

AMERICAN MONSTERS

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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REIGNDEER

The fawn had barely opened its eyes and begun to breathe, Danny having carefully cut open the dead doe's amniotic sac and severed the umbilical cord, when Tucker stepped forward and shot it clean through the eye—splattering the crisp linen snow with blood (more than a little of which sprinkled Danny) and causing everyone to jump, especially me.

To understand what happened next one would have had to been there for the entire trip—for all the jests gone too far and the constant, incessant bickering, for the bitching about where to go and even how to get there, for the bitter rivalry which had developed between the oldest and most experienced of us, Danny and Tucker.

All I know is Danny launched himself at him like there was no tomorrow right there in the middle of the glade, his arms sort of swinging like a windmill and his fists flying like you see in hockey fights, so that Tucker lost his balance almost instantly and tumbled back into the snow. I don't know who would have won if we hadn't broken it up—probably Tucker, who'd always been a mean bastard. If it hadn't been for the appearance of the buck I'm not sure we could have, frankly.

"Hey now, hey, hey, hey!" shouted Billy, who was holding back Tucker as I held Danny. "Holy shit, look!"

"Knock it off, Billy," cursed Danny, who'd begun trying to take off his coat. "No one fires a gun two feet from my fucking head and ..."

But he'd seen it too, just standing there at the edge of the glade: a fully-grown stag—easily a 10-pointer, maybe even a twelve—it was difficult to say considering the distance and the sun's glare.

"Get off me," said Tucker, wrestling with Billy. "I said get off me!" He shoved him hard and Billy fell ass-end into the snow—which should have been enough to startle the buck into flight, but didn't.

"I say it's the Beav's," said Danny, and everyone agreed but Tucker—of course. The Beaver was me, because I was the youngest and had a cowlick. I guess.

"I don't know, Danny. The last time didn't work out so—"

"Just do it," he said, and handed me his Scout rifle. "Use this. Merry Christmas."

I took the rifle and handed him my own.

It felt good in my hands, like my Uncle Fred's guitar, which always seemed to give me something even though I couldn't play it. It was something about the shape and heft of the thing—it inspired confidence, courage, focus. And its scope was wide and clear so that the buck's face veritably leapt out at me as I sighted it.

"Easy now ... what do you see?" said Danny.

I moved up one of the buck's antlers slowly and steadily, counting the tines. "One ... two ... three ... four ... five!"

"On one side?" Billy interjected excitedly.

"Six ... seven. One side." I moved to the other antler and counted to six. "13 total. A 13-point buck." I lowered my sites to its head and steadied my grip. That's when I noticed the unusual mark on its head, like a red diamond, right between its eyes. Its foggy, white eyes.

I must have stared at them for a long time, because I remember Tucker saying, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I think its blind," I said.

"So? All the more reason to put it down. So put it down. Or I will."

"I thought newborn calves were a bit more your speed," said Danny.

"Hey, fuck you. Who the hell brought its mother down? You?"

"Hold up, there's another," said Billy.

I took my eyes off the buck long enough to try to see what he was talking about. Sure enough, another buck had appeared just beyond the tree line, not ten feet from the first. There was a sudden movement and I squinted through the scope in time to see the first buck vanish in a blur—but squeezed the trigger anyway, on reflex, I suppose. The resulting *crack!* caused the winter birds to explode from the trees and the gathered reindeer to scatter—dozens of them, their movement having betrayed their true numbers. Then they were gone and the gunshot had finished echoing down the valley.

At last Tucker said, "That's great, asshole. That was beautiful."

"Step off him," warned Danny, and handed me my gun back.

"You want to make me?"

"Shut up, Tucker," said Billy. "Let's just pack up and head home ... been a shit-trip, anyway." He added, "At least we got the doe."

"I got the doe," Tucker corrected him. "And the calf."

I can't tell you what was said after that because I was still looking at the tree line and thinking about the buck's foggy, white eyes. And remembering, for whatever reason, a quote from the Bible: *Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk*. And as I did so I remember the scattered deer slowly coming back ... coming back and just watching us as we loaded the doe and its calf—each of which bore a red diamond on its head, just like the buck—into the bed of Danny's truck. As we loaded our cheeks with snuff and our iPods with rock and roll. As we popped open beers and guzzled them before crushing the cans in our cold, blue hands.

"Jesus, look, there's another one," said Billy, craning his neck as we blew past the deer. I did likewise and saw it step out onto the road, still watching us.

"How many is that? Fifteen? Twenty?" I watched until the buck disappeared around a bend. "I've never seen deer act like that. It's fucking weird. It's like they're all the Shape or something."

"The what?" Tucker was looking at me through the rearview mirror like he always looked at me, which is to say like he wanted to kick my ass.

"The Shape. Michael Myers. You know, stab-stab?" I jerked my fist in the air.

"Sorry, fresh forgot my English/Geek dictionary." He looked out his window at the pine trees rushing past. "We should be shooting them. It's not like we can't come back and get them later."

"Not from my truck, dickhead," snapped Danny. He glanced into his sideview mirror—nervously, it seemed.

“Hey, *eat shit, man*, you want to go again we can just pull over right—”

“*Fuck you, dude.*” Danny stabbed at the air between them with his finger. “Just fuck you. Not a goddamn word, you hear me?”

He’d stepped on the gas considerably—all that adrenalin from feuding with Tucker, I suppose—and no one noticed the buck standing in the middle of the road except me until—

“Jesus, look out!”

—until it struck the grill like an oncoming vehicle and tumbled up against the windshield, breaking it into a thousand spidery rings, and smearing it with blood as the truck careened wildly about the road and finally came to a rest in the ditch.

It didn’t take long to access the damage, and the short of it was: we weren’t going anywhere—other than on foot. The old Ford had a crushed radiator, and, somehow, a flat tire.

I’d never see Danny quite so upset, quite that livid, and I guess I never will again. As for Tucker, he seemed more bemused by the situation than anything, and volunteered to stay with the truck—but really just the kills—while the rest of us hoofed it into town—to fetch a tow truck, I suppose.

It was Billy who first noticed the thing’s eyes, and called us all over. Sure enough, the buck was a dead ringer for the one I’d missed in the clearing, right down to the red diamond above its snout. It even had 13 tines.

After checking the doe in the payload by holding open its eye, Danny said, “Some kind of disease, maybe?”

“I ain’t never seen a disease that turns eyes white,” said Billy.

“Yeah. Me neither,” said Danny. He exhaled sharply, looking down at the thing. “Okay, that settles it.”

“What do you mean,” said Tucker.

“What do you think I mean? I mean it can’t be eaten. We don’t even dare butcher it until someone from fish and game has a look. So guard your prize, asshole. But I wouldn’t get too attached if I was you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. That’s so.” He turned to the rest of us as if to say, *Ready?* We were.

We’d walked about two miles when Tucker jogged to catch up with us.

“Twenty dollars says I can get back here before you do,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“That’s fine,” said Danny. “Fish and game will have your info.”

“And that means your old man’s van down by the river as well as your mamma’s singlewide,” said Billy.

I was laughing when I noticed a handful of deer stepping onto the road ahead of us—which were quickly joined by others until they spanned nearly the entire width of the pavement. It’s funny because I don’t remember feeling scared, only curious. It was comical, frankly, like something from a *Far Side* cartoon.

“If you’re going to shoot an elephant, Mr. Schneider, you better be prepared to finish the job,” I joked, but no one got it, only gazed off down the road at the line of deer.

“Okay, that is fucking weird,” said Danny, and seemed to grip his rifle tighter. “Anybody else think that’s weird?”

“That’s definitely weird,” said Billy.

Tucker raised his rifle slowly.

“What are you doing?” snapped Danny.

“Chill out, Pussy Galore,” he said. He squinted through his telescope. “Just doing a little reconnaissance.” He tracked his barrel back and forth slowly. “Yeah ... they’ve got the white eyes, just like the others.” He paused and held steady. “And the red markings. I don’t know, looks almost like a—”

There was a *crack!* as he squeezed his trigger, and I looked up in time to see blood jet from the back of one of the bucks' heads. Then the life ran from its legs and it collapsed, right there in the middle of the road, as the others scattered and disappeared back into the tree line.

No one said anything for several moments.

"*Boo,*" said Tucker suddenly, spinning on Danny, and to his smug satisfaction the younger man jumped.

Tucker just laughed and slapped his gun barrel against his palm. "Everyone relax. I've cleared the threat—"

"*Right now,*" hissed Danny, throwing down his gun and darting at him.

What happened next surprised everyone, even, I think, Tucker himself. For he raised his rifle and pointed it directly at Danny's head—stopping the younger man in his tracks and causing the rest of us to freeze in place also. Then he just laughed and backed away, saying, "Uh-oh. The Geek Brothers are still armed. Now what do I do?" His face became suddenly serious. "Drop 'em, faggots. Drop 'em right where you stand and kick them over here. Do it!"

We did it.

"Now here's how it's going to be," he said, gathering up the rifles while keeping his own trained on Danny. "You're going to just turn around ... and march your candy asses back to the truck. Okay? And when you get there, you're going to watch my doe and fawn *real* close. All right? I'll be back with a truck as soon as I'm done boning your mothers."

And we started walking.

I'm not sure how long it took us to get back, about a half-hour, I reckon. I only know the sun was starting to go down and it was getting cold, like, *real* cold, enough to see our breath and for our fingers and toes to start going numb. One thing was for sure: it was going to be a hellish night

with no radiator and no heat, unless of course Tucker got back—if he was coming back—before the freezing temperatures set in.

I only know that Tucker was the last thing on my mind when Danny told me to search the payload toolbox for a lighter, and it's funny, because when I first saw him stretched out in the bed of the truck I thought he was fooling and had somehow double-timed through the trees and beat us there, just to give us a good scare.

But Tucker wasn't fooling. He was dead. I knew it the moment I laid eyes on him, even though he'd been rolled over on his stomach and might just as well have been sleeping. He was full of holes, for one; holes that looked as though they'd been made with tent stakes, and which covered every inch of him from the tips of his feet (which were frozen at odd angles in rigor mortis) to the crown of his head.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, the worst of it was when Danny rolled him over and we saw that his face had been almost completely spared—spared, that is, except for a single devastating wound: his right eye, which had been punched out like a raw egg and pushed so deep that the remains of it were now looking out from his brain.

“Where's the doe? Or the fawn, for that matter?”

But I could only look at Danny dumfounded, and I'm embarrassed to say the Bible verses were racing through my mind again: *Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.*

Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord.

“My God,” I remember Billy saying. “Danny. What do we do?”

But he didn't say anything for a long time. That was the worst of it, I think. Seeing Danny who was always so stalwart and brave and sure-footed and confident reduced to something like a frightened old lady, something like a wounded, hunted animal. But he recovered himself, as Danny always did, and when at last he spoke he did so calmly and with something of his usual assurance, outlining our options and asking us which we thought was better: to walk back down the road and look for our guns, or to wait it out here, inside the truck, and pray to God some-

one happened along, either tonight or in the morning, before we froze to death. Or worse.

To his obvious surprise, we voted unanimously to move on down the road.

I can't vouch for what Billy was thinking; I can only tell you how I felt. And my reasoning was as simple as it was ultimately misguided: The reindeer had gotten what they wanted. *An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.*

They were finished with us now. *He* was finished with us—God, Yahweh, Jehovah, whatever. We'd boiled a kid in his mother's milk and been punished. Now all that remained was the final part—the denouement—our perp walk through the very garden we'd spoiled. Then we'd be allowed to continue with our lives. Then we'd be allowed to return to our singlewide trailers and our pawnshop guns and our pickup trucks—our pregnant girlfriends, our jobs at the Ace steel foundry. Then we'd be allowed to simply roam the world as we saw fit.

It was Danny who first saw them this time, whispering to us that they were there and slowing his pace until all of us were standing bone-still in the middle of the road.

For they'd come back, all of them (and then some), and the road was blocked just as it had been before. Unlike before, the road was blocked in the direction from which we'd come as well.

"Easy does it," Danny whispered. "Just ... don't make any sudden moves. We'll head into the trees ... and climb them."

But when we moved toward the trees the deer were there also.

Which left only the trees on the other side of the road, which, not surprisingly, were devoid of any animals—all of us, I think, knew why. And then the animals were running—bounding—toward us, both the ones nearby and the ones father down the road, and we were running, too, into the trees to which we'd been herded and between which we

sprinted like pale, frightened ghosts. And it dawned on me that things could not have ended any other way—at least not in a just universe, because that is precisely what we'd stumbled into—for the dogs had become the hunted and the fox was now at their backs. And it seemed to me also that they took as much sport out of chasing us as we had taken out of chasing them, as we had taken out of chasing the pregnant doe (we didn't know that then, I tell you plainly) into the clearing in which it was killed.

A cry went up as I leapt over a deadfall and I looked into the dark next to me to see Danny impaled on a buck's horns, blood gurgling from his mouth and his eyes bugged out in terror before the animal rammed him into a tree with a sickening crunch and my supervisor and friend was lost behind me.

Then it was just me and Billy—the two hopeless dweebs, the ones who should never have been on a hunting trip in the first place—bounding like fucking gazelles through the ponderosa pines, laughing a little, I think, at the stark absurdity of it, hoping, perhaps, that it had all been a dream, that we would wake up momentarily in our shitty, threadbare beds, in our shitty, threadbare trailer parks, our shitty, threadbare lives, and maybe just maybe be grateful that we didn't actually have to hunt for our survival nor forage constantly while being hunted ourselves. That we were just lucky to be soft men living soft lives.

At last one of the bucks reared up next to Billy and jerked its head with an unimaginable violence—enough so that the tips of its tines penetrated clean through his neck—then he too stumbled over a deadfall and was gone behind, and I thought for a moment I'd been impaled myself but of course it was only the pounding of my own convulsing heart.

Then I was falling, tumbling, rolling, down a rocky incline and into a semi-frozen creek bed, where the reindeer fell upon me in full force, stomping me with their cloven hooves, banging their heads like teens at a death metal concert, punching me full of holes, taking out first one eye then the other.

Filling the world with a light as white as their eyes.

CLOUDS

“Meet you at the top!” Kerber hollered—cockily, as always—as he climbed rapidly past us. He gestured toward the cloud ceiling. “We’ll leave a light on!”

Sean and Karen looked at each other as his balloon disappeared around the envelope of our own.

“Everything a competition,” sighed Sean. There was a deafening roar as he toggled the blast valve. “Had to show us he could beat us on the ascent—even at night.”

“Talk about that a little,” I said, continuing to roll. “You mentioned that his balloon was different from yours. How so?” I nodded at Eddy, who moved the boom mic closer. “Just look out at the sky, Sean, not the camera.”

He scratched at his beard and seemed to marshal his thoughts. “Well, he’s running a gas balloon, not a hot-air vulcoon, which is what this is. A gas balloon uses gas instead of hot air for its lift, which is advantageous because you can stay up longer—a lot longer—and because it’s so quiet. There’s none of this,” He toggled the blast valve again and there was a mighty roar as liquid propane vaporized and ignited. “So, on that level, they’re extremely sought after. The problem is one of economy. Helium is *expensive*. Like, real expensive. Like five grand to fill a balloon expensive. So people use hydrogen—which, while relatively cheap, is also incredibly flammable. The *Hindenburg* was full of hydrogen, as is The *Excelsior*.”

He was referring, of course, to billionaire Ronald Trimp’s promotional blimp—which, winds allowing, we’d be seeing when these balloons and others converged on the Super Bowl in the morning.

Sean looked at the camera awkwardly. “How was that?”

“That was good, Sean. Thanks.” I stopped recording and ran the footage back—too far, to the point where the old Indian we’d encountered before takeoff was talking.

“They move,” he said, gazing at the snow-smothered hills.

“T-they? The mountains? The mountains move?”

“Uh-huh. They fall from sky ... onto my land.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. *“They move.”*

I powered the camera down—there wouldn’t be much to see until dawn, anyway—still thinking about his words. *They fall from the sky ... onto my land.*

“Wreckage from Jupiter 6?” prompted Eddy, noticing my expression. He was referring, of course, to the unmanned mission to the cloud planet, which had blown up in the earth’s atmosphere immediately after its long journey home.

“Yeah. Maybe.” I zippered my parka all the way up.

The two-way radio crackled to life. It was Kerber, calling from the other balloon. “West by northwest, you see that?”

It wasn’t until Sean had turned on the spotlight and aimed it in that direction that what he was talking about became clear: for a kind of fog bank had rolled in seemingly out of nowhere—and was moving toward us at a shockingly rapid clip.

“Sean ... what is that?” I recall asking nervously.

But he didn’t respond, at least not at first, and it took an elbow from Eddy to remind me why we were there in the first place.

I reactivated my camera. “Okay, folks. This is what reality TV’s all about. Remember, we’re not here.”

I zoomed up on Sean’s beard and focused as he toggled the mic.

“That’s affirmative, *Gas Monkey*, we see it. Not sure we believe it, but we see it.”

“The weather report said clear skies,” cursed Karen, even as the radio crackled and Kerber came again: “It’s nothing to worry about. A little thermal turbulence—*Gas Monkey* suggests letting it pass and carrying on.”

I panned past Karen slowly enough to register her concerned expression before focusing on the approaching clouds, which bubbled and roiled and shown mauve-pink, like plumes of dry ice at a rock concert.

Then they were upon us, reducing visibility dramatically and smelling faintly of ammonia.

"I'm not so sure," said Sean at last. Though I may have imagined it, it seemed there was a small quaver in his voice. "*Hot-air One* recommends seeing how thick it is before proceeding. Stand by."

"Negative, repeat negative on that. *Gas Monkey* will continue to ascend."

"Jesus Christ," hissed Sean, and released the mic.

I refocused on him, liking the way the purple fog rushed past him in the dark—

And something moved in that dark. Something like a giant scythe, which rose like a whale's pectoral fin breaching water and just as quickly vanished.

"Holy shit, what was that?" blurted Eddy, and jolted, his sudden movement rocking the basket.

Karen had seen it, too.

"Jesus, Sean, there's something out there ..."

"Something out—" He turned and looked into the mists, which bubbled and swirled, and I regained my senses enough to tape him as he did so.

"What'd it look like?" he asked, craning his neck to look up, then quickly cued his mic. "*Gas Monkey* this is *Hot-air One*. What's your altitude?"

"It wasn't them," said Karen.

"I repeat, *Hot-air One* to *Gas Monkey*. What is your present altitude?"

We all waited, shivering in the dark, and as we did so I zoomed up on Sean's face to capture his concern.

"It looked like a wing," Karen blurted suddenly.

He froze for a moment and didn't say anything. At last he looked from her to Eddy and then to me. "Ah. I see." He smiled suddenly and waved a finger. "You got me. Who's idea was it? *Hmmm*, let me guess ..."

He looked back to Karen and was about to say something when there was a sound like a slab of meat hitting the concrete and he jolted abruptly and we all just froze, in part, I suppose, because we couldn't figure out what the massive, arrow-shaped thing that had suddenly materialized amongst us was. But then the blood dribbled from his mouth and Karen began screaming and I realized with horror that he'd in fact been impaled—impaled by some kind of spaded appendage, which uncurled in the mists even as I watched and was suddenly stretched taught—so that he was jerked from the basket with a sickening crunch and swung arms and legs akimbo into space.

That was the worst of it, I think, seeing him swung about like a ragdoll like that, and in such an empty void, his body rising and falling as though in slow-motion and his arms and legs flapping almost gracefully—even as the owner of that appendage passed through the beam of the spotlight and revealed itself in full.

In retrospect, I wish I'd continued recording, for what I saw in that instant is difficult to describe, even now. Suffice it to say that it had a body like that of a manta ray—upon who's tail the balloonist had been impaled—or a manta ray combined with a bat, albeit huge, and that it was covered with a kind of camouflage which reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Jupiter—just a roil of purples and pinks and browns. I suppose that was when it first hit me: the possibility that there might be a connection between this *thing* and the Jupiter 6 probe. That the probe might have brought something back, even if it had just been a sprinkling of microbes on its surface.

And then there was an explosion somewhere above us, the concussion of which rocked our balloon, and we all looked up to see *Gas Monkey*—my God, it was like the sun!—on fire; and yet that wasn't all we saw, for as it dropped it became evident that there were more of the bat/manta ray things attached, suckling it as it fell, crawling upon it like flies. Then it passed us like some kind of great meteor—its occupants shrieking and calling out—and was gone below, the heat of it still painting our

faces, its awful smell, which was the smell of rotten eggs, filling our nostrils.

And then we were just drifting, all of us crouched low in the basket ... and the only sounds were those of Karen sobbing and my own pounding heart.

I'm not sure how much time passed, maybe five minutes, maybe twenty. All I know is that the sky had begun to lighten and that it was Eddy who spoke first, saying, "Hydrogen. They feed on hydrogen. We're safe."

I must have looked at him, because I remember clearly how pale he looked, how ill.

"Jupiter 6?" I said, although I already knew the answer.

"Why not?" He laughed a little to himself. "Cosmos. Carl Sagan. Hunters and floaters."

"Someone needs to toggle the propane," said Karen, absently, it seemed, as though she were a million miles away.

I looked at her to see a woman clearly in shock. "I'll do it. Okay? You—just relax." I looked at the apparatus for controlling the balloon. "The red lever?"

She nodded and sniffed, like a helpless little girl, and I climbed to my feet. Eddy grabbed my ankle.

"Wait. The cloud. Are we still in it?"

I scanned our surroundings. "Yes."

"Okay, toggle it and get back down. Quickly!"

I toggled it and got back down.

Quickly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The cloud ... it's ... I think it's a form of camouflage. You know, like how octopuses squirt ink—but in this case it's to confuse their prey, not predators. Right? Okay. So that means as long as that cloud's there, we got trouble."

"But you said they—"

"Feed on hydrogen, that's right," he said. "But they don't *know* we're running on hot air—not yet."

"Which means—"

"Which means they're checking us out, right now."

I looked at the pink and purple clouds. "But wouldn't they have a way to, I don't know, *sense* when hydrogen is present?"

"I'm sure they do. Look, all I know is they just hit the jackpot with Kerber's gas balloon, and it looked a lot like ours, all right?"

"Right," I mumbled, seeing the truth of it. "And that's not our only problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there's a giant meal called the *Excelsior* which could be hovering over the Super Bowl right now. Jesus. How many people does a stadium like that hold? 90,000? A hundred?"

No one said anything.

I climbed up and peeked over the basket's edge.

Sure enough, through a hole in the marmalade clouds, the stadium had come into view, shining like a north star and already crowded with balloons—including the *Excelsior*. I looked at the bullhorn in the corner of the basket, the one Sean had said he used to communicate with people on the ground. At least there was a way to warn the crowd—if and when we got there.

"The burner—it needs to be triggered again," said Karen, distantly. "And our altitude ... what is it?"

I looked at Eddy. The truth of it was, I was sort of hoping he'd take this one. But he only shook his head.

"Right," I sighed at last. "Okay. Is that the altimeter?" I gestured at the readout next to the burner valve.

Karen nodded.

"Okay—hold my beer."

And I counted to three.

What happened next happened very fast—so fast that I was unable to process the enormity of it until Eddy was long gone and so was most the floor, leaving us to dangle precariously as our feet sought the shattered plywood's edges and we hung onto the cold, chromed burner supports for life. For Karen had stood with me as I reached for the red propane valve (to check the altimeter herself, presumably) and thus been spared falling into nothing when one of the creature's knife-like tails penetrated the flooring—harpooning Eddy through his abdomen before jerking him clean through the plywood and dragging him screaming into the void.

But something else happened in that instant too, something which remains the single most terrifying aspect of the ordeal. For as we clung to the burner supports and tried to keep our feet on what was left of the floor, the head of one of the creatures darted from the fog—it was easily the size of a refrigerator laid on end—and just stopped: the tip of its nose all but touching my own and its huge eyes which were full of spirals regarding me with something like curiosity. Then it exhaled, blowing the hat off my head, and arced away into the mists, and as it went I felt a great rushing of wings as though a dozen others had suddenly abandoned their fascination with us and followed.

And then it was just us, Karen and I, gripping the burner supports and trying to keep our feet on what little remained to support them. And I knew that she knew we were safe now—at least from our Jovian hunters—but that we had a responsibility, too. For it was clear to both of us, I think, that the monsters had not merely lost interest but been *lured* away—by the promise of enough hydrogen to fill them all to bursting. By the promise of Ronald Trimp's leviathan blimp, which now loomed large in the slowly clearing mists.

By the time Karen had maneuvered us to a hard landing at the edge of the playing field, the first of the sword-tails were already circling the *Excelsior*—just circling and gliding, as though carefully sniffing the zeppelin out. As for myself, I knew we'd have but seconds before security responded—violently, I was sure—and so was scrambling with the bullhorn before the balloon's envelope had even fully deflated. I only remember that the thing was heavier and louder than I'd expected, and for the latter, at least, I was profoundly grateful.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to ask you all to get up and proceed to the nearest exits. Please don't panic, just do it now and in an orderly fashion."

But they did panic, almost instantly, probably because someone had already noticed the sword-tails, and the next thing I knew there was a sea of humanity crushing toward the exits even as the security staff ran at me across the field and the first explosion rocked the arena.

"Get on the ground!" I recall someone shouting in the instants before I was piledriven, and then I was literally seeing stars as the heavysset men piled on and at least one of them started kicking me in the ribs.

"Jesus, look up!" Karen shouted, and when I rolled over on my side I saw that she had leapt atop one of the men's backs and was forcibly lifting his head.

To the purple-pink sky and the soaring Jovian hunters. To the massive, dark-skinned zeppelin which was already on fire and continued to explode as additional cells were ignited.

And then I was free, they'd clambered off me at last, and I struggled for breath while still curled up on the Astroturf even as great chunks of burning wreckage began to reign down all around and Karen tried to help me to my feet. And yet even amidst all that it occurred to me: my camera might still be in the ruins of the balloon (for I'd placed it on a shelf below the bulwark right after the *Gas Monkey* had exploded). And the next thing I knew I was searching for and finding it and triggering

the record button, pausing only to look at Karen over the viewfinder as she let go of my arms at last and began shaking her head.

“I—I’ve got a kid, if no longer a husband,” she said, the tears streaming down her face. “I can’t stay here.”

“I know,” I remember saying—as gently as I could under the circumstances. “Go. I’ll be all right.”

And then she smiled almost motherly—and was gone across the wreckage-littered field.

It didn’t take long for what remained of the *Excelsior* to come crashing down, its great, bullet-shaped envelope almost completely burned away and its interior girders warping and melting. Nor did the hydrogen-eaters abandon it even then, but continued to draw sustenance from it as their abdominal sacs swelled and their manta ray/bat wings beat furiously and their eyes seemed to spiral like the storms of Jupiter itself.

As for myself, I’d retreated to the relative safety of a roofed area near the dugout, where I continued to record as the now-gorged hunters at last began to rise ... and in very short order disappeared into a cloud of their own making.

And then—finally—it was over, and I could only stare at the ruins of the *Excelsior* as a few survivors stumbled from the smoke and swirling particulate—at which instant I awakened as if from a dream and hurried to assist them.

I was helping an elderly woman get back on her feet when I first heard the gasps and expressions of surprise happening all around us. Nor did it take long to figure out what they were responding to, for when I followed their collective gaze to the blue-gray sky I saw two enormous creatures rising into the clouds—*huge* creatures, as big as mountains, shaking off avalanches of snow with each undulating breath, pulsing upward like man-of-wars in water.

And I remembered the old Indian.

They fall from sky ... onto my land.

And knew nothing would ever be the same.

EQUINOX

The napkin read, simply: *I feel it too. Meet me at The Gorgeous Dog at midnight ... Please?* —*Equinox*

She tucked it into the pocket of her apron, glancing around the diner. No one had noticed—not even nosy Claire. She glanced at the clock: It was half past ten. More than enough time to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

“Did your lumbersexual leave a good tip?” asked Sally as she breezed past holding a pair of serving trays.

After returning from the table she added: “That was quite the fireworks display.”

Sarah busied herself with wiping the counter, pretending not to hear. *And nosy Sally*, she thought—although the young hostess had a point. It would have been hard to miss the instant attraction between her and the stranger.

She thought of the man’s large hands and arms (the latter of which had clearly been honed from work, not working out), his dirty fingernails, his unkempt beard, and snorted a little to herself. *Lumbersexual?*

Hardly.

She wiped the same spot on the counter in an effort to remove a stubborn stain—realizing, after a moment, that it was not a stain at all. It was, strangely enough, a burn mark.

Now, isn’t that curious, she thought, recalling his ring—that strange, shifting ring—which he had rested in precisely that spot. The ring she had first noticed when checking to see if he was wearing a wedding band. The ring which appeared to have been sculpted from pure, black obsidian and whose highlights changed with each movement of his wrist—first gold, then green, then blue, then maroon. The ring which had been the only thing about him to feel truly off—off and off-putting. Grotesque, even.

Obscene.

“Hello ...? Earth to Sarah ...”

She looked up, dazedly, and saw Norm looking at her with distinct displeasure. He motioned to the cash register where several people were waiting to be seated.

“Sorry,” she said—wondering just how many times per shift she said that—then hurried toward the inpatient group, where she apologized yet again and led them to a booth.

And tried very hard not to look at the clock on the wall.

She saw him the instant she entered the bar—his size alone made him hard to miss—seated alone in a nook near the back; what’s more, he saw *her*, zeroing upon her immediately so that she suddenly got spooked and veered into the ladies’ room—where she closed herself in a stall and puffed on her vape pen furiously, wondering just what it was she thought she was doing and how she would extract herself from the situation if it should take a turn for the worse.

‘If?’ she reprimanded herself sternly. *Don’t you mean when? Hasn’t it always been just a matter of when?*

She straightened suddenly and stowed away the pen, rubbing the corners of her mouth to ensure there was no residue left from lunch, then hurried from the stall and quickly checked herself in the mirror.

It’ll have to do, she decided, not liking how gaunt she looked—how tired—but remembering that he had appeared tired as well. And then she stepped from the restroom and was on her way to the table, having chosen, somewhere in her last several breaths, to just go all in and let the tea leaves fall where they may.

As it turned out, she liked where the tea leaves had fallen just fine—for they’d hit it off just as breezily and effortlessly as they had earlier in the night; more so due to the addition of live music and alcohol. So much so, in fact, that by the time the bartender had given last call she had reached

a bold and somewhat uncharacteristic decision: which was that she'd give herself to this man completely and without reservation. If, of course, he were to so much as ask. And if he could answer a few questions of her own.

"Like, what's your real name, cowboy?"

He didn't hesitate before saying, "That's it. Equinox. I was born during an eclipse." He took a sip of beer and she appreciated the fact that he hadn't drunk himself into a stupor by now like most men. "As for your second question, which will be about the ring ... that one's a little harder." He glanced at the stage as the band introduced what they said would be their final number, and added, "Shall we dance?"

She looked at him uncertainly, wondering whether to press or not—and decided she was sufficiently charmed to let it go ... at least for now.

"Sure," she said at last, and stood, taking his hand.

And then they danced. And it seemed to her that she had stepped back in time, had stepped back in age, so that none of her current troubles (mostly financial) could gain traction in her mind—to the extent that when she shifted her cheek against his massive chest and saw the ring flicker with light where his hand rested on her hip, it was as if she had awakened from a dream. And she nearly said something about it but didn't for fear of ruining the moment—for he was clearly unaware of the thing's brief luminosity—and she nearly touched it (to see if it was hot) but didn't—again for fear of ruining the moment—and she nearly demanded that he explain the thing right then before her questions about it drove her batty—but didn't. Because of the moment.

It was a moment that would stretch indefinitely until they lay naked and depleted in the over-cab bedroom of his fifth-wheeler, which was parked in the diner's back lot, at which time she whispered, even while edging toward sleep, "Your ring. It glowed as we danced, did you know that?"

His body stiffened immediately. "It what?"

"Your hard-to-explain ring," she said, and giggled a little. "It—it lit up. Where on earth did you get that thing? I've never seen anything like—"

He sat up with a start, everything about him seeming suddenly electrified, suddenly rigid. "What color was it?"

She tittered hesitantly. "And that matters because ...?"

He grabbed her by the throat—not particularly hard, but enough to hurt. "*What color was it?*"

Her mind reeled. *Hasn't it always been just a matter of when?* "Green. It was green. You're—you're hurting me."

He released her suddenly and looked out the window. "Green ... by the gods. What shade?" He looked at her abruptly. "*What shade, Sarah?*"

She began to inch away from him slowly. "Just —just green. Dark green, I think. It—it only did it for—"

And then she was scrambling—disentangling herself from the sheets, tumbling dangerously down the thickly-carpeted stairs, climbing to her bare feet.

A gunshot rang out as she reached for the door and wood chips exploded from the cabinets above her. "Open that door and *we die*—do you understand?"

She looked to see him crouched at the top of the stairs, pistol in hand. "The best we can hope for now is to remain still ... and pray they don't find us. Now step away from the door—do it!"

She stared at him for several breaths, her heart hammering in her chest, wondering if he would really shoot—if he was really that crazy.

"Dark green, by the gods. Thazgul ..."

Yes, she could see now that he was. Could see it just as clear as day. Could see that he'd always been crazy and had always looked it: she'd just been too stupid to see—too needy, too agreeable. *Hasn't it always been just a matter of when?*

She moved away from the door slowly.

With you—yes. Because you're weak and insecure and teetering on the edge of crazy yourself. Because crazy is as crazy does—that's how you end up stuck in an RV with a psychopath at 3 am. And because like attracts like.

And then his ring began glowing—not flickering weakly as it had before but positively burning, like a green fire—and before she could take advantage of his distraction something came crashing through the door—something she could only liken to a gigantic green knife, only knotty and twisted and dripping viscous slime. Something which was terrible and alien and not alone, for others just like it had pierced the walls and the ceiling, even the floor, and the RV had begun to shake and shudder as though rattled by an earthquake.

“Take cover, damn you!” barked Equinox, adding quickly: “Find a place already punctured by a claw and stay close to it.”

And she did so, cowering beneath a table even as eyes opened along the length of the nearest appendage and regarded her moistly, blinking out of time with each other, rolling in their slimy sockets. That's when she peeked around the bottom of one of the bench seats and saw Equinox discard the pistol unceremoniously—before glaring angrily at the ceiling and twisting the ring around once.

At which instant, seeing with her own eyes what his action had initiated—she fainted dead away.

When she came to there was a medical helicopter circling the lot and the thing which had been Equinox was locked in heated combat with—what had he called it? *Thazgul*. A thing she could not have described even if her life had depended upon it. A thing whose multiple arms and tentacles were wrapped around Equinox—or what had become of him—like so many green, slimy ropes ... even as he punched at what passed for its head (for his great, hairy arms were free) and snapped at its probing antennae.

For the man named Equinox had been replaced by something akin to a prehistoric bear (or was it a bipedal wolf?); something which towered nearly as tall as the surrounding fir trees and bore a glowing ring—itsself the size of a small tire—on one of its long, claw-like fingers.

As for the 5th wheeler in which they'd made love, it had been smashed to pieces along with the truck which had been used to pull it. And yet it was a mystery to her how she had escaped the carnage—unless of course Equinox had picked her up and placed her where she had awakened, which was safely in front of the locked diner. Regardless, she'd scarcely had time to think about it when one of the Thazgul-thing's tentacles collided with the chopper and sent it spinning out of control—so that it crashed against the snowcapped trees and burst into flame ... amidst which she heard its occupants screaming.

Briefly.

And then it was all over, or nearly so, as Equinox snapped the crustacean-like arms of the thing one by one and finally lifted its entire body above his head ... only to bring it down suddenly and violently, just as she'd seen professional wrestlers do, so that its back was broken against the snowy pavement.

It would have been difficult to say how long she and the beast simply stared at each other, maybe several breaths, maybe several minutes. All she knew for certain was that it had been long enough for the snow to begin piling down and the Thazgul-thing's remains to melt as if dissolved in acid—and for Equinox to have returned to his original form, which stood before her now as naked and afraid as anything she had ever seen.

But that wasn't the only thing she knew for certain, was it? No. Indeed, she knew for certain one thing more ... and that was that she loved this man standing before her in a way she could not explain—could not, in truth, even begin to account for. It simply was, just like the ring and the Thazgul-thing and the snow-clouded sky.

And she decided, even as he started to fall and she rushed to support him, that she would not abandon this man to whatever curse had been visited on him. That she would save him, or die trying, even if it meant taking on his terrible burden as her own.

“They’ll be an investigation, of course,” she said, helping him to lay down on her threadbare coach. She’d fetched him a pair of her ex-husband’s pajama bottoms and put something on herself. “Of the medical helicopter crash and its fatalities. And they’ll trace the truck and camper back to you.”

He grunted as settled onto the cushions. “That was no medical helicopter. And no, there won’t be. The entire area will be quarantined by morning. As for the pickup and RV—well, they know who they’re looking for.”

She plopped into the easy chair next to him and shook the hair from her face. “Not a medical helicopter? What do you mean?”

He closed his eyes and began rubbing his temples. “Just a paint job. They ... they don’t want to be seen.” He lay silent for several moments. “My God, Sarah. What have I done?” He sat up abruptly. “I should never have left you that note, should never have ... carried on with you like I did. Don’t you see? I’ve implicated you in something from which ...” He trailed off, noticing the open curtains, then stood suddenly and went to them, snapping them closed. “I can’t stay, you know that. I can’t—”

She quickly rose and went to him and kissed him gently on the lips. “*Shhh*. Listen. Why don’t you tell me just what it is I’ve been implicated in? The ring ... Thazgul ... everything.”

He looked deep in her eyes and for just one moment it seemed he would, that he would lay the entire thing bare, that he would disclose everything. Then he moved away rapidly and peeked between the curtains and the window frame. “Believe me when I say—the less you know, the better. The ring is not of this earth; it is not even of this time and

space. Suffice it to say that it can transform its wearer into any creature across a thousand dimensions, but once donned it can never come off—not even amputation of the finger or even the whole hand will do it, the cutting instrument will merely glance off the skin as though it were protected by a forcefield. By the gods, don't think I haven't tried! As for Thazgul he is but one of many such monsters, all of whom covet the ring for their own purposes—I count among them your own government, who stalks me no less than a thousand Thazguls. And who will stop at nothing to—” He stopped talking abruptly and turned to face her, his eyes awash with tears. “By the gods, I've said too much. Oh, Sarah. I longed so much just to feel another soul against me, to love as it was meant to be, but I should have known—dear God, I should have known!”

She looked up at him then almost as a mother would look at her child—she had no children of her own—and her own eyes misted up. “But don't you see? I have longed for those same things. So much so and across so many nights that I would do anything, endure anything, just to have them again. I would even endure this—this curse which has been visited upon you. I would share the burden to lighten your load.” She pounded on his chest with her fists. “I love you, love me!”

He froze at this, for all the world as if he might accept her selfless offer, then gripped her shoulders gently but firmly and kissed her on the lips. “It is because I love you that I go.”

And then the ring was flashing—only this time the color of blood—and he turned it round once so that he shrunk before her very eyes: becoming at once a large, flat centipede ... which wound between her feet and across the hardwood floor to disappear at last beneath the dusty door.

The quarantine lasted the rest of the winter and well into spring, during which time she was able to collect unemployment and tend to her

health— namely her pregnancy, the first symptoms of which had began less than a month after her encounter with Equinox. She'd been questioned, of course—everyone in Kettle Rock, population 1,637, had—but ultimately nothing had come of it, and by the time she was in her 14th week she was back at the diner working part-time and fielding an endless stream of questions and congratulations, at least from her regulars. Her younger coworkers, meanwhile, Claire and Sally, had done everything in their power to distance themselves from her—as to whether this was because of the rumors surrounding her since the top-secret military accident or just plain jealousy, she couldn't be sure.

What she could be sure of is that she thought of him every day, the man named Equinox, and wondered if he were ever close or even still alive, but knew somehow in the pit of her stomach that he was—and that, indeed, he was thinking of her as well.

This seemed to bear out on her final day of work before she was to take maternity leave, when the old man who had been watching her off and on from the corner booth seemingly vanished while she was ringing up other customers—a curious thing since no one had seen him leave and his meal had remained virtually untouched, and this despite him having left enough on the table to cover fifty such meals, and then some.

Ah, and then some, indeed. For he'd left something else on the table also ... a clean, folded napkin with a single heart drawn on its surface and the simple instruction to open it only once she'd gotten home.

And she *did* open it only once she'd gotten home, after which it was revealed to contain a modest diamond ring the gold hoop of which was engraved. And what it said was as brief as it was ultimately elegant.

For what it said, simply, was:

Love, Hope, Equinox.

SADIE

In spite of his fear that he was becoming his father, he had to admit: knowing he would be coming home to her later was nice. He still left the TV on, of course—although he did so now to keep Sadie company rather than to take the edge off a lonesome apartment—and his solitude still got to him on occasion, especially now that the holidays were in full swing, but, mostly, he was just enjoying his little experiment in cat ownership—more so than he would have guessed. He still worried about Bonnie and Clyde—his parakeet and goldfish, respectively—despite the fact that he'd suspended the birdcage from the ceiling and relocated the tank to the highest shelf of the entertainment center; but even that, like his loneliness, had subsided since Sadie's arrival, mostly because she'd proven to have such a chill temperament.

None of which changed the fact that he'd taken his third step now toward becoming his father, a man who'd never met a stray he hadn't eagerly taken in and who lived barely a mile away in a house overrun by animals and their odors. A house which, as a boy, had been the envy of his friends—but which now reeked of cat piss and dog excrement ... so much so that it was difficult even to keep caregivers. He'd never understood it, frankly, this need of his father's (of anyone) to keep and maintain animals—my God, wasn't life complicated enough? And yet here he was, David E. Smithson Jr., keeping and maintaining animals—a regular chip off the old block, he supposed.

No matter. The fact was he was glad for the company, and he showed his appreciation before heading off to his nightshift the same way he had every night since bringing Sadie home from the shelter—by feeding her some Feline Caviar Buffalo Cat Treats and scratching her behind the ears; after which she purred contentedly and brushed against his leg—covering his uniform with hair, but that was okay. He'd bought a lint roller. And then he was off, locking the door behind him and saying, "Now you be a good girl. No parties." But if she meowed anything in response, he was unable to hear it.

When he got home at 7:30 am, he found Sadie right away—sitting like a fuzzy triangle in the corner of the living room, apparently sound asleep. At least that's what he'd thought until he knelt beside her and found her not only awake—but staring at the birdcage intently. Nor had she moved so much as an inch as he'd approached, which was unusual in itself.

"Sadie ... *Hey*." He snapped his fingers next to her head, twice, and still there was nothing. "Hello? Earth to Sadie?"

At last she came out of it, stirring as if from a trance, and he scratched her behind the ears. "What was *that*?"

And she growled at him, not hard, and not long, but enough to make him pull his hand back.

"Hey!"

And then she leapt forward, shaking herself, and trotted away from him, padding first into the hallway and then the bathroom, where a moment later he heard her scratching in her cat box.

Well, that didn't take long, he thought, and laughed a little to himself. The bloom was apparently off the rose.

He'd walked into the kitchen and begun unpacking the groceries when the doorbell rang—not just once but multiple times, as though the person ringing it were trying to be annoying. Harry.

"It's open," he hollered.

Harry poked his head around the door. "I, ah, thought I heard grocery bags. Borrow a soda?"

"Come in," sighed David. "Hurry up, before the cat gets out."

His neighbor crept in quickly and shut the door. "My God, he actually did it. Well, that's that, then. You're on your way."

David tossed him a soda. "Hardly. I just—"

He paused as Bonnie flew between them and landed near Sadie's dish, after which he and Harry just looked at each other.

"Hey, David. Your bird's out."

David peered at the cage, perplexed: sure enough, its little door hung wide open. He strode closer and stood on the end of the couch to inspect it.

"That's weird," he said, rubbing the latch between his fingers. "It's almost like ..." He paused.

Harry popped open a can of soda and joined him. "What?"

David frowned, examining the parts. "The latch. It's like it's been melted. Look," He made room for Harry on the couch and the man hopped up next to him. "Check it out. It's just sloughed away like butter."

Harry looked at it, squinting. "That is weird. And look at this," He reached into the cage and fingered the rearmost bars. "These are warped, too." He dabbed at them with his fingertips. "They're still warm. You been pointing heat rays at your parakeet or what?"

"Maybe Sadie has heat vision," David joked.

There was a distinct *chirp* followed by a tentative *meow*, and they looked toward the kitchen. "Uh-oh," said David. He hopped down from the couch and hurried toward them—but was instantly relieved when he saw the two just checking each other out ... amiably, it seemed. "I don't believe it," he said.

"And now for the bad news," said Harry, and laughed.

"What do you mean?" asked David, watching them carry on.

Harry finished his soda and crushed the can in his fist. "The bad news is ... she'll be no good as a mouser."

And then they both laughed, and David let them be as he began preparing dinner and Harry invited himself to stay.

By the time David's lunch hour rolled around the snow was coming down in sheets and the radio had warned of more to come, possibly as much as 6 inches. He was quite frankly exhausted from trudging through it when he collapsed in his chair next to the heat radiator in Building #4 and sat his lunch pail on the floor.

Because that was the thing about snow in his line of work—he was a night watchman for Community Colleges of Spokane—you *had* to do your rounds. If you didn't, the evidence, or lack thereof, was there for all to see. He stripped off his shoes and socks, thinking about Bonnie, and sat them on the radiator, wondering where the parakeet had disappeared to, and if, when she turned up, Sadie would be as docile in an empty house as she had been while he and Harry watched. He picked up his lunchbox and sat it on his lap, thinking about the cat's weird behavior when he'd gotten home: the frozen manner, the dazed eyes, and thinking, too, about the melted latch.

You been pointing heat rays at your parakeet or what?

Maybe Sadie has heat vision.

He had to laugh a little. She *had* been staring at it when he'd gotten home. He unlatched the pail but paused before opening it. But really—how had the thing gotten like that? Did he have a poltergeist? Was that it?

He watched as the snow drifted down, turning the campus into a necropolis. Then he opened the lunch pail and looked at its contents, wondering how many baloney sandwiches a guy could eat before he loosened up his budget and opted to live a little. No matter. He had vegetable soup in his little Thermos and a chilled Pepsi right outside the door—he'd placed it in the snow at the beginning of his shift—so how bad could it be? He unscrewed the cap of the Thermos and swished his spoon around in the broth—when he was distracted by an enormous gray cat, just looking at him through the glass.

Well, hello there, he thought, even as he lifted a spoonful to his mouth—and realized suddenly that it contained not just canned vegetables but Bonnie's little head.

He was still brooding over it even as he pulled into his driveway, wondering how the thing had gotten there and when precisely she'd killed

it—and why the soup, for God’s sake? His mind felt numb as he thought about it: There’d been no blood on the counter, he was sure of that. So that meant she had killed Bonnie elsewhere and literally carried the head for whatever distance to his soup, probably when it was still on the stove, but again, why, in God’s name?

He looked up at his apartment window after he’d gotten out of his truck, he didn’t know why, and saw Sadie sitting in the sill, staring down at him, it seemed. *Hey, you little psychopath*, he thought, as the snow fluttered down and clung to his face. *Have you been a good girl?*

He was relieved to find, a few minutes later, that she had: for nothing appeared amiss either in the kitchen or the living room. The bedroom, too, seemed in perfectly good order—although Sadie was no longer at the window, which *did* beg the question: Where on earth was she, exactly? He began calling out her name as he moved toward the bathroom, and was surprised by how little his voice sounded, how nervous.

“Sadie? Saaadie?”

He felt a wave of apprehension as he entered the bathroom, he wasn’t sure why, but was pleased to find it normal in every respect—there wasn’t even any discernable cat box odor. He laughed a little at his own paranoia. What had he expected? ‘REDRUM’ scrawled across the mirror in cat shit?

“Saaadie ... here, kitty-kitty ...”

He felt her before he saw her, just sort of a chill that ran up his spine, causing his arms to break out in gooseflesh, and craned his neck after re-entering the bedroom—and she hissed as they made eye contact. Nor was that all that he found disturbing: for she had somehow scaled the tallest bookshelf in the home in order to gain her present position—and yet not a trinket had been disturbed, not even the little glass flamingo perched on its single leg. Then she meowed almost forlornly and it occurred to him that she was stuck up there—that she was, quite frankly, probably just scared.

“Easy does it, girl,” he said, as gently and non-threateningly as he could. He took a tentative step closer. “You want down, is that it? We—we can do that. But you got to be nice, okay? You can’t—shred my arms to ribbons if I try to help, all right?”

She hissed as he took another step and he paused, thinking better of it. His uniform. Then he went to the open closet to fetch his old civilian coat—the one he wore when he was working on his truck—and promptly froze. For the truth of it was: he was having difficulty processing just what it was he was seeing.

“Get rid of her, dude. Seriously,” Harry said as he examined David’s spare uniform, which had been riddled with burn holes as if someone had taken a lighter to it. “Just take her out to the country and drop her off. I’ll go with you.”

David stopped pacing long enough to look at the clock, which read 10:30 pm—meaning he had exactly one-half hour before he had to be at work. “Jesus, Harry. It’s the middle of winter. I can’t just abandon her. We don’t even know if she’s respons—”

“Dude. The melted latch. Your parakeet. This crazy shit,” Harry indicated the burnt uniform. “Somehow I don’t recall you having these problems before.”

He looked at Sadie, who was sitting in the corner of the living room and staring at the fish tank atop the entertainment center—a spot from which she hadn’t moved since they’d gotten her down from the bookshelf. “And move that tank. She puts a hole in it and all that water’s going to short your electronics. And then *poof!* We got a fire. And I live in this building too, you know?”

David looked from the cat to the tank to the clock again. “Fuck. I gotta go. Can you help me with it in the morning?”

“I don’t trust her until morning,” said Harry, flatly. “Leave me your key ... and I’ll—I’ll look in on her. All right?”

David just looked at him. At last he dug out his keys and separated the one for his apartment. “Don’t lose it. It’s the only one I got. And don’t drink all my soda.”

And then he was gone, back out into the world—as the snow piled down and Sadie stared at the fish tank and Harry paced back and forth nervously.

David found himself going way too fast on the way home—in no small part because of what he’d read in the college library. For what he’d read made a certain kind of sense: this notion of some cats being almost co-dependent; of feeling a sense of ownership with regards to their human masters. To the point that anything which might take them away could be viewed as a threat, and thus lead the animal to act out ... by defecating on furniture, say. Or dropping severed parakeet heads in their vegetable soup.

All he knew for certain was that he’d had a very bad feeling most his shift—a feeling which had been exasperated when he’d dialed Harry and only gotten his voicemail. Now, as he sprinted up the stairs toward his apartment, he was genuinely worried.

The first thing he noticed was the door to Harry’s unit hanging open, which initially flooded him with relief—until, that is, he called his friend’s name, and there was no answer. He crept into his unit slowly and checked all the rooms—nothing.

It’s fine, he thought. *Just means he’s at your place ... probably snuggled up with the damned cat.*

He eased Harry’s door shut and moved across the hall to his own—and heard water boiling before he’d even finished opening the door. That’s when he noticed Harry standing in the middle of the room, just standing there as though he hadn’t a care in the world—even though half his head was missing and his left eyeball was dangling. Even though Sadie was perched on the edge of the couch nearby and staring up at the

fish tank—her eyes rolled back in her skull—as the tank boiled over and the electronics began to spark and short-circuit.

Crazy old Harry, just standing there, as dead as he was wide-eyed, and with a small fire burning in what was left of his partially-exposed brain. A fire which must have at last melted whatever was holding him up, for his knees buckled as David watched and he crumpled to the floor, startling Sadie from her trance and prompting her to pounce on him reflexively, after which she glared at him over the man's corpse and he felt a burning between his eyes—and knew he had to get away.

And then he was running, out the door and into Harry's apartment, the door of which he swung closed behind him—before sliding down the wall in a kind of mental exhaustion and attempting to catch his breath, which he'd just begun to do when he smelt burning wood and realized a hole was being seared into the lower portion of the door.

Come on, then, bitch, he thought, half-crazy with desperation, and loosed the Maglite from his belt. *You want a ticket to the great kitty condo in the sky—well, come on!*

And then she *was* coming, for the hole had expanded to let her through even as flames raced up the rest of the door, and he brought the club-like flashlight down hard and fast—striking her in the head as brutally as he could so that she yowled and hissed and tried to swipe at him ... but finally retreated beneath his continuing blows. At which instant he scrambled to his feet and grabbed a blanket from the couch, which he promptly used to beat the out the fire.

What followed was a silence in which he could only stare at the hole warily, certain he had wounded her but not nearly convinced the threat was over. At last he moved into the kitchen and took a butcher knife from the sink. Then he crouched near the door, and, after listening for several moments—and hearing nothing—began calling out to her.

"Saaadie. I'm right here, honey. Come on ..."

Several more minutes passed and still there was nothing. He leaned closer to the hole.

“Come on, sweetie. You know we’re not finished yet ...”

He gripped the knife and waited as the silence buzzed in his ears.

Wasn’t it at least possible that he’d already killed her? Blows like those ... and from a Maglite ... they would have laid low the strongest man, much less a 10-pound Main Coon.

He didn’t stop to think about it before he looked through the hole and the tip of his nose was flayed away. And then she was upon him, bursting through the hole and attacking his face, biting at his cheeks, sinking her claws into his scalp—even as dropped the knife and tried to shield himself desperately.

And then he was up, somehow, he was stumbling toward the window, and he somehow managed to yank her from his face before, holding her by the scruff of the neck while cocking his arm back—he launched her at the glass.

She hit like a rock and the glass shattered ... and then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, it was over, and he was standing there with his face and uniform cut to ribbons while watching snow billow gently into the room. Finally, once he’d caught his breath, he approached the window and looked down.

A story below, what had once been Sadie burned in the snow, its ashes spiraling in the breeze and the flames which were consuming her popping and hissing.

