

The Red-Eyed Bug of Byrgir

by Albatross, June 2015



School was done for the day and the sun was still high over the little mountain town of Byrgir as Jacque shed her uniform while walking. She pulled the form fitting body suit over her head and hopped on one foot and then the other as she peeled her legs from it. Gyl laughed at her.

"We can stop for a second if you want to get changed," he said walking briskly next to her, still suited.

"Don't want to waste any time," Jacque gasped as she wrestled her foot from the suits last grasp. "There! I couldn't wait to get out of that thing," she giggled letting the sun warm her skin and shoving the now miniature suit into her bag. "You should change. Your parents will know you were in the woods if you get your suit dirty."

"I will once we get there," he said.

"Race ya! I'm gonna win 'cause you're still wearing that! GO!"

"NO Way!" he yelled after her, already far behind.

The two made their way down a path they had used many times. It skirted the edge of town and at a blind spot where the Cams couldn't see they leapt into the bushes. From there it was simple. Just slide down a bank and follow the stream out of view until they made the trees. Of course this took much scouting and planning, but so far this summer they'd been getting away with it. Nobody knew. They relished the delinquency. Not even the adults were allowed out of town.

Once in the shade of the forest Gyl stripped off his suit.

"Oh no! I got dirt on my ass!" he moaned.

"Told ya! You should listen to me more. I'm much smarter than you. I'm like a Primary. They're gonna take me away from all of you to some wonderful place while you dig ditches," she teased, shoving Gyl while he was trying to get his feet out of the leggings.

"Hey!" he fell. "I hope they do. If you were gone then we'd have the wonderful place." They both laughed.

"C'mon!" Jacque yelled, running into the trees.

They leapt back and forth across the stream, over boulders, up felled tree trunks, ever upward and away from town. On a particularly high boulder they paused and laid down in the sun panting. In the distance they could see the town and the ever-present fog that hung over it like a dome. All the factory noise was now an echo in the valley and bird song was the sound that tickled them.

"We should head back," Gyl said looking down at Byrgir.

"Nope. Not yet."

"But, we've gone far. Almost too far."

"I want to get up there," Jacque pointed to a spot up above the tree line. An area of fallen rock, shale, boulders and pines.

"That's too far! The Bugs will surely be up there! Dad says that if anyone heads into the high hills out of town the Bugs will get them!"

"I want to see one." said Jacque standing up. "C'mon! Don't be a chicken!"

"I'm not, it's just..."

"Look we'll be real sneaky. Like when we were finding the path. They will never see us. We won't get too close."

"Well, alright. Not too close!" he agreed.

"Great!" she beamed standing up. "Let's go."

*

They kept climbing, ducking from boulder to boulder, peeking over the tops, whispering back to one another. The sun crept as well, lower and lower, toward the peaks of the hills and the forest began to also whisper, in that mysterious evening way as it does when the shadows become longer, darker, and that desire for warm lamp light

finally licks our feral nature. We look to the glow of windows with an almost wistful nostalgia, somehow far removed from our age.

And so looked Gyl towards town.

"Ok, we tried to find one. I just got a message on my Cuff from Mom saying that I need to get home soon for dinner. But we're going to seriously get into trouble..." he was cut off by a buzzing noise.

Jacque shushed him as they both hid. Further up the hill a black object hovered over the fallen rock. The setting sun glinted off the dark metallic of the body. In a whirring whoosh it moved from stone to stone leaning slightly forward where the thicker part of the disc-like machine, a mass of variegated lenses, seemed to be intently scanning the ground before it. They had found a Bug!

Jacque watched as it moved. It would hover a moment, then quickly change direction in a strange pattern, the lenses always pointed down. It seemed erratic.

"We found one!" she whispered back toward Gyl. "They're smaller than I thought. It's no bigger than my table..." she noticed Gyl was still hiding behind the boulder.

"Get up here, Gyl! Have a look at it."

He crept up the boulder to where she was.

"I don't want to," he whimpered.

"Gyl! It's not that scary. Look."

It was still humming, hovering over the rocks. It moved fast then stopped, lenses still pointed down. What was it doing? Jacque wondered. Then she saw it. A mouse scuttled over a rock and the Bug moved with it. It was following it! Looking at it! Playing with it! She smiled.

"Gyl, it's playing..." she began but noticed Gyl was sliding back down the shale. The rocks began tumbling and she winced at the sound. She turned and slowly looked back over the boulder. A red light in the middle of the Bug's lenses was pointed straight at her. The Bug was pointed straight at her! It hovered still a good distance away, unmoving, but focused on her. She dared not move. Suddenly her Cuff activated and she glanced down.

"Citizen, return to town," the message scrolled.

Slowly she stood up, in full view of the Bug. Still it did not move. They looked at one another. Jacque then moved to her right. The Bug leaned and hovered the same direction. She did the same to the Left, and so did the Bug. She laughed and waved to it.

"Goodbye Mr. Bug! I'll come and see you again."

She then turned and ran after Gyl down the dark hill and back towards town.

*

"How many times have I told you!? No more running around out there! I know you were out of town in the woods. Do you think they don't know!? And those Bugs out there!"

"But Dad they're not bad..."

"What did you say? Not bad? Sam and a few of the boys tried to escape town a few months back. Do you know what happened to them? Well, at least Sam is still around. It's dangerous!"

"Your father's right, Jacque," said Byl, a friend of her fathers. The three of them sat around the kitchen table, the same size as the Bug.

"Now, I have to be able to trust that you can take care of yourself while I'm at work all day," her father continued. "Promise me! No more trouble!"

"No more trouble, I promise Dad," she said with her head down.

"Good. Run off to bed now. Byl and me, we've got things to discuss."

Jacque sloped off from the kitchen into the dark of the next room. They didn't know what they were talking about! The woods weren't dangerous. Not if you knew them like she and Gyl did. They were just scared. Everyone was scared. She knew what she was doing. Through the door she could hear the mumbling of her father and Byl. She put her ear to the door.

"They couldn't find a single unwatched sector," came Byl's voice.

"But the boys, I thought they had the Bug's routines figured." said her father.

"They had. But they just keep coming out with newer better models. They're always smarter. Thing is, the Bugs are only scouts. Can't do anything on their own. If we could move fast enough, strike and move, we might be able to get to the rebels before the Company guard is on us."

"How far are they though!? We've no idea if they're over those hills or miles away!" her father sounded exasperated.

"They're over those hills alright! The people can't live like this any longer. We can't be the only ones. We've heard of the other towns fighting."

"Heard from who, eh? Could be all rumors." he sighed. "It's for our own good, they say. It's for your protection from the dangers out there! The Company thinks we're all idiots. How'd we get into this?"

"Well, you know as same as me that we needed a Company. It wasn't safe without one. An individual can't exist out there on their own. That's why when we do this we've all got to stick together," Byl was interrupted by a noise.

"What was that? Did you hear it?"

Jacque ran to her room in the dark.

*

Jacque was excited to see the Bug again but it rained for three days. Nobody could go out in the rain. Not without protective rain gear. Also, Gyl was taking much more convincing. The Bug scared him, but Jacque was doing her best to convince him that it wasn't bad. The weather had finally cleared and after school they walked down Main Street. The armed Company Guard was out more than usual today. Lined almost entirely down the street. It was going to be more difficult to sneak out.

"So? are you coming or not?" Jacque asked him.

"I dunno. My Mom was plenty mad. I'm grounded even. Gotta wear this tracker so she can see where I am while she's at work. That's why I'm walking straight home." Gyl said, kicking a stone on the street.

"I've got an idea!" Jacque lit up. "Do you still have that cat... Boots?"

"Brilliant! Put the tracker on Boots! I like it."

"Yea! The tracker. It should fit on him, right? He's only about this big? Isn't he?" she said holding her hand out with her bag. "Your Mom might wonder why you spend so much time in the litter box though," they laughed.

The pair ran the rest of the way past the Company Guard and around the bend to Gyl's house. Boots was not as cooperative as they had hoped. They chased him around the house for an half hour before Jacque finally caught him. She proudly marched into the living room where Gyl was changing out of his uniform.

"I got him! And put the tracker on. Let's get out of here."

Gyl couldn't stay behind now. Not after all the work capturing Boots.

*

"We're going to have to take a different secret path today." Jacque said as they left the house. "They're watching our old one. I've been reconnoitering."

"What different secret path?"

"There's a good one by the tracks."

"But there are always Guard by the tracks," Gyl said wearily.

"Not today. Because there's so many of them about. They're not by the old hole in the fence. Remember?"

"We haven't gone that way since before the shipments started!" he gasped. "Ages ago."

"Yep, the ditches along the tracks. No one will ever see us there. And we can get back into the woods."

Jacque was right. The Company Guard had been pulled from the rail yards and they had no trouble sneaking along the ditches. They entered their verdure temple. The emerald ceiling, the chirping, the playful light winking at them, the soft stomp of the leaf bed, the hissing language of the trees, the furry congregation, a place safe from town and its worries. This was theirs, these woods. Gyl began whistling as he skipped along, but Jacque was way ahead and moving fast.

"Hey, slow up! What's your hurry?" he yelled up to her.

"I want to find the Bug again," she yelled back.

"Why do you want to find that thing again? They're dangerous," he panted catching up to her.

"No, they're not. I saw that last one playing with a mouse."

"How do you know it was playing with the mouse. It might have been trying to kill it," Gyl said.

"I can tell the difference, Gyl. I saw the mouse stand on its hind legs and sniff up at the Bug. And besides, you were too chicken to even look. What do you know?"

"Was not," Gyl said quietly.

"Then prove it. Let's go find the Bug. I want to talk to it." Jacque smiled.

"What!? You're crazy!"

"That's right." she stuck her tongue out.

They kept climbing, taking the same path that they had before and in almost the same location they saw the black disc buzzing around the shale. It hummed and moved like a

bee, Jacque thought as they snuck from pine to pine and boulder to boulder getting ever closer. Gyl hung back to watch from a distance. He saw Jacque move to within a stones throw of the black machine then she stepped out from behind the trunk of a tree and spoke to the Bug!

"Hello again Mr. Bug! I told you I'd be back."

The Bug swung around to point all of its lenses at her. The red light looked like an evil eye to Gyl. It hovered slightly toward Jacque and stopped. Once again Jacque's Cuff activated:

"Citizen, return to town."

"Ok, Mr. Bug. I will. I promise, but I brought you something new to look at." she squatted down and opened her bag. Boots came out fast. The cat ran over the rocks in the direction of the Bug. The machine swooped down and buzzed just off the ground in front of Boots, stopping him quick. He hissed at the Bug.

"Boots!" yelled Gyl, running up the hill.

The Bug hovered in a circle around the cat with its lenses whirring and clicking.

"You seemed to like the mouse so much. I thought you would enjoy a cat," said Jacque happily.

Her Cuff activated again, "Cat?" scrolled across it.

"That's right! It's called a cat."

"How dare you!?" yelled Gyl, now upon them. "How dare you steal Boots from my house!?" he froze as the Bug tilted up, pointing his lenses at him.

"That's a Gyl," said Jacque laughing.

The Bug buzzed up to the pair of them. Stirred wind blew their hair wildly as the Bug moved around them in a circle as it had with the cat. Gyl closed his eyes, waiting for it to tear him apart but he just felt wind and blowing dirt. After a moment he peeked and over the rocks he saw Boots running away.

"Oh no! Boots! He's gonna run away into the woods."

Suddenly, the Bug spun around and in a blast of wind it made quickly for the running cat. It was too fast for Boots. The Bug was on him in a second and once again stared the cat down with it's whirring lenses. Jacque and Gyl ran after and while the cat was petrified with fear by the machine Jacque scooped him up and put him back into the bag. The Bug floated in front of them, unmoving.

"Ok, Mr. Bug. We'll go back to town now. I hope you liked seeing the cat. His name is Boots, by the way. I'm Jacque and this is Gyl." She grabbed Gyl by the hand and pulled him, heading back down the hill. "Goodbye Mr Bug!" she yelled back.

They ran over the rocks and into the tree line. Jacque looked back and the Bug was still where they left it, hovering and watching them retreat down the hill. She waved. They ran into the trees. They had made it back to the stream when Jacque looked down and noticed that her Cuff had activated.

"Goodbye," scrolled across it.

*

"I told you they were friendly!" Jacque boasted, as the two of them walked back down their street as the sun fairly bled in the sky. It looked like the red eye of the Bug, thought Gyl. Like the red eye as it stared you down and decided whether or not to tear you apart. "I don't know, Jacque. It still scares me. Just because nothing bad happened doesn't mean much. We might'a got lucky."

"Nonsense! I think they really are up there to help us. They're just looking out for us."

A sad meow came from Jacque's bag.

"And you're a huge jerk for taking Boots! What? Were you trying to feed him to the Bugs!" he cried.

"I knew the Bug would like him, that's all."

"Well, he could've run away! And in the woods at that!" Gyl retorted.

"But he tried! And you saw the Bug, he stopped him! Maybe they really are up there to look after us."

They separated as Jacque got to her house first and said goodbye to Gyl. Goodbye — that was what the Bug said! It actually said goodbye to her.

She walked into the house and noticed that Byl was there in the kitchen again with her father.

"Jacque, come on in here," his voice sounded stern.

"Dad, I wasn't in the woods, I swear!"

"Jacque! Don't start off with a lie. Look, we know where you've been. Don't even try to lie to me. Stop now, you are not in trouble. Byl and I just need to ask you some questions."

"Questions about what?" Jacque fought back some tears.

"We need to know how you and Gyl are able to get into the woods? Apparently you two are experts."

*

"We are Dad! We really are! You would love it. It's so green and pretty and you can hardly hear the town at all." she gushed.

"Settle down. Now tell me and Byl."

"Well, we spent all winter scouting out the spots. We know where all the Cams are blind. Gyl even made a map!"

"Can you show us the spots?"

"Of course, Dad! It's easy."

Byl laughed and her father looked at him and started laughing as well. Jacque laughed even though she wasn't quite sure what was so funny.

"That's my girl!" he hugged her and kissed her hard on her head. "Now, I'm very proud of how smart you are. I really am. But you can't go back out there. Now, listen! Those Bugs are very real and they're dangerous."

"But Dad! I talked to one today!"

"What!?" her father and Byl balked.

"Gyl and I, we've seen it before. I saw it play with a mouse and today I took it a cat to look at! Gyl's real sore about the cat, it was his, but the Bug played with the cat and said Cat on my Cuff! and when I said goodbye to it, it said Goodbye to me, Dad, right on my Cuff!"

"Are you saying that you've been around the Bug and nothing happened?" asked Byl.

"Loads happened! You should've seen it catch the cat! It was way faster than Boots! It zipped this way and that over the rocks, like, Whoosh! Whoosh!"

Byl motioned her father over to the other side of the kitchen. They mumbled under their breath and Jacque couldn't hear them. Her father got real mad for a moment and she thought they were angry with one another. It's funny how adults always get angry with each other under their breath. After a long discussion, Jacque was very bored. She was about to get up and leave the table when they came back to her.

"Jacque, tomorrow you don't have to go to school. I want you to take me to the Bug," her father said very seriously.

"But Dad, it doesn't know you. What if it doesn't like you."

"Well, I'll hide. I want you to play with the Bug again, baby. But I sure don't trust it," he glanced harshly at Byl. " And if you are going to play with it I want to be nearby in case. Do you understand?"

"Ok Dad, but you'll see. They're not so bad. I think they're kind of fun!"

"We'll see. You'll show me tomorrow. Now, show Uncle Byl here on this map where your secret paths are."

*

The next day Jacque was giddy with excitement. She was going to play with the Bug and this time she didn't have to hide it. It was a gray day and that upset her a little. She really wanted her father to see the woods in the sunlight. After breakfast she and her father walked out the front door and toward her usual entrance to the woods on the outskirts of town. She was worried about the Guards. Lately they had been watching this path, but as they approached the area there was a lot of noise coming from the other side of town. Company Guard were running up all the streets and when they arrived at the stream, luckily enough, they were the only ones there.

She showed her father how to slide down the bank and follow the stream all the way to the trees. He followed her, but he seemed distracted. At every bird chirp and twig snap his head would spin around like one of her whirly bird toys. Once in the woods they began to make their way up the hill.

"Where is the Bug usually, baby?" her father asked. She pointed up to the rocky section of the hill where the lone pines and shale seemed to be frozen in a downward tumble. He pulled a pistol out of the back of his pants.

"Dad! You not going to hurt the Bug are you?"

"Only if he tries to hurt you, baby. It's just for protection."

As they neared the tree line, she pointed up. There it was, humming in its bee-like pattern. This time it appeared to be very interested in the trees across the hill. Her father's eyes were big. He squinted to get a better look, then glanced to where the Bug was looking and back again.

"Ok baby listen. I want you to go talk to the Bug, but you have to walk all the way over there to the right in the pines and come out to talk to it from over there."

"But Dad. The rocks aren't good over there."

"Baby! Listen to me. Go that way. I'll be watching. I won't let anything happen to you. Ok?"

"Ok Dad," she said and she scurried off in the direction of the pines.

Her father crouched between some large stones in a place where he had a good view of the Bug and put the machine in his guns sites. Sweat trickled in his eyes and he brushed it away. He thought it was sweat. It better not be rain. They would all be prepared, of course. Every man knew to carry his rain gear. He had his own and Jacque's with him now, but it would really muck up the works if it started raining.

He saw his daughter slowly coming out of the pines to the far right of the Bug. Her little voice bounced off the stone down to where he was.

"Hello again Mr. Bug."

He held his breath as the Bug spun around and slowly glided toward her. He kept it in his sights. His finger held tight on the trigger. She appeared to be talking but he couldn't make out anything she was saying, but the Bug crept ever closer to her. Quickly he glanced to the left. Where was Byl and the boys, damn it!? This was their chance. He looked back. Jacque was running down an outcropping of rocks, the Bug was directly behind her moving fast, she squealed, his breath quickened, it had her! He fired. The report of the pistol was deafening and echoed through the valley. Briefly he saw the Bug crash into some stone. He hit it! But, where was Jacque? Where was his daughter? He stood up to look. His knees were shaking. The ground shaking as well. He noticed stones rolling. It was a slide! The entire hillside seemed to be moving and taking him with it. He fell back and slid on top of the rocks until they crashed into a felled tree trunk near the tree line. A terrible pain ran up his leg into his back. His foot was pinned by stone. When he reached down the pain almost made him black out. It began raining. Clenching his teeth he managed to pull his rain gear out and stretch it over his head and arms. He still couldn't see Jacque, but he did see the Bug. It rose up from behind some boulders. It was damaged but still able to fly. He watched in terror as it moved down the hill. He then saw Jacque cowering under a tree. He tried to yell her name but the pain was too much. The hill started spinning.

"Don't worry, man. We gotcha! We gotcha!" somebody said. They were removing the stones from on top of his leg. It was Byl!

"Byl! Byl, get Jacque ... save her ... the Bug," he croaked. He was falling down a hole. The last thing he saw was Jacque, walking down the rainy hill at a distance, underneath the Bug.

*

When he awoke, he saw Jacque looking down at him smiling.

"Jacque! You're Ok! I'm so sorry. So sorry," he said. The white around her began to find focus. He found he was in a medical clinic. Byl was behind her. "Byl, what happened?"

"You're fine, first off," Byl responded. "I saw you were in trouble and broke away from the boys. I think they made it! I saw them on the crest of the hill. The distraction worked! By the time I made it to you I believe they were...out. Anyway, that's when I saw the damnedest thing I ever could've imagined! Your daughter there, walking down the hill using the Bug as a damned umbrella! Never would've believed it unless I were there. It was hovering over her, keeping her out of the rain. I pulled you from the stone and hid until they got far enough away from us. You're daughter is something else! She was even smart enough not only to train the thing like a dog, but she knew not to bring it to us!" Byl laughed.

"My daughter," he reached up and stroked her cheek. "The Bug tamer. How are you ok?"

"I told you Dad. They're not bad. They're protecting us. Who I feel bad for are the boys. Who knows what's out there, and what's gonna happen to them without the Bugs looking out."