

# A Game of Cards

Gregory J. Downs

First Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2011 Young Writers' Contest

*Home-schooled, Finksburg MD*

"Is your deck ready?" I look down the dark hall to see who has spoken. It is a thick machine-man with a strange metal box over his mouth. It translates his native GM language into Common Speak. Behind him, a strange yellow light spills into the hall from the door behind him, illuminating his metallic skin. I finger the thin, battered box of cards wrapped up in my arm rags and nod. I'm shaking.

"Good," rasps the GM. "Follow me." I rise slowly from the rotting waiting bench where I have been sitting. Adrenaline pumps through my veins like electricity. As I follow the machine-man through the door, the yellow light blinds me and I have a strange sensation of falling, even though I know my feet are still on the ground. I close my eyes when I realize blinking is useless. GM traveling always has this effect on me.

"This your first Pro match?" asks the croaking, mechanical voice. I nod, eyes still closed, not trusting myself to talk and not caring if he can't see me. Whether he does or not, he continues talking.

"Keep your eyes peeled as soon as we hit the playing field," he says. "Whatever tricks you used to pull in the minor leagues, they don't work here in the Pros." There's a pause. "You'll probably die in a few minutes. Most do." Whatever. I nod. "Good luck, kid." I shrug, still keeping my eyes closed. I giggle. Why?

Then we hit. The light around me dims and I open my eyes again. The GM is gone, and I'm standing in a door at the bottom of a tall stone tower, looking out over an immensely wide field of grass. The playing field. I know the other competitor is probably already out there, so I reach tentatively into my sleeve pouch and pull Three from the deck. Each competition deck has only one suit, so I have to be careful about which cards I play. They'd only work once. Play all your cards at once and you're risking your life on a single move. Far better to spread them out. Strategy is everything.

I toss the Three up into the air, and it lands in the grass as a small, slim man in grey rags like mine. He stares at me with a blank face. I chuckle knowingly, just for effect.

"Go."

He bows and runs towards the center of the field with quick, easy strides, while I drop into a crouch and follow slowly, hidden by the tall green. I'm fast for fourteen, they say. They're right.

Three is halfway across the field when the ground behind him suddenly explodes, blowing dirt and weeds high into the air. I hiccup trying to stop a laugh. Out from the ground emerges an abnormally tall and thin man with painted red skin, who reaches out with a scrawny, elongated arm and snags Three like a runaway kitten. It's a Jack. I tighten my jaw and hurtle through the tall grass even faster. Only one competitor uses Red Jacks.

It's too late to save Three. The Jack snaps his neck before I can even get close, then he looks around with slanted, feline eyes, looking for more prey. Three turns back into a playing

card, torn and bloody, and floats softly to the ground.

The Jack sees me, and with a catlike screech he leaps in my direction on all fours. Time to act. I use my scuttling, forward motion to propel myself into a flying leap that meets the Jack in mid-air. His flailing arms wrap around me as we hit the ground with a *thud*, trying to crush the life out of me. But my arms are flung high, and as we roll in the grass I grab his abnormally long neck and dig my painted black fingernails in. My lungs begin to deflate like dead balloons just as I pinch the Jack's papery spinepiece, and suddenly I am wrestling with a red Jack of diamonds. Just a card. A pawn. A tool.

Most people think that since playing cards are manufactured, they don't feel emotion. The cards don't feel pain, they say.

They're wrong. Dead, *dead* wrong.

"Well, you certainly have lived up to expectations," says a voice behind me, "Though, for someone of your skills, I had expected you to be more... well, *more*." The voice is slimy and menacing, just like its owner, a short, flabby man, painted red like his Jack. He is dressed elaborately. He revels in glamorous excess. He is the Lord of Diamonds.

I have picked myself up, and I turn around, brushing the dirt off my rags.

"Well," I say, "Looks aren't everything." I stomp on the dead card, and the Lord strokes a diamond-studded card box of his own.

"Oh," he snickers, "But they are indeed!" He picks out three cards of his own, deliberately slow. I begin to step back, and as I do he suddenly hurls them at me. They are flimsy paper no longer; their edges are sharpened metal and they glow with burning heat. They are the cards of a long-time champion. Cards made to win, not like my own cheap deck.

I sway and twist backward, but I do not move. The cards whip past me, so close they sear my face. Behind me they expand, and before they hit the ground they have become the weapons they were built to be: a King, a Queen, and an Ace. The Lord of Diamonds is taking no chances.

"Beat this, kid," he snarls, and I know I can't. Not without cards of my own.

The fat, bejeweled Lord slips away, and as I pull out a random card from my deck the Red Queen is attacking me from behind, and I spin to meet the onslaught, laughing in spite of the danger. She is painted like the Jack, but she is armored from head to toe. She is slim and fit, with metal claws to tear and limbs powerful enough to break me like matchwood. She would be beautiful if she was not trying to kill me.

I lower my body like a bull and ram the Queen in the stomach. She slips and is knocked back, but I have not hurt her and my shoulder feels broken from her scarlet armor. The card held in my good left arm is crumpled from the impact and useless, so I throw it down and pull out another. Thank the Heavens—it's an Ace. I toss him in the small space between me and the Queen

just as she charges again. The ragged man springs up out of nowhere with his grey turban and mask and his arms that are wide, tapered blades. The Red Queen is lifted into the air, spitted by Ace, who tosses her limp body to the side as it whitens and shrinks back into a card. Without waiting for my orders, he leaps forward and engages the Lord of Diamonds' behemoth King, who is fuming over his dead partner. But where is the Red Ace?

I spin around just as he hits me, a lightning bolt of killing power, spiky red hair, bare chest with diamond shapes branded on it, red pants, and spiked war boots. Faster than thought I am slammed into the grass again, so hard that I see stars. The enemy is up long before me, and he stomps on my leg with wicked pleasure, laughing as it breaks. He kicks me again and again, and my bones bruise and crack as his laugh gets higher and higher. My vision blurs and my arms flop out limply in either direction. Ha.

I start laughing, painfully at first, then hysterically, like I've lost my mind. Maybe I have. The Red Ace just knocked all the cards out of my deck.

Grass is flattened as my eleven remaining playing cards stand up and glare at the Red Ace. The Face Cards look regal and dangerous even in urchin clothes, and all the numbers glare with teary eyes at the Ace. They know someone killed Three, and they don't care that it was me who sacrificed him.

Alone he would slaughter any one of my cards, but even an Ace can't fight an entire deck. He tries, though, spinning and kicking and punching away at Grey King, Grey Jack, and even Grey Five. I laugh at my enemy, and he looks at me for half a second, confused and angry. Then Grey Queen slashes him from behind and he shrivels into the useless paper card he is.

That they all are.

The Red King is putting up such a good fight, pounding away at my slippery Ace, that I leave the two to their battle and head for the thick woods where I know the Lord of Diamonds will have crept off to. He is good at this game, but his strategy has failed and now he is going to pay. I limp into the trees, every breath an agony, but my forces are behind me and I am unafraid. Rising on tiptoe, I tap lanky Grey Jack on the shoulder and whisper a command. He nods and slinks off in a different direction, his tattered, unassuming robes helping him to blend in with the musty gray-brown of the trees.

After a few minutes, we are deep into the forest, and the Lord of Diamonds has not shown his face. I say to him in my head, *you can't play this hiding game forever*, and this starts more giggles that I can't control. Then I see a clearing far ahead, and I stop. In the middle is an enormous stone tower, decrepit and crumbling with age. I head toward it with my cards in tow, and as I climb carefully through the underbrush, I begin to snicker under my breath again. I can't help it. What is wrong with me?

We are at the tower. I know the Lord of Diamonds is inside. This is the edge of the playing field, a portal like the one I came through to start. This is where the match ends. This is where I will win. I hope Grey Jack is nearby.

There are many, many stairs inside the tower, and it is very dark. Good. My troops crouch low behind me, imitating me as I creep up the steps, alert for any danger. But none comes until I step out onto the ruins of the tower's top, with cracked walls, gaping holes, and no ceiling.

"You did well, kid." It's my competitor. He stands, arms crossed over his bulging belly, surrounded by his red-painted Number Cards. Next to him stands a tall, mustached man with long, black hair and a flowing black cape.

"You did well," he repeats, like he's evaluating my performance, "But you're not a Lord. You're not even a peasant. You can't call other Lords to help you when some upstart," he spits in my direction, "knocks you down a peg. Don't you think so, Clubs?" Clubs, the man with the mustache, frowns.

"Most certainly, Diamonds," he muses, and his deck steps out to surround mine from the shadows where they've been hiding.

No. This can't be how my first match ends. I won't have it. The idea is so absurd that I start laughing all over again, and I laugh until my injured sides ache from the strain and I can't laugh any more.

"Shut up!" yells the Lord of Diamonds, and this starts me up again. When I'm finally done, my own cards are surrounded by the Red Diamonds and the Black Clubs.

"You—you know what they called me?" I giggle as my doom closes in. "In the Minor Leagues, when playing cards didn't get you killed?" No one answered, and suddenly a fierce melee develops around me as my cards try to defend me. I scream the last line over all the noise, and I'm laughing so hard that it freezes something in both lords' faces.

"They... *haha...* called me... *teehee!*... they called me Joker!" That is why I laugh, of course. I'm Joker.

Everything stops. The Red cards have suddenly reverted back into their normal shapes, every one of them, and it stuns the rest of the fighters into silence. I laugh even harder, a rasping, grating laugh that echoes around the silent tower like shouts in a graveyard.

"My name is *Joker!*" I scream, and the Lord of Diamonds falls on his face, pierced through his black heart by Grey Jack's cutlass. My cackling continues, and then without warning I become silent as a tomb, and twice as serious.

"Oh Dear," says the Lord of Clubs, and he glows brighter and brighter until I have to close my eyes to avoid being blinded. Everything around me is bathed in white-hot light...

...And when I can see again, I am back in the dingy, shadowy waiting corridor, the robotic GM beside me and the playing field gone into thin air. I feel excitedly in my arm pouch, and breath much easier when I touch a full deck of cards. I have won my first Pro match. I feel like laughing again, but I don't. I turn to the GM and raise an eyebrow.

"Well?" I ask, "How does a Joker compare to a King?" The metal man doesn't have a real face, but I swear he's smiling.

"You were terrific, kid," he says. "I've seen a lot of players, but none as talented as you. Nice job."

"Thanks." I grin and follow him down the other end of the hall. We reach the rickety wooden door and he opens it for me, bowing. I grin again, and as I step into the view of thousands of cameras that broadcast my face worldwide, my laugh finally breaks through the surface. I raise my arms and clench my fists. My laughter is amplified to the entire Earth as a manic roar, and I leap into the air in triumph.

This is just the first win of many. People know me now. They know my face, they know my style, they know my laugh. I am *Joker*.

Let's play cards.

# Unicorn Story

Brendan Bogley

Second Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2011 Young Writers' Contest

*Home-schooled, New Market, MD*

Nesta sat with her back to the tree. She did not know how much longer she would have to remain there. Shivering, she rubbed her arms as she gazed around at the shadow soaked wood. Moonlight managed in places to slither down and bathe splashes of ground and trees. There was a thick, foreboding stillness; a swollen, suffocating entity.

In an attempt to breach this void, Nesta tapped her foot against the forest floor. She immediately regretted this as a leaf rustled as it was kicked away. The sound was a signal that there was life about, susceptible to whatever unchecked, unnamed malignance prowled the black.

The girl held her breath and did not move a muscle, as if to appease the gloom. Wary, Nesta waited until she was satisfied that she had not alerted some horror to her presence. "Besides," she consoled herself, "that which I wait for is nothing to fear." She had just eased herself when she heard the sound of something approaching. Tense once more, Nesta sat erect as she scanned the forest for the source of the noise. Almost at once she spotted it, the thing that was scuttling around the bole of a tree in front of her. Before she could scream a small but eloquent voice came from the thing.

"Dear Lady!"

It was only after the creature had quickly closed the distance between them that she could get a decent look at it. It had the rough appearance of a child, but thin and firm. It stood about two feet tall but bent forward before Nesta in its apparent haste. The skin was of a strange texture, and colored shades of brown and tan. Its large, flat feet were braced as if in anticipation for immediate action, and the wide, clawed hands were in spasms. The round yet sleek head was urged forward, throwing the flat nose, long pointed ears, and large, black, shining eyes into perspective. Once more the thing spoke. "My Lady, you are in grave danger!"

Nesta cautiously speculated the imp before her and replied, "Danger? What do you mean? What are you?"

It continued in imperative urgency, "What I mean is that unless you act your life will end tonight, as others' have ended ere now! You came here at the bidding of a young man, did you not?"

"Why, yes," Nesta answered, dread inflating in her chest. "He told me of his sister who was severely ill, and was beyond all hope of a mortal cure. He had been tracking a unicorn for weeks, for it is known that these mythical creatures can grant a remarkable recovery. Finally the trail had led to this area, but he could not reach the unicorn himself. He needed a maiden to meet it for him, for it would not first approach a man. He sought one such as I out, and bade me wait in the woods tonight. The unicorn would reveal itself to me, and soon it would pledge itself to my will and allow me to guide it to him, where it would offer its services for his sister's sake."

"It is a lie," came the somber statement from the creature.

"What do you mean?" Nesta demanded, aghast.

"What I mean is that if the man has a sister, it is not for her welfare he implored you come here tonight.

"I am a wood elf from a grove far from here. I do not know how many times the event I witnessed there had been repeated before it ever met my eyes, but there I witnessed a tragic scene. A young human girl such as you sat in the woods for a time until she was approached by a unicorn; she seemed to have been expecting the arrival. Before long, however, an arrow flew out of the dark and slew the beast. The girl was next to die. The shadows spat forth a young male—the very one who entreated you here tonight. He is a base hunter who makes unicorns his sport, selling their hides and horns to equally foul individuals. He uses young females as bait. I do not know if the story that lures the women is always the same as the one told you, but however the beast and maiden are snared, they are snared. After the girl has served her purpose, the man kills her so that none may reveal him for his insidious motives. I have followed his red path, never in time to prevent the grim fate that has befallen so many. Know that you are the first I have ever been able to forewarn."

In a panic Nesta started to rise, wildly looking about. "This is horrible!" she gasped. "I must flee to home at once!"

"But to what avail?" cautioned the elf. "If you should meet him on his coming here, no good fate will be yours. Even if you should avoid him, what will prevent him from finding new, unaware victims? I have managed to delay the villain, but he will doubtless be here soon. You must flee, but farther into the woods."

"Into the woods?" Nesta screeched. "My fate will be sealed as grim regardless the manner it is executed. I shall surely die if I penetrate deeper, without any hope of succor!"

The wood elf's reply was ominous, and its shrewdly boyish face clouded. "Not you. I did not come alone as I stole across strange lands marked by his crimson hand. My own quest was one of deliverance. But many an ire has joined me, clung to my task. Vendettas have followed me as I searched.

"You must hurry. I have done all in my power to end the horrors and save you both. In preserving yourselves you protect all that would have come after. Good luck, and farewell, dear Lady. May you see tomorrow." And it vanished into the woods, leaving Nesta alone with the quiet.

Nesta stood a moment to collect herself, to construct the best course of action. But the only thing to do was to run, and to run hard. Could the man, with his hollow, disarming tale, already be watching her? Nesta turned to face the stygian bowels of the forest and plunged on.

It was a hectic, timeless journey, fraught with doubt and dire anticipation. The girl stumbled through brush, aware

that her only slim chance of survival drove her deeper, deeper into the maddening wood. Soon Nesta could not be sure of her direction at all, whether she fled back to doom or if she was continuing to bury herself in the foliage.

Her heart withered in terror as she heard the muffled crashing of undergrowth coming from behind her. Nesta could not keep herself from turning her head to see what approached. Fear numbed her as she recognized the silhouette of her pursuer. She bent back to her reckless path when she heard him call her name, "Nesta! Nesta, why do you run?"

As she continued to move, Nesta questioned the reasoning behind her actions. What word aside from that of the wood elf had blamed this man for a liar and a murderer? He had come off as charming and pitiful. On what authoritative grounds did she have reason to trust the elf? It was well known that the forest people were queer, mischievous folk. Perhaps the warning had been some nasty idea of a prank. She had been so timorous, so willing to jump at shadows. Was she being rational? But even as Nesta began to slow her flight, an arrow shot past her into the night ahead, and with a rush of fear she knew that the caution had been sincere, and she truly was being hounded by one of greed and evil. The façade was spent; now it was just innocence against corruption.

With renewed vigor Nesta bolted between the trees, not heeding the branches that whipped her face as she fought to live the rest of her life. Nesta wasn't aware of how long she ran. It was all a ferocious fog of hiding and escape. At times she felt that he had passed by as she crouched under a bush or pressed up against the bark of a tree. But he would always discover her whereabouts, and Nesta would spring out and pelt away.

Too soon the body that she strived to protect was giving up on her. She staggered on at random, cursing her inability to prevail. Turning to see if the enemy was gaining on her, Nesta pitched over a log. Struggling against the ground, she knew it was the end as she heard the brushing of foliage as something reached her. Lifting her bedraggled head up to glare at and vilify her offender, Nesta was utterly astounded as she beheld the unicorn. The white coat dazzled her and shone like the last beacon of salvation in the abysmal wood. The wise face contemplated the wretched form beneath it. Such a fantastic sight! What a final thing to get a glimpse of as the world was stolen forever!

"No," Nesta resolved with the last powers of her consciousness. "We need to go."

She floundered a moment more on the ground, but at the last weakly raised her arm to the beautiful beast in appeal. The unicorn stretched its white neck low towards the prone girl. Nesta's hand closed around the spiraled horn that grew from the creature's forehead. At once a fresh and sturdy fortitude coursed throughout Nesta's being—her exhaustion checked for the moment. She felt more whole than she could ever remember being, and with the unicorn's gorgeous head under her arm Nesta rose from the ground. She clambered on the snowy back, and as an arrow stuck into the ground beside them the unicorn darted off.

Furiously the man had chased Nesta through the woods.

What had come over her? How could she have possibly discovered his intentions? Was there someone who knew his trade and had come to warn her away? Maybe her helper was still in the woods. This new threat would need to be dispatched as well. Or perhaps the girl was just wary. Either way, this area would not be safe hunting grounds for much time after tonight.

He hunted Nesta for almost half an hour. Whenever he was almost upon her, she would disappear again, only to be detected farther off. But surely he must soon catch her. He had to, and he would.

At last he spotted her, but she was not alone. The blasted horse had come to her at last. As Nesta climbed upon it, the villain knocked an arrow and sent it hissing after his quarry. He swore under his breath as the shaft missed and the targets sped away.

He bounded after them—they could not escape. He kept the unicorn and its rider in his line of sight until they glided behind an obscuring crowd of trees. When he reached this point they were nowhere to be seen. He seethed, but he would not retire. Before he could move he caught a pale glimmer of movement out of the corner of his eye. He revolved to see a girl riding a unicorn pass deeper into the gloom. With a vicious, triumphant snarl he made after the pair. Again they were gone, but again he just managed to glimpse them riding a little way off. By the time he was there he was alone once more. But again he saw them.

With these indistinct sightings the hunter continued to track his prey down over the course of hours. Never would they be directly in his grasp. Sometimes they would be a shimmering speck in the distance. Other times they had been so close it was infuriating. He noted that they seemed to be running great, obscure circles about him, driving him further and further into the forest black. He would rave at the antagonists, threaten them, but always he would still follow them further into the woods.

The haggard man spotted the unicorn and rider just ahead of him, standing there as if waiting for him. With a roar he charged, and they slunk away. He burst through the trees after them, and his blood ran cold.

He stood in a clearing, and along its perimeter stood sentinel dozens of unicorns and their lady riders. But now that they were still, he could see that there was a macabre element about them. They appeared as faded, detailed, congealed mists. Streaking silver across the unicorns' phantom hides and spanning across their flanks and necks were trails of blood, originating from mortal wounds. The ghostly women too were stained with the memories of their murders. The company was angelic and atrocious. Lovely yet ruined. All of the cold, penetrating eyes were turned on their killer. They incapacitated him with their gaze; his sweat froze on his brow. They accused him, they spited him, they tormented him, in their silence! He knew their wrath, their mourning, their anxious redress, and his soul quaked in trepidation. And then they came for him.

Nesta shivered as the ghastly scream rent the night air. She clung tighter to the white mane as her steed bore her away.

# Sleeper

Daniel O'Neill

Third Place

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2011 Young Writers' Contest

*Loyola Blakefield High School, Baltimore, MD*

Imotekh rose from his cast-iron coffin, tubes and wires retracting from him as he stood. Stiffly, he stepped out, his foot impacting with a clang that echoed through the crypt. Though undisturbed for over a century, no dust coated the floor. The Tomb Warden had performed its tasks well. Strangely, though, it was not there to greet Imotekh as he awakened. Such an abnormality could not go uninvestigated.

Tracing the Warden's signal, Imotekh found it to be in Sector A-7. Odd. That sector was above ground, while the Warden's duties as crypt custodian seldom brought it above Level G. Protocol dictated a minimum-energy response, with the assumption that the warden was damaged or otherwise disabled. Though resilient, even a Tomb Warden could fall victim to a landslide or meteor. This was why it did not usually journey outside the safety of the crypt. It was that one piece of data that defied processing, refusing to fit any hypotheses generated by Imotekh's programs: Why had the Warden been aboveground in the first place?

He decided to follow the standard protocol. As he strode through the tomb complex, a halo of light followed him, illuminating the walls on either side. Ahead and behind, total darkness pressed in. It did not matter. A complete map of the massive crypt existed within the tomb mainframe, easily streamed to Imotekh's RAM. He would not make one false step. It would take nearly four hours to navigate the maze of tunnels to Lift Shaft 7, but time was no longer an obstacle to him.

As he made the long march, the monotony gave Imotekh's sub-programs a chance to examine the status of the crypt structure, checking each and every sector for full functionality. By the time the scan was complete, he was nearly to the shaft. It yawned before him, an empty tube extending eternally both up and down. Imotekh stepped out into the void and, with a thought, began to rise. The vertical journey, too, would be lengthy, so he slipped into low-energy mode, preparing for whatever task lay ahead.

Lift Shaft 7 opened directly onto the surface, blasting Imotekh with a wind nearly 100 degrees below zero. He did not feel the cold. It had been quite a while, in fact, since the amalgam of programs that was Imotekh had felt anything at all. Even as the thought entered his RAM, a memory subscript informed him that it had been exactly six hundred ninety-three thousand, two hundred eighty years and sixteen days since last a sensation fitting the definition of a "feeling" had been experienced. Nearly seven hundred thousand years since his consciousness had been transferred to this metal shell. Imotekh closed the script. He did not care.

The source of the signal was not far, only a few hundred

yards away. Soon he would be able to sleep again, and end this painful wakefulness. He crested a hill, every logic cycle predicting that he would find a malfunctioning or drained Tomb Warden beyond, and needing minor repairs. But the remains he found would require more than that.

Pieces of the Tomb Warden lay scattered around a deep crater, still smoking. Scanning the wreckage, Imotekh discovered that the Warden had been blasted apart by a burst of self-propelled magnesium core shells. How primitive. Still, the presence of a life form capable of using weapons technology was disturbing in and of itself. Such a major security breach merited immediate attention.

Imotekh plugged into the crypt mainframe, compiling information from a trio of satellites to ascertain the nature of the interlopers' spacecraft. Strangely, the scan came back a mass of meaningless jargon, jumbled data rife with error messages. Imotekh could not decipher even the location of the ship, much less its mass or armament. Perhaps some type of cloaking?

He queried protocol, which recommended a search for the invaders' base camp, over which their craft would most likely be maintaining geostationary orbit. Imotekh prepared to initiate this course of action; indeed, he could do nothing else. Full-planet scans indicated unusual activity in Sector A-23. Imotekh's sub-programs immediately began recalculating his total energy requirements: this would be another twelve-hour trip.

When Imotekh reached his destination, it was a hive of activity. The valley below the lift shaft was abuzz with biological life forms, assembling some sort of shelter. Around the construction site were stationed several ungainly vehicles, armed with weaponry similar to that which had destroyed the Tomb Warden. Most worryingly, at the center of the commotion was a phase generator, which appeared to be beaming down the raw materials for the structure. At their current rate of expansion, these trespassers could establish a beachhead that could prove... disruptive to the smooth operation of the crypt. They would not be allowed to do so.

Imotekh requisitioned a boost of energy from the mainframe, using it to increase his speed. Moving blazingly fast, he ran the circuit of the valley, firing a homing transmitter toward the generator as he went. As soon as he did so, an incandescent blast vaporized his position. But he was no longer there. By the time the homer vanished into the phase generator, Imotekh was adjacent to one of the interlopers' vehicles. When the homing signal reappeared milliseconds later in orbit, the tank was a smoking wreck.

As Imotekh moved from tank to tank, methodically

wiping out the enemy armor, reinforced cupolas rose from the surrounding hillsides, revolving open to train particle beams on the homing beacon's signal. The transmission was cut off moments later, but it was too late for the invaders. Imotekh knew where they were. Seven jade-green energy beams crackled through the air before disappearing into the cloaked area of space, wreathing it in iridescent fire. Without a sound, the stealth field winked out, revealing nothing but a steadily expanding cloud of dust particles. Even as he carved through the hull of the last alien tank, Imotekh processed the irony that he never would find out what class of ship he had just destroyed. A few more seconds, and his grisly work was done. Imotekh surveyed the devastation impassively. The alien landing site was in ruins, the plain littered with burnt-out wrecks scattered about as if by a careless god. Imotekh allowed a satisfaction circuit to flicker on momentarily. He turned, and a mass-reactive shell caught him in the solar plexus.

The blast hurled Imotekh 20 yards back before slamming him into the ground. Sensor readings wavered and fluttered, and static crackled across his vision. Through the interference, Imotekh saw a tank trundle out from where it had been hidden behind an outcropping of rock. Even as he spotted it, its turret swiveled toward him for a second shot. Logic cycles whirred wildly, risking overheating in their attempt to find any possible means of escape. The tank fired, the shell denting Imotekh's titanium ribcage and embedding him deeper in the hillside. The rounds continued to thud home, each impact driving Imotekh's mind farther from his RAM and deeper into the recesses of his programs. All around him, he could see self-regeneration programs desperately attempting damage control. For a time, he watched emergency scripts try and fail to call for aid, only to try again and fail again. He felt a thud, and the scene fell away. When Imotekh could see again, the light of consciousness was nothing but a glimmer above him. He was in the deeps now, in the heart of his logic engines. Pseudomorality databases pulsed below him, lighting the processing plane with an eerie virtual glow. Again, a shell impacted. He could see his memory databank rushing up towards him as he fell. A final thud, and Imotekh saw nothing but blackness.

Imotekh opened his eyes. Not optic sensors. Eyes. He looked around, and found himself in a large room with reflective metal walls. He felt odd. Strange things churned within him, and it was a moment before he could put a name to them. They were called... emotions. No! It could not be! Trembling, he raised a hand before face, and saw what he had feared. Flesh. Flesh and blood. Weakness. He attempted to rise, but found that he was bound at the waist to the table on which he lay. Frustration filled him. He should have been able to break these bonds with ease, but this body was too weak. He thrashed uselessly, straining against the restraints. Finally, he fell back in exhaustion. His head fell to one side, and he came face to face with death. A skeleton lay next to him, its grinning skull gazing at him with empty sockets.

He screamed with terror, desperately trying to escape the cadaverous face that leered at him from the adjacent table. It was no use. The straps held firm. Eventually, he dared to risk another glance at his neighbor. The creature had not moved, and Imotekh noticed something odd. Rather than ivory bone, the skull seemed to be made of... metal? Recognition filled him, replaced quickly by horror. He knew what that terror beside him was. The monster that had so terrified him was none other than himself. The Imotekh he was to become.

Taking another look at the room, he realized he knew where he was, too. He had been here before; six hundred ninety-three thousand, two hundred eighty years and sixteen days before, to be exact. At this very moment, terrible energies were scouring the planet's surface, energies unleashed by Imotekh himself. He, in his cowardice, had fled, fled to this last resort he had planned for so long. A hum filled the room. Looking up, Imotekh saw two glistening helmets joined by tangle of wires and tubes descending from above. He began to struggle again, though he knew it was no use. One of the caps reached him, pulling his head into it with a powerful vacuum. All around him, symbols ran across the walls as the crypt activated for the first time. Energy began to crackle between the two helmets. He let out one last useless yell, not of fear this time, but of anger, anger at himself for the terrible mistake he was about to make a second time, defiance against his inability to change what he had done, what he was about to do. The hum reached a fever pitch, and his yell was cut off.

Suddenly, Imotekh could see both incarnations of himself; both lying inert below him. He struggled back towards his body, but it was like swimming against a strong current. He was pulled inexorably away down towards the monstrous metal prison he would one day call himself. It was no use fighting, he knew. He had already lost. He had lost six hundred ninety-three thousand, two hundred eighty years and sixteen days ago. And, as his soul was torn apart into logic engines, pseudomorality databases, and consciousness scripts, he cursed himself in the name of the god he had just defied. The hum stopped.

Imotekh rose from his cast-iron coffin, tubes and wires retracting from him as he stood. Stiffly, he stepped out, his foot impacting with a clang that echoed through the crypt. He plugged in to a tomb-sleeper interface socket, his programs humming as he absorbed the mass of data that washed over him. The sepulcher mainframe informed him that the last of the alien forces hidden in reserve had been annihilated by nearby ion turrets shortly after his previous body was destroyed. An alert regarding the consciousness transfer stood out to him among the details of his reincarnation. A small packet of data had still been in use during the transfer, and had been lost. He closed the script. The data parcel was much too small to be of any significance. It wasn't even an active program, nothing but an archive segment. A memory file; it was nothing important.

# The Road Not Taken

Jeanette Brown

**Honorable Mention**

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2011 Young Writers' Contest

*Eleanor Roosevelt High School, Laurel, MD*

"Whoa," Benji said, halting in his tracks next to John, "has this road always forked like this?"

John shrugged, looking as confused as Benji sounded. "I don't know. Maybe we've walked farther than we usually do."

"But we haven't been walking that long," Benji pushed up the sleeve of his jacket to look at his watch. "It's only been about... shoot, the stupid thing has stopped again." Benji tapped the face of the watch and gave his wrist a couple sharp flicks. "There it goes. Not that it matters now, who knows how much time it's lost."

"I don't know why you don't just get a new watch," John said absently, still staring at the mysterious fork in the road. "This one stops more than it goes. I wonder why it's like that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Benji said. "I guess it's just getting old. Maybe I should get a new one..." he trailed off, staring sadly at his wrist.

"What? No, Benji, not your watch, the road," John said. "I was wondering why the road was forked."

"Oh," Benji said, dropping his wrist back down to his side and looking up at the fork again. He had almost forgotten about it in his contemplation of his watch. "I don't know, I guess they go to two different places. That's why most roads fork, right?"

"Well, yeah, but look," John said, a bit impatiently, stepping forward. "If you look down either side, it just goes completely straight for as far as you can see. It never turns off. And there are only about five feet of trees between them. It's not even dense! You'd be able to see right over to the other side." John looked back at Benji expectantly. Benji just shrugged. "It's actually kind of cool," John mused to himself. "It's like in those stories we used to read when we were younger. The ones in which the hero has to choose between two roads to the same place, but he dies if he goes down the wrong side."

Benji shuddered. "I hated those stories," he said, sounding like the petulant child he had been in those days. "Come on, let's go back. It's getting late." He tried to look at his watch to confirm this, but remembering that its time was wrong, he looked up into the sky instead as if he could read time from the sun.

"No, it's not," John retorted, laughing. "We left at one, and you just said a minute ago that we hadn't been gone long. Come on, let's keep going."

"Okay, well, even if it's not late, it's getting cold. Let's just go back."

John laughed again. "It's beautiful out, Benji. Don't be a coward; I have an idea. I'll go down one side, and you go down the other. We'll still be able to hear and see one another. I'm sure of it. If the trees get too dense, or the roads start to go in different directions, we'll just meet back up again, okay?"

“John, I really don’t want to,” Benji said desperately. “You know I don’t like being in the woods by myself. Please, John.” Benji was ashamed of himself, both for being scared and for begging John. But he wasn’t about to ignore his fear. It was too strong.

“Ah, Benji, come on, I’ll only be about five feet away from you. You’ll be able to see me no problem. I just want to see where they go, Benji. Please?” John looked at him, pleading. John had never begged Benji for anything before, and for that reason, Benji slowly nodded his head, trying to shake the unease settling around him at the decision. “Thanks, Ben,” John said excitedly, pulling Benji into a quick man-hug. “You go down the left side, and I’ll go down the right.”

John almost dragged Benji to the mouth of the left road and then bounded over to the right. “Let’s go!” he called out. He started to walk briskly down the road but stopped dead in his tracks. “Jeez,” he whispered to himself. “How did I not see this before?”

When John had peeked down this side of the fork earlier, it had seemed like the forest that lined the road he and Benji always walked on never changed. But now that John was walking down this branch, he saw that it had changed. It had changed spectacularly. The forest before had been nothing special, just a sloppy scattering of brown, peeling tree-trunks topped with standard green foliage. Now, however, it was beautiful. The trees were more thinly scattered in a way that looked artistic, as if someone had decided exactly where to put each individual tree. The trunks were smooth and a deep, golden brown. The leaves were more silver than green to John’s eye. The dim autumn sunlight filtered through the canopy in strong visible rays, adding a brilliant golden glow to some areas while leaving others doused in a shimmering shadow. John forced himself to look away and glance over his shoulder to make sure Benji hadn’t gotten too far ahead. He was glad when he saw Benji standing right on the other side of the strip of trees separating the two branches of road, looking up at the forest in rapture.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” John called, his voice painted with reverence. “The forest, I mean. It looks like it should be in one of those Disney princess movies or something.” He went back to staring at the forest. It almost seemed to pulsate with radiance. John, basking in the glow of the forest, almost didn’t hear Benji’s reply.

“Are you crazy?” Benji squeaked. The only similarity between John’s side of the forest and Benji’s was that they were both different from the forest they were used to. But Benji’s forest was dark, dense, and dead. The trees were crooked and pointy, looming tall in the sky, without a single leaf to cap them. The leaves instead littered the ground, in a swampy, rotting mess. From this mess grew thorns and brambles that seemed to reach toward Benji with poisoned points. The area repelled sunlight; in fact, it seemed to emit darkness. “John, I can’t do this,” Benji continued, his voice breathless with terror. “This is too... it’s like my worst nightmare, but multiplied a million times over. John, please, let’s just go back.”

John peered through the trees between the roads to try and see what it was Benji was so afraid of, but he saw nothing. Usually, John would agree to return home when Benji got this scared, but he didn’t want to leave this forest yet. He wanted to continue through it, see more of it, become close to it. The



thought of leaving, in fact, was quite unbearable to him. “Come on, Benji,” he said. “Don’t be such a coward. You’re getting to see a whole new part of our world, here. You’re getting to explore. Isn’t it cool?” When Benji only continued to stand staring at the forest, frozen in terror, John continued, in a soothing voice, “Ben, you’ve got to start getting over these fears. I’m right here, and you know I’d never let anything happen to you. Nothing will hurt you.” Benji stood frozen for a moment more, then stiffly nodded his head and turned away. John felt relief bloom in his chest. “Now, let’s keep going!”

Staying close to the forest on his right, John started to walk further down the road. He saw Benji do the same out of the corner of his eye. Satisfied that Benji really was still with him, he turned to look at the forest as he walked. He was about to open his mouth and say something when he heard a dull thump, quickly followed by a short, sharp cry from Benji and some shuffling. John quickly tore his gaze away from the forest and looked over at Benji. “What happened?” he asked, scared that something bad had actually happened to Benji.

Benji was on all fours on the ground. “Nothing, nothing,” he said, his voice shaky. “There was a root, and I didn’t see it, and I tripped over it. I’m fine, it’s okay.” He got up off the ground, brushed himself off with tender hands, and continued walking forward. John breathed a huge sigh of relief. As annoying as Benji could be with his multitude of pointless fears, John would rather die than have Benji be hurt.

The rest of the walk, to John’s relief, went smoothly. John kept Benji involved with constant conversation, and after awhile, the scared tremor left Benji’s voice. Soon, he was laughing and joking as boisterously as John. John was glad to see his friend be so carefree for once. Because of that, in addition to the pleasant weather and magical forest next to him, John felt happier than he could ever remember feeling before. But all too soon, it came to an end. The two roads never curved in opposite directions, but instead met back up to form one main road again. “Well, that was pointless,” John said bitterly. On the main road, the forest was back to normal, almost breaking John’s heart. He knew he would never see anything as beautiful again in his life, and he mourned that. “Let’s go back, Benji,” he continued. “We’ll both just walk back down your side.” John didn’t want to have to leave that beautiful forest again.

But Benji didn’t answer, and didn’t emerge from his road. “Benji?” John called, stepping forward hesitantly. Then he realized what was going on. Grinning, he called out, “Come on, Benji, I’m sorry I made fun of you earlier, but you know you’ll never scare me. You couldn’t when we were younger, and you can’t now.” Benji was hiding and waiting to jump out and scare him, John was sure. Still smiling, John went to the opening of Benji’s road. “Okay,” he said, “I’ll play along.” But before John began to walk down the road, he noticed something odd, something that didn’t make sense.

There were no footprints in the dirt of Benji’s road. John quickly looked back down his own road, and saw a neat pair of footprints. But there were none on the other road. John wondered how that could be. He had talked to Benji as he walked, saw him through the trees. The dirt on Benji’s road was the same as the dirt on his. John stepped a few feet onto the road and left footprints to confirm that.

John started down the road. He was confused about the lack of footprints but tried to rationalize it even as he started to become afraid. *Maybe he walked on the grass*, he thought to himself. *He wouldn't have left footprints that way*. John continued to walk down the road, his sense of dread growing with each step. This forest, he realized, was vastly different from the other. It was terrifying. He now felt bad about making fun of Benji for being scared. The further John walked, the more terrifying the forest got. It seemed to reach out to him - not to drag him to his death, but to welcome him in it. Finally, he got to the stop where he remembered hearing Benji trip.

The whole world was different now. John couldn't see colors; he could only see in shades of grey and black. He saw faces on the trees and heard voices on the wind. He felt the ground grow warm where he was standing, and slowly looked down. A bright, throbbing slash of red entered his vision. The ground beneath him was red, only red, and he knew what it was, and why it was there. He felt the warmth flow up through his legs and into his body, making him feel wonderfully intoxicated with life, the life of his friend. An animal cry ripped out of John's throat, a cry of horror and pleasure. He had to get out of there, he had to leave, he was losing his mind, he had to go...

He turned, and there was a man. He was caked in rusty brown, still coursing with the lives of his former hosts, and his eyes were shining black mirrors, deep and soulless. He stretched his arm out toward John and bent one gnarled finger, beckoning. John felt a moment of clarity through his insanity. The man turned and disappeared into the forest. John followed.

The forest opened for the two of them. Nothing hindered John's passage through it; he wasn't scratched with a single thorn. John entered a large, circular clearing in which the man was standing, smiling grimly with stained teeth. He pointed to a tree.

John turned to look where the man pointed, and the insanity washed over him again, putting everything in slow motion. He saw Benji, tied to the tree a foot off the ground. His body was twisted into unnatural angles, and a sign was nailed through his chest. **NOTHING WILL HURT YOU** jumped out at John in slashing red. On a tree next to Benji, there was another man, tied a foot off the ground. John slowly turned and looked at the trees circling the clearing. They all housed bodies, some fresh with that pulsating red still dripping, some nothing more than fading skeletons, crumbling to ash.

John turned full circle, and looked at the final tree in the circle. It had been empty before, no body hanging from it when he had entered. But now the man from the road was hanging from it, run through with scaly vines and prickling thorns. From empty sockets ran a black syrup, evil rivers of darkness and insanity, running down to a sign nailed to his chest:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

The last sane corner of John's mind identified the quote before fleeing forever.

The writing on the sign changed: "The Road Not Taken must remain not taken."

\* \* \* \*

An old man was walking down a road when he came to a fork. He could not recall the fork being there – he had walked this road almost every day of his long life – but he was old, and he knew that his memory must be going. It was too early for him to turn back and return to a now empty house. He slowly started down the road to the left, remembering that his recently late wife had been left-handed, wanting to honor her memory in any way possible.

John felt the old man's shaky steps as if they were small earthquakes. He quickly jumped away from Benji's body, the fresh, bright red still dripping from his fingers and teeth. Instinct kicked in, and he rushed through the forest, vaguely feeling its painful caresses but ignoring them. He had to stop the man; he could not let the road be traveled. He and the road were one now. If the road were to be traveled, it would be defeated. And so would John be defeated. If he didn't stop the old man, John would die, and the old man would take his place as the watcher of the road, and the keeper of the evil that dwelled beneath it.

He saw the man, and the man was grey. But John made him red and filled himself with the old man's like. He had done his job, and the road was undefeated. He was safe.

# The Man in the Wall

Julian Butcher

**Honorable Mention**

BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2011 Young Writers' Contest

*Linganore High School, New Windsor, MD*

A door opened in the dark basement. A man stepped through, his form engrossed in the shadows of the cobwebbed cellar. The ancient wooden steps did not sound beneath his feet, as though the sound would be an unwelcome one in the presence of this man. At the bottom a thin metal chain dangling from the ceiling brushed against his face. The man reached up and pulled the lightbulb chain, and after a few doubtful moments of flickering light, an orange glow filled the dank, dirt-walled chamber.

He was short and slight, dressed in a well-tailored suit and black bowler hat that the grime of the root cellar did not mar. His fine hair was neatly oiled back, his fingernails exquisitely manicured. Every fiber of his being repelled the dust and dirt of the dankness.

He put one hand against the dirt wall, dragging his fingers lightly against the earth. He walked around the room, feeling here, touching there, searching for something on or within the wall. After a few moments, he pulled his hand away, and stared at the wall, as though calculating an immense math problem. Then he smiled to himself and gracefully drew one long index finger through the dirt, making a circle his own height. He drew strange symbols along the outside and inside of the circle, and kept drawing more in tighter and tighter rings, each one ensconced within the last, until he found no more room to trace within the circle he had drawn. He glanced over his work, and then, satisfied, he gently touched the centermost rune. A blue energy flowed from the end of his finger into the dirt symbols like a river of water suspended within the air. The flow went from one symbol to another, lighting up the wall with an electric glow, until each concentric ring was lit and alive, and the center rune shined brightest of all, concentrating the light from each rune into a single speck of pure, white light.

As though a breaker had been thrown somewhere, the blue lights highlighting the circle went off. A light shower of dirt fell off the wall, and suddenly the circle had never been there. In its place, embedded in the wall, was something decidedly man-shaped. The human features were pressed through the earth like a child stretching latex over his face.

The dirt man began to stir behind the layer of earth that held him in place. His head twitched beneath the rubbery earth; one hand jerked, followed by the other; his neck stretched for a moment to each side. Then his mouth opened, like a yawn in the early morning, or a child's shrieks after waking from a nightmare. He tried to take a breath but inhaled nothing but his rubbery prison. He gagged, and the gag became a coughing sputter, and the cough became a scream. His mouth stretched open farther than any human mouth had any right to, like a snake dislodging its jaw before consuming its prey. His canines bit into the rubbery earthen mask, but failed to puncture it, and so his hands began tearing at

the bonds of his prison. His screams continued while the man in the wall tried to claw and kick through the dirt.

The man in the bowler hat watched. His freeing of the prisoner was already complete. The task of seizing freedom belonged to the man in the wall and to him alone.

One hand managed to get enough of the rubbery material under its fingers and pulled straight down, tearing a jagged hole in the sheath of earth. The man kicked and clawed through the hole, stretching and expanding the tear in the dirt. The hole grew with each attack, and when it finally became large enough, the man fell through, limp, hitting the earthen floor with a loud thud. He did not move.

The man in the bowler hat pulled out a golden pocket watch and flipped open the lid. "Excellent." He pocketed it again and shook the former prisoner gently by the shoulder. "Welcome back, Asphodai."

The man on the floor stirred gently before speaking in a soft, hoarse tone, as though he hadn't spoken in ages. "Tharic? Is that...you, my brother?"

Tharic helped Asphodai to his feet. The contrast between them was astounding. Tharic was round-faced, well-groomed, and plump, with merry eyes and fingers that danced to some unsung tune. As he helped up his fallen brother, it became apparent how much taller Asphodai was than he. Asphodai was nude and hairy, the product of a long imprisonment. His eyes darted around the dimly lit cellar, checking and double checking every shadow like a doe weary of the moonlit woods. He was shivering, though the air was not cold.

"This place is...different from h-h-how I remember it."

Tharic chuckled. "It was a book store last time you were here. It's a butchery now, but we're still in Chicago."

"H-h-how long?"

He understood the question. "Forty-three years. Give or take a decade." Asphodai shuddered. "Sorry it took me so long to find you. Things have been...hectic."

Getting his bearings of time and place seemed to calm Asphodai somewhat. "Where are the rest of our siblings?"

Tharic's smile faded. "Yera is gone. Sil with her. Balthagar is still with us though. He has a flat here in the city." He conjured a hopeful expression. "But now that you're back, the three of us can finish the Thread and—"

Asphodai interrupted Tharic's quick speech with but a whisper. "And Beth?"

His brother's face was carefully blank. "Beth is not one of us, my brother. She is Unnamed. Her Thread cannot be woven in with our kin..."

"Do not call her that."

"What, Unnamed?" His brother nodded. "It is what she is. She is human, and though I don't know what you may have done to prolong her life while you were away, she was not meant to live as we do. No human was."

"Where is my wife, Tharic?"

He sighed, and said, softly, "Dead. Four months ago." He reached out and put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Dai..."

Asphodai's head fell to his chest, but he did not cry, or shake, or sob. His long, wild bangs fell in front of his face, concealing whatever emotion he may have felt. The brothers spent several moments in silence. Then Asphodai shrugged Tharic's hand off of his shoulder. "How did it happen?"

"It doesn't really matter, does it? It's happened, and not even we can change it."

"I want to know."

"You don't."

"Maybe not, but I need to."

Tharic was silent, weighing the options, before finally speaking his damning word. "Balthagar."

"How?"

"I don't know, and I don't think you should either."

"You said he has a flat in the city."

Tharic shook his head. "No, brother. I will not take you there. I know what you are thinking, but it is not within our grasp. Blood is the only thing that can change the Thread, and you are not strong enough..."

"If you don't show it to me, I'll find it some other way."

"You've been gone for a long time. You don't know this world any more. You don't know yourself."

"I'm a quick learner."

"Dai, I don't..."

"He killed my wife, Tharic." Asphodai stared his brother straight in the eye, unblinking. "He killed Beth and I need to know why. I need to do something."

"You've only just woken up; it's natural that you aren't thinking clearly."

"I'm thinking more clearly than I have for the past half a century, brother."

So Tharic stared back into his brother's eyes. "So be it." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pen and a piece of paper. "This is the address of Balthagar's flat. You will be able to find it?"

"How much has Chicago changed since I left?"

"More booze. More people. Fewer police. Not much else."

"Then I'll find it."

It took Asphodai ten minutes to find clothes that fit him in a dumpster outside the butchery, forty to locate the address that Tharic had given him, and thirty seconds to figure out how to work the elevator. After that he was hurtling towards the top floor of the skyscraper that his brother called home.

With the ringing of an electronic bell, the doors opened onto a white-carpeted room, walled with abstract art and ugly wallpaper. A genderless bronze statuette stood poised on a table by the door. There was a band of glass encircling the expansive flat, providing a broad, nighttime view of Chicago stretched out below. The room was eerie, washed with white and black like a photo of a crime scene in the newspaper. A very large man with a long, pirate-like goatee sat engrossed in a sofa with a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka cupped tenderly in one hand, a crystal shot glass in the other.

The fat man lifted up the shot glass and drained its contents in a single throw of his head as Asphodai entered. He made a sour face, worrying his fat-laden eyes and rotund mouth with discomfort. "So the sleeper has finally awoken. I thought it was your presence that I felt today."

He refilled his glass and raised it to his visitor once again in a silent toast. He drained the glass once more and made a face, sticking his tongue out and making a noise of complaint.

"Alcohol is not what it once was, my brother. It takes harder liquor than I enjoy in order to lose one's sobriety. I ask for something smooth and they give me water." He took another drink before leveling his gaze at Asphodai's dead-eyed stare. "If you are here to kill me, brother, I would appreciate the common courtesy of waiting until I am stone drunk first."

Asphodai's face could have been carved in rock for all the emotion it foretold. "Tell me what happened, Balthagar."

The fat man sighed into his chest, eerily reminiscent of Tharic's attitude earlier the same evening. "I never meant for things to happen like they did. After sister Yera died, and brother Sil with her, I was lost. Things just didn't seem to matter to me anymore. Every second became another soulless year to me." He looked at the glass in his hand, threw it away with a grunt of disgust and took a long swig straight from the bottle. "And with you gone, and Beth...I don't know what you did to her, but she didn't age any more than me. And everyone thought you were dead..."

Asphodai was silent, and Balthagar ignored him. "We wronged you. I knew it then, I know it now. Even if you had been dead; I lost two brothers and a sister. I was out of my mind." He laughed breathlessly. "Even more so than I am now. And with every passing year I lost my charm. Do you remember how I looked before you left, brother? The Unnamed have an interesting story about a man whose insatiable lust for women and his incredible pride became his undoing. The devil came for him and dragged him down into the human hell." He burped. "Or maybe it was the ghost of one of his girls' fathers who hauled him away. I don't remember. But I always thought of myself as someone like him, an immortal Don Juan."

Balthagar looked up at his brother, self-loathing filling his eyes. "I have no excuses." Another drink. Another sigh. "I followed the Thread I was cast. As do you now. As do we all."

Asphodai was getting tired of everyone sighing at him. He wasn't a fool. He didn't want their pity. He had been gone, and now he was back, and the world would accept his presence kicking and screaming if that's what it took. He didn't need his brothers to tell him how he should feel.

He gripped the sexless statuette on the table by the legs, feeling out its weight. Balthagar didn't move, except to take his final swig of vodka.

There was a note in Balthagar's pocket with directions for locating and opening the hidden safe in his bedroom. There was money, of course, and some bank notes. Asphodai wasn't interested. What caught his attention was the tape recorder concealed behind the stacks of cash. It bore the human adaptation of his name written on a piece of masking tape: Ash. The name Beth had given him.

He extracted the recorder from the safe. It was already rewound to the beginning of the tape. He pushed the play button, set it down on the bedside table, lay down on the bed, and listened to the sweet voice of his dead wife.

"Hello, Ash. If you're listening to this, then...then you know what happened while you were away. Between me and Balthagar." She breathed static into the microphone. "I wish I could have told you myself. I wish that I was around to be with you. I wish a lot of things, and none of them can be any different. All part of your Thread, right?" Asphodai could hear her smiling.

"I never thought you were dead. Though I suppose that doesn't make what I did look any better. What you did for me, so we could always be together, so I would age like you...it made life difficult. I lost my human friends, my family. Your family was the only one left for me, and Balthagar...he made living that way easier. Bearable.

"I wish I could have been here when you woke up. But I guess...I guess that you know by now that that cannot happen. You know I love you, and you know that I'll always love you. I'll always be with you, even if you don't think so.

"There's something else I think you should know." Her voice grew softer, as if she was afraid of being overheard. "Something that no one else may be willing to tell you. Over the past few years, your brother has...changed. Like there's a little devil on his shoulder and he's started to give in to it. I hear him talking to himself behind closed doors, talking about something to do with the Thread, with changing the way things are, the way they will be. I've heard him talking about needing blood."

Blood. *Blood is the only thing that can change the Thread.*

"Ash...I think he killed Yera and Sil. I think Tharic...." There was a sound like a door opening. "Tharic! I didn't think you were here..." And Beth's voice faded into loud static as she screamed into the microphone.

There was a sharp click, and the tape came to an end.