

Never Wilder

“What do you get when you cross a Hemogoblin with an Aussuary?” Chaddis asked his sister Rillayn as soon as he dismounted. Talking while pedaling his bare-bones bike was impossible now that the road was nothing more than a scarred gash in the blackened hillside.

“I’ve no idea.” Instead of giving the kickstand a tap with her worn boot, Rillayn permitted the ancient bike, twin to her brother’s, to rest against her hip. Once upon a distant time she might have been a farm girl permitting herself to enjoy contact with a live beast, a goat or perhaps a sheep or miniature pony, but of course none of these existed outside of preserved vials of DNA these days. “What?”

“A bloody bag of bones that can fly underground.” Chaddis looked hopefully into his sister’s sad brown eyes. “I’m satirizing the experiments that *They* conduct on human blood cells. You’re supposed to laugh.”

Rillayn stared up at the setting sun through the black, twisted branches of the single tree left on the blasted landscape. “We’d better go. It’s getting late.”

“Wait.” Chaddis held up his palm with natural authority, forgetting that he didn’t have any. Once the presumptive heir to the throne, he was now just another physical body the invaders would use as cannon fodder in the next inevitable war between worlds. “I apologize. Of course it was over your head.”

Rillayn sighed. Although she was younger in years, she often felt older and wiser than Chaddis in every other way. In fact, she felt old as time. “I didn’t laugh because everything *They* do is wicked. *They* murdered our parents. *They* say our people are cowards. *They* say might is

Nancy Brewka-Clark

right.” Rillayn rubbed her forehead in a futile attempt to erase all the deadly insults stored there.

“*They* want people to forget what kindness is.”

“People can’t forget if we keep reminding them.”

Rillayn shook her head. “You know as well as I that if we ever mention our parents again, *They* will kill us too.”

“That’s why I’ve come up with an original creature capable of stirring everybody’s imagination. This creature will be so clever, so brave, so ingenious that people of all ages will rally to its side.”

“Another mutant,” Rillayn said.

“Not all mutants are bad,” Chaddis responded. “Look at the Hemogoblin. Cheerful little creature, right?”

“But your mutant can’t be called an ossuary,” Rillayn said. “An ossuary isn’t a living creature. Ossuaries are tombs for bones.”

“Not if you spell it with an ‘a’ and a ‘u’ and not an ‘o.’ It’s a kind of pun, an aural pun. Aural-with-an-A-and-a-U as opposed to Oral-with-an-O. Which means you can hear a word and think one thing when it can mean quite another.”

“An oral pun,” Rillayn said, “by definition, has to be spoken.”

“Not ‘oral.’” Chaddis smote his forehead. “Listen to me. I’m saying ‘aural.’”

“You’re just repeating yourself,” Rillayn sighed.

“I am not repeating myself. I am saying ‘aural,’ which means to hear something. You are saying ‘oral,’ which means to give voice to something.”

“But if you didn’t say it aloud, I couldn’t hear it,” Rillayn reasoned.

Nancy Brewka-Clark

“Listen to me. Oral can be spelled with an ‘au’ or an ‘o.’ O-R-A-L means spoken. A-U-R-A-L means heard.”

“You could have just said they were homophones,” she said.

Chaddis clenched his teeth, counted to ten, and smiled. “We’ll call it an Aussuary. With an A and a U.”

“But you said earlier that this Aussuary-with-an-A-and-a-U as opposed to an Ossuary-with-an-O must be able to fly underground. The question is, how? Does it make tunnels, like an earthworm?”

“Precisely,” Chaddis said, although he really hadn’t worked out all the technicalities yet. “It has displacement powers that move aside the earth the way the waters move aside for a boat and the air splits apart for an airship.”

“So, it’s basically a gigantic drill,” Rillayn said thoughtfully.

“In a manner of speaking,” Chaddis frowned. “What it isn’t, though, is a weapon of mass destruction.” His face cleared. “In fact, it will be a shining symbol of world peace, rather like a dove.”

“But it isn’t just a bird either, is it?” Rillayn said. “It’s half Hemogoblin. We can call it an Aussogoblin. A-U-S-S-O-G-O-B-L-I-N.”

“Aussogoblin it is. Or would be, if it existed.” Chaddis took her hand. “We’ve got to go back before we’re missed.”

Hunching over their handlebars, the two of them set off slowly over the rubble. Neither of them noticed one particularly long twig turning to follow their descent.

Nancy Brewka-Clark

“Stupid creatures.” Major Particular Sueby Huftt swiveled away from the screen, blank now. Weighing every word the two young traitors had spoken, she stared out the window at the twilight streets. Powerful klieg lights eternally circled the land from fleets of drones. The smog was still so dense the brutal spotlights were diluted to weak lemony rays. Only a handful of pedestrians were going about the dreary business of survival in an occupied land. “The time has come—” one of her steel-coated fingernails ticked against the desktop like a time bomb—“to deal with the brats.”

From behind the screen a gray paw shot out.

“Ah, there you are, Smokescreen. Come to Mama.” When the paw vanished, she swiveled back to face her second-in-command, Major General Occupied Vert. “Bring them to me. And make certain they have their bicycles with them.”

“Yes, Major Particular Huftt.” With a click of his heels, her underling marched to the door. She watched him with narrowed eyes, running an internal search through the digitized power chip embedded in her left frontal lobe for the perfect disciplinary measures.

“Ah, yes. Perfect.” Smiling at the inner image, Major Particular Huftt tapped her communication wand. “Warden Julonork, prepare the smallest cell in the largest penitentiary for two especially recalcitrant natives. And see to it there’s a fresh supply of old rope.” An avid student of ancient history on Earth, especially exotic punishments, she weighed the exciting possibilities. “Also, roll in one of those tumbler drums with a crank. And make certain the drum is filled with rocks.”

“All will be done instantly,” the warden intoned. “Any preference as to rocks, Major Particular?”

“Not too small,” she said thoughtfully, “and exceedingly heavy. No lava.”

Disconnecting, she tapped the tabletop once more. “Who’s a naughty boy? Who’s being a stubborn little kitty?” From around the corner of the screen, a face shaped like the rear end of one of those extinct farm creatures and covered in short, thick fur peered at her with glowing citrine eyes. “Come sit on Mama’s lap, sweetheart.”

Daintily the huge cat padded out to obey his mistress, sprawling across her thighs like a hairy sphinx. At the sharp triple knock repeated three times, Major Particular snapped, “Enter,” and leapt to her feet, earning a sharp retributive hiss from the cat as he thudded flat-eared to the floor.

Her underling shoved Rillayn and Chaddis, each of them wheeling a bike much the worse for wear, into the room before him. “Major Particular Huftt, may I present—”

“I know who they are.” She steepled her fingers. “Here’s a piece of advice. The next time the two of you share your treasonous little vision of world peace, don’t chat beneath a security camera.”

She looked over their heads at her second-in-command. “I trust they know who I am.” Before he could answer, she shouted, “DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?”

“You killed my father,” Chaddis replied, holding his head high. “And my mother.”

“And now I suppose you’re going to kill us, too,” Rillayn said with such composure that the major particular eyed her with open loathing and concealed admiration in equal measure. “Oh, I don’t mean you personally. You might ruin your manicure.”

In a blink the admiration evaporated, leaving only a hatred as thick and black and viscous as tar. “Foolish girl. Why would I want to kill you outright?” Major Particular Huftt grinned, showing teeth as narrow and pointed as a rat’s. “That’s far too easy. I want to see you bleed from a thousand little cuts, as the poets say.” Her fist smashed the desk. “Hemoglobin, not

Nancy Brewka-Clark

Hemogoblins, if you get my drift. As for you, young Chaddis, Aussogoblin, indeed. Have you ever heard of Oscar Wilde and his punishment?"

"I have never heard of Oscar Wilde," Chaddis said. "Therefore I would hardly know why he was being punished."

"You uncultured little boor." With a jerk of her head, she snapped, "Take them away, Julonork. Penitentiary Thirty-two." As they started to wheel out their bicycles, she snarled, "Are you insane? Leave those rattletrap contraptions here. They're good for nothing but scrap metal."

"One-hundred-and-forty-one," Chaddis moaned as the turn of the crank set off the bell. Although the exercise had absolutely no useful purpose other than to occupy his every waking minute, Chaddis had to sing out each turn or *They* would add more rocks to make cranking harder. He still didn't know who Oscar Wilde was or what he'd done, but the punishment was vile. Bringing the handle up to his perspiring face, he shouted hoarsely over the din of the rocks already rattling around inside the drum, "One-hundred-and-forty-two."

Crouching in the corner over a fresh delivery of frayed rope, Rillayn grabbed a length and began to pick it apart slowly with bleeding fingers. Although she'd never heard of Oscar Wilde either, she actually knew the origins of her punishment. In olden times it was inflicted on workhouse orphans, pirate captives and inmates of lunatic asylums. Not daring to lift her head, she whispered, "It isn't your fault, rope, but I do hate you."

"I can't blame you," a tiny voice whispered back.

Although she whispered her hatred to the hemp at random several times a day, never before had it talked back. "Oh, no," she whispered, dabbing away a tear to leave a diluted pink

Nancy Brewka-Clark

trickle in its wake. “It was bad enough having to eat rock salt and kale and sleep on a mattress stuffed with old tennis shoes. Now I’ve gone mad.”

“One-hundred-and-forty-six,” Chaddis shrieked over the rumble of the drum.

“Chaddis,” Rillayn cried, “I’ve gone—ouch.” Flinging down the length of rope, she screamed, “You bit me.”

“No talking, Number Two,” the voice from the overhead speaker barked. “Another word, and Number One will be punished with the addition of ten more rocks.”

Giving his sister a wild-eyed look, Chaddis howled, “One-hundred-and-forty-nine.”

“Princess Rillayn, down here.”

A figure so miniscule it was almost invisible crawled out from beneath the length of discarded rope. Standing upright on black legs no thicker than an eyelash, it put its fists on its tiny red hips and waggled two hair-like antennae at her. “Hematocritter T. Hemogoblin at your service.”

“Service?” she whispered without moving her lips.

With a bow, the little creature said, “I’ve come to rescue you. I’m reconnoitering. I’ll be back with reinforcements.” And with that, it rolled all the way up the stone wall like a tiny bead of gravity-defying blood, slipped out the air vent slit, and vanished.

During their thirteen-minute lunch break, a dismal meal consisting of raw chopped turnip sprinkled over boiled squid tentacles and a cup of glowing tap water, Rillayn whispered, “A Hemogoblin came by just now.”

Chaddis stopped chewing.

“We’re going to be rescued,” she breathed.

Nancy Brewka-Clark

The cell door, a massive sheet of steel with a one-way peephole in it, burst open. “Back to work, brats.” The guard snatched away their plates and cups, seized the pile of freshly unraveled rope filaments, noted the number of times the drum had been tumbled by peering at the counting screen to make certain that Chaddis had been accurate in his oral as well as aural count, and kicked the door shut behind him.

Pretending to pull up his socks, Chaddis mumbled, “When?”

When he looked up, Rillayn’s eyes were shining with hope. “I’ve no idea.”

“One,” Chaddis shouted hoarsely as he began the day’s idiotic work. “Two. Three.”

Staring at the fresh supply of old rope, Rillayn ran her hands over it frantically before biting her bottom lip to keep from crying aloud. Something terrible must have happened to Hematocritter T. Hemogoblin.

How many days, or weeks, or years, or eons had it been since the little creature made its rash promise?

Plucking the longest piece out of the pile, Rillayn started to pull it apart sullenly with scabby fingers. Dark thoughts gathered at the edges of her mind. She could weave a noose for herself and Chaddis, too. While her fingers worked numbly, she cast her eyes to the ceiling for the thousandth time. How could they hang themselves without so much as a light socket to cast a rope around?

Feeling an eye focused on her through the peephole, she promptly dropped her gaze to the floor.

Her heart jerked against her ribcage.

There was something moving just to the left of her foot.

Nancy Brewka-Clark

It was just a dot, but...

Fast as a lightning bolt, the dot turned into a hairline crack running the entire length of the floor. Instantly the floor began to crack apart from all directions, shattering like a gigantic eggshell. From far below, a faint rumbling grew louder, then louder still. The walls began to sway like a grass hut in a cyclone. A chunk of ceiling fell next to the drum.

Chaddis shouted, "Earthquake."

He fell flat on his face sheltering his head with his arms as the rumbling whined into high gear directly beneath his shaking body. An ear-shattering scream more terrifying than anything he'd ever heard ripped through the cell. "Rillayn, get down."

A furiously spinning object thrust up through the fractured floor between them. "Drill," Rillayn shrieked.

"No." Chaddis lifted his head but couldn't see her through the dust billowing around like a desert sandstorm "This is for real."

Up, up, the gigantic drill rose, splintering the air until it towered above them. Within a nanosecond its bullet-like steel body stopped spinning. Down, down the pointy head came. It flexed its tuberous neck as the plastic orbs of its bright black eyes fixed on them.

Click! Clack!

A giant pair of blades sprang apart as the creature scooped them up for all the world like a robin plucking two worms from the rubble. For a terrifying instant Rillayn and Chaddis dangled from the huge beak. Then the massive robotic monster tilted back its head. Down the two of them tumbled through the enormous windpipe to crash land in the creature's pitch-black but cushioned abdomen.

“Welcome,” the tiny voice of Hematocrit T. Hemogoblin shouted over the intercom, “to the Grand Opening of the world’s first Aussogoblin. Fasten your seat belts, please.”

“It’s magnificent,” Rillayn breathed, “But we need far more than one.”

“Did I mention,” The amplified voice squeaked, “that we will launch the rest of the fleet—all two hundred of them—at exactly eleven hundred hours?”

“Two hundred? All as big as this?” Chaddis shouted, clutching the armrests.

The amplifier vibrated with laughter. “This is your personal Aussogoblin, your majesties, the compact model, so to speak. The air force consists of models ten times this size, and one thousand times as powerful. The enemy will be reduced not just to rubble but to dust, which will then be vacuumed up and blasted into eternity.”

“I suppose that’s far enough,” Rillayn said.

“Just one thing,” Chaddis called. “Who is Oscar Wilde?”

Static filled the air. “Hang on.” After a moment, the Hemogoblin said, “According to the Endless Compendium he was a playwright and poet from the British Isles back in ancient times. He was attractive to and attracted by both sexes, i.e., male and female as defined by historical parameters, which was against the law in those times. He served a term of imprisonment with the peculiar punishment of having to turn a handle for no particular reason. His work made people laugh at their own society.”

“So, he was a subversive,” Rillayn whispered.

Chaddis nodded. “*They* never want people to laugh. Rillayn, do you think people will laugh when I’m on the throne?”

“Oh, yes,” Rillayn said. “Constantly.”

Nancy Brewka-Clark

““Our People Come First at Last.”” Looking up from the huge gray cat balanced on his knee, Chaddis was shocked to see Rillayn wrinkle her nose. “What’s wrong? Don’t you agree with the sentiment?”

“It’s a bit convoluted.” Rillayn shifted on her twin throne to allow Smokescreen to leap onto her lap from her brother’s. “Your Mr. Oscar Wilde said, ‘Always forgive your enemies—nothing annoys them so much.’ Does that inspire you?”

“Not really.” Chaddis rubbed his brow, already feeling the weight of the crown upon his head. “Our enemies have been vanquished. And I’d rather not remember Mr. Wilde, who certainly was never and shall never be mine.”

They sat pondering possible mottos while Smokescreen expressed himself in luxuriant purrs. Up against the throne room door were propped two ancient bicycles. How their Prime Minister Hematocritter T. Hemogoblin had wrested them away from the junk heap would be part and parcel of the new kingdom’s folklore.

“I’ve got it.” Chaddis sat bolt upright. ““Peace to Our People in Particular, the Planet in General, and Everything That May or May Not Lie Beyond Whether It Be Animal, Vegetable, Mineral or Other.””

Rillayn clapped her hands. “I can hear them laughing now.”

END