the Barrier."

Shamash's voice boomed like thunder. "Blind man! You lived a hero's tale to be sung around campfires for ten thousand years. Don't grieve for what cannot be. Celebrate what has already been."

Enkidu began destroying furniture, launching it through the windows with incoherent curses.

Mighty Shamash retreated from his fury, shaking his head, and murmuring, as he passed from the planetary realm through the air up into his climate-controlled, personal servitor ship. "He really is a dolt, like they say," he told his manservant, who rubbed him down with fine oils. "Rather surprised

the animals endured his company as long as they did."

"Unit 301 to dispatch," said a bored police officer's voice. "On scene at domestic. Requesting backup with-- hold your fire, it's the king's advis--"

Projectile shots rang out, before the transmission was abruptly cut short.

"Unit 301, this is dispatch, report." No answer, just static. "Officer down! All tac police to Inannas Temple at Third and Central! Suspect may be one of the king's advisors. Mobile care unit, respond at once."

There was a flurry of frantic responses and questions for half an hour, followed by the quiet voice of a sergeant on the scene.

"Dispatch, this is Tac 4. Request immediate air evac with cryopods at Third and Central. Six police dead but recoverable, four wounded. Also need an urban damage specialist for electromag rifle fire." A pause. "And you'd better notify the King. We killed his chief advisor with multiple shots to the head. Suspect cannot, I repeat cannot, be recovered."

As far away as six kilometers, hovercars burned. The confirmed death toll mounted quickly. At three thirty-four, Uruk Lion landed in the square and Gilgamesh ran to the temple while onlookers and holocameras waited.

Gilgamesh waded through the crowd of uniforms.

The captain in charge snapped to attention. "Sir!" He stood, rigid and sweating.

The king surveyed the scene. Two crumpled forms remained. Enkidu's corpse folded over the body of a much smaller woman as though they were fallen lovers.

"What happened?" demanded Gilgamesh, his haggard eyes returning to the captain's.

"We thought it was a domestic dispute at first," said the officer. "People in the adjoining apartments heard a man shouting and a woman screaming. We broke in and the suspect opened up with an e-m rifle. The ones he killed were shot in the chest and legs, but their brains are intact so they'll be revived, of course."

"Yes, certainly. And the girl?" asked Gilgamesh.

"Temple prostitute, sir, one of Ishtar's. No family—she was found after a Wilder culling and taken in by the local order." He pointed to the cheap plastic figurine on the table, an image of Ishtar with arms outstretched. "Sire, he, um, removed parts of his victim with his bare hands. Some of the organs

are missing or ruptured. It's pretty gruesome. He, um, did the damage while she was still alive, hence the screams. And her brain was one of the organs he damaged. He used his fingers to, well, never mind. You can read the report later, sire."

The king nodded, dumb with grief, and moved toward the two dead bodies sprawled in the indignant pose of death.

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir," continued the captain. "Our snipers opened up as soon as they had a shot. I take full responsibility."

The king waved him into silence. "No, you did well. Go attend the scene." Approaching the corpses, Gilgamesh sank to his knees, shoved the body of Enkidu from the violated woman and rose with the girl's wet remains splattering his arms. "He loved the Wilds so much, then take him to his Wilds." He pointed to Enkidu's corpse. "Give him a jackal's burial, sergeant. No more than that."

He addressed one of his advisors. "Koth, bury this honorable daughter of the temple in the imperial cemetery. Use the grave that was meant for Enkidu."

Advisor Koth frowned. "But sir, she's a mere--"

Gilgamesh stopped him with a hard, cold glance. "She is one of my subjects."

"Yessir." The man hurried off.

Gilgamesh turned to his son, and led him to the ring of reporters. He draped an arm about the youth whose bewildered eyes peered from under a shock of blond hair. "Son, I am going away, but I'm taking selected pilots and soldiers with me."

Prince Tor cocked his head. "Where to?"

"To do what should have been done a long time ago," said the king. "In my absence, I want you to prepare the people for a Dark Age, a necessary calamity. Unleash the thing inside of them that lets them be strong. Do not spare yourself, and do not spare others." He removed his signet ring and placed it on the prince's trembling finger.

Then he turned and strode off, pushing through the reporters and calling for his military staff. What followed was the stuff of legends.

His crusade against the gods began as a small affair, but at its conclusion, a hundred planets were burned to a cinder, while the interstellar fortresses of the gods lay shattered and drifting. Gilgamesh himself was slain in the final assault on Lord Shamash's stronghold. He died on the steps of his celestial father's palace with a maser beam through the left eye. His enraged Viper Control shock troops turned

the fortress into a floating charnel house, sparing not a living creature.

As foretold by the Uruk Tribune, Gilgamesh's great name passed into legend for a second time, but it stood alone.

No companion, beast or otherwise, was ever mentioned in the same breath, and that's the way he wanted it.

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