

## **The Various Adventures of Monkey Boy**

### **“Know No Evil”**

**By Anders Fischer**

There is a battle, a secret conflict that rages in the empty heart of consciousness, in that cognitive depth to which no thought has ever plummeted. And yet it is a battle waged by everyone, by every single soul that walks or has ever walked upon the Earth, each of them unified in a grand microcosmic war against one thing, one entity, shape or idea that all men speak of with contempt, but none know by name, one lonely force which can never be defined, but by whose definition the fallen shared be forever enslaved.

The station was up and running again and everyone was back to work, wearied and broken from their recent vacation. The halls were dark with memories and filled with faces whose eyes told stories not of the dust of carpentry or the cobwebs or still-wet paint, but of smoke and of fire and of laser beams. Ghosts haunted this place, possessed the cops and the clerks and the emaciated muffin cart man who squeaked and groaned through offices and aisles where dead things once laid.

All told though, it wasn't a wholly different ambiance than there ever was: all these same people – these same cops and clerks and cart men – had always known work to be the place where misery was born and where it was educated to become bigger, stronger and wiser to set out and spread new kinds of despair before finally returning to this place after a long and accomplished life to die in one last haze of gloom, a haze that never truly dissipated no matter how many windows they opened. The reasons might be different, the exact physical antecedents might have shifted over the weeks, but in the end the station was the station: it was a horrible place to be.

Alice was thinking about that a lot recently, especially at this moment because it distracted her from thoughts she really didn't want roaming around her head. She thought of the station and its usual gloom and doom, she thought of the muffin man and just what was going on in his cobwebbed cranium, she thought of Den Street and the cleanup still ongoing, she thought of this song she heard as a kid and couldn't get out of her head for weeks; it eventually got so bad that she hummed it uncontrollably in class, getting her suspended. And sadly the memory of the tune seemed to reimburse it with its decades-lost power, it grasped her brain like children snatch cookies and embedded itself deep. It nestled into every recess, every cranny, pushing out old memories and desires and intentions and focused her solely on one task and one task alone.

She began humming the song.

But obnoxious and embarrassing as that was, it still beat thinking about the one thing that she knew should be occupying her thoughts at that moment. The room sat in front of her, deceptively innocuous, but ominous all the same. The door was closed and it seemed to urge her, to call her to open it, to step inside, to access the secrets locked within. But she hesitated, she lingered, she refused to open it. Because what was in that room was simply beyond her.

“Second thoughts, kid?” Dan sidled up from nowhere and leaned on the wall near the hated door. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Alice jumped. “Certainly not humming.”

“Yeah, right, you know you got to go in there.”

“I know. It has to be me. I’m deeper in this than anybody. I’ve got to be the one to finish it.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t suppose you want to trade places?”

“Nope.”

“Right. Guess it’s on me then.”

“I’ll be in the booth. Don’t let her spook you.”

“Spook me? Who’s she to be so tough?”

Dan just shot her a stern knowing look.

“Right. Let’s just get this over with.”

Dan continued on down the hall and Alice steeled herself, steadied herself, placed one trembling hand on the doorknob and pushed the wicked portal open. Behind it was a room: a small, simple room, brightly lit – over-lit in fact – with a mirror on the far wall and a small table situated in the center. On one side of that table sat an empty chair and on the other side sat a woman, a woman very much like any other woman: tall, slender, dark-haired, but with the obvious exceptions that her head was the size of a small moon and her face and hands were covered in distinct black and orange fur. And as Alice approached this woman, anxiety overtook her.

Celia Heart had been both friend and enemy to her, but in neither role had she ever seemed to diminish Alice as much as she did now. Something profound had changed within her. Something more than the personality grafts, something deeper than the minor physical metamorphoses. Even chained to the floor as she was, Celia was still something powerful, something to be feared, something that could tear through the station unhindered. She could rip them all to pieces with her bare hands, she could burn them to ashes with her eyes, crush them beneath her foot, summon any number of items that could vaporize the whole city in an instant or she could even turn into a man and make them all very uncomfortable; and there was nothing present that could stop her. And so Alice entered that room, knowing full well that its other inhabitant could – and very probably would – kill her without warning.

But she wouldn’t let her dread show, she knew better than that. She blanked her face, stilled all expression and sat across from the she-demon.

“Good evening, Alice,” Celia greeted with a smarmy kind of contempt.

“We found your labs,” Alice said solemnly, “We read your notes. We know what you’ve been doing to Sue Jones and to Ricky. We know the chemicals you injected to maintain their comas and we know the counteragents. We know what you did and why you did it and what you were looking for.”

“But?”

“But we don’t know what you found.”

“Ah, that’s it, isn’t it?”

“You saw something, Celia, you spoke of something, of the cause to all this insanity. You saw it, you know what it is.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And you’re going to tell me.”

Celia said nothing for a few minutes and then hacked and coughed and gagged and smiled a reptile smile.

“Okay, then, yes, I think I shall tell you...”

The building seemed sad somehow. Kind of droopy and sagging. Its paint peeled, its hinges creaked, its roof was lined with gutters that were either overflowing with leaves or that had simply given up and let the weight of the world collapse them. Water seeped from the pipes and condensed around windows like tears in the eyes of a child who just learned about Santa Claus the hard way. And as Zack looked at this strangely forlorn edifice – with its creeper-assailed brickwork, its groaning foundations and its automatic doors that didn’t seem to close all the way, but kept on trying in vain frustration all the same – he couldn’t help but feel like he should give it a big hug.

The other kids scattered about the yard didn’t seem to notice. They jumped around and played and laughed and screamed and hardly realized the fences they leaned against were mildewed and splintering under them. They never looked twice at the gaping holes in the sidewalks that hadn’t been mended since dinosaurs fought cavemen for domination of the planet. It seemed as though these mars had simply become ordinary to them and Zack wondered why he had to leave his old school for this one; or perhaps it was that his old school was just as bad off, but he had become as desensitized to its unique dilapidations as these kids clearly had.

The kids themselves were the usual bunch one saw at every school. The boys and girls were pretty much separate and independent of each other, each occupying different sides of the yard, the boys opting away from the girls in fear of the nameless bugs rumored to grow and breed on their skin. Of the boys, there were only ever three types: the ones with active parents, who dressed in bright colors and carried backpacks filled with crayons and pencils and notebooks; the ones with knives who always vanished to some unknown place from whence it was said they never returned; and then there were the ones who spoke in words the others did not yet know, short but forceful words that still somehow registered a strange foreboding.

Zack had always assumed the girls had similar divisions, but he never dared venture into their contested domain to find out, lest the nameless bugs find their way to him.

But right now, Zack didn’t stand apart from just the girls, but from everyone. Because each student existed in a separate, smaller group. Each of them had friends, old buddies, people they knew and liked. And Zack, Zack didn’t know anybody. So he stood alone, awkwardly avoiding locking glances with anyone around him until at last the bell rang, sputtered, crackled and then gave off a kind of death cough and all the kids filed inside.

Zack joined the fray and tried to steady his nerves. He’d be fine, he thought. All he had to do was keep his head down and play by the rules, the rules his parents gave him before the first day of school every year:

1. Don’t do unto others as you wouldn’t have them do unto you
2. If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.
3. Don’t fight. If anyone gives you trouble, tell a teacher.

Zack recited them again and again in his head, over and over and over until his brain turned blue. He kept at it so much he didn’t even realize when he reached the door, nor did he realize someone else was there as well and the two of them squeezed through

painfully and simultaneously and once they reached the other side, the other kid stepped in front of Zack and blocked his path.

He was big, Zack noticed, too big. He must have been held back a couple grades. The other kid stood twenty, maybe thirty million feet over Zack's head. He was covered in deep red splotches of acne, a coverage so expansive that Zack reasoned he had acne even in those regions where acne ought not to go. And he wore a *Frilly: The Loveable Tadpole* t-shirt that was clearly too small for him and was stretched across his unsettlingly broad shoulders in just such a way as to make Frilly seem to wince and scream in unceasing agony. This kid looked down at Zack and Zack looked straight into his eyes, which seemed not at all the windows to a sane soul, but to a howling vortex that drew in the lost, the scared and the damned and then fostered and fed on their despair in order to empower its mortal avatar to bring it more ruined lives.

The kid looked at Zack with these angry, apocalyptic eyes and Zack responded with only a raspy, desperate squeak.

The kid grunted and disappeared into the scurrying mobs and Zack just fell back against a wall – and felt it creak behind him – as the sea of hurried strangers rushed straight through him.

The day, it seemed, was not off to a good start.

The night was kicking off well. Which of course just meant it was quiet. Quiet was good in the restaurant business. No one complaining about their orders, no one demanding things they weren't in any way equipped to make, no one taking off their pants and running around screaming about “the accursed hegemony of fashion.” Nope, none of that: just people sitting down, eating dinner, paying their checks, tipping their waiters and then leaving without fuss. Yes, for just one night, La Chaîne Alimentaire was a peaceful, serene, respectable place to dine.

At least until the elephant came in.

Though to call him an elephant would be somewhat incorrect. He was elephantine certainly. He was large, bulbous really, and his footfalls cracked the floor and shook the Earth worse than a “One Day All-You-Can Eat Buffet” sign. His skin was gray and appeared rough and his nose and ears were long and drooping. And he had two large ivory protuberances jutting out of his face. So the elephant descriptor was undoubtedly apt, but still inaccurate, for it failed to account for the creature's bizarre humanoid qualities. He had hands for example and walked upon two legs instead of four.

He was also dressed rather garishly and inappropriately for his setting in cowboy boots and rawhide hat and in a bright purple tuxedo with frills up and down the arms. The other patrons turned instantly at his arrival, all of them whispering and condemning, though whether their resentment was borne more from his bestial nature or his tacky attire would never be truly known.

Either way the strange man made his way to a table in the center of the room and sat down with everyone talking about him. He never opened a menu, never looked at any wine lists or specials. He just sat there patiently for his waiter to arrive.

It took some time of course for anyone to work up the nerve, but eventually one young man approached and cautiously asked:

“Hello, sir, may I take your order?”

And the elephant looked to him and answered: “Why, yes, son, I believe you can.”

It was then that the air in the room seemed lighter and the people were able to return to their own tables and their own conversations. They had all heard the stories, after all, of Bangaroos and Chamelios. They knew about the leopard-skinned pop star that destroyed Den Street and so the presence of another such creature proved an unsettling notion, one alleviated by his lilting folksy voice and seemingly genial, unthreatening way.

“I’ll take me some of them escargets and a bottle-a wine.”

“Escargets?”

“Yeah, you know: fancy snails.”

“Oh, you mean escargot?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Okay, I’ll hurry right back.”

“You do that, Randy.”

The waiter stopped then and looked the elephant in the eye.

“Did I tell you my name?”

“Nah, son, you didn’t. I’d have made a fuss, bein’ that it’s rude not to introduce yerself like that – you can call me Deo by the way...”

“Deo?”

“Deo Genis. It’s Greek.”

“Okay.”

“But anyway, I won’t fuss about you being rude because I know you’re distracted by that girlfriend of yours and that ring you got in your pocket.”

“How did you...”

“She’s gonna say no, you know. Says you’d be getting’ in the way of her career.”

“Wait. What? I know she’s been serious about... but...”

“Right choice too, I reckon. She becomes some big rich muckity-muck and you, well, son, let’s just say this is your dignified job.”

“What... How... How could you possibly think you know any of this?”

“Cause son...”

The elephant looked at him then, looked at him with eyes that didn’t so much see as show, eyes that pierced reality and revealed dark and terrible truths, subdermal quanta that shrieked and howled in the dark void where hope is too afraid to go, he looked at his waiter and answered with a tone of cold and irrefutable certainty:

“I know everything.”

New schools are like mazes and poor Zack was lost in winding corridors filled with classrooms that either didn’t have numbers or had their numbers covered by flowery decorations that used deadly predators to teach kids the alphabet. Zack at one point tried lifting a picture of a shark in sunglasses holding up the letter Q to see what room number it concealed, only for a teacher without a name to grab him by the ear and scold him for vandalizing school property.

Zack explained that he was just trying to find his way to class and the teacher investigated the official papers with his name and room assignment and then dragged him – again by the ear – two floors down and three right turns to a small room like all the

others. The teacher pushed him through the door and left. Zack looked around dumbfoundedly at the place before him. It was bright and cheerful, in a sterile kind of way. There were desks lined up against a far wall, but all the kids were seated on a carpet next to the near wall, where the chalkboard and teacher waited for him.

This seemingly less harsh teacher asked him what he was doing there and he told her he was new, that he was supposed to be here and – in a choking, nervous voice hampered by the staring eyes of the rest of the class – that his name was Zachary Zane. The teacher flipped through a book on her desk and delightedly remarked that he was indeed correct and that his name was very... something that started with A.

Whatever that meant, Zack did as the teacher next instructed and found an open spot on the carpet in the back. He sat down and got himself settled and then noticed to his horror that numbered among the mess of unfamiliar faces was one familiar one.

The tall kid from earlier, the one from the door, the scary face with the Frilly shirt, he sat in the back of that carpet as well. But he didn't seem to notice Zack. In fact, he hardly seemed to notice anything, as he leaned against a bookcase slipping into and out of his nap.

He was pulled entirely out of it though when the teacher – seeking someone with the mental chops to divine the answer to nine times two – would of course have to indicate him and force the sleeping giant into angry and unhappy consciousness.

He sat there for a moment yawning and then started working the math with his fingers. He found five on his right hand and then four on his left, so now he had one set of nine. But he couldn't for the life of him figure out how to get a second set. He fumbled for a few minutes, tried arranging his hands in different sequences and punched the bookcase a couple of times and then eventually settled on what must've been the highest number he knew.

The answer was not of course ten and the large kid sulked into the bookcase and tried to return to his nap.

Zack – forgetting the beast to his side – reflexively shot up his hand in a bid for brownie points. And when the teacher chose him, she was indeed grateful that somebody knew the answer to be eighteen.

The rest of the morning passed very much like that. This new school seemed slower than his last one, so he was already ahead in math and reading and science and so, yes, he showed off a bit. Because he didn't have any friends yet, he didn't know where anything was, but he knew school and he did well at school and it was good to finally not feel like an idiot in this place.

The recess bell tolled and then popped and gagged and everyone raced to the playground, Zack included. But on his way out, he was waylaid and pinned against a locker. A massive arm barred him on either side and a vengeful and pimply face stared at him from the black oblivion beyond (the hallway lights liked to flicker on and off). The tall kid looked at Zack with a fury so intense that it could frighten away even the Deadly Moon Goblins that wait silently for the day we return and set the stage for their invasion and he whispered threats to Zack with the kind of quiet rage that made fairies die:

“I don't like you.”

Deo slurped down his snails and didn't really get the appeal. He knew of course that these were considered a delicacy, that they were the height of the hoity-toity, but

having tried them, he didn't see what all the fuss was about. Frankly, a beer-battered pork roast with some Sunday night football was much better.

He slumped in his chair and surveyed the restaurant before him. The food wasn't the point of course; he was here on business, here in the heart of the upper class, the rich and untouchable, a den of such secret depravities the world couldn't even begin to guess. But Deo could. He knew them all and now he looked through the crowd for the perfect dishonest man. He wasn't exactly lacking for options. There was Rutherford Saint, the Emergent Heights "philanthropist" who dumped chemical byproducts from his factories into the rivers of third-world countries. There was Caroline Graff, who had more endangered species in her wardrobe than cellulite on a fat man's ass. And then there was happy-go-lucky, ever-popular Chuck Smith, who was in reality the famed 1930s diamond thief Sylvia Fox.

But, Deo decided, sometimes simple is best. So he walked up to Derek Sanders and sat down at his table.

"Can I help you?"

"Nah, son, it's about how I can help you."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"It can be tough, can't it? Working all day as CEO, holding the fate of nations in your hands, and then to come home to some shrew who can't be bothered to be nice, much less put out."

"I don't know what you..."

"Must be why you've been spending so many nights with that sweet little secretary of yours. Jessica, I think her name is. So eager to please, so much more friendly than the wife."

"Listen, sir, I don't like what you're implying..."

"Believe me, I get it. I cheated on all six of my wives. Sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. And sometimes a man's gotta pay to keep what he's gotta do quiet so he can keep right on doin' it."

"Yes, I see what this is about. Listen, Mr..."

"Genis."

"Mr. Genis, would you please look to your right."

Deo did just that and found sitting right beside him at the same table a slender, angry woman with fire in her eyes and a steak knife in her hand. And being the gentleman he was, Deo tipped his hat and greeted her:

"Mrs. Sanders. Lovely evening we're having, isn't it?"

She punched him in the trunk and knocked over his chair.

This, Deo decided, was a good indication that he had perhaps overreached himself. So he climbed to his feet, bypassed all the snobs and found a young busboy at an isolated table.

"Hey, kid," he whispered.

"Yeah?"

"I know you're planning on looting the safe tonight. How would you like to make it easy on yourself? You pay me now and I'll give you the combo."

"But I already know the combo," the kid snapped back quietly.

"No, you don't."

“Sure I do. It’s 5-6-9-0-8.”

“No, it ain’t. It’s 7-0-0-0-6.”

“Oh. My bad.”

It took a minute for what he just did to sink in and then Deo slunk back to his table and ordered another plate of snails. He was never any good at this stuff. He wasn’t really good at anything to be honest. But he thought now it would be better, now that he had the sword and the skin and the totality of all knowledge in the entire universe. Surely there was a way to make money off of that. But even though he knew everything, even though he possessed every objective fact that could ever be known – even the ones that never would be – he still couldn’t figure out what to do with any of it.

He collapsed onto his table and realized that he was just an idiot. Everybody always told him he was an idiot and he refused to believe them, he just knew they had to be wrong. He had to have something, something that was uniquely his, some talent or skill or idea, and he would show them all. But here he was with exactly what he had been searching for and the greatest knowledge he could glean from all the data he now possessed was that he was still a loser.

He lifted his head again and discovered that the whole restaurant had fallen deathly silent. Not a mouth moved, not one plate shuffled. No silverware clanged and no voices sounded. And every face, from every customer, every waiter and busboy and cook and host was all facing him, looking straight at him with unblinking eyes, looking straight through him. And it was then that Deo felt a tingling across his whole body, a great and unceasing shiver. There was something behind him, something dangerous and terrible and most disturbingly unknowable. He summoned his ivory sword and whipped around to hold it to the creature’s throat, to a throat covered in matted white fur and upon which sat a head that held yellow eyes that glowed in such a way as to suggest that they had seen the whole of the cosmos and knew without question that the creature who beheld it was better by far.

Deo jumped back as he realized what he saw, as he knew the animal before him was the feared and marveled Monkey Boy.

“It’s the little things that get to you in the end,” Celia said glumly “Sure, you’ll have the assholes and the entitled coming in and thinking they deserve a 50% discount or that they can alter store policy however they see fit because clearly it doesn’t apply to them. There will always be that one guy who will blame you because he bought the wrong thing and opened it before realizing he’s an idiot. And he’ll yell at you and insult you and threaten you over policies that you can’t dictate. And you can’t ever respond, not really, you can’t treat them as they treat you because they’ll yell toward a manager and get you fired or post your name to an online message board like the self-important pricks that they are and damage your ability to get a different job.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Alice screamed finally. Celia had been going on like this for an hour: just griping, griping, endless griping. First about aesthetic standards, then classism, then bureaucrats, always the bureaucrats. And now...

“But it’s not the ones who are clearly dipshits that get to you; it’s not for them and their petty senses of entitlement and their ultimately impotent outbursts that you finally snap. They just frustrate, wear you down so the little irritations break you; the demanding customer is the HIV of retail. And in the end, it’s not he who gets you, it’s the poor,

stupid sop who calls into the toy store with questions like: ‘Do you all sell toys here?’ ‘What kind of toys do you have?’ ‘How much are your toys?’ ‘Can you describe to me all the toys you have in stock right now?’ He’s the one to get snubbed or chastised because he *is* annoying and persistent and eventually he just becomes too much.”

“Oh, I get it. You’re channeling, aren’t you? All those other personalities...”

“He doesn’t mean to be a problem, he’s just dumb. And producers don’t mean to be so narrow-minded, they’re just scared. And the preppies don’t want to be so self-involved, but they are busy and...”

“Yeah, that’s nice, but what does this have to do with what you saw?”

“...And the coworkers and detectives who shun you and mock you are really just hiding their own self-doubts.”

“Okay, now you’re pushing it.”

“This is where it begins, Alice, with the persistent irritations, the tiny cruelties, the unintentional unkindnesses, this is what leads us all to the place where monsters come from.”

The large, bepimpled bully huffed in rancid breaths of stale peanut butter and possibly old eggs. He ranted about showing off, about smugness, about kissing up and making people look stupid. He still had Zack pinned to the locker by two arms thicker than the walls and at least ten times as sturdy. His poisonous breath was making it hard to focus and his thoughts seemed scattered at best. But with a bit of effort and resilience, Zack was able to deduce the heart of his grievances.

And he wanted to say something, wanted to scream out, wanted to tell this bully that it was his own fault he couldn’t count and that maybe if he took a bath and washed off that sweat and grime, some thoughts might actually be able to penetrate his big, bone head. But he didn’t, he couldn’t really.

The bully leaned in close, so close that his smell overpowered all others. His aroma was Zack’s whole world now. He put his face right up to Zack’s horribly oppressed nose and warned him, threatened him, insulted him with names that morons and two-year-olds might think were clever, a constant parade of indignities and gibes that were offensive only through their utter oafishness.

Zack wanted to respond, to tell the bully off with any one of a million insults he could think of, any one of a million comebacks that would put his aggressor’s piddling efforts to shame, but again he didn’t. And it wasn’t fear, it wasn’t cowardice or flight-instinct that bade him quiet, but the rules.

So as the bully released him and sauntered off down the hall, singing a song of gibes and threats, Zack simply sat there and absorbed it because when it came to this bully, he didn’t have anything nice to say, so he couldn’t say anything at all.

Monkey Boy glared at him like the sun glares at the moon and Deo froze in place before his great nemesis. He knew a million ways to fight back of course. He knew equations and formulae that could create weapons of such destructive power that the planet itself would be reshaped – most likely into a trapezoid. He knew of secrets and gases, strange chemical concoctions that would turn the flesh inside-out. He could fashion bombs that could shatter mountains, blades that could pierce titanium, guns that could shoot fire and bullets at the same time. All he needed was some plutonium or

napalm or razor-thin diamond filament or anthrax or at the very least some basic plastique and he could kill ten Monkey Boys simultaneously.

Unfortunately, he had none of these things, so he threw a plate instead.

But the worst part, the truly most maddening thing was that Deo knew, he was absolutely certain, that he alone possessed some grand secret truth about Monkey Boy, he alone knew what was very likely the only concrete fact about his existence, everything else having been buried under layers of mythology and legend and interpretation. But he couldn't quite access it. It was lost in his mind amid a sea of random Monkey Boy related tidbits and his brain couldn't parse the minutia quickly enough to sift out the useless bits from the crucial information.

He knew for example that in exactly three seconds Monkey Boy would whip him across the face with his tail and knock him across the room, but he pushed that aside, knowing that deep below it there was a kernel fact, a pivotal piece of data that could end Monkey Boy forever. The task of locating it however was not made any easier when Monkey Boy whipped him across the face with his tail and knocked him across the room.

Deo recovered and again noticed the other patrons, each and every one of them sat frozen at their tables, their eyes fixed in one specific direction: not at the fight, but at Monkey Boy himself. No sounds were made, no food was eaten. Everyone just sat there, awed into submission by the strange unknowable creature before them. Deo knew what they felt when they saw him: the elation, the lightness, the comfort, the sense that all the evil in the world was melting away. He understood it, but in a fact-based, detached, objective kind of way. Because when he looked at Monkey Boy, when he looked into those blazing yellow eyes, all he could feel was shame.

And assailed as he was by regrets, by failures and memories better left buried, he wanted to lash out, wanted to attack, wanted to build a bazooka out of forks if necessary and blow that rotten varmint of a primate straight back to Tallahassee.

But instead he just threw another plate.

The plates accomplished nothing though. And so faced with no recourse, no options and no ideas, Deo fell back onto a very basic instinct: he ran. He ran fast and far, never stopping, never looking back lest the white shadow that now hunted him locked gazes and reminded him once more of the man he used to be, the man he never wanted to be again.

Zack sat alone at lunch that day. He picked at the mush they dumped on his tray and tried to decipher whether it was originally carrots, peas or hotdogs. He sampled it and decided it tasted more like month-old bananas and pushed it aside. He laid his head down on the empty lunch table and listened to his stomach growl like a sacred beast denied its offering of firstborns. It snarled and raged and threatened to devour itself and then every other organ after it if its hunger was not satisfied. But Zack just sat there, unwilling to comply, unable to comply. And so his stomach roared on.

But then a smell captured them both, enraptured them both. It was a sweet aroma that wafted gracefully around his head and slid down his throat and soothed his angry stomach. He looked up from the table and saw sitting before him a cupcake, golden and soft and topped with chocolate frosting and sprinkles. And yet fixated on this mysterious morsel as he was, he still felt his gaze drawn up further to see sitting on the other side of the table a girl, a pretty girl he supposed with red hair and a stern, but sympathetic face.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” he responded, cautiously and warily, for he knew the stories, he knew why the boys avoided the girls and their kisses and crushes, he knew of the strange bugs they carried, the bugs that could infect little boys and turn them into saps, the bugs that could come from anywhere: from holding their hands, to eating the cupcakes they gave you.

But then he noticed something peculiar. In his careful examination of the pretty, but suspicious girl, he noticed that she too was looking back at him, eyeing him cautiously, looking at his skin as though she thought something might be crawling there. And in that sight, a great and relieving truth washed over him.

She smiled at him then and all his anxiety and fear melted away like so much ice cream. It was a relieved, delighted sort of smile that sank into his mind, the sort of smile he knew he would return to in future years to lighten his heart on the bad days.

They talked for so long after that. She was actually pretty cool... for a girl. She liked baseball and hockey and she watched *Super Samurai Space Fish*, the show about interstellar cyborg goldfish that saved the universe from Dominio and his legion of demonic caribou. She liked reading, but hated math; she liked chocolate, but hated month-old banana. And she kept smiling at him and although he couldn't quite figure out why or where, there was definitely some part of Zack that liked it when she smiled at him.

The bell warning that lunch was nearly over sounded and then fell off the wall and the girl reminded Zack about the cupcake he still hadn't eaten. His stomach reiterated this point and he turned greedily toward it, realizing now that this girl wasn't like other girls and he didn't need to fear the ravenous throng of mysterious insects that he once suspected to have nested in the depths of that wanted pastry. But as he moved to take it up and devour it whole, he found it strangely absent. It was definitely there when he went to grab it, but as his hand reached the table, it clasped only empty gas.

A chuckle from his left told him what had happened. The bully stood there, holding his cupcake and laughing to himself.

Zack pleaded with him to return it, apologized a thousand-fold for his alleged transgressions in class and begged that he and the bully could come to a solid understanding and mutual respect. It was just like the rules said: treat others as you want to be treated. If he treated the bully with respect, the bully would respond in kind.

But in the end the bully just gulped down the entirety of the cupcake.

It didn't make sense though. That should have worked. The rules said it would work. Zack was confused and that confusion bred frustration and that frustration bred rage. He lunged at the bully, but the bully just swatted him away like he was nothing, knocked him clear over to the other side of the table. The pretty girl rushed to Zack's aid and helped him up. He took her soft, warm hand as she pulled him to his feet and he forgot himself for a moment.

It was his stomach that reminded him, though, brought him back to himself and compelled him to move past the pretty girl and confront the bully again. But the bully was gone, already leaving the cafeteria and Zack stood there alone in a world he found made absolutely no sense.

“The world, you see, is completely absurd. It's run by politicians more inclined to avoiding controversy than protecting their constituents. Insurance companies have more

say over your well-being than your doctor. You have media experts who make careers off of vilifying you for the terrible crime of growing up. Music is nothing but recycled trends anyway and yet moving from one demographic to another condemns you.

“But it’s not enough to simply see the inherent absurdity of the world. You have to hate it, it and everyone that promotes it. You have to want to wipe out the customers and the managers and the media and the landlords and the colleges and the movie industry and the coworkers and the whole scientific community. Once you have achieved that level of rage, then and only then does it appear to you, the Big Swirly Green Thing. It appears to you and takes you on its back, on one of its many sides, each one a personalized maze of despairs.

“You could be forced to wade through a sea of strangers, each of them with a stamp that they use to forever brand you as ‘Idiot’ or ‘Rude’ or ‘Not suited to working with people.’ They stamp you and trod on you until you are more label than man all while demanding impossible things of you. ‘I want a unicorn,’ they say, ‘One with racing stripes.’ ‘I want the three-prism core of creation, from whose matrices all mythology emerges’ ‘What do you mean you don’t sell that?’ ‘What kind of toy store is this?’ And as you walk to places unknown, they condemn you unilaterally for not meeting their demands.

“Or you could try to navigate a thousand rooms, each with a million doors and each with a billion forms to be filled out in triplicate before they can be opened. You can spend seventy thousand years that pass as time in a dream, reach the end of the labyrinth only for some needle-nosed troglodyte to inform you that you forgot to pick up the Final Door Access Waiver at the first room and thus begin the cycle anew.

“There could just as easily be a crowd of faceless people, all of whom stare at your strange and unique features with ageless contempt. They assault you, tear at you, pull off the nose you have but they don’t, remove the eyes they don’t need to see, the ears that don’t grace their heads and the lips they don’t need for none of them have anything interesting to say. Only when you’re as faceless as they are do they accept you, but then all you can think about, all that occurs to you is that you’re bleeding to death.

“But worse I think is the empty terrain, an endless expanse of desert that you must tread alone, hearing over and over the happy laughter of faces you can never find, going mad from loneliness.

“But then there is the sea, an endless ocean with only one raft, a raft that currently holds one more person than it can support. It is a raft filled with gluttons and buffoons, food hoarders and would-be murderers and then you, you who enabled their freedom, who constructed the raft, who knows how to navigate with it. You are the one deemed obsolete and cast into the empty abyss of the ocean.

“And then there’s the dark room, where you stand naked beneath a searing spotlight so that faceless and nameless murmurers can critique you as you grow older. You remain there from birth to death, never once escaping judgment for every inch you grow or for every wrinkle you develop or for every change your body makes.”

“Yes, I get it,” Alice said finally, “you’ve all been through some bad times. Who hasn’t? But you’re still dodging the question, Celia, what is so special about you seven that you mutate or change? And where did those swords come from?”

“From the Big Swirly Green Thing of course. Though perhaps that isn’t the most apt of descriptions, as its appearance changes from person to person, as does its role. But

I think one thing we can all agree on is that at its heart and like everything else you've encountered in the past months, it is a beast, the Ultimate Beast you might say."

A great and terrible roar echoed throughout the halls, alerting no one for no one was actually there, save for a drunken and half-awake janitor, who wrote it off as the bellicose greeting of a disgruntled mother-in-law and pushed it out of his mind.

Zack currently sat suspended some five, six feet in the air, held aloft in the powerful hands of an especially angry bully, who shook him violently against the lockers, creating a racket that bounced down the empty halls and a sort of humming that ricocheted off the interior of his skull.

The bully raved and hissed and howled and railed against Zack's latest attempt to resolve their conflict. After the incident at lunch, he went straight to the teacher and told her everything. The pretty girl followed him, insisting all the way that it wouldn't do any good, that it would probably just make things worse. He really should have listened to her, she seemed to know what she was talking about.

But instead he followed the rules and told the teacher everything: about the threats, about the cupcake, everything. And she took the bully over to her desk, scolded him harshly, put him in time-out for several minutes and then released him back into the world, angrier now than he had ever been. His face blazed red and his eyes reflected a primal fury, the rage of the ancient Tyrannosaurs upon realizing their distant mammalian cousins – while infinitely less mighty than they – could easily best them at arm wrestling.

Yet still, he subdued his fire and dropped Zack, choosing instead the traditional challenge of schoolyard ruffians and old world fops alike. He told Zack they would meet in one-on-one combat tomorrow after school on the old playground out back. If Zack failed to show, then he would apparently die. If he did make his appointment, however, he would – as the bully sadistically assured him – die faster.

The bully sauntered off then. And Zack made his way to the front to meet his mom. He glumly sidled over to his locker and grabbed his bag and then slowly worked his way through the halls, as options slowly worked their way through his brain. He could tell the teacher again, but that wouldn't likely resolve the problem any better than last time. He could tell his parents, who could then call the bully's parents and settle him that way. But what if the bully's parents were themselves bullies? Wouldn't this then have the same effect as telling the teacher?

It was hopeless. And he tried to stay positive, tried to remember that he had a whole day yet to come up with a plan, but reality sank in too deeply and grim epiphanies burst like supernovas in his thoughts. The rules, he realized, were wrong. They made no sense. No one else was playing by them. The teachers didn't enforce them and the bullies probably didn't even know them. So what good were they? And if no one else cared about the rules, why should he? What was stopping him in the end from marching out to that fight tomorrow and instead of reasoning with the bully or placating him, picking up the biggest rock he could hold and bashing his empty head in? Would that, he wondered, make him feel better in the end?

The world colluded with him in his fury, locker doors opened and closed with increasing ferocity, classroom windows shattered and through the doorway to what looked like a science lab, Zack could see that the sun had disappeared. Not simply set, but vanished completely. What existed outside at that particular moment was not night as

we know it, but the absent remnant of day when all light is gone, a frigid abyss from which heat and hope and love have been removed and replaced only with snow.

A fierce wind blew through the hall, carrying the damp dandruff of the aging and wicked old gods down through the school, whipping past Zack and freezing his feet in place. An insidious winter claimed everything as its own and Zack stood there, paralyzed and cold and staring off into a lightless void from whose center he thought he could hear the faintest, almost unintelligible, echo of footsteps emerge. The sound grew louder, closer, and Zack could feel the sweat on his forehead freezing instantly and pinching his skin. Closer still. The footsteps were undeniable now. Something clearly lurked in this unholy realm and it was coming for him. Closer again. And now Zack thought he could see something. The slightest outline, but there was something there. Something small, he could tell, maybe only his height, but something that radiated a kind of aura, a sensation that bypassed his senses altogether and spoke directly to his soul.

And given the sudden tightness and tingling he felt all along his body, he assumed that whatever it was saying was not kind.

The footsteps drew closer one last time and the thing stepped into the light. Zack saw it and it was small, a strange sort of beast that walked on its haunches and whose eyes saw not food or lust or shelter – the only things beasts typically see – but destiny and order and chaos and salvation and ruination and galaxies and thoughts and dreams and fears. This was the sort of beast that took interest in humans not for fear or food, but for purpose, a grand and sacred purpose through which life itself would be irrevocably altered. As it walked, the snow melted away and the ice that held Zack's legs released its grip. The strange creature approached him and examined him, looked him up and down and grunted. And Zack dreaded it, dreaded what its arrival portended, dreaded for what terrible ambition the beast had appeared before him.

The beast then shook its head, kicked him in the shin and walked away.

“And so what, this beast shows up, reminds you why you hate everybody, gives you a sword and sets you to it?”

“No, that's not it at all. Everything you see while you ride the beast's back is a fabrication of your own mind. You put yourself through it. The beast strides a realm that doesn't actually exist, a purely memetic sphere composed of ideas, comprised of every thought, notion, ambition, achievement, invention and word of every mind ever. It's a dimension where streams echo philosophy, where the land is built upon music and cities are made of poetry. It is where custom, not physics, determines the cycles of night and day and where fiction is as real as history. It's the sum total of our personalities, our standards, our rules, our ethics.

“And buried deep inside it there is a lonely field where we all must visit, a place that each and every one of us inhabits every second of our lives; it is where we decide truly and with finality who we are.”

“And how do we do that?”

“We battle. And that's what the beast shows you: the battle you fight everyday without knowing you fight it. It swoops through clouds that are not clouds, through mists formed not of vapor but algebraic equations and through winds that whisper jokes not yet written; and through it all you see the field and a single figure standing upon it. And

before you realize how much that figure resembles you, it becomes you and you become it and you stand alone on that field as the beast takes its destined place opposite you.”

“And then what?”

“And then you fight it. You fight the only battle that ever truly matters, you fight with everything you have. But only soon do you realize that the outcome has already been determined.”

“I can help you kill your husband.”

“My word, how presumptuous!”

“Now, don’t you give me that, missy. I know who you be. I know your husband is richer than Grandmammy’s chocolate pudding and I know you’re just hanging around waiting for him to die. Taking a bit too long though, ain’t it? Well, lucky for you then, darlin’, that I know an allergy, a secret allergy that he hides from everyone, the sort of allergy that could let someone who knew about it get away with murder. And to learn it, all you gotta do is pay me.”

The woman waffled in uncertainty, taking nervous glances around her, meeting the eyes of strangers. Deo hadn’t realized they’d drawn so much attention to themselves. He must have been talking louder than he thought. But he didn’t care. He was too insane at this point to care. It should have been so simple. Why did everybody insist on complicating these things? They all had things they wanted, information they needed, information that he was happy to provide at a reasonable cost, but they simply insisted on remaining in ignorance. And it drove him to such insanity because he couldn’t for the life of him figure out why.

“Damn it, you cheap, two-faced harlot, just give me the cash and you’ll get everything you ever wanted. Why is this so hard for you to understand?”

The woman stopped waffling then. She stopped glancing around nervously. Instead she smiled a wry, sadistic kind of smile. And then this woman – this haughty, high-heeled, hyper-fashionista in an overpriced dress, who used words like Chanel and Prada like Christians used the names of the Apostles – unleashed unto his poor, poor trunk the sort of spinning kick that would make the world’s best ninja look like a third-grader with a paper sword.

And he flew backward, back into the sign, the glittering monstrosity that read: “Wet Season Wharves and Eateries,” or at least it did until he hit it and the “v” fell off and bonged him on the head.

But his skin these days was thick, his skull even thicker, so this proved little more than a minor irritation. The greater annoyance came from the people, the cursed, laughing, useless people who were all simply too stupid to understand the value in what he was offering them. In blind rage, he picked up that wayward letter and hurled it straight into the sky, only for it to come thundering down some distance away, cracking through the wooden dock planks and plunging eternally into the sea.

And yet no one said anything. No one made a movement or sound or reaction. And Deo looked at them as they looked elsewhere with that familiar silent awe. And as his own dread set in, as he again felt reduced in the way of an ant standing in the company of giants or an illiterate serf in the presence of gods, as every voice of every teacher, of every parent or friend or boss chimed in chanting one word that haunted him continuously over and over again throughout the ages, as everyone he had ever met called

him an idiot, he knew what it signified. Or more to the point, he knew as he knew all things what it was that stood behind him. He knew the Monkey Boy glared at him through impossible eyes and he turned – unsteady, unsure, unready – to face it.

His ivory sword materialized in his hand: smooth, firm and indomitable. Monkey Boy lurked in the distance, cracking his tail against the planks and blasting Deo with every thought and word and face that over his life made him hate himself. But no more. Deo trumpeted an elephantine roar and stormed across the docks, the wood creaking in utter agony beneath his weighty steps, sometimes breaking under a particularly heavy footfall. But he continued his charge, racing through a blinding red haze of sensation and regret, racing straight ahead until finally something stopped him, something repelled him and knocked him on his back.

Everything was too much a blur for Deo to truly perceive just what had happened, but he knew of course. He knew everything. He knew that for all his weight and muscle, all the little Monkey Boy had to do to stop him was whip his tail across his face.

Zack actually showed up to his fight with the bully, though he never really did decide on why. The bully's threat of a worse kind of death was hardly motivating and Zack never for a moment believed he stood a chance in a straight fight. But he figured that running away, deferring the pain, wasn't going to end things, that in angering the bully further it might only worsen them. He needed to end this somehow. Whether he fought the bully on his own terms or followed the rules, he couldn't just let it sit. Whatever the resolution may be, avoiding the conflict altogether was surely not the way to reach it.

This was a very practical reason of course, but not one that actually occurred to Zack as the schoolday pressed on. In fact, when he thought of the forthcoming duel, he never once worried or dreaded or considered evading it altogether. It always seemed a given that he would be there, that he would face the bully and – this is where the thoughts got weird – that he would win. He couldn't explain it, it was just this inkling in his head, but still, he somehow knew with absolute certainty that it was right.

He reached the old playground to find it littered with rusted slides and equipment, overgrown grass and apparently every student in the whole school. He recognized faces from class, from the halls and from the cafeteria. Even the pretty girl was there, smiling at him in that way she did. The bully himself stood imposingly at the center of the crowd, waving his arms and fanning applause like fire in a forge. Zack knew then that reasoning with him was impossible, that the rules didn't apply here. The bully wasn't there to settle with him, he wanted to humiliate him and in the process trump up himself. He didn't want reconciliation. He wanted to put on a show.

But when Zack walked toward him as the wrongly accused walked toward the gallows, another revelation came to him. As he passed the new and familiar faces, as they held out their arms and patted his back, as they yelled to him and cheered: "Way to go, Jack! Way to go, Jack!" Zack realized they weren't there to see him splattered across the playground like so much putty. They were there to see someone finally put that idiot bully in his place.

Unfortunately, the bully too seemed to pick up on this and he stopped waving his arms and growled like a hungry alligator at a salad bar. His face turned a new color, not pale or brown or red or blue or purple – the colors which under varying circumstances

faces can normally attain – but a sort of silver, which glowed sickly in the sunlight and gave him the impression of Death on its own deathbed. Even knowing the futility of it, Zack still tried to reason with him. He tried to apologize, he knelt down and begged, he complimented, he praised, he bargained, he offered up his prized Blue Space Fish action figure (the most sought after of them all), but it was no use. The only thing the bully had to say to him was something that could never be truly expressed with words.

So he walked up and punched Zack in the face.

Deo rose and charged again the hated Monkey Boy, but the vile elf simply leapt out of the way and kicked him the back of the head. His next attack, Deo knew, would be to spin around and hit him with the tail again. And so Deo braced himself for the impact as the inevitable blow hurled straight through the air into a nearby shop.

But as Deo picked the ice and the fish and that one very grabby lobster off of him and stood back to his feet, something remarkable happened, like the blooming of a single flower in an endless tundra or catching that rare glimpse of the streaking comets that come by only once every two lifetimes. He had a thought. Whether it was because something was dislodged in his head from all the tail strikes or whether the law of averages finally shined its holy light upon him, he didn't know.

But he did know something much better, something much more significant. He knew every single one of Monkey Boy's attacks beforehand. And moreover, he realized, if he knew the future in advance, he had the power to alter it.

Monkey Boy raced at him then, lunged at him as Deo knew he would, but this time the elephant stood ready and this time as Monkey Boy flew to him – claws and tail outstretched – he found not a helpless target, but a powerful gray arm that swatted him away.

“Ha!” Deo galumphed. “You see that there, you varmint, you can't beat me now. To know the future is to control the future and I know the future. So why don't you hustle your furry little backside on outta here, so's a man can complete his business in peace.”

Monkey Boy was not about to do any hustling though. And so Deo's brain sifted through its vast repository of knowledge – past the equations for harnessing antimatter, past the cures for all known diseases, past the names and birthdays of every *Playboy* Bunny since 1956 – to that soft spot that contained all known facts about Monkey Boy, including his every attack and every strategy he would implement in each battle before this one and each battle to come. He locked on to these strategies, kept his brain focused and rushed once more at his enemy. As Monkey Boy jumped, Deo caught him, as Monkey Boy attacked, Deo repelled him.

But with each counter, Deo wearied; with each new stage, he grew exhausted. Every block tired him, every dodge caused his muscles to groan and every counterattack was delivered slower than the last. But his mind never abated. It shouted instructions to a body less and less able to receive them until finally and inevitably, Deo moved too slow and he was kicked sideways. His brain continued to warn him, told him of how Monkey Boy intended next to pounce, to pin him to the ground and that the best way to evade this was...

Then his eyes caught sight of some random piece of the dock and his brain flashed anew with archaic trivia about when these docks were built, about how they were originally used predominantly by whiskey smugglers in noble, experimental days of yore.

It told him of how before that, this was wild land, occupied by large crabs and creatures now lost to the world. It told him of past times, primal times, times before society and humanity, times before laws and rules, times when the only two sides of any debate were those disinclined to being eaten and those who were hungry. His vision became so all-encompassing that as he fell he didn't land on the hard wood dock, but on the soft soil of a primordial world.

And then he saw something else, something he saw once before on that dark day when he felt at his worst. He saw this thing now born into the world, a birth that seemed to rend time itself and transplant this beast from places and periods unknown. And as it took shape and form and guise, it looked around itself, took stock of its entire existence and let out a loud impatient sigh that shook the cosmos across all eons.

The beast then transformed, diffused itself into a landscape that lost its ancient trees in favor of streetlamps and its soil for docks and its grass and creatures for stores and awestruck throngs, the beast changed and grew fur, short white fur and a long white tail and two bulbous searing yellow eyes.

Deo lay now pinned to the dock with the Monkey Boy looming atop him. It grinned a sly grin and Deo saw for the first time that its mouth was filled with the same fire as its eyes, that the fire must burn through its entire body. And as he looked into that gaping inferno, all he knew of Monkey Boy stepped aside, pulling back all other facts into the recess of his mind, so that one thing could take the stage, one grand truth that lingered just out of reach all night. And so Deo looked up to his aggressor and in an astonished whisper, muttered:

“I know who you are.”

“You're nothing!”

The words seemed to echo from everywhere and bounce off of everything. Was he hearing them then? Had he heard them before? Or was he hearing them later?

Zack lay pinned to the ground, enduring everything, unable to resist as the bully unleashed such an assault on him as to make horror movie directors wince. His head throbbed, his face bled and a stinging ache ran up and down his spine, teasing and tingling him, promising him relief one second and then stealing it back the next.

“You're useless!”

Another fist left Zack briefly in a strange white room, a glowing kind of crystal hall that shattered and brought him thundering back to brutal reality where only pain resided.

“You're stupid!”

The bully picked Zack up this time, holding him by his throat and throttling him.

Reflex seemed to take over then, reflex and resentment, and an instinctual desire to make all of this stop. Zack reached out with one battered and bleary hand, grabbed the bully by the nose and twisted and twisted and twisted until a loud snapping sound drowned out his own terrible sobs.

The bully dropped him then and a certain elation came over him. He was tired, hurt, scared, crying and woozy. But he was also winning. Zack scrambled to his feet and found a nearby stick, splintered it seemed from an old wooden merry-go-round, and he grabbed it and moved in for the bludgeon.

But then he saw the bully and he realized that not all the sobs in that playground came from his own mouth. He saw the once mighty titan in the tadpole t-shirt weeping into one hand, while the other held his broken nose in a desperate bid to keep the blood from coming out. All the menace, all the terror and thievery he once emanated so effortlessly fell away and as Zack looked at him he cried all anew. He felt sick in a way he hadn't felt since he accidentally flushed his cousin's goldfish down the toilet. But it was worse now. Elation came to despair and despair became hatred, absolute pure hatred for the thing he had done.

That same hate resonated in the eyes of the bully and Zack looked into those angry, sad, terrible, tragic eyes and dropped the stick.

"I'm sorry," he said.

The bully however didn't care. He grabbed Zack, threw him to the ground and repeatedly stomped on his head. One massive boot after the other, brain cells being crushed, others fleeing in terror. Thoughts faded away. Reason died altogether. And soon all that remained was instinct, pure primal instinct, instinct dating back to days before days, time before time, life before Man. A bestial fury radiated all throughout Zack and he caught the bully's foot in one hand and pushed him off. He climbed to his feet once more and he changed, changed into something no one could know.

Deo knew Monkey Boy. Or at least he knew the last great secret about Monkey Boy. Though that wasn't to say he knew everything about him. He knew all his forms, yes. His strategies and weapons also. He knew the enemies that had been defeated and how. But these were minor things, simple facts any observant person could pick up from anywhere. But there were some things about Monkey Boy that would always escape revelation. His origins would be clouded now and forever in the heady mists of causation, the mechanism of his powers eluded simple physicality and would always be perhaps most simply regarded as magic and his motives were too grand, too significant for the human mind to ever properly contain. But there was one thing, one tiny fact – insignificant really in itself, but crucial in what it represented – that Deo and only Deo could know.

"I know your real name," he proudly announced to his opponent and to the stifled crowds amassed there. "I know that you were once a person, a human boy, that you had family and friends and fish. I know you Monkey Boy. Tarnation do I know you, but not by the silly title you have so gracelessly appended to yourself. No, I know you as you don't even know yourself and I know that you are really Zachary Zane."

Zack felt a series of needles beneath his skin, poking and testing and eventually shoving their way out in the form of small, white hairs. His fingers started to itch and claws then popped out where his nails used to be. And then came the smells. All around him the smells, little smells like tar and old eggs and gym socks and things all coming from the huddled mass of onlookers circling the playground. But there was one smell stronger than the others, a tinny smell, acrid and unpleasant, the sort of thing one imagines mean might smell like if indeed mean could smell. And it grew worse, like a skunk coming closer, and Zack soon discovered why.

The bully was coming toward him, completely undeterred by his recent metamorphosis, driven only by rage and pain. Zack reacted again on instinct. He turned

his back to the bully and felt a most undesirable sensation as a long tail rushed outward from under his spine. He coiled this new appendage around his foe and hurled the demon child up into the treetops.

He had done it. He had vanquished the hated bully who tormented the school. And so he stood back and awaited the victorious chants of his grateful audience.

But no chants were forthcoming.

As he looked around, he saw only the confused and worried glances of his classmates who looked at him now as they looked at the kid who still had to wear diapers to school. And slowly, very slowly, the crowd dissipated. Some walked calmly and indifferently away. Others ran. Others cried while they ran. In any case, they all acted on their desire to be as far away from him as they could get. And as they left, the din of unwanted smells left with them, the toxic cloud slowly faded until only one scent remained, one scent so distinct from the others, one simple and alluring smell: Blueberries wafted through the air, pulling on his nostrils and dragging him to their source.

The pretty girl was still there. And he leapt to her side, tried to take her hand into his, tried to take some comfort in his one friend staying with him after everything. But she snatched her hand away from his because in the end pretty girls don't often like little boys with prehensile tails. And she too ran away, leaving him to stand by himself by the rubble of playgrounds past and beneath the discouraged whines of the tree-mounted bully, leaving him more alone than he ever was before.

Every last inch of Zack died then, fading into a psychic coma, locked deep beneath the mind of the monkey for years unknown. All his thoughts and dreams and memories and humanity slept and recovered, peeking out only occasionally as one sometimes wakes only to fade immediately back into slumber. And so Zachary Zane remained, lost and unaware, until one night on a crowded dock deep within a city that used to be a forest, he at last woke up.

Monkey Boy heard the crashing of the waves, the creaking of wood and the arrogant laughs of the Stinky Thing. New sounds flooded his mind, sounds that became words, words that floated out through the world and clung to things. The wooded ground became a dock, the Stinky Thing was an elephant, the large stone trees in the distance were now buildings and the he-things and she-things that surrounded him, they became people. The forest became a city in the wake of two words that had always sat somewhere in the back of Monkey Boy's mind, dormant and unheeded, but now vibrantly alive and eager to escape.

"Ha, you high-falooting scoundrel, I got you, I got you. I know what you are and now they know it too."

Monkey Boy looked around at the crowd of people. Each of them stirred now, no longer stationary and silent, they fussed and whispered and murmured things they thought he couldn't hear, but that he could hear all too well; things he once would have disregarded as the inarticulate utterances of weird creatures, but now he understood completely and they made his head heavy with sudden shame.

"Now be off you, you little brat, we grown-ups got things to do."

But Monkey Boy didn't really care about the Stinky Thing anymore. He was too focused on what the people now said about him.

“Wait, so he’s really a *boy*? I thought he was some kind of super monkey.”

“No, I guess he’s just a freak kid.”

He hardly noticed as he started to change forms, as his fur became black and bushy, his face wrinkled and dark and his throat loose and baggy.

“So this whole time, our great champion is just some naked kid with a toy sword and a tail?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of creepy.”

“Tell you who I blame. The parents. Who lets their kid run around in the dead of night with no pants? It’s not healthy.”

“It’s not sanitary. Who knows what kind of diseases he might have.”

Once his gibbon form was fully assumed, he opened his mouth and took in a huge swell of air, his throat sack bulging out to greater than the size of his head.

“This is clearly an outrage. It’s a violation of child labor or child abuse or negligence or poor educational systems or healthcare or something. I blame the government!”

And released a colossal gust of wind that blew apart a sizable chunk of the dock, kicked the Stinky Thing up into the air and deposited him somewhere deep past the horizon and even generated a tidal wave that put out an out-of-control wildfire on the distant side of the world.

Monkey Boy then recovered, quickly resumed his normal rate of breathing and returned to his base form. He looked to the assembled voyeurs and smiled victoriously. But they – each and every one of the hundred or so people there – just shrugged their shoulders and let loose a collective:

“Eh.”

“Evil is a construct. We have these ideas about it. That it is older than us, that it is eternal and universal, but in fact we have created it ourselves. Nature has no evil, only society does. It’s one of the great ironies of civilization that its very existence necessitates the generation of the thing that could undo it.”

“Ultimately and ideally though, doesn’t society aspire to be good, to create and defend good?”

“Now, Alice, you are being naïve. Society exists to weed out evil, which often takes the form of the primal, animalistic atavisms of our pre-civilized days. We create rules that dictate what we should *not* do because we perceive these things as harkening back to more indecorous times. Animals kill each other all the time, so humans have decided ‘thou shalt not kill;’ animals have no sense of property or possession, so ‘thou shalt not steal.’ Good simply emerges as a consequence of eliminating evil. If killing is bad, then it stands that saving a life must be good. If stealing is wrong, then tacitly charity becomes noble. But society seldom if ever actively promotes good, but instead vilifies and attacks evil. It plays off the very same primal need to hate and destroy that it allegedly eschews.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re all hypocrites. Get to the point.”

“But we’re not. Not individually. But collectively, that’s another matter. Because, you see, we try to pin evil as universal, as eternal, we send it back in time to before we even exist and build an entire belief system, fabricate a whole reality around this thing we just made up. And it would work just fine, except that every single society on the planet

has done the same thing and their definitions may be contradictory to ours. Nazis are often the common go-to symbol of evil these days, but in their eyes we are the evil ones. A less bombastic example might be that the old world puritanical views about premarital sex can't possibly coexist with modern day disapprovals of homophobia.

"And yet they do. In memetic space, where all human thought and idea exists equally and without bias, where every racial slur is put on equal footing with every criticism of torture, every law against murder, every theory about greed and indolence, every volley of class warfare on both sides – every definition of everything ever considered bad or wrong gets lumped together into one nonsensical, paradoxical mass that we call Evil (capital E, remember)."

"And that's the beast?"

"That's the beast. That's what each of us fights day in and day out unknowingly, unable to win because in the end we're fighting against nothing. It's like trying to punch a shadow. But every time in your life when you question yourself, your belief systems, your notions of entitlement and right and wrong, every time you wonder, you strike a blow against it. And every time you accept without thinking, every time – however slightly – you act against principle or when you do what the rules say you should but reality proves you've done wrong, it strikes a blow against you. And even then, when you question too much, when indecision shrinks you into inaction, the beast simply intimidates you with the enormity of itself, shows you that no matter what you do or how you do it, there is some established definition by which you can be said to have done wrong. And so the battles rages on until you die, neither side ever winning."

"But you seven changed all that somehow, didn't you?"

"We did. Or more likely it was changed for us. The beast came to us and showed us our unconscious war and in so doing made it a conscious war and so we inevitably lose because we know consciously it makes no sense, consciously it is impossible, consciously you can't counter the indefinable. There was no hope. There beast swallowed us all and made us its own."

Celia held out her arm and the familiar ivory sword appeared in her hand. Alice leapt up instantly, drew her gun and ordered her to put it down. But Celia didn't even acknowledge, she just sat there admiring the blade. Within seconds, Dan and about fifteen armed officers were in the room with them.

"You can all relax," Celia said, never rising, never resisting the chains on her legs. "If I wanted to escape, I could vaporize you all instantly. But my role in this is over. I think it had been since Spotlight came into existence. It's all out of my hands now."

She turned and looked Alice in the eye so fiercely that it was like a physical jolt. She almost dropped her gun.

"But it is coming, Alice. Something has changed. Maybe it's more powerful now or maybe just more confused, but it's not sitting back and letting us define it anymore. Through we seven and those like us yet to come, it's becoming real."

"And how are we supposed to stop it?"

"I suppose you need something good, but then what could possibly be deemed that? After all, as I said, Evil is everything."

"But what does that mean? If it's physical, it has to have a single shape. Will it be another animal then? A horse maybe? Or a giraffe? What kind of animal is the most evil?"

“Don’t you know? The beast isn’t supposed to be anything, not really, but if it took form, there’s really only one creature it could be, the one creature that – while not real itself – means something to nearly every civilization on the planet. You already know what it is, everybody should, it’s too obvious. It’s a dragon, Alice, and this sword...”

Celia raised the smooth blade above her head and plunged it deep into the floor so everyone gathered there could see it clearly and then spoke in what seemed to be seven distinct voices all at once.

“...Is one of its teeth.”

Monkey Boy arrived home. Not at an air-cave, but an apartment. It was dark and nobody else was there. This suited him fine. He moved to the place where the water came from – which he now knew was called a bathroom – and flicked the lightswitch, illuminated the place in pale yellow (he never had any theory for how those lights came on before). He moved to the sink and looked himself in the mirror and saw – truly saw for the first time – what Monkey Boy looked like.

His fur was dirty and white and ragged and rough, like it had never been groomed or kept, but subjected to endless and tireless hours of work and fatigue. His eyes and mouth glowed that otherworldly yellow that used to mean nothing to him, but now frightened him for what it portended. He didn’t like this face. It was a tired face, a dirty face, the wrong face. And so he changed, changed again to yet another form.

He felt his tail retract, which was just as uncomfortable as when it first appeared. His fur dissolved entirely, sinking deep into pink skin. His eyes and mouth lost their luster; they were just blue now. And a small patch of blond hair sprouted atop his head. He looked in the mirror now and saw not Monkey Boy, but Zachary Zane for the first time in... who knows how long. He was there, his old self at last, albeit lost, displaced and standing naked in the bathroom of a woman whose name he didn’t remember. But still truly human again.

He laughed, he screamed, he cried joyful tears and he yelled at the top of his lungs every word he could remember. He rambled off sentences about nothing. And he practically toppled over in sheer delight.

But his revels came to an abrupt end when he spotted something else in that mirror. Something cold and capricious and ominously familiar. It was old, impossibly old and dressed ornately. It was a strangely spectral and brown-furred monkey whose bushy mane flowed outward like a beard and stretched to its toes. The beast didn’t stay long and it vanished as inconspicuously as it appeared, fading away in a shimmer and with a single grunt.

But in its place was left a silent warning and an omen of obligation. And Zack looked down at his human hands to see they once again held a sword, a familiar sword with a smooth blade and the ever-ominous shape of a banana.

