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DAN SIMMONS

THE DEATH OF THE CENTAUR

The teacher and the boy climbed the steep arc of lawn that overlooked the southernmost curve of the Missouri River. Occasionally they glanced up at the stately brick mansion that held the high ground. Its tiers of tall windows and wide French doors reflected the broken patterns of bare branches against a gray sky. Both the boy and the young man knew the big house was most likely empty—its owner spent only a few weeks a year in town—but approaching so close afforded them the pleasurable tension of trespass as well as an outstanding view.

A hundred feet from the mansion they stopped climbing and sat down, backs against a tree which shielded them from the slight breeze and protected them from the casual notice of anyone in the house. The sun was very warm, a false spring warmth which would almost surely be driven off by at least one more snowstorm before returning in earnest. The wide expanse of lawn, dropping down to the railroad tracks and the river two hundred yards below, had the faint, green splotchiness of thawing earth. The air smelled like Saturday.

The teacher took up a short blade of grass, rolled it in his fingers, and began to chew on it thoughtfully. The boy pulled a piece, squinted at it for a long second, and did likewise.

“Mr. Kennan, d’you think the river’s gonna rise again this year and flood everythin’ like it done before?” asked the boy.

“I don’t know, Terry,” said the young man. He did not turn to look at the boy, but raised his face to the sun and closed his eyes.

The boy looked sideways at his teacher and noticed how the red hairs in the man’s beard glinted in the sunlight. Terry put his head back against the rough bark of the old elm but was too animated to shut his eyes for more than a few seconds.

“Do you figure it’ll flood Main if it does?”

“I doubt it, Terry. That kind of flood only comes along every few years.”

Neither participant in the conversation found it strange that the teacher was commenting on events which he had never experienced first hand. Kennan had been in the small Missouri town just under seven months, having arrived on an incredibly hot Labor Day just before school began. By then the flood had been old news for four

months. Terry Bester, although only ten years old, had seen three such floods in his life and he remembered the cursing and thumping in the morning darkness the previous April when the volunteer firemen had called his father down to work on the levee.

A train whistle came to them from the north, the Dopplered noise sounding delicate in the warm air. The teacher opened his eyes to await the coming of the eleven a.m. freight to St. Louis. Both counted the cars as the long train roared below them, diesel throbbing, whistle rising in pitch and then dropping as the last cars disappeared toward town around the bend in the track where they had just walked.

“Whew, good thing we wasn’t down there,” said Terry loudly.

“Weren’t,” said Mr. Kennan.

“Huh?” said Terry and looked at the man.

“We weren’t down there,” repeated the bearded young man with a hint of irritation in his voice.

“Yeah,” said Terry and there was a silence. Mr. Kennan closed his eyes and rested his head against the tree trunk once again. Terry stood to throw imaginary stones at the mansion. Sensing his teacher’s disapproval, he stopped the pantomine and stood facing the tree, resting his chin against the bark and squinting up at the high branches. Far overhead a squirrel leaped.

“Twenty-six,” said Terry.

“What’s that?”

“Cars on that train. I counted twenty-six.”

“Mmmmm. I counted twenty-four.”

“Yeah. Me too. That’s what I meant to say. Twenty-four, I meant.”

Kennan sat forward and rolled the blade of grass in his hands. His thoughts were elsewhere. Terry rode an invisible horse around in tight circles while making galloping sounds deep in his throat. He added the phlegmy noise of a rifle shot, grabbed at his chest, and tumbled off the horse. The boy rolled bonelessly down the hill and came to a contorted, grass-covered stop not three feet from his teacher.

Kennan glanced at him and then looked out at the river. The Missouri moved by, coffee brown, complicated by never repeating patterns of swirls and eddies.

“Terry, did you know that this is the southernmost bend of the Missouri River? Right here?”

“Uh-uh,” said the boy.

“It is,” said the teacher and looked across at the far shore.

“Hey, Mr. Kennan?”

“Yes?”

“What’s gonna happen on Monday?”

“What do you mean?” asked Kennan, knowing what he meant.

“You know, in the Story.”

The young man laughed and tossed away the blade of grass. For a brief second Terry thought that his teacher threw like a girl, but he immediately banished that from his mind.

“You know I can’t tell you ahead of the others, Terry. That wouldn’t be fair, would it?”

“Awww,” said the boy but it was a perfunctory whine, and something in the tone suggested that he was pleased with the response. The two stood up. Kennan brushed off the seat of his pants, and then pulled bits of grass from the child’s tangled hair. Together they walked back down the hill in the direction of the rail line and town.

The centaur, the neo-cat, and the sorcerer-ape moved across the endless Sea of Grass. Gernisavien was too short to see above the high grass and had to ride on Raul’s back. The centaur did not mind—he did not even notice her weight—and he enjoyed talking to her as he breasted the rippling waves of lemon-colored grass. Behind them came Dobby, ambling along in his comical, anthropoid stride and humming snatches of unintelligible tunes.

For nine days they waded the Sea of Grass. Far behind were the Haunted Ruins and the threat of the ratspiders. Far ahead—not yet in sight—was their immediate goal of the Mountains of Mist. At night Dobby would unsling his massive shoulder pack and retrieve the great silken umbrella of their tent. Intricate orange markings decorated the blue dome. Gernisavien loved the sound created as the evening wind came up and stirred a thousand miles of grass while rustling the silken canopy above them.

They were very careful with their fire. A single careless spark could ignite the entire

Sea and there would be no escape.

Raul would return from his evening hunt with his bow over a shoulder and a limp grazer in one massive hand. After dinner they often talked softly or listened to Dobby play the strange wind instrument he had found in the Man Ruins. As the night grew later, Dobby would point out the constellations—the Swan, Mellam's Bow, the Crystal Skyship, and the Little Lyre. Raul would tell stories of courage and sacrifice handed down through six generations of Centaur Clan warriors.

One evening after they had carefully doused the fire, Gernisavien spoke. Her voice seemed tiny under the blaze of stars and was almost lost in the great sighing of wind in the grass.

"What are our chances of actually finding the farcaster?"

"We can't know that," came Raul's firm voice. "We just have to keep heading south and do our best."

"But what if the Wizards get there first?" persisted the tawny neo-cat.

It was Dobby who answered. "Best we not discuss the Wizards at night," he said. "Never talk about scaly things after dark, that's what my old Granmum used to say."

In the morning they ate a cold breakfast, looked at the magic needle on Dobby's direction finder, and once again picked up the journey. The sun was close to the zenith when Raul suddenly froze and pointed to the east.

"Look!"

At first Gernisavien could see nothing, but after taking a handful of Raul's mane to steady herself and standing on his broad back, she could make out—sails! Billowing white sails against an azure sky. And beneath the straining canvas she could see a ship—a huge ship—creaking along on wooden wheels that must have been twenty feet high.

And it was headed right for them!

The classroom was ugly and uncomfortable. For a long time it had been used as a storeroom and even now the walls were marked and gashed where boxes and metal map cases had been stored.

The room, like the school, was old but not picturesque. It evoked no Norman Rockwell twinges of nostalgia. The once-high ceilings had been lowered with ill-fitting accoustical tiles that cut off the top third of the windows. Tubular fluorescent lights

hung from gray bars that emerged through holes in the ceiling tiles. The floors once had been smooth and varnished but were now splintered to the point that students could not risk taking off their soaked tennis shoes on wet days.

Twenty-eight plastic pink-and-tan metal desks filled a space designed for three rows of wooden schooldesks from a previous century. The desks were old enough that their tilted tops were carved and scratched and their ugly, tubular legs gouged new splinters from the floor. It was impossible to place a pencil on a desktop without it rolling noisily, and every time a child lifted the desktop to reach for a book, the little room echoed to the sound of screeching metal and notebooks falling to the floor.

The windows were high and warped and all but one refused to open. The previous September, when the temperature continued to hover near ninety degrees and children's sneakers sank into the asphalt playground, the little room was almost unlivable with only a rare stirring of breeze coming through the windows.

The chalkboard was four feet wide and had a crack running along the right side. Kennan had once used it to illustrate the San Andreas Fault. On his first day he had discovered that the room had no chalk, only one eraser, no yardstick, no globe, only one pull-down map (and that predating World War Two), no bookshelves, and a clock permanently frozen at one twenty-three. Kennan had requisitioned a wall clock on the third of September and an old one was mounted next to the door by the end of January. It stopped frequently so Kennan kept a cheap alarm clock on his desk. Its ticking had become background noise to all the other sounds in the room. Occasionally he set the alarm to signify the end of a quiz or silent reading period. On the last day before Christmas vacation, he had let the alarm go off at two o'clock to herald the end of work and the beginning of their hour-long Christmas party. The other classes reserved only the last twenty minutes of the day for their parties and although Kennan was reprimanded by the principal for not reading the school policy booklet, the incident confirmed the suspicion of most of the children in the school that Mr. Kennan's class was a fun place to be.

Kennan's memory of that Christmas season would always be linked with the musty, dimly lit basement of Reardon's Department Store, a faded and failing five and dime store on Water Street, where he had shopped for his fourth graders' presents late one evening. One by one he had selected the cheap rings, jars of bubble-blowing liquid, toy soldiers, balsa wood gliders, and model kits—each with a special message in mind—taking them home to wrap until the early morning hours.

Kennan had covered the chipped walls of the classroom with posters, including the illustrated map of Boston which had hung in his dorm room for three years. He changed the one bulletin board every three weeks. Now it boasted a huge map of the planet Garden on which the events of The Story were marked.

There was nothing he could do about the faint odor of rotting plaster and seeping sewage that permeated the room. Nor could he change the irritating buzz and flicker of the overhead lights. But he bought an old armchair at a fleamarket and borrowed an area rug from his landlord and every afternoon at one-ten, just after lunch period and just before language arts, Kennan sat in the sprung chair and twenty-seven children crowded into the carpeted corner and the tale resumed.

Gernisavien and Dobby paid their last two credit coins to enter the huge arena where Raul was scheduled to fight the Invincible Shrike. All around them were the dark alleys and gabled rooftops of legendary Carvnal. They pushed through the entrance tunnel with the crowd and came out in the tiered amphitheatre where hundreds of torches cast bizarre shadows up into the stands.

Around the circular pit were crowded all the races of Garden, or rather, all those races which had not been exterminated resisting the evil Wizards: the hooded Druids, brachiate tree dwellers from the Great Forest, a band of fuzzies in their bright orange robes, many lizard soldiers hissing and laughing and shouting, stubby little Marsh Folk, and hundreds of mutants. The night air was filled with strange sounds and stranger smells. Vendors bellowed over the noise to hawk their fried argot wings and cold beer. Out in the arena, work crews raked sand over the drying pools of blood that marked the spots where earlier Death Game contestants had lost to the Shrike.

“Why does he have to fight?” asked Gernisavien as they took their places on the rough bench.

“It’s the only way to earn a thousand credits so we can take the Sky Galleon south tomorrow morning,” Dobby answered in a low voice. A tall mutant sat down next to him on the bench, and Dobby had to tug to retrieve the end of his purple cape.

“But why can’t we just leave the city or take the raft farther south?” persisted Gernisavien. The little neo-cat’s tail was flicking back and forth.

“Raul explained all that,” whispered Dobby. “The Wizards know that we’re in Carvnal. They must already be covering the city gates and the docks. Besides, with their flying platforms we could never outdistance them on foot or by raft. No, Raul’s right, this is the only way.”

“But no one beats the Shrike! Isn’t that right? The thing was genetically designed during the Wizard Wars as a killing machine, wasn’t it?” Gernisavien said miserably. She squinted as if the light from the stadium torches hurt her eyes.

“Yes,” said Dobby, “but he doesn’t have to beat it to earn the thousand credits. Just stay alive for three minutes in the same arena.”

“Has anyone ever done that?” Gernisavien’s whisper was ragged.

“Well … I think …” began Dobby but was interrupted by a blare of trumpets from the arena. There was an immediate hushing of crowd noise. The torches seemed to flare more brightly and on one side of the wide pit a heavy portcullis drew up into the wall.

What’s a portcullis?

It’s like a big, heavy gate with spikes on the bottom. So every eye in the stadium was on that black hole in the wall. There was a long minute of silence so deep that you could hear the torches crackling and sputtering. Then the Shrike came out.

It was about seven and a half feet tall and it gleamed like polished steel in the light. Razor sharp spikes curled out like scythe blades from various parts of its smooth, metallic exoskeleton. Its elbows and knees were protected by rings of natural armor which also were covered by short spikes. There was even a spike protruding from its high forehead, just above where the red, multi-faceted eyes blazed like flaming rubies. Its hands were claws with five curved, metal blades that opened and closed so quickly that they were only a blur. The claws went snicker-snack, snicker-snack.

The Shrike moved out to the center of the arena slowly, lurching along like a sharp-edged sculpture learning how to walk. Its head lifted, the fighting beak snapped, and the red eyes searched the crowd as if seeking future victims.

Suddenly the stillness was broken as the hundreds of spectators began booing and jeering and throwing small items. Through it all the Shrike stood motionless and mute, seemingly unaware of the barrage of noise and missiles. Only once—when a large melon flew from the stands and headed straight for the Shrike’s head—only then did it condescend to move. But how it moved! The Shrike leaped twenty feet to one side with a jump so incredibly fast that the terrible creature was invisible for a second. The crowd hushed in awe.

Then the trumpets sounded again, a tall wooden door opened, and the first contestant of the Late Games entered. It was a rock giant much like the one that had chased Dobby when they were crossing the Mountains of Mist. But this one was bigger—at least twelve feet tall—and it looked to be made of solid muscle.

“I hope he doesn’t beat the Shrike and take the prize before Raul gets to fight,” said Dobby. Gernisavien flashed the sorcerer-ape a disapproving glance.

It was over in twenty seconds. One moment the two opponents stood facing each other in the torchlight and an instant later the Shrike was back in the center of the ring and the rock giant was lying in various parts of the arena. Some of the pieces were still twitching.

There were four more contestants. Two were obvious suicides—whom the crowd booed loudly—one was a drunken lizard soldier with a high-powered crossbow, and the last was a fierce mutant with body armor of his own and a battle-axe twice as tall as Gernisavien. None of them lasted a minute.

Then the trumpets sounded again and Raul cantered into the arena. Gernisavien watched through her fingers as the handsome centaur, upper body oiled and glistening, moved toward the waiting Shrike. Raul was carrying only his hunting spear and a light shield. No—wait—there was a small bottle hanging from a thong around his neck.

“What’s that?” asked Gernisavien, her voice sounding lost and quavery even to herself.

Dobby did not take his eyes off the arena as he answered. “A chemical I found in the Man Ruins. May the gods grant that I mixed it right.”

Down in the arena the Shrike began its attack.

Dear Whitney,

Yes—you’re right—this part of the country is the seventh circle of desolation. Sometimes I walk down the street (my “home” here is on a hill, if you can call furnished rooms in a rotting old brick house a home) and catch a glimpse of the Missouri River and remember those great days we had out on the Cape during spring break of our senior year. Remember the time we went riding along the beach and a thunderstorm came boiling in from the Bay and Pomegranate got so spooked? (And we had to … ahem … wait it out in the boathouse?)

Glad to hear that you enjoy working in the Senator’s office. Do all you Wellesley girls ascend directly into jobs like that or do most end up at Katie Gibbs School for Future Secretaries? (Sorry about that—someone stuck in the Meerschaum Pipe Capital of the World as I am shouldn’t throw stones … or stow thrones for that matter. Did you know that every corncob pipe in the western hemisphere comes from this town? I’ve got two inches of white soot on my windowsill and on the hood of my car to prove it!)

No—I don’t get into St. Louis very much. It’s about a fifty mile trip and the Volvo has been sitting by the curb for over a month. The head gasket is shot and it takes about ten years to get a part sent out here. I was lucky even to find a garage with metric tools. I did take the bus into the Big City three weeks ago. Went right after school Friday and got home Sunday evening in time to get depressed and to do my lesson plans. Ended up not seeing much except three movies and a lot of bookstores. Finally took a tour of the Gateway Arch. (No—I will not bore you with the details.) The best part of the weekend was enjoying the amenities of a good hotel for two nights.

To answer your question—I'm not totally sorry that I came out West to go to grad school in St. Louis. It was a good program (who can beat an 11-month Masters program?) but I hadn't anticipated that I'd be too poor to escape this goddamn state without teaching here for a year. Even that might have been OK if I could have found a position in Webster Groves or University City … but the Meerschaum Pipe Capital of the World? This place—and the people—are straight out of Deliverance.

Still—it's only a year, and if I get a job with Hovane Acad or the Experimental School (have you seen Fentworth recently?), this year could be invaluable background experience.

So you want to hear more about my students? What can you say about a bunch of bucolic fourth graders? I've already told you about some of the antics of Crazy Donald. If this podunk district had any real special ed or remedial programs he'd be in them all. Instead, I throw a lassoo on him and try to keep him from hurting anyone. So let's see, who does that leave to tell you about?

Monica—our resident nine-year-old sexpot. She has her eye on me but she'll settle for Craig Stears in the sixth grade if I'm not available.

Sara—a real sweet kid. A curly-haired, heart-faced little cutie. I like Sara. Her mother died last year and I think she needs an extra dose of affection.

Brad—Brad's the class moron. Dumber than Donald, if that's possible. He's been retained twice. (Yes … this district does flunk kids … and spank them.) Not a discipline problem, Brad's just a big, dumb cluck in bib overalls and a bowl haircut.

Teresa—Here's a girl after your own heart, Whit. A horse nut! Has a gelding which she enters in shows around here and in Illinois. But I'm afraid Teresa's into the Cowgirl Mystique. Probably wouldn't know an English riding saddle if she sat on it. The kid wears cowboy boots to school every day and keeps a currycomb in her desk.

And then there's Chuck & Orville(!) & William-call- me-Bill & Theresa (another one) & Bobby Lee & Alice & Alice's twin sister Agnes & etc. & etc …

Oh, I mentioned Terry Bester last time, but I do want to tell you more about him. He's a homely little kid—all overbite and receding chin. His hair hangs in his eyes and his mother must trim it with hedgeclippers. He wears the same filthy plaid shirt every day of the year and his boots have holes in them and one heel gone. (Get the picture? This kid's straight out of Tobacco Road!)

Still—Terry's my favorite. On the first day of school I was making some point and waving my arm around in my usual, histrionic fashion and Terry (who sits right up

front, unlike most of the other boys) made a dive for the floor. I started to get mad at him for clowning around and then noticed his face. The kid was scared to death! Obviously he was getting the shit beat out of him at home and had ducked out of habit.

Terry seems determined to fit every poor-kid stereotype. He even drags around this homemade shoeshine box and makes a few quarters shining these hillbillies' boots down at the Dew Drop Inn and Berringer's Bar & Grill where his old man hangs out.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the little guy has been spending a lot of time with me. He often shows up at the back porch here about five-thirty or six o'clock. Frequently I invite him to stay for dinner—although when I tell him I'm busy and I have to write or something, he doesn't seem to resent it and he's back the next night. Sometimes when I'm reading I forget he's there until ten or eleven o'clock. His parents don't seem to care where he is or when he gets home. When I got back from my weekend in St. Louis, there was 'ol Terry sitting on my back steps with that absurd shoeshine kit. For all I know he'd been sitting there since Friday night.

Last weekend he calmly mentioned something that made my hair stand on end. He said that last year when he was in third grade "Ma and the Old Man got in a terrible fight." Finally Ma locked the front door when the drunken father stepped out onto the porch to scream at the neighbors or something. The guy just got madder and madder when he couldn't get back in and started shouting that he was going to kill them all. Terry says that he was hugging his six-year-old sister, his Ma was crying and screaming, and then the Old Man kicked in the door. He proceeded to hit Terry's mother in the mouth and drag the two kids out to his pickup truck. He drove them up Sawmill Road (in nearby Boone National Forest) and finally jerked the children out of the cab and pulled his shotgun off the rack. (Everybody carries guns in their pickups here, Whit. I've been thinking of getting a gun rack for the Volvo!)

You can imagine Terry telling me all of this. Every once in a while he'd pause to brush the hair out of his eyes, but his voice was as calm as if he were telling me the plot of a TV show he'd seen once.

So the father drags eight-year-old Terry and his little sister into the trees and tells them to get down on their knees and pray to God for forgiveness because he's got to shoot them. Terry says that the old drunk was waving the double-barreled shotgun at them and that his little sister, Cindy, just "went and wet her panties, then and there." Instead of shooting, Terry's father just lurched off into the woods and stood there cussing at the sky for several minutes. Then he stuck the kids back in the pickup and drove them home. The mother never filed charges.

I've seen Mr. Bester around town. He reminds me of whatshisname in the movie version of To Kill A Mockingbird. You know, the racist farmer that Boo Radley kills. Wait a minute, I'll look it up. (Bob Ewell!)

So you can see why I'm allowing Terry to spend so much time with me. He needs a positive male role model around … as well as a sensitive adult to talk to and learn from. I'd consider adopting Terry if that were possible.

So now you know a little bit of how the other half lives. That's one reason why this year's been so important even if it has been sheer purgatory. Part of me can't wait to get back to you and the sea and a real city where people speak correctly and where you can walk into a drugstore and order a frappe without being stared at. But part of me knows how important this year is—both for me and the kids I'm touching by being here. Just the oral tradition of the story that I'm telling them is something they would never get otherwise.

Well, I'm out of paper and it's almost one a.m. School tomorrow. Give my best to your family, Whit, and tell the Senator to keep up the good work. With any luck (and the head gasket willing) you'll be seeing me sometime in mid-June.

Take care. Please write. It's lonely out here in the Missouri woods.

Love, Paul

The great Sky Galleon moved between high banks of stratocumulus that caught the last pink rays of sunset. Raul, Dobby, and Gernisavien stood on the deck and watched the great orb of the sun slowly sink into the layer of clouds beneath them. From time to time, Captain Kokus would bellow orders to the chimp-sailors who scampered through the rigging and sails far above the deck. Occasionally the captain turned and murmured quiet orders to the mate, who spoke into the metal speaking tube. Gernisavien could sense the fine adjustments to the hidden tanks of anti-gravity fluid.

Eventually the light faded except for the first twinkling of stars and the two minor moons hurtling above the cloud layer. Unseen sailors lit lantern running lights hanging from mast tops and spars. The climbing cloud towers lost the last of their glow and Dobby suggested that the three go below to prepare for the Spring Solstice party.

And what a party it was! The long Captain's Table was heaped with fine foods and rare wines. There was succulent roast bison from the Northern Steppes, swordfish from South Bay, and icy bellfruit from the far-off Equatorial Archipelago. The thirty guests—even the two dour Druids—ate and laughed as they never had before. The wine glasses continued to be refilled by the ship's stewards and soon the toasts began to flow as quickly as the wine. At one point Dobby rose to toast Captain Kokus and his splendid ship. Dobby referred to the grizzled old skysailor as a "fine fellow anthropoid" but stumbled a bit over the phrase and had to start again to general laughter. Captain Kokus returned the compliment by toasting the intrepid trio and praising Raul for his courageous victory at the Carvnal Death Games. Nothing was said about the Galleon's

undignified departure from the city mooring tower with two squads of lizard soldiers in hot pursuit of the last three passengers. The diners applauded and cheered.

Then it was time for the Solstice Ball to begin. The table was cleared, the tablecloth was furled, and then the table itself was broken into pieces and carried away. Guests stood around on the broad curve of the lowest deck and accepted refills once more. Then the ship's orchestra filed in and began their preparations.

When all was in readiness, Captain Kokus clapped his hands and there was a silence.

"Once again I formally welcome you all aboard the Benevolent Zephyr," rumbled the Captain, "and extend to you all the best wishes of the Solstice season. And now … let the dancing begin!"

And with a final clap of his hands the lantern light dimmed, the orchestra began playing, and great wooden louvers on the belly of the ship swung down so that nothing stood between the passengers and the depths of sky beneath them except crystal floor. There was a general oohing and ahhing and everyone took an involuntary step backward. Immediately this was followed by a burst of laughter and applause and then the dancing began.

On sped the great, graceful Sky Galleon into the aerial rivers of the night. Seen from above there would have been only the glow of the running lanterns and the only sound was the sigh and slap of wind in the sails and occasional calls of "All's Well!" from the lookout in the crow's nest. But seen from below, the ship blazed with light and echoed to tunes so ancient that they were said to have come from legendary Old Earth. Forest nymphs and demimen danced and pirouetted five thousand feet above the night-shrouded hills. At one point sober Gernisavien found herself in the undignified position of dancing with a centaur—lifted high in Raul's strong arms as his hooves tapped their own rhythm on the unscratchable crystal floor.

A storm came up before the party ended and the captain had the lights turned down so that the company could look past their feet at the lightning that rippled through the stormclouds far below. After a hushed moment, the orchestra began playing the Solstice Hymn and Gernisavien, much to her surprise, discovered herself singing the sentimental old ballad along with the others. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Then it was to bed, with revelers stumbling along the suddenly pitching corridors. Even the throes of an aerial storm could not prevent most of the tired passengers from dropping off to sleep. Dobby lay sprawled on his back, his purple beret on the pillow beside him, his great, smiling, simian mouth opened wide to release mighty snores. Gernisavien had found her bunk too large so she slept curled up in an open drawer which swung out slightly and then slid back to the ship's even rockings. Only Raul could not sleep, and after checking in on his friends he went above deck. There he

stood huddled against the cold breeze and watched the first, false light of dawn touch the boiling cloudtops.

Raul was thinking grim thoughts. He knew that if they were not intercepted by the Wizard's flying machines, it was only a few more days' journey to South Bay. From there it would be a four or five day trek overland to the supposed Farcaster Site. They were already much too close to the Wizard's Stronghold. The odds were poor that the three friends would live out the week. Raul tapped at the dagger on his belt and watched the new day begin.

Mr. Kennan stood on the asphalt playground with fourth graders running and playing all around him and smiled up at the pleasant spring day. His army jacket, so frequently commented upon by the children, was not needed on such a warm day, but he wore it loosely along with his sports-car cap. Occasionally he would grin just for the hell of it and rub at his beard. It was a beautiful day!

The children's spirits reflected the promise of summer all around them. The little playground that had been such a grim exercise yard through the long months of winter now seemed to be the most pleasant of places. Discarded jackets and sweaters littered the ground as children swung from the monkey bars, ran to the bordering alley and back, or played kickball near the brick cliff of the school building. Donald and Orville were engrossed in floating some tiny stick in a mud puddle, and even Terry entered into the spirit of the day by galloping around with Bill and Brad. Kennan overheard the boy say to Brad, "You be Dobby 'n I'll be Raul an' we'll be fightin' the ratspiders." Bill began to protest as the three boys ran toward the far end of the playground and Kennan knew that he was resisting becoming a female neo-cat, even for the ten minutes left of the recess.

Kennan breathed deeply and smiled once again. Life seemed to be flowing again after months of frozen solitude. Who would have dreamed that Missouri (hadn't it been part of the Confederacy?… or wanted to be …) could have such chill, gray, endless winters? There had been five snow days when school had to be cancelled. After two such snow days followed by a weekend, Kennan had realized with a shock that he had not spoken to anyone for four days. Would they have come looking for him if he had died? Would they have found him in his furnished room, propped up at the jerry-rigged writing desk surrounded by his manuscripts and shelves of silent paperbacks?

Kennan smiled at the conceit now, but it had been a grim thought during the darkest days of winter. The kickball eluded a fielder and rolled to where Kennan was standing amid his inevitable flock of adoring girls. He made a production of scooping up the ball and throwing it to the shouting catcher. The throw went wide and bounced off the basement window of the art room.

Kennan turned away to survey the apple blossoms filling the tree in a nearby yard.

New grass was growing up in the centerline of the alley. He could smell the river flowing by only four blocks away. Thirteen days of school left! He viewed the end of the year with self-conscious sadness mixed with unalloyed elation. He couldn't wait to be away—his car, newly resurrected, packed with his few cartons of books and possessions, and the summer sunlight warm on his arm as he headed east on Interstate 70. Kennan imagined his leisurely escape from the Midwest—the seemingly endless barrier of cornfields passed, the surge of traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, the contraction of distance between cities, the familiar exit signs in Massachusetts, the smell of the sea … Still, this had been his first class. He would never forget these children and they would never forget him. He imagined them sharing with their children and grandchildren the long, epic tale he had forged for them. During the past weeks he had even toyed with the idea of another year in Missouri.

Sara came forward from the little pack of girls following their teacher. She slipped her arm through Mr. Kennan's and looked up at him with a practiced coquettishness. Kennan smiled, patted her absently on the part in her hair, and took a few steps away from the children. Reaching into his coat pocket he withdrew a crumpled letter and reread parts of it for the tenth time. Then he replaced it and stared north toward the unseen river. Suddenly he was roused by an explosion of noise from the kickball players. Kennan glanced irritably at his watch, raised a plastic whistle to his lips, and signaled the end of recess. The children grabbed at scattered coats and ran to line up.

It was much warmer near South Bay. Raul, Dobby, and Gernisavien headed along the coast toward the legendary Farcaster Site. According to the ancient map which Dobby had found in the Man Ruins so many months ago, their journey's end should be only a few days to the west. Around her neck Gernisavien wore the key that they had found in the Carvnal Archives and paid for with the death of their old friend Fenn. If the Old Books were right, that key would activate the long dormant farcaster and reunite Garden with the Web of Worlds. Then would the tyranny of the cruel Wizards finally be cast down.

It was under the shadow of these same Wizards that our trio of friends made their way west. The sharp Fanghorn Mountains lay to the north and somewhere in their shadowy reaches was the feared Wizards' Stronghold.

The friends kept watch on the skies, always on the lookout for the Wizards' flying platforms as they moved along under the cover of lush, tropical foliage. Gernisavien marveled at the palm trees that rose two hundred feet high along their march.

On the afternoon of the third day they made camp near the mouth of a small river that fed into the South Sea. Dobby arranged their silk tent under the trees so that the warm breezes caused it to billow and ripple. Raul made sure the tent would be invisible from the air and then they sat down to their cold rations. By mutual consent they had avoided a fire since landing at South Bay, subsisting on biscuits and cold

jerky purchased from the Benevolent Zephyrs ship stores.

The tropical sunset was spectacular. The stars seemed to explode into the night sky. Dobby pointed out the Southern Archer, a constellation that was invisible from their respective homes in the northern part of the continent. Gernisavien felt a stab of homesickness, but put off the sadness by fingering the ancient key around her neck and imagining the thrill of reopening the farcaster portals to a hundred worlds. Which of those stars held other worlds, other peoples?

Dobby seemed to read her thoughts. “It seems impossible that the journey is almost over, doesn’t it?”

Raul rose, stretched, and moved away in the darkness to reconnoiter the stream.

“I keep thinking of that Fuzzy’s predictions,” said Gernisavien. “Remember, in Tartuffel’s Treehouse?”

Dobby nodded his massive head. How could one forget the frightening glimpses of the future which that strange little creature had offered each of them?

“Most of them have come to pass,” grumbled the sorcerer-ape. “Even the Shrike is behind us.”

“Yes, but not my dream—not the one with the Wizards all around in that terrible little room,” replied Gernisavien. It was true. Of all the future-seeing dreams, the neo-cat’s had been the most frightening, the most ominous, and the least discussed.

Strapped down and helpless on a stainless steel operating table with the hooded Wizards looming over her. Then the tallest stepping forward into the blood-red light … slowly drawing back its hood …

Gernisavien shuddered at the memory. As if to change the subject, Dobby stood and looked around in the darkness.

“Where’s Raul?” His attention was captured by the rising of the two moons above the jungle canopy. Then he realized that the moons did not rise this early …

“Run!” cried Dobby and pushed the startled neo-cat toward the trees. But it was too late.

The air filled with the scream of flying platforms. Rays of fire lanced out from the airborne machines and exploded the tops of trees into balls of flame. Knocked off her feet, fur and eyebrow whiskers singed from the heat, Gernisavien could see the hooded Wizards on the hovering machines, could hear the screams of the lizard

soldiers as they leaped to the ground.

For a self-avowed coward, Dobby fought valiantly. Dodging the first thrust of a lizard's pike, he grabbed the long shaft and wrested it away. Dobby stabbed the startled reptile through the throat and turned to hold off five more of the hissing enemy. He had downed two lizards and was lifting a third high into the air with his long, strong arms when he was struck down by a blow from behind.

Gernisavien let out a yell and ran toward her friend, but before she had taken five steps a tall, scaly form loomed over her and something struck her on the skull. The next few minutes were confused. She regained consciousness just after she and Dobby were loaded aboard two platforms which lifted into the air.

Then came the stirring sound which had thrilled her so many times before—Raul's war horn blown loud and sweet and clear. Five pure notes of challenge broke through the babble of noise and the crackle of flames.

Raul came charging across the clearing in a full gallop, war spear leveled, shield high, with the cry of the Centaur Clan on his lips. Lizard soldiers went down like tenpins. A Wizard fired a shaft of flame, but Raul warded it off with his shield of sacred metal. His long spear broke as it pierced three lizards attempting to cower behind one another, but he cast it aside and pulled out his lethal short sword. Once again he shouted his clan war cry and waded into a pack of hissing, sword-wielding lizards.

Gernisavien felt the platform shudder and stop at tree-top height. She heard the hooded Wizard at the controls rasp a command and thirty lizards fired their crossbows. The air was filled with the scream of feathered bolts and then filled again with lizard screams as the deadly shafts slammed into them and centaur alike. Gernisavien felt her heart stop as she saw at least six bolts strike home against Raul's chest and sides. The great centaur went down in a heap of lizard bodies. Green tails and scaled arms still twitched in that pile of death.

Gernisavien let out one high, mournful cry of rage and then the cuff of a Wizard's fist against her head sent her back into blessed darkness.

Thurs., May 20

Warmer today. Temp. in the high 70's all day. Evening seems to go on forever.

Spent some time in the library tonight. Mailed off my vita to three more places—Phillips-Exeter, the Latin School, and Green Mtn. No response yet from Whitney on the Exp. Sch. Sent her the forms almost two weeks ago & she was going to talk to Dr. Fentworth as soon as she received them.

Picked up some chicken at Col. Sanders. The neighborhood has really come alive—with the window open I can hear kids screaming and playing down on the 5th St. School playground. (It's after 9 p.m. but there's still a little light in the sky.) Late at night I can hear the deep rumble of the ships' engines as the barges move upriver & then the slosh of the waves against the concrete pilings down at the end of Locust Street.

Talked to Mr. Eppet and Dr. North (Asst. Supt.) about next year. Could still get a contract here if I wanted it. (Not much chance of that.) Other teachers are circling my room like buzzards. Mrs. Kyle has her name on a piece of tape on my file cabinet and Mrs. Reardon (the greedy old cow—why doesn't she just tend to her husband's store and keep shouting at the kids not to read the comics?) has staked out my chair, the globe, (the one we just got in March), and the paperback stand. She can't wait for me to be gone next year. (They'll only have two fourth grades again—) When I leave, the school can lapse back into the Dark Ages. (No wonder T.C. and the others called it the Menopause Foundation.)

Loud horn from the river. Ship's bells. Reminds me of the cowbells tinkling from the masts of the small craft at anchor in Yarmouth.

The story is right on schedule. Donna, Sara, and Alice were crying today. (So were some of the boys but they tried to hide it.) They'll be relieved to hear Monday's episode. It's not time for ol' Raul to die yet—when he does it will be in the finest epic tradition. If nothing else, this tale is a great lesson in friendship, loyalty, and honor. The ending will be sad—with Raul sacrificing himself to free the others—holding off the Wizards until his friends can activate the teleportation device. But hopefully the last episode where Gernisavien & Dobby bring the humans back to Garden to clobber the Wizards will offset the sad part. At least it'll be a hell of a finalé.

I've got to write this thing down! Maybe this summer.

Totally dark out now. The streetlight outside my second story window here is shining through the maple leaves. A breeze has come up. Think I'll go for a walk down to the river and then come back to do some work.

Gernisavien awoke to an icy wind whipping at her face. The nine Wizards' platforms were floating above mountaintops that glowed white in the starlight. The air was very thin. Gernisavien's arm hung over the side of the platform. If she rolled over she would fall hundreds of feet to her death.

The little neo-cat could dimly make out the other platforms silhouetted against the stars and could see the robed Wizard figures on each, but there was no sign of Dobby.

A hissing from a Wizard on her own platform, directed at the lizard at the controls,

made Gernisavien look ahead. The platform was headed for a mountain that loomed up like a broken tooth directly ahead of them. The lizard made no attempt to change their course and Gernisavien realized that at their present speed they would crash into the rock and ice in less than thirty seconds. The neo-cat prepared to jump, but at the last second the lizard calmly touched a button on the panel and the platform began to slow.

Ahead of them the side of the mountain rose up into itself and revealed the entrance to a huge tunnel. Light as red as newly spilled blood poured out of the aperture. Then the platform was inside, the wall had lowered into place behind them, and Gernisavien was a prisoner in the Wizards' Stronghold.

On Saturday morning Mr. Kennan took Sara, Monica, and Terry on an all-day outing. Terry was not pleased with the presence of the two giggling girls, but he occupied the front seat with an air of proprietal indifference and ignored the silly outbursts of whispers emanating from the back. Mr. Kennan joked with all three children as he drove across the river into Daniel Boone National Forest. The girls dissolved into more giggles and frantic whispers whenever they were addressed, but Terry answered the jests with his usual humorless drawl.

Kennan parked near a picnic spot and the four spent an hour clambering around on a heap of boulders in among the trees. Then the teacher sent Terry back to the car and the boy returned with a wicker picnic hamper. Mr. Kennan had purchased sandwiches at the supermarket delicatessen and there were cans of soft drinks, bags of corn chips, and a pack of Oreo cookies. They sat on a high rock and ate in companionable silence. As always, Kennan marveled at the ravenous appetites of such little people.

In the early afternoon, he drove them back across the bridge and headed north along the state highway that soon headed back west again along the river. Fourteen miles and they were in Hermann, a picturesque little German community that had preserved all of the Victorian charm that nearby towns had either lost or never possessed. The Maifest was still underway and Kennan treated the kids to a ride on a wheezing Ferris wheel and to genuine chocolate ice cream at a sidewalk cafe. Women in bright peasant garb danced with older men who looked pleasantly ridiculous in lederhosen. A band sat in a white bandstand and gamely produced polka after polka for the small crowd.

It was almost dinnertime when Kennan drove them home. Monica whined and wheedled until the teacher told Terry to ride in the back and allowed Monica up front. This arrangement pleased no one. Terry and Sara sat in frozen silence while Monica fidgeted in paroxysms of nervousness whenever Kennan spoke to her or looked her way. Finally they stopped at a gas station under the pretext of a restroom break, and the old arrangement was restored for the last eight miles.

Both girls shouted their perfunctory "Thank-you-very-much-we-had-a-very-nice-time"

while they ran pell mell for their respective front doors. Kennan heaved a melodramatic sigh after Monica was out of sight and turned to his last passenger.

“Well, Terry, where to? Shall we stop by the Dog’N’Suds for dinner?”

Surprisingly, the boy suggested an alternative. “How ’bout the fish fry?”

Kennan had forgotten about the fish fry. Held at the Elk’s Lodge Recreation Area, three miles out of town, the annual event was evidently considered a big deal.

“OK,” said Kennan, “let’s go try the fish fry.”

Half the town was there. Two huge tents sheltered tables where diners gorged themselves on fried catfish, French fries, and coleslaw. A few dilapidated carnival rides made up a midway in the high grass adjacent to the parking lot. Homemade booths sold pies, opportunities to throw a softball at weighted milk bottles, and raffle chances at a color television set. Out on the baseball diamond, the men’s softball teams were playing their last tournament games. Deeper in the meadow, two opposing groups of volunteer firemen aimed their high pressure firehoses at a barrel suspended on a cable. They pushed it back and forth to the cheering of a small crowd.

Kennan and Terry sat at a long table and ate catfish. They strolled past the booths while townspeople greeted Kennan by name. The teacher recognized about one person in ten. Together they watched a ballgame, and by the time it was over the sun had set and strings of hanging lights had come on. The merry-go-round cranked out its four tunes of imitation calliope music while fireflies blinked along the edge of the woods. Some boys ran by in a pack and called to Terry. Kennan pressed two dollars into the surprised boy’s hands, and Terry ran off with the others toward the rides and games.

Kennan watched the beginning of the next game under the yellow field lights and then wandered back to the tent for a beer. Kay Bennett, the district’s school psychologist, was there and Kennan bought a second round of beers while the two sat talking. Kay was from California, was in her second year here, and felt as trapped as Kennan in this small, Missouri backwater. They took their plastic cups and wandered away from the lights. Broad paths ran from the Elk Lodge to small cabins in among the trees. The two walked the trails and watched as the full moon rose above the meadow. Twice they came upon high school students petting in the darkness. Both times they turned away with knowing smiles and amused glances. Kennan felt his own excitement rising as he stood near the young woman in the moonlight.

Later, as he was driving home, Kennan slammed the steering wheel and wished that he had gotten to know Kay earlier in the year. How different the winter would have been!

Back in his apartment, Kennan got out the bottle of Chivas Regal and sat reading Voltaire at the kitchen table. A gentle night breeze came in through the screen. Two drinks later he showered and crawled into bed. He decided not to make a journal entry but smiled at the fullness of the day.

“Shit!” said Kennan as he sat up in bed. He dressed quickly, ignoring his socks and pulling on a nylon wind-breaker over his pajama tops.

The moon was bright enough that he could have driven without headlights as he pushed the Volvo around tight turns in the county road. The parking lot was empty and there were deep ruts and gouges in the field. The rides were still there, but folded and ready to be loaded on trailers. The meadow was moon-dappled and, to Kennan’s first relieved glance, empty. But then he saw the shadowy figure on the top row of empty bleachers.

When he came close enough the moonlight allowed him to see the streaks on the boy’s dusty face. Kennan stood on a lower level and started to speak, found no words, stopped, and shrugged.

“I knowed you’d come back,” said Terry. His voice seemed cheerful. “I knowed you’d come back.”

Raul was alive. He struggled to free himself from the pile of lizard bodies. It had been the shirt. Since Carvnal he had worn the brightly decorated tunic that Fenn had given him at Treetops. It is more than decoration. Isn’t that what the strange little Fuzzy had said? Indeed it was. The shirt had stopped six high-velocity crossbow bolts from penetrating. Certainly it had been more effective than the loose-link armor that still adorned the lizard corpses all around.

Raul made it up onto all four legs and took a few shaky steps. He didn’t know how long he had been unconscious. It hurt to breathe. Raul felt his upper torso and wondered if the impact had broken a rib.

No matter. He moved around the clearing, first picking up his bow and then retrieving as many arrows as he could. He found his short sword where it had cleft a lizard’s shield, helmet, and skull. His clan warspear was broken, but he snapped off the sacred metal spearhead and dropped it in his quiver. When he had armed himself as well as he could, picking up a long lizard war lance, he galloped to the edge of the clearing.

Some of the palm trees were still smoldering. The Wizard platforms could not have been gone for long. And Raul knew where they must have gone.

To the north gleamed the high peaks of the Fanghorn Mountains. Wincing a bit, Raul strapped his shield and bow to his back. Then, breaking into an effortless,

distance-devouring canter, he headed north.

• • •

Night. Bugs dance in agitated clouds around the mercury vapor lamps. Kennan is standing in a phone booth near a small grocery store. The store is closed and dark. The side street is empty.

“Yes, Whit, I did get it …” Only Kennan’s voice is audible in the darkness.

“No, I know what … I am aware that it isn’t easy to get to see Fentworth.”

“Sure I do, but it isn’t that simple, Whit. Not only do I … I have a contract. It specifies that …”

“Those last days will make a difference …”

“So what did he say?”

“Look, I don’t see what difference it makes if I see him now or when he gets back in August. If he has to decide on the position, they can’t fill it ’til he gets back, can they? If I can just make arrangements to …”

“Oh, yeah? Yeah, I see. Before he goes? Yeah. Yeah. Uh-huh, I see that …”

“No, Whit, it is important that you’re going to be there. It’s just a matter of … it’s just that I don’t have the money to fly. And then I’d have to fly back to get my stuff.”

“Yeah. Yeah. That’d work out, but I can’t afford to miss those last few … I don’t know. I suppose, why? Hell, Whitney, you’ve been to Europe before … why don’t you … no, really, why don’t you tell your folks you can’t join them until late June or …”

“Yeah. You did? Your folks won’t be there? What about … whatshername, the housekeeper, yeah, Millie … Until when?”

“Damn. Yes, it does sound good.”

“No, no, I do appreciate it, Whitney. You don’t know how much it means to me …”

“Yeah. Uh-huh, that all makes sense but, look, it’s hard to explain. No, listen, there’s tomorrow. Friday, yeah … and then Monday’s off because of Memorial Day. Then they go Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday’s their last day. No … just report cards and stuff. Look, couldn’t it be just a week later?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah. OK, I understand that. Well, look, let me think about it overnight, all right?”

“I know that … but he’s around on Saturday, isn’t he?”

“OK, look, I’ll call you tomorrow … that’s Friday night … and I’ll let you know what … no, goddamn it, Whit, I’m poor but I’m not that poor, I don’t want your parents getting billed for … look, I’ll call you about nine o’clock, that’s … uh … eleven your time, OK?”

“Well, you could call him on Saturday then and tell him I’d be there Wednesday, or I can just wait and hope something else opens up. Uh-huh, uh-huh … well, let’s just … just let me think about it, OK? Yes … well, I will take that into consideration, don’t worry.”

“Look, Whit, I’m running out of quarters here. Yeah. About nine … I mean eleven. No … me too. It’s real good to hear your voice … Yeah. OK. I’ll talk to you tomorrow then. Yeah … I look forward to seeing you soon, too. Me too. Bye, Whit.”

After Dobby’s unsuccessful escape attempt, they hung him from chains on the wall. From where Gernisavien was strapped to the table, she could not see if he was still breathing. The red light made it look as if he had been flayed alive.

Tall, shrouded shapes moved through the bloody dimness. When the Wizards weren’t turned her way, Gernisavien strained against the metal bands at her wrists and ankles. No use. The steel did not budge an inch. The neo-cat relaxed and inspected the steel table to which she was pinned. The smooth surface had metal gutters on the side and small drain holes. Gernisavien wondered at their purpose and then wished she hadn’t. Her heart was racing so fast that she feared it would tear its way out of her chest.

At least Dobby’s escape attempt the day before had distracted the guards long enough for Gernisavien to raise her hands, lift the key, and swallow it.

There was a movement in the shadows and the tallest of the hooded figures stepped forward into a shaft of red light. Slowly the Wizard drew back its hood. Gernisavien stared in horror at overlapping scales, a face like a mantis’s skull, great eyes that looked like pools of congealed blood, and fangs which dripped a thick mucus.

The Wizard said something that Gernisavien did not understand. Slowly it raised its bony, scaly hand. Clenched in the foul claws was a scalpel …

Less than half a mile away, Raul labored uphill through heavy snowdrifts. His hooves slipped on icy rocks. Twice he caught himself and only the strength of his massive arms allowed him to pull his body to safety. A fall now meant certain death.

The shirt Fenn had given him provided some warmth for his upper body, but the rest of him was freezing. His hands were quickly growing numb, and Raul knew that they would not save him again should he slip. What was worse, the sun was beginning to set. The centaur knew that he would not survive another night at these elevations.

If only he could find the opening!

Just as he was beginning to despair, Raul heard a rock fall below him and then a whispered curse came on the icy wind. Crawling to the edge of the snowy overhang, he looked down on two lizard guards no more than thirty feet away. They stood next to a heavy metal door that had been painted white to blend in with the snowy mountainside. The lizards wore white hoods and parkas and if it had not been for the curse, Raul would never have seen them.

The sun was down. A freezing wind swept the slopes and threw icy crystals against the centaur’s quivering flanks. Raul crouched in the snow. His frozen fingers reached for his bow and arrows.

From the estate atop the hill, the view of the river had been largely occluded by late-spring foliage. But from the wide veranda doors one could easily watch the boy and the man climbing the verdant curve of lawn. They walked slowly. The man was talking; the boy was looking up at him.

The man sat down on the grass and beckoned for the boy to do likewise. The boy shook his head and took two steps backward. The man spoke again. His hands were stretched out, fingers splayed wide. He leaned forward in an earnest gesture, but the boy took another two steps back. When the man rose, the boy turned and began walking quickly down the hill. The man took a few steps after him but stopped when the boy broke into a jog.

In less than a minute, the boy was out of sight around the bend in the railroad tracks and the man stood alone on the hill.

Kennan drove the Volvo down the narrow side street and stopped opposite Terry’s house. He sat in the car for a long minute with his hands on the steering wheel. As Kennan reached for the Volvo’s door handle, Mr. Bester came out of the house and stepped down from the high porch into the side yard. The man wore baggy bib overalls and no shirt. As he bent to peer under the house for something, his gray stubble caught the light. Kennan paused for a second and then drove on.

At two a.m. Kennan was still loading the books into cardboard cartons. As he passed in front of the screened window he thought he heard a noise from across the street. He put down the stack of books, walked to the screen, and looked down through streetlight glare and leaf shadows.

“Terry?”

There was no response. The shadows on the lawn did not move and a few minutes later Kennan resumed his packing.

He had planned to leave very early Sunday morning, but it was almost ten before the car was loaded. It was strangely cold, and a few drops of rain fell from leaden skies. His landlord was not home—in church probably—so Kennan dropped the key in his mailbox.

He drove around the town twice and past the school four times before he cursed softly and headed west on the main highway.

Traffic was very light on Interstate 55 and the few cars there tended to drive with their lights on. Occasionally rain would spatter the windshield. He stopped for breakfast on the west side of St. Louis. The waitress said that it was too late for breakfast so he had a hamburger and coffee. The storm light outside made the café seem dark and cold.

It was pouring by the time he passed through downtown St. Louis. The tricky lane changes made Kennan miss seeing the Gateway Arch as he crossed the Mississippi. The river was as gray and turbulent as the sky.

Once in Illinois, the Volvo headed east on Interstate 70, the trip settled down to the hiss of tires on wet pavement and the quick metronome of the wipers. This soon depressed Kennan and he switched on the radio. It surprised him a bit to hear the roars and shouts of the Indianapolis 500 being broadcast. He listened to it as great trucks whooshed past him in the drizzle. Within half an hour the announcer in Indianapolis was describing the storm clouds coming in from the west, and Kennan turned off the radio in the sure knowledge that the race would be called.

In silence he drove eastward.

On the Tuesday after Memorial Day, Mr. Kennan’s fourth graders filed into their classroom to find Mrs. Borcherding installed behind the teacher’s desk. All of them knew her from times she had substituted for their regular teachers in years past. Some of the children had known her as their first grade teacher during her last year before retirement.

Mrs. Borcherding was a swollen mass of fat, wrinkles, and wattles. Her upper arms hung loose and flapped when she gestured. Her legs were bloated masses of flesh straining against support stockings. Her arms, hands, and face were liberally sprinkled with liver spots and her whole body gave off a faint aroma of decay that soon

permeated the room. The children sat with their hands folded on their desks in unaccustomed formality and faced her silently.

“Mr. Kennan has been called away,” said the apparition in a voice that seemed too phlegmy to be human. “I believe there was an illness in the family. At any rate, I will be your teacher for these last three days of school. I want it understood that I expect everyone in this class to work. It does not matter to me whether there are three days of school left or three hundred. Nor am I interested in whether you’ve had to work as hard as you should have up to now. You will do your best work right up until the time you are dismissed on Thursday afternoon. Your report cards have already been filled out, but don’t think that you can start fooling around now. Mr. Eppert has given me the authority to change grades as I see fit. And that includes conduct grades. It is still possible that some of you may have to be retained in fourth grade if I see the necessity during the next few days. Now, are there any questions? No questions? Very good, you may get out your arithmetic books for a drill.”

During morning recess, Terry was besieged with kids demanding information. He stood as mute as a rock against the crashing waves of curiosity and desperation. The one piece of information he did impart caused the children to turn and babble at one another like extras in a melodramatic crowd scene.

It was mid-afternoon before someone worked up nerve to confront Mrs. Borcherding. Naturally it was Sara who went forward. In the thick stillness of the handwriting exercise, Sara’s tiny voice was as high and urgent as a bee’s distracting buzz. Mrs. Borcherding listened, frowned, and focused her scowl on the front row as Sara went back to her seat.

“Terry Bester.”

“Yes’m,” said Terry.

“Mmmmm … Sally says that you … ahh … have something to share with us,” began Mrs. Borcherding. The class started to giggle at the mistake with Sara’s name but then froze as Mrs. Borcherding’s little eyes darted around to find the source of the noise. “All right, since the class evidently has been expecting this for some time, we will get this … story … out of the way right now and then go on to social studies.”

“No, ma’m,” said Terry softly.

“What was that?” Mrs. Borcherding looked long and hard at the boy, obviously ready to rise out of her chair at any sign of defiance. Terry sat at polite attention, his hands folded on his notebook. Only in the firm set of the thin lips was there any sign of impertinence.

“It would be convenient to get this out of the way now,” repeated the substitute.

“No, ma’am,” repeated Terry and continued quickly before the shocked fat lady could say anything. “I was told that I was s’posed to tell it on the last day. That’s Thursday. That’s what he said.”

Mrs. Borcherding stared down at Terry. She started to speak, closed her mouth with an audible snap, and then began again. “We’ll use your regular Thursday recess time. Right before clean up. Those people who wish to miss recess can stay inside to listen. The others will be allowed to go outside and play.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Terry and returned to his handwriting drill.

Wednesday morning was hot and thick with summer. The children entered the classroom with hopeful eyes that turned to downcast glances as they spied the bulk of Mrs. Borcherding behind the desk. She rarely rose from her chair, and, as if to balance her immobility, the children were confined to their desks, Mr. Kennan’s assignment check-out cards and independent work centers abandoned.

At each recess Terry was mobbed with children seeking some small preview. Uncharacteristically for him, the attention did not seem to please him. He sought the far reaches of the playground and stood throwing pebbles at a picket fence.

Before school on Thursday, the rumor spread that Mr. Kennan’s Volvo had been seen on Main Street the night before. Monica Davis had been eating downtown at the Embers Restaurant when she was sure she had seen Mr. Kennan drive by. Sara took it upon herself to call her classmates with the information and happily accepted the reprimands from irate parents who did not appreciate early morning phone calls from fourth graders. By eight-fifteen, forty-five minutes before the bell rang, most of the class was on the playground. It was Bill who volunteered to go into the school and check out the situation.

Three minutes later he returned. One look at his crestfallen face told most of them what they needed to know.

“Well?” insisted Brad.

“It’s Borcherding,” said Bill.

“Maybe he’s not here yet,” ventured Monica, but few believed it and the girls wilted under their reprimanding stares.

When it came time to file in, reality sat before them in the same strained, purple-print dress that she had worn on Tuesday. The day dragged by with that indescribable,

open-windowed languor that only the last day of school can engender. The morning was filled with busy work made all the more maddening by the echoing emptiness of the rest of the school. Most classes were gone on class picnics. Mr. Kennan had long ago outlined his plan of hiking all the way to Riverfront Park to spend the entire day in "an orgy of playing softball and eating goodies." Specific children had volunteered to bring specific goodies. But there was no question of that now. When the students glanced up from their work to acknowledge a command from Mrs. Borcherding, there was a common look in their eyes. They shared a dawning realization that the world was not stable; that there were trapdoors to reality which could be sprung without warning. It was a lesson that all of the children instinctively had known once, but had been foolish enough to forget temporarily while encircled with the protective ring of magic.

The day crawled to noon. The class ate in the almost empty lunchroom, sharing it with only a first grade class being punished and five slobbering members of Miss Carter's self-contained EMR class.

Shouts on the playground were strangely subdued. No one approached Terry. If he was nervous, he did not show it as he stood leaning against a tetherball pole with his arms folded.

In the afternoon they checked in their rented books—Brad and Donald had to pay for their lost or damaged books—and sat in silent rows as Mrs. Borcherding laboriously took inventory. They knew that the last hour and a half of school would consist of scrubbing desks, clearing the walls of posters, and covering the bookshelves with paper. All these activities were useless, the children knew, because in a week or two the custodians would move everything out of the room to clean again anyway. They knew that Mrs. Borcherding would wait until the last possible moment to hand out their report cards, hinting all the while that some of them did not pass—or certainly did not deserve to. They also knew that everyone would pass.

At five minutes past two, Mrs. Borcherding ponderously stood and looked at the twenty-seven children sitting silently in their strangely clean desks. Tall stacks of books surrounded them like defensive sandbags.

"All right," said Mrs. Borcherding, "you may go out to recess."

No one moved except Brad who stood up, looked around in confusion at his seated classmates, and then sat back down with a foolish grin. Mrs. Borcherding flushed, started to speak, checked herself, and dropped heavily into her chair.

"Terry, I believe that you had something to say," she wheezed. She glanced up at the clock on the wall—it was not running—and then down at the alarm clock which the children had covertly continued to wind. "You have thirteen minutes, young man. Try

not to waste their entire recess time.”

“Yes’m,” said Terry and stood. He crossed to the long bulletin board and raised his hand to the triangular pattern of magic marker mountains which ran near the southern coast of the sketched-in continent. He said nothing. The children nodded silently. Terry dropped his hand and went to the front of the room. His corduroy pants made a whik-wik sound as he walked.

Once at the front of the room, he turned and faced his classmates. Sluggish currents of heat, the drone of insects, and distant shouts came through the open windows. Terry cleared his throat. His lips were white but his high, soft voice was firm as he began to speak.

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Raul was up the hill from the two lizards who’re guarding the door to that place where the Wizards was keeping Dobby and Gernisavien. Remember, this was about the time that that big Wizard was getting his knife out to maybe cut Gernisavien open to get the key. Anyway, Raul’s fingers was froze, but he knew he’d have to kill the lizards real quick or he wouldn’t get a second chance. The snow was blowing all around him and it was getting dark real fast.

The lizards were hunkered over and sort of mumbling to each other. They were wearing these real thick parka-like coats and Raul knew that if he didn’t shoot just right that the arrow wouldn’t get through all that stuff. Especially if they was wearing armor too.

So Raul got two arrows out. One he stuck point first in the snow and the other he goes and notches. His hands feel like he’s wearing thick gloves but he ain’t. He’s worried that he can’t feel nothing with his fingers and maybe the arrow’ll let go too soon and that’ll tip off the lizards. But he tries not to think about that and he draws the bowstring back as far as he can. Remember, this is a special bow—it come down the clan line from his old man who was war chief of all the centaurs and nobody ’cept for Raul can pull it all the way back.

He does. And he has to hold it that way while he takes aim. His muscles are freezing and for a second he begins to shake up and down, but he takes a big, deep breath and holds it steady … the bow … on that first lizard, the one who’s standing closest to the door. It’s real dark now but there’s a little bit of red light coming from around that door.

Swiish! Raul lets her go. And no sooner than he lets the first one fly but than he’s notchin’ the second arrow and pulling back on it. The first lizard—the one nearest the door?—he makes a funny little sound as the arrow gets him smack dab in the throat

and sticks out the other side. But the other lizard, he's looking out the other way and when he turns to see what's going on—swiish—there's an arrow growin' out of the back of his neck too and then he falls, but he slides over the edge and keeps on going down to the frozen ice about two miles below, but neither one of them made no sound.

And then Raul's coming down the hill on all four legs, sort of slipping and sliding and making straight for the door. Well, it's a real big metal door and there ain't no doorknob or nothing and it's locked. But the first lizard—the one who's laying dead in the snow—he's got this ring of keys with about sixteen big keys on it. And one of them fits. But it's lucky that he wasn't the one who fell over the edge, is all.

So Raul sticks this key in and the door slides back sideways and there's this long tunnel going off straight ahead 'til it turns and it's all lit with red light and sort of spooky. He walks into the tunnel and maybe he done something wrong or maybe there's an electric eyeball or something 'cause suddenly these bells are going off like an alarm.

"Well, I done it now," Raul thinks to hisself and takes off galloping down the hallway full speed. He'd put his bow back by this time and he's got his sword out.

Meanwhile, you remember that Gernisavien was all strapped down to this steel table and there was a Wizard standing over her fixing to slit open her belly to get at that farcaster key? He had the knife out—it was sort of like a doctor's knife, it was so sharp you could cut butter with it—and he was standing there just sort of deciding where to make the cut when all the bells went off.

"It's Raul!" yells Dobby who's hanging there on the wall and who's still alive.

The Wizard, he turns real fast and throws some switches and all these TV screens light up. On some of the screens you see lizard soldiers running and others you see a couple of Wizards sort of looking around and on one you see Raul running down this hallway.

The Wizard says something in Wizard talk to these other guys in robes in the room and then they go running out of the room together. So now Dobby and Gernisavien are all alone in there, but there ain't nothing they can do except to watch the TV because they're all tied up.

Raul, he's coming around this bend and all of the sudden here are a bunch of lizards in front of him and they've got crossbows and he's just got his sword. But they're more surprised than he is and he puts his head down and charges full speed into them and before they can get their crossbows loaded and everything he's in there swinging and there are lizard heads and tails and stuff flying around.

Now Gernisavien can see this on the TV and she and Dobby are cheering and

everything but they can see the other TVs too, and the halls is full of lizards and the Wizards are coming too. So Dobby, he begins to pull and pull against the chains as hard as he can. Remember, his arms are stronger than they look like we found out when he held up part of Tartuffel's Treehouse that time.

"What're you doing?" goes Gernisavien.

"Tryin' to get at that!" goes Dobby and he points at the table full of test tubes and bottles and all the chemical stuff where the Wizards had been working.

"What for?" goes Gernisavien.

"It's nucular fuel," Dobby says, "and that blue stuff is anti-gravity stuff like in the sky galleon. If it gets all mixed up …" And Dobby keeps pulling and pulling until the veins stood up out of his head, but finally one of the chain things breaks and Dobby's hanging down by one arm but he's too tired to keep going.

"Wait a minute," goes Gernisavien. She's watching the TV.

Raul was killing lizards this way and that and he got to within maybe a hundred feet or so to where Dobby and Gernisavien's being kept, but he don't know that and suddenly here come these four or five Wizards with their fire guns. Raul, he barely gets his shield up in time. As it is they scorched off some of his hair and mane and burned up all of his arrows and stuff on his back. And they burned up his daddy's bow, too.

So Raul starts going backwards and he knows they're trying to cut him off 'cause he can see the lizards running down these side hallways. So he turns and gallops as fast as he can but the Wizards are coming down the main way and when they get a clear shot he'll be a goner. So Raul stops and picks up a crossbow and he sort of keeps them back by shooting their way.

All of the sudden he's in this big room where the Wizards keep their flying platforms. And Raul goes and jumps the railing and lands on one and starts to look at the controls. He pushes this button and the wall rolls up—it's the door on the side of the mountain. Raul looks outside and sees the fresh air and stars and everything. And when he looks back all he can see is doorways full of lizards and here come the Wizards with their fire guns and everything and Raul knows that if he stays he can't dodge them all. Raul's not so much afraid of getting killed as he is of getting hurt real bad and having to stay there all chained up like Gernisavien and Dobby.

So Raul, he pushes the buttons until the flying platform starts flying and the Wizards are blasting away with their fire guns, but he's already outside in the night air and they can't get a good shot at him as he flies away sort of zig-zagging.

Now back up the hallway, Gernisavien and Dobby've been watching all this on the TV. Dobby's face, it always looks kind of sad but now it looks sadder than ever.

"Can you get your other arm loose?" goes Gernisavien.

Dobby just shakes his head no. He ain't got no leverage.

Gernisavien, she knows that the key's still in her stomach. And she knows that the Wizards're planning to use it to get at all those other worlds in the Web of Worlds. And maybe the humans could fight them off but it looks like it'd be real hard what with the Wizards coming on them by surprise and all. Gernisavien remembers all the times they talked about when they would get to the farcaster and all the planets they'd go to together and all the people they'd see.

"It's been fun, hasn't it?" goes Dobby.

"Yeah," says Gernisavien. And then she says. "Go ahead. Do it."

Dobby knows what she means. He smiles and the smile, it's sort of sad and sort of happy at the same time. Then he leans out real far until he's standing on the wall sideways. That's when they hear the Wizard's footsteps in the hallway. So Dobby starts swinging his right arm—the one with the chain hanging loose from it—and then he brings it down on the nucular fuel and other things on the table and smashes them all together.

Raul is five or six miles away when he sees the mountain blow up. The top just sort of came off and the whole thing went up in the air like a volcano. Raul's just high enough and just far enough away that he didn't get blown all to pieces with it. And he knew who did it. And why.

Now I don't know what else he was thinking about. But he was all by himself now. And he flew around up there alone while all the lava runs down the mountains and sparks shoot up into the air. And there's nowhere for him to go now. He can't get the farcaster to work all by himself. Gernisavien had the key and Dobby was the only one who knew how to turn it on.

Raul stayed up there in the dark for a long time. Then he turned the platform around and flew away. And that's the end.

There was a silence. Children sat stone still and watched as Terry went back to his desk. His corduroys went whik-wik. As he sat down, several of the girls began to sob. Many of the boys looked down or raised their desk lids to hide their own tears.

Mrs. Borcherding was at a loss. Then she turned to the wall clock, turned back angrily

to the alarm clock, and raised it between her and the class.

“See what you did, young man,” she snapped. “You’ve wasted the class’s entire recess and put us behind schedule on our clean-up. Quickly everyone, get ready to scrub your desks!”

The children rubbed at their eyes, took deep breaths, and obediently set to the final tasks that stood between them and freedom.