

As Luck Would Have It

By: Jamie Marchant

The trouble started this morning when I was making my way to back to my hovel. I was nearing my neighborhood when I heard the unmistakable m-m-m-r-r-o-o-w of a cat fight. Out of an alley shot a grey tabby chased by a large tom as dark as midnight. I'm not normally a suspicious person, and a black cat crossing my path wouldn't normally bother me, but in pursuing his rival this black cat twined himself around my legs, causing me to trip and slam my head into a three-foot high brick wall. Since I was already so close to the ground and the world was spinning, I deemed it appropriate to continue the rest of the way and lay still for a moment. At the time, I didn't realize the fall had torn my shirt, revealing a gold chain I had recently acquired.

"Are you alright, sir?" called a street urchin who'd been sleeping in the alley.

I groaned in response, certain I'd fractured my skull. Before I realized what was happening, little hands tugged at the chain, the clasp broke, and little feet took off running. I stumbled to my feet to see the child disappear around the corner. I'd scaled a five-story building and sneaked through a window into a lady's chamber to acquire that chain, risking arrest and hanging, and I wasn't going to let some street child steal it from me. Besides, I couldn't countenance theft in one so young.

I had two problems in my plan to apprehend the villain. One was the cut above my eyebrow, causing blood to flow into my right eye, and the second was the still-spinning world. You must take this into account and not blame me too heavily for what happened next. Gamedly, I took off in pursuit of the thieving scoundrel and rounded the corner. I did not see the ladder until it was too late to stop. Now, as I've said, I'm not normally a superstitious person, and I have run under many a ladder with impunity, but this time, because of the blood in my eye and my none-too-steady balance, I rammed my shoulder against one of the rungs, causing the ladder to topple and the workman using it to fall. I did my best to cushion his fall, seeing that he landed on top of me. Not only did this knock the air completely out of my lungs, but as I fell, my purse caught on the ladder and tore, scattering rings and other baubles.

The noise—the workman howling at the top of his lungs, as I might have been if I could catch a breath—drew a small crowd. “Well, well, well, what have we here,” a voice said, as the workman was helped off of me. “If it isn't young Phineus.”

To my horror, I discovered the voice belonged to Constable Rawlins. The good constable had been trying to apprehend me for some time, but when the world was not spinning and I could see out of both eyes, I was—and I can say this without boasting—the fastest runner in the city of Longston Beachidea. A hand grabbed me and hauled me roughly to my feet while I was still struggling to get air back into my lungs.

Believing my neck sufficiently long without having it stretched, I desperately scanned my surroundings for a way to extricate myself from my predicament. That was when I saw it. An owl flying in the daylight is the worse kind of luck and a sure death omen, but since I'm not a superstitious man, I didn't fear for myself. Instead, I pointed. “Hey, look, it's an owl.”

The owl conveniently hooted to confirm its identity. Fortunately, the crowd, especially

Constable Rawlins, was superstitious, and while they were busy making the sign against evil, I was able to wriggle free.

I never saw the hole until I was through it. Now, I'm not talking about a hole in the ground or any benign hole in a wall. I'm talking about a gaping hole in reality—a rip, if you will, in the space-time continuum. I know you are going to say: “How could you not see a ragged rift of absolute darkness and horror? These holes have been around for the last twenty years, virtually your entire life.” And yes, on two previous occasions I have had the misfortune to fall through such holes. But please take into account my diminished eyesight, the continued spinning of the world, and the pursuit of the angry constable.

With the proper application of magic, people have always been able to open a passage between Aracidia, my home realm, and Earth, Aracidia's technological sister realm, but it took a wizard of enormous power. For the last twenty years, however, holes have been randomly opening both here in Aracidia and on Earth, and people inadvertently crossing between realms has not been an uncommon occurrence, although believe me, it is dangerous and most unpleasant. It's estimated that one of every two people who enters a rift doesn't appear on the other side. What happens to them no one knows. Why these rifts in reality have started to occur is also a mystery. Some believe the use of nuclear weapons on Earth is responsible. Others think it was out of control, power-mad wizards here that did it. Or perhaps the two forces combined to disrupt the space-time continuum. I don't care why. I just know that falling through a hole hurt.

One minute I was barreling down the street, hoping to duck into a convenient alley and lose the constable, and the next I was having every atom in my body thrown about in ways atoms weren't supposed to be thrown. Then I was lying on my back, surrounded by a bunch of men in orange jumpsuits. Somehow I had landed straight in the middle of the Long Beach city jail. What

were the odds of that happening?

I've had the misfortune to end up in Long Beach twice before. The second occasion I fell through such holes, I spent time in the jail—all because of a misunderstanding, I assure you—before I was lucky enough to find a hole in the space-time continuum to take me back to Aracidia.

“Wow, man!” one of the prisoners said. “It's that dude from Aracidia.” At least I think that's what he said, my atoms still trying to resemble themselves.

I blinked and wiped the blood out of my eye. I noticed a rabbit's foot hanging from the zipper of another prisoner. As luck would have it, he also had a tattoo of a four-leaf clover on his wrist. While rabbit's feet and clovers are supposed to be signs of luck, this combination was certainly not lucky for me. You see, I recognized that tattoo. Its owner and I had had a slight misunderstanding. He seemed to be under the impression that I had stolen a gold ring he used to wear on his right hand while, I assure you, I had merely borrowed it to check the quality of the workmanship, which, actually, was very fine.

“Martin,” I said, using my most charming smile. “So nice to see you again.”

Martin smiled, but it wasn't a smile of friendly greeting. Instead, it was the same smile he had worn while beating me to a bloody pulp over the misunderstanding regarding the ring. I was contemplating whether Martin or Constable Rawlings was a bigger threat to me when the hole closed as abruptly as it had opened, trapping me in the prison yard. “I told you if I ever saw your face again I was going to break every bone in your body.”

I stumbled to my feet and noticed that Martin was surrounded by twelve of his friends. I quickly added this up and determined that made thirteen of them. Now, as I have said, I'm not normally a suspicious man, and the number thirteen usually meant no more to me than any other

number, but being outnumbered thirteen to one did seem a tad unlucky. “Ah, yes, I believe you did, but I assure you I had no intention of coming here. I didn’t notice the hole.”

Martin raised his eyebrows. “How could you miss seeing the hole?”

“Well . . . er . . . I was kind of being chased at the time.” I explained all about the cat, the street urchin, the ladder, and the constable who wanted to see me hang.

“What were you thinking?” said the tallest of Martin’s friends. “Everybody knows black cats and ladders are the worst kind of luck.”

Martin laughed. “Very bad luck for scrawny here.” He gave me a light push in the chest.

I looked around frantically for a prison guard, the only time in my life I’ve desired to see a representative of the law. But the guards were on the far side of the yard and had not noticed my arrival.

Tall pulled out a sharp piece of glass, and I realized it was a piece of a broken mirror. “I say we carve up his face.”

Now, as I have said, I’m not a superstitious man, but even a non-superstitious man will find his beauty marred by a broken mirror. “You said break every bone in my body. Nothing was said about carving up my face.” I objected, trying to back away.

As luck would have it, the broken mirror caught the sunlight and reflected it into the eyes of another group of prisoners—a gang of the Aryan Brotherhood. I should perhaps explain that my skin is none too light. Besides, I recognized the head Brother from my prior stint in the Long Beach city jail. His name was Justin, and we too had had a misunderstanding, my having made some remark about his parentage involving a dog and a baboon.

He signaled to the other members of the Brotherhood, and they too converged on me. I counted quickly and discovered there were also thirteen of them. I racked my brain for

something clever to say to avoid getting every bone in my body broken and my face carved like a pumpkin. The best I could think of was a joke about why the Nazi crossed the road that I didn't think either group would appreciate.

They stopped advancing about two feet from me. "Here's ours," said Martin, staring at the head Brother.

"You can have what's left of him when we're through with him," Justin said.

I put up a hand toward each of them. "Now, ladies, no need to fight over me." This may not have been the smartest thing to say because both men stopped glaring at each other and turned their full attention to me. But at that moment, I saw a penny lying face up at my feet. Now, I'm not normally a suspicious man, and I have left many a penny lie, but today I reached for it. At that exact moment, both men swung for me, but because of the penny, I was no longer there, and they hit each other instead.

An all-out brawl erupted, and I was able to crawl free of the fray with scarcely a bruise to show for it. While I was congratulating myself on my escape, I looked down and saw the crack in the concrete directly under my feet. Not knowing who my mother was, I was not much concerned with breaking my momma's back, but I noticed the crack start to widen and realized it was not an ordinary crack, but another rift in the space-time continuum. What are the odds of encountering two on the same day?

Before I could decide whether to jump aside or allow myself to fall through it, I was sucked into the fathomless void to have my atoms thrown about again. I nearly laughed in relief when I found myself on my back on the streets of my beloved Longston Beachidea.

Then I glanced to the side and saw a pair of boots. I looked up to find that they belonged to—you guessed it—Constable Rawlings.