

Maligoth

by William G. Tedford

Copyright © 2007 by William G. Tedford

-All rights reserved-

One

Somewhere around midnight, Wallace McFerguson bolted upright in bed. Dreams vanished like cobwebs bursting into flame. Eyes wide to the night, his heart racing and stomach knotting, he was hearing Arabian flutes and the counter beat of soft finger chimes drifting through the night. Eighteen-year-old Sasha Shahar Abdul had her father's scratchy records going again, and he knew with every fiber of his being what that meant.

He rolled to feet and on wobbling knees and threw the curtains open wide to the summer darkness. If her curtains were closed, he would die. The frustration of unrequited passion would be the death of him yet. Across two well-tended lawns and the five-foot chain-link fence that separated them, through the sparse vegetation of a

sapling ash, a square of warm light from an upstairs bedroom glowed in the midnight void. Within, a slender pink body whirled and bobbed. Sasha held her arms high and worked her finger chimes in time to the exotic beat of the Arabian music. Her body undulated with wild abandon and unbelievable grace.

“Oh, my God, she’s *naked!*”

Wallace’s heart palpitated. His knees all but buckled. Lust knotted his gut with unbearable intensity. At any cost, at any risk, he had to get closer. He could see nothing but an enticing pink blur at this distance.

He threw on his denims, a T-shirt and sneakers and clambered out the window of his attic room. He froze motionless and waited with baited breath for Aunt Bernice to respond to the disturbance from her room below. Hearing nothing, he ran along the edge of the gutter and leaped a yard of yawning emptiness to the platform of his childhood tree house.

He tore his T-shirt racing down the ladder and snagged his blue jeans catapulting himself over the low chain link fence. It was with utter dismay that he approached the twenty foot sapling rising directly in front of Sasha’s bedroom window. The little tree barely reached the eaves of the house. Did he seriously expect to climb the oversized twig supported by three wires staked to the lawn?

He had no choice but to try.

He shimmied up the trunk and paused as the sapling swayed. One of the wire stakes pulled loose in a gout of black earth. He looked up longingly at Sasha’s window no more than another five feet overhead. All thought of caution evaporated as the girl whirled her body into view

and then vanished. He would rather die than turn back now.

He climbed another few feet. The sapling leaned. It leaned the wrong way. Grunting with effort, Wallace rocked to and fro and sent the tree careening in the right direction, moving him directly into the light of the window.

What he saw stunned him, and then utterly entranced him. The orange glow of the lamp on Sasha's dresser played tag with flowing shadow across every subtle contour of muscle and bone of her lean body. She moved as gracefully as a ballerina even when she walked, but when she danced, she became a pirouetting angel.

Frustration gnawed at him in this perfect moment of awe and wonder. It shouldn't have to end like this. He wanted so badly to touch.

"Wallace McFerguson, what in the name of Allah are you doing up there?"

The voice was soft and calm and coming from somewhere below. Wallace looked down in utter horror.

Sasha's mother stood at the base of the tree with her hands on her shapely hips. Sylvia Carleton-Abdul yanked on one of the two surviving support wires. "Wallace, you little pervert, you come down here this very instant!"

"No, don't do that!"

One of two surviving stakes pulled loose from the ground. The tree toppled, tearing delicate roots with a crackling sound. Slowly, Wallace's weight bore the sapling to the ground. He lost his grip and fell the last few feet with a shriek. Impact knocked the wind from his lungs.

"Sasha, pull your blinds this very instant!"

Sasha stuck her head out the window, her voice

echoing throughout the neighborhood. “Mother, I need an audience to do my best! You said so yourself!”

“This is *not* what I had in mind!”

Sasha’s blinds snapped shut. Wallace rolled over and pushed himself onto his hands and knees, hoping for the opportunity to crawl into the darkness unnoticed. Sylvia hooked a finger in his belt and hauled him effortlessly to his feet.

“Wallace, really.”

The compassion in her voice quelled his rising panic.

Aunt Bernice reignited it. “Sylvia, you godless harlot!” she screamed from her bedroom window across the dark lawns. “Let go of my boy in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Sylvia sighed in despair. “Bad boy, Wallace. Now look at the trouble you’ve caused. Go home.”

She launched him toward his own house with a humiliating pat on the butt. No part of his anatomy had been incapacitated by the fall, but on a psychological level, he had been destroyed.

Wallace pointedly ignored Aunt Bernice’s strident cry and turned instead into the shelter of the dark woods out back within which to bury his shame, vowing from the depth of his mortification never to return.

Two

Patrick Sieman, fifty-year-old regional sales representative for the Harbor Rubber Products Company, left home at dawn. Less than three miles away, he blew a rear tire along the new two-lane highway bypassing Dale City and its smaller companion, Willington.

An ardent nature-lover, Patrick shrugged off his misfortune. The sun was bright and the morning warm and inviting along the three mile stretch of wooded terrain behind Willington. He eased the car and its blubbering flat tire to the shoulder of the road, turned off the engine and strolled around back to open the trunk and rummage for the spare tire and tools.

He had never used the jack of this particular car, but he found the bumper slot and hoisted the rear right corner of the car off the ground without difficulty. Experience had

taught him to keep a cross-type lug wrench on hand to deal with bolts over-tightened with enthusiastic air guns. Once they littered the ground and the flat tire was tossed into the trunk, he groaned a bit lifting the new tire in place. Despite his reasonably trim and fit figure, he had the flexibility of a dried noodle.

When he had the flat and tools securely in place in the trunk, he brushed beads of sweat from his brow, arched his sore back, and scanned the face of the woods. Nature beckoned to him, courtesy of the two cold beers he had drunk at breakfast. He crossed the shallow drainage ditch and stepped over a flattened barbed-wire fence, then ducked through the underbrush and wet down the moss on the south side of a tree trunk in a dark stand of elms.

A pinkish carpet of mushrooms in a sunlit clearing deeper in the woods caught his attention. Dew sparkled in the morning sun from all about the clearing.

"I'll be damned!" he cried out happily. "Mushrooms! Mushrooms up the ass!"

Grinning broadly and wishing Peg was with him to share his discovery, he roamed deeper into the trees and knelt reverently where the sprawling pink carpet began. As his eyes resolved individual fungi, he frowned.

The color was all wrong for the shape that met his eye. What species was this to be so prolific in such dry soil? He could name three toxic species that matched the size and form of these specimens, and one or two edible species that about matched the color, but none of those would have been found growing under these conditions. He knelt to study dark markings on the pinkish buds. A chill of fright coursed along his backbone.

Eat me, the markings read.

“Eat me?” he muttered in a sudden stirring of anxiety. Patrick in Wonderland, no less. “What kind of bullshit is this?”

He wiped a hand on his trousers legs, slipped two fingers beneath the two-inch cap of a specimen and lifted it from the earth. It broke free with surprising resistance, indicating a deeper root system than he would have expected. That at least explained its growth in the relatively dry soil.

“Eat me? No way, Jose.”

Some joker had rubber stamped the cap of every mushroom in sight. He couldn't imagine anyone going to so much trouble. He held a penknife in his teeth and opened the blade with his free hand, then carefully sliced the skin of the cap.

Eat me, the deeper markings continued to read.

He sliced deeper.

Eat me.

Whatever the nature of the markings, they went all the way through the meat. He looked out across the field of countless thousands of identical specimens and reached deep into his thirty years experience of mushroom hunting in these same magical woods for some explanation. None came to mind. The markings had to be a fluke of nature, a wildly unlikely coincidence.

The aroma of the exposed meat of the organism caught his attention. He brought the fungi to his nose and sniffed. The aroma was the most appealing he had ever experienced, tempting him to risk a taste.

It would be the stupidest thing he could do. He could picture himself writhing on the ground in agony, dying in a field of mushrooms that read *eat me* printed across their

pink caps. He could imagine the national headlines in the tabloids:

INCREDIBLY STUPID SALESMAN DIES DESERVING DEATH

He popped a tiny piece into his mouth regardless. “Hell with it,” he murmured.

The flavor was rich without being excessive, just as meaty and sweet as its aroma promised. He raised an eyebrow in surprise, shrugged, and wolfed down the balance of the morsel. How could anything so aromatic and tasty possibly be toxic?

He wandered the edge of the field, amazed by the dense growth filtering back into the trees as far as the eye could see. They grew especially fat and succulent in the moist shadows. He stooped and filled his pockets, absently popping another specimen into his mouth whole as he worked.

“Hmmm! Yum-yum!” He paused, captivated by the incredible taste. “Damn these things are good!”

Peg had to know. He had to call his attorney and find out how to safeguard his discovery. Who did this land belong to? How would he go about locating anyone else who had discovered the mushrooms and swear them to secrecy? He was more than willing to split profits. There’d be fame and fortune enough to go around.

He returned to his car and dumped the papers in his briefcase onto the backseat of the car, then went back to fill it with mushrooms. On his second trip back to the car, he paused in the warming sunlight to take notice of the amber, mystical atmosphere that had snapped into sharp focus around him. The world turned suddenly brighter and clearer, filled with distinct color, sound and aroma.

The birds in the trees were a veritable orchestra of happy trilling.

Psychedelic mushrooms? He was obviously being subjected to a mild hallucinogenic effect. How bad would it get? With a little chill of fear, he realized how stupid it had been to eat an unknown species of fungus. *Eat me?* For the love of God, what had he gotten himself into?

He had started out at dawn on a three hundred mile drive to a sales convention in Baltimore. Margaret Sullivan was surprised to see him back in less than two hours. Patrick's trim, petite, thirty-year-old girlfriend stood in the middle of her Willington living room and watched him dump a pile of dirty mushrooms onto her chrome and glass coffee table.

"Wanna go mushroom hunting?"

Peg wrinkled her nose. Peg loathed mushrooms.

"Okay, so you wanna go on a picnic?"

Peg cocked her head to one side. "Patrick, have you gone nuts? How many beers did you have for breakfast?"

He tossed Peg a specimen and watched her reaction to the message on the cap, amazed at how desirable she had become since he had last seen her two hours earlier. Patrick was suddenly very horny. Peg looked good enough to eat herself.

"This is some kind of joke, right?" She held the mushroom out to him, showing him the anomalous eat me sprawled across its face. Patrick took the fungus back. He whipped out his penknife, sliced the piece in two, and then dropped both segments into the palm of her hand.

Peg sniffed the aroma and held the gleaming surface of severed meat at different angles to the light. "Is it edible?"

Patrick picked the stem from her palm and popped it in his mouth.

“I don’t like mushrooms,” she reminded him.

“Try one of these.”

Encouraged by the meaty aroma, Peg shrugged off her reservations and ventured a taste. She raised an eyebrow in surprise and gave him a nod of approval.

“Wanna go on a picnic?”

“You were on your way to work, Patrick Sieman. What the hell happened?”

“Flat tire. Then I had to take a piss. And there they were.”

“I see. So now you want to play hooky and go mushroom hunting.”

Patrick edged eagerly toward the door. “Wanna?”

Peg laughed at his little-boy mentality. He was behaving as if intoxicated. Not that she objected. Peg liked Patrick intoxicated, whether by pot or alcohol. It was the only time he ever let down his facade of polite professional dignity.

“A picnic?” she queried. “Want me to bring some sandwiches along?”

Patrick wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Maybe a bottle of that white wine we had last night.”

Peg turned away to fetch a bottle from the kitchen cupboard. She was still a bit suspicious of his behavior. If he hadn’t been smoking dope or drinking, then what?

“And some rubbers, maybe,” he added, “if you really think we gotta have them.”

She looked back at him with a cautiously neutral expression. “Are we feeling frisky this morning, Pat?”

Patrick could be so infuriating when it came to sex.

He was fun when drunk, but damned near impotent. Sober, the fifty-year-old salesman was virile, but no more exciting than the vibrator she kept tucked away in a bedroom dresser, and far less effective.

He threw his hands into the air in a gesture of surrender. "I haven't been drinking. Honest."

Peg approached cautiously. "Show me, Patrick. Show me how frisky you're feeling this morning. Then maybe we'll go mushroom hunting."

Patrick wiped his hands on his pants leg and had no trouble showing Peg how frisky he was feeling. By early afternoon, Peg was feeling a bit wobbly in the knees but was more than willing to go in search of as many of Patrick's mysterious mushrooms as could be found.

Three

Wallace McFerguson tried sleeping on a bed of leaves and pine needles in the woods behind the house and discovered the woods infested with mosquitoes and other carnivorous bugs intent on eating him alive. He returned to his room an hour or two before dawn covered with welts, and awoke later in the morning to a soft hand caressing his forehead.

While still cocooned in a very pleasant dream, the hand belonged to the lovely Sasha Abdul. Gentle fingers drawn across his brow drew him from the depths of sleep and he thought it more likely that the hand belonged to the equally beautiful Sylvia Carleton-Abdul, Sasha's mother, as he lay injured and unconscious at the foot of the toppled sapling.

But he opened his eyes to bright sunlight and the familiar confines of his bedroom, and Aunt Bernice's

worried face hovering above him. “What did that wicked woman do to you, my poor boy?”

Wallace looked down at himself in horror. A nocturnal hard-on strained the fabric of his briefs. He sat up in alarm and stuffed his pillow into his lap.

Bernice beamed a benevolent smile, practiced at refusing to acknowledge offensive bits of reality. “Such a handsome boy. If only you would allow Brother Sebastian and I to counsel you on the temptations of the flesh and help you follow in the footsteps of our Lord.”

She leaned across his mussed bed, her eyes bright with fervor. “Satan tempts us all, Wallace. Truly, he does. Only those whose souls are already condemned to everlasting hellfire are free of his vile offerings. Temptation is the hallmark of the godly.”

Wallace leaped to his feet. He turned his back on his aunt and pulled on his dew-dampened pants. He shoved his bare feet into his tennis shoes and grabbed his comb and wallet from the dresser before rushing from the room.

“Wallace, are you hurt?” Bernice called after him. “You took a terrible fall last night!”

A terrible fall taken by a total fool.

“Wallace, where are you going?”

Nowhere, he decided. The incipient panic in his Aunt’s voice restrained him. If he ran away now, she’d panic and call the police. “I’m just hungry is all,” he called over his shoulder.

Breakfast was waiting for him downstairs. He sat at the kitchen table and ate. Aunt Bernice prattled on about the evils of foreign woman, the temptations of the flesh, and the wisdom of her only ally in life, Brother Sebastian Grieg of the Willington Last Days of Our Lord Penance

Church. Wallace tolerated her lectures with as much compassion as he could muster. She had been alone in the world for so long, whose business was it if she had gotten a bit eccentric along the way?

“Brother Sebastian told me that Mr. Nicholas is looking for a boy to sweep the hardware store after hours. I asked that he put in a good word for you.”

Implying that idle hands were the devil’s tools. Not that Wallace enjoyed his idle days and sleepless nights worrying about upcoming college. “I’ll take it if I can get it,” he assured her.

It hardly mattered at this late date. The fall semester started in another two weeks, and he had his parent’s trust fund to see him through a degree in business administration, just as they had suggested in their will. The future seemed secure, if a bit droll and tarnished following their death.

For the immediate moment, his thoughts were still on Sasha. For one night alone with Sasha and the opportunity to satisfy his every adolescent fantasy, he’d give up the balance of his very life.

“Coming to church with me tonight?”

He glanced up at her from his plate of sunny side down eggs and pork links, irritating by her mildly challenging tone of voice. “I don’t believe in that stuff, Aunt Bernice.”

“But Wallace, the Bible says...”

Another particularly stern look stopped her. She sat and primly folded her hands on the table surface. “I have been told that I must be patient. If only your mother and father had set you on the path to the Lord before...”

The sound of his fork striking the china plate stopped

her. His mother and father had died in a plane that had exploded at thirty-six thousand feet somewhere over the Rocky Mountains. Five years had passed since that terrible day. He could discuss the facts of the incident calmly, but his tolerance of Bernice's criticism of his upbringing was nil.

Bernice folded a napkin in her lap. "My, but it's a pleasant day today. Would you mind picking up a few things at the store while you're out and about?"

He picked up his fork and continued eating. "No problem," he said, and Aunt Bernice knew better than to mope over her transgression. Once, five years ago when he had been caught up in the throes of grief, he had slapped Bernice, his mother's sister, for a careless remark about his dead father. Afterwards, he had hid in the woods for three long and cold February days wallowing in remorse. Three days in the hospital recovering from exposure and frost bite taught him to control both his grief and his temper. And Aunt Bernice had learned to quit before she tested his new level of self-control.

"Good food," he said.

Bernice beamed. "The Lord doth provide."

She had a grocery list ready when he finished, and he determined that everything would fit in the baskets he had fitted to the sides of his old ten-speed bicycle. Rather than waste part of his trust fund on a car, he had let Bernice save the money for her own living expenses when he was gone

It would be over soon, the pennies saved and life with Aunt Bernice in general. An entirely new existence awaited him at college. He didn't much look forward to being thrown cold turkey into complete independence. Neither

could he endure the tension-laden atmosphere of Aunt Bernice's anxiety much longer.

When he left for the store, he rode past Sasha's house without risking a look. He had window-peeked enough and had been caught at long last. For the rest of his life, he'd have to make do with memories of Sasha tainted by guilt and humiliation. Sylvia and her beautiful young daughter had tempted him beyond the capacity of any nineteen-year-old to resist.

A rusty beige pickup parked out front reminded Wallace that Sasha had a boyfriend to boot, a shaggy blonde bully named Duke. Wallace looked about in alarm for the husky twenty-year-old, assessing his chances of reaching the top of the street uninjured as nil should Duke take notice of him from inside the house, particularly if Sasha or her mother had tattled on him.

He tore up the short hill, turned onto the boulevard and peddled furiously. His adrenaline level eased off a bit a block or two away, but his heart sank in his chest when he heard the familiar roar of the worn truck engine coming up from behind him. When he could see the dented fenders in his rear view mirror, he pulled in between some parked cars and slowed down. Hopefully, the young tyrant would drive on by and leave him in peace.

No such luck. The truck stopped in a shriek of worn brake linings.

"Duke, don't you dare!" Sasha cried out from behind the dusty windshield. "I told you it was none of your business!"

Wallace raced away with the truck door slamming in his ears and heard Duke's boots pounding the pavement. Given another few seconds, he would have built up the

speed to make a clean getaway. Shy of that brief moment, Duke struck from behind.

Stunned by Duke's fist striking the side of his head, Wallace lost control of the bike. The front tire struck the curb and tossed him over the handlebars. He hit ground at an awkward angle. Stunned by the impact, he was helpless when Duke gathered a fistful of his shirt and dragged him to his feet. Wallace was swung bodily around and slammed him against the trunk of a nearby tree.

Duke's face twisted with a sneer filled his field of view. "Get an eyeful, pervert?"

"Duke!" Sasha screamed, "I said no!"

"Fucking creep."

A fist slammed into his gut with devastating impact. Duke then threw him to the ground. Wallace looked up in time to see Duke studying his fallen bicycle with a twisted grin.

"Not the bike!" he cried.

Duke kicked in the spokes of both wheels, then turned back to the truck with amused satisfaction. Sasha began a screaming tirade of verbal abuse and fought with the passenger door to let herself out.

"Okay, so I'm not going to waste him!" Duke assured the girl. "I just want to teach the creep a lesson!"

"But you had no right! Let me out of here this instant!"

Wallace never saw the struggle that transpired in the cab of the truck. Sasha apparently lost her bid for freedom. The rear wheels burned rubber and he could hear her shrill protest for half a block before the truck turned a corner and was gone.

Wallace dragged himself to the curb and took a seat.

Maligoth

He looked about to see who had witnessed his humiliation. None of the passing traffic slowed to lend aid, so he dipped his head and let a few tears spill to the ground.

Sasha had been enraged by Duke's behavior. She wasn't at all afraid of the bastard. His own cowardice made his disgrace that much more painful.

Sasha and Duke made a good couple, self-confident and good-looking with families that had the money to buy luxuries that they took for granted and chalked up to their own personal genius, cars and clothes and the gobs of unthinking arrogance that went with it.

Wallace climbed to his feet and brushed himself off. The spill on the bike had hurt worse than the punch to the gut, but the ruined wheels hurt worse of all. He stood over the battered bicycle fighting back his tears.

Why was he so different from Duke and his friends? He had seen them passing condoms around like candy at school. They probably had all the sex they wanted. How long had it been since any of them had bothered peeking in windows, or jacking off behind locked bathroom doors in the middle of the night?

Wallace wheeled the crippled bike back home, hiding it in the trees around back. Then he walked to the store. When he returned to the house with two bags of groceries an hour later, he could hear Bernice praying behind the closet door in her bedroom. Personally, he could thank God for Brother Sebastian who seemed content to allow him to claim himself an agnostic. According to Brother Sebastian Grieg, agnostics were potential believers, and Bernice needed to learn patience if she hoped to save the soul of her wayward nephew.

Wallace put the groceries away in the kitchen and went out the back door to spend some time alone in the woods. He wended his way deep into the woods behind the house to the magical grotto where he had played for so many summers of his younger years.

Sunlight sparkled through the dense canopy of oaks. Countless little spotlights shone down into the gloom and illuminated carpets of ferns and mushrooms and tiny blue flowers. Slugs and toads and countless species of spiders and beetles with iridescent carapaces inhabited the exotic flora. He sat on a ledge of shale overlooking its sparkling beauty. This was his favorite place in the world. Here, he was confident that whatever God might exist knew what he was doing after all.

He spotted a mushroom just below his position. *Eat me*, it read on its pinkish surface. Alice in Wonderland, he thought to himself. Wouldn't it be great? He dropped down to the ground and reached for the mutant fungi, chuckling in nervous amusement.

Gooseflesh rippled across his back. *Eat me*, it said, and calling to him as it did from the mysterious depth of nature, it was indeed the commanding voice of an unknown God.

Four

Peg came like gangbusters beneath him. Patrick clung tight to her slick body until it was over and burst into uncontrollable laughter. The idea of playing hooky from work and boffing his girlfriend on her living room rug amused him to no end. How long had it been since he had had so much fun?

Peg squirmed beneath him. “Pat, I feel funny.”

Patrick propped himself up on both elbows. “Eat me. Or maybe I’ll eat you.” He burst out laughing again.

Peg rolled him aside and sat up, brushing her hair from her face. “I’m hungry.”

Patrick charged her on hands and knees. He knocked her over backwards, muzzled her stomach and growled like an animal.

“Ouch! Patrick, you bit me!”

“But I’m hungry, too!”

“Eat shit! Get off me!”

She rolled him aside a second time and climbed to her feet. Shaking her head in mock disgust, she stormed into the bathroom and vomited.

Patrick rolled over on his back and frowned at the textured ceiling. His stomach growled. “Damn, I’m hungry, too.”

He climbed to his feet and went in search of sustenance. Peg joined him in the cold draft before the open refrigerator door. They stood naked in the glow of the forty watt light, picking at leftovers.

“Mushrooms gone?” Peg said.

“I’ll get some more on the way to work tomorrow.”

Peg reached for a carton of raw chicken liver.

“What’s that?” Patrick said. “Let me have one.”

Peg peered into the open container. “Yuck. They look slimy.”

Patrick discarded the lid and tossed one of the little brown livers into his mouth. His was a ravenous protein hunger, he decided. Uncooked pork carried the bad bugs, he told himself, not raw chicken liver.

“Yum, yum.”

Peg tried one. She retreated to the kitchen table and dumped the carton’s content to the table surface. Patrick had no way to bite or chew the rough meat with his ill-fitting dentures. He swallowed his share whole, one gleaming little organ after another.

Peg finished the last piece and smiled at him with a strange gleam in her eye. A brown trickle of juice ran from her chin onto her left breast. Patrick reached for her, grinning. “I’m still hungry. Come here.”

Peg evaded his groping with a twist of her slender

torso. She ran shrieking with laughter from the room. Patrick dashed after her and caught her in the hall short off the living room. He wrestled her to the cold linoleum. Peg sank her nails into the skin of his back with renewed and ever intensifying passion.

Dimly, Pat sensed something amiss in their behavior as he pumped away at the overheated body beneath him. He was going to pick the whole damned field, if the mushrooms were responsible, run his credit cards to their limit buying freezers, and ensure himself a supply for the balance of his natural life.

If Peg didn't kill him first. The nails in his back were mere distractions. The teeth sinking into the side of his neck during the orgasm that followed caused serious and prolonged agony. He waited, though, until the high-power explosion of bittersweet ecstasy had ended for the both of them before protesting.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her eyes glazed and her mouth rimmed with bright red blood. His blood. Her breath came in ragged gulps. Her entire body trembled like an overworked machine.

She buried her face in his injured neck, her words washing hot against his skin. "Let me kiss it and make it better."

Patrick rolled away irritably. Peg grabbed at his ankle. "Please, don't leave me."

Her teeth chattered. Her body trembled. He eyed her, puzzled by his hunger, both kinds of hungers. Why would he confuse the two? He gazed at her quivering belly and grinned. "Chicken livers," he murmured.

She crawled into his arms. "Patrick, I'm scared. Something's wrong."

“Mushrooms.” His tongue felt thick and kept tripping over his teeth. “We’re higher than kites.”

“Take me to the doctor.”

Patrick mulled over their plight. “It’ll wear off by tomorrow.”

She writhed against him and sighed. “Okay.”

Her breath washed hot over his face. Her heart raced wildly beneath her breasts. He could hear gurgling from inside her body, smell her every odor, sense the twitch and stirring of each muscle. He could smell every aroma, odor and stench in the house, and hear the tick of the clock, and the chatter of birds outside, and traffic growling further away, even voices talking in conversational tones from up the block.

Peg gnawed gently at his throat. “Patrick, I’m so hungry.”

He murmured agreement, his mind preoccupied by the vivid bombardment of his senses.

“Feels good,” he whispered. “I like it.”

Five

Wallace McFerguson squatted in front of the enigmatic mushroom, lost in uneasy thought. He looked up to find Sasha standing over him, backpedaled in alarm and fell heavily on his rump.

Sasha sat cross-legged at his side and held one of the mushrooms to his face. “This is a joke, right?”

Wallace reached for it, alarmed by her mischievous smile. She snatched it away and held the fungus to her parted lips. “Shall I?”

“Please. It might be poisonous.”

“Who were you planning on feeding it to? Duke, maybe?”

Wallace stared at her, lost in her dark eyes.

“I’ve seen you come out this way,” she said more gently. “I come here myself from time to time. I don’t mean to intrude, but I wanted to apologize. I told Mom what

happened. She called Duke's parents and said you were taking him to court if he doesn't fix the bicycle."

"I don't want trouble," Wallace said. Duke would just corner him again later and do worse than punch him in the gut.

"Duke only picks on you because you quake in your boots."

Wallace couldn't imagine himself engaged in a conversation with the girl. He couldn't imagine what he might say.

"He's a low C student, Wallace, dumb as a fencepost. His old man bought that truck for him. He'd ride a bike himself, left to his own resources."

Wallace nodded, feeling about as dumb as a fencepost himself.

Sasha laughed at him. "He's got social skills is all. He thinks he's a stud. Mom says he's a conduit for social diseases, like my father."

Her grin broadened mischievously. "I know you have a brain, Wallace, even if I don't see you make good use of it in public. If I can only get you to talk. I think I could have more fun with you than with Duke and his friends. That was a dirty trick I played on you last night. I was deliberately tormenting you, but I didn't mean to be cruel."

He wished she hadn't brought that up. He wanted to run and hide. Instead, he looked away and blinked back tears.

"Don't be afraid of me, Wallace. I know you like me."

And still he said nothing, certain that she'd rise to her feet any moment and walk away in exasperation.

"You probably think I'm a shallow-minded party

animal going out with the likes of Duke. Is that what you think of me? All beauty, no brains?”

Wallace glanced at her, startled. It was exactly what he had thought of her all along.

“I heard you were going to college pretty quick.”

Wallace looked away again. It was the right subject, but he’d say the wrong thing if he responded.

“I’m not exactly sure what I’ve got planned,” Sasha volunteered, “except that I’m sure as hell not going back to Saudi Arabia to live with dear old pop. They treat women like dogs over there. That’s why my parents can’t get along. The devout Muslim and the irresistible harlot. That’s how my Mom puts it. They make quite a pair.”

Wallace stared at the ground.

“It’s going to be a lonesome life, if you don’t clean up your act, Wallace McFerguson. You can’t be a wimp forever, scared of your own shadow and thinking you’re better than anyone else because you’re so smart. Mom says you introverts are all alike, cutting yourself off from life, burying your nose in a book until you go blind. Mom says if I want a go at you, I have to pry you out of your shell like an oyster.”

Sasha leaned close, smiling. “What do you say, Wallace? Will I find a pearl if I dig deep enough?”

Wallace blushed furiously. She was laughing, and he wanted to laugh with her, even at his own expense.

“Treat me like a bimbo, if you want. You gotta practice your social skills, so practice on me. What harm will it do?”

The harm it would do would be to confirm his worst fears about himself, that he was incapable of entertaining

another human being as thoroughly as he was being entertained by Sasha Abdul.

“I saw your lips move. Think aloud, Wallace, so that I can hear.”

“I’m afraid you won’t like me,” he said softly, and it was exactly the wrong thing to say.

“I already like you, silly. You’ve been a stuck-up snob and a horny little pervert and I still like you. What worse can you do, pick your nose and gross me out?”

Wallace had to chuckle. “Something like that. I tend to sabotage myself. I know I’m going to do or say something stupid at the wrong moment. I try not to, but I do it anyhow.”

Sasha sidled closer. “The geekish thing to do now would be to try to stick your hands down my blouse seeing as I’m all friendly like and maybe dumb enough to feel sorry for you. So, are you going to invite me up to your room to show me your stamp collection?”

“I don’t have a stamp collection.”

“I’ll settle for butterflies. I’m not fond of spiders.”

“Bank notes.”

She raised an eyebrow. “As in paper money?”

“Foreign currency. I get approvals in the mail. I buy what I want and send the rest back. Bernice keeps trying to cancel, but they send the stuff anyhow. Probably because I always buy something.”

“Bank notes. What else?”

Wallace gestured to the surrounding grotto. “This place, the things that grow after the snow melts in the spring, the changes in the kinds of things that live here in the summer and fall. I don’t collect anything. I like my

spiders and butterflies living where they belong and doing their own thing.”

Sasha wrinkled her nose. “Let’s stick to bank notes. Anything from Saudi Arabia?”

Wallace brightened. “Yeah! From all over!”

Sasha held her hand out to him. “Show me. If I really like what I see, I might even dance for you again some time. You might try a pair of binoculars the next time. I think the little tree is a goner.”

Wallace stared up at her, astonished that she could be so outrageously candid.

“Dressed in proper attire, of course,” she added. “Mom says I should take my heritage, whatever that might be, seriously.”

She tugged at his arm. “We don’t have time to waste if you’re going to be leaving this fall, Wallace. Talk to me.”

Wallace tried. He began to stutter during the walk back to the house, then silenced himself in anguished frustration. But she held on to his hand all the way. Only once did she glance back at the field of mushrooms with a curious frown.

The mushrooms could wait for a free moment. His greatest fear was that someone would try to eat one just because of the coincidental pattern of color forming two apparent words, and that strangely tempting aroma. Would anybody be so stupid?

But he’d only draw attention to their existence and increase the risk if he told anybody. He would mull over the danger and the mystery of the mushroom and decide later what to do. Sasha came first, Sasha for as long as she would have him.

Six

Patrick remembered how to turn on his laptop computer before he noticed the serious problem he was having with his memory. He had called in sick earlier in the day, then decided that uploading his sales orders for the past week to the computers at the main office would soften the repercussions of missing the regional sales conference. But once the silver and black screen of the portable was lit, he forgot what to do next.

“What the hell...”

He put his fingers on the keyboard, hoping they'd remember how to place themselves. Willing to use two fingers to get the ball rolling, he scanned the small screen, searching for some clue that would jog his memory. Nothing he saw was intelligible.

“Spreadsheet,” he muttered absently. He glanced up from his place at Peg's little roll-top desk in her bedroom,

wondering how spreading a sheet had anything to do with selling food.

A bottle shattered in the bathroom followed by a scream of frustration. Letting the computer absently slip from his lap and clatter to the floor, Patrick went to investigate. He found Peg on hands and knees amidst broken glass, gobbling handfuls of aspirin from the tile floor. Both of her hands and knees were bleeding.

Peg looked up at him with a haunted expression, oblivious to her injuries. "I couldn't get the bottle open. I've got such a headache, and I couldn't get the damned bottle open!"

Her words were slurred. She was drunk, except that they hadn't drunk anything except the white wine earlier in the day. It couldn't have been enough to screw them over this bad.

Peg held her hands out to the light. "Look at me! What is it?"

Her skin was shiny with an odd bluish tinge. He had noticed. It kept slipping his mind.

"You're just all sweaty, Peg." It was just the light playing tricks. He paid close attention to the enunciation of his own words as he tried to calm her.

She crawled to him on hands and knees. "But I'm not sweaty! I'm cold!"

Patrick helped her to her feet, amazed at the dry, smooth sensation that met his touch. She didn't feel cold, though. Her skin was on fire. Her condition warned him that the chill in the air was one of his own symptoms and not some freak act of nature.

Dimly, Patrick knew that something was ominously

wrong and that the mushrooms had caused it. "I think we had better call the doctor, or the hospital."

"Patrick, we've been poisoned! We've been poisoned by your damn toadstools!"

Patrick went to the living room to call for help. He fumbled with the phone, knocking it to the floor before remembering how to separate the handset from the base. He dropped to his knees to punch a three digit number that would bring help. One of the numbers was a nine. The handset began to buzz with a grating noise. He ripped the cord loose in a fit of anger.

"It's all your fault!" Peg screamed at him. "I hate mushrooms!"

Patrick took note of the light at the window. Late afternoon already. Odd that he was still hungry. They had eaten all the mushrooms and everything in the house. His skin itched. Pain stabbed at him from every joint in his body. But more than anything else, he was hungry. He was hungry beyond his ability to think or reason straight.

Peg threw a temper tantrum in the bathroom, shrieking at the top of her lungs and creating a whirlwind of loose objects in the air. With a final wail of frustration, she appeared in the doorway and launched herself at him, striking from behind and sending him sprawling face down on the ruined rug.

Her torn fingernails raked his back. Her teeth were in far better condition. She bit him on the right shoulder, sending him arcing back in searing pain and roaring with sudden anger of his own.

He reached for a fistful of hair, pulled her bodily over his shoulders and slammed her to the floor. Rebounding, she bit him again, this time sinking her teeth all the way

to the bone at the base of his left thumb. In blind retaliation, he took her throat in his jaws and clamped down with every ounce of strength.

His dentures slipped, popped from his mouth and clattered across the floor. With a scream of laughter, Peg rolled him over and raked his face again. She straddled his lower legs to pin him in place, then went down with gnashing teeth to attack the most valued and vulnerable part of his anatomy.

Patrick grabbed her tangled hair in both hands and held her back with all his strength. Slowly, trembling with the effort, he rose to his feet. He lifted her bodily from the floor with a wild strength born of desperation and threw her against the wall.

He had hoped to stun her. She bounced unharmed and leaped upon him like a jungle cat. He grabbed for her as she struck, but her inexplicably dry, slick body slid through his hands like a bar of soap. Enraged, he swung a closed fist. The blow connected, and Peg spun once and collapsed.

Patrick scooped her into his arms and rushed her into the kitchen. He draped her pale body over the island counter thinking of chicken livers and where he might find the sustenance that would satisfy his intolerable hunger. Overhead, kitchen utensils gleamed in the kitchen light. He absently reached for the biggest knife in view.

Peg turned her head to one side and vomited down the front of his legs. She opened her eyes and blinked at him, her heaving breasts calming. She smiled wanly, ignoring the butcher knife clutched in his right hand.

“Patrick, I’m hungry. Why am I so hungry?”

“I don’t know.”

He struggled to hold on to that quiet moment of sanity. Peg rolled to her stomach and climbed off the counter surface. She wove an unsteady path to the wall-mounted phone, snatched the handset, and pecked out seven hesitant digits.

She sounded like her old self ordering three pepperoni and cheese pizzas. “Lots of pepperoni,” she added, then recited her address. “Eleven oh...”

“Eleven oh six Forest Drive,” Patrick finished for her, proud to have remembered. But why a pizza when she could have called an ambulance?

She repeated the address. “Who will it be?” she murmured to the handset, then shrieked, “the pizza boy! Who will the pizza boy be!”

Her jaw hung slack for a moment, her eyes unfocused. “Jimmy Smith?” She glanced at him, her eyes bright with anticipation. “Jimmy Smith, the little fat one.”

She hung the phone up, not quite hitting the cradle. The handset clattered to the floor. She turned her back on it and slipped hot and trembling into his arms. She looked up at him with burning eyes and grinned.

“The little fat one. God, please make him hurry.”

Seven

Aunt Bernice was out back hanging clothes on the line. Wallace snuck Sasha in through the front door and up the stairs, watching her with absolute adulation as she moved about. She inspected his room with her hands clasped behind her back, then sat on the edge of his unmade bed.

“Okay, stud, let’s see how much money you got.”

Wallace stored his banknote collection between plastic sheets of a loose-leaf notebook. He set the heavy volume in her lap and let her thumb through at random.

“How do you know these are really real?”

He sat at her side, extracted a banknote from a sleeve and held it to the light. “The watermark and the embedded threads and the fine color engraving are protection against counterfeiting.”

“These are all so beautiful. Why are American bills so plain?”

“I don’t really know. We don’t seem to give a damn, or maybe all the little nations are just too pretentious.”

It was at that point that Wallace found himself gazing deep into her dark eyes. His next awareness was of a soft body wrestling beneath him and a patient voice murmuring in his ear to cease and desist. When he became aware of the bulk of the banknote album wedged between their lower abdominal regions, he had little choice but to roll aside to dislodge it. Given that moment of respite, Sasha stood and shook out her dark mane of hair. She gave him a knowing smile. “Naughty little boy,” she said.

Wallace turned beet red. Before gut-wrenching humiliation moved in to claim what remained of his self-confidence, Sasha reached for his hand and pulled him to his feet. She embraced him, and kissed him ardently.

It was a first for Wallace, clumsy and embarrassing, but Sasha persisted until it felt right and he lingered.

Wallace lost control again and groveled, satisfying a long-standing, heart-felt urge to run his hands up the broad sweep of her hips and verify the reality of the incredible biological architecture of a woman’s body. When she tolerated an exploratory caress of her backside, Wallace gathered the courage to try for her breasts.

Sasha stepped out of reach and eyed him severely. “Mother says there’s nothing about my body that should be any big mystery to a boy your age. She says perverts are born of denial and frustration, that us women have a big responsibility to manage the male sex drive properly.”

Wallace gawked in confusion. Sasha then stepped back into his arms. "I never said you had to stop."

Tentatively, disbelievingly, Wallace unbuttoned her blouse and slipped his hand inside, and for the first time, cupped the naked breast of a woman.

"What's it for, Wallace?"

Wallace drew back slightly and grimaced. "What?"

"What's my breast for? What does it do?"

Wallace groped for an answer. His mouth worked. No sound came out.

Sasha stepped back out of reach again, and his hand came free. "You can't touch me if you don't answer my question," she said gently.

Wallace stared at her breasts showing through the parted blouse. They were the perfect size and shape, better than anything he had ever seen in the Playboy centerfolds at the drugstore in town. "They're for feeding babies," Wallace said in a broken voice rife with embarrassment.

"Duke touched me once," Sasha said. "He wouldn't be honest with me. He tried to make fun of it all, of sex, and the purpose for our bodies. I never let him touch me again."

Sasha smiled at his confusion. "Mother makes me do it. I promised her. I swore to Allah, even though we don't really believe in Allah, not like my father does. My father's an absolute fanatic about Islam, his religion."

Wallace floundered. "Oh, yeah?"

"My father says we're no better than the animals if we don't use the brains Allah gave us to better manage our lives." There were sudden tears in her eyes. "My parents worked for the United Nations. That's how they met. Mom caught me messing around with a neighborhood boy in

Riyadh once and made me watch a tape of a little girl dying in a field hospital in Somalia. They hadn't been able to feed her. They couldn't even get a good intravenous drip going. She was just all wasted away, blind, brain-damaged. But it took her a long time to die. She tried so hard to keep breathing. My Mom made me watch it until the little girl was gone and they wrapped her up in her dirty blankets and took her away."

Wallace was frightened the intensity of her anguish. "Why?" he asked, horrified that her parents could have been so cruel.

"Because too many unwanted babies are born to people who just fuck each other for the fun of it," Sasha said, "and Mom doesn't want that to happen to me. She says I can do it if I want, whenever I want, if I take all necessary precautions, and I choose a partner who will be responsible. Most boys don't want to think about babies when they're having sex, but it's what sex is for. If an unwanted baby is born, we can't always count on other people taking care of it, or loving it. It might die like that little girl I watched die, and the responsibility for its death would be mine."

Wallace was speechless. Unexpectedly, she stepped back into his arms. She put her arms around his neck and murmured something Arabic in his ears.

Wallace blinked back tears of penitence. "I'm sorry?"

"I said thanks for not laughing at me."

He couldn't resist the renewed temptation of her even knowing she was going to stop him before he went too far. She gave him a soft, lingering kiss and let him put his hands wherever he wanted. He was just about to push away from her having taken all he could take when she

ran her hand down the inside of his pants leg and gently squeezed.

With his mouth open, his tongue possibly hanging out, and his eyes definitely crossed, Wallace had an embarrassing personal accident. Sasha felt it happen. She had meant for it to happen. “We really should be responsible about such things, you know,” she said with a smile.

Wallace croaked awkwardly in protest, half bent at the waist. Sasha stepped back. “Gotta run for now. Give me a call later.”

She whirled about and vanished out the door.

Wallace stumbled blindly after her, then thought better of open pursuit. He had a more pressing need for a clean pair of underwear.

Aunt Bernice called up the stairs. “Wallace, are you up there?”

“I’m up here, Bernice!”

“I thought I heard someone go out the front door!”

“Just me! I had to go to the bathroom really quick!”

Less than a half hour later, Wallace watched from his bedroom window as Sasha and her mother left in their battered old Mercedes. He sat on the edge of his bed, still enveloped in a warm halo of happiness, already madly in love forever with Sasha Shahar Abdul. She had tore through his soul like a tornado through a trailer court, and he was never going to recover.

Memory of the mushroom finally intruded. The whole world had turned strange on him, first Sasha’s wicked behavior, and then a mushroom ripping off Lewis Carol’s *Alice in Wonderland*.

But the fact remained that the fungus could be toxic.

Whoever, or whatever, phenomenon was responsible for the markings that spelled out two legible words, there was a risk of someone poisoning themselves. The woods along the west side of Willington attracted mushroom hunters from miles around. He had to at least take a run back to the grotto and assess the extent of the hazard.

He glanced at his watch. Another two hours of daylight remained.

“Supper!” Bernice called from below.

Wallace went down and ate. Bernice’s evening meal was extravagant as usual. She had her hair done up and she smelled of fresh soap. By the telltale gleam in her eye, he suspected Brother Sebastian would be paying a visit after her return from church.

Wallace had heard rumors about town of the affair between the town’s minister and the attractive spinster on Forest Drive. He would have preferred a sexual liaison to the true nature of their relationship. In reality, Bernice and Brother Sebastian did nothing but spend hours kneeling face to face in the dark closet, confessing with tearful abandon and in intimate detail the temptations that put their immortal souls at risk. They never touched one another.

Wallace finished his meal still a bit hungry. Bernice never prepared more food than could be consumed at one sitting, and she had never fully compensated for his growth and increased appetite in recent years. Only his monthly allowance from the trust fund and an occasional Big Mac kept him from wasting away to a physique more in line with Bernice’s meatless frame.

“I’m going to the library,” he announced. “Back at nine-thirty.”

Maligoth

“Brother Sebastian will be by,” she said, friendly warning to steer clear until he was gone. In his younger years, she had sent him off to the movies during Sebastian’s visits, and the two had picked him up in the pastor’s car afterward.

Wallace went out the front door, ducked around back, and jogged down the winding path into the ravine. He selected a well-worn foot path that followed the bottom of the dry run-off into the densest part of the woods. His private grotto was nothing elaborate, just an acre of rich humus surrounded on three sides by a low wall of shale outcropping. The woods continued on back another mile before opening onto the new four-lane state highway bypassing Dale City and Willington.

A scattering of mushroom waited for him, each reading a distinct *eat me* on their pinkish caps. Wallace had no interest in a closer inspection. Instead, he followed their trail of growth, wondering why so many were growing in the dry soil. It hadn’t rained for a week, but this part of the woods was covered with a pink carpet. He had never seen the phenomenon before. He doubted if anyone had.

The mushrooms grew all the way to the highway. There, he found evidence that someone had been picking the fungi. He stooped and touched the severed stem of a specimen and rubbed his moistened fingers together. Sometime during the past day a good-sized patch of the growth had been cleaned out.

Wallace used a cash register receipt and a ballpoint pen to sketch a rough image of a specimen. He then jogged to the library in the center of town and thumbed through three mushroom and fungi field manuals without deciding upon the identity of the species in question.

Trouble was brewing. He could feel its ominous approach as surely as the cloying aroma of the fungus clinging to his fingertips. If one mushroom hunter had gone on a picking binge, others were sure to follow. It seemed inevitable that the woods would soon be filled with people.

He thought of stopping by the police station on the way home and giving the authorities adequate warning of his discovery. He dropped the idea when he rehearsed in his imagination an encounter with Sergeant Boston at the front desk. *“Hey, Sarge, I found this mushroom that says eat me on it, like in those Alice in Wonderland stories, so I think you’d better rope off the woods and post a thousand guards until the Food and Drug Administration approves them for human consumption.”* And the Sarge would mutter a derogatory obscenity and remember his irresponsible story the next time Duke punched him in the face and broke something truly worthy of a police report.

Wallace went home before Aunt Bernice returned with Brother Sebastian. It had been a rough day, and he intended to rest for a few minutes while waiting for Sasha. He always had his window and the tree to slip in and out of the house unseen and unannounced.

Instead, he fell asleep for the night. He had one nightmare of being poisoned by the mushrooms on a Swiss steak Aunt Bernice forced him to eat at breakfast, another of being lost in the woods and surrounded by a grotto with walls a mile high, and one magnificent wet dream starring both Sasha Shahar Abdul and her mother, Sylvia, both of them naked and vying for his attention.

He was sleeping when Aunt Bernice checked his room at midnight. She stood in the dark doorway staring at him

Maligoth

for a time, then quietly closed the door behind her. Neither of them was among the light sleepers and early risers about town who heard the sharp, piercing scream echo in Willington during the quiet hours just before dawn. A brief thunderstorm at daybreak washed away the pool of blood congealing on a sidewalk three blocks away.

Eight

During the course of the night, Patrick Sieman forgot who he was. Fifty years of human existence slipped quietly away. His partial death was a transparent process and therefore entirely painless. He continued to recognize the house about him as an abode of sorts, but along with his human memory went understanding of mechanisms as simple as a door hinge.

And he discarded his clothing.

He recognized the changes taking place within him as a time of vulnerability. Until they were finished, he would hide in the darkness from the light of day.

He was not alone in the damp and cool semidarkness. The shape curled up against the far wall was like himself. He watched her shallow panting and bodily tremors from time to time, thankful that her alarming cries of pain and fear had finally subsided.

Maligoth

Light seeping through the basement window glimmered on shiny, scaled skin. He recognized her as female, but naming things was beyond his capacity now. He had no idea of who she had been, only that she shared with him this moment in time and space. Earlier, she had engorged herself on the boy who had come to their door with an offering of unpalatable food. She had denied him most of her kill. Pieces of the body still lay scattered about, all the soft parts devoured.

She was sleeping peacefully now, but his own hunger continued to burn in his gut. He feared that he would die if he became too weak to hunt, and he ventured alone into the night just before dawn. His new body felt light and powerful. It worked a bit differently that he thought it should. He painfully twisted each joint in his arms and legs until he got the hang of their new mode of operation, then fled through the night in joy of his newfound freedom. He could see in the darkness, and hear the owls sweeping down to snatch mice from the grass. He could smell human prey sleeping behind their walls of wood and glass. If he had to, he would take one of those.

Before his hunger forced him to pit himself against physical barriers, prey came to him instead, walking down a path of flat stone toward lights in the distance. She screamed when he stopped from the darkness to block her way. He would have apologized for his hunger had he been able to speak. As it was, he regretted the brief and necessary violence that followed.

The bite to the throat was instinctive. It worked this time. He had grown teeth during the night, large and sturdy teeth in a powerful and enlarged jaw that effortlessly severed arteries, muscle, and even tendons. He

William G. Tedford

held tight while she flailed in her death throes, then tossed his kill over one shoulder and hurried her back to the basement. There, he picked away the tasteless layers of covering and fed on the soft parts of the body during the quiet hours of dawn.

At first light, the female awoke and took what was left away from him.

Nine

The sound of the downstairs shower awoke Wallace at dawn. He lay awake in bed, listening to the drone of running water for one half hour. An evening's penance with Brother Sebastian often led to bouts of obsessive washing.

He then rose and pulled on his pants. Barefoot, he negotiated the upstairs hall and staircase, avoiding the creaking boards that would alert Bernice to his movement in the house. He went into the basement and shut off the hot water valve to the heater.

Bernice cried out in the sudden drop of water temperature. Wallace waited until she stopped muttering in frustration and shut the shower off before he turned the hot water back on and returned to his room. He lay back down on the bed fully dressed and tried to snooze for another hour or two.

The sound of traffic out front kept him awake. Forest Drive was not a through street. Several times during the night, lost traffic ventured down the dead end. They came and went quietly. This particular morning, he could hear idling engines and the busy opening and closing of car doors.

Bernice was in the downstairs closet in prayer when he left the house to investigate. He paused on the front porch, alarmed by the sight of two Dale City patrol cars parked just up the street. Technically, Willington was the responsibility of the sheriff's department, but the Dale City police were closer, and often responded to calls in an unofficial capacity.

An officer was talking to Sasha and her mother in front of their house. The two women turned as Wallace approached, offering him a close, side by side comparison of the two. Sasha was the tallest of the pair. Her mother had a slimmer, athletic build. Both had long, luxurious hair, Sylvia's a rich auburn, her daughter's coal black cut Cleopatra-style just above the eyes. Sylvia's eyes were green and flecked with gold. Sasha had huge brown eyes and a darker skin tone, evidence of her father's Arabian heritage. They were both alert and outgoing women. A day ago, Wallace would not have dared approach either of them as boldly as he did now.

"Is it something I can help with?" he asked of the two.

The Dale City cop resented the intrusion, but resigned himself to business. "Do you know Jimmy Smith, son?"

"Sure. I don't know him personally, but I've seen him driving the new pizza car around town. He's was a sophomore this past year."

“Have you seen him about at any time since last evening?”

Wallace shook his head.

“How about Sherry Phillips?”

The name meant nothing.

“She’s a waitress at the Derby Club up the way.”

Wallace shrugged. He had never been inside the Derby.

“Did you hear anything this morning, say about five-thirty or six?”

Wallace glanced at Sasha and Sylvia for a clue, then shook his head again. The cop studied him for a moment, then turned back to the women. “If you happen to run across either party or hear about anything that might pertain to our search, give us a call.”

“We most certainly will, officer,” Sylvia purred, and watched the officer turn reluctantly away and return to his car. “Nice butt,” she murmured appreciatively.

“Mom, really.”

Sylvia glanced at Wallace and winked at him. Wallace was certain he turned bright red in that moment. “I see that Sasha managed to draw you out of your shell after all.”

“What’s going on?” Wallace said, anxious to change the subject, and alert to anything that might involve the mushrooms in the woods.

“Jimmy Smith is missing,” Sasha said. She pointed up the block. “He left his car at the top of the street. It was still running. He had a pizza delivery at Peg’s house. Nobody answers the door, although the cars are in the drive. Shades are open, though, and they can’t see anyone inside. I guess there’s a waitress missing, too. Someone

heard screams this morning. That was a few blocks away, though.”

Wallace was appalled.

“Gotta run,” Sylvia said and gave her daughter a peck on the cheek. Wallace watched the fluid motion of the older woman’s body as she hurried to her car.

“Got the hots for my mom?” Sasha said.

Sasha’s quirky smile embarrassed him. “No, but she sure is nice. And smart.”

Sasha’s smile intensified. “Like mother, like daughter?”

“That’s for sure.”

Tires squealed a couple blocks away. The noise sent a tendril of panic coursing along his nerves. A beige pickup tore down the street and braked with a squall of bald tires in the parking space left by the departing Mercedes. Wallace backed away, intending to make his escape before Duke caught sight of him.

“Don’t run,” Sasha hissed in a warning tone of voice. Wallace paused, reluctant to brand himself a coward in Sasha’s presence.

“Psych him out,” Sasha offered as an alternative.

“Psyche him out?”

“You can do it.”

By the time Wallace decided to ignore her advice and obey his original impulse, it was too late for a clean escape. Duke eyed Wallace with a glare of hatred from behind the wheel. “We’re going looking for Jimmy,” he said to Sasha. “Wanna ride along?”

There were three others in the bed of the truck. Wallace recognized all three from his senior year. One

nodded a friendly greeting. Wallace returned a nod of his own.

“Who you getting friendly with, geek?” Duke muttered threateningly.

Wallace expected to bungle his reply. Instead, his anger flared unexpectedly. “None of your concern, Bluto, or are you looking for another bicycle to trash, you adolescent shit?”

Duke threw the door of his truck open and stormed out. Wallace held his ground, counting on Sasha to intervene. So, apparently, did Duke. Duke balked at displaying another bout of violence to a larger and mostly unsympathetic audience. The menace he radiated evaporated in an instant.

“I’ll take care of you later, punk.”

“Make sure I got my back turned to you again, hot shot.”

“Don’t clown around!” one of the three in the pickup admonished. “We gotta find Jimmy. His parents are worried sick.”

“We think some pervert got him,” Duke ventured in a business-like tone of voice to Sasha, “maybe dragged him out in the woods and wasted him. Same with the lady from Derby.”

Wallace put his hand on Sasha’s arm to catch her attention. He leaned close so that only she would hear. “I went back out last night. Those mushrooms are all over the woods.”

She grimaced in displeasure. “The one you wrote on?”

“I didn’t do that! There’s thousands, millions of them! They’re all the same!”

“Say what?” Duke queried.

Wallace ignored him, watching anxiously for a reaction from Sasha. “Half the town’s going to be out looking for Jimmy and that waitress,” she said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t eat any of them!”

She shrugged her helplessness. “Someone would have gotten sick by now if they were poisonous.”

“No! Toxic reactions can show up hours, or even days later!”

Sasha nodded up the street where one lone patrol car remained. “If you think it could be serious, you had better go tell the police.”

Duke was both irked and confused by the quiet conversation between the two, but Duke had become irrelevant. Wallace paused to consider his options, feeling weak with fright. The entire town would stumble blindly upon the mushrooms before the authorities had been forewarned. He couldn’t allow that to happen. He started up the street feeling the weight of Duke’s angered stare at his back.

“I’m going to go with Duke to see what’s going on!” Sasha called after him. “I’ll be back this afternoon!”

One of the police officers took notice of his approach. Wallace fumbled for the words to express himself. “Sir, there’s mushrooms in the woods. All over the place. I don’t think they’re edible.”

Duke’s pickup truck roared by. The cop just stared at him.

“Yes?”

“Everybody’s going to be in the woods. I think someone’s going to get poisoned.”

“Mushrooms, you say?”

“Toadstools!”

The cop frowned. “Why in hell would anyone eat a toadstool?”

“They smell good.” It sounded stupid even to his own ears.

The cop nodded his willingness to acknowledge Wallace’s good intent. “Okay. Toadstools. It wouldn’t surprise me if someone poisoned themselves. It sure as hell wouldn’t be the first time. Do you live on this block?”

Wallace pointed. “Last house.”

“Do you know who lives in this house?”

The cop nodded to indicate Peg Sullivan’s little bungalow with the two cars parked in the drive. “I used to deliver papers,” Wallace said. “Peg is usually gone by seven or eight in the morning. She’s a secretary. I don’t know where.”

“Who’s her friend?” the officer said, indicating the second car.

Wallace shrugged. “Don’t know, but I see him around quite a bit. Carries an attaché case, dresses nice. Probably a salesman.”

The cop muttered his thanks and turned away. There was nothing more Wallace could do. Mushrooms could rot away as quickly as they sprouted. If he made a pest of himself and the police found nothing in the woods, even Sasha would laugh at him.

He returned home, closed the front door behind him, and went to the closet in the dingy downstairs bedroom feeling awkward and meddlesome.

“Aunt Bernice?”

The harried murmuring continued.

Wallace cracked the door open. A sliver of light fell

across Bernice. She wore a tattered robe with her still wet hair in a snarled tangle across her shoulders. She dipped her face and jammed her eyes closed.

“Pray with me, Wallace?”

He sighed, relented, and stepped inside the closet, closing the door behind him, and dropping to his knees. Bernice murmured her prayer repeatedly. “Lord Jesus Christ, protect me from the temptations of evil that I may carry your message to the world. Get thee behind me Satan, for you are condemned to the lake of everlasting fire.”

Not that Aunt Bernice had ever been much of an evangelist. Willington had little tolerance for the eccentric Penance Church. Membership stood at forty-two by Bernice’s last count. Only once had he ever suggested that she try the county mental health center in Dale Center to find out why she felt so guilty about so many things and so fearful of the world around her. Her reaction has been a hysterical diatribe that had lasted an entire evening. Since those days, they had learned to adapt to one another’s idiosyncrasies. His only alternative to her care had been a boy’s home, and Bernice had no other means of financial support aside from the trust fund given to her to support him until he graduated from high school.

“Wallace, I’m scared,” she confessed.

Wallace knew better than to try to console her. He had been through this before a thousand times.

“I feel the presence of Satan. He only tempts those who resist him. Only the wicked know peace of mind, for they are already condemned to everlasting hellfire. But I don’t know for how much longer I can resist. I’m not as good a woman as I should be. I can’t defend myself against

the thoughts and feelings Satan puts into my head. If he puts another physical temptation into my path like he did last night, I fear I will succumb and betray my Lord and condemn myself to eternal damnation. Brother Sebastian may have already fallen. He wants me to do such sinful things with him.”

Wallace rose to his feet, waiting to be dismissed.

“You, too, are being tempted, Wallace,” she added. “Your soul will be doomed if you fall prey to the foreign influences that have invaded our neighborhood. Do not accept the offering of flesh the devil has made to you.”

Wallace backed from the closet and gently closed the door behind him. There was nothing he could do for her. He wandered into the back yard and could hear voices calling to one another from the woods. Three local boys walked among the trees a short distance away, searching every gully and fallen log in their path for a lost pizza delivery boy and a waitress.

Either the mushrooms were gone, or they weren't immediately toxic. Otherwise, he would have heard ambulance sirens by now. Hopefully, there were experienced mushroom hunters among the searchers, enough to pass the word not to fall prey to the freakish message on the pink cap of the rogue species invading the woods of Willington. Who, he wondered again, would be so dumb?

Wallace waited patiently for Sasha's return. The morning's cloud cover cleared away by late afternoon. By dusk, a full moon had risen into the sky. Wallace sat in the living room, reading, listening to Bernice hustle about the house. She finally stormed out the front door

muttering something about a church gathering, repentance, and the end of the world.

As soon as she was gone, Sasha tapped at his front door. Wallace went down to let her in, thinking how much she looked like a dark angel with her hair all blown about and filled with twigs and debris and her dark-skinned face smeared with dust. Her shoes were caked with mud and her fashionably torn jeans ripped even worse across her left thigh. “No, I didn’t eat any fucking mushrooms,” she muttered on the way up the stairs to his bedroom. “Duke tried to make me eat one, but I spit it out.”

“How long have you been waiting outside?” Wallace called after her.

“Just got back.”

Wallace followed her down the hall, but stopped dead in his tracks when she began to strip off her clothes. She shucked off blouse, jeans, underwear, and loafers. Stark naked, she disappeared into the bathroom and left the door open behind her.

“I saw your Aunt leaving!” she called out as the shower started. “How long will she be gone?”

“Two hours or so.”

“Good!”

Wallace sat on the edge of his bed, his hands trembling. He stared in disbelief at Sasha’s pile of clothes on the floor. When Sasha reappeared, she had a towel wrapped around her wet hair and another covering her body. “I hope you don’t mind. Mom’s not home and I locked myself out.”

Wallace shrugged. How could he possibly mind? His face felt hot enough to melt wax. He fumbled for something in the way of idle conversation, fearful she’d

loathe him for the way his eyes kept roaming to her bare legs. "What does your mother do?" he asked finally.

"She's a model at the mall."

"Where's your dad?"

"He travels. They see each other two or three times a year."

"Did anyone eat any of the mushrooms?"

Sasha threw her arm up in exasperation. "Everybody and their uncles ate the mushrooms! The whole damned town thinks it's a big joke!"

"But..."

Sasha sat at his side and eyed him solemnly. "If they're poisonous, Willington's going to make national news, Wallace. Everybody's going to die. I know you're right. There were others trying to warn everybody of delayed symptoms should they be toxic. Nobody knows what species they are."

"Is it over now? Did Duke bring you back?"

"No, it's not over. Everybody started partying and acting crazy. They're all still out there. I walked back alone."

Wallace stared at the floor, still convinced that he came in a distant second to the bully in Sasha's eyes.

Sasha gave him a sad smile, all but reading his mind. "Duke's just a friend, Wallace. If he wasn't such an airhead, I'd love him. I'm going to have a problem with you, too, you know. You think too much. You don't know how to fly. That's why I behave like such a hussy around you. I'm hoping to be the one to crack your cosmic egg."

Wallace smiled, pleased that Sasha was as educated as she was beautiful. "You've read Joseph Chilton Pearce."

"Yes, I've read Joseph Chilton Pearce." She tossed her

towels over Wallace's face, first the one about her head, then the one about her body. In the time it took him to snatch them away, she had dived beneath the covers of his bed. She fluffed a pillow and pulled the covers to her chin. "You can join me if you want, but you have to stay dressed. I don't mean to be a tease..."

"But we have to be responsible about such things," he finished for her.

She chuckled. "I didn't plan on loosing my house key, and mother's going to be half the night getting back home. Does your Aunt ever barge in on you in the middle of the night?"

"God, I hope not."

"Got any condoms lying around? Unused, of course."

He dipped his head in embarrassment.

"I didn't think so. Too bad." She held the blanket open for him. "Be my guest."

Wallace crawled in at her side. She rolled against him and draped the blanket across his shoulders. He lay against her soft body smelling of soap and tried not to let his rising passion get the best of him. He kept his hands splayed across the soft skin of her back.

She stirred against him, smiling. "What's the matter, Wallace? Got the hots for the girl next door?"

Wallace jammed his eyes closed in torment. He had another personal accident thirty seconds later and rolled away with a moan of frustration.

"Sorry." She watched him climb to his feet in renewed misery. "Turn out the lights on the way out, will you?"

By the time he showered and changed clothes and made it back to the darkened bedroom, Sasha had fallen asleep. Rather than continue with his self-imposed

Maligoth

torture, he pulled his desk chair around and sat watching her sleeping in the moonlight streaming through the window.

The night outside grew far, far too quiet. He went to the window, glanced at Sasha's darkened house, then into the utter blackness out back.

What had it been like in the woods? Had anybody gotten sick yet? He had yet to hear his first ambulance siren. But he heard something else, like a cry or a call rising and falling almost above the range of human hearing, something like a human voice, a choir maybe, but maybe not. Haunting, seductive, maybe just dim music filtering through the trees from a neighborhood on the other side.

He resisted the urge to check it out until Bernice returned home. He couldn't afford to have her look in on him and find Sasha sleeping in his bed. She arrived far later than he would have expected and went straight to bed. Wallace waited until the house had fallen silent again, then took a flashlight and left by way of the window.

Exploring the woods at night had never been much of a temptation. The trees were filled with raccoons, possums, and deer, harmless creatures, but always good for startling one half to death unexpectedly. This night, the full moon shone with a special brilliance.

And a mystery beckoned.

Wallace thought it his imagination at work, especially when the haunting singing led him to the grotto, the one spot in the wilderness of personal significance. Until he saw the light in the grotto, maybe the light of a campfire, he thought it safe to investigate. The party had to have

William G. Tedford

ended by now. The mushrooms were either gone or harmless. Why otherwise would it be so ungodly quiet?

He stopped on the ledge overlooking the recessed clearing to discover strange events still afoot in the woods. The glow of light was simple moonlight, except that the oaks formed an unbroken canopy of vegetation overhead. The moonlight was coming from...

...elsewhere.

Ten

He jumped from the ledge of rock to the soft ground to investigate. The acrid smell of ozone filled the air. A crackling could be heard, the sound of a high voltage electric current, like a distant lightning bolt just before the thunderclap strikes.

Five or ten feet wide, twice that in height, there was a hole in the middle of the grotto rimmed by blue light, an opening into some other landscape entirely. At ground level, despite being surrounded by hills and trees, he could now see a distant horizon and a portion of the night sky in the far distance. The breeze that reached him from the open plains carried with it the strange aromas of another world.

The portal faced Willington. Edge on, Wallace could see nothing but a vertical blue glow. Nothing at all could

be seen from the back except for the light cast upon the ground from the opening on the other side.

Twigs crackled in the surrounding woods. Heavy footsteps crunched the dry ground cover. The cool evening breeze turned to ice, and Wallace crouched along the base of the low outcropping of rock the very instant two onrushing figures leaped through the air overhead.

They struck ground with an impact that jolted the earth, squatting as they landed, and peering through the opening into the other world. Neither was entirely human, nor were they mere animals. They looked to Wallace like streamlined dinosaurs designed for power and speed. The size of their jaws warned of their carnivorous nature, but the shape of their skulls and their graceful movements hinted at a high level of intelligence and superb motor coordination. Their hands were oversized with three clawed fingers and an opposing thumb on each. Their chests heaved as they breathed, geared to a far higher rate of respiration. One of the two was smaller and of a slighter build, possibly female.

The male stepped through the portal to be enveloped in the moonlight. Its body glistened in the cold illumination. The female looked about before following. Her inhuman gaze fell momentarily upon their all too human spectator.

The face had been a human face, maybe even a recognizable face. It looked like Peg Sullivan from just up the street.

They sniffed the air, attuned to the eerie siren calling to them from just beyond the range of human hearing. The male was the first to venture away from the portal in that other world. The female followed, too captivated by

Maligoth

their new environment to bother with Wallace. They vanished from view when they moved to one side, then reappeared at a greater distance and began to leap about in elation of their newfound freedom. As Wallace watched, they raced off toward a distant stand of trees and vanished from sight.

A deer moved into Wallace's field of vision, its head cocked high as it tracked the retreating carnivores. Rather, it would have been a deer except for its heftier hind quarters and its oddly flattened face. It stood momentarily on its haunches, dangling its forepaws like a kangaroo. Its lower jaw working on a cud as it scanned the horizon for trouble.

Wallace gave a shuddering sigh of relief. The deer that was not a deer heard the sound and bolted.

Alone, Wallace rose slowly to his feet. He inched forward until his field of view through the portal spread out to encompass one hundred and eighty degrees. The terrain directly ahead was gently rolling grassland with scattered stands of trees, similar to the terrain about Wellington, except that it was missing trees and all signs of human habitation. A full moon shone upon the plains from the same position in the sky as the moon above the forest of Wellington.

Wallace stuck his hand into the scene, expecting to touch glass or a projection screen. He continued inching forward until it dawned on him that he was already completely through the opening.

Alarmed, he whirled about and saw that it was now the grotto on the other side of the unframed portal. Wallace pivoted in place to take a quick look at his

surroundings before ducking back into the darkness and the safety of his own world.

It was then that another and far more incredible thing happened. A patch of iridescent light appeared in midair in the center of the portal, an infinitesimal glare of silver light with rays of light shooting out vertically and horizontally. As he watched, it expanded to take the form of an animate, vertical shape, a snake perhaps, silver and gleaming like metal, except that it spread bat-like wings from behind its back.

Wallace had no time to react to the appearance of the apparition. The winged serpent opened its jaws, exposing curved fangs, and struck at him in a flash, biting him on the fleshy part of his right forearm, then rearing back with horrific magnificence.

As quickly as it had appeared, the image contracted and vanished, leaving him weaving precariously in the moonlight cast from beyond. The portal remained in place, undisturbed by the surrealistic incident.

The pain of the injury remained behind, and two puncture wounds, each leaking a tendril of blood. Wallace dropped to his knees in shock, waiting for the venom of the bite to reach his brain, or his heart, expecting in that moment of stunned surprise to be on the verge of death.

Nothing so untoward happened. Before him, a small herd of kangaroo deer moved calmly into view, feeding on the knee-high grass that undulated in the breeze. In the distance, the moonlight rippled across it as if upon the surface of an inland sea.

Calmed by the tranquility of the scene, Wallace climbed to his feet and backed slowly away. When he

struck the wall of shale behind him, he scrambled onto the ledge, then walked numbly back toward the house.

He paused at one point and found himself standing in a carpet of pink mushrooms. Kicking through the fungus released a cloud of spores visible in the moonlight. He watched the haze of light seep through the trees thinking that if he had been breathing hallucinogenic dust, he had an explanation for a hole between worlds and a winged serpent to go with it. He preferred an innocuous explanation for the twin puncture wounds on his arm. He hoped for one.

Emerging into his own back yard failed to end the nightmare. Duke's pickup idled in front of Sasha's darkened house. Forewarned by the sound of breaking glass, Wallace backed into the shadows and waited.

Duke stormed out onto the porch from inside the house, throwing his arms out, his head back, and bellowing into the night. "Where are you, you fucking bitch! I want you, damn it! Sasha, I want you!"

The downstairs lights were on in his own house. Brother Sebastian's car was parked in the drive out front. Sirens now wailed in the distance, sounding first from one direction, then another.

Wallace climbed up to his tree house ladder and hurried along the edge of the roof. Sasha had the window closed, but she was awake, and she raised it as he approached.

She swarmed over him as he climbed inside, her body as hot as a furnace. She cupped his head in her trembling hands. "I spit it out, Wallace!" she whispered in his ear, her voice unsteady with terror. "He forced me to put one in my mouth, but I swear, I spit most of it out!"

Wallace held her at arm's length, still too shaken by the animal rage he had heard in Duke's voice to deal with Sasha's strange panic. She was wearing one of his short sleeve shirts and, he discovered when he looked, nothing more. The moment at hand held the promise of every adolescent fantasy he had ever imagined. Under these circumstances, it was nothing but a distraction and an annoyance.

"Let me check on Bernice," he said. "I'll be right back."

He had to pull free of her grip, but she let him go without trying to follow. He went downstairs, trying to plan his moves and excuses in advance. He'd have to get Sasha and Bernice to the hospital. The mushrooms had been toxic after all.

"Wallace, I'm so hungry!" Sasha called down the stairs after him.

He couldn't find Bernice anywhere in the downstairs rooms. When he paused at the top of the basement stairs, he could hear her muttering prayers and breathing harshly from below. Labored breathing. He jammed his eyes shut, remembering the car in the drive. Brother Sebastian was with her.

"Aunt Bernice, are you down there?" His soft voice shattered the stillness. He didn't want to be heard. He didn't want for her to answer.

Shadows stirred across the cement floor. A pale leg appeared to view, stumbling. Aunt Bernice craned her head and peered up into the darkness of the stairwell. Sweating profusely, her hair matted against her back, she was naked, and trembling violently.

She had blood on her.

"Wallace, is that you?"

Wallace backed one step away in horror. “Aunt Bernice, is Brother Sebastian with you?”

She glanced furtively behind her, her movements quick and bird-like. “Yes, Brother Sebastian is with me, Wallace. Wallace, we’ve sinned.” She crossed her arms against her breasts and shuddered from head to toe. “We’ve succumbed to the temptations of the flesh.”

She flashed a sudden, brilliant smile. “You should have come to the church picnic, Wallace. We had pizza. Someone brought the most delectable mushrooms for a topping.”

Wallace started down the stairs in a panic.

“No!”

Her scream was an explosion, laced with abrupt anger. Gritting her teeth, her eyes wide with blind fury, she stopped Wallace in his tracks.

“Don’t come down here,” she growled, her voice suddenly cold and hard. “I am in the presence of Satan. I have fallen prey to the temptations of the flesh.” Her brows knitted, and her lower lip trembled. “Brother Sebastian hurt me, and I have become an instrument of God. I punished him, Wallace. I punished him so very terribly.”

“Aunt Bernice, you’ve been poisoned.” Wallace backed up the stairs slowly, fearful as well of encountering Sasha somewhere in the dark shadows behind him. “I’ll go for help.”

Tears flowed from her dark eyes. An absent look befell her. “I’ve failed you. I’ve failed my sister’s boy. I was tried by the Lord, and I have failed.”

She stared up at him. Wallace saw a peculiar look take form on her face. Gooseflesh sprang upon his body.

Hunger. What kind of hunger, he didn't want to even guess.

Aunt Bernice put a bare foot on the bottom step, looking suddenly confused. "Wallace, I need you. Come to me, child."

She opened her arms to him.

With a cry of terror that came out more like the squeak of frightened prey, Wallace closed and bolted the basement door.

If the wild mushrooms had been served at the church dinner, the entire congregation of the Willington Last Days of our Lord Penance Church had been poisoned. As soon as the Dale City police figured out what was happening, the area hospitals were bound to be overburdened with victims. He had no way of knowing what kind of medical help Sasha and Bernice and the others would need, how fast they would need it, how severe the symptoms would become, or even what form they would take.

Prepared to flee, Wallace put his ear to the basement door and listened for the sound of creaking stairs. He heard other sounds instead, indecipherable, but horrible sounds, and he leaped away from the door with a moan of despair.

He tried the phone in the darkened living room. There was no dial tone at all.

"Wallace!"

Sasha rose to face him from the shadows of a far corner of the living room, a pale wraith in the darkness. "I'm so cold. Wallace, I'm hungry."

He sidestepped to the front door. "I'll go for help."

He had to get away. He had to go for help. He had

Maligoth

sensed from the first that something like this would happen.

Eat me, the mushrooms read. Unimaginable treachery was afoot, and Wellington had fallen prey to it en masse.