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Schlock!

WEBZINE

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KASSI AND THE SWORD

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
RETURN TO
THE PIPE-
WORLD...

KOMODO DANCER

BY PAUL
LUBACZEWSKI
IT HUNTED...

GRAVE DIGGER ROB BLISS

APOSTASY JOSEF DESADE

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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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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Bogatyrs woke up* by *Nicholas Roerich*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, Kassi explores the depths of the Pipe-World with her mechanoid companion, Sebastian. A disturbed man blunders through life, little suspecting the true horrors that lurk beneath. A Generation X dropout tries to put his English degree to profitable use. A priest suffering a crisis of faith seeks evidence of his Maker—through murder!

Stephen Hernandez reviews Steven Deighan's novel, *Salvation in her Name*. The *Dawnsmasher* approaches the *Derelect*. Ned Malone, seeking excitement and fulfilment, is advised to interview an eccentric professor recently returned from South America with stories of prehistoric monsters. Meanwhile, Throck describes the disappearance of his companions—into the Moon Pool!

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t-shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

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KASSI AND THE SWORD by Ste Whitehouse

Kassi Seishin was almost sixteen years old and by rights, according to village lore, should already be married off and sprouting babies as quickly as she could. All her peers were; even Tenshi her best friend. She had started her bleeds two years earlier and her mother had begun to search in earnest for a husband approximately ten minutes later. Fortunately, Kassi's father saw the horror in his daughter's summer green eyes and had relented—although in truth the fact that Kassi could beat any lad in the village (and surrounding area) with any weapon had made it almost impossible for a fitting suitor to be found. That and the 'thing' that hovered close to their village because of her; a machine that spoke like a man troubled even the few men who felt a bride who could defend herself worth the effort.

Of course, her mother Kireina protested bitterly, as though planning a wedding feast was something to look forward to—which puzzled Kassi, considering how often she had complained about the self-same task to her. So here she was almost sixteen and husbandless. Working on her parries and disengages silently outside the small village she called home, watched by her brother Kaze intently. He was four years older than her, and an accomplished swordsman himself, but even he could see that she was the better swordsmith.

"What exactly am I doing here, Kassi?" he said in between chewing on a sliver of grass. "I mean there's nothing I could teach you." To emphasis the fact he threw a small pebble at her which she caught mid-air with the flat of her old sword.

"It's just that we spend so little time together now." She avoided adding 'now that you're married' and continued with. "I thought this would be fun."

"Fun! To be constantly bettered by my little sister?" She heard the hard edge to Kaze's voice but tried to emolliate it by saying:

"But you're almost as good as me!" As soon as the words had been spoken Kassi knew she had made a mistake. Her brother did not explode in anger nor did he rant at her; in some respects, she would have felt better if he had done so. Instead Kaze sighed and turned back towards their village, not bothering to say a word. She watched him go; a forlorn figure moving up clockwise to Shirô, their village, about a mile southward.

From where she stood Kassi could see their—her—home, a plume of thin smoke curling jauntily at an angle (from her perspective). The Seam, a wide highway that mostly ran from southend to northend, could be seen half hidden in cloud up and beyond Shirô. The highway brought trade to the village from the northern lands, and ferried pine, birch and ash away. Well beyond Shirô, hidden in pale mists, lay the snow field that now covered the southend. Allegedly the snow line crept forward year on year, but Kassi was still too young to really notice.

There was a silence behind her, the absence of sound as though nature held her breath momentarily. Kassi did not need to look behind her.

"Hello Sebastian."

“Hello Kassi, luv. Are you well?” There was a hint of concern in his voice; more than Kaze had shown, she considered bitterly.

The mechanoid nuzzled up to her and she absently ran her fingers along the knot of enclosed wires and articulate tubes that constituted Sebastian’s neck. The ‘Thing’—as he was called by most in the village—was around five feet in length and could stand as tall as Kassi’s waist or so low to the ground as to be hidden by tall grass. His eight legs were each paired to an articulate section of his body which reflected the sunline dimly. Each leg could split at their ends into ‘fingers’ which at times appeared to be either sharp as a blade or blunt. Kassi could never really tell. His head could retract partially into his body and consisted merely of an ovoid and two sets of multifaceted lenses that glowed a deep blue from within. He called himself a ‘Surface Engineering Bot’ with the designation A5T1, but Kassi had named him Sebastian.

“I said the wrong thing to Kaze and now he’s angry at me.”

The machine knew that it was expected to say something but could not think what. In the ensuing silence Kassi continued. “I just wanted to spend time with him. I hardly see him now that he’s married and Riku expecting.”

“And yet only last week you were complaining that he was....”

“*That* was last week!” Kassi said sharply. Like most teenagers she did not wish to be reminded of what was—to her—a life-time ago. She stared after the distant figure and sighed theatrically without knowing. “All I said was that he was almost as good as I with the sword.”

“And he took umbrage at *that*!?” Sebastian said. Kassi looked at him sensing there was a mocking tone somewhere in his voice. His blue lenses looked up impassively at her. If he had a mouth butter would remain solid.

“I sometimes think it would be a good thing if I could actually read your thoughts,” she said, partially in earnest.

“Oh, such dull thoughts they would be Kassi, luv. All ‘servo THX1138 needs lubricating’ and ‘the calculation of Pi to the ten millionth decimal point’.”

As always she knew he was bamboozling her but could not quite work out how. “Which is why it would be so useful. I would at least know when to blank out the bullshit.”

A deep chuckle emanated from within. “Still, I believe there is something occurring back in Shirô. My audio sensors are picking up calls and shouts, gathering people in.”

Kassi looked up and could see agitated movement around the small market square. Possibly she heard a call but was unsure. What she was certain of was the flurry of men and women hurrying back into the village. Sheathing her ragged sword and saying farewell to Sebastian, Kassi ran quickly back home catching up with Kaze just at the boundary of Kensi’s last field.

Everyone was gathered in the small square empty of stalls today. The children ran around in excitement unaware and uncaring about what was happening. A few of the older children stopped to listen, hovering at the back as though ready to slip away if the conversation became boring. Mataso the village's leader stood centre of the crowd waiting until he considered enough men had gathered.

"As many of you may know there has been a Sigh around the area for a few weeks now."

Kassi looked around at the handful of imperceptible nods from the usual adults. For herself she had had no idea a Sigh was even that far south. Part of her mind wondered whether it was Allon the arci-olo-gist she had first met years ago, even though she did not consider him a proper Sigh; what with him digging around in the soil and interested in things gone by and not things to come like most Sighs.

Mataso was still speaking and she had missed the first part of the sentence. "...entered the cave complex at Sans Madra two days ago. It is believed he may be trapped somewhere within the cave system."

Kassi suddenly understood why the village was concerned; Shirô was the nearest settlement to the cave entrance and could possibly be viewed as responsible. The cave itself was a large overhang of granite arching across stygian darkness. As children she and Kaze had dared each other to go deeper and deeper into the system, each trying to deter the other with tales of trolls and rock hardened dwarves. She believed in trolls; some of the tamer ones worked the fields during harvest time—if the farmers could afford the costs—and after all they were little more than machines just like Sebastian, but dwarfs she dismissed; she was no longer a child. Still stories held traction on the collective imagination of people and most villagers could recite a litany of ghost stories about what 'really' happened deep underground.

"We need a swordsman to find him." Mataso sounded hopeful that people would readily volunteer. He was sadly mistaken. Most of the men were farmers and the few swordsmen that could hold a weapon without taking their own fingers off felt that they had better things to do than find a foolish Sigh stupid enough to get lost in the Sans Madra caves. Even Kaze jeered loudly with the others.

Mataso looked concerned and tried to cajole the men, but he was leader of Shirô because of his age rather than his commanding presence and the crowd began to drift away.

"I will pledge this sword to the man who volunteers," Mataso called out, holding up a beautiful filigreed broadsword almost as long as Kassi was tall. Most of the men stopped and a few looked admiringly at the craftsmanship that had gone into the piece. Mataso had been a fine blacksmith in his day and even from a distance this looked to excel his best work. Still no one called out and the gathering continued to thin out.

"I'll do it."

All eyes turned to Kassi. She blushed deeply but tried to maintain a solemn pose, hoping that one day people would speak of this moment. If they ever did it would most likely be for the silence interspaced by suppressed laughter. Even though she was the best swordsman in the village she was still just a girl. At least her father looked at her with pride; it was either that or reflux due to her mother's cooking. As always she found it hard to tell.

"Accepted," Mataso said bluntly. "Come with me, lass."

Kassi approached the entrance with trepidation. In truth she had never beaten her brother as the caves felt constricting and overwhelming, causing her to give up a long before Kaze. There were several cave systems where Kassi happily explored, but this particular one felt ominous. Sebastian was there, of course. Somehow he knew things before she did and he sat there waiting smugly—if a machine could be said to look smug; or sit for that matter. Today it did not matter, she was glad for his company.

"I gather there is someone within the system that needs rescuing?" he asked.

"A Sigh."

Sebastian's head seemed to rotate to the side slightly and she had the impression that he was looking at her quizzically.

"A Sigh? That is a word I've not heard before; or at least I know it but suspect the context is different."

"A Sigh is someone who tries to discover the ancient magic of the machines," Kassi explained. "Allon always said that he was a sort of Sigh even though he looked at the dirt."

"He was the archaeologist?"

"The day we first met." *The day I saw the demons.*

She left the second part unsaid but Sebastian picked up the undercurrent.

"Ah. I believe I understand. The s c i in scientist is enunciated as sigh. Over the centuries here anyone who works in those fields has become known as Sighs."

Kassi was puzzled. She understood enough about the ancient runes and their language to read many of the signs still found across the land. "Sigh? Surely s c i would be pronounced sky or ski?"

He rolled a limb indicating a shrug. "Such is the inconsistency of the English language."

She put it from her mind and concentrated on the task at hand. Mataso had lent her a better

sword—if not better in quality it was at least sharp—and had told her of the Sigh who had arrived to explore the cave system and then two days ago vanished. Despite Ah'kis been a collection of villages and lands along the length of the pipe, the elders of the village worried about some far off Gov'ment that might take pleasure in casting retribution upon them for not aiding the Sigh. Thus someone had to be dispatched to find him; preferably alive but if not, with proof of his own foolishness so freeing the village of any responsibility. She had thought that her father's taxes went to the local Lord but it was possible there were other layers above him.

“He most likely will have made for the ‘Grand Chamber’ about four miles in,” Kassi said, more to herself as she tried to push out of her mind the feelings that gripped her chest.

“My chemical sensors indicate bear, fox, bat, salamander and possibly beaver; although that last could possibly have been someone's meal.” He looked carefully at Kassi. “Are you alright, Kassi? You look pale.” There was concern in his voice.

“I'm fine. I...” She considered what to say and then came to a decision. “You know what. The last time I was here I felt as though my insides were boiling, starting with my brain. I was nauseous and scared by these odd flickers of light that seemed only to occur in my eye. No one else could see them.” She blurted it all out feeling better for doing so. Somehow she trusted Sebastian.

“Hmmm. You have never displayed any claustrophobic tendencies before.” It was not a question; they had explored a number of cave systems over the years.

“Exactly. It's just here that I feel this way.”

The mechanoid sighed loudly. “Then why did you volunteer?”

The young girl smiled shyly. “You should have seen the sword; it was beautiful.” There was a faraway look in her eyes that Sebastian ignored.

“So you agreed to venture into an environment aware that it affects you adversely?”

“If you mean I agreed to find this Sigh in the Sans Madra despite the fact that it puts the fear of the Builders up me, then yes.”

Sebastian could have sworn she had lifted her chin a little more than usual. The girl continued. “The sword is truly magnificent, *and* you have forbidden me from stealing anything.” She mumbled the last part of the sentence. He sighed again. Despite his best efforts, the girls' morals dragged them into more troubles than he cared to acknowledge. He also knew not to try and stop her. “Very well, Kassi. Let us proceed.”

She did a little dance, knowing how much it annoyed him.

Inside, the sunlight faded quickly and at the first bend they were in total darkness. Sebastian lit a torch for Kassi and they continued onwards. Parts of the passageways were slick with water and

slime whilst other parts were dry as bones. The ground underneath shifted and it did not help that the shadows shimmied in the pale torchlight.

“Are these dungeons?” Kassi asked.

“No. Just natural hollows in the rocks used to create Ah’kis. Those things you call dungeons are corridors built into the rock for storage or to facilitate travel. They generally drop 30 levels or more, but a few reach the exterior, miles out.”

Kassi knew enough to ignore Sebastian’s ‘exterior’. He had spent two days once trying to explain that they were ‘in’ a world which itself ‘travelled’ through a larger space actually called space. It had ended with him balancing a jug of beer on a plank with rope and spinning it to represent ‘centrifugal force’. Kassi was unimpressed, as a magician in a travelling fair had pulled that self-same trick only a season earlier.

“So there should be nothing unnatural deeper within the caves?” she asked.

“Most likely not.”

“Then why was the Sigh exploring them? They only ever look for new machines or tek-no-logy.”

“It has been thousands of years, lass. God knows where anything is or even if it stayed in place. Look at me.”

“I know. You were built for ‘exterior’ work but here you are, looking after me.” She smiled and ran her fingers along the shaft of his neck.

They came to the ‘Grand Chamber’, so called because it was the largest of four connecting chambers and not because of its overall splendour. If anything, it was a little drab, with dull grey slate reflecting the torch badly and the stalactites and stalagmites, great thick pillars with little colour or evanesce to captivate an audience, oozing from a wedge of limestone one side of the chamber. A small rivulet of dank water wound its way across the floor.

Suddenly Kassi felt pressure deep in her chest. The sound of her heart beating quickly swamped all the other sounds and she felt bile rise at the back of her throat. Sebastian curled a leg around her to steady her. “Are you feeling alright, Kassi luv?”

“I’m fine. *Really!* It’s just that there’s this... “

“Pressure deep in your mind?” Sebastian finished.

“Yes! How did you know?”

“I can sense some low level frequencies most often associated with feelings of disquiet and apprehension. They emanate from deeper in the complex.”

“They would.”

“You can wait here whilst I go on.”

“And then the sword would be yours and I mean how on earth would you even heft such a beautiful object?” She smiled.

“I am quite dexterous, despite....”

“...not having opposable thumbs. Yes, you keep informing me. Shall we go on?”

They moved further into the caves, along the right hand exit from the large chamber. Sebastian kept an eye or three on Kassi and scanned along the spectrum available to him. There were blips down along the infra-sound wavelengths and again near the microwave and quantumwave levels. All three were obviously synced to whatever was causing the girl’s discomfort. The cavern was a maze of chambers and passages etched out by water over the millennia, but this far down the unmistakable stench of human sweat hung in the air. Sebastian broke down the molecules in his sensors and stated blandly. “He went along there a matter of hours ago.”

They followed the trail of imperceptible scent molecules until Sebastian saw a flash of light in the ultraviolet frequencies. Before he could speak Kassi stumbled and he barely had time to catch her before a polysteel net crossed the open space, wrapping itself around them both. He checked Kassi’s vitals first. Nothing seemed to indicate that she was physically harmed but her face contorted as though in pain. He had modified his sensors enough to be able to scan a human body and determine whether there were broken bones or if soft tissue damage had spread deeper, but he could not scan for pain.

Frustrated, he waited listening across numerous wavelengths for any indication of what had trapped them. All he could hear audibly was Kassi’s breath, rasping but steady, and the breath of one other human a hundred yards away. He cut the net away with tools built to be used in outer space and on objects hardened by a vacuum. He paused, waiting to see what would happen next. When no one or no thing intervened, he carefully picked Kassi up and followed the sounds to the scientist.

In the bulge of a tall corridor he found the man shackled within netting much like they had been. He smelt of piss, shit and vomit but a swift scan indicated that he was generally well; his only discomfort coming from being enclosed and lack of food—and toilet facilities obviously. Built, or more truthfully absorbed, into the wall of the passageway was a collection of machines which miraculously were still active. Sebastian could sense the pulses of energy which seemed to be affecting Kassi. It would be easy just to smash what part of the machines were accessible but he was reluctant to do so. Besides, he might make things worse.

“Wh... what are you?” The voice was weak and reedy, rasping over dry lips. “Have you come to free me or kill me?”

“I am Surface Engineering Bot A5T1. We have come to rescue you, but first this machine; can

you shut it down?”

The thin man groaned and rolled over one rheumy eye looking intently at Sebastian.

“I... it is nothing.”

Sebastian stared at the man. “You lie. This machine is the reason you came down here. What does it do?”

“Nothing. Believe me it does nothing. It is a relay.”

“But?” Sebastian replied encouragingly.

The man groaned in hunger, but realised that he would need to answer Sebastian’s questions if he wanted to leave the caves.

“It appears to be malfunctioning. I came to either repair the damage or switch it off, but fear I can do neither.”

Sebastian looked around the face of the rock. Beneath the surface he could see the impressions of more machinery, covered now by calcium carbonate that had leached out of the rock over the thousands of years Ah’kis had been travelling. It was testament to the Builders that even after such a time period their equipment worked, albeit badly.

“You know how to work such machinery?” Sebastian asked.

“No. Only the Builders—may they be forever blessed—understand how such a thing of magic works. I have some knowledge of how to repair minor damage or to switch it off.”

“But it has a defence shield.”

The man nodded glumly. “Aye. Even though I called out in the Builders’ names it still mistook me for a thief or miscreant and imprisoned me thus.” He held up his arms as best he could bound in polysteel netting. Sebastian nonchalantly cut the netting, glancing about in case the defence mechanism reasserted itself again.

“Thank you.” The man hobbled over to a rucksack and took out thick sandwiches of white bread already going mouldy. The Sigh did not care. He was near starvation and discussing software problems with a machine. At that moment whether he saw the sun again felt intangible and distant.

“Thank the Builders!” the man exclaimed through a mouthful of stale bread and curried chicken.

“This machine appears to be affecting my young friend. She complained of headaches and nausea just before she collapsed, and their occurrence matches pulsations from the machine.”

“Impossible!” the man replied. “It has no effect on humans.”

Sebastian uncurled a limb in Kassi’s direction. As if hearing them, a low moan echoed from her.

“But it has no effect. Believe me. Only the Builders would feel anything,” the man insisted.

“Only the Builders. What do you mean by that?” the machine asked.

“This is one of a hundred or more nodes along the length of Ah’kis whose job it was to relay the Builders’ thoughts. Or so we are led to understand. What ancient texts remain are vague on the subject.”

“Telepathy?”

“If not the Builders then perhaps the Krewm? The Kap’tan? They would need to communicate. After all, Ah’kis is over five thousand miles long.”

Krewm? Kap’tan. Sebastian decided the Sigh meant crew members and the captain of the vessel. But telepathy?

“Have they not heard of radios?” he mused aloud.

To which the Sigh replied. “But the sunline disrupts much of transmission of ethereal words. There are cables, but they can become damaged.”

“So each vessel needed a means to communicate efficiently and quickly over great distances?” Sebastian said. It made sense. The plasma line stretching from south to north would naturally disrupt long distance radio waves, and throughout history a number of humans had exhibited empathic resonance beyond most normal parameters. But how did this then effect Kassi? Unless...

“She is telepathic! Or at least has the ability.”

The man looked doubtful. “The Krewm vanished millennia ago. That is why The Mission continues until this day. There is none to stop us. For we are sent unto the heavens and shall never cease, for we bear the taint of sin and debauchery and pleasures of the flesh and thus are condemned by our own ills.”

Well, that was cheering, Sebastian thought sarcastically. “And these ‘pleasures of the flesh’ are?”

“Anything that arouses in you such passion that it leads you from the true builder-gods,” the man answered far too arrogantly for Sebastian’s tastes.

“So anything really. Reading a book. Watching a particularly beautiful sunset. Holding hands. Good food.” At each the man nodded his head almost eagerly—although a little confused over what exactly a ‘sunset’ was, he felt that it sounded morally bad.

“Fortunately Kassi’s unconscious and you have my morals to deal with,” he added just quietly enough for the man to not hear him. “I am pretty sure she would leave you down here.” He paused to calm his thoughts before continuing. “Still, if she is telepathic that would explain her discomfort. You say the node is malfunctioning?”

“Yes, but I am unable to either repair it or actually switch it off. Rock has built up around the core of its being.”

Sebastian looked down at the comatose girl. If there were as many nodes as the man said, then if any or all were faulty her life would be one of pain and disability. And if this node’s fault grew worse? If it spread beyond the caves?

“Is there anything that can be done for the girl?” he asked grimly, aware that this was a man hundreds of generations away from what an actual scientist had been.

“For the girl, no; but there are ‘The Words’ which change machines. They could be harnessed and so linking you to her. With your own ‘Network’ you could offer her protection eliminating the effects of this node.”

“I sense a but.”

“There would be a link; permanently altering both of you. If it is unsuccessful you may both be changed irrevocably for the worse.”

‘The Words?’ ‘Network?’ Sebastian considered the man’s meaning. Network probably meant his neural net but ‘The Words?’ Then it became clear.

“Code,” he said. “The words that alters machines. You mean recoding.”

“I can write the words which will link you to this child,” the man said,” and then your own network would support her mind and protect it from the nodes emanations. But it is dangerous.”

In a split second Sebastian had run the odds and made his decision. “Do it.”

The man took out an ancient pad that looked more jury-rigged than actual machine but he typed quickly showing Sebastian the code every minute or so. When he had finished the mechanoid was confident that the code would do as he said and not screw him up royally. Still if he had fingers he would have crossed them.

The code took a second or two to download and a full minute to alter certain pathways deep within his neural net. He felt her mind, her thoughts bubbling upwards upon a surface of ephemeral topaz. Random words and emotions flowing like detritus upon the surface.

{Kassi} he ‘said’ instinctively.

{Sebastian?} The reply both gave him hope but also troubled him. He knew no external sensors had picked up any sound.

{Kassi luv. Can you hear me?}

{Of course I can. Why do you...?} He saw her face, eyes still closed, stiffen. {What the fuck!?!}

He placed a limb across her hand in comfort, her summer green eyes now looking up at him and the scientist.

{Oh my poor head.... You've found the Sigh I see. Wait! Is that supposed to be here?}

{What?}

Sebastian turned and saw a second machine taller than him, no more than a collection of shapes. It gave off an air of menace.

"Shit! A jigsaw."

"I guess from the appellation that's not a good thing?" she asked, sitting up sword in hand.

"It's a collection of mini-bots usually working independently, but which can come together if there is a big enough problem," the Sigh replied almost proudly.

"And I guess we've become a big enough problem?" Kassi asked sweetly.

"Yes." Sebastian.

"No," the Sigh replied.

The machine raised a limb and started a large buzzsaw.

"Possibly," he added as the sound reverberated in the narrow cavern.

Kassi leapt to her feet all discomfort gone and smiled. "You know, I was thinking I was going to get through the day without hitting stuff."

She swung the broadsword and the machine thrust the buzzsaw forward. Despite the narrowness of the cave Kassi was relentless using the cave walls against the thing. Within a few minutes, it was a collection of scrap over which the Sigh gesticulated in horror.

"Th... that was a machine of the Builders," he said softly.

"And it was also a motherfucking machine ready to kill us," Kassi replied calmly, examining her now worn and damaged sword.

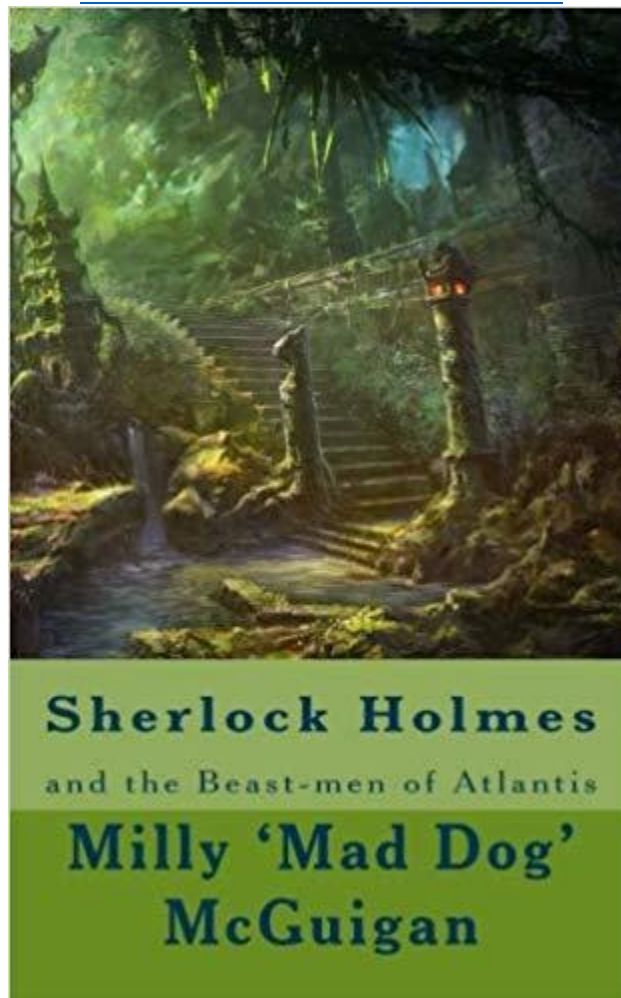
“I suggest we leave before the nodes defence systems finds any more mini-bots with which to apprehend us,” Sebastian proposed.

Kassi slid the remnants of the sword into its scabbard. “Well, if we meet anything else this is almost useless. I just hope the one Mataso has promised me is a better blade.”

As the two friends laughed and joked neither saw the Sigh slip a thumb drive into a hidden port. He knew that they would not be attacked as the node had completed its task and now it would work as well as all the other nodes. All was just as his masters required; the machine had acquiesced as planned and the two were now irrevocably linked together. He smiled and followed the girl out, happy to be in her presence even for this brief amount of time. Proud to play a small part in her story. Thinking of the tales he would tell his children and grandchildren of the day he met the one who would save them all.

THE END

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KOMODO DANCER by Paul Lubaczewski

It hunted. Hope was with it; the night was the best time for the hunt. Its prey was at its most vulnerable in the night. Nothing could sense it until it was too late to do anything but bow to the inevitable. But ease was not the only reason to keep the hunt to the night. The prey called out in the dark, practically begged for the opportunity to feel the strike of the hunter in the night.

Its scales rustled as it moved. Even then, though, you'd need the right ears to hear it. You'd have to be another one of the clutch, or, in very a unique frame of mind. There was potential prey all around, it could vaguely see that, but potential, and ready, were different entirely. Everyone is a potential race car driver too, but only the special ones ever go crashing into a wall and vanish into eternity at 200 miles per hour.

Its eyes searched through the ghostly world, it inhabited. A veneer overlaid onto the known, or maybe the real thing unseen by most. Who, but the creator of all of it could tell? Shadows moved by, unripe prey most would only rot on the vine as it were, amid the background noise of the world never to experience the subtle caress it offered. There! In the murky shadows of night, a sob of despair! Always worth investigating! It swirled away into the gloom to find the source!

The brief pools of light in the path flowed by as it hunted faster. It was sure of the noise, now to get closer, to assess the state of the prey! There in the distance! Walking slowly and unaware, there was the target! With silky stealth, born of aeons of instinct, it moved onward. It weaved ever closer to its victim!

A brief assessment told it, there was no way it would be able to bring this animal down tonight. The thing was too big. It had too much life left in it. Too much fight, too much size! But it was of no moment, sometimes they were ready to bow down, ready to accept being fed upon. Sometimes, all you could hope for was one BITE! Then vanish into the night again, looking for something that WAS ready to just lie down and accept its fate. Just a little closer now....

Tonight sucked. There was no good way to look at it, it just was. He had been hoping for that consulting job and now.... Well, now he was going back to being a teacher. A non-tenured one at that. He was an ecologist, he wanted to work in his field! He was young, he wanted to get field work in while he was still young enough to really get out there, not spending his time teaching others to do it. He'd done solid intern work, but it just didn't seem to count!

They said that his educational background was wonderful, but they were going with someone with more "field experience". How in the hell was he ever going to get field experience if he couldn't land a job somewhere as a consultant? It was a Catch-22 hell trap; if he had the experience he could easily get the job, but to get the job he needed the experience, that he could only get from having landed the job.

Janice would try to cheer him up, of course; it was what made her a good friend and a great fiancé. But, he wasn't ready for cheering up tonight. Not in the slightest little bit. Tonight, he

was in the mood to get something to drink, hell he was in the mood to get a lot of somethings and bring them back to the apartment with him. It was a Senator Beer and his friend Mr. Vodka sort of evening.

He already had a quart of vodka tucked in the car. All he needed was the beer. The supermarket was a dead zone this late. Everyone was long gone, home to eat their purchases of the day. Only a few stragglers now, wandering the aisles looking for that one specific thing they had completely forgotten they were out of. The perfect time for shopping, really, as long as you didn't have plans or a life.

The beer aisle was even quieter. This was a slightly nicer part of town, and people might linger in the wine aisle, but they didn't want anyone to see them haunting the beer section too long. Nice people were allowed to drink wine by the cask and could still be eccentrics with impeccable taste in wine. Beer drinkers were expected to grab "their brand" and get the hell out. That was actually a shame, since the corporate chain had made the place carry a rotating selection of microbrews.

He frankly didn't care what the few housewives hovering around the joint thought tonight. He was a man with no plans to see his girlfriend, a whole lot of upset, and ample cash in his debit account. He was going to take a minute to ponder what he wanted. The vodka was for the get sick drunk and have no taste buds left anyway part of the evening, the beer he hoped to enjoy some. Finally, he settled on a mix 12 pack from some micro-brew he'd never heard of. He would get lit, AND have a new life experience, perfection.

There was almost no line at the checkout this time of night. Just the exhausted face of the cashier as she checked him out. Her mouthing the platitudes of official grocery store greetings, and he repeats his time-honoured responses. The pair, like a couple of nouveau 21st century Catholics repeating the traditional greetings of their faith in Cheetos being tasty, and Noosa yogurt being in the dairy aisle. He avoided looking at the tabloids in their rack, the bibles of the First Church of The Checkout Aisle.

Out to the parking lot and the car. The massive field of asphalt stuck in the middle of all the concrete felt chill tonight. Which was odd, since it was late summer, and the black tar had been roasting in the sun all day, and the air hadn't been cool when he'd gone in. His car popped open with the keyless entry, and he set his beer down in the passenger seat. It was far too much bother to get it into the back seat of his little hybrid acknowledgment of adult responsibility.

He stared out at the city lights for a second, standing there next to the ridiculously small car. The unfairness of it all welled up in him. He was sure, as he was standing there now if his family had DONE things with THEIR lives, he'd have that job now. But not him! Oh no, his Mom toddles off to crazy town and he made the most of a charity ward ride to higher education, but that was it. The end of it. Maybe if he was lucky his kids would get to benefit from the connections he made in his life one day, but the last thing HE wanted to maintain a connection to was where he came from in life. Not to her.

The pain felt sharp for a moment, like it was an almost psychical thing, not an emotional one. A

sob welled up in him, and a tear welled up to roll down his face unbidden. For a moment, he thought he heard a voice on the wind speak. But there was no wind, and there was no voice, it was just the misery of his mind echoing his sadness, just like the stab in his chest was just the pain making it tangible.

Twelve beers and a pint of vodka should make the wind and the ache all go away.

He had really done it this time. But nobody would listen! It wasn't his FAULT. He had to hit her! Janice just wouldn't listen! He was so close to getting the answers he needed, the answers that would explain it to everyone else! But she didn't want to hear it, not any of it. He TRIED to explain it to her, but she just wouldn't listen! All she would say to him is that he shouldn't drink as much, and maybe he should go back to seeing Doctor Allen. Then she started asking him if he was still taking his medication.

Didn't she know the drugs made it so he couldn't listen? He couldn't hear the answers anymore when he took the horrible drugs. He needed to know, he could save the whole planet if only they would tell him the secret before they gave it to that bastard Brad Pitt. He told her, god knows how many times, that Pitt was spying on him. Why wouldn't she listen? There were spies everywhere, but what was the point in telling her if she refused to LISTEN?

Fear began to hit at him now. He hadn't meant to hit Janice, he loved Janice. Hitting was bad, he knew that. Hitting a girl was worse, nobody heard your side of it if you hit a girl. He wondered for the first time how much trouble HE was in now. But he had no choice, he had to, he had to, he had no.....

The door to the cell opened.

He was fairly sure this was a police officer. The man may have been dressed in a shirt and tie instead of a uniform, but he was still fairly sure that the guy was a cop. The guy looked particularly young to him. Almost as young as he had been once when he was still teaching. When they still let him teach. Before the world had started telling him the secrets he needed to know.

The officer sat down nonchalantly in the chair across from him. He could afford to be nonchalant with a cuffed suspect. The officer's eyes were wary despite his air of nonchalance now that he looked more carefully at him. Probably seen a lot of things come out of supposedly subdued suspects before. And he was more than a suspect, he had hit Janice. She had left in an ambulance, you don't get more guilty than that. He wondered for a second where the kids were, before turning back to face this demon with a badge here to torment him, he was sure of that.

"I don't know if you care much," the officer said, "but your wife is going to be alright. The cut looked worse than it is. She's already home with your kids."

This brought his head up to stare directly at the officer now. "Thank god," he mumbled through

the blood that had crusted around the rim of his mouth. He wasn't entirely how that had gotten there.

The officer sighed, he brought out a little disposable vape pen. "Can't even fucking smoke in here anymore, ain't that something? The union got it so we can use these things, so, better than nothing, right?"

He didn't say anything, so the officer sighed again and leaned forward, "Why did you hit your wife, Richard?"

This sent a shock him that partially brought him out of his daze like an electric shock running right into his eyes, sending them wide. "I...I..." he stuttered.

"Take your time. Talk to me, Richard."

He stared at the officer his eyes pleading, his face a mask of mute entreaty for pity of some kind. Finally, he violently shook his head back and forth for a moment, something in the movement delivering him his voice back. "I...I didn't want to. Really! I didn't! But...but, but, but I... I, umm so close you see, so awfully close. Everybody NEEDS me to finish, and she...she, she tried to stop me!"

"Tried to stop you how?" the officer said in a soothing calm tone.

"She wanted me to umm...to take the medication.... she demanded I do it. Said I had to quit drinking and take the medication. That stuff is evil, it *Ummm*, it hides the mind. They can't tell you what you need to finish your calculations if you...if you take it."

"Who can't, Richard?"

"The committee, the steering committee. You know! Everybody does! They pretend they don't, but they do! Oh YES!" Richard's voice began to run through a groove now as it rose in volume and passion. A path that it had taken so many times, so many times, each time the groove grinding deeper and harder to bounce out of.

"Whoa, whoa there, Richard, calm down, I just needed to get the basics from you," the officer said softly and calmly putting his hands up, palms towards Richard. "I need you to stay here for a bit longer, OK, Richard? Would you like a soda from the vending machine? A coke?"

Richard nodded his head with another violent shake.

The officer got up and walked over to the door, "OK there, buddy. You be good, don't yell, or try to break anything, and I'll be back in a minute with your soda, alright?"

Then he was gone, and the door slammed shut like the lid of judgment on the coffin of the hanged man.

The officer's voice could be heard through the door, "Call General, we got one that's gonna have to go to State, so reserve him a new admittance, prone to violence. We'll try to wind him down some before they gotta transport him!"

Soon, soon they would shut the hell up for a while. Richard just needed to get to his spot, and then he could finally shut them up for a while. It had been a long day, trying to get it together to beg for money. Just getting his own voice to come out was hard while they were screaming at him, all of them, tormenting him. Even a simple little sentence like "Spare some change" was a struggle.

Richard knew now, they weren't going to help him. No, years of visits to the doctors, losing everything, that had dissuaded him of those illusions. They were evil, they were mocking him. They laughed at how stupid he was to believe them. All the time, mocking him, just mocking. They were going to kill him! They told him all the time. They said he'd never know when it would happen. One of them, holding a knife, ready to stab it deeply into his shrunken skin! Finding the spot between the bones that led to his special heart. They needed to pierce his special heart to complete their plans.

Richard rubbed his coat sleeve against his nose to clear some of the snot away. It dripped now constantly. Maybe winter was coming. It would explain why he was wearing this hideous jacket. Maybe fall had already passed and he'd just missed it all together, he certainly couldn't remember it. Richard could think of no other reason why he'd be wearing this ugly thing, with the greasy sheen on the inside of the elbow like someone rubbed it all the time, and the equally shiny spot on the sleeve like some druggie was constantly wiping their nose on it. Coke heads were everywhere, running the government, trying to pervert little kids and turn them into hookers, he knew, he tried to tell people, but...nobody listened to him anymore for some reason.

But soon enough, it wouldn't matter for a few hours. He'd been able to get the wonder potion he needed to make them be quiet for a while. Something that would let him float in its warmth. No one screaming in his head, no one reminding him of Janice or Conner or Amber. No wife, no kids, no lost jobs, no hospital stays. Nothing but bliss.

He slipped down the alley over to the broken and rotted old warehouse, pulling back a piece of plywood that covered where the windows had been. It took a horrible amount of effort for him to pull his emaciated frame up and over, peeling paint cracking underneath him as he dragged himself through. Richard was thankful for the coat now, one time last...spring? summer? Well, one of the warm months anyway, he'd been only wearing a t-shirt and a piece of glass had cut him pretty badly. The doctors had been surprised he was still alive the next day when he came to and somehow managed to get himself to the emergency ward.

He had to lie on the floor he slid on to face first for a moment, to get his breath and his strength back. His face pressed hard against the timbers, his one foot still hooked in the window frame. Richard was fascinated for a moment, watching the little clouds of brown blown up as the dust danced along the exposed wood floating over the remaining specks of industrial grey paint,

disturbed by his panting gasps. Finally, though, he was able to drag himself back to his feet to look around.

He decided against the rotting mattress thrown down on the floor close to where he stood now. Richard didn't want to talk to anyone today, so he wanted no accidental conversations with anyone else taking advantage of the space tonight. He stumbled across the empty cavern of a single room heading for the staircase in the corner.

Richard chose the upstairs. The downstairs always had a foul stench to it, as all the rot from this decaying building oozed its way down the flaking and decaying walls and floors, only to pool on the mud and the concrete that remained down there. He wanted to enjoy this, and the smell would be distracting. He considered that the smell must be especially horrid these days, considering how poorly his nose worked since it had gotten broken by some kid looking to beat up bums a year ago. If he noticed stench, it must be abominable.

As he entered the second floor, Richard looked out the un-boarded but broken window. He saw the sun was setting over the city, and the city lights were turning on. This would be a perfect spot. Picturesque. But he'd need to hurry, he wanted this run to be all his, he didn't need some other wretch coming around looking for "just a taste", not now.

Richard lit a cigarette from his small supply that he had bummed during the day. Taking another one out of his crumpled pack he snapped the filter off. He took out a bottle of water he had, a spoon, and the needle he needed. Finally, with almost religious care, he took out the little packet of his wonder potion. A little water, a little heat, and most importantly of all, his needle. He had tried to get a newer one from one of the exchanges, but no luck, they'd run out, so old faithful was going to have to get him through tonight.

His jacket on the floor, he watched in the twinkling of the city lights as the mixture in the needle darkened. First shot, he'd hit the spot. Slowly he pushed the plunger home. Some of the others would almost slam it in, but he preferred slow. He always said it burned if it was too fast. His vital task complete, he leaned against the one remaining window pane, watching the pretty lights, lost in bliss, a smile across his lips, blood dripping down his arm.

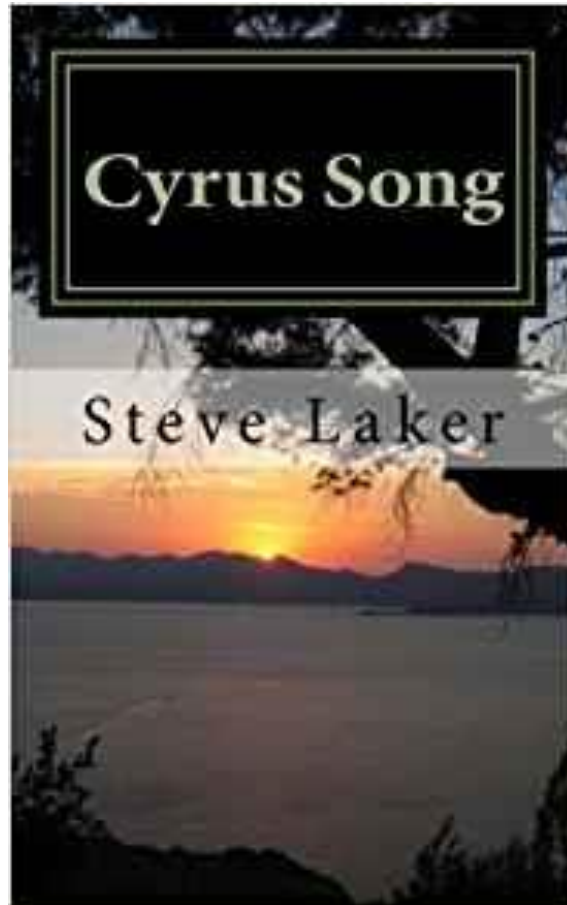
The large male hissed at the others. He would feed first, by right of his size. Many of them were swirling through this dark room tonight, they could smell it as well. This was a good hunting ground for them. The feeding was upon them all tonight. But he had bitten many over the years, he had fed many of his kind with those bites. He had sent the prey stumbling and rotting from the inside out into the world where eventually they would drop, beyond hope, beyond saving and redemption, where no cure could reach them so that the others might feed.

He had grown large over those years, he had grown strong, and he would feed first!

Later, engorged with his meal, he would move away from the kill. He would lay his scales down on this dirty place to digest what he had devoured. Then, and only then, would the others be free

to rush in, to grab their chunks out of the prey as it lay stinking and foul upon the floor. It was the way of his kind. All attempted to bite the vulnerable, not so they may eat today, but so that someday, when the infection has finally done the damage, the prey will lay down. When it does, all will feast on the rotting flesh of the soul.

THE END



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GRAVE DIGGER by Rob Bliss

I was tired of being poor my whole life. Too much debt, lousy jobs, no way to save to give myself a better life. I was born at the wrong time, early '70s, before the computer and internet were forecast to be the latest careers that could make you rich. Or at least have a well-paying job. Generation X meant you were a non-person.

But as I got older, the net stayed around, grew, and the strangeness of people spread across the cyber world. People sold everything because people bought anything. Nobodies were becoming somebodies, and the young were becoming the masters of the world. Kids born when I was graduating with a useless degree in English literature could buy and sell me.

I wanted to stop being somebody's whore.

My idea to change my fortune was something out of the best horror stories, which had always delighted me as a child of the Seventies, a depressed era, Vietnam and Nixon ... *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Exorcist* and *The Omen*. I became what my era raised me to become.

I couldn't stop giggling as I dug up the grave in the churchyard.

Past midnight, with only a sliver of white moon to shine on the gravestone. Washed by a thousand rains until the name and date were almost vanished. But I had been there a few times, day and night, to confirm I had the right person.

An old church, an historic monument, protected and rarely visited, even by tourists. Time wore at its stones, its silent bell tower. A small cemetery where only the town's first inhabitants or the very rich were buried. An honour to be buried at the protected cemetery.

I had no idea how far down the bones rested, how deep the coffin. And, yes, there were bones down there, not ashes. I had done my research. The view of me digging was blocked by a tall hedge that lined the small country road on one side, and by the lake on the other. A Sunday night, the Monday was a statutory holiday. No one, not even drunk teens wanting to smash a stone for the thrill, would be prowling passed.

I hadn't planned to take the ribs or legs or arm bones, still in their burial suit beneath the coffin lid. Only the skull. The casket wood was brittle, easily smashed by the shovel, almost a hundred years old.

I got back in my car, macabrely sat the skull on the passenger seat, kept my gloves on until I could dump the shovel in the river as I passed over the wooden bridge heading home.

The crime would be reported eventually—my authentication, proof of purchase. The skull belonged to a famous writer, but only to Canada, not to the world. So I could only ask for so high a price on his head. I'd sell him online, put the skull in a bubble wrap box, mail him from a distant town or city, take a day to drive there if need be, then off to the buyer. I took a few pictures of the dug grave, the skull in my gloved hand, to prove who he was, and that I had been

the thief. Part of the sale package. A Polaroid camera—modern invention of an old era—is still untraceable in the era of digital fingerprints.

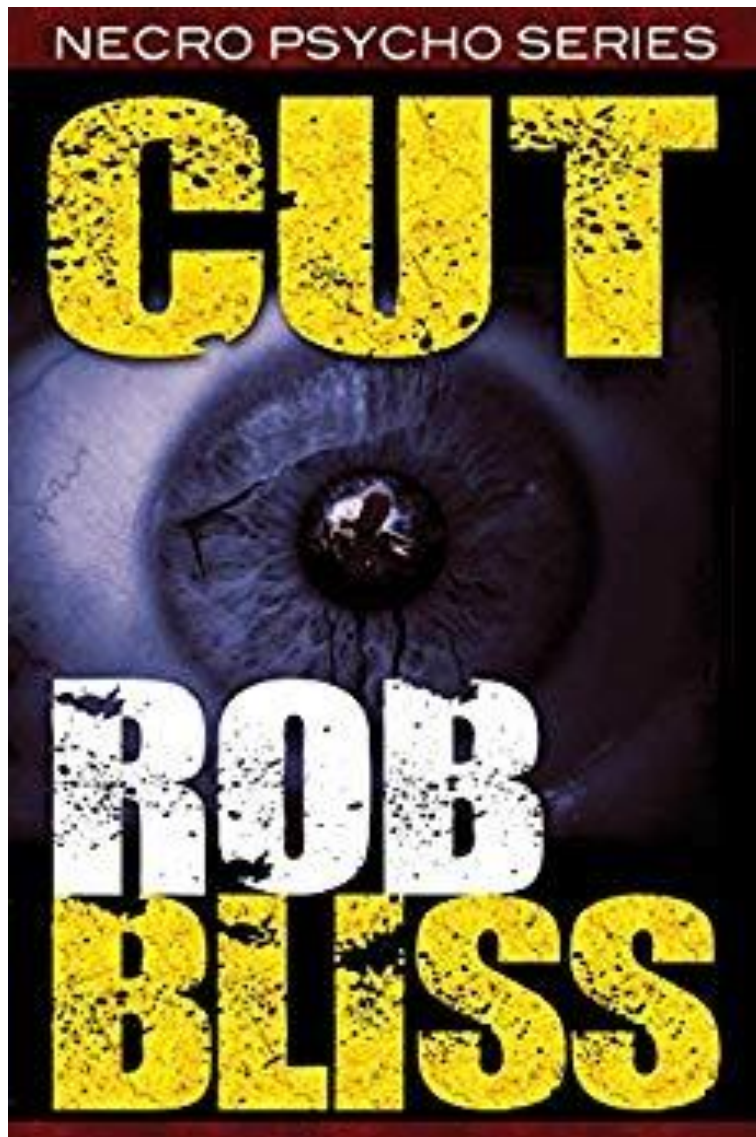
The only drawback: he might not be famous enough. If the younger generation—the internet youth, those millionaires, creators of the new culture—didn't know or care who the almost one-century-old man was to pay for him, then I'd have his skull sitting on my mantel. For how long? I couldn't easily put him back. Would have to wait months, a year maybe. But what if they hired a security guard to patrol, or put in cameras? Then the old man would be my possession forever.

Still, if all else failed, I'd drop him in the river. What would he care where his head rested? And he was really only a test. If someone offered me even a dollar, then that would show me there was a buyer for bones.

I had plans for the future. A shovel, gloves, and the location of graves belonging to the perpetually famous. I'd fly across the world to find them. People who, even in death, were valuable, to every generation, in every era. There are more famous dead people than living. Every celebrity is protected in life by bodyguards and the electrified fences of their high-walled mansions, secluded far from the public eye.

But in death, no one is guarded. All it takes is the right skull, and fanatics will pay a price comparable to the greatest works of art. My fortune is assured. I may even start a trend.

THE END



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APOSTASY by Josef Desade

If there was a hell, he knew he was headed there. His soul was far beyond redemption and honestly, he just didn't care. Inhuman screams issued forth with the first snip of the rusted garden shears. An explosion, tear drops falling to the ground; the windows had blown out. Feathers fluttered in the air, slowly drifting, settling to the cold dirt floor one by one. White as pure snow; for a moment it seemed as if a storm had begun in the dimly lit basement as the wind from outside whipped through the empty eye sockets where the windows had been. He gazed upon the sobbing girl, porcelain skin against a backdrop of darkness, bound in steel chains; she knelt as if she were praying. Praying to an entity that no longer cared, if he ever had at all. Blood ran down the back of the angel, creating a thin trail that sent tiny droplets dripping down onto the wing that lay discarded behind her. It had turned black when the first crimson drop of blood had touched it, as if it had been poisoned. "The blood of an angel kills," he thought to himself, "Well, the devil's in the details."

The angel looked up at him, an ocean of sadness and pain within her eyes. He held the garden shears beneath her back and let her blood drip onto the blade, watching as it slowly covered the surface. He held them up in front of her and she stared frightened as the elixir of life ran down the steel. "This is the blood of Christ." He ran the blade across her arm and the beautiful porcelain began to boil as the angel let out another scream. He slid it slowly across her one more time, watching as her flesh charred. "Ah, now you are just like us, imperfect," he said as he laid his eyes upon the cross that lay smoking upon her arm like a fire that had just burned out. Tears fell from her eyes as he walked around behind her and cut off the other wing with a quick snip. It hit the ground and a fountain of blood burst forth from her shoulder, soaking the ground behind her. The second wing turned a deathly black and the angel fell forward on her face, the pain overwhelming her.

He stood over her, watching as the blood pooled at her feet, smoke rising from where it had touched upon her skin, leaving scarred flesh behind. Her back rippled with blisters and she was sobbing uncontrollably. He grabbed her hair and pulled her head back, gazing into her eyes as crystal clear tears rolled down her face. "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams," he whispered to her. He let go of her and she fell to her hands and knees as he walked around behind her again. "Revelation calls," he said softly and then slid the garden shears around her neck; snip.

A month ago he had been preaching sermons to the masses from the pulpit, now he stood behind the likeness of an angel burned into the ground, black and white feathers spiralling around the room in the breeze that came from the open wounds that led to the outside. He was perhaps the first human to witness the death of an angel; those etheric immortal creatures that were nothing more than slaves in the end. He had watched her head roll, bouncing on the ground like a ball, and then there had been a flash. He had blinked his eyes until they readjusted to the light and the angel had been gone. All that was left was a shadow, burned into the ground where her body had been, like a terrible reflection of what really awaited humanity. He went over to an old wooden

rack that sat in the corner of the basement filled with empty mason jars that were wrapped within the twisted tangles of spider webs. He picked one up, brushing a spider away and then picked up a trowel from a table that sat nearby. He knelt down and slowly scooped the ashes into the jar and sealed it tight. To hold an angel in your palm, the wonder of it all, he thought to himself.

He ran his fingers along the side of his face, where a scar had begun to form. The blood had splashed back and before he had been able to move a single drop had touched his skin, branding him for damnation perhaps. No voice from on high had called down to him, no archangels had descended to smite him, not even a serpent had appeared to congratulate him. Everything had just grown silent. Silence...perhaps silence was something however. Maybe the silence was the entire chorus of angels in heaven screaming in agony. An eye for an eye, he thought to himself as he sat down.

He gazed down at the dirt floor in front of him. The vision of the angel still burned to the ground, although he had taken the ashes away. Perhaps after everything else is gone, this memorial will remain, a curious reminder of beauty that had once been. He reminisced about the first time he had stepped up to an altar. He had felt such exquisite joy gazing up at the stained glass windows above the priest; visions of angels dancing on high behind his vision. Nothing had ever come close to that initial joy he felt until he saw the death of one. The death of an immortal, incomprehensible ages witnessed, all those memories erased in a solitary moment.

He wondered if demons in some dark abyss were rejoicing in the extinguished life of one of their own. Was there a master demon somewhere that was now counting down the hours until his soul belonged with them, lost in a place that was forgotten by time? He didn't believe so...if there was a creature that was truly evil it was the creator who allowed children born without sin to perish. An eye for an eye, he thought to himself. Where was the vengeful god of the Old Testament now? Why hadn't he been stricken down for his actions? The only logical answer was that there was no one there. A clock chimed midnight somewhere above him in the monastery. It was Christmas morning.

Nightfall...paralyzing dreams...he tossed and turned as he awoke repeatedly throughout the night. It seemed as if he was cursed to see the angel's face every time he closed his eyes. He had gone through the day as if sleepwalking. Everything was a blur. Pacing back and forth through the rooms of the monastery his anger welled up as his eyes fell upon religious artefacts hung upon the walls of the chambers. He had visited the cemetery earlier, while the twilight sky had begun to take over the surrounding canvas he had fallen to his knees at the grave and cursed the heavens for giving him no answer. What other atrocious acts must he commit before it caught the attention of the god he had dedicated his life to serving. He was feverish, his mind racing as the sweat dripped down his face. He had watched the life fade from the eyes of the lady the night before, watched as the colour slowly faded from the orbs that held a secret ocean within the confines of a leathery wrinkled beach.

The ticking had begun again. It started off in the distance and got closer and closer, mocking his every move. What kind of game was this? A vision came into focus before him. The man with

the cross, the pocket watch he held counting away the seconds, as the man sat before him in a wing back chair smiling. He watched as the man made the sign of the cross and then the church bell ringing outside the building snapped him back into reality. He was alone in the dark, the soft movement of the sands of time fading away like a distant dream.

He began to cry and grabbed an antique porcelain cross from the wall and smashed it on the ground. Shards flew into the air around him and he kicked over the chair in front of him. Even now he was just a joke, a game for the amusement of divine beings. The road to damnation had been paved in laughter at his expense. He began to cry again as his eyes fell upon a portrait of Jesus. He looked back at him with a curious smile upon his face as if to say *your pain means nothing*. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, slowing his racing thoughts. He pulled himself slowly to his feet and backed out of the room.

Josue sat in the dark, his nerves on end. He listened to the silence in the church. He tried to gather his thoughts while he waited, feeling a little uncomfortable sitting in a church that wasn't his, from a faith that wasn't either. He heard a faint echo as the sound of footsteps slowly approached. He heard shallow breathing as someone slid into the confessional on the other side of the screen. Why would god allow murder to be the only thing that has stuck with us since the beginning? An evil deed following us towards oblivion.

"Father, forgive me, for I have sinned."

Josue began his prayers but the man interrupted him abruptly.

"That has always been a hard question to answer. Some would say it is because many have told God to leave their lives, with God being a gentleman and giving us free will, he steps aside."

"I've done horrible things...the sound of his watch haunts me in my dreams...mocking me...and still no answers from heaven or hell."

"Your conscience is getting the better of you. You are feeling alone in this time of sorrow, and you are looking for answers."

"I know someone is listening, I can feel his presence...and yet silence greets me...I will receive an answer."

"God will give you an answer. He chooses the time and the way you receive it. Even Jesus felt abandoned while he was on the cross."

"I've seen an angel...I know they're there...I watched as it died in torment...and still silence...its blood burned the ground...its silhouette burned as a horrible reminder."

Josue sat silent in the booth as he heard the footsteps echoing and slowly fading away. For a moment he forgot where he was as the stranger's words replayed themselves. The footsteps died

away and Josue said a prayer and slowly made his way out of the church as he pondered what he had just heard.

Horrible nightmares had crept into his dreams until he could stand it no more. He sat awake, staring at the wall of his bedroom where a wooden cross hung against a white backdrop. He couldn't get the ticking out of his head. His life, dedicated to a being that tormented his soul like it was a television program for his amusement. He could feel unseen eyes upon him as the flesh of his arms began to bump up. He screamed at the empty room and threw a glass from his nightstand, the shattering breaking the silence. He watched as the sun slowly rose in the sky, a fireball against a pale ocean, dotted with the lights of twinkling ships. He began to pace, back and forth to the phantom sound of the hands on a clock ticking when it hit him. He knew what must be done, it was so obvious. He sat down at a chair, gazing out at the rising sun and began to laugh.

Josue sat in a recliner, staring at the blank screen on the television. He hadn't slept at all, his thoughts and insomnia had become lovers for the evening. He couldn't get the cryptic words out of his head the man had spoken about angels and deeds best left unsaid. What could he of possibly meant when he said he'd watched an angel die, surely he must be out of his mind. The man must be delusional, for how could that be possible? The rising rays of the sun washed across his face like the cleansing water of a baptismal font as he rose to his feet to start his morning routine.

He looked out the window, the yard was bathed in a soothing light that calmed his nerves. The man obviously needed some kind of help, perhaps he should let the priest at the church know about their night time visitor. He flipped on the television and put on the news; a reporter in a cheap suit standing in front of a church. He turned the volume up and his eyes grew wide as he realized it was the church he had been meeting the strange man at. The reporter was going on about a homeless lady that had been found strangled a couple days prior. Nervously, Josue's mind began to race as he stared at the stone church on the screen.

The sun was setting as he stared up at the altar. The day had felt like a blur, he couldn't keep track of the time. His body screamed out for sleep, but whenever he closed his eyes he was haunted by the man and his watch. He knew it was almost time; this time he would have the answers he sought. Everything had fallen into place quite easily. The lady had come into the church to give confession, pushing along a carriage with a small infant. She hadn't even seen it coming when he had hit her in the back of the head with the base of the candlestick. She had slumped to the ground and he had dragged her into the basement, using duct tape to bind her hands. Now he was awaiting nightfall as he gazed up at the stained glass windows behind the altar, the woman's baby cooing gently beside him.

An eye for an eye he thought to himself. He could feel someone watching him although he knew the church was empty. Some unseen force that was emitted from the shadows. The light falling on the floor was slowly creeping towards the walls as he began to light candles. *If only you had answered my prayers I wouldn't have had to go to such lengths*, he thought to himself. If it

weren't for the strange visions he had seen, he would have doubted there even was some spectral visitor that had been watching, and if it were the devil then there must be a god as well. A god that sat back and watched as he tried in vain to scream out to the heavens. He stepped back and watched the last of the sunlight dissipate as the altar glowed with the light of the dancing flames.

The sun was setting as Josue approached the parish. He could see the light of candles reflecting off stained glass, an evening mass must have ended recently. He looked around at the receding sunlight and walked up to the old wooden door. He pulled lightly on the door to make sure it wasn't locked and seeing as it moved he pulled it open the rest of the way, the weight of it catching him off guard. As he entered he noticed that there were no lights on, save the faint light down the corridor from candles. He must have caught them right before they locked up for the evening. Quietly, he walked down the hall and towards the nave where he hoped to find the resident priest.

He turned into the doorway and froze in shock at what he saw. Before the devilish illumination of the candles, a priest stood at the altar with a knife at his side, a sleeping infant lain before him. He slowly crept forward as he heard the priest talking to someone who couldn't be seen when it dawned on him that the voice belonged to the man whose confessions he had been taking. As he slowly moved forward, his footsteps muffled by a carpet that went the length between the pews he could hear the man arguing with himself, tears pouring down his face; glittering in the candlelight.

He was within ten feet of the man when he saw him begin to move his arm. He watched as the metal glinted while the priest raised the knife above his head and began to raise his voice. Nonsense, gibberish. He ran forward and grabbed his arm, catching him off guard. The man began to struggle with him and losing their balance they took a step back, slipping on the nearby stairs leading up to the altar and fell backwards landing on the cold stone floor behind them.

Out of breath and frantic, Josue rolled to the side as the steel of the blade swung down, catching his arm. He felt a stinging pain as he rolled further away and pulled himself quickly to his feet. The man climbed to his feet and as he lunged at him waving the knife wildly, Josue ducked to the side. He stumbled backwards, realizing he had been hit in the face with an elbow and fell to the ground. Crawling towards the side of the nave Josue struggled to keep conscious as the black of midnight rushed forward to greet him. His eyes flickered as he saw the priest stumble and then fall facedown before the altar, the knife jutting out of his side like a deformed appendage.

Josue awoke to the sound of a clock. He lifted his head, confusion putting him in a haze as he tried to comprehend what had happened. Two solitary candles were lit at the altar and there was no sign of the child that had lain so peacefully on it. Josue blinked his eyes, adjusting to the dim lighting when he realized he was not alone. The troubled man who's confession he had taken lay dead before the stairs, a thick pool of blood on the ground around him. Staring down

nonchalantly at him was a man in dark clothing, holding what looked like a pocket watch. Josue frightened, lay still and watched; unsure of whether the man had noticed him or not.

Time marched on...tick...tick...tick. The man sat behind the altar as if a king upon his throne, a pompous look on his face as he stared at the face of the watch. He put his feet up on the altar and leaned back. A wooden cross dangled from around his neck as he tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. The scent of frankincense and pine lingered in the air as Josue heard the hands slowly click over and the deafening sound of bells rang throughout the empty church. The echo slowly died down and there was a sudden flash of blinding light.

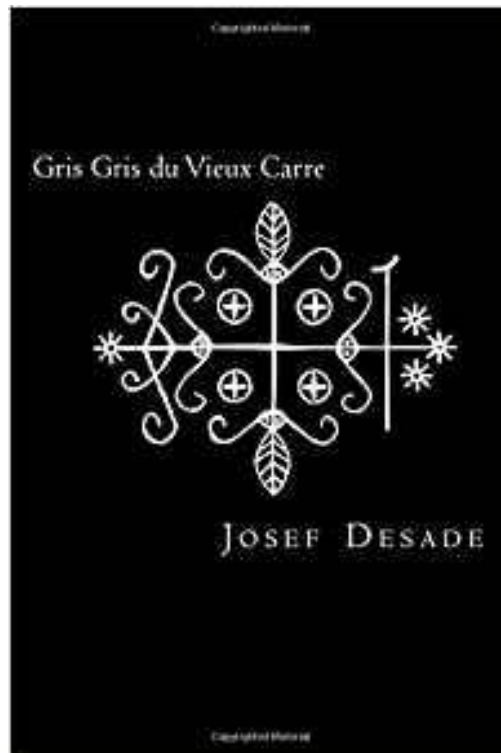
The man closed the watch and put it into the pocket of his jacket as he looked up and Josue saw a man dressed in all white before him. He radiated with a brightness that was indescribable and as the man watched, wings unfolded behind the newcomer. The being slowly walked towards the altar as feathers fluttered slowly to the ground. He walked with a sad, forlorn look upon his face as he approached and fell to his knees. The man in black stood up and looked down upon the prostrate figure.

“Day star, son of Dawn; once again we find ourselves on the precipice of heaven and hell. I send another one of the souls you so love; that has fallen from the tree of life, your way, for they have succumbed to the path of sin. I sincerely hope you enjoy your punishment as much as I.”

He let out a laugh as Lucifer looked upon his face with sadness. He rose to his feet and picked up the body of the priest that was before him, his demeanour one of defeat and slowly started to walk between the pews. His brilliant white wings pulled in close to his body as there was a burst of light and Josue found himself alone, with the man in black. The man stood up and walked over to where he lay in the dark and looked down at him smiling. He opened up the old pocket watch in his hand and glanced at the face of it. A blinding light enveloped Josue and as he strained to see, he could hear the voice of the man coming to him from what seemed a great distance as a wind blew through the church, extinguishing the candles and leaving him in darkness.

“It’s amazing how one who was given the keys to heaven could fall in love with beings that are so easily corrupted. My, look at the time.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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REVIEW by Stephen Hernandez

Salvation in Her Name a *Bethany Chiller* by Steven Deighan.

To start with, it is plain to see that Steven Deighan has a kind of Stephen King fixation. In fact one of his books (a graphic novel) is entitled: 'Feels like Stephen King'. He published his first collection of short stories in 2006, apparently shortly after leaving school, which is a promising beginning for any author, and bodes well for his future. He has received mixed reviews for the three books he has had published since. He seems to be progressing well and has gone through the stages of any developing novelist in pretty short shrift. In this novel, *Salvation in Her Name*, he seems to have developed something of his own style and created, perhaps, a long-lasting and well-rounded character in Bethany Chiller from which to focus on. It seems like he is coming out of Stephen King's shadow—which is a particularly long one if you are writing in this kind of genre. Although, you can see an element of *Carrie* in this novel: Its tense, sexually charged High-School setting coupled with the unfairness of losing innocence in circumstances one has not planned for and not wanted, resulting in feelings of seething vengeance which the victim nurtures in her bosom and culminates in supernatural abilities.

I must admit that on reading the novel I had to keep reminding myself that it was set in Lanarkshire, Scotland, and not in Maine, USA (Stephen King's usual fictional topography). Not that that is a bad thing in itself, anyone who can make a rural Scottish town seem like Maine must be doing something right.

This book has a strange beginning because on one of the first few pages which usually contain dedications, acknowledgements and such, which many people usually skip, there is a spoiler. The author makes a point, out of, well... pointing it out. The spoiler consists of a sort of short story which is in fact a memory from Bethany Childs'/Chiller's past—the heroine/anti-heroine of the novel. It is put as an appendix-like story at the end of the novel, and is meant to be seen as the catalyst for the unfolding events of the novel. I don't know why Steven Deighan didn't just stick it at the beginning as a prelude rather than tack it on at the end as a separate short story as it is not really a spoiler in the true definition of the word.

In the 'spoiler' Bethany experiences a disturbing event during her adolescence involving a so-called haunted tent in an abandoned field near her aunt's house. Both she and her younger cousin are warned not to go near it. Of course, this naturally arouses the youngsters' curiosity even more, so they steal out of the house in the middle of the night to investigate it themselves. It is Bethany who actually enters the unoccupied tent. She finds a torch on the floor and then with the light of the torch finds that the tent is filled with pornographic magazines. Bethany is sickened by what she sees and her young mind is mentally scarred for life.

However, the incident is a mere prelude, worse is yet to come... On her sixteenth birthday, which happens to fall on Halloween, she is raped. What follows is her transformation from the virginal Bethany Childs into the vengeful Bethany Chiller after meeting an entity from Hell named Amy, who has been waiting for just this moment to offer assistance... but I'm getting ahead of myself. And this is also what Steven Deighan does in his novel. He practically tells you what is going to happen before it does. It is a good way of building up tension and he ratchets it up well, page

after page. But sometimes the trouble with building up this kind of horror suspense can lead to a sense of anti-climax—like unwrapping an unwanted gift on a particularly boring Christmas Day. If you are building this kind of suspense you have to deliver the goods. Deighan tells us so much about the upcoming rape that it is a bit of a let-down when it actually happens but it doesn't stop there... You are practically told everything that is going to happen to Bethany before it actually happens throughout the book. It gives one an overall sense of *déjà vu*. I suppose you could say it is a novel written in horrific flashbacks. If nothing else—it is an interesting style. And somehow Deighan manages to pull it off. It makes the novel into something of a page turner.

Before I get carried away with praise for the novel it would be remiss of me not to point out its faults. Sometimes, Bethany's ongoing soliloquy about her past seems out of kilter with her age and her era. Do sixteen year old Scottish girls really come out with phrases like: *"It's hardly July heat but it does drain you,"* and *"My wrists were still throbbing from their manly restraints"*? Bethany also seems at times to get her English a bit mixed-up. Two examples: *"He stuttered much whilst taking in the viewless scenery around him"*, and *"I can't forget. I won't let me"*. Surely, she has not degenerated into baby-speak and really meant *"I won't let myself"*. But I am being overly pedantic—these pieces stand out because the overall writing is very good.

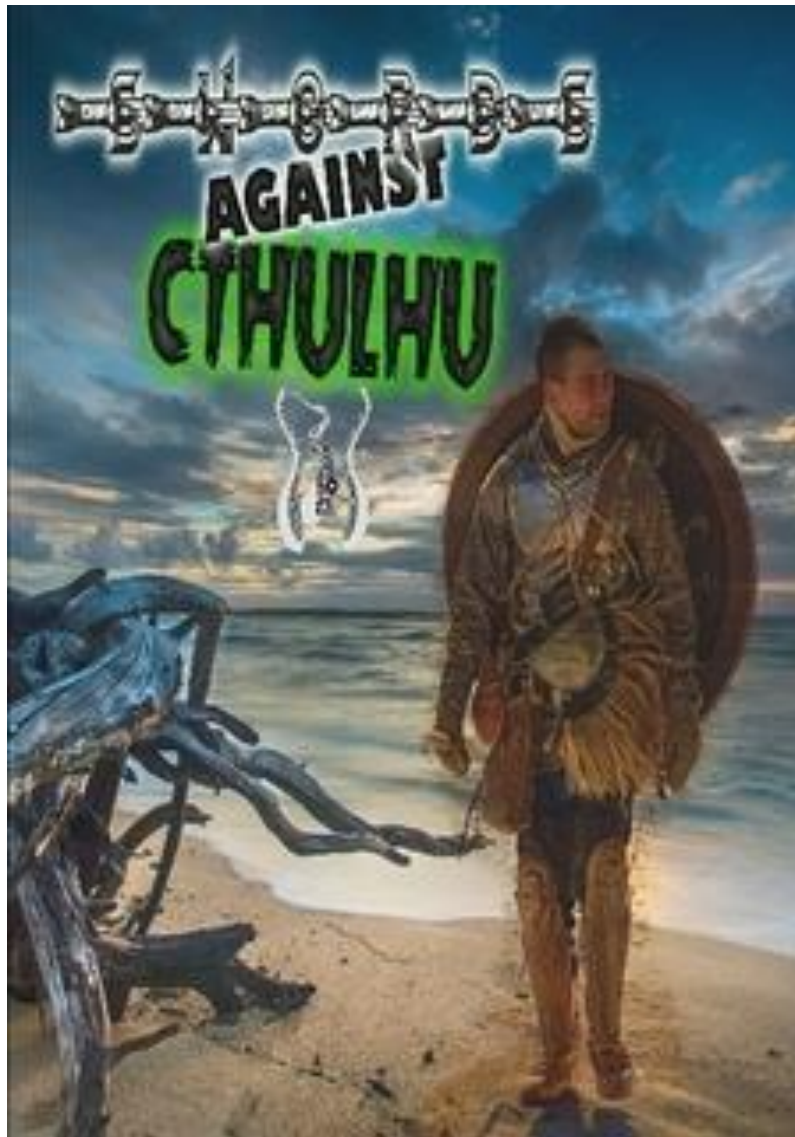
Steven Deighan is an author who is now defining his own territory. His own fictional topography, if you will. And if this topography is to be the realm of Bethany Chiller then so be it. The duo character he has created inhabits it well. I also have a feeling that Bethany Chiller may be heading somewhere special as she develops. I am still not sure what market this book will fit into, perhaps teenagers of sixteen and young adults who enjoy *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but with more explicit sexuality.

Ultimately, though, this is a tale of straightforward vengeance, or not-so-quite-straightforward vengeance. Very terrible vengeance. I think most of us at one time or another have fantasised about getting our own back on someone who has done us wrong, even though we may choose to 'turn the other cheek'. It is usually for something minor though. In the case of something as serious as rape... who would not want an aide from Hell itself to help out, regardless of the repercussions? If you have ever thought of pursuing this train of thought, then hop aboard—this is the novel for you.

THE END

This book is apparently not yet available from Amazon, however Steven Deighan's earlier titles can be found [here](#).

Now available from Rogue Planet Press:



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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Six

Carter Ward was trapped. Ward hated being trapped. Turhan Mot had learned much about Ward, and especially his ship, in his previous run-ins with the man and his ship. As they approached the hulking shadow of the Derelict, Tu-Hit and Mokem Bet turned to Turhan Mot with a silent, anxious plea for guidance.

“Let Turhan Mot,” he said, speaking of himself in the third person, “waste no time in assuaging whatever concerns his superior officers may harbour in seeking his guidance. Be assured, friends, that we do not consider this moment an opportunity to expand our authority, thin as it is. My brothers and I now seek a common goal, and that goal is the utter destruction of Carter Ward.

“That man is aboard the “Derelict”. Nor shall we be brought down by that ship of his, the O8-111A, for a third time.”

Mokem Bet shook his head vigorously to indicate that he agreed with Turhan Mot’s remarks.

“We know it from the reports sent to us by our three friends who so cunningly brought Carter Ward and his ship to the “Derelict”. Ward is on board that ship. Unfortunately, the idiots who brought him to the “Derelict” failed to secure him within a cage, and Ward runs loose about the ruins.

“The crew of the “Derelict” has managed to keep Carter Ward separated from his ship, which has proven to be all-important. As we have already seen, that ship is intelligent. It can think. It can make decisions. At all costs, we must ensure that Carter Ward never returns to his ship.

“And, as we have indicated, the crew of the “Derelict” has done a most commendable piece of work in keeping this Ward from his ship. He has been completely unable to board his ship, indeed, the crew of the “Derelict” has made it effectively impossible for the man to even come near the O8-111A.

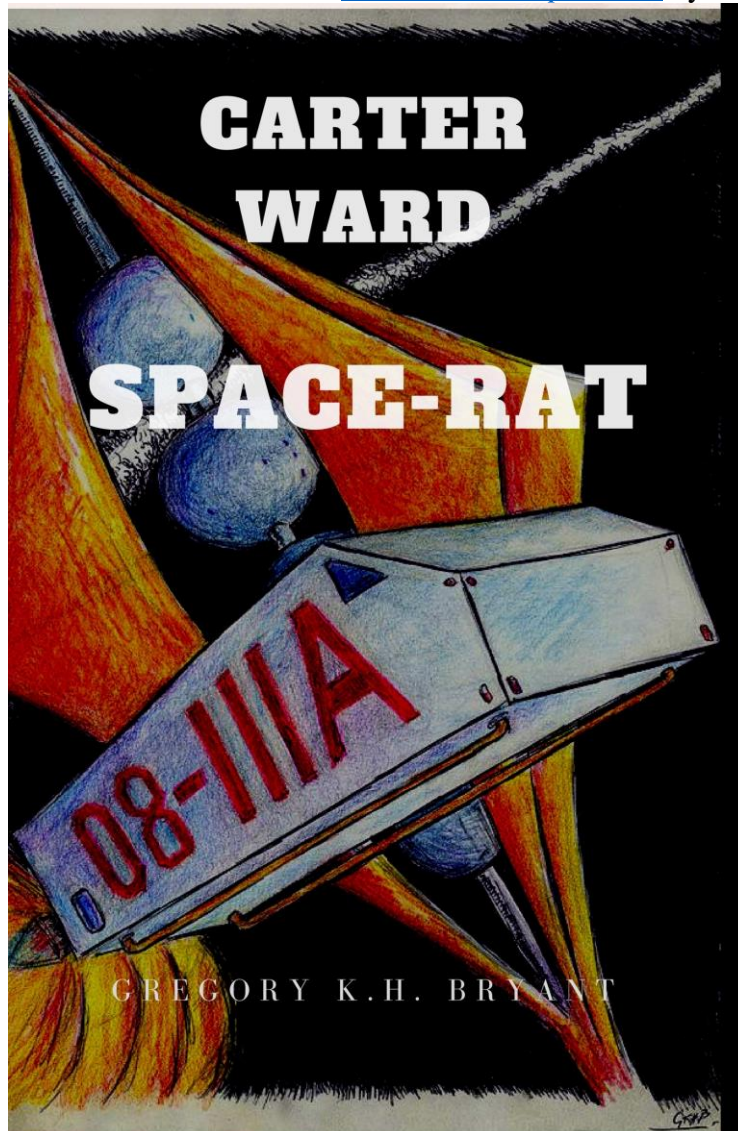
Turhan Mot pursed his thin, purple lips into a grimace that was his attempt at a smile. Mokem Bet grinned. Tu Hit said nothing, but imply allowed words and sounds to flow around him.

“Come then,” Turhan Mot said to his two companions, “Let us prepare ourselves for the fight ahead, while our good pilot sets the “Dawnsmasher”,” Turhan Mot said, with a brief bow of his head to acknowledge Tu Hit’s skills as a pilot.

“Turhan Mot also suggests that while Tu Hit manoeuvres the “Dawnsmasher” into the dock between Carter Ward and the O8-111A, that he and his second-in-command, Mokem Bet, will at long last bring this Carter Ward to a very richly deserved and a very painful death.”

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: [*Carter Ward—Space Rat*](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter II: "Try Your Luck with Professor Challenger"

I always liked McArdle, the crabbed, old, round-backed, red-headed news editor, and I rather hoped that he liked me. Of course, Beaumont was the real boss; but he lived in the rarefied atmosphere of some Olympian height from which he could distinguish nothing smaller than an international crisis or a split in the Cabinet. Sometimes we saw him passing in lonely majesty to his inner sanctum, with his eyes staring vaguely and his mind hovering over the Balkans or the Persian Gulf. He was above and beyond us. But McArdle was his first lieutenant, and it was he that we knew. The old man nodded as I entered the room, and he pushed his spectacles far up on his bald forehead.

"Well, Mr. Malone, from all I hear, you seem to be doing very well," said he in his kindly Scotch accent.

I thanked him.

"The colliery explosion was excellent. So was the Southwark fire. You have the true descreptive touch. What did you want to see me about?"

"To ask a favour."

He looked alarmed, and his eyes shunned mine. "Tut, tut! What is it?"

"Do you think, Sir, that you could possibly send me on some mission for the paper? I would do my best to put it through and get you some good copy."

"What sort of meesion had you in your mind, Mr. Malone?"

"Well, Sir, anything that had adventure and danger in it. I really would do my very best. The more difficult it was, the better it would suit me."

"You seem very anxious to lose your life."

"To justify my life, Sir."

"Dear me, Mr. Malone, this is very—very exalted. I'm afraid the day for this sort of thing is rather past. The expense of the 'special meesion' business hardly justifies the result, and, of course, in any case it would only be an experienced man with a name that would command public confidence who would get such an order. The big blank spaces in the map are all being filled in, and there's no room for romance anywhere. Wait a bit, though!" he added, with a sudden smile upon his face. "Talking of the blank spaces of the map gives me an idea. What about exposing a fraud—a modern Munchausen—and making him rideeculous? You could show him up as the liar that he is! Eh, man, it would be fine. How does it appeal to you?"

“Anything—anywhere—I care nothing.”

McArdle was plunged in thought for some minutes.

“I wonder whether you could get on friendly—or at least on talking terms with the fellow,” he said, at last. “You seem to have a sort of genius for establishing relations with people—seempathy, I suppose, or animal magnetism, or youthful vitality, or something. I am conscious of it myself.”

“You are very good, sir.”

“So why should you not try your luck with Professor Challenger, of Enmore Park?”

I dare say I looked a little startled.

“Challenger!” I cried. “Professor Challenger, the famous zoologist! Wasn’t he the man who broke the skull of Blundell, of the Telegraph?”

The news editor smiled grimly.

“Do you mind? Didn’t you say it was adventures you were after?”

“It is all in the way of business, sir,” I answered.

“Exactly. I don’t suppose he can always be so violent as that. I’m thinking that Blundell got him at the wrong moment, maybe, or in the wrong fashion. You may have better luck, or more tact in handling him. There’s something in your line there, I am sure, and the Gazette should work it.”

“I really know nothing about him,” said I. “I only remember his name in connection with the police-court proceedings, for striking Blundell.”

“I have a few notes for your guidance, Mr. Malone. I’ve had my eye on the Professor for some little time.” He took a paper from a drawer. “Here is a summary of his record. I give it you briefly:—

“Challenger, George Edward. Born: Largs, N. B., 1863. Educ.: Largs Academy; Edinburgh University. British Museum Assistant, 1892. Assistant-Keeper of Comparative Anthropology Department, 1893. Resigned after acrimonious correspondence same year. Winner of Crayston Medal for Zoological Research. Foreign Member of’—well, quite a lot of things, about two inches of small type— ‘Societe Belge, American Academy of Sciences, La Plata, etc., etc. Ex-President Palaeontological Society. Section H, British Association’—so on, so on!’
‘Publications: “Some Observations Upon a Series of Kalmuck Skulls”; “Outlines of Vertebrate Evolution”; and numerous papers, including “The underlying fallacy of Weissmannism,” which caused heated discussion at the Zoological Congress of Vienna. Recreations: Walking, Alpine climbing. Address: Enmore Park, Kensington, W.’

“There, take it with you. I’ve nothing more for you to-night.”

I pocketed the slip of paper.

“One moment, sir,” I said, as I realized that it was a pink bald head, and not a red face, which was fronting me. “I am not very clear yet why I am to interview this gentleman. What has he done?”

The face flashed back again.

“Went to South America on a solitary expediteon two years ago. Came back last year. Had undoubtedly been to South America, but refused to say exactly where. Began to tell his adventures in a vague way, but somebody started to pick holes, and he just shut up like an oyster. Something wonderful happened—or the man’s a champion liar, which is the more probable supposition. Had some damaged photographs, said to be fakes. Got so touchy that he assaults anyone who asks questions, and heaves reporters down the stairs. In my opinion he’s just a homicidal megalomaniac with a turn for science. That’s your man, Mr. Malone. Now, off you run, and see what you can make of him. You’re big enough to look after yourself. Anyway, you are all safe. Employers’ Liability Act, you know.”

A grinning red face turned once more into a pink oval, fringed with gingery fluff; the interview was at an end.

I walked across to the Savage Club, but instead of turning into it I leaned upon the railings of Adelphi Terrace and gazed thoughtfully for a long time at the brown, oily river. I can always think most sanely and clearly in the open air. I took out the list of Professor Challenger’s exploits, and I read it over under the electric lamp. Then I had what I can only regard as an inspiration. As a Pressman, I felt sure from what I had been told that I could never hope to get into touch with this cantankerous Professor. But these recriminations, twice mentioned in his skeleton biography, could only mean that he was a fanatic in science. Was there not an exposed margin there upon which he might be accessible? I would try.

I entered the club. It was just after eleven, and the big room was fairly full, though the rush had not yet set in. I noticed a tall, thin, angular man seated in an arm-chair by the fire. He turned as I drew my chair up to him. It was the man of all others whom I should have chosen—Tarp Henry, of the staff of Nature, a thin, dry, leathery creature, who was full, to those who knew him, of kindly humanity. I plunged instantly into my subject.

“What do you know of Professor Challenger?”

“Challenger?” He gathered his brows in scientific disapproval. “Challenger was the man who came with some cock-and-bull story from South America.”

“What story?”

“Oh, it was rank nonsense about some queer animals he had discovered. I believe he has

retracted since. Anyhow, he has suppressed it all. He gave an interview to Reuter's, and there was such a howl that he saw it wouldn't do. It was a discreditable business. There were one or two folk who were inclined to take him seriously, but he soon choked them off."

"How?"

"Well, by his insufferable rudeness and impossible behaviour. There was poor old Wadley, of the Zoological Institute. Wadley sent a message: 'The President of the Zoological Institute presents his compliments to Professor Challenger, and would take it as a personal favour if he would do them the honour to come to their next meeting.' The answer was unprintable."

"You don't say?"

"Well, a bowdlerized version of it would run: 'Professor Challenger presents his compliments to the President of the Zoological Institute, and would take it as a personal favour if he would go to the devil.'"

"Good Lord!"

"Yes, I expect that's what old Wadley said. I remember his wail at the meeting, which began: 'In fifty years' experience of scientific intercourse——' It quite broke the old man up."

"Anything more about Challenger?"

"Well, I'm a bacteriologist, you know. I live in a nine-hundred-diameter microscope. I can hardly claim to take serious notice of anything that I can see with my naked eye. I'm a frontiersman from the extreme edge of the Knowable, and I feel quite out of place when I leave my study and come into touch with all you great, rough, hulking creatures. I'm too detached to talk scandal, and yet at scientific conversaziones I HAVE heard something of Challenger, for he is one of those men whom nobody can ignore. He's as clever as they make 'em—a full-charged battery of force and vitality, but a quarrelsome, ill-conditioned faddist, and unscrupulous at that. He had gone the length of faking some photographs over the South American business."

"You say he is a faddist. What is his particular fad?"

"He has a thousand, but the latest is something about Weissmann and Evolution. He had a fearful row about it in Vienna, I believe."

"Can't you tell me the point?"

"Not at the moment, but a translation of the proceedings exists. We have it filed at the office. Would you care to come?"

"It's just what I want. I have to interview the fellow, and I need some lead up to him. It's really awfully good of you to give me a lift. I'll go with you now, if it is not too late."

Half an hour later I was seated in the newspaper office with a huge tome in front of me, which had been opened at the article “Weissmann versus Darwin,” with the sub heading, “Spirited Protest at Vienna. Lively Proceedings.” My scientific education having been somewhat neglected, I was unable to follow the whole argument, but it was evident that the English Professor had handled his subject in a very aggressive fashion, and had thoroughly annoyed his Continental colleagues. “Protests,” “Uproar,” and “General appeal to the Chairman” were three of the first brackets which caught my eye. Most of the matter might have been written in Chinese for any definite meaning that it conveyed to my brain.

“I wish you could translate it into English for me,” I said, pathetically, to my help-mate.

“Well, it is a translation.”

“Then I’d better try my luck with the original.”

“It is certainly rather deep for a layman.”

“If I could only get a single good, meaty sentence which seemed to convey some sort of definite human idea, it would serve my turn. Ah, yes, this one will do. I seem in a vague way almost to understand it. I’ll copy it out. This shall be my link with the terrible Professor.”

“Nothing else I can do?”

“Well, yes; I propose to write to him. If I could frame the letter here, and use your address it would give atmosphere.”

“We’ll have the fellow round here making a row and breaking the furniture.”

“No, no; you’ll see the letter—nothing contentious, I assure you.”

“Well, that’s my chair and desk. You’ll find paper there. I’d like to censor it before it goes.”

It took some doing, but I flatter myself that it wasn’t such a bad job when it was finished. I read it aloud to the critical bacteriologist with some pride in my handiwork.

“DEAR PROFESSOR CHALLENGER,” it said, “As a humble student of Nature, I have always taken the most profound interest in your speculations as to the differences between Darwin and Weissmann. I have recently had occasion to refresh my memory by re-reading——”

“You infernal liar!” murmured Tarp Henry.

—”by re-reading your masterly address at Vienna. That lucid and admirable statement seems to be the last word in the matter. There is one sentence in it, however—namely: ‘I protest strongly against the insufferable and entirely dogmatic assertion that each separate id is a microcosm possessed of an historical architecture elaborated slowly through the series of generations.’ Have you no desire, in view of later research, to modify this statement? Do you not think that it is over-accentuated? With your permission, I would ask the favour of an interview, as I feel strongly upon the subject, and have certain suggestions which I could only elaborate in a personal conversation. With your consent, I trust to have the honour of calling at eleven o’clock the day after to-morrow (Wednesday) morning.

“I remain, Sir, with assurances of profound respect, yours very truly,

EDWARD D. MALONE.”

“How’s that?” I asked, triumphantly.

“Well if your conscience can stand it——”

“It has never failed me yet.”

“But what do you mean to do?”

“To get there. Once I am in his room I may see some opening. I may even go the length of open confession. If he is a sportsman he will be tickled.”

“Tickled, indeed! He’s much more likely to do the tickling. Chain mail, or an American football suit—that’s what you’ll want. Well, good-bye. I’ll have the answer for you here on Wednesday morning—if he ever deigns to answer you. He is a violent, dangerous, cantankerous character, hated by everyone who comes across him, and the butt of the students, so far as they dare take a liberty with him. Perhaps it would be best for you if you never heard from the fellow at all.”

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter V: Into the Moon Pool

“Goodwin,” Throckmartin went on at last, “I can describe him only as a thing of living light. He radiated light; was filled with light; overflowed with it. A shining cloud whirled through and around him in radiant swirls, shimmering tentacles, luminescent, coruscating spirals.

“His face shone with a rapture too great to be borne by living man, and was shadowed with insuperable misery. It was as though it had been remoulded by the hand of God and the hand of Satan, working together and in harmony. You have seen that seal upon my own. But you have never seen it in the degree that Stanton bore it. The eyes were wide open and fixed, as though upon some inward vision of hell and heaven!

“The light that filled and surrounded him had a nucleus, a core—something shiftingly human shaped—that dissolved and changed, gathered itself, whirled through and beyond him and back again. And as its shining nucleus passed through him Stanton’s whole body pulsed radiance. As the luminescence moved, there moved above it, still and serene always, seven tiny globes of seven colours, like seven little moons.

“Then swiftly Stanton was lifted—levitated—up the unscalable wall and to its top. The glow faded from the moonlight, the tinkling music grew fainter. I tried again to move. The tears were running down now from my rigid lids and they brought relief to my tortured eyes.

“I have said my gaze was fixed. It was. But from the side, peripherally, it took in a part of the far wall of the outer enclosure. Ages seemed to pass and a radiance stole along it. Soon drifted into sight the figure that was Stanton. Far away he was—on the gigantic wall. But still I could see the shining spirals whirling jubilantly around and through him; felt rather than saw his tranced face beneath the seven moons. A swirl of crystal notes, and he had passed. And all the time, as though from some opened well of light, the courtyard gleamed and sent out silver fires that dimmed the moonrays, yet seemed strangely to be a part of them.

“At last the moon neared the horizon. There came a louder burst of sound; the second, and last, cry of Stanton, like an echo of his first! Again the soft sighing from the inner terrace. Then—utter silence!

“The light faded; the moon was setting and with a rush life and power to move returned to me. I made a leap for the steps, rushed up them, through the gateway and straight to the grey rock. It was closed—as I knew it would be. But did I dream it or did I hear, echoing through it as though from vast distances a triumphant shouting?

“I ran back to Edith. At my touch she wakened; looked at me wandringly; raised herself on a hand.

“‘Dave!’ she said, ‘I slept—after all.’ She saw the despair on my face and leaped to her feet. ‘Dave!’ she cried. ‘What is it? Where’s Charles?’

“I lighted a fire before I spoke. Then I told her. And for the balance of that night we sat before the flames, arms around each other—like two frightened children.”

Abruptly Throckmartin held his hands out to me appealingly.

“Walter, old friend!” he cried. “Don’t look at me as though I were mad. It’s truth, absolute truth. Wait—” I comforted him as well as I could. After a little time he took up his story.

“Never,” he said, “did man welcome the sun as we did that morning. As soon as it had risen we went back to the courtyard. The walls whereon I had seen Stanton were black and silent. The terraces were as they had been. The grey slab was in its place. In the shallow hollow at its base was—nothing. Nothing—nothing was there anywhere on the islet of Stanton—not a trace.

“What were we to do? Precisely the same arguments that had kept us there the night before held good now—and doubly good. We could not abandon these two; could not go as long as there was the faintest hope of finding them—and yet for love of each other how could we remain? I loved my wife,—how much I never knew until that day; and she loved me as deeply.

“‘It takes only one each night,’ she pleaded. ‘Beloved, let it take me.’

“I wept, Walter. We both wept.

“‘We will meet it together,’ she said. And it was thus at last that we arranged it.”

“That took great courage indeed, Throckmartin,” I interrupted. He looked at me eagerly.

“You do believe then?” he exclaimed.

“I believe,” I said. He pressed my hand with a grip that nearly crushed it.

“Now,” he told me. “I do not fear. If I—fail, you will follow with help?”

I promised.

“We talked it over carefully,” he went on, “bringing to bear all our power of analysis and habit of calm, scientific thought. We considered minutely the time element in the phenomena. Although the deep chanting began at the very moment of moonrise, fully five minutes had passed between its full lifting and the strange sighing sound from the inner terrace. I went back in memory over the happenings of the night before. At least ten minutes had intervened between the first heralding sigh and the intensification of the moonlight in the courtyard. And this glow grew for at least ten minutes more before the first burst of the crystal notes. Indeed, more than half an hour must have elapsed, I calculated, between the moment the moon showed above the horizon and the first delicate onslaught of the tinklings.

“‘Edith!’ I cried. ‘I think I have it! The grey rock opens five minutes after upon the moonrise.

But whoever or whatever it is that comes through it must wait until the moon has risen higher, or else it must come from a distance. The thing to do is not to wait for it, but to surprise it before it passes out the door. We will go into the inner court early. You will take your rifle and pistol and hide yourself where you can command the opening—if the slab does open. The instant it opens I will enter. It's our best chance, Edith. I think it's our only one.'

"My wife demurred strongly. She wanted to go with me. But I convinced her that it was better for her to stand guard without, prepared to help me if I were forced again into the open by what lay behind the rock.

"At the half-hour before moonrise we went into the inner court. I took my place at the side of the grey rock. Edith crouched behind a broken pillar twenty feet away; slipped her rifle-barrel over it so that it would cover the opening.

"The minutes crept by. The darkness lessened and through the breaches of the terrace I watched the far sky softly lighten. With the first pale flush the silence of the place intensified. It deepened; became unbearably—expectant. The moon rose, showed the quarter, the half, then swam up into full sight like a great bubble.

"Its rays fell upon the wall before me and suddenly upon the convexities I have described seven little circles of light sprang out. They gleamed, glimmered, grew brighter—shone. The gigantic slab before me glowed with them, silver wavelets of phosphorescence pulsed over its surface and then—it turned as though on a pivot, sighing softly as it moved!

"With a word to Edith I flung myself through the opening. A tunnel stretched before me. It glowed with the same faint silvery radiance. Down it I raced. The passage turned abruptly, passed parallel to the walls of the outer courtyard and then once more led downward.

"The passage ended. Before me was a high vaulted arch. It seemed to open into space; a space filled with lambent, coruscating, many-coloured mist whose brightness grew even as I watched. I passed through the arch and stopped in sheer awe!

"In front of me was a pool. It was circular, perhaps twenty feet wide. Around it ran a low, softly curved lip of glimmering silvery stone. Its water was palest blue. The pool with its silvery rim was like a great blue eye staring upward.

"Upon it streamed seven shafts of radiance. They poured down upon the blue eye like cylindrical torrents; they were like shining pillars of light rising from a sapphire floor.

"One was the tender pink of the pearl; one of the aurora's green; a third a deathly white; the fourth the blue in mother-of-pearl; a shimmering column of pale amber; a beam of amethyst; a shaft of molten silver. Such are the colours of the seven lights that stream upon the Moon Pool. I drew closer, awestricken. The shafts did not illumine the depths. They played upon the surface and seemed there to diffuse, to melt into it. The Pool drank them?

"Through the water tiny gleams of phosphorescence began to dart, sparkles and coruscations of

pale incandescence. And far, far below I sensed a movement, a shifting glow as of a radiant body slowly rising.

“I looked upward, following the radiant pillars to their source. Far above were seven shining globes, and it was from these that the rays poured. Even as I watched their brightness grew. They were like seven moons set high in some caverned heaven. Slowly their splendour increased, and with it the splendour of the seven beams streaming from them.

“I tore my gaze away and stared at the Pool. It had grown milky, opalescent. The rays gushing into it seemed to be filling it; it was alive with sparklings, scintillations, glimmerings. And the luminescence I had seen rising from its depths was larger, nearer!

“A swirl of mist floated up from its surface. It drifted within the embrace of the rosy beam and hung there for a moment. The beam seemed to embrace it, sending through it little shining corpuscles, tiny rosy spirallings. The mist absorbed the rays, was strengthened by them, gained substance. Another swirl sprang into the amber shaft, clung and fed there, moved swiftly toward the first and mingled with it. And now other swirls arose, here and there, too fast to be counted; hung poised in the embrace of the light streams; flashed and pulsed into each other.

“Thicker and thicker still they arose until over the surface of the Pool was a pulsating pillar of opalescent mist steadily growing stronger; drawing within it life from the seven beams falling upon it; drawing to it from below the darting, incandescent atoms of the Pool. Into its centre was passing the luminescence rising from the far depths. And the pillar glowed, throbbed—began to send out questing swirls and tendrils—

“There forming before me was That which had walked with Stanton, which had taken Thora—the thing I had come to find!

“My brain sprang into action. My hand threw up the pistol and I fired shot after shot into the shining core.

“As I fired, it swayed and shook; gathered again. I slipped a second clip into the automatic and another idea coming to me took careful aim at one of the globes in the roof. From thence I knew came the force that shaped this Dweller in the Pool—from the pouring rays came its strength. If I could destroy them I could check its forming. I fired again and again. If I hit the globes I did no damage. The little motes in their beams danced with the motes in the mist, troubled. That was all.

“But up from the Pool like little bells, like tiny bursting bubbles of glass, swarmed the tinkling sounds—their pitch higher, all their sweetness lost, angry.

“And out from the Inexplicable swept a shining spiral.

“It caught me above the heart; wrapped itself around me. There rushed through me a mingled ecstasy and horror. Every atom of me quivered with delight and shrank with despair. There was nothing loathsome in it. But it was as though the icy soul of evil and the fiery soul of good had stepped together within me. The pistol dropped from my hand.

“So I stood while the Pool gleamed and sparkled; the streams of light grew more intense and the radiant Thing that held me gleamed and strengthened. Its shining core had shape—but a shape that my eyes and brain could not define. It was as though a being of another sphere should assume what it might of human semblance, but was not able to conceal that what human eyes saw was but a part of it. It was neither man nor woman; it was unearthly and androgynous. Even as I found its human semblance it changed. And still the mingled rapture and terror held me. Only in a little corner of my brain dwelt something untouched; something that held itself apart and watched. Was it the soul? I have never believed—and yet—

“Over the head of the misty body there sprang suddenly out seven little lights. Each was the colour of the beam beneath which it rested. I knew now that the Dweller was—complete!

“I heard a scream. It was Edith’s voice. It came to me that she had heard the shots and followed me. I felt every faculty concentrate into a mighty effort. I wrenched myself free from the gripping tentacle and it swept back. I turned to catch Edith, and as I did so slipped—fell.

“The radiant shape above the Pool leaped swiftly—and straight into it raced Edith, arms outstretched to shield me from it! God!

“She threw herself squarely within its splendour,” he whispered. “It wrapped its shining self around her. The crystal tinklings burst forth jubilantly. The light filled her, ran through and around her as it had with Stanton; and dropped down upon her face—the look!

“But her rush had taken her to the very verge of the Moon Pool. She tottered; she fell—with the radiance still holding her, still swirling and winding around and through her—into the Moon Pool! She sank, and with her went—the Dweller!

“I dragged myself to the brink. Far down was a shining, many-coloured nebulous cloud descending; out of it peered Edith’s face, disappearing; her eyes stared up at me—and she vanished!

“‘Edith!’ I cried again. ‘Edith, come back to me!’

“And then a darkness fell upon me. I remember running back through the shimmering corridors and out into the courtyard. Reason had left me. When it returned I was far out at sea in our boat wholly estranged from civilization. A day later I was picked up by the schooner in which I came to Port Moresby.

“I have formed a plan; you must hear it, Goodwin—” He fell upon his berth. I bent over him. Exhaustion and the relief of telling his story had been too much for him. He slept like the dead.

All that night I watched over him. When dawn broke I went to my room to get a little sleep myself. But my slumber was haunted.

The next day the storm was unabated. Throckmartin came to me at lunch. He had regained much

of his old alertness.

“Come to my cabin,” he said. There, he stripped his shirt from him. “Something is happening,” he said. “The mark is smaller.” It was as he said.

“I’m escaping,” he whispered jubilantly, “Just let me get to Melbourne safely, and then we’ll see who’ll win! For, Walter, I’m not at all sure that Edith is dead—as we know death—nor that the others are. There is something outside experience there—some great mystery.”

And all that day he talked to me of his plans.

“There’s a natural explanation, of course,” he said. “My theory is that the moon rock is of some composition sensitive to the action of moon rays; somewhat as the metal selenium is to sun rays. The little circles over the top are, without doubt, its operating agency. When the light strikes them they release the mechanism that opens the slab, just as you can open doors with sun or electric light by an ingenious arrangement of selenium-cells. Apparently it takes the strength of the full moon both to do this and to summon the Dweller in the Pool. We will first try a concentration of the rays of the waning moon upon these circles to see whether that will open the rock. If it does we will be able to investigate the Pool without interruption from—from—what emanates.

“Look, here on the chart are their locations. I have made this in duplicate for you in the event—of something happening—to me. And if I lose—you’ll come after us, Goodwin, with help—won’t you?”

And again I promised.

A little later he complained of increasing sleepiness.

“But it’s just weariness,” he said. “Not at all like that other drowsiness. It’s an hour till moonrise still,” he yawned at last. “Wake me up a good fifteen minutes before.”

He lay upon the berth. I sat thinking. I came to myself with a guilty start. I had completely lost myself in my deep preoccupation. What time was it? I looked at my watch and jumped to the port-hole. It was full moonlight; the orb had been up for fully half an hour. I strode over to Throckmartin and shook him by the shoulder.

“Up, quick, man!” I cried. He rose sleepily. His shirt fell open at the neck and I looked, in amazement, at the white band around his chest. Even under the electric light it shone softly, as though little flecks of light were in it.

Throckmartin seemed only half-awake. He looked down at his breast, saw the glowing cincture, and smiled.

“Yes,” he said drowsily, “it’s coming—to take me back to Edith! Well, I’m glad.”

“Throckmartin!” I cried. “Wake up! Fight!”

“Fight!” he said. “No use; come after us!”

He went to the port and sleepily drew aside the curtain. The moon traced a broad path of light straight to the ship. Under its rays the band around his chest gleamed brighter and brighter; shot forth little rays; seemed to writhe.

The lights went out in the cabin; evidently also throughout the ship, for I heard shoutings above.

Throckmartin still stood at the open port. Over his shoulder I saw a gleaming pillar racing along the moon path toward us. Through the window cascaded a blinding radiance. It gathered Throckmartin to it, clothed him in a robe of living opalescence. Light pulsed through and from him. The cabin filled with murmurings—

A wave of weakness swept over me, buried me in blackness. When consciousness came back, the lights were again burning brightly.

But of Throckmartin there was no trace!

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