



Volume 1  
Issue 1

conjunction

# The Reluctant Traveler

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**Vol 1, No. 1**

**“The Reluctant Traveler”**

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Distributed and published by Dime Novel Publishing

[www.dimenovelpublishing.com](http://www.dimenovelpublishing.com)

[www.conjunctionseries.com](http://www.conjunctionseries.com)

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ISBN: 978-0-9712734-2-9

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# “The Reluctant Traveler”

**W**here to start...that’s what Roy wondered as he eyed the empty house from the bushes across the street. It was a murky Wednesday evening, the sky the color of hot chocolate, frothed with whipped cream. The late-October winds whipped the bushes in which Roy hid, the branches biting and scratching at his face. He knew he could have chosen another spot, one a little more obvious perhaps, a little less uncomfortable. But no, what he was after required the utmost in secrecy, a clandestine act that would make even the infamous James Bond nod his head in approval. At least he had dressed appropriately—a black parka, black jeans, his favorite black sneakers—if not for the task, at least for the weather. Thunder clapped off in the distance and the sky lit up, temporarily illuminating the house of Billy “The Squid” Myers. When the sky settled back to its turbulent grayness, Roy could see that only one light was on in the house...upstairs...

Billy’s room.

Although the scene itself was strange, it was made even stranger by the ordinariness of Roy. He was the boy that everyone acknowledged but no one noticed. He was there but only when you looked. It was how it had been his entire life. He was sure, at one point, that when he’d been born, in his basinet in the nursery, next to all the other

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babies, that it had taken a while for his parents to find him. He could even picture other parents at the nursery window, looking in on their babies, finally noticing him, “hey, here’s another baby in there. I didn’t even notice him.”

All through his life, Roy had been ordinary. He didn’t live underneath the stairs, his parents hadn’t died, he hadn’t been abducted and sent to live with a carnival. He was just Roy, always seeming to live on the fringes of the world, on the outskirts of life. It wasn’t as if he was an outcast, one of those kids that was shunned on the playground or a kid that sat brooding in his room all day in front of the computer. No, everyone waved to him when he passed, smiled at him when they saw him. He was invited to birthday parties and to sleepovers. But he didn’t really have any real “friends” (and especially not a *best friend*). He always felt like he belonged somewhere else.

And that’s why he was in the bushes now. When he had woken up that morning, unsure of why, he had decided to step into life, to break that seemingly magic barrier that had always separated him from the rest of the world.

“Man, this sucks. Maybe I should come back on a better day...,” Roy mumbled to himself. He took a deep breath and parted the shrubs a little more, looking out across the quiet, suburban street dull in the streetlamps that flickered, as if in anticipation of what was about to happen.

“No,” he mumbled, certain that something was special about this time. He was somehow meant to be here. It was as if the decision he’d made this morning was a decision he had no control over.

Roy steadied himself, feeling his legs coil. He was ready, just like

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off the running blocks at the school track. He was the fastest long-distance runner at Emery Junior High. At least that's what he told his mom. When he took off, when he hit his stride, it felt like his feet weren't even touching the ground; that's what the coach said it would be like when he really applied himself. He'd fly around the track. The coach could see the potential in him; he just had to focus.

Focus.

A sound behind him startled him and his heart skipped. He swiveled around quickly, catching a branch on his face that scraped him from nose to ear. Wincing silently as he put his hand to his face to feel for the blood, while he searched the dark house behind him, the one that belong to Ms. Malone, the old woman whose bushes he was hiding in.

Maybe Billy knows I'm here, Roy thought. Maybe he heard about the dare somehow. The thought put a shiver up Roy's spine. If that was the case, then he was dead for sure. They didn't call Billy "The Squid" for nothing. They said that when he started fighting, it was like he had six arms—two to pin you down, two to punch you in the stomach, and two to wail on your face. But Ms. Malone wasn't any better either. If she caught him tearing up her bushes like he was (and who knows, she might be able to track him down by the size 6 shoe prints he was leaving in the mud) she'd come after him with, with...Roy thought about it for a moment, imagining her limping out the front door...with her broom stick.

"Old witch," he mumbled.

But no one came out her door, her house as silent as the street. But things felt tense, as if the streetlights sensed an impending something. The storm perhaps. And even though Roy waited a few more seconds,

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none of the infamous Squid's six hands reached into the bush to grab him.

Roy turned back to look across the street at Billy's house in the darkness and took another deep breath. It had to be now or never.

He scanned for it—he looked through the picket fence, through the creaking gate groaning on its old hinges with each gust of wind, and up the winding path lit with pleasant little blue garden lights. Some of the lights had been uprooted by the night's weather and were laying on their sides casting strange shadows across the well manicured lawn and along the stones of the path that lead up to the wooden porch stairs and to the forbidding front door, big and silent. He felt the porch daring him to step upon it and grab what he had come for.

Even though he couldn't see it, he knew it was there. On the porch. Leaning against the house.

The Squid's bike.



"Roy, you are the biggest talker. Always talking and never doing," Brian had said suddenly. Roy hadn't even noticed him leaning against the brick wall of the school building. "I bet you haven't done half the crazy things you say you have."

Brian had said it just the other day, between periods as Roy walked from Algebra class to English. Brian had peeled himself off the wall, Greg and Zach in tow and suddenly he was at Roy's shoulder, his hood pulled so his face was barely visible. Roy had caught the glint of his braces as he talked at him.

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“Such a liar,” Brian had said.

Roy didn’t need to turn around to know that Greg and Zach, Brian’s henchmen, were nodding in agreement.

“Dad a CIA agent. You’re here under witness protection. Yeah, right,” Brian had sneered at him. “I bet he works at McDonald’s or something, right?”

Roy had only arrived in town a few months after moving from San Francisco. His parents didn’t really tell him why, just that they had to “downsize.” Roy figured his dad had lost his job at whatever company he had worked at. He didn’t really know and had never really wanted to. His dad had worked all the time and, with no brothers or sisters, Roy had been left to entertain himself most of the time, which meant TV, video games, and, most of all, a vivid imagination.

“I bet you haven’t even finished Halo 3. Crap,” he had said, rolling his eyes. “I bet you don’t even have an Xbox.”

At least Roy hadn’t lied about that one. He did have an Xbox and *had* finished Halo 3.

“I’ll tell you what,” Brian had said as he grabbed Roy’s arm. Roy had spun about then, flinging Brian’s arm off his. Brian got into his face, his braces glinting in the sun that poured into the quad, his hot breath stinking of cinnamon Pop Tarts. “I’m going to dare you to do something.” He stepped closer to Roy. Greg and Zach stood on either side, diverting the traffic between classes around the two. “I’m going to dare you to do something...crazy,” Brian had whispered. “And if you can pull it off...”

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He had grinned wickedly. It was a grin, full of metal and malice, that had haunted Roy's dreams that night.

"You can hang out with me and Greg and Zach. But if you don't... "and although he couldn't see his eyes, Roy could feel them squinting at him, feel Brian's brow furrowing and his jaw tensing. But he didn't need to finish the sentence. Roy knew what kind of kid Brian was. They had them at his old school too.

If Brian knew who you were, he was either your friend or your enemy. There was nothing in between.

"Steal the Squid's bike. Steal it from his porch. Tomorrow night," said Brian.

Roy tensed. Even though he was new at school, he had already heard about Billy "The Squid."

Every school had a few Billys in it.

Billys.

Bullies.

Whatever you wanted to call them. Some were physical and would push you around. Others were verbal and would constantly insult you.

"Yeah, figured you knew who Squid was, new kid or not," Brian had said. "So do it. Get the bike."

Brian motioned to Greg and Zach, giving a "were done here" kind of head jerk. The buzzer for the start of English rang throughout the quad and everyone began to disappear into different classrooms. Only



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Roy stood where he was, stunned by what had just occurred.

Brian looked back over his shoulder as he walked away with his posse and Roy could swear he saw him wink.

Roy wanted to punch himself as he waited in the bushes. He had no one to blame about being in this situation but himself. He wasn't sure why he had started making up stories about his dad, pretending that he was doing something dangerous, that he was the kind of dad you could tell your friends stories about.

But he had. And along with it, he had embellished a little about his own past too, about some of the trips he'd taken and the things he'd done on them. He'd even gone so far as to let slip that his dad had involved him with his work sometimes.

"Crap," Roy mumbled to himself. "Well, I guess there's only one way out of this mess now."

So he bolted out of the bushes, ripping branches along with him in a gaping hole that Ms. Malone would no doubt be cursing about in the morning. Leaves and bits flew from his parka as he sprinted across the street, and leapt over the Squid's gate in a single bound, knowing that he'd have to open it on the way out. But at least he could jump on the bike quickly before Billy could be on top of him. Now over the gate his heart pounded as his feet squished on the wet grass and he jumped over the lights that had blown around. He still couldn't see the bike as the porch was engulfed in darkness making Roy acutely aware that all of the streetlights had gone out as well. Coupled with the massive clouds overhead, the entire street was blanketed in an inky blackness

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and Roy wondered if the power had gone out.

But despite the apparent suddenness of the darkness, part of Roy's brain recognized the advantage of the situation.

"Man, this couldn't be easier..." Roy started to say.

Then he stopped.

Stopped moving, stopped saying, stopped thinking.

Not because he thought Billy was standing on the porch, in the shadows, waiting for him or because he felt Ms. Malone was running across the street to get him; no, because when he finally got close enough to the porch, the bike wasn't there.


Roy could feel the sweat breaking out over his forehead despite the increasing chill in the air and the wind's growing ferocity. It felt as if something was pulling against the entire yard, the entire street.

And then suddenly, the bike no longer mattered. The wind was so hard and fast now that bits and pieces of his surroundings were flying into the air—the landscape lights from Billy's yard, their stored solar energy still pulsing away as they flew to Roy's right; pieces of Billy's picket fence, breaking off where weak, old nails snapped and pulled free; and, Roy was guessing although he couldn't see, even Ms. Malone's shrubs, nasty branch by nasty branch.

Roy braced himself on the lawn, pushing out his leg, straightening it so that he could pivot to grab something, like the porch railing. He fumbled at the steps in front of him, stretching his fingers out.

The wind howled, whipping the hood of Roy's parka around his ears

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like a loose piece of paper. Lightening cracked almost directly overhead, punctuating an already horrific scene with occasional vibrancy, giving Roy just enough time to see the bushes and bits of wood being...pulled through the air. Thunder boomed in the air, but Roy felt as if it was coming from beneath his feet.

“Help!” Roy yelled. He no longer cared about the dare, or about being called a liar, or about being exposed as one for that matter. It was about survival now.

He reached out again, taking one step forward.

*If I can just reach that porch*, he thought, gritting his teeth, when his feet gave out. He wasn't sure if his leg buckled or if something hit him and carried him down but he was suddenly buffeting along the ground like everything else—like the leaves, the grass, planks of wood, even Billy's bike.

If someone were watching it from a distance, they might swear that a giant tornado had appeared in this neighborhood, that it was almost serene the way that everything was pulled towards the end of the street (wood, bricks, car tires, bicycles) without much fuss. Things weren't wrenched apart with great force or energy. They simply “popped off” as if they wanted to go where the wind was pulling them. And that even applied to Roy who was scrambling and grabbing at things as he was pulled along, yelling and screaming, the wind snatching up his voice just as easily as it had carried away the wood and cars and even half a house. He had simply resigned himself now to the fact that he was going to die as he gave into the relentless pull of wind.

And if that same someone had stayed to watch, rather than running away in fright as it seemed that the entire neighborhood was being

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whisked away, they would have seen the pale purple light at the end of the street blink out as the last bit of debris vanished from sight.



Roy woke up somewhere.

That's all he was sure about.

He was somewhere with a hard ground and dull light. He didn't want to open his eyes yet, fearing that if he did, he would see the "land of the dead," angels, and maybe even a few zombies. So he lay there, strewn on what he presumed to be the remains of the neighborhood. He could feel bits of wood and concrete beneath him. Tentatively, he stretched out his fingers (partly to make sure they still worked), letting them play over the surface like curious ants, touching here and there, communicating with each other (and his brain) that what he was feeling was, in fact, real.

His hands found all sorts of things. And slowly, still keeping his eyes shut, he began to crawl in no particular direction, touching and feeling, reassuring himself again and again that he wasn't dead, that he couldn't be dead if he could feel all this stuff.

*If I was dead, Roy thought, there would be more music like harps and stuff, right?*

By now, he felt like he'd crawled a few hundred feet to his right, maybe a little left turn here and there. He couldn't be sure but his knees and his hands had run over all sorts of things—dog bowls, fire hydrants, a magazine, a lawn chair, and what seemed like a neighborhood's-worth of wood, stucco, tile, and shrubbery.

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The growing temptation to open his eyes gnawed at him.

“How could a tornado,” Roy mumbled, because he had already concluded that’s what it must have been, “take the entire neighborhood and put it somewhere else? Am I just a few miles away from home?”

And with that thought he opened his eyes only to discover that *wherever* he was, the *somewhere* because he was physically there, was really *nowhere* because it didn’t seem like any place he’d ever seen before.

Roy put his face in his hands. He thought about crying for a second but what would be the point? There was no way this could be happening. There was no possibility even that the tornado had swept him up and, what, took him to a different world like the *Wizard of Oz*?

“What’s happening?!” Roy screamed at the top of his lungs, his throat still sore from the yelling he had done as the wind had carried him away.

And just as the last of his voice trailed away, he realized that the sound stopped. It was sort of a double realization. He first realized that what he’d been doing was crawling towards a scratching and pulling sound, like people moving the debris looking for survivors. Second, he realized that the sound had stopped. A deathly silence fell over the wreckage.

“Who are you?” a voice asked.

Roy refused to look at or acknowledge the voice.

“Hey, you’re sitting on my stuff. I called this spot. It’s mine.”

The voice was strangely metallic, as if a robot had been given a set of

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vocal chords and was still trying to work them out.

Roy took a deep breath. He recognized that he was somewhere and even if he didn't know where that somewhere was, he needed to acknowledge that the only way he was going to get back home was to come to terms with that. So some guy with a weird voice was saying something strange to him. That didn't matter. What mattered was that he needed to take some action if he was going to make any progress in solving his current problems.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Roy started to say as he turned to face the voice. But when he caught sight of him, of the two large luminescent eyes and the spindly body, and the head like a watermelon, Roy screamed as if he was six years old again, scampering from his room and the monster under his bed that he was sure was reaching out to get him.

Roy scrambled backwards faster than he could have imagined possible, telling himself that he was dead, that it was the only explanation for what he saw in front of him. And even though it hadn't made another move towards him, its small, mouth locked into what appeared to be an "o" position, Roy felt like he wasn't getting any farther from it. Just then he realized that he needed to get to his feet and sprint in any direction.

But as Roy twisted his body to get to his feet, the creature was upon him, its scrawny leg pushing into Roy's back and easily pinning him to the ground.

"What are you doing here?!" It shrieked. Even though its voice was strange and its language not quite right, Roy could tell that it was as frightened as he was.

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“Get off me,” Roy grunted as he squirmed to get out from underneath the foot but to no avail. The creature was strong and as Roy squirmed he caught glimpses of its thin, wiry frame. Almost stick figure-like but clearly muscular and hardened from the labor it was carrying out before being interrupted.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” it said, again, clearly agitated. Roy felt a hand grasp the back of his parka and suddenly he was lifted to his feet, held at an arm’s length. He glanced over his shoulder to look more closely at the creature and took in his large, luminous, almond-shaped silver eyes, the elongated head with small pointy chin, the almost stick-like frame, covered in sinuous muscle, scratches, and scars; the tattered pants that fell to just below the knee and the three-toed feet. Roy took it all in, wanting to scream and laugh at the same time. It was like a video game or a bad, midnight science fiction movie. Or anything in between.

The creature suddenly made a series of clicks and whistles, as if talking to itself, and that’s when Roy realized that it wasn’t.

From all around, clicks and whistles answered back and Roy began to see dozens of the same creatures rummaging around the debris pile. He could see the edges of the pile in some directions and large contraptions onto which the creatures were stacking pieces of wood, concrete, car tires, and other bits. They worked like ants, or bees, single-mindedly as if they were all connected somehow. They picked from the debris pile as they would from stalks of grain or an overturned picnic basket, harvesting the devastation bit by bit. And as they all clicked away, Roy sensed a growing, collective agitation. But he also realized, in looking at the dozens of creatures coming towards him, that he could see his surroundings as well and he was again struck by

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the completely ridiculous idea that he had been transported to somewhere other than Earth.

The first thing that came to Roy's mind was *dirty*. The entire landscape looked dirty. Sure, there were mountains, some towering higher than he could see, and hills, and cliffs and valleys, but over all of it was a dull, dingy film like a haze of smog on a hot day. And if he let his vision wander, not focusing on anything in particular, he swore he could see gentle undulations in the grime, and ripples in the hazy sky weaved with subtle purple and blue lines, blended together almost beautifully as they appeared and disappeared. But if he concentrated for a moment on one, and tried to capture it so that he could catalog it away like he did everything he saw, it vanished and all he was left with was the filthy sky.

Roy realized the clicking had stopped and the creatures were all looking at him expectantly or angrily; he couldn't tell as they crowded around him. The one that had grabbed him first was beginning to pull him now, away from the crowd, rather than hold him at length.

A few more clicks and whistles from the one that held him.

Silence from those around.

The thing shrugged one shoulder and pulled Roy closer to him, eventually putting an arm around his shoulder like they were old chums. Almost protectively.

"Come on. I need to take you to the Tuner."



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“Can you tell me where we’re going?” Roy asked as he stumbled again. Despite the creature’s frail appearance, it moved quickly and sure-footedly across the debris pile. Behind them, some of the others that had been digging, looking almost identical to the one that had grabbed Roy, were still huddled together looking after the two as they walked quickly away while the rest had already dispersed, back to collecting.

Roy kicked another large section of wall—*was that from Billy’s house, he wondered*—and caught himself before pitching forward onto his face. For the first time, Roy caught a glance at himself in some broken mirror on the ground. His jeans were torn in three places—one at the left knee, one at the left ankle, and a big tear on his right thigh. Trying to watch where his feet were going at the same time made it difficult to tell, but he was pretty sure that he wasn’t bleeding beneath the torn jeans. Given that he had his arms free, he began to pat his parka and feel underneath to his sweatshirt. Everything else seemed OK, although he couldn’t be sure about the back of his jacket and assumed that there had to be some rips there, seeing as how he had been dragged along the street by the wind before coming...

And at that, Roy paused his self-inspection.

*Here*, he thought. Where is here? Can this really be happening?

“I know what you’re thinking,” the creature suddenly said. “Yes. You are really here. And you’re causing big trouble for me. Now I have to stop collecting. Other’s are going to get my stuff.”

Roy was flabbergasted.

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*Did he just read my mind?* He asked himself.

“Your mind is like a book,” the creature said again.

*Roy*, he thought.

The creature stopped suddenly, turning around to look at Roy but not letting lose his grip of Roy’s parka.

“Roy?”

They stood just at the fringes of the debris pile. In the distance, Roy could see some sort of rudimentary camp, with flapping tents made of patchwork materials, some structures pieced together, like tree houses, from mismatched timber and drywall...and creatures scurrying about.

“That’s my name,” Roy said. “My...name...is...Roy.”


The creature looked at him still, quizzically. It cocked its head from side to side, as if trying to read more of Roy’s mind.

“I’m taking you to the Tuner,” it said. “I don’t care what your name is.”

He started to turn around to walk again, his arm stiffening to begin pulling but Roy dug his heels in. It may not have worked for the wind, straightening his leg to brace against the incredible pull, but he was sure his legs would hold out against this creature. Even at his young age, Roy’s legs were muscular from cross-country running.

The creature pulled a little harder, maybe moving Roy an inch or two. But Roy was determined to stand his ground. And in one motion,

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he threw the creature's arm off him and struck the best kung-fu pose he could imagine—legs spread wide, hands up. He just imagined what Bruce Lee would look like. He tried to remember even what Po from Kung-Fu Panda did. He wasn't sure if he could actually kick or punch the creature but he wasn't going to stand there and take it anymore. He'd been taking it all his life, always doing what he was told, always being the normal kid, the easy kid, the kid who didn't put up a fight.

Well not anymore.

If this was a dream, he was finally going to stand up for himself.

Putting its hands up, as if in surrender, the creature sighed a little.

“OK, OK,” it said. “Let's just say my name is Joen.”

“Joen?”

The creature sighed again.

“Joe.” It forced the name out slowly, enunciating. And as he said the name, Roy realized why it sounded so strange when he spoke. Although it seemed to have thin lips capable of forming normal sounds, its teeth moved hardly at all when speaking.

“OK...Joe,” Roy said, emphasizing its name. “I've got that you are taking me to the Tuner, or whatever you call it. But I need some answers.”

Joe stared at him, his large luminous silver eyes emotionless. Roy found it disconcerting and looked down at his feet.

“I mean, wouldn't you want to know some things if you were me?”

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Joe continued to stare.

“Can you tell me where I am?”

Joe smiled a little. “Stitches,” he said.

“Am I dead?” Roy asked?

“No, you’re not dead. You might wish you were dead when the Tuner sees you. But you are definitely alive.”

“If I’m not dead, then where am I?”

“Stitches. What, are you stupid?”

Roy wanted to punch Joe. To kick and hit him. To scream at him. That was perhaps the most frustrating thing of all. Joe seemed to speak English just fine, seemed to hear what Roy was saying but he didn’t understand him at all. As Roy’s frustration grew, Joe’s posture became more defensive. The lithe, three-fingered hand that didn’t hold Roy’s parka curled into a tight fist. The one that did dug harder into the fabric of the coat.

“Wait, wait, I’m not going to hit you,” Roy said, taking a deep breath. “I just don’t understand any of this.” He waved his hand across the debris, across the land. “Why am I here? Did you cause the wind? Did you bring all of this here? Who are you really? Do you live here?” And the questions poured out of Roy faster than he could even articulate them until, at last, he began to cry. Not sobbing hysterically, the kind of crying that calls out for sympathy, calls out for someone to come over and say everything is all right. No, it was a resigned sobbing, a natural outpouring of emotion as if each tear was simply the easiest way to let it all out.

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Joe, letting go, just watched as Roy, now on his hands and knees, sobbed his tears onto the debris from his neighborhood, onto broken bicycle tires, and cracked streetlamps, and bits of dishes, and stuffed animals.

“If you are going to die,” Joe said, “just do it. It would be easier that way. You aren’t supposed to be here.”

Roy realized that’s what people have been saying to him his entire life. *You aren’t supposed to be here.* Maybe it was in track and field, or on the basketball court at the local park, or at the mall in the food court. *You aren’t supposed to be here.*

Each time that he repeated those words, the sobs lessened. *You aren’t supposed to be...at this school.* Roy took a deep breath. *You aren’t supposed to be...in this club.* He stood up, wiping the tears from his face.

“OK, so you already said that,” Roy said, picking himself up and wiping the tears off his face. “So what. I’m here.”

Joe continued to stare at him with his unblinking eyes. But it appeared that he had relaxed some. The hand that Joe had balled into a fist was now in a pocket in his pants and the hand that had been clenching him was twiddling a small crystal that hung around his neck. Roy was momentarily entranced by it. He hadn’t seen the crystal before but was mesmerized by the way it caught the hazy light of the, *what did Joe call it* Roy wondered, the Stitches?

Realizing that Roy was staring at the crystal, Joe let go of it and went to grab Roy again.

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“OK, enough talking,” Joe said. “Tuner.”

But Roy backed away, still weary from the crying but resolute enough that he didn’t want to be pulled around anymore.

“Wait,” Roy said, holding his hands up. “I’ll go with you but no more pulling. OK? Maybe you can tell me what the Tuner is while we walk.”

Joe stared at him and kind of shrugged.

“Are we going down there?” Roy asked, pointing to the settlement that seemed a little farther away now. In fact, Roy was sure that it was further away, now which seemed impossible although he realized that, given the way he had arrived and the creature in front of him, if he wasn’t dead, and he still wasn’t sure that was the case, anything seemed possible here.

“Yes,” Joe said. “So we need to hurry.” He looked expectantly at Roy, his body already poised to start walking but unwilling to leave until he was sure that Roy would follow him.

Roy took one more deep breath and began to walk with Joe.

Although Joe kept up a pretty brisk pace, Roy found it easy enough to walk quickly and think too, giving him time to reflect both on what had happened and what was about to happen. He wondered exactly how long it had been between getting pulled by the wind and walking up on the debris pile.

Roy came to the conclusion that it must have been a tornado, although he felt a little stupid about thinking that, about how much that sounded like the *Wizard of Oz*, but that was the only thing it could

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have been. There was no way it was a hurricane or a blackhole. Although Roy remembered reading something about wormholes, about how scientists believed they could form spontaneously and connect two distant parts of the universe together.

*Is that where I am? Roy wondered. Is this an alien world? I mean Joe looks like an alien but we seem to breathe the same air. I guess that could be possible.*

He was OK with the idea that it could be something like that, a wormhole or being in an alien world. It was far better than continuing to think that he was dead. If everyone knew about this afterlife, they would do whatever they could to stay alive as long as possible. But he couldn't seem to remember anything particular about the wind that would make him certain of it one way or another. In fact, he wondered if a wormhole would have a lot of wind like that and realized at the same time that he couldn't remember much of anything between getting pulled by the wind and walking up on the debris panel.

It was a giant blank spot in his memory.

And just as he found time to reflect a little as he walked swiftly alongside Joe, he also had time to look more closely at this world now that he was away from the debris pile.

Like before, when he had only a few seconds to glance around, the landscape was pretty bleak. It was a hazy light from a sun that he couldn't find. The entire world seemed cloaked somehow as if someone had laid gauze down on everything to cover up some of the bleakness of the world. There were mountains, hills, a definitely topology as Roy looked around in every direction, catching sight of the debris pile behind him, again, seemingly farther away than it should be as if

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the world was stretching while they walked. The ground itself was hard and unforgiving, cracked in various places, screaming for water.

As Roy scanned the horizons, pivoting as he walked, he saw no differences in any directions and wondered if there was water somewhere, trees, and an oasis. He wondered what the other side of the planet looked like, wondered if there were animals scampering around, birds chirping, zoos, cities, schools.

“Is this a different world than mine,” Roy asked.

Joe didn’t turn his head, just kind of shrugged again.

“You said it was the Stitches, right? Is that the name of your world?”

“Not a *world*,” Joe answered without breaking pace. Roy noticed that the creature continued to walk without sweating as well.

“I saw that there are others like you but are there other types of creatures here too? Is there water somewhere? Is...” he felt the momentum building again. So many questions to be asked.

Joe shook his head. “One question at a time,” he said, shaking his head. He began to fondle the crystal at his neck again and Roy realized it must be absentminded, perhaps a nervous habit.

“Sorry, I...” Roy started when Joe cut him off.

“I know you’re scared,” he began, slowing down a little. Roy could swear he took a breath as if preparing to tell him something important, to deliver some bad news. “This place is called the Stitches. It’s not a different world. It’s not *alien*.” He began to rub the crystal a little more vigorously and slowed to almost a complete stop. “Hard to explain.



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Hard to find the words. Maybe the Tuner can explain better.”

Joe stopped and Roy studied him.

“The Stitches is *between* worlds,” Joe said, starting to draw out shapes with his hand. Roy couldn’t quite follow what his gestures were supposed to produce but he watched anyway, trying to comprehend what Joe had said...*between worlds*.

“Four worlds,” Joe said. “Majyk, Psyence, Deth, Lyfe. The Stitches holds them together.”

It was Roy’s turn to be studied as Joe looked at him.

“Holds them together...with yours.”

Roy couldn’t put words to what Joe was saying.

*This has to be a dream*, Roy thought. *A really weird, vivid dream. But...*

“It’s not a dream,” Joe said, looking over his shoulder at the town that was, again, getting farther and farther away. Joe was getting agitated now and had begun to make some whispered clicking and whistling sounds. Roy had put his face into his hands, closed his eyes hard, told himself over and over again that he needed to wake up, probably lying in somebody’s yard after getting knocked out in the tornado.

Joe reached out to Roy’s parker, but not to force him to walk. Joe looked over his shoulder again towards the ever-growing distance between he, Roy, and the town. His agitation grew.

“Trust me,” he said as his free hand went to the crystal around his

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neck again. “The Tuner can explain better. You’re young. Difficult to understand.” Joe seemed to sigh a little. “Tough.”

Roy looked up from his hands. Dream. No Dream. Dead. Not Dead. None of it really mattered. For the first time in his life, Roy felt stripped bare. No lies and no need to pretend about who he was, or his dad, or that his life was more interesting than it really was.

Roy realized that Joe was right. He didn’t belong here. But he was here.

“OK Joe,” Roy sighed. “Let’s go see the Tuner.”

But Joe was extremely agitated now, shuffling his feet. He was clicking and whistling a lot, as if he was talking to himself, rubbing the crystal between two of his three fingers as Roy might a coin.

“We aren’t going to make it walking,” Joe mumbled as he stopped shuffling and looked out at the town now, just a tiny spot away.

“Why does it keep getting...,” Roy started to ask but Joe cut him off, the crystal now in his hand beginning to glow.

“We have to travel quickly,” Joe said. “Hang on.” And with that, he grabbed Roy hard by the arm and pulled him against him. Roy wrinkled his nose at a faint, but unpleasant odor that began to circle around them. But he quickly forgot that, despite its growing pungency, as he became solely focused on the growing light in Joe’s hand, pulsating from the crystal, stretching its tendrils out through Joe’s clasped fingers, enveloping his face, curling around his neck and down his arm. Roy wanted to pull away, to twist and squirm as the tendrils snaked their way behind him and over his shoulders, around his neck

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and down his pant legs.

“No, no, just hang on,” Joe mumbled, holding Roy tightly as more light enveloped them. Roy wanted to scream but was afraid that if he opened his mouth, the light would climb down his throat and fill his stomach.

So he just closed his eyes as tightly as he could, squeezed his mouth shut, even tried to close his nose. But with his eyes shut so tightly that they hurt, he could see the light trying to get in, trying, trying...

And the next thing Roy felt was being stretched, as if he was made of rubber or taffy. It started from the inside. First his stomach, and then his heart, his lungs, his brain. It felt like a hand was reaching inside to tear everything out only just before it could, the rest of his body followed. Every cell of skin. Every bit of hair. Roy was certain that he could feel each and every molecule of his body at that exact moment in time as independent pieces.

Stretching, stretching, stretching until it felt like everything he was would rip in half—then it suddenly reversed. Only faster than the stretching, everything rushing into him like clay filling a mold, everything that was Roy fitting into the mold-of-Roy.

And that’s when he felt Joe’s arm release him, felt himself tumbling to the ground on hands and knees, felt the vomit rush up his throat and onto the ground.

“Welcome to Gurnz,” Joe said, and Roy, the urge to vomit again subsiding, could almost swear that Joe was laughing.

**TURN THE PAGE TO FIND OUT  
WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!**

# In the next installment of **Conjunction:**

*“No worries,” Joe said, holding his hands up as if to try and calm Roy. “You’re going home now.”*

*And just then, the door swung open behind Roy. He could see the surprise flash across Joe’s face as he snapped the crystal from his neck and wrapped it around one of his hands. For the first time since meeting him just a short time ago, Roy saw expression in his face. The silver eyes clouded a bit, narrowed. Joe’s mouth turned down in a scowl.*

*“I don’t think so,” a voice said from the open doorway.*

*Without turning, Roy knew it was the man from the tent. And before he could even acknowledge that understanding, the Tuner flew from where he stood, propelled by an explosion of purple and blue lights. The device was ripped from his hands, the crystal detonating in the air with a dull thud and the silver plate falling harmlessly to the ground. The concussion of the initial blast threw Roy to his left, pitching him onto the nice little couch in the living room and then onto the floor where he quickly scrambled under the coffee table, which was low enough to allow him passage but high enough to let him see the back of the room where Joe still stood by the desk.*

## About *Conjunction*

*Conjunction* is a serialized story for young adult readers published by Dime Novel Publishing. Each volume of *Conjunction* is comprised of approximately 26 issues (30-50 pages per issue) published bi-weekly for \$.99 per issue (the first issue of each series is free). You can access additional issues of *Conjunction*, and other Dime Novel Publishing series, from [www.dimenovelpublishing.com](http://www.dimenovelpublishing.com). You can follow Roy on his blog at [www.conjunctionseries.com](http://www.conjunctionseries.com).

## About the Author

Jason Thibeault has been an aspiring/failed/re-born writer for over twenty years. He finished his first novel *If This is Adventure...I Don't Need It* when he was sixteen (thankfully unpublished). He wrote his second novel, *Ordinary Magic* (a magical realism novel set in Haiti), while in the Campus Wide Honors Program at the University of California, Irvine. Focusing on creative writing, he spent a lot of his time working with the faculty of the Graduate Writing program as well as at numerous writing conferences including Squaw Valley. He also helped edit, publish, and develop the UCI Journal of Fiction, *Faultline*.

After getting his undergraduate degree, Jason spent time abroad, working for HarperCollins London and trying, unsuccessfully, to publish numerous short stories and *Ordinary Magic*. Upon his return, he finished his formal writing education at California State University, Northridge and wrote his third novel, a hard sci-fi dystopian titled *Red Dust Storm*. He also founded the Phoenix Writing Project, a literary journal and local reading series featuring CSUN, local community, and celebrity writers. Jason has also taught numerous creative writing classes at various colleges and universities.

Taking a decade off from serious writing, Jason finally returned to fiction in 2007 focusing on young-adult. Paying attention to what his children were reading (from *Harry Potter* to *Cirque du Freak* to *Percy Jackson*) Jason began to understand that his imagination and writing style were ultimately suited to young adults and pre-teens. With less concern for the details of adult-oriented novel (and far more suspension of disbelief), Jason found quickly that he could generate young-adult fiction at a frighteningly fast pace.

Jason is currently the author of several of DimeNovel Publishing's series (*Barty the Kid*, *Jake: Vampire Hunter*, *Conjunction*) and the creator of many of Dime Novel Publishing's syndicated storylines.