

*At the Edge of the Forest*  
By Danny Cove

Billy Marzano was only ten years old when the fires burned away his hometown, but he was not around to see that happen. He'd been playing at the edge of the forest in his own backyard with his closest friend and next-door-neighbor, Tina Grayson, on the eve of the town's destruction. Billy was looking for rabbits, his favorite pastime, while Tina jumped ceaselessly on his family's small trampoline. His parents had gotten that for him from a yard sale at the Petersons' house, friends of theirs whose daughter – a girl Billy had never met – had gone off to college. Billy was initially interested in it, taking a few bouncing steps at a time, but it was Tina, his dearest friend, who developed a real obsession with the springy device. Although it was only four feet wide, she could use it to launch herself well over her own four-and-a-half feet high, so high that Billy's mom was prone to yelling at her at least four times not to jump so high whenever she came over. Someday, Tina hoped to be able to do a back-flip on the thing, and perhaps even further ahead, a back-flip with a landing on her feet, on the ground. So far, she hadn't built up the courage or agility to do so, so practice she did.

Billy ignored her while he scanned the edge of the great forest that broached his house's border, looking for the long-eared rodents he loved. He had seen rabbits crossing his yard on numerous occasions, but every time they were gone before he made it outside. As much as Tina wanted to do a back-flip on his own trampoline, Billy more ardently wanted to catch and domesticate a feral rabbit. Perhaps the rabbit he caught would be pregnant, and then he could share the babies with his friends, and someday open a lucrative business in the pet rabbit department. At least, that's how the fantastical mind of a ten-year-old animal lover went.

But on this particular evening, there were no rabbits. He saw no tracks, heard none of their strange chittering, and eventually he realized that neither did he hear the clicking of crickets or cicadas. As the shadows began to grow in the dim twilight, he saw no lightning bugs, the small, glowing insects his dad had helped him catch in a bottle last year. He remembered his dad taking a knife to the bottle in order to create breathing holes in the lid, holes through which – to his mom's utter amusement – the insects had escaped, never to be seen again. Those creatures were not out tonight. There was nothing out tonight.

Billy turned around when he realized that the regular creaking of Tina's – *his* – trampoline had stopped. The tall girl was standing still, her body still rising and falling by an inch or two as her momentum ceased. Her gaze was fixed upward, and Billy followed that gaze into the rapidly darkening sky. This was strange. Even storm clouds wouldn't gather that quickly, blocking out the entire dying sun in less than a minute. But these were no clouds; instead, it seemed to be a steady transformation into a deepening, gloomy darkness. Billy backed away from the treeline as the shadows of the trees reached out menacingly, the silhouettes stretching toward him like the gnarled fingers of an old witch. Just before the shadow-fingers would have reached him, they were swallowed up in the pitch that cast its pallor across the entire backyard. Billy heard his backdoor slam open and his mom's squeaky shoes come walking outside, but there were no words in her throat.

There was a strange sound from deep in the forest, like a powerful thumping, and the image of a twenty-foot giant with a club the size of Billy's dad popped into the young boy's mind. He pictured the giant smashing its way toward their house, knocking trees over with no effort, its club smacking the ground below it with sickening thuds. As the thudding sound grew closer, heat began to billow out from the forest, as if someone had started a fire and was

somehow carrying it into the civilized town. The heat became so intense that Billy was shoved back a few feet, and the squeaking of the trampoline followed by the thud of small feet told him that Tina had either leapt or fallen from her elastic perch. Billy heard his mom's voice, heard the fear in it, but he couldn't tear his eyes from the forest. Or, rather, the darkness which had once been a forest.

Something like an enormous wave of utter darkness rushed out of the woods, flooding across his yard toward him. Billy didn't even have a chance to move before it swarmed over and enveloped him, cutting out everything, the light, the sounds, the screaming voices of Tina and his mom. Billy was surrounded by the darkness now, and it seemed to lift him up off the ground, where he floated in abject terror.

The terror soon subsided as he felt more confused than scared. He tried to think about what had just happened, about what he'd been doing. He'd been searching for...what? Wait, had he been searching? Had he been alone? No, he'd been with a friend, she was jumping on a trampoline. But try as he might, Billy could not remember his friend's name, nor could he picture her face. So instead, he tried to focus on his mom, but there, too, he could draw forth no face, no voice, only the thought that he had once had a mom. Did he still?

When that failed, Billy tried to think of his dad. He remembered the time with his dad last summer when they'd caught – what? – in a jar. He remembered his dad with a knife and the lid of a jar, and then the knife seemed to vanish in Billy's memory, along with the jar. All Billy had was the face of a man who...a man who...Billy couldn't remember who the man was. Was he the one doing this to him? Billy tried to fight, but he couldn't feel his limbs, so all he could do was say his name over and over, the last shred of himself that he didn't want to let go of. But eventually, repeating the name a dozen, perhaps a hundred times resulted in it sounding foreign, and at the slightest pause in his repetition, the sound was lost.

But there was one sound he could remember, a series of sounds, and images of the forest, of a waterfall and a pack of wolves. There was the image of a metal ceiling with a fluorescent light in its center, and men in white coats. He couldn't make sense of any of these images, and soon they drifted away into the darkness, leaving only that single word again. He didn't know what it meant, but before he finally vanished into the pressing darkness and shadows, he wondered with a detached curiosity if that was his name. That word was *Formulus*.