

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 2 Number 5

Page 1 – THE HUNT by Janel Brubaker. Ms Brubaker of Molalla, OR, writes, “I recently graduated from Clackamas Community College with my Associates in English and Creative Writing. I worked as a student assistant editor for the *Clackamas Literary Review* for the 2015 and 2016 editions. I have been published in *Sick Lit Magazine*, *The Bella Online Literary Review*, *Heartbeat Literary Journal*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Dark Fire Fiction*. I will soon be published in *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*. I am currently pursuing a B.A. in Creative Writing from Marylhurst University.”

Page 11 – THE EPIC QUEST OF THE THREE ARMS by Brett Peterson. Mr. Petersen obtained his B.A. in English from the College of Saint Rose in 2011. His fictions have appeared in journals such as *Polychrome Ink*, *The Offbeat* and *Leopardskin & Limes*. He is also a cartoonist, drummer and singer/songwriter whose high-functioning autism only adds to his creativity. He lives in Albany New York.



“THE HUNT”

by JANEL BRUBAKER

Destiny was known as a beautiful town; situated in an open plain near a forest at the base of a mountain pass, it offered all of the opportunities of a large city, with the peace and tranquility of a country village. Farming was the town’s primary source of employment and spurred the economy. Other shops and services were mingled in amongst those dependent on the farms, but they were few. Individuals and families looking for a new start often made their way to Destiny and usually found themselves staying for life. Its citizens were comprised of an equal spread of humans and faeries, a small community of half-breeds, and a few of the last remaining elven population. Crime was always low, which made it a wonderful place to raise children, and if anything arose that did bother or concern the citizens, it was dealt with swiftly. But one year during late autumn that standard was tested.

It began with a dense fog that settled over the town and wouldn’t lift. No one had seen such a heavy blanket of mist before. Sporadic thunder and lightning storms came and went, grossly unusual for the time of year. A few days after the fog fell and storms began, other bizarre occurrences arose across town; hen houses on farms along the forest line were attacked and hens were killed or taken. Every few

nights farmers found dead chickens in their coops and discovered others missing. The bodies of the dead chickens were mauled, heads nearly torn from their bodies, most of the blood lost from the wounds. The farmers assumed a wild dog or cougar of some kind were feeding on the hens and taking others back to their cubs, but no paw prints were found.

After a few weeks small livestock like sheep and goats became targets. So much livestock had been lost that it was beginning to affect the town on a large scale. Farmers and their hands stayed up at night to protect their animals and, hopefully, rid the town of the mysterious menace, but the fog and random storms made it impossible to detect when anything was amiss. The attacks were as random as the storms; some nights the farms were left alone, others were alive with chaos and destruction. One thing remained the same from incident to incident: no paw prints were ever found. The typical suspects like coyotes or cougars hadn’t been seen at all, which was even more unusual. Late autumn was the time of year when local predators fed on the livestock that had been born that spring. That they were keeping their distance only served to increase the town’s concerns. The farmers collectively offered a reward to anyone who was able to find and kill this

unusual predator. Three of Destiny's finest hunters ventured into the woods to destroy the beast; none of them returned.

This was how Teryn, a young human woman who lived in Destiny, came to be in a tree, alone, at sunset. She and her friend Liam were desperate for money. They, like many of Destiny's citizens, had settled there to leave their past behind and begin anew. Orphaned at the age of nine, Teryn had been deserted by the rest of her family and left to fend for herself. Liam, thirteen and orphaned by the same fire that killed her mother, took her into his own care. They'd been together for twelve long years, during which time they had struggled terribly to support themselves. Neither of them had been given much of an education, having come from poor families, nor were they good at any particular trade. Liam had been lucky enough to be taken on as an apprentice in three separate trades over the twelve year span and had utterly failed to establish himself in any of them.

Blacksmithing and masonry had been too demanding for him to spend more than six months in each, and after four years of learning to be a silversmith it was clear he lacked any formal discipline, and was immediately replaced. The vast majority of the money he had earned had come from inconsistent labor jobs. Teryn had, therefore, been responsible for earning the bulk of their income by starting as a laundress in the small manor of a local baronet. It had provided enough income to pay for a small hovel in the city and put some food on the table each night, but not much else.

After eleven years, Liam had expressed a great desire to leave the city and find

employment elsewhere.

"I cannot live a life of labor forever!" he'd exclaimed. "I want us to thrive, to succeed!"

Teryn had wanted to point out that, had he persevered with any of the trades in which he'd previously been apprenticed, they'd have already been successful for years, but she couldn't bring herself to say so. Liam was a sensitive sort and did not take criticism well. And so, after weeks of his complaints and profusions of restlessness, she had agreed to relocate. Destiny symbolized hope for them, a chance to be more than products of their past, but they had been unable to find employment. There was no local nobility or gentry who needed a laundress, neither Teryn nor Liam had any experience in farming, and no one hired out for manual labor. Months of living in an abandoned shed and sneaking produce from the farms had left them desperate. Liam found the flyer offering the reward and convinced her they could kill this animal.

"This is the key to our problems!" he had said. "A reward such as this would pay for a home nicer than either of us could ever wish for *and* feed us plentifully for months!"

"We will only get the reward once we've killed the beast," she had replied, "and neither of us knows how to use a weapon or even how to track!"

He had rolled his eyes in frustration. "Must you always be so negative? This is an opportunity too grand to shy away from, the likes of which will not come again."

"How are we to find and kill a creature so fearsome that the best hunters in

Destiny didn't survive their search?"

His confidence had been unwavering, and his explanations unending, though he had yet to answer her question. She had begged and pleaded with him to simply leave Destiny and seek refuge in a larger town with more employment opportunities, but he had sternly refused. He wasn't going to live another day of his life working for someone else's benefit, he had said, and she wasn't about to leave Destiny without him. Seeing as they had no other prospects, Teryn had reluctantly agreed to the hunt. Winter was rushing upon them; if they weren't going to leave, they would either freeze to death later, or die trying to find this horrible nuisance.

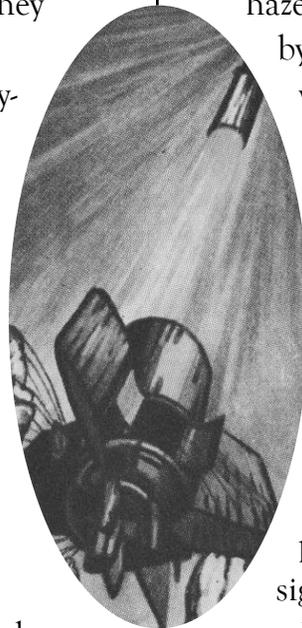
Thus, she was sitting high up in a tree by one of the farms least visited by the beast. She wore a dark-green dress with the skirt shortened to above her knees, and a pair of leather trousers underneath; on her feet she wore a worn-out pair of boots, and she held a bow in her hand, the quiver of arrows on her back. Liam had procured the weapon the day before, and she was fairly certain he'd stolen it. She had practiced with it for hours and only managed to learn how to successfully draw back the arrow enough that, when loosed, it didn't immediately fall to the ground. She had little-to-no aiming abilities and, due to being undernourished for months, no real power behind her less than efficient aim. Liam was in a tree about a mile away near the farm which had lost the most with nothing but a rusted sword, and no real skill besides brute strength. They each

watched to see if either farm would be attacked. If so, they would attempt to identify and, hopefully, kill the animal. Unfortunately, the fog afforded minimal visibility and the lightning which flashed every few moments only changed the fog from grey to white whenever it struck. Teryn didn't think she'd see anything if the beast attacked.

Night went on and thunder rolled across the sky. The owner of the farm closest to her had lit numerous torches surrounding his land, offering a flickering haze in the distance, but no actual light by which to see. Hours of utter silence went by. The forest should have been alive with the sounds of nocturnal life, but all was deathly quiet. How would she be able to fight against an animal that intimidated the entire forest?

The longer she sat and waited, the more nervous she became. She could only see about a yard ahead of her, which made her feel completely alone. Liam was supposed to signal if and when he saw or heard anything, and vice versa, but even if he did signal, how would she see it? Would he see her signal? What *was* her signal? Anything bright enough to alert him would also spook the beast. "This plan was poorly conceived..." she thought, wishing she were anywhere else.

Suddenly, an animal somewhere nearby let out a chilling cry of pain. It was so sudden, so loud, so unexpected, Teryn was violently startled. She jumped in her seat and lost her balance; she gasped as she fell sideways and dropped her bow to try and grab



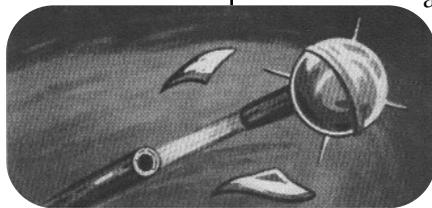
the branch. She missed and fell completely out of the tree, landing hard on her back. She grunted, lungs heavy with the sudden shock and lack of oxygen. Her eyes were wide with fear as she tried to catch her breath without making any noise, and failed. Being on the ground made her exceedingly uneasy. She coughed heavily and couldn't imagine that this went unnoticed by the beast which, with her luck, was sure to be nearby.

She grabbed her bow, strung an arrow and crouched quietly near the trunk of the tree from which she'd fallen. She was still wheezing and the sudden rush from falling caused her to tremble uncontrollably. Her eyes darted back and forth, looking for movement or Liam's signal. "Or was I to signal him?" she wondered, cursing to herself. Her heart was racing. Should she wait for Liam? How was she to know if he had or hadn't signaled? Perhaps she had missed his signal when she fell from the tree? What if he was now pursuing the beast alone, expecting her to join him? She took a deep breath, wishing she were dreaming, and began to move in the direction of the screaming animal, which had suddenly grown silent.

Teryn jogged through the night until she came to a fence, indicating that she was very near the farm. Every few posts of the fence carried a lit torch which did not work to improve visibility. It was enough, however, to give her the confidence to continue forward. She jogged along the fence line with the forest to her left, watching carefully for anything unusual. A few moments later she came to an

opening in the fence where boards had been broken. It was clear the beast had attempted to drag its prey over the fence. On the ground were drag marks, but no footprints to indicate what sort of animal this was. The drag marks went directly into the woods. Teryn looked around, even more unsure of what to do. The light of the torches offered a safety that the dark of the forest could not. She stood, frozen, by the fence. Her breathing was shallow and erratic and she was still trembling fearfully. She tried to calm herself, to keep her bow steady, but it was no use. She hoped and prayed for some sign from Liam, and a moment later, heard him shout her name in the distance. It sounded as if it came from the woods ahead of her. If he was already in the woods, he would be in great need of her assistance. He had always been there for her, she couldn't now leave him in darkness. Even though she was terrified for the sake of her only loved one, she darted into the forest.

Only after leaving the light from the torches did she realize just how much they had comforted her. Her eyes had become accustomed to the torch light, and now she had to strain them just to see a few feet in front of her. The fog, which had been incredibly dense beforehand, now began to disperse. Where before she had had to stoop low to the ground to see the drag marks, making her progress through the forest slow, now she could jog steadily through the trees. Ten minutes passed and Liam hadn't again called out. Teryn was terrified that he'd been caught by the beast. Each moment



that passed increased her fear. She was now deep in the woods, alone, and terrified for herself and for Liam. Tears filled her eyes. She hated herself for ever agreeing to such a plan in the first place and wished she had insisted they leave. None of this was worth whatever reward was being offered!

A moment later she came to an area near a waterfall next to the opening of a cave. The marks on the ground lead into the darkened entrance. Teryn's heart thundered; this was the beast's lair. She had no torch and was entirely without the confidence needed to go in. She feared that Liam might be in the cave, but without light to guide her steps, simply couldn't compel herself to move forward. "I could run to the fence, grab a torch off of one of the posts, and hurry back," she thought. It would take some time, but without more light to see by, she wouldn't do Liam much good anyway. She knew that, if he had been taken into the cave with whatever poor animal had fallen prey to the beast, her chances of saving him were slim. She also knew that by entering the cave she would, in all likelihood, be putting herself at great risk. But, despite the odds against her, she couldn't leave the man she loved behind. If there was a chance that she could save him, or kill the beast while it fed, she had to try. She nodded to herself and turned to make her way back to the torches.

"Light won't protect you, sweetling," came a female voice from behind her.

Teryn spun around, bow raised and arrow drawn. She could see no one. A flash of lightning illuminated the night and thunder danced across the sky. She heard laughter come from inside the cave and frowned.

Had she been pursuing humans all this time?

"Your weapons will be useless against us," a male voice said as three figures emerged from the cave.

Teryn couldn't think of what to do or say. Truth be told, she couldn't think at all. She was utterly dumbfounded. She had followed drag marks from the fence to the cave and not once had seen a single footprint. How would they have managed that? She eyed the figures warily, unnerved as they slowly advanced toward her. There were two female and one male. The male wore dark trousers and a matching tunic and was barefoot. He was tall and had short, black hair and a faint beard. His eyes were as gold and sparkled despite the lack of moonlight. The two females were also tall, and they each had long, curly brown hair. Their dresses, which were long and flowing, looked exactly the same in the darkness. They were long-sleeved and black. One of the females, who seemed to be older than the other two but had no physical characteristics of aging, had a long scar on her face and eyes of silver. The other female, the best looking of the two, had eyes of bronze. All three had sickeningly pale skin which almost appeared blue in the midnight darkness. They smiled meaningfully, their eyes glowing unnaturally.

"You're either courageous or suicidal to be here," said the male.

The female with bronze eyes let out a laugh which chilled Teryn's very blood. It was high and full, as if more than one individual had joined in her laughter, though she had laughed alone. "Courageous? Look at her! She's about to drop the bow!"

She and the male chuckled.

“Still, I think she was worth the wait,” said the male. “Do you not think so?”

“Yes,” the female with the scar replied, inhaling deeply through her nose. “I do. There’s a definite sense of complexity...a scent of the underdeveloped in her which I find most appealing.”

Teryn swallowed and tried to think of an escape plan. She began to back away, confused by the bizarre energy which seemed to surround them. She still didn’t understand how these three could have been responsible for the mass killing and stealing of livestock, nor how they managed it without leaving a single footprint to follow. They laughed again.

“We don’t leave footprints,” said the female without the scar.

Teryn shook her head in disbelief. Had they truly read her thoughts? *How* had they read her thoughts? Only faeries were known to have that ability, and even then very few of them did, and these three were clearly not faeries. They each cackled amusingly and slowly extended their canine teeth, which reached two inches out of their mouths. Teryn’s eyes widened as the realization hit her; she had, unknowingly, been tracking vampires.

“Teryn!” Liam’s voice snapped her out of her frozen state, a string of hope suddenly surging within her.

Without a thought she turned and darted into the woods, screaming Liam’s name in response. She didn’t see any of the forest that passed her as she ran; all she wanted was to get as far away from the evil creatures as possible. The endless echo of their laughter filled her ears as she ran. The

distance she put between herself and the undead didn’t seem to lessen the intensity of their amusement. It was as if they could still see her, even though she wasn’t in their direct line of sight. Liam continued to call out to her, but she couldn’t seem to figure out from which direction his voice was coming. Her lack of common sense had led her into the woods in the first place, and her horrible sense of direction had led her to the cave rather than to Liam, and was still keeping her from the one person in the world who cared whether she lived or not. She called out to him and heard him respond, but she thought he sounded farther away than he had previously, and so was forced to slow to a halt and listen carefully. The laughter of the vampires had stopped and the fog had almost cleared, but it had once again begun to rain and lightning lit up the darkness. Teryn looked around, suddenly very aware that she had only run deeper into the forest and away from the presence of others which would, likely, have been her greatest defense. She would have cried out for Liam again, but on the slim chance that she had actually escaped the vampires, decided against it. Even if she had outrun them, she still faced the issue that she had no idea where she was, or how to return to Destiny, and the odds that she would stumble into the vampires again while attempting to flee the woods were not in her favor. She wished Liam were with her; he always made her feel safe.

“You don’t need him,” came a female voice from behind her.

Teryn cursed and spun around, straining her eyes to look for the vampires in the

darkness. She attempted to string an arrow in her bow, only to realize that she'd lost each and every arrow in her attempt to flee. Only the female vampire with the scar stood before her, fangs bared and smoky wings unfurled. Teryn backed away, trembling and confused. She felt like she should plead for mercy and opened her mouth to do so, but words wouldn't come. With each step backward, the vampire moved forward.

"You're stronger on your own, Teryn."

Teryn froze and knit her eyebrows together in confusion. "You...You know my name?" she asked, her voice shaky.

The female vampire smiled, but said nothing. Teryn stared at her for a moment, unsure of what she'd meant. Although the vampire's teeth were bared, she'd made no aggressive movements toward her. And, when she thought about it, none of them had indicated aggression of any kind toward her. It was enough to give her pause, though did little to negate her fear.

"We are not your enemies, Teryn. We mean you no harm. You need not fear us," she said, her voice calm and even empathetic.

Teryn felt oddly comforted by the vampire's words and tone of voice. The initial shock that she'd tracked vampires into the woods on her own had begun to lessen. The fact that the other two vampires weren't within sight helped lessen her anxiety, and the longer she was with the woman, the more comfortable she became. Even the surroundings seemed less ominous. It was as if the darkness, which had before seemed empty and all-consuming, was now made peaceful by the vampire's presence; it was as if the night, like an old

friend, was offering her comfort, solace and acceptance. Moreover, in her silver eyes Teryn thought she saw a semblance of familial recognition. The vampire's eyes glimmered and her smile grew.

"I would have come to you long ago, sweetling, but I am tied to the vampiric bloodline of this region, and had to wait until you passed within our jurisdiction. Twelve years was a long time to wait, but it was Time that brought you here, and for that I am thankful."

Teryn furrowed her eyebrows. "You've been waiting for me?"

She nodded.

"W-Why? I'm...not anyone special..."

The female vampire went to speak again, but hissed when she was interrupted by the sound of Liam's voice calling for Teryn. Startled by the vicious look on the woman's face, she turned to run in the direction from which his voice had come, but the female vampire was suddenly clutching her arm, her skin like ice to the touch.

"Do not!" she said, her silver eyes alight with concern.

Teryn hesitated a moment, but when the female vampire didn't offer further explanation, she turned and ran into the woods to find Liam. He called out for her again and she responded. A few moments later they found their way to each other; Liam's hazel eyes were wide with fear and disbelief.

"We need to get out of here!" he exclaimed. "We weren't prepared for this!"

She nodded and looked around, though she wasn't entirely sure she was ready to leave. Her conversation with the

vampire, albeit brief, had raised certain questions and she didn't think she could leave the woods without answers.

"What do we do?" Liam said, apparently unaware that she was much less afraid than he.

"If we can find our way back to the fence, we'll be less than five minutes outside of Destiny. I doubt the vampires will follow us into the middle of the village," she said reluctantly. She was beginning to wonder if the vampires even meant them harm at all. They had, after all, only been feeding on livestock when there was an entire village of people nearby on which to feed.

"How are we going to find our way back to the fence?" Liam exclaimed. "I'm not a tracker!"

At that moment, laughter filled the air and a symphony of voices echoed off the trees. Liam cursed and backed away a bit, his eyes wide with horror. All three vampires landed before them a moment later, their giant wings unfurled in wispy clouds of grey as a single bolt of lightning struck a nearby tree, setting it ablaze. Liam and Teryn squinted as their eyes adjusted to the sudden light.

"What do we do?" Liam whispered.

The female with the bronze eyes breathed in deeply. "He stinks of cowardice. It makes up the very blood in his veins," she snarled.

"So it does," muttered the male.

"Such an intoxicating scent!" exclaimed the female with the scar. "All the more reason for Teryn to leave him to destiny."

"What do we do?" Liam asked again, ever frantic.

Teryn glanced at him; incredible fear lit up his eyes in the firelight. She looked back and forth between the vampires and the man she loved. He had always been the one to find solutions to their problems, he'd always had answers. With him she'd felt safe, and now, seeing the fear in his eyes, she wondered why she'd ever placed her confidence in him. The vampires had attacked neither of them, even though they could have done so many times during the course of the night, and yet Liam had been reduced to nothing more than a coward.

Teryn wondered how she'd not seen the truth before.

"Maybe you should run?"

Teryn suggested, staring at the vampires.

Liam didn't need the suggestion twice. He turned and ran into the darkness. Teryn, however, didn't immediately follow. The female vampire with the scar offered her a smile that felt almost kind...loving, even. It filled her with peace and a sense of belonging. But her love for Liam compelled her to move away and, after a few mere seconds of hesitation, she turned

and ran. The light from the fire faded swiftly, engulfing them in darkness once again. Liam seemed more concerned with putting as much distance between himself and the



vampires, than he was with keeping himself and Teryn together. Teryn's eyes were still adjusting to the darkness and she couldn't see him very clearly. Afraid that he would outrun her and leave her behind, she tried to run faster. She was incredibly tired from all of the previous running and was rapidly losing stamina. Her chest burned and her side ached, but she forced herself to continue. Liam had run so quickly, he had disappeared from sight. She was about to call out to him when a horrible pain shot through her foot and she fell to the ground.

Teryn let out a scream and looked down. Tears filled her eyes. Her foot had been caught in a hunter's trap; the teeth dug into the skin of her ankle, the jaws locked into place. She would never get out of it without assistance. She cried out for Liam as the vampires landed next to her. A moment later, Liam ran into view but froze when he saw the vampires.

"My foot is caught!" Teryn cried, trying to crawl toward him. "Help me!"

He looked down at her and then back at the vampires, clearly conflicted. Teryn watched his face as he stared at the undead creatures before them, and her heart sank. She knew the look that passed over his face; his features hardened and the emotion in his eyes stiffened. He was going to run away. Teryn shook her head as he looked back down at her.

"Don't," she said, her voice cracking.

"I'm sorry," he said sadly.

"Don't, Liam!" she pleaded.

But it was no use. He turned and ran into the darkness, and she knew he wouldn't be back. Through her tears, she watched

as Liam's figure disappeared into the woods.

"Liam!" she screamed, sobbing deeply. She couldn't believe what was happening! He wasn't *really* sacrificing her to save himself? Anger flooded her being. She momentarily forgot about the wretched, unbearable pain in her foot and slammed her fist into the dirt. "You bastard! You can't leave me like this!"

She was met with silence. Her heart broke and turned cold as her only semblance of love and family disappeared into the night. He hadn't looked back. It had been a chillingly calculated decision. The man she had believed would always protect her, the one who'd promised to give his life for her if need be, had betrayed her. Memories of their glorious days, and many vigorous nights, together, flooded into her memory, contaminated by the pain and hatred coursing through her veins. She looked up at the vampires who stood and stared silently. The eyes of the female with the scar were filled with tears, and Teryn couldn't understand why.

"What am I to you that you would care for me so?" Teryn asked bitterly, trying to remain as still as possible to limit the pain in her leg.

"Mothers hate to see their children hurt and disappointed, even if it will make them stronger in the end," the vampire said as she knelt next to Teryn.

Teryn stared at her in disbelief and was about to protest, but the realization washed over her all at once. The scar that ran across the vampire's face had mutilated her appearance, but as Teryn recalled her mother's face, the resemblance was incredible.

Tears filled Teryn's eyes. She wanted to speak, but could think of nothing to say. Before she could respond, the other two vampires moved in. Their teeth, still extended, now dripped with a yellow liquid that sizzled where it landed and consumed all it touched. Her mother crouched next to her and ran her fingers through Teryn's brown hair; her skin tingled at the chill of the vampire's skin against her own.

"I've been waiting for this day for twelve years. In a few moments, you will be one of us and everything will be made right," she said, tilting Teryn's neck to the side, exposing the rich veins under the skin where she bit into her sensitive flesh and allowed the liquid to flow.

The instant sensation was a fierce burning. Teryn screamed in pain, and then the air was suddenly stolen from her lungs. She fought to free herself, overwhelmed by the pain, but the undead being was far too strong. A moment later she felt the same sensation in her arm as the male pierced her skin with his fangs. Tears fell silently down her cheeks. Her chest burned as she struggled to breathe, but no matter how deeply she tried to suck in air, she found no relief. She kicked and pulled, her eyes wide with pain, but they held tight. Her skin was pierced a third time, in the other arm, by the female with the bronze eyes. Teryn's vision began to blur. Her heart, which had been racing from the terror wrecking her body, began to slow. The pain in her chest faded. She went limp. Life was leaking from her body. Seconds later her vision went black, and she knew nothing but silent, empty darkness.

The darkness embraced her, and she it.

For a time, everything was calm, peaceful. She knew nothing outside of herself. It was as if she was caught in a deep, dreamless sleep. Slowly, Teryn's senses began to awaken. Eyes closed, she felt the earth beneath her body and against her skin; each individual pine needle, each pebble, each blade of grass...she knew them all. She could pick them out and identify them, one from the other. Then the sounds of the forest filled her ears; each leaf brushed by the passing wind, the footsteps of each scurrying animal, the gentle plop of raindrops, began to coax her out of the darkness. The scent of the forest was next, and it was overridden by the immediate and intoxicating smell of blood...warm and thick, pumping through the veins of thousands of creatures. The hunger was overwhelming and drew her into the moonlight. Her eyes opened then as she leapt to her feet; where her eyes once had been brown, they were now a brilliant copper with silver, gold, and bronze flecks. She remembered the bites before the darkness and looked down at her arms: there were no marks to be seen. She looked down at the foot which had been caught in the trap: it was whole, as if the trap had never touched it. She looked to her left where her mother stood, eyes alight from the brilliance of the silver moon.

"What do we do now?" Teryn asked, her voice ever so much more alluring and musical.

The woman smiled. "Now we hunt." ❖

“THE EPIC QUEST OF THE THREE ARMS”

by BRETT PETERSON

Part I. The Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine

It was too late. The panel designed to protect the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine’s Ununinium Drive had blown off as soon as it left the launch pad. When it reached the Singularity at the center of the universe, the exposed U-Drive would detonate and cancel out the Big Bang. Doctor James Hammond Morphor was dumbfounded. How could this have happened? He bolted across the patio and through the open screen door, nearly tripping over his own beard which had tangled itself around his ankle. He flew up the stairs and into his office, dove into a heap of papers and old sticky notes and pored over his calculations. He couldn’t find a single thing wrong with the schematics. How could the panel have come loose like that?

In the corner of his eye, something twinkled. It was a screw the size of a piece of pet food he had forgotten to twist into one of the panel’s four cylindrical holes. He ran the palm of his hand down his forehead and bulbous nose. All the years he’d studied at Winston University and the three PhD’s he’d gotten as a result of sleepless weeks spent guzzling pots of black espresso had been for naught. His crowning

achievement would ensure that no one would accomplish anything ever again. Despair clawed at his stomach but for some reason, he began to smile.

“Oh, how funny,” his chest flab jiggled as he laughed. “Existence is doomed all because of a lost screw. Not a nuclear holocaust, asteroid or runaway greenhouse effect, just a darn screw the size of something that holds a TV remote together. I suppose you could say I *screwed* it up for all of us.”

The Doctor kept making screw puns until he was laughing so hard he needed to lie down and crack open a bottle of merlot.

A couple million light years from Earth, the ARM continued to cruise toward the absolute center. In addition to the U-Drive, the Doctor had instilled within it the capability of thought. It used a process similar to Gematria, a meditative practice employed by Jewish Kabbalists. They would divide passages from the Torah into individual letters and rearrange them in hopes of uncovering secret messages. In the case of the ARM, the characters of the English alphabet were placed in a digital randomization engine, shaken and dumped out like Scrabble pieces. It repeated this process for eons, trying every combination of letters

imaginable. Most of them were gibberish, but on rare occasions, words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, entire books and even encyclopedias were formed, given a mistake or two.

After traveling for three billion years, the ARM successfully, (albeit by chance) composed an exact replica of *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* by sociologist Madan Sarup. However, in the ultimate paragraph of page 105, the sentence, “[i]f one looks at the work of the post-structuralists such as Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and others, one can see the influence of Nietzsche’s philosophy,” (Sarup) was replaced with “shubab-bu, nickel dime panst669 what wh5at 7 ?j ?(ss 9)#ddamun dersta nd ing,,wishful lllalrth ipp6 11Xq#3–sandwak gkl _lk orcutt41 99v9,” (Petersen).

It wasn’t until the ARM had journeyed for 41.4 billion years that it came to realize what it was doing. Never before had it questioned its motives; it just jumbled letters for the sake of jumbling. Now it began to wonder.

Why am I traveling all this way? What am I supposed to do when I get to the center of the universe? And why am I asymmetrical? Its body resembled a butterfly yo-yo except that its right side was significantly larger than its left.

As it pondered the shape of its body, something else occurred to it.

I’m only asymmetrical because I assumed the front part of me was facing the direction I was heading. But I don’t have eyes or any kind of facial features to

make that distinction. If I orient my awareness of motion to one of my sides, it can be as though I’m moving *sideways* through space-time. That way, I’ll be symmetrical because my right and left sides will be even!

It shifted its focus so that its larger side was now its front.

Having this as my front is much better, because now I have a bigger brain!

A bolt of intelligence surged through the ARM’s mind. It felt capable of changing the universe with a single thought.

Okay. So now, I’m moving sideways. But really, that can’t be proven one way or the other. What if I’m not really moving at all? I can’t be moving toward the *center of the universe* anyway, because the center was *within me* all along! Either that or there is *no center*. Perhaps everything with self-awareness acts as *its own center*. In that case, there is no ultimate origin of anything; just a picture painted by the senses that appears differently to each individual observer.

The ARM became aware of something else. It wasn’t drifting through outer space at all. It was sound asleep in a bed in some far-off corner of reality with overstuffed pillows and plush animals. There was a tiger, a walrus and a beanbag creature from a popular Japanese animated show back on Earth. It was comfortable and quiet, like a reflecting pool above which a human heart floated, dripping with condensation, creating ripples with a *plink-plink* sound that could soothe even the most barbed-wire entangled, frustrated soul, writhing and thrashing sleepless on a bed of splintered wood and nails. This was the place that the ARM

wanted to be. To stay forever. To close its eyes and breathe in the cool fog of the hidden grotto it had discovered. To rest. To be centered. To dream.

41.4 billion years earlier, Dr. Morphor shot upward from sleep in a panic. He had passed out drunk on the couch.

“Is it over? Are we dead?” His eyes darted around the room. The empty merlot bottle had fallen onto the carpeted floor. The TV was still on. The idiotic drone of some daytime talk show was barely audible above the chirping birds perched in the tree in the front yard.

“Whew!” The Doctor wiped sweat from his forehead. Everything was fine. The ARM had not caused the end of existence unless, of course, it had sent this region of space into a pocket universe. But that wasn’t likely. The ARM had not been designed to do such a thing. Its intent was only to...

“Wait, what was its intent again?” He ran his fingers through his beard. “I can’t remember for the life of me.”

He reached down, grasped the bottle and put it to his lips. Not a single drop left.

“Damn!” he tossed it across the room and it shattered on the kitchen floor. “I studied all those years and built the thing from scratch. It took me ten years to com-

plete, but why can’t I remember what it was supposed to do? Maybe I just got so wrapped up in the construction that I forgot the most important detail.”

He sighed. “No, that can’t be. I feel like I remembered last night. Now it’s as if that piece of information was excised from my head like a tumor or bad tooth. I know it had the capability to destroy the universe, but why did I build it? It must have been for a good reason. The University okayed the project after all. Was it a weapon? A satellite? God damn it, why can’t I remember!?” He slammed his fist on the coffee table.

“Wait a minute,” his eyes lit up. “My notes! It’s gotta be in my notes, blueprints and stuff, the purpose of the thing!” He clambered off the couch and bounded up the steps to his office.

His heart nearly stopped when he opened the door. There were no piles of papers, no sticky notes, no diagrams stenciled on easels, and no shelves full of

scientific books. Instead, the office resembled that of a fastidious scholar. There were leather-bound volumes of Chaucer and Milton neatly arranged on shelves next to paperback editions of Shakespeare’s Comedies and several books on literary crit-



icism and theory. The desk was organized and there were several manuscripts, apparently written by students, weighed down with a black stapler. He noticed a blank piece of letterhead with a curious name in place of his own; Dr. James H. Morton.

“Morton?” The Doctor rubbed the flesh around his eyes, “is that my name? Why did I think I was Morphor? Who am I? I thought I was Dr. Morphor: astro-physicist? No, wait. What did I get my degree in?”

His eyes gravitated to the plaque on the wall opposite the desk.

“University of Saint Vincent, Heldeberg Valley New York,” he read: “upon the recommendation of the graduate faculty, we bestow upon James Hammond Morton the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.”

“University of Saint Vincent? Doctor of Philosophy? But I went to...”

Then it hit him. He could not remember where he went to school or what for.

Upon searching the room further, he gathered that he had been an English professor for fifteen years at the school he’d gotten his Doctorate from. He’d taught undergraduate classes centered on questions such as ‘what constitutes literature?’ and would have his students write theses arguing why their favorite books, comics, movies or video games should be considered art worthy of study by academia. He’d been respected by his students and found value in almost anything they produced. This resulted in him being a pushover when it came to grading, much to the cha-

grin of the Dean of Arts and Humanities.

“But what happened last night to make me forget all this?” He threw up his arms and let them fall limply to his sides.

A shrill noise sounded from the kitchen. His cat Cynthia was meowing.

“I have a cat? Since when?”

He remembered the name Cynthia, but he was pretty sure that was the name of his ex-wife. He shuffled down the stairs and into the kitchen. Pieces of dry cat food crunched under the soles of his bare feet. Cynthia, a golden-furred tabby trotted up to him holding something in her mouth.

“Whatcha got there?” he stooped down to pet her and examine the thing she carried in her teeth. It was a string, and on the end of the string was a rainbow-colored butterfly yo-yo.

Part II. The Artificial Rainbow Machine

The Artificial Rainbow Machine sat by the entrance of 1999 Iceberg Way; a deli that specialized in wholesale polar bear meat. The ARM’s job was to produce artificial rainbows to brighten the mood of the people who lived and worked at the North Pole. The machine was constructed by arguably the most famous North Pole resident: Santa Claus himself. Santa was the Mayor of the North Pole as well as C.E.O. and Chief of Research and Development for Christmas Inc.

Once a drifter and hobo who rode trains across the U.S. grain belt, Nicholas Cagnina had ventured to the Pole in a state of pure despair with a lack of desire to go

anywhere else. He figured if he couldn't find Santa's workshop hidden beneath the ice, accessible only by relating a password to some elfin sentry, the only thing to do would be to let the polar winds freeze his blood vessels and stop his beating heart.

As expected, there were no elves or reindeer or jolly bearded men to greet him when he arrived at the Pole. He simply stood ankle deep in a snowdrift, alone and shivering, teeth chattering louder with each passing gust of icy wind. He surveyed the white world that would be his tomb. It was nothing but a cold, sterile emptiness. Perfect for a guy like him. He looked down at his belly which had grown fat from downing entire bottles of Chyden's whiskey each day during his time riding the rails. His beard, he noticed, had gotten incredibly long and white.

He might as well have *been* Santa Claus at that point. The thought made him chuckle despite the shards of suicidal ideation inching towards his heart. The chuckle escalated into a laugh, and the laugh became a full-blown 'ho-ho-ho!' His belly shook and he swore he saw sugar plums dancing a tribal funeral rite on the horizon. They must be mourning the death of my old ways, he figured. At that moment, Nicholas Cagnina *became* Santa Claus. He'd been destined for this role since he rode out of his mother's womb on a one-horse open sleigh.

For the next twelve years, instead of resigning himself to a slow, cold death, he

built his empire of benevolence. He befriended and named the wild reindeer and constructed igloos for the sugar plums to live in. As it turned out, they were mutated humans; by-products of Soviet nuclear testing during the 1950's that had gone undetected by U.S. intelligence. These atomic lepers had been sent to the Pole to be euthanized by the cold. St. Nick, however, took these purple masses of flesh under his wing offered them new lives as his elves.

With the help of the elves, he constructed the factory he was to call his workshop, a place where he would manufacture toys (not iPods, smartphones or video games, but actual wooden trains, dolls and jack-in-the-boxes) for kids to open on Christmas morning. On Christmas Eve he would distribute them to kids all over the world, especially in places like Somalia, North Korea and the ISIS-run bomb shelters of the Middle East. He would give to them the kind of Christmas he had once had. That is, before his parents stopped giving gifts.

Mr. and Mrs. Cagnina had not done this out of spite or lack of love; it was his father's way of getting Nicholas who was thirty-five, unemployed, a virgin and a homebody, to seek a life outside of weekly band rehearsal with his pot-smoking friends. On Friday nights, the band would practice their noise/deathcore act which sounded to Nicholas' mother like someone brushing a feral cat with a belt sander. Nicholas would pluck one string on his bass and his friends would scream into a microphone and loop cascades of guitar

feedback through a foot switch. The band would play for only twenty minutes and then they'd spend the rest of the night watching Ren and Stimpy and taking hits from the guitar player's purple Love Bong. The project would take on a different moniker every practice. One week, it would be *Jelly*, next it would be *Autistic Prostitute*, and then *The Blue Dweebs*, and so forth.

After several years of making toys, the elves grew despondent and talked of throwing themselves into the Arctic Ocean as the Soviets had long ago expected them to. Acknowledging their misery, St. Nick came up with an idea to brighten their lives. He had them construct a device out of wood, mirrors and convex lenses intended for kaleidoscopes. He blessed it with a little Christmas magic and the twenty-foot cylindrical machine began to spin and spurt rainbows in all directions like a unicorn with the runs. At the sight of the rainbows, the elves' depression gave way to an ecstasy greater than that of a child beholding presents under the Christmas tree. The machine was placed outside of the Iceberg Deli in the center of town, a favorite gathering place of the elves when they were off-duty.

The machine spun and shot rainbow magic into the elves' hearts for weeks and weeks. This motivated them to continue inventing new lines of toys such as the iPad Wooden, the screen of which featured a holographic kitten. They made ear buds out of marshmallow and attached them to

wires of cherry licorice. The elves worked tirelessly under the streaks of rainbow that filled the skies and made the air seem slightly less frigid. It was as if springtime had permanently arrived at the top of the world.

One day, the machine stopped. The rainbows ceased and the elves could feel the malformed veins in their heads start to ache again. St. Nick examined the machine inside and out, but could not find anything wrong with it. He asked the elf in charge of the novelty electronics department for a pair of the marshmallow ear buds. St. Nick plugged the buds into a jack in the machine's side.

"What is the matter?" he asked it. "Are you not satisfied with the work you've been doing for our community?"

"That's not it," the machine answered. "It's just that I miss my brothers. I'd always hoped I'd be reunited with them someday."

"Brothers?" St. Nick seemed somewhat gaffed. "I don't recall making any other Artificial Rainbow Machines."

"You didn't make them," it said. "My brothers exist in two separate dimensions. One is the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine who was built by a man with an identity crisis. He's in a dimension to the left of this one. The other is the Arbitrary Rainbow Machine. I don't know much about him but I am pretty sure he's somewhere to the right of here."

"How can we possibly find them?" St. Nick grumbled, "I don't believe our society has reached the technological breakthrough

which makes inter-dimensional travel possible.”

“That’s easy,” The Artificial Rainbow Machine laughed. “Use the magic of Christmas. You are Santa Claus aren’t you?”

St. Nick snorted, shaking icicles loose from the awning of the deli. “That is true. Wait just a moment, I might have an idea.”

“What’s that?” said the Artificial Rainbow Machine.

“Rudolph’s nose. If I can harness the power of its glow, perhaps breaching dimensional fabric would be possible.”

“Right on!” The Machine seemed to smile.

After weeks of research and drawing blueprints, St. Nick and the elves came up with a potential way to penetrate the ‘wall’ separating their universe from the one they wished to enter.

All nine reindeer were hitched up with Rudolph in front. St. Nick, decked in his red suit and cap, hoisted himself and the Artificial Rainbow Machine into his sleigh.

“On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen! On Comet, on Cupid, on Donner and Blitzen!”

Rudolph’s nose had been fitted with a wreath capable of amplifying the Power of Christmas by 250 percent. With all the joy and good tidings of the Christmas Spirit rolling through his mind like a snowball, Rudolph focused the glow of his nose through the center of the wreath and produced a laser powerful enough to cut a

hole in the dimensional membrane. No holiday miracle since the discovery of reindeer flight in the nineteenth century had been more profound than what was achieved that night.

Part III. The Arbitrary Rainbow Machine

Bradley Biggins’ legs were going numb from supporting his laptop. Blessed with an uncanny amount of energy that morning, he wrote poem after poem about rainbows.

*Arbitrary rainbows stuffed in a urinal.
Serve me well as I wander through Hell
Gnawing on a white scorpion
With a side of time coated in tinfoil
Wondering why I have to live without the smell
Of lemon pledge and the blood of the moon
Offering milk and broken water
To the you that exists in my mind
Reminding me of the hours I waited
In a Styrofoam room for my thoughts to flower
On a threadbare mattress
While drinking glasses explode
And the Animaniacs bounce on trampolines
On channel 23.*

Satisfied with his poetic exploits for the moment, he decided to take a piss and comb his parents’ fridge for something to drink.

Once settled with an Arnold Palmer, he opened his Word document and noticed a paragraph that he himself did not write.

“Hello?” It read. “This is Santa Claus from a dimension outside of your own. Who is this that I am speaking to? I’m not

sure, but I think we're lost in a sort of digital space with a bunch of numbers and lines of code. Can you help us out, whoever this presence is that we're feeling? We're looking for something called the Arbitrary Rainbow Machine. Could you maybe direct us toward such a thing if it exists in this dimension?"

Bradley realized at once what was happening. *He*, Bradley was the creator of the Santa Claus character who was addressing him. Three days ago, using Microsoft Word, he had created the story of Nicholas Cagnina, the mutated sugar plum elves, the setting of the North Pole, and the whole scenario these characters were embroiled in.

Bradley, being a fan and author of fiction that tackled existential and metaphysical concepts, understood that somehow, in defiance of logic, characters he had invented were trying to contact him. He had spent many sleepless nights contemplating the infiniteness of the multiverse and had concluded that just because human minds had made it up, didn't mean it didn't exist somewhere. The universe was a vast place. It was the only logical conclusion he could draw.

"Hello Santa, this is Bradley," he typed. "How are you?"

"We're fine," Santa replied, "but we're a little lost. Like I said before, we're looking for something called the Arbitrary Rainbow Machine. Could you maybe help us search for it?"

Bradley thought for a second. Then it became clear.

"Santa," he typed, "the machine you're looking for is *me*. I'm the creator of Arbitrary Rainbows. See the poetry I've written?" he highlighted it with his cursor, "I say it's about rainbows, but really it's not about anything. I guess it's about whatever the reader wants it to be about. The images and metaphors I come up with are completely arbitrary. There are no hidden meanings or intentions behind them. They just sound good to me. That's all."

"Oh," Santa seemed disappointed, "well, that's good I suppose. But the reason we're on this journey is that we have one more thing to find; the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine. Would you happen to know anything about it?"

Bradley laughed out loud. "Know about it? I created that too. It's in another story which, incidentally, is now part of *this* story. How about I write you into that story along with an avatar of myself and the Artificial Rainbow Machine? I can do that easily. In fact, I have complete control over the outcome of your predicament. I'm even creating this conversation we're having. All you are is a projection of my personality with some variables changed to make it seem like you're a different entity. But when it comes down to it, you are a part of me. Sort of like how the human race is really just six billion facets of one consciousness. The world soul, I guess you could call it."

"Are you God then?" Santa seemed genuinely uneasy and in awe at the same time.

"Yeah, I suppose so," said Bradley. "I

never thought about it that way before. I created you and your universe, so it's not much of a stretch to say that I am God to you. Perhaps the whole idea of Godhood is relative to which perspective you're viewing reality from. The relationships between beings of higher and lower orders are often believed to be fixed, but I know for a fact that's not true. They are in constant flux. Fluctuations like this explain perfectly what happens after one dies. Death is a shift in the binary relationship between one level of being and another. When one dies, one transcends their ant farm existence and adopts a more omniscient point of view. And, just like in the world of humans and animals, it is the higher being's responsibility to intervene only when necessary and to refrain from cruel acts such as burning anthills or breeding cattle for the purpose of slaughter via the factory farm system."

"But what about the Artificial?" Santa began, but Bradley cut him off.

"Being in control of every aspect of your life, I could have you tortured or killed at any time, but I won't. Karma won't let me do it. Because I'm a moral person, I feel that I should give you the type of life that I'd want for myself; a pleasant, happy life. I mean, who knows. If I did that for you, perhaps the person sitting at their computer typing the story of *my* life would do the same."

A tense silence followed.

"So you're saying you'll help us?"

"Absolutely," said Bradley, "I'll combine your story with that of the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine and write

myself in as well."

Part IV. The Combination of the Three ARMs

Despite Bradley's intention to complete the story right then and there, he wouldn't get started on it until nearly a year later. On March twentieth, 2014 at 5:18 in the morning, strung out on Red Bull with neurons dancing the flamenco, he decided to create a scene featuring the Asymmetrical, Artificial and Arbitrary Rainbow Machines. Where should the scene take place? The first thing that came to Bradley's head was a beach somewhere in Mexico.

St. Nick and his sleigh team, the Artificial Rainbow Machine, the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine and an avatar of Bradley blipped into existence on a beach in Mexico. They stood out like sore Caucasian thumbs among the locals and the masses of tanned college kids cheering on volleyball matches between shirtless dudes and bikini-clad girls. Since the *real* Bradley, the Author, the Creator of Arbitrary Rainbows (whose real name must never be spoken or written down) had to remain in his own dimension to type the rest of the story, he sent an avatar of himself to the beach where (hopefully) the plot thread concerning the reunion of the three ARMs would be resolved.

"Ah," the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine pulled up an empty beach chair and donned a pair of aviators, "now *this* is truly the center of the universe."

"It certainly is," St. Nick had removed

his coat and undershirt and was propositioning coeds for a rubdown. “I’ll take sunny Mexico any day over being stuck in that digital purgatory ... all those ones and zeroes ... brrrr!”

“How did you survive? Did you have to eat the reindeer?” One of the ARM’s colored bands curled upward, approximating a smirk.

“No,” Santa sighed, “it never came to that. Since we had entered a digital space, our bodies were converted into data. The good thing about being data is that you can do almost anything. If you get hungry or thirsty, you can reprogram yourself to survive on simple five-bit strings rather than the complex codes that make up things like hamburgers and bottles of soda.”

“Very interesting,” the ARM squirted sun block from a purple bottle and applied it liberally to its aching U-Drive. “You wanna hear my story?”

“Sure, I guess,” Santa yawned and cracked his neck.

“I was built by a scientist named Dr. Morphor,” the ARM began, “to find the center of the universe. However, because he was in such a rush, he forgot to install a screw in the panel designed to protect my Ununinium Drive from the elements. Morphor believed that contact between my U-Drive and the Singularity would destroy everything.

“But after more than 40 billion years of contemplation, I discovered that he had been wrong

about the whole notion of the center. The ‘center’ is not a place, but a state of mind in which you are content with yourself, your surroundings and your path in life. As long as you’re centered, the universe falls into place around you. The moment this dawned on me, there was a Shift in the space-time continuum. My attainment of total peace and centeredness altered the subjective reality of every conscious being, causing their overall circumstances to change for the better. However, due to Ununinium contamination, these realities didn’t turn out completely perfect.

“Morphor, whose real name was Morton, had always wanted to be an English professor. He chose a career in physics because he figured that’s where the money was. The Shift altered his timeline and allowed him to pursue what he loved, but the Ununinium muddled his memories and his sense of who he was. You were unhappy as a hobo, and the Shift granted



your wish to become Santa Claus, something you'd always wanted to do since you were a child. But again, the presence of Ununium made it so that the sugar plum elves required the Artificial Rainbow Machine in order to work happily. Only after the three of us ARMs merge will Morphor's mistake be rectified."

St. Nick had tuned out a while ago. A girl who had been eyeing him for the last several minutes was coming his way.

"What are you doin' here Santa Claus?" said the girl, whose afro was adorned with wooden beads. Her ill-fitting green bikini top kept slipping off. "I'll rub you down hun," she petted his hairy shoulder, "as long as you promise to bring me a Lexus for Christmas," she winked.

"Ho-ho!" St. Nick could hardly conceal the raging candy cane in his trousers, "you've certainly been a good girl this year."

"Hold it just a minute there, Sandy Claws!" snapped the Artificial Rainbow Machine.

Santa nearly dropped the bottle of lotion.

"Don't forget, we're not here to party. We've got to merge so that the elves can be happy, and everyone's reality can be ideal, right?"

"Now, *you* hold it just a minute," St. Nick scoffed at the ARM. "Something doesn't add up. If the three of you merge, how will that bring happiness to the elves? How can you be in two places at once?"

"Were you paying attention or just playing with yourself?" Bradley sneered. "The Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine literally

just explained how we're going to fix this. Once we merge, the elves won't need artificial rainbows."

St. Nick grumbled and stroked his beard.

The girl was now clinging to the arm of a guy pouring wine into peoples' mouths from a plastic bag.

"Can you tell the *real* Bradley to either to send me back to the North Pole or give me a bottle of tequila and a good girl to sit on my lap until the ARMs fix reality?"

"If it'll keep Christmas alive." Bradley snapped his fingers.

A bottle of José Cuervo appeared in Santa's left hand, and a topless girl in a red bikini bottom jumped into his arms.

"Ho, ho, HO!" Santa's face became red as a turnip. "I said 'good' but naughty is fine too!"

Bradley and the other two ARMs looked at each other.

"Ready to unify?" said Bradley.

Both of them nodded.

The three of them leaped into the air and fused together in a fantastic display of lasers, pyrotechnics, beeps, bleeps and sputters like a supercomputer blossoming out of the forehead of a prismatic R2-D2, spilling fractals, geodes, diodes and cathodes onto roads of rainbow ribbons spiraling into the hearts of teenage lovers fucking in hotel rooms all over the globe. The resulting new form was a cross between a ray gun, kaleidoscope and reel-to-reel projector. In a robotic voice that felt somehow both gratifying and comforting, it declared itself to be the Arbiter of All Rainbow Dreams,

Visions And Realities Known. The AARDVARK screened the following poem onto a cloud above the beach:

*“Endings sometimes feel like beginnings.
The ends we’ve strived for return
And loop themselves through our hair
Like rainbows secreted by the late summer sky
Once celebrated, now forgotten
Buried in urns sitting lonely as pie crusts
On a table to become stale
As the death knells of static bands
Tracking the Eastern bloc with antennae
Wiggling like worms beneath an anthill
Into which the sounds of pen and ink flow
Like dots connecting the dreams of puzzle pieces
To flowers blooming with a sinister kind of eternity
Wrapped in fast food burger tissue paper.”*

The AARDVARK zapped a hole in the sky in blasted through in a burst of rainbow fire.

“And awa-ay they go-ho-ho!” Santa had downed three-fourths of the bottle and was all but passed out on the beach chair where the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine had been sitting. The party was winding down, and a custodian humming a nameless tune was fishing used condoms, cigarette butts and someone’s missing Red Sox cap out of the pool with a net attached to an eight foot pole.

Part V. An AARDVARK and a Coffee Machine Walk into an Epilogue

A week had passed since Dr. Morton lost his memories. It was the night before the first day of the Fall semester, and he

was scrambling to prepare a lesson on a subject he knew nothing about.

“How can I teach literature if I have no idea what it is?” He tore at his hair.

“Think, Morpho ... I mean Morton, what do I know about literature? Only that the study of the language and the study of the universe are really the same thing. It all boils down to information. Yeah, that’s what I can start my lesson with.

Information, language and meaning; these are the fundamental building blocks of everything. Now, whether or not a piece of writing qualifies as literature is a matter of aesthetics. Any segment of information can be meaningful as long as one gleans meaning from it. Take fractals for example.

Fractal geometry is a natural occurrence from which an observer might infer meaning. This meaning may or may not be objectively real, but then again, is *anything* objectively real? Order and meaning are in the eye of the beholder as is beauty. This applies to all things whether they are natural or artificial. Another example would be hearing music in a babbling brook vs. hearing music in the noises made by a construction crew. Whether or not they are artificial, it falls on the listener to make a value judgment.”

Morton grabbed a notebook and pen and jotted down these thoughts before they escaped him. “Okay, here we go, I can start with this.” He wiped sweat away from his forehead, but somehow, he still felt cold. “Phew, I need to relax for a couple of minutes.”

He padded over to the kitchen cabinet

in search of the coffee he had purchased from a barista house in the city. It was a strange kind of coffee that had an effect like no other he had ever tried. It was almost like smoking marijuana, but without the paranoia and mental slowdown. There was also something extra about it which he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He peeled the lid off the can and smelled it. The aroma was the richest and most delicious thing that had ever entered his nostrils. It reminded him of Christmas mornings with his family when he was a child. His mother had also liked this brand of coffee. The scent alone could probably help him remember who he was before the night of the fatal launch. He scooped up a spoonful of black roasty goodness, lifted the lid of the coffee machine and poured it in.

As the coffee brewed, he stared at the light on the side of the machine. It had an entrancing quality like a red beacon against a black sky. The machine had been a gift from someone, but he couldn't remember who. Something told him it had been from his ex-wife Cynthia, but that couldn't be. He'd never been married, and Cynthia was the name of his cat.

He traced the origin of these discrepancies back to the night he had launched the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine into space. He had been certain that without the panel

to protect the U-Drive, the universe would be doomed. But the next morning, he woke up and everything was fine; everything except for his memories.

On top of his amnesia, he experienced bizarre hallucinations on a daily basis. Sometimes, out of the corner of his eye, the coffee machine would change shape. Besides its standard form, it had three different permutations. One was a cylinder with convex mirrors distributed evenly around it. Another was a ray gun kaleidoscope thing. But most unusual of all was when it became a little boy with a red mushroom cut and glasses straight out of a 1980's movie about nerds and bullies in grade school. The boy would always repeat the same phrase: 'society of white ants' three times and then go back to being a coffee machine.

Then there was that butterfly yo-yo the

cat was always carrying. Where had it come from? Was it Morton's from when he was a kid? It couldn't have been. He would've remembered if he had owned such a thing. The cat was obsessed with it. She would constantly

meow and rub her silky body against his leg, wanting him to play with her and the yo-yo.

Morton couldn't help but think that all of these strange variables added up to some unforeseen whole. Something told him that



as soon as he drank the coffee, he'd know something. A piece of knowledge he'd been seeking for a very long time would finally reveal itself.

The frothing percolation sounds indicated that the coffee was done. Hands shaking with anticipation, Morton poured the black liquid into a cup he'd gotten at a garage sale eons ago. The cup had reflective squares paneled all around it like a disco ball. He took a sip of coffee and waited a few seconds. Nothing. No revelations, no epiphanies, just a slightly-stronger-than-average coffee buzz.

He hobbled over to the couch and picked up the TV remote. Class didn't start for another hour, so he figured he could watch the news for a bit before packing up his teaching supplies and driving to work.

He was able to catch thirty seconds of the newscast before it went to commercial.

The product being advertized was something called an AARDVARK. The thing was like an amalgamation of a telescope, film projector and zap gun from a 1950's sci-fi flick.

"For the low, low price of \$414.99," the pitchman bleated, "this new product from the company that brought you the Coffee Wizard can help you realign your life to an ideal state! Whenever you're having a bad day, just apply the nozzle to your temple and pull the trigger! In an instant, you'll find that your life is back on track and that everything is the way it should be!

(Warning: overuse may lead to a loss of free will. For maximum product enjoyment, some bad things must be allowed to hap-

pen. Otherwise, how would we know what good is? You must be eighteen or older to order.)"

The urge to buy an AARDVARK seized Morton for a second, but then he remembered that his bank balance had been decimated by a purchase he didn't remember making. Two days ago, a package had arrived at his door. Inside was an albino scorpion sealed in a glass jar. Disgusted, he threw the jar in the garbage, called the parcel service and began screaming about how he had never ordered such an item and that he wanted his money back. The lady assured him that he had definitely placed the order back on March 13th 2013. They had the order number on file and everything. To make matters worse, the company he had supposedly ordered from had a strict 'no returns' policy. There was nothing the parcel service could do. Morton slammed his phone shut and threw it across the kitchen. The scorpion had cost exactly \$313.13. The rent was due in a few days, and all he had left was grocery money. The whole thing was total bullshit. He couldn't have ordered that damn scorpion. He had been busy that day preparing to launch the Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine into space. All he could do was write off the scorpion fiasco as yet another symptom of the reality dysfunction that had been plaguing him ever since that day.

He sighed and leaned his head back against the couch so he could study the complexities of the ceiling tiles. No ideal life for me this month. Oh well.

His inner clock jolted him out of his

reverie. He looked at his watch. It was time to leave.

Part VI. Epilogue (For Real This Time)

As students filed into the classroom, Morton sat behind a desk nervously shuffling the stack of handouts he had photocopied on Friday. While most of the students slouched and yawned, one boy already had his notebooks and pens out. His name was Bradley Biggins. Bradley's appearance struck Morton as oddly familiar. It pained him to make the connection, but Biggins bore an uncanny resemblance to the boy whose shape the coffee machine would sometimes assume. The only difference was that this boy was an adult with a full beard, shoulder-length hair and black glasses ripped straight off the face of some musician on the Ed Sullivan Show back in 1964.

"Alright everyone," said Morton as soon as the minute hand reached the appointed position, "please take out the reading I emailed you. Hopefully you didn't have trouble printing it."

A couple of the students pursed their lips and shook their heads slowly. Bradley fidgeted in his chair. He had a piece of paper out, but it certainly wasn't the assigned piece.

The assignment had been a short story titled "Burning White Anthills" in which the protagonist, a little boy, gleans sadistic pleasure from burning anthills with a magnifying glass. All the while, his older sister is pregnant and hasn't told anybody. She divulges the news to her brother, but he

has no idea what to do with it since his concerns are inconsequential compared to hers. A powerful metaphor is invoked at the end when the boy squishes a queen ant and kills all her babies while at the same time, his sister is in the stirrups having an abortion. Throughout the story, the magnifying glass serves as a symbol of the vast discrepancies between the problems of an eight-year-old boy compared to those of teenage girls and adults.

"Okay," Morton cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles. "What did everyone think of the story? Anyone want to open the floor for discussion?"

The room was silent save for a nearly inaudible belch emitted by a guy in turquoise crocs.

Suddenly, Bradley's hand shot up.

This was funny, thought Morton, because Bradley had obviously not read the material. Morton decided to call on him anyway.

"Yes, Bradley."

"I don't have anything to say about this story per se, but I just want to make a comment about literature in general."

"O-kay?" Morton tried to look unamused, but couldn't hide his curiosity. He wanted to hear what this young man had to say. "Go ahead."

"First of all, before I say anything, I just want to show the class something I purchased the other day." He reached into his backpack and pulled out something that looked like it had been manufactured in Willy Wonka's factory. It took Morton a second to realize that it was an AARD-

VARCK. Its nodules, widgets and curlicues were even more gaudy and colorful than those of the one shown on TV.

"This device right here," Bradley pulled back the safety which was made of ribbon candy, "will show you what true literature is." He pointed it at Morton.

The other students in their North Face jackets and Ugg boots, scrambled toward the exit like sheep scattered by a rifle blast. This was in spite of the fact that the object of their fear was made of candy.

Once they were all gone, Morton shut and locked the door. The students were probably texting security or calling the police. It wouldn't be long before the authorities busted down the door.

"Be careful with that thing," Morton instinctively held his hands up. "I don't know what will happen if someone else besides me pulls the trigger. If you fire that at me, I might end up in *your* ideal reality as opposed to mine."

Bradley lowered the AARDVARK. "You're right, I didn't think of that. I guess I just wanted to try out my new invention."

"You invented it?"

"Yeah, I suppose you could say my essence makes up one-third of it."

Morton lowered his hands. "I knew there was something special about you. You're also the boy who appears to me in the form of—"

"Your coffee machine, yes I'm totally aware of that. In fact, I'm a lot more omniscient than I appear. I just take whatever form I feel like whenever I enter a world I've created."

"Worlds you've ... created?" Morton's eyes widened.

Bradley glanced at the door. "We're running short on time, so we'll save that discussion for later."

"Could you maybe let me use that AARDVARK on myself?" Morton grinned sheepishly.

"I was just about to offer," Bradley marched across the room and placed the AARDVARK in Morton's hand. "I understand that your reality has been fucked up for quite some time."

"Yes, it has been. How did you know?"

"That Asymmetrical Rainbow Machine you constructed. It is responsible for your current predicament. It didn't destroy the universe like you thought it would, but its U-Drive messed up everybody's reality. I, along with the ARM and its brother from another dimension created the AARDVARK to set things right."

"You've been trying to reach me haven't you? Through various forms of stimuli, hallucinations, visions, stuff like that."

"Yeah, I do have a bad habit of communicating vicariously as opposed to directly. It's more fun to be subtle, but people don't always get the hints I drop."

Morton craned his neck towards the door. "The campus police are gonna be here any second. I need to use the AARDVARK now or never."

"I'm not stopping you," Bradley laughed. "I think I'll take my leave and go bother someone else. You'll see me again though. As long as I'm writing the story of

your life, you'll see me again." Bradley's body winked out of existence in a beam of blue light.

There was a ferocious pounding on the door.

"Open up, Police! An authoritative voice boomed.

There was no more time. Morton put the nozzle to his temple and pulled the trigger.

BLAM!

The pounding at the door ceased. All the students including Bradley instantly rematerialized. The AARDVARK was no longer in Morton's hand. He searched his pockets, but couldn't find it. After a moment of panic, he realized that it didn't matter. James Hammond Morton remembered exactly who he was! He was an English professor. He had never built a spacecraft. He loved all books equally and would not stop teaching the value of pan-literariness until he convinced academia to allow *all* stories into the canon whether they be good, bad, pulpy or just plain unpalatable to wine-tasting, cheese-sniffing literary types.

Today was the last day of classes before Winter break. The students were turning in their final papers, all of which seemed brilliant to Morton as he skimmed through them. Bradley's stood out as being especially profound. It was a complete literary analysis of the video game *Vessels of Sin*. The first paragraph alone made Morton want to play the game, study it, analyze its

symbolism and character development and view it through Marxist, Feminist and Deconstructionist lenses.

Bradley was the last one out of the classroom.

"Have a nice holiday," Morton extended his hand.

"Same to you," Bradley shook it.

"I should have the final grades posted by sometime after the Holidays."

"Did I do okay?"

"I really enjoyed having you in class," Morton smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes," Bradley looked at his professor as though he had more to say, but thought better of it. He turned around, hiked up his ill-fitting pants and exited the classroom.

That kid is gonna be a star someday, Morton thought. In fact, he probably already is one.

As Morton walked to his car through the blustery air of late December, he glanced up at the night sky. The star on the tip of Scorpius' tail winked at him as if in affirmation.

"Atta boy Bradley," the wind blew Morton's frozen breath back onto his face. His teeth were chattering, so he opened the car door and got in.

When he arrived home, his wife Hyacinth was sitting on the couch with Cynthia on her lap. They were watching a documentary on the true story of Saint Nicholas. Morton scampered over to her and hugged and kissed her like he hadn't

seen her in years. A Christmas tree stood in the corner of the living room decorated with glistening glass balls.

“When do you want to open your Christmas Eve gift?” Hyacinth kissed him on the lips softly.

“It’s Christmas Eve?” Morton was bewildered. Had the AARDVARK caused time to skip forward?

“Duh!” Hyacinth giggled. “Did you forget?”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” Morton smirked.

“Come on, let’s open our gifts,” Hyacinth sounded just like a little girl. “I want to see your reaction to what I got you.”

“Okay,” Morton smiled and kissed his wife once again.

Hyacinth got up from the couch and sauntered over to the Christmas tree. The pattern of her nightgown was a breathtaking display of fractal rainbows.

He followed her to the tree and she handed him a present the size of a shoebox wrapped in rainbow paper.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” she winked and smiled.

Morton tore off the paper and opened the box. Inside was an AARDVARK with a

price tag attached to it that read: “\$3.13.”

“I found it at a rummage sale,” Hyacinth admitted. “It was weird and kooky-looking like a lot of the stories your students write, so I thought you might like it.”

“I love it,” Morton leaned over and kissed Hyacinth for the thousandth time. “Merry Christmas Eve.”

The gift he had gotten her wasn’t all that special: just a bag of coffee from the barista house. He figured they could both have some with breakfast the next morning.

After Hyacinth had gone to bed, Morton studied his AARDVARK. He recalled the warning of the pitchman on TV: ‘overuse of this product can lead to a loss of free will,’ or something like that. Morton promised himself he would only use it when times got really tough. And even then, he’d allow some bad things to happen for the sake of balance. Hopefully he wouldn’t be too tempted to use the AARDVARK unnecessarily. He made a resolution then and there that he would only use it as a last resort. For everything else, coffee would have to suffice. ❖

END TRANSMISSION