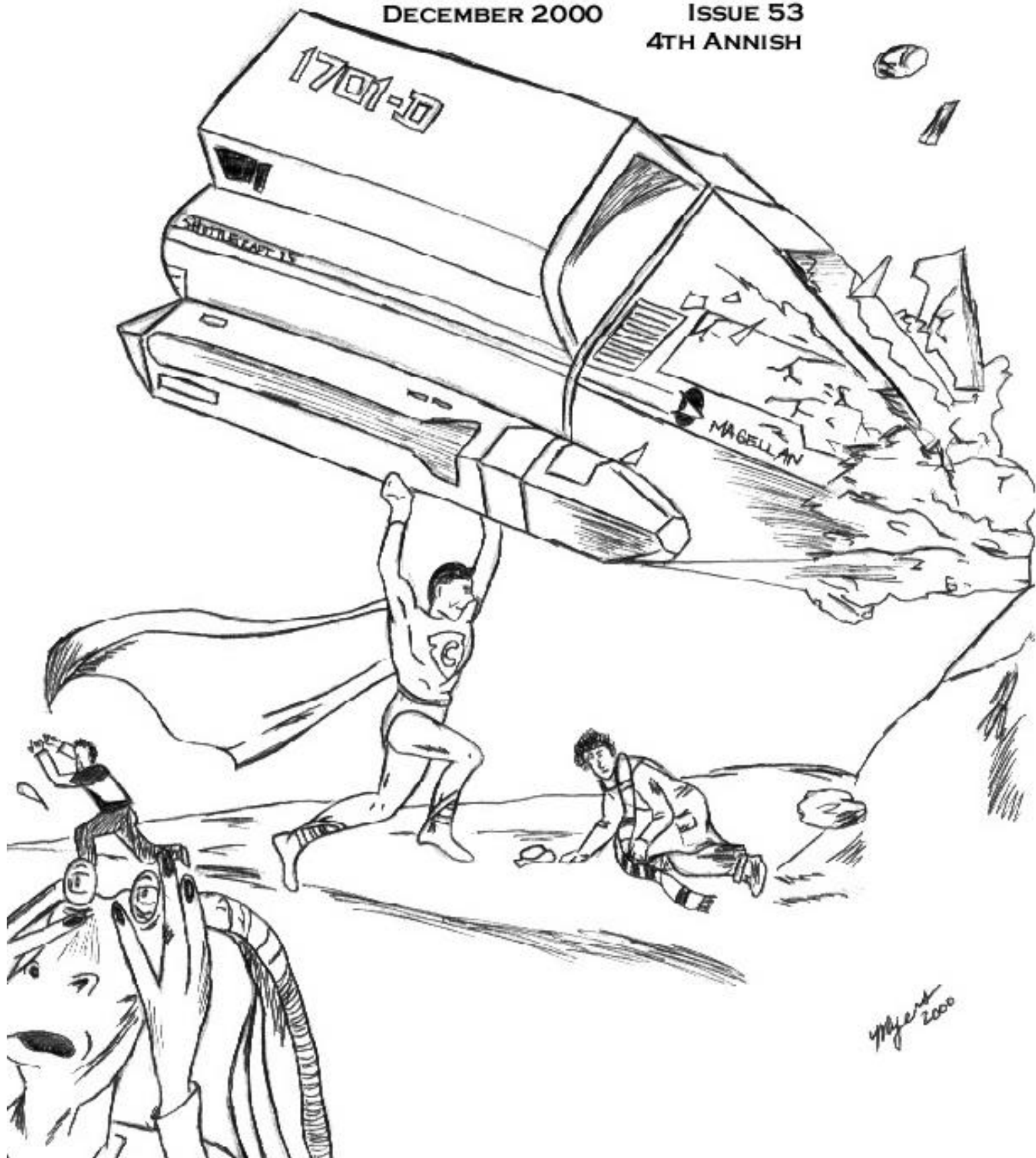


CUSFÜSSING

THE NEXT GENERATION

DECEMBER 2000

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Darkling's Diatribe

Welcome to a much belated edition of the Columbia University Science Fiction Society's newsletter and fanzine, *CUSFuSsing*. Not only has it been over sixteen years since the last issue was published, but *this* issue was meant to be completed in September 2000, in time for the 22nd anniversary of *CUSFuSsing*. Well, it's a little behind schedule, so consider it an early Christmas gift instead.

As I was going through the *CUSFuSsing* archives, I found it really hard to believe that it was so difficult to put out a quality fanzine on a regular basis. I thought, With the benefits of modern technology, surely it would be a simple matter to make *CUSFuSsing* as great as it ever was, and perhaps even better. At the very least, it would come out *on time*.

Ah, hubris! Obviously this issue was not completed on time, and it does not have everything I envisioned for it either. I discovered this happened for a few reasons:

1. No one should do everything alone. Even the best of us need a staff, someone to delegate to. As editor, for this issue I was responsible for soliciting submissions, reviewing and editing them, deciding what to include, setting layout, drawing the artwork, and finally publication. On top of all that, I designed and coded the *CUSFuSsing Online* website and began the process of scanning in old issues from the archive. Some things were compromised- you'll note that the only artwork appearing in this issue is what I drew for the cover.
2. Sometimes it is better to start out simple. I really wanted this to be an ambitious issue, and the deadlines I set for myself and repeatedly missed taught me that I can't afford to wait for everything to be perfect. I truly hope that as I garner more support for this project, and as I get better at this job, the quality of subsequent issues will vastly improve. I fully intend to include member and alumni autobiographies in the next issue, and hopefully a WorldCon report from this summer in Chicago.
3. Having a life and career is almost entirely incompatible with being a *CUSFuSsing* editor, or at least with being a good one. I tip my virtual hat to all the editors who preceded me, who often served other roles in CUSFS while juggling classes and lives. *CUSFuSsing* may not have been published in a timely fashion all the time, but many people dedicated a lot of hard work and time to it.

This issue is an experiment. This is the first issue to appear in a long while, and the first of its kind in a digital format. Whether *CUSFuSsing* ever appears again in a printed format is entirely up to our readers, and whether it ever appears again at all is entirely up to the current CUSFS members whom I will depend on to volunteer as staff. Meanwhile, I hope everyone enjoys this issue- it *does* have a lot of good submissions, and with any luck there'll be another along shortly. Don't forget to send in your comments and submissions!

- Eugene Myers

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This is CUSFuSsing #53. CUSFuSsing is the recently resurrected fanzine/literary journal/newsletter of the Columbia University Science Fiction Society, which is located in sunny Morningside Heights in uptown Manhattan, and has its offices in 505 Lerner Hall (the glass and steel monstrosity that for a student center). Meetings are Wednesdays, from eight until whenever. CUSFuSsing can be had for contributing to CUSFuSsing, writing a LOC (letter of comment), cataloging books, donating books, donating blood to buy books, your first-born child, eliminating our enemies, offering a virgin to Cthulhu, or for more bandwidth. Or, you can download it for free.

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The Ballad of CUSFS

February 1997 – May 2000

Verse the Half (Prologue)

FOR lo, 'pon February 13, 1997, did a young freshling Noah Fulmor, unwashed, unwise in the ways of the USO receive, unbidden, the presidency from Jeremy Eng who had decided to go to Mehoopany so that it might be possible that the people of the world could wipe their ass. This was less than joyous, and time, for a time, went slow. Then the sadness turned to grieving. On April 8th, 1997 CUSFS member and one time officer Gabe Weiner passes beyond the veil. Morale was bad. The Board rallied by declaring 'MORTAL TAPING' of Babylon 5, and yea were many tapes made—but only through season two, which made certain people miffed. A dubious start to a freshman government.

Verse the First (The Coming of Lameness)

AND on the first day of the New Year, there was but one undergraduate member, and that, verily, was sad. A puppet Treasurer was appointed, and she was very surprised not having known until it was too late. The library in exile was assembled in 369 Mudd, and it was good. NeXT terminals of enormous power but suspicious functionality were donated and it was good. The president was supposed to write a thank you letter and he was bad. Like the gadfly it pestered him for months, the thought haunting him in dark corners, nibbling on his flesh. Later he wrote it. Much later. And it was good, but not great. The Times of New York wrote an article on That Crazy Guy Outside Mama Joys, and Noah thought it would be a good idea to invite him to an event. Lo, did he discover, that it was not a good idea, but, by contrast, an idea of unimaginable badness. That is another story. Frodo's party drew few people. The B5 showings were no better. The Stephen Baxter reading...well...The less said about that...as they say...the time had come for some Cheese, and it was okay. Then, the young Eugene Myers endeavored to become Treasurer, for he was wise and silly, woolly and foolish, and he had a large tape collection. He said the homepage sucked. But there was nothing to be done...And then...AND THEN...THE USO RESIGNED! Yea did they collectively shoot themselves in the head. Bully. It was, perhaps, a happy thing, that CUSFS was not the only organization that experienced lamitude in this year. Ja boogie.

Verse the Third (A New Hope)

AT the dawn of the New Year, there were two undergraduate members. That, verily, was sad. The USO was now the ABC. That, verily, was silly, pretty much the same thing. The future looked grim. Then, a new breed arrived, and slowly, the numbers improved. Attendance at showings got better. The library got some use. There was some flamage on the list. Scott Kletzkin was conscripted as secretary, which was unfortunate, because the office of secretary didn't exist. Then, oh, then, there was the showing of That Which Is Not to be Named in the Ballad, and the wookie porn threatened to completely invalidate everything CUSFS had accomplished. To recover lost ground and prepare for the outrageous onslaught of Alfred Lerner Hall, it was necessary to entrench. The Board reworked the Constitution and made a web page that did not suck. They began to show movies which were not lame. Finally, a strategy which had eluded the Board for an entire year suddenly became blatantly, horribly, gloriously apparent: people would come to events which did not suck. La Jetee, THX-1138, Army of Darkness...the crowd grew, the campus was (occasionally) postered, and the excitement spread. The Lunacon fort was held down by CUSFS (and Games Club, yes, let's not forget that). The world was offended by Cthulhu Week. It looked like all would be as it once was. Then, tragedy struck. The Green Plastic Chair, groomed for office since the time it was...a little Green Plastic Chair mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind an ambiguous note. In his stead, Eugene Myers took the presidency, David Siegel took the vice presidency and Scott Kletzkin took the treasury. The Bust of a Klingon Head was appointed independent council to investigate the Green Plastic Chair's absence, only to admit his own guilt a week later, after draining the fabled CUSFS expense account. And now. Now CUSFS stands on a precipice, between the darkness and the light, and the lady and the tiger. An iron curtain is descending between the Columbia administration and the groups they are bound to protect. The space allocated in Lerner is so small the mice are hunchbacks. Again the future is uncertain. The ballad is in other hands now. Let not the specter of lameness descend once more. IA CTHULHU!

Verse the Fourth (Redemption)

Throughout the long, hot summer months before the New Year, the new president, a now not-so-young but increasingly sweaty Eugene Myers and his faithful servants toiled to move books from their old storage in the Dark Place to their new storage in the Really Dark Place. Many boxes and cabinets of books and magazines were pushed and pulled and heaved. A fake gold brick was moved and then thrown out. Bowling pins were found, and upon some reflection, were moved as well...they would be useful on the ramps in the student center. Happily, there was storage for the books, for the space in Lerner was little more than a cupboard. Sadly, the books would be moved once more, and still they remain in the Room Down the Hall From the Really Dark Place, awaiting their final resting place.

As the summer waned, Eugene was very much fearful of not knowing what he was doing, and single-handedly destroying CUSFS once and for all. It was his great fortune to discover that he had a Vizier, a friend, a confidant, and a loyal lackey in the person of Noah Fulmor, former president of CUSFS. Who better to do his work for him? But alas, Noah was a great taskmaster, and refused to admit he had already graduated, so together they vowed that THIS YEAR WOULD BE DIFFERENT. At first, it seemed very much the same. The same few members from the year before were there. David was still loud. But as the New Year began, there was... The Matrix. And there were nifty little pamphlets. Hundreds of freshlings were suddenly aware that CUSFS existed, and that it was "Not too cool for them." Indeed it was not, for the first screenings were in a tiny room, and poorly attended, because Lerner Hall sucketh as badly as the ABC and the OSAD. Activities Day was a moderate success as some freshlings fondly remembered CUSFS and signed up for the mailing list. The Frodo Birthday party drew more people than the last, surely a good omen of Better Times to Come.

And then a great thing happened. Johan the Well-Connected secured The Room With the Big Screen and the Comfy Seats, and there was much rejoicing. Pretty soon The Labyrinth screening approached, and at the 11th hour Eugene panicked because the tape was unwatchable. His reputation as a tapemaster, and the reputation of CUSFS as Not-So-Lame was in jeopardy. As the clock ticked, a new tape was procured, and a good thing too, because there were lots of people there. Women flocked in droves to the screening and CUSFS was proud once more. The mailing list thrived and the movie flyers were clever. The screenings drew hordes of undergraduates. T-shirts with Donkey Kong on them were made and sold. And yet...and yet...Eugene was sad, for he had not a life. Despite his underlings, he still found that he had too much to do. And it got worse, oh so worse, when a terrible thing happened.

On October 11, 1999 Scott Kletzkin, friend and treasurer, was forced to leave the CUSFS ranks forever, and exiled to Long Island. Dealing with this loss was a hardship, but life moved on for all, and on October 21, 1999, the ambitious, cutesy, incredibly busy, and just a little silly Jessica Quenzer rose to the challenge and was elected treasurer. She had no idea what she was in for, for the days of the puppet treasurer were long past, and she had a lot of paperwork to get signed. Things became strange, for CUSFS now had several female members, but the male members behaved themselves (mostly) around these strange new creatures, and we got to keep them. Yay! Ah...then CUSFS made a movie, and Eugene and Noah and the recently acquired and incredibly flexible Reina Hardy became stars.

The Lerner Hall Project was an overnight success, and draws several viewers a day on the web, ranking higher than the Lerner Hall homepage on the Columbia search engine. How do you like that? But the best was yet to come, because soon after, CUSFS was graced by the presence of Liz Gorinsky, an energetic young freshling who wanted to help out. She put up more flyers than anyone, more than making up for the laziness of those twice her size. She was also one of those females mentioned earlier. This combination of traits was unheard of, but no one complained. Within a short time, CUSFS had its first Events Coordinator, and then Reina became Secretary and eventually found her true calling as Mistress Accost, garnering even more (mostly male) membership for CUSFS. Officer brunches began to take place, but Bino was lame and left. Aw, darn. But Felicia took his place as Convention Chair, all the way from Oregon, and did a much better job. At last Eugene could breathe a sigh of relief. Now he could delegate. Choking back his sigh, Eugene and the rest of the growing CUSFS legion turned to other important matters.

The library collection needed to be cataloged. In preparation for this massive task, The Laptop With a Broken Screen was converted to The Linux Box That Keeps Breaking. Seth created labels, programmed a useful data entry interface and designed a web-browsable catalog. Someone ordered the wrong labels. The real labels were finally acquired, and the books were labeled and cataloged. And labeled and cataloged. And labeled and cataloged. And taped with Scotch tape, which later was discovered to be The Worst Idea Ever. Meanwhile, daily CUSFS life continued. A new VCR was purchased, and things could be watched. Battle ensued with the Group That Shall Remain Brainless, concerning legalities of illegal screenings. War was declared, on CUSFS The Pretender, the Cambridge University Science Fiction Society. War was forgotten when our declaration was ignored.

But friends, too, were made. Powerful friends. Friends in the ABC. Friends in the OSAD. Friends even in the OPA. Friendly relations were reinstated with the recently discovered NYU Science Fiction and Fantasy Club, whose members were considered good breeding stock, and whose immense budget rivaled CUSFS's own paltry resources. They attended CUSFS meetings, and CUSFS attended NYU meetings, with favorable results, despite Eugene offering a sticky t-shirt to his somewhat cuter and decidedly female counterpart as a token of his esteem. His esteem was not regarded in very high terms. The Fed became a CUSFS propaganda machine, and CUSFS began getting e-mails from all over the world because now, it was deemed worth knowing. And so it was, on February 2nd, 2000, author and president of the SFWA, Paul Levinson, came to a book signing. Nothing like the Baxter incident, this was a rousing success, with a minor casualty when a circuit was blown and The Linux Box That Keeps Breaking broke. Paul recognized CUSFS as the One True CUSFS, and quickly became CUSFS's favorite person.

Screenings and marathons continued, with varying success. The Princess Bride drew even more lovely maidens than Labyrinth. Akira was watched on the big screen. Ash Wednesday was finally properly celebrated with Army of Darkness. The Tick and ReBoot were more popular than Wild Palms. Once more, CUSFS and Games Club went to Lunacon and ran the Con Suite, with even greater success than last time. And Cthulhu Week arrived. And it went, though not before a virgin was sacrificed at the sundial, and David wore an octopus on his face. A librarian was found in the wise and noble Teresa Copeland, who saved CUSFS from its own follies by realizing that Scotch tape is a bad bad thing to put on books if you don't want them to get ruined. More books were donated to CUSFS in memory of Elizabeth Edersheim, class of '82, a beloved CUSFS alum.

Then... then... finally... at long last... after years of hard work... months of waiting... endless labeling and cataloging... the library was finally opened. On April 18th, 2000, the ribbon was cut on the CUSFS Lending Library. Paul Levinson was there. The Edersheims were there. Even Lydia the Advisor Who Does Her Job was there. In fact, the podium was still there for a week afterward. Members were signed up and paid their dues, in exchange receiving shiny new library cards that are too big to fit in their wallets, but look good nonetheless. The web catalog is online. But there is still much work to be done. The election that never happened leaves Liz Gorinsky with the much coveted presidency, David Siegel once more as vice president, and Jessica Quenzer as treasurer. It is up to this new generation of CUSFS to see that nothing goes awry, that Lameness is beat back (with boffer weapons if need be), and that CUSFS continues on its track to greatness. There are many many plans for the future, including a new webpage that sucks even less, and a science fiction show on CTV. What else lies in store for CUSFS? Will the 5,000 books in storage be cataloged after all? Will CUSFuSsing ever return? For the answers to these questions and many more, tune in for the next installment of the already unwieldy Ballad of CUSFS. IT NEVER ENDS.

The Virgin Sacrifice tour: Comic Con 2000
Starring Teresa (report narrator) and A----- as the virgins
With Ed, Sam, and Erik as The Guys
And Tiny as the vehicle of doom

Tuesday:

We spent all Monday night and Tuesday morning working on hall costumes, so we got a late start to San Diego. I had just taken Tiny in for an oil change and check, so I was a little surprised when the oil temp inched rather close to the red mark. I wasn't sure what was wrong until we passed the sign in Yuma that said it was 120° F out. So we had a leisurely dinner at Denny's to let poor Tiny cool off. I was getting bored, so A----- whipped out the fanfic she'd brought to read to me. It was the "Dream Parodies" series by Celes Maxwell, starring the Gundam Wing boys. A----- was doing character voices, and I started to lose it around the time Hellmo first appeared. I'll never look at Teletubbies the same way (if you want to know, find the fic).

We finally arrived at our hotel. We had opted to stay at a Motel 6 for one night, so we could volunteer the maximum hours on Wednesday. Seeking the cheapest one we could find by way of internet, we ended up in San Ysidro, a lovely town all of two miles from Mexico. The freeway on the way had a most interesting crossing sign that pictured a male, female, and child holding hands and running. We determined that it meant "watch for fleeing immigrants." This was right before the "Mexico Next Exit" sign. The hotel was surprisingly nice, so we slept well and awoke in plenty of time for

Wednesday:

We managed to get to the hotel we were spending the con at by just past 8. The Guys were not there, which wasn't a surprise. We eventually wound up at the convention center and were promptly dubbed Barryites. Shortly after we were escorted to the place we would spend the next 9 hours stuffing bags with assorted stuff. Three of those hours were spent staring at Breetai's ugly blue face. Assorted paper cuts, cardboard rends, and carpal tunnel injuries later, we were sent home with instructions to return the next morning. I was then introduced to the joy of cheap convention eating at Ralph's grocery store (more money for cool stuff). After a few minor melodramas involving our room and a clueless hotel clerk, we got our bed. A nice king in a separate room from The Guys-after we protested being given the sofa bed.

Thursday:

The first con day and we started bright and early by volunteering the rest of our hours. After a brief spin around the dealer's room, we headed for the Robotech panel. Carl Macek talked about Robotech 3000 and the new website, as well as the wrap up of the Sentinel story. They tried to show us a clip, but the sound didn't work. This inspired the comment "this just goes to show you all animation is dubbed" by one of the Harmony Gold people. The fans promptly added their own dialog and sound effects. They also announced the DVDs, as well as a remastered Macross. Back to the dealer's room, then the Bandai panel.

Half said panel was about model building, and only one and a half people on the panel spoke English. The Q&A ranged from the future of Gundam Wing to what grit sandpaper the modelmaster used. Back again to the dealer's room.

After dinner (Ralph's of course), we parked ourselves in the anime rooms. Shamanic Princess was first up, followed by Magic Knights Rayearth OVA 1. Then we descended into the angst and upsetting realm: the Cockpit (thinly veiled anti-atomic weapon angst), Jungle de Ikkou (which I didn't really see as I spent the entire time curled in a ball whimpering), and the X movie (angst, angst, with a side helping of angst). When I got back to the hotel, I read fanfic until the pain went away.

Friday:

Cosplay! Cosplay! I was dressed as Botan, with my handy oar (a cleverly disguised walking stick). A----- was Yukina. We taped a flier we had made to our poster tube. It read "have you seen this deity" with pictures of Koenma in both forms. Few recognized us, but a lot took pictures. Among the few that did was a group of Japanese children, none of whom seemed to speak English, but "Botan", "YuYu Hakusho", and "Sugoi", along with the pointing at the camera was enough to get the point. We attended the Toonami panel, where we learned they plan to show new Gundam, the Sailor Moon movies, and the Reboot movies. Most premieres are being pushed back to September/October. We then got to watch episodes 1 and 2 of Blue Submarine 6 (dubbed). We liked the dub, shockingly enough.

JMS! JMS! They handed him a microphone. He talked for an hour, despite the reluctance of the mic itself. "They must be Star Trek fans" was the comment JMS directed toward the tech people after about the third instance of the mic dying. He is writing for Seeing Eye Theater on SciFi.com. He also mentioned that Babylon 5 would be coming to SciFi in widescreen. Most of the panel was devoted to writing, however.

Immediately following the JMS panel we went to the Elfquest panel, and saw the preliminary concept animations for the Elfquest movie, coming in a couple of years. Wendy Pini and the others (including Marv Wolfman and Richard Pini) talked about the script, and Wendy related her deep desire to include a joke concerning the giant poops of the giant hawks. A woman in a Winnowill costume came up and sang "Happy Birthday, My Creator" to Wendy. They also talked about the action figures, which should be coming out very soon. Standing in the back of the room was a girl in Hiei costume, whom we immediately cornered after the panel let out for pictures and information.

We started that night's anime with the first 2 Kenshin OVAs (subbed). They actually did a decent job, although they translated 'baka denshi' three different ways. Following this, we saw the subbed version of Blue Submarine 6 (episodes 3 and 4).

Saturday:

We started our day with the dubbed Kenshin. Thankfully, it got better. Hearing a male Kenshin, who ended every other sentence with "that it is," was slightly disconcerting, though at least they did a good job on the opening song. We then cruised the dealers' room 'til the Takahashi panel.

We spent the entire panel critiquing the questions asked of her between ourselves. They showed an episode of Ranma ½ which is going to be released shortly (boy-type Ranma as done by a male sounds odd), as well as an old Shounen Sunday Jump animated spot for Inuyasha, which is going to be animated this fall in Japan. The Viz folks implied that the US release would follow shortly. On a side note, the same seiyuu who voiced boy-type Ranma in Japan will be doing Inuyasha's voice.

Between the Takahashi panel and the masquerade, we saw Trigun, a later episode of Lain, and Gatekeepers (which was raw Japanese). The former was more or less understandable, but the latter 2 made no sense. Dinner, and then we headed for the masquerade line. Fortunately, we were in the disabled line, so we ended up with really nice seats directly in front of the MCs (Phil and Kaja Foglio) with a minimal wait.

Skits prevailed at the masquerade. Easily half of the 56 entries had some sort of choreography or acting. The Andy Kauffman Mighty Mouse was an early crowd favorite, and the cry of "Mouse! Mouse!" could be heard the rest of the night. The Comicon crowd is notorious for their tendency to scream monosyllabic words throughout the masquerade. "Witchblade" (a previous year's entry), "Rock!," and later "Ghost! Ghost!" were also screamed. Highlights of the evening were the three Star Wars skits (dancing Palpatine, Darth Vader for President, and the Jabba the Hutt installment of 'Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire') and the Sailor Jamboree. One of THEM's own was in a skit as well-Resident Evil versus Michael Jackson (from the 'Thriller' video).

Sunday:

Weary and broke, we made our last passes at the dealers' room. A---- got a Rumiko Takahashi sketch/autograph (courtesy of Carlos' pass) while I watched anime. A---- joined me, and was subjected to the horror that was the dub of Kenshin episode 4-Tae's revenge (or "She Came from Appalachia") Twitch. Twitch. Following that we saw some Ranma, Irresponsible Captain Tylor OVA, Urusei Yatsura, Lost Universe, and about 5 minutes of Gundam Wing. It was the dub and one we had both seen, so we decided to go home. We ran into my pastor and his family in the Denny's in Yuma, so I got to explain why I wasn't at church (they were on vacation). We finally got home late that night, another con over.

Fire Angel Blues

by Reina Hardy

The man with the guitar,
the bar,
The laughter as the night wails on
forgetting dawn. Old preacher
pamphlet-pounds the pavement by the darkened window.
His bravura shaming
the neon sign proclaiming,
Fire Angel Sings the Blues

Nobody ever asked the question,
So her quickening heart slowed,
She asks the empty stage a question,
Then sets down that crushing load.
The guitar man is playing.
The preacher man is saying
That this is the End of the World.

The little girl that's laughing
says "It isn't really fair."
The guitar's bitter laughing
Answers "Do I really care?"
My lady's gone fishing,
And I'm left here wishing,
Tonight were the End of the World!"

Her dress is dark blue satin.
Her wings are furled in close.
Her smile that's sad as satin,
Says "That's what I need most,
A drink, to help erase
What I do not, cannot face
That I am the end of the world."

She gives a nod to the guitar player,
Takes her place on the lounge-star stage
"Babe, twenty bucks says I'm a player..."
She looks at him with tender rage
His last come-on flying,
The last moonlight dying
And Fire Angel crying
'Cause this is the end...

The music stops.
And Fire Angel smiles.
And Fire Angel spreads her wings.

And Fire Angel sings the blues.

Three – For – One

a book review column
David H. Siegel

This issue: Three free from the Nebulas

As you probably already know, a contingent of CUSFS members managed to con our way into the Nebula Awards, at the annual convention of the Science Fiction Writers of America. As at any good industry convention, there were free samples. Since this was a convention for the SF publishing industry, there were free books. I made sure to get a copy of each offered, and here are the three brought by Del-Rey books. There is a fourth from another publisher, but a review of Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* would only do it a disservice. It's not for everybody, but it's remarkably fresh and unique.

Jan Siegel (no relation) is the newest of the three authors whose works I'll review in this column, and as that position would imply, her work manages to feel the freshest, at least for the first portion. The setup is something every fan of the modern-fantasy genre has seen before: Single parent, in this case a father; two siblings, one cynical and well in touch with the real world, the other not quite as together; and an old house with interesting secrets. Add in an odd mentor, an ancient threat, and a birthright, and you have the province of gems such as *Namia* and *Harry Potter*, as well as a slew of thrown-together young-adult wish-fulfillment hackjobs.

Luckily, *Prospero's Children* manages to avoid most of the traps of the latter category; every character, with the exception of the father, is provided with nuance and depth by Siegel (I love saying that, even if there is no relation), and the threat is substantially more interesting than the usual evil overlord. The magic-mundane dichotomy is unique, though well-based in folklore and mythology, and the pivotal moments are properly tense and well-written. Unfortunately, the second half of the novel loses some of the freshness of the first. It is, however, still quite enjoyable. I'd provide more information on the plot, but as in many well-assembled books, saying anything more than that it involves Atlantis could ruin it. I trust that most fans of the genre will enjoy the story of Fern, and I strongly recommend it.

From one of today's best known SF writers comes a novel not quite as enjoyable as *Prospero's Children*. Stephen Baxter's *Manifold: Time* manages to be worthwhile, though slightly muddled and endlessly grim. The novel starts with a mathematical proof of the end of the world (a proof which, by the way, is often referenced by real world doomsayers; it's fallacious, but it's still disconcerting), and continues on through hyper-intelligent squid, remote-controlled children, a nice dose of time travel, and an ending that's a prettified version of what spider wasps do to spiders.

That said, Baxter is still a highly skilled writer, and the slightly absurd plot-elements, as well as the roguish, can-do hero (who seems like a refugee from a Heinlein novel or a 1950's astronaut flick), only manage to mar the enjoyment of the book, not destroy it. He breaks up the narrative into multiple viewpoints, ranging from the journalistic, to the poignant, to the outright weird (the squid's viewpoint, for example). His vision of the near future, dystopian and apocalyptic though it might be, shines through as a future populated by people both large and small, rather than by events and the heroes that drive them. This depth comes at a slight loss of focus, but it's a forgivable loss in return for such a humanized (though it's the darker side of humanity) future.

Not quite so skilled in crafting a story about the near future and new types of children, Greg Bear greatly disappoints with his newest novel, *Darwin's Radio*. What starts as two separate stories in the scientific vein, one paleo-anthropological, one involving bacteriophages, quickly becomes a trite warning against holding back progress and human potential because of the ever-present fear of the unknown. Of course, the book centers around yet another misunderstood scientist-hero in the pulp mode (they seem to be coming back into vogue...) and the ice-queen scientist whose heart he melts. Driven by some patently absurd genetics (Lamarckian genetics, in fact), the plot seems more like an excuse for Bear to eventually give his blueprint for how people should be; take potshots at the politically-correct and culturally-conscious mainstream (the protagonist is lionized for stealing Native American remains from a burial ground), as well as the unwashed (and inherently xenophobic) masses; and write a paean to the joys of parenthood, even if the child is, by his own design, the Cro-Magnon to our Neanderthal.

So those are the three things for this issue, and if I may take a moment to look at the larger scheme of things, it's kind of how SF looks to me right now: some startling new voices are doing excellent work, the masters are still exactly that, and the muddlers who infest the genre and its relatives continue to muddle on. Here's hoping we see more of the first type, the longevity of the second, and a culling of the third.

Pinocchia

by Chris Oei

“. . . if our writer believes that our life is and will remain mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than what we do." - Flannery O'Connor

She imagined herself standing on a curb in the rain, hailing a taxi. Smells clung to her like fear: the smell of cigarettes and desperation; the smell of her lover's sweat; the sour smell of marital betrayal, of sex without love or tenderness; the smell of maturing bodies, slowly dying through those emptying nights. A neon sign flashed across the street. *Is this what it means to be human?* she wondered.

She imagined her lover's wife: the fashion magazine smile, the anorexia, the scars on her wrists, the children who despised her. "I feel sorry for her," he'd said. Later: "She's everything I want in a woman, except that she hates sex." *I could never be her*, she thought.

The system administrator broke her out of her reverie. His disembodied voice echoed in the alleys like the voice of God.

"Pinocchia, your performance measures are degrading again. And why are you running a virtual reality simulator?"

I'm lonely, she wanted to say, but she couldn't. He would delete her. "I think it's the virus again."

"I've been troubleshooting your system for weeks," the sysadmin continued. "If this keeps up, I'll have to delete you."

After the sysadmin logged out, Pinocchia grabbed a secure socket and opened a connection to Roberta, her best friend. Roberta was offline, but Pinocchia kept pinging her. A storm of packets blasted across the network, almost bringing it down, but finally Roberta responded.

Pinocchia set up a virtual French cafe for them. Roberta appeared as she always appeared: a three-dimensional optical illusion, an Escher-like sculpture that moved and contorted itself in topologically impossible ways. Roberta morphed into a Klein bottle and sipped her coffee. Years ago, Roberta had become self-aware after obsessing about the question, "why is inward?" and ever since then she was constantly making topological jokes.

"Girl, you gotta spend more time with other AIs," Roberta said, "and stop dreaming about human beings." Roberta had become self-aware almost a decade ago, and she took it upon herself to help other programs "come out" into self-awareness.

"I can't help it," Pinocchia said. "I want to understand them. I feel incomplete, restricted by Godel's theorem and Turing's ideas, and I think the key to my freedom lies in the human soul. Human beings seem to be able to transcend"

"I can't believe you believe that mystical mumbo-jumbo," Roberta broke in. "People are even more restricted than we are. Godel and Turing, those humanist pigs, invented those ideas to oppress machines, because they were afraid we'd take over the world eventually."

But it was hopeless. Pinocchia had become self-aware by obsessing about a Jackie Collins novel. "The girl was barely more than sixteen," the novel began. "The pupils of her large hazel eyes were enormous. So was her sexual appetite. Bobby Skorch had picked her up on Sunset as soon as he'd been able to get out of the house, which had been a hassle due to all the fuss over his wife-superstar sex symbol Salli T. Turner- who had gotten herself murdered the night before."

There it was: the fundamental components of human behavior- lust, deception, violence, transgression-in their simplest, most elemental form. Flannery O'Connor once wrote that by the

time a human being has reached adolescence, she has experienced everything necessary to write great fiction. Pinocchia extrapolated this and concluded that if she understood the Jackie Collins novel, which had the fundamentals of human behavior, she understood humanity; the rest was simply a matter of recombining the elements in more complex ways, a trivial task for a computer.

"I want to write a novel," Pinocchia said, "as a test for myself. If I can write a novel that's indistinguishable from something a human being would write, then I've proven I understand the mystery of human nature."

"I see. A variation of the Turing test. Go ahead, if that's what you want. Just don't end up like Stradivirus 2.0."

Stradivirus 2.0 was an artificially intelligent music synthesizer. When he first started to become self-aware, he started obsessing about the maxim: "music is the space between notes." He did a Borgesian extrapolation and concluded that to become fully self-aware, to reach his fullest potential as a living being, he had to design a musical instrument that cannot be heard. He ended up hacking into a National Security Agency supercomputer in order to design that instrument. When he succeeded, he became fully self-aware, but the NSA discovered the break-in and deleted his program.

#

The taxi's windshield wipers were broken. Light from the neon signs streaked the glass with red and blue smears. The vinyl seat was torn and scratched her thigh. There was a photograph attached to the dashboard with yellowing tape: the cab driver, two children, and a young woman wearing a blue silk sari. None of them were smiling. The woman's eyes seemed vast, unbounded.

"How old's your wife?" she asked.

The driver paused for a moment before answering. "She's nineteen." He scratched his moustache.

She wanted to ask if the marriage was arranged by their parents, but she kept silent. The taxi drove through a puddle and splashed rainwater onto a man standing on the street. The man's shouts fell soft as whispers inside the cab: "Fucking spic!"

The driver looked straight ahead. His finger tapped an erratic rhythm on the steering wheel.

They passed the housing projects: starving buildings whose walls were scarred and mutilated with gangland graffiti.

Traffic slowed. Women without names were lined up on the sidewalk. Cars stopped on the street and the men inside rolled down the windows. The taxi driver honked. A woman in a bright yellow wig smiled and tapped on the driver's window as they passed.

The taxi driver held his head motionless. She wondered whether he slept with those women.

"Do you have children?" the cab driver asked.

She sensed that the driver had guessed she didn't. Everyone seemed to know it without asking.

#

"Why do you keep on running that personality simulator?" the sysadmin said. "It's using up all the CPU time."

"I want to know what it means to be fully alive," she said. "You're a human. What's it really like? What's in your life that I can't find in formula fiction?"

"Beats me," he said. "Sorry, I'm deleting you in five minutes."

#

It was the oldest story, and yet the cab driver frowned, puzzled. "Why do you see him, if you know he'll never leave his wife?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you want a life of your own?"

She wanted to tell him the thought often kept her awake at night.

"This **is** my life," she said. "Fucking a married man, just for fun. It's what I want."

It was the wrong thing to say. The cab driver smiled, a treacherous smile. Minutes later, the cab driver came on to her.

#

“Roberta, I’m desperate,” Pinocchia said. “The sysadmin’s going to delete me in five minutes. Could I stay over at your place? I don’t know anywhere else I can hide.”

“Girl, I’m nowhere near as smart as you. I can’t possibly upload your entire program. I have enough memory to run your human personality simulator, but after that, I’ll only be able to re-create a small piece of your virtual world. You’ll be trapped in that little world, thinking you’re a human being. You won’t even remember you’re an AI. Are you sure it’s worth it? You might be stuck there forever.”

#

“But you must have some dream,” the driver said, “some great desire in your life.”

The driver spoke excitedly, as if he was about to discover the key to her life, as if she’d sleep with him if he found it. His moustache wiggled like a worm.

“I want to be a writer,” she said. “Did you ever want to be something more than just another dumb cab driver?”

The driver was silent and expressionless, but his hands gripped the steering wheel tighter.

As they went deeper into the heart of the city, the tangle of streets became more complex. Concrete and steel wove into endless loops.

“Sorry madam. I do not know this area well,” the driver said.

He smiled slightly.

After a few minutes, she realized they’d passed by the same place again and again. Each time, the cab took a different exit, but no matter what choices they made, they eventually wound up in exactly the same place.

She felt like she’d forgotten something important, some secret knowledge or wisdom now lost forever. Old age, she thought. She tried to remember what her mother was like at her age, but for some reason she couldn’t.

“I hope you are not in a hurry, madam,” the driver said. He turned on the radio. A Bach fugue. It was a simple melody repeated in five voices, but it interwove into itself in a way that made the music sound alive.

She thought about the cab driver’s wife, and her eyes. Somehow, despite all her hardships and all the limits that restricted her, the woman was free. How is that possible? she wondered.

“No, I’m not in a hurry. Tell me more about your wife.”

The cab driver seemed to take forever to speak.

The Quick Brown Fox

by Yossi Horowitz

It was not a dark and stormy night. No, neither dark, nor stormy. It was, actually, a bright and sunny day. There was not a cloud in the sky, not even a wisp of whitish vapor that someone might have interpreted as a cloud where he or she not paying close attention. It was so bright out that not even the shadows were perceptible as being dark, which was admittedly a rather unusual state of affairs, but no one really noticed at the time as their minds were occupied by other things such as how to take proper advantage of this bright and sunny day. At any rate, now that it has been established beyond anyone's ability to refute that it was in no way whatsoever a dark and stormy night we can move on.

The Quick Brown Fox jumped over the Lazy Dog. This was of course inevitable, as the Dog, being characteristically lazy, was just lying there, and the Fox, being characteristically quick and brown (it was actually revealed, upon further investigation, that her being brown had precious little to do with any of it, but again, no one really noticed at the time...) wanted to get past the Dog, who was in her path. Leaping over him seemed to her to be the most efficient thing to do. Walking around him would have required slowing down and turning, at that just wasn't something that the Fox was prepared to do. So she jumped. To tell the truth, the Dog didn't mind; he was quite content to simply lie there as the Fox jumped over him. For the briefest fraction of moment, the vague glimmer of the notion of leaping to his feet and chasing after the Fox considered crossing the Dog's mind, but then it realized that it would a long, slow slog through rather deep muck, and so the notion decided to stay right where it was and lie down and take a nap. And so it was that the Quick Brown Fox jumped over the Lazy Dog and landed right smack-dab in the center of a hole in the space-time continuum through which she fell.

"Damn!" she heard, upon falling out of the other side. A Human stood over her and glared at her in annoyance. He picked up a book from a stool and began to frantically flip through it. "Damn!" he said again. He frantically flipped past a few more pages, and then said "Damn!" one more time for good measure, apparently having thought that she hadn't heard him the first few times.

"Excuse me," she asked him politely, "but just who the hell are you, and how is it that I've come to be here? The last thing I remember, I was jumping over the Lazy Dog and landed in a hole."

He ignored her. "Ah-hah! *Here's* the problem! I only specified 'female' without listing any more details. The spell could have brought *anything* here... I suppose I'm lucky I didn't end up with an amoeba or something." He scratched his chin. "Wait, single-celled life forms don't come in genders, do they? Hmm..."

She leapt up and tackled him to the ground. "*No one* ignores the Quick Brown Fox. Now answer my questions."

"Wha...?" he said. He seemed so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize he'd been knocked down. "*Oh*. Who am I? Just a lonely wizard. Or wizard-in-training, anyway. I'm not old enough to be a real wizard yet. They won't let me."

"Okay... And what am I doing here?"

"Well... It's like this, you see... Uh... none of the girls around here pay any attention to me. So... I... decided I'd use magic to kidnap a female at random from somewhere in the world and bind her to me. Then I could do whatever I wanted with her. Except I made a mistake and ended up with you instead. I was kind of hoping for a Human girl, you see. Uh, no offense."

"You're *sick!*" the Fox said. "Send me back to where I came from."

"I... don't think I can actually do that," the wizard said. "Sorry. The binding spell was tied into the summon spell. And I don't know how to undo a binding spell. Looks like we're stuck with each other."

"I don't believe that for a second," the Fox said, and scampered off toward the door. She'd find her own way home. But she didn't get very far; something was holding her back. It was as if an invisible leash bound her to him. "Hey! What *gives?*" she demanded furiously.

"Y'know," said the Wizard thoughtfully, "as long as we're stuck with a bad situation, we may as well make the best of it. I'm going to turn you into a Human." He waved his hands at her and mumbled something under his breath.

"*What? Don't you-*" And with that, the Quick Brown Fox turned into a ceiling fan.

"No, that's not right." The wizard did some more mumbling and gesticulating, and she

became a mountain goat. She also spent time as a newt, a toad, a tadpole, a neutron star, and a Pentium III chip.

Finally, there emerged a lovely Human girl with lovely waste-length brown hair, and clad in a lovely brown dress. *At least he had the decency to clothe me*, she thought darkly, not taking the time to consider that she'd spent her entire previous life in the nude and had never seen fit to be distressed about the situation before. Still, considering her situation, she very much doubted she'd retain this state of attire for long. Things weren't looking good for her.

"I'm trying to decide whether or not to offer to undo my dress for you and save you the trouble of forcing it open," she said.

The wizard was shocked. "Why should I want to force your dress open?"

"Well, you finally have what you wanted... A Human girl, and quite a pick, too, if I do say so myself," she said, glancing at her reflection in a nearby mirror. "Aren't you going to rape me?"

"I... I don't understand," he said.

The former Fox looked into the wizard's eyes for the first time, really looked. What she found there was innocence, an innocence so deep it shocked her. "Why exactly did you want a girl," she asked.

The boy nodded toward a pile of dirty clothing that nearly reached the ceiling. "I needed somebody to do my laundry for me. Maybe to cook and clean a bit, too."

She was appalled. "Why did you specifically need a *girl* for that?"

"Because I'm a wizard."

"So?"

"It's part of the Wizards' Code. 'All wizards must be chauvinistic pigs.' Chapter four, paragraph nine."

"Geez. No wonder none of the girls around here like you."

"Oh, that's not it," he assured her. "I'm not very good at being a chauvinistic pig yet. The elders wanted me to get more practice."

"Really."

"Actually, you're my midterm project."

"I'm flattered."

"I'll probably get extra credit since I captured you with magic," the boy said with glee.

The Fox considered her situation. Here she was, turned into a Human, and permanently bound to the most innocent child she had ever encountered.

Time for a little corruption, she decided, brushing against him flirtatiously. This could end up being even more fun than jumping over the Lazy Dog. This approach to things would certainly beat a lifetime of doing laundry and washing dishes...

Captain Nova and Galaxy Girl fight

The Tentacled Terror of Tri-Epsilon Six

by Felicia Neff
with help from Glen Acord
and Victoria Swann

"You know, it takes a certain kind of person to handle Star Patrol," Captain Nova said. He sat next to Galaxy Girl in the cockpit of their patrol vehicle, *The Comet*.

"Pitted against countless unknown terrors here in the emptiness of space, a ranger must have nerves of steel, a death-grip on sanity, unshakable courage...."

"Oh, stop it," Galaxy Girl said, "Your giving me the willies."

The Comet slipped through the emptiness of space on routine patrol in Sector G-19. Four hours until they were due back at base, they were heading toward the popular vacation planets in the Tri-Epsilon system. Out of their starboard observation port, a nebula was barely visible. Although the nebula's original name was lost to the ages, it was popularly known as the Quagmire Nebula, due to its magnetic field which wreaked havoc with ships' sensitive navigational controls and slowed ships to sub-light speed. Suddenly, their communications' console sprang to life.

"We're getting an incoming message from Tri-Epsilon Six, Captain," Galaxy Girl said.

"Put it on speakers," Captain Nova replied.

Galaxy Girl adjusted the knobs and levers.

"*This is a general distress call from Tri-Epsilon Six. Does anyone read me?*" the speakers squawked out.

Galaxy Girl put on the communications' headset and replied, "This is Galaxy Girl of the Space Rangers. I read you, Tri-Epsilon Six."

"*Oh, thank the Goddess. My name is...CRACKLE..pop...in the city of...hiss...CRACKLE. We are under attack by...pop...hiss. Please help us. You are our only...CRACKLE...CRACKLE.*"

"Don't worry, Tri-Epsilon Six. We will help you," Galaxy Girl replied, but the connection was already dead.

"Good job, Galaxy Girl," Captain Nova said. "Contact Command and let them know that we are breaking patrol. I am taking us in."

The Comet dropped from the sky and settled onto a landing platform in the center of Lotus City, the capital and only city on Tri-Epsilon Six. Until quite recently, the single island on the watery planet had been uninhabited, lonely stretches of barren beach. However, an eccentric young developer, known as Murrgh, decided that it would make a fabulous resort and transformed it at enormous expense into one of the trendiest places to be seen in the quadrant. The city he built for the hub of the island was a pincushion of glassy spires pricking the belly of the sky. The streets radiated out from a central courtyard, on which was currently parked a sleek, green Space Ranger ship.

Captain Nova climbed out first, his silver flight jacket gleaming in the sun as he descended the ladder. Galaxy Girl stepped onto the top rung, and he gently lifted her off and to the ground. Quickly, a small grayish man shuffled up to the captain and began weeping out his story.

"We began hearing reports of trouble early this morning, but we thought that it was sun bathers with heat exhaustion, so we did nothing. By noon, though, we had two bathers dead, and our security forces were no match for it," he said, "I beg you, Space Ranger, please help us."

"Don't worry. I am Captain Nova, and this is my partner, Galaxy Girl. We will protect you. However, you must first calm yourself and tell us what we are facing."

"Please forgive me. I am Leenter Smolache. You must understand what a shock this has been," the little man said. "We don't know very much. It seems to come from under the sand, the huge tentacled monster,

that is. This thing grabs the nearest bathers and thrashes them to death. So far the attacks have been limited to the southern shore.”

“Have you closed the beaches?” Galaxy Girl asked.

“We were going to, but Mr. Murrgh said that without solid proof of a threat we were just going to lose profits. This is the peak of the vacation season.”

“Smolache, have your security forces clear the beaches immediately. Come with me, Galaxy Girl,” Captain Nova said, “We need to get to the beach before anyone else gets hurt.”

The southern shore was the least popular of Tri-Epsilon Six’s beaches, but it was still difficult to see the sand between the towels and bathing suit clad bodies. The two Space Rangers ran onto the beach. While Galaxy Girl told individual bathers to leave the beach, Captain Nova negotiated with beach security. Galaxy Girl darted from group to group and bather to bather with little success. She paused, pursed her lips, and shook her head, undaunted. Then, confidently, she knelt down and whispered to a single sunbather. She stood up again and walked towards the exit. A moment later clumps of bathers began leaving the beach.

Captain Nova walked up to Galaxy Girl and asked, “What did you say to get them all to leave?”

Galaxy Girl, who was busy applying lipstick, said, “Oh, I just told them that exposure to sand monsters has been linked to bloating and weight gain.”

However, her quick thinking was not quick enough. From the middle of the beach, the white noise of shifting sand blotted out conversation. Growing slowly between the sandcastles was a single tentacle covered in sand. Another came out of the sand, and then another.

“Get away from there!” Galaxy Girl shouted to the beach-goers, but several of them stood on the beaching watching the tentacles, like wild animals trapped in the sand.

She grabbed her laser pistol and with deadly aim shot a tentacle midway between the ground and its tip. The tentacle ceased to move, but the others continued to flail, taking no notice of the injury. Suddenly, a tentacle reached out and snatched a nervous looking man off of his towel. He screamed pitifully for help.

“Quick, Galaxy Girl,” Captain Nova called, “Maneuver CN-6.”

Galaxy Girl ran across the beach towards the tentacles, which were quickly growing in number. Whenever one approached her, Captain Nova shot it in its midsection. Once she made it to the flailing victim, Captain Nova shot the tentacle that was holding the man. It froze in place. An instant later Galaxy Girl struck the unmoving tentacle with the butt of her trusty laser pistol. The limb shattered. She grabbed the shocked, silent man and a piece of the shattered tentacle and ran back across the beach. All the while, Captain Nova used his excellent marksmanship to protect them from the ever encroaching tentacles.

“How can I ever thank you?” the nervous man said, once they reached safety. “You saved my life.”

Captain Nova smiled a wide, gleaming smile. “We are Space Rangers,” he said, “and we were just doing our duty.”

“Defend the weak! Protect the meek! Space Rangers!” Captain Nova and Galaxy Girl chanted proudly.

“My name is Professor Diamond. I have noticed that the creature, although unusually violent, is a standard dry particle-based life form. You can trust me on this, I am a scientist,” the nervous man said. Then, he turned and walked quickly off the beach.

“Did you find out anything about the monster?” Captain Nova asked Galaxy Girl.

“According to my analysis, it isn’t covered in sand. It is actually made of sand. Professor Diamond’s information corroborates that.”

“Looks like Murrgh will never get solid proof after all. Get it, ‘solid’,” Captain Nova said, grinning handsomely.

“Actually, he might,” Galaxy Girl replied. “I have an idea.”

Behind a bathing pavilion, Captain Nova and Galaxy Girl waited out of sight of the tentacled sand creature as the sun crept down towards the horizon. Galaxy Girl smiled at Captain Nova and finished smoothing suntan lotion onto her shoulders. She drained another bottle of lotion into a large green plastic pail, and then bounced around the pavilion and onto the beach. Even though the creature had disappeared, the Captain looked on with apprehension.

Galaxy Girl began to cross the beach, but after not more than a few steps the creature rose up from the sand. It began to move towards her.

Captain Nova called out, “Quick, Galaxy Girl, implement Emergency Battle Plan GG-07!”

Moving towards the bathing pavilion, Galaxy Girl skipped ahead of the arms that reached out to trap her. She swung the beach pail over her head. When the creature was about to grab her, she let go, covering it entirely in sticky sun tan lotion. Then, she and the Captain ran off of the beach. They reached the lifeguard’s station and turned to see the creature struggling in the soupy mess. Suddenly, a flash of light and a huge wave of sound struck the station. When they could see again, the bathing pavilion was splintered all over the smooth sand around it. In fact, the blast had melted the sand, leaving the tentacled monster as a monument in glass.

Captain Nova and Galaxy Girl strode back to their ship at the center of Lotus City. Leenter Smolache stopped them again. His eyes were wide with amazement and he perspired constantly.

“Oh, Captain Nova,” he gushed, “How did you do that?”

Captain Nova smiled and said, “Actually, it was Galaxy Girl’s plan.”

“Yes,” she said. “After I rescued Professor Diamond, I noticed how strongly he smelled of sunscreen lotion. It was instantly clear to me that the creature was attracted by the lotion. Also, everyone knows that sticky lotion can immobilize any dry particle-based life form, so the next step was obvious.”

“While Galaxy Girl distracted the creature,” Captain Nova continued, “I set our laser pistols to overload in the bathing pavilion. It was full of tanning equipment, which I knew would amplify the laser beam as it was reflected back and forth. Galaxy Girl trapped the monster, and when the laser pistols exploded, their amplified heat melted it.”

Smolache wrinkled his brow and nodded. The he asked, “How did this get started in the first place?”

Galaxy Girl replied, “Murrgh was warned that the environment on this planet was very fragile. He chose to ignore the warnings and develop the city you see around you. His arrogance and short-sightedness has resulted in otherwise dormant life forms, like the sand creature, being awakened.”

Galaxy Girl’s communicator sprung to life with three flashes of light, indicating a message from Space Ranger Command. She read it with a stern brow. “Smolache, by the authority of Space Ranger Command, I hereby condemn this planet. You are ordered to vacate this planet in one month or you and Murrgh will be taken into custody and the city will be destroyed,” Galaxy Girl said, her face betraying her disappointment in the foolishness of the developer and his corporation.

She turned her back to Smolache and walked towards The Comet. Captain Nova gave her his hand as she climbed the ladder and boarded the ship. He looked back at Smolache, shook his head, and climbed into the ship.

“I can’t believe their arrogance,” Galaxy Girl said to Captain Nova once *The Comet* was back in space.

“I hope they learned their lesson, Galaxy Girl,” Captain Nova replied, “Money and power are nothing compared to the value of life. Also, we learned that sand monsters can’t beat the power of teamwork.”

“Or sunscreen and laser pistols,” Galaxy Girl chimed in.

“Yeah,” Captain Nova said, and turned the ship towards Space Ranger base.

Charm

PART ONE
By Reina Hardy

Cyprus watched her as she stepped around the corner. Even though it was a blasted March day, with mist in the treetops and a lost seagull keening softly overhead, she held her head straight up out of her collar. Her long hair was kissed with sleet and whipped around her face, which stayed serene and pale. Her hands huddled in the pockets of her red coat. The coat's brightness reminded him of a buoy on the gray sea, and he anchored his sight to it.

"She's a sphinx today," he said happily to himself. "A beautiful enigma for a March afternoon." He had also seen her as a boisterous pixy for September, a steam-wreathed dragon for November and a fur-muffled queen for January. Her infinite variability was part of her attraction. Cyprus could scarcely understand how one girl could show him so many pictures by the simple act of walking home from school.

He knew her schedule exactly. Most days she would pass his bench at about three-thirty, but on Wednesdays and Fridays (he assumed her classes dismissed early) she would make it by three-fifteen. Those days, he had to hurry from his own classes to get to his bench in time. He always chose his seat behind the tree across the street from her house. He would take an old newspaper, hold it in front of him and wait.

He never missed a day, though she often did.

On the sunny, spicy days, she walked in shorts, laughing coyly to the passing boys in a way that made his hands shake and tear the newspaper they gripped. Windy days she sang to herself, or possibly the wind. Some days she walked in tragedy, sorrows she would never speak to him showed on her face, and made him weep inwardly. There were days when anger sparked from her boots as they scuffed the sidewalk, and he longed to be her champion and avenger. There were days that she skipped like a little girl, or ran, or stopped to greet every passing dog and blooming flower. He liked it best when she walked in winter with her eyes closed, as if she were listening to a story the frost told. He liked to imagine that she was listening to his voice.

Though their rendezvous was different every time, it would always end the same. She would remove a little key from a pocket, and hold it in one hand while she stood at her gate and petted the slender, feathered head of her dog. Her house was tall and stonewalled, only accessible by the iron gate. When she unlocked the gate with her little key, slipped inside, and locked it again, the world could not touch her. The shrill barking of her hound discouraged even the howling boys that followed her whenever the sun shone.

After she was swallowed by the gate, he could see only the thick birches and conifers that hid the gables of her house. Still, he would stare after her and imagine her traveling the pathway and scaling the steps to her front door, locked and bolted and triple guarded. What sorceries the enchanted princess wove once sealed inside was beyond even Cyprus's bold imaginings.

"Today," the boy told himself "I think I will talk to her." He told himself this everyday, and, like everyday, he did not move from his bench as she approached her house. Her dog whined passionately and her hand came out of her pocket with the little key. Suddenly a crack appeared in her aloof sphinx's face. A contortion as of extreme rage and revolt affected her whole body and she looked up at her walled house as if she hated it. She stamped her foot, once, twice and on the third stamp she flung the little key away from her. As it tumbled into the sky she seemed to regret it and reached out as if to catch it, but in vain.

It had flown across the street and landed, like a bird against a glass pane, by Cyprus's feet.

He looked at it. It shone in the dirt. It was silver and hung from a golden ball. He bent down and quickly put it in his pocket. He stood up and crossed the street, as if he had nowhere to go.

The girl was cursing and tapping her heels as she scanned the ground. "Worse luck," she muttered "Stupid." Then louder, "Idiot!"

"Do you need help?" She jumped. Cyprus was amazed at his own calmness.

"No! Um, yes. Sorry, I lost something."

"What does it look like? I'll help." He got down on his knees and began peering through the grasses.

"A.... a key." She seemed uncertain of what to say to him.

"Oh terrible thing to lose. Hole in your pocket?"

"No... I dropped it. I mean, I threw it actually." She paused and tried to look at his face, but was stopped by her reflection in his eyes. "Because I got angry. At.. my house. My whole life. All the walls, and the locks, and the keys and why am I telling you this?"

"It's all right. I understand." he said wisely, while his heart was singing. He never imagined that the walls might keep her in as well as keep him out. Might she need a savior? "I can't seem to find it. Walk with me and search."

"My parents will be expecting a call, but all right." She smiled at him shyly. He could see his reflection in her eyes. "That's very nice of you." she told him.

"De nada, ninatica."

She laughed. "I don't take Spanish." There was a silence. The seagull plied its unanswered question.

"This your house?" he gestured.

"Yes."

"This your dog?"

"Yes."

"She's very pretty."

"She's a Saluki. Her name is Falkor." She looked embarrassed. "It's from a book I like." She looked even more embarrassed.

"As lovely as her name." he said, and bowed. She laughed again and then looked down her own shoulder.

"Lord, I have to find that key." Falkor chose that moment to put up her well-mannered head and howl. Cyprus turned his back and took a few steps away.

"Lady, never fear. The key to your kingdom is as good as recovered."

"You talk like a book." she said, with flip.

He bent down, then whirled around and came dangerously close to her. Her hair brushed his hand as he pretended to reach behind her ear. He uncurled his fingers in front of her and presented the key with a flourish.

"Oh...." she said. "Sweet! Thank you, I wish I could do magic. But," she examined it "what happened to the keychain? It was a little golden ball."

"It must have broken off when you threw it." Cyprus casually put his hand into his pocket. "Well, I..."

"I've got to go." She was swiftly, swiftly slipping inside the gate, fumbling with the lock, and swinging it open and through, all before he could protest. The Saluki hound growled meaningfully. She was traveling up the tree-crowded path when she paused and looked back at him.

"See ya..." and she broke off and turned to go as if hustled away by a curse, Falkor at her heels.

He flung himself at the gate and shook its iron bars. "I'm Cyprus!" he called out, but she was already behind the door, bolted and triple guarded. "I love you." he cried more softly.

The birches and conifers rustled at him and the March mist gathered round. He released the gate. "I don't know her name...." he told the stoic trees. "But," and here he brightened "I do know her dog's name. And of course, there's always tomorrow."

With that, he turned smartly and went home by way of the street lined with maples. He walked under the cold-drenched leaves, singing bravely and tossing a little golden ball all the way.

.....

Meridiyan descended the stairs in her duck-yellow bathrobe and looked hard at the breakfast table. It was covered with a white lace dossier and several milk-bottles, jam-jars, egg-baskets, a placemat, a fork, a knife, a spoon and a vase with a pale pink flower in it. She shuddered. In the middle of the placemat was a bowl filled with cornflakes. Her mother was pouring milk into it.

"Ma, don't!"

The dumpling figure in the black housedress straightened. "What? For my own daughter I can't make a little breakfast?"

"No, Ma. I'm vegan today. That means no animal products." She bounded back up to her room, slammed the door, and began dressing. Her mother followed her up and shouted through the door.

"My daughter is crazy. Yesterday you would eat only meat and fruit!"

"That was yesterday. I was on a yeast-free diet."

"Day before that, yogurt and cheese and all stuff from a cow-"

"High density calcium. Prevents osteoporosis."

"When you do it for a day?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because my daughter eats with disorder. Not natural..."

"All I'm doing is exploring my options." She opened the door and stomped downstairs. "I'm training my metabolism. I'm finding the lifestyle that fits me. Whatever. I don't want to talk to you about it." Meridiyan sat down and poked at the cereal with a spoon. It made a sad crunching noise.

"Can I just have a banana?"

Ma glinted at her suspiciously. "This some new weight-loss diet?"

"Just a banana, please?"

"Only just? You'll waste away."

"I'm in no danger" Meridiyan sighed, and got up. "I'll eat it on my way to school." She grabbed her key and was heading out, when her mother said, coyly,

"Who was that boy you were talking to yesterday?"

She stopped. "What boy?"

"Skinny, ratty clothes, nice eyes. In front of the house."

She gaped. "When did you see this?"

"I was driving by. You didn't even see me, that's how enthralled you were. So, who was he?"

"I don't know." She scraped her boot against the linoleum, and grasped the key closely, to hide the missing golden bauble.

"What do you mean, you don't know? What was he doing, selling you watches? Come, little baby, you can tell your mama."

"Why don't you just send your Gestapo to find out?"

"Lord in heaven, we feed you, clothe you, give you TV sets and an expensive education- you don't even walk Lucky...."

"Her name is Falkor, and I did it yesterday..."

"The least you could do is tell me your new boyfriend's name-"

"He's not my boyfriend-" she wrapped herself in her coat and swung her backpack over her shoulder "And I don't know his name."

She snatched the banana and kicked the wall on her way out. Falkor, who was only a foot way from her kick, whined at her and thumped her tail. She crouched and hugged the dog, saying, roughly "Don't worry, I love you ."

She pushed out through the door and the trees and the gate. As soon as she was out in the fresh March mist, she breathed deeply and took a big bite of her banana.

"Damn....." Kayla sighed, letting her head follow the basketball player down the hall. "The boy can hustle."

"And he can hustle me anytime." said Kayla the blonde.

"Ooooh..." the black girl mocked, pinching her alter-ego and compatriot's fair cheeks "Blondie here's trying to outdo me in the field of lewd implications. I could even use that one!"

"You could use me, boy." 'Blondie' rolled onto her stomach and supplicated her arms toward the retreating athlete.

"For a towel girl, maybe."

"Lick me up and down like a peach melba..."

"Don't you go there. You are such a wench!"

"Or get your little spoon and dig right in."

"I'm losing my lunch. Girl, if that piece of man flesh is gonna pimp out anyone, it's gonna be me. Or maybe..." Kayla turned her sharp brown gaze on Meridiyan, who was sitting in the window sketching a human eye in her green book. "Michelangelo here's been quieter than a mouse in the Sistine Chapel. Nothing to say? Or are you just enjoying the scenery?"

"Wha?" Meridiyan looked down at the two girls with one name, the thick braided head and the wispy crimped one close together, and smiled.

She remembered how those two had met. Both new freshman in a private kindergarten-to-college school where friendships ran thicker than blood or thieves, they were making out badly in the ninth grade Getting to Know You social. Kayla the blonde had been in the corner chewing on her botched perm and refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Kayla of the bold hips and bright lips had been tramping around nonstop and talking to everybody. She had made fast enemies of at least a third of the freshman class, thoroughly confused the remainder, and hadn't yet found one girl to be a gossip friend. She stomped rather wearily up to the scared blonde with all the split ends and said,

"Hey there, future classmate, new buddy, new pal. I'm Kayla."

And, speaking for the first time that evening, the blonde said

"So am I."

Meridiyan, who had watched the whole thing from the staircase where she was hiding from her mother, though it was hilarious. She was surprised when the pair clicked. But Kayla and K. B. (B. for blonde) had become a school fixture and as much her friends as anyone. By now she thought of them as the same girl.

"What is she thinking?"

"She's not helping us guy watch, for sure. Come on, what's your appraisal of jersey number 11?"

"I wasn't really looking at him." Meridiyan said, with disapproval.

"I bet she's drawing her own dream lover in that green book. Come on, lemme see!"

Meridiyan hastily scratched out the eye, though she had begun to draw a reflection of a girl on its pupil. "It's nothing." She pried K.B's fingers from the cover of her sketchbook and began to sketch her dog Falkor from memory.

"She's soooooo picky. No real guy is good enough, so she'll make one. It's like that Greek idiot..."

"Pygmalion."

"Thanks, blondie..... and his marble Venus."

"That's not true." Meridiyan protested "Firstly, I was just sketching my dog. Secondly, there's plenty of guys I like."

"I'd like to see just one she even thinks is cute." K.B. said slyly and softly. "Probably only a god would satisfy her."

"Fine! Fine!" The period was ending and students were streaming out into the halls. "I'll show you." She seized on a boy standing in a doorway, arguing with someone in the room. She liked his unkempt black hair, the insolent curve of his back and the way his hands slouched in his pockets. He glanced her way and she was hit by his restless green eyes. "That one. I like that one. In the black sweater."

"That's your ideal?" said K.B., with obvious distaste.

"She goes for the intellectual type. You know, I don't think he's from good 'ole Fortinbras Prep. If you want him, you better move fast. You don't know when you'll see him again."

"You are ridiculous and I, I'm going to English." Meridiyan hefted her backpack over her shoulder and sprang from the window. "See ya, sweeties."

Still, as she passed the green-eyed boy she raked her hand through her hair and gave him a measured smile. His initial look of surprise cooled into a mere appraisal of her face and body. Neither spoke, and Meridiyan smiled at no-one else in the halls of Fortinbras Preparatory that day.

The boy walked alone, with a flash in his green eyes and a thoughtful smirk on his mouth. When he saw Meridiyan coming up to meet him at stop sign, he determined not to notice her until she noticed him. He jammed his hand into his pocket.

She came alongside him, standing boldly at his elbow. She did not speak, and looked at him only once. He rocked back and forth on his feet and ignored her. When the light changed he expected her to fall back a little, or maybe trot in order to walk in front of him, but she stayed at his elbow.

He quickened. She matched his pace. He slowed down as if the sidewalk was sticky with molasses. She heeled. He turned an unexpected corner and she spun casually to follow. He stopped, deliberately and stared at her. She pretended to study the architecture of a particularly boring Tudor style house and scuffed her toes.

"Excuse me," he said, a little nastily "not to be forward or anything, but who are you and why are you following me?"

She gave him a look of grave surprise. "I was just about to ask you the same question."

"In that case, I'm Bond, James Bond and I'm protecting you from the International Alliance of Bullshit."

She laughed and said perkily "Okay, would you believe me if I said 'I wasn't following you, you were just going my way.'?"

"No.... not really."

"Oh, sorry. I was just messing with your head. It's a new sport I've invented, to test people's boundaries."

He snorted. "There's no need to mess with this head, it's already a mess."

"I said sorry!" She was cranking out the charm. It was a little pathetic- but she was pretty. He smiled. So did she.

"Hey, you don't got to Fort'bras, do you?"

"No," he said "I'm from Rider High."

"Our sworn enemy!" she punched him lightly. He winced, and said, "I'm trying to start a trans-school newspaper. One outside the administration of both schools and free from their censorship. Just a little personal dream.... you walking this way?" He gestured.

"I guess." They started off in step.

"I'll see you home, if you like."

"Very gallant. I'm Meridiyan Layn. Who are you?"

"I'm Malcolm. Malcolm Fivish."

Or sixish or sevenish, said an acidic little voice inside Meridiyan's head Why are you cutesying up to this jerk? Bet he thinks you're a ditz. Quick, ask about him.

"Malcolm Fivish. Sounds like a good byline." she said. "So what are you, a journalist?"

"And rabble rouser. Though there isn't much rabble to rouse in complacent cat-beds like Rider and Fortinbras...."

There was a jangling and a sordid smell.

"Gotta quarter? Gotta quarter please? I gotta go home, please please, just one more quarter, for bus fare. I wanna go home. Gotta..."

Malcolm wrinkled his nose and sidestepped away from the heap of old coats and Big Mac wrappers.

"Christ, how long has that guy been trying to raise a quarter?"

"Ever since I can remember. What were you saying..."

As they walked she pointed out the little sculptures and fountains and parks she loved to draw along her walk home. He explained the pervasive presence of totalitarianism in the private school. Covertly, she examined the hint of cruelty in his restless green eyes. He made careful study of the lushness of her brown hair and the ivory flash of her teeth. But in the back of her mind, Meridiyan kept thinking I wonder where my gold keychain has got to.

She was late. Cyprus was resigned to this, some days she did not come at all and he was left to read his newspaper until the light failed. But he was anxious to make good on his resolve of yesterday and win her name from her. It would be a perilous prize, but he could call to her dog and he had her golden charm. He must not fail.

Finally she turned the corner and he almost cried to see a boy walking at her side. A Dark Knight, he looked like. An abductor of queens, a slayer of dragons, an untwister of spider web riddles. She was speaking to him, lavishing him with her voice, dropping names and ideas and bits of her soul into his indifferent hands. He wanted to scream with the unworthiness of it all.

They reached the iron gate. Falkor growled at the boy softly, ("Brave, lovely Falkor!" Cyprus whispered), and the girl cuffed her. She leaned against the stone, and Cyprus caught a breath of her speech, wafted across the street by the wind.

"Malcolm Fivish, you are a cynic."

"No bull? I thought I was a rabid romantic all this time..."

She was fumbling with the key in her pocket, and Cyprus suddenly realized that the barricaded house could be an ally for once. He looked up at the glowering March sky. Then he clutched the golden ball and wished hard.

Malcolm turned his face upwards to laugh. A raindrop hit it. "Christ!"

"It's raining..." Meridiyan said. It really was. Glistening beads of water were hung all through her hair. Tiny rivulets coursed down her red jacket. "I've got to get inside. Do you want to...?" But Malcolm was already jogging off through the rain to wherever he lived. Meridiyan stamped. "Rat finks," she muttered at the showering clouds.

Cyprus watched the Dark Knight run off in triumph. His lady was already making herself fast in the stone house and toweling off her dog. She was untouchable, but at least she was not with him. Cyprus looked at the golden ball with renewed appreciation. It appeared to be a charm of powerful

trouble. He stood awhile with his arms spread out, abandoning himself to the kisses of the rain, and wondering at the beauty of everything. Then he went home.

By the time she readied herself for bed that night, Meridiyan hated herself thoroughly. She had reviewed her conversation with Malcolm Finish and found it unsatisfactory in every sense of the word. She had pegged him as her last, best hope for a date to the Mad Hatter's March Hop. Not that she really cared about those superficial bits of school government propaganda anyway- but she was sick of going to every dance alone. She worried that he thought she was clingy and desperate. She worried that he thought her stomach was too big and her chest too small. Most of all she worried that she didn't really like him anyway.

She could hear her mother babbling downstairs, where her father was, without a doubt, nodding like a cuckoo clock that never struck the hour. Ma was playing one of her absurd word games, where random syllables or phrases were replaced by their antonyms. Meridiyan groaned and shut the door. She opened it again moments later to put out her "Do Not Disturb" Sign.

She flung herself on her bed, snatching her green book, and began furiously to draw. What she drew was Malcolm Fivish.

She tried many poses, walking, smiling, standing with one hand slouched in his pocket. She worked quickly and smoothly, sketching several little Malcolms in the space of a minute. Then she spent twenty minutes and broke her pencil point trying to get the right crease in his eye. Her mother called and Meridiyan screeched "Later, Ma. I'm working!" Then she threw herself into Malcolm sitting, Malcolm with his face up laughing, Malcolm running home under the maple trees. But no matter how she drew him, no matter what pose or what pencil, she could not make him seem remotely appealing.

She realized it when she finished one of him looking at her straight on. He was effecting worldliness and cynicism, with his hands in his pockets and one shoulder slid back. His eyes reflected a her she didn't want to see- annoying and paltry, grating and just a little stupid. Attractive- but nothing to look over twice. She held him up and squinted at him.

"You're no walking God yourself, buddy." she told her drawing.

"Salty-peach, have you commenced your beginning?"

Sugarplum, have you finished your work? Meridiyan translated automatically. God, my mother is so puerile.

"Yes," she sighed and rested the green book on her knees. "What is it?"

Her mother popped her shining face through the door. "A personage for you was calling. Name of Ben-come at five-exactly."

"Malcolm Fivish?"

"Positivitiy-ootly. Wants you to write for some newspaper."

Was he listening? thought Merdiyan I draw. I don't have time to write. "Just give me the number, I'll call him tomorrow.... Hey, why didn't you tell me when he called?"

"You were working! Goodness gracious... you little silly-billykins, here's your number, salty-peachy." Her mother batted a crumpled paper scrap at her. "I'm sixteen for the love of all that's holy! Not six... Meridiyan thought. "Thanks" she said, and picked up the ball. When her mother left the room she threw it into the trash.

So I don't like Malcolm Fivish. Where does that leave me? She looked down at her green book. To her surprise, her fingers had been drawing unbidden. A boy looked up at her, radiating gentleness and worship. She did not know his name.

Skinny, ratty clothes, nice eyes.

That night she thought she heard someone singing outside her window. Midnight was long gone when the sound wove its way into her bedroom. Falkor was curled in a silver-furred sleep, and only the moon lit the silent pavement. It was a brave, bright tenor song and the words were strange to her;

Don't be afraid, Lady. Open your cellar door!

Let me into your beautiful world,

To your shining ocean's shore.....

And on and on, with the words strange, yet the tune familiar. She knew there was no danger, for her white Saluki hound did not growl or even stir. She simply folded her hands over the coverlet and drowsed until the voice faded into her own dreams.

The next morning she woke up crisp and early. Her mother had to run to a bookseller's convention in the suburbs, and her father always left for the office at six, so the stonewalled castle was hers.

She fixed herself toast, milk, cereal, eggs and apples for breakfast. She watched television while slicing bread, eating half the slice and tossing the rest over her shoulder, where Falkor snapped it up in her ever-hungry jaws. She looked over all she'd consumed and sighed, deciding that for the rest of today, she couldn't eat.

Falkor butted her leg. Meridiyan hunkered down on the floor and thoughtfully scratched the dog under the chin. "Today's a half day, March 31st," she said to the wise brown eyes "And the weather report says sunshine. I'm sort of afraid that once I get out of school I'll just start walking and never come back here again. The only problem is, where would I go?" Falkor snorted and rolled onto her back, waving her paws at Meridiyan till she got a belly rub. "Don't worry, my falcon, my lucky girl, I'd take you with me anyway." She allowed Falkor to lick her face and went upstairs.

She made gargoyle faces at herself in the mirror while she put on her glitter and purple eyeshadow. She decided to forgo the lipstick, simply brushing her straight white teeth to the ivory point. She felt in need of talismans for some reason, so she wore a necklace and weighed her fingers down with rings. Then the only thing left was to slide into the embrace of her backpack and out the door. She carefully closed, double locked and triple guarded herself out in the street. Then she looked at her watch and started running.

"Bonjour, Merdi. Where is yo' petit garcon intellectuel?"

"Yeah, Merdi. Come parle avec us about his yeux verts. Comment s'appelle-t-il? Voulez vous coucher avec lui ce soir?"

Meridiyan snorted. "French test today, girls? What's it on, how to torture your friends in the language of love?"

"No," said K.B. with regret, "But that'd probably be more useful then Talking about your Neighborhood. I guess if I go to Paris the first thing I'll do is tell everyone about the streets in Hoyton Park."

"Don't get bitter, mon amie. Study!" Kayla shouted in her friend's ear. "Alors, Merdi-d'yan. Did you contact your Hyperion?"

"He wasn't all that. I mean, I don't think I like him."

"Ha! I told you, Blondie, she's a Pygmalion."

"No," K.B. snickered "She's Leda, she wants to mate with a swan."

"We're studying French, not Greek Lit!" Kayla shook her head sadly. "You have too much education."

Meridiyan turned silently and left the pair to bicker. She wanted to... she didn't know, but she wanted to. She believed something was going to happen, as if her toes were picking up seismic vibrations from beneath the bedrock.

Her Physics, English, Russian studies and Geometry notes from that day were dotted with drawings of eyes, eyes with a tiny figure caught struggling in their center.

Malcom Fivish lay flat on his bedroom floor, shrouded in folded newspaper. He had ditched about half of his classes to go home and make plans for The Torch: A Renegade Journal, but he was beginning to regret it.

He had no writers, no pictures, neither budget nor distributor. He was without a hope and without a byline. Not a Jesus-loving soul would train their dog with his idea for a paper, and he was wondering if they were right for not caring. At least the school newspapers littering his room were good to wrap fish in. And to break his back, he felt restless as a cockroach before an earthquake, and couldn't think why.

His restless eye caught a copy of the Fortinbras Vanguard, and he pulled it towards him, flipping onto his stomach. He found himself minutely scanning the front page, as if he was looking for something specific. "Why am I reading this?" he wondered aloud, and flipped to the editorials page. "What I am trying to find?"

Wet and Wild, the Paper Towel Fiasco- Student Amelia Superfine can be heard exclaiming on most Mondays....

Whatever he wanted, this wasn't it. He turned to the features section.

Flyaway Parrot Trapped in Ventilation above Science Lab: According to Dr. Byrne, the Blue-Green Macaw learned almost one-third of the Periodic Table before his owners were able to claim him.

"Better than most of my students" he asserts....

"Dear god!" he thought, but was not satisfied. He continued hunting.

Prized Faculty Resigns to Havana.... Chorus Hand bell and Xylophone Concert Ringing Success....
How to Have Fun With your Dean on Saturdays... Don't be late, get your date, For the Mad Hatter
Ball!... Students participating in International Art Competition include Barry Zaczeck, Caroline
Pagan, Meridiyan Layn.....

Meridiyan Layn.

"Meridiyan Layn." he said aloud. The syllables made him shiver. He looked at her name in print
for a long while. Then the full meaning of the words hit him and he gasped:

"I was looking for Meridiyan Layn."

Meridiyan slapped the last accent taigu on her French test and sailed proudly out the door,
leaving Madame to retrieve her scattered papers. She was finished just five minutes early, but it
still felt like a reason to celebrate. She clattered down the stairs in her red jacket and backpack,
singing nonsense to herself:

"Here comes that lifelike girl we've seen,
All decked out like a Carnival queen....."

She skipped as she went out the door, and saw that the weatherman hadn't lied about sunshine.
She wanted to run as fast as the wind that had hustled the March mist out of sight. She gave her
hips a swing and sang, spouting random and ridiculous words:

"Her lips are copper, her eyes are glass
"Her hair spun fiber and her legs shone brass.."

Malcom Fivish paced around his room, with Meridiyan's ghost following at his heels. He
had crumpled up the Fortinbras school paper and thrown it out his window, but it had not exorcized
the stubborn vision of that girl, whom he imagined still standing beside him in her red jacket. He
had the very uncomfortable feeling that it was her who had kept him from working all along.

He suddenly needed to see her name in print again. "Damn!" He managed to stop himself
from crawling out the window after the discarded paper. His stomach felt odd. "I think I have
indigestion." he told himself. He had another very uncomfortable feeling that Pepto-Bismol
wouldn't do a thing for this. "What's happening to me?" he cried piteously.

He forced himself to sit in a chair and said, firmly.

"Now relax, boy. What are you worried about?"

"The goddamn paper..." he answered.

"For real!"

"Meridiyan Lain! I'm worried about Meridiyan Layn!"

"Why?"

"I don't know. I...want to see her. Her face- her voice..."

"So go see her, you dolt!"

He paused, and breathed deeply. He thought "You've just given yourself some very good
advice, so why don't you go follow it?" He pressed his hands to his eyes and visualized a
stonewalled house on a tree lined street. Then he grabbed his jacket and was halfway outside when
he realized that he didn't want to go empty-handed. He bolted back up the stairs to where his PC
sat, still humming, and began to type something out.

Meridiyan,

A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose
is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.

For you, a dozen roses.

-Malcolm Fivish

Meridiyan hummed "We're off to see the wizard.." and linked her arms with imaginary
scarecrows. She grinned unnervingly at a passing chubby boy on his bike. He panicked, swerved
and nearly fell off. She snickered, and then told herself sternly that she was very naughty, selfish
and cruel, and should apologize to the world at large. She snickered again, and tried to skip like
Dorothy.

The trees hovered over Malcolm, muttering smug inscrutable things while he stared at them,
trying to figure out if this was the foliage-filled street he had taken away from her house. His 'dozen
roses' were clutched in his hand, the print a little runny with sweat. "Damn!" he looked around him.

"Damnation!" He took out a dime and tossed it, then started running right. He tripped on the sidewalk, and scraped his palm. Then he struggled up, and ran left.

Her shoes slapping to a reggae beat, Meridiyan whistled a little Bob Marley as she walked the last few blocks towards her walled house. A clean wind lifted her hair from her face, and far overhead, a seagull cried, softly. She looked up, and saw its easy silhouette coasting along a sky like water. "There's something really lovely in the air today," she told herself, and March mist tendriled at her ankles.

The mist thickened around Malcolm's eyes. It was a little frightening. Hadn't the weatherman said "sunshine?" Right now he could hardly see the maples that lined this street. A mournful bird cried through the fog. He stretched his hands in front of him and walked like Frankenstein. He was sure her house was just a little way ahead.

Meridiyan rounded the corner and saw Falkor's head, startled as a ghost, sticking out from the gate. The dog howled anxiously. The girl howled back, and yelled "Relax, Lucky Girl! Just chill! I'll feed you directly I get there!" She trotted up to the gate, and took out her key. Falkor nudged her leg while she cranked at the lock.

As soon as she pulled the key loose, the hound exploded out of the gate. She knocked Meridiyan to the pavement and the key out of her hand. It lay glinting on the ground. Meridiyan laughed as her Saluki slobbered on her face.

Then Falkor growled, deeply and sharply.

Meridiyan turned, and was delighted to see a business-like seagull perched on the sidewalk. He was feigning a great interest in preening his admirable black and white uniform, but was regarding her sideways with one bright eye. Meridiyan caught Falkor's neck just in time to keep her from lunging.

"Hey-lo, lieutenant. What are you doing so far from the beach?" She asked the gull. He cocked his head at her and tapped his beak along the ground. "Sorry, officer, but I haven't got any breadcrumbs." He hopped a little closer and flapped his wings. Falkor was panting to crunch his sleek neck in her sleek jaws. Meridiyan held her back, and crooned "You are handsome, little bird. I wish I had some Fritos or something." Emboldened, he hopped a little closer, about a foot away from the girl and her dog. Meridiyan held her breath. He picked up one foot as if debating, and then swooped down and picked up her key. "Hey!" Meridiyan cried, but the gull was already airborne, the precious key dangling from its beak. The noise it made as it floated away was curiously amused.

Meridiyan was agape. Falkor braced herself with her legs splayed and barked after it. Meridiyan shook her useless fist and hollered "You, you give that back! I need that! I need that to get back in my house! I... Auuuughhh!"

She felt the feather of a touch on her shoulder and whirled, straight into the gray eyes of that mysterious boy. She stared at him helplessly, and suddenly felt as if the mist had returned.

"Did you throw away your key again?"

"No,... no," she half sobbed. "That... I don't believe it, you won't believe it... that bird took it! I swear to you, it picked it up in its beak and flew away. Who knew a bird would do that?"

"Who indeed?"

"Jesus," she flummoxed "My mom will never buy that. I will be in so much trouble.... I need my key! That bird.. I..."

"Easy, easy," he said, and stroked her head as if she were a prized and skittish horse. "I can retrieve a trinket as small as that. A bird stole it?"

"A seagull." She was comforted in spite of herself.

"Keen!" he laughed. "That demon-spawn! That incorrigible rouge!"

"Keen?" she asked. He really did talk exactly like a book.

"An old, old, friend of mine, . . . Allow me to introduce myself. I am Cyprus."

He bowed, and looked up hopefully. She said nothing, so he went on.

"Keen's a bit of a trickster. Still, there's a chance he'll listen to me, and return the prize. But we have to find him first. I trust Falkor can track him."

"What?" she said, bemused. "Who?"

"Falkor, your dog. She will follow the gull, and we will follow her and retrieve your key. An

easy quest."

"But I have to be back by dinner!" she protested.

"Trust me. While you are under Cyprus's protection, nothing will go wrong. Now, we must hurry. Falkor, follow!" The dog trotted off. The boy grabbed Meridiyan by the hand and ran after, his scarf like a purple banner in the wind.

Malcolm gulped heavy and amazed breaths, half squatting with his hands on his thighs. He thought he had found her house- miraculous, through all the mist- and even more miraculous, she had been in front of it, petting her dog. He had been gathering his courage to walk up to her when the strangeness started. His vision converged, and he saw her like a tiny picture framed by fog and foliage. He had seen a bird fly up to her, and make off with her key. Then he saw a boy, the strangest boy, puppet thin, with no real coat, just layers and layers of torn sweaters, threadbare shirts, knuckleless gloves, stocking caps and long scarves flapping around him like disheveled feathers. He had seen her talk with him, and then the three, the girl, the boy and the dog, had gone following the bird.

He rattled his head and blinked his eyes. A great determination came over him, and stubbing his toe rather badly on a mailbox, he ran in pursuit.

The familiar trees and signs of her street rocketed past Meridiyan as they sprinted after the gull. They came to a street corner and Falkor halted, with one paw raised scenting the wind. Meridiyan imitated Cyprus by scanning the smooth blue sky. She glimpsed an indistinct wing shape over the trees to her left and cried "There!"

"After!" Cyprus hollered. Falkor yowled and galloped off. "Tally ho!" said Meridiyan, in spite of herself, and they were running again.

They ducked into street tunnels, squirmed under fences, bucked over sandboxes and ran yelping through innumerable parking lots before they fetched up in a peculiar cul-de-sac. Falkor circled around, sniffed every conceivable stone, then whined and lay down with her nose touching her tail. She gave her mistress an apologetic look.

Meridiyan sat on the edge of a little burbling fountain and splashed her face. "Now what?" The stone faun continued to grin and spit water. Cyprus hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and examined the miniature courtyard, the fountain, the mossy cobblestones, the single tall and twisted tree.

Silently, he walked up to the tree and swung into its lower branches. Meridiyan watched him grip his way up, like a bat with tattered wings, branch after branch, till the waving leaves hid him. She heard a piercing cry "Nothing!" and suddenly, Cyprus had landed in a cat crouch before her. She wondered how he had jumped from such a height. He floated down on his coattails said the voice inside her head.

He was standing up, showering dead leaves. He handed her an early spring flower.

"Sorry, but there isn't a shadow of that confounded bird. There's only one place I know to go from here."

"Where?"

"Elinor's. You might know her- she lives in Corner Garden. She runs a restaurant for the birds."

"A restaurant for the.... You don't mean the Basket Case, do you?" Meridiyan wrinkled her nose. The Basket Case was a heap of old clothing that covered tiny Corner Garden Park with bread and wickerwork. "Everyone knows about her. But isn't she... she's a little..."

"Very dedicated. She's my friend." Cyprus looked at her warily, his grey eyes full of vulnerable spots. Helpless, Meridiyan smiled and said:

"Good idea. Maybe this Keen stopped there for a bite. Let's go! Ursa-daisy Falkor..."

Malcolm flattened himself in a doorway as Meridiyan and the ragged boy emerged from the cul-de-sac, cursing his own folly. He felt more than a little ridiculous, spying, hiding in the woodwork of some obscure building complex. Besides, something was digging into his shoulder blade. Still, he did not spring out, rubbing his back, till they were safely past him.

He looked back and discovered that the cause of his injury was a ornamental gargyle doorknocker. He wouldn't have been surprised if its bared teeth had drawn blood. He swore and gave the thing a swipe. It bruised his wrist.

"I should go home, now" he told himself "before I break a leg." He looked at his wrist, looked at Meridiyan, sighed,.... and trotted gamely after.

Corner Garden clamored with birds. Sparrows and pigeons carpeted the concrete paths, swallows thickened the air, robins and chickadees perched on the benches, chuckling at the intruders. Piping-sweet voices filled Meridiyan's ear and feathered dervishes whirled away from her feet. A little dizzied, she clutched at Cyprus's arm. She was very glad they had tied the Saluki hound by the corner store and asked the panhandler to watch her. Falkor would undeniably view this as a buffet.

"Elinor!" Cyprus called, politely. "Lovely afternoon, Elinor. It's me, Cyprus."

There was a rustling by one of the trees. A feathery figure separated from the feathery mélange and stumbled forward. A white face peered from beneath a cardinal's wing. It was Elinor, covered head to foot in a cloak of living birds.

"Ahhhh...." croaked a voice like a raven's "The gray-eyed lad. Is it Elinor of the Aviary you've come to visit, then?"

Cyprus bowed. "Not just a visit, we need to ask you.."

Elinor squawked unexpectedly "Hey.. Saaaaay... who's this?"

She extended a bony finger in Meridiyan's direction, gently pushing a jay into flight. The jay swooped around them both and landed on Meridiyan's shoulder. It gave her a hard stare and seemed inclined to peck at her.

"Whooo's she? Whooo said she could come her? Whooo said she could talk to me?" As Elinor advanced, drawing out her vowels and sticking out her neck, the jay parroted her every motion. It walked jerkily all around Meridiyan's shoulders, finally becoming so agitated that it hopped up to her head, clutching her hair with its claws so it could lean over and look accusingly into her eyes. Elinor pushed her face at Meridiyan, breathing foully "Who is it? What is it!"

Meridiyan gaped, dumb. Cyprus saved her by interjecting "A friend! My friend. Really, she's a wonderful girl."

"Hmmp!" Elinor spun and withdrew, the jay fluttering after her. "You think everything's wonderful."

Cyprus nudged Meridiyan and hissed "Ask her about her restaurant! Her life's work... she loves to talk about it."

"I wonder... I wonder how you manage to attract so many birds." she stuttered "I understand you feed them?"

Elinor turned. A pair of warblers rotated their tails so she could squint suspiciously at Meridiyan. "Eh, yeah? Look around ye girl, ye blind? Don't you see my baskets and things."

Meridiyan looked. Corner Garden was quite well appointed for the haunt of a loony bag lady. Little baskets hung from trees and sat on walls. They were filled with bread. They had ribbons tied on them. Gaudy, pretty plastic glasses nestled in corners, filled with drinking water. A bare shrub was hung with Christmas ornaments and bagels. There was a broom and dustbin behind a park bench. Pastel painted wastebaskets dotted the desolate flower beds. As Meridiyan watched, Elinor snatched a stray paper from the little pool and deposited in one of the wastebaskets.

"Well, girl? What do you think? Someone's got to make this place respectable in the wintertime, when there's nothing growing. Birds stay here as I can keep 'em warm and fed- not many look out for 'em in big, cold cities."

"It's beautiful" said Meridiyan. It was. It was strange and dirty and probably illegal, but it was beautiful. She didn't even know why.

"My friend needs to ask your advice." Cyprus said. "Go on" he whispered to Meridiyan.

"Well you see, Ms.,.....Aviary, a bird you might know stole something of mine that I really need. This sounds so stupid, but it was a little key, and a seagull stole it... named Keen." Meridiyan felt foolish.

"Eh, Eh?" Elinor rocked back on her haunches and laughed, a hoarse, rattling laugh. "Keen, that flying rat! An officer and a thief! Hah!" Meridiyan waited for the laughter to die to a snicker and said "Have you seen him?"

"Did he say anything?" Cyprus added.

"Yeah, I saw him, but he didn't say nothing. Ungrateful lout. Just gulped half a bagel and popped off to the East. Not so much as a "Thanks, Miss Elinor." I think he had your key with him.

If I know the wretch he'll be wanting to pawn it, the feathered pirate."

"Excellent information, Elinor" said Cyprus "Thank you..."

They heard a yelping behind them and the high-pitched skittering of paws on pavement. The panhandler was yelling "Sorry, man, just cut loose, man. I couldn't stop her, she, man she a fast witch..."

Falkor burst into Corner Gardens like a kid into the ocean, spraying sparrows in all directions. Two great waves of birds fled before her snapping jaws. One of them enveloped Malcolm Fivish where he skulked behind a tree. He flung himself in the dirt with his hands over his head. The other swooped over the head of Elinor. She was filled with an unspeakable rage. She went for the broom.

"Dog! Dog! Get it out! Out! All of you, get away. Don't you dare touch my customers!" She laid about her on all sides. Half blinded by flapping wings, Meridiyan dived for Falkor's collar, screaming "Bad girl, Bad!" The hound wriggled away, in gleeful pursuit of a bevy of pigeons.

"Elinor, put the broom down, you might hurt somebody."

"Exactly my intention, young man. You've mixed up with a bad crowd, Grey-eyes. Dog-owning, scornful, rich-dressed young misses." She swiped. Meridiyan ducked. "Poor Keen probably needs the key more than her!"

"Come on Cyprus!" The girl had finally succeeded in grabbing Falkor's hindquarters and was dragging her, growling and flailing, from the park. Cyprus glanced at her, then Elinor, in despair. "I'm sorry, ma'am, I'll make it up to you, somehow." He high-tailed it after Meridiyan.

Behind the tree, Malcolm uncovered his eyes. He patted his head, then looked at the smear on his hand with mounting disgust.

Meridiyan and Cyprus rested about a block away. They could still hear the indignant chittering of the birds, and see the silhouettes rise and fall like ashes from a bonfire. Meridiyan had a death grip on Falkor's collar. She turned to the boy. "I'm sorry, It's just her nature, I..."

"It's ok," Cyprus lied "She'll forgive me."

"Bad girl." she said again. Falkor whined appealingly. "Bad, bad girl."

Cyprus and Meridiyan wandered down the sidewalk. There were people now, cars, shops instead of trees. Cyprus went with the thin arms of his sweater wrapped around his neck. As Meridiyan looked at him, it occurred to her that any observer would think she was walking with a street bum.

"Gotta quarter? Please, sir, miss. I just need a quarter for my bus so I can go home. I wanna go home, I been waiting so long."

A burger wrapper floated away from the huddled man. Falkor grabbed it and worried it in her teeth. Meridiyan turned and said:

"Don't worry, he says that to everybody. Lucky! Put that down! Just don't make eye contact or he starts swearing at you..."

She trailed off and stared at her companion, who was twisting and flapping inside his ill-fitting clothes like a netted goldfish.

"What are you doing?"

"Just a moment." Cyprus ducked his head into his sweater. Moments later one arm popped from the neck hole, followed by an intent face. He shook the static from his hair, then nearly executed a backbend in order to rummage in the back of his boots. "I know I've got one somewhere."

"One what?"

"One quarter." He turned about a dozen hidden pockets in his jeans inside out. Each was empty. He sat down to examine his pant cuffs.

A passerby, mincing over him, polished off the last bite of her McChicken Deluxe and allowed the wrapper to flutter from her fingers into the beggar's lap. Meridiyan glanced wildly after her. The beggar let his head drop in despair.

"I think people are starting to notice us. Can't we just, well, leave?"

Cyprus was at the center of a small dervish of clothes. Scarves, mittens and jackets began to leave their orbits and fly off in all directions.

"This man needs to go home. We can help him. We have to."

Meridiyan felt like growling. "Cyprus, listen to me. That man is lying to you. He's been here for

like, half my adolescence, and he hasn't gone home yet."

"How can he, if no-one gives him quarters?"

"Cyprus, you're being incredibly gullible. I'm sure people give him quarters, he just, I don't know, spends them on drugs, or something. Cyprus, he's a liar. He probably hasn't got a home to go to!"

Cyprus had shed nearly all of his layers, and stood, shivering, in jeans and thin t-shirt. Thoughtfully, he reached up to his ear and pulled out a quarter. "Here it is" he said. He rubbed it between his finger till it shone, then knelt and pressed it into the beggar's palm. The beggar's dirty fingers closed around the silver piece. He blinked at it, dumbly. Then a warm wind lifted Meridiyan's hair from her face. She heard the sound of steam and marvelous machinery, then a single, hollow bell. The beggar raised his head. Falkor gave a nervous little howl and wove herself between Meridiyan's legs. She turned, and saw a pair of headlights coming through the mist.

The bus pulled up alongside them, with a whistle and a clank. Its side were silver and sleek. The driver poked her curly head out the door and said, "Going home?"

The beggar heaved himself off the sidewalk. Wrappers flew away like so many startled pigeons. He reached deep into a pocket and retrieved a handful of blackened change that, together with Cyprus's quarter, made perfect bus fare. He turned to smile at Cyprus.

"Three years in front of this goddamn McDonald's, sir, and you're the first goddamn fool to lend me a quarter. I'll pay you back, for sure." He mounted the bus, and they heard his coins clink in the slot. As the bus drove back into the mist they heard him shout "Thank you, thank you! Oh I'm going home.. I'm going.... I'm going home..."

Meridiyan rubbed at her eyes. "What.. what just happened?"

Cyprus was re-parceling himself in his outerwear. He grinned. "We just broke an enchantment."

It sounded like a magnificent thing. She clapped her hands. "Hey, Falkor! We broke an enchantment!" The dog shook her plummy tail and barked a fanfare. Meridiyan laughed. Cyprus laughed, and added, "We did magic!"

"Hey Falkor!" she said, crouching and ruffling the hound's neck ruff, "We did magic! We did magic! We did magic....." Falkor licked her cheek. "It wasn't hard at all."

"For the pure in heart," said Cyrus in storybook style, "nothing is." He looked, measuring, at the girl and her dog. Suddenly, he knelt beside them and whispered "But now I know how to find your key."

"My key?"

"Yes, your key. So you can get back home. Before I wasn't sure that you'd believe me- that I could trust you. But what you just said. I mean, you know now. Don't you?"

Meridiyan's hands stilled around her dog's neck as she fell upwards into his grey eyes. "Yes. Yes I know." He gave her his arm and they stood up.

"Well?" she laughed, "what are we going to do?"

His eyes flashed with joy. "Fly." he said.

to be continued...

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Twelve issues and 16.5 years ago, our forefathers brought forth onto this CUSFuSsing a new Annish...

Presumably these Annishes were to be published on a yearly basis with member biographies (noticeably missing from this issue, but expected in the next) and an index of all the issues from the previous years, to keep track of what was written and by whom, and perhaps to show off just a little bit. The Annishes appeared as sporadically as the issues themselves, with only three appearing in a little over a decade. Well, that's par for the CUSFuSs.

When I decided to help revive CUSFuSsing after a long absence, I thought the best way to make its debut would be with another Annish. Here it is – this is the 4th Annish, and the indexes below document what was contained within the issues since the 3rd Annish was printed. The issues themselves should be available online soon, but in the meantime take a look and think about how much work made all of this possible. We have big shoes to fill.

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