

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 10
10TH FEBRUARY 2019

BONELESS

BY JAKE
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COULDN'T
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DEARG DUE

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—“YOU’RE A
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THE THIRD
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ROB BLISS

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Gregory Owen, Jake Zawlacki, Gregory KH Bryant, Rob Bliss, H Rider Haggard, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 10

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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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to editor@schlock.co.uk. We will also review published and self-published novels. Please contact the editor at the above email address for further details.

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Gerbic as Nosferatu* by [Sgerbic](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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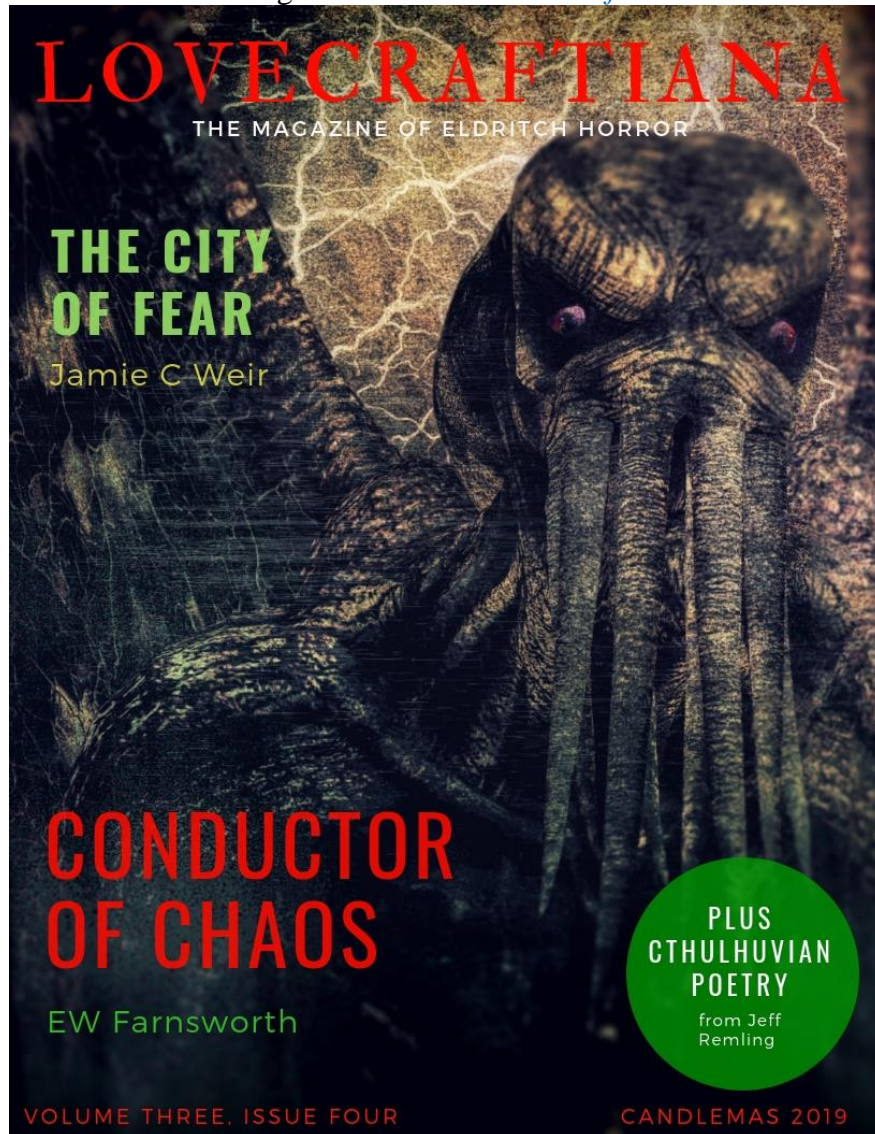
EDITORIAL

This week we have the tragic tale of a human invertebrate, a modern day Iron Age horror, and more xenomorphic madness in outer space, followed by the beginning of a fishy two-parter courtesy of Gregory Owen. Meanwhile, Rob Bliss weighs in with the Third Wish.

Carter Ward is faced with further peril in the arena. Eric Brighteyes and his berserk companion encounter Ospakar Blacktooth. And Larry and friends enter the Lair of the Dweller...

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana: Candlemas 2019](#)



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"SINCE IT'S YOUR FIRST DAY ON THE JOB, HERE'S SOME HELPFUL
ADVICE, KEEP YOUR EXPECTATIONS LOW."

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.

<https://www.freelanced.com/vincentdavis>

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BONELESS by Jake Zawlacki

I was born with no organs. Science couldn't explain it. My parents searched and searched for answers, but I lost interest. I was imparted with wisdom, but no brain. Love, without a heart. Intuition; no stomach. The clever observer will say, "But you have eyes! You can see" I was born without 'eyes' as you may call them, but with vision. Skin? Tenderness. Receptivity. 'Bones' of fortitude and not calcium. 'Muscles' of strength and power, not sinew and tendons.

It feels important to tell you this because I am not human in the sense of science, but I am Man in the sense of Spirit. Show me your soul and I'll show you compassion and more.

When I was young, my parents thought I would die. I was dead in their sense. A still birth. A seemingly drowned passenger resuscitated by Will itself. For the first five years of my life I was always in hospitals. My mother and father wanted Reason to explain me, but It could not. I had needles forced through my tenderness and violent magnetic scans swirled and whirled around and through me. Invisible ethereal rays shotgunned through my Self.

Once a doctor in a starched gown told them, "We don't know why your son is alive. Or how he keeps living. There is nothing we understand about him. Nothing."

We stopped going to the doctor. Nobody could tell. I wasn't ill. Despite their best intentions of making me so.

I've lived a good life, until today. I've always found dichotomy so comforting. Hues of greys and lines in grains never meant much to me. I'd rather love to understand the concreteness of it all. If I can't understand myself, I'd like to understand everything else. I decided to murder. There is a thought that the most valuable possession, is that of Man. If we try to understand our world, we must surround ourselves with the objects of the world we try to understand.

I murdered an old woman. I lived next to her on the second floor for ten years. She had asked the land lady if she could paint her door blue, she said she always wanted a small white house with a blue door and if she had to settle for an apartment, she wouldn't settle on the door. Her name was Alice. She had no pets or relatives and I spoke to her every Tuesday morning as I walked to work.

The thought came spontaneously, but not out of passion or Soul. It came out of wanting to feel life. I've held puppies and eaten live scorpions. I've lain with women and felt the warmth of breath but I've never felt life. Not capital 'L' Life. Nor have I seen it just out of my reach.

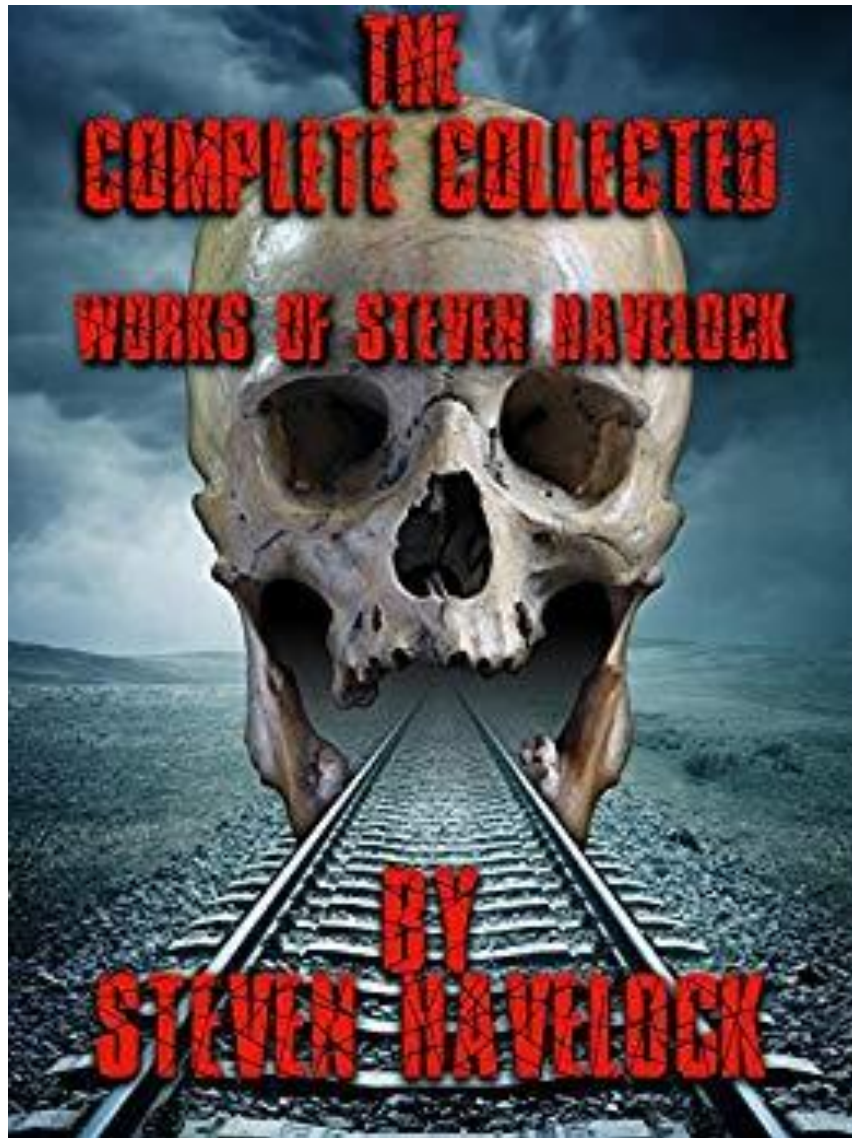
I wanted to feel it. Maybe I could touch it as it left her mouth or eyes or hands. Maybe I could feel it through her lips or chest or forehead. Maybe it would pass through me as she faded into nothingness, emptiness. Into my place of residence.

Once I broke my fortitude from skateboarding and the surgeon couldn't reset it because there wasn't anything there. The pain informed me otherwise.

I invited Alice to my apartment last week and made dinner. Handmade spinach ravioli. I thought long about how I would take her life. I didn't want it to be painful or dramatic, but a relaxing drift on the sea of unconsciousness. I placed six sleeping pills into her first Sauvignon and four in her second. She lay on the couch with Chopin's fingers dancing softly around us. I waited for her eyes to close and then sat next to her. My hands lowered like falling feathers. One to the flat of her chest where her breath slowed. The other to her cheek. Her warmth washed away over the hour like thick filth under water. I felt the age and innocence of experience in my palms.

I felt Life.

THE END



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DEARG DUE by PS Sullivan

Thomas heard the theatre door close behind him. “That was a pretty good movie,” said Brianna, the girl next to him. Her curly red hair blew in the wind.

“Yeah,” Thomas said. He spoke with a thick Brooklyn accent. “It was.”

In truth, he barely remembered the movie. It had been some cheap zombie flick with a couple of semi-big names behind it. He’d been focusing on Brianna.

He’d met her at a party a little over a week ago. She’d been standing awkwardly in the corner, all alone. He asked around, and it turned out, nobody knew who she was. Apparently, she’d just sort of showed up. So, he’d decided to take a chance and introduce himself.

She seemed almost relieved when he started talking to her, as though she’d been waiting for someone to finally ask her name. After they spent a few minutes discussing the terrible beer at the party, she’d asked him if she wanted to go see a movie. Thomas, of course, had said yes.

“So, I was thinking,” Thomas said. “Maybe you and I—”

“Hm?” Brianna said. She looked up at him.

Thomas licked his lips. “Maybe, we could, eh, grab dinner sometime?” he said. “I know this nice Italian place over on Fifth Street.”

She looked up at him. “I’d like that,” she said. Then, she flashed him a smile. But it was a tired, sad sort of smile.

Thomas frowned. “What’s wrong?”

Brianna continued smiling. “It’s just—oh, it’s nothing,” she said. She looked away.

Thomas could sense that she was thinking about something, but before he could push the issue, she grabbed his arm. “Come here,” she said. She pulled him into a nearby alleyway, and gently pushed him up against one of the nearby walls.

Thomas blinked. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Brianna stared at him for a moment longer, still wearing that same, sad smile. “You’re a sweet guy, Thomas,” she said.

Thomas grinned nervously. “Thanks,” he said.

Brianna wrapped her arms around his neck. Then, she closed her eyes, and leaned towards him.

Oh, Thomas thought. He took a breath, and closed his eyes. He leaned forwards to lock his lips with hers.

“Stop!”

Thomas opened his eyes, and looked in the direction of the voice. Standing at the entrance to the alleyway was a man with dark brown hair, piercing blue eyes, and a healthy coating of stubble around his face. He wore a dark black trench coat which flapped gently in the breeze. “What the hell are you doing with my daughter?”

It took several seconds for Thomas to process that sentence. “What?” He looked over at Brianna, who was staring at the man, her mouth frozen in a slight ‘o’.

“Brianna?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

The man stepped forwards menacingly. “What’s going on,” he said, “is that this young girl doesn’t know how to obey the rules! Now leave!”

Thomas felt his cheeks grow red with anger. He didn’t care if this guy was Brianna’s father or not. He wasn’t going to be pushed around. “Hey pal,” he said, “you can’t just—”

The man fixed him with a smouldering gaze. “Now.”

The words died on Thomas’s lips. He looked over at Brianna, who was looking at the ground. She gave him a dull nod.

Thomas glanced up at the man once more, and then slowly walked out of the alleyway, his hands in his pockets.

The man watched the boy go. His name was Robert O’Brian, which was, in fact, a rather ordinary name for a rather unordinary man. Then, he looked down at the girl who was not, in fact, his daughter.

She watched the boy leave, her eyes filled with disappointment. “He’s a good guy,” she said.

“All the better I came along then,” Robert said. He reached into his trench coat, but the girl held up a hand. The boy had called her Brianna, though he doubted that that was her real name. It was far too modern for something as old as her. “Is it all right if we wait for a few minutes?” she asked.

Robert considered it, and then nodded. “Alright,” he said. “It’s not like you’ll change my mind, you know.”

Brianna nodded. “I don’t expect to,” she said. She sat down, propping her back against the wall.

Robert studied her for a moment. “Your accent’s very good, by the way,” he said. “If I hadn’t known better, I’d have believed you were a real American girl.”

“I’ve had a while to practice,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. Then, she paused. “What gave me away?”

“I caught onto your aura,” he said. “You were infiltrating that boy’s mind, trying to get him to love you.” He gazed at her. “You’re not nearly as clever as you think.”

Brianna snorted. “Must be getting sloppy in my old age,” she said mockingly. “By the way—your daughter? Really?”

Robert snorted. “I had to think of something,” he said. “I couldn’t just let you kill him.”

The girl sighed. “Fair enough.”

“When exactly did you come over here anyway?” Robert asked. “I traced the killings back to 1956, but I’ve a feeling that they go back way further than that.”

“About 1849,” she said. “The famine was in full force back then, and many people were fleeing for the new world. There was enough misery in the old country without me adding to their troubles.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Robert said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

She flashed him an angry look. “I can’t help what I am!”

“Maybe not,” Robert replied. “But you’re still a monster.”

“I didn’t ask for this!” she shouted, standing up. “I didn’t ask for any of this!” She began pacing around the alleyway. “I didn’t ask for my father to cast my lover out of his house! I didn’t ask for him to marry me off to a brute who beat me and raped me at least three times a week! All I wanted was for it all to end! I didn’t ask to come back as some monster!”

Robert was quiet for a moment. “No one asks for something like that,” he said.

“Then aren’t I afforded a little pity?” she asked, turning towards him. Her eyes were fixed on him with a pleading expression.

Robert slowly shook his head. “You’ve squandered any pity you might’ve gotten from me,” he said. “And you know damn well why.”

Brianna stared at him for a minute. Then, she sighed, and sank back down to the ground. “It wasn’t until after I took my vengeance on my father and my husband that I discovered the full extent of my curse,” she said.

Robert nodded. “Every year since then, you’ve been feeding,” he said. “Seducing young men like that boy I chased off and killing them. Draining the life right out of their bodies.”

Brianna flinched slightly. “I didn’t want to,” she said.

“Then why?” Robert demanded.

Brianna looked at the ground. “I don’t want to die,” she whispered.

Robert stared at her for a moment. He supposed that was reason enough.

And for a moment, as he looked upon the sad, redheaded girl, he did pity her. She hadn’t asked for her fate, and her motivations were understandable. She didn’t want to die? He understood that.

“But how many had to die so that you could live?” he asked.

She stared down at the ground. “It’s been a thousand years since my father gave me to Lord Kamrin,” she said. “A thousand years since I took my own life. A thousand years since I became this...” She held up one of her hands, and waved it in front of her face. “... thing.”

“And you’ve taken one young man a year since that date.”

Brianna remained silent.

Robert looked at her. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. “Why not just let me end it?” he asked.

She looked up at him.

“You don’t have to go on like this. Feeding every year, taking lives to prolong your own. You’ve already lived an unnaturally long life—even if your father had allowed you to marry your lover, you’d have died many, many years ago. So why not just let this cycle end?”

Brianna appeared to consider it. “You’d make it quick?”

Robert nodded solemnly. “Painless as possible.”

Brianna grunted. She looked down at her feet once more. “Do you know what he did to me?” she asked. “Lord Kamrin, I mean.”

Robert nodded. “I do.”

Brianna lifted up her shirt. Beneath the thin fabric, her torso was covered in a series of thin, puckered scars. “He liked to watch me bleed,” she said. “Almost every night, he would come to

me. He would strip me down naked and scrape my flesh with a dagger. For two months, he tortured me so.”

Robert stared over her figure, his expression unchanging.

“Every night, I prayed to God for salvation,” she said. “I begged Him for help. I even shouted from my window to the village down below, begging them to come to my aide. Kamrin beat me when I did that, but he would’ve done that anyway. I thought that if they knew what a man Kamrin was, they would surely help me.” Her shoulders sagged. “But none did.”

“So you decided to take matters into your own hand,” Robert said.

Brianna’s lips twisted into a pained smile. “That I did,” she said. She pulled up her shirt further, revealing an ugly, twisted scar, this one much larger than all the others. “One night, he came to me with his knife, ready to bleed me as he had bled me before. But I did something he wasn’t expecting. When he ran the dagger through my flesh, I grabbed it, and shoved it into my heart!” She let her shirt fall back down, covering her mutilated body.

“I felt the cold steel penetrate deep into my bosom. And as I died, I swore that I would hurt him as he had hurt me. I swore to kill my father, and all those who had wronged me! I swore vengeance on all mankind!”

Robert nodded. He was intimately familiar with the rest of the story. “And when they buried you, you rose from the grave,” he said. “And you killed both your father and Lord Kamrin.”

Brianna smiled. “I did,” she said. “You should have seen his face! Oh, how he screamed! He kept going until I ripped his throat out with my teeth! I drank his blood like wine! Then, I did the same to my father.” Then, her expression softened. “I didn’t know that I’d have to continue doing it. Year after year, century after century.”

“You swore vengeance on all mankind,” Robert said. “You’ve more than paid it back.”

“I know,” Brianna said. She looked up at Robert with a saddened gaze. “I don’t want to kill. But you have to understand. I also don’t want to die. I did that once.” She shuddered. “I don’t want to do it again.” She gingerly placed her hand over her chest, as though the millennia old wound still troubled her. “Please.”

Robert wasn’t used to monsters like this. Though many of the beings he’d encountered over the ages had tragic backstories, few seemed to have genuine remorse for their actions.

So, he nodded. “I understand,” he said.

Her gaze flickered. “You do?” she asked hopefully.

“I do,” he said. “And now, I hope you understand what I must do,” He reached into his trench coat, and drew out a long, glistening sword. Several ancient runes had been carved into the handle by its long dead maker, their meaning long since lost to time.

Brianna’s gaze sagged. She looked up at him. “Must it be this way?” she asked.

“I cannot allow you to harm more innocents,” Robert said. “You know this, just as well as I.”

Brianna nodded in understanding. “I do,” she said. Her expression hardened. “But if you want to kill a monster, then goddamnit, I’ll give you a monster to kill!” And with that Brianna threw her head back and let out an unearthly howl.

Robert watched as she transformed.

Brianna’s hair faded, becoming a pale red colour. It also began to thin, revealing grey, puckered skin beneath it. Her eyes sunk deep into her sockets, until only a faint blue glow remained in each. Her teeth lengthened into points and her skin took on the grey hue of the dead. Her fingernails lengthened into dirty claws. Her clothes began to change into ancient silk garments which had rotted with decay. It was covered with dark patches that Robert realized were blood.

When Brianna faced Robert again, he was looking at a corpse.

He nodded, and readied his blade. “Have it your way, monster,” he said.

The corpse howled, and charged at him, slashing at him with her claws.

Robert stepped to the side, and struck at her with his sword. The blow scratched her back, and the corpse let out a screech of pain. She turned to face him, her eyes blazing. Growling, she began to circle him to his left.

Robert kept his blade trained on the corpse. Suddenly, she hissed, and jumped ten feet into the air. Then, she angled herself down towards him.

Robert readied to block her, but at the last minute, she changed directions, and raked his side with her claws.

Robert let out a cry of pain, but he kept his footing as he faced the corpse. She rushed at him, and he parried her—but barely.

“Hey!” someone said. “I’ve—” then, the voice stopped. “What the hell?”

Robert turned, and saw the boy from earlier, standing in the alleyway. He was holding an old wooden plank like a baseball bat, and was staring open-mouthed at the scene in the alleyway. The corpse stared at the boy, similarly distracted.

Robert exploited the opportunity, and ran his sword through the corpse’s chest.

The corpse let out a high pitched screech. Robert removed the blade, and the corpse fell to the ground, thrashing.

“What the hell?” the boy asked again.

The corpse’s thrashing stilled. Suddenly, her hair became thick and lush again, and her skin regained its living hue. Her eyes reappeared, brilliant blue in her sockets.

The boy stared at her, open-mouthed. He slowly walked up to her. “Br-Brianna?”

The girl looked up at him. Even as Robert watched, she began to age. Her skin began to wrinkle, and her hair went grey, then white.

The centuries, it seemed, were catching up to her.

“My name,” she said, her voice now gravely and dusty, “was Aibreann.” Then, she closed her eyes.

Thomas grabbed her hand. “What—”

As he did so, her hand dissolved, turning to dust before his very eyes. The rest of the body dissolved with it, and the wind quickly picked it up and blew it away.

Thomas looked up at Robert, stunned.

“She would’ve killed you, you know,” Robert said. “She wouldn’t have wanted to, but she would have done it.”

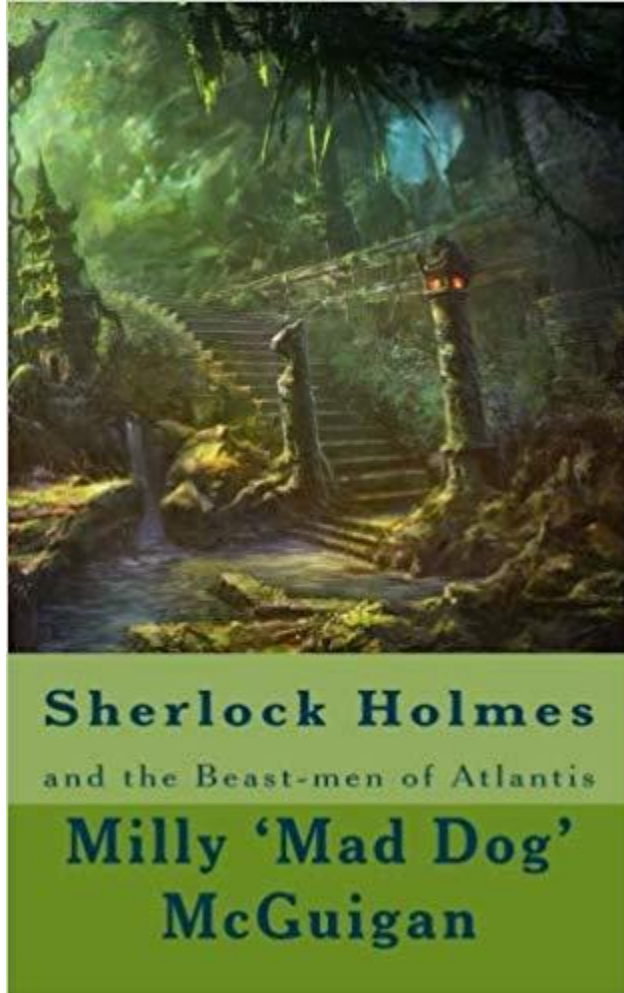
Thomas stared at him, uncomprehending. “What was she?” he asked.

“They called her ‘Dearg-Due,’” Robert replied. “It roughly translates to ‘red-blood sucker.’ But I suppose the term ‘vampire’ works just as well.” With that, he shoved his sword back into his scabbard, and turned to walk out of the alleyway. But before he could, a cloud of dust formed in front of him. In it, he could see the shape of a girl with wavy hair.

The girl stared at him for a moment. Suddenly, she lifted up her hand and waved goodbye.

Then, the cloud of dust dissolved as it was blown away by the evening breeze.

THE END



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RED PLANT PURPLE PLANT BLUE PLANT by Joachim Heijndermans

LOG ENTRY—0056.8

It don't roar, though it looks like it probably could. It don't hiss or growl or nothin'. I mean, I figured spacey creatures that can live in the vacuum would roar an' stuff. Okay, I know I wouldn't hear anythin', on account of it bein' outside the ship an' all, but I'd be able to see it do somethin', right? Wriggle its body, open a mouth (if it has one), or move that eye of his. But no, it just sits there, looking at me with that one big eye. That intense monstrosity of an eye, with pulsatin' veins an' the big purple an' green iris.

I can't blink right now. I want to, so badly, but I can't. I know the second I do, it'll...it'll...I can't even think about it. I've seen what happens. It's horrible.

I think this is it for me. I don't know who'll hear this log. I've never kept a log before, so I'm sorry if I'm gonna be all over the place. I'm so tired an' scared. I hope this gets to someone, so they'll will know what happened to the crew of the Fisher.

It's movin'! This might be it! Oh fu—

LOG ENTRY—0057.2

Okay, I'm back. It moved, but it didn't do anythin'. I'm all right. It's gone from the front of the ship an' moved elsewhere. Broke eye-contact with me on its own, so I'll be fine for now.

Christ, listen to me. I'm not making any sense. I should probably explain what's happenin'. I'm Paul, by the way. Driller on the Fisher team. We were out on the Tezuka asteroid belt, 'bout one-third of an AU from where we are now, mining ion-ore for the Oberon corp. I'm just a driller; nothin' special. Wasn't even the one who found it. That was Coot. Unless, instead of us findin' it, maybe it found us? Is that possible? Was it waitin' for us? Waitin' for someone to find it an' let it loose onto the universe? Christ, I don't wanna even think about that.

Anyway, so there was me, Johnson, Fenderlein, an' Coot on the diggin' team. Johnson was our supervisor an' ship's captain. We just called him Johnny; no formalities an' all on our ship. We were 'bout eight weeks away from maxing our cargo hold, so Johnny was really pushing us to fill 'er up. Tried to get us ahead of schedule for some reason, so he had us drilling the really big 'roids, he did. We found us a thick cluster of mineable 'roids. Big. Like you wouldn't believe, with the lasrgest maybe at a diameter of 4700 KM. That's bigger than Terra-Lunar 1 for reference. We mined about 20% of quota in the first week. Good haul. With that pace, we might've been home on time with full shares for everyone. We never thought we'd find...that.

It was inside one of the 'roids. Once we hit a depth of 200 KM, the outer crust suddenly cracked. It was weird, the way the top layer fell apart. Not like shattered rocks or nothin', but more like it

peeled itself apart. You know, like when you've got a sunburn an' the skin falls off? Gross, I know, but it was like that. We peeled the skin from somethin' big an' old an' nasty.

After that outer layer cleared, there weren't anythin' but this big hunk of...somethin' under it. Had a lotta sharp angles. We had no idea what we were even lookin' at when we first saw it. Coot thought it was some kinda gem. It was black. Blacker than anything I ever did see. Even space wasn't as black as this thing. Like there was an entirely new kind of black that ate all colour an' light away. A dark shade of nothin'. It was hard too, with an outer hide that felt like it was laced with a diamond coatin'. We broke three drills on it tryin' to break through. We even used a laser, but that one burned out after three hours, with not a dent in the surface. Nothin' worked. 'Twas almost like someone took dark matter an' compressed it together into a solid rock or somethin'. Was unsettlin' to look at too. Gave me the creeps every time I glanced at it.

Still, we didn't think much about it. Couldn't drill through an' there weren't no salvageable minerals on it, so there weren't much point to poking at it an' waste time. It wasn't going anywhere, so we ignored it. Plenty of work to be done. We sent out a report back to home-base, then went back to mining the other 'roids. The company would send out a guy to look at it, who'd probably be here in 'bout six weeks. We didn't care what they'd do with it. Wasn't our business.

Then Coot went nuts. All of a sudden, outta the blue, he'd gone an' became delusional. He ran 'round the barracks with a knife, tryin' to cut up Fenderlein. She had a three-inch gash on her arm by the time we pinned him down an' pried the knife from his hand. He bit me too. This was a guy I've worked with for years, an' now he was screaming an' biting at me.

"The plant! Fucking plant!" he screamed. "Changing colours! Red plant! Purple plant! Blue plant! Fucking plant!" No idea what he was going on about. We locked him in a compartment for spare energy cells, since we didn't have no holding pens on our tiny Halicon class shuttle. Strapped him down too, as he tried to bite his own skin off. For all we knew he would've strangled himself with his shirt or somethin'.

So at first, Johnny thinks maybe Coot came down with decompression sickness. But there's an inhibitor on board, so that theory was out. We checked Coot's barracks for drugs. Wouldn't be the first guy to smuggle Minnies on board or get high on the emergency Oxy-caps. I mean, it was a fair assumption the way he shook an' talked like a skit-head. I should know, talkin' from experience an' all here. But there weren't anythin' there. Not even headixion pain pills. All he had was a tiny little—,

Oh, fuck! It moved! The thing outside the ship! It's movin' toward me. No, wait, it's not. Just an asteroid that bumped into its...what is that? A tentacle?

Never mind. I'm okay. I'm all right. For now.

Anyway, so all we found in Coot's quarters was a little red plant, 'bout six inches big with small barbs on the stem. Must've paid a fortune for it in some backwater market on Sumeria. He'd

done an' thrown it against the wall. It laid there, roots pokin' out of the dirt an' the bits of shattered pottery lyin' all over. Was the saddest sight I did ever see.

Despite being cut by Coot, an' having every reason to take a flamethrower to his things, Fenderlein took the little plant an' tried to keep it alive as best as she could, usin' coffee grinds as fertilizer. She told us she didn't want it to die. Didn't think too much of it. She had a little project that, as far as we knew, kept her occupied outside of her regular job of ship's maintenance.

Then she started talkin' to it. Like, full on conversations an' stuff. With pauses an' everythin', like it was talking back to her an' she was lettin' it finish. It was weird. Not just talkin', but singin' as well. When Coot killed himself, I found her in bed with it, cradlin' it like it was a baby. She—

Shit, I skipped a part, didn't I? Coot died. Can't believe I forgot to mention that. Bit his tongue out an' bled to death. Can't imagine what'd gone through his head to come up with a thing like that. Must've went off the deep end. I was the one who found him an' told the rest. That's when I burst into Fenderlein's quarters an' found her. She was snugglin' in bed with the little plant, clutched it in her arms like a thorny teddy. She was naked, so the thorns cut her skin from squeezin' it too hard. There was blood on her sheets an' all over her. The damnedest thing was, it didn't seem to bother her one bit.

“What do you want?” she asked. I told her about Coot, but she just shrugged an' rolled back over, pressin' the red plant 'gainst her bosom. “You gotta wake the baby for that? Can't you see she's sleeping?” When I asked her “what baby?”, she threw her stuff at me. A picture frame of her husband an' her little girl hit me above my eyebrow, which left me with a nasty gash.

After what happened with Coot, Johnson an' I didn't want to risk leavin' her alone too much. We took her on regular walks an' sat her down to eat, treatin' her with silk gloves every step of the way. She seemed to do better for a while. Began to talk more like she used to. She looked like she was going to be all right.

That's when the eye opened. That eye. Tha—

—RECORDING ERROR—

LOG ENTRY—0057.2 — FILE ERROR—

G'n'trn!

LOG ENTRY—0057.2 - SUPPLEMENTARY

Sorry. Don't know what happened. All the gear went haywire. I rebooted the audio system, so I can continue. Where was I? Oh yeah; the thing with the eye.

We hovered around that one 'roid that gave us so much trouble. Y'know, the one I mentioned before? That mean sucker that was hard as seven-year-old shit? It still hadn't budged an inch in all that time. Granted, after Coot an' Fenderlein went bonkers, me an' the chief didn't do much drillin', so it wasn't like we were payin' much attention to the creepy black rock of darkness. It was quite a shock when the big sucker suddenly closed in on us one mornin'. There weren't no sign of a push from a collision with another 'roid or anythin'. An' with Fenderlein out of commission, we couldn't get the ship up an' runnin' quick enough to avoid it. We were in our damn jammies when we saw it, for Christ's sakes. We panicked when it got closer, 'bout less than a KM before impact, but we never could've thought that it would stop right before us like it did. The damndest thing. It hovered there, just a few feet away from scrapin' against the Fisher's paint-job. So we're thinkin' we just gave death the slip.

Then the eye opened, peerin' straight at us through the bridge window. This giant eye is peerin' into our ship, like a kid lookin' at ants in a jar. We shut the blast shields immediately. Somehow we didn't make eye-contact with it, which was good, but we didn't know that at the time. Sorry, I'm gettin' ahead of myself. I ain't too good at makin' reports.

So the 'roid turned out to have an eye, which meant it was obviously not a 'roid. Anyway, we hid from it, hopin' that the whatever-it-was would go away. It didn't. It just hovered around the ship for days. We could see it on the screen, where we were the little green box an' it was the giant red thing that circled around us. We freaked out, but the blast shields gave us some comfort. Johnny decided we weren't gonna lower 'em till the reps from Oberon came for us. Maybe they'd figure out what to hell to do with the giant dark rock with the big eye pokin' out.

Fenderlein got worse after the eye opened. She started ramblin' on an' on, barely takin' the time to catch her breath. Stopped eatin' too. I have no idea what she was sayin', really. It was too fast for me to understand. She'd just mumble for hours on end.

Lockdown didn't do us any favours. We started gettin' antsy as all hell. Johnny grew a mean temper while Fenderlein got kookier an' kookier. She started puttin' the tiny plant in the weirdest places, which just pissed Johnny off even more.

"Goddammit, if I see that plant in my chair one more time, I'm shooting it outta the damn airlock," he'd shout at her.

"Leave her alone! She ain't hurting nobody!" Fenderlein yell back.

It went on like this for a week. The rock didn't move, but the plant did. Johnson was convinced Fenderlein was tryin' to mess with us. He might've been right, but that don't matter now. Then, one morning, I woke up to see Fenderlein standin' over my bed.

"Did you see her?" she asked.

Since she was the only woman on board, I had no idea who she was talkin' 'bout. I asked her if she meant Johnny.

"Not him. I know where he is," she giggled. "Where's Gentren?"

I ain't never heard of no Gentren, so I tell her I've got no idea what she's talkin' about.

"Liar," she said, when she suddenly plunged a drill down at me. Missed me by a hair. She was crazy, runnin' after me with that drill. But her not eatin' cut her strength down, so overpowerin' her was no problem. Tied her up with my sheets an' gagged her, so she wouldn't bite her tongue out too. Johnny then told me to lock her up in—

Shit, I skipped the part where I found him. He was in his chair. But not like sittin' there or nothin'. I mean he was stuck to it. Fenderlein stabbed him with a pair of diamond tipped harpoons, nailin' him to the seat. I tried to help him, but he told me not to come closer. It was then that I noticed the blast shields were open, allowin' the thing to peer inside at us. It looked right at Johnny, who whimpered an' began to cry blood.

"Fenderlein busted the blast shields," he told me. The closin' mechanism had been ripped apart, an' she was the only one who could've fixed it. "Saxon! Don't let it look at you," he said to me. "It'll break your mind. It'll peel your brain apart piece by piece. It's looking for something. Whatever you do, don't blink when you make eye contact. It'll eat your mind an' soul an' rip your every being apart."

He told me not to let Fenderlein loose at any costs, before giving me a rundown on how to keep the Fisher up an' runnin' 'till the Corp came to fetch us. When he was done, he screamed like a stuck hog. "I can't hold my eyes open any longer. I can feel it! I can feel red plant! Purple plant! Blue plant! Red plant! Purp—!"

He blinked his eyes once. I...I don't know if I can talk about this yet. There are still stains on the walls from when his head...I can't. I'm sorry. I—,

Oh! But here's the thing. The really freaky thing. You'll never guess what I found, lyin' in his lap. The Goddamn plant. Fenderlein must've put her red plant there after she bolted him down. Though it wasn't red no more. Its petals were blue. Or purple, maybe. But it was definitely a different colour. I just can't pin down which. I don't know why—

Holy shit! The thing outside! It moved away. I think it's gone. Oh, thank God, I think it left. It—.

No. I was wrong. Dammit. It's on the scanners. It moved to the lower deck. I don't know why it does that. It's like it just wants a change of view. Don't know why it goes there. There ain't no other windows down there, so I don't know what it's lookin' for. Crazy thing.

Shit, I'm so damn tired. I'm callin' it a night. There's a lot more I wanna talk about, an' I'll get to that, I promise. Just so tired now. Tired...

LOG ENTRY—0058.4

Scr'ty't tn gath
Tr'nnyw Tyah go'yath
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
A'gnth tri Ka'sth
Br'aalh ki Wr'tith
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,

LOG ENTRY—0059.9

Okay, I'm back. Got some sleep, but I still feel dog-tired. Where was I? Oh, right! Johnny.

I should mention why I'm stuck here. Johnny was the cap, an' without his access codes, I can't fly the Fisher anywhere. Company insurance policy so we don't hijack the ship an' sell our haul to the enemy or somethin'. The Corp's got wars to win on the edge of the frontier an' all. But it's still a shit idea, cause we ended up stranded here.

I got off topic. Sorry.

So after Johnny died, there was just me an' Fenderlein, the crazy bitch. No, I'm sorry, that ain't fair. Ain't her fault she went over the edge. Coot did too, but he never got as weird as she did. He just went screamin' an' full on crazy. Fenderlein became creepy, with her sneakin' in the dark like a gargoyle, carryin' the plant in her arms like how chimps carry their kids. I didn't want to take it away from her, but she was startin' to hurt herself with it again. I was busy runnin' after her with a towel an' a first-aid kit half the time, patchin' her cuts an' tryin' to cover her up. She'd gotten rid of all her clothes by now, tearin' them apart fibre by fibre, but I was okay with that as I didn't want her to have anythin' she could hang herself with. An' fuck you if you think I did it to get my jollies off. It ain't like that. It ain't.

So anyway, we were a few days away from makin' contact with the company ship, so I figured I do my best to keep us alive. I failed.

One morning, I walked onto the command deck an' saw the thing with the eye outside, so I crouched outta sight. But Fenderlein was there too. She stood in front of the window, buck naked, arms wide, lettin' the eye look at her. She then turned to me an'...an' she ain't had eyes no more. Plucked 'em out of her head. She whispered somethin' at me, seconds before she began slammin' her head against the glass. I couldn't stop her with that big eye peerin' in, so I had to watch her crack her head right open. Nothin' I could do. I still get sick thinkin' about it.

When the thing moved away an' I could walk in an' clean up Fenderlein's remains, I saw the plant in the captain's chair. I don't know why the plant was there. Fenderlein must've put it there before she killed herself. I wanted to throw out of the airlock. But in the days since, I still haven't done it.

It's a weird thing. Its petals keeps changin' colour. Weird colour changin' plant. Red plant. Purple plant. Blue plant. Over an' over again. I don't know why it does that. I hate it. Sometimes I think that flower is somehow in cahoots with the eye-monster-'roid-whatever-it-is. I know I ain't makin' much sense, but I'm sure that's what's up. I can feel it in my gut. But I can't get myself to get rid of it. I just can't.

Signin' off for now. Gettin' more tired every day. I don't know what's up. Just tired. Sorry.

LOG ENTRY—0061.4

Oh-okay, I'm freakin' out right now. It caught me. I was tryin' to find a way to shut the blast shields again when it locked eyes with me. I'm so stupid. It caught me off guard. Snuck up to the windows. I didn't even see it comin'. I'm lookin' into its eye right now.

My eyes are heavy. I haven't blinked. I'm afraid of what'll happen. I pissed myself, an' it stinks like hell. I'm thirsty too. Ain't got no more fluids inside me. I can't keep 'em open anymore, my eyes. I'm going crazy, is what. I can't. I just can't. Oh God, I'm gonna die. I'm—

LOG ENTRY—0061.8

She has awakened, the mother of the vine,
Reborn in skin of green and thorn,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Her strength regained, sapping power from specks,
The dirt and wastes of existence,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Eating time, eating the void,
Eating all that is to be,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,

LOG ENTRY—0062.0

Okay, this might sound totally insane, but I'm okay. I blinked, but nothin' happened. It just drifted off somewhere. First thing I did when I didn't turn into a ravin' lunatic or had my head explode on me, was wash out my eyes in the bathroom for an hour. Then I drank almost two litres of water.

So, I'm all right. Which is good. I'm so glad. Kinda wonderin' why nothin' happened to me, but I'm not gonna question a good thing. I'm gonna try an' get a good night's rest. It's fine. I'm all right.

LOG ENTRY—0063.5

I'm not all right. I'm seein' things, man. I hear them too. Whispers around every corner. Ghosts in the dark. I'm scared, man. I think someone's tryin' to mess with my mind. But there ain't no-one else on board no more. The rest is dead. I'm it. But there's gotta be someone. Because of the plant. Someone is movin' that plant. It was in my room, you see. On my bed. How did it get there?

I'm so tired. I can barely move. So tired. I'm signin' off for tonight. I...I just can't anymore. Just can't.

LOG ENTRY—0065.9

In the sleeping world, it grows,
Under the light of the dark eye,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
The great weed, the great seed,
The mother of madness,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
She wakes under the dreaming one's eye,
Her vines will grow, guided by the empty incarnate,
C'n'trn, G'n'tnr.

LOG ENTRY—0067.5

Okay, so I just played back some of my log entries this morning, just to see where I left off. I don't remember makin' that last entry. I don't even remember bein' up at that time. I was asleep. I'm sure I was.

LOG ENTRY—0068.7

Okay, so I went back. Turns out there's an earlier entry I don't remember makin'. But I did make it. So I'm thinkin' I was just tired or somethin'. Too exhausted to remember an' all.

But I wasn't. The log entries are all time stamped. I checked the security footage on the Fisher. There's me, at exactly 4 PM Earth Central time, makin' dinner an' doin' logistics on the 'roid outside. When did I make that entry?

I listened to it. It's just nonsense. But it's definitely my voice. It don't make no sense.

Strange thing is, even though I've got visual footage of me walkin' around an' doing stuff, I don't remember most of it. There's gaps in my memory. I've lost whole hours with no idea what I was doin' in that time.

What is happenin' to me?

LOG ENTRY—0069.8

It talks! I was drinkin' my coffee (which we're runnin' out of an' I don't know why I just mentioned that but I felt like I should but I don't remember why so I'll just stop), lookin' out at the big black rock with the unblinkin' eye. 'Cept it stopped bein' unblinkin' when it blinked on me, but you probably guessed that so I'm sorry I said that but I'm afraid to stop talking or it's gonna start talking to me again.

So I was just lookin' at it from the pilot's chair, not doin' nothin' when I heard this voice. It said some things, but I don't have a clue what they meant. It sounded like singin' or chantin'. I don't know. But it did this for hours, circlin' around an' around the Fisher while sayin' the same thing over an' over again.

It went somethin' like this: Gantern Gantern, Gallah Broo Darak. It kept sayin' that over an' over. At least, I think it did. But I keep hearin' those words in my head. Over an' over again. It was like what Fenderlein was saying before she died, but makin' even less sense than she did, if that's even possible.

Another thing! I forgot to mention this before. The 'roid with the eye? It's changin'. I don't know into what, but it's weird. It started out as just a rock lookin' thing. Then it grew tentacles. It's only got the one eye, but there's somethin' weird about it now that I got a closer look at it. It's like there's eyes inside the eye. Like one of those kaleidoscope things, where there's millions on millions of things inside. It's crazy! I can't unsee it. Even in my dreams. A vortex of eyes an' tentacles. An' inside that there's a star. A black star that's growin'.

I can't sleep. I tried eatin' but I threw up half an hour later. I think my hair is fallin' out. I keep findin' clumps of it all over the ship. Even though the temperature system is all good, I keep shiverin' like some kind of skit-head achin' for a fix. I ain't done that shit in years, but it's the exact same feelin'. That feeling of somethin' crawlin' behind your eyes an' you just can't find relief, no matter how much you rub them. When you find yourself bitin' your lip, just to see how much pressure will cause you to bleed.

I think...I think I'm going insane. My head feels like it's being ripped apart. Like claws diggin' into it. Claws...or thorns? What is happenin'? What is happenin' to me? It's the plant! I'm sure of it. Goddamn plant, changin' colours again! Red plant! Purple plant! Blue Plant! Red plant! Purple plant! Blue Plant! Red—

LOG ENTRY—0070.7

It was her. The plant. She did it. The thing outside is only part of it. It makes sense now. She's the one that made all this happen.

I don't think she can hear me, but I'm gonna whisper anyway. Anyway, last night I realized why the thing outside didn't blow my brains out like it did with Johnson. Johnny hated the plant. He wanted to get rid of it, no matter what Fenderlein said. Whether he was gonna do it or not don't matter, but he was a threat to the plant. I wasn't, so I got to live. But for what purpose?

But that's where my theory comes in. It's protectin' the plant. The thing outside, the big mass of dark an' tentacles—did I mention it grew even more tentacles now?—is the plant's muscle. The plant that Coot smuggled on board is its master, tellin' it what to do an' who to kill.

I know how insane this sounds. But if it's not true, then I'm the crazy one. An' I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy. Don't you call me crazy!

I'm sorry. I don't mean to shout, but I'm at the end of my rope. I can't, anymore. I just can't.

LOG ENTRY—0071.1

A soft lullaby, for a soft heart,
Bring the mother closer, awakens the dark,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Litter her seeds, sing her song,
Reunite the children of the vine,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Embrace the true sight, see the empty,
Remove the false, undo the blind,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn.

LOG ENTRY—0071.9

I am much better now. I'm not as confused as I was before. Ridding myself of my eyes surely did help, even though it was difficult since I couldn't find a knife and the spoons were ever so dull. My headaches are gone as well. Submitting to the great mother of the vine really put this situation into perspective, if you understand my meaning.

Did I mention? The great mother G'n'trn spoke to me. She said that my eyes blinded me from seeing the great light of the infinite, where shadows crumble and the stars scream. So I took care of that. Now I too can see. Fenderlein nearly saw it. But she was a weak silly bitch who treated mother like a babe, a weak infant. Coot was a mongoloid whose brains were too small to comprehend the beauty she showed him. And Johnson? Pfft, he was probably a—

Oh? Shh. Quiet for a second, please. She speaks. Yes? Ahuh. Yes, great mother. Oh, yes, we will rebuild. Crack this plane. Turn all to dust. Let the black stars grow. Pile the ashes, until we rebuild Carcosa in this black and pleasant land.

LOG ENTRY—0075.4

She's asleep. I don't hear her voice now. I have control again over my mind. I've got my thoughts back.

I can't see. My eyes. I can't feel my eyes. She made me do somethin' to myself. Why can't I see anythin'? I think...oh God, I think I'm blind.

I'll show her. That fuckin' thing. I'll show her good.

System override code: Kagemusha, Epsilon, Drake, Eight, Pluto. Command: activate the self-destruct system. Acti-

—RECORDING ERROR—

LOG ENTRY—0076.3

She's overridin' the system! I can't get it to—

No! You fuckin' bitch! She's in my skin! Digging inside me! Get out! You piece of shit! Argh! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck—

—RECORDING ERROR—

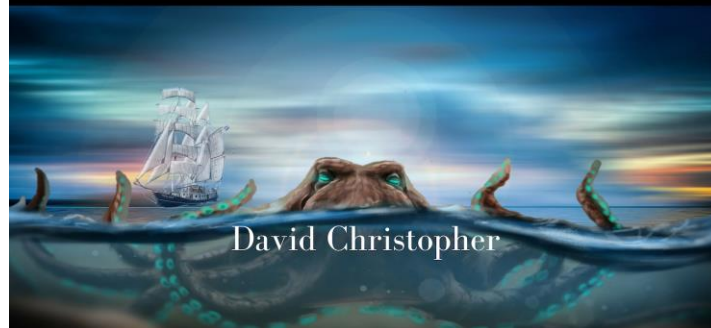
LOG ENTRY—0076.7

He is mine, I am hers,
The Mother awakens, her vines take root,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Soon, soon she will rise,
And further her seeds will spread,
G'n'trn, G'n'trn,
Begin, the age of the great Mother,
Red plant, purple plant, blue plant.

THE END

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Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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A FISH STORY by Gregory Owen

1

Little drew Wayne Poole's ire quicker than what his old man always called a fish story. When he was a kid, it was the "big 'un" that got away, the one that was ten feet long or weighed fifty pounds and put up one hell of a fight in a life or death struggle, snapping the line so that it could escape into the safety of the depths. As Wayne came to regard it in a less romantic way in intervening years, it was a damn lie with no proof to back it up. All lies were fish stories, every single one, with some fish bigger than others, and it was adopted into his lexicon to describe anytime he heard something roll out of someone's mouth that he didn't believe. He'd grown to hate them from a young age, instilled in him by his father's proclamation that 'Hell is fulla liars, and there's always room for more,' but the passage of time only made fish stories and those that told them more intolerable (especially in recent years), inspiring a deep-seated rage within him at the very idea or notion.

That was exactly how he felt when Tom came in late that afternoon in a panic.

"Dad!" The back door opened and slammed closed and there were footsteps through the kitchen. "Dad! I need help!"

Growling irritably, Wayne shifted on the couch in the nearby living room. The old leather groaned and squeaked. "What the hell..." He swished his half-empty beer in one hand, changed the channel with the remote in the other, and sighed. He'd only wanted some peace before work, but that was what he got for even hoping. "In the living room!"

Tom burst through the kitchen door, squinting to adjust to the darkness, where the only light came from the glow of the small flatscreen that bathed the mountainous slab of Wayne Poole. "Dad, something happened to Alan!"

"Get me another beer." Wayne commanded, ignoring Tom's words as he gulped down the remains and offered the empty can. "Least you can do after skippin' out on your chores today. Guess you thought I'd forget."

"Chores? Dad, I asked you this morning if I could do them when I got back, remember?"

Wayne squinted, dismissing the claim. "I don't recall, boy. You know I ain't thinkin' when I'm tryin' to sleep..."

Momentarily taken aback, Tom continued on, unfazed, his eyes then bulging with fright, returning to his earlier plea. "Never mind that...Alan's hurt, Dad! He ran off...We...I've...I've been looking, need to...I need-"

"To get me another beer," Wayne commanded again. "And calm down. And get to work 'round here."

“No, Dad, goddamnit! Listen!”

Wayne Poole lurched forward, not quite to his feet, and pounded the can down on the couch’s arm. He never tolerated disrespect, especially when he told someone to do something—he owned the house, paid the bills. Disrespect was the only thing he hated as much as lies—fish stories. It was times like these that he wanted to openly curse his ex-wife Paula, the biggest liar he’d ever met, for succumbing to lung cancer the previous year, leaving him to have to deal with their two boys alone. He was certain that, rotting in whatever hole she had slithered into as refuge down past the ninth circle of Hell, she was laughing it up gloriously, the bitch. “Don’t you ever talk to me that way, boy. Never, you hear?”

“But-”

“Never, Tom!”

Unknown to the two of them, a third party had quietly entered the living room from the darkness of the adjacent hallway, hidden from view by the television’s luminous screen. Tom was the first to notice the presence of his little brother, pausing to mask his combination of hysteria and anger with a false smile. “Uh...h-hey, Billy...”

“Hey, Tom,” Billy said softly, returning a warm smile to his sibling. “Dad, I’ll get you the beer.” As he walked past his father, the youth winced slightly when Wayne shifted in his seat again, the glazed eyes trailing him, and braced himself for a hit that he expected but never came. Though not quite ten years old, Billy Poole was a smart kid—at least his brother thought so.

It was painfully obvious that Wayne would never take the time to really know his sons—Tom had realized this even before Mom died—and he only seemed to resent them, forcing the brothers to depend upon each other. Finding himself counting on his little brother more than he realized, Tom had seen that Billy knew how to keep the old man pacified, to defuse tense situations, though this wasn’t one that Tom felt that even his little brother’s kind nature could hope to cure. He could barely contain the fire in his own brain as it was.

Once Billy entered the kitchen, Tom turned his attention back the eldest Poole, who grumbled as he turned the television off, convinced that this situation wasn’t going to end anytime soon.

“What’s goin’ on, then?”

“...I need your phone.”

“What’s wrong with yours?”

Frustrated at his father’s deflection, Tom clicked his teeth, exasperated. “You know it’s fried, Dad. When you chucked it in the toilet-”

“Why do you need mine? Use the goddamn house phone,” he said, pointing toward the kitchen.

“You haven’t paid the bill in over a month! I need to call 911!” Frantic and distressed beyond rationality, his emotional state as steady as a rickety, ancient roller coaster that he could barely hold together, Tom tried to stifle himself—this was getting nowhere. “Just...shh...I...have you seen Alan? Has he come this way?”

“No, I have not seen Alan,” Wayne replied sardonically, disliking the sobriety that was creeping into him. Billy needed to get a move on with that beer. “That all?”

“He’s hurt...he ran off...” He knew how scared Alan had been; how much pain he was in. His screams. “Somethin’ happened, Dad. At the lake.”

Wayne scoffed. “Lake? You mean the pond, doncha? Too damn small for a lake.” Less than a quarter of a mile from the small Poole house was a large freshwater pond (or a small lake, depending on who you asked) on the edge of the property, typically home to assorted aquatic game ranging from crappies in the summer to catfish in the fall. It wasn’t necessarily impressive by any means, but it did lend to itself a quiet, secluded area to spend warm summer afternoons away from negativity; for Tom, it was being away from Wayne, who never used it.

“Yeah. We were fishing-”

“Who?” Wayne interrupted. “Who else? You said ‘we’ a few minutes ago, and I only realized it just now...” He paused, frowning at the subterfuge, and his voice took on a mocking tone.

“‘We’, oh, ‘I’ve’ been looking for Alan. Who’s been with you, lookin’ for Alan, huh? It wasn’t just you and Alan at the pond, am I right?”

Tom grew quiet for a few seconds. Even with a buzz, his father could still be pretty perceptive when it suited him. Looking at the floor, knowing that his father wouldn’t be happy about the company he and his friend were keeping, he continued. “...Sally and Heather were there with us.”

“God Almighty, Tom. You lied to me, huh?”

“They wanted to hang out with us—nothing was going on. Just fishing.”

“Sure, boy, I know what goes on with girls. Especially a little whore like Heather Robbins...”

“Dad.”

Wayne Poole sneered, venom in his voice. “You skip out on your chores, you’re not around all day, and worst of all: you just keep tellin’ me fish stories, goddamnit! That cunt doesn’t need to be around my house or anything I own. She ain’t nothin’ but trouble. Bad enough you’re with that Delmont boy, damn bad influence, but...Psh, fishin’...prolly all over there havin’ some kinda goddamn orgy on my land!”

“Shut up, Dad! Jesus!”

At that outburst, Wayne pushed himself up from his seat with considerable effort, and faced his eldest like an outlaw staring down another in a Western showdown. He easily towered over Tom in height and girth, and he made his size known when he inhaled deeply, the way a bloated toad does to frighten away other predators. “Say that again,” he muttered aggressively.

Tom wasn’t to be intimidated this time, and with good reason. He knew his father was not a friendly man, not even a really good man, made all the more apparent when Mom died and he was awarded custody, but Tom sometimes had to use the man as a necessary evil. What he had seen at the pond had scared the living hell out of him, much more than Wayne Poole could ever scare him, and he was still trying to make sense of it the best that he could. The absolute last thing he needed was his old man making disparaging remarks about his girlfriend; that was inexcusable, and like Wayne’s professed disdain for lying and disrespect, intolerable. “I said shut up, Dad. Do you see my fishing rod?” Tom gestured to the empty space in the corner of the room that was always occupied by his pawn shop-purchased angler casting rod when not in use. “You see a damn rod? No? I took it to go fishing,” he said in ridicule. “And I left it at the lake...pond...in a rush to get here! I’m trying to tell you that Alan’s hurt, and you’re trying to lecture me? And still callin’ them ‘fish stories’? What, are we in elementary school now? I’m not a damn kid!”

The empty Pabst Blue Ribbon can in Wayne’s hand crunched and crinkled, his meaty knuckles clenched into a fist. “You are when you’re under my roof...and you’d best watch that kinda tone with me, Tom, or...”

“You gonna hit me, too?” Tom challenged. It wouldn’t be the first time, he thought coldly, and after today, it wouldn’t matter to him if he did.

Before the two could continue the confrontation and possibly—likely—come to blows, Billy returned from the kitchen with the cold brew for his father. “Here, Dad,” he said.

Dropping the empty Pabst carcass onto the floor, Wayne snatched the fresh one from Billy’s hand and eyed him as he unconsciously did as his father would have demanded, picking up the crushed can. “Throw that away and get your ass in your room. This don’t concern you.”

Looking back to Tom, the youth complied and silently made his way back to the safe confines of his room. His door closed with a soft click, and the teenager resumed eying his father with his defiant gaze, quaking not just from adrenaline, but from fear of what had occurred earlier. He hoped Alan was all right...

Pulling the can’s tab, taking a shallow breath, and finally drinking deeply, Wayne collected himself for a moment. The sweet taste of the lager didn’t make him forget, but he’d forgive Tom’s earlier transgressions. For a time, anyway. “Since you ain’t leaving me be, tell me what happened,” he said, managing to sound slightly as though he truly cared. “Then you will get to cleanin’, takin’ out the trash...what you was supposed to do today.”

Tom, too, collected himself, ignoring his father’s adamant orders, and tried to focus his scattered mind. “Alan...he caught somethin’ on his line, only it wasn’t a fish. It was...somethin’ else.”

“Psh...what was it then if it wasn’t a fish? A shark?” Wayne smirked and took another drink.

“No...you could...see through it. Like...like a membrane, I guess...sorta like jellyfish, but not...”

“Oh, this is a good one,” Wayne muttered into his beer can. “No such thing as a freshwater jellyfish, Tom. That girl’s got your mind all fuzzed.”

Tom knew that aquatic animal fact, too, but he was struggling to find an explanation as he ignored the comment about Heather. Thinking back with perfect clarity, Tom remembered when, only an hour or so ago, Alan had made the fateful catch as he tried to explain.

On what was to be a typical day of lazy summer fishing, Tom and Alan were perturbed by the fact that there was so little activity during their impromptu excursion with their girlfriends. They caught nothing of note for hours, aside from occasional chunks of long-lost litter and gangly wads of vine and moss. At least, not until Tom gave his fishing rod to Heather for kicks, seeing as how she was more of a city girl not versed in his ways.

Moments after casting, to her delight, she had something. “Maybe all it needs is a woman’s touch,” she had joked, until she reeled in an object none of them expected: a fish’s skeleton.

“Picked clean,” Alan had said.

“Ew, no...there’s still some...meat...and what is this? Slime?” Heather had observed her quarry more closely and had to stifle gagging, handing the rod back to her boyfriend.

For the next several minutes, Tom and Alan—Sally and Heather neglected to join in after catching the gooey fish remains—continued pulling in skeletons. Some were complete and others had fallen apart or were soft in consistency, but all were covered in strange, clear ooze. It looked like snot, Alan claimed, but he dared not touch it. Despite their uneasiness and confusion as to what was going on, both of them continued fishing until Alan snagged something that, as he claimed, pulled back.

Reeling in the line wasn’t much of a struggle for Alan, certainly not one that Wayne Poole’s father would have said had been key to an authentic “fish story,” but whatever the quarry lacked in strength, it made up for with sheer oddity.

“What in the hell is it?” Tom had asked.

The thing on the end of Alan’s line was something none of the teenagers had ever seen. It almost resembled a single-celled organism found in a Biology textbook, much like a microscopic amoeba, only much, much larger in size. There were pulsing veins that formed numerous branches throughout its translucent form like dead purple trees, and spiny tendrils, clear and slimy like the rest of the creature’s body, protruded from it as it writhed and slithered, trying instinctively to release itself from the hook embedded in it.

“It was like some kind of...giant amoeba, maybe. I don’t know.” Tom stopped, looking past his father as he relayed the story. “Alan wasn’t paying attention for a second and...it jumped onto his hand and...and he...he started...screamin’...beggin’ me to help him.”

“So it was an...ah-mee-bah?” Wayne’s face contorted into that of a sceptic, remembering the word he slowly pronounced being akin to a germ.

“I don’t know what it was! I just know he ran off, clinging on to his hand. He was in pain. Sally was freaking out and went after him. I told Heather to stay with her, and I said I’d run here, maybe catch him, and try and call 911 since reception’s so bad down there...told them to try and call if they found them...if...if they even can.”

“Heh.” Wayne slurped his beer and returned to the couch, slumping upon it heavily. “Bullshit.”

“What?” Tom stepped closer as Wayne turned the television back on. “I’m telling you the truth...I swear to God, Dad!”

“I don’t have time for this stupidity, Tom. It’s bullshit. A fish story, like I always say. Just like your goddamn mama...she lied all the time, too. You seem to like lying to me. You already lied about you and Alan being with the girls, prolly doin’...shit knows what... and now this...this crap? I don’t tolerate fish stories in MY house.” Wayne placed his beer on the coffee table and reached into his pocket, plucking from it his cell phone, and waved it at Tom. “Take the damn thing. Do what you want.” As his son leaned in to grab it, Wayne glared at him. “But you lie to me anymore...and I’ll kick your little ass to hell and back, show ya for the liar you are. Billy can watch, see what lying’ll get him.”

In his room with walls thin as cardboard, Billy Poole shuddered.

Taking the phone, Tom decided instead to try and call Heather. It had been about twenty minutes since Alan was attacked by...the thing. Maybe they found him? After all, Alan had a car nearby that he used to pick up the girls—a cherry red Firebird his old man had given him (my old man just gives me problems and a beat-up Buick that I have to ask to use)—and they could be heading to the hospital now. There was one in town about twenty miles away.

“Christ, just like your mother. Never knew what the truth was,” Wayne sputtered to himself.

Dialling her number and placing the cell to his ear, Tom quietly prayed that wherever Heather was, she had a signal. If not, he wouldn’t waste time calling her over and over—he’d just call 911.

“H-hello?” a voice stammered.

“Heather? God, are you okay? Have you found Alan?”

“I’m okay, but...but Jesus, Alan...Tom, we found him...but...”

“Is he okay?”

“Sally, you got him? No, Tom...Jesus...his arm...it’s bad...”

As his girlfriend spoke, in the background, Tom could hear Alan whimpering and what sounded like Sally crying hysterically. Barely making out the words “up to his elbow” through the belligerent exchange, he looked to his father with a face obviously of growing despair, and Wayne could only roll his eyes and shake his head in dismissal, changing the channel again and again.

“Sal, calm down...We’ve got him in his car...where-where are your keys, Alan?...You’ll...be okay, I promise...I’m gonna take him to the hospital.”

“Good,” Tom said, trying to maintain his composure. “There’s one close by. Uh...take the highway.”

“You want me to come get you?”

“No, you go ahead. Get Alan there and I’ll be there soon. Be careful. You...you want me to call 911?”

“No.”

“Okay. Okay. Tell Alan he’ll be okay.”

Intertwined with Sally’s own cries were Alan’s, though his were more easily heard and understood. “Get this thing offa me, please! It hurrrts!”

Sounds of grunting, struggling, and Heather spoke again. “Please hurry...p-please...I love you...”

“I love you, too,” Tom replied softly, and Wayne Poole gave a dismissive sigh as the call ended. The silence filled the room, heavy and choking, all while Tom still tried to process what had happened, what was happening. At least Heather was okay, and Sally seemed to be. That was of some relief...but Alan...

Wayne slurped more beer. “You sure he didn’t just...” he belched, “...get a hook hung in his arm?”

“I couldn’t be more sure if I was a damn psychic, Dad. I know what I saw.”

“I’d be more inclined to believe you if it was a hook.”

“It wasn’t, Dad.”

Wayne took another gulp. “Still sounds like bullshit. But I almost admire your dedication. Your mama was like that, too.”

Tom sighed, knowing that his father wouldn’t be satisfied no matter what. “Here,” he said, handing the phone back to Wayne. “Alan’s on his way to the hospital with Heather and Sal, so I’m headin’ over there, too.”

“The hell you are, boy,” Wayne said. “You’ve got chores to do and you’re stayin’ home with Billy. You know I’m on third shift now.”

“Billy will be okay for a bit, and I’ll do the chores tomorrow, Dad! I’ll do ‘em, just lemme-”

“I got work in less than two hours. I just wanna relax a bit before I go in. You’ve wasted enough of my time—I listened to your fish stories and now I’m done. I ain’t buyin’ it, you hear me? Oh, and before you go an’ run off with the Buick...” Wayne plunged a meaty hand into his pant pocket and produced a set of keys. “I’m makin’ sure your lyin’ ass is staying right here!”

“But-”

“And get outside and do your goddamn chores!”

Wanting to say more, Tom inhaled but paused, mid-breath. He knew this was a lost battle; he knew it before he started. He knew how his father was. He was foolish to try this route, but he wanted to explore his options starting with telling him what happened. Didn’t work, no surprise. He’d just have to go ahead with Plan B, like usual. Despite what Wayne Poole thought of his oldest son, he wasn’t a liar, but he did sometimes have to do the old sneaky cloak and dagger routine, which was especially effective when the adult in your house was an alcoholic.

“Okay...Dad,” Tom answered finally. With that façade of peaceful acceptance established, the teenager exited through the kitchen and went outside.

Wayne half-smiled, satisfied that it was over, but annoyed that Tom had, as usual, wasted his valuable time in front of the television. “Damn fish stories.”

When the head of the household vacated his position on the couch to shower before work, Tom—who had been peeking in from time to time through the back kitchen window, which itself had a perfect view of the living room—made his move. He slipped back into the house, quietly, and moved to the single bathroom. The door was cracked open and he could see his father’s rotund silhouette through the plastic curtain, but his goal was folded sloppily on the toilet. Tom crept stealthily and reached into the back pocket of his Dad’s jeans, taking his prize.

Moving quickly back into the hallway, Tom began dialling Heather’s number. Four rings, then to voicemail. “Hey, you’ve reached Heather...sorry I can’t come to the phone right-” Tom ended the call. He figured the hospital didn’t have a good signal. Yeah, that was it. It wasn’t something else. Listening for a moment, hearing the shower spraying full-blast, Tom was silently thankful that Wayne tended to take long showers. He’d call the hospital to check on Alan and the others. He just needed the number.

It didn't take long using the data on his dad's phone to find it. Tom had to press a series of numbers to reach the ER via an automated service, since that would have to be where Heather would've taken Alan. After about a minute of bad saxophone music, a woman answered. "Emergency Room Front Desk. This is Marie."

"H-hello, yes, I'm wanting to know if a friend of mine made it there? His hand...he had a hand injury, and I...I want to know if he and my girlfriend...two girls were with him."

"Doesn't sound familiar," the voice said. "I've been here since 10 AM and I haven't seen anyone like that. Patient name?"

"Um, Alan Delmont."

Marie looked on her computer. "No. No one by that name. What is your name, sir?"

Tom felt his stomach sink like an elevator into Hell. He pressed End. Alan wasn't at the hospital. He didn't make it there. It was the only local hospital for fifty miles, and there was no way they would have went anywhere else. No way. Tom was going to head that way once Wayne left for work, anyway, but now, it was going to have to be a search. Possibly a search and rescue.

Sliding his dad's cell phone back into his pant pocket without the old man knowing, Tom briefly flirted with the notion of taking the keys to the Buick and bolting out of there—God only knew that he wanted to. Not that he needed the keys, though. One of the talents taught to him by his friend Alan, whom Wayne was likely right to call a "bad influence," was hot-wiring a car. But that took time.

Outside of the bathroom door waiting as Tom exited was the primary reason behind his desire to not to act on impulse and to be a conscientious older brother. "Everything okay?" Billy Poole whispered.

Looking over his shoulder, hearing Wayne clear his throat and vacate his sinuses—a signal that his shower was coming to a close—Tom leaned down at his little brother's level. "No, Billy. Alan's hurt...and he's not at the hospital. Heather and Sally are with him..."

"What?" Billy looked concerned. He liked Alan. Sure, the seventeen-year-old picked on him sometimes, but he was Tom's best friend, and Billy loved his brother. And the girls were okay, too. Too concerned with their appearances, but they were not too bad...for girls, at least. Billy never wanted anything bad to happen to them. Not to anyone...except...maybe...

"Look, Billy..." Tom continued. "I'm gonna wait until Dad leaves and I'm going out to look for them...they have to be on the highway."

"Why don't you take the keys?"

"Dad's got 'em...not gonna take 'em...might get you...you know."

Billy nodded, knowing how Wayne was. If Tom did something and wasn't around for punishment, Billy was the next logical choice, usually to act as a lesson for Tom. Billy was too young to see it as anything more than how things were; Tom saw it as sick.

"I'll just hot-wire the Buick. When he leaves." The shower handle squeaked and the water turned off. "Okay? I'll wait until he leaves...will you be okay?"

"Yeah, Tom. I will." Wayne's heavy footsteps left the bathtub. "You better head back out."

Tom smiled. Billy had been learning well. "I'll be back tonight." The oldest sibling left soundlessly, returning to his chores that he had pantomimed until he could get inside, and Billy moved back into his bedroom before Wayne could hear and likely berate him. Or worse.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK



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THE THIRD WISH by Rob Bliss

When I was a kid, my best friend, Dougie, and I would go on adventures, which just meant we'd trek through a farmer's field or inspect the roadside ditch for treasure—beer bottles or a torn page from a naked lady magazine—or inspect various trees to see if they were good for tree forts. But we never went into a forest. Our folks told us we'd get lost and trapped if we did, and we had both seen enough movies and read enough comic books to know that children rarely came out of the forest alive. We would have to resort to cannibalism, and Dougie and I were real good friends so it was too tough to decided who would eat who.

His dad told him a story that was based on an old legend about a woman who had to tell stories so some king wouldn't kill her (and probably eat her) or cut off her head so she didn't turn into a zombie or a vampire. Dougie's dad said the lady got three wishes from a genie in a bottle. I told him that was an old one and that there were tons of cartoons about that. Dougie said he knew, and that the one wish you couldn't ask for was more wishes.

So we trekked through the McMaster field with walking sticks, pretending we were smoking wizard pipes and slashing sabre-toothed tigers to pieces, telling each other what we'd wish for.

"Money, so you could buy everything," Dougie said, but I said that was too much like the 'more wishes' wish, but he said it counted.

I threw a big clod of dirt that was not cow poo (no matter what Dougie said), and it exploded and killed an entire Jeep full of commies, and Dougie threw a clod of dirt that exploded into an atom bomb that killed zombies.

I said, "A motocross bike, Suzuki 450. No, Kawasaki."

"Suzuki's better," Dougie said.

"I like green, so I'm wishing for a Kawasaki."

"Does the genie give motocross bikes?"

"Sure, he could give anything."

"I want a dune buggy and a hang glider."

"Every hockey card ever in the universe."

"Every comic book ever in the universe. Infinity." Dougie always made a better wish.

"And ninja stars. And nunchakus," I added, knowing he couldn't resist the same wish.

"We only get three wishes though so they gotta be good."

He tried to hit a stone like a baseball but his stick always missed so he expertly threw the stick and it split the eye of a dragon right in half and when the dragon fell it started an earthquake.

We both wriggled and writhed between the furrows of McMaster's ploughed field, and we got our shirts and pants dirty. My mom would be mad, maybe, so I got up after the dragonquake and brushed off most of the dirt. It was fine.

Dougie had to pee so he peed. I threw my stick like a boomerang straight up and it came back to me.

"What if we could get into every movie ever?" I suggested. "Scary movies—blood and guts and gore—tentacle monsters, aliens, haunted chainsaws killing, like, everybody in the universe!"

Dougie jumped and wriggled and got pee on his pant legs as he zipped up and yelled, "Yeah! And naked chicks getting their heads hacked off to shut them up when they're screaming through the woods and Jason in the hockey mask —"

"She can't scream if her head's cut off," I said, bringing reality into the fantasy.

I was doing it even way back then. Getting right into the worlds we created, or resurrected from our comics and movies, but then retreating when ... when what? It got too scary? I was scared of everything as a kid, and yet I couldn't stop getting closer and closer to the forbidden. Nothing changed, so many years later.

I tried to tell the judge it was an accident—that the girl hit her head on a rock in the field, that we were just wrestling, playing. But really that was just me getting closer and closer to the forbidden, then trying to retreat and renege and deny everything. I had a good lawyer, at least—he kept me out of the chair.

Anyway, it was on that adventure that Dougie and I had forgotten the path of our trek and came to the edge of the forest. There was still lots of light so we didn't have to get home and we easily saw the burlap bag just inside the trees. Not too far, so if the forest tried to get either of us we could still run out.

I was chicken, so I told Dougie I'd stay in the field and be ready to pull him out in case a tree tried to loop a vine around his leg. He ran in quick, grabbed the bag, and rushed it back into the field. Safe.

It stank like roadkill, so we had to open it. The mouth of the bag was tied with binder twine used for hay bales. Dougie never clipped his nails so he got the knot undone. He told me I had to open it and look inside, but I was still chicken so I pinched the bottom of the bag and lifted and shook it until the thing inside rolled out.

It was a woman's head.

We stared at it for two thousand years and I peed down my leg. My dad was going to kill me,

telling to grow the hell up, be a man, stop talking shit. (My dad didn't tell stories about woman except how they deserved what they got and they were all asking for it. Whatever 'it' was. Probably a smack, like what mom got sometimes.) Her hair was like long black snakes, I remember, and her mouth and eyes were open. Her neck was all chewed or hacked and you could see a white circle of bone. Just like in the movies and comics. It was all exactly the same, so maybe that was why me and Dougie didn't freak out too much. I knew I was chicken, but that was more leading up to the scary thing. Once we saw the head, it wasn't that scary; we had kinda seen them before.

So Dougie and I buried the lady's head in the field and threw away the sack and made our sticks into a cross with the binder twine and the burial grave was marked forever.

Then we went to our homes and had dinner and talked later that night on our walkie-talkies, vowing to tell no one. As we grew up we forgot about it, and forgot to talk about it.

Well, Dougie did. Like I told the court-appointed shrink, I went back to the edge of the forest and dug the head back up.

I asked the lady for three wishes. But she said she wouldn't grant the wishes I wanted when I was a child, only the wishes I would need when I was an adult.

I remember in the story with the lady and the genie there was always a twist that revealed how good things were actually bad, that you could get what you wanted but you had to pay a heavy price. Now, as an adult, I know this is called a Faustian Deal. I'm not sure I made one as a child because the head didn't grant any wish I wanted, only those I needed.

She said my first granted wish would be not to get caught until after I had thoroughly enjoyed myself. Which I did, as forensics showed. Second, the head said I would not die due to my actions. True: I had a good lawyer.

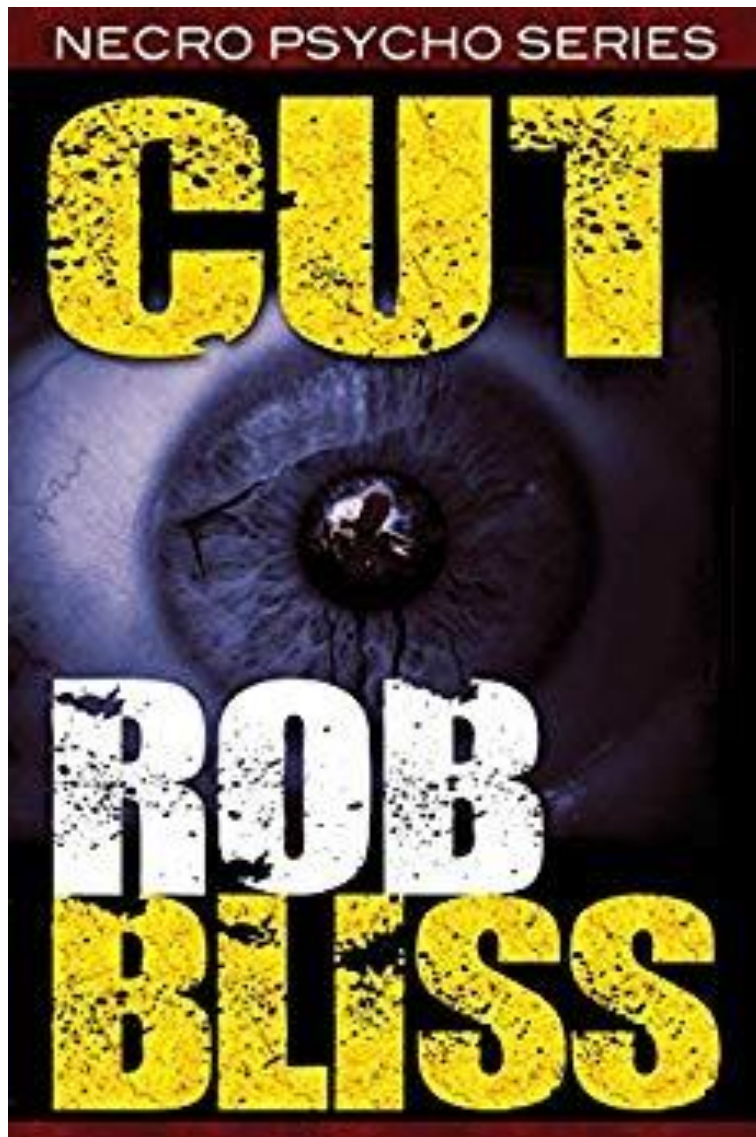
The third wish I never entirely understood, no matter how many times I went back to the edge where field met forest, swept aside the crossed sticks, dug her up and demanded more details about the third wish. When I was an adult, I even went back to where I had grown up to see if she was there, just before I got myself the girl I had been wanting for so long, but the head was gone. Rotted to dirt maybe, or maybe my memory wasn't so good and I had dug in the wrong place.

But I think I know now what she meant. Now that I'm in a concrete box and will never be free until I'm dead. Either I let death happen naturally, or I make it happen. That's the only act of willpower I have left.

The third wish was: you'll live for Hell but die for Heaven. All my life has led to that third wish. A thin bedsheet still makes a strong noose.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Forty-Eight

True to her word, Dimara did indeed take great joy in searching for Carter Ward. She was puzzled that Turhan Mot took no action on the nearly microscopic tracer she had managed to implant into the hull of the ship.

As it happened, though, for all his suave fearsomeness, Turhan Mot was, like Carter Ward, only himself a human being, subject to common human error. It was Mokem Bet to whom Horst Dal had given command of the “Dawnsmasher”. And Turhan Mot’s mind was so occupied with the capture of Carter Ward, that he paid no attention to anything else, leaving the tedium of running the ship entirely in the hands of Mokem Bet. And a more negligent captain of a ship Horst Dal would be most unlikely to find.

It never once occurred to Mokem Bet to check his ship for trackers, nor did he know to turn on the automatic warning system. So he never had any idea that the “Dawnsmasher” was being tracked.

Which made Dimara’s task relatively easy. Mud had the foresight to patch the tracker’s signal to his own ship. He was also scrupulous in keeping Rat carefully locked away in a storage bay below decks, with a plentiful supply of mud to keep the man quiet.

And Mud cautioned everyone to say nothing at all about their destination. As far as Rat knew, the whole gang was headed toward Mars, where they would drop Rat off with a few pounds of mud. He’d sell it off there, mud being a seller’s market there, and he having a few old friends in the neighbourhood.

Afterwards, or so he thought, he’d pick up a quick flight to the Earth’s moon. From there to the crowded cloud cities of Venus, maybe. Or he’d bury himself among the teeming billions on Earth herself. Neither Horst Dal, nor anyone else, was going to find him there on Earth.

So Rat was feeling pretty comfortable, all things considered.

Illara had long been curious about Dimara, since first meeting her when Carter Ward brought the Sherman family, Frederick, Joyce, his wife, and their two children, Jeffrey and Emily, to Callisto. Dimara had been Ward’s companion for many years, and Illara, one of the very few people Ward might call a friend.

So it was that Illara spent many long hours projecting a holographic image of herself to the bridge of the O8-111A. There, she made herself better acquainted with Dimara as the two ships pursued the “Dawnsmasher”. Illara had long been curious about Dimara, and was happy for the opportunity to learn more about her.

And Dimara, for her part, was delighted for the company. Ward was a most incurious man, one with no interest in the art of conversation. He often went for a hundred hours at a time without

voicing so much as a single syllable.

Dimara was a woman in appearance only. She was otherwise a manifestation of several interlocking programs which used quantum-based elements to create an artificial intelligence. Ward had selected this appearance, that of a woman, as something easy to look at in those long journeys between the asteroids. He could just as easily have assigned her the appearance of a toaster, a woodpecker, or any other odd object he could think of.

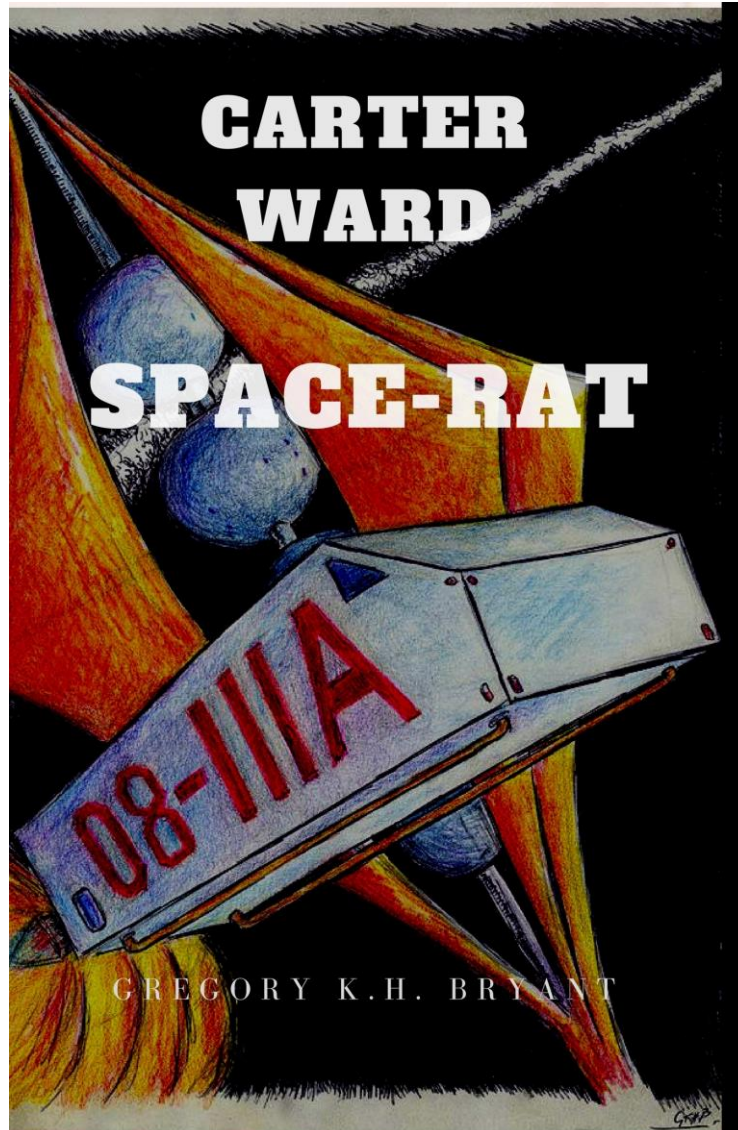
Dimara was delighted to find in Illara an engaging conversationalist. Though her knowledge of the universe outside the O8-111A was extensive – all she need do is upload the subjects in question. Dimara easily sidestepped the tedious chores and habits that are all part of the art of learning.

Even so, the dry programs that made up Dimara's memory and her mind, what she learned from them all was very superficial.

These conversations with Illara opened up new worlds for Dimara. Over time, the two became fast friends.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: *Carter Ward—Space Rat* by Gregory KH Bryant.



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ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

VIII: How Ospakar Blacktooth Found Eric Brighteyes and Skallagrim Lambstail on Horse-Head Heights

Now Skallagrim led Eric to his cave and fed the fire and gave him flesh to eat and ale to drink. When he had eaten his fill Eric looked at the Baresark. He had black hair streaked with grey that hung down upon his shoulders. His nose was hooked like an eagle's beak, his beard was wild and his sunken eyes were keen as a hawk's. He was somewhat bent and not over tall, but of a mighty make, for his shoulders must pass many a door sideways.

"Thou art a great man," said Eric, "and it is something to have overcome thee. Now tell me what turned thee Baresark."

"A shameful deed that was done against me, lord. Ten years ago I was a yeoman of small wealth in the north. I had but one good thing, and that was the fairest housewife in those parts—Thorunna by name—and I loved her much, but we had no children. Now, not far from my stead is a place called Swinefell, and there dwells a mighty chief named Ospakar Blacktooth; he is an evil man and strong——"

Eric started at the name and then bade Skallagrim take up the tale.

"It chanced that Ospakar saw my wife Thorunna and would take her, but at first she did not listen. Then he promised her wealth and all good things, and she was weary of our hard way of life and hearkened. Still, she would not go away openly, for that had brought shame on her, but plotted with Ospakar that he should come and take her as though by force. So it came about, as I lay heavily asleep one night at Thorunna's side, having drunk somewhat too deeply of the autumn ale, that armed men seized me, bound me, and haled me from my bed. There were eight of them, and with them was Ospakar. Then Blacktooth bid Thorunna rise, clothe herself and come to be his May, and she made pretence to weep at this, but fell to it readily enough. Now she bound her girdle round her and to it a knife hung.

"'Kill thyself, sweet,' I cried: 'death is better than shame.'

"'Not so, husband,' she answered. 'It is true that I love but thee; yet a woman may find another love, but not another life,' and I saw her laugh through her mock tears. Now Ospakar rode in hot haste away to Swinefell and with him went Thorunna, but his men stayed a while and drank my ale, and, as they drank, they mocked me who was bound before them, and little by little all the truth was told of the doings of Ospakar and Thorunna my housewife, and I learned that it was she who had planned this sport. Then my eyes grew dark and I drew near to death from very shame and bitterness. But of a sudden something leaped up in my heart, fire raged before my eyes and voices in my ears called on to war and vengeance. I was Baresark—and like hay bands I burst my cords. My axe hung on the wainscot. I snatched it thence, and of what befell I know this alone, that, when the madness passed, eight men lay stretched out before me, and all the place was but a gore of blood.

“Then I drew the dead together and piled drinking tables over them, and benches, and turf, and anything else that would burn, and put cod’s oil on the pile, and fired the stead above them, so that the tale went abroad that all these men were burned in their cups, and I with them.

“But I took the name of Skallagrim and swore an oath against all men, ay, and women too, and away I went to the wood-folk and worked much mischief, for I spared few, and so on to Mosfell. Here I have stayed these five years, awaiting the time when I shall find Ospakar and Thorunna the harlot, and I have fought many men, but, till thou camest up against me, none could stand before my might.”

“A strange tale, truly,” said Eric; “but now hearken thou to a stranger, for of a truth it seems that we have not come together by chance,” and he told him of Gudruda and the wrestling and of the overthrow of Blacktooth, and showed him Whitefire which he won out of the hand of Ospakar.

Skallagrim listened and laughed aloud. “Surely,” he said, “this is the work of the Norns. See, lord, thou and I will yet smite this Ospakar. He has taken my wife and he would take thy betrothed. Let it be! Let it be! Ah, would that I had been there to see the wrestling—Ospakar had never risen from his snow-bed. But there is time left to us, and I shall yet see his head roll along the dust. Thou hast his goodly sword and with it thou shalt sweep Blacktooth’s head from his shoulders—or perchance that shall be my lot,” and with this Skallagrim sprang up, gnashing his teeth and clutching at the air.

“Peace,” said Eric. “Blacktooth is not here. Save thy rage until it can run along thy sword and strike him.”

“Nay, not here, nor yet so far off, lord. Hearken: I know this Ospakar. If he has set eyes of longing on Gudruda, Asmund’s daughter, he will not rest one hour till he have her or is slain; and if he has set eyes of hate on thee—then take heed to thy going and spy down every path before thy feet tread it. Soon shall the matter come on for judgment and even now Odin’s Valkyries [¹] choose their own.”

“It is well, then,” said Eric.

“Yea, lord, it is well, for we two have little to fear from any six men, if so be that they fall on us in fair fight. But I do not altogether like thy tale. Too many women are mixed up in it, and women stab in the back. A man may deal with swords aloft, but not with tricks, and lies, and false women’s witchery. It was a woman who greased thy wrestling soles; mayhap it will be a woman that binds on thy Hell-shoes when all is done—ay! and who makes them ready for thy feet.”

“Of women, as of men,” answered Eric, “there is this to be said, that some are good and some evil.”

¹ The “corse-choosing sisters” who were bidden by Odin to single out those warriors whose hour had come to die in battle and win Valhalla.

“Yes, lord, and this also, that the evil ones plot the ill of their evil, but the good do it of their blind foolishness. Forswear women and so shalt thou live happy and die in honour—cherish them and live in wretchedness and die an outcast.”

“Thy talk is foolish,” said Eric. “Birds must to the air, the sea to the shore, and man must to woman. As things are so let them be, for they will soon seem as though they had never been. I had rather kiss my dear and die, if so it pleases me to do, than kiss her not and live, for at the last the end will be one end, and kisses are sweet!”

“That is a good saying,” said Skallagrim, and they fell asleep side by side and Eric had no fear.

Now they awoke and the light was already full, for they were weary and their sleep had been heavy.

Hard by the mouth of the cave is a little well of water that gathers there from the rocks above and in this Eric washed himself. Then Skallagrim showed him the cave and the goodly store of arms that he had won from those whom he had slain and robbed.

“A wondrous place, truly,” said Eric, “and well fitted to the uses of such a chapman [²] as thou art; but, say, how didst thou find it?”

“I followed him who was here before me and gave him choice—to go, or to fight for the stronghold. But he needs must fight and that was his bane, for I slew him.”

“Who was that, then,” asked Eric, “whose head lies yonder?”

“A cave-dweller, lord, whom I took to me because of the lonesomeness of the winter tide. He was an evil man, for though it is good to be Baresark from time to time, yet to dwell with one who is always Baresark is not good, and thou didst a needful deed in smiting his head from him—and now let it go to find its trunk,” and he rolled it over the edge of the great rift.

“Knowest thou, Skallagrim, that this head spoke to me after it had left the man’s shoulders, saying that where its body fell there I should fall, and where it lay there I should lie also?”

“Then, lord, that is likely to be thy doom, for this man was foresighted, and, but the night before last, as we rode out to seek sheep, he felt his head, and said that, before the sun sank again, a hundred fathoms of air should link it to his shoulders.”

“It may be so,” answered Eric. “I thought as I lay in thy grip yonder that the fate was near. And now arm thyself, and take such goods as thou needest, and let us hence, for that thrall of mine who waits me yonder will think thou hast been too mighty for me.”

Skallagrim went to the edge of the rift and searched the plain with his hawk eyes.

² Merchant.

“No need to hasten, lord,” he said. “See yonder rides thy thrall across the black sand, and with him goes thy horse. Surely he thought thou camest no more down the path by which thou wentest up, and it is not thrall’s work to seek Skallagrim in his lair and ask for tidings.”

“Wolves take him for a fool!” said Eric in anger. “He will ride to Middalhof and sing my death-song, and that will sound sadly in some ears.”

“It is pleasant, lord,” said Skallagrim, “when good tidings dog the heels of bad, and womenfolk can spare some tears and be little poorer. I have horses in a secret dell that I will show thee, and on them we will ride hence to Middalhof—and there thou must claim peace for me.”

“It is well,” said Eric; “now arm thyself, for if thou goest with me thou must make an end of thy Baresark ways, or keep them for the hour of battle.”

“I will do thy bidding, lord,” said Skallagrim. Then he entered the cave and set a plain black steel helm upon his black locks, and a black chain byrnie about his breast. He took the great axe-head also and fitted to it the half of another axe that lay among the weapons. Then he drew out a purse of money and a store of golden rings, and set them in a bag of otter skin, and buckled it about him. But the other goods he wrapped up in skins and hid behind some stones which were at the bottom of the cave—purposing to come another time and fetch them.

Then they went forth by that same perilous path which Eric had trod, and Skallagrim showed him how he might pass the rock in safety.

“A rough road this,” said Eric as he gained the deep cleft.

“Yea, lord, and, till thou camest, one that none but wood-folk have trodden.”

“I would tread it no more,” said Eric again, “and yet that fellow thief of thine said that I should die here,” and for a while his heart was heavy.

Now Skallagrim Lambstail led him by secret paths to a dell rich in grass, that is hid in the round of the mountain, and here three good horses were at feed. Then, going to a certain rock, he brought out bits and saddles, and they caught the horses, and, mounting them, rode away from Mosfell.

Now Eric and his henchman Skallagrim the Baresark rode four hours and saw nobody, till at length they came to the brow of a hill that is named Horse-Head Heights, and, crossing it, found themselves almost in the midst of a score of armed men who were about to mount their horses.

“Now we have company,” said Skallagrim.

“Yes, and bad company,” answered Eric, “for yonder I spy Ospakar Blacktooth, and Gizur and Mord his sons, ay and others. Down, and back to back, for they will show us little gentleness.”

Then they sprang to earth and took their stand upon a mound of rising ground—and the men rode

towards them.

“I shall soon know what thy fellowship is worth,” said Eric.

“Fear not, lord,” answered Skallagrim. “Hold thou thy head and I will hold thy back. We are met in a good hour.”

“Good or ill, it is likely to be a short one. Hearken thou: if thou must turn Baresark when swords begin to flash, at the least stand and be Baresark where thou art, for if thou rushest on the foe, my back will be naked and I must soon be sped.”

“It shall be as thou sayest, lord.”

Now men rode round them, but at first they did not know Eric, because of the golden helm that hid his face in shadow.

“Who are ye?” called Ospakar.

“I think that thou shouldst know me, Blacktooth,” Eric answered, “for I set thee heels up in the snow but lately—or, at the least, thou wilt know this,” and he drew great Whitefire.

“Thou mayest know me also, Ospakar,” cried the Baresark. “Skallagrim, men called me, Lambstail, Eric Brighteyes calls me, but once thou didst call me Ounound. Say, lord, what tidings of Thorunna?”

Now Ospakar shook his sword, laughing. “I came out to seek one foe, and I have found two,” he cried. “Hearken, Eric: when thou art slain I go hence to burn and kill at Middalhof. Shall I bear thy head as keepsake from thee to Gudruda? For thee, Ounound, I thought thee dead; but, being yet alive, Thorunna, my sweet love, sends thee this,” and he hurled a spear at him with all his might.

But Skallagrim catches the spear as it flies and hurls it back. It strikes right on the shield of Ospakar and pierces it, ay and the byrnie, and the shoulder that is beneath the byrnie, so that Blacktooth was made unmeet for fight, and howled with pain and rage.

“Go, bid Thorunna draw that splinter forth,” says Skallagrim, “and heal the hole with kisses.”

Now Ospakar, writhing with his hurt, shouts to his men to slay the two of them, and then the fight begins.

One rushes at Eric and smites at him with an axe. The blow falls on his shield, and shears off the side of it, then strikes the byrnie beneath, but lightly. In answer Eric sweeps low at him with Whitefire, and cuts his leg from under him between knee and thigh, and he falls and dies.

Another rushes in. Down flashes Whitefire before he can smite, and the carle’s shield is cloven through. Then he chooses to draw back and fights no more that day.

Skallagrim slays a man, and wounds another sore. A tall chief with a red scar on his face comes at Brighteyes. Twice he feints at the head while Eric watches, then lowers the sword beneath the cover of his shield, and sweeps suddenly at Eric's legs. Brighteyes leaps high into the air, smiting downward with Whitefire as he leaps, and presently that chief is dead, shorn through shoulder to breast.

Now Skallagrim slays another man, and grows Baresark. He looks so fierce that men fall back from him.

Two rush on Eric, one from either side. The sword of him on the right falls on his shield and sinks in, but Brighteyes twists the shorn shield so strongly that the sword is wrenched from the smiter's hand. Now the other sword is aloft above him, and that had been Eric's bane, but Skallagrim glances round and sees it about to fall. He has no time to turn, but dashes the hammer of his axe backward. It falls full on the swordsman's head, and the head is shattered.

"That was well done," says Eric as the sword goes down.

"Not so ill but it might be worse," growls Skallagrim.

Presently all men drew back from those two, for they have had enough of Whitefire and the Baresark's axe.

Ospakar sits on his horse, his shield pinned to his shoulder and curses aloud.

"Close in, you cowards!" he yells, "close in and cut them down!" but no man stirs.

Then Eric mocks them. "There are but two of us," he says, "will no man try a game with me? Let it not be sung that twenty were overcome of two."

Now Ospakar's son Mord hears, and he grows mad with rage. He holds his shield aloft and rushes on. But Gizur the Lawman does not come, for Gizur was a coward.

Skallagrim turns to meet Mord, but Eric says:—

"This one for me, comrade," and steps forward.

Mord strikes a mighty blow. Eric's shield is all shattered and cannot stay it. It crashes through and falls full on the golden helm, beating Brighteyes to his knee. Now he is up again and blows fall thick and fast. Mord is a strong man, unwearied, and skilled in war, and Eric's arms grow faint and his strength sinks low. Mord smites again and wounds him somewhat on the shoulder.

Eric throws aside his cloven shield and, shouting, plies Whitefire with both arms. Mord gives before him, then rushes and smites; Eric leaps aside. Again he rushes and lo! Brighteyes has dropped his point, and it stands a full span through the back of Mord, and instantly that was his bane.

Now men rush to their horses, mount in hot haste and ride away, crying that these are trolls whom they have to do with here, not men. Skallagrim sees, and the Baresark fit takes him sore. With axe aloft he charges after them, screaming as he comes. There is one man, the same whom he had wounded. He cannot mount easily, and when the Baresark comes he still lies on the neck of his horse. The great axe wheels on high and falls, and it is told of this stroke that it was so mighty that man and horse sank dead beneath it, cloven through and through. Then the fit leaves Skallagrim and he walks back, and they are alone with the dead and dying.

Eric leans on Whitefire and speaks:

“Get thee gone, Skallagrim Lambstail!” he said; “get thee gone!”

“It shall be as thou wilt, lord,” answered the Baresark; “but I have not befriended thee so ill that thou shouldst fear for blows to come.”

“I will keep no man with me who puts my word aside, Skallagrim. What did I bid thee? Was it not that thou shouldst have done with the Baresark ways, and where thou stookest there thou shouldst bide? and see: thou didst forget my word swiftly! Now get thee gone!”

“It is true, lord,” he said. “He who serves must serve wholly,” and Skallagrim turned to seek his horse.

“Stay,” said Eric; “thou art a gallant man and I forgive thee: but cross my will no more. We have slain several men and Ospakar goes hence wounded. We have got honour, and they loss and the greatest shame. Nevertheless, ill shall come of this to me, for Ospakar has many friends and will set a law-suit on foot against me at the Althing, [³] and thou didst draw the first blood.”

“Would that the spear had gone more home,” said Skallagrim.

“Ospakar’s time is not yet,” answered Eric; “still, he has something by which to bear us in mind.”

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³ The annual assembly of free men which, in Iceland, performed the functions of a Parliament and Supreme Court of Law.

THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XXVIII: In the Lair of the Dweller

It is with marked hesitation that I begin this chapter, because in it I must deal with an experience so contrary to every known law of physics as to seem impossible. Until this time, barring, of course, the mystery of the Dweller, I had encountered nothing that was not susceptible of naturalistic explanation; nothing, in a word, outside the domain of science itself; nothing that I would have felt hesitancy in reciting to my colleagues of the International Association of Science. Amazing, unfamiliar—advanced—as many of the phenomena were, still they lay well within the limits of what we have mapped as the possible; in regions, it is true, still virgin to the mind of man, but toward which that mind is steadily advancing.

But this—well, I confess that I have a theory that is naturalistic; but so abstruse, so difficult to make clear within the short confines of the space I have to give it, so dependent upon conceptions that even the highest-trained scientific brains find difficult to grasp, that I despair.

I can only say that the thing occurred; that it took place in precisely the manner I am about to narrate, and that I experienced it.

Yet, in justice to myself, I must open up some paths of preliminary approach toward the heart of the perplexity. And the first path is the realization that our world whatever it is, is certainly not the world as we see it! Regarding this I shall refer to a discourse upon “Gravitation and the Principle of Relativity,” by the distinguished English physicist, Dr. A. S. Eddington, which I had the pleasure of hearing him deliver before the Royal Institution. [⁴]

I realize, of course, that it is not true logic to argue—”The world is not as we think it is—therefore everything we think impossible is possible in it.” Even if it be different, it is governed by law. The truly impossible is that which is outside law, and as nothing can be outside law, the impossible cannot exist.

The crux of the matter then becomes our determination whether what we think is impossible may or may not be possible under laws still beyond our knowledge.

I hope that you will pardon me for this somewhat academic digression, but I felt it was necessary, and it has, at least, put me more at ease. And now to resume.

We had watched, Larry and I, the frog-men throw the bodies of Yolará’s assassins into the crimson waters. As vultures swoop down upon the dying, there came sailing swiftly to where the dead men floated, dozens of the luminous globes. Their slender, varicoloured tentacles whipped out; the giant iridescent bubbles climbed over the cadavers. And as they touched them there was the swift dissolution, the melting away into putrescence of flesh and bone that I had witnessed when the dart touched fruit that time I had saved Rador—and upon this the Medusae gorged; pulsing lambently; their wondrous colours shifting, changing, glowing stronger; elfin moons now

⁴ Reprinted in full in *Nature*, in which those sufficiently interested may peruse it.—W. T. G.

indeed, but satellites whose glimmering beauty was fed by death; alembics of enchantment whose glorious hues were sucked from horror.

Sick, I turned away—O’Keefe as pale as I; passed back into the corridor that had opened on the ledge from which we had watched; met Lakla hurrying toward us. Before she could speak there throbbed faintly about us a vast sighing. It grew into a murmur, a whispering, shook us—then passing like a presence, died away in far distance.

“The Portal has opened,” said the handmaiden. A fainter sighing, like an echo of the other, mourned about us. “Yolara is gone,” she said, “the Portal is closed. Now must we hasten—for the Three have commanded that you, Goodwin, and Larry and I tread that strange road of which I have spoken, and which Olaf may not take lest his heart break—and we must return ere he and Rador cross the bridge.”

Her hand sought Larry’s.

“Come!” said Lakla, and we walked on; down and down through hall after hall, flight upon flight of stairways. Deep, deep indeed, we must be beneath the domed castle—Lakla paused before a curved, smooth breast of the crimson stone rounding gently into the passage. She pressed its side; it revolved; we entered; it closed behind us.

The room, the—hollow—in which we stood was faceted like a diamond; and like a cut brilliant its sides glistened—though dully. Its shape was a deep oval, and our path dropped down to a circular polished base, roughly two yards in diameter. Glancing behind me I saw that in the closing of the entrance there had been left no trace of it save the steps that led from where that entrance had been—and as I looked these steps turned, leaving us isolated upon the circle, only the faceted walls about us—and in each of the gleaming faces the three of us reflected—dimly. It was as though we were within a diamond egg whose graven angles had been turned inward.

But the oval was not perfect; at my right a screen cut it—a screen that gleamed with fugitive, fleeting luminescences—stretching from the side of our standing place up to the tip of the chamber; slightly convex and crisscrossed by millions of fine lines like those upon a spectroscopic plate, but with this difference—that within each line I sensed the presence of multitudes of finer lines, dwindling into infinitude, ultramicroscopic, traced by some instrument compared to whose delicacy our finest tool would be as a crowbar to the needle of a micrometer.

A foot or two from it stood something like the standee of a compass, bearing, like it a cradled dial under whose crystal ran concentric rings of prisoned, lambent vapours, faintly blue. From the edge of the dial jutted a little shelf of crystal, a keyboard, in which were cut eight small cups.

Within these cups the handmaiden placed her tapering fingers. She gazed down upon the disk; pressed a digit—and the screen behind us slipped noiselessly into another angle.

“Put your arm around my waist, Larry, darlin’, and stand close,” she murmured. “You, Goodwin, place your arm over my shoulder.”

Wondering, I did as she bade; she pressed other fingers upon the shelf's indentations—three of the rings of vapour spun into intense light, raced around each other; from the screen behind us grew a radiance that held within itself all spectrums—not only those seen, but those unseen by man's eyes. It waxed brilliant and ever more brilliant, all suffusing, passing through me as day streams through a window pane!

The enclosing facets burst into a blaze of coruscations, and in each sparkling panel I saw our images, shaken and torn like pennants in a whirlwind. I turned to look—was stopped by the handmaiden's swift command: "Turn not—on your life!"

The radiance behind me grew; was a rushing tempest of light in which I was but the shadow of a shadow. I heard, but not with my ears—nay with mind itself—a vast roaring; an ordered tumult of sound that came hurling from the outposts of space; approaching—rushing—hurricane out of the heart of the cosmos—closer, closer. It wrapped itself about us with unearthly mighty arms.

And brilliant, ever more brilliant, streamed the radiance through us.

The faceted walls dimmed; in front of me they melted, diaphanously, like a gelatinous wall in a blast of flame; through their vanishing, under the torrent of driving light, the unthinkable, impalpable tornado, I began to move, slowly—then ever more swiftly!

Still the roaring grew; the radiance streamed—ever faster we went. Cutting down through the length, the extension of me, dropped a wall of rock, foreshortened, clenched close; I caught a glimpse of the elfin gardens; they whirled, contracted, into a thin—slice—of colour that was a part of me; another wall of rock shrinking into a thin wedge through which I flew, and that at once took its place within me like a card slipped beside those others!

Flashing around me, and from Lakla and O'Keefe, were nimbuses of flickering scarlet flames. And always the steady hurling forward—appallingly mechanical.

Another barrier of rock—a gleam of white waters incorporating themselves into my—drawing out—even as were the flowered moss lands, the slicing, rocky walls—still another rampart of cliff, dwindling instantly into the vertical plane of those others. Our flight checked; we seemed to hover within, then to sway onward—slowly, cautiously.

A mist danced ahead of me—a mist that grew steadily thinner. We stopped, wavered—the mist cleared.

I looked out into translucent, green distances; shot with swift prismatic gleamings; waves and pulsings of luminosity like midday sun glow through green, tropic waters: dancing, scintillating veils of sparkling atoms that flew, hither and yon, through depths of nebulous splendour!

And Lakla and Larry and I were, I saw, like shadow shapes upon a smooth breast of stone twenty feet or more above the surface of this place—a surface spangled with tiny white blossoms gleaming wanly through creeping veils of phosphorescence like smoke of moon fire. We were shadows—and yet we had substance; we were incorporated with, a part of, the rock—and yet we

were living flesh and blood; we stretched—nor will I qualify this—we stretched through mile upon mile of space that weirdly enough gave at one and the same time an absolute certainty of immense horizontal lengths and a vertical concentration that contained nothing of length, nothing of space whatever; we stood there upon the face of the stone—and still we were here within the faceted oval before the screen of radiance!

“Steady!” It was Lakla’s voice—and not beside me there, but at my ear close before the screen. “Steady, Goodwin! And—see!”

The sparkling haze cleared. Enormous reaches stretched before me. Shimmering up through them, and as though growing in some medium thicker than air, was mass upon mass of verdure—fruiting trees and trees laden with pale blossoms, arbours and bowers of pallid blooms, like that sea fruit of oblivion—grapes of Lethe—that cling to the tide-swept walls of the caverns of the Hebrides.

Through them, beyond them, around and about them, drifted and eddied a horde—great as that with which Tamerlane swept down upon Rome, vast as the myriads which Genghis Khan rolled upon the califs—men and women and children—clothed in tatters, half nude and wholly naked; slant-eyed Chinese, sloe-eyed Malays, islanders black and brown and yellow, fierce-faced warriors of the Solomons with grizzled locks fantastically bedizened; Papuans, feline Javans, Dyaks of hill and shore; hook-nosed Phoenicians, Romans, straight-browed Greeks, and Vikings centuries beyond their lives: scores of the black-haired Murians; white faces of our own Westerners—men and women and children—drifting, eddying—each stamped with that mingled horror and rapture, eyes filled with ecstasy and terror entwined, marked by God and devil in embrace—the seal of the Shining One—the dead-alive; the lost ones!

The loot of the Dweller!

Soul-sick, I gazed. They lifted to us visages of dread; they swept down toward us, glaring upward—a bank against which other and still other waves of faces rolled, were checked, paused; until as far as I could see, like billows piled upon an ever-growing barrier, they stretched beneath us—staring—staring!

Now there was a movement—far, far away; a concentrating of the lambency; the dead-alive swayed, oscillated, separated—forming a long lane against whose outskirts they crowded with avid, hungry insistence.

First only a luminous cloud, then a whirling pillar of splendours through the lane came—the Shining One. As it passed, the dead-alive swirled in its wake like leaves behind a whirlwind, eddying, twisting; and as the Dweller raced by them, brushing them with its spirallings and tentacles, they shone forth with unearthly, awesome gleamings—like vessels of alabaster in which wicks flare suddenly. And when it had passed they closed behind it, staring up at us once more.

The Dweller paused beneath us.

Out of the drifting ruck swam the body of Throckmartin! Throckmartin, my friend, to find whom I had gone to the pallid moon door; my friend whose call I had so laggardly followed. On his face was the Dweller's dreadful stamp; the lips were bloodless; the eyes were wide, lucent, something like pale, phosphorescence gleaming within them—and soulless.

He stared straight up at me, unwinking, unrecognizing. Pressing against his side was a woman, young and gentle, and lovely—lovely even through the mask that lay upon her face. And her wide eyes, like Throckmartin's, glowed with the lurking, unholy fires. She pressed against him closely; though the hordes kept up the faint churning, these two kept ever together, as though bound by unseen fetters.

And I knew the girl for Edith, his wife, who in vain effort to save him had cast herself into the Dweller's embrace!

“Throckmartin!” I cried. “Throckmartin! I'm here!”

Did he hear? I know now, of course, he could not.

But then I waited—hope striving to break through the nightmare hands that gripped my heart.

Their wide eyes never left me. There was another movement about them, others pushed past them; they drifted back, swaying, eddying—and still staring were lost in the awful throng.

Vainly I strained my gaze to find them again, to force some sign of recognition, some awakening of the clean life we know. But they were gone. Try as I would I could not see them—nor Stanton and the northern woman named Thora who had been the first of that tragic party to be taken by the Dweller.

“Throckmartin!” I cried again, despairingly. My tears blinded me.

I felt Lakla's light touch.

“Steady,” she commanded, pitifully. “Steady, Goodwin. You cannot help them—now! Steady and—watch!”

Below us the Shining One had paused—spiralling, swirling, vibrant with all its transcendent, devilish beauty; had paused and was contemplating us. Now I could see clearly that nucleus, that core shot through with flashing veins of radiance, that ever-shifting shape of glory through the shroudings of shimmering, misty plumes, throbbing lacy opalescences, vaporous spirallings of prismatic phantom fires. Steady over it hung the seven little moons of amethyst, of saffron, of emerald and azure and silver, of rose of life and moon white. They poised themselves like a diadem—calm, serene, immobile—and down from them into the Dweller, piercing plumes and swirls and spirals, ran countless tiny strands, radiations, finer than the finest spun thread of spider's web, gleaming filaments through which seemed to run—power—from the seven globes; like—yes, that was it—miniatures of the seven torrents of moon flame that poured through the septichromatic, high crystals in the Moon Pool's chamber roof.

Swam out of the coruscating haze the—face!

Both of man and of woman it was—like some ancient, androgynous deity of Etruscan fanes long dust, and yet neither woman nor man; human and unhuman, seraphic and sinister, benign and malefic—and still no more of these four than is flame, which is beautiful whether it warms or devours, or wind whether it feathers the trees or shatters them, or the wave which is wondrous whether it caresses or kills.

Subtly, undefinably it was of our world and of one not ours. Its lineaments flowed from another sphere, took fleeting familiar form—and as swiftly withdrew whence they had come; something amorphous, unearthly—as of unknown unheeding, unseen gods rushing through the depths of star-hung space; and still of our own earth, with the very soul of earth peering out from it, caught within it—and in some—unholy—way debased.

It had eyes—eyes that were now only shadows darkening within its luminosity like veils falling, and falling, opening windows into the unknowable; deepening into softly glowing blue pools, blue as the Moon Pool itself; then flashing out, and this only when the—face—bore its most human resemblance, into twin stars large almost as the crown of little moons; and with that same baffling suggestion of peep-holes into a world untrodden, alien, perilous to man!

“Steady!” came Lakla’s voice, her body leaned against mine.

I gripped myself, my brain steadied, I looked again. And I saw that of body, at least body as we know it, the Shining One had none—nothing but the throbbing, pulsing core streaked with lightning veins of rainbows; and around this, never still, sheathing it, the swirling, glorious veilings of its hell and heaven born radiance.

So the Dweller stood—and gazed.

Then up toward us swept a reaching, questing spiral!

Under my hand Lakla’s shoulder quivered; dead-alive and their master vanished—I danced, flickered, within the rock; felt a swift sense of shrinking, of withdrawal; slice upon slice the carded walls of stone, of silvery waters, of elfin gardens slipped from me as cards are withdrawn from a pack, one by one—slipped, wheeled, flattened, and lengthened out as I passed through them and they passed from me.

Gasping, shaken, weak, I stood within the faceted oval chamber; arm still about the handmaiden’s white shoulder; Larry’s hand still clutching her girdle.

The roaring, impalpable gale from the cosmos was retreating to the outposts of space—was still; the intense, streaming, flooding radiance lessened—died.

“Now have you beheld,” said Lakla, “and well you trod the road. And now shall you hear, even as the Silent Ones have commanded, what the Shining One is—and how it came to be.”

The steps flashed back; the doorway into the chamber opened.

Larry as silent as I—we followed her through it.

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