

FLORIDIANA

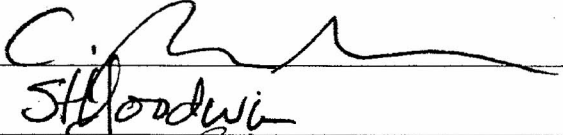
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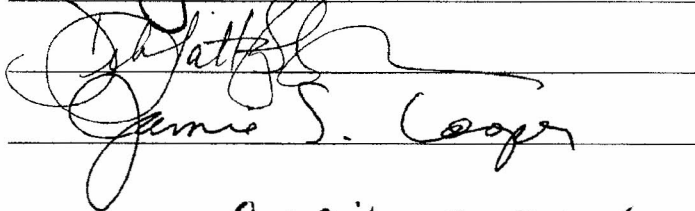
Alexander W. Henderson  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing

Committee:



Director





Department Chairperson

Date: April 17, 2014

Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

Floridiana

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
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## **DEDICATION**

This story is dedicated to Harold Henderson, because of; Barbara Brown, in whose; and to the connective tissue which spreads between them, a host for these words.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Susan, NOVALists, and my roommates, for putting up with me. George Mason University, for putting me up. And to the state of Florida, for putting out.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	v.
Part I.....	1

## **ABSTRACT**

FLORIDIANA

Alexander W. Henderson

George Mason University, 2014

Thesis Director: Susan Richards Shreve

A novel.

## PART I

“Nature mocks us, and poets live in torture.”

–Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

Even covered in blood and stomach bile, I couldn't stop counting the Mickeys.

The first hung on a poster, Dr. Mickey Mouse in white lab coat, tongue depressor stuck down Pluto's throat. The second, next to a water fountain, showed a sadlooking Mickey in bed, thermometer trembling on the edge of his lip like a cigarette. Brochures leaned beside me hawking beachside timeshares and discount swamp tours in plastic vertical display trays, at least one Mickey visible on each. On the nurse's counter a beaming rubber mousehead stuck out from a cup of pens lately used to fill out two new-patient intake forms. On the other side of the waiting room, three plastic coconuts huddled together in a fake potted palmtree. Their shape, from where I sat, looked like Mickey's head.

Never lose faith in Florida.

Tightly wound nurses propelled by blonde ponytails scurried through the waiting area, mint-green facemasks gripping their faces, clipboards tucked underarm. I recognized the one who had brought me here by her eggnog-yellow scrubs, stickered all



over with smiling Mickey's. She walked past me now without looking down, her facemask fallen into a papery double chin. In another part of the waiting room an old woman sat nodding back, spongy white hair cushioning her head against the wall. She wore a thick-yarned Mickey knitted into her sweater. Her mouth gapped gently as she breathed.

I sat in a chair pushed against the wall across from the nurse's station, shaking. When I looked down I could even see it in the shape of bloodstains on my jeans.

Nurses and orderlies passed by every few minutes, pausing just long enough to scan and dismiss me from their minds. A glasscovered floor map hung bolted to the wall, designating each hospital wing and how to get between them by stair. The wings were color-coded, and I had been brought to the one painted red. Red was for Emergency Room. The rest of the colors were for other things.

What is it they say, about how it's not the fall that kills you, but the sudden stop at the end? I sat in my chair, eyes glazed to the floor, trying to figure out why this seemed so funny to me.

The shock of cleanliness made everything shine like illusion: Mirrored chrome IV poles clattered from room to room, vacuum-sealed saline bags dangling from them like fruit. Even the clean paper of the hospital intake form, the scratch of new pen dashing off my name: JENNIFER ELIZABETH BEACON. The efficiency with which a hospital's business proceeds. Every nerve in my body said it couldn't be real. No place in the world could follow so many rules.

Dark russet crescents of blood caked beneath my fingernails: real dirt smuggled into this bright house of order. I curled my fingers into fists and felt a twinge of exhaustion up my arm. My eyes closed of their own and I let them, for two subterranean breaths. Then I forced them open again. As much as I wanted to follow the old woman's lead, news would be coming down the hallway any second and I had to stay awake to hear it.

I had to stay awake to hear what I had done.

It's funny what comes back to you in a crisis. I have few recollections from my early childhood, of the months leading up to my parents' separation, the morning of flurried packing and the long months spent at Meemaw's.

What I remember most is the lizard.

My brother Michael had always grown an awful thick head of hair, and in my memory it presses him to the ground like a weight. He waddles toward me in our front yard, dodging ant piles, seven years old and fat as a cherub. His face is split in an uneven grin. Round cookie dough arms stick out to his sides for balance.

"What do you got, Mikey?" I say, arms crossed, the stern older sister. My hair is in a pink clip and I am trying out the suspicious tone I have heard my mother use. I'm eleven years old, too big for the neon-yellow shorts I refuse to stop wearing. "Come on, Mikey, no tricks." At school I purport to be an only child, for fun.

My brother lurches closer to me, grinning.

I have read the warning signs but for some reason react too late. The next second he's on me, wrapping his arms around my legs in chubby brotherly love. I look down into his hair and see lidless eyeballs.

"Mikey!" I push him off me, and now he is cackling. It's the funniest thing in the world, to have a lizard in his hair. He comes chasing after me and I run into the house, lock the door behind me and yell for Mom. The last thing I remember is Michael's face bobbing outside the door, blurry through the frosted glass, trying to catch sight of me.

I should have called her by now. But what could I even say? *Hi Mom, it's Jenny. Michael is in the emergency room. Don't worry, he'll be fine. I think.* I'm sure she would appreciate that. Once she got over her shock that I was even here.

I did suspect that my brother would, in the end, be alright. At least physically. But I wasn't so sure about Jalil.

Sitting there, counting Mickeys and trying to ignore the burning of the grazed furrow across my thigh, I jumped at every worker who came into the room, ready for each one to tell me bad news. It could come from anywhere: the clipboard of a doctor flipping pages to avoid my eye, the squeeze of a nurse's fingers gone red from disinfectant, or simply the crestfallen look of a tech who'd seen the damage. When they came I knew I would lose it. I braced myself every single time. But then the spike of adrenaline bled out into disbelief every time they walked past. Now I just sat there, praying for good news, trying to convince myself that no matter what happened, the retrieval of the stone was worth it.

But without anything else to occupy my mind while the surgeons did their best, I could only start back at the beginning and count the Mickeys again.



It had been a week earlier, a Friday morning, when Rick called a meeting in his office at the Department of Forensic Astronomy, UMass–Amherst. I could tell something was up from the way he flung his Stetson onto the hook next to his desk.

“The stone’s moving,” he said. Dr. Li was in the room too, though I hadn’t seen her enter. She wore an aubergine turtleneck with unpainted nails, and her black eyes flicked between Rick Chilton’s and mine. He sat down. “Or at least I think it is. Couple of defectors popped up in Tangier last week. A few more in Puerto Rico two days ago. They’re en route to Florida or I’m eatin this for dinner.” He thumped the hat on the wall.

“Wait,” I said, looking back and forth between them. “What defectors? Which stone are we talking about here?”

Dr. Li uncrossed and recrossed her legs and flattened her steepled fingers into her lap. I had rarely seen her so agitated before. “Sample 70017.”

“Seven-seventeen?” My voice rose, incredulous. “Which fragment?”

Rick and Dr. Li shared a glance, and Rick picked up the thread.

“There’s reports it went missing from the Jamahiriyan Palace last week. Libyan police – what’s left of them – report it destroyed in the chaos in central Tripoli. But INTERPOL and UNOOSA both cite eyewitnesses to the Colonel’s inner guard claiming to have seen it gone from the compound days before the storming. Which squares with

what I'm hearing about its movement since." He shook his head. "Those rebels are really socking em over there."

Dr. Li interlaced her fingers. "We're dealing with a Kapszási stone here, Jenny. Priority One."

"Jesus," I whispered. I'd never even seen a Kapszási stone before. "What's the market on those right now, do you think?"

"They'll be happy walking away with \$15 million." Rick rolled back in his chair and rifled through a teetering pile of manila folders on top of a filing cabinet behind his desk. "Here's who we think is handling the sale. Ex-Jamahiriyan, posing as civilian." He slipped a folder from the stack and spun it across the desk to me. "Read up when you get a minute, Jen."

I took the folder and directed my next question to both of them. "So what are we going to do? Who do we know in Florida on such short notice?"

But Rick was shaking his head. "My buddies at CIA are already doing everything they can to keep their boys in the Maghreb safe. It's a goddamn powderkeg, this whole Arab thing, and the K-stone is just a tiny piece of it screaming in our direction. We're gonna have to risk our own necks on this one if we want it bad enough." He kicked both bootheels up on the desk and sucked a tooth while we looked on. "So the question is, ladies...How bad do we want it?"

Dr. Li stopped me in the hallway just outside the door to the Department a few hours later. Rick was crouched in the parking lot checking the Dynasty's oil and wiper

fluid in case I needed to leave in a hurry. She stilled me with slender fingers on my wrist, her small size demanding my full attention.

“Talk to me, Jennifer,” she said, studying me like a soldier inspecting a gun before battle. “How soon can you be on the road?” She was all straight lines as she spoke, thin arms depending from pointed shoulders and crossed at right angles over a shallow chest. She could be a formidable woman when she wanted to be, which was most of the time, and it had served her well: Each year that she’d had to wade into battle with the college dean in defense of the Department’s right to exist seemed to shave her body down even further until all that was left was this hard, flinty shard of a woman before me.

My back straightened in response to her question. “As soon as you need me to,” I said.

“Good. I’ll have Richard make sure the tank is full and your tires have air. Are you confident the car can make this trip?”

I hesitated. “She should be alright.” I’d been driving the Dynasty since college and put a lot of miles on her since then, mostly crisscrossing the country chasing down hunches, looking for missing stones Dr. Li had deemed valuable to her research. “We can always get a rental if we need one, right?”

She frowned, and her face flattened like it always did when discussing the Department’s fragile bottom line. “I wouldn’t count on it. In fact, I’ve been meaning to ask about your family down there.” She hesitated. “Your remaining family, that is. Are you aware of whether he still works at the park?”

I said, “I haven’t heard anything about him quitting.”

“Were you thinking of contacting him?”

“Not really.” I shifted uncomfortably. It had been a long time since we talked. And I didn’t see any reason to change that.

“Perhaps you should. The stone will be taking you practically to his doorstep, and the Department would have to put you up in a hotel otherwise. There’s no need to stretch the budget further than necessary. In fact, there’s no need stretching it at all.”

I stared at her. “You want me to conduct the investigation from Michael’s?”

She met my stare without blinking.

“I don’t even think I have his phone number anymore.”

She handed me a slip of paper with a tracery of cursive on one side. “I took the liberty. It’s the address to an apartment complex close to the park. Even Tides. You shouldn’t have any trouble finding it.”

I took the paper and frowned at it.

She studied my expression with glittering eyes. “Feel free to seek alternative lodging if you don’t like what I’ve arranged for you. However, there will be no reimbursements.” Her head tilted slightly, her tone contained and cool. “Besides, I’m sure you two will find something to talk about.” She turned and went back into her office.

I waited for the door to close before looking at the slip of paper in my hand. She’d torn it neatly out of a notebook, her fingers following the line of the fiber. After another moment I let out a deep breath, crumpled the paper in my hand, and stuffed it in my back pocket to throw away later.

\* \* \*

I left work that afternoon and stepped out under a dull sun hidden behind gray New England clouds. The Professors wanted me on the road within twenty-four hours, which meant heading home immediately to start packing. But instead of turning toward the parking lot I kept walking straight, through the heart of campus and toward town. A dry wind swirled autumn leaves around my feet while undergrads in burgundy sweaters sat on benches, wordlessly talking. My shadow strode ahead of me, fragile and drawn.

I slunk past the jutting WEB du Bois Library, past South College, past the Old Chapel, the austere architecture of rural Massachusetts poking up all around me as I made my way south toward Lincoln Avenue and into town. Flower shops, a local boardgame store, computer repair outlets flanked me on either side of the street, doing brisk business on this equally brisk afternoon. I wondered how many of them knew that their little town was home to the largest collection of moon rocks outside of NASA archives. I certainly hadn't known when I'd taken the job. Each footstep brought me further from my apartment, further from being ready to go, yet brought the simultaneous sensation of inching closer and closer to some inevitable and looming future.

I rounded the corner on a used bookstore, Comet Books, and stopped for a moment to look in the window. Beside the Halloween-themed display they'd laid out to snare trick-or-treaters in two weeks' time I saw a book that didn't quite fit in: *Goodnight Moon*, sun-faded and age-worn, by Margaret Weiss Brown, pictures by Clement Hurd. Standing still I felt the afternoon's chill catching up with me; I shivered and stepped into the store. Nearly twenty years and I still wasn't as used to the impending New England winter as I pretended to be.



Inside, the smell of warm books washed over me.

I drifted for a few minutes but found myself pulled, tidelike, back to the window at the front. Reaching over the carefully arranged display of jack-o-lantern patterns and cut-away monsters, I lifted *Goodnight Moon* from its perch. Something about its blocky saturated colors drew me, the stillness of the seemingly empty room on its cover. The cozy fire left burning in the fireplace.

But there was something disquieting about that emptiness, too. As if the room's occupants had stepped out for a moment, intending to return. An empty room never filled. I remembered my father's reading it to me when I was little, remembered creaking in a wooden rocking chair in the living room of our home in Lakeland, Florida, sitting on his knee. One of the few good memories I had of him. I must have been four or five years old then, and he would still have been working at the Kennedy Space Center, gone three or four days out of every week to Cape Canaveral (area code: 3-2-1), while Mom stayed home and looked after us. I liked to picture him there, before he'd ever met my mother: Dick Beacon in his prime. White sleeves rolled up to the elbows, hair slicked so black it gleamed indigo, stalking the Launch Operations Center like a conquistador at the helm of a Portuguese caravel bound for the New World. Except what he'd sought was even more exciting than the Fountain of Youth: Cold lunar regolith and the history of the cosmos promised within. But with the arrival of the 1980s and the dawn of the Shuttle Age he'd relocated our new family inland and continued on as an aerospace consultant on projects surrounding the Shuttle Program. I remembered watching the launches from my parents' bedroom, curled in front of the TV at the end of their king-sized bed, imagining my father

into those spacecraft which I knew he only worked on. I was there when *Challenger* exploded just 73 seconds into launch, hanging in the air, a breathtaking first image of death. I was there when he came home late that night, eyes more bloodshot than usual, Mom shooing me out of the bedroom to go look in on baby Michael. Later I remembered reading to myself, alone in the rocking chair.

I absentmindedly fingered the timeswollen edges of the book and thought about this trip the Professors were asking me to take. Until the meeting in Rick's office, I'd been looking forward to a quiet weekend at home. The Alberta premier's office had left a voicemail regarding a Goodwill stone kicking around outside of Calgary (part of some dead MP's estate). I could stand to go grocery shopping, too. Prominently not on this list were driving a thousand miles and wading through eighty-five percent humidity on the heels of a possible war criminal. But Rick's intel was plain: The Libyan stone was headed for the black hole of the private collector's market. U.S. law, though no longer actively *giving* them away, didn't go in much for helping get these rocks back, even when we had solid documentation that they were on U.S. soil. Which made this opportunity all the more precious. Only a few Kapszási stones were left above board. If we wanted to nab this one we would have to do it now and we would have to do it without any help. Which meant *I* would have to do it without any help. Which was fine. That was my job, after all.

I just never thought I'd have to go back home to do it.

I set the copy of *Goodnight Moon* back in its corner and was about to leave the store, chest tight, when another book caught my eye. I walked toward it and tipped it out from between two others on the U.S./Regional shelf, its oversized weight falling easily

into my hand: *Floridiana: Collecting Florida's Best*, by Myra Yellin Outwater and Eric B. Outwater. *A Schiffer Book for Collectors*. An image of a huge palm tree reached out toward me from its cover, and thumbnails of various Florida-related images (a sand dollar, synchronized surfing, parrots) crowded together along its bottom. I flipped it open, wondering how it had made the trip all the way to western Massachusetts, and scanned the inside flap to see what it was about: "An array of Florida collectibles, ephemera and souvenirs, along with highlights of Florida culture, and a price guide." The corner of my lip twitched. From what I remembered, most of Florida's culture could fit inside a plastic coconut snow globe with room left over for a wax flamingo. The flap continued:

*Nostalgia is often an element in the appreciation of "Floridiana" – the nostalgia that evokes yearning for an unattainable or irrecoverable state, where the Floridian wilderness as well as its pioneering spirit have been decimated by urban and industrial growth (as in the fiction of Carl Hiaasen and the lyrics of early Jimmy Buffett).*

I stopped and read the passage again. An unattainable or irrecoverable state? I flipped quickly through the book, looking for anything more along these lines, anything to clarify what the Outwaters were talking about. But aside from a brief and poorly written forward about the history of pricing guides in the Southeastern United States, the book's 160 pages featured nothing but pictures of collectible kitsch with \$15 suggested price tags.

I let the glossy covers clap shut and turned it over, looking for a sticker. I found one, a dollar, a price befitting an almost perfectly useless book full of perfectly useless things. I looked at the cover again, faded green ink pleading not to be forgotten between obsolete travel guides and musty thrillers. The sky outside was still gray and looked like it might drizzle; if nothing else, it could serve as a makeshift umbrella on the way back to

the car. I paid my dollar and left the store, turning the title over and over again in my mind as I walked: *Floridiana. Flo-rid-i-an-a*. It sounded like a made-up place, a fantasy world. Or maybe it was real, a place I'd once known and then forgotten. I couldn't figure it out, and the feeling nagged me as I turned back in the direction of the car. From the window, *Goodnight Moon* watched me go.

A light rain began to fall.

I dumped my work bag in the chair by the door of my apartment and shook the mist from my hair. A printed pamphlet lay on the floor just inside the door, a mass-mailer slipped in by some college kid desperately in need of a better job. I propped *Floridiana* in the chair and carried the pamphlet over to the kitchen, reading "*Are You Ready To Meet The Real New You? The Answer Might Surprise You!*" My eyes scanned further, and with a measure of delight I crumpled it up and dunked it one handed into the open trash can. I brought reheated drunken noodles over to the paper-strewn table that had served as both dining room and office workspace since I'd moved into the apartment five years ago. The sad little TV I'd rescued from the curb during spring dorm purging flickered harmlessly in the corner, a rolling tapestry of news updates and jerky footage of street protests across the Middle East playing to an empty loveseat in the middle of the living room. I ate with one hand, eyes half on the TV and half on my phone, fielding text messages about an in-progress date with Mom's new beau, Alvin.

After a while I switched from phone to laptop and started in on a little bit of work. Several follow-up emails from Dr. Li had arrived, and each spun me off on a different

research tangent around the Internet. I eventually found myself pushing midnight with an open series of tabs covering everything from the geography of central Libya to a history of the medjool date trade between Africa and the New World. I had yet to start packing. My eyeballs and head ached. I stood up, stretched, and rolled my neck. My eyes lit on the book by the door.

I stared at it staring at me, then crossed over and picked it up, studying its cover again. The white italics of its title. “Why did I pay for you?” I whispered. “Why do you even *exist*?”

I flipped it open to a random page filled with Disney-themed *PEZ* dispensers and all at once it hit me, like a thunk on the head. I hated the book. I hated everything about it. I hated everything *inside* it. I flipped more pages, satisfied by my epiphany, and came to a picture of a bobbleheaded astronaut (suggested value \$7) shooting a spacesuited thumbs-up at the reader. I closed the book in bemused disgust and frisbeed it to the couch, feeling suddenly much less conflicted about everything.

I would go on the trip, then. I would drive to Florida. This assignment didn't have to be different than any other. In fact it could be quick, tidy, professional. Get in. Get out. Simple. Easy.

A new relaxation came over me. The unsettledness from earlier was gone. With unhurried resolve I went over to the couch, picked the book back up, and carried it into the kitchen, where I flipped open the lid to the trash can and dropped it face down on top of the crumpled pamphlet. Then I went into my bedroom, dragged a suitcase out from

underneath the bed, and began picking through every article of clothing I owned, trying to decide how little I could get away with packing.



Thirty hours later I was in the car and deep in Floridian night. New England's autumn rusts lay far behind me and, not nearly so far, the dim lights of Jacksonville. Construction had forced me off the highway south of 295, and my phone's GPS struggled to reroute me through the swampy backroads of the state. I had reached the part of the country where all the hills go away, and of course it was just like I remembered.

Rain had begun to fall, and I turned the radio on for a distraction. I found a late-night AM station out of the Caribbean going on about flooding from Tropical Storm Miguel on St. Thomas Island, but I twisted the dial, looking for something more pleasant to listen to. Static and smooth jazz wrestled out of the speakers, then a snippet of news: "*—was reported missing four days ago, and residents of Marion and Putnam counties are still advised to steer clear of anything unusual seen on the edges of their—*" The signal died. I turned the radio off and drove on in silence except for the rhythm of my round plastic moonball keychain knocking against the Dynasty's steering column. My phone chirruped occasionally to let me know I was on the right course.

Outside of the headlights, the night slumped pitch black.

After a while the rain stopped abruptly, bitten off, and all the insects came back out. They hovered so thickly in front of the car I could have carved a solid block of them from the air with a good machete. Their heavy white bodies left smears of dust on the windshield, reminding me of pictures I'd seen of marine snow.

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

**Comment [1]:** "More density + suggestion of the future" – SRS

I thought, this is what an alien world must be like.

I thought, this must be the bottom of the sea.

For a while the wind picked up again, teasing another storm, and I braced myself for the next sudden onslaught. But all that came to pass was the dry weaving of the trees. Every so often a huge palm frond would detach and sail into the road from the nightcloaked boughs, settling over potholes that hadn't seen repairs in decades. I clenched my teeth to keep from nipping my tongue as I bumped over these ruts and clumps of debris, taxing the Dynasty's aged suspension as well as my tired nerves. My reassurance to Dr. Li notwithstanding, I worried something under the hood might give out and strand me here in the middle of nowhere. I hadn't counted on taking such awful roads, and I hadn't seen another soul for what felt like hours. On top of that, my phone's reception kept dipping in and out, along with the road. At one point a declivity in the asphalt forced me through several inches of standing water, slowing me to a crawl. For a few seconds the tires spun, and I tensed, fearing the worst. But they found traction and carried me forward, splashing eerily in the darkness. Back on dry ground, the Dynasty picked up speed.

My phone chimed. I picked it up from the cupholder and glanced at it: estimated time of arrival in Orlando, 5:40 AM. With luck I would find a motel that was still open, hopefully cheap. I might even get some work done organizing my hastily assembled files before falling asleep (though after this nerve-racking drive, I expected I wouldn't be sleeping for awhile).

I looked up just in time to see a huge white shape flare up under the headlights and disappear under the car with a muted thump. In the same instant an enormous fan of dark water sprayed across the windshield, and the whole car shuddered.

“Jesus christ!” My front tires bucked into the air, my stomach turning over. With an abhorrent thud the car’s front end crashed back to the road, so hard that my chin cracked down on the steering wheel. My teeth clicked sharply, just missing my tongue. My phone had flown out of my hand. My shoe slammed the brake pedal down into unexpected resistance and a crack. But the car finally jerked to a stop, my hair falling in my face.

Heaving with breath, I twisted in my seat to look out the back window into the darkness. But I couldn’t tell what I’d hit. I thought I saw something in the side mirror, something white and long sticking out from under the back tire, about the length and thickness of a human leg. My thoughts hooded with the idea that I’d killed someone, and I swooned. After a moment my vision cleared, and I grabbed the keys from the ignition, threw off my seatbelt, and pushed open the dripping door.

The Dynasty had come to a stop in a puddle of stormwater, which I discovered when my foot sank in up to the ankle, soaking thoroughly. It was pitch black outside of the headlights, and I couldn’t see three inches past my feet. I thought for a second about just getting back in the car and driving away, pretending I’d hit a pothole, telling no one. Yet I could just make out a shape under the car, long and pale. What little surface of the shallow pond I could make out in the moonlight appeared like some shiny black fabric



stretched taut and then allowed to wrinkle. The shape in the water didn't appear to be wearing any clothes. Naked and white and murky underwater.

I squinted and leaned closer to get a better look. Suddenly, the shape in the water twitched, and in that moment its similarity to a human body part vanished. A ripple traveled along its length, a shudder, and it retracted under the car with a sudden, boneless jerk. Empty black water sloshed behind. I felt a vacuum thumping in my ears. I stood stock still listening to a mounting breeze lap water against the backs of the tires and my shoes. Everything was hushed; I could still almost pretend I hadn't seen anything at all.

Then there came a clang.

The whole car shook with metallic ringing. The sound was so sudden, so alien that I jumped. The next thing I knew I was rebounding off the open door, falling back inside the car; the door slammed shut behind me, or maybe I pulled it shut, sealing myself off from whatever was outside.

Only after the door had shut did I realize I didn't have my keys anymore.

Horror crept over me as I checked all over myself, my pockets, my sleeves, my pants. But the keys were not there. I knew with a sick certainty where they had to be. And things were getting worse out there. Sounds were coming from underneath the car – not the sounds of a person crying for help. Other kinds of sounds. Scraping.

I needed the keys back: The wind was picking up, and I knew a storm would be blowing through any minute and wash them into the swamp at the side of the road. But just the thought of reaching down into the dark waters under the car triggered rapid breathing verging into hyperventilation. I found actually that I was crying. My palms

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

Comment [2]: "REALLY so good!" – SRS

slammed the steering wheel, then slammed two or three more times. “Fuck!” I felt a pair of sobs wrack my gut, and the sheer helplessness of it flex just made me angrier. “Goddamn it!” I stomped my foot down, kicking the phone which had fallen there, and dug my head into the headrest, leaking tears.

I felt the presence beneath me, a malevolent gravity, holding me to this moment, this place, against my will. An infinite-seeming stretch of midnight extended ahead and behind me, twin orbs of asphalt and dense vegetation punched out of the blackness by the headlights, bright eyes in the mask of night. The trees pressed up close against the road, trapping me in a corridor, and green water reached amoebic from the dark pool under the car into the adjoining swamp. A rotting smell wafted from it, the smell of decomposing vegetation or decomposing flesh, life and death intermingled. I shifted and felt the clammy fabric of wet jeans clinging to my ankles.

A small voice piped up in the back of my mind; I recognized its dry and mocking tone. I resisted at first, like always, but it grew louder and louder until it surpassed the creak of the car, the whistling wind, louder than the thump of blood in my ears. *The hell is wrong with you?* the voice demanded. *Will you just think for a second? So you're afraid of ghosts now? Christ. Pull yourself together. Use your brain. Unless you want to end up dead and wadded up in the intestines of some dumb creature with a brain the size of a peanut.*

I strove to distract myself from the words pumping out of my subconsciousness, thinking back to the moment I'd dropped the keys, reconstructing it. I put myself back where I'd been, crouched and peering at the white thing in the water, and let the scene

play again. The thing in the water twitched, retracted under the car, and there came the first clang. I felt it with my hand on the car, reverberating throughout the frame, and I jumped back. My shoulderblades hit the door. My feet splashed water. My elbow struck the door – and there, my funny bone, that sinister tingle, caused fingers to open and keys to fall – there.

I opened my eyes and knew where the keys had to be. They glowed in my mind as if lit by the moon, submerged in dark water outside the car, just within reach.

It was just a matter now of being the faster on the draw.

After a second's hesitation, during which I considered the possibility of Michael's reading about my death in the following morning's paper, I pushed open the door, reached out, and dove for where I knew the keys had to be. My left hand stretched, my right on the door, and as I dipped low my eyes pointed straight under the car. My fingers reached where the keys had to be – and found nothing. I gasped. They weren't there. I swept around, raking up mush and gunk and rotted debris, and found nothing. As I searched wildly I saw, emerging from the darkness under the chassis of the car, the pale white outline of a head. No, not a head: A long and grinning skull. Lidless. Unblinking eyes regarded me. Ancient things, black as bullet holes. I froze, caught in the living death of that gaze. Then my fingers found plastic and metal, and I closed them and flung myself back up into the car. At the same moment the water erupted. I heard the sound: A splash of lunging, the skeletal smack of jaws zipping together around the space where seconds before my head had been.

I slammed the door, dripping everywhere, and jabbed the keys into the ignition to rev the engine murderously, laying on the horn, sawing the steering wheel back and forth, driving the tires to groan in the water. I hollared too, a war yell, venting raw emotion into the assault. After a few seconds I rolled down the windows and looked down at the road. Nothing but black water on the driver's side of the car. I leaned across to the passenger window and looked out of it: And there I saw an unbelievable sight: Squeezing into the plantmatter at the side of the road, the back half of a creature, just a tail, quivered. Pure white, slinking into the marshland; from the length of the tail I could only estimate its full size, but even then I couldn't believe it. It must have been twelve or thirteen feet in total, and its presence felt even bigger than that.

But then, just like a ghost, it disappeared, vanishing to a fleeting point. The trees swallowed it up, and then only the swamp remained. And insects rioting in its place.

A fat drop of rain fell on the windshield.

I sat still, the car's engine humming along now as if nothing had happened, and stared into the nighttime ahead of me. After several long moments I reached into the back pocket of my jeans, pulled out a wad of paper stuffed there, and tossed it on the dash. At last I reached down with jittery hands for the phone that had dropped at my feet.

As I did a flake of glass lifted from the screen and slid deep into my flesh. I grunted in surprise, dropping the phone and sucking air between my teeth. My smiling thumb jumped to my mouth; a warm copper bath flooded my tongue. I grabbed the phone roughly with my other hand and threw it rattling at the cupholder. Bits of glass tinkled down, a soundtrack for everything that had just happened.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath while the rain picked up around me. Then I put the car into motion again, slouching toward Disney World sucking blood.



I pulled into Kissimmee around 5:45 AM, driving around in the predawn light. Nondescript condo blocks with goose-gray siding clustered together at the address on the paper around an amoeba-shaped parking lot attached to Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway. *Even Tides Luxury Apartments* read the sign, an extra Floridian touch of a pink seashell above the “i” in *Tides*. I’d stayed in places just like this with Mom during the move to Massachusetts. The only surprise here was that it hadn’t blown away in a hurricane yet.

A wicked crack in my phone screen grinned up from the cupholder, courtesy of the heel of my shoe. I left it there and got out of the car, stood, and ached. The cut in my thumb had congealed and the pain lessened somewhat, but my jaw kept throbbing: a screwdriving pain behind my eyes. Sunshine pinkened the sky’s east edge, grapefruit juice spilling over the tops of trees to the east and pushing purple night back into the Gulf. The light under the complex’s palms, a dark blue.

I dragged myself onto the sidewalk and went in search of the right apartment. A grumpy looking stretch of cement steps rose to the higher floors of each block of buildings, ringing under my heels as I climbed. At the top of the stairs I knocked on a door. After a few minutes there came a shuffle.

The door opened on a tall kid in his early twenties clad in a ripped up t-shirt and *Dark Side of the Moon* boxers. A dragon on top of a mountain blew flames across his torso while holes in the mountain drooped to reveal hairy white belly underneath. He

stared down at me from under purple oxygen-deprived eyelids, his face heavy and unshaved. He looked how I felt.

“Michael?” I said.

His brow wrinkled. “Huh?” His voice was weighty and deep.

“Does Michael Beacon live here?” I asked, extraordinarily vulnerable-sounding to my own ears. “Or maybe Michael Dufresne?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m his sister,” I said.

His lips pursed. “Michael has a sister?”

I felt a bubble pop inside. “Actually I’m the angel of death dispatched to central Florida taking all the first born sons. You aren’t one yourself?”

He studied me for a few seconds, then grunted and stepped aside like a secret passage opening to let me onto a stiff brown carpet, which gave slightly under my shoes with the crackling of dried grime. I saw that he was barefoot and tried not to imagine what the bottoms of his feet looked like. “Thanks,” I said with a grimace. He shrugged and dragged the door shut behind me, then shuffled into the kitchen where the refrigerator door stood open.

I watched him through the space above the counter, unsure whether I was allowed further into the room or not. My host struck me as the kind of person who would come into your house and use your fingernail clippers without asking. I’ve never known how to talk to people like that.

“So...does Michael Beacon live here?” I said from the door.

He shut the fridge and dropped a carton of milk on the counter. “Down the hall on the left. Probably in raid.”

I stared at him a second longer, waiting for what he’d said to make sense. When it didn’t I gathered myself and started down the hall, glancing for the first time to the rest of the living room. To my right, softly backlit by the rising sun through balcony doors, a grisly tableau occupied the small living space: Bloated heads and ballooned-out hands draped over each other, dead eyes staring into the walls and ceiling. Donald’s bill had fallen salaciously into Goofy’s lap; Mickey’s head had toppled to the floor, revealing through his neck hole a black vacancy.

I gave myself a shake and continued down the hall, passing a half-open door which sported a homemade pentagram in bleeding red sharpie. Inside the door lay a warzone of pizza boxes, soda cans, and dirty laundry. But no Michael.

I moved past the smell and arrived at another door on the left. It stood open just a hair, unlatched. I felt the thrumming presence of a body on the other side. With a finger I gently pushed it open and looked in.

Thick humidity wafted past me, a vapor up from hell. If I’d thought his room would be different from his roommate’s, I was wrong: Cluttered shelves and strewn belongings heaped everywhere on the floor and walls, posters of metal bands with razor-glyphed names, solidified lava lamps and flickering blacklights, glossy magazines stacked three feet high in the corner (porn or video games, I couldn’t tell which); mass market Star Wars novels and empty Mellow Yellow bottles made a small mountain by the side of the bed, full 2-liter bottles, no mere 8-ouncers. A ceiling fan dangled in the

middle of the room doing nothing. Enthroned before a humming computer screen, with a pair of hamburger-sized headphones swallowed in his hair, sat Michael.

I stood for a minute, just taking him in. It had been two years since I'd seen him, and in that time he'd put on even more weight it looked like. I felt a pang at the sight. But right on its heels came another emotion, a familiar reflex, one that told me not to feel responsible for the problems in other peoples' lives.

The sight of him in the flesh and the resultant wash of emotions that rose up as a result had another, more concrete effect too: Second guessing myself. But before I could decide to slip out, a voice cut in so loudly that I turned to see who had entered the room. I realized a second later it was coming from the headphones, which might as well have been boomboxes strapped to his head (and this at 6 AM in the morning).

"Genlok, Fedzil; Moonshine, Tugnut," came the nasal voice. "You're tanking this fight. Protect all healers and juggle aggro." It looked like some sort of online fantasy game. I really hoped "Tugnut" wasn't him. Mom and I had moved away before Michael was old enough to really get into games, but his hobbies had eventually become apparent. I'd even mailed him a game for Christmas once, *Grand Theft Auto*; Dad had refused to buy it because it was supposedly so violent, which I thought was funny, so I mailed a copy behind his back disguised as a Veggie Tales DVD. Michael sent me a drawing the next year of the game's main character riding a giant cucumber. At least, I hoped it was a giant cucumber.

Over his shoulder I watched my brother pilot a plucky little gnome around a battlefield, conjuring up sparkling magic, reviving fallen comrades. The chatter spilling



from the headphones afforded me only the vaguest sense of the tide of battle – when our heroes’ luck was surging; when it was flagging – but that suited me fine. I preferred watching the real Michael, his huge shoulders twitching in response to the demands of war, the black t-shirt stretched across his back with its Rorschach-shaped hint of sweat. His large arms tapered to tiny hands that clicked and scrolled deftly. I couldn’t see his face, but his cheeks, fuzzy and stippled with bold purple pores, vibrated with each quick jerk of his head. I imagined I saw his eyes reflected in the brightly lit screen, darting around the battlefield like a medic’s.

But soon tragedy struck: An errant swing of the enemy’s giant hammer caught one of his companions, an elf, square in the face. The elf crumpled like a virtual boneless chicken and lay still. Michael startled me, speaking for the first time – “Moonshine!” His voice boomed in the tiny room. I leaned in.

A girl’s voice came over the headphones. “It’s alright, Wyrrix.” She spoke with an accent I couldn’t quite place, possibly British? Australian? “Is it dead?” The fact that she was a girl caught me off guard almost as much as Michael’s outburst.

In the next second the enemy, a giant demon-suit of armor, collapsed into a rusty pile, and tinny cheers rose up in the headphones. “Yeah,” he said, slumping back in his chair, “it’s dead.” He didn’t sound happy about it.

“Great job everyone!” the girl said, among other hurrahs.

“But your *quest-shard*,” Michael said, genuinely plaintive.

“Oh, I’ll get it next time,” the girl-elf said. “I’ve got to pop off anyway.

Supertime here. See you later Wyrrix?” Wyrrix, I gathered, was the gnome.

He said goodbye as the elf's corpse faded away and then leaned forward again to click around aimlessly amidst cheering in the background.

I cleared my throat. "A little late here too, don't you think?"

He jumped about a foot out of the seat, the mouse flying. Momentum sent his chair spinning, and he rotated to face me, headphones akimbo like slapped eyeglasses on his head.

"Jenny?" he said, a spasm of recognition crossed his face. "What on earth--?"

"Hi," I said, stepping into the room.

He blinked, mouth open, headphones dangling. "What on earth are you *doing* here? Is Mom okay?"

"What?" I stopped short. "*Jesus*, yes. Mom's fine." I suddenly realized I was shaking and needed to sit; I crossed to his bed, under a wopsed up old corduroy duvet that I remembered Mom shipping off to him when he started college, and hopped up onto the edge. My feet dangled where it rose on stacks of textbooks to make room for video games underneath. My jittery hands shoved under my thighs, and a hidden reservoir of comic books cascaded from behind me onto the floor. Michael didn't spare them a glance.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

I looked at him, forcing a grin. "Well," I said. "I thought it might be time for a haircut."

This was a joke. As kids, I'd gotten us in trouble for trying to give Michael a haircut with a pair of child-safety scissors. I had underestimated the fortitude of his hair

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

**Comment [3]:**

His feelins here are--What?  
And express that--How?

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

**Comment [4]:** Why?

follicles and wound up getting the scissors inextricably tangled up. Mom'd had to cut them out with real scissors from her sewing kit, leaving a patch of bare white scalp to indict my crime. Of course, Michael's hair grew back in two weeks. But in the meantime Dad made our mother cut off all *my* hair as punishment. This was not long before Meemaw came over and helped us move out.

His mouth quirked up into a half-smile, but his brow stayed heavy and furrowed. "Seriously, what are you doing in Kissimmee at—" he glanced at the game clock. "Six-thirty in the morning?" He didn't sound unhappy to see me, just confused. So far.

I took a steadying breath, hoping I'd picked my words delicately. "I'm on a job. For the Department. They think there's some kind of action down here and they'd...like me to stay with you while I look into it."

"Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"I didn't have your number," I said.

"Mom does."

I looked off to the side.

"What kind of action?" He hadn't moved from his chair. "What department are you talking about?"

"The one I work for?" I said. "Listen, that doesn't really matter. Right now I just need to know whether to look for a motel or not. I'm about to collapse and I have to get out of these clothes. I've had a long drive today." The image of a white skull flickered through my mind. "A really long drive."

He didn't speak at first. I stared at him in the chair, this little brother who had become so much bigger than me, and braced myself for him to tell me no. The last time we'd talked, things had come out of both of our mouths that I'd never thought either of us capable. If he did kick me out, I told myself I wouldn't take it personally.

Instead he said, "Well *damnit*, Jenny," and got up out of the seat to come over to the bed. He surprised me by putting his arms around me, crushing several comic books between us, and squeezing. I put my hands on his forearm and leaned toward him stiffly. "I can't believe how *long* it's been since I've seen you." I felt hot breath on my hair.

I sat speechless for a moment. "Me either," I managed to say. The tang of insincerity crackled on my tongue. He pulled back and regarded me, clean morning light just now gracing the room.

"Do you need to sleep?" He patted his own bed as if testing for foreign lumps. "I'm leaving for work pretty soon. I can clear all this away and get a new pillow if you need one."

"What about the pull-out couch?" I said. "Don't you have one out front?"

He stopped fussing with the sheets abruptly and smoothed them out. "Yeah, we do," he said. He looked at me for a moment, then nodded slowly, as if in realization, and slid off the bed. "Yeah, come on." His voice sounded like it had earlier, when the elf had crumpled to the ground. "Let me go ahead and pull it out for you."



I slept for nine hours and woke up feeling tired.

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

Comment [5]: Feeling here, or just action?

Afternoon light slanted in warmly through the blinds, zebra-stripping the wall over the TV. I watched news for a little while while I finished waking up: Desert wind swirled darkly around the heads of squint-eyed Maghrebi youth trying to ignore the television cameras while they dug shell-scrapes by the side of the road and kept improvised headwraps from blowing loose. Every once in a while an exhausted fighter would load a stolen mortar shell in the whipping wind. The oldest of them looked no older than Michael. Blonde news anchors stepped back while shells *ka-foomed* in the dusty air, arcing toward unseen enemies.

I began sorting through a fusillade of emails the Professors had been sending me since the night before. It looked like they'd alternated sending one about every half hour, with subject lines like "Phone still not answering?" and "WHERE IS JENNY". A loud explosion or snatch of shouted Arabic briefly pulled my attention back to the TV every few minutes. Before long my chatbox icon blinked with an incoming video call, and Dr. Li's pursed and worried face bloomed across my screen.

"Jennifer," she said, her words glitchy on the apartment wifi. "What on Earth is g-g-going on?"

"Hi, Dr. Li," I said patiently. I told her everything was fine.

"Fine? Then why haven't you been answering your phone for the last twelve hours?"

I settled back against the head of the bed, which was really the back of the couch.

"Well, I had sort of an accident," I said.

"What kind of accident?"

I described the night before, the construction on the highway, the backroads detour, the surprise waiting for me in the darkness, and the destruction of my phone (a phone, I didn't need her to remind me, paid for on the Department plan). "Goodness gracious, Jennifer," she said when I was done. "Are you sure you're alright?" She looked ready to crawl through the computer screen and check me over then and there, and not just because she was concerned for my wellbeing. "And your car? It's still in a working condition to continue the investigation?"

I told her nothing was broken except the phone and she seemed to relax. She didn't bother asking where I was staying. "You won't be surprised to know that Richard has been on and off the phone with his contacts ever since you left," she said. "I don't know if you saw our emails?" I laughed drily, which she took for a yes and continued on. She explained that Rick had gotten his hands on another cache of State cables detailing exactly which Jamahiriya's from Col. Gadhafi's inner circle had escaped the crumbling situation at home (apparently through the Algerian port city of Bijaya, about a week earlier). "This confirms what Richard told you on Friday. They're defecting," she said, "in ones and twos. And we believe one of them is possesses a briefcase which contains the stone."

"Who is it?" I asked.

She couldn't say for sure. She explained that a small group of Libyan nationals, no more than five or six, had transferred into something called the Cultural Representative Program in Orlando as recently as the previous Wednesday, and they believed one of those men to be the former Secretary of Economic Development, the

highest-ranking defection in several months. “His name is Mutassim Alefar Abdulqadr. If he’s in the area, he will certainly be the leader of this impromptu cartel. It’s safe to assume that wherever he is, the stone will be there also.”

I frowned, looking through some papers from my files. “Cultural Representative Program? What is that, some kind of ambassadorship?”

Her lips twisted into a rare, wry smile. “Some kind.” She explained that the Cultural Representative Program was an organ of the larger recruiting arm of the parks, charged with headhunting real denizens of distant lands to “authentically” populate Epcot’s multicultural World Showcase.

“From what I understand, these so-called Cultural Representatives are assigned specific areas which correspond to their nation of origin within the park,” Dr. Li said. “Our new friends will have likely begun training in or near the Libyan Pavilion itself to maintain their cover while they sell the stone. I’m sure you’ll bring yourself up to speed on all this very quickly once you visit.” She looked down and shuffled through some papers of her own, off screen. “You do plan to visit soon, don’t you? Have you any documentation pertaining to the grounds, perhaps maps?”

“Nothing yet. I’ve been catching up on sleep all day. But I’ll see what I can find.”

She nodded, lips flat, leaving no doubt about her opinion of such sleeping in. “Richard says he has a few questions for you. I’m giving him the computer now.” She disappeared without waiting for a response, and a second later Rick Chilton slid into frame.

“Hiya kid.” His hat brim cut the screen in half over a ruddy face. “Heard you ran over a gator.”

I barked a laugh. “Feels more like he ran over me,” I said. Rick’s eyebrows went up, so I ran through the story again, adding details here and there where I thought he might appreciate it. In fact he seemed to enjoy the story so much I almost wished I’d had more to tell.

“Sounds about right to me,” he said, chuckling when I’d finished. “Those gators will jerk you around if you give them half a chance. You must have just about messed yourself right then and there.” I laughed, and he got a wistful look in his eye. “I used to rile them up myself when I was a kid. Put a couple in their tail from the back of the truck and then light out of there. Nothing meaner than a Texas gator with a slug in him. Sometimes they corner you though, and that’s when you pop em in the head with the rifle, and there’s dinner.” I made a bluh-face, and he laughed. “All white, though. Boy, that’s something. Albino I’d reckon. Probably worth some money. Too bad he got away. You sure you didn’t leave him for dead?”

I laughed, then said exaggeratedly soberly, “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Well, at least you got out with all your fingers and toes. Neb must have told you about the cables, I guess.” Neb was Nebula, Dr. Li’s first name, and something of a running mystery around the office. Department lore held that by the time Dr. Li’s parents had emigrated from Taiwan in the early 1970s she was already such an advanced student that she read entire astronomy textbooks – in English – for fun, and that when officials asked for an Anglicized version of her name to stamp on the immigration form, the six-



year-old girl gave them “Nebula” on the spot. This story got major traction a few years later when she became the first amateur astronomer under ten years old – and the first girl – to discover and name an asteroid from her own backyard (*242-Nemea*). Professor Kapszási himself apparently loved telling the story at parties. I never quite knew whether to believe any of it or not, and Dr. Li wasn’t the type of woman who volunteered personal information.

“She did,” I said. “Sounds like we have a pretty good idea of who took the stone now. Nice work.”

“Shucks,” he said distractedly, rifling through a stack of papers on the out-of-view desk in front of him. He pulled one out. “I personally hope it turns out to be this guy. Abdu Nassir.” He held up a grainy black and white printout from what looked like closed circuit security footage. “Known confidante of Col. Gaddafi, former head of imports and exports, suspected by the ICC of massive arms embezzlement into Mogadishu.” He tossed that picture aside. “Or this one, Sameh al-Amireh, child sex-slave trafficker. Specializes in orphans of war. Wouldn’t you just love to get your fingers around that guy’s neck?” He shrugged and shuffled the pictures back into the stack. “Anyway, we think it’s probably this Abdulqadr fella. You know much about him yet?”

I told him I didn’t, and he directed me to several documents in the larger dossier they’d sent with me. I set them aside to look over later, and he proceeded to grill me for several minutes about possible courses of action for infiltrating the Jamahiriya’s operation. Before joining Dr. Li to found the DFA in the late 1990s, Rick had worked with the NASA Office of the Inspector General and, before that, with the Texas Rangers.

He wasn't one to go into a risky scenario without at least three good plans and three back-ups just in case.

"I think the first thing I want to do is visit the park," I said, "just like a tourist, and see if I can make a visual ID of any of the defectors in the dossier."

He nodded. "And then what?"

"Well, I imagine they won't be bringing the stone with them to work every day, and I imagine Disney'll have put them up somewhere not too far from the park. So step two will be trailing any of them I find to see where they live, what their routines are, and where they might be keeping the stone."

"What're you gonna say if they notice you and ask what you're doing following them around?"

"I'm just a harmless tourist trying to find the gift shop," I said. "But they won't notice me."

He didn't smile. "Okay, and when you find the stone. Then what?"

"Then I wait and see what makes the most sense. Do they ever leave it unattended? Do they post a guard? Will they let me hold it for a second if I just ask nicely?"

He broke in with a serious look on his face.

"Let me say something, here. These type of dudes, they don't play around. They're professional criminals, most of them. Glorified thugs. And I know it's silly, their dressing up and hiding inside the CRP and all that. But you better be careful from here on out. They're guaranteed to have a hair up. And they're bound to know someone's on their

trail sooner or later. So you're going to have to be extra careful to not let them know what *you're* up to, you hear me? If they catch on it won't take long for your life and mine to get a lot more complicated." He paused for a second, pursing his mustache. "I know you had one hell of a scare last night, but don't go thinking it gets easier from here. A spooked animal's a world different from a man with power on the line."

I listened dutifully, nodding in all the right places, but I couldn't help a smirk. "What are they really going to do, Rick? Start a shootout in the middle of Disney World?"

"Listen, just be careful. This here's one step nastier than anything we've sent you on before." He leaned in and looked over his shoulder before whispering into the computer's microphone. "I know Neb's got an itch for this stone, but there's only so much a rock's worth. You hear me? Don't do anything stupid." He fixed me with a stern, open look. "There's plenty more rocks up on the moon if we want one bad enough."

He leaned back and nodded at me meaningfully, and then the window bleeped dark and he was gone.

I was sitting cross-legged on the sheets watching colored smudges of Tropical Storm Miguel licking up the Carribean when Michael came home from work an hour later. "Hi," I said, looking up. A spoon clinked in an empty cereal bowl on my knee.

He stopped and stared at me from the doorway, his face flushed and radiating heat from the late afternoon sunshine.

"What's wrong?" I said.

“Nothing.” He came into the room and dropped his duffel bag on the armchair. “I just...wasn’t sure you’d still be here when I got back.”

“Well I’m happy to see you too. How’s work?”

He shook his head soberly and went over to the refrigerator. “Had to take pictures with this rich Bangladeshi family all day. Private session with Mickey Mouse. It was...” The magnetic gasp and sigh of the door finished his thought. He came back with a soda and sat on the other end of the couch-bed. “I don’t want to talk about it.” He laughed darkly, then waved his hand toward the computer in my lap. “What’s this?” He saw the map of Epcot stretched across my screen; I moved to dim it, but too late. “Planning a trip to the park?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

I minimized the window and shut the computer lid. “Just trying to get the lay of the land,” I said vaguely.

“Well, do you need maps of the park?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Really, I have a bunch in the back. I could get you some.”

“No, don’t worry about it.”

“Here, let me get you one.” He hopped up and reappeared a minute later with a thick stack of maps in his hands. “They give us these every year, to update on construction or something.” He looked through them for a second before handing them to me. “They have utilidor entrances and stuff on there too.”

I took them from him and looked them over. “Thanks,” I said, setting them to the side without further inspection.

He eyed the stack and sighed, which turned into a yawn. “Now is when I usually sleep. Are you going to be here alright here tonight?”

“Probably. I have a lot to figure out before tomorrow. Do you have an extra set of keys?”

“Yeah, by the door.” He yawned again, cast one last look at the stack of maps by my knee, and turned toward the bedroom. I watched him go and relaxed once I heard the click of his door. Then I turned to the task at hand.

The pile of material the Professors had sent me over the last twelve hours had grown into a modest trove. I turned to the dossier Rick had pointed me to earlier and began to read. What I found explained a lot about the ex-Jamahiriyans’ decision to head toward Disney World, of all places. Apparently most pavilions at the international World Showcase (there were at least a dozen) were run by private corporations hired to create the immersive cultural experiences Epcot was so well-known for. The Libyan Pavilion, however, was actually directly run by the government of Libya – the only one so managed. Federal intelligence agencies had suspected for years that the Gaddhafi regime had coopted the CRP for illicit purposes, though there had never been the urgency to launch a full-scale investigation. And it was largely assumed that the stakes were low anyway, what with the Colonel’s pacifist change of heart in the early 2000s: Reagan’s Mad Dog of the Middle East had traded in munitions silos for oil sales, and in this new world of militarized Mexican cartels and Mujahideen sleeper-cells, who cared if a few kilos of opium trickled in from Libya each year?

But all that had changed with the recent arrival of actual fugitives from the Gaddhafi regime. This Abdulqadr worried me. He sounded more than just an opportunist fleeing upheaval at home. I picked up the documents I'd set aside earlier. What I found painted a grim yet complicated picture: Apparently one of the first forty officers to join Muammar Gaddhafi's *coup d'etat* against King Idris in 1969, Mutassim A. Abdulqadr had served the next 36 years as a member of Gaddhafi's inner circle, one of the elite Free Officers Movement, bouncing between powerful national posts as the Colonel himself saw fit. An obsequious man by all accounts, by the time of the uprising he was serving as the Secretary of Economic Development, a posting which oversaw, among other things, the administration of the official Disney–Libyan Cultural Representative Exchange and College Credit Program. As far as anyone at State could guess, Abdulqadr had stuck by Colonel Gaddhafi's side through the onset of the Arab Spring (whether voluntarily or not, given the UN-imposed travel ban and seizure of foreign-held assets which had clamped down earlier in the year) and had been seen standing dutifully behind Gaddhafi on state television with a dour, petulant look on his face while the Colonel went off on his many tirades against the rats then swarming Benghazi (and soon to be overtaking Tripoli).

But very recently the Secretary had disappeared, just long enough *before* the storming of the palace to suggest defection rather than death (not that his death would have given anyone pause; this was the man who'd earned the nickname "the Butcher of Benghazi" after all). In any case, Rick's best guess was that he'd leveraged connections as Secretary to fake travel credentials and smuggle himself and a few supporters out of the country through the only aperture left open to them during the uprising: the Cultural

Alex Henderson 5/2/14 1:38 PM

**Comment [6]:** "This is good + interesting + [strikes?] the more expository voice I'd like to see in the beginning." – SRS

Representative Program. (This was no wild speculation; in his capacity as head of Economic Development, Abdulqadr was alleged to have provided safe passage and travel documents over the years to such varied clientele as Ratko Mladić, Joseph Kony, and the Irish Republican Army, as well as senior leaders of al-Qaida and al-Shabaab and, curiously, at one point in the late 1980s, Aerosmith. His specialty was moving people around, including what appeared to be heavy involvement in the current human trafficking crisis in neighboring Mauritania, where some estimates put the number of forced laborers at 20% of the population.) Though oral reports from this time tell the story of a vain and self-obsessed man, a sort of mini-tyrant who had carved out a fastidious dictatorship of his own within the larger madness of Gadhafi's Libya, he was nevertheless apparently well-traveled and had found enthusiastic reception at various photo ops by no less than Angela Merkel and Hillary Rodham Clinton, who must have been disarmed by his severe, Ben Kingsley-ish good looks. At a much more recent point, judging by various airport security-camera snapshots, he must have suffered an injury to the face necessitating the adoption of an eyepatch – a grave blow to a man as reportedly well-groomed as he (assuming it wasn't just another part of the disguise).

Hard as it was for me to wrap my head around everything Rick had told me, I'd bet it was even harder for Abdulqadr. Forty years of uncontested power only to end up slumming it at Disney World? But if Rick was right, the whole thing was just a cover for the ex-Jamahiriya's real mission, which was the sale of Gadhafi's Kapszasi stone (the one given by Richard Nixon in 1972 as part of the Goodwill Program) to a private

collector somewhere in the United States. A man with connections like Abdulqadr would have no trouble lining up a buyer. At least, that's what we feared.

I sat up and pored over the map of Epcot. The enormous World Lagoon, a gray splotch on the printout, took up most of the park, with the crown jewel of Spaceship Earth perched just above its north rim. The World Showcase stretched around the Lagoon, and it was there that the massive encampment of multinational pavilions which included Libyan Pavilion lay, presumptive home base of the ex-Jamahiriya and, I felt certain, this Abdulqadr. I felt reasonably sure the stone itself wouldn't be at the Libyan Pavilion – he wouldn't want to risk something so valuable by bringing it to work with him every day – but since I didn't know where they were staying or where the stone would be, the Libyan Pavilion was a good place to start.

My stomach started grumbling again, and I found a pizza in the freezer and threw it in the oven, then came back over to the bed. The Libyan Pavilion, I saw, sat sandwiched between France and Japan in the extreme SW corner of the Showcase, sort of tucked away, on the other side of a treewall separating the park interior from the outside world, and in particular a giant square building simply marked "Costume Warehouse". What looked like dozens of underground tunnels connected various locations around the park, some entrances smack in the middle of major park features, others way backstage, where only maintenance and groundscrew staff would be. They lay beneath everything like a circulatory system, pulmonary corridors leading to and from of the beating heart of the park.



The buttery smell of cheap living filled the apartment as I studied these subcutaneous routes, trying to tease out their logic, the logic of the park as a whole. But I couldn't find any. The sun waned and reddened through the sliding balcony doors, and finally I stood up, stretched, brought the pizza back to the table and ate.

By the time Michael woke up I was sitting up on the pull-out bed again, the sun nearly gone, a blanket wrapped around my hunched shoulders, clicking through news footage of shoulder-fired missiles trailing chains of gray smoke across the Libyan sky.

"What's this?" Michael said, croaky voiced under his fork-in-the-toaster hair.

"Arab Spring."

He stared for a second and then moseyed into the kitchen, followed a moment later by the sound of general rummaging. Then a pause. "Hey!" he said lucidly. The freezer door whomped shut.

"Oh, sorry." I looked around from the bed. "I ate the pizza."

He scowled half-heartedly and came over to the living room, barefoot and wild-haired, watching the TV images flicker.

"Haven't they caught that guy yet?" he said after a few seconds.

"What guy?"

"The crazy one. With all the female bodyguards."

I was surprised he even knew who Col. Gaddafi was. "Not yet," I said. We watched for a few more seconds, Anderson Cooper talking with some reporters in the

field about rebel supply chains and combat tactics. Then Michael broke the TV's gaze, sat down in the armchair next to it, his hands folded atop his belly, and looked at me.

I put Anderson on mute. "What?"

He smiled, somewhat distantly. "Nothing," he said. "I'm just trying to figure out why you're actually here, is all."

"I'm on a mission for the Department, I told you."

"Yeah, but I don't know what that means." He gave a shrug and a half-laugh. "You assume I know what you do for a living. I don't have the faintest idea. I thought you were working for a museum or something."

I frowned at him. "Well, I'm not. But I can't really talk about it. Not until the investigation is closed, at least."

His eyebrows went up. "Investigation? Into what?"

I looked back to the TV for something to stare at. "It's complicated and boring. You wouldn't want to hear it."

"Actually, I would."

"Well unfortunately I can't talk about it." I made an attempt at a sincere apology-face. "It's bosses' orders, sorry."

He frowned. His foot, propped across one knee, jiggled. "But what if I could help you? You haven't been here in who knows how long. Things might have changed, you know? And if you did need to get into the park for any reason, I could help you out."

I leaned forward. "Listen, I appreciate the offer. But don't worry. I got this." The fact that I didn't entirely have it yet was not something he needed to know. But involving

my brother in Department business any more than he was already was the last thing I needed. “Trust me, everything’ll be fine.”

But from the look he was giving me, everything wasn’t fine. “I don’t get it, Jenny. You come down here, the first time I’ve seen you in years, and all you want to do is watch TV and surf the Internet? What gives? Why not just go to a motel in the first place?”

The image of lidless eyeballs flashed through my mind again. I didn’t know what to say. But the accusing tone in his voice must have registered somewhere in my deeper reflexes, because before I could stop myself I heard myself saying, “Listen, I’m happy to leave. You don’t want me here? Just tell me and cut the bullshit.”

“I *do* want you here,” he said. “But do you?” He waved a hand at me sitting on the bed, wrapped in blankets. “Ever since you got here it’s like you’ve been trying to be two places at once, here and not-here at the same time. I don’t get it. Either come in or stay out, you know? What’s with the half-assed attitude?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, cheeks heating. “I told you, the reason I’m here is classified. If you’re mad because I can’t let you in on the secret, I’m sorry but that’s just the way it is. I don’t make the rules. I go where they tell me.”

“Oh don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten that,” he said, suddenly more bitter. It took me a moment to realize what he meant. When I did, the heat in my cheeks leapt to my scalp.

“And what’s that supposed to mean? You think I came down here just because I wanted to? You think I wanted to come back to Florida in the first place? I go where I’m needed.”

He laughed, not kindly. “Like the middle of freakin *Latvia*?” His face clouded in a way I’d never seen it before. “Did you even bother telling him that you weren’t coming down, or did you just trust Mom to do it for you?”

I stood up. “Alright, I’m done here.” I realized my eyes were filling with tears. My knees bumped into the corner of the mattress, and the metal frame banged into my shin. I started to speak, but couldn’t get the words out. Michael tried to get up, but then I was down the hallway, the bathroom door slamming shut behind me. The sound of the sink running and fan roaring in the echoing room drowned out every other sound, wrapping me within white noise, and I collapsed on the toilet and started crying.

I heard what could have been Michael’s voice from outside, but I ignored it. I just cried, not sure why, not caring why. It had been a huge mistake to come here. He was right, I should have just gotten a room. I should have just told Rick I was feeling ill, I couldn’t come, he would have to make the trip himself. But I was here already, and I could either leave or deal with it. Wetness tickled the tops of my feet, tears queueing up to drip from the end of my nose. I wadded up some toilet paper and wiped my face, but more kept coming. An aftershock sob heaved in my chest.

After a while I heard a muffled knock. “Jenny? Is everything alright?” came Michael’s raised voice; it sounded like he was crouching near the gap at the bottom of the

door. When I didn't answer he said, "I have something to show you. For when you're ready."

I realized I was wasting water and turned off the faucet, then dabbed my face clean of snot and pulled my hair back into a pony tail. I looked like shit on a stick in the mirror, white and puffy with irritated red cheeks. I came out to find Michael standing in the hallway.

"I thought it might be—" he started saying, then stopped, shrugged and started over. "Do you want to go for a walk?" he asked bluntly.

The question caught me off guard, and I laughed a little despite myself and swallowed the rest of my snot.

"What the hell," I said, shaking my head in a kind of surrender. "Why not. Where do you want to go?"



The Floridian night was hot.

We walked along the side of the road, Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway, kicking grit into the knuckly grass and leaning into each other whenever a car came by. Frog song swelled the air with a twangy philharmonic, an endless concatenation of sound. Insomniac birds tried their best to compete and failed.

Michael was telling me about his game.

"It's called *Asmaphroledoir Online*," he said. "I started playing right before college. Most of my friends now are from there."

"Like your elf-girl?"

“Who, Hannah?” He pronounced her name funny, with a long rounded A, like *haughty*.

“*Haughna*?” I said, laughing. “Who’s *Haughna*? I thought her name was Moonshine.”

He smirked. “Same girl. She’s an in-game friend.”

A semi-truck pounded past, tamping its thunder down our ears. The frogs shut up for a second and a negative sonic space bloomed in the truck’s wake. We kept walking. The frogs started back up.

“Have you ever met her?” I said.

“Not in real life.”

“But you like her though,” I said.

He was silent.

“Is she pretty?” I said.

“I guess.”

“Oh you like her.” I poked him in the ribs. He batted me away. “What’s the matter, why haven’t you two hooked up yet? She could be the elf of your dreams.”

“She lives in England,” he said.

“So? Doesn’t she ever go on vacation, or holiday or whatever they call it?” He grunted, and I smiled out of the corner of my mouth. “You like her so much,” I muttered. The darkness hid his obvious blush.

We reached the foot of a hill, a rare enough feature in the landscape, which rose out of the dark swamp to our right and sloped up toward the moon (obscured though she

was by tentacles of park light from the north). The grass squelched under our feet at first but soon quieted, marshy cat-tails dwindling as we reached higher and dryer ground. Everywhere smelled like hot vegetables.

“How much do you play this game?” I said, after a while. The incline leveled out, and our backs straightened.

“Oh, every day,” he said, breathing deeply. “It’s pretty much...my main hobby.”

“You ought to get out more,” I said, listening to him huff. “Meet some people. Go bowling.”

“Yeah,” he said. We passed the first headstone. “You make it sound easy.”

More stones began appearing around us, low square plaques in the earth. “I’m surprised there isn’t a fence separating this from the road,” I said.

“Why?” he said, still out of breath. “It’s not like they’re going anywhere.” He paused for a moment and nudged a pink-gray granite slab with the toe of his sneaker. We were standing at the edge of an esplanade, and he started toward the center.

We came to a paved circular footpath that served as the boundary to taller and much denser graveplotting just beyond. We stepped across, our shoes kicking up leafy little insects. Headstones slid between us like sharkfins.

“When dad got sick,” he said, after some silence, “I thought for sure you and mom would move back to Florida.”

“Really?” I kept a tombstone’s distance between us. The muggy clouds parted and hot air blew through, carrying with it the brief plaint of a distant siren. “Do you wish we had?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think, yes, for myself, but I don’t think you would have been very happy down here.” He looked over at me. “You in particular.”

“Why me?” A beetle plopped onto the headstone between us and rolled around on its back for a second.

“Well, Florida’s not really your kind of place, is it?” he said. He thought about it for a second more. “It just isn’t ashamed enough of itself for you.”

I gave a small grunt but let him keep it at that. We walked on through the cemetery.

“There it is,” he said, suddenly.

I stopped short. Despite myself, I had allowed a small amount of melodramatic anticipation to creep in, and I was surprised to see not a gnarled raven-covered cairn but a row of small polite squares in the grass, shapes that reminded me of the hotel Monopoly pieces we’d played with as kids.

The stones were about a foot high each, with a sloping face that bore standard gravestone-type inscriptions. I didn’t realize how close we were to the grave until Michael stopped and looked down at his own feet.

“Well,” he said, triumphant and deflated at the same time. “Here he is.”

I stared for a second and then knelt and peered at the inscription. *RICHARD MICHAEL BEACON, 1954-2009*, a small fleur-de-lis engraved under the date. I reached out and rested the pad of my finger in the thickest part of the engraving. An ant crawled out from underneath.



It struck me as funny, the word *engrave* – to put into permanently. A body engraved in earth, a name engraved in stone. I brushed my hand across the inscription, feeling the sharp angles of each etched letter, the cool stone despite the hot night. A fleck of dirt rested in the crevice of the *N*, probably splashed up in a recent storm; I dug it out with my fingernail and rolled it between my fingers.

Unexpected stickiness rose in my throat.

“I’ll see you next Tuesday,” I said, after a moment.

“What?” Michael said. He had been watching me, clearly not expecting me to speak.

“You asked if I ever talked to him before he died. I said I’ll see you next Tuesday. It was the last time we talked. I was planning to drive down.”

“You were?” He sounded stunned. “Mom never told me that.”

“She didn’t know.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” I stared into the white stone until my eyes blurred. then shook my head. “It didn’t end up mattering. He died the day I left.”

A cooler wind whistled over the top of the hill. “I thought you had to fly overseas for your job?” Michael said.

“That wasn’t until a couple days later.” I swiveled on my heels and looked up at him, my hand continuing to rest on the stone face. Michael’s hair was outlined dimly by the diffracted glow of the moon behind light-polluted clouds.

“So you did talk to him?”

“Just once,” I said. “Out of nowhere. He had the nurse call me. I don’t think they’re supposed to make personal calls for residents, but he probably talked her into it. You know how he was. I thought he wanted to patch things up or something. Turns out he just wanted to chat.”

Michael nodded slowly, waiting for me to go on.

“He had so many complaints. About the TV in his room, the food, the nurses. He was having trouble breathing, you know, but not too bad to tell me about, like, the nurses’ cold *goddam* fingers and their *goddam* small talk.” I smiled a little. “He was such an ass, you know.”

“But all it took was his asking for you to visit?”

“He never asked. He spent fifteen minutes coughing and bitching and then told me he had to go. I asked him right then if he’d like me to take a trip down there soon, he sounded so bad. I didn’t even think before I said it.”

Michael seemed taken aback. “What did he say?”

“He laughed and said he hadn’t called expecting any miracles. He just wanted to tell me he loved me and was proud of me and that if they ever tried to put me in a place like that to find the nearest bridge and jump off.”

I stood up, pushing off the stone, and saw the southern tip of the park fifteen miles away, curious over the moonblurred tops of the trees. “He died three days later, the morning I’d planned to leave. I was almost to the Connecticut state line.”

A warm torpid wind moved through the cemetery and blew my hair about my shoulders before dying down, and I realized Michael was crying.

“Yeah,” I said, in a whisper. “It sucks.”

He sat down in the grass and I went over and sat next to him, and after a moment I put my arm around his shoulders. He cried, not loudly but heavily and physically, so that I felt the heat coming off his chest, rising in steam from his face. After a little bit he said, “It’s like, it doesn’t even matter if he was a great guy or not. It just matters that he was *here*.”

We sat and his body shook and the clouds moved in front of the moon. Eventually he stopped and I gave him a squeeze and let him lean against my shoulder.

“It’s complicated,” I said. “Being a human. Sometimes you can’t think too much about it.”

We sat in silence for a few more minutes while a plane skated across the sky. In its wake it trailed the same dull reverberating sound as the inside of an empty cave. Michael stared at his fingers, rolling a stalk of grass into a ball and flattening it straight again against his knee. He split the blade of grass halfway down the middle and twisted it around itself; it held for a second and then wilted apart.

“Why won’t you tell me what you’re looking for?”

“What?” I said sharply.

“In Florida, I mean. For your job.”

“Oh.” I paused. I felt several things shifting inside me, decongesting. “Do you really want to know?”

He nodded, his shape heavy and black to my right.

It took me a moment to realize I was opening my mouth to speak.

\* \* \*

In the 1970s (I explained), an ascendant Richard Nixon, fresh off a diplomatic victory in China, decided to take a victory lap around global politics in the form of a new initiative called the Goodwill Program, whose aim was to distribute newly acquired material from the lunar surface (courtesy of Apollo missions 15, 16 and 17) in the form of gifts to every nation on earth, plus U.S. states and outlying areas. The problem is that some of that lunar material was still needed for scientific studies, especially the studies of one scientist in particular, a Soviet émigré and astrogeologist name Luódor Kapszási.

Professor Kapszási, probably most well-known for hosting of the immensely popular (for its time) *The Kapszási Kosmos* science-education TV show in late '70s and early '80s, was also the progenitor of what's called the Theia Hypothesis, the idea that the moon formed as the result of a massive collision between early Earth and a proposed third planet named "Theia". Of course it's difficult to prove what happened in the solar system before the surface of the Earth had solidified, but luckily for Prof. Kapszási the moon's surface contained ample evidence (or so he thought) to prove his theory once and for all.

Unfortunately for Prof. Kapszási, the government felt differently. They rather thought these prize chunks of the moon would look better shattered into pieces and mounted on tasteful plaques. Once the lunar samples (including the biggest, Sample 70017) had been broken apart and each of their constituent fragments encased in transparent methacrylate spheres, it was too late: These shards of the moon disappeared from U.S. hands, many never to return. The problem wasn't even that they'd given them

away, but that they'd established absolutely no way to get them back. U.S. ownership of the Goodwill stones ended once they reached their new homes, which were as often as not the private collections of despots and dictators the world over (Nixon's team were utterly indiscriminate in their distribution of stones: literally every single nation received one, regardless of their human rights abuse score). Newly minted Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi got his in the mail in 1973, and it has never been seen since.

The reason these stones are so important is that, in aggregate, they tell the story of the formation of the moon that cannot be gleaned from the pieces individually. Unfortunately Prof. Kapszási died before his science advocacy could effect new legislation demanding the stones' return, but a certain young woman, a graduate student in his class at the University of New Mexico–Albuquerque by the name of Nebula Li, resolved to carry the torch, and thus the Department of Forensic Astronomy was born. It remains America's only organization devoted to tracking down and cataloguing the country's lost space legacy, mostly through the hard work and winning charm of its single full-time special investigator.

I explained to Michael that the stone given to Gadhafi in the early seventies was one of what we called Kapszási stones – stones which no amount of diplomacy could retrieve, stones thought to be lost to science forever, but whose retrieval could yield tremendous advances in proving the Theia Hypothesis right or wrong, which was Dr. Li's ultimate goal and the stated mission of the DFA (it's in our charter). No one ever thought Libya's stone would make it back into Western hands, and now that the Arab Spring had

shaken things up so much, we had reason to believe the stone had been stolen by a fleeing officer and brought to the United States to be sold.

“And you think it’s here?” he said.

“I do,” I said. “And tomorrow I need to start finding out where.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Well,” I said. “They’re Libyans, right? If you were a Libyan at Disney World, where would you go?”

He looked at me, eyes widening. “No way.”

I smirked, standing up and brushing dirt from the bottom of my pants. “I can’t prove anything yet. Which is why I’m coming with you to work tomorrow. Are we done here?”

He looked around, as if remembering where we were. “Oh, yeah. Uh, sure.”

“Good,” I said, helping him to his feet. I turned in the direction of home. “What time do I set my alarm for in the morning?”



The shuttle rattled up World Boulevard from Kissimmee to Orlando and crossed through the trees separating Disney World from the world outside. Here and there I caught glimpses of man-made structures over the trees.

“You come this far every day?” I asked.

“It’s not so bad,” Michael said, a little defensively, looking out the window.

We rumbled through the mostly empty lots until, suddenly, the greenery pulled apart to reveal a huge expanse of sky, a tundra of asphalt and hot cars under a brooding sun. In the middle of the lot stood an enormous building, low and wide and gray as a thunderhead.

Beside me, Michael gathered himself up and looked over as the shuttle slowed. “Here’s our stop.”

I felt sweat already popping out along my hairline as we marched across the pavement and into the dark, air-conditioned anteroom inside the building.

“I can’t believe you wear a costume in this heat,” I said.

“You get used to it,” he said, leading me further into the building. “Or you quit, I guess.”

Our shoes rang on the glossy tile. Other employees passed us decked out in a mélange of crisp and inscrutable uniforms, most with badges and lanyards and a walkie-talkie or clipboard banging their hip. A few greeted Michael in a genial sort of way, not too different from outright dismissal; it occurred to me that in an organization this big no one could know every other employee.

Michael led me through a pair of double doors in the middle of the hallway toward another door but stopped just short of opening it. He looked at me with a grin. “Get ready.”

He hauled the door open and led me through.

I stepped into a world that had exploded.

It looked like a bomb had gone off in the middle of a childhood memory. Every character from Steamboat Willie to Winnie-the-Pooh to Pluto and Buzz Lightyear lay in some state of mangled disrepair. Hundreds of workers sat on stools next to overflowing tables of loops of fabric and sprays of lace, many of them island-hopping from station to station trying not to tread on each others' fabric reserves.

"Here's where all the fake hair gets sorted," Michael said, "for wigs and stuff. And over here's the hot glue-gun station." I followed his pointing, overwhelmed by the amount of information visible everywhere. "And over here is where—"

The crack of a staple gun thundered behind me, and I jumped and bumped into my brother. He laughed in a way I had not heard in years. "You alright?"

"How many people work here?" I asked, smoothing the hairs standing up on the backs of my arms.

He surveyed the cavernous room. Supply trains snaked their way through the hedgerows of sewing stations and cloth dispensaries, pushcarts laden with plastic whisksers, bobbins of glittering thread, here and there an entire foot. The workers seemed happy. I wondered whether friendly rivalries ever rose up between Cinderella Island and Team Snow White. At the far end of the chamber, blurred to indistinction by the distance, workers loaded finished costumes like bales of hay onto a giant angled conveyor belt that bore them three stories up to a waiting receiving hatch on the third floor, into which they disappeared. Above it all hung a huge cargo crane, three curved claws and a center hook, which appeared to rest within a network of rails that stretched across the enormous ceiling.



“About a hundred?” Michael said. “I don’t usually come down here that much. I just thought you would think it was interesting.”

We wandered around for a few more minutes, checking out half-finished heads and racks of plush arms raining stuffing from stumped elbows. Back out in the hallway, Michael took me up an elevator and toward a door with the words CAST MEMBER PREP ROOM III. “Ready to see my office?” he said.

“Your office?” I followed him in.

An environment more like a gym than a Disney set greeted me: lockers and a long low metal bleacher marched up and down in rows exactly like a YMCA, except that on one side of the room all of the lockers were five times bigger than normal.

“Yeah, my office,” Michael said, and let the door close behind me.

I gravitated toward one of the oversized lockers. “Smells better than your apartment in here at least. What’s with the lockers? Aren’t you keeping a bunch of suits at your apartment?”

He raised a hurried finger to his lips. “Not supposed to talk about that. Could get major deductions if they find out.”

“Deductions?”

He opened one of the lockers. “Take middle school plus the military and you’re close. Too many deductions and they cut your pay or fire you.”

“No kidding.” I settled on the bleacher running the length of the lockers while he took a duffel bag out and set it next to me. “Do you have any deductions?”

“I don’t like thinking about it.” He took a long black shape out of the locker and hung it, headless, on a hook on the inside of the door. “There’s a joke here that asking about deductions gets you another deduction.” He slipped his sneakers off and tossed them into the locker with a drum-like clatter. “Personally I feel like if they fire me, they fire me. This isn’t the only job in the world.”

“It’s the only one that lets you wear shit like that,” I said, nodding to the giant mouse head emerging from the locker.

He paused, studying the head like something queer pulled out of the oven. “Yeah, I guess so.” He set the head on the bench next to me. Its eyes stared disconcertingly.

While he went back to rummaging around in the locker I sat, Indian-style, and studied the head, my first time up close and personal to one. Its unblinking eyes made me uncomfortable, and I decided it was a stupid piece of plastic and I shouldn’t be bothered by it anymore. After all, I could easily see where human hands had stitched it together out of flags of black felt across a dome of cardboard and foam; a little gray pseudopod of dried glue peeked out from under one of its plastic avocado-slice eyes, which expressed a distinctly giant-squid-ish vibe as this distance. At the same time, when I blinked and looked again, I saw nothing less than Mickey Mouse, famous star.

I looked up at my brother, unbuttoning his overshirt and stuffing it in a duffel.

“Do you ever forget which is which when you’re inside the suit?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, which one is you,” I said. “Mikey or Mickey?”

His fingers froze and he looked up at me.

“What?” I said quickly.

He shook his head as if jarring loose a dangling thought. “Nothing,” he said at last. “It’s just – no one’s called me Mikey in a long time. People here call me Mike, usually”

“Doesn’t Mom still call you Mikey?”

“You were the only one who ever really called me Mikey,” he said.

I felt the strange vertigo of realigning deep memory, which I fought against with a laugh. “Do you remember how you used to call me Jember?” I said. “You couldn’t figure out how to say my name right.”

“That’s not true,” he said, cautiously playing along.

“Is too,” I insisted. “Jember.” I pooched out my lips to mimic his roly-poly baby face. “*Jemmbow*. You had trouble with Rs.”

“Yeah, well,” he said with a darker laugh than I expected. “I had trouble with a lot of things.” He stepped inside the suit. It engulfed him like loose elephant skin. The zipper brought loose flaps together into one.

“To answer your question,” he said, “I never forget who is who.” His arms sprouted from the trunks of the sleeves, pink asterisks poking out. “It’s too damn hot for that. Only my own shitty body could get so sweaty and uncomfortable.” He stepped into a swollen pair of shoes, custom made as cartoonishly large as possible. Then he reached for the head.

I grabbed it first, holding it out of reach.

“I don’t know if I can watch,” I said. He began to scoff defensively. “But I want to anyway,” I went on. He stopped, looked at me for a moment, and seemed to soften in some almost imperceptible way. I handed the head up to him and he took it, looked the mouse in the eye for a second, then raised it over his head and plunked it down.

“Well?” His voice was muffled, his arms extended in a pantomime of showmanship. “How do I look?”

“Weird,” I said. “But good.” He shook the head to settle it into place. “How well can you see?” I looked for his eyes through the mesh screen of the mouth. “Can you see me?”

His movements were exaggerated. When he raised one four-finger-gloved hand horizontally to his eyes and mimed a sailor scanning the horizon for me, I laughed but recoiled just a bit, put off by something I couldn’t quite name.

“This is kind of fascinating,” I said. “You, like, disappear.” He nodded silently, and it gave me the creeps. I glanced at a wall clock. “The park is open now, right?” My plan for the day was to make my way to the Libyan Pavilion and see if I could match any Cast Members there with photographs of known defectors the Professors had sent me. He nodded. “Can I walk there from here?”

He explained in a mumbly way that I could use a passcard in one of the pockets of the duffelbag to get into the park. I would have to use the front entrance, though. He could tell me about other ways to get in for free when he had more time.

“Thanks,” I said, sticking the card in my shoulder bag.

“Wait til you’re inside to thank me,” he said. He trundled toward an exit marked CAST ACCESS, turned one last time, and waved goodbye with his stung-looking, bloated magical hands.

A row of strategically placed trees hid the bluff exterior of the Costume Warehouse from the carefully coiffed views within the park. I stepped out of the building and looked across the way to see park buildings squashed together, blocky off-white garages interspersed with loading docks, overflow storage areas, grounds-crew vehicle parking, and Dumpsters. Here was blue-collar Disney World, a place of truck drivers and garbage men and line cooks taking exhausted smoke breaks on the back steps. It held like an outer crust around the rich meat of the park within.

And somewhere within that, the Kapszásí stone.

I skirted the shade between the Warehouse and the front entrance of the park, mustering up my best impersonation of a lost tourist. I had the feeling I might be doing a lot of that soon. Eventually the entrance line appeared, slowly but steadily attracting early morning adherants. I fell into the flow of those scooching forward, happy to see my decision to dress as All-American as possible was fitting me right in: Hair to my shoulderblades, brunette as your next door neighbor’s wife, a little taller than average but not so tall you’d remember me (I hoped). I wore a knee-length dress of stiff navy blue and white buttons, certainly not the kind of thing you’d wear on a dangerous mission.

But something wasn’t right. Despite my preparation, I began to notice differences between myself and the crowd. All at once I realized what it was: Out of the hundreds of

postulants waiting in line, I alone was bereft of even a single image of Mickey. Once I realized this, the truth of it overwhelmed me: I saw Mickey balloons clutched by little doughy fists, Mickey-ear headbands and Mickey decals on cars. I saw tote bags with pictures of Minnie Mouse, herself laden heavily with more cartoon tote bags; I saw dads holding coffee mugs by their mouse-ear handles and moms draining water bottles with mouse-ear grips; I saw Mickey pens tucked into Mickey shirts, and Mickey Bluetooth sets clipped under Mickey hats. Young children carried small colored plastic carabiners attached to plush Mickey heads, their phone numbers and home addresses sewn on in case of emergency. There were Mickey chain wallets and Minnie handbags and Mickey-ear sunglasses and Minnie-ear sun visors and Mickey fanny-packs and Minnie fanny-packs and baseball caps and bookbags and lapel pins and tank tops and flip flops and watches and phone cases with clumsy looking mouse ears butterflying out to the sides and rings and bracelets and anklets and *tattoos* and keychains and battery-powered foam-bladed spray water misters and towels – towels? – and buttons and badges and baby buggies and wheelchairs and Mickey sunscreen and Mickey antennae bobbles and Minnie hair clips and Mickey do-rags.

I alone stood alone, unbranded, stigmata-free.

Eventually I came up to the front of the line, where an elderly Trinidadian man with no top teeth and a baggy Epcot employee shirt looked me up and down and gestured toward a silver contraption near his waist.

Uncomprehending, I held out the plastic card Michael had given me, but he was beckoning impatiently for my other hand. “Pleath, young lady.” He gestured for me to

touch the card to a Mickey-shaped bulb while placing my index finger on an adjacent scanner. I gave him a look like, Come again? The next lane over, an eight year old girl with golden ringlets blew right through the line. Fuck you kid, I thought, and then my posts dinged too, and before I knew it Trinidad's wide worn hands were at my back, patting me forward and out of his life forever.

The ticket line spit me out into an open, fan-shaped staging area paved with cement. The little girl skipped past me with family in tow.

I stretched, jaw still sore, and stowed the passcard in my bag as I walked into the park. Anthropomorphic topiary depicting the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary party for Mickey and friends greeted all attendees as they entered, and I tipped my hat to the mouse who had started it all before moving on. When I tried to see the Costume Warehouse from here, all I could see were trees.

A cavalcade of visual distraction mobbed me as I drifted further into the scrum of the park; the towering planetoid Spaceship Earth was a giant golfball threatening to teeter off-peg and careen through the crowds of pilgrims toward the World Lagoon a half-mile to the south. How many would it flatten on its way? At least a couple hundred, I imagined.

It was all I could do not to spin in a circle with my hands over my ears like an overstimulated synaesthete. Music blared from everywhere, a syrupy, air-clogging smog of theme music, whistles and sproings, timpani drums and tubas beating against my cochlea like railroad workers trading off hammer swings at a spike head. The music felt familiar but placeless, a saccharine, sentimental blend of the dregs of Golden Era

America decocted to send vulnerable listeners into paroxysms of yearning for a lost time, except – perhaps, just maybe – for this one place on earth, a land of miracles, just eighty-nine dollars’ entry fee.

Even as I mocked it, I felt its pull. Deeper into the park I wandered, stripped of mission for the moment. I succumbed half-willingly, a child following the pied piper’s melody. Paths and foot trails pulled me forward, affording the illusion of free will: Do I turn left or right?, each path promising uncharted territories of fun yet each, somehow, ultimately leading right back to where it started. Walking around the buildings here was like tracing a Möbius strip with your feet, but one that had been further tangled and clover-looped and threaded around exhibitions with names like “Innoventions East” and “Innoventions West” and something simply titled “Imagination!”. I passed a neon tube sign proclaiming a virtual reality extravaganza named THE SUM OF ALL THRILLS (underwritten by Raytheon) right next to a doorway marked SEVERE WEATHER SURVIVORS (State Farm and Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Association). I couldn’t quite figure out what HABIT HEROES was suppose to mean (Energizer and Blue Cross/Blue Shield), but I passed it by all the same.

The air was a wet rag left on a hot sidewalk to steam. A swoop of chemically treated canal water burbled under an arched sandstone bridge not much further on, in what the map dubbed the “transition area”, the waist of the hourglass of the park. I found and sat down on a fountain’s rim to rest; light mist from the fountain’s spray cooled my hot neck and shoulders. A fleet of women in matching blaze-orange t-shirts (Relay for Something) scootered by on electric Rascals. A Filipino groundskeeper in a maroon



apron appeared to be sweeping up cigarette butts while sleepwalking. A woman held her husband's hand, and laughed.

The air smelled like birthday cake with just the hint of pond scum.

The incessant music that had been harrying me across the park was louder here than elsewhere, and I turned in irritation to discover in a flowerbed behind me an artificial mushroom, classic *Amanita muscaria* (if a bit implausibly oversized), stuck right there in the middle of otherwise perfectly pretty pink and purple petunias. I reached back as inconspicuously as possible and felt for the ribs under the mushroom's cap; my fingers buzzed. Hidden speakers. The bastards.

As I straightened, I noticed something else: Of the dozens of white warts painted on the mushroom's red cap, three were touching in such a way that they formed a triangular shape, the shape of Mickey Mouse's ears. I tapped the symbol with my fingernail, and the whole cap rang plastic. Accidental, or intentional?

Not that it mattered. I stood up and fell in behind a bowling team from Topeka, Kansas and headed to the end of the transitional bridge.

I smelled the World Lagoon before I saw it. A stale, sour smell, the smell of a hospice patient. The Topeka Ten-Pins veered to the side and I saw it then, its rim circling for at least a mile around, a great darkgreen birdbath. A few peach-and-teal ships shared the surface with the slow reflection of the clouds. From this distance, it was almost tranquil.

I couldn't help but picture the scene I would have seen, though, forty years ago on this exact spot. Intrepid young land developers and the poor sherpas they'd hired to hack

the way clear for them; Walt Himself striding in to take a personal measure of the swamp; birds bursting from the trees in dim foreknowledge with each sharp swing of the machete, snapping turtles beating hasty retreats in their stone colored shells, gator tails shrinking to dots. Imagine the mosquitos who would have orgied on their faces. Imagine Walt's vision for a changed America. It would have all started here, where the muck sucked his boots. It would have to be drained, of course, and cleaned of its swampmatter – declawed, defanged, stripped, scaled and gutted. The trees would have to go. And the fish. And once the ground was leveled and bulldozed and packed in tight enough to put roads over top, what would they build first? Why, a lagoon, of course. Only a lagoon so perfect, so improved over nature, that only the most mutated fish or algae could survive in its gasoline and tea colored waters. And right up the street they'd drop a giant aluminum ball to scatter the sun and drive birds blind. And they would call it "Spaceship Earth".

Pavilions crowded the Lagoon's rim not unlike animals at a watering hole. I saw a mini-Eiffel Tower shoved up next to a mini-Tower of Pisa. Mini-Big Ben faced off against mini-Colossus of Rhodes. Competing pagodae rising from China and Japan leaned toward each other pugnaciously, or maybe it was just their reflection in the water. I saw Rapa Nui Moai and a Columbian Exposition Ferris wheel, I saw the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall and Niagara Falls, all in miniature. The model UN I thought was a nice if idealistic touch.

In the distance I made out the onion-topped domes of little Libya. It sat directly across the Lagoon from me, a few degrees west of America. A small wave of attendees

came up behind while I stood gawking, a pasty ginger tribe sporting one child each from ages two to twelve. They stood in a cacophonous knot debating whether to visit Canada or Mexico or just to get some ice cream right then. Beyond them a blueskinned Genie loitered, obliging this or that fan with a Robin Williams impersonation and a photo. On the horizon loomed a gibbous Spaceship Earth.

I had to turn east or west. East took me the longer way clockwise around the Lagoon, passing Mexico, Norway, China and Germany, while west would be the shorter, more obvious route past Canada, India and the United Kingdom. Yet just as I was turning toward the towering oak lodge of the Canadian Pavilion, something caught my attention over my shoulder. I turned and looked again. There, perched atop the giant sandstone ziggurat of the Mexican Pavilion spread the mighty stone wings of a Quetzalcoatl statue. But that wasn't what caught my attention. Worked in the feathers of the great serpent's headdress I saw something I thought I'd mistaken at first: Three stylized circles in the shape of a Mickey in the greater pattern of spots and Mesoamerican markings. I moved through a crowd of people, bumping past the Genie, on my way to inspect it closer. It was just subtle enough to be coincidental, but this time I was sure it wasn't.

I started seeing more of them. Not the big smiling face of the cartoon character, but the classic shape, the one from the mushroom cap: three circles: two ears and a head. The next couple sightings I was tempted to pass off as coincidence again – some rough splotches of rust on an old hubcap, a cluster of knots sawn off in the bole of a tree – but their shape was too consistent for serendipity. Without meaning to – without *wanting* to – I began looking for them. Discreetly, I sought out the the secret little Mickeys.

And I saw them everywhere. In acorns and brickwork and loops of rope left haphazardly on mini-wharfs. Anywhere with splotches or spots or drill holes or dots was an opportunity for the mouse to manifest. While the pilgrims around me busied themselves with photographs with their favorite characters, I paused in front of seemingly blank steps of the ziggurat, arms crossed and a smirk on my face, seeing what no one else saw.

I stepped in for a moment to cool off and found myself surrounded by artifacts from Central American history hovering behind glass, death masks and sun disks and alpaca-hair dolls, a couple Mickeys tucked away here or there. In the dark of the ziggurat's interior a smaller ziggurat stood surrounded by a glowing lava moat while amber-skinned servicemembers set candles on clean white squares of fine dining linen. Before I could exit through a side door, a costumed Donald Duck butted in wearing a zany zig-zagged sombrero with dangling purple fuzzy balls around its rim and a candycolor serape; his plastic webbed feet slapped on the varnished temple floor.

I squeezed past him and exited. Heat bonked me on the head like an oven door falling open. From the top of the ziggurat the Libyan Pavilion was plainly visible in the distance. Descending the side path, I caught sight of a small sign planted in the ground that read CAST MEMBERS ONLY. I stopped and checked the map Michael had given me to see whether I might slip backstage and bypass the crowds that way. But all I saw was a service alley.

I turned back toward the park and saw a Mickey hidden in the wood of the CAST MEMBERS ONLY sign. Then I noticed something else.

It was the Genie. The one in the big blue suit. He was staring at me. In the next passing clump of pilgrims he was gone; I was left standing conspicuously near the CAST MEMBERS ONLY sign.

I felt slightly disturbed and disappeared into the crowd to try and shake it off. Soon I fell back into a state of shock and awe, an exhausting whirlwind of different cultures smashed against each other one after the other – Norwegian ships and stave churches, Chinese arches (I caught sight of a three-circled shape curled in the beard of the wise dragon perched on his gatepost) and something called the “Trader’s Outpost”, where a single black woodworker in a tribal caftan sat on a stump carving grassland animals with leathery fingers.

I felt fatigued by the constant bombardment of stimulation. The next pavilion, it looked like Micronesia or something, offered me a chance to rest. A heavy chest-thumping beat rolled out of the foliage near my head. I put two fingers to my temple and felt a throbbing vein there, syncopated to the drums rumbling out of speakers in the towering, pouty Moai heads lining the entrance to the tiki temple. I took refuge in the shade of a giant head to cool off for a moment.

Hardly had I leaned against the giant stone behind me when I heard the sound of skipping sandals and saw the little blonde ticket-line girl emerge from the mouth of the temple-cave (its lintel worked in hewn runes: the sun, the moon, Mickey Mouse). Behind her trailed the family: brother in a red OSU hoodie, portable video game in hand; mom behind wrestling with an unfolded map of the park; dad bringing up the leisurely rear. Across his shirt barbed-wire lettering spelled out the words PAIN IS JUST WEAKNESS

LEAVING THE BODY. Every few seconds he brought a Dorito to his lips and brushed orange crumbs from his fingers.

While bopping her Mickey Mouse balloon with one little breadroll fist, the girl happened to skip across her brother's unlaced sneakers; the tip of her flip-flop caught under his shoe and got stuck for just a second. Everything else happened in slow motion: the girl's smooth arc through the air, pre-scripted by gravity; the brother's recoil, one eye still on his screen; mom and dad in mid-squabble, stabbing at the map, their heads cranking around one vertebrae at a time. First mom's, then dad's, incomprehension on their faces as their little girl fell, forehead first, into the quarry-carved corner of a leering Moai, an edge of mean pressure-treated stone reaching out like an animal's horn to meet her milkwhite cranium with a meaty crunch; and somehow I was there too.

The girl hit the ground, a lurid slug already welling on her forehead, with only my hand behind her weightless head supporting her neck. Mom screamed. The girl looked up at me.

"It's okay," I said, smiling down. "It's going to be okay." Then she let it rip. Blood poured down her face, her mother rushing up to shove me out of the way. Already a crowd had agglutinated, from out of nowhere a security guard rolled up on a Disney-brand Segway, mouse ears rotating on its wheels.

Mom screamed for first aid and, miraculously, it appeared: two medics hopping down from a white medical carts. I lingered for one last moment over the shoulders of the first aid servicemembers to make sure she was alright then let myself sink backwards into the crowd and blend in, just another rubbernecker. I nonchalantly detached, turned, and

walked away quickly as possible, hoping to make it to the Libyan Pavilion, not much farther now, without attracting any more attention.

That's when I caught the Genie looking at me.

I cursed under my breath and dove smoothly into the crowd of pilgrims flowing past me on all sides, not stopping to turn around or even look behind me. I cursed under my breath. I'd had one job today, and that was to see without being seen. And I had blown it. Ahead of me rose Italy, rustic Roman ruins and classical cobbled canals.

I ducked into the Trattoria Pizzeria Italiano, in the back corner of the Coliseum gift shop, near the door to the mini-Vatican, and crept out along a fresco of plump Pompeii-faded grapevines (Mickey in the grapes). No sign of a Genie. I eased into a nervous walk along the aqueducts. But ten steps on, I saw him standing near Café CalZone, half-turned from me, scanning the crowd.

Without slowing I continued toward Germany, hunching my shoulders and dipping awkwardly to stay out of sight. I couldn't why exactly the Genie was interested in me, but I couldn't mistake that he was. The details of the next pavilion were a blur of rosy cheeks and Werther's Originals, and I nearly knocked over a wicker barrel of Mickey dolls wearing lederhosen ducking into a candy shop. I spent several furtive minutes' feigned interest in a wall of exotic caramels while worming through a crowded doorway into a beer stein shop. I realized that all of the Bavarian storefronts connected into one long continuous retail space within, which was to my advantage as I hopped from shop to shop to the end of the German pavilion. On exiting, I confronted the

crumbled remains of a gray wall, chunks covered in spray painted graffiti. I stepped over it and hurried on.

I spared one glance over my shoulder to see the Genie forty feet behind me, head sticking above the crowd, and almost collided with a knot of Lutherans posing for a pastor with a camera. I whizzed past them into Israel and didn't think twice about blowing right through.

"Shalom!" a smiling young Cultural Representative greeted me, but then I was past the mini-Wailing Wall, past the animatronic Knesset, ducking under the sweeping field-goal-size Menorah and heading toward the neighboring American Pavilion, which reached out toward the Israeli Pavilion like God's finger in *The Creation of Adam*.

I saw a group of passengers loading onto the peach and teal FriendShip that criccrossed the Lagoon and dashed toward the landing, inspired by the thought of disappearing at sea. But when I was thirty feet away from the dock I saw a blue form angling toward it, a rictus grin surfing above the crowd, bobbing and taunting like a devil. I veered to the left, toward France, and disappeared.

Sad accordion music welled up from the mocked-up cobblestone streets and the faux-drizzle pouring romantically down onto fashionable young lovers from hidden sprinklers in the café signs. Mini-Eiffel loomed over mini-Norte Dame and mini-Louvre like a triad of concerned godparents as I scurried into a fake Latin Quarter, not sure exactly how to identify what it was I wanted. A mime stepped out of a supply closet right in front of me, juggling several suspiciously rigid baguettes, heading toward the pilgrims



amassed on the Champs-Élysées, and forced me into a pirouette to avoid bowling him over; as I spun, I caught a flash of blue through the legs of the Arc de Triomphe.

I dove deeper, the rich smell of French cooking clogging the tight passages of Le Marais and seeming to work against me. A champagne shop (Mickey in the bubbles) and a Francophone-African chocolatier's stood next to each other, and in between them cut an alleyway, just broad enough for my shoulders; I slid in and disappeared, the sign for CAST MEMBERS ONLY blurring past unheeded over my head.

The nature of the environment changed immediately. Handcrafted trellises crawling up the walls gave way to plain bluegray paint. I slowed and pulled out the map Michael had given me. The back areas of the French and Libyan Pavilions shared a maintenance courtyard, and I folded the map and headed deeper. The alley turned and opened onto the small maintenance courtyard, with mops and buckets leaning against a wall near a slightly lowered drain in the cement. Accordion music drifted over the roofs, the sound shred thin by the rooftiles' imbricate teeth. A musty listlessness prevailed. I moved toward the door I wanted. LIB. PAV. ACCESS. I tried the handle, and it gave. I pushed the door open slowly.

I stepped into a desert-like environment. Sand and grit blew into my face. I shut the door behind me before more dust could settle on the gray Parisian *concrète* and give me away. Bright sun reflected off yellow sandstone walls in long, sinuous corridors seemingly carved in rock by time and wind. The heat seemed hotter on this side of the door, the sun sharper. I slunk forwards, into the twisting lanes, hair clinging to the back of my neck like a wet mammal.

The murmur of Arabic voices and music, wayward and atonal, echoed down the sandstone path. I was somewhere in back of the pavilion, and not much was visible. Doors to kitchens and storage areas pressed into stucco walls; I felt sure I had shaken the Genie, but I didn't know what to look for next.

Turning a corner, I yelped. A tall body draped in white nearly collided with me.

"Excuse me," I said, averting my eyes. "I was just trying to find the—"

"It's that way." The man jerked his thumb over an angular shoulder, sparing me not even a glance. Only then did I notice the black eyepatch on his sour face.

"Thanks," I managed to say, and turned aside. He blew by me, an explosion of white robes. The flats of his sandals left puffs of dust in his wake.

In a moment of snap-realization, I recognized his face. It was the one from the security pictures. It was Mutassim Alefar Abdulqadr.

I stumbled out into a wide busy area of shops, tables of wares, seated musicians and busy shoppers. A sign told me in English and Arabic that I had entered the Central Medina of Tripoli, the largest medina in the world. (A medina, it explained, was a neighborhood of narrow twisting streets often built to confound invading armies.) People milled about, in fewer numbers than in the other pavilions but still dense enough for me to blend into, while smiling Cultural Representatives explained an array of exotic soaps, incenses and perfumes. I was having trouble thinking straight. A stout Latin American man with black hair and a graying mustache stared up at the ceiling, apparently studying the design of the roof-work. A Chinese couple murmured quietly to each other while looking at their digital camera.

I drifted, trying to blend in, toying with this or that hand-dyed shawl while my mind leapt ahead. Had it really been him? Had he suspected me of sneaking? Why would he care, I was just another tourist. But what could I do with this new information? He was gone, for the moment at least, and I couldn't go after him without rousing more suspicion. The stucco walls of the medina were covered in all manner of woven baskets, wooden ouds, spangled belts, gourds, and stretched rugs, and I pretended to study them as I tried to form a plan. But my mind kept slipping into other things, agitated into distraction. It was clear this central bazaar space had occupied Imagineers for quite a while; I could almost believe it had accreted organically over time, the physical expression of a collective cultural character. The Cultural Representatives, when left alone for a few minutes, began conversing amongst themselves in liquid Arabic.

I made my way to the other end of the medina, smiling at a pretty young Cultural Rep with dark kohl eyes and black hair in a braid. I wanted to stop her and ask her about her involvement with the pavilion, how she'd gotten here, whether she would ever go back to war-torn Libya, but instead I lifted the sleeve of a dress and pretended to admire its exotic weave. Suddenly over her shoulder I saw a flash of white down an alley marked employees only, the unmistakable swirl of robes. When the girl looked away, I slipped behind the counter and down the alley too. A door came into view.

It blended into the sandstone wall, its edges worked to resemble the arbitrary cut of stone. I checked behind me in case the girl from the clothiers should step into the alley and see me standing there. The man in white robes, if it was Abdulqadr, had to have gone through this door. I didn't see any other place he could go. I put my hand on the

doorknob and began to turn it. It opened half an inch. Dark cool air whistled out across my wrist.

I held still for a moment, on some instinct, and in the quiet that suddenly descended I heard the shuffle of another body behind me.

My hand recoiled from the door as if bitten. I turned. The great blue face of the Genie stared back at me, eyes wide and direct and vacant, mouth a wicked crescent of black mesh in a blue, gourd-shaped head. He stood six or seven feet from me, hands at his sides, just staring.

“I saw you.”

My skin tingled, ready to run, ready for sudden violence. It took me a moment to realize the words had come out of the Genie’s mouth. I said nothing.

The Genie took a step forward. “I was watching you.” The words were muffled by the suit, but unmistakably male, accented. “You are looking for something.”

I took a step back. My shoulderblades bumped into the door. “Listen,” I said, “I’m just looking for a bathroom.”

“You *see* them.” The voice was fervent, suddenly. I had no time to process its change as the hands came up, all at once, and lifted the Genie’s head straight into the air with a neck-breaking jerk. What the lifting revealed was a face as intense and beatific as a child’s, staring at me, smiling. His teeth were the whitest I had ever seen. “You see the Mickeys.”

I swallowed the lump of fear that had clogged in my throat. “Come again?” I said.

He put his hand forward. "I am very pleased to meet you. My name is Jalil Hanif Mamoun Al-Amin. But I will be happy if you simply call me Jalil."

We were walking around the park.

"Here is a beautiful one hidden in the antler holes of the great Canadian moose," Jalil was saying. "And over there, inside the observation cave by the bridge of Pluto's Log Ride, there is some moss in the shape of Mickey on the ceiling. And close by is Mickey in the golden coins of the Spanish treasure, near the skull. This one is Reynold's favorite, although he does not like me talking about him with strangers."

I was getting the grand tour. We had walked a quarter of the way around the Lagoon from the Libyan Pavilion, all hope of finding Abdulqadr now lost. I was so thrown at first that I'd let him lead me out of the medina and into the park, and now he was ambling along, subjecting me to an endless stream of secret Mickey-symbol locations which he seemed to have found entirely on his own. I still wasn't convinced this wasn't some complicated ruse on the part of the Jamahiriya to throw pursuers off their trail. I considered the possibility that I was dealing with a highly trained operative.

"And here is one which I call Bacon Mickey."

"Alright," I said, stopping. "Wait a minute. Tell me this isn't the only reason you really followed me."

"What do you mean?" I couldn't see his face through the foam head, but the tone carried genuine (or genuine *sounding*) confusion. "Of course. Why else would I have?"

I peered into the mesh mouth. “Well it’s creepy. There must be hundreds of people every day doing it. Do you go chasing them down too?”

“Oh not at all. In fact you are the first one in many seasons who I have noticed searching for Mickeys.”

“What about the other employees?” I said, admittedly a little absently. I was looking around, trying to find a way to extract myself. “You can’t be the only schmuck who’s been stuck here long enough to seem them.”

“I am also confused about that. One of my coworkers Jafar, he seems very intelligent, and yet when I watch him walking throughout the Pavilion he does not notice a single one. Yesterday he stood beneath the shape of Mickey in the scrollwork outside the Café Tripolitania for five minutes and did not look up even once.” I heard him frowning inside the suit. “It was one of the first ones I found. ”

I reached for my phone to check the time, then remembered I didn’t have it anymore. “That does sound frustrating,” I said, not really paying attention. “In any case, it was nice meeting you, Jalil. Thanks for showing me all the things.” I pulled away with a smile and dove into a passing crowd.

“Wait!” I heard a voice. “You have not yet given me your name!”

I kept going, pretending I hadn’t heard him.

I spent the shuttle ride back to Michael’s going back over the encounter with Abdulqadr, and Jalil, in my head. When I got back to Even Tides, the apartment door was locked and nobody was home. I used the key Michael had given me and let myself in.

The lights were off, so I flicked on a lamp. The pile of foam bodies heaped in the corner stared up at me, mangled and horrified looking.

“Shut up,” I said, and wandered into the kitchen.

After fixing up a snack, I opened up the case files Dr. Li had emailed me and started scrolling through them, looking for every picture of Abdulqadr in the collection. I needed to make absolutely sure. Each grainy thumbnail and cropped snapshot made it more and more clear that I was not mistaken. A chill ran through me, the frisson of danger realized after the fact. To distract myself, I searched for any Jalils in the record too. The closest I came was a 6’4” rapist and war criminal named Jabril Mahfouz with a chunk missing from his ear. I sighed and closed the window.

Dr. Li wanted to hear all about it when I rang her later.

“You’re *completely* sure it was him?” she asked me, her face bulging in the camera as she leaned forward. “Not someone in costume?”

“I’m sure,” I said. “He looked at me like I was a bug.”

“But you weren’t able to find out any more about him?”

I sighed and finally told her about my run-in with the Genie. I felt embarrassed that my first and maybe only break in this case had been squandered all because I’d let myself get snuck up on by the park’s resident simpleton.

“Maybe it’s not so bad...” Dr. Li said. She pointed out that if he was truly what he said he was, then he must have been at the park long before the uprising began and thus would very likely have no connection to the ex-Jamahiriyans at all. “Perhaps he doesn’t even know who they are?” she said. “Perhaps you might take advantage of that.”

It wasn't the worst idea in the world. "He did mention someone named 'Jafar' that he works with. There are no Jafars on the manifest, but that doesn't mean a ton. Maybe I'll go back and see what else I can get from him tomorrow."

"As long as you believe he won't alert Abdulqadr's men, I think it's a reasonable plan."

That night, after his evening nap, Michael sat in the living room with me for a while, watching the international news and asking me questions now and then about the nature of the conflict. I was no expert, but I tried to tell him what I knew. More than any detail he seemed to want to know the context: What were these nations, who were these leaders, what were their peoples' beliefs? And then an orange plume would shoot across the screen, and a distant hill would explode in gray dirt, and none of the context seemed to matter anymore.

"Mutassim Aelfar Abdulqadr," I read from the biography on my screen. "Born 1950 in Sirte, also the hometown of Col. Gaddhafi. Member of the original seventy officers who together made up the Free Officers Movement, which deposed King Idris in 1969. Rose to the level of Agency Director of the *Mukhabarat el-Jamahiriya* national intelligence service before becoming Secretary of Foreign Affairs. Assets frozen and travel ban enforced on February 26, 2011, reported last seen by journalists in Col. Gaddhafi's retinue in late July." I flipped the laptop around on my knee to face Michael. "Here's what he looks like. Ever talk to him?"

Michael leaned in and pursed purple lips. "No, sorry."

I spun the laptop back around. "Didn't think so. But the question is, does Jalil?"



“How you going to find that out?”

“Well,” I said, “he seems to be interested in *me*, so maybe I can use that to my advantage to get him to rat out his countrymen.”

Michael broke into a grin. “Hey, femme fatale here.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t get too excited. Big blue spirits aren’t usually my type.”

He grumbled and settled back into the chair to watch TV. Later, when he got up to go to his room, he did something unexpected: He came over and gave me a hug.

“Goodnight, Jen.”

“Goodnight yourself,” I said, hugging back with one free arm.

Then he pulled his bedroom door shut and began what I knew would be a night of straight gaming. I let the news play for a while longer, dominated by the hunt for Gadhafi. The venue for war had changed from desert to city and back to desert again. I fell asleep with visions of shoulder-fired grenades dancing through my head.

I woke up to the sound of roaring.

“Jesufuh,” I shouted, sat up, and rolled off the bed into the jaws of a dream-alligator waiting below. The dream sensation lingered several seconds, and I laid dazed on the carpet letting the icepick of adrenaline retreat from my heart before attempting to stand.

“You alright?” Michael’s roommate Glen said, shirtless in the kitchen with a blender raised in one hand.

“What time is it?”

“Eight.” He tipped the blender into his mouth and drank huge gulps of smoothie from the blender’s spout.

“Don’t you think it’s a little early?” I said.

He shrugged. “Mike’s usually awake.” He rotated the blender before him and studied it as if for the first time.

“Great,” I said, smoothing my hair back from my face. He shrugged again and I stomped off to the bathroom, and when I came out he was gone. I laid in bed for a while, trying to get back to sleep, but the truth was I had slept poorly, on the edge of waking throughout the night. I couldn’t stop going over everything from the day before. The more time passed, the less sure I was that I was going about tracking the stone in the right way.

I gave up and got out of bed for good. Michael was done with the shower, so I hopped in and when I came out two bowls of cereal were sitting on the counter top.

“I didn’t know if you wanted Cheerios or Lucky Charms,” he said “I’ll eat whichever one you don’t want.” We sat on barstools munching side by side.

I rode the shuttle to the park with Michael again, not really talking, preoccupied with anxiety about finding the Genie again (and then what?). The shuttle dropped us off by the Costume Warehouse. Michael’d told me about another way to get into the park, through the Costume Warehouse utilidor, and gave me a VIP lanyard he had swiped from a co-worker who he said owed him one. The lanyard would get me back into the Warehouse whenever I was ready to come back. I had to find the staircase that led to the utilidor entrance inside the Warehouse. He also explained the rules of comportment – no

needless lingering, no asking for directions – if I didn’t want to be kicked out. The lanyard didn’t strictly have my name on it – I would be Melissa Harp for the next several hours – and it would be best if no one looked too close.

A few minutes later, after saying goodbye, I found myself at the utilidor entrance. A drafty chill greeted me past the door: the walls, floor, and ceiling of smooth concrete, the kind that leaves a light gray powder on your hands when you touch it. Gray pipes ran the length of the ceiling, the nervelines of the park running through these arteries, humming. The inside of the beast.

I walked what felt like long, echoing miles until I found the door that lead up to the Libyan Pavilion. I found myself in a narrow stairwell, a couple of mop buckets kicked against the wall, a mousetrap sticking out from a corner. The stairs took me up, folding origami-like over themselves again and again. Finally I saw the top door. I pushed it open and stepped out into sunlight. A man was standing right in front of me.

He seemed surprised to see me. “Ah, *discúlpeme*,” he said, quickly pocketing the Blackberry he had been punching into. He flashed me a genial grin under a salt-and-pepper mustache and quickly walked away, tall rancho boots clapping on the hard yellow path of the Libyan pavilion.

I headed for the front of the pavilion, past the Medina and Bazaar and Bedouin Museum and the savory open-air Minaret Market, to stand for a minute on the raised lip of a circular fountain near the entrance

I found the Genie in a clump of Indian schoolgirls near the Russian Pavilion. He was obliging each with a personal photo and a quote from the movie. “Phenomenal

cosmic power!" I heard him say, to which the girls, in accented unison, responded, "Itty bitty living space!" I leaned against a lamppost tapping my foot, and when the last girl had pulled herself away I stalked over and planted myself in front of him.

"Jalil," I said. "How are you?"

He seemed stunned to see me. "Hello!" he said at last. "It is you!"

He told me his break arrived in fifteen minutes, so I hung around the Pavilion observing a new crop of dedicated swarming around me for a while. Then he tapped me on the shoulder with a blue finger and led me to a Cast Member Only hallway behind the medina, near the restaurant. We came to a bench.

"It is hot today!" he said, sitting down and taking off the Genie's head. Sweat matted his dark hair to his head and tracked down the side of his head like dripping glaze. He was smiling.

"Isn't it hot every day?"

"Yes, but especially it is hot today. I come to this place to be cool sometimes."

The alcove was protected from the sun, and a breeze visited intermittently. I realized we couldn't be too far from where he'd cornered me yesterday.

Jalil radiated heat. "I am very glad to see you again," he said. "The only guest who has done that is Reynold."

"I thought you weren't supposed to talk about him."

"Oh yes, of course. He would be very cross to know that I am." He was silent for a moment, then leaned in close and whispered confidentially, "Ray lives on an *island*."

“So that’s really your thing, huh? These Mickeys?” I looked around, expecting to see them everywhere. But all I saw was the smooth beige of the corridor wall. “I guess you work at the right place for that. No one else sees them though, huh?” I looked at him edgewise. “Not even your *co-workers*?”

He shook his head in disbelief. “It’s true. I will never understand the blindness of some people.” Then he laughed. “Well, except for Jafar. Who can blame him for his trouble seeing?”

I laughed too, politely, then stopped cold. “Wait, what do you mean?”

He looked at me with a grin and covered one of his eyes with a big blue hand. ““You are very popular with the girls here, yes?”” he said, lips puckered in a mocking scowl. His voice returned to normal. “He means of course the six-year-old girls.”

“Does Jafar only have...one eye?” I managed to say.

“Oh, and it is *so* very mysterious. Do not both asking him what happened! Oh no. Only if you want the sharp side of his tongue, do you ask.”

“What–what does he say?”

“He says to me, ‘It is none of your business, *fighead*,’ only he does not use the word *fighead*. ‘Bother me again and that suit will be all they find of you.’” His scowl relaed and he looked at me with a resigned grin. “It’s normal, I’ve grown up with this.”

“But Jafar, he...came here recently?”

“I believe it has been a week? Of course he is not the only one. Many come from back home and I have learned it is foolish to try to be friends.”

“Wait, how long have *you* been here?”

He looked at me, affronted. "I have been here since 1997, of course. I am American as an apple pie."

I leaned back against the rough stone alcove wall and looked out at the sunlight scrubbing the alley clean of shadows. For some reason, I couldn't keep from laughing.

Jalil looked at me with an expression of slight concern.

"Would you like a glass of water?" he said.

I waved him off, coughing a little, my laughter turning hoarse. I was having trouble acclimating to the fact that Abdulqadr, *the* Abdulqadr, former secretary of Jamahiriyan intelligence and most inner of the Colonel's inner circle, the Abdulqadr on whose hands the blood of countless men, women and children was stained had now been reduced to bullying kids in cartoon suits at an amusement park.

"Let me bring you a glass of water," Jalil said, rising.

"No." I put my hand on his foam elbow. "I'm fine. Sit back down." He did, and I took my hand away. "Sorry, I just..." I cleared my throat with a grunt. "Anyway, I'm sorry he's...been such a jerk to you."

"I do not hold it against him. Whenever I do not sleep well, I am also crabby." He lifted foam hands into the air and snapped them like pincers.

"Does he not sleep?"

"I cannot imagine he does. New exchanges always stay in the International Village in Celebration, and I happen to know that our building is under construction. Imagine the noise! My heart does go out to him."

Gears were clicking in my head. “Your building? Like, for Libyans? And they all live together?”

“I believe that is the case. For new exchanges it is often not much room. Myself I live in Doctor Philips, which is much nicer, and I do not have to share.”

“Yeah that is nice,” I said, not really listening, a plan whirring into shape. “Say, I’ve never been to Celebration, that’s the town Disney built from scratch a few years ago, right?”

This was a topic he had plenty to say about, and I let him, feigning interest while I raced through several possibilities for what might happen this afternoon. “And how would I get there if I felt like exploring?” I interrupted.

“For employees there is a shuttle. Every thirty minutes. If you do visit, there is a particularly good Mickey above the steps of the SunTrust bank.” He explained where to stand in order to see it. I stared at the wedge of visible sky, pretending to listen, plotting my next move.



The shuttle looked identical to the one that ran Michael from Kissimmee to Epcot every day. The driver was a gruff golem of a man, the kind of ex-wrestler who now taught woodworking classes at the local highschool and picked up extra work wherever he could. He glanced at the plastic lanyard around my neck and hauled the door shut behind me with a grunt.

I scurried to my seat halfway in the back.

The shuttle was half-full, most of the two-seat rows filled with one person each staring out of their windows. It made a few stops to pick up or drop off passengers, each time breaking my reverie. [I didn't have a plan, but I had something just as good: Information.] Eventually we passed through the boundary between the park proper and the real life suburbs that abutted it. After a few miles of placeless, everytown-America strip malls and chain stores, we came into the heart of what must have been the Town of Celebration. It was hard to ignore the giant Mickey Mouse on the water tower and the SunTrust bank. You could almost see the small town charm of it, though. If you squinted hard enough.

The shuttle sidled up to the curb and burped out its folding doors, and I walked up to the driver and asked, "Excuse me, do you stop at the International Village on this route?"

Mr. Shop Class aimed his thumbtack eyes at me. "Get off here," he croaked, "hike yourself about a quarter mile that way." He showed me with a generous jerk of his thumb. "Look for the crap in the trees."

I blinked, said thank you, and stepped off.

The path he'd indicated hugged the curve of a small artificial lake, and I passed several young, fit joggers and older couples strolling hand-in-hand. By the time the path cut back into the trees I was beginning to wonder if I was heading the right direction. Then the greenery parted and I saw buildings, a parking lot, cars.

The lot was about a quarter full of cars, presumably belonging to tenants of the five or six big teal buildings bunched up near the edge of the lake. The whole



development had clearly been built on land Disney hadn't had to pay much for. I wondered why they'd decided to put the Cultural Representative housing so far away from the park.

Then I looked up into the trees.

Plastic cups, party hats, several balloons and a bra dangled like storm debris from the branches overhanging the path. A rained on pizza box wilted into the top of a bush. Signs of constant partying were everywhere. I could imagine the construction wasn't the only thing keeping the Jamahiriya's up at night. The smell of booze wafted from the earth.

I crept around unmolested by bystanders, though I saw several people in the parking lot going about their business. I hopped from unit to unit, trying to stay out of sight of the cars. On the other side of the buildings, a row of trees mostly obscured the water.

Flags taped to windows gave me some sense of which home nation was Culturally Represented in which building. Soccer rivalries ran deep even in America, it became clear. I saw more than one hastily rendered drawing of an opposing team's goal being penetrated by a phallus with soccerball testicles. A few windows were open and the smell of marijuana wafted out. The last building of the five, on the south end of the plot, was slightly less brocaded in nationalistic fervor. As I got closer I realized that was because some of its bottom units were in the process of being gutted and renovated. I made my way over to them carefully, glad I had worn jeans that morning as I scraped past bushes close to the building.

One of the ground units looked intact. There was nothing taped to their glass. The lights were on.

I stole up to the door of the adjacent unit, its windows mere wooden frames bandaged with painter's tape. A store-bought knob jutted from the unpainted door, and on instinct I tried it and found it locked. The moment of disappointment was fleeting, however, as I sensed a looseness in the construction and, with one quick motion, pushed the door open anyway, its poorly fitted lock slipping out of the cradle.

Afternoon sunlight poured in through the westward-facing window frames, and I crept across the unfinished floor, looking for a back porch or any sort of shared access. What I found, in what looked like a future washer/dryer closet, was the exposed ribs of a wall, several slabs of drywall leaning in a stack nearby. Near the floor, next to several coils of hoses, I saw a square grille, what would become an HVAC-vent I assumed. Through it, I heard voices.

I dropped to a crouch and placed my fingers lightly on the wall around the vent, peeking through the tilted slats. Five or six men sat around a spare kitchen, beyond them a shelf of what looked like no more than cereal boxes and cans of chickpeas. They were arguing, it was clear. In Arabic.

For the first few minutes I watched, tense, waiting for some violent or revealing gesture, a word I recognized, anything. But this seemed to be an old dispute, something they could talk about without becoming too heated. In fact, I began to doubt whether I'd found the right apartment. Abdulqadr was nowhere in sight, though admittedly I could

only see a part of the kitchen, and from the sound of the voices there were more in the room.

Then he did step into frame, dressed all in black – black slacks, black shoes, a tucked-in black button up, matching the black patch strapped across his eye. His body language said he was exasperated, a leader under fire. The men were allied against him in some fashion, it sounded – he was angry, defending himself. This was dicey territory, it was clear; he was not a man you challenged easily, and I sensed that it was only as a group, and a group pushed to some sort of brink, that his underlings could bring suit against him in this way. And I could tell he did not like it.

He paced, listening to the men speak in turn, interrupting each other to air whatever grievances they felt entitled to express. Their speech was rapid and dense in the way of foreign languages in private conversation. I would have killed to have someone there to translate for me. Who knew how much valuable information was flying right past me, trapped just on the other side of intelligibility.

Things seemed to be coming to a head. Abdulqadr stopped and listened to one young man, a lanky 20-something in white trackpants and a gray Zoo York baseball cap, who seemed to have settled out as the unofficial spokesman for the group. He stammered, cast around for support, and finally squeezed out some sentence which set the other men nodding silently, a few affirmative murmurs here or there. Abdulqadr listened stonefaced, arms crossed, veins rising from his bare scalp in a throbbing filigree.

Something changed. The young man stopped speaking, petering out, and Abdulqadr regarded first the speaker, then the group as a whole. He seemed to be

considering whether to wipe them all out as one or allow them to keep living for the moment. Finally he shifted onto his heels, nodded slowly, and began speaking quietly. His voice quickly rose in rapid acknowledgment, darting around the room, before he pivoted, swept past the closet I was hiding behind, and stalked out of the room. The men seemed stunned and a little apprehensive. They didn't have long to wonder, though, as Abdulqadr reappeared a moment later bearing a briefcase.

My pulse jumped. He set the briefcase down on the table with a declarative thud, then snapped at the nearest Jamahiriyan, a heavysset and sweaty fellow, to move back. Then he flicked open the latches of the case, panned the room once with his eye, and lifted the lid.

The men leaned in as one. I couldn't see what they were looking at. The lid of the briefcase blocked its contents from where I crouched. Abdulqadr said something conclusory, which I interpreted as, "There, see?" The sweaty Jamahiriyan reached forward instinctively, and Abdulqadr barked at him so viciously his hand recoiled as if bitten. The others kept back, but their appetites clearly pulled them forward, dogs surrounding a bone. I almost groaned with the unfairness of it.

Abdulqadr, apparently sensing victory over the nascent coup, relaxed. Then, as if to cement some nuance in the power hierarchy, he reached his hand into the briefcase and lifted it up.

"Oh," I whispered, a small gasp.

There, cradled on the tips of his upheld fingers, was the Kapszási stone. A small clear marble and within it a gray-black chunk of the moon. He held it up only a few

seconds, turning it to let light play on the hard glassy surface, then returned it to the briefcase and snapped shut the lid.

The men, seeming much allayed in their concerns, began moving around, even laughing. Abdulqadr returned the briefcase to a room at the back of the apartment and re-joined the men in the common space a few minutes later. The urge to wait for them all to leave and break into the apartment was strong, but I knew it was a useless impulse. A few of the men began to prepare food, and they all seemed to be settling in, several of them opening laptops or magazines. But that was alright. I'd gotten what I needed. Or close enough.

Easing out of my crouch, I stepped back – and onto the end of a plastic hose. The hose slipped out from my foot and I tipped forward suddenly, slamming the heel of one hand to the silent cement and the other, with a sickening thump, on the vertical strut of a 2x4. The sound was no louder than an air-conditioning system kicking on in a house. I turned and ran.

I was already outside and slowing to a casual walk when I heard the door to the Jamahiriya's apartment opening and footsteps come outside. A group of young Japanese lounged around outside of a groundfloor apartment in the next building over, and I angled toward them, pretending I had come from a slightly different direction. Still, I heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the sidewalk behind me.

I kept walking, staring straight ahead, affecting nonchalance.

“Pardon me.”

I froze. A grimace hung on my face. I smoothed it into polite interest and turned around to face the black-clad man standing behind me.

“Yes?”

“I believe you dropped this.” He held forward a small marble. At first I thought it was the Kapszási stone itself, and my head swam for a second. Then I realized it was just a simple marble, a ribbon of green twisting within. The group of Japanese students looked on, their conversation falling silent.

“Thanks, but I don’t think I did,” I said as graciously as I could.

He studied my face. I thought for a second he would draw a knife and slit my throat then and there. Instead his fingers simply closed around the marble, becoming a fist. He glanced at the Japanese sitting a few yards away. “No, I suppose you did not.” His accent was sharp, carved into the side of the language he spoke. “Please accept my apologies.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling wide, heart thumping. “Have a great day.” I turned away.

“Yourself as well. And I hope in the future you have better luck locating the restroom.”

It took every ounce of control not to stumble. I kept walking, sweeping past the Japanese, who watched me with swiveling heads, walking swiftly back toward the opening in the woods and the beginning of the pathway back into town.



I practically pounced on Michael when he got home from work that evening, and he had to shoo me away while he changed out of his work clothes and cooled down from the day. When he was finally ready I sat him down and explained everything that had happened, pacing back and forth around the living just like Abdulqadr had as I described what I'd seen. He listened attentively, eyes widening during the exciting parts, leaning in when I re-counted the events in the kitchen. When I got to the part about Abdulqadr stopping me outside he said *no!*, and when I told him what was said he mouthed *oh wow!*.

"Yeah, crazy right?" I plopped down in the armchair, exhausted from the retelling.

"If Mom ever finds out you're doing this," he said. He was laughing, but I caught an edge of concern in his voice. "Jenny Beacon, a regular modern day Indiana Jones. Who would have thunk?"

I decided not to tell him about my plans for the following day, afraid he might try to put the kibosh on any follow-up visits. Instead I started asking him about his day, which he was more than happy to talk about. The fact was it had been even hotter than normal, and he'd felt light-headed throughout the day from inadequate hydration.

"Jesus, do they not give you water breaks?"

"They do. I just...wasn't thinking about it."

I cast a glance at the suits heaped up in the corner, where they'd lain since pulling the couch out the first morning. "I don't understand how you even manage to get through one day in those things. It seems unbearable."

“It’s really not so bad once you get used to it.” He followed my gaze for a minute, then looked back at me with a grin twinkling. “Hey,” he said. “Want to see what it’s like?”

“What?”

“Inside the suit. Give it a shot.”

“Me? Oh, no. That won’t be necessary.”

“What else are you going to do tonight, watch the news?” He was already standing up. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

I remained firmly rooted in the chair. “Why don’t you just show me how you look? I promise I’ll think it’s really cool.”

He stood up with three heads held between his hands, a macabre Three Stooges effect: Donald, Goofy, Mickey. “Come on, pick one out.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Well,” he said, hefting the heads higher into the air and grinning at me, “one of us is going to be disappointed tonight. And I guarantee you it ain’t gonna be me.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I said.

“Listen, it’s the role you were born to play.”

“It’s a giant mouse suit with red underwear.”

“*Exactly.* Now shut up and step into these pants.”

He helped me pull the baggy fabric up for the first time and zipped me in. “Are your arms through the sleeve-straps?” he said.



“I don’t know.”

“Well, we’ll find out in a second. Suck in your gut.”

“I *am* sucking in.”

“Well then let it out. And tell me if this pulls on your—”

“Ow!”

“Okay, good. How does it feel now?”

I stood in front of him in the lamplit living room, grimfaced anchors narrating urban warfare on low volume behind me.

“I feel like a hot idiot,” I said, arms stuck out at 45-degree angles at my sides.

“Great, that means you’re doing it right. Try to move your arms.”

I flapped them up and down like the world’s saddest duckling.

“Now back and forth?”

I sawed them through the air like a helicopter.

“Good. Try walking down the hall and back.”

I took one step and fell over onto the bed.

“Hm, I was afraid that might happen,” he said, leaning in and studying the foam laced to my feet.

“A little help,” I mumbled, my face mashed to the inside of the Mickey head. I felt his arms snake under my foam armpits and wrap around Mickey’s belly.

“Up you go!” He hauled me to my feet and held me til I stabilized.

“Why couldn’t I be Donald?” I said. “At least he gets to yell at people.”

“I just tightened the head. How’s your airflow? Say something.”

“I hate you.”

“Good, you can breathe. Now let’s try walking down the hall again.” He held my hand and watched my feet as I stepped one in front of the other around the obstacle course of the living room, giving directions like “A little higher!” and “Circle around to the left.” Eventually we made it to the top of the short hallway, and he released me to bound, Neil Armstrong-like, to the end of the carpet and back.

“All right!” he said, catching me before I toppled on my return. “Now let’s try it again with stopping.” He had me make the dash to the linen closet and back a dozen times, penalizing me if he saw me run into the door or if he had to brake me with his body. “You want to be able to stop and turn like you’re on ice skates.”

“I’m trying!”

“Harder than it looks, isn’t it?” He reached up and straightened the head which had knocked crooked in my last encounter with the door. “Now it makes sense that they send us to school for two years before they hire us.”

“Yeah, well.” I was breathing heavily and sweating. “I just can’t believe you do this in fucking August.”

“Three-sixty-five, baby. Only the best.”

“I think I need a break.” I fumbled with the head, impossible to get off with these gloves on. They only had four fingers, for Christ’s sake. “Help me with this.”

Unseen hands lifted the head and cool air rushed in to my face and neck.

“If you ever get tired of moon rock hunting,” he said, grinning, “Disney’s always hiring.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, wading over to the armchair to sit down, a collapsed astronaut. “I need a glass of water.”

“Water for the pretty lady, coming right up.” He went in the kitchen and I heard the faucet running. Anderson Cooper was saying something about the role of the Internet and social media in the growth of democratic uprisings around the world. Michael brought me a plastic cup with a faded Buzz Lightyear on the side. I drank half and balanced the rest on my knee.

“So what do you think?” he said, sitting Indian style on the couch-bed facing me.

“I think I’d rather wrestle alligators than walk around in this thing all day.” He laughed, and I gave him a big foam middle finger. “Why do you even have these in your apartment? Aren’t they property of the park or something?”

“Yeah well, NASA’s not the only one who loses track of things.” He looked at the Donald and Goofy still on the floor.

“What do you plan to do with them?”

“Sell them I guess.”

“Sell them?”

“Yeah, people on the Internet buy these things for all sorts of reasons.”

“Gross.”

“Whatever man, they sell for like \$600 each.”

“What if your bosses ever found out?”

“I think they know. They must know. Why else would they keep making more suits?”

“Have you ever sold any before?”

He was silent for a second. “Yeah, a few times. I try not to get into the habit of it. They helped buy my computer.”

“Ahh–*ahhhh*,” I said, getting in on the secret. “Sounds like someone’s got a little black market operation of their own going on here, don’t they?”

He laughed. “I guess so. If fifteen hundred bucks in two years counts.”

“Better take advantage of it while you still can, I guess. You won’t be here forever.” I swirled the water in my cup and stared at the TV for a second. “What *do* you think you’re going to do after this, anyway?” I said.

“After what?”

“After Disney. Have you thought about your long-term plans at all?”

A look came over his face for a second like a bee was buzzing on the tip of his nose – acute concentration and unpleasant confusion in one .

“I mean, you can’t just work at *Disney* and play computer games your whole life,” I offered.

“Why not?”

“What do you mean why not? Is that all you want out of life? To work at Disney and wear a mouse suit every day?”

“Well, no. Of course I don’t care about the job that much. I mean, I do like it, it’s interesting...” He shrugged.

“So then what *do* you care about?”

The bee look returned for a second. “God, *I* don’t know. What do *you* care about?”

“I’m asking you!”

“Well I don’t know.”

“Then think about it for a second. What would you do if you could do *anything* at all in the world for your job.”

He did think for a few seconds, tugging idly at his naked big toes while he thought.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “Play video games, maybe? Or make them? It’s what I do in my spare time...” He didn’t look content with his own answer, or the conversation at large.

“Well have you thought about trying to get into the video game industry? I mean you’re only, what, twenty-five?”

“Twenty-six.”

“—Still plenty of time to switch careers. I bet you’d be good at it. You should find somebody to talk to.” I drank the rest of my water. “I bet it would impress Hannah too.”

He jerked his head up and grinned at me with a self-deprecating twist to his lips. “Is *that* what this is all about?”

“No,” I said. “Maybe. So what?”

“She doesn’t like me like that.”

“She totally does.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I saw her sacrifice her *life* to save you in your dumb game,” I said. “That’s love.”

“That’s fantasy. That’s not *me*.”

“It *is* you. I heard you both talking. I saw you taking care of her, on the screen.

Girls dig stuff like that, Michael – they can tell when someone really cares.”

He blushed. “But that’s a character. He’s cute. And tiny.”

“So what? You’re cute too.”

“But I’m not small.” He looked up to me, then looked at the TV. He pulled his t-shirt away from his body and smoothed it flat against his stomach. He was still blushing.

“Listen,” I said. “No, hold on, I’m coming over.” I knocked my empty cup to the ground and levered my ungainly mouse-body out of the chair. “No, don’t help me.”

He looked up to my struggle and laughed. I staggered perhaps a little exaggeratedly over to the couch-bed and plopped down next to him.

“Listen, *dude*,” I said. “I’m only going to give this little speech once so listen up. No, you’re not small. Some people aren’t. I’m not the tiniest girl in the world either. So what? Maybe you’re a little bigger than you need to be, but that’s because you drink soda all the goddamn time. But that’s alright. That’s not my point. My point is, so what? Some people are bigger. Some people are huge. D’you rather live in a world where everyone’s the same size and paperthin and there’s no junk food? That world would suck. And I guarantee you Hannah feels the same way. Buh–ah! Don’t interrupt me. She does. Girls don’t care about looks the same way men do. Could you lose a little weight? Sure, and you probably should cause you’ll live longer. Are you ever looking like Joseph Gordon-Levitt? No, and who cares? Not me, not Glen, not Hannah, and not you.” I poked him in

the shoulder with a mouse-finger to emphasize each point. “You have to promise me that when we get this stupid stone back you’re going to email Hannah and tell her you’re flying to England to see her.”

“But that’s—”

“I’ll buy the ticket,” I said. “I’ve missed enough birthdays that I owe it to you. But you have to promise me you’ll do it. Promise. Promise me.”

He looked at me dubiously, with a shy half-grin. “I promise.”

I stuck out four puffy fingers and we shook on it. “Alright,” I said. “Good. Now help me get out of this goddamn thing so I can go to bed.”



My plan the next morning was to drive the Dynasty back over to the International Village, determine whether any Jamahiriyans had stayed home from work and, if not, find some way into their apartment and to the secret hiding place of the stone. I felt fairly confident it would work, though I didn’t tell Michael about any of it; I didn’t want him worrying unnecessarily or getting in my way about it.

Traffic was light, the drive an easy twenty minutes. I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel at the few lights which stopped me. I felt keenly aware of the existence of time and the world, of the fact that I was driving in bright sunlight down an unbusy road toward a moment which would determine my life and its outcomes for a long time afterward. Retail chains passed by on either side, giant weather-resistant doughnuts and golden arches splattered in bird shit. The flatness of the road, endemic to Florida, emphasized the sense of inevitable fate drawing nearer.

Eventually I found my way to the small development, tucked away behind a scrum of trees planted, I was sure, to keep the rowdy international visitors away from polite and law-abiding Celebrationers. It was odd, approaching by car after having already crept around on foot: a reversal of the regular heist narrative. I decided to read it as a good sign, and parked the Dynasty.

This early in the day few Cultural Representatives were out. Across the way, on an unsupervised patch of grass, two Dutch men played an improvised game of volleyball over a piece string. On her patio, a young French African lay in a green bikini, sunning. Otherwise, the grounds lay empty.

Affecting utter casualness, I walked from the parking lot up to the area of the buildings. The Libyans' building was easy to spot, as it was the only one still under construction. I wished I'd had a phone to pretend to be using. Nevertheless, I strolled up, just another young woman on her way home from an errand, and glanced in the window of the Jamahiriya's unit. The blinds were drawn, but it seemed to me no one was home.

I walked up to the door, placed my hand on the knob for a long second, then twisted and pushed. I felt the lock resist. But then the cradle rasped and released the bolt, and the door swung open. With half a glance to either side, I slipped in and shut the door properly behind me. The living room was empty. I released a shuddered exhalation and stepped further into the apartment.

It took me two or three minutes of standing silently inside the door to satisfy myself that no one else was in the apartment with me; I heard the hum of the refrigerator,



the birds chirping outside, but no sounds of others inhabiting the space. Still, I stepped lightly. A quick peek into the bathroom and bedrooms reassured me I was alone.

Next came reconnaissance. Abdulqadr had gone to the back bedroom to retrieve and replace the briefcase the day before. I went there now, noting details along the way about the lives of these men: Six cheap plastic toothbrushes lined up along the kitchen sink, prayer mats rolled up and leaned in the corner like yoga mats. I couldn't resist peeking into the fridge and freezer: baby carrots, a Sprite, a half-eaten bag of pita bread tied with a twist.

I moved on. The door to the back bedroom stood half-open, sunlight pouring white and clean in through open blinds. The air smelled mustier back here. I wondered how many of the men slept in here at a time. Or whether Abdulqadr kept it all to himself.

Little in the way of furnishings interrupted the beige expanse of carpet; not many places to hide a briefcase. I checked under the bed first, then the drawers of the dresser, which squealed for lubrication. Finding nothing but thin folded white cloth I replaced the drawers carefully, avoiding sound. I ran my hands over the tightly pulled coversheet on the bed, feeling no hard objects. A spare wooden nightstand supported a lemon-colored lamp, and the small drawer which pulled out smoothly contained only a copy of the Cast Member Handbook and a No. 2 pencil, broken in half.

Only the closet remained. Its doors fan-folded out when I pulled and revealed a largely empty rectangle of carpet bounded on three sides by the wall; at one end, along the short wall, was a metal grate. A few black button-ups hung from a rod under a shelf,

but a tentative sweep of the hand revealed nothing on the shelf but dust and a dried up roach.

Frowning, I turned to survey the room one more time, and that's when I heard a sound at the front of the apartment. It sounded like a doorknob turning. I froze. Mid-morning sunlight continued to stream into the bedroom, highlighting the places where I'd tread on the carpet, leaving faint footprints. They couldn't be back from the park yet. It wasn't even noon.

But the sound of the front door opening and someone stepping in was unmistakable, and at that instant it broke the paralysis which gripped me and sent me scrambling to think of an escape, to find a place to hide. I nearly dove under the bed. But at the last second I realized how visible I would be down there, how exposed, and instead redirected my momentum into the closet. I tried to remember if the door had been completely open or left ajar when I'd first entered. I couldn't remember, and found on top of that the doors, which opened easily from the outside, featured no handles or knobs on the inside for grabbing. As quickly and silently as possible I scooted the door along its tracks, trying to straighten out the door. I got within an inch before I heard footsteps on the tiled kitchen floor, too close to the bedroom door for me to risk it. I left the door where it was, mostly closed, and scuttled back into the far corner, pressing my shoulderblades to the grate, breathing through a pinhole.

At first nothing happened; I got no reads on what was happening, who was even out there. The sink ran for a minute; the bathroom fan flicked off. I was beginning to wonder if it was perhaps just a cleaning lady or something, and I relaxed every so

slightly, sliding down the wall to a more comfortable position, when I felt an odd shift behind me. I tensed again, then realized it was the vent itself, shifting slightly where it was set into the wall. I twisted and studied it for a moment, running my fingers along its border, and found where it was fastened to the drywall. Four screws in each corner. One of them was loose.

I stared at the loose screw, in the top right corner, trying to make it out in the closet's darkness. A standard flathead. With my fingers I began twisting it, incredulous at first by how easy it turned. In seconds I had it wiggled out and safe in the palm of my hand. Through the vent I saw the empty apartment next door, exposed walls and struts.

I groped for the second screw, top left, and found that, unlike its brother, it sat firmly in its hole – or mostly firmly. I tried gripping and wiggling it back and forth but felt only the slightest give. I bore down, trying to pinch the raised head between sweaty fingers, trying to will it to turn.

I almost yelped when a phone rang in the next room. The screw had just started to turn (or so I told myself), but in the shock of the ringing phone I lost my grip and sat back, defeated. The phone reached its third ring before I heard the beep of an answer. Ice splashed in my gut at the voice that answered.

“Yes, this is Mutassim,” he said.

I froze, straining to hear the other end of the call. But it was impossible.

“Of course it is here,” Abdulqadr said. “I have already spoken with your man.” A pause to listen. “Indeed. I was led to believe he would be handling the transaction.

*Yesterday.*” He did not sound happy. I heard the sound of chair legs shifting around in the kitchen.

“Then please explain the necessity of this call.” His voice, I realized, carried a hint of British in it, on top of the Arabic accent. It came like a cold, contained explosion: “You are now testing my patience, Lleazar. Do not mistake a purchaser’s priority for sacrosanctity.”

There was a long pause while the other speaker – *Lleazar?* – spoke. Then: “Do you suspect me of playing unfair?” I thought I could hear laughing on the other end of the line, but wasn’t sure.

“–And is it *my* stone, old man,” Abdulqadr interrupted after some time. He listened, then snorted. “Of course he has seen it. I was under the impression that your ‘Procurement Specialist’ had already confirmed its authenticity to you.” A longer pause. “The plaque has never been part of this deal. Only the stone. Transit from Tripoli was...fraught.” There was a long, deadly silent pause. My whole body thumped with each pulse, the screws forgotten. Then:

“And is this why you insist on calling? To threaten me?” More silence. “I have no interest in games, Lleazar. The stone changes hands tonight or we will be finding a new buyer. Now, will your man be there to make good his end of the trade or not?”

I nearly jumped. Tonight! I realized I had put myself in greater danger listening to the call, and turned back to the vent in front of me. With a thumbnail I began slowly, painstakingly turning the loose screw, pulling the pad of my thumb down to better enable the nail to slip into the metal groove. It worked, but progress required constant

concentration, constant tiring and slow turning. Several times my nail slipped out, but the screw hadn't come loose enough yet to pull. Abdulqadr's voice continued in the other room, and it sounded like he was pacing again; his voice came nearer the bedroom door, then further, then nearer again.

"What?" He sounded angrier than before. "And what happened to the previous arrangement?" He listened, clearly fuming; his footsteps stopped, then resumed again once he started talking. "Of course I know where fucking *Spanish*—" He cut off. "I have difficulty believing you are not simply playing with me, *friend*." Pause. "Yes, I know this treasure chest." A special note of defeated hatred crept into his voice at that. He fell silent for a while, presumably listening to a slew of new details, certainly unhappy about every one of them. I busied myself with twisting the screw out of the hole, coaxing it out turn by turn, millimeter by millimeter. Finally it projected far enough for my fingers to grip it and pull it the last bit out; it fell into my palm and joined its mate there.

But now I found myself with a new problem: The top of the vent fell loose, but the bottom two screws held it to the wall and I didn't think I could get them out. Or anyway I didn't want to risk trying. I made the decision to bend the grill forward to clear the square of space into the adjacent unit.

At that moment, Abdulqadr spoke up again, and suddenly his voice was coming from inside the bedroom. I hadn't heard him enter. I stopped moving and listened, heart inflating to fill my throat.

"I am not happy about this. You expect me to trust Mr. Gutiérrez to prosecute a fair drop. But what guarantee can you give me he will not simply take the stone and

flee?" He waited, just on the other side of the closet, while the other voice spoke. I did hear it now, a light buzzing, almost gentle. A soft voice. "Yes, I'm well aware of your assets, Mr. Lleazar. But if you expect me to believe that the money is as immaterial to you as—" A stop. "Well, forty-five is quite a lot in any circumstance. But I take your point. So be it. Ten o'clock tonight. And Mr. Lleazar?" A pregnant pause. "If anything should happen which interferes with the successful transaction of the money, you will find your little Captiva to be not so remote after all."

The room was quiet as a tomb. I was sure I heard laughing on the other end of the line. Abdulqadr grunted and hung up. I waited for what he would do next.

At first he only rested on the bed, or so I guessed. Then, finally, after minutes, he stood up and left the room. I heard the refrigerator open, and a jangle of some sort in the kitchen. I seized the opportunity to bend the vent down flush with the carpet and push my shoulders through. I was afraid I would get stuck or make some other horrible noise, but I slipped through without a sound and found myself in the empty adjacent apartment. I reached backed through the hole and pinched the vent and tried to pull it back up, but the metal at the bottom had irreparably bent and now it laid flat, trampled-looking, as clear a sign of intrusion as dirty footprints. But it almost didn't matter now. I knew where the stone would be in only a few hours' time, and I knew how to get there. My only worry as I slipped out of a window and into the sunny grass at the side of the building, circling carefully around toward the parking lot to avoid any lines of sight from the Jamahiriya's apartment, was that he would know for certain who had broken in. One way or the other I would have to avoid letting him see me; I had lost the protection of invisibility. I realized

that what I'd thought was inevitable destiny had turned out, once again, to be only one more turning point on a seemingly straight road. But that was alright. I saw the end ahead of me now, almost close enough now to touch.



I burst in through the door.

"Whoa. Whoa, Jen. Where you been?" Michael was standing in the kitchen frying some eggs.

I stood in the doorway, unsure where to start. "Michael," I said, stalking over to the open counter. "I know where the stone is going to be."

He listened again to everything that had happened, concentrating on the stovetop while I ran through every detail. I couldn't even stand still. When I got to the part about escaping through the wall he stopped halfway to the table with the plate of eggs in his hand. "Jesus, Jenny. You could have gotten yourself killed."

I pulled out a seat and sat facing him. "They're exchanging it tonight. And I know exactly where too. It's by the Spanish Pavilion, I walked by the spot two days ago. The only question now is, what do we do next?"

"Well that's obvious."

I grinned, happy to hear him sounding so confident. "Well I have plenty of ideas, but let me hear what you think." I propped my elbows on my knees and leaned forward. "Hit me."

"We call the police."

"We do *what*?"

“It’s your next step here. You’ve done your job, you’ve tracked down the stone – you’ve confirmed it’s here and you know who’s got it. The next thing you do is contact the proper authorities and let them take care of the rest.”

My face was sinking with every word he said. “What? No, the next step is we *take the stone*, Michael. That’s what they sent me down here for. What do you think, they wanted me to give the Jamahiriyaans a fucking *survey*?”

“Jenny, you told me yourself how dangerous these men are. You’re excited now, but I don’t think you’re really taking everything you’ve told me into account...”

“The hell I’m not. You don’t think I’m perfectly aware of what we’re up against here?”

“Jenny, I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job. I’m just saying, I think you’re...letting yourself get carried away a little bit with the new information. You need to remember some things are more important than just getting this stone back.”

“Listen, this isn’t me being hardheaded. It’s just a fact. First of all the police don’t know thing one about the relevant laws here. They’re not going to believe me when I tell them, and secondly the drop off is in *six hours*. How quick do you think I could get all the paperwork in to request assistance anyway? Not to mention that the Kapszási stone belongs at the DFA, not in the evidence bin of some bumfuck Florida sherriff’s department.”

“What you’re forgetting is that that bumfuck sherriff isn’t going to get himself *killed* just because he can’t let go of the idea of this stone for two *seconds*, which for all I care can go to the bottom of the Gulf of freaking *Mexico*—”



“You’re talking about my *job* Michael.”

“You know what I think?” he said. “I think you just can’t let go of the idea of recapturing this stone because you’re still following in Dad’s footsteps.”

“*What?*”

“I bet he even worked on the exact same crew who brought it back. What do you want to bet? You try so hard to get away from him but guess what? Every step you’re taking just brings you closer. You have to see that.”

I sat there, jaw open, for several seconds, while he poked around a bit of egg with his fork.

“First of all,” I said.

“You know what?” he said, looking up. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“*First* of all, Dad *never* talked about this stuff growing up around us. Never. *Second* of all, no. Just no, okay?” I stared at him. “You hear me?”

He was quacking his hand in the air like a talking duck. “I hear you,” he said. “I hear you getting defensive cause you know it’s true.”

“So why are you a mascot, then? Did dad work at Disney World too?”

“I *lived* with him for twenty-five years,” Michael said. “I don’t *have* to go trying to recapture him in all these different ways. I don’t have to put my damn *life* on the line just because I can’t admit what I want in order to be happy!”

He stood up, clearly upset, and pushed the plate away from him.

“You know what, Jenny? If you want to go get yourself killed, fine. Do it. It’s only been four days since you’ve been here, I’ll get used to your being gone again fast

enough. But I'll be *damned* if I help you do it. Just tell me what you want me to tell Mom when I have to call her with news that they found your body in the fucking *Lagoon*."

I stared as he turned on his heel and disappeared down the hall into his room. It took several minutes for my head to stop spinning.

When it finally did, I realized that what had just happened, unexpected as it was, didn't really affect the mission. Apart from losing an insider's perspective, which might have proved useful for sneaking up on the drop off point, I didn't really need him. I'd familiarized myself enough with the park over the last several days to navigate it on my own. With a frisson of horror it dawned on me that I'd begun leaning on my brother for emotional support. And he had just proven how stupid that was to do.

But still I found myself stuck in his apartment sitting on information I didn't know what precisely to do with. I took my badge out [of my pocket] and studied it, then set it on the table and gave it a flick while I stewed. It spun to a stop and I flipped it over to study its face again. Blue paint flecked on a gold shield, the elegant stylized flight-like swoop into space behind the name of the organization stamped in raised letters:

*Department of Forensic Astronomy*. I'd only ever had reason to brandish it once before, in Romania, and on the half-blind mother of a deceased diplomatic attaché who had somehow ended up with a moon rock from neighboring Moldova. I barely had any reason to ever take it out of its case, much less wear it around like an actual law enforcement agent. But I pinned it to the top of my vest and felt it hang there, like a scarab – like a second heart made of gold.

I took it back off and put it away. Seconds ticked by, merciless.

A low-volume crash from the TV pulled my attention to the other side of the room. I stared at it dumbly for a moment, my eyes settling on a shape on the ground next to the TV. It was the Mickey suit. The one I had practiced wearing. It was laying on the ground where I had thrown it off the night before. Its face grinned up at me, maniacal, uninhabited, demonic.

Suddenly, I got an idea.

The Dynasty made a sound I had never heard before: A chugging, clunking sound that worried me. I chalked it up to the encounter with the alligator, some (hopefully nonessential) piece jarred loose and dangling. I would have to get down on hands and knees and look underneath when I had a minute.

I put it out of my mind for the moment.

The Mickey costume lay in the trunk where I had folded it like a limp corpse, but the head rolled as I turned into the Epcot parking lot, thumping like something not quite dead. I waited at the light and studied my thumb where the phone screen had cut it: The thin scab a raised curve not unlike the swoop of the NASA logo. I rubbed a couple invisible pennies together and felt the crusty ridge over and over again, transgressing my thumbprint. Such a clean cut, the glass. Right into the meat.

The Melissa Harp lanyard dangled from the rearview mirror, the other integral part of my plan. I couldn't be sure it would work until I got to the park, but I couldn't worry too much about it until then. The Dynasty pulled through several empty parking lots, yawning like massive dried tarpits in the vacant night, toward the Costume

Warehouse. I parked under an orange streetlight and scurried to the side entrance, my arms full.

Melissa Harp's lanyard swiped through the card reader beside the door, and I held my breath. Silence was followed by a silent ping of green light, and I heard the lock in the door click. I stepped through and pulled it gently closed behind me, stealing the echo out of the air. Then I made my way over to the elevator Michael always used.

On the way I passed a door which opened onto the main floor of the warehouse. It was only around 9:40 PM, and though I needed to leave myself plenty of time to get where I needed to go, I allowed myself a few seconds to stop and stick my head in. Darkness stretched for hundreds of unseen yards, a reverberating present emptiness: Hearing rather than seeing the massive space. At the far end of the room I saw the tiny glowing bug of the EXIT sign, and high overhead faint light glinted off the claws of the ceiling freight crane.

I made my way up the stairs, where motion-sensing lights flickered on sleepily, and up to the third floor, to Michael's "office". Once inside, it was a matter of several minutes laying the suit out on the bench and remembering exactly how to get inside.

I opted for the feet-first approach and soon had the suit pulled up around my shoulders. Severed-looking hands and head sat on the bench, waiting for me to put them on. I had a hell of a time reaching around the bulky suit, which was heavier than I remembered, trying to zip up the back. Eventually I managed to twist my body inside the suit and grab the zipper from the inside. Once zipped, I donned the shoes and head. The world becomes a radically difference place from within cranial entombment. I took my

time adjusting the head because I knew I wouldn't be able to very easily once I had the gloves on.

Then, all of a sudden, I was done. I waddled over to the mirror and surveyed myself. I was gone. Effaced and replaced. I experienced an acute and dizzying dissonance whenever I stepped or raised my hand. The mouse in the mirror did the same, but I couldn't quite believe that it was me.

I didn't have time to get acquainted. There was only about an hour left before the drop, according to the clock on the wall. And I had to make sure I was ready when it came. I made my way carefully to the utilidor elevator and rode it down, then took advantage of the long empty space of the utilidor to practice moving again. I started with tiny steps, regular stride, leaping and bounding, and crabwalking from wall to wall. From outside I'm sure I looked like the world's strangest one-mouse dance show. Heat was already building up inside the suit, but it could have just been my own excitement.

Once I'd satisfied myself that I could stop, turn, sit down and walk backwards, I set off, walking at a measured pace toward the park; my ears brushed the ceiling and my clopping feet cast overlapping echoes in both directions. It was hard to tell exactly where I was through the view-mouth of the suit; I wished I could have brought my maps with me, but Mickey's shorts didn't come with pockets. Go figure. Eventually I came upon a door marked LIB. PAV. STAIRS and pulled it open with one huge gloved hand. A few seconds later I popped through under the smeary night sky of Central Florida.

It took me a moment to orient myself. I almost couldn't recognize the park: Gone were the screaming kids, the grumbling grandparents, the footsore and leg weary and

wallet tired. In their place stretched long shadows cast by fizzing overhead lights, forlorn skeletons of food carts and kiosks left standing on the plain. Spare maintenance crews in dark maroon jumpsuits drifted through the park like shadows disconnected from their bodies picking over the day's food trash, abstractly hungry, ghosts without stomachs. I felt sorry for them until I realized that this was probably the calmest part of their day.

I needed to get to the Spanish Pavilion as soon as possible, about a seven minute walk away. I exited the Libyan Pavilion and turned left, past the entrance to Restaurant Tripolitania, the pavilion's fine-dining establishment. I was surprised to find lights on in the building, noises coming from inside. I remembered something Michael had told me, that oftentimes the Cultural Representatives, who by and large come from lower income-earning backgrounds, come together after hours to enjoy discounted dinners of homeland cuisines once they'd finished their duties for the day. I kept going toward the Japanese Pavilion, not wanting to be seen through the half-draped window, and almost collided with another body going the other way. I yelped, then choked on it, afraid I'd run smack dab into Abdulqadr again, or one of the Jamahiriya. But the body I bounced off of was slight and gave way beneath my greater bulk. And I remembered that even if it had been, they wouldn't have been able to tell who I was. I stepped back and squinted through the mouth-hole.

“Jalil?”

Luckily I had spoken quietly, and my words hadn't escaped the Mickey head. Jalil was recomposing himself in the dim moonlight, his bright eyes white and visible. “Oh, please excuse me,” he said. “I did not see you there.”

I decided to keep quiet, wanting more than anything else to get out of there with as little interaction as possible. I sidled by, trying to get around him while nodding vaguely with my huge head in acknowledgement of his apology. I was almost past when I heard him say, in a voice rarefied by curiosity, “Excuse me, are you...new to this suit?”

I froze, not sure how to respond. I decided it was best to keep mum and play it cool. I shook my head and squeezed past to the other side of him, half-turned toward the Lagoon.

“Oh. Have we spoken before?”

I shrugged. I could see little of his face, half-cast in lunar glow and half in shadow, except his bright eyes, which hovered moonwhite in the darkness.

He seemed to be studying Mickey’s posture, so I stood straight and took another step back. But there was a hesitation in his body that I couldn’t quite leave yet. I hovered on the verge of retreating, waiting for him to speak.

He must have sensed this, for when he spoke it was with a kind of explanatory offering in his voice. “I only ask because I am...very interested in... your suit. I have never worn it myself. They tell me they like the Genie for me, and so I have never moved to any other. But sometimes I wonder what it must be like to wear the suit of Mickey.”

I opened my mouth, then clicked it shut again, hidden inside the suit. What was there to say? I simply nodded, sympathetically I hoped, and turned and walked away. I felt his eyes on my back as I pulled away, before finally the sound of his footsteps heading toward the Restaurant Tripolitania.

I made my way unmolested around the Lagoon. Spaceship Earth floated ahead of me, reflected brightly in the dark waters. It was harder making out the reflection of the moon.

The encounter with Jalil had rattled me. But it was almost over, I reminded myself. The stone was almost in my hands. The wind blew a little more strongly, buffeting my wide flat ears, and I thrilled at the thought that it was probably no more than a few hundred feet away at that very moment, soon to emerge into the night air, ready to be plucked.

I slowed as I came to the Spanish Pavilion. A dark-peaked Iberian monastery spread out from the boulevard into individual courtyards and stony cisterns; beyond that, miniature windmills rose on the far side, spinning lazily. In between I caught a glimpse of the miniature Plaza de Toros de Pamplona, but that wasn't what interested me. I skulked toward the replica late-16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish galleon, supposedly found wrecked in the swamps of central Florida (yeah right) with a mysterious privateer's lifetime of collected booty intact. This is what the placard sticking up from the bushes near the wrecked ship said. In fact the side of the hull had been meticulously destroyed as a part of its construction, the jagged planked edges lacquered to keep from decaying in the eternal Floridian humidity. Spilling out from this burst hull flowed an avalanche of gold pieces, in which rode several treasure chests, themselves cartoonishly overflowing with bullion. This spillage spread out into the general footpath area of the pavilion's entrance, fused as one giant climbable piece of terrain, and near the bottom the individually carved pieces of eight had been rubbed into indistinction by generations of feet. Still, the general mass



reached out in two widely pinching arcs, encircling a clear space where one particularly large treasure chest had come to rest, bolted to the flagstones, its lid flung open, and a very *Pirates of the Caribbean*-esque human skull sitting on top of the mound of gold contained therein, grinning.

Intuition told me that the treasure chest was where this Lleazar intended the drop-off to go down. I cast around, mouse-head swiveling on a delay as I turned, looking for the best place to hide in a giant mouse costume without losing direct line-of-sight of the chest. I decided to tuck myself inside the ship itself and picked my way up the golden slope toward the jagged opening. I worried there wouldn't actually be any space inside to hide, but when I got to the top I found a deep cavity, utterly black, the perfect size for a mouse.

I slipped in, checking behind me to make sure no one had seen, and made myself comfortable.

Now it was time to wait. And I didn't have to wait long. No more than ten minutes after I had secreted myself away I saw a shadow protruding from the deeper night outside of the overhead lights, followed by a squareish head topped with short, tight graying hair. It took me a few seconds' squinting through Mickey's mouth to realize I had seen that face before. It was the Hispanic man I had seen around the park the last couple days, loitering around the Libyan Pavilion. My pulse quickened at the realization that this was the point man – the “Procurement Specialist” Abdulqadr has spoken of – the Mr. Gutiérrez. He wore a leather jacket and denim jeans and black *ranchero* boots with

intricate white stitchwork, and he took one look around the lighted area surrounding the treasure and disappeared back into the shadows.

So. He had arrived early to check things out. If I understood the plan correctly, he would now disappear and wait until Abdulqadr showed up with the stone, which he would then drop off before disappearing too, waiting from a distance for Lleazar's man to take the stone and leave the money.

But this was speculation. Anything could have changed since the overheard phone call, and even that I couldn't be sure I had interpreted correctly. I was beginning to worry that events would outpace me for lack of a concrete plan when I saw another shadow flicker, this time from the opposite end of the clearing, nearer the entrance to the bull-ring: A tall, smooth shadow. This shadow didn't even break the circle of light entirely; instead, it hovered for a moment just at the edge before melting back into the darkness of the inside of the Pavilion. I realized with a jolt that he could have been waiting there the whole time. I had to trust that he hadn't seen me or else the rest of my plan was null. Not that I had much of a plan to begin with. But if he knew there was *any* third party waiting around, costume or not, my chance at the stone was gone.

So I crouched and waited. Stillness and silence settled over the clearing in front of the ship, not a sign of a groundskeeper in sight. I readied myself to move, prepared for anything to happen. But the only thing I wasn't prepared for was nothing.

Wind blew in, and the far windmills creaked. The sough of the air sliding across the water's black surface was deceptively soothing: A slight rasp, soft, easy. Somewhere

nearby Gutiérrez was waiting for Abdulqadr to move first, and Abdulqadr was waiting for – what?

As I sat there puzzling it out, waiting for something to happen, I heard a sound – a thump somewhere above me, then a sliding. I realized a split second before the body entered that this ship featured not one hole but two, including a second one in the back through which a slight form now ducked, almost entirely obscured by darkness. I had jumped back and now stood stock still – either they didn't see me or dismissed me as a prop, a suit stashed back here for safekeeping. The person crept up to the frontward hole, stopped to peer through, then slipped out and stole along the side of the ship.

My heart was hammering against my ribs, and it took every ounce of willpower to peel myself from the shadows and creep up to the opening myself; as I did, I caught just a glimpse of the young Jamahiriyan from the day before, the one in the gray Zoo York hat, just slipping through a shard of light on his way into the deeper recesses of the Pavilion through the Iberian arch. So Abdulqadr had scouts. Probably several of them. Crawling all over the place. And I had somehow just missed being caught by one.

Michael's words floated back up to me, and I realized how much danger I was in. But by this point it was too late. All I could do was keep waiting for something to happen, something I could understand, and hope it led me to the stone.

Finally, after what felt like hours but was probably only eleven or twelve minutes, I saw Abdulqadr himself emerge once again from the shadows, this time fully, carrying a dark brown briefcase, and step smartly up to the treasure chest in the middle of the

clearing. Without looking around he set it on top, stepped back, swept the darkness on all sides with his single eye, then pivoted and returned to the darkness.

I stared at the briefcase teetering on top of the fake treasure, my entire body buzzing with adrenaline. I felt my kneecaps jumping, and my teeth chattered. It was right there. No one knew I was here. No one would expect it. I could launch myself out of the ship like a cannonball, sprint down the slope and have the briefcase in hand before anyone knew what was happening. I could disappear into the darkness on the other side, find someplace to hide, throw off the suit, and be free. It would take six seconds total, I estimated, to cross the clearing of light. Six seconds. The briefcase stared back at me, wondering what was taking me so long. It was waiting. It was alone.

But something wasn't right. I could put no words to the feeling, but I just knew it couldn't be this easy. My brain screamed at me to go, to take advantage of the thin margin of surprise I still possessed, but something deeper held me back. Call it instinct, or intuition, or just my raw gut, but I stared at the briefcase sitting there and knew that something else was going to happen, something I didn't expect, or Gutiérrez either, probably.

I realized, too, that what I'd taken for a perfect hiding place was, in fact, much less safe than I'd thought. There were plenty of bushes and low trees surrounding the ship, and I decided after a bout of indecision to sneak out the back and into the foliage there. My plan was to sneak further down, closer to the treasure but closer to an escape route, too, more on the periphery of things, in case I needed to get away in a hurry. I still hadn't seen Gutiérrez appear to make the swap. I began creeping sideways through the

trees, keeping my motions slow to minimize rustling, one eye on the briefcase and the other on the ground beneath my feet. I was now regretting wearing the suit utterly; if anyone saw me, they couldn't fail to know I didn't belong there, and it was only making my progress that much more difficult. Frustration joined apprehension as I picked my way down the slope. With a clearer view from the ground, I hoped to have a better sense of what to do.

What I didn't expect to happen was to run into somebody else doing the same thing. As I came around a thick palm tree, light from an overhead lamp cut to ribbons by the leaves, my elbow bumped into someone else's. I turned and, with a jolt of dread, looked into the face of Abdulqadr himself staring at me, stricken, from the darkness, holding a second briefcase.

"Oh shit," I said.

His face convulsed. In a trice he turned and fled, crashing through the trees away from me, not a sound escaping his lips.

"Shit shit shit shit," I said, pushing off after him, tearing through the trees like a rogue elephant, bursting through onto the boulevard many yards from the Spanish ship, but fairly close to a tapas kiosk and the maintenance alley which ran behind it. I heard footsteps echoing down the alley and I lit after them, racing down the alley in my huge feet. Turning into it, I saw a door flying open and slamming into the adobe wall; I didn't need to see the writing on it to know where it led. I bolted down the alley after him, reached the door, and threw myself into the stairs. Mickey's belly bounced all over the place. My slippery grip on the handrail was all that kept me from falling flat on my ass. I

sledged more than stepped down each step, my heels slipping from one stair to the next without lifting. I slammed into the wall where the stairs turned a corner near the bottom and jammed my shoulder hard, the suit's head jostling a quarter-turn around. "Shit shit fuck shit fuck," I muttered breathlessly as I skidded down the last flight of steps, Abdulqadr's black soles punctuating the air directly behind him one flight below, now mostly blind in my giant head, falling onto my ass, righting myself, and finally reaching the bottom. I fumbled with my grip on the door handle only to realize I was grabbing the hinge, then pushed the bar open and spilled through. My head somehow corrected its alignment in my fall, and I now looked up to see the tiny black figure of Abdulqadr sprinting down the utilidor, away from me.

I grunted loudly and stood up. "No no no no—!" I started off down after him, my trunk-like legs swinging out in front of me in the least graceful but most effective gait I could muster. "Hey!" I shouted. "Get your ass back here!" He didn't slow.

Mechanical fixtures blurred past me on either side, and the head of the suit bobbed back and forth and up and down with each loping step. "Goddamnit," I said, and knocked the head straight. "Keep it together Mickey." Abdulqadr had reached a door, maybe a hundred and fifty feet ahead of me; his [sandaled] foot slaps stopped and the industrial clang of the door opening and closing echoed to my ears. I doubled down and pumped my legs, stale unventilated air scooping into my lungs through Mickey's mouth with a painful ferocity. This stupid suit was slowing me down worse than a broken leg, but I couldn't afford to stop and take it off. Finally I reached the door to the Costume Warehouse and wrenched it open after him.

Familiar stairs and an elevator presented themselves; I took the stairs, cursing my burning legs, cursing everything. At least running up the stairs was easier than running down. I huffed and grimaced as my muscles burned. I went through the first door I came to, hoping I'd be able to stop him from reaching any of the external exits from the building. I came out into the hallway and looked around.

I was alone.

Bright lights stretched in both directions. I had no reason to turn left or right, but I turned right on instinct, even though the doors to the parking lot were to the left. The hallway in that direction was longer, and even though I thought Abdulqadr could have made it to the exit before I reached the top of the stairs, something told me he wouldn't have wanted to risk being seen and would have turned right, where he could have disappeared more quickly. I trotted right, checking over my big foam shoulder every few seconds just to be sure.

At the bottom of the stairs I paused just long enough to kick off each oversized foot and stash them in a trashcan. The jog up the stairs was much easier with real shoes, but the suit still made me feel like a demented Santa Clause with a belly full of live snakes. At the top of the stairwell I cracked the door and peeked out onto an equally empty hall, identical to the one two floors below. I was about to step out fully into it when a door at the other end of the hall opened, a bathroom door, and Abdulqadr stepped out, still holding the briefcase. He looked both ways, but either couldn't see the sliver of the door open (my head was tilted almost sideways to align Mickey's mouth with the

crack) or pretended not to, and slinked across the hall, into another room, and shut the door behind him.

*What are you up to, you little shithead?* I thought to myself, and started down the hall, no other option but walking in plain sight.

I took the opportunity to glance into several rooms on my right, some of which featured small windows on the other side of which lay visible several rooms of technical-looking consoles and panels, banks of monitors and rows of dormant blinking servers. I passed a few solid doors stamped ELEC. UTILITY or MAINT. ACCESS, but most looked quite important during the day. I tried a few door handles: about half of them opened. Including the one next to where Abdulqadr had gone.

The plate on the door read DACS–WEST. I slipped into it and shut it gently behind me, glad to be out of sight again. The room lay in darkness save for a broad console of black plastic with gray sliders, for lights or sound or something, which glowed with dots of little green, yellow and red LED lights. I wondered what it controlled; but more importantly, I wondered what Abdulqadr was doing one room over, and how I would be able to stop him.

Suddenly, the very last thing I expected to see happen happened: The lights in the massive darkened cavern space of the costume floor flickered on, a thousand sleepy bats coming awake. In seconds the entire floor lay bathed in floodlight, all shadows banished to nooks and cracks. I looked through the window overlooking the floor: At the far end of the warehouse the diagonal conveyor belt shuddered and started moving. All the costume fragments and lumps of fabric that had been left on its began to slide down. But before I



could marvel any more about what the hell was going on, I heard a door open and the sound of sandals slapping rapidly along the hallway outside my door.

“Oh motherfucker,” I said, and bolted for the door. I came out to see him running away from me, long legs flying out at full speed. As soon as I stepped out into the hall he looked over his shoulder, and the next thing I knew a hornet had buzzed angrily past me, and I felt a tug on my costume. I reached up and felt a hole in the dead center of Mickey’s right ear, and then I heard a second crack. “Are you *shooting* at me?” I yelled, diving to the floor, and then he was at through the hatch at the end of the hall and gone.

I ran back to the room he had left and found the lights on, the computer running. I knocked Mickey’s head to the floor, the ear with the hole sticking up like a flag. COSTUME LIFT OPERATOR the plate on the door said. The controls couldn’t have been more complicated on a space ship, but I ran up to the panel under the window and looked out. Abdulqadr was stepping out onto the conveyor belt and trying to walk down it, over the lumps of costumes being slowly conveyed down to the floor. Near where the bottom of the incline met the warehouse floor was a door and an EXIT sign. In thirty seconds he would be at the bottom of the ramp and through the door.

I cast about the room, looking for anything that offered the chance to stop him. I couldn’t catch him on foot now if I’d tried. I had to find some other way. Next to the panel he’d been using was another, this one powered but inactive. CRANE OPERATION it said. There was a joystick sticking out of the lower part of the console.

Without thinking, I began punching buttons.

In a matter of seconds I made *something* happen. I wasn't sure what. Looking out the window, I saw Abdulqadr passing the halfway point and nearing the bottom. Only a few Winnie-the-Poohs and an Eeyore now blocked him from the exit. He was having to walk carefully to keep from toppling forward with the slow momentum of the belt. Over his head, something shifted.

He looked up. I looked up. The giant metal claw of the warehouse ceiling crane shivered in the rafter shadows and came to life: Three pinchers and a hook dangling from the middle, like some giant sea creature's skeletal maw. I couldn't see his face, but I imagine a look of fear passed over it. He began sprinting down the belt, robes flying, briefcase banging on the protective rail.

I jerked the joystick.

The claw moved. Its shadow bent and crawled complexly over the walls and struts of the ceiling as its ball bearings rolled along, creaking. A quick calculation told me he'd reach the bottom before I could get the crane positioned overhead, so I mashed the REVERSE switch on the COSTUME LIFT OPERATOR and suddenly Abdulqadr's job getting to the bottom became a lot harder. Still, it only bought me a few seconds as the conveyor belt carried Eeyore and all three Winnie-the-Poohs up into his shins. A few seconds was all I needed. Jerking the joystick wildly, I fell onto instinct and jammed the CRANE DROP button before it was fully over him, hoping its momentum would swing it where I needed it to go.

Instead of dropping like a rock as I'd hoped, the crane lowered slowly, thoughtfully, clearly obeying the dozens of failsafes put in place to prevent exactly what I

was trying to make happen. I looked around wildly, saw a knob marked LIFT SPEED and cranked it up to max; the conveyor belt shot Eeyore into Abdulqadr's legs and sent him sprawling on his back on the ramp. Almost too late I realized that the belt would crush him against the access hatch at the top, so I cut the speed, reversed direction again, and watched as the ceiling crane descended with the awkward grace of a lunar lander just as the huge clot of costumes in which Abdulqadr now lay tangled reached the bottom, where the crane fell, trapping him there like the basket cage at the end of *Mouse Trap*.

"Oh my god," I said, and rushed out of the room.

In the elevator I took thirty seconds finally ripping myself free of the suit and taking deep breaths, waiting for the doors to open. I darted out onto the warehouse floor through the nearest door. The chaos at the bottom of the ramp looked even worse up close, ripped rubber and bent railings and the crane tilting violently to the side like some sort of intoxicated crab. Underneath, trapped in its legs, the pile of foam bodies and among them a live one, squirming.

I ran up, kicking aside a Pooh head, and peered into the mess. I saw Abdulqadr pinned between two bodies, Tigger and Eeyore, the arm with the briefcase twisted behind and under him and the briefcase flopped open. Whatever it'd contained was now lost in the debris.

"Where is it?" I shouted.

He winced, trying to twist his body around to make his arm more comfortable. "It's gone, you *maniac*," he said. "Somewhere in this *disaster* of yours."

“You saw where it went,” I said, panting. “You had to. Tell me where it fell and I’ll let you out.”

He laughed weakly, exhausted but full of spite. “And into into a police van, I’m sure. How kind.”

I started pulling parts of foam bodies out of the pile, out through the arms of the crane, which listed heavily but seemed, for the moment, stable enough. I saw that even if he weren’t trapped between the suits, Abdulqadr’s hand was handcuffed to the briefcase, which had slid between two safety rail that had subsequently crimped shut under the weight of the falling crane, trapping the briefcase there and his arm with it. I relaxed slightly. He couldn’t escape. Still, nothing was settled until I had the stone.

“Where did you come from?” he said between pinched breaths.

“None of your business,” I said, digging through tangled fabric. I touched his knee accidentally and recoiled. He laughed.

“I remember you, you know,” he said. “You have been following me.” He sounded almost curious.

“I’ve been following the stone,” I said, distracted and frustrated. It would take a day just to look through all the clutter within a fifty foot arc of the ramp. And the stone could have flown much farther.

“Of course,” he said, a wheeze. Then, after a pause: “You’re a very clever girl, you know. But not clever enough.”

“Excuse me?” I leaned in to yank out a coiled Tigger tail.

He was silent. He seemed to be in some acute pain. The silence unnerved me; it felt too intimate. If he wouldn't talk, then I would.

"I'm only surprised you were so easy to catch, *Jafar*," I said. A Piglet torso, dislodged by my removal of its head, flopped to the floor and rolled past my feet. I got down on hands and knees to peer under the ramp's stubby foot.

"I think you won't be finding it," he said, almost ruminative, though his voice was as raspy as ever. I avoided looking him in the eye.

"I think shut up," I said, on hands and knees. I saw the gun in the far corner, under the ramp; relief and fear spiked in equal measure at seeing it so up close yet out of reach. I heard a chuckling above my head.

"Better hurry up, mystery girl. My friends will begin wondering where I am soon. I don't think you want to be here when they find me."

"Listen, *dude*," I said, standing up. Then I saw something queer about his eyepatch. It had slipped in the tumble and now covered only part of his eye-socket. A horrible puckering appeared on the skin around the eye, but the socket itself was visible for the first time. It wasn't an empty hole, as I'd imagined. Instead, I could see a crescent of gray peeking out over the top of the black patch.

"What...?" I said, stepping closer. He turned a sneer to me, unable to dislodge his other arm from between the costumes. "No way."

He spat, but I avoided it, and in one swift motion reached forward and peeled the eyepatch off his head. Around the eye was a boiled-looking stretch of skin, extending to

the bent arch of his nose, but in the middle, staring out like some spider's milky eye, was the Kapszási stone.

"Oh Jesus," I said in a whisper. He glared up at me, his expression more full of hate and challenge than any I had ever seen, and all the more chilling with the alien artifact lodged in his eye. "You've got to be kidding me," I said.

"Bitch," he said. "Whore. I'll fuck you, I'll kill you."

His words entered me like arrowheads. I steeled myself against them, and what was still to come, and stepped back.

"I'll kill you, I'll kill your brother," he spat, and this time it did get on me. I wiped it on Tigger's nose.

"Lovely," I said. My head was woozy with adrenaline. I came around behind him, where he couldn't spit on me anymore, and stood partly raised on the lift, hunching to get under the crane. "Hold still if you know what's good for you," I said, and grabbed him around the head.

He thrashed, and his teeth grazed my arm. I tightened my grip around his neck and pressed the back of his head against my chest to trap it there and hold it. He thrashed like a shark, spitting every vile word in two languages at me. I bit my lips between my teeth and clamped his head as best I could, breathing violently through my nose, careful not to let my fingers anywhere near his mouth, worried that he should get either arm free while I held him so close. With my right hand I covered his right burned eye and then slowly drew my fingertips together toward the well of the socket, as if I were drawing them into an asterisk, and applied pressure at the bottom, pulling down the lid with the

thumb of my other hand all while holding his jaw tilted forcefully up and locked in place. Inarticulate snarls came out of from between his involuntarily clenched teeth. I felt spittle foam and spill onto my skin. I pushed harder, angling my fingertips like a scoop, and with a snarl that rose in pitch to a yelp, the stone popped out into my hand, wet and warm.

Abdulqadr yowled, and I fell back onto the conveyor belt, stone in hand. His panting breath followed me, spent, raw.

“You... *bitch*,” he said, and it took me several seconds to realize he was laughing.

“What the hell is so funny?” I said, too burned out to sneer. My muscles twitched. I wanted to sleep for a thousand hours.

“Look for yourself.”

Puzzled, I stood and looked across the Warehouse floor. At the far other end, too far for communication, I saw a shape in an open door. It looked familiar. It looked like Michael.

“Oh no,” I said. “No no no.”

The tiny voice reached me from the far end, wrapped in echo: Calling my name.

“No no *no*,” I said, leaping over the leg of the crane, clambering over foam bodies spilling down to the ground. He must have seen the missing suit and come looking for me. I had to get to him before it was too late. I sprinted toward the other end of the floor, dodging around crates of exploding fabric, mailbox cubby-holes full of sewing patterns, free-standing cloth models of torsos and legs, an ironing board. But I was flagging. My legs could marshal only so much, a limp jog. I looked up, and that’s when I saw them:

Men, three or four of them, appearing behind him in the doorway; one of them lifted up an arm and struck Michael in the head with a heavy black object.

*“Michael!”*

By the time I reached the door they were gone. I ran to the exterior doors and burst out into the night in time to see two red rail lights on a black CR-V peeling out of the parking lot with a squeal. The Dynasty was close, but before I even made it halfway there the CR-V had pulled onto a busy highway and vanished into the night.

When I went back into the warehouse, shaking, still clutching the warm stone in my first, I found the briefcase dangling from the safety railing at the end of an unclasped handcuff, and the gun under the ramp was gone.





## **BIOGRAPHY**

Alexander W. Henderson graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2008. He lived, worked and wrote in Prague, Czech Republic for a year after that. In 2013 he was awarded the Thesis Fellowship for Fiction at George Mason University, where he also received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in 2014.