

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

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23RD SEPTEMBER
2018

ALGARD PEAK

BY JONATHAN
TRUE
THE LAST
SHRED OF
CIVILISATION...

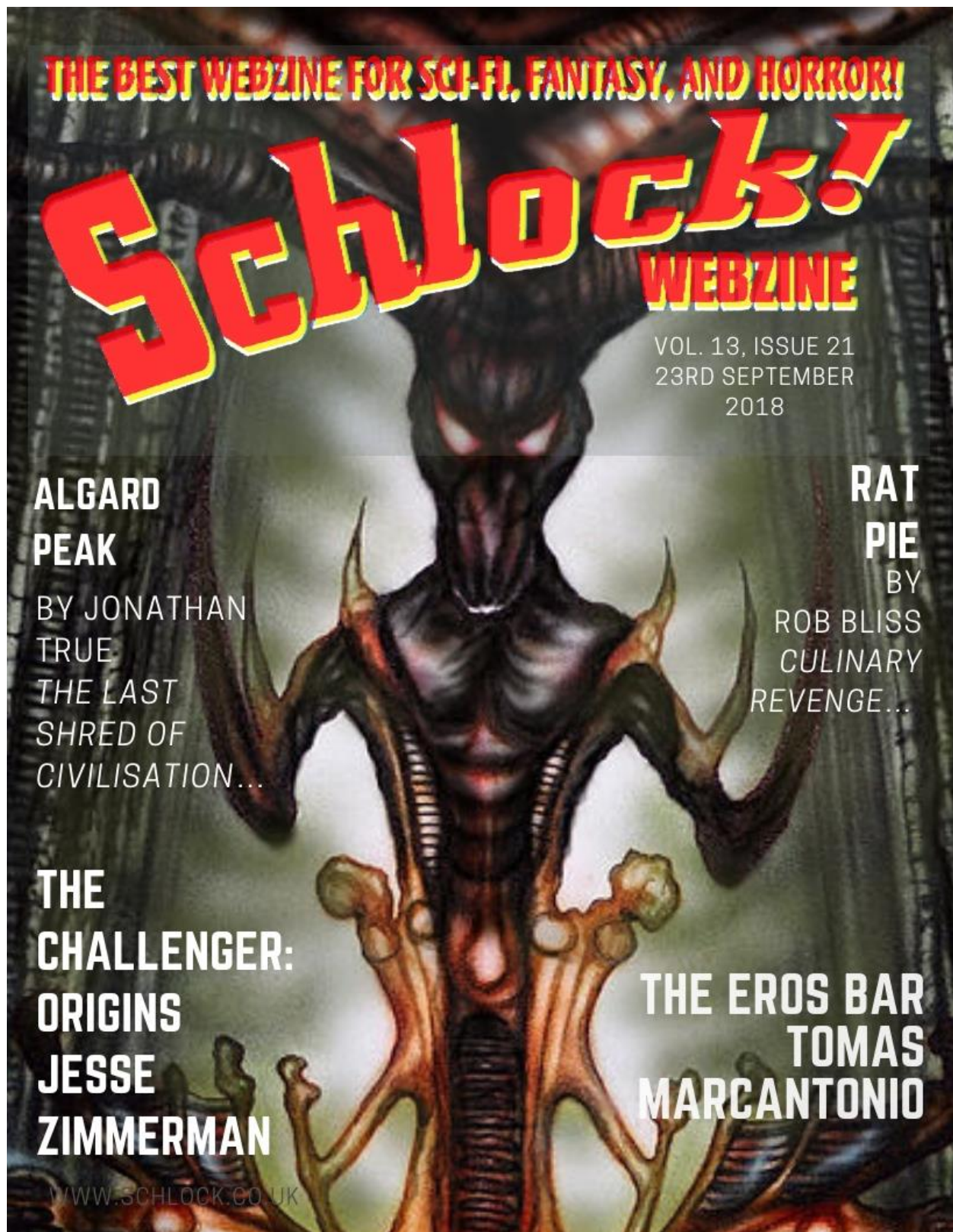
RAT PIE

BY
ROB BLISS
CULINARY
REVENGE...

THE CHALLENGER: ORIGINS JESSE ZIMMERMAN

THE EROS BAR TOMAS MARCANTONIO

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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 *800px-The Sun-God's Lair In The Dwellings Under The Pyro-Middeon ZOOMED2* by [Johnaemeth](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, a forest trek goes badly wrong, revenge proves to be bad news for rodents, and Flora, Fauna and the Challenger return in a new story. An idyllic meeting conceals an unpalatable truth. And an encounter with an inventor hides a hidden purpose.

Out in space, Carter Ward faces danger. Down on Earth, Challenger puts the cat among the pigeons. And in *The Moon Pool* we hear Olaf's story.

—Gavin Chappell

Available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana: Lammas Eve 2018](#).



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

by Vincent Davis



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

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

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

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

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ALGARD PEAK by Jonathan True

It was approaching dinner time when Karen, Becca, and Marcus finally reached Orford Bay 4. So far, it had been an amazing journey filled with beautiful sights. They had started out in Santa Cruz, California, flown up to Vancouver, and just finished an eight-hour boat ride up the coast and into one of the many waterways. The constant drone of the nautical motor still rang in their ears when they spotted a clearing in the endless temperate rainforest.

Orford Bay 4 was just another logging site up the coast. More importantly, to this group, was its proximity to Algard Peak, their final destination. Six months ago, during the mild California winter, Rebecca Walker (a UCSD student and outdoor enthusiast) convinced her boyfriend and sister that a trip to one of the world's most remote and beautiful peaks would be a memory they would cherish for all of their lives.

Their guide, Shiloh Carpenter, was a sixty-year-old Chinook man. He jumped into the waist-high water, pulled the twenty-foot well-used cuddy cabin, christened The Native Sun, onto the rocky shore. The waves lapped against hand-sized, well-rounded stones, most of them dark in colour, with the occasional white rock contrasting strongly with the rest. In front of them, stood the cluster of simple single-story buildings that made up the logging camp.

This was the last shred of civilization they would see on their journey. It was a small logging village, nestled in a deep valley completely surrounded by a lush green forest. In the middle of the encampment ran a gravel road. Most of the buildings stood to the right, and on the opposite side, there were supplies, water and propane tanks. A latrine stood on its own, and further down, a smokehouse that currently was emitting small amounts of delicious smelling white puffs.

Not wanting to look like a lazy tourist, Marcus Randall Stevens jumped out of the boat, rocking it a little too much for Karen's liking, and helped drag the small marine vessel to shore. The waves aided in pushing it the last few inches out of the water. Karen and Becca were the last to step out of the boat. Becca felt the still ground was unsettling. They hadn't made any pit stops on the way up the shoreline. She had gotten used to the constant whine of the motor, the breeze in her straight blonde hair, braided for travel, and the smell of the ocean breeze. She enjoyed the gentle waves rocking the boat and the mist sprayed up from the engine.

The trees, mostly coniferous, masked the shoreline. Enormous ancient pines coated the countryside. A small portion had been reduced to trunks; the logs with hundreds of rings were floating in the water. Held in place by massive chains, the once majestic trees, now awaiting the next pickup.

Karen was concerned about the size of the tourist boat. When she booked the vacation package, she imagined the cruise up to have more creature comforts. Her sister and her sister's boyfriend were into nature: they liked hiking and mountain climbing. She was just along for the sights. She needed the inspiration. Karen Walker was a landscape painter. She knew there would be little time for sketching on the long journey up the mountain, but she couldn't help packing some pastels, charcoal, and a sketchbook.

Karen was twenty-eight and had already built up a small following of patrons. Most from the Santa Cruz area, but a few from all over the world. The mountains loomed in front of her as she stepped onto the muddy ground. The shoreline was more soot than sand. She was worried that the hike would be too much for her. The five foot four woman was not entirely out of shape; she did bike to get around back home, but this was something altogether different. This was serious. They were a hundred miles from the nearest hospital. If someone got hurt...they might not make it. Karen took a deep breath, grabbed her pack out of the boat, and looked anxiously at her watch.

"The itinerary says that dinner was served at five-thirty. It's ten past six. I hope they have something left. You know, 'cause it's our last opportunity to eat something that's not cooked on a campfire." Karen inhaled deeply, "You smell that?"

Her little sister chimed in, "What? The fresh northern air? The ocean breeze? The fact Marcus needs a shower?"

"No... it's dinner. I heard lumberjacks know how to cook, looks like they are not going to disappoint!"

Their guide, the grey-haired Shiloh Carpenter, tied the boat to a post to ensure it didn't get swept out to sea when the tides came in. "Go grab a plate; they're expecting us. There's always plenty of food left. I just have to finish up here, and I'll be right behind you." He was getting older. His walking stick was becoming more of a requirement than a decoration. It was a solid looking maple walking stick with his favourite animals carved into it. At the top were the tricksters: the jay and coyote. Below was Shikla, the shapeshifter, in the form of an owl. Under them, all was the grizzly, Shiloh's own spirit animal. Since his initiation rites when he was fourteen, Shiloh had always felt a close kinship with the grizzly. On many occasions, his spirit guide had led him when he was lost, brought him food when he was hungry, and provided him with wisdom when he needed it most.

Shiloh still remembered his first vision. It had been several days since he had last eaten. The tribe gathered around to show him the ways of their people. He was in a sweat lodge, what little he had drunk was pouring out of his body; he remembered how weak he felt as he left his body and went to the spirit plane. He remembered how the grass had felt, soft between his toes. He looked up to see the giant grizzly, but he did not fear it. And he remembered what it said to him, "Running Water (the name his mother called him before she died.) I can feel your heart, and I know its pain for I am always with you. We are both solitary creatures, but we care for our tribe; we care for our own. You will travel far in your lifetime, and I will be there to guard you, and when you need, guide you to fertile hunting grounds. Your life will be long and you will live without fear because of the secret I'm about to share with you." The twenty-foot tall creature walked closer to the young Shiloh. The Grizzly's eyes were black as coal; his voice was like thunder rolling off over the countryside. "Beware the two-headed elk, your cultus. Only he can mark your transition from the mortal realm."

That seemed like a lifetime ago. It had been a long time since he went back to see his tribe. All of the people he remembered from that day were long since dead. His heart sank. He wanted to feel the loss of his parents and his elders, but they had died so long ago he was numb to it. He

was angry at himself for not being able to remember their faces. He was disappointed that he never taught his own son the ways of their people. There was always an excuse not to go back and visit. He was too poor, or there wasn't enough time between jobs. But before he knew it, his son had gone from a child to a young man with children of his own and no idea of who he was or where he came from.

The leathery-skinned guide hardly noticed, the weight of his pack when he threw it over his shoulders. It weighed over fifty pounds for a trip like this. He needed his sleeping bag (rated to negative forty degrees), a single person tent, three days' worth of food, an extra set of clothes, and first aid supplies in case of emergency. He had made trips like this over a hundred times now, and this trip, hiking to Algard Peak, a dozen times. He knew what path they needed to take, where the picture-perfect touristy spots were, and what times of year were best for the trip.

It was early August, just perfect for enjoying nature. Most of the time, there was no chill in the air at sea-level. Spring was long over, and there was still time before the animals had to prepare for the winter freeze. It was, however, the most popular time of year for salmon to spawn. That meant there will be plenty of fish to catch, but the bears will be out in force along the river. Shiloh always loved watching the bears, but he knew tourists were stupid. That would make this trip especially nerve-racking.

Marcus Randall Stevens was the first person to enter the dining lodge. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the poorly lit aluminium structure. The doors were open to let in the light and let out the heat. All of the food was cooked with wood heat, either in a wood-burning oven, or on a makeshift griddle that sat on a wood-burning stove. The ground was white gravel covering dry, well-compacted dirt. Eight bearded men sat talking at picnic tables that were pushed end to end to make one long seating area. Most of the smoke was caught in the chimney, but there was still a discernible amount making the inside of the lodge hazy.

"Ahhh, there they are! My name is John, but everyone calls me Cookie," said the man standing at the griddle. "I was afraid you would not get here in time. Leftovers are fine, with a cook as great as me..." The men sitting all jeered, "Ahum! But... as I was saying, fresh is better." Cookie was the only man lacking a full beard. Instead, he sported a full walrus moustache and a shaved head. The drops of sweat on his bald head were a testament to the heat in the cooking area of the building.

Shiloh was the last person to walk in. He sat his rucksack and walking stick against the wall, beside the front door, like he had done a dozen times before. Excited to have new people that didn't berate him on a daily basis taste, and if he were lucky, eat his food. Cookie placed four aluminium plates on a counter. Tink. They sounded like, and looked a lot like, tiny metal trash can lids, the kind you would see in pictures of New York City back in the seventies. He started with a massive salmon steak, seasoned with salt and pepper with chopped chives on top. Afterward, he took what appeared to be an ice cream scoop and carefully placed a dome of macaroni and cheese beside a heaping pile of French-cut green beans that were poured directly from the can to a pot, aluminium flavoured water and all.

“Don’t let these men fool-ya,” the old guide said to his flock. “Cookie here’s the best cook in a hundred miles.”

“He’s the ONLY cook for a hundred miles,” shouted one of the louder men at the table.

The lodge erupted with laughter, all except the cook who sneered and said, “You guys don’t know what you’re talking about. Fresh ingredients are hard to come by. I don’t mean to be rude, but what would you cook if all you had to work with was canned vegetables, instant mashed potatoes, and fish! We have all the fish we can handle, that’s for sure.”

Becca, feeling massively outnumbered, was glad her big sister was there. She knew she wasn’t in danger. These guys seemed just like regular, if not rough around the edges, folks. Here to do a job. She imagined being away from their families for so long must be hard on them. Some of them must be married she thought, “I bet these are just hard-working, ordinary guys... Definitely NOT psycho-killers in the middle of nowhere that prey on tourists.” She did a quick scan of the room and saw no wedding bands. She did see, however, one of the men with a nasty scar across his face missing his ring finger entirely. Becca tried not to wince at the sight of it but failed unnoticeably.

“Karen, look,” Becca leaned in to whisper to her older sister, “none of the guys are wearing wedding rings so they don’t get their fingers ripped off by the logging equipment. I brought my own boyfriend, but it looks like you get your pick!”

Karen scowled, not wanting to give Becca any footing for continuation of this line of conversation. “If that’s what I wanted, I didn’t have to leave California... They certainly smell better back home. I’m just here for a little fresh air and enough inspiration to last me a few months.” She made up her mind: she was here for inspiration, and what better way to do that than talk to the locals? She could hear a few stories; learn about the best views, and most importantly, eat without her sister harassing her about not having a man. She had to muster up the courage to talk to new people all the time when patrons wanted to talk about her art... This was no different. She would just find an open seat, eat her fish, and listen to the locals.

The loggers were well behaved and courteous, for the most part. They were all too happy to regale the newcomers with an assortment of stories. All of which were over-told, and over-embellished. One story, in particular, caught even the old man’s attention.

“On the north side of Orford River, about half a mile past the logging site,” the young man with piercing blue eyes and a flaming red beard started, “I was marking trees. I know you aren’t going to believe me, but there are things out here. The Chinook have known about things that don’t belong in this world. Things they had been telling stories about long before the first explorers crossed the Atlantic. That’s exactly what I saw. I think it was just as surprised to see me as I was to see it. The sun had just gone behind the ridge when I started to hear something eating. Not the sound of chewing leaves, mind you. It was the sound of something loudly ripping, tearing, swallowing flesh. I figured it was just a bear; God knows there’s plenty of them up here.” Orville’s demeanour changed. His expression went to concern, worry, and then fear as he continued. His eyes looked through Karen, as though he were seeing it all again.

“There, on the ground, eating the carcass of a mama grizzly, was a creature hunched over. Almost like a person. It used hands to feed itself. Two baby bears were hiding behind a tree. Too afraid of the beast to go closer, but not knowing what to do without their mama. It just ate her... until it noticed me.” The man went pale under his long fiery hair and beard, “The creature stood up on its hind legs and screamed at me. No human can make that sound, believe you me!”

By that point, everyone in the room was listening to Orville’s story. All except the outsiders had heard it before and it was clear even the steeliest among them were unnerved. There was a long uncomfortable silence as Orville regained his train of thought. “I ran, and I’m not ashamed to say it. I ran like my very life depended on it. And in that moment, I was sure it did.”

Orville looked off into the distance and spoke like he was in a trance, “I kept running through the trees until I made it back to the rest of the crew. I’ve never in my life been afraid of anything, but when that thing looked at me and screamed... I... I pissed my pants. It was like the very gates of Hell opened through its throat... Every damned soul in the blazing pits, wanting to rip me to shreds, wanting to drag me right to Hell with them.”

“I, um, I have a few chores to finish up,” the solemn Orville continued, “anyway... Be careful out there. I’m not sure if anyone believes me, but it was real, as real as we are right now.” He stood up from the picnic table he was sitting at, ran his thick calloused hands down his worn-out tan Carhartt jacket, and slowly, walked out the back door. The sun had all but gone down, and the rest of the crew, being reminded of their own responsibilities, quietly left the dining hall as well.

“Jesus, that wasn’t awkward at all,” Marcus said with a level of sarcasm that was not wanted or appreciated by his girlfriend Becca. She scowled at him in the same way Karen had scowled at Becca earlier in the evening.

“Don’t mind them,” Cookie started, “they are just a little superstitious. Being up here, man versus the wild, it does things to your mind.” He chuckled nervously while wildly waving a ladle he was in the middle of cleaning. “There’s nothing more dangerous than the odd Grizzly who wanders into camp looking for a little sna...”

“Speaking of which,” Shiloh said cutting off the Canadian cook, “it’s time to set up camp. There’s a flat spot over by the hatchery pools where we can set up our tents. Rule number one in bear country... Don’t leave out any snacks. All food must be sealed up. If they don’t smell anything, they won’t bother us, for the most part. Rule number two, if you are in your tent and hear a bear outside, just let it pass. It will eventually get bored and move on. Leave them alone, and they will leave you alone.”

Shiloh was mostly blind in his left eye, so he had a tendency to squint that eye giving him the appearance of disdain for everything he looked at. He was completely unaware of how it made him appear and mostly unaware of how it made people react to him. His thick, silvery, shoulder-length hair fell around his face when he leaned over to pick his rucksack off of the floor. The

campsite was only a couple hundred feet away from the back door of the dining lodge, so he casually threw his pack over one shoulder and made his way outside.

The ocean fog had made its daily appearance in Orford Bay 4. Like an unstoppable wall of milky white cotton, it enveloped everything it came in contact with. From a distance, it was almost ominous, hiding the bay water and everything beyond. Once it came closer, it was more calming than alarming. Visibility went down to twenty feet. The hikers felt anxious in anticipation for the upcoming hike as they finished setting up their tents. Becca and Marcus shared one tent while Karen and Shiloh had their own single person tents.

Karen Walker zipped up her sleeping bag, laid back, closed her eyes and listened. “The sounds of the night were like a song,” she mused to herself. All of the instruments playing together in harmony to create her own personal symphony. The waves of the bay, gently lapping at the shoreline, was the unchanging beat of the bass. Crickets softly keeping perfect rhythm as the string section. A distant woodpecker faded in and out, searching for a meal, played the percussion on a timeworn tree. Lastly, a pair of owls played an enchanting melody as the flute. It was a long trip out there; her muscles were a little sore from the first day’s journey, but at that moment, before she fell asleep, Karen was certain she had made the right decision in coming.

The crisp morning air was still thick with fog when Marcus unzipped his and Becca’s tent. He did not have a particularly good night’s sleep. He and Becca tried using the same sleeping bag so they could be close, but there wasn’t quite enough room. There was only one position that they found they could both sleep in, but it put him with his arm too far above his head leaving him stiff, sore, and generally groggy. “I love you babe, but you are sleeping in your own bag tonight,” he said to a sleeping Becca.

Cold, aching, and ready to pee, Marcus stepped out of the tent, zipped it back up and stretched in the cool dawn air. He heard his back pop and mused to himself that it was probably loud enough for the people around him to hear; that is if there were any people actually awake. Marcus’ eyes were already adjusted to the early morning light, but there wasn’t a lot to see. The large hatchery pools they camped beside seemed more interesting in the fog, like a mystery; Marcus smiled to himself. He scratched his two-week-old, dirty-blond beard and went to investigate, after relieving himself on a not-too-close spruce tree.

Tiny fish swam around the four above ground pools. Marcus lit up a cigarette while watching tiny ripples on the water. He took a long drag, blew the smoke back over his shoulder, and said, “Now what are you doing here?” More to himself than the fish. The longer he stood there, the more agitated they became. “Hungry for some breakfast?” Marcus thought about flicking some ash in the water to see what the fry would do. It was a fleeting thought. He felt bad that he even thought about it. He wondered what protected the fish out here from birds or bears. Marcus looked around all four pools for something to feed the fish that wasn’t an evil, horrible thing, but found nothing. “No food left outside. Sorry guys, I’m sure they’ll bring you your breakfast soon.”

The sun was quickly rising, giving the pools a mirrored surface. Marcus looked down at himself frowning in disapproval. Behind him, Karen started to unzip her tent; Marcus, distracted, looked back to see who it was. Seeing it was only Karen, he peered back into the pool only to see his head split in two.

“Shit!” Marcus stumbled backward and landed hard on his back. His arms shaking, the college dropout ran his hands over his head. Karen was the first to make it over to Marcus.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Karen reached out a hand to the confused looking young man. “What’d you trip over... eh...?” She looked around and didn’t see any obstructions on the ground, and with a nervous laugh said “your feet?”

Marcus felt overwhelmingly embarrassed. He felt fine; Karen wasn’t screaming, so he must look fine. “Must’ve been a ripple in the water. Jesus, I feel stupid.” He timidly stood up, dusted off the back of his pants, and peered into the hatchery. A nervous twenty-four-year-old peered back at him. He ran his hands over his head and face. There was nothing there, nothing unusual at least. Marcus stepped away from the pool and noticed his unfinished cigarette still burning on the ground. He picked it up with some disgust, peering at it suspiciously. Satisfied that there was nothing more than dust on it, he blew the dust off and resumed smoking.

Becca, finally emerging from her tent, was not happy she had woken up alone. She was even less happy to find her boyfriend talking to her sister, and her body language showed it. Her arms were crossed as she walked off to the latrine. Karen looked quizzically at Marcus as Becca stormed off. All Marcus could think of was to shrug and hope Becca was friendlier when she returned.

“Time to break camp,” barked Shiloh. He had been silently packing up his tent for the last couple of minutes without anyone noticing. Shiloh was the kind of man who liked to lead by example. He was hoping the others would notice what he was doing and follow his lead... sadly no one was paying attention. “Cheechako,” he thought to himself, “are always too caught up in their own drama to notice what’s happening around them.”

Shiloh said in a firm but quiet tone, “Ten minutes to breakfast, people.” There was little sound to compete with. The animals were silent, and the morning fog felt like it dampened all of the noise around them.

Marcus finished packing his and Becca’s packs before Becca got back to the hatchery area. She returned just in time to help Karen finish getting her sleeping bag attached to the outside of her rucksack. “Thanks for packing up, Sweetums,” Becca rewarded her boyfriend with a kiss. “Mmmm...” she pulled away, “You’ve been smoking again. Can you stop polluting your lungs?” She made a face like she was being force fed canned spinach.

Within thirty minutes, the group had eaten a hearty meal of thick oatmeal and real maple syrup from the dining lodge. The loggers ate their breakfast and left before even Marcus woke up. There was a banquet style heater that was keeping the remainder of the oatmeal warm for the

sleeping campers. Even Cookie was nowhere to be seen. He had already left the dining area to get fresh water in preparation for the next meal.

“This is the last time we’re going to see a latrine for two days. Anyone who needs to should probably use it now.” He looked directly at the two sisters. Karen felt a little uncomfortable being talked to like a child but decided not to argue since she had to go anyway. “I’ll go with you,” said Becca. Years of being her big sister’s shadow still applied, even as adults, even in the middle of nowhere.

A few minutes later, the group was hiking, packs on, and ready for their adventure. The temperature was now climbing to the sixties, and the sun was burning off the fog that had shrouded the valley. It was like the opening curtains of a vast play. More of the awe-inspiring land was being revealed by the second. Pine covered mountains jetted up towards the sky, surrounding them on both sides. The path was well-kept and fairly straight-forward. A slight incline reminded them they were indeed climbing.

The Orford River sliced through the middle of the nearly-untouched valley. The path was cut in a way that kept the river to the left of the hikers and mountains loomed overhead to their right. Snow-capped peaks cut the passing clouds like jagged rocks sticking out of a stream, slicing through the current. The hikers walked single file, Shiloh in front, Karen, Becca, and then Marcus, an experienced hiker, bringing up the rear to make sure nobody was lagging too far behind. As they walked deeper into the forest, he was reminded, more and more, of his time on the Appalachian Trail.

Marcus Randall Stevens started seriously planning his trek down the Appalachian Trail over two years earlier. He had lost his way in college. His grades were failing. He was smart enough, but he just wasn’t interested. That’s when he started thinking about getting away. To be alone with nature. Not having to worry about grades, money, women, anything. That would be the life. Even so, he felt he needed a purpose. The A.T., as he had started calling it, was the perfect fit. He could remove himself from society while still looking like he had a purpose, a singular goal. His plan was to hike from Maine to Georgia in five months.

Walking over two thousand miles in just five months was an ambitious goal, even more so, for someone who had never hiked more than the distance from the couch to the kitchen. Marcus was never a strong planner. He managed to plan far enough in advance to pick out the day he should start: the last winter freeze. He figured he would need some food, mostly jerky and trail mix. He saved nearly a thousand bucks. In his mind, he wouldn’t need much along the way, just the occasional boost in jerky and maybe some extra socks.

That year was unusually cold. Marcus felt at times that he would freeze. He packed for the winter he grew up with... in Southern California. He had no concept of the bitter freezing rain he would experience walking through New England. There was a week-long stretch where he found himself between towns; his food running low, and sheets of freezing rain made the path muddy

and virtually impassable. Marcus' hair and beard were dirty and clumped. He went from a solid two hundred twenty pounds down to a slim one-eighty in just a month. It was then, in his moment of desperation, that fate tested him.

The starving man had stumbled in the rain for hours. Mud covered his body, his fingernails black, only the taste of bile lingered in his mouth. He was completely out of food. The unforgiving weather had thrown him off the path. He was lost, freezing, and scared for his life. All of the trees started to look the same, one after another, until there was one different from all the rest. That tree had a man in an orange vest, preparing a noose, a noose for himself. As Marcus approached, the man let himself fall from the branch. The rope tightened around his neck, but it was not a far enough drop to snap it. Marcus watched as everything played out in slow-motion. Every choking noise echoing in his mind, like a loop on a tape player. The sound of the rope pulling tight, the creak of the branch as he swung there momentarily, and then, the frantic noises of him trying to pull the rope off of his neck. Desperately trying to get his fingers between the rope and his throat, and ultimately failing. The man in orange's face turned bright red, and then, purple as his eyes rolled back.

Revelation, clear and unmistakable flashed in the eyes of the suicidal man. Swinging from the tree, he realized he didn't want to die, that life was worth fighting for. In those last few seconds of his miserable existence, he scratched at the implement of his death and begged Marcus with his eyes to cut him down. Marcus did no such thing. He just stood, watching the gruesome act play out.

Marcus knew he should do something. A quiet voice inside of him pleaded for the man's life, but his feet were lead. He could do nothing more than be an unwilling witness to the horrific deed. When the swinging stopped, after the man relieved himself, after his eyes bulged forth from his skull in unblinking death, Marcus found himself rummaging through the dead man's pack.

Food, plain and simple. It took a few minutes before he could regain enough control to stop eating. Marcus' hands shook while he ravenously ate an MRE the corpse had brought with him. It took all of his strength to open it. He forced nearly all of the crackers in his mouth, greedily devouring the first thing he had eaten in days. Like a madman he opened his mouth to the cold rain, drinking from the sky. The swinging man in the tree above did not concern him at all. He started the warming pack with some water from his canteen. The taste of the warmed beef and noodles was so overwhelmingly delicious that tears ran down his face. And then, all at once, the emotions came back, his humanity returned. Staggering guilt and remorse slammed down on him, crushing his throat, moving down to his chest.

Shame and regret filled the lost vagabond. He wanted to think he was a good person, but when it really counted, he did nothing but watch, as another man died. Sitting there, under that tree in the early New England spring, Marcus realized that as much as he wanted to be different, he was just an animal. No matter what he did, he was just a couple of meals away from not giving a shit about his fellow man.

People mould moments to their desire. Day in, day out, planning, plotting, crafting what they want the moment to be. This moment, in Marcus' life, moulded him. It taught him what he was

like at his core, and as people do, he judged others based on his own guilt and standards. He no longer cared about what other people thought of him because, in the end, swinging from a tree, it just doesn't matter. We are born alone, we die alone, and nothing we do keeps us from being what we are at our core: animals, hungry and selfish.

It was early afternoon when Karen started falling behind. She was young, but not in shape. Shiloh with all of his years could still outpace most of his patrons. Even so, he was careful to watch for them as they needed rest. "How is everything back there? Are we ready for a break?" Shiloh called out over his shoulder.

Karen was out of breath. Becca dropped her pack on the ground, making Marcus the first one to say anything.

"Whooo, yeah. Ha, this climb is a good workout. Don't forget to stretch out before coming to a complete stop ladies."

Marcus overplayed a breathless tone. The truth was he could have kept going for hours. He was hungry, but he had several protein bars in the front left pocket of his dark grey cargo pants. There was no way Marcus was going to be caught without food on this trip. He knew first-hand how a trip that was planned to take a couple of days could grow into something far longer.

"Come on, old lady, what's the hold-up?" jested Becca at her sister's expense. She pulled her canteen from a side pouch in her pack that was sitting on the dusty road. The sun was nearly directly overhead and was surprisingly hot on her hair. The wind felt good on her back. Becca's shirt was soaked where her pack rested against it. "I didn't expect it to be so hot up here. I know it's only sixty-five, but it feels more like eighty-five." She pulled a black ponytail holder, seemingly out of nowhere, and put her blonde, shoulder-length hair up off of her neck. "Jesus, that feels better."

Karen stood admiring the view. She closed her eyes and imagined it was a painting. Thinking of the focal point, where she would put the horizon, the colours, the best time of day for the best shadows to bring depth to the painting. With that, she was off. Her tired legs and sore muscles didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was capturing the feeling. She pulled out her sketchbook. She had to capture the emotions, how she felt being here. Her hunger was gone. All that mattered was capturing the now.

Ten minutes disappeared. The others had already had time to catch their breath and look around for a proper place to sit and enjoy some food and relaxation. Tiny shadows danced on the ground as the less artistic members of the troop quietly ate lunch. A cool breeze moved through the valley carrying on it a crane, flying high in the mountain air.

Shiloh noticed a rustling in the woods. He was on the lookout for bears, but what he heard was much smaller. It was a fox, sitting between two pines. The old guide smiled and waved at their audience. The fox remained seated. A chill ran down his spine, "Is this really just a fox? It's just

sitting there... Watching me. Am I supposed to follow you?" he thought to himself. He stood up and the fox turned and started trotting off in suit.

No one noticed as Shiloh Carpenter walked away. Karen was focused on recording the sunbeams in the valley. The lovebirds were too involved with each other to notice anything around them. The leather-skinned man slipped into the woods without a sound. The fox kept perfect pace leading him deeper, further into the thick underbrush.

Before long, they had made it to an outcropping of rock, rising up from the forest floor. Green moss covered the base of the boulder becoming more mottled as it crept up the stone. A small, dead tree jutted out of a crack a few meters up. Below the tree, where the rock met the ground, the fox slipped beneath, into a small hole. Shiloh was certain the fox was trying to show him something. The stories of his youth warned against the fox, often a trickster. He steeled his nerves, ready, waiting... Nothing. Silence. Only the sound of something quietly munching leaves behind him which he ignored, focusing his attention to the hole at his feet.

A snapping twig pulled him from his trance-like gaze. A shadow fell over him as he slowly turned around and looked up at the silhouetted figure. Four massive antlers loomed from above, each with a dozen dagger-like points. Like a dream, the massive beast looked into Shiloh's soul. The two-headed elk stood, fearless, in front of the once mighty Chinook warrior. His own personal harbinger of death. Shiloh was not afraid to die. He knew this was his time, but he still wanted to die fighting. He couldn't face his ancestors any other way.

With a battle cry, he unsheathed his hunter's knife and lunged toward the colossal quadruped. The monster reared up on two legs; its razor-sharp hooves cut into Shiloh, slicing him deep across the chest and neck. The proud, Chinook man, squirting blood, grabbed one of the biting heads and pulled it close. One of the antlers' lethal spikes found its way under his jaw and into his throat. He was stuck, impaled by the forest spirit. With his vision growing dim, and body growing cold, he plunged his knife deep into the fiend's chest, over and over until it finally collapsed with him still attached.

Shiloh's enraged scream echoed through the valley. Birds resting in the pocket forest took flight in anticipation of the worst. A murder of ravens cawed, the sound of flapping wings followed closely, and then, all was deathly silent. The remaining hikers looked up and, all at once, realized he was gone. It was impossible to determine from which direction the battle cry came from. The distortion from the mountains, the sound bouncing off of every rock wall and being absorbed by the forest itself, caused it to feel like it came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"Oh shit, where did Mr. Carpenter go?" said Becca. "He's dead, oh my God, he's dead. I just know it."

"Relax, you don't know..." started Marcus.

“Don’t fucking tell me to relax! You always do this shit to me. You’re always being dismissive.” The stress of losing their leader and a year’s worth of not feeling heard fired from Becca’s mouth without her consent. “Damn it, Marcus, if you think he’s fine, go and fucking get him!”

Marcus thought of the man gently, swinging in the breeze. “Listen, it’s probably a bear. He probably accidentally walked into a mother and her cub. She got mad and either attacked him outright... or maybe that was just him, screaming to scare off the bear. Either way, he’s been doing this for years. Besides, he’s Native American, or... what do they say up here in Canada? First Nations? That grants him some kind of nature magic, right?” Marcus smiled. He was trying to bring some levity to the situation, but Karen was unimpressed, and Becca, seeing Karen unimpressed, was unimpressed herself.

Karen started in, “This is no time for your bigotry. It’s not funny. He needs our help, and if you’re not going to go, that means I have to.”

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” responded her little sister.

“Both of you have lost your minds. Listen to yourselves! You don’t even know which direction he’s in. That scream echoed all over the valley. Look, we should stay together, number one. Number two: he was only gone for like ten minutes at most... so we just walk in spirals, getting larger from the point of origin... right here.” He took out his collapsible shovel, tied a piece of cloth to it and jammed it in the ground directly in the centre of the path.

“There, now, no one is getting lost, and if the worst happens, if anyone comes looking for us, they will know we are close to here.” Marcus clenched his teeth and grimaced. He didn’t like the idea of losing their guide, but he knew they were only a half day’s walk away from the logger’s camp. The most important thing to do was remain calm and think rationally.

The sun had fallen behind the western mountains when the group stumbled upon the gruesome scene. Shadows were cast over the entire valley, the temperature was dropping. Unbeknownst to them, there was a wall of fog silently enveloping the valley. More out of obligation than necessity, Karen walked up to the heap of bloody death. “What in God’s name?” she whispered to herself. Shiloh, with his head entangled in the elk’s fearsome antlers, gazed lifelessly to the sky. “Help me get him off of this thing. Grab his legs...”

Only a thick trickle of dark blood ran out of his neck when they moved him. None of them knew the old Chinook man very long, but they treated his body with the utmost respect. They ended up laying him flat on his back, crossing his arms over his chest, and closing his eyes. It was quickly growing dark, and Becca was the first to take out her flashlight. She illuminated Shiloh’s mortal enemy, the two-headed stag.

Karen started the conversation, “Do we want to go back now?”

“We can’t just leave him,” chimed in Becca

“There is no him... he’s gone. That’s just his body,” said Marcus matter-of-factly.

“It doesn’t matter. What if that were me? Would you just leave me out here?” Angry tears threatened in the bottom of Becca’s eyes.

Marcus knew there was no right answer to the question. It was a trap. No matter how he answered, she would be angry at him. “Wouldn’t you want me to get Karen back to safety? You don’t want the rest of ...” his voice trailed off. He grabbed the flashlight out of Becca’s hands and pointed it at the elk. More to the point, he pointed it where the elk was just a few seconds ago. Nothing remained, just a pool of quickly drying blood and a spot bare of pine needles. Marcus swung the light from tree to tree.

“You guys are seeing this right?” shouted the frightened Marcus.

“What the hell? It was just there.”

“This can’t be happening!” Karen’s world of lists and order was quickly unravelling. Her voice quaked with the uncertainty she was feeling. Madness was setting in, and it was only going to get worse. “The deer, or whatever the hell that thing was, is gone. Now, they’re going to think we killed him. We have to hide the body. Fuck! They know who we are. They have our passport information, they know where we live. We have to carry him back. I’m sure they can tell it was a wild animal attack.”

Marcus shook his head, “Even if I wanted to I couldn’t carry him ten kilometres in the dark. We can’t go anywhere, not now.” As if on cue, a wall of dense fog, 100 meters high, overtook them like a runaway train. “Chill out, everything is going to be fine. Freaking out isn’t going to help anyone. I’ll check his pack to see if he had something useful.” The similarity to the swinging man didn’t escape him. Here, another man lay dead, and he was rummaging through his belongings. It didn’t feel right like he was violating the corpse itself. Maybe it was deeper than that, maybe that’s just what he was programmed to think by society. Maybe what he felt, was the profound violation of the man, not just the shell currently decaying in the woods. Marcus had food, matches, a flashlight, everything he needed, but there was one thing he was looking for. They were in bear country, where no experienced hiker would go without a gun for protection.

He rummaged through the rucksack: tent, cooking gear, food, change of clothes, but no gun. “He has to have one, maybe he kept it on him.” Marcus knelt over the corpse and slowly began to run his hands along the cold, wet sides of his body. His palms were now covered with blood. There, on Shiloh’s left side, under his jacket, was a holster. With great trepidation, the young Mr. Stevens reached into the sticky orange jacket and pulled out a handgun. He had no idea how to use it. He had never even held one, but having it somehow made him feel better.

Marcus stood up and looked around. Only the beacon of their flashlights made the two women visible in the fog. The smell of death lingered in the air. A gentle breeze swept billions of tiny white particles past the light. Karen and Becca were terrified, standing in the northern wilderness, with nothing but a couple of flashlights for protection. This was not the vacation they

bargained for. It became even worse when Marcus got close enough for them to see. Drenched in blood and shakily carrying a gun in his right hand, he approached them. He smiled, showing off his prize. Becca and Karen were horrified.

“Wha-What are you going to do with that?” Karen shifted her weight nervously.

“Just in case we run into something we can’t handle. I’m going to make sure we get out of this shithole.” He held up the 9mm as proof his statement was true and smiled reassuringly. “All we have to do now is set up a tent. Karen, you can sleep with us. We’ll be fine.” Marcus hastily dumped the tent out of his rucksack. He put it together in no time while Becca kept the area lit with her flashlight.

Becca’s light was pulled off of Marcus when he got the last pole in place. It wasn’t staked down yet, but it was good enough for tonight she thought. Her light swept passed Shiloh’s body. A small rusty red animal sat quietly on his chest. Patiently, silently, the fox sat... and waited. It watched Marcus frantically finish setting up the tent, and then it started. Quietly at first, a barely perceivable growl. Soon, its unearthly screaming was all they could hear. It just stood on the dead Native American and screamed like its throat was the gateway to all of the lost souls in Tartarus.

A single shot rang out in the night, and the abomination was silent. It fell over, stiff and silent. Everyone’s flashlights were focused on the dead fox. Thirty seconds passed and something started to move in its belly. Suddenly, violently, bloody tentacles of flesh burst out of it, far more flesh than the fox had. Piles of skinless muscles writhed on the pine needle covered forest floor. There was nothing left to be seen of the fox, just a hole where it once been. The sound of cracking bones joined in on the already grotesque noises.

Marcus fired wildly into the night. There was nobody to aim at. He simply sent bullet after red-hot bullet screaming into the pile of flesh that jiggled before them. Logic played no part in the action; it was a bullet that started this nightmarish outburst. It didn’t make sense that a half dozen more would make reality fall back into place. The searing lead did seem to get its attention. A nine-inch, thick bundle of muscle, fat, and blood shot out and wrapped several times around Marcus’ leg. He tried to pull away, but there was no escape. Like a boa constrictor, it squeezed, snapping every bone in his leg. Becca ran blindly into the night. Karen wanted to follow, but her mind was broken.

Marcus, like a ragdoll, was smashed against five trees in the area. He screamed and tried to protect his head against the first tree. By the time he was flung against the fourth, he was silent, and his body started coming apart. There was a huge gash in his head where his brains were exposed from being bashed against the unforgiving wood.

“This must be a dream. It has to be a dream,” Karen started muttering to herself over and over. Time started to move slowly over her, like syrup over cold pancakes. Her psyche was broken. There was only one thing to do: she picked up the gun off the ground from where Marcus dropped it. She resolved to shoot herself. If this was a terrible dream, she would wake up. If it was not a dream, she couldn’t handle it anyway and wanted no further part of living. She pressed

the muzzle against her heart. The trigger squeezed under her unsteady hand. Click...nothing. Click click click. No ammo remained. It had all been wasted, without effect.

Out of options, Karen started running headfirst into the rocky outcropping that marked the fox's hole. She hit her head and stumbled backward. She was desperate to die, but her body wouldn't give in. She backed up dizzy and disoriented. Karen found her bearings and footing enough to give it another go. Run, run, run, run, thud! She fell to the ground. It still wasn't enough; she hated herself for being so weak.

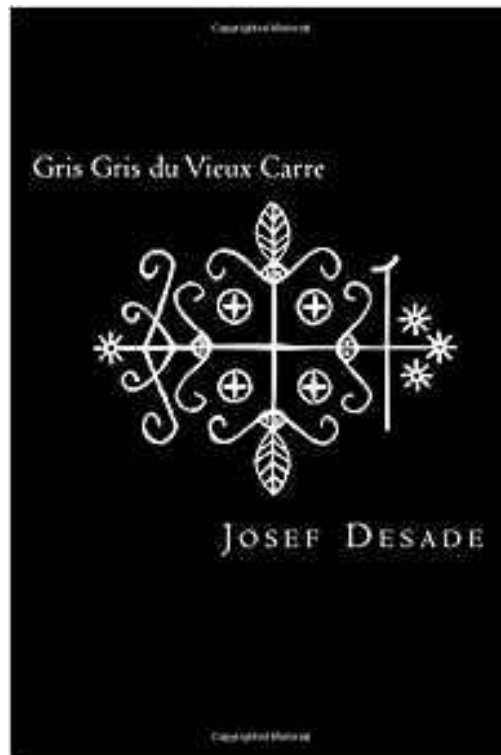
Karen climbed back to her feet. She was determined to finish what she had started. It was the only thing that made any sense. She found her balance once again. A bulky tentacle wrapped itself around her torso. Solid muscle squeezed her fragile body. She couldn't breathe. The sound of her back popping was heard over the colossal forest spirit's writhing. Karen could no longer feel her legs. They wouldn't move; there was no sensation, just a feeling like warm water washing over her lower half.

The titan relinquished its coil dropping the once beautiful young artist on the ground. Her mind lost control; her body started calling the shots as instinct kicked in. She could not move her legs so she grasped at the pine-scented ground in futile anguish, pulling herself forward a few measly inches at a time. The primeval creature watched in amusement as she tried to escape. It allowed her to crawl for a few seconds, and when it became bored, it wrapped a coil around her leg and popped her skull against the rock, like a red water balloon, snapping her the way you would a wet towel in the locker room.

Becca, hearing her sister's final scream, did not slow down to think of the moral implications of leaving her sister to die. She was in fight or flight mode, and she had chosen the latter. There were two obvious problems with this: the first being that Becca had no sense of direction and even the best navigators would get lost in this fog, and the second was her flashlight was starting to flicker out.

Moments passed as she ran through the woods; she stumbled over a large root but kept running deeper into the darkness. Her light faltered. She stood alone in the black. "Please please pleEEEEase! Goddammit, I don't have time for this shit!" She slapped the flashlight against her hand pleading with her only source of light to return. The sound of her heavy, frenzied breath was outweighed by a new sound, squelching, squishing, shifting in the darkness. The light came on briefly, just long enough to see the dead faces of her traveling companions entombed in writhing flesh. The faces wailed when the light hit them, something between anger and fear. Becca screamed in response. The light blacked out. Silent sobs were absorbed by the impenetrable gloom. A muffled cry was immediately followed by blood splatter and snapping bones. Silence, once again, dominated the night.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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RAT PIE by Rob Bliss

No one criticizes my cooking.

I'm an abused woman, I know that. Been in and out of women's shelters when Gary got too rough. Read their pamphlets, listened to their sweet words, but it only made me hate the women there even more. I didn't like myself for running away, wanted to stay and fight, but didn't know how. Just needed a different roof to sleep under for a night or two while Gary calmed down. Then I always went home.

My husband hits me, so what? Yells at me, calls me every name in the book, I've heard them all, and I still go back. It's what a lot of women do, and whether you explain the psychological reasons to them or not—their daddies were the same as their husbands, their mamas the same as themselves—most still return to repeated behaviours. There's still the comfort of home, of having a man to protect you in case of trouble, especially if he's the father of your children. I'm no coward. I stay and fight.

When a rat got into the house one day I found a way to fight back. All I ever really needed. Stomped on the tail of the vermin and clubbed it with a tenderizing hammer. Ugly thing, a dead rat is. I loved it.

Skinned it, threw the pelt in the trash, ground it up into a meaty pulp—head, tail, feet and nails—all of it. Made a meat pie. Knew when the kids got home from school they'd want some for dinner, lots of gravy, a side of mixed veg. But I wouldn't feed my children it—I loved them.

I made them hot dogs, Thursday's usual dinner, which Gary always hated. He said they were for barbecues and kid's birthdays. He wanted real food—he worked hard—he was a man, goddammit, and he wanted a man's dinner.

I said I saw a meat pie on sale today while doing groceries, but since we're on a tight budget I just bought one. For him, of course. If he liked it, I could get more, if he let me spend the money. Then maybe I could change Thursday's meals.

Lots of gravy. He dug in and loved it. Gorged himself and was done before the kids had finished their hot dogs. The children watched him eat, gravy on his chin and shirt. I was allowed to buy more, but only if they stayed on sale. I told him I had a feeling they would.

No more rats came into the house, so I went looking for them. Drove to town to complete the list of household and outside chores Gary always gave me before he left for work. Had my hammer and a garbage bag as I strolled the Dumpsters behind the Chinese food restaurant, the fish and chips, the burger joints. Caught three. Bought some more pie crust and ingredients at the grocery.

Made three pies and put them in the freezer. Gary doesn't like the same meal twice, so I made my Friday dinner, casserole. But he asked if I had picked up any more meat pies. I surprised him and said they were on sale three for ten dollars. They hadn't been in the freezer too long. He told me to go fuck my casserole, the kids could have that shit, heat him up a meat pie and don't take

forever.

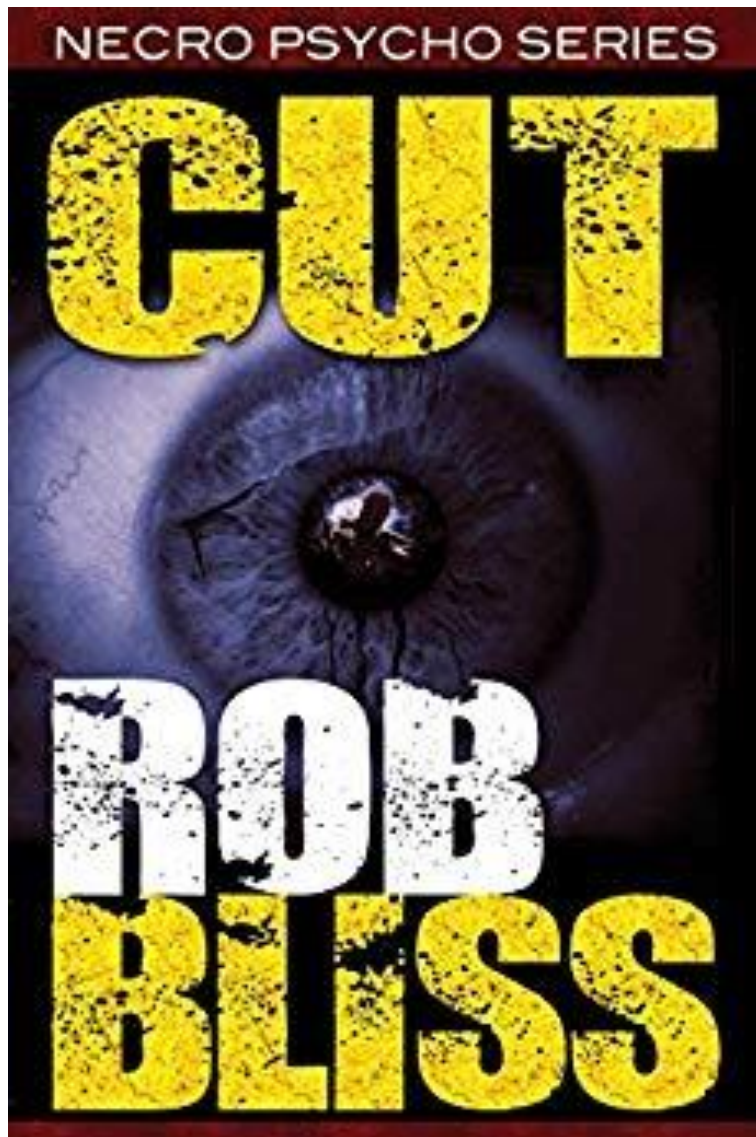
I heated two, with lots of gravy. It was the beginning of the weekend, Friday night, so ten beers before dinner and Gary had an appetite. He ate both pies while the children moped about their casserole. Gary told them to quit their whining and eat their goddamn shit. The beer provided a good haze. He didn't recognize the small tip of tail which I hadn't chopped finely enough. Thought it was a small piece of bone or cartilage, put it on the side of his plate as he kept eating the meat.

Long story short, I've been feeding Gary rat pie for a month now, and he's a glutton for it. I even started collecting some of the rat shit crusted on the edge of the Dumpsters and mixed it in with the gravy, only to be used for pies. The children know not to touch daddy's food. Gary has had to go to the doctor a few times; doctor said he had some kind of parasite, antibiotics should help. Maybe just heartburn or upset stomach; an over-the-counter medicine should alleviate the problem.

But Gary keeps eating the pies and he's not a man for pills and medicines. He's a real man—pills are for women when they don't wanna fuck or are on the rag. He should be dead in six months if all goes well. He never takes a lunch, calls even my peanut butter and jam sandwiches shit, so he eats off those lunch trucks. I'm sure they could be blamed for being unsanitary, the driver given a fine until he cleans his truck. I read that rat and mouse shit gets into a lot of food, and no one gets charged with anything. Contaminated food gets a lot of people sick every year, and life goes on as normal.

I am an abused woman. My place is in the kitchen. It harbours many weapons.

THE END



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THE CHALLENGER: ORIGINS by Jesse Zimmerman

When we last left our three heroes they had escaped the reactionary claws of Lobster-Man. In a random tying up of loose ends, they ran into the same oversized toad that had eaten their food, and in turn, ate the toad. Little did they know (Flora knew) that it was one of those magic toads...

My vision is watery, slightly swirly, and the forest in the distance is alike a running oil painting with bubbly sparkles floating. Fauna looks odd, the reds of her cap and outfit twice as bright. In her hands is a fried toad piece, her face gnawing at it, getting juices on her cheeks.

“Fauna-aaaah,” I say. “Do you feel?—and how?”

“I feel...like...” she sniffs, looking about apprehensively like a chipmunk. “When did the sky become green?”

“I was too hungry to say anything,” I explain to her, looking at this light green sky. The land is violet, the grass an acrylic turquoise.

“You knew?” she stammers, half laughing. “People say that I’m the wild one, but you just got us into a magic toad adventure!”

The Challenger—that is, the ranger, our friend of two other adventures, was seated on a tuft of grass. He pulls out a bone from his mouth and nods. “I thought it might be!” he says. “I can’t tell you how many of these babies I’ve eaten! Other stuff too, like cave glow-worms, meditating mantises, and been sprayed by certain skunks that give insight, you know?”

“Never read about those,” I say, standing up, managing to adjust my stance on the shifty land. “Whoa...okay, so, don’t tell Mother we did this or we won’t get supplies for the next time we decide to find a quest!”

My sister shrugs, but I pay it no more mind. I feel panicked and relaxed. Without any words, we all lay on our backs, putting our weapons and things between ourselves. Things pass by in the air before us, distant birds flapping long wings slowly as if they beat against a current in the ocean, some of the birds surfing in the wind, looking cool. A soft gust comes from the North and we see a flutter of seeds flow over us, white fluffy stems spinning to keep them flying, spinning as they move over us. I imagine myself among them.

“You look good like that,” says my sister to my side.

“Hm?” I ask, my face warm in the sun.

“Oh yeah,” says the Challenger calmly. “We all see what the other person is thinking. If you imagine something and see it, then the other people who also partook in the toad will see it. It’s kind of a collective, group activity, this toad-eating thingy.”

I don't want them seeing all my inner thoughts!

I block them, thinking of everything I'm trying to block. Images of our city, the Silver Coast, streak through my mind; memories from when we were growing up, the two of us sisters running through the hallways of our home, through fields in parkland, Fauna always showing off and climbing the biggest trees. I am in the campus next, the Academy where I learned everything I could about the world! In my mind I see the face of all my old classmates, all of them.

"Was she that one you told me about?" sister asks me in jest.

"Look up there," says the Challenger as I'm about to make her shut up.

"Wow," says Fauna. "Flora, look, you'll like this."

In the clouds is a great building with walls of marble. This structure is wide and tall, atop it ascends three domed towers. At the building's base opens a gigantic doorway, a long, thin blue carpet rolled out to the courtyard before it.

"That's an Academy," I slowly say, feeling a smile. "We have a great one back home; Mother's Library is part of it. We grew on the edge of that campus. This one though...where?"

I look to my left and see the ranger holds his stare with his one uncovered eye and then he answers: "Northsphere; back when I dwelt in urban places, before the Challenger."

"Oh," says my sister. "This is before you were a weird woodsy kind of guy. Sorry, that came out wrong. Blame the toad."

There are now tiny figures in the sky, all crowding around the courtyard. Our vision zooms, the Challenger's mind taking us closer to the people in the shadow of the great building. They wear white robes, the ones who have first honours, while the rest are clad in simpler things, these newer students. As I focus my vision on the image that the Challenger has mentally sculpted before us, I feel a tingly warm feeling inside me, looking out over the book-bearing, robed pupils. I want to be there.

Then I see the scene turn to night where from one of the domed towers black smoke rises. Thin flames begin to crackle from the windows, thickening as the pillars of smoke become ballooning clouds of black.

I am about to comment on the change of mood before the Challenger speaks: "That night long ago. I had to have been around your age then."

Night fades backwards into day. In our vision emerges a boy with only the faintest trace of fuzz on his upper lip, his frame thin under a plain robe, his face soft and boyish. He carries books in his arms.

“Aw!” Fauna declares loudly. “Is that you?”

He looks so different. As his doppelganger walks I see an awkward gait in his step.

“I was granted a sponsorship by an old sage. He took me out of the orphanage and straight into the Academy,” the ranger narrates from my side.

We see the pre-Challenger standing in a room that glows in afternoon light from slanted windows. There are small wooden desks, all set in a semi-circle. The Challenger student takes one, and the door at the far side of the room swings open, and a man who looks ancient enters, leaning over a curved cane, wobbling over to the front podium.

I am there now.

“Where am I?” I ask loudly, uneasy. No one reacts. I see the Challenger waving to someone else now, a green-haired girl a few desks over.

At the front of the classroom stands someone new. Here is a big man, older but not nearly as old as the last man. This is a barrel chested brute clad in a robe that is black on one shoulder, yellow on the other, and then black on one part of his belly, and yellow on the other and so-on; a chequered pattern that accentuates his shape. His face is the middle place between red and pink, and he is yelling.

“Who is he?” I hear my sister ask, and I see her appear in the room, seated near the front.

“Bumbly,” says the Challenger. “He was once our alchemist. He feared the students and faculty from other Academies.”

“What?” I say, almost laughing. “You mean like Silver Coast?”

“He was paranoid, Old Bumbly,” says the Challenger. “And he hated me. All the rest hated him though. He spoke badly about Talen, so that alienated most of the other Educators. He manipulated others.”

“Talen,” I say, remembering hearing that name. I see the book in front of me, the Book of Gods. There is on the page an image of a robed figure, a tall thin being with face unseen, hands bearing a glass beaker and a quilled pen. “Talen, God of Knowledge. I know of Talen.”

“Uphold knowledge, reason, and temper it with wisdom through experience.” I hear the Challenger’s voice. We return to the classroom. The young Challenger is at the desk right in front of us.

“Then why are you neutral and chaotic?” Fauna asks. I see the look on her face. She seems concerned for him. It is legit, what she asks, for Talen is known for being lawful and ordered.

“Bumbly showed me that there is no order,” he answers and I hear anger in his voice, fixated at

the sight before him. “He hated me because I was the symbol of everything he hated, an orphan who defied the odds. He hates the weak becoming strong. It was his gold, along with the gold of every rich man, he said, that was spent by the Academy through a tax to bring an orphan like to into higher learning.”

“Be Objective!” booms the one called Bumbly from the front of the classroom. We are in another chamber now, one with stone tables and no chairs. Fauna stands beside me, both of us over a table, tools and instruments of brass and glass before us. The Challenger is across from us, the green haired girl, a year older now, with him. Both wear white robes with blue sashes, and I see their hands clasped, hidden from the other pupils.

I get a closer look at our friend in front of us. I see both of his blue eyes and fair cheeks, the same as our Challenger, but he is weak, I can see it. His arms are thin, his shoulders nearly not existing. Across from him I see another boy, also thin, shorter, and clad in white with a yellow sash. Underneath a mop of straw-like hair I see a deep scowl, his face all bunched up like he just ate a salted lemon.

The room gets cold. The walls collapse, the wooden planks fading like sand. Everything is white for a moment, and then colour begins to emerge. I see the young Challenger. He stands in white robes, three colourful (blue, red, and yellow) sashes strapped against his chest. The whiteness around us is no longer, and I see many colours about us, the scents of rich flowers reaching my nose before the image of the lovely gardens emerge; forms and hues come into being, an unseen paintbrush creates them. A small crowd materializes, and now more people are near the young Challenger student. To the Challenger’s side she stands, the green haired girl—the green haired young woman. She too wears the tricolour sash.

“She is beautiful,” says the disembodied voice of my sister.

She has emerald eyes that contrast with her fair skin and soft features. “Oh,” I say, remembering what he once told me. “This is her.”

I hear the Challenger, our Challenger, mutter something. The young couple embrace and the crowd cheers.

Everything is dark, the blackness around us suffocating. I want this to end now. I’ve seen enough. Bumbly appears and he reads from a scroll, repeating some words, long words:

“Amberiousite, Magilidium, and Tristogralinite!” barks Bumbly, and now at his side I see something, a towering being twice as tall, four times as wide. Its skin is a swampy dark green, face devoid of feature, no eyes, nose, or mouth, only a pair of pointed ears that shoot out at the side of its head. The thick arms nearly reach the floor, long scythe-like claws on each of its hands.

“He made us create that thing,” Challenger tells us solemnly.

“When alchemists of the last era mixed these elements together, always they resulted in fire and

blasts! But never have all three been combined at once! Sages once theorized that it would create greatness!”

“Those tomes are out of date! They’ve been debunked! Can I not convince you not to do this, Professor?” young Challenger says.

“No, Mister! Recall what I say, be objective! Do not give it to your fear! It is for the sake of all us individuals that we signed contracts when we entered the Academy to gain knowledge!” grumbles the big professor. Something scurries at his side—the pupil, the weird one with straw-like hair and a scrunched face.

“He is called Rand,” says the Challenger’s voice to our side. “His nickname was The Straw-Man. Bumbly was a mentor to him, those of the yellow and black patch.”

The spindly youth grins at the young Challenger. “Listen to him! He comes from a long line of blood! Best pedigree! You should see how well his dogs are bred!”

“That’s enough, Rand!” says Bumbly, turning about to a white stone desk for a moment, grabbing a tall bottle in his big hand. “Here, have something to drink!”

The young Challenger waves his hand in refusal. “No, got an examination tomorrow. She’s expecting me.”

Rand, half the size of big Bumbly, leaps up and grabs the bottle from his mentor’s hand. Bumbly grumbles, and he whispers to his ward. The whisper is faint but we hear it; “This isn’t for you, fool. This is for him, to knock him out.”

The little assistant nods eagerly and leaps towards the rival pupil, throwing the bottom of the bottle up into the young Challenger’s forehead. He falls over, and Bumbly instructs the giant green thing to pick him up. We are now in a small room, a tower from what I can tell, for there is a small window with no glass or curtain, and through this portal I can see the rooftops of the city of Northsphere. Lightning strikes in the distance because of course it does! The young Challenger is there. He is tied up against the far wall, wrapped by his wrists in ropes, his ankles in chains attached to the bricks of the wall. Across from him, in the middle of the room, sits a cauldron of bubbling blue goop filled half to the brim.

“Antidote,” I hear his voice beside me. This must be the antidote, the same that Lobster-Man had, though this one is not temporary like his.

The young Challenger awakens, shaking his head, noticing in panic that he is tied to the wall. “Let me go!” he shrieks. I never thought such fear could come from him. I gaze at the shelves that line the room’s walls. There are all kinds of items here. I see vials and beakers, sealed bottles, dusty books, a few rolled up linens, among other weird things. Torches glow on the walls.

Now I see Bumbly, Rand, and the big green thing. The monster carries something in his hands,

something the size of a small person in a leather sack. This sack begins moving. I realize someone is in there.

“Now, when you signed—when you signed your papers!” Bumbly shouts, pointing a single finger at the abducted pupil at the wall. “You committed to Talen, committed to finding out truth and we are here to do that! My antidote! It works! It is mixed of the elements!”

“Amberiousite, Magilidium, and Tristogralinite!” shouts Rand at his side.

“You mock Talen!” young Challenger snaps.

“Now drink of it!” Bumbly calls, taking a long wooden spoon from one of the shelves and dipping it in the blue antidote.

“I refuse!” the young Challenger barks.

“We are committed to finding out the truth, no matter the methods!” Bumbly retorts. “Even if the methods are questionable. Attomoton!”

The green faceless thing opens up the sack, pulls the person inside out of it, and then tosses the sack out the window. I hear Fauna gasping, and then I hear both the young Challenger and the woman in the arms of the green beast scream.

“No,” I whisper. It is the Challenger’s wife. (We know not her name, or anything else save her appearance, for this story is not about her, but about what happened to the Challenger.)

Her hair flings about as she struggles to get free of the thing called Attomoton. Bumbly approaches the Challenger. She calls his name, but I cannot hear it properly over the commotion. And then I see Bumbly stick the end of the spoon into young Challenger’s mouth. He must have done it from fear.

“Now, show me your strength! Break free of your ropes and chains and save her!” he bellows as the Challenger gulps.

“Let her go!” the pupil shouts with a rage that he looks too weak to create, but still does not break the bonds.

Bumbly shakes his head, “It’s not working!”

“Come! Break free!” chirps Rand menacingly at the bigger man’s side.

Young Challenger struggles hard. Nothing changes.

The monster holds her over the open window. She screams for her husband.

“Okay,” says Bumbly, sounding defeated and Rand sighs loudly. “The experiment is over. The

antidote doesn't work. Okay, Atto, bring her back in."

The green thing shakes its head and we hear a deep monstrous voice emanate from it: "No Master. You who made me and educated me in the ways of the individual's will. You told me that we would do all to find the truth, yet you are unwilling to take it all the way."

Bumbly repeats his order for the thing we assumed was mindless to bring the green-haired woman back inside, but the monster refuses.

Attomoton drops Challenger's wife over the window pane.

I hear two screams, one from Fauna, and one from Challenger's wife as she falls from sight. The student does not cry out. He merely snaps the chains at his ankle, rips the ropes apart, and charges, leaping over the cauldron, pushing the green beast as he reaches him. A claw flings up as Attomoton falls over the edge, following the poor woman he had just dropped, managing to scratch out one of Challenger's eyes before falling.

Lightning illuminates the room. I see rage on the young man's face as he turns to Bumbly. The older man cries out, yelling apologies to no avail. The young Challenger jumps to him, put his feet on his shoulders, twists his neck, the big floppy body falling onto the floor. Rand cries out for help. Challenger tears across the room as the assistant makes for the doorway, our youthful friend knocking over everything on the shelves as he runs, causing the room to ignite on fire almost instantly. He reaches Rand and in one move tosses him across the room, the little man landing in the cauldron with a goopy splash.

For a moment I think I hear something amongst the roaring, the sound of Challenger crying. The room burns. Young Challenger grabs one of the linens and leaps from the window into the night, gliding with the linen that acts like makeshift wings.

Things swirl in fire and smoke.

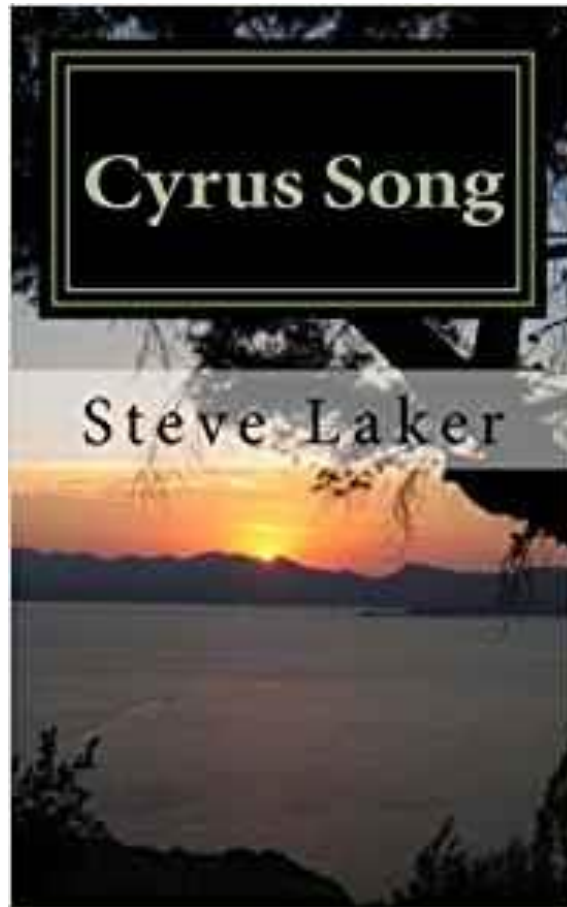
We see images of various landscapes; mountains, rivers, and the rest of our time here on the grass is that, just relaxing as the world passes us by. The images eventually fade. The Challenger is first to stand. Fauna is next, and then I get up. A part of me wants to say something, to tell him I am sorry about what happened, how I wish I knew more about his wife, and to remind him that we are glad to be his friends now, but I say nothing. We walk away, onward East to continue our quest to find yet another quest, another adventure.

As we descend a hill, we do not see that the vision in the sky has come back. I look for a moment and see it, though I do not tell the others what I see.

The room, in that small room in the tower where our friend lost his wife long ago and became a great warrior, something happens. The cauldron of blue antidote goop that Rand was thrown into, it stirs even as the room turns to ash.

A wet hand rises, and then an arm, muscular and thick followed by a mop of straw-like hair.

THE END



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THE EROS BAR by Tomas Marcantonio

‘Welcome to the Eros Bar, inmate 7436.’

Holding the door open is a woman of about thirty, her skin peach coloured and her blonde hair tied back in a neat ponytail. She wears a white shirt with a black waistcoat and black trousers. Her blue eyes find Hana’s face framed in the doorway, but Hana recognises the empty glare in them immediately. A Dream can pass for a human in the dark, but the technicians still haven’t mastered the complexity and depth of the human eye. One glance is enough to remind you that you’re looking at a mannequin with wires tied up between their ears.

The room is small and dark, the bar lined with oak and smelling of leather. Dozens of bottles are lined up behind the bar: port, whisky, beer, wine, rum; Hana can barely remember the taste of any of them.

‘The gentleman is already waiting in the next room,’ the Dream says, directing a hand towards the second door. ‘If you wish to select your preferred atmosphere.’

Hana looks around at the room. ‘Something like this,’ she says, indicating the bar they’re standing in. ‘Some place with jazz.’

The Dream bows and moves behind the bar. She enters a code on the grey screen next to the shelf of bottles. Hana watches her perfect fingers at work, compares them with her own. She observes the blue-ice hue of her knuckles in the artificial light; her veins, green with purple tributaries, crawling over her thin metacarpals like trails of rain spreading down a window pane. Hands older than her thirty six years, she thinks, and not hands to fall in love with.

‘Your room is now ready. On your last reward evening you selected soju as your beverage of the evening. Would you like the same again?’

‘Soju will be fine.’

Another bow. ‘Please have a seat and I’ll bring your refreshments through shortly.’

Hana pushes through the oak door and it closes behind her, leaving her in semi-darkness. The room is small, about six foot by six, empty apart from a wooden chair in front of her and a half-moon table that disappears into the wall. Suddenly the walls, ceiling and floor flash into life. The room is long now with high ceilings, illuminated by golden lamps that hang like glass tulips around the maroon walls. A dozen or so tables surround her own, most of them occupied by young couples, some by larger groups of smiling teens in open collar shirts and summer dresses. There’s a bar at the far side, penguin-suited staff behind it, and a tessellation of vinyl sleeves above the bottle shelves. Take Five by Dave Brubeck is playing behind the background chatter.

Hana takes her seat, looks across the table at the empty chair in front of her. She reaches out and touches the screen; she can almost feel the pixels. Then the door to her right opens and the Dream enters with a black tray with a green bottle and a shot glass upon it. She places the bottle

on the table in front of Hana and then the shot glass.

‘May I pour for you?’

Hana shakes her head and waves her hand. ‘That’s fine.’

The Dream bows. ‘I’ll activate the timer as soon as I leave the room,’ she says, and then exits. Hana watches the door as it closes; it disappears back into the wall, the jazz bar once again whole.

‘Hi,’ comes a man’s voice from across the table. There’s still no one in front of her, just the image of an empty chair.

Hana doesn’t answer right away. She takes a breath and unscrews the cap of the soju bottle. She pours a half shot into the clear glass and replaces the bottle on the table. Holding the rim of the glass to her upper lip, she lets the scent of the alcohol into her nostrils.

‘You forget how much it smells like nail varnish remover,’ she says to the wall.

The empty chair on the other side of the screen laughs. ‘I knew you’d be drinking soju, too.’ His voice is smoky, hoarse, like he might be old enough to remember the taste of cigarettes. ‘All the expensive drinks they have, and this is what we choose.’

Hana throws the liquid into her mouth, feels it burn through her throat.

‘Where are you?’ she asks.

‘On a beach. Thailand, 2023.’

Hana smiles. ‘Cute.’

‘You?’

‘Jazz bar.’

Silence between them. Hana fills her glass again, this time to the brim. She thinks about saying something and then stops. Instead she throws the soju down her throat in one go. The burn is stronger this time but the kick feels good. She looks at the empty chair across from her. Thailand, honestly. She knows already he’s not her type. Still, at least he’s Korean. There wasn’t always a Korean on the waiting list for rewards.

‘So tell me about it,’ she says. ‘What’s happening?’ Now that she’s here she might as well make an effort. Another twelve months of good behaviour, hundreds of hours cycling the generators just for this night.

‘There are plastic tables and chairs on the sand.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Fire dancers outside one of the beach bars. Teenagers with body paint, sitting in groups with beach buckets full of Sangsom whisky and colourful straws. The ocean’s behind me, lights across the water are glistening. Did you ever go?’

‘Didn’t have chance,’ Hana answers. ‘I was nineteen when they brought me here.’

She slugs another shot and she hears the man on the other side of the wall smack his lips after doing the same.

‘I can still remember the sound of the wash of the tide,’ he says. ‘The smell of the paraffin from the fire dancers. The crunch of the sand between my teeth as I sucked the whisky up through my straw.’ He laughs quietly. ‘No matter what you did, that damn sand always found its way in there.’

‘I never liked the idea of it,’ Hana says. ‘All those kids drinking on beaches, throwing their empty bottles into the ocean, making a mess of the place.’

A moment of silence.

‘I didn’t throw anything into the ocean,’ the man says.

Hana rolls her eyes. She looks around at the faces of the young men in the bar; she tries to find one that matches the voice opposite her but they all look too young. It doesn’t matter anyway.

‘Did I offend you?’ she says. Another shot.

‘No,’ the man answers. ‘It’s okay, forget it. I suppose there were a lot of stupid kids there in those days.’

The soju’s starting to hit already. Hana can feel it when her eyes move around the bar; her vision lags, like the slow tail of a comet. All of Me by Billie Holiday is playing, and Hana closes her eyes to absorb it.

‘I went there with my girlfriend,’ the man goes on. ‘She died a month after we got back to Korea.’

Hana blinks slow. Sure; everyone here has a story. She keeps her eyes closed and tries to remember a time when she wasn’t numb to emotion; when she didn’t feel as plastic as the Dreams who guarded her.

‘What happened?’

She tilts her head to one side, waiting for the answer.

‘Sometimes people die,’ the man says.

‘Yeah. They sure do.’

Hana pours herself another shot of soju, finishing the bottle. She’s making good time.

She presses the button on the table and the Dream re-enters with a second bottle and a breathalyser on the tray.

‘It’s policy to provide you with an intoxication check,’ the Dream says, ‘to ensure you-’

‘Do it then,’ Hana says.

She picks up the breathalyser from the Dream’s tray and holds it to her lips. Blows hard for five seconds and hands it back.

‘You’re blowing a four point eight. Based on your constitution you can expect a mild hangover if you were to stop drinking now. Would you prefer a non-alcoholic beverage for your second drink?’

Four point eight after one bottle; every time Hana comes her tolerance weakens.

‘No, give me the real stuff,’ she says. Tomorrow doesn’t mean much anymore.

The Dream bows and leaves the second bottle of soju unopened on the table. Hana opens it, pours a shot and finishes it quickly. She turns circles with her empty glass.

‘How long have you been in for?’ the man asks.

‘Seventeen years,’ Hana says. ‘Five to go. You?’

Hesitation. ‘Twelve.’

‘How’s everything on the men’s side? You see anything of the escape attempt?’

The man laughs quietly. ‘Hardly an attempt. Just a couple of fools. Smashed a Dream to pieces and tried to commandeer an escape pod. Of course, they couldn’t operate the thing once they got inside. Got locked up straight away, been in solitary ever since. That’s the best attempt anyone’s mustered in thirty years.’

Hana smiles. ‘Worth a try, I suppose.’

‘What are you in for anyway?’

Hana sighs, pours out. She’s starting to feel a slight dizziness.

‘You can see it if you want.’

‘Sure.’

Hana rings the bell and fishes out her memory stick for the Dream who comes to serve her.

‘Number twenty-six,’ she says, and the Dream nods and exits the room.

A moment later the illusion of the bar disappears and the walls, ceiling and floor turn black. The wall to the left is opaque; Hana sees the outside world through the misty nothingness of it. Stars are out. She stands and places a hand on the wall. Looking down she sees the earth, scrolling past slowly; the lights of a city hundreds of feet below. She wonders what country they’re flying over; the last she heard they were somewhere over Russia.

‘I remember the first time I saw the ship myself,’ she says, hand still on the wall. ‘I was just a kid. The shadow came over the beach at Busan like a storm cloud and everyone looked up to the sky and fell quiet. I remember asking my mum what it was.’

‘And what did she tell you?’

‘She said it was a deterrent. A reminder. I didn’t understand what she meant until a few years later.’

The walls flash into life again before Hana can make out any landmarks below. They light up, pixelated for a moment, loading, before sharpening into complete clarity. Hana sits back down on her chair.

‘Where are we?’ the man asks.

Hana looks around. Alleyways spread deep into the night. Neon glaring from upper-floor signs in the distance, but here is only darkness and smoke. There’s a motorbike leaning up against a lamppost, a girl sitting on it wearing short leather pants and a white t-shirt. Her hair’s tied back into a messy bun and a cigarette hangs from her teeth. A cloud of smoke passes across her face.

‘That’s me,’ Hana says. ‘Nineteen years old, but I thought I was older than that.’ She smiles at the cool way her younger self smokes, even though no one was there to see. ‘Busan. Friday night in the backstreets of Seomyeon. Hell, that place was alive. Friday nights in summer, I thought it was the whole world. I wonder what it’s like now.’

‘No cigarettes for a start,’ the man says.

Hana watches her teenage self and closes her eyes as she takes her latest shot. It burns in her throat, and the smells of old Busan summers flood back to her. Pork belly burning through the neon backstreets, kimchi and cow intestines wrapped up in perilla leaf bundles, makgeoli spilled over crowded tables. It seems like another lifetime.

‘Back then I thought it was cool to get drunk and cruise the arteries of Seomyeon on that bike of mine,’ she says, opening her eyes. ‘It was like an extension of my soul, that bike, tight between my thighs, purring into the night.’

A couple enter the alley from the far side. The nineteen year-old Hana lifts her head slowly, watches them approach.

‘And who do we have here?’ the man asks.

‘The victims,’ Hana answers.

They watch in silence. The argument starts out small; a couple of snide comments, an exchange of insults.

‘What’s it all about?’ the man asks.

‘That girl,’ Hana says. ‘Slept with my ex. He told me so himself before I kicked him out, but she never admitted it. And her boyfriend believed her, of course.’

The girl kicks Hana’s bike, and Hana flicks her cigarette butt at the girl’s face. That’s when the boyfriend intervenes. Pushes Hana in the shoulder with his right fist so that she almost falls off her bike and into the wall. Then Hana pulls something out of her boot.

‘I thought it would make me look hard,’ Hana says, watching her younger self. ‘That was the first night I’d put a knife to my ankle; I guess that’s why I went to it so quickly. I was so conscious of it being there; I never thought I’d actually use it.’

The three figures scuffle in the dark. Hands grasping hands, bodies pinning each other to the floor, flashes of silver in Hana’s hand as it catches the light. Then there’s a scream that pierces through the whole room.

‘All over a teenage argument,’ Hana says, closing her eyes again. ‘Something so small. So stupid.’

The girl drops limply to the floor and her boyfriend, grimacing, falls backwards. Hana mounts her bike and rides off into the alleys, into darkness.

‘Drones caught the whole thing on video, of course,’ Hana says, pouring herself another. ‘I barely made it ten minutes before they caught up with me. Take me back to the jazz bar,’ she calls through the door.

The screens around her flash and in a moment Hana is back in the red leather bar with the sound of Frank Sinatra.

‘She died?’ the man asks.

‘She died. And they said he’d never be able to walk again.’

‘You still think about it?’

‘Every day. Every hour, probably.’

‘Because you’re in here,’ the man says. ‘Because you threw your life away because of one moment of stupidity.’

‘No,’ Hana says, licking her lips. ‘Because I killed someone. And because I ruined another person’s life.’ Another shot.

They drink in silence again.

‘Where are you now?’ Hana asks. ‘Back on your perfect Thai beach?’

‘No, I’m with you. In the jazz bar.’

Hana nods to herself. ‘We’re running out of time,’ she says. ‘We’ll have to make our decision soon. If you haven’t made yours already. Do you want to see my face?’

A pause while he takes a drink.

‘Yes. Yes, I do.’

Hana reaches out in front of her and knocks three times on the wall. She hears the man do the same on the other side. The screen between them slides up slowly, and then she sees him.

He looks younger than his voice. Probably around her own age. Short hair, shaved close at the sides. Soft, dark eyes, premature wrinkles on his forehead. His shoulders are stooped forwards, his arms crossed over the table.

Neither one says anything when their eyes meet. Both reach for their bottles and pour fresh glasses. Then they slide their glasses forward and touch them together.

‘Cheers.’

‘Cheers.’

‘What’s your name?’ Hana asks.

‘Everyone calls me Soo.’

‘Hana Jang. You’re better looking than your voice, Soo,’ Hana says.

‘Women always say that after two bottles of soju,’ Soo says, and Hana smiles at the corners. ‘You look much the same as you did back then.’

Hana rolls her eyes. ‘This isn’t a real date, you don’t have to flatter me. We’re only here because the fools down there would rather date video game characters and Dreams than real people.’

‘Right,’ he says, looking down at his hands with a smile. Hana watches him play with his glass.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Soo says.

‘Shoot.’

‘What do you think you’d be like if it never happened? I mean,’ he says, fingering his bottle, ‘the way you talk and everything. I don’t know. Do you think you’d be the same?’

Hana looks down at her hands again. Old hands. ‘Seventeen years does a lot to a person,’ she says.

Soo nods slowly, his brow furrowed. Hana looks at him curiously.

‘You’re not like the other men in here,’ she says.

Soo looks up at her, smiles. It’s slow, laboured.

‘You didn’t tell me what you were in for.’

‘No,’ Soo says. ‘I didn’t.’

The walls around them flash back to black. Hana can only see the whites of his eyes now, the soft outline of his face in the new gloom.

‘Time’s up,’ she says. ‘So tell me, Soo. Do you want to make a night of it? Do our bit for the dwindling population of fools down there? Maybe cut a few years off our sentences?’ A pause. ‘Don’t feel like you have to.’

Soo observes her in silence for a moment.

‘Let’s do it,’ he says.

Hana stands up, her bottles and glasses empty on the table. The Dream escorts her outside into a new, dimly-lit corridor. Hana can just about walk in a straight line. They come to a door at the end.

‘I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening.’

Hana nods and pushes the door open. She looks around; the Dream must have made a mistake,

shown her to the wrong door. Hana's done this enough times to know how it works: one small bedroom, one double bed, one shower and bathroom, one night. But here is only a pod with a window to the night sky. It's been seventeen years since she was brought to the ship in one, but the design has hardly changed at all. The door closes behind her and locks. The Dream on the other side doesn't answer her calls or beating fists on the door.

Hana waits for minutes and nothing happens. Then the door opens, and a man in a wheelchair enters. It takes Hana a moment to recognise him.

'Sorry to keep you waiting,' Soo says. 'There was a lot of paperwork for me to fill out. Are you ready?'

'Ready for what?'

'To go back.'

Hana looks at him, at his neutral expression, his hands on the wheels of his chair.

'You're him,' she says. 'The boyfriend.'

Soo's expression doesn't change. She sees it now in his face, the young man from that night all those years ago.

'Good behaviour,' he says. 'You were due for an assessment to see if you were truly ready to return.'

Hana watches him, uncomprehending.

'You're not an inmate?'

Soo shakes his head.

'They wanted me to make the final call, decide if you were remorseful for what you did. To see if I could forgive you.'

Words catch in Hana's throat; her eyes sting. How many nights she's thought about what she would say if she ever met the man whose life she ruined.

'I'm so sorr-'

'You don't have to say it now,' Soo says. 'It's done, and we can't change anything that happened.'

'I don't deserve anyone's forgiveness. I'm not asking for it.'

'I forgave you a long time ago,' Soo says. He looks down at his chair, then back at Hana. 'If I

didn't I would have given up a long time ago. Hatred, resentment,' he says, shaking his head, 'they do to a heart what plaque does to unbrushed teeth. Allow it to build up, fester, and you'll be buried deep beneath it, unable to breathe. My heart was buried for a long time, believe me. But not anymore.'

Soo wheels himself into the capsule. Hana stands watching him.

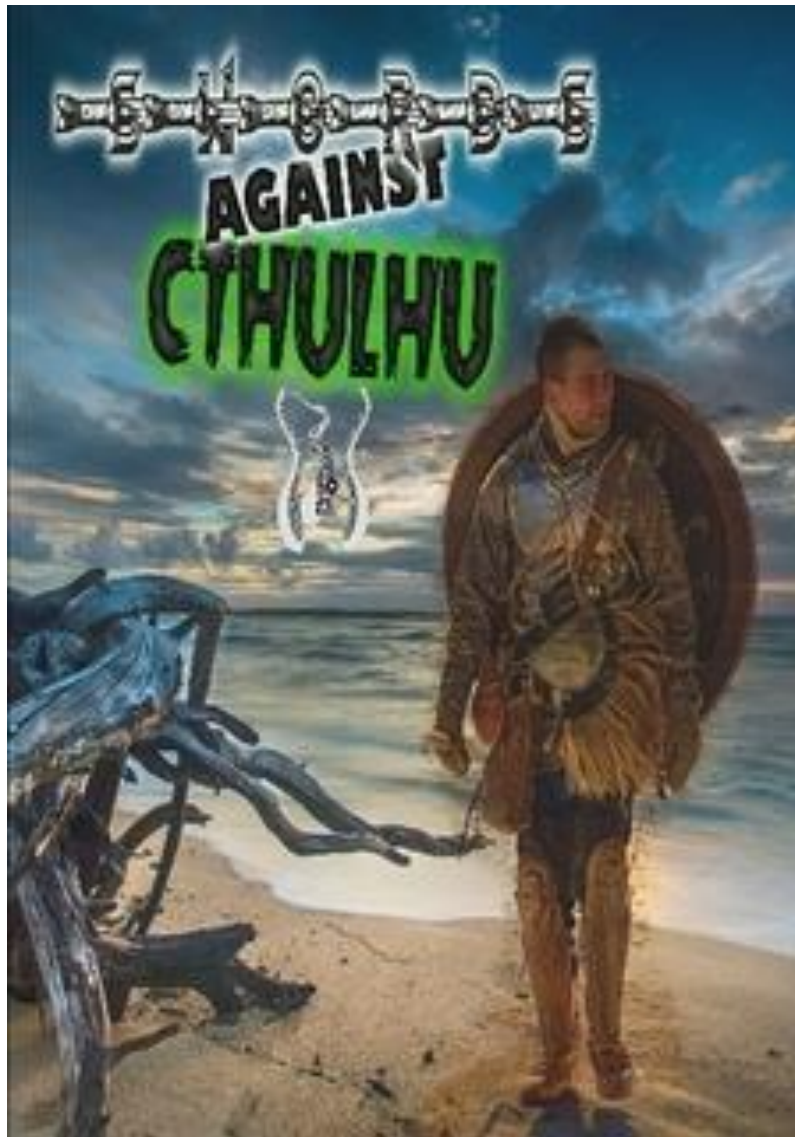
'The world's waiting. Are you ready to go back?'

Hana looks out the window. They're passing over a city; she can make out a bridge glowing purple and red over the water; it looks like Busan. She looks back to Soo. It's been seventeen years; too long for a heart to be buried, numbed by guilt. Time to set it free.

'Yes. I'm ready.'

THE END

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THE PROFESSOR by Paul Alex Grey

The wind shrieked as I stumbled across the empty quadrangle. The rain came in hard, freezing instantly when it hit the bare trees. It was a terrible night and I shivered and cursed the cold.

Tomorrow this would all look beautiful. Maybe I should come out and take some photos. That is if I didn't crack my head open on the ice tonight.

I pushed open the doors to Building S, stamping ice from my boots and hurrying downstairs to Professor Kessel's lab.

He'd messaged me in the midst of a Netflix binge.

URGENT! CONTINUED SUCCESS! YOUR PRESENCE IS KINDLY REQUESTED!!!

Then, moments later -

AND BRING A TIPPLE!

I hoped the half-finished bottle of rum I carried would meet his expectations. It wasn't possible to get anything else at one in the morning during winter break. Spending a cold night drinking with an octogenarian wasn't something I'd ever imagined I'd do but lining the insides of my dissertation director couldn't be a bad thing.

"Ah, Jason, come in!" croaked Kessel.

"Evening, Professor!" I replied, placing the bottle on the table.

"Not out with friends this fine night?"

His voice was thin and wiry.

"No, you know me, professor. Not really the social type."

"Yes, yes. I don't have many friends these days either. In my case it's because they're all dead!"

He raised his glasses to inspect the bottle, muttering something before turning around and barking, "Well, come on then!"

I followed him through the lab, past whiteboards filled with scribbles, post-it notes, pieces of paper with graphs and tables. Strange contraptions lay on benchtops surrounded by test tubes and beakers. It wouldn't surprise me if I came in once to see strange substances bubbling away while lightning crashed outside.

Professor Kessel is quite the character. I was sure he's well aware that most of the student body calls him The Nutty Professor. Clinically insane might be a more apt description.

“So, you’re a rum man, eh?”

“Indeed I am.”

“Well, let me tell you Jason, I think you and I might just finish that bottle tonight. It’s a celebration! A night I won’t forget!”

I chuckled, loudly, so that he could hear.

He struggled as he walked, clutching his cane and moving slowly. He’s been here for decades, almost sixty years. I think the faculty regards him as something of an heirloom. He was quite prominent for a while... early seventies maybe? Did lots of studies of the brain. Got his professorship along with Doctor Brennan. Of course, she went on to found Psyentech, create all sorts of fancy brain-related medical equipment and become a billionaire.

Professor Kessel on the other hand... I think he preferred pottering around on new ideas to be honest. I can’t say I agree he’s made the right decision. Surely sipping martinis on a yacht in the Caribbean would be better than these cold and rainy nights, cooped up in this musty basement.

“Now, Jason, please see exhibits C and D.”

He gestured to where two of his white rabbits sat peacefully, their noses wriggling soundlessly. Each had a splash of paint on their fur. C was blue. D was green.

“Jason, what was unique about Exhibit C?”

I found myself wishing I’d poured us some rum... or slept through his message.

“Um... that was the rabbit that liked to sit in its litter box, right?”

“Exactly!” said the professor before bursting into a fit of heavy coughing.

When he recovered he wiped at his mouth with a handkerchief. I couldn’t help but notice a smear of red before he stuffed it in his sleeve.

“Exactly! C was rather fond of its own crap! Well. Please take the exhibits to their enclosure for me.”

I picked up the rabbits, docile as ever and put them back in their hutch. Straight away greenie moved over to the litter box and bluey went to join the others.

“Voila!” shouted the professor.

I definitely should have had that rum.

“Don’t you see? Exhibit C is now Exhibit D!”

“I don’t know, Professor. That could be just chance.”

His experiments were wacky. That was for sure. Mind-shifting. Transmuting the consciousness of one creature into another. I’m not even sure how he’d gotten funded. But, perhaps half a century’s tenure gave him free reign to pursue whatever hypothesis he wanted.

“Jason. You have followed my research, my experiments. I assure you that I have successfully transmuted the two subjects. Now, the process is not without risk and needs more work but-”

Why did I reply to his text? I should have ignored it.

“Fancy a rum professor?”

He stared at me, his usual absent-minded joyfulness gone. The look he gave me was as cold as the night outside. I felt a shiver run through me.

“You don’t believe me.”

This was getting awkward.

“Professor. It’s not that. It’s just. Well, it’s hard to tell with rabbits. I can’t really tell two rabbits apart most of the time, let alone to know if you’ve actually switched their brains.”

“This is not about switching brains, Jason.” He sighed, his expression softening.

He moved over and sat on a stool by his machine. He hadn’t given it a name yet. I was sure he’d give it something fantastic like the Transmogriifier. As I approached it I noticed it was humming, and I instinctively drew my arms back. It was plugged into the mains and I wasn’t too confident in the Professor’s commitment to workplace safety.

I picked up the bottle from the bench and returned to join him, sitting on the stool opposite. The machine buzzed beside me, two odd antennae humming above our heads.

I poured two drinks, savouring the aroma.

We clinked glasses. I took a sip and shut my eyes. What was I doing here? I should’ve gone somewhere for the break. Mexico. Dominican. Anywhere. Then again, it would have been alone. Might as well be alone here at school rather than spend a load of money to be somewhere exotic by myself.

The rum warmed my chest. I opened my eyes.

The professor was staring at the window. Had I taken a sketch of him there and then it would have been perfect for an illustrated dictionary’s entry for despondent.

I stifled a sigh and then spoke.

“Listen, professor. Maybe we can find some other test subjects. Something else to experiment on?”

He smiled.

“We could get some undergrads when term starts,” I said, sipping at the rum. “Then again, I’m not sure they’re much more cerebral than your rabbits!”

That made him chuckle. He swirled the rum and then downed the whole thing. Not bad for one foot in the grave. He smiled at me, then wiggled his glass.

I quaffed my rum, felt the fire slide and settle in me. He poured again.

“You know Jason, I appreciate your friendship. It’s an honour to have such an accomplished young scientist as a friend.”

He set the bottle down and shifted a little in his seat. I sat still, expecting some sort of long monologue was about to begin.

“I think we’re kindred spirits. Loners. I know about how you lost your family, and how much research means to you. Most people have abandoned me as some old crank. Not you. Now, I know I’m a little avant-garde in my research. But I have spent the best part of my life in this field. A great deal of modern technology is due to my work.... If I were a young man again, I would have time to continue. To show them all, make them see just what I have achieved... and what I could still achieve.”

He was staring at me. Then he raised the glass and downed his rum again.

I swirled the rum in my glass as I listened to the wind outside. It rattled the windows and shrieked at the night. I might need to camp out in the lab rather than braving the night to get back to my apartment.

The lights in the quadrangle cast a flickering glow, cut into pieces by the rain. I watched as a tree leaned and swayed in the wind, its branches clutching at the night.

Then there was a tilting shift in volume and it seemed like my ears popped. Could a window have burst? Everything had gone a bit dull and I blinked. Even my vision was blurred. I raised a hand and rubbed at my eyes, feeling a sudden headache.

I raised my glass for a sip... and found it empty.

I looked at my companion and the glass fell from my hands, shattering with a muted crash.

My own face stared back at me. It wore a smug smile.

I looked down at my hands. Old, withered hands. Sallow skin with liver spots. I felt at my legs, thin and bony. I stood and just about fell, shocked at the weakness in my body. I hobbled to the window where the freezing rain swirled in ghostlike waves. In the glass I saw my reflection. The face of Professor Kessel.

A strangely familiar voice carried through the room.

“Some say the greatest joy of invention is what comes from it.”

My heart beat a heavy march in my chest and my mouth was dry.

“I disagree.”

I heard a chair scrape on the floor.

“The greatest joy is the fame. The respect. The adulation.”

I turned back, my breath coming in shallow gulps. I saw my own form rise. It began to move towards me menacingly, fists clenched tightly.

“You can’t do this! You’ll be found out!”

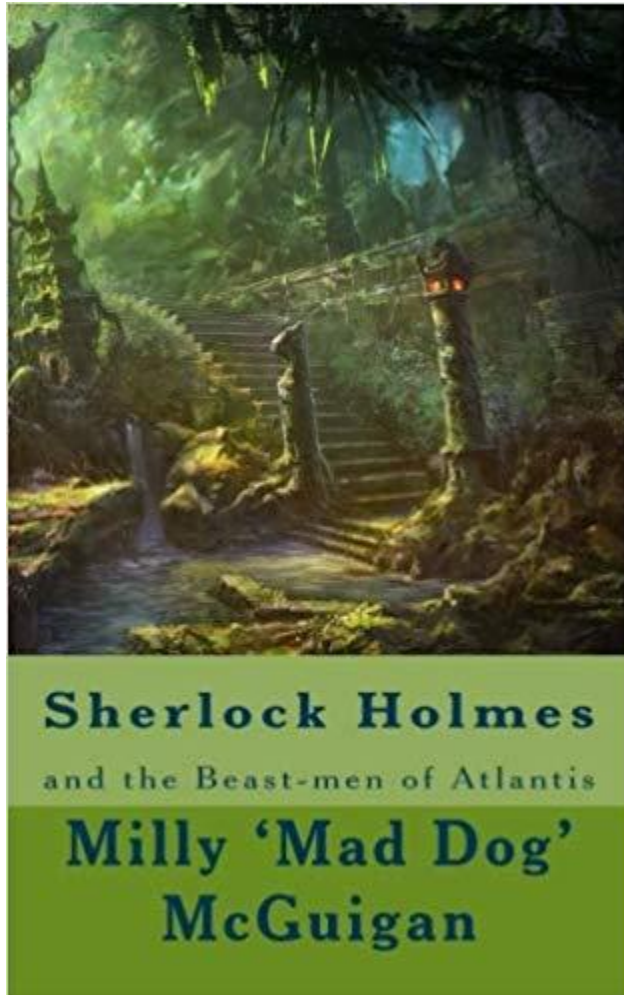
“Oh no,” he laughed. “An old man, overworked and unwell. A sudden death late at night would be anything but unexpected.”

I backed up, raising my arms to defend myself. Weak arms. I’d surely lose this fight.

“Thank you, Jason,” he said, raising one arm to strike me. “For giving me the opportunity to continue my work. Oh, and thanks for the rum too.”

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty-Nine

A low grumbling went rumbling through the darkened decks and halls of the “Derelict”. Clearly, the news that they were to be deprived of the prize they had so carefully cultivated for countless hours was not theirs, even in the smallest part.

“Who’re you? Who’re you to be tellin’ us what’s ours and what idn’t?”

“We are Horst Dal’s own emissary (away from Horst Dal and Yamir, Turhan Mot felt emboldened once again to refer to himself in the third person). We have come to claim his property, she, whose tongue spills Horst Dal’s habits too freely for his liking...”

“We heard nuthin’ about that,” several voices called out from the crowd.

“And there is also the matter of Turhan Mot, and his capture.”

“Aye,” came a voice that had apparently appointed itself as the spokesperson for the crowd. “That we know of. For half a million Universal Credits, he’s yours. He’s a dangerous bitch, I tell you whut.”

“The crew of the “Derelict” will deliver Carter Ward to us, and we will gladly make all due payments.”

Ward didn’t have to listen to another word. Casting his eyes upwards as his body fell downward, he saw the dim red lights emanating from the bridge. There, he saw the shadows of those commanding the “Derelict”. They gestured, pointing at the murky corners where they presumed someone had been hiding. They shouted commands though the intercom system, commands that echoed and reverberated through the yawning hull of the “Derelict”.

On an impulse, Ward grabbed a cage with both hands as he tumbled past it. The wires of the cage cut through the flesh of his fingers. The stack of cages wavered dangerously in the near weightless environment of the ancient derelict.

The stack of cages, standing nearly twenty feet high, joined its rank to a row of cages, one of many, that numbered as many as hundred. Laid out carelessly, the rows of cages, standing each five to six feet in height, created a massive and crazed maze in the shadowy world that was the “Derelict”.

The cages that Ward clutched to teetered along with the rest of the row. They began a slow collapse at the point where Ward was hanging. Ward pulled himself up by his elbows to avoid getting himself crushed by the collapsing walls. His eyes searched the darkened stowage bay. He had to find the O8-111A, more importantly, he had to find Dimara. Once in contact with her, he could wreak any amount of havoc.

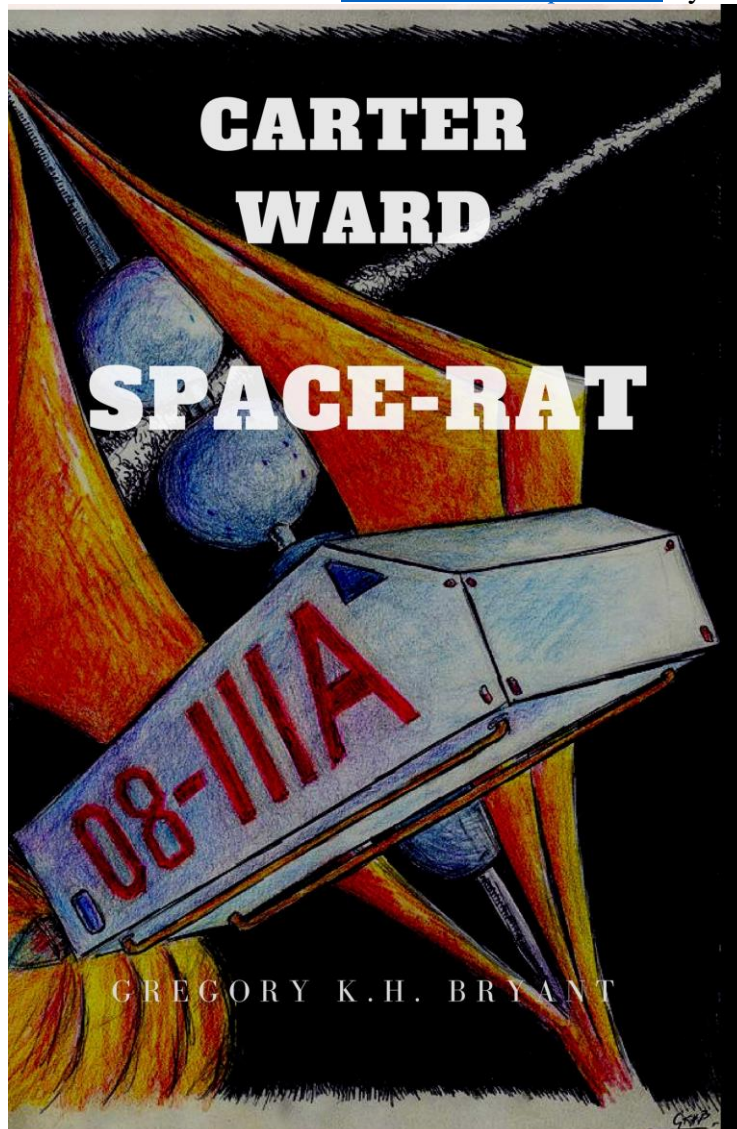
But Ward's ship was nowhere to be seen. The O8-111A was hidden behind shrouds of darkness. Somewhat overhead and several dozen yards off, Ward caught a glimpse of Turhan Mot's fighter ship with Turhan Mot in the pilot's seat. He was smirking at that Lacey kid from his seat in the cockpit, ordering her around with a smile on his purple lips.

"Tough on the kid," Ward remarked to himself. But that's the way of things, wasn't? Play it careful, or you're liable to get yourself fucked big time.

Ward didn't have time to squander any of it worrying over anyone he barely knew. The stack of cages where he had found shelter was on the point of collapse. Ward looked upward to study his predicament. It was at that moment that the scaffolding of cages began crashing down upon Carter Ward.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

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



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THE LOST WORLD by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Chapter V: "Question!"

What with the physical shocks incidental to my first interview with Professor Challenger and the mental ones which accompanied the second, I was a somewhat demoralized journalist by the time I found myself in Enmore Park once more. In my aching head the one thought was throbbing that there really was truth in this man's story, that it was of tremendous consequence, and that it would work up into inconceivable copy for the Gazette when I could obtain permission to use it. A taxicab was waiting at the end of the road, so I sprang into it and drove down to the office. McArdle was at his post as usual.

"Well," he cried, expectantly, "what may it run to? I'm thinking, young man, you have been in the wars. Don't tell me that he assaulted you."

"We had a little difference at first."

"What a man it is! What did you do?"

"Well, he became more reasonable and we had a chat. But I got nothing out of him—nothing for publication."

"I'm not so sure about that. You got a black eye out of him, and that's for publication. We can't have this reign of terror, Mr. Malone. We must bring the man to his bearings. I'll have a leaderette on him to-morrow that will raise a blister. Just give me the material and I will engage to brand the fellow for ever. Professor Munchausen—how's that for an inset headline? Sir John Mandeville redivivus—Cagliostro—all the imposters and bullies in history. I'll show him up for the fraud he is."

"I wouldn't do that, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because he is not a fraud at all."

"What!" roared McArdle. "You don't mean to say you really believe this stuff of his about mammoths and mastodons and great sea sairpents?"

"Well, I don't know about that. I don't think he makes any claims of that kind. But I do believe he has got something new."

"Then for Heaven's sake, man, write it up!"

"I'm longing to, but all I know he gave me in confidence and on condition that I didn't." I condensed into a few sentences the Professor's narrative. "That's how it stands."

McArdle looked deeply incredulous.

“Well, Mr. Malone,” he said at last, “about this scientific meeting to-night; there can be no privacy about that, anyhow. I don’t suppose any paper will want to report it, for Waldron has been reported already a dozen times, and no one is aware that Challenger will speak. We may get a scoop, if we are lucky. You’ll be there in any case, so you’ll just give us a pretty full report. I’ll keep space up to midnight.”

My day was a busy one, and I had an early dinner at the Savage Club with Tarp Henry, to whom I gave some account of my adventures. He listened with a sceptical smile on his gaunt face, and roared with laughter on hearing that the Professor had convinced me.

“My dear chap, things don’t happen like that in real life. People don’t stumble upon enormous discoveries and then lose their evidence. Leave that to the novelists. The fellow is as full of tricks as the monkey-house at the Zoo. It’s all bosh.”

“But the American poet?”

“He never existed.”

“I saw his sketch-book.”

“Challenger’s sketch-book.”

“You think he drew that animal?”

“Of course he did. Who else?”

“Well, then, the photographs?”

“There was nothing in the photographs. By your own admission you only saw a bird.”

“A pterodactyl.”

“That’s what HE says. He put the pterodactyl into your head.”

“Well, then, the bones?”

“First one out of an Irish stew. Second one vamped up for the occasion. If you are clever and know your business you can fake a bone as easily as you can a photograph.”

I began to feel uneasy. Perhaps, after all, I had been premature in my acquiescence. Then I had a sudden happy thought.

“Will you come to the meeting?” I asked.

Tarp Henry looked thoughtful.

“He is not a popular person, the genial Challenger,” said he. “A lot of people have accounts to settle with him. I should say he is about the best-hated man in London. If the medical students turn out there will be no end of a rag. I don’t want to get into a bear-garden.”

“You might at least do him the justice to hear him state his own case.”

“Well, perhaps it’s only fair. All right. I’m your man for the evening.”

When we arrived at the hall we found a much greater concourse than I had expected. A line of electric broughams discharged their little cargoes of white-bearded professors, while the dark stream of humbler pedestrians, who crowded through the arched door-way, showed that the audience would be popular as well as scientific. Indeed, it became evident to us as soon as we had taken our seats that a youthful and even boyish spirit was abroad in the gallery and the back portions of the hall. Looking behind me, I could see rows of faces of the familiar medical student type. Apparently the great hospitals had each sent down their contingent. The behaviour of the audience at present was good-humoured, but mischievous. Scraps of popular songs were chorused with an enthusiasm which was a strange prelude to a scientific lecture, and there was already a tendency to personal chaff which promised a jovial evening to others, however embarrassing it might be to the recipients of these dubious honours.

Thus, when old Doctor Meldrum, with his well-known curly-brimmed opera-hat, appeared upon the platform, there was such a universal query of “Where DID you get that tile?” that he hurriedly removed it, and concealed it furtively under his chair. When gouty Professor Wadley limped down to his seat there were general affectionate inquiries from all parts of the hall as to the exact state of his poor toe, which caused him obvious embarrassment. The greatest demonstration of all, however, was at the entrance of my new acquaintance, Professor Challenger, when he passed down to take his place at the extreme end of the front row of the platform. Such a yell of welcome broke forth when his black beard first protruded round the corner that I began to suspect Tarp Henry was right in his surmise, and that this assemblage was there not merely for the sake of the lecture, but because it had got rumoured abroad that the famous Professor would take part in the proceedings.

There was some sympathetic laughter on his entrance among the front benches of well-dressed spectators, as though the demonstration of the students in this instance was not unwelcome to them. That greeting was, indeed, a frightful outburst of sound, the uproar of the carnivora cage when the step of the bucket-bearing keeper is heard in the distance. There was an offensive tone in it, perhaps, and yet in the main it struck me as mere riotous outcry, the noisy reception of one who amused and interested them, rather than of one they disliked or despised. Challenger smiled with weary and tolerant contempt, as a kindly man would meet the yapping of a litter of puppies. He sat slowly down, blew out his chest, passed his hand caressingly down his beard, and looked with drooping eyelids and supercilious eyes at the crowded hall before him. The uproar of his advent had not yet died away when Professor Ronald Murray, the chairman, and Mr. Waldron, the lecturer, threaded their way to the front, and the proceedings began

.

Professor Murray will, I am sure, excuse me if I say that he has the common fault of most Englishmen of being inaudible. Why on earth people who have something to say which is worth hearing should not take the slight trouble to learn how to make it heard is one of the strange mysteries of modern life. Their methods are as reasonable as to try to pour some precious stuff from the spring to the reservoir through a non-conducting pipe, which could by the least effort be opened. Professor Murray made several profound remarks to his white tie and to the water-carafe upon the table, with a humorous, twinkling aside to the silver candlestick upon his right. Then he sat down, and Mr. Waldron, the famous popular lecturer, rose amid a general murmur of applause. He was a stern, gaunt man, with a harsh voice, and an aggressive manner, but he had the merit of knowing how to assimilate the ideas of other men, and to pass them on in a way which was intelligible and even interesting to the lay public, with a happy knack of being funny about the most unlikely objects, so that the precession of the Equinox or the formation of a vertebrate became a highly humorous process as treated by him.

It was a bird's-eye view of creation, as interpreted by science, which, in language always clear and sometimes picturesque, he unfolded before us. He told us of the globe, a huge mass of flaming gas, flaring through the heavens. Then he pictured the solidification, the cooling, the wrinkling which formed the mountains, the steam which turned to water, the slow preparation of the stage upon which was to be played the inexplicable drama of life. On the origin of life itself he was discreetly vague. That the germs of it could hardly have survived the original roasting was, he declared, fairly certain. Therefore it had come later. Had it built itself out of the cooling, inorganic elements of the globe? Very likely. Had the germs of it arrived from outside upon a meteor? It was hardly conceivable. On the whole, the wisest man was the least dogmatic upon the point. We could not—or at least we had not succeeded up to date in making organic life in our laboratories out of inorganic materials. The gulf between the dead and the living was something which our chemistry could not as yet bridge. But there was a higher and subtler chemistry of Nature, which, working with great forces over long epochs, might well produce results which were impossible for us. There the matter must be left.

This brought the lecturer to the great ladder of animal life, beginning low down in molluscs and feeble sea creatures, then up rung by rung through reptiles and fishes, till at last we came to a kangaroo-rat, a creature which brought forth its young alive, the direct ancestor of all mammals, and presumably, therefore, of everyone in the audience. ("No, no," from a sceptical student in the back row.) If the young gentleman in the red tie who cried "No, no," and who presumably claimed to have been hatched out of an egg, would wait upon him after the lecture, he would be glad to see such a curiosity. (Laughter.) It was strange to think that the climax of all the age-long process of Nature had been the creation of that gentleman in the red tie. But had the process stopped? Was this gentleman to be taken as the final type—the be-all and end-all of development? He hoped that he would not hurt the feelings of the gentleman in the red tie if he maintained that, whatever virtues that gentleman might possess in private life, still the vast processes of the universe were not fully justified if they were to end entirely in his production. Evolution was not a spent force, but one still working, and even greater achievements were in store.

Having thus, amid a general titter, played very prettily with his interrupter, the lecturer went back

to his picture of the past, the drying of the seas, the emergence of the sand-bank, the sluggish, viscous life which lay upon their margins, the overcrowded lagoons, the tendency of the sea creatures to take refuge upon the mud-flats, the abundance of food awaiting them, their consequent enormous growth. "Hence, ladies and gentlemen," he added, "that frightful brood of saurians which still affright our eyes when seen in the Wealden or in the Solenhofen slates, but which were fortunately extinct long before the first appearance of mankind upon this planet."

"Question!" boomed a voice from the platform.

Mr. Waldron was a strict disciplinarian with a gift of acid humour, as exemplified upon the gentleman with the red tie, which made it perilous to interrupt him. But this interjection appeared to him so absurd that he was at a loss how to deal with it. So looks the Shakespearean who is confronted by a rancid Baconian, or the astronomer who is assailed by a flat-earth fanatic. He paused for a moment, and then, raising his voice, repeated slowly the words: "Which were extinct before the coming of man."

"Question!" boomed the voice once more.

Waldron looked with amazement along the line of professors upon the platform until his eyes fell upon the figure of Challenger, who leaned back in his chair with closed eyes and an amused expression, as if he were smiling in his sleep.

"I see!" said Waldron, with a shrug. "It is my friend Professor Challenger," and amid laughter he renewed his lecture as if this was a final explanation and no more need be said.

But the incident was far from being closed. Whatever path the lecturer took amid the wilds of the past seemed invariably to lead him to some assertion as to extinct or prehistoric life which instantly brought the same bulls' bellow from the Professor. The audience began to anticipate it and to roar with delight when it came. The packed benches of students joined in, and every time Challenger's beard opened, before any sound could come forth, there was a yell of "Question!" from a hundred voices, and an answering counter cry of "Order!" and "Shame!" from as many more. Waldron, though a hardened lecturer and a strong man, became rattled. He hesitated, stammered, repeated himself, got snarled in a long sentence, and finally turned furiously upon the cause of his troubles.

"This is really intolerable!" he cried, glaring across the platform. "I must ask you, Professor Challenger, to cease these ignorant and unmannerly interruptions."

There was a hush over the hall, the students rigid with delight at seeing the high gods on Olympus quarrelling among themselves. Challenger levered his bulky figure slowly out of his chair.

"I must in turn ask you, Mr. Waldron," he said, "to cease to make assertions which are not in strict accordance with scientific fact."

The words unloosed a tempest. "Shame! Shame!" "Give him a hearing!" "Put him out!" "Shove

him off the platform!" "Fair play!" emerged from a general roar of amusement or execration. The chairman was on his feet flapping both his hands and bleating excitedly. "Professor Challenger—personal—views—later," were the solid peaks above his clouds of inaudible mutter. The interrupter bowed, smiled, stroked his beard, and relapsed into his chair. Waldron, very flushed and warlike, continued his observations. Now and then, as he made an assertion, he shot a venomous glance at his opponent, who seemed to be slumbering deeply, with the same broad, happy smile upon his face.

At last the lecture came to an end—I am inclined to think that it was a premature one, as the peroration was hurried and disconnected. The thread of the argument had been rudely broken, and the audience was restless and expectant. Waldron sat down, and, after a chirrup from the chairman, Professor Challenger rose and advanced to the edge of the platform. In the interests of my paper I took down his speech verbatim.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began, amid a sustained interruption from the back. "I beg pardon—Ladies, Gentlemen, and Children—I must apologize, I had inadvertently omitted a considerable section of this audience" (tumult, during which the Professor stood with one hand raised and his enormous head nodding sympathetically, as if he were bestowing a pontifical blessing upon the crowd), "I have been selected to move a vote of thanks to Mr. Waldron for the very picturesque and imaginative address to which we have just listened. There are points in it with which I disagree, and it has been my duty to indicate them as they arose, but, none the less, Mr. Waldron has accomplished his object well, that object being to give a simple and interesting account of what he conceives to have been the history of our planet. Popular lectures are the easiest to listen to, but Mr. Waldron" (here he beamed and blinked at the lecturer) "will excuse me when I say that they are necessarily both superficial and misleading, since they have to be graded to the comprehension of an ignorant audience." (Ironical cheering.) "Popular lecturers are in their nature parasitic." (Angry gesture of protest from Mr. Waldron.) "They exploit for fame or cash the work which has been done by their indigent and unknown brethren. One smallest new fact obtained in the laboratory, one brick built into the temple of science, far outweighs any second-hand exposition which passes an idle hour, but can leave no useful result behind it. I put forward this obvious reflection, not out of any desire to disparage Mr. Waldron in particular, but that you may not lose your sense of proportion and mistake the acolyte for the high priest." (At this point Mr. Waldron whispered to the chairman, who half rose and said something severely to his water-carafe.) "But enough of this!" (Loud and prolonged cheers.) "Let me pass to some subject of wider interest. What is the particular point upon which I, as an original investigator, have challenged our lecturer's accuracy? It is upon the permanence of certain types of animal life upon the earth. I do not speak upon this subject as an amateur, nor, I may add, as a popular lecturer, but I speak as one whose scientific conscience compels him to adhere closely to facts, when I say that Mr. Waldron is very wrong in supposing that because he has never himself seen a so-called prehistoric animal, therefore these creatures no longer exist. They are indeed, as he has said, our ancestors, but they are, if I may use the expression, our contemporary ancestors, who can still be found with all their hideous and formidable characteristics if one has but the energy and hardihood to seek their haunts. Creatures which were supposed to be Jurassic, monsters who would hunt down and devour our largest and fiercest mammals, still exist." (Cries of "Bosh!" "Prove it!" "How do YOU know?" "Question!") "How do I know, you ask me? I know because I have visited their secret haunts. I know because I have seen some of them."

(Applause, uproar, and a voice, "Liar!") "Am I a liar?" (General hearty and noisy assent.) "Did I hear someone say that I was a liar? Will the person who called me a liar kindly stand up that I may know him?" (A voice, "Here he is, sir!" and an inoffensive little person in spectacles, struggling violently, was held up among a group of students.) "Did you venture to call me a liar?" ("No, sir, no!" shouted the accused, and disappeared like a jack-in-the-box.) "If any person in this hall dares to doubt my veracity, I shall be glad to have a few words with him after the lecture." ("Liar!") "Who said that?" (Again the inoffensive one plunging desperately, was elevated high into the air.) "If I come down among you——" (General chorus of "Come, love, come!" which interrupted the proceedings for some moments, while the chairman, standing up and waving both his arms, seemed to be conducting the music. The Professor, with his face flushed, his nostrils dilated, and his beard bristling, was now in a proper Berserk mood.) "Every great discoverer has been met with the same incredulity—the sure brand of a generation of fools. When great facts are laid before you, you have not the intuition, the imagination which would help you to understand them. You can only throw mud at the men who have risked their lives to open new fields to science. You persecute the prophets! Galileo! Darwin, and I——" (Prolonged cheering and complete interruption.)

All this is from my hurried notes taken at the time, which give little notion of the absolute chaos to which the assembly had by this time been reduced. So terrific was the uproar that several ladies had already beaten a hurried retreat. Grave and reverend seniors seemed to have caught the prevailing spirit as badly as the students, and I saw white-bearded men rising and shaking their fists at the obdurate Professor. The whole great audience seethed and simmered like a boiling pot. The Professor took a step forward and raised both his hands. There was something so big and arresting and virile in the man that the clatter and shouting died gradually away before his commanding gesture and his masterful eyes. He seemed to have a definite message. They hushed to hear it.

"I will not detain you," he said. "It is not worth it. Truth is truth, and the noise of a number of foolish young men—and, I fear I must add, of their equally foolish seniors—cannot affect the matter. I claim that I have opened a new field of science. You dispute it." (Cheers.) "Then I put you to the test. Will you accredit one or more of your own number to go out as your representatives and test my statement in your name?"

Mr. Summerlee, the veteran Professor of Comparative Anatomy, rose among the audience, a tall, thin, bitter man, with the withered aspect of a theologian. He wished, he said, to ask Professor Challenger whether the results to which he had alluded in his remarks had been obtained during a journey to the headwaters of the Amazon made by him two years before.

Professor Challenger answered that they had.

Mr. Summerlee desired to know how it was that Professor Challenger claimed to have made discoveries in those regions which had been overlooked by Wallace, Bates, and other previous explorers of established scientific repute.

Professor Challenger answered that Mr. Summerlee appeared to be confusing the Amazon with the Thames; that it was in reality a somewhat larger river; that Mr. Summerlee might be

interested to know that with the Orinoco, which communicated with it, some fifty thousand miles of country were opened up, and that in so vast a space it was not impossible for one person to find what another had missed.

Mr. Summerlee declared, with an acid smile, that he fully appreciated the difference between the Thames and the Amazon, which lay in the fact that any assertion about the former could be tested, while about the latter it could not. He would be obliged if Professor Challenger would give the latitude and the longitude of the country in which prehistoric animals were to be found.

Professor Challenger replied that he reserved such information for good reasons of his own, but would be prepared to give it with proper precautions to a committee chosen from the audience. Would Mr. Summerlee serve on such a committee and test his story in person?

Mr. Summerlee: "Yes, I will." (Great cheering.)

Professor Challenger: "Then I guarantee that I will place in your hands such material as will enable you to find your way. It is only right, however, since Mr. Summerlee goes to check my statement that I should have one or more with him who may check his. I will not disguise from you that there are difficulties and dangers. Mr. Summerlee will need a younger colleague. May I ask for volunteers?"

It is thus that the great crisis of a man's life springs out at him. Could I have imagined when I entered that hall that I was about to pledge myself to a wilder adventure than had ever come to me in my dreams? But Gladys—was it not the very opportunity of which she spoke? Gladys would have told me to go. I had sprung to my feet. I was speaking, and yet I had prepared no words. Tarp Henry, my companion, was plucking at my skirts and I heard him whispering, "Sit down, Malone! Don't make a public ass of yourself." At the same time I was aware that a tall, thin man, with dark gingery hair, a few seats in front of me, was also upon his feet. He glared back at me with hard angry eyes, but I refused to give way.

"I will go, Mr. Chairman," I kept repeating over and over again.

"Name! Name!" cried the audience.

"My name is Edward Dunn Malone. I am the reporter of the Daily Gazette. I claim to be an absolutely unprejudiced witness."

"What is YOUR name, sir?" the chairman asked of my tall rival.

"I am Lord John Roxton. I have already been up the Amazon, I know all the ground, and have special qualifications for this investigation."

"Lord John Roxton's reputation as a sportsman and a traveller is, of course, world-famous," said the chairman; "at the same time it would certainly be as well to have a member of the Press upon such an expedition."

“Then I move,” said Professor Challenger, “that both these gentlemen be elected, as representatives of this meeting, to accompany Professor Summerlee upon his journey to investigate and to report upon the truth of my statements.”

And so, amid shouting and cheering, our fate was decided, and I found myself borne away in the human current which swirled towards the door, with my mind half stunned by the vast new project which had risen so suddenly before it. As I emerged from the hall I was conscious for a moment of a rush of laughing students—down the pavement, and of an arm wielding a heavy umbrella, which rose and fell in the midst of them. Then, amid a mixture of groans and cheers, Professor Challenger’s electric brougham slid from the curb, and I found myself walking under the silvery lights of Regent Street, full of thoughts of Gladys and of wonder as to my future.

Suddenly there was a touch at my elbow. I turned, and found myself looking into the humorous, masterful eyes of the tall, thin man who had volunteered to be my companion on this strange quest.

“Mr. Malone, I understand,” said he. “We are to be companions—what? My rooms are just over the road, in the Albany. Perhaps you would have the kindness to spare me half an hour, for there are one or two things that I badly want to say to you.”

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter VIII: Olaf's Story

There was a little silence. I looked upon him with wonder. Clearly he was in deepest earnest. I know the psychology of the Gael is a curious one and that deep in all their hearts their ancient traditions and beliefs have strong and living roots. And I was both amused and touched.

Here was this soldier, who had faced war and its ugly realities open-eyed and fearless, picking, indeed, the most dangerous branch of service for his own, a modern if ever there was one, appreciative of most unmystical Broadway, and yet soberly and earnestly attesting to his belief in banshee, in shadowy people of the woods, and phantom harpers! I wondered what he would think if he could see the Dweller and then, with a pang, that perhaps his superstitions might make him an easy prey.

He shook his head half impatiently and ran a hand over his eyes; turned to me and grinned:

"Don't think I'm cracked, Professor," he said. "I'm not. But it takes me that way now and then. It's the Irish in me. And, believe it or not, I'm telling you the truth."

I looked eastward where the moon, now nearly a week past the full, was mounting.

"You can't make me see what you've seen, Lieutenant," I laughed. "But you can make me hear. I've always wondered what kind of a noise a disembodied spirit could make without any vocal cords or breath or any other earthly sound-producing mechanism. How does the banshee sound?"

O'Keefe looked at me seriously.

"All right," he said. "I'll show you." From deep down in his throat came first a low, weird sobbing that mounted steadily into a keening whose mournfulness made my skin creep. And then his hand shot out and gripped my shoulder, and I stiffened like stone in my chair—for from behind us, like an echo, and then taking up the cry, swelled a wail that seemed to hold within it a sublimation of the sorrows of centuries! It gathered itself into one heartbroken, sobbing note and died away! O'Keefe's grip loosened, and he rose swiftly to his feet.

"It's all right, Professor," he said. "It's for me. It found me—all this way from Ireland."

Again the silence was rent by the cry. But now I had located it. It came from my room, and it could mean only one thing—Huldricksson had wakened.

"Forget your banshee!" I gasped, and made a jump for the cabin.

Out of the corner of my eye I noted a look of half-sheepish relief flit over O'Keefe's face, and then he was beside me. Da Costa shouted an order from the wheel, the Cantonese ran up and took it from his hands and the little Portuguese pattered down toward us. My hand on the door, ready to throw it open, I stopped. What if the Dweller were within—what if we had been wrong

and it was not dependent for its power upon that full flood of moon ray which Throckmartin had thought essential to draw it from the blue pool!

From within, the sobbing wail began once more to rise. O'Keefe pushed me aside, threw open the door and crouched low within it. I saw an automatic flash dully in his hand; saw it cover the cabin from side to side, following the swift sweep of his eyes around it. Then he straightened and his face, turned toward the berth, was filled with wondering pity.

Through the window streamed a shaft of the moonlight. It fell upon Huldricksson's staring eyes; in them great tears slowly gathered and rolled down his cheeks; from his opened mouth came the woe-laden wailing. I ran to the port and drew the curtains. Da Costa snapped the lights.

The Norseman's dolorous crying stopped as abruptly as though cut. His gaze rolled toward us. And at one bound he broke through the leashes I had buckled round him and faced us, his eyes glaring, his yellow hair almost erect with the force of the rage visibly surging through him. Da Costa shrunk behind me. O'Keefe, coolly watchful, took a quick step that brought him in front of me.

"Where do you take me?" said Huldricksson, and his voice was like the growl of a beast. "Where is my boat?"

I touched O'Keefe gently and stood before the giant.

"Listen, Olaf Huldricksson," I said. "We take you to where the sparkling devil took your Helma and your Freda. We follow the sparkling devil that came down from the moon. Do you hear me?" I spoke slowly, distinctly, striving to pierce the mists that I knew swirled around the strained brain. And the words did pierce.

He thrust out a shaking hand.

"You say you follow?" he asked falteringly. "You know where to follow? Where it took my Helma and my little Freda?"

"Just that, Olaf Huldricksson," I answered. "Just that! I pledge you my life that I know."

Da Costa stepped forward. "He speaks true, Olaf. You go faster on the Suwarna than on the Br-rw-un'ilda, Olaf, yes."

The giant Norseman, still gripping my hand, looked at him. "I know you, Da Costa," he muttered. "You are all right. Ja! You are a fair man. Where is the Brunhilda?"

"She follow be'ind on a big rope, Olaf," soothed the Portuguese. "Soon you see her. But now lie down an' tell us, if you can, why you tie yourself to your wheel an' what it is that happen, Olaf."

"If you'll tell us how the sparkling devil came it will help us all when we get to where it is, Huldricksson," I said.

On O’Keefe’s face there was an expression of well-nigh ludicrous doubt and amazement. He glanced from one to the other. The giant shifted his own tense look from me to the Irishman. A gleam of approval lighted in his eyes. He loosed me, and gripped O’Keefe’s arm. “Staerk!” he said. “Ja—strong, and with a strong heart. A man—ja! He comes too—we shall need him—ja!”

“I tell,” he muttered, and seated himself on the side of the bunk. “It was four nights ago. My Freda”—his voice shook— “Mine Yndling! She loved the moonlight. I was at the wheel and my Freda and my Helma they were behind me. The moon was behind us and the Brunhilda was like a swanboat sailing down with the moonlight sending her, ja.

“I heard my Freda say: ‘I see a nisse coming down the track of the moon.’ And I hear her mother laugh, low, like a mother does when her Yndling dreams. I was happy—that night—with my Helma and my Freda, and the Brunhilda sailing like a swan-boat, ja. I heard the child say, ‘The nisse comes fast!’ And then I heard a scream from my Helma, a great scream—like a mare when her foal is torn from her. I spun around fast, ja! I dropped the wheel and spun fast! I saw—” He covered his eyes with his hands.

The Portuguese had crept close to me, and I heard him panting like a frightened dog.

“I saw a white fire spring over the rail,” whispered Olaf Huldricksson. “It whirled round and round, and it shone like—like stars in a whirlwind mist. There was a noise in my ears. It sounded like bells—little bells, ja! Like the music you make when you run your finger round goblets. It made me sick and dizzy—the hell noise.

“My Helma was—indeholde—what you say—in the middle of the white fire. She turned her face to me and she turned it on the child, and my Helma’s face burned into my heart. Because it was full of fear, and it was full of happiness—of glaede. I tell you that the fear in my Helma’s face made me ice here”—he beat his breast with clenched hand—”but the happiness in it burned on me like fire. And I could not move—I could not move.

“I said in here”—he touched his head—”I said, ‘It is Loki come out of Helvede. But he cannot take my Helma, for Christ lives and Loki has no power to hurt my Helma or my Freda! Christ lives! Christ lives!’ I said. But the sparkling devil did not let my Helma go. It drew her to the rail; half over it. I saw her eyes upon the child and a little she broke away and reached to it. And my Freda jumped into her arms. And the fire wrapped them both and they were gone! A little I saw them whirling on the moon track behind the Brunhilda—and they were gone!

“The sparkling devil took them! Loki was loosed, and he had power. I turned the Brunhilda, and I followed where my Helma and mine Yndling had gone. My boys crept up and asked me to turn again. But I would not. They dropped a boat and left me. I steered straight on the path. I lashed my hands to the wheel that sleep might not loose them. I steered on and on and on—

“Where was the God I prayed when my wife and child were taken?” cried Olaf Huldricksson—and it was as though I heard Throckmartin asking that same bitter question. “I have left Him as He left me, ja! I pray now to Thor and to Odin, who can fetter Loki.” He sank back, covering

again his eyes.

“Olaf,” I said, “what you have called the sparkling devil has taken ones dear to me. I, too, was following it when we found you. You shall go with me to its home, and there we will try to take from it your wife and your child and my friends as well. But now that you may be strong for what is before us, you must sleep again.”

Olaf Huldricksson looked upon me and in his eyes was that something which souls must see in the eyes of Him the old Egyptians called the Searcher of Hearts in the Judgment Hall of Osiris.

“You speak truth!” he said at last slowly. “I will do what you say!”

He stretched out an arm at my bidding. I gave him a second injection. He lay back and soon he was sleeping. I turned toward Da Costa. His face was livid and sweating, and he was trembling pitiably. O’Keefe stirred.

“You did that mighty well, Dr. Goodwin,” he said. “So well that I almost believed you myself.”

“What did you think of his story, Mr. O’Keefe?” I asked.

His answer was almost painfully brief and colloquial.

“Nuts!” he said. I was a little shocked, I admit. “I think he’s crazy, Dr. Goodwin,” he corrected himself, quickly. “What else could I think?”

I turned to the little Portuguese without answering.

“There’s no need for any anxiety tonight, Captain,” I said. “Take my word for it. You need some rest yourself. Shall I give you a sleeping draft?”

“I do wish you would, Dr. Goodwin, sair,” he answered gratefully. “Tomorrow, when I feel better—I would have a talk with you.”

I nodded. He did know something then! I mixed him an opiate of considerable strength. He took it and went to his own cabin.

I locked the door behind him and then, sitting beside the sleeping Norseman, I told O’Keefe my story from end to end. He asked few questions as I spoke. But after I had finished he cross-examined me rather minutely upon my recollections of the radiant phases upon each appearance, checking these with Throckmartin’s observations of the same phenomena in the Chamber of the Moon Pool.

“And now what do you think of it all?” I asked.

He sat silent for a while, looking at Huldricksson.

“Not what you seem to think, Dr. Goodwin,” he answered at last, gravely. “Let me sleep over it. One thing of course is certain—you and your friend Throckmartin and this man here saw—something. But—” he was silent again and then continued with a kindness that I found vaguely irritating—”but I’ve noticed that when a scientist gets superstitious it—er—takes very hard!

“Here’s a few things I can tell you now though,” he went on while I struggled to speak—”I pray in my heart that we’ll meet neither the Dolphin nor anything with wireless on board going up. Because, Dr. Goodwin, I’d dearly love to take a crack at your Dweller.

“And another thing,” said O’Keefe. “After this—cut out the trimmings, Doc, and call me plain Larry, for whether I think you’re crazy or whether I don’t, you’re there with the nerve, Professor, and I’m for you.

“Good night!” said Larry and took himself out to the deck hammock he had insisted upon having slung for him, refusing the captain’s importunities to use his own cabin.

And it was with extremely mixed emotions as to his compliment that I watched him go. Superstitious. I, whose pride was my scientific devotion to fact and fact alone! Superstitious—and this from a man who believed in banshees and ghostly harpers and Irish wood nymphs and no doubt in leprechauns and all their tribe!

Half laughing, half irritated, and wholly happy in even the part promise of Larry O’Keefe’s comradeship on my venture, I arranged a couple of pillows, stretched myself out on two chairs and took up my vigil beside Olaf Huldricsson.

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