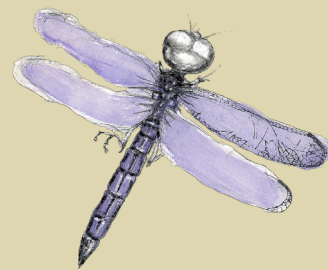
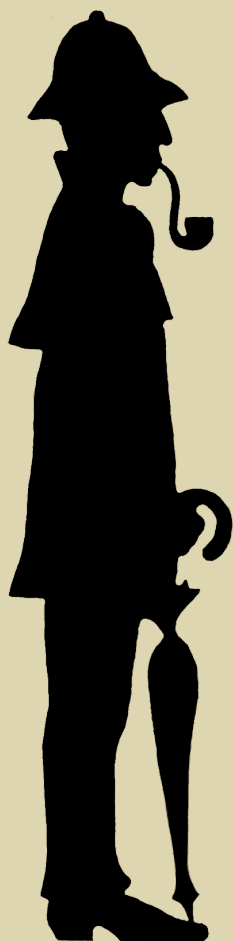


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Issue 4 - November 2012



With Stories by
M. Bennardo, Jonathan Maberry, Joanne Merriam,
Sunny Moraine, and Michael D. Winkle

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Table of Contents

Ants	4
Editors' Note	5
The Famous Fabre Fly Caper by M. Bennardo	6
The Candy Aisle by Joanne Merriam	17
In Your Own Back Yard by Michael D. Winkle	21
Invasives by Sunny Moraine	30
Deep, Dark by Jonathan Maberry	36
Contributor Bios	50

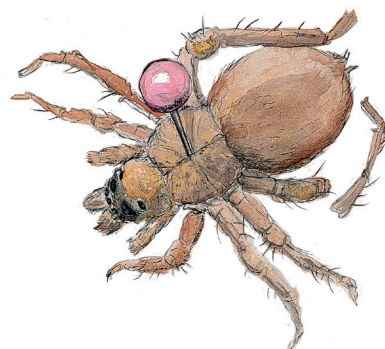
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Editors' Note

Dear Readers, it is our pleasure to welcome you to our fourth issue. We are now well passed the anniversary marking our first year in existence as the premier publication of fiction and art peculiarly devoted to bugs (or so we assume, not knowing of any other such specialized publications). As such, we can only assume after a year of existence, you may expect more of us. Shame on us if we do not deliver! Deliver we must, and deliver we do in this most diverse (well-rounded? capricious?) issue.

Here, should you care to delve deep, you may find a theme of cunning and strategy. Military encounters of an insectile nature! Many-legged creatures avoiding capture through their skill at evasion! A daring heist carried out in broad daylight! What more could you ask from those inclined to connive and scheme? There are, of course, quiet moments, too — moments of terrifying stillness, with sounds on the edge of hearing, and moments filled with self-reflection and stark realization.

We do hope you will enjoy these tales of daring and cleverness. And the moments of dread hush, too. Whatever your tastes — for adventure, or quiet contemplation — we thank you for joining us once again, and hope you will join us for many issues to come. After all, the varied tales of insect kind number more than the legs of a centipede... And we invite you to experience each and every one.





The Famous Fabre Fly Caper

by M. Bennardo
Illustration by Linda Saboe

This is what I wished for, *hoc erat in votis*: a bit of land, oh, not so very large, but fenced in, to avoid the drawbacks of a public way; an abandoned, barren, sun scorched bit of land, favored by thistles and by wasps and bees. Here, without fear of being troubled by the passersby, I could consult the *Ammophila* and the *Sphex* and engage in that difficult conversation whose questions and answers have experiment for their language; here, without distant expeditions that take up my time, without tiring rambles that strain my nerves, I could contrive my plans of attack, lay my ambushes and watch their effects at every hour of the day. *Hoc erat in votis*. Yes, this was my wish, my dream, always cherished, always vanishing into the mists of the future.

Jean-Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Fly*

“That’s a queer bird,” said Claud from among the reeds as he cooled his posterior in the mud of the pond bank.

“What bird?” asked Denis. He raised himself slightly on his legs and peered nervously around the pond, for birds were often to be avoided.

“Are you blind?” asked Claud. “Over there — that great hulking black thing.”

Denis shifted his body to look and immediately chirped a cheery laugh. “That’s no bird, you ignoramus. That’s just Fabre.”

And indeed, the “great hulking black thing” was in fact a sharp-featured man just beginning the descent into old age, dressed in a fading black suit, his creased and pocked face peering out in kindly, enthusiastic interest from under a wide-brimmed hat. He carried a glass jar with him, and seemed engrossed in the mud around his feet.

“And just who exactly,” sniffed Claud, whose feelings had been bruised, “is Fabre?”

“He’s the man who owns the house just over there —”

“The house?” asked Claud in distraction. He had quite forgotten there was a house, even though it sat fewer than fifty meters from the water. But one must make allowances with tree frogs — to them, a tree in which to perch and a little pond nearby in which to breed might comprise all the world that is worth thinking about. “Oh yes, the house. But then why haven’t I seen him before now?”

“He spends most days in some dusty old field in back of the house, collecting wasps’ nests and peering into spiders’ holes.”

“Oh, does he...?” murmured Claud, his attention drawn away by a buzzing fly.

“Fabre is a naturalist, I’m told,” continued Denis. “He has studied all sorts of living things, but they say he loves insects most of all. He keeps a great many specimens in cages and jars in the house. In fact, I expect that’s what he’s doing out with that jar at the moment.”

Claud was only half listening, as the fly seemed increasingly likely to land on a nearby sedge leaf. As it swooped lower and lower, Denis’s chirping

explanation receded farther and farther into the background — for tree frogs can really only do one thing at a time.

At last, the fly swooped into range, and Claud’s tongue flashed from his lipless mouth, catching the juicy little morsel just as it was about to land. After reeling his tongue back into his mouth, Claud disengaged the fly and pressed it up against his cheek next to another that he had been saving since morning.

“Specimens?” asked Claud, mostly because he was trying to be polite and that was the last word he remembered hearing.

“Bugs and things, I’m told. Loads and loads of them. Spiders seem to be his pet obsession at the moment.”

“And just who is telling you all of this?” asked Claud. Denis somehow always seemed to know everything about everything, at least as concerned the world of the pond and its immediate surroundings. But, of course, the idea of any wider world — even of such quite near places as the little village of Sérignan-du-Comtat, just down the lane, and not to mention any of the vastly distant metropolises of Provence, such as Marseilles or Avignon, each some fifty kilometers away — would have been a shocking concept. “Just where do you get such reliable dispatches of foreign intelligence?”

Now it was Denis’s turn to be offended. He shifted a little, making a show of scanning for flies for a few moments. But, just like most people who seem to know everything, he could not long resist answering any question that was put to him.

“Fabre has a cat,” he said coolly. “The cat stalks the sparrows — whom I suppose even you may know, for they come here to drink every day — and the sparrows taunt the cat. The cat, unable to catch them and being of a weak and spoiled disposition, resorts to sniveling about the greatness and cleverness of her owner, the naturalist Fabre.” Denis shifted a little again, lunging for a fly and missing. “Just how the cat collects her information, I’m sure I don’t know, but she is in the house every day and must know what goes on there.”

Further discussion was silenced as a black and white head with a great orange bill appeared over the

tops of the reeds some meters away. The head balanced on the end of a long, snake-like neck, and its large watery eyes inspected the ground with care.

“The heron!” hissed Denis.

She was some distance away yet, but the way the bird slowly scanned the water while stepping delicately through the mud left no question that she was on the hunt.

“And you-know-who will doubtless be creeping along with her.”

“I haven’t got any flies,” said Denis morosely.

Claud harrumphed. “Then let’s hope we aren’t found out.” With that, both frogs dived into the pond, sinking down to the murky bottom where they could cover themselves in the suspended muck of the bed. Above them, the surface of the pond vibrated momentarily with two radiating circles of ripples, but soon enough all was quiet again.



A frog can be very still when he wants to be. And at that moment, with the heron searching and hunting above them, Claud and Denis wanted to be as still as stones at the bottom of a well. And if there had only been the heron to worry about, they would doubtless have escaped detection. But this heron, who went by the name Aurélie, found that it was to her profit if she did not work alone.

And so it was with a sinking feeling in his stomach that Claud felt a webby hand press against his back. Before he even turned around, he knew he’d find one of the enormous marsh frogs — more than four times his own size — giving him the hardest stare an animal can when his eyes are on entirely opposite sides of his head. Overhead, a large shadow moving from side to side proved that Aurélie waited above.

“Well, my boy,” said the marsh frog, a giant bubble resting against the roof of his mouth as he spoke. “Have you got your payment for the Syndicate?”

Claud sighed. There was nothing to do but cooperate. If he refused, a single croak from the marsh frog would tell the heron to strike. In fact, there was little doubt that Aurélie would take any excuse whatsoever to snap him up. Sullenly, Claud disgorged one of the flies he had been keeping against his cheek

and watched in fury as the marsh frog gobbled it up.

“Timely payment,” puffed the marsh frog. “And a juicy fly, at that. This is a good mark for you, my boy. The Syndicate could use a few more decent tree frogs like you.”

Claud only glared back, hatred burning in his elliptical pupils.

“Now what about this other fellow?” asked the marsh frog, laying its hand on Denis next.

Denis was hopelessly distraught as he emerged from his hiding place. He trembled before the marsh frog, the heron’s shadow cold and dark above him. He could even make out two thick stick-like legs jutting down through the murky water, and the spidery spread of clawed toes.

“I haven’t gotten any yet today,” Denis whispered. “Give me a little more time, please!”

The marsh frog eyed Denis critically. “You look fat enough for a tree frog, eh?” He poked Denis in the ribs with his hand. “You haven’t been snacking on bugs that should rightfully belong to the Syndicate, have you?”

Denis turned pale and shook his head feebly.

“Just lazy then, eh? I’m afraid this is a bad mark for you, my boy. In fact, we may have to consider you an unproductive drain on Syndicate resources.” The marsh frog made an airy, imperious gesture, as though to include the entire pond among these so-called Syndicate resources.

“No, please!”

Claud cringed. He expected at any moment that the great bill would flash down and send Denis wriggling down the hateful bird’s endless esophagus. Such was the way of the Syndicate — its stooges grew fat on the “payments” they extracted from every frog and toad in the pond, and the heron got an easy meal whenever some unfortunate like Denis failed to keep up with the extortion.

“Wait,” said Claud. “I’ll pay for him.” He disgorged the fly he’d been keeping since morning, leaving him with nothing to show for the day. But this wouldn’t be Claud’s first hungry night since that overgrown natterjack bully Grégoire had conceived of the Syndicate racket as a way to stuff his belly without

doing any work himself.

The marsh frog eyed the fly critically — it was a small thing, and badly damaged from being carried around all day. But finally he sniffed and sucked it into his mouth as well. “Boss Grégoire will hardly be pleased with this one,” he said. Then he turned to Denis. “Your friend has got you off the hook this time. But don’t expect to make this a habit — every frog has to produce his own payment.”

With that, the marsh frog swam away, its long legs taking it deep into the pond with a couple graceful kicks. The shadow lifted a moment later as Aurélie followed after. Claud and Denis settled back down into the muck of the pond, trembling at their close call.

Finally, Claud asked, “What kind of specimens did you say Fabre keeps in his house?”

“Mostly spiders at the moment,” said Denis quietly.

“And how many did you say he had?”

“Loads and loads,” croaked Denis.

“And,” asked Claud after a few moments had passed, “what exactly does he feed them?”



Claud was not a bad frog by any means, and he was certainly not a mean one. But ever since the pond had been taken over by the Syndicate, with its blatant corruption and coercion, there had been some erosion in the morals of the animals suffering under its rule. So when Claud speculated on the insect riches that must be kept in Fabre’s house, he felt no twinge of conscience if his plans evolved along the same lines as those of a criminal plotting a burglary. He was simply doing what was needed to survive.

Late that night, Claud and Denis descended from their tree to see what they could discover at the house. The spider specimens themselves weren’t the target of the investigation, but rather the vast store of flies Claud had convinced himself Fabre must be keeping for their food.

The pond was alive with chirping and croaking as Claud and Denis crept across the grass of the lawn. In fact, on spring nights such as this one, the pond and

the surrounding wetlands were home to a veritable cacophony of chirps, croaks, and peeps reverberating across the surrounding countryside.

For a long time, the house seemed to stay the same size — it was simply “big” and “far away.” But after a few moments, it looked distinctly closer, and they could make out the outline of the piled stones of the walls and the misshapen outline of the chimney. Lamplight seeped out from the crack under the door and from behind the curtains. Somewhere inside, Fabre was inspecting one of his specimens, or devising an ingenious experiment, or writing one of his famous *Souvenirs entomologiques*.

Claud had interviewed the sparrows earlier that day, and they had told him where to expect the spider cages — boxy enclosures that sat out back behind the house, covered in netting to keep the inmates in. But the sparrows had never seen anything looking like a container of flies, and so Claud suspected it must be kept inside. The first task, then, was to find a way into the house.

Generally speaking, tree frogs have very little to do with houses. Therefore, Claud’s plan had been very fuzzy on the matter of ingress. He expected they would simply climb up to some hole or crack, and squirm through until they found themselves in the house. After all, garden walls and tree trunks always abounded in holes and cracks. Why should houses be any different?

After some hours and a great deal of fruitless exploration, Claud finally managed to find a sufficiently large crack under the front door, squeezing into a gap between boards. Denis followed and at last they were in Fabre’s house.

By this time, the household had gone to bed. All the lamps were extinguished, and everything was silent — save, of course, for the chorus of chirps and croaks rising up from the pond and the wet earth all around the house.

The requirements of frog biology usually make them very timid explorers, except when water is present. You will not ordinarily find two tree frogs systematically searching the rooms of a house, hopping along the dusty flagstones and using the soft sticky pads on their hands and feet to climb up every table leg. However, if you had been a silent, hidden

observer in the shadowy corners of Harmas (which was the name for Jean-Henri Fabre's house in Provence) on this particular night in May of 1883, then that is exactly what you would have seen if you had looked close enough.

It was Claud, at last, who found the treasure they sought. It took the form of a large box, about fifteen centimeters in every direction, made of a light wood frame covered tightly with translucent parchment paper. Claud could hear the flies buzzing inside, their wings vibrating against the parchment walls. How many flies, he wondered. A hundred? Two hundred? A thousand or more could easily have fit in that space, though Claud did not necessarily expect the entire box to be full.

"It's up here," chirped Claud. He had tried calling to Denis as softly as he could, but frogs are not known to be great judges of acoustics.

"You found it?" chirped Denis.

"Yes! Come look!"

This idle and unwise chirping went on for quite a while as Claud and Denis excitedly inspected their find. There did seem to be no doubt that the box was full of an extraordinary number of flies — enough to pay off the Syndicate for the rest of the spring and summer, most likely. If they could only somehow get possession of the insects inside the box, they might rest easy for the rest of the year.

It's perhaps for the best they were interrupted at that point by a loud banging and grousing from the next room, or else they might have tried to open the box right away. But instead, they both jumped six inches at the sounds, and suddenly realized they had foolishly woken up the people in the house.

"I can hear them, I tell you!" growled a man's voice, which we may take for that of Jean-Henri, the naturalist himself.

"Darling, please," said a woman's voice, which must have belonged to Marie-Césarine, his wife. "You're just over-tired and agitated."

"I *am* over-tired and agitated," grumbled Jean-Henri again, "on account of this incessant chirping night after night. But I can hear them in the house, nonetheless!"

Denis gulped. "We'd better hop," he said, "and come back for the box another night."

"Ah ha!" shouted Jean-Henri as he stumbled into the room, his face lit by the flickering light of a taper. "You hear that?" He advanced upon the frogs and promptly barked his shins against a chair in the darkness.

"Indeed!" chirped Claud, and both frogs jumped down off the table and wriggled back under the door. Only Fabre's cat, who had quietly slinked into the room along with her master, remained to watch the long, fruitless search that followed until Fabre's exasperation gave way at last to exhaustion.



By the next day, Claud had realized his plans regarding the fly box required further development. Reflection had revealed to him the disaster that would have followed if they had opened the box while still in Fabre's house. It seemed what was called for was to take the box out of Fabre's house, and to keep it in a place where Claud and Denis could harvest its riches at ease, one fly at a time.

Human readers, with the advantage of human intellects, will instantly point out a host of problems with this plan. How could a frog ever manage to transport such a monstrous piece of furniture anywhere? Where could it be hidden so Claud and Denis could get at it when they liked, but the stooges of the Syndicate could not? And, of course, how were the flies to be kept alive once they were taken away from the succoring hand of Fabre, and his eye-droppers of sugar solution?

Claud, however, did not have a human intellect. He had a frog intellect, and in true frog fashion he thought it sufficient to consider only the first problem that occurred to him — that of getting the box out of Fabre's house. All the same, it was half a day of thinking before he had any kind of solution at all.

"I keep thinking it over," Claud finally said to Denis, about mid-afternoon, "and I don't see any other alternative. We'll have to cut in the heron on the job."

To Denis, this sentence was full of so many horrors that he hardly knew how to respond. Phrases like "cut in" and "the job" carried with them an unmistakable tang of criminality — a tang that had increasingly peppered Claud's language of late. And

then, this horrible reference to the heron! Denis looked furtively around, as if to be sure the uttering of the words had not conjured the monster herself, but Claud was already forging ahead.

“Aurélie is the only creature I can think of who would have any hope of carrying that box away intact.” Claud tapped his front leg pensively on the lily pad on which he was resting. “But why would she ever consent to help us?”

The minds of animals do not run in many channels, and it was not long before Claud determined food must be the enticement for Aurélie. The flies would not appeal to her, of course. But perhaps the spiders would be juicy enough?

Claud impulsively called to one of the sparrows drinking at the pond not far away. “Hey, sparrow! Is Aurélie somewhere about here today?”

“She’s on the other side of the pond,” answered the sparrow. “You’ve no need to worry for now.”

“I wonder if you’d carry a message to her for me?” asked Claud. “In particular, I wonder if you’d ask her if she would be interested in making a meal out of a lot of fat spiders? Perhaps she’s seen the ones I mean — the spiders in the boxes outside Fabre’s house.”

After getting over the shock of a frog asking to send a message to the heron, the sparrow got up and flew over to Aurélie to put the question to her. It was a novel situation, and he wanted to see what would come of it. A moment later, the sparrow was flying back with the response, and perched on a rush to deliver it.

“She says spiders aren’t ordinarily in her line, but that she would have eaten the ones in the boxes long ago if the netting hadn’t gotten in the way.”

Claud croaked in approval. “Excellent, excellent.”

But before he could continue, the sparrow interrupted him. “Begging your pardon, but I can see the heron leaping up into the sky right now. I think she intends to come over here and continue the interview in person.”

“More like she intends to eat us,” said Denis in despair.

“Yes, I’m not sure a personal interview would be wise...” Claud looked about and then pointed at a little

rock in the middle of the pond on which a couple of small turtles were sunning themselves. “When Aurélie arrives, tell her that we will remove the netting for her if she consents to carry out a box from inside the house for us. Then meet us over by that rock to give us her answer.”

At that, Claud and Denis disappeared into the water. By the time they surfaced over by the rock, they could see Aurélie pacing around the bank of the pond where they had been sitting. She looked a little perplexed to find there were no frogs waiting for her, but a moment later the sparrow was winging over with another message. This time he alighted on the shell of a turtle.

“She’s agreeable to the idea, so long as it’s not too big of a box, and so long as the box doesn’t contain anything that she should like better than spiders, and so long as the windows are open wide enough to let her in.”

Claud waved his arm. “Yes, yes, it’s just a box of flies, which I doubt she would have any interest in. Tell her that Denis and I will creep inside the house tonight and make sure the windows are open, and then once she has taken out the box we will remove the netting from the spider cages.”

“Begging your pardon—” said the sparrow again.

“Go on, go on,” said Claud. “We’ll wait for the answer.”

But no sooner had he finished chirping, then Aurélie herself landed heavily in the muck by the rock, her wings outstretched to break her fall from the sky. The turtles instantly slipped away into the water, and the sparrow had to jump quickly to avoid getting dunked. In an instant, only the two frogs remained. Before they could move a muscle, Aurélie’s bill hovered over top of them, as if ready to make a meal out of both frogs at once.

“I roost at night,” squawked Aurélie in her ragged heron’s screech. “And the windows will be locked. Either we will do it now, or not at all.”

Claud gulped, a shiver running through his whole little body. Denis seemed ready to pass out. “Now then, of course,” Claud whispered.

Aurélie hung over them a moment longer, and

then nodded her head. “And where would you like this box placed?”

“I suppose our tree would be the best place...” stammered Claud.

“Then quickly up to the house while everyone is napping!” And with that, Aurélie flapped heavily up again to take her position on the lawn outside the window. A moment later, when Claud and Denis had regained their composure, they slipped into the water and swam off in the same direction.



The Famous Fabre Fly Caper (as it would later be called by generations of admiring polliwogs) was destined to be remembered more for its audacity and for occasional flashes of ingenious improvisation than for any craftsmanship that went into its planning or execution. After all, it is not merely a matter of the difference in species that the name of Claud the tree frog is not often mentioned in the company of others such as James Moriarty, A.J. Raffles, or Arsene Lupin. The truth is that it is difficult to imagine any of those great criminals allowing one of their projects to be engulfed by such a whirlwind of chaos as that in which Claud and Denis were soon to find themselves.

The unraveling of the thin plan began almost as soon as Claud and Denis squeezed under the front door. The inside of Fabre’s house looked considerably different in the afternoon light — the rooms seemed smaller, for one thing, but also more perilous. If the frogs should be heard or seen on this excursion, they were far more likely to be caught or killed.

And, in fact, Claud and Denis *were* seen, almost as soon as they entered the house. It was the cat, lounging on a chair in a ray of sunlight, who happened to notice them. This was an extraordinary coincidence, for the cat had just been thinking about the two little frogs who had been in the house the night before. She had been dreaming about how happy it would make her master to receive the little gift of their headless bodies — for he had certainly seemed very interested in the creatures.

And so the cat was dreaming about how cunningly she would stalk and catch those two frogs down by the pond. She often had such dreams about little animals that came around the house — mice and

sparrows and so on — and very often they amounted to nothing more than a pleasant afternoon’s musing. It was cold and wet down by the pond, and it was full of quacking ducks and hissing geese, and little animals had the annoying habit of jumping or scurrying or flying away at the last moment. Much better to do her stalking and killing in her mind, so thought the cat, where those unpleasant realities need not intrude.

When Claud and Denis hopped out from under the front door, the cat had just got to the part of her dream where she was solemnly laying their decapitated bodies at Fabre’s feet, ready to receive the praise and treats she knew would be her reward. She was bewildered for a moment by the sudden appearance of the subjects of her dream in the flesh, and at first she was frozen in a strange state of shock. But then a shiver went down her spine as instinct took hold, and suddenly her eyes snapped wide open and her claws slipped out of their sheaths.

For their part, the two frogs knew nothing of the cat until she had flown over their heads and skidded into a pile of boots next to the door. Claud had been distracted, thinking about the window and how they might manage to open it wide enough to allow the heron inside. Denis had simply been realizing, little by little, how much he disliked being there at all. But as the boots toppled over and the cat emerged from the disordered pile, they were both snapped violently back into the moment.

Claud and Denis found themselves huddled under a nearby chair, hurried there by instinct before they had even really comprehended the situation. Likewise, instinct ordered the cat to once again hurl herself at her prey — this time colliding with the chair and sending it spinning across the floor. At this, Claud and Denis hopped behind a pile of books which was, in short order, tumbled down by another yowling leap.

As instinct shuttled the frogs and their pursuer from one shelter to another, Claud’s little intellect began to assert itself again. The problem he had been concerned with — how to open the window wider on its hinge — merged in his brain with the problem at hand, and suddenly Claud had one of those flashes of brilliant insight.

“Quick,” he hissed to Denis. “Behind the bookcase!” And in an instant, the two frogs were

wriggling into the crack behind a small bookcase which sat against the wall under the window. The cat's paw reached deep into the crack behind them, swatting and swiping, but she soon found herself pressed flat up against the side of the bookcase, frogs just out of reach and unable to stretch any farther.

Once her blood was up, the cat was not the sort of creature to be so easily deterred. If she couldn't get the frogs from one side, she would soon try reaching from the other, or down from the top. If those tactics failed, she would push at the crack until it parted and she could force herself inside.

Claud and Denis, however, did not wait for those developments. Instead, they pressed the sticky pads of their hands and feet to the wall and began to climb up behind the bookcase, up and out, until they reached the windowsill above. And no sooner had they crawled over the sill and onto the windowpanes than they were confronted with the searching eye of the heron — yellow and limpid — staring back through the window and into the house.

Aurélie was in fact trying to see what was going on inside the house. She had started to wonder if the frogs had met with some accident, and found herself regretting that she had not eaten them when she had the chance. For a moment, she was taken aback by their appearance clinging to the other side of the window before her — but it was only a moment before she realized this was a second opportunity to make a good meal.

Of course, if there were any hope that the frogs could actually open the window, she might play along long enough to get those spiders as well... But as things stood, she didn't see how such tiny animals could ever open the window any wider than it already stood. This flaw in the plan should have been evident from the beginning. Now that it had become clear to Aurélie, she considered the deal well and off.

Stepping delicately to the side, Aurélie tilted her head and opened her bill. Daintily extending it into the crack of the window, she blindly groped, searching for the frogs and ready to snap shut when she should find them.

But it was at that moment the cat noticed the frogs had climbed out from behind the bookcase. Coiling herself for a leap, she let out a furious yowl and launched

herself over the bookcase at the window. Mid-air, she caught sight of the sharp heron's bill tapping its way along the windowpane. Twisting herself in surprise, she struck the window with her back and proceeded to tumble out into open space. Aurélie jumped back with her feathers all disordered. The window itself sprang wide open at the force of the impact, and Claud and Denis could only hold on as tight as they could.



Denis, who was always less finely constituted than Claud, actually succumbed momentarily to the bliss of unconsciousness. All of the stress of the moment melted away, and he floated on a cushion of peaceful ignorance. An eternity seemed to pass — a wonderful eternity free of cats and herons, free in fact from every bodily care.

In reality, the eternity passed in a single second, and when Denis returned to awareness he found himself still clinging by reflex to the windowpane next to Claud — but now with Aurélie perched on the windowsill behind him, wings fluffed out over her back and neck extended as she squawked at the startled cat below. The cat, for her part, was so dismayed and demoralized by these unexpected developments that she sped off around the house as soon as she found her feet again.

Cognizant that the situation had changed again, Aurélie stepped lightly from the windowsill and floated to the table with the box on it. "Yes," chirped Claud. "That's the box! Now quickly, fly it out the window so we can drop to the ground and get to those spider boxes before the cat returns to trap us."

"In good time, in good time," squawked Aurélie. She poked at the box gingerly with her bill, tipping and tilting it on the table. "First we shall find out what is in here."

"It's flies!"

"So you say... But how do I know it isn't really something better?" Aurélie snaked her neck back towards the window as she asked the question. Clearly she was a creature so used to deceit and double-crosses that she could hardly imagine Claud might be telling the truth.

"Hold on there!" came another voice — a deep and throaty croak. It bore with it such an air of

command, everyone really did stop to listen. “I shall open the box, for it is mine now. Bring it down to me here, Aurélie.”

The new arrival was Grégoire, the natterjack toad boss of the Syndicate, who had dug his way under the door just moments earlier. He was accompanied by practically every marsh frog from the pond. For what had happened was this: moments after Claud and Denis left for the house, the sparrows started spreading a lot of sparrow gossip about a great house full of thousands of flies. Grégoire had woken from a nap to the unpleasant news that a great mass of insects were about to bypass the Syndicate altogether, and he had instantly mobilized his strongest enforcers. The rest of the marsh frogs had then followed after, afraid that by hanging behind they would lose their share of the spoils.

The front room of Fabre’s house, now full of frogs and with a heron perched on the tabletop, looked more like a pond than the pond itself at that moment. The cat, meanwhile, could be heard yowling from the other side of the front door, her paw reaching up through the hole that Grégoire and the marsh frogs had dug to get in.

“All we need now is for Fabre himself to show up as well.” So chirped Claud, despair in his voice, as he watched Aurélie drive her bill down into the parchment covering of the box, releasing the startled flies in a buzzing cloud.

“I’m told he naps on the back porch in a hammock at this hour,” answered Denis. “So we might as well take this moment to slip away...”

But Claud felt a sudden surging in his breast as another inspiration hit him. “No, my brother!” he said. “Sing as loud as and as fast as you can! Sing for all you are worth!”



The rest of the tale is not long in the telling. Claud and Denis did sing for all they were worth, their throats vibrating heroically as they sent their high piercing calls out into the sunny afternoon.

So insistent where they in their singing that eventually they achieved what the squawks of Aurélie and the clatter of the cat could not — they woke the naturalist himself, Jean-Henri Fabre, from

his afternoon nap. Weeks of being tormented every night by the chorus of chirps and croaks coming from the pond had left Fabre’s nerves finely tuned to the calls of frogs. He awoke in a rage, for it seemed the frogs would not even let him nap during the day.

Claud and Denis kept singing until they saw Fabre burst into the house from a back entrance. He was a terrible sight with his collar unbuttoned, his hair in disarray, a broom in his hands that he wielded like a battleaxe. But berserker that he was, the sight which met his eyes in the front room stopped him in his tracks.

Marsh frogs covered the flagstones, hopping and crawling after hundreds of flies who filled the air, landing here and there as they searched for the windows. Meanwhile, the cat was raising an unholy racket from outside the front door. But most startling of all was the grey heron standing on the table, picking apart the parchment fly box with its bill as a natterjack toad hopped uselessly again and again on the floor far below.

“My God,” whispered Fabre, pressing a hand to his forehead but finding no sign of fever.

The heron was the first to see how things stood. The box truly contained nothing but flies, and the room was hemmed in now by man and cat. Sweeping her head around the entire room, Aurélie could see there was no escape for any of the marsh frogs anymore. Without the climbing ability of the tree frogs, they would never reach the windows, and the only other exits were now both closed off. The Syndicate didn’t seem likely to outlast the day.

Cutting her losses, Aurélie jumped down from the table and plucked Grégoire from the floor with a sharp stab of her bill. Tilting her head back, she severed her ties with the Syndicate forever. Then leaping up to the window, she balanced a precarious moment on the sill before leaping again, taking wing, and flying away from the coming scene of carnage.

Claud and Denis, meanwhile, took the appearance of Fabre as their cue to release their grips on the window, dropping lightly to the wet grass below. As they crept away towards the pond, they could hear terrible noises and curses coming from the house as Fabre relieved himself of his frustration against the frogs that had robbed him of sleep for almost a month. None of

the marsh frogs ever returned to the pond, and though Claud and Denis never learned exactly what their fate had been, it is a well-known fact in Provence that they make an excellent dish when breaded and fried in butter with garlic and parsley.

Though Claud and Denis never tasted any of Fabre's flies, they returned to a pond where the oppressive heel of the Syndicate had been forever lifted. Aurélie had given up on amphibian alliances, so they had only to contend with the normal dangers of life in the countryside. Being clever frogs who looked out for each other's welfare, this ensured that Claud and Denis lived many happy years among their friends.

For his part, Fabre did find his pond much quieter after the strange events of that day, and soon his nights were restful and refreshing again. Even into his old age, thirty years later, he often thought (with some embarrassment) that the marsh frog massacre had been responsible for the change.

But Fabre, of course, could never know that on moist May nights, when the tree frogs were apt to sing their loudest, there were in fact two grateful agents creeping from tree to tree on his behalf, whispering to their brothers and sisters, and to their nephews and nieces: "Softly, softly now. We mustn't disturb old Fabre, for we owe to him still our lives and liberty."

In front of the house is a large pond, fed by the aqueduct that supplies the village pumps with water. Here, from half a mile and more around, come the frogs and toads in the lovers' season. The natterjack, sometimes as large as a plate, with a narrow stripe of yellow down his back, makes his appointments here to take his bath; when the evening twilight falls, we see hopping along the edge the midwife toad, the male, who carries a cluster of eggs, the size of peppercorns, wrapped round his hindlegs... Lastly, when not croaking amid the foliage, the tree frogs indulge in the most graceful dives. And so, in May, as soon as it is dark, the pond becomes a deafening orchestra: it is impossible to talk at table, impossible to sleep. We had to remedy this by means perhaps a little too rigorous. What could we do? He who tries to sleep and cannot needs becomes ruthless.

Jean-Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Fly*



The Famous Fabre Fly Caper © 2012 M. Bennardo
Let's Make a Deal © 2012 Linda Saboe

The Candy Aisle

by Joanne Merriam

Illustration by Dag Jørgensen



My first impression of Phillip is that he is blessed with ignorance. Ignorance of the importance of a good first impression, not to mention the finer points of fashion.

My netting is tight and full-body, designed for under street clothes, and looks chic where it drapes over the sweet little pillbox hat I always wear now; he's taken his off, apparently lulled by the airlocks and security sweeps and dragonflies into thinking he's safe

inside the mall, the idiot. That kind of thinking can get you killed. Instead of frowning at him — wrinkles, you know — I relieve my feelings by giving him a level, unsmiling look, which he doesn't notice.

"That's the best chocolate," he says to me, pointing at the bar in my hand. It's square and foreign. I had picked it up because I like the smoothness of foil wrappers, and then I'd tried to read the German and French on the back, to keep myself in practice,

and because it was reassuring to think that people in other countries, who spoke other languages, were still alive.

I'm in the grocery store. The grocery store is my place: the rows of leafy vegetables and carrots and bell peppers being misted every few minutes, the shiny columns of cans, this week's special at the end of every aisle, the pyramid of on sale toilet paper, the self-checkout's soothing female voice, the astringent whiff of detergent, the candy aisle. The seasonal posters hanging in wooden frames from the ceiling twist slightly in the breeze from the air conditioning, which is always turned up to full now, to discourages the mosquitoes.

I can't help stopping in the candy aisle. I'm not bad; I never buy any of it. I just look. I like the boxes of candy, their bright colors and tidy stacks. I like to weigh bags of hard candies and feel them slip over each other under the plastic like beans in a stuffed toy. I touch the wrappings, and my mouth waters, and then I go home.

I never eat sugary foods. You have to be careful. You've always had to be careful, of course; I remember a time when, if you didn't watch yourself, you'd end up like my sister, plump and single, telling people you're a lesbian when they ask you why you aren't married yet. Now there's an extra incentive: the rumors that people who eat sweets have more attractive blood. I read every label, note the grams of fat and carbohydrates, looking for saturated or hydrogenated anything, high fructose corn syrup, dextrose, and of course the sugar itself.

He seems to expect an answer, so I say, "I'm not very big on milk chocolate."

"You like it dark?"

"Sure," I say as I put down the bar and start to move away.

"You ever had Ghirardelli?" he says.

Why is he still talking to me? I shake my head and keep walking. He paces me, and his netting (which he's draped over one arm) shushes against the floor. I imagine it catching on random particles of dirt and bits of broken glass tracked in from the parking lot, developing micro-tears he won't notice until it's too late. I imagine him bitten, dizzy, paralyzed, dead, but

he's still talking.

He's saying, "They have real nice dark chocolate. You should try it." He pauses and when I don't respond, continues, in a somewhat desperate tone, "I could buy you a cup of hot chocolate there."

I stop walking abruptly, jerking my arms a little to stop my grocery cart in its tracks. I look at him: doe eyes, wide mouth, ungroomed eyebrows, laugh lines, farmer's tan. He looks pleasant, harmless, a little boring. Under my scrutiny, he smiles a little, nervously, as though he expects me to call mall security.

I'm going to say, "I don't eat sugar," but I don't because I'm thinking that this guy, he's really two people.

One is the guy himself and the other is his ignorant, groveling hopefulness, which is so huge it's like a monstrous shadow hovering over him. I can't decide if he really imagines he has a chance with me, or if this is just something he does to pass the time, and while I'm thinking about this I miss my opportunity to reject him, because he's seen me thinking and he'll assume I'm thinking about having his hot chocolate, so I say, "Why the hell not," making the question a statement.

His smile expands. For just a second, he is gorgeous with real joy, and he reminds me of somebody, perhaps somebody I knew once, in a simpler time, and then the moment is gone.

So here we are, sitting in Ghirardelli with our hot chocolates. I've removed the netting around my face so I can sip at my drink. We've done all the fuss of deciding on our orders (made with skim milk, please), and whether or not to get whipped cream (absolutely not), and settled ourselves in a booth, and traded names (Harriet for Phillip), and silence falls, and there's this eternity when the ground threatens to open up and swallow us both, and then we both talk at once: he says, "How's your—" and I say, "So what do you—" and then we both laugh.

He tells me a funny story about his job, which turns out to be medical research. "Naturally my research has been suspended so I can work on a vaccine," he says, and I say, "Do you miss it?" not because I really care, but to divert him from saying anything about arbo.

It's all my sister talks about these days, and I

actually miss her rambling stories about nights out with her girlfriend. Not that anybody goes out anymore. The broadcasts over the tornado warning loudspeakers have grown tedious. We all know by now to wear protective gear, to empty out standing water, to avoid lakes, and to call 911 at the first sign of dizziness, before paralysis sets in. I mean, you lose a quarter of the population, you're going to pay attention. It's been years, and I'm so bored with it. I sigh, and when he stops talking to give me a look of concern, I realize I've missed everything he's been telling me about his job. I feel bad about that, so I concentrate, and when he tells another funny story, I laugh, and even though he uses phrases like *fixin' to* and *mighta could*, I laugh some more. I can feel my shoulders relaxing. It must be the unaccustomed rush from all that sugar, or the nostalgia of actually tasting chocolate for the first time in ten years, or something in his face, but I find myself telling him something I've never told a soul down here before.

When I was a teenager, I ate like this all the time. Hot chocolate, ice cream, everything. When he saw me eating, my father called me, affectionately you understand, his little piglet, and I could have stood that if the kids at school had called me anything, or even known my name, but I was invisible. My sister was the popular one. She wasn't a cheerleader or anything like that, she was just likeable and pretty. She knew when to be funny and when to shut up; it came naturally to her, when it was something I had to learn: to watch one's companion for a wandering gaze, or rolled eyes, or fake laughter, or for that little shrug that's supposed to be self-deprecating, but really means they'd like to take their turn at talking now thank you very much, or for the undercurrents in their voice that signal derision, or boredom, or indifference. I still get it wrong, although not as often or as nakedly as when I was a child.

And I can tell I'm getting it wrong now, because this nobody sitting across from me is giving me the strangest look, and then he says, "You're Harriet from Mrs. Davenport's English class. I thought you looked familiar," and I freeze, because I suddenly realize that this is Phillip, Phillip from drama club and that one night at the movies and yes, from Mrs. Davenport's English class. Phillip who has turned out not to be so ignorant after all.

Well, he sure has changed. He's gone native, for

one thing; I couldn't tell him apart from any other random Tennessean, for all he grew up in Pittsburgh like me. For another, he looks different. Now that I know it's him, I can see his beautiful teenaged face hidden under all that pudge, but only barely. He's got laugh lines now, and horizontal wrinkles across his forehead when he frowns. His hair is starting to recede. He's still the height he was at sixteen. And he must be smart, to do the kind of research he does, but he isn't that smart, I think, looking at the netting still dangling across his arm.

So I look at my watch, make an excuse, give him a fake number, and go out to the parking lot to find my car. It's just too embarrassing.

I was sixteen, and my boss had pushed me up against the freezer in the back, and held my shoulders firmly enough that even I could figure out submitting to this, whatever it was he was about to do, was not optional. He had told me I was pretty, and then he'd told me to calm down, even though all I was doing was standing there, paralyzed. His face had hovered over mine for a horrible moment while he looked at my lips and I wondered if I should say something, and then he'd kissed me. I'd closed my eyes because looking at him so close to my face was making me a little dizzy. I didn't try to get away, and I didn't return his kiss: I just stood there, like I used to when my great-aunts hugged me and pinched my cheeks.

His hands slid from my shoulders and felt my breasts through the thin fabric of the pizzeria's scratchy uniform. It was red and white checks with blue piping, and the skirt was designed to look like an apron. Up until that night, I had thought it was the cutest uniform ever, and before I left for work I would pose in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom I shared with my sister. My breasts felt like part of somebody else's body. I couldn't stop thinking of what my braces must feel like under his tongue. That had to be gross, right? Why would anybody want to feel that? Then he squeezed a nipple, and it was like he'd flipped a switch and I tried to move away at last. I thought he wasn't going to let me go, but somebody was ringing the bell by the cash register, so he lifted his hands just the slightest amount, and I wriggled away from him and went to ring up their pepperoni and extra cheese.

I'm distracted thinking about this, and I can't remember where I left my car. I am walking around the

parking lot in the 110 degree heat, and I've forgotten to rearrange the netting over my face. I feel something on my cheek, and before I can think about it, I swat it. My hand comes away with the broken body of the mosquito plastered to my index finger, and a little blotch of blood around it. I wipe it on my pants, and fix my netting, but it's too late. Some people get bitten and survive. It happens, and it could happen to me. It's not likely. Phillip could probably tell me exactly how unlikely it is.

Later that night, after my boss came out to sling pizzas with me as if nothing had happened, Phillip picked me up to take me to a movie. It was our first date. I'd been excited about it, because I didn't get asked out very often, and because Phillip was so cute, and he was always so funny when we did improv in drama. He wasn't as good as a jock might have been, but he was a step up for me. I had walked home from work and changed out of my uniform into the first dress that came to hand. I still don't remember what I wore that night, but I remember he looked a little too well-groomed in an Oxford shirt under a gray sweater. He bought our tickets and a big bucket of popcorn to share. He tried to hold my hand in the theater, and at his touch I started to cry and couldn't stop. He patted me on the back, as though I had the hiccups, and suddenly I couldn't get away from him fast enough. I walked out on him. I just stood up from my seat in the movie theater and left, without a word. He probably thought I was going to the lady's room to fix my face, or something; I don't know. I never asked him what he

thought.

I never thought before about what that night may have looked like from his point of view, but I think about it now. I wonder if, when the picture was over, he realized right away that he'd been dumped, and left, or if he looked for me. I wonder if he asked the staff if they'd seen me leave, and if he'd been laughed at for his trouble. I never told him about my boss, or explained. He never spoke to me after that night. I found out later that before our date, he'd told his friends he was going to ask me to go steady.

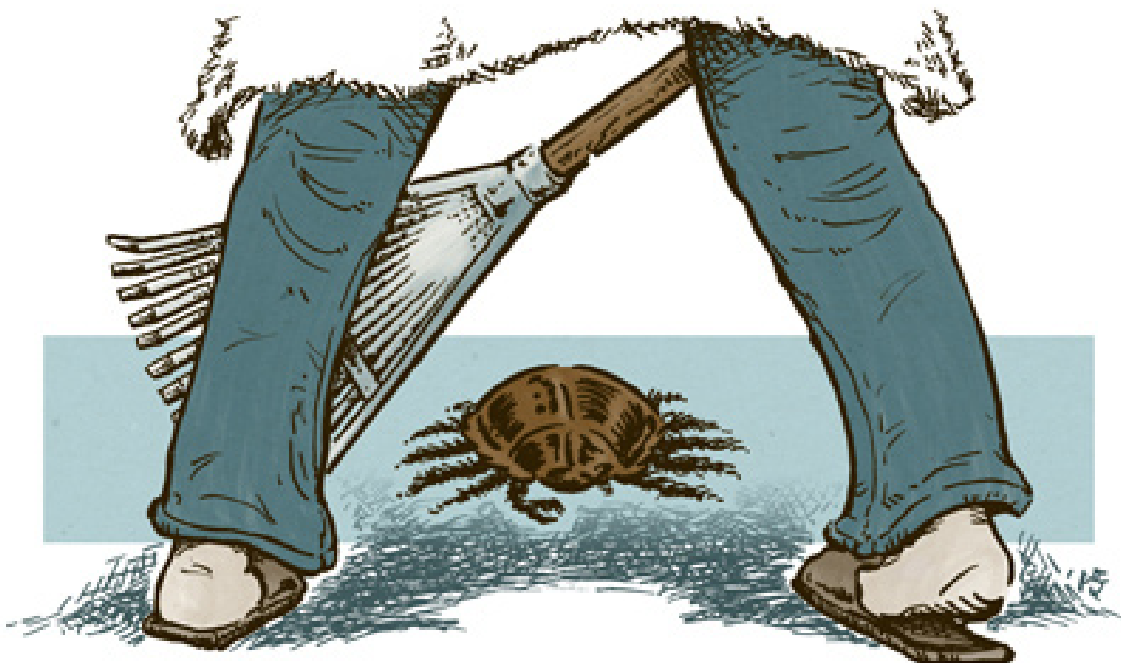
I see my car at last, and then I'm standing next to it with no memory of having walked over to it, and I get inside. I'm dizzy, but it has to be from the heat. The arbo takes at least fifteen minutes to set in. I should pray or drive to the hospital or something. I should dial 911 on my phone and tell them I've been bitten, but the world is wobbly and unsteady. I turn on the car and the air conditioning is such a relief I just sit there, waiting for it to pass. I should go back inside and give him my real number, I think, but it's too hard to move.

I try to reach for my phone, and my hand just twitches, and then it won't move at all, like I'm back in the pizzeria, trapped between the freezer and a graying Italian. God, poor Phillip. He was such a beautiful boy. That's just what happens sometimes — love comes to you trustingly, like a child, and you're too stupid to take its hand.



In Your Own Back Yard

by Michael D. Winkle
Illustration by Bryan Prindiville



Wendell set his saucer and cup in the sink and looked out the window. His neighbor's teenage son pushed an orange Yazoo mower out of a work shed.

The old man checked the radio-clock. Seven AM, and this was just the beginning of the boy's day. Later he'd trim the hedge or clean the gutters or paint the garage. Allen Cranston never seemed to be free for anything else.

Wendell lowered his gaze to his own yard. He mowed occasionally, but there were so many hard-to-reach places where grass grew tall. Nothing at all grew under the maples, where leaves formed a gray carpet.

He spotted a brown lump near the birdbath. A gopher mound? Just what he needed

The Yazoo roared to life. Wendell headed for the

bedroom. "Might as well get on my shoes and go out," he said to Gladys' side of the bed.



Patti bounced along at Wendell's feet. The old man held out his hand; the cocker spaniel jumped up and smacked her head against his palm.

Wendell paused halfway across the yard. This was where he'd seen the brown lump, but there was nothing here now. He scratched his balding scalp. The peach and white dog trotted in circles, nose to the ground, and growled.

"Yo, Henderson!" Cranston Senior stood at the fence. The old man winced. "Up kinda early, aintcha?"

“Oh, got things to do, things to do,” said Wendell.

“Finally getting around to the hedge?”

The hedge marked the western border of both properties. The Cranston end was smooth as brick; the Henderson section resembled a row of Christmas trees.

“I like the hedge tall,” said Wendell. “It gives me shade in the evening.”

Cranston snorted.

“Your yard could be a showpiece, if you’d just do a few things. Like rake those leaves.”

“I like the way they spread out under the maples.”

Cranston snorted again.

“Like it the way it is. My Allen tried that line on me a few times. Said he liked the ivy crawling up the house. Said he liked the den without a carpet. I never let him get away with it. We gotta set an example for these kids today. I—”

With a clunk of metal on rock, the Yazoo stopped. Cranston dashed away. Wendell looked down at his dog.

“Come on, Patti. Cranston’s not going to let us get away with it.”

He headed for the garage as his neighbor’s voice rose again: “What were you, daydreaming? You break that blade, you’re paying for it yourself!”



Wendell dragged the hose around front. He sent a fan of water over the flowerbeds. The teddy-bear eyes of dandelions watched the sun. Their white balls of gossamer awaited the winds.

Cranston hated dandelions like he hated crab grass and web worms. He once offered to come over (that is, send his son) and spray such offending life-forms with various grades of toxic waste.

Wendell studied the yellow flowers and serrated leaves dotting his lawn.

“Poor little things. You look thirsty.”

He sprayed water over them, a rainbow dancing on the flying drops. Through the rainbow he noted a strange lump near the street.

A turtle? A run-down ‘possum? Wendell walked idly toward the object.

The cold stream from his brass nozzle became a dribble as a loop of hose folded. The old man whipped the hose around, and the water spewed again.

He turned back to the road. The lump was gone.

A panic of blue feathers burst from the juniper tree on Wendell’s right. The jays twittered angrily as something shook the dark green foliage.

He knelt beside the juniper. Through a haze of shadow and light he glimpsed legs scrabbling over dry leaves. He rose again.

Hard by the juniper stood the hedge. In Cranston’s yard you could see the black roots and stems that supported the green wall. Not so here, where the wind packratted leaves, candy wrappers, and newspaper fliers.

An oily splotch of mulch showed where something had forced its way under the hedge. Probably a rabbit.



The old man wheeled out his Toro, contemplating the hours of mowing that faced him. A clatter like a rock slide came from Cranston’s yard. Wendell guided his mower to the fence. Allen, armed with crowbar and pickaxe, methodically tore bricks loose from a raised azalea bed.

“What are you up to, Allen?” called Wendell.

“Dad said to knock down the walls around the flowerbeds,” answered the teen. “He wants to build new ones.”

“What was wrong with the old ones?”

Allen shrugged and wiped his forehead, leaving a streak of dirt behind.

“You do a lot of work around there,” Wendell observed.

The younger Cranston, attired in sweaty T-shirt and shorts, stacked bricks in a lawn cart.

“Dad would help more if he could, but you know — his heart.”

Wendell had heard of the elder Cranston’s heart condition. It never impeded his intake of pizza, beer, coffee, and donuts.

Nor did it affect his voice. A shout rose from the Cranston house: “Hey! Allen! Hurry up with those bricks! We’ve got more work to do while it’s still light!”

“I’ve got to go,” said Allen.



The Toro’s motorcycle sound filled Wendell’s ears. Patti yapped, barely audible over the mower. Wendell made his about-face at the hedge and spotted the dog in the uncut grass by the shed. She lowered her head to the ground, hips high, and barked. She seemed intent on a brown lump, like a turtle, on the lawn.

Wendell focused on the chain-link fence he now approached. Might as well have some fun. It was an electric fence around Area 51 —

“Yap! Yap!”

And he was James Bond driving a stolen truck —

“Yap! Yipe!”

Wendell about-faced again. Patti, hyperkinetic a second before, lay still. The old man throttled down.

“Patti?”

Wendell jogged across the lawn. The cocker spaniel lay with her head and spine bent back in an incredible semicircle, her eyes like golf balls, her tongue green and swollen like a pickle.



“Sorry to hear about your dog, Mr. Henderson,” said Allen.

“Hmm?” mumbled Wendell.

He sat on the bench by the big oak tree, staring at the ground between his loafers. He straightened to find the Cranston boy at the back fence, garden hoe in hand.

“Sorry about Patti,” said Allen. “What happened to her?”

“The vet said it might have been a coral snake,” answered the old man.

“You’d better be careful,” said his neighbor. “It might still be around.”

Wendell grunted in acknowledgement.

“You really liked her, didn’t you?”

“She’s shared the house with me since Gladys died.”

Wendell chuckled humorlessly.

“Your father was right. If I mowed that howling wilderness more often, that snake — or whatever it was — wouldn’t find the place so attractive.”

“Dad was right? There’s something new.”

Wendell lifted his head.

“What’s this? Insubordination?”

Allen looked toward the Cranston driveway. The older Cranston’s Chevy Blazer was gone.

“Well,” said Allen, leaning against the fence, “let me tell you: Dad bought this house for the pecan trees. He was gonna sell pecans. But every year the worms got the pecans. So he sprayed them, and we all got sick. So he insisted on keeping the trees for shade, at least — but he couldn’t understand why grass wasn’t growing under them.”

“Grass won’t grow under trees planted that close together.”

“Try telling him that. I spread fescue seed and fertilizer for years.”

Allen thrust a thumb over his shoulder.

“You’ve never been inside, have you? You should see Dad’s home improvements. He decided to wire up new light fixtures himself because he was too cheap to call an electrician. We broke our backs on that, and he still had to call an electrician. Then we put vinyl tiles on the kitchen floor. Now that was a horror story. And— oops!”

Allen hopped over to the tomato patch as the elder Cranston’s Blazer rolled into view.



Wendell lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Poor

little Patti. Gladys brought the pup home one day, hidden under her coat as if Wendell might drown it in the creek. But he loved Patti as much as she did, and the peach-and-white dog became their spoiled surrogate baby.

The old man sat up at the sound of a thump — followed by several softer “flump”s. Patti had made those sounds a million times over the years, the “thump” as she hit the home-made pet door in the garage, and the “flump”s as the door panel swung after her passage.

But there was no Patti now.

Wendell threw off the covers, slipped on his house shoes and padded down the hall. He grabbed the broom by the refrigerator, flicked on the garage light, and opened the door.

His Buick took up the middle of the two-and-a-half car garage. The door to the back yard stood on the right, the lowest panel replaced by the pet entrance. On the left, chairs, steamer trunks, Christmas decorations, and golf clubs formed a labyrinth to puzzle future archeologists.

A lamp toppled from the junk pile and shattered on the concrete floor. The widower hefted his broom like a rifle and walked the length of the car, scanning the shadows.

Something rattled over an old cookie sheet and into a little cave formed by a TV and a bookcase. Wendell knelt by the uninviting void, wincing at the pain in his joints, and poked the stick end of the broom in.

A sharp blow jarred his hands as if someone hit the handle with a mallet, then the broom jerked side to side. Wendell dropped it and jumped away. The handle banged against the bookcase and television as loud as a pack of Black Cats going off.

The old man stumbled back into the house. He slammed the door and leaned against it, heart pounding hard enough to shake his ribcage. He knew from playing with Patti that animals were often stronger than they looked, but —

Crashes from the garage, then another thump against the pet door as — whatever — left. Half an hour ticked by before Wendell could force himself back out.

The broom lay by the car, its handle a mass of splinters. Wendell stacked cinder blocks and his old tool chest in front of the pet door.



Wendell did not sleep well. Something skittered across the roof. A squirrel, he told himself. Something climbed the fence with that squinking noise peculiar to chain link. A cat. Something raked the window screen above his bed. A branch.

The next morning he explored the back yard, checking gingerly behind the charcoal broiler and the rose bushes. Once he looked up. Mr. and Mrs. Cranston stood by their Chevy Blazer, looking back. He waved, feeling like an idiot.

The Cranstons climbed into the vehicle. Mrs. Cranston was a bit of an enigma; Wendell had lived here eight years, but he had never said more than a hundred words to her. She usually bore that much-put-upon expression Alice Cramden wore on the old *Honeymooners* show.

The adult Cramdens — *Cranstons* — drove off. Their son appeared, his scowl visible from Wendell’s patio.

“Allen!” he called.

Wendell traipsed over to the fence, watching for turtle-like lumps. Allen put on a smile.

“Morning, Mr. Henderson.”

“Allen — have you seen anything unusual lately? An odd sort of animal?”

Allen shook his head.

“I’d like to know what’s been digging under the fences, though,” the teen said. “Dad’s on the warpath.”

The boy raised a hoe.

“I get to fill in the holes it’s dug. Then I can get the old, crud-caked pots and replant the begonias. And the gutters need cleaning again. Hoo-boy!”

“You seem less satisfied with your lot in life this week, Allen,” observed Wendell.

The youth leaned on the hoe handle.

“Yeah, well. I’ve sort of been seeing Deborah

Hanauer.”

Wendell raised his eyebrows. “And?”

Allen spat at a pile of dirt by the fence.

“He doesn’t want me to see her. Says she’s from a sleazy family.”

“The Hanauers? They’ve got a relative in jail for running a meth lab, but...”

“That’s not it. He doesn’t like her just because I do. It’s always been that way. When I set up the birdbath and those stupid gnomes, he uprooted them all and carted them across the yard. Just because I picked that spot. When I say we ought to go to the lake, he drags us to the mountains. If I say the mountains, he drags us to the lake. If he says the mountains and five minutes later I say the mountains, he’ll drag us to the lake!”

Wendell nodded in sympathy.

“But what can you do?”

The youth pulled a brochure from his hip pocket and handed it over the fence.

“The University of Missouri at Columbia,” said Allen. “That’s where I’m going next year. I’ve already been accepted.”

Wendell opened the brochure. It had been folded and unfolded many times.

“That’s where Debbie’s going,” Allen continued. “And it’s just a little too far for me to return on weekends and plow the south forty. I’ll get a job there — hell, I can’t think of a job worse than working here all my life!”

Wendell hummed in appreciation.

“Well, good luck, Allen,” he said.

“Thanks,” said the youth. “Now if I could just catch whatever’s doing this.”

He kicked dirt into a hole under the fence.



Wendell opened the work shed door. Nothing dangled from the rafters or hunkered in the corners. The hedge — the junk in the garage — the plastic trash bags full to bursting — the old camper trailer, nearly

buried in thistles — the Henderson place was full of hidey-holes for things small but unpleasant.

Wendell pulled the Toro into the light of day. Patti’s death had put a temporary halt to mowing. He remembered the dog and the — whatever — in the high grass. He lowered the cutting level of the blade.

“You won’t hide there anymore,” he muttered.



The growl of the motor calmed his nerves. His mind wandered. What would Cranston do without his one-boy work force? Allen had to seek his fortune sometime...

He reached the trailer. Grass and weeds grew riotously around it. He hadn’t touched it since he and Gladys went to Lake Eufaula, three years before she died.

He pushed the mower under the trailer as far as it would go. The roar of the engine dropped in pitch as the blades chopped into the thick greenery. He’d clog it for sure this way. He pulled the mower back and pushed down the handle to raise the front wheels. He worked the machine a foot or two over and lowered it slowly, grinding weeds down.

Allen lay flat on the Cranston roof, digging wet pulp from the rain gutter with his bare hands. The boy waved, black leaves like leeches on his arm. Wendell lifted the front end of the mower and dropped it onto high grass again.

A metallic screech filled the air. The engine sputtered and died. The screech continued.

The front wheels of the Toro bounced into the air. Wendell gasped and stepped back. The rear of the mower, handle and all, jumped up to reveal a brown lump.

“Allen!” Wendell yelled. “Allen!”

The ungodly screech continued. The lawnmower bucked like a horse. Allen yelled something from the roof.

The mower fell over. For the first time, Wendell saw his adversary clearly. The brown lump was the body, but legs or feelers or something surrounded it. The thing spun like a surprised cockroach, limbs blurring so fast he could not count them. It disappeared

under the trailer.

“Allen!” he cried again.

The teenager jogged across the Cranston roof. He grabbed the aluminum ladder at the corner of the house and swung a foot onto a rung.

Wendell backed away. The thing stopped screeching.

He heard a crash. He looked to the Cranston house again. The ladder — and Allen — lay on the patio.



A dozen televisions hung from the ceiling of the waiting room. ESPN, CNN, HBO, E! talked over and under one another. Wendell studied the people waiting with him. Men, women, a little girl sleeping on a couch, a wrinkled grandmother flipping through Newsweek.

Cranston Senior finally appeared.

“Well, he’s going to be here a day or two,” said Allen’s father. “Broke his arm, and he’s got a mild concussion.”

Cranston sat on the vinyl seat next to Wendell.

“Concussion! He could talk well enough when I saw him. Said you’d been — attacked by something. What was that about?”

“I, er, ran over a ‘possum,” said Wendell. “It made such a racket, I must have yelled out.”

“Allen fell off the roof for that? I’m surprised he hasn’t broken something before. Missing the ladder! Imagine!” He snorted. “But he never was too good at handling things. Nails things crooked, leaves globs of paint behind . . .”

Cranston leaned back, shaking his head sadly.

“Not much of a decision-maker, either. He’s got some half-assed idea of going to the University of Missouri. Thinks he’s going to live off me, hundreds of miles from home. Hell, OU was good enough for me, and it wasn’t four hundred damn miles away. And if he’d gone for that football scholarship like I told him...”

“But shouldn’t Allen have a say in what college he attends?”

“He can go anywhere he wants,” said Cranston. “But I’m not paying for the University of Missouri.”



Wendell dragged his mower to the middle of the yard, where the grass was golf-course short. He tilted it onto one side and inspected the fibrous mulch caked to the undercarriage. The normally green mass was stained yellow.

Wendell crept back to the trailer, rake in hand. He noted more yellow stains, like mustard, on the ground. Then he found a big brown centipede.

The old man hooked the creature with the rake’s iron teeth and lifted it.

It’s not a centipede. It’s a leg.



He entered the house, rake and all, and snatched up the morning paper. He whipped it open across the kitchen table and let the leg plop onto page one.

The mower had sliced it neatly from the brown thing. Each segment of the limb could slide partly into the one before, like a spyglass. What would have been legs on a centipede were spines or hairs along the sides. At one end hung a nasty crab-like pincer.

He lifted the thing with thumb and forefinger, screwing his face in disgust. He thought of starfish, squids, and Daddy Longlegs, but this tentacle did not belong to anything he’d ever heard of. All he knew for certain was that its owner was dangerous.



Eventually the Blazer pulled into the Cranston driveway. Cranston climbed out alone. Presumably his wife stayed at the hospital.

Wendell turned on the Public TV station and watched an old *Lawrence Welk Show*. If only the brown thing wasn’t so flat! The way it could hide in tall grass or slip under the trailer... What he needed was a sawed-off shotgun, but he didn’t own any firearms.

The zoo? The police? What would he say? The vet thought Patti had been bitten by a snake. That seemed to be the best bet. Animal control people would have to look in every nook and cranny.

A slow-moving documentary about the Great Barrier Reef followed Lawrence Welk. Wendell's eyelids drooped.

He half-remembered, half-dreamed a story he had heard in the Boy Scouts, O so many years ago. "The Tailypo." A hunter chopped off the tail of a Thing he encountered in the woods, a small but horrid Thing that escaped screeching into the forest. He took the tail home as a souvenir, but the Thing wanted its tail back, and that night it crept into the hunter's cabin...

Something thumped upstairs. Not quite awake, the old man took inventory of the second floor: The bedroom, the half-bath, and the garret, where he sat and read by the window, occasionally slapping the mosquitoes that whizzed in through the rip in the screen...

Something somewhere scratched like Brillo on a cheese grater. Something else — maybe the green vase by the garret window — crashed to the floor.

Wendell struggled out of his recliner and edged toward the kitchen. The planks of the second floor transmitted a dull scrabbling sound. The old man backed onto something that gave beneath his foot like a gas pedal. What?

The handle of the rake hit his shoulder. Like a doofus in a comic strip, he'd stepped on it.

Something plopped from the stairs onto the living room floor. Wendell snatched up the rake.

The brown thing crept into view. The old man gasped. Somehow he could accept it, half-seen in shadow or under the hedge, but in his house, in the glare of his seventy-five watt bulbs — things like that just did not exist. The central body, wide as a basketball, balanced on a dozen segmented legs that whirled along at an amazing speed. Wendell thought of the rotating brushes of a street cleaner.

The creature looked like something Wendell had just seen in that boring documentary — a brittle star. That sea-dweller, however, dragged itself languidly across the ocean floor. The brown thing sprang like some impossible squirrel.

Wendell swung the rake, hitting the creature in mid-flight. It fell back with a wet spaghetti slap.

The brown thing flipped right side up like a

click beetle. It scrambled for Wendell's ankles. He shoved the rake along the floor, shuffleboard fashion, knocking the creature away. It drew in its legs and rolled. The old man took a few steps toward the garage before the thing scampered at him again. He thrust at it, but this time the creature wrapped several legs around the rake's iron head. Pincers snapped at the wooden handle. Pale slivers flew from the shaft.

The old man shuffleboard-shoved the rake again but let go this time. He ran for the garage door.

The multi-limbed thing clicked over the kitchen tiles even as he turned the knob. Damn, it was fast! He jumped through and yanked the door after.

Wendell caught the thing between door and jamb. He pulled with all his might. A spike of white pine split from the door. The thing forced itself through slowly, inexorably, its spines like gear teeth.

The old man groped along the wall, where tools hung on pegs. He seized a wooden handle just as the brown thing pulled free. Wendell swung his new weapon at the creature.

The old handsaw slapped across the many-legged attacker with a ridiculous rubbery sound.

This isn't working.

He tried batting it away. The creature dug its pincers into a crack in the floor, refusing even to skid.

"Hold still, then!" yelled Wendell.

He brought the saw blade down like a sword, then he set his shoe on the creature and drew back hard.

Yellow blood splattered. The monstrosity screeched. (Where was its mouth?) It scampered across the garage, pulled its limbs back like a girl's hair in a ponytail, and hit the pet-door with a resounding smack.

Wendell trotted after, wheezing. The yard was dark, but he heard a steel mesh rattle at the back fence. The brown thing rolled up the chain link rather than climbed and dropped into Cranston's yard.

A light burned in Cranston's garage. A strident noise indicated that Cranston worked with a circular saw.

Flailing legs eclipsed the light. The creature made straight for his neighbor's open garage door.

"Cranston!" called Wendell. "Cranston!"

Cranston couldn't hear over the whining saw. Wendell reached the fence and tried to lift himself over, but he had not climbed fences in half a century. He nearly punctured his abdomen on the sharp prongs on top.

He puffed back across the lawn. He would have to drive around the block to reach Cranston's house.



A curving drive led right up to the front step of the Cranston house. Wendell barely switched off his ignition before jumping out.

"Cranston!"

He opened his neighbor's door without awaiting an answer. With the wife and son at the hospital, the place was empty. The old man worked his way toward the garage. He found the fireplace and grabbed a poker.

A door in the living room led to the garage. It was not quite shut. A bar of light shone through, and Wendell heard a few strains of country music. The saw's whine had ceased.

Wendell peeked out. Nervous as he was, he had to whistle. The Cranston garage looked like a Sears outlet. Weed-whackers, edgers, leaf-blowers, and other machines stood like soldiers in neat rows.

He stepped out carefully. Near the yard door a pair of sawhorses stood in heaps of beige snow. A Black & Decker circular saw lay on the concrete floor. Cranston lay face down halfway out the door.

The thing seemed to have come and gone. Wendell crept across the garage and knelt by his neighbor. He set the poker down to turn Cranston over. Cranston's face had puffed up like a balloon, his tongue a grotesque cucumber. Wendell shook his head slowly.

From the yard came a screech like metal tearing.

The chitinous monster scuttled in right over Cranston's body. Startled, Wendell fell on his rump, then his back. He waved his arms wildly as if making a

snow angel. His fingers closed on something cold and hard: the handle of Cranston's circular saw. He pulled back the safety shield just as the creature jumped.

It draped itself over the power tool and Wendell's hands. A jet of yellow liquid shot from the spinning blade. The creature sprang away again as if yanked by a rope.

Wendell rolled over and lurched to his feet. The brown thing's claws tacked against the floor like a rain of buckshot. The old man ran for Cranston's Black & Decker/ Craftsman/ John Deere collection.

Spiny arms lassoed his ankles. He fell but kicked like a jackass on crack. The creature lost its grip.

It's weakening! God, let it be weakening!

He dragged himself up with the help of an orange metal box with a funnel on top. A leaf-mulcher? A woodchipper?

The thing had turned turtle again. Only now did it flip itself up. It *was* weakening — slowing, at least.

Wendell pushed the mulcher's throttle to CHOKER. He found the starting rope and yanked with both hands, nearly hauling the machine off the floor. The engine putted and died. The brown thing froze for a second at the brief motor sound.

Gaining some respect for our noisy machines, I see, thought the old man as he yanked the cord again. *Maybe you'll find some for their creators.*

The mulcher roared easily to life. Well, Cranston probably polished every cam and washer. The multi-legged creature actually cringed. Wendell took the opportunity to check the wall behind him. Hanging here were folding chairs, fishing rods, a hunting bow, a quiver of arrows.

Wendell worked an arrow out. It looked like a damned harpoon, its head a steel barb with four razor-edged fins. Cranston never did anything halfway.

The creature scuttled forward. Wendell gripped the arrow in both hands and plunged at the thing like Captain Ahab. The arrowhead, sharp as it was, could not penetrate the central body, but the brown thing clamped onto the fiberglass shaft.

"That's it," hissed Wendell. "Hold tight!"

He heaved the arrow and its passenger over the

funnel of the mulcher. The creature spread its limbs like the petals of a flower.

“Oh, no you don’t,” said Wendell. He shoved the arrow like a plunger. Pincer-legs scrabbled against the steel funnel. The creature vanished into the guts of the machine. The engine coughed but did not die. Bits of brown shell and yellow flesh spilled out of the exit chute.

Wendell waited a full minute. Nothing more flew out of the mulcher. He finally pulled the throttle to STOP.

He sat down heavily among the gardening machines. He supposed he should call the police. He could say he heard Cranston scream and found

him like that. Let the cops explain the yellow-brown creature mush.

Finally Wendell rose and staggered to the kitchen door. He looked past Cranston’s inert form out into the yard. He had assumed the brown thing was unique, a mutant, a freak of nature. But what if there were others like it? What if it was a scout? A harbinger of some sort of — invasion?

So many places they can hide, he thought. Got to rake the leaves out from under the hedge. Got to get rid of those trash bags and the junk in the garage. Got to move the trailer. Cut — clean — weed —

From whatever green-lawned Valhalla he now inhabited, Cranston snorted in amusement.





Invasives

by Sunny Moraine

Illustration by Katie Rose Pipkin

“Cassie, come *on*.”

All little sisters whine. Cassie is aware of this, but Mona has it down to an art, refined and perfect: That rising inflection capped by an apex of sound cutting into the eardrum, and a sharp drop-off tying it up in a neat bow of annoyance. It’s a whine that tugs with all the force of physical hands. Cassie stands between two gently undulating trees, pink dome of the sky rising over them all.

“Cassiopeia!”

Cassie hates her full name. Mona knows this. Mona is standing a few yards ahead, her little hand held in their father’s, who is looking at Cassie with quiet concern.

“Cassie, honey — what’s wrong?”

Cassie looks up at the trees, which are still just a little way in front of her. She’s clinging to that distance. She had agreed to this camping trip because she had thought off-world camping would be fun. Off-world parks aren’t dangerous. They’re kept just wild enough.

The trees are covered with caterpillars.

“I don’t like them,” she mumbles, and Mona rolls her eyes in an ecstasy of exasperation. *I’m twice her age*, Cassie thinks. *This is so stupid*.

“Sweetheart, I told you — they can’t hurt you. They’re like the ones back home. They turn into those butterflies we saw back at the port. I thought you liked those.”

“I did,” Cassie says. Her voice is starting to rise. “I just... there’s a *lot* of them, and I don’t like them,

is all. The butterflies were nice, but these are...” She trails off, knowing she won’t be able to get it into words. The fat, gray, jelly-like ugliness of them. Their bristling fur. The way they seem to be making a sound that hovers just outside the edges of what she can hear.

“So you don’t want to go hiking?” An edge of impatience makes its way into her father’s voice. “If you don’t want to go, that’s fine, but make up your mind. We’re losing daylight.”

Cassie looks off through the trees. When they landed back at the port, she had thought they were pretty, so tall and slender-graceful, moving like seaweed in a current, brightly-colored butterflies flitting through their branches. Now the waving branches look like long arms, the tendril-leaves like fingers that might grab her.

And the caterpillars. Thousands of them, crawling slowly up and down the papery green bark. Covering the tree trunks as far into the forest as she can see.

Why don’t they hate it too? Why can’t they see how gross it is?

“I don’t wanna go,” she mutters again. She glances back toward the camp.

“Okay, then. Go back to the tent and stay put until we get back. Get a fire going, maybe.”

Mona waits until their father has turned before she sticks out her tongue and protrudes her eyes, ending with a mocking laugh and turning to follow. Cassie watches them go. She’d like to chase them

down and kick Mona's snotty little legs out from under her.

But the caterpillars. Their bodies are pulsing like the big, gray veins of some larger animal. Cassie shivers and turns away, back through the thinner trees, the lighter forest the caterpillars don't seem to inhabit.

At length, the rage and frustration fade, and she feels stupid. It had been so cool a few hours ago: The new trees, the sky the same light pink as a rose petal, the curve of the reddish gas giant that the moon orbits sinking below the horizon, the spongy ground under their feet, the pleasant bob of the lower gravity. Now she just feels nauseated, the low gravity not helping.

She stands in the clearing where they've made camp, alone, the trees whispering their tendril dance over her head.

So what if they've gone on without her? She brought her pad, and it's loaded with books and shows. She can get a fire going. Maybe even make some dinner. She looks up at the deepening rose sky. The days on the moon are short, only about two thirds of Earth's. *They won't even have time to get that far*, she thinks. *They'll have to turn around and come back soon.*

They've already gathered a pile of firewood, but when she arranges it like her father showed her and tries to light the kindling under it, it sputters and goes out. She huffs an exasperated breath, and tries again; this time a weak flame catches for an instant, but popping hisses escape the wood over it. Too wet. Cassie sits back on her heels, and pushes her hair out of her face. *Figures.*

Tiny, gnat-like things buzz around her face, trying to sip at the sheen of sweat on her skin. The moon is humid, and that's something else which seemed pleasant before, and now only serves to make everything more miserable.

Cassie pushes to her feet, and makes her way back to the tent, crawling inside and flopping down onto her back. She could read. She tries, but anger makes her tired. At last she sleeps, the pad falling flat onto her chest with a muffled thump.



She doesn't dream so much as she remembers: A scattered collection of fragments, not all of them in order, not all of them making any sense. Watching the moon get bigger in the transport's window, hazy green and brown and ringed with clouds, close enough to old images of Earth to look familiar, but different enough to emphasize how unlike Earth it is.

The port, busy with researchers and other vacationers. The iridescent blue-purple of a butterfly landing on her arm for a brief moment. The long line at entry, the body scan, the antiseptic beam, how it had made her uncomfortable. *They have to make sure we aren't bringing anything alive with us from Earth*, her father is saying. *They have to make sure the environment here doesn't change too much because of us.* She had understood that. Invasive species, something mentioned in a school bio class.

The dirt track away from the port. The rattle of the bus, puffing water vapor. The walk away from the road toward the campsites, watching the other people peeling off. She had wondered then, thinking about the oncoming night, if she would be able to see their fires.

Before, during the drive into the forest, a swarm of butterflies flooding across the track, surrounding the bus. Engulfing it. A soft gasp of surprise from a couple of people in front. An even softer *pat pat* as the bright color smacks against the windshield and scatters across it like spilled powder.

The butterflies disperse. The forest swallows them, until it's just her and Mona and their father. And the trees are covered with caterpillars. In her dream they seethe — a pulsating, gray mass bristling with mindless malevolence.

She can hear them now. It's the sound of chewing. Horrible, always eating, and the beautiful forms they take after are just a lie. This feels more solid and more true than that scatter of multicolored powder. Now, they swarm up out of the leaf litter, no end to them. Out of the forest like a tidal wave, coming toward her, that awful wave of sound pushed before them. She can't move, and they are on her feet, up her legs, deceptively soft, and *cool*, bloodless jelly things, up her arms. She closes her hands, and feels them squish and ooze between her fingers. She feels a sharp pain by her elbow.

They are chewing her skin. She doesn't wake herself with a scream. She can't make a sound at all as they flow in a bristling, gelatinous wave into her mouth.



She comes awake with a jerk. She sits up, the dream already fading, her head throbbing. It's dark outside, the interior of the tent lost in shadow. She turns and opens the tent flap, crawling out onto the mossy ground. "Dad? Mona?"

Nothing.

She sits in front of the tent for a few minutes, her knees drawn up against her chest. Why would they still be gone after dark? *Maybe gone for drier firewood*, she thinks. But why would both of them go?

At last, she turns back to the tent. There's a bag in there with flashlights and a q-phone. So she can call someone. If she has to. Which she won't. But a flashlight might be handy right about now.

She finds the bag after a little fumbling, hands combing through the contents; a couple of lighters, cans, dried food — until her hand closes on a plastic cylinder, and she pulls it out and presses the nub set high on the neck. Light flares, hurting her eyes, and she feels a flush of relief.

The relief dies when she realizes: The q-phone isn't here. She rocks back on her heels, gnawing at the inside of her cheeks. It's...

It's with her father and Mona.

She crawls back out. It's all she can think to do. Inside, the tent is stuffy, and the longer she stays there, the smaller it feels. Outside, the night is humid and fragrant with decaying plant matter, but at least she can breathe. She listens to the sound of her breath, the whisper of a breeze through the trees, the two blending together. Listening for the sound of her father, Mona, anything that isn't part of this alien rock, which is feeling more alien by the second.

Chewing.

She jerks, swinging the beam up toward the trees; they tower over her, the shadows between them hard and ominous, and she utters a soft cry. Seconds later she's embarrassed, but before that she sits

immobilized, staring up at the unfamiliar stars.

Just her imagination. Just nerves.

But she does hear something off in the trees. Not chewing. Rustling. She raises the beam again, her breath catching. "Dad?"

She sees a shape move past the edge of the beam, gray in the dimness. *An animal*, she thinks. *Something that comes out at night*.

Which is far from comforting.

The rustling fades, and when she doesn't hear it again for a long time, she begins to drowse in spite of everything. She keeps her back to the tent, the flashlight in her hands, watching. Eventually, no matter how she fights it, she falls asleep again, the flashlight beam flickering against the tree trunks.



She opens her eyes to that flicker; it might be what's awakened her, but what really jerks her into awareness is the understanding of what that flicker means. The battery is dying, and the sky is still dark. She shakes the flashlight, not sure what good it'll do, but the flickering seems to subside.

The rustling again. She raises the beam but the flicker makes everything shifty, uncertain. "Hello?"

She sees a shape, and she's sure it's human — or *humanoid* — moving through the trees, and making its way closer.

The flashlight isn't just flickering now, it's dimming. Along with the loss of visual certainty comes uncertainty of other kinds. She doesn't know how she should feel, if this should be something comforting or not — she might not be alone.

"Are you from another camp?"

Still no answer, but for a split second she sees the shape more clearly — small, maybe no taller than Mona. It pauses between two trees, then moves again, still coming closer, though not by any direct route.

"I'm missing my dad and my sister. Did you see anyone?"

Nothing, but the shape is closer still, and in the shaky beam it raises a shadowy hand, beckoning her, nodding.

She stays where she is, ripples of disquiet up and down her skin. “Do you know where they are?”

It seems like a stupid question, but there’s another nod, another beckoning wave, a motion off into the woods.

She doesn’t know why she does it. It’s more than stupidity; her father told her if she was ever lost out here, ever separated from him, she was to stay put and wait to be found. And she nodded, filing the instruction away. But when he said that, they were sitting comfortably on the couch at home, and she hadn’t thought about sitting alone in the dark with a dying light in her hands and an entire alien world closing in on her. Those things hadn’t seemed possible. Now, all the rules feel like they’ve fallen away completely.

So she gets to her feet, clutching the flashlight like a talisman. She’s in among the trees before she really knows it, nothing but shadows and swaying green trunks in front of her. She follows the figure, speeding up when it does, trying not to lose it among the trees. Until the light abruptly dies and she stops dead, trying to listen but with every sound drowned out by the harsh rush of her breath. She hadn’t been lost before. She had just been alone. She had not really — not *fully* — imagined that things could get any worse.

She sinks to the springy ground. *Should have stayed put*, she thinks hectically. *Should have listened*. “Oh, God,” she whispers, and covers her eyes.



What feels like hours later, Cassie raises her head. The sky is faintly pink.

The ugly weight in her chest is less heavy. She can find the camp now. And Mona and her father might be there, mad at her for scaring them so much, but there. And this whole vacation is going to be cut short. She’s going to pester or bully or just flat-out *demand* that they all go home.

She gets to her feet and groans as she forces the muscles in her calves to unclench. She rubs her face; it feels disgustingly grimy, her hair tangled and matted with nervous sweat. *I’m going to get a shower*, she thinks. *When this is over, first thing. I’m going to take the longest shower ever.*

She feels the sound first. It takes some time to make its way past her eardrums and into her brain. But once she’s heard it, she can’t stop hearing it. Just at the edges, but swelling, close. She whirls, unthinkingly raises the useless flashlight like a club. Thousands of generations’ worth of genetic memory seize her at once: threat, response.

What response she can give.

She doesn’t call out. Her throat is clenched like a fist. She turns, her gaze sweeping the trees.

It’s the shape from the night before. Standing and watching her, though she can’t see his or her — or *its* — eyes. She can feel cold detachment. Maybe a kind of curiosity.

“Help,” she whispers. But not to it. And it is an *it*, she knows that now.

It moves forward in a kind of shamble, and none of what happens next surprises her: It starts to disintegrate, chunks of it dropping off. In a few seconds, it’s close enough to see. It looked gray last night in the deep shadow, but now she sees *it is gray*, and it is *bristling*, the surface of it a churning mass of little bodies surging toward her.

Cassie runs. She makes it five yards and hits a tree, jerks herself upright and stumbles on. They didn’t get it, Mona and her father. Do they get it now? In the end, did they get it as well as anyone could? Cassie is screaming as she runs, breathy screams that sound more like sobs as she stumbles again, her ankle twisting. She goes down hard, grasping at the trunks around her, trying to drag herself back up. She gropes at the soft bark - too soft. Coming apart in her hand. Swarming over her arm.

Ecstasies bring a kind of clarity, even ecstasies of terror. *No one ever saw it coming*, she thinks with a bizarre calm. They did — all those checks at the port — but they didn’t really. They didn’t stop us from coming. Invasive species. And sometimes the invaded species learn too much from the invaders. The caterpillars slide up her legs, her arm, over her shoulder, soft and cool against her neck. Hundreds of tiny legs against her mouth, wriggling between her lips. She sees gray, then an explosion of color.

And the chewing.



“Cassie!” Mona sprints into the clearing. She’s been worried, though she’ll never admit it — worried about her big sister, though at least she’s had her father with her, and they hadn’t even gotten all *that* lost.

But there had been sounds in the darkness. She hadn’t liked it.

“Cassie!” She stops; there’s the tent, the remains of a fire, but no Cassie. There’s something else here, and her breath catches in her throat. Shimmering in the morning light, moving with the dappled shade.

Butterflies. Butterflies on the tent, butterflies on the cold remains of the fire, on the ground and on the trees, dancing their way around the clearing. Like a present the dawn left for them. And — she looks around again — all the ugly caterpillars gone.

“They must’ve changed overnight.” Dad behind her. “Where’s Cassie?”

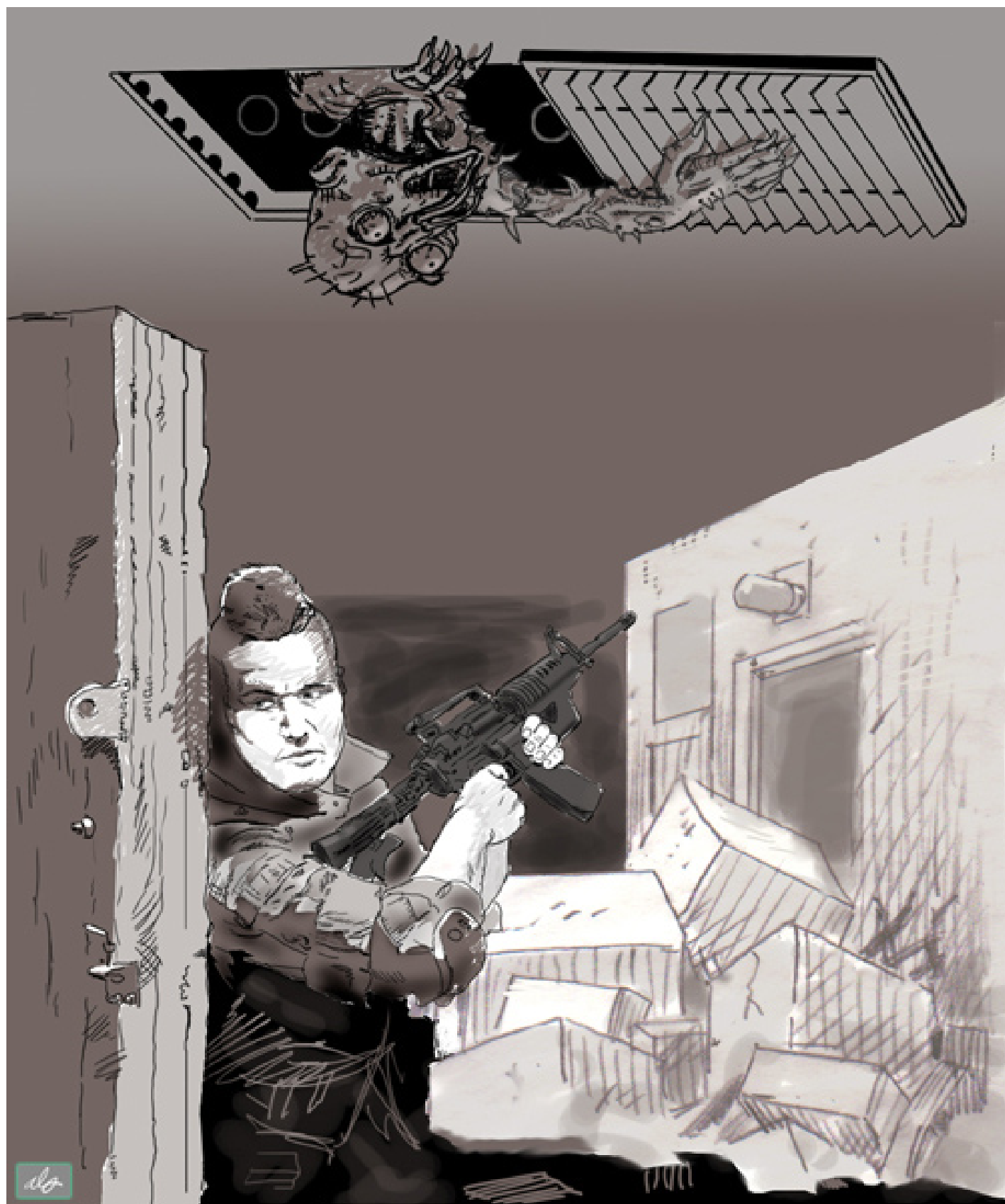
“I dunno.” Mona can’t stop looking. She fumbles in her pocket for the phone, but she knows it won’t be able to capture everything. “Cassie’ll be happy. She hated the caterpillars.”

“Even though these are the same things?” Dad sounds distracted, and for a moment Mona is nervous. Where *is* Cassie, anyway? Why isn’t she here to see this? “Dammit, I told her not to leave the camp.”

“We’ll find her,” Mona says. And just like that, she’s distracted again. “Man, they are so *pretty*...”

One lands on the back of her hand. She looks at it, enraptured, and she sees that instead of the familiar curled proboscis, it has tiny hooked jaws. And it’s chewing.





Deep, Dark

by Jonathan Maberry

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NOTE: This story features Joe Ledger, the hero of the novels PATIENT ZERO, THE DRAGON FACTORY, THE KING OF PLAGUES and ASSASSIN'S CODE, all from St. Martin's Griffin. This story takes place between the first two books, however you don't need to have read any of the books to enjoy this adventure.

(1)

The Vault

**Ultra High Security Biological
Research Facility**

The Poconos, Pennsylvania

Twenty Minutes Ago

It was the dirty end of a dirty job.

Three of us — Bunny, Top and I — were hunting horrors in the dark, seven thousand feet below Camelback Mountain. Even with Night vision, body armor, and weapons, we were lost in an infinity of shadows. If we blew this, if we couldn't wrap this before the clock ticked down, then the whole place would go into hard lockdown. Steel doors would drop, and explosive bolts would fire, triggering thermite charges that would seal the doors permanently in place. Federal and international biohazard protocols forbade anyone from digging us out if the fail-safes went active.

The Vault would become our tomb.

The government would disown us, our own people would have to write us off.

But the things we hunted wouldn't care. When our lights and weapons and food ran out, they'd hunt us.

And, very likely, they would get us...and then get out.

(2)

Camelback Mountain

**Pocono Plateau, Elevation
2,133 Feet**

Two Hours Ago

We touched down on a State Forestry helipad at the top of Camelback. Morning mist still clung to the off-season ski slopes. The sun was a weak promise behind a ceiling of white clouds that stretched off into the dim forever. A bookish-looking man in a white anorak and thick glasses met us as we ducked out through the rotor wash. He was flanked by a State Cop who looked confused, and a security officer from the Vault who looked bug-eyed scared. Nobody shook hands.

We piled into an Expedition. The State Cop looked at the equipment bags we carried and it was clear he wanted to ask, but he'd been told that questions were off limits. All he knew was that we were 'specialists' on the Federal dime who came here to help solve a security problem. Which is another way of telling him to shut the hell up and just drive the car.

The geek with the glasses turned to me and started to speak, but I shook my head.

We drove in silence down the zigzag road that should have been packed with tourists here for the water-park and other summer sports. We passed three police roadblocks and turned onto an access road before a fourth. A phalanx of Troopers were bellowing at the families and tour busses, waving them into

U-turns and turning deaf ears to the abuse heaped on them by people who had driven since before dawn to get here. Top caught my eye and shook his head. I nodded. Inconvenience was a hell of a lot better than dying out here in the cold.

A smaller road split off from the access road and led into a big equipment barn, but the barn was just a cover for the entrance to the vault. Four nervous-looking guards manned the entrance, and their supervisor came over to us in an electric golf cart. He cut a look at the bookworm.

"These the pros from Dover?" He tried for the joke, but his voice cracked, spoiling it. I gave him a hard grin anyway. It was a nice try.

I turned to our driver as we climbed out. "Thanks, Troop...we're good from here."

He gave me a gruff nod, backed up, turned and left, throwing suspicious looks at us through the side view mirror. The three of us unzipped the light windbreakers we'd worn on the flight, and checked our weapons. We all wore Heckler & Koch Mark 23 .45 ACP pistols in nylon shoulder rigs. We each carried six magazines, and we had other toys in the equipment bags. Bookworm stared at the guns, and flicked his tongue over his lips like a nervous gecko.

"Okay, run it down for us," I said to him.

"We'll talk on the way down," he said, and we piled into the golf cart. The security guy drove it into an elevator that began a descent of over a mile.

"I'm Dr. Goldman," said the guy with glasses. "I'm the deputy director of this facility. This is Lars Halverson, our head of security."

I shook hands with Halverson. His hand was firm but clammy, and his face and throat glistened with nervous sweat.

"You're Captain Ledger?" Goldman asked.

I nodded and jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "The old man behind me is Top Sims and the kid in diapers is Bunny." In my peripheral vision, I saw Top scratch his cheek with a middle finger.

First Sergeant Bradley Sims was hardly old — but at forty-one he was the oldest field operative in the DMS. He was nearly as tall as me, a little heavier in the shoulders, and though he was a calm man by na-

ture, he could turn mean as a snake when it mattered.

The big kid next to him was Staff Sergeant Harvey Rabbit. Real name, so no surprise that everyone called him Bunny. He was just a smidge smaller than the Colossus of Rhodes, and somehow despite everything we've been through together while running black ops for the Department of Military Sciences, Bunny still managed to keep his idealism bolted in place. My own was wearing pretty damn thin, and my optimism for rational behavior in people who should know better was taking one hell of a beating.

"What were you told?" asked Goldman.

"Not enough," I said. "You believe there's one or more infiltrators operating in your facility. You have one casualty, is that right?"

I caught the quick look that passed between Goldman and Halverson. It was furtive as all get-out, and at that moment I wouldn't have bought water from either of them if my ass was on fire.

"Actually," Goldman said slowly, "we have four casualties."

The engine of the elevator car was the only sound for a while. I heard Top clear his throat ever so slightly behind me.

"Who's dead?" I said sharply.

"Two of my people," said Halverson. "And another of the research staff."

"How and when?"

"We found the second guard half an hour ago," Goldman said. "The others were killed sometime last night. They didn't report for the breakfast meeting, and when the security teams did a search they found them dead in their rooms."

"How were they killed?"

Goldman chewed his lip. "The same as the first one."

"That's not an answer. I asked 'how'."

He turned to Halverson, but I snapped my fingers. Loud as a firecracker in the confines of the elevator car. "Hey! Don't look at him. I asked you a question. Look at me and give me a straight answer."

He blinked in surprise, obviously unused to

being ordered about. Probably thought his rank here at the facility put him above such things. Life's full of disappointments.

"They were...*bitten*."

"Bitten? By what? An animal? An insect?"

Halverson snorted and then hid it with a cough.

Goldman shook his head. "No...they were bitten to death by the...um...terrorists."

I stared at him, mouth open, not knowing how to respond. The elevator reached the bottom with a clang, and Halverson drove us out into the complex. We passed through a massive airlock that would have put a dent in NASA's budget. None of us said anything, because all around us klaxons screamed and red emergency lights pulsed.

Halverson stamped on the brakes.

"Christ!" Goldman yelled.

"OUT!" I growled, but Top and Bunny were already out of the cart, their guns appearing in their hands as if by magic. I was right with them. The floor, the walls, even the ceiling of the steel tunnel were splashed with bright red blood. Five bodies lay sprawled in ragdoll heaps. Arms and legs twisted into grotesque shapes, eyes wide with profound shock and everlasting terror.

The corridor ran a hundred yards straight forward, angling down deeper into the bowels of the mountain. Behind us, the hall ran twenty yards and jagged left into a side hall. Bunny put his laser sight on the far wall near the turn. Top had his pointed ahead. I swept in a full circle.

"Clear!" Bunny said.

"Clear," said Top.

"Jesus Christ!" said Goldman.

Halverson was saying something to himself. Maybe a prayer, but we couldn't hear it beneath the noise of the klaxons.

Then the alarms died. Just like that.

So did the lights.

The silence was immediate and dreadful.

The darkness was absolute.

But it was not an empty darkness. There were sounds in it, and I knew that we were far from alone down there.

"Night vision," I barked.

"On it," Bunny said. He was the closest to the golf-cart, and I heard him rummaging in the bags. A moment later he said, "Green and go. Coming to you on your six."

He moved through the darkness behind me and touched my shoulder, then pressed a helmet into my hands. I put on the tin pot, flipped down the night vision, and flicked it on. The world went from absolute darkness to a surreal landscape of green, white, and black.

"Top," Bunny said, "coming to you."

I held my ground and studied the hall. Nothing moved. Goldman cowered beside me. He folded himself into the smallest possible package, tucked against the right front fender of the cart. Halverson was still behind the wheel. He had a Glock in his hand and the barrel was pointed at Top.

"Halverson," I said evenly, not wanting to startle him. "Raise your barrel. Do it now."

He did it, but there was a long moment of nervous indecision before he complied, so I swarmed up and took the gun away from him.

"Hey!" he complained. "Don't — I need that!"

"You can't see to shoot. Do you have night vision?"

"I have a flashlight." He began fumbling at his belt, but I batted his hand aside. "No. Stay here and be still. I'm going to place your weapon on the seat next to you. Do not pick it up until the lights come on."

"But—."

"You're a danger to me and mine," I said, bending close. "Point a gun in the dark around me again, and I'll put a bullet in you. Do you believe me?"

"Y-yes."

I patted his shoulder — to which he flinched — and moved away.

"What are you seeing, Top?"

He knelt by the wall, his pistol aimed wherever he looked. “Nothing, seeing nothing, Cap’n.”

“Bunny?”

He was guarding our backs. “Dead people and shadows, Boss. Look at the walls. Someone busted out the emergency lights.”

“Captain Ledger,” began Goldman, “what—?”

“Be quiet and be still,” I said.

We squatted in the dark and listened.

A sound.

Thin and scratchy, like fingernails on cardboard. Then a grunt of effort.

Top and I looked up at the same time, putting the red dots of our laser sights on the same part of the upper wall. There was a metal grille over an access port. The grille hung by a single screw, and one corner of it was twisted and bent out of shape, the spikes of two screws hanging from the edges. The grille hadn’t been opened with a screwdriver; it had been torn out.

No. *Pushed*.

The scratching sound was coming from there, but as we listened, it faded and was gone.

“It’s gone,” whispered Goldman.

I noticed that he said ‘it’, not ‘him’ or ‘them.’ I could tell from the way he stiffened that Top caught it, too.

But Bunny asked, “What’s gone? I mean...what the hell *was* that?”

The scientist turned toward Bunny’s voice. His green-hued face was a study in inner conflict. His eyes were wide and blind, but they were windows into his soul. I doubt I’ve ever seen anyone as genuinely or deeply terrified.

“They...they’re soldiers,” he said.

“*Whose* soldiers? We were told this was a potential terrorist infiltration.”

“God,” he said hollowly. “There are a dozen of them.”

I moved up to him and grabbed a fistful of his shirt.

“Stop screwing around, Doc, or so help me God—.”

“Please,” he begged. “Please... We were trying to help. We were doing good work, *important* work. We were just trying to help the men in the field. But... but...”

And he began to cry.

We were screwed. Deeply, comprehensively, and perhaps terminally screwed.

Something moved in the green gloom down the hall. It was big and it kept to the shadows behind a stack of packing crates. It made a weird chittering sound.

“Is that a radio?” Bunny whispered.

I shook my head, but I really didn’t know what it was.

“It’s *them*!” Goldman said, and he loaded those two words with so much dread that I felt my flesh crawl.

“I got nothing down here,” said Bunny, who was still guarding behind us. “What are you seeing, Boss?”

“Unknown. Top, watch the ceilings. I don’t like this worth a damn.”

The chittering sound came again, but this time it was behind us.

“What’ve you got, Bunny?” I called.

“I don’t know, Boss, but it’s weird and it’s big. Staying out of range, just around the bend.”

I turned.

“This is the U.S. Army. Lay down your weapons and step out into the hall with your hands raised.”

My voice echoed back to me through the darkness, but whoever was around the bend did not step out.

The chittering sound was constant.

I repeated the challenge.

The sound changed, fading as the figure retreated. It was gone in seconds. I turned again, and the one ahead of us was gone as well.

“Cover me,” I said, and Top shifted to keep his laser sight next to me as I crept over to the wall below the grille. I stood on tiptoes and strained to hear.

The chittering sound was there, but it was very faint, and as I listened, it faded to silence. Whatever was making that sound was too far away to be heard, but I knew that didn’t mean it was gone.

I turned to the others. Doctor Goldman sat with his face in his hands, weeping.

“We’re all going to Hell for this,” he sobbed. “Oh, God...I’m going to Hell.”

(3)

The Vault

Forty-six Minutes Ago

When I finally got Goldman to stop blubbering and tell me what the hell was happening I was almost sorry he did.

Halverson was able to lead us to the breakers, and we got the main lights back on. The rest of the research team huddled in the staff lounge, a few of them with improvised weapons — a fire axe, hammers, that sort of thing. The lounge had a single door, and the filtration system vent in that room was the size of a baseball. We locked ourselves in and had a powwow.

Goldman said: “This facility was originally built as a secure bunker to house the Governor and other officials during a nuclear war. After the Cold War, it was repurposed for genetics and biological research.”

“What kind of research?” I asked.

“That’s classified.”

I put my pistol barrel against his forehead. “Declassify it,” I suggested.

“Listen to the man,” murmured Top in a fatherly voice — if your father was Hannibal Lecter.

Everyone gasped, and Halverson’s hand almost strayed toward his sidearm. Goldman licked his lips. “We...we’ve been tasked with exploring the feasibility of using gene therapy for military asset enhancement.”

“What kind of gene therapy?”

“Various.”

I tapped him with the barrel. “You’re stalling, and I’m disliking you more and more each second, Doc.”

He winced. “Please...I can’t think with that—.” He gestured vaguely toward the gun, and I moved it six inches away.

“Talk.”

“We...I mean the government, the military, see the way things are going. The biosphere is critically wounded. Global warming is only the beginning. That’s the pop culture talking point, but it’s a lot worse than that. Seas are dying because pollution has interrupted or eliminated key links in the food chain. Plankton and krill are dying off while sea-borne bacteria proliferate. Coral reefs are dying, the sea floor is a garbage pit, and even third world countries are building centrifuges by the score to refine uranium.”

“Yeah, I watch CNN. Life sucks. Get to the point.”

“Some key people in government want to insure that no matter what happens we’ll still be able to maintain an effective military presence capable of response under all conditions.”

“What kinds of conditions?”

“Extreme. Deep pollution, blight, even post-conflict radiation environments.”

“Meaning?”

Goldman’s face was bleak. “Meaning, that if you can’t fix the world, then alter the inhabitants to adapt to the ambient circumstances.”

I sat back and laid the pistol on my lap, my finger outside of the trigger guard.

“How?” asked Bunny. “How do you make people adapt?”

“Transgenics. Gene therapy. And some other methods. We explored some surgical options, but that’s problematic. There’s recovery time, tissue rejection issues, and other problems. Genetic modification is less traumatic.”

“Let me see if I get this,” I said. “You and your

bunch of mad scientists down here alter the genes of test subjects to see if you can make them more adaptable to polluted and devastated environments.”

“Yes.”

“What kinds of genes?”

“Insect,” he said. “Insects are among the most successful life forms. Not as durable as viruses, or as hardy as some forms of bacteria, of course, but otherwise, they’re remarkable. Many can live on very little food, they can endure great injury, and there are some who are highly resistant to radiation.”

“You mean cockroaches?” Bunny asked.

Goldman shot him a quick look. “Yes and no. The idea that cockroaches would survive a nuclear war... that’s a distortion based on urban myths. Cockroaches are only a little more resistant to radiation than humans. Four hundred to one thousand rads will usually kill a human. A thousand rads will cause infertility in cockroaches. Sixty-four hundred rads will kill over ninety percent of the *Blattella germanica* cockroaches. No... for increased resistance to radiation we explored genes from wood-boring insects and the fruit fly. Some species of wood-borers can withstand forty-eight to sixty-eight thousand rads without measurable harm. It takes sixty-four thousand rads to kill a fruit fly; and if you’re talking real endurance, the *Habrobracon*, a parasitoid wasp, can withstand one-hundred and eighty thousand rads.”

“Hooray for garden pests,” Top muttered.

“We experimented with various gene combinations and got mixed results. Many of those lines of research were terminated. We did come back to the cockroach, though,” he said, and again he licked his lips with a nervous tongue. “Not for radiation resistance, but for other qualities.”

“Like what?”

“They can run at incredible speeds. Even ordinary cockroaches can run at a speed of one meter per second. That’s like an ordinary man running at one-hundred and forty miles an hour. And they can change direction twenty-five times per second! Nothing else in nature can do that. Their elusiveness is one of the things that explains how they’ve survived in so many situations in which other animals were destroyed. They can also climb walls because the tiny *pillus* on

their feet allow them to adhere to surfaces as if they’re covered in suction cups. It’s like Velcro. They have light receptors in the ultraviolet range. And the list goes on and on.” He took a breath, clearly caught up in the excitement of his life’s work. “As we mapped the genome from the desired source animals, we began to see the potential emerge. A true super soldier. I—”

“Soldier?” Bunny interrupted.

Goldman turned to him, momentarily flummoxed. “Yes, of course...didn’t I make that clear? All of our test subjects are soldiers.”

“Whose soldiers?” asked Top.

“Why...ours, of course.”

I leaned toward him. “Did they *know*?”

Goldman recoiled, but his voice was firm. “Of course! They all knew that they were volunteering for genetic experiments designed to make them better fighters. We had to tell them. There were letters of agreement, and every man signed.” He looked at me accusingly. “You think we’d do this without telling them? God, what kind of monster do you think I am?”

I wanted to hit him. I wanted to drag him and his whole team into a quiet room and work them over.

“What went wrong?” I said, keeping my voice even.

He was a long time answering. He and the other scientists exchanged looks, and Halverson studied the floor between his shoes.

“They were all screened,” Goldman said softly. “They knew the risks. But...gene therapy isn’t yet an exact science. Mapping the genome isn’t the same as truly indexing and annotating it.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “What happened to them? Did they get sick?”

“Sick? No. No...they’re very healthy. It’s just that they...*changed*.”

“Use the word, dammit,” said Halverson in a fierce whisper. Apparently he wasn’t as fully on board with all this as the science staff.

“Some of the insect genes coded differently

than we expected. Most of the changes were mild and mostly irrelevant. Some skin changes. Thickening of the dermis, some color changes, follicular alterations. We tried to correct the problems with more gene therapy, but...we couldn't control the mutations." Goldman sighed, and said: "They *mutated*."

"Oh man," said Bunny. "My Daddy wanted me to stay in Force Recon. Worst that could happen there is I get shot."

Top gave Goldman a hard look. "Why are they attacking your people? If they're volunteers..."

Goldman shook his head, and nothing that I said could make him say it out loud. The rest of the science team looked ashamed and frightened. A few were openly weeping. None of them could look at us except Halverson. I saw the muscles at the corners of his jaw bunch and flex.

"Tell me," I said. We were past the point of threats now.

Halverson wiped sweat from his eyes. "These... *scientists*...had a protocol for incidents involving extreme aberrations. The entire project was to be terminated, along with any potentially dangerous aberrant forms."

"Aberrant forms'?" I echoed. "God. You idiots were going to terminate a dozen U.S. soldiers? Citizens?"

"No," said Goldman. "They signed the papers! That officially made them property of the United States Army. And, besides...they were no longer soldiers."

"You mean that they were no longer *people*?"

He didn't answer, which was answer enough.

"You're a real piece of work, doc."

"Look," he snapped, "we're at war! I did what I had to do to protect the best interests of the American people."

Suddenly there was a low rumble that shuddered its way heavily through the walls. The cement floor beneath our feet buckled and cracked. Dust puffed down from the ceiling, pictures fell from the walls. The scientists screamed and started from their chairs, but there was nowhere to run. Top and Bunny yelled at them to shut up, and they cowered back from the two

big men with guns.

Halverson and I hurried to the door and peered out. There was a faint flickering red glow from down the hall. I could smell smoke. "Christ!" Halverson said. "I think that was the generator room."

There was a high whine from distressed engines, and then the lights dimmed again and went out. The staff room emergency lights kicked in after a few seconds, weak and yellow, giving each face a sallow and guilty cast.

"The generator *can't* be out," Goldman protested.

Halverson said nothing, but he looked stricken.

"What—?" Bunny asked.

The alarm took on a new tone as a pre-recorded voice shouted from all the speakers. It told us why everyone in the room was looking even more terrified than they had been only a minute ago.

"This facility has been compromised. Level One containment is in effect."

The message looped and repeated. I turned to Goldman. "What does that mean?"

"It means that the generator is no longer feeding power to the airlocks or security systems. If the backup doesn't come on, then the system will move to Level Two."

"What happens then?"

"The whole place goes into lockdown," said Halverson. "This is a biological research facility, Captain. If containment is in danger of total failure, then the whole system shuts down. The doors will seal permanently."

"Did your test subjects know this?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Goldman. "Probably. I know the first subject, James Collins, knew it. He made a joke about it once. But...really, everyone knows, and it's posted on signs all over the facility."

I went to the door and opened it. Halverson joined me. "Looks like the backup generators are still on line. See — they are pulling the smoke out of the hall. The flames from the burning generator are dying down, too."

"I take it the backup generators aren't in the same room as the mains?"

"No, of course not. They're at the other end of the complex."

I pointed to the damaged access panel high on the wall. "That's the air duct system?"

"Yes."

"Does it go all the way into the chamber with the backup generators?"

He thought about it. "No. It terminates outside. The backups are on a totally separate system. Different venting, too. Smaller. No way they could use them to get into the chamber."

"How secure is it?"

"If you didn't have a key, then you'd need tools. Heavy pry bars and a lot of time. They were intended to protect against all forms of intrusion. The generator room is even hardened against an EMP."

"That's something."

I pulled Halverson out into the hall for a moment. "Tell me about James Collins."

Halverson paled. "He...he's a good kid. Young, in his twenties. No family, no one at home. No sweetheart or anything like that. It was one of the conditions. The men couldn't have families waiting at home. Better that way."

"Better for whom?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

"Collins was smart. He did a couple of tours with Force Recon. One in Iraq, one in Afghanistan. Took some shrapnel last time out. Lost a couple of fingers. It was while he was recovering at the evac hospital that he was approached about this project. He's been here almost seventeen months."

I stared at him. It was horrible. Some kid joins the Marines. Maybe he thinks he's helping to save the world from terrorists, or maybe he thinks he's saving his country. Or, maybe he's just lonely. Someone with no one at home and nowhere to be, so he makes the Marine Corps into his family, and it's a war so they're happy as hell to have him. They throw him into one meat grinder, and when he survives that they feed him into another. Then, when he's battle-shocked and

mutilated, they make him an offer. Maybe money, maybe promotion. Or maybe they play off his sense of duty. God and country. That kind of pitch. They bring him to this place, hide him down in the dark, and when he's totally off the radar, they play God with him. If he lives, he's the prize hog at the fair. Someone to trot out to appropriations committees. If he dies, who's going to miss him?

But they never planned around a third option. What if they made him into a monster?

Hell, they wouldn't think that way. They're too limited, too conventional. They can make a monster, but to them it's just science. Pure science, divorced from conscience, separated from ethical concerns because no one is watching. People like Goldman and his masters in the military always think they have everything under control.

I know firsthand that, too often, they don't. I know because I'm the guy they send in to clean up their messes.

I don't know who I hated more in that moment: Goldman, because he made a monster; or me, because I knew that I had to kill it.

In the air vents I could hear a faint scuttling sound. Like fingernails on paper. I stepped closer to the vent, straining to hear it in the gaps between the bleats of the warning bells. It was there. Faint, and growing fainter.

They were moving away from us. Toward the other end of the complex.

Damn.

(4)

The Vault

Twenty-two Minutes Ago

We left the others behind in a locked room. The emergency lights were smashed out along most of the hallway, so we flipped down our night vision. We had M4s from our equipment bags, and each of us wore light body armor. The stuff would stop most bullets, but I didn't think that was the kind of fight we were likely to have. Would it stop Collins?

Only one way to find out, and I didn't want to. Not one damn bit.

As he ran, Top whispered, "That door back at the staff room."

"Yeah."

"You saw the way those things tore at that vent grille. No way that chicken-ass door would keep them out."

"Yeah."

"You don't seem too broken up about the thought of those things getting in there."

"Are you?"

We ran for a dozen yards. Bunny said, "They're still civilians, Boss."

"Farm boy's right," agreed Top.

"Yep. So, if you want to go back and babysit them, you have my permission, First Sergeant."

Bunny cursed under his breath. We kept running down the hall.

We ran low and fast along the wall, guns out, moving heads and gun barrels in unison, the red eyes of the laser sights peering into every shadow. The Vault was enormous. It was all on one level, built into a series of interlocking limestone caves, but it spread out like an anemone, with side corridors and disused rooms and staff quarters and labs. There were three of us and thirty wouldn't have been enough. Not without lights. Not with an enemy that could move as fast as these things could.

We looked for an ambush everywhere we went, and even then the monsters caught us off guard.

We were looking forward, we were looking side to side, we were covering our asses. Anything came at us in any normal direction, we'd have sent it home to Jesus in a heartbeat.

They tore open the damn ceiling and dropped on us.

There was a puff of dust, and then a screeching tear as the whole belly of the air duct tore open and they dropped out.

Like bugs.

The first one slammed down on Bunny. Two hundred pounds of it struck him between the shoulder blades, and the big man went down hard, knees cracking against the concrete, the air leaving his body in a surprised and terrified *whuf!*

Top screamed and spun, sweeping his gun up, firing as the second one fell, and the third. The rounds tore into them, punching through the dark, mottled skin, splattering the walls and ceiling with black blood. The creatures twisted in midair, trying to dodge the spray of lead, but instead soaking up the bullets.

The air was filled with a high-pitched keening and screeching as the things climbed through the torn duct and dropped into the hall.

Bunny was screaming as the creature on his back tore at him with fingers that had grown strangely thick and dark, the fingernails and the flesh beneath fused into chitinous hooks. Its back was to me, and I fired as I backpedaled, angling to shoot it and not Bunny. The creature threw back its head and screamed. Not like an insect, but like a man.

Bunny twisted under it, and slammed an elbow into the monster's side, and squirmed out from under. He was drenched with blood. I didn't know how much of it was his own.

"Cap!"

I turned at the yell and saw Top being driven backward against the wall. He had his M4 jammed sideways and pressed against the chest of a creature whose face was something out of nightmare. The eyes were human, but that was all. Its face was covered with thick scablike plates, some of them overlaid like dragon scales, others standing alone on otherwise human skin. The nose was nearly gone, flattened against the armored face, and the mouth was a lipless slash surrounded by wriggling antennae. The creature was naked to the waist, the rags of fatigue pants hanging from its spindly legs.

Before I could close on him and offer help, Top pivoted and chopped out with a low, short side-thrust kick that shattered the creature's knee. As it reeled back, he came off the wall and swung the M4 in a tight upward arc, crushing its chin with the stock of the rifle. The blow was so powerful that the telescoping stock cracked and bent, but the thing that had once been a soldier flipped over backward and crashed down on

the ground. Top stamped a foot onto its chest, and put two rounds into the misshapen skull.

I had my own troubles. Three of them swarmed at me in a three-point close. They tried to run me back against the wall, and if they had, I'd have been trapped and torn apart. They were so close that I only had enough room to bring my M4 up and hit the closest one with a burst to the chest. The impact flung him back, but the creature to his right lashed out and swatted the rifle out of my hands. It was a hugely powerful blow, way too strong for a man of his size. Whatever the doctors had done had amped up his strength. Or maybe he was mad with horror and rage and was pumping adrenaline. The rifle sling kept the weapon from flying away, but I lost my hold on it, and the creature reached for my throat with gnarled black fingers.

I parried and ducked and came up on the far side of his arms, then shoved him hard into the other attacker. They crashed into the wall, which gave me a short second of breathing space, so I grabbed at the Rapid Release folding knife clipped to the edge of my pocket. It was positioned to release right into my hand, and I gave it a flick and felt the blade lock into place even while my hand was moving. There was a flash of green fire, and then the second of the monsters was spinning away, trying to staunch the flow of black blood from his throat.

The third one growled at me, his voice filled with clicks and hisses, and he slashed at my face. I ducked, and felt his iron-hard nails tear through the fabric cover over my helmet. I didn't wait. I drove in low and hard and put my shoulder into his chest, driving him back against the wall. He hit with a crunch that tore a howl from his throat. I used a flat palm to knock his head against the wall, and then moved in to let the knife do its work.

He fell, and I pivoted, switching the knife to my left hand, drawing my pistol with my right.

And froze.

There was James Collins right in front of me. I knew immediately that it was him. Three of the fingers were missing from his left hand. He crouched ten feet away, legs wide to straddle the body on the ground.

Bunny.

Collins bent low so that he could touch Bunny's

throat with the fingers of his right hand. The fingers were long, the nails thickened into talons, and from where each tip dented Bunny's throat, thin lines of blood leaked down the side of the big Marine's neck. Around us, the alarms rang and the lights flashed, but nothing and no one moved. Collins raised his horror-show face and I could tell, even with those dark and alien eyes, that he knew as well as I did that we were all sliding down a steep slope into hell.

I raised my pistol and put the laser sight on Collins, right over the heart. He looked down at it for a moment, and his fingers pressed more deeply into Bunny's flesh.

"Cap'n," murmured Top from a few yards away, but I ignored him.

Even though Goldman and Halverson had told us what to expect, I could feel a scream bubbling in my gut. This was wrong, and it was ugly, and it was scaring the living shit out of me. Sweat ran down inside my clothes and my mouth was as dry as mummy dust. If I could have run, I would have.

I said, "Collins."

The creature's head jerked up, and his slit of a mouth worked for a moment. All I could hear were clicks. His face was covered with the same platelike scabs as the others. It wasn't precisely an insect face, but it was too far away from human. There were tiny fibers or antennae around his mouth, and they twitched like stubby fingers. God only knows what sensory information those appendages fed that tortured mind.

"Listen to me," I said, and my voice cracked a little. I cleared my throat, and tried it again. "Collins... listen."

In the shadows, the other creatures clicked and hissed at the sound of my voice.

"I know you're in there. I know Corporal James Collins is still in there."

His mouth and throat muscles worked. Rasps and clicks, a stilted flow that was so alien and unnatural that it was painful to hear.

"J-J-J—."

I kept the red dot steady, my finger inside the trigger guard. I had my trigger adjusted to a five and a half pound pull, and I had about four pounds on it.

Bunny was trying not to breathe, trying to sink into the floor, and he looked every bit as terrified as I felt.

“J-J-J-Jimm...J-J-Jimmy,” said Collins.

My breath caught in my throat.

“Holy mother of God,” Top whispered behind me.

“Jimmy?” I asked.

The misshapen head bobbed.

“You’re Jimmy Collins, is that right? Jimmy, not James?”

Another nod. There was a light in his eyes. Fear. Anger. Maybe — relief?

“The docs,” I said. “Jimmy — the docs said that you signed up for this.”

His eyes hardened. The others hissed.

“They said that you knew the risks.”

“Risks,” he snarled and I knew that just framing the word had to hurt his throat. He used his maimed hand to touch his face. “Not...*this*.”

“No,” I said emphatically. Almost a shout. “*Not* this. There’s no way they told you that this would happen. But did they tell you what might happen?”

He tried to answer, but emotion — or whatever was left for him to feel — stole what little voice he had. Eventually he managed to get it out. Two words.

“They...lied.”

“Yeah, brother, I pretty much figured that. That sucks more than I can describe, but listen to me, Jimmy.... I can’t let you hurt my man there. He’s a good man. A friend.”

“A—Army?” Collins said.

“No. He’s Gyrene like you are. End of the day, though, he’s another pair of boots on the ground in someone else’s war.” I eased off of the trigger and slipped my finger outside the guard. He watched me do it. I didn’t lower the gun, though; and he saw that, too. “I know you never signed up for this, Jimmy. Who would? They think that because you enlisted and because you signed a piece of paper that they *own* you, that you’re just a lab rat to them. If that’s the case, if that’s what we’ve all been fighting for, then God help

the United States. Or maybe God help us all, because someone’s missing the whole damn point. You with me on this, Jimmy?”

He paused, then nodded. It was impossible to read his face, hard to know if he was agreeing with me or giving me permission to keep talking.

“You want to know why I’m here? Why me and my team are here? The docs who did this to you called Homeland and said that this facility was being overrun by terrorists.”

“T-T-T-T—.” He couldn’t even get the word out. The stubby antennae around his mouth twitched with wild agitation.

“Yes, sir, Jimmy. Terrorists. How’s that for a thank-you from Uncle Sam? They rang the alarm, and we were sent in to drop the hammer on the bad guys. But...here’s my problem, Jimmy, and maybe you can help me out with it.”

His black eyes glittered like jewels.

“I’m not sure who the bad guys are. I mean... you’re killing folks, and you know that I can’t let that happen. I can’t let it continue. But at the same time, I don’t think you’re doing these kills because you’re a terrorist.”

He said nothing. They all waited.

“I think you’re doing it because you’re scared. More scared than I am now, and that’s saying something. But you know I can’t let you go on killing these people. Even if I agree with why you’re doing it, I got a job to do, and I know you understand that.”

His antennae twitched.

“Now...’terror’ is a funny word,” I said. “We use it all the time, but we don’t think about what it really means. Right now...I think my man on the floor there is feeling some genuine terror.”

Collins looked down at Bunny and then up at me.

“And you’ve got to be feeling it. All of you.”

The others clicked and hissed.

“And everyone else down here is feeling it because of you. There may not be any terrorists down here, Jimmy, but I have to stop the terror. That’s my job. That’s what I’m really here to do.”

Jimmy Collins's eyes were wide, and dark, and wet.

"Can you help me with that, marine? Can you give me an out here?"

Collins looked at me, and raised his eyes slowly toward my helmet. Not at the Night vision unit, but at the small cylinder mounted on the left side of my tin pot. He nodded at me. At it.

"That's right, Jimmy," I said with a smile. "That's a video camera. We're on mission time here, everything's being recorded. Everything we've seen, and everything we've *heard* since we came down here is saved to memory in our helmet cams. Now how about that?"

Collins bent low until his deformed face was inches from Bunny's. He whispered something that I couldn't hear over the alarms.

And then he straightened and pulled his hand away from Bunny. The five little pinpricks still leaked blood, but there was no real damage. Collins took a step back, and another. Bunny scrabbled sideways and scuttled back toward me. He made a grab for his fallen M4.

"No," I said.

Bunny looked at me in surprise, then at Top, who nodded, and then at Collins.

The hulking figure stepped farther back. His companions clustered around him. They made chattering noises, and God only knows if it was some kind of speech or the screams of the damned. Behind them was the door to the secondary generator. Collins turned, looked at the door and then back at me. His eyes were intense, pleading.

I swallowed a lump the size of a fist.

"Boss," said Bunny, "if we get them out...maybe something can be done. Maybe there's some way of reversing this..."

His voice trailed off as the huddled monsters chattered and clicked. It wasn't words, but it was eloquent enough.

I shook my head.

"But...you know what they want to do," he pleaded.

Top put his hand on Bunny's shoulder. "If it was you, farm boy, what would you do?"

I raised my pistol. "Stand aside," I said to Collins.

After a moment, he and the others moved away.

It took six rounds to blow the lock open.

Smoke hung thick in the air. The klaxons continued to bleat.

"Give us ten minutes," I said.

Collins stared at me, his eyes unreadable in the green gloom of my Night vision. Did he nod? Or was it simply the way his body trembled as he turned and slipped into the generator room? The others followed.

I holstered my gun and looked at Bunny and Top.

We ran like sons of bitches

(5) The Vault Now

The voice said: "Fail-safe is active. Hard lockdown commencing."

It was a female voice, very calm. She began counting down from one hundred.

"Top, Bunny...get everyone into the elevators."

"The generator—," Top said.

"...Eighty-nine, eighty-eight, eighty-seven..."

Halverson said, "The elevator has a separate power source. It's topside. As long as we get above the three thousand foot line we'll be fine. Below that charges in the wall will collapse the elevator into the shaft."

"...seventy, seventy-nine..."

"Get moving!" I ordered, and my men began herding the remaining scientists, support staff, and security personnel into the elevator.

"...sixty-three, sixty-two..."

I lingered in the staff room, watching as Doctor

Goldman finished downloading his research files onto a one-terabyte portable drive.

"Is that everything?" I said as he pulled it out of the socket.

"...forty-four, forty-three..."

"Yes, thank God. Everything was in packets for quick hard-dump. We have everything we need to start over." He moved to the door, but I shifted to block his way.

"Give me the drive," I said.

"...thirty-six, thirty-five..."

"What the hell are you *doing*? This is no time for—?"

I kicked him in the nuts and snatched the drive out of his hand. Yeah, it was a sneak shot, but who cares? He uttered a thin whistling shriek and grabbed his groin, sinking to his knees in shock and agony.

I set the drive on a counter top.

"...twenty-eight, twenty-seven..."

I drew my sidearm and used the butt to smash the drive to silicon junk. Goldman screamed louder than when I'd kicked him. He made a grab for it, but I batted his hand away.

"What are you doing?" he croaked.

I moved to the doorway. The elevator was a hundred yards down the hall. I could make it at a dead run.

I said, "I'm doing what I believe is in the best interests of the American people."

He stared at me and opened his mouth to say something, but a sound cut him off. Not the relentless female voice counting down. This was a thin, chittering noise that echoed out of the darkness at the far end

of the corridor.

I holstered my gun, turned and ran like hell.

"...thirteen, twelve, eleven..."

"Where's the doc?" Halverson demanded as I skidded into the elevator car.

"They ambushed us," I lied. "Came out of nowhere. Now come on, get this damn thing moving!"

Halverson met my eyes for the briefest of moments, and I could see the realization in his eyes. He flicked a look out into the darkness. Maybe he could hear the skittering sounds. Probably not. The alarms were so loud that they even drowned out the sound of the screams.

He slammed the door shut and the car began to rise.

Three seconds later, we heard the *bang-bang-bang* as the steel doors dropped down and the thermite charges blew, fusing them shut. A moment later, the explosives in the elevator shaft blasted half a million tons of rock into the well of darkness below us. Dust clouds chased us all the way up into the light.

As the car slowed to a stop, I removed my helmet. The helmet cam was gone. I'd taken it off after we'd left Collins and the others outside of the generator room. The video file ended there.

Top, Bunny and I stepped out into the gloom of the building. State Troopers were everywhere, and soon there would be FBI, Marine Corps, and DMS choppers in the air. We didn't care. The three of us stood there in the darkness and said nothing. I reached into my pocket to touch the helmet cam, and closed my fist around it.

In silence, we left the shadows and walked out into the light.



Contributors



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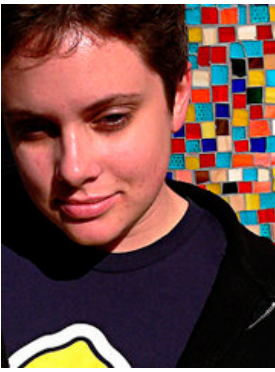


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Sunny Moraine is a humanoid creature of average height, luminosity, and inertial mass. They're also a PhD student in sociology and a writer-like object who has published short stories in *Strange Horizons*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Shimmer*, among other places. Their first novel *Line and Orbit*, co-written with Lisa Soem, is forthcoming from Samhain Publishing.

Katie Rose Pipkin is a visual artist working across media, currently living in Austin, Texas. She has studied and worked in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Paris, and holds a BFA in studio art from the University of Texas. She has been awarded the Young Masters award through the Texas Cultural Trust, and residencies at Oxbow and the Paris American Academy of Art. She currently runs Wardencllyffe Gallery, a mixed use artspace in Austin. Her work deals with fragments, remnants, that which was never alive but holds an importance granted to it. She is fascinated with pulling memory and history from these objects, finding their cracks, holes, alterations in course and casting their negative. She is interested in working along the fault lines.

Bryan Prindiville is currently an Art Director for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) where he has also worked as a designer and illustrator since late 2000. In his free time he has had a hand in a number of webcomics including *Bassetville* and *Hello with Cheese*. Traditionally published work can be found in *Rum and Runestones*, Tee Morris' *All a Twitter*, and others. Less traditionally he can be found as a member of the live art entertainment show Super Art Fight. More information and work are available at his sketch blog, bryanprindiville.com.



Linda Saboe is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters. Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda's work, please visit www.croneswood.com.

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