

Avoiding  
Space Madness

Or

A week in the life of a toll-booth worker in a vaguely  
futuristic dystopian world

Non-canonical edition

By  
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For  
my wife

### Acknowledgements

I know more people who deserve a dedication than I have books.

Thanks go first and foremost to my partner. Before you I could not have imagined someone as wonderful as you and some days I still can't. Thankfully you are here to remind me.

Superlative filled thanks to my family, my mother, father, sister, grandparents and all the rest of you. I am a better person for having known all of you and I love you all.

Hi Eric.

Hello free e-book readers. This book has been made available for free though my time and effort.

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Rumors of a gift economy remain unconfirmed.

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Thank you. [1]

[1] Remember, by tradition both Interludes, Preludes and Appendixes (like the quotations at the beginning of this book) are pretentious nonsense. Feel free to skim over them as you would Tolken's music.

[Gilgamesh:]

“The fate of mankind overtook him.  
Six days and seven nights I wept over him  
until a worm fell out of his nose.  
Then I was afraid.  
In fear of death I roam the wilderness. The case of my friend lies  
heavy in me...

How can I keep still? How can I be silent?  
The friend I loved has turned to clay. Enkidu, the friend I love,  
has turned to clay.  
Me, shall I not lie down like him, never again to move?’

...

Utnapishtim [the immortal man] says to him, to Gilgamesh:

...

‘There is no word of advice...’

-Selections from Gilgamesh (Third Millennium B.C,  
possibly the oldest surviving story on record)  
translated from cuneiform by John Gardner and John Maier

“The design shows a long-armed monkey reaching out for a reflection of the moon on  
water.”

- Artwork on metal sword scabbard by  
Miyamoto Musashi (1584- 1645),  
description by Victor Harris

“In 1968 we ran a pig for president of the United States. Her name was Pigasus Pig and  
she was the first female black and white candidate for that high office”

-Wavy Gravy

Do It Again

-Kinks

### Prelude

Beginnings are easy, once you get the hang of them. Not everyone will, or perhaps not everyone can. But they come around often, and once you learn how to handle them, starting is easy.

Middles aren't too bad either, if you're a believer in truth like me. They tend to follow naturally from the beginning. You may have to force your way past some ennui from time to time, and the content might even turn out to be painful... which I guess means they aren't always easy.

Fine then, middles are simple. Excuse me if I pick up the pace a little here, I have to move quickly or this whole theory will unravel before I get to the end.

I haven't lived long enough to be sure of endings. From what I've gleaned so far they are both simple and often heartbreaking. They can contain bittersweet encapsulations of the past alongside sensations of unbearable loss.

After sufficient time has passed, a sense of wonder can begin to form anew. Unfortunately sometimes the wait starts to drag. Then you'd better know some tricks to keep the vultures at bay. If you aren't careful, *an* ending can all too easily develop into *the* ending.

Beginnings can be hard. Middles may be complex, but nonetheless they remain easy. Or was it simple?

All the middle consists of really is the playing out of the variables set into motion by the tone of the beginning. Honesty simplifies. It is the truth of who you are. If someone else hates it, they hate it. It can be painful, but not complex. You just remain committed to your mission and hold steady until it all blows over. If you are still lying and playing games by the middle, then you haven't truly made it to the middle. All you've done is

create a long beginning, and extended beginnings, like extended adolescences, give me a headache.

Sometimes I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for it to finish beginning.

The tricky part is getting your beginning to mesh up with your middle. The beginning is a flashy representative sent ahead to prepare the way for what's to come. It's easy to be impressive for fifteen minutes. The middle is the main course, the substance. The problem then is, how to manage the transition.

No more "you" then. We are approaching the middle, its time that I started talking about me.

Beginnings and middles. The art of letting the flashy facade I put up fade away when I want to enjoy the fruits of my labor.

The more I think about it, the faster the analogy breaks down, and I become dissatisfied with it. After all, I'm obviously past the beginning of my life now, and nobody except my cat knows or cares. As each car pulls up the tollbooth where I work, I start a new beginning.

I play a game with the drivers, matching my facial expression and two seconds of dialogue to give them the exact version of myself that they want to see. I am keeping my beginnings in shape, in case I ever need to make a great first impression.

Too much truth was what landed me this job.

It was almost a year ago that I heard the knock on my door. It was the police, and they had a warrant, so I let them in. I had been trying to throw playing cards, one at a time, into a novelty-sized top hat. I felt inconvenienced but I tried not to let it show.

I made a good first impression, and as a result I was able to confirm "unofficially" that it had my neighbor Leonard who had tipped them off.

In the absence of any evidence for what I assume is an irrational hatred of me, I have made some up.

My fantasy reasoning is that he overheard me say something snarky about the honorable Reverend Feldwater, who had been caught buying meth from his

homosexual prostitute lover. I may have even said something about it to him directly; because the story was so unlikely it seemed like fiction. But as far as I can remember we've never spoken. By the time I realized there was a problem my memory of the party had already grown hazy.

I tend to say a lot of stupid things I don't believe about sixteen minutes into any party. Just to get a reaction. It's a bad habit and I'm working on it.

For all I know, he operated under the belief that we were locked in a battle of the ages, a steel cage match with our souls on the line. Maybe he was right. It wouldn't surprise me to see him take after the honorable Reverend that way. Ok cheap shot, I'm sorry. You can see how I get in trouble though.

His yard signs indicate that I he is the kind of man who is still pissed off that women abandoned the kitchen and forced him to learn how to dial for out for pizza.

If only he could realize that deep down we aren't really so different. This is only a conjecture, but I suspect that like me, he was only at the party for the free food.

The complaint that had inspired the police visit came from an "anonymous caller" who was concerned about a marijuana patch that had spread into his yard, whose roots began in mine.

As I explained at my court hearing, the plants were not mine. Quite honestly I didn't trust nor like my neighbors enough to flaunt the law so brazenly, and I suspected that the government already had me under surveillance in any case. Nor did I suspect my neighbor, even in a self-righteous fit, planted the evidence. Deep down he was an evil vindictive man, but on the surface he wanted his grandchildren to respect him so I doubted he would frame me. He was too convinced that I was as evil and all he had to do was catch me at it.

My best guess, I responded to the judge's questioning, was that some dimwitted teenagers had probably planted it there, after noting the state of my yard. The stoned youths had probably planted it hoping for the best, knowing that there was no worst-case scenario for them.

I felt that the judge and I were off to a good start. It was readily apparent that she respected my decision to defend myself, and disliked the prosecuting lawyer.

After years of committee meetings the lawmakers had finally renovated the justice system, raising the fees associated with hiring public defenders to reflect fair market value. Rich lawyers everywhere praised this as a victory for democracy and the power of the free market to make life better for everyone. This in turn caused budget, already under strain, to wave a white flag.

Bold leaders quickly called for committee hearings. These hearings resulted in recommendations for sweeping reforms that encouraged defendants to take their status as defendants seriously and defend themselves, saving taxpayers millions. Some lawyers went on strike while others sued. The upshot was, while they sorted it all out I scored some points with an impatient and overworked judge by not clamoring about unfair representation.

Negotiations took a sinister turn however when I was called upon to explain the whole organic apple found during the somewhat illegal search of my house. While not technically illegal, it whole fruit was considered highly suspect. Opposing council had experts from the applesauce council show their multimedia presentation on how, given the quality and relative cheapness of their products, whole apples were unlikely to be used for anything except smoking implements.

While I sympathized with the courts point of view that allowing people to have real apples did increase the chances of those apples being converted into makeshift smoking implements for use with marijuana, I really did think canned apples were disgusting.

Somewhere in this explanation my transition to the middle failed me. I beat the rap on the marijuana, but lost the subsequent lawsuit brought by the Food Manufactory Association. I was taken to debtor's court and met my diminutive but kindly parole officer Kathy. She had been nice enough to offer me a drink when she assigned my job at the tollbooth. Never mind that my old job had paid more, they needed the workers and it was this or jail time.

I was forced to sell my house and move into an apartment. I had finished paying off my debt to society a month ago, but at this point I didn't really have the heart to look for a new job.

Here's your change mam. Off to a good start, big smile, just a hint of irony. This driver looks like he knows that I hate my job and will like me more if I don't hide it too well. Yes, we have made a connection. Here comes a stern looking older woman, I need to appear industrious, not afraid of a little hard work. I represent everything that is right with the country, and wrong with her ungrateful children. Yes, we are friends as I hand her fifty cents change.

Time Of The Preacher

-Willie Nelson

The Beginning

I was in a fairly good mood the night it began. It was two hours past midnight and traffic had slowed down considerably. There were only two of us on duty at the tollbooth station. Our usual companion, the traffic-cop Karen was off duty, which meant drivers were free to speed out from the toll area with impunity. I sat alone in my box. The radio was extolling the virtues of a miracle cream, possibly a shampoo that would cause women to fight, in mud if necessary, for the chance to glimpse the beauty of whoever used this wondrous product. It could be me if I played my cards right.

I wondered if tollbooth workers in deserted areas were ever left alone at night. I felt shame at not knowing more about my colleagues. Did we have a union? Karen had no partner most of the time, and her job is more dangerous than mine.

Solo tollbooth workers didn't strike me as a good idea. Even with a security camera to watch over me, the idea of being left alone in a small booth with a pile of money was unappealing.

The commercial ended, and the radio host returned. He resumed his rant about sports fans that stopped rooting for their local team just because the team stopped winning. "Where's the loyalty!?" he railed into the night air.

I listened half-heartedly until a dour faced man pulled up slowly to the booth. I hesitated longer than was necessary, letting him know I was being extra-careful about counting his change, and he left satisfied, listening to local high school game that had run into overtime.

If we paid half as much attention to politicians as we do to sports then we might still have a couple more caribou hopping around. That was the kind of libelous thinking that had gotten me the job in the first place.

I had stolen that idea from somewhere, and was trying to remember where when I heard a small “click” come from the direction of my car.

The complex amalgamation of influences that caused me to investigate this noise rather than ignore are as irrelevant as they are unknowable. It is worth noting that in general I trust my instincts, and that it was almost time for my break. Maybe if I had still needed the job I would have stayed where I was, but I could afford to lose it now, and in some subtle ways I had already started making sure that it would go away on its own.

I signaled to the other on-duty toll-worker Jacob that I would be right back and headed over to my car, which was hidden in the darkness behind the main building.

The parking lot was well lit, but it was still an empty parking lot after midnight, so my hand was on the handle of the three-inch knife I shouldn't have been carrying when I fell unconscious for the first time.

I woke up to the sight of Jacob's large smashed nose and small blue eyes. He appeared to be concerned. He asked a few questions, and I told him everything I remembered, which was nothing. He clearly didn't believe me, but he could tell I was shook up, so we took turns making smart-ass remarks about what might have happened. None of them were funny, but we both understood that it's important to keep in practice. After making sure that I was going to live he hurried back to the booth that shouldn't have been left unattended, and I took my non-smoking smoke break.

I kept a few cigarettes on hand in the glove compartment of my car in case management ever checked up on me.

I had only a vague indication of how long I had been out for. Jacob is an obscenely good tollbooth worker, but he's not much for keeping track of time. He hadn't even noticed that I was gone for a while, and then he hadn't worried about me for even longer. There were no marks on me, and nothing hurt except my brain.

Before I met Jacob I had assumed that it was impossible to be a “great” tollbooth worker.

Inasmuch as possible, he was a genius at it.

He had only been working there for a few weeks, but he already had a technique down. Within his hand he held every combination of change that you could want or need. As he took your money in his right hand, the left did a flourish, and from between his large calloused fingers your change would appear as if by magic. Its impressiveness was negligible. The time it saved was minimal.

With any given customer it was easily forgotten. But the consistency with which he made the flourish seem new, the earnest grin on his face, and the fact that he always, always, *always* had the exact change the very second you handed him your money, no matter how much you gave him, or how busy we were, was truly remarkable. He was above and beyond the best tollbooth worker possible, and I suspected that he would have been the best at any job he took on.

Since he was a tollbooth worker, I was the only one who ever commented upon his ability. But in his own small way, he had raised the bar a little.

And in the process he often lost track of the time. This meant that I didn't have any idea how long I'd been out for, or why. My reactions are usually pretty good, and the lighting wasn't *that* poor. My wallet was still in my back pocket. My car was still there, unscathed. So what had happened?

I checked around inside my car. Then on a hunch, with a sick knot in my stomach, I opened my trunk.

Music redeems life. I have theories on music, things like how rhythm can be an expression of the natural vibrations of the universe. I have rants about music. Not just rants about the latest fad musicians either although I can do an hour on them as well. I have rants about the lack of music played by people at home, or in communities. About what we have lost when the only music we hear comes from professionals. I can complain for hours about the slow death of radio, about how *Frampton Comes Alive* marked the beginning of the end. About how listeners have become key demographics and how that impoverishes us all. I have a deep appreciation for music.

As a great man once said “It was only everything.” I consider it one of the few redeeming aspects of existence.

Music makes me happier than should be allowed.

This is relevant because my albums<sup>1</sup> had been taken from my trunk. They do not usually travel with me in my car, for just this reason. But the apartments in my building had been experiencing a rash of burglaries lately and I had panicked and started traveling with them. At work, my car is in a relatively well-lit area that usually has a few cops around, unlike my home.

The albums were gone. They were the heart of my music collection. It would never be the same. It was not just the monetary value. Some of them were rare and almost impossible to find. Every dollar spent reclaiming them, would be a dollar that could have expanded the collection. The time and effort spent trying to locate them that would not be spent basking in their magnificence. As the enormity of the loss dawned on me so did my conviction that I had to get them back.

How did a race of people so tragically flawed manage to produce such an overabundance of art that could produce such inordinately profound feelings? It really should be illegal.

The albums are gone? No. I couldn't accept it. But how could I avoid it? It had happened. I looked around, and saw no sign of the culprit. I was left with distracted energy and an intense anger, but nothing to focus it on. No release. I needed to sit down and collect my thoughts.

I sat down with my mind locked in horror and tried to rationalize the experience. My mind floated to my other most valued possessions. The ones back at home. A Vietnamese plant that had been on the verge of death for years, two carved wooden monkeys. I thought about my small plastic German troll doll carrying a load of wood on his back with a big grin that was sometimes frightening and sometimes insightful.

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<sup>1</sup> Technically CDV's - advanced record technology that only audiophiles invested in anymore. I continued to refer to them as albums to avoid thinking of them as the 1's and 0's they were.]

I closed my eyes and tried to focus. I've picked up a little formal meditation training from a few different traditions. Remnants of the brief phases when I've tried to engage with life to relieve the crushing ennui that crops up from time to time.

But for the most part I preformed the same basic parody of meditation I've been doing since I was thirteen years old. I crossed my legs, because that's what felt natural. Why? Probably because that's what they did on reruns of *Kung Fu*:

*The Legend Maintains*, so that's what seemed natural to me. I like to think feeling natural is more important than real training.

Something nagged at me. All of the energy from my anger flowed towards it, refocused into something useful. My memory came back in flashes. How much time had I lost? Something green flashed in the corner of my vision. I saw a blur coming around the corner. I saw my car the trunk was open. Why? I focused as best I could. When was this? Everything was fuzzy. Then or now? I saw a creature...

In my dream-like state I readily accepted that the creature was an alien. It could have been mutant, or a monster from some secret underground society. Its actions told me that it was either intelligent or controlled by something with intelligence. Beyond those brief observations I didn't waste time speculating. My anger had already been drained to make this possible, so I accepted this new reality calmly, and reacted appropriately. It was an alien in the truest sense of the word - It was from a world wholly unlike the one I interacted with.

We didn't even share enough in common to provide a point of reference for describing it. I spared a moment to ponder what I would say during the interviews I was sure to give.

But as important as that impending fame was, at the moment my albums were more important.

The creature in my minds eye was a deep shade of green that refused to stay put when I tried to focus on it. I didn't try. It moved on four legs, and stood about a foot off the ground, with long thick whisker-like hairs sprouting out at random from all over its body. Its general movements and shape resembled one of those enormous 300-hundred year old tortoises that turn up on the news from time to time. What seemed to be a head

reached out from one end of its elongated body. This “head” had no visible eyes and a mouth shaped hole and from which even more of those whiskers sprouted.

The case that held my albums lay on a flat spot on its back. Its back was oddly shaped, like poorly packed luggage or a plastic bag full of rocks.

In my memory, it turned around slowly, the hole opened and inside I saw no teeth, but more of those small hairs covered in mucus. Then the air began to shimmer and turn a light shade of blue-gray. I saw it run off towards the forest. Then I had collapsed.

My eyes snapped open, as if waking from a nightmare. The creature didn’t seem like it could move too fast. Fast for its size yes, fast for a turtle even, but it was still too short to build up any real speed. Its legs simply weren’t long enough. I began running towards the woods in the same direction I had seen it moving. The damn thing had my music.

I was scared, but not too scared. I didn’t know enough to be terrified. Did I make the decision without thought? I’m not sure.

Is that even possible? I think I had decided to chase it the instant I had first seen it. The only thing that had prevented me was my temporary memory loss and unconsciousness.

Some part of my brain may have been plotting its revenge on the whole time, waiting for the rest of me to catch up. I’ll have to ask it sometime.

These are justifications for what essentially was a stupid and ill-considered decision. But they are valid justifications. Besides, I was bored and a general dissatisfaction with life had set in, and this was an extreme situation. Being cautious in mundane situations, in bar fights or on standardized tests is one thing. It’s another to be cautious when the stakes are high and a foreign life form steals your music.

These are justifications for an ill-considered decision. And I stand behind them. I have to; it’s too late to go back now.

Jogging through the woods after a creature that had already easily bested me I tried to focus on the job at hand. If I could reclaim my albums I would get out of there as

quickly as possible. I would let the proper authorities handle the cleanup, if I even reported the incident.

I'd like to, after all it's not as if the aliens were blameless victims.

I also knew I would probably be called crazy, and would risk becoming the punch line on one of those late night talk radio shows that most people only listen to with a sense of ironic detachment.

Jogging through the woods after a creature that had already easily gotten the best of me, I had trouble staying focused. I suppose I did well enough though, because I spotted it before it reacted to me. I think. The albums were nowhere to be seen.

The timing was close, but I managed to get the jump on it, which is exactly what I tried to do.

Unfortunately, even though it resembled a bug in many respects, it had more in common with a turtle than I had previously suspected. Its back was solid. When I landed on it, it did not even hesitate, it just kept moving until I fell off. I landed on my back. Looking down between my legs I watched as it turned around like a bull and came back at me. It's mouth was open and I held my breathe, in an attempt to ward off the noxious gases that may have foiled me before.

A long tentacle looking appendage shot out from nowhere, wrapped itself around my neck, and began to choke me. Basic survival instincts took over and I gasped for air. The world began to swirl and I took a swipe at the tentacle with my knife. I must have scored a hit, and the creature began making a squealing noise that didn't seem natural.

But what is natural anyways? Besides, by then it was too late. I had already opened my mouth, breathing in the air. Now I'd have to suffer the consequences.

## Lawyers Guns and Money

-Warren Zevon

This time I woke up more slowly, almost against my will. I was unable to move at first. All I could do was lie in the darkness and wonder how it had come to this.

Eventually I became more aware of the world around me. The fog lifted to the sounds of people arguing in Spanish. I don't speak Spanish, but was nonetheless comforting to hear a language that I could identify. One of the disadvantages of the downtime was that I had woken up afraid that all I would be able to hear would be the clicking sounds of creatures with no tongues and hairy mouths. I turned my head to the right, and cautiously opened my left eye.

A pale young woman with store-bought black hair stood over an old man who sat crossed legged. Her words were incomprehensible to me and her face was beginning to flush. I felt sympathy for her. I also noted that there were other people in the room, but they all kept their distance. The man sitting on my left said, "Hello, my name is Carl" and smiled, as he did so, his whole face lit up.

It was tough to judge from my position on the floor but he appeared to be extremely tall, probably over six feet. He had black hair dark eyes and dark skin. He was clean-shaven and wearing a nice striped suit. He gave off the antiseptic, friendly aura of a doctor. His grin was friendly and he wasn't currently stealing my albums.

It was about this time I noticed that I couldn't move much below my neck. I concentrated hard and bent my left pointer finger slightly and with difficulty. That scared me.

Carl, who had been talking in a quiet rhythmic tone throughout this discovery process continued, "... that unless you are the exception to the rule, you probably can't move too much of your body yet. Nor can you speak coherently. Please don't get mad at me. I did not do this to you.

“The creatures we are assuming you encountered did this. Allow me to repeat, so far as we know there are no long-term side effects, and you should be fine in an hour or so. Now if you don’t mind, could you attempt to nod at this point, if indeed, you came here after some sort of a meeting with rather large bug-like green four legged creatures?”

I wanted to comment that insects were so numerous and various that it was unhelpful to describe anything as bug-like.

Instead I nodded, appreciating a chance to participate in this monologue that hinted at holding some answers about what the hell was going on. In the background I could hear that the Spanish duel had calmed down.

Carl gave me the same amiable smile and continued. “I am now going to use this time while you are unable to speak to fill you in on what we have been able to determine so far.”

Advertisers would pay kill for a product that gave them this level of unfettered access to people’s consciousness.

“I have in this room the longest. About sixty hours. There has been no pattern to how often new people are brought in, but there has not been more than one new person brought in within a single hour. That’s just an average, and we have not been able to figure out any real pattern. The creatures that carry the people appear to be different individuals of the same species and do not interact with each other or us.

“We are now in holding room of some sort. The only evidence we have of this is that we do not seem to be able to leave, or even locate an exit. We were all brought here after having a similar experience. After chasing a creature that had stolen something valuable to us.

“We have not been able to detect any pattern in the items stolen except that they were all of value to the person they were taken from. We do not know if they only stole valuable items or if only people who had valuable items stolen followed the creatures and thus were taken captive. As you have probably now noticed, we have done a lot of thinking, and talking about our situation.”

His voice had a nice rhythmic lilt to it that I enjoyed.

I found that I could move my body with a bit more ease, and attempted a nod. For the first time I noticed he was reading off notecards. Inwardly I smiled, and tried to push the insanity of the situation out of my head for the moment, and absorb the information as it was presented.

“... in conclusion we cannot leave this room for now. Thanks to Dr. Wallace we have food, and almost any material that she can figure out the elements for, although I actually had these note cards with me when I was taken. There structure is too complex for her as yet, but we do have food and water.”

Man I wish I had been paying attention. I had probably missed something important. Who was Dr. Wallace? Why couldn't I think and pay attention at the same time? That's odd...no time to think, must listen...

Carl was leaning in close as if telling me a secret “... after we finished figuring out everything we could about the creatures and our situation, then people started to fight. That spat you heard between Roselyn and Ernesto is just the latest in a series. I'm pretty sure that we all know that its getting to be a bit irrational, but this many personalities in such an enclosed space under stress...” he shrugged “I suppose it's inevitable.”

I guess I blacked out again around then.

My first thought as I fought my way through the haze of unconsciousness was that for now on I was determined to stay conscious.

Not knowing why I was blacking out didn't help, but going unconscious without being in control is disorienting no matter what the cause. Combine that with the known reason for the blackouts - namely “creatures” of undetermined everything. They had done something to me, and now I was trapped in some mysterious prison cell with people I didn't know, blacking out periodically. That couldn't be healthy.

I consider myself pretty good at dealing with new situations. For instance I was able to assimilate the fact that an alien had stolen my music pretty quickly. Part of that skill lies in well timed denial. What the creature was wasn't as important then as what it was doing. The first time I had awoken slowly and it had helped me get oriented. Now, fear was beginning to set in. This was all beyond strange. I needed to control my body.

This time, there was nobody near me when I woke up. I had been moved, and propped up in one corner of a room that was probably about 900 square feet. I was quite satisfied with myself for being able to use an actual number in this estimation. Usually I had to make one up, or think in terms of “large” and “small”. But the room was about the size of my apartment which Roy, a used cars salesman turned landlord, had described me to me with pride as being about 900 square feet.

There were seven people in the cell with me. It was a cell, not a “room” or “holding area” no matter how Carl liked to refer to it. Until I found an exit, it was a prison cell. Closest to me in the cell was a plump woman who looked to be in her mid forty’s wearing a white lab coat. She was fiddling with what appeared to be a smooth indentation in the wall. It was some small number of feet around.

Let’s call it three.

The indentation drew my attention to the wall itself, which was more interesting than the people, none of who appeared to be attacking me. Some small part of my brain tried to make a quick case for paying attention to the people, but I’ve never been very social despite all the research done with chimpanzees, and that impulse was squashed by a larger, more impatient, ogre-like part of my brain.

The cell walls were made out of a disconcerting silvery-brown tinged metal. The impatient part of my brain begin to regret its decision to focus on the walls, but the smaller, more annoying, more simian part of my brain goaded it on, daring it to continue. Being the ogre-like brain it was, it was easily tricked. Turning my head to examine the part of the wall nearest to me caused me to put my ear right against the wall.

I immediately regretted it. From the wall into my ear came a low, almost imperceptible groan.

If I thought about it, then I couldn’t hear anything. It was only when I stopped listening that I heard the noise that didn’t exist. But the distinct feeling of having possibly heard a noise stayed with me. Examining the wall more closely I began to worry that it did not seem quite stable, almost as if it was shifting in on itself, but I wasn’t sure what that meant.

Before I had time to consider the matter any longer, the woman who had been looking at the indentation in the wall turned to me. She had light brown hair tied back in a grandmotherly bun, round features and hard brown eyes. Even when she was looking right at me she seemed distant, as if she was lost in thoughts too obtuse for mortals to consider.

“You should excuse Carl. He was going to notify you that you were going pass out again, but I did the calculations for how long you would be awake based on his body mass. Do not worry. There is no reason to believe that you will pass out a third time. I am still not sure why the substance reacts with the human metabolism as it does. But everyone passed out a second time, and nobody has done so a third time. So far as I know there is no cause for alarm.” She said, not quite paying attention to her own words.

I wasn't sure if I should feel proud that I understood which substance she was referring to, or annoyed that I had to think about it first. It was whatever chemical the aliens spewed out right? I knew I should ask something, but I couldn't think of anything to ask. It was all just too bizarre.

“Could I at least get your name?” I asked as she turned back to the indentation in the wall.

“Julie Wallace. Sorry if I seem rude but I am on the verge of a breakthrough here.” With a quick smile she turned back to her work. Since her work did not seem to be aimed at breaking through the wall itself, so I assumed she meant something more abstract than I wanted to deal with.

Trying not to look too closely at the wall I got up. I wanted something to investigate besides the wall only yielded a vague feeling of wrongness. The situation had activated my flight/flee/learn impulse. But the only option I saw was option D: None of the above.

Almost everyone else appeared to be sleeping on the floor, using various articles of clothing as pillows. It didn't look that comfortable, but I considered joining them anyways.

No, I couldn't. I was still too superstitious after having lost consciousness three times. Some people, Ultimate Fighting champion's maybe, may not mind being knocked out so often but I certainly did.

I considered my options. There was no way around Carl's assessment of the situation, and no exits in sight.

The walls were glowing I realized, and it was darker now than before. Was the cell trying to replicate nighttime? Where the heck were we anyways? My shift would have ended by now.

I walked over quietly and inspected the wall with the indentation. It was groaning noticeably more than the other walls. I still had to put my ear against it, but this time I was sure that I heard something.

I sat down. So here I was, captured by aliens. The only person awake was a cheery woman who I could only hope was skilled at something relating to the indentation and wasn't simply insane. Down that line of inquiry lay madness.

No help for it. Everyone else was asleep, and every time I tried to investigate my situation the walls made me want to lose my nonexistent lunch. I was hungry, but didn't want to bother Julie again. I tried to think of a way to make a snide joke relating this whole situation back to my old job. Something about being trapped and hungry, unable to leave a box, but it was too much of a reach.

Was it possible that things had changed so drastically that I could no longer relate current experiences back to my past? I would have to start from scratch on every joke.

I don't know how long I sat there feeling sorry for myself. It felt like hours and I was glad that I didn't have a watch to prove me wrong. Eventually Carl woke up and came over and said "hi". I chatted with him a bit and learned that the old man's name was Ernesto and he claimed he was here because they had stole his TV remote. The young woman he was arguing with was Roselyn, and Carl didn't trust her. The guy in the other corner was named Chester and he was here because someone stole his cross. Julie used to work for the government.

Nobody else understood what she was doing with the hole in the wall; she claimed it was some sort of machine. After the first day she had produced a nasty brown sludge that she claimed was edible. Carl had tried it, and nobody was starving.

At first only Julie had been the only one able to produce food. Finally, annoyed at being pestered about it all the time, she had taught Carl. The consensus from the rest of the group was that she should work on weapons next. With pillows coming in a close second, but she didn't seem moved by their votes.

When she had arrived the old man was already here, and by the time the next person came, they had figured out almost everything that had been in the welcome speech Carl had given me.

After some more gossip I finally calmed enough to attempt sleep. Carl was, as I suspected was usually the case, sympathetic and tactful about it. He even offered me his jacket as a pillow.

I woke up three times to the sound of people sneaking around politely out of respect for those of us who were trying to sleep. The room was small and my instincts had already been overloaded by the events of the previous day. I slept fitfully, waking up at smallest noise, secure in the knowledge that my companions weren't going to get anymore honorable while I tossed and turned on the surprisingly soft ground. Besides most of them were awake by now. Watching each other should help keep the crime rate down.

The fourth time I woke up and felt a hand sliding into my pocket. I cracked open my left eye to see the girl who had been arguing with the old man earlier. What had Carl said her name was? Rose? Studying her closely I realized that she was probably still in her late teen's. She had deep green eyes that shone with an attentiveness that didn't quite fit with the rest of her face. Her black hair had purple tips, and the remnants of dark makeup still clung to her skin. She was dressed in black jeans and an equally black t-shirt that had the faint outline of a bloody skull. Everything except the alert look in her eyes told the story of a middle class white girl trying piss off her parents.

Her lack of a scent caused me to wonder briefly why the place didn't smell bad sense nobody here could have taken a bath lately. Then I realized that I couldn't smell much of anything at all that was more than a foot or two away.

I hated this room.

"I really wish you wouldn't do that." I said with a smile as she replaced the wallet.

Most of my attention was focused on those strange eyes of her while my left hand inched towards the knife in my pocket. It was disconcerting that the creatures had let me keep the knife.

Some people will swear that if you want to know what a person will do next, you should watch their eyes. Others claim that the best give-away is a person's body language, often the shoulders. In the rare situations I need to, I try to vary it up just to be safe. In this case it didn't matter much. She just stared at me for a few moments, glaring with the hatred that only teenagers have energy for.

Then in a low voice full of disgust she said "God! What a fucking arrogant jerk. I'm sick of all you people all showing off for each other. We are all human here. Stuck in a messed-up situation and you can't pass one single up the opportunity to show off. Fine you caught me. You're *VERY* cool. But then you wait until I go to put it back and use the opportunity to spout some cute little line. This isn't a comic book for Christ's sake."

Then she cursed a little bit more and wandered off, although she didn't go too far. There was no place else to go. Everybody else suddenly looked busy. A room this small was going to take some getting used to.

I went back to sleep.

## Interlude

*I knew from the beginning that it was a dream. True, even at the time it seemed strangely significant, but many of my dreams seem strangely significant. I knew it was a dream because although the world around me was terrifying, I was never afraid.*

*I decided to take everything at face value. Something inside me warned that its job was to protest these sorts of decisions. It also complained that it was being suppressed without due process.*

*This dream took place in a murky, shadowy world. There was fog everywhere, and in the distance ruined castles dotted the landscape. Large winged creatures flittered across the moonlit sky.*

*“All the worlds pain must be hidden in a joke or amusing story. Otherwise nobody will care. And you know it.”*

*These were the first words she said to me.*

*She sat on a tattered dark throne made that jutted out like a natural outgrowth of the mountain. The dark rock contrasted nicely with her porcelain skin. She wore a black and gray dress that gave off the impression of having been very elegant at some point. But now it was decidedly out of fashion. Unless the random rips, holes, and dry blood splatter are back in style.*

*She wasn't much larger than me, but she exuded the presence of someone much taller, thinner, and more elegant than she actually was. Her long black hair hung down loosely, framing her face perfectly. Her hair band was golden; the rest of her jewelry was plain unadorned silver, shaped into hard, sharp points.*

*The throne was in the exact center of landing I stood on. Like the throne she sat on the plateau jutted awkwardly out from the side of the mountain, near the top. Also like the throne she sat on, the only plausible explanation for such a usual feature on a mountain was to give us someplace to be.*

*It was cold.*

*“What are you thinking about?” she asked in a light hypnotic voice that made me forget about the post-apocalyptic nightmare surrounding us.*

*"What am I thinking about?" The question I always want to be asked, particularly if it can be made to sound sincere.*

*I was surprised at the honesty of my own reply. There was something very odd about this world.*

*"Star-Trek: The Nextest Generation." I said.*

*Amusement and a touch of shock registered on her face, then it disappeared back into her neutral near-smile once more.*

*"You are trapped on a space-ship full of people from all over the world, captured by aliens that you didn't know existed yesterday, and your thinking about a TV show that barely makes it onto reruns?" she asked.*

*I spoke as if compelled to speak. The words were mine, but the choice to speak them was not.*

*"The show featured a futuristic captain of a starship. The Enterprise. Who in addition to exploring new civilizations, most of which were comfortingly human-like, also conveniently had the personal quirk of being a student of historical events that the viewers of the TV show would be familiar with.*

*"Did you know that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America, about 4 million suffered from the utterly humiliating disease of Alzheimer's.*

*"Even then, various forms of cancer, in which the very cells themselves attacked the body, often causing long lingering painful deaths, accounted for almost a quarter of all deaths in that same country.*

*"Also included in this snapshot of statistics I can include the 150,000 known dead from the tsunami at the end of 2004. They died I suppose just to show that Mother Nature still had it. Star Trek is a snapshot of this. Like Captain Jean-Luc, I know my history.*

*"Great minds, brilliant minds, have dedicated their lives to the task of confronting helpless death and suffering. Geniuses have contemplated and sung about people who suffer from 'preventable' problems, and those who never had a chance. These geniuses have given there all to try to explain the horror of its true impact. The reality of the evil and thoughtlessness in the world. Anything I can do is but a drop in the bucket.*

*"But I contemplate Star Trek, because of its symbolic value. Thinking of the horrors occurring when it was still on air gives me enough distance that my mind does not recoil*

entirely. It forces me to wonder things I wouldn't dare confront, things that nobody can truly attack directly and remain sane.

"For instance, maybe all this space travel I'm doing is giving me cancer" As I finished this something within me stirred. Concerned I suppose by the long monologue that I hadn't meant to give. But it didn't get very far.

"You like symbols don't you?" She asked.

"They help me hide from the truth." I responded truthfully. "Want another? Heard of know the one about Gioacchino Rossini? Arguably more famous in his lifetime than Beethoven, he died thinking his place in history was assured. Now he's mostly known for being the contemporary of Beethoven who nobody cares about anymore."

"I could mention that oftentimes I have a strong preference for read books by authors who have at least three books out, because I can't be bothered with getting to know a genius and then having him die off, or not get his book deal renewed.

"The secret to eternal prosperity could be contained in a half-completed work by some young prodigy, from the 1800's. Through some miracle of the publishing world it might have been preserved and published anyway. It may have made it onto best-of lists. I am one of the privileged few who can read, and loves to read. But I won't read it for reasons that sound hollow even to me.

"Sounds like you've identified your problem then" she said with a smile.

This space had turned me into a broken record. Pouring out my soul into this darkness. I wanted to stop.

"Ok then, heard the one about the one with Warren Zevon, the musician who gave his albums titles like Life'll Kill Ya. He made a nice little career out of his fear of death. But no matter how much he talked about it beforehand, as I'm doing now, it didn't ward off the cancer.

"Or how about Hunter S Thompson, who convinced the world that true happiness lay just around the next drug?"

"I sick of hearing about famous people," she said. No smile. I had gone from interesting to annoying. Just like when I tried this trick at parties.

*"Hear the one about George Washington? He was by all reports, a complex intelligent man. Born at the right time in history to help change the world and get noticed for doing so. Now his legacy is reduced to cherry-tree jokes."*

*Shock, real shock registered on her face for a moment when she heard the name George Washington, but then her sad smile returned and she said, "Well have you heard the one about the man who sailed with Christopher Columbus?"*

*"No"*

*"Neither have I" she said.*

*"Enough stories. Fame is fleeting." She said, "As you yourself said, greater men than you have commented about the fragility of life. Tell me about you instead. Why do you fear death so much?"*

## How Do You Sleep?

-John Lennon

I was getting sick of waking up. Not that I wasn't grateful to be alive, but it had I preferred it when it had involved a bed. As soft as the floor was, ultimately its softness was more disconcerting than comfortable. Various parts on my body ached, which was to be expected. I felt slightly sick, and discombobulated. I also felt intolerably lonely. Nothing changes new under the brown tinged light of my cell.

For a variety of reasons, mostly because I enjoy it, I have often found myself wandering alone in the woods. Once as I walked down a mountainside I picked up a walking stick. It had an end that split off into a two prongs. After I had wandered for a while I began to pick up small dead twigs off the ground with my stick and hurl them up into the air and then hit them with my stick. After doing this for a while, I became careless and a particularly large branch got away from me, instead of going straight up and away from me, it came hurling towards my head. At the last second my self-preservation kicked in and I knocked the branch away with my stick.

A disaster of my own making, averted by my own skill, leaving me just as I had been before.

I repeated this lesson on more than one occasion. But there was only one time that was the first time I understood it as a deep and meaningful metaphor.

I stood up intending to find some food and a wave of illness came over me. Something was wrong. I had heard something from Carl about there being food, but Carl was still asleep, as was Julie. I made a mental note to ask her what she called the indentation when she woke up. I couldn't go around thinking about it as "the indention" forever. Almost nobody else was asleep. Nor was anyone doing anything that struck the casual observer, me, as important, so I had my choice of who to go to for help.

I needed an ally. I looked around, carefully avoiding eye contact with Rose, who was walking towards the Ernesto. I could worry about her once I got oriented again. I was not feeling well. My head still hurt and something in the pit of my stomach whined. The old man intrigued me, but he was already involved in another epic Good vs. Evil battle Royale with Rose.

Then I noticed a woman at the indentation, doing something. She had shoulder length bright red hair that she wore in a single braid. She wore all black, but unlike Rose's outfit it seemed designed for functionality rather than effect. Comfortable sweats with a hood and a belt that held various pouches, knives, and a pair of gloves. The only hints of color on her were some small jade earrings and her freckles. More than anything else what caught my attention was the confidence with which she stood there.

Disoriented for no reason I made my way over to the indentation.

"So what do you call this thing?" I asked, instantly regretting it, remembering too late Rose's lesson about snappy lines.

"The groove." she replied with a bemused smirk.

Her name was Corrina, and she showed me how to get "food" out of the indentation. Which apparently was some sort of machine. She had interrogated Julie about it, but the explanation had been incomprehensible. I accepted this, but privately doubted that she was truly as ignorant of its workings as she pretended. Nonetheless I resolved to try and figure it out myself so I could impress my new friend.

In any case, getting "food" out of it was fairly easy. It only required hitting a single point on the indentation on the upper right, which was apparently set up to provide food.

What is food? If you're practical about it then food is little more than what you need to survive. Essential vitamins and nutrients, a tasteless pill that takes care of that annoying human addiction known as hunger.

If you're a romantic, then food is smells and feelings and tastes. I know people who spend hours in the kitchen, just feeling their way through meal. It can be an art. I resolved that if I ever got out of here I would invite her a pizza parlor some friends of mine run. The pizza there is so good it actually counts as real food.

This was a brown globular substance that looked like a three year olds interpretation of mashed potatoes, constructed out of mud. Not easy swallow like a pill, nor was appetizing like my specialty - French toast. I was assured that Julie had assured everyone that it was safe. Julie seemed to be the only one who claimed to know anything so I was forced to take her at her word or be resigned to eternal disbelief.

Like a man trapped in an odd room with a bunch of strangers after being captured by strange aliens who had stolen his albums, I was desperate for guidance. I was trying to retain my natural skepticism. For instance there was a shady man who I had seen talking with Corrina earlier who I didn't trust.

Up close I could see that her earrings were actually shaped into elegant golden hoops, with small green stones hanging in the middle.

So I ate the goop. What taste it had resembled an old sock soaked in carrot juice. I made nervous conversation with Corrina about nothing in particular, fighting my tendency to babble incoherently. Despite her relatively comforting presence I remained disoriented and melancholy.

For her part Corrina struck just the right tone. Not so concerned about our situation that it further agitated my worries, but not so relaxed that it made me suspect she was inhuman.

I had just noticed that I hadn't heard any tense words in Spanish for quite some time when the Ernesto cleared his throat loudly from the other side of the room.

"So, I think it's only fair to let you all know that we are probably in space. At the very least we are quickly moving away from the surface of Earth. We aren't simply underground, nor are we making the transition to a different version of Earth. And no I won't tell you how I know this. No I won't answer any questions, and if you ask me for any details other than that I'll deny having ever said anything.

"Take it as fact or not. I am entirely convinced of it." His gruff voice seemed ill suited to public speaking.

Immediately half of the room rushed over to him and started talking at once. To which I heard him mumble "I've no idea what you're talking about".

The doctor science lady, whose name I couldn't remember, returned to her fiddling with the indentation, forcing Corrina and I to move.

"I've no idea if he's telling the truth or not, but either way I admire his instance that he knows nothing" I commented to Corrina.

"Yeah, I guess. I'll admire him if he manages not to take a swing at any of them." she replied indicating the people swarming around Ernesto.

"That's what you get for trying to help I suppose" I said, and wondered if it was announcements like that which caused him to fight with Rose so much. To be honest, I wanted to rush up and ask him questions too, but I was playing it cool. "So, I've got a delicate question to ask. What magical solution has the science lady come up with for bathrooms?"

The things you wish you didn't know about being captured by space aliens.

Upon my grand re-entrance, I found Corrina talking with the shady guy I had seen her talking to earlier. I didn't want to interrupt, so went over to Dr. Wallace. "So the floors are weird huh?" I said, causing her to look up from the indentation.

"Yeah, they are." She said without looking up. "No we cannot use them to escape. As near as I can figure they are made from the same semi-organic substance that this whole room is made out of. It detects waste matter, odors, and all sorts of stuff. Near as I can figure it's also where our oxygen comes from."

She went on to talk more about the science of the room. I got the impression that she just wanted to say it all out loud to get it straight in her head. At least that's what I hoped, because most of it made no sense to me. I had always suspected that a basic understanding of quantum physics might come in handy, but this was beyond what you can pick up in your spare time and besides she wasn't really giving a lesson. I tried my best, remembering my vow to impress Corrina.

I had trouble focusing though. Maybe it was because I was getting sick. I was able pick up the general impression that the indentation had numerous pre-set settings,

presumably programmed in by the aliens for our benefit. Their science was far ahead of ours in most ways, but not in every way. Her reason for this suspicion had to do with lots of long numbers.

If you push hard enough, the basic particles of matter are really all the same, although the alien's technology seemed to be more organically based than ours, which meant that they may not understand metals as well as she did. Some things may be blocked to us. Or she may not have found the right spots to press yet. A lot of it was still in the trial and error phase. That plus a lot of numbers and long words was apparently what she had been working on. Trying to find a common language to program in new things for the machine to create.

I also learned that it could, under certain circumstances, it could create almost anything. In theory. I think. Maybe.

I spent the next few days wandering around aimlessly. I spoke to everyone, but nobody knew what was going on, or seemed to want to chat. I talked to Corrina. Yup, I still liked her. She tolerated me, and was that a hint of affection? The more time I spent around her the more she intrigued me. She was always kind and open but I never got beyond the surface, and none of our conversations lasted very long.

As kind and open as she seemed, there was a deeper person there, one who I wanted to impress. That prospect held its own annoyances as well. Feeling trapped by my own need to impress someone wasn't something I'd felt in a long time, but I knew it could be problematic. As frustrating as it was, it also had the added benefit of providing a distraction from the insanity of the situation.

I began to grow sick of my own thoughts. No action. Nothing was happening at all. There are only so many thoughts you can have, and I was getting sick of mine.

My cellmates and I began to develop the camaraderie of prisoners. Admittedly there were some minor differences in our circumstances, but the principle of inaction remained the same. I had the urge to start bodybuilding just to kill time. There were eyes on me all of the time. Or at least the potential for eyes, so every moment felt as if it

had to contain something. Even sitting and thinking was something I had to **do**. I couldn't just let it happen. I was aware of my every move. I had to make things happen, move with purpose from one action to the next.

Having never been in prison I'm not really sure how much this resembles what prisoners actually feel like. Maybe real prisoners are more talkative. More likely than not I am being unforgivably presumptuous to claim any affinity for their suffering, but these were my thoughts.

Also, it was boring. There wasn't much to do. I could for instance go over and talk to that guy who I didn't trust. The one who was always talking with Corrina. He was probably a nice enough guy.

See, everyone's always doing something; he's not just sitting in a corner. He's walking towards Ernesto. What does that mean? How should I interpret this simple action? I started to look away, disgusted at myself for contributing to making him feel like he was under a microscope.

As I watched, he came up behind Ernesto and grabbed onto him with a maneuver that probably shouldn't have worked. They tumbled onto what passed for the ground with Ernesto in a headlock.

"Ok buster, tell me how you know we are in outer space" growled the young man unconvincingly. I didn't take him to be a real threat, everything about him spoke of a schoolyard bully who had gotten his way for far too long. Although, I reflected, in some ways that only made him more dangerous. With an expert marksman you don't have to worry as much about collateral damage. Then again, if they want to kill innocents, they are likely to succeed. Everything is a tradeoff.

"First of all I have no idea what you're talking about," said Ernesto. "Second, it's too late now you idiot. You really shouldn't have startled me like that. Now if everyone could please move against this back wall here..." said Ernesto in a loud voice, indicating the wall with the indentation.

I decided to play hero and made a move towards the scene. I came in from his right trying to stay out of his line of sight. As I was walking I felt a brush of air against my back, I ducked and looked behind me. My instincts screamed at me. Neither they, nor

my eyes, were polite enough to tell me what they were whining about but I heard a loud scream from the walls. Everyone froze.

A few tense moments later, both Rose and the suspicious man screamed and collapsed. Rose went down a few seconds before the man. They both had screamed in pain, but judging by their screams they had been subtly different. The man had been taken by surprise, while Rose's was a conscious pain, a wail that came out of someone who had known it was coming.

The air returned to normal. I shot a glance at Corrina and noted that she was near the two struggling figures, about where suspicious man's line of sight would have failed him on his left side. Selfishly I hoped she had noticed my move towards them as well.

Now, lying face down, the attacker did not appear to have any line of sight at all. This was taken advantage of by Ernesto who stood up and glanced at the far wall for a moment before rushing over to Rose.

He whispered something in her ear that I missed, and she nodded. She didn't look very happy, but she was awake. I looked at Ernesto with renewed interest. He was about six feet tall and wore a dark blue bathrobe of indeterminate material. Underneath sported some gray sweat pants and a black t-shirt that read "TAKE THIS JOB AND SHOVE IT" in block white letters. He didn't look any older than 60 and I'm not sure why I thought of him as the old man, except that he was balding and had a stringy unkempt beard.

Physically he was thin but seemed to be in pretty good shape even with his hunch. He was already up and moving, whereas I have trouble getting up from the floor after playing with my cat. In his Spanish fights with Rose I couldn't get much of a feel for what he was saying, but he said it forcefully and I responded like a horse drawn to its master by the tone of his voice. I was drawn to his steady presence and decided to follow his lead in all things.

"Is everyone ok? Does anybody have something better to tie him up with than my shirt?" I asked, hunching over the unconscious man in case he woke up.

"I'm fine. Roselyn will be all right. There is no need to tie him up. Everything will be ok." Said Ernest. I looked at him, but his mind was elsewhere.

A gurgling swamp-like noise *burst* out from the wall across from the indentation. The wall held still a moment and then it began to ooze and melt. I caught a glimpse of the old man, who seemed surprised. Having decided to use him as my guide in this insane world, I in turn became really worried.

Like a high school science project gone awry, the goo oozed everywhere and looked neat but didn't do much. The world outside the cell looked a lot like the world inside the cell, only smaller. People were hunched over, cheering, and running down what I tenuously labeled a hallway. There was no further indication of what had caused the wall to melt.

I tried to suppress the reminder that I didn't have any idea what was going on, and headed for the new exit. I looked out and just saw a hallway full of people.

"Unless anyone's got a plan I'm think I'm going to see what's going on outside." I said, trying for Rose's sake not to sound too confidant, and for my own to sound as confidant as possible.

It worked. The hallway may have been long and dark, but I knew that up ahead somewhere there was a light. I jogged down the hallway, not having to hunch over too much, avoiding the temptation to duck into one of the side-passages. Best to follow the pack and find out if they knew something I didn't. I wanted to maintain my reputation as a guy in the know. There would be time to feign ignorance later.

After about fifty feet the metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel became a reality, and I came out into a gigantic room that reached up like a giant beehive. It appeared to be constructed out of the same odd material as my cell. Like Rome all roads seemed to point here, so I made a mental note of which hallway I came from, as there were people streaming in from half a dozen openings. People where coming

everywhere, for just milling about for the most part. I slowed to a walk, and noticed the dead body of one of the alien creatures.

A few distant screams made me realize that perhaps the battle for our freedom had not yet been secured. A point driven home by some not so distant screams off to my right. I looked over just in time to see three of the creatures rush out, spewing a dark green liquid. The liquid shot up into the air, held there for a moment before solidifying into small pellets. I ducked down into a tight ball and rolled away. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the gunk shoot forward faster than seemed possible given my sketchy understanding of physics.

People all around me were hit, and the pellets expanded into webbing that held them down. It was us against them. Allied with people who I wasn't sure I liked against a common enemy that I wasn't sure was really all that bad. It was high school all over again. I took a moment to wish that I had a longer weapon before pulling out my knife once again, and I leapt onto the back of one of them, stabbing downward. I held my breath, hoping to keep it from using its knockout gas. Although these green pellets seemed to be a different weapon than the fog from before. I stabbed down at its back, and the knife slid harmlessly off to the side. My second attempt at its side was more successful. The knife went in deep, along with my hand. I ripped my hand out. It was covered in green gunk. The thing underneath me shook noiselessly.

Surprising myself I stuck my hand back in and found the knife. I was just grabbing hold of it when the creature started to buck. I flew into the air with my hand still inside of it causing me to fly into the air like I was riding a mechanical bull from hell. Not enjoying pain, I pulled hard on my knife and I was free to fly even higher into the air.

I landed on the ground hard, facedown. I took a moment to collect my thoughts, breathed in a couple of times, and rolled. "Stampede!" I thought as a different creature stepped on my leg. Hard. I felt a welt beginning to form. I caught a glimpse of the first one sputtering more green stuff, this time out of its side. It didn't really remind me of blood, it was much more solid than that. Nonetheless it looked like it was in some equivalent of pain.

If they were allowed to take this room all would be lost. There were plenty of people at this entryway, but aliens were streaming in from unguarded gaps across room. I took in the situation, and noticed newcomers piling in behind me, apparently most of the cells had I clustered together.

“You! Follow me!” I screamed at the largest bunch of humans I could find as I ran towards the largest group of aliens I could find. Not very elegant, but it worked. Some of smarter newcomers began to react, and the rest soon followed suit.

They tell me that I fought long and well for a while after that, but I don't remember much of it. I still don't think that air born memory wiping poison is fair.

## Interlude Two

*"Something about control maybe?" I said. This had been going on for some time now. I did not yet feel weary. The strange woman on her throne was not tired either.*

*"I could spend all my time eating well. Pray once an hour, every hour, to all the right Gods. Exercise, drink water and take all the vitamins on the market. And it means nothing. Or not enough.*

*"Perhaps the eggs I ate helped prevent one kind of cancer, but caused another. Some of the cells in my body might just decide they don't like some of the other cells."*

*I paused for a moment. She sat there looking incredibly interested, perched on her throne in this strange world. She stared gave me the look you give your companion on the third date when your new crush on starts talking about their collection of autographed snow globes. With the passion of a collector, I continued.*

*"Then I get some disease, and I don't die at first. I suffer. Depending what I have, I could suffer tremendously. I could reach that point of suffering where suffering doesn't mean anything anymore. I could push human pain to its limit. If I'm lucky I'll be able to channel this pain into procedures that give me a chance of surviving. I might be resolved to "beat this thing". Or I might give up hope.*

*"Then it's on to round two, same as round one. I can eat all the right things, sacrifice everything, and maintain hope to the bitter end. And die. Or I can give up immediately and miraculously recover.*

*"That's life- I have just enough control to keep me interested, but not enough for it to really matter. And I know I will fight. I will fight to the end. But I also know it won't really matter in the sense I want it to." I said all of this in the same monotone voice. I was talking, choosing the words, but some essential part of my will was missing.*

*Again I noted this, and again I ignored it, but wondered for the first time why I kept noticing it if I was only going to ignore it.*

*"So it is death that you fear most of all then? Or the lack of control over your own fate?" she asked, barely audible.*

*"Most of all?" I responded, "That question is meaningless. I simply fear things. I do not rate them after.*

*"I fear old age creeping up on me. Not thinking or reacting as quickly. Of playing one last game of chess at my peak, then my brain can't quite keep up. Knowing that it's not all gone yet, I have some more good games left in me, but I'll never be that good again.*

*"I may gain more wisdom, in fact I hope to, but I lose something as well. Eventually if I grow old and senile enough, I'll begin to even forget to worry about what I'm losing. Or will I? Will I cry myself to sleep each night, knowing that my brain, my very essence of myself is giving out on me? Will I cry and not be sure why I'm crying?*

*"I'm not sure. I hope to be aware enough to mourn my losses and celebrate my gains, but maybe I won't be. Maybe I will be and I'll wish I didn't.*

*"There is no most of all. I am not simply plagued by a slow inevitable end. Death, cancer, old age, Star Trek, they are symbols, archetypes of fear.*

*"Tomorrow an alien, or the General could kill me. Or wound me; destroy my hearing so I cannot experience the music that helps me transcend life. I could make it back to earth, only to get hit by a car on my way home." I sighed.*

*"Death concerns you." She whispered "But it concerns us all, can you take no solace in that?"*

*"I take the opposite of solace." I said, "This conversation has occurred a million times before, on deathbeds and in philosophy classes. I do not dare try and describe tragedies for you. People suffering. Really truly suffering like I have never suffered. People so consumed by the needs of daily existence that their lives give shame to my existential whining."*

*"Suffering that cannot be comprehended, on scales that do no justice to the suffering even if we try.*

*"People watch the bodies of people they love more than I have ever loved anyone, as they are killed, or worse. These things happen to people better than me. Nicer and kinder people.*

*"The things that happen to them are not only worse than I've ever experienced, they are worse than I can imagine. I have experienced no real pain. I feel confident that I am not even capable of the amount of pain millions of people have experienced. That some experience daily.*

*“There is indescribable tragedy in the world I will give you that” she said, giving away nothing.*

*“And there is no justice to it. No levers I can pull and manipulate. Death and suffering are concepts we can talk about in circles forever. They are simple and trite. And infinitely deep. We can joke about them at a party. Then, for a lark, we can say the same thing again, but be serious about it and give it as much meaning as we like.*

*“I can plug away at it forever. More than that, people have. It will always have meaning so long as you are alive.*

*She nodded to a question I did not ask. I noticed a little passion creeping into my voice again, but if she noticed, she didn’t give any indication. She was intent on my words. I saw greed in her eyes.*

*“The worst part is that I believe you know most this already. As a result I assume you can fill in the gaps. But maybe you don’t understand. Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I should have slowed down, and built my argument from the ground up, spoken eloquently and convincingly, one fraught with both emotional and logical appeal.*

*“But it’s conceivable that I failed not because I truly think you already know what I’m saying. Not because of my faith that the inherent depth of the topic it will enable it to rise up out of triteness without my aid.*

*“Possibly I only spoke so poorly out of selfishness, because I didn’t want to face my own limitations as a speaker”*

*“That’s the worst of it?” she asked, knowing that it wasn’t.*

*“No. The worst of it is that it doesn’t matter. This ground is so well worn that it’s trite to point out the grooves. These ideas have driven people to extremes, to the limitations of what humankind can do. And it didn’t matter. I have read passages on the topic that make me cry tears of joy.*

*“Things so wonderful I believed for a while that perhaps beauty alone was enough. That merely by dealing with the topic in such an amazing way, something had to have changed. Or perhaps the beauty itself was so redeeming that it justified everything.*

*“And it changed nothing.” She said.*

*“It’s a cage that does not notice if you rail at it. I am not a fly bothering a rhino, I am a fly, and the problem is gravity. I enjoy railing against it sometimes. So I do. In this you have given me another chance to rail. Perhaps I did it well. Perhaps I did it poorly. If I did it poorly it doesn’t matter. It would not have mattered if I had done it well. When I die of cancer, or am stabbed in the back, or lose this memory to old age. If I said it perfectly, and it got written down in a book that became a best seller, it still won’t have mattered. Neither the quality of this, nor its existence at all.”*

## Zombie Zoo

-Tom Petty

I woke up with a headache. I missed aspirin. I decided that I couldn't feel bad about killing anything that knocked me out as often as these things did. I knew I was lying to myself, but the existential angst over my violence would have to wait.

Besides, the real reason that I didn't feel bad about killing them was because they stole my albums.

When I woke up, I found myself back in the cell I had started in. For a moment I was gripped with horror, until I saw that it was still missing a wall. Most of the people I had come to think of as the "extras" had left. Corrina was chatting with Carl. Ernesto was gone, but Rose was still here so I knew he'd be back. Julie was at the indentation looking frustrated.

Everything was back to normal.

After awhile I managed to get up and ask Julie if she knew how to make tea yet, but she just glared at me. Then I passed out again. I had forgotten about that.

When I woke up the second time I really wanted to talk with Corrina some more, but she was gone. I chatted with Carl some, who told me that he would have warned me, but he didn't know it would happen. Apparently there had been a variety of chemicals sprayed during the battle, each with different effects. Which also helped explain why I couldn't remember much of the battle itself.

After a few hours spent gathering my strength, I went exploring. Out in the main room they had grouped the bodies into three areas, one pile for our dead, one for their dead, and one for our unconscious. A few people were tending to the wounded. Some of the alien bodies showed signs of burn marks. I looked around for someone holding a flamethrower and tried again to remember what I could about the battle, but I drew a blank.

I only saw four dead humans, lying in a row. In contrast, the alien bodies were piled high, containing dozens of corpses. I didn't really want to count exact numbers, but it seemed like a lot.

I was loath to admit it but I suppose there are some advantages to fighting creatures that spew knockout gases.

The room was even bigger than I remembered. It was at least two stories high with cave-like openings coming in from all sides. I found myself surrounded by people who didn't seem to be concerned that they might be attacked by strange chemical spewing aliens. From this I took it that we had won something, or at least that most people thought we did. I also noted that we had been taken from all over earth. But true diversity was a mirage on earth so it was almost as surreal as everything else to see it here.

I had to assume however that for one reason or another we had been stored at least loosely based on our point of origin. Despite Carl, the mysterious ethnic origins of Ernesto, and all the Spanish, almost everyone in my cell had been pretty white. The arguments I could overhear now were in languages I couldn't even identify. There were also a few people shouting at nobody.

Other than musing about the number of bodies on both sides there wasn't much to do. My fellow humans were undoubtedly interesting people with profound insights. I noticed that many of them were trying to catch my eye and nodding approvingly at me. But I wasn't ready to deal with that yet. Data acquisition can be hard work. Besides the sadness in my heart was still there, and while part of it wanted companionship, it didn't want strangers.

Noting that I didn't have anything better to do I decided to make something up before I was given busywork. Assuming that the aliens operated like humans, a poor assumption, the larger holes were bound to lead to more important places. I headed towards a medium sized entrance. I toyed with the idea of going back to find my knife. I had just dismissed the idea as being both impractical and potentially gross when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Attached to the hand was an arm. The arm was fairly large, tan, muscled and more than a little hairy. Not coincidentally, attached to that arm was a similarly featured man.

“Sorry, I canna let you through there. That where the General is meeting.” He said. He was apparently referring to the entranceway I had haphazardly chosen to wander into, in my valiant, but ultimately doomed attempt to find some peace and quiet. Instead, like most attempts at peace, it had gotten me involved in a conflict that I hadn’t known existed, probably didn’t care about, but which I could not bring myself to ignore.

“Who’s the General?” I asked.

“He’s de one who organized the break-out.”

“Who’s he meeting with?”

“If you don’t know I ain’t gunna tell you.”

With that he turned away from me and reached over to grab a young Asian man by the shoulder and say something in some Asian language. This confirmed my suspicion that he wasn’t as nearly backwards as his accident was supposed to indicate. What it didn’t do was tell me much about this “General” fellow. If he was really the grand leader who had freed us all then I shouldn’t randomly interfere with his plans. On the other hand, all I had was one hairy man’s word on that. Freeing me counted for but it didn’t count for everything.

I looked around the room again with new eyes, and noted that this wasn’t the only opening that had guards posted. Some were obvious now that I looked for them, or so I thought.

The entire room which moments before had appeared calm and peaceful now seemed menacing. With this crowd it was difficult to tell the guards from the paranoid and insane. Quite a few people seemed be cracking. Moreover my woeful lack of multi-cultural experience made it even harder to judge the suspiciousness of certain actions. Suffice to say that there were a lot of people watching a lot of other people, and statically I suspected that some of them had been asked to do so by someone other than the voices in their head. While all of these people couldn’t be working for the General, I reasoned that most of them had to have a better idea of what was going on than I did.

Otherwise they would be demanding to know more, and my large guard friend would be having some trouble by now.

As I surveyed the room I felt the pain in my heart flare up again. To accomplish this task, I really needed theme music. Also, I was hungry. There had been a food-like substance and it had filled me up. Actually, I had eaten quite a bit of it, there hadn't been much else to do in that small room. Now in this larger room, my choices were still limited, and I hadn't eaten any food with taste in awhile. My stomach was full, but my taste buds hadn't noticed.

The stalling finally worked. Corrina came strolling out of the little cubbyhole. Best to go with an established source, I decided, I didn't have time to make new friends. I sidled on over.

"Did you know Carl worked at a funeral home?" she asked as I approached her.

"No I didn't. Didn't strike me as the type. Though I guess I don't know what the type would be," I replied. I added, "I bet he saw some strange stuff."

"Yeah I guess. Mostly it was really sad I think."

"People don't handle death well"

She turned and gave me an odd stare that was interrupted by the untimely arrival of Kyle. That was the name of the punk who, when we last left him, had been making unkind gestures in the general direction of Ernesto. He flashed a smile at Corrina who simply glared back at him.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I've been sent by the General to request the presence of this man here" he pointed at me, "We can talk later Corrina, but you have to understand that there were good reasons for what I did."

"Whose is this General and why does he want to see me?" I asked.

"Come along with me and find out," said Kyle, still looking at Corrina.

I tried to catch Corrina's eye. But she seemed locked into some sort of staring contest with Kyle. As much as I would have liked to consult with her before diving into this new world of Generals it was apparent that I wasn't going to get any good information from her as long as Kyle was around.

“Can I get back to you on this?” I asked.

Kyle finally stopped staring at Corrina to free them up to glare at me.

“No. Lets go” he said and grabbed my arm and started pulling me along towards the big man I had met before. I considered breaking his hand, but realized that I didn’t know how. I also considered breaking free, but decided that if the General turned out to be smarter than the people who worked for him, a likely proposition; it probably would start off our relationship on the wrong foot.

Plus it gave me the element of surprise if I needed it. I glanced back at Corrina who seemed annoyed but not terribly concerned about my welfare. This could be seen either as a vote of confidence, or a sign that she didn't much care what happened to me.

The guard let me through without comment and Kyle kept trudging along the corridors. Eventually he seemed to realize that he was dragging me and released his grip on my arm. My fingers began to regain sensation. Apparently I was only a pseudo-hostage. He flashed me the same quick smile that I he had tried on Corrina and we kept moving.

As I followed down smaller passages I realized that the ache in my heart remained, and I missed music more than ever before. I really needed a theme song if I was going to deal with this - something with a solid backbeat - a driving rhythm but a looping melody line. An ironically detached, but secretly earnest chorus would be optional.

Finally we reached a room that looked almost exactly like the one I had been imprisoned in, but slightly larger. Kyle gave me a little shove and started to walk off.

A tall lanky man wearing a striped lab coat was stooping near the back wall, fiddling around with an indentation. If I something about his eyes hadn’t made me nervous, then it would have made me feel like home.

The only other person was obviously the General. He wasn’t dressed like a general; his sense of command was palatable. He was tall, vaguely English, and he wore a top hat. The top hat didn’t go with the rest of his outfit, business casual suit.

A chicken or the egg question: Did he obtain the odd, but effective outfit after reaching his position of authority, or did he get to be in charge because of the outfit? The suit didn’t quite fit him, so I suspected the former, but you never know. He carried

himself with effortless nobility, and as he sat behind a metal desk on a metal chair I could not help but feel as though it was an honor to speak to him in person. I thought about asking him where his monocle was, but Kyle squeezed my shoulder hard and I thought better of it.

"Kyle, please don't treat my guests like that," said the General as he looked up from his paperwork. His voice was calm, and held a self-assured power that sounds annoying but actually made me like him. Or maybe it was just the look on Kyle's face when he was rebuked for his petty shove. Either way it had been the right way to handle the situation, and it diffused most of my annoyance at how I had been brought there.

Kyle left the room and the General focused his attention on me.

"So very sorry about that. Circumstances have prevented me from being as selective about my help as I would like." He said.

"I understand," I said magnanimously.

"Unfortunately circumstances have also prevented me from doing a lot of other things. Things that need to be done. And that's why I need your help."

"What sort of help?"

"As you may or may not know, you were very impressive during the recent battle with the aliens. Many people have lost their memories in the aftermath of the battle, but not everyone. You were also one of the few people who managed to be impressive without any obvious use of... extra powers.

"As effective as those powers can be they also tend to make people who don't fully understand them nervous. You on the other hand acquitted yourself well during a crisis. You led people who needed to be led, and were crucial in helping turn the tide of the battle. For that you should be commended. *Publicly*. And I would like to have the honor of being the one to do so." He paused, waiting.

Extra powers... that would explain the odd burn marks on some of the dead bodies. I wished I could remember more of the battle...

"I appreciate the offer but I have no interest in public ceremonies" I replied with feigned regret. The General seemed nice enough but there was something just a little too pat about all of this.

He didn't miss a beat. "Perhaps I need to be clearer. I do not just want this for your benefit. You see something there is of a political scuffle being waged already, and for me to be the one to honor you helps both of us. Not to be crass, but, don't fool yourself. You're not really in a position of power here. Not *that* many people saw you fighting. But if you join sides with me, then I'll use my influence to make it seem like a big deal... which benefits everyone." He paused for a moment gauging my reaction, which was muted, and then continued.

"I get to be the one who honors the great and honorable warrior, and you get to be a hero. Make no mistake; this is not just about my ego and me either. I wish I had the time to individually convince you and everyone else that I am sincere in my wish to help everyone. We need to present a strong united front right now. But alas. By then it would be too late.

"Think about it. As soon as I free us from our cells a battle breaks out, a battle that we win. We win because in part because people like you stood up to the immediate challenge, and in part because of my carefully laid plans. We are still trapped on an alien spaceship. A spaceship that is in motion, heading towards god knows what. Even if I'm not the best possible ruler, I am the one who started this, and I currently have the most support. I freed us, and everyone knows it. Someone has to unite us or it will all fall apart. There are new challenges in the days ahead, and the aliens are not gone.

"I am going to be in control of all significant actions that occur from here on out. Isn't it better that you help me get the rest of the people on board? The longer it takes the worse it's going to be, we don't have time for political infighting, this is too important. Everyone on board this ship's life could be at stake."

Again he paused. I said nothing. He continued.

"You do not need to agree with me to know that in the end it's best if there is no real fight for power at this moment. I do not need your support, but it would be nice. You on the other hand need mine..."

Another pause. He was not flustered, nor was I expected to respond. These pauses were for effect.

“Besides, joining the winning team has its advantages. I don’t want to stress them because I think that you should be on my side for other, more altruistic reasons, but there are advantages. We are currently the only group that has a living alien hostage. That’s how we know they are aliens, and we know where the ship is going... AND we know where whatever they stole from you is.”

Something gave me away. Either my eyes must have widened or some other involuntary spasm or twitch betrayed me, and he grinned an equally spontaneous, and slightly nasty grin. “We can give it to you right after the ceremony, or if it’s too large for that we can guarantee that you will get it back whenever you like... so long as we remain in charge. I cannot guarantee’s how this trip is going to turn out, but you will want to be with the winning team”

This silence was designed for me to fill. So I filled it with the most obvious question I could think of, “Wouldn't I get my ‘item’ back in any case? If the humans come out on top of all this that is?”

“Ideally yes. I am a good leader,” he said, "and I want to be fair to everyone. But even I don’t know what might have to happen to accomplish the greatest good. Some items may need to be confiscated by necessity. Some people may need some... persuasion to do the right thing. The alien we are in communication with has indicated that the items were originally taken for research purposes. They are the main reason they came to our planet. To get us out of this alive we may have let them keep most of them. There is no way to know what’s going to happen, and I’m not going to lie. I hope that everyone will get his or her possessions back. But your best chance overall to ensure a happy outcome for yourself is to join up with me. I am a busy man and I cannot spend forever on you. There are other potential hero’s and a lot that has to be done.”

Finally he paused, this time being less subtle about giving me time to weigh the consequences of my decision. He knew he had the upper hand. Something deep within my soul resisted the idea of being a puppet to increase a political party’s power and

prestige. As much as I didn't like it though, he had a point. Even if he were deeply flawed, the any leader would probably be good right now. These were extenuating circumstances.

Plus he had control of my albums. I'd been hearing music play in my head for the last few days and my heart leapt at the idea of getting them back. I wouldn't be able to carry them around with me without arousing suspicion, but my best chance to get them back was still to side with him.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked with a smile. "Is your name really Darwin?"

What a perfect question. His timing was impeccable. After all that serious talk he asks a nice easy question, one that was interesting enough to make it rude to ignore. Even after implying that I was unimportant, and potentially a waste of his valuable time, he finishes off with a personal touch.

"No, but I'm bad at making up names and I didn't really know where I was when I woke up." I replied. "My turn. Have you, or would you, ever consider eating monkey brains?"

He chuckled. "Under the right circumstances I suppose I would. If was in danger of starving, for instance. Why?"

"I think this meeting is over zombie man"

With that I got up and left. He was too cool to let his surprise show for more than a millisecond. Or maybe I just projected it onto him. I really like zombie jokes even though nobody else does.

*Q: How do you kill a three-headed super zombie?*

*A: Chop up into pieces and bury it separate locations spread throughout the four corners of the earth.*

If I wanted to I would have let him slide on the monkey brain thing until I knew him better. And while I'm not always as culturally sensitive as I'd like to be, I do

understand that some perfectly nice, non-zombie worshipping people consider monkey brains to be a delicacy.

Had my 'item' been small enough for me to hide on my person, things may have played out differently. I'm always disgusted when the do-gooder refuses to play along with the insane warlord who wants to bribe them with an army of their own. If they would just set aside their two-shoes for a moment and accept control of half an army, then they could kill the wacko with much less trouble. They'd have an army!

But I couldn't exactly walk around with the case of albums without drawing attention to myself. I was forced into considering the prospect of a long-term partnership with a man who threatened to keep me from my most valued possession.

Plus monkeys are basically apes, and apes are basically humans, and zombies eat brains. A man who is willing to eat monkey's brains is just not reliable as a leader.

Leaving the room I saw a brown wall that led me down a brown hallway. Four turns later, I was lost. I knew the general direction of the main room, but the path Kyle had used to bring me here hadn't been a straight line. Sporadically I saw other people, but nobody who seemed friendly. By the time I was desperate enough to ask an unfriendly person, I couldn't find one of those either. So I turned left, walking confidently if I knew where I was going

About five minutes later I no longer saw anyone else wandering around. It was at least another hour before the panic began to set in. To comfort myself, I began to talk aloud.

"But then again, aren't we all lost in one sense or another?" I waxed on philosophically to myself. "Though nobody happens to be asking, I will tell you that other than that item which has been taken from me, and which evil forces surrounding me may even now be conspiring to discover the nature of - forcing me to refrain from speaking it's name aloud, other than that item, the object that I miss the most from Earth is my bobbled-headed German troll doll. About four inch's tall, and dressed for traveling with a walking stick, he jauntily carries a knapsack and grins with a gap-toothed smile and those deep wise eyes that make me feel less foolish about talking to a

doll. This is not the genderless bright red haired troll from the 1980's fad. No, this is a troll that has attitude and style. He means business..."

I went on mumbling about the troll, with every intention of ending the monologue with an ironic reference to the troll's ability to allow me to talk to myself without being completely insane, and how I missed him now. I never made it that far.

As I rambled on about the troll's extraordinary abilities I continued walking down random corridors. The monologue began to take on its own peculiar comforting rhythm, independent of any conscious effort on my part. It was like finding my theme song at last. I felt a tug at that empty feeling I'd been carrying with me, that little ball of loneliness in my heart. It was always there, but thinking about it caused an indistinct ache. It was in the same genus of aches I felt when I remembered the songs that I couldn't hear because the aliens had my music.

I allowed my body and ramblings to go on autopilot as I investigated this sensation. The pain in my heart, this hole that pierced through my sense of self. How did this knot in my heart differ from the one that had been there on and off for years? I'd felt disoriented and alone for some time now. Because of it, my senses came to me as if through a fog, and I had to fight for them. When I let them go they just faded away. I feared that's what ageing would be like.

But it was more than that, a faster progression down the path to insanity than nature, however brutal, would normally allow. I was in tune with my body, and it was out of tune. But there just hadn't been time to investigate as deeply as I should have. I regretted it already, but I knew pushing onwards now would be the wrong decision.

Making the same mistake over again just to justify the first one is rarely a wise move, but it does happen.

"...his eye's can shine with truth or glisten and hint at a seductive lie. The troll is a powerful force, but one that must be handled carefully, delicately. My friends, you must understand that he has his own goals and they may not coincide with your own..."

I heard a groan that was a suppressed scream in the distance. My pulse picked up, and I shook off the effects of my ramblings. I came around the corner cautiously hoping to ask the winner of the fight to show me how to get back home.



## Let The Good Times Roll

-B.B. King

Five people were attacking a dark haired man and a lighter haired woman. The man was unconscious and on the ground and wore a loose fitting dark blue robe. The woman had a matching green robe, and was defending the man. I noticed a trickle of blood slide down the side of his face. I sighed inwardly. These villains had committed my new pet peeve of depriving him of consciousness. The leer on the faces of the men as they eyed the woman made it clear who wore the black hats in this confrontation. I stepped forward, terrified, but determined. After all, I was already in a rambling mood.

"Gentlemen, I just want to say, I really, *really* didn't want to get involved in another conflict right now." I spoke using my theatre voice so that my voice carried without yelling. I had timed it correctly, or else I had been lucky, and the fight had just hit a lull, so I didn't have much competition for their attention.

"You probably don't know me, so let me tell you up front that by nature I am not a fighting man. I dislike violence.

"But this my friends? Come on. Too far I say! You are quite obviously horrible horrible people. When you go through life being so horrible then you should know you have to watch out.

"Should reality suddenly grow the conscience of an after school horror film you will find that you've set yourselves up to be mutilated by a swamp creature from the colder parts of hell before the curtain closes on the first act, possibly in such a manner as to provide both karmic and comedic undertones that play into a larger theme. But you won't know that, because your whole life will amount to nothing more than an establishing shot so that the hero can demonstrate their non-evilness." As usual, I had more random nonsense chambered, but they were rapidly losing interest. So I gave the speech a final flourish before I lost my audience.

"For now I am afraid that I will have to eat you. I will eat you because I hate you. I hate you because you are horrible people. Also because I require the sweet sustenance only brains can provide."

At which point they stopped being distracted. I could tell, not because of their erudite response, but because they attacked. Two of them came towards me. I stood my ground, trying to look casual, at the last moment I made a dive for the ground; I rolled and kicked one of them in the stomach, causing him to double over. The other recovered quickly from my unorthodox maneuver, and kicked me hard in the side. I stood up and leapt past them tackling one of the three men going after the woman in green. I got another painful glancing blow against my shoulder for the trouble.

Like most people, by default, I consider myself a slightly above average at everything I do, including physical confrontations, but these guys had been involved a few more bar-fights than me.

Additionally they had brains the size of hamsters, which enabled them to spend hours every day working out. Or at least that was my assumption as I tried to move my left arm, and felt the ache from the “glancing” blow I had just received.

Apparently I had been effective against the aliens, and I knew that I was even better when I had a stick, but overcoming larger men and five to two odds is harder in real life than in movies. I still had a strange urge to eat their brains, but I wasn't sure where that nonsense had come from in the first place.

My strategy depended on the assumption that the woman in green was one of those exceptional warriors who could overcome impossible odds if given the chance. To facilitate her anticipated amazingness I was doing things that they wouldn't expect to distract them and keep some of them occupied beating me while she did whatever an amazing warrior would do to *regulate* the situation.

I fell to the ground taking a nasty guy with a scar across his face with me. I kicked another, futilely hitting at his legs. I wished I had a stick; I was so much better with a stick.

I took another kick on my side, made a roll and was preparing to stand when the tension in room finally popped. I crawled forward a bit to stay in motion until I was sure that nobody was near me and then looked up to see Ernesto.

Then things got strange.

Next to him stood an enormous pink fuzzy bunny and a thin long limbed dark skinned woman with gray streak hair tied back into multiple, thin braids. The bunny was at least 8 feet tall, which didn't make any sense, if only because there was no way it would have been able to navigate the hallways to reach that room. The woman was less unusual, but only in comparison to the bunny. She was carrying a long knotty walking stick, wore a multi-colored scarf wrapped around her black hair with an equally vibrant dress.

She cackled. "Boo!"

The giant pink bunny hopped once, turning 180 degrees. Then, balancing its enormous body on one leg, it back kicked one of the bad guys. The woman cackled again.

"To clarify the bunny is on our side." Ernesto said with an admirably small smirk.

"You bet! You wipper-snappers better give up!" said the woman as she waved the stick around wildly, periodically jabbing it in the air. The look in her eye probably would have had caused them worry, except I was the only one watching her. Everyone else was focused on the bunny.

To their credit, they put up more resistance than I would have. The bunny wasn't as helpful as one might suspect. Being so large it wasn't exactly maneuverable, and it could only hit the ones stupid enough to get near it. Nonetheless, they were demoralized and distracted. A giant pink bunny is more off-putting than I can ever hope to be, even when I'm in human punching bag mode.

Not wanting to be left out I said to them as they fell one by one. "Do not fear my friends, although you deserve it, I am not truly a zombie. Your brains are safe from me."

The woman in green Jen explained what she could as Luke, the man on the ground came around. The older woman, Josephine, apparently had some medical skills and did something beyond me to help him recover. The old man was of course still Ernesto. I

continued to introduce myself as Darwin. The bunny, possibly due to its status as an innocent, remained nameless.

"I guess we were sort of asking for it." Said Jen. "After the first day of freedom we noticed some of the more unsavory types were taking advantage of innocents. So we thought we'd give them some not to innocents to worry about in the back hallways. After a few unsuccessful muggings we got overconfident and that we just sort of fell into a pattern of taking turns walking alone in dark corners. I guess we figured we could handle it better than most. Take as many of the bastards out of commission as possible." she spoke with a calm assurance that was unnerving. Nobody asked what she meant by taking em out of commission.

"Finally this guy came along. After Luke knocked him down he screamed and a bunch of his buddies came swarming in. Pretty soon things were out of hand so we called for help and you guys came. That's about it."

By the end of his little monologue Josephine had Luke back up on his feet and Jen was hugging him. I felt a little embarrassed so I focused my attention on the old man to give them some privacy.

Avoiding the proverbial giant pink bunny in the center of the room, as well as the less proverbial but equally puzzling question of "Did you hear him 'call' for help because I sure as hell didn't" I instead asked him:

"Does it ever bother you that large numbers of people pay money for tour guide books designed to show them unusual out of the way "non-touristy" locations that nobody else could possibly find. Unless of course they also bought the same guidebook, which is subsequently, makes it onto the bestseller list.

"The only way this scheme works is if everyone is desperate to have stories that are different than everyone else's stories of the same place while never risking encountering anything too off the beaten path or truly risky? Or do you think I'm being too cynical about the whole thing?"

Before the resulting silence had dragged on long enough to make the transition from merely somewhat awkward to excruciatingly painful Josephine rescued me. She

was leaning heavily on her stick and the wild look in her eyes remained as she came over.

"No. I don't think enough people travel or read for that to be a problem." She said. "But don't go doing this again, if you ask me, which you aren't. I know how tough you guys are, but there's some out there who are tougher. Your not just messing with lazy American's from truck stops here. We've got people from all over the world, and some of them..." she paused, as if at a loss for what to say.

Finally she managed "just be careful."

I wondered how a bookie would line up the odds on this situation.

The old mans nod indicated that he agreed with Josephine, although it wasn't clear which of her assessments he was agreeing with.

"I'm afraid that I must be moving on," said Ernesto, who seemed genuinely embarrassed that he had to rush out. "Glad I could help and all but I've other affairs that sadly cannot be put off."

Luke's response was short and heartfelt. He looked each of us in the eye as he spoke, "Many thanks, if you ever need any help feel free to call for my aid. I owe you all a great debt. Jen and I should be safe enough now"

"Nonsense, I'll stick around fer a bit. There's no knowing if these guys have any friends who might be lurking around," said Josephine suspiciously. "Ernesto here can take care of himself."

What would Josephine do if they were attacked again? I didn't know, but everybody else seemed comfortable with the arrangement so I didn't feel tempted to comment.

"Before we break up this party, could someone please give me directions back to... uhh that big meeting place?" I asked hoping that the ship was small enough that they would know what I meant.

"I can take you if you can leave now" replied Ernesto. "I'm going that way anyways."

"Thanks. One more thing" I said turning to Josephine "If you don't mind... where'd you get the stick?"

“It’s mine,” she said with a defensive scowl. She paused for a moment, and then smiled. “But if you’re just interested in a good piece of wood to bop people over the head with. Then I’d recommend you talk to someone from Operation Humankind.”

I was going to inquire further, but the old man had started walking towards one of the tunnels. The bunny followed close behind. I gave Josephine a quick smile and said “thanks” before rushing after the old man.

Dutifully I followed the old man as he led our way through the confusing maze of tunnels. His brisk pace got me lost again, but since I never knew where I had been, not knowing how to return to didn’t worry me as much. Every time I looked at the pink bunny it seemed slightly smaller until finally it was no larger than your average rabbit. Are bunny’s different than rabbits? Either way it managed to shrink without me ever seeing it actually get smaller.

For too long I had been acting in deference to my environment. That is, I had not been demanding explanations from any number of people as they preformed extraordinary feats that required explanation. I wasn’t about to demand an answer from Ernesto, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t curious.

Asking would be pointless I reasoned, because if Ernesto wanted me to know then no question would be necessary. Assuming that my chosen hero Ernesto had a brain behind his surly expression, he had to know that anyone encountering his size shifting, crime-fighting bunny companion would be intrigued. The situation itself begged the question for me. This realization, much in the nature of rabbits themselves, spawned some internal realizations of its own.

For the first time began to comprehend just how truly out of my league I was. I still hadn’t had a chance to absorb everything that had happened, so I couldn’t really draw any definite conclusions yet, but I knew enough to know that I didn’t know anything.

Nor did it appear as if a good opportunity to clear my mind and make sense of everything would present itself anytime soon. The situation was truly insane, and there was no good way to react.

So I would continue making irreverent remarks and trying to learn something useful, hoping that it would all fall into place like the final stages of a well-planned heist in a heroin addict's dreams.

"You realize of course that the bunny is shrinking," I said, ignoring most of my recent conclusions.

"You're quite observant," replied the old man.

The old man smiled reassuringly and said, "There is a lot going on that you want to know about. I want to know more as well. Some of it you may even be able to help me with.

"This is an odd assortment of people that have been thrown together. Do you think it's a coincidence that almost one out of every five people on board has some kind of special skill? Jen and Luke are among a handful of people in the world who could pull that off.

"Unfortunately I don't have the time to give you answers right now. The bunny is my friend, and he has many powers that even I do not fully understand. One of them is that he can shrink. I don't know how it's done. I don't interrogate my friends.

"As for the rest... Unfortunately there are crucial battles that must be fought and we are nearly back to the main hall. From here I must go on to attend to my own affairs, which cannot be delayed any longer. I am trying to make us safer and incidentally thwart the Generals efforts to do the same. He is not working alone. My advice is not to help him, unless of course he turns out to be the only way to get us home, which might very well be the case.

He stopped for a second, looked me straight in the eye as if examining my soul, and then looked away.

Before I could respond, we reached the main hall, and he gave me one last harrumph before wandering off into the crowd and disappearing. The pink bunny, which should have stood out like a pink bunny in a not very tightly packed crowd of people, was also nowhere to be seen.

As for myself, after a few false starts I found my way back the room I had started in and found it empty. It wasn't much of a home but it was all I had. I promptly fell asleep.



### Interlude Three

*"If I offered you the opportunity to become a vampire, would you take me up on it?" she asked after some time had passed.*

*"Depends on what kind of vampire. The answer to your real question however, is yes. Yes I would. I would sacrifice some part of my soul in order to have the potential for eternal life and magical powers."*

*I knew that she was smarter than this. Before I had felt dragged along by our conversation, as a man floating downstream. Now I felt as if I was hitting my head on rocks barely concealed underwater. There was silence for and I looked around at my surroundings. The world seemed fuzzy. On the flat stone mountainside I noticed some words carved into the stone. They hadn't been there before. Something flitted in the darkness.*

*"Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It's the transition that's troublesome."- Isaac Asimov.*

*"Did you do that?" I asked.*

*"Not everything that people have said about death is nonsense." She said by way of explanation.*

*"The fear of death is more to be dreaded than death itself. -Publilius Syrus -100 BC"* appeared on the wall, under the first quote, carved into the stone as if it had been their for centuries.

*"Nice trick." I said, "Let me try one." In this world, my memory worked better than it does. Once I had in mind, imprinting it on the wall was simple. Some part of my brain was by now strongly protesting my hypothesis that this was a dream, but it worked like one, conforming to it's own rules of logic. And so I saw...*

*"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work... I want to achieve it through not dying."- Woody Allen*

*"Humorous. Your point?" she said.*

*"You asked if I wanted to be a vampire." I responded.*

*"Yet almost every one of your precious artistic explorations that deal with immortality ends up being studies of tragedy, the horribleness of outliving everything, of seeing the world you knew collapse around you."*

*“Vampires can be killed, and kill themselves. If I live 100 years and want to die I will. I want the option. I want the chance to live forever; I want to make the choice. Car wrecks give you no choice. Vampires don't die of cancer.”*

*“So you would become a vampire to avoid death. Vampires are real you know, you are correct to assume that they differ slightly from the novels, but they exist, and they are immortal in their own way. But vampires can die.”*

*Another quote: “The meaning of life is that it stops”- Franz Kafka. This time because I could, because I wanted to distract myself from this heavily scripted conversation.*

*“Being a vampire in a literary sense would give meaning to my life by opening up the possibility of it not stopping.” I paused to consider this.*

*She smiled again, and it sent a small shiver down my spine. I resolved to calm down before my fear fully betrayed me, and I considered my next words carefully. She was mysterious and vast, but I would treat her as if I was teaching her. So I said,*

*“As William Wallace once said, (I placed it on the rock face as I said it aloud) ‘they may take away our lives, but they'll never take our freeedooooomm.’*

*“I don't begrudge people finding things to value enough in life to ignore their fear of death. I begrudge that it is all that can be done. My symbols all hide death, but I'm too aware of it. It is a temporary retreat for me, not an inner sanctuary.*

*“My goal is to cloak death in rituals and treat it like just another transition. In order to accept death, to function, I must retreat and accept its inevitability.”*

*“What happens if you don't accept the inevitable tragedies of life?”*

*“Nothing. I know because I've tried, I sit around fearing death, or more accurately, I fear separating from my sense of self. I fear a car wreck. I fear the General killing me. I fear that whatever it is the aliens spit at me will have permanently affected my brain cells. Or that I won't wake up. I work up long rants about how death is a pit, infinitely deep, so important and profound that no matter what you throw in it, it retains its meaning and depth.*

*“I fear these things, and no matter how much I fear them, how much energy I put into worrying about them. Nothing happens. They fall noiselessly into the pit.*

*"Already this conversation is running in circles. It all gets sucked into a vacuum. It doesn't affect anything. So I largely ignore my own fears, just as I largely ignore my guilt over world hunger.*

*"But mostly I ignore it. Because that's what it takes to live. If I didn't, I'd simply go insane.*

*"It wears on me, slows me down. The energy wasted ignoring so much leaves me with just enough energy to function."*

*She paused and waited, but I was done. So she said "Then why not just amuse yourself if there is nothing else? Why help others, how does that matter if nothing else does?" her eyes slanted, and suddenly I felt her pressure again. I had been lulled into relaxation by talking so long. But now something told me that there were stakes at risk, and I needed to be careful. Yet I still couldn't lie, or refuse to answer.*

*"It matters to them. And since none of it matters to me, I live my life on their borrowed faith.*

*"Do you believe in nothing then?" she asked, intensity creeping into her voice, bringing the first signs of energy to this soulless place "Your life is meaningless until the day you die"*

*I suddenly felt hopeless and alone. She continued "What if I were to offer you the chance to become a vampire then? Or something more? And in return ask not for immoral acts, but merely for your loyalty?"*

*The true meaning of what we had been discussing in the abstract was closing in on me. I felt an almost physical pain in my chest.*

*She said, "You have no beliefs, no faith, so why not join me? I can give you want you want, and in turn I can be the thing that matters to you."*

*I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry out in pain and frustration, like a child whose sense of reality and safety has been destroyed. This was more than a request, this surreal world created the conditions that allowed her assault my sense of self. She was forcing her way into my brain. I yearned for acknowledgement of my pain, and I wanted it to matter if it was acknowledged. In her own way, she offered that, in exchange for nothing that I valued.*

*I had to fight through the throbbing in my vision and my head to utter my next words. Words that she wanted to be "yes master." Words that almost were "I agree"*

*Deep inside I launched a rebellion based on my knowledge of myself. I threw my whole self into that rebellion, knowing full well that she had won. I used that knowledge as fuel. She had burrowed inside me, used my weakness to find a hole, and crawled in and made a nest. After an eternity, I spoke slowly, in agony, knowing I would always regret it*

*"I cannot follow you madam. I do still have some beliefs to hang my hat on. I believe in morality despite. I believe in fatalism in the service of others delusions of peace. I believe in the power of dice I haven't bothered to purchase. I place my souls fate in the hands of my bobble-headed troll, who is a figment of my imagination but does not tell me what I want to hear." I said, meaning it in jest. I think. Or maybe it just came out. I wanted to say something about randomness, nihilism, and redemption.*

*Suddenly everything changed.*

## Highlands

- Bob Dylan (verse six)

The next day... Or however you measure time in space, where sundials lose all meaning and there are no clocks on the wall. No mechanisms to mark the slow passing of minutes. Suffice to say, that upon awaking I found the once empty room to be full again. Most of the extras with whom I had begun this journey had returned, along with a few new faces.

Apparently I wasn't the only one who didn't have know were to go once let loose upon the world. Like schoolchildren sitting in the same seat in the lunchroom every day, with a minimum of new friends, we had all returned.

Unfortunately, the people I wanted to see the most were among the missing. Corrina, Dr. Wallace, and Ernesto were all gone. Rose was there, but she was still asleep, like almost everyone else in the room. I guess my sleeping schedule was off. I didn't quite remember how to operate the indentation, and was afraid to experiment.

Soon enough Carl woke up and showed me once again how to persuade the indentation to give me food. We chatted as we ate. He finished eating before me, but, perhaps sensing my melancholy, he stuck around for a while to keep me company.

We left the room together, but soon enough he turned right where I turned left and waved goodbye as he walked deeper towards strange and mysterious rooms. Maybe he had friends elsewhere. As for myself, I walked towards the large central meeting room where the battle had taken place. I knew very little about my surroundings. I realized that I assumed Carl was walking deeper into the ship, but for all I knew perhaps he was heading towards an even larger 'meeting room'. It was unlikely; my 'meeting room' was enormous, and seemed to be the center of everything. But perception can be tricky.

Back on Earth my kitchen was the whole world to a stubborn ant colony.

The size of the ship was only the beginning of what I didn't know.

About this time I reached the 'meeting room', which was larger than I remembered it. Someone had removed most of the dead bodies from both species, which was nice because they would have begun to smell by then, if odors had existed on the ship.

Maybe that explained the sense of existential discomfort I kept fighting off. Maybe my body was just confused by the lack of smell.

Either way, the removal of the bodies indicated that a rudimentary level of organization was underway. The advent of ceremonies associated with the treatment of dead bodies is considered to be among the first signs of a civilized culture.

With the General annoyed at me, a basic grasp of the emerging political structure would make as good of a first priority as any. There was too much going on for me to try and grasp it all at once.

Among the unknowns where the size of the ship, where it was going and the mysterious bolts of energy I remembered shooting from people's hands during the battle. The old man's pink bunny.

The situation was too new to make sense of everything at once, and it had to be chopped into more manageable chunks. But that was no excuse for me having avoided trying to understand anything at all. My excuse was laziness; the poor mans overwhelmed.

Hopefully key facts would be disseminated to the general public and I could learn a lot from a few people rather trying to sort through rumors and speculation. Even back on earth I tended to ignore breaking news reports. Trying to wring truth from the up to the minute reporting was a chancy business at best. Of course in some cases, tornados or prison breaks the advanced warning of a rumor can save your life.

Corrina was standing over on the far side of the room talking to two men. I wasn't sure how much she liked me, and I worried about that. I decided that she would be the ideal person to begin gathering knowledge from.

As I approached she gave me a smile. The man who had been talking to her noticed and turned around warily. He was at least a foot taller than me, with well-kempt black hair, green eyes and a fetching little goatee. The man next to him was a little shorter, but still taller than me. He was heavily tanned and wore a red baseball cap backwards. I realized that I had interrupted Corrina at the worst possible time.

The two men were competing for Corrina's attention, and the tension was palatable. Like half starved bull seals fighting for control of the pack. They probably didn't even know how obvious it was.

"Hello Darwin" she said, her smile neutral "This is Jake and this is Steve" Jake was the well-groomed taller one. "Jake, Steve, this is Darwin, a friend from my original cell. They were just telling me about the General. Last I heard he was requesting your services. How did that go?"

Did she just wink at me?

I could feel both of them bristle her tone. Things only got worse when she implied that the General was interested in me. No help for it, I would just have to assume she knew what she was doing.

"I'm afraid not." I replied, "The General wanted me to participate in a parade of some sort. I was forced to decline"

Corrina smiled politely, as did the two men, although theirs were less convincing. They were smart enough to try and humor me, but they hated me all the same. Had they been a different species of animal I would have merely been an obstacle, keeping them from their goal. Once conquered, forgotten. But I knew that we had passed that threshold. Stepping aside would be risky. It was personal. I was a bad person trying to take away their woman.

The texture of the hostility emanating towards me told me that they had been friends before meeting Corrina, and were now considering a temporary alliance once more.

"Well then, if you aren't for the General, then perhaps you'd like to elaborate on your true political sympathies," asked Steve, pretention dripping from the voice. He was probably the smartest kid at his community college. The one who dominated all the discussions with outrageous claims that nobody dared to contradict.

I considered withdrawing completely and seeking my information elsewhere. I liked Corrina but I could talk to her later. More importantly, the circumstances being what they were, it was increasingly unlikely that I would be able to avoid a juvenile confrontation.

“Actually, I am almost completely ignorant as to what’s going on. Perhaps you could fill me in on the details first?”

My admission of ignorance gave them a chance to show off while making me less of a threat. Every once in awhile Corrina would add an important tidbit of information, but mostly she let them do the talking. The majority of their self-serving commentary was useless, but the basic facts I craved spoke for themselves, and the picture that emerged was clear enough.

Everyone conceded that the General had been responsible for somehow orchestrating the escape, and for a brief period afterwards things had gone well. Peace in the valley lasted almost half a day after the counterattack. Once the battle was over however, people began to relax enough to start quarreling. The General still commanded the loyalty of the largest faction, but his grip was beginning to slip. Some of his power was inertia, but a lot of it was his charm, organization, and the fact he had apparently talked some of the other “hero’s” of the battle into joining him.

As I had feared, there had been a number of parades already.

A number of other groups had also decided to make there own bids for power. An American woman by the name of Martha had the most success. She was a populist who challenged the Generals authority with identity politics.

Culturally speaking, self-segregation was clearly taking place, which partly explained why I hadn’t met many people non-English speakers. But they existed in large numbers and many of them were joining Martha and various other splinter factions. This confirmed my suspicion that we had been gathered from around the world. The logistics’ of any single organization building a functional consensus in time to be useful were mind numbing.

It helped Martha's cause that she spoke a number of languages, and she had surrounded herself with people who spoke more. Many of her converts still had revolutionary fervor, unlike those who supported the General because he seemed like he was winning.

Other various factions were vying for third place, making alliances and working behind the scenes. Among these were religious sects like the White Knights who held

great moral authority, and Project Humankind, which was comprised mostly of scientists. Both were being wooed extensively.

The damn cubbyholes were now commonly being referred to as particle processors or P.P's. The name was widely disdained as it fell into common usage.

Slowly the conversation became less about useful facts and began to be dominated by self-serving posturing.

Jake was convinced that our current situation, while having many disadvantages, was good in the sense that it was close to a true expression of anarchy. Steve disagreed. Anarchy would be good, but he contended that since people were discussing things in terms of governments, this very conversation being a case in point, we might be in a state of anarchy but if nobody acknowledged it, then it didn't count.

About every three seconds one of them would glance at Corrina seeking an approving nod. Which she unfailingly gave, followed inevitably by a significant glance in my direction.

Whose side was she really on?

Sometimes you have to randomly make a stand. When dealing with fools, it doesn't have to be random. They had more or less forgotten about me since I clearly was no longer making any real effort to impress Corrina. I decided that I had learned all I could from them.

"Just so I don't feel bad about this later could you define what you mean by anarchy?" I asked. The blank look on their faces told me everything I needed to know, but I pressed forward anyways.

"Not all anarchists are idiots. For instance, you could believe that a world without the necessity of formal government is a future goal that we as humans should aspire to? A light at the end of the tunnel that we must work to create?" I paused. No response. "Or are you proposing that we should have anarchy right now in this situation, as well as back on Earth?"

Finally Jake responded, "You underestimate both humankind and the beauty of the theory. You see if each person looks after their self interest exclusively..." Jake began, with Steve nodding along.

"Corrina, I want you to understand that this is not for your benefit. I know that this will fail to impress you" I smiled at Corrina, bowed slightly, and then interrupted Jakes speech. "But I can't help myself. Poor impulse control." I wanted to give her a chance to stop me if necessary.

Jake and Steve were looking annoyed again. When Corrina returned my smile with a curious look on her face the tension in the room rose to new heights. Animalistic waves of dislike emanated from them. Time to diffuse this situation before their feral hormones got the better of them.

"First, imagine a person on the edge of sanity.

"Now set them aside a moment. Imagine a world where people realize that they can do whatever they want, all at once acting of course in there own 'enlightened' self interest.

"Our person from before may have been barely hanging onto their sanity, or perhaps they lost it long ago, but they did not act, due to their fear of the authorities. Not real authorities, just their vague sense that someone would stop them. In this new situation they might suddenly lose it.

"Possibly this person has an obsession with... oh I don't know, zombies. Yes! That's the ticket! Imagine a person who has been obsessing for years about zombies. This obsession begins to grow, and take on new importance in this atmosphere unfettered by laws. This half crazed manic might even decide that you two are zombies!

"Or maybe they simply think that you are funding the zombie's nation. Or conceivably they need your money in order to fund their eternal holy war against the zombies.

"Only your not willing to help so...

"Enough!" Shouted Jake, turning red "If some person were to try that kind of nonsense people would take the situation in hand" with that, Jake made an awkward punch at me, too busy timing it to punctuate his speech to aim properly. I dodged and then delivered a swift kick to each of their in the shins.

Steve seemed to be the smarter one so I kicked him first. Not so hard that they would think I was truly attacking them. I didn't want a real fight. Just hard enough to

wipe the confused look off their faces and fundamentally change the nature of their dislike for me.

"Now if this person with an unnatural fear of zombies happens to be larger, better trained than you, or maybe just lucky. Well then you have a problem."

At which point I took the opportunity to pull on their noses hard, three-stooges style, and make a hasty, but confident exit.

Speed was key. Too quickly they would take me for a wimp and retaliate. Since these particular fools were under the sway of some misguided attempt to impress Corrina, this was a possibility that would be foolish to underestimate.

Leaving too slowly however presented it's own difficulties. While there might be no official government, there were people around who would probably enforce their personal moral code on me if it looked like I was attacking innocents. These people, both the genuinely good-hearted as well as the power hungry fools that would form the core of a new government under the right circumstances, were both a potential danger. All I had to fend off these unlicensed proprietors of justice was the speed of my walk.

Either I was lucky or I managed my personal exodus with the skill of a master. Nobody so much as gave me a second glance as I made my way towards the edge of the room. Apparently the two boys had turned their attention back to Corrina as soon as I seemed to retreat. Maybe they were smarter than I gave them credit for.

Before I could reach a point to stop and decide where I was going next, Corrina slipped in beside me. Escaping from two hormone-ridden men who had just had their egos severely tampered with is quite a trick.

"That was a pretty nasty stunt to pull. However I'm going to take you at your word that it had nothing to do with trying to impress me. If I decide later on that it did I'll be severely disappointed." She said by way of introduction.

"I give you my utmost assurances madam that I pulled that particular stunt had nothing at all to do with impressing you. Had I been trying to impress you I wouldn't have used a straw argument. If I had been locked in a room with a hologram and no audience, I would have acted the same. Although my exit probably would have suffered," I said in my most sincere tone. "Speaking of holograms, what do you think

the chances are that we are really in space? Everyone seems to be sure but nobody has told me why yet."

"You haven't been doing your fair share of information gathering now have you?" she chided me in such a tone that indicated she was 'joking around the square', a phrase that refers to harmless teasing that the speaker also really means.

"I'm afraid not." I said, "I've been slacking. Care to help me play catch up?"

"Well for starters, in about five minutes one of the political parties is going to parade in here and make a speech."

As if on cue a rail-thin black woman began to speak in a loud voice from across the hall in a language I didn't understand. Soon thereafter came an English translation from someone I couldn't see. There was some commotion and a few random cheers. The path I had chosen had led us into a wall, so we stopped walking and turned around. From across the room a parade of people began to emerge.

"She's early. There are other smaller halls where the rallies for particular parties are held and representatives can give out more detailed information. This is the largest room, so they take turns making a big speech in here from time to time. Luckily no organized fights have broken out yet. It's only a matter of time though." Corrina continued.

"Yeah, it's early yet." I said, "They are probably all still hoping they can win the popularity contest. Eventually someone will be backed into a corner"

She smiled yet again. "So what's your next move?"

Her face was unreadable. The problem with spouting random nonsense as often as I do is that you can't be sure how people are taking you.

"I don't see any way to help the political process along, it's all probably going to be decided in a bloody coup anyways." Once that had been settled I thought of a couple dozen even better reasons to avoid learning anything more for now.

"I don't know about that" she said, "You have some reputation you know, you might be able to have more of an effect than you think."

I suppose she was referring to the Generals offer. Which begged the question, exactly how famous could I easily be?

People had been looking at me, but with all the strange people about it was hard to know why. I had assumed was a matter of self-preservation.

After all, there were rumors of crazed vigilante zombie hunters wandering the streets.

Naturally then, everyone was interested in everyone else. With the possible exception of Corrina, who was dangerously close to losing interest in me as I pondered the metaphysical implications of her comments. It was time to establish my reputation as a master of the witty comeback.

"I was thinking of trying to track down a stick." I said.

She gave me a look that chose to interpret as waiting for more information before responding. I acquiesced.

"I came back here to try and learn more about my surroundings only to discover that a intricate and highly unstable world has sprung up around me. Rather than study it, my first priority is to live in it. Hopefully my natural curiosity will give me the knowledge I need to survive, and thrive. Perhaps someday I will be able to influence the complex policy decisions that will allow a relative heaven on earth to flourish on this spaceship hurtling towards god knows where. Probably the fiery star these aliens worship as God.

"In the meantime, chaos is flourishing and I seem to be averaging a major conflict every 48 hours since release. Therefore, I go in search of a weapon, and my preference is a stick."

She gave me a look that I couldn't read and said "Well... I guess any excuse to get out of here. The parade is about to begin in earnest. Care for some company?" she asked.

"Always. Happen to know where Project Humankind is located?"

As we left the speaker's voice was just reaching a crescendo. Something about how a socialist state based on the principles of Roberts Rules of Order was the only way out of this mess.

Corrina led the way to Project Humankind's HQ. On the way I gave her a shortened version of my most recent adventures. She in turn answered a few of my questions about what the hell was going on and reassured me as to the quality of her sources.

On the basis of her testimony I let go most of the last of my reservations and accepted that this was an alien craft hurtling through space away from Earth. I understood that some complex math had proven it. But then how Ernesto known? Corrina didn't have an answer for that, but she seemed to hold him in high regard.

Finally we turned a corner and came upon a man sitting behind a metal desk in the middle of the hallway. The desk looked very much like the one the General used. The man sitting behind this desk however was significantly less impressive looking. He was short and gangly, an impressive combination. He did not smile as we came into view.

"Welcome to Project Humankind's territory. Do you have any specific questions about our organization?" he asked in the tone of a fast food cashier on hour five of their shift.

"No thank you. Who do I need to speak to about getting a staff made?" I asked in my most polite tone of voice. Staff sounded more professional than stick I decided.

His face cocked to the side patronizingly "Despite what you may have heard I'm afraid that we are not in the business of bribing people over to our cause with custom-made items. We are a serious origination with lofty goals that deserve consideration based on there own merits. Primarily composed of scientists Project Humankind hopes... "

"Stop that!" I barked out quickly "Stop that right now. Do you have a supervisor I can talk to?"

It took awhile, but eventually we got to see his supervisor without lying too much. Unfortunately even more deception was required to gain an audience with that supervisor's supervisor. By then Corrina had worked up a good "Do you know who this man is?" speech that made me afraid to annoy myself. Who knows what I could do!

Finally we were led us further into the labyrinth that Project Humankind controlled to a place that contained people who were in charge of actually accomplishing stuff.

"Greetings, my name is Keiji." said the man who greeted us. "Don't worry if you can't pronounce it. Just do your best.

"My administrators tell me that you're an important man with a top-secret solution that could solve all our problems and make us all filthy rich in the process. While I highly doubt it, I'd love to be proven wrong. Care for something resembling tea?" Keiji was a quiet looking man, with light skin and narrow eyes. His English was good by not perfect. He was wearing a pair of tan slacks and a white collared shirt. He held out a tray with three cups of what was apparently tea. He had shoulder length black hair that was held back by his overly large ears. Keiji appeared to be very intelligent, and very tired. Lines circled his eyes, and he stifled a yawn.

The sizeable administrator was dismissed and at Keiji's request we seated ourselves and sipped at something warm that did indeed remind one of tea.

"I must admit that I'm impressed." I began. "You have marshaled a tremendous amount of bureaucracy under very trying circumstances and in an astoundingly short amount of time."

Keiji winced slightly.

"I'm so sorry about all of that." He said "Many of our members have become enamored by a study that correlated bureaucracy size with public perception of importance. The study is probably correct, but it leaves me in an awkward position of only meeting with people who have had to wade through layers of obviously superfluous administrators. Many of whom are annoyed at us by the time they reach me. It's particularly embarrassing for me since I disapprove of the practice myself." He smiled as if to show his embarrassment at the situation and sipped at his tea.

"I'm afraid the tea isn't all that good. I haven't had much time to work on it. What with everything else going on. But come now, this isn't what you came to talk about. I must ask are you really *the* 'Darwin'?"

No use lying about it. More importantly I decided I needed to find out what exactly it meant to be me.

"What have you heard about me?" I asked.

His expression was unreadable. I wondered if I had made a mistake in revealing my ignorance. "Well I only know the rumors, and probably not all of those. If you're the Darwin I've heard so much about then after the war there was a lot of hubbub about you saving the room by plugging up the eastern hole. You... er it is said that he fought well, and led some of the most dangerous charges. He assigned those around him to positions, and whenever a gap in the ranks appeared this Darwin was there. That sort of thing.

"So much openly displayed magic seems to have disturbed those unused to it. Including, I must admit, myself. His actions without magic have transformed him into a minor folk hero, although he's at least a good two inches taller than you" he said; joy showing clearly on his face.

Keiji sipped at his tea, reminding me to sip at mine. I caught Corrina's eye, and she looked amused as well. I probably should have asked her about this first. My heart, which if you will recall had been feeling quite sad lately, had perked up at the mention of magic. I told it to quiet down; the grown-ups were trying to talk. But it remained hyperactive, bouncing around excitedly in the background.

"Additionally, from my own sources I know that Darwin was summoned by the General soon after the war along with a number of other potential hero's. The General had already started to drum up some publicity about Darwin, and when he didn't agree to join up the General was very disappointed. It's one of the few setbacks he's experienced.

"He's good. He's not working with study's he's a natural leader and he seems to be getting some help. There are rumors that he's working with a magician of some sort.

"Any way you look at it, he's still outclassing us. He had publicity before we even had bureaucracy."

"Don't let it get you down. The tea is nice," replied Corrina.

"Thanks" Keiji blushed. Corrina had that effect on people. "In any case, this Darwin fellow turned down the General's offer and left. He was the only one to do so."

It was shocking and more than a little odd to find that I a celebrity, if only a C-lister. Particularly when I did not even remember most of the events he was referring too. I

would have to file this information away for later however, there were other things to attend to. Otherwise he might catch on that I didn't deserve any of these accolades and kick us out.

That certainly wouldn't help me get a stick.

"Thank you, I appreciate you answering my question in such detail," I said.

"It was not a problem. It is my job to know as much as I can, and our groups mission is to spread that knowledge in a responsible manner. Now if you have no other questions for me, I have one for you. What is this amazing proposal you have for us?" Keiji said, while sipping at his tea.

Corrina had helped me bluster my way past the red tape. Now she gave me a glance that seemed to say, "this is your show". She was being helpful, but I suspected that she could be more so. Was she was testing me? If so, why? My first impulse was to try and be more impressive. This time at least, I noticed it and crushed it.

"I am afraid that was something of a front. I came in search of a conversation with someone from your organization. When you put barriers in front of me, I simply worked to get past them. I do however have a request, and I am willing to see what I can do make it a fair deal"

Keiji chuckled "I told them. Put up walls and all you will do create men with catapults. Basic evolutionary theory eh Darwin?" At this he laughed so hard that tea came out his nose.

Eventually he recovered and continued, "You could be a great asset to us. In this venture I have been able to work with scientists and intellectuals who I had only dreamed of meeting on earth. Yet as you noted, we are still in the beginning stages of organizing ourselves, and we don't know how much longer we have. Our goal is to simply gain knowledge for now. What Project Humankind lacks are people who are well suited to combat." Keiji stopped and sipped his tea. I sipped mine. "I am prepared to make you head of our security operations. Keep us safe while we work. It may be that nobody wants to harm us, but then again, it may be that we have enemies."

It made sense I suppose. On board this ship there were an amazing variety of people, with a higher than average percentage of exceptional people. This group was

banding together based on scientific know-how. How would that affect the dynamics? And how necessary would security be? I had no way of knowing.

"I know what you're thinking" he continued, "There is no catch. I know that it may sound like a trap, but I assure you, I understand that that it is a risk to give a stranger so much trust. I don't know you very well. But there is no time for background checks. We need to trust someone. Our goal is not leadership.

"We do know however that the General is immoral and cannot be allowed to rule uncontested. To that end we are attempting to gain knowledge and information equal to, or exceeding his, in the event that it may prove useful. Risks of all kinds are necessary."

I couldn't let him continue. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid that I am unwilling to throw my full support behind any organization right now." I responded carefully. I approved of their goal, and I was honestly flattered. I told him as much, but the responsibility was simply too much for me.

Keiji sighed and sipped at his tea wistfully. By now, the cup, which at one point had almost runnith over was now almost empty.

"Is there any other way I could be of service to you? I would really like a stick to call my own." I offered.

He considered my offer as he refreshed our tea using the P.P in ways I didn't understand. He was nervous about something, which lead me to hope there was something else I could do for him. These negotiations were going well, but it would not do me any good to underestimate Keiji's mind. "As I just said, we need military might. We are also attempting to gather information. In a time of crisis this information may be crucial"

"Or irrelevant" said Corrina for no reason that I could determine.

Keiji nodded "Yes, or it may very well be irrelevant. Yet we solider on. If you will not join us, perhaps you could provide a service that we are loath to undertake ourselves" he handed us our tea and continued.

"Somewhere within the area that the General has set up his headquarters is the room that contains the items that drew all of us here. We need confirmation of this

room's existence and whereabouts by someone we trust. If you could escort one of our own into the Generals territory and somehow locate the room it would be of great help to us."

He sipped his tea some more.

## Wading In The Velvet Sea

-Phish

Despite my reservations, I consented to take on the mission. Happily, Corrina agreed accompany me. As was becoming usual, I was out of my depth, a state that was rapidly becoming the new normal. Corrina's presence offered additional comfort. In return for her services she demanded a dagger designed to exacting specifications. Keiji trusted us enough to give us the items before left on our mission. Hopefully it wouldn't matter in the end, but it would be nice to have them.

After the formal negotiation ended, Keiji left us with some tea and went to find from Project Humankind willing to serve as a witness. We made small talk that was indistinguishable from silence. I wanted to ask Corrina why she had decided to tag along, but the opportunity never presented itself. After about an hour Keiji came back, and said that having thought it over he decided that we could be trusted to report the truth on our own. No witness would be required.

We were then led to another room with yet another P.P. Keiji offered to create a staff for me that would incorporate my DNA directly into its design. He was very excited about the prospect. Apparently it was a pre-set configuration they had found within the "computer" system, and it had produced some interesting results. While they did not fully understand it, he claimed objects created with this method had many unique properties for their owners.

I declined, as did Corrina. It was an interesting possibility, one that part of me begged the rest of me to consider. Under the circumstances I craved normal. I just wanted a stick that I could trust and understand. The fewer mysteries the better. I momentarily reconsidered; having realized that to turn the insanity up a notch under these circumstances might be my religious duty. I considered the spiritual implications of failing to do so. But some internal voice reminded me that random stupidity had to be applied in a disciplined fashion, and now was not that time.

Keiji nodded sadly as if he had expected that answer. Up close it was apparent P.P he used had been modified somehow. The area surrounding it had been stripped away to reveal a second layer, a shade lighter. From a distance the changes were imperceptible, but up close it was clear that they had been toying around with it.

When Corrina saw the modified P.P. her eyes narrowed slightly and she looked quizzically at Keiji. He took the hint and explained that they had concocted a formula that appeared to cause the walls to reposition themselves. The walls didn't dissolve, they just moved which caused the oddly shaped bulges. Keiji was still unsure about how or why it worked. He offered to take us to talk to some other scientists who were working directly with the issue but Corrina insisted it wasn't necessary.

However she did ask for, and receive a bottle of the substance they used to melt away the walls.

The stick was designed to my liking. It was one long rod that reached from the floor up till just past my elbow. Short for a walking stick the inside was made with the same hard metal substance as the tables. They couldn't make wood yet, but Keiji surrounded it with a softer plastic-like substance that had some bounce to it. I would have preferred genuine wood, or more conventional padding, but it was serviceable. If wood had been available, I might have changed my mind about the DNA.

Then he gave Corrina her knife and his best guess of where we could start looking for the room that contained everyone's stolen items.

"I'm getting hungry. Mind if we stop and eat before we risk our lives for fun and profit?" I asked. I had been eating a lot lately. Proper nutrition was important if I was going to avoid scurvy. For all its nutrients, the brown mush wasn't very filling and I had been burning a lot of calories.

"Sure" said Corrina. We turned a corner and she led us down a few featureless hallways. Eventually we ended up near where our original cell had been. Most of my travels onboard the spaceship so far had been an effort get away from here, but in the end I kept coming back.

I was not alone. Room after room was filled with people who weren't holding any meetings, and didn't seem to really know each other. Just coming back to their cell after their release. Finding out the hard way that the great wide world outside held nothing better for them.

Once we got away from the main arteries of the spaceship we came upon something even more disturbing. As despondent as the residents of the village had looked those in the hinterlands were even more worrying. In rooms of various sizes they sat looking despondent, crazy, or both.

Some were curled up into balls; others were standing and glaring at nobody in particular. A few yelled profanities at us as we passed, others gibberish, but for the most part were quietly suffering lives of quite desperation.

Sometimes everything seems like a metaphor for life.

After what seemed like a mile, and almost certainly wasn't, we came upon an empty room. Indistinguishable from many of those we had just passed, only this time Corrina went in. Nobody was home.

"Ladies first" I said with a bow, indicating the mysterious indentation in the wall.

She knew how to press all the right buttons, and soon enough we were happily eating away at our brown nutrient rich mush.

"Not many people in these hallways" I commented, aiming for the same purposeless small talk we had shared earlier.

"As far as I can tell, nobody was stored in this area, so nobody comes back here much. Most of us were imprisoned in a relatively small area on the spaceship. Once you get aware from there it gets empty fast. Some of the more adventurous have set up bases throughout the explored areas, but most of the population just stays where it came from."

"But as you said, not everyone, we did have to walk a ways to get here..." I said thinking of the people I had seen. Like the Ron the singing homeless man who hangs out near my apartment riding his skateboard in circles, I wanted to help them but didn't know what to do. I suppose I could make insincere conversation and loan them a couple bucks.

"Yeah." she said, in agreement "Every time I have to walk further out to get completely away from them. Luckily this time it was on our way. But most of the people you saw probably just need the privacy.

"Quite a few of them seem to be suffering acute mental breakdowns." She paused to take a bite to eat. "In a way they are doing the best thing. Even more people are falling apart in public. It could get nasty."

"I suppose this sort of thing is bound to be tough on a lot of people," I said, thinking that I hadn't exactly been handling things too well myself.

"It's really sad in a way." She said, "Everyone on this ship is here because they had some capacity to react well when under pressure. I know quite a few people who'd love to have an adventure like this, but not many of them made it. I think the only thing reason things haven't devolved further is that so many of them have found other things to focus on

"Like getting a stick" I interrupted.

"Yeah" she said "Or like holding parades. The rest are just following routines and not venturing out of their homerooms."

I chewed on that, and my food for a while.

"So, tell me about your life back on Earth" Corrina asked eventually. I did not want to lie to her and so for a brief moment I felt torn. I struggled with the vast expanse of possible reactions that lay before me, and in this moment I finally admitted to myself how much I liked her.

Perhaps the only reason I was infatuated was it gave my life order, meaning and a sense of relative normalcy during a stressful time. The temptation to lie and brag came on strong. It ploughed into my defenses. But I threw some more sandbag's on and resisted as best I could.

The counterweight was over sharing.

"I worked at a toll booth back on earth. That job's probably gone by now.

"Luckily my parole was already over. I think I was only there due to inertia. Music is what I love enough to end up chasing an alien. I have art, particularly music, from which I derive unreasonable amounts of pleasure from time to time. Beyond that I have

a German Troll doll, a dieing Vietnamese plant, a cat and two wooden sailor monkey statues. Each about 4 inches tall. One blind monkey captain, attempting to steer the boat, the other sitting helplessly by, tangled in his own knots, waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

“I don’t have a bag of dice, but I want one. These are the symbols that guided my life before I ever came on board. Well, not that exact interpretation of those symbols. Sometimes the captain appears confident and defiant, and sometimes the mate appears on the verge of solving his dilemma. What I mostly have been doing in life is playing with these symbols in my head, and quite clearly stagnating in a very unromantic fashion, while pretending to do so with gusto.

“I used to have things happen to me that felt meaningful. Lately they have all seemed to slip away.” Pause “So this is crazy and all, but at least its different.

“I realize that I should also mention that I’m really quite terrified and confused.” I concluded. I was quite unhappy with my narrative. It was too personal, too open, and too deeply buried in self-pity. But there it was, I couldn't take it back, but I could move forward. So I started again, and told her about how I had gotten here instead.

As usual talking aloud had given me more insight into myself than I had suspected it would, and I realized how much I missed having conversations. Even scary ones like this where I was talking with a person that I didn’t entirely trust about things I was only just then realizing. Realizing just how dissatisfied I had been with my life. Like joining the military to force yourself to get into shape, the solution may have been a bit extreme, but at least you aren't watching reruns anymore.

These thoughts made me realize that the pain in my heart that I had been feeling was definitely not normal. And that the insane action of chasing after a monster that had stolen my album’s was less a calculated decision that the end result of a series of unwise ill conceived decisions borne out of desperation and depression. In retrospect I had clearly been lashing out, trying to get a reaction out of the universe. And boy had it hit back.

Thinking about having going after the albums based on a vision also should have seemed odd I realized, but I knew that it wasn't. Of course, not all of this was in what I said, but it fell into place as I spoke.

Terrified that she might react to what I had said I said into the silence that followed, "So how did you end up here?"

I knew from experience that the question was impossible to answer. Although what you choose to say can still say a lot.

She looked at me for a few seconds, curiously, like a stray cat trying to decide if you're friendly. Then she bowed her head back down to her bowl of food and began to speak in a practiced light sing-songy voice that had only the most tenuous connection to her usual voice, but which was nonetheless was wholly her. It was her storytelling voice.

"I had just finished some business in southern France and returned home to my home in Ohio, ready to make my report. But when I came back I discovered that my mentor was missing. Not unprecedented, but worrying. After a few days I found to my surprised that she had left me a note at one of our drop points. It was a secure location in a code that I mostly trusted. It instructed me to retrieve a certain object that was in the position of a Mr. Famosa and contained everything I would need to locate him. I was to reconvene with her with the object in time for a very important meeting." Corrina glanced at me again "Sorry to speak in such vague terms but a lot of this I'm not really at liberty to reveal."

I nodded, annoyed but fascinated. Even if she was lying, I had always had a soft spot for spy novels.

"I didn't know what to expect. The message had lacked detail and I didn't even know if I should consider Famosa a friend or a foe? After a short, bumpy flight into Pennsylvania, I made it to Famosa's place. Not knowing where to start, I put him under super secret surveillance. He owned a large three-story house, with a solid foundation but in need of repairs. The gutters hadn't been cleaned in years, and part of the porch

was caved in. It was situated on the outskirts, surrounded by unused farmland and woods. The sort of house a casual observer might assume had been abandoned.

"I had awhile until I had to meet up with my master, so I decided to be extra careful. I rented a room and a car in town, and for the first few days I simply watched. I learned that Famosa slept in an upstairs bedroom every night. Everyday after breakfast he went down to his basement. He made a second trip right before dinner. He spent most of his time reading and watching TV. I couldn't tell what he read, but his viewing habits consisted primarily of cartoons. Most of what I learned never became relevant.

"What I had really been waiting for was for him to leave the house and go grocery shopping or something. But for the three days I was there he never left. I was prepared to wait him out though, I had time, and I saw no point in risking a confrontation. For all I knew I might have been able to simply identify myself and get what I needed, but I did not want to risk it.

"On the fourth night when I was sure he had gone to bed, I started the trek back through the trees towards my car when I heard another car pull up in the distance.

"At first I ignored it, but soon I heard voices in the woods ahead of me. They were coming towards me. So I hid, knowing that they had probably seen my car parked on the side of the road, hoping they had no reason to care.

"There were three of them, dressed in black, their faces were obscured by ski masks. The tall one was almost certainly female, and the other two were male. Each was equipped pretty much identically, a semi-automatic rifle, a handgun, and a few knives strapped around their belt. When they got to about the midway point in the woods they stopped. I slid up as close to them as I dared.

'What about the girl?' asked the shorter man.

'She's nothing. We could warn her away, but it would risk alerting *him*, and more likely than not she'd ignore us or try and cause trouble. If she decides to interfere we'll just overpower her.'" responded the woman, who glanced up at the larger man for confirmation.

Unless there was another woman involved, they knew I was around. I was about to come up behind them and take them out, when I heard another car pull up in the distance. I couldn't be sure about taking them all down silently without raising a fuss.

"It must have been a van because when the second group arrived I had ten people to contend with, all identically dressed and armed. This was getting out of hand. It was obvious they were planning more than a simple robbery, and there wasn't anything else around except Famosa's place.

"While I hesitated they went on ahead. They split when they got to the clearing around the house. Five went in the front and five in the back.

"I made a dash through the open area between the woods and the house and leaned up against the house. My first instinct was to go in through the cellar door, hoping I was right about where he kept the object, and that they didn't know that yet. I was also hoping that they would be spread thinly enough through the house that I could handle anyone I met one on one.

"I felt bad for Famosa. He seemed like a nice guy, and by this point I half-suspected that he didn't even know what he had. If he did know then for all I knew he could have been a friend of my mentor. There just wasn't much I could do for him against ten armed brigands. Once I had the object I thought I might be able to lure some of them away, it would be risky, but worth a try. Assuming they were after the same thing I was.

"Then, as I was creeping towards the cellar door, I saw the lights flash on in the house, and I heard a gunshot. Through the window came the unfamiliar voice of an older man.

'In my hand is the detonator to the dynamite you see all around you. It is rigged throughout the house. If you kill me, my hand will naturally unclench and set off the explosion that will result in your deaths. As you will also observe, I am blindfolded. This is so that I cannot see you to identify you later.

"You are only safe if you walk away. My blindfold puts me at a disadvantage, so that if I even *think* that you are coming near me I will be forced to set off the explosives.

If my calculations are correct it should destroy everything outside of a one-foot radius of me, including almost certainly whatever you have come here for.

'Now I don't have much money, but I want to give you a way to back out of this without too much damage to your pride. So why don't you tell me what you've come here for and if I can give it to you then I will. There are some objects in my possession that unfortunately, I would rather die than let you have. In which case we will have come to an impasse.'

'By this time I had snuck up to the window and could see what was going on. Famosa was sitting in a wooden rocking chair in the middle of the library, blindfolded. In his left hand he held a small electronic device of some sort. Novelty sized sticks of foam dynamite were strewn throughout the room. Ducked taped to the foam were what appeared to be real sticks of dynamite. The people in black were all crowded in near the doorway, looking at each other, in apparent confusion.

'One of them opened his mouth to respond and got as far as "This is all..." when the sound of thumping came from behind them. Everyone in the doorway except for the leader got out of the way. He stayed held his ground for a moment, pulled out his gun, and hesitated. There backs were to me, so I did not see the alien until he had knocked over the man with the gun. It was then that I saw the alien held the object I had been sent to obtain on it's back. The alien scurried through the room and jumped through the window I was standing under. It landed just past me. I grabbed the object, while trying to shield my eyes from the still falling broken glass. The alien didn't let go, and spewed out the chemicals necessary to knock me unconscious.

"The last thing I heard was Famosa mutter "They never let me have any fun." Blurrily I saw him running after the creature, no longer blindfolded, with a pink bunny hopping ahead of him.

"When I awoke, I was onboard this ship. Famosa was going by the name of Ernesto, and the pink bunny was nowhere to be found. I don't think any of the people in black made it on board, but I can't be sure. Ernesto has agreed to come and meet my master if we make it back in time. I suspect that he might already know her. He certainly didn't

seem annoyed when I confessed to have been plotting to steal from him. But he's a strange man, so I can't be sure."

I took a few moments to allow for digestion. Then we got up, made some small talk, and went on our way.

The Wind  
-Cat Stevens

As we walked, we planned how we would overcome the Generals forces. This was fun, but unproductive. It was nearly impossible to anticipate what we would encounter.

So, far I had been doing little more than reacting to the situations that had popped up around me, and struggling to turn this realization into a proactive solution. I deserved some slack because the situation in question involved aliens stealing my album collection, causing me to give chase until I was imprisoned on their spaceship. Which subsequently led to a jailbreak and then uprising that somehow had half the spaceship believing in magic.

Which doesn't exist.

Space madness.

The incident with Luke and Jen was perhaps partially my own doing, but as when I chased after the alien, I had been reacting not planning. Also that situation had ended up involving a giant pink bunny. A fact that easily trumps any logic you might care to throw at it.

I had been improvising solutions to problems as they had arisen, playing whack-a-mole. My mission to obtain a stick had been the first goal I had set for myself. Having made a deal to accomplish my goal, I was now honor bound to sneak into the Generals territory and locating the stolen items that had lured us all onboard.

The downside was that I had no idea what to expect. Would there be guards posted? If so, would they be armed? I tended to envision the General as surrounded by highly intelligent henchmen. With a world to chose from, and enough time I had no doubts that he would round up such a crew. But circumstances on the ship were far from ideal, as my attempts to break through Project Humankind's bureaucratic defenses had shown.

It was Corrina who put an end to it to the speculation. "It goes against my training to take on a mission this dangerous without a plan, but now that we have, I don't see any choice but to just go in and do our best. If he's taken every precaution possible, then

we have no hope. If we waited and tried to investigate it would only give him time to develop more sophisticated defenses."

"And probably our information would be useless by then anyways." I said.

My grand insight aside, her speech made me want to depend on her expertise, yet every time I tried she found subtle ways to confound my attempts to do so. Whenever I would try to let her take the lead in the conversation she would always find a way to sidestep it and keep me talking about *my* ideas and *my* contingency plans.

As we walked I contemplated all the ways I was out of my depth. The surface was barely visible above me, and I could not tell which direction I was heading. There was nothing to do about it though.

It was into this atmosphere of fear and mystery that my self-confidence inserted itself.

Using Keiji's directions we reached the edge General's territory by way of a side passage. Our hope was to enter a relatively undefended area as close as possible to the storehouse. Project Humankind had drawn up projections as to the most likely locations based on structural patterns in the building that he hadn't even tried to explain to us.

The General's territory was surprisingly small compared to the area's others had staked their claims on shaped like a congressional voting map.

As we walked I reflected on the position the General held in the world I now inhabited. He defined all of the political debates. Just as I reacted to the strangeness of the world around me, anyone else seeking influence was forced to react to him. He did not need to control a larger territory because, in a sense, he was laying claim to the whole world. Since falling from his grace I had spent most of my time surrounded by the opposition, who defined their identity in relation to him.

Yet he was the man who had freed us. Had he called himself the reincarnation of Hitler and instituted a reign of terror demanding that all worship him as God Supreme and requiring the public sacrifice the cutest babies he *still* would have a cache of political capital to burn. There simply hadn't been enough time for anything to catch up with him.

These thoughts led me to the mystery of my shipmates. So far I had encountered my fair share of fools, but fewer than I expected. This could work for me as well, if the apparent lack of guards we encountered was any indication then hopefully in this environment even the General was having a hard time finding privates for his army.

It was at a crossroads that we first encountered signs of life, two men, both taller than me. I am sure they had distinguishing marks, but nothing so distinguishing that I remember it now.

I don't want to give the impression that I am dismissive of foot soldiers. On the contrary, without them and other small miracles, chaos would break out of its well-cleaned cage, and the world would rapidly collapse into true anarchy. All hope would be lost and a reign of terror such as even the General could not imagine would overcome the land.

At the time I'm sure I paid close attention to them. But the unfortunate truth is that while privates are the entire world to themselves, everyone ends up functioning as disposable NPC's to most people they meet. In other peoples narratives the role I played was assuredly that a private. I can accept that.

I do remember that we came upon them in deep conversation. Their metal poles were leaning against the wall rather than in their hands. Had we been planning an ambush this would have been ideal.

"Ello there." I called out amicably as we approached them. "I just finished up my job. As well he should know by now given all the trouble it caused! So, iffin you don't mind, could ja you please take me to check on my ring?"

"Your ring?" asked man I thought of simply as Lefty.

"It's with the rest of the items the alien bastards stole. Just take me back to the room and show you where it is find it". I snapped back.

"I could take you there, but I doubt they'll let you in unless you have special permission. I was just there just a few hours ago and nobody there had heard anything from Jake about these missions, and Jake's the only one they'll listen to" said Righty helpfully. "So, why don't I walk you down right now to his office and see if he's busy."

I sighed dramatically. "That's alright. All this damn red tape. I know it's for the best but..." It was just like my day job. Instantly we were friends.

"Anyways, I don't wanna cause any trouble. I just want to make sure my ring's alright" The thought struck me that this was working out rather well given my contrived speech impediment. It seems I wasn't the only one who'd been sent out on a "mission" with my stolen item as payment. "I think we can manage on our own" I finally managed with a weak smile.

"No can do." said Righty with a shake of his head "Till they get some identification together I have to escort everyone to their destination so that nobody gets the idea they can just walk in."

No use insisting. If I pushed harder I risked reminding him that his job was to be suspicious not amicable.

Once we started walking Righty moved to my left, and I was forced to ask him his real name, which he claimed was Rocky. No reason he should be better at making up names than me. I told him my name was Ralph, and suddenly wondered if I should have worried that he would recognize me.

Not that he should be able to, but I was apparently semi-famous now. I'd have to be careful. Although I wasn't sure how I could avoid letting people recognize me, maybe a mustache.

I was considering the best way to get rid of him when we rounded a corner and heard a shout. A slight woman with bright yellow hair came running up to us, breathing heavily.

"Rocky, thank god I caught you. There's been another break-in. All non-essentials are supposed to help neutralize. Code Andrew five niner. She was last seen near the pits, so she may be here already, or she may have gone straight for the heart. No way to know. It's probably just a harmless kid, but you know how ancy they are." The yellow haired woman gave a quick description of the intruder, and ran off, presumably to notify the next guard station.

As soon as she was out of sight Corrina came behind the man previously known as Righty and grabbed his neck. Apparently she did so in a very specialized way, because he collapsed.

“Do you think that could be Roselyn?” she asked me her face full of concern.

Which caused me to think back on the description. It hadn't sparked any thoughts at the time except mild annoyance that someone else had seen us with Righty.

In retrospect, the description did sound a lot like Roselyn.

“I guess so... but what are the chances?” I responded and kept watch while she dragged good old Rocky's body into a side room. “I guess we should try and look for her?” I said, hoping that she hadn't knocked out Rocky and compromised our mission without reason.

Now that there was a body, it was only a matter of time until people started looking for us as well. “I'm going to.” She replied. “You're welcome to join me if you'd like”.

With that she closed her eyes, knelt, and placed one hand on the floor and the other around some object in a pouch she had on her belt. She did not take the object out of the pouch. I assumed that she was doing something productive and hadn't simply flown off her rocker. Back on earth - hey that's a cool phrase that finally had a legitimate place in my vocabulary - “back on earth”. A phrase like that can help you attract the interest of women.

Anyways... back on earth my neighbor, a wild haired divorced ex-marine who lived across the hall also ran a new-age bookstore. Once when I lost my keys he had spent two hours meditating on them for me in an attempt to help me locate them. It hadn't helped, but his body posture had been very similar to Corrina's current posture.

Situations like this are why I am always reluctant to work with a partner never. On my own I'm free to take risks, and while I don't always know what's going on, I am still alive and as far as I can tell I haven't ruined anyone's life in years. As soon as I'm forced to consider someone else's well being, and more importantly, trust in their skills, things inevitably become complicated.

After a few moments she opened her eyes and walked quickly out of the room. The time when she deferred to my leadership was over. I was relieved. It had left me feeling a little manipulated.

We moved as quickly as we could without drawing undue attention. Quite a few guards were running around, presumably searching for the same person. We ducked behind corners as needed. Corrina only had to repeat her Vulcan death grip once. The cracking sound he made as he hit the ground resonated loudly, and I started to wonder how long it would take them to recover, and if they ever would. The human body can be surprisingly frail.

Ignoring the possibility of death, if I got hurt during this misadventure, there was no guarantee I wouldn't end up with a permanent trick knee or something.

The ship once again became a blur of disorienting hallways that I could never hope to comprehend. My heart hurt. We rounded a particularly sharp corner and I almost bumped into a large black man with a bushy grey beard and a shaved head. He was wearing a bright orange hunting vest.

"If your looking for the runaway they already got her, you can return to your posts," he said. He looked haggard, and tired. Probably trouble at the office.

I considered telling a fib about orders direct from the General to escort the 'captive' someplace. Before I had the chance Corrina had already nodded and moved on. So I followed. Once out of sight she picked up the pace to an all out run. It was obvious that she knew where we were going, but how?

The next corner pushed the thought from my mind as I saw Rose slung over the shoulder of an extremely large man with long flowing neon green hair. I assumed it was dyed, because it couldn't be a wig, a fact evidenced by Rose pulling determinedly at it with her teeth, her arms being tied behind her back. The longhaired fellow signaled silently to one of the other three men, who walked behind him and raised his hand, presumably to punish Rose for her defiance.

Corrina leapt between the four men. Either through luck, or skill, she managed to knock over the one who had been carrying Rose. They all fell to the ground in a tangle.

Increasingly I found myself taking on the role of the reluctant warrior. I faced off against two men, one tall and lanky, and the other short and pig-like. Both were armed with the long metal poles that I had decided must be standard issue to all privates in the Generals army.

It was a peasant's weapon; unlike a sword it required almost no skill to use effectively. Still, I had a slight advantage, because I had asked for a stick because it is my weapon of choice. Unfortunately outnumbering your opponent and ruthlessness are also advantages.

Unlike my opponents, I did not relish the role of a warrior. It was a peaceful man. Or, a fearful man, plagued by the fear that I'd get into the wrong bar-fight and end up with a trick knee that would hurt every time it rained until the day I died. Violence is a tool of last resort, but it is an effective one.

Once again my strategy was to distract them and wait for someone who knew more than me to step in. Privates are integral to the workings of any operation, and I was proud to serve.

The tall lanky man made a wild downward swing. As I parried his attack, I decided that I probably could have taken him down fairly quickly if not for Pig-boy. Each time I blocked one of Pig-boy's swings fire shot up my arms and my ears rang. He was much stronger, and due to the length of their weapons, the fact I was finally facing an opponent shorter than me didn't give me any edge.

Pig-boy didn't want to be fighting me however. He wanted to be attacking Corrina from behind as she wrestled with the man she had tackled.

This had to be discouraged. I was fighting to keep him occupied, with all my free time devoted to thwapping Pig-boy upside the head when he tried to sidle away. Then the tall one would attack again. I saw the pattern before they did, but there was no obvious way of breaking it without risking letting Pig-boy get away.

For the sake of completeness it should be noted that the final man of there little troop lay mysteriously unconscious on the ground, next to Rose, who seemed awake, but dazed.

Pig-boy exhibited a peculiar level of intelligence. He was just smart enough to realize he needed get away from me so that they could outnumber the greater threat: Corrina. But he was not wise enough to let me hit him once without retaliating so that he could escape, like a runaway poodle that comes back whenever you call its name. Pause to catch your breath and it's gone out of range. Thwap, as the comic's say, and Pig-boy came running back again.

Old tricks are sometimes the best ones, that's why they have lasted so long.

So I ignored Pig-boy for a moment, and instead glanced over the shoulder of his lanky companion and smirked.

Old tricks work because they appeal to something basic within us. I had managed to slide my stick along his pole until it was directly over his head. Nonetheless he was naturally quick, and managed to turn back just in time to see his fate. He looked up, but he didn't have a chance to utter a curse before I leaned in, pulled my stick off its resting place and pushed it downward, hard, onto his head. It wasn't as comical then as it seems now.

Thunk.

The second blow to his midsection felt natural, as did dropping my knee onto him to keep him disoriented while extending my reach. "Here Fido!" I called out as I thwapped Pig-boy in the kneecap with the tip of my stick, stretching my arm. He had almost gotten off his leash. He fell hard and groaned, but didn't get back up right away; it must have been a nasty fall.

The mysteries on this ship had reached critical mass. I needed some answers. The stick had come in handy though.

### Interlude Four

*One of the creatures in the distance began flying towards us rapidly, too quickly to be natural; even for a non-existent dream creature. Its motion was suddenly the focal point of this whole world. The women glared at me and I felt myself thrown to the ground. My cells hurt.*

*“You fool!” she screeched. “I could have given you everything. Taken away your fears. Your valid fears that will not go away, and will torment you until the day their truth is realized upon you.”*

*And then the flying creature was there, swooping down. Off of it’s back jumped an eight-foot troll. Holding a knapsack over one shoulder, and a walking stick in hir<sup>2</sup> other hand. Hir head bobbed slightly as zie walked towards us, indicating neither yes or no.*

*“You’ve had your chance. Now begone.” Zie said in the coarse voice of an ageing rock star who had destroyed his vocal cords with a thousand nights of revelry.*

*“That is a lie, I had no fair chance, he called on you too early, before I could make him my offer” she protested.*

*“Don’t be more of a fool than you have too. You know how the game is played. You lost, now begone!”*

*With that she disappeared. And my suffering left with her.*

*“Hello Darwin” said the eight-foot troll with glassy eyes and gray hair that should have been 3 inch’s high and in my apartment. The troll with wrinkled skin, a kindly face, and too-smart grin, the troll that should have been made of plastic and should definitely not be talking. I no longer felt the oppressive forces that had pounded at me when the woman had been there. But nonetheless I was rattled.*

*“I’m afraid this must be a bit of a shock to you.” As the troll continued the excess skin around hir face gave it an unreal look.*

*“I’m afraid that I must agree that it is. Care to help me out a bit?” I said, stalling, trying to recover my senses.*

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<sup>2</sup> Hir = gender neutral pronoun for his/her; Zie = gender neutral pronoun for he/she. It’s difficult to ascribe gender to a troll.

*"I'm afraid that I'm going to have to be awfully formal about this. Protocol is important in some things" Zie responded with confidence.*

*"I am positively terrified that I don't know what 'kind of thing' this is."*

*"I am willing admit bravely that I am in fact, a God."*

*"Courageously, I would like to point out that I bought you for five dollars in Germany."*

*"Without much trepidation I would like to inform you that, in my natural form I do not actually look like the troll doll you so faithfully worship. Anymore than my assistants two associates look like two sailor monkeys. There are many different types of Gods, and our power comes from many sources.*

*"Many, like the one you just met, depend on the fear and awe of humans to get by. And so she appeared to you as she did. It is an indication of her power that she is here at all. Most of her kind could not even make the journey on board this ship at all. They are based on earth, or other planets, and cannot operate away from them."*

*"And you?"*

*"What is a God? More than just a creature than has the audacity to call itself a God and make it stick? There are many different forms... most simply take their power from essential forces. Like the desperate Gods of fire. Now I am a bit of a special case, but I am not as dependent on worshippers as our friend there. Nonetheless I appreciate them, and find them useful."*

*"Is Ernesto a follower of yours?"*

*Zie laughed. "No. But you're thinking along the right tracks. Ernesto is a bit of a special case as well. As you will probably guess I was involved in leading you there to help save the couple. I am... a friend with the force that called Ernesto there. I owed it a favor at least, and now it owes me one. It all gets very complicated very quickly. If it was easy, it wouldn't require Gods."*

*I could tell that was supposed to be a joke, but I didn't really understand it. I thought about this for a moment. I wasn't angry exactly, but confused. "Not that I minded helping the couple, but I risked my life so you could earn a favor with some other mysterious force? Not that I believe you, this being a dream and all.*

*"How often have you manipulated me like that?"*

*"How can this be a dream?" Zie asked. "You're not even asleep right now."*



## Castles Made of Sand

-Jimi Hendrix

The commotion caused enough of a distraction that the more experienced fighters were forced to take notice. Corrina took advantage this and soon enough our only problem was the man I was kneeling on. He was feisty and tried to resist.

"Do you have any fancy tricks that can be used to knock out our dear friend here?" I asked Corrina. He made another attempt at a struggle, until I leaned in even harder, aware that if I continued to press on his throat it might do real damage. Or perhaps do nothing and he would just wake up as soon as we left the room.

"Just hit him on the head" suggested Rose with a smirk as Corrina came over and preformed her neat little sleeper hold.

"We all have much to learn" I commented to nobody in particular.

Rose looked up at me annoyed, but then turned to Corrina and said "We have to hurry. Josephine and Ernesto are in trouble. They've been captured, and he's calling to me."

I carefully watched Corrina's reaction to this news. Giving nothing away, she said, "Do you have any idea who has taken them? Surely not that fool General..."

Rose's entire body shook as she said " I have no idea; he's only been able to reach me for brief periods. He's struggling, we have to hurry."

Corrina nodded and glanced at me with a concerned frown. "We should be very careful. If there is something around that can hold those two against there will then there are forces at work far more powerful than anything I suspected before. This ups the stakes quite a bit."

"I've always been a gambler," I said, mostly to annoy Rose.

Rose stood up, faltered against the wall for a second and began walking, with Corrina following close behind. My brain meanwhile was working harder than Sherlock Holmes on cocaine to assimilate this new knowledge. Ernesto was my moral guide and hero, and I remembered Josephine from before.

The warning about power was more worrying however. I had no trouble thinking of Ernesto as powerful in some mysterious unspecific way, but Corrina's comments seemed to indicate that something more than that was at play.

She had voiced no concerns when we decided to infiltrate the base of the most powerful human onboard an alien spaceship. She had been nonchalant about going up against someone who referred to himself as the General, and who had assembled an army out of nothing after potentially staging a coupe against our alien overlords.

She had also failed to bat an eyelash when she located Rose through mysterious means. Discussions of magic held no interest for her.

And yet she chose now to give a warning.

I had been dealing with things at the upper limits of my ability for some time now; meanwhile she had been be-bopping along as if taking a stroll through the park during a jazz festival. And NOW the stakes were being raised.

It was only through a Herculean effort that I was able to re-focus myself on the task at hand. Well that and a promise to myself to ask even more questions at the next convenient opportunity, followed by another formidable exertion of pure will-power to force myself to overlook that I'd made that promise to myself more than once now.

After passing through a few rooms we came, not surprisingly, to a different one. As per usual it didn't appear any different to me, but we had stopped. So I knew that this one was different.

"This repetitive décor is enough to drive a person mad" I commented to one of the two guards who were lounging about, very clearly not doing much guarding and not even regarding us with suspicion. It's hard to find good help.

Corrina lunged at the man. Then the other, a woman, tried to run. Unfortunately she tripped over my foot on her way out, and Corrina did her trick again. Your average private just hasn't received enough training to stand up to someone like Corrina.

Rose went over the wall and pushed on it. "He's behind this wall. I know he's behind this wall. There's no way to get around. The door's gotta be here somewhere" she in a voice that got shriller by the moment. I wasn't the only one beginning to lose it.

Corrina smiled and her eye's lit up as she pulled out the jar of liquid she had borrowed from the scientist's coven. "Lets try this," she said, and with that she opened the jar and splashed the liquid on the wall where Rose had been pounding. The wall began to disintegrate.

No, it began to recede, like a slug pulling away from a pretzel.

The process was fascinating. Obviously the walls were a mystery that Corrina had been working on for awhile, but like this entire adventure so far, observing this piece of the puzzle only produced more questions than answers. When I had first arrived I had investigated the walls carefully and I knew that they were weird. After awhile I had gotten accustomed to them, and I had fallen into the habit of treating them like normal walls. This had clearly been a mistake.

Anther mistake may have been opening this doorway, or whatever it was. Behind it were the Old Man, Ernesto and Josephine along with a two-inch tall pinkish ball of fluff.

They each were encapsulated motionless with their eyes closed; surrounded by a transparent version of the same substance the walls were made out of. It didn't have the solidity that the walls did, but now that I was looking for it, it had the same eerie subtle unnatural features. I tapped it with my stick and it made an odd noise, but it was definitely solid.

"Will that stuff work on whatever's holding them too?" asked Rose.

"I don't know. I didn't know if it would work on the other walls until I tried, I have no idea what it might do..." said Corrina softly, considering her options. "I guess I could try. I don't want to hurt them, but we can't stay here forever."

For a moment everyone hesitated. Torn between fear of harming them and fear of doing nothing. Then the goo around the bunny exploded. Small one-inch pieces of hardened gunk shot out everywhere. By the time got to me they were soft again, but they quickly hardened like candle wax onto my cloths. The bunny looked up, and it's countenance shown of intelligence and fury. I was a little bit intimidated and took an involuntary step back. This was fortunate because it put me behind Corrina, who shielded me from the second round of goo that shot away from Josephine. Her first

expression was one of satisfaction. By the time Ernesto's blew I had put a wall between the flying goo and me.

I didn't see his expression, due to the aforementioned wall.

"We must take leave of this place," said Ernesto in a tone that made his phrasing sound even more awkward. Then again, the fact he was talking at all moments after awaking from his sludge prison was a good sign. Josephine nodded a somewhat more dazed assent. The bunny was already out the opening and standing next to me. Its ears standing straight up.

Soon enough we were on the move again. Corrina was having a conversation I couldn't quite make out with Rose and Ernesto.

Nobody was chasing us, which surprised me, but with the new additions to our party, and recent events being what they were, I had accepted that I was completely out of my league. Maybe some ghosts were chasing us? How would I know?

Wherever they went I would follow. These thoughts must have shown, because Josephine turned to me with a sympathetic expression on her face

"Ya know, you're really handling this all very well. Lotsa people are cracking all over the place, and most of em have hardly gone anywhere. You've a right to feel a little frazzled. I feel it myself and there's no shame in it." Perhaps because something about her was so grandmotherly, I didn't feel condescend to.

I didn't really get a chance to react more than that before a vision appeared in front of us. The creature, or vision of the creature, - I knew instantly that it wasn't the real creature, only a sort of holographic vision of one - was floating in the precise center of the room.

I knew that what I saw was a vision because it told me so. Not with words. I just knew, and I knew that it had told me, just as I knew it was telling everyone else on board the ship the same thing, and I knew that it was appearing in every room on the ship that had sentient life in it.

Descriptions aren't my strong point. Details tend to blur for me once they are no longer relevant. So I remember that my opponent had long arms, but I forget the scar on his nose and the gleam in his eyes.

I remember exactly how this thing looked. It was shaped like a pinto bean. In its center was a one inch pulsating dark pink ball, emanating from which were blue vein-like lines that spread rapidly like tree branches throughout the translucent substance that was its body. Some of the lines dead-ended, while others continued to the outer edges of its body. As it floated the entire body contracted in and out a few inches, and the blue veins twitched. Periodically a blast of deep purple would pulsate through one of the veins, until it reached a dead end, causing blast of light to flare up for a moment.

I remember exactly how it looked, because it wasn't really there, it was just telling me that it was there. This information was burned deep into my subconscious, as well as my consciousness, and probably parts of my nose as well. This made being knocked unconscious by the first aliens seem like a pleasant day at the spa. These aliens didn't bother with chemicals; this was a direct assault on my reality. It was as if something was talking through my spine. Its message was more real than reality.

And as I contemplated this I realized that it knew I what I was thinking. When it spoke again, after what seemed an eternity, I heard its words in the same terrifying fashion it communicated everything else.

"Greetings everyone. We apologize for your concern. This is an informative statement in order to be telling you that we present no sick will towards you. Does not exist any need to worry. Those sick are not wounded deeply and will heal with no aid. Translated in a poor manner, we are..." silence, and then... "Vuerpo, enemies of Ghfdipo. Ghfdipo are ones who captured you and brought you here. While they live in the surface, we developed in the humid liquid center of our planet.

"For far too much from our time they have ruled us. But now we are using our superior mental skills and overcoming them. We now rule the planet, and have taken custody of this ship as war presses on. We are not certain why you are here. They are in binding treaty's that should not allow. Only take limited living forms for their scientific

studies, as with us as well. This issue will be presented above in the next international meeting of courts.

“It is not clear how this will have repercussions on your fate. We have this ship and we will now begin the negotiations with your leader the General. You I thank for your patience for the duration of this time of trouble. We will make the further statements, as required.”

Having deposited that bit of knowledge in our heads, the creature promptly disappeared.

Everyone was struck silent, processing the poorly worded information. It was clear that they were still struggling to learn our languages. Or maybe it translated perfectly into Chinese, but for me it left something to be desired. But what did that indicate? How different were our languages? Was the fact they could communicate at all impressive? Or should it indicate a weakness? How much do they think they told us? They had certainly hinted at some interesting possibilities.

Some of the implications were clear at least. There was another alien species. They were caught up in a battle or revolution of some sort, against the ones who had taken us. The entire situation had taken a jump to the right. There was some sort of other authority, a general council, our presence here was illegal according to that council. If it functioned anything like the Federation we would be out of here in no time. Maybe this whole thing was a mistake.

In this new paradigm, the General had won. He was in charge of negotiating our position in this new world. All of the political efforts of my fellow shipmates, as well as my current mission, were rendered, for now, meaningless.

Jamming  
-Bob Marley

In the midst of these thoughts, I felt a tremendous pressure along the right side of my body. I had the brief sensation of flying, which ended quickly when the left side of my body hit the wall. I would probably develop a few small bruises, but I was ok. My companions had all been through a similar experience I noted, although Ernesto and Josephine had managed to stay on their feet. I took ungentlemanly satisfaction in seeing that both Rose and Corrina had been knocked to the ground.

“Looks like someone’s not happy” said Rose, pointing at where the middle of the room where we had been standing. A stunning variety of nouns, many ethereal in nature, were flying through the room. Some mixed with other things, some came alone. They traveled through an air that usually, but not always, seemed shimmer. Otherworldly blue bolts of light came first, followed by a variety of floating sharp metallic objects. At one point a stream of black flame filled the entire room for a moment, and was gone. I’m pretty sure I even saw a few flying animals. Most of the stuff simply moved too quickly, or was partially obscured by other objects, and came off as a blur. A few things even hit each other and caused miniature explosions. I gave silent thanks to whatever force had moved us to the sides of the room.

Rose was right. Accepting that magic existed, it looked very much as if some of the more powerful magic users on-board weren’t happy with the creature’s decision to anoint the General as leader, and had done something about it. Magic, one of the biggest of the herd of proverbial elephant's that my brain had been avoiding.

The ability to create rooms of black flame stood in conflict with everything I knew about reality. In some ways it stood as much in defiance of my sense of the world as the non-existent alien that had so recently forced its way into my consciousness.

I delegated responsibility for working out the implications of what I was seeing to another part of my brain, and let the majority focus on being in awe.

I was not frightened, or agitated. I was simply mesmerized. My heart called me towards it. Something within me longed. Something within me recoiled.

If magic existed, then it meant my sense of the world had no bearings. It was like death as it killed my sense of self, my ability to process experience as anything but pure terror. It was like life as it opened up a wider world of infinite possibilities and pure wonder.

Then it tapered off, and stopped. "Is it over?" I asked to nobody in particular.

"I guess that's most of what's coming this direction" said Josephine. "Some won't have to send projections through the air like that anyways. It's sloppy."

Ernesto looked insulted at that comment.

That was all I needed, and I began to run after the magic. Towards its destination, towards the General, I followed it down twisting corridors. As I ran, I realized that I could feel something in the air, left in the wake of the magic. I used it, and the scorch marks on the wall to guide me. I heard Rose call for me to slow down as they followed. Part of me wanted to, but I didn't. I did however glance behind me, and saw that the pink bunny had doubled in size and was a few feet behind me.

It leapt up face-high and turned blue for a moment. I could feel power in the air. The bunny had taken a hit of some Johnny-come lately force, but it kept hopping.

In the distance I heard the voice of the General.

"You should realize that we are more powerful than we look. You are in a delicate situation. Can you really afford any unexpected surprises? I can provide you with most of the objects, and perhaps a few dozen people for study, but I will need more than just our safe passage home..."

I peaked in and saw the General sitting in the middle of a large room sitting on a steel chair. Across from him was one of the floating jellybean aliens. Behind him stood a small mousy man with curly brown hair and dark blue eyes, decked out in a brown tweed suit. At his feet lay over half a dozen men lying on the ground in various states of undress. I could see blood pooling on the ground next to them. They weren't moaning.

The small man would have looked like a high school principle if not for the long curved knife he held over his head. He was chanting something in a language I couldn't

decipher, one that didn't even have proper syllables. Lately I had overheard people talking in every language known to humankind, and this still sounded foreign.

From the blade dark shadowy forms rapidly emerged. Like ghosts they floated out slowly towards the many entrances into the room. They hovered there for a moment. Some of them dissolved, some exploded, and others merely glowed for a moment and disappeared. After I saw a yellow bolt hit one I realized that these wraith like figures were absorbing the attacks, much as the pink bunny had done for me. A few seemed to be able to withstand more than one attack before dissipating, while others disappeared with no visible attack. A few moments ago they must have had their work cut out for them, but now they were beginning to overwhelm the room. The small man showed no signs of stopping whatever he was doing though and didn't appear to notice my arrival.

One of the shadow creatures started moving towards me. This had clearly been rash. I swung my staff at its faceless head, and felt a jolt as it passed through. It made no response, so I stepped around it. It just hung there, motionless.

I walked forward calmly. The General turned to try and face me. Before he got very far I swung the stick as hard as I could at the back of his head and connected. I felt ill to my stomach as I saw him go down, and heard a crack as his face hit head hit the table.

"He is not our leader, you were mistaken. You should not deal with him," I said to the alien, as I turned to deal with the knife wielding man. He cried out something else in that same language and I saw one of the black creatures flying at me. I felt pain in my back. I fell to my knees, moaning.

I hurt. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Corrina and Rose come round the corner. The last thing I saw before blacking out were the feet of the pink bunny as it landed right in front of me.

### Interlude Five

*The dark easy laugh of my mysterious troll/god companion soothed the little anger I had managed to accumulate in the midst of my confusion.*

*"Look" zie began "You're handling all this rather well. Most of your shipmates have gone mad already and they have been spared Oskira. But I'm afraid I have a confession that is going to make this harder for you.*

*"You see, I have been manipulating your life for a while now.*

*"It is no mistake that you have no significant conflicts in your life; that no factions have tried to recruit you for their causes, or that no groups have tried to train you in their ways. It's no real defense to say that even if I hadn't affected your life, other gods, and other things would have. Now try and save your rage about that for another time. For I have shielded you so that I could make this offer."*

*Zie must have known my soul well. The confession was only that I had been spared unpleasant things. But even if zie had not used the word, there was no escaping it.*

*Manipulated. My whole life had been manipulated against my will.*

*"What kind of offer?" I asked.*

*"You are already my follower. Albeit, not the best one. You are good, but your ironic self-confidence remains forced and stilted.*

*"However, now is a time where we can formulize our relationship. Oskira's attack has provided us with an opportunity. One of the advantages of this situation is that it gives us a moment of GRP."*

*"GRP?"*

*"Great Ritual Potential."*

*"Because of that other God-woman?"*

*"Technically a Goddess, but yes that is part of it. It is also because you rejected her freely. Because you are here in this place, at this time in your life. There are more factors at play here than you may realize, and the rules about these things are... more flexible than you might realize. Still, I like doing it this way. Symbols still have power. There are things happening you cannot understand. But there is this moment.*

*"This moment, before you consciously use manipulate the world without your body for the first time, in the midst of your first grand adventure, I would like to make you my priest."*

*Zie winked. It seemed out of place, which seemed just about right.*

*"I am making you the formal offer of allowing your power to mix with mine. Then I will be able I ask things of you that I would ask of no other, and you may ask things of me I would tolerate from no other. We may both refuse sometimes, or always.*

*"This is an offer of profound trust. I am courting you above all else because I think that our aims are aligned, and will remain that way. Because I think I can trust that you will not wholly reject me in the future. Once given, I cannot take this gift from you. It becomes a part of you, just as everything else that is a part of you."*

*"What makes you think I would like to join you anymore than I wanted to join her?"*

*"For one, because I am not here to threaten or control you..."*

*"You just admitted to manipulating my whole life..."*

*"Yes, I have manipulated your life, and I may try to do so again. Everyone you meet does that, and you do it to everyone you meet. Even if all you want is for them to go away, you give off body language to try and convince them to do what you want.*

*I am just better at it than most. Do not feel bad, I am a God and you are not. That is not insignificant. But in this moment I am not here to threaten or control you.*

*"Also, I am making you no offers of immortality. That barrier is too great; I may not even be immortal.*

*Even she wouldn't have really given you true immortality, and that's one of her areas of power. Besides, you already follow me, just by being yourself. Just as I simply exist by being myself. That's the whole key to Godship.*

*"It's just like any other relationship, you have obligations by receiving a gift, but they are not iron-clad. You can reject me as an entity at any time. I already have, and may continue to manipulate the world around you; nothing you can do will change that. What I am doing is giving you a chance to change the power differential so it's not as coercive.*

*"If I decide I want out of this, I can of course have you killed, or do it myself, although it would be costly. In fact, it will be more costly once we are connected.*

*"I have many expectations of you as well. I have reasons for wanting you to be more powerful. This is not charity and I hope to receive my dues from this transaction, but I have the advantage of knowing you, so I have no need to question you at this time. To do so would be a charade and insulting to us all.*

*Time passed.*

*"Moreover, I promise that I am not in any way aligned with zombies. Nor do I condone any form of brain consumption." Zie grinned. I felt disturbed, but amused.*

*"Sir, you're pushing it." Said a meek, desperate voice from about three feet to his right, which belonged to a mischievous, if dour humanoid monkey with a long beard. As I looked at his body, the windless place had wind, and I saw a large ship helm, that zie struggled to keep steady. And then it was gone. But the voice said "This is a formal ceremony after all"*

*"Come now," protested the Troll, his head bobbling from side to side. "I've given him new, secret information about the Gods, I've made a formal request, I've drawn out the lines of the agreement but..."*

*"And you've also failed to fill in the lines, I know. You're doing well when it comes to mysteriousness, but it's not me you need to argue with," said the droll voice.*

*"What's the point of being a God if I can't push on the limits of reality?" asked the Troll with a slight irritation to his voice. Zie also winked at me yet again. "Ok fine, no more jokes. The most immediate effect of the change will simply be that my essence will become part of your magic. You will be more powerful."*

*I must admit by this point I was tired, emotionally worn out, and more than a bit awed. All this talk of my future had me excited, although the back of my mind was still puzzling out its implications.*

*"Why should I agree to help you?" I asked, "As you said, it will make me enemies, and impose certain obligations" I asked. I asked these things, but I did not ask them aloud. I asked them of myself. Of the troll's eyes and bobbling head. Of the terrible acid trip that had become the world around me and which threatened every possible conception of reality.*

*I asked if I trusted his. If I wanted the life that lay down this path.*

*I looked into his eyes and saw no answers.*

*The power did not entrap me. It was a gift, like all gifts, given in part out of selfishness. It weakened the borders between us and for a moment I my God better, and I trusted it. I saw that it trapped me, and made me hir. I saw that it was a God, that it was neither he nor she. I knew its name.*

*I saw in hir eyes that zie was afraid of this moment, and that zie had no fear.*

*And then I was back in my body. I looked up, and zie smiled kindly at me. Looking less like a bobbly headed troll, and more like a kindly old grandparent. My vision was fading, in and out.*

*“Congratulations. It is done. Betray me, but do not betray this gift.” Zie said. And I blacked out.*

Popeye The Sailor Man  
- Kinky Friedman / Panama Red

I awoke with a Rolling Stones song speeding along at a leisurely pace inside my skull. The song was frantic, but played with a one-off feel and confidence that calmed me. I felt better than I had in days. I still didn't understand much of what was going on. None of it really. But I felt in control of myself again.

I was armed with the knowledge of who I was, and how I wanted to deal with the insanity that surrounded me. I was ready to act. The ache in my heart had lessened, although it remained in the background, like Charlie Watt's drums, affecting everything, but difficult to pinpoint. But other burdens that I hadn't realized I had been carrying were suddenly lifted.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the ground in yet another of those brown indistinguishable rooms on board the spaceship. Josephine was the only one in the room with me.

"Up already are ya?" she asked with a grin. "I told em you'd be a quick healer"

"How long have I been out?" I asked.

"Not long, fifteen, twenty minutes at the most. But they have been some crazy times! You missed out on the best part."

I stared at her blankly.

"Right right, starting at the beginning might help. You stunned the General. A crafty fellow by all accounts, but it was Bryce's support that put him over the top."

"Bryce?" I interrupted. Determined not to lose track of what was going on around me again.

"The short guy wielding the knife and cutting up those poor people? If you don't remember them I won't remind ya. Anyways, after he saw Ernesto he ran away. Ernesto is a bit temperamental to begin with, and he's never gotten along real well with Bryce."

She smiled fondly as if lost in a happy memory. "Anyways he's still off chasing Bryce, but even money says Bryce will get away for now. Though these are tight quarters so we'll see..."

"In any case!" She interrupted herself "You'll be interested in this part. Those aliens made another general announcement that 'negations with the General proved inconclusive' and proclaimed that they would choose a new person to negotiate with. Then about five minutes later came back and told us that you were it. Since you took out the General, the alien thing declared you the new leader and said he'd be back later to talk with you after you woke up."

"Wait a second! What do you mean they said I'm the new leader?" I tried to avoid sounding like Charlie Brown; I had been doing so well playing it cool.

She gave me another grin and said, "In all my life those are some of the oddest creatures I've met. They know a lot of what's going on, and they've even been rummaging around in peoples heads, but between you and me I don't think they really grasp humans as well as they'd like.

"What you going to do? Culture can be tricky even for the best of us. Apparently when you knocked out the General they assumed you were the new Alpha. Ta be honest, they were going to sit around and wait for ya to wake up, but Roselyn spoke up and explained that you would need some time to recover and such. She's a smart little cookie, you should thank her sometime."

"Glad to see you're awake already" said Corrina with a smile. She and Rose made there way in. "I've got the General tied up pretty well and found someone to watch him. Thought I'd come and see how our new captain is doing." Her confidence inspired me.

That, nobody seemed to be resisting my ascendance to power was comforting. I took that to mean that I wasn't going to be holding any real power. These people had a plan, and I would just have to go along with it.

Thus reassured, I spoke, "I think it only fair to let everybody know that I've never been in charge of a ship this large before. Where is the dog star? Does she have a name? I've heard it's bad luck to christen a ship when not at port?"

“She?” asked Rose with a confused expression on her face.

“Ah, I can see you didn’t grow up around water. Well this will be a learning experience for us all; I didn’t grow up this near outer space.

“By tradition, all ships are female. It probably goes back to something terrible in our collective past, but I’m afraid I don’t know any details.

“Check the ships log if you want!

“Also nobody’s aloud to use ‘left’ or ‘right’ anymore. It’s all port and starboard or I’ll have ya walk the plank. Everyone got that?” I asked sitting up.

“Right Captain!” said Corrina with a grin. Even Rose was smiling, as if unable to take me seriously. Perfect.

As I was explaining what I knew of ships, the pink bunny hopped in from a room off to my port side, followed by Ernesto. I noticed for the first time that we had only moved one room away from where the General had been meeting the aliens, and that the bodies of the men and women were lying still on the ground.

That sobered me up pretty quick.

“I’m afraid he got away. But I hooked a few nasty things onto him that should keep him out of the picture for awhile” said Ernesto with a scowl that drove all thought of merriment from the room.

Nasty things? Spells? I had learned to accept a lot during my little nap, but real functional magic was still a bit of a stretch. It made me excited though. After all this maybe I could sweet talk Ernesto into teaching me something.

Some better card tricks at least.

“Well now that the gang’s all here, what are we going to do about these aliens?” I asked.

After a moment of silence Ernesto said, “If I were you, which thankfully I’m not, I wouldn’t worry about the aliens quite yet. Unless you’ve better sources than me you don’t know enough about them to do any good, so I’d focus on making sure things around here are secure. Josephine and I are holding off what we can for you, but as you demonstrated, sometimes a direct assault can trump the best laid plans.” That was comforting, focus in on practical problems on board the ship.

"Hate ta disagree with ya, but if you be want my opinion, I wouldn't worry so much about the stuff here. It's all for naught if we can't gather enough information about the aliens to give us an edge." offered Josephine.

"Now see here!" I said sternly, trying to keep an edge of humor to my voice "For one reason or another, probably some form of self-selection, this ship has attracted more than it's fair share of extraordinary people.

"Perhaps you have me confused with one of them. Now I don't mind fooling around with my own life, but everyone on the ship's life could depend on our next move. So why don't I wander off into the next room there until you guys figure it all out?"

I was panicking. Desperation had seeped in a little bit, so I overstated my case and humbleness for effect. This did not sit well with any of my images of myself, even my practical one. The best thing to do would have been to let this happen in its own time, but the aliens could come back any moment, and I didn't want to fool around.

Ernesto guffawed for a moment, and then fell silent.

"Sorry son. You weren't awake for it but... I don't think anyone here wants to risk another change of leadership. We'll help you and all but... the aliens simply won't accept it, they might go back to a popularity contest, in which case who knows who'd win." Said Ernesto gruffly. My reaction to his words must have shown plainly on my face, for he added. "I think I'm going to go poke around and make sure Bryce isn't lurking about."

Josephine smiled sadly at me, said "I have faith in you. You've held up well so far" in a grandmotherly tone and followed him out of the room.

The bunny stared at me blankly for a moment, then hopped out as well.

Corrina started to say something, and then didn't, her face creased together in worry.

"Your smart enough to know that the people here are exceptions." Said Rose quietly. "And well, as near as I can tell, those two are the most extraordinary of the bunch. But even among them... there is disagreement. Nobody has the right answer because there isn't one. Any solution that would work out for them personally might

fall apart in your hands, in part just because they are so exceptional, so powerful... but someone has to make decisions at the end of the day. And you are it. Like it or not.

“I don’t know how, but the aliens made it clear that the change in leaders confused them and they didn’t like it at all. Since you have to relay the decisions to the aliens, and nobody knows what to do, I guess you’ve also been elected to be in charge for real. I’m sure we will all give you any help we can...”

I thought for a moment. “Thank you Rose.” She winced. “I hear you talked the aliens into delaying their next move at least. You’ve given me a lot to think about.

“Now, I think I need a moment or two alone if you two don’t mind.”

They left me contemplating the nature of leadership.

Loving Cup  
-Rolling Stones

After some time, I opened my eyes and walked into the next room where they awaited my decision.

“Rosalyn, would you do me a favor?” I asked. She looked up from her conversation with Corrina.

“Thanks for finally getting my name right. What do you need?” she asked with a pleasant expression on her face. She had been annoyed at me so long I had forgotten that she probably didn’t spend her every waking moment scowling.

“Do you know where Keiji and Project Humankind are?” I asked. She nodded.

“Would you mind running over and expressing to them that I think it important that we sit down and drink some tea. I have another proposition for him”

I watched carefully as she resisted a few choice snide remarks. I suspected that she had resolved to be nicer to me. Maybe I could thank Corrina for that, or maybe it was just that I had remembered her name. Finally she settled on “I can probably get by their guys and meet with Keiji, but getting out of this area might be harder. Most of the guards already have my description and I’d bet they aren’t all happy about their leaders fall from power.”

I had assumed that the alien’s second announcement of leadership had been public like their first. Thinking back, nobody has said that. They had announced that they had broken off talks with the General, but not that I was in charge, or that the General was incapacitated. Maybe the aliens were learning, or maybe they were lazy. Either way this wasn’t much of an improvement.

Suddenly I became worried that they were no better than me, trying random things, reaching out in the dark, and hoping the next thing they tried proved to be more effective than the last.

It struck me that if so, it was my concern now. Crap.

“Does anybody know where the General is now?”

"He's over in the next room," responded Corrina, with an expression that was more curious than concerned. I got the sensation that I was being tested again, although with perhaps a little more affection than when she had accompanied me before. "I think Ernesto and Josephine are doing something with him."

"Well, lets go pay them a visit shall we?" I said, returning her smile.

There were five bodies in the room. Well, seven if you counted Ernesto and Josephine, and ten if you counted the group I came in with. But there were five unconscious bodies lying on the floor. This was a different room than the one that contained the bodies from my confrontation with the General, and, as if to prove the point that not everything has to be inscrutable, these were different bodies as well.

Off to one side was the General with Ernesto and Josephine sitting next to him, eating brown mush. The other four bodies lay near the other entrance, and were in a neat row. The pink bunny was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps it was out getting them some more food. There was no cubbyhole in this room.

"There been any trouble?" I asked, indicating the bodies.

Ernesto choked on his food for a moment, but said nothing. Josephine shot him a glance, and said, "This is the most obvious path to the Generals chambers. After the aliens announced that peace talks had broken down, a couple of people came to check in on him. Mostly concerned guards, though we've had a few would be heroes who couldn't be turned away. Figured ya could use some time to think, so we took care of em for ya, but eventually its gunna be a problem."

"Many thanks. How about the General? He likely to wake up any time soon?"

"I can wake him up for ya if you want. But otherwise he's likely to stay down."

"What if we moved him? Would he wake up?"

"What cha got in mind?" she asked with a smile that would make Dennis the Menace proud. I was unprepared for the pressure that put on me, but seeing it as my first real task as supreme leader, I pressed onward.

I glanced over at the body of the General. He was a thin man, but muscular. Weighing him in my head, I decided that given all the problems he'd caused while

awake, it was almost certain that he'd be deceptively heavy. Some people are like that. I sighed.

If only we had a wheelbarrow. Then we would really have something.

In the end, I decided to carry his body myself. It was a bit of a strain, but there was nobody else around. Rose was openly amused by my difficulties, while Corrina hid her reaction gracefully. Josephine's expression was one of amusement as well, but it was amusement directed towards an anticipated future, a tough distinction to make I know so just trust me. It has to do with the eyes. Ernesto stayed behind.

Unamused perhaps.

The weight of his body pressed down on me, and I gave a grunt of satisfaction when, upon seeing our first set of what were clearly guards, I was able to drop his body onto the ground. It gave a nice solid THUD sound. No mercy for the zombie man.

I didn't let the smile drop as I examined the guards. A man and a woman, both with dark tan skin, black round eyes, and bad teeth. The small weasely man wore his stringy brown hair long and unkempt, the other wore hers cropped sharply just above the ears. She stood almost two feet above him, and was far and away the strongest person in the room. She was also the one who was about to take the initiative and speak before I cut her off.

"As you can see, the General has been defeated." I said, gesturing to the body. "He is now under my control, and I am officially disbanding his organization. Any promises he made to you are no longer valid."

To my surprise and relief, rather than protesting and forcing me to begin my prepared list of threats, they simply exchanged a relieved glance. The man's face lit up, while the woman's smile was shorter lived. She gave me a hard appraising look.

"If he's not in charge anymore, what are you going to do with our jewelry?" she asked in a strained voice.

"Jewelry?"

She only hesitated a moment before saying, "Yes, the General was holding onto our rings... they represent everything to us. Not for our sake but our children..."

“Your children?” piped in Roselyn.

The woman took a step back, and the man wrapped an arm around her defensively. A few moments passed in silence. “Ok, I will tell you our story, then you will understand that I do not want to harm you, but I will if I must.” She said. The lines on her face hardened and she began to speak in a slightly strained voice.

“The island we grew up on was also the corporate headquarters for ANNLIUASHDKJOUYNLUYDSAA8p incorporated. They employed the whole village, and even though they didn’t pay us much, nobody starved. They were our Gods, our providers. Without them our way of life did not exist. You worked for them, or you didn’t work.

“We grew up playing in the road together and married young. We worked hard, slowly moving up the chain of command in the company. Finally on my thirty-first birthday we were selected to go work at one of their “minor” offices back on the mainland.

“The journey to America was hard, and we earned our passage by helping with the ship, became good friends with the captain along the way.

“When we arrived we were stunned to realize that the headquarters they had set up on our island was nothing. The mainland office building was easily four times larger than the one back home, and full of men in business suits. And there were another thirty buildings like this spread around the country.

“It turned out that they maintained their main production and official headquarters on our island. 'Tax loopholes' the head janitor explained to us during our second week there. It all had to do with taxes. We also discovered that we had been transferred out of the management path, and now reported to the head janitor. Tax loopholes also explained why we had been brought to the mainland. Even so, our salaries had jumped considerably compared to what we were paid back home. We thought we were rich. With the money we were making now we could have gone home and bought drinks for the entire village.

“If the corporation didn’t already own it all.” Said the man, and she chuckled bitterly.

"Anyways" she continued, "The money we were making didn't go so far in the city we now lived in. To find someplace we could afford we had to make a 3-hour drive into work everyday on a bus... Our boss invited us over for dinner from time to time, and showed us how where to shop, how to find the meat without any maggots in it..."

"It wasn't so bad" the small man interjected. She gave him a look that only wives and mothers can give.

"But then we were fired.

"Some sort of merger. ANNLIUASHDKJOUYNLUYDSAA8p incorporated got a few more letters added to the end and a Z in front of it, and we were forced out. Well without any work, Philippe and I ended up spending a lot of time in-between interviews at the library.

"There we learned about our exploitation. And more importantly, we learned even more about this tax code. I also discovered that the Z corporation that we had merged with only existed on paper. They had needed an excuse to be reclassified and utilize a different set of tax loopholes, so they could fire some people in middle management who were making too much money. So Z corp was born, full of young hungry 20 year olds willing to work for nothing for a chance at the salaries we used to make. What they don't know is... if they ever made it to the top, they'll end up getting fired by T-corp."

"I eventually found a job doing yard work" said the man. "But we were more miserable than before."

"So we became pirates!" said the woman grinning madly like Josephine. "We sold everything. Bought a boat, and started pirating. Mostly overtaking smugglers and just letting them go in exchange for a small fee. It was dangerous, but after awhile you get a sense about which ones are tough, and which ones are just dumb kids out for the weekend."

"To make a long story short" said the man, "Dealing with all those dumb teenagers made us yearn to have some of our own. But we couldn't afford it. We didn't want to really hurt anyone though, so we got into smuggling in recyclables instead."

"Recyclables?" asked Rose, frowning slightly.

"Gill Bates?" I asked smiling a touch more than Rose frowned.

The woman nodded. Rose turned to me, still clearly confused. Gill Bates was one of my personal hero's.

By way of explanation I said, "Gill Bates is one of my personal hero's. One of the last great Americans." I paused a moment to give the new couple a chance to tell their story. They said nothing.

"Correct me if I'm wrong but my understanding is this; Gill Bates is one of the richest men in the world. His deal is that he thinks the government has betrayed its mission to such a degree that he spends most of his time trying to figure out ways to not pay taxes." I said.

"What kind of name is Gill Bates anyways?" asked Rose.

"A good question. I suspect that Gill Bates was not always his name. His original name is probably lost forever in the piles of money he spends hide it. He's been around forever; replacing his body parts, as they age with technology that nobody else has access to. In one of his many efforts to avoid paying taxes, he hired a bunch of environmental scientists to find him a lake that had already been so ruined by human development that it was irredeemable. He purchased it, and all the expensive condominium homes around it. Tore down the houses, expanded the lake, and moved into the lake, changing his name to Gill Bates."

"What do you mean moved in?" asked Rose, looking skeptical.

"I mean, his name is Gill, because he has gills. He had found a way to turn living in a lake a tax free zone. The government finally caught up with him on that one though. He moved out and into a smaller, better designed home elsewhere."

"Doesn't all this cost a lot of money? I mean, how is he still rich?"

The woman, Jesula, chuckled. "Once you make a certain amount, there is no going back. Everything he does make him money whether he likes it or not. When he sold the lake, he nearly doubled his investment. He managed to save some money on taxes due to the environmental credits as well. Then the super rich all wanted to move back to the place. He tried to refuse and build some low income housing instead for, and sell the place at a loss to some charities.

“He was sued in an international court for obstructing the free marketplace. They ended up forcing him to sell at market value, which had more than doubled yet again.

“Still determined to waste his money in court, he hired more lawyers and sued them for suing him. He had no legal leg to stand on, so he figured it was a safe way to dump some cash with the charity’s lawyers he hired.

“Then he won the lawsuit, while failing to overturn the previous case. I’m not even sure if he’s trying to make money anymore, or if it’s become a cartoon boomerang. Just can’t get rid of it.”

“Ok fine.” Said Rose, scrunching her nose. “I don’t know if I believe all that, but what does this have to do with recyclables?”

“Ah, see about the time we realized that ripping off drug dealers wasn’t making us enough money, Gill Bates announced that he was going to start paying outrageous sums of money for recyclables to get the tax exemptions based on them. He’d spend more buying the recyclables than he’d pay in taxes, but none of it would go directly to the government. We started off highjacking garbage boats. We’d make raids on some of the coastal cities, and then cart the stuff back to his nearest collection center”

Someday, I hoped to meet Gill Bates. They seemed to know a lot about him, but not many people did. I’d done a lot of independent research on the man, and found out that beyond his official biography, there just wasn’t much out there. Someone didn’t want Gill Bates becoming a household name. This is what had peaked my teenage interest.

“In any case” Jesula continued “once I got pregnant, we sold our boat and all our equipment, and converted it into jewelry. Even before then most of our wealth was contained in small valuable jewels... we never trusted banks much. Then the aliens took it all! We didn’t like the General... but our children... we can’t raise them on the run... it’s our life savings. It’s all we have. We could make a go of it again ourselves... but that’s no life for our kids...”

Mesmerized by my reminiscing of Gill Bates stories, I dragged myself away from my own thoughts. They had finished speaking, and were now watching me. Expectantly.

“Unfortunately, I think I’m going to have to level with you.” I said, “I have no idea, none, about what is going to happen. That said, the forces that be tell me I’m charge now. I guess that means that I’ll be taking over official custody of all the ‘items’. But I am not going to use them as leverage. I don’t need that kind of ally.

“I’m going to do everything I can to get everyone all there stuff back in the end. However, with the aliens threatening to kill us, and my not really having any idea of what’s going on, making sure we all live is going to have to take first priority. My heart goes out to everyone... but I’m not really prepared for the logistical nightmare of returning items yet. Indeed, I do not even actually control them yet. If you could help spread the word on that I’d be appreciative. You’ll get your stuff back as soon as possible.”

“That’s awfully ambitious of you. Yet I can’t help but notice that you’re not much older than those teenagers we used to deal with” said the woman, her tone flat “Why don’t we just declare ourselves in charge and ‘take custody of the items ourselves?” She wore a perfect poker face.

For the first time on this mission, I felt true fear.

I raised my hands in mock defeat. “It’s not my fault I’m charge here.” I said, and then pointed at Josephine. “Blame her.” Josephine, reliably enough grinned broadly. “But so long as I am. I’m afraid I’m going to have to take my responsibility very seriously. No mucking about you understand.”

I looked her straight in the eyes. My hand right hand held my stick loosely, and I focused on my breathing. I thought of a thousand unconvincing things to say.

“He’s a bit of a punk, but he’s better than most and we really need to get on with things.” Said Rose.

The mother nodded slowly, not quite taking her eyes off me, and reached down to pick up the dead weight of the General’s body off the floor.

The woman, Jesula, and her husband, Philippe, became even friendlier as we walked. Somehow I had forgotten how recently I had come through here, and although I still couldn’t lead the way, I was beginning to sense the pattern to how the area was

laid out. Most of the guards we met were still unconscious, whether from Corrina's antic's, the magical attack, or some third force wasn't always clear. The others were still shaken up by recent events, and were relatively easy to deal with. The glint in Jesula's eye as she casually carried General over her shoulder probably helped.

On the other hand, nobody else told as good of a story, or joined our cause.

And so it was, heading starboard, we cut a swath towards freedom. Finally we reached the edge of the artificially determined border of the Generals, ahem- MY territory. Once we were safely out of my territory Rose left on her mission, wordlessly, taking a left turn down the tunnel and out of sight. Jesula turned to me and said "You sure there's nothing we can do to get you to let us have our jewelry now?" She spoke plainly, but there was an underlying strain to her voice that only an expectant mother can have.

I opened my mouth to articulate a deeply unsatisfactory reply. I wanted to, but the burden of my newfound leadership weighed on me. From around the bend, coming in from the right I saw Luke and Jen, the troubled couple from my earlier exploits.

I took it as a sign. My brain raced, and my heart ached again. I wanted nothing more than peace, and yet it never came. That was a lie, but I had no time to deal with it, I was too busy formulating a plan. For a moment I panicked, and dismissed a notion. Then fully in control of my emotions, I decided on a course of action, and took it

I waved to them and called out "Hello there! How would you feel about making a suicidal assault on a stronghold of wickedness with me? We lack a wheelbarrow, but I think with a strong enough show of force our ship of cards will sail us safely through this dark and lonely night."

For some reason, it was Josephine's eyes that I felt most acutely on the back of my head as I pressed onwards to greet our friends.

Josephine Luke and Jen came in behind me on my right. Corrina, Philippe, and Jesula followed on my left. Philippe had awakened, as if from a coma, and before his profanity and the Generals limp body, three sets of guards backed down. They left,

Philippe's shouts ringing in their ears, to spread the gospel of Darwin. They wouldn't all have Philippe's charm, but there is something to be said for strength in numbers.

It soon became apparent that, some of them had merely retreated, so that by the time we reached the room holding all our items, the seven of us faced at least two-dozen guards.

There it was, right where Project Humankind had predicted. Mission accomplished.

Ideally you want the sun your back for a showdown. Makes them squint. There was no sun here, but I was grateful that the room was large enough to easily accommodate us all. It also meant that if it came down to a fight, we would be easily outnumbered and they would have room to maneuver.

"The revolution my friends, has arrived" I said. "The Generals reign is over. I'd like to leave you in charge of this room, but you can imagine how that would look. So I'm going to have to ask you to step aside for the good of your country. I will do everything I can to return everyone's property as soon as possible." Thump went the General's body as it fell on floor. One of them coughed. They were not moving.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I had envisioned those left as being devoid of loyalty.

When I reached the room, I realized once again what an effective leader he had been. Nobody was backing down. How the General had inspired such loyalty in the large slavic woman who appeared to be in charge was beyond me. But she had enough allegiance to not only stand her ground, but also the foresight to gather others around her who would do the same

For a few moments all I heard was someone speaking Russian, presumably translation my earlier words. His stance confirmed my suspicions about who was in charge. The woman gave me a look that could have leveled mountains.

Then there was simply silence.

"May I ask why you continue to stand against me?" I asked quietly. Giving her time to realize that she could easily crush us simply wouldn't do. Her translator spoke in hushed tones that did not carry. I surveyed the crowd I realized that most of them probably spoke English.

The woman stood there staring at me. I don't know what she was considering, but it wasn't backing down. Probably she was wondering how many cute speeches I could make without a tongue.

She eyed the General's body on the ground, where before it had been a victory trophy, now it was a liability. If defeated she would take it. There was no telling how the aliens would interpret that.

My brain raced ahead, trying to decide how to best win the confidence of the mob away from her. If I waited too long, they were liable to attack.

Then I noticed a glow, and the mob parted so that I could see the open entrance into the room Jesula had told us about, the room whose discovery fulfilled our obligation to Project Humankind, back when that had seemed important.

The room that we suspected contained all the items that had been brought on board with us. In front of it stood the short misshapen man who had been performing rituals for the General. He looked uglier and more brutal than before, but it was the same man. Behind him the entrance silently shut to leave a smooth surface. The curious light nonetheless continued to shine from behind him, causing me to squint.

I waited for him to open his mouth to speak before interrupting.

"It gladdens my heart to see a door again. I don't think I've encountered something I'd call a door since I came on board. Walls, and prison cells yet, but no real opening and closing doors. Things are tough and anything that reminds one of home is a comfort. Isn't that true Bryce?" I asked. "Of course that's not a true door, as it has just disappeared again. But as I found out when you trapped my friends behind a similar structure, there are ways to open and close these things, so it's close enough to make me homesick. I just don't know, maybe it's not a true door, but it still gladdens my heart. What do you think?"

"You little snot." said Bryce, his face reddened. "Don't be a smart arse. I can crush you like a bug."

"I can still see the edges of the suckers Ernesto left on you." interrupted Josephine "You may be able to make some pretty lights to dazzle us, but you have no power right

now. You may be able to fool them, but I am no fool" her tone was decidedly un-grandmotherly.

"Ernesto? What a putz. You should know I have more than a few tricks up my sleeve," said Bryce. He held up a perfectly straight stick, if you can call it that. Perhaps twig would be more appropriate given that it couldn't have been longer than a foot. At the end of it was a small green stone that seemed to balance improbably on the end. "You see I've learned a few tricks since we last met. I've got more than enough energy in here to do whatever needs done. But why bother with it?"

"We outnumber you three to one, and you're the only one here with any real power. A fact I shall neutralize soon enough."

His smile was unforced, unpleasant and revealed his teeth. He looked like a spoiled five year old who found a secret stash of cookies. "Now Josephine, if we were alone you might be inclined to try something stupid. So I'll remind you, if you try anything here and now I can launch a blast that will kill at least a few of your friends. I think it will do more... but you know I will be able to do at least that much.

"So turn the General over, and I'll let you walk away. Though I doubt you'll make it off this ship alive."

As he spoke Josephine's face burned with hatred. Corrina was taking her cue from Josephine, and although I wanted to see what everyone else thought, I couldn't without turning my back to my enemies.

Bryce was also watching Josephine's face carefully, relishing his apparent victory. Given the intensity of his gaze he was relishing the moment. He took a step forward.

By all accounts his threat seemed to be legitimate and Josephine did nothing except seethe.

Slowly, while nobody was watching, I changed my grip on my staff. How quickly the public forgets its leaders. Sadly I must report that to the best of my knowledge Bryce was the first to take note of me, the first to realize that I was charging towards him. From behind me I heard a belated "No! You don't know..."

Bryce was still looking at my charge with the beginnings of an amused shock when the stick I had thrown ahead of me hit him in the throat. A lucky shot. I had been aiming for his chest, the broadest part of his body.

The room was small, but not small enough, before I could reach him, he had recovered enough to wave the twig. Not knowing if it would do any good, I stepped to the side and grabbed one of the flunkies that had yet to fully realize what was going on, throwing him between Bryce and I.

Something flashed bright red right in front of the twig, and I heard Josephine mutter behind me. Another flunky managed to get in front of me, but I charged at him causing him to step back and trip over his buddy. Lucky me. I looked up and saw Bryce staring at me with a vicious look in his half-crazed eyes, and I stumbled over the pile of bodies I had just created.

Lucky Corrina. Had I managed to stay on my feet much longer I might have noticed her slinking around behind him and given her away. As it happened, I tripped, and she managed to get in close, and get one good stab in his left arm with her dagger she caused him to drop the twig, before he disappeared in a flash.

When I looked up, I saw Corrina standing there looking slightly flustered. The twig lay on the ground, and an unhappy mob was just beginning to mobilize.

My general philosophy whenever I find myself lying on the ground in a dangerous situation is to remain on the ground slightly longer than anyone expects, and utilize the moment of hesitation that creates to get up safely. Keeping this in mind, I wasted no time rolling over to the twig. Dizzily, I glanced up and noted that Corrina was under attack. Unused to violence this terrified me. But I had the presence of mind to reach for the twig. As my fingers wrapped around it, my vision took on a yellow tinge and as I flew back my heart rate jumped suddenly. This couldn't be healthy I thought. My heart had already been working pretty hard.

Thankfully I did not black out, but I did lose my sense of direction, and found myself unable to do anything but watch as the fight around me quickly dispersed. Luke

was brutal and frightening as he snapped back the head of the Russian woman. After that the opposition seemed to give up hope. Although they outnumbered us badly, Luke's brutality gave everyone except him a moment's pause. In that pause, the troops on the sidelines had time to think.

I'm no mind reader, but judging from their subsequent actions what most of them thought was "What am I doing here?" or perhaps "Wow that looks painful, maybe I'll go for a walk."

I watched as more and more of them snuck out the back way. Those that remained began to falter. It was a spiral, the fewer of them that remained, the worse their situation looked. Luke, Jesula and Corrina made up a vicious fighting trio, and Josephine somehow remained untouched, although I never really saw her do anything.

Finally, I seemed to recover from my daze and stood up. I managed to wander over to my staff and picked it up before anyone noticed that I was among the living again. By the time I managed to take my first swing it was pretty much over.

I helped distract a few of the remaining guards in a peripheral role. Corrina was quick and efficient as always, but I was shocked by ferocious brutal power of both Luke and Philippe. Luke was much calmer and more sophisticated, while Philippe was loud, and fought like a wild animal, but the fearsome look on their faces spoke a universal message.

Although if the result I'm referring to is bodies lying in unconscionable positions, then Corrina and Jen belong in the same category as well. So perhaps I have no point. Once again realized that I was a lamb running with a pack of wolfs.

"You damn fool child..." I heard Josephine shriek in a slightly higher pitch than usual "Its bad enough ya attacked Bryce without knowing what you were doing, but at least that was just a risk. If you had managed ta pick up that jewel his mind pattern could have been burned into yours!"

"My most sincere apologies, I really had no idea what I was doing. And I thank you for saving my life." I said with a sarcastic bow and true sincerity. She gave me a near-smile, and I was forgiven if not forgotten. To her I was a child who had played with fire,

and she had been worried about me, and about me burning down the house. Now everything was safe again and she knew I had learned a lesson she had no real energy for warning me or elaborating what had just happened, although I wished I knew what the hell she had been talking about.

Instead I said, "Now my friends, I'm afraid I must ask yet another favor of you. Some of these people may wake up eventually..."

## Sitting In Limbo

-Jimmy Cliff

Josephine agreed to stay behind and help our new friends locate their life savings. I offered to let everyone else go in as well, but they all declined. I left my albums because there was no way to carry them without arousing suspicion. Meanwhile, I set off with Corrina as my guide to find our Japanese tea-drinking friend. I had planned to return immediately after escorting Rose safely to the boarder, and he could already be waiting back at my new HQ. Few people realize just how much caffeine is in your average cup of tea.

“So why you’d do it?” Corrina asked me once we were alone. I smiled involuntarily. A selfish part of me was pleased to know I could generate that curiosity in her, even if I didn’t really want to answer the question. Thinking about near-deadly mistakes too soon after you make them can be problematic.

“I don’t mean this to be cruel,” she continued "But up until now you’ve been pretty smart. I’ve seen you random things but you’ve also realized when you were outmatched. You are smart enough to realize that Josephine intimidated by him and whatever that thing he was holding was. You're also smart enough to know that Josephine has more power in her pinky finger than anyone else around here except maybe Ernesto. They are legends. So I have to ask... why did you do it? Why did you attack him?”

I hesitated before answering. I was practically bursting with pride at her backhanded compliment, even though I knew that soon I would have to pop her bubble of faith in me.

So often in life I had no discernable reason for the things I did, it was nice to be asked during a time that I did. Yet, I was unsatisfied with the answer I knew I had to give, and I didn’t want to have to defend it. I trusted her though, and I had placed her

life at risk with my decision, so I voted for a transparent form of government. It's not all roses being King.

"Nobody was paying any attention to me. I'd just gotten finished having a crisis about being placed in charge, and yet everything that was happening was ignoring me. Now that's fine, my ego can take care of itself. But if I'm going to be in charge, and apparently I am, then I owe it to everyone not to be a NPC. I can't simply sit by passively while events happen around me simply because I don't understand them." I said.

She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, and we walked on in silence. "Just because you're in charge you think that you have to always act? Even in situations you know nothing about?"

"No. But it does mean that I can't selfishly allow myself the luxury of not acting simply because I'm not an expert. In the end, nobody really knows anything anyways, and I certainly don't know anything much about anything that's likely to be relevant anytime soon."

"Ok... but how is not acting in a situation like that selfish?"

"On my own I would have simply let Josephine's decision stand. But now, I'm left with the responsibility of acting like a person of consequence even if I'm not, I still have to act like I am. It's the same reason we had to take over the room with our items. It was the moral action from the limited perspective I am forced to inhabit."

I paused for a moment, and we walked in silence. She didn't seem satisfied, so recklessly, I continued.

"So for instance... I considered that if Bryce had enough power to stop Josephine, we were in serious trouble. Trouble that I didn't see a way out of, and trouble that given the demands of our situation we could not afford. It was worth some risk based on that alone.

"If Bryce were powerful enough then my action would have been meaningless. If he were truly unstoppable then he would either kill us all anyways, or he might simply laugh at my attack.

"Really in the great expanse of the unknown, there was only a small area of probability that his unknown power could enable him to stop me, but also force him to harm us when he wouldn't have otherwise. And so on..." I felt worn out after my little speech, and I knew that most of it had been rubbish. I mean, some part of my brain had taken those kinds of things into consideration, but I hadn't really thought about it in such detail.

Explanations are always lies, but that one was as good as it got.

In any case, this seemed to satisfy Corrina. Or else she was getting smarter and didn't want to hear me "explain" anymore.

I craved her approval of my ad-hoc explanation but I couldn't think of any way to ask without revealing that I cared.

In this I represented myself alone and so I had no excuse to be reckless, and so we walked in silence the rest of the way.

Powderfinger

-Neil Young

"Greetings Keiji. I wish had some tea to offer you, but unfortunately we're all out. I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long." I said as I sat down on the floor across from Keiji, who had been awaiting my arrival. I didn't know how long he had been sitting in the room, and I didn't think it polite to ask.

Keiji said, "Worry not, I only just arrived. I was in a meeting when Roselyn arrived, and I believe that she was delayed in reaching me." He caught my eye and continued, "Although she did make it through faster than you did my friend.

"I can make some tea for you with your PPP over there. But personally I'm sick of the stuff. Can't get any variety yet, but we are working on it."

"Fair enough. No tea for me thanks. So, what, if anything, has my dear friend Roselyn told you?" I asked.

"Just that you managed to save her life. Take the General out of power, and install yourself as the new go-to man for the League of Alien Nations." He said with a wry grin. "All well and good, but I don't know why you called me here since you've apparently still not completed the task I sent you on." I really did like Keiji.

"Ah, I'm afraid Rose is a little behind. After I sent her on her way I went ahead and wrestled control of that location too. Just for you."

"Was it where we thought?"

"I've no idea where you thought it was. I had one of the guards lead me there. Ask Corrina if you'd like, or I can take you there later..." I hesitated. "But since you brought it up. Now that I've done a favor for you by finding and identifying the holding place for everyone's stuff, I need to impose on our friendship and ask a favor of you."

His face stiffened slightly, "What do you need?"

"The aliens think that I am in charge, but word hasn't gotten out to the general public yet. When people find out... I can't control this area. I don't have any followers,

only friends. I had to ask Rose to go get you as a favor to me. If I am going to make a go at this, I need people I can tell to do stuff. I need an organization. Bureaucracy.

"I need people I can boss around! Keiji, I need you to give Project Humankind to me, or use Project Humankind to run my organization, which doesn't exist. But it needs to or I won't ever get anything done."

"You are not the first one to come to us for help. I thought that might be why you called me here. So I'll ask you the same thing I ask everyone who comes to me. If we back you, what are you hoping to accomplish?"

"I intend to get us back to earth. Alive. And to return get everyone's stuff back to its rightful owner. As it happens I left all my proof at home, but I'll mail you a notarized copy as soon as possible.

"In return I can offer you what nobody else can, access to the chief negotiator on behalf of the humans. I've been dumped into this spot, and I'm convinced that doing my best is what's best for everyone, but I have no lust for power. Inasmuch as circumstances allow this to be a democratic process I'd value Project Humankind's input. Not as an incentive, but because I want and need the advice.

"If you want, I'll give your group and everyone else there stuff back now. Something I can't do if I'm killed. Although it will be up to you to deal with the logistics of distributing the items, and with any fallout from the rest of the ship when they find out."

My stomach unclenched when I saw his expression. We would be able to work out a deal, maybe not the exact one I had in mind, but there weren't really that many chips to negotiate with. There were no salaries to be paid, and promotions were meaningless unless they helped you survive. It was likely that not everyone aboard the ship had realized the implications of this yet. They would cling to the old codes and ways of making deals. But not Keiji. I could trust his practicality, and that lightened my load considerably.

Suddenly I wondered what kind of technology he had access to. I had been so concerned with getting an operating headquarters and some subordinates that I had

forgotten that Project Humankind existed to promote scientific research. This should work out well, if we could only manage to iron out the details.

Leaning back in satisfaction I glanced over his shoulder and I noticed a long limbed dark man saunter into the room. Past him I saw Corrina running, looking like she was ready to kill, although that didn't necessarily mean anything. "Hello can I be of assistance..." was all I got out before once again, my vision began to blur.

My eyes snapped open an instant later and I wished that they hadn't. I was still in a sitting position, but nonetheless I dropped down a foot as if I had tried to sit on a chair that wasn't there. I hit the ground hard and injured my sit bone. My stomach twirled, and it took skills I wasn't aware that I possessed, finely honed instincts, to turn in time to avoid splattering myself as I threw up.

Afterwards I glanced up to see one of the turtle creatures that had stolen my albums. I was someplace different. "My apologies for your discomfort sir. We have learned that you disliked the forced sleep process. So I have bypassed it for you. As we feared it seems to have some other effects. Please follow me now." Its voice spoke inside my head, but oddly enough it was not nearly as creepy as when the jellyfish things had done it.

I should take this moment to make it perfectly clear that the turtle aliens did not look at all like turtles. I have attempted to describe their appearance elsewhere, and if I failed then I apologize. They actually looked more like an euoplocephalus dinosaur.

Nor did the jellyfish aliens look that much like jellyfish. But the mind seeks order and classification. So even in the moment, I had begun to think of them as the turtle aliens, because taking in my situation was hard enough without taking in all the differences.

I tried to stand and follow the turtle-thing, but found that I could not make it to my feet. It was as if I had a large monkey hanging onto my back, and his brother and sisters were hanging onto my arms and legs. The turtle alien was on the move though, so, having nothing better to do, I began to crawl after him.

“So did you guys just hijack me or did you win your civil war with the other guys?” I asked as I crawled, following it down a mysterious corridor, which had the same general feel as the spaceship, but was done in lighter shades and gave off a much homier feel. There was more room, and I did not feel as cramped. I realized how oppressive the spaceship's design had been, though I had not noticed it before. My heart still felt heavy in my chest.

“He is what you would term... a traitor in your language.” It was not the voice of the turtle-thing. I looked around for a floating jellyfish, but the hallway was empty. “My apologies that I could not be there in person to greet you. I have been... how do you say it... I have been detained. There has been another attack. He will lead you to a waiting room. This should not take long. My apologies.”

As you can probably imagine, that shut me up for a few moments. But eventually, “Can someone please explain why I can't stand?” I asked aloud. The skin on my face felt as though it was being pulled to the ground. There was no response.

It must be some gravity related phenomenon I decided finally.

After a few more minutes of crawling in silence we reached a room that looked like my original holding cell. Within it sat a metal chair like the one the General had. The creature ahead of me had stopped. I thought about attacking it, just for the hell of it, but I resisted the urge. My inability to lift my arms above my head may have factored into my thinking.

Instead I crawled into the room. The creature turned around and plodded away. I tried to follow it, but found that I could not move past the opening into the room. Some sort of invisible force field I thought. Now that was something Star Trek had prepared me for at least.

It was an agonizing few hours as I waited for something to happen. Events had taken a turn for the confusing. I had spent the last few weeks vaguely annoyed at never having a moment to myself. Now I was completely isolated. If they killed me here, nobody would even know.

I tried to leave the room a number of different ways and failed. The force field or whatever didn't let the chair out either, and I found that I could stand if I braced myself for it. But not for very long. When I finally decided to rest it was easier to just lay down than to sit in the chair.

The floor buzzed oddly, but it had been an exciting day and my brain wanted to sleep even if my body didn't.

"If I find out that I was forced to sleep against my will this time, I'll kill them all" was my first thought upon waking. I woke up with a pounding headache. I couldn't identify the music in my head, but it was slow and purposeful. I took it in and I found that I could stand up again.

"Notice that you can stand upright again my comrade. We apologize again, the difference in... gravity went unnoticed for some time." Said the eerie voice in my head.

My first thought: So I had been right!

My second thought: This method of communication was increasingly making me uncomfortable. Apparently as irritating as it is to have aliens with a minimal grasp of English project an image of a their jelly fish like bodies into your consciousness, it's even more disconcerting when they use just the voice.

I drew a line at that. They didn't notice. "We took you away ... to reach an accord with you. Resolving this minor disturbance has taken more time than we anticipated. We will have to meet with you later. Is there anything we can do to make you happier while you wait?" continued the voice, oblivious to my discomfort.

"Wait a second, I thought that you guys were the rebels and the short guys ruled the land?" I asked.

"WE ARE THE RIGHTFUL OWNERS OF THIS WORLD! THEY ARE THE REBELS NOW!" The voice boomed in my head. I felt an oppressive force pushing me back towards the ground. In my head the music reached a crescendo. I was sick of this, sick of being pushed around, of having my music stolen, of being put to sleep against my will, and being knocked around by unseen forces.

So I pushed back; the image of pyramid conjured itself from my unconscious mind, surrounding me and forcing the pressure back.

Something contorted within my skull. It did not originate from me. Just as I knew that it was the alien talking to me, I knew that it was the alien's mind that was wrenching away, and I felt an unnatural silent scream.

Then it was gone, and I stood back up. I had regained the ability to stand on my hind legs like the Darwinian Ape that I was. Everything was silent and boring again. I wasn't sure what to think about what had just happened. I wasn't even sure what had just happened. Suddenly I was unsure if I had even caused it, but I began to fear I had. Annoying them right now was probably not the best idea. It was an even worse one if it was just a fluke and I couldn't manage to do it again.

Then again, what are you going to do? Long ago I had vowed to myself never to let seemingly omnipotent creatures from outer space push me around. Down that path chaos reigns, holding sway over its rat-infested kingdom. So I began searching for an escape route.

We Darwinian apes are renowned for our clever use of tools, but hypothetically speaking, could one harm a space creature with an ingeniously placed mental pyramid? I must have imagined the whole thing. I was sure of it.

The ache of random guitar noodling was playing in my head when Corrina appeared. I wanted to hear it for real. It had been far too long. Life, perhaps realizing that it had been trying my patience for some time now gave me a pleasant surprise as well. Corrina was sitting in the metal chair in the corner of the room, gazing at me questioningly.

My first impulse upon seeing her was happiness. Then I felt bad that I had managed to drag her into whatever was going on here. My last interaction with the creatures had not been positive, and her presence may be the precursor to trouble.

I fretted about the order of those thoughts. I must be more than a little smitten with her given my reaction upon seeing her. I assured myself that I was a good person because I was also concerned about her welfare.

Had it been Josephine I wouldn't have worried about her, I would have happily predicted rescue, and had it been Rose I would have been more concerned. Yet my thoughts towards Corrina were of a slightly more romantic nature. The point of all this being- if I liked her so much, why was my first thought selfish joy and not concern for her? What did that say about me? Did I really like her or was it just infatuation brought on by the stressful situation?

Moreover, if I accepted that I only liked her because of the situation it would stymie my ability to draw comfort from my affection for her. I was being selfish again. Time to end this circle.

"Come here often?" I asked after the silence had gone on long enough.

"No, can't say that I do." She replied carefully, "May I ask exactly where *here* is? That man was coming to kill you, and you just disappeared. At first we all assumed you had done it on purpose somehow, but you never came back. A little while later I was sitting alone and the next thing I know, I'm here."

I was about to say something inadequate, when the Jellyfish creature appeared before our eyes again. Not for real, but another projection imprinted on our brains.

"Once again I apologize comrades... It appears that there has been more... trouble- than we anticipated. The... disturbance... is taking more of our resources to quash than we anticipated. You are of course on our home planet, in a highly specialized holding area. The normal air here would harm your ...systems. Darwin- you were brought here as is honorable for a leader. So negotiations could commence. This must be put on hold once again. Our research specialists declare to us that you are communal creatures, so we decided to bring you a companion.

"I sense now that... this was not appropriate somehow. This distresses you. She should not return to the... previous location... until after negotiations, but find her another space to occupy, in accordance with your preferences"

"I think I would prefer to stay here for now" replied Corrina. "How long will we have to wait?"

The creature shimmered for a moment. "Do you... agree to her request Darwin?" It finally asked, in an almost curious tone. The first bit of emotion I had sense from it thus

far. The more time I spent around these creatures the less strange they seemed, and the more I began to trust my intuitions about them.

“Whatever she prefers is fine with me.” I said.

“Agreed then. Perhaps later you would meet with our... learned ones. You are a most interesting species. I must depart now. Please speak with... the traitorous one if you need anything.”

It promptly disappeared. I hoped that the traitorous comment was part of the language barrier and not how they truly referred to it. That was bound to foster resentment, whatever cultural differences we may have. Then again, I don't know why I cared.

“I don't know why they bothered to bring me here if they weren't going to appear in person.” I said to aloud to no one in particular, to the extent that it is possible to say something to nobody in particular when you have only one other body in the room.

That body, namely Corrina, expressed only mild amusement, and instead of responding to it with a witticism of her own, said “I'd rather be with you than in a cell of my own, and I'm pretty sure that creature was confused by you letting me decide.

“But that's all I know. Maybe you could fill me in on anything else you know?”

I gave her the rundown of the little I knew, and threw in some of my more intelligent guesses for free. I even included, although somewhat sheepishly, the full story about the pyramid episode. She didn't react to anything in particular, or ask any uncomfortable questions. When I was done she nodded thoughtfully.

“Once we get back to earth I'm sure that Ernesto can get you some training.” She stopped for a moment, considering, and then said in a kindly tone “If not, I'll pull some strings and do it myself. You definitely have talent.”

My heart swelled. I said, “You seem awfully confident that we are going to get out of here alive.”

“Well... I don't know about us. But I suspect everyone else will at least. I know Josephine by reputation, and now think I know who Ernesto is. The only reason I think they haven't ended this already is because they want to use the opportunity to corner Bryce. I'm surprised they are even here.

“You probably can’t tell, but while there are a fair number of exceptional people on board Josephine and Ernesto are a class unto themselves. All that stuff flying by your head was probably the work of a handful of hyperactive people. Most of our shipmates are people who excel in mundane affairs, or aspire to more, but fail. Most of the real forces like Ernesto probably just killed the aliens outright or escaped their notice entirely.”

“So much for your theory of me being impressive.” I said.

“Hey I’m here too.”

Just as I was feeling slightly ashamed at my fishing venture the room began to shake.

“Has this happened before?” asked Corrina nervously.

Before I could answer a monotone voice filled the room in broken English.

“Prisoners- The base - an emergency state. The prisoners level eight and lesser value will be set free below momentarily. He prepares for release, and please recall fondly good about our race for have made these precautions to save lives and your benefit. This message recorded previously.”

This same basic message repeated itself three or four times in various translations. All of them were in English, just slightly different phrasing. Clearly the original message had been stated in multiple ways so that it could be conceptually translated into a wide variety of conceivable languages. It never quite got the hang of “you” versus “he” but other than that it was an impressive feat of linguistic semiotics.

Then the force field disappeared. I took a step towards it. A wall grew up in its place. I took a step back.

The wall fell down, much as it had when we’d escaped from our first cell.

Outside stood what appeared to be the same alien turtle I had encountered when I had first appeared. Since our last meeting I had decided to refer to him as stubby.

“Follow me if you value your lives” said the Stub-mister. He turned around and some gas spewed from him at long thin gray vine-like tentacles that had come at us from around the corner. The tentacles promptly withered and died. Seconds later they caught on fire, for no discernable reason. As they did so, a high-pitched noise shrieked

out from the hallway. The hallway itself seemed to contort and from across the distance of light-years and a different evolutionary path, I sensed that in some sense part of the building was alive. And also that it was dieing. Everything continued to shake and shudder, and the flames grew higher.

“Aye-aye captain stubby” I said.

## Goin' Out West

-Tom Waits

Life, I reflected as we rushed away from the burning tentacles, the dieing room, and the shaking hallway, is often chaotic.

"Got a plan?" asked Corrina as we picked up speed moving down the hallway.

Fearing for my life, I decided to continue down the path of self-revelation, and I turned to Corrina and said, "Stubby's people here stole my music from me. The key to life is taking the seemingly chaotic and random noises that surround us in the wilderness, and turning them into music. They are the same notes, but when placed together properly they rise above mere order. Their edge of chaos only makes them more powerful, and they can redeem everything. That's the art of it, taking the random noises and putting them in their proper place, without controlling them. Riding the imperfections, creating something slightly chaotic.

"They are in essence, a china cat sunflower."

"So no plan then?" she asked.

"Weren't you listening?" I said with mock indignation. "I just told you my plan."

"Ok then. I'll bite, what do we do when ... oh wait, let me guess in situations like this when everything is out of control, there's nothing left to do but improvise?"

"Ideally on a golden string fiddle."

Our intrepid leader made it around a corner out of sight for a moment. Smoke filled the hallway. Stubby backed back into our line of sight, and we took an alternate route.

"Corrina, I have to say, that sometime you make me wish I was a headlight on a north-bound train."

To which she quite appropriately gave me a confused look. I was feeling a certain frenzied greatness within myself and intended to explain to her that I had been an oblique reference to the fact that I would miss her when she was gone, a consequence of my having made inner peace with the world. Including with my crush on her. I was

interrupted, however, by Stubbs's sudden reversal, the natural result of another series of about two-dozen tentacles.

My reversal was not quite as sudden, and as I turned around one thin tentacle grabbed onto my left foot. As it did, tiny bumps on its gray surface rapidly began to grow tentacles of their own, each of which proceeded to wrap further around my foot.

What the hell were these things anyways?

As I fell I decided that I was just another victim of love. How many young impulsive men had ended their lives exactly like this, a victim of love's distracting effects? I looked up to see Corrina quite efficiently turning around yet a second time to come back for me. Her dagger was out, and she was hacking at the other tentacles that had rushed past me, by now the bottom half of my leg was covered in the vines, which did not seem to want to do anything particularly painful. Nonetheless, it seemed prudent to escape.

Love does not only entrap, it also ennobles. Thus rejuvenated and redeemed by Corrina's valiant attempt to return to me, I pulled hard with my left leg, and kicked at the tentacle with my right foot, causing the thin tentacle to break. The part that came off my left promptly lit on fire, which spread to my pants, forcing me to roll to suffocate it. I got up and ran, just barely escaping another grasping vine.

Corrina in the meantime had managed to slice off quite a few of the tentacles and had created a wall of fire in the process. Not taking the time to have second thoughts I leapt through it. Corrina followed my lead and we ran after the now distant figure of Stubby.

"Fighting that thing was the equivalent of lifting your girlfriend above your head in the community pool. It makes you feel tough, but somewhere in the back of your mind you know you're not really that strong." I said to Corrina once we had reached what Stubby apparently considered a safe place.

He wasn't paying much attention to us. Instead he was fiddling with a cubbyhole in the wall. Well it wasn't exactly a cubbyhole, his was a lot bigger than the CCC's I was used to, and had all sorts of useful looking instruments hanging out of it. They hadn't

been here when we had come to the room either. Stubby, always the clever one, had made them appear somehow. Maybe that's why Keiji's tea had tasted so bitter.

Corrina nodded. "I have no idea what's going on. Maybe they are just stupid. Hopefully our guide will have a chance to explain soon."

"I thought you'd never ask." said Stubby, his face still turned towards the cubbyhole. "I'm currently trying to plan an escape route, but I can answer any questions you may have in the meantime. Our brains don't operate as linearly as yours do." He probably didn't want to answer our questions, but simply couldn't resist the chance to snub our linear brains.

Since nobody else seemed to have anything to say I blurted out "So those tentacle things died off pretty easily. I mean I broke one in two with a kick of my boot, why are we so terrified of them?"

"They aren't meant to fight." Stubby responded, still staring at something I couldn't comprehend on the wall "They are part of a larger creature that has been designed to grow and expand in order to destroy this structure. It was never intended primarily as a weapon to hurt mobile creatures. It will attack and try to immobilize us, eventually dragging us back to the center. We need to avoid them. When you cut down one, more grow in its place to compensate and overwhelm.

"The real threat is that once the building we are in collapses, you die. If we don't find an escape route that's what will happen in any case. You're just lucky that this building was designed by my people rather than my new masters."

Corrina stared at him inquisitively for a moment, and then as if realizing that he wasn't paying any attention she asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"We implemented the safety features that freed you. If they lose a building they just let any prisoners in it die."

"So are you taking us back to your people?" I asked, noting that he didn't seem too happy with the floating jellyfish.

"Sadly no, I cannot return to my own people. Note how good I am at speaking your language. Since I can empathize with you I can speak your language. My people are

more generous with their hearts than their opponents, but even they do not look kindly on that degree of empathy with the enemy.

"It inspires dissent. I was thrown out, and now I am a tool of a much eviler race. If I had any moral system to go with my empathy I would probably kill myself rather than be used this way."

"So if this base used to belong to your people, and is under attack by them, why can't the... uhh floating guys just transport us out of here the same way they brought us in?" asked Corrina.

"Call them jelly-beans" I said "That's what I do."

"I'm afraid it's not that easy. Even if they could, they probably wouldn't." said a somewhat bitter sounding Stubby "For one thing, they don't like Darwin here much, and it wouldn't be proper to kill him outright, or even help engineer his death. But they won't go to much effort to save him either. There is no saving the building without gaining control of the growth, and that is nearly impossible. So I'm the only thing here of value that could be saved, and I'm a traitor, a useful one but not of any real consequence.

"They can't in any case though. As much as they like doing flashy stuff, they don't have the mental power on there own. They need a nearby source of energy. The only one near is used to power this structure. That is the nexus point, and also the easiest place to transport stuff to and from, which is why my people sent the Grublobb there. It's blocking the energy waves from there, so nothing can be moved in or out."

"So why..." I began

"Sorry, no more time for questions, I found us a way out of here if we hurry."

"I thought your brain was nonlinear," I said as we rushed out of the room, not knowing what else to do but follow it.

"Yes, but yours clearly are not." Snapped back Stubby.

The rooms did not have time to become a blur before our plans went awry. Two left-handed turns brought us to a room with three exits. We choose the middle way, but from the extreme right an overwhelming mass of tentacles flanked us. One grabbed

Corrina at the same instant that Stubby spewed something yellow and gaseous out of his mouth. The room blurred for a second, and then cleared instantly, to find the tentacles gone, along with Corrina.

Stubby began moving down the middle path again, faster than before, and I followed.

"Where's Corrina?" I asked as soon as I caught up with him.

"Gone I'm afraid, dragged back to the center of the base. I managed to drive it back rather than kill it, hoping it would drop her, but I need time to recover. There's nothing I can do for her now. It's moving faster than I anticipated."

"We've got to go back for her" I said, dumbfounded by this turn of events.

"It would just immobilize you too. I'm wiped, and nothing either of us could do would have much affect on the Grublobb. Best to just move on. I have found another escape route," he said as he continued running away from the room where we lost Corrina.

I can see why they booted him out for his bleeding heart.

I stopped and turned around. I was terrified; each step into chaos had been crazier than the last. Chasing after the initial creature that stole my music had been insane, but at least everything else had been familiar when I had made that decision. I had been on my native planet. I knew my surroundings. The only odd thing had been the monster stealing my music. Now everything was unfamiliar, and for all my bravado I was more frightened than ever. But I knew that I had to go back, and I had to do so quickly before I talked myself out of it.

Corrina may not be as valuable as my albums, but the principle was the same. Aliens simply could not be allowed to go around stealing the stuff I valued.

Also, she was a person.

A sigh filled the room. "Are you going to insist going after her?" asked Stubby.

I nodded, unable to say the words out loud.

"Ok fine. No time for questions, I'm still going to escape. But I can send you to the center room where she is being held by the main part of the Grublobb. It's not like the tentacles, it's just a bundle of nerves, but once it senses you it will have some defenses.

I'm going to tell the buildings brain here to cooperate with you. From the center you will be closer to the power source, you may still be able to transport out, if you adjust to the futility of your situation quickly enough. Say the password 'Jalbleiop' and the building will attune itself to you. Just tell to transport you both back to your spaceship. You'll most likely be killed as soon as you arrive. But good luck."

"How come you can transport me from here but you can't escape that way yourself?" was all I could think to say.

"Different energy levels" he said. When I looked confused he said "Think about it this way, it has no reason to stop things from coming towards it."

That's when I knew for certain Stubby wasn't human. Anyone with an ounce of human compassion would have given me a final chance to back out.

Then once again, the whole world changed before my eyes. Which, despite everything, still stressed my brain. In that moment, I resolved that if I ever knew I was going to be transported again, I would close my eyes first.

Eyes open, I appeared in a large circular room, perhaps three stories high. There were many levels above me, and the ground spiraled upwards in one corner to create a makeshift wheelchair ramp. To my left, about four feet off the ground, was Corrina, vines holding her immobile. She was positioned in-between the many doorways that left the room. The rest of the wall space was taken up by large cubbyholes, many of which sported the same extra gadgets that Stubby's had. In front of each doorway was a small fist sized white bulb. They were the source of the vines that were slowly taking over the building, and were holding Corrina.

And directly in front of me was a large cone shaped pile of those same white ovals. I felt the force of the pile emanating out from it, like a bundle of nerves or socks fresh from the dryer. I took one step towards Corrina before the first wave of vines reached me. I held out my stick in an attempt to ward them off, and they wrapped around it, as if attempting to take it away from me. Instead I pulled hard, easily breaking off the ends of the tentacles, which promptly burst into flame.

I took another step back away from the heat and turned to face the next set of tentacles. Apparently the driving force behind all this chaos did not like to feel the heat so close up. The air crackled, and suddenly the tentacle vines pulled back. I turned towards the source of the crackle, and watched as one of the bulbs fell from the pile in the center of the room. It rolled slowly for about two feet and then turned pitch black and began to grow.

What a few seconds ago had been the eggshell white of my old apartment was now as black as a witch's cat.

A few seconds later the transformation was complete, and what stood before me was like a monster from some 1950's horror comic. It stood a little over twice my height, had six arms and a fearsome spiked head. Its features were ill defined, both by my fear and by its light absorbing color, which gave away nothing. It was almost a mist as it moved towards me. Then it leaned back and pounced. A large red tongue flapped out the side of its mouth like a basset hound.

I barely had time to get my stick in front of me again, this time end first. When it hit the stick it knocked both of us backwards. I fell onto my back, and the creature flew upwards, impaled. The shadow-thing began to absorb the other end of my stick in its chest. It could not have weighed more than a few pounds, and I swung the stick around violently, trying to shake the creature off before it got too close. It worked, and the monster flew back towards the wall. It hit the wall with a resounding thud and promptly disappeared in flames.

I stood up, confused and in minor pain, making a break for Corrina. This time I was waiting for the sound and heard the second oval hit the ground and roll. The creature it produced this time was slightly larger than the first and had spikes for arms. I waited until it rushed me, and brought my stick down on its head, causing it to dissipate as easily as the first.

It only took another two more of them for me to get to Corrina. Before when I had kicked the vines off my leg I hadn't worried about setting my leg on fire. But now I was worried, what would happen if I smashed the oval that spouted the vines that held her? I didn't want her to catch on fire. Purposefully I avoided her gaze. While I was thinking,

a large green creature that resembled a clown came charging at me. I dodged and stuck out my stick, tripping the creature, which in turn fell on the oval whose vines held Corrina, smashing it.

The vines simply dropped Corrina and fell uselessly to the ground.

“That’s odd.” I thought, taking the time to let the next creature, a four headed spider come in close to me. It bit at me, but I easily dodged it, this time I punched it in the face, and it disappeared. I felt a terrific surge. Look how strong I am.

“Lets get going,” said Corrina, already beginning to recover from what must have been a terrifying experience. “If this thing gets smart enough to send more than one or two of these at us at a time we could be in trouble.”

“Yes they are very lemming-like aren’t they?” I said and then mumbled the word “Jalbleiop” and felt the building attune itself to me. Some part of my brain realized that the building was alive, not wholly conscious, but it had some semblance of sentience. It was an organic creature not just a computer. But that realization was put off to the side for now, as my brain raced ahead.

“You know actual lemmings don’t really commit suicide at random.” I said, not quite prepared to leave yet, although I wasn’t sure why. “Evolution does not work that way.”

The next creature resembled a moppet, and I knocked it square in the face, but it didn’t disappear. Instead it grew larger, and spikes began to appear on its back. It reared back and roared. “You try my patience small one,” it said in a low voice that dripped with evil. Corrina leapt onto it’s back and stabbed it, causing it to howl and throw her off.

Corrina looked up at me, and I knew that she wanted to know why we weren’t running. She didn’t know that I could transport us out of there at any time, or at least I thought I could, but she did know that we should be leaving. She stayed, knowing that I wasn’t leaving, but not knowing why. I was touched by her faith in me, and I wanted to be worthy of that trust. But I stayed, just one moment longer. Some part of my brain couldn’t let it go at this.

I had gone from terrified when I arrived to confident and now I was simply amused.

When the next the shadow creature appeared, it resembled a little girl, complete with lollipop, I looked it straight in its eyes and I said "You've gotta be kidding me"

From somewhere overhead I heard a rhythmic warble like a dieing frog.

"Shut up dude, your gunna to blow it," said a voice.

"Dude, it wasn't blown until you said that... idiot" was the response, in a slightly lighter tone.

Then I heard two rhythmic warbles together in unison.

Ride My Llama

-Neil Young

The spiral walkway circled around to individual levels, which in turn formed circular pathways full of indentations and strange bright-multicolored pads. They represented the first bright colors I had seen in awhile. The attacks had stopped, and the only noise was that of a whispering. Corrina looked at me questioningly. I looked at Corrina questioningly.

Had we been in a human building, we would have been at about the second story when we found them. They were hunched in a corner under a low overhang. They sat in a reclining position at an old wooden table that looked as if it had been stolen from a cheap bar.

Adding to this effect was the green stained glass light that hung from a golden chain above their heads. It was all the more out of place because it was the first obvious source of artificial light I had seen in days. On the table was what appeared to be a white plastic bowling ball with tubes coming out from it, and a smaller golden egg shaped object.

They were two of them, each about seven feet tall and disproportionately long limbed. They were covered from head to toe in silky white hair, which was particularly long around their faces. The one on the right had a smattering of gray hair thrown in for good measure. Its facial hair was tied into complex braids, revealing a third eye where its nose should have been. The one on the left had almost pure white hair, and seemed lumpier. They wore no obvious clothing, but they each had what appeared to be a variation of a knapsack sitting on the ground next to them.

In keeping with my theme of describing indescribable alien life forms in earth terms, I would say they were modeled after an LCD addict's impression of Salvador Dali's painting of a Yeti.

“Hey there Darwin” said the gray haired one. “Please call me Wave, and this my associate Psuh. I suppose now that Psuh has blown it, the least we can do is offer you an explanation”

Psuh opened his mouth, and out came another series of warbles, to which Wave quickly added his own.

After a few moments Wave regained his composure, “You must excuse us. We are under the influence of some Tetrahydrocannabinol we replicated from a young woman on your ship. Now sit, partake with us, and we will explain everything.” I noticed that they had directed all of this at me.

“Is there some reason why my friend Corrina has not been acknowledged?” I asked, suddenly deciding that if I was going to be risking my life for albums, I owed the ideal of equality the same commitment.

They warbled uncomfortably for a moment, and then Psuh said “None at all. We should have recalled that you had insisted on equal treatment for her before.”

I glanced at Corrina, who did not seem insulted. If anything, it seemed as if she wanted me to shut up and focus on saving out lives.

At this point, I will stop mentioning each of their individual warbles, simply insert them into any moment before and after anyone did or said anything. They were clearly baked, and warbling seemed to be a near equivalent of laughter. Or maybe it was them crying out in unimaginable suffering.

Wave handed me one of the aforementioned long clear tubes that had its origins in the white orb sitting on the table. Corrina sat down next to me. “marijuana?” I asked, Wave nodded. I breathed it in, no smoke, just a light taste of honey. Clearly this was an advanced species.

Corrina did not choose to partake.

“So did you guys steal this then?”

Psuh shook his head. “No need Dude, we merely scanned the ship, reading the owners thoughts intrigued us about the substance so we replicated it.”

“So who exactly are you?” asked Corrina, who was not amused

“We are diplomatic representatives of the Space Council that was convened to investigate charges that members of a sentient apex species were illegally taken from their home world.” said Wave, changing into the universal tone of a diplomat. “These charges were brought to light when a revolution on Aklvefitcx caused a slave species to take control over the ship that brought you here.

“For convenience sake, we will call them the ones who took you Stubbies, and the rebels, Floaters.”

Psuh warbled long and hard, and then said “Things are not going well for the Stubbies at the moment.” With a conspiratorial grin, he turned to Corrina and confided. “They’ve had some trouble making the transition to world power. About 100 years after they developed world-destroying weapons, their governments began to fail. They had representative governments, but the voters starting electing in half mad rulers into power. Those that did not were taken over by those who had. To be safe they needed someone crazy enough to be willing to go to war if anyone messed with them first. Once a few countries had crazy warlord rulers everyone had to have one” Psuh looked saddened “Real policy took backstage to the politics’ of who could project the most war-hungry image...”

“Oh stop it,” snapped Wave, “ He always gets too philosophical when intoxicated. While the general council debates how involved it wants to get in the affairs of this planet we were chosen to come down here and orchestrate your return to Earth.” They warbled at some private joke, and everyone except Corrina took a break to breathe in another of those long tubes.

“Dude, I am so high” said Psuh

“Ok man, keep a lid on it. We have to maintain.” Snapped Wave at Psuh, then Wave turned back to Corrina and I. “So we confiscated this fort, after the Floaties had you brought here and used it as a base. They didn’t like it, but since they had reported your existence, and they want our support for their revolution they had no choice. Our goal was to let you have a daring escape, and return home feeling good about yourselves. Unfortunately...”

“Interesting fact” interrupted Psuh “ Did you know that in all the known universe, the only cultures in which at least some minority of sentient creatures never become purposefully intoxicated, are the ones that physically can’t?”

Corrina ignored Psuh and asked Wave “So you're saying that this was all a setup? You were in control of those creatures the whole time?”

Wave nodded. “Yes I’m sorry. The Floaters brought you here of their own accord, but the attack on the base was a bit of a hoax. The creature you fought is a real weapon being used in the current conflict, but I controlled it and kept it weakened the whole time with this” it tapped a golden egg thing sitting next to the white orb “Make no mistake though, normally that creature it is deadly to the extreme, although they rarely make it to the center of bases without a more direct assault. The Floaters simply don’t have powerful enough transporter technology to do that. They barely got you here, and they probably couldn’t have gotten you back without us.

“So we set you up with compliant computer system. We gave it enough of a boost that it would be able to get out safely which would have normally been impossible. Then we gave you an enemy that you could defeat but should have still be enough to challenge you. You could have been killed, but it was unlikely. I know it seems patronizing but psychology suggests that these sorts of ending work out best for everyone involved. You go home feeling like hero’s, and everybody wins.”

“Unless you blow it by getting stoned and messing around with the creatures he fights” spouted out Psuh with another warble that Wave joined in on.

“Or unless you start laughing too loud” retorted Wave

“So what’s going to happen to the uhh... Stubbies that stole all our stuff?” I asked.

“Probably nothing anytime soon.” Said Wave “It doesn’t look like it was widespread corruption, just an overanxious group of scientists who are now stuck at their base on Jax 8743, fighting rebels. They decided to stretch the rules, not break them.

“They are only permitted by the accords to take small items for research purposes, and due to a loophole, any subjects who interfere are forfeit. They just went out of their way to take things that would give them a maximum number of organic subjects for

study. In fact, if nobody gave chase, they just returned the item and moved on to the next person, a mistake that will cost them in trial.

“You will get all your stuff back, and your planet will be off limits for a while. But the council is likely to be lenient since they are already under attack. Though it looks as though they may win in the end.”

“Hey man, what did they steal from you anyways?” asked Psuh.

From there the conversation drifted off into an intoxication filled haze. They quickly got excited as I explained Earth music to them, relating it to obscure theories of their own that made no sense later. They put all my albums onto a strange black quarter sized piece of metal that functioned as an all-purpose music player and I showed them some Grateful Dead, which they liked. They began saying “Dude” more and more often, and eventually I got over the warbling. It became background noise. Psuh tried to make a few jokes about quantum theory, but nobody else cared.

After a few hours they explained that new plan was to send us back to the ship tomorrow morning, and they asked us to keep quiet about the snafu. Once we appeared there a different group of ethically vetted Stubbies would all ready be there prepared take us back to Earth. The ones responsible for our predicament were still doing battle at Jax 8743, fighting for there lives and not allowed to leave by the Space Council in any case. All we had to do was pretend that negotiations had gone well.

Due to complexities inherent in the travel methods used by the Stubby ship, we would be back to earth no later than a day from when we left, and the Stubbies would make sure everyone got their items back. Finally, much to Corrina’s disgust, we all passed out.

If I may be permitted, a final Interlude

*I saw the German Troll floating in mist. Zie was sitting in a circle with a floating armadillo shaped skull, an oversized Stubbie, a small green rock with eyes, a multicolored triangle, and a woman with bright red spiky hair and two floating bat-like creatures on her shoulders. There were other figures, but they faded in and out of the haze, and I could see them, but not describe them later.*

*They were all breathing in on tubes that came from a small white oval that sat in the center of the circle. It was not plastic. It was a bone.*

*The green rock had just finished talking. It's voice echoed.*

*"Ok Dude, you think your war-democracy gone wrong thing is crazy? Get this- On this trip out here I just recruited someone I've been cultivating for awhile. Some super risky priest making went down.*

*"And why? I knew I could get through this trip ok, but I need him ready now in case the Pope, a religious leader back home falls ill. The portents tell me that once he starts to go, I'll need to kill him quickly. Otherwise he'll just keep getting hooked up on more and more life saving machines until he becomes a cyborg. Eventually this will cause a war of epic proportions as computers take him over and use him as a symbol." Said the Troll.*

*As the scene faded away, I saw the blind sailor monkey. Zie seemed sad. "Don't take it personally. Even zie couldn't anticipate that you would be able to make it to this place without hir call. It's only a side effect from before. It will fade. Do not expect this much contact from hir in the future.*

*"And... zie wants you for more than just the Pope thing. That was all for the sake of a good story."*

Went to see the captain, strangest I could find  
Laid my proposition down, laid it on the line  
I won't slave for beggar's pay, likewise gold and jewels  
But I would slave to learn the way  
to sink your ship of fools  
-Grateful Dead

When I woke up, everyone else was still collapsed on the floor, Corrina more comfortably than the rest of us. I snagged the golden egg, and walked over to a cubbyhole.

"Computer?" I whispered, although I knew it wasn't really a computer, if Wave and Psuh could speak perfect English, then their modified computer should be smart enough to know what I was referring to.

"Yes?" it responded equally quietly.

"Are you still programmed to respond to give me full access to your capabilities?"

"Yes"

"And you have been modified by Wave and Psuh?"

"The one you call Psuh has modified me, Yes"

"Computer, I want you to do three things for me. On my word, I want you to return Corrina and I back to our ship, then I want you to transfer this golden egg to some random point in space, far away from Jax 8743. Then I want you to do whatever you need to do to transport and activate the creature that I fought earlier. I want it placed in the most vulnerable location within the base at Jax 8743."

"Away from the 'golden egg' it will need no activation. It will awaken and attack immediately if I place it in the core of the base. How long of a delay between these orders sir?"

"As little as possible."

"I can do all three instantaneously. Awaiting your order."

"Make it so number one."



## Extended Epilogue

Heart With No Companion  
-Leonard Cohen (verse four)

The specter of death hung over my dream. My dream was complex, long and involved, like a Bob Dylan song. My heart was in the highlands. It was deeply meaningful while it was happening, but when I woke up, I forgot what the significance was.

This was not the first time. It would not be the last. There are great things waiting out there, life is worthwhile and meaningful. But why?

Later the fog always clears, and life resumes. If there is a key, then it probably has something to do with incorporating that feeling from that other world into our day-to-day existence. I figured out how once, but then the drugs wore off and I fell asleep.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and looked around. I tried to close my eyes and waited for the day to start of its own accord. Eventually boredom impelled me onwards, and I sat up. It was time for me to take control of this situation.

“You’re welcome to come with me when we get to my stop” said Corrina as she walked into the room.

These words excited me. I was not as excited as I could have been of course. Ideally she would have at least said ‘You *should* come with me’ rather than the decidedly less than inspiring ‘You’re *welcome* to come with me’. Nonetheless, these words remained exciting when spoken by a beautiful woman.

The last few days had been calm enough that I was able to focus on the high I got from having a crush on her. Before then I had felt attraction for her, but it had been based on adrenaline from the chaos around me. Now she was the cause, and the rest of life was colorless. Slowly cruising home on an alien spaceship wasn’t exactly a normal activity, but everything is relative, and it had given me some time to think and come up with rationalizations to ease my mind.

After the untimely destruction of the alien’s base on Jax 8743 boring day-to-day bureaucracy had taken over. The drug toking Yeti-style aliens had stepped in. Our ship was promptly turned around and sent towards Earth with a computer intelligence

system left in charge in place of the previously assigned crew. There was no official word about why this had changed.

Despite being a little surely at times, the computer was able to manage almost any request asked of it. But most of the time that request had to come from me, the nominal leader of our troop of misfit humans.

Since then, events had conspired to shake my confidence in my own leadership abilities. I had always prided myself in my ability to delegate authority, but volunteers had been scarce once the danger had passed. Nobody wants to be a private on the cleanup crew. Everything I delegated came back to me for approval or to make a final decision between two squabbling factions.

So, like the time I spent working at Wal-Mart, my life I had been reduced to being constantly busy, and rarely entertained.

The first two days had been hell. After that I managed talk some of Project Humankind to taking over some of my leadership responsibilities. I even got one of them to explain to me why it was taking us longer to get back to Earth than it took us to get to wherever we had been when we turned around.

It had something to do with our lack of a crew.

It did help that the computer seemed capable of taking on almost any menial task that I explained to it, and with the help of Keiji we were able to develop a workable system for distributing luggage and returning all the lost travelers to their respective hometowns.

“What makes you think that I don’t want to return to my own hometown?” I asked Corrina, sinking enough levity into my voice that she wouldn’t take it the wrong way.

Much to my surprise, she didn’t take it the wrong way.

As crushes go however, this one that hadn’t had much of a chance to blossom recently. Corrina had been busy as well, until she showed up in my room one day, and said:

“You’re welcome to come with me when we get to my stop.”

“What makes you think that I don’t want to return to my own hometown?”

“We all admire your fortitude. But my impressive powers of deduction, have deduced that you mope a little bit whenever anyone asks you about going home.”

Due to my impressive powers of self-control I managed not to say ‘oh yeah I when have you been around to notice that!’ and instead demonstrated my maturity with a “Well ok then Sherlock...I suppose I would like that.”

With that, she nodded her head in satisfaction, smiled at me briefly and left my alone again.

I had acted like a jealous eight year old and what’s worse, I knew it.

“That was pitiful. You’ll never get the girl that way man,” said a familiar voice.

Startled, I looked around and saw a slightly chubby three-inch tall bearded man dressed in a stylish green and purple striped suit, with dreadlocks smoking a corn cob pipe.

Since I didn’t know any drugged out leprechauns and I had thought that I was alone, I was naturally sounded more defensive than I meant to when I said, “I must admit that I’m impressed that anyone can pull off that suit, nonetheless I must ask... Who the hell are you?”

“Don’t cha remember me my good man? It’s me Wave,” he said with an unnaturally friendly smile. That made sense, sort of, the voice was familiar, except that...

“Last time I talked to you, you were six feet tall, covered in white hair, and sounded... a bit more warblely” I said.

The thing claiming to be Wave blushed, and I noticed how incredibly pale his skin was. Almost like a china doll.

“Well I’m in disguise now, don’t cha know” and he tipped his top hat, which I would have sworn he hadn’t been wearing a moment ago. “Actually you see, I’m not really here, this is just a mental projection of me, I’m still back on that same spaceship as before.”

A few moments passed in silence, and eventually I decided that waiting him out to make him explain more might not work. After all, this was an alien life form that I was dealing with.

“So why are you, or at least, why is a projection of you here now?” I finally asked.

“Well you see, after that little stunt you pulled back on our spaceship, my colleagues and I came off looking pretty bad.” He said.

Damn... I had almost managed to forget that I had potentially annoyed an alien race of unknown powers when I interfered in intergalactic politics to extract my petty revenge.

“So now it’s my job to try and investigate your race a little more. That is... if it’s alright with you.” He continued, in a normal sized voice. I guess his dreads did contain splotches of white that reminded me of Wave’s fur.

“Why ask my permission?”

A faint look of boredom crossed Wave’s new highly expressive face as he said, “In order to conduct a close quartered visual observation of a species of your classification, a certain amount of informed consent is required. In this case, it means that I have to maintain a visible presence to at least one member of that species, and gain their consent to do so. That’s where you come in. I need your consent to use your brain waves as a focal point for my visualization. The procedure I will use will not be invasive to your brain in any known way. It will act as a homing beacon to orient me as we travel away from my original body. I will only know things about you that I observe, and the same goes for anyone that you come into contact with. You are restricted from telling anyone else about me without my expressed permission, which I am unlikely to give. Nobody else will be able to see me, unless I reveal myself.

“The underlying concept is that it’s not an invasive study since for the most part I won’t be seeing much that you could not potentially see if you were as sneaky and mobile as me. Everyone I watch will in general at least know that you are around. I am given leeway to wander quite a distance from you, and I won’t be around at all most of the time. I just need to use your brain patterns to focus my appearances, and if I am within sight of you, you will always be able to see me.”

“That’s your informed consent? That’s pitiful, what about potential risks to me? Benefits?”

“You're lucky to get this much, I could just read your mind and move on. Nonetheless, let me tell you, I can't interfere too much in your affairs, but I can provide you with some compensation.”

“Like what?”

“Well for one, my constantly witty advice on the affairs of the heart. You're not doing too well with Corrina there”

“What else?”

“Well, you SHOULD do this out of the kindness of your heart. Or at least out of guilt. If we weren't so civilized you'd be dead after that stunt you pulled.” Wave pulled an object the size of a quarter out of his pocket. “However, in addition to my advice and assistance, I can offer you this- It's the latest in musical technology, with some slight modifications to make it compatible to your auditory system.”

“Don't I already have one of those?” I asked, reaching for the small coin they had given me last time we met, and was unable to find it.

Wave smiled and said “Tut tut, remember, we gave that one to you in exchange for keeping silent about our mis-adventures. You blowing up Jax 8743 voided that contract. Besides, this one is better, and I can't take it away. It already has all the entire collection of albums you have with you, and it project them in true sound 21.7, or below. Including, and I had to get this feature special made, the exact sound quality produced by that strange machine you have your apartment.”

I was less annoyed by the prospect of him having searched through my apartment than I would have suspected. Which is to say, very annoyed. What happened to his strange version of informed consent? It must have shown on my face because he continued.

“Also, I can provide you with some of the best marijuana you've ever had.”

“Damn pothead, that's really why you took this assignment isn't it?”

Wave chuckled deeply “You know it man” and lit up his pipe.

“Ok fine, you may have a deal, show me how this thing works,” I said sitting down cross legged across from him and taking the music machine.

After some haggling, I decided on the small silver hoop earring model. I simply couldn't resist giving the homage to my pirate forefathers who also wore their most valued possession on their ear. Beyond the modifications necessary to make it fully compatible for Earth music, I also demanded that it not be controlled mentally, as was the normal way of these things. This caused poor Wave some amount of distress, but soon enough he found a company able to produce a special custom made edition of the music machine. I would have to touch it make it work.

We had similar items for sale on earth, but they all sacrificed music quality in minor ways. This thing took the same, and multiplied it in quality to the point that it was no longer in the same genre. Songs were sorted by album; the music still felt real, rather than a plaything. It was well designed, and very intuitive to use. I found I could alter its size and shape, as well as if I was the only one who heard the music or not. My head ached from tiredness, and my mind became fuzzy.

*Suddenly I glanced up, and noticed that I was sitting in darkness. The air around me was cold, and I was sitting on stone. I stood up. My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. I could see nothing.*

*Long moments passed. Notes faded in and began to amble without purpose. Nevertheless, I felt pressure. Instinctively, fearfully, I pulled inwards, calling for comfort. Oddly, it began to gather. Something I could not see glinted from around me neck in the non-light. From it I felt calm, power, hunger, and peace. Through it the heat passed, into my outstretched hand.*

*A glow appeared, and I was startled. I wanted to pull back, but I pushed forward. The object in my hand grew and grew, quickly becoming uncontrollable. I tried to release it, to take away it's fuel so it would cause it to disappear, but instead it simply flew upwards until it hit the arched ceiling of what I could now see was a circular room made entirely out of dark brown stone. The ceiling was glass, but I could see nothing outside it. The glass did not react. On its way towards the roof object I had created had passed by a crevice about halfway up that encircled the entire room. From the crevice came flames that lit the room.*

*All around me I could see patterns etched onto the walls in black. As I looked I began to notice the outlines of human figures, not so human figures. All of the lines connected. There were no obvious exits; the ceiling was at least ten stories up, and probably did not have a latch.*

*If I could make it to the glass, perhaps I could simply float out.*

*I leaned forward to get a better look. As I did so the light went out, leaving me momentarily in darkness. I glanced around, and saw my German Troll god striding towards me, lit by moonlight that now steamed in from the ceiling. With him was a sailor monkey walking beside him. The monkey looked tired and slightly confused. Zie was tangled in his own rigging, but managed to keep going anyhow.*

*As he came closer, zie passed through the area where the wall was. Too late I thought to look for the wall. It was now there, but I could not remember if it had been there when I first saw him approaching. Around his shoulders zie wore a yellow hide.*

*"Like my new cloak?" asked the troll. Indicating the oddly familiar shroud.*

*"Not particularly" I said.*

*"Oh yes, I forgot, you don't approve of putting dead animals in your mouth"*

*I was silent.*

*"Well, I must admit that I did eat her. But worry not my loyal priest, I only killed this once-god in self-defense. In fact, she is the reason why I am late.*

*"However, I noticed that you made good use of your time. Your propensities are growing faster than I anticipated. Which makes this meeting all the more vital."*

*Thinking back, I realized two things. The first was that the yellow hide resembled that of one of the creatures I had briefly seen the Troll talking with before. My second realization was my new jewelry that I had been mysteriously wearing moments before had mysteriously disappeared.*

*"Any chance that all of this is about to suddenly make sense?" I asked.*

*The Troll chuckled. "It's too late to repair the past, but let me see what I can do about the future. But first, let me congratulate you on your victory over the ones who stole your music, and on your choice of a reward, although I'm not sure how I feel about you having that pot-head following you around."*

*"Everyone needs a good sidekick" I replied.*

*A significant glance down at the confused monkey sailor. Then a nod.*

*I said "All the more so if you suspect they may be more powerful than yourself."*

*"An astute point, I knew I choose well. Speaking of which, tomorrow is an important day. As a result of old grudges and new alliances forged in praxis..."*

*The Troll-God suddenly began to look confused. Hir face wrinkled even more. The monkey stood on his tiptoes and whispered something into it's ear. Zie nodded satisfied.*

*"I am forced to apologize once again, but our good friend here is quite right. You are neither a Truthseeker nor a prophet. You don't speak a specialist's language, and since you have no aspirations to learn, I must ignore my earlier promise to make this clear. It will work out in the end, or not, according to your wit and guile." these words flowed out of him quickly, almost to himself. Then zie turned to me and said in a formal booming tone "That is the way of your people. Suffice to say; tomorrow is a day of high portents. As a curtesy to you I am warning you that decisions will be made concerning your future. I have made arrangements that will help, but you must ultimately take responsibility for reaching your destination. Indeed, it is imperative to my ego that you do the impossible and reach the lighthouse unaided. I have seen that it may be possible, but you must do it. Or not.*

*"But know that it is my wish that you try."*

*Thunder crashed in the distance. The Troll's face melted away from my vision. Fog rolled in. Mountains appeared in the distance. Purple swirled. I blinked.*

## Make No Mistake

-Keith Richards & The X-Pensive Winos

A few hours later I was alone again, trying to stare down reality. It had a good poker face, but after all I had seen, I suspected it was bluffing. The past week of near-riots had staved off the boredom of being aboard a ship. When traveling by ship it's usually best to be captain, it may not always be exciting, but it's rarely boring, and the perks are nice.

If we had been a fishing vessel it would have been my responsibility to keep the crew busy, preventing underlying tensions from bubbling up by ordering half of them to tie complex knots in the day, and the other half to un-tie them at night.

Like the governor of Texas or the Queen of England, I had enough power to prevent mutiny, but mostly what I had was ceremonial power.

The problems came in waves. I kept thinking I had managed to escape by acting incompetent while surrounding myself with competent underlings, so that finally I would be left in charge of nothing. Then something else would come up that demanded the royal signature.

Now was one of the quiet times. I was left alone with my thoughts. Reality was intruding on my peace, and demanding a showdown. I had been denying it so long that it had raised itself, and it had grown into a monster. I blamed the parents. But I knew this was not the location for our showdown. A beast of this magnitude needed to be battled it from a position of strength, where there were no distractions. Its remains would need to be spread to the four corners of the earth, each part buried in a box of pure iron ore. Magic, interstellar travel, my personal journey from tollbooth worker into leader of the S.S Begal. Horizons were expanding around me too quickly to process. What to believe? What was real? How to define reality after being saved by a pink bunny? How much of it was my own self-serving delusions?

These questions propelled me out the entryway of my room (one of the perks of being captain) in search of love and compassion.

After a few minutes of wandering I found Corrina. I hadn't known that I was looking for her, but of course I had been.

After some initial chatter, we began to walk together. I thought about an old Elvis movie. My mind wandered.

"You know, I consider myself a perpetually inspired man. But if I'm honest, when I look back I have to admit that I spend more time recovering from inspirational moments that never really lead anywhere worthwhile, than I actually spend being inspired." I said.

She glanced at me sadly, as if waiting for more. I sighed.

In the distance I heard a voice.

"He saved the ship, and acquitted himself with honor throughout. He clearly needs help and training. What do you have against the boy that you won't take him? He has talent and you know it!" Josephine's distinctive voice filled the silence. Before Corrina had the chance to do anything honorable, I put my finger up to my lips and singled for silence.

"You know just as well as I do that we were never in any real danger!" responded the voice of Earnest, in stressful tones.

"True, but he surely didn't. And that matters."

A sigh.

"I like him as much as you do, and I agree, he needs to be brought in for everyone's benefit. I've stayed away from the Lighthouse for over twenty years. Then I reappeared just last year! You know how easy it is to trick the system, we can arrange for him to get in next year."

"Don't try that on me you old badger. You never gave a damn about your reputation. Besides you have to go back for Roselyn anyways..."

"Who would probably slit Darwin's throat on her way there if I tried. And as a matter of fact, I probably won't be taking her, at least not this year. She's at a sensitive point, and I don't trust those elitist bureaucrats."

Josephine let out a short burst of affectionate laughter before responding with “Don’t think that’ll get you off. I’m intrigued by the unprecedented interest you’re showing in the girl, but you’re also trying to distract me.”

“Well, why don’t YOU take him if you’re so insistent on it?” interrupted Earnest.

This suggestion seemed to deflate Josephine. She was quieter as she said “You know as well as I do that he’ll have enough trouble without my taint on him.”

“You don’t really think anyone cares about that anymore? And if so, what makes you think that I’ll be any better for him?”

Corrina chose this moment to start walking furiously towards the open doorway. I of course followed.

Corrina was grinning from ear to ear, while Ernesto and Josephine both looked as if they had seen a ghost. The ghost chided them; “Two of the most powerful beings on the planet earth, and you let us sneak up on you like tourists out sightseeing.”

Ernesto recovered quickly enough, and said forcefully “Who I am does not concern you. And if you dare breathe a word of what you *suspect* to Roselyn, I will see that you regret it. She has enough on her mind without you confusing her.”

Josephine turned to Ernesto and said “So *that’s* why you don’t want to take her...”

Ernesto glared back at her, and she stopped talking, but held a smile on her face.

“Threat’s are all well and good,” said Corrina, “But I think I have a proposition for you. I have to go to the Lighthouse anyways. My master and I can take him with me. But you know that my master can’t just vouch for him based on my word, she has barely met him. She would be willing to take him there if you allow her to borrow a certain item, as a token of goodwill, so she she knows you approve of him.”

Ernesto looked at Corrina as if he couldn’t decide if she were a leper or his favorite niece at Christmas. “She won’t take your word for it?”

Corrina smiled like a cat about to finish toying with its prey “She’s a very suspicious lady.”

“None of which matters” said Josephine bluntly. “He can’t get in with your Master remember, as she well knows. You’re master’s voucher couldn’t be accepted. She hasn’t met him. You might be able to contrive something in time, but time is running short

already and Darwin here will have enough troubles as it is. Which is also why he can't wait another year. He can't have your master dragging him there only to get turned down at the gate."

"Perhaps it's for the best," said Ernesto, "I don't entirely trust that place anyways, and as you said, Darwin's got a little too much personality."

"I beg to differ," I said. "How much personality can I have if you all seem perfectly willing to talk about me as if I wasn't here."

In the corner I saw Wave smirk. I winked at him. Things were getting entirely out of hand.

"So let me get this straight." I said. At least everyone stopped arguing and looked at me. "We are discussing how to get me to the Lighthouse. Which I'm sure is a wonderful place."

"It's a training school of sorts, for people of exceptional abilities, it's really an honor." said Corrina helpfully.

"To enter this place. I need two things. A voucher from someone who has seen my abilities in action, and a way to find the place." I continued.

"Actually, you need more than a voucher, you need the presence of that person. That person has to have been ranked Master or above by the Lighthouse" said Josephine. "And that only gets ya past the gate. Once there you need to get approval from Nathan or Andrea. Which is why Ernesto is really the only one who can realistically take you." continued Josephine. Ernesto glared at her.

"Fine. Tell you what. Ernesto, give Corrina whatever it is she wants for her master. That voucher will have to do to get me past Nathan and them. I'll take care of the rest." I said with confidence I didn't feel. I remembered the words of my God though, and felt confident that I wasn't proposing the impossible. Might as well get Corrina whatever it was she wanted out of the deal.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," said Josephine into the silence that followed "What you're proposing is impossible. This isn't some bureaucracy you have to get around. The Lighthouse itself will stop you. It won't LET anybody in who doesn't meet these requirements. You have to have been seen 'showing great courage in the face of a

threat' or 'demonstrated exceptional talent that demands to be trained' and they can't lie."

I sighed. "Thank you for your concern. But I will find a way, or I will fail. I take the responsibility upon myself. I will not have Ernesto take me if he doesn't want to. So lets all just let it be. I have to stop off at home to pick up some things first. Corrina, where can I meet you and when?"

Looking a little bit startled, Corrina thought for a moment and said "If you could meet me at the Chicago O'Hare airport on the 17<sup>th</sup> I should be able to handle everything from there." Everyone else was looking at me with what I choose to interpret as respect. Either that or I had gone crazy. As many dead wise men will tell you, when in doubt press onward.

"How does 3 pm at baggage claim sound?" I asked.

"That sounds fine I guess. What's your hurry? Do we really have to decide this right now?" asked Corrina

"Yeah. I've got to get out of this place."

With that, I walked out of the room. Unreasonably frightened about what I had just done. As I stalked towards my room I said "Computer!"

"Yes?" came the mechanical voice of the computer.

"For now on, refer to me as O-cap-a-tan."

"Yes O-cap-a-tan."

Causing this highly sophisticated, immeasurably complex and powerful computer to be able to flub the pronunciation made me smile.

"New orders computer. For now on, refer to all of your future commanders with that term as well. This is a standing order, so if a future commander circumvents this, revert back to calling them O-cap-a-tan as soon as possible. Understood?"

"Yes, O-cap-a-tan."

"When is the soonest that we can re-route this ship to arrange for me to be dropped off at the location you picked me up?"

"Approximately 4.86742 seconds O-cap-a-tan"

I was surprised, but shouldn't have been. We have been moving along slowly dropping off people on Earth according to some ideal order in accordance with logistics I couldn't understand. I considered going back and asking Corrina what to pack. Thankfully I already had a passport, or the question would have been more pressing.

"Make it so."

In what felt like only 3 seconds, the ship said, "O-cap-a-tan, we have arrived. "On my order, transport me, all of my possessions including my albums along with 8,750,000 dollars worth of local currency in a black suitcase. Afterwards return to your pre-ordered path."

Luckily I had never planned to be the last one on the ship. A succession plan was already in place.

"Any problems with that order?"

"No, O-cap-a-tan. Standing by to transport on your word."

"Make it so."

The money had been a gamble that I hadn't really expected to work. It had. I should have asked for more.

And that is how I left my first ship, the HMS Beagle. I knew that I had not abandoned her, and that she was in capable hands. I also knew that she would always have a special place in my heart. She had been Yar.

My shift at the tollbooth was over, time to go home. I opened my trunk, and threw the suitcase full of cash in. The albums's went in the passenger seat.

Even So

-Ratdog

I drove home in the rain. The sky was dark and cloudy, obscuring the moon. What remained appeared so large that at first I thought something must have gone horribly wrong in my absence. Perhaps the moon was hurling towards the earth, and everyone was preparing for his or her final moments.

I breathed in slowly and drove my normal route, ignoring the faces that appeared outside my window. The foam on my steering wheel was falling apart under my hands. It felt comforting. I even appreciated the familiar noises that sputtered out from the engine as I drove along.

I decided to try my new music player. I oriented it to play through my car's sound system, and hit play. The sound came in clearly through my car speakers, and I was pleased at how easy it had been to operate. Now that I was back on Earth, my fear of technology was back in full force. Nonetheless, I was pleased with my new toy.

It was not raining, but it felt like rain. The silence was refreshing until I reached the city. Clubs noises and bright neon lights disturbed my peace.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled down a long driveway, and parked on the grass near an unused dumpster. I locked my doors, gathered my belongings and set out for home. In the parking lot there was an obese four-year-old in diapers, dancing to the noises of a bright neon green plastic music player, powered by the same technology sound chip found in musical greeting cards. His mother was not in sight, but I knew that she was near. She'd always managed to arrive before protective services. I considered rubbing my ear and changing the child's music, but decided that would be an abuse of my powers.

Walking into the building, I frowned as the cool night air dissipated into the stale freezing air of 40 air conditioners running at full blast, an inherent disadvantage of having electricity included in the rent. I walked past three muscular men, nervously

exchanging a brown bag for cash with a thin young man who had a distant look in his eyes. I walked up the stairs, only to see a woman I didn't know sitting in her apartment on her couch chanting. Across from her sat to a couple with rings under their eyes. Crosses and candles were strewn throughout the room.

I dropped the suitcase and CD's onto an empty spot on the couch. I turned on the window fan bring in fresh air. I noticed my cat's empty dish, and reached down to wash it. The gray and black cat jumped into my line of vision from nowhere. It looked as good as ever, thin and lean, its eye's so wise they almost spoke to me.

"You've been gone longer than you've been gone, and soon you will be leaving again. Thank you for your time with me, and feel free to call on me for aid, if I can, I will help you." Said the cat, its words not quite matching its lips. Then, as I stood their speechless, it leapt out the other open window above the kitchen sink, not falling, but simply disappearing into the night.

I glanced around my empty apartment. Discarded clothes and other random messes were strewn about at disjointed angles. I sat down on the kitchen floor and felt the cold tile with my hands, and eventually through my cloths. I looked across the room at the cheap wooden walls and began to cry in earnest.

A few hours later I fell asleep.

## Thing Called Love

-Bonnie Raitt

I heard a knock on my door.

When I woke up, my head ached. I noticed that the strange, indefinable pain that had plagued me throughout my space travels had finally disappeared, confirming my suspicion that it had been of a wholly different origin than the pain that now caused my headache. I lifted my head up and ran my fingers along the groove in the side my face. It felt like a tile.

I heard a knock on my door.

I stood up slowly, using the counter for support. My vision was still a little shaky when I opened the door and saw Corrina. She was holding a bag of unpopped popcorn, extra buttery, and a few plastic cards. She was wearing a black t-shirt with a grey jacket, and jeans. In street cloths and different light, she looked different. She, unlike me, had clearly taken the time to shower since leaving the ship.

“Hey there,” she said, clearly pleased with the look of shock on my face, “I thought you might like some company.”

“My cat *flew* out the window.” was my response.

“Oh yeah, you had a spirit? How neat. Not many of them live as companions anymore. Most of the ones left avoid humans all together.” she said, then stopped talking for a second, catching herself before continuing “Ah well, listen, I’m not here to answer questions, I’m here to take your mind off of everything. I’ve got some movie cards, and if you don’t take a break, you’ll go mad.” And then she tried to walk into my apartment. In many ways this was a dream come true. I glanced behind me into the dimly lit apartment and said

“Actually, why don’t we go out and get something to eat first...I’m a little hungry.”

“Ok, well just let me set this stuff down real quick.”

“I’ll get that for you” I said, grabbing the items from her hand and setting them down on a conveniently placed speaker next to the door. Performing a difficult maneuver I blocked her line of sight with the door. I reached across the room and

grabbed a wad of cash, before I sneaking one last look at the room and closing the door. The apartment would still be a mess when we returned, and I had no plan. As my pappy always told me, when in doubt, stall for time.

I took her to Tony and Sal's Pizza Joint. It was a windowless solid brick building that stood out from the surrounding buildings of steel. Tony and Sal's was one of the last non-franchise businesses in the area. As usual, it was nearly empty inside; the only other customers were two teens wearing leather jackets. As we entered, I heard the tall one with spiked hair say, "You guys are just like the characters from High Fidelity."

The teenagers almost trampled us on their way out. The foam brick was thrown by Sal, a bald man, a little chubby, wearing a tie-dye Hawaiian tee-shirt. It bounced harmlessness off the wall next to us.

"Watch those things, you'll hurt the paying customers!" I said coming in, holding the door open for a wary Corrina.

"When was the last time you actually paid a bill here?" said Tony coming out from the back. "Although since you brought a friend, I suppose we might actually see some money this time. What'll you have?"

We seated ourselves at the counter; Jeremiah Puddleduck played a loopy blues groove on the high-quality speakers. There were no menus. I pulled out a wad of cash and slapped it onto the counter. "That should about pay my back tab eh?"

Sal moved suddenly with a quickness that was shocking. His smile vanished. In a low voice he said, "What do you think you're messing with kid? If you need money that badly you come to us. You don't go elsewhere to pay us. You know that."

I was shocked, and I'm sure that it showed on my face. It had always been fairly obvious that Sal and Tony weren't even close to legitimate, and the pizza place was kept open because they had diversified income streams. The bribes alone must have cost more than the place brought in.

I knew this, and they knew that I knew this. But we never talked about it, and I was shocked at how close to the word "illegal" Sal had come in front of a stranger like Corrina. They didn't get this far by being lucky.

Sal's concern touched me.

"Don't worry." I said, "This doesn't come with strings attached. I'm heading out of town and I want to be square with you guys." I said lamely, realizing that there was no good explanation.

Tony looked at me skeptically and said, "Boy, we have seen your bank account" and then pushed the money back at me.

"You're money's no good here." He said.

I sighed; this was becoming more of a pain than it was worth. "Let's not fight. I want to show my friend some good food.

"So tell you what, you keep the money for now, we'll call it savings, and we'll fight about next time I come by." I said with a smile. This not so subtle reminder of Corrina's presence worked, and they each took another look at her and smiled. I had never brought anyone with me before.

"So one pizza coming right up. Real tomato's, no corn syrup in the crust, nothing that's been sitting in a freezer for a year. It lessens the chances that you'll get mutant powers, but it tastes better! Your lady friend has never tasted nothin so good!" exclaimed Tony as he made his way into the back room. As he turned around the budge from the gun he had strapped to his back was visible.

Sal introduced himself to Corrina, gave me another glance and disappeared into the corner with the piano.

He sat on the cushioned stool and began hitting notes at random, which morphed into a melody of well-known tunes. Corrina turned to me and said "Nice friends you've got here". This was clearly a hint, but I didn't know what she was hinting at. I closed my eyes and listened to the music coming from the old piano.

After awhile Tony came out from the back, with a pizza in one hand, and two stools in his other oversized hand.

"Never trust a chef who doesn't have a little extra weight on him" I said.

"You calling me fat?" responded Tony, throwing the two stools just over my head, causing me to flinch. They both landed upright.

I stood up, and pushed the new stools into place at the counter. Their backs were slightly taller than the ones we had been using, and the cushions had an odd shape, but nothing else was noticeably different.

“What’s with the stool?” ask Corrina, as Tony set down the pizza on the counter.

“Try it.” I offered. Corrina stood up and switched stools as I had done. Everyone in the room was watching her carefully. Her face relaxed noticeably as she sat.

“That is better than a day at the spa!” she exclaimed.

Tony chuckled “You can thank your boy here. He was in here all the time complaining about how chairs were among the first things ever invented but most of them still sucked.”

I jumped in, warming up to the topic “Think about it, chairs, or at least things to sit on - come from pre-history. All of the greatest inventors, engineers, etc... since have sat in or on things while contemplating their own works, and they all had to have at least least briefly considered why most of them aren’t all that comfortable. By nature we are a lazy species, and yet we all sit in uncomfortable chairs!”

“In our defense, most of our chairs are purchased explicitly to be uncomfortable.” Said Tony. He was a great storyteller; his voice was deep and soothing, and critically, his own stories excited him. He continued, “We didn’t want customers overstaying their welcome. But when we decided to go and buy a comfortable chair for him. Lo and behold, he was right! It was almost impossible to find one that is comfortable for everyone, not just one that suits your own body.

“Eventually we had to bribe a Jimmy Carter type to hand carve these two to exacting specifications designed by a scientist who we had to hire, bribe, blackmail AND lie to!”

“I’ve sat in comfortable chairs before,” said Corrina, in-between bites of pizza. The pizza of course was wonderful. Like great chairs, you don’t realize what your missing until you encounter the good stuff.

“No, you only think you have. More likely, you’ve sat in a chair that was comfortable to your body. Instead of stumbling about in the dark hoping to find a chair that by some quirk of fate fits you, these chairs are basic and comfortable for everyone!”

I exclaimed, unable to mask the enthusiasm I felt for the topic. Must have been the pizza.

Everyone laughed.

“So wait, if they just made the chair for you, how come there are two of them?”

Corrina asked me a few bites of pizza later. Her face told me that she was proud to have found a flaw in the Tony’s story. I was happy just to notice how normal the evening had become.

Tony came to my rescue, sort of. “Your boy here is god damn idealist. When I presented him with the chair he asked if I could get my hands on another. I asked him why he wanted two, being a naturally curious fellow, and he told me ‘We must prepare for an ideal world!’ was what he said. Mind you he was awfully sullen back in those days.”

“Aw stop it.” I said before things got so awkward as to be beyond redemption, “Next you’ll be dragging out the baby pictures.”

As we prepared to leave Sal, who had been quiet most of the evening said, “If you like her, try your best to keep her. Trust me, there is no single talent that will keep you happier than the ability to keep a good woman happy.” I shook his hand and told him I was going out of town for a while, but I’d stop in whenever I was back.

As we walked through the night air Corrina said “I liked your friends.” When I didn’t respond she added, “Sal’s quite the piano player. I can almost understand why music’s so important to you.”

“Something has to be sacred,” I said.

Then feeling as if that wasn’t enough I added, “There are only a few things that can give meaning to life. Ignoring for a moment religions various promises, everything else is a quest for food, sex or death. For philosophical reasons I’m trying to avoid being controlled by hormones, and fear of death can only take you so far.”

“One could argue that none of those are all that far from religion.” commented Corrina.

“Yes, but art transcends.”

She nodded thoughtfully. I could tell that she didn't fully understand what I was talking about. Deep down something in me was saddened. It knew that eventually I would have to face up to the fact that she wasn't perfect. But not tonight.

The night air was cold, and the city was dirty. In the distance I heard people laughing the ugly laugh of drinkers trying to make clubs fun. The buildings all around us were tall, gray and dark. There was nobody else on the street. Already the warehouse of the pizza place was far behind us. The streetlight was out, but I felt no danger. Corrina turned to me and said "What about emotions like love? Doesn't that transcend?"

"Now whose the romantic?" I joke. In our brief time together we had already experienced more than our fair share of awkward silences, but this one beat them all. I couldn't tell if she had been flirting or simply thinking aloud.

I usually thought of her to be in a class above me, and in many ways she was. But in this light I could also see that was human as well, and that wasn't all bad.

Nothing broke the silence, and eventually we walked on.

Walking up the creaking wooden stairs I knew that my apartment would still be a disaster. Despite the magical nature of the night so far, experience told me that no woman worth wooing could resist being slightly disgusted.

"You know what I just realized?" asked Corrina. "The scientist they tried to bribe almost certainly wasn't exactly the most honest guy to begin with. I mean, I like your friends and all, but I get the impression that they probably know where to find a corrupt one if they really tried hard."

I nodded "So how come he resisted so hard?" I said, finishing her thought "I have no idea. It doesn't even make economic sense. I like to assume that Tony just has a dramatic flair for storytelling and not that there is a powerful conspiracy to keep us all in uncomfortable chairs."

I put the key in the door.

"I'm probably wrong," I said, as my mind raced, trying to think of a way of politely getting into the apartment long enough to straighten the worst of the mess while leaving her on the doorstep. Maybe I could get a blindfold on her momentarily? Tell her I had a surprise for her. No, that's just creepy.

I opened the door, and the apartment was clean, not spotless, but clean. Startled I saw Wave in the corner, wearing a butler's uniform. He brought a single finger up to his lips, smiled mischievously, and disappeared. Unconsciously I touched my earring, and stepped aside to let Corrina in.

Corrina had brought some rental cards with her. Two movies and one all purpose video game.

With the advances in technology rentals had long ago become obsolete as every home was now legally required "for security purposes" to have a perfect home entertainment system (PHES) provided by Global Domination Corp. The company's name was the remnant of a last ditch effort by a few brave lawmakers to shame the corporation. One of the many bastard children of Gill Bates ancestor, it was tough to find any reliable information about them. Global Corp provided home entertainment systems were connected to the information superhighway. They also monitored most of your activity and provided essential services and warnings in emergencies. As a bonus they were also able to tailor advertising to you as well!

These monitoring abilities were one of a myriad of reasons that I had built my primary sound system from component parts and never connected it Global Corps servers.

The relevant aspect of this system is that it made video rentals obsolete. Even the most basic version like mine, required by law, (which could be instantly upgraded for a small fee to provide more services) had the ability to play any movie from any time period for the same fee as a rental.

Nonetheless research suggested that many people enjoyed going out and renting movies despite the obvious superiority of the download on demand service. Men liked being able to impress their dates, and women liked being able to control what they were

going to watch ahead of time. Capitalism being the name of the game<sup>3</sup>, rental cards such as the ones Corrina had purchased still existed. They contained only the information of a single movie, and could be inserted into the PHES at to play for a limited amount of time.

“Want the popcorn now or later?” I said, indicating the popcorn she had brought.  
“Now.”

The first movie was teenage rom-com about a hapless but well intentioned young man’s first year of college, as he navigated the hazards of the real world, was momentarily was transported to an alternate realm, briefly gained god-like powers, and discovered that the girl he had always longed after was evil while simultaneously realizing that his best friend was not only a girl, but indeed the girl of his dreams.

Corrina seemed quite pleased with herself, and as she made comments that were funny without being biting.

We dismissed the second movie in lieu of the game. I was a fair hand at some of the more esoteric strategy computer titles, but my meager TV system couldn’t handle most of the newer special effects. We eventually settled down to play game 43523578 by Global Corp. It was an open-ended, dynamically generated role-playing game, guaranteed to produce a new experience every time you played. We were neighbors who grew up across the street from each other. In high school we briefly fell in love before being torn apart by our parents. I quickly ended up running a major corporation centered on exploiting gold mines buried under the sea. She was an adventurous young artist determined to overthrow my evil corporation and stop my world dominating ways, not realizing that I was the same person she had known in high school. By night she was also vampire slayer, and I was her mysterious consultant, using my vampire powers to help solve the increasingly complex crimes of the supernatural underworld. The game wasn’t very good, but it was gratifying to see the blood splatter as I stuck the pen in the large demon’s throat.

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<sup>3</sup> The game was invitation only.

As we played we chatted. I told her about my life BALSMM (Before Alien Lifeforms Stole My Music). She related similar stories about her life, although her stories had more holes in them than mine did.

The atmosphere was relaxed enough that I didn't try and conceal from her the ordinariness of my life. I suspected her omissions concealed more exciting secrets, but it was still surprisingly natural to chat about the idiocy of traffic laws and the evilness of Global Corp, and the accepted irony of them putting anti-corporation sentiments into their own game.

I told her amusing stories about childhood antics and near-genius madmen I had met. Not thrilling ones who were on the verge of taking over the world, just the ones who read books about nuclear physics for fun and lived in their mom's basement.

We agreed that great movies are so rarely great that you have to be able to appreciate the bad ones or else give up. I told her about the time I had walked in on the beginnings of a forest fire and helped the idiot teenagers put it out. She told me about the time she had almost set fire to her room in experimenting with candles. I told her about my how I had spent an inordinate amount of time practicing darts. She told me that she had briefly become a pool shark and made an inordinate amount of money at it. I told her my theory of art, and she gave me her B.S. theory of history. And so on.

"Some people are just crazy. Sandra and Ellen probably had good reasons for being the way they were." I said, commenting on my ex-housemates "But for that to be true their sense of reality has to be so different from mine that there's no point in pursuing it any further. Down that road lies madness. I can only assume that their personalities were enough punishment to ruin the rest of their lives." I said.

"Yeah, I guess I would agree with that. WATCH OUT FOR THE ZOMBIE! The important thing is that you looked for a sensible reason first though. A lot of people wouldn't have tried to do even that."

I wanted to continue to selflessly talk about my theory of looking for the good reasons people do horrible things, but my eyelids were closing without my permission, and I could tell that I was not the only one. I yawned.

“I don’t know about you, I’m getting a little tired. You’re welcome to stay here though, I’ll sleep on the couch and you can have the bed. I can even change the sheets and whatnot.”

“That’d be nice. But I can take the couch.”

“No I insist. I was raised right, well no I wasn’t, but that’s another story. Lemme find the sheets.”

I was stunned that she had said yes. The depth of my tiredness had made me speak more freely around someone who I was “in like with” than I would have otherwise. I normally wouldn’t have even thought to offer. The whole evening had contained a subtext of romantic tension for me, and I worried that tomorrow I would regret having said or done all sorts of things. I was happy.

Wang Dang Doodle

-Willie Dixon

I woke to the sound of the shower. I said, "I never liked my violets wilting anyways" to the cat. I sighed sadly remembering the cat had jumped out the window, and got up to see what was for breakfast. Nothing.

Then I laid back down and rested until I heard noises indicating that she was done. After giving her time to dress, I called out at the closed door "I can't make anything except pasta for dinner, but I make the best French Toast you've ever had. Care for some breakfast?"

I took her muffled response for a yes, and set to work. When she finally opened the door I had to make a conscious decision not to stare. Her long red hair hung down loosely framing her face. She was wearing jeans and a simple black t-shirt as she walked unselfconsciously into the kitchen. Even her walk was confident, attractive.

In my frantic search to think of something besides her, I suddenly realized that I needed to call in sick to work or I'd be considered late. I served her and went over to the other side of the room to do that. I'd already missed one day without calling, so the conversation was awkward. By the time I returned I had regained control of me emotions, although she was still beautiful.

"I've never particularly liked French Toast, but this is pretty good" she said through a mouthful of toast.

"Thanks."

"So I've got some bad news. I'm not going to be able escort you personally to the Lighthouse."

"Any reason in particular?" I said trying to be casual.

She paused for a moment, either carefully considering her next words or possibly just chewing. "I suppose given the deal I've made on behalf of my master, she'll have to trust you anyways."

This, I assumed, was not directed at me. I wanted to interrupt her and tell her not to tell me anything that she wasn't comfortable sharing. I didn't.

"My master, Sonya, she left me a message last night." She began, then stopped as if unsure how to proceed. "I need to take the item Ernesto gave me to her right away. Before things get out of hand. I'm afraid I can't tell you more than that without explicit permission. I trust you, but I'm not aware of all the dynamics involved in this. I've arranged for a friend of mine, Zachary, to help guide you there. I'm so sorry about this. I'm sure that Sonya would understand if I could explain the situation to her, but I don't have any way of contacting her."

"...and if you don't show up, she'll probably worry and do something stupid." I finished for her. She nodded, looking quite distraught.

"I prefer the term 'unnecessarily dangerous' to stupid if you don't mind."

I laughed politely. "Don't worry about it." I continued in-between bites of food. "So long as your friend can get me in the general proximity of the place I'll handle the rest. You weren't going to be able to get me in on your own anyways."

She nodded, still looking concerned "That brings up something else if you don't mind me asking. Why are you so confident that you can make it in anyways? Not to be rude, but as much as I like you, you don't really seem to know what you're talking about when you agreed to this. You've led an interesting life, but by your own admission the spaceship journey was your first real adventure."

"I'll answer your question if you answer mine. Have you really had that many adventures of significance besides the spaceship?"

She blushed slightly. "No, not really, but I have been to the Lighthouse, and I am training to do this sort of thing." She sighed, clearly trying to avoid insulting me. "I just mean that I have some idea of what I'm talking about, if only in theory. These are infallible magical defenses, and from all indications you appear to be walking into this blindly."

"Ah, well then. There is your answer. I am blind, so I have nothing to go on but faith."

"Meaning?"

“My God, the bobble headed troll came to me in a dream and told me that zie would like me to give this my best shot. Who am I to argue with my dreams?”

She stopped eating and gave me a look that made me feel guilty for being so flippant. “Maybe you shouldn’t go. They only accept new admissions once a year but it’s not vital that you attend this year. The deadlines not for another month and a half anyways, we may be able to squeeze you in legitimately anyways if you will just accept some help. People do it all the time, find one of the masters who thinks the admissions policy is stupid and rescue a stray dog in front of them. Or better yet, wait until next year and we can get you in no problem. Most of the people who make it in don’t even deserve to be there, they just find ways to work with accredited masters to get around the system.

“Or we can even get you into a different school. The Lighthouse isn’t the only one you know, and if you really need to be in the Lighthouse you’ll end up there eventually.” This last suggestion she made with a look of disgust on her face. “I don’t have a relationship with any particular deity,” she continued “and I’m not sure which one you’re describing but I’ve studied the God-Touched. I pretty certain that it doesn’t work like you seem to think that it does. A lot of people have died trying to follow through on their God’s whims thinking they would be protected. When he says he wants you to try, that’s what he really means. He’s not making any guarantee’s that he’ll help you... He doesn’t even necessarily know what he’s asking.”

“Don’t worry.” I said “I don’t really have any faith in him. We talked about this last night. All I have faith in is music. But I owe him a favor so I’m going to give it at least a try. I’m terrified of course, but there you go.” I decided to change the subject “Now, answer me this, is Sonya really your *master*? I mean are you a servant?”

She chuckled. “No, that’s just a shorthand term you’ll pick up at the Lighthouse. They tend to refer to themselves as Honored One, but the students just call them all masters, I don’t know why. Mentor is probably a better term, just not the one we use. She’s training me, and I have certain obligations to her, but I’m not her servant in any way. Although I hear it can be done that way. It depends on who your master is. In this case, all it means is that she’s the one training me. Master is a rank, indicating that they

have mastered certain skills; they can take on apprentices and vouch others to be let into the school. There is a ceremony that goes along with it, but it's all very secretive."

Although I could tell that she was still concerned, she didn't say anything else about my upcoming journey that morning. I would have liked to offer her more reassurances, but I didn't really have any. All too soon breakfast was over, and she was offering to do the dishes. I turned her down, and then, after giving me instructions about where to meet her friend Zachary, she was gone. Off to save her master from whatever international den of thieves she had gotten involved with.

The apartment was lonely without the cat. I looked around at the chaos leftover from the night before. I sat down to play the video game for a little bit, but it wasn't the same.

I spent the next week making arraignments to be out of town. Whoever coined the phrase 'money can't buy happiness' may have been right, but only on a technicality. You may not be able to buy happiness, but you can certainly rent it, and more importantly, it frees you to pursue happiness on a more even footing.

I got the cheap thrill from handing large amounts of cash to various stunned observers. Well, the sales associates were pretty much numb to this sort of thing and I think they were only pretending to be surprised, but the look on my landlords face when I paid the next two years in advance was worth something. I also had the satisfaction of paying off a number of old debts, and the pleasure of quitting my job in a self-righteous huff.

Packing for the trip to unknown regions, I was sad to admit that after all of that I would be forced to leave my physical albums behind. After careful experimentation with the earring I realized that I truly could tell no difference in sound quality between it and the more conventional albums'. It did not have any of the subtle distortions of sound or methodology of playing music that I had turned me off to similar human contraptions.

The scrolling functions in my earring were so intuitively linked to my brain patterns that I didn't feel like I was cheating, did not impel me towards shallow listening.

So I stored them and a few other valued possessions in a bank's safety deposit box protected by the same laws that defended international C.E.O's. Theoretically they should be safe from everything up to, and including a minor nuclear war.

Trying very hard to restrain myself, I promptly went out and spent a bunch of money on albums that I had always wanted but could never quite justify. I treated myself to a couple of extravagant meals, put paid stranger's parking meters, and gave the homeless hundred dollar bills.

When it was time to leave, I filled the cat's bowl. Just in case. Given a couple of days alone to sort things out, I had adjusted admirably to the profound changes that had taken place recently in my understanding of the world. Indeed, I strangely felt almost none of the remorse I expected to feel during my preparations to leave for this odd version of summer camp for unusually talented youth.

I took a bus to the address Corrina had given me. The half-empty bus was long gray and dark. The bus driver sneered at me slightly as I searched for my token. I sat towards the back on the drivers side and watched the traffic pass. I wasted some time wondering if the dingy fog was some atmospheric anomaly or a dirty window.

The people outside the bus all looked sad in the early morning light. Neither the bus nor the people inspired me with confidence that things were heading in the right direction.

After a few more roads, the bus finally turned its last corner and sputtered to a stop on the side of the road. It was a good twenty feet from the next bus stop. After a few moments of confusion people from the bus stop began to start walking towards us, intending to get on. The bus driver got off. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

There was a little bit of grumbling, but not much. I was proud of my fellow bus riders for not complaining. I was saddened that my companions were by and large the poor and downtrodden, too beaten down by life to consider complaining.

“What the hell!” shouted a voice from the back of the bus. “Let’s get on the road you jackass!”

“You go to hell!” was the response that emerged from outside the bus. A few moments later the bus driver returned and announced “My apologies to everyone. There is a problem with the engine. I’ve radioed ahead and another bus is coming to pick you up.”

“What the hell!” said a familiar voice. I stood up and walked off the bus before I had to hear any more. Once I had climbed down the three short stairs and made my way to the sidewalk I took a moment to re-adjust my bags on my shoulder, and began walking towards the nearby bus stop, assuming that the new bus would show up shortly. The bus stop was located at a four-way intersection, and once I got close enough I realized that the street name looked familiar. I was still about a half hour away from the stop I was supposed to get off at, yet there it was, Swing Fish Parkway.

Down the street a crowd of people were chanting in front of a tall steel building, the only nice building in sight. Closer to me I noticed a blue neon sign flashing “Mamma and Son’s Diner” about a block and a half away. I couldn’t hear what the protestors were chanting, and I didn’t care. I looked across the street from Mamma’s and saw a run-down red wooden building that had a sign in front of it I couldn’t read. If that was Pap and Cousins, then I was in the right place.

Behind me the rest of the rider’s were finally beginning to get off the bus. They looked dazed, and I thought I saw some blood spots on one man’s shirt. I lifted my bags off the ground and began to flee towards Mamma’s.

Mamma and Son’s was a two story blue fiberglass affair that was badly in need of a bath. Across the street stood Pap and Cousins, a red wooden building that was badly in need of a health inspector. Luckily, I was supposed to meet Corrina’s friend Zachary at Mamma’s.

The lighting inside was poor, and it took my eyes a moment to adjust. None of the waitresses lounging about seemed particularly interested in me. I saw someone fitting the description of Zachary sitting in a corner booth in the back. He was peering intently into his dark green mug. He was wearing a pair of nice brown slacks and a matching

plaid button up shirt. His sandy blonde hair was just the right length that any military commander would have thought him a likeable rebel. Not knowing what else to do walked cautiously over towards the booth.

Zachary suddenly looked up, he stared at me intently for a moment, and then stood up and grinned widely, like an excited puppy. Standing up I could tell he was only a few inches taller than me, but clearly in better physical shape. His dark eye's contrasted with his fair skin and huge grin. The black Buddy Holly glasses didn't help much. He stuck out his hand "My name's Zachary, I presume you're the one and only Darwin."

Suddenly frowning, the life force seemed to drain out of him as he slumped back into the booth. "I've some bad news I'm afraid."

He waved for me to sit down, so I did. He shook his head sadly and said, "I won't be able to leave for another month or so. I've run into some problems with the locals. I'll do my best to find someone to take you, but I won't be able to escort you."

"I was under the impression there was a fairly tight deadline we had to get there by." I said.

"You're right of course," he sighed, "I can get in any time, but you're under enough restrictions as it is. Corrina told me all about it. Unfortunately I just don't see any way I can get out of the country in time."

I was surprised at how young he was, younger than me probably just out of high school. And he was a horrible liar, which made me feel instantly protective of him. So instead of responding to his misery, I said "Well, that's alright man. What can you tell me about this school anyways?"

"What do you want to know? I don't know what you've been told."

"Well, assume I know nothing, and you won't be far from the truth."

"Alright." He said, giving me a half smile and took a sip from his drink. "Well, if you're able to get in..."

"Why exactly won't I be able to?" I interrupted. He shook his head again and started over.

"Alright." He gave a short laugh of someone with his own problems "

“Hmm, where to begin. Umm. Ok the short version goes like this. The Lighthouse is about 200 years old and it is invitation only. The founders bonded the whole place to something powerful and when they created it, they bonded it to something with sentience and more power than anything I’ve ever seen.

“At first this was just to keep out the riff-raff that all the other schools were letting in, avoid grade inflation and all that. They are pretty hush hush about the whole thing. I could get in serious trouble talking about it at all with someone who hasn’t been admitted yet...”

“The point is. Everyone agrees that the Lighthouse cannot be deceived or overpowered. There is a sentience to it, and not even the Council can defy it. And it doesn’t accept anyone who doesn’t meet the qualifications, however loosely it might interpret them. And frankly, unless things have changed since Corrina talked to me, you don’t have those qualifications.”

Just then the waitress came over, and he ordered another drink. I ordered a milk shake. I thought about asking him how the apprenticeship process worked, or what the difference between Council members and Master’s was, but decided not be selfish. Instead, noting that he seemed much more relaxed I asked, “So, why can’t we leave today?”

He gazed into his glass and said “During the break I ended up taking a job as an archivist with a government subcontractor. I’ve been doing archival work at the library at the Lighthouse and I enjoy it. In fact they’ve practically promised me a job when I ascend. But if I don’t at least technically qualify as a master first, the students will never treat me with respect. Can you imagine a 40-year-old non-master librarian? Nobody would take me seriously.”

He gave a bitter laugh at my nod. “Yeah well, you haven’t been there yet! Anyways Master Ragathan, the head librarian, set me up with this job over break to give me some experience outside of the Lighthouse.

“The first few weeks went fine. Then, well... I ended up in a department run by this guy Tyler. He showed me the ropes and I did well... too well I guess.

“I guess I didn’t really realize what a jerk Tyler was until today. I was overworked, and I kept trying to quit, but every time Tyler talked me into staying just a little but longer. In retrospect I can see that I had essentially made it so he never had to do anything anymore. By then however, we were already reaching the end of my internship.

“Then on what was supposed to be my last day we got a new set of instructions from HQ. Tyler begged me to stay and help. So I did. I told him all along though that today would be my last day.

“Then yesterday, as I am walking out the door, he calls me into his office. He offers me a salary if I stay. He’s enthusiastic about it; as if I hadn’t told him twenty times that I couldn’t stay past today.

“I turn him down and go to leave, and he pulls out my passport. I don’t know how he got it; or how he even guessed I was going to leave the country. I must have left it in my desk or something. Now he’s holding it ransom. Now he’s probably sitting comfortably in his office chair just down the road from here, and it’ll take me a month at least to get a new passport made. The way he explained it, I might as well get paid for that month.”

I sensed that some of the details had been glossed over, but that I had all the important ones. Zachary displayed quite a bit of trust by sharing such an embarrassing story.

There was something comforting in that. It took some of the pressure off of entering this world of magic and hero’s to find one of them being scammed by such ordinary techniques.

It was the look in his eye that decided it for me.

“So, if I managed to get your passport back, we’d be able to leave today?” I said, after a few moments had passed.

I was watching him closely as his face lit up for a moment, before returning almost instantly to a frown. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He began rather resignedly “Tyler is rich, and not all of his businesses are exactly legal. He has defenses. Besides, I promised Corrina that I’d keep you out of trouble.”

“We don’t have to tell her.” I responded, resisting the temptation to wink. Something about Zachary demanded to be cheered up.

Despite the humanizing effect of Zachary’s story, I still felt a deep insecurity about my place in this new world of magic and hero’s. This was not helped by the image of Wave smiling at me from the corner as he rifled through a garbage can. The prospect of infiltrating an unknown evil corporations middle management appealed to me. I knew that having something to prove would get me into trouble eventually, but I also I knew that if we succeeded it would get me back to Corrina more quickly. And if we failed, I would never make it to the Lighthouse.

I brushed these thoughts from my mind, reasoning that I didn’t want to think in terms of “if we succeeded”.

It took a few moments of quibbling, and he finally agreed. He probably thought that I knew what I was doing.

I insisted on going alone, ostensibly because he would be recognized, but mostly because I didn’t want him to realize I had no plan. I quizzed him about the layout, and discovered he didn’t know much. Tyler was probably still at his office with the passport. The building was within walking distance, but it was a front, no real work ever occurred there. It also had security to keep out protesters. Zachary didn’t know much beyond that.

I was slightly taken aback at his mention of protesters, so he walked me over to the window of the small restaurant so that I could see the building where our quarry lay.

By the time I left I still didn’t have a plan, but I did have some parameters. During my conversation with Zachary I had kept my cool externally, but internally my fear level had risen and fallen with the regularity of the tides. Walking towards the building I felt the same irrational fear I had felt when I was ten and being dragged onto my second roller coaster. The first one, I didn’t know what I was in for. It was the second one that I felt the anticipatory fear while standing in line knowing that all I had to do to avoid this thing I feared was turn around and walk away.

On the other hand, I no longer ride roller coasters.

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wave following behind me, and my fear broke. My shoulders fell back, relaxed, and I began planning.

Ahead of me I saw the protesters outside the building. They weren't just protesting, they were picketing. Violently. No way to sneak past them, they were serious. Besides, I never cross a picket line. So instead I began chanting:

“WE ARE BEGINNING TO BELEAVE!  
THAT THE MAN IN CHARGE MUST LEAVE  
WE ARE BEGINNING TO BELEAVE  
THAT THE MAN IN CHARGE MUST LEAVE!”

As I chanted I pumped my fists in the air. As I entered their midst others began to take up my chant. The first was a sad looking middle-aged woman, who did it more out of sympathy than because she liked it, but I kept at it, and soon enough everyone was chanting. I turned to the bright-eyed college student next to me and said, “I can't believe there are this many people here! I thought I was the only one who even knew he was coming! I'm so glad to see you!”

He turned back to me and smiled indulgently, as if he didn't quite understand what I had said, but he had dealt with that problem so often that it barely registered anymore. “We appreciate anyone who can make it out” he said to me then began chanting again.

I sighed internally, and saw the sincerity in his eyes. I scrapped my plan to send them all off on a wild goose chase and instead just walked through the crowd, gave a wink to the guard, who was looking a little flustered himself, and walked in.

Inside sat a slightly more serious looking guard, situated at a small desk in front of the hallway that lead to elevators. As I began walking towards him, I heard a call from the secretary on the other side of the room “Excuse me. You'll need to sign in here sir before you can go upstairs.”

The guard began to stand up as I proceeded forward. "Tell Mr. Tyler that I'm coming to see him about getting paid. I got rid of those protesters' didn't I? Don't worry he knows I'm coming."

The both hesitated for a moment, looking out the relatively small glass door to check on the status of the protesters. They were still there, chanting.

"Sir, Mr. Tyler is located on the seventh floor. You can't even go up that high until he buzzes you up. Just hold on a moment here and I'll give him a call."

By then I was well past the guard. I called out into the main office from the inside of an elevator "I'll wait in the elevator then." And on that note I pushed the button for the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

The doors closed. I saw that I could go up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor without a key. Tyler was on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. I hit button for the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Once the doors opened I hit "close doors" button on my way out. Hopefully it would make it smoothly to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and the guard downstairs who I assumed was monitoring the elevator would assume I got off on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, a secretary with a long thin face and lizard eyes was blushing at a curly haired teenager wearing a dark gray uniform and a gun. They stopped mid-flirt to glance up at me expectantly.

"I'm on my way to see Mr. Tyler about some reward money. They are calling him from downstairs', I'm just here to use your restroom real quick, and the one on the first floor is broken. Got to look your best when meeting the boss, eh? This is a big opportunity for me."

As I headed down the hallway behind the woman, I heard her say "Sir I'm afraid I'll have to ask you...." But I was already in the door and didn't catch the end of her sentence.

Inside the restroom I began prying off the vent to the airshaft using a fork I'd pocketed from the diner. It was a solid fork, real metal, but it still bent.

Thinking slightly more clearly, I used the other end to start turning the screws. The vent looked abnormally small, and it wasn't until after I had the first screw off that I

realized that there was no way I'd fit in there. It must be more efficient technology than the buildings in my video game.

For plan B, I decided that my lead-time had probably run out. I went over to the stall and stood on the toilet, and pushed up on the drywall ceiling. It hit cement after about two inches. Plan C was just coming to a proper ferment when the door burst open and the wild curly haired guy came rushing in. "Sir I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come with me." He said in a practiced voice that almost squeaked.

When he came to just outside the stall, I pulled myself up, gripping the crack in-between the drywall and the cement above it, and kicked out, causing the blue stall door to fly open hitting curly haired kids face. He fell back. I considered swinging out and landing on him, but decided it would be likely to hurt me.

Instead I dropped down and pushed hard on the door. The kid flew back again, a muffled "oohmf" coming from his general direction. As I came around the door I grabbed his hand that was holding the billy club. His other hand was covering his face, probably a bloody nose. I tried to swing the billy club back at him using his own arm, but he proved stronger than me. Before he had a chance to assimilate that fact, I shouldered into him hard, pushing him back against the tile wall. He screamed and fell with a short shout. I reached down quickly and grabbed his handcuffs from their easily detachable loop on his belt. I handcuffed him to the nearby pipe coming down from the sink.

Thank god some clichés still proved to be accurate.

Eventually I walked hurriedly out of the restroom, holding a wet paper towel against a scratch on my face. His shouts behind me were disturbing, but I had to assume they would not make the situation any worse.

Luckily I found another elevator at the end of the hallway, so I didn't have to go past the secretary. I knew that it would require the key I had just taken off the curly haired boy.

I tried get to 7<sup>th</sup> floor, but the key didn't work for that floor. I did make it to level 6 though, and that was close enough. No more time to waste trying to outsmart myself.

The elevator door opened, and I saw the glint of a gun. Luckily it was the harmless end. I took a step back as the man fell backwards, his weight came down on me, and I pushed him aside. I took a step forward, and felt a sharp pain in my right shoulder. A dart? I saw a tall woman with short black hair stare at me in shock. And then the room began to swirl, actually swirl, and I stumbled forward. I felt the elevator close on my side, and then open again, and then there was nothing.

"The main thrust of that is, do you dare jump in the air at all?  
And if you jump in the air, are you gonna have presence of mind enough to do a trick?"

-Robert Hunter on 'Row Jimmy'

I opened my eyes to see a silver room, a very small silver room. I turned my head and saw the black haired woman crouching next to me. She had a hard face, with small eyes and big, yet somehow very elegant features. "My name is Althea, you must be Darwin." She said in a whisper. "I'm Zach's friend, I met him at the restaurant, he was worried about you, so I thought I'd come to see how you were getting along. Sorry about poisoning you."

"No worries." I interrupted, not quite at peace with the ordeal, but not needing to hear her reasons. I'm sure that they were good. "I'm just glad all that happened was that I got knocked out for a bit" and that was true. "So, where are we?" I realized that the room we were in wasn't even large enough to stand up in.

"The air vents" she said.

"What are you talking about? I tried to get in here and the entrance way was too small to fit in. Why would they even have vents this big at all?"

She chuckled lightly. "You just have to know which ones to use. I don't want to be rude, but you've been out almost fifteen minutes. The fact that you're waking up means a couple of other people are too. They've been searching for us for a while, and eventually they will find us if we stay here. If not, there is always risks that if given enough time they'll call in the authorities, and then we'll never get out of here."

"You're saying we should get moving?" I asked wryly.

She nodded, satisfied. I rolled over onto my belly, did a quick push up and said "Which way boss?"

"Well, are we leaving or do you still want to get his passport?"

"Let's go for the passport if you're up to it"

She nodded again and began crawling ahead of me. That exchange had been extremely easy. She hadn't tried to voice any objections or test my resolve. Still I felt strange. Maybe it was the drugs in my system. Maybe Wave would want some. I looked back and saw him crawling behind me.

My knees felt heavy and my arms seemed to drag a little at first, but once I got going it was easy enough. After a few moments I decided that I would be ok so long as I didn't need to react too quickly. I smiled slowly at that thought.

After what felt like miles, but only took about ten minutes to crawl to, we came upon an opening, and crawled out into an even darker room. I heard a dripping noise, and the scattering of mice. Where we in the basement? When I opened my mouth to ask Althea simply turned around and motioned me into be silence.

It occurred to me that even if she was who she claimed to be, it was stretching my trust pretty thin to count on the friend of a friend of a crush. I also decided that there was nothing I could at this point except be suspicious. Even if I discovered that she was the enemy, the aftereffects of the drug had left me too sluggish to protest effectively.

My eye's kept failing to adjust to the darkness, but I was able to make out her movements as she made her way to an opening that turned out to be an elevator. She keyed us in the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. On the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, the door opened to reveal another security guard. He seemed quite surprised to see us, and instead of reaching for a weapon, he simply shouted, "Help! Intru-" before Althea had him in a headlock. A moment later he fell to the ground. More poison?

This sparked my curiosity about what her plan would have been if we had made it to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. It was only in the context of this thought that I realized that she had in fact left the elevator and was making her way down the corridor. I hit the red OPEN button, and tried to shake the cobwebs from my mind as I followed her.

By the time I made it to the next room I discovered two more guards, no longer a threat to society. I looked through the open wooden door, and saw her stalking towards a man in a nice suit with spiked blonde hair who was clearly Tyler. I looked back down the hallway I had come from and saw the elevator door open. Quickly, I grabbed the dart out of one of the men on the ground, and threw it in the general direction of the

elevator, as I scrambled to make into the room with Tyler and Althea. I closed the door behind me and locked it.

“We should probably hurry this along.” I said. I saw the back of Althea’s head nod. Tyler smiled, and then frowned as Althea took another slow step towards him. She slowly stalked towards him like a hunter going in for an easy kill that has nowhere to run. At a slightly more brisk pace, I moved in front of her and began opening the drawers in his desk, searching for the passport. I heard Tyler take the step forward, and I caught a glimpse of his incredulous expression in the corner of my eye as I spun around to give him a roundhouse kick in the head. One of the only moves I remembered from my children’s karate class, a move I only managed thanks to the support of his solid oak desk.

Ouch. So *that’s* why Sensei always emphasized stretching first.

He went down hard, and I pressed my knee into his throat. “Where is the passport?” said Althea from behind me. Tyler reached into his pocket and handed it to me just as the door burst open. I took the time to bend over to his ear and whispered,

“We know all about your organization. Try to go to the police about this and I can assure you that it will backfire. All you’ve lost so far is a little respect.” The words sounded hollow and cliché from my lips, but I saw fear in his eyes.

I grabbed a file at random from his desk drawer, rolled it up and stuck it in my pocket. Althea had managed to push the desk into the door and keep away that round of guards, but time was not on our side. Eventually someone competent would show up, or they would figure out to wait and stop coming at us one at a time.

The element of surprise had held on for a surprising length of time, but I was in no mood to test it. Nor, it seemed, was Althea who gave me a significant glance and began to walk out of the room. When I caught up with her she smiled and dropped a small black ball that I hadn’t seen before. It began to emit a high-pitched wail, and smoke filled the room.

When my eye’s cleared I found myself in the bathroom of Mamma’s Kitchen or whatever the name of the damn restaurant was. Zachary stood before me, looking

slightly concerned about me, and very concerned about Althea. For her part, Althea smiled and gave Zachary a casual bear hug. Zachary's expression changed, and he was grinning when he finally made his way back to the ground. For my part, I stumbled over to the sink, and propped myself up against the cold porcelain.

"Leave me alone for a moment eh?" I managed to choke out. "I'm not too good with sudden dislocations. I just need a moment to catch my breath."

After they left, I sunk down onto my knees, and leaned back against the metal of the stall next to me. I closed my eyes, and waited for the cold of the stall to reach my skull. Voices swirled around in my head.

"It's all worthless. Nobody gives a damn," said a familiar, female voice. Was she really back? Or just in my head? Was I talking to myself?

"Then why should I care about eternal life?" I asked.

A light chuckle, like sandpaper rubbing against a log, like a snake. "Because, given enough time a monkey rebuild typewriter into an escape hatch."

I closed my eyes within my eyes, and saw purple streaks flying by for a moment.

Nothing for a moment, and then a traveler's hat, and the face of my god. He said nothing.

I opened my eyes and shook my head. I made my way up and to the door. I ordered some orange juice from the waitress, and sat down across from Althea. Zachary was nowhere to be seen.

"Did my guide abandon me?" I asked.

"He's off to see if he can change your plane tickets so you can all can come with me. From what he told me you're in for a nasty shock when you try and make it into the school." She was poker faced, sipping at a fruit drink. I could see strange bumps at various places in her outfit. Strange how odd they looked here in the daylight. Did she intend to board the airplane fully armed?

"I take it that my guide has more abilities than I gave him credit for, or did you do the transport? How'd you guys arrange it anyways?"

She raised an eyebrow “You’re a quick study. It was him. He made the smokeball, all I had to do was activate it.” A pause. “Zachary is pretty good with the abstract stuff.”

“No complaints here” I said. She grunted and said, “So, I hear you’re an avatar?”

Zachary appeared behind me, and I looked up at him in surprise, and scooted over, letting him sit down next to me. I hadn’t noticed his approach, and I wondered if he’d gotten the best of Althea as well. “I told you that I didn’t know anything definite about him,” said Zachary, “And it’s rude to ask that sort of thing.”

“Is it?” she asked in a voice that could have been genuine. “I think it’s ruder to just ignore the questions you want to ask, and play stupid. It assumes the other person is an idiot who can’t handle reality.”

“I’m working for something that I’m calling a God right now. But I do so half-mockingly,” I interjected, before Zachary responded. It had hurt him to say something negative to her, but I appreciated his concern for my sensibilities. “I’m not doing anything I don’t want to, and I’m not really sure how it works, or that I want to know.”

Apparently, that didn’t answer her question. The waitress arrived with my orange juice.

## Burn One Down

-Ben Harper

We spent the night in a ratty roadside motel Althea recommended. Ants crawled across the windowsill in my bathroom. I don't know where they came from. There was no sign of food, and expressed no interest in the odd shaped brown stain in the carpet.

The three of us decided to go across the street to check out a bar/pool hall. There was dancing, and darts. Soon enough I was thankfully alone. I wondered if Zachary had any more of a chance with Althea than I had with Corrina. I waited for something, or someone interesting to happen. A couple of young college-age girls came in and danced for awhile, clearly slumming it; wearing matching black leather skirts that were too tight. They danced together. They danced with seemingly harmless old men who were only too happy, and a little surprised to receive the attention.

Why did I feel so distant? I wasn't any older. I was too proud to admit that I felt wiser. I smiled to myself, but nobody noticed. I stared at my empty glass. It was water, and the waitress kept forgetting about me. I resolved to leave a big tip.

Wave sat next to me, looking absurd in his chair, but maintained a restrained silence.

Althea and Zach played a round of pool, which Althea won. I tried my hand at darts for a while, and then gave up. I stayed until I could barely keep my eyes open. Nothing else happened.

[Instrumental noodling that Charlie Hunter would approve of]