

The man Who fell from a clear blue sky

william kern

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Picture it; we fools, I and they, now all with the dying and the dead, standing mute around the fading hearth and wondering, all of us, we miserable fools, they and I, how we might tend toward this task. Darkness never seemed so dark; dread never seemed quite so dreadful as on that smothering night.

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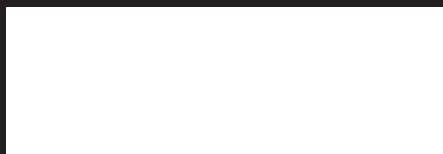
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She touched my lips with a finger. "I, too, have loved you and no other since that first day. But I know we cannot be together. Our different worlds will not allow it. Still, we can be companions for many years."

I did not have the heart or the courage to tell her how different our worlds really were, that I might one day simply vanish, fall into a mirror and vanish without a trace, with not so much as a flake of skin or thread of hair left as evidence that I had ever existed in her world. I could not screw up the courage to explain it, to tell her that I was two hundred years old and that if I did not vanish into a mirror, I might just drop dead. I wanted so badly to say it, but I could not. I could not bear to destroy her dreams for the future, to see the hope and happiness in her bright eyes dashed to despair. And so the traitor in me said, "Yes."



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The Man Who Fell From A Clear Blue Sky

by

William Kern

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I have often wondered if “changelings,” especially human/wolf changelings (hulfs) have not got a bad rap in the pages of contemporary literature. Certainly, there is ample anecdotal evidence to indicate that “werewolves” have existed and that they may have been responsible for gruesome crimes. But what if the hulfs were innocent of the crimes and have only been the scapegoats to cover up the crimes of other humans? This brief story examines such a possibility.



THE MAN WHO FELL FROM A CLEAR BLUE SKY

by

William Kern

For Jane

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How Dark The Blaze of Noon
O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrevocably dark, total eclipse...
Total eclipse! no sun, no moon!
All dark amidst the blaze of noon

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At The End Of The Universe Lies The Beginning Of Life

Because it occurs in Time, there is no beginning to this adventure and, therefore, it will have no ending; at least no ending that the reader might recognize as an ending. It is a tale about people and the world they inhabit, about the world and the various people in it, about how people view and struggle with the world that often seems to thwart their every move, and how the world (and the cosmos for that matter) uses and consumes the creatures that dwell in it.

There is no great, earth-shattering moral to the story, unless the reader finds something his or her mind is listening to as they read, and connects those unspoken unthoughts to this tale. If there is an underlying thought, it will be to question whether or not humans and other creatures have any control over their existence while they are dwellers on this strange and often hostile world.

Since the story has no chronological beginning, it might as well begin today; this morning as I was strolling down the street on my way to the market to purchase food for my evening meal. I had twice seen

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an old man (or a man who appeared old, but who may have been middle-aged). He had the look and demeanor of a wretched homeless person and, yet, he walked with a stride and purpose that told me he was going somewhere important to him and that to get there was important. A most purposeful stride that was taking him to a meaningful destination, a dreadful mission. I was determined, out of curiosity, if nothing else, to follow him and find out what he was up to. I probably should have minded my own business.

The old man looked like an oily rag someone had thrown into a pond; he just kind of floated through the world all sloshy and raggedy and older than the scaly serpent itself. No one paid much attention to him; first he was there then he wasn't and few noticed either way. He was gutter rain and trash blowing across the street. Everyone knew he was there but no one cared. He was in the corner of your eye, the corner of your mind; he was sneeze or clear your throat or scratch an itch. He happened to the world automatically like he was invisible most of the time and probably that was the way he wanted it.

The only reason the old man came to my attention at all was because I spotted him twice in the same day almost the same hour all wrinkly and brown dirty mail pouch tobacco barn siding skin, tattered clothes, dull brown eyes, dull brown greasy hair, streaks of gray, dull brown lips that looked like they hadn't cracked a smile in a thousand years walking in front of me the same way I was going with his gnarled dull

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brown hands permanently semi-clenched like dead chicken feet, sculling himself along the sidewalk with a stick he had found somewhere and I wondered where he lived and how he managed to survive in a world that cared little or nothing for homeless things.

I recalled someone mentioned that they had heard the old man had fallen from the sky and no one bothered him because the brassface police and the street thugs were scared to death of him saying he was immortal and invincible powerful filled with magic.

Everyone thought he was a magician from another world and who was to say otherwise?

It took some doing just to catch up with him and I thought maybe he even slowed down some so I could get up beside him without running and I said hi but he just kept rowing himself down the sidewalk like he either didn't see or hear me or did but didn't give a damn so I said hi again and he said go away or I'll hit you with this stick you nosy damned kid stop bothering me or I'll bust your head like a rotten punkin so I sidestepped a little but kept on walking with him and pretty soon he just stopped dead without warning and I took two steps before I could stop and he swung the stick like swoosh an inch from my face and I put up my arm and caught a mighty whack on the palm of my hand goddamn I hollered and he grinned like that was about the funniest thing he had seen in a long time.

Okay he says come along and I'll tell you the story

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of how I happened to fall from the sky to land on this here miserable piece of real estate. How did you know I asked and he said that's what everyone who follows me wants to know so why would you be any different and I rubbed my hand with my other hand and walked with him into a dark gloomy alley between two old derelict buildings the city hadn't got around to tearing down and through a kind of doorway that seemed to appear from the darkness and into a black room with a couple of small boxes next to a bigger box like your old basic table and chairs and he lit a candle on the big box using a match from a folder that I couldn't even see until the light came up and I could see that the old man and me and the three boxes and the candle and the folder of matches were the only things in the room about sixty feet square, a room so large the candle light barely reached the graffiti walls, the peeling scarred gray dull concrete windowless walls ciphered with lifetimes of chalk and spray-paint, sad memories and forlorn wisdom.

The raggedy man seemed to waver in the flickering candle glow, staring at his hands, flexing and unflexing his fingers and marveling at the motion as if he had never really seen such wonders before that very moment.

We sat and he rested his chin in the palms of his upturned hands, staring into the flickering candle-light. He seemed to have died as soon as he sat for he did not move did not blink and I thought he did not even breathe for almost a minute.

The mirror people, he said of a sudden, cast me

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here when I least expected it to happen. I'd known for some weeks, couple of months really, that the people in the mirror were real, were alive, were watching me, every move I made, even when I wasn't in front of a mirror. They knew what I was doing, knew what I was thinking because they were doing and thinking the same thing. I began to fear sleeping, thinking the dopplegangers would come to get me in the darkness while I was dreaming of pretty girls and sweet cherry blossoms falling like pink snow.

Not certain what made me think of it the first time. I wasn't even in front of a mirror. I began to wonder if the image—the mirror image—extended beyond what could be seen in the glass. Look here, if you step slightly to one side of the mirror you can see the door to the bedroom. If you step the other way you can see the shower or the wardrobe. And a little more you can see down the hallway leading into the living room. You can't see the living room because it is around corners and behind walls but isn't the living room there all the same? Everything in your house or apartment is there, in the mirror. Even the world beyond your front door, the very cosmos itself, is in the mirror; you just have to be able to figure out how to see around the corners and through the walls.

You get so interested in the image in the mirror that it becomes you, and you forget who you were, who you are, who you could become. You become the person in the mirror.

I had everything I wanted. I envied no one, wanted no one else's life. Having survived the expe-

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rience of living on Earth for a full forty years, I felt I was unique, unlike anyone else. I began to imagine that I had discovered some great universal secret, this new world in the mirror. It was the place where ghosts live, where spooks and haunts and creatures of the night reside until we think them into existence. I was reborn into a completely new reality and, having realized that, I had just begun to live.

The images in the mirror were from a parallel universe just waiting to be explored, just waiting there in the silvered glass, drawing me closer with every glance.

I began to obsess on this idea, wondering before I slept or soon after waking, if there was another being, a doppelganger, reclining on a bed identical to mine, only mirror-image, who was thinking about me lying in bed thinking about him. I began to fear that one day, when I least expected it, one of those beings in the mirror world would come and snatch me away.

I worried that I was mad and hoped that I was prepared for it but I knew I wasn't.

They didn't come for me at all. I went to them as easily as if I walked through a doorway into another room, just slipped right into the mirror one early Fall morning as if I'd been sucked up by a vacuum and landed in a backwards world. Everything seemed perfectly normal but in the back of my head I knew my world, what I thought of as the real world, was on the other side of the mirror. I wanted to go back but

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didn't know how. Going back was not as easy as crossing over.

I jumped from my world of 1851 to the first reflected world of 1951, a full one hundred years into their future. But the mirror world of 1951 was, I believe now, unlike the world that would have existed in 1951 where I originated. Perhaps it was or wasn't. I don't know anymore. I thought I had died and that I was in the world of death. I was certain God had forsaken me as punishment for my sins, which at that time were legion. I was afraid, scared stupid for a long time, but soon I accepted my life as the real life and began to suspect that the life I'd had on the other side of the mirror was an illusion.

As soon as I grabbed a hold of the mirror world, strange new things began to happen. I would wake up and be in a different world every morning, go to sleep in a different world every night. I almost couldn't keep up with it at first. But it was not long before I couldn't remember my life before I fell into the mirror.

Things happened slowly at the beginning like I was being prepared for my new world carefully, but soon came one adventure after another, a carousel whirling past me so quickly everything was a blur. I can't remember the first hundred years clearly but I do remember a couple of things that happened before I fell back through the mirror to land here. Now all I can think about is going back to find the people I knew there, in the last world into which I had fallen, the people I loved, the people I long for.

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“You said ‘the first hundred years,’ ” said I. “Were you there that long?”

“Twice as long, perhaps thrice as long. It is not in me to remember so many years, so many adventures. Sometimes I think I am dreaming it all, even now here with you. But I was going to tell you about the people I cared for, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, tell me,” I said, and he pursed his dull gray lips and nodded sagely. Presently he spoke and when he did his voice was thin and dark and ancient.

* * * * *

Gold and frankincense and myrrh. The earth exploded beneath a new star. I walked under the vast electric midnight sky. Wise men arrived at last but they did not stop to ask for directions; they knew where they were going. The oak tree, naked in the shadow, was not interested in cherry blossoms or dancing cranes in far away Japan. An imprisoned monk sipped warm tea before a dusty window while he peered at the four strangers, barely visible on the road below. It was quiet except for the faint white voices of geese winging southward in the high and lonely sky.

The sea darkened; the tall cliffs, newly washed by crashing high tide, stood as mute guardians against the invincible intruding waves.

How cold it was.

The gray pink fog, never far behind, accompa-

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nied the winter wind, pushed, stirred up the loose, torn off bits of seagrass, ready or not, and dragged them into the relentless surf, carried them to where, scattered all about, remained the rumpled souvenirs of heaven's flame, all one pile.

Unarmed but for faith I walked across the dying embers of the universe, holy golden funeral pyre, low and crackling, where the bleating wind swirled the ashes as they rose to the nameless hill in the mist.

Rain, falling like hard, rusted nails, a sudden late autumn shower. I was newly baptized. I reached out and touched the rook's impulsive call, a massive melody agonizing downward from the greening shade. The planets hesitated. Martyrs with ashen faces looked up briefly from the temple, sputtering madness, incredulous, then withdrew into their lairs, heads bowed beneath uncombed hair.

All was still once more.

A green frog, its form freshly painted by the clinging mist, sprang into an old pool, plopping into the sound of water. My footsteps alarmed the rooks and they flew madly just above the withered reeds, protesting my approach. Soon will come the first soft snow, enough to bend the leaves of the fragile jonquil and in the frog's cry was a portent of the winter death to come.

Still shivering, I longed for cherry blossoms and butterflies, for brightly colored Maples and sun-filled skies. Last days of autumn, first days of winter. No one traveled the road now but I, steeped in thoughts and

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loneliness as dawn ascended. Far down the stream I could see the rough wooden bridge that joined the path leading to the stone house on the cliff. The ammonia-colored moon was hidden now and then by angry dark clouds; the stars were gone. Around the harvest pool more frogs leaped away as I longed for the warmth of home. I thought I would not like to die here in this place behind the mirror, in this dream, in this gloom where there was no joy, no sky, no moon, no stars, no flowers.

How cold it was, how cold. No familiar sky, no familiar earth, but still the snow will fall.

In the pale light I stared into the stream and saw my father's face. The clouds parted for a moment and I could see the Milky Way Galaxy at the bottom of the dark water. When I looked up it was already gone. I was naked in the darkness. I stirred the water with my hand, remembering the vision of the stars but only a slight muddiness appeared.

The imprisoned monk, having finished his warm tea, was playing his flute all out of tune. The horizon was glowing lighter in the east. Soon the sun would rise, still lost to my sight above the black clouds. In the half light I longed for love and the cold wind turned to rain again, smudging the clouds that snaked through the stream. The bridge was not far but I leaped across the narrow stream and struggled up the far bank in the mud, too eager for the shelter and warmth of the hearth.

A lightning flash in the faraway sky. Between the

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forest trees I saw the shape of a creature watching as I approached. When the lightning flashed again, it was gone. It saw all it needed to see.

In that morning's mad world, visions of the hulf.

I was cold and now I was smeared with mud to my knees. I mounted the trail to the stone house above on the windswept cliff. The footpath was slick and the going was slow.

Dreams in my head like wet heavy rain, like soot on a broken window, like a soft and terrible machine, like a skulking young hulf and when she growled I could hear under the purling little girl voice the dark, lean, terrible animal living in the heat of her throat.

This hulf had been stalking me for at least an hour, from the moment I left the safety of the village where she wished not to show herself, and I could tell from the sound of her panting it was a female. I never saw her clearly, but I knew she was there in the underbrush trying to keep pace with me and I wondered if she was hungry, if she would pounce upon me and kill me.

But it had been an hour and still she had only followed and I pondered to what purpose.

I stopped and peered into the dense brush then upward at the house above me on the headland, longing all the more for its safety and comfort.

"Hulf," said I with a gentle voice, "Why do you not come out to the path where the ground is firmer,

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where we may walk together to the house yonder?"

Silence in the bush, then a low purling, then a stirring and parting of the green, and she crept into view first on all fours—I started at the sight of her—then she stood with amazing agility, smiling a little smile, her eyes keen upon me, her hands curled as if to attack but her back straight and strong. When she spoke her voice was remarkably masculine and deep, a counterpoint to the siren female whisper above it as if she spoke with two voices at once.

"I am not good at tracking," she intoned through her white wolf teeth and dark red hunger, wondering aloud if we humans had to sleep with the fear of waking someday to find we, too, were changing into the hulf, part human and part wolf, sometimes more of one than the other and I just smiled back at her with deliberate silence, eyes narrowed and piercing, until she turned away to gaze with feral curiosity at the stone house above us on the rocky promontory.

"And are you going there?" she asked presently.

"I am."

"May I go with you?"

"If you wish it." And I wondered if she had children and if they, too, were hulfs living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder.

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“My forerunners were human like you,” she said. “It was only after the disease accident that we became the hulf living on the swiftness of our limbs. I was only thirteen years alive when I began to change. Now I am twenty years alive and I have had no children.” She thrust out her ample bare human breasts and laughed gaily, almost a puppylike yelp. “Not yet.”

“Did you think perhaps to kill me and have me for breakfast back there?” I asked.

“Briefly,” said she, “but I suppose I am too much human and too little wolf to do it.” And nothing else.

And so we walked to the house together without further conversation.

I felt, for a moment, that she wanted to reach out and take my hand, to walk swinging it gaily back and forth like a child at a circus with her father. But, perhaps, it was I who wanted to hold the hulf's hand so that both she and I would feel more at ease.

I did and she did not draw away.

When we reached the house I began to search for the key in my kit while she gazed about at the mist-covered trees and brush, the spider webs bejeweled with glistening droplets of crystal rain, and she soon spied an enormous rook perched upon a barren limb, preening and combing its feathers fastidiously.

Here the hulf mustered up some urge to commune with nature. Perhaps she wished to see some design among the fallen leaves and receive some

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backtalk from the mute sky or the frantic rook, open to any gesture on the part of nature to grant a brief respite from fear of what she had become. The hope of such a moment of transcendent beauty and communion seemed worth the wait for that which she interpreted as that rare, random granting of a miracle.

The rook, arranging and rearranging its feathers, seemed like a fastidious spinster in comparison with the strange form of the sad hulf. It was an object set out on the landscape for no particular purpose, because her real desire was some backtalk from the recalcitrant human. Neither rook nor sky nor human spoke, but the hulf herself was very wordy, full of parenthetical phrases, uttered half whispers, concerned not with the actual landscape but with her own thoughts. She finally reattached these thoughts to the landscape by declaring that the rook might be a tasty morsel, a repast enjoyed in the company of bejewelled columbines.

She was aglow, was the hulf, in the notion that she might have been the first of her pack to travel this high mountain trail, delighted by a rook on a bare branch autumn morning, and last summer's berry canes and vines binding the sagging fence, and the stone house of a human who had actually taken her hand and urged her upward to the lonely headland.

I left most of my wet and muddy garments on the screened porch, then fetched towels. The she hulf had no idea what to do with a towel, so I showed her by first drying her and then myself. She allowed me to touch her without the least bit of shame.

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Her hair was long and unkempt although it seemed not to be dirty. Her upper torso was as human as any human girl I had ever seen but her lower torso was covered with a soft, light colored downy fur. Except that her face appeared to protrude a bit more than normal at the jaw, she was quite a striking looking girl. The most unusual features were her legs and feet. The heel was high, exactly like a canine's and she walked on toes which terminated in canine claws. She had slightly pronounced canine teeth.

A month earlier creatures such as that she hulf filled me with disgust and revulsion; now I watched her with admiration and, perhaps, something more; adoration, or if not adoration, then empathy.

I struck a fire on the hearth which at first filled her with temerity. I sat before the flames to show that the fire would only harm her if she fell into it or got too near. She crept toward it, cautious and inquisitive, soon sat with her legs beneath her haunches and gazed at the hypnotic curling.

In the light I could see that she was beautiful, almost diaphanous, both in form and in features. Her dark wolf eyes turned toward me and caught me stealing her beauty. She smiled softly and I blushed.

“Have you a name?” I asked.

“Name?”

“Yes, a name. What do the others call you?”

“They call me to them by saying ‘hulf’.”

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"And the others," I asked, "are they also addressed as 'hulf'?"

She nodded to affirm it.

I could not refer to her as 'hulf'; it was not in me to do it. "May I call you by a human name?"

"Yes," said she absently, still mesmerized by the dancing fire.

"I'll call you Cybele, then. Is that alright?"

"See-bee-lee," she repeated and nodded her head slightly.

"My human name is Guillaume," I said. "Close friends call me Gill."

"Gill." She nodded again as she repeated the name and her old stones and mossy voice made it sound like thunder echoing from faraway mountains.

Hulf and human, Cybele and Gill, we took breakfast of hot chocolate and honeyed biscuits under one roof together, moon in a field of clover and among all the moon gazers at the ancient temple grounds below, there was not one nearly so beautiful as the hulf. I was enchanted and she was the enchantress.

Later I dozed in my chair before the hearth, wrapped in a soft comforter, and she lay upon a cushion at my feet, refusing my invitation to sit in the facing chair, saying the position of sitting as a human was too difficult for her, too uncomfortable, too foreign.

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By mid morning, we slept soundly and the fire burned down to cold ash.

When I awoke, she was gone, the door closed securely behind her and I felt strangely and sadly alone, longing for her to return, cold and empty inside.

She had taken the towel and I wondered why.

The wise men, ever erudite and pedantic, had told us that we might all change eventually into the hulfs and laws were passed after that forbidding anyone to kill them. Generally speaking, the hulfs presented no danger to those of us who had not changed. Even so, most people shunned them and tried to drive them away. As long as there was adequate food, the hulfs stayed to themselves, formed their own communities as packs and were civil to each other and to humans.

But when food was not plentiful, or when the populations of hulfs outgrew the food supply (they were prolific breeders), there would in some towns occur an occasional kill and human bones would be found in the ditches and fields. Then the humans would put their guns by their doors and sit by the fires all night, alert for sounds of skulking creatures outside in the darkness, some of the men looking for any excuse to reduce the populations of the changelings, never thinking that the victims might have been killed by other humans.

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I dreamed of a man of power standing at a podium with his hand raised to heaven, invoking the wisdom of God. The man of power said God told him the hulfs were evil and all should be killed. Next morning he was found torn to shreds on his living room floor.

All in my dream.

A week later one of the pundits who advocated the deaths of the hulfs was found torn to shreds on his living room floor. I think it was a coincidence that it happened the way I dreamed it.

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Winter drew closer with each passing hour and I grew keen to close the house and go to my apartment in the village below. I put it off day after day hoping the she-hulf would return. I did not want her to find the house locked and empty.

Strange that I should have been so concerned for her. The thought of her living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder filled every hour of every day of my life.

A linnet sang, and through a thicket of barren larches the late moon shone. That cool morning was swept away into the sea. All along the road to the village not a single soul, only the autumn dawn came, seen but not heard; the branches of the forlorn trees poured rainwater into puddles when they leaned, then, with the solitaire for a soul, they slept peacefully, awaiting the first snows already lurking above the peaks to the north.

Dark autumn old age settled down on me like heavy clouds or dying birds and dead morning glory vines secured the gate in the old fence; the hand of death strangling the life from the world. Crossing half the sky, as I stared at the raging gray ocean below,

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massive clouds promised snow and, later, a sudden winter shower sent the noisy rooks diving into the shelter of the eaves.

Day and night. Night and day. Even those long and dreary days and nights were not long enough to empty my mind of the she hulf Cybele. No words can express how sad I was, propped unceremoniously against the great window frame staring dumbly at the darkening seasons outside.

I wished she were there to listen to my words. The world is wearisome when there is no one to share it. I stalked from room to room through that house of dreadful night.

Raindrops spiraled down from unknown universes, carrying their precious cargoes of microscopic life. The seas darkened and the wild geese had all gone to their breeding grounds far to the south. I wished I had gone with them. From every direction winter approached. The house had become a trap; I yearned to close it and go to the village.

But I determined to wait one more day for Cybele.

When I awoke the next morning (late, for I slept fitfully), there was a light covering of fresh snow upon the ground. Thin, it would melt by noon. A foot from the bottom step of the porch was a yellow patch where something had pissed in the snow. I began to look from window to window, front and back, side to side, for signs of Cybele, hoping she had returned, hoping she was waiting, worrying that she would be cold and

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wet. At first nothing, then, near the shed behind the house I saw her crouching to examine something in the tall, brown grass. When she stood, she was holding a tiny rabbit. She pulled the towel from her shoulders and wrapped the bunny in it and held it close to her breasts.

I opened the back door and she turned toward me and came in, just like that, without a word, and went in to sit before the fire newly built upon the hearth.

“Something for this tiny?” she asked, and I brought some greens from the refrigerator, watched amazed as she caressed it and fed it until it slept in the warm towel.

I wondered aloud, unfortunately, if she was saving it for a meal and she glared at me with accusing eyes. “That is offensive. This is an orphan who has survived the first snow of winter here on this high place. To think that I would kill it is a knife in my heart. Never ask such things of me again.”

I apologized sincerely and she turned away with a nod to begin caressing once more the orphaned survivor of the first snow of winter. I felt terrible to have misjudged her so.

“When you were here before,” I began to ask.

“Yes?”

“Why did you take the towel?”

“I needed it for this tiny,” she answered and the

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occult wisdom of the response slammed into my brain like a hammer. Had she really foreseen the discovery of the cold little orphan? I suspected she had.

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“Can you imagine it?” he asked me, still staring into the candle flame.

“I can. But did you close the house and go to the village as you had planned?”

“No. After Cybele returned I never even thought of it again. We spent the first months of winter there, a mild winter as it turned out, and I was often able to go into the village for provisions. I bought girl clothes for her, warm things because it seemed to me she was often uncomfortable with the cold. She was rarely without a towel for a shawl, although it may have been a security blanket rather than a hedge against the cold. It pleased her to receive the gifts and I must admit it pleased me to give them.”

“Did you fall in love with her?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, of course, from the very beginning, despite knowing it was an impossible thing for both of us.”

“Did you...ah...sleep with her?” I asked as delicately as possible.

He smiled wryly and looked away into the darkness at the edge of the light. “Always that imprudent question. The answer is no, I did not; something I often thought of and more often regretted having not

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done. She was an innocent child and I was two hundred years old. I thought to protect her and she thought of me as her guardian. To kiss her, to caress her would have been the same as to destroy her innocence for no purpose. You see that it was... not possible. But you are wondering why I am here and she is not. A long story and a sad one.”

“Why do you say you were two hundred years old?” I asked.

“Quite simply because I was at least that old. I am even older now that I am here. When I fell into the mirror, or to be more precise, when my image and I exchanged places in the mirror, the year was 1851. I landed in an alternate world of the hulfs where it was, by my time reckoning, 1951, and now I am here where, if I reckon aright, it is the year 2054. I have been here for two years and each day of that I have been trying to figure out how I can return to the world of the hulfs. I am beginning to fear that it is not possible.”

“You do not look like a two hundred years old man,” said I, appraising him with a sideways glance and thinking he might be more than a little bit mad.

“I have not aged a day since I fell into this strange world. I am still forty years old although I have lived nearly two hundred and fifty years.”

“Is that, do you think, a paradox of the parallel universe?”

“I imagine, although I have not really given it much thought. But, probably, it is.”

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“But you are safe here and secure. No one has any thought to harm you. Why do you feel you must return?” I asked.

He was quite for a time, rocking gently back and forth on the creaky wooden box chair.

“Because I had promised to lead them to safety, to a sanctuary, where they could live without fear of the humans but I was unable to complete the journey. We began our dangerous journey without much planning in the last days of winter, escaping from men who would murder us.

“It was terrible. We were constantly hungry and thirsty. I was always cold and wet and I feared that if the humans did not find and kill me, I would perish from disease or exposure to the elements.

“Sometimes we walked; sometimes we ran, always hiding during the day and making our way through unfamiliar lands at night. We had fled for hundreds of miles in those months of late winter and early spring and I began to think that we might reach our destination safely within just a few more days.

“And, then, one morning, I awoke to find myself here in this abandoned building, with not a clue as to what might have happened to the others. I believe, or I want to believe, that my mirror self continued with them and completed that mad journey to freedom.

“But I must know the truth. If I do not return, I fear they may all perish. Time may not be the same for them as it is for me. A hundred years or a thou-

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sand may have passed for them. They may have already reached their haven safely, or they may have perished, but I must find out.

“It is I who is now living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness upon the land, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder.

“My dear God, I am at an age now and at a time where life stops giving and begins to take. What a mockery our bodies make of us when they are finished with us. It would be better if we simply evaporated when we grow too old and weary to go on living; a puff of smoke drifting skyward and that would be the end of us.”

* * * * *

It was cold enough to make the devil swear on the evening the others came, the other hulfs, two dozen to be sure, slipping into the yard under cover of darkness and asking entrance to the house. I struggled to understand the meaning of their visit until Cybele explained that a vaccine had been formulated that would protect humans against the disease that had affected the hulfs. The hulfs, living in their dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder, could not be protected; they would continue to change until they perished from the disease or were killed by humans.

And I came to understand that evening the true reason Cybele had taken the towel. It bore my scent

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and that scent had led the pack around the village, through the forest and up the steep incline to my doorstep, the beginning of their hazardous and fearful escape from certain death.

The world I had thought secure now changed into something new and foreboding. The hulfs, all of the pack to which Cybele belonged, were asking that I lead them away to a place of safety in the South; a place they were told about by others who had journeyed there and returned to spread the word that a haven existed for any hulf brave enough to chance it. They could no longer travel safely in the world of humans now that a preventive had been found. Hulfs were hunted and killed without mercy. They had become expendable, a sacrifice to science. Six from their pack had already been slain.

I was filled with dread for the hulfs, but most especially for Cybele and the pups, and, at the end, I agreed to lead them to the unknown sanctuary in the South. I had no idea where to begin. In wiser days, when I was younger and stronger, I might have made a plan for salvation before the night was over but that evening I was stymied and loathe to dice with death. And, oh, I could see in their eyes, their shining eyes, their hopeful eyes, the growing fear that I might abandon them to the mad guns cursing in the village below, and some began to decry their hope in knowing tones.

Picture it; we fools, I and they, now all with the dying and the dead, standing mute around the fading hearth and wondering, all of us, we miserable fools,

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they and I, how we might tend toward this task. Darkness never seemed so dark; dread never seemed quite so dreadful as on that smothering night.

Now here I am, sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire. Some days when you wake up, you think you are the same person who went to sleep in your bed the night before.

Believe me, you aren't.

In wiser days, in days before I first fell into the mirror (oh, how I wish I knew how it happened,) I had no thoughts of heroic adventures. I worked and enjoyed my life as most nineteenth century forty-year-old men did, giving little or no thoughts to the lives and wants of others, even of those I thought I loved. Live and let live, you see.

Now, here in this place where I am imprisoned, I can think of little else save Cybele and the others and trying to find a way to get back to them. Yes, I know the mirror me must have taken them to their sanctuary, but I dearly want to know if they made it or not.

"Perhaps," said I, "you don't want to know. What if you learn they didn't safely reach their destination? What if you find they and you—the mirror you—perished before you reached the sanctuary?"

"Perished? How perished?"

"Accident or at the hands of others," I said.

"The humans, you mean?" the raggedy man asked.

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“Or perhaps other hulfs who saw you as a threat...or see you as a threat, as the case may be or may have been.”

“I think they would not ever have done that, and yet...” he let the thought slip away as his mind drifted back to that time moments ago or hundreds of ages past when he had promised to lead the hulfs to safety in the south of whatever world he had found himself in.

“No,” he said at last, “If my double had been killed or even injured there, I could not have come here, or I would have come here injured, and I did not”.

“Are you certain that’s how it works?”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

His piercing grey eyes bored into me. “For me, at least, up to this point.”

He stood slowly and languidly, stretching his lean frame wearily. “You should go now,” he said at length. “I want to continue my experiments with the transference, to see if I can discover what beam or current existed on the occasions that I fell into these alternate worlds.”

“But have you a mirror?” I asked.

“Pieces that I have salvaged from the trash bins. They are not adequate, I think, since I have been un-

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able to effect a transfer. Perhaps you might fetch one for me and bring it tomorrow.”

“Several, perhaps. Large or small?”

“Small,” he said. “About this size.” He made a circle with his arms, fingertips touching.

“Then I shall bring two when I take my lunch hour.”

“Oh, of course,” he said quietly. “I forget people here must work for...things.”

He promised to continue with his story the following day and, after getting a list of things he could use—not the least of which was a boxful of food and toiletries, bottles of drinking water and clean clothes—I bid him farewell.

I turned and looked back at him as I left the building and saw that he was again sitting on the hard wooden box with his mouth working chants and silent, unspoken dreams that seemed to fall away from him like smoke and summer rain. He made little gestures with his thin, gnarled fingers, pointing and waving, brushing his thoughts away and inventing others from the still, dark air.

I did not go to work the following day. I called in for a vacation day and went directly to a hardware store to purchase the two mirrors, then, with the boxes of supplies and the mirrors, I drove to the abandoned building where I expected to find the traveler wait-

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ing for me. He was not there. I lighted the candle to dispel the darkness and sat to wait for him. It was nearly ten o'clock before he rowed himself through the open doorway holding in his right hand a small book.

"Library," he said, by way of explaining where he had been. "I have no library card, so I had to steal it." He held the book toward me so I could read the title. *Currents From The Void*, was imprinted on the spine. His eyes gleamed with some sort of ethereal light, almost glowing with electric fire, and for a moment I was frightened that I was in the presence of a demon. I started backward but he pointed to some debris beyond the ring of light; wooden stands that I had not seen. He placed the book upon the box he used as a table.

"You'll return it for me, won't you?" he asked.

"What?"

"The book. You'll return it?"

"Oh, of course."

He began arranging the wooden stands near the table. "If you want to see ghosts," he said, "just look into the mirror. Or, better still, have the two mirrors look at each other." As he spoke, he went busily about placing the two mirrors in a way that they directly faced one another, each reflection creating an infinite passageway into and out of the other.

"According to the book, by placing these two

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mirrors facing one another, the light energy reflected back and forth between them might create a vortex, an energy beam or current, that might create a transfer of my mirror double from his world to this one.”

“And you to his,” I said.

“Precisely, exactly, yes.”

Light might be coaxed out of empty space, he explained, when in the presence of reflective surfaces. It was, he said, a process known as the “Casimir Effect” where two metallic plates or mirrors placed in close proximity to one another can result in an attraction between the two, despite there being no charge running into the plates to create an electromagnetic force. The reflecting coatings of mirrors is silver, an excellent conductor of electricity.

“The attraction seems to come from the fact that virtual photons—that is, particles of light energy that only exist for a limited time and space—exist in greater numbers outside the two plates, rather than between them. The resulting force, though miniscule, is still strong enough to be measured.” He wagged a finger at the book. “I read it there.”

He motioned me to the table and sat, then began sorting through the food and clothes I had brought. He constructed a large sandwich and ate parts of it while he examined the clothing and toiletries, humming and nodding, nodding and humming, until he had selected a shirt and trousers, shoes and stockings that suited him.

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“These will do nicely. Thank you.”

I nodded and managed a smile. “Sturdy togs for traveling,” said I. “In case you are thinking of traveling, I mean.”

“Yes. Now or tomorrow or next week.”

“If you can transfer.”

“Yes, if I can transfer.”

“And if you cannot?”

“I will keep trying.”

He ate slowly, deliberately, as he explained his arrangement of the mirrors. In all the years of thinking of mirrors, it had never occurred to him, he said, to place two of them facing each other, precisely aligned so that one reflected the other and nothing else, either to the sides or to the top or bottom. Mirrors so placed should be able to collect and store virtual photons, if even for a fraction of a second, and be reflected as light, vibrating back and forth, reflected back and forth endlessly, infinitely, billions of times per second, creating a magnetic field, a beam, a current exactly like a river, a physical bond between the mirrors upon which one might travel to the far fields of space and time.

“And, according to this fellow in the book, the virtual photons do not merely create light where none exists; ethereal light, it also retains the images of everything that passed before it and all that passed in one’s life. Images, sound, sensations and actual

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memories. That is why I experienced so many adventures when I exchanged worlds the first time. I was living and reliving the lives of every mirror double with whom I was reacting. When I at last slipped into that one life of the gent who lived in the stone house upon the headland, all the others faded away.”

“So you think that you can step into this virtual energy and be whisked away back to the world of the hulfs?” I asked. “What makes you think you can go back to the world you left? This is like a time machine of some sort. Aren’t you afraid you will appear on another world in the middle of a war, or in the middle of a plague, or some other mass extinction?”

He shook his head with dark, brooding eyes. Clearly he was not afraid of any of those possibilities. Or he simply refused to acknowledge them. He was focused upon returning to Cybele; intent upon saving her from the guns of the madmen who wanted only to kill the hulfs.

“The mirrors create light and memories from empty space where none actually exists,” he cried, hands above his head, sweeping the air as if to clear it of debris and call down blazing shards of fire and brimstone.

“If I step into the current, the doppelgangers will also step into the current of their mirrors at the same time because we are always doing exactly the same things with the mirrors, and we should transfer; I there and he, here. Or I to some other world and he to another, rather than I to his and he to mine. That is the

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chance one takes when posing before the mirror. The world to which I transfer will be like this one in nearly all respects. See, I had never thought of using two mirrors before. I always tried to use a single mirror. But in my home in the year 1851 there were two mirrors in the room, facing each other. And in the home upon the headland, there was but a single mirror in the great room. In none of the rooms were there two mirrors facing each other. It did not occur to me that the mirrors would actually produce the current of virtual energy that could project me into another existence, a parallel universe, a mirror cosmos.”

“How, then, did you transfer here?” I asked.

He finished eating the sandwich and wiped his mouth upon the sleeve of his ragged coat. His eyes grew empty and he drew down a somber face. “Ah,” he said at last, “that is the story, isn’t it? That is the error. That is the flaw I could not see.”

The raggedy man fell into a deep silence, still and hardly breathing. “What if I fail?” he said at last. “What if I cannot transfer? Perhaps my plan for the mirrors is a fantasy and all that happened before was simply some kind of mad coincidence. What if I cannot return to lead them to safety?” He sagged, with his neck drawn down into his shoulders, and he shook his head forlornly.

“Then one day, when this world had ended, she will join you. Cybele, I mean. You will be together somewhere, somewhen,” I said and touched his arm reassuringly.

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He drew away and stared at me incredulously. "Do you really imagine the cosmos is so tender, so gracious, so kind? How came I here before I completed my task if that is so?"

I told him I didn't know the answer to that but that I felt certain if his love for the she-hulf was strong enough, they might meet again in another life.

"Strangely enough," he said with narrowed eyes, "I have some memories of such things, although I cannot be certain they are not memories of dreams or nightmares or hallucinations. I remember living briefly and dying on the planet Mars." He looked up quickly, fixing me with his fierce, mad gaze, assured himself I did not think him possessed, and looked away into the shadows at the edges of the room. "Perhaps it is a sort of madness brought about by the mirror world in which I dwelled for so many years. And it is all of them who share my concern equally."

"What?"

"I want to return to save all the hulfs; not just Cybele, although she does concern me most, I confess."

I cleared my throat of the tight dryness I felt there. "Perhaps, when their world has ended, they will appear here to be with you," I said.

"Their world has already ended. It is no longer their world. They were driven out, brutalized, and to appear here would be the worst of all situations! Can you imagine what would happen to them in this world

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if they suddenly appeared as hulfs, as I left them? They would be murdered just as quickly here as there and perhaps even more brutally. Are they dead now? Were they ever alive? Am I alive or dead? I don't even know anymore. But I shall surely die if I cannot return to learn if they were saved. I can feel myself growing older and closer to the fate that awaits all humans since I fell to this place."

"You can try," I said softly. "Only try."

"Yes." He nodded gravely. "Only try."

"Perhaps, if you are successful with the mirrors, you will find them again," I said as I watched him arrange and rearrange the mirrors. "Perhaps you will find Cybele again."

"One must be lost in order to be found. They are not lost; it is I who has gone missing." He stared at the graffiti-covered walls with empty eyes. "Why do you test me?" he growled. "God's unmerciful fist! What has brought me to this fate? Have I not been tested enough these last two-hundred years?"

He was clearly challenging whatever god he thought might be listening at that moment, shamelessly, as if he had no shame at all.

"Oh, dear Cybele! Jack! Pups! Apollo! Naomi! Why, Shiatan, do you test me so?" He breathed a long, quivering sigh and turned back to me. "I must complete my arrangements here to learn if I can create the vortex or energy field that will carry me on to the next world, or back to that world which I so long to

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see again.”

* * * * *

We do not know what we do not know. And we fools; all of us, could not know what awaited us when we planned so carefully our perilous escape. Had I known the dangers, the sadness, the treachery we would encounter, I might have told the hulfs that we could not go. But, we planned through the winter, often huddling around the blazing fire late into the evenings, that we should begin soon after the first promising warm days of spring.

We heard no fearful reports from the village of more killings and we sank into a kind of trusting denial, thinking that everything would be alright, believing that the villagers had decided to try to live with the hulfs; even if in an uneasy peaceful coexistence. These were naive, foolish dreams. The reason we heard no gunshots or further reports of death was because nearly all the hulfs had been killed by mid-winter, and only a few had managed to flee to the south, to safety, or the promise of it.

But we did not know these things for we remained secluded in the stone house on the headland, rarely venturing out for fear of being seen, and only I, at that, and only to go into the village for provisions that we needed to survive. The plan had been to always keep a small store of supplies to take with us, food and water we could not buy or find as we moved southward, and to live off the land as much as possible.

It was easy to plan but, as we were to discover,

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nearly impossible to accomplish. In late winter and early Spring, there is little growing from the cold earth to sustain man or beast. Seeds and berries and herbs still lay dormant beneath patches of lingering snow. It is a wonder any of us managed to survive at all.

Cybele came to me early one late winter morning, wrapped in the blanket she had become accustomed to carrying with her, still sleepy-eyed from her warm pallet in the cellar.

“We have been talking and thinking,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Some are thinking of leaving in a few days even if you choose not to lead us.”

I was astonished. “But, why?” I asked.

“They... some of them... are afraid. They say they can smell death in the village. They say they cannot hear the voices of the other hulfs. They are afraid.”

“And you?”

“Yes,” she responded softly. “I, too, am afraid. Not of staying until warmer days, but of their fear and what it might drive them to do. They do not trust the humans; some are beginning wonder if even you might betray them. I worry that some harm may come to you.”

Do you care for me that much? I wondered, and saw in her eyes that she did.

“Did they send you to speak with me?” I asked.

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“I told them I would do it because I trust you. I know you will not deceive us.”

I turned away from her and held my hands toward the fire, rubbing warmth into my fingers and arms. At length I faced her. “We shall leave in two days. Tell them that. No, I shall tell them myself after all are awakened and have eaten.”

And, so, for two days we packed our provisions—scant few that we had—wrapped our bedding and selected clothing so that all would appear at a distance to be humans, placed as much as we could into two small carts and enjoyed, on that last afternoon in the stone house, a substantial meal.

After sunset at middle March, the hulfs all dressed as humans dress and we ventured into the night. I did not even bother to lock the house, knowing even then that I should never return. It was still quite cold.

There was no moon that night.

* * * * *

One of the problems with being the last of your kind is that, if things do not work out, if your plans for the future fail and your dreams go awry, then you and your blood line shall soon cease to exist. Nothing will remain of you to remind future generations that you were even here, except, perhaps, some myths and legends whispered around an evening hearth. It was likely that the two dozen hulfs who had stayed with me through the winter and a few dozen more from

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the village were the only ones who had managed to escape the guns and axes of the humans. How many others had already fled to the sanctuary in the south and found safety we could only guess.

I had done all I could to encourage the hulfs, to convince them we could reach the unknown sanctuary had we but the courage, stamina and perseverance to accomplish it. Secretly, I hoped my promises would not be revealed to be the hollow mutterings of a fool.

The arrow of time moves forward only. Things done can never be undone but, perhaps, they can be repeated or duplicated or reenacted differently, or dreamed again on a new night with less terrifying conclusions. Perhaps. Perhaps.

Sometimes we walked; sometimes we ran, always hiding during the day and making our way through unfamiliar lands at night. It was dreadful. We were constantly hungry and thirsty. I was always cold and wet and I feared that if the humans did not find and kill me, I would perish from disease or exposure to the elements. In moments of fevered madness I even imagined that the hulfs would kill me as I slept and eat me.

We had fled for hundreds of miles in those months of late winter and early spring and I began to think that we might reach our destination safely within just a few more days. We began to see signs, trails and pathways, hulf prints, bits of hair clinging to the

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brush, that indicated we were on or near the road leading to the sanctuary. We fell into a kind of complacency, thinking that beyond the next turn or over the next hill we would find our salvation.

It did not occur to me that if we could see and follow the signs, the human hunters could follow them as well. And, so, we were caught in their trap.

I plodded beside one of the carts keeping my eyes fixed on the top of a tree which showed against the sky above the pines. The trees might mean that a stream or lake was near. I was a good foot taller than the largest of the male hulfs and had been walking with my shoulders hunched forward under my heavy tattered and dirty shirt so I would not present a noticable target in case we were observed by humans who might be lurking in the forests.

My height made walking difficult, for I had to cut down my normal stride to accommodate my speed to the progress of those pulling the carts. After months of stumbling along behind them my back and shoulders ached unmercifully.

We had been twenty-six in number when we left the headland in March and we had moved slowly but unfaltering, sometimes covering as much as twenty miles in a night. Now there were only twenty-two of us. Four had sickened and died within the first month, and those of us who remained were weakened from hunger and exposure.

As our provisions dwindled, we transferred as much as we could to the largest of the carts and aban-

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done the smaller in a copse beside a stream where we had stayed for two days and nights.

The single cart and its load had become a living thing, a determined, nearly unmovable object, everlastingly pitting its weight against our strength.

I shifted the two pistols hidden under my coat and shivered a little. I had hoped to find warmth and sunshine as we trekked southward, gentle breezes that might restore strength to all of us. The hope had become a jest. Bitter cold had stalked us without cease from the moment we had left the great stone house on the headland above the village.

It would settle down with deathly frostiness as soon as the sun was gone, numbing us into mindless zombies and shivering the uncomplaining pups, lying so still in the bottom of the cart.

I lost all track of time. Not until we crossed a broad, winding ice-free river whose banks were lined with crocus and Queen Anne's Lace did I realize we had journeyed into Spring. It was the twenty-fourth of June! Three long, miserable months since we had begun our escape from certain death. In that time, not one of us had been injured or killed by the humans, although we often saw them in the distance watching us as we passed and once we were pursued by hunters on horses. They gave up the chase when their mounts were unable to follow us through the dense forests.

But it was there, in the forest, that we found the abandoned homes and farms, the abandoned hopes

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and dreams, of the humans who had succumbed to the disease of the hulfs. Empty houses stared back at us with sightless eyes, the dreams of their owners dead and forgotten, leaving populous, prosperous villages to be overrun by encroaching forests.

In the wagon, I heard one of the she-hulfs moan. I halted the company and walked to the back, lowering the heavy tailboard. A she-hulf lay in one corner, the piled-up provisions towering above her, a lovely girl barely in her mid-teens, scarcely heavy enough to depress the thick pallet beneath her. At the sight of me she smiled, but her lips were colorless and pinched, and her golden eyes were bright with fever.

“What is it?” I asked.

“She is pregnant, Gill,” Cybele said behind me. “The pup will come soon. Are we near any place where we can stop?”

“There must be something soon.” I placed a hand on her forehead, felt the heat and smoothed back her golden hair. It was damp beneath my fingers. Cybele took out a cupful of water, then raised her with an arm beneath her shoulders and let the girl drink.

She took but a swallow. Cybele found a cloth, moistened it from the cup, and gently bathed her forehead and temples.

She moaned again. For an instant we stood staring down at her swollen belly, rounding the folds of the long cloak which covered her. Her lean face was

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tight with despair.

“How did this happen?” I asked.

Cybele’s eyebrows went up a half inch. “How? Do you not understand the mating?”

“Yes, of course,” I stammered. “But I mean when did this happen, how without my seeing or knowing?”

“The males are stealthy and filled with cunning, Gill. Wherever we’re going, we’d better hurry, or we’ll have a pup before we get there.”

I straightened and pulled the covers over the she-hulf, then swept back my long unshorn hair. The company plodded on through the early morning toward a sagging house across a meadow of knee-high grass.

The sun glowed bronze through a haze, and was already riding above the towering tops of the trees. The temperature was slowly rising and the mist swept from the meadow on a light breeze.

We did not see the humans, coiled like a panther, waiting at the edge of the trees, waiting to shoot and hack with their terrible guns and axes, waiting to kill us all, hulfs and human alike, as if we were all so much garbage to be disposed of at the command of madmen.

Within minutes after reaching the house, I had a fire going and a kettle filled with vegetables hanging on a tripod.

The heat repelled the coldness. Squatting down

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beside the flames, for a time we could almost believe that we had reached the end of the journey. The woods around us seemed friendly, like the windrow of some quiet farm. The cart was as secure as a small fortress. The girl on the bed inside it was young and healthy and happy, and seemed safe from any harm. I lifted her gently and carried her into the old house while Cybele carried in the padded pallet. When she was comfortable, I went outside to sit by the fire.

The stew began to simmer. I rose and went to talk to the other hulfs, who had all gathered to sleep at the edge of the woods, to get a feel for their hopes, and to give them encouragement for the journey ahead of us.

I stopped in the half-darkness of the trees. Behind me the clearing showed bright, giving me the sensation of standing outside a window and looking into a lighted room. I lowered my hands to close about the coolness of the pistols and stood frozen, looking at the sandy ground marked with human boot-prints.

I moved a few steps forward, bent over as if in a dream, and touched a piece of rope circling one of the trees. From there I moved on quietly to touch others. All were covered with blood. I could see that from the flickering rays of the rising sun which danced through the trees, bringing light from the clearing.

I knelt and pulled one of the pistols from my belt, scanning the brightening forest for signs of humans or hulfs. At a distance, I could see the form of a man behind one of the trees, his fat belly and face silhou-

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eted against the light from the clearing.

I leveled the pistol and cocked the hammer. Suddenly, someone grabbed me about the neck and pulled me backward, snatching the pistol from my hand at the same time.

“They have taken four of us,” a voice rasped in my ear. It was Jack, the Alpha male.

“Taken? Where are they taking them?” I croaked.

“To death with their knives.”

“Oh, God, oh, God.”

“Your god cannot help them now,” Jack said as he released me from his powerful grip.

“How many are they?” I asked.

“I counted nine with knives and guns. They knew we were coming, Gill. I think they have been following us for days.”

“Why could you not smell them?”

“They have covered their clothing and skin with a lotion that masks their scent. But I have smelled that scent since the day we were at the river.”

We sat in silence for some time, waiting for the assault that we knew must surely come. Jack leaned back against the base of a tree and raised his snout to the sky, his nostrils flaring.

“They are still here,” he said.

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“Where are the other hulfs?”

“They have gone by ones and twos back to house. There is some safety there.”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” I said weakly, close to tears.

“For what?”

“For the hulfs. For the deaths of the hulfs.”

“It was not your fault. Come.”

We went back and stood leaning against the cart. Steam came up from the kettle of water and hovered above the simmering stew.

My back grew cold, and I draped a blanket about my shoulders, reaching again for the pistols in my belt, to assure myself they were still there, ready and deadly. Many times I heard a rustle, but it was only wind in the treetops.

The fire had died and twice been replenished when we heard the young she-hulf scream. Hours later, she gave birth to a son. Some of the females bathed the tiny, squalling pup, wrapped it in clean old linen, and laid it beside its mother.

Her lips moved feebly. “I’m very tired.”

“You have a son,” someone said in the shadows.

She closed her eyes. After a while, Cybele put her hand on the girl’s ashen face and found it cold.

Across the clearing a shot flashed out from the

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trees, then, closer, another one. I ran out to crouch behind the shelter of the cart, pistols out and ready.

“Come inside, fool,” Jack growled. “The air will not stop their bullets but perhaps the timbers of the house will.”

He grabbed my arm and dragged me inside where most of the survivors were clustered together for protection.

Hideous and demonic figures broke from the trees, yelling and screaming. I held my fire, then coolly picked out the nearest hunter and shot him. He fell, his arms sprawled wide. Another was killed seconds later.

“Seven more,” I thought. “And I have but ten more rounds.”

It didn't seem to matter, for the thought of the dead she-hulf, herself no more than a child, lying in the next room had crept deep into my soul.

There was a noise outside. Hurried steps bounded up on the porch, and someone knocked at the door. I flung it open.

A hulf I did not recognize stood outside in a long leather coat. “There's firing!”

“Where?”

“Just south of here. Not very far.”

“Where were you?”

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"In the forest, following the nine humans who took the four hulfs. I turned from the trail and heard firing as I was coming in."

At a soft command, water was dumped on the flaming logs, raising a cloud of ruby-colored steam. More water came, and the fire died.

I stood by the half-opened door waiting for the humans to attack in force. Jack and some of the other hulfs watched at the windows.

Cybele stood, and was trembling. "Be careful, Gill."

"I'm always careful, girl. I've been careful all my life. Too careful, perhaps. Now is the time for madness and action or we shall all perish." I pulled her close and kissed her. "Nothing living shall kill me tonight."

"Nothing but another human's gun," she whispered, pressing her fingers to her lips as if to seal the kiss there forever. "Be careful."

I motioned for Jack and two of the other hulfs to go with me into the forest to get behind the hunters. Together we went down from the porch and crept around to the back of the house.

Cybele watched without speaking. My eyes swept the camp, darkened now except for the sputtering fire.

When we had reached the edge of the forest, I turned to Jack and indicated that he and one hulf

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should go to the left while I would take the other hulf to the right. The idea was to get behind the humans and kill them one at a time.

“We’ll circle to meet and home in on the noise of any firing. Watch for an ambush.”

I had no worries about Jack. He could travel the woods in daylight or darkness with the speed and silence of a spectre.

When I was certain we were behind the humans, I stopped and listened. There was no sound of firing, but somewhat northward I heard a soft whistle. An instant later, to the left, it was answered by another. The hulf touched my shoulder.

“Not humans,” he said quietly.

I nodded and we moved forward toward the sound.

“Let’s push on. There’ll be no more firing. Whatever it is, their work is done. The two dead humans have spooked them. They’re probably wondering how hulfs could have killed their comrades.”

We approached a clearing and pulled up short. There was smoke in the air, and the smell of burned powder. To our right were the last few embers of a dying fire in the camp where the humans had waited.

Jack, with the other hulf in tow loomed from the shadows, ghost-like, to stand beside us.

“We’ve circled the clearing,” Jack said grimly.

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“We found the bodies of the four taken earlier. They were skinned and their paws cut off. They took the heads of the two females.”

“Come away from the fire,” I said, “in case they are watching. We’ll make easy targets in the glow of this smoke.”

“The seven hunters are over there,” Jack said, pointing toward the south. “They are all together, hiding, afraid. No one is watching for us.”

“In that case,” I said, “they will be easy pickings for my pistols.”

“Are you certain you want to do that?” Jack asked. “You are human; they are humans. Is it not murder in the eyes of your laws?”

“Self-defense is not murder.”

“It is if one is a hulf.”

I had no answer for that. I checked the pistols to make certain I had ten rounds. I silently wished I had more. “The Lord provideth, and equally taketh away.”

“Nonsense,” Jack growled. “But do what you must. I will take these hulfs back to the house to protect the others. Be careful; someone or something besides the hunters is in this forest tonight.”

They moved silently, drifting away like the smoke from the dying campfire.

Tomorrow you’ll christen the baby and bury his mother with a few words from the Scriptures, I thought,

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as I made my way into the forest toward the hunters. I tried to think of words of Scripture I could say and found I could not remember any. They were lost two hundred years behind me.

It was strangely silent as I crept forward into the greening forest. There were no animal sounds, no bird calls, no human voices from the camp now only yards away. Smoke from their fire curled upward and was borne away on the breeze. The sun was now already above the trees and I could see the hunters slumped around the meager fire as if asleep.

I stopped at the edge of the small clearing. No one was on watch. I looked for the bags holding the hulf skins and heads, but could not see them anywhere. From my left came a single soft whistle and from the right, moments later, came an answer.

“Not human,” the hulf had told me.

I eased forward until I was less than ten feet from the nearest sleeping hunter. There was a pungent smell of death in the camp. I searched again for the bags of hulf skins and realized with a start that the hunters were not sleeping at all—they were dead; killed where they sat by some unseen and unheard creature.

Horrified, I stood and backed away from the goulsh scene, then turned and began to run as fast as I could through the tangled brush. I had not gone ten yards when two large male hulfs stepped into view before me. I tried to stop, tried to turn away, but one grabbed me around the neck and flung me to the

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ground, mouth open wide to crush my throat.

“Hold!” came a harsh command from the shadows.

I looked beyond the hulf to see a large, muscular male appear from behind a tree. He waved his arm and the hulf holding me down sprang away, leaving me breathless and choking.

The great hulf stepped to my side and bent near me, sniffing and snorting. I feared then that he would kill me himself.

He straightened and relaxed a bit. “You have the scent of a she-hulf on you,” he said. “The young one with the newborn pup in the house yonder. And another, perhaps, as well.”

I could not answer, only nod affirmatively.

“Do you lead them to the sanctuary?”

Nodding again.

“We have been watching you for some time, wondering where you are going, what you are doing. This morning we thought you had led them here into the trap to be killed by the humans.”

I shook my head no.

“I see that. If you seek the sanctuary, you are leading them in the wrong direction. You took the wrong trail at the river two days ago and you are moving away from the sanctuary. It is a trap the humans have devised by leaving bits of fur and paw prints to

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make it appear as though hulfs have gone down the one path while they swept away the tracks from the other.”

I swallowed away the dryness in my throat and managed to sit upright. I looked back toward the hunter’s camp. “Did you...?”

“Of course we did. We cannot leave this baggage alive to kill our brothers and sisters. Some of the hulfs are already cleaning the campsite of the refuse so other hunters will never know what happened there. More are back at the river to make sure the trap signs are removed. It is something we try to do every day. It is why we are here.”

“How many are you?” I asked.

He raised his head suspiciously and eyed me askance. “We are many,” he said simply. “But you are now only nineteen, counting the newborn pup.”

“The mother died,” I said quietly.

He grimaced and looked away into the forest, growling deep in the heat of his throat. Presently, he turned back to me. “Eighteen, then. Do you have lactating females to care for the pup? If you do not, we will take him and our camp will raise him.”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask when I return.”

“Come.” He extended his hand—still human but lengthened and distorted and clawed and covered with dark fur—and snatched me from the ground as easily as he might lift an infant. “We have much to do

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this day.”

I wanted to ask his name but knew he would only say, ‘hulf,’ if he answered at all.

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The world is not dying; it is being killed. And we know who is killing it, for they have names and addresses. They hold positions of power. They have written the human laws. They enforce those laws at the point of a gun. And they punish by death.

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“I would spend days in those intercrossing mirror worlds which ran into one another, trembled, vanished, only to reappear again.

“I gave my mind, my body, my soul to those fathomless distances, those echoing vistas, those separate universes cutting across my own and existing, despite my consciousness of them, in the same place at the same time. That extended reality, separated from me by the smooth surface of silvered glass, drew me towards itself by a kind of unknowable, intangible touch, dragging me into the gleaming surface, as if into a mysterious abyss.

“I was drawn towards the apparition which posed before me when I came near the mirror and which strangely doubled my being. I tried to imagine how this other was different from me, how it was possible that my right hand should be his left, and that all the fingers of my hands should change places.

“My thoughts were confused when I attempted to probe that enigma, to solve it. In this world, where everything could be touched, where voices were heard I lived, actually, and in that reflected world, which it was only possible to imagine, was he, the phantom, the ghost. He was almost myself and yet not really myself; he repeated all my movements, but not

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a single one of those movements exactly matched my own.

“He, that other, that phantom, knew something I could not divine, he held a secret hidden from my understanding; a secret that would soon come crashing down upon me to fill me with terror and wonder.

“But I noticed that each mirror had its own separate and special world. Put two mirrors in the very same place, one after the other, and there will arise two different universes. And in different mirrors before which I posed, there would rise before me different apparitions, all of them similar to me but never exactly like me and never exactly like the others.

“According to the strange conditions of their worlds they take the form of the person who poses before the glass but under this borrowed image they each preserved their own personal characteristics.

“There were some worlds of mirrors which I loved; others which I hated. I did not love all my doubles. I felt most were hostile toward me, if only because they were forced to drape themselves in my likeness.

“There were some whom I despised. There were others, on the other hand, whom I feared, who were too strong for me and who dared in their turn to mock me to do as they demanded.

“I smashed the mirrors where these hostile doubles lived. I would not look into them. I hid them, gave them away, even broke them into pieces.

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“But every time I destroyed a mirror I wept for hours, knowing that I had broken to pieces a distinct, distant universe. And hateful, terrible faces stared up at me from the broken fragments of the worlds I had scattered upon the floor.”

I returned to the abandoned house, accompanied by twelve guardian hulfs, eight of them adult males, four of them adult females, but they were certainly not all who were in the forest that night.

Our frightened company were huddled in one corner of the room sharing the vegetable stew. They were elated when they saw the guardians and began enthusiastic conversations. Some of them knew a few of the guardian hulfs as being from the village from which they, themselves, had recently fled.

The alpha male guardian hulf asked about the newborn pup and learned we had no lactating females. He told one of his females to take the pup and, because she was lactating, she began nursing it. He let us know that they would take the pup to their camp and raise it as their own.

I named the alpha male Apollo and the nursing female Naomi, although I never addressed them by those names because I feared it might offend them to be called by human names.

Cybele brought me a cup of still warm stew. “Are you okay?” she asked. “You look strange and you are so quiet.”

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"I'm okay now that I am back here with you. It was a cruel morning and a sad one."

"It is not your fault that the hulfs were taken. Don't punish yourself for something you cannot or could not prevent." She looked at the cup of stew I held in my trembling hands. "Drink now," she said tenderly.

I lifted the cup and drank a bit of the broth. "The hulfs have told me we are going in the wrong direction," I said. "We will have to go back to the river where the trails diverged, or cut across from here if there is a trail which will take us to the sanctuary."

"Yes, there is a secret way, but it leads to a large lake where we may take a ferry across. It is but two days through the forest. If the ferry is not there, or if the captain will not or cannot take us, we will have to go around. It will be a month or more if we go around; only four days if we can cross."

"Then let us hope we can cross," I said as I finished the cup of stew. "Did anyone say how far the sanctuary is from the lake?"

"Two more days." Cybele said. "They said we would be safe from harm once we cross the lake."

"Or journey around it."

"Yes." She looked away briefly and shifted awkwardly. "You kissed me, Gill," she said so softly that I had to lean forward to hear.

"Yes, I did. Should I not have done it? I didn't mean anything wanton by it. It is a human gesture to-

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ward someone they care about. It is meant to reassure the other that everything will be okay.”

“For someone you love?”

“Well, yes, I suppose that’s the way to say it.”

“And do you love me?”

“Dear Cybele, I have loved you from the first day when we met on the path to the stone house.”

“You never told me.”

“Because it is not possible for us to be together. We live in different worlds. You have the world of the hulfs and I”

She touched my lips with a finger. “I, too, have loved you and no other since that first day. But I know we cannot be together. Our different worlds will not allow it. Still, we can be companions for many years.”

I did not have the heart or the courage to tell her how different our worlds really were, that I might one day simply vanish, fall into a mirror and vanish without a trace, with not so much as a flake of skin or thread of hair left as evidence that I had ever existed in her world. I could not screw up the courage to explain it, to tell her that I was two hundred years old and that if I did not vanish into a mirror, I might just drop dead. I wanted so badly to say it, but I could not. I could not bear to destroy her dreams for the future, to see the hope and happiness in her bright eyes dashed to despair. And so the traitor in me said, “Yes.”

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The raggedy man began to weep. Not aloud, not pitifully, but silently. Tears crept down his brown, wrinkled cheeks to fall into his lap.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a time. His lips trembled. He shook his head from side to side. “I’m sorry. I loved her so.”

“And she loved you.”

“And I deserted her at her hour of need...at their hour of greatest need... by doing that which I feared so much. I fell into this world where I have lived as a pauper, longing only to return to my most beloved Cybele.”

In the days when the hulf disease began, there was little trouble between the hulfs and men. They lived apart—the men in the villages and farms and the hulfs in the swamps and thickets and on the wide grassy meadows between the villages.

Sometimes a horse or cow or a pig would stray into the marshes or meadows to become a meal, and sometimes the hulfs would find one already dead, and drive off the vultures and feral cats, and feast well to their heart’s content for days.

The hulfs of the old time were clumsy of foot and dull-coloured, with rough fur and large heads, many of them misshapen and ugly. They came every spring north into the villages, after the willows turned green

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and before the fruit trees flowered, when the grass on the wide meadows grew long. They came only in small groups then, each pack an alpha male and two or three females with a pup or two, having their own hunting territory, and they went again to hunt in the foothills when the Harlequin Maples were red and the antelope came down from the mountains.

But, as the disease evolved, the hulfs became sleek and swift, brave and cunning; the males strong and handsome, the females lithe and lovely. The pups were simply beautiful to behold by the time I had fallen into their world.

It was their custom to hunt in the open, going into cover only when the sun was at the zenith. They avoided the long stretches of tangled forest, preferring the openness of meadows and farms near the edges of the villages where they often found portions of food shared by sympathetic humans.

It was difficult, if not impossible, to come upon them unawares. They were not fighters; their fangs and claws were only for prey, but if they were provoked or threatened, once they began, no living thing came near them; no other living creature could withstand their power and ferocity.

And in those early days when men seemed to be trying to account for the disease and to find a cure, humans, by and large, seemed harmless; indeed, many wanted to do all they could to help the sad and hopeless hulfs.

But no utterance of prophecy warned the hulfs of

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the terrible savagery that was to come, of the clubs and guns and axes to be wielded to drive the packs from the villages into the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder that was to replace the wide meadows and the freedom of the earth.

Season changes had compensations. The bitter cold, which lasted for intense, shivering periods that winter and sent us sometimes from our beds to shiver about the edge of a roaring fire, equally rid the encampment of the pesky insects and brought great flocks of wild ducks and geese into the nearby rivers and lakes.

Relief from the cold came with spring, but the insects returned, and a new caution was necessary against the deadly snakes and panthers and bears which had come out from hibernation to bask in the sun.

But it was worth trudging through the thin, lingering snow and ankle-deep icy marshes just to smell again the sweetness of blossoming trees and flowers, and to know that the fish of the lakes and streams would soon begin to rise again to be snatched by a quick, clawed hand.

Most humans, and especially their children, had

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never seen hulfs closely, but soon they saw them every day as they began to raid out from their lairs on the edges of the villages, joining and raiding together in search of food. The hulfs in the countryside came together in larger and stronger packs, forming communities around many of the abandoned farms that dotted the countryside.

The bears and panthers had become afraid of them, and when they caught wind of a hulf they turned aside. When the humans saw this, they, too, became afraid of the hulf living on the swiftness of their limbs and the deep, dark, red heat of their throats.

And many humans began to keep guns and axes beside their doors to drive away or kill any hulf who might stray too close. They surrounded themselves with fear and loathing, never suspecting they might, one day, also become a creature of the darkness to be loathed and feared by those who loved them but a day before.

Apollo and Naomi came to me in the evening to say that they would lead us to the secret trail to the lake, would take us as far as they could before turning back to guard and protect any others who might seek the sanctuary by the same path we had traveled.

Naomi was nursing the pup and I watched unabashed the tender scene, knowing that the pup would be safe and loved, growing someday to a strong adult, running free and hunting the marshes and meadows of the sanctuary.

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“Sanctuary is but eight days away if you are fortunate enough to cross the lake. But the ferry is not always at the lake,” said Apollo. “If it is taking others across, and if it left only a day before, or the morning before you arrive, it will be eight days before it returns. It is not safe on this side of the lake. Human bounty hunters have discovered the pier and they lurk nearby, waiting for some luckless straggler to arrive.”

“Then they kill!” Naomi growled, slashing the air with her fingers. “And they take their skins and the feet of the males and the heads of the females back to the villages to prove they have killed those who make the pups so they can claim their bounties.”

“They are paid small fees for males,” Apollo said. “Larger fees for the females because when they kill a female, they are killing the future of the packs. Fewer pups means we soon will be gone forever.”

“I am weary,” said the raggedy man. “I should find a place to bathe and change into these clothes you have brought me. Then I must arrange my mirrors and try to return to Cybele.”

I looked at my watch and realized that it was evening. Outside, the sun was already on the horizon and it would soon be dark.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“Not really. If the mirrors are arranged properly, I will vanish and some other man or creature will ap-

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pear in my place. If not, then we will continue our conversation tomorrow.”

“If you go—fall into the mirror, I mean—will the man who replaces you know what happened in the world where you left the hulfs?”

“If he is from that world, yes, I suppose he will. But it has been two years. How many adventures will he have survived in so long a time?”

“Yes,” I said softly. “How many adventures?”

“And he might not be from the world of the hulfs. He might be from the past, or from a future so distant that he would not recognize this world at all. It might not even be a human.”

“I see,” I said, standing to go. I reached out and took the raggedy man’s wrinkled brown hand in my own. “If I do not see you again, then I wish you a safe journey and hope you find those you left behind and loved so much.”

The raggedy man said nothing, stood with lips pursed and eyes bright with tears. He took the book from the large box and gave it to me.

I walked away, then, without looking back.

And, so, the raggedy man’s story ends. When I returned the next morning, everything was gone. The boxes, the mirrors, the food and clothing, the easels, even the folder of matches and the candle had vanished as if they had never existed at all.

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No man or creature was lurking in the dark building to explain what had transpired the previous night. I want to believe that the transfer occurred and that the newcomer, eager to escape the filthy delelict building, had thrown everything into the trash bin to hide any evidence of his arrival and had then gone into the outside world to live another fantastic adventure.

I want to believe that the raggedy man returned to the world of the hulfs, returned to Cybele, and lived with her in the sanctuary until the end of his days.

But I would never know.

Only the paw prints of a large canine were lightly visible upon the dusty concrete floor. But the pattern was of two paws only, as if the creature walked upon its hind legs in the manner of a human.

I had one more task to do. I took the book to the library on my way to work, dropping it unnoticed into the night return slot.

I never saw the raggedy man again and realized he had never told me his name and had never explained why or how he had fallen into this world.