

FOUR STORIES: A STUDY IN GENRE

by

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November, 2010

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Major Department: English

Genre is a label of classification imposed on literary works, usually as a means to understand how to market a project. The traditional form – “literary fiction” – is the most common, but a visit to any bookstore will demonstrate that there are so many more options. This collection contains my beginning studies in crafting genre literature: a “literary” piece that was a finalist in a competition, a monster based horror story, a supernatural horror story, and a science fiction tale of initial planetary exploration.

FOUR STORIES: A STUDY IN GENRE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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Sure Thing

“What’ll you have, buddy?” The voice is gruff, like a twenty year chain smoker. He follows his question with the same raspy cough and grunt I’ve heard from the smokers at rehab meetings.

I look up from the laminated menu into the face of a man wearing a black t-shirt and jeans. He looks like he should be riding a Harley at bike week instead of working in some dive. “I’ll have an egg white omelet, a side of sausage,” I pause for a moment, adding, “and a beer if you’ve got one.” I surprise myself with how easily that phrase rolls out. My sponsor would kill me.

“I got plenty, but I can’t sell ‘em,” the man says. He leans on the counter of the bar, his leathery face looking at me, a half-smile playing on his lips. The sweet fragrance of alcohol, distorted by his smoke-laden clothes, assaults my nose. He may not be able to sell any drinks, but he’s already had some himself, the bastard. He takes a moment to scribble something on an order-pad.

“What?” I ask, coming back to the moment. I am preoccupied, trying to figure out the smell on his breath. Whisky, maybe gin?

“Goddam blue laws around here,” he says, shrugging and gesturing with his hands. “No alcohol sales until this afternoon.” He’s serious, but I admire the guy. I’ve never been a big fan of bullshit laws restricting sales of anything legal. If I want to buy a drink at eight in the morning on a Sunday, then I should be allowed to buy a drink at eight in the fucking morning on a goddamned Sunday. Churches use wine for communion, don’t they?

I decide to play with the guy. Feed him a line, see if I might be able to get a break. “You’re kidding. What kinda shit is that?” Maybe if I joke with the guy I might get a pity drink or something.

“Not from around here, are ya?” He’s bright, I’ll give him that. At least he’s playing along. He’s leaning against the back counter, the wood vacant where the beautiful bottles should be on display. The mirror behind him is reflecting the bald spot on the back of his head, circled by a faint ring of grey, where the rest of his hair appears to be a dark brown.

“Not really... I’ve been away for a while. Haven’t really been around here since I was kid.” It’s a half-truth, but he doesn’t need know that. I’ve never seen this guy before, so I don’t mind lying to him. I *have* been away for a while. This is the longest that I’ve been sober in fifteen years, and the last month has been a bitch. I used to come by this place all the time, though. There was this woman I was seeing a few years ago, a bartender, and she lived around here. The sex was good, and the drinks were fabulous. She broke it off when she said she found religion, but I found out later she had a husband that was coming back from overseas. Turns out the guy ended up becoming a client of mine for their divorce a year later.

“Well, that’s the Bible belt for you... if the politicians don’t screw ya, the self-righteous religious ones will,” leather-biker-man says. All I can think is *amen*.

“Alright.” I look back over the menu, deflated. “I’ll take an orange juice and a cup of coffee,” I offer, flipping the cheaply laminated menu back onto the bar.

“No problem. I’ll get those out to you in a couple of minutes.” He saunters away, scribbling something else on the ticket pad. As he walks into the kitchen, I hear

him tell someone, “You got a coffee and an OJ at the bar” before the heavy door flaps closed behind him.

I look around the space, at the four-top tables and chairs, and I’m reminded of my college days – the blur of bars and women, and crap jobs waiting tables to pay the bills. Faint sunlight peers its way into the large front window, shades still covering most of the glass. The wood stain is fading on the tables closest to the window. There’s nobody else in the place, which doesn’t surprise me too much. Hell, I’m surprised that I’m here, up this early. I’m teasing myself, going through the motions, when I know I can’t be served. But I’m here...

“There you go, sugar,” I hear a sultry voice, lightly laced with a southern lilt, say. I’ve been staring so hard at the sunlight and the faded tables that I didn’t see the waitress approaching from behind the bar, bringing the drinks – wisps of steam rising from the coffee, and dots of condensation on the glass of juice. She’s cute, maybe in her late thirties, but trying to look like she’s still in her mid-twenties. Her reddish-blond hair is cut almost pixie-like, slightly longer around her face and shorter in the back. Looking at her body, and the attention her clothes call to her form, I am wondering about three things: is she anorexic, are they real, and is she good in bed?

All of the coffee I had been drinking earlier this morning has started pressing inside. I don’t remember having to piss this much before. The waitress is leaning over the bar, about halfway to the kitchen, her posture rank with her disdain for being here this early on a Sunday. I lean a little towards her, and when she looks over at me I ask, “Where’s the bathroom?”

“Down the hall, over there by the jukebox.” Her eyes flicker over me. She points across the room, past the kitchen, where an old-looking jukebox is sitting in a corner, next to a small stage and a row of booths. As I pass her on my way to the toilet, I notice a smile playing on her glossed lips as she watches me walk.

The bathroom is small, with one toilet and two urinals. Partitions look like they were an afterthought. There is an odor of old urine mixed with chemicals hanging in the air, and I gag at first smell. After a moment I grow accustomed to the smell, and move to the urinal in the corner farthest from the door. While I pee, the image of the waitress crosses my mind. I pull a few strokes, imagining getting an answer to two of my questions, before shaking off the last drops of piss.

I return to my seat by the bar to find my plate waiting for me. My hands are still wet from washing, and in the absence of towels in the bathroom, I wipe them on my pants legs before eating.

The waitress returns, this time wearing a name-tag that was missing before. “How is everything, shug?” she purrs, leaning across the bar to my left. Her arms are crossed and positioned to emphasize her breasts in a black, low cut shirt. Her name tag is in a precarious position, forcing anyone trying to read it to stare at her breasts. I casually stare for a moment, more for the breasts than the name, before responding.

“Angel,” I start, my gaze moving from her chest to her face. There are traces of crow’s feet around her blue eyes. She giggles a little, like she’s trying to act younger than she looks, and smiles as I call her by the name on the tag. “The food’s not bad... but the orange juice tastes a little funny to me.”

“Really? We just got our food truck yesterday.” She appears genuinely concerned that something may be wrong with the juice.

“Any chance of getting a shot of Gin or Vodka? Might help the juice.” I feel myself smile, surprised at how naturally it happens.

She smiles back and winks, realizing the real source of the problem. She reaches her hand over and gently pats my forearm. “Sorry, hon, I wish I could. Everything’s locked up until this afternoon.” Her hands feel soft on my arm, and her nails look clean, recently tipped with a French manicure.

“It’s alright,” I reply. I still want a drink, but I have resigned myself that it will not be this morning.

“You know,” Angel starts, her hand still holding my forearm. “If you stick around long enough, or if you come back tonight, maybe I can hook you up with something better than a screwdriver.” I watch Angel pick up a tumbler glass and nimbly flip it into the air, where it spins three times before she turns around, catching the glass behind her back. She turns her head, looks at me over her right shoulder. Angel smiles and shrugs, saying, “I don’t mean to brag, but... I’ve been told I’m the best drink-mixer here.” I’m still looking at the glass, when I realize that she isn’t moving to turn around.

Angel wiggles her hips, indicating that she knows exactly where I am still looking. “Really? What’s your specialty?” I ask, looking up as she turns back to face me.

She draws herself back to the bar, and leans over, closer to me. “Sex drinks,” she says, slowly, emphasizing each word. Angel steps back quickly as she hears a thud against the kitchen door. There is a hint of a sweet fragrance that lingers after she moves. I can’t quite identify it, but on her it smells good. When no one emerges, she

leans against the back of the bar and continues. “Seriously, there’s a slew of drinks that have “sex” or some variation in the name... and I know almost all of them. My Sex on the Clock, Sex on the Dance Floor, and Oral Sex on the Beach go over well, but my favorite one to make is Sex with the Bartender.”

“Have you ever tried sex in the bathroom? It can be really good if it’s done right.” The question is out before I really think about what I am saying.

She tilts her head to one side, thinking, as if trying to remember a seldom-requested drink. “No, I haven’t. How’s it made?”

I’m a little embarrassed at how forward my question was, and how she interpreted it. I glance at my watch, feigning an obligation. “Geez, I have to get going.” I reach in my pocket, and pull out money to pay the check. She scribbles something on a ticket, and motions that I should meet her at the register.

I hand over the money and indicate that she can keep the change. Instead of just taking the money, she wraps her hand around mine. As she slides the money from my hand, she replaces it with the paper that she had just scribbled on. “I really would like you to show me how it’s made,” Angel says. “Tonight, maybe?” She cashes out the ticket at the register, slipping the change into a tight back pocket in her black shorts. She stares at me, waiting for an answer.

“Maybe I’ll come back by later, and I can show you. How late are you working?”

“Sugar, I’m here all day, every Sunday,” she replies. She leans over the register, glancing at the kitchen door. “But,” she continues, her voice low enough that I have to lean towards her to hear her well. She grows a little taller as she pushes herself onto the balls of her feet. “If you don’t make it back tonight,” she whispers, “call that number.

We can hook up for a lesson.” She winks at me, before lowering herself. Angel moves down the bar to pick up the dishes when leather-biker-man comes out of the kitchen, glances at us, and makes his way towards the bathroom.

“Can I get a cup of coffee to go?” I ask, my voice wavering a little, surprised and intrigued at how forward Angel is. She nods the affirmative, pressing her back against the heavy kitchen door, taking the dishes with her. “Thanks,” I mutter a moment later when she emerges with a large Styrofoam cup, filled almost to the top.

Angel places the cup next to the register, pressing down one extra time to make sure the lid is on tight. “Sure thing,” she says smoothly, handing me the cup as I move toward the door.

Outside, I look at the paper, crumpling it and throwing it into a trash can as I walk back to my car. Once inside, I take out my cell phone and press the speed-dial key for my sponsor, staring at the dashboard as I listen to his voicemail greeting. I leave my message and start the car. He’ll call back... Sure thing, he always calls back.

Jack Be Nimble

He stopped, nose to the air. A sniff told him they were close, ahead to his right, a few hundred yards. Leaves crunched as they ran. His lips curled, smiling around his teeth. Their fear in the night air was another scent marking the trail. He ran towards their stench, their clumsiness, towards their dancing flashlights stumbling through the woods. His tongue lolled from his mouth; he panted, beads of drool dripping from his tongue.

He heard a crash ahead; leaves crunched by a flailing body. Something had fallen, separated from its pack. The running voices did not seem to notice they had lost one of their own. He slowed and allowed it a chance to get up. He was enjoying the chase. He could see the figure in front of him, dressed in denim pants and a fluffy red coat. As he drew closer, he could see where branches and thorns had cut into the coat.

It looked around, trying to spot the thing chasing her. He was close enough to identify it was a her, a she, almost an adult but not quite. She would never know what happened. It would be better that way. She turned towards him as she scrambled to her feet. His smile widened as he charged. She looked back as she ran and her eyes widened when she saw him jump at her. She tried to run, but he pulled her down. She whimpered, cursing at him, trying to fight him off. His jaws gnashed at her coat, at her arms as she tried to push him off. She began to scream, but the sound was drowned by the gurgle of blood; his jaw tightened on her throat. He jerked his body, shaking her until the neck snapped. Her body still convulsed. His claws slashed at the clothing and he began to eat.

Jack sat up with a yell, the sheets wet with sweat and tangled around his legs. He tried to recall the images, but the only thing he remembered was the taste of blood in his mouth before waking up. He swallowed, the thick taste of iron on his tongue. He touched the tender inside of his bottom lip, his finger came away with spots of blood. He had heard about reality working its way into dreams – one time he remembered trying to answer a phone that was ringing in a dream, only to wake up to the chime of his cell phone.

Apart from the dream, he had slept quite well. He looked at the clock next to the bed. Eleven thirty-seven. His eyes blinked rapidly as he looked around the room. He didn't recognize the surroundings – the golden wing chairs, mismatched dark wood furniture and the floral bedspread that matched the faded pattern of the wallpaper. Then he remembered where he was.

There was a marketing proposal that one of his partners was going to be making early on Monday, but the product samples finally arrived, too late to be FedExed in time for the early presentation. Since he was already traveling to Castle Rock, Maine, for another appointment, Jack had driven from New York to Boston the night before, dropped off the samples, and drove on. He had been driving up ninety-five, but traffic had gotten slow – accidents stopped traffic on both ninety-five and US one. Jack decided to loop around. He drove east on the one-twenty-eight before picking up the one-thirty-three to head back north. He was halfway to Essex when something ran in front of him. Jack hit the brakes, but still clipped it.

He stopped and surveyed the damage to the car – he would need a new driver’s-side headlight - but there was little body damage. The night was clear; the waxing moon almost full. He could see the figure in the road a dozen yards behind the car. Jack found a large stick next to the road, thick enough for stickball. He approached the shape still lying in the road. It looked like some strange breed of dog. Its sides rose and fell rapidly with very shallow breathing. Jack poked at it. It twitched, and looked at him, snarled and jumped at him. It was bigger than Jack had expected. He dodged the beast’s bite, but sharp, bloody claws sliced into Jack’s left arm. Jack swung the stick. There was a solid thud and crack when the stick hit the beast in the back, near the shoulders. It yelped and lumbered into the woods. Jack tossed the broken stick away and clutched his injured arm.

He wrapped a cloth around the gashes to staunch the bleeding. He tried calling the highway patrol, but his cell phone could not get a signal. Jack decided to drive to the next town to get his arm looked at, and to find a hotel. He could replace the headlight in the morning, and still make it to Castle Rock in good time.

The sign said “Welcome to Innsmouth” when he turned off at the next exit, and managed to get a room in the only place that appeared to be open – Madame Ezekiel’s. It looked like a gingerbread turned bed and breakfast, and at four stories appeared to be one of the tallest buildings in town. After he checked in and found out that there were no medical facilities available, he asked for some bandages and peroxide. He tidied himself up, gingerly cleaning the four long gash marks on his arm, and went to bed. The auto shop would be open until one, the desk clerk had said, so Jack hadn’t bothered to set an alarm.

His stomach felt light, bubbly, spasming. Jack got up and crossed to the bathroom. It was small, with a toilet, pedestal sink and a stand-up shower. His stomach fluttered faster with his movement. He quickened his pace, lifted the lid to the toilet just in time. He threw up. A slimy yellow liquid, a mix of bile and mucus with traces of blood, drizzled into the toilet. His mouth stung from the acid hitting the open sore on his lip. A thin line of saliva hung from his mouth, slowly lengthening as he lingered over the bowl. He spit into the toilet before going to the sink to rinse the taste from his mouth. The cool water felt good as he caught it in his cupped hands. He spit it back into the sink. The water was briny. He let the water run for a moment and tried again. It was better, but a briny taste still lingered.

Since it was almost noon Jack skipped his usual morning shower so he could get to the auto shop for a headlight. Jack packed and dressed, pulling on a light jacket before grabbing his bag and leaving the room. When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he noticed a police officer sitting in the parlor, reading a newspaper while sipping a cup of tea. Jack went to the desk to turn in his key.

“May I help you?” the old woman behind the counter asked. She looked like she could be Madame Ezekiel herself, her geriatric form was hunched over, likely a product of poor nutrition and bone degeneration in her old age. Through the wrinkles on her face, she seemed kind – her dentured smile reminded Jack of his grandmother.

“Yes, ma’am. I need to check out.” Jack had spoken louder than he needed to.

“So soon? You’ve only been here one night,” the older woman said. Though she appeared old and weathered, she moved and acted as if she were generations younger.

“I’m afraid so. I’m on my way up into Maine, but I need to get over to the auto shop for a headlight – “

“Where?” She stared at Jack. Her squinted eyes were dark specks behind her two-toned cat-eye glasses.

“The auto shop? The gentleman last night said it was open until one o’clock.”

“Oh, I’m sorry... the auto shop is open until one, but it will take more than an hour to take care of your car.”

“Excuse me?” Jack stared at the woman, who had started busying herself behind the desk. He turned to a voice behind him.

“Sir,” the policeman said, approaching from the parlor. “Do you drive the navy blue Chrysler parked outside?”

“What? Yes, I have a navy Chrysler. Why? What’s going on?” Jack turned from the officer, back to the woman behind the desk. She blinked, knowingly, and smiled politely as the officer continued.

“Sir, my name is Officer Eldridge. You may want to come with me.”

Jack and Officer Eldridge walked outside, into the small parking lot next to the building. It offered a modest amount of parking, and a small stacked-shale wall enclosed most of the perimeter. Jack emitted a brief shriek, something between a gasp and a whimper, when he saw his car. He began surveying the damage before they crossed the lot. When he parked the car last night, the only thing that he needed was a new headlight. Now, it was almost as if he were seeing a different vehicle. All four tires were slashed. There were lines etched down the sides of the vehicle – four lines, wavy

but evenly spaced, as if the car had been scratched by claws. None of the other cars in the parking lot had been touched.

“Sir,” the officer started. “We received a call early this morning about vandalism to the vehicle. Do you know anyone that might have wanted to do this?”

“No,” Jack answered, walking around the car, wondering if this was real. “When I got here last night, all I needed was a headlight. I had hit a dog when I was driving last night, and – “

“A dog, you say?” the officer asked.

“Yeah, I was driving down one-thirty-three, late last night. A dog ran in front of me. I tried to avoid it, but I clipped it with the front driver’s side.” Jack pointed at the light. There was still a small tuft of hair clinging to the cracked plastic of the light cover. “I went to check on the animal, but it ran away.”

“Did you get a good look at the animal? Anything stand out about its features?”

“It was bigger than most dogs, but I couldn’t really tell what kind of breed.” Jack paused then added, “Does it really matter, though? All of this happened after I checked in here last night?”

“We just want to make sure that we get as much information as possible. Did you attempt to contact anyone last night – highway patrol? Were you injured during the accident last night?”

“Yes, I tried calling, but my cell phone... I couldn’t get any reception.” Jack was staring at his car and didn’t want to answer any more questions.

Officer Eldridge seemed to sense this, and broke the silence a moment later.

“Well, I can file a report, if you want. Your insurance will want something when you file

your claim.” Jack nodded, telling the officer to file the report. “Doris was right, though... it’ll take them more than an hour to get you back on the road. I’ll get it towed over, and see if they can at least get it so you can drive. They don’t do much body work here.”

“Thanks,” Jack offered, still shocked at the damage to his car.

“I just need a little bit of information from you, so I can take care of the paperwork.” The officer asked his battery of questions – all of the pertinent contact information – before sending Jack back in to Doris.

“Another night?” she asked, a smile beaming on her lips. “Do you want the same room, or do you want to try one of our others?”

“The same room is fine,” Jack answered. “Doris, right?”

“That’s right.” She nodded, leaning forward attentively.

“Where’s a good place around here for some food?”

“Well, all we have open this time of year is Mel’s, over by the waterfront... but if you want to try something truly local, I would suggest Yidhra’s. It’s the only other place visitors have spoken highly of.”

“Hmmm, that sounds interesting.” Jack stood for a moment, signing the new guest registration card Doris had slid over to him. “I think I’ll try out the Yidrah place. How far is it?”

“Only a few blocks, towards the waterfront. Look for the sign that looks like one of those gypsy faces, like you see in the motion pictures.”

“And if I can’t find it, how much farther is Mel’s?”

“It’s on the waterfront, but don’t worry. I don’t think you’ll have any problems finding Yidrah’s.”

“Thanks,” Jack said, leaving the desk and heading for the stairs. He returned to his third floor room. When he entered the room, he paused. He placed his bag in a golden wingback chair by the door, and glanced slowly around the room. The room looked fresh, like it had already been cleaned and reset while he was downstairs. He peeked out into the hallway, but did not see any signs of a housekeeper.

Jack closed his door, and took off the light jacket he was wearing. He touched the makeshift bandage on his arm, and crossed to the bathroom. He peeled his arm free, wincing as patches of the cloth stuck to the dried, bloody hair on his forearm. After removing the bandage, he cleaned his arm. The dried blood slowly became light brown water running down the drain; Jack’s arm emerged clean, with four distinct lines on his arm. The lines were covered over with soft scabs, some of which flaked off as he washed. Jack was confused. He thought the wounds were deeper when he cleaned them before going to bed. He wrapped his arm again, and slipped on his jacket as he left his room.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, Doris was still standing at her desk. She watched him walk past. She called after him, “Have a good time.” When Jack looked back at her, she tilted her head, gave a wink, and smiled.

Jack huddled inside his jacket while a chilly September breeze blew from the waterfront. He was still confused about the damage to his car, and he walked solemnly following the directions that Doris had provided. He passively surveyed the buildings. It was a quaint-looking harbor town, one that looked like it had gone out of its way to maintain the rustic, old-world feel of New England cottages and colonial buildings. There were very few signs of significant modernization – the only real evidence being

products in shop windows, or the flicker of television sets through residential windows that he passed.

Jack had been walking for fifteen minutes and had not seen any sign for Yidhra's. There was no one on the street close enough to casually ask for directions, and he didn't want to yell after complete strangers a block away. He paused, and checked the buildings again. "A gypsy face," he mumbled. "A sign like a gypsy face." He examined the buildings along the other side of the street, but with no luck. He looked back the way he had come, the wood and brick framed buildings revealed nothing. There was a creak overhead, mixed with a scraping thud. Jack stepped back quickly, looking up, half expecting something to crash down next to him. A window had just been closed, the curtains fluttering into place. Hanging overhead, though, he noticed an old sun-and-salt faded sign. He looked at it for a few moments before he realized he had found it. There was an image, faded but there, of a woman's face, partially covered with a veil, just below the eyes.

The eyes. Jack's gaze lingered on the eyes. He could imagine the sign when it was freshly hung, painted with sparkling blue eyes beckoning patrons to the establishment, but now the eyes seemed to be nothing more than dark spots of wood staring into nothing. He moved towards the thick, wooden, church-like doors set into the brick framed arch in the wall. He opened the door to his right, surprised at how easily it swung open on the aged, black iron hinges. Jack stepped into a small antechamber, not much bigger than a closet, lit only by a naked, low-watt light bulb. He pushed on an interior door, equally as thick and heavy looking as the ones outside and it opened

almost as easily. The smells, followed by the sounds, hit Jack before he could enter the main room.

Jack's first breath of the place gave support to Doris's votes of confidence. There was the briny scent of freshly caught fish; the smell of cinnamon, nutmeg, Old Bay, garlic, pepper and a variety of other spices hung in the air, drifting to him in waves as doors opened from the kitchen. There was the relaxed odor of smoked, Cavendish-styled pipe tobacco coming from back corners of the dining room.

As he walked in, Jack could feel some of the tension over his car melt away. Light music played on a speaker system – a playful, classical piece of music was ending, followed by the start of a song that sounded like it was recorded in the forties. His stomach growled.

While looking for an open table, Jack took in the physical atmosphere of the place. The hardwood floors looked faded and well worn, but otherwise well maintained. Tables protruded from the walls, giving the sides a booth-like appearance, with several smaller tables placed neatly down the center of the dining room. At the back was a bar made of oak and mahogany, with inlays filling the panels that faced the bar stools. There were sounds of silverware clinking against plates, and a low buzz of conversation from a room set off from the main dining room – the same area, he realized, where the tobacco smells were coming from. Jack heard a deep voice cut through the other conversations in the room, saying, "We'll take care of it," followed by a man dressed in black, almost like a priest, closing the doors to the side dining room. Their eyes met for a moment, before the priest man looked away, nervously. With those doors closed, the only thing Jack could hear was the rhythm from the sound system. He moved to a

table away from the door, away from the side dining room, and away from most of the other patrons who watched him quietly, casually, while he crossed the dining room.

The table was simple hardwood with a bench seat like a church pew. Jack reached for the simple, one-page menu that was wedged between the condiment rack and the paper-towel-roll-for-napkins as he sat down. The menu was limited, mostly seafood selections featuring Atlantic Cod, Tautog, Rainbow Smelt and Winter Flounder, with a few steak or chicken options to cover a slow fishing season. Jack decided on trying one of the house specialty burgers. He was looking at the drink choices when the waitress approached.

“How are we doing today?” she asked.

Jack looked up from the menu to see a middle-aged woman with graying hair, dressed in a pair of jeans and a plain, dark t-shirt. He shrugged his shoulders. “Eh... I’m doing okay. Having some car problems, but otherwise not too bad.”

“Sorry to hear that,” she said. She paused for a moment, offering a moment of silence before asking for his order.

“I’ll try the Yog burger... that’s an interesting name.”

“Around here, it’s a special name.” She paused, as she scratched his order onto a notepad. “It’s an old name in the area,” she added, looking back at him. “And what would you like to drink?”

“I’m not sure... Do you have Coke or Pepsi products?”

“Well, we have water. I might be able to find something in the back room, but we don’t get much call for sodas...”

“Right, um... anything you would recommend?”

“It depends... do you like spirits? We have several excellent local drinks. One of the more popular ones is Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar...”

“What’s that one like, a lager? Ale?”

“It’s a beer, a darker one than most, but smooth. And it actually goes quite well with that burger.”

“Well...” Jack thought for a moment. “Sure, I’ll try it. And a water, too, just to be safe.”

“Very good,” the waitress said, scratching something else onto the pad. “I’ll get the drinks out to you in a few moments, and get them started on your burger.” When she left the table, he noticed her hair pulled into a small ponytail.

Jack looked around the dining room at the other patrons. Some had plates of food in front of them, others just had pint glasses filled to various levels. All of them quickly looked away when Jack looked at their tables.

The waitress returned with a glass of water, and a pint glass of dark liquid, only a few shades lighter than Guinness. He sipped the water, wincing at the hint of brine that he could still taste. He hesitantly decided to try the Old Peculiar before getting his food. He sipped, and at first thought it didn’t taste unlike a Guinness, but after the first swallow there was an aftertaste that made him gag.

“First time trying the Old Peculiar?”

Jack looked up to see a woman approaching him. He hadn’t seen her before, and neither the front doors, nor the doors to the side room, had opened. She was dressed in clean black hiking boots and dark corduroy jeans. A maroon long-sleeved mock turtleneck shirt clung to her well, but was still loose enough to be tasteful. A silver

necklace with a dangling wolf's head charm stood out prominently against the shirt. "I'm sorry?" Jack asked as she sat down across from him. The subtle odor of lotus blossoms mixed with citrus elements drifted to him.

"The Old Peculiar," she said, motioning to his glass. "Um," she said, swirling her finger in front of her mouth. She waited while Jack wiped the foam remains from his top lip. "That face... That's how most people react to their first drink. It's part of the charm and mystique – it bites you at first drink with a curdled milk aftertaste. That's why most of the locals only drink it with food."

"That's good to know," Jack said. "Thanks for the advice."

Jack took in the woman's features. There was something familiar about her, but he couldn't quite place the sensation. Her hair was a shoulder length, off-the shelf black coloring old enough that a natural brown was showing around the roots. She also had a streak of white hair pulled back and framing one side of her face, but it appeared to be natural. Her eyes were a calm green, and framed behind simple rectangular glasses. Her nose fit her face, and her mouth was delicate, with small dimples in her cheeks when she smiled. "I'm sorry," Jack started. "Do I know you? Have we met before?"

"My name's Jill." She leaned against the stiff wooden back of the booth bench. She shifted, crossing her legs under the table. "No, we haven't. Consider me your welcoming committee and tour guide for the day."

"What makes you think I need a tour guide?"

"Doris called, and asked me to keep an eye out for you. She said you were a bit on edge this morning, and you might do well with some company today." Jill looked up at the approaching waitress, and they smiled politely at each other. The waitress

nodded casually at Jill, and placed a pint glass filled with an amber colored drink in front of Jill, and the plate of food in front of Jack.

“Excuse me?” Jack started, shaking his head at Jill. “She said what?”

“Hang on, let me start over. Doris called me and said she had a gentleman she was sending our way. She does that, when she gets a new outie – what we call out-of-town visitors. Said something about a car problem, and having to stay longer than you had planned. In addition to running Madame Ezekiel’s, she is also an advocate for a proper Innsmouth image. She just wanted to make sure that you have a good visit here.”

“Oh, kinda like a tourism official. Give someone a reason to consider coming back?” Jack took a bite of his sandwich, watching Jill for a response. When she nodded, he thought of another question. “What if I said I was going to go back to my room and watch television until my car was ready?”

“Well,” Jill began. She sipped from her drink and crossed her hands on the table. “I would call you a fool to close yourself up without so much as taking a walk around, but I am biased.”

“So what would you suggest?”

She smiled, watched him take another bite of his sandwich. “There are several things that come to mind – walking along the docks and talking about our maritime history. Or examining the different architectural styles in town.” She paused for another sip of her drink. “And if you are spiritually minded, there are several very unique churches that we have – including something that’s believed to be an ancient druidic site.”

“Hmm,” Jack said, swallowing. “Ancient druidic worship centers sound interesting, really, but I’ve been to England – I’ve seen Stonehenge. I don’t quite see how anything here could compare.” He sipped the Old Peculiar. “You know, it is actually quite better with food. Not as bitter after swallowing.”

“Didn’t I tell you? Now, if I could have gotten to you before you ordered, I could have helped you before you found out for yourself.” Jill leaned back, stretching her right arm along the back of the bench while playing with the necklace’s wolf’s head charm with her left hand. Sliding it from side to side, creating a faint scraping sound; a slow steady rhythm, as the charm slid along the chain. “And tonight is supposed to be a full moon. There are a couple of great spots for star gazing, out by the water. I can show you some of those, too.”

“You’re not going to take no for an answer, are you?”

“I would hate to disappoint Doris.”

“Okay, then... I’ll make a deal with you,” Jack said, taking another swallow of the Old Peculiar. “We can go on your walking tour, you can show me the town, and we keep Doris happy.” He wiped his forehead with his jacket sleeve, then wiped again with a napkin. “Wow, are there any special spices, peppers or anything, in this?” he asked, motioning at the sandwich? He touched his stomach and covered his mouth as he burped. He sipped the water, hoping to rinse the taste of bile, beer and grease from his throat.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “Has it been good?”

“Oh, yeah. One of the best burgers I’ve had in a while, just a little heavier than I’m used to.” Jack wiped his face again. “Where’s the bathroom?” He looked over

towards the bar, towards the corner Jill pointed to. She sipped her drink while he slid himself to the end of his seat. He stood, took a shaky step towards the bar before he teetered forward collapsing onto the floor. As his consciousness floated away, he heard whispers around him, but couldn't understand the words. The blackness enveloped him and he felt hands grab at his arms.

The air was crisp. He was standing in a clearing surrounded by cypress, maple and poplar trees. There was a path leading out of the small field. He began walking, admiring the variety of colored leaves. A gust of wind blew dust into his eyes. When he was able to look again, the path had become covered with leaves. He continued walking, kicking leaves aside trying to find the trail. There was a stabbing pain on his legs which collapsed him into the leaves. He looked around, feeling around his legs. There were tentacles, long, sinewy members that reached for him, from something under the leaves. He kicked himself free and began to run. The cool air filled his lungs, biting them as he gasped, before the pain found his legs again.

He was tripped up again; his legs strained to kick loose. He looked back at the tentacles, the long, dark figures reaching for him. Tree roots were reaching for him; a weeping willow was rising up, towering over him. His arms stung as new tentacles groped for them. He was being pulled higher. Above the base of the tentacles he could make out a pair of dark eyes staring out from the trunk of the tree. In the center of the tentacles he could see a large blackness, something he was sure he wanted to avoid.

He struggled against the tentacles; the more he fought the tighter they became. They were lifting him higher, carrying him towards the blackness. With no other options,

he lowered his head, attempting to bite one of the things from his arm. His arm had become covered in some thick material – it looked like hair, but it could have been something from the tentacles. He wasn't sure. His chest tightened. He looked down, and could barely see the forest floor. He pulled his right arm to his face, craned his neck to get a good angle. He sunk his teeth into the soft tissue of the tentacle wrapped around his arm. He felt the thing tense then loosen as his jaw clamped tighter. He felt like a dog playing with a rope toy. The tastes of bile and blood and dirt filled his mouth. He bit at several other tendrils until they finally let go. He was falling, the willow creature now gone, crashing to the forest floor. He lay there, crumpled, watching beams of light dancing on the leaves.

Jack spat, shivering. His stomach spasmed and he vomited again. He tasted the bile and the aftertaste of the Old Peculiar as the contents of his stomach splattered beside him. His head throbbed. He tried to cradle his face in his hands, but they hardly moved. He forced his eyes to open, his vision blurry. He jerked his arms, and looked to see them restrained in steel manacles. He was standing, chained to a tree, facing the night. He was naked, the puddle of his sick started to seep under his feet. There was a ring of torches casting a pool of light around him. He shivered again, felt the bark gouge his bare back.

“He's awake,” Jack heard a voice say. It was gruff, authoritarian. Masculine. “We've done as we agreed. He's yours.” It sounded like a voice he had heard in the restaurant. The priest? He listened as several sets of footsteps slithered away through the dew soaked grass.

After their steps had faded, there was another voice. "It's about time you woke up." Feminine, but with a harsh, scratchy edge, like there had been damage done to its vocal cords.

Jack lifted his head, looked for the source of the voice. It felt familiar, but different than he remembered. Instinctively he sniffed the air. His head still felt cloudy as he tried to identify the smells. Lamp oil – the torches were using plain lamp oil. Sea salt, mist hung in the air – he could hear waves crash but he couldn't gauge the distance. Traces of grasses, flowers and weeds, mixed with the stench of his sick and animal excrement from earlier in the day. There was a hint of citrus mixed with lotus blossoms that found its way to him. He smelled the anger and growled.

She stepped into the torchlight in front of Jack. She was covered in a long black cloak that brushed the grass as she walked. A large hood was pulled forward, her features hidden. The figure stopped a few feet from Jack, and stood motionless.

Jack pulled against his restraints, trying to move his arms. "Why are you doing this?"

"You killed my son."

"What?" Jack murmured. "I killed who? I don't know what you're talking about." Jack paused as the figure stood motionless. "You've got the wrong guy."

"No, I do not. You smell of his blood. Your car," the figure paused, turned away for a moment. When the voice spoke again, there were gasps of air between the words. "Your... car... you killed... my... son... with... your car." The hood lowered further, the figure bent over, the shoulders heaving and falling as she cried.

Jack stared at the figure, dumbfounded. He was trying to piece the story together. “I honestly have no idea what you are talking about. I hit a dog in the road last night, but – “

“That was no dog,” the voice snarled, the head jerked back. The hood shifted enough to show the mouth and jaw when it spoke. The lips were thin, and curled around teeth when she spoke. The jaw line and lips protruded forward, almost snout-like. “That was my son.” She lowered her head; the hood shifted, hiding her features again. It paused. Jack could hear the sound of sobs being stifled, like she was finding her composure. The figure stood, slowly. It spoke again, drawing the words out. “You took my son, and I demand retribution. You will be sacrificed to the elder gods so that our union will be blessed and I will be given another.”

“Our union? Are you crazy?” He looked at the figure, examining it. He noticed a silver device at its neck, a fastener for the cloak. A silver wolf’s head. When the figure turned and began walking towards the torches, Jack finally seemed to understand. He sniffed the air again. She was in heat, the scent of pheromones and blood drifted to him on a breeze that caused him to shiver again. His head swam with the sensations, trying to make sense of what was happening to him.

“Jill?” he asked, hesitantly. The figure stopped for a moment, then continued until she was next to the torches. “Why?” he asked again. “Why are you doing this?”

She turned to face him across the clearing, and removed her hood. “Why? Because it was my son... Does there need to be anything else?” Jack could see her facial features in the flickering light. Her eyes twinkled with reflected light, her mouth had already started to change. Her features appeared more canine, with a protruding

snout and shallower cheeks. Her hair was still dark brown with black tinted patches forming a mane, but the only thing that definitively identified her was the streak of white framing one side of her face. She reached from under her cloak to unfasten the wolf-head clasp. “Do you have any idea what it is like to have the one thing in the world that matters to you taken away?” Her voice was sharp, losing any hint of humanity as her vocal cords continued to stretch. She paused before adding, “You’re about to.”

Her cloak dropped around her feet, and she began to step towards him. She was naked, the torch light gave her pink skin a soft glow. Jack looked at her body and began to become aroused. His erection faltered as she approached. He watched the softness of her flesh fade; patches of coarse hair sprouted, encasing her. He watched her body twitch as she walked; her muscles tightened. Her body continued to change.

He shivered and winced as she pressed a claw into the soft flesh his cheek, forced him to look at her. She sniffed the air around him. “Are you scared, Jack?” she asked, growling the question slowly. She dragged her left hand across his chest and abdomen, digging her claws enough to draw a trickle of blood. He could feel her elongated nails – her claws – scratch the inside of his thigh and the underside of his scrotum as she moved to take him in her hand. She turned herself around, pressed his flaccid penis against her and gyrated her hips until she slipped him inside. His body tensed. He strained against the restraints, trying to push her away, but the best he could manage were a few moments when he slipped out of her, before she plunged him back in. She grunted with pleasure as she pinned him against the tree.

His muscles were beginning to spasm, tightening. Blood rushed through his veins. He began hearing tendons pop and could feel his posture changing. His back

was stretching, his neck elongating. He began grunting himself, not from pleasure but from the pain of the changes to his body. His skin burned, itching as the hair on his body became longer, thicker. He could feel her tighten. He was fighting himself, trying to stave off orgasm. Her body pounded against him. There would only be one chance, he realized, for him to escape. He felt himself come.

He leaned forward, stretching against the chains. Jill was satiated, the air around them smelled of sex. He felt his penis slide out as she adjusted herself. And he bit. Her lupine posture only gave Jack access to her right shoulder, which he sank his teeth into. Jill yelped, tried to pull away, but Jack's jaw tightened. He began growling, shaking his torso from side to side. He was a dog, fighting for his life.

Jill was growling now, trying to twist herself free. For every move that she made, Jack clamped his jaw tighter. She began slashing backwards with her left arm, scratching at his side and leg. He twisted, dragging her to his right, where she could only graze him. Finally, Jill began trying to reach over her head to scratch his face. It took her several attempts before she was able to rake her claws against his face. He released her, howling. He fought against his restraints. She turned, raking her left hand across his chest again, this time digging her claws until blood began trickling into his fur. A loud pop let them both know that one of his arms had broken free; the chain still hung from his wrist. She growled, and slashed at him again before running into the night.

Jack leaned against the tree, panting. When he could no longer smell Jill's presence he began trying to get his other arm free. He looked up at the sky. When he saw the full moon, Jack howled. From somewhere in the distance, another voice joined his.

Casting the Fool

“Mr. Hayes?” Paul knocked on the door. He leaned in, listening, then looked up and down the silent hall. He checked his watch: 12:34am.

“Mr. Hayes?” Paul said, knocking again. The door moved slightly as he knocked; it had been closed but the latch hadn’t caught. “Mr. Hayes,” he said, pushing the door open. “We had a call about noise coming from your flat, sir.”

Paul looked around the foyer. There was the shattered body of a Fender Jazz bass. Sets of pickups had fallen out of the guitar body, and the bridge was still clinging to two of the four strings, the only connection between the body and neck that was still intact. Paul followed a line of debris – splintered drumsticks, punched-through drum heads, broken-necked guitars. It looked like the stage after a concert in The Who’s heyday.

“Is everything –“ That’s when Paul saw him, ran from the apartment, and slammed the door closed behind him.

John Hayes sat in his uptown apartment, staring at the piece of paper laid flat on his desk. He read back over the letter again, slowly. The script, like calligraphy, flowed across the page in neat, precise, delicate lines.

Mr. John Hayes

It is almost time for you to fulfill our agreement, previously discussed fifteen years ago. You will be collected within the week, after your current studio engagement is sufficiently completed.

The letter had been waiting for him, slipped under his apartment door, when he returned from the recording studio. He had called the front desk shortly after reading it.

“How may I help you, Mr. Hayes?” an English voice answered, trying its best to sound cheery and enthusiastic at one in the morning on a Thursday.

“Hey, Paul. I just got in up here and there was a letter slid under my door. Any idea where it’s from, or who may have dropped it off?”

“I’ll check for you, sir. Hold one moment, please.” The line clicked over and John listened to a few moments of elevator music before the young man returned. “No, sir. I don’t see any deliveries signed for from today. Er, um, yesterday. And no records of any guests signing in to the building since Tuesday night.”

“Thanks for checking.”

“Sure thing, sir. Anything else I can do for you Mr. Hayes?”

“Not tonight. Thanks, though, Paulie.”

“Have a good night, sir. Cheers.”

“Night,” John said as he clunked the receiver back into the cradle.

Everyone in the band had gotten crazy letters before, but John was the face of the band;. He got most of them and they were either from loyal fans or from people praying for his soul for the “music” he recorded. But this one was different. This one

had been delivered to his home, and was not fanatical in either sense. It was brief; the author appeared to be lucid, business like, even if the text was cryptic. Without a signature, John decided it was some kind of joke, crumpled the letter as he walked into the kitchen, and dropped it into the trash can before getting a beer from the fridge.

John was back up at eight that morning, and getting ready to return to the studio. He'd spent the last two weeks working on the solo album, and only had three days left of reserved studio time. There were still a few tracks to record, and John wanted to have a single able to hit the radio within a month of finishing at the studio. Start building the anticipation, he liked to say.

He grabbed a bottle of water, swallowed his vitamins, and reached for the front door handle when he saw it, on his hall table, next to where his other hand was reaching for his keys. It was the envelope that he had thrown away six hours earlier. Wasn't it?

He tore the envelope, skimmed over the letter – noticed the dark stains from the dregs that had trickled from the discarded bottle of beer he had drunk, and the creases from where the papers had been balled up.

“What the fuck?” he muttered. He carried the letter and envelope with him, tearing them up as he walked. He rode the elevator from the ninth floor, passed through the lobby and dropped the pieces in the trashcan. He waved at the doorman, pushed his way into the sunshine and made his way to the studio where his engineer was already working.

“You alright?” Alex asked when John entered the booth.

“Fine. Had something weird happen to me this morning, but yeah, I’m fine.”

“What kind of weird?” Alex turned to the board, toggling faders and gain dials, configuring the mixing board to prepare for the day’s work.

“I threw something out last night, but when I was leaving the house this morning, it was right there with my keys.”

“Maybe you didn’t toss it. Or maybe you tossed it, and fished it out while you were sleeping. You ever sleepwalk?” Alex adjusted the recording channels, and looked at the computer screen. “There was one time, I was so out of it that I woke up sitting in my car in my shorts. It was December, in fuckin’ Wisconsin of all places, and the last thing I remember was going to bed, then bam, I wake up freezing my nuts off.”

“No, I don’t sleepwalk.”

“Just sayin. It’s a thought.” Alex toggled a few more knobs.

John stared through the glass at the microphone hanging in the recording booth and took a long sip from his bottle. “Do you want to work on mixing the songs from last week, or finish recording the backing tracks from yesterday’s stuff?”

“Vocals,” Alex said, and they started on another long day in the studio, and the letter was forgotten by lunch.

John and Alex finished around ten that Sunday evening, instead of their usual midnight. John returned home, feeling good about the mixes they had recorded throughout the day. He chatted with Paul, the night clerk: about Paul’s relationship, his thoughts on returning to England after he and his fiancé graduated, and other events that John had been too focused on the record to keep up with, before he rode the

elevator to the ninth floor. John was humming part of the bass riff for the last song they had finished when he turned the key in his apartment's deadbolt. When he stepped inside his foot brushed an envelope, kicking it from the entranceway.

"You're kidding," John said, picking up the envelope. The script on the envelope was similar to the one that was waiting for him three nights before. He tore it open and read the letter.

Mr. Hayes:

As you have shown disregard to our previous attempt at communication, be advised that we will be calling on you this evening. Enclosed you find a copy of our agreement, with your signature clearly identifiable.

He stood, held his breath as he reread the letter three more times before his feet remembered how to move. He went to the nearest phone, picked up the receiver, and was greeted by the sound of silence. He clicked the cradle a few times but still no dial tone. He pulled out his cell phone from

John went back into the hall and stormed to the elevator, jabbed at the call buttons. There were no signs of movement. He found the door for the stairs, pushed the handle, then paused. Paul knows how to keep people out of my hair, he thought.

John returned to his apartment, locked the door and sat in his office, waiting. The letter lay next to his laptop, taunting him. He fell asleep in his office chair, staring at the letter and watching time creep past on the computer's clock.

At 12:05 he was jarred awake by his cell phone screaming and vibrating in his pocket. “Shit,” he grunted, scrambling for the phone. “Hello?” he barked into the phone.

“Mister Hayes?” The voice was clipped, raspy, with an accent.

“Who is this?”

“You have forgotten, Mister Hayes? The cards? Our contract? Is no good business to break contract.”

A flicker of recognition. A memory.

He had been spending long nights recording and mixing his band’s first major label album. They had just finished their last session after an all-night push and were getting ready for a tour starting that night. One of the engineers had suggested something dark for the cover art, and John was looking for some inspiration. An old, clunky cowbell rattled against the door as John Hayes entered the shop. He had been passing outside when he noticed the faded sign in the window. “Fortunes told, palms read,” the sign read, with an image of an open eye in the middle of an open palm. John sniggered when he saw it, and on a whim decided to check it out. He didn’t believe in that stuff – tarot cards, crystal balls, séances and the like, but he thought it would be good for a laugh. The shop was musty, dark and cluttered. There were shelves stacked with books, spines flaking and fading with age, a few tables covered in boxes. The shelves of books were divided in sections, areas of the store labeled “crystals”, “meditation”, “spirit guides”, “runes” were a few that John first noticed. On several of the tables boxes of Tarot deck were standing on their ends – titles like Dragon Tarot, Osho-

Zen Tarot, Lovers Tarot and Celestial Tarot were lined up with novelty decks like Tolkien's Tarot and Sandman's Tarot. There was a glass display case in the center of the room, filled with an array of crystals – skulls, loose stones, things called Chakra necklaces, pentacles, crosses. John shook his head at the array.

“Do you see something you like?” came a raspy voice.

John looked around, startled. He hadn't seen anyone when he had first entered, and the wrinkled old man that was standing in front of him, behind the counter of crystals, certainly wasn't there when John started looking at the objects inside, was he? After the first shocks of surprise faded, “I'm sorry. Didn't see you there,” John said.

“Is okay. With so many things, is easy to miss old man like me,” the man said. He looked John over for a moment, his wrinkled face folding in on itself as the old man's eyes squinted. “Ah,” he finally said. “You are very, ah, what is word... closed. You doubt what these can do.” The old man waved a hand over the display case containing the crystals and Chakra necklaces.

“What?” John replied.

The old man's face stretched out. “You no believe in cards, in crystals, in spirits. You know how I know? I tell you,” he took a long, raspy breath. “How you stand. You are unsure of why you are here.” He coughed, fished out a tissue from a pocket, and coughed again. He coughed a few more times until there was finally a wet mottled sound rising in his throat and a dark brown glob of slime landed in the tissue. “I apologize. I am old man. My body is not like when I was your age, is rebelling against me.” He threw the tissue into a trashcan that was already overflowing with similarly discarded dark tissues, and smiled. He smiled an old man's smile, full of lips curling

over darkened teeth, some missing, and a tongue that that danced and darted around the inside of the mouth. “So why you are here?”

“Looking for inspiration,” John said. He glanced around the shop and settled on the section labeled “Tarot.” “Can you tell me about Tarot cards?” John asked, softly, his voice momentarily sucked out of him. “What can they do?”

“Do?” the man said. “Cards do nothing but lay on table. But,” a wavering finger pointed at John. “But, they can help answer your own questions. No two people will get same meaning from cards, meaning of spread changes even if you pull same cards. Is all in moment of reading.”

“How does a spread work?” John was more sure of himself.

There was a twinkle in the old man’s left eye through a cloudy haze of cataract. “There are many spreads. Easiest way is for to read your cards. Come, I show you.”

John followed the man to a table nestled in a back corner of the shop. “First, you must pick cards. Is important for cards to speak to you. Makes reading more significant.” The old man produced several ornate wooden boxes. “I give you moment to look at these, see which one strikes you.”

John nodded, sat at the table and leaned towards the first box when the cowbell clanked again and the man disappeared. He flipped open the first box, fanned the cards, and saw a colorful array of images. There were symbols at the bottoms of the cards, and labels like “Transformation”, “Innocence”, “The Fool”, and “Change.” The cards looked very clean, Zen-like, with many of the people from the images reminding him of artwork that he saw at Chinese restaurants. He returned the cards to their box, closed it, and went to the next one.

Three of the other decks appeared similar to the first, with variations in artwork for the common cards. “The Fool” was still present, as were cards like “Death”, High Priestess”, “The Hermit”, and “Lovers.” The four distinct groupings – suits – in each deck varied, however, with names like Pentacles, Swords, Rainbows, Clouds, Cups, Fire, andr Water.

It was the last box that he opened that resonated with him. The deck felt thinner than the others, but the images struck John as vibrant. They were images he would have considered framing. They were of people he recognized. As he shuffled through the deck, he saw images of Janice Joplin (labeled “The Empress”), Jim Morrison (“King of Swords”), Jimmy Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Stevie Ray Vaughn (all associated with “Wands”). Robert Johnson was depicted as “The Magician.” Cliff Burton and Sid Vicious were associated with “Cups”. Keith Moon was shown as the “King of Coins.” The personalities that those images represented spoke to John, spoke to what he hoped to become.

The old man returned a few moments after the cowbell rattled again. “Which cards, eh?”

“These,” John said, holding the deck of musicians.

“Oh,” the old man said, fussing over the box. “No. Deck is not complete. Is work in progress. I am sorry, you cannot use.” He took the cards from John and motioned at the other four decks. “Please, you pick another.”

“Did you paint those? Do their families know?”

“They sign contracts. Before, when were young.”

“You knew all of them? Even Robert Johnson?”

“He was first. My father met him, many years ago. In him was something special, and father helped him realize. Has been, how you say, family tradition. We have met many people, but only few that have special gift and agree to pose for cards.”

“They posed?”

“Yes, and each had similar questions.” The old man paused, coughed, filling another tissue. “You... you have similar light around you. Great light. Perhaps you might pose?”

“Now? I can’t now, I’ve got a gig to get to tonight.”

“Perhaps later. In future. I could call on you then.”

He looked back at the closed box, the images from the cards vibrant in his mind.

“Sure, why not?”

“Good.” The man smiled and extended a pen and piece of paper to John. “Sign, please. So when I call, or my family calls, you will remember.”

John skimmed the document and signed his name.

“Now, which other deck would you like to be using?”

John remembered having his cards read, remembered the contract. He remembered going from playing 500-seat venues to stadiums in a matter of months, and fifteen years later, he remembered the cards that had captured his attention. Real fear entered his voice. “How... how did you get this number?”

There was silence on the line, broken when the caller cleared his throat with a guttural, wet cough. “I will be by shortly to collect you.”

“What the hell makes you think –“

Silence.

John's mind raced, considering his options: fight or flight. A knock at the front door interrupted him. John looked at the blank cell phone display, put it down, and listened to the knocking. The soft, gentle tapping. Five quick knocks and a brief pause before resuming. Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock, then silence. A brief break in a song leading to a key change and another verse. After listening to, and trying to ignore, the knocking for several minutes John tried his phones again. There was now no signal on the cell phone, and still no dial tone on the house phone.

Knock-knock-knock-knock-knock

John cracked his knuckles and walked quietly to the front door, grabbing the first weapon-like object that he could: the Fender Jazz bass that he was playing when the band first started. He looked through the peep-hole and saw nothing. He exhaled, turned his back to the door.

Boom-boom-boom.

Three quick thuds against the door. Slow triplets from a bass drum at a live show – the kind that can be felt through the sound system from half a block away. Boom-boom-boom. The pause, silence ringing so sharp in John's ears after the beating it felt like an accent – a high-hat or splash cymbal.

Boom-boom-boom-chang.

Boom-boom-boom-chang.

John reached for the handle. As he turned the knob the banging stopped, the echoes like final chords left ringing, fading into the night air as the band leaves the stage.

Police found John Hayes, upside down, lifeless, suspended in the center of his office, dressed in a form of Harlequin motley, with white stockings, breeches of black and red diamonds, a vest half black and half red, and a white tunic shirt. On his head was a black and red three-pronged jester's cap, and a similar mask marked with gold borders round the eyes covered his face.

He was bound by microphone cable, hung by his left leg. The right leg hung askew. His right elbow was tethered to his right knee, giving his torso a hunched look. The left arm hung limp, fingertips just off the floor and his right hand hung near his head.

Somewhere, a deck of cards was being shuffled.

Finding Atlantis – Part 1: Drop Zone

The five of us were strapped into our seats, as the drop shuttle broke formation and prepared to enter atmosphere. I stared alternately between the loadmaster, his black uniform and helmet with visor slid open and oxygen mask dangling, and the red light over the cargo hatch, partially obscured by “the box” – a shipping container filled with navigational beacons, two mech bodies, and other supplies we would need planet-side. Once that red light turns yellow, I thought, we mobilize. I leaned my head back, letting the hum of the ship comfort my mind as I focused on something that I knew. Something that was comfortable. Something I was looking forward to leaving. This was going to be my last drop. I had orders to another unit pending, and a promotion along with it. I would miss these moments, but not as much as I had missed my family, and force recon hasn't been known for promoting stable family life. I thought about my wife and our three kids. The youngest was two, and I had yet to see her in person, only on a vid screen.

I pulled out the snapshot taken around Christmas last year, of the four of them, smiling at me from the still image. They were all seated in front of a simple blue-gray backdrop. Linda, my wife, was seated in the center. The picture doesn't show it but there's a touch of gray to her otherwise dark hair that I love, but she insists on hiding it through coloring. She's dressed in the same red and black outfit that she wore to our rehearsal dinner eight years before. It still turns me on anytime I see her in it. In Linda's lap was little Michelle, with her cherub cheeks and a shock of dark hair like her

mother's. She had been dressed in a red and blue jumper, and her hands had been caught in a clap, her mouth open in laughter. I wondered how many shots it took to capture that moment. She was still four months from delivery when I got orders for a three-year remote space tour, and my heart ached at not being able to be with her, to catch little moments like that. That's the fear I had every time I jumped, that I wouldn't make it back – that she might only know her father through pictures. To Linda's right was Catherine, our five year old, the middle child like I was. She had a beaming grin on her face and her hair, so I was told, was pulled back into a French braid. Catherine was in a dark red sweater with the collar of a white shirt poking out at the neck, and a dark green velvet skirt. She takes so much after her brother that I imagined her running to her room to change shortly after the picture was taken. Her brother. John junior, two years older than Catherine, was standing to Linda's left, his hands folded on her shoulder. He's in a white shirt, navy slacks, a red sweater and close cut hair. He once said he wants to be just like me when he grows up. I hope not. Hopefully it's a stage he'll grow out of. The corners of the picture were bent, the image showing wear from being carried in my left breast pocket, my good luck charm every time I jump.

The jump. Twelve hours before we were mustered in the flight deck, getting our orders from Admiral Halsey. "We will be establishing a research facility on this planet," he said. "It is believed that the planet is devoid of sentient life, but that's part of what we're here to find out. Our job is to secure sites for development. Alpha Company, Echo Flight?"

The twenty-six of us assigned to Echo Flight, in unison, signaled our attention with the customary "h'uah."

“Echo Flight. You will be the shock troop. First in to secure the initial drop zones. Squads of Four. You’ll leave within the hour. Bravo Company?”

Another unit released their “h’uah.”

“Bravo Company. Once Echo Flight’s squads have set up the LZs, you deploy. One flight at each site to begin setting up base camps.” The Admiral continued his briefing, relayed initial orders for waves of deployment, but I was busy thinking about our assignment, starting the mental process of preparing for a drop. I found my way back to the briefing as the Admiral was finishing up. “Specific unit orders will be delivered through your unit commanders. That is all.” The entire flight line snapped to attention and was promptly dismissed to our ready rooms.

Back in our ready rooms, we got a planetary SITREP from one of the Chiefs. “One step from a training hop: drop in, do a little recon, set the landing beacons, then hurry up and wait,” he started, then we got the hard details. “Multiple climates on the planet, much like Earth. Initial scans indicate the air seems breathable, but I don’t want you to find out. That’s what the science guys are for. Gravity appears to be twice standard, so everyone goes in wearing suits. They’re being modified to compensate for the extra gravity.” The chief read off squad musters. I was teamed up with Foxtrot, Victor and Tango, and we were slated to drop into a temperate climate. When we were dismissed I caught glimpses of the other three faces. I think all four of us were relieved we didn’t get an arctic region.

“Let’s suit up,” the loadmaster called. The red light blinked three times before turning yellow. We slipped out of our harnesses and made our way towards the back, where our drop suits were waiting.

We dressed quickly. It had become habit, securing ourselves into the leggings, then fastening the chest plates into place. The arms and helmet were last. Once all of the components were in place the power unit came on-line. It was our ritual, like a pilot doing pre-flight checks. We checked our HUD’s diagnostic display screen. Its readings were cold since we were on-ship, but it was blinking away, making sure the seals were intact. I glance round the cargo bay, and as their suits powered up Victor and Tango’s call-signs registered on the HUD. I felt the suit start to pressurize, preparing for the jump.

The yellow light began to flash. We’re getting close.

I did one last check – my knife was on the right calf. HUD’s showing full power. Parachute was reading safe. Oxygen levels were good.

The four of us mustered around the supply box where we were given our rifles and final jump orders. “Box goes first,” the loadmaster said as we tethered our rifles to our waists. “Thirty seconds later, you go.” He held up a fist with three lengths of wire, and pushed it towards the other three. I would jump last, their show of respect.

The loadmaster touched his ear, listening to an earpiece. “Roger that,” he said, then looks at us. “Grab hold, boys. It’s time.” We reached for the restraining tethers on the floor while the loadmaster stepped away and secured himself by the rear hatch. “Good luck,” he yelled as he secured his oxygen mask, lowered his visor and punched

the control to open the rear hatch. The ramp slid open, hanging from the back like some kind of reverse lower jaw. It hung open for a moment before we heard a faint pop over the air rushing past the tail, and the cargo box started shifting, sliding towards the ramp.

It fell, tumbling, spinning as its leverage shifted.

The next thirty seconds seemed to crawl past, waiting for the signal to jump.

Finally it came.

Victor went first, followed by Foxtrot. Before he jumped, Tango looked at me, gave me a mock salute. "See you downstairs, Charlie," he said, dropped his tether and bound out. I watched the loadmaster, counted off three second to myself. He shots me a thumbs up and a salute, and I was gone.

Freefall...

I stepped off of the ramp, holding firmly to my rifle as I tumbled. I felt the suit's pressure increase, adjusting to the change in atmosphere. I barrel-rolled onto my back, watched the shuttle quickly move towards becoming a spec on the horizon. Soon, I thought, it would be back with the fleet, being prepared for its next run. That next run, its arrival would signal the countdown to my return home. I allowed myself a brief smile as I continued my descent.

After rolling back onto my stomach I scanned the sky for the box and the other three members of my squad. My HUD took a few moments to locate them, but Victor, Tango and Foxtrot all popped up on the display, still on course it seemed. The Altimeter function showed there was still another minute before chute deployment. The box though, three chutes billowed out allowing a clear visual reference.

I did my best to glide, closing some of the gap between the others. A few moments later and there was a pop of color in front of me. Victor's chute deployed. Two more were coming. I began to tighten, preparing for mine. Pop. Foxtrot. Pop. Tango. Five, I thought. Four. Three. Two. I clenched my rifle, tightened my body. Pop. My body jerked as the chute deployed and I flopped for a moment like an old string puppet. I let go of my rifle, letting it dangle from my body while I took hold of the tethers. The fun part was over, time to go to work.

I began to take in the world.

The horizon was clear, patchy clouds glowed pink and white as the light hit them from different angles. The sun seemed to be low, like it was caught between rising and setting. Vague silhouettes dotted the horizon – two of the planet's three moons. Below us was a lush array of colors. We're tacking towards where the box had landed, crushed its way into a dense patch of wooded area. It could be forest or it may be jungle, I thought; from that height it was hard to tell, but the trees looked different than anything I had seen before. I could see a clearing at the top of a ridge, a small hill, something that would be a better landing site for shuttles, and make it easier to set up a base camp. From up there it didn't look too bad. It would be a haul, I figured, getting everything up there, but it would be better than playing lumberjack to raze enough of a clearing. The Admiral said "nothing sentient," but that didn't mean there weren't other things. Dangerous things. Things with teeth long and sharp enough to become can openers before we could set up the LZ and get more bodies on the ground. Tree canopies radiated green, red and yellow. The HUD was throwing faint heat signatures everywhere I looked, and it picked up a small flock of about six birds. Even at full

magnification, I could barely make out anything more than a fuzzy image. Maybe they're just small birds. Or something.

I tried to block out those thoughts, but it's too late. It's natural, though, jumping someplace for the first time, knowing that you would see something and experience something before anyone else; before the brain-trust could get involved. I wondered about the ancient days, about Columbus, Magellan, even Lewis and Clark back in the days of Earth's Colonial era. They must have felt something similar as they traveled – a sense of wonder and excitement, but nervous as hell at what might find them along the way.

I scanned back across the horizon and could see part of a mountain range well into the distance. There was an indication that the ridgeline tapered, only to reassert itself by rising back again as it bled out of view. As I circled around, off to my left, I could clearly see a sliver of blue and dark green cutting through the landscape, far enough from us that we wouldn't have to worry about landing in it. From that altitude, though, I could tell it's wide enough to be risky, and that I wouldn't want to meet anything that lived in it.

I pulled the cords, rode thermals left, then right, drew bearings from the chutes for the supply box. There's crackling on the radio, then Victor's voice broke in.

“... Fellas... check...”

“Foxtrot...”

“... Here.” It sounded like Tango.

“Charlie, here,” I said. “Sounds like there's interference.”

“Roger... channel... try... clear.” We continued falling, circling around the box, but stayed clear enough to give the chutes ample clearance. We continued basic chatter, signal checking, as we kept falling. Eventually the static became less and less and we were able to talk clearly.

We had been on the ground for twenty minutes, examining the box and the awkward position it had landed in while securing and storing our chutes. Victor had been trying to radio up to the ship, but there was nothing getting through.

“So it landed at an angle,” Tango finally said. “It’s not upside down. Mech access will be a challenge, but it won’t be impossible. The things should be locked into place, anyway.” It felt like one of those leadership challenge training scenarios that we were always being put through, and it felt like Victor might crack. They always do, at some point, I was just surprised signs showed so early in the mission.

“But the gyroscopes and stabilizers should have kept it level.” He eyed the area for the thousandth time, scanning, like we all had on first approach. There were no signs of recent terrain shift so it wasn’t just an issue of a bad landing spot. Tree damage was fairly straight forward and didn’t indicate excessive resistance. The way they were packed, the only thing that could change the trajectory of a box – enough to tip it over – had to be something solid enough to support a few solid tons of steel.

“Yeah, we know,” Foxtrot said. “Welcome to Discovery 101. In case you missed that part of the briefing, let me remind you: we are the first people here. And judging from the radio situation, there’s a chance that there are a lot of things that are supposed to work, but may have problems.” He clapped Victor on the shoulder. “Like Tango said,

no problem. We power up a mech, and use it to help level the box out, then we prep for transport.” Another shoulder clap. “Improvisation, Vic. Best word we ever created.”

“Victor grinned and shook his head. As Foxtrot left us for the box, Victor said, “Alright, let’s get moving. Sorry, Charlie, I hoped this one would be an easy run.”

“So did we,” the rest of us agreed.

Foxtrot stopped a few meters short of the box, crouched, then jumped. A few sparks and a flash of light launched him up onto the apex of the box, where he landed with a heavy thud and clang as his boots hit the metal of the box. Quickly he was on his knees, securing a repelling cable, then sliding towards the base, and the control panel that was several meters above us.

He reached the keypad on his third attempt, after various positions of laying and hanging over the side of the box. We had watched his attempts, offering our own suggestions, until finally he had found a place on the edge of the frame that he used like a piton and lowered himself over.

Dangling in front of the control panel, he worked quickly. Once his access code was entered, Foxtrot climbed up to his belay point, waited for the access portals to open, then removed the cable from the belay point and swung across the face of the box. A quick cheer went up as we watched him dangle, swing and rock his way to the opening, then disappear inside.

They had packed the drop box in the supposed order of our needs. Closest to the face, where Foxtrot had just disappeared, was the body of a medium mech, down fitted for more for labor functions than combat. We watched as Foxtrot shimmied up the restraining gantry and slid himself into the cockpit.

“Okay, ladies, time to exit, stage left,” Foxtrot said as he powered up the mech. From outside we could see the glow of lights from the cockpit, a soft glow from underneath Foxtrot’s face.

“Retracting left framework,” he said. The left side of the restraining gantries slowly moved away from the body, retracting into points both above and below the mech, and closer to the side of the box. Once that had been removed, we watched the giant left arm rise and point to the side wall.

“Nice catch,” I called. I could see the body of the mech crashing to the left, and imagined that being enough weight to force the box over onto its side.

“Yeah, good job,” Victor added as the right gantry was removed and the mech shifted less than a meter to the left.

“Thanks, guys, but these stabilizer readings are going crazy.” His arms were busy, finding handholds to use in maneuvering the mech. “I’m coming out. Make a hole.”

We cleared away from the open face of the box and Foxtrot emerged soon after with a crushing thud as the mech landed in some foliage, taking out a few small trees with his landing. Soon after emerging from the box, Foxtrot was busy surveying the situation from inside the mech. “Guys, you’re not going to like this,” he said. “I’m getting some weird readings from up here.”

“What is it, Fox?” Victor asked.

“I can’t tell if the calibration is bad or it’s just the environment, but sensors are reading this site as hypermagnetic. Basic detections appear fine, but analytical scans are spitting back ‘fuck-you’ data. None of it appears to be making any sense.”

“Duly noted, Foxtrot. Keep the sensors running in a background status. I’m sure the lab rats would be pissed if we didn’t give them something to work with.”

“Roger that.”

“Charlie, Tango,” Victor said. “Take a bearing on that high clearing we saw, and begin a preliminary route check. Let’s get an idea of how much of a slag this may be. You’ve got thirty minutes, unless we call sooner.”

“Aye, roger that,” we said, and left them to level the box.

“How’s she look?” Victor asked Foxtrot.

“Let me put it like this,” Foxtrot started. Slag was right. Anytime Foxtrot starts an explanation with that phrase, hang up any hopes of it being simple. We left them to their discussion, only half listening, in case our names were mentioned.

“Are you really ready to rotate out?” Tango asked as we heard the crunch and crash of Foxtrot’s work behind us.

I pulled up the image I had captured of the plateau, and initiated the routing logarithm to calculate an estimated distance from our position. “You have no idea,” I said. “This is fun and all, but I want my kids to know me, not my picture.”

“Yeah, I hear you. I just don’t want any sappy ‘I miss you guys’ crap from you later.” He paused, reading something inside his visor. “What kind of a read did you get?”

“Nothing short and easy,” I said. “Accounting for elevation and topography, I’d estimate a solid couple of hours, if we go sloppy. Going as clean as we can, triple it.”

“I was afraid you would say that.”

We walked, recording visual scans as we went. I was torn between what I hoped we would do. Going sloppy would mean blazing the trail the quickest, easiest way, and not caring what we leave in our wake. As much as I wanted to get to the top and set up a landing site, I didn't want to be wanton about bulldozing our way through.

Somewhere, I knew that scientists that would watch through our debrief videos would strike up the inquisition if we didn't at least keep our environmental impact as close to minimal. At least, as minimal as possible until they could take inventory of the possible resources that could be extracted.

"Can you believe these thermal readings?" I put my hand to my helmet, as if that might change the display.

"No, man," Tango said. "Everything's reading normal – Earth normal – but the UV and IR levels... it's like there's something connecting everything."

That's what I had thought, too, before we knew the truth. Trees and plants all gave off a faint pink. There were dots of bright red scurrying along the ground and in the air flitting between trees – the only other signs of animal life we had seen.

"What do you make of this?" Tango asked, peeling away some ground cover.

It was a stone. It was about two and a half meters tall, weather worn, but smooth. The stone was a deep blue, like the ribbon of blue sky at dusk, caught between the fading sun and the march of night. We stepped back to better notice its shape. An obelisk. The lines were cleanly wrought, the top still a clearly defined point. We pulled vines away from the base, and that's when we noticed the hieroglyphs.

"Some people always said Egyptians had some other influence," Tango joked.

"Chicken or egg?" I asked.

“What?”

“Do you think the Egyptians learned the hieroglyphs from something celestial, or taught them?”

“Damn, hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“Probably those ‘other people’ didn’t either. Make sure we get a clear read on these. Someone’s going to want that for record.”

“On it,” Tango said. He knelt in front of the base of the obelisk, staring at and slowly moving over the panels around the faces of the statue, while I walked ahead, scouting. “Stills and video. Got it,” Tango said a few moments later. “See anything?”

“Everything,” I said. “You’re not going to believe this...”

“What?” Tango took two steps, jumped. His propulsion unit fired, carrying him to where I stood in a few leaps.

Then he saw it.

There was a ribbon of stones, a broken road that was winding through the landscape, disappearing around a bend far in the distance. The thick canopy of trees overhead let in little light, with spots of sunlight breaking through at intervals to show the way.

“Wasn’t there a story about four people following a road somewhere?”

“Lot’s of them, I’m sure,” Tango said.

“It looks like it’s going in the right direction. Worst case, it serves as a starting point and saves us some time,” I said.

“That canopy looks tight. Mechs might make it, but the road looks like it’ll be hell for the box transport.”

“It’ll be easier than blazing a path through the forest.”

“Yes. Yes, it will,” Tango said.

“Charlie to Victor,” I said. After his response, I continued. “It looks like an ancient road, hidden by tree cover. Will take some time to punch through to get to it, but it will make progress easier.”

“Roger that,” Victor said. “Come on back. We’ve got the box level, and are almost ready to head out.”

“Aye, roger that. We’re on our way back.”

As we retraced our path to the box, Tango stopped for a moment at the obelisk. He placed a tracer beacon near it. “If they like the pictures, they may want to see the real thing.” I nodded, and we continued back.

When we returned, Victor was already in the cockpit of the second mech. The box had been half-converted – the control room had been exposed and some of the panels had been collapsed. It now looked more like a flat “A” or a giant field tent than the box we had last seen.

“Upload the data from your route,” Victor said as we approached the box.

“Foxtrot and I will start punching through for you guys.”

“Just watch out for the obelisk,” I mentioned. Tango uploaded an image he had captured, for their reference, right after I sent them the positional marks I had recorded.

“Roger that,” Foxtrot said. “Impressive. Nice picture of that thing,” he added a moment later.

“We thought so,” Tango replied. He was already inside the control room of the box. I heard the whine as he finished the conversion – deploying the eight sets of treads from the bottom, effectively lifting the entire structure for mobility. Not the fastest transportation in the world, but one of the easiest ways to move a few tons without a full convoy.

By the time we had started moving the box Victor and Foxtrot had razed a path to the stone road. Trees had been sheared, broken close to the surface; the trunks were laid as a guide on either side of us, our sensors picked up the fading heat signatures of the fallen trees as we passed. I was thankful there wasn't too much to clear to get us to the road. As we passed the obelisk, I saw a strange electro-signature that wasn't present when Tango and I had discovered it. There seemed to be a slow pulse, as if it were mimicking the beacon Tango had placed.

Then we were on the road.

Foxtrot was in the lead, standing in a puddle of sunlight a few hundred meters in front of us. Trees shifted in a breeze that gave the sunlight a flicker effect over the mech's chassis. Tango and I were in the middle, while Victor was a few meters behind us. The road was irregular, which we expected, and wide enough for the box with room to spare on either side, which we hadn't.

We had been on the road for about an hour when we saw something to the left, just off the road. Foxtrot reached it first.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said. “It's another one of your statues.”

“I'm the one who found the first one,” Tango cried.

“At ease, Tango. You found it, Charlie told us to watch out for it when we were blazing trail,” Victor said. “It doesn’t matter whose name we use, it’s there. Charlie, check it out as we pass.”

“Aye, roger that.” I clapped Tango on the shoulder and left the control room, jumping from the side of the box, firing the pack to slow my descent then launching myself forward to where Foxtrot had been.

This one was a deep green, darker than the trees around it. The darkness made it more pronounced, even in the shadows; any lighter and we might have missed it. There were white veins showing on the surface, different widths flowing together like a spider’s web. Like the first, this one was just as smooth. Around the base, another series of hieroglyphs, but with different characters. I lingered, taking detailed images, and ran multiple scans. Nothing seemed unusual, compared to the first one.

Then I placed a beacon.

The others had already rumbled past, the mech’s crunching lost in the constant grind of the box’s treads.

“You coming?” Victor asked. I looked down the road and saw his mech turned towards me, a spotlight glowing over the right shoulder. The tree canopy was getting thicker, blocking out more light.

“On my way,” I said. I turned back to the obelisk, still not detecting anything unusual, and returned to our small convoy. I wondered if the obelisks react to our beacons, would the second one display similar changes as I had witnessed in the first? I wanted to say something to the others, but I wanted to get that LZ set up more. Accomplish that, I thought, and I’m one step closer to home.

“Anybody think it’s odd that we haven’t seen any wildlife?” Foxtrot asked, about forty-five minutes past the green obelisk.

“Charlie and I saw traces,” Tango said. “Signatures, anyway.”

“Right, but no visual sightings.”

“Foxtrot,” I said. “Put yourselves in their position. You’re sitting around in the den, minding your own business. Getting frisky with the wife or working on digging an addition to a tunnel. Then you feel this thing come rolling by, long before and after it cruises through your neighborhood. Would you want to stick your neck out and see what the racket is?”

“Probably not,” Foxtrot agreed. “I’m just curious about what the species are like.”

“So am I,” Victor said. “But I’m also not opposed to finishing up down here and not knowing. Let the bigger guns find out.”

“Here, here,” Tango and I agreed.

That’s when we saw the third obelisk.

It was white with thin black streaks. When the spotlights passed over it, it gave off a glow like some kind of polished marble. Tango went this time, and this one was broken. The top quarter had been broken off, sheared cleanly at an angle, and was lying near the base, partially buried by the undergrowth. He recorded images of this one, left a beacon, and returned. “That was such a clean line, it looked like it was laser-sliced,” he said when he returned.

Soon after the third obelisk, Foxtrot stopped. “Problem, guys,” he said. “There’s a river crossing, but the bridge here doesn’t look too secure.”

“What?” the rest of us asked. There wasn’t supposed to be a river crossing. We didn’t register any tributaries on this side of the forest during our descent.

“How wide is it?” Victor asked.

“About sixty meters across, and about thirty meters down to the water. Foliage is pretty thick along the walls, and there’s enough trees leaning over that would have obscured it from the sky.” We could see him shifting in the cockpit, looking along the chasm. “There seems to be some kind of netting, too. Maybe some webbing?”

“Still want to see some of the local wildlife?” I asked.

“Not if it’s spiders big enough to make this kind of stuff,” Foxtrot replied.

We arrived, rounding a curve in the road to reach Foxtrot’s position. We hadn’t taken notice of the slow change in elevation but the height of the bridge made sense as we looked back where we had come from.

The bridge was stone and timber, looking very much like a seamless continuation of the road. At either corner were small pedestals with statuary. While they were not obelisks, there were small carvings on the two closest to us, but the details seemed to have been obscured from the elements. There were railing walls one meter high on either side of the bridge. We stared across the bridge, and at the drop below, for several minutes before anyone finally spoke.

“How far to the site?” Victor asked.

I ran the calculations, adjusting for our route travelled. “According to bearings, we’re right around the corner. A few thousand meters and we should be about there.”

“Charlie, Tango? Which one of you wants inspection duty?” Victor asked.

Tango and I looked at each other. “I’m on it,” I said.

I dropped off the box, my ears still filled with the rumble of riding over the stone. That's why I didn't notice the rattling right away. I thought it was rattling, anyway, at first. The longer I listened, though, the more I was able to discern the chitinous sound of beetle shells and insectoid chatter filling the air around us. The farther I got from the box, the clearer it became.

I approached the bridge carefully, rifle slung and ready. My scans were registering clean: sensors in my boots relayed information into algorithms, each step calculating structural density, load capacity, odds of collapse under the weight of the box. I had covered half of the bridge, and the results were telling me all clear.

As I began checking the second half of the bridge, the chitinous chatter became louder, more intense.

Something splattered on the stones beside me. It was yellow, and foamy, and registered as highly acidic. Another splatter. And a third. I had been so focused on inspecting the bridge I hadn't looked closely at the forest on the other side.

I turned to run and heard bullets fly past me, crunching into something solid. I looked over my shoulder and saw two legs, giant, as big as a tree, stepping onto the road beyond the bridge. The legs kept coming until they were in the road, all twelve of them, connected to the largest thing I had ever seen. It looked like a spider, but with a double abdomen. There were eight legs on its main body – four under each abdomen – with another four on a front module that supported a head. It was that head that was projecting blobs of acid towards us, shooting them from between a pair of pincers that surrounded what I took to be its mouth. I didn't stop to ask it for an anatomy lesson, I just fired.

Victor and Foxtrot launched a few missiles each, aiming for the head, but the projectile acid threw most of them off course so they landed in the forest or hit the beast in its legs. Tango launched a pulse grenade, high, so it landed on the creature's back. When it exploded, several smaller ones fell from its body.

"It's a fucking brood," I yelled. "Smaller ones, on its back."

"Shit," Victor and Foxtrot yelled, switching their rifles to pulse shells. They fired alternating high and low shots as the smaller creatures scattered over the bridge, many over the side but a few towards us.

I was backing across the bridge, firing at the little ones, when I tripped and fell on my back. I watched as one of the smaller ones skittered sideways, jumped at me, and was carried away by a shell from one of the mechs. I was almost on my feet when another one jumped at me. My knife was up, carving a line down its belly as I flipped it over the side of the bridge. I ran, jumped, and roared back to the box under cover fire.

The onslaught lasted twenty minutes, until there was a sound from the giant beast, something horrible, like the wail of the dead. It climbed over the corner of the bridge, into the chasm, and along the rock face. We continued firing until we saw it collapse, fall from the rock wall into the river below. Dozens more black dots spread in the water as the young scattered.

"There's you're fucking wildlife, Foxtrot. You satisfied?" Tango said.

"Fully. Let's not do that again, shall we?"

"Tango," I said. "Send out some specimen storage. Eggheads might appreciate the samples."

"Roger that," he said.

I found one of the young and dropped it into a container when Tango arrived. The body was easily half the size of me, and I shuddered as I thought about how big it could grow. We tossed the rest of the carrion over the side as we crossed the bridge, and moved quickly to put the encounter behind us.

That was easier said than done since we talked about it as we pressed on. As we went, we could tell how the road climbed, and where it had started to show signs of wear.

We emerged from the tree cover into a stone lined clearing that was surrounded by trees.

“How about here?” Tango asked as we rolled into the clearing.

“Not big enough,” Victor said. “But good try.”

“What do you think this is?” I asked. I stared down from the control room at what were at least three other branches to the road that intersected here, with no obvious identifiers that suggested where they lead. Or what might be encountered. It gave me the feeling of being trapped in a labyrinth. Victor stepped next to us, and Foxtrot was nowhere to be seen.

“Foxtrot, report,” Victor said.

Silence.

“Foxtrot,” he said again. I could hear the twinge of panic lingering at the edge of his voice. “Where the hell are you?”

“I’m over here,” Foxtrot said, approaching from the branch of road that connected to our right. By our bearings it would lead up to our plateau.

“Why didn’t you answer?” Victor asked.

“I was a little preoccupied,” he said. “There is another statue this way. Not like the others, the obelisks. This one is more of an actual figure, like a totem.” He walked towards us and was gesturing with his hands. “The thing is huge, as tall as we are,” he said, motioning to Victor. “I was just trying to log some recordings.” He sent us a still.

“That’s not an excuse for not answering. Have you gone down any other direction?” Victor asked, indicating the other paths from the clearing. “Seen any other statues?”

“No,” Foxtrot replied. “And just the one.”

Tango and I were still staring at the image on our screen. It looked like an intricate carving for Quetzacoatl, with the suggestion of ancient Asian dragon elements like a mane and lion snout.

“Right. How far to the zone?”

“Bearings suggest the top is past Foxtrot’s dragon. Should be able to be setting camp within the hour,” Tango said.

“Fine. I’ll drop a beacon when we pass. Depending on possible landing ETA once the camp’s been set up, we might be able to come back and check out the rest of the area.” Victor looked at the sky. The light was fading, and one of the moons seemed more prominent than the silhouettes I had first seen during our jump. “I’d like to be set before nightfall, which doesn’t look too far off.”

“Aye, for that,” we all said. I’m not sure about everyone else, but I was thinking about the native species more the later it got. After the bridge, being caught in the forest at night was quickly climbing my list of things I would rather avoid.

We turned up that branch of road and passed the dragon statue. Foxtrot was right – it was huge, easily a few meters taller than the mechs. There were still traces of color that I hadn't noticed from the picture – reds, greens and yellows wound up the body, and white plumage dotted around the head. As we thundered by I stared in amazement.

Before long the trees grew sparse, thinning as we climbed.

Then the road ended.

We emerged onto the plateau. Foxtrot had arrived first and waited while the box finished the climb. It was slow going for the last four hundred meters. At one point there was a slight elevation – a step of about a meter – that slowed us down while we shifted, telescoped our treads further below the body as a form of riser, elevated the front higher at first, then slowly lowered as each set of treads was brought over the elevation.

The view was amazing. I looked out over the expanse of forest, most of which we had just spent the day traveling through. To either side of us I could see the glimmer of the giant river below us, the reflection of the waning sunlight setting the water ablaze. For a moment, I wondered what it might be like to live here.

“Tango,” Victor called. “Set the box about twenty meters from the edge, about halfway up the right side.” The side we approached from, I noted.

“Aye, roger that,” Tango said.

Soon we were lost in our work, talking only in short phrases related to tasks at hand. Tango and I initiated the dismantle sequences that allowed Victor and Foxtrot to remove parts of the box's framework for the outpost site. The long sides were removed

first and placed in the center of the plateau, a little closer to the cliff over the river than where we had stopped the box. They would be able to bear the brunt of the first shuttle's vertical thrusters as they landed and relaunched until a more permanent landing pad could be constructed. Other segments – what had been the doors and the retracted portions of the sides – were placed as footprints for the quick-place buildings Bravo Company would be bringing. Two platforms for barracks, one platform for a research building, another for a mess hall. The control room and central framework of the box remained in place to serve as equal parts observation tower, outpost headquarters and radio station.

By the time the box was dismantled and the platforms placed we were working in the early twilight of dusk. Tango and I each activated two of the radio beacons by the blaze of spotlights from the mechs, and we guided Victor and Foxtrot as they placed them at four points around the perimeter.

“Fire it up,” Victor said once everything was in place.

Tango returned to the control room and keyed the radio transmitter and power channels online. Victor positioned his mech at the base of the tower as blue and red lights began to flicker to life outlining the shuttle pad. I extended a field gantry to the front of Victor's mech, and Foxtrot assumed watch detail and paced the perimeter.

Victor, once out of his mech, joined Tango. Now that the drop zone had been established, he would report, the second wave could be sent in. That would mean we could rotate back to the ship, our mission over.

I went down to stand by the base of the tower. I started into the night sky, past the moons and into the stars, already thinking about my family, and the jumps that would take me home.

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