

Loops

Peter Veres

First Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2010 Young Writers' Contest

Home-schooled, Odenton, MD

There is a very common phenomenon known as childhood amnesia, in which adults are unable to recall their early childhood. There are several theories for why this might be, with no real consensus, but it is generally accepted that the amnesia only covers the period of time from the child's birth to about five years of age. When I discovered this, I was a bit worried. You see, my first memory is of my tenth birthday.

I guess I always knew at some level that I had existed before age 10, but I simply can't imagine at all what life was like before that. My friends like to joke that I just sprung into existence in my mom's living room, and my mom, some lonely single woman, pretended that I had been her child for the past 10 years. But there are some pictures of me during my earlier years, so I can rule that out. I've always tried to imagine I just hit my head right before that first memory, and actually once when I was 13 I had to be hospitalized because I dropped a 10-pound weight on my head trying to get those memories back. Real-life memory apparently doesn't work like in soap operas, though.

Often I want to ask my mom about what I was like during the first 10 years of my life, but that's one of those taboo subjects with her. She never talks about it, and it's understood that I can't talk about it either. It's the same reason I never ask about my dad. For all I know, I was immaculately conceived. I assume he died or left her at some point during the 10 years I can't remember, or maybe she was never married at all.

Anyway, I'm almost 17 now. I've accepted by now how weird my early life must have been, but I think I'm turning out pretty normally for now. I have a bunch of friends, my grades in school are pretty good, and I'm not quite popular, but I've never really wanted to be. I'm, you know, pretty average. And today, a few of my friends and I are going to the mall. The plan is for me to pick them up, since none of the others have cars, and then we'll shop around, see a movie if we feel like it, get dinner and then go home. Nothing too special, but it should be fun.

It turned out to be quite an interesting trip.

Almost as soon as we got to the mall, my friend Kate dragged us all to some store that sold baby clothes, because apparently she has to go to her cousin's second birthday party next week. I kind of wonder if he'll remember that party anyway. Anyway, we all went in with Kate for no real reason, and while she was looking around, one of my other friends named David pointed out a young woman, maybe in her late twenties, standing near us.

"She looks a lot like your mom, doesn't she?" he asked me.

I looked her up and down. She was the right height and had the right brown hair, though she looked more in shape than I had ever seen my mom. Her hair was in a tight bun, whereas

my mom always kept her hair short. She was carrying a young child in her arms; he looked about two or three. She turned and saw me looking at her and smiled. She must have assumed I was looking at her kid, because she started talking to him in that little baby voice and said something to the effect of "You want to go see the big boys over there?"

She put the kid down on the ground and he stood up, a bit wobbly, and stumbled over to David and me. I've always been amused by little kids, so I smiled when he collapsed on my leg.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

David had walked away by now, thank God, or else I'd have to explain to him what happened next.

"Jimmy," he replied, struggling to get back on his feet. "Jimmy Gilman."

At first, I didn't think anything of it. But then I remembered that David had just pointed out that this woman looked like my mother, and now her child was named Jimmy Gilman...

I looked over my shoulder and saw Kate paying for her purchase at the register, so I picked up the kid and handed him back to his mother.

"Thanks," she said, giving me an all-too-familiar smile.

"Oh, no problem," I replied. "By the way, your first name wouldn't happen to be Barbara, would it?"

"Um, yes, actually, that is my name," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just that my last name is Gilman too, and you look a lot like my mother, whose name is Barbara," I said. "Just a crazy coincidence, I'm sure, though. Maybe we're distant relatives."

For a brief moment, there was an unmistakable expression of horror in her eyes. Then she chuckled. "Yeah, haha... It's a small world." She walked a couple steps away; then I saw her take out a small notepad and a pen; she scratched something down, then put it away.

Kate was done paying, and she alerted me of this by walking up, grabbing me by the wrist and beginning to pull me away. "C'mon, Jim," she said, "we're leaving now."

By the way, when I told that lady I was sure it was a crazy coincidence, I was lying. I wasn't quite sure of that at all.

The rest of the trip was pretty uneventful. I didn't end up spending any money. We skipped the movie and everyone got an early dinner, but I didn't feel like eating much so I ended up just stealing a few fries from David.

I had a few questions for my mom when I got home.

When I got home, my mom was sitting on the couch with a somber look on her face. "You wanted to talk to me, Jim?"

"I never said that," I replied, raising an eyebrow. I sat down on the armchair facing the couch. "But yes."

She sighed and rested her forehead in the palm of her hand. "I had hoped I would never have to talk to you about this, but I guess I shouldn't try to keep the *façade* up any longer. You're about to ask me about a woman you met at the mall today, and her kid, right?"

"Yeah," I answered, already seeing where this was going. To tell the truth, I half-expected to wake up in a couple seconds. But in an actual nightmare, you never really hope it's just a dream.

"Right... That was me, and the kid was you."

That was what I had expected.

"You were four at the time. From my perspective, that event happened about 12 years ago." She picked up a notebook sitting on her lap, opened it and showed me a page that said *'June 19th, 2010—the day teenage Jimmy will meet us at the mall.'* I got the feeling that this was the same notebook I had just seen that lady—apparently my mother—writing in a couple hours ago.

"So... How did that happen?"

"Time travel, of course," she replied, confirming my fears. Her voice never lost that tone like she was on the verge of tears, even as she got deeper and deeper into what sounded like the epilogue of a science fiction novel.

"Then what year was I actually born, if not 1993?"

"You were born in 2005. In 2015, when the you that you met today will be a little over nine years old, we travel forward in time to 2134. I ask to be taken off of the TIPPF, and then I return to the year 2003 to give you a normal life at the beginning of the 21st century, which I had come to enjoy. It's so...quaint compared to the time I grew up in."

"What time was that?"

"The early 23rd century. You'll have died from natural causes not too long before then."

"Really?" I said flatly. This really was turning out like a science fiction novel—a horribly uninspired one at that. "Anyway, I met my younger self. Isn't that supposed to make the universe explode or something?"

"Nope," she replied. "That concept is purely science fiction. But I'm not free to discuss more as far as time travel mechanics go."

"I won't tell anyone."

"I still can't tell you... It would create a time loop, and we're not quite sure how the laws of physics work their way past that yet."

"I see where this is going... I invent time travel, don't I?"

"Right. James Gilman invents time travel in 2078 and makes the first successful time travel trip, to the year 2010... You'll meet him in a few months. In the years after 2078, time machines become about as common as cars are today, and so the TIPPF, or Temporal Integrity Protection Police Force, is formed. Basically, we—I mean, they—are stationed in various parts of the timeline, and they focus on various historical events to ensure that no one attempts to change history. They don't know if it's even possible, but they want to make sure. You'd be shocked at how many people are assigned to protecting Hitler."

So apparently not only was reality stranger than fiction, it was less imaginative too. I had seen this plot a thousand

times.

"By the way, Mom," I asked, "have you ever considered that the TIPPF might be *why* history happens the way it does? Maybe Hitler was able to do everything he did because you guys from the future decided that he had to."

"But that would imply a paradox. Hitler was able to do what he did because we knew that he did? How would we know that he did it if it was our own future actions that caused us to know that? It doesn't make any sense."

"Well, maybe time loops are normal. After all, think about it. When I invent time travel in 2078, I will come back to 2010 because of this conversation. You had the information that you gave me in this conversation because you were taught at some point that the first successful time travel trip was from 2078 to 2010 by James Gilman, with the intention of meeting his younger self. And of course, the reason you were taught that was because it happened, because of this conversation... You see the problem? The very first act of time travel created a time loop. I think they're perfectly safe."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'm not taking any risks, though. You're handling all of this so much better than I expected..."

"Mostly because I'm just waiting to wake up," I muttered.

She sighed through her nose. "Well, we might as well get it all out, then. There's a bit more you need to know. Your father..."

"Don't tell me that he's my son."

"No."

"Is he, like, Abraham Lincoln, captured from the past?"

"No."

"So he's a Martian?"

"No. Well, not exactly." I rolled my eyes. "He was Venusian."

"So I'm really half-alien. Alright, subconscious mind, it's not funny anymore, let me wake up now."

"Sorry, honey," she said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I imagine how this all must sound to someone raised at the beginning of the 21st century... All like a classic science fiction story. Some of them ended up surprisingly accurate."

"While we're sharing things, why can't I remember anything before my tenth birthday?"

"Well, that brings me to my next point. Sorry again, honey. I can't allow this time loop to happen."

She produced a device that looked like some cheap Chinese MP3 player and pointed it at me. She pressed a button on the back, and there was a bright flash. And in the last second, I understood.

There is a very common phenomenon known as childhood amnesia, in which adults are unable to recall their early childhood. There are several theories for why this might be, with no real consensus, but it is generally accepted that the amnesia only covers the period of time from the child's birth to about five years of age. When I discovered this, I was a bit worried. You see, I have no memories before some time after my 16th birthday.

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Shadowville

C.A. Lippert

Second Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2010 Young Writers' Contest

Northern High School, Chesapeake Beach, MD

Inspired by the song "Maenam," composed and performed by Jami Sieber.

The world was quiet.

Among the dusty, abandoned streets, a small hooded figure rushed by. It made no sound as it moved about quickly through the desolate place, casting a wary glance behind it. The figure knew that if it was followed, it would have to spend an extra hour running in circles to shake off the follower. Tonight its luck held out, but the figure proceeded with extra speed and caution regardless. Soon, it came to a halt beneath an old streetlight, which, despite all odds, had managed to flicker on every night after the sun set. The figure threw back its hood, revealing the stern, worn face of a teenage boy. He gazed up at the old brick and wooden building across the street from where he stood and gave the streetlamp a sharp blow with his gloved fist. The light flickered but did not blink out. The boy waited and soon a small light from the very top of the building blinked back at him. He gave his surroundings a quick scan before he dashed across the street and into the old abandoned house.

The floorboards and stairs creaked ominously as the boy made his way upstairs. He shifted his weight somewhat in order to reduce some of the sound; the signaler knew it was he who was in the building, but the boy knew that he would still be careful nonetheless. When he reached the very top of the stairs, the boy paused and then gently rapped his knuckles on the wooden door upon which hung a sign dangling crookedly, written in a language long forgotten. The wooden door also had a small portal covered by a piece of wood. Without warning, it slid open forcefully, revealing a pair of shining eyes surrounded by creases and wrinkles. The portal snapped shut again and the boy waited patiently as the bolts and locks of the door were unlocked. A few seconds later, it swung open, allowing a bit of light from a glowing fire and a few candles to stream through.

A gruff old man stood at the door and quickly waved the boy over the threshold before quickly shutting the door and locking it up tight again.

"About time, Logan! Did you find anything?"

The boy called Logan removed his cloak and hung it on a nail next to a few other cloaks and coats. He removed the coarse messenger bag from his shoulder and brought it to the table where another man sat snoozing lightly, his hand gently placed on a strange contraption. He jolted awake immediately and pulled his small pistol from his pocket, but he set it down almost reflexively when he saw where he was. He didn't ease himself back to sleep but instead watched in interest as Logan unpacked the belongings from his bag.

Logan felt like Father Christmas as he pulled the items out,

and each member within the room regarded him curiously as he did so.

"I found some more canned goods and I was able to find a fountain of fresh water that hasn't been contaminated." Logan lined the items up in a neat row on the table. "I also found this, which I thought you'd be interested in, Tesla."

Logan handed the man at the table a mysterious box that had a number of dials, lights, and symbols on it. Tesla snatched the box up and held it up to the candlelight. "Fascinating! I wonder what it is?"

"You weren't able to find any kind of strings were you?"

Logan turned and regarded the ghostly young woman sitting at the open window of the room. He gave her a sad smile. "Not this time, Nina. I'm sorry."

The man who had guarded the door now approached Logan and laid a hand on his shoulder. "And me?"

Logan stuck his hand into the bottom of the bag and pulled out a paper box, which jingled and clattered as the boy handed it to the man. "I couldn't believe how lucky I was to have found these. Just use them a little more sparingly this time, Christopher."

The old man nodded and put the box in one of his inner coat pockets.

Logan dumped out the dust and whatever else remained in his bag and hung it on the wall next to his cloak. He then took stock of the food he had found and began filing them away in the small cupboard where the rest of the provisions were kept. As he closed the peeling wooden door, he heard the notes of a cello stream into the room. The atmosphere was suddenly filled with a mournful tune. Logan sniffed and brushed away the small bit of liquid that had formed at the corner of his eye and took a seat next to Tesla.

The war of thousands of countries had poured into every speck of land and now all that was left of such wars was ruin, starvation, and rebellion. Logan, along with the other three people in the room, had banded together in order to stay alive as well as hidden from any threatening attacks from rebel groups, or the members of the militia who continued to wage the hated and long-lost war. Logan had only been five when the war finally broke out and immediately escalated. Both of his parents had mysteriously disappeared weeks after the outbreak, leaving Logan to fend for himself. Christopher had found Logan in an abandoned metro station, and his poor heart couldn't bear to leave the child alone, so he picked him up and brought him to the place where Logan and his friends sat today. Nina and Tesla had also been living with Christopher for some time, and the three of them had all willingly looked after Logan until he was fairly old enough to look out for himself.

"So what do you have planned for tomorrow?" Tesla asked as he spooned the contents of a can into his mouth.

Logan shrugged. "We're bleeding this little town dry of the goods that it has, so we're going to have to find some new venues if we ever want to survive."

"You mean we have to leave?"

Logan turned his attention to Nina, who had asked the question. She had stopped her playing and was now staring at the boy across from her with hollow blue eyes that were forever surrounded with dark make-up. A strand of raven black hair fell across her face, but she quickly pushed it back.

"Sorry, Nina, I know how much this place means to you, but we can't possibly survive out here with a dwindling food supply."

"I know, you're right. I'm just being silly, forgive me," she quickly replied, waving a dismissive hand.

Logan smiled sadly. Poor Nina. It had been nearly seven years since she'd lost her husband to a skirmish that had invaded the small town. The group had buried Nina's husband out in the courtyard when the firefight had died down, and as soon as the task had been finished, Nina had disappeared to some part of the building that Logan and the others hadn't yet explored and wouldn't come out for weeks. Finally, Tesla went looking for her and brought her back to warmth, food, and company, and those were precisely the things she needed. She looked like a walking nightmare when she came back.

"We can always come back," Logan tried, hoping to give Nina some reassurance.

"It would be too dangerous," Nina countered. "No matter how much I'd want to see the grave of my husband, I know I won't until this blasted war is over."

"You mean *if* this blasted war ends," Tesla corrected.

"Stop being the devil's advocate," Logan scolded.

"Well it's the truth."

Truth or not, Logan was going to make sure he'd find a suitable place for the four of them to live.

The group set out early the next morning, long before the sun had risen to cast its feeble rays on the mist-cloaked earth. The group had packed whatever they could carry and had said their last good-byes to Nina's husband's grave as well as to the town. When Logan looked back over his shoulder, he saw nothing but a dirty horizon behind him, littered with old war toys, abandoned cars, and personal belongings. The village had been quickly swallowed up by all of it.

Navigating the streets to get out of the city hadn't been a problem, as Logan knew them all like the back of his hand. Although they had no need to fear being stopped by the authorities, Logan was worried that they'd run into some militiamen hiding out in the town, or maybe even encounter something much worse, and that made Logan shudder every time. The creatures that he was most afraid of were shells of human beings known as Hunters. They had lost their souls long ago and now prowled the villages and countryside in search of foolish humans who wandered out without any sort of protection. Logan had only ever encountered one, but he hoped never to see them again.

By the time it was midday (or at least what he thought was midday, Logan couldn't tell with all the haze in the sky), Logan called for a stop and the group sat down to rest. He began

passing out cans of cold ravioli for everyone to eat.

"How much farther do you reckon the next town is?" Tesla asked.

Logan pulled out a map from his jacket and opened it up. "Dunno, maybe another five K or so. It's hard to navigate with absolutely no road signs."

"Yes, who pulled those down?" Christopher asked.

Logan shrugged and ate a bite of ravioli. "The Hunters, the militia. It's hard to tell."

Nina shuddered. "Those things are awful. Just thinking about them gives me the chills. It's thanks to those foolish scientists that we have to put up such things."

The group nodded in unison and continued to eat their cold meal. They each had a few sips of the water that Logan had collected from the town before shouldering their packs and continuing their journey.

They never said much while traveling as they liked to make their presence as unnoticeable as possible. Sometimes Nina and Tesla would talk softly with each other, and every now and then Logan would catch a few snippets of words, a great deal of them centered on the mountains and the sea. Logan would have loved to have seen these kinds of wonders, and maybe someday he would, but right now they only seemed like fairytales to him.

"What happens if we don't find a town by nightfall? What are we supposed to do then?" Christopher asked, coming up next to Logan.

Logan stopped, let out an annoyed sigh, and closed his eyes. He hadn't factored in nightfall and he wasn't too keen on traveling in the dark. Without a light, they wouldn't be able to see, but with a light, they'd draw unwanted attention. Both choices didn't seem very viable.

"I know there are a few old houses and farms scattered about here. Maybe if we're lucky we'll come across one and just camp there until morning. I don't know where the next house would be if we kept going and ignored the first one we found," Logan reasoned.

"Sounds grand, but what if it's occupied?" Tesla asked.

"We chase the inhabitants out." The men turned and regarded Nina with some surprise. She shrugged, and her clutch on her sniper rifle tightened. "It's every man for himself these days. It's not like the inhabitants are going to be friendly ones. They'll most likely be the militia or the Hunters."

"We'll use force as necessary, but I'd rather avoid conflict," Logan concluded. "Let's keep moving."

Their search for a house proved fruitless and Logan was about to turn around and go back, but as they crested a large hill, the group came across a small girl with white-blond hair and green eyes.

Logan had to convince the others to lower their guns when they came across the girl, but they did not seem so pleased to do so. Just because she was a child didn't mean that she wasn't after their souls.

The group stayed their ground, waiting for the girl to approach them. She clutched her worn teddy bear closer to her before she finally asked, "What are you doing here?"

Continued on p. 70

Faceless

Nick Anstett

Third Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2010 Young Writers' Contest

Home-schooled, Cockeysville, MD

Tim eased itself onto the steps, and sat down. It had become a habit for Tim to sit outside at this time of day. Its master no longer required the task, and it no longer served any practical purpose, but something that resembled nostalgia had grown deep within Tim's processors. Tim found this odd. Being an android, Tim shouldn't experience such things, but there was little explanation for why he performed this activity on a daily basis. Tim could not feel the warm sun, or the patter of rain beat down on its metallic skin. It could not smell the blossoming flowers during the onset of spring, or taste the brisk fall air. Tim was here because the first thing it could recall clearly was greeting a six year old Luciana as she stepped off the school bus.

The smiling little blond girl had rushed to it after school, and flung her arms around it in unconditional embrace. Tim had known children before Luciana; all had turned away from its faceless exterior in a strange fear. A fear that was perfectly natural and understanding for a young child so filled with life. Tim was not part of their world, but rather a perversion made by the hands of man to do their bidding. Yet, Luciana, or Lucy as Tim's masters affectionately called her, was the opposite. Where others showed fear, Lucy showed a strange loving compassion that had registered a rather strange response deep inside Tim's cranium. Tim's brain was built off experience. It learned as it grew, and grew as it learned. It contrived data from the world around it, and could thus make expectations, decisions, and even assumptions. Lucy's bizarre behavior had shattered every previous calculation Tim had made about the human race.

Perhaps that's why it sat on the steps outside his owner's suburban house every day, trying to find the reasoning behind this fundamental aberration of human behavior. However, Tim denied this theory. The steps were no longer significant. Lucy was older now, in the final years of adolescence, and the steps no longer held any true significance.

Tim's master's voice called from the inside, and it rose from its sacred steps and strolled inside. The masters, Harriet and Gerald, were busy human beings. They worked almost constantly, on what Tim did not truly know. It noticed their comings and goings, their typing and their scribbling, but nothing truly made sense to Tim's electronic brain. Tim only had limited reading capabilities, and eavesdropping on its masters was something that was strictly prohibited in its programming. Comprehending the work of its masters was not necessary to Tim either. Tim was only charged with the menial tasks and tribulations that were below its masters' attention, such as greeting their daughter as she arrived home from school.

Harriet wanted dinner cooked and Tim stepped into the kitchen. Cooking was one of the many things that Tim was good at. Its brain included over 12 million recipes and cooking

techniques, and in its existence Tim had prepared over seven thousand meals. It was a Tuesday, and it was spring. Based on previous patterns Tim calculated that Harriet wanted a Caesar salad for dinner, and it reached for the pantry for the ingredients.

However, something caught its visual receptor as it turned across the room. It was Lucy. The girl was slouched in its usual afternoon activity of writing and typing. This was something that had not changed about Lucy as she aged. Every week day, except during the middle months of the year, she returned and scribbled and typed for sometimes hours on end. Tim had assumed that this was some form of preparation for the same activity she would make once she reached adulthood, but something about it made arise a deep unpleasant feeling that Tim had yet to name. Lucy smiled less, and that unique compassion that had broken the conformity of Tim's programming was seen less frequently now. Tim had spent many hours flipping through its databanks trying to find an accurate word to describe this sensation, and the only word that matched was one called "regret." So Tim often spent many hours a day feeling "regret" as it gazed upon Lucy.

Harriet called from across the household, and awoke Tim from its processing. This had been happening more and more frequently. Lucy would break its concentration from some task that needed to be done, and thus Tim would make mistakes. Nothing dangerous had happened so far, but Tim had broken numerous pieces of china due to its stalling. Gerald had blamed this on Tim's now aging frame and programming, well over a decade old, but Tim knew this to be incorrect. It was Lucy that created the distraction.

Androids do not sleep. They do not enter stasis and they do not recharge. Tim did not know why this was. It had seen older models rest or recharge, but it had never had to. Instead, Tim had often just sat in the family parlor for nights on end just processing. Tim did a lot of processing. For Tim was plagued by something mankind called "curiosity." This itself was curious to Tim, for it contained one of the largest databases of information ever assembled. It did not need to be curious, but it was. Databases could not always explain things, and this was something that Tim had grown to realize more and more in growing years. Lucy was its favorite thing to process. Lucy's defiance of human nature and her evolution to the slouching creature that came home every year fascinated Tim.

Sometimes Tim would sit besides Lucy's bed to process. Several hours into Lucy's sleeping period, Tim would enter Lucy's room, and watch her. It always made sure to arrive once it was sure she was asleep, and it always made sure that it left before she awoke. Perhaps the thing that Tim was the most "curious" about was where the old Lucy had gone. It would appear sometimes, in fleeting glances, and these were

the moments that Tim processed the most. There was the time when Lucy was 13 that she had placed her lips against its forehead, or the time after her grandfather's death that she slipped her hand into its and cried. Tim understood the meaning of these human gestures, but had never seen them given to an android. It was something special, something unique, and so Tim processed.

Tim would always watch as Lucy left every morning. Whether she took her car or walked, Tim always felt as if her departure was the loss of something significant. The daylight hours when she was away were the slowest. They normally included the most menial tasks, and provided little time for Tim to process. Yet, this was also the time of day that Tim worked its hardest. Every day it finished on time to sit in front of the house, and watch the buses go by.

Tim often studied the faces of children insides these vehicles, and was normally met with the usual stares and glances of fear. Although androids were a common sight in society, children still regarded Tim with a strange sense of admonishment and contempt.

The day came when Lucy did not come home at her usual time. To a machine that spoke in patterns and correlations, this bizarre break of conformity was a shock to Tim. However, the masters did not share the same concern. They followed their pattern with a relentless determination, and Tim soon left them to their scribbling and typing.

Tim had spent that afternoon and evening standing by the parlor window gazing out at the street. The masters were long asleep when Lucy returned. She was not alone; a human male accompanied her to the doorway. She was smiling and laughing, but not in the way Tim knew. Tim stood concealed behind the parlor curtain as Lucy turned and planted her lips against his. Tim turned away. Words were flashing through its databanks with various implications. Kiss. Companion. Regret. Dislike. Sorrow. Jealousy. Most were previously unknown to Tim, but they felt all too familiar. Lucy and the male broke their embrace, and Tim walked to the corner of the parlor, and sat. Lucy did not notice it as she ascended the stairs to her bedroom.

Tim did not go up to Lucy's room to process that night. In fact, it processed very little. It just sat. Sat and gazed.

Tim worked well the next day. Better than it had in years. The distraction of Lucy was gone. Whatever had captured its curiosity, had incited the need to process had disappeared. It worked well, diligently, and never paused. It no longer sat on the steps during the afternoon, it just worked. When the masters ran out of tasks for Tim to accomplish, Tim's processors invented their own. Gerald made a comment on Tim's new productivity, and even gave the android a hearty slap on the back, but it meant nothing.

At the end of every week, Lucy would disappear into the late hours of the night, and every time she would embrace the male in the same passionate embrace. Soon a new pattern began to form in Tim's head, one that it did not care to process.

Eventually, one long night several weeks after the first time Lucy had gone missing, Tim broke its new pattern, and returned to Lucy's bed side. It did not process, but instead just stared. It touched its metallic hand against her cheek, watched her breathing. Tim even reached out and let its spindly fingers

dance through her golden hair. It longed for the return of that old Lucy that embraced it so many years ago. Tim pined for the Lucy that saw past its faceless mechanical body and saw something different, something worth loving.

Tim's lapses in work and attention returned, and again Lucy was the cause. However, it was no longer an innocent curiosity that plagued Tim's electronic brain. Tim often processed that intimate moment where its hand had dared to touch Lucy, and Tim found itself returning nightly to Lucy's bedside, and repeating the same acts. Unable to speak, unable to smile, unable to kiss, Tim kneeled beside Lucy every night and cradled her beautiful head in its chrome arms.

Weeks passed, and the pattern repeated. Tim would work during the day, Lucy would return in the afternoon, and Tim would watch over her during the long hours of the night. Lucy would disappear at the end of every week with the male, and Tim would return to the corner of the parlor.

However, as Tim had begun to realize, patterns were meant to be broken. One Friday night, Lucy returned earlier than usual, this time with the male in tow. The male shook Gerald's hand, and gave Harriet a careful embrace. Lucy and the male soon disappeared into the parlor, and Harriet ordered Tim to prepare dinner.

Tim found it hard to focus on the cooking. Its focus kept drifting not to Lucy, but to the male. He held Lucy in a constant embrace, and the two touched lips frequently. However, what truly broke Tim was the way he regarded it. His face was like the children on the school buses, filled with scorn and even fear. What was worse was that Tim could see that this look had been adopted by Lucy. Tim's Lucy was truly gone, and the male had done the final blow.

Tim burnt dinner three times that night, and had to prepare the meal several times before Harriet would accept it. Gerald made numerous apologies to the male, blaming "that damned machine" for the delay.

After dinner, the male and Lucy returned to the parlor, and the masters returned to their room with glasses of wine Tim had poured for them. Tim sat down in the kitchen, and listened to the male and Lucy. The tones of stung with an acidic intimacy. Tim sunk down deeper into the floor, and rested its faceless head on its knees. However, the voices gave a sudden shift in tone. The male was yelling, and Lucy was crying. Tim rose to its feet. The male stormed past it, and exited the home. Lucy was not far behind. Tim followed too, slowly, but with urgency.

The male was climbing into his car and continued to scream at Lucy about something Tim's audio receptors could not make out. The male ignited his vehicle, and backed out. He performed a U-turn and turned back. Lucy was rushing forward tears streaming down her face, yelling at the male to come back. Overcome by grief, Lucy burst out in front of the male's vehicle.

For once in its existence it did not process, it acted. It acted, and it loved. Tim sprinted as fast as its chrome legs could carry it towards the crying form of Lucy. Tim crashed forward and Lucy stumbled backward. Tim's visual preceptors caught one final glance at Lucy, the former aberration of the human race. The girl had made Tim cease to become a mere machine. The object of what could only be called its love. The car struck, and Tim ceased to process.

Loops – cont.

It's the funniest thing. My mother said I just passed out one night, and when I woke up, I didn't remember anything. She said I had friends, but I couldn't remember them. They seemed to remember me, though, but we drifted apart not long after. Literally everything before that evening is a blank. But I sort of feel like it was a long bad dream.

Anyway, I never did regain those memories, but now I'm in my seventies. I never really felt like the first 16-and-a-half years of my life were something I could ask my mother about. Same reason I never asked about who my father was. Maybe I was somehow related to that nice 80-something guy I met once when I was 17, because my mom seemed pretty friendly with him. I think his name was James, too. He's long-dead by now, of course.

I've kind of accepted the whole weird part of my life; I don't really care what my first 16 years were like and I couldn't care less that I never met my dad. I'm a physicist now. Physics haven't really advanced much since my teenage years, but I think I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. I might be about to prove that time travel is possible. It would still take years and millions of dollars from this point to build a prototype time machine, but this is still very exciting...

I think if I do invent a time machine, I'm going to travel back to 2010 and meet myself when I was 17. That was a crazy year for me. Hopefully meeting myself won't blow up the universe.



Bunni & Tagon

Art by Howard Tayler

Shadowville – cont.

Logan hesitated at first and then he looked at each of his friends. They all gave him nods of approval, so he answered back, "We're looking for shelter."

"Why?"

"Because our old shelter doesn't have food anymore," replied Logan.

The girl across from them giggled, and Logan was slightly unnerved by this. "Why would you need food?"

"We need food to survive, don't we?"

The little girl shook her head. "You don't anymore." She peered around him and began pointing at each of his companions. "He doesn't, and he doesn't, and she really doesn't need food, either."

Logan was a little confused by what the girl was talking about, so he carefully inquired, "Why do you think we don't need food?"

The girl frowned. "Isn't it a little obvious? You guys are all dead."

Her answer struck them all by surprise and Nina became so mad that she tried to fire at the girl. Tesla quickly pushed her gun upward and her shot rang out into the sky.

"How can you be certain that we're dead?" Logan asked.

"Everybody here is dead. Some people don't realize it, but I don't mind telling them," the girl answered. "We're in limbo, Shadowville. It's a place that the scientists created after the war was won."

"The war ended?" Tesla inquired skeptically.

"Yeah, it ended and the scientists punished the losing side by trapping the soldiers here, in this dream world. We innocent civilians just happened to get stuck in their mad prison. Now all we do is wander around here in this wasteland."

Logan couldn't believe what the girl was saying. How could it be possible?

"So, we're not alone?"

The girl shook her head. "Everybody who's dead always comes from where you came from. I come here every night to see if anybody new appears. Give me your hand and I'll show you."

The group cautiously approached the girl and when Logan was close enough, she grabbed his hand and smiled up at him.

"I'm Celesta by the way."

He looked down and smiled.

"And I'm Logan. Well, then...lead the way."

**Honorable Mention – BSFS Jack L. Chalker
2010 Young Writers' Contest**

The Beast Within

Brendon Bogley

Home-schooled, New Market, MD

No Honor

Constantine Nakos

Severn School, Annapolis, MD

No Honor

Constantine Nakos

Honorable Mention

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2010 Young Writers' Contest

Severn School, Annapolis, MD

Len woke with a jolt, feverishly clutching the bed sheets and panting with the adrenaline that had entered his system. He watched the darkness for a few moments, waiting for the vivacity of his dream to fade and hoping his heart would ease its frantic pace. *It was just a dream*, he kept repeating to himself. *It was just a dream*. The mantra helped detach him from what he had seen, even if he knew that his claim was a lie. It was never just a dream.

Numbly, he felt around under the covers for the gun he kept by his side. Having it in his hand gave him a certain sense of confidence that he could desperately use right now. There had been a time when he had had little more than quick feet and a sluggish sense of self-preservation to keep him alive. That had all changed when he had found a beaten-up .22 at a secondhand dealer. He was no longer helpless, and little by little his life had begun to improve. He had kept it with him ever since, even when he didn't strictly need it. It had become a superstition.

Sandra had always reprimanded Len for going to bed with his gun. At the time her nagging had seemed bossy and annoying, but now it seemed almost motherly in retrospect. She had been the responsible member of the group, always taking care of the things that Gordon never considered and Len forgot. Together the three of them had made a fair amount of money over the past few years, never a lot—there were no fortunes to be found down here—but enough to keep them fed and provide them with some shelter, however transient. As time had gone by, they had developed a certain sense of camaraderie, the kind of kinship that comes from depending on someone to keep you safe and alive.

This kinship was the reason it had hurt so much when Sandra had died on the job two months earlier. Len had seen accomplices come and go—he had even helped some of them go on a few occasions—but he had never lost family before. He had never had family before. What made the pain worse was the fact that he had been responsible for the job that had ended so poorly. He knew what he was getting her into and he hadn't hesitated... The only solace was that he and Gordon had given her a proper funeral. They had wrapped her body in the largest piece of cloth they could find, a dirty, tattered thing that had once been a sail, and together they had dragged her body down to the furnaces. After Len read a short prayer off a scrap of Bible he had found years earlier, Gordon fed her body to the flames, and Sandra was no more.

"Another one?" came Gordon's voice from the bottom bunk, jolting Len from his somber thoughts. Len contemplated lying.

"Yeah," he said after a moment's hesitation. "We got a job coming up." His visions had been getting stronger of late. They always started off as bits of sound and color and eventually grew into full scenes stolen from the future, like the one that had woken Len just a few long moments ago. The full visions were almost always of jobs, and they almost always started with the ending and worked backwards, so that Len would know how a job would end before he knew how it began. This usually led to improvisation until Len's visions worked their way back to the present, but any preparation was better than going into a job blind, and the visions often sniffed out opportunities the group would have missed otherwise.

"Should I round up our gear?" asked Gordon. He had a considerate streak that Len still wasn't sure he liked. Kindness got people killed down here.

"Yeah," Len answered. "It's time to get going." He fumbled around in the dark for the switch that had been retrofitted onto the wall by his head. Finding the switch, he gave it a sharp flick, causing the single fluorescent tube set in the ceiling to spring to life with a sickly glow. Below him, Gordon rolled out of the bunk, pulled open the large storage drawer under the bed, and started unpacking what they would need. An assortment of crowbars, lock picks, and other disreputable tools made their way from the drawer into a pair of well-worn black satchels. As Gordon finished packing, Len clambered down from the top bunk, shoved the gun down the back of his ratty belt, and shouldered the bag that Gordon offered him.

The room was claustrophobic, with barely enough room for two people to slip by each other next to the bed. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all made of aging metal, with rust and rivets showing everywhere. The only features of note were the bunk bed and a sink and toilet located along the narrow wall opposite the door. The room and several thousand like it had once been cells in a massive underground penitentiary that had been abandoned decades ago when its conditions were deemed inhumane. The prisoners were released or moved elsewhere, and the complex eventually became cheap housing for those unlucky enough to live underground.

The door opened into a long hallway, made from the same corroding metal as the rooms and lined along both

"Is that our target?" Gordon asked.

"I think so. It's the smallest. Let's go."

The two made their way down to the cavern floor in silence, absorbed in the treacherous climb down. Eventually they worked their way to the walls of the mansion, hidden in the shadows.

"How do we get in?" Gordon whispered.

"I'm not sure yet. I think something will turn up," answered Len. "But when we get in there, watch out. There's a clunker around."

Gordon gave a grunt. "Wonderful."

Clunkers were roughly human-shaped robots scrapped together from old parts. They were slow, easy to disable, and required near-constant maintenance, but they still made for the best cheap security around. Their lack of dexterity didn't seem to matter much when you were nursing a bullet wound, and getting close enough to take out a weak point meant putting yourself in range of their deadly hands. Len had almost lost an arm to one once, and his arm still ached on occasion where the metal had nearly crushed his bone.

Len figured they should try the front door first. There was no other easy way into the mansion, and climbing over the walls would be a very difficult maneuver. Luck was with them, though, and the gate was unlocked. "The old coot must've forgot to lock up for the night," whispered Len as he eased open the door.

The two slipped into the yard, a cautious shadow followed by a larger one. There was no sign of the clunker yet, so they crept up to the building proper, opened the door, and went inside. The house was as run-down as the rest of the buildings underground, but this one showed the faintest signs of comfort: wooden floors, occasional decorations, and even some carpeting. Furthermore, the halls were spacious, and the customary smells of rust, mold, and metal were noticeably absent. Len and Gordon wandered around for a few minutes, until Len held up his hand, motioning for his partner to stop. Then Len sunk to the ground, clutching his forehead and breathing heavily.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine," he muttered through clenched teeth. In a moment the episode subsided, and he rose to his feet. "Stay sharp, Gordon. Things are going to get rough." He led the way to the back of the house, this time sure of where he was going, and found a staircase leading to the second floor. From the top of the stairs, it was just a few steps to the bedroom and their goal. Len opened the door slowly and stepped into the room. Gordon followed him.

It was a medium-sized room with lavish decoration. A purple rug covered the floor, furniture stood here and there, and there was even a cuckoo clock hanging from one of the walls. A four-poster bed on the opposite side of the room held the house's sole occupant, an older woman who had somehow managed to accumulate and keep her

relative wealth over the years. Len didn't know who she was, but he knew what he wanted from her. There was a jewelry box on the table next to the bed, and from his visions, he knew what was in it. It would be worth quite a bit. He could live comfortably for a long time if he got his hands on it.

As he came closer to the bed, the woman stirred. He paused, easing back on his heels. The creak of a floorboard sent her bolting upright, and as soon as she saw the intruders, she let out a shriek. Len swore. So this was how it happened. The clunker would be here any second. As she grabbed the jewelry box, Len reached for the small of his back, drew his .22, and shot her through the forehead. Her body slumped to the side, the hole in her head leaking blood. Len pried the jewelry box from her lifeless fingers. It was surprisingly heavy.

"Let's go," he said, ignoring Gordon's look of disapproval. Any longer and they would both be dead, vision or no. Len raced out of the bedroom and took the stairs two at a time. Gordon was close behind him. He picked his way back through the winding passages of the house, skidded to a near-stop at an intersection, and shouted "Left!" at the top of his lungs. He dove to the left and heard Gordon do the same. A blast tore through the air, and a bullet buried itself in the wall where Len had been standing. The clunker was here. It stood menacingly at the end of one hallway, holding a rifle in its mismatched robotic hands. Though made of scrap like all other clunkers, this one looked well-maintained; it wouldn't be failing any time soon. Len wasn't about to wait around for it to kill him, either.

He scrambled to his feet and sprinted away as fast as he could, clutching the jewelry box to his body tightly. In a matter of seconds Len had found the front door and was out in the yard. He had seen this part, in that first vision, and his muscles moved automatically. He reached the gate and tore it open just as Gordon reached the yard. Len knew what was happening behind him, but he didn't stop. He ran as fast as he could, not looking back, but in his mind's eye, he saw the scene played out once again.

Gordon ran, but he wasn't fast enough. The clunker reached the door before Gordon reached the gate. It raised its rifle, took aim casually, and fired. The bullet tore a gaping hole in Gordon's head. He didn't have a chance. He was dead before he hit the ground. Len had known from the beginning what the outcome would be, just as he had known the day Sandra died. He tried to tell himself it was fate, that there was nothing he could have done, but it was a lie and he knew it. For the second time in his life, Len had betrayed one of his family, and this time there was no funeral. Len looked at the jewelry box in his arms, his ill-gotten gains. It would be worth something, that was for sure. He'd be able to rent a bigger room, live in a little comfort, eat until he was full. It was what he'd always wanted. Small solace.

The Beast Within

Brendan Bogley

Honorable Mention

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2010 Young Writers' Contest

Home-schooled, New Market, MD

The melancholy young woman withdrew from her window and drew the silk curtains in, the light filtering red into the finely furnished room. The princess sighed. It wasn't so much the dullness of her life of recent, but the prospect of being caged that bore into her soul and saddened her. Her solitude was also wearying.

During the first days of her imprisonment in what had once been the home of her family, she hadn't been able to restrain herself from peering out the window in hopes of seeing someone rise up over the horizon to recover her. As the futility of this practice settled in adjacent to the initial fear she had felt, she began to control herself and only gazed out seldom.

Apparently a few bold knights *had* come to her aid, managing to avoid her sight. She had never met their acquaintance, but there was evidence of their having been from the fresh bones.

Malbroc was answering the universal plea of their region's morose ruler.

A few weeks ago, the castle's mystic was revealed to have been part of a conspiracy against the king, Froldur. Before the treacherous sorcerer could be executed, he swore his black retribution. Soon after, from their very midst a foul creature, a dragon, seemingly without origin, had sprung and had begun to wreak havoc, slaying and cindering with its scorching breath—the revenge of the wizard made tooth and scale.

His Majesty's castle had been purged of the nobility and of those in the royal employ. Driven from the keep, those who managed to flee took refuge in the nearest village. Among the few who scampered and survived, the king's daughter was unaccounted for. Refusing to contemplate the worst, King Froldur swore great rewards for whomever went forth and confirmed the fate of his daughter; if she yet lived, her hand would be theirs.

Others with a more renowned, superior reputation had ventured forth on this quest and had not returned. But was it not expeditions of this magnitude that bought a man his praise? Revealed and polished the dormant champion?

Determined to be this hero, Malbroc rode on.

The sun had begun its descent west by the time Malbroc's horse cantered into view of the castle. Once in the shadows of the parapet, he dismounted his steed. There Malbroc stood, the image of potential victory. Tall and of good build he was, his taut muscles confined in plates of armor. He wore a black leather tunic over his suit. On his head was his helmet, horse hair streaming from its back. A set of spikes jutted back from each side of this headpiece, and determined eyes stared forth from the provided slit. On his back hung his crude scabbard, weathered with time. From this scabbard he drew his blade, scarce used, long parched and thirsting for combat. Joining this weapon, on the left arm his shield shone, devoid of dings and scratches from battles that never were. Defiant eyes breached through the gloom as he strode in.

Once inside, the main hall was so terribly desecrated that Malbroc was confronted with the ghost of how the hall once was. He saw things for how they had been as a shadow to what now spanned before him. Deep gouges were torn into the floor, tapestries had been cast aside and shredded, and statues had toppled to lie in pools of broken marble and stone, as if to give emphasis to the sundered glory. Littered amongst the ruin were the undistinguishable corpses.

Malbroc made his way about the castle with all of the stealth he could. No sign of the beast was seen or heard. And then came the issue of the princess' safety—that is if she yet drew breath. Victory could not be guaranteed if he sought out the dragon, yet he would run the risk of meeting the beast after he had lead the damsel from hiding. He concluded that he would first seek out the princess, and leave the worm's questionable encounter up to chance.

Not long after this the young knight was startled to hear a voice calling out from somewhere.

"By the All-Weaver," Malbroc mused. "The princess lives!"

With inspired feet he made on, following the voice that spoke out from mysterious depths. At last Malbroc reached a winding stair, and on its steps stood a lovely maiden. She wore a soft blue gown, and from her neck hung a splendorous necklace of embroidered stones. She had graceful brown hair that curled gently. Her face was warm

and held brilliant, happy eyes. These eyes beamed as they fixed on Malbroc.

"Oh, stalwart sir!" she exclaimed. "It truly is a momentous occasion! Never previous have I witnessed a knight coming to my aid, and I have exercised patience and gazed out my window with hopes. I now see that it was the power men dub destiny that shielded the noble failed from my eyes, for their success was not to be! But when I spied *you* venturing here, I knew that your role would be unique."

"My princess," began Malbroc with a bow, "you glorify me with your words, so I feel I must rectify your thoughts, revealing that no special man am I. Fate and chance often intertwine, don each other's guises. Nevertheless it is my duty to escort you to the town of Gorowell, where your father waits for your return. With haste, let us depart."

"Yes," she agreed, descending the steps. "My name is Yvel. And your name, good sir?"

"Men call me Malbroc," he replied, and with that they turned and were off.

It soon became evident that the princess was beginning to fret. "Do not tremble from the menace of the dragon," Malbroc reassured. "Thus far I have seen no recent sign of him. Perhaps it has wandered off to other parts."

"Knight Malbroc, the dragon is here. I know this. Why, for every step we go, his footfalls become louder."

"You hear the thing?" He turned and looked at her. They halted. Malbroc heard no evidence of the tread of heavy feet.

"I believe you are frightened and imagining horrors," he concluded. "My ears are not that of a fox, but I hear silence."

They continued on, but Yvel remained nervous. "Never have I trekked far within the castle," she said, "for the deeper I go the greater his din."

Soon she could bear it no longer. "Good Malbroc, I am ashamed to say that I cannot move further. The dragon is a breath away, oh I know!"

They had almost reached the main hall. Malbroc turned with befuddled compassion and spoke. "Fair Yvel, again no sound I hear. I believe that as soon as we leave these walls, your courage shall recuperate."

She was reluctant, but was eventually persuaded to move. They walked down the hall so that they could see the outside light coming from the destroyed gate. Malbroc peered around the corner. It was devoid of activity.

"We are within sight of liberation, princess. Come, we must..."

A bellowing growl issued from behind Malbroc, like an obscene wind filtering through coarse boulders. He turned, hand flying to his sheath.

There stood the beast, present after all. Its head rose

three times the height of Malbroc; imbedded in this head was a pair of smoldering yellow eyes. The dragon supported itself on four limbs. Its horrible, long, scaly body was akin to the coils of a monolithic serpent; it wove and tossed with evil anticipation. The snout was curled in bestial hatred, fangs gleamed under slavering lips.

With an insidious roar the dragon charged, mouth agape to clamp onto the knight. Malbroc dove aside—sinuous, scaly hide rushing past him as the monster continued its motion.

"Princess! Princess Yvel!" Malbroc bellowed, straining to see her form behind sinister coils. "Princess, where have you run? Wherever you be, remain if it is safe!"

The dragon rose up with an abominable sneer and lashed with its jaws again. Malbroc's shield rebuffed the blow, but he was still sent careening to the floor. A giant claw smashed adjacent to him, and he rolled aside before the other talon could rend him.

He leapt to his feet. Malbroc saw the grisly head heave back, realized a second early what this new attack was, and hurled himself behind a gigantic slab of marble as the fiery onrush cascaded around him; the heat was incredible.

As the last cinders wisped away, Malbroc just had time to throw himself from harm as the dragon's tail crashed down on the marble, which powdered from the explosive impact.

"Where have you gone, princess?" he shouted. "Why have—?" He had to cut this sentence off as he ducked beneath a great swing of the beast's claw. Rising, he lifted his sword and swung down at the left arm. The dragon sharply drew back his injured limb and bellowed his promise of retribution.

It swung its massive head into Malbroc who lacked the time to maneuver away. He went soaring into the wall and crumpled on the floor. He heard the heavy intake of air that preceded the scalding breath. He leapt up in time to feel the flames lick his iron clad heels. He turned a corner, and seeing a niche in the wall shrouded by a tapestry, hid inside. Malbroc heard the thing turn the bend and continue to spew his fire, he sweat from the heat, and then the blaze ceased. He heard the thunders of its feet move across the ground, heard it snuff, and it seemed that the dragon soon meandered off, retired from the chase.

A while Malbroc stood there, and for the first few minutes he could hear the footfalls, a snarl, and an occasional roar from somewhere in the castle. Then silence.

Malbroc cautiously left the niche and began to search again for the princess, even inspecting the ground for her corpse. There was no fresh blood save the dragon's that had spilled on the floor, and he deemed if she

had been consumed by the beast that there would be something attesting to this. He found nothing. Perhaps, he thought, she had made her way to the stairs at which they had met.

As he returned to this spot, he thought it odd that the princess had been able to hear the worm, and he never could until it was at his back. Malbroc was a wise man, and he knew something was bizarre.

He found the steps again; they were deserted. "Princess Yvel?" he called, receiving no answer. He made his way up the winding stairs. At their peak he found a door. Leaning against this, he found it unlocked. He slowly pushed it open, saying "Princess Yvel?"

There she sat, gazing out a window, and the moment she saw him her face spread in jubilation.

"Oh courageous knight!" she exclaimed, leaping off of the sill and running towards him. "You have managed to make it thus far! Has my father sent you? Does he still live? I am astounded at my fortune! This is the only time any rescuer has reached me!"

"Yes," Malbroc stated, slightly confused. "Why did you flee without telling me where you went? I could have assured your protection all the more."

"I'm afraid you are not making sense too me, sir," Yvel said. "But tell me your name, so that you will be remembered."

Now Malbroc was truly perplexed. "You know my name, princess, for you have already asked for it, and I have..."

He stopped as he caught sight of her left arm. A bloody piece of cloth was wrapped around it.

Grasping this arm in a gentle but firm grip, Malbroc asked Yvel, "How did you receive this injury? This gash?"

Yvel started and slowly said, "Why, to be honest, I do not know sir. It must be recent, for I just noticed it and bandaged it. How does this concern you?"

Through his helmet's slit he questioned her eyes. They were pools of innocence; they harbored no deceit.

"Remain here, my princess," Malbroc said, dropping her arm and turning towards the door. "But I will return," he added to answer her bewildered look, "and until I do, do not leave this castle, and do not venture far from your quarters."

"Are you sure this will work?" asked Malbroc as he handed his blade to the traitorous magician's apprentice, a thin, young man of purer heart who had remained

ignorant of his teacher's schemes.

"It is the best remedy I can concoct for such a situation as you present."

The apprentice then turned to the blade, laid it on a table, and with a brush dipped in quizzical powders began to draw various symbols of hidden significance on the sword. Next he dripped some strange oils along the length of the weapon. He whispered something of a dialect foreign to Malbroc's ears. He again picked up the brush, scribed a final rune on the blade, and stood back.

"If there is anything I can do, I have done it. This will protect the princess," he said, looking at Malbroc through sandy hair. "Here on, you must rely on your strength and willpower."

"But Sir Malbroc, the dragon is close; his fearful pacing sounds so loud!" spoke Yvel as she stared at the knight who beckoned her forth.

"I know your fear," spoke he, and his sword was gripped firm and his muscles tense, "but you must rely on me and come forward, else you never shall be free."

They were just outside the main hall. Yvel took a few tentative steps forward, sweat on her brow.

As Malbroc had expected, it happened. One instant the princess stood there, the next the dragon exploded outwards where she had stood.

As the monster roared, Malbroc yelled his own cry, sprang up, and slashed a gaping wound in the dragon's throat. The dragon screamed an elephantine rage as it threw itself back, colliding into walls and scrabbling at its throat. Hideous gurgles issued forth as the beast flopped in its death throes, writhing as a skewered worm on a hook. Choked snarls bubbled from the torn throat, a few violent quivers, and the dragon fell dead in its spreading, dark blood.

A brief time it lay there, and then it seemed to dissolve, disappearing into a smoking inexistence. Soon on the ground lay Yvel, resting in a pool of the thing's blood. Malbroc walked over to her side. She opened her eyes and found Malbroc's.

"I... I never understood.... To think that I..." she whispered, light tears forming. "The dragon is dead; I am freed. Thank you. You truly astound, Malbroc."

He helped her to her feet, and sheathed his sword, bathed in conflict at last. But before they made towards the outside, Malbroc noticed that across Yvel's neck spanned a thin scar.