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WEBZINE

VOL. 13, ISSUE 12
22ND JULY 2018

LOBSTER'S REVENGE

BY JESSE
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IN A TAVERN
WE MET...

THE FATE OF KASTENMARK

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UP...

BLOOD THEATRE BY ROB BLISS

REVIEW BY JOHN C ADAMS

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by
Gavin Chappell

PUBLISHED BY:
Schlock! Publications
(www.schlock.co.uk)

Schlock! Webzine

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Jesse Zimmerman, Gregory KH Bryant, Dan Morley, Percy Greg, Cyrano de Bergerac*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 13, Issue 12

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

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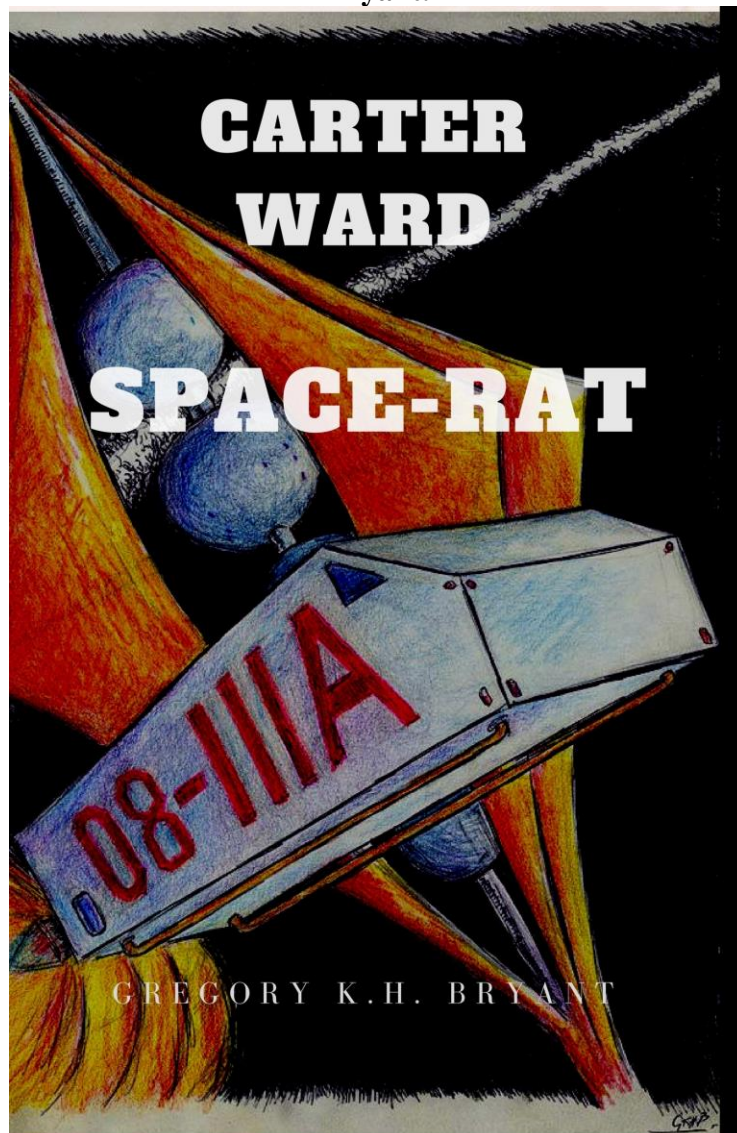
EDITORIAL

This week, Flora, Fauna, and The Challenger all return to face *Lobster's Revenge*. A case of arson is traced to an unexpected source. A beleaguered commander bargains with dark forces. And John C Adams reviews a true life crime book from Truman Capote.

Rob Bliss tells us of an extreme attempt to titilate jaded theatre crowds. Mud searches for Rat. Twilight falls on Mars. And meanwhile, on the Moon, Cyrano de Bergerac is examined by the most learned scientists of the Lunar race.

—Gavin Chappell

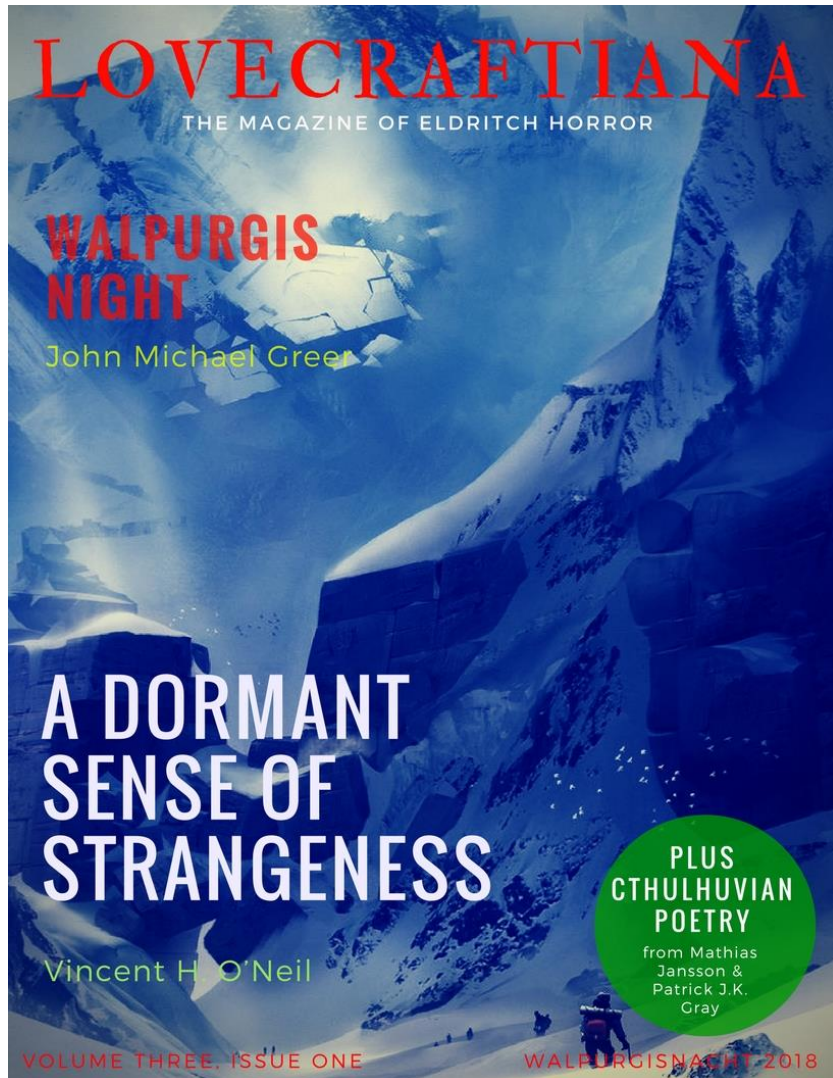
Now available from Schlock! Publications: [Carter Ward—Space Rat](#) by Gregory KH Bryant.



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And the Walpurgisnacht edition of [*Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror*](#).



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LOBSTER'S REVENGE by Jesse Zimmerman

Part One

We stayed at the tree-home of our rescuer, Barpar, for three days, twice as long as we had lodged with Dick Bumpedop. The big, furred man's stories were entertaining, or at least seemed so with his brew of thick, malty, hoppy brown beer. Our three member party endured our latest host's songs and tales while we passed along some of Barpar's herbs from the forest. We are rested and now ready to leave this smoky home. This morning we bade farewell to Barpar and Screech, the giant owl who rescued us from the perilous valley of the hair-necked ones. This mighty bird roosted upon a branch high upon the tree that Barpar calls home, the majestic creature having flown down to us from above the foliage when we emerged from Barpar's front door.

We had set out, us two sisters, weeks ago. In a tavern we met our friend the Challenger, a ranger whom we quickly hired. Our party now continues our trek through the woodlands of the great northeast, my sis running on ahead of us as usual; a wide ancient road between heavily treed ridges is our first pathway of the day. Here the tall grasses and woodland weeds have reclaimed most of the old road, leaving only islands of half-broken bricks that look like pebbles amidst an overflowing river. I opt to tread on the grasses instead. A month ago I would've laughed if someone told me I would ever make this choice. I am used to the smooth roads of my city, not the tough grounds of the wild, but maybe this journey, young as it is, has changed me somewhat.

Fauna hops along the bricks, leaping from one to the other, same as she would pass over the metaphorical overflowing river that I mentioned above. The Challenger stays with me, the 30-something man clearly exhausted from his last two hangovers, his visible eye having been half closed all morning. It is around noon when we take a rest from our walking, seating ourselves along the mossy left side of the cracked road, the ground diving downward into a thicket under our laid out legs. Fauna, my twin as energized as always, refuses to sit, standing near the midpoint of the road, glaring out at the way ahead.

After downing half a flask of water, or something watery, the Challenger turns to me. "I'm hungry," he says, bringing the knapsack Barpar had gifted us off of his back. Our furry rescuer had given us this backpack and filled it with good food; loaves of seedy baked brown bread with cinnamon, salted strips of sirloin, a bushel of giant apples, and a jar of deep orange honey. Barpar had even stitched his name into the gift, just so we'd always remember him. The ranger licks his lips as he takes out a piece of steak and then dips it in the honey jar.

I take out a big dark apple, needing my full hand to clasp it, opening my jaw to take a bit bite—when it flies out from my hands, an arrow shaft emerging in my vision as it plunges through the apple, sending it whizzing through the air and sticking against a thick willow trunk that rises from the ditch.

"Fauna!" I shriek, turning to see my idiot sister with a big grin under her bright red cap, her bow in her hands.

"I'm sorry, sis, just that apple looked so perfect for me!"

“What, red and innocent on the outside but full of worms?” I snap back, not even sure what I mean when I say this.

The Challenger dabs my knuckles with his fist from beside me.

Fauna steps over to the edge of the ditch, leaping to the bottom to reach the tree.

“It’s because of your reckless attitude why we ended up in that so-called Hair-Neck Valley and almost got killed!” I snap at her as she retrieves the apple from the tree and bites into it, taking a tiny piece with her small mouth.

“No worms!” she laughs before tossing the apple to me.

It hits my forehead because I don’t raise my hands in time, leaving a bruise on the apple and on me. “Ouch!”

The three of us eat silently save the Challenger’s slurping and yumming as he gobbles the honeyed steak. When lunch is over, my sister puts on the new backpack as we continue our journey, moving eastward to where the trees suddenly stop, entering an immense golden field. Here the air is exceptionally warm with no breeze to balance things out. As we make our way along a thin trail I notice that the tall grasses on our sides are not so much golden as much as they are dried out and yellowed. Our sojourn under the canopies had so far concealed us from the hot summer sun.

Within moments I feel a layer of nasty sweat running down my forehead, my skin feeling warm as I wipe away the moisture with the back of my hand. I call up to Fauna to pass me a flask of water.

“Wait until we take a break, Flora!” she calls back, ahead as always, her hand on her sword’s hilt, the blade in the scabbard that she keeps at her belt.

The Challenger groans and mumbles something as beads of sweat trickle down his dirty blonde waves of hair. He looks overheated in his jerkin armour, his two belts, and his long green cloak. His blade is also kept a long sheath at his side, slung upon his leather belt. The two of them both have bows and quivers of arrows on their backs. I am relieved, at the least, to not have so many things to carry. All I have is my trusty dagger in my pocket. We lost a bunch of items back in Hair-Neck Valley, including the little scope that Mother gifted me. I don’t look forward to facing her back in the city.

“Ahh,” I say aloud, thinking about home. “I could use a day on the Silver Coast, or inside Mother’s Great Library!”

This immense library is always cool, for there are tunnels that are designed to suck in the air from outside and send it spiralling down long pipes that lead to the chambers, the breeze cooled by tunnels of water that it flows through on the way. Right now I imagine myself reading an old

book, leaning back, drinking from a cup of icy water as I enjoy the calming silence in one of the giant rooms or corridors.

A long hour passes while we make our way through the tall grasses. The landscape stays the same. There are mountains and hills in the distance to the north and east, a half a day's trek perhaps, and beyond the field I can see woodlands again, thick forests that we should be in soon.

"Trees!" the Challenger shouts as he too notices them. "We got to get back under shade!"

"You guys really hate the heat, aye?" Fauna asks, waiting for us to catch up to her, hands on her hips, a typical adventurous grin on her face. A green dragonfly buzzes past her. She moves to swap at it but misses, the long-bodied bug speeding past her. My sis charges after it, pulling out her bow as she runs, loading an arrow. The Challenger and I just shrug and take off after her. We run ahead a short distance, coming to a creek (a real one, not a metaphorical one) with a shore of dry mud and sand.

We peer over at dark green water, its surface covered in thick peat. "I bet it's deeper than it looks," says the Challenger, pointing his hand at the width of the river, which looks two times too wide to leap across even for my sister.

"Wait a sec," says Fauna, pulling back her bowstring. "I think I got it."

Just as she is about to lose the arrow at the dragonfly that now rests upon a particularly tall cattail, a red long thing flings up from beneath the water and snatches it. We see a pair of olive green lips emerge from the creek, realizing that the dragonfly had been grabbed by a tongue.

"Ew," says Fauna as a toad that must be as large as a medium-sized dog raises its head above the water, chewing loudly before belching louder than any person I've ever heard.

At my side The Challenger laughs and says: "Alright then, how to cross?"

Scanning the far side of the dank creek, I begin to say something when my sister backtracks a few steps before charging and then leaping from the edge of the creek, her feet landing nimbly upon the big toad's head before jumping again and flipping in the air, landing perfectly upon the far shore.

"She's such a show-off," mutters the Challenger. "I can do that, probably."

The toad in the middle of the creek seems annoyed. It raises its bulbous head, opens its lips, and lets loose its mighty tongue, aiming directly at Fauna, who is in the process of turning about. The tongue latches onto the knapsack with all our food. She cries out, falling back, landing on her butt on the dry mud of the far shore.

The ranger at my side grabs his bow in haste; lining up an arrow just as the knapsack flings off of my sister's back, splashing green-brown water as it lands atop the toad's face, and then both sink into the gloopy water. By the time the Challenger shoots the arrow the toad has vanished into the

deep water.

“Ah!” Fauna shouts, cursing a few words I never heard her say. “That’s our food! We need to find it! Kill that toad!”

A series of big bubbles rises to the surface of the spot where the knapsack sank. Another loud belch rings out. And then something splashes, flies out of the water, landing beside Fauna. It’s the knapsack; the one Barpar gifted us (his name is stitched into its side).

Fauna sighs really loud in relief, grabbing the now slimy bag, forcing it open. “Hey! The toad ate all the food!”

The Challenger loads another arrow. Fauna grabs her bow off of her torso and does the same. They both let loose about five arrows each before I yell at them. “Stop it! You’re wasting arrows!”

“Kill the toad!” my sister cries angrily.

“Slice its belly!” my ranger friend agrees.

“Get our food!”

“Do you really want to eat the food after it’s been inside that thing?” I ask.

They both stop. My sister continues swearing. I look away, sighting a wooden bridge down the creek, cursing a bit myself as I realize if we’d just looked around when we came to the water we’d still have our food.

We cross the bridge soon after, meeting Fauna at the other side before continuing towards the now close-by woodlands.

“What’re we going to do?” Fauna asks as we get into the shade of the first few trees, finding a thin trail to tread upon for now.

“I’m hungry already,” moans the Challenger, rubbing his finely chiselled abs under his jerkin.

“You can catch us something as you always do,” I tell him. “Great Challenger of the Wilderlands they called you right?”

He nods, gazing about, taking off down a smaller trail, telling us to go ahead while he catches something, only to meet us further down without any food. He tells us he saw a mother deer and a fawn, but thought they were too cute to eat, as well as a few skunks that he was too hesitant to eat lest we bite into its stinky parts. The skilled hunter promises to get us something later.

We continue on our way, our quest to have another quest proceeding, the forest pathway widening, forking at some points as we keep to the north and east. While we move I look about

the trees and bushes for apples, pears, or berries, finding nothing but leaves and buds, nothing I can eat. At one point, as the three of us are walking side by side, we hear a deep, low grumbling noise. Thinking a ferocious beast is near, we all prepare our weapons, only to realize it was the Challenger's belly.

I am beginning to feel hungry too. We last ate in the morning by that ditch and dusk is now approaching. Soon we come to a high point, the forest floor having run uphill most of the afternoon. Here there are only a few short trees, this place relatively clear, almost a clearing, and we can see the treetops ahead and below us where the pathway plunges downward again. A short way away we see a single pillar of smoke rising from between the canopies, a sweet roasting smell accompanying it.

"A camp!" Fauna shouts, pointing.

"And they're cooking something nice!" the Challenger adds, licking his lips. "Although I wouldn't count on them sharing."

"No?" I ask. "Why not?"

He chuckles a bit, rubbing his belly. "You don't know wandering folks so much as I do. Some have great hospitality, sure. But others would slay you for asking for food."

"We'll see," says Fauna.

"I say we take the food," says the ranger, shaking his head. "Why risk a fight?"

"We can't do that!" I say.

"Yeah!" agrees my sister. "I already told you we're a force for good in this world."

"And I told you I'm—"

"Yeah, yeah, neutral and chaotic!" both us sisters snap at once, to which the Challenger nods.

We descend the path cautiously, our soft boots making barely any noise, the succulent smell getting more intense when we get closer. Fauna points out a pair of prints in the earthen trail, pointed toes looking more like a beast than a man, but clearly the work of two feet rather than four. The Challenger says "Kobolds," under his breath and retrieves his sword from his scabbard.

I groan.

Eventually, as the scent becomes stronger than ever, we hear voices. They are deep, guttural, masculine voices. The three of us slink along the now narrow trail, finding ourselves on a ridge overlooking a camp. The fire burns intensely in a clearing down the way, a thick pair of bushes concealing us as we peer down at a pair of two-legged creatures. They resemble the kobolds we saw back in the valley, furry and rat-like, dressed in red mail armour, though they are nearly the

size of a person, and their snouts look longer, their faces almost dog-like compared to the smaller kobolds we saw days prior. They hold in their hands long iron-tipped spears, and both of them are facing away from the fire.

“What are they?” I whisper to the Challenger as the three of us huddle in the little space upon the overlooking ridge. He shakes his head, his one unpatched eye looking confused. At his hands his blade is ready, while my sister prepares her bow.

And then I take a better look at the fire. There is a big slab of gigantic meat on it, part of it blackened and crispy, the other part facing upward from the fire sweet and juicy-looking. Behind the flames, where the larger-than-usual kobolds are not looking, runs a trail beyond a wall of massive tree trunks.

“No, let’s not,” I say, wanting to be cautious. “We can get food elsewhere.”

The Challenger shakes his head again.

“Let me go,” says Fauna. “I can grab it. I’m small.”

“No,” says the Challenger.

“Why, because you’re a man? You sound like Slug-Lord,” Fauna hisses at him, but it’s too late. The Challenger has already parted us, making his way down the ridge towards the trail that leads to the rear of the camp.

Fauna grunts, pulling back her bow, ready to cover for him. We see him, sneaking through the back trail; his arms sprawled out at his side, each step he takes gingerly, gazing at the two kobold guards. They stand side to side, leaning slightly against their spears which they hold before them upright, still gazing away from him.

“Mmm,” one of them mutters, the one on the left, then says: “I’m starving, I am!”

“Ah! Quit your whining, worm!” returns the other. “Captain says we ain’t taking food until ‘e and the others are back! Those are our orders!”

The first of them grunts in reply. “Starving I am!” he shouts. “Oh, just a little piece, guv?”

“Shut your rat mouth!” snaps the second. “Is you still a kobold, or did Master make you a proper alphabold like the rest of us? Stand straight, mate, shoulders back like Master says, lest you be a snivelling cuck!”

The first one snarls angrily, but says nothing more.

The Challenger steps on a twig that snaps loudly. I see him grimace as both kobolds (or “alphabolds”) turn about. One thing I have to tell you about the Challenger is that he always tries to make it seem like he is in control of the situation, even when—especially when—he totally

isn't, and he always has a snarky line ready.

The ranger sees that he is spotted and straightens, saying boldly: "Looking for me, boys?"

The two creatures grab their spears firmly and run over to the Challenger, one on each side. Fauna curses at my side. I try to stay calm, tapping Fauna's shoulder, noticing a large wasp nest hanging from a tree branch above them. My sis raises her bow slightly.

"Eh, who are you?" asks the more aggressive of the two, shoving the tip of his spear an inch from the Challenger's chest.

"No one," says the ranger, putting both hands up while still clutching his sword.

"No one? Aye, that be your name then?" says the first of them, the snivelling one.

"Sure."

"We got No One, we does!"

"Quiet your bloomin' snout!" says the second. "Eh, we's got a prisoner 'ere! A prisoner for Master! Oh, he'll make us the first alphabolds, he will!"

The first of them then grins, his front teeth pointed and yellow. The Challenger shakes his head, waves his sword about for a split second, and then ducks. The second kobold shoves his spear forward, missing the Challenger's head by a half a foot, the end of his spear plunging into the chest of the first kobold.

"Ah!" the snivelling creature cries out, grabbing the spear shaft. "I thought we was friends I did!"

Fauna shoots.

"Get here, you twit!" the surviving kobold guard shouts as his companion falls over and dies promptly. The Challenger leaps backwards, dodging the proceeding spear thrusts.

"Ow!" shrieks the kobold as the wasp nest lands on his head. "Ouch! They're stinging me!"

The Challenger sees his chance and he takes it, striking his blade hard against the foe, bringing him down into a bloodied mass at his feet. He cheers. I pat Fauna's shoulder and we both laugh.

And then the clearing our friend stands in erupts with furred bodies, all clad in the red armour as the first two kobolds. I count quickly, gasping as I tally nearly a dozen of them. The Challenger's eye goes wild. He looks ready to begin slashing, and I know he can likely still win here, but a great net is flung from one of the big kobolds, trapping him instantly. The many furry bodies move in, tie up the net, take his sword, and then clamber on through the woods, grabbing the meat off the fire as they move, all vanishing as quickly as they came down the trail.

My sister and I exchange fearful looks. She mouths the words: “What do we do?”

The Challenger is alive but taken by the enemy.

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INVENTION OF THE PENCIL CASE by Steve Laker

The strangest lunch I ever had was with a veterinary doctor, and it was the meal which finally turned me vegetarian. I should note at the start, we didn't eat any domestic pets.

I first met Dr Hannah Jones when we worked on a film together, and we'd remained friends since. We'd meet up every now and then, I'd tell her stories from the writing world and she'd give me ideas from her field of science. It was Hannah who'd suggested we meet, as she said she had something important for me.

We met at a pop-up cafe at the Camden end of Regent's Park. It was an indifferent day weather wise, unable to decide what it wanted to do. We sat outside nonetheless, as we both like to people-watch: me making up stories of what people in the park might be away from that setting, Hannah priding herself on identifying the bits of cross-breeds and mongrels, and sometimes scoring the dogs' humans on parts of their anatomy.

The Camden end of the park is quieter nowadays, and at one point on that particular Saturday, we counted only sixteen legs besides our own. It's been that way since the last fire at the zoo, and that's what Hannah said she wanted to tell me about. But first we ordered food. I went for a rare steak with fries, and Hannah chose a vegetarian pizza.

The cafe backed on to the old zoo, now a construction site. The distant sound of hammers and saws competed with the clatter of dishes from the cafe, which was quite arresting. The animals' former home was being demolished in the background, while I was waiting for part of a former animal to arrive before me. So I turned to Hannah, and asked her what she wanted to tell me. Something she'd been working on perhaps, some veterinary breakthrough, or anything I might use as a story?

"You remember the first fire," Hannah said, "and the cause was unknown?" She didn't have to remind me. The London Zoo fire of 2017 killed four meerkats and Mischa the aardvark, and the cause of the blaze was never made public. I nodded. "Well," she continued, "some colleagues of mine found out what started the latest one." Many more had perished in the great fire of 2020, and there was extensive structural damage. Most of the remaining exhibits had been moved to other zoos, and all who remained were the rarest and most threatened in the wild. Our food arrived and suddenly, char-grilled animal wasn't terribly appetising.

"So what was it?" I asked, as Hannah chewed righteously on her veggie pizza.

"The kind of thing," she said, "that is never likely to be made public."

"So why would you tell me?"

"Because you're a fiction writer. If you write it, no-one will believe you." I wasn't sure how to take that, but I smiled nonetheless as I ate a fry.

"Go on then," I prompted. Hannah looked at my steak.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?”

“It doesn’t have the same sort of appeal it once had,” I said.

“But that’s such a waste.” She was right. “Such a shame that not only does someone have to die to feed you, but their selfless act is unappreciated and their sacrifice goes to waste.” She had a point. “And pity the poor chef, cooking that for you, only to have it returned like there’s something wrong with it.” The only thing wrong was me eating it. As I chewed reluctantly, Hannah told me the story of the great fire.

“I’ve got a friend who was in the forensics team. She told me this, and she told me not to tell anyone.”

“So you’re telling me,” I said, “because if I write about it, no-one will believe it.”

“But you’ll believe me,” she replied. “So, after the fire brigade put out the fire, they identified the seat of the blaze, in a pile of hay.”

“Someone’s bed?” I wondered. “Did it catch in the sun?”

“No,” Hannah replied, “it was deliberate.”

“Arson. Why?”

“We don’t know if it was. It started in the mountain gorilla area.”

“Someone threw a lighter in?” I imagined it wouldn’t take a gorilla long to work out how a lighter worked.

“No,” Hannah said again. “It was all enclosed in strengthened glass.”

“A keeper dropped a lighter?”

“Nope.” She was getting quite smug now, knowing what I didn’t. I tried again.

“So maybe the sun did start it, like the magnifying glass effect.”

“All of the above remained possibilities for a while, and that’s how it’ll remain on the public record. Just like the first one: cause unknown.”

“So what do you know which no-one else does, including me?”

“This.” She unfolded a sheet of paper, a photo, and handed it to me. It was like a scenes of crime picture: little plastic signs with numbers on, dotted around the ground, and an arrow pointing to a singled spot of earth about the size of a dinner plate. “That’s the seat of the fire.”

“And this is inside the gorilla enclosure?”

“Yes. Where this came from.” Hannah rummaged in her bag, then handed me something rolled in newspaper. “It’s what’s inside.”

Inside was a piece of dried wood about the size of a pencil case, with a small crater burned into the centre.

“What the...” I didn’t finish.

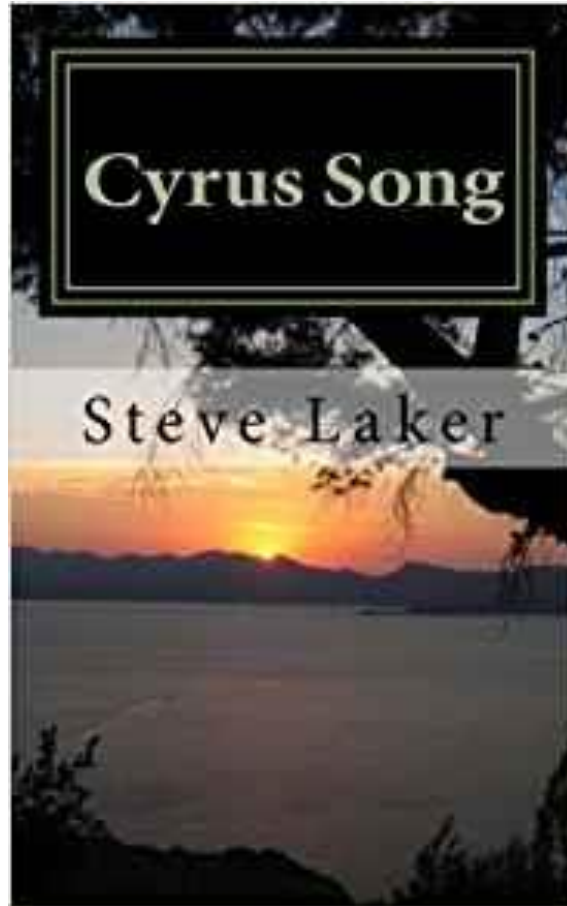
“Hold on,” Hannah said, “there’s this as well.” She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out what looked like a burnt pencil. I knew by now what it really was, and it had a much bigger story to tell. It seemed somehow poetic to write it down, lest anyone hear, so I used the charred, sharpened end:

THEY DISCOVERED FIRE?

Hannah nodded.

THE END

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THE FATE OF KASTENMARK by Dan Morley

Jess Quillon huddled beneath the balcony, stifling a yawn as it dripped rainwater onto her cowl. The house was abandoned, rotten and failing like the rest of Kastenmark. Nevertheless, it shielded her from the night's cold drizzle whilst she waited. The alchemical glow of the Kastenworks outlined sparse buildings made jagged by earthquakes and battle. Even through the oily scarf over her nose and mouth, the stink of decay made Quillon grimace.

'A fine place to meet,' she said to her squire as she kicked a rotting corpse, one of many that lay scattered between the town and its breached outer wall. 'What's wrong with the gatehouse?'

Her squire's scavenged mail shirt buried him, and the rings were bent where an obsidia's limbs had pierced its former owner. The broken supply lines wore at him and his face was gaunt from malnourishment. 'Apologies, Captain, but our associate insisted.'

'He's also late. Who have you dragged me from my sheets to meet, Ethan? I'm mustering a defence, not smuggling *ghafrii* across Rathenmire.'

'Allies are hard to find, Captain.' He coughed weakly, grasping the house's crumbling plaster for stability.

Quillon shot him a glare. 'I know they're hard to find. I've spent these last weeks burying them.' She surveyed the devastation wrought by earthquakes and battle and cooled her tongue. He was doing his duty just as she did hers. Once upon a time, they used to laugh together, until the crushing responsibility of holding the Kastenworks, tired and battered, and losing countless friends, had shortened her temper. 'But I'll take what help I can get.'

A hunched figure approached from the Kastenworks. Cloaked with his cowl up, and leaning on a staff, he stopped before them and dipped his head. Rot blackened his teeth and thin, straggly hair whipped about his face. Hardly the mercenary she had in mind.

'Who is this?' Quillon snapped.

'You said we're desperate,' Ethan stammered. 'You said—'

'I need someone to put these besieging things in their graves, not someone who's ready for his own.' She regarded the stranger. 'Apologies, old man, but my squire is an idiot. Go back to bed.'

'I'm stronger than I look,' the man said, grinning.

The wind and rain bothered him little and his posture was relaxed, though much of his weight rested on his staff.

Quillon stepped from her shelter and looked him over. She made no effort to hide her derision. Always, she watched the breached wall. The obsidia had not struck at night before but she knew little about them and was not about to assume they never would.

‘No doubt you are, but I need fighters.’ She lifted his free arm by its sleeve and let it drop. ‘Can you join a shield wall and hold the line against a charge?’

He stood, allowing her to perform her checks, manhandling him, shaking him from his hunched stance. If he took affront, he made no indication.

‘No.’

‘Can you draw a bow?’ Quillon continued. ‘Can your ancient eyes even spot an obsidia before it caves in your skull?’

‘No, and probably not, Captain Jess Quillon.’ He leaned against his staff, the corners of his mouth upturned.

Quillon groaned. ‘If you want to get yourself killed, I won’t stop you, but you’re no use to me. I’m sorry, old man.’ She frowned as her brain caught up with her mouth. ‘Wait. How do you come by my name?’ She eyed her squire but the young man shook his head.

A pale glow bloomed within the stranger’s cloak. It illuminated his drawn features, his hooked nose and wide, crooked smile. ‘I don’t expect you to hire me for my appearance, Captain.’

‘A wizard?’ Quillon perked up.

He shuffled closer. ‘Is that, perhaps, of use to you?’

The wizard’s demeanour chilled Quillon, making her want to recoil. Discipline stayed her feet though the feel of him repelled her and his fragile frame disgusted her.

‘That depends on your skills,’ she said, putting her feelings aside and trusting to duty. ‘I’ll need something more tangible than lights and guessing names.’

‘Tangible.’ The wizard backed away and raised his staff. His face retreated into the depths of his cowl.

Hoarfrost spread glistening spider webs across the house. Cold seeped into Quillon. Already foul, the charnel stink of Kastenmark’s outskirts intensified, bringing tears to Quillon’s eyes, tears that froze on her face.

The wizard’s staff shone, bathing the cracked earth and bodies around him in pale light. Movement caught Quillon’s peripherals. A corpse’s arm twitched near her feet.

Not a human corpse, but an obsidia. The limb looked mostly human, though chipped and cracked like stone, and discoloured, dark like obsidian. Red veins forked across its hardened skin, along with sharp growths like flint blades on the forearms and elbows. Around the wizard’s feet, the grass withered and blackened.

‘What have you done?’ Quillon growled at her squire. She went for the blade at her waist. ‘Who have you brought here?’

The squire retreated, gaping in terror. ‘He said he was a wizard! I assumed... Any help, you said!’

The feel of her sword hilt bolstered Quillon against her creeping fear. She sprang towards the wizard but her blade stuck, its guard and scabbard rimed in frost. It didn’t matter. She still had her hands and her target was weak.

Before completing two strides, something grasped her ankle and pulled her to the ground. Struggling against the grip and intense cold spreading through her leg, she dared a glance. A dead man’s hand held her.

More corpses stirred; men, women and obsidia. Their movements were stunted and awkward but soon they stood in their varied states of decay. They formed ranks in front of the wizard, carrying notched weapons and shields, but did not attack. The grip on her ankle released.

The wizard stepped forwards and Ethan fled. His wails disappeared into the streets, leaving Quillon to face the dark magic alone. She glared after the craven fool before standing and facing what he had brought upon them. She reached for the warhammer at her back but a shadow draped over her and she met the wizard’s glassy, grey eyes.

‘Don’t you recognise me?’ he asked. ‘We kissed once, outside The Anchor. You’d sprained your ankle, having slipped on the mossy steps.’

The Anchor. That Yrnist waterfront inn had been closed for years but she remembered the young man she’d met there and this wasn’t him. Quillon grimaced, casting her mind back. Life before the earthquakes and obsidia seemed ages gone. ‘You’re mistaken, old man. Whatever tricks you employ to know these things, I would recognise Corrus to this day.’

‘Would you really?’ For the first time, his smile seemed genuine. ‘I employ no tricks. You call me old, but I am no older than you, Jess.’

Quillon studied him warily, still watching the dead and the breach. None of them approached. His voice sounded familiar, if more gravelly than she remembered Corrus. His face was far too old but definitely resembled him, perhaps his grandfather. But his grandfather was long dead.

‘Corrus took my weight all the way home that day,’ she said. ‘What happened to him?’

In answer, he gestured to a dozen reanimated corpses. ‘I cannot withstand a charge of...did you call them obsidia? But I can raise a regiment who can. And another to counter that charge.’

Though the wizard spoke no command, the human dead tightened their ranks and raised their shields. Dead obsidia lurched around them, their movements lumbering.

Corrus' chill went beyond the frost upon the ground and on Quillon's clothing. It crept inside her.

'No,' she spat. 'Not if Kastenmark were falling around me.'

'Kastenmark is falling,' Corrus gestured to the breach. 'Your enemy is strong. Would you rather it struck the living or the dead?'

Quillon took a breath and tiredness weighed her down. This conversation shouldn't have drained her. The obsidia would be amassing for another assault at dawn. She already heard her garrison rousing throughout the streets. There wasn't nearly enough clamour for what they'd face. She glanced to the Kastenworks and the purple glow lining its window shutters, still running day and night despite all other civilians evacuating. Over a hundred people had died to keep it running.

'What's your price?' Quillon forced through gritted teeth.

'I want all the manors between the East Road and the Evendawn Bridge, along with fourteen thousand crowns.'

'Fourteen thousand? That's more than I pay the entire garrison.'

'You have precious little garrison left.' Corrus spread his arms and smiled, rotten and sickly. She wanted to punch it off. 'That is my price.'

Allowing the obsidia to level the place might be cheaper, if not for the Kastenworks. The garrison could retreat faster than the enemy and dig in at Yrnist's fortified manors. Assuming the road was clear. No messengers had returned after sending the civilians that way, and no reinforcements. But while she lived, Quillon defended Kastenmark.

Her only option, however—a gravestirrer—distressed her. If he was Corrus, he was once gallant. After turning to necromancy, could he still be a good man? Were dark magic Quillon's only talent to perform her duty, she wondered what she'd do.

With a deep sigh, she nodded. 'The property I can give only while Kastenmark is under my control, then you must relinquish it. If that's acceptable, we have a deal, Corrus Gravestirrer.'

'Gravestirrer?' Corrus laughed. 'We fight with the weapons we have. You can relate to that, can you not? Return here in one hour to prepare. Then we take the fight to the obsidia.'

'Attack them?'

Weeks on the back foot had strangled any thought of retaliation. At best, she intended to hold out another week, but to eradicate the threat altogether, that would earn her renown indeed. Peering into Corrus' sunken eyes still troubled her. She suspected a higher price than their agreement.

‘Naturally,’ the wizard said. ‘I don’t want my new property to become damaged in the fighting.’ He cackled. ‘And either we attack or they keep coming.’

Corrus muttered to himself and the light on his staff died. The animated corpses dropped to the ground, lifeless once again.

‘What happened?’ Quillon asked.

‘Giving life isn’t free. These puppets follow simple commands only but it still drains me. I give life to animate theirs and I’d rather give no more than I have to, especially on demonstrations. Yes, my price is high, but the cost to my life is higher. That is a finite currency.’

‘You sacrifice your own lifespan for this?’ She scarcely believed that someone would consider it a fair arrangement.

‘Amongst other things. Like the grass you see withering, but my life is significantly more potent.’

He had mentioned nothing of giving other lives. If he could take life from the grass, could he also transfer it from another person?

‘I see your reluctance.’ He surveyed the ruined buildings, scattered rubble and bodies. ‘The enemy has breached your walls. Ask yourself, Captain, how much do you want to defend your town?’

Quillon grunted. She’d done what she could. Perhaps he was the Corrus she knew, merely adapting to this changing world with the only craft he had. Even so, foreboding sickened her, and so did the thought of what that young man had become.

‘Gather your soldiers and bring me two carts. You won’t like this.’

Quillon found Ethan cowering in the deserted Gatehouse Inn. He stared at her from the corner, stinking of spirits.

‘Remove your armour,’ Quillon said.

At his hesitation, she sharpened her tone. ‘Now.’

‘Captain, I...’ He shrank away then removed his mail shirt.

‘I’m not your captain. Flee like a civilian and you’ll be treated like one. The others have left for Yrnist. I suggest you catch them up.’ She turned on her heel and made for the exit. It was hard, but so was their enemy. The only way she thought to beat them was to become harder than they, even when it tore her heart to treat loyalty this way.

Hurried footsteps followed. As Quillon reached the door, she paused at Ethan's call.

'Captain, I'm sorry. Don't send me away. Please.'

Quillon stepped into the night. The breeze cooled her temper. 'Find some courage that isn't bottled and follow me.'

She led him to the yard behind the inn and cleared a pile of debris from a hand cart. 'Bring that.'

Empty cart rattling behind, they wound through the streets until they met soldiers on the edge of town. The wizard hobbled between them, occasionally gesturing to the ground before a soldier bundled something onto a laden cart.

At Quillon's direction, Ethan rested his own cart by a pile of corpses which the soldiers soon hefted on top. The squire retched. Atop the pile, Quillon regarded the dead eyes of Sylus who fell two days past. It hadn't occurred to her until now. These were her soldiers, people she'd fought alongside. She buried her guilt, knowing what the wizard planned for him. As she closed Sylus' eyes, silencing their accusation, another of her warriors, Garrion, sidled closer.

'This is going too far, Captain.'

She guided him away from the others. 'If there's another option, tell me,' she hissed. 'Anything. We asked for aid. It came. It died.'

Garrion glowered at her. 'Better Kastenmark falls than this. Better we leave it undefended or die defending it.'

'That's not your choice,' Quillon said, harsher than she intended. Responsibility fell to her to hold Kastenmark and the luxury of choosing her means of doing so had passed. She suppressed her temper. 'Sylus guarded you in life. He'd guard you in death.'

'And should I die?' Garrion pressed. 'Would you make me guard you too?'

She held his gaze. 'I expect you to use me the same way.'

Quillon realised she meant it. The obsidia had attacked without warning or explanation following a string of tremors. She'd watched friends die, suffered hunger and injury. It left her not just with her duty but a venomous hatred for the creatures that could be satisfied only with their obliteration. From beyond the grave if required. She relaxed her gripped fists and sent Garrion back to work.

He obeyed, casting her a dark glance. Like most of the other soldiers, a military pick hung from his waist, belted over a mail shirt. Few still carried swords as the tough skin of the obsidia turned their edges away. Some had warhammers strapped to their backs with a heavy, flat pane on one side of the head and an armour-piercing beak the other.

Another corpse gave Quillon pause. An obsidia. She recognised him. Though his skin was rough and black, and red veins forked along his limbs, the quartermaster from the Riverfork shield fort retained his baby-faced features. She went to touch his rough cheek then withdrew her hand. It wasn't the time for sentiment.

'Gravestirrer,' Quillon said. When the wizard neared, she gestured along the Fiorren Road, from where the obsidia attacks came. 'I would be through with this.'

'It will do,' he said, surveying the two laden carts. Most were obsidia but a few soldiers from Quillon's garrison showed through the pile. 'There will always be more. Bring them to the menhir a mile along the road.'

Before they set off, Quillon summoned her squire. 'Ethan, remain here and prepare for a Final Spite order.'

He blinked at her. 'The Kastenworks?'

Quillon nodded. 'Last resort.'

As Ethan scurried into the Kastenworks, Quillon and Corrus walked behind the soldiers and their cargo on the Fiorren Road. She squared her shoulders and repeated the word, duty, in her mind. It failed to quell her hate and guilt. Seeing so few soldiers troubled her further. The entire garrison marched. If they failed, Kastenmark fell.

Corrus said nothing until he signalled their halt near a menhir overlooking Three Stones village. Earthquakes had reduced most of the buildings to rubble. He bade Quillon join him but silenced her with a finger to his thin, grey lips.

In the dawn half-light they watched figures moving dazed around the village. Others lumbered in from the surrounding hills with the slow, heavy gait of obsidia. There were at least a hundred.

'It's about time you told me what you know about these obsidia,' Quillon whispered. While confusion remained in the village, she could still retreat to Kastenmark.

'I remember you as intense but never so serious. Have the years changed you?'

Quillon fixed him a flat stare. 'I have thirty warriors who live or die by my next order, and a knife at your gut if you don't speak plainly.' She pressed her blade against him, enough to pierce his robe. His rotten smile made her want to drive it in to the hilt. She considered the dead obsidia that she recognised. 'It's not a disease. We've been in too much contact with their blood to remain unaffected.'

He cleared his throat. 'It has a touch of magic about it, but nothing conventional. This feels...primal. I fought them at Yrnist.'

Quillon's guts churned. Yrnist. She'd sent hundreds of civilians there. That the wizard survived suggested it stood, though she knew nothing of the circumstances under which he left it.

'Something in the village is organising them,' Corrus continued. 'Watch how they're drawn to the standing stones in the square and how they become more purposeful when they reach them. They'll attack soon. The dead will take their charge, standing between the obsidia and Kastenmark. Your warriors are our hammer stroke, Jess.'

'Captain Quillon,' she snapped. 'You proved this at Yrnist?'

The wizard stood. 'Quickly. They're moving. Keep out of sight while they march and then sweep in behind. Once they're between the corpse piles, I'll spring the trap. Like you, Captain, they fully commit to their course.'

With a grunt, Quillon joined her warriors, ignoring his comment. The wizard's plan invited ruin. She wouldn't commit everyone to a single attack, leaving him alone behind them. Instead, she surveyed the outcroppings and hills on either side of the road. She selected a handful of her fastest, most reliable fighters and bid them join her. The rest, she set to unloading the carts and spacing the dead in clusters along the road.

Some obsidia formed a loose regiment and stomped along the road to Kastenmark while more organised before following. Moving in a low crouch, Quillon and her chosen few skirted the hill, out of sight. It helped to keep moving. It stopped her thoughts of desecrating her dead comrades with grave magic and worrying over her alliance. It was much easier to lash out than reconcile a land in chaos.

They approached the village from the west, away from the road. Timber and rubble lay strewn through the streets, jutting from cracks in the earth. A few obsidia surrounded the standing stones while another six formed a regiment on the Fiorren Road.

'What now?' Garrion asked.

'There's a break in the obsidia coming in,' Quillon said. 'When these form up with the regiment, we'll see what's so important about those stones.'

The ground rumbled and the gathered obsidia stood straighter. They shook off their daze and joined the regiment as Quillon predicted, then marched on Kastenmark.

The wind brought a sudden chill, signalling that the wizard's ambush had sprung. Quillon glanced back as corpses rose either side of the first wave of obsidia. With the creatures trapped, the Kastenmark garrison sprang from behind rocks beside the road and smashed the creatures down with pick and hammer before melting into the rocks again ready for the next regiment.

'Now!' Quillon hissed and her group dashed into the village.

As they reached the standing stones, a noise like crashing rocks sent Quillon reeling, along with

her warriors. Steadying herself, Quillon approached the stones, studying their dark surfaces up to their jagged tops.

She touched one of the swirled markings on the stones and a tremor shook the village. In a rolling thunderclap, the ground rippled like water, throwing her warriors from their feet. Springing back upright, Quillon raised her guard and gaped at the stones. They moved with such violence that smaller rocks pelted her like hail. The stones swung around, forming a great beast of rock that tore itself from the earth.

It roared like a landslide and crushed the warrior to Quillon's left under its heavy leg. It stood almost humanoid in form, but twice the width of Quillon's most sturdy warrior and half again their height. Veins of metal glittered across the beast as they caught glimpses of sunlight.

Quillon's battle-hardened warriors countered but only chipped fragments of rock. It swiped again and smashed a warrior into a crevice. The man hung there, suspended by a jagged timber frame that punched through his chest. Quillon reformed her chosen and attacked in unison, giving their huge adversary too many targets. They darted in with quick strikes, chipping rock and metal. They landed countless hits for every one the beast managed. But such heavy blows killed every time. First Hussman, then Elsin. Quin went down in a red spray from a kick to her chest.

'Fall back!' Quillon called.

Two survivors fled along the road to Kastenmark. Shaking ground warned of pursuit. Faster than the beast, they picked their way through dozens of fallen obsidia where Corrus and the garrison had done bloody work, and joined battle with obsidia at the fourth and final line of awakened dead. Her garrison fared poorly. Worse, the obsidia coming in from the hills sped closer as though drawn to the rocky giant.

Once pick or warhammer punctured their thick hide, obsidia bled like humans. But Quillon's momentum dwindled, for the remaining obsidia used greater numbers to close them in. It became a brutal melee, difficult to swing a weapon. Penned in, Quillon drove her dagger into one, snapping the blade in a craggy shoulder. A rocky growth splintered off the creature and grazed Quillon's cheek. She snarled and weaved between the fighting to bring her hammer to bear.

More obsidia surged into the fray, driving them back to Kastenmark.

'Part,' Corrus croaked from the back. He swept his staff low, pale light shining on the fallen. Twenty stirred to life.

Just as relief flooded Quillon, the light on his staff winked out.

'No,' he breathed, his attention fixed on the pursuing giant. 'You left me once, Jess Quillon. Consider us even.'

The stirring dead collapsed while the awakened corpses already fighting covered Corrus' retreat. Obsidia closed around Quillon while more continued to Kastenmark.

Everywhere Quillon looked, she saw death and failure. Her warriors dying, Kastenmark being destroyed, and no sign of reinforcement. She raged at Corrus' betrayal, and at the land which rose against her. Her eyes bulged as she channelled desperation and anger into a primal cry. Garrion nodded to her, his teeth and face streaked with blood, the same fury in his expression.

They attacked together. While Quillon's hammer swung wide, Garrion became a whirlwind of pick and shield. They cleared enough space to retreat.

'Back!' Quillon yelled. 'Back to the breach!'

The wall funnelled the obsidia into twos and threes where the garrison fought them on closer terms. The reprieve lasted until the wall to their right exploded in rock and grit. Obsidia poured through, followed by the giant.

Quillon caught Garrion's eye. 'Final Spite,' she said.

Garrion slammed the butt of his pick into an obsidia's face and replied with a sharp nod. The two broke from the defence, leaving the remaining Kastenmark garrison fighting. Quillon reached for the vial looped around her waist and tested its weight in her hand.

'A gift from the Kastenworks,' she said and hurled it at the giant.

The vial smashed, splattering it with liquid. Tiny flashes of green and purple exploded across the creature, blasting chunks of steaming rock from it. It bellowed like thunder and charged for her. She pelted through the streets, her eyes darting until she spotted her squire.

'Is it done?' Quillon cried, not slowing.

Eyes wide at the monster pursuing his captain, Ethan nodded, unable to form words.

'Then run like hell,' Quillon said, charging through the arched doorway of the Kastenworks.

The wall caved in behind her. She leapt over scattered crates and smashed beakers and alembics as she crashed through desks. Passing a metal vat, she kicked through its weakened supports, silently thanking Ethan for his work, and for evacuating the building. The vat toppled onto the crates which splintered open, shattering the vials inside. Before she cleared the large chamber, a blast threw her from her feet and through the doors opposite.

Her ears rang and her vision blurred. The Kastenworks collapsed behind her in a cloud of stinking alchemical fallout, burying the shattered remains of her pursuer.

Garrion rose the cheer first, then others joined him. Quillon staggered to her feet, chest heaving to catch her breath. She glanced around, picking out her bloodied warriors in the smoking ruins of the Kastenworks. Six remained. She breathed a lungful of gritty, acrid air and ran her hand through her wild, tangled hair.

Kastenmark was lost. Obsidia pulled down the inner town, though its real value had gone with the Kastenworks. They paid the garrison no further heed, as though they had only ever been an obstacle.

The guilt of failure welled in Quillon as Garrion approached. He made to speak when an unnatural chill hit them. In the distance, swaths of grass blackened.

‘Gravestirrer,’ Garrion said, readying his weapon though his scowl betrayed his protest at saving the wretch.

Quillon envied his devotion to duty. She shook her head. ‘Let them have him.’

‘He said you left him before.’ Garrion’s armour was a ragged, torn mess and though his left eye was cut, he glared accusation at her. ‘What did he mean?’

Quillon grunted. ‘Nothing important.’

True, she’d left Corrus years ago, but she was a career soldier; she’d told him that. She went where duty dictated. Whether Corrus fled through cowardice or had enacted some misguided revenge, she didn’t care. Judging by when he fled, Quillon suspected he’d met one of the giants before.

She reflected with remorse and shame on what she’d had him do to her fallen warriors. Garrion would never forgive her. She had lost the respect of her warriors and respect for herself. Desperate times, she told herself, though it brought no comfort. At least she’d gained knowledge of their foe. And she’d survived.

The other survivors joined them.

‘That was a magmatic,’ Vigdis said, clutching Garrion’s shoulder for stability. She looked as battered as the rest of them.

Quillon nodded. ‘Looked like it.’

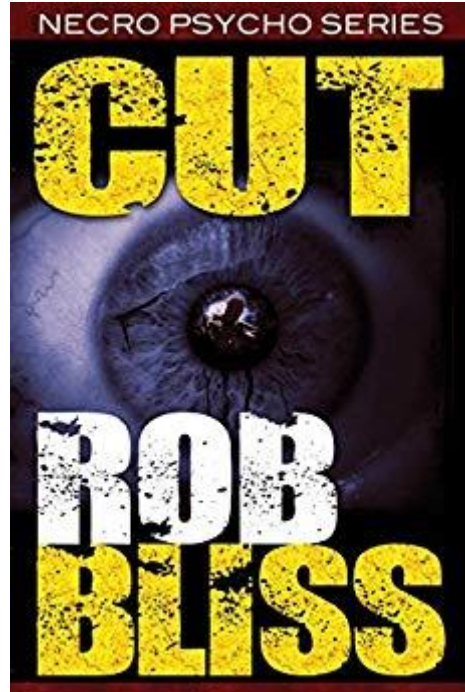
‘What does it mean?’ Garrion asked.

Quillon gazed over the shattered landscape beyond Kastenmark; the earthquakes, the magmatic, the obsidia. It meant legends. Her mind leapt to the same conclusion that her warriors had no doubt arrived at, though she had no wish to voice it. Portents of the Gargantuans. She glanced to the town that she had defended so fervently. And it was dust.

But the next one wouldn’t be.

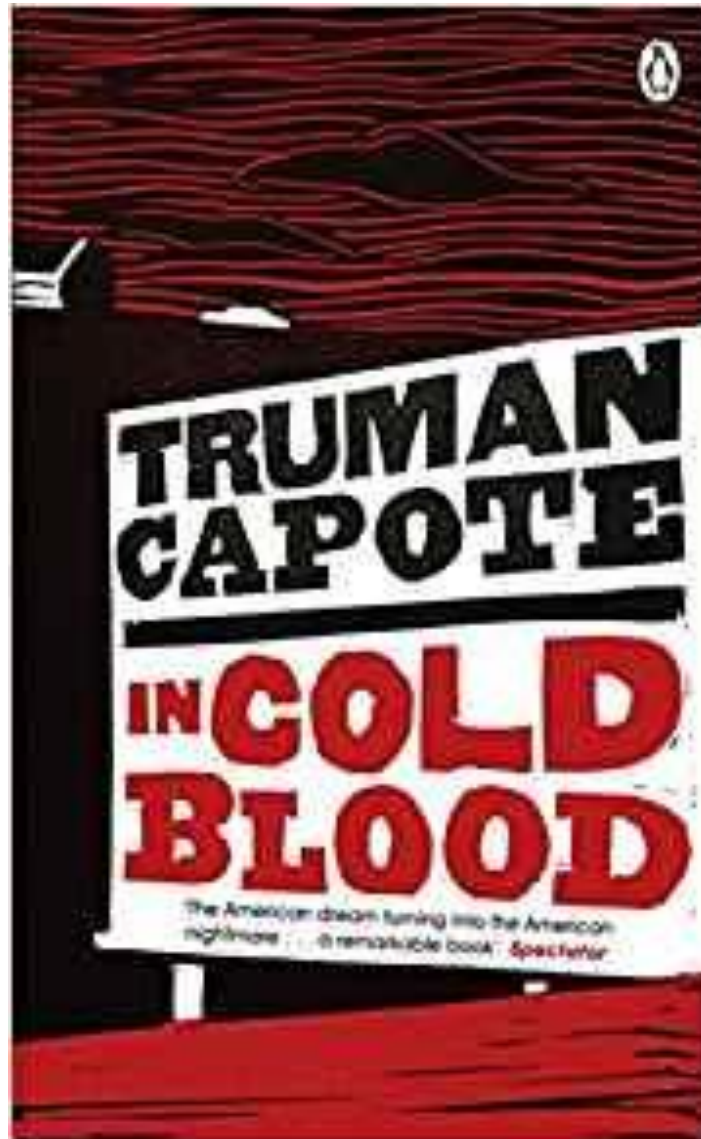
‘It means we’re needed elsewhere.’

THE END



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REVIEW by John C Adams



On a first glance at *In Cold Blood* it might seem odd to think of the inoffensive Truman Capote sucking the life force out of anyone, but when this book was published its well-intentioned and honourable attempt to see a violent crime from both sides (the victims and that of the perpetrators) caused a furore.

It's 1959 and Herb Clutter, his wife Bonnie and two of their children, teenagers Kenyon and Nancy, are enjoying a comfortable life in Kansas. Herb is well respected in the tight-knit, rural Holcomb community: a fair employer to his farmhands, a regular churchgoer and staunch temperance man. Then Dick Hickock hears from his cellmate that Herb has a big safe in the farmhouse reputedly stuffed with cash. After he is released from Lansing prison Dick shares those details with his buddy, Perry Smith. They plan to drive there, rob the Clutters and silence any witnesses. All four of the Clutters are murdered and the pair make off with all the cash in the place: a pathetic haul of forty dollars.

Truman Capote was already was the author of *Breakfast in Tiffany's* and the internationally acclaimed *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. This gentle soul had also been the inspiration for Harper Lee's childhood friend Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Yet after hearing of the murders he set off for Kansas to interview members of the community, the law enforcement officers and, after their conviction, the murderers and their legal teams.

The book begins with an in-depth portrait of the Clutters and reflects upon the shock felt by the Holcomb community as the authorities investigated the murders:

Strangers, ignorant of the disaster, were startled by windows ablaze...fully clothed people, even entire families, who had sat the whole night wide-awake, watchful, listening.

It moves on through the investigation, the trial, the appeals and the executions. Perhaps unusually for the time, it explores the mental state of both perpetrators in the light of their childhood traumas. After the conviction, a large section of the latter part of the book is devoted to the perpetrator's legal challenges and incarceration whilst no more is heard of the victims or their grieving community and family.

It is clear that in attempting to hear from both sides, Capote is scrupulously fair. As a non-practising solicitor, I was very impressed by its portrayal of the investigation, legal proceedings and incarceration. However, after Capote has exhausted what the community and the surviving Clutters were willing to say publicly about the victims, he has no way to present the voices of the bereaved. I felt that very quickly Herb, Bonnie, Nancy and Kenyon, and the grief of the surviving family members Eveanna and Beverly, disappeared from the narrative, and that was something I was painfully aware of when I was reading it.

Enjoy!

THE END

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BLOOD THEATRE by Rob Bliss

The theatre has been slowly dying. Only musicals draw a crowd, can ward off their creditors. But plays put on by established, even legendary, playwrights (never mind a new dramatist, some foolish unknown trying to make a living as a writer of comedies and tragedies) can't fill seats. You may have luck with the more popular Shakespeare plays, but don't bet your budget on *Coriolanus* or *Timon of Athens*.

The internet is destroying many mediums: film, newspapers, magazines, paperback novels, even music. So you can imagine how much worse off is live theatre. I made it my life, have had no other career outside the theatre, and hope I never have to. But I'm getting old—the stage is eroding and I erode with it. Time and technology inflict their perpetual wounds. What can be done? I asked myself. What do people *need* that theatre can still offer? The answer hit me like a spotlight. The irony was: the internet gave me the answer.

Sex and violence always sell. There are countries still liberal enough to have live sex shows. Theatre of Fucking. And yet nudity is still abhorrent to the medium of television. Writing and painting can sell nudity without condemnation. People, companies, get fined if a nipple is inadvertently exposed on television. Yet the number of people killed in the most horrific methods on television and in film is on the rise. Even gory images are allowed in newspapers and magazines—some tragedy of a foreign war, captured by photojournalists, who are not fined a dime. Our society loves to kill. So be it.

I heard a report of a man who wanted to die—assisted suicide due to an incurable disease, or he just didn't want to live anymore—so he put an ad on the net. For someone to kill him. Hundreds responded positively. They would be paid well from the man's savings, and measures were put in place so that the killer would not be caught. Which was why the man used the internet. (Is there any other medium for the greatest of Mankind's taboos to be unleashed?) A killer from an unknown country, no criminal record, using a false name, would stymie police around the world. And, of course, the dead man could not be brought to any court.

It was a genius idea, and it worked. The man is dead, the killer free and unknown to all but the deceased (perhaps not even him), and money safely exchanged hands.

So I put up a similar ad. Essentially for suicidal actors. We met at an undisclosed location for rehearsals of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's most popular play, always a ticket-seller. Odd paradox: the actors playing the characters who die (and *Hamlet* has an immense body count, most coming wonderfully at the end of the play) knew when they were to die—it's right there in the script. What other event in life can offer this? Knowing the exact time and method of your own death? And they each met their killers. The actor who played Claudius shared a drink before the play with the actor who played Hamlet. And both gave the other his wish, so who was to blame?

The swords were real.

The audience applauded at the end, as they do. But when the curtain rose for the actors to take their bows, they instead stayed bleeding on stage. Real blood and real death, sometimes slow. The audience chuckled, assured it was a postmodern or Brechtian touch.

One show only, naturally. Mainly since it takes time to find more actor martyrs via the net. (And not have police hunt me down.) But the really exciting thing about the performance was the press afterwards. The suicides were leaked. (I may have had something to do with this, but I plead the fifth.) So anyone who saw the show that night essentially saw a snuff version of *Hamlet*. The first ever in the history of the 500-year-old play.

I had made an old play new. People clamoured for more. The law tried to hunt me, but to no avail. The people want—need—another bloody version of the melancholy Dane, somewhere in the world, at an undisclosed location, underground, invite only or word of mouth, contracts signed that the audience will not disclose the location and will not attempt to stop the play. It would be replayed on social media for ... 500 years?

I invented a new stage. “Blood Theatre”, as one internet fan dubbed it. The name has stuck and gone ‘viral’, as the youth—and their media—term it.

The people who need my theatre are willing to pay handsomely for a ticket. Five hundred dollars for the worst seats, up to five thousand to sit in the handful of chairs that—as in days of old—are located on the stage itself, downstage left, not an obstacle to the performance.

A true thespian makes sacrifices for his art. Or hers. We could always mount an all-female version, depending on the suicide applicants.

Theatre has always been about adaptability, from era to era, from new media to dying arts. It is not dead and neither am I. I didn’t die in the end, but someone had to.

THE END

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Sherlock Holmes and the Beast-men of Atlantis

Milly 'Mad Dog'
McGuigan

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Twenty

They had come to a doorway, one very plain, and one carved directly into the naked stone of the asteroid. Traffic was busy, and light were bright. Music was pumped through the hallways.

The door into Ed's place was unmarked. One somewhat wide wooden panel gave both entrance and egress. Above it, a single light mounted into the rock. A cart on a trellis rattled by.

Mud opened the door, and with a sweeping gesture, he invited, "Welcome to Ed's place!"

Illara stepped through, keeping a very stiff face. Hardy followed Illara. Mud closed the door behind them, then led them through the crowded bar to an empty booth near a darkened corner.

Spotting Ed at the bar, he told Hardy and Illara to "Sit tight, and make y'selves comfortable. I'm gonna talk to my friend at the bar," he finished with a nod toward a stocky man in a yellow apron. That was Ed, a middle-aged man both phlegmatic and taciturn. Fluent in the language of liquor, Ed ran a well-stocked bar. He did not have to rely on the replicator alone, but had managed to build together an impressive stock over the years, which is what gave his bar its reputation here in the outer asteroid belt.

Ed was idly busy at the moment, wiping down glasses and taking orders. The hookers who worked the bar were doing well.

"Hiya, Ed," Mud greeted the man with a cheery voice. "How's ever'thing?"

Ed looked up from what he was doing.

"S'awrite," he said. "What can I getcha?"

"Nothin' fancy. Just gimme a coupla shots of...oh, let's call it bourbon."

"Okie dokie, will do," Ed said. He turned his back to Mud as he spoke into the replicator, asking for two shots of unmarked bourbon.

Once Ed's back was turned to Mud, Mud asked, "D'ja hear from Lacey?"

Ed, a most imperturbable man, answered bluntly, "Hadn't seen her in a while."

"I heard she'd been disappeared," Mud said.

Ed turned and set two small glasses on the counter between them.

"You know as much as I do," Ed answered. He began to turn away to attend to another customer.

“That’s not what I heard,” Mud said.

“Can’t say I’m much responsible for what you hear,” Ed said.

“I’m not askin’ ya ta be responsible for anything,” Mud said. “Only maybe you should be payin’ attention.”

Ed glanced down and saw the pistol Mud had discreetly slipped from its holster to point at his ribcage. He held the gun in one hand, while shielding it from view with the other.

“Well,” Ed drawled. “I guess you oughta know, I got some friends here.”

“As it happens, I do too,” Mud said.

“Yeah, I seen `en when they come in with ya,” Ed replied. He looked at Mud carelessly. “Ya wancher drinks?”

Mud laughed easily. Sliding his pistol back into its holster, he said, “Yeah, you’re okay. Don’t scare easy, do ya?”

“No pay in it.”

“Haw! Haw!” Mud laughed. “Well, I sure am sorry to be so rude to ya, Ed. Had ta get yer attention.”

“You got it now, don’t squander it,” Ed said. A nearly imperceptible gesture called off the three guns he’d hired on as bodyguards and bouncers. Ed had learned that the value of trading information outweighed whatever thin measure of satisfaction was to be got by returning a threat, or a punch.

This Mud fellow obviously had something on his mind. It might be useful to him, Ed, to find out what it was. In any case, that one word, `sorry’ which he heard so very rarely, and the tone in which it was spoken, did much to pacify the man.

“Well, then, what can I do for you?” Ed asked.

Mud knew that there would be no point now in asking any questions about Lacey, so he approached Ed from a different angle.

“I hear my friend Rat has been grudging against me.”

“Rat’s been grudging agin’st everybody, long as I’ve known him.”

“I’m sure of it. Any idea where I might dig him up?”

“Hang out here long enough. You’re bound to see him.”

“Thanks,” Mud said. He turned to see what Hardy and Illara were up to, and saw them chatting away, sitting at an empty table. “Gimme one a’ them sangrias for the lady over there and a coupla beers, one for him and one for me.”

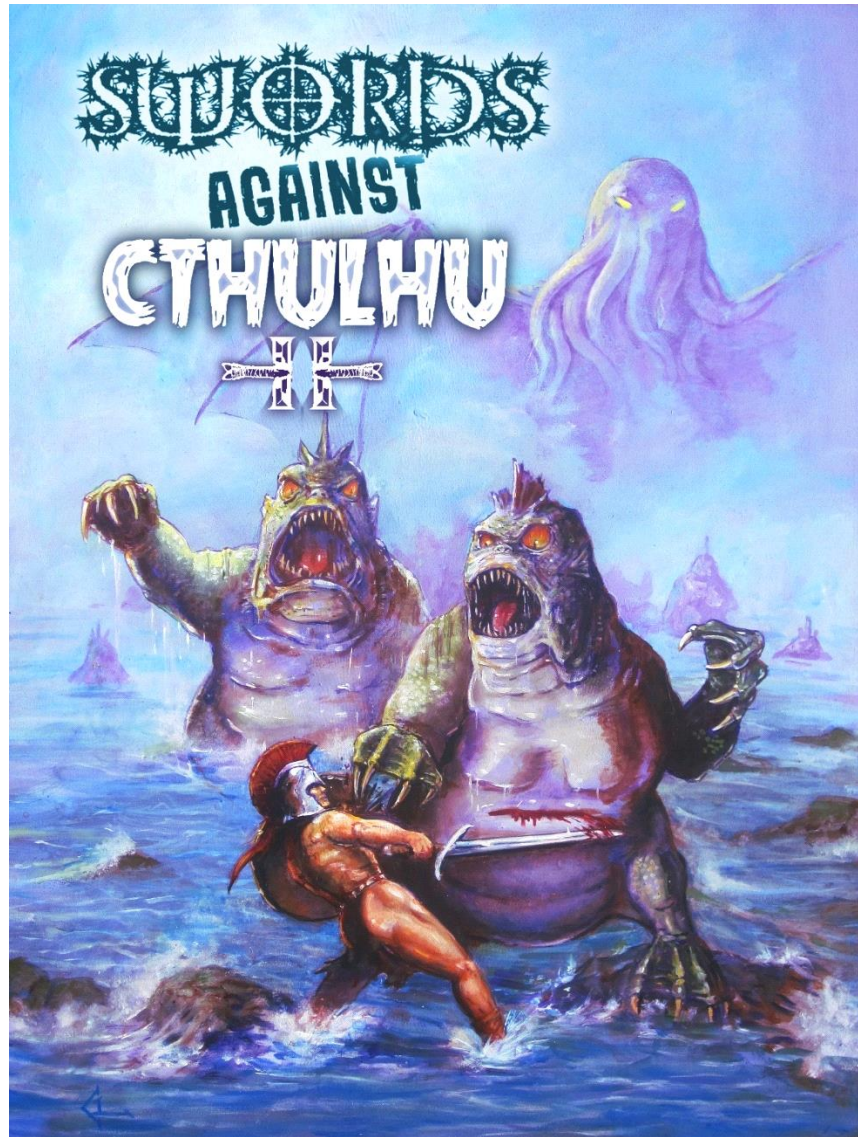
“Awrite,” Ed answered.

He turned back to the replicator, and spoke Mud’s order into it. After a moment, the drinks appeared. Ed slid them onto a tray, and handed it off to Mud. Holding the tray with one hand, he held his wristband up and tapped Ed’s with it, paying for the drinks and leaving a very generous tip.

Mud turned and carried the tray to the table.

And damn it if it wasn’t Rat himself, walking right that moment through the door.

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ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

Chapter XXVI—Twilight.

I was, perhaps, the only member of the assembly to whom the doomed man was not personally known, and to all of us the tie which had been severed was one at least as close as that of natural brotherhood on Earth.

How long the pause lasted—how, or why, or when we resumed our seats, even I knew not. The Shrine was unveiled, and Esmo's next colleague spoke again—

“A seat among the elders has been three days vacant by the departure of one well known and dear to all. His colleagues have considered how best it may be filled. The member they have selected is of the youngest in experience here; but from the first moment of his initiation it was evident to us that more than half the learning of the Starlight had been his before. Nothing could so deeply confirm our joy and confidence in that lore, as to find that in another world the truths we hold dearest are held with equal faith, that many of our deepest secrets have there been sought and discovered by societies not unlike our own. For that reason, and because of that House, whereof now but two members are left us, he is by wedlock and adoption the third, the elder brethren have unanimously resolved to recommend to Clavelta, and to the Children of the Star, that this seat,” and he pointed to the vacant place, “shall be filled by him who has but now expressed, with a warmth seldom shown in this place, his love and trust for the daughter of our Chief, the descendant of our Founder.”

Certainly not on my own account, but from the earnest attachment and devotion they felt for Esmo, both personally as a long-trying and deservedly revered Chief, and as almost the last representative of a lineage so profoundly loved and honoured, the approval of all present was expressed with a sudden and eager warmth which deeply affected me; the more that it expressed an hereditary regard and esteem, not for myself but for Eveena, rarely or never, even among the Zveltau, paid to a woman. Esmo bent his head in assent, and then, addressing me by name, called me to the foot of the platform.

He held in his hand the golden sash and rose-coloured wand which marked the rank about to be bestowed on me. I felt very deeply my own incompetence and ignorance; and even had I valued more the proffered honour, I should have been bound to decline it. But at the third word I spoke, I was silenced with a stern though perfectly calm severity. Flinging back the fold of his robe that covered his left arm, with a gesture that placed the Signet full before my eyes, he said—

“You have sworn obedience.”

A soldier's instinct or habit, the mesmeric command of Esmo's glance, and the awe, due less to my own feeling than to the infectious reverence of others, which the symbols and the oaths of the Order extorted, left me no further will to resist. At the foot of the Throne I received the investiture of my new rank; and as I rose and faced my brethren, every hand was lifted to the lips, every head bent in salutation of their new leader. Then, as I passed to the extreme place on the right, they came forward to grasp my hand and utter a few words of sympathy and kindness,

in which a frank spirit of affectionate comradeship, that reminded me forcibly of the mess-tent and the bivouac fire, was mingled with the sense of a deeper and more sacred tie.

Scarcely had we resumed our places than a startling incident gave a new turn to the scene. Approaching the barrier, a woman, veiled, but wearing the sash and star, knelt for a moment to the presence of the Arch-Teacher, and then, as the barrier was thrown open by the sentries, came up to the dais.

“She,” said the new-comer, “has a message for you, Clavelta, for your Council, and particularly for the last of its members.”

“It is well,” he answered.

The messenger took her seat among the Initiates, and Esmo dismissed the assembly in the solemn form employed on the former occasion. Then, followed by the twelve, and guided by the messenger (the gloved fingers of whose left hand, as I observed, he very slightly touched with his own right), he passed by another door out of the Hall, and along one of the many passages of the subterrene Temple, into a chamber resembling in every respect an apartment in an ordinary residence. Here, with her veil, as is permitted only to maidenhood, drawn back from her face, but covering almost entirely her neck and bosom, and clad in the vestal white, reclined with eyes nearly closed a young girl, in whose countenance a beauty almost spiritual was enhanced rather than marred by signs of physical ill-health painfully unmistakable. Warning us back with a slight movement of his hand, Esmo approached her. Our presence had at first seemed to cast her into almost convulsive agitation; but under his steady gaze and the movement of his hands, she lapsed almost instantly into what appeared to be profound slumber.

The practical information that concerned the present peril menacing the Order delivered, and when it was plain that no further revelation or counsel was to be expected on this all-important topic, Esmo beckoned to me, taking my hand in his own and placing it very gently and carefully in that of the unconscious sybil. The effect, however, was startling. Without unclosing her eyes, she sprang into a sitting posture and clasped my hand almost convulsively with her own long, thin all but transparent fingers. Turning her face to mine, and seeming, though her eyes were closed, as if she looked intently into it, she murmured words at first unintelligible, but which seemed by degrees to bear clearer and clearer reference to some of the stormy scenes of my youth in another world. Then—as one looking upon pictures but partially intelligible to her, and commenting on them as a girl who had never seen or known the passions and the mutual enmity of men—she startled me by breaking into the kind of chant in which the peculiar verse of her language is commonly delivered. My own thought of the moment was not her guide. The Moslem battle-cry had rung too often in my ears ever to be forgotten; but up to that moment I had never recalled to memory the words in which on my last field I retorted upon my Arab comrades, when flinching from a third charge against those terrible “sons of Eblis,” whose stubborn courage had already twice hurled us back in confusion and disgrace with a hundred empty saddles. At first her tone was one of simple amaze and horror. It softened afterwards into wonder and perplexity, and the oft-repeated rebuke or curse was on its last recurrence spoken

with more of pitying tenderness and regret than of severity:—

“What! those are human bosoms whereon the brute hath trod!
What! through the storm of slaughter rings the appeal to God!
Through the smoke and flash of battle a single form is shown;
O’er clang and crash and rattle peals out one trumpet-tone—
‘Strike, for Allah and the Prophet! let Eblis take his own!’
“Strange! the soul that, fresh from carnage, quailed not alone to face
The unfathomed depths of Darkness, the solitudes of Space!
Strange! the smile of scorn, while nerveless dropped the sword-arm from the sting,
On the death that scowled at distance, on the closing murder-ring.
Strange! no crimson stain on conscience from the hand in gore imbrued!
But Death haunts the death-dealer; blood taints the life of blood!
“Strange! the arm that smote and spared not in the tempest of the strife,
Quivers with pitying terror—clings, for a maiden’s life!
Strange! the heart steel-hard to death-shrieks by girlish tears subdued;
The falcon’s sheathless talons among the esve’s brood!
But Death haunts the death-dealer; blood taints the life of blood.
“The breast for woman’s peril that dared the despot’s ire,
Shall dauntless front, and scathless, the closing curve of fire.
The heart, by household treason stung home, that can forgive,
Shall brave a woman’s hatred, a woman’s wiles, and live.
“A woman’s well-won fealty shall give the life he gave,
Love shall redeem the loving, and Sacrifice shall save.
But—God heal the tortured spirit, God calm the maddened mood;
For Death haunts the death-dealer; blood taints the life of blood!”

Relaxing but not releasing her grasp of my own hand, she felt about with her left till Esmo gently placed his own therein. Then, in a tone at first of deep and passionate anxiety and eagerness, passing into one of regretful admiration, and varying with the purport of each utterance, she broke into another chant, in which were repeated over and again phrases familiar in the traditions and prophetic or symbolic formularies of the Zinta:—

“Ever on deadliest peril shines the Star with steadiest ray;
Ever quail the fiercest hunters when Kargynda turns at bay.
Close, Children of the Starlight! close, for the Emerald Throne!
Close round the life that closeth your life within the zone!
Rests the Golden Circle’s glory, rests the silver gleam on her
Who shall rein Kargynda’s fury with a thread of gossamer.
He metes not mortal measure, He pays not human price,
Who crowns that life’s devotion with the death of sacrifice!
Woe worth the moment’s panic; woe worth the victory won!
But the Night is near the breaking when the Stranger claims his own.
“Ever on deadliest peril shines the Star with steadiest ray;
Ever quail the fiercest hunters when Kargynda turns at bay.
No life is worth the living that counts each fleeting breath;

No eyes from God averted can meet the eyes of Death.
Vague fear and spectral terrors haunt the soul that dwells in shade,
Nor e'er can crimson conscience confront the crimson blade.
From a cloud of shame and sorrow breaks the Light that shines afar,
And cold and dark the household spark that lit the Silver Star.
The triumph is a death-march; the victor's voice a moan:—
But the Powers of Night are broken when the Stranger wins his own!
“Ever in blackest midnight shines the Star with brightest ray;
Woe to them that hunt the theme if Kargynda cross the way!
In the Home of Peace, Clavelta, can our fears thy spirit move?
Look down! whence comes the rescue to the household of thy love?
As the All-Commander's lightning falls the Vengeance from above!
A shriek from thousand voices; a thunder crash; a groan;
A thousand homes in mourning—a thousand deaths in one!
Woe to the Sons of Darkness, for the Stranger wields his own!
Oh, hide that scene of horror in the deepest shades of night!
Look upward to the welkin, where the Vessel fades from sight ...
But the Veil is rent for ever by the Hand that veiled the Shrine;
And, on a peace of ages, the Star of Peace shall shine!”

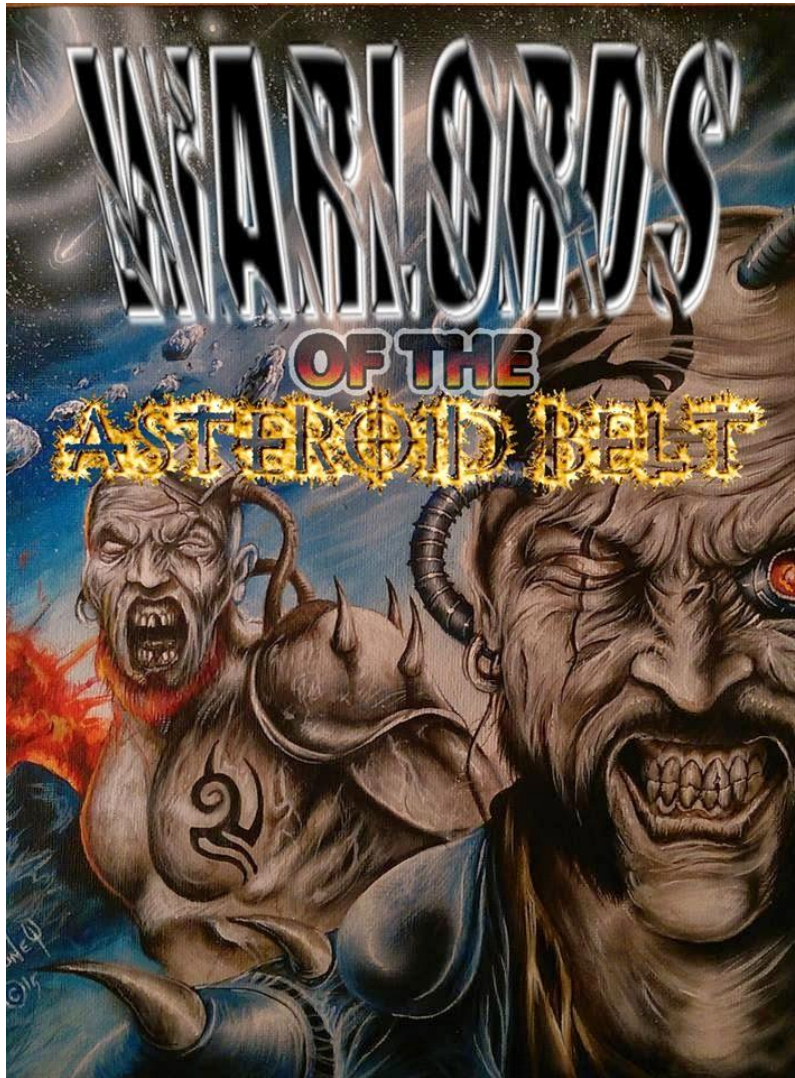
Esmo listened with the anxious attention of one who believed that her every word had a real and literal meaning; and his face was overclouded with a calm but deep sadness, which testified to the nature of the impression made on his mind by language that hardly conveyed to my own more than a dim and general prediction of victory, won through scenes of trial and trouble. But when she had closed, a quiet satisfaction in what seemed to be the final promise of triumph to the Star, at whatever cost to the noblest of its adherents, was all that I could trace in his countenance.

The sibyl fell back as the last word passed her lips, with a sigh of relief, into what was evidently a profound and insensible sleep. Those around me must have witnessed such scenes at least as often as I; but it was plain that the impression made, even on the experienced Chiefs of the Order, was far deeper than had affected myself. I should hardly have been able to remember the words of the prophecy, but for subsequent conversation thereon with Eveena, when one part had been fulfilled and the rest was on the eve of a too terribly truthful fulfilment; but for the events that fixed their prediction in my mind—it may be in terms a little more precise than those actually employed, though I have endeavoured to record these with conscientious accuracy.

Led by Esmo, we passed along another gallery into the small chamber where met the secret Council of the Order, and long and anxious were the debates wherein the revelations of the dreamer were treated as conveying the most certain and unquestionable warning. The first rays of morning were stealing through the mists into the peristyle of our host's dwelling before I re-entered Eveena's chamber. She was slumbering, but restlessly, and so lightly that she sprang up at once on my entrance. For a few moments all other thought was lost in the delight of my return after an absence whose very length had alarmed her, despite her father's previous assurance. But as at last she drew back sufficiently to look into my face, its expression seemed to startle and sadden her. The questions that sprang to her lips died there, as she probably saw in my eyes a look not only of weariness and perplexity, but of profound reluctance to speak of what had

passed. Expressing her sympathy only by look and touch, she began to unclasp my robe at the throat, aware that my only wish was for rest, and content to postpone her own anxiety and natural curiosity. Then, as the golden sash which I had not removed met her sight, she looked up for a moment with a glance of natural pride and fondness, intensely gratified by the highly-prized honour paid to her husband; then bent low and kissed my hand with the gesture wherewith the presence of a superior is acknowledged by the members of the Order. “Used as my earlier life was, Eveena, to the Eastern prostrations of my own world, I hate all that recalls them; and if I must accept, as I fulfil, these forms in the Halls of the Zinta, let me never be reminded of them by you.”

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A VOYAGE TO THE MOON by Cyrano de Bergerac

II.—The Garb of Shame

At this point our conversation was broken off by my keeper. He saw that the company was tired of my talk, which seemed to them mere grunting. So he pulled my rope, and made me dance and caper until the spectators ached with laughter.

Happily, the next morning the Man of the Sun opened my cage and put me on his back and carried me away.

“I have spoken to the King of the Moon,” he said; “and he has commanded that you should be taken to his court and examined by his learned doctors.”

As my companion went on four feet, he was able to travel as fast as a racehorse, and we soon arrived at another town, where we put up at an inn for dinner. I followed him into a magnificently furnished hall, and a servant asked me what I would begin with.

“Some soup,” I replied.

I had scarcely pronounced the words when I smelt a very succulent broth. I rose up to look for the source of this agreeable smell; but my companion stopped me.

“What do you want to walk away for?” said he. “Stay and finish your soup.”

“But where is the soup?” I said.

“Ah,” he replied. “This is the first meal you have had on the Moon. You see, the people here only live on the smell of food. The fine, lunar art of cookery consists in collecting the exhalations that come from cooked meat, and bottling them up. Then, at meal-time, the various jars are uncorked, one after the other, until the appetites of the diners are satisfied.”

“It is, no doubt, an exquisite way of eating,” I said; “but I am afraid I shall starve on it.”

“Oh, no, you will not,” said he. “You will soon find that a man can nourish himself as well by his nose as by his mouth.”

And so it was. After smelling for a quarter of an hour a variety of rich, appetising vapours, I rose up quite satisfied.

In the afternoon I was taken to the palace of the king, and examined by the greatest men of science on the Moon. In spite of all that my friend had said on my behalf, I was adjudged to be a mere animal, and again shut up in a cage. The king, queen, and courtiers spent a considerable time every day watching me, and with the help of the Man of the Sun I soon learned to speak a little of their, music-language. This caused a great deal of surprise. Several persons began to think that I was really a man who had been dwarfed and weakened from want of nourishment.

But the learned doctors again examined me, and decided that, as I did not walk on four legs, I must be a new kind of featherless parrot. Thereupon I was given a pole to perch on, instead of a nice warm bed to lie in; and every day the queen's fowler used to come and whistle tunes for me to learn. In the meantime, however, I improved my knowledge of the language, and at last I spoke so well and intelligibly that all the courtiers said that the learned doctors had been mistaken. One of the queen's maids of honour not only thought that I was a man, but fell in love with me. She often used to steal to my cage, and listen to my stories of the customs and amusements of our world. She was so interested that she begged me to take her with me if ever I found a way of returning to the Earth.

In my examination by the learned doctors I had stated that their world was but a Moon, and that the Moon from which I had come was really a world. It was this which had made them angry against me. But my friend, the Man of the Sun, at last prevailed upon the king to let me out of the cage on my retracting my wicked heresy. I was clad in splendid robes, and placed on a magnificent chariot to which four great noblemen were harnessed, and led to the centre of the city, where I had to make the following statement:

"People, I declare to you that this Moon is not a Moon but a world; and that the world I come from is not a world but a Moon. For this is what the Royal Council believe that you ought to believe."

The Man of the Sun then helped me to descend from the chariot, and took me quickly into a house, and stripped me of my gorgeous robes. "Why do you do that?" I asked. "This is the most splendid dress I have ever seen on the Moon."

"It is a garb of shame," said my companion. "You have this day undergone the lowest degradation that can be imposed on a man. You committed an awful crime in saying that the Moon was not a Moon. It is a great wonder you were not condemned to die of old age."

"Die of old age?" I said.

"Yes," replied my companion. "Usually, when a Man of the Moon comes to that time of life in which he feels that he is losing his strength of mind and body, he invites all his friends to a banquet. After explaining what little hope he has of adding anything to the fine actions of his life, he asks for permission to depart. If he has led a bad life, he is ordered to live; but if he has been a good man, his dearest friend kisses him, and plunges a dagger in his heart."

As he was talking, the son of the man in whose house we were staying entered the room. My companion quickly rose on his four feet, and made the young man a profound bow. I asked him why he did this. He told me that on the Moon parents obey their children, and old men are compelled to show to young men the greatest respect.

"They are of opinion," said my companion, "that a strong and active young man is more capable of governing a family than a dull, infirm sexagenarian. I know that on your Earth old men are supposed to be wise and prudent. But, as a matter of fact, their wisdom and prudence consists

merely of a timid frame of mind and a disinclination to take any risks.”

The father then entered the room, and his son said to him in an angry voice:

“Why have you not got our house ready to sail away? You know the walls of the city have gone some hours ago. Bring me at once your image!”

The man brought a great wooden image of himself, and his son whipped it furiously for a quarter of an hour.

“And now,” said the young man at last, “go and hoist the sails at once!”

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