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Orson Bean, *Sky & Telescope*

Advance Praise for
Matt Springer's current novel, *Unconventional*

"I haven't read it, but isn't he gay?"

Kitty Carlisle, *Easy Rider*

Mandatory type!

Unconventional

Matt Springer

Alert Nerd Press
Orlando, FL

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Are you really reading this? Why?! Get to the book already! Geez.

For my family—Mom, Dad, Sarah, Emily, and Megan—with inexpressible
gratitude for their love and support.

And for Ginna, my darling—we will live long and prosper!
I love you.

More mandatory type!

Prologue
November 1984

Luke Skywalker was just about to take a tumble into Jabba the Hutt's Rancor pit when Theo got kicked in the balls.

"DORK!" Tommy Livingston screamed as his foot made contact with Theo's groin. Tears welled in Theo's eyes and he dropped to his knees, his hands immediately traveling downward to his crotch. He bent his head and fell onto his side.

Tommy was the top dog in fourth grade—not necessarily the most popular kid, and certainly nowhere near the smartest, but definitely the most feared. The lame, the dorky and the weak cowered in his presence—the mere whispered mention of his name was enough to send Danny Mandernach, the sickly albino kid whose mom walked him to school, into bawling hysterics.

Decades later, all who were tortured by Tommy Livingston would be advised by their therapists that his bullying tactics were little more than an unfortunate response to his premature physical development—in other words, Tommy was shopping in the big boys' section at J.C. Penney well before his contemporaries had left their Osh Kosh outfits behind. And running into him working the counter at the local Wendy's was some consolation once they had overcome the psychic scars brought on by his reign of terror.

But in 1984, the kid was just plain scary. Theo felt the full brunt

of his fearful power as Tommy stood over his agonized form, grinning his half-toothless grin. Behind him, an ogling crew of his top cronies in the playground Gestapo snickered like cartoon vultures. One of them had planted his boot on top of Theo's copy of the *Return of the Jedi* novelization.

"You are a DORK," Tommy screamed again mercilessly. The cronies renewed their giggles.

"Way to state the obvious, Tommy," Theo muttered under his breath as he rolled in agony on the parking lot pavement.

"What did you say, dork?" Tommy was in Theo's face now, leaning over him, all four feet of his hulking frame towering over Theo's inert form.

"Nothing," Theo muttered, rolling away from Tommy. Tommy stared for a moment, chuckled to himself, and then stepped away. The Gestapo followed a few feet behind, their hands fumbling over each other to eagerly slap Tommy's ample back, each occasionally pausing to gawk back at their lead henchman's handiwork.

Aside from the fact that he'd been kicked in the groin—a stripe of blow so vicious that even Tommy Livingston's near-boundless cruelty could only summon the hate necessary to deliver it on rare occasions—this particular day represented an average one for Theodore Makrakis. He'd be minding his own business in the corner during recess at St. Anne's Elementary School in Chicago's south suburbs, perhaps reading a *Choose Your Own Adventure* (he had them all) or studying his *Star Trek Compendium* for episode details he may have missed. Occasionally he'd glance up over his reading, watching not just for Tommy but for any other classmate who might have singled him out on that particular day for a pantsing or verbal taunting. When you were at the bottom of the grade school food chain, everyone wanted their shot, and everyone took it.

He'd be standing there, keeping his eagle-eyed watch, and still Tommy would somehow manage to surprise him—every single time. Then came the pain. If it wasn't a sharp knuckle punch on the upper arm, it was a kick to the shin. If it wasn't a kick to the shin,

it was a punch in the gut. If it wasn't a punch in the gut, it was a knee to the crotch. It was as ritualistic as the sacrifice of the rebels to the Sarlacc pit, and no more enjoyable either. Sometimes he felt like he, too, was learning a new definition of pain and suffering as he was slowly digested over a thousand years.

Still, as his grandmother was so fond of saying, it could be worse. Theo was never sure how, but he was certain there was some way.

Theo crouched cautiously on one knee, eyes saucer-wide, scanning the area for further threats. Fortunately, he was alone again in his corner of the playground. He dusted off his jeans and reached over for his novelization, only to find it missing. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he groaned. First, the daily Tommy assault; now a surprise book heist. It was shaping up to be a super day.

"Hey," a voice shouted from a few feet away. Ron Davies, a kid he recognized from his math class, stood there holding the novelization. He had it opened up to a particular passage and kept glancing down at it, a stunned expression on his face. Next to him, that chubby new kid Marty McAfee was balancing carefully on his tippy-toes and reading over Ron's shoulder.

"That's mine," Theo said, striding over to the pair. This couldn't be good. The other kids only talked to him if they wanted the cheap, sadistic thrills of mocking him or the answers to a pop quiz.

"Have you read this?" Ron asked as Marty kept reading, every so often losing his balance and falling back onto his heels.

"Yeah," Theo replied. "Just give it back. Please."

"No, this part right here." Ron pushed the book into Theo's face. "Obi-Wan doesn't say this in the movie."

Theo had read the *Return of the Jedi* novelization sixty-seven times since he'd begged his mom to pick it up in the checkout line at Venture last May. He would have squeezed in twice as many readings, but his dad kept hiding it around the house to prevent him from disappearing into it too often. Theo knew the section of

which Ron spoke especially well—in the passage detailing Luke’s chat with his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi on Dagobah after Yoda’s death, Obi-Wan delivered a speech about hurling his former pupil Anakin Skywalker into a pit of lava. Of course Obi-Wan didn’t say that in the movie.

“Of course Obi-Wan didn’t say that in the movie,” Theo said.

“Well, that’s weird,” Marty retorted, standing normally again and pushing his sliding glasses back up his nose with a snuffle. “Why not?”

“George Lucas just decided to change it or something,” Ron said. “Maybe he changed his mind.”

“I don’t think George Lucas would change his mind!”

Theo snorted with disgust at their insinuation that George Lucas could ever be wrong about anything. And with that snort, a glob of early winter snot flew from out his nose and straight onto the open page of his book. The three boys stared at the snot for a second, and then Ron stuck out his hand.

“I’m Ron. This is Marty. And that was so cool.”

**August 23, 2001
(Thursday)**

“Man, I told you,” Marty said, dropping the *Return of the Jedi* novelization with disgust. “There is still snot on this book.”

“No way!” Ron lunged over the poker table to grab the novel. He flipped quickly toward the offending page, and there it was—a tiny speck of green, 17-year-old booger. Beneath it, Yoda’s moniker had been shortened by the aged projectile to simply “Yo.” “It is still there! Take it away. It sickens me.” He grasped the book delicately between his thumb and index finger, dangling it with disgust an arm’s length from his body, treating it as though it were a noxious biohazard.

“What can I say?” Theo replied, shuffling a deck of cards. “It’s true vintage.”

“That’s a real classy collectible right there, Ham,” Marty said. They’d stopped calling Theo by his real name in fifth grade, when he’d confessed that of all the known characters in the *Star Wars* universe, his favorite was Hammerhead, a skinny brown creature in a blue tank top who had all of five seconds of screen time in the films. Since this admission, he was addressed as Ham, or Hammy, or occasionally Head.

The trio was gathered in the basement of Ham’s mother’s home, where Ham still lived. It had been the site of many a battle between

the action figure forces of the Rebellion and the Empire throughout their childhoods, as well as one memorable sleepover where Marty unleashed a fart that, Ham claimed, made a small section of wallpaper start to peel. It was also the annual location of their Thursday night poker game before the UnConvention, Schaumburg, Illinois' largest yearly science fiction convention, a game which was about to commence when Marty recalled Ham's snot outburst in second grade and made for the bookcase.

Though Marty and Ron had moved out of their respective homes since graduating college—Marty to an apartment in downtown Chicago, Ron to New York City—Ham had remained here, in South Holland, in his mother's house.

"The attic, not the basement," he usually said when pressed for details. "Only losers live in their parents' basements."

Occasionally he contemplated moving out, but the setup was too sweet—an attic room to call his own and a basement den to decorate however he liked, all for just \$300 a month. This left plenty of extra cash for action figures, comic books and DVDs. Besides, his mom made all his meals and stuffed him with enough home cooking to choke Jimmy Doohan. Not that it showed—he still weighed about 140 dripping wet.

"Will you deal already?" Marty said to Ham, who was staring idly at the ceiling, contemplating boogers and bogarting the deck.

"Damn you! DAAAAAAMN YOOOOOOOOOU!" Ron began screaming in his best Ricardo Montalban Khan impersonation. A lot had changed since second grade for Ron—he'd filled out plenty and earned occasional physical comparisons to a young Harrison Ford—but he still knew every line of *Star Trek II* backwards and forwards.

"Ah, it's nice to have you back in town, mi amigo," Marty sighed. "The finest Ricardo Montalban impersonator in America returns to the Midwest for one weekend only."

"Good to be back, pal. Good to be back." Ron smirked and took a drag off his beer. In moments like these, he regretted leaving town so quickly after college. There was nothing quite like the

fellowship of his best geek buddies.

"I see you so often online, it's like you never left," Marty said. "That's chapter twelve in the new book I'm working on, *How to Tell You're A Pasty White Tech Consultant*. You see your best friends more often online than you do in person." He laughed with Ron at his own joke as he brushed pretzel crumbs off the front of his Chewbacca T-shirt. His slight beer gut tended to act as a shelf for any detritus that happened to fall from his mouth.

"Alright, so is anybody cheating already?" The basement door slammed against the wall with a boom and Toby Gordon entered, the chains on his leather jacket jangling as he walked. Having been purchased in 1977, his constantly flaking coat always looked like it was in danger of falling in frayed pieces off his middle-aged frame. Ditto his torn blue jeans, combat boots and the remaining gray hairs clinging to his head. He dropped a six-pack of Corona bottles off in the fridge and took the fourth seat at the table, popping open his beer as he sat.

"No one's cheating yet," Ron said. "But the night is young."

"Nice to see you, Ronnie." Toby offered his free hand for a shake. "I haven't seen you since...well, since last year at about this time. You still shagging that same bird?"

"Is that all you care about? My sex life?"

"No, that's all *you* care about," Toby said.

"What, no hearty handshake for me?" Marty said in his best mock-wounded tone.

"I see you far too often as it is," Toby replied. To the untrained ear, Toby would have sounded bombed already, but the slurring was just his unmistakable Liverpool accent. He'd been a British ex-patriot since the early eighties, and somehow his accent seemed to grow thicker by the year. In his own defiant kiss-off to colonial ears, he also managed to throw more Brit-centric lingo into an average sentence than all the limeys in Yorkshire could cough up in a week.

Toby owned and operated The Fortress, perhaps the finest comic book and pop culture detritus shop in Chicagoland. At least,

that's how he liked to think of it. He became acquainted with Ron, Marty and Ham when they began appearing every afternoon after school in his shop, and once they reached his idea of a drinking age (sixteen) he found himself inviting them into the back room for Friday night beers.

"It's Ham's deal?" Toby rolled his eyes and groaned. "Christ on a bike."

"What?" Ham immediately whined.

"You deal like a girl. Give me the bloody cards."

"Yeah, well, you talk like a bloody Beatle," Ham attempted to retort but failed miserably. The joke flopped hard to the floor in a painful silence and languished briefly in their collective memory before the conversation moved on. "Ante up, gang. The game is five-card draw."

"No Sabacc tonight, Ham?" Ron said.

"Screw off. Ante up."

Each of the four tossed a trading card into the ring—a Garbage Pail Kid for Ham, a *Jedi* card for Ron, an *Alf* card for Marty and a *Star Trek III* card for Toby. Ham lobbed playing cards around the table at each of them.

"While we're on the subject of sex, I've been meaning to ask you goons a question for months," Ron said as he picked up his cards. "Here's the situation. You can have sexual intercourse with any *Star Trek* character from any series or film. Who do you choose?"

"Including the novels?" Ham asked. Toby punched him hard on the arm.

"Fuck the novels! Who knows any of that crap?"

"There are a few foxes in the *Trek* novels," Marty said, scanning over and rearranging his hand.

"Anyone can be hot in a book," Toby said, "but if you're hot on the telly or in a film, you're really hot. You're not the fictional hot of some slimy hack's trembling fingers. We can all see that Lieutenant Uhura is hot."

"Even when she does that strip tease in *Star Trek V*?" Ham

asked.

“Except for that strip tease in *Star Trek V*,” Toby said. He grimaced at the mere memory of a hefty Nichelle Nichols, naked and shimmying suggestively behind two feathers. “Damn near made me want to toss up my popcorn, that did.”

“I’ll go first, and I’ll take two cards, por favor,” Ron said. “I would choose Miss Nichols as Uhura. The Original Series incarnation. Preferably dressed up in her Mirror Universe uniform. Hot, hot, super hot. Ham, your turn.”

“This is a tricky conundrum,” Ham said in his best Spock impersonation, discarding his own cards and taking three from the pile. “Of course, the knee-jerk choice would have to be Seven of Nine, but she’s so cold from all that Borg programming. Has she ever known any love but bleeps and tweets? Could any human’s touch penetrate her shield of quasi-robotic functions?”

“You copped that line from fan fiction, didn’t you,” Marty said.

“And Deanna Troi, while certainly sensual, has all that messy hair,” Ham continued, ignoring Marty. “It would only get in the way. Thus, my choice is Beverly Crusher. A bit older, yes, but still foxy. And her medical training gives her an intimate knowledge of the human body, which would come in oh-so-handy when she’s taken me back to her quarters and she’s beaming me up, Scotty.”

“Right, then,” Toby interjected. “My turn. No cards. I’m gonna pull out my own honey of a wild card and say Lieutenant Ilia, from *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*.”

“Excellent call, old man,” Ron boomed. “Persis Khambatta, sporting the Sinead O’Connor hairdo long before it became fashionable. I cannot help but be touched. Marty, it’s all yours. Some slim pickings left, but a few gems...”

“Captain Kirk,” Marty said. The table fell into a stunned silence.

“You must be a poofter, then,” Toby said, throwing two more trading cards into the pot. “A right square queer.”

“Absolutely not. He has always been the most sexual being in the galaxy. He scored poon in the Original Series, he scored poon

in the 1980s in *Star Trek IV*, and if he hadn't been castrated by a shitty script, he would have easily scored some poon with Picard in *Generations*."

"What you're really saying is that you would fuck a man," Ron said.

"No, but I might fuck *the* man, and I ain't talkin' Whitey," Marty said. "I fold."

"Sounds like you suck and swallow too," Ham said. "I'm out."

"Hold on," Ron idly tossed a few trading cards onto the table to see Toby's bet. "This does not compute. You would actually have sexual intercourse with William Shatner?"

"There are a lot of details to be worked out, sure," Marty said. "The penis, for one thing. But in theory, I think I would. Hell, it's the least I can do for the man after all he's done for me."

"If I catch you scamming with some bloke this weekend at con, McAfee, I'll rip your lungs out," Toby said. He spread his hand of cards out purposefully onto the table. "I've got a full house."

"Shit," Ron said, laying his own cards down. "Two pairs. The pot is yours, Mrs. Shatner."

"Toby's really good at cards, Marty," Ham said. "Would you fuck him too?"

"Just gimme the deck," Marty said.

Day One
Friday, August 24, 2001

Chapter 1

For those who have ever been to a science fiction convention, no explanation is necessary. Those who regularly attend cons understand the unique vibe one encounters when several hundred sci-fi fans gather in one place for three days of inane chatter, outrageous spending, and casual sex—or alternately, three days of no sunlight, little sleep, and full-on submission to total geekdom.

For those who have never been, no explanation will suffice. To those who are con virgins—or “mundanes,” as non-fans are often known to con goers—attending a con might seem, in many crucial ways, like stepping into another world. A quick scan around the lobby of Schaumburg’s Hyatt Regency on the UnConvention’s opening day would do nothing to relieve that feeling. The real trick would be trying to figure out just which world you’d wandered into by mistake.

On a bank of couches, a passable Doctor Who (the fourth

Doctor, by all appearances) chatted amiably with an overweight woman in a full renaissance maiden costume, her long hair braided and hanging down over her ample (and amply exposed) breasts. Four guys in near-matching black T-shirts had staked out a spot near the concierge desk and were engaging in a fierce session of *Magic: The Gathering* on the lobby floor. In the expansive atrium area, a small crowd had gathered to watch two Jedi engage in an impromptu lightsaber battle.

Everyone had their own particular quirk to flaunt, be it a costume, an allegiance to a particular subclass of fans, or even just a tiny button with the catchphrase “My friend went to the Hellmouth and all I got was this lousy pin” emblazoned upon it. In other words, it was your typical con crowd, and there’s no doubt that any mundanes stumbling upon the proceedings might start searching for the first available shuttle back to Planet Normal.

But for the UnCon community, banded together for three days each year then scattered back into the harsh winds of the “real world,” the Hyatt felt like home.

Ron, Marty and Ham had been attending UnCon together every year without fail since they were just fourteen years old. As you might expect, certain traditions had formed. There was the poker game the night before UnCon at Ham’s place, which set the tone for the weekend. There was the egg breakfast on Sunday morning, which closed the weekend out with piles of greasy goodness from the hotel’s buffet. And upon their arrival at the registration table each year came the excruciating ordeal in which the con staff somehow lost Ham’s weekend membership.

“Listen, I know I paid,” Ham pleaded, reaching into the pocket of his black leather trenchcoat to ferret out his receipt. Behind him, Marty turned away from the table and pushed his Buddy Holly glasses up onto the bridge of his nose. He began to scan the lobby of the Hyatt for friends, goofballs or cute chicks.

“Check out Optimus Prime over there,” Marty said, elbowing Ron and gesturing toward a hulking brute of a man in a bright red cardboard robot suit. “I forget...what does he transform into?”

“A forty-year-old Burger King manager with an overbite and a foot fetish,” Ron replied. The homemade Autobot had removed his helmet and was wiping rivulets of sweat from his brow. He leaned against a table as he sucked down complimentary glass after complimentary glass of water.

“Man, it’s like *Cocoon* at this thing,” Marty said. “Come to con, and you won’t ever get old and you won’t ever die. I’ve been seeing some of these goofs every year for over a decade, and they just don’t change a bit.”

They continued scanning over the pageant quickly unfolding before them. After the Optimus sighting, both noticed a whiff of pathos intermingled with the stench of fierce individuality.

“How’s the girlfriend?” Marty asked. “You dodged the question pretty admirably last night.”

“Oh, Melissa’s fine, I guess,” Ron said distractedly. His eyes kept roaming about the lobby. “She’s not here, obviously. She’s got an exam on Monday so she’s studying all weekend.”

“Grad school’s treating her well?”

“As well as can be expected, I guess.”

“I’ve always wondered—what does she think of all this crap?”

“I don’t think she’d ever come to a con. I’ve asked her before, and she is definitely not interested.”

“Doesn’t that bother you? I mean, she’s your girlfriend. She doesn’t have to rush out and buy her own Catwoman costume, but shouldn’t she want to share what you love, even just once?”

“I can share it all by my lonesome, if you get my meaning, and I know that you do,” Ron said as he ogled a particularly adorable young con goer clad in a note-perfect Princess Leia metal bikini replica. “You know how I like to share.”

“You are a dog,” Marty said, turning a bright shade of red. “Hey, Ham, get your badge this millennium, alright? What’s your major malfunction?”

“It’s not my fault!” Ham wailed as he spun around. “These fuckers...”

“This fucker has your pass right here,” a female voice behind

the table declared. Ham turned back to see Monica Deloro dangling a laminated card between her thumb and index finger.

“Sorry, Monica,” Ham mumbled sheepishly as he pinned the badge to his shirt. “You’re not a fucker.”

“She certainly isn’t,” Marty said. Her sizable mane of brown curly hair was pulled back into a ponytail, though a few stray ringlets hung down over a snug black T-shirt with Buttercup, her favorite Powerpuff Girl, on the front.

“Hey baby doll,” Ron oozed in her general direction.

“Oh, stop it,” Monica said, rolling her eyes as she dug through a box for Ron’s badge. Monica was one of many con friends that Ron, Marty and Ham had cultivated, part of an intricate network of relationships revolving around UnCon that somehow sustained themselves through just a few days of contact each year. If you asked Ron, Monica could easily be more than just one of Marty’s “friends. Being intensely shy and slightly uncomfortable when it came to women, Marty would deny, deny, deny. But there was no denying her attractiveness. She was a cute girl who knew her sci-fi, and so it should come as no surprise that somewhere, deep down in parts of himself he didn’t know existed yet, Marty was crushing on her in a major way.

“Boy, I’m glad I’m not volunteering, that’s for sure,” Marty said. “It looks hard. Have you mastered the alphabetical order thing yet?”

“You bastard.” Monica reached over the table and smacked Marty on the arm, playfully but hard enough to leave a mark. “Do I have to drink you under the table again, McAfee?”

“Listen, if you hadn’t spiked my Saurian brandy last year, I would have won that contest, you cheat.”

“I didn’t cheat,” Monica retorted.

“Did too,” Marty said.

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Hey, do me if you want, I’d just like a badge,” a guy three

people back shouted, to a chorus of appreciative male snickering. The line had stretched all the way back to the front doors of the hotel.

“Right then, fellas, step up,” Bill Ramiro said. Seated next to Monica behind the table, Bill was this year’s UnCon chairman. Every year it was a new luckless sap who got roped into playing Fearless Leader, and every year, said luckless sap would vow at the weekend’s end that he or she would never chair UnCon again. But Bill had three days of constant badgering and complaining to go before he reached the end of his rope. All he knew now was that he had to keep the line moving, or else ten of the con goers in that line would be calling for his head at Sunday’s business meeting.

“Bill, you are a hardass,” Ron said. “How the hell are you?”

“It’s an E.T.-eat-E.T. universe, and I’m wearing Reese’s Pieces underwear,” Bill sighed.

“The joke needs work, buddy,” Ron said, taking his badge from Monica. “But good to see ya anyway.”

“Hurry up! The dealers’ room is opening in ten minutes!” Ham spun quickly away from the group and headed toward the hotel’s main ballroom, where dozens of area comic book shops and sci-fi bookstores would have their wares available for sale. He stood at the end of the registration table shifting his backpack awkwardly from arm to arm.

“Monica, do you...” Marty began.

“Here it is,” she said, cutting him off and leaning over the table to pin the badge on Marty’s jacket. He couldn’t help but scan down her blouse into her ample cleavage. Glancing over at Ron, he caught him scanning too. Ron gave Marty a big wink just before Monica raised her head and patted Marty’s chest.

“You boys have fun,” she said, meeting Marty’s eyes. The moment lingered a split-second longer than either intended, and they both blushed slightly. “And don’t buy any Luke Skywalker autographs. They’re all fake. He doesn’t exist.”

“Hey, it’s me,” Marty said with his best Han Solo swagger, and stepped away with Ron. They jogged a bit to catch up with Ham.

“You could hit that if you wanted,” Ron whispered.

“I could hit you if I wanted,” Marty replied. “Let’s go waste some money.”

Chapter 2

“You are a complete wanker,” Toby scowled as he scanned disgustedly over the back issues at Graham Boss’ booth in the UnCon dealers’ room. “Every single one of these is stickered at way over price guide value.”

“Leave it to Toby fucking Gordon to tell me how to sell comic books,” Graham muttered under his breath.

“I heard that. I wouldn’t leave these unattended if I were you. Somebody’s likely to piss on them in protest.”

As a comic book shop owner himself, Toby had a definite business interest in scoping out Graham’s setup. After all, Graham’s shop was serious competition; Cryptkeeper’s had come second to The Fortress for three years straight in the yearly UnCon fan polls for Favorite Geek Shop, and the vote had grown a bit closer every year. Graham’s table was situated along the back wall of the UnCon dealers’ room, currently filled to bursting with tables full of comic books, toys, cheap rubber replicas of medieval weapons, chain mail underpants, and all other manner of geekly wares. Of course, the threat from Graham’s shop didn’t mean Toby was ready to spring the bucks for his own table at UnCon and spend his weekend working instead of boozing with his buddies, but he still felt the heat.

Toby had one other great reason to taunt and badger Graham—

he hated the guy's guts. Graham had ruthlessly outbid Toby on a near-mint copy of *Amazing Fantasy* #15, the first appearance of Spider-Man, at an UnCon charity auction six years ago. Since then, they had become more than just business rivals—they were archenemies in the classic pop culture mold. Graham was Doctor Doom to Toby's Mister Fantastic, Lex Luthor to his Superman, a notoriously unbathed Joker to Toby's paunchy Batman.

"You move many of these *Transmetropolitan* graphic novels?" Toby asked innocently.

"I do," Graham said. "Why? You got some you want me to take off your hands? Show you how it's really done?"

"No," Toby said, running his finger across the top of the book and scraping off a thick layer of dust. He shoved the dirty finger straight into Graham's face. "But I don't know how you could be selling any of these if they're so bloody filthy. This one looks like it hasn't budged since God was a boy. You ought to ring up my good buddy Warren Ellis. He writes this, you know. He's signed all mine. They move like nothing."

"Listen, do you have business here, or are you just wasting valuable retail space?"

"I wouldn't have business here if you cut my dick off and tried to sell it back to me," Toby said, wiping his dirty finger on the sleeve of Graham's moldy *Doonesbury* T-shirt.

"These back issues are all way over book value!" Ham screeched from a few feet away, his nasal voice cutting through the crowd and reaching Toby's ear.

"Right on, boyo," Toby shouted with the sudden fervor of an evangelical preacher. He delivered a spirited high-five to Ham, who grinned like a trained monkey. The trio scanned over Graham's selection of older comics, their eyes narrowing to angry slits. Ham, Marty and Ron hated Graham too, not just because Toby did, though that would have been reason enough. No, Graham had kicked all of them out of his shop far too many times during their wayward geek youth for "too much browsin', and not enough buyin'."

At the Fortress, Toby not only let them read all the comics they wanted, he even occasionally passed on free stacks of damaged issues he couldn't sell. Once they started regularly doing far more buyin' than browsin', they solely frequented Toby's shop and only stopped by Graham's booth every year to mock his ludicrously overpriced product.

"All you guys oughta just move on and kiss off," Graham grumbled over his gargantuan beer gut as he settled his mass into a wobbly stool behind his cash register.

"Face it, Tiger—I just hit the jackpot," Ron whispered to Marty, leering openly at a spectacular woman striding confidently toward the booth. He'd first noticed the hair, a shocking bright red mane bobbing along amid the throngs of fans clustered in the narrow aisles between tables. It gave her a striking resemblance to the titular sprinter in *Run Lola Run*. He then scanned quickly down her body, past the damp red lips and tight black T-shirt to the even tighter PVC pants, which had seemingly been stitched or painted over her note-perfect legs. She stepped gingerly around the dazed pack of ogling geeks and into the booth itself, narrowly avoiding a nasty slip in the pile of drool gathering beneath Ron's feet.

"I have smoked, and I now feel better," she said to Graham. "Thanks."

"Graham, you old scoundrel!" Ron exclaimed. "How did you manage to hire such a foxalicious lady to work your booth?"

"Foxalicious, eh?" The girl smirked at Ron, sizing him up. "I have never heard that one."

"Try this one—scrumdiddilyumptious," Ron replied, moving in closer to her.

"That's from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*," Ham declared from ten feet away, his head buried in the latest issue of *Cinescape* magazine. As he scanned the back cover of a woefully overpriced Harlan Ellison collection, Marty stomped hard on Ham's foot, eliciting a tiny howl of anguish.

"That's it!" she exclaimed, pointing over at Ham. "But I knew that one."

Ron shot a glare at Ham that could have melted carbonite. “I’m Ron,” he said, extending his hand toward the girl. “And you are?”

“Becca,” she replied, taking his hand and shaking it for a few seconds longer than your average buddy grip. “I’m Becca. And I’m blown away.”

“Why?” Ron asked.

“Usually no one tries to pick me up at UnCon until at least the end of opening ceremonies,” she said. “I feel like the fast-forward button on my life is stuck.”

Before Ron could serve up a clever retort, a collective shriek rose from the direction of the dealers’ room doorway. They all paused their chatter to listen as similar shrieks filled the air closer and closer to them, until they finally spotted the reason for all the commotion. Bill Ramiro, con president, was briskly making his way through the crowds with a clear plastic case in his hands. He stopped in front of Graham’s booth to show off his precious cargo.

“Oh. My. God.” Everyone stared longingly at the contents of the case, but only Ham could summon the will to speak.

“Are those...real?”

“Yep,” Bill said, straightening his body with pride and lifting the case toward them. “A pair of actual Spock ears, worn by Mr. Leonard Nimoy in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*.”

Ron turned quickly away from Becca and stepped hesitatingly toward Bill and the case. He approached it as a Knight Templar might have approached the Grail itself.

“Do not grieve, Admiral,” Ron whispered as he tenderly placed his hand atop the box.

“It is...logical,” Marty offered, taking up the quote.

“The needs of the many...outweigh...” Ham picked up the next bit, the three of them huddled over the box and breathing deeply while Bill grinned with pride.

“The needs of the few,” Bill said. “Or the two, as the case may be. As in ears, on loan from Paramount. They’re trying to sign people up to a DVD e-mail list and I suggested that a vintage prop would help draw in the crowds. This is what they sent.”

“Are they really that important?” Becca said, pushing her way through the circle of reverent Trekkies and scanning the box skeptically. “They’re just latex ears.”

“Just latex ears?!” Ron spun around to face her. “Those are not just latex ears, and it is not just a movie, so don’t even say that, because I know how you people think. Those are Spock’s ears, Nimoy’s ears, and he wore them while giving the performance of a lifetime in the greatest *Star Trek* adventure ever.”

“Your vein, here,” Becca said quietly, touching his forehead, “throbs when you get really excited.”

“That’s not all that thro...ow!” Marty elbowed Ham in the ribs before he could get his full joke out.

“Anyway, I gotta get this over to its booth,” Bill said, stepping away with the box.

“We should really get moving, too,” Marty said. “Lots of crap to be checking out.”

“Cheaper crap than this crap!” Toby shouted in Graham’s direction. Graham responded with a unique variation on the Vulcan hand salute, in which only the middle finger is extended.

“I’m ready for some impulse spending,” Ham declared, rubbing his hands together eagerly and striding away from Graham’s booth. For most geeks, this moment was like Indiana Jones’ first hesitant steps into an archaeological dig in the heart of the Congo—hopes always ran high that great treasure would be unearthed, and if they didn’t surface with one or two artifacts, it was considered a wasted effort. Marty and Toby followed close behind. Ron hung back for just a moment.

“I should shove off, too,” Ron said, turning to her expectantly. “Are you hanging out tonight?”

“I’m here all weekend,” Becca replied.

“You have to stop by the Chicago Force party tonight. Room 3302. They always do good work—great decorations, amazing drinks, big fun. Will I see you there?”

“I’ll hang out for a while, but I won’t be there all night,” she said. “I turn into a pumpkin.”

“Fair enough.”

Ron strode after his friends, then stopped for a second and turned, watching Becca straighten out a few piles of *Batman* comics before heading on his way.

Chapter 3

“He tasks me,” Ron Montalbaned as he dropped the air hockey puck onto the table. “He tasks me, and I shall have him.” The puck glided a few inches across the table before a stray bump from his paddle knocked it straight back into his own goal.

“Score!” Marty yelled, stepping away from the table and engaging in an impromptu and uncoordinated victory dance. “Big win for McAfee. Big win.”

“You win now, but I win later, with Becca,” Ron said, crashing onto a couch. He kicked up his feet and smirked mischievously at Marty. “She’s a stone cold fox. Probably the hottest chick here.”

“So are you and Melissa on the rocks, or what?” Marty replied. He pulled up his own chair and picked up his Diet Coke.

“No, we’re doing all right. It’s just...”

“It’s just that you’ve run into a hot girl at con and you want to fuck her.”

“Marty, you know I’m not a one-woman man. That’s not my style.”

“I guess your style is to stick your dick into anything that moves.”

“Nice quip, Mr. Rickles,” Ron said, a harsh edge creeping into his voice. A familiar tension trembled in the air, the kind of tension that appears between two friends who were fighting about a topic

they'd clashed over before. Then a smile crept over Ron's face.

"I don't think the subject should be my female plans at UnCon anyway, Marty. Let's talk about your plans."

"I don't have any plans."

"That's your problem. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times..."

"I know, I know, strategy is everything." Marty was shaking off their flare-up now, getting back into the spirit of the weekend. His ongoing exasperation over Ron's parade of broken hearts would have to wait.

"It absolutely is. How long have you known Monica? How right is this moment? How pregnant each pause?"

"Pregnant pause"? I'm a shitty writer, and even I wouldn't stoop that low."

"You should consider stooping," Ron said. "Get your hands dirty. Hers are too. You're nice men."

"I'm...I don't know what I am." Marty blushed and began picking at a dangling bit of rubber on the sole of his shoe.

"You are a great, brilliant, handsome specimen. You could have any woman at this con."

"Too bad you fucked them all first."

"Touché, mon capitain."

Silence.

"Marty?"

"Yeah?"

"What's your novel about?"

"I'm not telling you." Marty smirked big; Ron groaned and threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Jesus H. Christ. Your novel has been done for over a year. The night you finished it, you called me at four in the morning and woke me up to tell me. You made me crack open a beer and drink it with you on the phone. And since then, you have refused to tell me what it's about."

"It is locked away in a fireproof box under my bed. When it's published, then you'll know what it's about. Not before."

“What if it never gets published?”

“Silence, foolish mortal!” Marty yelled.

“If you’d just tell me what it’s about...”

“No can do. Besides, you may know sooner than later.”

A beat. Then, “What does that mean?”

“I’ve been thinking crazy things,” Marty said. He drained the Diet Coke and tossed it toward a trashcan. It landed with a clunk next to it. “Crazy things about quitting my job and becoming a full-time writer.”

“All right, Mr. Asimov,” Ron said, sitting up on the couch, suddenly alert. “That sounds like a masterstroke.”

“Whatever, asshole,” Marty said.

“Jesus, I’m just busting your balls,” Ron said. “That sounds awesome. But that’s a big move. Many are called, few are chosen, all that jazz. Why the sudden life upheaval?”

Marty thought for a minute before answering. “There has to be more than what I’ve got,” he said with a careful nod. “More than computer bullshit, more than getting home so tired I don’t have the energy to spend all the money I’m making. There has to be more.”

Silence again. Marty listened to the click and ting of the pinball machine and the *Ms. Pac-Man* theme song, number one with a bullet, twenty years going in the Hyatt Regency Schaumburg game room.

“Seriously. What’s up with you and Melissa?” Marty finally asked. “Is it over, or almost over, or what? You seem unusually eager to hop on a con skank.”

“I’m always eager to hop on a con skank,” Ron said. He stared hard at Marty. “Have you seen the guest list yet?”

“I haven’t even had a chance to look at it.” Marty stared back at Ron, still unable to quite figure out what was going on behind the eyes of his best friend. It felt like Ron was hiding something, but then it often felt that way, and typically he wasn’t. He never could (maybe never would) completely figure Ron out.

“Isn’t A.G. Randall one of your favorite writers?” Ron said, reaching for the program in his pocket.

Suddenly, Marty's head began to race. "Yeah, he is," he replied as casually as he could manage. But there was nothing casual about Marty's love for Randall's work. As a kid, he'd started reading at an obscenely early age; the first books he treasured were Asimov's *Foundation* series and Randall's *Wargrowth* trilogy. He still re-read at least one Randall book a year and picked up his newest releases besides. But he'd never managed to meet the guy.

"The program says he's a guest this year," Ron said. "Check it out."

"I'll do that," Marty said.

"Hey, maybe you can ask him for advice about your writing career. Ask him if it's time to jump the job and write full-time."

"Yeah, and maybe you can hit up Ham for some advice on how to keep your dick in your pants," Marty said, smirking a little, but not really kidding.

"You are a major-league asshole," Ron replied. "And I would like to kick that asshole now in air hockey, if you're man enough for the challenge."

"I am Superman, and I can do anything," Marty said.

Chapter 4

On May 19, 1999, at approximately 10:45 a.m. in Chicago's McClurg Court Theater, Hammerhead saw *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* for the first time.

On May 20, 1999, he began writing. For thirty straight hours he wrote on his mom's ancient typewriter, until a document was complete—The Phantom Memo. Over the dizzying course of forty-two single-spaced pages, Ham outlined everything that was wrong with *The Phantom Menace*, with George Lucas, and with science fiction in general. In his humble opinion, of course.

The moment it was complete, he brought the memo to the Fortress and read whole passages from it aloud—to Marty, Ron, Toby and any other patron who might have drifted into hearing range of his voice. By June, they were rolling their eyes, and by July, Toby had banned the “blasted mad document” from his store completely. It didn't matter—he hung up fliers and sold copies of it at cost from his house. He mailed it to Skywalker Ranch and every executive at Twentieth Century Fox. He posted it on his webpage. The word quickly got out, and when fans read the document, their reaction was nearly universal: Ham was a stark raving lunatic. He was absolutely right about *Episode I*, but still fairly nuts.

On Friday, August 24, 2001, Ham clutched a sweaty copy of

this manifesto tightly to his chest as he stepped into the Hyatt Regency Schaumburg's largest meeting room, which served as the space for most of the con's major events. Its small stage was adorned with huge cardboard rocketships covered in aluminum foil and thousands of tiny glow-in-the-dark stars pasted to sheets of black poster board. A chain of helium-filled balloons created a makeshift proscenium over the space where a shortish man of about fifty sat on a stool and held the crowd entranced. The man was Gene Carter, a minor figure in the history of film, but a major figure in the history of fandom—he had appeared as a stormtrooper in all three of the original *Star Wars* films. In his two decades working the convention circuit, his stories had become as legendary as his propensity for alcohol and women. Ham took a seat in the back of the room and listened as Carter spun silken words from bullshit.

"I really hoped George would call me to be in *The Phantom Menace*, maybe as a Jawa or some such nonsense," he quipped. The crowd, which filled up a solid half of the room, chuckled appreciatively. Many of them had seen Carter speak so often that they could mouth the words of his stories along with him.

"Can you see me in a little Jawa hood, screaming at the top of my lungs? 'Utini!'" The chuckles became a roar, and he took a sip from his "water"—which most fans knew was really gin and tonic—as the crowd applauded.

"But then I realized, he's got to be saving me for Episode Two. *Attack of the Clones*? Hello? Stormtroopers anyone? That's got to be his game. So I did approach him at the premiere of the *Star Wars Special Edition*, and he said he'd definitely keep me in mind. My webmaster is out there somewhere..."

A bespectacled kid of fifteen raised his gawky hand.

"There he is! Big hand for Chris Kurtz, everyone. Webmaster to the stars. Great kid. Anyway, he has a petition up you can surf over and sign, asking George Lucas to put me in Episode Two as a stormtrooper, or clonetrooper, or whatever. So check it out and sign up. It's at www.genecarter.com and it's just a great site in

general, pictures and stories and you can buy my hats and T-shirts and everything. Great stuff.

“Now that I’ve gotten my plug in, ha ha, I better skeedaddle to sign some autographs. Thanks for having me again this year and enjoy UnCon 2001!”

The crowd erupted into a spontaneous standing ovation for Carter. Ham remained seated in the back of the room, flipping through his memo. This was his big chance, his moment to seize.

After a forty-five minute wait in the autograph line, Ham finally reached the front. He slid the memo across the table toward Carter.

“Who should I make this out to, kid?” Carter said, looking up and winking at Ham.

“No one. I mean, it’s not for signing, really.”

“Then what are you here for? There’s a line, you see. I can’t really chat right now, unfortunately. Stop by my panel tomorrow and ask your question...”

“I need you to take that.”

“Excuse me?” Carter tried to smile warmly, but it came off as cold and smug.

“You need to take that. It’s a memo. For George Lucas.”

“Is it really?” Carter said, flipping through the crowded pages. He seemed momentarily in awe of the document. “What is this?”

“It’s about why I thought *The Phantom Menace* sucked, and what’s wrong with *Star Wars* and everything I want to say to him.”

“And you want me to do what with it?”

“Well, you said you see George Lucas sometimes. Take it to him. I think he needs to read it.”

“I’m sure he does, kid.” Carter was through with the game. “I hate to break your heart, because clearly you’ve put some time into this, but I can’t give it to George. What would he do with it?”

“Read it. Figure out what his problem is.” Ham was beginning to flip out a bit now. His face suddenly blushed red and his hands began to tremble as he gestured wildly with them. “I mean, it’s not really for you, it’s for him...”

“Listen, buddy,” Carter said, motioning for Ham to lean in

close. Ham bent his head down toward the actor. “George Lucas is a very rich and powerful man. He has buttlloads of money. Why would he want to take notes from you?”

“Because I’ve seen all the movies,” Ham said. His voice had lost its pitch control and was veering wildly into ranges only dogs could hear. Ham leaned down on the table and into Carter’s face. “I know *Star Wars*, I’ve watched *Star Wars*, and *The Phantom Menace* isn’t *Star Wars*.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s shit!” Ham shrieked. He stopped himself—he had to keep composure. He couldn’t flip out. Not when he was so close.

“I cannot take this, kid. I admire your guts, though. Wish I’d had someone like you with me in ‘Nam.”

“It’s like this,” Ham said, sighing a defeated sigh. “All my life, I’ve loved *Star Wars*. Lived it. I bought all the toys and I still do, and...well, George Lucas took a shit on something I loved very much. I just want him to know that. Can’t you understand?”

Carter looked down at the document for a long second, then up at Ham. For that entire moment, it seemed as though he actually understood. Then the comprehension fled from his face like a thief in a church.

“You want me to sign it, or not?”

Ham looked at the memo, then looked at Carter. He was shaking the Osco gold pen he used for autographs and flattening out the cover of the document, Ham’s document, Ham’s dream. Then Ham rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Make it out to Theo,” he muttered, slapping twenty dollars down on the table.

“See, buddy? That wasn’t so hard!”

“Fuck you,” Ham said. He strode away, carefully nestling the memo in his hands so as not to smear the gold marker signature.

Chapter 5

“This is the best part,” Ron whispered to Toby as Buckaroo Banzai stopped the Hong Kong Cavaliers as they rocked out on the stage of a dive somewhere in New Jersey and asked the audience, “Is someone out there not having a good time?”

“How the fuck can you enjoy *The Adventures of Buckaroo* fucking *Banzai* so much?” Toby hissed back at him. They were in the back of the con screening room, and though they were two of only four viewers there, they still whispered.

“Because Buckaroo Banzai is the coolest guy in the history of guys,” Ron replied. He turned toward Toby with excitement. “First off, he’s a neurosurgeon. Bad ass. Second, he’s an explorer and scientist and superhero. All bad ass. But more important than any of those, he’s a fucking rock star! And he plays the guitar as well as the trumpet.”

“Does he play the skin flute?” Toby snickered at his own joke even as it struggled to escape his lips. Ron ignored it.

“Fuck Captain Kirk, fuck Han Solo. I’d rather be Buckaroo.”

Toby laughed even harder in the face of Ron’s unflagging enthusiasm.

“Laugh-a while you can-a, monkey boy,” Ron muttered. They turned their attentions back toward the movie. On screen, Penny Priddy tried to commit suicide and Lord John Whorfin galloped his

way out of a mental hospital.

“Lemme ask you something, Toby,” Ron whispered. “Does this shit ever get old?”

“What shit? This half-assed eighties’ crap-fi bullshit shit? It’s already bloody well old to me, thanks.”

“No. I mean all this crap we’re so obsessed with. Y’know, I really do love *Buckaroo Banzai*. I totally fucking love this movie. And I wonder if one day I’ll wake up and think it’s shit like you do.”

“I sure as fuck hope you feel that way soon, for your own pathetic sake,” Toby said, nearly shouting. A guy in the second row turned around to shush him; Toby glared at him with the bloodlust of a pit bull facing an empty Alpo bowl. The guy turned back sheepishly; Toby reverted to more hushed tones.

“Listen, there was a time when I would have stood up and screamed at all these motherfuckers that Banzai sucks my cock, this movie blows, a pack of dickless, no-talent hacks cranked it out and it’s cheapening the art of science fiction on film, blah blah yadda crap phooey. Now I’m pissed, sure, and it still sucks, and I will bust your balls over it until the day my face turns grey. But hey, go watch it. See if I care. It’s not my brain, it’s your brain. It’s not really about defending the universe from shit anymore, or representing the dork lumpenproletariat at every turn and making an ass from myself in the process. You don’t just start to care less. You stop yelling and start talking instead. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does,” Ron said.

“Somehow that answer doesn’t seem to have silenced your brain.”

“That’s not exactly all that’s on my mind right now.”

“What could possibly be more mind-consuming than my pithy treatise on geekdom and age?”

“My girlfriend Melissa gave me a deadline. I have to propose to her by Thanksgiving or it’s over.”

“What’s that now?” Toby said. He shook his head and made his cheeks wobble haphazardly, Hanna-Barbera cartoon style, slightly

dumbfounded. “Marriage? You? Hardy-har-har.”

“This is serious,” Ron said. “Melissa is gonna walk away forever unless I go the three months’ salary route and vow to tie her knot. I have three months to decide.”

“What’s there to decide? You’ve been with her, what, over a year now? That’s a record for you. Sounds like you love this bird.”

“I do. I guess. I have no idea. What should I do?”

“If you’re confused, then don’t fucking marry her.”

“But then she’ll leave.”

“Then marry her.”

“But I’m not sure.”

“Then hop on the screen and join these Shanghai Surprises or whatever the fuck they’re called. You asked me if this shit gets old? Sci-fi shit, who knows, but your relationship shit? You’ll have to answer that question for yourself. I don’t know what to tell you, Ronnie.”

“And I don’t know what to say.”

“Have you told anyone else about this yet?”

“No,” Ron said, fidgeting in his chair. “I should definitely tell Marty. And Ham, I guess, but he’ll just want to know if we’ll be opting for the Starfleet dress uniforms or the Han and Leia costumes for the ceremony.”

“What about that Becca cat? What’s your bag with her, then?”

“I believe it’s what you folks on the other side of the pond would call a ‘shag,’” Ron said with a grin.

“You really think that’s such a good idea, Ronnie?” Toby asked, ignoring Ron’s irreverence and opting for dead seriousness instead. “This Melissa...she wants to marry you. That’s no tiny thing.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the screen. He knew that was true. It was no tiny thing—it was huge. So huge, his head refused to grasp it. At all. Finally, as Buckaroo was hurtling wildly into the woods on his motorcycle, running after trouble instead of away from it, Ron stood up and sighed.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

The Way Back Machine
June 24, 1990

“You get the fuck out of here! And don’t you ever come back!” He was leaning over the counter of the comic book shop. Tiny flecks of spittle stained the glass of the countertop.

“Listen, fuck you. You’re nuts.” The customer was trembling a bit, his thin plastic bag of comic books quivering in his hands.

“Adam West is NOT a fucking better Batman than Michael Keaton! If I ever see you in here again, I will shove a Batarang so far up your ass that surgeons will be mystified.”

“Fuck off.” Totally thrown, the patron spun toward the door and strode out of the shop.

Toby Gordon always knew that opening the Fortress—what he called a “pop culture ephemera destination,” but what most folks would recognize as a comic book store—would be a tough gig. When he signed the paperwork nearly six years ago, granting him the deed to one corner of a strip mall located just off Golf Road in Rolling Meadows, he had some inkling that within a couple years, he’d either be ready to shove a futon into the shop’s back room and live his comics fan dream life, or ready to leap off I-294 into the Thornton rock quarry.

Yet after six years of owning and working in the Fortress, the feeling still amazed him. Somehow, he constantly wanted to do

both at the exact same time. Just now, in fact, that familiar tension of abiding love and virulent hatred for the state of his life had risen again, like bile gurgling in the back of his throat.

Why else would he have dropped his first \$300 in profits on a custom-made sign, defiantly declaring the store's motto in comics-style black lettering inside a word bubble over his counter, if he didn't really mean every word of it? "Venture stupid opinions at your own risk," the sign read, and while many of his regular customers openly mocked it, just about everyone who walked through the door had come to respect its suggestion. You could shoot your mouth in any direction you saw fit inside the Fortress, but you'd best be prepared for Toby's mouth to fire back. And after three decades of Navy Seal training deep within the trenches of geekdom, Toby wielded his mouth like a sniper with a dead aim and an attitude problem.

The tinkle of the bells attached to the door dragged Toby from his musings on the endless stupidity of his fellow man. After seeing who had just entered the shop, he hung his head and heaved a heavy sigh. It was the comic shop owner's greatest enemy: Teenagers. If they weren't shooting their snotty mouths off or attaching themselves at the groin to any female who happened to come in, they were trying to stuff copies of the latest issue of *Uncanny X-Men* into their Jockeys. Bloody rotten teenagers.

"May I help you gents?" Toby asked in as kind a way as he could muster. It came out sounding like it'd been forced through clenched teeth, which it had.

"We're just browsing," the leader said. Toby could tell he was the leader because he was in front.

"You don't have a problem with that, do you?" squeaked the tallest of the litter, a gangly rod of a kid with thick glasses and a staggering infestation of acne on his face.

"Ham, shut it!" hissed the third member of the trio. "You'll get us kicked out of this store too."

"Kicked out?" Toby asked. "And what kind of a name is Ham?"

"It's short for Hammerhead." The gawky kid pushed his glasses

back up his nose.

“Like that alien in *Star Wars*?”

The three geeks stared dumbfounded at him.

“What? Am I wrong? No, of course I’m not wrong, and if you’re going to read that entire issue of *Detective Comics*, young man, at least have the common decency to hold it carefully, otherwise I cannot sell it to people, other people, people who aren’t low-life bottom-feeding leeches like you lot.”

Two of the geeks continued staring. The roguish one, the one without the glasses, he kept reading the comic book.

“Can...can he...”

“Yes, he can read it.” Toby finished the sentence for the gawky one, the one they called Ham. “Now do you three fancy yourselves some kind of *Star Wars* geeks, or what?”

“I prefer to be known as an aficionado, myself,” Ham wheezed through his nostrils.

“Yeah, sure, whatever, as long as it ain’t that *Battlestar Galactica* crapola,” the spectacle-free bloke said.

“I think we’re pretty big geeks, yeah,” the chubby kid grinned.

“You three fancy yourself some kind of Trilogy or something?” Toby asked.

“Yeah,” Ham said through a comic-book geekgasm haze. They had all vanished into the latest issue of their favorite titles. He’d lost them. But that had never stopped Toby before.

“I bet you’re a lot like those movies. You there, groping the Batman comic book in your greasy palms, you’re *Star Wars*, the original.”

“Damn straight,” he whispered.

“And Ham, the gangly fella, you’re *Return of the Jedi*.”

“Fly casual.”

“I suppose I’m *The Empire Strikes Back*, then?” The chubby kid, the one with the glasses, spoke from deep within the pages of a *Fantastic Four* annual.

“No, you’re one of those prequel things that everyone thinks Lucas will make someday. Of course you’re *Empire*. Which, I

must confess, is my least favorite of the *Star Wars* films.”

The three looked up from their comic books in unison, as though choreographed to do so. Then they spoke.

“You’re nuts...”

“Whatever, limey...”

“What???”

As Ham spurted the latter exclamation, a tiny snot projectile hurtled from his nose and onto page 22 of the latest *Action Comics*.

“You like that issue there, pal?” Toby said.

“It’s...it’s pretty good.”

“Great, because you’re buying it now.”

Night One

Chapter 6

There was sand everywhere.

Sand covered the tables. Sand sank into every nook and cranny of the chairs. Sand swirled up the walls and onto the guests, courtesy of the fans circulating the stuffy hotel suite air. And sand covered every inch of the floor.

Every year, Chicago Force found a new way to transform a hotel room into as authentic a *Star Wars* environment as they could imagine. One year, it was Dagobah. The fake vines and leaves definitely set a spooky atmosphere, but they were forced to shut down the fog machine when it set off the fire alarm, sending over a hundred fans into the hotel's parking lot at 2 a.m. dripping wet from the sprinklers. The following year, they memorably recreated the ice planet of Hoth. Legend has it that they stayed up all night vacuuming Styrofoam peanuts out of the hotel's carpets.

By the time 2001 rolled around, Chicagoland's coolest *Star*

Wars fan club had a reputation to uphold. This year, their theme was Tatooine, the desert planet that both Anakin Skywalker and his son Luke called home at different points in the saga. Aside from the sand—which, once again, was turning up everywhere—a few well-placed sun lamps cranked the temperature up to a balmy if slightly uncomfortable level. Construction paper Stormtroopers, Jawas and Sand People were pasted to the walls, along with a giant paper sun that covered the windows. In the corner, two huge vats of mixed alcoholic beverages—their Amidala Ambrosia, for which they were most famous, and the more standard Sith Bitch Punch—sat atop a table transformed into a Tatooine home settlement. To add the final touch, Chicago Force’s party planning crew had donned shorts, straw hats and Hawaiian shirts for the festivities.

“Bloody hell, it is a fucking desert in here,” Toby grouched as he entered the room, immediately disrobing and tossing his jacket onto a chair. Ron, Marty and Ham followed close behind, their jaws dropping at the sight of the room decorations and the sizable crowd at the party. It was only ten p.m. and already the room was packed with geeks—most parties didn’t really get hopping until midnight.

“Of course it’s a fucking desert,” Dave Gray, Chicago Force’s founder and president, said to Toby as he forced a glass of cold punch into his hands. “Welcome to Tatooine. Drink up.”

“Don’t mind if I do, either,” Ron said as the Trilogy headed toward the punch while Toby crashed into the chair with his jacket. Behind the punch table, a tall woman with long red hair stood, carefully ladling the brew into cups. In spite of the warmth and the tropical surroundings, she was clad entirely in black.

“Shauna, hello, hello,” Marty said as he took his chilled glass. They were always regulars at the Chicago Force parties, and had gotten to know the CF crew over the years. Ham had even once attempted to lure Shauna into a bathroom grope, but he had passed out in a corner before he could seal the deal.

“Good to see you, Marty,” Shauna replied, wiping a bit of sweat off her brow. “Um, is it just me, or is it hot in here?”

“I think we need to turn down the sun lamps,” Heather said as she laid out some fresh snacks for the guests.

“Heather, you are so right that it hurts,” Marty said.

“Thanks, Marty,” Heather said, winking in his direction. She was leaning up against the table and using her plastic lei as a fan. Just then, a bearded man with a digital camera lunged into her face and snapped a picture.

“HazMatt, do you need another shot of me looking warm?” Heather asked with a laugh.

“You can never have too many,” HazMatt said. As usual, Chicago Force’s resident webmaster and official photographer was busy constantly snapping pics.

“Shall we take some seats, fellows?” Ham said, gesturing with his glass toward a few open chairs. They sat down next to Toby, who downed his punch in a single gulp.

“This is some fucking yummy shit,” he said. His words cut through the swarm of other conversations drifting toward their ears; they picked up a “You’re fucking crazy” here and a “Trinity is *so* hot, dude” there. They took in the pageantry of a classic con room party in full swing. At the front of the room, Carrie the Chicago Force Prize Queen was setting out a table of choice gifts for winners of the evening’s raffle. At a TV in the corner, Mark and Jeff faced off on the classic Atari 2600 *Empire Strikes Back* game, their wives and children at home wondering just what kind of weirdness they were up to with their “*Star Wars* friends.” Darth Inebriated—real name: Ray—pushed his way through the crowd with a fresh bowl of punch.

Ham’s ears tuned in on one particularly heated debate taking place over his left shoulder. He recognized the voices as belonging to two of his favorite con sparring partners, Thom and Phil.

“I just don’t see how you can argue about it,” Phil said, slicking back his black hair with his hand. He bloused out his Hawaiian shirt as he chatted in a vain effort to cool down. “That’s got to be Dash Rendar’s Outrider in the *Star Wars Special Edition*.”

“I would say that there has to be proof, then, other than the fact

that they look so similar,” Thom replied. He shook out his long mane of blonde hair and adjusted his tunic. It was definitely the wrong temperature for a full tunic, long pants and boots. But at con, climate could never be allowed to stand in the way of a fashion statement. “If it is the Outrider, it is definitely not canon.”

“Well, what is canon, then?” Ham pivoted around and leapt straight into the middle of the conversation. He slid his chair into their tiny group and they parted to make way.

“There we go. We won’t see him until tomorrow morning.” Ron drained his punch and stood. “You guys want another?”

“Shit, yeah,” Marty said. Toby managed a sweat-drenched nod, drips of perspiration sliding off his forehead and sprinkling onto his waist. Ron stepped over to the punch table even as a hulking form dropped straight into his freshly-vacant chair.

“Hey, Ignatowski,” Marty grumbled toward the creature. Ignatowski had two arms, two legs, a smushed-up face, and other general physical characteristics of an Earthling—he was definitely humanoid. But every inch of visible skin had been covered with a sickly and poorly-applied coat of green body paint. In the heat of the room, his copious sweat made the paint slippery and sticky, so that every time Ignatowski idly rubbed his arm or scratched his forehead, huge streaks appeared. Still, this was his traditional Friday night costume—Larlon, the green Nycron from Phebos he portrayed in his monthly live-action role-playing tournament—and he couldn’t disappoint his fellow fen.

“Man, it’s really brutal tonight,” Ignatowski said, itching his elbow and wiping off whole gobs of his “costume” in the process. “Already busted three kids for underage drinking.”

“Tough gig, mate,” Toby monotoned, rolling his eyes away from Ignatowski’s watchful glare. Ignatowski was a universally disrespected member of the con security staff, but because he had some small measure of power within the con—and because it gave him enough of an undeserved ego trip that he employed it with wild indiscretion—almost everyone tolerated and humored him.

“Yeah, truly,” Ignatowski said. “You guys gonna score tonight,

or what? That over there is one tasty treat, dudes.”

Ignatowski nodded exaggeratedly toward the punch table, where Ron had bumped into Becca and was chatting her up.

“Tasty,” Marty replied. “Just like the cold, icy punch I’m waiting for, the punch he better be bringing over soon or I will literally sweat to death.”

On the other side of the room, Ron stood oblivious to Marty’s heat exhaustion. He guided Becca gently away from the front of the punch table, leaving room for other guests to snag their refills.

“I can’t believe you’ve never seen *Run Lola Run*,” Ron said. “You look just like Lola with that shocking red hair.”

“Why is it shocking?” Becca said.

“Not shocking in the sense that, wow, I’m shocked you have red hair. Shocking in its impact, which is significant, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“What exactly does it say to you, Ronald McDonald?” Already with the cute nicknames. This might be further in the bag than he thought. Ron allowed himself a split-second of inner glee before continuing the flirting. He completely ignored the inner dread, the part that kept Melissa’s face popping up in his brain.

“It says that you’re an independent woman. Throw your hands up at me. You’re every woman; it’s all in you. Sisters are doing it for themselves.”

Becca laughed hard, reaching out her punch glass for more Amidala Ambrosia. “This shit is addictive,” she said to Shauna behind the table.

“No shit!” Shauna replied brightly, filling her cup again

“How did you end up working with Graham?” Ron asked. “You know he’s an asshole.”

“Asshole!” Marty shouted from his chair. Ron glanced over and noticed Ignatowski shedding a disgusting green substance all over his former chair, while Toby gave Ron the stare of death. He knew there was no way he could lead Becca near Ignatowski, or he would suffer from a clumsy cock block that would end the evening far too early. Ron gestured quickly toward Marty with his head.

Marty rose and came over, his exasperation showing.

“Graham is an asshole,” Becca said, watching Ron’s little drama unfold. “Listen, if you need to get back to your friends...”

“Not at all,” Ron said. Marty stepped up to Ron and, with a curt nod toward Becca, took the two full cups of punch from Ron’s hands. He pivoted and walked back toward his seat.

“I’ve seen you guys here before,” Becca said. “You’re like a little team or something. A little crew.”

“We are that,” Ron said. “My buddy Toby over there, the older guy, he calls us the Trilogy, like the *Star Wars* trilogy. We each represent a movie.”

“Which movie are you?” Becca said, moving in closer. He could smell her shampoo.

“I’m the original *Star Wars*,” Ron said. He stared straight down into her sharp green eyes. “*A New Hope*. I’m brash, fast and sexy.”

Becca exploded with laughter. Her giggles cut through the buzz of conversation in the party, and a few heads turned toward them to scope out any potential humiliation taking place. Ron met Marty’s glance within the crowd and raised his eyebrows toward him. Marty retorted with an exaggerated wink.

“Hey, don’t laugh yourself into a coma,” Ron said, placing his hand gently on Becca’s back. “I don’t suppose you’re ready to get out of here yet?”

“Oh, gosh, that’s funny. Too, too funny. Um, leave here? With you? I’m not that easy, sexy boy. I don’t go running off to strange boys’ hotel rooms until well after two a.m.”

“I’m not strange. Besides, this place is crowded. And hot.”

“True on both counts. Take me away.”

Glancing over at Marty to deliver his own exaggerated wink, he guided Becca through the party crowds and out the door. Ignatowski, Marty and Toby silently watched him leave, too drained to do much of anything else.

“I yearn to move on, but my legs are sloppy rubbish,” Toby croaked. He lifted up the bottom of his T-shirt and wiped his brow dry. The shirt was already drenched in his sweat.

“Wish I could afford to be so lazy, but duty calls. I have to move on, boys,” Ignatowski said, standing slowly and deliberately. He didn’t look downward to note that the chair he’d sat in was now greener than the Chicago River on St. Patty’s Day—or any other day, for that matter. “People to bust, you know the drill. You guys have fun, and stay safe, you hear?”

“Safe,” Marty said. “Right. You too.”

“Goddamn hardass poofter,” Toby muttered bitterly in Marty’s direction as Ignatowski left the room.

“Check out our Hammy,” Marty said. “Looks like the Gollum strikes again.”

Having long since abandoned his *Star Wars* debate, Ham was currently trapped in the throes of conversation with a tiny woman in a sports bra and a long black skirt. She had one hand leaning up against the wall, blocking Ham’s main route of escape, and the other gently resting on Ham’s chest. As they chatted, Ham’s expression rarely veered from its mix of barely-contained terror and slight excitement.

The Gollum had earned her nickname because of a slight hissing speech impediment, which was hardly debilitating but was close enough to the sound of the gray, slimy creature in *The Hobbit* to warrant shameless mockery. Her real name was Katherine, and in 1993—at UnCon’s first and only *Jurassic Park*-themed party—she had pounced on a young Hammerhead and swiped away his virginity. Every year since then, she would track down Ham at some point over the weekend and push hard for more of his sweet, sweet lovin’. Convinced he was meant for better things, Ham usually tried his best to dodge the Gollum’s heart-shaped bullet.

“Romeo Casanova is at it again,” Toby chuckled. “How much time do you give him before he...”

Ham gestured a little too wildly, then jogged a little too fast over to where Marty and Toby sat languishing in the heat.

“...breaks off the chat and makes his escape,” Toby finished.

“We have to go now,” Ham said, glancing furtively over his shoulder toward the Gollum.

“No argument here,” Marty replied. “It’s hot. Africa hot.”

“Ten-Forward party, anyone?” Toby said, snagging his leather jacket and heading for the door.

“Let’s hit it,” Ham answered, practically pushing the pair out the door.

Chapter 7

“Would you like to engage in some recreational games for bars of gold-pressed latnium?”

A tiny man, dressed in the worst Ferengi costume in the long, dark history of bad Ferengi costumes, stopped Marty, Ham and Toby before they could even enter the *Star Trek* party, themed this year as the recreational lounge on board the *Next Generation* Enterprise, Ten-Forward.

“Rot,” Toby growled toward the alien monstrosity, gently pushing the fellow out of his way. The three stepped into a much cooler and darker room. With its swirling colored lights and throbbing electronica, it was set up almost like your average Earth nightclub—except for the representatives from a number of the galaxy’s most evolved species. Wookiees chatted with Klingons; Vulcans laughed alongside Pokemons. Truly, this was a portrait of interstellar peace.

“They must all hang out here because it’s fifty times less humid than any other party, and those costumes are megawarm,” Marty commented as they nabbed glasses of Romulan Ale—a.k.a a tasty rum punch with a healthy dose of blue food coloring. They took up seats at a table near the wall and launched into what was easily their favorite con activity, people-watching.

“That is one sad sack Andorian right there,” Marty said,

pointing out a tall guy covered in blue makeup. He wore only a white sheet and two pathetic antennae drooped precariously over his face, threatening at any moment to tumble off his forehead and into his beverage. “That is not the proud race we have come to know and respect.”

“It certainly isn’t,” Toby said. “We should talk a few of the Klingons into kicking his ass.”

“Wow,” Ham said.

“Pardon?” Marty replied.

“Just...wow,” he repeated. “Check out the wow.”

They followed Ham’s glassy gaze toward the door, where the perfect woman had just walked in. Not Nicole Kidman perfect, or Katie Holmes perfect, or even Carrie Fisher in *Jedi* perfect. She was geek perfect.

It began with the long brown hair, currently tied up into two braids. Next came the sexy horn-rimmed glasses perched over pouty, full lips, then the form-fitting Care Bears T-shirt and the tight black jeans hugging her slender form. Her geeky splendor concluded on a perfect note at the bright red Converse sneakers on her feet. They were just clean enough to catch the eye but scuffed enough to look hip and worn.

“Hey, big wow from here,” Marty said, draining his glass. “You think they’d let me smoke?”

“I’d guess not,” Toby said, “although we can test it with the smoke billowing from Hammy’s ears here. You okay, boyo?”

“Wow is all I can really think to say at this particular moment.” Ham’s eyes were fixated on the brilliant mystery woman, so much so that he didn’t even notice Monica until she was standing directly in his field of eyesight, just a few feet from his face. He looked up into her eyes.

“Tell me about it, stud,” Monica purred in her best skanky Olivia Newton-John impersonation. She had changed into her typical con party wear—a Boba Fett T-shirt, pajama pants and giant white bunny slippers. Her hair was still pulled back into a bushy pile atop her head, but she had popped out the contacts in

favor of her glasses.

“Monica, have yourself a seat,” Marty said, gesturing to the lone empty chair.

“Is there anything to do here, dollface?” Toby said to Monica. “If I sit here much longer, I’m liable to drift away. All that sweating on Tatooine has me tuckered.”

“They’re playing the Shatner drinking game in the next room. They’re up to ‘The Enemy Within,’” Monica said.

“Kill us both, Spock!” Toby and Marty yelled in unison, breaking Ham from his lady-drenched reverie.

“Come on, Hamalamadingdong,” Toby said. “Let’s go booze it up with the Trekkies.”

The two stumbled off, Ham glancing over his shoulder toward the bar as he walked, watching his dream woman chat with the bartender and sip punch.

“So do you mind that we call you patronizing nicknames on a regular basis?” Marty said.

“Naw, I like you guys,” Monica replied. “I know you don’t mean it. It’s not like any of these other assholes, half of whom call me ‘Honey’ because they think I should be at home painting their Millennium Falcon model kits while they’re busy bringing home the Bantha. Speaking of which, how’s the writing? Any gigs?”

“No, but I appreciate you taking a look at that short story I e-mailed you.” Monica had been one of Marty’s best de facto editors since he’d finished his first novella just days before UnCon 1994.

“The pleasure was mine. It sure beats waiting at the paper for someone to call so I can take a picture of their cat stuck in a tree.”

Marty laughed hard. Monica was clever. She also knew her geek lore and possessed a unique gift for spinning it into one-liners. His mind drifted back to his chat that afternoon with Ron. He had to admit she was definitely something else. What was holding him back? They were con friends, hanging out every year, making fun of pathetic costumes and trading favorite lines from *Trek*. They knew each other from perhaps the most sympathetic environment in which to hook up. What was stopping him?

“Monica, I have to say, you’re...”

Before he could even begin, a random man clad only in a loincloth and a crown sat himself down in the seat closest to Monica. His costume indicated he was trying desperately to be Conan the Barbarian, but his physique suggested Floyd, the T.V. Repairman instead.

“You’re hot,” the poor man’s Schwarzenegger said to Monica, leaning in close and effectively cutting Marty completely out of the conversation. Marty couldn’t help but laugh as Monica pushed his face away.

“Right,” she said. “Smells like Conan’s hit a little too much of the brandyberry wine tonight. You wanna back off?”

Dejected and lacking the self-esteem to try another pass, Conan rose and stepped away, ready to face off against unspeakable beasts or fix the vertical hold on a helpless housewife’s Zenith.

“You look totally annoyed,” Marty said.

“I fucking am! It’s a pain in the ass. All these drunk losers fawning over you, trying to paw you, treating you like some kind of object. If anyone wonders where good old-fashioned American chauvinism went, it’s living on quite comfortably in the world of sci-fi fandom.”

“It’s got to be a little flattering, though.”

“Sometimes it feels like everyone’s looking at me, a million eyes all taking off my clothes at the same time,” Monica said. “It’s like I’m constantly competing with Vampirella.”

“But you’re not Vampirella.”

“You are so observant,” Monica deadpanned. “You should be a writer.”

“If everyone says it, it must be true,” Marty replied. “If you dislike it so much, why do you come back every year?”

“Fuck them!” Monica said, smacking the table hard with her palm. “I don’t dislike it. I love all this shit. I love being here. I like my friends here, and the atmosphere, and all this geeky stuff. I’m not gonna let some asshole guys keep me from doing something I want to do.”

“That’s the spirit, girl!” Marty said, snapping his fingers. “You go!”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not! I’m not, really. I think that’s awesome.”

Monica looked at Marty for a split-second longer than she usually did, their second slightly extended gaze of the day, and she smiled. Just then, the sad Andorian sat down in Conan’s chair and put his drink on the table.

“Klaatu barada nikto, my fair maiden?” he said. Marty snorted punch through his nose as Monica rolled her eyes.

“I’d just as soon kiss a wookiee,” she mumbled.

Chapter 8

“You people are insane,” Becca sighed as she stumbled out of yet another hotel room filled with sweaty geeks in sweatshirts and jeans, half-naked exhibitionist geeks, and geeks decked out in ill-fitting semiformal wear.

“Us people?! Whatever.”

Ron guided Becca down the hotel hallway with his hand on the small of her back. He had discovered a tiny patch of her naked skin between the bottom of her shirt and the top of her pants, and his fingers were lightly rubbing the little fuzzy hairs that resided there. Like Crash Davis, he adored the small of a woman’s back.

“Mmmm, that’s nice,” Becca cooed as they walked, her back arching slightly under his touch. Then she suddenly took two big strides forward and turned to face Ron, walking backwards, nearly stumbling over her own feet in the process. “But you can’t throw me off the case so easily. You people are still insane.”

“What makes you any different?”

“I’m not into most of this crap, and I would never dress up in a costume, unless it were Halloween or to turn on my boyfriend.”

“You have a boyfriend?” Ron stopped in his tracks.

“My hypothetical boyfriend, you worry wart,” Becca said, leaning forward to grab his hand and drag him into the hotel’s main recreational area. Three floors of rooms, each one with its

own private balcony, surrounded the pool, which was closed for the evening. Partiers of every stripe stood out on those balconies, filling their glasses with beer from that room's keg or loudly debating the merits of Todd McFarlane's *Spider-Man* versus Steve Ditko's. A cluster of quieter fans, those too young to drink or too tired to continue drinking, sat on the ground in circles around the pool. Becca guided Ron toward a small table pushed into a corner, two chairs haphazardly scattered around it. She pushed him into one chair and crashed in the other herself.

"So you're a mundane," Ron said.

"I'm not fucking mundane!" Becca shrieked with a shocked laugh. "I am so far from mundane that you have no idea."

"But you're not into all this geeky stuff, the movies or the TV shows or the novels or the gaming, and thus you are mundane. I'm sorry, those are the rules."

"I like anime," Becca pouted. "Does that count?"

"We'll have to consult the judges...no, I'm sorry. That doesn't quite cut it. Please pick up your consolation prizes on the way out. You're officially here to take advantage of the loose atmosphere and the free alcohol. Also to enjoy a few chuckles at the expense of people you think are beneath you."

"That's an asshole thing to say," Becca replied, standing to leave. Ron lunged out and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her roughly onto his lap. She sat there for a few seconds, her face inches from his, staring at him with a total bemusement before leaning in to kiss him.

"You're not a geek," Ron whispered as their lips separated. "You're mundane. And yet, isn't it ironic that us geeks practically beg you mundanes to notice us at every turn? We disregard you and mock you in our snotty way, but we long for your approval. We hunger for acceptance. We crave it, even though we have more of it than we know what to do with at these things, from people who share our every passion and desire. Weird."

"What the hell are you babbling on about?" Becca wondered aloud, shaking her head with a smile and kissing Ron again, this

time longer and harder. He reached his arms around her waist and pulled her close to him. She sank deeper into his lap, her PVC pants sliding around on his khaki shorts.

“I have no idea what I am babbling on about,” Ron replied as their liplock ended. “I am drunk, and you are drunk, and so I believe it might be time to ask you to join me in my room, where I will lure you into my seductive clutches by pretending I have to find something I lost, or that I have to call somebody.”

“Like your girlfriend?”

Becca smirked. Ron didn’t. He paused for a few seconds and stared at the ripples in the chlorinated water before kissing Becca again. Then they stood and walked to Ron’s hotel room.

Chapter 9

“Dark Angel,” Ham whispered in a hushed, holy tone, his voice charged with reverence. He started to roll the words around in his mouth. “Dark. Angel. The darkest of angels.”

“What in the bloody fuck are you babbling about?” Toby finally blurted out in exasperation, turning toward Ham on the bed. The video room at the Ten-Forward party had long since emptied and the two were reclining in boozy splendor, half-watching some forgettable episode of the *Trek* animated series and half-dazed with drunkenness.

“That’s who she is, Toby,” Ham continued, still whispering even though he and Toby were the only two people in the room. “She’s my Dark Angel. My. Dark. Angel.”

“Not only are you wasted, as am I, but you have yet another worthless con crush.”

“It’s not worthless. This time, I am not going to crash and burn. I will not sacrifice the Enterprise in a blaze of fiery glory and then wonder, ‘Bones, what have I done?’ I will score with this perfect creature. I will meet the Dark Angel, and she will be mine.”

“Anyone ever told you that you watch too many fucking movies?”

“Whatever, Toby,” Ham whined, sitting up on the bed and reaching for his glass of lukewarm punch. “Like you should talk.”

“I bloody well should talk! I’ve known your sorry ass for over a decade. You pick some poor defenseless creature to obsess over, and then you spend the entire weekend enjoying yourself less and less as you fixate on her more and more. Then you get way too drunk and either stumble in her general direction, or pass out in a stairwell mumbling her name and practically weeping.”

“That’s not...it,” Ham said. “I just want something to happen. What’s wrong with that? Don’t I deserve love? Me? The loser who lives at home with his toys and his videos?”

“Hey, those’re your words, not mine, bloke,” Toby said. “Besides, it’s no better when you do have someone. Remember Samantha?”

Of course Ham remembered Samantha. He had met her less than a year ago at a Kurt Busiek signing at The Fortress. She was plain, but cute; quiet, but opinionated. Their hands touché as they reached for the same *Astro City* trade paperback to purchase for an autograph, and it was the closest Ham had ever come to kismet. At the very least, everything seemed to work out fine until one sad night three months later, when she stormed from his house in tears at three in the morning after the tenth time he’d tried to make her appreciate the finer points of his laserdisc copy of *Akira*.

“I’d rather forget Samantha,” Ham said.

“You tried to turn her into you. You bloody geeks. Can’t just enjoy a woman for who she is. You’ve got to bloody make her over into your brilliant image.”

“That may be true, and it may not,” Ham said, rising defiantly from the bed, “but I’m still gonna score with the Dark Angel.”

He offered an outstretched arm to Toby, who took it and let Ham drag him up. The two strode cautiously into the main party room, being careful not to engage in any sudden bodily motions that might jar their woozy brains. They found Marty sitting alone at the same table they’d left him at a few hours before, quietly sipping punch.

“Where’s the bird?” Toby said, taking a seat at the table as Ham did the same.

“Monica went to bed about a half-hour ago,” Marty replied. “Are you guys wasted yet?”

“You shoulda gone with her,” Toby said. “That girl likes you. And yes—thank you for asking—we are.”

“Fuckin’ A right,” Ham said, slamming his palm down on the table. Suddenly, Bill the con organizer sprinted into the room, stopped in the middle, and scanned the partygoers in a mad panic.

“The ears,” he muttered as he glanced about in terror. “The ears. They’re gone.”

“The ears?” Marty yelled. “What’s up, Bill? Have a drink...”

“SOMEBODY STOLE THE EARS.” Bill yelled at the top of his lungs, then collapsed to his knees.

“Shit,” Toby said. “He’s fairly fucked.”

Chapter 10

“That,” Ron sighed as he stubbed out a cigarette, “was better sex than any geek deserves to have.”

Becca had slipped back into her bra and panties; her skin shone in the soft light of the bedside lamp. She turned and leaned her head on her elbow. Her free hand dropped onto Ron’s belly.

“So what’s her name?”

“Whose name?” Ron’s face flushed red.

“Your girlfriend,” Becca whispered, leaning forward into Ron’s ear close enough to nibble it, which she did. “You think I’m dumb?”

Ron pulled his head away. He felt a sudden urge to flee, to return to New York and Melissa and the end of his immature maturity. But he didn’t. He stayed, in the bed, with the half-naked vixen he barely knew. The one who would likely never want to marry him.

“Why are you making this weird?” Ron said.

“It’s not weird,” Becca replied. She sat up on the bed. “You think you claimed my womanhood or something? Like I’ve been saving myself for you? I know exactly what we’re doing here.”

“Melissa,” Ron blurted out into the near-darkness. “Her name is Melissa.”

“See? Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

“I told you before, I don’t have one,” Becca said. She grabbed a cigarette for herself, striking a match and lighting it in a single unbroken gesture. The match light tossed tiny shadows over her pale face. “I am single. Free as a bird.”

“So you come here often, though? This con?”

“Every year. I like some of the people, I definitely like the spirit, I enjoy the pageant, and I adore the guys. Just the cute ones, though. Like you.”

Ron blushed red again and pulled himself up onto his elbows. He felt the tiny sting of a pre-hangover headache inside his skull and moaned quietly, reaching his hand up to his forehead.

“Why haven’t I seen you before?”

“I tend to avoid the unwashed masses,” Becca replied. “Though I also usually get lucky somehow. Strange, that.”

“What are you, some kind of con skank?”

“Fuck you!” Becca slapped him hard on the arm. “You’re as much of a con skank as I am, from what I’ve heard.”

“What have you heard?”

“Denise Lyon told me you guys did it once under a table after a panel like five years ago.”

Ron reached back through his extensive mental file of con conquests. Denise Lyon...oh yeah. There she was. Short blonde hair, big fat red lips, a tiny but satisfying body. He’d had to cover her mouth once or twice to avoid detection by any lurking con staffers.

“That was a particularly good day.”

“Well, I’ve had some good days too, and let’s leave it at that.”

They lay together in silence for a few minutes, Becca dragging intermittently on her cigarette. Ron focused his eyes on the tiny orange embers at the end of it and fought another sudden urge, burning to feel her body all over his again.

“She wants to get married,” Ron finally muttered, shattering the quiet with the truth. “To me.”

“Jesus, does that make me feel special,” Becca murmured

softly, a barely-noticeable edge of resentment creeping into her voice.

“This isn’t about you,” Ron grumbled, turning away from her and shutting out the lamp near his bed. “It’s about me.”

“And the hits just keep coming. That is some lover’s tongue you’ve got there, Ron. I am hot and bothered.”

“That’s not fair.” Ron sat up in bed again. His head responded with a stab of pain. “You can’t just suddenly change all the rules because...”

“MAJ!” A shrill scream cut through the room from the room next door. “OH! OH! OH! MAJOA’!”

“What. The. Fuck. Is. That?” Becca said. They paused and listened for a few seconds, picking up only heavy panting and the occasional guttural grunt.

“HIGHOS!” This time, it was a male voice doing the yelling. The woman had given up on any attempt at speech and had resorted to a colorful variety of shrieks and grunts. “HEGHLU ‘MEH QAQ JAJVAM!”

“Shit. I think it’s Klingon,” Ron whispered in amazement.

“So you’re saying that there are Klingons fucking in the room next door?” Becca asked, turning to look at Ron. They held the gaze for a few seconds before rolling all over the bed in uncontrollable laughter.

Chapter 11

The entire hotel was spinning, spinning, swirling round and round in a glorious mélange of lights and colors and pretty faces. Pretty faces! Marty reached out for the fence next to the pool, but missed it; he reached out again and missed again. He could swear he actually saw three fences, identical and solid, competing to exist in the exact same spot. Finally he just stumbled forward in the fence's general direction until he knew he'd hit it by the piercing pain he felt in his skull. Behind him, Toby held Ham up with his arm draped over his shoulder, neither of them in any condition to be walking anywhere.

"DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARK!" Ham yelled occasionally. "DAAAARK AAAAAANGEL!"

"SHUT YER HOLE!" Toby yelled back. "It's late!"

"Holditholditholdit." Marty stopped the pair in their tracks by standing directly in front of them. They collided into him and then stepped back to listen. Actually, "listen" is a strong word, considering they were barely able to stand let alone comprehend complete sentences. "We cannot just go back to your room."

"We can't go back to yer room though either, can we, Mr. Genius?" Toby mumbled. "Yer boy is bangin' con skank. Bangin' and bangin' and bangin'..."

"WE have to keep going. Keep funning it up. It's Friday night!"

Fun time! Time for fun!” Marty smacked the fence with his open palm for emphasis. “What’re we gonna DO for fun?”

“I know what I’m gonna do,” Ham said, shrugging Toby off and standing wobbly tall. “I’m gonna find my hottie love and tell her I love her and she’s gonna love me and we’re gonna FUCK, right? We’re just gonna and I know.”

“I’m gonna find that assbag Graham and punch his lights to the moon,” Toby grumbled, leaning up against the fence for support.

“Good,” Marty said, smiling big and stumbling a bit. “I gotta go pee, though.”

“I gotta go pee too,” Ham said.

“I wanna pee too,” Toby said.

So they staggered off to pee.

The Way Back Machine
August 22, 1993

“Um, that was great, really. That was really great. I have to say. I have to tell you, that was great.”

Theodore “Hammerhead” Makrakis had just lost his virginity. The woman who took it from him, a regular attendee of UnCon recently christened “The Gollum,” was trying to sleep next to him. And yet Ham still could not shut his mouth.

“I think it’s fair to say that I’ve been thinking about this moment for a long time. Back when I first became aware of that mysterious beast with two backs, I never quite imagined...”

“Babe?”

“Yes, my darling?”

“This isn’t the Oscars. No need for a speech. Let’s go to sleep.”

“You don’t understand,” Ham squeaked. “I never thought this day would come. Never, never ever. That may sound crazy to you, because you certainly seem like a pretty cultured lady. But I never thought this would happen.”

The Gollum didn’t, in fact, seem like much of a “cultured lady” at all. To the well-trained observer, she was at least one white leather skirt past “culture” and about fifteen minutes past being a “lady.” When seen through the refractor of Ham’s sex-soaked eyes, however, she was a veritable princess.

“I keep hearing things are ‘better than sex,’” Ham said. “Chocolate. Winning. Whatever. *Nothing* is better than sex.”

“It was fairly brief, sugar.”

“Isn’t that funny? I thought I’d last longer, but I just couldn’t do it. I’m such a typical man.”

Ham laughed, and the Gollum laughed too, altogether a remarkable feat. Usually, when anybody said anything that could be construed as remotely threatening or slightly critical of Ham, he’d respond with wild, whining overreaction. Yet just moments after his first sexual experience, he was uttering his very first self-deprecating chuckle.

A deafening snore from the Gollum’s side of the bed cut Ham’s chuckle short, and he settled in to sleep himself, but slumber wouldn’t come. He tried not to toss and turn too much; he tried to shut off his brain. Instead he stared at the ceiling, and he whispered to his sleeping bedmate.

“You remember in *Jurassic Park*? I don’t know...it was kind of a crappy movie in parts. It’s no *Jaws* or *Close Encounters*, that’s for sure. Anyway, I keep thinking about that moment when all the scientists and kids first see the dinosaurs, the brontosaurus or whatever.

“That’s how I feel right now, believe it or not. Nothing in my world will ever be the same. I mean, I guess it probably will. But I’ve finally come across something that’s commensurate with my capacity for wonder.

“I don’t really understand why it was always so important to me that this happen, though. Especially after it’s over. No offense; you’ve been a fantastic lover...”

Ham patted the Gollum on the shoulder, just to make sure she knew he was serious.

“...but it wasn’t that big of a deal. Why was it such a big deal? Why should it be such a big deal? It doesn’t feel like a big deal now.

“I should enjoy this moment—it’s the only time in the history of my life that I’m not obsessed with whether women love me, or

hating myself when they don't."

The Gollum rolled over onto her side; her arm flopped across Ham's chest, and he smiled into the darkness of the hotel room. Sex might not be everything, but it was still...well, it was still everything.

Day Two
Saturday, August 25, 2001

Chapter 12

It sounded as if the phone were ringing on Jupiter. After the first twelve rings, however, Marty reluctantly accepted that it was ringing on planet Earth, in the United States of America. In their hotel room, in fact.

With no small degree of the traditional hangover slow-motion, he reached for the phone and knocked it off the receiver onto the floor. He then carefully stretched out his arm to grab the phone cord and slowly dragged the earpiece up to his body, finally placing it gently next to his head. He flinched as it touched his ear.

“To whom am I speaking?” The voice on the phone seemed to bypass Marty’s eardrum completely and bark straight into his aching brain. He flinched again.

“It’s Marty,” he groaned. “Who is this and what do you want?”

“It’s Ignatowski. I was calling about last night.”

The tone of general menace, guilt and threat in those six small words was not lost on Marty. What were lost on him were any memories of what Ignatowski might have been referring to. He remembered Bill stumbling into a room and screaming something about lost ears, and then he remembered the phone on Jupiter.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Ignatowski growled.

“You are a mind-reader, pal,” Marty replied, already sick of the hardass game. In the bed next to his, Ham let loose the kind of agonized moan that immediately reminded Marty of the tortured howl of “God” at the end of *Star Trek V*. What *did* God need with a starship, anyway?

“I caught you three freaks trying to piss in the pool,” Ignatowski said. Marty sat up quickly in bed, only to feel his head start pounding like a jackhammer against the inside of his skull. It was one of those hangover moments when he dearly wished his grey matter would just pour out of his head already and end the anguish.

“We tried to piss in the pool?” Marty said. “Shit, Ignatowski, we were really drunk, and I’m really sorry, I really am...”

“Yeah, well, I just wanted to let you know that your famous buddy won’t be able to help you next time,” Ignatowski said.

“Famous...buddy?” Slowly but surely, pieces of the incident began to float back into Marty’s brain and his face turned an ashen white.

“Yeah. A.G. Randall. He talked me out of busting you guys and kicking you out of the con, and we always like to keep our guests happy, so I helped him escort you to your room and into bed. But next time, pally, he won’t be around, and you’re outta here. Consider this a final warning. You got that?”

“Right,” Marty said, replacing the phone on its perch and burying his face in a pillow. A.G. Randall, one of his lifelong heroes, had caught him trying to piss in a hotel pool. If there is a sure-fire route to a literary agent, a publishing deal and minor fame as a sci-fi author, Marty had somehow stumbled upon the road traveling in the exact opposite direction. He had just drifted off into the sleep of the dumb when he was startled awake yet again,

this time by a shocked gasp from Ham.

“Marty!” Ham shouted.

“This is no time for your Doc Brown impersonation, asshole,” Marty grumbled, his scratchy whisper barely audible with his face still half-sunk into the pillow. “I am so fucking tired.”

“No, Marty. I had a dream. About her.”

“Who?”

“The Dark Angel. She was there, in my dreams.”

Marty knew that Ham was perversely gifted with one of the most powerful constitutions known to man. Though he was scrawny as a spider, he possessed a near-superhuman ability to guzzle down more booze than anyone he knew and always spring up unaffected the next morning. Marty also knew that no matter how sickly Ham might have felt, it would be impossible to keep Ham quiet about anything involving a con crush. Reluctantly, he leaned up on a single elbow and turned to Ham.

“What was she doing? Sucky-sucky? She love you long time?”

“No,” Ham sighed, staring spacily up at the corner where the ceiling of the room met the walls. “At first, I was running from her. I was running far and fast. I don’t know why I was running; I know I wanted her to catch me, but I ran. Finally, she tackled me, only it wasn’t really her. She was dressed as Trinity from *The Matrix*. Tight leather, short haircut, but she was still wearing her glasses.

“Then,” Ham continued, hitting Marty with the maniacal look of a man who’s seen the face of God, “we were in the Genesis chamber and she was dressed up in an awful early eighties’ *Trek* outfit, like she was Carol Marcus.”

“Still the glasses?” Marty asked.

“Yep, those big horny glasses, still plastered on her face. She was eating an apple, very seductively I might add. Then...”

“Let me guess. She was Princess Leia in the south passage, she expressed her true feelings for you.”

“How did you know?”

“Because you are thin like wax paper and easily seen through. You are also quite sad,” Marty sighed as he rolled over in a

sincere, desperate attempt to get back to sleep. But Ham wouldn't let it go.

"You don't understand. This is like some kind of sign from God or something. It's a message. She could be the one. She's my Dark Angel."

"Gurrrrrruuuuuuhhhhh," Marty snored from the bed next door.

Chapter 13

Ron could not believe how loud the phone was.

The receiver sat idly on his naked belly. It had been resting there for quite some time, making that staccato buzzing noise that phones make when off the hook.

It served as an auditory expression of his own feelings. Becca had vanished at some point while he dozed that morning; the second he woke up, he felt as though he had to call Melissa. He had picked up the phone, but he couldn't finish the job. He wasn't really sure why, and he didn't think about why, because he didn't want to face precisely what "why" could mean, just like he didn't want to feel the dark pit of unconquerable dread he felt when he remembered last night.

So he lay there in his unmade hotel bed and picked fuzz absentmindedly out of his belly button. He wished belly button lint could be like tea leaves—he wished it could tell him what to do. Unfortunately, it couldn't.

Finally, his guilt outweighed his dread. He clicked over to a dial tone and dialed Melissa's number in New York. A tingle rose up from his gut and tickled his chest. It was that feeling he always got when he first faced a girlfriend after betraying her trust. It was familiar to him, and thus, reassuring—only slightly, but still.

"Melissa? It's Ron."

“Wow, this is a surprise. Hold on.”

Back in New York, Melissa reached for the radio and turned down a blaring Cher tune.

“I’m so glad you called, honey,” Melissa said. “How’s the conference?”

Ron’s face flushed red with embarrassment. “Honey.” Already his studied inner cool was gone. “It’s called a convention, remember? It’s been pretty fun so far. We all partied last night.”

“Well, it’s nice you get to have a little vacation and see the guys again. I know how much they miss you.”

“Right.” There were fifty thousand words on the tip of Ron’s tongue—words like “sex” and “girl” and “Becca,” words like “marry” and “me” and “love.” He couldn’t grab them in his head, couldn’t force them from his lips. The closest he could manage was, “Getting a lot of work done?”

“Oh yeah,” Melissa replied. She was a Ph.D student in English at NYU. She was always getting a lot of work done. “Just reading and highlighting. I am so happy you called, Ron. I didn’t expect to talk to you again until you got back into the city on Sunday night. It really made my day.”

“It made mine, too,” Ron said. Made it into a hell of angst, Ron thought. But then, he knew he deserved that. Or did he? What did he deserve? What did she deserve? Maybe that was his problem; he never thought about anyone else...

A pounding on the hotel room door. Ron took the escape route.

“Listen, someone’s here, probably one of the guys. I better go. I love you.”

“Love you too, Ron,” Melissa said. “Have fun.”

He hung up the phone and checked himself in the mirror. He wasn’t sure who he saw. He answered the door.

“Ron, you gotta come to my panel,” Ham said, forcing his way past Ron into the hotel room. “It starts in like a half-hour and I’m afraid no one will come.”

“That *Star Wars* thing? Yeah, I’ll go. Lemme shower. Where’s Marty, still sleeping it off?”

“Yeah, he was hanging pretty bad when I left,” Ham said, glowering at the rumpled bed. “Someone had some kind of night, didn’t they, Mr. Ronnie?”

“Someone did,” Ron mumbled as he headed for the bathroom.

“Hey Ron,” Ham yelled after him as the door shut. “Has Toby stopped by here? We haven’t seen him all morning.”

Chapter 14

“I don’t think there’s much of anything wrong with science fiction today,” Sailor Moon said.

It wasn’t really Sailor Moon, though. Unlike the popular lead character of the Japanimated series, who was both female and a teenager, this particular Sailor Moon was a hefty thirtysomething man with a scraggly goatee, clad in a huge schoolgirl outfit and a cheap yellow wig.

“Science fiction is just all right by me,” he added, quickly realizing he didn’t actually have anything to say. “Everyone has their own opinions, but that’s just what I think.”

“That’s fine,” the moderator said. He sat at the front of a small hotel conference room, behind a long table littered with half-full plastic glasses of water. In the crowd, Sailor Moon slumped down into his seat and beamed around the room to the staggering crowd. A grand total of five fans had managed to drag themselves out of bed for this 10 a.m. Saturday morning panel, “What’s Wrong with Science Fiction Today?”

“Any other comments?” The moderator, a bit groggy himself from overpartying the night before, shuffled quietly through his pages of notes. He was prepared to talk for forty-five minutes about the sorry state of science fiction in the early part of the twenty-first century if he needed to. In fact, there was a big part of

him that hoped he would need to. Secretly, he prayed that no one else would speak so that he could launch into his prepared speech. Certainly no one at the insurance office where he filed claim paperwork all day ever asked him what he thought about anything.

Lame mundanes. They just didn't understand.

A slightly uncomfortable silence lingered over the crowd until it was shattered by a commotion at the rear of the room. The door banged open against the back wall and a scummy-looking guy wearing a leather jacket and a permanent scowl stumbled in. He slammed the door behind him and collapsed into a chair.

"Bloody hell!" he shouted for no particular reason. Everyone in the room turned, stared and then kept staring.

"Sir?" The moderator spoke into the microphone, jarring the new guest from his drool-drenched haze. "Did you have something to add?"

"Fucking add what?" Toby tried to get his head to stand up straight atop his neck; really, he did. But the best it could do was wobble oddly from side to side, thoroughly uncertain of its role in this mysterious conflagration of parts usually referred to a "body."

"We're talking about what's wrong with science fiction today," the moderator intoned. "Do you have any thoughts, sir?"

"Bloody fucking punk hell shit!" Toby shouted, punching a dent into the back of the chair in front of him. A middle-aged woman in the second row wearing a *Xena* T-shirt blushed and audibly gasped.

"Are you drunk, sir?" the moderator asked cautiously.

"I am indeed. I am so fucking drunk that I am rounding the bend and drinking my way to sobriety," Toby slurred, sending random droplets of spittle spraying all over the back of the seats in front of him. "I am absolutely drunk, sir."

"Well, then you might want to think about heading back to your room for some clearly needed rest, or we will be forced to call con security and have you escorted to your room," the moderator said. He reached into his bag for his cell phone; he'd programmed the con security office's special hotline into it the night before in

preparation for an unexpected incident such as this one. He didn't earn this gig by being unprepared for any eventuality.

Suddenly, Toby sat bolt upright as though possessed. His spine straightened like a dog's tail hit by lightning. He glared hard at the moderator and then stood up fast—the kind of standing that would have sent his head into a dizzying spin of nausea, were he in his right mind.

“You know what's wrong with science fiction today? People have stopped really dreaming, haven't they?” The slur vanished temporarily and he spoke in a crisp, clear voice. “There's nothing new under the sun, of course; even I know that. But there's nothing good under the sun anymore either. There are no beautiful dreams like Roddenberry had, or swashbuckling fantasies like Lucas had. There's no fucking dreams period, except about money. Lucas, you can bet right sure that bile-drenched fucker dreams about money, every night, wet mad dreams covered in cash that he sucks from all you crazy pathetic maniacs who sop this shit up.

“This whole thing...this whole place...it's all about the cash. They've sucked us all in, and we can't let it go, and it's our fault for not trying harder and showing them what we really think. We keep slurping it all up. Until we stop, it won't stop.”

“Hey, you look familiar,” said one of the staring geeks.

“Of course I do. I'm your worst fucking nightmare.”

“No, you own that comic book shop, the Fortress. Your back issues are highway robbery. You should talk about money, dickhead.”

“You may kiss my brilliant white ass, friend,” Toby retorted. “Now if you'll all excuse me”—he stood with as much dignity as his booze-addled body could summon—“I must puke. Live long and...aw, fuck me.”

Toby scrambled out of the room, found the nearest garbage can, and deposited yesterday's meals, beverages and snacks into it. Back at the panel, the moderator stared blankly at the spot where Toby had been before leaning into the mic again.

“Any further thoughts?” he hesitantly asked.

Chapter 15

In another, eerily similar hotel conference room just down the hall from where Toby had proclaimed his gospel of sci-fi fandom, ten people sat flipping through their programs and engaging in idle geek chit-chat. Ham was running five minutes early for his panel, yet he strode purposefully into the room and stormed up the aisle as though hundreds were waiting to hang on his every word. Ron lagged a few feet behind, slumping into a chair in the second row. Once Ham had deposited his stack of notes, references and charts onto the table at the front of the room, he stepped back into the audience and sat down in front of Ron.

“Is this your panel with the Dark Lord of the Shit?” Ron asked.

“Yeah,” Ham replied. “Should be a real doozy.”

“I can only imagine,” Ron said, leaning back and half-closing his eyes. The Dark Lord of the Shit had the only *Star Wars* collection in Cook County that came close to rivaling Ham’s. He had earned his nickname by acting as though his collection made him a better fan than anyone who couldn’t afford to drop tens of thousands of dollars a year on crap that sits in boxes in one’s basement. This stood in stark contrast to Ham, who believed he was a better *Star Wars* fan than most because he was insane.

“Theodore,” the Dark Lord said, striding cockily over to where Ham sat and extending his hand toward him. Ham grasped it in an

overly sincere two-handed shake. The Dark Lord treated Ham as though they were both colleagues in some exclusive club of geniuses.

“Hey,” Ham said. He could never remember the Dark Lord’s real name. “There were a few things I thought we could go over before...”

Ham’s sentence screeched to a halt as his gaze drifted toward the back of the room. The Dark Angel had just walked through the door and taken a seat in the middle of the room.

“Ron, wake up,” Ham said, pushing Ron’s knee until he jolted awake.

“What? It’s not starting yet. I can snooze.”

“Were you about to say something, Theodore?” The Dark Lord folded his arms over his Gamorrean Guard T-shirt and tapped his foot impatiently.

“Ron, it’s her. She’s here. Her is here.”

“Who is she, Ham?” Ron turned to scope the room and immediately realized who “her” was. “The one with the glasses?”

“Yeah, Ron. She’s the Dark Angel. Wow. Just wow.”

““Dark Angel?”” Ron leaned back to nap again. “Another dumb con crush. You never learn, do you?”

“It’s not dumb!” Ham’s voice had run the red light at whiny and was racing full-tilt toward screechy when the Dark Lord placed his hand on his shoulder.

“We better get started,” he said. The two stepped up onto the tiny platform and took their seats. Ron sat up reluctantly, stealing a few glances over his shoulder at the Dark Angel. He had to admit she was a pretty yummy lady.

“Can everyone hear...BREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE...”

Ham leaned in to speak into the mic, and the room echoed with the screeching howl of feedback. Every pair of hands in attendance leapt to its corresponding pair of ears, including the Dark Angel’s.

“Sorry,” Ham said sheepishly, his face blushing red. “I’ll try not to do that again.” The crowd chuckled slightly. Ham’s face visibly shone with embarrassment as he continued.

“My name is Theodore Makrakis, and we’re here to discuss the current state of the *Star Wars* franchise...”

For the next forty-five minutes, they did just that. The Dark Lord of the Shit was one of area fandom’s fiercest *Phantom Menace* apologists, so there was no shortage of hot topics. Ham spent most of the time rolling his eyes as the Dark Lord uttered statements like, “Jar Jar Binks is a jovial representation of a very human struggle for acceptance” without a hint of irony. It was all he could do not to smack the Shit upside the head with his always-at-hand copy of his Phantom Memo.

Though the debate grew quite furious by geek standards, Ham couldn’t help but steal glance after glance at his Dark Angel, seated there in all her geek finery, her bright orange backpack perched on the chair next to her. At long last, the pair drew their remarks to a close, to a modest round of applause.

“If there aren’t any more questions...” Ham said, rising quickly from his seat. If he sprinted fast enough down the aisle, he hoped he could reach the Dark Angel in time to attempt some awkward conversation before she left. Maybe Ron would come with and act suave on his behalf. Just as he placed his palms onto the table to stand, the Dark Angel’s hand slowly rose.

“I have a question,” she said.

“Yes?” Ham said, his voice cracking. He could see Ron in the second row, laughing and shaking his head.

“What does George Lucas owe you?” she said. “Because I would say he owes you nothing.”

“Well, we spend all of the money that keeps him rich,” the Dark Lord said with as much condescension as he could summon.

“Right,” the Dark Angel said. “But no one’s making you spend your money. And he’s just creating. He has to create in a vacuum, otherwise it’s not pure.”

“I’m sure he created *Phantom Menace* in a vacuum, because it sucked,” Ham said. The room erupted in as much laughter as ten people can create. Ham’s heart leapt when he noticed that the Dark Angel was among those laughing. As the laughter died down, her

voice piped up above it.

"I just think it's a little bit sad for people to argue about what should happen with something they have no real control over," she said. Ham's face turned burning red at lightning speed and he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising slightly. "I mean, if you don't like it, why do you keep doing it? How many times have you seen *The Phantom Menace*, anyway?"

"That has nothing to do with it..." Ham's voice was squeaking its way into astonishing new registers. This was bad.

"Come on," she said, her eyes rolling behind her glasses. "How many times?"

"I saw it ten times at the theater," Ham said. Ron glared up at him, mouthing the word "Stop..." over and over.

"Then I would say what you think doesn't matter," she said, standing up to leave. "George Lucas won."

"We should end now; there's another panel starting in here in just a few minutes," the Dark Lord said, yanking the mic forcefully from Ham's sweaty clutches. "Besides, Theodore here is digging himself into quite the Great Pit of Carkoon. Thanks for coming."

The crowd offered the two panelists another smattering of applause. Ham watched from his seat as the Dark Angel snagged her backpack and slipped out the door. Finally, Ham rose slowly from his seat and stumbled off the tiny stage toward Ron.

"Isn't she something?" Ham said, gazing toward the door. "She will be mine. Oh yes, she will."

"Damn, buddy," Ron said, shaking his head. "Just damn." He put his arm around Ham and walked him toward the back door. Ham stared forward with glazed, empty eyes, swooning over the only girl who had ever defeated him in a *Star Wars* debate.

Chapter 16

"Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnngggggggggggggg
ggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

Marty unleashed a noise approximating that collection of letters and flipped over in bed to check the clock. It was 11 a.m. Ham's annual *Star Wars* bitchfest would be starting any minute. He'd never make it in time, which was a small mercy. The last thing he needed in the late stages of a hangover was to spend an hour in the dank confines of a hotel conference room listening to Ham rant and rave about *The Phantom Menace*. He could pick up Ham for a movie on any given Friday night and get that anyway.

He rose slowly from the bed and staggered into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. He stared at himself for a minute in the mirror, playing with the planet-sized bags under his eyes and popping a zit or two. Then he wiped his face off with a towel, walked back into the room and fell into a chair.

He was tired not just from lack of sleep or the nagging hangover, but from pondering his life and the schemes he was cooking up for it. He was serious about what he'd told Ron yesterday in the arcade, but still the words kept popping back into his brain, haunting him like a dream—"I'm thinking about quitting my job and doing the sci-fi writing gig full-time." He heard them as he'd said them to Ron, and he heard them as he'd said them to

his mother on the phone last week.

“That seems like a big chance to take,” she had said. “What if it doesn’t work? How will you pay your bills? Are you sure doing something like that makes sense?”

“Mom, if it made sense, they wouldn’t call it a risk,” he had replied, and those words knocked around inside his head too, continually bumping up against the bundle of doubts and thrills all wrapped tight inside a single idea, a single defiance—walking into his boss’ office, giving two weeks’ notice and spending the rest of his entire days penning science fiction.

His ambitions for his future hadn’t been dragged randomly from the ether. They were grounded in a few tiny victories, stories placed in a couple small sci-fi magazines and encouragingly detailed rejection letters from publishers. He had a little momentum going and he couldn’t resist the urge to capitalize on it, to ride it as far as he could.

But he couldn’t really trust momentum, not like he could trust a perfectly average life spent at a series of well-paying average jobs, spending his average money on average bullshit and attending these average geek celebrations until he became just another faded memory of a man, walking the hotel halls with a sheaf of unpublished manuscripts under his arms and the hazy edges of an old dream playing out in his eyes.

A knock at the door. Marty answered it. Monica was standing there in her one-piece swimsuit, a hotel towel wrapped around her waist.

“Get your suit on, Mr. Grumpypants,” she said. “We’re going hot tubbing.”

“Give me five,” he replied, shutting the door to get ready. Ten minutes later, they were both submerged.

“Is there a more relaxing spot on the planet than a near-empty hotel hot tub at noon on a Saturday?” Monica sighed, sinking her body down into the gurgling water.

“That’s a question best left for future scientists to interpret,” Marty said. Monica shook out the back of her mangy mane of hair.

For a while they just relaxed in silence, her staring at the tips of her toes and contemplating him, him staring at the tips of her toes and contemplating his future.

"You seem distracted," Monica finally said.

"I am distracted," Marty replied. "I think I'm gonna turn my life upside down soon, and frankly, I don't know if I really have the courage to do it."

"The writing. Well, you're definitely good. What I've read, anyway. But I haven't read the novel..."

"No one has."

"It's scary, isn't it? Big life changes. It's like bungee jumping minus the bungee. So just like jumping, I guess you could say."

"Like jumping off a big cliff into nothingness," Marty said. "Like...shit, that's dorky, I shouldn't say it."

"No, go ahead." Monica kicked Marty's leg gently under the water. "Say it."

"I keep thinking of *Star Trek: Generations*, which is a shit movie," Marty said. "An absolute shit movie. And Kirk goes off into the bowels of the Enterprise to fix whatever the hell it is that's wrong, and that nexus thing swings by and zaps him away, and then Scotty and Chekov go down there with Cameron from *Ferris Bueller* and look out that big hole in the ship with the force shield on it. He just gets sucked away into the nexus. Boom. Gone."

"And I'd like to get sucked away by something bigger than I am," Marty said. "But I'm afraid to let go of what I know."

"That was not the strongest metaphor in the galaxy," Monica said. Marty splashed a heap of water into her face.

"Of course you're scared," she continued. "It's a big risk. I've tried it myself. When I got out of school, I suddenly decided that I wanted to draw those pictures on the covers of science fiction and fantasy novels. I wanted to be an artist."

"Yep. You were an honored guest at this very convention."

"I'd sold a couple things, and they were desperate, I guess. And it felt so right, sitting up front at panels and spouting off my worthless wisdom about drawing."

“But what happened? Why are you now a staff photographer at a newspaper and a part-time artist, instead of the other way around?”

“It just didn’t work. The leads ran dry, I was sucking down ramen noodles and begging for another break, and I just woke up one day and realized that it wasn’t worth it anymore. I could be just as happy doing art as a hobby and enjoying my life and money and friends, instead of cowering in my apartment without a dime to my name and clinging to a dream that made no sense anymore.”

“Didn’t that bother you?”

“Not as much as I thought it would,” she said. “I still have the art thing. It’s not gone forever. There’s just no pressure to either turn my passion into my existence or feel like a failure. After all, living off your art is no easy feat, even if you’re brilliant.”

They sat together listening to the gurgle of the jets beneath the water’s surface. Then Monica slid through the water toward Marty, gesturing for him to come closer. He leaned in toward her. Their faces were inches apart.

“Let me just say this. Are you listening?” She was speaking softly, slowly, searching his face with her eyes.

“I’m listening.”

“The scary part isn’t the risk. The scary part is making sure the risk is one you *have* to take. Take the right risk.”

Marty thought long and hard about that long after she’d left, and long after his fingers and toes had shriveled past the point of recognition under the bubbling water. Then he stood, towed off and headed back to his room for a nap.

Chapter 17

To try and break Ham out of his Dark Angel-induced stupor, Ron relied on yet another UnCon tradition—a trip across the street to the area mall, where those guilty of hunger could be sentenced to a hot, greasy meal in the food court, and where the KB Toys inevitably held some desperately needed *Star Wars* figure or a clearance-priced oddity. After a dig through the racks, Ron bought Ham lunch at the A&W Hamburger joint next to Lane Bryant.

“I’m still reeling,” Ham said after taking a long, frosty drag from his root beer float.

“Not this Dark Angel nonsense again.”

“No, actually, I’m reeling from the \$2 Power of the Force Han Solo in Endor Gear that I picked up. That’ll do nicely for my Ewok Village diorama.

“But,” Ham added, “you can be sure that Ms. Angel is never far from my mind, Ronald.”

“Well, were you going to talk to her anytime soon, or just ogle from afar?”

“Why don’t you come with me and we’ll find her, and you can help me strike up a chat?”

“No way, amigo,” Ron said. “We are both way too old for me to continue acting as your diplomat of love.” It was a classic Ham ploy—draw either Marty, Ron or Toby into the tractor beam of his

obsessive crush so that he could lay the blame on someone else when things went awry.

"I wish you knew how it felt. Women make me freeze up." Ham looked at the floor and started toying with his fries, a sure-fire sign that he was quickly letting the Dark Angel situation drag him down into self-loathing. Ron jumped in to rescue him.

"Come on, pal. Don't start getting down. You've got to stay on top of the game. You have it going on. Jesus, if it weren't for me, you and Marty would've driven off a bridge together long ago."

"I know, I know, by the power of Grayskull, I have the power." Ham raised his head, left his fries alone, and returned to the current conversation. "But enough of my yakkin'. Are you thinking about dumping Melissa? Because that new chick is pretty hot."

"Yeah, she is. And...well, there's no fun transition, so I'll just say it. Melissa wants to marry me."

"No kidding?" Clearly shocked, Ham just about wailed his response, his eyes bulging out at Ron.

"Yep. Rings, marriage, the whole bit."

"One ring to rule them all..." Ham intoned. "Are you gonna do it? Well, how can you do it? You're sleeping with other chicks."

"That is the question of the hour."

The sentence hung between them for a moment, until they both dug simultaneously into their baskets of food. After a few minutes of devouring, Ron sat back and tossed his napkin onto the table.

"Y'know, when I think, really think, about marrying her, my mind becomes a total blur," he said. "I love her. I really love her. She's not a geek, but who really gives a shit? And marrying her—the idea of marrying her—scares the piss outta me."

"Then I guess it's not meant to be, right?"

"But I love her. And if this is love and it's not enough, then what will be? What am I waiting for? What am I running from?"

"Don't ask me," Ham said, pushing away from the table. "Did you tell Marty yet?"

"No. I don't know if I will, either. You know how he gets."

"He's kinda right..."

“And anyway,” Ron said, “there isn’t anything to tell yet. No ring, no dress, no date, no nothing. It’s just on the table.”

“Right.”

Ron started laughing.

“What?” Ham asked. More than anything, he couldn’t stand being left out of a joke.

“I’m laughing at us. I hate myself because I fuck women, and you hate yourself because you can’t.”

“Whatever. Who’s the more foolish, Ronald—the fool, or the fool who follows him?”

“That quote isn’t even relevant,” Ron said, incredulous.

“It’s *Star Wars*,” Ham said. “It’s always relevant.”

“I know,” Ron sighed. He was losing Ham to the siren song of the geek Mecca across the street.

“Let’s get back,” he said. “There’s more con to be done. I wanna rustle up Marty and do some browsing in the dealer’s room. Plus, there’s only a few hours until the masquerade.”

“Right!” Ham squealed. “I gotta get my outfit ready.”

They stood up and grabbed their trays of fast food debris.

“Ham, I gotta tell ya—when you’re not spouting random geek nonsense, you’re a pretty good friend.”

“What about when I am spouting random geek nonsense?”

“Then I pity you.”

“Har, har, hardy-har-har,” Ham said with a roll of his eyes.

Without another word, Ron and Ham each slipped their glass A&W root beer mugs into Ham’s shopping bag. They left the mall and headed out into the sticky, suburban August afternoon.

Chapter 18

Toby was a man on a mission. Actually, he was the scariest kind of man on a mission—he was a hungover man on a mission. He'd sucked down six cups of black coffee and passed out for a nap since that morning's display, and now he was back to fighting form, pushing his way through the crowds in the dealers' room like a man possessed. He finally reached Graham's table and knocked his way past the customers standing around the register, stopping about six inches from Graham's face.

"You've got those fucking ears, you scumbag," Toby said, practically yelling, jabbing his finger into Graham's sizable belly. "Where are they? I know you ripped them off."

"You are stupid and crazy," Graham said, handing a pile of bills to a customer. "And your change. Thanks for shopping."

"Fuck that," Toby said, his voice lowering to a hiss. "Only you could be so bold. Only you could be so grubby greedy that you'd rip off a pair of vintage bloody Nimoy ears. My fucking Imperial Senate will not sit still for this. Where have you got them, anyway? Snookered away in your room? Or do you got them fenced? You already got a connection in Germany who's fronting the dough?"

"What is your problem?" Graham said.

"You're my problem. You've got them. I know it. And you're a sleazeball who pumps up your prices too high." Toby's voice had

raised again to the point where he was shouting, and he was posturing wildly about the booth, defiant and accusing. Passerby definitely peeked in to have a look at the commotion.

“Says you,” Graham glowered back at him. Toby wondered for a split-second why Graham even bothered speaking to him at all—it always went the same way. He suspected it was because Graham secretly enjoyed the hateful give-and-take as much as Toby did.

“Says me! You are ruining the industry with your inflation. This is not the bloody elevated art form of the privileged—this is entertainment for the masses. What rotting kid is going to fork over forty bucks for a comic book, anyway? You should be giving this shit away.”

“That must be how you stay in business, asshole,” Graham snorted derisively. “You just give this shit away.”

“I would give this shit away, absolutely,” Toby said. “Fuck it. It’s not worth my time. You just better fork back those ears, or I will make certain you pay hell.”

Toby stepped away and nearly backed into Ron and Marty, who were prowling Graham’s toy rack in search of loot.

“Hey lardass, is Becca around?” Ron said. Toby laughed cartoonishly loud and smacked Ron hard on the back, attracting a few perplexed stares.

“Fuck off,” Graham said. “She’s not here.”

“Then we’re not either,” Marty said, guiding Ron away from the booth. “Toby, you look like death, by the way.”

“I need a nap,” Toby said. “I need fifty naps. I’m gonna go see how many I can squeeze in before tonight.”

Toby strode off, leaving Marty and Ron to prowl through the dealers room. Ron picked up a fan-made custom action figure—a Ken doll with its hair magic-markered brown, wearing a grubby brown T-shirt and with red “blood” painted onto its bare feet. Allegedly, it was John McClane from the *Die Hard* films.

“‘Welcome to the party, pal.’ What loser would buy this shit?”

“Why do you say things like that?” Marty asked, a perturbed look passing over his face.

“Like what? I mean, if you buy that, are you not a loser? Is that a point of debate at all?”

“It’s not that. It’s your attitude.”

“Well, it’s your attitude, too.”

“I know, I know.” Marty picked up a stuffed Cthulhu, checked the price tag, then set it back down on the table. “But I think about this a lot. We’re really no better than any of these people.”

“The hell we aren’t!” Ron exclaimed.

“Why would we be better than them? We have the action figures. We have the comic books. You have half of the *Star Trek* media in existence committed to memory. I regularly post six-page analytical missives to a *Matrix* e-mail listserv.”

“We know what reality is, man,” Ron said. He sounded like he might only be half-joking. “We’ve got a grip, and I know it, and you know it, and fuck them. I’m sorry. Fuck them.”

“I will say this,” Marty said as they each pawed casually through a longbox of back issues. “There is something sad about these conventions.”

“You mean all these people who have no real lives outside of this shit?”

“No, that’s not what I mean at all,” Marty said. He was getting a little exasperated now. “Everything in the world of fandom is just a hollow reflection of the passion of the past. Shuffling past stars and plunking down twenty bucks for a lousy autograph before walking away, our eyes just as dead as they were when we showed up. What are we fans of? Being fans? We’re excited about being excited. It’s the lousy, worthless momentum of it all—of the constant push forward to the next movie, the next show, the next limited edition bullshit. It’s all limited edition bullshit, and the shelf date is coming due.”

“That is, like, totally profound. You should be a writer,” Ron said.

“Fuck you,” Marty said through a laugh, plunking down thirty bucks for a vintage Rancor Keeper action figure, mint on the card.

Chapter 19

“Ham, if she didn’t swoon when you humiliated yourself in front of her at that panel this morning,” Ron said as he flopped onto the bed, “the full Jedi costume will just send her over the edge into hysterics.”

“Yeah, Ham,” Marty chimed in. “If you’re as smooth tonight with her as I’ve heard you were this morning, she will be putty in your hands.”

“I actually have a really good feeling about tonight, assholes,” Ham said. He sat on the edge of the bed and began lacing up his brown boots.

Since his return from the mall, Ham had been sequestered in the hotel room he shared with Toby, working quietly while Toby snored away on the other bed. He had spent most of his free time over the past three months perfecting his new Jedi costume, either hovering over his mother while she sewed it together or locked away in his room carving accessories out of wood. The lightsaber alone had taken a taxing sixty Ham-hours to create. Like all Jedi before him, he had constructed it in a solitary state of meditation. Unlike most Jedi, his was built around a paper towel tube, spraypainted silver and pasted with beads he stole from his mom’s jewelry drawer.

“It’s gonna happen, guys,” he said. The laces tightened, he

donned his light beige robe and began weaving his hair into a single braid. “I have the blood fever. I am in Pon Farr. Tread carefully.”

“Speaking of ladies,” Ron said, “my informants tell me that Mr. McAfee was spotted in the hot tub earlier today with a Monica Deloro? Is that true?”

“Guilty as charged, I guess,” Marty said. “But not like fooling around. Obviously.”

“Why not, man? She seems like a cool chick.”

“She is. I’ve been a little distracted, trying to figure everything out. She actually helped me out a lot. Who knows what’s gonna...”

“You are also in the blood fever,” Ham said, pointing toward Ron. “With that red-haired girl. You are possessed by it. I can tell.”

“You have no fucking clue what you’re talking about,” Ron said, sitting up straight on the bed. He toyed nervously with a loose string on the comforter. “She’s just some girl I met at con.”

“Man, things with Melissa must be pretty shitty, if you’re still prowling around for women here,” Marty said. Ron knew where this was going. He could tell from a miniscule change in his tone that Marty thought his running around on Melissa was a despicable act, but he ignored it and pressed on.

“I dunno. Things are not that bad. I just don’t know what’s gonna happen with her, is all.”

“Do you love her?”

“I guess,” Ron lied. The comforter continued to unravel in his hands.

“It seems pretty serious to me every time you talk about it,” Marty said. “I don’t know why you’d want to fuck something like that up because of some crappy liaison with someone you don’t really care about. Why sabotage it?”

“She...she wants me to marry her. She wants a ring by Thanksgiving.”

Marty stared at Ron in disbelief. In the mirror, Ron saw Ham’s eyebrows shoot toward the ceiling. He continued fidgeting with his Jedi utility belt.

“Are you serious?” Marty asked. “That’s a really big fucking deal. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“There never seemed to be a right time, and...I dunno. I just don’t know.” Ron had pulled an entire length of thread from the comforter and was now wrapping it tight around his index finger, making its tip puffy red with trapped blood. “I’ve told you now, haven’t I?”

“So explain this to me again. How does fucking some girl here at con fit into those plans?” Marty glared at Ron. He had slipped into full disgust mode and was ready to unleash it all.

“It doesn’t. I just don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t really like to think about it.”

“Well, obviously.” Marty stood up and walked toward the window. He stared down at the pool, trying to simmer down.

“Alright, I think I’m ready,” Ham said, spinning around from the mirror so that his braid swung wildly behind his head. He had transformed into Obi-Ham Kenobi. “Let’s hit the masquerade.”

“Wha?” Toby exclaimed, waking suddenly with a start. “Did I miss anything?”

The Way Back Machine
May 14, 1994

Marty stormed into the kitchen, slamming the front door behind him. He hit the stairs moving fast, determined to make it up to his room before his mother could appear and ask how his day was.

Another slam shut the door in his room. He crashed onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling, still stunned that one of the last days of his high school career had become one of the worst.

It had started out so well. His first class was AP English with Beatrice O'Neill, Beatrice Emily O'Neill, the girl of his dreams. She read Emily Dickinson in spare moments between classes and dressed in a style that could best be described as Annie Hall meets Edward Scissorhands—lots of blacks, but also ties and tilted hats. She was unique, special, something.

He'd even made her smile that morning with a well-timed roll of his eyes at one of Mr. Anderson's awkward one-liners, another sad attempt to make Emily Bronte more "accessible" to seniors ticking down the minutes until graduation. She had such a soft, delicate smile, and she'd given it to him.

He didn't know a whole lot about her yet, but he had a strategy. He planned to lay fairly low until right around graduation, when he'd strike up a conversation and make his big move. Then he had the whole summer to get to know her—the whole summer and

beyond.

“I don’t know about that, Marty,” Ham had said over lunch that day. “It doesn’t seem like a lot of time to get to know her. You gonna eat your fries?”

“No, I’m not, and you’re wrong,” Marty said. He dumped his basket of fries over Ham’s grilled cheese sandwich.

“I think Ham’s right,” Ron said. “And I never thought I’d say that for any reason, let alone in response to advice from Ham about women. But the guy is right. You should get moving, Marty.”

“Thanks, Ronald,” Ham said.

“However, he’s also wearing a black trenchcoat in the middle of May, so he’s still stupid.” Ron reached over the table and slid his fingers under the lapel of Ham’s coat; Ham smacked them away.

“Touché, douchebag,” Ham retorted.

“I’m still gonna go through with it,” Marty said. “I just have a feeling about this one.”

“I have a feeling you’re headed for a heartbreak,” Ron replied.

Turns out Ron was right. But Marty never expected that Ron’s rightness would arrive as the result of stumbling upon Beatrice and Ron in the yearbook office, making out after school in the dim light of a desk lamp while uncorrected proofs lay scattered on the floor.

“Fuck,” Marty had yelled, and spun out of the doorway.

“Marty, please, it wasn’t my fault,” Ron said, chasing him toward his car. Marty broke into a dead sprint to get to the parking lot; Ron followed and caught up easily.

“Dude, please, listen to me,” Ron said, grabbing Marty by the shoulder as he reached the school’s front door. Marty shrugged off Ron’s hand.

“I’m not going to listen to you, Ron. This is such fucking bullshit. Why would you do something like that?”

“I didn’t, man. She was all over me. Anyway, who cares? It’s just some stupid girl.”

“She’s not a stupid girl!” Marty smacked the palm of his hand hard against the glass of the door. “I never thought she was a

stupid girl. You did. You do.”

“I don’t think she’s stupid, but she’s not important...”

“SHE WAS TO ME!” Marty swung the door open and sprinted again, made it to his car, sped home, left Ron in the lobby.

Now Marty was at home in his room pouting instead of flirting with Beatrice after school. Ron had ruined everything.

It wasn’t the first time. There was something easy about the way Ron regarded women—not cheaply, at least not always, but with a conviction that every relationship he had wouldn’t be his last, and that every kiss wouldn’t linger forever on his lips. This was not the life-or-death battle that Marty fought with his shyness, with the way his respect for women clashed with his desire for them. It was a casual regard for the opposite sex. Marty understood it, a little, and he hated it. In moments like these, though, he just hated that Ron had it, and he didn’t.

To him, such feelings were foreign. He struggled over every conversation with the girls he took an interest in. He dated, sure, but he usually found himself in turgid, emotional relationships where he fell too hard and hurt too much. Ron skipped in and out of hearts, weaving his way amiably through half the girls in the senior class. Everyone seemed to notice. No one seemed to mind.

Marty saw them solely in terms of false contrasts. Ron was more attractive, and Marty had acne. Ron was shallow, and he was deep. Ron didn’t really care about women, and Marty did. But the only real difference was that, for reasons Marty never understood, it was easy for Ron, and not for him.

There was a light tapping on his door, which had to be his mother. Sure enough, Mrs. McAfee cracked the door open a bit and poked her head in.

“Marty, hon? Ron’s on the phone.”

“I don’t want to talk to him.”

“What’s wrong?” That was why Marty had raced up the stairs. Like all mothers, Mrs. McAfee possessed a preternatural sense for reading her son’s every emotional state.

“There was this girl, and Ron...” Marty said. He let his words

trail off. His mom understood anyway.

“I’m sorry, babe. I know it’s hard for you now, but...”

“Why is it hard? And when will it get easier?”

Mrs. McAffee walked into the room and tousled Marty’s hair.

“It will get easier. Just act with respect, kill them with kindness, and everything else will come. I know that for a fact.”

She handed Marty the cordless phone and left. He clicked off the mute button and raised it to his ear.

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Can we talk about this, or not?”

“Goddamnit...”

Marty already felt his anger melting away. He and Ron were best friends, inseparable since the age of eight. He couldn’t stay pissed. But he could try.

“Fuck off!” Marty hung up the phone, cranked a Billy Joel CD and screamed every word to the ceiling.

In the years to come, as he and Ron grew past college and into their mid-twenties, Marty would come to treasure his yin-yang relationship with Ron more and more. But still, after almost two decades of friendship, Marty didn’t understand how women could sometimes mean nothing to Ron, and everything to him.

Night Two

Chapter 20

Were it someone's secret ambition to obliterate all of the geeks in northern Illinois, one well-placed smart bomb at the yearly UnCon masquerade would easily do the trick. Though the con goers found themselves divided into their own tiny subcultures for the rest of the weekend—gamers, Trekkers, literary fen, Trekkies, costumers, Trek fans—everyone came together in the hotel's main ballroom for the masquerade. It was the perfect excuse to either dress as your favorite character, or mock those foolish enough to do so. Toby, Ham, Ron and Marty usually chose the latter option.

"Refresh my memory," Toby said as they took seats near the back. "Aren't Agent Mulder's breasts supposed to be smaller than Agent Scully's?"

"Those are some heinous costumes, man," Ron replied. "Mulder" was about two hundred pounds heavier than his on-air counterpart and sported a mullet. "Scully" was somehow a foot

taller than her partner and had refused to dye her hair red for the occasion. Her bleached-blond tresses hung down well past her nonexistent ass.

“They look more like morticians than FBI agents,” Ham said.

“Well, you look more like a creep in a bathrobe than a Jedi,” Ron retorted.

“Is Carter hosting the contest this year, Ham?” Marty asked.

“Of course. He does every year. How else do you think he ends up with some foxy number in a skimpy outfit to escort around from party to party on Saturday night?”

Ham spit out the last few words with disgust, and Toby winced. “You whine too much, chap,” he said.

Then the lights dimmed and the *Star Wars* main theme came blaring over the speakers. Decked out in a sparkly gold dinner jacket and a black bow tie, Gene Carter took the stage to a wave of warm applause.

“Hey there, Chicago! How the hell are ya doing tonight?” His slight slur indicated that in classic Gene Carter fashion, he’d spent the hours before the masquerade tanking up in the hotel bar. Everyone screamed their response at once.

“Whoa. Hey there, gang. Hot stuff. Fantastic. We better get this thing rolling—I don’t think we can keep the Klingons off the Vulcans for much longer!”

The crowd buzzed with laughter.

“This guy is so fucking lame,” Ron muttered.

“What was he in again? *The Black Hole*?” Toby crossed and recrossed his legs, fidgeting in his plastic hotel folding chair.

“He was in all three original *Star Wars* films,” Ham said. “He’s quite a character.”

“Don’t you mean he has no character?” Ron quipped.

“You would know,” Marty said.

“What does that mean?” Ron turned and glared at Marty, his temple starting to throb. Xena’s sidekick Gabrielle, seated directly in front of them, turned and shushed them into silence.

“We have a huge night tonight, so let’s get things started right

away,” Carter said, strutting across the stage in his own inimitable huckster style. His every movement seemed to say, “Help me—I’m a has-been.” “I’ll call up the contestants one at a time, and our panel of celebrity judges”—here he gestured downward toward the front row of the crowd, where A.G. Randall and a few of the other con guests sat waving—“will kindly rate each performer on a scale of one to ten. At the end, we’ll whip out our tricorders and tally up the votes and pick our winner. This year’s winner will pick up a one hundred dollar gift certificate from The Fortress, northern Illinois’ ginchiest comic book store.”

Toby grinned from ear to ear. “You like that, boys? ‘Ginchiest’? I thought it damn near brilliant.”

“Damn near, but not quite there,” Ham said.

“Very funny, you bloody goof.”

“Alrighty, then. Let’s bring out our first contestant. By day, he’s Bruce Wayne, but by night, he’s the Dark Knight, Batman!”

Occasionally, one comes across a man or woman who clearly has no business spending any time in public wearing spandex. This “Batman” was one such person. In fact, this particular Caped Crusader’s lumpy physique made Adam West look like Arnold Schwarzenegger. But the costume did demonstrate a remarkable attention to detail, including snap-open compartments on the utility belt and blue satin boots. “Batman” strutted to the center of the stage, then produced a pellet from his belt and tossed it down between him and Carter, engulfing the spot with a cloud of smoke.

“Hey now, crimefighter! I’m no archvillain!” Carter vigorously waved the smoke out of his face and coughed into the microphone. “Batman” took a deep bow to cordial applause from the audience. Toby clapped loud and long.

“I don’t understand why nobody respects a decent costume anymore,” he said.

“Because it’s not worn by a sexy mama,” Ham replied.

“Thank you, Batman,” Carter said, his eyes still watering from the smoke. “Fantastic. Next we have—oh my gosh, is this special. What loveliness. It’s none other than the vampire slayer herself,

Buffy Summers.”

“Holy shit,” Ron whispered as a curvy vixen in a tight red tank top and a black skirt a few sizes too small strode across the stage to appreciative hoots and hollers. “She can dust me anytime she wants.”

“What, you gonna fuck her too?” Marty hissed.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Ron said in full voice, turning again to glare hard at Marty. Gabrielle shushed them again. They ignored her.

“I’m fucking sick of you fucking around on great woman after great woman and then moping like you’re the one being put upon because you’re expected to treat a relationship seriously instead of like a fucking game.”

“It’s none of your business.”

“No, it’s not, but it’s not Melissa’s business, though, is it? And it’s not Becca’s business, is it? Whose business is it? It’s yours. Face your fucking business for a change.”

“I’ll live my life however I want.”

“Yeah, and hurt anyone you can in the process. You’re one of the most selfish people I know.”

“I’m outta here,” Ron said. He stood and bumped his way down the crowded aisle even as the Slayer tried to fend off Carter’s grabby embrace.

“Isn’t she something, ladies and gentleman?” he said, pulling her close. She looked as though she wanted to shove her prop stake straight through Carter’s heart—assuming he had one.

“You okay, Marty?” Toby asked. “That was pretty brutal.” Ham sat in silence, picking at his lightsaber.

“I’m fine,” Marty said. They sat watching the masquerade in silence for a few minutes. Toby and Ham made eye contact; Toby shrugged while Ham shook his head, both in reaction to the outburst they’d just witnessed. Then Toby turned abruptly toward the sad sack Jedi next to him.

“Ham, I’ve got a plan,” Toby said. “I need your help. Can we get out of here?”

“I guess,” Ham replied. “Marty, are you okay?”

“Just go,” Marty said.

Slipping past Lando Calrissian, Morpheus and Captain Picard, Toby and Ham made their way to the exit, leaving Marty alone in a room filled with loneliness.

Chapter 21

Ron sprinted down the hallway, through the lobby, kicked the door open. He slowed to a stride as he stepped into the humid night air of the hotel's front driveway. Within seconds, he'd lit a cigarette and taken several cool, satisfying drags.

Maybe Marty was right. Maybe he did fuck everything up, maybe he was selfish, maybe he did hurt people. There was no maybe about the last part. He did hurt people. That wasn't the question. The question was whether he knew how to stop.

He didn't know if he could keep himself from racing toward his inevitable future—single, endlessly dating and sleeping around until he became too old to bother. Then a twilight time spent trying to recapture some small dose of the romance he'd enjoyed as a strapping young lad of twenty-five.

He didn't want to become that. He knew he had to find some long-term place of comfort and contentment. Melissa felt like that place. But then, why did he surge with an unconquerable desire to leave her forever—to run away, as far and as fast as he could—every time he considered spending the rest of his life with her?

"You don't look too good."

It was Becca. She was standing behind him, leaning up against a pillar and smoking her own cigarette.

"I don't feel good right now," Ron replied. "I think I'm afraid

of commitment.”

“Oh, really? I’m sure you’re afraid of commitment, and I’ve known you for less than twenty-four hours.”

“Are you afraid of commitment?”

“I don’t know,” Becca said, stepping over to stand next to Ron. She sliced through the emotional haze in his brain, ravishing in a one-piece pleather dress and knee-high stiletto boots. “I’ve never tried it. I have no idea what it feels like.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll die alone?”

“We’re all gonna die alone. But I’ll never be lonely, that I know. People find each other. I found you.”

“What does that mean? You found me...and for what? Sex? Chit-chat?”

“I’ll take either one, but I’d prefer them both,” Becca said. She pushed him gently up against the pillar and kissed him hard. “And just like that. The commitment-phobe commits to something.”

“She’s so great,” Ron said. “Melissa. She’s amazing.” Becca didn’t move. She stayed pressed up against Ron.

“Then go. Call her. Marry her.”

Ron searched Becca’s eyes for a long minute. He saw nothing. He kissed her again; they parted. He grabbed her hand and led her through the hotel’s front door.

Chapter 22

“What an incredible smell you’ve discovered,” Ham hissed, his nose curling up with disgust. “What is that?”

“It’s my shit,” Toby replied. The two were crouched down next to the back door of the dealers’ room. Toby had a hairpin and was doing his best to clumsily pick the lock. Ham gingerly picked up a clear mylar bag on the ground next to Toby. It was, indeed, a clear plastic bag filled with shit. Immediately he dropped it.

“I think I might puke,” Ham said.

“I don’t know that we need both puke and shit to make this prank work, but if you’ve got it in you, then by all means.”

“What are we doing, anyway?” Ham stood and straightened out his robes with a faux regal air.

“My original plan was to ransack Graham’s booth...uh...in search of the ears,” Toby glanced furtively over his shoulder at Ham as he fiddled with the lock. “Then I decided it might be more redeeming just to leave a steaming bag of my shit in his general area. So that’s what we’re doing. And...voila. We’re in.”

Toby slowly pushed the door open, sending a shaft of light into the darkened dealers’ room. It was completely deserted, with most of the tables covered in white sheets. Without the throngs of people pushing their way around to check out the merchandise, or the constant throb of videos, stereos and chatter all buzzing at the same

time, the space felt empty. Toby picked up his bag of shit and stepped inside, gesturing for Ham to follow. The pair weaved around the tables until Toby recognized the familiar plywood logo of Cryptkeeper's.

"Jackpot," he whispered.

"So now you're punishing him because you think he has the Spock ears?" Ham asked. He had no capacity for mischief, so this covert op was slowly freaking him out. He breathed heavy and glanced around nervously for security.

"I'm doing this because this guy's an asshole. His theft is just a byproduct of that."

Toby pulled back a stack of comics inside a longbox and dropped the bag behind them, replacing them carefully so as not to crush the putrid parcel.

"Now your prices really stink," Toby whispered to himself with a chuckle. "It'll take him hours to find that."

"Whoever you are, I hear you!" Toby and Ham froze. They both instantly recognized the booming voice of Ignatowski. Ham let slip a petrified squeak.

"Shit," Toby hissed. "Security. Let's move."

Toby grabbed Ham by the back of his robe and dragged him toward the exit, sprinting as fast as his fortysomething legs would carry him. Behind them, Ignatowski turned a corner and spotted them. Just as Ignatowski's flashlight switched on and its beam sliced in their general direction, the pair hit the door and sprinted through it. By now, Ham had gained his own footing and was sprinting alongside Toby like a girl. His Jedi braid kept flopping in his face as he fled.

They kept running down hallway after hallway until they found an open door. Through it they burst, straight into the middle of a *Vampire: The Masquerade* live role-playing session. Gothic geeks of every stripe wandered earnestly around the room while a boombox in the corner cranked Ministry.

"Who are you supposed to be, fair travelers?" One of the pale contestants in his black jeans and white pirate shirt approached

Toby and Ham.

“We’re total assholes,” Toby muttered with a sly grin. They strode through the room, out the other door and straight to their hotel room without another word.

Chapter 23

The Hobbit was getting on Marty's nerves.

"Then I heard that Peter Jackson may have cut a few scenes from *The Two Towers*, which I can understand, I guess," it said. As he endeavored to ignore the miniscule creature, Marty glanced down at the top of its feet, on which it had somehow plastered two grimy patches of wig.

"Nice foot toupees," Marty said, gesturing downward. "How much do those run? Do they custom-fit them?"

"Uh, those are just old wigs," the Hobbit said. "You saw the *Rings* trailer online, right? The one with the orcs?"

"Who is this bloke?" Toby said as he and Ham made their way through the crowd to where Marty stood against the wall. They were smooshed into the back corner of a Tolkien party—the place was packed.

"This is a...you're a Hobbit, right?" Marty said, turning to his companion. "Or a dwarf? Or do you prefer 'little person'?"

"My name is Frodo Baggins," the Hobbit said indignantly.

"Right, Fredo. I gotcha. You were his older brother, and you were stepped over, and it's not hard to see why." Marty's patience for the twerp had run out.

"Uh, I should get punch," the Hobbit said as he wandered off.

"Christ, what an ordeal," Ham sighed. "Where's the booze?"

“On the table, right next to the Gandalf standee. Where have you two been?”

“We ran into some old friends,” Ham said. Toby poked Ham on the shoulder.

“For that, you’ve earned yourself a drink.” Toby headed for the punch bowls.

“What was that all about? At the masquerade?” Ham took his lightsaber off his belt and began picking intently at one of the costume beads.

“You know what it’s about, Ham. You know Ron too. He’s running from himself.”

“There’s not much we can do, though. If he’s going to run, then he’s going to run.”

“I’d like to think you’re wrong, but you’re probably right.”

“About what?” Toby said, handing Ham and Marty fresh glasses of the party’s trademark Precioussss Punch.

“Ron,” Marty said. “But let’s talk about anything but Ron.”

They immediately dropped into silence, quietly draining their punch glasses. Then Ham suddenly turned from the group without a word and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?” Toby called after him.

“I have to go,” Ham said, and went.

“That can’t be good,” Marty said. “Not good at all.”

“This doesn’t look so good, either,” Toby said, nodding toward the other end of the room. Monica was woozily leaning up against a chair, and staring unapologetically at Marty. She was visibly, earnestly, staggeringly drunk. As soon as Marty met her gaze, she started to amble over.

“I’m gonna make my exit. Hope this works out for you.” Toby slipped through the crowds and left the party.

“Hello, stranger,” Monica slurred, pushing up against Marty and dropping her arm over his shoulders. He could make out three varieties of liquor on her breath.

“How many of those punches have you had, Monica?”

“Either not enough or too many. That depends on this.”

She gave him a kiss he wanted, but couldn't accept.

"You're really drunk, Monica," Marty said, gently pushing her away.

"I know," she replied. "I needed to be. Otherwise, I would be too scared. You're so confident all the time. You always know what you want. I'm not like that."

"Confident...yeah, right."

"Well, you are. You act that way. You're quiet. You always are thinking. What's going on in that head of yours?" She tapped her finger against Marty's forehead.

"Why don't we go get you some water and you can sit down somewhere?" Marty tried to guide her through the party toward an exit, but she shrugged off his arm.

"Why? I don't want to sit down."

"You don't know what you want. You're wasted."

"Fuck that!" Monica screamed. Half the heads at the party turned. "You just don't think I'm cute enough because I'm not some little hot dumb thing that you can boss around."

"That's so far from the truth I can't even understand it."

"I know what I want. I know. I want to stop being one of the fucking boys."

"You're not one of the boys, Monica."

"Then why won't you kiss me?" Monica looked straight at Marty as she said it.

"I...Monica, I'd love to kiss you," Marty said. "Just not the drunk-out-of-your-mind you."

"Ah, shit. I'm such an asshole."

Monica shoved her way through the crowd and out the door, knocking a few glasses of punch out of a few hands in the process. The assembled throngs all gazed over at Marty alone in the corner, holding two empty glasses and wondering how the evening could possibly get more awkward and painful.

Chapter 24

He found her.

Ham had stumbled from party to party for over an hour, picking up every alcoholic concoction he could get his hands on and swigging each one down hard. He'd downed two pangalactic gargleblasters, a snifter of blue milk and three glasses of bug juice before finally making his way to Area 51. There, standing quietly alone in a corner with a half-empty glass, was the Dark Angel.

Ham knew what he should do next: Go up and talk to her.

Other than that, he had no idea how it should work. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to say it. He didn't know how to stand next to her.

He knew, however, exactly what he'd do if she didn't want to talk to him. He'd get so angry and sad that he couldn't speak, then he'd drink whatever booze was dropped in his cup until he passed out. He just didn't want to think about that yet.

On some level, he knew attitude was important. He understood from years of watching James T. Kirk that confidence was key. But where did confidence come from? It was probably a lie, Ham figured. It would have to be a lie in his case. He had no confidence to speak of, no good reason to even consider being confident about himself. That was essentially his problem. He wasn't confident because he wasn't happy, he wasn't independent, he wasn't even

really grown up yet.

And yet, he was sure that having a girlfriend would help. He could use her encouragement and unflinching affection to rise up from his station. He'd quit the video store, he'd get a real graphic design job instead of fiddling on his computer at night. He'd move out of his parents' place and into his own apartment. They'd live together in geeky splendor, she and he, her toys sitting alongside his on acres of shelving, their DVD and laserdisc collections wedded together in a beautiful blend of her tastes and his.

What would Han Solo do, he wondered? A slightly pathetic question, true, but he didn't have many role models to turn to for guidance. And yet, how could he be Han? How was he supposed to be indifferent and cool when confronted with the perfection of the Dark Angel? There she was, her long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, smoothing out her skirt as though she were waiting for someone special to materialize from thin air.

Ron knew how to score, and he always gave Ham the same advice: "Treat each situation with a woman as though you don't really care about getting laid or meeting a soulmate. In fact, act as though you don't care at all."

Unfortunately, Ham did care. Ham always cared. Ham thought he probably cared too much.

His mind was racing, burning, thoughts stumbling into each other like blind men without canes. He had to do something. So what if she didn't want to meet him? Big deal. There's always a bigger fish, Ham mused, kicking himself for inadvertently quoting *The Phantom Menace* in his mind.

The tangle, the fire. He couldn't machete his way through; he couldn't put it out. The same thoughts that always flew around his brain when confronted with women of any stripe were out in full force tonight. There was the fear, there was the excitement, there was the stark mad paralysis of confronting it all. The bored sitcom audience in his mind applauded dutifully as they made their big entrances.

And there was Gene Carter, resplendent in his cheesy gold

jacket and his wannabe Hollywood smile, leaning next to the Dark Angel and making her laugh. Ham watched as he leaned in to whisper something into her ear. He watched her giggle and glance flirtatiously up at Carter. Then he watched Carter take her hand and lead her toward the exit.

Carter noticed Ham spectating and shot him a tiny wink. Ham stood where he had been standing for the past twenty minutes, staring and drinking and thinking without acting, and he ceased to exist.

Chapter 25

“I finally found Monica. She seemed calmer,” Toby said.

He’d stumbled upon Marty sitting alone in a stairwell. He was stretched out next to him now, his body extended over several stairs, picking idly at a particularly sloppy hole in the knee of his jeans. Marty just looked down at the blank grey floor, an empty plastic cup still clutched in his hand.

“Did she really calm down? She seemed pretty upset when she left.”

“Well, she made her shot for the Marty-nator and bloody failed,” Toby chuckled. “Of course she’s upset.”

“She didn’t fail. I think she’s really cool, honestly. But man, was she drunk. I’m not gonna go for that.”

“You’re a better man than I. I’m still on the prowl for my yearly con bang. I’m trying to decide between the aspiring actress I met last night or that Agent Scully lass we saw earlier.”

“Good luck.”

“Listen, Marty, if I say something to you, do you promise not to get yer panties twisted up?”

“I can try,” Marty said, tossing his cup behind the stairwell.

“I think you’re being too hard on Ron.”

“Someone needs to be hard on him!” Marty turned to look at Toby. His eyes burned bright with frustration. “He’s never hard on

himself. That's his goddamn problem."

"I know," Toby said.

"It's always been his problem. In high school, he'd study the night before every test, and sometimes he'd pass, sometimes he'd get an A. But when he'd fail, he'd wonder like an idiot what had happened. He'd get all depressed, or pissed off. And he had to know, somewhere, deep down inside himself. He had to know that if he just really tried, he could have done his best. Instead he gives half of himself because...I don't know why."

"I don't either, and you're right," Toby said. "But trust me when I say that he's staring down the rest of his life right now, and it's not an easy place to be. These things...they're never easy. When they're real, they're never easy."

"Who left who, Toby? Did you leave her, or did she leave you?"

"My wife?" Toby sat up on the steps and draped his arms over his knees. "Oh, that was ages ago. She left me. I mean, I know why. I don't blame her. I wasn't the safest bet at the time. I had joined up with these punk blokes in Chicago, I was playing guitar and coming home three sheets away every other night."

"So did she make the wrong decision?"

"No, I'm glad. I wasn't ready. Maybe she wasn't either. But what could I do? It wasn't my move to make. I would have stayed with her, I know that. Man, she was bloody something. Adorable. Smart."

"What if Ron is making the wrong decision, and he doesn't realize it? What if he keeps making the same wrong decision over and over, and he can't stop himself? Isn't it my duty as his friend to stop him?"

"As his friend," Toby said, "it's your duty to do everything you can. Say everything you have to say and then step aside. The worst thing you could do, though, is walk away. No matter what he decides. Especially you, Marty. You're half of his brain, you're his conscience. And he does listen to you. I know that he does. It's just that some lessons are impossible to learn until you've had your

guts ripped out.”

“I don’t know...” Marty shook his head.

“There’s a reason I nicknamed you for *The Empire Strikes Back*, mate. You guys just think they’re stupid nicknames, but they’re not. They’re dead true. Ron is fast, and he is sexy. Ham is a bit messy and disappointing in places. And you...Marty, you’re the moody one, and on rare occasions, the quiet one.

“But you’ve got the dignity. You’ve got the heart. Don’t give up on him yet. He needs you, and you know it. You need him too. Who else is gonna tell you when you’re being pig-headed? Hell, if he’d been there for that Monica thing tonight, he would have cursed you to hell.”

“Toby, when you gave us those nicknames, you barely knew us,” Marty said, smirking.

“True enough. And yet...well, true enough.” Toby stood up and stretched his legs. “What a night. I need a break. I’m going up for a bit.”

“I’m gonna wander,” Marty said. “I need to think.”

“Understood.”

Marty watched Toby walk up the stairs and wondered how a middle-aged comic book shop owner could know so damn much about life.

Chapter 26

It happened fast, the sex, and then they were off each other, rolling to their own sides of the bed, speaking not at all and pretending to be asleep. Ron wasn't sleeping, though—he was scared, and confused, and staring at the wall as though waiting for answers to pour from it.

He knew only one thing: He couldn't marry Melissa. There was simply no way. Come to think of it, he knew another thing: He'd never speak to Becca again. He might see her next year or the year after at UnCon, might exchange greetings or even another drunken hookup. But he knew how the routine would pan out. They'd wake up, he'd whisper earnestly, "I'll call you," and then he never would.

Ron felt certain it wasn't any kind of twisted pull from this lothario lifestyle that created the doubts in him about Melissa. He was only really such a stud at cons, where desperation combined with alcohol made sex easy to score. His attractiveness meant that he could move into an environment like this and have no problem picking the choicest women to spend time with. Lying in a dark bed next to Becca, he realized he was immersed in the symptom, not the problem.

Careful not to stir the bed too much, he slowly got up and stood at the mirror. As he stared into it, he could just make out Becca

behind him, lying there sleeping, naked and beautiful. There was something there, some connection, and she was definitely someone to be reckoned with. Outside of this room, though, she'd hold no more sway over him, and he knew he'd mean nothing to her. He was reminded of the old cliché—two ships passing in the night. These two ships stopped for a couple days, fucked around with each other, then sailed onward.

His encounter with Becca was like so many he'd had in years past at UnCon, and yet somehow, it was different. It made him feel intensely self-aware at four in the morning, staring at himself in the mirror while his latest sexual conquest lay dozing behind him. He was a twenty-five year old man unable to commit, possessed by an unshakable immaturity that both excited and embarrassed him.

He knew exactly who he was. Yet even if he wanted to—and he had no idea if he did—he could not change it. He didn't have it in him. He had the awareness of himself, but not the knowledge. It was exhilarating, terrifying and sad all at once.

Becca stirred on the bed and groaned softly. Ron watched her rise, watched her body move in the delicate moonlight. He sat back down on the bed.

"I better go," she said. She started to slip on her clothes.

"Yeah," Ron replied. "You should go."

"I'll call you."

"That's my line."

Becca giggled and buttoned her pants. Then she took a seat next to Ron, taking his chin delicately into her hand and turning his face toward her.

"Are you gonna be alright?" she said.

"Yeah. I've got a lot on my mind."

"You do. You definitely do."

Her hand caressed his face for a moment. Then she stood. She grabbed her purse from the nightstand.

"Well, thanks," she said. She leaned down and gave Ron one final, lingering kiss—a kiss goodbye. She strode over to the door and reached for the knob.

“Becca?”

She turned. He knew her completely in this moment. She was the mirror—he saw his own desires, his own need for approval, his own blank dread in her eyes.

“Thanks,” he said.

She smiled, and shut the door quietly behind her.

Chapter 27

Somehow, at 2 a.m., Marty found himself downstairs in the hotel bar. Since meeting Toby in the stairwell, he'd wandered the halls and peeked into parties for a few hours, hoping to run into Monica. He'd also spent the last half-hour mindlessly watching a barely-conscious couple attempt to scale the fence surrounding the pool in a desperate bid to skinny-dip for the viewing pleasure of a hotel full of guests. When that adventure anticlimaxed, his appetite for parties ended too.

The bar was full, but not too crowded; he easily found a table in the corner and nursed a gin and tonic while staring blankly into space. An older man's face floated into his field of vision and tugged at the corner of Marty's memory.

"Can I join you?" The man pulled out the seat across from Marty and placed his drink on the table.

"Sure," Marty said. The guy definitely looked familiar...and then the realization crushed him in an instant. This was A.G. Randall. He recognized him from his book jacket picture, though just barely. Randall had been using the same portrait for his hardcover editions since the early eighties, and a full beard and thick white hair did their best to obscure the few parts of the face available to view. Clad in a blue sweater and corduroy pants, a pipe puffing smoke at his lips, he looked the very image of the

stereotypical aging sci-fi writer. That, or a particularly crazed great uncle. A touch of madness flashed in Randall's eye, the kind of madness that would drive a person to pen novel after novel about an alternate Earth where the human race is bred for war.

"You here for the con?" Randall said. He lifted his mug of beer to his lips and drained half of it in a gulp. Immediately he licked away the foamy mustache that was trapped in the upper portion of his beard.

"Yeah," Marty replied, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"Me too. You having fun?"

"Yeah."

"Me too."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Randall toyed with the cardboard coaster beneath his beer while Marty glanced around the room. He thought back to Ron's suggestion. If the opinions of a man who had helped form most of Marty's lifelong passions meant anything at all, this was his time to receive them. He sat up in his seat, grasped his glass with both hands, and leaned forward on the table.

"Can I ask you a question?" Marty didn't wait for an okay to ask, though; he launched straight into it. "I've been thinking about quitting my job to become a sci-fi writer. I've sold a few stories, no big deal, right? I just think it might be something I want to do, something I'd like to try and do. Anyway, I know you're...you're A.G. Randall and I'm a massive fan and I just wondered if you had any advice."

Randall regarded Marty for a long beat. He rubbed his fingers up and down the condensation on the side of his mug; they squeaked softly against the glass.

"You just have to work hard, be talented and dig up some luck," Randall said before draining the last of his beer. Marty waited for more. Randall just stared back at him.

"That's it?" Marty finally said. "That's your advice? Big help."

"Nice work," he said. "You passed the test. Of course that's

awful advice. Frankly, I never know what to say. The truth of the matter is that I was lucky, and I think I am talented, and I do work hard. But all of that means nothing—lots of people are lucky and have no talent, so they fail. Others work hard and have talent, but never get lucky, so they fail too. It's a combination of the three, and that's pretty obvious, but beyond that? I have no earthly idea what to say to you."

Up until this moment, it hadn't ever occurred to Marty that the man he held up as a prose idol for much of his life would have absolutely nothing worthwhile to say when spoken with in person. It was a lot to swallow.

"I'll say this, though, and I'm improvising beyond my canned response, so bear with me," Randall said. "If you try, then you've accomplished something."

"Not if I starve to death."

"Right, I know, it sounds crazy. But you have to respect the courage involved in the attempt. Listen, nobody hates reading unsolicited manuscripts more than me. If I see some crazed thing coming at me with a stack of printouts, I will turn and sprint the other way. But I respect that person. He has a dream, just like I had a dream, and he's chasing it down. He probably doesn't have decent hygiene habits, but that's the nature of fandom. You can't really argue with a dream. It may not happen for him, and it may not happen for you, but there's something to be said for trying."

"I don't know," Marty said. "It still scares me."

"It should. I'll say this, too. If there is anything you can imagine yourself doing with your life other than writing science fiction, anything at all, then quit wasting your fucking energy thinking about that crap and write science fiction. There. That's my advice."

"Could I interrupt?" Monica approached the table cautiously, her eyes bleary and filled with exhaustion.

"I think I'm done here, anyway," Randall said, rising with his glass. "Please, miss, take my seat. Talk to this man. Tell him to quit thinking so much and start doing."

Randall winked at Monica and took a few steps away. Then he

turned back toward the pair.

“You say you wanna be a writer? I say you are one. And next time, kid, piss in a toilet.” He laughed at his own joke and vanished into the crowds.

“Was that...” Monica started to ask as she sat down.

“Yep, it was,” Marty said. “My Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

“Wow. Neat.”

Monica picked up Randall’s coaster and started tearing it into tiny pieces as she talked.

“Marty, I need to apologize for tonight.”

“You were drunk. I understand.”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said. “Remember the other night, when we were talking about what it’s like for me being a woman in this ultramale little subculture? I have to be...tough, you know? I have to be fierce. Because the minute I show weakness, these assholes look down on me, like I’m beneath them. They patronize me anyway all the damn time, because I’m a woman. I’m not complaining...I’m not weak. But I have to be strong. My guard is up all the time. And it’s exhausting. And I was drunk, so I let my defenses down...”

“You don’t need defenses around me,” Marty whispered, glancing up from his glass into Monica’s eyes. They both blushed.

“I know,” Monica said. “And you have no idea how attractive that is. To know that there’s someone here in this fucked-up world of fandom who understands me without trying, knows me better in an instant than any other jerkoff could after talking for me for three days. Because they’d be talking to me to get in my pants, and you talk to me because you care about what I have to say.”

“You’re not one of the guys,” Marty said, taking Monica’s hand. “You’re a stunning, powerful, beautiful woman.”

Monica didn’t pull her hand away, and Marty didn’t let it go, for a long moment. Then their hands slipped apart.

“This has been a weird weekend,” Marty said. “I’m sorry about that. Maybe all this shit is getting old. Maybe I’m growing up.”

“I know how you feel. I don’t think it’s growing up, though.

You don't need to leave this behind. You just need to realize it's not everything. That's the first step. That's the only step. Not that I have any fucking idea what I'm saying, because I'm still just the babyest bit drunk."

"I would like to call you sometime, Monica," Marty said.

"You've called me before."

"What I mean is that I would like to call you and ask you out on a real human date, with a movie and dinner, and hopefully kissing afterward."

Monica smiled. She grabbed a pen from her purse and a napkin from the next table over, and scrawled her name and number on the napkin.

"There. You scored my digits."

She stood to leave, walked around the table, and gave Marty a light kiss on the lips.

"There are always...possibilities," Marty said. Monica winked at him, and then weaved her way through the crowds to the exit.

Chapter 28

Toby couldn't help but hum to himself. He hummed for the buzz in his brain, from the booze and the simple joy of a shag in a hotel bathroom. Somehow it happened every year, and somehow it felt just as sweet as the first time. He'd met the aspiring actress—was her name Vivian? Or Vicki? Or Veronica?—last night, and again tonight, but it didn't really take much prodding at all. That was the joy of con—all these random desperate bodies colliding, and all you really had to do was place yourself square in the path of the one you wanted most. The encounter was brief, but sweet. Then they'd kissed gently and gone their separate ways. Now he sat contentedly in the back corner of the con suite, a room packed to bursting with geeks in search of free coffee and conversation, and reflected with satisfaction on the tiny but pleasant details of his life. All in all, he had so little to complain about that it was quite frightening.

In his slightly giddy mental state, he wasn't quite prepared for the sight of Ham stumbling into the room shirtless. In one hand, he held the tattered remains of his Jedi costume; in the other was a pair of scissors. He stopped every few feet and cut another tiny square of cloth off the costume; each one drifted slowly to the floor.

"The clarity is chilling," Ham said, slumping down into the

couch next to Toby.

“You okay there, pal?” Toby asked.

“I’m NOT fucking OKAY.” Ham yelled every other word, not necessarily in Toby’s face but close enough to start pissing him off. He didn’t need his buzz harshened, not in the slightest.

“I gather things didn’t go okay with that Angel bird.”

“‘Everything I’ll ever be, I’ve been.’ Matthew Sweet.”

“What, then?”

“That’s a line from a song. That’s all I am. A collection of quotes and ideas from other fucking people all strung together into a person. And it’s still so fucking true—everything I will ever be, I have already been.”

“There will be other girls,” Toby said, patting Ham on the shoulder gently. “There are already other girls. Why not track one down? It’s not even dawn yet. Plenty of time.”

“I don’t WANT to TRACK DOWN another girl. I WANTED that girl, and she DIDN’T want ME. JUST like every other GIRL I’ve WANTED.”

Ham was hitting himself now with every shouted word, hard punches on the thigh that would leave bruises. Conversations were quieting around the room as people turned to see what was going on. Ham could feel every pair of eyes on him.

“This PLACE sucks, and these PEOPLE suck, and I SUCK for getting sucked INTO it, Toby, I DO. I am NOTHING and NO ONE and I am DRUNK again and I HATE MYSELF so much that it HURTS.”

He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. Ham stood up and threw down the costume and scissors. He wiped the tears away hard. He glared around the room, meeting reluctant eyes; they all quickly glanced away.

“It is ALWAYS the SAME.”

“Alright, then, mate,” Toby said calmly as he stood, putting his arm carefully around Ham’s waist. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m NOT going to BED. ‘So hold me, love me, tie me up and drug me...’”

Ham was singing now and stepping toward a random woman in the room, one of the people who had met his eyes just a few seconds earlier. She glanced around with embarrassment and tried to summon a nervous laugh. It didn't come.

"I need someone to pull the trigger, cause there's a hole in my heart getting bigger..."

"Sorry, fans," Toby shouted with a gregarious chuckle. "Bit too much of the sauce, if you get my meaning. We've all been there before, I'm sure."

"NO ONE'S BEEN HERE BEFORE!" Ham threw off Toby's arm and pushed him down to the ground. "I AM HERE. I AM NOT HERE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? I LIVE WITH MY MOM AND I AM NOTHING. NOTHING. NOTHING."

Humming softly to himself, Ham started to stare upward at the ceiling, his eyes suddenly quiet. Toby brushed off his pants and stood glaring at him for a moment. He wanted to push Ham back, to knock his block off and play out this scene the way Ham clearly wanted it.

Instead, Toby stood up and took Ham's arm. This time, Ham didn't resist.

"I'm not gonna beg you for my life," Ham sang quietly as Toby led him out of the room. Everyone sat in silence for a few seconds. Then slowly, the conversations started up again, and the room filled again with the hum of chatter, about Darth Vader and Spider-Man and absolutely nothing more important than either.

Chapter 29

Marty gently knocked on the hotel room door before opening it with his key. He entered to find Ron on the bed, clad only in boxers, smoking and staring at the ceiling. The room was pitch black except for the ember on the tip of Ron's cigarette.

"Hey," Marty said. He flipped on the light.

"Hey," Ron replied, his eyes squinting and adjusting.

Marty fell back onto the other bed and kicked off his shoes, immediately joining Ron in staring upward.

"So I'm sorry about..."

"Forget it," Ron said, only half-meaning it.

"No, I'm really sorry. Don't dismiss it, please. You're my friend, and you know I care about the decisions you make, because I want you to be happy. But I also want you to be the best person you can possibly be. And I can't make you do anything. And whatever makes you happy is the right decision."

"Thanks," Ron said, turning to face Marty and stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray. "I don't dismiss that at all."

"I called the voicemail of my boss just now from the lobby phone," Marty said. "I left him a message, said we needed to talk on Monday. I'm gonna quit."

"How do you feel?"

"I feel...young," Marty said, unable to resist the *Trek* quote.

Ron glanced over and groaned. “Seriously, I’m scared shitless. But I’m excited. This is right. It feels right.”

“What are you gonna do for money?”

“Freelance a bit, hopefully sell a few stories. I’ve got a small savings built up, rainy day money. It feels to me like it’s pouring.”

“See? That’s why you’re so fucking brilliant.”

“What do you mean?”

“You really can figure things out, y’know? And then express them in these beautiful ways. It takes me years to even figure out what’s going on inside me.”

“So I take it you’ve given the Melissa situation a lot more thought?”

“I can’t...I can’t do it. I’m gonna break up with her.”

“For this Becca chick?”

“No way,” Ron said. “No. Just because. Marty, I am so scared.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Nothing. Everything. I only know I can’t do it. That’s all I can take in right now. I can’t figure it out past that.”

More silence. Then laughter, from Marty.

“What?” Ron asked.

“It’s just funny as shit,” Marty said. “We are obsessed with these damn things, all this fiction of escape. We are consumed by the story of Luke Skywalker, a poor farm boy from a planet furthest from the bright shining center of the galaxy who leaves to seek his fortune and face his destiny. He does it—he faces down his destiny. And most of the time, we can’t even face our own.”

“I don’t get it,” Ron said. “Are you wasted?”

“Maybe I just took the wrong pill,” Marty whispered to himself.

“You are talking like you took several of the wrong pill.”

“No, I’ve been thinking a lot about this all weekend. It’s like *The Matrix*—and please, bear with me through one more geek metaphor.” Ron sat up on the bed to listen.

“We’re in this world, right? This ‘Matrix’ of fandom. It is a completely different world. Only certain stuff gets in, and very little ever comes out. And somehow, somewhere, someone gave

us, me and you, the chance to choose—the red pill or the blue pill. We took the red—we see that there’s a world outside of this shit, ‘reality’ or whatever you want to call it. Everyone else, they don’t even realize there is a world outside of conventions, of movies and books and TV shows and games. Jobs, love, real connections of any kind with others—they’re all secondary to the way they live here, at these things, inside this fucking Matrix. Look at Ham. He’s stumbling toward figuring it all out, but he never does.

“I’d go back if I could, I think,” Marty sighed. “I’d give up the self-awareness. I’d take the blue pill.”

“No, you wouldn’t, and I wouldn’t either,” Ron said. “Assuming I’ve taken the red pill.”

“Maybe you did this weekend. Maybe not. It’s hard to see all the angles. I guess all we can do is keep making decisions, one at a time, and hope they all fall together to lead us where we need to be.”

“Some people must never even see the pills,” Ron said. “We’re lucky, I guess. We got to pick.”

“All that’s from my novel,” Marty blurted out.

“What? Your novel is about *The Matrix*? You wrote fanfic?”

“No, it’s about us. This. Conventions and people who go to them.”

“That’s not science fiction.”

“I know...that’s why I’ve been afraid to tell you. It’s a weird thing. But I’m pretty happy with it.”

“Am I in it?”

“Yeah, but I wrote you as a much smaller asshole than you really are.”

“TLHINGAN MAH!” A bloodcurdling yell from the room next door cut straight through Marty’s sentence, followed by a horrifying series of moans and howls in an incomprehensible tongue. Ron got up and pounded hard on the wall.

“What the hell is that?” Marty asked.

“We’re next door to some horny Klingons. They have been screwing their knobby little heads off all weekend.”

As if in response, three hard thuds hit the wall with such force that bits of plaster flaked from the ceiling onto Marty's head.

"HAB SOSLI' QUCH!" the male Klingon screamed.

"Damn. Those are some tough-ass Klingons," Marty said.

"Yeah. Let's go get one more drink," Ron said. They set their fears aside and headed back down to the bar.

Day Three
Sunday, August 26, 2001

Chapter 30

“Could you pass the ketchup?” Marty asked. Toby handed over the bottle and winced with disgust.

“I cannot believe you drown your eggs in that shit,” he grumbled. “Fucking vile.”

“You people drink warm beer, and you call your toilet a ‘loo,’” Ron said. “You have no room to talk.”

As their groggy jokes hung in the air, the quartet attended to their plates of runny eggs and lukewarm sausage. No one in their right mind would place the Hyatt’s breakfast buffet on any Zagats list. Yet after a long weekend of con, there was nothing finer to stuff into your belly. Ham picked up the pepper and doused his omelet with the spice and the spontaneous sneeze that followed it.

“So what happened with you and that chick?” Ron asked. “The Dark Angel.”

“She went off with some asshole,” Ham said. He glanced over at Toby, who gave him a reassuring wink and smile. “Gene Carter, I mean. That asshole.”

“What a prick!” Marty exclaimed. “Fuck him. And fuck her if she’s gonna wander off with him. Man, that’s shitty. Sorry, Ham.”

“Yeah, other fish in the sea and all that,” Toby said. “Ron, I take it you shagged that Becca bird?”

“I did,” Ron said. “I definitely did.”

“Lemme ask this,” Marty said, shoveling a forkload of pancakes into his mouth. “Every year, we do UnCon. Every year, we have fun together, hang out, joke, the usual. And every year at breakfast on Sunday, we spend the entire time talking about women. What’s up with that?”

“It’s geek approval,” Ham said quietly. “We don’t feel like we’re worth anything unless some female finds us attractive. It’s a byproduct of all the mocking in grade school.”

“So it’s all Tommy Livingston’s fault? All this?”

“You could say that.”

“Ham, that is brilliant,” Marty said with a smile. “Fucking brilliant.”

“Hey guys.” With a dejected sigh, UnCon president Bill Ramiro leaned up against the back of Ron’s chair and gave a flaccid wave.

“Bill, what’s the rumpus?” Toby asked. “You ever find those ears?”

“Naw, they never turned up. I called Paramount. They were pretty pissed, but they said they have a case of them at the warehouse, so whatever. It’ll probably cost me my job as head of the con.”

“Really?” Toby looked genuinely upset. “That’s a shame, then...”

“No, it’s cool. I’m sick of all this crap anyway. I just want to show up next year and get wasted and have fun.”

“Buddy, you have earned it,” Ron said. “You want some eggs and ketchup?”

“Naw, I gotta run and get ready for closing ceremonies. See you

guys later.” He stumbled off. Toby smirked after him.

“I just don’t know if I’ll ever be more than some geek,” Ham said, apropos of nothing. “I feel like such a loser sometimes.”

“At the end of the day, you are who you choose to be,” Marty said, casting a sideways glance at Ron, who was buried in his plate.

“Are you still down about that foolish bird, boyo?” Toby asked. “Do you need a little pick-me-up? Well, I was gonna save this for your birthday, but here.”

Toby tossed two floppy hunks of foam onto the table.

“Fuck me,” Ron whispered.

“The ears?” Ham said. Toby was laughing so hard he was crying.

“Oh, Christ, is this rich,” Toby said through his guffaws. “I thought I would pin it on Graham, and then I just figured I’d leave him a bag of shit instead, and now I have them, and they’re yours. I don’t bloody want them.”

Ham’s eyes lit up as he caressed them gingerly in the palm of his hand.

“Dude, you can’t keep those,” Ron said. “What are you gonna do with them? No one can ever know you have them.”

“I’ll know,” Ham said. Marty turned to Toby in incredulous shock.

“So all this time, all this weekend, you were sitting on those ears. You had them all along. You stole Spock’s fucking ears.”

“Yeah, I did,” Toby said. He wiped the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand. “Ain’t it a pisser?”

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Dave Gonzalez stepped in for the home stretch and designed the fantastic cover in a matter of days. When the movie rights get sold, you're in for a cut.

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Anvil Press sponsored the Three-Day Novel Writing Contest that gave birth to the first draft of *Unconventional*. It's every Labor Day weekend, and you get three days—72 hours—to pound out a novel. I highly recommend it to everyone.

Ginna Costello, my brilliant and patient and pretty fiancé—your support, encouragement and love are everything to me.

Finally, to the organizers and attendees of the myriad conventions I've attended throughout my life, a hearty "Huzzah!" And especially to all those who make Windycon and Capricon here in Chicagoland such fantastic experiences every year—thank you for the inspiration, the fellowship, and the geekdom.

Author's Note (April 2007)

This book was originally written in September 2001 and self-published in February 2003. A mind-boggling fifty copies sold out in just a few months! Take THAT, Grisham! You ass.

Then it languished on my computer hard drive, and I always wanted to put it back out into the world and LEAVE it there.

Hence, this “second printing.”

So if you're reading this and wondering, “Why the hell is it set in 2001? What's with all the *Lord of the Rings* references? Why do my fingers smell like garbage?”

There's your answer. This shit is OLD, dudes. And unchanged.

Those familiar with the 2003 edition may also recall that it contained a series of “appendices,” an obtuse metaparody of Tolkien that gave me an excuse to print some of my random columns, reviews, and interviews.

In creating this second and FINAL edition, I wanted the original novel (fine, it's about 35,000 words, it's actually a NOVELLA, you caught me, call the goddamned literary police) to stand on its own. (I left the back cover blurb as-is, for laffs.) I plan to republish some of those assorted bits of ephemera together with lots more bits of ephemera as its own collection, which a handful of you will read, and then use as toilet paper.

As well you should.

About the Author (April 2007)

Matt Springer has been a card-carrying geek for about as long as he can remember. He's written professionally for the past nine-odd years as an entertainment journalist, online blowhard, and PR/marketing professional. He currently shares a surprisingly old house in Orlando, FL with his wife and the greatest baby EVER. You can reach him at matt@alertnerd.com.