

The Island

by miles zarathustra

ONE

I sat in the coffeeshop chatting with my friend Vaughn Helsing, about the nifty new vacation I was planning. “A discount vacation,” I said, “Because, being a bohemian artist, I can’t afford anything fancy. So I went to one of those vacation stores where a nice lady told me she had just the thing I was looking for.”

“Where you are going?” asked Vaughn, in his Dutch accent.

“It’s a place called — *The Island*,” I said.

The moment I said the words, a sinister icy wind stole blasting through the coffeeshop, causing everybody to shiver as the paintings rattled alarmingly against the wallboards. The lights flickered and went out, plunging the room into inky black darkness, a shadowy obscurity thick with the asphyxiating claustrophobia of constrictive caverns sunk deep into blind windowless subterranean depths.

A black cat leapt up on the table between us and began hissing and snarling angrily. A dreadful scream of unnameable terror pierced the darkness.

Brushing the cat off the table, Vaughn leaned forward, speaking loudly to be heard above the shrieks and other sounds of panic. “Please to allow me confide in you something: me think is no good idea this vacation of yours. Even the word, it seems omened badly.”

“Which word?”

“I do not want to say word. Is bad luck.”

“But you have to say the word, because if you don’t tell me the word, how will I know what word not to say?”

“Oh, you make me so mad!”

“Let me guess. Is it the. . . *‘Island?’*”

“Yes. NOOO!”

All at once, an inky black swarm of bats flapping squealing took off from the rafters, filling the air with a fluttering cloud of chaotic darkness, which was already pretty dark from the lights being out. It made for an exotically unusual atmosphere. It was so palpably thick that one could cut through it with a knife, or maybe with a baseball bat. I thought about how funny it was to think about cutting through the swarm of bats with a bat, which cheered me up.

I don’t know why, but everyone else was getting up and running for the door screaming. Some of them hadn’t even finished drinking their tasty and expensive caffeinated drinks! But you never know what

a swarm of bats will do to make people get all freaked out. Go figure.

“I think we should go!” shouted Vaughn.

“But I have not finished my expensive and tasty caffeinated beverage,” I protested.

“You mean your Raspberry Rush tea?”

I beamed luminously to hear the name of my favorite tasty beverage. “Why, yes!”

“I think it has not much caffeine in it.”

By now the black cat had jumped back up on the table and was hissing and clawing at the table top again, which made quite a sound what with all the tiny flapping wings all around. I wished I had a tape recorder so I could capture it for listening to later when reminiscing about this carefree time of my life spent as a bohemian artist of some sort (see, part of being a bohemian artist means you don't need to decide exactly which sort of artist you are).

“A common misconception,” I explained, “Indeed, the very word *caffeine* was derived from the word coffee because early connoisseurs did not properly understand that the active stimulant in tea is identical.”

“Is not identical with Raspberry Fru-fru,” argued my friend.

“And anyhow, I hadn't finished telling you about — *The Island*.”

I'm sure it was just a coincidence, but right when I said the word, the whole room shook with enormous tremors, and a big cracks formed in the floor while the ceiling plaster crumbled, and the cracks widened until a giant crevice opened up in the earth next to our table.

It looked like a pretty deep crevice, because it was really dark at the bottom, so deep that I couldn't even see it. It was convenient though, because with all those bats in the Café, they really needed a place to go, and with that crevice in there we had a lot more room for the bats.

That was when the swarm of black widow spiders started crawling out of the newly formed yawning crevice, across the floor. I think the crevice wasn't yawning because it was sleepy, but only because it was bored. Maybe it just needed some Raspberry Rush tea to help it stay on its toes.

My friend Vaughn, he's so easily moved to panic. He's got such a tender, delicate, floral sort of personality. Standing up like a bolt of lightning, he stood on his chair, yelling frantically at me, “Quickly now! We have to run for it!”

The black cat, back arched, hissed and spat at the ebony-black carpet spiders rolling out on the floor towards it. “You know what's wrong with this cat,” I said, “He's just hungry, that's all. Here, kitty kitty!”

I took the creamer that was sitting on the table and poured some of it into my saucer, then set it on the table, and lifted the cat up to it. The trick is, you have to grab them by the back of the neck, then they think you're their mom.

The cat, black as night with two luminescent green half-moons for eyes, sniffed at the saucer of milk, then sniffed some more, then, grudgingly, knelt down to begin lapping it up.

"There," I said. "That's all that was wrong. Just a little unhappy tummy in the liddle kiddy widdy."

"You grinning imbecile!" shouted Vaughn. "We have to run!"

Just then, as the cat began to lap up the cream, the lights came back on, and with a groaning creak like a sound a giant might make, the crevice closed itself up, leaving nary a trace, and the rug fell back into place over it, putting it back exactly like it had been before.

I looked around, and the bats and the spiders were all gone, and the air was all warm and cheery again.

Gradually, people began returning to finish their expensive and tasty caffeinated beverages, which is good because it's really too bad when you have to let a beverage go to waste, especially a hot and yummy one on a cold night, and also it's bad for those students who have to spend all night up writing papers to go without their caffeine.

"What was *that*?" said someone behind me.

"Gol, you got me. Give me the creeps. Did you see all the bats?"

"So there," I was telling my friend Vaughn. "Just sit down and enjoy your tasty beverage, and I can tell you all about the vacation I'm going to take, to this place called. . ."

"DON'T SAY IT!!"

"Alright, alright. I won't. See, I like to make you happy, but if you insist on getting all upset when these little things happen, and you just get all gloomy doomy about it, then you just miss the bright side of things with the silver lining."

He swirled his espresso in the bottom of the cup. "You are grinning imbecile," he grumbled. "How you do ever survive? I don't know."

The black cat had finished the saucer of cream, and was smiling and purring loudly. It stepped one paw down in my lap, and then the next, and soon it was curled up contentedly.

"Oh, and the best part about my vacation to the. . ."

"Don't! No word!"

"Oh right. Well, the nice lady at the travel store place said it would be really cheap because you only

have to buy a one-way ticket. She said that if you survive the stay, then they pay your way back for free and all. I can't imagine how they make any money on it."

"This vacation of yours," said Vaughn, "I get a very bad feeling from it. What is called this vacation store you go to?"

"Why, the 'Nosferatu Skull Discount Vacation Store,' of course! Now you have just got to lighten up and enjoy yourself some, start looking on the sunny side of things!"

"This name sounds very giving of suspicion."

"Now don't be silly. A skull is what keeps your brains safe and sound, and keeps all the rain out, kind of like a comfy little home for those brain cells. Like a little house, with a fireplace, maybe a hot tub."

"Please, my friend," he pleaded, "Can I not persuade you to change your mind? To give up this mad-thinking thing?"

"Too late," I said. "My bus leaves in a half an hour. It's time to go."

The cat refused to get up from my lap, so I gently put him down on the floor, purring away. He followed me to my bicycle, and then astonished me by leaping into the basket as I got ready to pedal away.

Vaughn was frowning. "You promise me, you will write every day! Let me know you are safe! My subtle intuition tells to me of danger grave. If no I hear, will come find you and rescue."

I laughed. "Oh, you and your silly superstitions! I can't imagine what it is that makes you so worried, but, well, all right, I'll be sure to send some messages, but I don't think they have DSL. It's all secluded out in nature, away from the hurry and scurry of the civilized world. I'll have to get some of those thingies they have at the postman place. . ."

"Stamps," he said.

"Right, like those. Then our correspondence will be a warm and rosy reminder later in life of my carefree times as a bohemian artist."

"You know," he said, "To be an artist, one must actually create something that could be called art."

"Hey, I'm working on it!" I said. "I figure I'll take one word at a time. First I'll get down the 'bohemian' part, then I'll worry about the 'art' part. If you try too much at once, you know it's just a recipe for failure."

"You are a grinning fool," he said, "so be careful."

"Oh, don't you worry about me!" I said, pedaling off with the black cat purring in the basket of my bicycle, which almost flew out as I went over a speed bump.

TWO

[Letter addressed to Vaughn Helsing]

Dear Vaughn,

Before you know it, I was standing on the black basalt quay with my suitcase and purring black cat, waiting for the ferry to take me across to the Island. And there was a nice man dressed in black with a measuring tape. He had a black coat and a black hat and shiny black shoes, but something seemed to be wrong with his smile-maker, because his expression was awfully grim. And he was wearing dark sunglasses.

What a wonderful spot for a vacation! There's a big beautiful lake, and lots of sunshine. Just to let you know how friendly and thoughtful people are around here, and how they like to plan so really far ahead! It turns out that the nice man with the measuring tape very helpfully thought he would help me plan for my funeral, even though it's such a very long time in the future. It turns out he's the town coffin-maker, and just happens to have a spare moment, so he has been very helpful in taking all of my measurements for that day so far in the future when I might need a coffin.

He even offered to measure the cat too, but I told him it's all right because with nine lives she'll live almost forever.

I told him where I'll be staying, and he said that depending on the cause of death, he might even only need to make a coffin that's a lot smaller. It's funny that I'm the only one on the quay waiting for the ferry boat to come pick me up.

Now, as I'm writing this letter to you, he tells me that the ferry boat over to the Island won't be leaving for awhile, so I have decided to wander around the quaint old-fashioned little town and see what's happening in this wonderful little neck of the woods. The black cat followed in sleek elegant style alongside me, pausing now and then to chase something in the shrubbery, its tail a perpetual punctuation mark: now a question mark as she strolls regally, then an exclamation point as she dives into the bushes. One time she even came out with a small squirming critter in her mouth, and then excused herself and I didn't see her for awhile while the two of them went off to play together. The small critter must have had another engagement, because I didn't see it again.

I think the whole town wasn't much more than about a block long, from the bus stop where I got off to the dark basalt quay down by the water. I guess that everybody who lives here went on a vacation to somewhere else, though, because although there were a whole lot of buildings and houses and stores and hotels and stuff, all built in an old-fashioned victorian wood style, with gambrel rooftops and circular

cupolæ, and gables and all kinds of fancy architecture, the whole place seemed nearly deserted. A lot of the places had broken windows, and some of them were boarded up, and the ones that weren't you could look inside the dark interior and see thick dusty tangles of cobwebs.

It looked like once upon a time all the people who lived there were really wealthy, and signs of faded opulence abounded, with all the formerly expensive houses having shutters falling off and paint peeling.

I walked by a small white church. Nailed across its front doors were a few big old ugly wood planks. The sign in the front was from a long time ago, and it said in white letters against a faded and weathered black background: "THE L RD WILL SAVE US" which I thought might be some sort of coded message, until I saw the 'O' lying in the dirt. I picked it up and stuck it back between the 'L' and the 'R,' the circle of the soul between left and right.

As I did, I saw one of the nice men who all seemed to like dressing in nothing but black, and he was inside a house across the way looking at me through a window. He seemed to be unhappy about something, because when he looked at me he threw closed the curtains in a huff and disappeared.

Next to the church was an old graveyard. It looked to be a couple hundred years old, at least. Right in front was a gravestone that looked newer than the others around it. "Gloria Kyrie Goodie, 1893 - 1906" it read. I wondered if maybe she had died in the San Francisco Earthquake. I thought about how sad it must have been to die at such an early age, at thirteen.

The place seemed all but deserted, with hardly any numbers in their population count, or even people visiting. In fact, I think they changed the town population from "5" to "6" on the sign when I showed up.

Being only a block long, it was such a diminutively tiny, miniscule town that there were only two Starbucks to choose from, so I went by one of the two Starbucks and ordered myself a tasty beverage. It's not that I prefer Starbucks or anything, but it seemed to be the only place that was open. The door creaked open, and the spring made a sound as it shut behind me like it was trying to tell me something. There was an nice old man behind the counter, in a dark black coat and black hat something like the nice man who was taking my measurements so helpfully helping me to help me plan ahead for with coffin measurings a little while ago.

He asked me if I was going on vacation over at the Island, and I said yes, and he said he heard all about me, so I guess I'm kinda famous in these here parts. A kind of celebrity.

He asked me what I want, and I told him that I like Raspberry Rush tea, and he said they didn't

have any of it, and said it was “that sickly sweet stuff,” which I thought was a slightly disapproving thing to say, but everyone has their own opinions which is what makes the world such a lovely beautiful kind of diverse planet to live on. It turned out they only had just plain coffee, only instead of flavors usually they have at Starbucks, like Guatemala Antigua and Kona, this was one of those unique individualistic Starbucks that had creative flavors including “Battery Acid” and “Paint Thinner.” So I figured, heck, I’m on vacation now, so maybe I should just go on and be adventurous and try something a little different, so I said “OK, let’s try one of those!”

Then he said, as he was pouring it, that he didn’t figure I would need much help staying awake tonight, and I guess he meant because I would be all so excited from being on vacation and everything, and so I took my coffee over here to the table and commenced on continuing to write this letter I’m sending to you.

It was at about that time that the black cat came strolling back in. Pretty unusual for a black cat, since cats aren’t usually too good about traveling, and black cats are supposed to be bad luck. But she fell right asleep there on the seat of the bus, and I’ve had so much good luck with her there along with me, especially with the nice man in the black hat offering to take my coffin measurements and being real helpful like that.

I really hope you’re not too worried about me and the black cat. I have decided that his name is Winifred, because he likes to sit in the window sill, and “Winifred” is kind of like “window.” Only I think Winifred might be a girl’s name, even though it has a “Fred” at the end like Fred Flintstone, but I can tell that the cat likes his new name, so I better just keep it. He likes to purr, and also to sleep. Or it could be a she.

Anyway, so I got to talking with the nice old man behind the counter, and he told me that he was the ferry boat driver person, so any time I wanted to leave that we could just go, and I thought that was awfully nice of him.

“My name is Ivle,” he said.

“I’m Art,” I replied, “because I’m a bohemian artist. Well, actually, I was named Art before I was ever a bohemian, but now I’m Art and also I’m an artist.”

“What sort of art?” asked Ivle.

“Oh, well I haven’t decided yet. I figure I’ll just take one thing at a time. No need to rush things. Life is long.”

He grinned. “Oh, is it?”

“Well, it’s all relative. I mean, for a tree or a mountain, the life of a person may not seem all that long. But compared with an ant? Isn’t it wonderful that there are so many diverse opportunities to explore the experience of being a living being?”

He frowned. “I suppose. I like my name because it has all the same letters as the word ‘EVIL.’” Then he grinned again.

I thought about it for a minute. “But ‘evil’ is ‘live’ spelled backwards, so it also has all the letters in the word ‘live’ in it!”

That made him frown again, and he was muttering all kinds of stuff that I couldn’t hear.

I asked him about the church, and why it was closed and boarded and why the O was on the ground, and he grinned wistfully and said there were thirteen ministers that had all disappeared mysteriously, so finally they had just shut the place down.

I just love a town with some quaint history, and especially when there’s a nice person around to reminisce and tell all the old stories.

Then he came over and handed me a plastic-laminated sheet of paper with a bunch of writing on it, done all up with one of those old-fashioned typewriter thingies.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“The light codes. No electricity, no phone on the Island. You’ll have to signal with the lantern in our own little version of Morse code. We’ve reduced it down to the set of most commonly used phrases.

Here’s what it said:

.	Everything is OK.
_	Please send supplies.
_.	Ready to return to shore.
... _ _ _	Help!
.. _ .	Emergency! I require the services of. . .
._ _a doctor
_ _ . _	. . .a priest
_ . . _	. . .an exorcist
._ . _an undertaker
. . _ _	. . .a lawyer
. . . _ _	Help! I’m under attack by. . .
_ . . _	. . .an apparition
..	. . .a vampire

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— · —	. . .demons
—aliens
.....	. . .carnivorous insects
.. — —	. . .giant clams
_____	aaaaaaaaaagh!
_____ ..	aaaaaaaaaagh— (urk!)

Enjoy your stay!

“I’m glad it tells about the way to have you send more supplies, because I was wondering about that part,” I said.

“The rest is just boilerplate. Required by FEMA.”

“Always good to be prepared for those emergencies!” I agreed, nodding.

Then I asked him where I could buy some stamps, and he said they were all out but then I found one when it fell out of the book I was reading, and so I put it on the envelope and dashed over to the post box to mail this to you before I have to leave on the ferryboat over to the Island.

Anyway, I’m having a really swell time on my vacation, and I know you must be so jealous. So ta-ta for now, and I’ll write you again as soon as I can.

Your friend,

Art.

THREE

[Letter from Vaughn Helsing to Art, returned with 2 cents postage due]

Art,

You grinning imbecile! This ferryboat ride is such very bad thing. I see many subtle warning signs in this letter you write. You must be cautious of those who work at Starbucks! They are puppets of the megalithic capitalist machine!

You must halt immediately your plans, and wait until I arrive!

Ever your dear friend,

Vaughn Helsing

[Art's Diary entry]

Dear diary,

Well, here I am at last, on this famous "Island." There is only one house here, a gigantic old-fashioned historic mansion, with lots of rooms and a big old kitchen and dumbwaiters, and dark corners and maybe even secret passageways, just oozing with atmosphere. I'm the only one staying here, so it's a great sense of freedom and seclusion to explore my artwork. Or to figure out what kind of artwork I want to explore. Or just to be lazy and enjoy the beautiful weather and the sights and sounds of nature, surrounded by this big glorious lake and all the trees in the forest.

It's night time now, and I'm writing by candlelight, with the cat purring in my lap. In fact, it wasn't until dusk that the ferry boat departed from the quay. The nice man in the black suit and black hat with shiny black shoes brought over the boat, and I can tell you that they really like to keep everything here quaint and rustic, free from the pollutions of modern civilization. Although I admit it might have been a little more comfortable if the boat hadn't had so many little leaks, but it just kind of added to the atmosphere of being at one with nature, to have a little bit of water in the bottom of the boat all the time. The poor cat was growling and cringing up on the bench the whole time. She doesn't seem to like water too much.

The nice man who was piloting the boat told me his name was "Vile," which I think is Transylvanian or maybe Carpathian, and I told him I guessed everyone here has the tradition of only using names that are anagrams of the letters "L-I-V-E," and he thought about it and said "Yes, that's one way to

put it.”

The emerging stars glittering against the sky deepening into darkness reflected against the still mirror of the lake all around, and with the restful splashing and gurgling of the oars and the water going by, I felt like I was suspended in the middle of space, surrounded by the glory of distant suns.

Beneath the water, it seemed like something every now and then disturbed the surface of the lake, as I could see from the subtle ripples in the reflection of the stars and fading sky. It was looked like it must have been something big, as large as a whale even, and once I thought I heard and felt something roughly scraping the bottom of the boat. Then a dark shape sped by and I caught the flashing glimpse of long curved sharp teeth. It terrified poor Winifred something awful.

But I saw Vile grin at the scraping sound, and figured we must be safe because he didn't seem too alarmed. I wonder what the big animal is that is living under the water here? Maybe it's something like the Loch Ness monster, or the creature from the depths. It's so thrilling to be in a place that has some sort of mystery, even if there seem to be an awful lot of Starbucks for such a small town.

I wonder what it was that swallowed up all those thirteen ministers of the church? Of course, I don't mean literally swallowed, other than in the sense of swallowed by darkness or swallowed by the crowd or whatever. I mean, what kind of animal could there be that would just swallow a minister?

Then there's that girl with the gravestone that died in 1906. I wondered if maybe she died in the San Francisco earthquake or something, even though we're a long ways from there, it could be that she died there but her family lived here and brought her coffin here or something. Then I had the funniest feeling, as I sat staring out at the whole lake around me, that there was someone behind me, and when I turned around I thought I might have glimpsed a girl, but it turned out to be only the shapes of my suitcase that was up on the bench to keep it out of the water, and no girl was there.

I kept on thinking about the mysteries of the town, like the club of nice men that like to dress in black suits. It must be one of those special service organizations like the Elks or the Lions, helping others in various ways and doing good deeds for the betterment of society.

So when we landed on the shore, Vile showed me the house. In the old days it was a grand old vacation spot with every room filled all the time, but right now I'm the only one staying here, so me and Winifred have this whole big old gigantic victorian-style house all to ourselves. It's got tall ceilings, and wonderfully intricate woodwork with scrolls and fancy lathed balusters and curved windows and gables and all sorts of intriguing little dark corners and crannies, that seemed to be filled with the drama of a historic past.

The housekeeping staff seems to have been not quite so diligent as they might be, but now there is a nice warm fire burning in the fireplace, and the black cat Winifred is purring away in my lap.

I'm really looking forward to seeing the place in the sunlight, since there's no electricity and all I've got are candles and oil lanterns that seem to flicker and go out all the time. It's quite atmospheric. The fresh air from the lake and the quiet rustle of the leaves outside in the wind are like a peaceful lullaby, and I think now it's time to retire for a nice restful night of sleep. I only hope that I don't stay awake too long from the coffee I had this afternoon, because I'm used to having only Raspberry Rush tea which doesn't have nearly as much caffeine in it, but I think I'll probably just doze off since I'm so exhausted.

FOUR

Dear diary,

What a beautiful day it is! I woke up and looked outside and the sun was all shining and sparkly off the little waves in the water, and the dew drops were glistening on the pristine blades of grass springing up from the ground, and glinting from the leaves hanging down from the the tree branches, green with the freshness of the new day.

It's so nice to be out here in the wilderness. Why, as I went for a little walk along the lakeside this morning, I saw the fresh foot prints of some wild animal. It must have been awfully heavy, from how deep they were, and it must have feet that are about a foot long. It made me think about how it's kinda funny, that usually a foot isn't really a foot long, unless it's someone who has really big feet. But this foot was a foot, at least, maybe two! A foot that was two feet, now there's a good riddle for the sphinx. And with big sharp talons, too.

I can hardly wait to catch a tiny glimpse of it, since I know how shy wildlife often is, that it may never come out very often for people to look at. It probably doesn't get too much contact with humans, so my presence here is probably scaring it off. Maybe I'll leave some little bits of leftover food to see if I can lure it out into the open, so I can observe it from a safe distance without making it afraid.

The funniest thing happened last night in my room, was there was this flapping against the window, and when I lifted the sash it turned out to be this giant green parrot that came in and perched on this statue of some really pretty lady. I looked around but couldn't find any birdie num-nums, or crackers or anything, so I thought it might be rude to say "polly want a cracker" because it might get all hungry and then be disappointed when there weren't any crackers. So I just blew out the candle, and then I saw out the window how beautiful the lake is from the second-story window as I looked out on it in the moonlight.

Then, just as I was almost asleep, the bird squawked the words "Never mind!" which woke me up again, so I was wide awake, and I went to the window and watched how lovely the little tiny waves were glittering in the moonlight. Then I tucked myself back in and was just about to doze off to sleep, when the bird once again squawked the words "Never mind!" So then I went down to the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards and finally found a box marked "Birdie num-nums," and took it up and gave one of the little nut-and-seed clusters to the bird. It took it in its mouth and flapped back over to the windowsill and so I opened up the window and let it fly away. The poor thing must be hungry all the time, what with

not so many people staying here to give it birdie num-nums when it gets hungry.

By then, Winifred had come up and was all warm and cozy besides me and so we drifted off to sleep. But let me tell you I had some strange dreams. I can't remember them all very well, but it was something about the throne of ultimate chaos and being on the edge of an infinite abyss.

I got to thinking about whatever might have devoured the priests, and I started thinking that it was probably because being a priest is sort of a sedentary occupation, so probably they were all nice and soft and flabby, which is just the sort of thing you would like to eat if you were a carnivorous animal. After all, those carnivorous animals have needs and feelings too, and just like any living creature they get hungry and want to eat too!

So I think the way to not be such a temptation to them is to develop strong muscles so I'll be all stringy and then they won't think I look so good to eat. And what better way is there to develop strong muscles, what with this nice huge lake here, than to go swimming! That way, when I'm all swimming around and splashing and making noise to scare the man-eating beasties away, they'll all be thinking "Gosh, look at that guy swim. He's sure to be all stringy and not at all good to eat. I guess I'll go hunt down a deer or have some berries or something."

Well, that being my determination, I did put on my swim suit and go down to the edge of the lake with my little towel, but when I stuck my toe in the water it was just about as cold as an arctic ice pack. I couldn't even go in to my ankles, it was shiveringly freezing!

So instead, I went and just laid out in the sun and thought about what kind of art I want to do as a bohemian artist. Or anyway, I tried to, though I can't really say anything came to mind. Meanwhile, Winifred went off around the bend, and when he returned, what did he have in his mouth but a big old gigantic fish! He excused himself and went off around the corner for awhile with it. I'm sure he's fast friends with the fish now, because he's always so friendly with those small little animals, like mice and things. Only when Winifred came back, he didn't have the fish with him, and so I'm a little worried about the fish, because I don't think they like to breathe too well out of the water, which is why they have gills.

Then the long shadows of the beautiful giant trees all around came and drained away all the sunlight, even though it was hardly even noon yet. So I thought I might go inside the house and explore all the fun little nooks and crevices. Maybe it even has a secret passageway, or some sort of cellar with buried treasure in it or something! I thought that maybe pirates lived there at one time, or at least it could be. Of course, they would have had to get all the way there from the Caribbean, which is a long ways away, but if they were looking for a place to hide their treasure where nobody would find it, they wouldn't just go put it

in some obvious place now, would they? So they might have just put it in the basement of and old house like this.

I think you just have to love an old house like that, with so much character and history, you just wonder how many different kinds of people have lived there, soldiers and playboys and workers and aristocrats, pirates and kings, and all the kinds of people in between. A quaint old house with all these quaint old noises in the stillness, little creaking and groaning of the planks of wood shifting in the changing heat of the day, the wind whistling through the cracks and crevices, the clanking and dragging of chains across the attic floor, the occasional muffled scream from the cellar, you know, quaint little noises like that.

So anyway, I got a cloth and was getting rid of all the dust and old cobwebs, and was all sneezing up a storm. Those housekeepers sure must have been on vacation for a long time! But that's just how it goes when you get a discount vacation, so I figure the best thing to do is just find the bright side of things and make the best of it. See everybody says I'm a grinning imbecile, but they're wrong.

It's just that I'm one of those happy kinds of people they call an optometrist, because I think you need to see clearly, and so long as one has the right view of things there is always something good to look at if you point your eyes the right way. It also helps if you have good glasses, unless your eyes are really good, or maybe even binoculars. Not that there's anything wrong with being blind, because I think blind people can see fantastically amazing visions in their imagination, and sometimes even people who aren't blind see better when they have their eyes closed.

Thing is, it sure would be nice to have someone around to talk to. I'm just so shocked that more smart people haven't stumbled upon this great vacation package from the Nosferatu Skull travel agency, especially with only needing to get a one-way ticket and all. It's just so much cheaper and more convenient than a regular vacation. Well, I guess it is anyway, because being a bohemian artist I haven't really ever been on a regular vacation. Which reminds me that I really should be working on figuring out what kind of artist I want to be as a bohemian artist. But then again I have plenty of time. After all, life is long!

FIVE

Dear Diary,

I'm so excited! I finally met someone whose sunny bright smile dispels the chilling dark shadows of loneliness!

It was in the middle of the night. Just before retiring for the evening with a cup of Raspberry Rush tea (boy, am I sure glad I remembered to bring along some bags of it with me, since the only kind of tea they have here is Lipton's). In the dark of night, I saw a glimmer of light from the other end of the hallway. Going down to investigate, I found a door that had a strange unearthly light coming from the crack underneath. It was a malign unnatural flickering bluish-violet light, something like when electricity is arcing or a neon light is broken.

For some reason though, the door was stuck, and try as I might I couldn't get it to open. I wonder what's in there?

The cat was checking it out, sniffing at it all curious and everything, then out of nowhere she all up and just walked away. Maybe she saw something she didn't like, or heard a dog or something on the other side, but she won't tell me. In fact, she never tells me anything, but I guess that's just kind of the sort of personality she has.

But that's wasn't what I was going to tell you about. I had blown the candle out, and the rattling of chains dragging across the floor in the attic had quieted down, as the house settled in for a good night's rest. I guess I must have dozed off for awhile, because when I awoke, the thick velvet blackness of night was alight with the silvery blue moonlight.

With a feeling like I must have been still dreaming, I got up and went to the window, gazing out at the ice-blue cast of the lunar light across the lawn. Moonbeams like marble columns supported the mass of clouds beneath the starry sky, the infinite dark void of the heavens above.

The sundial had become a moondial, and I wondered what time it might tell. Perhaps in the lunar light, with its different kind of sanity, it would foretell fantastic prophecies of interstellar wanderings, or sing the phantom ancient songs and murmurings of civilizations gone by.

Across the lake, I saw the faint glimmer of distant firelight, and bizarre shadows cavorting around it in a twisted savage lunatic dance. I guess the nice men in black hats were having a little campfire.

It was when I turned around that I saw her coming through the wall. Yes, that's right, *through* the

wall. It only took a few seconds, but first it was her hand, then some of her arm, then her other hand, then her nose, her breast, her bare feet, emerging out of the flat plane surface just like gumby or pokey.

It was then that I was sure that I was dreaming, only except that I wasn't. Unless I'm dreaming right now as I'm writing this and it will all disappear when I wake up, the writing and all.

She didn't see me at first, so intently was she concentrating on something, some memory of sadness or wistful nostalgia. She padded swiftly across the room towards me in bare feet. Or she would have padded, except that her feet left no traces in the dust across the floor. So distracted she was that she almost walked right through me before I moved to get out of her way.

"Oh my God!" she yelped when she finally saw me, jumping back a few paces. "Don't *do* that! Just holding still in the darkness so I won't see you. You gave me such a fright. Almost like. . . almost like, let's see. . ."

"Like you had seen a ghost?" I offered.

"Yeah! Except. . . Hey, who are you anyway?"

"Hi, my name is Art. It's a convenient name because I'm an artist, bohemian, except I haven't figured out what kind of artist yet. What's yours?"

"Gloria. Gloria Kyrie Goodie."

There was an awkward silence.

"Listen," I said. "I'm sorry I gave you such a start like that. Would you like to go have some tea? I have Raspberry Rush."

Her face lit up with such a glorious smile that I knew immediately she had a wonderful sense of happiness. "Tea, I love tea," she said. "Only, I haven't had any in such a very long time. I can't hold the cup, you see? And if I could it would probably pour right through me. But if you'd like some, I'll come sit with you. It's been so long since anyone came to visit. And then when they do, they get all scared of me, and they won't even talk to me. I get so lonely here."

"Yeah, I don't know why there aren't more vacationers here," I said. "It's such a good deal as holidays go. You'd think more people would take advantage of it."

She came closer to me, so I could see the gentle friendly contours of her face, the delicate strands of blonde hair encircling her gracefully curved features like a halo. She gazed at me with fondness, eyes and lips only inches away from mine.

I reached out to caress her cheek, but my fingers touched nothing but the motes glittering in the moonbeam.

Soon we were sitting in the moonlight at the kitchen table, watching the leaves of trees dance gently in the wind outside the window. I made had myself some tea, watching the leaves dance, unfurling in the hot water as it steeped. (I had brought bulk supplies for everyday drinking, as well as teabags for emergencies).

I put an empty cup where she sat, so she wouldn't feel left out, though of course she could not lift it. I wished I could have given her a ghost cup, and steeped spirit water with ectoplasmic tea leaves so she would have been able to share with me all proper, but I guess she was used to not having all those things, so she didn't really mention it, only she did look a tiny bit wistful and glanced at the empty cup in front of her every time I stopped to take a sip of tea.

We talked for hours of life and happiness and things. By now the black cat had awakened and was running around the room, pausing now and then to lie in wait for any potential prey that might come around.

"How old are you?" I asked Gloria.

"Almost thirteen. I'll have my birthday party next week, and my mother will give me her very special locket, passed down from my grandmother, in the shape of a heart, in which she kept the petal of a flower given to her by my grandfather when they were a-courting. Only I think something must be dreadfully wrong, because I haven't seen any of them in such a very long time."

"How long?" I asked.

"Oh, a hundred years or so. But I keep smiling and look at the bright side of things, because no matter how dark things get there's always a reason and a loving God, and the angels always guide our footsteps for the greater good."

"Exactly!" I said. "Just how I look at it. Well, except maybe the angels and God and stuff, but it's pretty exact other than that. So you must be an optometrist too?"

She looked puzzled. "Well, I've never worn glasses before, but I had an uncle who did, when he was reading. But so much has changed since then. . ."

"Maybe you could ask for an iPod instead, 'cause I don't know if you can really get a locket anymore. They might have them at Target, but I've never looked."

I must have said something wrong, because she started to cry. But then, you know how girls are, they're all weird and they like flowers and hearts and have neat handwriting in curvy cursive and all. So I didn't want to make her unhappy or anything, so I looked all sympathetic and went to put my arms around her shoulders, except that didn't work very well because they just kinda went through the air, but she didn't

really seem to notice.

“There was the accident,” she said between sobs. “The wheel of the carriage — oh it was so awful.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, figuring she might want to get it off her chest.

“I was riding on top, I remember my daddy was driving and cracking the whip and all because it was getting on towards nighttime and we wanted to get there before dark, when we was going over this little bridge see, and the wheel went off the edge and the carriage fell, and I remember trying to hold on, but all I could grab was the air. Then there was a terrible pain as I landed, then there was a dreadful heavy weight all on my chest, and I couldn’t breathe. And I turned my head and saw blood running across the ground, and I knew it must be mine, and people were all calling out my name and telling me to wake up, making all kinds of racket.

“Then everything faded and I found myself in this garden of light, only it wasn’t really a garden, and it wasn’t any kind of light you ever seen before, the colors were so extraordinary. I felt like I was tiny little girl all over again, back when everything is so big and all a wonder.”

I waited for her to go on, but she fell silent, thinking about it. I didn’t want to say anything wrong to her or anything, so I just kept quiet. I was thinking how maybe the reason girls have such neat handwriting is because they’re always crying, and if you’ve got messy handwriting it’s hard to read through the tears, but then again maybe they’re always crying because they read some break-up letter sent to them by a man, who has messy handwriting, especially if he’s a doctor, and maybe it makes it easier if you can’t read it through the tears. Unless they’re a lesbian and they get a breakup letter from another girl, because then they could still read it even though they were crying. Anyway, I guess sometimes these things that men think aren’t the sort of thing that’s right to say to a girl when she’s crying, so I figured maybe at that moment I should just keep my lips sealed.

But I wouldn’t have minded having them sealed by a kiss, especially if it was her who was kissing me, because now for some reason I felt all kinds of really wonderful love for her, and she was real beautiful and all, but you can’t really kiss someone when all you would be kissing is the middle of the air, so I just kept my mouth all zippered up.

“So anyway, I came back here for my birthday party, only it wasn’t much of a party because everyone was looking so sad, everybody dressed in black and crying. I’d try to talk to them and they’d look at me like I wasn’t there, though sometimes I think my little sister heard me, but when she tried to tell them I was there they just sort of ignored her and patted her on the head like she was talking nonsense.”

“Maybe they just couldn’t see you,” I said.

“I guess you’re right,” she sighed. “That were so long ago. Then they all left, and took all their clothes and tools and toys and things with them, saying it weren’t no good to stick around the place of such a tragedy darkening up their days. But I stayed here because I want to have my birthday party, and we’re going to have it here, with streamers and cake and my friends all around. And I’ll get the locket my grandmother had from long ago, so I could put the petal of some flower from a man who was sweet on me and came courting.”

In my mind I could picture the flowers all around, streamers and shining silverware, the daylight and laughter of all of her friends celebrating. It seemed so far away from the room where we sat in the darkness at a table in the moonlight. I wished I could fill her empty cup and turn it into a ghost cup with tea she could hold and sip in its warm sweetness as I did.

“Then the men in black hats came,” she said.

“Oh, you mean like the nice man who brought me over here? The one that works at Starbucks?”

She gave me a blank look. “The nice men who hold firelight dancing rituals at night, in order to conjure up a horrible dark beast from the middle of the lake, that comes out to feast on human flesh?”

“Um, yeah. *Those* nice men, I guess. Only, I didn’t know about the horrible dark beast part, only Starbucks, which is sort of the same thing, only instead of dark beast they have dark coffee, and instead of feasting on human flesh they have scones and stuff like that. So what’s going on with this dark beast?”

“Well, they got this book in funny writing, that they call the *Necronomicon*, and they would all get together late at night around the firelight and dance around all weird. And nobody in the town wanted to make anything out of it, what it being a free country and everyone having the right to be who they want and worship as they please. Only, the folks from the town started noticing that everytime there was one of these firelight dances, they’d wake up the next day and someone would have gone missing. It started on the priests, and they had thirteen of them before they finally shut down the church. Then there was folks from the town missing, and then this whole litter of kittens, and that’s when folks started really gettin’ upset, only there wasn’t much they could do by then, because there weren’t many of them left, except for the men in black hats.”

“And what about this beast. Have you seen it?”

“Oh, the beast,” she gave a shudder. “It came from the dreadful depths of the Earth, of a time long before our own when the demon races ruled the world, walking the land from the mildewed meadows of slime to the great mountain peaks hurling forth enormous balls of molten rock, to the devouring

depths of the infested seas, and all was ghastly horrible decay and chaos. It is neither beast of land nor sea, but dwells in the sucking mud beneath, where it burrows and gnaws ceaselessly, feeding solely on human flesh to fuel its awful slobbering slithering and gnashing of teeth.”

Behind her, out the window, I thought I might have beheld a shadow cross the lawn in the moonlight.

“So was that the same beast that might leave gigantic talon marks across the sand?”

“No, that one came later.”

“And you know it’s funny you mention those little parties the nice men in black hats used to have at night. Because I thought I saw some figures dancing in the moonlight by a fire over on the shore. But I don’t want to leap to any conclusions, because it was pretty far away and I couldn’t tell if they were wearing black hats or not. Probably it’s just some girl scouts. Maybe we could ask, the next time I see them. Because I have to order some supplies soon, so when they come over in the boat I’ll just ask if it was them dancing.

“After all, there’s all sorts of groups that might be having a frolicking dance in the moonlight, like some girl scouts or campfire girls camping out for the night and roasting marshmallows, because I know girl scouts like to have campfires and sing songs and I bet they dance around too, only it’s one of those secret things I wouldn’t know because I’m not a girl so I’ve never been in girl scouts or camp fire girls, so I don’t know what weird kinds of strange rituals they hold in the deep velvety blackness of night when all the men are gone.”

There was a loud thumping from the front door.

“Now who could that be,” I asked, “coming over to visit in the middle of the night?”

I got up to answer it. “Wait!” she said. “I have an idea: don’t answer it!”

“Why not?” I said. “If it’s the Jehovah’s witnesses I’ll just tell them I converted to witchcraft. It’s always worked before. Heck, whoever it is, I’ll tell them I’m a witch, and just watch them run away screaming!”

“I don’t think it’s any witnesses,” she said.

The loud thumping at the front door sounded again, even more insistently and sonorously than before.

“OK, we’ll just pretend nobody’s home,” I said.

Then I heard the doorknob begin to turn.

“Do beasts from the dreadful depths ever use a doorknob?” I asked. “Because you know it just occurred to me that it might be that thing you were talking about, that’s knocking on the door. So do they

have doorknobs in the sucking slimy mud of decay beneath, or is this a modern adaptation?”

“Quickly!” she whispered. “Upstairs!”

“But I haven’t finished my tea yet,” I whispered back. “Do you think the monster might like Raspberry Rush tea? I could make another pot.”

There was a long, loud ratcheting creak from the other room, as the hinge of the front door protested under some ponderously heavy weight. In an instant, the room filled stifflingly with the odor of swampy mildew and decay. I heard the rattling wheezes of strained breathing, and what sounded like soggy, wet slithering across the floorboards.

I felt the hair on my arms and the back of my neck rising, and for some reason I felt like standing up.

“Run!” she hissed desperately, floating frantically like a sheet whipping in the cold winter wind.

“Quickly! Upstairs!”

“OK, if you insist,” I whispered back. “Even though I would point out that I still haven’t finished my tea.”

“Never mind your tea! Just go!”

I didn’t see who it was that came in, but I could tell whoever it was wasn’t very polite because they didn’t shut the front door again. Born in a barnyard, I guess. I turned and followed her up the stairs into the hallway, where we cringed in the dark. I could hear my heart hammering like Thor’s thunder, and my lungs were straining from being out of breath, wanting to gulp deep gasps of fresh oxygen, but I was desperate not to make a sound, suffocated in the fumes of noxious mold and stinking foetor.

“If it’s figured out how to use a doorknob,” I whispered, “Do you suppose it might know how to climb a flight of stairs?” I asked.

She held her finger up to her lips to shush me, as I could hear the clinking and clatter of teacups downstairs as something shoved the table, followed by the sound of glass, shattering as it hit the floor.

Then, in answer to my question, I heard the sloshing slither of some sort of appendage smacking on the bottom step.

“Quickly!” she whispered, close by my ear, “the gateway!”

“What gateway?”

“The door at the end of the hall! The one with the unearthly unnatural light coming from underneath the door!”

I rolled my eyes. “Well yeah. But it’s locked. And anyway, who knows what’s making that light?”

Especially with there being there's no electricity or anything around here. It could be something weird is going on."

I heard a slimy tentacle on the second step.

"You'll have to trust me," she said.

"But I hardly know you. . ." I replied.

She looked at me all earnest and sincere, glowing all beautiful and see-through in the dark dreariness of the old hallway, and I felt such a welling of love for her in all her memories and missed birthday parties, that I just wanted to reach out and give her a big old hug. But by then I had figured out that was pretty near useless to even try.

So instead, I said ". . . but something tells me I can trust you."

She nodded solemnly. I could see the outline of her bare neck against the open collar of her shirt, and I wished I could give her a ghost-locket so she could keep the petal of a flower from some man that had come a courting, or maybe even I'd put a petal in there myself and clobber that other man over the head. I guess that's the sort of feeling you might call being in love. It was a weird sort of feeling, somewhere between needing to sneeze and smelling the wafting aroma of spicy Indian food when you're hungry.

I heard a slithering slimy tentacle on the fourth step.

"Quickly!" she said.

We ran down the hall to the doorway I had been looking at earlier, before I went to bed. There was still this otherworldly garish blue-green light dancing underneath the door crack, shifting colors periodically.

There was the sloppy wet plop of a tentacle on the seventh step.

Desperately, I grabbed the doorknob and wrestled and turned and pulled and struggled with all my might. Huge beads of sweat stood out on my forehead.

There was a ponderous slithering on the tenth step.

I looked around at Gloria, and she stood there calmly with her arms folded.

"How can you be so calm!?" I demanded.

She shrugged. "I just realized that *I'm* not the one who's going to get eaten. but if you want to open the door, you'll need to undo the secret latch."

"Latch? Secret?"

"On the side edge of the upper-right corner of the doorframe. Slide it upwards."

Instantly, my hand darted out, and I could feel the latch she spoke of. With a smooth click, it slid into place, and I could feel the door give way in my other hand, opening outwards.

I heard slimy tentacles on the floor of the hallway. The pale moonlight at the end of the hall had disappeared, having been swallowed up by the sinister, horribly gaping black shadow of something large and heavy. The stench of waste and decay assaulted all of my senses. I heard the wheezing rattle of gasping breath, as if of a creature of the depths, unaccustomed to inhaling the lightness of Earthly atmosphere.

I flung the door open. Before me arced and quivered a shimmering rectangular field of bluish lavender light, as though the flickering of a broken neon sign had been released from its prison of glass, and stood framed now before me in the doorway.

“Go!” she said. “Through the door!”

Looking around, I saw that all had been blotted out by the terrible damp icky blackness behind me. My only choice was to trust Gloria.

I leapt through the weird shimmering rectangle.

SIX

I fell into the light, tumbling into fragrant satiny softness. I felt something warm soft and furry tumbling with me, landing beside me. Face down, I lay there resting for a moment. For some reason, I had no motivation to turn my head or rise, but like jagged shards of dark pottery, the terrible fist of fear gripped my heart in its vicelike grip once more, as the recent memory of the inky blackness that had blotted out the moon once more stole across my mind, and I sat with a start.

It was daylight, and I lay on a soft grassy hillside sprinkled with wildflowers. In the hazy distance of a nearby valley I could make out the cozy contours of an old-world village and adjacent farmlands. A few paces away was Winifred, back arched, tail in the air. I guess she had fell through the gateway with me. For a brief moment, I was filled with gladness, knowing that he had survived the attack of the slimy tentacle monster.

Then, abruptly, without any warning, fear once more stole across my heart and jerked me to standing. I spun around frantically, but saw no trace of the night or the house, nor of the doorway I had just fallen through. Nor of her.

“Gloria,” I whispered.

“Here,” I heard the answer by my ear. “Don’t panic. The beast cannot cross the threshold. You are safe here.”

I turned to see her, and could barely make out the contours of her face against the sky, but in the brilliant midday light I could barely see her. Like the starlight, she was visible only against the darkness of the nighttime celestial sphere.

“Is this why I didn’t need to have a return ticket?” I asked. “This looks a lot like near where I live. I could probably just walk home from here. Except I’ll need to send for my luggage. And I didn’t even bring a toothbrush. Is this how the previous vacationers got back?”

She looked down solemnly. “No. The other visitors — they either couldn’t see me, or found my appearance too frightening. They refused to listen when I tried to help them escape. I couldn’t bear to watch.”

“So they didn’t get back this way?”

“You’re the first to open the doorway.”

“Then how did you know about it? The latch?”

“A traveling magician from long ago. One time he drifted through our town, and revealed its secret to me. Only — so much is still mystery. I only know that this is the way out. It’s the way out for me as well, only I could never open the door, since I cannot — well, you know.”

“So you were just using me to get what you wanted?” I accused her.

“Don’t be mean,” she said sadly. “Couldn’t you just go back to being an eye doctor?”

“A what?”

“An optometrist, you know. Seeing the bright side of things.”

I considered. “I suppose you’re right. You know, the cold shadow of fear is just like a wet blanket over things. It makes the whole world seem topsy turvy, and makes what up seem down and vice versa. After all, it seems like a pretty nice place here, even if it isn’t an island like the vacation brochure promised.”

I wished I could see her clearly, but she was barely visible in the bright daylight. The sun came out, dazzling, from where it had been hiding behind one of the scores of white clouds that dappled the dark blue sky.

A million questions swirled in my mind, like a million anchovies swirling around in the ocean when there’s stuff that anchovies like to eat, even if it came from the bait of a fishing boat and they’re all going to wind up decorating pizzas inside a cardboard box that’s probably going to get cold because the delivery guys are always changing around because it’s such a high turnover job and they can never seem to find your house before the pizza gets cold.

Those were the kind of anchovies that were like the questions that swirled around in my mind, except I wasn’t thinking about pizza. I was thinking about the nice men in black hats, and I was wondering if they lived in that town down there that looked so cozy, because when I thought that maybe they did I got this sort of icky knot in my insides that isn’t the sort of feeling I get when I think of nice things and sunshine and flowers, which I was sort of thinking about because there were both of those things all around me, and the gentle balmy breeze blowing through the grass was all pleasant, but after a while it would be night time, and I would have to go find someplace to be, and plus I was getting sort of hungry.

And then there were other questions, like supposing there weren’t any of the nice men in black hats, did they have any Raspberry Rush tea? And was there a Starbucks? Although I think it would have been better if it was a locally owned coffeeshop with organic coffee (even though I don’t usually drink coffee) because Starbucks never has Raspberry Rush tea. But if they’re the kind of coffeeshop that has organic coffee, they generally have a better tea selection.

And did they know where I could send to get my luggage back? Because I had a whole box of tea in there, so maybe if we could do that, I wouldn't need to find out where they might have Raspberry Rush tea in these parts, because the more I looked it didn't look so much like the town next door to where I lived any more. If I had just had the box of Raspberry Rush Tea from my suitcase, then all I would have to ask for would be hot water, or maybe I wouldn't need to even ask for it since I seemed to have found myself in plenty of hot water without even asking.

"Gloria," I said, "Do you ever have a million questions circling around in your head like anchovies?"

"I don't know," she said. "What do anchovies circle like?"

"Like the ones that might wind up being cold on your pizza because the delivery guys keep on changing, only I never order anchovies. I always get bell peppers."

"We never had pizza delivery on the Island," she said. "Unless maybe the delivery people got eaten by the slimy tentacle thing from the middle of the lake."

"Well, it's only fair I should point out that I never order anchovies because I'm a vegetarian."

"Does that mean you don't eat any meat? I guess that makes *me* a vegetarian too, only because I don't eat anything."

"Maybe that would make you a nonitarian," I said, "or maybe a nanovore. No wait, a nanovore would only eat very small things. Like if you had a breast of amœba maybe it would weigh a nanogram. But it would certainly mean not eating anchovies."

"Speaking of anchovies," she said, "what kind of questions are circling inside your head?"

I hesitated to reveal the depth of my pondering, the very abyss of doubt which assailed my consciousness so shrewdly, but I felt I must share my concerns about the negative possibilities that presented themselves inherent in the situation in which we found ourselves presently.

"Do you think they have Raspberry Rush Tea in this town?" I asked.

"I think we're on another planet," she said.

"Another planet?" I said. "What kind of other planet?"

"One in another galaxy," she replied. "At least, the magician said something about it when he conjured up the magical doorway. And he said something about the amulet."

"Amulet?"

"That's right. If only I could remember, it was so long ago. It's fading. . ."

I wondered if *she* was fading, she was so faintly visible beside me. But her voice remained calm and

steady.

“I seem to remember,” she continued, “we have to go on some sort of quest. Prove our mettle, and choose correctly between right and wrong, and ultimately triumph over the forces of evil.”

“I don’t know if I have any metal,” I said. “But I’ve got some friends at home who have a few CD’s of it. Or maybe if we could find an i-Pod, we could download some from i-Tunes. See, in modern times everything starts with an ‘i,’ except e-mail which starts with an ‘e.’ Or we could just wander around and find someone dressed like a metal head, with vampy fishnet and all in black, though it’s hard to tell them apart from the goths.”

Even though she was so faint, I could tell she was looking at me real funny, like I was talking complete nonsense or something. I could tell she was a bit out of touch with the currents and trends of our times. Well, it was OK. I didn’t mind being her mentor and guide, and helping her catch up with all the vitally cool info that she had missed.

“You’re avoiding the subject,” she said.

“I am?” I said. I felt somehow as if we were married, as if we had already been married for years and years, even though I barely just met her, though I hadn’t yet met her when she was bare, which if we were married I would. But it was silly to think that way, since it was of course impossible, because how could you go walking down the aisle with a girl who was all see-through, then the minister says “Put the ring on the bride,” then it doesn’t stick because it’s just in midair, and it falls onto the church floor and makes a loud clanging sound, unless they have a rug in the church, then the ring bounces a few times and rolls underneath the feet of your father-in-law, except maybe he’s a ghost too because it was all so long ago. . .

“Yes, you’re avoiding the subject. You’re not even thinking about it.”

I had the sneaking feeling that she was about to pull out a Cosmopolitan magazine and ask me to take a quiz, with questions like “Do you believe in monogamy?” and “How often should you give a girl flowers?”

“I’ll give you some flowers right now,” I said, jumping obviously way ahead in her train of thought. “See?” I leapt up and began picking wildflowers. I saw Winifred over the next hilltop, a black flurry of fur and claws, chasing butterflies.

“Very sweet, only what will I do with them? You’ll have to hold them for me. And you’re still avoiding the subject.”

I knew she was going to ask me if I believed in monogamy. “In theory, I think it’s a great idea, but

I, I. . . have a right to be accompanied by my lawyer in the event of any questioning. And furthermore, how can one answer such inquiries about belief, without penetrating the core essence of belief itself? For how can one truly know if one *believes* in, say, the existence of God (or Satan) unless one can prove beyond the faintest shadow of a question that one comprehends fully the exact nature of what it means ‘to believe in’ something? And given the infinite nature and variety of what the gamut of human individuals claim as belief, how can one analyze such a thing with complete certainty, with the assurance that the next one will not fail to follow the pattern ascertained? And how is one to separate belief from the myths of tales which are purported to be the subject of belief, but in fact exist on a spectrum of metaphorical instruction on the face of which lies profound depth of knowledge regarding the immutable nature of things? So, in brief, the question is in fact unanswerable.”

As faint as she was in the light, I see the look of extreme puzzlement. “What on earth are you babbling about?” she asked quizzically.

“This isn’t the Cosmo questionnaire?”

“Cosmo?” She shook her head. “I know so little about these modern times. Your ways are very strange.”

“What — um — subject were you referring to?” I asked gingerly.

“The city. Down there. Are they friendly or not?”

“Oh. I didn’t know that was the subject.”

“Well, what were you planning to do?”

“Maybe, just sit here in hiding and hope not to be discovered?”

“Silly. And what were you planning to eat? Where to sleep?”

“Grass? In the grass? I know. Wildflowers. I hear they’re yummy.”

“I was going to offer to go down there and have a look around, since I’m invisible and they can’t harm me. Then I could come back and let you know what I find.”

“But. . .”

“What?”

“Don’t leave right now. I mean, that’s a great idea and thank you for being so kind as to offer it, but. . .”

“But what?”

“Don’t leave me alone here, just yet.”

“Alright.”

I lay down on my back in the middle of the huge lush green meadow filled with fragrant wildflowers and stared up at the sky. She lay down beside me (at least I think she did, because she was very faint). Even Winifred came over and decided to stop catching butterflies, and came around to lie down and purr contentedly beside us.

There were lots of clouds in the sky, and you could make whatever shape you wanted out of them. On most days, I love lying on my back staring up at the sky and making shapes in the clouds, because almost always I can find a big white horsie and a lion, and then a snake, and sometimes even a unicorn, but today all the clouds were looking like black hats and dark tentacle swamp things. One of the black hats got bigger and meaner, and soon it got so big that the sun was gone, and I felt drops of water on my face and hands.

“Quick!” she said. “Into the cave!”

“What cave?” I asked. I didn’t see one.

“Over this hilltop.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “I didn’t see a cave.”

“I just know,” she whispered in my ear. “Come on!”

The little drops of water were getting bigger, and there was a deep rolling roar of thunder. Quickly, I got up and ran over the hill like Gloria was saying to, and sure enough, there was a big old sheltered cave nestled back into the side of the hill. It looked warm and spacious, and there weren’t any creepy spiderwebs or anything.

Me and Winifred ran all in a hurry to get in there, and ducked inside just in time as the downpour started, and you could smell the moisture in the grass and hear it hissing all around, and just then there was another growl of thunder and a flash right nearby. Electricity was all around in the air.

“I’m sure glad you knew where the cave was,” I said, “Because otherwise we would have gotten soaked.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin and my socks when I heard an unfamiliar voice beside me: “Do you always talk to yourself, young man?”

I turned around and sitting right there was this old woman, with long white braids of hair and dressed in these fancy robes like she was a shaman or sha-woman or something.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“The real question,” she replied, “is who are *you*? I’ve never seen you around here before.”

“It’s not actually more real in the universal sense,” I said. “It just seems more real to you, because

you already know who *you* are, which is the question that seems more real to us. But the question of who *we* are doesn't seem as real to us because we already know who we are."

"Philosopher, eh? So can you be so certain that you know who you are?"

"Well, I, uh, I don't know."

"Well then. My name is Zelaia. And yours?"

"Art. It's easy to remember because I'm a bohemian artist, like it says in my name, except I haven't figured out what kind of art I'm doing yet. And this is my cat Winifred, and my ghost friend Gloria."

In the dim light, Gloria was more visible now, beautiful as ever.

Zelaia squinted, then held her hands out in the direction where Gloria was sitting, palms and fingers open and spread to sense the energy flow.

"I can't see her, like you can, lad," said Zelaia, "but I can feel memories. Old memories, from long ago. A terrible tragedy. Great sadness. And. . . a beautiful spirit."

Gloria reached out to touch the palm of Zelaia's hand gently with an index finger, and I could see the older woman shiver from the chill of her touch. Older in the sense of having grey hair and looking older and stuff, though I suppose if Gloria was being about to turn thirteen for over a hundred years now, that might make her older than Zelaia. Depending on how old Zelaia was, which I didn't think it was too polite to ask when I hardly knew her.

Outside the cave, the raindrops fell through the air, and rushes of tiny rivers sent water speeding by on its way to the ocean. The rhythmic drip-drop of cascading lines of dots and dashes fell into splashes in symmetric patterns, restful, hypnotic. Another flash and rumble, yet our little cave remained dry.

Outside, the leaves made like those Japanese fans that the ladies with pale white faces hold all dainty-like, with tiny rivers of water running down them and the raindrops hammering against them like the thundering of taiko drums. And nearby was a creek running, and it started rushing louder, and the chorus of chirping frogs rose up louder and louder, as they were singing the praises of the sky and the earth (though I suppose it wasn't really the earth, if we were in fact on another planet).

I thought of the subject that Gloria was so set on me not straying from, so I thought in order to keep on good terms with her I ought to mention to Zelaia about it.

"You don't happen to know?" I asked her, "See, me and Gloria were wondering if those people down in the town there were nice, especially if they're nicer than the nice men in the black hats because it would be better all around if they didn't have one of those tentacly swamp creatures that might want to devour us. Well, me and Winifred, because Gloria's a ghost and probably doesn't have too many calories for

any sort of nasty old swamp critter to feel like devouring. So anyway, I was wondering, if you happen to know if those people who live down there are nice, and also if they happen to have Raspberry Rush Tea anywhere, or if you could maybe go down there and check for us if they're nice people or not, because Gloria offered to go down and look around but then she'd have to leave me here all alone with Winifred and I would be all lonely. But I should probably warn you not to not to let any of them know we're up here in this cave, in case they don't feel like they want to be bothered, and we could just go off somewhere else without bothering them."

Zelaia chuckled. "I suppose I could go down there and ask about the people who live there. Or you could come down there to my house with me once the rainstorm has ended, since I expect you're looking for a place to stay and something to eat? Then you can dry off and tell me exactly how it was that you got here."

"Oh." I said, exchanging glances with Gloria. She nodded silently.

"Yes, I believe we would. Do you have a big enough bed for both me and Gloria? Or probably it should be two beds, because she's a girl and I don't want to get cooties. Except, I guess we could sleep in the same place, since she's all see-through and can't really touch anything." I looked at her. "I forgot to ask. Do you even sleep? I thought being dead was sort of like being asleep, so maybe this is just the same as one long wandering dream?"

Gloria thought about it, and Zelaia watched as I seemed to her to be having a conversation with myself.

"I don't know," said Gloria, looking away all distressed. "Sometimes I think I fade away, and time goes swirling around past me without me knowing it. Then I look around and everything has changed, but it makes me all sad because next Saturday all my friends are coming out, and we'll have streamers and cake, and my mother will present me with the precious little locket that *her* mother gave to her when she turned thirteen. . ." her voice trailed off in uncertainty, and it made me wish I could put my arms around her and hold her and make her feel better, but instead all I could do was look into her eyes, and reach with my gaze into the sadness of her heart and absorb it like a leaf of paper drinks up the ink of words and memories turned into silent markings, dreams held like flowers long gone old and dry, the endless mad rush of youthful impatience frozen like a summer thistle in the dry desert of lost days.

Her eyes locked on to mine, and her woeful gaze seemed more solid, and could almost feel her caress as she reached out to my hand, then through it.

With the rain like drumbeats, like heartbeats skipping in the background between the ribbits of

amphibious celebratory cacophony, Zelaia watched curiously the mysterious dance of visible and invisible, the sweeping sighs of fate ever turning, the cartwheels of clockwork endlessly ticking, with day and night as the sundial turned into a moondial and back again in our dreams.

“Stay with me,” I whispered to her. “Don’t fade away.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” she replied. “But I’ll try, so long as you promise, no matter what, to keep on seeing clearly.”

I grinned. “Of course,” I said. “Like an optometrist!”

“What?” exclaimed Zelaia. “I suppose I should have my prescription checked. But I only use my glasses when I’m reading, so I never bother to think of it, even though I know I should make an appointment soon.”

“Why does everyone always think seeing clearly is about wearing glasses?” I said. “When the eyes that see are the ones who find the bright side of that gloomy old dark cloud, who know that the sun is waiting there on the other side ready to shine through, that around the next corner is a blazing light just yearning to drive away those bluesy old dusty doldrums?”

“You don’t say?” replied Zelaia, looking out over the valley before us as a clearing formed in the clouds and, would you believe it, out of nowhere right in front of us the sun shone through and gave us the most magnificent gigantic beautiful colorful rainbow you ever did see.

“Do you think it’s wise to fall in love with a ghost?” asked Zelaia, turning to me. “Sounds like the recipe for disappointment.”

I shrugged. “She did save my life.”

“Indeed?”

“Besides, who said I was in love? I just want her to be with me, that’s all. So long as she doesn’t give me the Cosmo quiz.”

Both Zelaia and Gloria gave me simultaneous looks of complete bafflement. “Cosmo?” they both asked in unison.

“Oh, never mind. Look! The rain is slowing down. I think it’s going to stop soon!”

Zelaia smiled. “Same as always. I do so love these afternoon summer showers.”

Then, as abruptly as it had started, the rain ceased completely, leaving the landscape sparkling in the mist of warm sweet-scented freshness. It was about then that all the birds all around joined the frogs in singing the praises of sun and sky, of planet and weather.

And speaking of *planet*, “So,” I began, almost afraid to ask. “Are we on the Earth anymore?”

“The Earth?”

Me and Gloria exchanged glances. “I think we’re on a different planet.”

“Planet?” asked Zelaia. More exchanged glances. I knew the village down there seemed pretty old fashioned, and maybe it had turned out that we landed in some place where they still thought the Earth was flat. . . Or not the Earth, but whatever they called the place they lived in. Except I’m not too good at explaining stuff like that, so I was hoping to maybe avoid the subject for a little while longer.

“So what do you do here?” I asked. “Aside from living here, obviously. I’m just curious because I’m still deciding my career, and what kind of art I’m going to be doing as a bohemian artist, and I think it’s often instructive to observe the choices of others in choosing their life’s paths and goals and stuff.”

“I see,” replied Zelaia. She seemed a little flattered that I might ask. “I,” she said, “am a dowser. Like my mother before me, and her mother before that.”

“A what?” I asked. “like dousing a candle before you go to sleep, so it will get dark? I didn’t know anybody could have a career like that.”

She laughed almost like I had said something funny, and so I laughed along with her. I noticed that Winifred had found some poor bug in the corner of the cave, and was all intent on playing with it.

“Dowsing. You know, finding water underground?”

“How do you do that?” I asked. “Isn’t it kind of difficult to see? Down there underneath all the dirt and rocks?” I thought about how maybe she could see slimy tentacle creatures, but it seemed like the wrong time to mention it.

She drew forth something from the folds of her dress, something like a necklace or piece of jewelry with a pretty gemstone. A little cluster of colored crystals that hung down on a silvery braided chain. “A pendulum,” she said. “It’s one way to open a channel for intuition to speak. To let the wisdom of Omicron bubble up to the surface, to reveal the secret dark pathways of pure flowing life deep below.”

“Wow,” I said. “Whoever this Omicron is, he must be pretty smart.”

“*She*,” corrected Zelaia sternly. “She is the soil beneath our feet, the rich ground of our ancestors, from which the plants and waters arise, and to which they fall back again from the sky.”

“Wow,” I said. “Sort of like the Earth?”

“The Earth?”

Isn’t it odd how you can know exactly what a word means, but when it comes time to try and explain it to someone who doesn’t understand, it’s near impossible to come up with any words that get close to explaining. Overall, though I thought about how nice it was that on this planet of Omicron, that

they still spoke American English, just like they do on Startrek when they've traveled half way across the galaxy. Maybe in the library here they have Webster's, except everywhere instead of Earth it's all crossed out and someone wrote in "Omicron" instead, unless they don't even have books here.

I thought about how primitive a culture we maybe stumbled into was, and I started thinking about all the things I might have to learn to live without.

"Do you have Raspberry Rush Tea?" I blurted out. I just had to know.

"Well." she said. "I personally don't care for that wimpy sort of fru-fru stuff, but I'm sure you'll find some if you look hard enough."

"Really?" I said, "Because I was worried about all the things that might be different here, from where we came from."

"And how *did* you get here?" she mused curiously, holding out the mystical pendulum before her. She stood up and held it out, arm extended, eyes closed, until it reached a point of near stillness, wavering nearly imperceptibly with the natural motion of her hand.

Walking out of the cave, into the rising mists around us, she wandered left and right, finally settling on a direction, and began walking straight ahead, unheeding of the moisture that collected, soaking its way up from the hem of her dress as tiny warm droplets clinging to the grass broke before her.

We followed together behind her, me and Gloria and Winifred, as she led us back towards where we had first come when we arrived. It was pretty mysterious to me, because it wasn't as though there were any footprints or signs of where we had been or anything that I could see, and it was pretty uncanny how even with her eyes closed she could follow the direction back to how we came in.

She came to a halt, right exactly at the spot in the grass where we first landed, and turned in a circle, eyes still closed, like she was looking for something. Then she seemed to find it. She reached into a little satchel she had hanging from one of the belts around her waist, and threw an orange powder high into the air.

There it made a sizzling sound, like water on a hot griddle as it connected with something, and for a brief moment I could see a bluish rectangular door-sized shape in midair, that faded away nearly as soon as it had appeared.

SEVEN

[From the Journal of Vaughn Helsing, in a Dutch Accent]

Am now quite worried about friend Arthur, who is a grinning imbecile. Have not heard in many days any news, and am beginning to suspecting some sort of supernatural forces that may be interfering in the mix.

First, my I detect subtle hints of trouble in letter he sent last, invisible to the untrained eye but to my highly astute abilities stand out like neon “don’t walk” sign in midnight rainstorm.

For example, the presence of Starbucks is a sure sign of malevolence and decay. Such terrible establishments are invariably the places of evil-doers and riff-raff, and surely can only serve as collecting points for the very worst of society bent on reversing human evolution and regression to the depths of the very darkest ages of life, back in the time of mold and slime when chaos ruled the earth and the earliest horrible reptiles reigned in madness and dread.

So, guided by this very sure sign of malign influences, I have gone to seek this “Nosferatu Skull” travel agency, only to find the deserted shell of an office, looking like a burnt-out husk, with broken windows boarded up and rodent droppings and dust of many decades upon everything, rotting mildewed curtains falling from rusted rods. Of all appearances, nobody has been there in scores of years.

So I suspect some supernatural force may be at play, an alteration of time or space or some such. On other hand, friend Art would be usual grinning imbecile self and say the broken windows were good for air conditioning and that dust gives character and quaintness.

Oh, I am so worried about the grinning friend of mine, but something tells me he find a way through mishmash of wicked jungle by sheer virtue of being so completely naïve and silly. Some times it seems the wise ones cannot hear the quiet whisper of guardian angels, for having so many voices inside their heads, but a simple fool hears perfectly divine messengers because nothing much else is going on up there. One can only hope.

I hear the ringing of church bells, and I pray to God that my friend is safe.

In meantime, I think I must find this place of which the postmark is addressed from, this city called “Innsnose,” and investigate the sinister course of events which might have transpired.

EIGHT

Dear Diary,

It's me, Art, again.

We were walking on the path into the quaint old-time city that we had seen from the hilltop, and I was wondering to myself about how backwards and old fashioned it might be, seeing as I hadn't seen any traffic lights or automobiles (or even airplanes, come to think of it) since we had got there. I had to feel sorry for these primitive people, so deprived of the wonders of the modern world, but still at least from Zelaia it seemed that they found a way through the hardship to find happiness and wonder. Truly an inspiration to us all, to be grateful for the wonderful things we have even though we could be happy without them.

I asked Zelaia what was the yellow powder that she used to find the portal.

"Oh, a mixture of things. Sanctified amber, maybe a bit of gold dust, turmeric."

"Turmeric?"

"Turmeric, with an 'R.'"

"Oh. Is that the kind of 'R' like the one in *February*, that everyone leaves out all the time? Or the 'D' in *Wednesday*?"

"February?" she asked.

Something occurred to me. "Do you know what year it is? Do you even have years here?"

"Years, yes. It's the year 347, I think."

"You *think*?"

"Yes, well, we used to have this really long year number, it was about seven digits, that was the length of time since the birth of some ancient holy person or rock star. but nobody could remember the year number, and then we realized that nobody even know whose birthday it was we were supposed to be celebrating, so we decided it would be easier to just go back to zero. Only, not everybody went back to zero at the same time, which nobody noticed because nobody pays much attention to time any more."

"Oh." I spent some time thinking about not thinking about time anymore, and I decided I thought it sounded like a good idea, but I wasn't sure how a whole world of people could simply stop thinking about time. But I liked the idea.

It would maybe be like always being on vacation, like when you can't remember whether it's Monday or Sunday, unless you're on one of those vacations where you can only go kite-surfing on Tuesdays and Sundays, but then you might still lose track if you didn't count very carefully the number of days between Tuesday and Sunday, because it could seem like a Sunday on a Tuesday if you didn't remember that the last time you went kite-surfing was only a couple of days ago, like if you spent lots of time drinking beer in between, which is why I don't drink beer, because I wouldn't want to confuse the difference between sundays and Tuesdays, even though I've never been kite-surfing, but it's fun to watch.

Then I started wondering about daylight savings time, and what happens to the daylight if it doesn't find salvation. Does it wind up in purgatory or hell? And when Jesus saves daylight, where does he put it? Because I save pennies, and I put them in a pink clay piggy bank that's got a big smile on it, but it's pretty dark in there with all the pennies so if someone were saving daylight they could put it in my bank and then the pennies wouldn't have to go around in the dark all the time.

It's amazing how many important things you never realized that you start thinking about when you travel to someplace different, because in the ordinary swing of things these thoughts just don't occur, so it's good to go on vacation and take a trip to someplace different, even if it's a little more different than I expected.

Gloria seemed to be doing OK, sort of gliding along beside me. It was a walking and gliding combination at the same time, hard to describe. She was being silent, so I'm sure she was thinking thoughts that were every bit as deep and profound as mine.

Then something else occurred to me. "Do you think we can get back through the doorway?"

"Are you sure you would want to, if you could?" asked Zelaia.

"Not so long as the ugly tentacly swamp creature is there," I said. "But I bet it will get bored and go away, since what it wanted for dinner is gone now, which is me. Then all I have to do is go back and turn on the signal lantern, with that handy dandy code sheet the nice man in the black hat gave me, and the ferry boat will come back and take me back to shore, so I can go home."

Only the more I started talking about my plans to go home, the farther away and less of a good idea they sounded like. Especially on account of I didn't know for sure that the tentacly swamp creature would really get bored, because it must be pretty boring in the chaotic dank depths of sucking mud, so maybe it was just staying there, just hanging out by the doorway in case we came back through.

The farther away it seemed, the more I wished I could be back in my own kitchen in my favorite chair, with a big pot of Raspberry Rush tea steeping.

“I see,” said Zelaia. “Well it seemed to be fading out there. You can’t expect the opening to stay in one place. Soon it may be on a completely different planet, in another region of time.”

It made me very sad when I heard that, that I maybe would never again hear the church bells of my home in Pleasant Hills, or see my good friend Vaughn.

But I was excited to see the city we were walking towards on this planet of Omicron as our footsteps crossed over the grassy meadows surrounded by chirping crickets and frogs, and sweet blossoms of perfume. I was thinking how it would be like being born way back in the old days on the Earth, back in the time of all those old pioneers from long ago, back when they didn’t have iPods or toothbrushes, and when they were still trying to change gold into lead, or maybe the other way around.

As we descended, the distant road that seemed such a tiny thin ribbon from above became the street all around us, though still there was nobody on it. It was a different kind of road than I remember from Earth, because it wasn’t all ugly black asphalt, but even though it looked like regular dirt it didn’t get all muddy like a dirt road on Earth might in the heavy rain.

The weather was just perfect for walking, not too hot and not too cold, with a balmy breeze of fresh air and birdsongs all around. And with the clouds coming and going over the sun it never got too bright or too dark.

Then we got to a place where the land on either side of the road was all laid out in rows of some kind of vegetables, a bunch of different kinds all in different fields. They were growing all wild and orderly, vines and shrubs and little cabbage-like things, all green and healthy in the sunlight.

Then finally we got to what seemed like a village, with houses of wood and plaster with thatched grass roof tops and chimneys, just as beautiful as the kind you see in a painting by Van Gough. There were even these tall radiant petalled things that looked like sunflowers in the garden of one, and bright colorful flowers of all kinds everywhere all around.

The first people we saw were some little kids playing in the mud half naked. They watched us curiously as we walked by, but soon forgot about us to go back to the good time they were having splashing around in the muck. Nearby, a lady was hanging out clothes and sheets on a line.

We crossed over a stone bridge, and there in the river was a big old mill wheel, two stories tall or so, lazily turning around as the water ladled from one paddle to the next. The dark-colored wood mill adjacent was all weathered and faded, embroidered with ivy, flowered vines and wisteria. We stopped for a while to stand on the bridge and watch the paddlewheel turn, listening to the hypnotic rhythm of splashing and the gentle creak of the axle as it revolved.

I started thinking about the bright side of things, even though it made me sad to think how far away it was to get home, all on the other side of the galaxy with this door that just came and went as it pleases, not caring whether you want to be back in your kitchen with a pot of tea or not.

But the good thing was all these beautiful places and things and people I was seeing as we walked along that I might never have seen if it hadn't been for the nasty old tentacle swamp thing. So the insidious tendrils of misfortune wound up taking me to a place that might even be a better spot for a vacation than I had even planned! Even if they didn't have iPods.

Suddenly a sweaty panic crept across my mind, as I noticed that I couldn't see Gloria anymore. "Gloria!" I called out. I noticed how hot it was.

"Right here," her voice whispered softly in my ear.

"I couldn't see you — I was afraid you had disappeared," I said. filled with cool refreshing calmness to hear her voice talking to me in such sweet sibilants.

"I've been right here all along," she said.

Zelaia gave me a funny look. "Dulcinea," she said.

"What?" I asked.

She thought for a minute, then said "Oh, nothing," except I was pretty sure wasn't nothing.

"No really, I said," tell me.

"Don Quijote was a fictional madman who fancied himself to be a knight errant, who set out to right all wrongs. Dulcinea was his mythical lady."

"I usually run my errands during the day, because when I run night errands, the stores are all closed," I said, "But righting all wrongs sounds like a happy thought, and I like happy thoughts, because I'm an optometrist.

"Well," she began, "maybe you can help me with my reading glasses." We watched the mill wheel lazily turning, the water falling in bursts as the paddles passed by, end over end. The long grasses swayed lazily in the wind. Winifred was busily playing with some small bug or rodent that was causing the leaves to rustle in the nearby field.

"What?" I asked.

"She was mostly in his imagination," spoke Zelaia softly.

"Oh," I said. "Except it's not like that." I thought some more, then the realization hit me. "She saved my life."

"She did?"

“By telling me where the latch was. The power of a few words. If she hadn’t spoken them, if she hadn’t existed, and been there to speak them, I would not be here right now. Isn’t it amazing the sheer power of a few words?”

“I’m glad to hear that I exist,” murmured Gloria faintly.

“I see,” said Zelaia, but for some reason she didn’t ask any more about the latch or Gloria, at least right that second.

“If it hadn’t been for those words,” I blurted on, “I would be all devoured now by the tentacly swamp thing, unless it would have gotten full when it was halfway done eating and then I would only be halfway devoured, and then the slimy tentacly mud-sucking swamp thing would have asked the waitress to bring a box like they do in Chinese restaurants, only I don’t think the swamp thing spent much time in Chinese restaurants, because they would make it put on a shirt and shoes, only I don’t think it could really put on shoes because all it had was tentacles, unless there were feet down there that I couldn’t see which wouldn’t be surprising because it was very dark. And can you imagine being a shoe salesperson when this creature comes in, and all it’s got is tentacles? And then the creature explains that it needs shoes so that it can go into the Chinese restaurant.”

Zelaia looked at me kind of funny the way she does. “Do you ever think about stopping while you’re ahead?”

Finally we were done watching the mill wheel turning in the river, even though the mill wheel wasn’t done turning because I suppose it never got done unless they stopped it for some reason or it wore out or fell off, or maybe there was a drought. We continued walking along down the road we had been traveling, as the wheel kept on turning behind us. At least, I assume it kept on turning, unless they shut it off when we were done with our contemplative moment beside it, kind of like the refrigerator light goes out when you close the door.

“We’re almost there,” said Zelaia, “to my house. I’ve got a spare bed I can set up, or two if you need it. Does your Dulcinea require additional accommodations?”

“Actually her name is Gloria,” I said. “I don’t know. I’ll ask.”

Gloria laughed. “It’s quite alright,” she said. “I’ve gotten used to sleeping whilst floating dreamily in midair.”

But Zelaia hadn’t heard her. “Or are the two of you planning to share the same bed? I wasn’t expecting a nuptial visit, or conjugal, or what have you. Are you planning to have children?”

I think that Zelaia was a little bit jealous that she couldn’t hear Gloria, so she was saying those

things to hurt me. But I could understand, so I let her do her thing, figuring she would get over it after a while.

“It’s fine, just one bed,” I said, wondering what sort of stuffing they might be using for beds in this old-fashioned renaissance-fair world, maybe clumps of hay with little rocks in between. I supposed I could get used to it if I had to.

We turned off the main road and onto a narrow winding path that twisted up a hillside, beneath some enormous shady trees, until finally we reached the top of the ridge and we could see her house set up on it. Her house looked all cozy, same sort of design as the rest we had seen, wood and plaster with thatched roof, and all around beyond it was a little valley that was all lush and green in the sun, all grasses and trees with a river running through it, maybe even the same river that came out at the mill. I took a deep breath, from seeing how beautiful it was.

As we were walking up to the front door, I was wondering if they even had locks and keys for security in this quaint but primitive universe, or if they just kept out the bad people with dogs.

Zelaia walked up to the front steps and flipped the cover off a tiny control box at the top of one of the posts in front of her house, to reveal a grid of silver buttons, each with a glyph engraved in gold. Quickly, as of habit, she punched in a combination. We heard the quiet, melodically soft, clear bell-like electronic ‘ding’ of an artificial chime, and the front door swung open.

“Welcome to my home,” she said.

DINE

Later that afternoon, I lay on the plush pseudo-down bed. It had, after all, been the middle of the night in the universe I had come from, so my body was wanting to engage in rest and repose. Gloria floated “on” the bed beside me, drifting slowly up and down with the inhalation and exhalation of some sort of ethereal cosmic wind.

It had taken a while to get the softness and temperature to the exact levels I wanted. Even though it was just a one-person bed, it was like a queen-size or something by Earth standards. I wasn’t sure if they had queens on here Omicron, or if they called their beds by them or not, but it was fully adjustable in all sorts of different ways. I asked Zelaia how it changed the softness (which you could adjust with one of a little row of dials beside it) and she went on for awhile about submicrotonic transfibulation or something like that, and meanwhile I was falling asleep because I had just gotten the softness just right, and all of my limbs felt like they were very heavy, as if I were one of those old marble statues from long ago, David or Venus or someone like that, except I was wearing a little bit more clothes than they were, and also lying down.

I sat there on the mattress feeling like a king. Zelaia had gone off to the local village to attend to some business, so me and Gloria were reclining in this semi-darkened room, ruminating on the recent events and occurrences that had just taken place so tumultuously.

I was still thinking about how she saved my life.

“You, know?” I said.

“Yes?”

“The power of words. Amazing. Just a few words that you said mean that now I’m alive instead of being dead. It makes me think of all the times that words make such a huge difference in someone’s life.”

“Like the words of a Queen or King.”

“Yeah, that’s one kind of power. A few whimsical syllables determining the destinies of millions. Lives lived in wartime or peace, of death and suffering or prosperity and happiness and creativity.”

“Or ‘I do.’”

“You what?”

She laughed with a burst of raucous abandon. “Silly. When two people are getting married. ‘Do you take this man, in sickness and health, poverty and wealth, however.’ And then you say ‘I do,’ and everything

changes.”

“Yes,” I said, perhaps a little less interested than she was. It’s another girl thing, like neat handwriting and flowers and stuff.

“Or if you’re the captain of a submarine, and you say to fire torpedos or not, a lot of people could live or die.”

“Hm. Submarine, torpedoes,” she mused, rolling over again. “Sounds like something a man would say. Or think about the words a doctor might say, like ‘you only have a month to live,’ or how about a writer who writes a book that changes the way everyone thinks about something.”

“Yeah!” I said, starting to get all excited. “Like the guy who invented Superman! Now you talk about kryptonite and everyone knows what it is, which nobody would have if he hadn’t educated us all with all those books!”

She looked at me with an expression of helplessness. “Submarines. Superman. What ever am I going to do with you?”

I looked at her curiously. “How do you know about submarines?” I said.

“Movies,” she said. “Because I can’t pick up books, so unless I find someone who’s reading the exact story I want to read at exactly the same speed, it’s quite difficult.”

“So you haven’t read any books?”

She shrugged. “Well, except ‘Harry Potter.’ But once I watched ‘The Titanic’ about seventeen times in a row. At least, that was when I lost count.”

“I was wondering,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“About the saving my life thing. If I had died, wouldn’t I have become a ghost, like you, and then we could be together. You know, I mean that I could be able to touch you and stuff.”

“Stuff.”

“You know, stuff.”

“Submarine kind of stuff?” She asked. “Firing torpedoes?”

I didn’t know what on Earth (or on Omicron) that she could possibly be talking about, so I must have given her an expression of extreme puzzlement.

“Oh, never mind,” she said. “You’ll learn about it when you get older.”

“But I thought you were only thirteen, so wouldn’t I be way older than you?”

She drew herself up so her face was right up close in front of me. I saw the glowing turquoise

blue of her eyes all bright and clear. “But I’ve been thirteen for over a hundred years now.”

I thought about that for awhile. “So I guess you’re a little bit older than me.”

“A little bit. But I still feel like a little girl sometimes.” She sighed wistfully, rolling over again in midair.

“So you never answered my question,” I said. “Did you ever see anyone else become a ghost?”

“Nope. Never have. I’ve never met another ghost.”

“Never?”

“Not a one.”

It made me sad to think about her not ever meeting anyone like her, like how I would have felt if I had never met another human being, maybe on a whole planet of cats. “You must be so lonely,” I said. “Why didn’t you follow your family when they left? Your mother and father, the way you followed me through the portal gateway thingie?”

She shrugged. “You care about *me*. All *they* cared about was what they wanted me to be. I mean, my father had all kinds of guilt because he felt so bad about the accident, and how he was driving the carriage when it fell in the ditch and I got killed. But guilt isn’t the same thing as love or understanding. It just didn’t do anything for me, so after a while I got so sick of it, because it seemed like he was just looking for excuses to feel sorry for himself instead of doing something positive and useful.”

“I’m glad you think I care about you,” I said, my heart fluttering, “But I hardly even know who you are. I just met you a little while ago.”

“But you’re not trying to force me to be your little princess, and you’re not trying to make me into something that I’m not in order to feed your own selfish pride.”

“Well, no.” I conceded, though I suspected from the way I was feeling all nervous and prickly that we were hovering dangerously close to the Cosmo-quiz topic realm of conversation. “So why do you think you turned into a ghost, when nobody else did? Or maybe they did but you just can’t see them? The way Zelaia can’t see you but I can?”

“Who knows?” she said. “There was never anybody to ask. Destiny, I guess. Isn’t the church supposed to be the expert on death and what happens after? But they wouldn’t even admit that I existed, so how could they answer all my questions? Sometimes I would just sit there in the back pews and listen, but the long monotone lectures all faded into a meaningless blur. The priests spouted all kinds of answers, but only for the sort of questions they could think of, none for the kind that my head is filled with. Then they all got eaten by the tentacle swamp monster, so now they don’t spout any answers at all.”

I was lying on my side, and she settled down to lie on her side facing me. “Maybe you can help me find them,” she said.

“And maybe you can help me find what I’m looking for. Like what kind of art I’m supposed to do, being a Bohemian artist.”

She looked at me earnestly, with wide innocent turquoise blue eyes. “We can both help each other,” she said, then turned over to snuggle up with her back facing me, though of course I couldn’t feel it. Or maybe I felt something, but I don’t know if it was real, or even if I could understand what was real or not anymore, but I knew that it felt nice to have her there talking to me, whether or not she was only my imagination.

Soon after, I must have drifted off to sleep.

TED

The deep obscurity of night hung over the temple of Omicron in the middle of the city. The dark, still and motionless, remained ever the gentle protector of all who wish to remain unseen.

Raktjeh lurked in the shadows, skillfull, silent. Both unseen himself, and enemy of others unseen, ears pricked up at the scarcely audible brush of a hasty sneaking footstep in the shadows.

Then, bracing slightly, muscles long held poised ready to spring leapt into action, as he lunged towards the figure more felt than seen before him, a figure swiftly running now, ready to slip through Raktjeh's fingers.

Almost.

Impact of limbs. Steel fingers gripped the intruder by the scruff of his coat, liberated him of his surreptitious package just as a toe deftly slipped in front of his ankle, causing him to spill entirely, losing his balance to land in what must have been a painful sprawl on the wood floorboards of the temple. Raktjeh could tell that it would have hurt much more, had it not been for the numbness of intoxication belied by the stink of alcohol on the intruder's breath.

Meanwhile, Raktjeh playfully tossed and caught the item he had retrieved in one hand, and set it down beside him, then turned his attention to the intruder once more. Striking up a flashlight beam, he directed it in the intruder's face. What he saw led him to emit a grunt of disgust.

"Meck Murphy. I shoulda' known. Run out of hooch money again, have yeh? Well?"

Meck struggled with the stars before his eyes, with the half-anticipated failure. Had he really expected to get away with it this time? One of these days. Now what, land in jail? Or would the night guard be lenient.

There was a time I could have taken this guy on, thought Meck. He had been a soldier, damn good one too. Killed his share of the enemy, and not by dropping sissy bombs on them neither. We're talking straight hand-to-hand combat. But then what happens, you get back from the battle, saving the world from the enemies of virtue and freedom and all that's good, and what happens?

Do I get a hero's welcome? A parade with crowds cheering on all sides, flowers and confetti raining down like colorful blessings from the sky? So well he remembered that day, coming home. No crowds, at least none that paid him any mind. Crowds of stone-cold faces, bustling, rushing, in a hurry to somewhere else, if only he could know where, but it wasn't here.

Be with me! he had wanted to plead, *Be here, with someone who doesn't have anywhere else to go!* But the streets were filthy, and there was garbage, and with nobody there to greet him, and the train left the station and with awkward good-byes, his companions in arms quickly dissolved into the boiling bustle of the crowd, and it took every ounce of courage not to disappear himself, to vanish into the anonymous indistinct blur of the nameless streets and stores and houses, and soon the only other person standing on the platform was an old beggar, wrinkled and dirty, holding out her cup for money.

Seeing her was like walking the narrow edge of a high mountain cliff trail, and watching the stones tumbling down into the abyss. The horrifying thing was how close was his own condition to hers.

As Raktjeh looked down in disgust, Meck relieved that moment again and again, the disappointment, the anticlimax, the nightmares, the certainty of spiraling decay, the falling down into oblivion of drunken despair.

The nameless stone faces in the crowd all around, unseeing, or pretending not to see, couldn't they at least pay him the least thanks? The least bit of gratitude for saving their way of life from the clutches of the enemy, with their wily and disreputable ways, their sinister deceptions and propaganda, the enemies of all that was good. Couldn't they see?

But no, there were voices of criticism. He had, after all, been in a foreign land wreaking death in their names. "Killer," they called him. "Murderer." It stung like salt as their words relentlessly lashed him.

If only he could make it through the night, tomorrow would be better, he knew it. Right around the corner. But tonight, the only way was in the bottle, and the only way to acquire his friend inside the bottle was with money he didn't have. All those bottles in the friendly store, exchanging phony hellos with the clerk with the crocodile smile under cold buzzing fluorescent lights, each bottle with a night spent in company of relief, of putting off, procrastinating the inevitable, of shoving aside the pain, knowing somewhere in the depths of the hopeless tangle, that someday it would confront him and be unavoidable, that he would have to look the pain straight in the face, and fight.

But fight, how? He was a good soldier, he liked to think anyway, and he had learned to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand battle, to disable, to cripple, to kill. To break bones and plunge sharp metal into soft flesh. But the enemy inside his skull had no bones, no flesh. It knew no death, laughing safely from the shelter of invincibility as it tormented him with its insults and judgment.

Just one more night, then he would face it, he told himself night after night.

Meck tried to get up, but Raktjeh planted a heavy boot on the center of his chest. "Nowhere's where you be headed," he said. "What else ya got?"

“Nothing,” Meck protested.

“Right,” spat Raktjeh. “Nothin’, save the Amulet of Imbalance,” he said, liberating two other packages from inner pockets of Meck’s coat. One of them fell out of its wrappings into Raktjeh’s hand, a miniature gold statue of the sacred coyote.

“Did you think ta fence ’em off? You canna’ be thinkin’ to get away with it.”

“Melt them down,” mumbled Meck, nervously. Not jail again. He couldn’t go back, not there. *Be honest, then maybe he’ll be lenient.*

“Melt down the old sacred statues? You’re a disgrace.”

“Not me,” said Meck, then stopped, knowing he had already gone too far.

Raktjeh’s gaze turned sharply back at Meck, like the point of a knife against his liver.

“*Not* you? Then who? Who put you up to this?”

Meck began sobbing. Caught in the vice, between the hard questions and the punishment he knew would await when he returned. As if losing his spoils had not been bad enough, now he had almost betrayed his supplier of salvation, his source of painkillers, if only he could bring it finally to an end. . .

Looking up, Raktjeh saw the monks walking calmly by down the hall, to the light of a decorated lantern that each one held hanging down from a chain like a pendulum, a score of gentle globes of light softly swinging, illuminating their wordless footsteps.

Never a word. The monks of Omicron were entirely silent. Immersed in lifetime vows of silence, they honed their psychic abilities to amazing degrees of sharpness. He could see the urgency in the strained smiles on their faces, that they wanted him to accompany them, now. The leader beckoned.

“For the love of —” Of course, it would have to be right while he was in the middle of questioning a burglar, right on the brink of finally getting at the bottom of this rash of thefts that had been plaguing them recently.

But cordial though the monks were, he knew they would not wait for him. *They never do*, thought Raktjeh. *Never mind*, he thought, *I’ll catch up later*. Gracefully, silently they floated by in their dark robes with amber and crimson sashes, lamps swinging down the corridor, leaving him once more in the dark with this disgusting lump of human failure.

Soon they were gone, but now Raktjeh couldn’t bring his mind to focus on interrogating his prisoner. Feeling around Meck’s coat pockets once more, he satisfied himself that he had recovered at least the most valuable items.

Something indistinct triggered his instinctual wariness as a trained warrior. He couldn’t put his

finger on it. Perhaps a sound, a flitting shadow. Maybe just a feeling, some kind of telepathic impression. Maybe just imagination, too little sleep, too many nightmares.

He took a hold of the burglar's lapels, and hauled him up once more. "Who set you to this?" he asked with a cordial, almost pleading tone. "Was it Barney the wheedler? I know I saw yeh slinkin' about wi' 'im not so long ago. Or was it yer ol' pal down by the docks?"

Meck winced with each accusation, but remained silent.

Raktjeh took one more look at Meck, and let go the lapels. Meck was too drunk to support his head from falling to the floor, and it made a loud impact against the floorboards that would have hurt something awful had it not been for the gallons of artificial stupidity poisoning his blood.

Meck whimpered.

"You're pathetic," said Raktjeh. "Not even worth the bother. Now get your sorry carcass out of here before I change my mind. But you better find some answers afore the next time I have the misfortune of seein' you. You follow?"

"Y-y-yessir," stammered Meck, quickly pulling himself together and scrambling across the ground to the opening in outer wall, to the stairway, with a surprising burst of energy.

As Raktjeh swooped down to pick up the plundered items, there was a flash of light from the direction of the stairs. He looked up to see Meck, standing up straight on the top step. Unnaturally straight, attention absorbed in something in front of him, the source of the bright light, nearly as bright as daylight.

"It's you," Meck was saying. "I lost them. I. . ." and then an explosion from outside, followed by the disturbing sound of metal impacting flesh, harsh sharp edges tearing apart a body, buried in it. Inwardly Raktjeh flinched, a mental gesture invisible to the eye of anyone who might have been watching. No stranger to battle, Raktjeh felt the memories of such impact in places on his own body, but even more strongly he felt the cool presence of mind of a true warrior, that crystal sharp focus and clarity of attention brought on by the immediacy of his awareness of threat.

He watched calmly, analytically, as the stiffened body of the drunken burglar rose for the final time with agonized effort, then slumped and fell with a sloppy clatter to the ground as the pool of blood spread on the sacred floorboards around him.

Raktjeh's mind was already calculating the possible hiding places and escape routes, potential strategies and weapons.

Meanwhile, his own morbid curiosity was luring him like a beautiful woman, like a glimmer of a

rainbow fragment from a crystal, projected flitting across the floor, luring a cat to chase. Who had been behind this series of vexing crimes? He was certain that in the back of all the seemingly irrational thefts was some purpose, some sinister design of iceberg proportions of which he was only seeing the crooked nasty dissembling pointed tip.

Stupidly, irrationally, he felt the tug of his sense of duty as the temple guard, reaching down to grab the packages that had been dropped by the now moribund thief, carrying them with him as he backed away from the increasing light.

Dimly he felt the familiar awareness that he was watching a fellow being, a living rational creature like himself, in the last moments of bodily incarnation, aware of the thoughts he imagined must be passing through the mind of the hapless drunk, the pain, the memories, the plans unfulfilled, childhood dreams from long ago now had their finality with rude inappropriateness, torn away so unexpectedly. How unfair that death should steal someone in such a shoddy manner.

At least they were in a temple.

Unconsciously, he had been slowly backing away. Now it was time to put some earnest effort into an exit. He turned, just as he felt the steel grip of unseen hands closing around his neck, wresting away the from his grasp the precious statues he had been rescuing.

“I’ll take that,” spoke a harsh rasping voice with a familiar southern twang.

ELEVEN

[from the Diary of Art Bohemian]

Hi Diary,

It's me again, your cheerful happy friend. We must have had a nice long nap, because I felt all rested, and when I woke up it was nighttime. I couldn't see Gloria anywhere around, but I heard shuffling about in the other room, and heard Zelaia's voice talking to Winifred.

Rubbing my eyes, I climbed out of the wonderfully just-the-right softness bed, and made my way towards the light coming from the crack at the bottom of the door. I've never seen anything like these doorknobs, or actually they weren't really knobs but sort of handles, that know when you're touching them and then the door unlatches. Almost as if they were alive or something.

When I made my way out into the kitchen, I saw Zelaia bent over, talking to Winifred. The cat, tail in the air, was sniffing disdainfully at the food in the bowl. "Don't tell you don't like that one either."

"Miao," complained Winifred loudly.

"Well, you can't expect it to taste the same as the food you're used to. It's a whole different planet you're on now."

"I could only get him to eat Royal Organic Deluxe Feline Blend," I said.

"Oh, hi. You feeling rested?"

"Much better, without the tentacly swamp thing chasing after me. But I sure had some weird dreams."

"Oh? Anything you'd like to share?"

I shrugged. "Oh, the usual, I suppose. After all, dreams are always weird, so what would really be weird is if you had normal dreams. But do you ever hear anybody say 'I had really normal dreams last night?' or 'The weather is really normal today?'"

Zelaia, still crouching over to attend to the cat, looked up at me with a puzzled look.

"So you're telling me they were weird for being normal, or normal for being weird?"

Now *I* was confused. "I forget. But my friend Vaughn was in one of them, and my cozy little bed back in my bohemian flat back home, though as much as I really like your fancy hi-tech bed that's exactly the softness you want it to be."

"Vaughn?"

“Yeah, my friend Vaughn Helsing. He told me I was a grinning imbecile and I shouldn’t have gone on this discount vacation with just a one way ticket, but he’s always so grim and serious with dark clouds hanging over his brow, so I told him to just lighten up and see the bright side like a good optometrist.”

“I think the word you want is. . .” started Zelaia.

“Cause being an optometrist is all about seeing clearly, because when you look at the way things really are and focus on the positive, then everything always turns out alright,” I explained. “So, what were you saying?”

“ . . .Uh, never mind.”

“I was wondering,” I said. “Do you always get those doors opening in the middle of the air like that, and people falling through from other planets with their ghost friend and their cat? Because that must get awfully confusing, and plus it might get kind of crowded too, with people falling through from all over the place. Not to mention you must need some especially sturdy umbrellas.”

I was wondering where Gloria had gone to, but then I saw her come into focus over next to Winifred with Zelaia, sitting (or floating) on her knees, looking at him intently.

“He doesn’t like the fish,” said Gloria. “He’s saying he had a bad experience with tuna once, so he’d like to try another flavor if he could, please.”

It surprised me to hear that a cat was using the word ‘please,’ but I guess they’re more polite than we realize. Zelaia, of course, couldn’t hear her.

“And by the way,” I added quickly as Zelaia got ready to answer my question about the doors, “Try the one without fish.”

“What?”

“Gloria said to,” I explained.

Zelaia shrugged. “Only one left to try. Let’s see, Grathrumph birds and Wyzirianth grain. No fish. May as well. . .” She poured some out into the remaining empty bowl, and Winifred sniffed only briefly before commencing on wolfing it down eagerly.

“Well, how about that. Dulcinea scores again, if it wasn’t just a lucky guess.”

“She’s real,” I said sulkily, “Not just my imagination.”

“Yes, I know,” said Zelaia patronizingly.

“Don’t worry,” said Gloria. “You mustn’t let it bother you that she doesn’t believe in me. A lot of people don’t”

I didn’t have anything nice to say, so I decided to keep quiet. It seemed strange to me that Zelaia

believed in finding invisible water underground with a pendulum, but she was giving me so much trouble about my ghost friend that was invisible to her, especially because I knew she couldn't possibly disbelieve in Gloria, because she had sensed her in the cave when it was raining.

"Would you like to eat?" asked Zelaia, standing, looking down at busily devouring cat, hands on her hips. "I made some dinner."

She said the names of all the vegetables that went into it, but I forgot them, because everything around here has long funny names with lots of letters in them. But it was very good, because whatever else was true, Zelaia did know how to use a kitchen.

So after dinner, while we were eating this sweet pie-like kind of stuff, I asked her again about the doorways.

"Are there a lot of them out there? I've never seen one on my planet before."

She laughed. "Well, we probably have more of them than most places."

"So how do I find one that will take me home?"

"Well, you might start by talking to the Warlock of the Temple of Omicron. Or you could go on a quest for the Amulet of Imbalance."

"The what?"

"The Amulet of Imbalance. Of course, there are many who would maintain that it doesn't exist, but it wouldn't be a proper quest otherwise, would it?"

"I guess," I said.

"And what's a knight-errant without a quest?"

"I don't know," I said, "I go on errands at night sometimes because, being a bohemian artist I like to sleep in late and go about my business in the middle of the night, but sometimes it doesn't work too well because a lot of stores are closed in the middle of the night, and the ones that aren't have weird people in them in the odd hours after midnight."

She looked at me all confused, and I guessed maybe she didn't understand because maybe English on Omicron is a little different from English on the Earth, the same way that English in America is different from English in Britain, so I only was hoping that I didn't say anything that sounded too silly, and then I got all nervous and hot and sweaty hoping that I didn't accidentally use a bad word on Omicron that was a good word on the Earth, like if say "errand" on the Earth meant "sex" on Omicron or something like that.

But Gloria was all sitting (or floating) there smiling at one of the empty chairs at the table, smiling

like nothing was wrong, gazing off into the distance like she was remembering a good thing that happened long ago, so I figured it was OK because Gloria's pretty good at being telepathic and knowing if things are OK or not.

"So if we have a Quest for the Amulet of Imbalance, then we'll be able to find a door that goes back to my home?"

She laughed again the way she does when I don't really understand things the way she does. Because I know I don't understand things the same way other people do, but they never seem to realize that they don't understand things the way that I do either.

"The Amulet of Imbalance gives whoever carries it the all power over time and space, or at least so the legend goes. That ought to help you find your doorway, or even make your own if it doesn't exist."

It sounded pretty good to me. "But why do they call it the Amulet of Imbalance then? It sounds like they should call it the *Amulet of All Power Over Time and Space*, or the *Amulet of Making Doorways for People who Fell Into Another Universe From Escaping a Nasty Tentacle Swamp Creature* or something."

"I'm sure that your names for it are much more sensible, and if we ever find it we'll have to rename it."

"Only, won't it be really easy to find? Because if it gives the bearer all power over time and space, all you have to do is find someone with all power over time and space, and then that's the bearer of the amulet. Then we could just ask to borrow it for a little while, say five minutes or something, however long it takes to create a doorway."

"So you're saying that whoever has all power of time and space should be easy to find?"

"Well, yeah. Wouldn't they be kind of obvious in a crowd? Everyone would be waiting in line and then they would be in front in the wink of an eye. Or say someone spilled their Raspberry Rush tea, and was all upset about it, then they could rewind back to before when it was spilled and move the cup away from the edge of the table so it wouldn't spill."

"But God has all power over time and space, and how easy is it to find God?"

"I, uh, well. . ." that made me stop, and I was all quiet for awhile thinking, which I've been meaning to tell you, is a fairly rare occurrence for me, the being quiet part anyway.

Anyhow, she said we would leave in the morning, to see if we could find the Warlock anyway even if the Quest for the Amulet of Imbalance was an imaginary sort of thing that was more of a joke anyway than real, at least so far as Zelaia was concerned, but she said there were those who had spent lifetimes and fortunes seeking it.

After I helped her wash the dishes and thanked her for the wonderful lovely dinner, and said goodnight, I was walking through the semidarkened livingroom hallway between the bedroom, when I saw all the bookshelves, filled with paperback novels. At first I thought the writing might be different than what I could read, a different alphabet of letters and words, like the buttons on the keypad she used to open the front door.

But when I got closer I could see the titles, and found I could read them clearly. They were all names like “Mountains of Passion” and “Heartbeat of Desire” and so on.

I got to thinking as I lay there in the bed in the dark that maybe she read all the books to fill the place of something missing in her life, and that maybe that was why she didn't like it when I could see Gloria and she couldn't. But I know my understanding of things is different than everybody else's, so I figured it would be best to just not say anything about it to avoid upsetting anybody, because it's probably all just my imagination anyway.

TWELVE

Raktjeh swore. Clumping footsteps of rough heavy combat boots across the smoothly polished dark wood floors of the temple. The obscenity of light, driving away the shadows, not the friendly wash of light from the sun that gave life to a planet, but harsh militant artificial light meant to reveal an enemy, meant to route out the hidden innocents like the blade of a knife.

“Is that Raktjeh?” spoke the harsh voice behind him softly, from an infuriatingly unseen source. “So, they allow your sort in the temple now?”

For a moment, Raktjeh went limp, just long enough to throw his captor off balance. Then in a flash, he became a whirling explosion of fists and boots. Freeing himself from the grip around his neck, he felt his bare fists impact harmlessly against the surface of body armor. But he had back his freedom, at least momentarily.

He turned to face his opponent, a tall, powerful cleancut mountain of a man, dressed in black from the top of his black hat down to the tips of his shiny combat boots. Belt, anklets and hatband were strips of sharp metal spikes. “Narthex, of course,” spat Raktjeh. “It would have to be you. I should’ve known all along.”

The heavily armed troopers were all around them now, swarming like ants. Three of them closed in on Raktjeh, but he deftly slipped out of their way, somersaulting into the next passageway, around the corner. Now he had out his electrosabre, and swung it around in a seemingly careless swath that made the troopers hesitate. Even through their thick armor, getting stung by the electrosabre would not have been pleasant.

“So where is it?” asked Narthex calmly, examining the packages that his lackeys had taken from Raktjeh.

“Where is *what*?” asked Raktjeh, slightly out of breath, sweat dripping from his brow.

“The amulet, of course,” replied Narthex, roughly pulling aside the wrappings around the beautifully carved gold statues now in his possession. The largest was a gracefully sculpted image of a robed woman, standing, long hair down to her waist, face in a carefully crafted expression of illumined contemplation.

Omicron. Goddess of life, matron saint of all goodness and creative in the world.

“Now ain’t that just dandy,” said Narthex. “Shore is a purty lady you got there.”

Inwardly, Raktjeh seethed with rage. But now was not the time. “What amulet?” he asked innocently.

Narthex looked up, with an expression curiously crossed between greed and rapture. “The Amulet of Imbalance, of course.”

Of course. Now it all made sense.

Raktjeh laughed. “You’re seeking a mythical amulet of power. Good luck.”

Narthex’s expression turned harsh. “Not mythical. It does exist, after all.”

“Right,” said Raktjeh. “And I’m the lady in the moon.”

“Don’t you dare mock me, coward,” grated Narthex.

One of the soldiers came up Narthex. “Sir, they’re all gone. The monks are not here. We’ve searched everywhere.”

“They’ll be back,” crooned Narthex lazily with a wicked smile. “We’ve got something they want. You see, it’s easy to bend a man to your will. All you have to do is hurt someone he cares about. And meanwhile, we can ask our hostage some questions, in such a manner that he’ll be more inclined to answer.”

With all attention on the soldier, Raktjeh saw his chance. Lashing out behind him with a powerful kick, he pinned the wrist of one of the soldiers against the wall, knocking the heavy disintegrator pistol from his hand.

Like lightning, Raktjeh had seized the pistol and fired off three rounds at the various torches around. The crash of breaking glass shattered eardrums. Instantly, the room plunged into darkness. Mayhem ensued. There were shouts from all around, and cries of pain and anger.

“Get those lights back on!” raged Narthex.

But it took about ten minutes, and by then the prisoner had escaped.

THIRTEEN

[Excerpt from the Diary of Art Bohemian]

Dear Diary,

You'll never believe what I have to tell you today. Of course, you never believe me anyway, since you're an inanimate object incapable of either belief nor disbelief. But what an amazing thing!

First, we woke up and had breakfast. That part was pretty believable. On the way to the kitchen I walked by the hallway full of books with titles like "Hearthrob in the castle" and "Paradise for two." Winifred had a nice saucer of milk, and then went outside to sit in the sun, all leisurely. And we had something like light crispy pancakes all dripping with sweet syrup and fruit. She didn't have any Raspberry Rush tea, but instead she told me to try some of her own special blend, and at first I found it too bitter to drink and put a bunch of sugar in it, but after a while I had a few cups and decided that maybe I could get used to it, only was different from what I knew about as familiar, kind of like green eggs and ham, except that instead of being green it was this dark greyish brown color, and instead of being eggs and ham it was tea.

So that was still pretty easy to believe, being just about the same as those kinds of things are on Earth, with people trying to get me to try some other kind of tea than Raspberry Rush and convince me that it's better, but don't worry, I'll never change my mind.

There was one kind of unbelievable thing before that, because I woke up in the middle of the night and there was pale moonlight coming in the window, but it was kind of a lot of light, so I went to the window to see the stars and the moon, and there was not one but *three* glowing orbs in the sky orbiting around Omicron, all in different parts of the sky. One of them was a full moon, and the other two were way across the sky, and more the kind that looked like the horns of a bull.

Gloria was there at the window watching with me, and there on the windowsill was a bug that looked sort of like a cricket, with the same kind of enormous springy back legs obviously meant for jumping, and friendly antennae all twitching around curiously. I let it walk on my hand, and Gloria got all freaked out because of it being a bug, which must be one of those things that goes along having neat handwriting and cooties. But I after I let it walk all over my hand and up my arm and onto the other hand for awhile, I told her it was good luck, because if you go in your house and there's a cricket in there it's a sign of good luck, so it made me happy that the cricket had thought our room was a cozy place that it

wanted to come into and explore, because it must mean there was a good energy to it.

She seemed OK with that, especially when I got to the part of it being our room together, and then I went back to bed, though I could hardly fall asleep on account of being so excited about going on a Quest. I didn't even know what a Quest was really, but it sounded like something that I wanted to be on if I could, only I hoped someone would show me how to do it right, because I must have been gone that day in school when we were supposed to learn about going on Quests. Kind of like learning about addition, except we learned about addition on a lot of days, so maybe going on a Quest was one of those things they only told about on one day, which was why it was so easy to miss. Like the day they took all the girls in another room and told them about something that was some kind of girl secret that they had sworn to secrecy never to tell. I figured that maybe the teacher handed out the sheet with the top-secret assignment and then maybe they had to tear it up eat it like the spys in the movies, so that nobody would discover it and hold the fate of the civilized world in balance or anything. I always figured it had to do with writing neatly, because it would explain why girls always have neat curvy handwriting that you can actually read, or why they have cooties.

I told Zelaia about it, I mean about the moon part, not about the cooties, and she asked why it was so unusual to have three moons, and I told her that we only have one on the Earth, and she said 'How boring,' only then she said she remembered talking to someone who was from a planet with only one moon, or even no moons at all.

After we were done eating and washing the dishes, I took a bath and got all clean in this amazingly spotless bathroom. There was some sort of robot thingie that was rolling around on the floor picking up dirt and dust and stuff, and I guess she had another robot that kept the basins and bathtub spotless, because she said not to worry about cleaning it.

I was a little afraid to take off my clothes in front of Gloria, but she rolled her eyes and said she would turn around and not look, until there were so many soap suds in the bathtub that you couldn't see anything interesting. I asked her if she ever sneaked in and watched people when they didn't know she was looking, and she said that nobody ever knew she was looking and got all pouty and sulky because I guess she was wishing that she could be part of the living world the way that I was and that people could see her, so I decided I would change the subject to something happier.

Zelaia left some clothes for me that I guess were old clothes that she wasn't wearing anymore, or maybe from a friend of hers that came to visit sometimes or something. They were similar to what she was wearing, only I guess they were the boy-version rather than the girl-version. I wasn't sure on this planet

how they told them apart, at least in terms of what kind of clothes you wear. Even on Earth it's a bit difficult to tell sometimes because the Scottish men wear kilts that look like dresses which you might think was a girl thing but you better not tell them that.

The clothes Zelaia loaned to me were a tan pants and shirt, soft and loose-fitting but elastic and strong, and they fit comfortably. There was some sort of batik pattern to them, so it wasn't a boring-old plain fabric, but had nice designs on it in a pattern that wasn't obtrusive or anything. It looked like some of it might even be letters in some obscure alphabet, but Zelaia said it was just designs, and then there were lizards and birds and things in a kind of stylized technique. She gave me a sash to go with it, that was also done up in greens and tans, similar earth-tones (or Omicron-tones, I guess).

We all went out in the back of where Zelaia lives, and it was all filled with glorious sunlight and the vivacious green jungle exuberance of green trees and leaves growing and soaking up the sunlight. There were birds singing and insects buzzing around, the smell of farming, of freshly dug earth. Or Omicron, I guess you would call it, since we weren't really on the Earth but it smelled like the Earth about as close as it could. I was starting to think this wasn't such a bad vacation after all, and plus it was a great deal on account of I didn't have to pay for the return ticket.

"Well then," Zelaia said "Are you ready to go?"

"Go where?"

"The temple of Omicron. To set out on your Quest."

"I know about the Quest, even though I don't really know what one is, but which way do we go? Is it to the left or to the right when I walk out the front door? Do you have a map?"

She came up all close, so I could see every detail of the turquoise beads and amber and feathers and leather braided into her hair. "Map? You don't take a map when you're going on a Quest. You have to rely on your sense of adventure and intuition. It's a test of your true mettle, strength and spirit."

"What if I don't really know what all those things are? I know Gloria said something about testing our metal, but now I don't have an iPod, or even if you can download any tunes in this galaxy even if you have an iPod, because they might not have a heavy metal channel. And anyhow, I can't really tell the difference between metal and goth, because they both seem to wear those fishnets and fancy silver crosses, but I can tell the difference between Reggae and Ska because one's quicker than the other, unless it's some sort of fusion that's better described as being somewhere between the two extremes."

She laughed. "Don't worry. I'm sure everything will be alright, even though I haven't the faintest notion what on Omicron you're talking about."

“That’s because we’re on Omicron,” I explained. “On Earth, it would make complete sense.”

“I see,” replied Zelaia. Then she pulled out from the pocket of her handwoven batik gown this thing that looked like a channel changer. She pushed a few buttons, and there was a whirring sound and what do you know but this gigantic hatch starts to open up in what looked like the back lawn, or more like a meadow than a lawn because it wasn’t all neat and trim or anything, but more like a wild field with flowers.

So this huge dark gaping hole starts to open up in the earth, with the two sides of the meadow sliding apart kind of like a garage door, and meanwhile the sleek metallic curves of a rounded sculpture thingie rise up from underneath. Finally there is a big gigantic kind of “click,” like some huge gear locking into place, and there in front of us is this polished metal sculpture thing, with a row of steps leading up to it. It was just about then that I started thinking maybe that was what a Quest was all about, that I was going to learn all about sculpture, and by carefully studying the craftsmanship on the statue in front of us I would meticulously hone my craft, and then I would set out on my own to hew a raw chunk of marble rock from the mountainside and laboriously carry it to my workshop with the help of my trusty assistants, on wood rollers, and then carefully begin chiseling away in harmony both with a classic sensibility to form and composition, and with the grain and texture of the marble, and in the end I would have perfected after many years of laborious labor my skill as an artist, and then I would no longer be simply “Art” Bohemian, but Art the sculptor, thus finally resolving this dilemma (or multi-lemma) of what it was I would choose for a career among the possibilities available to the bohemian artist.

But as it turned out, Zelaia clicked on another button, and a little door opened up in the side of the sculpture thingie, right at the end of the flight of stairs, and she walked on over and beckoned me to follow. So I did, and when we got there it turned out to be there was this big old room inside it with chairs and cushions, and in front of some of the chairs were big old consoles full of dials and knobs and levers and gauges and things, so me and Gloria and Winifred all filed along up the stairs and sat down inside the room, because I suppose if we were going to have a lecture on sculpture it would be a little more comfortable sitting in a a chair inside a little room than in a meadow, though I wouldn’t have minded lying out in the meadow looking up at the clouds, but I remembered that if I wanted to be a bohemian artist I would have to stick with my goals and learn my craft like anyone else, but not like one of those artists that never learns any craft other than schmoozing fine fancy art dealers and making lots of money turning out weird pieces of art that look like they took two minutes a piece to make and they fool really stupid people with lots of money into prattling on for hours about “significance” and then writing checks for millions of

dollars.

Zelaia watched Winifred regally strutting up the stairs and sitting down to join us. “I have never seen a cat that likes to travel the way this one does. It’s more like a dog than a cat.” I think maybe Winifred was a bit offended by such a crass comparison, but fortunately she’s very tactful and didn’t let on that she might have been offended.

“Buckle up,” said Zelaia, and I found straps on the chair for my belt and shoulders. They didn’t have any buckles that I could see, but when I touched the ends together they just sort of merged and automatically adjusted to the right tightness. There was a little dark red dot in the middle, and I found that when I pressed it, the straps retracted automatically, so I had to put them back on all over again.

There was even a little animal strap for Winifred, which Zelaia put on her, but she didn’t like it very much. Gloria shared my chair with me, sitting or floating sort of beside me on my lap. I guess she didn’t need a strap, or anyhow if she had one it wouldn’t do any good on account of she could go right through it, so it wouldn’t really strap her in or anything.

Then Zelaia sat at one of the consoles with all the buttons and knobs and dials on it, and said, “Sit tight,” and pressed a lever and the door closed, blocking out the sunshine and birdcalls and fresh air. But it was light inside the sculpture room, and in front of us was a large viewscreen that flickered to life, and showed a picture of the back yard like it might have looked on a TV camera, only much more realistic. Then there were screens all around us that flickered to life, until we were looking at the back yard outside all around, only on these screens that were around us. Only the difference between them and a TV was that you could see things in three dimensions, so it was more like looking through a window than at a flat TV screen.

Then Zelaia touched a few more buttons and levers, and there were some more whirring and buzzing and whooshing noises, plus a whole bunch of other noise that I can’t really spell, and then Zelaia looked around at me and said, “I don’t know how the physics of this will work, but I hope Dulcinea doesn’t mind a bit of space travel.”

Gloria looked at me, eyes all big and blue, in her long white gown.

It was right about then that I figured out that maybe this room we were in was some kind of spaceship, because maybe they didn’t have good enough sculpture classes on this planet, so we would have to go to another planet for it. “Just hold on to me,” I told her. “Just hang on tight so you don’t get lost,” because it made me scared and lonely to think of Gloria being lost in the middle of space somewhere, not knowing how to get home.

So she wrapped her arms all around me (though of course I couldn't feel it, or maybe I felt something but it wasn't like the touch of another human being), and I said "OK, we're ready."

So Diary, I just thought I'd mention that was when the part you won't believe started to happen.

We could see on the screens all around us that we had begun to slowly rise, to the level of the rooftop, where I could see every strand of grass in the thatched roof, up to the tree tops, where I could see all the leaves and a couple of sort of surprised looking birds perched way up on top singing away, and then the only thing around us was blue sky. There was a little screen in front of me that showed the view looking down, so I could see the house receding, starting out as a full-sized house, then the size of a playhouse we had when I was a kid, then the size of a dollhouse, then the size of a box of matches. And meanwhile all around it the trees and the roadway and other houses came into view, and a little village square nearby, and the river and waterfall and the mill. The two halves of Zelaia's meadow that had separated came back together again, so it once more looked like just an ordinary meadow, on which it would be relaxing to lie on ones back drinking Raspberry Rush Tea and finding shapes in the clouds.

Then they all shrunk until they were tiny little pinpoints on the carpet of green, then shining deep blue water came into view, and then for awhile we went through some clouds, and all we could see was whiteness all around, until we got above them and could look down on the sculptures in cream and satin all around.

Then peeking out from the edges of the land were the sparkling deep blue of the ocean again, and now we could see the shadow of the dark side of Omicron, the places where it was very early morning and the newspaper delivery people and the milk trucks were all scurrying around and people were drinking their morning coffee and burning toast or spreading marmalade. Only I didn't know if they had coffee or marmalade or milkmen on Omicron, but I would imagine they had something similar, unless they were all lactose-intolerant.

"So just out of curiosity," I said, "Are we going to some particular place? Because I know you said you didn't need a map, but given that we are in a spaceship I hope you've got a map anyway, so we don't get lost. And so I guess if I want to find a Quest, I don't need a map, but I need a spaceship?"

She gave me this kind of look that told me I was understanding things differently again, and said: "We're going to the temple of Omicron."

"But isn't the planet we were on called Omicron? Is the temple of Omicron on the planet of Omicron?"

"Well, it's a long story. You see, the disadvantage of living in a world of relative peace and

prosperity, where a single government can flourish for thousands of years, is that our culture has thousands of years of bureaucracy built up around it. Around 300 years ago, it turned out that there was a clause in a subpassage of a subarticle of a sub-sub-paragraph that stated that at no time could the planet of Omicron be the home of the temple of Omicron. Something to do with separation of powers.

“And since they didn’t want to move the temple, because it consists of several thousand acres of ornate, multistoried construction carved into a hillside, in stone, gold and marble, integrated with various features of the landscape including numerous stands of trees and several waterfalls, it was determined that the only solution was to rename another planet provisionally as Omicron, by filling out a 3462 page form located in the back filing drawer of the Galactic Registrar’s office, and then hope for the best. Unfortunately, one of the more inexperienced clerks who was dozing off after a heavy lunch checked one of the boxes incorrectly somewhere around the 1700th page of the form, and as a result the Galactic Registrar renamed all of the planets in the inner cluster of the Federation quadrant, to Omicron. Being as there are several thousand planets that were affected, it was something like being in the Australian Philosopher’s guild with seven guys named Bruce, only times a thousand.”

“So does that mean you’re all philosophers now?”

“No, but the monks said that it was a profound symbol of the ubiquity of the infinite wisdom and love of the spirit of Omicron, of which all being and life is an emanation. But having everything named the same does make it difficult to give directions, especially to anyone who’s new to the area.”

“So why didn’t they just change it back?”

“Well, it turned out that would have required filling a 5284 page form, with notarized approval of the Council of Planet-Renaming, but it turned out that the Council had disintegrated centuries ago on account of disinterest, and then the only clerk who was fully familiar with all of the details of the 5284 page form reached retirement age and vanished to some uncharted tropical planet, and the whole idea of un-renaming fell into a state of chaos. There was an attempt to dial the number of another clerk who at one time had heard of the details of the form, but the phone number itself consumed over 200 pages and so it took several days to dial it, and then it turned out to be disconnected. There was some discussion regarding the possibility of perhaps several of the digits on the 173rd page having misdialed, but in any event the project shortly thereafter lost its funding and the funding committee had just departed for a seven-year recess, so eventually the idea was just dropped.”

“Wow,” I said. “It’s amazing to hear about such an advanced civilization. When I get back to the Earth, I’ll be sure to spread the story as in inspiration that the human race might aspire to such heights, if

only we can build a world of sufficient peace and prosperity.”

“Right,” she replied. “It’s truly something to strive for.”

By now, Omicron was a globe hanging in space in front of us, against a field of inky black void and twinkling stars. Off to one side to the left behind us was the sun, only because it was coming through a viewscreen instead of directly through a window, you could look right at it without it hurting your eyes. The three moons were in various places on all sides.

“So where are we going, again?” I asked.

Zelaia grinned mischievously. “The planet of Omicron, of course.”

“Oh,” I said. I guess it was kind of a silly question, to ask what planet you were going to, if they all have the same name, so I decided to just keep quiet and enjoy the ride. Winifred seemed contented, having found a way to lie down and take a nap even while being strapped in, and Gloria seemed to be doing just fine, with her arms wrapped around me, head all tucked in against my chest.

After a while, the sun and the moon shrunk until they were only tiny stars just like the rest of them, and the only thing around us on all sides were the gaunt empty abyss of dark void, and the shimmering pinpoint fires of distant suns on all sides.

FOURTEEN

Our landing on the temple planet a few hours later was like the takeoff I just described, only in reverse. First, one of the tiny pinpoints of light in front of us grew bigger, and then we went past one of the outer planets, though it was so far away that I wouldn't have noticed unless Zelaia had pointed it out.

I guess there was some sort of artificial gravity, because we still seemed to have up and down the way it was before, only I felt a little bit lighter. By then Zelaia said it was OK to undo the straps in our chairs until the landing, and so I got up and was looking around, and Gloria was floating around too, and Winifred was searching for bugs to chase, only he didn't find any, and had to settle instead on harassing the little cleaning bot that skittered around sweeping up dirt and dust. Zelaia was reading a literary work entitled *Her Flaming Secret Indiscretion by the Shore*.

I was wearing the clothes that Zelaia had loaned to me, because mine were all sweaty from being afraid of the tentacle swamp thing, and also muddy from the rain. But I decided that maybe they had better ideas about fashion than on earth here, because the were so much more comfortable than what I usually wore.

I thought about how many astronomers would love to have a sculpture thingie like the one we were inside in their back yard with a hatch and everything like an automatic garage door opener, because then rather than looking at the next star all faintly with a big old telescope, you could just get in your sculpture thingie and go there to see it up close. It was kind of freedom like what Dorothy was singing about when she sang "Over the rainbow." It got me to thinking that there was someone else like me who had some return-ticket issues, and so maybe we could find ruby slippers and a wizard, but then I decided it was ridiculous because that was only a movie and things like that don't happen in real life.

The amazing thing about landing on the temple planet of Omicron was the temple itself. Not that it wasn't already pretty dazzling to watch this tiny green and blue speck get bigger and bigger and turn out to be another circular beautiful ocean and cloud covered planet just like ours, but as we got closer we could see the temple from way high above. It was designed in a particular shape, one that I learned was the sign of Omicron. Zelaia drew it out for me all officially, so I could see how the emblem corresponded with the shape of the architecture as we approached. There were two semi-triangular shapes, but flat on top, one above the other, with one sort of inside, and an intersecting triumvirate of curving circular designs.

You could tell even from far away how huge the thing must be, from the way it looked in relation

to the mountains and lakes around it. In a way it was more of a city than a temple, a city with all sorts of temples inside of it, but the central temple at the center was pretty gigantic also.

As we were getting closer, Zelaia made us all strap in again, all except for Winifred who refused to, so Zelaia lifted him by the scruff of the neck and put him in this forcefield box thing that people used for taking animals with them when they travel from planet to planet. Winifred didn't like it very much, and was making all kinds of noise, but after a while she settled down some.

While we were sitting there and Zelaia was steering with knobs and levers and stuff, a box of red flashing letters came up on the screen in front of us, accompanied by the raucous buzzing of an alarm. "Approaching ship," it said.

"For the love of Frupzaq," swore Zelaia, "Of *all* the audacity."

She popped open a compartment over in the corner of the instrument panel and played with the controls inside. Soon another set of flashing letters, blue this time, joined the first. "Cloaking," it said.

Her long white hair and braided beads hung down beside her hands as she frowned angrily. Our course changed abruptly, and we a shadowy grey shape filled the screen as we grazed the other ship.

A harsh, clipped male voice came over the intercom. "By the authority of the batallions of Narthex, we wish to inform you that cloaked flight in the vicinity of the Omicron Temple is now strictly forbidden. Any ships found in violation —"

Abruptly Zelaia punched a button on the console to shut off the speaker. "Try and intimidate me, will you? Imbecile!"

Our course changed abruptly again, earth and sky tilted at all sorts of odd angles and we veered in one direction then another, brushing so close to the tops of a stand of trees on the plateau of a high cliff that I could swear I saw leaves swishing from the air currents as we passed by.

The shadowy black shape was behind us now, like a fat predatory bird hovering in midair, and from it I could see smaller dark shapes emerge from it, tearing off in the direction where our ship had been only moments before. Soon on the ground, I saw bursts of flame and explosions where the smaller dark shapes had made contact.

Gloria was next to me again, and she had on her face the same expression as when I almost got eaten by the tentacly swamp thing. She knew that she was dead already, so she couldn't die. Somehow I was sure everything would be alright, as scary as it was.

For quite a while we skimmed treetops and then over the bright reflective surface of a beautiful clear blue lake. Even as quickly as we were passing over, it was as if I could see every tiny pure white grain

of sand on the bottom of the lake, so clear was the water.

The ugly fat dark warbird with missiles was drifting away in some other direction, I guess either searching for us, or having given up to pursue some other activity.

Zelaia was watching it too, but with one eye on the controls.

“Is it always like that when you go to the Omicron temple, with a big old nasty spaceship firing missiles at you?”

“No, sometimes it’s worse,” said Zelaia distracted. “When it gets insanely crowded and then I have to parallel-park.”

I thought about it a little bit. “That doesn’t sound worse to me, only like maybe a bunch of tourists or spiritual seekers.”

“That’s because you’ve never watched me try to parallel park,” she said. “Brace yourselves, here we go.”

We plunged below the level of the treetops now, flying between forest canopy above and the leaf-covered rocks dirt below, between tree trunks flying by on both sides. Gradually we slowed down and emerged in a clearing where we abruptly came to a halt, hovering over what looked like a dirt field sectioned off with lines and symbols.

“Plenty of parking,” she said. “though I can’t say that’s a good sign, given the other evidence.”

“I was wondering,” I said, “if we really needed to find my Quest today, or if maybe it wouldn’t be a better idea to wait a few days or something, and maybe take today more slowly, like go back to Omicron, by which I mean the Omicron we came from, not this Omicron, and then we could lie out in the meadow looking up at the clouds and finding different shapes in them, and drinking Raspberry Rush tea. Or even that other kind of tea. I think it’s a pretty big concession on my part, but I would even be willing to drink some other kind of tea, if only we could just go back and lie in the meadow and look up at the clouds.”

“Too late,” said Zelaia.

“Land somewhere else,” said Gloria. “They’ll see us if we land here.”

I exchanged glances with her, then relayed the message to Zelaia. “Gloria says don’t land here, or they’ll see us.”

“Good point,” whispered Zelaia. “she’s pretty clever, that imaginary friend of yours.”

I didn’t think that was a very grateful thing to say, but Zelaia seemed to have her own ideas about things right now. It was a little bit scary. In fact, it was a really big bit scary, especially remembering that I had just only met Zelaia only less than a day or so ago, and had no idea if she was reliable or sane.

We travelled a ways further through the trees, then set down beside a stone archway temple that looked something like a cross between an old ornate church from long ago and a Thai pagoda with gold leaf and patterns reaching up like flames from the edges of the rooftops.

There was a barely perceptible jolt as we set down, and then the belts released themselves and the door opened.

“You’re going out there?” I demanded frantically.

“Why not?” asked Zelaia.

“They fired torpedoes at us. They were trying to kill us.”

Zelaia blew it off. “Don’t be silly. Any halfway decent shielding system would have shrugged those things off. They weren’t trying to kill us, just to scare us away.”

“So would it be so bad to be a little more cooperative when big old meanies with nasty torpedoes want us to go away? Wouldn’t it be a better idea to just leave?”

Zelaia’s face wore an expression of determination that told me she wasn’t about to give in. “There’s something they don’t want us to see, and I intend to find out what it is.”

“Don’t you think. . .” I began again, but Gloria silenced me, holding up her hand.

“I’ll keep you safe,” she whispered in my ear.

Zelaia was already halfway down the stairs, with Winifred tagging after her, like a miniature panther excited with the hunt.

I dashed out after her too, emerging from the artificial soft light and warmth into the harsh bitterness of a cold wind tearing over the cliff. Something happened in the clothes I was wearing, as though they became more dense in response to the cold, and I no longer felt the chill cutting through to my bones, but instead was feeling warm and comfortable again.

We walked along the cliffside up a steep slope. To our left was a sheer drop, and to the right a canyon choked with brush and shrubbery. We got to the end of the path, and Zelaia cautiously crept up to the edge on hands and knees, carefully peering over. Below us lay a large, dark wood building, an elegant architecture that succeeded in being simultaneously both simple and ornate. Over the door, standing out in gold against the dark wood backdrop, was the symbol of Omicron that Zelaia had taught me to recognize.

Zelaia had binoculars out, and was intensely scrutinizing the surroundings. “What in Frupzaq’s name do they think they’re doing?” she murmured.

“Who?” I asked, straining to peer over the edge. She pulled me down.

“Narthex. He’s got troops all around the central temple.”

“Who’s Narthex?” I asked.

She regarded me curiously. “Let me put it this way,” she said. “Ten thousand gallons of Raspberry Rush tea would not be enough to ward off the twisted black nasties filling his tiny bent little mind.”

“Oh,” I replied. I think for the first time, I understood something she said right away.

“How about, ten thousand and one?” I suggested.

“Right.” She stashed the binoculars back in the pouch she kept them in from a strap around her neck, and crawled back on hands and knees to where we could stand and be out of site from the temple. I followed her too, crawling all the way. Winifred was busy sniffing the bushes nearby.

“So what next?” I said. “Can we go home now?”

“Next,” she said, with a glint of determination in her eye, “we go down there and see what they’re trying to hide.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked. “I’ll be glad to just stay behind and guard the sculpture thingie.”

“You do that, if you like. You’ll miss all the fun, though.”

As we walked past a brush-choked canyon on the side of the path away from the cliff, Gloria tugged at me. “Someone down there wants to talk to you.”

I stopped, and Zelaia paused to wait for me. “What is it now? You want to go back to the edge of the cliff? Maybe wave your arms for someone to rescue you?”

I pointed. I could see the start of the trail. “Gloria says there’s someone down there.”

To my surprise, Zelaia reached into her gown and drew out her pendulum, the one on the gleaming silver chain with the fancy gem as the counter-weight. She closed her eyes and let the pendulum swing. The oscillations died down until they were almost imperceptible, then Zelaia opened her eyes again and calmly observed the motion.

Silently, she nodded in assent, and started down the trail I had noticed. Winifred crossed the trail in front of us. The trail wound down and down into the canyon, and it was slow going on account of the thick brush on all sides, but there was definitely a trail there that we could follow.

Finally, we got to a place where we had to duck under the curved archway of a tree trunk growing over the path, and then up a small hillside into a clearing beside a small stream.

He was sitting on the ground with his back against a boulder, all hunched over, snoring softly. His clothes were all dark grey, and they were torn and dirty. He wore heavy black boots and a bandana wrapped around his head. He had a mustache, and the rest of his olive-skinned face sported the heavy black growth

that spoke of maybe a day or two of not shaving.

Gloria was floating over with gentle footsteps, and lightly touched his forehead, and when she did he leapt up to standing, and out of nowhere he had produced this sword-looking thingie that made an electrical kind of buzzing sound.

He regarded us warily, eyes bloodshot and with dark circles from the lack of sleep. “Who are you people?” he asked carefully. “and what do you want?”

We must have looked like quite the shaman pair, Zelaia and me in our light-tan batik patterned fabric, especially Zelaia with all of her potions and poultices and gems and things carried in pouches that were strapped all around her.

She regarded the stranger with a sniff of unconcealed disdain. It was apparent from his body odor that he had not bathed recently, and his scarred, haggard and weary face told of a rough life.

Seeing Zelaia’s response, he lowered his weapon, and turned off the irritating buzzing sound. “I beg your pardon, my lady. I wish that I could introduce myself to you in a more presentable state, but of late the unexpected presence of some unpleasant visitors has left me somewhat without my accustomed resources. My name is Raktjeh. I am a guardian of the temple of Omicron.” The gem in his earlobe gleamed in the dappled sunlight.

“I’m Art Bohemian,” I said, because I knew Zelaia wasn’t in a mood to be polite. “And this is Zelaia and my cat Winifred.” Winifred had gone right up to the stranger and was sniffing his boots, but then ran away when Raktjeh made to bend over and pet her.

“And who else?” asked Raktjeh. “You have another friend with you, I see,” he said looking directly at Gloria.

“My name is Gloria,” she said.

“Gloria,” repeated Raktjeh.

That shook up Zelaia something bad, though she didn’t want to show it, because she couldn’t see Gloria, but she knew that Raktjeh couldn’t have known her name unless he had heard her.

“Do you always see ghosts?” asked Gloria.

Raktjeh laughed. “Too often. Occasionally, they even forgive me for making them what they are.”

I started to think about what the nice man with the earring was saying, and after a minute or so I was trying to think of a polite way that you could make someone into a ghost, but the only ways I could think of were not so much what one might call polite.

From the way Zelaia was looking at him, I figure she was thinking pretty much the same thing.

Then she caught sight of a thing he had dangling from a chain around his neck, a small jewel in a humble setting, sort of an amethyst color. She must have been pretty curious about it, because I could see her sort of brace herself to walk over there, but she went up real close to him to look at it.

I thought he might shy away or put up his sword again, but instead he let her just come over, and even take it up gently in her hands to look at.

“Is this a gem of remembrance?”

“Why, yes, milady. I believe it is.”

“And who did you kill to get this?”

I thought he might be offended, given how forward she was being, but instead he just politely answered. “Nobody I had to kill to get that one. The monks offered it to me for protection, in exchange for my services. That and a place to stay and hot meals.”

I could tell she was trying to decide whether to believe him or not, though I couldn’t see why not, since it seemed like he would have been just as proud to say he *had* killed someone to get it as not.

Slowly, she set it back against his chest, and let go of the chain. The two of them were awfully close together, being as how she so obviously didn’t like him very much.

“You know that there are only three of these?” Now she didn’t take her eyes off of his, and he met her gaze calmly.

“That’s what I heard, ma’am.”

“Did they teach you how to use it, or just give it to you to for safekeeping?”

“Well, ma’am,” he said kind of laughing, “I wasn’t privy to no secrets of the monks or nothin’, particularly seeing as they don’t never say nothin’, on account of their vow of silence. But there was one guy who did talk, he did their cooking for ‘em, and he’d been with ‘em a long time, and he tol’ me holding the gem was some sort of fate or destiny or something, like it was a journey jes’ all by itself, and to guard it with my life, but not to be surprise if it save my life one day, on account of some special features it had in it which he did not disclose.”

Zelaia thought about that for some time, then she said in a musing sort of way: “They must have thought you were something special, to let you hang on to it.”

“Time to leave,” said Gloria.

“The girl is right,” said Raktjeh.

Zelaia looked confused, but didn’t say anything.

Raktjeh looked at her, with a hint of amusement. “You cain’t hear her, ken you?”

That made Zelaia all flustered. “No!” she said, finally, like she wanted him to leave her alone.

“Some people have no idea what’s real and what isn’t,” said Gloria.

There was a rustling in the shrubbery from the direction of the path we had come down.

“You come here in a ship, or did you all just walk by yerself?”

“A ship,” I said, because I knew he must have meant the sculpture thingie.

“Which way is it? Over there? That must be about the only flat spot around here to land on.” The way he was pointing looked about the right direction.

Zelaia nodded.

He looked around on both sides, then said: “Follow me,” and took off into what looked like solid thorny bushes that all tore into our clothes and skin, but right beyond was a pretty clear trail, and he seemed familiar with it.

I was trying to remember if Zelaia had closed the door when we left or not. Maybe it was the kind that just closed itself. It seemed like it might be a good time to think about getting back to that meadow where we could lie on our backs and stare up lazily at the clouds. And ordinarily, I hold to some pretty strong objections at that notion of being in a hurry, on account of I figure God made time the way it was for a reason, and the feeling like there wasn’t enough of it somehow came from not seeing clearly, like somehow if I was being impatient I was criticizing God’s plan for everything, and it seemed more likely to me that maybe it was my plan that was more likely to have some flaws in it than the plan of all-knowing perfection.

But now and then I figure there’s an opportunity to let there be an exception to any line of reasoning one might come up with, and it looked like this might be one of these moments when I could be swayed in the direction of making an exception to my rule about not being in a hurry.

Up ahead, Zelaia was whispering angrily to Raktjeh: “I can’t take you with me!”

He stopped and said quietly, “Now ma’am, I ain’t gonna beg. But you might want to consider that, being as I’m from around this neighborhood, I might be a bit more familiar with a good way to get out of here, in a way such as you might find useful.”

He turned and kept walking, and we were all still following him. “But, but. . .” she was exasperated. “You’ve *killed* people. Taken someone’s life away, against their will. I’ve never had a killer on board my ship!”

He turned back and flashed a grin. “Leave me here, you’ll force me to waste one or two of ‘em right before your eyes. Take me with you, and you’ll be savin’ lives, which would seem like the better route

for you, since it seems like that's how you're inclined."

She didn't have any time to reply, because he whirled right around and kept on walking, which made sense given that those rustlings in the brush behind us were getting closer and closer. I don't know how he did it, but he found a way through what looked like impassible brush. We could hear from the rustling and shouts behind us, there must have been at least four or five of them following us, and they didn't seem to be enjoying their sojourn in such intimate communion with the more pointed features of the natural habitat. Maybe it was only the sharp prickly side of nature that was giving them grief, but they seemed to be cursing and condemning the whole entirety of it.

We broke through into the clearing where the ship was, and sure enough the door was still sitting there wide open.

Raktjeh eyed Zelaia curiously.

"Go!" she pushed him ahead decisively. "I'll be there in a minute!"

I followed, and so did Gloria and Winifred, and we all clambered back up the stairs into the gleaming silver sculpture thingie. I guess the meanie old guys we were running away from hadn't found it, because there weren't any of them around.

Looking back, on the viewport screen, which was just like looking out a window, I could see Zelaia throwing something back in the direction we had come from. She hurled it a long way. She had a pretty good throwing arm, for a girl. In fact, I think she was a better aim than I was, which made me think twice about saying bad things about the way girls throw, only I was wondering if her handwriting was all neat and curvy when she wrote in cursive.

Moments later, there was a blinding flash from where the thing she threw must have landed, and I guess it must have been pretty bright because I could hear them all shouting how they couldn't see. By then, Zelaia climbing on board, and the door was closing and she was all punching buttons and turning dials as fast as she could, and the systems of the ship were whirring and spinning up.

"That ought to slow them down for a minute," she said.

The scruffy guy we had picked up leaned over to me and confided loudly behind the back of his hand: "The lady's got some style."

And he really did need a bath, but I tried to be polite about it, even though I must have made a bit of a face.

Winifred got all settled down in her little force-field cage, and we lifted off all neatly and nicely.

Well, almost.

From the screen that showed what was going on below us, I could see one of the meanie guys break into the clearing, dressed in heavy black armor. He pointed some kind of thing that looked like a weapon up at us. It was all happening as if in slow motion. I was wondering if we were all going to die, except Gloria of course since she had already died.

There was a blaze of light from the pistol or whatever he was holding up, pointing at us, and next you knew it the ship all jolted and jostled, and sparks were flying out of one of the console panels, but we kept on rising upward.

“Love of Frupzaq,” cursed Zelaia, and the blue flashing words “cloaking. . .” were in their little box on the screen.

A harsh grating voice came through on the loudspeakers, maybe the same one we had heard before, or maybe all of the people who used loudspeakers on this planet were required to take lessons in “harsh grating voice” technique.

“By the authority of Narthex, we order you to stand down now. If you release the fugitive into our custody, you will be permitted to live. . .”

“I thought I had turned that stupid thing off,” she snarled, angrily punching a button. Then she turned and glared at Raktjeh. “One point for you, scruffykins. Any enemy of Narthex is likely to be a friend of mine.”

Looking up, I could see an ugly dark hunched-over insectoid bulk of a ship hovering above us like an angry wasp like it had before, except now there were four or five more just like it hovering all around us. Maybe less a wasp than a flea or a tick.

“Now what?” asked Raktjeh.

Gloria had her arms wrapped around me, looking sadly up at the threat from above. I wished I could feel it when she did that, and squeeze her to me like a real live human, but I couldn’t.

Zelaia shrugged. “Now, we do the exact opposite of what they expect.” By now, the blue “Cloaking. . .” had turned into “Cloaked.”

She pulled back on one of the levers in front of her, and we took off even faster up into the air, right towards the ugly bug-ships. The horizon skewed and spun as she dodged between them, but in a flash we were above them looking down. None too soon, either, because right then they all started raining down torpedoes like they had before, dropping them like a deadly torrent of a downpour, and we could see them exploding, some in the air, and others when they hit the ground.

But it didn’t seem to occur to the meanie guys in the bug-ships that we had already gotten above

the island ☹

them, and with a flourish Zelaia caressed the controls, taking us way high above, through the clouds into the immense blue-green sky.

FIFTEEN

Once it became apparent that nobody was in pursuit, we were able to slow down and assess our situation. Raktjeh turned out to know some things about fixing sculpture thingies, so he poked around and took off one of the panels. Inside was all blackened and burned, twisted tangles of charred wires and metal and he said that the thermodurator induction correction circuitry was shot, so we weren't about to go interstellar any time soon.

“But if you take a hop to the next planet out, I ken get you to a place where you can get it replaced all discreet-like.”

“Discreet, eh?”

“Entirely.”

Zelaia looked at him curiously. “And what sort of clientele, shall we call them, do such discreet repair facilities attract?”

Raktjeh shrugged. “Smugglers, pirates, theives, nothing too irregular.”

“Oh good. So now that you've turned me into a fugitive, you figured you'd upgrade my social circle as well?”

I was wondering what type of person Raktjeh *would* refer to as regular.

“I reckon you got some better idea?”

Zelaia gave a wry smile. “It's OK. I'm counting on you to protect us.”

That set him back a little, being as he couldn't be sure whether she was kidding or not. Then he shrugged and leaned back in the chair and made as if to doze off some.

“There's a bed you can use in the downstairs compartment,” said Zelaia. “I know you must be exhausted. I'll wake you up when we approach.”

That caught him totally off guard, as he didn't seem to be expecting her to accept to him at all, let alone offer any sort of hospitality. So he stood up while she threw a switch to opened the hatch to downstairs. They went off down there and I guess she showed him all around and everything, and then she came back up and started reading her paperback again.

After a minute or two she tossed it aside and pulled out a keyboard and a mouse and was hunched over what looked like a computer screen. I saw what looked like news headlines flashing and scrolling, but I couldn't read them from where I was sitting.

I went up to see what was going on.

“One thing I was wondering,” I said, “is you said that it was a time of peace and prosperity of several thousands of years, but that looked like an awful lot of torpedoes that they were exploding back there, so does that mean that the peace and prosperity is all gone?”

She grumbled something I didn’t understand, then said “No, sir knight. The ruling force of our society is remains as it has been these thousands of years. The sole uniting force that binds together all things in an irrefutably systematic orderly fashion.”

“What do you mean? Love and light? Truth? A phenomenal devotion to social justice?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“What then?” I was eager to hear this deep and profound secret to peaceful prosperity which our world is so sorely lacking, so that I could return to our civilization and reveal this vital secret. So then I could win tremendous fame and fortune as the harbinger of a new golden age of enlightenment.

She turned to me with the eyes of wisdom. “You’re sure you’re ready for this?”

“Why, of course,” I said.

“Bureaucracy.”

“What?”

“Paperwork. Red tape. Petty rules. Yes indeed, grasshopper, that is the secret.”

Somehow I felt I would not be so welcome as a harbinger if this was the secret I was harbinging.

“Are you positive?”

“Absolutely,” she said.

OK, so maybe this harbinging idea wasn’t such a good one after all. I would just have to go back to being a bohemian artist, especially once I figured out what sort of art I was going to be doing.

I pondered these, and other thoughts, while I watched Gloria gliding slowly around the room, curiously examining all of the panels of lights and knobs. I guess Zelaia didn’t feel any need to tell her not to touch anything, which was partly because she didn’t know what Gloria was doing. But it made me a little nervous because I know I’ve heard of ghosts making things move around before, shaking tables and making stuff float in the air in seances and so on, and it wouldn’t be so good if she accidentally hit some button and we wound up getting lost in the stars somewhere, even though we were already lost in the stars, in the sense that we couldn’t get back to our home on the Earth.

“So why then. . .” I said.

“Yes?”

“If bureaucracy is the ruling force of peace and order, then how come it didn’t stop Narthex from dropping all the bombs?” I imagined a gigantic wall of paperwork, big as the great wall of china, rising up like a wave from the ocean and sweeping clean the sky from Narthex’s giant bug-ships.

“You see,” said Zelaia, raising her eyebrows, “Narthex recruited one of the most formidable, most powerful and clever bureaucrats in the galaxy, a man who can fill out even the most complex, convoluted, confusing form in the wink of an eye. Who can memorize a whole department’s filing procedures in a few milliseconds. In short, the highest and best, whom none can defeat in the darkest and most arcane secrets of governmental and corporate paperwork.”

“And then what?” I said.

She was reading from the news story on the screen in front of her. “Then he filled out a relatively simple form, only 200 pages or so, which declared a planetary holiday for all the security force of the temple planet of Omicron. Then, once they had departed on their vacation, he invaded with a small batallion equipped with a small cache of illegal weapons. Meanwhile the peacekeeping force of security guards were on holiday, drinking multicolored brain-melting beverages on the tropical oceanside planet of . . .”

“Omicron?” I guessed.

“How did you guess?” she said, “The planet of Omicron in the starsystem of Lakilahimahilulumumukai, where all of the land mass is conveniently close to good surfing beaches, and ninety percent of the acreage is beachfront property.”

“So what you need to find is someone who’s a skilled bureaucrat,” I said. “And a Quest.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said “the system has already leapt to the defensive call, and several battalions of highly trained, pencil-sharpened, and paperwork-ready bureaucrats have been dispatched to the scene. Several hundreds of millions of pages of paperwork have already been filed, and several small planets have been completely deforested in the valiant effort to defeat Narthex. There have already been several casualties, from paper cuts and accidental impalings on the extra-sharp pencils.

“That sounds very exciting,” I said. “And also, it explains why I like to use a mechanical pencil, because they always have a good point, but they’re not sharp like a regular wood pencil is when it comes fresh out of the sharpener perfectly honed for staking vampires, softly dusted with a gentle coat of wood and graphite powder. That’s one disadvantage of the mechanical pencils, though, you get to miss out on that little bit of sensory pleasure. Just, click click, and that’s the end of it.”

“So what I want to know,” she said, “is what in Frupzaq’s name was Narthex hoping to accomplish

by taking over the temple planet? And wreaking terrible devastation, as we saw.”

“Maybe he was feeling underappreciated?” I offered. “Because sometimes when people get to feeling like nobody cares about them, the little light we all carry around in our hearts gets kind of covered over, and they get an attack of the meanies, when all they need is just a little bit of appreciation and knowing that they have a valuable place as a unique being in the universe, and then the sun comes out again to chase those dark old meanies away.”

From the way she smiled at what I said, I began to get the feeling maybe she didn’t believe me. “I think the light has gone out for Narthex a bit beyond what could be rescued by a little bit of appreciation.”

I thought about it. “Well, maybe that’s a possibility. But you never know how much a little bit of sympathy might accomplish until you try it.”

She chortled. “Well, you’re welcome to try, if you can get close enough to express sympathy and appreciation. Not to mention that you’d also want to figure out something you might be expressing appreciation *for*, which might be rather a challenge.”

“So instead, you think we should try bureaucracy?”

She mused on this for a while. “Doesn’t make sense, though. Eventually, it will catch up with him. Narthex must have something else in mind, or he wouldn’t have taken such a huge risk.”

SIXTEEN

Raktjeh awoke in the darkness. Time and the events of the past days were all blurred together into a disorienting tangle in his memory. He was about to drift off to sleep again, when he caught the flicker of a vaguely unfamiliar shape drifting across his field of vision.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” she said. “Only to see if you were already awake.”

He rubbed his eyes, realizing how badly he was in need of a bath. Well at least he was feeling a little more rested now.

He looked up again, and sat up, thinking it was Zelaia who had come to visit, but she had already drifted behind him again, slowly circling like a shark. When she came around again, he saw that it was not the woman but the ghost.

“Oh, you,” he said, collapsing back onto the bed. He was lying on top of the covers fully dressed, having been too exhausted to do anything but fall onto the bed. Now, on the other hand, a shower would be nice.

“I didn’t mean to bother you. . .” she said.

“But what?” he said.

“I was just wondering,” she said, settling down into one place and standing there before him.

“Because you know other people who turned into ghosts. . .”

He laughed grimly. “Oh, *that*.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Not much, I’m a feared.”

Her expression of earnest despair sunk deep into his heart. “Please, tell me what I am.”

“Now miss, you gotta understand. I’m no kind of expert on those higher truths of life and death. You gotta go ask the monks about that. The got all the answers.”

“Answers,” she said, commencing her sharklike circles around him again. “All kinds of answers. But not the ones I’m looking for. They say I don’t exist, or at least what they say is that everyone who dies goes to heaven or hell or maybe this limbo sort of place, but they don’t say anything about someone like me who’s still around in some sort of ethereal form without any body.”

“Some kinda funny foreign religion,” muttered Raktjeh. “Nothin’ I ken claim any sort of acquaintance with.”

“So tell me what you know,” she said, having circled around in front of him again.

“Listen miss, I can’t be held responsible for knowin’ where you come from or where yer goin’, but all I do know is what I seen.”

“Tell me then, what have you seen?”

He thought about it a while. She changed her direction of circling from clockwise to counter-clockwise. “Seems like some folk’, when they die, they just move along on to the next place they’re goin’, and I can’t tell you nothin’ about where that might be, on account of I never been there afore. But then, there’s other folk who seem to linger on, maybe ‘cause there were some real strong feelin’s they had goin’ about someone, or on account of something real horrible that happened, especially if it went on for a long time, over and over again, like all that feeling formed a kind of habit in the energy of a place. Or sometimes it can be with somethin’ good, ‘cause repeated happiness or sometimes prayer can cause a habit of good energy in a place, like when you walk in one of them old temples and it just has an effect of uplifting yer mood from the meditations of all them old monks from long times ago.

“And then there’s another kind of lingering around, what’s when a body has like the hooks sunk in a fish, and they’s tied by some steel line to somebody or someplace in the world. Like a crime of passion, stuff like that, when some big ol’ drama took place and everyone was all jealous and shouting and someone done someone wrong and then somebody’s lover done got killed, or maybe the injured party in love decides to kill both of the cheatin’ ones, or somethin’ awful like that. Then sometimes you’ll see ‘em still around, yearnin’ to relive that powerful moment of revenge, or that moment of stealin’ away something that didn’t belong to them. It’s heady brew, that.

“Then sometime you run across’t one who were yearning for something in this world that weren’t finished, and so they winds up spendin’ an eternity searchin’ for whatever it is, or at least until all the energy’s gone from the desire, and then they just dissolve and disappear.”

She stopped abruptly in front of him, alarm bursting from her face. “Just disappear? You mean once I find what I’m looking for that I’ll just cease to exist? That I’ll just disintegrate and vaporize into nothing?”

Raktjeh felt a sense of panic. Odd it was, that he could be in the heat of a ferocious conflict with angry warriors, sharp blades, and dangerous weapons on all sides, and feel as content and clear and centered as any high Lama in the Himalayas. But when a woman started asking a few little tricky questions, it just set his heart pounding and all kinds of fear he never imagined was in there rushed in and took over, tying up his tongue and taking away all logic and reason from every corner of his mind. A ghost of a

woman, at that.

“Listen miss,” he said. “I know it’s a terrible fear, to think of that dark abyss, to think about being just nothing, an empty void, or just a vanished speck that don’t no longer make no never mind in a universe of so much chaos and messes and disorder everywhere. But you gotta know it ain’t like that. I jes’ don’t know how to say it all purty like one of those preacher types who has all kinds o’ frilly words to spin around like a spider spinnin’ a web.”

“What do you mean, exactly?” she demanded.

“Look miss, ya cain’t put off finding what yer lookin’ for just on account of some sort of fear. ’Cause *that* right there is hell.”

She considered. “So you’re saying I should just get on with my life.”

“So to speak.”

“Or I should just get on with my *death*, rather.”

“Listen miss, you do as you please, and don’t put no words in my mouth as construed as tellin’ you what to do. But some day or other, it’s gonna happen, whether you like it or not. Because nothin’ in the universe exists what stays the same always, except that one great source of all creation, or at least so they say.

“Except I never actually seen that great being they all talks about, nor has anybody I expect, ’cause how can something as small as one of us fathom the reaches of something what’s infinite beyond the reaches of time and space? It would be like an ant tryin’ to comprehend the size of a whole mountain, when it may not even live long enough to walk the whole thing from one side to the other.

“So all I can say is don’t let those little tendrils of fear twine around your heart, or afore you know it that vine will be set in and fully grown, and you gotta just look ahead like a horse with blinders on, and not look down at that terrible dark of decay and emptiness, ’cause you can look either way you please, but one way lies madness and the other takes you to that other shore where everything is light and creation, and you’re held safe in a circle of loving friends.”

She had continued circling again. “You’re sure you’re not one of those priests?” she queried acerbically.

He had a good laugh at that. “You kiddin’? You hear me talk. I cain’t even put together no fancy words in any way like folks’ ’ud barely think worth listenin’ to. I never studied all those frilly ways of talkin’.”

She mused. “Too bad. I think what you just said was more helpful than all the properly constructed

and eloquently poetic lectures I've forced myself to sit through. Dry as sandpaper. Not a drop of wisdom, just empty words."

"And now miss, if you will, I got a question fer you."

Taken aback, she considered carefully. "Fair is fair," she said. "What would you like to know?"

"Do yer happen to know where around these parts I could go to get a decent bathin'?"

SEVENTEEN

[From the journal of Art Bohemian]

After we were done talking, I looked around and noticed that Gloria was gone, which made me feel a little icky inside, with wondering where she had gone off to, or whether she was with some other guy, which might seem like a kind of weird thing to feel about a ghost. So I let Winifred out of her box, and tried playing with her for awhile, only she was in one of those moods where she didn't feel like playing, you know how cats can get, and all she would do is claw or bite, and even when I poured her a nice big ol' saucer full of cream, all she did was turn up her nose and walk away.

Then I went over to maybe talk with Zelaia some more, only she seemed pretty intent on reading some article she was reading from the news paper kind of thingie, so for a while I picked up her book that she had brought along and read some of it.

Thing was, the paperback had all kinds of stuff in it that in order to understand, you must have to have curvy cursive and cooties. It was about some lady who was desperate to find a particular man, who she described as the "right" man, only she couldn't seem to figure out how to tell what the right kind of man was, because she kept making friends with men that were obviously the wrong kind who were always riding loud motorcycles and taking amphetamines and stealing money or selling weapons, setting of bombs, or something along those lines. Only, the lady this story was about must not have been very bright, because she couldn't seem to figure out that they were the wrong kind of man even though you'd think she'd notice that maybe some of those things weren't very conducive to the flowering of spiritual wholeness, well-being, or the cultivation of subtle delicate æsthetic sensibility.

And meanwhile the whole time there was a kind and patient doctor who she met because he wound up taking care of one of her kids that she had out of wedlock fathered by one of those motorcycle gang members who left her abandoned and penniless in a cheap hotel, and then the father of her child wound up in jail, and when he got out he immediately was murdered in a knife fight.

The kind doctor was completely devoted to her and listened to all her stories about riding on the backs of wild horses and motorcycles and going to raging kegger costume parties with all the verminest sorts of men, and the friendly doctor didn't have any romantic sort of lady friend in his life, so you had to wonder if he was all so smart like they said he was, why he didn't have the sense to stop listening starry-eyed to all of her silly stories when she kept on going out and having dumb affairs and making the same

mistakes over and over. You had to wonder if maybe he was gay or something, especially on account of the narrator describing him as being kind and somewhat effeminate, but I don't want to leap to conclusions, especially because I never got around to reading the end of the book.

I guess I just don't understand those kinds of stories, probably because I don't have curvy cursive or cooties.

Anyhow, Gloria had come back from wherever she had been, and I kept on reading, ignoring her.

Finally she sat down sort of in my lap like she does, with her arms all around my neck, only I couldn't feel it any more than I could ever. "Whatcha readin'?" she asked, all in slang-like, the way that scruffy guy we had downstairs spoke. I hated that sloppy old slang like way of speaking.

"Nothing," I said, and pretended to keep on reading, only I couldn't make my eyes go past this one paragraph because I kept looking at all the words one after the other but by the time I had gotten to the end of the sentence the beginning had fallen out of my mind, and I couldn't put together sense nor meaning out of any of it.

"You know what?" she said.

"What," I snarled angrily.

"I think you're jealous."

"Why would I be jealous of you?" I said. "You're a ghost."

She smiled. "Sounds like denial to me."

I threw down the book. "OK," I said, ready for that Talk that two people have to have some times, that's not any sort of old talk with a lower-case t, but that big old heavy scary sort of talk with a big "T" that sends strong men scurrying for cover and sets the bravest hero racing out as fast as they can for the hills.

But it was time, and there wasn't no longer any avoiding it.

"So tell me," I said. "I need you to answer one question for me."

She looked at me smiling, lips all moist and appealing, or at least they looked moist even though I knew her body consisted just some sort of wispy smokelike ectoplasm that was coexistent with our universe somehow in the same way that dreams were, so they couldn't be moist in a genuinely physical sense of containing water molecules, and they might have been alluring if I could have even felt them in the slightest.

"Question?" she said, still smiling. "What might that be?"

"OK," I said. "The question."

“Yes?”

“Do you think we’re becoming codependent?”

She frowned, as if that weren’t the question she were expecting, only I couldn’t think what other question there might be, she could possibly have been expecting. So I felt like I ought to explain.

“Because you know, how two people, or maybe a person and a ghost in this case, though I don’t mean to make less of your personhood or imply that the lack of a physical body means you’re any less worthy of the full respect due to any human or formerly human person. Leaving aside for now the question of whether or not you ought to be entitled to one of those stickers or placards that lets you park in the handicap spaces, partly because it might be difficult to drive, being a ghost, since you might have trouble turning the key in the ignition and also because if you had a ghost car that you could drive, you could just double up in the same parking space as another car, only it might be difficult to tell which car you were getting into when it came time to drive away.

“So anyway, there’s a way two humans or a human and a former human can be in a sort of relationship that’s equal on all sides, except on being able to pass through walls and go hang out with some sleazy guy that needs a bath. . .”

“Actually, I told him where the shower was, so he could get cleaned up.”

Then I was starting to see all kinds of red stars, even though I knew I should really be more sensible, and these not-so happy little feelings put some words in my little mouth that came from that place of nasties where that light gets all covered over when someone doesn’t feel appreciated.

“So right,” I said, all rightly upset. “Now you’re taking a shower with some other guy.”

She rolled her eyes. “I left the room before he got undressed. Listen, I understand your feeling a bit left out and bent out of shape, but would you please listen to me for a second? I just felt a need to see what I could find out from someone who knows about being a ghost, so maybe I could figure out some things about what it is exactly that I am, and where I’m going and what I’m doing here.”

I thought about it for a while, with all these not very optometrist kinds of feelings swirling around inside of me. Then finally, I said: “Well, OK. Just so long as you don’t go all codependent on me.”

EIGHTEEN

The landing on the other planet of Omicron was a little more placid than the last one. The planet grew into a great big circle out of a tiny speck of light, the same way, only this planet was more of a tan and grey deserty kind of place, at least that's what it looked like from space. As we got closer, we came into a slow descent, hovering lazily like old-time explorers in one of those gigantic hot-air balloons or dirigibles.

By then, Raktjeh had come out from downstairs, looking better after a little bit of sleep and a shower.

He mentioned to Zelaia that he had been chatting with Gloria, and Zelaia got all angry-eyed and said something I couldn't hear, except the last word which was "slut!"

Gloria was sitting next to me listening, and when she heard that she rolled her eyes and said "I think someone else has been getting a little codependent."

Meanwhile, the planet approached below us, and I could see sand dune ripples like the brownish waves in meringue, with spatters of dark pigmentation, like the edges of a spray-paint design.

Raktjeh sat up front with Zelaia, and both of them were pretty intense focused on the control panels, as he was trying to remember some special approach pattern you had to use to wind up in the place we were looking for.

"You gotta align with them transaxial orbital lines, synchronizin' agin' the corialis spiral. Then you'll find a teeny little pocket in them vertical extra-orbital longitudinal force vectors, so you just kinda edge on in there real easy like, and that takes you down the corridor shaft to the secret hideaway."

She scrutinized him critically. "You're sure about this?" she said.

He shrugged. "Done it a million times before, back when I was a pirate."

"When you were *what?*"

"A pirate. Done run off with 'em when I was a kid 'cause I didn't got no other place for to go. Hard-hearted as they was, they somehow found a place for me on the ship."

"Maybe because your seeming innocence could help them wheedle plunder from their victims more easily?"

"Possible, yes. Twas them that taught me how to kill, only 'cause I was just a kid I didn't see nothin' wrong with it, a'least right off. I guess I was purty hard-hearted meself, sometime."

"So what happens if I just land the ship, rather than following your exquisitely dictated set of

instructions?”

He shrugged again. “Best thing that happens, you find yourself in the middle of the desert. Worst thing is someone thinks you’re one of them gov’ment ships, and they shoots you down out of the sky.”

“And what guarantees they won’t anyway?”

“Code of honor. Back when the colony was founded, ol’ Dark Star hisself, the ol’ rogue, laid down the law, sayin’ that even us who was outside the law needed some kinda rule for abidin’ together, and one of them first rules was, so long as you follow the protocol for landin’ on the oasis, ’twarn’t fair for nobody to interfere. See, none of them gov’ment ships can do it, on account of some rules it goes aginst, in their big old book of rules.

She continued to study him suspiciously, but meanwhile set about adjusting the controls in front of her, I guess in order to do like he said. “I don’t see a whole lot of choice right now, since I don’t think it would be wise to make a legitimate landing, the details of which would be publically available for Narthex to find.”

He started adjusting stuff in front of him as well, and said “I’ll keep my eye out fer that opening,” he said. “Sometimes you can ketch it on the instruments, an’ sometimes not. Only I was the one what could always see it iffen I had my eye peeled for it, which I reckon is parta why they might’ve kept me around so long, for that sort a thing.”

“Are there many planets with secret entryways like this?” she asked.

“Quite a few, I reckon, but there ain’t no tour guide or nothin to point ‘em all out to anyone, but you gotta jes talk to the different captains ‘till you finds out the ones who knows how to navigate the place you want to land on. And some of em’s even on planets that are full populated with people, not some desert place like this one. An’ sometimes the captains ‘ll tell you straight, and sometimes not. Sometimes they tells it just a bit curvy, so you might get lost, unless you ask’t somebody else, and they tells it a bit curvy in some other way, so you gotta puts it together and come up with something that might work. ‘Course, best way is to follow someone in who knows where they’s goin, only sometimes that doesn’t happen under the best sorts of circumstances.”

So I guess there was something special about the way we had to land, so I kept on waiting for those weird coriolis lines to show up, and I was a little anxious, even though I was strapped in and I had the cat purring in my lap, in case maybe like he said they would try and shoot us down out of the sky, but I couldn’t see anything unusual about the way we landed, aside from the fact we were in this modern sculpture sort of thingie and not an aeroplane.

The nice thing about that was that instead of a tiny little window, like you would in an airplane, I could see all around us, watching as the sky deep black and full of stars, slowly lightening up and filling with color. It turned out this planet had a sky that was kind of a pale lavender sort of color. I was thinking how peaceful and calm it would have been if I hadn't been a bit nervous about all the things Raktjeh had been saying about pirates and the Dark Star guy, and thinking about what kind of city it was we were headed off to, that was some repair place for all the bad people's ships, and what kind of people might live in such a place as that.

But all around us was no sign of such things, only the sky of deepening lavender a healing color to wash away all the anxiety and tension of the day, like the tension of being chased through the sharp prickly underbrush by guys from bug-ships that had torpedoes, which went along with the tension from the day before of being chased by the tentacle slimy swamp thing, which was almost as bad at being at a Starbucks that only had the "Battery Acid" flavor of coffee and didn't have any Raspberry Rush tea at all, not even one leaf of it.

Above us, the stars faded from sight as the backdrop brightened into tranquil lavender, while below us the meringue waves rose and fell in silent still sculpture shapes as we glided over. As we got closer, I began to see our shadow on the ground, chasing along below us, getting bigger and smaller as the terrain went up and down.

After a while, we started to see signs of civilization, if you could call it that, or at least of people living out there, though whether they were civilized or not I couldn't properly say, on account of I had never met them face to face. Heck, I didn't even know if they looked like we did, or whether they had a zillion tentacles like the stinky carnivorous swamp creature back on the Island.

As we got closer, we could see a few other ships zipping around, mostly ignoring us, and one that even flew right over us and looked like it was nearly going to hit us.

When that happened, Zelaia turned to Raktjeh and gave him a look.

"Welcome to Dark Star Oasis," he said. "If you happen to shake tentacles with one of the locals, be sure to count all your fingers afterwards."

"We did it, I guess," said Zelaia.

"I think it would be best to steer over that way. We'll see if Rosie's still here."

"Rosie? An old lover?"

He laughed. "I wish. Nah, I were never good enough for one like her. But she'll be able to tell us which way to go for parts and repairs."

“Is she humanoid?” asked Zelaia.

Raktjeh nodded. “The parts of ‘er I seen, at least.”

As we continued flying, below us became more and more densely populated with houses and streets, and we could see various people and other creatures making their ways along them, sometimes carrying what seemed like odd bits of machinery or maybe a load of hay, or tools or animals.

“Over this way,” said Raktjeh, directing us to a section where a bunch of giant trees were growing, all linked together like a banyan. Soon looking down, we could see nothing but leaves and branches.

“There’s a clearing up in a little bit,” he said. “Slow down. . .”

She did, and shortly we saw what he was talking about, a clearing in the trees large enough to land a few sculpture thingies. There was already one there, that looked like it had been done by even a more creative sculptor than the one who had created ours, and it had all kinds of bizarre shapes patched together into one, a tetrahedron there, a curvy windvane like thing there, a dome here, a blocky rectangular piece there. Only, where ours had a smooth and slick silvery metallic sheen to it, the bizarre pastiche ship was dark and looked like it was rusty, and you could see the rivets and welding patches. It reminded me of one of those rainbow hippie vans made from old school busses and VW vans and other random pieces of metal.

“Rosie’s here,” said Raktjeh, gesturing at the other ship.

Zelaia set down slowly, looking at the other ship, and back to Raktjeh. “Does that thing even fly?”

“She may not look like much, but she been spry enough to escape more than one galactic pursuit vessel. Packs quite an arsenal, or at least she used to.”

“What on Omicron does your friend do, that requires such a fancy vessel?”

“She’s a tea merchant,” said Raktjeh.

When I heard that, my ears perked up, because I was just even thinking at that very moment how much I would like to have a cup of Raspberry Rush tea, and that since I hadn’t seen a Starbucks in a while, I was beginning to wonder if they even had them in this part of the galaxy. You would think so, since they’re just about everywhere you look other than that.

Once we set down, a woman descended this rope stepladder kind of stairway that came down from one of the trees. When I looked around, I noticed that there were several others of that same kind of ladder stairway in other places around us, though I never would have guessed what they were from just looking at them if I hadn’t seen this woman come down one.

She was dark skinned, small, and not very tall, and very beautiful. She wore a dark magenta sari or

sarong sort of wraparound affair, and a matching flower in her hair. Wrapped around at other odd angles were other sashes and scarves of various bright colors.

The door opened up, and she came along up to the ship, sort of skipping along, looking very happy. When Zelaia stepped out onto the stairway of our sculpture thingie, the woman in dark magenta said all cheerfully, "Hello, how are you doing today? Might I interest you in some teas?"

"Just watch who you tease," grumbled Zelaia, almost too quietly to hear.

Raktjeh stepped up quickly walked over to the dark gypsy girl. "Hi Rosie!" he said.

Her eyes widened, and she exclaimed jubilantly: "Raktjeh! I haven't seen you for ages." They exchanged a hug, and Zelaia scowled. "I heard you got captured by the temple ship, and sentenced to hard labor. So you're alright?"

"Temple ship, yes love. But hard labor, no. I went willingly. T'were not punishment, but penance. I'm a private guard for the Omicron temple now. Only, it's been taken over by Narthex."

"Really? I heard rumors, but you never know what people are saying. And you know we still don't get news transmissions out this way, only sometimes recorded ones brought out by the traders, though they're usually a few weeks old. What on Omicron is Narthex doing with the temple?"

Raktjeh laughed. "Says he's lookin' fer the Amulet of Imbalance," and he started laughing and laughing, until he noticed that Zelaia was looking all serious.

"He's looking for what?"

"The Amulet of Imbalance," he said.

"Isn't that what we're supposed to be looking for?" I asked, "that and a Quest?"

Then Rosie turned to me, and said, "And who is your handsome friend here?"

I got all shy when she said that. "Art," I introduced myself. "Art Bohemian."

"And what brings *you* to this far arm of the galaxy?" she asked, "or as some would call it, armpit of the galaxy?" She came over all close, and I got even more shy and flustered, especially because she was very pretty, and she was dressed all nice and colorful in a gypsy sort of way, with sparkly jewelery and beads and feathers, kind of a little like Zelaia, only more playful and colorful.

She stood there right in front of me with a big wide smile and waited for me to tell her.

"Well, it was a long story with a doorway and a slimy tentacle thing, but that's not important right this second. I was wondering, because Raktjeh says you're a tea merchant?"

"I certainly am," she declared proudly. "Whatever variety of tea you like, I can get it. If not, I'll grow it in my garden. Would you like to see my garden? It's filled with beautiful flowers, and I know you

would just love them.”

“Why, uh, sure,” I said.

Meanwhile, Zelaia was looking at Raktjeh all serious. “He’s looking for *what?*”

“The amulet of imbalance. Only I know that. . .”

“You didn’t tell him where it is, did you?”

Raktjeh laughed even more loudly than before. “Don’t be silly. He’s looking for a mythical amulet of power. It don’t even exist, no matter for me to tell him where it is or isn’t, ‘cause you typically cain’t find nothing what don’t even exist!”

“What if the monks only say it doesn’t exist, so nobody will come looking for it.”

“Well actually, the monks don’t say nothin’ at all, on account of this vow of silence they all took. But everybody know it’s all jes’ and ol’ wive’s tale, and they all say them amulets as gots all sorts of weird powers, but nobody ever seen them actually do nothin’, only the faithful gotta keep on spreadin’ the old tales what to keep the stories alive, but they don’t mean nothin’ real by ‘em. Do they?”

Zelaia was eying the gem that Raktjeh wore around his neck.

“And nobody ever told you about any mythical powers your necklace might have.”

He looked down at it, only he couldn’t see it very well because he was wearing it, so he took it off and handed it to her.

“Power away,” he said.

She held the gem up, and gazed at it, suspended like a pendulum hung on the chain. After a while she placed it in the palm of her hand and drew it to her heart, closing her eyes, and muttering some words in an alien tongue.

Some kids came down one of the stairway ladders, and began to play a game that looked like jacks on the ground over on the far side of the field.

Then there was the sound from above, only it wasn’t so much a sound as a memory of a sound, except it sounded clear as a bell. The sound of a ship overhead, and then I could see it as sharp as a cactus in broad daylight, only I knew it wasn’t there. At first, I thought it was one of those buglike ships, like we had been running from the day before, but then I noticed it was different.

As it was flying overhead, I saw something like a door open underneath, and someone came out from it and was falling towards us, only as whoever it was got closer, they must have had some sort of jet pack on, because they slowed down and landed gently on the ground. I could see that it was Raktjeh, only he was a lot younger, and he looked all around him and then took off running under the trees. Meanwhile,

the ship kept on flying by overhead, until it got a fair ways off up into the sky, then the whole thing disappeared.

When I looked at Raktjeh, I could tell by the way he was trembling a little that he could see it too. Now the kids that had been playing jacks out there were gone too, since I guess they were part of whatever vision we were seeing.

“Sweet Omicron,” said Raktjeh. “What in the name of Frupzaq was that?”

Zelaia smiled ironically, handing him back his necklace.

“Supposing you could tell *me*?”

“Whoa,” he said. “It would have been the day I finally escaped from them pirates. I stole out from one of the cargo bays while we was flyin’ overhead, and I happen’ to land right here in this clearing. I don’ recall them kids playin over in the field that day, though I recollect them bein’ some kids that used to live over that way. Good thing I escaped that day, too, on account of that ship I had been on got took over the next day, blowed clear from the sky, and all hand on board was lost.”

“Wow, that was a trip. How did you do that?” asked Rosie. I guess she had seen it too.

“The gem of remembrance has many powers. Every location, every point in space retains a psychic impression of every event that has ever occurred there. Those memories are always present inside the energy field of the particles that occupy that space, as well as the fabric of the space itself. One ability belonging to the gem of remembrance is to uncover those hidden memories and bring them to the surface level of consciousness, so that they reach the plane of perception of living beings, where we can actively perceive them.”

“So we can see stuff what happened long ago,” said Raktjeh, with a low whistle. “How come it pulled out that one thing that happened, out from all the rest?”

Zelaia shrugged. “It was resonating with your presence, one would guess. But a sufficiently adept warlock can control the point of recall, down to the exact second.”

He dangled it in front of him to look at, then put it back on as a necklace. “Guess I got some few things to practice afore I c’n be properly called an adept warlock, or even a warlock at all. An’ you say there’s only three of them here gems?”

“Only three, that I know of.”

“And where’s the other two? And why did they give it to me, then, if I warn’t enough savvy to even make it remember nothin’?”

“Maybe so you would know when you found the right teacher,” said Zelaia. “whoever *that* might

be.”

Rosie, who was still standing all close to me, started being all smiles again, and said, “Who would like to come on up to my place and have some tea? I hope you all are planning to stay awhile?”

We all looked at each other, and kind of nodded, and then noticed a kind of scuffle on the ground nearby. Looking over, we could see that Winifred had trapped this fancy looking bug, that looked like a multilayered butterfly sort of insect with colorful fancy shaped wings that folded up elegantly into the body.

“No!” exclaimed Raktjeh, and made to run over there, but just at the same time, the bug sneezed out this cloud of sparkly rainbow dust, startling the cat into letting it go, upon which the bug unfurled its complicated geometrically fractal patterned wings and took off like a miniature clipper ship off into the sky.

Poor Winifred was sort of stumbling around all dazed, and I ran over toward her.

“Careful,” said Raktjeh. “You won’t want to breathe none of that dust. Unless you’re one of them hippie types that gets a kick out of trippin’ on psychedelic drugs.”

I got all worried about my kitty. “She’ll be OK then?”

He laughed. “I’d keep a good eye on ‘er for the next twelve hours or so. After that, she’ll be fine, only I reckon she’ll not be messing with a Psilocybin beetle again.”

“To answer your question,” said Zelaia, “We can’t go interstellar until we get our the thermodurator induction correction circuitry repaired, and given the current state of relations with Narthex, we need it to be done discreetly. We were hoping that you might know someone qualified to handle such a repair.”

“Why of course. I can think of a couple, and I bet even Manny who lives next door would be able to fix something like that.”

“And also,” I said, “we were looking for a way to get back to my home planet on Earth, and also a Quest. If you happen to see one lying around.”

“Well, I think we should look into finding all of those things. But you’ve been traveling, and don’t you think things will go better if we sit down to some hot tea first? Then I can make you a wholesome, filling, and delicious organic lunch using recipes that I learned from the a friend of mine who used to live on the Vegan starsystem.

“That’s good,” I said, “because I’m a vegan too.”

“Oh really?” asked Rosie, leading us all towards one of the stairway-ladders, “You come from the starsystem of Vega?”

“Well not really,” I said. “Because we don’t have any stars in our solar system, unless you count rock stars like Jimi Hendrix. But the way I heard about it, on the Vegan starsystem they don’t eat any animal products, including honey. Only I eat honey, but I don’t like eating parts of animals that were alive and then had to be killed to eat them, because I believe in kindness to all living beings, which is what the Buddha told us to be, only I’m not really a Buddhist.”

“I see. So then, are you a — what is the word you used, ‘Buddhist?’”

“Actually, I’m an optometrist, because I always look on the bright happy sides of things and it’s easier to be happy if you keep your eyes open so stay focused all the positive thingies and not spend time on all the grim and dreary little gloomies that get you down.”

She laughed, a gay little trickle of a laugh that reminded me of a waterfall, or the sound of the beads in one of those bead curtains after someone was passing through. We went up the stairway, and first I was wondering why we didn’t go up the same stairway she had come down, but then I could see once we got up there that the whole place was interconnected with all these lashed-together wooden bridges and causeways. We went into one of the treehouse rooms, and it was this cozy little diningroom and kitchen sort of place, all done up in dark wood with a low table that had cushions all around it.

Behind the counter were shelves that had a million and one apothecary jars and other kinds of tins, all with different odd shapes of labels.

Zelaia had picked up Winifred and had been carrying the poor dazed cat along as we walked up the stairs, while she talked with Raktjeh very seriously in low tones about something. The two of them sat down at the table to continue their discussion, but Rosie invited me behind the counter into the kitchen to help her with the teas and things.

First she touched a few buttons on a black box recessed underneath the counter, and music sprang forth from hidden speakers around the room. It was some kind of instrument that sounded like a cross between a sitar and electric guitar, with a background consisting of maybe a synthesized orchestra accompanied by an ethereal batterie of African drums.

“Now tell me again, this kind of tea you like? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Raspberry Rush,” I said. “I generally buy it in bulk from my local health food store, though you can also get it in bags, which is nice in a pinch, if you don’t happen to be in a situation where the use of a tea infuser is practical.”

“I’ve never heard of Raspberry. It must be a kind of fruit from the planet your from?”

“Earth. Yes.”

“Well, we have ZurPringle berries, from the North side of Omicron, are those maybe kind of close?” She leaned against me all close, to help her reach up to one of the up-high canisters, and opened it up to reveal a bunch of dried berries.

I held them up and took in the smell. “Maybe,” I said. “I think it’s something sweeter than that.”

“Well then, we have FurTingle berries from the South side of Omicron. They’re a little bit sweeter. Would you like to try some of those?” Her face was up close to mine, and she was all smiling and happy, with the flower in her long dark beautiful hair.

“Sure,” I said, “Let’s see what those smell like.”

“Ok,” she said. “I’ve got a ladder, but it’s way over in the corner. Maybe you could help lift me up to get them?”

“Ok, like this?” I said, and I got behind her and put my arms around her and lifted her gently off the floor, feeling her soft invitingly warm body through the fabric of her dress.

“Sure,” she said, a little breathlessly, “That’s perfect.”

I lifted her up to where she could reach the tin she pointed at, though I think it might have been easier if she had just pointed at it and asked me to get it, but I didn’t say anything.

She lifted it down, and I set her down, and she looked back up at me with a big smile, then held up the tin for me to sniff.

“So how come you never got married, Rosie?” asked Raktjeh from across the room.

“Oh, I suppose I never found the right man,” she said. “I want someone who’s nice, someone polite and gentle.”

“How on Omicron did you wind up in Dark Star Colony, then?”

“Oh, it happened a long time ago. My mother was a tea merchant before me, and she was living right here, where my father abandoned her to just before I was born. He was a pirate.”

“I think this one is good,” I said, pointing to the second tin.

She gave me her big smile again, and brushed by me as she swept it from my hands. “Yes, this one is very sweet.” she spooned out some of the dried berries, and put them in a fancy ceramic tea infuser that sat inside the teapot. “I’ve got some herbs that would go well with it, some floral essences, and the petals of the Bluringia flower, which have the kind of crimson pigmentation I think you were hinting at.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said, feeling all a twitter with excitement. After all, this was a special moment, because even if it wasn’t genuine one hundred percent pure Raspberry Rush tea, this would be the first time since we had fallen through the glowing rectangle door into this universe that I had been able to drink

anything even close to resembling Raspberry Rush. And for me, that's a pretty long time to go without having any.

She had a kettle of water that was boiling, and she poured it over the mixture she had measured into the infuser in the tea kettle. It was amazing for a treehouse, how it was so well equipped, with a stove and running water and electric lights (or at least I think they were electric).

As the aroma arose from the steeping herbs, I started thinking about all the times I had sat down to drink my favorite tea, in the mornings and the evenings, and the afternoons. My favorite was just about at sunset.

Then as she poured the tea into the cup, and I was lifting it to my lips, thinking how close it smelled to the real thing, I started thinking about the last time I had my favorite Raspberry Rush tea, and that would have been the night that me and Gloria were sitting at the table in the house on the Island.

"Oh by the way," I said, just as I was about to take a sip, "I'd like you to meet my friend Gloria. . ."

only I looked around for her and she was nowhere to be found.

I set down the cup in agitation. I couldn't be sitting here drinking tea if my friend was lost. "Where did Gloria go?"

"Gloria?" asked Rosie.

"Don't you think," said Zelaia, "that this might be the time to just forget about Dulcinea for a bit?"

"We never would have found Raktjeh if it hadn't been for Gloria," I said. "How could I have forgotten all about her?"

"Right," replied Zelaia smiling, "and I wouldn't have had to fly through the hard rainfall of disintegrator torpedoes."

"Is that right?" asked Raktjeh. "that you wouldn't have found me?"

Zelaia thought about it, then reluctantly conceded. "Probably not."

"We were headed back to the ship. We never would have found him," I said. "Oh, where did she go?"

At that, Raktjeh stood up. "I owe that girl more than I thought. We gotta find her."

But I was out on the walkway we had come up, looking all around, in every corner she might have slipped off into. "Gloria! Gloria!" I was calling out. I went back, and Raktjeh was still inside looking through all the corners of the room we were in, in case she was there but had just gotten very faint.

Rosie was watching with a sad smile over the neglected tea. "I'm sorry about the tea," I said. "I know it's best when it's just fresh, but maybe we can reheat it? We gotta find our friend."

“We can reheat it,” said Rosie. “Go!”

I dashed out across the bridgeway between trees, looking up for a moment at the lavender sky through the canopy of enormous green leaves. A collection of birds were singing in the branches outside of Rosie’s window, and they all watched curiously as I dashed across the bridge, but they kept on singing.

I hurried down the stairway, making sure I took enough time that I would see her if she was there, and then frantically ran across the clearing back to our ship. I prayed that she was not somewhere in the middle of the clearing, because with the sun so bright there would have been no way, on Earth *or* Omicron, for me to see her.

I got back to the ship, and the door had been closed, but it opened when I arrived, I guess because it knew who I am by now. I rushed in a panic up the steps, and when I got inside, I saw Gloria in her old fashioned gingham dress, sitting in the chair that we were accustomed to sharing together on these voyages.

“Gloria!” I said.

She looked up at me with faint surprise, big blue eyes and blonde hair. “Hi,” she said. “My name is Gloria. Who are you?”

“Gloria! It’s me, Art! Don’t you remember?”

She turned away. “I’m going to be thirteen on Saturday, and I’m going to have a party, and all my friends are coming out, and we’ll have streamers and cake, and my mother will present me with the precious little locket that *her* mother gave to her when she turned thirteen. It’s in the shape of a heart, in which she kept the petal of a flower given to her by my grandfather when they were a-courting. Only I think something must be dreadfully wrong, because I haven’t seen any of them in such a very long time.” Everyone seems to have gone away, and this place is so different, and I don’t know where I am, and I’m afraid.” She started to cry, quietly.

“Gloria!” I said, going over to her and sitting down, through her, on the chair, so that in the end she was sitting kind of on my lap, only I couldn’t feel her any more than I could before. I wished I could hold her in my arms and comfort her.

“Gloria, don’t you remember? The tea and the monster and doorway, and now we’re in some other galaxy?”

She looked at me with what might have been a hint of recollection.

“Gloria,” I whispered. “You saved my life. Remember?”

I could see the memories returning, and the gingham dress turned more into the kind of white gown she had been wearing more on the trip. Her looking at me had more familiarity to it. “I think I

started to fade away,” she said finally. “It happens when someone forgets about me.”

I looked up and saw Rosie standing in the doorway, and got all embarrassed, but I didn’t want to stand up. “Rosie,” I said quietly. “Can you see her?”

Rosie stepped closer, and nodded slowly. “Yes, I see.” She came over to us. “It’s hardly as though we’ve never had a ghost around here before.” She reached out to touch Gloria, and of course her hand passed right through. “Completely impalpable.”

“Gloria, this is Rosie,” I said.

“I remember now,” said Gloria, with a hint of sullenness. “I think you should be with your own kind, the living. I don’t mean to hold you back from them. After all, I’m just a ghost. Not even part of the world of the living.”

“Gloria,” I whispered, “you saved my life. How could I ever let you fade away? I’m so sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to forget all about you. I promise, I’ll remember you every moment of the day from now on.”

“And now I remember. My birthday party. The trip across the galaxy.” she sighed. “I only ever had thirteen years that I was in a body, that I could feel and smell and touch everything around me. I feel so old and yet so young at the same time.”

We sat there like that for some time, with Rosie standing there watching, and then Raktjeh and then Zelaia came in from outside. “Can you come with us now?” I said, “We were going to have some tea. I promise we’ll never forget about you again. You’re one of the family on this trip, like or not.”

She looked around at all the faces of concern looking at her, and nodded. “OK. I think I feel strong enough now. Let’s go.”

NINETEEN

We all stayed there that night, and Rosie had a big guest house with enough rooms for all of us. Zelaia took her aside and made some arrangements, so I guess it was kind of like a hotel, only without the plastic-wrapped styrofoam cups and the funny-smelling soap.

The beds were like swings, hanging down from four ropes, one from each corner, from the ceiling, and as night fell the sounds of the insects and frogs grew louder and louder until we could hardly hear each other talking, and even though she had artificial lighting, we used candles to avoid too much brightness, so we were still able to see the stars. Rosie said it was customary to avoid making any more light than necessary, since it helped keep the colony more invisible from space.

When we were lying there, the bed would sway a little bit with every movement I made that changed the balance, kind of like sleeping on a gigantic swingset.

Through the trees some distance away we could hear the sounds of music and partying, what sounded like live instruments and people singing.

From where we lay that night, me and Gloria could see the stars through an opening in the forest canopy, and they were all bright and twinkling much bigger than I ever remember them anywhere before.

“I promise, I’ll remember you, even when I’m dreaming,” I said. “At least, the best I can, because sometimes my dreams are about things I don’t understand or sometimes can do anything about, but I’ll remember you any time I can in my dreams, because I don’t think I could stand it if you disappeared again the way you did today.”

She smiled beside me. “I think it should be OK.”

As I was drifting away off into dreamland, I asked her, “Do you ever go to sleep and dream?” I couldn’t remember ever seeing her asleep.

“I think I do. Maybe. I guess I sort of fade away sometimes when nobody’s around to talk to. Maybe I’m nothing more than a collection of people’s memories.”

The idea of that bothered me, but I couldn’t think of what to say about it because I’m not one of those philosopher genius guys who has lots to say about such things with quotes in Latin and long sentences with all kinds of long words that sound very important and difficult to understand. It made me wish that instead of being an artist, I had maybe chosen to be a philosopher, just for a minute at least, so I would be able to think of the right things to say at a moment like this.

So instead, I said: “Gloria, I like you exactly as you are. To me you’re perfect.”

She smiled at me with a hint of sadness. “I don’t believe you for even the briefest tiny fraction of a second, but you’re very sweet.”

And so we fell asleep together, swaying gently under the leaves and bright shining stars.

TWENTY

The next morning, Raktjeh and Zelaia set off for the big city. I asked if I could go along, and they both kind of looked at each other, and said it wasn't going to be very fun, because it was a big ugly city and it could be dangerous if you didn't know what you were doing. But they said they would call as soon as they knew anything, so I wouldn't get too worried, and they got in the sculpture thingie and it closed all up and took off, just like a flying saucer. At least, it looked like what I imagine a flying saucer might, only I've never seen one that was unidentified before.

Which was just as well, since it gave me a chance to lie on my back out in the field and see if there were shapes in the clouds. Only that was a little different than it was on Earth, because of the sky being lavender. The other good thing was it gave me plenty of time to think about what sort of art I wanted to be doing as a bohemian artist, and to talk with Gloria about one thing and another.

After awhile, we got a phone call, only the phones around here are pretty different from the phones on Earth. They're only about as big as a credit card or so, but you don't even need to hold them up to your mouth and your ear to speak and hear, but you just hold it in your pocket and go on doing whatever, and the only one who can hear the conversation is the one with the phone-card thingie, unless they touch one of the buttons and let another person share in it.

Rosie was spending a lot of time on the phone that way, as she attended to things walking around her treehouse, and I guess that's how she set up the tea trading because now and then these rough looking sculpture thingies would land, that looked more like expressionist or abstract than Zelaia's ship. Then guys would get out, and sometimes ladies, and they would chat about this and that, and open little packages that had samples of the leaves, and they would talk about what was going on in the world and argue about money.

"Check this out," said one of the rough looking guys, handing Zelaia something shiny the size of a quarter. Only I guess it wasn't a quarter, because she put it in this slot and a screen like a TV, only in 3 dimensions, came to life on the console screen in the main room where she did business.

A newscaster came on and told how the siege of the temple planet had ended, and that Narthex's ships had left just about as quickly as they had shown up, even though after filing several billion of pages of paperwork, the security forces for the temple planet were still on vacation on the planet of Omicron in the starsystem of Lakilahimahilulumumukai. The bureaucrat who had filed the initial paperwork to foil the

temple security forces was becoming a sort of folk hero and there were already pop songs on several hundred music channels about him.

Then the screen darkened, and this mean looking man came on the screen. Even though he had a big grin, he did not seem like a very nice person, because it wasn't the sort of grin that was a "Hi, how happy to see you" sort of grin, but more of the crocodile's "gee you sure would taste good when I tear you to shreds and devour you" variety. He was dressed in black, from head to foot, with silver spikes around his head and neck and wrists.

He opened his mouth to speak, and an ugly sound came out, that felt like big old rough pieces of gravel scraping across the airwaves. "I am NARTHEX," he said. "TERRIBLE AND GREAT AM I! FEEL MY POWER AND TREMBLE!"

Everybody in the room watching seemed to get all twitchy and uncomfortable when he came on. "You think your petty, meaningless conventional lives are important. Hah! Well, enjoy them while you can, because soon I, yes I NARTHEX will have all power over time and space, and then you, yes YOU will all become my helpless slaves, to do my every bidding until the end of eternity. Have pity on yourselves, because soon I will be supreme ruler over the ENTIRE UNIVERSE! And remember, it won't be cheating when I win, because I'll be the one making up all the rules! Bwahahahahaha! And there's nothing you can do about it, because I AM NARTHEX! TERRIBLE AND GRREEAAT AM I! FEEEEEEL MY POWERRRR AND TREMMMBLLLE!"

The screen darkened and fell blank.

"What do you think, this guy is just blowing smoke?" said the guy who had handed Rosie the quarter thingie, but nobody else was laughing. They all went back to doing their business and smelling tea and the like, but now everyone was quiet, tense, and pensive.

I went back out with Gloria to lie on my back and look at the clouds, because I got to thinking that exactly what Narthex wanted was for everyone to be all afraid of him, so if I caved in to being afraid it would mean that he had won.

So instead, I decided not to let him win, and I went out and was looking up at the clouds and seeing happy things.

TWENTY ONE

Rosie was humming to herself, adding up figures and filing away this and that in the lull between customers, when Gloria came through the wall. Rosie looked up at her.

“Sorry about using the wall, like that,” she said. “I have a rough time with doorknobs. Not that you even have doorknobs on this fancy modernistic world, but. . . Hey, can you see me?”

Rosie nodded slowly.

Gloria began circling the room, neither drifting nor walking, but somewhere in between. “Have you seen other ghosts? What are they like? Am I normal? Is there something I’m supposed to be doing as a ghost, or do I just hang out and haunt people? Am I truly an independent conscious being, or am I just a collection of memories and preferences that will eventually just dissolve into little tiny granules of nothingness?”

“I think you need some tea,” said Rosie. “To help you calm down.”

“But what if I disappear again? Or maybe I should want to disappear? It seems like I should get on with something, whether it’s getting another body or vaporizing into a meaningless random vortex of disjunct ideas. I feel like such an underachiever.”

Silently, Rosie had set out a cup and saucer on the table.

“Lift the cup,” she said.

“Lift the cup? What do you mean lift the cup. You’re just making fun of me. There’s no way on Earth, or Omicron, or whatever you call it, that I can lift the stupid cup!”

“Maybe you have powers that you aren’t aware of,” said Rosie.

Looking at the cup again, Gloria filled with rage. “It’s no use!” she shouted. “Over and over again the same thing. I get to watch everybody else walk around and enjoy the sense of touch, of feeling and smelling, of having and holding, and what do I get? What did I do to deserve this? To HELL with your flipping CUP!”

And with that, she slashed at it, sending forth a blow that would have sent it flying off the table, had she been human.

And it jumped off the saucer and flipped over onto the rim, spinning and wobbling like a top, until it settled down almost comically on the table top.

Gloria had her hands up to cover her mouth. “Oh my God,” she said finally. “Did you see that?”

“I understand it works better if you learn to focus your emotion, instead of just lashing out in anger,” said Rosie quietly. “Of course, I don’t know from personal experience.”

“Oh my God,” Gloria kept saying. “I actually touched something.”

“Now,” said Rosie, picking up the cup, and setting it back on the saucer, “Try lifting the cup.”

TWENTY TWO

When Zelaia and Raktjeh got back, they watched the scary video that came on the quarter thing some guy had handed to Rosie. “What do you make of it?” asked Zelaia.

“I’d say he’s onto your mythical amulet,” said Raktjeh. “Though it were kinda silly, him takin’ over the Temple planet and all, ‘cause it ain’t no secret where the amulet is, if it is anywhere at all.”

“Subtle intellect and investigative skill would not be among Narthex’s redeeming features, if he has any,” replied Zelaia. “But nonetheless, I don’t know where it is either. Enlighten me.”

He gave a faint smile. “With the Warlock of Omicron, in the Tower of Inquiry. Anyone could tell you it’s never been on the Temple planet.”

Zelaia paled.

“But it ain’t no matter anyway, on account of nobody know for sure where the Tower or the Warlock is exactly.”

“Not nobody.”

He was incredulous. “You mean *you* know?”

“I’ve been there. Once.”

[Diary of Art Bohemian]

Dear Diary,

It sure is taking a long time to get the ship repaired. Zelaia said they had to wait to get some part shipped in from far away, and meantime there wasn’t anything we could do except stick around and wait. It isn’t such a bad place to be stuck waiting anyhow, since it’s got enormous cloud-filled skies and at night time the air just seems enchanted with the thickness of the music of bugs and critters, and the lights of the stars that I see hanging there from the ceiling, the soft cushiony swing-bed pulsing ever so softly with my every breath.

And Gloria’s been doing pretty well here it seems, with the way her and Rosie have been getting along. I was even pretty spooked one time when I was sitting by the window and a cup of tea came right in and floated by me and set itself down on the table, just like in those scary movies where the ghosts have seances and there’s trumpets and crowns and things floating in the air.

Then while I was sitting there with my hair standing on end, Gloria appeared out of thin air with a

big old grin on her face, and said “You like it? Rosie’s been teaching me.”

And I said “Um sure,” because I wasn’t sure, because part of me liked it that she was learning and feeling stronger and another part of me was a little bit scared by what she was able to do.

“I’m learning to focus my emotions, because when I concentrate my passion and desire on something, I can make it move,” she said, and she reached over and brushed the hair out of my face, and I could feel it just barely like the lightest feather, and then she was all giggling and disappeared.

I guess it helped her not to have me forget about her, because now I was a bit on edge always watching out to be on my guard so she wouldn’t surprise me with any of the mischief she was learning.

Mostly it wasn’t me she was aiming all of it at, though. Like the one time this one guy, who was a pretty rough character I guess, and was all big and muscular like a bully and smelled pretty bad, and he was giving Rosie a kind of a difficult time, asking “Hey Rosie, how come you never got married? How’d a nice girl like you get stuck in a place like this?” and started to get all close and fresh with her, when all of a sudden out of nowhere a big bucket of cold water flew through the air and dumped itself over his head, after which the bucket landed over his head upside down so he couldn’t see.

That gave Rosie the chance to get away, and before that guy knew it, he was face down flat on the floor. About then, Raktjeh heard all the commotion, and came up and dragged the guy out by putting his arm all uncomfortable. But by then, the guy was pretty anxious to just get out of there, and once he got to the door he broke away and took off back to his ship, cussin’ about how the place was haunted.

Then Gloria appeared with a big grin and said “And *stay* away, you moron.”

It made me wonder how Rosie managed by herself in such a rough place, but I guess she must’ve had her ways about her, and she had some good strong friends who came by now and then.

And now at night Gloria was more inclined to go off wandering around exploring, and then when she got back I could tell more than I used to, and sometimes it almost felt like she was actually like a real person lying there beside me, all soft and warm, and then it would fade, and we would be lying on the swing-bed, looking up at the millions of brightly gleaming stars, tiny suns, and one of them ours. One far away, ever so far.

Then one day this pretty rough looking guy showed up in a ship that had all this stuff kind of tied to it, all kinds of pieces and parts hanging out from all over, and he got out and untied a big black oblong thing about the size of a refrigerator that had been riding along lashed to the side, and Zelaia and Raktjeh came out all excited, and helped him while he loaded it onto this transport thingie, that made it float in the air even though it looked like it was pretty heavy, and he was smoking this cigarette the whole time that

smelled really horrible, only nobody complained because we all knew he was helping us get the ship repaired so we could get back to traveling, and I was happy that I could get back to finding my Quest so I could get back to Earth, but also sad because I was enjoying my vacation here with Gloria, even though she was being more and more powerful and mischievous, but it was good to watch her being happy and watching the clouds and stars in the lavender sky.

I went back up into the tree house to get away from the mephitic cigarette fumes, but Gloria stayed down there because the noxious aroma didn't seem to bother her, maybe seeing as it was too late for her to die of lung cancer, plus she was able to help them out because she could go through the walls and see things that they couldn't. So I laid out on one of the chairs in the balcony and looked up at the clouds for one final time before we would have to leave, and thought about trying to decide what kind of art I would be doing as a bohemian artist, and drinking this kind of tea that Rosie made a whole batch of for me, that wasn't exactly like Raspberry Rush tea, but it was pretty darn close, and I was even sometimes starting to like it better than the original.

It was then, as I was lying there looking up at the sky and sipping tea, that Rosie came up real quietly, and she had something in her hand, that she opened my hand and put into it my palm, then closing my fingers around it, giving it to me. She held my closed hand in both of hers, and looked at me with an expression that I will always remember, though I wasn't quite sure what it meant.

When she had walked away back into the other room, I opened up my hand, and I saw what was in it was a heart-shaped locket on a pretty silver chain. I don't know if it was anything like the one Gloria had been supposed to get on her birthday, but I knew that if there was any way I ever could, I would find a way to give it to her. But until then, I put it in a special place, in one of my inner pockets, so that it would be a secret.

That night we had a big dinner, with Rosie and Zelaia cooking up all kinds of exotic food, salads and soups and rice (or something like it) and vegetables and dessert, and everyone was laughing and having a good time, and when it came time to lie on our swing bed and stare up at the distant suns, I really felt how I was looking right into the center of infinity, and felt like I could just reach up and touch the endlessness and boundless possibilities of the whole universe.

The next day we set out bright and early, as it turns out that inside of the sculpture thingie downstairs were all these rooms with places to stay, which was hard to believe because it didn't look that big from the outside, so I guess they had some way of playing games with space so it was bigger on the inside than it looked. By then, I had found a travel bag that Rosie had traded me for helping her to file

away the herbs she got in all the right places, and here and there I was picking up more different kinds of clothes to wear, that fit more in line with what people wore in that part of the galaxy.

Soon we were all looking out the familiar windows, that weren't really windows but 3d screens, and Gloria was sitting on my lap the way she always did, though I couldn't feel her right then.

As we all gazed on sadly at Rosie waving us away, she grew smaller and smaller and the clearing turned into just another gap in the trees, and the trees turned into a tiny oasis in the middle of an ocean of meringue waves, and then slowly the meringue melded together into a spherical planet that grew smaller and smaller until it was a tiny dot like a period, and then we were in the middle of nothing but a sea of stars.

It was going to take a bunch of days to travel all the way to the tower planet, so Zelaia went back to reading her book about the kind doctor who was taking care of the wild lady's out-of-wedlock baby, and Raktjeh took to sitting at the computer and scanning the stories about what was going on in the galaxy.

I liked to go into the observatory room, where you could lie in the middle of space with the stars all around you, and imagine different shapes in the stars, which was a little like looking up at the clouds only without so much light around, and they didn't move so much. But it was like being at the very center of infinity, which was very cool.

One time Raktjeh asked me what the name of my home planet was, and I said "Earth."

"You ever 'Gargle' that?"

"Well, it's not exactly like a mouthwash. You wouldn't exactly be able to gargle earth, if you mean like dirt from the garden, because it might get all stuck in your throat."

He laughed. "Nah, my boy. I mean the search engine, 'Gargle,'" and he pulled up this screen where he typed in the 5 letters E-A-R-T-H and then waited while it pulled up results.

"There, is that it? The semi-primitive planet with the pyramids and that big wall?"

"What do you mean, *semi-primitive*?" I asked with irritation. "After all, *we* have Raspberry Rush Tea!"

Raktjeh shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe it means yer don't got space travel. Let's see here what it says: 'best known galaxy-wide as home of the *hello kitty* oeuvre.'"

"Is it the great wall of China?" I asked.

"Don't look like it's made of China. Looks like stone or bricks or something."

I blinked. "You mean you know where my home planet is?"

He looked at the coordinates. "Yep. A few days flyin', though 'course we's goin' in the opposite direction presently."

“So, by the way,” I said, thinking about why it was we were flying in the opposite direction, “What were we planning to do when we get to this tower planet? Won’t Narthex have all of his armies there, like he did on that temple planet? What do we expect that we can do to stop him, especially since it was so easy for one little guy to blast out that thermodulator thingie so we couldn’t fly anywhere for so long? Shouldn’t we try to get an army or something to go along with us?”

“Won’t matter, out there. Not on the Warlock’s planet.”

“Well, then why does it even matter if we go out there, if this Warlock is more powerful than all those armies?”

“What matters is that we do what we can to make things better. ‘Cause lad, if things went awry and Narthex won control over all time and space, think how bad you’d feel knowin’ you coulda done somethin’ but didn’t.”

Somehow that didn’t convince me we shouldn’t be heading back towards the Earth right now, back to the blue skies I knew and my friend Vaughn, and the Nosferatu Skull Discount Vacation store, and Raspberry Rush tea. Heck, I think I even missed the tentacly fetid slimy swamp creature.

“So what makes you so set on stopping Narthex, anyway. I mean, he can’t be the only evil arch-nemesis villian-type guy in the galaxy, so why are you so fixated him in particular?”

Raktjeh mused slightly. “Well, now lad. That go back to the day when I were a pirate, and the wrongs that were done back then that still need a-rightin’. But those ‘er stories I’d rather not tell at this point. Just rest yerself reassured that there be meaning to it all in the end.”

It seemed to me that the meaning was that now I was caught in the middle of some intergalactic feud, and that I’d rather be back on Earth where I belonged, although I did have to admit that things would be better if Narthex didn’t have ultimate power over all time and space, so I guessed I would just resign myself to tagging along and seeing what happened.

The days went by, though they didn’t seem like days because there wasn’t a sun overhead to warm us up or the moon at night to make us lunatic, only the cold dark matter and vacuum of space to make us feel cold and dark. Then finally, one of the points of light started to get brighter, and turn more into what looked like a sun, and as we got closer, the now familiar approach of a glowing spheroid grew and grew until it overwhelmed the screen.

The color of this one was aquamarine blue, if you could call it that. An iridescent opalescent swirl of turquoise and white, with hints of every color imaginable flashing in a milion tiny pinpoints of light the way the freshness of water droplets halo a rainbow.

As we approached the planet, Raktjeh pointed to one of the screens in front of him, that was alive and pulsating with all some kinds of undulating bright colors. “Whoa, what’s this?” he asked.

“The intramolecular energetic fields in the planetary atmosphere generate intensely powerful psychedelic interference patterns throughout most of the planetary subspace. It makes navigation virtually impossible, and even visual navigation is problematic owing to the unusual amounts of surface fog, coupled with the large and complex array of rugged geological features.”

“Lots of mountains?”

“Right. Though paradoxically, almost the entire planet surface is covered by oceans. There’s essentially only one place to land safely, the continent of Pangea, and that’s where we’re headed. Then, to get to the Tower of Inquiry, we have to hire a ship to cross the Blue Straights to the Abyss of Indifference. There we cross a narrow suspension bridge over the Abyss and that’s where the tower is.”

Now I was starting to get a little more curious, even though it seemed like the only reason we were only there because they were jealous that Narthex might get to visit the Warlock and they wouldn’t, because if the Warlock had all power over time and space then what were we going to do to stop Narthex that the Warlock couldn’t? Unless maybe there was something I didn’t know about that Narthex could do.

But maybe the Warlock had a Quest, because Zelaia said I would need it for running errands at night. I couldn’t think of why I might need something else at night except maybe a flashlight, and a credit card for my night errands, but now I was all wondering what this Quest thing might look like.

Plus I like sailing, and so it sounded fun to get a boat and sail across the Blue Straights, so long as there weren’t any cannons or sinking going on. And right then Winifred jumped up in my lap, so he could watch the landing too from my lap, or maybe just because he wanted attention. I petted him and made sure he had food, because I notice things seem to go better when Winifred is happy.

As we got closer, we were gradually surrounded by thick white fog, until after awhile all we could see anywhere around us on all of the screens was pure white. I could still hear the quiet hum and hiss of the ambient noise on the ship, and feel the slight vibration as we passed through the atmosphere, but other than that, we had no signs that we were going anywhere aside from the altitude gauge on the instrument panel, a red digital readout of a number that kept getting smaller.

Finally, after the number got down to the double digits, there was a kind of crosshairs and target shape that appeared on a screen in front of Zelaia, and she guided the steering toward the flashing light that winked across the screen, until finally we came out into a clear patch, and could see all around us.

It was a surprise because, even though we had just come through all these thick white clouds, when

we looked up the sky was a pure azure blue, all the way from horizon to zenith, with little puffy white clouds here and there.

On all sides around us was ocean, also pure blue, but a turquoise aquamarine blue that looked just like a frosting on a cake, so clear with delicious cool purity that I just wanted to jump right in and frolic all day long in it. Below us, the beach sands were white and clean and inviting.

The land, such as it was, was like an atoll or a sand bar, no wider than a few feet in most places.

“There’s only one place we’ll be able to land,” said Zelaia. “Otherwise, we get back into that white stuff.”

“Not fog, is it?” said Raktjeh. “Otherwise we’d be not seein’ blue sky above.”

“One of the many mysteries of the tower planet,” replied Zelaia. “There!”

And before us appeared a dark island in the middle of the sea, rock and mountainous, with tall foreboding trees jutting from steep cliffs. As it drew closer, flew over the ships, and rooftops and houses on the quay, we could see the one flat spot in the center on which we could land a ship. There was already a ship that had landed there, one of the buglike ships that had been attacking us on the temple planet.

When I saw that, it sent a chill through my heart, the kind of chill that always makes it difficult to be an optometrist. I tried to see clearly, that there must be a bright side to things, because at least we were on this beautiful planet with bright clear oceans and inviting sands, but it was hard to stop thinking about being underneath the rain of deadly torpedoes.

Raktjeh and Zelaia must have been feeling the same thing, or at least something similar, because we didn’t land right away.

“They can’t harm us here,” said Zelia, pointing to the gently flashing indicator on her panel that said WEAPONS SYSTEMS OFFLINE. “Armor and tools of warfare don’t function on this planet.”

Raktjeh frowned, but said nothing as Zelaia lightly set down the ship on the opposite side of the stone circle from the big bug ship. There seemed to be nobody around.

The whole of the flat area was circular, like a giant plaza, and it was all surrounded by a really tall wall made of rectangular grey stone bricks, maybe thirty or fifty feet high or so, broken only by a single archway which you had to walk through in order to get to the city. We cautiously opened up the ship and stepped out down the stairway. Still, it seemed nobody was around.

This time we were a little smarter, and we closed up the ship. By now, our sculpture thingie had learned to recognize all of us, and would open the hatch for any of us, including even Winifred, but would not open for anybody that wasn’t one of us. As we departed, Winifred came tagging along after with her

tail like an inky black question mark, we made our way to the stone gateway, all on our toes with alertness. When we got there, we all went through, but Raktjeh tried and he couldn't, as though he had run into an invisible wall.

Zelaia chuckled. "You have your electrosabre? Body armor?"

He shrugged. "Well, yeah. Weren't we expectin' some trouble?"

"You'll have to take it off to pass through the gate."

He swore, but he took off his shirt so he could take off the armor underneath, then reluctantly left it in a pile with his sabre (which had been hidden in a sheath strapped around his calf), and sure enough, then he was able to walk through.

"They oughtta have a sign or somethin'" he grumbled.

"We'll wait," said Zelaia, as he headed back to the ship to drop off his weaponry.

Soon we were all standing down on the quay, looking at all the boats around and the ocean stretching off into the bright blue hazy distance all around.

A young, Polynesian-looking woman was lounging on the bench there, staring out to sea. "You'll be with that other crew that was just here?"

"Frupzaq," spat Raktjeh. "They've already gone on ahead."

"Not *with*, strictly speaking," said Zelaia.

The woman just smiled pleasantly. "Oh, like *that*. Sometimes that's how it is. They rented the big schooner a little while ago, since they had about thirty men, but time travels differently here on the tower planet, so you may find that you arrive simultaneously even if you take one of our smaller vessels."

"Do you take Galactacredit?" asked Zelaia.

"Why, certainly," said the young lady. "By the way, you may call me Hinakai."

And we introduced ourselves all around, and Zelaia chattered cheerily with her about the arrangements, as Raktjeh grimly strode down to the quay to check out the different boats that were there. I followed him down there, mostly because it was so cool to see all the different sizes of sloops and dingys, with all different kinds of rigging, only I wasn't looking forward so much to meeting Narthex again, because I figured that must be who it was who had come here with a bunch of men in the bug ship, unless someone else was riding around in bug ships and trying to steal the Amulet of Imbalance. But it was such a beautiful day, and Gloria was looking stronger than ever, with all the stuff she had learned from Rosie, so that I could see her plainly even though it was bright daylight.

"Ever work one of these things?" asked Raktjeh.

“Um, sure.” I said. “I’ve sailed before.”

“Good,” he said, “because I haven’t. I haven’t got a clue how they run.”

“Well, mostly you just pull in the ropes far enough that the sails make you go, and don’t try to head straight into the wind,” I said. “Does that mean I get to steer?” I was very proud.

He sighed. “I suppose it probably does.” Soon we had set the rigging, and Zelaia and Winifred had come down and soon we were all on board and so we cast off from the shore and set out in the direction that Hinakai had told us, in order to get to the tower island. Soon the tall peaks and dark ridges and trees of the island we had landed on had vanished over the horizon, and we were in the middle of iridescent blue ocean, gliding over the gentle waves underneath the bright sun, listening to the water lapping at the sides of the boat, watching just below the surface all the different kinds of colorful fishes and sea creatures.

I got to steer, and Raktjeh looked like he was a little uneasy at the idea of being on a boat in the middle of the water, but he didn’t say anything about it and after awhile it was all very pleasant. We had along a little lunch that Zelaia had bought, and after an hour or so, she brought it out and we had sandwiches and iced tea. It wasn’t quite like Raspberry Rush, which generally I drink hot, but I decided that even still it was quite good.

There were other boats out on the water too, some looked like they had cast nets out and were fishing, and others like they were just making their way from one island to another, because we could see all kinds of different islands around, mostly small ones with a few palm trees, but sometimes they were bigger.

Everywhere, the balmy breeze carried the sweet scent of many kinds of flowers. I felt the feather touch of Gloria, snuggling up behind me. “Perfect spot for a honeymoon!” she eyed me meaningfully.

“That must be how it sticks to the sky,” I replied.

She gazed at me blankly. “What sticks to who?”

“The moon, with honey, because it’s so sticky. I always wondered how it stayed up there, and now you answered my question with your highly informative proclamation, thus further enhancing my knowledge of all things scientific!”

The blankness in her gaze gained even further still in its vacuity, until it had well attained, yea even surpassed the ultimate emptiness of which the Buddha speaks. Obviously, my gratitude for her inspirational knowledge had given rise in her to a state of profound enlightenment.

“The amazing thing is,” she said, “that even still, I continue listening to you.”

“It’s better to listen to me when I’m still,” I explained, “because sometimes when I’m moving you can get the Doppler effect.”

Then I guess she had to go somewhere, because she rolled her eyes and disappeared.

Soon there was one island looming in front of us that was much bigger than all the rest. The first we saw was the tip of the mountaintop, and then gradually its full dark mass drew into view.

“That’s it?” asked Raktjeh.

Zelaia nodded.

As we got closer, we could see in the distance, another boat that was docked on a pier, that must have been that big schooner that Hinakai said Narthex had taken. But even as we got closer, there was still no sign of anybody being around.

“I guess since he can’t take no weapons, he just took a lot of men,” speculated Raktjeh. “After all, the warlock is just one man. I bet he can’t take on thirty men.”

Zelaia said nothing.

“I did once, take on a hundred men,” he said, “To keep ‘em from havin’ their way with a beautiful young lady on a ship they had took over.”

“Did you win?” asked Zelaia.

He grinned. “I’m still alive, ain’t I?”

“And the lady?”

“Stayed safe.”

“Even from *you*?”

He sighed. “Alas, yes, in a manner o’ speakin. Though it might be felt that twas on account a’ my being’ called away to depart soon after.”

We landed on the pier, and made fast all the moorings, and let down the sail so that the boat wouldn’t be tossed in the wind. Narthex had left all the sails of the schooner still rigged, and they were flapping about something fierce.

There was a small beachfront, and we could see dozens of deep bootprints in the sand from heavy feet, all leading up to a trailhead, that was the start of a narrow winding trail cut into the steep mountainside.

“So what are *we* going to do, then?” asked Zelia finally.

Raktjeh shrugged. “See what we can. If it looks bad, we run away as fast as our tiny legs will carry us.”

I was beginning to wonder if what we were doing was such a good idea, but it was a little late to turn back, seeing as I was kind of committed to whatever the group decided to do. I decided that in the future I would be a little more careful what group I got committed to doing whatever they wanted with.

Winifred was busy chasing some bug in the sand. I guess she hadn't learned very much from the experience with the psilocybin beetle.

As the sinking feeling in my stomach continued to grow, and I was imagining all the not very nice things that Narthex might have planned for us, or that he might think of to do to us if we got captured by his dozens of soldiers. I looked around in a panic. "Where's Gloria?!" I exclaimed. Everyone looked at me.

At that moment, Gloria appeared next to me, smiling. "Here I am, don't worry. I just thought I'd go see what they're up to, since I can travel a little faster than you, being a lot lighter."

It was good to see her smile, and I felt a rush of relief, but it was still something to worry about that we were doing something that was probably not very smart.

"What are they doing, then?" asked Raktjeh. I think Zelaia could even see her some, now that she had learned from Rosie about how to be stronger by controlling the force of her passions.

"They're sitting in this wide place on the trail resting, getting ready to cross this narrow bridge across an enormous ravine. I couldn't see the bottom of the ravine, and it was very dark down there. The bridge looks pretty rickety."

Zelaia nodded. "The Abyss of Indifference."

"It's not too far up that way. You could probably catch up with them, and there's a place on the way where you can peek down at them from behind some trees, and probably not be seen."

Raktjeh jumped up, all a rarin' to go. "Perfect!" he said, with a gleam in his eye. "About time for Narthex to pay back for some o' them wrongs he done."

I wasn't feeling quite so enthusiastic, but I followed along anyway, as he dashed up the trail. He got way ahead of us, so that we lost sight of him.

A good ways up the mountain, after walking for awhile, Gloria pulled us aside to a trail you almost couldn't see, and pointed. "If you go that way, you'll get to an observation point."

So we did, and it felt good to get off the trail, because I kept worrying that some of Narthex's men might come along any time, and that could be bad.

Zelaia saw my worried expression, and smiled. "What happened to just expressing some appreciation? I thought you said it would go a long ways."

"I know it does," I replied, "but I'm not so sure I can think of anything to appreciate about

Narthex right now, except for raining down deadly torpedoes, which isn't exactly the sort of thing that it's easy to appreciate when you were the one who was underneath them."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something," she said. "You just keep working on it."

"How about you?" I asked. "Aren't you a little worried what might happen?"

"Of course," she said, "But there's something about doing the right thing, that often makes things turn out all right even when they seem impossible."

"How do you know we're doing the right thing?" I started to ask, but Gloria interrupted by putting her finger up to lips to shush us.

We got to a place like a 'V' in the rocks, and when we stood just right, we could see all of Narthex's men, ganged up together, sitting resting.

Then all at once, I saw a figure run out through the middle of them, out onto the bridge. "Here, said Zelaia," handing some binoculars she had been looking through, which she had produced from out of one of her satchels.

I looked through them and saw Raktjeh down on the bridge. He had turned around and was yelling something at Narthex and his men. Then he started further along the bridge, which by now was swaying and pitching and rocking from his running along it.

Now Narthex's men, all dressed in black kind of like Narthex himself except without so many spikes, were running to get on the bridge. The first two were some pretty burly looking tough guys, but from being so big and heavy they looked a little off-balance with the swaying of the bridge.

Raktjeh kept his cool though, and I guess that all the practice with the swaying and tossing during the boat ride we had just been on together had inspired him, because when the first of the two mean heavy guys threw a punch at him he just dodged, all nimble footed, and the heavy guy lost his balance, which Raktjeh helped along by a sharp boot in the bottom, and the guy went over the edge, falling into the deep black abyss.

You'd think with having such a rickety bridge over a huge deep and dark ravine like that, that it might have a railing or two on it, but I guess maybe the carpenters forgot, or they got dizzy from looking down and just abandoned construction before they finished that part.

Anyway, now the second heavy guy went to grab Raktjeh and pitch him over too, but Raktjeh rolled kind of underneath him, and which made the heavy guy lose his balance too and then he went over the edge too.

At this point, all of the men Narthex had brought were streaming out onto the bridge, which made

me wonder if would even hold up under all of that weight, especially the way it was dancing wildly all about, just like a rubber band. But somehow Raktjeh held on and no matter what sort of man came at him, he rolled and dodged and kicked and punched, and one by one they all tumbled over the edge into the dark terrifying depths of the of the blackness below.

The last one to tumble over the edge must have been a little more adept than the rest, however, plus Raktjeh must have been pretty exhausted by that point, but Raktjeh nearly fell over that time, and he only just caught a hold of the edge of the bridge at the last minute, so he was hanging down, dangling a precarious handhold with the bridge still swaying and turning from all the commotion that had been taking place on it.

A lone figure remained on the cliff leading out onto the bridge, a hulking figure all dressed in black, except this one had wicked sharp silver spikes banded around his waist and ankles and neck.

TWENTY THREE

Raktjeh felt the air, the wind gusting around him as he panted and puffed, breathing deeply to catch his breath. He stared up at the underside of the bridge, the planks above him, feeling his fingers slowly weaken as he held on for his life, sore from a half a dozen kicks and blows that had landed on him, fatigued from the exertion, and terribly out of breath, desperately breathing to regain his strength to lift himself up.

He heard footsteps set out from the end of the bridge, heavy ominous footsteps that made the wood to creak and give way. He could see the planks from the underside, like the keys of a piano depressing one by one in a sinister chromatic scale moving slowly towards him.

Involuntarily he glanced for a brief instant down into the gorge, knowing that it was the wrong thing to do, but it was just the way his head had turned. Instantly he closed his eyes, but the dizzying image of landscape below fading into grey and black at the center brought home the heights he could now fall from, and his thoughts spun.

Then he felt something lifting him up, and opened his eyes to see a smoky ectoplasmic figure. A spirit form was floating about beside him, and something in its power was lifting him up. He felt himself place one palm fully onto the rough wood surface of the bridge, then with that hand lifted the other forearm, and then the other, until he was able to get one boot up, finally heaving himself over the edge back onto the bridge.

In front of him were two massive boots, connected to two ankles each encircled with an array of viciously sharp metal spikes.

“Well, well, Raktjeh,” cackled Narthex, “We meet again. Well met indeed, I should say. What do you think, we even out the score, after you sent so many of my men over the edge, that now I just send over after them.”

“Scoundrel,” snarled Raktjeh. “It’s cheating to kick me when I’m down.”

“It’s not cheating, if I’m making up the rules!” laughed Narthex harshly. “Besides, I haven’t kicked you yet, but what a delightful idea you have given me,” and he reared one foot up to land a blow on his opponent’s head, but Raktjeh had regained his strength, and rolled out of the way just in a nick of time.

Narthex nearly lost his balance, and by the time he had regained it Raktjeh was standing in ready, out of reach. The two of them stood regarding each other for some time, one or the other feinting a rush,

only to back off at the last moment, each testing the other's reflexes, when finally Narthex impatiently lunged for Raktjeh, who deftly stepped aside at the last minute, planting a solid kick in the other's back.

The feinting continued again for awhile, then Narthex rushed again and the two exchanged blows once more, only this time it was Narthex who had the advantage, and landed a sharp blow sent Raktjeh to the ground.

Narthex's laughter now was harsh and rough, like huge chunks gravel scraping together, and he got set to lunge once more.

But suddenly a white smoky form materialized between Narthex and Raktjeh. It was Meck Murphy, the drunken thief, standing with his unkempt shirt half open the way he had been the night he had died in the temple. He was facing Narthex.

"I can't go on like this," he said. "It's not right. I'm so sorry, Raktjeh. I should never have stolen those statues from the temple, the beautiful lady of Omicron and the other ones. But here's the one who set me up to it."

Narthex scoffed disgustedly. "Meck Murphy, you pathetic fool. It's too bad you can't do anything about it, considering that I killed you back on the temple planet!"

Meck's ghost didn't seem to hear. It drew closer to Narthex, who cringed slightly in spite of himself. "It's just plain wrong, I see it now. I should never have listened, and I should have gone instead and got myself off the hooch, dried up and found something useful to do with my life, instead of stealing those statues. Hindsight. There isn't anything I can do about all that now, only now I can't go on, can't be at peace because I know it was wrong. But you, Narthex, I pity you. Because you don't know right from wrong for the life of you. You couldn't tell the difference if your life depended on it, because you've spent so much time lying to yourself about how great and wonderful you are. I thought you were strong, but you're just a bully, and a coward. Nothing more than a sniveling pathetic liar, and you just make up all of your. . ."

"Shut up you old fool!" came the thundering reply. "I AM NARTHEX!! FEEL MY POWER AND TREMBLE!!" Quivering with anger, he aimed and swung heavy blow at Meck Murphy's ghost.

Only, of course, Meck's ghost wasn't solid like it seemed, and Narthex's fist swung right through him. There was an odd moment, when the whole universe seemed to stand still, when Narthex, stood balanced on the toe of one boot, trying to shift his weight somehow to regain equilibrium. His arms flailed wildly for a second, too close to his face, and the sharp spikes that were encircling his wrist met soft skin and dug in, dragging huge gouges across his forehead, as if some wild animal had raked its claws.

Then, the fraction of a second was over, and Narthex was gone, his cry of anguish echoing from the cliffs around and receding in pitch and volume as he fell: “YOOOOOU CHEEEEEATEEEEEEEEEED!!!”

An expression of relief and freedom crossed over the ghost of Meck, and now at peace, it ascended slowly, disintegrating into the rays of sunlight as it went. Soon it had vanished completely.

By now, Art and Zelaia and Gloria had come around the trail, and studied the peril-fraught bridge over which so many had tumbled only moments ago.

“Amazing,” said Gloria quietly. “So *that’s* what we look like?”

“You sound like you’ve never seen a ghost before,” said Zelaia.

“I haven’t. . . or hadn’t until now. I was almost starting not to believe. . .”

“In ghosts?” prompted Zelaia.

“Well, yeah.”

“Do we really really need to go over there?” asked Art. “We could just go home now, since he already defeated the arch-nemesis villian guy.”

Zelaia smiled. “And miss an opportunity to visit the warlock, now that we’ve come this far?”

They stared at the bridge and the Abyss for a little while longer, then gingerly began to cross, with Winifred behind, then running ahead playfully, then waiting to fall behind again, then running ahead. The wind gusted and whistled all around them. With the darkness yawning so wide below, the sun seemed remote in the shining down from so high above in the deep blue sky.

They walked along slowly, swaying together, single file, until they reached Raktjeh, who was standing on the swaying catwalk. “You’ll forgive me, I hope, for sending ‘em all to their deaths.”

“Don’t worry about them. They’re not dead,” said Zelaia.

After a moment that it took to register, Raktjeh burst forth with a look of relief.

Silently he turned, and led them across the bridge to the other side.

TWENTY FOUR

[From the Diary of Art Bohemian]

It sure was amazing how Raktjeh battled all those guys and won! Like he was some sort of Hercules or ninja or something.

After we crossed the bridge, we walked along for some ways, around a few bends in the winding trail, and finally came upon tower made of stone blocks. It was enormous, as big around as a small mountain, and so tall that the top was invisible above through the clouds that surrounded it.

On the side facing us was a door, with a stone archway similar to the one we had walked through in the wall from the landing pad. The interior was comfortably washed in a warm light, whose source was invisible. We all looked at each other, inquisitively.

“The Tower of Inquiry,” announced Zelaia.

“Do we have to go all the way up?” I asked. “Because it looks like a whole lot of steps.”

“You can stay here if you like,” said Zelaia, “but you won’t get to meet the Warlock.”

I kept on thinking about all those steps, and how long it might take to climb them, especially if you counted each one. “But. . . doesn’t he have to come downstairs sometimes? Like when he has to go to the store or take out the recycling?” I even looked around for recycling bins, but there didn’t seem to be any. “Or maybe they’re not environmentally conscious on this planet, because they don’t seem to have recycling bins. Or DSL,” I said.

Zelaia looked at him curiously. “How does DSL make them environmentally conscious?”

I always have to explain so other people will get it. “Well I just happened to notice it right then, but if you don’t have DSL then it could be too difficult to figure out what morning the recyclers show up on, or how to separate which items belong in the container can and which ones belong in the paper can, because if you had a Chinese food leftover box it was a container but it’s made out of paper, so it could be, like, this major ethical dilemma that could take hours to solve, and then by then you might just wind up throwing it in the garbage, unless you had DSL, because it could take several hours to figure out which is the right can unless you had access to the web site, although sometimes even the web site isn’t very clear about it if it isn’t on the FAQ, because you just know that’s a Question that must get Asked Frequently. . .”

The rest of them looked at me with a simultaneous expression of dismay, which led me to suspect that maybe they didn’t quite understand my explanation. So I took a deep breath, and braced myself to

explain it better, when Zelaia placed her hand on my shoulder.

“I have an idea. Why don’t you stay down here, and see if you can straighten out the recycling situation?”

“But if all of you are going up there. . .” I didn’t want to be left behind all alone by my self, unless maybe Winifred would stay there with me, but she was already playing on the bottom steps, ready to climb up.

Raktjeh stepped through the archway and started up the stone spiral staircase. “Come on. Let’s see what’s up here.”

The staircase was enormous and wide,

Winifred scampered along around us, running ahead, then standing still on one of the steps, exactly underfoot, staring at an opening between the stones that seemed like a likely mouse hole, then scampering up ahead to get underfoot again.

There weren’t any windows, and every now and then Gloria would stick her head out through the wall to see what was outside, but all she would say was “It’s a long ways down!”

After some time, we come to landing that had a window, a plain aperture open to the fresh sea breeze from outside. One by one, we all looked out to see the clouds below us, and the sun shining down on the clouds.

There was also a portrait, an old one in dark oil paints, of a woman in fancy old-fashioned clothes. Only, every time I looked away and then looked back, she had a different expression on her face. I could never see it change, because it only changed when I looked away, and then when I looked back it looked just as if it had been painted that way centuries ago. Once it was serious, once it was happy, once it was angry, and then it was a silly one with her tongue sticking out. But I never once saw it move.

“Um,” said Zelaia, “Is it my imagination, or is the painting. . .”

“Keeps on shiftin’ around,” said Raktjeh. We looked at it for a while more, on the wall next to the sunlight streaming in through the window, then after while we kept on up the stairs.

I was trying to keep count of the steps, but I kept getting distracted by thoughts that came into my head, thoughts about asking questions. So then I had the question of whether I was just thinking of questions because I heard the name of the tower was the tower of inquiry, or if there was some sort of magical power that made people ask questions when they were walking up the steps of it. Questions, like that one. After a while, I figured I would just enjoy the stroll up the stairs and count them on the way back down.

Finally, we arrived on a landing that opened out on an enormous sunlit chamber surrealistically bright with the daylight streaming through tall windows that ran from floor to ceiling. The light flooded vision, obscuring details of all around them, the plush velvet chairs, the statuesque antique suits of armor, decor like one might have found in an ancient castle.

A young boy went scampering across the long Persian carpet that ran along the wall. He did a cartwheel and somersaulted onto an enormous pile of pillows that was piled up in one corner. “Eeeeeaaaaahhhh!” he said.

I thought that might be fun too, and the pile of pillows looked inviting after the long climb, so I ran over and landed on the pillows too. I didn’t do a somersault, but I did roll over a couple of times and laid back, relaxing. I looked up to see the young boy standing over him.

“Hello mister. You like my pillows?”

“Yes,” I replied, “They’re very soft.” “Are they yours?”

He looked away by rolling his eyes aside diagonally, then nodded his head.

“Because I thought they might belong to the warlock. Have you ever met the warlock?”

He away diagonally again, then nodded his head.

“We were wondering where he might be,” I said, “because we climbed a lot of steps looking for him, and I was going to count the steps, but I got distracted and lost count, so I’ll count them on the way down instead.”

“You wanna know where he is?” asked the boy.

By then, the rest of the group had come over to hear our conversation. Raktjeh folded his arms and drummed his fingers impatiently.

“OK,” I said. “Where is he?”

The boy didn’t answer, but I noticed that he seemed to stand up taller. Then I realized that he wasn’t just standing taller, but that he was actually growing, until he was twice the size, his clothes growing right along with him. His features changed as he grew, maturing and becoming more complex. He sprouted a beard, which grew longer and longer as he grew older, until it was down to his waist and had turned from dark brown to solid grey.

We all drew a collective breath of amazement.

“Hello, Warlock,” said Zelaia.

“But wait. . .” I said. “I thought that. . .”

“The keeper of the Amulet of Imbalance has complete control over time and space,” replied the

Warlock.

“So why were you a little boy?” I asked.

“Because it’s the most fun,” said the warlock. But he hadn’t stopped aging. Soon his hair was entirely white, and his posture stooped over into a curve like a question mark, while he gazed at us with the same exact childlike expression that he had as a young boy.

Then something amazing happened — his body disintegrated, leaving only a smoky transparent image of a man in his twenties, with a goatee.

I glanced at Zelaia. “Can you see him?” I asked, because she sometimes had trouble seeing Gloria.

Zelaia nodded back *yes*.

The Warlock walked over to Gloria and reached out his hand, touching her gently on the middle of the forehead.

Her eyes sprang wide open. “Wow! You’re kidding!”

“What?” I asked.

“I can feel it!” she said glowing with ecstasy. “I felt someone touching me! I haven’t felt anyone’s touch in over a hundred years!”

He regarded her quizzically. I found myself feeling a little irritated, and I was beginning to think that I knew what she had felt like the time when I forgot all about her.

“Mr. Warlock, sir!” she was so excited. “Can you turn me back into a real girl again? So I can have my birthday party with all my friends and cake and streamers? Please please please pretty please? Because I know you have this Amulet of Imbalance that gives you control over all time and space. Please?”

The Warlock studied her, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Such a thing is not in the realm of the Amulet of Imbalance. But the means lie within your grasp.”

“What kind of name is *that* anyway?” I said, feeling annoyed. “Amulet of Imbalance. If you’ve got an amulet that gives you all kinds of tremendous power you really ought to name it the ‘Amulet of All Kinds of Tremendous Power’ or the ‘Super-Amulet’ or the ‘Amulet of Dominion Over Time and Space’ or something clear and logical so that people can understand it, instead of some silly nonsense name that isn’t going to make sense to anybody who hears it, if has any really even means anything at all.”

“Imbalance is power. Without it one cannot take a single step. But in order to find imbalance, one must first cultivate balance, by crossing over the Abyss of Indifference.”

“Also I was wondering,” I said. “If you’ve got a Quest we could borrow? Because we were looking for a Quest.”

My three traveling companions all looked over at me and rolled their eyes, but the Warlock smiled. “You seek the seeking, but in the seeking is, itself, what you seek. Quite a conundrum, yes. . .”

“Does that mean I need to get a drum?” I said. “Because I have a bongo drum at home, but I don’t know if it would be suitable for a Nun. And also I’m trying to find out what kind of art I am supposed to be doing as a Bohemian artist.”

The Warlock regarded me studiously. “You have many unfathomed depths within you, my friend,” he said.

“Oh Lord,” said Zelaia, rolling her eyes for some reason.

Gloria was running all around the room. She had come back and was bouncing up and down impatiently. “Please, Mr. Warlock, can you make it so I can feel things again? Please, please, pretty please?”

“There are two ways you can go:” he replied, “on to oblivion, or back into physical existence. But remember that in physical existence, suffering is inescapable.”

“So how do I get back?”

“If you must, then very simply: someone must remember you. Come with me, and you’ll see what I mean.” The Warlock smiled, setting off on a stroll down the hallway, continuing in the direction we had been going when we had gotten to the top of the stairs.

Not knowing what else to do, we all followed along, and the corridor opened up into a ceilingless expanse of open sky. Looking down, I noticed that the stones looked familiar.

As we kept on walking, we came to a familiar archway, and I noticed as I looked around that the Warlock was nowhere to be found.

“Hey!” exclaimed Raktjeh, “We’re back where we landed.”

And indeed it was true, for as we walked through the stone archway, we arrived at the stone circle where our ship still sat waiting for us. It was alone: the ugly buglike ship was gone.

“Wait. How did —” Raktjeh started.

“Best just to forget about it,” sighed Zelaia. “There’s always something about this place that leaves me asking unanswerable questions.”

“But what about *me*?” protested Gloria, angrily. “He said he would show me how to get back!”

“So you can be hungry and cold and have to go to the bathroom again?” asked Zelaia.

“You don’t know what it’s like,” replied Gloria. “Having to watch everyone else enjoy a normal life, everyone *else* being able to turn the pages of a book, everyone *else* able to feel grains of sand from the beach between your toes, the gentle summer breeze through your hair. The Warlock said he would show

me how to get it all back, then he went along his merry old way and disappeared. Now *there's* a fine how do you do. It's just not fair." She folded her arms and pouted angrily.

"He didn't say he would *show* you," said Raktjeh, thoughtfully. "He said you would see what he meant." He looked at me, as he reached around his neck and drew out the necklace, handing it to me. "I reckon this is yer part," he said to me softly, "Though I'll be needin' the gem back when you be done with it, seen' as I'm the one charged with keepin' it sound."

"Remembering," I said, realizing what he meant. "So if she faded away when I forgot, then maybe she'll get more real when I remember?"

Gloria brightened again, her smile like a halo, beaming at me and bouncing up and down again. "Yes, yes, yes. Please, pretty please?"

"But wait a minute," I said. "What if it goes wrong? What if you don't like it? I wouldn't want it to be my fault."

"Please, just try. Just for me, pretty please?"

I felt all torn up inside. I could feel how excited she was, but at the same time I was so afraid of what could possibly happen, because I had never done any magic before, and I didn't know for certain what effects the gem might have, remembering how spooky it was when Raktjeh brought back the memory of his long-ago landing from the ship.

"I don't know," I said.

"Won't you even just try?" she cried, then collapsed into a sitting on the ground in a thundershower of tears. "Oh, it's no use. Nobody understands what it's like. It's just not fair! And before you know it, you'll all forget about me and I'll fade away into oblivion."

When I saw how upset she was, it filled me to bursting with sadness, and I wished I could find a way to comfort her. To hold her close and feel the rise and fall of her breath, to massage the soles of her feet and her dainty toes, to hear the gentle pulsation of her heartbeat.

"Gloria," I said, reaching out without thinking, to touch her hand. And as my fingers arrived at the familiar place in midair, they were shocked to encounter the smooth soft warmth of human skin. Jolting awake, gasping, I seized her hand.

"Gloria, look!" I cried.

She blinked in astonishment. "Dear Lord," she said. "I can feel you."

For an instant, she vanished, then reappeared. "Dandy!" she exclaimed, letting out a little cackle of glee. "I can still disappear!"

“Girls with superpowers,” mused Raktjeh. “What’ll ya be seen’ next?”

“Oh Gloria!” Her hand in mine, I steadied her as she stood up tall, my fingers pressed against hers as she rose, thrusting her smiling face all close to mine, beaming with the rainbow glow of flush exuberance.

Hesitating with disbelief, I leaned over and placed a light kiss on the gentle warmth of her sweet forehead. Then I took her delicately into my arms for a long, deep embrace, caressing her slender shoulders through the long wispy strands of silken hair.

“I can tell,” critiqued Zelaia, “that the two of you will will be positively insufferable for the remainder of the trip. Even more so than you have been so far, which, up until now, I believed to be impossible.”

“Now, don’t go bein’ bitter,” chided Raktjeh, placing his arm gently across Zelaia’s shoulder.

I was about to protest sorely against the accusation of being called insufferable, but when Gloria burrowed her head against my neck, and I felt enveloped in the cozy shroud of her soft hair, and the moist heat of her breath on my skin, I fell into an irresistibly overwhelming daze of indescribably blissful confusion, and everything else slipped from my mind.

TWENTY FIVE

[From the journal of Vaughn Helsing]

On arrival at the stately, quaint and historic town of Innsnose, I am in disconcert to encounter not one soul at all present, at least so far as can be seen visible on the streets. I then investigate more closely to the avenues and houses. Down by the quay of basalt black, clues I find to confirm suspicions mine from research in the week previous. Present on the ground are thick caked trails of mud to betray the movements of a creature armed with tentacles which dwelling in the terrible morose depths of the dark sucking clay deep in the bowels of the our great planet Earth.

Perhaps this will suffice to explain why it is closed, the Starbucks.

TWENTY SIX

[From the journal of Art Bohemian]

I was thrilled that Raktjeh had found the Earth on his “Gargle” search, and in spite of all the fantastic new futuristic experiences I was having, I was also anxious to find my way back to my own home back on Earth, where I could get real authentic Raspberry Rush tea whenever I liked. Even though I had left a whole huge box of it in the suitcase on The Island, I was sure that by now the tentacly creature had drank all of it, and besides I was sure that my hotel reservation had ended, and the nice men in black hats had already no doubt set up housekeeping for the next guest.

But Zelaia wouldn’t quit giggling about this tentacly creature we were talking about, and she was just dying to see it. So, we directed her to the vacation spot we had so recently vacated, and soon were hovering overhead the lake and the island.

As we approached the lake, we caught a glimpse of a white patch in the middle of it, which, as we got closer, became the sail of a boat which had a lone person on it, gliding silently across the murky waters in the early afternoon sunlight.

I got excited to see that, as we got even closer, it turned out the person was my friend Vaughn Helsing, who was gazing intently in our direction as we made our way closer.

“It’s my friend Vaughn!” I exclaimed. “Can I open the window so we can all wave?”

Zelaia gave me a curious look, and pressed a button. The light modulated subtly. “Go ahead. I shut off the outward-facing opacity, so he can see you now.”

So I did wave, and shouted. “Hi Vaughn! It’s me! Art!”

I’m not sure he heard me, but Zelaia was bringing our sculpture-thingie down on the Island.

“Try a psion-frequency refraction scan,” Raktjeh was saying to Zelaia, as they both hunched over one of the viewscreens. But I was too excited by seeing my friend to pay them much mind.

As soon as the door opened, I was jumping out of the ship, just in time for Vaughn to bring the sailing boat to a landing on the sandy shore of The Island.

“I like the sailboat,” I said, “much nicer than the ferry that brought me over.”

He clucked. “Yes, silent, avoiding to awaken of sinister creature dwelling below. Still, there is danger, but I could not leave my friend stranded in such a terrible place.”

“It’s OK,” I said. I found myself with tears in my eyes to discover that he cared enough about me to risk his own life. “I fell through the neon glowing portal and got rescued.”

Vaughn eyed me curiously, as he struggled to pull the boat up onto the shore, where it would be secure. I rushed over to the other side of it to help out. “Of course, it would be thus with my friend Arthur,” he said, “who would fall through glowing portal and wind up rescued by UFO. And I see you have found romance as well?”

I looked at Gloria, who had appeared beside me. “Well, not romance exactly, but. . .”

I felt Gloria jabbing her elbow into my ribs, which really hurt, and almost made me wish that she were a little less solid. “I mean,” I said, “very romance. But what I meant was, not an *exact* romance, exactly. Because the best kind is when it’s not exact.” I cringed as I looked in her direction, and she was scrutinizing me carefully, but the elbow relaxed, and she smiled with tentative satisfaction.

“What happened to the tentacly creature?” she asked.

Vaughn looked grim. “I found that which was not pretty. But are indications that creatures are returned to that place from whence they came. As my research indicates, a dark cult exists of those who call forth from the dark bowels of the earth the dregs of earliest existence, the evil creatures that ruled our planet long ago when all was a molten and harsh. Foul rituals, carried out with terrible cavorting cacophony within a fiery circle, from which these have sent out the creature to devour its sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?”

“A poor hapless soul, gullible enough to be tricked into staying in the place where the creature was wont to feed.”

I gulped. “You don’t by any chance mean *me*, do you? Unless the creature had been on a diet, because Gloria probably is less calories, being a ghost. Besides which, I’m not gullible.”

The last bit elicited a raised eyebrow from Vaughn, but he continued: “When found the creature sacrifice having no existence, creature dreadful, it would turned for its appetite on those practicing of the ritual. And clues have I seen to that sequence of events, with trails in mud leading from the lake to the fire pit, and dried pools of blood.”

“Whew,” I said. “It must have been hungry, if it ate all of them, like one of those two-for-one lunch specials, except it would have been more like dinner, and more like three or four for one, which would be a pretty good deal if you ask me. So now maybe it’s like that snake that ate an elephant and looks like a hat? Meaning that it’s going to be dormently sleepy for a week or so at least, if I remember what snakes are like when they eat.”

Gloria looked at me. “A *hat*?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but not like the one in *Mystery Science Theatre 2000*, because that one was a flying hat.”

“I see.”

“Hey!” shouted Zelaia, from the sculpture-thingie. “Come check this out!”

Vaughn followed us curiously. When we got there, I introduced him, as he was walking up the steps. “Zelaia and Raktjeh, this is my friend Vaughn. And by the way, this is Gloria, and the black cat Winifred.”

Winifred was studying Vaughn, deciding whether to rub affectionately up against him or to borrow his leg as a scratching post. “So, this is what is like inside, a UFO,” said Vaughn.

“What on Omicron is a UFO?” demanded Zelaia.

“What on Earth is an Omicron?” asked Vaughn.

“What on Omicron is an Earth?” countered Zelaia.

“Never mind that,” said Raktjeh. “Look at this!”

On the screen before him was something that looked like an X-ray cross-section, only in color. I could make out a creature with a starfish head and tentacles, that looked like the one that had so rudely spilled my tea, after it had come in without closing the door behind it on that fateful night that seemed so long ago.

Then he adjusted a joystick lever so that the screen zoomed back, and revealed not just one, but three or four of those tentacled creatures, all frozen in varying poses in a series of connected caves.

“Where are they?” asked Gloria.

“Under the bottom o’ the lake.” Raktjeh zoomed out to an image which showed an overhead view of the lake, and the small rectangle we had been looking at with the creatures in it. “It looks wot sorta stasis field keepin’ around ’em.” He grinned. “I could blow ’em away right ’ere, if you like.”

Zelaia frowned. “Bad idea. If you harm the cubs, it will rouse the mother.”

“The ritual it was, that caused them to awakening,” said Vaughn. “That is recorded within the horrible tomes that have been passed down from the generations. With ritual no more, they will sleep.

Zelaia mused on this. “Probably true. Until someone else discovers the ritual. But best to leave well enough alone, if you ask me.”

“Dear Lord,” murmured Gloria. “I never knew there was more than one.”

“Do they wake up soon, or are they going to be asleep for awhile?” I inquired.

“Why do you ask?” replied Zelaia.

“Because I wanted to go get my Raspberry Rush tea, from where it was in my suitcase.”

Zelaia appeared to find this amusing. “I think we can fend them off while you get your tea. Go!”

“A’ter ’ow many centuries?” replied Raktjeh. “The’ll be asleepin’ fer awhile, wot.”

Gloria followed me back to the house, where the place was a mess, with mud all over. But I guess it was because like Zelaia said, they were only cubs, and their mother hadn’t taught them any manners yet, even how to close the door when you come through it, and not to go around spilling other peoples tea and devouring them and stuff like that.

“Are you sure you’ll be OK?” I asked. “You won’t miss this house? You’ve been here so long.”

She shivered. “This dark creepy and creaky old dusty mildewed termite-ridden shack? I should think not.”

“But as a bohemian artist, I may not be able to afford much better,” I said.

She smiled at me warmly, drawing me close to her. “*Anything* will be better than this. And besides, you’ll be there with me.”

TWENTY SEVEN

Beneath the brightly colored crepe-paper streamers, Gloria blew out the sizzling candles that were set into the white frosting-covered cake.

As the acrid scent of burning wax curled lazily into the air, Zelaia deftly brandished the cake slicer, laying a carefully delineated portion on the pastry plate, and handing it to Vaughn along with a fork.

“Can I give it to you now?” I asked.

“Sure, now that I’ve made my wish.”

“And you won’t tell me what you’re wishing?”

“Of course not, silly. That would spoil everything.”

“OK, so here it is.” I reached under the table and pulled out the little white box from where I had been keeping it, smoothing out the silver ribbon and handing it to Gloria.

She pulled on the bow and made faces of anticipation and delight as the wrappings fell away.

“Dear Lord,” she said finally. “It’s lovely.”

“Rosie gave it to me, as a gift for you,” I said. “I hope it’s close to what you were expecting, because I don’t know what happened to the locket your mother was going to give you, but maybe this is close to the same thing.”

She brushed aside a tear. “It’s perfect,” she said, opening it to see what was inside — it was empty. “But the best gift is having all my friends here.” She looked around at all of us.

“So Arthur,” inquired Vaughn. “Did ever you determine what category of art you will be engaged to create, in order to be a bohemian artist?”

“Well. . .” I said.

There was a long pause, until finally Gloria spoke up. “Why *do* art, when you can *be* Art?”

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