



**CRAWLING BETWEEN
HEAVEN
AND
EARTH**

SARAH A. HOYT

Crawling Between Heaven And Earth

Sarah A. Hoyt

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Elvis Died for Your Sins

Every year, when I catch the flu, I lose about two weeks of work to sitting in a truly enormous arm chair in my office and reading whatever is within easy reach. A victim of laziness and viruses, I have—literally found myself reading nineteenth century biology school books rather than getting up and finding more congenial reading material in my bookshelves. My friends and family all come onto me. If they find a book they want me to read, they'll set it by my chair when I get sick. I think my friend who left the biography of Elvis Presley by my chair didn't do it on purpose. However, I still read it. And, since the quasi deification of Elvis Presley has always fascinated me, this story emerged.

"It's whom I'm dreamed that remains eternal. It's him whom I shall return."

Fernando Pessoa

Mid afternoon in Eternal Life, the only New Age Store in Lythia Springs, Colorado, tended to be quiet.

We were through with the lunch-time rush of power-vegetarian-executives and not yet up to the late-afternoon rush of college students in search of books on the Hermetic Order Of the Golden Dawn or those convenient Ouija board kits.

I'd taken my sandals off, grabbed a rice-cream popsicle from the freezer at the back of the store and sat down in the window seat behind the magical-crystal-jewelry counter, with my knees drawn up and the long skirt of my Indian print dress demurely drawn down to hide all but my toes.

My eyes half closed, I heard the rumbling talk coming from the book section.

"Archetypes can come alive. You really must read this book, it takes the thesis of the Golden Bough one step further. You know, the one about the divinization of dead chieftains. It maintains that not only did humanity worship these . . . beings, but that they were actually called into existence by this worship and assumed, not the flawed mortal envelopes in which they had truly existed, but perfect archetypes."

A male voice. Probably a college professor, I thought, from the boring, slow, "I'm going to impart this knowledge whether you want it or not" tone. My first husband had been a college professor. I made a face at the memory.

"Oh, you mean they would take the form expected of them, like John Keel claims happens with UFOs and men in black and fairies . . ." A young woman's voice. Buttering the guy up for the kill. Trust me, honey, not worth it.

"Yes, in a way. They're brought to life by the collective subconscious. Perhaps they existed in another form, some spiritual form." A bout of nervous laughter. "I'm not sure I like the idea of all those idolized rock stars and actors walking around long after death, not even in archetype form. Anyway, the idea is so elegant, like something out of Jung, something resonating of the shared collective subconscious"

He continued, on and on, in slow, rolling language, full of names and quotes. His female companion listened in silence and presumed raptness. I sighed and ate my rice-cream and kept my mouth shut. The pickups that took place in this store were as unusual as everything else.

"Mariann?"

I opened my eyes.

My boss, Elroy Peters, owner of Eternal Life, stood by the batik curtain that hid the store area

from our warehouse and staff kitchen, what had once been the servants quarters of this converted Victorian. A tall man with snow-white hair, thin to the point of gauntness, Elroy stood as always with his hip tilted to one side and his lower lip poked out, in a way that reminded me of someone, but I could never make out whom. His pruned old face showed. "Hasn't Jonni shown up yet?"

I shook my head.

"Wasn't she supposed to have been here at ten?"

I nodded.

"It's not like her," Elroy said. "She might be many things, but she's also punctual to the minute. He normally spoke in an odd way that Jonni called "chewing on the words." Agitation made it even worse, and brought out his too-perfect-to-be-true good-ol'boy southern accent.

And he had some reason to be agitated. Jonni, our resident college-student-ditsy-blonde, had never been this late. And Elroy, rightly or wrongly, thought that he was responsible for all of us.

"I've called her," I said. "But there was no answer."

Elroy frowned, threw back a white cowlick. "Mark supposed to come in?"

"At two," I said.

"Tell me when he gets in . . . maybe we can go out and see if there's anything wrong with Jonni. He disappeared into the back, so fast that he gave the impression of walking through the virulent red-colored batik curtain.

"Miss?" a young man's voice.

I turned away from the curtain that hung motionless, as though no one had gone near it, and looked at the young man who stood at the other end of the counter. "Yes?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure how to put this," he said. He had wild green eyes and wilder hair and beard a shade of red not normally seen outside Crayola boxes. His voice came out in odd fits and starts. "But . . . my spirit just took over this body. I'm an advanced soul from the Gorianth sphere and I'm here to lead humanity, but I'm not sure"

Ah, a walk-in. Our daily bread. I took a final bite of my rice-cream. "You want walk-ins. Book section. Fourth set of shelves to the right, in the sunroom area. We have several books that will give you further insight into humanity on Earth and what you're expected to tell them."

"Thanks," he said, flashing odd metal-capped teeth.

I watched his retreating back for so long that I missed Mark's approach until he came behind the counter and almost within touching distance. "Problem?" he asked.

"Nah," I said. "A walk-in. From the Gorianth sphere."

Mark raised his perfect black eyebrows over his bright blue eyes. "No kidding. Another one? It's the tenth since the psychic fair."

"Yeah." I looked at the stick for my rice-cream. The licked clean stick said LIFE IS SENSELESS WITHOUT BELIEF. Well, then, I thought to myself, I shouldn't work at a New Age store. Nothing would jaded you quicker. "Elroy wanted to know when you came in."

Mark frowned. He took off his bright blue tapestry jacket, shoved it out of sight under the counter. "Why?"

"Jonni hasn't come in. I think he had some idea of going out and checking on her."

"She had an argument with her boyfriend last night," Mark said, pulling out the schedule sheet to write in the time he'd arrived. "At the Catering Turnip."

Mark played his acoustic guitar and sang his own songs at the Catering Turnip, a vegetarian restaurant. He was such a nice guy I'd never had the courage to tell him that he was too late to be the next Bob Dylan. Even Bob Dylan didn't want to be Bob Dylan anymore.

"Big row," he said, looking up at the clock on the wall and writing down a time ten minutes

earlier. "He left her to pick up the check, and she didn't have any cash and I had to lend her money. She left in tears. I expected to hear the entire soap opera today."

I found my sandals with my feet. It didn't sound good. As I made my way to the back I thought that the more I heard about this, the less I liked it. Jonni always took her boyfriends so seriously and she picked them with the same recklessness that led other people to play Russian roulette. "If the guy who wants to be possessed calls, tell him we don't have any particular relationship with supernatural entities and he'll have to find his own way to damnation," I told Mark just before I ducked through the batik curtain.

"What?" he asked, for once surprised.

"Some guy who wants instructions on how to become possessed," I said. "He's trying to get over his fundamentalist upbringing, he says. He called five times this morning. Probably will call again, trying to get a different answer."

Mark gave me a bewildered half smile, as if not sure whether to believe me.

I opened the batik curtain and went in, letting it swing closed behind me.

Elroy was half-hidden by a pile of cardboard boxes marked with BLUE GREEN ALGAE HANDLE WITH CARE.

"Mark is here," I told him. "If you want to go out or whatever."

"Come with me," he said. "To take care of business."

I hesitated. Like everyone in this store, Elroy was all right but slightly different, like his whole concept of reality hung slightly askew. And I had never fully got over the impression that one day one of them was going to pull out a big ritual knife and sacrifice me to the god or goddess of his or her choice.

"In case I need help, young un. Come on."

"You could take Mark," I demurred.

But Elroy shook his head. "And leave you here alone? Not right for a young lady."

After two failed marriages and in my mid-thirties, I didn't really feel like a young lady, but I backed my response. I didn't particularly want to hang around and talk to the possession aspirant, either.

I made a quick detour to inform Mark that I'd be going with Elroy and left through the front door.

Elroy waited in the parking lot, warming up his car, a white Eldorado with huge tail fins and pin accents.

Inside, teddy bears in pastel colors filled all except the driver's seat. I tried not to bat an eye as I said, people at Eternal Life store were odd and started to push the teddy bears off the seat onto the floor. Elroy gave me a freezing glare, took the teddy bears and put them in the backseat, next to the hundred or so of their near relatives.

"You know where Jonni lives?" I asked, as he started up his car.

He nodded and mumbled, "Employment application."

As though he thought I'd suspect him of an illicit affair with Jonni, who must be all of seventeen, I told him about what Mark had said of Jonni, to forestall any more such nonsense.

We drove deeper into the old Victorian district of Lythia Springs, past the zone where houses were converted into shops, through the zone where the houses were houses, each one with a tender lawn to rival the most conventional of suburbs and on to the zone of houses chopped up into apartments, with beer cans on the window sills, and dried-up, dusty front yards.

Elroy pulled up in front of a narrow, violet townhouse.

As he got out of the car, the sun shone on his belt buckle, a huge gold-and-fake-jewels affair with the initials EP picked out in would-be rubies. I shook my head. I'd never noticed the thing. Then again I didn't normally go around staring at my boss's belt buckle.

I walked up the maltreated concrete steps to the violet door. Elroy looked in the fly-specked window to the left. "Too dirty," he mumbled. "Can't see a darn thing."

I rang the bell, tried the massive brass doorknob.

"Is it open?" Elroy asked.

"No," I said, giving the doorknob a final shove.

"Here," he said. "Let me try."

"Be my guest." I stepped back and he took my place. The sun shone off something, probably his belt buckle, enveloping the knob in a blinding white light. He turned it. "It was unlocked after all."

The door opened with a mighty creak.

I frowned at the doorknob and followed Elroy into the dark living room. It was decorated in *earthy college student*, with sheets of batik in reddish brown tenting the ceiling, covering the walls and draped over the two shapeless sofas.

On the right hand sofa, Jonni lay. "Jonni," I called, making my way around piles of books and mounds of dirty clothes.

"Jonni."

She lay on her stomach, in her long T-shirt nightgown, and she didn't move. Her long blond hair covered her face.

"Jonni," I called. But even before I knelt by her side and put my hand on her cold, cold neck to feel for an nonexistent pulse, I knew that she was dead. The cause wasn't that far to seek, either. Several empty prescription-labeled bottles lay scattered on the floor near the sofa.

Shocked, gasping, not sure yet what I felt, I yelled out, "She's dead. Don't touch anything." Just as if this were some stupid murder mystery.

Elroy stood by the sofa, staring down at Jonni's body. "I knew something had gone wrong," he said.

"Just don't touch anything," I told him, feeling tears well up in my eyes, moist, warm tears rolling down my face. Damn, what did Jonni want to go and do this for? She was so young, so pretty. And unlike me, she hadn't thoroughly fucked up her life, yet. She should have at least tried her hand at fucking it up further, before giving it up. I stumbled to the kitchen, blinded by tears, looking for a phone. I had to call nine-one-one. I had to get the police out here.

"She's not dead," Elroy said. "She just needs waking up."

I didn't even attempt to argue. No one that cold could be alive.

In the kitchen a narrow cubicle with a stove and a sink piled up with dirty dishes I found a small white wall-phone and managed to blink away enough of my tears to dial. I'd no more than dialed the nine when I stopped.

From the living room came the sound of Elvis singing "Are you lonesome tonight." A bright light shone through the kitchen doorway.

Damn, I'd told Elroy not to touch anything. Did he have to go and turn on Jonni's music, and every damned light? Damn the man.

I slammed the phone down and walked into the living room, to give him what for.

And stopped. He hadn't turned on any music. Nor the lights.

Elvis, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, stood in the middle of the living room, dressed in a white-sequined polyester jumpsuit, leaning over Jonni and singing, "all my dreams fulfill." Light shone around and from him.

And Jonni, Jonni who had been cold and dead, sat on the ratty batik sofa and stared up at Elvis with her eyes full of wonder, her cheeks red.

I couldn't speak. I could take walk-ins. I could take attempted possession. I could take a hundred

different things, but Elvis materializing in Jonni's living room was just too much. To say nothing of this resurrection business.

I leaned against the wall and wondered what had been in that Rice-dream bar.

Elvis took off his scarf and handed it to Jonni.

Jonni, a dazed, enchanted-looking Jonni, clapped enthusiastically.

"Jonni?" I managed to say.

The light went out. I blinked. It wasn't Elvis. Only Elroy, who stood there, with his hip poked out, his lower lip sticking forward in a rakish pout. "See?" he said, turning around. "I told you she just needed waking."

I shook my head. Side-effects of working in a New Age store. You eventually went as nuts as the customers.

I approached Jonni gingerly. She had been dead. I was sure she had been dead. "Are you alright?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, in her thin, little-girl voice. "Yeah. I had a bad argument with Pete and I took some sleeping pills and slept late, that's all. You guys want me to come in to the store?"

"Yes," Elroy said, unequivocal. "Why don't you go get dressed?"

"I'll go with you," I volunteered, not willing to let her out of my sight, lest she should revert to dead state. I followed her up a rickety stair and into a messy room, where I watched her change into a pair of jeans and T-shirt. And heard the full account of her row with Pete, told in a strangely detached voice.

"And Elroy woke you?" I asked, bringing her back to the present.

"Yes," she said, and wrinkled her perfect brow. "Only . . . I didn't even know he was an Elvis impersonator."

Elvis impersonator? So, she'd seen it too? Were hallucinations shared, now?

I led Jonni downstairs and out the door, to the car.

Elroy had cleared a space for her in the back by piling the teddy bears in unholy confusion on one side of the back seat. He sat her down with unusual solicitude, then opened the door for me.

Once I was in and we'd started the drive back to the store, he said, "I hope I never catch you taking sleeping pills again, young one. I don't want you taking any of that trash. That stuff can kill you."

I almost told Elroy that we'd all seen the this-is-your-brain-on-drugs commercial, but it struck me that Jonni, whose full name was Jonnitan and whose parents had met in a hippie commune, *might* never have heard any anti-drug speech from someone she respected. So I let Elroy ramble on in his odd, chewed-up speech.

He sounds just like Elvis, I thought. And his gestures, his hip-positioning, his lower-lip pouting, his disapproving sneer. All of them are just like Elvis. "So, you were an Elvis impersonator, when you were young?" I asked him, when I thought that Jonni had enough sermonizing. Besides, he'd started quoting the gospels mixed up with vintage New Age sayings and stuff about a higher plane.

My question brought him up short. He turned to stare at me. "A what?"

"An Elvis impersonator," I said, just as the weird thought ran through my mind that there had been no impersonation involved. Looking down, I saw that he wasn't wearing any belt buckle, certainly not a huge, gold-and-jewels one. Had I dreamed that, too?

I was so shocked that when I paid mind to Elroy again, he had launched off in another sermon of some sort, this one apparently directed at me, "besides, young lady, unlike some people I don't go through life playing no phony role. It's just that sometimes you're required to be what people need, what people think you should be, and in a way to expiate and to cleanse the sins of who you were

they think you were. For instance, all those ice creams you eat"

"I pay for them," I protested.

"Damn right you do. You can die of overweight, you know. And besides, as my mama used to say"

He had parked in front of the store by the time he finished his sermon. I almost ran out of the car, confused, baffled, feeling like I was having a weird dream and definitely very tired of Elroy's sermon.

Mark was at the counter, on the phone, with a pile of books in front of him and a pricing gun in his hand. He looked up and mouthed at me, "Jonni?"

"She's fine. She's coming in," I said. I wanted to tell him she'd been dead and Elroy had taken on Elvis' form and resurrected her, but then Mark would just tell me I'd been working for Eternal Life too long. And maybe I had.

"Well, ma'am, if you are possessed by a malevolent entity, I'd say you definitely should quit your job with the nuclear power plant," Mark said, into the phone.

I moved in beside him, took the price gun from his hand, determined to start work and forget what must have been a dream, had to have been a dream.

Looking down at the cover on the first book on the pile, I gasped.

Mark covered the mouthpiece on the phone. "Elroy had them vanity published. Isn't it a hoot?"

I looked at the cover again, speechless.

It showed a figure in a white jumpsuit, surrounded by light. On the top it said Elroy Peters. And on the bottom, in black letters, was the title: *Elvis Died For Your Sins*.

Like Dreams of Waking

I have a Southern friend who talks endlessly of civil war minutia. He happened to mention that Stonewall Jackson was killed by friendly fire. With one thing and another, next thing I knew I found myself writing this story.

(preceding pages rendered illegible through water damage and age) . . . possible that he had been wounded early in the day, more than twelve hours beforehand, and just as possible that all those hours he had lain for dead, in that great butcher-shop that Gettysburg had become.

I'm not sure when he was brought to the hospital we'd established at Plank Farm.

Situated three miles west of Gettysburg, the farm consisted of a good sized building on the west bank of Willoughby's Run. A few of us, medical men, had claimed it early in the morning of Wednesday, the first of July 1863, and since then we'd been disposing sick and wounded where we could best. Beds and mattresses, as well as anything that could be pressed into service as such, had long since been occupied by wretched sufferers.

We had the orderlies bring straw from the barns and spread it on the floor, so that more room might be made to care for afflicted men.

The man I wish to tell you about lay on the floor of the front parlor, upon the already blood-soaked straw, amid scores of wounded, moaning, crying men.

I thought he was dead. Surveying him from the narrow corridor about six feet away, I thought he couldn't be anything but dead and must have died the moment he received his wound. I couldn't imagine why anyone had dragged his corpse in.

His head was all a mass of gore, from which nothing human emerged.

Yet, the gore appeared to move.

Curious, I stepped amid the wounded, careful to avoid touching the infection-swollen limbs and extricating myself from hands that grasped my ankles.

To be honest, I no longer noticed the grabbing hands, nor the piteous moaning of the poor sufferers, nor could I any longer smell the miasma of putrefaction and illness that pervaded the room. I'd smelled its like or much worse after other campaigns and in other hospitals, worse provisions than this.

In those other necessity-engendered hospitals, the wounded had lain in tents that could not keep the water fully away from their tortured bodies, and had been crowded so tightly together that there had been no room to step between them.

At least here there was plenty of room around this man for me get close to him. Close enough to realize that what moved amid the gore and blood on his face was no human muscle but a mass of maggots that writhed and danced like children at a feast, all the while making a sound like honeybees feeding on mash.

Revolted, my stomach reacting to this sight with a violence I hadn't experienced since the early days of the war, I attempted to find an orderly that would take the corpse away, before its corruption contaminated the living bodies lying beside it.

But just then the assumed corpse spoke, a whisper barely audible above the sound the maggots made while feasting his still-living flesh. "France," he said, with startling clarity. "And the English too." His voice subsided into a low sound that might not have been more than labored breathing.

His uniform might be a mishmash of Confederate and Federal issue, but his voice held the slow accent of the South.

I rushed out to the yard of the farmhouse, where I found a pail and filled it with water from the pump, displacing the walking wounded who had been taking turns pumping cold water over the afflicted limbs.

Though his words held no meaning for me, they were words, the words of a fellow human being suffering the tortures of hell while in this world. And his accent was the accent of a compatriot. To assist him and others such as him, I'd left my studies in England to come to the succor of my homeland, when it first seceded from the Union.

I'd come back, against my mother's besieging and my father's instructing, and through two years of hard, bitter campaigning, I'd lived to endure the full pain of my decision. But I'd never regretted it, because what use is man if he doesn't do something for his fellow?

I took the pail with water and a discarded rag that I found in a corner of the yard.

Kneeling by the wounded man, I did my best to clear away the blood and gore, and the vermin that infested it. As I cleared the gore, I found his injury was less than I'd at first suspected.

The right half of his head was intact, his elongated dolichocephalic cranium covered in pale blond hair. But the left half couldn't be cleaned. It remained a mass of gore and hair, with bits of bone and metal sticking to it. I could do no more than clear away the vermin and wrap his head in the cleanest ligature to be found.

He would be very young, perhaps twenty at most, and at one time might have been thought handsome, with clean-cut squarish features, somewhat obscured by a puffy swelling of his face.

As a man who'd long been interested in the human brain and the science of phrenology, I marveled at his being still alive despite his wound and wondered what faculties he would find missing should he survive.

.(pages missing, where a rat gnawed at manuscript) . . .as well as procuring food from the vegetable gardens and pens of the farm, besides keeping those wounded who could and would move about for their own purposes from eating all of it, leaving nothing for the worst sufferers.

While at these labors, I found a bottle of spirits in an unused cupboard and I thought it might be used to comfort some of those in worst extremities. I have to confess I thought foremost of my head wound case, the nameless man who, as I've written earlier, had made wondrous progress in the last five hours, so that he sat up and looked about with remarkably clear green-brown eyes.

However, upon reaching the front parlor, where he had lain, I saw that his space had emptied, though all about it the wounded lay crowded as before. He must have died.

Yet, as I walked to the door, I looked at his spot once more and saw him standing where he'd once lain.

He looked startled, scared, his eyes wide and unreasoning, like the eyes of a horse about to rear.

I hastened to his side. He showed some hint of recognizing me and allowed me to sit him down.

I proffered the whiskey, and he took a healthy swig, capping the flask and handing it back to me all as sane as you please. He might have been a fellow drinker on a social visit.

And then he spoke.

"How goes . . .the fighting?" he asked. His voice, scarcely louder than wind rustling through trees, sounded alarmed.

I shrugged. I knew little enough of it, being here, away from the action, and heard close to nothing from the mouths of those I treated. "I hear Stonewall Jackson's command took Cemetery hill," I said. "And it seems as though we'll carry the day, though we get so many dead and wounded, one way and another"

He nodded, as though he understood. The ligature on his head, brown with soot and seeping blood, had remained vermin-free. "So the Yankees won't win?" He spoke in the familiar accent of the

Piedmont.

I shrugged again. "It looks like we'll carry this. And in a month the Yankees might well have capitulated and we all be home."

He raised a dirt-encrusted hand to his forehead, bringing it down again before touching the portion of it where the ligature hid broken bone and said, "I had dreams. Dreams like when one dream of being awakened and in the dream walks and talks and does all the normal things of life. I dreamed rose and walked as through an open door, and found myself back home, but the Union had won and scavengers from the North descended upon Dixie like vultures on an ill-dead carcass." He looked away. "My wife had died of dysentery. My farm was ruined. I had to sell the house."

"A nightmare," I told him. "You've been grievously wounded."

"Yes," he said, and looked in some distaste around him, at the wounded lying all about, as though he himself weren't as filthy and meagerly fed and hard-driven as them. "And will I live?"

I couldn't tell him it was passing marvelous that he was alive with half his brain destroyed. Though it was. So I told him . . .

. . .(water damage renders a few lines illegible) . . .and with that he had to be contented.

The rest of the day and through the night I was kept busy with more wounded brought in, half of them at least Federal prisoners that we treated as we did our own, though some of the doctors refused to treat anyone not of their regiment, a crime and offense against divine law for which I often wished they would be incinerated on the spot. Alas, divine mercy and divine justice both being in short supply in this war we had to make do with the human variety that required sweat and blood and sleepless nights for your humble servant.

At daybreak on the second of July, I searched for and found my head-injury case. He walked about the yard, as though in a daze, tracing an erratic path around the fires that warmed those not seriously wounded. He looked at everything with a strange, detached expression, as though not sure who he was, nor why he walked.

Judging him to be prey to a fever, I found him and took him by the arm and started guiding him back inside.

But he pulled his arm from mine and regarded me, his eyes open wide and his nostrils flaring, the look of a man scared, a man under mortal threat.

"The Yankees won't win, son," I said, addressing him thus because of his youth, though I was not by any means old enough to have sired him. "I know what you dreamed, but it won't come true."

But he only opened his eyes further and hissed breath through his clenched teeth. "No. No, the Yankees won't win. But neither will we . . .I saw it all." He blinked. "Perhaps it was a dream, too, but I swear it was so vivid . . .I stepped through the opening again, and found myself in a strange land . . .a strange land though it was our own. I listened to the people and I talked and I almost got killed for saying the wrong thing." His lips trembled. His ligature had become even dirtier, as though a good many days had passed and he'd wandered far and wide. "I understand that even now Napoleon III of France dreams to establish a monarchy in Mexico. If we win" He swallowed. "With us winning the battle, France and England will recognize us. They'll also subsidize our fighting and prop up our treasury." He swallowed again. "When the war is over, in another year, they will own us, lock, stock and barrel. And from here they'll take over the Federal territory too. America will be no more." His eyes filled with tears. "Nor will democracy nor the dream that men of wisdom can govern themselves. Kings will own the land. Forever."

I could tell from his words that he was a man of some learning, and I had to admit the scenario he painted might be likely. Nothing for it but to calm him down and tell him that all would be well, as I took him back to his spot on the floor and lay him down upon the soiled straw and gave him more

my hoarded spirits to help him rest.

~~However, when I checked on him later, I found his eyes wide open, filled with understanding. Looking up at me he said, "Of the two, I'd rather sacrifice our cause than sacrifice the whole land and have foreigners split us like preying wolves split a wounded lamb."~~

(Water damage) . . . some beef tea, that I brought to him and made him drink. He sipped willingly enough. He didn't feel hot to the touch, and didn't rave, but when he finished his drink, he looked at me and said, "It should not be allowed. If I'm given this vision it's for a reason. There must be a reason."

That night I found some time to lay down amid the wounded and get well-earned rest. But though I was tired and hadn't slept in well over twenty four hours, I couldn't settle. I kept wondering about the strange dreams that kept my patient worried. Dreams? Or was it possible, just possible that the human brain, like the rudder on a ship, kept men to one time and place at a time and that a man with his brain injured might move through time and space without direction like a rudderless vessel? And if that were the case, well, then, wouldn't it explain most madness that follows an injury to the head? Am I most prophesying for that matter?

I remembered from my grammar school days that many philosophers in ancient times thought that what men perceived and reality were not necessarily the same. Like Plato, with his idea that what we saw were no more than reflections of the truth. What if all of God's creation unfolded at once, with his one word, but parts of our brain allowed us to perceive it a little at a time, lest we got mad?

And if so, was my poor patient a true prophet? Did God allow him to suffer this injury and survive it so that he might transmit to me the dangers of our cause? And if so, what could I do?

A heavy wind blew around the building, shaking the trees, but inside it heat collected, suffocating, and every smell of disease, every hint of rot and decay assailed my nose.

I turned and weighed things in my mind. If the Yankees won they would have full revenge on our land. The emancipation proclamation their president had made would wreck the southern plantation and Dixie might never recover from its death blow.

If we won this battle, France and England would recognize us. But would they recognize us without intending to get their own back? Or was their support for us as much interest in our cause as wish to see democracy as a form of government fail? Since the ancient world, only America had lived in a successful republic. France had tried the rule of the people, only to take it to extremes and retreat shrieking into the arms of monarchy, once more. Was that what they wished on us? Would England, still smarting from the blow given it by our grandfathers, ever let us go once it had a chance to put its feet on our neck again?

I turned and tossed on the filthy straw. I could imagine a land ruled and divided by European powers. I thought that the English, as keen on abolishing slavery as the Yankees, would ruin the south just as certainly, only they might as well muzzle the free southerners to the work in the plantation making us something between slave and free. Not full citizens. A colonized people.

And yet, certainly my poor sufferer was delusional and I was but following him on the road to madness. A fit destination for someone as short on sleep as I was.

Besides, what could I do about it? And why would the Almighty send me, me of all people, a vision of the future and a choice about it? What was the choice? What could I do?

I tossed and turned. Through the windows, I saw the reflection of fires in the courtyard, heard the rough voices of the men, some of them little more than boys, who sat there, in the warm night outside discussing the battle, the comrades lost, the charges that had succeeded and those that had failed.

If what I heard was true, the turning point at Gettysburg had come when Stonewall Jackson took Cemetery Hill. What if that hadn't happened? What if Stonewall Jackson had died at Chancellorsville?

when some of the N.C. volunteers had mistakenly fired upon him?

~~I'd been there and I remembered General A. P. Hill frantically crying for the troops to stop firing.~~

They had stopped and no damage done. But what if they hadn't?

If they hadn't, Stonewall Jackson might well be dead and this day lost and . . .and a good man dead to prevent what? The dreams of a man whose brain had been shattered by a bullet?

But if these were dreams, dreams and nothing else, wouldn't my giving him a way to relieve his anxiety within his fantasy be an act of mercy?

And if they were dreams, dreams and nothing else, dreams as yet as vivid as waking and no more, what difference could it make?

That morning, the morning of the third of July 1863, when I found my patient walking around in a daze, I told him what I'd thought. I told him that if one of his doors to other times and places should open to that night of May second 1863 and he could find a way to ensure the friendly fire continued, Stonewall Jackson might well die and the cause of the Confederacy with it.

After I talked to him, he sank into sleep, seemingly relieved by my suggestion.

Wounded arrived in such great numbers that all that day I was kept busy, unable to see my patient.

The next morning we got orders to return to Virginia. The orders from General Lee were that we should take as many of our poor wounded as possible back home.

We loaded all vehicles we could find with wounded and in the commotion I lost track of my particular patient.

After noon the rain started and puddled in the already poor roads. Horses and mules lost direction and became unmanageable. In the wagons the wounded and mutilated men cried out for death as their ultimate reliever.

I went from wagon to wagon, attempting to somehow mitigate the suffering, though there was precious little I could do, absent morphine or the other physics that mitigate pain and those had long been lacking in the Confederacy due to the Yankee blockade.

In the pouring rain, I finally came across the man who was wounded on the head. He sat bolt upright in a wagon, looking into the pouring rain, the eyes of a man who sees something else, far away. "We lost at Gettysburg, doctor. We lost. Stonewall Jackson died at Chancellorsville, shot down by his own men."

I thought then, at that moment, that he hallucinated and said whatever was needed to soothe him, paying no more heed to my words than to the sounds a mother makes to gentle a babe to sleep.

Later, walking behind the wagon, with all the other men who could walk, it came to me, as a dream, the awful memory of that sleepless night and the thoughts that had haunted me in those days at Gettysburg.

They were clear, like dreams of being awake, but they made no sense, because of course I knew that Stonewall Jackson had died at Chancellorsville, and that Gettysburg had been a disaster for the Confederacy. We'd never taken Cemetery Hill. My thought that we had, had to be the product of sleepless nights and the shock of working with so many wounded.

The man who'd been wounded on the head died that night, on the wagon, and was buried by the side of the road, like so many other anonymous heroes, who died to defend our land.

(Water damage) . . .these many years later. And yet, sometimes I wake in the dark of night and think of that scene in the woods, East of Orange Plank Road and I remember the circumstances of the North Carolina detachment of Pender's brigade shooting at General Jackson. I remember Hill's frantic pleas for them to stop, screaming "Cease firing," and then the sound of a voice with a thick Piedmont accent calling out, "It's a lie; pour it into them, boys!" and a full volley striking the group, giving

General Jackson his fatal injury.

~~Then I sit in my bed, all in a sweat, and wonder. I wonder if it was me who caused the death of that hero, Stonewall Jackson. I wonder if it was me who put the knife through the heart of the Confederacy. If it was me who made it possible for the North to feed on the South like a jackal on sickened prey.~~

Of course, if that blame rests on me, then my patient's injured brain allowed him to go through the different paths of time and place and visit the possible futures. And if that was true, then it must be the design of the Almighty that I could save the American lands from being divided between France and England.

And yet, the man had half his brain missing. What if he could truly wander amid time and place but could not see clearly?

What if I caused the defeat of the South in vain? Did I betray my land for nothing?

I think and I turn and I toss. From outside my window come the sounds of bustling London where I sought refuge after defeat, and where I've lived for forty years now.

As my days draw to a close, rarely a night goes by that I don't hear that voice shouting in my dreams, "Pour it into them, boys."

And that fatal phrase on which the entire war pivoted, on which my sanity hangs, is pronounced in the voice of the wounded man that we left buried by the roadside on the way back from Gettysburg.

Ariadne's Skein

I've always been fascinated with Borges' poem and the idea of a circular time—the idea that the myths and legends of humanity might reflect the time ahead, not the time before them. This story was born of this.

"When Rome is dust Again shall wail in the endless Night of his rank palace"

Jorge Luis Borges, "The Minotaur"

We clambered onto the white deck of a Blue Gryphon 56 sea-to-air and sat on deck chairs disposed in two rows. There were fourteen of us, jet-lagged tourists from pan America and the guide who'd show us the manufactured wonders of Mythos.

Sunlight showed as no more than a hint of silver on the deep blue waves of the Mediterranean.

The man across from me reclined on his chair, stretched his long legs, threw his head back and half-closed his eyes. He wore only a scrap of shorts and looked no more than twenty. Tanned and sporting fashionably long black curls, he showed better defined muscles than any one man should have been born with.

Instinctively, I glanced at the middle-finger of his right hand.

In the place where an artifact *had* to display the red ring of his slavery or the black ring of his freedom either permanently embedded in the flesh this man wore a thin gold band. Matching ones adorned every finger of his right hand, even his thumb.

So, this exquisite creature had been naturally born, not test-tube assembled. Would wonder never cease?

He looked at me from beneath his artfully lowered eyelids. The corners of his lips lifted in a tentative smile.

"Living, breathing things to see at last." The fidgety older blonde who sat next to him dug her skinny elbow into his supple muscles. She wore a long yellow silk party dress, singularly out of place. "It will be a relief, after all those dried-up stones at Knossos and all the dreadful bits of pottery in museums."

He opened startling green-blue eyes and looked at her with the bewilderment of an innocent.

"But Nary, if you wanted an amusement park peopled with fantastic characters, why didn't you stay in Sea York? They do have those, you know?" His voice would serve a university professor better than a gigolo.

Which proved nothing, except that natural humans seldom lived up to their archetypes. I was about to believe the demigod had paired with this woman out of love.

His girlfriend blushed and primmed thin accordion-creased lips. She glanced at me, lifted her eyebrows at my too-regular features. Her gaze found the black ring of a freed artifact on my right hand and she relaxed.

I was not really human. Didn't count. Not to people like her, I didn't. After all, freed artifacts, though nominal citizens, could neither marry nor vote.

"Don't be tart, Pol," she said. "Mythos is *not* an amusement park. It recreates scenes from mythology. It is . . . cultural."

Pol's perfect lips curled disdainfully. "Ah," he said. "I see. Amusement park for *adults*."

"Pol, you are *not* irreplaceable."

I looked away. I didn't want to empathize with his reluctantly subservient position. True, I'd been

subservient most of my life, but I hadn't chosen it as the quickest course to an easy life. I'd been born an artifact. I'd been born owned, one of a few thousand people worldwide who had been created because the unique attributes they could be given outweighed the cost of making and training them.

Willfully abstracting my mind and gaze from the couple and stared ahead where the dark shape of an island rose out of the glimmering sea ahead of the boat.

"Ladies and gentleman, if you please," the guide said. "Could I have your attention?"

We swiveled our chairs to face him.

Dapper and cool in a white linen suit, the guide graced us with a practiced smile. In Pan-America his position would have been filled by an artifact. But not here. Though he looked just like any of the figures on a thousand classical vases, he lacked the artifact ring. "Welcome," he said.

The self-piloted ship thumped against the shore, mooring on the white sands of the artificial isle.

The guide gestured towards land. "Welcome to the fabulous island of Mythos, where you will see marvels to dazzle your eyes." His perfect, white teeth flashed briefly between red lips. "Our first stop is the palace of the Minotaur . . . the fabled labyrinth. For those of you not familiar with the legend, let me tell you how Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos, gave birth to a monster, half-man, half-bull. The monster was confined in a labyrinth built by Daedalus. Because he ate human flesh, the city of Athens was forced to send a yearly tribute of seven maidens and seven youths. The Minotaur devoured them all, year after year, until Theseus was chosen. Theseus killed the monster with the help of Ariadne, daughter of King Minos. She gave him a sword to slay the Minotaur and a skein of magic thread with which to find his way out of the labyrinth, once he'd killed the beast. Ariadne and Theseus left together, but later Dionysus fell in love with her and compelled Theseus to abandon her while she slept."

He cleared his throat. "Our engineers have recreated the labyrinth and the Minotaur in all particulars," he went on. "Of course, the Minotaur does not eat meat and has the mind and manners of a well-behaved seven-year-old. As for the labyrinth, do not be afraid of getting lost. If you become disoriented, just remain still. Sensors on the walls will allow rescuers to find you anywhere. Now follow me to the country of myth."

We rose. Pol helped his companion stand, offered her his arm. She gave no sign of being charmed. Perhaps familiarity truly bred contempt.

His muscled chest glimmered with suntan lotion. I wouldn't mind getting familiar with him. But she would have no chance. He was the wages of fortune and no doubt of natural birth.

Reserved for nats only. No artifacts need apply.

The guide led us down the automatically-lowered gangplank to the shore.

If I hadn't known Mythos had been built by an international conglomerate less than twenty years ago, I would have thought it was just another Greek isle. It looked ancient and weathered another volcanic islet. The only difference was that this one didn't show any signs of ever having been inhabited, much less of the creeping overpopulation that crowded every other isle with massed houses and unsightly high rises.

In Mythos, the white shore rose slowly to a plateau where no building glimmered. Up the white shore, we tourists went scrambling.

The first to reach the summit, I removed my light wrap and stowed it in my ever-present belt pouch while I waited for the others. Under it I wore a sleeveless short dress, adequate after walking. Even the guide had been left behind by my trot, not surprising, considering what I'd been created to do.

The sun showed itself now, pale but warm. A heated breeze blew. The day would be a scorcher.

On the other side of the beach, at my back, green countryside stretched inland, cut here and there

by groves of gnarled, twisted olive trees.

~~Another party of tourists walked through the middle of a field, stopping to take their tiny cameras to their eyes and snap holos of the view.~~

The rest of our group finally joined me, one by one and two by two. The guide came first, and accosted me with a buoyant, "You're a fast walker."

Then he looked at the ring on my finger and looked away, towards the approaching party. It took some people that way. As the other tourists arrived, he talked to them, instead, discussing the sea and the heat, the sand and recreated myths. But I'd ceased existing.

Pol brought up the rear, supporting his less decorative companion.

She leaned heavily on him, and no wonder, since she wore five inch stiletto heels in shiny, rock-hard dimatough. Not the most adequate shoes for walking on sand, and what could have possessed her to wear them?

I wondered how money, or even social prestige, could keep a thinking man in thrall to such a fool. Then, of course, I was assuming that Pol was a thinking manna stretch of the imagination.

Turning away from him, I concentrated on following the guide and not overtaking him as he led us on the same route the other group had followed, up a convincingly weathered narrow path and through a grove of trees.

Flawlessly sensuous nymphs danced with faultlessly goat-legged satyrs for the amusement of yet another group of tourists.

I looked away, counting my blessings. Other than exceptional strength and agility and the eidetic memory and sense of direction necessary for my erstwhile job as a courier, I had no modifications that distinguished me from natural humans.

Oh, my features might be a little too perfect, as designers would make them if they got the chance. And I wore the black ring of a freed artifact. But those didn't matter. It could have been worse. Much worse.

A hundred steps past the grove, a seven-foot-tall stone wall rose. A panel of dimatough, inexpertly made to look like wood, covered a narrow doorway.

Our guide touched a button. The panel slid away.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us enter the fabulous labyrinth of the Minotaur."

We followed him into a tunnel. Its walls were molded of smooth black dimatough, and the blackness swallowed what light shone from the diminutive lamps on the wall sconces.

The uncertain lighting changed my companions into shapes and shadows. The dank air reeked of manure. It felt like a cheap ride in a second class carnival.

"It smells like a stable," Pol's girlfriend said. "I'm not going in."

The guide turned around. A light affixed at the base of his throat lit his face partially and from below, obscenely emphasizing his mouth. "It's perfectly clean," he said his mouth opening and closing, white teeth shining and making him look like a snarling beast. "But the Minotaur . . . You see, he's an animal. He smells."

In the doorway, square-shouldered Pol bowed meekly to whisper something to his companion.

She giggled. "Oh, don't be silly. No, I wouldn't want to deprive you . . . I know you want to go in."

Another bout of whispering, and a muffled giggle. "No, I won't stay here alone, either. I guess I'm being a silly old woman. We'll go in, Pol. Come along."

They joined the party, her high heels clicking as we walked along the ever-narrowing corridor. We stopped in front of a fresco-adorned wall that depicted, in gruesome color and lurid detail, the Minotaur feasting on the corpses of ancient Greek maidens and youths.

The guide turned to face us, winked. "Follow me," he said.

~~Flattening himself against the fresco, he slithered sideways, seemingly disappearing into the~~
stone wall. Pol followed, eagerly, smiling like a child at a party.

I tried it next.

There was an opening, of course, to the left side of the panel, an opening so narrow that required our sliding sideways, squeezing between stony surfaces.

On the other side, Pol smiled at me, and the guide looked away.

"Look what it's done to my dress," Nary said as she emerged. "I don't think anything will get clean."

Her bright yellow silk dress showed dust and something like a verdigris stain.

The guide looked abashed. "Replacements will be provided, of course," he said, and bowed and turned to lead us down the wider, curving corridor into which we'd emerged.

We walked a long time, between black walls and my sense of direction, built into me for my job as a courier, told me that we actually described a full circle before we took an abrupt left turn.

The purpose of the circle would be to make the way seem longer. However disadvantages of being a human homing pigeon my being forced to take a circuitous route countered my carefully designed instincts for always choosing the quickest way. My mind knew where the turns we took were silly and useless and, trudging along the dark, dank, smelly hallways, I literally ached to take a streamlined path.

The ceiling of the next compartment hung so low that we had to duck our heads. Because of his height, Pol had to bend almost double. His dark hair brushed my shoulder.

No one spoke. At the end of the tunnel, the head of the Minotaur, carved in stone, glared at us. We turned right, suddenly able to stand up. The high ceiling, on which the guide helpfully shone his light, displayed another fresco, this one of the Minotaur standing astride a pile of human corpse while Theseus pierced the beast's chest with his borrowed sword.

The smell of manure got worse. My hair attempted to stand on end.

"It's too long," Pol's girlfriend said. "And it smells. Can't we take a short cut? Can't you call the beast to us?"

"Ah, my dear, but the Minotaur hides in the labyrinth and ambushes us," the guide said.

Nary murmured something from which the word, "nonsense," emerged.

To my disgust, I agreed with her. She might be an idiot, but even idiots were right sometimes.

The place *did* smell like a stable, a musty animal-waste smell. The dark, cold corridors didn't disturb me any less for my knowing that they were *supposed* to disturb me.

Most attractions didn't try this hard to put tourists off.

We turned left, then right, then left again. Two of the frescoes repeated themselves. The carved head of the Minotaur protruded from the tunnel at regular intervals and if it were not for my sense of direction, I'd assume we were going in circles and passing the same carving again and again.

Couldn't make it too easy to find our way out, could they?

I huffed under my breath, doubting that my complaints would be met with such gentle rejoinders as natural-born Nary's.

Mostly, I was mad at myself. Why hadn't I begged off this particular attraction? For that matter, why had I signed up for this tour of Mythos at all?

But I knew why. Greek mythology, with its capricious gods, its heroic mortals, drew me like a half-healed lip sore, to which your tongue strays irresistibly. Hard to read the myths and not to think of our present world, of capricious humans playing god and long-suffering artifacts enduring the whimsy. Hard not to identify with the situations created.

"Imagine Theseus making his way through these dark corridors," the guide said. "Knowing that the end he will have to fight a supernatural beast for his life and the lives of his companions."—

I shook my head. Not while discreet electrical lights shone on me, not when I knew the Minotaur was vegetarian and had the intelligence of a seven-year-old.

A high pitched, tremulous scream echoed through the chamber. It ended in a gurgle.

Ahead of us, the corridor bifurcated via doorways opening to the right and left of another horrendous fresco.

I froze in place, all my instincts alert. My heart raced.

Scene-setting, my mind said. But my senses protested it had been too realistic. Too real. The scream had sounded too present, too anguished to be part of the scene-setting.

My nostrils flared.

I caught the smell of the charnel house, the metallic tang of blood mixed with animal waste: the smell of sudden death.

"What! What is that?" Nary asked. "What I want out."

"Hey, take us out of here," Pol said. "My friend is" He stopped. "Where did he go?"

I looked around for the guide, as did other tour members. But we saw only each other's frightened expressions. Our guide had vanished.

"Where did he go?" A young teenage girl clutched at my arm with her hot, moist hand. "Where did he go?"

"He ran," Pol said.

"Out?" I asked. My voice sounded alien, disembodied. My heart beat too fast, up by my throat.

"I don't know." Pol shuffled back a step, opened his eyes wide. He looked restless and skittish. As if he too could smell better than natural humans. As if he knew that somewhere close by people had died violently. "But he has to have run. He was here, and then not."

The teenager giggled. "It's probably a trick to scare us." She started ahead.

"We should go out, Nary," Pol said, his voice hoarse and low. "Something is wrong. We should"

"I'm not going anywhere." Nary stomped her dimatough heel. "The guide said if we got lost we should just stay where we are and the rescuers would find us."

"But that was if we got lost alone." The girl stared at Nary wide-eyed. "I'm sure it's different as a group. Come on. This is just supposed to make it more exciting. Why else would the guide leave?"

A couple of other people stepped forward.

I backed up against the wall. If this was a simulation, its creators had raided an abattoir for parts to make it smell right.

Then again, Mythos had a very good reputation. Perhaps it came from stage-setting like this. Maybe the girl was right.

I took a step forward. A scream sounded, high, insane, ending in a gurgle. Another, then another reverberated off the tunnel walls. The first one had been female, the last two male.

Pol grabbed his girlfriend and pulled her back, against the wall, away from the noise and the smell.

In the doorway on the right, something large and square-shouldered appeared. Two large horns crowned its bovine head.

I took a step back.

"Run," someone screamed. "Oh, dammit, run."

"No," Pol yelled. "No. Be still, make no sound. Maybe it can't see."

They ignored him. His efforts at holding Nary failed. They ran in a group—stumbling and whimpering, missing the left corridor.

The creature lumbered after them, past us, moving fast, much too fast for its gait. Under the bubble lights, I saw it clearly: recurved horns, blood-stained as was the muzzle, wide green eyes—eyes more like a cat's than like a bull's.

Our screaming companions ran straight back, to huddle by the wall that blocked their path. Still within full view of us, they pushed against the wall and screamed and kicked in a writhing pile. Their panic, each prevented the other from getting through the doors on either side.

The Minotaur trotted towards them, head down, and charged bull fashion. It speared a balding man through the chest of his tie-dyed T-shirt. The man whimpered and fell like a deflated balloon. Blood gushed. His cry ended in a sort of gurgle.

The Minotaur charged the group again.

It all seemed to take place in slow motion and yet I knew it was very fast, taking no more than a few breaths. There was nothing I could do, no time to intervene.

My stomach churned. I didn't want to think, to smell, to see, or to hear. But neither could I close my eyes. If I were to die I wanted to know it was going to happen. I wanted to know it was all over even if only for a few seconds.

Sweat running down my back, I concentrated on standing still, on breathing quietly.

Pol, two steps to the right and in front of me, looked like a statue, only the slight rise of his broad chest betraying life.

The Minotaur lowered its head again. A sharp cry sounded and a dark red stain bloomed on Nary's yellow dress.

Pol swallowed audibly and shifted his weight to the foot closer to his girlfriend.

The Minotaur lifted her, threw her. She landed in a heap close to us. Drops of her blood sprinkled my ankles.

I closed my eyes, biting my lips together as acid bile rose from my stomach.

Pol made a low, keening sound and the Minotaur turned an inquiring head. Pol bit his lips and though his face glimmered white with shock and his eyes were wide and expressionless, he made no more sound.

I concentrated on remaining still, on not moving to either help or run away. I could do nothing except, if I were lucky, save my own life.

I knew quite well, from my crèche days, that artifacts with the Minotaur's cat-eyes were not good at perceiving shapes and outlines. But they could always pick out movement, no matter how dark the surroundings.

If I moved, he'd see me.

I'd bet that the Minotaur could also hear better than natural people. It would have to if it had been designed to hunt in these corridors, to follow people by sound, to seek them out by stealth.

Could its sense of smell also be improved? If it was, could it discern Pol's and my smells amid the stench of the labyrinth?

Who was this beast? No, *what* was it? It couldn't be the good, vegetarian, mentally slow Minotaur we'd been promised, could it?

Perhaps this was all an illusion, aided by great special effects. Perhaps. I opened one eye. The Minotaur, having made mince-meat of my companions, had squatted down to feasting. Its muzzle opened and closed. Blood dripped down its neck. Sharp carnivorous teeth gleamed, crunching the way through bones. I looked across at Pol.

He wasn't there.

I looked down.

Pol had knelt on the ground.

He stretched his hand to his girlfriend's corpse.

~~With infinite, cautious slowness, he got hold of the woman's ridiculously thin stiletto high-heeled shoe and pulled the shoe loose.~~

Engrossed in his meal, the Minotaur paid no attention.

Pol straightened, clutching his prize. His feet worked against each other, stealthily getting rid of his own flopping sandals.

The Minotaur grunted its satisfaction as it crunched into the mass of mangled corpses.

Pol held the shoe with the heel sticking out like a fantastic dagger. Wearing only tiny shorts, he looked like a mythological hero, himself, as he leapt forward and, with the grace of an athlete, he launched himself through the air at the Minotaur's back.

Before Pol reached him, the beast turned.

Pol jumped sideways, fell awkwardly just in front of the beast, who bellowed, outraged. Its sharp teeth clamped onto Pol's left arm. Pol screamed, but shoved the shoe's heel into the Minotaur's eye with his right hand, pushing hard, madly.

The Minotaur bayed. It shook the arm it had clamped onto.

Pol screamed higher, a high, insane screech, as the creature lifted him off his feet, and Pol's body arched back in pain.

Sweat flowed down my back. It would kill Pol. And then I'd be left alone in a labyrinth with a rampaging beast. Sooner or later I'd scream, or sneeze. And be killed.

I bent to pick up the other one of the dead woman's shoes.

As I stood up, the Minotaur's strange cat eyes fixed on me, its gaze betraying only madness and hatred.

It opened its mouth to bellow, dropping Pol to the floor.

I jumped with artifact speed and strength, using it to compensate for the lack of a running start.

It stepped on Pol as it lowered his head and charged me.

The Minotaur's horn, aimed at my chest, caught me in the thigh. Pain burst through my body like a succession of electrical shocks. Everything spun around me. I screamed.

The Minotaur lifted me, in preparation to throwing me.

But I had a moment. Long enough. I grabbed onto its ear with all my strength, as I lay half-across the Minotaur's massive head, steadied between its horns, my leg impaled by the right horn. With my free hand, I pushed the heel of the shoe into the back of the creature's neck.

It bellowed and grunted, and it tried to bite me, but it couldn't because I lay astride its head.

It shook its head, crushing my bone. A red veil filmed my vision.

I knew I was going to die, yet something in me refused to give up. I'd survived the crèche and my harsh training as a courier.

Humans were born to coddling and family, but artifacts were ejected from their crèches like objects in an assembly line. No one had ever cared if I lived or died, and yet I'd lived. I'd survived years of being treated like a machine I wouldn't—damn it—die now. I wouldn't let another artifact or some bio-engineered beast destroy what not all the spite and indifference of natural borns had managed.

My hand, as though of its own accord, kept on digging the heel into the monster's neck, as my vision grew dim and dark.

Pol muttered obscenities, whimpered. I heard him move. His harsh, panting breath rasped from behind me.

My hand on the broad shoulders of the beast, I turned my head to yell at him to go back. Natural borns couldn't survive what we artifacts could. And, gigolo though he might be, he'd shown courage enough.

to be an artifact himself. He shouldn't just be killed now.

~~But I couldn't find the strength to talk and warn him off. My mouth was too dry.~~

Pol, his left arm hanging like a limp rag at his side, lurched up behind me and, evading the creature's teeth with speed and reflexes worthy of the best artifacts, stuck the shoe heel into the human chest beneath the bull's head.

The beast bellowed and shuddered. Its great head snapped up and back.

My thigh ripped. I flew up and then down again, landing against the wall. Darkness closed in.

* * *

"Wake up, please. Wake up." Pol's raspy voice sounded like he'd cried himself to exhaustion.

I tried to open my eyes and saw his eyes—sea green and full of tears—floating as if in a sea of darkness.

The Minotaur . . . A dream?

Sudden stabbing pain from my thigh brought me to full consciousness.

The pain came from a tourniquet which Pol was tying on my leg. He held an end of the cloth with his good hand and the other between his teeth.

He tied the frayed, bloodstained piece of cloth into a tight, tight noose around my mangled limb and looked apologetically up at me. "I know it hurts, but the blood."

I nodded. "Your arm?" My voice was a bare growl, but my vision improved slowly. I blinked away drops of sweat from my eyes.

Pol had tied a tourniquet on himself, clumsily but effectively enough.

He glanced at it, shrugged as if the ruin of the pretty body that was his fortune meant nothing. "Repairable," he said. "If we get out of here in time." He gave me a mirthless teeth-only grin and sniffled back tears. "Only I don't think rescuers are coming. I think someone sabotaged the whole site. Unless you believe *that* was vegetarian." He gestured towards the corpse of the Minotaur.

"No," I said. Faint and nauseated, I felt bile burn my throat. No one else moved, nothing else made a sound. Pol and I were the only living beings. Smells of spilt blood and torn flesh stung my nostrils. "No."

Pol's companion hadn't wanted to enter the labyrinth. "I'm sorry about your friend," I said, as I dragged myself up on my elbows.

He flashed me another of his quick, joyless smiles. "Nary? Yes, I'll miss her." He glanced at her corpse. Tears shone in his eyes. "I don't even know . . ." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. We're going to die anyway. I have no idea how to get out of here. We can't rely on rescuers finding us. Not after this. So we're going to die here. Lost."

I almost laughed. For the first time since my freedom, my carrier-pigeon sense of direction would come in handy.

Of course, I'd have to tell Pol about it. I sighed. Weak and tired, I needed sympathy and human comfort, both things he wasn't likely to expend on a bio-engineered creature like me. Of course, he hadn't made a secret of my identity. My ring was there, for all to see. However, judging from the way he'd played up to me, his accomplice looks, his smiles, I couldn't believe he'd seen it.

Once he saw it, he was likely to demand I guide him and never mind if I died in the process of dragging myself down the dark, smelly hallways. Freed artifacts were protected from murder by law. But causing their death from neglect probably would bring no penalty. Judges were natural-born.

No matter. We had to get out. We had to. And I had no time for pride, no patience to wheedle sympathy from this pretty, spoiled nat. Even if I had to crawl out of here, I refused to die. I'd survive. I'd always survived.

Sunken dark rings surrounded Pol's aqua-marine eyes and he had gone so pale that his lips looked

grey. Nats were fragile. *He* needed a doctor.

~~I would have to tell him of my nature and of my talent. "We can get out," I said. "I was created with a sense of direction. For my work."~~

He nodded. His eyes widened slightly. His generous lips tightened into a line. "All right, then," he said. "I help you out and you guide us, right?" He bent and offered me his good hand, to help me stand.

Either he hadn't heard what I'd said, or he was unusual indeed. He would help me out? He was still willing to touch me after knowing I'd been created?

I gave him a sidelong glance and sighed. Maybe he was just a practical man. He knew I'd taken much too long to crawl out of here.

I sighed. Think of mythology enough, and you might find yourself living it. Just like my mythic namesake, I'd get to guide handsome Theseus out. And at the islet of Zeus, or some other convenient purlieu, he could leave me asleep and go on to his glorious destiny.

His companion had looked rich. He'd inherit. She would have made provisions. And, if not, there would be some other natural human hungry for beauty and company who would take him in his heartbeat, and provide him with all his heart's desire.

Something I could never do, on my professor's salary.

He helped me up.

"We turn left here," I told him. "And the next one is right, but I'll have to get there before I sense exactly which doorway it is."

My leg hurt like the blazes. I had to lean against him and put my arms around his neck. My face pressed against his broad, golden chest. His heart thumped rhythmically. He smelled of sweat with faint traces of sun lotion.

He put his arm underneath mine, supporting me.

It was the only way I was likely to be embraced by a natural male, much less one this beautiful.

We progressed slowly. I held onto the walls. He held me up.

"What is your name?" His voice echoed distorted, through his chest.

"Ariadne. Ariadne Knossos." If he didn't know what I was before he would know now. Artifacts were always given mythological or pseudo-classical names. It was another way to make us different.

"Ariadne? Really? How appropriate."

Ah. Two minds that thought like one. My throat closed.

I didn't want him to despise me. Not him. Even though I was in pain, I could feel his attraction. He was beautiful and brave and even if he'd allowed himself to be bought, he'd had the decency of crying for the woman who'd paid him—annoying though she'd seemed.

I wanted his attention, his admiration. Long denied hormones surged to the surface of my being.

I'd been taken out of the crèche just at the onset of puberty and my work hadn't required me to come in contact with men. For the company who'd created and employed me, I had been little more than an animated message system. The body and the gender had come as part of a package they didn't find it worth to break up. From the moment of my official activation, on leaving the crèche, constant traveling had kept me from relationships with my kind. As for male nats, I shied away from them. Too many female artifacts were created as pleasure toys and anyone I approached would only think of me like that.

I'd rather be celibate and keep my dignity.

But now, free and almost thirty, here I was with my face pressed up against the most handsome nat I'd ever met and my libido—or something—surged. In my present state I couldn't seduce him. But oh, I wished I could. Even if he thought of me as a toy. Even if it were for only one night.

"What was your . . . job?" He gasped for breath and his chest muscles moved, beneath my face.

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