

GALLOWACKS (EYE FOR AN I)

I slept well.

When I did stir the next morning, I had no intention of getting up right away. My eyes involuntarily cracked open though and any hope of further rest was dashed. For the second day in a row, I woke up to find that I was not alone. In fact, there were even more fiends in the room than there had been when I woke on the morning prior. The medallion was set on end on the nightstand again out of courtesy. Though I could not hear a word they were saying, it was very apparent that they were at it real hard. The crowd was very lively. Even Wee Markey Greene was animated, not much but unusually so for him. Cards and loci were strewn everywhere. More striking than any of that, however, were the number of beer cans that covered essentially every surface of the apartment. Admittedly, some of them were left from yesterday afternoon, but there had to be the better part of twelve cases in there now. It was clear that they had gotten a little too caught up in the campus energy and had been overtaken by some rowdy beer lust.

I reached over and tipped the medallion. Voices burst, tripping over each other to make themselves heard. I was about to shout for silence but stopped. It would have been a futile effort to try to bring them all to order. Instead I just lie there and listened for a moment, but there were too many of them chattering all at once and could make no sense of what they were up to. They were quite absorbed in whatever it was though. So much so that no one even noticed when I kicked off the covers only a few feet away.

I positioned myself behind fat old Wauldoo Francoi and looked over his shoulder. The floor was a mess. There were probably four decks being used for a game of about nine or ten spirits. As was the custom for card games in my apartment, bottle caps were being used as loci, and there had to be several hundred of them arranged and stacked on the mathematical mural painted on the floor. I couldn't help but notice that Tea Rainwell Po was among my uninvited guests. Seeing her was always a treat. It helped soften my resentment of this intrusion.

Matt Jenkins was the first to take note of me. "Nathan Allen Foster you're up! Right on time!" This was followed by a loud cry of excitement from the room in general. "Sleep O.K.? Any dreams?"

"Not a one. What on earth is going on here?"

"Oh, a little bit of bartering," he snickered. A couple others laughed with him.

Gallowacks. They were playing Gallowacks. It's a sort of trading game. You accumulate cards and loci based on the trades you make. Those game tokens give mathematical form to an intricate network of transactions. It's supposed to be played with a group. To get in on the action, all you need is something of value to trade. But, be warned, your game mates will assuredly identify things of value you may not have planned on offering.

A game of Gallowacks can get pretty intense. There are forty-five equations pertaining to lust, want and availability that can be applied alone or in various combinations to determine equivalence

in value of the commodities in play. These equations are at the heart of a game of Gallowacks. They give it its form. Particularly good games seem to take on a life of their own. And from what I could see from over Wauldoo Francoi's shoulder, this one was a fucking doozy.

A Gallowacks game is not typically planned. It just sort of starts up organically when conditions are right. It always starts with a trade proposal. If the terms of this trade become sufficiently complex, others will begin to be drawn in. Perhaps they might have some vested interest. Perhaps they want to add something to sweeten the original deal. Inevitably, the conditions of the trades start being worked out mathematically. As the snowball of bartering grows, the easier it becomes for an outsider to come along and put their own goods or services on the trading block.

I personally had played the game only a couple of times and was a very minor contributor at that. It looked like a lot of fun, but I never had much to offer up. Therefore, I had little bargaining leverage. And without bargaining leverage, you were more bystander than an active participant in Gallowacks.

I looked around at the floor again and trying to take in as much as I could. I didn't know the details, but I knew enough to see that there was some wicked heavy shit out there in play. "God damn!" was all I could think to say.

Conversations had resumed again at a much more reasonable level but not by everyone. Matt Jenkins was standing and grinning at me from the other side of the game. Edinexia Marden moved in my side and offered up her cheek for a peck. She was carrying Wee Markey Greene in her arms. He was watching me with interest. For some reason his lips, tongue and gums had turned jet black. I could only assume that it was the result of some queer deal he had made. Abel Knot Barrelbright approached me from my other side and clapped my back in greeting, smiling and nodding.

Fuck, I thought.

"Hey, sorry that we had to take the place over again like that last night," Matt Jenkins said.

"You had to?"

"Yeah, sorta. Listen to this. After I left you last night, I ran into Abel Gnot Barrelbright and Edinexia Marden out by campus. Edinexia Marden made a most excellent suggestion. Consider this; as it currently stands once you leave this apartment, this game space that we labored on and have so enjoyed is pretty much doomed. In all likelihood, your landlord is going to see it when he checks the place out and probably paint over it. I don't want that to happen. Let's be honest with ourselves, we did a really nice job on it."

"It would be a tragedy to see it so unceremoniously destroyed," Edinexia Marden added. "Wouldn't it be much better to try to preserve it and see that it continues to be put to use. You know how much Abel Gnot Barrelbright and I love to play down here. I've told you that a thousand times myself. Why don't we work it out so that I take over the apartment as a student? I will take care of it and you would even have access to it whenever you're back through this way."

“You’re so sure that I’m leaving?”

“Nathan Allan Foster,” she laughed. “Matt Jenkins has told us all about Grace. We know what you two have brewing. I think it’s very exciting. You’re not really going to stay in this funky old basement instead are you? Let me take it over for a while. It must mean something to you to know that it will be in good hands.”

“Well, honestly, I have to agree that that is a most excellent suggestion.”

“Sure,” said Matt Jenkins. “So, she pointed this out to me, and we began to discuss some of the logistical details. There’s some preparation work we should do to the floor before transferring it to her care. You can talk to the landlord and facilitate getting them together. She probably should make a plan for raising rent money. It sounds like there are a couple of moderate modifications that she would like to make to the floor which we could help with. So, we started talking about these things and voila, a Gallowacks game broke out. It seemed only appropriate that it was played out on the surface that represents the first game offering. Word got spread that there was a Gallowacks game starting up and the next thing you know, here we are.”

“Yes, here we are,” I said. “Chin deep in beer cans with a houseful. At least it’s probably safe to assume that we’re not going to church today.”

“Wrong! You better believe we’re going. Things are just wrapping up here. We’ll be done in a jiffy.”

“Yep. Just about done,” grinned Abel Gnot Barrelbright as he put his arm around me.

I sighed. “Well why don’t I stand clear and let you guys finish and perhaps clean up some of this fucking trash.”

“Hold on cowboy,” Matt Jenkins said. “It’s true the bazaar is closing down but not every shop has shuttered up. There are still a few very juicy items up for grabs.”

Tea Rainwell Po had wafted over in beside Matt Jenkins. She is very enjoyable to watch, as I’ve said. She appeared to be made of mist, a rolling cloud with a young, beautiful face. The face was her only distinguishing feature. The rest of her shifted around amorously occasionally suggesting the shape of hips or breasts, sometimes lean and lithe and other times round and generous. She had a fun kind of quiet flirtatiousness in her manner. She made me think of a manifestation of a wet dream.

Though to describe Tea Rainwell Po as a mist is a bit misleading. Mist implies vapor or moisture. She had neither of these. I don’t think her “body” has as much as a single atom’s worth of real matter. She floated very near his arm flashing her lovely smile alternately at him and me.

“In fact, I’m still trying to close up my big score,” Matt Jenkins said.

“What is it?”

“You wanna know?”

“That’s why I asked.”

“You’re gonna love it.”

“Right now, I think I hate it.”

“Season tickets to the Sox next year,” he said and did a little tap dance on his hooves.

“Really!” I gasped/laughed.

“Totally good ones too.”

“Who are you getting them from?”

“Wee Markey Greene. He has some funny connections in MLB. Problem is, there are some ripples in the math. You see, there are two tickets. I only have one ass. Taking possession of a seat that I can’t put my ass in is obviously not a very equitable maneuver. Furthermore, a single ticket itself isn’t that great of a score since going by myself is kind of lame. So, we haven’t really been able to balance out the formulas, y’know?”

I noticed other conversations in the room had come to a complete stop. He was about to make a pitch and everyone wanted to hear it.

“What would really work out great, for all parties, is if I took just one seat and somehow was able to connect your ass with the other one.” There were more than a few nods of agreement around the room. I took that to mean that the tickets were tied to a larger network of trades. Most, if not all, of the room probably had some stakes that were dependent on the fate of those seats.

“What do you want for it?”

“Me? Nothing. See this over here?” he said and waved a hand over a certain arrangement of cards and loci. “This is my position and that one ticket very nicely squares up my accounts, provided I won’t be going to all those games myself. The game owes me no debt, so you can’t pay me for the tickets.

“Tea Rainwell Po, however, is left still pretty far down in the red. I think maybe if you two could work something out, we’d all be winners.” He turned to address Tea Rainwell Po. “What say you, dear? Is there something that Nathan Allen Foster can do that would have some worth to you?”

She drew herself up into a very tall and thin shape and gave a few rapid, happy nods.

“You do? That’s wonderful. Why don’t you go ask him? See if he’s game?”

She shifted and rolled loosely in my direction then gathered up in the space in front of me. “They tell me you’re leaving, Nathan Allen Foster,” she said. “You weren’t going to go without saying ‘bye’ to me, were you?”

“Of course, I wasn’t.”

“I don’t want you to go. Prence is more fun with you around. I’m going to miss you.” She floated closer to me while she spoke. For an instant I thought I saw bare shoulders and neck take shape under her face.

“I’ll miss you too.”

“You’ll come back, right?”

“I’m sure I will. Can’t say that I’ve thought that far out. It might not be for at least six years.”

“Promise me!” she demanded, “Promise that you will come see me again.”

Since Tea Rainwell Po had no physical body, you can’t touch her and she can’t touch you. Your hand would just pass through her if you ever tried to make contact. It would pass through without stirring her mistiness in the least. As if she was really just a vision of a mist. And though you couldn’t touch her, you could definitely feel her. It was as if you were getting ticked with microscopic electric shocks wherever she touched you. It was a mild sensation that seemed like it would start to become unpleasant if it were any more intense. When she made her demand that I return to Prence, she was close enough that her cloud was brushing up against me and I could feel that little sensation.

“I can make that promise,” I said. “You will see me again.”

“Good. And maybe you can give me a little token of you to keep while you’re away. Something I can look at when I feel lonely for your company.” I could feel the little shocks crawl over both of my shoulders.

“You have something in mind?”

She drew herself up again and smiled at me through a few rapid nods. Then she seemed to sort of melt and settled in again even closer to me.

“What do you want?”

“Your eye,” she said like it was made of gold dust and

“My eye?” I asked with shock.

“Your EYE!” she giggled and brought her face up to mine until her right eye and my right eye were only a few millimeters apart. She blinked slowly and coyly. Her misty eyelashes passed through my eyeball with a tingle.

“I want one of your beautiful brown eyes as a keepsake while you are gone.”

The thought made me squirm a bit. She added quickly, “I’ll give it back. I promise. You come back here after six years has passed. You come see me again and I’ll give it back to you.” It felt as though my entire torso and upper thighs were caught up in her mist.

“Tea Rainwell Po, I am very fond of my eyes. I’d be very upset if anything happened to either one. While I do believe that I can trust you to be good and gentle with it, you have no physical presence as far as I know. How can you possibly take care of an eye?”

“I’m going to help her,” said Edinexia Marden. “She can keep it here.”

“You’re helping?” I asked.

“Sure. Your eye would be perfectly welcome and safe right here in the basement with me. In fact, I will take responsibility for the any physical needs the eye may require, IF you, Tea Rainwell Po, will allow me to use it on occasion,” Edinaexia Marden replied. She knelt down to the floor and lay the duke of hammers down beside a pair of eights. She put small stacks of bottle caps on three of the duke’s four corners.

“Use it? What does that mean?” I asked while analyzing the position of the card she laid.

“Use it sometimes when we play cards down here. This surface is in part a product of your own imagination, creativity. Your visual organ would be a very handy tool for developing perspective transpositions. Tea Rainwell Po you will let me do this from time to time, won’t you?!”

“Oh yes, Edinexia Marden! I would be so grateful if you took care of my eye for me! Would you be able to help me look through it?” She did not wait for an answer but turned to me. “What does the world look like through your eyes, Nathan Allen Foster? I cannot wait to find out.”

“It looks big. And it looks crowded with a great many beautiful things. But Tea Rainwell Po, I daresay you may be the most beautiful of them all.”

She grinned and slid herself a little lower down so that she was looking up at me ever so slightly. “Then I must get a mirror. I want to know how I look through your lens.”

Matt Jenkins was rubbing his hands together and giving me encouraging nods. “Season tickets to the Sox for a year in trade for a few without an eye,” he said. “Sounds pretty good, huh?”

Edinexia Marden’s duke of hammers was positioned at a critical point of a very large, very complicated network of bartering, confirming my suspicion that everyone had some stake in the exchange. There was a lot of funny shit going on that I had no chance of deciphering at the

moment. The crowd was silent. I grunted a bit to express my dissatisfaction of being put in this situation.

“It will be in the best care possible,” Edinexia Marden assured coolly. “Nothing bad is going to happen to it.” Tea Rainwell Po nodded excited agreement.

“I think I’ll need my eye. There are depth perception considerations to be made.”

“I think you’ll need that eye less than you think over the next six years,” Matt Jenkins said. “Besides there are things we can do to simulate the missing organ if it presents that much of a problem. It’s really not that big of a deal.”

“Feels like a big deal. You want it right now, do you?” I asked Tea Rainwell Po.

She shook her head. “You can hold onto it for now. You were going to come see me again before you left, right? Give it to me then. Then come back to me in six years and I’ll return it.” She gathered herself up around me again and the tingling quickened a bit. “Ooooh, this is kinda fun!” she laughed.

“Where’d you say these tickets are again, Wee Markey Greene? Field Box?” asked Matt Jenkins loudly.

“Yess,” hissed Wee Markey Greene. “Row i.”

Matt Jenkins stepped closer to me and pressed a handful of bottle caps into my palm. He held up three cards in front of me; the rose of bones, the two of bells and the caterpillar. With the exception of Tea Rainwell Po, who swirled around me playfully, not a soul in the room moved. All attention was on me.

“Edinexia Marden, please tell me I can trust you here.”

“You know you can,” she said.

“I don’t believe I’m going to do this,” I sighed. Tea Rainwell Po was beaming at me. “I can trust you too, can’t I sweetheart?” I asked her.

She nodded eagerly while nibbling on her lower lip.

“Promise me I’ll get this eye back in the same condition as when I give it to you.”

“It may be even better. It might get a chance to see some special things that it otherwise would not.”

“Alright!” I announced to the room. “I will accept the offer of a season ticket to the Red Sox in exchange for a six year loaner of one of my eyes (either one, I don’t care) on the added condition that you assholes wrap this game up immediately and clean up these God damned beer cans.”

The silence broke into a wild cheer. I snatched the cards out of Matt Jenkins' hand and crouched down on the floor. I laid a few beer cap loci and my cards to seal the deal. They fit in the larger matrix almost perfectly and brought balance to a large portion of remaining open plays. A few others made minor moves to tie up loose ends or clear unclaimed offers. Beer cans were drained and collected while the group broke into smaller conversations. Van was walking around handing out vials, envelopes and pill bottles.

“This is going to be fucking awesome!” cried Matt Jenkins.

I regarded him in silence for a moment. Tea Rainwell Po had uncoiled from me and was floating in the space between us. I watched him silently through her shifting, sexy silhouette.

“What?” he asked. “You don't seem as excited as I would have expected.”

“You had a large part in setting this up. Obviously.”

“Moi?”

“Obviously. That being said, I trust that you were mostly working in my favor and didn't set this up with any sense of malice towards me. But my eye?!? You couldn't have worked out something better than that?”

“It's a bargain. What kind of sick sentimental attachment do you have with that eye that you can't live without it for a little while?”

“It's my eye! Of course I have a sentimental attachment to it. I use it to look at boobs among other things.”

“You really shouldn't form sentimental attachments to material things, y'know?”

“My eye is a material thing?”

“Well it's not spiritual so you could argue that it's material, yes. Besides you will not see half as many boobies because you have half as many eyes. That's not the way it works.”

“I know how eyes work.”

At the mention of boobs, Tea Rainwell Po began to giggle. Her cloud rolled slowly, and the shadows of large, voluptuous breast were suggested in her contours. Matt Jenkins lost his focus on me and locked his gaze on her. After a quick moment of silence, he lurched at her trying to pinch her and tickle her with his beard.

“Oh, Tea Rainwell Po! You are the most precious little angel of them all, do you know that? Your splendid cloud might be my favorite of all God's creations.”

She laughed warmly at his sudden burst of affection but began to waft off across the room. As the last little wisps of her were drawing away from him he made a last small jump to sink his face into her. He drew a deep breath and with both hands he tried to rub her essence into his face.

He then withdrew and tipped his head back in satisfaction and groaned contentedly.

“Control yourself, man,” I said to him.

“What?” he asked defensively.

“What? Your uncontrolled libido, that’s what. Making you act like an ass.”

Edinexia Mardin laughed aloud. “You should talk. You’re no better than he is.”

“I am much better than he is.”

“Oh, then why did you just let that same cloud of sexuality charm you out of an eyeball?”

“For Sox tickets.”

“Just for Sox tickets, you mean. If anyone of the rest of us asked you for the same thing you would have given us no end of grief with your haggling. Probably would have had to pony up half again the value of those tickets to get that thing out of your skull.”

“Bullshit,” I denied.

“No shit,” she said. “Why do you think we set it up so that she was the one doing the asking? All of us are going to want to use that eye at one time or another while you’re gone. So, we had the pretty one come over, say please, tickle your scrotum a bit. Eyeball comes down to a reasonable asking price with no haggling required. It’s just a fact; you treat pretty girls differently. We know how you tick.”

The truth of Edinexia Mardin’s words struck me. “You let them swindle me, you bastard!” I said to Matt Jenkins.

“I didn’t really have a problem with it,” he confessed. “You’re overvaluing a single eye. I saved you from making ridiculous counter offers that would have undone the whole thing. Trust me, you still got a good return on the eye. And there was even a scrotum tickle thrown in for good measure.”

The tickle was pretty nice.

“The eye,” he continued, “is a material thing, as we concluded.”

“As you concluded,” I corrected.

“But the Sox tickets are an experience. That’s something you keep forever. And I really shouldn’t have to tell you how awesome this season long experience is going to be.”

A deal made in Gallowacks can’t be undone. The reality of what I had agreed to was starting to sink in as was the realization that I was stuck with the decision. I was probably inclined to be searching for validation that I hadn’t been hosed, but Matt Jenkins words seemed to have a ring of truth. We were going to enjoy those tickets. Still I felt a little chapped that I’d let them play me like that.

“Edinexia Marden,” I said. “I’m not surprised to know that these other scoundrels are willing to use my weakness for girls against me for their own gain, but I thought you would be above that.”

“Against you? You’re lucky that was able to work it out so that I’m the one taking custody of the eye. Those Sox tickets came into the game a few hours ago, I guess. They were purposely thrown out on the trading block to get you and Matt Jenkins’ interest. One way or another they were going to find their way to your hands and somebody was going to get something out of you for ‘em. At least this way you have me watching over your body parts. You can be a little less concerned about the deal backfiring on you. You know you can trust me”

“Yes. I do know I can trust you, which brings up another thing. I don’t think I like the implication that I show Tea Rainwell Po preference to you because she’s pretty. You’re one of my best friends. You know I hold you in very high regard. And I don’t like that you think I would treat anyone better than you.”

“Not better, different,” Edinexia Marden replied. “You treat her different because she is different. I know you are fond of me, but if I had presented an offer for your eye, you would have treated me like one of the boys.”

“Well, you are kind of like one of the boys.”

“Not exactly like one of the boys though, am I? You aren’t trying to explain yourself to Matt Jenkins or Abel Gnot Barrelbright or Van. Am I making you uncomfortable about the shortcomings created by your libido? With the boys you flout your perversions like a new toy. With me you try make light of it, subdue it, even deny it. You normally take so much pride in your libido. Does it make you feel guilty that I don’t arouse it? How silly is that? You treat me different from the boys yet not quite like the pretty girls either. It’s the way you treat a girl with the figure of a bean,” which Edinexia Mardin has, “and the teeth of a llama,” which she also has.

“Had one of the boys or I made you the same offer Tea Rainwell Po did, you’re first instinct would’ve been to counteroffer to see how badly we really wanted it. Her sexuality was the packaging we needed to present this very reasonable offer to you in a way that made it appealing on face value.”

“SALESMANSHIP!!!” shouted Matt Jenkins. “An invaluable branch of mathematics to have mastery with in a fierce game of Gallowacks. I suppose it should come as no surprise that it draws

on system of theorems that are very similar to those of showmanship, governorship and litigation. Remind me to give you the basic rundown later on,” he said to me.

“Fuck off!” I told him then returned to Edinexia Mardin. “Am I really that shallow and predictable?”

“You are as your nature compels you. Don’t feel bad Nathan Allen Foster. Your heart is kind. That is why we are friends. And as a friend I have different methods for seducing you. I don’t need dumb cards to exercise them either.”

“Oh is that so?”

“Uh-huh. For instance, I have a few large...furnishings that I was able to obtain in the course of this Gallowacks game. I am going to need someone to help me get them down here.”

“You need help moving? Is that it?”

“Only a couple things. Oh, by the way, I figured you goons had a hard night so I stopped and got a couple bottles of iced tea. They’re in the fridge.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome, sweet dear,” she said and offered a cheek for me to kiss before she left.