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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 8
5TH NOVEMBER 2017

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ANYTHING ABOUT THE
REVOLUTION...*

ANTARCTICA

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THE GRIMOIRE
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URSULA
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Hernandez, Gregory KH Bryant, HP Lovecraft, Jules Verne, Dave Ludford*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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EDITORIAL

This week we begin our Guy Fawkes celebrations with a bang—or rather, a gory interrogation from Schlock! newcomer Chris Tutty. Following this is a chilly tale of Nazis, vampires, and vampire hunters, from the pen of Stephen Hernandez. Steven Havelock regales us with the horrific story of a psychiatric patient and his connections with a sinister grimoire. And Dave Ludford has a touching account of a dumb girl and a white witch.

HP Lovecraft has reached the Apex of the Gothic Novel in his survey of supernatural horror. Six adventurers lead a strike force deep into ogre country. In the Battle for Callisto, we catch up with “Talbot Story”. And the settlers on Lincoln Island witness the death of a legend.

—Gavin Chappell

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INTERROGATION by Chris Tutty

The sound of a bone breaking varies depending on whether it is broken inside or outside of the body. A bone removed from a body, or left once the flesh has rotted away, produces a sharp crack. In my line of work, however, the crack is partially muffled by surrounding layers of tissue and flesh and ever-circulating blood. Another sound, more variable in pitch and duration, comes from the mouth of the bone's owner at the instant of breakage. This sound could be anything from a guttural yet admirably stoic and restrained grunt or hiss, usually from the tough, weathered subject who is no stranger to pain, to a shriek in a grating tenor belying how deep the subject's voice may naturally be. This latter kind of sound is usually longer, piercing, and the product of the common garden-variety weak and terrified prisoner. It is also by far the most common type of reaction, demonstrative of shock at just how painful torture can be, and suggesting that the majority of subjects did not fully think through the consequences of plotting against the Great Authority.

I had two prisoners to interrogate today. One woman, and one man, scheduled to receive my attention in that order. The woman fell somewhere in-between the 'quiet' and the 'loud' type of sufferer, although tending towards the former. As I tightened the vice on its last turn and her finger finally broke, she gave vent to an anguished moan, mid-ranged, and lasting for perhaps two seconds. She was tougher than I would have given her credit for. Of course, once the initial, painful jolt had dissipated, she lapsed into a series of heaving sobs interspersed with protestations of ignorance—the same kind of protestation I had heard from countless prisoners over the years, a quantity of people I had long since ceased to tally. Everyone insists on their innocence. They are wrongly accused, they protest. They shouldn't be here. Someone else was to blame.

I know better. Everyone in this world is guilty of one type of crime or another. We are all guilty of something.

I unscrewed the vice and the woman was left clutching her misshapen, ruined middle finger with her opposite hand, which had not been subject to my ministrations. She looked me in the eye, her expression something of a paradox. She was making no secret of her pain, and no doubt very much desirous of being anywhere else. Yet she was defiant. Quite admirable, in its way. Most who did not confess at the first sight of my instruments would admit their guilt at the first tightening of the vice or cut of the blade and they realised that there would be far, far worse to come if they did not capitulate.

I should make clear at this point that never in all my years as an inquisitor have I enjoyed inflicting the pain I cause. I am not, despite all the names and accusations the subject may throw at me, a monster. On the contrary, the extraction of a confession is, in an odd sort of way, as unpleasant for me as for the questioned. It takes some time and much soul-searching when one makes a living like this to feel as though one is acting for the greater good. Still, I consider myself fortunate that I am the one who is the questioner, not the questioned. A safe line of work to be in, I judge.

It is natural to wonder exactly why I chose the office of inquisitor, or why anyone in possession of a moral compass would do so. Appropriately, it is just this issue of morality which provides the answer. The hateful transgressions my subjects commit against the Great Authority are as abhorrent to me as the infliction of pain on an innocent—and none of those left to my ministrations are innocent, as I have stressed. Treachery, treason, sedition, plotting

against the Great Authority. All names for the same thing. My role is akin to that of an arboreal surgeon, cutting the diseased limb from the tree so that the infection does not undermine and bring about the collapse of the whole edifice.

Remember, I said that we are all guilty of something, and I should not be thought an exception. But my price has been paid, and I am able to operate with my conscience clear and my sense of purpose unshakable. One might think that I must feel a crushing sense of guilt for the things I do. I do not. Even if I did, experience shows that guilt is something to which the human conscience can develop a remarkable resilience.

Such was the case with this woman and would no doubt prove to be the case with her co-conspirator, whom I would be questioning next. Their brazen and unrepentant arrogance! Their claims to independence and liberty were saliva spat in the face of the Great Authority!

I looked at the woman, and she looked up from her mangled finger to meet my stare. ‘Now,’ I asked, ‘are you ready to confess yet?’

I had asked her this once already, once she had been brought to this room. They only get that one chance before the torture begins, and I consider even that to be a boon they do not deserve.

‘I don’t know anything about the Revolution!’ she snarled through her teeth. Teeth which might not remain in her mouth for long, if I decided that certain among my tools were required. ‘I’ve nothing to say to you!’

I had only asked if she was ready to confess; those brought before me are aware without my asking what it is they stand accused of.

What they are guilty of.

The heavy hand of enforcers clamping on their smug, unsuspecting shoulder was enough to tell them that we knew what they were up to. I had mentioned no specific charge to this woman, no details or particulars.

‘Interesting choice of words,’ I said. ‘You admit that there is a revolution being planned?’ I never tire of catching them out like that.

She responded with a coarse if not entirely inaccurate remark about my mother. I grinned without humour, a slightly smug little gesture to let her know that the insult was water off a duck’s back. In general, humour is not a required trait in an inquisitor. On the contrary, the less the inquisitor has, the easier they will find their work.

‘Do I need to break another finger?’ I demanded without raising my voice. Showing anger, or anything other than a professional dispassion would let the subject know that they were doing a good job under the circumstances. A shout, or a lashing out—any expression of anger, and certainly any infliction of pain which was not done mechanically, as though it were as natural as drawing breath, was a sign of weakness and fallibility. No, at all times I must represent the righteousness, the majesty and the dignity of the Great Authority, and operate with a gracefulness becoming of one who is in the right. ‘A toe?’ I asked. ‘Or should I put away the vice and try something else?’

She did a very respectable job of maintaining her equilibrium, and said nothing. Saying nothing can be harder than saying anything, sometimes.

‘I could have irons heated quickly enough, if you’d prefer that,’ I told her. ‘I’m in no hurry.’ This last was not entirely correct; the Great Authority require that confessions be extracted in a timely and efficient manner. Not that this young woman needed to know that.

She spat at me. The little rope of saliva travelled across the two feet or so separating us and splattered against the lapel of my black inquisitor’s tunic. That one act told me that I was wasting my time and that a course of events that might allow this woman to keep her life, if not all of her anatomy, was a lost cause. She was as guilty as they come, I knew, but knowledge can sometimes be impotent without something conformational. It is like having money to spare but lacking something to spend it on. Fortunately, her little slip of the tongue was enough.

I sighed, in order that she realise that her little display of petulance was of no benefit to either of us, and that, with my little sigh of reproach—like that shown by a firm but patient schoolmaster to a fractious and unrepentant pupil—a much sterner treatment would be necessary. The kind of treatment that not even I, with my blades, irons, and vices could provide.

The gaoler, who had delivered the woman from her holding cell to the interrogation room, and who had been standing behind me and to my left during the proceedings, handed me a cloth to wipe away the saliva. As I cleaned myself, I spoke to her, paying deliberate attention to my little mopping up, not meeting her eyes. This apparent nonchalance, when combined with the sigh of condescension, always let the subject know that I was no longer interested in what they might have to say, or in any other little acts of bravado they might have to offer.

‘I see that you don’t wish to help any further,’ I said. ‘Not me and certainly not yourself. As you wish.’

I looked up and met her angry, defiant eyes. Eyes into which a greater sense of fear was seeping, the defiance slowly but surely diluting. This moment, when subjects realised that their sentence was to be delivered, often loosened tongues which had been recalcitrant throughout the pain and questioning. A few moments tense silence from her told me she would buck that trend, and, despite the indirect confession I had managed to get, I was frankly starting to tire of her.

‘You have let slip to me,’ I said, ‘that revolution is indeed being planned. By your words to me here, and by the fact that you were caught in the company of a co-conspirator discussing such treason, you admit your guilt. Your letting slip suggests that you are not as practiced in the art of denial as you thought you were, or perhaps that you are simply quite stupid—as if plotting treason against the Great Authority did not make you stupid enough. Your refusal to provide more information, information which may have caused me to be more lenient and possibly recommend to my superiors that your life be spared, tells me that you are not just guilty but unapologetic in your treason.’ My eyes narrowed. ‘I’m not sure which of the two I find the more distasteful.’

I turned to the gaoler. ‘Take her to the execution block.’

The gaoler, who had been silent and detached throughout the interrogation—as professionalism demands—nodded and walked over to the woman. He bound her wrists, grasped her firmly by the upper arms, lifted her to her feet, and marched her towards the door. Her face was suddenly uncertain and fearful, the defiance and determination gone—as though her fear had been kept at bay throughout the interrogation and was now allowed to come crashing down on her all at once. Her understanding of my sentence, its implication, was sinking in. It doesn't always happen immediately, but it certainly would when the subject saw the guillotine they had been escorted to. She looked over her shoulder at me as she was escorted from the room. I had already looked away from her, in order that she know that she no longer held any interest for me, that she know her last chance of keeping her life was irretrievably lost.

I looked calmly at the wall opposite the table with its vice, the wall with its years of bloodstains fading to brown providing a basecoat for more recent splashes of crimson. So much blood spilled.

So much justice dispensed.

After a few minutes, the gaoler returned with the second conspirator, a young man with whom I was acquainted—he was, I knew, even younger than the woman had been. I was disappointed to see him under such circumstances. So much potential, like the woman, put to the wrong ends. He would never see her alive again. I wondered if his interrogation would proceed differently.

The gaoler sat him down and stepped back to his customary space behind me, ready to watch.

I decided that I would try a different approach with this young man from the broken bones his comrade had suffered. A rotating schedule of torture methods prevented things from getting stale. I would not use the vice, and it was not the turn of the hot irons, either. The vertical rack which stood against the room's right-hand wall was not yet due its turn, and the gaoler had recently suffered a repetitive strain injury to his whipping arm, precluding that method of torture. No, this time I would use my blades and other hand tools.

I took down the instrument case from its hooks on the wall next to the rack and set it on the table, facing the youth. I clicked its latch and opened the lid, giving him a clear and ominous view of an assortment of scalpels, pliers, chisels, and other small but highly unpleasant implements.

I waited until his eyes, which contained the same combination of defiance and vulnerability as his cohort, lifted from the tools to meet my stare.

'You know full well why you are here,' I told him. 'I shall not waste time with small talk.' I turned the case at a ninety-degree angle so that I could reach into it. I took out a scalpel, the cutting edge of which was honed to a fraction of a millimetre.

'So, do you confess to conspiring to commit treason against the Great Authority?' I asked him.

Seconds passed. No response.

‘Very well,’ I said. I stood and walked around the table to him, scalpel in hand. I grasped a handful of his hair and bent his head back so that he was looking up into my eyes. I held the scalpel to his cheek. ‘Are you ready for me to begin?’ I asked.

‘Yes, father,’ he said.

THE END

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Quarterly

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Plus Essays
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Fossemò



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ANTARCTICA by Stephen Hernandez

Oderint, dum metuant— (Let them hate, so long as they fear).

From 'Atreus', in Seneca 'Dialogues' bks.

Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler, strode about the bunker's meeting room waving his arms, and spasmodically clenching his fists. He was spluttering so much in his fury that flecks of spit covered the front of his usually immaculate brown uniform. Albert Speer, sat placidly, his arms loosely folded, his legs crossed, coolly regarding the Führer of Nazi Germany raving like a madman. He had seen Hitler have these fits many times before, but they had got worse since he had retreated into the Bunker. The end of the war and Germany's imminent defeat looked inevitable, so did the Führer's descent into insanity. Dimly, noises from outside penetrated down to the underground bunker, booming rumbles like the onset of a distant thunder storm—the Red Army was on the outskirts of Berlin.

As Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, the unenviable task of bringing the news of the theft of the Nazi's top-secret weapon had naturally fallen to Speer (also, no-one else wanted to do it). It had been the Führer's last, only hope of conceivably winning the war, or at least brokering an armistice. Dr Morell, Hitler's personal physician, was chasing the manic leader around the room trying to inject him with one of his drug concoctions. He could be witnessing one of those comic farces, so beloved of the British, Speer mused to himself. But the situation was serious. One wrong word could bring all the Führer's wrath down on one's head, with fatal consequences.

The secret weapon, known as 'Die Glocke'— 'The Bell' (because of its unusual shape), was arguably the Nazis greatest scientific accomplishment. Its production had been kept so secret that Speer had only the sparsest of information regarding its development, which was not surprising, given that he was much more aesthetically inclined towards architecture, which took up most of his time. To have the super powerful weapon stolen, virtually, from under their noses, was inconceivable. Luckily, Hitler seemed to lay most of the blame on Reichsführer Himmler and the SS, and not to his profound relief, on Speer himself. Finally, the good Doctor managed to catch up with the madly gesticulating Führer, inject him, and make a quick exit. But it still took several minutes for Hitler to calm down.

Speer, uncrossed his legs and observed the miraculous transformation that slowly crept over the Reich Chancellor. It was like watching a man's mind drifting off to recollect a pleasant memory. Hitler, sat down in his chair at the head of the meeting table—relaxation personified. He dismissed Doctor Morell with a wave of his hand and focused his remaining attention completely on Speer. The Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production, accustomed as he was to intense scrutiny, always felt uncomfortable when the Führer's bloodshot blue eyes bored into him.

'Now, Speer give me some good news. I know I can rely on you for that, at least. Unlike, those other traitors... No, I won't name them, they don't even deserve that! I won't let their foul names pollute my lips,' he said.

Speer, restrained himself from telling Hitler the truth: it was already too late for any secret weapon to have saved them, anyway. It was time to make the situation more palatable for the Chancellor, tell him some half-truths. It was a time when some small flattery meant survival.

‘Due to your incredible foresight, *mein Führer*, of building several models of Die Glocke we should have another working model up and running within a week.’ Speer knew full well that it would be months before one was ready. No-one appeared to be completely sure how the one finished Bell had managed to take off anyway, because according to the scientists working on the project—the Bell hadn’t even been readied for launch.

Hitler clapped his hands in glee and incongruously fist pummelled the air in triumph.

‘*Ja. Ja!* I knew it! All is not lost. Soon, we will rain terror on the Allied swine,’ he said, smiling beneficently at Speer as though he were a priest dispensing the Eucharist.

Speer wanted to leave there and then, but the demented Führer had not finished.

‘What I don’t understand is who managed to pilot the Bell? Goering denies any knowledge of the Luftwaffe having sent any pilots, and the Luftwaffe have the only men that can fly such a machine. How is it possible, Speer?’

Speer, who had only heard some of the vague rumours that were circulating, decided it was best to shift the blame once more.

‘I am afraid you would have to ask Reichsführer Himmler about security, *mein Führer*. The project, after all, was overseen by the SS. There are strange rumours...’

His voice trailed off. He knew that there was much more than just strange rumours. There had been occult practices in Wewelsburg—Himmler’s SS stronghold, and the suspected involvement of vampires, of all things! —Speer had his own sources when it came to Reichsführer Himmler’s activities.

‘I know about the rumours,’ Hitler, said calmly. ‘I authorised Himmler and poor Heydrich to use whatever powers were available to them, including the occult, however evil those powers might be.’

Speer, restrained a shudder. He had also heard about the evil that was taking place in camps in the East, some sort of ‘Final Solution’ designed by the late Heydrich and instigated by Himmler’s notorious SS, and a singular group known as the Einsatzgruppe—a euphemism for Death Squads.

Speer, couldn’t help himself and blurted: ‘But vampires, *mein Führer*... surely they belong only in fairy tales and horror stories?’

‘Speer, this is top secret,’ Hitler whispered, a somewhat outré mode of speech for the Führer. ‘The SS have been using supernatural forces against the Allies. So far, they have had limited success.’ Hitler suddenly had a fit of coughing. ‘Himmler has told me he has conscripted vampires into the Wehrmacht,’ he waved his hands about again, ‘I know, I find the whole thing unbelievable as well. Himmler is not to be trusted—perhaps he has gone mad. I want

you to find out what happened to my secret weapon,' he slammed his fist onto the meeting table. 'And I want it back.'

Speer shrugged his greatcoat on resignedly as he left the bunker. Germany was in chaos, and he was being sent on a hopeless mission. It was typical of these end days: a madman sending him to spy on a lunatic.

Van Helsing struggled with the controls of Die Glocke. One moment it seemed to be in a stable position, the next it was rocking as if it was going to turn upside down. It did not help that the Count, still in his bat form, was conveying his messages telepathically, it was a method of communication that van Helsing had never experienced before. The steering wheel was not actually a wheel but an old-fashioned yoke which controlled both altitude and steering. Van Helsing held the stick in both hands, but it was like trying to hold a fish. It slipped out of his hands with every jolt, and the Count would bat shriek in his mind to regain control. It was pitch black inside the cramped hull of The Bell. The darkness was only broken occasionally by the flash of red lights that would illuminate one of the many control panels. Van Helsing tried to communicate with the Count—he wanted to know how to turn the displays on permanently. He must have got through somehow, although he had no idea how, because dozens of dimly lit instrument panels suddenly appeared. The weak green, amber, and red lights were just sufficient to make out the cramped interior of The Bell. Van Helsing could see the Count bat / bat Count sitting with its wings folded on one of the panels. Its crimson eyes seemed to be studying the flashing figures displayed on it with concentrated interest. Van Helsing was sure he had heard that bats might be blind (apparently not in this case), and steered themselves through the darkness using something akin to radar—perhaps the Count was using a mixture of both to navigate Die Glocke. Occasionally, the Count bat would stretch out a clawed digit and turn a switch on or off, or press a button.

Van Helsing had been aware that the flying vessel had no porthole or window before he boarded. He suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to see outside, for the first time in his life he was feeling undeniably claustrophobic. He did, however, manage to make out the fluorescent dial of his wristwatch and happily noted that the time matched a twenty-four-hour time dial on one of the panels, somehow, he felt this small coincidence reassuring. He also noted that several hours had past, but what he really wanted to know was their speed and destination. Van Helsing should have known that the Count could quite easily read his mind, although he perceived it was strictly a one-way process, so the Count's answer came to him straight away—their speed was an astonishing 1400 kilometres an hour! Their destination was no less astonishing: Antarctica! The Count premeditated van Helsing's next question: they would arrive in just under 8 hours.

Speer surveyed the destruction. It was even worse than the reports had suggested. The launch of Die Glocke had not only destroyed most of the underground bunkers, it had taken half of the hillside with it. Such power! It sent a shiver down his spine. Where would this search for the ultimate weapon lead? In some terrible destruction that up to now had only been the province of God? Many of the slave labourers—mostly Jewish—had died in the explosion. But Speer had an idea of the awful conditions they would have worked under—death would have been a welcome release. The Jews would have been exterminated either way—to his shame, he was aware of that. Not for once, he thought of the terrible atrocities that even now were being committed against the Semitic race. How would he explain himself to the Allies when they won the war? which they most surely would. He would no doubt be tried for Crimes against Humanity, but he had to put such negative thoughts and the shame they would

bring to one side, concentrate on the here and now. Some of the unfortunate Jews were being systematically shot by the SS, who seemed to believe that this larceny was some sort of conspiracy on the workers' part. What was it in the Nazi pathology that so ardently believed in Zionist conspiracies? He put a stop to it immediately, reminded the Bunker commander that they would need all the men they could get if they were to repair the damage. He wondered, even as he gave his orders to spare them, how these emaciated bodies managed to cling to life. On the other hand, many of the well-fed SS guard had survived, but even these brutes seemed in a state of suspended shock.

Speer decided he needed to interrogate the surviving scientists. They were reluctant to talk at first, after all they had been sworn to secrecy. But Speer carried direct orders from the Führer, and to reinforce his authority over them he threatened to hand all of them into the gentle hands of the Gestapo if they did not tell him what he wanted to know.

'How did whoever stole it manage to pilot the machine?' Speer asked over and over again.

Finally, one of the scientists gave way. 'It would not be too much of a problem to actually fly as it is pre-programmed to go to Neuschwabenland, you would just need to keep it steady, but you would also need a knowledge of advanced, anomalous physics, and electromagnetic momentum as outlined by Tesla. Only someone with an intimate knowledge of its workings and Tesla's theories could start it up it—all those people are present in this room.'

'What the hell has Tesla got to do with this, and where the hell is Neuschwabenland for that matter?'

His suspicions had been aroused upon hearing the name of Nikola Tesla. He knew there were hidden esoteric orders within the SS, including the Vril and the Black Sun Society—coincidentally the eponymous Schwarze Sonne initials were actually 'SS', who claimed that they had secret papers penned by the great scientist which had never seen the light of day. Speer, disliked intrigues, especially when he was not involved in them. Once again Himmler had made him feel like an outsider. Yet why had the Führer entrusted him with this task when it was clearly Himmler's province? Hitler knew Himmler and Speer hated each other. The Führer was playing his closest confidants against each other again, a favourite game of his, and a sure way to stop them banding together and assassinating him—clever.

'Die Glocke is wholly based around Tesla's theories of endothermic explosion and Neuschwabenland is in Antarctica,' the scientist said.

It occurred to Speer that he needed to get to Antarctica straight away.

'How long will it take for the Bell to reach Neuschwabenland?'

'We estimate between fourteen and twenty hours,' the scientist replied.

'What!' Speer was aghast. It must be thousands of miles. He had never heard of a craft travelling so fast. He realised, with some regret, that he should have been paying more attention to what Himmler was up to in these huge underground bunkers. 'Why Neuschwabenland?' he demanded.

The scientist shrugged. ‘As far as I know they were the Führer’s wishes.’ The scientist dearly hoped this would satisfy the curiosity of the annoying officer. He and the others were preparing to surrender themselves to the Allies, and all they wanted was to escape from the horrible place as soon as possible. He breathed a sigh of relief when the man with the annoying questions dismissed him. He was glad that he had not had to reveal the secrets of the Hollow Earth that lay underneath Neuschwabenland.

Van Helsing was beginning to get the hang of this telepathy thing. ‘Why Antarctica?’ he let the question form in his mind, but did not voice it. He was not prepared for the lecture that followed. It was the longest that the Count had ever ‘talked’ to him.

‘You really want to know?’

The question echoed through van Helsing’s mind like he was thinking it himself. Van Helsing assured him he did.

‘You won’t believe it.’ The thought came back.

Van Helsing assured the Count he would. After all, whatever the Count told him could not be more bizarre than his present situation, he reasoned. He stopped the thought as soon as he realised the Count was laughing inside his head—he had read his mind.

‘First tell me how you come to know how to manoeuvre this thing.’

The Count told him that it came to him through psychometry as soon as he came into contact with it, as he had guessed it would. When it was nearing completion, he could feel its pull with each fresh experiment. It was like a feeling of ancient déjà vu, even though Die Glocke had only just been invented, he replied to the incredulous van Helsing. He then started another strange lecture. Half a billion years ago, the Elder Race (to which the Count was merely a lately adopted son), began to colonize the Earth’s solar system because their own system—Aldebaran—had become uninhabitable. These Elders or Elohin were all blonde, tall and blue eyed. The corrupt Nazi party had mistakenly adopted these Aryan traits as human perfection, not realising they were in fact alien in origin.

Van Helsing couldn’t help wondering how old the Count actually was. The Count’s answer came into his head instantaneously.

‘I have forgotten. I have seen all the greatest of men’s empires rise and fall. I have lost count of the mortal and immortal companions I have had who are long turned to dust.’

Van Helsing sensed a feeling of sadness that was tinged by an ancient melancholy. The Count continued with his narrative as if nothing had happened. Van Helsing realised with awe that the Count could probably carry out many telepathic conversations and actions at once. It was taking multi-tasking to another level.

The Elohin who inhabited Earth were known as Sumerians and they farmed a sub-species for their food—blood. The sub-species was known as man. Sometimes they selected one of the humans to receive their blood. These became vampires (a poor copy of the Elohin), and they eventually became Nosferatu, and had powers closer to their ‘parents’. These Nosferatu became supervisors of the farmed humans. But the Elohin got caught up in an interstellar war

and called on their Sumerian cousins to join the conflict. The Sumerians left in their inter-dimensional and time-warping flying machines of which this—Die Glocke—is but a poor example. The poor deluded scientists who believe they have built The Bell out of their own intelligence have been encouraged in their delusion by the Vril Society who implanted the design in their minds using mediums who had picked up ancient Sumerian messages that had been lost in the Aether.

The Sumerians left the Nosferatu to control the Earth vowing to return when the conflict was over. They have been gone for millennia. But a millennium is but a blink of an eye to the Elohim.

The humans bred uncontrollably. There were not enough Nosferatu to control them, and gradually man overran Earth and chaos ensued. The remaining Nosferatu went into hiding. They managed to ‘turn’ some humans but most were too weak to take pure Nosferatu blood and perished, but some survived. ‘We’ survive in smaller and smaller numbers. Unless we are renewed with Sumerian blood we may disappear altogether. There are very few amongst the Nazis that know about the Sumerians. Most of them are in the very top ranks of the SS. Their members belong to the Order of the Black Sun—with that, the Count finished his tale.

The whole thing sounded preposterous to van Helsing, but on the other hand, he reasoned, he was travelling across the face of the Earth at an astonishing speed powered by God knows what, and accompanied by an ancient vampire in the form of a bat—so anything seemed possible.

Van Helsing had a bad suspicion.

‘Where were the Sumerians based?’

The answer once again echoed through his head unbidden as if he had thought it. But it was the Count, of course.

‘Neuschwabenland in Antarctica. It is the entrance to the Hollow Earth, where the Sumerian lived.’

‘So remind me again. Why are we going to Neuschwabenland?’ Van Helsing sent back the thought.

‘I never told you.’ Was the Count’s reply.

The bat fluttered above van Helsing’s head and hung upside-down on the ceiling. Their telepathic communication appeared to have ended.

Angelique, and the rest of the Count’s ‘girls’ were getting restless—they were hungry. The Count had yet to contact her telepathically as arranged. Angelique was the only one who the Count entrusted with his orders. Her innate sexuality also helped to keep the ‘girls’ all together. If there was one thing the ‘girls’ craved nearly as much as feeding, it was sex. Their ensemble orgies served to satisfy their burning physical needs, and rekindle their love for each other. Angelique decided she needed to satisfy not one, but both of their needs as soon as possible. The Count had warned her about taking any of the SS guards, or the Jewish workers. He had not said anything about the fat scientists though. She wandered through the

ruins of the bunker, getting a lot of lustful looks from the soldiers and shy glances from the slave workers, until she came to the scientists' quarters which were relatively unscathed and luxurious compared to the rest of the bunker's quarters.

Gerlach was the first to respond to the loud knocking on the door. It was no doubt another of those cretinous SS guards and he was fed up with their interruptions. He flung open the door, only to be confronted with the most attractive woman he had set eyes on—no matter that she was dressed in a SS Major's uniform which carried the dreaded insignia of The Black Sun. The uniform only served to emphasize the voluptuous figure that lay beneath.

Angelique gave a straight arm salute and practically shouted, 'Heil Hitler!' She accompanied it with an equally smart clicking of her boots' heels.

Gerlach was taken aback by this apparition. And so were the other scientists in the room. Angelique strode into the room followed by the rest of the girls. The sight of the scientists, well fed if a trifle elderly, had set Angelique's and the other vampires' mouths watering. Once Gerlach had got his jaw back in place he tried a clumsy salute and stammered a greeting. Selene, the serene half-caste vampiress, shut and locked the door behind them. The scientists were too surprised to notice.

Angelique gave Gerlach a stunning smile and proceeded to strip. So did the others. They were down to their underwear when Gerlach noticed there was something wrong with their smiles—his greedy eyes had been occupied elsewhere. He finally hit on it. It was their teeth—they appeared to be growing. It was the last discovery he would ever make. The hunger made the vampires transformation nearly instantaneous. Gerlach let out a huge rumbling, thunderous fart—it was to be his epitaph. The scientists only had a brief moment to see all their worst nightmares come true. The beautiful women suddenly turned into monsters with deformed jaws nearly four times as large as those of a human being, jaws more suited to jackals, and the terrible maws were full of razor like teeth in which the two eye teeth were the largest, they curled inwards like ivory sabres. In fact, if the scientists had found themselves in a roomful of sabre tooth tigers the outcome would not have been that much different. The room became a bloodbath as the vampires ripped their prey apart. Unlike their cousins-in-teeth, the female haemovores did not consume the flesh, contenting themselves with licking and sucking up every last drop of their victims' precious red fluid. With superhuman speed the 'girls' had completely ingested all of the blood that had been in veins, arteries, on the floor, and on the walls. What was left of the scientists were mere shrunken, desiccated husks. They piled the corpses in one corner. The scientists' blood depleted cadavers were little more than creamy white mush, as if an industrial sized dollop of Bavarian strudel had been dumped on the floor. A pair of wire framed spectacles sat atop the mound, and seemed to stare, emptily yet accusatorily, at the wearer's recent unwelcome guests, because as usual the slaughter had aroused the 'girls', and as their bodies returned to normal so did their considerable sexual desires—one hunger was now replaced by another. Selene and April had begun soft petting, and their deep-water musk scented the room. The others undressed in seconds, and soon there was nothing to distinguish them in the writhing mass of limbed flesh. Sounds of satisfied sighs and hissing expectation filled the room. The mass of beautiful bodies settled into a rhythmical juddering as orgasm after orgasm flowed through them. Lust and pleasure verging on pain wracked their bodies.

Angelique, however, even through the mist of bliss, was aware that they could not linger in their ecstasy. Once all their needs had been satiated, especially, those of Miss Lovelace—who took the longest, they quickly dressed and left the scientists' quarters.

It was not until they were back out in the open that Angelique received the Count's message, faint as it was. He wanted them to commandeer an aircraft and make their way immediately to Antarctica. If they couldn't commandeer one they were to take it by force. Angelique considered either option perfectly viable. They shot some soldiers who were working on a lorry. It seemed a pity to leave warm blood, but needs must, Angelique thought. They drove it to the airport.

Reich Minister Speer did not enjoy his flight. He always got travel sick, but it was exacerbated by being the target of anti-aircraft shells that burst in the Berlin sky like bright fireworks. Luckily, the Allies seemed more interested in invading Germany rather than shooting down transport planes, and the targeting was lackadaisical. Things calmed down once they had left Berlin behind them. Speer fell in and out of sleep. They refuelled twice before they reached Argentina, where they transferred to a waiting U-Boat bound for Antarctica.

The living conditions aboard the abominably cramped U-Boat were awful. There was one toilet to service the whole crew. Its smell, along with the hanging dried meats and the men's sweat, permeated the whole U-Boat. Speer swore that once he got out of the stinking tin can he would never suffer from claustrophobia in his life. He spent as much time as he could with the tight-lipped U-Boat Captain on the conning tower, gulping down the freezing air like a man dying of thirst.

Van Helsing found the flickering lights inside Die Glocke hypnotizing, without meaning to he had started to doze off. He was rudely awakened by a shrieking braking noise inside the strange craft, and the Count's voice inside his head. The Count was calmly telling him to wake up—they had arrived at their destination. Helsing opened the hatchway and the Count bat flitted out. The brilliant white light seared his eyes. It seemed to be coming from everywhere, and it was physically painful. He clambered out blindly, and fell to his knees. Whatever he had landed in was freezing. He looked down. More light. Somewhere, in his light saturated brain, he registered that he was kneeling in snow. And he was cold—very, very cold.

The Count materialised next to him in his human form.

'Are you cold?' the Count asked in a mildly sympathetic voice.

Van Helsing was shivering and his teeth chattering too much to give the sort of answer he would have liked.

'How can you tell?' he managed to say, gritting his teeth. He hugged his body with both arms, and jumped up and down on the spot.

The Count, for the first time ever, touched him. He put both hands on van Helsing's shoulders. Van Helsing felt warmth flood through him. It was like his blood was on fire. He felt full of energy. Was this what it was like to be a vampire? He put the thought aside. He

had his own reasons for wishing to remain mortal, free of damnation, and it had nothing to do with religion.

‘Let’s go,’ the Count said.

‘Where?’ Van Helsing turned a full circle. There was white everywhere, white ground, white sky, and whiteness in between. They and the matt black Bell, were the only colour in the whole frozen, virgin landscape.

‘You will see.’ The Count set off, and van Helsing had no choice but to follow. Van Helsing kept his eyes firmly locked on the Count’s back. The black cloak was by far the most identifiable object on the horizon. However, it provided van Helsing with a means of conversation—he found he needed to do something with his new-found energy and talking was a way of unloading, he really felt like running, but he was afraid he might actually lose the Count if he ran too far away. Talking, whilst briskly walking, seemed the only viable option.

‘I couldn’t help wondering—what happens with your clothes when you turn into a bat?’

‘You mean when I transmogrify?’

‘If that is what it is called—yes.’

‘You are a mortal. You see what you need to see.’

Van Helsing mulled this over for some time. It gave him something to do in the white wilderness. The Count did not seem to be inclined to further conversation.

‘Here we are,’ the Count’s voice startled van Helsing out of his reverie.

‘Here’ appeared to still be in the middle of the white nowhere, as far as van Helsing was concerned.

Van Helsing turned around on the spot, again and again, hoping to see something... anything... but there was still nothing.

The Count did something with his hands. It was a movement that van Helsing found on hindsight that he could never recall or replicate properly. The Count’s arm seemed to strobe through the air as if the air itself was a thick, viscous material, like he was moving underwater. A low-pitched grinding sound came from under their feet. The ground began to shake violently, so much so, that van Helsing could not keep his feet, and fell to his knees. A huge chasm opened beneath him. Its icy walls, smooth as glass, penetrated to unknown depths. Staring down into the mysterious abyss van Helsing had a terrible sense of vertigo, it was all he could do to stop himself from vomiting. However, the Count seemed quite happy, and pointed at something unnoticed along the chasm’s walls. And then van Helsing saw it: a staircase cut into the very ice itself, leading downwards, forever downwards.

The Count motioned him to follow, and van Helsing followed, reluctantly at first, but then with a renewed curiosity of what lay in those hidden depths. The steps, strangely, were not slippery, because grooves had been conveniently cut in them in such a manner that they held

their shoes firm. The staircase of ice was barely distinguishable from the surrounding ice apart from the fact that there was a slight inner green glow to it, but still van Helsing had to concentrate to keep his footing. He tried not to look down beyond his own feet and the back of the Count's cloak. The stairs, seemed endless, and many times he was afraid his legs would give way, but van Helsing knew that would be fatal, and he refused with all his being to die such an unknown and ignominious death.

All things, though, come to pass—including staircases. They had reached the bottom, where there was a sort of hollowed out pit. The Count did the same thing with his hands as he had done earlier. A loud crack, and then a dark line appeared in the ice in front of them. The dark line slowly spread upwards, downwards, and sideways until it had formed the outline of a doorway. The door silently slid open. There was only darkness beyond, but as he followed the Count through the entrance an eerie green light started to emanate from the icy walls. The same light that had illuminated the steps. They were in a chamber with no means of egress other than the way they had come in. The chamber was drenched in cold and solemn silence. There was not even the ominous creak and groaning from the huge mass of ice surrounding them. There was something special about this silence that unnerved van Helsing, but he couldn't put his finger on it, and then he realised what was wrong—The Count was no longer in his head. Whatever, or wherever, this place was it blocked telepathic communication. The silence between them hung in the heavy, charged air like an uninvited guest. With alarming prescience van Helsing realised he missed the Count's otherworldly presence in his mind. The heat in his veins had disappeared along with the Count's reassuring telepathic voice. Did it mean that the Count was losing in his powers in this unhallowed place? He also realised that even though he no longer possessed internal heat he was not cold. The icy walls, for some bizarre, impossible reason seemed to emanate a kind of low heat. The Count was forging ahead. Then van Helsing saw that the wall ahead of them was not really a wall, it was a green mist evaporating off of the walls. As they penetrated further and further along the passage the more temperate became the climate. Van Helsing felt something brushing his sleeve and to his surprise found it was a leafy branch. The mist was dissipating fast, and van Helsing perceived they were in some kind of glade. As his eyes became accustomed to the air's greenish hue he saw how picturesque his surroundings were. It was like a spring day in the Bavarian Alps, but without the mountains. The air was so fresh it was like drinking from a cool, clear stream. He felt renewed and revived, but it seemed to be having no noticeable effect on his companion. The Count strode along seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. Van Helsing wanted to stop and take in the blissful, peaceful scene, but the Count seemed determined to push on.

'Why the hurry?' van Helsing, asked out loud.

'We have a meeting to attend. It would be inappropriate to arrive late after triggering the alarms. Our hosts, or more appropriately—The Host is awaiting us,' the Count, replied.

Some minutes later the glade parted to reveal a crystal-clear lake banked by weeping willows and cypresses. The place could have been idyllic save for the U-boats moored incongruously along the shoreline. There was no sign of their crews.

Van Helsing saw that they were heading towards some kind of fairy-tale, ostentatious building, possibly designed along the lines of mad King Ludwig the Second's Neuschwanstein Castle. He had decided quite some time ago that he was dreaming, and all of

this made complete sense in a dream. It also kept him sane. The castle's drawbridge (of course it had to have one, van Helsing reasoned), was lowered as they approached.

Inside the castle's walls a parade of sorts was taking place—it was a parade of children. But this was not a parade conducted by soldiers, or if they were, they were the youngest soldiers he had ever seen, even younger than the Hitlerjugend. These perfect children would have even put the SS Division Hitlerjugend to shame, on top of that there was not even a sign of a swastika. Van Helsing realised that over the years he had become so accustomed to seeing it that he felt something was wrong when its very absence was conspicuous. The children were all immaculately dressed in identical khaki uniforms of shorts, shirts and socks. They all had armbands depicting the same logo: The Deutsche Ahnenerbe. Van Helsing could see the link between the Aryan research project and the perfect children. The children, boys and girls alike, were all blonde and blue eyed with immaculate, pale white skin—the embodiment of Aryan perfection.

‘Behold, the future of mankind,’ the Count said to van Helsing.

‘My God, it's an army of children!’ van Helsing, said.

‘Worse, it's an army of young Nosferatu raised on the pure blood of the last remaining Sumerian. Soon, just one of these ‘children’ will be as powerful as me,’ the Count replied. ‘See, they are already day-walkers.’

‘Where are the adults?’ van Helsing, asked. The sight of all the children neatly marching and then standing to attention without any spoken commands was very unnerving. ‘Are they all telepathic?’

‘Yes, but you cannot hear them, nor thankfully, can you hear the Sumerian. Their voices would destroy your mind. That is why I have closed that channel down for you. The only need they have for adults is for food. Humans are bred like cattle and secretly replenished by Lebensborn breeding stock via the U-boats.’

‘Are we going to meet the Sumerian?’ van Helsing asked, anxious to be away from the unnatural children.

‘Yes. I should think so. Are you afraid?’

‘Yes,’ van Helsing admitted immediately. ‘How am I supposed to feel about meeting a blood-sucking alien? your so-called ‘girls’ are frightening enough, and now these ‘children’’ The fairy tale feeling was rapidly dissipating.

The Count strode purposely forward. The children parted silently in front of them like diminutive white and khaki curtains. A flight of steps led up to the castle's keep. Inside, the place was completely empty except for what appeared to be an upright Egyptian sarcophagus. The sarcophagus opened by itself. Van Helsing fell instinctively to his knees—after all, he was in the presence of a living God. The Sumerian was so blonde and white he looked like an albino. Van Helsing realised the Sumerian was immensely tall even from his genuflected prospective—over eight foot. The giant was naked, and appeared to be sexless. But the most striking thing about the alien was its eyes. If the eyes were the windows of the soul then the Sumerian was soulless. The eyes were blacker than coal, blacker and emptier than space

itself, and most strikingly they had no irises. The eyes were hypnotic and van Helsing found himself tumbling into them as if he were falling down a well. A well that had no bottom. He was reminded of a favourite childhood book—a young girl named Alice forever falling down a hole. If it had not been for the Count placing a hand on his shoulder he could have stayed rooted to the spot like that forever. The Sumerian had not moved. It could have been a statue, but for the powerful force that emanated from it. The Count was also staring into those ghastly eyes, but van Helsing sensed that some kind of unspoken communication was passing between him and the Sumerian, much deeper even than telepathy. The Count bowed very low and they left the huge, empty hall.

Van Helsing went to ask the Count something but the Count made a dismissive motion with his hand.

‘Wait until we are out of the Castle,’ the Count told him.

Once they were over the drawbridge, the Count said to him: ‘Now we can talk.’

‘You talked to him, to it, didn’t you? ... with your mind.’

The Count nodded.

‘Well, what did he say?’

‘I will try to explain...’ the Count said.

Speer stood in the conning tower of the U-boat breathing in lungfuls of the icy air, so cold it burnt his throat. He beat his arms around his body and jogged from foot to foot. The freezing cold was preferable to the stink down below. He chatted for a while with the Captain. An intelligent but hard man who seemed immune to the cold around him. Their breath billowed in front of them every time they opened their mouths. The Captain had informed him it was his third trip to the secret Antarctica base, but he was reluctant to elucidate on the nature of the trips. Instead, he preferred to restrict their conversation to small talk. The ice floes were becoming more numerous, and their progress became slower as they edged past huge icebergs and cliffs of ice. Thick clouds of fog surrounded the conning tower. Visibility was so poor they could hardly make out the bow of the U-boat as it nudged slowly forward.

Speer was woken during the middle of the night by the submerge alarm. Men were rushing to their posts automatically. They were a well-trained and disciplined crew as befitted their strict Captain. Every man knew their place. Speer knew that he had to remain in his bunk. He would only get in the way. When the crew had settled somewhat, he ventured out of the tiny bunk and asked one of the crew what was happening.

‘We are approaching the harbour,’ he was told. Speer was bemused. Surely they should be surfaced to enter the harbour? The U-boat was going ever deeper. The hull began to creak and groan under the rising pressure. Suddenly, there was a tremendous bang. A large, flesh-piercing bolt shot passed him like a bullet, followed by a spray of water. If it had hit Speer’s head it would have taken it off. It was followed by several similar bangs. Unnecessary orders to plug the holes were screamed out. Speer breathed a sigh of relief as the submarine mercifully halted its descent and everything stopped sliding towards the bow. Evidently, they were not set on a suicide mission to the bottom of the sea.

Speer made his way forward to where the Captain was poring over charts.

‘Nearly there, Reich Minister,’ the Captain said without looking up. ‘We will be surfacing shortly. I suggest you change into smarter clothes.’ Speer, realised he had not shaved or changed his clothes in days. He went to attend to his toilet whilst the U-Boat prepared to dock.

Speer was totally unprepared for the sight that met his eyes when he climbed out of the exit hatch. They seemed to be docked in a peaceful, picturesque lake. It could have been a spring day on Lake Como. But the scenery was nothing compared to the welcoming party awaiting him on the jetty. There was a gentleman of indeterminate age elegantly dressed in a flamboyant white frilled shirt and black velvet cloak lined with scarlet silk, accompanied by a tall man dressed in leather lederhosen. Their companions were even more exotic—they were the most beautiful women Speer had ever seen. He immediately felt a stirring in his loins accompanied by an unwanted feeling of dread. Had he arrived in Heaven or Hell?

The elegant man stepped forward. ‘Hello,’ he said, ‘welcome to the end of the world.’

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Ghostlands



A Book of Ghost Stories

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THE GRIMOIRE by Steven Havelock

“Why did he do it?” asked Dr Gonzalez.

“Nobody knows,” said Dr Jalile. ‘He just got a knife and murdered four members of his family.’ The two psychiatrists stared at the view screen of the CCTV that showed the picture from Azeem’s holding cell.

Just then Dr Jalile’s phone beeped. He took it out and saw it was his wife, Parveen, asking what he wanted for dinner later that night. He quickly typed *Saag Aloo* and put his phone away.

“Sorry.”

Dr Gonzalez continued. “Yes, why would anyone murder their own parents and brother and sister?”

“The patient muttered something to the police officers that arrested him, something about the King of Liars and the First Power.” Dr Gonzalez was perplexed, which for him after twenty-five years of working in the psychiatric field, was a rarity. “I don’t know what he meant.”

“Well, I’m going in to interview him,” said Dr Jalile, who had just started his morning shift.

“Okay, see you later tonight. Let me know what you find out,” said Dr Gonzalez. “After a busy night shift, I’m exhausted, going home to hit the sack.”

“See you tonight.”

Dr Jalile dialled an internal number on the office phone. “Yes, Jackson, bring our new guest, Azeem, to the interview room.”

Height: 5ft’3

Occupation: Unemployed

Qualifications: Basic English and maths.

Why did he do it?

As Dr Jalile was going down the list the door opened and Azeem was brought in, in handcuffs, with two large orderlies on each side of him.

The orderlies sat Azeem down at Dr Jalile’s desk.

“I’m Dr Jalile.” Jalile sounded more confident than he felt. “I understand you were brought in two nights ago?”

Jalile looked for any reaction, but Azeem remained silent, eyes downcast.

“Can you explain to me in your own words what happened at your house on Seaford Street, two days ago?”

“He made me do it,” Azeem said without looking up, keeping his eyes downcast.

“Who made you do what?”

“The murders, he made me do it.”

“Who?”

“The demon.”

Jalile remained silent. The silence stretched out.

“I should have never bought that grimoire...I didn’t realise what I was doing.”

“Where is this grimoire?”

“Doctor, the social worker brought it in with Azeem’s belongings,” said Graham, a well-muscled orderly to Azeem’s right. “He thought we would find it interesting.”

“Okay, thank you, I will take a look at it later.”

“The demon. He wouldn’t let it drop, he harassed me, day and night, night and day...until...until I did the dreaded deed.”

He’s definitely psychotic...that explains a lot, thought Jalile.

“What does this demon look like?”

“He’s like a shadow that hangs just on the edge of your peripheral vision.”

“What does he sound like? Can you hear him now?”

“No, not now. He only comes out at night.”

“So you can hear him at night?”

Azeem nodded an affirmative, still without looking up at the doctor.

Jalile nodded to the orderlies. *I found out what I wanted to know. He’s a schizophrenic in a psychotic phase.* The two orderlies took Azeem back to his holding room.

Dr Jalile picked up the phone and asked an orderly to bring him the grimoire. He spent the next thirty minutes looking through the old large book whose pages seemed to be made of some sort of hide or skin. The writing was scrawled in small, barely readable letters. He studied the book for a short time.

Total load of nonsense!

As he went to close the book, he thought he saw something dark on the edge of his peripheral vision.

What?

He looked again.

Nothing. Just a trick of the light. *I wish this place could afford some proper lighting then these cheap fluorescent bulbs.*

Later that night when Dr Gonzalez arrived. Jalile informed him of the conversations with the various patients. He knew Gonzalez would ask about their latest patient.

“He’s a paranoid schizophrenic, killed his family because a demon told him to.” He reached into a desk drawer, pulled out the grimoire and slammed it down on the desk but as he did so a shadow flashed across his vision.

Just a trick of the light.

The next day when Jalile arrived for work, he heard the high pitch whine of the security alarms. He thought nothing more about it as the security alarms regularly went off several times a day. It would be strange if there was a day when they didn’t go off; after all it was a high security mental hospital.

A female orderly whose name eluded him, ran up to Dr Jalile. Her face was flushed red and her eyes showed something more...

Is that confusion...?

“It’s Dr Gonzalez! He killed Azeem with a kitchen knife and stabbed Graham in the neck and then attacked the rest of the staff.”

“What?”

“Graham’s dead!”

Jalile head started to spin.

Dr Gonzalez? I have known him for six years. This can’t be right?

“Why, for God’s sake?”

“We don’t know. He was talking to Azeem half the night. Then Graham took his breakfast and tea in this morning, Gonzalez had been reading that strange book all night. No one knows why.”

“Where is Gonzalez?”

“The police took him.”

Without another word Dr Jalile headed to the office which he shared with Dr Gonzalez. As he entered he saw the grimoire lying open at a page. With his curiosity aroused he sat down and started to read.

The first power is the power of immortality. The second is the power of telepathy. The third is the power of invisibility.

Just then something flashed on the edge of his peripheral vision.

A shadow...?

Was the nonsense Azeem was talking about actually real? No can't be...Azeem said the demon only came out at night...and Gonzalez was here last night....

He would go and see Dr Gonzalez.

A few hours later Jalile was at another high security mental hospital. He sat in a room talking to the resident consultant psychiatrist.

“You say there is no history of mental illness in Gonzalez's background?”

“No, none, I have known him for six years now. Always very professional.”

The resident consultant psychiatrist, a Dr Freeman, stroked his chin. He had a perplexed look about him.

“Well, from the way he's been talking to himself since he was brought in I would say he's having a psychotic break.”

“Why did he kill Azeem?” asked Jalile.

“Your guess is as good as mine but I would say that he's flipped.”

Jalile dipped his hand into his briefcase and pulled out the grimoire. “They say he was reading this before he flipped. Maybe this grimoire had something to do with it?”

Dr Freeman stared at it dismissively. “Just superstitious nonsense, Dr Jalile.”

Dr Jalile suddenly felt embarrassed and silly for entertaining the idea that the book could have something to do with the murders.

“Sorry, Dr Freeman, yes you are right.”

That night Dr Jalile was awoken. For a second he was confused and wondered what had awoken him. Then he heard it again, a dark sibilant whisper that frightened the life out of him.

Come to me...come to me...

His wife Parveen was still fast asleep. He got up and followed the sound he heard in his head. He knew what he would see when he made it downstairs to the kitchen.

He descended the steps, walked through the living room.

Come to me...come to me...

He was in the kitchen.

There!

He saw the grimoire but what sent shivers down his spine was something that he could have never imagined. Reading the grimoire was a skeletal figure dressed in a black robe.

Before Jalile had time to ask who the robed figure was, he heard a voice in his head.

I am death...

“What the hell do you want with me?”

You and everyone you love must die!

“Why? Why must we die?”

You have read my book...The Book of the Dead. Did you not see the words inscribed on the front cover of the book? Come closer...look at these words.

Jalile did so.

The skeletal figure closed the book and Jalile read the inscription on the front, it was in Latin. Jalile translated it in his head.

He who reads this book will be cursed and sentenced to die.

“No! There must be a way out!”

There is one way. A way which will reward you not only with your life but with immortality.

“Please tell me the way out?”

You must kill those you love most.

“No! I won’t do it ever!”

The skeletal figure got up. Jalil noticed the scythe in his left hand that had been hidden by the side of the thing's cloak.

It came closer and closer.

If you want immortality then you must kill those you love most.

In a heartbeat Jalile had made his decision...and yet it felt like it wasn't him... as if he was possessed.

A few minutes later, Jalile stumbled down the stairs, his clothes and hands bloody and his eyes had the same look he had seen in Azeem and Gonzalez.

"I have done what you asked." A broken, pain wracked voice, "My wife and young child are no more..."

I wasn't entirely honest with you...I am not death...but the king of liars...

The skeletal figure suddenly transformed into a horned beast with a tail and hooves for feet.

"Why did I do it? I loved my family more than life itself."

Words from the fiend again entered Jalile's head.

You did it because your actions were guided by my expert hand.

"No! You promised to make me immortal!"

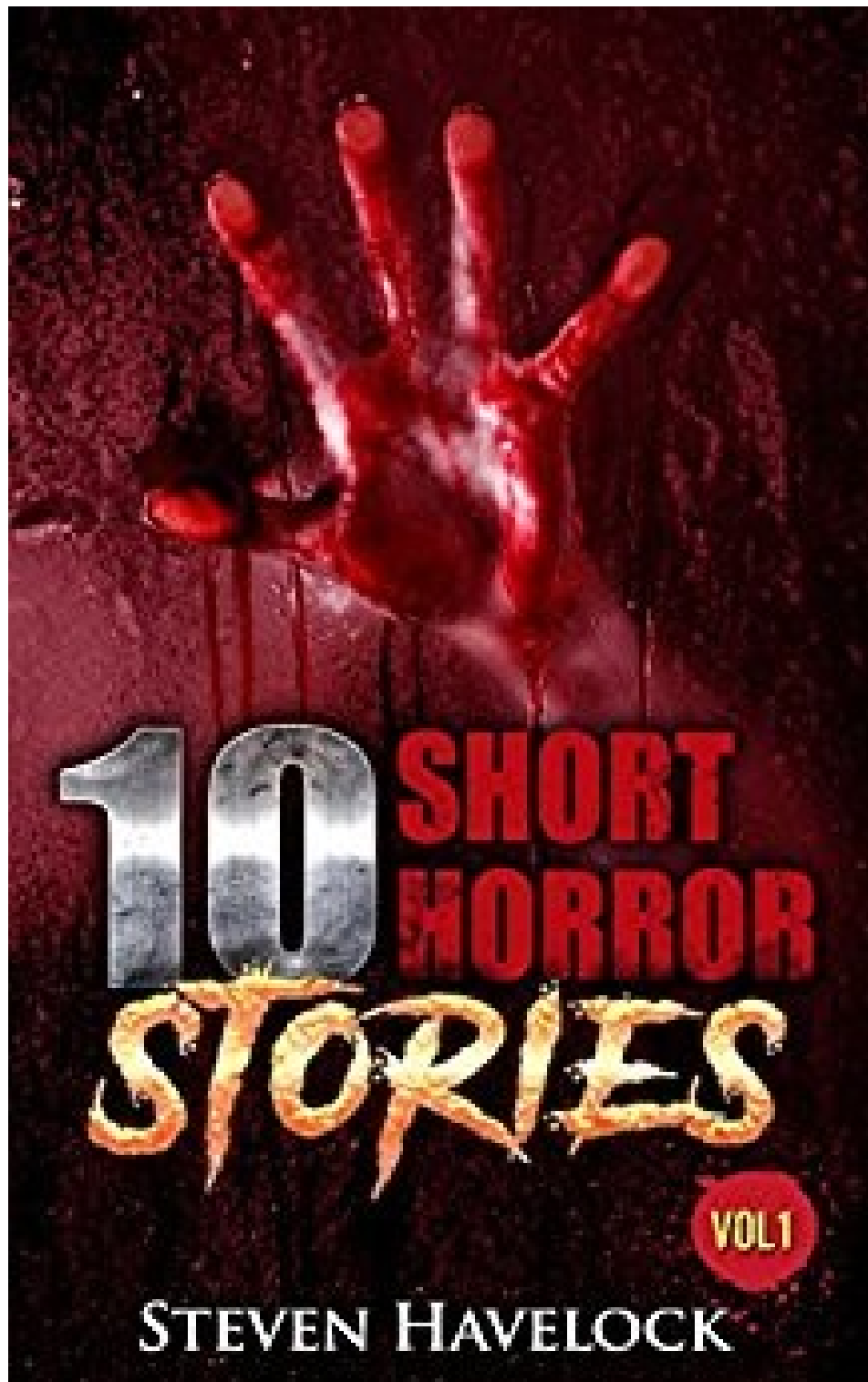
I lied.

Jalile suddenly felt very unwell. His mind spun like he was drunk. A scream ripped out into the night, again and again. The neighbours heard the scream and called the police.

Jalile was still screaming when they put him in handcuffs and took him away.

THE END

Steven Havelock's books are available from [Amazon](#).



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URSULA by Dave Ludford

Four months of intensely hot, dry weather had baked the earth hard and cracks split the ground like the deep lines that etched the faces of the old men in the village, lines that had grown deeper with worry as crops and cattle perished. Everyone prayed for rain; for relief from the merciless heat that sapped away one's strength and determination to continue with the daily struggle for survival. A heavy air of tension hung over the village like an invisible cloud that only broke on the day of the storm, and that was the day that Ursula vanished.

Ursula was the fourteen year-old daughter of Tamara, the widowed village midwife, and had not spoken since birth. She had keenly intelligent eyes and a friendly, outgoing manner and was as strong as any boy her age in the village. She would help the men in the fields at harvest time, and often ran errands for villagers to make a bit of extra money, all of which she gave to her mother. She would often spend hours on end walking through the rolling hills and forests round about, being a loner by nature and given to prolonged periods of deep introspective thought. Her mother often wished that Ursula could communicate these thoughts, but was content that they did not cause bouts of melancholia in the child. As Ursula was too young to remember her father (having been only a few months old when he'd succumbed to fever and passed away after a week of fitful struggle) Tamara knew that his passing couldn't be a source of mourning and grieving to her daughter. She often wondered however if Ursula gave any thought to what he'd been like.

The day of the storm began like every other had in the past four months; just a couple of hours after dawn the heat was already unbearable and the vultures, those ever-present speculative opportunists, gathered in numbers in the fields surrounding the village, waiting for the chance to pick at the flesh and bones of fallen cattle. Tamara was not perturbed at finding that her daughter was not in her room, and had not joined her for breakfast. Ursula would often take herself off in the early morning to go walking. She noticed that Ursula's bed had been slept in and that there were a couple of apples missing from the bowl on the kitchen table, so all seemed reasonably normal.

Mid-morning brought thunder that rolled through the valley sounding like the heavy boom of cannon fire, and forked lightning that lit up the firmament even against the backdrop of gathering clouds that were bruise-black. A few heavy drops of rain fell tentatively on the parched earth that sent steam hissing into the air; after a few minutes it became so torrential that a steamy mist drifted towards the village. Within a short time the ground became a mud bath, the flash-flooding creating rivers of fast-flowing water. The men in the fields scattered, quickly abandoning what few crops remained and driving cattle ahead of them that seemed frustratingly stubborn and unwilling to move even given the sudden change to violent, angry weather that seemed to be ripping apart both heaven and earth. The vultures rose heavily, screaming and flapping furiously as they wheeled away to escape the fierce onslaught.

Tamara watched the men as they returned from the shelter of her cottage doorway as the driving rain turned the once dusty, heat-seared road into a snarling river. She experienced what at first was a mild tinge of unease in the pit of her stomach as she strained her eyes and noticed that her daughter wasn't amongst them; so she hadn't gone to help them in the fields this morning, therefore she must have gone walking in the hills or the forest, she concluded. The sodden, miserable-looking men drove the cattle into their barns then quickly dispersed to their own homes. As the rain continued to hammer down relentlessly she tried to reassure

herself that her sensible and resourceful daughter had somewhere found adequate shelter. She turned and walked back into the cottage, closing the door firmly behind her.

A fresh and prolonged bout of thunder and lightning did little to calm Tamara's increasingly fractious nerves and she began to pace up and down the small room while the rain battered against the windows. She was praying silently that the weather would lift and her daughter would become sufficiently encouraged to make the return journey home; she walked towards the window and peered into the gloom but could see virtually nothing. Maybe, she thought, if she were to run to her uncle's cottage in the next street and explained the situation then perhaps he might organize a search party, despite the adverse conditions. She sat down and gave this idea serious consideration. They were a tight-knit community and surely there would be no shortage of volunteers willing to help. She realized that she needed to act fast if such a search party were to have any chance of success in what remained of the light, otherwise they would have to wait until morning and the thought of her daughter being out in the open all night, exposed, alone and frightened, filled her with horror. She grabbed her shawl and rushed out of the cottage.

The rain had abated somewhat as she hurriedly trudged through mud to reach the cottage of her uncle Saul, one of the village elders and a man of significant wealth and position within the village. Upon reaching his front door, she banged the heavy wood with her fist several times then stood back, shouting:

"Uncle Saul! Please come to the door. It is I, Tamara! Please, I fear that Ursula has disappeared."

The door was opened a few moments later by Saul's second wife Jennifer; a small woman who radiated love and warmth and who loved her adopted family deeply.

"Tamara, what is this you are saying about our beloved Ursula? She has disappeared? Please, come in quickly or you will catch your death from a chill."

"Thank you, Jennifer," Tamara replied, and advanced swiftly past her into the cottage.

"Now then, child, sit down and calm yourself and explain what has happened. Saul is feeding the chickens at the back but I will go and fetch him immediately."

She bustled through the door from the living room and thence through the kitchen to the rear of the house and called her husband; they both returned within minutes and seated themselves opposite where Tamara sat, shivering and wringing her hands.

"Tamara, my beloved niece, what can have happened?" Saul said calmly. "Has Ursula gone on one of her long walks? She certainly wasn't with us in the fields today. I'm sure she is safe and all is well. You know how she loves to just wander off."

His words did little to reassure Tamara, and she could see the impossible-to-hide look of grave concern on his face.

"But we must go and find her instantly," Saul continued, sensing that Tamara was far from convinced.

“I’ll go now and round up some men and we’ll set out before it gets too dark.”

“Thank you, uncle,” Tamara replied, rising. “I’ll come with you, if I may.”

“You’ll do no such thing, my girl,” Jennifer interjected. “This is no sort of weather for you to be out rooting around God knows where out there. Let the men search. Stay here with me; I’ll make us both a hot, soothing drink.” Tamara smiled and retook her seat.

Saul took his jacket which was hanging from a hook near the door and went out into the night, without uttering a further word.

He called upon his immediate neighbours Joshua, George, Jason, Ben, Matthew and Peter who in turn enlisted the aid of several of their sons until the search party reached eighteen in number. And thus they moved forward into the miserable night, with torches held high scanning the landscape and with a mixture of fear, hope and determination in their hearts.

“Are you hungry, child?”

Ursula, seated on a large boulder, nodded her head vigorously.

“I thought so. Perhaps a serving of my broth would serve to make you feel better.”

The old woman busied herself spooning soup from a large tureen into a small, clay bowl, which she then handed to the young girl along with a chunk of bread.

While Ursula ate, the old woman regarded her keenly, smiling.

“It’s lucky that Malkin found you when he did,” she said. Ursula looked up briefly from her bowl, then dropped her head and continued eating.

“There are many evil trolls in this forest,” the old woman continued. “It’s no place for a child to be wandering alone, especially in stormy weather. The lightning invigorates their spirits. Recharges their energy, gives them new life. Seeing a human child in trouble and distress would make them feel very hungry, too; would give them a ravenous appetite. They love nothing better than the taste of young flesh.”

Ursula looked up from her eating once more and stared at the old woman, an open-mouthed expression of horror on her face.

“Sorry, child, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” the old woman said. “But it’s best that you are aware of the potential dangers you face out here. As I say, you were lucky; those evil ones were no match for Malkin.”

The old woman bent down and indulgently scratched behind the ears of the large, leopard-like cat that was sprawled on the sandy floor of the cave. The cat rolled over, closing its eyes and purring heavily. Outside, the persistent hiss of rain could be heard, although the worst of the storm had passed over a few hours previously.

Ursula had slept for several hours after the exhaustion of her ordeal. The large cat, patrolling its territory in the forest, had encountered the half dozen or so evil spirits that had been taunting the little girl, who had backed herself against the trunk of an ancient, gnarled oak tree, looking frantically all around her for a place of safety to run to; but having had no experience of spirits, she was unsure where safe harbour or refuge could be found. She had begun crying when Malkin had sidled up to the clearing where this drama had been unfolding. Quickly assessing what was occurring, Malkin had emitted a roar, which had been virtually soundless to Ursula. She merely saw the huge beast open its ferocious jaws widely, exposing a mass of razor-sharp teeth, and emit a noise akin to that of the soft mewling of a domestic cat. The effect on the trolls however had been dramatic and devastating; they had clasped their ears with both hands as if to banish an excruciating, unbearably loud noise and had dissolved into nothingness after only a few seconds. Clearly the sound of the beast's roar had been transmitted on a wavelength largely imperceptible to humans.

The huge cat had then casually walked towards Ursula, who had shown no fear; after all, it had dispensed with her evil tormentors. The beast had crouched down low, and Ursula, sensing what she must do, had climbed onto its back. She had thus been transported to this cave, the home of the old woman. Although it had still been raining heavily the cat seemed to radiate an invisible shield which surrounded Ursula, keeping her dry. The old woman had dried Ursula's clothes by an open fire while the young girl slept.

"You do not speak," the old woman said now, as Ursula finished eating and laid her bowl down on the ground. "Can you write down your name?"

Ursula searched around at her feet and quickly found what she was looking for; a small twig, which she picked up and used to inscribe letters in the dust:

U-R-S-U-L-A

"A lovely name," the old woman said. "I am called Celia. Once I was young and beautiful like you. And then, when I was not much older than you are now, I was driven from my village, many, many miles from here."

Ursula tilted her head, a quizzical expression on her face, inviting elaboration. The old woman gave a small laugh before continuing:

"I'm a white witch, Ursula, like my mother and my grandmother before me. I did good things, such as healing sick people and animals with my special herbal medicines. But one day a plague of locusts descended on our fields and destroyed our crops; it was utter devastation. My mother and I were blamed for summoning those hideous creatures from hell. My mother was murdered, but I managed to flee to safety, unharmed. I've lived in the vast forests and caves here ever since."

Ursula shook her head, looking extremely sad upon hearing the old woman's story.

"Do not be upset," Celia said. "It was all so very long ago. Now hand me your bowl, girl. I'm sure you would enjoy some more soup."

Ursula nodded and picked up her bowl. Just as she was handing it to Celia, there came the unmistakeable shouts of voices from outside, calling Ursula's name. The young girl stood up quickly, pointing towards the cave's entrance.

"Your people?" Celia said. "They have been searching for you. I thought they would be coming for you eventually. Hurry, you must go to them. Ride upon Malkin, it will be quicker."

The huge cat, understanding the old woman's words, pricked up his ears and, rising, walked towards Ursula, who climbed onto his back once more.

"Goodbye, Ursula," the old woman said. "It was such a pleasure meeting you. You must come and visit me again, soon! Promise?"

Ursula nodded several times, smiling. Then Malkin began to pad towards the cave entrance, thence out into the thick black night, towards the pinprick lights of the villagers' torches.

The search party, to a man, looked in stunned disbelief at the approaching sight; their missing, beloved girl Ursula, riding on the back of a huge, ferocious-looking cat. Ursula gave the men a wave and a wide smile as Malkin sauntered past, oblivious to their presence, plodding steadily towards the village. The men fell quickly into step behind them and followed, all the while looking completely bewildered.

Tamara, who had been sitting quietly next to Jennifer for what seemed like eternity, looked up from where she had been staring into her lap, seeming to sense that her daughter was safe and was now coming home; it was like a sixth sense that only mothers possess. She sprang up from the sofa and rushed out of the cottage, standing in the middle of the street and peering hard into the darkness. At first she saw the torches of the search party some way in the distance, and her spirits fell at the thought that perhaps after all they had not been successful in their search and her instinct had been wrong. Then she made out the figure of a huge cat, carrying her daughter on its broad back, walking towards her. She shrieked in horror and ran swiftly forward.

Upon seeing her mother illuminated in the few dim outside lights of several of the cottages, Ursula excitedly jumped down from the cat's back, and patted its head. She waited until Tamara was only a few feet away, then opened her arms out wide.

"Mummy, Mummy! I've had such a really big adventure!" the child shouted, jumping up and down. She then shook her head in shock and disbelief at the sound of her own, newly found voice.

THE END

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SUPERNATURAL HORROR IN LITERATURE by HP Lovecraft

IV. The Apex of Gothic Romance

Horror in literature attains a new malignity in the work of Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775–1818), whose novel *The Monk* (1796) achieved marvellous popularity and earned him the nickname of “Monk” Lewis. This young author, educated in Germany and saturated with a body of wild Teuton lore unknown to Mrs. Radcliffe, turned to terror in forms more violent than his gentle predecessor had ever dared to think of; and produced as a result a masterpiece of active nightmare whose general Gothic cast is spiced with added stores of ghoulishness. The story is one of a Spanish monk, Ambrosio, who from a state of overproud virtue is tempted to the very nadir of evil by a fiend in the guise of the maiden Matilda; and who is finally, when awaiting death at the Inquisition’s hands, induced to purchase escape at the price of his soul from the Devil, because he deems both body and soul already lost. Forthwith the mocking Fiend snatches him to a lonely place, tells him he has sold his soul in vain since both pardon and a chance for salvation were approaching at the moment of his hideous bargain, and completes the sardonic betrayal by rebuking him for his unnatural crimes, and casting his body down a precipice whilst his soul is borne off for ever to perdition. The novel contains some appalling descriptions such as the incantation in the vaults beneath the convent cemetery, the burning of the convent, and the final end of the wretched abbot. In the sub-plot where the Marquis de las Cisternas meets the spectre of his erring ancestress, *The Bleeding Nun*, there are many enormously potent strokes; notably the visit of the animated corpse to the Marquis’s bedside, and the cabbalistic ritual whereby the Wandering Jew helps him to fathom and banish his dead tormentor. Nevertheless *The Monk* drags sadly when read as a whole. It is too long and too diffuse, and much of its potency is marred by flippancy and by an awkwardly excessive reaction against those canons of decorum which Lewis at first despised as prudish. One great thing may be said of the author; that he never ruined his ghostly visions with a natural explanation. He succeeded in breaking up the Radcliffian tradition and expanding the field of the Gothic novel. Lewis wrote much more than *The Monk*. His drama, *The Castle Spectre*, was produced in 1798, and he later found time to pen other fictions in ballad form—*Tales of Terror* (1799), *Tales of Wonder* (1801), and a succession of translations from the German.

Gothic romances, both English and German, now appeared in multitudinous and mediocre profusion. Most of them were merely ridiculous in the light of mature taste, and Miss Austen’s famous satire *Northanger Abbey* was by no means an unmerited rebuke to a school which had sunk far toward absurdity. This particular school was petering out, but before its final subordination there arose its last and greatest figure in the person of Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824), an obscure and eccentric Irish clergyman. Out of an ample body of miscellaneous writing which includes one confused Radcliffian imitation called *Fatal Revenge*; or, *The Family of Montorio* (1807), Maturin at length evolved the vivid horror-masterpiece of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), in which the Gothic tale climbed to altitudes of sheer spiritual fright which it had never known before.

Melmoth is the tale of an Irish gentleman who, in the seventeenth century, obtained a preternaturally extended life from the Devil at the price of his soul. If he can persuade another to take the bargain off his hands, and assume his existing state, he can be saved; but this he can never manage to effect, no matter how assiduously he haunts those whom despair has made reckless and frantic. The framework of the story is very clumsy; involving tedious length, digressive episodes, narratives within narratives, and laboured dovetailing and

coincidences; but at various points in the endless rambling there is felt a pulse of power undiscoverable in any previous work of this kind—a kinship to the essential truth of human nature, an understanding of the profoundest sources of actual cosmic fear, and a white heat of sympathetic passion on the writer's part which makes the book a true document of aesthetic self-expression rather than a mere clever compound of artifice. No unbiassed reader can doubt that with *Melmoth* an enormous stride in the evolution of the horror-tale is represented. Fear is taken out of the realm of the conventional and exalted into a hideous cloud over mankind's very destiny. Maturin's shudders, the work of one capable of shuddering himself, are of the sort that convince. Mrs. Radcliffe and Lewis are fair game for the parodist, but it would be difficult to find a false note in the feverishly intensified action and high atmospheric tension of the *Irishman* whose less sophisticated emotions and strain of Celtic mysticism gave him the finest possible natural equipment for his task. Without a doubt Maturin is a man of authentic genius, and he was so recognised by Balzac, who grouped *Melmoth* with Molière's *Don Juan*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Byron's *Manfred* as the supreme allegorical figures of modern European literature, and wrote a whimsical piece called "*Melmoth Reconciled*", in which the Wanderer succeeds in passing his infernal bargain on to a Parisian bank defaulter, who in turn hands it along a chain of victims until a revelling gambler dies with it in his possession, and by his damnation ends the curse. Scott, Rossetti, Thackeray, and Baudelaire are the other titans who gave Maturin their unqualified admiration, and there is much significance in the fact that Oscar Wilde, after his disgrace and exile, chose for his last days in Paris the assumed name of "*Sebastian Melmoth*".

Melmoth contains scenes which even now have not lost their power to evoke dread. It begins with a deathbed—an old miser is dying of sheer fright because of something he has seen, coupled with a manuscript he has read and a family portrait which hangs in an obscure closet of his centuried home in County Wicklow. He sends to Trinity College, Dublin, for his nephew John; and the latter upon arriving notes many uncanny things. The eyes of the portrait in the closet glow horribly, and twice a figure strangely resembling the portrait appears momentarily at the door. Dread hangs over that house of the *Melmoths*, one of whose ancestors, "*J. Melmoth, 1646*", the portrait represents. The dying miser declares that this man—at a date slightly before 1800—is alive. Finally the miser dies, and the nephew is told in the will to destroy both the portrait and a manuscript to be found in a certain drawer. Reading the manuscript, which was written late in the seventeenth century by an Englishman named Stanton, young John learns of a terrible incident in Spain in 1677, when the writer met a horrible fellow-countryman and was told of how he had stared to death a priest who tried to denounce him as one filled with fearsome evil. Later, after meeting the man again in London, Stanton is cast into a madhouse and visited by the stranger, whose approach is heralded by spectral music and whose eyes have a more than mortal glare. *Melmoth the Wanderer*—for such is the malign visitor—offers the captive freedom if he will take over his bargain with the Devil; but like all others whom *Melmoth* has approached, Stanton is proof against temptation. *Melmoth's* description of the horrors of a life in a madhouse, used to tempt Stanton, is one of the most potent passages of the book. Stanton is at length liberated, and spends the rest of his life tracking down *Melmoth*, whose family and ancestral abode he discovers. With the family he leaves the manuscript, which by young John's time is sadly ruinous and fragmentary. John destroys both portrait and manuscript, but in sleep is visited by his horrible ancestor, who leaves a black and blue mark on his wrist.

Young John soon afterward receives as a visitor a shipwrecked Spaniard, Alonzo de Monçada, who has escaped from compulsory monasticism and from the perils of the Inquisition. He has suffered horribly—and the descriptions of his experiences under torment

and in the vaults through which he once essays escape are classic—but had the strength to resist Melmoth the Wanderer when approached at his darkest hour in prison. At the house of a Jew who sheltered him after his escape he discovers a wealth of manuscript relating other exploits of Melmoth including his wooing of an Indian island maiden, Immalee, who later comes to her birthright in Spain and is known as Donna Isidora; and of his horrible marriage to her by the corpse of a dead anchorite at midnight in the ruined chapel of a shunned and abhorred monastery. Monçada's narrative to young John takes up the bulk of Maturin's four-volume book; this disproportion being considered one of the chief technical faults of the composition.

At last the colloquies of John and Monçada are interrupted by the entrance of Melmoth the Wanderer himself, his piercing eyes now fading, and decrepitude swiftly overtaking him. The term of his bargain has approached its end, and he has come home after a century and a half to meet his fate. Warning all others from the room, no matter what sounds they may hear in the night, he awaits the end alone. Young John and Monçada hear frightful ululations, but do not intrude till silence comes toward morning. They then find the room empty. Clayey footprints lead out a rear door to a cliff overlooking the sea, and near the edge of the precipice is a track indicating the forcible dragging of some heavy body. The Wanderer's scarf is found on a crag some distance below the brink, but nothing further is ever seen or heard of him.

Such is the story, and none can fail to notice the difference between this modulated, suggestive, and artistically moulded horror and—to use the words of Professor George Saintsbury—"the artful but rather jejune rationalism of Mrs. Radcliffe, and the too often puerile extravagance, the bad taste, and the sometimes slipshod style of Lewis." Maturin's style in itself deserves particular praise, for its forcible directness and vitality lift it altogether above the pompous artificialities of which his predecessors are guilty. Professor Edith Birkhead, in her history of the Gothic novel, justly observes that with all his faults Maturin was the greatest as well as the last of the Goths. Melmoth was widely read and eventually dramatised, but its late date in the evolution of the Gothic tale deprived it of the tumultuous popularity of *Udolpho* and *The Monk*.

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OGRES' GATE by Gavin Chappell

The six adventurers rode from the duchy of Hexenwald as if demons were at their horses' hoofs. Over the heaths of the border country they galloped, crags looming on either side like strange sculptures of tormented rock. Soon the riders were beyond the duchy's borders, where the king's highway wound across the moors and the wind blew clean and free. They had left the witch-haunted lowlands far behind them; ahead lay an uncertain future.

Dread Lord Gurak reined his steed atop a rise and sat looking back down the pass towards the oak forests of his adopted homeland. Lady Candida soon joined him. The four youths were still riding up the stone-strewn path towards them.

'You will accompany us, my lord?' Lady Candida asked him.

He turned a sombre look upon her. 'I have no choice. By helping you and these younglings escape from the witches, I put in jeopardy my standing in Duke Hexenwald's retinue. I must return to the adventuring life.' A whimsical thought struck him when he thought of the retainers he left behind. 'Ruggins will miss me.'

She looked away and the wind played with her auburn curls. He noticed the slight lines that marred her classic beauty. No, not marred; enhanced. They gave her character. But they were the marks of suffering.

'Name of Tesh, it is a hard life,' she murmured. 'But then, life is hard.'

Lord Gurak leaned over his saddle towards her, and laid a caressing hand on her cheek. She shivered involuntarily at the contact and looked at him with wide eyes.

Their mutual reverie was rudely interrupted when the youths joined them, riding their horses as if they were wild stallions. Norman had already fallen off his several times. Brian rode like some wild barbarian nomad, while Gerald and Percy clung to their own steeds like grim death. Percy's face shone with sweat as he gripped his mount.

As they came to an unruly halt, Brian's horse threw him.

Gerald and Percy roared with laughter until Gerald's horse did the same to him. Percy and Norman remained on their bucking steeds. Lord Gurak leaped down from his own, caught the reins of first one horse, then another. Slowly, he managed to calm them. Lady Candida watched him admiringly.

'Where do we go now?' a severely bruised Gerald asked a short while later. Their horses were picketed and blanketed, and the shades of evening were falling about the camp-fire. Lord Gurak had prepared it without any seeming effort, to Percy's annoyance. The moors around them were bleak and treeless, and empty except for a few mangy sheep.

For the first time, Lord Gurak looked uncertain.

'I'm an exile,' he said. 'I'm fleeing Duke Hexenwald's wrath. But where were you younglings going? Lady Candida? Where were you intending to journey next?'

‘I was hoping to make it to Trinovant for the season,’ Lady Candida said wistfully. ‘My erstwhile companion Cormok and I would have spent our witch-hunting bounties fraternising with the fashionable of the city.’

‘I can’t imagine penniless vagabonds such as we will be welcome among the aristos of Trinovant,’ Lord Gurak murmured sardonically.

Gerald rubbed his bruises and looked at his friends. ‘We had serious shit we wanted to do,’ he said urgently. ‘We’re going to the Duchy of Ogres’ Gate to join the war against the ogres.’

Lord Gurak raised his eyebrows. ‘It’s war again?’ he asked. ‘We’re out of touch in Hexenwald; for all that Ogres’ Gate is our neighbour.’

‘Again?’ Gerald didn’t know what Lord Gurak meant. Surely the war against evil was never-ending? He’d heard that in a movie or something, back in the real world.

‘Name of Tesh!’ Lady Candida gave her favourite exclamation. ‘The boy’s got a point.’ She mussed Gerald’s already messy hair, to his annoyance. ‘We could travel on to Ogres’ Gate. If the war is on again, we’ll be able to sell our swords.’ Gerald guessed she was talking about acting as mercenaries, not arms dealing.

‘Or better, hire our own troop,’ Lord Gurak mused. ‘Yes, this will be a profitable war, I’m sure. The ogre wars always are.’

Gerald wondered if anyone in this world thought about anything but money. It was as bad as Planet Earth. ‘I’m not going there to make money!’ he exclaimed. ‘I’m going there because I hate those ogre bastards!’

Lady Candida raised a perfect, arched eyebrow. ‘You sound like you bear a grudge,’ she said questioningly. ‘When did ogres cross your path?’

Gerald shrugged. ‘I’ve never met any,’ he admitted, and felt a bit inadequate. ‘I’ve met plenty of orcs, though! And manicures and things...’

‘Manticores,’ Percy murmured wearily.

Gerald darted him a look and continued. ‘...but those ogres eat babies! That’s enough reason to want to go to war against them.’

He told Lady Candida and Gurak about the Conjurer Kalitkin and his con-trick, how he’d persuaded the innkeeper to steal babies under the pretext that they were sacrifices to a demon who’d look over the hostelry. When he explained that it was all to provide the ogres with their favourite delicacy—human babies—Lady Candida nodded darkly.

‘There’s quite a trade in babes in these parts,’ she said.

Lord Gurak nodded. ‘I did what I could to discourage it in my own domain,’ he said, ‘but worse things happened in Hexenwald. Very well, we’ll ride for Ogres’ Gate tomorrow.’

Gerald wrapped himself up in a blanket he'd found in his saddlebag and lay beside the fire until he fell asleep.

When he woke in the morning, he was coughing. He opened streaming eyes and coughed again. The horses were shifting and neighing nearby. At first he thought the fire had got out of control. He sat up.

The wind was blowing across the bleak moor. It was early morning. His companions were grey, motionless humps in the dawn light. Gerald realised that the smoke was coming from the ridge ahead of them. A thick black greasy column, bent by the wind, streamed across the heather.

Percy woke up, coughing like Gerald's chain-smoking Nan. His eyes were red and bloodshot and he stared blearily around and caught Gerald's eyes.

'What the [cough] is going on?' he coughed.

Gerald shrugged; a difficult thing to do when lying down. 'Something's on fire,' he suggested.

'Fuck, Gerald,' Percy complained. 'I could have worked that much out.'

Brian woke up. 'Who left the cooker on, mum?' he demanded.

Before Gerald could reply, everyone was waking, confused and coughing, apart from Norman who slept on, oblivious. Lord Gurak sprang to his feet and raced towards the nearest crag. He stood atop it, scanning the horizon.

'Who's he think he is,' Percy muttered. 'Fuckin' Lone Ranger?'

Lady Candida looked up as she pulled on her riding britches. 'Lord Gurak did indeed spend time as a Ranger of the Carillian Hills,' she said reprovingly. 'He is highly skilled.' Gerald and Percy exchanged glances. Seemed like Lord Gurak had been everything, in his day.

Norman woke up and wanted to know what was happening, and they had to explain it all to him.

Lord Gurak returned shortly after, looking grim.

'Night-raiders,' he said abruptly. 'They attacked a hill-farm over the ridge.'

Lady Candida stared at him. 'Is it bad?' she asked.

'It lies on our road,' Lord Gurak replied. 'We'll have to pass by. You'll see how bad it is.'

'I'm going to see now,' said Gerald defiantly. He was starting to get irritated by Lord Gurak's superior manner. The guy had been alright, back in the lowlands, but now they'd got up into the hill he was carrying on like someone from Last of the Mohicans.

Gerald ran up the hillside.

Percy, Norman and Brian hurried after him. They soon caught up and raced at his side, leaving Lord Gurak shouting behind them.

‘Fuck him,’ Gerald said as they crested the ride. ‘He doesn’t know everyth-’ He broke off.

Below them, the valley rolled towards another ridge. The king’s highway cut straight through the heather and through the home-field of a stone-built hill-farm, a two-storey slate-roofed house surrounded by outbuildings. The roof was ablaze and it was from this that most of the smoke came. Hanging from the walls of the barn were several red lumps. Gerald stared at them for a long, puzzled moment. Then he retched. They were flayed human carcasses.

A clatter from the mountainside alerted them and Gerald looked up to see a long line of mounted figures as they vanished over the skyline.

Huge figures. The distance made establishing their size difficult but as far as Gerald could work out, each rider must be eight or nine feet tall.

‘They’re riding buffaloes,’ Percy said in wonder, following Gerald’s gaze.

Lord Gurak had joined them by now. ‘Down!’ he hissed, and he dragged all three of them to the ground. Gerald struggled against his arm, but it was brawny and strong.

‘Get off!’ he grumbled. ‘They won’t see us.’

‘They must have been ascending the mountainside even as I investigated their work,’ Lord Gurak muttered, ignoring him. ‘I didn’t know the danger we were in.’

‘Maybe you’re not so hot after all,’ Percy grumbled resentfully from Lord Gurak’s other side.

‘Why don’t we attack them?’ Brian snarled.

‘Patience, youngling,’ Lord Gurak told him. ‘You’ll have your chance when we go to war.’

‘Are they ogres?’ Norman asked.

Gerald stared up at the mountainside. By now, most of the riders had crossed the ridge and were out of sight. As he watched, the last few followed. They had been a long way off, but he had got enough of a picture of them to have a reasonable idea of what they were up against.

Big men; well, not men really. Men weren’t so big, nor did they have such broad shoulders. These guys were massive. And Percy was right; they were riding buffalo, or bison, or something. And they were big enough for bison to look as small as Shetland ponies. He’d got an impression of huge men with wild, matted hair, big beards, big bodies. Maybe horns, maybe tusks. They’d been too far off for him to be sure. But they were huge. They were horrible.

‘They were ogres,’ said Lord Gurak.

Lady Candida joined them. 'I saw the last of them,' she said darkly. The white streak in her hair shone out in the greyness of dawn. 'So they are raiding as far south as this! Duke Dalimer must be losing ground.'

Lord Gurak set the youths free. They rose and looked down into the valley.

'Are those... people?' Norman asked worriedly, after a long time.

'Obviously,' Gerald snapped. God, Norman could be thick. 'The ogres killed them.'

'We should go and take a closer look,' Brian urged.

'It will achieve nothing,' said Lord Gurak sadly. 'We'll strike camp. When we ride through the farm, you'll get every opportunity to get a closer look.' His face was weary, as if he was sickened by the slaughter. Turning on his heel, he led them back down the heathery hillside.

A quarter of an hour later they rode over the ridge and down through the farmyard. The smoke still drifted through the air, black and thick. The hideous lumps of red flesh that hung from the barn wall were out of sight, to Gerald's relief. He hadn't wanted to see them close up. But the farmyard itself was a scene of devastation. The ogres had obviously attacked when the farmers were in their beds, burning everything and dragging the people out to torture and kill them. They were inhuman sadists. Gerald shuddered to think what they had subjected their victims to. The more he saw of ogres, the more he wanted to wipe them off the face of the planet.

They rode on for the rest of the day, passing through similar landscape; heather, crags, mountain slopes, occasional hill-farms: some still in operation, others abandoned. Some had been destroyed recently, others longer ago. It was a dismal, dreary journey. As Gerald rode alongside the others, his blood began to boil. He hated those ogre bastards. What was wrong with the fuckers? Couldn't they leave peaceful farmers to get on with their lives? This mindless slaughter just didn't make sense.

The adventurers rode through a mountain pass. It opened out into a wide valley whose bottom was green and lush, covered in a patchwork of fields with farms dotted here and there. The silver thread of a river wound through the fields. On the north side, a glittering castle stood on an outcrop of rock, and at its base huddled a shining town. Beyond the castle the valley narrowed again; another pass led through high granite cliffs; where to, Gerald couldn't see. But the castle itself stood beside the pass as if on guard.

The size of the town beneath the castle surprised Gerald. He'd never listened much in Geography lessons but surely you needed more than a few flocks of sheep to be able to support such a large place. Where was the money coming from? And what made the town and the castle shine like fallen stars?

As they rode on, Gerald saw that the king's highway itself made a sharp turn as it reached the town. It ran on through the valley, away from the pass guarded by the castle. At the end of the valley was the seemingly impenetrable wall of a dark pine forest, into which the king's highway vanished.

They passed several hill-farms. These were flourishing, and when their owners were to be seen it was clear that the proximity of the castle and the shining town was good for them. After a few hours Gerald and his fellow adventurers splashed across the stony ford of the river and approached the town gates. From here, Gerald saw that the gleam of the town came from the gems that lined the walls. Glow-gems, he realised, carbuncles like he'd seen in the lowlands; but presumably of inferior quality considering the quantity of them. The place must be lit up at night. He wondered what it was like trying to get to sleep here.

Two sentries challenged them at the gate.

'What is your business in Ogres' Gate?' one demanded, levelling his spear.

'We come to join the war,' said Lord Gurak.

'Only the six of you?' asked the other guard. He indicated over his shoulder with a thumb. 'You'll want to see his grace, up at the castle. Enter.'

They clattered through the gate and rode up the winding lanes of the town towards the castle. In very little time they were being ushered into the outer bailey. A major domo came out to greet them.

'Here at Ogres' Gate we're always on the lookout for eager new warriors to fight against the ogre menace,' he told them enthusiastically; he was an animated little man with large and highly expressive eyebrows. Counting them, he seemed disappointed. 'Usually mercenaries applying for war-rights have larger retinues. Perhaps your men are camping in the plain?'

Lord Gurak shook his head. 'You know the procedure,' he said. 'The duke provides a permit to plunder and gives free companies funding in return for a controlling share in the profits. Then we use that money to recruit our infantry from the available freelances. That's how it's always been done.'

The major domo peered at him uncertainly. 'You seem to know what you're about,' he said, 'though I don't recall seeing you here before...'

'I'm before your time,' Lord Gurak cut in, cuttingly.

'... but in that case you'll know that according to law, a free company must a) be subject to suitable aristocratic patronage, and b) successfully submit a bill for tender to the ducal office.'

Gerald's head was whirling but Lord Gurak seemed to be the equal of this bureaucrat. 'Both Lady Candida and I hold aristocratic rank,' he said. 'Lady Candida is higher in rank than I, and from a long established family. She is our nominal patron.' Lady Candida curtsied graciously, as best she could in skin-tight riding britches. 'Furthermore, we—the Lady Candida Free Company—are fully prepared to submit a bill for tender. As you know, we must be shown into the presence of the duke himself for that to be accomplished.'

The major domo's smile was thin. 'The duke is busy, milord,' he said with an air of finality. Gerald sighed heavily.

‘Well, we’ll wait!’ he told the man. ‘When’s he going to stop being busy?’

The major domo’s next smile was almost anorexic. ‘The duke is always busy,’ he said. ‘However, I will forward your request through the usual channels.’

‘Please expedite it,’ Lady Candida asked, with a winning smile. ‘I’m sure a man like you will be able to ensure we are not kept waiting.’ The major domo gave her a long, appraising look which she returned boldly.

‘Very well, milady,’ he said, turned, and entered the castle keep.

Despite Lady Candida’s blandishments, they were indeed kept waiting, and it was past noon when two guards appeared and led them into the keep. The passages were lit by glow-gems, and the air was clean of smoke, unlike most places Gerald had been recently. They were shown into a small, high-roofed office where a tired-looking man with waxy skin and unnaturally glossy black hair sat at a desk.

He looked up.

‘I am Duke Dalimer,’ he said. ‘Those warring in these domains come under my aegis. Any unlawful plundering is punishable by severe fines. However, if I deem you sufficiently professional to plunder in accordance with legal statute, I will provide the necessary permits and funds for the recruitment of the rank and file. This is in return for written assurances that I receive a tithe of profits accrued from sale of plunder.’

Gerald broke in impatiently. ‘Look, we just want a chance to kill some ogres!’

‘Gerald, Gerald,’ said Lord Gurak reprovingly. ‘Let me negotiate with his grace.’ He turned to the duke.

‘Let me present my credentials,’ he said. ‘I am Dread Lord Gurak of Hexenwald, formerly Gurak Blackheart, scourge of orcs and slayer of dragons. Born just a simple farmboy, I never dreamed that I would grow up to fulfil the Prophecy of Mugrak...’

Gerald grimaced at Percy as Lord Gurak gave his CV to the unimpressed-looking duke.

Lord Gurak reached his end. ‘By your own admission, all that swashbuckling was long ago,’ Dalimer said. ‘I won’t ask why you’ve come out of retirement, but I’m concerned that you’ll be out of touch with recent developments in the trade.’

Lady Candida strode forward. ‘Name of Tesh! I have been adventuring for... a number of years, and I am some years away from retirement. I am fully in tune with modern adventuring. I took to the road when little more than a girl. It has been the fate of my noble House since the days of the Great Schism to wander the land selling our swords...’

The Duke listened impatiently. ‘And what of these lads who accompany you?’ he broke in. ‘What experience do they have? You! Yes, you,’ he added, as Gerald looked around. ‘What experience?’

Gerald stumbled forward. ‘Well, not much really,’ he stammered, intimidated. His mind went blank. ‘Oh,’ he said after an awkward pause. ‘I started an apprenticeship at the Thieves’ Guild Academy in Kashamash. But I dropped out...’

‘Why?’ the duke demanded.

‘Because a bunch of barbarians attacked the city and we had to run away,’ Gerald replied with a shrug.

The duke shook his head. ‘Do the rest of you have such wretched tales? What about you, lad?’

Brian swaggered forward and struck a pose.

‘I am Brian the Destroyer!’ he bellowed. Gerald put his hands over his ears and tried to block the rest out. He saw Duke Dalimer cringing as Brian ranted about being a barbarian nomad; having slain orcs and demons, wandered the world from edge to edge, been a wizard-slaying warrior whose sword terrified the gods themselves.

Brian finished. Gerald took his hands away from his ears. The duke played idly with a paperweight on the desk before him.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘I had my doubts at first; a gang of geriatrics and wet-behind-the-ears children. But now I see that Brian the Destroyer will lead you to hell or plunder.’ He called the major domo into the office. ‘Make the necessary arrangements.’

The major domo led them down to the castle treasury. ‘I think you impressed his grace,’ he commented as they descended a spiral staircase into the cold depths of the castle. ‘He told me he wants you to march before the next day was out.’

The major domo opened the heavy oak doors with a large iron key, and then filled a leather bag, which he referred to as a “budget,” with gold and silver coins from one of many strongboxes in the gloomy space beyond. Then he gave them a contract to sign, in which they gave assurances that they would provide the duke with a tithe of all profits. Finally he gave them another document, a parchment scroll signed by Duke Dalimer. This was their permit to plunder the duke’s enemies.

‘Now I suggest you go down to the alehouses and low dives of the town...’ he went on.

‘Wow, you mean all this is beer money?’ Brian grinned incredulously.

The major domo pursed his lips. ‘No, lad,’ he said. ‘The alehouses are where you will find hiring warriors. You will need troops if you are successfully to wage war against the ogres. His grace has advanced you these funds in order to recruit them.’

‘So now we’re going on a recruitment drive,’ Gerald said, as they left the castle and crossed the market square towards Alehouse Street. He was carrying the budget and it was heavy.

‘Warriors are always to be found in alehouses,’ Lord Gurak stated. He looked troubled. ‘At least, they always were...’

Lady Candida touched his elbow. 'Things are as they ever were,' she said gently. 'Forget his grace's ill-chosen words.'

'He made me doubt myself,' said Lord Gurak bleakly. 'Am I too old for this life?'

They stood in silence for a moment; the youths awkward, Lady Candida compassionate, Lord Gurak brooding.

'Let's go to the pub,' said Brian impatiently.

The first alehouse they tried was a gloomy place. Only one glow-gem was in evidence, glimmering faintly above the bar, while the further corners and the booths of the establishment were in shadow. It was bustling, though, with brawny men clad in furs and rust-stained leathers, drinking, arguing and roistering.

Feeling that it was time he took the reins now that Lord Gurak was looking so pensive, Gerald walked to the bar and banged on it.

'Free drinks all round!' he said in a shrill voice that carried over the hubbub. 'The Lady Candida Free Company is recruiting.'

A burly man with a fringe of beard and an eye patch rolled up from a nearby table.

'Lady Candida Free Company?' he said with a sneer of his scarred lips. 'Pah! Who are they? Never heard of them.'

Before Gerald could think up a suitably witty retort, Lord Gurak stepped out of the shadows and tapped him on the shoulder. The big man turned sullenly, then his one eye widened.

'Gurak Blackheart!' he exclaimed. 'Is it really you? They told me you'd bought the farm.'

'Bought the farm?' Lord Gurak threw back his head and roared with laughter, completely at odds with his usual sobriety. 'Bought the title and landed estates to go with it. Lost it though. Now I'm on the road again.' He studied the man. 'Baylor One-Eye. It's been too long.'

He turned to Gerald. 'Drinks all round, youngling.' He led Baylor off towards his table, talking: 'You'll have to introduce me to your boys. Do you still have that murderous prince-in-exile...?'

Gurak shook his head with a grin. Gerald watched bitterly. Ever since Lord Gurak had joined them, he had felt threatened: the man knew too much about adventuring. Gerald hadn't really realised that he'd been the leader until now, now he'd lost his place. He'd tried to claim it back again when Lord Gurak showed his weakness, by being the one to offer free drinks to the mercenaries. Now he was nothing more than Lord Gurak's waiter.

Percy and the others joined him at the bar, followed quickly by a crowd of rogues and warriors. Gerald opened his budget and handed the innkeeper a fistful of gold pieces. 'Drinks all round,' he said. 'Come to me if anyone's dry.'

The innkeeper knuckled his forehead and began serving out pints, obviously used to the situation. Gerald and the others got themselves drinks and joined Lord Gurak and Baylor at the table. From then on, it went in a whirl as drink followed drink and warriors came clamouring to join the free company.

By the next day they had signed up a troop of a one hundred and twenty two warriors. Many of these had come from the first alehouse, but the Company had gone on a further recruitment drive-cum-pub crawl, gathering men from alehouses along the streets as they did so. Someone had brought a drum along, and Baylor contributed a hastily adapted standard that showed the White Hawk of House Lady Candida.

‘That’ll be enough,’ said Lord Gurak. The tall man had been none the worse for the drinks he had quaffed along the route, but Gerald was having trouble standing up. ‘Any more and we will encounter logistical problems on our march.’

‘Whatever, mate,’ Gerald replied. ‘I just want somewhere to sleep....’

That was the last he could remember. Now he awoke on a straw mattress in a garret room filled with sleeping bodies. To his surprise, a semi-naked blonde lay beside him. He had no idea where they’d picked up her, but he didn’t think war was her profession.

He was severely hungover. With a manful effort he went to a washstand and poured a ewer of water over his head. He stuck out his tongue to lap at some of the drops. Then he went down a creaking flight of steps, without any idea of where he was, to find some breakfast.

Turned out they were in an inn with the picturesque monicker of The Ogre’s Head. A huge tusked skull, about twice as big as any man’s, had been stuck on a pole outside as an inn sign. The place was on the edge of town, near the town wall and the gate that led to the road to the pass. He learnt this from Lord Gurak, who was in the common room of the inn, studying a map spread out on a table. He had a black eye. Lady Candida sat nearby, looking on with her sphinx-like expression.

‘The hireling warriors you signed on will be assembling here at noon,’ Lord Gurak went on. ‘We should be able to march an hour afterwards.’ He paused, regarding Gerald doubtfully. ‘Youngling,’ he added, ‘I’m not your enemy.’

‘Okay...’ said Gerald, frowning doubtfully. What was the guy getting at?

He went to the kitchen to see if he could rustle up some breakfast. As he did, he became aware of a pain in his hand. Inspecting it, he saw that his knuckles were unaccountable skinned. He remembered Lord Gurak’s black eye and wondered.

Shortly after, once he’d shovelled some greasy ham and fried egg down his parched throat, the others filed down from the upstairs room, along with one or two men and women Gerald didn’t recognise. Lord Gurak’s mate with the one eye, Baylor, entered from the street.

‘The horses are all stabled nearby,’ he told Gerald. ‘The hirelings will provide their own. Is all prepared?’

Gerald looked to Lord Gurak, who nodded imperceptibly. Gerald nodded at Baylor.

‘As soon as the hirelings assemble, then,’ Baylor said, ‘we go to war.’

The hirelings trotted into the inn courtyard in dribs and drabs; bleary-eyed, burly bruisers, carrying assorted spears and halberds, swords and axes, even a couple with a primitive-looking hand-cannon. Some wore half armour, some wore chainmail, some wore studded leather, one man wore plate armour and a couple of warriors Lord Gurak said came from the plains of the horse folk wore little more than a twist of cloth around their loins, and numerous leather straps and bracers. The steeds were similarly assorted specimens.

After a pep-talk from Lord Gurak—although he offered the honour to Gerald first, bizarrely—the warriors formed themselves up into a column with scouts at the front, followed by Gerald and his friends, with Brian holding the standard that Baylor had cobbled together—‘to give him something to do,’ Lord Gurak had explained confidently to Gerald. The rest of the riders came at the back.

They rode out under the town gate, leaving their camp followers behind, and clattered off down the rocky defile that led towards the towering mountain pass.

Beyond lay ogre country.

As they rode onwards, between the shadows of the crags that flanked the pass, Gerald felt a mixture of anxiety and joy. At last they had escaped the red tape and bureaucracy that had troubled them in the Duchy of Ogres’ Gate, the problems of recruitment were solved, and even Lord Gurak had stopped getting above himself. He turned and peered back at the man, noticing that black eye again, and feeling a twinge from his skinned knuckles. What had happened last night? Lord Gurak noticed him, and Gerald turned his eyes forward hurriedly.

It was good to get away from all that stupid complication. It was exactly like Hexenwald, full of people making things needlessly complicated. All Gerald wanted to do was find some ogres and kill the fuckers. They deserved it, didn’t they? They ate babies; they killed innocent farmers for no reason. Fucking bastards. He was glad put it all behind him and ride through the pass into ogre country, ready to wreak a bloody vengeance.

Trouble was, those ogres he had seen were big bastards. Well, of course they were; they were ogres. Gerald had a sizeable army behind him; well, okay, not an army by Earth standards, maybe not even by local standards, but he had plenty of thugs and meatheads ready to put the boot in—at his order, it seemed. And yet, tough bastards as his men were, they were nothing compared with the bison-riding bastards they were up against. If they faced an equal number of ogres, they’d be fucked. Righteously fucked. Up the arse. Without protection.

Percy rode his horse closer. He was getting a bit better at making his horse behave, Gerald noticed. Percy leaned closer.

‘You showed him, didn’t you?’ he said, with a lick of his lips and a quick dart of the head in Lord Gurak’s direction. ‘Fuckin’ wanker that he is.’

‘Yeah,’ said Gerald vaguely. He rubbed his knuckles absently. Percy nodded a little nervously, and let his whinnying horse move away.

Gerald hadn’t clue what Percy was on about. He rode closer to Norman. ‘What did I do last night?’ he hissed.

Norman didn’t look well. ‘If you can’t remember,’ he said wearily, ‘how do you expect me to?’

‘Fuck,’ Gerald muttered. He guided his unusually obliging steed—he’d given it the name Fuckhead during their time together, and he didn’t care if it was male or female; it was “it” as far as he was concerned—towards Brian, who was bearing his standard as proudly as he carried his bastard sword.

‘Do you remember last night?’ he asked.

Brian cowered back, then recovered himself. ‘You mean that slapper you picked up?’ he asked. ‘That blonde? Fuck, mate, you did well there. I wish I’d shagged her. I only got a fatty.’

Gerald got the feeling he’d missed a meeting. ‘Did I twat Lord Gurak, Brian?’ he asked bluntly.

Brian laughed. ‘Did you twat Lord Gurak?’ he hooted. ‘That’s a good one, Gerald. You were twatting him all round the shop. We had to drag you off him or you’d have murdered the bastard.’

‘Yeah, right, okay,’ said Gerald, trying to look tougher than he felt. ‘Just don’t you go crossing me, Brian, or you’ll get the same.’

He rode alone, trying to deal with his whirling thoughts. He’d given Lord Gurak a good twatting? Shit. That might explain things. He was just thinking about apologising when the scouts, who had been ranging far ahead, rode back down the pass.

‘Sir, sir!’ the leader of the scouts reported. Gerald flushed when he realised they were talking to him.

‘Yes?’ he snapped.

‘There’s a fortress ahead, sir. And a quarry, from what we saw.’

Gerald called a halt. He was quite giddy with power as all his riders reined their horses and awaited his word.

‘Scouts say there’s a fortress ahead,’ he told them all. He noticed Lady Candida watching him admiringly but demurely from among the other riders. She was a bit long in the tooth, he thought, maybe as old as thirty or something. Almost old enough to be his mum. But god, he’d like to...

‘What are your orders, sir?’ Lord Gurak asked.

Gerald boggled. He was supposed to give orders? No one had told him that. What kind of orders?

‘Alright, there’s a fortress ahead... Yeah? What is it, at the back?’

‘Could you speak up, sir?’ asked a leather-clad nomad from the plains of the horse folk.

‘Listen up, you deaf bastard,’ Gerald insisted. ‘And put some proper clothes on! There’s a fortress ahead, and a quarry in front. What does that mean?’

Lady Candida lifted a slim arm.

‘They’re mining for carbuncles?’ she asked.

Gerald pointed at her. ‘Right!’ he said. ‘Well done, milady. It’s a carbuncle mine. Quarry, I mean. They’re mining, okay quarrying, for carbuncles. The fortress must be there to protect the quarry.’ He looked over at Lord Gurak. ‘You’ve got the map. Any sign of quarries or castles?’

Lord Gurak pulled out a large sheet of parchment. Gerald knew that parchment came from cows or something. Size of this one, it must be from a mammoth. It flapped back and forth in the wind that was whistling up the pass. Lord Gurak looked up.

‘Nothing here,’ he reported. ‘It must be new.’

‘They’re getting bold,’ rumbled Baylor One-Eye, scratching his beard. ‘To be quarrying so close to the frontier in war-time.’

‘Or desperate,’ Lady Candida murmured.

‘Sir!’ said Lord Gurak. ‘I’ll take the scouts forward to get more intelligence, if you want.’

Gerald nodded grimly.

‘What I was about to suggest. Check out the terrain, and report back with a plan of attack. We’ll storm the fortress and get control of the quarry. Slaughter the ogres and take their carbuncles.’

‘Sir!’ Lord Gurak said smartly. He nodded to the scouts and led them at a canter over the rocky ridge.

Gerald breathed out, looked at his nails, breathed on them, polished them against his cloak.

‘He’s taking his time,’ he commented.

Lady Candida trotted forward. ‘I’m sure it’s only because he’s doing his best,’ she told him urgently. It was as if she was afraid of him as well. Fuck, what had he done last night?

Lord Gurak and the scouts rode back ten minutes later.

‘There’s a new fortress on this outcrop,’ Lord Gurak said, indicating the map. ‘Beneath it is a quarry. It reaches as far as the road. In fact, the road is beginning to fall into it, it spreads so far. Ogre slaves are working under the whips of their overseers, while the castle looms over all.’

Gerald stiffened. Another score against the evil fucking bastards. ‘Slaves?’ he said. ‘What slaves do ogres have?’

Lord Gurak shrugged. ‘Other ogres,’ he said.

‘Oh.’ Gerald frowned. They enslaved each other? ‘Why don’t they enslave people?’

‘Ogres are better workers,’ Lord Gurak replied. ‘Stronger.’

Gerald gave it some thought. He didn’t like it. Too complicated. Why couldn’t things stay simple? Fuck this, he thought.

‘Okay, we storm the place,’ he said. ‘Get it organised, Lord Gurak.’

A quarter of an hour later, Gerald and his warriors rode wildly over the ridge and bore down upon the quarry ahead. A fortress of megalithic stone blocks loomed over it on an outcrop. Down in the quarry, huge figures laboured under the whips of overseers.

The nomads shrieked out an ululating war-cry that, though incomprehensible, was taken up by the others. It echoed from the walls of the pass as they galloped down into the quarry, their horse’s hoofs splashing up water and clay as they went. Ogre slaves and overseers stared in horror at the descending horde. One ogre rushed to a wooden platform from which hung a bell. He began ringing it desperately.

Gerald’s warrior raced across the rock and clay. Overseers came running forward, each one so tall that his face was on a level with the rider he confronted. Each bore a large stone axe.

Gerald’s riders outnumbered the ogres, but in the first few seconds of the fight six or seven riders were battered down, their horses with them, by wild, berserk ogre warriors. Gerald led a charge at the main contingent of overseers. He knew immense satisfaction as he cut down one of the huge, tusked, hairy, stinking bastards, with Percy and Norman’s assistance. They had to worry at the fuckers like dogs bringing down wolves. Gerald saw his men falling all around him. Shit, he thought wildly, swinging about him with his sword, they were getting slaughtered. He’d come here to slaughter ogres, not lead people to their deaths.

Suddenly, the ogre he was fighting went down in a detonation of gore. Gerald’s horse reared at the sight of a clay-stained, blood-drenched, matted-haired ogre slave standing behind him, holding a broken chain, spattered in blood.

‘Liberator!’ the blood-stained ogre roared in a voice so deep it reminded Gerald of the only rock concert he’d actually been to.

Percy and Norman rode up on either side and Gerald grew calmer. ‘Who are you?’ he asked the ogre.

‘I am Hogback,’ the ogre roared. ‘Leader of the slaves of Brightpit. Long have we waited for the chance to rise against our masters. Lead us, and we will help you bring down Brightpit Fort!’

Gerald looked wildly around him. It was a scene of confusion. Ogres and humans fought desperately, ogre overseers and ogre slaves struggled tooth and nail. Gerald kicked his horse into motion and soon he was beside Lord Gurak.

‘We’re joining with the slaves,’ he shouted. ‘We need to fight past the overseers and take the fortress.’

Lord Gurak blew a horn. Belling notes rang out across the confusion and chaos. The riders fought their way through the overseers.

Gerald found himself on the far side of the quarry. Above him, the walls of the fortress reared. He could see hairy great faces peering down, brows furrowed stupidly. A portcullis began to rise and ogres were visible, ready to pour out and attack the riders.

Urgently, he beckoned to his assembling fighters; those men who remained, and the free ogre slaves who had joined them.

‘Attack!’ he bellowed.

The ogres in the fortress gates were barely prepared. The battle raged for several minutes, with warriors falling on either side. The fortress seemed impenetrable until Hogback and two of his fellow slaves hauled themselves up the wall then leapt down into the courtyard beyond. Soon the defenders were under attack from two sides. Gerald forced his warriors onwards. The defenders gave ground.

They found themselves in the courtyard, amid the bodies of the slain. Hogback was visible with a double headed axe, gore spattering him and the flagstones around him. Blood and brains stained the stones. Humped ogre corpses lay all around. Two of them were those of Hogback’s erstwhile companions.

Gerald rode towards him, followed by the riders and the ogre slaves.

‘This fortress is ours now,’ he said, and he reached down to shake Hogback’s huge paw. ‘Thanks.’

Several ogres of the fortress garrison were kneeling. One of them wore a crudely ornamented helmet.

‘Who’s this?’ Gerald asked.

‘This is the ogre chief, Liberator,’ said Hogback grimly. ‘Many’s the flogging I’ve had from him.’ His warty hide was latticed with whip-marks.

‘Where are the babies?’ Gerald shouted. ‘Where do you keep them?’

The ogre chief shook his head, refusing to meet Gerald's eyes, staring at the ground dully. Gerald looked at Hogback.

'Don't you know?' he demanded. 'Where are the babies?'

Hogback scratched his hairy pate.

'You want to see the livestock?' he asked. 'I was set to mucking them out when first I was enslaved. But there are no man-calves here. Only matures.'

'Take me there,' Gerald snapped.

Hogback lumbered down a rock-hewn passage lit by uncut glow-gems, leading Gerald to a stone door to which he set his shoulder. With some effort, he shoved it open.

A horrible stench met Gerald's nostrils. It stank like a stable that hadn't been mucked out recently, but there was something else that reminded him of visits to his Nan's in the weeks before she was taken off to the home. Stale sweat and shit; the stink of poor hygiene and self-neglect. The door opened further as Hogback heaved at it more.

Revealed in the light of the carbuncles was a largish cavern. The floor was scattered with straw and kitchen waste. Blinking up at the light were several obese, lard-skinned, recumbent figures. Their hair was uncut, their nails were like claws. Their flesh was flabby and they looked like dumplings. Black, piggy eyes stared beadily up at their visitors. Moaning sounds came from drooling lips.

'These are the livestock pens, Liberator,' Hogback mumbled.

Gerald was sickened. 'They're people...' he breathed.

'They've known no other life,' Hogback said. 'They were bred in darkness, force-fed. Bred for the table. Do you want me to bring them out?'

Violently, Gerald shuddered. He shook his head.

'Just... just kill them,' he said thickly. 'It would be better. They've got no life... Kill them, I said!' Hogback hefted his chain and shambled resolutely into the rock-cut chamber.

When he came back, more blood splattered him, but the purposeless moaning from the chamber was at an end.

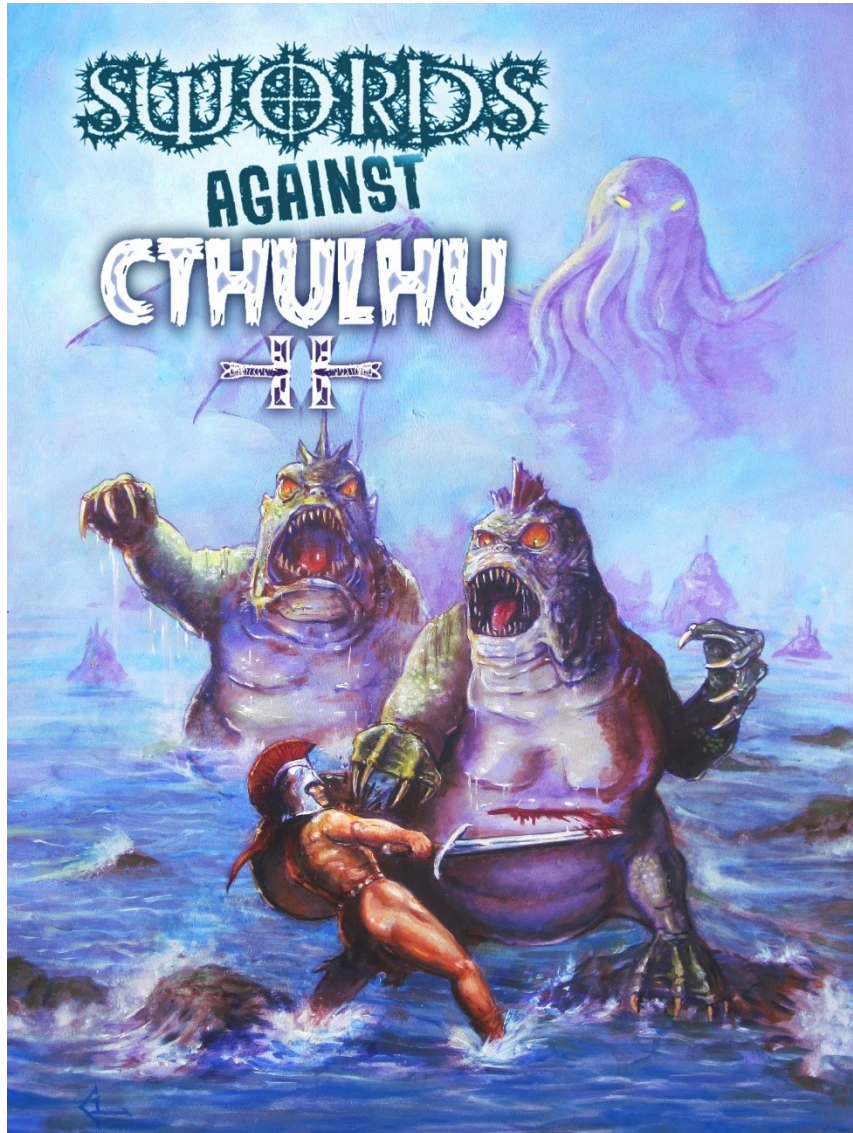
'And kill the ogre chieftain,' Gerald snapped. 'Hang him.' He looked at Hogback wonderingly. He'd come here to kill ogres, and here was one obeying him. 'What will you do now you're free?' he asked suddenly.

'We ride north to the Mountain of Light,' the ogre rumbled. 'There our king, Cragface, has the centre of his power. A mountain of carbuncles, it has made him richer than any other ogre. It is the source of his wealth, his tyranny. Trade with menfolk has made him the most powerful of the ogres: all but his trusties are his slaves. My men will overthrow him and then we will control the Mountain of Light. Will you join us?'

Gerald looked doubtfully at the ogre, then clasped his mighty hand again.

‘Okay, mate,’ he said grimly. ‘Today we rest, and execute a few bastards. Tomorrow we ride for the Mountain of Light.’

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Thirty-One

When the warning sirens first blared out, before the battle began, Story Talbot was in his apartment, enjoying the quiet company of his wife, Joyce. She had regained much of her vitality, and her beauty, in the time that had been on Callisto.

She was no longer the pale, worried and wan woman who had escaped from Earth, along with Story—whose name at birth was Frederick Jarvis Sherman, III, the name Story Talbot being the pseudonym he had adopted upon their arrival at Callisto.

Now, knowing safety for herself and her family, Jeffrey her son, and Emily, her daughter, Joyce began to flourish once again on Callisto. Though it was not without hazard, she and Story had begun to make a few friends here, Colonel Bridgemont foremost among them, and through him, others who could be trusted not to probe too closely into the background of this newly relocated family from Mars, as the Talbots explained their origin to their new neighbors.

Abandoning her name, and the person she was, to adopt a name wholly new, and a person she had never been, was difficult for her, of course, as it also was for Emily, most particularly, but Jeffrey and even Story, too. Her children had proven very slow to make new acquaintances here on Callisto, and stayed very much to themselves. Jeffrey had done more to adapt to this new world, than Emily, and adjusted well to having to say goodbye to his friends and all he remembered on Earth—there had been a girl—but yet he was still very disinclined to seek new company on Callisto.

Colonel Bridgemont was often at their apartment for dinner, with his wife, Ellen. And they had invited Joyce and Story, and Jeffrey and Emily, to their own suites for brunches and board games.

It was Bridgemont and Ellen who showed Story Talbot and his family around Callisto Base 1, familiarizing them with their new home. And it was Bridgemont who, after a quiet word with a couple of trusted friends, was able to place Talbot in a newly formed advisory board to Jovian Security, where Story Talbot was able to make a few professional acquaintances that began, helpfully, to establish him in Callistoan society.

Illara, too, visited often with the Talbots. A very amiable and outgoing woman, Illara was quick to make friends here on Callisto, not the least of whom were the first Callistoans she'd met, that evening that she and Carter Ward, Lieutenant Hardy and Carter's friend, Mud shared a few drinks with Alyshia and her fiancée, the astronomer Antoni Zimmerman.

And through Zimmerman, and the credentials he had established, serving on the advisory board to Jovian Security, Story Talbot, found a position on a board that was laying down the preliminary groundwork for an eventual expedition to Saturn, and, from there, the to the Uranian system.

Talbot, an intelligent and well-studied man in many fields, who had already introduced himself as a theoretician doing work in the planetary sciences, had enough knowledge on the

subject to pass himself off easily as an authority, even among professional astronomers, especially if he kept his thoughts to himself, a habit which he had long mastered.

So, in the short time they had been there, Story Talbot and his wife soon found themselves again within a social milieu of dinners and brunches, cocktails and days out on the town, lectures and openings that made Joyce feel alive. Cautiously, she allowed herself to relax her guard, especially after the very harrowing trip from Earth, when she had first learned of the Scroungers, and met them.

Carter Ward had carried them from Mars in the O8-111A, narrowly escaping the unpleasant attention of the Scroungers, and a friendship has bloomed between he and Emily, who adorned the sullen, taciturn space rat. So Ward, at Emily's insistence, was a frequent guest of the Talbots. Accompanying Illara, he shared dinner with Talbot family with a regularity that bordered upon the routine. Joyce's circle of friends had grown to comfortable proportions, and she was very nearly happy again, or as happy as anyone forced to give up the planet of her birth could possibly be.

And that day had found Joyce Talbot, after seeing her children off to the Education Center where they had been enrolled enjoying tea with her husband, as she planned to idle the hours away over a novel, while her husband followed the most recent developments on Earth, and the latest outrages of Secretary Benson, the CEO and COO of the Alliance of Western States, as the man planned his campaign against Mars, as well as against the Eastern Alliance on Earth. Though removed to Callisto, and living under a pseudonym, Story Talbot was still very much engaged in the intrigues against the avaricious Benson and was currently engaged in quietly—and carefully—rebuilding his contacts on Earth, most notably General William Howe, Commander of Earth Space Forces, with whom Talbot had served as civilian liaison.

A quiet day, bathed in the gleaming light of Jupiter so near.

But the promise of a quiet day was instantly shattered with the blaring of the emergency sirens that announced the first approach of the Scrounger fleet.

Joyce's head jerked involuntarily to her husband.

"Fred?" she asked, startled, forgetting his pseudonym.

Story looked at his wife. He shook his head.

"I do not know, Joyce," he said, rising from his chair, and shutting off the broadcast that played from his wristband.

He looked out through the wide picture window, with the vague notion that he might find an answer to the questions in his mind outside, in the pathways below their suite.

Then came an urgent pounding on the door.

Story Talbot moved swiftly to answer the door, Joyce following closely behind.

Opening the door, he found himself confronted by a young man wearing the black and purple uniform of Jovian Security.

“I am sorry sir, but we must evacuate the building.”

“Why?” Talbot asked bluntly.

The young officer glanced quickly down the hall. He had little time to explain.

“We are under attack, sir. Or soon shall be. I’m afraid you must evacuate to the subsurface areas immediately. No... you don’t have time to take anything. You must leave now.”

“Oh, Fr... Story...” Joyce whispered. She touched Story’s arm with her fingertips.

Story half turned and looked down at his wife’s upturned face.

“Joyce...” he began.

“Jeffrey...?” Joyce asked, barely daring to formulate the question that hung from her lips.

“Emily...”

“They have undoubtedly been evacuated to the basements below the Education Center. They are as safe there as they can be anywhere now.”

“Sir,” the young officer said, his voice rising with urgency. “I’m sorry, but I must ask you to leave now, and evacuate to the subsurface offices.”

“Certainly, certainly, young man,” Talbot said. He stepped outside, into the hallway, with Joyce holding his arm.

“It seems as if the Scroungers have anticipated Colonel Westland’s campaign against them, and have taken the wise course of stealing a march against him... and... all of us.”

“Sir... this way, sir,” the young officer said, moving down the hall, and banging his fist on another door.

Story Talbot and his wife followed, then passed the officer, as more people left their apartments and moved toward the stairs that led downward, toward the subsurface offices.

Though a preternatural calm filled the hallway as it began to be crowded, yet still those who crowded into the narrow hall were themselves filled with confusion and dread.

“What is it?” came the subdued whispers.

“An attack? But... who?”

“The Scroungers... is that what they said?”

Down several close and narrow stairs Story Talbot and Joyce allowed themselves to be ushered, along with the growing numbers of people who were also interrupted in their morning routines, to evacuate to the basement offices below the building.

Both were worried about Jeffrey and Emily but there being nothing to be gained by raising a fuss, Story and Joyce simply moved along with the others.

They came at last, in the lower levels, to a large suite of offices and storage rooms. The security officers led them to each of these rooms, taking their names and counting their numbers as they entered.

“Stay here, folks, and you should all be safe,” they said, having no idea of the size of the forces attacking them.

“My children...” Joyce, and several others began to ask, surrounding the officer at the door of the storage room they had been ushered into.

“Sorry, ma’am...” the overworked officer replied. “I have to keep track of everybody here. If you’ll...”

He paused, realizing he had nothing more to say.

At that moment, a huge shock caused the floors and ceiling to shake. Concrete dust fell from the ceiling upon the rolling floor. The shock was so strong that several people were knocked over by it. Several short screams punctuated the tremors that accompanied the shock.

“What was that?” a number of people asked, loudly, but no answer came back. No one knew what caused the shock.

“Story...?” Joyce began to ask.

Talbot shook his weary, worried and heavy head.

“I am sure that Jeffrey and Emily are safe. As safe as we are, at least.”

“Joyce? Story? Is that you?”

They turned in the direction of the now familiar voice. Yes, indeed, it was Eleen Bridgemont, wife of Colonel Bridgemont. She, along with Illara, Alyshia and her fiancée, Antoni, all lived in the same building.

“Oh, Ellen! Is it you? How are you?”

“Alive and well... at least so far,” she answered with a smile that covered her fear. “And you?”

“Oh, we are doing as well as can be,” Joyce answered. “But I am worried sick over Jeffrey and Emily.”

“Were they at the Education Center this morning?” Ellen asked.

“Yes...” Joyce answered.

“Then they are as well off as any of us can be,” Ellen answered.

“And Gerald? Colonel Bridgemont?” Story asked.

Ellen took a deep breath and held it for a long moment before she let it go and answered Talbot/s question.

“As I think you can imagine,” she replied, “My Gerald is very busy at the moment.”

“Have you heard of anything from him?”

Ellen shook her head slowly from left to right. Her eyes welled with moisture.

“Oh... Ellen...” Joyce said. She wrapped her arms around the stout, middle-aged woman and the two embraced in a long hug.

“He left this morning...” Ellen finally managed to say. “His usual... his job... and... I usually call him at 2500, but... well... I doubt I’ll be hearing from him until all this is over...”

And the two women, sick with worry, comforted each other through the long, suffocating hours that followed. It was up to Story Talbot to recognize Alyshia and Antoni, as they, too, were brought into the offices where all had been brought to find shelter.

They joined the group, but it was not a merry meeting. Alyshia was in no mood for conversation, and, except for comforting each other over their family members not present, neither, of course, were Joyce or Ellen.

Story Talbot and Antoni Zimmerman exchanged a few polite words, but as the heavy mood settled more completely upon them, they, too, preferred the company of silence over surrounding themselves with walls of words.

Shocks rattled the ceiling and floor. Dull and distant thuds reverberated throughout the walls and hallways, echoes of the intense battle being fought in the sky above Callisto.

Only when the security officers changed posts did the evacuees rouse themselves, to ask questions and to demand any news. Hours passed by, and they had nothing to say.

“I don’t know, sir... I don’t know, ma’am...” was all they could answer.

“No, sir. It would be better if you stayed... I am sure they are safe... no word from Colonel Bridgemont...yes, the “Bellerophon” is still close by. I am sure the ship is fighting hard...”

The long, endless silence through the hours, the ceaseless shaking of the walls from distant explosions, the lack of news—all was torture to Joyce, and Ellen as they worried themselves over their children and husband.

Finally came a huge shock that overturned file cabinets and chairs. The walls and ceiling shook for many long minutes as clouds of dust from shattered concrete spilled to the floor.

“That was... that was close...” Story Talbot managed to say.

The evacuees crowded hard upon the security officers standing at the door.

“What was that?” came the demands.

“Are we really safe here?”

“Should we leave?”

“Please... people... please... everything will be best if you just stay in your seats... there will be...” the officer abruptly stopped speaking, then brought his wristband close to his ear.

He nodded once. Then again, as his face turned into a scowl.

“Yes... I... but...” he paused again, to whisper into his wristband. “Look, it’s already pretty tense here... I...”

Then came urgent sounds from his wristband, which caused him to pull it away from his head.

“Yes, sir. I understand, sir,” he said.

Then raising his voice so everyone could hear, he said.

“People... if I could have your attention. Orders have come in. We must all move above ground. Our subsurface... uh... this is not safe. We must move to the surface.”

“Not safe? Why not? What’s happened?” came the questions.

The officer hesitated. He glanced at the worried faces staring at him. Their eyes were particularly haunting.

“Uh... I am sorry to say...” he paused, took in a deep breath, and then let it out again.

“I am sorry to have to announce that the Education Center has collapsed. It...”

But he could not get out another word, for all the questions that were hurtled at him from many mouths, and all at once.

Joyce only turned her eyes to Story. Her eyes welled deep with tears that ran openly down her face. Story Talbot, unable to cry—a characteristic he shared with Carter Ward—could only look down into his wife’s face.

“Jeffrey...?” she silently mouthed his name. “Emily...?”

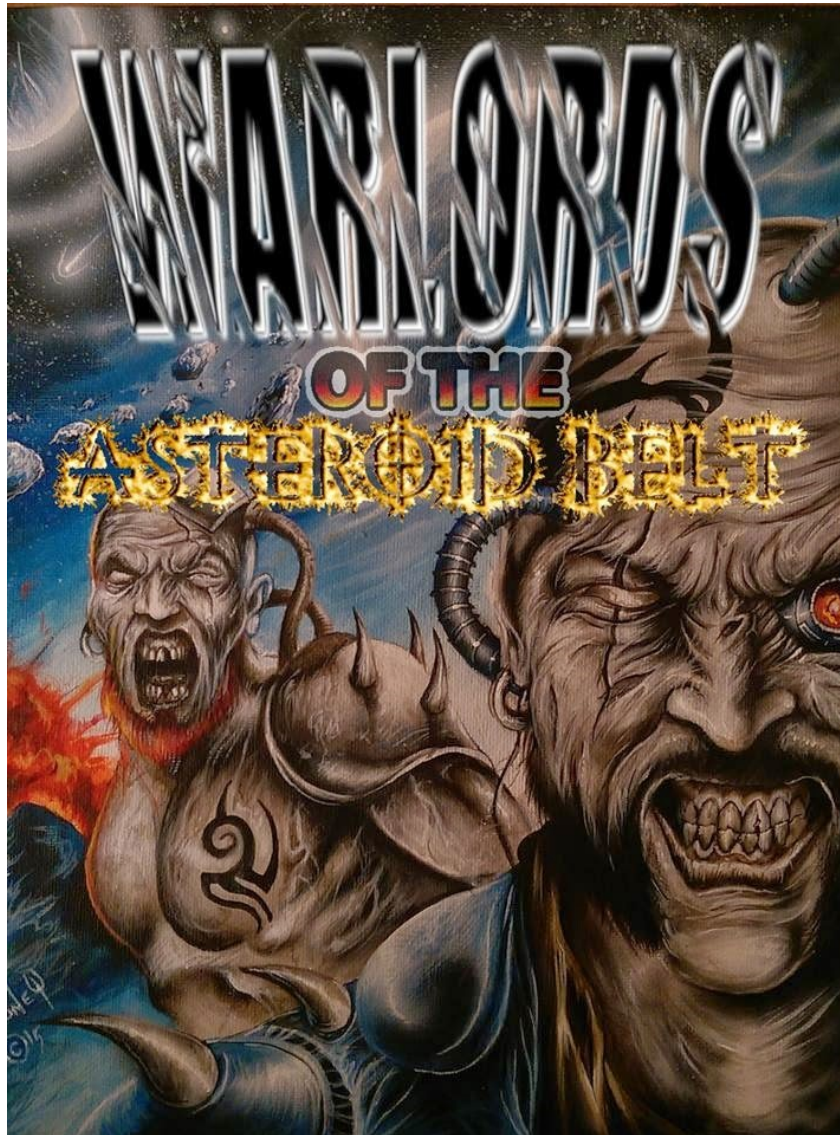
At that moment, a section of the ceiling came crashing down. It missed the huddled group of Story Talbot and Joyce, Ellen Bridgemont, Alyshia Stern and Antoni Zimmerman by only inches.

“We must leave,” Story said to the group.

“We must leave now.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Carter Ward's earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 17

Day had returned. No ray of light penetrated into the profundity of the cavern. It being high-water, the entrance was closed by the sea. But the artificial light, which escaped in long streams from the skylights of the "Nautilus" was as vivid as before, and the sheet of water shone around the floating vessel.

An extreme exhaustion now overcame Captain Nemo, who had fallen back upon the divan. It was useless to contemplate removing him to Granite House, for he had expressed his wish to remain in the midst of those marvels of the "Nautilus" which millions could not have purchased, and to wait there for that death which was swiftly approaching.

During a long interval of prostration, which rendered him almost unconscious, Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett attentively observed the condition of the dying man. It was apparent that his strength was gradually diminishing. That frame, once so robust, was now but the fragile tenement of a departing soul. All of life was concentrated in the heart and head.

The engineer and reporter consulted in whispers. Was it possible to render any aid to the dying man? Might his life, if not saved, be prolonged for some days? He himself had said that no remedy could avail, and he awaited with tranquillity that death which had for him no terrors.

"We can do nothing," said Gideon Spilett.

"But of what is he dying?" asked Pencroft.

"Life is simply fading out," replied the reporter.

"Nevertheless," said the sailor, "if we move him into the open air, and the light of the sun, he might perhaps recover."

"No, Pencroft," answered the engineer, "it is useless to attempt it. Besides, Captain Nemo would never consent to leave his vessel. He has lived for a dozen years on board the 'Nautilus,' and on board the 'Nautilus' he desires to die."

Without doubt Captain Nemo heard Cyrus Harding's reply, for he raised himself slightly, and in a voice more feeble, but always intelligible,—

"You are right, sir," he said. "I shall die here—it is my wish; and therefore I have a request to make of you."

Cyrus Harding and his companions had drawn near the divan, and now arranged the cushions in such a manner as to better support the dying man.

They saw his eyes wander over all the marvels of this saloon, lighted by the electric rays which fell from the arabesques of the luminous ceiling. He surveyed, one after the other, the

pictures hanging from the splendid tapestries of the partitions, the chef-d'oeuvres of the Italian, Flemish, French, and Spanish masters; the statues of marble and bronze on their pedestals; the magnificent organ, leaning against the after-partition; the aquarium, in which bloomed the most wonderful productions of the sea—marine plants, zoophytes, chaplets of pearls of inestimable value; and, finally, his eyes rested on this device, inscribed over the pediment of the museum—the motto of the “Nautilus”—

“Mobilis in mobile.”

His glance seemed to rest fondly for the last time on these masterpieces of art and of nature, to which he had limited his horizon during a sojourn of so many years in the abysses of the seas.

Cyrus Harding respected the captain's silence, and waited till he should speak.

After some minutes, during which, doubtless, he passed in review his whole life, Captain Nemo turned to the colonists and said,

“You consider yourselves, gentlemen, under some obligations to me?”

“Captain, believe us that we would give our lives to prolong yours.”

“Promise, then,” continued Captain Nemo, “to carry out my last wishes, and I shall be repaid for all I have done for you.”

“We promise,” said Cyrus Harding.

And by this promise he bound both himself and his companions.

“Gentlemen,” resumed the captain, “to-morrow I shall be dead.”

Herbert was about to utter an exclamation, but a sign from the captain arrested him.

“To-morrow I shall die, and I desire no other tomb than the ‘Nautilus.’ It is my grave! All my friends repose in the depths of the ocean; their resting-place shall be mine.”

These words were received with profound silence.

“Pay attention to my wishes,” he continued. “The ‘Nautilus’ is imprisoned in this grotto, the entrance of which is blocked up; but, although egress is impossible, the vessel may at least sink in the abyss, and there bury my remains.”

The colonists listened reverently to the words of the dying man.

“To-morrow, after my death, Mr. Harding,” continued the captain, “yourself and companions will leave the ‘Nautilus,’ for all the treasures it contains must perish with me. One token alone will remain with you of Prince Dakkar, with whose history you are now acquainted. That coffer yonder contains diamonds of the value of many millions, most of them mementoes of the time when, husband and father, I thought happiness possible for me, and a collection of pearls gathered by my friends and myself in the depths of the ocean. Of this

treasure at a future day, you may make good use. In the hands of such men as yourself and your comrades, Captain Harding, money will never be a source of danger. From on high I shall still participate in your enterprises, and I fear not but that they will prosper.”

After a few moments’ repose, necessitated by his extreme weakness, Captain Nemo continued,—

“To-morrow you will take the coffer, you will leave the saloon, of which you will close the door; then you will ascend on to the deck of the ‘Nautilus,’ and you will lower the mainhatch so as entirely to close the vessel.”

“It shall be done, captain,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“Good. You will then embark in the canoe which brought you hither; but, before leaving the ‘Nautilus,’ go to the stern and there open two large stop-cocks which you will find upon the water-line. The water will penetrate into the reservoirs, and the ‘Nautilus’ will gradually sink beneath the water to repose at the bottom of the abyss.”

And comprehending a gesture of Cyrus Harding, the captain added,—

“Fear nothing! You will but bury a corpse!”

Neither Cyrus Harding nor his companions ventured to offer any observation to Captain Nemo. He had expressed his last wishes, and they had nothing to do but to conform to them.

“I have your promise, gentlemen?” added Captain Nemo.

“You have, captain,” replied the engineer.

The captain thanked the colonists by a sign, and requested them to leave him for some hours. Gideon Spilett wished to remain near him, in the event of a crisis coming on, but the dying man refused, saying, “I shall live until to-morrow, sir.”

All left the saloon, passed through the library and the dining-room, and arrived forward, in the machine-room where the electrical apparatus was established, which supplied not only heat and light, but the mechanical power of the “Nautilus.”

The “Nautilus” was a masterpiece containing masterpieces within itself, and the engineer was struck with astonishment.

The colonists mounted the platform, which rose seven or eight feet above the water. There they beheld a thick glass lenticular covering, which protected a kind of large eye, from which flashed forth light. Behind this eye was apparently a cabin containing the wheels of the rudder, and in which was stationed the helmsman, when he navigated the “Nautilus” over the bed of the ocean, which the electric rays would evidently light up to a considerable distance.

Cyrus Harding and his companions remained for a time silent, for they were vividly impressed by what they had just seen and heard, and their hearts were deeply touched by the thought that he whose arm had so often aided them, the protector whom they had known but a few hours, was at the point of death.

Whatever might be the judgment pronounced by posterity upon the events of this, so to speak, extra-human existence, the character of Prince Dakkar would ever remain as one of those whose memory time can never efface.

“What a man!” said Pencroft. “Is it possible that he can have lived at the bottom of the sea? And it seems to me that perhaps he has not found peace there any more than elsewhere!”

“The ‘Nautilus,’” observed Ayrton, “might have enabled us to leave Lincoln Island and reach some inhabited country.”

“Good Heavens!” exclaimed Pencroft, “I for one would never risk myself in such a craft. To sail on the seas, good, but under the seas, never!”

“I believe, Pencroft,” answered the reporter, “that the navigation of a submarine vessel such as the ‘Nautilus’ ought to be very easy, and that we should soon become accustomed to it. There would be no storms, no lee-shore to fear. At some feet beneath the surface the waters of the ocean are as calm as those of a lake.”

“That may be,” replied the sailor, “but I prefer a gale of wind on board a well-found craft. A vessel is built to sail on the sea, and not beneath it.”

“My friends,” said the engineer, “it is useless, at any rate as regards the ‘Nautilus,’ to discuss the question of submarine vessels. The ‘Nautilus’ is not ours, and we have not the right to dispose of it. Moreover, we could in no case avail ourselves of it. Independently of the fact that it would be impossible to get it out of this cavern, whose entrance is now closed by the uprising of the basaltic rocks, Captain Nemo’s wish is that it shall be buried with him. His wish is our law, and we will fulfil it.”

After a somewhat prolonged conversation, Cyrus Harding and his companions again descended to the interior of the “Nautilus.” There they took some refreshment and returned to the saloon.

Captain Nemo had somewhat rallied from the prostration which had overcome him, and his eyes shone with their wonted fire. A faint smile even curled his lips.

The colonists drew around him.

“Gentlemen,” said the captain, “you are brave and honest men. You have devoted yourselves to the common weal. Often have I observed your conduct. I have esteemed you—I esteem you still! Your hand, Mr. Harding.”

Cyrus Harding gave his hand to the captain, who clasped it affectionately.

“It is well!” he murmured.

He resumed,—

“But enough of myself. I have to speak concerning yourselves, and this Lincoln Island, upon which you have taken refuge. You now desire to leave it?”

“To return, captain!” answered Pencroft quickly.

“To return, Pencroft?” said the captain, with a smile. “I know, it is true, your love for this island. You have helped to make it what it now is, and it seems to you a paradise!”

“Our project, captain,” interposed Cyrus Harding, “is to annex it to the United States, and to establish for our shipping a port so fortunately situated in this part of the Pacific.”

“Your thoughts are with your country, gentlemen,” continued the captain; “your toils are for her prosperity and glory. You are right. One’s native land!—there should one live! there die! And I die far from all I loved!”

“You have some last wish to transmit,” said the engineer with emotion, “some souvenir to send to those friends you have left in the mountains of India?”

“No, Captain Harding; no friends remain to me! I am the last of my race, and to all whom I have known I have long been as are the dead.—But to return to yourselves. Solitude, isolation, are painful things, and beyond human endurance. I die of having thought it possible to live alone! You should, therefore, dare all in the attempt to leave Lincoln Island, and see once more the land of your birth. I am aware that those wretches have destroyed the vessel you have built.”

“We propose to construct a vessel,” said Gideon Spilett, “sufficiently large to convey us to the nearest land; but if we should succeed, sooner or later we shall return to Lincoln Island. We are attached to it by too many recollections ever to forget it.”

“It is here that we have known Captain Nemo,” said Cyrus Harding.

“It is here only that we can make our home!” added Herbert.

“And here shall I sleep the sleep of eternity, if—” replied the captain.

He paused for a moment, and, instead of completing the sentence, said simply,—

“Mr. Harding, I wish to speak with you—alone!”

The engineer’s companions, respecting the wish, retired.

Cyrus Harding remained but a few minutes alone with Captain Nemo, and soon recalled his companions; but he said nothing to them of the private matters which the dying man had confided to him.

Gideon Spilett now watched the captain with extreme care. It was evident that he was no longer sustained by his moral energy, which had lost the power of reaction against his physical weakness.

The day closed without change. The colonists did not quit the “Nautilus” for a moment. Night arrived, although it was impossible to distinguish it from day in the cavern.

Captain Nemo suffered no pain, but he was visibly sinking. His noble features, paled by the approach of death, were perfectly calm. Inaudible words escaped at intervals from his lips, bearing upon various incidents of his checkered career. Life was evidently ebbing slowly and his extremities were already cold.

Once or twice more he spoke to the colonists who stood around him, and smiled on them with that last smile which continues after death.

At length, shortly after midnight, Captain Nemo by a supreme effort succeeded in folding his arms across his breast, as if wishing in that attitude to compose himself for death.

By one o'clock his glance alone showed signs of life. A dying light gleamed in those eyes once so brilliant. Then, murmuring the words, "God and my country!" he quietly expired.

Cyrus Harding, bending low closed the eyes of him who had once been the Prince Dakkar, and was now not even Captain Nemo.

Herbert and Pencroft sobbed aloud. Tears fell from Ayrton's eyes. Neb was on his knees by the reporter's side, motionless as a statue.

Then Cyrus Harding, extending his hand over the forehead of the dead, said solemnly, "May his soul be with God!" Turning to his friends, he added, "Let us pray for him whom we have lost!"

Some hours later the colonists fulfilled the promise made to the captain by carrying out his dying wishes.

Cyrus Harding and his companions quitted the "Nautilus," taking with them the only memento left them by their benefactor, the coffer which contained wealth amounting to millions.

The marvelous saloon, still flooded with light, had been carefully closed. The iron door leading on deck was then securely fastened in such a manner as to prevent even a drop of water from penetrating to the interior of the "Nautilus."

The colonists then descended into the canoe, which was moored to the side of the submarine vessel.

The canoe was now brought around to the stern. There, at the water-line, were two large stop-cocks communicating with the reservoirs employed in the submersion of the vessel.

The stop-cocks were opened, the reservoirs filled, and the "Nautilus," slowly sinking, disappeared beneath the surface of the lake.

But the colonists were yet able to follow its descent through the waves. The powerful light it gave forth lighted up the translucent water, while the cavern became gradually obscure. At length this vast effusion of electric light faded away, and soon after the "Nautilus," now the tomb of Captain Nemo, reposed in its ocean bed.

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Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror

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Sword and sorcery in the aeon of Cthulhu Rising!

‘The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.’

So saith Lovecraft.

Picture a future Earth, a savage world where science is jettisoned in favour of primitive superstition, where technology has become the idol of a new religion. A world where the truth of Cthulhu has been revealed, where a lunatic humanity has discovered its true insignificance—the punchline in a cosmic joke. A new dark age has descended upon a species that has learnt too much. Science and superstition and the sorcery of the Mad Arab create a world where only the strong survive, and barbarian warriors battle for existence in a bleak and pitiless universe...

Science fantasy tales of dying earths, of low tech dystopias, of medieval post-apocalyptic worlds—all with a Cthulhu Mythos slant—will be welcome in this anthology.

Submission guidelines:

Please submit your manuscript as a .rtf, .doc or .docx file (all other formats will automatically be rejected. Contact me prior to submitting if this presents an issue for you.)

Font and formatting: Please submit in Times New Roman, 12-point font; single line spacing. Please format the document to 1st line indentation of 1". The page margin should be set to 1" on all sides.

No headers, footers, or page numbers.

Please check grammar.

Upon acceptance into the anthology, you agree that Horrified Press holds exclusive publishing rights for six months from the date of publication. All intellectual property rights over the author's work remain with the author, with the proviso that Horrified Press retains distribution rights in the format of the contracted anthology.

This title will be available as an e book and trade quality paperback.

Gavin Chappell will be presiding over this anthology.

Email your submission as an attachment to: editor@schlock.co.uk

The email subject line must read 'SUBMISSION SAC: Dark Age—your story title' or your submission will not be considered for this anthology.

Successful applicants will be notified before the deadline has expired.