The Pathfinder: A Parallel Roads Novel: Synopsis by Lyle Skains

Gloria Walker loses her job, her fiancé, and her apartment all on the same day. What's worse, when she wakes up the next day she finds her family completely transformed and bizarre, and a strange man telling her she's on the wrong planet.

This man, Oscar, takes her to another planet called Atlantis. He tells her that people can travel using either mechanical or magical means to 5000 mapped parallel Earths, but that they all must first travel through Atlantis, the hub. But Gloria doesn't have any means to travel – which makes her unique. Only one other like her has ever existed: the Pathfinder, who mapped the 5000 Worlds to begin with.

What's more, there is a black hole threatening Atlantis, and by extension, the ability for anyone to travel to parallel Earths. He believes Gloria alone can stop it. Gloria is not so sure, and she just wants to go home. But she quickly finds that she is incapable of getting there.

She visits several experts in her quest to return home: an expert in pathfinder lore, a witch who claims to be the original pathfinder, and the scientist who invented the mechanical devices by which many people travel. She picks up two friends along the way, a thief and a witch, who wind up helping her steal the original Pathfinder's journals.

Gradually, Gloria realizes she doesn't want to be the one who could help all these people and instead ducked her head in the sand, so she decides to try to help Atlantis. Together with her new friends, she uses the journals to travel to many unmapped parallel Earths, seeking objects that might help them.

They eventually come to a bleak planet that has managed to contain their own black hole, where they meet up with a much older Oscar – it turns out he can bend time. He gives them a final clue, and they embark on the last leg of their quest, calling the younger Oscar to them.

Gloria and Oscar use their unique abilities to travel into interdimensional space, giving them access to all the parallel planets. Using the objects Gloria has gathered, they rearrange Atlantis so that not only is it the hub for the 5000 Worlds, it is now open to the infinite possible parallel worlds.

After a year, Gloria returns to Earth –her home Earth – to her sister, nieces and nephews. She introduces them to the Infinite Worlds. It is a beginning to opening up the Parallel Roads to all parallel Earths.

about 99,500 words

Rebecca Lyle Skains 48 Lynch Trail Edgewood, NM 87015 (505) 281-7146 rlskains@yahoo.com

THE PATHFINDER: A PARALLEL ROADS NOVEL

by

Lyle Skains

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

PROLOGUE

The sky had taken on that sickly olive drab tinge he had known so well a lifetime from now. The hurried crowds coursed through the streets of the city, always passing through, never stopping, never noticing the ugly tilt of the atmosphere, the way even the light and fluffy clouds seemed to be magnetized toward a pinprick of swirling darkness. They'd never seen it as he had, never had to battle it, never had to watch it swallow their worlds.

He was tired. Despite the polish on his patent shoes, despite the natty press to his suit, an ache resonated from his bones. The sun, shining hotly on the tarred rooftop, was unable to warm the exhaustion and resignation out of his body. It felt as though he'd stood here a thousand times, more than he could hope to count, staring up at the budding disaster opening its maw an intergalactic stone's throw from the home he could never abandon. And yet he had no concrete memory of ever before doing what he knew he was going to do.

An intense wave of déjà vu swept through him,

originating in the depths of his stomach, echoing until he felt a twinge of nausea. Though today was the first that he had physically climbed the stairs to the top of this building, the first time he had stared up at the shimmering blue sky with an eye toward disaster, every cell in his body was groaning with recognition.

A vibration from his belt pulled him to the present, his monitor calling him to duty. He sighed and clicked the pager off, ready to carry out his daily existence until he was forced to act against the coldness above him.

He opened the door to the stairwell, giving one last hard look to the first inkling of the black hole that would consume his planet, knowing that his every attempt to deflect it had failed.

CHAPTER 1

It wasn't easy to lose an entire world. Oh, sure, a red sandal or a hair tie every once in a while. Some people even managed to lose their cars in parking lots and their homes in freak accidents of nature. But your entire planet? An object almost 8000 miles in diameter wasn't likely to be found in a beat up cardboard lost-and-found box under some receptionist's desk. Tacking posters to telephone poles with photocopied images of the blue and green swirl's likeness probably wouldn't do a whole lot of good, either.

It started on a Sunday. Sundays, Gloria decided, were definitely the bloodiest day of the week. Sure, Mondays were depressing, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays mind-numbingly boring. Fridays were just experiments in exhaustion and disappointment. She couldn't recall the last Saturday she hadn't slept through. But Sundays, O Holy Days, Sundays were the worst of all.

Sundays, she went home for dinner with the family.

"I don't know why this is such torture for you every freaking week," Benny sighed. "It's not like they throw knives at you."

Gloria mashed the radio preset buttons in sequence.

Nothing but synchronized commercials. She and Benny lived ten miles from her mother's house, but the trip was never long enough to provide her with enough escapist tunes.

"They throw knives, it's just you can't see them.

They loooove you." She flopped back in her seat, giving up on the radio and knocking a week-old coffee cup out of the console. "Well, crap," she commented.

Benny laughed and fished the empty cup from under the brake pedal. "They love you, too. It's just normal family stuff, okay? Like when my family teases me. Your mom doesn't really think you have a bad job and a diseased uterus."

"Shriveled," Gloria reminded him. "I said shriveled, not diseased."

He patted her thigh, smiling his sweet, boyish smile at her, the one with crinkles and blue eyes and those little bitty sexy freckles. She wiggled her almost-too-tall-for-compact-cars frame around in the passenger seat and kissed his cheek. "I'm glad I have you, anyway. I can't wait till we get married and move at least 500 miles away."

His hand squeezed her leg reassuringly, but his smile faded. A public service announcement from the electric company filled the little car.

"So hey," Benny said loudly, covering the awkward silence, "I saw your dad yesterday, grabbing coffee at the Frontier."

"What, no heart-attack-on-a-plate cinnamon roll?"

"Nah, looks like he's trimmed down some."

"Did he remember who you were?" She attempted a derogatory chuckle, but it was painful. "Hell, did he remember who I was?"

"Christ." Benny exhaled in frustration. "Your entire family is not made up of monsters."

"True. There's my sister."

"Okay, your mom's kind of bossy and your dad can't concentrate for two seconds on anything or anyone outside a laboratory, but you're their kid. They love you."

Gloria refused to respond, tired of how this conversation always went. She went through the radio dial again, a futile effort. Thankfully, Benny let it drop.

Before the commercials ended, they pulled into her mother's driveway, chugged up the steep slope to the top of the drive and stepped out. Her mother's house, evidence of the benefits of multiple divorces, was a sprawling hacienda in the Albuquerque foothills, its solar windows glinting

gold in the setting sun. It was not home to Gloria, much as the five childhood interval houses had merely been places to rest her head and stay out of a stepfather's way.

She settled her Sunday skirt awkwardly on her hips, knowing it showed her knobby knees, and let Benny take her hand to drag her bodily to the front door.

"There you are!" her sister hollered from the front door, a trio of children winding around her feet like hungry cats. "We were starting to get worried you'd gotten lost."

"I tried," Gloria mumbled, pulling her face into what she hoped was a happy smile as an ever-plumping Annie pulled her into a bear hug.

"I'm so glad you managed to drag Benny here this week." Annie gushed, sucking Benny into her gravity of warmth. "Mom got this idea into her head you two had broken it off and Glor' was just making it all up -- stop licking your sister, Matty -- so we wouldn't fix her up with any more lawyers."

Annie's laughter echoed around the large foyer, bouncing off the sautillo tiles and cavorting to the vigabeamed ceiling. Gloria couldn't help but laugh back.

Where she'd gotten all the bitterness and insecurities, her older sister had developed into the personification of a hug.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Gloria," her mother's voice wafted through the foyer, seeming to gain in reverberation and recrimination as the words fell over all of them.

"Late again to the family dinner."

Evelyn propped herself regally on the back of her white sofa, for which four dozen bathed and pampered baby goats must have given their lives. Her pink silk robe, her "day dress," fluttered about her spinning-class shaped skeleton like day-old butterflies.

Even Annie's kids -- 4-year-old Matty approaching the world by taste, 6-year-old Allie with her nose permanently stuck in a book, and 2-year-old Jack who held the world record for drool volume in an hour -- fell utterly silent and stared at their grandmother in awe, peasants caught in the light of a fearsome fallen goddess.

Gloria started to stammer out her weekly apology, and in her stumbling somehow toppled the vase on the hall table.

Benny, his reflexes honed by months of practice, deftly caught the pottery. He smiled his woman-melting smile, directed its full heat on Evelyn, and actually had the gall to hug her. No evil befell him.

"It was my fault, Ev. I just couldn't get my mascara straight." He winked his long black lashes at her.

Evelyn waited a moment for the power in the room to

shift back to her realm. Annie held her breath, Gloria rolled her eyes, and finally, thankfully, Evelyn laughed, sharp as breaking glass.

She patted Benny on his beloved cheek and swished her stilt-like legs to the dining room. "Well, let's not waste the caterer's efforts. It may be cold, but it likely won't kill us."

"Can't say the same for her," Gloria muttered to Annie, who stifled a giggle.

"Gloria," Evelyn snapped, and though her back was turned, Gloria could see her blood red lips thin and her hawkish eyes narrow. "How are your applications going?"

Gloria closed her eyes and let her head drop. Annie gave her a pat on the back. "Buck up, soldier."

A childish murmur rose from around her feet, and Gloria opened her eyes to find Allie staring owlishly up at her.

"I know Peter Pan, Aunt Glory," Allie whispered urgently. "If you want, you can sleep over at my house, and when he flies over tonight we can run away to Neverland and be little kids forever. Grammy Evlin can't come," she added, pushing her pink glasses solemnly up her nose.

Gloria laughed for the first time in a month of Sundays. She folded up her towering frame to child's size and hugged her niece. "I might take you up on that, Al.

Just don't let Grammy hear you call her that, 'kay?"
"Gloria!"

"Coming, Mother," Gloria sighed.

"I can't keep telling you this every time I see you, Gloria," her mother began, taking her seat at the head of the heavy, ornate, Mexican-style dining table. "If you don't get that advanced degree, you'll never be anything more than a secretary."

"She's a social worker," Benny interjected gently.

"Social worker, secretary," Evelyn waved her manicured nails. "It's all paperwork. Do you want to fill out other people's forms the rest of your life?"

Gloria gritted her teeth, and girded herself for her weekly three-hour lambasting, the motherly storm that somehow spared everyone but her.

Later, lying in their queen size bed, her head throbbing, the familiar frustrated tears fighting to emerge, she buried her face in Benny's chest and whispered, "I swear, you're the only reason I don't stab her in the eye before turning a fork on my own soft parts."

For once, Benny failed to laugh.

Five days later, Gloria stared down at three piles of paper sitting menacingly atop her government-issue gray

monster of a desk. The first was a large stack of other people's paperwork: processing documents for foster children, reports of possible domestic abuse, in-home evaluations. The second was more colorful, with better spelling: various applications to local colleges in anthropology, psychology, and history, all subjects she'd expressed interest in at one time or another, all applications her mother had requested on her behalf.

The third stack wasn't really a stack, just one final paycheck and a formally apologetic letter. Budget cutbacks, they had to reduce the workforce, she didn't have enough seniority, clout, degrees, experience, yada yada yada. What it really boiled down to was she was just a paperpusher earning virtually no money, but if they "let go" of her and everyone else like her, the city could afford to build a spaceport or downtown canal system.

Gloria let her head drop to the desk. The government had even taken an extra chunk off her last payment because she'd been in the hole on vacation days. The grand total came to \$103.42. It wouldn't even pay her half of the bills for a week.

Too tired for tears, she gathered the handbag's worth of personal items from her desk and trudged out of the office five hours earlier than normal. She briefly stopped by her friend Terry's cubicle, only to discover the

normally effervescently cheerful butterball staring at the same form letter she herself had received.

"You too, huh?"

Terry looked up with a start, mascara-streaked tears rolling down her face. She swiped them away. "Happy Friday, right?"

"Want to go get a drink?"

"Who's buying?" Terry joked wetly, waving her own stunted paycheck.

"We can order water."

Luckily, the Up All Night Café was open even in the middle of the day. Not so luckily, Sean was behind the counter.

"Late for lunch or early for tea?" he belted as soon as he saw them. "Haven't seen you ladies in a while. Did you miss me?"

"If I promise to, will you leave us alone?" Terry jabbed.

"'Cause I haven't heard that one before," Sean grinned, running a clammy hand through his shaggy red hair. "Nonfat lattes again today? Or are we feeling adventurous?"

"Two waters," Gloria replied before he could start the drip. She sat down heavily at a table.

Sean glanced from one to the other, back and forth,

attempting to glean the problem telepathically before finally resorting to old-fashioned, unreliable speech. "What's going on?"

"Got any job openings?" Terry asked. Even her bleached-blond kinky curls drooped.

"Oh, wow." Without another word, Sean set two large mugs under the espresso machine and set them flowing. He emerged from behind the counter, setting the two foamy full-fat lattes on the table. "On me."

Gloria offered a genuine smile of thanks, which she was sure she would later regret in the form of a dozen deflected date requests. For the moment, however, Sean went quietly back behind his counter, leaving them to mope in peace.

Four free lattes and half a dozen pee breaks later, Gloria staggered up from the table. "I think my head is going to pop off," she commented, her words tumbling out quicker than her brain could process.

"Can you OD on caffeine?" Terry groaned.

"If you can, I have. I'm going home. Will you be okay?"

"Honey, I'm married." Terry glanced slyly at her.

"After the apocalypse, it'll be the roaches and the married folk. We survive."

Gloria gave her a fortifying hug, waved at Sean before

he could corner her, and went home. It was close enough to quitting time, maybe Benny would be home already.

She trudged home to their super modern, brand new downtown loft, whose only benefit as far as she was concerned was that it offered her a walking commute to work. Otherwise, it was completely Benny's baby -- she'd wanted a quiet old adobe in the valley, where they could have a dog, or maybe a goat. But today, she was just glad it afforded her the opportunity to avoid the broken down car she was sure the universe would have inflicted upon her.

She climbed the three flights of stairs, wary of getting on an elevator should it get stuck while she had to pee so badly yet again.

She unlocked the bright white front door, calling out, "Benny, you home, baby?"

She heard a thump and a groan from the bedroom.

"Sorry, didn't mean to surprise you. I just have to pee, then I'll explain ever...y...thing."

Despite the cries of her bladder, she ground to a halt in the bedroom doorway.

Benny was home, but he wasn't the only one. The thump she'd heard hadn't been a surprised Benny stumbling or dropping something. It had been the top of the girl's over-dyed head thumping Gloria's headboard.

They were having such a good time under the sheets they hadn't even noticed her. Either that or they were using teamwork -- and their belly buttons -- to open a jar whose lid was stuck tight.

"This isn't tragic," Gloria said out loud. "It's just so...so...cliché."

Forgetting her biological urges, she backed out of the apartment. She went back down the stairs and outside into the end of the week as the traffic flowed out of downtown to the neighborhoods and suburbs, as the pool halls and pubs began to collect their patrons for the evening.

She counted all she had lost that day, and when the total was whittled down, she found she had only \$103.42 to her name. No car, no job, no home, no bed, no warm lover. Just one last paycheck -- and her family.

She reluctantly dialed out collect on the payphone, then slumped on the curb to wait for her mother. She knew only that it couldn't possibly get any worse, and at least the world still turned beneath her feet.

Before morning, she would have lost even that.

CHAPTER 2

Gloria rubbed her eyes open, her fingers scrunching through the dried tears that had clotted in her lashes.

She reached over to her left, beginning the Saturday morning cuddle ritual that began with her burrowing under Benny's warmth and ended with...

Her hand hit something soft and small, but definitely not warm. She squinted in the midmorning sun beams that managed to poke through the closed blinds. One of her mother's spare pillows, fluffy and wrapped in a 300-thread count case, stared blankly back at her.

She rolled on her back and examined the pristine white ceiling of her mother's guest bedroom. Tendrils of fresh brewed coffee wafted up her nose, and the crushing grind of a blender hummed through the closed door. Her mother would be in the kitchen, her makeup already on, her hair already coifed, drinking coffee, whirring up juice, pouring tiny bowls of granola and grapefruit. Gloria should feel homey, she should want to wander down the hall in her socks, she

should love to sleepily inhale a mug of coffee just like those old Taster's Choice commercials.

But granola wasn't pancakes, steamy coffee wasn't herbal tea, and her mother certainly wasn't a source of warmth and comfort. She whined at the pillow and buried herself under the covers.

A rap on her door thumped through her depression. The door slid partway open, spilling unfiltered light.

"What?" Gloria groaned.

"I made breakfast," came the whisper from the door,

"but if you want any you have to get it now before I have

to go to work."

Frowning, Gloria peered over the top of her bedsheets. Her mother didn't work, and she hadn't made anyone else breakfast since 1983.

Instead of her mother's pursed features, however, it was Annie's face smiling wanly at her. Yet it wasn't Annie at all. Annie was plump, round, joyful, happy, caring.

This mockup of her sister was pale, drawn, tired. An element of sweetness was still there, but it lay weakly underneath a patina of premature age.

Gloria rushed out of bed, stubbing her toe on the nightstand and noisily brushing a decorative kokopelli figurine to the hardwood floor.

"Annie, what are you doing here? Are you all right?

Do you need me to take you to a doctor?" Gloria reached out to touch her sister, her heart stopping as she saw Annie's frame seemed to have dropped thirty pounds overnight.

"I live here, dummy," Annie replied, pushing Gloria's hand away. "Now come on. If you want the car today, you have to take me to work."

"What work? Since when do you work?"

Annie rolled her eyes and turned down the hall toward the kitchen. "Since the last rat stopped making child support payments. Jeez, Glor', it must've been some crazy dream you were having."

Gloria stumbled down the hall behind her sister, trying to figure out what dream could mess with real life like this. Did she dream her mother was a cranky old matriarch living it up on alimony payments? Did she fantasize a happily married stay-at-home-mom of a sister?

Finally, awareness trickled into her brain. The real world hadn't gotten messed up -- well, not any more than it already had been. She was dreaming right now. That was all. It wasn't a nice dream, though, that was for sure. Hopefully, getting fired and finding Benny playing wild stallion for some other woman was all part of the mad, mad, mad, mad nightmare she was having.

Relief flooded through her. Soon she would wake up at

home, Benny snoring next to her, a transvestite hollering drunkenly on the downtown street below, and she would know that all was right and good and just in the world. She'd trudge through her normal weekend routine and bemoan the alarm clock come Monday morning.

"Where's Mom?" she asked as she plopped into a chair at the breakfast table. She was interested to see how her subconscious would twist the all-powerful Evelyn Walker.

"In her room, as always." Annie tossed a bowl, spoon, a box of cereal and a jug of milk in front of her. "Which reminds me, could you go to the drugstore today? Her meds are about out, and I don't think I'll be able to get out of the cafe before the pharmacy closes."

Interesting. "Sure. Which meds does she need?"

"The pain meds and anti-nausea. I can't ever remember what they're called." Annie piled several glasses of juice, a mug of coffee, and a handful of pills on a tray.

"Just don't let them tell you the insurance isn't covering it. Doesn't seem to matter how many times I tell them, they always want to get cash. Bastards."

Gloria nodded, and Annie carried the loaded tray down the hall. Pain and nausea, Gloria thought. That could be anything.

She went through the motions of pouring her bowl of cereal, chomping through it.

She heard the TV in the sitting room click on loudly, and the furiously paced music of a Saturday morning cartoon blared briefly.

"Shhh!" someone whispered urgently, and the volume quickly receded.

Gloria padded over to the doorway, peering through the shuttered gloom. Three half-sized bodies crowded around the set, two of them struggling for the remote.

"I said give it to me!" the one she recognized as Allie said through clenched teeth. "You'll wake up Grammy."

"She's already awake," the smaller, who must be Matty, replied. "Mommy went in there, I saw her."

Gloria realized the tiny drooling body must be Jack, but it was only their ages, genders, and resemblance to Annie that allowed her to come to any sort of conclusion. Allie was no longer a studious, mousy little thing — instead, her lovely green eyes had a distinct tilt, her mouth was full, her hair was not brown but a curly black. Matty had red hair now, and little Jack...well, all babies looked alike to Gloria. None of them looked anything like their father Mateo any longer.

Annie had said something about the "last rat." Gloria supposed that in this bizarro dream world of hers, Annie's beloved kids all came from different sources.

Bizarro-Jack pushed himself upright and tottered over to her, a gnawed teddy bear dangling from his hands. She smiled at him as he grinned with all his pearly little milk teeth. Gloria crouched, holding her arms open to him.

"Hey, there, kiddo. How're you doing this morning?"

The older kids turned at the sound of her voice, and
Bizarro-Allie cried, "Don't!" while Bizarro-Matty
snickered.

Before she could gather the toddler into her arms, his maw gaped wide and his chubby sausage legs launched him at her. Those pretty little beads of teeth chomped firmly on the soft flesh of her thigh, and even through her pajama bottoms Gloria could feel her skin tearing.

She shrieked, fighting the instinct to whack at the kid like he was a rabid squirrel. She tumbled over backward, hitting her butt hard on the floor, and crabscrambled away.

Bizarro-Jack plunked onto his bottom, his diaper making squishing sounds. He blinked angelically.

"What the hell was that?" Gloria shouted.

Bizarro-Allie shook her head. "He likes to bite."

Bizarro-Matty chortled. "Hell!" he repeated, picking up on Gloria's slip. He leapt to his feet and ran a tight circle, muttering "hell" over and over with glee.

"Matthew, sit down! I'll get Mom," Bizarro-Allie

warned.

Gloria rubbed at her leg, frowning. This dream was not only weird, it hurt.

Stomping footsteps echoed toward them, and Gloria stood up quickly, hoping to remind her red-faced sister that she was the adult and surely far too old for a spanking. Who knew what could happen.

"What are you all doing?" Annie hissed. "Do none of you care a damn about your poor grandmother? Your mother?" She glared pointedly at Gloria.

"He bit me," Gloria interjected. She immediately regretted her tone, as it sent her maturity back to grade school, in the age-old "he started it" defense.

"Don't give me that," Annie snapped. "He's bitten you three times a day since you moved back here. I'm sick of hearing about it, and I can't do anything about it. Matty, dammit, shut your mouth or I'll wash it out with soap, I swear to God!"

Bizarro-Matty wound down, breathing heavily and whispering one final "hell" as his eyes spun dizzily.

"Gloria, is that you I hear?" her mother's voice called. It trembled and cracked as it made its way down the long tiled hallway.

"Go," Annie said, nodding toward the bedroom. "She's having a good day."

Wondering what a bad day was, Gloria slowly made her way down the hall, leaving Annie to sedate her children.

She paused in the doorway. The room was inky black, and it took her eyes a moment to realize the windows were covered with heavy drapes to suffocate the sun. The air was stale, tainted with disinfectant and an underlying cologne of sickness.

Evelyn lay in the middle of her huge bed, barely making an ant-sized tent in the heavy duvet. But as she drew closer, Gloria could see her mother's slight shape was not brought on by hours on an exercise bike or a life of fat- and sugar-free living. This Evelyn was eaten away from the inside, as though a creature lived within who was desperately hungry and sucking her body inward, devouring first the fat, then the muscles and tissues, the organs, liver, gall bladder, intestines. Her blood was nowhere to be seen, leaving her a pale wraith, consisting only of bones and skin that would soon be consumed.

This was no flu, no recovering surgery or accidental injury. Death hovered over this room.

Her mother's hand reached out, wavering and trembling. Reluctantly, Gloria grasped the paper-thin fingers.

"Hey, there, sweetheart," Evelyn smiled. "Are you staying with me today?"

"I-I think so," Gloria stuttered.

"Good. I've missed you. We were only halfway through
The Wizard of Oz. I love the way you read it."

Gloria's heart thumped. The novel had been the first

-- and only -- book her mother had ever given her, when she
was nine years old. She'd read the tale over and over,
until the covers fell apart and she'd had to keep the pages
together with a large rubber band. When she was fifteen
she'd come home from school to find Evelyn had thrown the
beloved tome out in the garbage while preparing to move
house yet again.

She felt tears running down her face as she spied the book lying on the bed table, its old worn covers held in place by a strip of duct tape.

Throat closed, unable to speak or even swallow, Gloria pulled away, dropping her mother's frail hand.

"This isn't happening," she whispered. "I need to wake up."

"What was that, sweetheart?" Evelyn said faintly, even as Gloria backed out of the room. Her eyes fluttered and she drifted away on medication and disease.

Gloria raced back to the guest bedroom, flinging her pajamas off and hurriedly tugging on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She hopped into her tennis shoes and fled back to the kitchen, stuffing her hair back in a ponytail.

Annie was loading the dishwasher, and the urchins all

had their heads buried in breakfast bowls. "We need to leave in about five min-- Gloria, where are you going?"

Gloria paused with her hand on the back door knob. "I don't want to be here anymore. I have to wake up."

Bizarro-Matty giggled, and his older sister looked at her solemnly, as if she completely understood, but had accepted her strange world long ago.

"Gloria, I need you to stay with the kids and Mom today," Annie insisted. "If I miss one more day down at the shop, that a-hole Abrego will fire me. Mom's insurance only goes so far."

"I'm sorry," Gloria said, shaking her head in denial.
"I have to go."

Annie started toward her, but Gloria pushed through the door, banging her hip -- that was going to leave a mark. With her shoes untied, she ran down the street, feeling the blood pumping in her long legs.

She closed her eyes as she ran, telling herself it couldn't hurt, she was only dreaming, the worst that could happen was she'd fall out of bed. At least she'd wake herself up doing that.

And then she fell out of bed. Onto hot asphalt.

She opened her eyes. Nope, still on the street, the hot New Mexico sun beating down into her, reflecting off the macadam like a convection oven. Sweat poured from her

pores, soaking her flimsy T-shirt -- where had she gotten a
Rainbow Brite shirt? -- and her jeans were torn and bloody
from the curb that had tripped her and rammed itself
through the flesh over her knee.

She peered at the wound, picking bits of gravel out of it, her tears blurring her vision and heating her face to near melting. Wanting to wake up had never seemed so important before, nor nearly as impossible. She sobbed, letting the sun bake the back of her neck, letting her tears dribble endlessly onto her clothes, merging with the panicked sweat. Sitting in the gutter, she huddled and did her best to wish herself back to her calm, sane, world, where she could brush her teeth, throw on a Ross Dress For Less suit, and go off to do other people's paperwork. She longed to march tiredly home at six o'clock sharp and watch TV for a few hours before engaging in hanky-panky-by-rote and dropping off to bored and exhausted sleep.

A cool breeze danced over her back, raising goose bumps in her flesh. She pulled back, and stared blinkingly upward, wondering if the world had mustered up a thunderstorm just to further ruin her life.

But when she looked up, it wasn't a fat olive thundercloud hanging over her. Instead, she saw a man who could have been Indiana Jones, Aragorn, and Dracula all rolled into one. The sun behind his head cast him into

complete silhouette. He brought shadows around him, darkening his face even further until she wasn't even sure he had one. His hair was so black it didn't even reflect the white morning sunlight. He wore a dark suit, dull and bureaucratic, and wild thoughts of the sun frying him like a burrito scampered across her mind. Gravity pulled her gaze downward, all the way to the wingtip shoes, polished and shiny just like a 1930s gangster's, parked inches away from her.

Unable to see his eyes, she still felt them boring into her, and she thought they might be black, too, so dark the pupils wouldn't even show up.

"Uh, can I help you?" she offered, feeling confined, trapped, like a poor defenseless, weeping, sweaty beetle about to be squished 'neath a descending shoe.

A shadowy hand hovered before her face. From the area of the silhouetted face, the man asked a question in a language so unfamiliar it sounded unearthly.

Startled, Gloria considered her position. His voice wasn't a booming god-like menace, didn't reverberate to her bones like a bass drum beaten in the middle of the night.

Instead, it was young, a little scratchy, like the lead singer in a hot new rock band the morning after a concert.

It disarmed her, and she felt the early tension of terror ebb away, replaced by a new pile of confusion.

She tentatively took his hand, and he smoothly pulled her to her feet.

From her new angle, she studied the face revealed by sunlight. He was more attractive than Dracula, less rugged than Indiana Jones, his bones refined, his face granite. His eyes weren't black pits, but sparked with the green of fresh spring shoots. Despite that, she figured he wasn't very old. Maybe college age. At nearly thirty years old, it had been a long time since she'd looked at a man that young and thought anything other than "Is that guy even old enough to drive?" Sharing airspace with this particular guy, however, only made her wonder how long she'd have to live to see the things he'd seen.

He asked another question in a lilting tongue, the words sounding like a digital meshing of French and Hindu.

One black eyebrow raised in the inkling of a smile.

Gloria cast her gaze about uneasily. Few families living in her mother's neighborhood spoke anything other than English and a smattering of Spanish. Oh, and the couple on the corner who usually spoke to one another in Arabic. This guy was definitely not Middle Eastern.

He asked his question again, his brow knitting in concern.

"I'm sorry," Gloria stuttered, cutting him off midquestion. "I can't understand you. Do you speak English?

¿Habla Ingles?"

An expression of pure shock dashed over his stern features, and then a brief hint of a startled laugh rumbled from his throat. He held a finger up and fished something out of his pocket that would have been at home in any Radio Shack-stocked tinkerer's basement.

Clicking a button on the device, he again spoke his question.

Gloria began shaking her head, still not understanding, but before she could speak, a tinny reproduction of the man's voice burst from the device in his hand. Only this time, the question was in English: "Are you Gloria Walker?"

"Who wants to know?" she blurted, then winced at the pseudo-bluster implied in her De Niro inspired performance.

He flashed what might have been a badge at her, might also have been a tin can lid. Speaking through the translator-recorder, he replied, "Sullivan Oscar Timon, Special Traveler Unit. I'm sorry about the language barrier -- travelers aren't usually without a form of translator. Here, if you will put this in your ear, it will be easier for us to communicate." He held out a tiny ear bud in his palm, its bright blue light flashing intermittently. It resembled a blue tooth hands free earpiece more than anything, and Gloria wondered if it was

linked to brain cancer just like cell phones, radar guns, and MTV.

The man shoved the bud at her. "Trust me," he insisted. "It won't hurt you."

Reluctantly, she took the bud and stuck it in her hear. When he spoke again, she learned that while the translation was not instantaneous, and she could still hear the strange combination of guttural noises and lilting melodies that made up his natural tongue, she could more clearly hear his words in English.

"I'd like to know why you didn't check into the station on Atlantis before traveling," he continued.

Gloria stared at him, unable to so much as begin crafting a lie or denial as a response. Her eyes cast about for the large men in white coats who should definitely be tracking this person down and locking him back up in the rubber room he'd obviously escaped from. It was too bad, him being kind of cute with those shoes and all. Or perhaps, given that he seemed aware and in control of his own situation, while she was running madly from hers, the men in white coats were far more likely to dogpile her.

"The flipping station," he clarified. "You're required to check in at one of the stations on Atlantis within 24 hours before traveling."

Gloria slowly started to back away from him, feeling herself sinking deeper and deeper into the insanity of the world she had awakened into, fearing that this man was here to drag her bodily into the quicksand. "Unless you're talking about basketball, I haven't done any traveling since last Christmas." She also hadn't done any serious running since her cross-country days in college, but she figured she could outlast the man in black long enough to get help.

"Look, I think I know who you are, and I don't want you to get into any trouble." He closed the gap between them, and the fear she'd first felt in his presence returned. "You're lucky I was the one who found you."

"Did Annie send you?" Gloria asked, grasping for anything to keep him from getting close enough to grab her.

"No one sent me. I'm just doing my job." He sighed and stopped following her retreat. "Miss Walker, let me ask you something. Do you know where you are?"

"Albuquerque, about three blocks from my mother's house. I grew up here, I live here, I know where I am, this is my home." She backpedaled furiously down the street, until she was shouting. "Where the hell are you, you crazy bastard?"

He laughed, his face breaking open into something handsome and intriguing, boyish. "You really have no idea.

Sweetheart, you are worlds away from home. Or do you still think you're going to wake up like Dorothy, and be happily back in Kaxas?"

Gloria froze. "Kansas!" she yelled inanely. "Dorothy lived in Kansas."

"Fine, Kansas, then. Is that where you think you are? Home?"

No, it sure wasn't. It smelled like home, and it looked like home, it may have even tasted like home, but it wasn't. It was the Twilight Zone, it was the X-Files, it was the umpteenth dimension.

Gloria stood there, hands on her hips, frowning while he laughed. He wasn't Dracula, or a loon, she knew, but he was something mysterious. And slowly she realized he was the only strange thing in this weird world that was making any sense at all.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"It's better if I show you," he said, his laughter dying down to a crooked little pirate smile. "You're going to have to come with me anyway."

"Come with you where?"

He approached her, his slick shoes sliding over the shimmering blacktop. She flinched as he reached for her, but he only brushed the damp clumps of hair away from her left ear, looking for something and not finding it. Goose

bumps peaked on her flesh underneath his fingertips, racing down her skin.

"No stamp, see?"

She didn't see.

He offered her his hand. "Take my hand. Come on, I won't bite," he coaxed. "It'll clear everything up. The worlds have been waiting for you for a very long time."

Gloria stared at his hand. His fingers were strong and tanned. She peered behind him toward her mother's house, yearning for one saving glimpse of normality, or maybe just a final hint that this really was a dream, but the heat rose off the asphalt, clouding the structure in waves of distortion.

She met his eyes. Green as a newly cut emerald, open wide. She took his hand.

He smiled and reached his free hand to a beeper-sized box on his belt. It had several dials on the side, and one large green button in the center.

"Wait," Gloria whispered.

"It's all right," he said. "You're safe."

"Who are you?"

"I told you, I'm Oscar. Pleased to meet you."

He slowly bent over and kissed the back of her hand. She didn't know whether to laugh or swoon.

Then he pressed the green button on his belt, and a

giant, invisible hand thumped into her and knocked her on her butt. The shadows around Oscar the Shadow-Man crowded around her, and the world fell into a black hole.

CHAPTER 3

Gloria kept her eyes shut as tightly as she could. She didn't want to be feeling what was happening to her, and she certainly didn't want to be seeing it.

She heard Oscar's deep sardonic laughter. "You can open your eyes, Miss Walker. We're here."

Gloria took stock of her person. Feet felt like they were standing on the ground, and the rest of her body felt the normal downward pull of gravity. She didn't feel terribly discombobulated or violated in any way.

She cracked one eye open. Not fully trusting the information that was entering her brain from just that one source, she opened the other one, too. Both eyes concurred: this was the strangest place she'd ever even heard of, like George Lucas and David Lynch working together in two-part harmony.

She was standing on a street that was only ten feet wide. No cars or motorized vehicles whizzed by, only chatting, murmuring hoards of pedestrians. Buildings on

either side of her rose into the brilliant blue sky, all of varying sizes and soothing colors. A large white dome squatted ahead and to her left. Neighboring it was a towering medieval castle, complete with ramparts and a moat. To her right was a luminous skyscraper, standing so tall it faded away into the clouds. Through the gaps in the buildings, in the breaks of the sea of strange faces, Gloria caught glimpses of a vast ocean all around them, its white-capped waves sparkling like gems in the bristling sunlight.

Hinges squealed behind her, and she turned to see an Old West saloon complete with swinging doors and a false front. It wasn't a cowboy, however, who came out of the saloon. The man striding through the swinging doors wore a long purple, velvet robe that shimmered like oil on water in the sunlight. As he swung by them he turned up his long, lumpy nose and swung his cape over his shoulder.

Gloria gaped at him until she took note of the other pedestrians filling the narrow street. There were a few people who would have looked normal walking around the mall in Albuquerque, but for the most part these were characters straight out of the fantasy books. A woman walked by with flowing turquoise hair and matching leather straps for clothes, which barely covered the parts that needed to be covered. A young man whipped by on a floating scooter, his

long jacket dangling with numerous mechanical devices that Gloria couldn't for the life of her figure out. Several people shuffled through the crowd in robes and what she would have sworn were wizards' hats, with objects that looked suspiciously like magic wands in their hands.

Half a block away, circling and swarming and jostling for attention was a crowd that might have been at home in front of Washington D.C.'s Capitol Building. They were focused on the white dome building that Gloria had taken for some sort of sports arena or performance complex. They hoisted signs and shouted at anyone not part of their gang, and even some who were. Gloria could not make out their chants, but several banners flapped in the breeze, written in symbols she could not decipher with only the translator bug in her ear.

Immediately behind her, a voice boomed like brimstone, and she twirled to find a man in long red robes, nearly seven feet tall, towering over the pedestrians on the sidewalk and preaching to anyone who would glance his way.

"You think this is an accident?" the soapbox man shouted. "You think the hoovering of our planet is a cosmic coincidence? Think again, my friends! This is a judgment upon our souls! This evil threatening to swallow us whole is no evil at all -- it is but a way to cleanse ourselves of our ungodly ways, to begin anew, fresh, like

children. Reborn, we will march into a new era..."

Gloria turned to Oscar, fighting off a feelings-combo of panic attack and excitement akin to Christmas morning.

"Where are we?" she asked, hearing her voice shiver down to a whisper. "And how the hell did we get here?"

Oscar tilted his mouth in that crooked grin. "Welcome to Atlantis."

"Atlantis?" Gloria scoffed. "But--"

"Come on," Oscar said, placing an arm around her, tucking her in closely. "Let's get off the street, and I'll explain everything to you." He looked down at her, his eyes narrowed, the amused expression lingering.

She blinked stupidly at him, and he pulled her through the crowd. She paid no attention to where they were going, just gaped at the crazy, wonderful people they passed. One woman actually had a cat on one shoulder and a crow on the other, and was frantically trying to keep the two from eating one another.

Just as the woman teetered past them, the crow turned around, looked Gloria straight in the eye, and in a startlingly clear Charleton Heston voice told her "There's a cyclone coming, Em."

"What did you say?" Gloria stopped, tugging free of Oscar's protective arm.

The crow cawed and struck at its neighboring cat,

ignoring Gloria completely.

She tried to follow the woman through the crowd, using her height to see over the various pointy hats and oblong heads and flying scooters. But the crow and the cat and the woman they perched upon had faded, engulfed by the mass of people.

She felt Oscar reach her side. "What?" he asked.

"That crow, it said something to me," she said, her eyes still scanning the crowd. "A line from The Wizard of
Oz."

Oscar remained silent, but he stopped trying to drag her away and looked closer at the crowd.

"What crow?"

"It's gone, I can't see it anymore. But it talked to me, clear as day. Right to me."

"It happens here," he said quietly, brushing it off.
But his green eyes betrayed something deeper, something he
wouldn't tell her. Not yet, anyway.

Gloria gave up on the crow, still turning it over in her head, and let Oscar lead her toward the huge, white domed building. It stood out from its neighbors by the lack of adornment, the lack of affiliation with any time period, geography, or nation. It was just a plain white shell, reflecting the sun's rays dully and without break.

They pushed through the protestors, who began shouting

their rhythmic chants as soon as they recognized they had an audience. Several people even got close enough to shout into Gloria's face, pelting her with demands.

"Plug the hole! Save our home! Plug the hole! Save our home!"

"Keep the world spinning! Keep the 5000 winning!"

"It's a conspiracy! Old man Sullivan is back, and he's taking Atlantis back from his sniveling son. Watch out for the Sullivans, girlie, they're all rotten to the core."

This last was neither a rhyme nor a chant, but the woman spewing it in Gloria's face was very convinced of the validity of her screeched statements. She reached out to grasp Gloria's arm, pulling her away from Oscar, spraying spittle and the stench of decaying, abscessed teeth over Gloria's face.

Oscar quickly tossed the woman's hand off, pressing

Gloria more tightly to him and bulldozing his way through

the crowd until an opening melted away in the face of the

unbroken white dome. They pushed inside and felt the door

swoosh to a close behind them, blocking out the fervor, the

hysteria, and the danger of the fear-mongered

demonstrators.

Gloria caught her breath, nodding at Oscar when he asked if she was okay.

"Holy Jesus in a jam jar," she managed. "What was that all about?"

Oscar cast his eyes toward the entrance, avoiding her open stare. "It's complicated."

"Lots of things are complicated with you."

At this, his granite expression finally softened. "You haven't begun to see complicated."

Gloria paused, off balance, feeling her heart rate pick up again at the quirk of a smile. Finally, she managed, "Is it always like that here?"

"Never before," Oscar said, tightness creeping into his voice. "At least that I'm aware of."

Strangely, his answer disappointed her. The vehemence of the faithful demanding a change in their system was familiar, a trait in common with her own world where so many people had so many causes to fight for. At least something was normal in this tour through the looking glass.

Recovering, Gloria became aware of where she was: the giant white dome Oscar called HQ. On the inside, too, it was completely white. She felt she should have to squint her eyes, but somehow there was no glare at all. The only relief to the unrelenting white wall, chairs, desks and floors was the occasional black. Here and there, a splash of black paint on canvas was mounted on a wall for

decoration. Several black doors led away from the allwhite entry room where they now stood. Like Oscar,
everyone in the building wore clothes in black and white,
and they all wore what seemed to be standard issue wing-tip
shoes.

They walked up to a woman behind a white desk. Her hair was white-blond but her lips were blood-red, and Gloria found herself focused on them to convince herself she hadn't fallen into an old tape of some Nick at Nite show.

The woman raised her eyebrow at Oscar. "She why you haven't called me in a month?"

"Good morning, Luz," Oscar said, his voice tight, all trace of amusement drained. Ignoring her pointed question he asked, "Why hasn't anything been done about the crowd outside?"

Luz snorted. "Oh, something's been done all right, over and over and over. You been out on assignment too long, boy. We keep chasing 'em off, they keep coming back and yelling in our faces, like we can do something 'bout that great hole in the sky. Free universe, I guess."

Gloria frowned. A hole in the sky didn't sound particularly healthy. She should have thought to bring some super high SPF sunblock, and would have if she hadn't been half out of her own gourd.

Luz glanced sideways at Gloria. "You arresting those folks now? This one don't look nearly as harmful as that old hag hollering about conspiracies."

Oscar shook his head. "Unauthorized flipper I picked up on Tarsa. Is there a coffee room open?"

"Uh-huh," Luz replied, unconvinced. She kept one sharp eye on Gloria as she tapped a black pad on the desk. One of the doors behind her opened wide into a white hallway. "You go on through to room eight. But don't go thinking I've forgiven you, Oscar Timon."

"Thanks, Luz." Oscar, tight-lipped and professional, pointed Gloria toward the hallway and propelled her into it. The black door swing noiselessly shut behind them.

"Let me guess. You said you'd call her and then you didn't," Gloria said lightly. "Good thing to know about a guy: cute, but lies through his shiny white teeth."

Oscar frowned at her, but didn't respond.

"I get it, none of my business." She heard herself prattling nervously, but couldn't stop. If she stopped, she might actually have a moment to think about where the hell she was. "And what did you call me? I'm a what? A flipper? I'm a dolphin?"

Oscar just kept walking until he came to another open door. They went through it to find a sitting room, complete with white leather armchairs and a black coffee

table with a pot of black coffee and a jug of milk on its surface.

"Have a seat," Oscar said.

"Okay." Gloria flopped on the seat and poured herself a cup of milk with some coffee dashed in. Perhaps in this bizarro-verse caffeine actually had a calming effect.

Oscar shed his suit coat and sat across from her. He ignored the coffee.

"So, this is where you work?" Gloria asked, wincing at her own inane small talk.

"This is HQ," he replied easily. "Better known as the Bubble."

They stared at each other for a moment, Gloria drinking her coffee and contemplating questions.

She leaned forward.

"So this is still a pretty good dream I'm having. I hope I remember all the details so I can write them down in my journal later."

Oscar smiled for the first time since entering the building. "You're not dreaming. I'm sure it feels like it, but you're not."

She nodded, going along with him. "Who are you, then? Some kind of G-man, like the X-Files?"

"I'm a Sullivan, Special Traveler Unit."

"You said that before." Gloria shrugged, less

concerned than she would have been if this were all real.

She had nearly convinced herself she was dreaming, in which case she wished her subconscious would recognize how enticing this man was and allow her to have some fun before she woke up. Either she was asleep and aloft in dreamland, or she was wrapped up in a strait jacket, lost to the real world, banging her head on a rubber wall and drooling.

"Look," Oscar said, settling back into his chair, stretching out his long legs. "Let me give you some basics. You showed up yesterday morning on Tarsa. This is Atlantis."

"Never heard of Tarsa, but I know Atlantis. Lost city, right?"

"Sort of." Oscar's forehead wrinkled and he stared hard at her, as if waiting for her to fill in the gaps.

Since she had no idea what he was going to come up with, she waited him out.

He gave in first, sighing. "A lot of the terras have the Atlantis legend, even though no one ever located the original city. When the Five Thousand Worlds was created, considering the geography of the hub, it just seemed natural to name it Atlantis."

Gloria waved a hand at him, signaling him to stop. "You've lost me. Hub? Five Thousand Worlds, terras? Where are we, some lost continent?" "You really don't know?"

"No," she snapped angrily, "I really don't."

The flicker of a smile dashed across his hard features, and Gloria felt a flutter in her belly, along with a flash of irritation at his continued aura of knowing mystery.

"Is this fun for you, keeping me in the dark, being all smiley about it?"

The hint of a smile exploded into a grin before he managed to delete it from his face. "Sorry. I've just waited a long time."

"You're doing it again, with the mystery."

"Here we go." He paused for dramatic effect. "Your terra, the planet you're from, what's it called?"

"Um, Earth," Gloria replied in confusion.

"Ah, Earth. It is unmapped, not one of the Five Thousand."

"Are you about to tell me we're in outer space?"

"Not a bit. You're still on your terra, Earth, you're just in a different universe."

"Uh-huh."

"When you woke up this morning, you were on Tarsa, a mapped terra. I don't know how you got there, but you set off our sensors, and I came to arrest you, basically."

"And now we're on a different, what is it, terra?"

"Atlantis. Your Earth, Tarsa, Atlantis, they're parallel planets, existing in separate dimensions. There are thousands of them, that we know about anyway."

"Parallel universes," Gloria murmured. "There should be millions. More. Infinite, if I remember my Physics 101."

Oscar nodded. "I said that we know of. See, we can only travel to about 5000."

"You can travel between dimensions?" Apparently, it was going to take some time for her befuddled brain to sponge up this information.

"Just like you." His voice lowered, and he glanced toward the door they'd entered. "But unlike you, we can only get to the 5000 mapped terras. That's still a lot for us to police. But we do the best--"

"Hold up." Gloria waved her hands around, squeezing her eyes shut. Suddenly, she stood up, peering into every corner of the room, each shadowed hollow and hidden crevice. "Am I on candid camera somewhere? I mean, I know I've been a little depressed lately, but surely my family didn't have to stage this elaborate of an intervention. Is this some kind of game? I saw Total Recall. I saw that Michael Douglas movie. I saw Office Space. Is this some weird hypnosis thing to get my mind off how shite my life is, by showing me something even more wacked out?"

She paused for breath, turning to find Oscar giving her a stare she'd seen on male faces a hundred times: the confused shock of a man witnessing a female in full emotional rant.

"Miss Walker," he managed, "you need to sit back down."

She didn't move, just stood there feeling her chest heaving with panicked breaths. "Someone drugged me," she stated quietly.

"No."

"I drugged myself. A reaction to an anti-depressant."
"No."

"I hit my head, I got in a car accident, I'm in a coma, I had a stroke, a freak run-in with a wild boar."

"No, no, no, no, and again, no." His mouth was starting to twitch. If he laughed at her, she would lose it, and she would make sure he sorely regretted that lapse in judgment.

Gloria pulled in a deep, calming breath of oxygen, trying to count to five before she exhaled slowly. "I'm in a parallel universe, talking to what...some sort of outer space G-man?"

Oscar smiled, not a laugh at her expense, but a comforting gesture, a reward. Oddly, it warmed her, and she felt her heart rate slow to a more sustainable level.

She sat back down across from him, and he relaxed in his chair again. "I'm a peacekeeper," he replied gently. "Sullivans monitor inter-world travel. See, even though there are all those people wandering around Atlantis who know how to travel, there are millions on each of these terras who don't know anything about it. We can't keep the travelers from moving around, but we don't want 5000 worlds in a panic."

"So you keep the dopes doped."

"Pretty much."

"And I'm unauthorized, right? I'm like an illegal alien. And you're INS."

"I'm not sure what INS is, but you've got the rest of it pretty much right." Oscar nodded, clearly glad she was keeping up so well.

Gloria bit her lip. "So then everything that's happened today, my sister being this beaten down triple divorcee, my mom dying, that wasn't my terra, my Earth?"

Oscar shook his head. "No. Somehow you floundered into Tarsa. Which is why I had to pick you up. The nature of traveling somehow requires travelers to go through Atlantis to reach any other terra. We don't know why, it's just physically impossible to go anywhere without coming here first. Ever traveler must check in within 24 hours of traveling, just so we know who is where, just in case, you

know."

"Sure. Wouldn't want chaos to run amok." Gloria drained her coffee and reached for some more. This was going to take some fortification.

"What I'm going to do now is bring in a couple of Sullies from the widget-detection unit. They want to try to figure out how you flipped." Oscar cocked his head at her. "We'd also like to know how you flipped without any idea what you were doing."

"Excuse me, did you say 'widget'?" An absurd bubble of laughter popped out of her throat. "As in, nonexistent units my sophomore economics professor loved to beat us over the head with?"

Oscar smiled a little, and tapped his belt. "These little mechanical devices that help us travel. The guy who first invented them figured there was a word without an object, an object without a name, and there you go. Widgets."

Gloria shrugged and nodded. "I don't have any, you know. Widgets."

"It's procedure. Just smile and nod, and then we'll talk more."

Oscar got out of his chair, and the door immediately opened to let in the detection team. Gloria stared a moment at Oscar, feeling a layer of security fall away from

her as strangers entered the room. That damn mystery was back in his face, that thumping sense that Oscar knew more about her than she did. She thought maybe he already knew all the answers to his questions, and he was just running through the motions for the sake of "procedure." And the more she talked to him, the more she saw that knowledge in his eyes, the less sure she was that she was going to wake up from this.

The widget detection team consisted of a bug and a witch. The bug turned out to be merely a man with an odd assortment of equipment strapped to his body. He wore goggles with several facets, which Gloria figured were some kind of infrared vision specs. He also wore metallic gloves that resembled the Terminator's bare titanium skeleton. Wires trailed all over him, connecting his various mechanisms together.

The witch was no less exotic, even if she was a tad more familiar. She didn't have a pointy hat or a wart on her nose. She was middle aged and plump, with gray hair and sweet, squinty little eyes. Her black gown billowed softly around her, and one of her blue-veined hands held a simple silver wand.

Gloria nearly laughed when she caught sight of the Sully-standard wing-tip shoes peeking out from under the witch's gown. The witch smiled at her, and Gloria wondered

if she was going to get a hug from this grandmotherly woman.

"This will only take a few minutes," the bug said.
"Can you stand for me, please?"

"I don't have to strip or anything, do I?" Gloria asked.

They all looked at her blankly.

"No," said the bug. "You just have to stand up."

Gloria complied, and the bug looked her over with his goggles. She looked at Oscar.

"Can he see through my clothes?" she asked.

"No. He can only see if you've got mechanical devices on you."

"Uh-huh." Gloria peered suspiciously at the bug.

"Don't see anything," the bug commented. He straightened and placed his buggy hands around her skull.

Gloria looked helplessly at the witch. The woman smiled faintly. "Don't worry, kid," the witch said, her voice gratingly raspy and brash. "That little twerp ain't frying your brains. He's just checking to make sure you ain't got no widgets embedded in your brain."

"You can do that? Have them stuck in your brain?"

"Oh, sure. People stick 'em everywhere. But if you want one to work while it's up inside you, it's got to be at a nerve center. You know, so's you can run it whenever

you think about it."

The bug shook his head and stepped away from her. "No widgets, not that I can see, anyway. If she had one, she stashed it before you got to her," he said to Oscar.

Oscar nodded, and gestured for the witch to go ahead.

The witch stepped forward and raised her wand over Gloria's head, rising up on her tip-toes to stretch her vertically challenged form over Gloria's tall frame.

"I don't think so," Gloria said, stepping away from her and pushing her hands in front of her defensively. "I saw this movie on SciFi. You put some spell on me, and before I know it, I'm a cute little white rat that the exterminator over there can use in his psychotic experiments."

The witch and the bug looked curiously at her, then at Oscar. Oscar shrugged indifferently.

"I'm doing the same thing the twerp did. Just checking for spells you or somebody else mighta put on you. Magical widgets."

"You never said anything about magical widgets,"
Gloria said to Oscar, her voice rising.

"There's a lot I haven't told you," Oscar replied calmly. "Yet. You're going to have to trust me."

She took a deep breath and focused on his green eyes,

searching for the rest of the story, the kicker that would send her back to her real life. She nodded and let the witch wave her wand around.

The witch closed her eyes and muttered some words under her breath. The wand wove a thin gossamer net around Gloria, and she could see tiny tendrils weaving their way toward her. They weren't snake-like or menacing; they seemed to be friendly, almost waving at her as they examined her magical aura, or whatever they examined.

The web faded softly around her, until her little tendrils were gone and she stood in the middle of the room, magic-free. The witch was shaking her head.

"Not a drop of unnatural magic around the girl," the witch said. "Cleanest thing I ever saw."

Oscar nodded, completely unsurprised with the results. He ushered the detection team out, and turned to Gloria with his arms crossed. Slowly, the corners of his mouth lifted in that smile he seemed to save exclusively for her.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" Gloria asked.

"Not a chance."

"No widgets, no magic, no nothing. If I'm not dreaming, drunk, or hallucinating, and you don't have some third mechanism for your interdimensional traveling thing," Gloria crossed her arms determinedly, "then how in holy hell did I get here?"

"I have an idea," he replied, and his voice was almost giddy. She half-expected him to rub his palms together gleefully. She waited for this exciting revelation.

Before replying, Oscar reached for his belt and clicked something there, an object that closely resembled a pager. It beeped, flashed once, and powered down with a hum.

"Not here," he said. "If I'm right, I've been looking for you for a long, long time. And so has every traveler in the 5000."