

THE BEST WEBZINE FOR SCI-FI, FANTASY, AND HORROR!

Schlock!

WEBZINE

**VOL. 11, ISSUE 28
27TH AUGUST 2017**

DEAD IN THE WATER

**BY DAVE
LUDFORD—
YOU WILL
CONFESS
YOUR SIN...**

**A YOUNG CAPTAIN
PLAYS IT SAFE
BY STEVE LAKER**

NOKO NIGHTMARE!

**BY GARY
MURPHY—
THE
ABOMINATION
FROM THE
SEA...**

THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT

IS BACK!!!

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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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

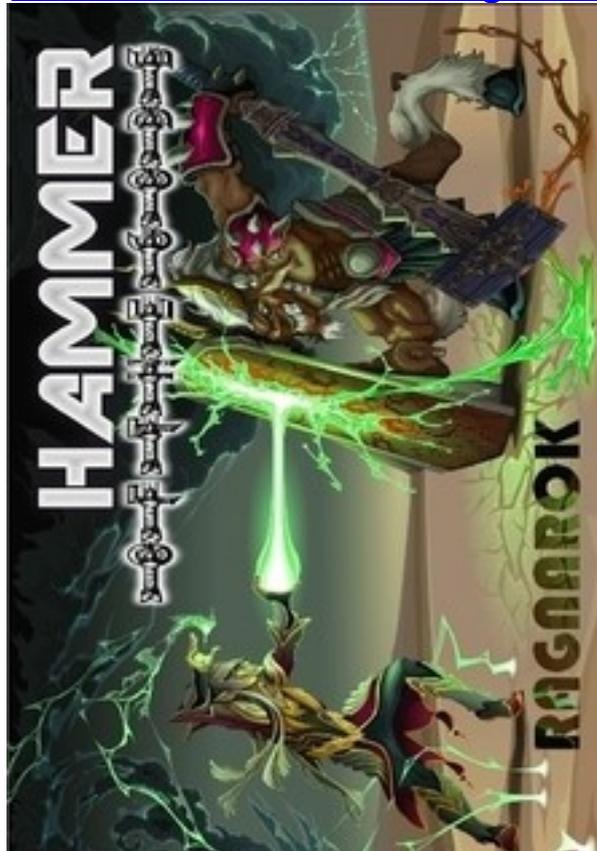
This week, a writer confesses murder. A girl encounters monsters in a totalitarian society. A boy makes a strange discovery. And online necromancy evokes new terrors.

The Hettford Witch Hunt makes a welcome return, but Julie is having strange experiences with her fruit bowl. The Callistoan defenders plan death for the Scroungers. On *The Mysterious Island*, Harding fears for Herbert's life. And Blind Olaf resolves to travel to Egypt.

—Gavin Chappell

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DEAD IN THE WATER by Dave Ludford

'Whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind.'

- William James, 'Principles of Psychology.'

The Lake

You look out of the window at the huge expanse of lake that has swollen and burst its banks after several days of persistently heavy rain; the water is muddy, the colour of builders' tea. It is still raining, but it's a much lighter downpour now, more like a spring shower. You reach out with the index finger of your right hand and trace the downward progress of a single raindrop on its journey from the top of the pane to the bottom, where it merges with countless others; you repeat this process several times then give a light grunt that is the brief exhaling of deep despair: lean forward, and kiss the glass. Your breath creates a small patch of mist that quickly evaporates as you pull your head away slowly and refocus your gaze on the lake. "Jenny," you say in a whispered voice, soft but choked with emotion. "I'm so very, very sorry. Please forgive me." The rain continues to patter softly on the lake's surface but you are too far away to see the tiny ripples it makes.

Charity Bags

Lined up against the wall of your living room: fifteen bulging black refuse sacks full of Jenny's clothes; mostly summer dresses, unworn since being tried on in the shop's fitting room. It was the possession that she craved: the feeling, the knowledge of possessing beautiful, fashionable things. Most of the time she was happy wearing years-old baggy jumpers, jeans and T-shirts. It was one of the many things you loved about her, her air of naturalness. The complete lack of any pretension. The dress thing was an endearing foible. You both often laughed about it. Besides, she hated crowds, and therefore seldom went anywhere to adorn herself with her obsessive purchases. Very few parties, and even fewer visits to the cinema, theatre or concerts in the ten years you were with her.

The charity bags seem to you to be like huge bloated crows that have gorged themselves on carrion and now sit quietly digesting their meals.

You switch off the light and head upstairs to bed. It is still early, only 8pm, and you know you will have difficulty sleeping. No matter; you will take another of Jenny's sleeping pills. Oblivion guaranteed, although you fear the nightmares that lurk just beneath your subconscious mind.

The Watcher

He's there again, on the far shore of the lake. A distant figure, wearing black. You don't know who he is—or even if it is a 'he'—but you know that whoever it is they are watching you. Watching the house.

The Message

You pick up the single sheet of paper that is lying on the mat by the front door. Unfold it. Read it. ‘You will confess your sin,’ it says. Simple. Unequivocal. Unambiguous. You scrunch it up, walk into the kitchen, and toss it into the waste bin. Worried now.

The Visitor

The knock at the door rouses you from your brief sleep. It sounds like thunder in the stillness of the quiet afternoon air. You shake your head, trying to bring order to your thoughts whilst trying to quell the rising feeling of panic. You get up from your armchair and walk gingerly toward the bay window. Another thunderous knock. Your stomach turns to liquid. Could this be the dark figure from across the lake? The author of the anonymous letter? Are they one and the same person, the same person who is now sounding an insistent report on your heavy brass door knocker? You peer from behind the curtain where you have a good view of the figure standing there. You recognize him instantly. Geoff Cross: Jenny’s brother. Relief surges through you like an electric current. You move from the bay window to the hallway.

“Geoff!” you say, having opened the front door. “It’s been ages. Please come in. Sorry to keep you waiting; I must have dozed off.”

Geoff flashes a brief smile but says nothing. Follows you into the house. You don’t notice his expression: it is unreadable anyway and you are still partly dazed and disorientated from your sleep. Perhaps Geoff is happy to see you, too. Perhaps not. His smile could have been interpreted in many different ways.

The Conversation

“Tea? Coffee? Or something a bit stronger perhaps?”

“Sit down, Ray. I haven’t come here for a cosy little chat. This isn’t a social call.”

You adopt a baffled expression. Indicate for Geoff to take a seat on the sofa while you sit in the armchair opposite. You wait for Geoff to speak whilst fixing yourself a whisky.

“I’ll get straight to the point, Ray. Jenny has been missing for three months now. Three months and not a single word. That’s so unlike her, Ray, we both know that. You know something about her disappearance.”

An accusation, not a question. Your jaw begins to twitch, your throat goes dry. You try to swallow but can’t. You shake your head slowly from side to side, maintaining the air of bafflement, mouth set in a thin line. Eventually you find the right words with which to reply.

“I told the police everything I know, Geoff.”

“Well we both know that’s simply not true, is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” A hint of annoyance and frustration in your voice now. “Whatever you’re thinking, it’s wrong.”

“You know what happened to Jenny,” Geoff persists. “I’m sure of it.”

The Confession

You smile nervously and look down at the whisky in your tumbler, swirl it around slowly. Say nothing. Drink nothing. Put the tumbler down, rise, and walk across to the bay windows. You look out towards the lake, sigh heavily, and slump your shoulders. Is this confession time? Only you know the answer to that question. After a few minutes of decision you feel that it is. Still looking at the lake, back turned on your visitor, your voice is quiet; in a vain hope that Geoff won't be able to hear what you have got to say perhaps.

“We had an almighty row. Bigger than any we'd had before, and god knows there had been some humdingers in the past. You know how Jenny could be; fine one moment and then she'd just explode. It was the usual stuff: 'Why don't you get a proper job instead of daydreaming about becoming a writer? You have no talent for it whatsoever, and the money your father left you won't last forever. Why must I be the one going out to work while you moon and mope about the house all day?'” Or words to that effect. Jenny always knew how to push my buttons but the remark about me having no talent for writing really cut me to the quick, Geoff. I've been tirelessly working on a novel for eight months, and I know, I just know, that it's going to be big. Better than anything I've done before. So: my turn to explode. I lashed out, slapping her across the face, really hard. She stumbled backwards, in a state of complete shock. Lost her footing, tripped and fell. Banged her head on the marble fireplace. I'll never forget the horrible cracking sound her skull made upon impact. Like dropping an egg on the kitchen floor. I knew she was dead, Geoff, as she lay there crumpled and broken, her eyes open but unseeing with that same shocked expression, blood seeping across the floor like spilled red wine.

“I was in a state, as you can imagine. I walked across to her, knelt down and took her wrist. Tried to find a pulse but it was useless. I stood and went to fix myself a whisky. I had several in fact. The drink helped to numb my senses. Later, when I felt able to, I wrapped her in an old blanket along with some heavy rocks from the garden, and tied her up. Took the small rowing boat out to the middle of the lake and pushed her in. She sank without trace.

“It was an accident, Geoff, pure and simple. Honest, I had no intention of killing Jenny. It was pure anger that motivated me. You have to believe that.”

You turn to face your accuser, but he's not there. The sofa is empty. You have been performing to an empty gallery.

The Novel

You boot up your laptop and open the folder simply called 'Novel'. Three thousand words of meaningless gibberish stare back at you as you scroll up and down the pages. You bang the table with both fists, frustrated. This has been your fourth attempt at writing a crime thriller involving a young girl called Jenny; how one day she is brutally killed. Her brother, frustrated at the lack of progress by the police, heavily suspects her boyfriend and decides to confront him and extract a confession. The boyfriend is a complete fantasist who will do anything, invent any fiction, to profess his innocence. He is haunted by a mysterious, ghost-like figure across the lake near to where he lives. You haven't decided yet who this figure could be. Jenny, perhaps? And then there's the mysterious anonymous letter he receives commanding him to confess. You have lived and breathed these characters, invested all of whatever modicum of talent you may have into telling their story.

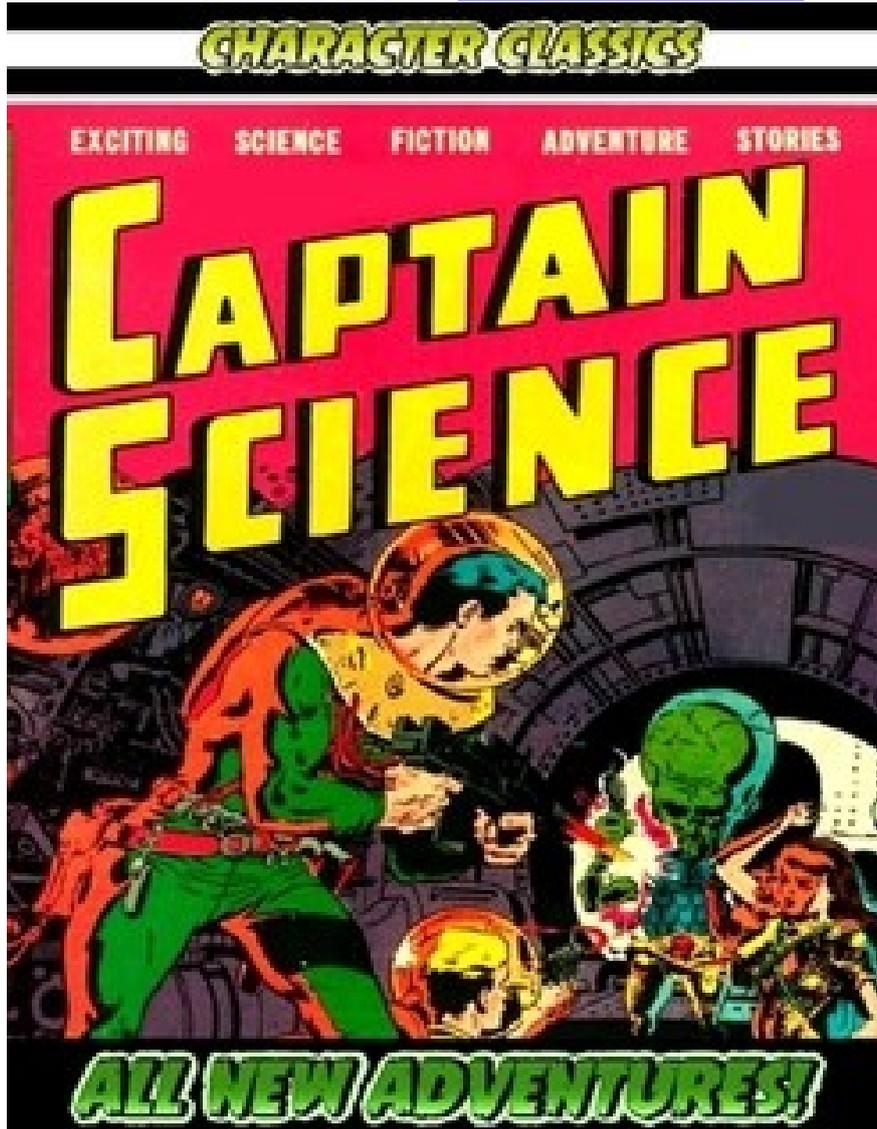
A phrase enters your mind that makes you smile, the irony of it. 'Dead in the Water'. That is what you were going to call your masterpiece. Dead in the Water.

Just like this story, you feel.

You highlight all that you have written and, much calmer now, press the 'delete' key.

THE END

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NOKO NIGHTMARE! by Gary Murphy

Just another boring North Korean school day as 9 year old Sasha made her morning journey along mostly deserted streets, up a huge hill and through a couple of empty alleys and avenues, towards that old ramshackle of a learning facility. Funnily, her name was not by any means Korean, since her father was Jewish, having married her mother and moved here over twenty years ago—which was vehemently frowned upon throughout the community to this day.

No Xbox360 or PlayStation 5 for Sasha, no Barbie dolls, and no MTV to watch her favourite stars singing her favourite songs in her favourite music videos.

No, not here sadly, since all Sasha could watch was boring news bulletins, which were more serious and somehow morbid, more than anything else.

But her daddy had a secret and captivating electronic device kept in the outdoor shed connected to a small monitor, and something he sometimes let Sasha watch, that in particular showcased American and British singing talent, and he allowed it to stream throughout the long, dull nocturne in the relative silence of this particular community. If anyone—anyone, it must be stated—found out about this, well, it might well have drawn some heat from the authorities and orchestrated her father's immediate execution by firing squad—or perhaps a long stint of hard labour in one of the many camps used to contain infidels from abroad or those deemed traitors. He might have been detained there for the rest of his natural life—until he dropped dead from exhaustion on the very spot, or died horribly due to being battered by the screws or even whipped and flogged to death.

These people were treated worse than dogs. In fact, dogs in these parts were treated better by this regime, and yes, a great deal better than the district's human population. That was, the dogs that were not butchered to be cooked along with a sprinkle of local roasted, domestic cats which were prepared to eat for supper—a nightly treat that pissed all over chicken and cuts of pork.

Sasha watched MTV most nights in secret and in particular loved Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears—as well as her favourite, Robbie Williams, whom she adored and longed to marry one day! He was so handsome and super cool.

Things went a little awry this morning in class as the kids sang the song that degraded everything America stood for. The rest of kids sang enthusiastically but a deeply saddened and petulant Sasha refused play the role of every North Korean child in this day and age. This was much to the disgust of the Stick Insect female teacher at the head of class today. Stood by the blackboard, she spied Sasha from behind her Coke-bottle spectacles and looked as if she might walk all the way to the girl's desk where she would set about throttling the girl on the spot this sunny, radioactive-tinged morning. It was the absolute and complete must-do—the must-happen—it had to happen every morning without fail. It was the rule set by their masters. Everyone had to join in and prove their love and allegiance to the Great Leader.

“Miss, Miss...” Sasha protested, waving her right arm and silencing the others into stunned disapproval as she yelled, “...But Americans are cool!”

Of course, the language was Korean.

Miss Rosemary (for the sake of a name that isn't even remotely Korean), stuttered and tore through the class of kids towards Sasha at speed. The frightened little girl feared the worst. She should have just kept her mouth shut and none of this would have occurred. God only knew what the consequences would be after this, the girl simply speaking up in protest, shocking and stunning everyone there.

There was a hush as the young kids frowned in bewilderment, and scolded Sasha. One day, these kids would most probably join their esteemed and respected (over here anyway, on home soil—fortunately, nowhere else) military, arse lick for many years until they were truly fed-up, when they would then be put against a wall and shot—either for a lack of enthused worship—or insurgency—or for perhaps just not laughing too heavily (or not heavily enough) at their Leader's jokes!

It was funny how the only person with a sense of humour in this neck of the woods seemed to be the Great Leader's hairdresser.

Miss Rosemary lashed out with her cane, rapping Sash across the back of her hands and making her scream in pain.

“I will report this, bank on it...” Rosemary spat, saliva spurting from her mouth like a viper, “...Now, go home and never return. I will report this, my girl. You will pay for your treason and insolence. The Great Leader has shed many tears and worked so hard to create our blossoming republic. You should be ashamed. Americans are not cool, as you say...they are our enemy, and would not think twice of destroying all of us—which is why we must destroy them first!”

“But, Miss...they want to be our friends. I love America!”

Miss Rosemary lashed out with the cane. This time it struck the girls face, the reverberation and pained scream stunning the entire class.

“Go, child...and never come back!” the teacher yelled, as Sasha upped and ran for the door, much to the derision of her classmates.

Sasha ran all the way home. She ran upstairs to her bedroom, knowing her parents were both at work and wouldn't be back until late that evening. Upon return, daddy would cook and they would eat. Daddy was a great chef, serving only the finest cuisine—or what he could afford (or steal).

Something resided under the floorboards in her bedroom. It was something she spoke to often, confided in, yet never actually observed fully, just heard and laughed at its 'squelches' and 'soggy feet and hands' against the wood.

“Miss Rosemary caned my face today, Soggy Bum...I hate that horrible school and never want to go back. I want to move to Israel with daddy and go to a proper school, like the one he attended...and then, just me, daddy and mummy, can move to America to live, where I can take singing and dance lessons, and meet my favourite rock stars and go to parties...I fancy Los Angeles or New York!”

She always called her friend Soggy Bum.

Two men dressed in black barged through the door. They grabbed the girl and grabbed a wooden chair, which they sat her on and tied her to with thick rope. One man extracted a Stanley knife from his coat pocket. They looked mean and scary, true horrors, both of them...they were members of the Government, these two, and at 9 years old Sasha had already gathered and realized these two thugs might be here to kill her, and begin with some torture. She was weeping profusely and started to beg the men to let her live and also that she was sorry. Convincing two idiots was difficult, though—two BRAINWASHED IDIOTS.

Sasha shook in the chair with violent dread.

As the two thugs laughed, she screamed, which only made them laugh more. The two fools relished seeing the girl suffer. It gave their official work a sense of purpose, since the forthcoming cruelty and brutality were the key ingredients that justified everything they were about to do. What they were about to do was carry out orders from superiors and those high-up in authority, carrying out the Top Dog's wishes despite this being just a child...No, but the acts they were about to commit would please the Great Leader, it summed up the Great Leader and his followers nicely, torturing the innocent.

The shorter of the two men leaned forward because he was prepared and ready to slash the girl's face with the blade. The blade he held to her flesh was almost touching...

“SOGGY BUM, HELP ME...Please, help me now, I need you...!” Sasha shouted through the tears and sobs, shuffling in the chair for freedom, “...Help me, Soggy Bum!”

Bewildered, the two men looked at each other.

One merely shrugged and said, “I don't know what she means!”

Then, it happened. The monster rose from the floor, tapered and strewn by ocean-junk and seaweed. The unattractive yet seemingly benevolent creature stood tall and mighty then made to move-in and seize each of the two intruders, before ripping their heads off. This left two ruined necks, as the remaining two severed stumps expelled awesome festooning sprays of bloods that arced from where their two heads once sat.

The abomination from the sea then moved forward and untied the ropes to free a weeping and disturbed Sasha.

She sobbed, “Thank you, Soggy Bum...” She looked around the room, surveying the blood and carnage, and added, “...What are we going to do about the mess?”

The creature spoke in Korean. “I'm very hungry. I will lick the place clean, as well as eat these two sacks of meat. Yes, I will do this before I disappear into the ether and return to where I belong. But you and your family must leave here. They will be back. Explain to your father when you see him and tell him everything, but I will be gone, I must move on...my work here is done!”

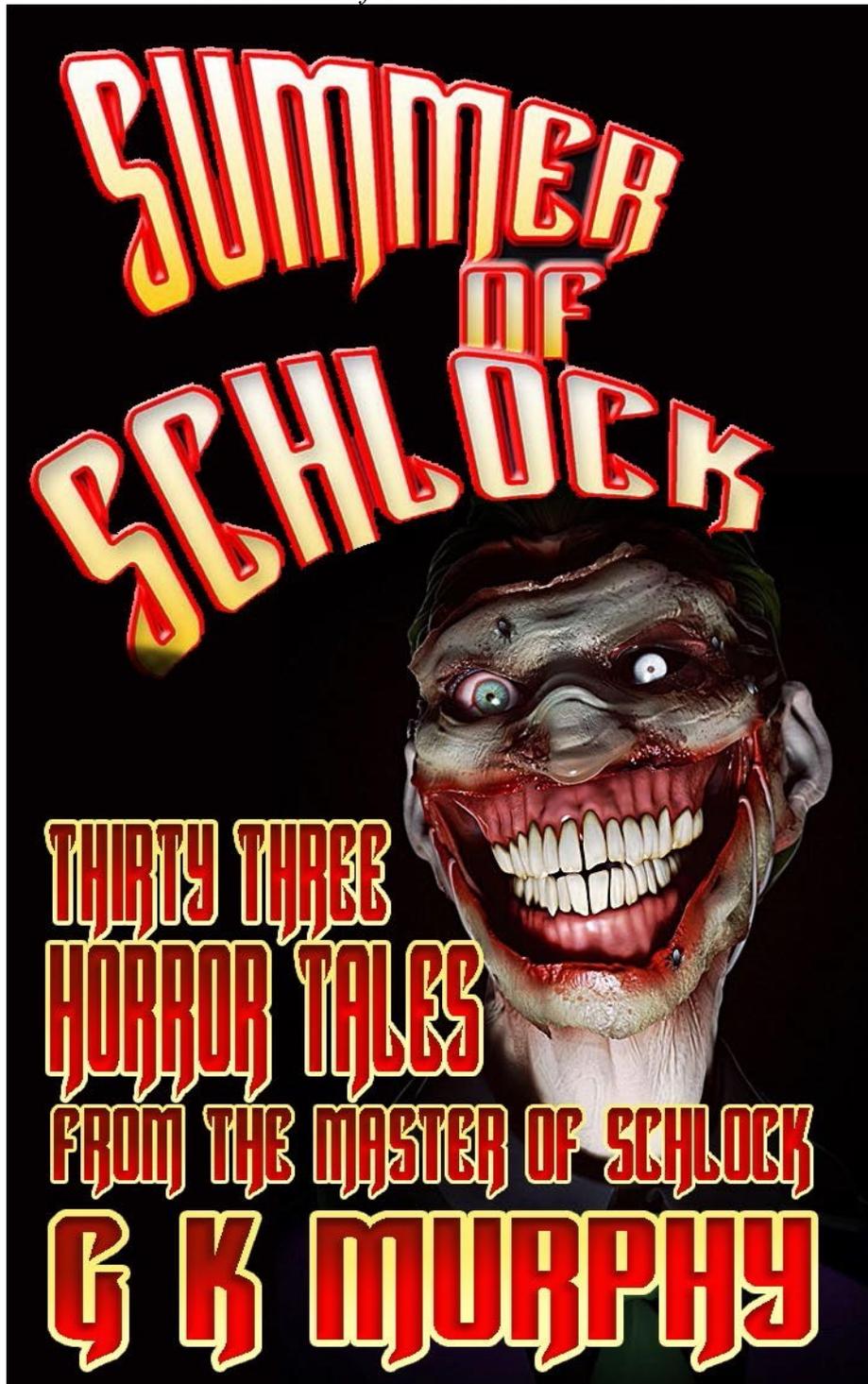
The girl seemed to understand immediately.

Sasha reached out and hugged the mammoth sea creature. “I’ll always remember this day,” she said, and departed the blood-filled room to go downstairs to await her parents’ return home from work. Deep down, she gleefully anticipated watching MTV tonight in the shed.

Perhaps Robbie and Justin were on the video playlist.

THE END

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A YOUNG CAPTAIN PLAYS IT SAFE by Steve Laker

It was homework which started this story: an assignment marked 'F', my initial; because I'd misplaced a decimal point and completely fluffed up a calculation. But it was that very decimal point which had landed me in detention, so I'd taken it with me, in a Petri dish liberated from the biology lab where I now sat again after school. The detention was planned, so that I could further my studies. I looked down at the little thing in the dish as I wondered what to do next. It was moving around, now more elongated, like a comma.

This being a school science classroom I was sitting in, I was surrounded by equipment and paraphernalia which might better allow me to understand what it was I'd caught, but for the occasional glance from Big John. Mr Fowle was our biology tutor and a fine man, both in profession and less regimented theatres. A man of science, but with a wider mind, he was admired by his pupils, and it was actually quite a privilege to be in detention with him, of all teachers.

For a moment, I thought about simply talking to John about this little thing I'd caught. He was a science teacher after all. But even though I viewed him as a friend, he remained a teacher and my thoughts on the scurrying comma were perhaps outside even his broad mind, as they grew whimsical. So I decided to write them down.

With my biology homework corrected with the removal the rogue decimal point, I thought I could use the duration of the detention to tackle some other homework: English Literature. I needed to turn in an open-form essay or fiction piece of 5-6000 words.

I had what could just possibly be a previously undiscovered organism secreted on my person: What on earth might I be carrying? Or might it not be of this earth? The possibilities began to multiply, and I realised I needed to have a focus for the rest of the story, if I was to remain within the word count. It turns out I fell asleep at around this point.

"Ford." That's me. "Mr Ford?"

"Yes, that's me."

"Yes, well done, lad. Off you go."

"Thank you, sir."

"What for? Keeping you in detention? I'd rather not be here. No, in future, Mr Ford, beware decimal points and other mathematical indicators. Exercise caution also, with grammar and punctuation. Because the difference, Mr Ford, can be that between life and death. Think, Mr Ford. Think, before you speak or act. Open your eyes, then you might be made a prefect. But you have to get to sixth form first."

'Captain, my captain' sprang to mind. I knew I should do well to heed his words.

Lewisham High Street is a long road. From school in New Cross, the road takes me past the station, with its bus depot, overground and DLR trains, then through the market and its fragrance which could only ever be labelled 'Lewisham', and into Catford. Sometimes I'll

walk the street and say hi to the Catford cat. Other times I'll cut through Mountsfield Park. This particular time, I took a different diversion.

With Big John's words in my head, I'd walked from school and thought about who I could speak to about this comma I'd found. I'd eliminated all the possibilities I could, but I was limited by means. It definitely moved of its own free will, so it was organic. But it was small. I hadn't even been able to discern if it had legs. When I moved my spectacles between my eyes and the Petri dish, the best magnification I'd managed seemed to show the little thing floating.

Having no pets, I'd rarely paid attention to the PDSA (People's Dispensary for Sick Animals) hospital in New Cross. I'd passed it many times and it had always just been there, of no use or interest to me at all. But I had an idea.

This being late in the day, there was no-one in the waiting room. I had to fill in a form at reception, which asked for my pet's type, breed, gender and name. I wasn't really comfortable with any living being called a 'pet', but I'd never had one, so I just scrubbed the word out in a rebellious 14-year-old schoolboy way, then wondered why I'd done it. For the other questions, I simply answered 'NA', on the grounds of, I didn't know what it was, so I hadn't named it when it might have its own name, and did it matter what sex it was (even if it knew)?

"Mr Ford?" That's me. "Mr Ford, and Nah?" I could see what she'd done there.

There's always a mate at school who has a really fit, young-looking mum. I had no such friends whom I was aware of, least of all their mums. In any case, a school satchel is just as useful as a towel for a teenage traveller to carry about their person, arranged upon the lap before standing up. The MILF vet was the same height as me, which is not very. She had strawberry blonde hair, tied back from black-rimmed glasses. She was very pretty. She looked at her clipboard as I rearranged things in my satchel and retrieved the Petri dish. "I'm Eve. Come with me, please." Rare will be the school boy a certain way inclined to not react to such words: A blush, snort, a guffaw, would perhaps be permissible in the circumstances, but a firm punch to my satchel contained mine.

Whichever way I looked at it, she was Eve: Forwards or backwards, her name was a palindrome. I followed Eve along a corridor and into a room, which wasn't surprising. If it had led into Narnia, it might have been. But inside was as surprising to me as it would probably be to anyone else who'd never set foot in a veterinary laboratory, consulting room, or whatever it was. Inside the room were the usual things I might have expected to find, if I'd been in one before: An examination table with an overhead lamp, a portable ultrasound machine and so on. But there was also what looked like a scanning electron microscope and a mainframe computer.

It seemed as normal to Eve to be looking at a little scurrying thing in a dish, as I assumed it would if I'd had or been a dog or cat. She put the container down on the examination table and positioned the lamp over it. The lamp doubled as a magnifier, with a circular fluorescent tube surrounding a lens, which Eve peered through. Then she said something quite unexpected:

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” It was unexpected, because I assumed that as a vet she’d seen most things.

“What is it?” I wondered.

“I don’t know. It’s certainly alive.” She continued to peer. “It’s moving, anyway. But I can’t see that it’s got any legs. Shall we take a closer look?” I assumed she meant the electron microscope. This was confirmed when she walked towards it.

“Yes please,” I said, perhaps a little too keenly placing myself next to her.

The electron microscope was more like some futuristic arcade game when it was switched on: A tiny camera operated by a joystick hovered around the Petri dish, now magnified so that we could clearly make out the shape and features of the little creature.

It was a metallic silver / black colour, and tubular, with rounded ends: Like a baguette. But not like a baguette at all, except in shape. But smooth, metallic and with a sort of translucent sheen. It was completely unlike a baguette. But as Eve panned in closer with the camera, we could see it was filled with something.

Running along both sides of the not baguette was a series of what looked like portholes, all blacked out and recessed into the side of the creature: Perhaps these were breathing holes. The creature had markings too: red stripes, running along the sides, just above the belly. All the time, it was moving, but not by any visible means. We’d discounted legs, but the thing didn’t contract and expand, nor undulate, but still it slowly floated around, just above the surface of the dish. And it didn’t seem to be moving blindly: It didn’t hit walls then adjust its course, it seemed to know where it was going. Whether it knew where it was was another unanswered question. But it seemed to be sentient, and its movement allowed us to deduce which end was the front.

Eve moved the camera to what we’d now identified as the front of the creature, where we’d expect to find a mouth and eyes. Seeing the creature several times magnified, I could hardly believe that this was the little speck which had landed on my homework. And when Eve stopped the camera at the front of the thing, it became even more startling.

Around the top of the front of the thing (its head, we were assuming), was an apparently illuminated crescent shape, like a visor. If this was the creature’s eye, I wondered what spectra it could see in. I had to assume that the blue/ green light was probably down to a chemical reaction, like that used by fireflies.

“This is absolutely fascinating,” Eve finally said. “Where did you say you found it?” Well actually, I hadn’t said where.

“It just appeared in my homework, on the page, like a comma.” I really wished I’d thought of something more dramatic.

“Was it any help with your homework?”

“No, I failed. But it made me resolve to look at things differently and check them over.” That was pretty much what Big John had said to me at school. “To always think, before speaking or acting.”

“That’s a lot to get from an out-of-place punctuation mark.” Which is true, but such a thing can completely change the meaning of something if it’s in the wrong place. So it’s worth checking. And here we were, checking, trying to find out what this particular comma was all about. Where did it come from? Where did it belong? What was its context? It wasn’t long before there were yet more questions.

Eve zoomed in on the creature’s crescent eye, so that the microscope camera was almost peering into the thing’s head, when in reality it was two centimetres away from something the size of a speck of dirt. The eye was semi-opaque, as though it was double-glazed, with a thin white mist between the layers; very much like the eye scales of a snake just before it sheds its skin, loosening the top layer from that underneath with a milky excretion.

“It looks like,” I began, “a snake’s eye just before a slough.” I resisted the urge to punch my satchel again.

“I was just thinking the same,” Eve said. Great minds think alike. “It’s like there’s a milky excretion here.” When you’re 14 years old, hearing an attractive lady say things like ‘milky excretion’ can cause one a moment in one’s own thoughts. “Let’s see if there’s anyone at home, shall we?” Was she proposing psychiatry?

Eve panned the camera in even closer, so that it was practically knocking on the front of the creature. If I wasn’t already writing a fiction assignment for English Literature, I definitely was from this point hence, because no-one would believe it to be real...

As Eve adjusted the focus on the microscope’s camera, we could make out what was behind the eyes of the creature. It wasn’t a creature at all; it was some sort of microscopic spacecraft. The visor was a screen, and behind the white mist was what would look like a bridge in any sci-fi film. There were three very comfortable-looking seats, like reclining easy chairs, facing what we now knew to be the window / screen. Around the perimeter of the bridge were various computer screens, displaying text and graphics we couldn’t make out. The hi-tech was juxtaposed though, by metal pipes, levers and analogue dials. Every now and then, one or more of the pipes would expel what looked like steam, like a steam train whistle. I wondered if we’d been able to hear what was going on, whether the pipes might be playing some sort of tune. I tried to imagine some retro-futuristic pipe organ, parping out a steam punk tune, like the five-tone greeting in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which this wasn’t yet.

Whatever this thing was, it could still be a man-made nano machine. If it was, then I probably shouldn’t know about it. Seeing as I did, I shouldn’t let on. The English Literature route was perfect for this recording of events.

Encounters with Unidentified Flying (or Floating) Objects have been categorised into five groups as close encounters of the first, second, third, fourth and fifth kind. When a person sees a UFO within 150 metres, it’s an encounter of the first kind. Given that we were about 150 micrometres away, we could tick that one off. When an encounter with a UFO in the sky or on the ground leaves evidence behind, such as scorch marks on the ground or indents etc.,

it's of the second kind. Given that ours hadn't stopped hovering just above the base of the dish, we hadn't had one of those yet. When an encounter is with visible occupants inside the UFO, it's of the third kind. Unless the aliens were invisible to us, we couldn't tick that one off. Which is a slight paradox, because if there were aliens but they weren't visible to us (through choice or otherwise), would that count? Anyway, assuming any extra-terrestrials wouldn't look like recliner chairs (unless they were disguised; another paradox), then we hadn't seen any that we were aware of. The fourth kind involves the person being taken and experimented on inside the alien craft. At that point, we wouldn't fit, on account of scale. The fifth kind involves direct communication between aliens and humans. This, I assumed to be impossible, even if there were aliens present. Yet somehow, we went straight from first base to third.

Somewhere among the mangles and parps of the pipes and levers, a door opened.

At this point, I should like to insert a note to Mrs Walker, my English tutor, and to Mr Harmer, my other English teacher: One is Language and the other is Literature, and together, they taught me a lot of what I know. So:

Dear Lois and John,

Among the many things you taught me, was to imagine a situation: A situation as complex and fun as I'd liked. Then you told me to mix it up more, to make it not incomprehensible but fantastical, whimsical, and perhaps odd. Finally, you taught me how to translate what I see into the simple medium of words alone, through prose; to make my writing not implausible but just about believable. I learned how to use plot devices and all sorts of other ways to manipulate words and the thoughts they convey, so that each carries a part of an image. You even inspired me to write my own literary statement in the form of a challenge:

Imagine you're in a room, with no visible means of exit: How do you escape? Well, you could stop imagining. Or you could use your imagination.

This is what happened next:

To use onomatopoeia, there was a 'whoosh' sound, as the door opened. Then a snake fell out and onto the bridge. As the doors opened, a snake was standing, with more than half its body lifted from the ground. Then it just fell in through the doors. It raised itself up again, then moved around on the bridge, bumping into a lever and clambering over a pipe. And then it sat in the central chair. Its head rested well below the headrest, its back extended down the back of the chair and along the seat, so that its tail end dangled over the edge. I remember my father's barber placing a wooden plank across a similar chair to prop me up for a haircut. And then the snake seemed to fall asleep.

I'm familiar with snakes in the wild and even though this one was microscopic, I had to rely on the limits of my personal knowledge. This one was a grey brown colour. Assuming the seat to be seat-sized, I put the snake at about four feet in length. Not knowing where it came from, nor its size if it were in my dimension, it could be any one of a number of snakes I knew about. It was only when the snake's mouth drooped open, as though it was snoring, that I was almost sure.

“It’s a fuc—flipping black mamba, Doctor!” I should have left it there. “You are a doctor, aren’t you?” What I meant was, ‘I really hope someone can tell me what’s going on here,’ and not, ‘Are you a fraud?’

“Yes, I am. My PhD was in human psychology, but I branched out into other kinds of people.” I must have looked confused for a second. “Animal people. So much easier to understand.” How did she know? “And yes, that is a fucking black mamba.”

“What’s it doing here though?”

“I don’t know. You found it.”

“Well, I did. But I didn’t mean to. It was accidental. It was what got me detention.”

“But isn’t it also what brought you here? Think differently, young man.” I was trying my best. Maybe I should just submit this English Literature assignment as a poem. ‘Snake in a baguette / Don’t know what it’s up to / Cos we haven’t spoken yet.’ Because it was about to get stranger still.

Another black mamba, kind of walked onto the bridge of the ship. The second one didn’t fall out of the door like the first. Instead, there was another ‘whoosh’ sound, and the second snake moved onto the bridge, with about half of its body raised from the floor, so that at full size, it would be about two feet tall. It then sat, in the same way the first snake had, on the seat to the latter’s left. But this second snake didn’t fall asleep. Instead, it started moving its jaws as it looked at the other snake next to it. I’m familiar with snakes adjusting and stretching their jaws prior to eating prey, but black mambas have never been known to practice cannibalism. In fact, if I’d been able to hear, I might go so far as to say the second snake might have been talking.

“Do you want to listen in?” Eve asked me. Of course I did. Could we? Should we?

“Erm,” I stammered, “yes, please.” The pleading was really unnecessary. “How though?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Well, I wasn’t going to say ‘no’, was I?

“Yes, what is it?”

“Well, if I tell you, it’ll no longer be a secret.” Was that a threat?

“You kind of have, Doctor,” I reminded her. The Doctor smiled, which was reassuring, I think. It was one of those double-meaning smiles, like a newsreader at the end of a report they’re not sure how they should react to.

“Call me Eve. Well, it would be our secret then, Mr Ford.” I wondered if I should ask her to call me by my first name, but she hadn’t asked what it was.

“So, how can we listen to the snakes? But more importantly, how the fuc... flipping hell did a black mamba get that small, and in what looks like a space ship?”

“If we can speak to them, we might be able to find out.”

“Yes, but how doctor?”

“This,” she said, then stood up. She walked to the computer in the corner and pressed some keys, then fished something from a drawer and returned, trailing an electric cable behind her. She sat back next to me and plugged the cable into the electron microscope. “This,” she said again, “is something I’ve been working on, on the side.”

“What is it?”

“Well, it’s at an early stage: Experimental. I don’t know if it’ll ever have a practical application, least of all one I might be willing to use.”

“Why so?”

“Because it’s a prototype for a universal translation device. I’ve called it the Babel fish.”

“And it works?”

“Generally speaking. It needs a lot of tweaking for individual species, but as a concept, it somehow seems to work. If you look at the microscope’s camera,” which I did, “you’ll see there’s a tiny microphone attached.” She pointed, and there was. “So, theoretically, with this plugged into the computer and with the Babel fish program running, the microphone should pick up what the snake, or alien, is saying, and translate it for us.”

“What about talking back?” I Wondered.

“It’s not something I’d ever planned to do, but it does work both ways. So if we speak, the microphone will pick us up. And then how it works becomes a bit confusing.

“Why?”

“Because with the few animals I’ve listened to, they’ve always had voices which reflected their personalities, of course. But also, which bely their physiology.”

“How do you mean?”

“A mouse, for instance, sounds squeaky. I’ve never deliberately spoken back, but when I first heard that, I giggled at the stereotype being confirmed, and the mouse must have heard me. It looked startled. And I imagined that if I’d heard a smaller thing as higher pitched, perhaps the mouse heard bigger me as a really deep voice. But I don’t know how the Babel fish actually does that. It’s kind of a paradox, like never really knowing what your own voice sounds like.”

“Nor, by extension,” I offered, “does anyone truly know what they look like.”

“Eh?”

“Because we only ever see ourselves in mirror image, or in photographs. It is impossible for us to view ourselves directly. Ergo, as we really are, and are seen by other people.”

“That’s pretty deep, Mr Ford.”

“Yes, sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. Like I said, think differently. So, back to the snakes?” I’d momentarily forgotten, in the presence of an attractive woman old enough to be someone my age’s mum, about two potential extra-terrestrial snakes in a microscopic spacecraft, under the microscope.

Eve flicked a switch, then a sound came from some speakers on the computer. It was a high-pitched rasping sound, almost a shrill whistle. As Eve adjusted some controls, the shrieks became a voice:

“Wake up.” By the way the mouth was moving, this was the second snake speaking to the first, who was still asleep. “Wake up,” it said again. “We’re here.”

“What!?” The first snake now woke with a start. “What? Where?”

“Here,” said the second snake. “Here, wherever you programmed the ship to come to. Well, we’re there.”

“Are we?” The first snake adjusted himself in his chair, peering forward at the screen, and our camera. “What’s that?” I assumed he was talking about the camera.

“I don’t know. I thought you would.”

“Why would I?”

“Because these are the co-ordinates you programmed into the ship.”

“But that’s not supposed to be here.”

“Well, what were you expecting?”

“This is supposed to be a quiet country spot. There should be humans around.”

“But you said yourself, it’s a quiet country spot. If it’s secluded, might there actually not be people there?”

“Well, I suppose. But I was hoping for a little village or something. You know, where there’d just be one or two people around. Not that thing.” He gestured with his snout at the screen.

“Do you think we should speak now?” I said.

“What the fuck was that!?” I heard a sharp, whistling rasp: The alien snake had heard me.

“I think he heard you just fine,” Eve confirmed.

“What!? Who is that?” hissed the snake. Eve switched off the Babel fish.

“So?” she wondered. So did I.

“I don’t know, Doctor. They can hear us. Are we not breaking all sorts of rules?”

“Probably.” That was very carefree. “But it looks like they’ve made a mistake. If they didn’t mean to be here, shouldn’t we help them out?”

“Well,” I thought, “maybe. But without knowing we’re here. I guess it’s too late for that.”

“I’d say so. So the least we can do is help them. We’ll say no more and perhaps they don’t either. That part we’ll have to trust to faith. Whatever else we pick up in any conversation will just remain our secret.”

“Well, I was going to write about it. But for an English Literature assignment. Fiction.”

“Perfect. Just so long as no-one believes you. Shall we get back to the snakes?” Eve switched the Babel fish on again. The snakes were still talking:

“So why did you only want to see one or two humans?”

“Because then we could’ve just buzzed them, you know?”

“No?”

“You know, float menacingly in front of them in the sky. Make the ship do some hoots and parps, flash a few lights. Then just fuck off.”

“Why?”

“Well, who’s going to believe them? One or two people, in a secluded place. The only ones to witness a UFO. Everyone would think they were cranks. It’s the best way to study them, so they don’t take us too seriously.”

“They’re joyriding,” I said.

“Who is that?” said one of the snakes.

“Well it’s not God,” said another. “We’ve pretty much discounted him if that’s a universal translation device we’re hearing. We’re disobeying the lessons from The Tower of Babel, where God allegedly knocked it down, because he didn’t want people understanding all languages. With language barriers in place as a defence mechanism, God was maintaining the rules of confusion and misunderstanding though...”

“Well, that’s what our books say. But what’s that voice?”

“What?” Eve asked.

“And that one?” hissed the snake.

“I’ve read about it,” I said. “Aliens, they go around looking for secluded places on Earth, where they can put on a display for a few people.”

“But why?”

“Well,” I continued, “as this snake here said, just to spook people. But not too many. A bit of fun, showing off. But I always thought it could be something more. I mean, if they were appearing to a lot of people, that could cause all sorts of problems. By keeping it within a select group, only a few people will take the story of the whole thing seriously. It’s a containment mechanism. Like the Babel fish, I suppose. I mean, if universal translation was suddenly freely available to everyone, that would cause all sorts of trouble. And that’s why I’ll keep this secret, so as not to spoil things. So my theory on so-called joyriders is that what we see is only a part of something greater, which we may not yet understand.”

“That is both very liberal and deep, Mr Ford.” This wasn’t Eve’s voice. This was the rasping whistle from the Babel fish. I turned to look at the screen, directly at the first snake.

“Thank you,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say.

“You are an interesting specimen, Mr Ford. You may benefit your species yet.” Which was kind of what John Fowle had said. The truth behind this story may be something discussed with school prefect peers, in a secret society, such as that of The Dead Poets. To anyone outside, the forbidden knowledge was just a work of fiction.

“Captain,” I said, that just seeming to be the most appropriate way to address him.

“Human,” he replied. Which threw up many questions. He referred to me by my name when he first addressed me. Then when I addressed him as ‘captain’, he called me ‘human’. Did this impart an assumed rank? Scholars might ponder over this in years to come if it wasn’t written as a work of fiction. The captain continued: “We are here by accident, as I believe you have gathered. I think we made a mistake with a decimal point in our co-ordinates.”

“Are you aware of your size though?” I couldn’t think of any other way to point out that might be the error.

“My what?” I may have touched a nerve.

“Well, we’re looking at you through an electron microscope.”

“Is that what it is? We thought that was a telescope.”

“I think there’s been a miscalculation of scales.”

“I think you may be right, Mr Ford. A decimal point would seem to have caused me all these problems. Thank you for pointing it out.”

“I’m sure you’d have worked it out.”

“Not without the benefit of your perspective. Can we agree that it might be wise to keep this between ourselves?”

“We’d kind of agreed that already between ourselves, captain.” I looked at Eve, who was smiling at some inner news.

“You won’t tell my father?”

“I wouldn’t know who your father is.”

“Good. Mum’s the word then.” Eh? Mum: Mother who? Mother Earth? More speculation for later English Literature assignments.

“Keep learning, Mr Ford. For then you will truly learn.” From a snake, it didn’t seem so strange, when the snake was some sort of alien life form I couldn’t previously imagine, but never now dismiss.

“So what now?”

“Now, we go home.” Which really summed things up nicely.

And we speak no more of it, except with those in a secret club who know the truth. The Captain Mamba Society? It was a great beginning to end a story with. But I had a few things to attend to first.

“How do we get you home?”

“Just let us go, out of this thing you’ve got us in.”

“You’re free to fly away.”

“Well, we need a bit of a push, see? When we launched, we had a thing which shot us off at speed.”

“And that’s back where you came from?”

“No, it’s the engine of the ship. We need a bit of a launch assist, seeing as we miscalculated our size a bit.”

“So how?”

“At your size, just a good push should get us going.”

“Yes, but what do I push?”

“Do you have windows here?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Well, what’s outside?”

“Er, outside?”

“Well done. Well, that’s where we want to go. And how do we get there?”

“Through the window?”

“Well done. Think one step beyond, Mr Ford.”

“You literally, want me to throw you out of the window?”

“Unless you have a better idea?” Thinking outside, inside, and all around, I didn’t. I had to let this moment go.

So it was Eve in fact, perhaps sensing my newfound attachment, who picked up that Petri dish, opened the window, and threw Captain Mamba, his crew mate and their ship, out into the world to make their own way home.

“Do you think,” I wondered to Eve, “they’ll make the return journey?” That was a very loaded question, and one which begged for a greater word allowance on an English Literature assignment. “There are so many possibilities.”

“You’re the space cadet, Mr Ford. I’m sure you’ll make of it all what you will. Keep what you know between the friends you trust. Don’t abuse it for personal gain. You have a responsibility. I think you’ll make a fine prefect.” So, a girl called Eve had advised me to guard the words which the serpent had given us. That would make quite a good story.

I had the remainder of Lewisham to traverse before I got home. By now, it was dark. I walked beneath the street lamps and the Catford cat, as the park was closed. I’d write up my notes before school the next day. If what I’d written was judged to be a good fiction piece, then perhaps the misplaced comma which had caused me failure before, might get me recognition in a field besides biology.

“You’re late, Dixon.” It was my dad, tuned into my frequency.

“Yeah, sorry dad. I got talking after detention.”

“Well, I won’t ask who to. That would shatter my illusion that you might have done something amazing.” He’d told me I had it in me, and now I couldn’t tell him. “One day,” dad continued, “you’ll be really late, Dixon.”

“What?”

“Late, as in the late Dixon Ford. Well, when you are, try to remember.”

“Captain, my captain.”

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QUIJA.ASK by Mathias Jansson

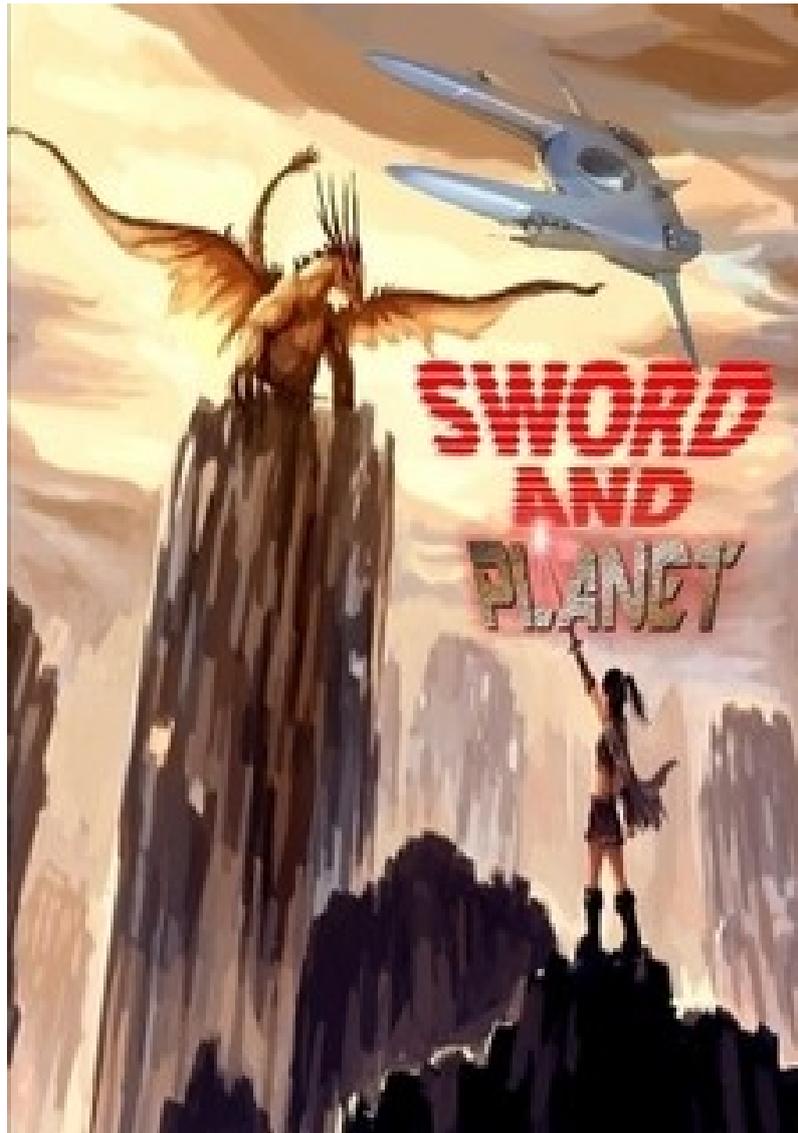
It was a stormy night
when he, restless, surfed the net
he found this homepage
Quija.ask with a virtual board

Only for fun he wrote
-Where are you?
“Outside”, the screen slowly spelled
-Who are you?
“At your door.”
This is not funny he thought
“In your house,” he read on the screen
-Wait is this a joke or what?

Suddenly the mouse on his desk
started to move by itself
the pointer on the screen
pulling towards
the left corner of the desktop
opening the start menu
clicking on Shut down
and in the dark he could hear
the voice whispering
-Behind you...

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THE HETTFORD WITCH HUNT by Oafish J Rhodes

Episode One: The Magical Fruit.

01.

The curtains flung open and the bright summer sun pervaded the room with an intensity that bordered on hostility. At the end of the bed, Gary's eyes looking down on Shelley, who somehow had the audacity to be asleep. Her elfin face scrunched up as if to emphasise the tiny quality of her nose. She snored gently, like a kitten in a basket or perhaps a friendly lynx. There was a definite feline quality to the snoring; that much Gary was sure of. How he was going to wake her up was a different story. He shook her foot violently. It seemed like the least inappropriate way to wake her up.

"Shelley, Shelley," he whispered.

Shelley pulled the blankets tight around her bony shoulders and retracted her body in to a little ball, making a long and alluring sound that was almost entirely comprised of the consonant M.

"Shelley."

This time Gary spoke at a normal volume, loud enough for her to hear. Even though he had been sleeping in the same bed as her (in the purely platonic sense), Gary was still not comfortable with how little Shelley actually wore to bed and he was loath to pull the sheets off her, just in case, though the possibility of nakedness seemed more erotic to him than it usually would.

"Shelley!"

That one did it. Shelley sat up against the headboard and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Her brown hair was ruffled fell in strands over her brow. She was wearing a T-shirt that Gary could remember his ex buying him. One he never wore because it brought back too many memories.

"Morning Gary," said Shelley.

"What is that woman, doing in the kitchen?"

Gary's voice was filled with the sort of outrage that knew it was justified and at the same time was cautious not to be overheard.

"Which woman?" Shelley asked.

"Bloody Alison, which woman do you think."

Gary paused as if the weight of his words carried a tremendous significance that ought to be plain and apparent.

"I invited her," said Shelley.

Gary's physicality rippled with an explosion of suppressed squirming.

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"She's my cousin," said Shelley.

"She's my bloody ex."

"Well that's part of the reason I invited her, she dumped you because she thought you lived in a fantasy land. I've seen that you don't, I thought it would be good for her to see that."

Shelley stretched up her left arm bending her palm backwards and scrunching up her face. She was wearing a large t-shirt with a picture of a video game character in a green elf costume on it.

"Why?"

"So you either get back together or don't, you keep talking about her in your sleep you know?"

"How would I know what I talk about in my sleep?"

"You say it. What time is it?"

"Nineish," said Gary, "you're not going out, are you?"

"There's a case Milton wanted me to talk to you about but you were at work so I didn't and when you got back I was asleep and I'd already invited Alison. I'm pretty surprised she made the drive to be honest.

Gary thinned his lips in contemplation.

"She must be having difficulties with Neville," he told her.

"You hope! Anyway, you'll have to keep her busy whilst I tell the boys about the situation. They're not expecting her."

"It would probably sound better coming from me," Gary suggested.

Shelley leant forward in the bed and gave him a broad smile.

"Sure, you can talk about her in your sleep but you can't talk to her now that she's here."

Gary shrugged.

"Please don't be long," he said.

02.

The bright morning sun lit through a crack in the curtains of the kitchen of Milton's house and reflected off a small puddle of spilled milk that sat on the counter top. Gary was tapping his foot and staring at the kettle as it were a time bomb ticking out its last few seconds before explosion.

"Remind me," said Gary, "is it one sugar or two?"

Alison had an expression of tiredness that came from the long car journey she had just completed.

"It is no sugars, as it has always been no sugars, it always will be no sugars."

"Technically, there is sugar in the milk," Gary told her.

Alison yawned and adjusted the button on her blouse sleeve.

"I see your small talk hasn't improved," she said.

Gary's eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. What on God's green Earth was taking Shelley so long? How could anyone take this long just to go to Milton's house and back. Looking at the clock Gary was forced to concede that it had only been a few minutes and that it only felt like a cold awkward eternal hell.

Gary put a mug of tea with no sugar in front of Alison.

"Can I make you a sandwich, BLT?"

"Do you have the ingredients?"

"No, I was hoping you'd decline to be honest."

Alison smiled.

"Could you do me a fried egg?"

Gary noisily fished a saucepan from the bottom of the cupboard, it was an old one that the Teflon coating had long since burned off.

"How's Neville?"

Gary did his best to make his voice sound airy and disinterested, however it let him down and cracked for one syllable in the middle of the sentence.

"We broke up."

Gary paused for a second and tried his best to compose his face into an expression entirely contrary to the emotion he was feeling.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gary let a deep graveness hang in his voice, “what happened?”

Alison raised her eyebrow.

“Honestly, don’t be sorry.”

“That bad?”

“You remember that latex allergy?”

“Yes?”

“Well, he was hospitalised by it while trying to shag a prostitute.”

“Ha,” said Gary, “Sorry.”

“It’s OK, he was a rebound anyway.”

“Like me and my unlubricated hand.”

Gary flipped the fried egg in the pan. The toast popped out of the toaster as if to provide a percussive to his self-effacing joke.

“Except less violent,” added Alison.

“I’m glad Shelley invited you, it’s nice to see you again,” said Gary.

“And you,” said Alison, “I’ve missed you.”

03.

Dan spat orange juice out of his nose and onto the table. The action caused him to laugh even harder than he had been.

“You invited...”

Dan could not finish the sentence, so wild was the gale force of his mirth. Milton was rushing to the sink to get a damp cloth to wipe the mess up with but even he seemed to be biting back a look of amusement.

Carrie was wide eyed, her smile patiently waiting for Dan to be quiet enough for her to get a word into the conversation.

“This should make for an interesting day,” Carrie said.

Poor Shelley looked bewildered, she had been expecting a strong reaction from the members of the Hettford Witch Hunt but she was expecting something a little less dramatic than this one.

“Are you worried that she’s a witch?” Shelley asked.

Dan clutched his sides and his substantial form slid from the chair, eyes streaming tears on to his green army surplus jumper.

“Alison,” was the only intelligible sound that Dan could make.

Shelley’s eyes looked imploringly up at Milton.

“What’s going on?” She asked him.

“Hang on,” said Milton, “let Dan find his feet.”

“Do you know where we’re going today?” Carrie asked.

“Milton said there was signs of witchcraft,” said Shelley.

“Yes, but did he say where?”

“I didn’t,” said Milton, “this one is probably on me, still I wasn’t expecting you to invite Alison.”

Dan was still intermittently giggling as he rearranged himself at the table and tucked directly into his cornflakes.

“We’re going to Shakespeare’s Sister’s house,” said Dan.

“Who?” Shelley asked.

“Julie Fuller,” said Milton, “you may have heard Alison talk about her.”

“It’s not ringing a bell,” said Shelley.

“She,” Dan stifled a guffaw just for a second, “she’s the one who sucked him off.”

Dan took several loud gasping inhalations.

“She’s the girl Gary cheated on Alison with,” Carrie said calmly.

“Oh,” said Shelley.

“My fault,” said Milton.

“We’ll just have to tell her it’s cancelled,” said Carrie.

“She’s driven all the way down from Sheffield.”

“She should definitely tag along,” said Dan.

“There you go,” said Milton, “If Dan thinks it’s a good idea, we definitely shouldn’t bring her.”

Shelley looked to each of the three group members.

“I honestly think it’ll be fine,” she said.

04.

The stone cladding of the terraced house was cracked and the white paint was partially stained with what looked like blotches of yellow paint but had no good reason to be.

All four official members of The Hettford Hunt, Shelley and her cousin Alison stood outside of the house. Alison’s arms were folded, Gary’s face was purple with stress. Here was an opportunity to convince Alison that his chosen occupation wasn’t the waste of time that she had always told him it was. There was also the opportunity for the whole thing to go completely tits up. Why, he wondered, hadn’t anyone thought to mention to him that it was at Julie’s house? He would never have brought Alison to Julie’s house and yet there they both were.

Gary hurled an accusatory glare at Milton. Milton raised his eyebrows and mouthed the word, “sorry.”

Gary shook his head and muttered a swear word under his breath.

“What’s going on?” Alison asked.

“It’s Julie’s house,” Gary told her, “Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’ll be fine,” said Alison, “It’s not like we’re a couple anymore.”

“No,” said Gary.

Dan was already knocking on the door.

05.

Dan lifted his stomach to rest it on the sideboard, next to his small leather satchel. Milton shot him a reproachful sideways glance.

“What? It’s tiny in here.”

The small kitchen of Julie’s terrace was very small, much too small to accommodate the seven people who were stood in it.

“I don’t see you making room,” said Dan.

“I wasn’t expecting so many of you,” said Julie.

Julie’s voice was soft and unsure. She was dressed entirely in black, with the exception of her t-shirt that showed garish white skull surrounded by roses and a diamond pattern viper. The majority of the skull and any additional detail that might have provided context for it were obscured by a thick cardigan that had holes at the bottom of the sleeves. Julie’s thumbs stuck out through the holes. Below that, tight black leggings that emphasised full hips hidden under a purple mini skirt. Julie’s blue hair was just about visible through the black snood that she wore over her head.

“Have you found God?” Alison asked.

Alison made a gesture to the head wear that Julie was wearing.

“No,” said Julie.

Alison cast her eyes down to Julie’s legs.

“No, I don’t suppose you have,” said Alison.

“Tell us what the phenomena is,” Milton butted in quickly.

“It’s my fruit bowl,” said Julie, “It’s gone all Sixth Sense.”

Everyone stopped and looked at Julie as if she was mad.

“Witchcraft doesn’t generally have much of an impact on the storage of fruit,” Gary explained slowly.

Julie walked to the sideboard and after dislodging Dan, opened her cupboard and took out a large full bag of Seville oranges. She offered one to Dan.

“Here, take one,” she said.

Dan took one and immediately dug his fingernail into the skin.

“Don’t peel it,” said Julie.

She then distributed all the rest of the oranges to everyone else in the group. When each person in the room was holding an orange Julie put the rest back in the cupboard.

“Now,” Julie said, “put them in the fruit bowl.”

First Milton, then Dan, then Carrie, then Gary and Shelley put their oranges in the bowl. Alison put hers on the sideboard.

“I’ll pass,” she said.

Before giving the instruction, Julie had moved to the back of the kitchen as far away from the fruit bowl as possible.

“OK,” said Julie, “Everyone look at me for a second.

Everyone looked at Julie.

“Now, take your fruit back out of the bowl.”

They all turned their heads to look at the fruit bowl which was now completely empty of Seville oranges.

“Bloody stage magic,” said Dan.

“That’s not it,” said Julie, “follow me.”

The crew of friends all traipsed after Julie as she walked them back out to her driveway. As they stood on the cracked crazy paving that lead over the dirt to her doorway, six oranges appeared from thin air and hurled themselves with force directly into the faces of Dan, Milton, Carrie, Shelley and Gary.

“OK,” said Dan holding his bruised nose, “It’s bloody good stage magic.”

06.

Milton closed the front door, leaving it open just a crack, whilst the rest of the group went inside to look for further signs of witchcraft.

“How’s your nose?” asked Milton.

“Better than Carrie’s eye,” Dan told her.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?”

“Not exactly like it. I mean, I’ve seen oranges before obviously. Just not appearing in mid-air to direct themselves at my face. I bet Alison is feeling pretty smug.”

“I bet,” said Milton, “what equipment did you bring?”

“Everything but milk,” said Dan.

“Maybe Julie has some in the fridge.”

Dan was looking around the garden, checking under plants in the narrow, untended flowerbeds.

“I don’t think slugs will be causing this,” said Milton.

“I’m not looking for slugs,” said Dan.

“What then, spiders?”

“I’m looking for unusual herbs, meadowsweet, sage, rosemary.”

“Are you planning to cook with them or compose a folk song?” Milton asked.

“I’m trying to rule out Julie as a source of the strange happenings. You know witches and herbs.”

“They’re worse than Jamie Oliver.”

“Nobody is worse than Jamie Oliver,” said Dan, “nobody.”

“You find anything?”

Dan stood up, his nose was comically swollen from the impact of the orange. Milton had been lucky enough to catch his orange on the side of the cheek.

“There’s a witch in the village,” said Dan. “That’s why I brought my pricking needle.”

“There are two witches in the village,” said Milton, “and neither of them are alive enough for a pricking needle to work on.”

“There might be a third a more recent one.”

“And so what, you’re just going to start stabbing people’s moles and freckles on the off chance one of them doesn’t bleed. We can’t be doing with any more witches.”

“Right, but we’re fine with being arrested for serious assault?”

“You can’t make a witch pyre without pricking a few witches,” Dan’s voice rang pompously.

“So your thinking is: One, we find the witch by randomly stabbing people with a needle. How is that more effective than the established method of weighing them? I mean just in terms of consent...”

“Not randomly, only in their blemishes.”

“Then, should one of them not bleed, you think we should stick them on a big fire and burn them?” Milton asked.

“Well, I think we should give them a chance to confess and rescind their evil ways. We’re not monsters.”

“And then we burn them alive?”

“No, that would be barbaric. First, we hang them, then we burn their corpses. We’re not European for pity’s sake.”

“Dan, you know...”

Milton stopped himself, he had known Dan long enough to recognise when lengthy and pointless debate was on the horizon.

“Right,” said Milton, “Shall we focus on finding out what’s actually going on first?”

“Reg’s pigs were all in season at the Discount News ran out of tampons. That’s what’s going on. All the women synchronising means there’s a new witch in the area.”

“I meant at the house,” Milton confirmed, “this house, with the oranges.”

“I’m pretty sure they’re all related.”

“What? Oranges?” Milton asked.

“I meant the events.”

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves Dan. Come on, the others will be waiting for us.”

“They probably are though, now that I think about it,” said Dan.

“What are?” Milton asked him.

“Oranges, they probably are all related.”

“Well then, they’re ideally suited to live in Hettford.”

07.

Shelley sat with her head backwards, a paper towel pinched around her nose. Carrie held a bag of frozen peas to her eye, whilst Gary helped Julie make tea for everybody. Gary was doing most of the work as Julie was continuously wiping her eyes and apologising.

“Don’t use all the milk,” said Dan.

“Why not?” asked Gary.

“Triangulation, it might go sour.”

“If it were going to, it would have already,” Gary told him.

“Hmm,” said Dan, “That would mean no witches, I don’t buy it.”

Milton and Gary shared a knowing look.

“I’m so sorry,” said Julie, “it’s not normally that violent. I was hit by an entire grocery shop’s worth and...”

“It’s OK,” said Milton, “these things are erratic.”

“Anything else unusual?” Carrie asked, “Weird puddles or smells.”

“The lights flicker a lot, but I live in a pretty shit house and I can’t afford an electrician.”

“The strange case of the disappearing fruit,” said Alison to no-one in particular.

“Gary, any suggestions?” Shelley asked.

“Maintain constant pressure,” Gary told her.

“I meant about the fruit.”

“Yes, don’t put any more in the bowl,” was Gary’s simple solution.

“She means, how should we investigate?” Carrie said, “Can I suggest we break off in to groups.”

“Like in the Funky Phantom?” Gary asked.

“Or Captain Caveman,” suggested Milton.

“Or the axis of World War Two,” said Dan.

“Something like that,” said Carrie, “we’re taking the upstairs.”

Carrie motioned to herself and Julie.

“See if you can find anything in the kitchen or lounge, be on the lookout for small puddles,” said Carrie.

“What’s with the puddles?” Dan asked.

“Just a theory I have,” said Carrie.

“Dan and I will check the garden,” Milton said.

Gary looked from side to side to see whose team he was on. He hoped neither of them noticed him gulp.

08.

The sound of the front door closing made Gary to an aware that any allies he might have had in the inevitable conversation had now left him.

“Julie’s house Gary? I told you to feel free to pursue her,” said Alison.

“I really didn’t know.” said Gary, “I didn’t know you were coming at all.”

“I didn’t know either,” said Shelley, “I have to say, she’s not what I was expecting.”

“You think you were surprised,” said Alison.

The two girls laughed loudly. Gary tried for a few seconds to formulate an answer that Alison could pitch back at him. When the attempt failed, he began to open cupboards in a futile effort not to engage in the conversation.

09.

Julie’s house had only one bedroom and a bathroom. Carrie cast a cursory glance over the bathroom. It was clean and neatly tiled. It smelled strongly of patchouli oil.

“Nice,” said Carrie.

“I tiled it myself,” said Julie.

“I think we’d better check the bedroom first,” said Carrie.

The bedroom was as neat as the bathroom, the walls had been plastered with band posters and pre-Raphaelite art. The posters had been plastered at angles but it was obvious even to the casual observer that they had not been tacked up but rather pasted. And, pasted so that no air bubbles were trapped beneath.

There was a small bookcase and a bulky round screen TV that was attached to an old Sega Dreamcast.

“I’m loving this set up,” said Carrie, “retro.”

“I don’t play much,” said Julie, “I prefer books.”

“Are you OK?”

Julie sat down on the bed.

“I am too sick to work, I live on my own, there is something weird going on with my kitchen and Gary came along with Alison. I don’t know how many times I have to get rejected by him before I give up hope. I mean, I wasn’t expecting anything today but I wasn’t expecting her.”

“To be fair to Gary, neither was he. It was Shelley’s doing.”

“I don’t trust her,” said Julie.

“I know what you mean.”

Carrie smiled sympathetically.

“It’s not that she’s a bad person,” said Carrie, “but you can’t trust anyone quite that insecure.”

Julie returned the smile.

“You might not want to trust me then,” said Julie.

“You’re beautiful, I don’t know what goes on in Gary’s mind sometimes.”

“Thanks, it doesn’t matter, he made his choice and I’m OK with that. I should probably expand my horizons outside of Hettford.”

Carrie nodded emphatically.

“You should definitely, for your career’s sake if nothing else,” Carrie told her.

“I haven’t got much in the way of career paths.”

“Not here you don’t.”

Julie lifted her arms and pulled back her snood, the skin around her neck was bloated and dark coloured. One small black lesion sat on the centre right side of her neck.

“I also have scrofula.”

Carrie shook her head slowly.

“Fucking Hettford,” she muttered.

“It’s supposed to clear up with antibiotics but it isn’t.”

Carrie had no answer.

“Well I think the least we can do is fix your fruit-bowl problem.”

Julie pulled her snood back up and quietly nodded.

“Before you ask, I’ve tried it with a different bowl, it happens when you leave anything smaller than the fruit bowl there.”

Carrie put her arm on Julie’s shoulder.

“I’m not sure what’s causing it but I can definitely make it stop.”

“It’s the cause that worries me the most,” said Julie, “what if it’s a curse or something.”

“It’s the or something that worries me,” said Carrie, “but we’ll get to the bottom of it. Even if it takes a few days.”

10.

Dan was down on his hands and knees inspecting the soil. Milton was trying not to notice how ridiculously hairy the crack of his arse was as his pants sagged to a cavernous opening.

“I thought you’d already checked for suspicious herbs,” said Milton.

“I have, I’m checking loose soil. You never know, someone might have hidden a fetish, charm or hex bag somewhere in the garden.”

“Who would want to curse Julie?” Milton asked.

“Besides Alison or Gary? Shelley perhaps, she’s definitely get attached to our apprentice.”

“We made him a full member ages ago,” Milton corrected.

“That doesn’t stop him being our apprentice. And since when did Carrie get to make decisions about who splits off with whom.”

“Since neither of us had the social skill to manage any awkward situation,” said Milton.

“The threat of witchcraft outweighs any social embarrassment.”

“Carrie is with the only person who we haven’t previously weighed and accepted as a member and Carrie can handled herself.”

“We’ve never weighed Alison.”

“True, but if she was the sort of person that was likely to pursue witchcraft I don’t think she’d have moved to Sheffield.”

Dan stood and waved his arms dramatically.

“And yet here we are Milton, he we are.”

“I’m not convinced this is witchcraft. It doesn’t match anything in Karswell or Der Hexenhammer.”

“What then?”

“I don’t know, it could be fairies.”

Dan’s face flushed, not the sort of light flush of a man with terminally high blood pressure but the dark angry flush of a man with terminally high blood pressure that had, after returning from a long day of white hot hostage negotiation (at which he had failed; allowing several small children to die) discovered that his next door neighbour was upstairs sodomising his prize winning schnauzer.

“Fairies!” Dan exploded.

“It’s just a theory.”

“Well, how’s this for a theory? Double U chuffing ‘itches.”

“No need to swear Dan,” said Milton.

Dan’s mouth was still hanging agog in total disbelief.

“Fairies,” Dan repeated.

“Come on,” said Milton, “There has to be something we can think of. What do you know about spirit wells?”

With the mention of serious occult matters, Dan regained his focus.

“I know they mean trouble and I know they aren’t going to get you off suggesting fairies.”

“Spirit wells, ethereal locations, shifting planes... Come on Dan let my faux pas pass and help me out.”

“Alright, said Dan. I have a copy of Karswell in my bag.”

11.

Gary had taken out every tin from Julie’s cupboard and was now looking through her collection of spices. Shelley was looking underneath the kitchen units to see if there were any unexplained puddles. Alison was sat on the chair.

“I have to say,” said Alison, “I am starting to be somewhat sold on the idea that there are forces beyond our understanding in the world.”

“There really are,” said Shelley.

For someone who was lying on a cold kitchen floor, Shelley’s voice carried a surprising amount of enthusiasm.

“I suppose all the hundreds of times I told you didn’t count?” Gary asked.

“They really didn’t,” said Alison.

“It’s a wonder that Gary didn’t show you his work before, he’s doing some really amazing things,” said Shelley.

“I think the real wonder is,” said Alison “What did you ever see in Julie?”

Gary winced, it was becoming his default reaction to all stimuli. He had been willing to put up with the grief about Julie when he was actually in a relationship with Alison but now...

“How many times do I have to apologise for this?” Gary asked.

“None,” said Alison, “just answer the question.”

“She’s smart,” said Gary, “even if she doesn’t know it and she accepts me at face value.”

“Do you have another value?” Alison asked.

“No, that’s why she appealed to me, that and her looks” said Gary.

Alison looked over at Shelley.

“Notice his clever use of past tense,” Alison told her.

“What I wonder,” Gary interrupted, “Is where is the fruit going? Come on Alison, you’re smarter than me...”

Alison took the challenge and allowed Gary to change the subject.

“I could put my phone on record and see if we could get a video of it,” suggested Alison.

“You realise there is a very good chance you won’t get it back?” Gary asked.

“I’ll take the SIM card out, its due for an upgrade anyway.”

Gary gave her the blank look of someone who was listening to a strange foreign religion being explained to him in a strange foreign language.

“If that’s OK,” said Gary.

Alison took her mobile phone out of her pocket and pressed a few buttons, she pointed the camera at her cousin.

“Do you have any words of advice to my phone before it embarks upon its journey to the spirit world?”

“Don’t go into the light,” said Shelley.

Alison put the phone in to the fruit bowl. Nothing happened.

“I think we have to turn away,” said Gary.

The groups turned in the opposite direction to face the back wall of the kitchen.

“How long should we wait for?” Shelley asked.

“I’m not sure that orange teleportation is an exact science,” Gary told her.

“We should probably at least consider a scientific explanation,” said Alison, “what if it’s a quantum event, that relies on observation.

“Schroedinger’s orange,” said Shelley.

“Then the chances are it won’t get gradually worse and end up with someone getting a weird disease or something and we don’t have to worry about it.”

“Wouldn’t that be better?” Alison asked.

“Way better,” said Gary.

He turned around.

“I guess we’ll find out when we get your phone back.”

“Oh bollocks,” said Alison, “I’ve just realised how much it’s going to hurt when I do get it back.”

“Any suggestions Gary,” said Shelley.

Gary held up a finger.

“One second,” he said. “how do we know it’s the same fruit coming back to each person. Maybe I’ll get hit with the phone, or maybe you just get hit with a recreation of what you put in the bowl.”

“Well, the video will sort that out,” said Alison.

“Video and witchcraft don’t tend to mix well,” said Gary, “Best to be sure.”

Gary took the last remaining orange from the cupboard.

“Have you got a pen Shelley?”

Shelley passed Gary a silver Biro that she used for research notes. Gary wrote his name “Gary Turlough” on to the side of the orange and carefully placed it into the bowl.

12.

As soon as the orange touched the fruit bowl Dan and Milton burst into the room.

“Everybody step back,” said Milton.

It was obvious to them all that Dan was holding up a large stick of chalk.

“I have in my hand a piece of chalk,” said Dan.

“Shhh, please,” said Milton.

Dan approached the now empty fruit bowl with his chalk stretched out in front of him. He carefully drew a circle around the fruit bowl. Pushing his tongue through his front lip in concentration Dan began to carefully craft five arcane symbols around the fruit-bowl. He then closed a second circle around the symbols.

“Somebody pass me a fruit,” demanded Dan.

“I just used the last orange,” said Gary.

“You’ve what?”

“There are six oranges lying in the garden,” Milton reminded him.

“Are you going to get them?” Dan’s voice was greased with both conceit and disbelief.

“It seems to work with anything,” said Gary, “Alison just put her phone in there.”

“Great,” said Dan, “Does anyone else have a phone?”

Shelley declined to answer the question and instead took a step backwards.

“I don’t think it need be a phone,” suggested Gary.

Milton handed Dan a small package, rectangular and wrapped in tinfoil.

“This appears to be our lunch,” said Dan.

“Yes,” said Milton, “cheese and pickle sandwiches, it’s a small part of any healthy lunch.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Dan asked.

“Then I guess you don’t eat.”

“It’s not worth it,” said Dan, “let’s just go home.”

“If it doesn’t work, we can buy chips.”

Dan smiled.

“You realise I am hoping it will fail now.” said Dan.

“Just put it in the bowl.”

The door opened a second time, giving everyone a prompt to shift their eyes from the sandwiches. Carrie stepped into the room, her face wearing a tired look of concern.

“Gary, I need you to help me check something upstairs,” said Carrie.

“Can I help?” Milton said.

Carrie took a quick appraisal of the room.

“No, you stick with the important issue, I don’t want loads of people seeing this in case I’m way off.”

Gary shrugged and followed Carrie. During the brief distraction, everyone had their eyes away from the fruit bowl; the neatly wrapped cheese and pickle sandwiches remained solidly within the bowl.

“It’s a dismissal circle,” Milton explained, “it’s how you get rid of a spirit in traditional summoning.”

“Straight out of Karswell,” Dan confirmed.

“Will I be able to get my phone back?” Alison asked.

Milton pulled a face that lightly suggested he had no idea.

“And can I still have chips?” Dan asked,

13.

Julie was sat on the bed, Carrie guided Gary into the room. The curtains were closed and the thing purple material that they were constructed from cast an eerie light throughout the room.

“I’m really sorry,” said Gary, “no-one thought to tell me this was at your house.”

“It’s OK,” said Julie, “Carrie told me.

Carrie nodded, sincerely.

“I’ll be waiting in the hall,” said Carrie.

Carrie left the room.

“Will you sit down?” Julie asked.

Garry gave a smiling nod and placed himself next to Julie on the bed.

“How’s the garage?” Julie asked.

“Shit but less shit than starvation, more importantly, how are you? I heard you were really ill.”

Gary frowned and pursed his lips to express just how heartfelt his concern was.

“I should be back in two weeks if the medicine works,” Julie told him.

“Good, I’ve missed you.”

“I wouldn’t think you would, living with what’s her name?”

“Shelley, she’s just a roommate.”

Julie looked around as if she were measuring the size of her bedroom against the infinite mass of the atomic universe.

“You live in a one bedroom house like this with Shelley?”

“Yeah, but as roommates,” Gary told her.

“You don’t like her?”

“I’ve had my heart set on Alison.”

Julie frowned.

“And then she came back and I’m not so sure any more, she’s kind of a bitch.”

“Kind of?”

They both laughed and Gary gave a vigorous nod.

“More so than I remembered her being.”

“So what?” Julie asked.

“I don’t know, I’m completely all over the place.”

The two of them sat comfortably through the awkward silence that directly followed Gary’s statement. Gary passed a few seconds by rubbing his knees for no discernible reason.

“Do you think you could come and visit soon? I am really bored. And do you have any books I could borrow?”

“Of course, if you don’t mind early mornings maybe we could stay up late drinking?”

Julie laughed.

“Thanks,” she said.

Julie put her hand on to Gary’s knee. The touch surprised him and his body shivered. He put his hand on to her hand and without thinking leant forward and kissed her. Julie pulled him over on to bed. Gary closed his eyes and kissed her again. He ran his hand and up to her face and softly brushed her cheek pulling back the snood. His mouth instinctively moved to Julie’s neck. Gary did not seem to notice the rough texture of the lesion as he pressed his mouth against it.

Julie pulled back suddenly.

“I’m sorry, I’m moving too fast,” said Gary.

“It’s not that,” said Julie.

Gary looked at her and saw the bloating around her neck, the single lesion like the burn of some abusive giant’s cigar. It wasn’t a pleasant sight and Gary bit back a gag reflex.

“Please don’t hate me,” she said.

Gary blanked his face and thinned his lips.

“I’m just worried I’ve upset you,” he said.

The door suddenly swung open, Carrie’s silhouette filled the door frame, her head was nodding frantically in the direction of the stairs.

Gary did not spring to his feet, rather he leant forward and kissed Julie a second time.

“There’s a definite cold spot in the room, I’m convinced it might be a sign of spiritual activity.”

Gary could hear Dan’s voice booming up the stairs.

“One more problem for the masters to fix,” he said.

“I’ll be around on Tuesday morning,” said Gary to Julie.

Their moment of intimacy was ended by Milton and Dan bursting into the room as full of energy and direction as a bouncy castle filled with toddlers. The reader will not need the debacle that was the search for the cold spot describing in detail. Suffice it to say, that it involved an awful lot of Dan licking his index finger and checking for drafts.

14.

The cramped kitchen was again full of the members of the Hettford Witch Hunt, Alison and Julie. Dan was holding a cloth with which he had just rubbed away his runic circle.

“And so you can see, the sandwiches stay in the bowl. What happened was a spirit well, an after effect of previous magic performed in the house.”

“But, I haven’t...” Julie said.

“It could be centuries old, it is not something we can just check. Anyway, the main point is we have closed the portal and there will be no more activity at this side. And at no cost, let’s see British Gas do that.”

Milton smiled to himself at the thought that Dan had never once dealt with British Gas in his adult life.

“Thank you,” said Julie, “If there’s anything I can do...”

“No worry my dear,” said Dan, “Milton’s fish and chips will be payment enough.”

“I never said anything about fish,” said Milton.

“In all seriousness, we might need to come back and investigate the cause,” said Carrie, “I’m still a bit iffy on this.”

“That would great,” said Julie.

They began to filter down the narrow hallway toward the front door. First Dan, then Milton, then Carrie, then Shelley, then...

Gary was hit full in the face with an orange. The force of it was so great that he fell forwards clutching his nose. Dan picked up the fallen orange.

“I guess this one had your name on it,” said Dan.

Gary was bleeding profusely from the nose and Julie ran into the house to get some paper towels. Whilst everyone crowded around Gary, Alison stepped quietly over the threshold and flinched in anticipation of the impact of the hard plastic phone.

The impact never came however. Instead there was only the softer impact of a balled up piece of paper. The attention of the others was too focussed on Gary for them to notice as she stooped to pick it up and unfolded it. The message inside read only, “Piss off back to New Zealand.” Alison felt a cold chill run up her spine and clenching the note thrust it into her pocket.

“That was the last thing to go in,” Dan was saying, “we’ve definitely closed off one end.”

“We’ll daff do dowse dor de ubber end,” Gary spoke through a pinched nose.

“Dowse,” translated Milton, “we’ll have to dowse for the other end.”

“At least no more objects will escape your kitchen,” said Dan, “now, if you’ll excuse us, we have 20 minutes before the chip shop closes until dinner time and it’s a ten minute walk.”

Milton, Dan and Carrie all set off, with Carrie giving reassurance that they would be back soon. Shelley declined an offer for them to return back in to the house and instead helped Gary to his feet.

15.

Gary was stood in front of both Alison's glowering face and his old car.

"Do you have to hurry back?" Gary asked her.

"I'd rather beat the rush hour," she said.

"I know today was pretty freaky," Gary said, "but you could stay for dinner, I'm cooking yummy stuff."

"Thank you, Gary, but no."

"Is it something I've done?"

Alison shook her head, she took the note out of her pocket and passed pushed it into his hand.

"I didn't come down here to see Julie's shitty house," said Alison, "but it did remind me of how much I hate this village."

Gary unfolded the note and read the pencil written scrawl.

"This is bad," he said.

"It came out of thin air and hit me in the face," she said, "it's not quite as good as a phone is it?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "I do miss you Gary but this, this I haven't missed."

"This came out of the spirit well?"

"And hit me in the face."

Gary shuddered with the sheer ominousness of the implication.

"Shit," he added.

"Tell Shelley thanks."

Alison stepped forward.

"Well go on, hug me then."

Gary wrapped his arms around Alison and the two of them held the embrace for much longer than either of them was expecting to.

The heavy close of the car door and sputtered start of the engine made Gary's heart sink. He stood at the end of the driveway until Alison was out of sight.

16.

Back inside the house Shelley already had a cup of tea ready for Gary.

"What's this for?" He asked.

"I thought you might need it," Shelley said, "Also, I should have told you about Alison coming."

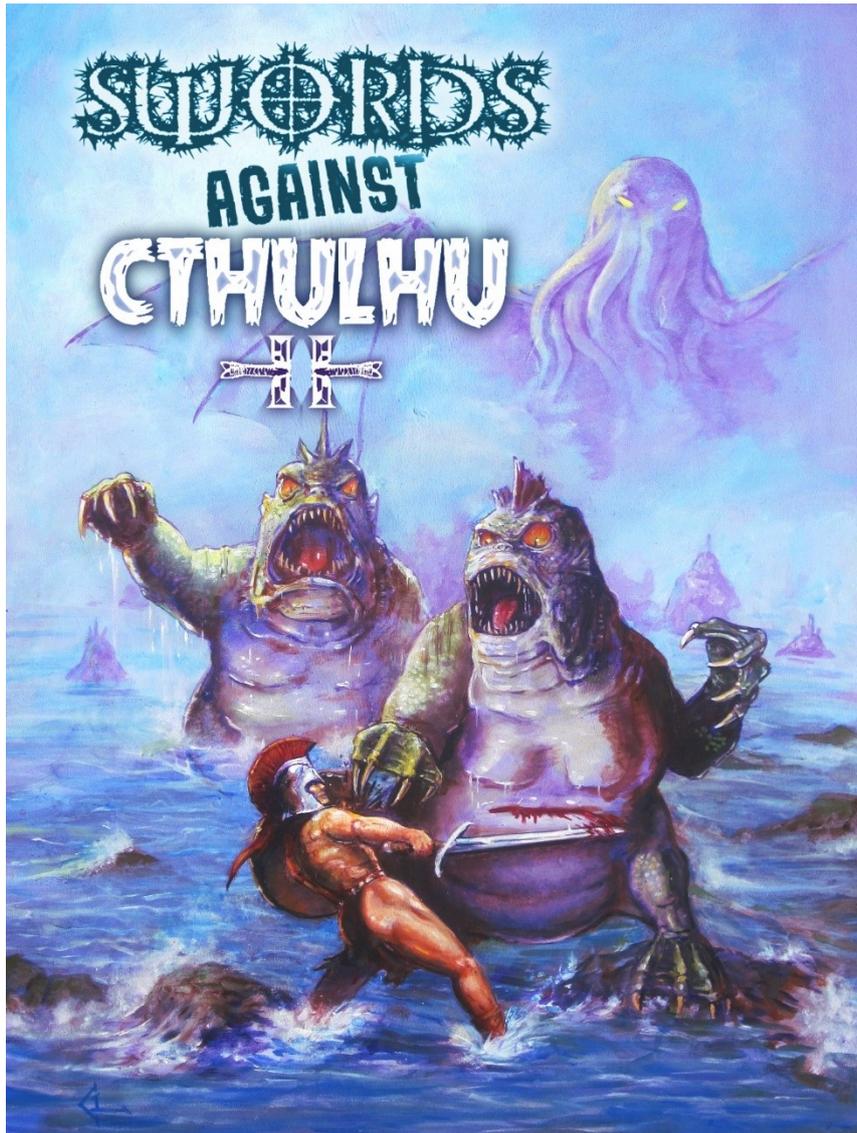
"I get the feeling that you invited her for my benefit. Did you know that she'd broken up with Neville?"

"Of course," said Shelley.

"Thanks for the tea."

Gary picked up the warm mug and put it to his lips. He looked at Shelley's wide obliging smile and decided against telling her what was on his mind.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Twenty-One

News that the defenses of Callisto Base 1 had been breached spread quickly throughout the forces gathered by Turhan Mot and Yamir. Many who were still attacking, but had not yet succeeded in breaking through the barriers of the other bases on Callisto ceased their campaigns and flew to Callisto Base 1. In very little time, hundreds of Scroungers had added their numbers, and their ships, to the assault.

Captain Waverly and his command of eighteen men and women of Callisto Base Security were hopelessly outnumbered, and they knew it.

They had barely managed to staunch the initial assault, when the first Scroungers, numbering two dozen or so, had blown the airlocks that separated the landing bays of the Space Port from the rail station that gave passage to the colony.

They'd met that first wild charge with a disciplined barrage of plasma rifles, instantly killing the raucous Scroungers who had come shouting and shooting through the billowing blankets of smoke that roiled across the tarmac of the landing bay.

That had caused the Scroungers to pause. They scrambled seeking every refuge they could, burrowing in behind the ships parked there, and the beams that supported the dome overhead. But news of the approaching reinforcements came to them quickly, and that emboldened them. They fired barrage after barrage at Waverly's platoon, filling the landing bay with squealing bolts of laser blasts and plasma discharges.

"Aim for the tanks," Waverly commanded, referring to the fuel tanks near the ships behind which the Scroungers had sought refuge. Desperate times required desperate measures.

Waverly's troops fired. The fuel tanks exploded. Huge fireballs swallowed the ships nearby up into a vast hellscape of flaming, twisted steel. Human being, converted into stumbling torches, came screaming from the flames and the wreckage, the sounds of their screams drowned out completely by the roaring of the fires.

"Good shooting," Waverly commended his platoon.

But it was not enough.

More Scroungers came running through the smoke and the flames. Having learned from Waverly's maneuver, these fighters, fresh to the scene, played him back his own hand.

They fired directly at the fuel tanks nearest Waverly and the eighteen men and women of his command.

"Pull back!" Waverly commanded.

Only just barely in time to save but half his platoon.

The fires that exploded, surrounding them, killed six of his troops instantly. The others suffered deep burns throughout their bodies. Waverly himself had half his face burned off in that explosion. But he managed to keep conscious.

He ordered those who were able to walk to carry the wounded who couldn't. And somehow they managed to struggle back into the rail station. Here there was but a wide single corridor leading to the platforms where passengers and cargo were deployed to the cars that shipped all into the interior of Callisto Base 1, some miles away.

"We can't hold it forever," Waverly, his face still smoldering, told his troops. "But we can make them hurt."

He stationed his troops at the far end of the corridor, setting up a tentative barrier of desks and tables quickly hauled out from nearby offices. The Scroungers would be forced to make that long march down that empty hallway with nothing to hide behind.

Overhead, through the skylights, Waverly and his twelve surviving troops could plainly see the ships of Scroungers circling in the sky as they prepared to land.

Of course Turhan Mot kept an escape pod locked into place, just below his command center. Large enough to carry two people, it was secreted just below deck. A swift and surreptitious press of a button was all that was needed to open the partition in the deck that revealed the narrow tunnel leading to it.

And, while Carter Ward and Mud were pinned down behind a smoldering console, in a gun fight with four of Turhan Mot's lieutenants, the commander of the "Grand Marquis" and Mokem Bet, his second in command, swiftly dropped into the hidden tunnel, and climbed down a ladder to the escape pod, below.

Ward saw that. He saw Turhan Mot duck behind another console and disappear. Mokem Bet gave Ward a quick sneer, then spat at him before he, too, disappeared with his commander. Through a port, Ward caught a glimpse of the escape pod as it shot out from the "Grand Marquis".

"Dammit!" Ward shouted.

"What? They gettin' away?" Mud asked.

"Hell, no, they aren't," Ward said.

"I'm not wasting any time with these fucks," Ward said, with a nod to Turhan Mot's four lieutenants, who were all firing furiously at the two men.

"Give `em one of your bombs," he finished, then he turned and crawled away.

"Where you goin'?" Mud asked, tossing a bomb into the smoking command center. He quickly scabbled away, following Ward.

The blast shook the command center, but other than confounding Turhan Mot's lieutenants, did little damage. Tu Hit remained at the wheel of the "Grand Marquis", barely keeping the ship under control as it rolled heavily through space. Outside, the "Bellerophon" was still hitting the huge ship with broadside after broadside, while the gunners at the stern of the "Grand Marquis" continued to return fire. The sounds of screaming metal pierced the ears.

And Yamir was still attempting to bring the "Reliant" alongside the "Grand Marquis".

"To my ship!" Ward answered Mud. "We'll get those ratfucks on the outside."

"Okay, brother," Mud replied, pushing himself alongside Ward through the weightless corridor. A flash from a laser pistol singed Ward's ear.

"The fuck?"

Turhan Mot's lieutenants were pursuing them down the corridor.

"Real funny, guys," Mud said. "Here's a little joke for you all."

Coming up to one of the plastic sheets that Mud had placed on their way to the command center, Mud pulled his last grenade from its belt, and set it drifting toward the sheet.

"It's going to get hot," Mud said. "And time's a wastin'!"

Ward recognized the cue from their days with the Rangers. Both men redoubled their efforts to get down the hallways and to their ships.

The blast behind them sent them careening forward, as pieces of the bodies of Turhan Mot's lieutenants went sailing past. That blast was sufficient to trigger other blasts from the other patches that Mud had laid. One by one, they exploded, tearing the nose of the "Grand Marquis" into bits.

From where he stood on the bridge of the "Reliant", Yamir saw the explosions, first as flashes of light penetrating through the windows of the ship, then streams of flame that shot out from the windows.

One after another, the explosions burst in an ever-growing crescendo of smoke and fire. Yet still, the convulsions burning metal were not enough to completely destroy the ship. Somehow, the vigilant Tu Hit remained at the wheel, barely keeping sufficient control to keep the "Grand Marquis" from plowing into both the "Reliant" and the nearby "Bellerophon".

Ward and Mud were blown by the blasts into the landing bay of the "Grand Marquis". There, they saw their ships, the O8-111A and Mud's ship, the somewhat larger "Charon". Ward and Mud wasted no words. Each man made directly for his own ship, both of them knowing that Ward was intent on pursuing Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet.

"I'm takin' over now, Dimara," Ward said, strapping himself into his pilot's seat.

Dimara said nothing, but silently turned over control of the ship to Ward.

Just ahead of him, Ward saw the “Charon” leap upwards from the deck, and out through the plasma wall, into the battle beyond.

Hundreds of ships of every size, buzzed around the “Bellerophon”, all firing laser and plasma blasts. Ward ignored those. He sought out only the tiny escape pod he had briefly glimpsed as it carried Turhan Mot and Moekm Bet away. Ward guessed that Turhan Mot would attempt to escape to the other ship which had shown up for the battle, but of which he did not know the name.

That was Yamir’s ship, of course, the “Reliant”. And Ward guessed right. There it was, the tiny escape pod, seeking to make its way through the wild battle, sailing a crazed course through deadly ruby beams of light and plasma.

“Oh no you don’t, fucker,” Ward said.

He sent a burst from his forward quantum cannon directly at the escape pod. The burst, had it hit, would have caused the pod to vanish into a cloud of subatomic particles. But the burst missed, instead striking a glancing blow on one of the spheres that made up the hull of the “Reliant”.

Mokem Bet, steering, saw the lurid purple beam of the quantum burst as it flashed past the nose of the escape pod. He pulled back.

Yamir, likewise, realizing that his ship was under attack with weapons for which he had no shields, ordered the “Reliant” to pull about.

Ward ignored the “Reliant”, and aimed his next shot at the wildly careening escape pod.

As it was an escape pod only, it was not equipped for battle. Mokem Bet had no weapons to fire back with.

And each time he attempted to draw near the “Reliant”, Ward answered with another fusillade from his quantum cannons.

“It is impossible, my captain,” Mokem Bet said hopelessly to Turhan Mot. “I can only elude the man. Docking with the “Reliant” as long as he fires upon us is impossible.”

“Bring us down to Callisto, then,” Turhan Mot said. “Our forces are grouping there.”

“Yes, my captain,” Mokem Bet answered.

He pulled the nose of the escape pod into a steep corkscrewing dive. Below, the domes of Callisto Base 1, where numerous fires had begun to flare up.

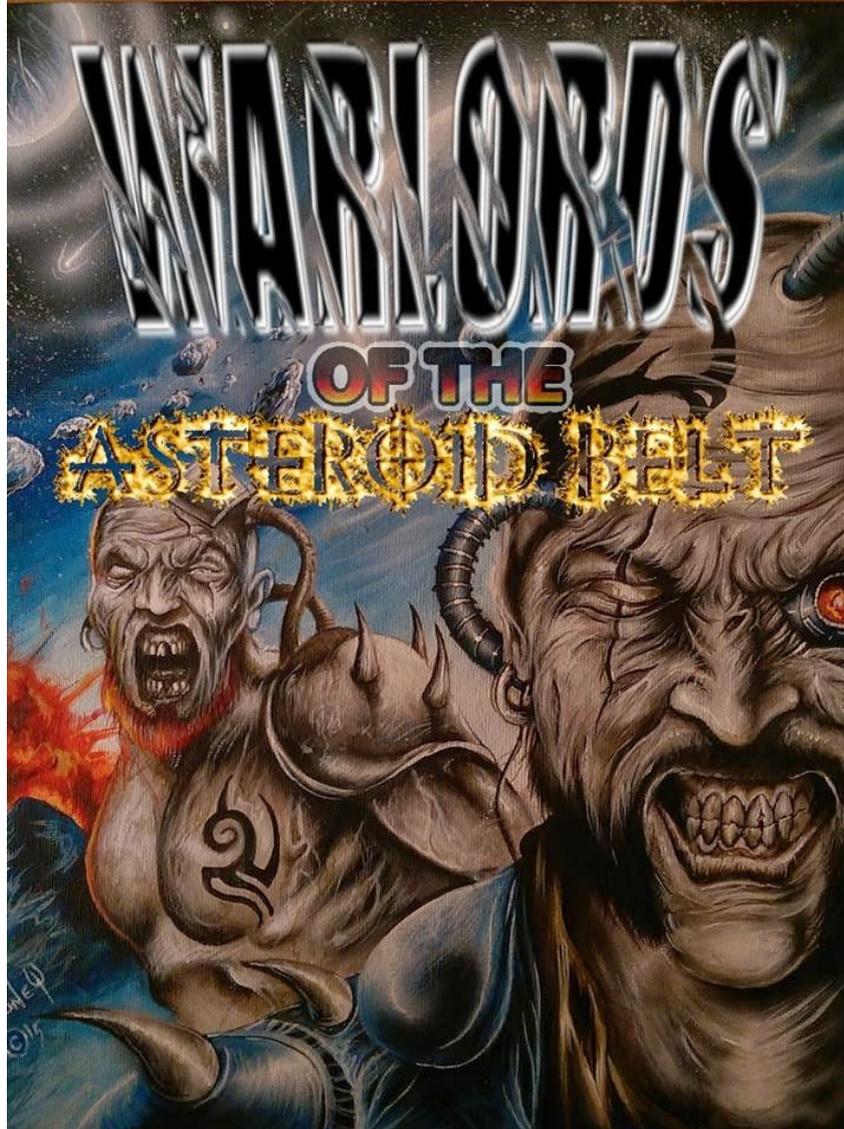
Ward saw where Mokem Bet was bringing the escape pod.

He followed.

Behind him came Mud, in the Charon.

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 7

At Herbert's cry, Pencroft, letting his gun fall, rushed towards him.

"They have killed him!" he cried. "My boy! They have killed him!"

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett ran to Herbert.

The reporter listened to ascertain if the poor lad's heart was still beating.

"He lives," said he, "but he must be carried—"

"To Granite House? that is impossible!" replied the engineer.

"Into the corral, then!" said Pencroft.

"In a moment," said Harding.

And he ran round the left corner of the palisade. There he found a convict, who aiming at him, sent a ball through his hat. In a few seconds, before he had even time to fire his second barrel, he fell, struck to the heart by Harding's dagger, more sure even than his gun.

During this time, Gideon Spilett and the sailor hoisted themselves over the palisade, leaped into the enclosure, threw down the props which supported the inner door, ran into the empty house, and soon, poor Herbert was lying on Ayrton's bed. In a few moments, Harding was by his side.

On seeing Herbert senseless, the sailor's grief was terrible.

He sobbed, he cried, he tried to beat his head against the wall.

Neither the engineer nor the reporter could calm him. They themselves were choked with emotion. They could not speak.

However, they knew that it depended on them to rescue from death the poor boy who was suffering beneath their eyes. Gideon Spilett had not passed through the many incidents by which his life had been checkered without acquiring some slight knowledge of medicine. He knew a little of everything, and several times he had been obliged to attend to wounds produced either by a sword-bayonet or shot. Assisted by Cyrus Harding, he proceeded to render the aid Herbert required.

The reporter was immediately struck by the complete stupor in which Herbert lay, a stupor owing either to the hemorrhage, or to the shock, the ball having struck a bone with sufficient force to produce a violent concussion.

Herbert was deadly pale, and his pulse so feeble that Spilett only felt it beat at long intervals, as if it was on the point of stopping.

These symptoms were very serious.

Herbert's chest was laid bare, and the blood having been stanchd with handkerchiefs, it was bathed with cold water.

The contusion, or rather the contused wound appeared,—an oval below the chest between the third and fourth ribs. It was there that Herbert had been hit by the bullet.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett then turned the poor boy over; as they did so, he uttered a moan so feeble that they almost thought it was his last sigh.

Herbert's back was covered with blood from another contused wound, by which the ball had immediately escaped.

“God be praised!” said the reporter, “the ball is not in the body, and we shall not have to extract it.”

“But the heart?” asked Harding.

“The heart has not been touched; if it had been, Herbert would be dead!”

“Dead!” exclaimed Pencroft, with a groan.

The sailor had only heard the last words uttered by the reporter.

“No, Pencroft,” replied Cyrus Harding, “no! He is not dead. His pulse still beats. He has even uttered a moan. But for your boy's sake, calm yourself. We have need of all our self-possession.”

“Do not make us lose it, my friend.”

Pencroft was silent, but a reaction set in, and great tears rolled down his cheeks.

In the meanwhile, Gideon Spilett endeavored to collect his ideas, and proceed methodically. After his examination he had no doubt that the ball, entering in front, between the seventh and eighth ribs, had issued behind between the third and fourth. But what mischief had the ball committed in its passage? What important organs had been reached? A professional surgeon would have had difficulty in determining this at once, and still more so the reporter.

However, he knew one thing, this was that he would have to prevent the inflammatory strangulation of the injured parts, then to contend with the local inflammation and fever which would result from the wound, perhaps mortal! Now, what styptics, what antiphlogistics ought to be employed? By what means could inflammation be prevented?

At any rate, the most important thing was that the two wounds should be dressed without delay. It did not appear necessary to Gideon Spilett that a fresh flow of blood should be

caused by bathing them in tepid water, and compressing their lips. The hemorrhage had been very abundant, and Herbert was already too much enfeebled by the loss of blood.

The reporter, therefore, thought it best to simply bathe the two wounds with cold water.

Herbert was placed on his left side, and was maintained in that position.

“He must not be moved.” said Gideon Spilett. “He is in the most favorable position for the wounds in his back and chest to suppurate easily, and absolute rest is necessary.”

“What! can’t we carry him to Granite House?” asked Pencroft.

“No, Pencroft,” replied the reporter.

“I’ll pay the villains off!” cried the sailor, shaking his fist in a menacing manner.

“Pencroft!” said Cyrus Harding.

Gideon Spilett had resumed his examination of the wounded boy. Herbert was still so frightfully pale, that the reporter felt anxious.

“Cyrus,” said he, “I am not a surgeon. I am in terrible perplexity. You must aid me with your advice, your experience!”

“Take courage, my friend,” answered the engineer, pressing the reporter’s hand. “Judge coolly. Think only of this: Herbert must be saved!”

These words restored to Gideon Spilett that self-possession which he had lost in a moment of discouragement on feeling his great responsibility. He seated himself close to the bed. Cyrus Harding stood near. Pencroft had torn up his shirt, and was mechanically making lint.

Spilett then explained to Cyrus Harding that he thought he ought first of all to stop the hemorrhage, but not close the two wounds, or cause their immediate cicatrization, for there had been internal perforation, and the suppuration must not be allowed to accumulate in the chest.

Harding approved entirely, and it was decided that the two wounds should be dressed without attempting to close them by immediate coaptation.

And now did the colonists possess an efficacious agent to act against the inflammation which might occur?

Yes. They had one, for nature had generously lavished it. They had cold water, that is to say, the most powerful sedative that can be employed against inflammation of wounds, the most efficacious therapeutic agent in grave cases, and the one which is now adopted by all physicians. Cold water has, moreover, the advantage of leaving the wound in absolute rest, and preserving it from all premature dressing, a considerable advantage, since it has been found by experience that contact with the air is dangerous during the first days.

Gideon Spilett and Cyrus Harding reasoned thus with their simple good sense, and they acted as the best surgeon would have done. Compresses of linen were applied to poor Herbert's two wounds, and were kept constantly wet with cold water.

The sailor had at first lighted a fire in the hut, which was not wanting in things necessary for life. Maple sugar, medicinal plants, the same which the lad had gathered on the banks of Lake Grant, enabled them to make some refreshing drinks, which they gave him without his taking any notice of it. His fever was extremely high, and all that day and night passed without his becoming conscious.

Herbert's life hung on a thread, and this thread might break at any moment. The next day, the 12th of November, the hopes of Harding and his companions slightly revived. Herbert had come out of his long stupor. He opened his eyes, he recognized Cyrus Harding, the reporter, and Pencroft. He uttered two or three words. He did not know what had happened. They told him, and Spilett begged him to remain perfectly still, telling him that his life was not in danger, and that his wounds would heal in a few days. However, Herbert scarcely suffered at all, and the cold water with which they were constantly bathed, prevented any inflammation of the wounds. The suppuration was established in a regular way, the fever did not increase, and it might now be hoped that this terrible wound would not involve any catastrophe. Pencroft felt the swelling of his heart gradually subside. He was like a sister of mercy, like a mother by the bed of her child.

Herbert dozed again, but his sleep appeared more natural.

"Tell me again that you hope, Mr. Spilett," said Pencroft. "Tell me again that you will save Herbert!"

"Yes, we will save him!" replied the reporter. "The wound is serious, and, perhaps, even the ball has traversed the lungs, but the perforation of this organ is not fatal."

"God bless you!" answered Pencroft.

As may be believed, during the four-and-twenty hours they had been in the corral, the colonists had no other thought than that of nursing Herbert. They did not think either of the danger which threatened them should the convicts return, or of the precautions to be taken for the future.

But on this day, while Pencroft watched by the sick-bed, Cyrus Harding and the reporter consulted as to what it would be best to do.

First of all they examined the corral. There was not a trace of Ayrton. Had the unhappy man been dragged away by his former accomplices? Had he resisted, and been overcome in the struggle? This last supposition was only too probable. Gideon Spilett, at the moment he scaled the palisade, had clearly seen some one of the convicts running along the southern spur of Mount Franklin, towards whom Top had sprung. It was one of those whose object had been so completely defeated by the rocks at the mouth of the Mercy. Besides, the one killed by Harding, and whose body was found outside the enclosure, of course belonged to Bob Harvey's crew.

As to the corral, it had not suffered any damage. The gates were closed, and the animals had not been able to disperse in the forest. Nor could they see traces of any struggle, any devastation, either in the hut, or in the palisade. The ammunition only, with which Ayrton had been supplied, had disappeared with him.

“The unhappy man has been surprised,” said Harding, “and as he was a man to defend himself, he must have been overpowered.”

“Yes, that is to be feared!” said the reporter. “Then, doubtless, the convicts installed themselves in the corral where they found plenty of everything, and only fled when they saw us coming. It is very evident, too, that at this moment Ayrton, whether living or dead, is not here!”

“We shall have to beat the forest,” said the engineer, “and rid the island of these wretches. Pencroft’s presentiments were not mistaken, when he wished to hunt them as wild beasts. That would have spared us all these misfortunes!”

“Yes,” answered the reporter, “but now we have the right to be merciless!”

“At any rate,” said the engineer, “we are obliged to wait some time, and to remain at the corral until we can carry Herbert without danger to Granite House.”

“But Neb?” asked the reporter.

“Neb is in safety.”

“But if, uneasy at our absence, he would venture to come?”

“He must not come!” returned Cyrus Harding quickly. “He would be murdered on the road!”

“It is very probable, however, that he will attempt to rejoin us!”

“Ah, if the telegraph still acted, he might be warned! But that is impossible now! As to leaving Pencroft and Herbert here alone, we could not do it! Well, I will go alone to Granite House.”

“No, no! Cyrus,” answered the reporter, “you must not expose yourself! Your courage would be of no avail. The villains are evidently watching the corral, they are hidden in the thick woods which surround it, and if you go we shall soon have to regret two misfortunes instead of one!”

“But Neb?” repeated the engineer. “It is now four-and-twenty hours since he has had any news of us! He will be sure to come!”

“And as he will be less on his guard than we should be ourselves,” added Spilett, “he will be killed!”

“Is there really no way of warning him?”

While the engineer thought, his eyes fell on Top, who, going backwards and forwards seemed to say,—

“Am not I here?”

“Top!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding.

The animal sprang at his master’s call.

“Yes, Top will go,” said the reporter, who had understood the engineer.

“Top can go where we cannot! He will carry to Granite House the news of the corral, and he will bring back to us that from Granite House!”

“Quick!” said Harding. “Quick!”

Spilett rapidly tore a leaf from his note-book, and wrote these words:—

“Herbert wounded. We are at the corral. Be on your guard. Do not leave Granite House. Have the convicts appeared in the neighborhood? Reply by Top.”

This laconic note contained all that Neb ought to know, and at the same time asked all that the colonists wished to know. It was folded and fastened to Top’s collar in a conspicuous position.

“Top, my dog,” said the engineer, caressing the animal, “Neb, Top! Neb! Go, go!”

Top bounded at these words. He understood, he knew what was expected of him. The road to the corral was familiar to him. In less than an hour he could clear it, and it might be hoped that where neither Cyrus Harding nor the reporter could have ventured without danger, Top, running among the grass or in the wood, would pass unperceived.

The engineer went to the gate of the corral and opened it.

“Neb, Top! Neb!” repeated the engineer, again pointing in the direction of Granite House.

Top sprang forwards, then almost immediately disappeared.

“He will get there!” said the reporter.

“Yes, and he will come back, the faithful animal!”

“What o’clock is it?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Ten.”

“In an hour he may be here. We will watch for his return.”

The gate of the corral was closed. The engineer and the reporter re-entered the house. Herbert was still in a sleep. Pencroft kept the compresses always wet. Spilett, seeing there was

nothing he could do at that moment, busied himself in preparing some nourishment, while attentively watching that part of the enclosure against the hill, at which an attack might be expected.

The settlers awaited Top's return with much anxiety. A little before eleven o'clock, Cyrus Harding and the reporter, rifle in hand, were behind the gate, ready to open it at the first bark of their dog.

They did not doubt that if Top had arrived safely at Granite House, Neb would have sent him back immediately.

They had both been there for about ten minutes, when a report was heard, followed by repeated barks.

The engineer opened the gate, and seeing smoke a hundred feet off in the wood, he fired in that direction.

Almost immediately Top bounded into the corral, and the gate was quickly shut.

"Top, Top!" exclaimed the engineer, taking the dog's great honest head between his hands.

A note was fastened to his neck, and Cyrus Harding read these words, traced in Neb's large writing:—"No pirates in the neighborhood of Granite House. I will not stir. Poor Mr. Herbert!"

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book III: Egypt

Chapter I: Tidings From Egypt

That curtain of oblivion without rent or seam sinks again upon the visions of this past of mine. It falls, as it were, on the last of the scenes in the dreadful chamber of the pit, to rise once more far from Byzantium.

I am blind and can see nothing, for the power which enables me to disinter what lies buried beneath the weight and wreck of so many ages tells me no more than those things that once my senses knew. What I did not hear then I do not hear now; what I did not see then I do not see now. Thus it comes about that of Lesbos itself, of the shape of its mountains or the colour of its seas I can tell nothing more than I was told, because my sight never dwelt on them in any life that I can remember.

It was evening. The heat of the sun had passed and the night breeze blew through the wide, cool chamber in which I sat with Martina, whom the soldiers, in their rude fashion, called "Olaf's Brown Dog." For brown was her colouring, and she led me from place to place as dogs are trained to lead blind men. Yet against her the roughest of them never said an evil word; not from fear, but because they knew that none could be said.

Martina was talking, she who always loved to talk, if not of one thing, then of another.

"God-son," she said, "although you are a great grumbler, I tell you that in my judgment you were born under a lucky star, or saint, call it which you will. For instance, when you were walking up and down that Hall of the Pit in the palace at Constantinople, which I always dream of now if I sup too late——"

"And your spirit, or double, or whatever you call it, was kindly leading me round the edge of the death-trap," I interrupted.

"——and my spirit, or double, making itself useful for once, was doing what you say, well, who would have thought that before so very long you would be the governor, much beloved, of the rich and prosperous island of Lesbos; still the commander, much beloved, of troops, many of them your own countrymen, and, although you are blind, the Imperial general who has dealt the Moslems one of the worst defeats they have suffered for a long while."

"Jodd and the others did that," I answered. "I only sat here and made the plans."

"Jodd!" she exclaimed with contempt. "Jodd has no more head for plans than a doorpost! Although it is true," she added with a softening of the voice, "that he is a good man to lean on at a pinch, and a very terrible fighter; also one who can keep such brain as God gave him cool in the hour of terror, as Irene knows well enough. Yet it was you, Olaf, not even I, but you, who remembered that the Northmen are seafolk born, and turned all those trading vessels into war-galleys and hid them in the little bays with a few of your people in command of each. It was you who suffered the Moslem fleet to sail unmolested into the Mitylene harbours, pretending and giving notice that the only defence would be by land. Then, after they were at anchor and beginning to disembark, it was you who fell on them at the dawn and sank and

slew till none remained save those of their army who were taken prisoners or spared for ransom. Yes, and you commanded our ships in person; and at night who is a better captain than a blind man? Oh! you did well, very well; and you are rich with Irene's lands, and sit here in comfort and in honour, with the best of health save for your blindness, and I repeat that you were born under a lucky star—or saint."

"Not altogether so, Martina," I answered with a sigh.

"Ah!" she replied, "man can never be content. As usual, you are thinking of that Egyptian, I mean of the lady Heliodore, of whom, of course, it is quite right that you should think. Well, it is true that we have heard nothing of her. Still, that does not mean that we may not hear. Perhaps Jodd has learned something from those prisoners. Hark! he comes."

As she spoke I heard the guards salute without and Jodd's heavy step at the door of the chamber.

"Greeting, General," he said presently. "I bring you good news. The messengers to the Sultan Harun have returned with the ransom. Also this Caliph sends a writing signed by himself and his ministers, in which he swears by God and His Prophet that in consideration of our giving up our prisoners, among whom, it seems, are some great men, neither he nor his successors will attempt any new attack upon Lesbos for thirty years. The interpreter will read it to you to-morrow, and you can send your answering letters with the prisoners."

"Seeing that these heathen are so many and we are so few, we could scarcely look for better terms," I said, "as I hope they will think at Constantinople. At least the prisoners shall sail when all is in order. Now for another matter. Have you inquired as to the Bishop Barnabas and the Egyptian Prince Magas and his daughter?"

"Aye, General, this very day. I found that among the prisoners were three of the commoner sort who have served in Egypt and left that land not three months ago. Of these men two have never heard of the bishop or the others. The third, however, who was wounded in the fight, had some tidings."

"What tidings, Jodd?"

"None that are good, General. The bishop, he says, was killed by Moslems a while ago, or so he had been told."

"God rest him. But the others, Jodd, what of the others?"

"This. It seems that the Copt, as he called him, Magas, returned from a long journey, as we know he did, and raised an insurrection somewhere in the south of Egypt, far up the Nile. An expedition was sent against him, under one Musa, the Governor of Egypt, and there was much fighting, in which this prisoner took part. The end of it was that the Copts who fought with Magas were conquered with slaughter, Magas himself was slain, for he would not fly, and his daughter, the lady Heliodore, was taken prisoner with some other Coptic women."

"And then?" I gasped.

“Then, General, she was brought before the Emir Musa, who, noting her beauty, proposed to make her his slave. At her prayer, however, being, as the prisoner said, a merciful man, he gave her a week to mourn her father before she entered his harem. Still, the worst,” he went on hurriedly, “did not happen. Before that week was done, as the Moslem force was marching down the Nile, she stabbed the eunuch who was in charge of her and escaped.”

“I thank God,” I said. “But, Jodd, how is the man sure that she was Heliodore?”

“Thus: All knew her to be the daughter of Magas, one whom the Egyptians held in honour. Moreover, among the Moslem soldiers she was named ‘the Lady of the Shells,’ because of a certain necklace she wore, which you will remember.”

“What more?” I asked.

“Only that the Emir Musa was very angry at her loss and because of it caused certain soldiers to be beaten on the feet. Moreover, he halted his army and offered a reward for her. For two days they hunted, even searching some tombs where it was thought she might have hidden, but there found nothing but the dead. Then the Emir returned down the Nile, and that is the end of the story.”

“Send this prisoner to me at once, Jodd, with an interpreter. I would question him myself.”

“I fear he is not fit to come, General.”

“Then I will go to him. Lead me, Martina.”

“If so, you must go far, General, for he died an hour ago, and his companions are making him ready for burial.”

“Jodd,” I said angrily, “those men have been in our hands for weeks. How comes it that you did not discover these things before? You had my orders.”

“Because, General, until they knew that they were to go free none of these prisoners would tell us anything. However closely they were questioned, they said that it was against their oath, and that first they would die. A long while ago I asked this very man of Egypt, and he vowed that he had never been there.”

“Be comforted, Olaf,” broke in Martina, “for what more could he have told you?”

“Nothing, perchance,” I answered; “yet I should have gained many days of time. Know that I go to Egypt to search for Heliodore.”

“Be comforted again,” said Martina. “This you could not have done until the peace was signed; it would have been against your oath and duty.”

“That is so,” I answered heavily.

“Olaf,” said Martina to me that night after Jodd had left us, “you say that you will go to Egypt. How will you go? Will the blind Christian general of the Empire, who has just dealt so great a defeat to the mighty Caliph of the East, be welcome in Egypt? Above all, will he be

welcomed by the Emir Musa, who rules there, when it is known that he comes to seek a woman who has escaped from that Emir's harem? Why, within an hour he'd offer you the choice between death and the Koran. Olaf, this thing is madness."

"It may be, Martina. Still, I go to seek Heliodore."

"If Heliodore still lives you will not help her by dying, and if she is dead time will be little to her and she can wait for you a while."

"Yet I go, Martina."

"You, being blind, go to Egypt to seek one whom those who rule there have searched for in vain. So be it. But how will you go? It cannot be as an open enemy, since then you would need a fleet and ten thousand swords to back you, which you have not. To take a few brave men, unless they were Moslems, which is impossible, would be but to give them to death. How do you go, Olaf?"

"I do not know, Martina. Your brain is more nimble than mine; think, think, and tell me."

I heard Martina rise and walk up and down the room for a long time. At length she returned and sat herself by me again.

"Olaf," she said, "you always had a taste for music. You have told me that as a boy in your northern home you used to play upon the harp and sing songs to it of your own making, and now, since you have been blind, you have practised at this art till you are its master. Also, my voice is good; indeed, it is my only gift. It was my voice that first brought me to Irene's notice, when I was but the daughter of a poor Greek gentleman who had been her father's friend and therefore was given a small place about the Court. Of late we have sung many songs together, have we not, certain of them in that northern tongue, of which you have taught me something?"

"Yes, Martina; but what of it?"

"You are dull, Olaf. I have heard that these Easterns love music, especially if it be of a sort they do not know. Why, therefore, should not a blind man and his daughter—no, his orphaned niece—earn an honest living as travelling musicians in Egypt? These Prophet worshippers, I am told, think it a great sin to harm one who is maimed—a poor northern trader in amber who has been robbed by Christian thieves. Rendered sightless also that he might not be able to swear to them before the judges, and now, with his sister's child, winning his bread as best he may. Like you, Olaf, I have skill in languages, and even know enough of Arabic to beg in it, for my mother, who was a Syrian, taught it to me as a child, and since we have been here I have practised. What say you?"

"I say that we might travel as safely thus as in any other way. Yet, Martina, how can I ask you to tie such a burden on your back?"

"Oh! no need to ask, Olaf, since Fate bound it there when it made me your—god-mother. Where you go I needs must go also, until you are married," she added with a laugh.

"Afterwards, perhaps, you will need me no more. Well, there's a plan, for what it is worth, and now we'll sleep on it, hoping to find a better. Pray to St. Michael to-night, Olaf."

As it chanced, St. Michael gave me no light, so the end of it was that I determined to play this part of a blind harper. In those days there was a trade between Lesbos and Egypt in cedar wood, wool, wine for the Copts, for the Moslems drank none, and other goods. Peace having been declared between the island and the Caliph, a small vessel was laden with such merchandise at my cost, and a Greek of Lesbos, Menas by name, put in command of it as the owner, with a crew of sailors whom I could trust to the death.

To these men, who were Christians, I told my business, swearing them to secrecy by the most holy of all oaths. But, alas! as I shall show, although I could trust these sailors when they were masters of themselves, I could not trust them, or, rather, one of them, when wine was his master. In our northern land we had a saying that “Ale is another man,” and now its truth was to be proved to me, not for the first time.

When all was ready I made known my plans to Jodd alone, in whose hands I left a writing to say what must be done if I returned no more. To the other officers and the soldiers I said only that I proposed to make a journey in this trading ship disguised as a merchant, both for my health’s sake and to discover for myself the state of the surrounding countries, and especially of the Christians in Egypt.

When he had heard all, Jodd, although he was a hopeful-minded man, grew sad over this journey, which I could see he thought would be my last.

“I expected no less,” he said; “and yet, General, I trusted that your saint might keep your feet on some safer path. Doubtless this lady Heliodore is dead, or fled, or wed; at least, you will never find her.”

“Still, I must search for her, Jodd.”

“You are a blind man. How can you search?”

Then an idea came to him, and he added,

“Listen, General. I and the rest of us swore to protect the lady Heliodore and to be as her father or her brothers. Do you bide here. I will go to search for her, either with a vessel full of armed men, or alone, disguised.”

Now I laughed outright and asked,

“What disguise is there that would hide the giant Jodd, whose fame the Moslem spies have spread throughout the East? Why, on the darkest night your voice would betray you to all within a hundred paces. And what use would one shipload of armed men be against the forces of the Emir of Egypt? No, no, Jodd, whatever the danger I must go and I alone. If I am killed, or do not return within eight months, I have named you to be Governor of Lesbos, as already you have been named my deputy by Constantine, which appointment will probably be confirmed.”

“I do not want to be Governor of Lesbos,” said Jodd. “Moreover, Olaf,” he added slowly, “a blind beggar must have his dog to lead him, his brown dog. You cannot go alone, Olaf. Those dangers of which you speak must be shared by another.”

“That is so, and it troubles me much. Indeed, it is in my mind to seek some other guide, for I think this one would be safest here in your charge. You must reason with her, Jodd. One can ask too much, even of a god-mother.”

“Of a god-mother! Why not say of a grandmother? By Thor! Olaf, you are blind indeed. Still, I’ll try. Hush! here she comes to say that our supper is ready.”

At our meal several others were present, besides the serving folk, and the talk was general. After it was done I had an interview with some officers. These left, and I sat myself down upon a cushioned couch, and, being tired, there fell asleep, till I was awakened, or, rather, half awakened by voices talking in the garden without. They were those of Jodd and Martina, and Martina was saying,

“Cease your words. I and no one else will go on this Egyptian quest with Olaf. If we die, as I dare say we shall, what does it matter? At least he shall not die alone.”

“And if the quest should fail, Martina? I mean if he should not find the lady Heliodore and you should happen both to return safe, what then?”

“Why, then—nothing, except that as it has been, so it will be. I shall continue to play my part, as is my duty and my wish. Do you not remember that I am Olaf’s god-mother?”

“Yes, I remember. Still, I have heard somewhere that the Christian Church never ties a knot which it cannot unloose—for a proper fee, and for my part I do not know why a man should not marry one of different blood because she has been named his god-mother before a stone vessel by a man in a brodered robe. You say I do not understand such matters. Perhaps, so let them be. But, Martina, let us suppose that this strange search were to succeed, and Olaf has a way of succeeding where others would fail. For instance, who else could have escaped alive out of the hand of Irene and become governor of Lesbos, and, being blind, yet have planned a great victory? Well, supposing that by the help of gods or men—or women—he should find this beautiful Heliodore, unwed and still willing, and that they should marry. What then, Martina?”

“Then, Captain Jodd,” she answered slowly, “if you are yet of the same mind we may talk again. Only remember that I ask no promises and make none.”

“So you go to Egypt with Olaf?”

“Aye, certainly, unless I should die first, and perhaps even then. You do not understand? Oh! of course you do not understand, nor can I stop to explain to you. Captain Jodd, I am going to Egypt with a certain blind beggar, whose name I forget at the moment, but who is my uncle, where no doubt I shall see many strange things. If ever I come back I will tell you about them, and, meanwhile, good night.”

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