

Kansas, She Says, Is the Name of the Star by R. Garcia y Robertson

In recent years, most of Mr. Garcia's contributions to our pages have been fantasy stories, including the Markovy adventures. A novel entitled Firebird, related to the story of the same name, has just been published. With this new tale, Mr. Garcia shifts gears to give us a science fiction story with a cinematic feel to it.

Scarecrow

Amy stared out her bedroom window as the summer sun settled into the flat cornfields, spreading gold fire over the green sea of leaves. Her red hair caught the slanting light, giving her a fiery orange halo. Alert brown eyes searched for the first evening star. Amy ached to make a wish. Tonight she was twelve for the last time. Tomorrow was her birthday, and tomorrow evening would be her wedding night.

Leaning farther out the second floor window, straining to see a star, Amy rehearsed her wish. She wanted to be eleven again, or even ten, with her wedding day years away. Amy was not in the least ready for marriage. Especially to some stranger three times her age—if she was lucky. What a ghostly thought. She would much rather shovel manure with a spoon.

But no one gave her that choice. Fat chance. Everyone acted like marrying some strange man was totally natural. No one saw it her way, not Mom, not Lilith, not Delilah, or Dot. Tuck and Nathan were boys, and naturally no help. And Dad had two teenage brides himself—one of them from Amy's grade. So she appealed to the evening star, since no one else would listen.

There it was, a glowing speck, low in the north, just over the shoulder of the scarecrow at the edge of the cornfield. A real star for sure, too far from the sun to be Venus. From the house, the fence line ran due north, and the star was right where Polaris would be, but lower, and brighter. She made her wish at once, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, save me from wedded blight. I wish I may, I wish I might, be nine again tonight."

As if in answer, the star shone brighter, becoming plainly visible, instead of just a speck. Astounding, since there was no star that bright to the north. That had to mean her wish was granted, that somehow she would be set free.

Then the star fell from the sky. Trailing fire, but still blazing brightly, her star went straight down, disappearing below the northern horizon.

What in heaven (or out of it) was that? Nothing that she ever saw before, that's for sure. Maybe she was fated to wed.

Not having the heart to search out a second star, Amy lay back down on the bed, though it was not yet dark. Tonight was her last night alone, in her own bed, in her own home, so she might as well make the best of it.

Breakfast came all too soon, and Amy was last to the table, where she was greeted by a rousing chorus of "Happy Birthday," followed by a party, complete with cake and presents. Clothes from her mom and step-mom. Dot gave her a flower, and the boys had whittled her a whistle. Dad gave her his best leather traveling bag.

Amy did her best to be sociable, sitting down and thanking everyone for the presents, though she had small appetite for cake. Mother suggested that she try to enjoy herself, saying, "We won't be together again for a long while."

No lie. Amy replied, "I do not want to be thirteen."

That was a mere statement of fact, but Mom took it as childish rebellion. "We cannot help growing up. I

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while."

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That was a mere statement of fact, but Mom took it as childish rebellion. "We cannot help growing up. I am much older than I would like to be."

Only blonde Lilith tried to comfort her, smiling hopefully and pressing her bare foot against Amy's under the table. Being youngest wife, Lilith could do little else. They were friends, and in the same grade because Lilith had been held back, twice. Nothing says family like doing your step-mom's homework.

"You are at the age of consent," Mother reminded her, as if Amy could have possibly forgotten. Dad added

practically, "If we do not take you to Concordia to register, then the Bushwhackers will." At least with Bushwhackers she had half a chance. Being older than all three of his wives combined, Dad took the long view, letting his women handle family issues. Yet he was always attentive and affectionate, being very fond of young girls, treating Amy a lot like a favorite grandchild. And he never laid a hand on her, preferring to correct with a belt.

"What is the use of consenting, if I do not want to?" Amy asked stubbornly.

"Consent just means it is up to you," her father intoned. Mother added, "No one is making you marry."

Delilah smiled wickedly across the

table. "There is always the maiden's academy."

"Right." From all that Amy had heard, the Concordia Academy for Reluctant Virgins made marriage seem a blessing. Delilah had married Dad at thirteen, and thought this was fussing over nothing. With a young daughter, and Lilith as a live-in babysitter, Delilah enjoyed herself immensely. Last night had been her night, and Delilah once told her step-daughter, "He looks old, but your Dad's real active with the light out."

Just what every daughter wants to hear. Amy sat in glum silence, wishing a tornado would tear the whole house away.

"Maybe no one will want you," Tuck

suggested. "I wouldn't." Nathan agreed, "Me neither."

Small chance of that. Some girls were sent home, but not many. Lilith failed both fifth and sixth grade, but had no trouble getting married. Amy knew just by looking in the water pail that someone would want her, young as she was, and without her having to show a lick of sense, or even say a thing. When her party was over, Amy stalked upstairs to pack.

Delilah's daughter Dot toddled after her, asking, "Are yew goin', Aunti Em?" Dot could not say Amy, always calling her Aunti Em. It was too hard to explain to a toddler that she was not her aunt, but her half-sister. All she said was, "Yeah,

Aunti Em is going."

"Me miss yew." Dot plainly meant it.

"Me too." She would miss not just Dot and the family, but her whole life, which would very soon cease to be her own.

Glancing out the window, she saw the road stretching north past the cornfield, past the scarecrow, disappearing into the morning haze. She heard the boys bringing out the horses to hitch to the wagon. Concordia was a long ride off, and they would need to start before noon. Dot clung to her, saying, "No want you go!"

Squatting down, Amy got on a level with her half-sister, saying, "I will miss you very much." For one wild moment, she thought she should take Dot with her,

though she had no idea where she was going. But wherever it was it had to be better than here. And Dot was her true sister, the only other female born into the family. But Dot was also Delilah's daughter, for better or for worse.

"Yew will come back?" Dot demanded.

"Yeah," she gave her little sister a hug. "I will come back for you." Dot had a good ten years before she turned thirteen; maybe then Amy could come for her. "Now go find your Mom."

"Bye-bye, Aunti Em." Dot scooted off, thinking it was a game. Amy wished it was. Stuffing everything she could take into a knapsack, she left her Dad's leather bag sitting open on the carpet.

Then she swung out the window and shinned down the drainpipe, something she had done hundreds of times in the dark, just never in daylight, and carrying a pack. Except for chickens scratching about, the yard below was empty.

She ducked into the smokehouse and came out with some hard sausage. As she filled her waterbag from the well, Amy took a last look at the house, which was tall and square, with big windows that made it look like a giant dollhouse. Two trees gave the only bit of shade for more than a mile around. When her bag was full, she cut across the chicken yard and went over the back fence, disappearing into the corn. Moving easily through the tangled green maze,

she followed the big hand-plowed furrows to the corner where the road heading east to Aurora crossed the one that ran by their farm. This was where the scarecrow stood, wearing Nathan's shirt and jacket, cast-off overalls, and a ragged straw hat. Pulling the shirt and overalls over her underwear, she tucked the jacket into her pack strap and put her hair up under the hat. From a decent distance she might pass for a boy, if it was a man looking for her. There was no room for her dress, so she buried her face in the fabric, smelling her mother's scent, from when they hugged around the cake. Then she stuffed it deep between the cornrows and headed on her way.

Tin Man

Brought up in a very deserted part of Cloud County, with Aurora far to the east and nothing to the west but the county line, Amy had no notion where she should head. Or what the wider world was like. Geography was not one of the three Rs--Reading, Rhythm, and Regulations. But she was determined to follow her star, heading due north, even if it took her into Republic County. Her biggest fear was Bushwhackers, and it was far too soon for them to be searching for her. When her family did not show in Concordia, people would want to know why--but it would be a day at least before she was posted as a runaway bride. Aiming to make the most of her reprieve, Amy walked briskly

along in her scarecrow clothes, not looking back.

Wagons went by. Then cheerful families on buggies, but Amy turned down every offer of a ride. In theory she had done no wrong, and had until dusk to register as a bride, but she did not want helpful strangers whisking her into Concordia.

After ten or so miles, she had to make her first detour, swinging west through the fields to avoid Jamestown, and the road to Concordia.

Now she was clearly on the run, with nothing ahead of her but the county line. Grasshoppers bounded about in the heat, soaring away down the road, waiting for her to catch up, then flying off again.

Dust appeared ahead, a small thin cloud that might have been a whirlwind, since it was certainly tornado weather. She watched the dust devil come closer, not feeling especially wary, until the cloud topped a rise. There was a Wheeler beneath it, headed straight at her.

Damn! Only the second Wheeler she had ever seen. What a time for him to show up. Wheelers lived far to the west, beyond Norton and Oberlin. They were scary fast, and would turn her in as easy as Bushwhackers. Both were always looking out for girls on the run. Leaving the road would just attract attention. Amy pulled her hat down over face and kept on walking, sure he could not be looking for her. Rapidly, the Wheeler

got closer, becoming a man in a scarlet suit and black boots, seated atop a silver frame, with two spoked wheels that seemed to turn on their own, whirling along without a horse or peddles, trailing a tall cloud of dust. Grabbing her straw hat to help cover her face, Amy waved vigorously as the Wheeler sped past. That was what a boy would do. He was wearing goggles and a red cap, and guiding the front wheel with silver handlebars, so long and curved that he could lean back in his seat, steering in complete comfort.

Fast as he had come, the Wheeler was gone, not even giving her a glance. Dust settled, and Amy quickened her pace, determined not to be surprised so easily

next time. Now she kept looking over her shoulder, and half a mile farther along she spotted another cloud of dust--this time to the south. Another Wheeler. Two in one day. Or the same one coming back to have a closer look.

Amy ducked into the corn, threading through the green rows until she could not be seen from the road. Sure enough, this time the Wheeler seemed to slow, and maybe even stop, as though searching for her. But there was nothing to see, and the dust cloud went whirling off to the north. She no longer felt safe on the road, a feeling soon reinforced by yet another passing Wheeler, this one headed south. Or maybe it was the same one, still looking for her. Heading north

through the corn rows, she slid between the stalks, letting the furrows guide her feet. Dodging the Wheelers was no fun, but it gave her more purpose, just like her star gave her direction. Which was good, since she knew what she was running from, but not where she was going. Without warning, Amy came upon a dish-like depression twenty yards across. There the corn was crushed down, with the flattened stalks radiating outward from the center, where a smaller deeper ring was gouged into the ground. For the first time since leaving the road, Amy saw open sky. It scared her. Something with a big saucer-shaped bottom had fallen out of that sky, crushed the corn, then gone on its way. A distant

dust plume signaled another Wheeler on the road.

Skirting the depression, Amy sought safety in the narrow green tunnels, sliding between the tall stalks. Crows cawed at the walking scarecrow, but no one else noticed.

She soon came on another saucer-like depression, which she also avoided. But beyond that her way was suddenly blocked by a long break in the corn, stretching straight across her path. What to do now? All the flattened corn was facing one way, as though something had whipped through the rows, inches above the ground. Nothing like this ever happened back on the farm.

Amy tried to go around the break. She

ran right into a great silver wing, slanting into the ground. This stiff silver wing had cut through the corn like a scythe, slicing out a wide clearing. Attached to it was the crushed and burnt fuselage of a sailplane.

Forgetting her fear, Amy crept closer. She had seen sailplanes gliding overhead, but never this close up, near enough to touch, if she dared.

Wedged inside the crumpled cockpit was the biggest monkey Amy had ever seen. Bigger than her, and dead, with his dried blood spattered over the the smashed controls. Sheesh! Awfully gory, even to Amy, who gutted pigs and beheaded chickens at home--pigs she considered her friends, and hens she had

raised from chicks. Amy backed away slowly, until she was standing smack up against the corn. She hoped that up past Concordia things might be different--but not this different. First Wheelers, then this mashed flying monkey. What next?

As if in answer, she heard someone crashing toward her. Horses were coming, many horses, thrashing through the corn. The only folks who casually rode over a farmer's standing corn, with no care or warning, were Bushwhackers.

Amy spun about and vanished into the corn, having little faith in her scarecrow disguise. If Bushwhackers did not like how she looked, they would sling her over a saddle and take her into Concordia just to be sure. Hooting and

hollering the whole way.

Who needed that? Not her. She followed the furrows away from the wreck, working her way downwind, in case they had dogs. When she found a safe spot beneath the corn, she squatted and listened for pursuit, unsure what to do next. Following her star had gotten her in more trouble than Amy could have ever imagined. Bushwhackers should not even be looking for her, but here they were, so close she could smell the dust and horse sweat.

Without warning, a soft voice behind her hissed, "Hey, kid." Amy almost leaped out of her scarecrow pants, spinning swiftly about. Behind her, crouched in the corn, was a dark-haired,

smiling girl in a blue-checked gingham dress, wearing pigtails and bright ruby-red slippers. She waved to Amy, saying, "Come here."

Surprised at being called kid by someone smaller than she was, Amy crawled back through the corn to where the girl in the gingham dress was hiding. Looking Amy over keenly, the little girl asked, "Who are you?"

"Tip." The first male name that came to mind; it belonged to one of their dogs.

"If you say so." The little girl produced a small clear capsule from her dress pocket, holding it up to Amy's mouth. "Here, spit in this."

Amy looked at her like she was crazy.

"Go on, spit," the girl insisted. "It

won't hurt." She spit, then asked, "What is that for?"

"DNA sample." The girl carefully closed the capsule, held it up to the light, then tucked it into her checked dress, adding, "We had better get going."

"Going where?"

"Away from here." The girl nodded toward the crash site. "That sailplane was a two-seater, and there is only one body. Even Bushwhackers can count that far."

Amy had not thought of that. She asked, "What was that in the wreck?"

"SuperChimp named Ham. He was my pilot."

"Your pilot?"

"Damned good one too, named for the

first ape in space." Getting up, the girl smoothed out her dress, saying, "Come on, before Bushwhackers come looking." They set out, sliding in silence for most of an hour through green tunnels of corn. With no more obstructions or weird depressions, the cornfields went on until they came on a creek, lined with cottonwoods. Here they stopped to drink and rest their hot feet in cool rippling water. Amy asked,

"What's your name?"

"Dorothy," the girl in gingham replied.

"Means Beloved of God," Amy observed piously.

Dorothy nodded. "One of the reasons I picked it."

"You don't come from around here, do

you?" Amy guessed. Girls she knew did not pick their names.

"Heavens, no." Dorothy smiled at the notion. "I fell out of the sky. Last night, actually. Haven't been here a day."

Amy believed it. Dorothy did not act or talk like a little girl, but Amy did not press the subject, since she was pretending to be a boy. "Fell from where?"

"Kansas system."

Amy had never heard of it. "What county is that?"

Dorothy smiled at her naivet. "Kansas is a G-type star, not far from here. We are actually distant binaries."

Star travel sounded like something from fairy tales. "What are you doing

here?"

"Right now, trying to get home," Dorothy explained airily. "Got anything to eat?" Amy opened her pack and produced a piece of cake. Dorothy's sly smile broke into a grin. "Birthday cake?"

"There's also some hard sausage."

"Cake's fine." Dorothy broke off a bit of frosted corner and stuffed it in her mouth. "So, how old are you today?"

"Thirteen," Amy admitted.

"Sorry to hear that."

"Me too." Amy forgot she was supposed to be a boy.

"So did you run off?"

Amy nodded guiltily. "Do you blame me?"

"Heavens no!" Dorothy hurried to

console her. "Barefoot and pregnant is no way to start junior high." Dorothy broke off more cake. "Is 'Tip' a product of whimsical parents, or part of your disguise?"

"My name is Amy. And I am on the run, but I don't know to where. Last night, I tried to wish upon the first star, and it fell from the sky, trailing fire. I've been following it ever since."

"That was me," Dorothy declared, happily splashing her feet in the stream. "Couple of saucers got us."

"Saucers?"

"UFOs," Dorothy explained. "Those moving lights you see at night."

"Dad says that's swamp gas."

Dorothy rolled her eyes. "See any

swamps on your way here?" She hadn't. Just lots of corn, and summer wheat.

"Saucers are scary smart," Dorothy warned, "and can see for miles. UFOs are why I was lying low, until those Bushwhackers arrived."

Amy told Dorothy about her own adventures since leaving home, dodging Wheelers, then Bushwhackers. Dorothy was impressed. "You saw my ship shot down, and came straight here? That shows good sense, and keen navigation."

Amy was not so sure. "I thought it was a star."

"Still, you got here, and that's what counts." They headed off downstream, walking in the water to confuse their scent, in case the Bushwhackers brought

dogs--which they did when they had difficult girls to track. Bushwhackers kept in practice by hunting coons in the dark. This little stream led them to the Republican River, which ran down from Republican County and the Pawnee Nation. They camped on the south bank of the Republican, making a fire, and staring up at the stars, while chewing hard sausage. Amy smirked, saying, "This was going to be my wedding night."

"Disappointed?" Dorothy asked.

"Not at all." Thirteen and unmarried. Only that morning Amy thought it was impossible, now it felt wonderful. With nowhere to go, this warm campfire seemed the perfect place to be. "Where

is Kansas, the star you came from?"

"You can barely see it from Earth." Dorothy searched the sky, then pointed, saying, "That dim one, there."

"I see it." Amy knew the night sky by heart.

"Kansas is the name of the star. It has two terraformed planets, Wichita and Topeka--but I'm not from either of them. I was born aboard ship."

"So, how old are you?" Amy asked suspiciously.

"In Earth years?" Dorothy smirked. "Way older than you." Small surprise, Dorothy acted much older than anyone Amy knew, except maybe Dad. "But you look like a kid."

"I'm a Munchkin." Dorothy acted

nonchalant. "We are bio-engineered not to mature, or even go through puberty."

"Why?" That was the strangest thing Amy had heard since leaving home, weirder than flying monkeys.

"Because some folks thought it would be fun." Dorothy sounded breezy, but still a bit bitter. "Rich pedophiles, high-end pimps, and greedy genetechs. I was rescued from a slaver harem when I was four."

"Slavers?" One of those words Amy had heard whispered by adults, when she was not supposed to be listening.

"Like Bushwhackers, only worse."

"So how old are you?"

Sitting in the flickering firelight, Dorothy looked nine or ten, at most.

"Thirty-two standard years, not counting relativity effects. I have lived half my life at light speed."

"So you have no family?"

"Conceived in a lab, and born in an incubator. My earliest memories are of living in a creche, with a bunch of other babies for sale, aboard the slaver Hydra. But I have a perfectly fine foster family on Topeka. They're the folks who raised me."

And Amy thought her life was weird.

Next morning they were up with the birds, breakfasting on the last of her birthday cake. As Amy fed crumbs to the sparrows, Dorothy laid out the day. "We can follow the Republican up into the next county. Once we get past Kackley

there are no towns to worry about until we get to the pickup point just beyond Jewel City. Ham was supposed to drop me off, then fly me to safety--but in case something bad happened, there are other arrangements."

Something bad had happened, especially to Ham, spattered all over his cockpit. Now it was just assumed that they were both going to this "pickup." If Amy had another choice she might well have taken it.

Dorothy sensed her fear. "Just remember, west of Jewel City, tomorrow night, near to dawn. Get there, and we are both okay. What you don't know, Bushwhackers can't beat out of you." A happy thought. Like parents and

teachers, Bushwhackers had the authority to thrash the truth out of flagrant liars, or errant runaways. Amy was both.

Heading upriver, they crossed over into Republic County, named for the Pawnee Republic, lying farther upstream. Amy wished the Pawnee would take her in, but late summer was when they had their virgin corn-sacrifice to the Morning Star. Not the best time to go knocking on Pawnee long lodges. Eventually they came to a bridge, and a road crossing it, paved with yellow bricks. Each brick was stamped Golden Brick Company, Jewel City.

They set out down the yellow brick road, talking and laughing. Only to find

Kackley full of Wheelers, some headed south into Cloud County, most just speeding around town, kicking up dust. Not a pretty sight.

This meant another miles-long detour through the fields, consuming most of the morning. Twice, Dorothy begged food and DNA samples from farm families. When they got back to the yellow brick road, it was afternoon already, with many long miles to go. At the county line, the road jogged to the south, for a while forming the border; then it turned decisively into Jewel County. Almost at once, their luck changed. They came upon a repair robot mortaring up a pothole--a tin-plated mechanical man, bearing the company motto on his chest,

"We Lay Good and Gold Brick." On his shiny back it said, "Golden Brick Company, Jewel City and County."

"Just what we need," Dorothy decided, producing an electronic bug, shaped like a spider. Amy watched in amazement as the bug scurried across the gold bricks, then raced up the robot's tin-plated leg and body. As soon as the spider clamped itself to the robot's head, the brick layer froze in midmotion.

"These repair robots don't have much of a brain," Dorothy explained. "Hop aboard. He will do whatever we want."

Dorothy had the robot dump his bricks and pick them up instead. "So long as that bug stays attached, the robot will obey both you and me. Try it out."

Amy told the mechanical man to head west, and he did, carrying them easily over the yellow bricks. This was the way to travel, with no effort, sitting on the robot's shoulder, able to see all around, with her feet resting in his metal hand. Though the robot could not outrun the Wheelers, they could easily spot them coming. Amy asked, "What if Wheelers are waiting for us at Jewel City?"

"Wheelers are at their worst at night." Dorothy had no fear in the dark, being able to gather firewood and count stars long after Amy gave up.

They ran into trouble well before dusk. As the sun dipped into the southwest, a silver disk separated from

the corona and started sweeping the sky between them and Jewel City. Dorothy ordered the robot off the road, headed north fast and hard, saying, "That UFO is hunting us. It came right out of the sun to sweep the road. We dare not approach until dark." Not content just to hide, Dorothy told the mechanical man to keep going north toward Webber, up by the Pawnee Nation. "Those disks see a long way, and tell the Bushwhackers where to search." Amy believed it. Bushwhackers had been on to her faster than she ever thought possible. As the sun set behind them, they kept on going, crossing the White Rock fork of the Republican, and skirting Webber in the dark. Amy worried aloud, saying, "There are

nothing but Pawnee up here."

"That's why we are going through in the dark," Dorothy explained. "It's virgin sacrifice season."

"Don't have to tell me," Amy whispered back. The Pawnee habit of sacrificing stray virgins to the Morning Star was the only drawback of an otherwise friendly and hospitable people. "What's beyond the Pawnee?"

This was a question Amy had never thought to ask before. Pawnee to the north, Cheyenne to the west, and Ottawas to the south, those were the limits of her world--heard of, but hardly ever seen. All Dorothy said was, "You'll see."

And Amy did. Without much warning,

the open prairie and creekbed farmlands favored by Pawnee and Ottawas turned into sandy desert, followed by fenced wheatfields shining in the moonlight, backed by stands of corn.

She had thought that beyond the Pawnee there could only be more Indians. Instead it looked like home.

"Where are we?"

"This is Mitchell County. We are still headed north, aiming to cross the Solomon, west of Beloit." Amy could tell they were headed north, aimed smack at the Little Dipper, but the rest made no sense. Mitchell County was south of Jewel City. Beloit was just about even with her home, only one county over. "How could we get here by

heading north?"

Dorothy sighed. "Here's where it gets hard. You're not living on Earth. Not even close."

"Not Earth?" Where else could she be?

"Brace yourself," Dorothy advised. "Your world is not even a planet, it's a habitat, a spinning torus about a hundred miles across, orbiting in a dead system. Everything looks flat to you because of gravity control and 3V effects. North just means moving around the inner surface of the torus counter-clockwise." Amy stared at Dorothy in disbelief, but the little girl in gingham just said, "Get used to it. Every world is finite. Yours is just smaller than most, and turned in on

itself, like an overgrown doughnut. North is counter-clockwise, south is clockwise, east is spinward, and west is anti-spinward. If you go straight in any direction, you will come back to where you started."

Apparently. Amy still could not believe it.

"Same is true in the big universe outside," Dorothy told her, "discounting relativity effects. Ottawas and Pawnee have known this for a long time, but settled folk tend to hide it from the kids." Proof of this outrageous claim came when they crossed the Solomon west of Beloit, and Amy recognized the big covered bridge, having been there before. Soon they were back in Jewel

County, and she could see Jewel City sparkling in the distance. Just to the north of them was the yellow brick road that they had left many miles to the south.

Dorothy weighed their chances of making the rendezvous. "This is the area they searched yesterday afternoon. They found nothing, so it should be safe to enter, especially from the south. I've programmed the pickup point into this robot, so whatever happens, try to stay with him." With nowhere else to go, Amy nodded vigorously. Supported by the swift, strong metal man, she felt invulnerable. From what Dorothy said, there was a huge wide cosmos beyond the narrow limits of her world. This was her best chance of getting there. If she

did not go with Dorothy, she might as well give herself to the Bushwhackers.

Before they even got to the yellow brick road, Amy saw lights blinking to the east, between them and Jewel City. Dorothy told the metal man to put them down, saying, "We should go on foot from here. It'll attract less attention."

"What about him?" Amy had grown fond of the robot.

Dorothy smiled at her concern, saying, "I'm leaving the bug on him, just in case. Hopefully we're home free."

"Home" and "free" were two words Amy never put together, but Dorothy was full of such odd sayings. As they approached the road, Dorothy whispered for silence. "Pickup is now, two hundred

meters north of the road. If you lose me, just keep heading for the Little Dipper." Amy nodded. Follow the Drinking Gourd. Holding onto Dorothy's hand, she crept up to the road. Dawn glowed faintly in the east, beyond the lights of Jewel City, but by now the moon had set, leaving only starlight to the north. Amy did not see the road until she stumbled hard on an invisible brick.

"Shit!" Dorothy hissed. "We've been seen."

By whom? Amy peered about, nursing her hurt toe, seeing nothing. Dorothy shoved her back off the road, saying, "Run."

Run where? Suddenly, stabbing bright lights flashed in her eyes, blinding her

even more. Unable to see, she fell to her knees, holding her hat. Dorothy stepped between her and the glaring lights, a small dark blur.

Wheels whined in the dark, and the lights leaped forward, flashing down the road toward Dorothy. Amy wanted to scream, but did not dare, as the lights sped past and Dorothy disappeared. Blinded again, Amy stared into darkness, still on her knees, listening for Wheelers. Nothing. Amy could not hear any Wheelers, or see the lights of Jewel City. She wanted to call out to Dorothy, but it would do no good.

Suddenly, strong hands seized her, lifting her up. She struggled against the merciless grip, expecting to hear a

triumphant Bushwhacker yell. But the hands holding her were cold tin-plated metal. It was the robot, and he began to run with her, across the yellow brick road and on into the night. Cowardly Lion

Dawn found Amy sitting in a cold wheatfield, miserable and alone, with the silent robot at her side. Tall fluffy clouds dotted the bright 3V sky. Pickup, whatever that meant, had not happened. Instead she had lost Dorothy, the best friend she ever had. Practically her only friend. Sure Dorothy was weird, but no weirder than tutoring her seventh-grade step-mom, or having Dot call her "Aunt Em." Given her family, anyone Amy got to know was sure to be strange.

Despite Dorothy's genetic deformity, the Munchkin was the bravest, smartest person Amy had ever known. The only one to say, "Look girl, this is totally nuts. We're getting you out of here." Now she was going nowhere. Whoever was coming for Dorothy, did not come for her--leaving Amy with no notion what to do next. Her big, shining, tin-plated robot was strong, fast, tireless, and obedient, but unable to offer suggestions. Worming advice out of the metal man got answers like:

**PLEASE REPHRASE
QUESTION**

Or maybe:

SPECIFY POINT-SECOND

And repeatedly:

VOID DATA FIELD

If he only had a brain. Taking a drink from her waterbag, Amy noted it would need to be filled. Not so easy this far from the Solomon, where creeks were few and dry.

Deciding to pee, she got up and walked around behind the metal man, going a good ways into the wheat. Sure, he was just a machine that saw and talked, but it made her feel better. Pulling down her scarecrow pants, she squatted in the wheat, wondering what to

do next.

Nothing came to mind. As Amy finished, and pulled up her pants, she was blindsided by a tawny blur that shot out of the wheat stalks, knocking her off her feet.

Clawed hands seized her, one covering her mouth, the other pressing her into the wheat. Something heavy and hairy had landed on top of her, holding her down and hissing in her ear, "Stop thrashing and squealing. You're going to give us away."

Us? What did this beast mean? Though it had hands and fingers, the thing holding her most resembled a man-sized panther, with tan fur and a slight lisp. He whispered, "Promise not to

scream, and I will take my hand away."

She nodded vigorously, and his hand relaxed. Amy breathed out, then turned to look at her attacker. Seeing a tawny, yellow-eyed cat face, with white saber-like canines inches from her throat, Amy shrieked.

His hand cut off her cry. "You promised," he hissed. "Screaming will just bring Bushwhackers." Neither of them wanted that. Amy nodded again, and he relaxed his grip. She asked, "Who are you?"

"Call me Leo," the big cat suggested, "a lot of humans do."

"What are you?"

"Never seen a SuperCat?" Leo sounded sorry for her. "We're a genetic

improvement on humanity, faster, stronger, smarter, and fiercer, created centuries back from human and big cat DNA, to tackle superhuman tasks."

So far, all Leo had tackled was her, but he was rigged for trouble, wearing battle-armor, and a string of gas grenades that dug into Amy's side. She was also getting her first close-up look at the butt of a military-style stinger, tucked into the SuperCat's furry armpit. Leo's sly saber-toothed smile widened.

"My current task is simple. Have you seen a small dark-haired female in a blue dress? I fear she is in distress."

"Maybe." Leo was no Bushwhacker. Or Wheeler. This heavily armed, gene-spliced catman fairly screamed "off-

world." Animals in Cloud County usually knew their place. Only parrots talked, and even the worst chicken-thief coyotes stole about unarmed.

"My orders are to rescue her," Leo explained. "She is Peace Corps, assigned to this world." Peace Corps. Another word adults only whispered. Besides runaway girls, Bushwhackers were on the lookout for Peace Corps spies, who were the worst sort of Jayhawkers, fiends that came in the night to steal naughty girls like Amy. What they did with them, heaven only knew. Dorothy hardly fit the image. Smiling slyly, the SuperCat cocked an eye at her. "Tell me you never heard of the Peace Corps?"

"I have heard of them." She just did not know who they were.

"Good." Leo got up, setting Amy back on her feet. "'Cause they are the only folks within a billion light-years who give a hoot about your naked-monkey ass. So you need to help me." Amy finished pulling up her pants, telling her attacker, "You didn't have to jump me while I was peeing." Leo laughed, standing up on his hind legs. "Second best time to hit an awake human. I didn't want to tackle your robot too. That was the only time you parted from him."

"Right." Good thing she had already peed. It was nice to know that he feared the robot, which was programmed to defend humans from animal attack.

Her captor patted chaff off her pants, asking, "So have you seen Dorothy?"

"Wheelers took her." Amy pointed back toward the yellow brick road. "Heading west."

"Probably taking her back to Wheeler," Leo decided.

"What will happen to her?" By now she was horribly worried for Dorothy. Wheeler sounded worse than the Concordia Academy for Reluctant Virgins.

Furry shoulders shrugged. "Do I look like a Wheeler?"

Not a lot. "So what will you do?"

"Report that she did not make pickup."

Leo was beginning to sound like the robot. Amy scooped up her hat, saying,

"I'm going to find her."

"In Wheeler?" Leo laughed aloud.

Wherever. Two days away from home, with nothing but her scarecrow clothes, and a next to useless robot, Amy knew what to do. Dorothy needed to be saved. Her whole life turned on that wish-upon-a-star. Going back now would be as good as suicide.

"This is nonsense," Leo declared, as she stalked over to the tin man, telling him to pick her up. The robot hoisted her onto its shoulder.

"What will you do for me?" Amy asked. "If I give up on Dorothy, what do I get?" Leo shrugged again. "Nothing."

Exactly. Leo meant to abandon her, as soon as she ceased to be useful. Dorothy

deserved better than that. Amy told the robot to take her to the yellow brick road, and head west. Rolling his eyes, Leo trotted after her, saying, "You're going the wrong way." Amy shot back. "Why do you care?"

"I don't," Leo assured her. "But I cannot allow you to get caught. You know too much." Of course. So long as it was just Dorothy, he didn't care. But she had seen Leo, and the SuperCat could not afford to let Bushwhackers beat the truth out of her--then come looking for him. Hardly caring about humans, Leo was very careful with his own furry skin.

Leo told her, "Wheelers have to use the yellow brick road, going west to

Wheeler. That's the long way around the torus. We can go the short way, through the Kickapoos to Cheyenne country, getting to Wheeler before they arrive."

Head the wrong way and get there first. Why was she the only one who thought that sounded wrong?

"And you're coming with me?"

"Reluctantly," Leo admitted. He could not coerce her so long as she sat atop her tin-plated protector. So they turned about, heading for Kickapoo Country, bypassing Jewel City, Kackley, Norway, and Agenda. When the yellow brick road ended, Leo led her through the badlands in broad daylight, without so much as seeing a Kickapoo. Leo was not lying about his SuperCat abilities. Only the

tireless tin man let Amy keep up.

In a few hours they had come back around, and were in Cheyenne County, crossing the south fork of the Republican, which should have been miles behind them. On the far bank, Amy saw the yellow brick road rising out of the stream. She had found the west end of the road by heading east, making her world very much smaller than she ever imagined.

Leo led her past Wheeler, to a lonely stretch of the yellow brick road west of Bird City, so close Amy glimpsed the half-mile tall aviary tower. She would have liked to get a closer look, but feared being spotted by Birdmen, who were little better than flying

Bushwhackers. By now she was a posted runaway bride, with a generous reward for her capture, payable in Concordia. At a shady spot out of sight of the tower, she and Leo settled down to watch the road. Curious about the wider universe, Amy asked the SuperCat, "Where do you come from?"

"From a world far, far away," Leo replied airily.

"Why?"

"Excellent question, especially when I am about to take on a pack of Wheelers, aided by a scarecrow in drag." Leo clearly did not like their chances, and resented her putting him here. "This is what I do. Every so often, the Peace Corps must be backed by the sure and

precise use of force. Something humans are pretty horrible at."

Hard to argue there. All the force in Cloud County, from Bushwhackers to just plain folks, were aimed at making her life hell--for no good reason that Amy could see.

This deep in Cheyenne County, there was scant traffic on the yellow brick road, so when a dust cloud appeared, Amy knew it would be Wheelers. Leo looked intently down the road, finally saying, "She's with them."

"How can you tell?" All Amy could see was dots beneath the dust cloud. Leo tapped the corner of his eye. "2000x1 night lenses. I can see her yellow bows." No wonder Dorothy could find her way

in the dark. Amy held her breath, watching the dust cloud get bigger. Looking away for a moment, she saw that Leo had vanished, along with the robot. Just like the cowardly lion to leave her all alone.

By now the Wheelers were near enough for her to see Dorothy, strapped in a side-car. As the Wheelers drew abreast of her, gas grenades went off along the yellow brick road. Sleep gas billowed up on both sides of the Wheelers, who lost control, skidding and crashing into one another. Dorothy's side-car kept her motorcycle stable, and it came roaring out of the white gas cloud, with Dorothy asleep, and the tin man at the controls.

Very neatly done. Leo rose out of the long grass, never having gotten near the wrecked Wheelers. The robot brought the cycle to a stop in front of Amy, with Dorothy still slumped in the side-car. Leo sauntered over and administered an antidote.

Dorothy's eyes flipped open, and the girl in blue gingham stared up at the 3V sky, asking, "Where am I?" Amy knelt down to take her hand. "Just west of Bird City, on the way to Wheeler." That shocked Dorothy. "What the hell am I doing here?"

"It will take too long to tell," Leo objected. "We've missed pickup, and must make for Mount Sunflower."

Dorothy grimaced. "That bad?"

"Worse," the SuperCat assured her, helping Dorothy mount the robot. Amy climbed up onto the other shoulder, and they headed for Mount Sunflower, leaving unconscious Wheelers littering the yellow brick road.

South of Wheeler, rolling plains rose toward mile-high Mount Sunflower. They crossed the Little Beaver and the North Fork of the Smoky Hill, seeing nothing but Cheyenne lodges and clumps of buffalo. Ominous lightning strikes to the north were followed by distant rolling thunder, on an otherwise sunny day. Clearly tornado weather.

Beyond the North Smoky, Dorothy spotted something behind them. "UFO to the north." Leo glumly agreed, but it was

twenty minutes before Amy made out a blue-white spark near the northern horizon, backed by tall spiked clouds and a darkening sky. Feeling the breeze stirring, and pressure dropping, Amy warned, "There's a tornado coming."

"Do tell?" Leo had come to the same conclusion.

Amy asked Dorothy, "What happens when we get to Mount Sunflower?" Her Munchkin friend smiled, saying, "The summit has an emergency exit to the habitat--where no one would likely stumble on it." Despite all Amy had seen, it was amazing to think that her world was so tiny that it had hidden exits into the real cosmos.

As the land rose toward Mount

Sunflower, rain fell, just a sprinkling at first, followed by hail--stinging pea-sized balls of ice--that grew to frosty marbles, battering at Amy's scarecrow hat. Wind kicked up, whipping the ice about, and Amy could see the clouds over Mount Sunflower circling in a familiar pattern. Holding hard to her hat, she fought the mounting suction. Hail turned to horizontal rain, lashing at their faces, then suddenly ceasing as they entered the eye of the cyclone. Amy clung to the robot's shoulder, while Dorothy ordered the tin-plated man to run faster. Looking straight up, Amy could see a funnel cloud forming directly overhead, a great gray whirlpool, spinning faster and rising higher.

At the summit of Mount Sunflower, debris rained down, twigs, branches, clods of mud, roof nails and barn shingles. Howling winds tore at Amy's hold on the robot. Her straw hat flew off. A few more seconds, and the swirling funnel of grit and pebbles would pull her fingers free, and whirl her away as well. Amy's whole world had turned on her--Wheelers, UFOs, Birdmen, Bushwhackers, and now a twister.

Leo knelt and grabbed a patch of ground, yanking it up, revealing a pressure lock. As he did, the tornado touched down, pulling Leo off his feet, lifting the ground up with him. Holding grimly to the latch, Leo bellowed for

help, telling the robot, "Take us down, damn you." Only the robot had the weight to resist the twister. Diving into the hole, with Amy and Dorothy clinging to his back, the tin man grabbed Leo as he fell past, hauling the SuperCat in with them. "Close the lock," roared Leo, clawing at the lock ladder as tornado winds tried to suck them back out. "Shut it, now!" Fighting tremendous suction, the lock mechanism struggled to obey. Then the robot threw his full weight on the hatch, dragging it closed. Howling ceased, and the wind stopped. Silence filled the small metal airlock. Amy saw they were all there, looking wet and bedraggled--Dorothy, Leo, and the tin man, covered with dirt and twigs, but

safe for the moment. Her scarecrow clothes were totally soaked.

Pressure suits hung from the lock walls, and there was another hatch in the chamber floor. Dorothy showed her how to choose the right-sized suit, and how to seal it tight. Leo had more trouble suiting up than she did.

Then Amy hugged the tin man, saying good-bye to the robot, who responded with a pleasant:

NULL PROGRAM

"I'll remember you too," Amy promised the metal man. Dorothy retrieved her bug, then Leo emptied the lock and threw back the bottom hatch.

Amy stared down the incredibly deep shaft beneath, startled to see stars at the far end. Literally the end of the world. Cool air from the suit recycler chilled the nape of her neck. She asked Dorothy over the suit comlink, "How do we get down?"

"Easy," Leo declared, giving her a shove. "Relax and try not to struggle." Toppling into the shaft, Amy fell right out of the 1-g field, into a slowly accelerating descent. For the first time in her life, she felt the real tug of the cosmos, as smooth shaft walls slid by, gaining speed, going faster and faster.

Then the walls vanished, and she went flying out into the starry void, a tiny self-contained satellite in her vacuum suit.

Glancing back, she saw the huge outer hull of the habitat, a gray, faceless wall, slowly receding from her. Dorothy and Leo appeared, two figures in silver suits, shooting out of the gray wall. Dorothy's suit began to broadcast:

MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY...

Why May Day? It was August. Maybe dates were different in space. Leo's voice cut in. "Saucer port opening."

Amy saw a bright slot appear in the huge gray wall. Three flat disks emerged from the slot.

"Saucers coming out," Leo announced. "Three of them!" MAYDAY, MAYDAY...

Amy watched the disks grow larger, heading right for them. Close up, they

did look like pairs of saucers, one piled upside down atop the other.

Behind her, Dorothy called out, "Here comes the *Jackdaw*." Silently, a spark separated from the stars, moving closer, and growing in size, becoming a mini-starship, a nuclear-armed Navy corvette.

Glancing back at the saucers, Amy saw that gaping ports had opened on the saucer bottoms. All set to scoop them up.

"Hellhounds loosed!" Leo shouted, as three smaller sparks separated from the *Jackdaw*. The effect on the saucers was miraculous. Instantly they closed their ports and sped away, firing off smaller decoys to confuse the missiles.

Not at all fooled, the Hellhounds

streaked by, going straight after the fleeing saucers. Which left the three of them floating alone in space.

Amy watched the *Jackdaw* expand into a long cylindrical ramscoop, with an arsenal of smart-nukes, and minimal crew quarters. Operating on gravity drive, the *Jackdaw* swept them up into the ramscoop, where automated grapples reeled them in.

Crew members helped Amy out of her suit and gave her ship's coveralls to replace her sodden scarecrow clothes. Dorothy helped her change into the strange, smooth, zip-sealing fabric. Now nothing of her world remained. Viewscreens showed the world she had left behind, looking like a great gray

donut, hanging amid incredibly distant stars. Hard to believe that everything she knew was wrapped up inside. She asked Dorothy, "What will happen to me?"

"Hard to say." Dorothy sympathized with her dilemma. "But you can stay with me until you make up your mind."

"With you?" That sounded wonderful.

"I have a place in Kansas system," Dorothy explained. "Which is where we're headed. Eventually." Right now they were headed nowhere. *Jackdaw* was in close orbit around the habitat, keeping watch on her world. Amy shook her head, admitting, "I don't understand any of this."

"Few folks do," Dorothy agreed. "Your world is a stolen habitat stashed

in a dead system. Navy intelligence thinks it's a nest of slavers, and that's why *Jackdaw* keeps watch on the system. But they had no proof, so they asked for a Peace Corps investigation."

"That's you?" Apparently peace and war went hand-in-hand.

"Exactly. I was supposed to take a closer look, and try to get evidence. DNA samples, that sort of thing."

"Like when I spit in that tube?"

Dorothy nodded. "You are related to five known slavers, either killed or DNA-identified--men who raided and kidnapped for profit." And who dealt in gene-altered oddities like Dorothy. "Two cousins, a paternal uncle, and both your grandfathers."

Father always said that before he "bought the farm" he had lived off-world; now she knew what he had been doing. And why family arguments never fazed him, so long as they were not settled with a blaster. Dorothy took her hand, a strangely parental gesture from someone a head shorter, saying, "You are living proof that this is a slaver haven, where retired slavers go to raise sons for ship's crews, and girls to pass around and enjoy."

It was fairly horrific to hear your world reduced to those terms, but this all started with her running away.

"What will happen now?"

"Maybe nothing. In Kansas system there are folks who say that what

happens out here is not our business." Dorothy did not think that way, having been saved from a slaver creche herself. "These are mostly retired slavers, absolutely bent on avoiding the law. Why not let them live out their golden years in peace? Civilized worlds only act when our own interests are at stake--that's what separates us from the barbarians."

Dorothy sounded sarcastic. Amy just stared at her world, orbiting through the void, all turned in on itself. Mom and Dad, Tuck and Nathan, Lilith, Delilah and Dot, all lived in there, along with everyone that Amy had ever known, everything she had ever seen before she turned thirteen. Hard to believe it. All

Amy knew for sure was that one day she was coming back for Dot.