

THE WIZARDS OF THE MOJAVE

'Butch' Ferraro shuffled off the bus into the blast-oven of the Mojave. His foul mood made worse by the Californian desert. The bus stop was as much a desert as the landscape. There was nothing here, except a dying diner. The best spots to view the Emerald City were further north. This was simply a place to grab a bite to eat before starting the long detour around the Quarantine

"Twenty minutes." the driver said lifelessly. Everything seemed lifeless to Butch; his awareness of death had sharpened a great deal in the last few days. He had certainly not been aware before. He was young, sixteen, still young enough to believe the universe centered on him, that death was something that happened to others. Butch had found out about death a week ago.

The flood of passengers spilling off the big diesel transport jostled him back to the dusty bus stop, with its' *Emerald City Cafe*. Despite the name, it was a greasy spoon. Already close to hurling, Butch stepped around to the back of the old building revealing a view of The Emerald City, itself.

Of course he had seen the cities on TeeVee, but this was different. Even in daylight, and with most of the city obscured by low hills, it was a spectacular sight. The tall towers stabbed high into the sky, yet remained impossibly thin and fragile. They looked as though they were made out of some bizarre cross of cotton candy and jade. Even a street punk like Butch was moved by the beauty of the city. The green spires, the blue sky, it looked unreal. This was someone's fantasy, and his only hope.

Slouching against the wooden fence that ran behind the cafe, Butch checked out the embankment. It was steep, but not enough to stop him. His heart quickened a beat.

“First time?”

Butch, the fugitive, flinched at the sudden sound.

“Sorry, son. I didn’t mean to scare you,” the cook said. Butch put a sneer on his face that had served him well on the streets of Los Angeles. The cook took one look at the gaunt, sneering face and decided that he would waste his smoke break elsewhere.

Sitting in the dirt Butch tried to breathe easy. He was acting like some freaking kid on his first run. Butch wasted a few moments cursing himself, the Staffy, and life in general.

He settled down with his legs dangling over the embankment, arms over a crossbar of the fence, and stared at the city. The Wizards had to help him. He didn’t care what it took or what he had to do, he was going to get their help.

A roar of diesels brought him awake. He gulped, and waited until he heard the bus fade off into the distance. He was committed.

“You missed your bus,” the cook shouted from the back door of the cafe.

“I’ll catch the next one.”

“That’s not until the morning.”

“Then it’ll be morning,” he snapped contemptuously. Butch’s shoulder itched as he waited for a hand to land there. Instead he heard the cook mumble something and the door close. The sun was low in the sky; soon it would be

dark and he would be on his way. Unless a cop grabbed him first. It wasn't smart pissing off the cook like that. The cops weren't going care about a punk who walked out of a hospital, but a trouble maker near the Emerald City: that was different.

The cafe looked just as greasy on the inside as it had on the out.

Butch settled onto a stool. "A sandwich."

"What kind?"

A stolen twenty dollar bill appeared on the counter. "Why don't you decide."

The cook looked at the twenty and then back to Butch. "You're going to try for the city." It wasn't a question.

"What's it to you?"

"Not a thing." The twenty vanished from sight and a three dollar tuna sandwich replaced it. Butch ate the sandwich and congratulated himself on reading the cook just right. The sandwich wasn't half gone when Butch dashed outside. He returned to the counter weak and dizzy.

"How sick are you?"

"Sick enough."

"Wizards aren't going help you," the cook said. "They don't care about us."

"I can't lose nothin' for trying."

"You can lose time. Running thru the desert ain't going to help you. Get to a hospital, don't be pinning your hopes on things that ain't gonna happen."

“I been to the hospital, the docs can’t do anything. I got the Staffy.” Butch noticed the cook backing up just a tad. He remembered when he could do that with a look and didn’t need the help from a bug.

“Sorry to hear that.” The cook sounded sincere. “But the Feds patrol the desert pretty well. You know how the Wizards overreact.”

Butch wished the cook hadn’t said that. The whole world knew that the Wizards didn’t like anyone bothering them. He wasn’t planning any air strikes. It didn’t matter that the green spires weren’t even scratched, The Wizards had let the whole world know that such actions would not be tolerated. They destroyed the Aswan dam, and the flood waters were still higher than a building when they hit the Mediterranean. There weren’t very many Egyptians today.

“What do you expect? If I get hit, I hit back hard. I can understand the Wizards.” Butch tried to sound like he had thought this all out, but he wasn’t sure it was in his voice. “You gotta respect their turf, then they’ll respect you.”

“You’re dreaming,” the cook took away the remain of the sandwich. “But I wish you luck.” Butch stood from the counter and started toward the door. With each step he felt his old life slipping away.

“One more thing,” the cook added, “there’s a dry wash about a mile from the embankment. It’ll take you as far as the hills”

“Thanks, man.” Butch opened the door, paused, then stepped into the night. The desert night was much colder then he had expected. Having lived his entire life in the concrete of L.A., he was now ignorant of what the desert was

really like. Shivering from the wind, Butch circled the cafe to head for the Emerald City.

The City was on fire. Each spire glowed like the chem-lights on the freeway after an accident. From over the low hills between Butch and the city, a red glow filtered up into the night. Red and green the alien city was like a giant christmas ornament. Filled with hopes and dreams. Butch stood there, dumbfounded for the second time that day. He had never read the Wizard of Oz, but had seen the movie. Now he understood why they were called Emerald Cities. He was convinced, that here, he would find what he needed. With shaky hands, he climbed over the wooden fence, and down the embankment.

The embankment was not too steep, and he was soon walking across the desert expanse. The dim light from the diner quickly faded leaving the green and red glow from the Emerald city as his only beacon.

The desert he walked thru was hard stone and twisted brush. The unyielding stone made his shins hurt after even a short while. This night was looking longer than he had planed.

As Butch walked along the hard desert floor, he tried to remember everything he had ever heard about the Wizards. It wasn't much; he had never cared about the news before. He was becoming aware of how much he did not know. He was just a little kid when The Cities first appeared. No one had seen the ships, the world just woke up one morning and there were green towers in deserts all over the world. To Butch, it was like a sudden holiday. No one went to school or work that day. All the grown-ups stayed home, excited. For a little

boy it was thrilling and not at all scary. There wasn't a channel on the TeeVee that didn't have a picture of The Cities. Everyone held their breaths, waiting to see what would happen next.

Nothing happened. Butch had learned that much before dropping out of school. All the governments and all the people had waited for the contact to occur, and it never did. The aliens never spoke, never signaled. It was as if the humans simply didn't exist.

Butch wasn't sure what happened after that or when some of the things he did know did happen. His memory was sharper on other events. Like when his mother got busted and the city put him in the first foster home. At the time it seemed so much more important. The other foster homes had become a faded series that melted from one scene into another, but that first was bright, hot, and searing in his memory.

The desert in contrast was cold. Even the hard stone seemed to suck the heat and life out of him as he marched. In the dark, with only a half moon to light the landscape, Butch felt as if he were walking on an alien world, perhaps even the one the Wizards had come from. A world of bleak stone and hard stars above. Butch was so lost in visions of their world, that he nearly fell in the inky darkness of the wash at his feet.

The dry wash looked more like a chasm. He considered looking for a better route down when he heard the truck. It could only be a patrol. He tried to scrambled down into the wash, but a sudden dizziness stole his balance. He tumbled to the bottom of the wash, and lay still.

He woke up looking at the Milky Way thru a haze of pain. Carefully he rolled over and rose to his feet. Locating the glow of The Emerald City again, started off once more.

The desert cold sapped his strength but he struggled on. Shivers raced thru his body uncontrolled. He was a city boy, unprepared for even a short journey. By the time he could see the first glow of the false dawn he still had not reached the hills. They were closer, but he had along way to go.

At first Butch welcomed the sun and the warmth it brought, then, the sky turned a deep blue and the sun became God's heat lamp, turned squarely on Butch. For the first time in his life, Butch felt true empathy, for the hapless and uncomprehending ants he had roasted with his magnifying glass.

As the sun and heat continued to rise. his thoughts lingered on memories of TeeVee westerns he had seen. He always thought the dangers of the desert were overblown, now his opinion changed. Desperately he needed to get away from the sun, to get something to drink.

The house was old. It sagged badly, nearly buckled with the years. Dancing and wavering in the shimmering heat, surely the house was a gift from God; a sign that he was going to beat the Staffy. It was, of course, abandoned. The occupants long since chased off by a government afraid of an incident with the Wizards.

Old tired wood creaked and threatened to break as Butch crossed the porch and entered the house. It was dusty, dirty, and stank of animal refuse, but he didn't notice. He simply collapsed to the floor and slept.

His sleep was deep, but far from untroubled. Two weeks ago he lived in the violent world of the streets, but that world was a stable one. He had known who he could count on and who he couldn't. Life made sense. That night he'd been at the hospital waiting on a comrade to finish getting stitches. It was a stupid argument he'd gotten into: fighting over an emergency room sofa. Butch won the fight, but not before getting a cut of his own that needed sewing up.

The cut didn't heal. It grew sore and smelled. A week later they'd told him he had the Staffy. They gave him all sorts of drugs and shots, but everyone knew about Staffy. It laughed at every attempt. He had felt a little better for awhile, the cut even looked like it was healing, but in the end the grey-haired doctor explained it to him. Butch wouldn't be getting any grey hairs of his own.

He had hung around the hospital for a few more days. Maybe the old man was wrong, a mixed up test or something. He couldn't avoid the truth very long. The way the nurses avoided his room or their looks when they did see him. There was nothing the doctors could do, so he decided to find the only ones who could. With a wallet full of money stolen from a fat woman downtown, and his own slim knowledge of the aliens, Butch headed for the Emerald City of The Mojave.

Butch awoke to green. The soft green light from the Emerald City filled the room. Groggy with hunger, thirst, and infection, Butch took a long time to sit up. The cut on his stomach hurt like hell, and it was starting to smell again. He knew he was going to have to get to the Wizards soon, or die out on the dirt.

Food, he decided, he could do without, but water he needed. It took only a few moments of trying to convince him that no faucet in the old house worked. Giving up on the idea of water, Butch decided he was simply going to have to make it to The Emerald City tonight. Another day under that sun would kill him. On shaky legs, he made his way out the backdoor.

God was on his side; Butch knew it. There, standing in what was once a yard, was an old hand pump. He stumbled quickly to it. When he pumped, nothing but dust and dirt came out. Butch didn't stop. God had put this here for him; there would be water. The wound along his side screamed in pain, but he refused to stop. A tiny trickle of rust-colored water began to flow from the pump. Butch dropped to his knees and greedily drank the foul tasting water.

After getting his fill, Butch had an uncharacteristic moment of foresight. Proving that lessons were not wasted on him, he fetched a couple of old mason jars and a sack from the abandoned house. Provisioned with water and the optimism of youth, he continued towards the Wizards.

Returning to the cover of the wash, Butch strained to recall anything he had heard about the aliens. The Wizards never ventured far from their cities. Like everyone else he had seen the fuzzy photos of them taken from far off, his impression was of giant black spiders. He tried to not think about the attempts to contact the Wizards. Planes flying over went down, cars that came to the cities were attacked. The Wizards did not let anyone trespass on their turf. What happened to those who did wasn't pretty.

Then there was Egypt. Even he remembered that clearly. He wasn't sure who had attacked The Wizards of The Middle East, and in the end it didn't matter. After the bombs and missiles failed to hurt their cities, the Wizards responded. Egypt paid the price for her neighbors' attacks. After that everyone pretty much decided to leave the Wizards alone.

Butch stopped and looked around. The hills had grown up around him, cutting off even the green glow from The City. Only the light of the half moon served to guide his steps. Exhausted from his trek, he sat and opened one of the jars of water.

The Wizards had staked out a turf; he could understand that. He also understood you didn't go packing in someone else's turf unless you were looking for a fight. If you didn't show the proper respect, of course there would be trouble. On the other hand, the Wizards never went looking for trouble. He was certain it was a matter of respect. He knew he was going to make it, 'cause God was helping him. The Staffy wasn't going to get him; the Wizards would see to that. Finishing off the last of a jar, Butch stood, let the dizziness pass, and continued following the wash eastward. The land was broken and his path was as crooked as a cop's word. The cold night was passing far faster than he would have liked. With every crest of a hill or turn of the ravine he expected to see the Emerald City, but the view continued to be twisting ravines and washes. He began to panic when the half moon started to slide behind the hill top. Darkness closed in around him, deeper and blacker than anything he had experienced on the streets.

Defeat washed over Butch. Giving in to exhaustion and illness, he sank to the ground and began to cry. It wasn't fair! None of it was, not the Staffy, not the desert, not his life! Sixteen years old, sobbing in the desert, death sitting on his shoulder, he was forced to admit that he wasn't as tough as he thought. He cried because he was going to die. He cried because he had been cheated, but mostly he cried because he wanted to be ten again. To have his mother and the home that life had stolen from him.

After a long time the tears stopped. Butch looked up at the stars hanging bright, brilliant, and hard above him. Something inside of him changed. Death didn't matter now, he wasn't going to quit. The Staffy might kill him, the desert might kill him, in the end *something* would, but death wasn't going to beat him. This was no false bravado, he was past that now. With a resolution powered by acceptance, Butch rose to his feet. His body wavered, the world spun, but step by step he pushed his way east.

There were many stumbles, many falls. He collected bruises, scrapes and cuts. Each time he fell it was harder to rise. Each time he rose he grew more unsteady, but he did not stop. The goal had ceased to exist, all that existed for Butch was the ravine, the darkness, and the next step. Death held no terror for him. It was a place everyone went. What mattered was how you got there. Then the darkness broke.

A faint green glow shimmered off the dirt and stones of the ravine. His spirit rose, and he pushed his tired, aching body faster. Breaking free of the ravine, he was greeted with a glorious view of The Emerald City.

Butch had thought he had seen the beauty of the city before; he had been wrong. The green spires luminesced in bair relief against the deep purple of the pre-dawn sky. Red light played and chased around the base of the spires, like fire brought to life and cast as children.

He sat down and stared at the city as the sun broke over the horizon. Its warmth soothed the chill from his body, and soon he was asleep.

He awoke to a blazing sun. The world was all heat and pain. His throat was closed from thirst, his skin burned with pain. Mustering what little strength he had left, Butch tried to crawl to the shadow that teased him from such a short distance away.

The shadow shifted and drew away. Awareness pierced his delirium, he was looking at a Wizard! It towered into the sky, nearly ten feet tall. Up close it looked less spidery; but rather more crablike. Its hard-shelled body was a blending of reds and yellows, without, as far as Butch could see, any form of a face. Spaced evenly about this huge body were ten legs, each ending in a complex arrangement that he could only guess were feet.

Butch pushed himself up to his hands and knees and reached out with one hand. Red skittered back as though it had been bitten. Butch tried to speak, but only harsh, nearly silent, croaks came out of his throat.

Red stood immobile for several moments, then very slowly approached him.

Butch again reached out, once more it skittered back with amazing speed.

“Please.” A fellow human would have had hard pressed to understand him, much less an alien.

The creature stood motionless for a long time. Then, with a folding its legs, Red lowered its body until it was very nearly lying on the ground, and remained motionless. Butch simply lay there, waiting and watching. The Wizard began to move slowly closer. It would move a little, stop for awhile, then creep closer again. Too tired to try to move, Butch simply watched the Wizard approach. From about a yard away, Red reached out for him. One leg came up and stretched out, the foot unfolding to become a hand with a dozen fingers. Warily it touched his hair, jerking back its hand just as contact was made. Then Red reached out again, this time leaving its hand on his head. The fingers explored and pulled at his hair. Another hand then moved down to his back. With one hard extended finger it began thumping on his back, with hard sharp blows. Butch found his voice in painful screams.

Red leaped up and skittered a dozen feet away. Butch's world swayed and spun then went black.

The sharp pain of being dropped brought him back to the world. The Emerald City towered over him, and nearby were several Wizards. Yellow ones, whitish ones, pink ones, orange ones and standing directly over him, Red.

The Wizards were passing a glowing crystal from one to another, while running about without any apparent reason. Red screeched loudly, stopping all activity. Emitting high-pitched screeches and calls of their own, the Wizards circled around Red and Butch.

The crowd of giant crabs fought and shoved to get near him. Butch's head rang with pain from their shrill screams. Fingers extended from their foot/hands

and thumped him painfully. His hair was pulled, tufts yanked from his head. His screams were drowned in the roar of their voices.

An explosion brought silence. A Blue-green Wizard, with a voice of thunder, the voice of a magnum fired too close for comfort, approached. The yellows, whites, and others scattered before him. Only Red remained. Blue again boomed. Red spun twice and then folded its legs until it was lying fully on the ground. Red's voice screamed and screeched; cannons replied. Red stood to full height, extending two legs as hands and lifted Butch into the air. Following after Blue, Red carried him into the Emerald City.

He awoke in a green room screaming in pain. He was on his stomach, lying on a large round table. Three Wizards were in the room with him. Red, Blue, and a new one Purple-black in color. Blue held onto Red with two of its' hands-feet. Its fingers were striking Red's shell hard enough to fill the room with a rhythmic sound. Purple was prodding and stabbing Butch with a long grey metal rod, its tip sharply spiked. Each time the hard metal was jabbed forcefully into his flesh, Butch screamed.

"Stop it!" He said more than that, but the profanity was as lost on the Wizards as his pleas. Butch swung at the grey rod as Purple tried to stab him again. Purple voiced great cannon-like reports. Using its multiple feet-hands, Purple restrained Butch with thin dark fibers. It then resumed stabbing Butch with the grey rod. Eventually the stabbing was replaced by Purple slicing off layers of skin. It took the strips of flesh and exited the room.

Red detached itself from Blue's grasp, slowly approaching the table where Butch lay restrained. With one extended digit from its hand, Red began thumping solidly on his back. Butch cried out, but Red only increased in force. Blue came forward, and with its two forward legs, took Red back to the far side of the room.

Purple returned. Blue spoke, its deep vocal explosions seemed more like pistol shots now. Purple responded with the heavy deep sounds of a large caliber round. The two exchanged volleys for some time before Butch grew aware that now Bluesound like a magnum again and Purple was now more like a small rifle. With a sudden cannon-like report from Blue the room fell silent. Purple spun several times, dipped almost to the floor, and retreated away.

Purple moved to one wall and pulled out a table laid with gleaming sharp-edged tools. Red started to move closer, but was restrained by Blue. Red began screeching as Purple came back to table with the instruments.

Purple turned Butch, a cutting tool in one hand and a silver canister the other. Butch's last clear image was the silver canister coming down next to his head. Sleep left in bits and pieces. Like waking after a long winter sleep, Butch opened his eyes to light filtered thru green walls. He felt fine, rested, and strong. He felt well! Hesitantly he probed the wound on his stomach. It was gone. The Wizards had cured him. The Staffy was gone too, he was sure of it! He looked around and found that he was alone in a small room. The air was cool and pleasant, not at all like the hot dry desert that had nearly killed him.

The Wizards had taken his clothes, but in this comfort it hardly mattered. He sat up and took in the rest of the room.

He was on a mat made of deep blue fibers. There were no sheets or blankets, perhaps the Wizards didn't use them. There also didn't appear to be anything that looked like chairs, tables, or any other kind of furniture. Aside from the mat, the room only held only two large bowls.

Feeling better than he had in weeks, Butch stood and walked over to the bowls. One held water, and was nearly big enough for him to bathe in. The other had some brown stuff that Butch could not identify. Dipping his hands in the water, he found it perfect for chasing off the last bits of sleep.

He turned his attention to the walls. Now he felt uneasy about his lack of clothing. The walls were green, but not opaque he could see the desert beyond. In one direction lay the Emerald City, in the other nothing but the vast Mojave. He wondered how he was going to get the Wizards to bring him food when he saw a one of them coming out to the building. The Wizard touched the wall closest to the bowls, and the wall slid open. It was Red.

Red screeched loudly and entered the building, barely able to fit its huge bulk inside. Butch started to speak, but Red screeched again, reaching out with its front two legs, hands unfolding. Red grabbed him roughly, and with one hand began pawing at his hair. Up close and in much better shape than he had been earlier, Butch could see that the fingers had twice as many joints as a humans'. Red stopped exploring his hair after a few moments. It then extended one finger and began thumping him on the chest with hard painful blows.

Butch yowled, sure his ribs would crack. The pummeling had not gone on long when deep bass explosions boomed into the room. Red dropped him at once and spun around toward the open wall. Blue was there. It thundered twice more. Red moved out of the building much slower than it had come in. Blue reached into the room and removed the large bowl of water, replacing it with a fresh one. It hovered, seeming to consider the brown gunk in the other bowl for a moment, but let it remain, untouched. The wall slid closed, and Butch watched as Red, carrying the bowl of used water, followed Blue back to The Emerald City.

Turning away from the wall, Butch crossed the floor to his food and water. The realization growing in his mind that he was never going to return to his streets. That he could look forward to a long healthy life.