

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

# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 13, ISSUE 11  
15TH JULY 2018

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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Edited by  
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Schlock! Webzine

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Stephen Hernandez, Ste Whitehouse, Gregory KH Bryant, Rob Bliss, Percy Greg, Cyrano de  
Bergerac*

## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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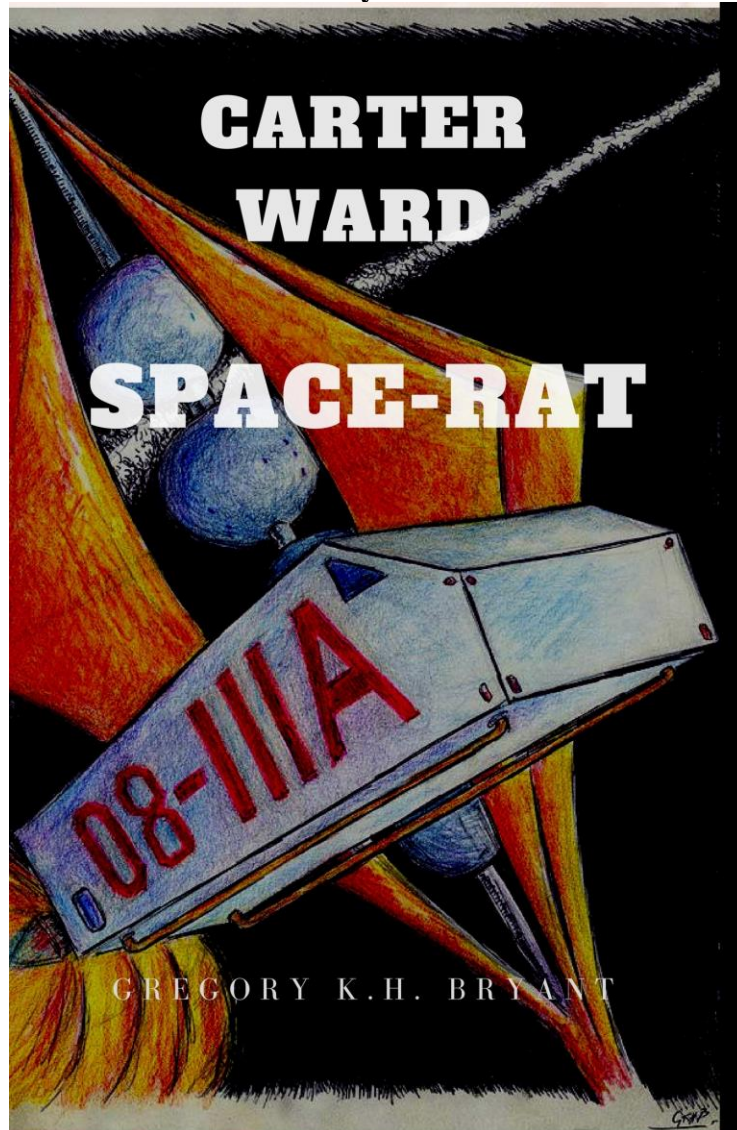
## EDITORIAL

This week Kassi encounters dwarves and trolls in the depths of her world. An isolated and incestuous group learn a little about new fashions in the big wide world. Thoric, faraway in Ultima Thule, is threatened by a danger from back home. And Patrick discovers the reason for high employee turnover at the Library.

Hunter learns that the female is deadlier. Mud and his companions approach asteroid AT-4442-ST. On Mars, a culprit is called to trial. And in a planetary romance dating back to the seventeenth century, a long nosed poet and lover travels to the Moon by flying machine.

—Gavin Chappell

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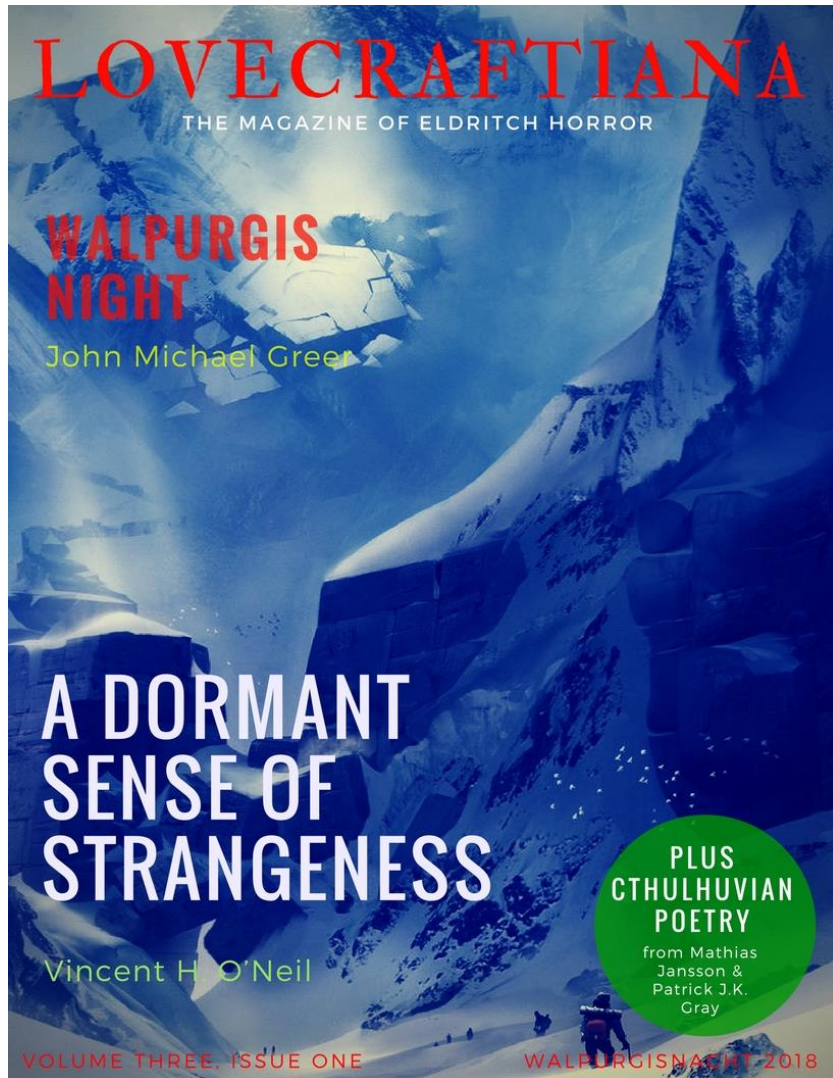




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And the Walpurgisnacht edition of [Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror](#).



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## KASSI AND THE DUNGEON by Ste Whitehouse

The dwarf shifted in the dim light, his milky white skin glistening with sweat. Pale eyes as bleached as his skin glanced across at the bodies of his brethren and a snarl escaped softly from thin lips. He was naked except for cotton trousers, and hairless but for a sheen of white down across his scalp. His legs were thick and sinewy beneath a thickset body that stood almost four feet in height.

Kassi Seishin adjusted her sword and kept her own eyes upon the squat creature before her. She was a good two feet taller than the dwarf, but down here where gravity was stronger the dwarf's larger frame assisted him in ways her wiry build did not. Managing that extra weight was hard work and all the dwarf really had to do was be patient. He was adapted to this environment in ways that Kassi was not; besides her armour sat heavily on her. She paused, confident she would not need to wait long. Dwarfs were notoriously impatient.

As if on cue he leapt at her, his metallic hammer swinging down and to her right. She caught it easily with the face of her shield and stepped back, bringing her own weapon down in a vicious arc that barely missed the creature. A small line of pale dwarven blood, hardly noticeable against his smooth white skin, opened up, and crystal rivulets mingled with his sweat. He muttered darkly and wiped a sweaty palm dry on his trousers before gripping his large hammer tighter. They circled each other as the sole flame flickered in the long corridor. A pearl of light fading into stygian blackness either side.

Kassi eyed the pale silvery blood as it mingled with the dwarf's sweat. Allegedly, spiced dwarven blood taken with wine was a strong aphrodisiac and fetched a high price in the markets above. It strongly enhanced any number of physical sensations, particularly those below the waist and made sex a lot more intense; so it was said. She was considering the chance of collecting some when her reverie was interrupted.

{Sex will be a lot less intense if you are dead, Kassi.} The words intruded deep within her mind.

"Sebastian! Don't break my concentration," she muttered.

{What concentration? You're thinking about hot dwarf-enhanced sex. Where is the concentration in that?}

"Sebastian!" She shouted, just as the dwarf lunged forward. She easily dodged his blow and slammed her shield into his side pushing him into the far wall with a sharp thud. There was heavy silence from Sebastian. "Thank you."

She lifted her shield feeling its extra weight pull her right arm downwards. It had been a good steal, she considered; well worth the quick escape from Ornn and the consequent chase through Seven Fields. It was well balanced, unusually light and seemingly impervious to any sword. All hallmarks of an artefact from 'The Beginning'. All it really needed was a 'trey' to power it. Hence their diversion down into this dungeon, the most likely place to find a 'trey'. Seeking her brother could wait while they scoured down here for the multi-use black oblongs and of course—



according to Sebastian—they were much less likely to meet a band of dwarves in the upper levels; so they had thought. Still, four were dead and their companion would be soon joining them in whatever heaven or hell dwarves believed in.

They may hunt in packs but cornered and alone they would fight on; as this one showed. He stumbled to his feet but, despite her weariness, Kassi felt confident. She stood her ground and raised her broadsword as the dwarf began its run towards her. Dwarfs were strong and built like brick outhouses but a good blade could always kill; and Kassi was an excellent blades woman.

She shifted her weight onto her right foot and pivoted. He glanced off her shield, hardly slowing as she swept her blade downwards and across his back. This time she felt more than a thin layer of skin under the blades edge. Sinews and even bones crunched and she felt the sword shudder momentarily. The dwarf fell forwards and skidded along the smooth flooring, his soft grunt echoing along the dark passageway. Kassi crept forward as he tried to push himself up, a hand fumbling for his hammer. She pushed her sword down into his back and rested it there for a second. The dwarf screamed, its echo filling the darkness. The effort had caused her to sweat under the thick plated leather armour and she brushed a few loose strands of hair from dark green eyes.

Her hair was black and straight, cut to shoulder length and left unadorned. Kassi's arms and legs were long but muscular with flashes of olive skin peeping through the latticework of tough leather armour. Her face was angular but pretty. The armour she wore fitted her curves closely but no one could doubt the seriousness with which Kassi took her swordsmanship; this was no papery armour to enhance womanly curves—and expose sensuous curves of flesh—but rather solid, battle weary armour. Etched leather shin and arm pads hardened almost to the consistency of steel were tied securely in place; her breastplate woven with steel. The new shield from Ornn was now slung over her shoulder and the large broadsword sheathed at her right side. She bent over, holding her knees, and breathed in deeply. All she needed was a few minute to recuperate. A sound echoed from beyond the sphere of light and she glanced up, trying to peer into the blackness of the corridor. Kassi lifted her scabbarded sword in readiness; holding it steady in front of her.

“Really! I was about to swoop in and rescue you.” The voice was low and dripping in sarcasm; sounding almost human despite its origin. “And instead I find a sword in my face?”

“A rescue? Ha! Just a thought, Sebastian; but if you had skin I believe it would be yellow,” she replied.

A portion of the inky darkness high up on a far wall paled slightly and detached itself from the rest of the blackness, padding softly into the light. Although metal there was a dull sheen to his exterior and his eight limbs moved silently. Only the softest of sounds echoed as each leg deliberately found its place. Two multifaceted lenses gleamed in the dull torchlight as the machine's small 'head' turned to face Kassi. Sebastian swore that he had been built for 'exterior work' but the girl had never been able to comprehend what could possibly be 'exterior' to the world.

“Well, I was not the one thinking about fucking,” he said his voice deep and velvety.

The girl sighed and ran a hand along the bulge of wires and articulate tubes that ran down Sebastian’s short neck. Despite what he said, there appeared to be some form of feeling, and he arched his back as if he had been a cat, a soft purr escaping from wherever his voice came.

She said, “Well, I hope you were busy whilst I was clearing the corridor for you.”

Sebastian shook his head. “Of course, but sorry; no such luck. There are no batteries nearby.”

Kassi looked at the creature, puzzled. “Sometimes I find just understanding you a chore, Sebastian.”

It was the machine’s turn to sigh. “I found no treys, Kassi.”

“Perhaps deeper?” she asked.

“That would mean higher gravity and possibly more dwarfs,” Sebastian stated flatly.

“Gravity, yes, but perhaps not so the dwarfs. They prefer to cling close to the outer wall. This group may well be scouts of some sort.”

“Back at the Southern end of the pipe dwarves did indeed stay close to the surface.” Sebastian said. “But we ran into this bunch on level ten.”

“Eleven,” she corrected.

“Pardon me?”

“We dropped two levels to bypass the circulatory system, remember?”

“Level ten or eleven. It does not really matter that much, Kassi. Not if they are up this high. Besides, the longer you’re under this higher gravity or the deeper you go, the heavier you will get; you’ll be at a disadvantage either way.” He lifted a leg and weaved a pattern in the air which the girl recognised as a ‘shrug’.

“That’s okay, Sebastian. I hear I have a protector who will rush in and rescue me,” she laughed. The machine unfurled two extremities on the upraised arm and gesticulated at her.

“I have TWO rescuers?” she said in a laughing tone.

“Sarcasm is...”

“...the lowest form of wit; I know; but how come it only ever applies to me and not to you?” She asked.

Sebastian sighed, loudly, but ignored her saying with concern in his voice. “Well, three levels more and that’s it. If we don’t find any... treys by then we scarper, okay?”

“As you wish.” She stood and caught her bearings then turned towards where the group of dwarfs had come at her; a doorway twenty feet down the corridor. The machine followed, picking up the burning torch in a leg and causing the square cut of the corridor to fill with slabs of shadow, dancing back and forth in the spluttering flame.

Without a word they continued onwards. Kassi thought back to the day she first met Sebastian; it was the day she first saw the demons. Creatures alive with sinew and flesh but deep red in colour and with only three fingers on each hand. Their skin scaly and ridged with protuberances; their eyes the yellow of the sunline. Each had stood a good two yards over her even though at seven she was one of the tallest girls in her village.

That had been a strange day; and now those self-same demons held her brother at the world’s northern end. She paused and tried to focus on the job at hand. Thinking on her family and their woes would not help down here within the deep dungeons. No! She needed to concentrate and be ready for possibly another group of dwarves. They descended a series of stairs edged by a metal railing. The blackness was complete but she could sense the depth these stairs dropped through. Possibly all the way to level 30 or even this fabled ‘exterior’ of Sebastian’s. Kassi felt gravity build almost imperceptibly. The air was still, but from below there was an appreciable chill; air that had never seen the sunline. She recognised the numbering system still in use above ground.

“Sebastian?”

“Mmmm?” he said, crawling along the wall, all of his focus on the stygian blackness ahead of them.

“You know all these ancient runes; don’t you? I mean you say batteries instead of treys all the time; and all those other long dead words...”

“Hmmm.”

“This one I see a lot in dungeons such as these. What does it say? Is it some grave warning?”

She pointed to a tattered sheaf of laminate. A blue circle enclosed a plump white exclamation mark above a similarly coloured rectangle full of runes. Sebastian studied it carefully.

“Health and Safety. Probably the most insidious curse of all,” he replied with an air of ‘something’ in his voice.

“Really?”

“Yep. Ah’kis’ biggest curse.” She looked at him curiously. The psychic link they shared meant that even when not ‘connected’ she felt something of his emotions and now she thought she detected humour; but before she could say anything, they came to two high wide doors. One was

already ajar. From within light spilled out into the stairwell.

“Dwarves?” she asked.

“I doubt it. They are almost totally blind and spend all their time down at the lower levels, or at least they did so back home. Besides, as I’ve told you many times, I’m rigged with biosensors that can pick up different molecules. I may not be as proficient as a dog but I can sense enough to know that there are no dwarf based odours coming from in there.”

Kassi understood enough of Sebastian’s archaic language NOT to ask him to explain—it was better to just nod and hope that what he meant did not involve the difference between life or death sometime soon. She said. “Possibly the cold drove them downwards back at Southend. They wear few clothes and it is pretty warm up top this far north. Conceivably they could venture higher in the dungeons?”

“A valid point, Kassi, but probably not so relevant here. Warmth or not, dwarfs dislike light.”

They stepped through the doors and entered a high ceilinged cavern that appeared to stretch northwards indefinitely. A series of dim bulbs shone in four rows thirty feet up and vanished at a point possibly miles away. It was at least sixty yards wide. They paused, allowing Kassi to regain a little of her vision after the dimness of the flaming torch.

There were similar doors across the vault and Kassi noted pairs of doors either side of the great hall about a hundred yards on and a further hundred yards after that. Other than the two of them the large hall appeared to be empty, although Kassi noticed a slight vibration through the concrete floor as if some heavy animal was nearby, stomping about.

“Machinery,” Sebastian stated bluntly.

“I thought perhaps a giant.”

“In all of our adventures since leaving Brackenwood have you ever seen a giant?”

“They say that elves are taller than men,” she retorted.

“Taller does not a giant make.”

She was about to reply that actually the definition of a giant was its tallness when a pair of doors to the right slid open with a dull scrape of sound and something emerged.

Kassi drew her sword and swung her shield into place. Sebastian dodged to the left, dropping the torch and darting into the shadows. Kassi watched as the thing closed in on her. It was big, reaching half as tall as the ceiling, which meant that Sebastian’s ideas about giants might need to be updated. It was also fairly slow, or at least pretending to be so. She heard metal scrape against metal, and as it moved there was the odd dull gleam of something hard and polished. Multiple legs skittered across the flooring and she saw at least three lenses snake out of the top of the

thing, each one eyeing her where she stood.

{ A troll!? Underground? I thought they were creatures found above? }

{ Perhaps thinking is not what we need to be focused upon just now, } Sebastian said hurriedly.

{ It appears to be in no haste to reach us, } Kassi replied hopefully.

As if hearing her ‘speak’ the Troll picked up speed.

“You distract it while I see about disarming it.” Sebastian spoke from somewhere; Kassi could vaguely feel his presence, even the direction he was in, but anything more specific was veiled.

“For once I would like to be the one who disarms things,” she whispered but knew exactly where her strengths lay. Dodging and slashing at things came easier than dismantling a troll. Even with no opposable thumb, (as he continually informed her), Sebastian was superb at finding just the right section of wire to cut through with his ‘fingers’. Kassi stepped forward and flexed her legs, standing on the balls of her feet in readiness. The troll moved faster and two rusting girders swung out from its back, vicious hooks attached to both.

She waited until the last second and then dived out of the things way, rolling up onto her feet in an instance. Cutting across with her sword, she felt it catch a leg and saw sparks and oil hang momentarily in the air. The troll slowed itself merely by slamming into the wall behind them. Perhaps if they stood each end of the large hall they could wear it out by watching it slam itself to bits.

{ That would take rather a long time, I suspect. Its carapace looks to be tungsten. }

“It’s easing off the leg I hit, so...”

She ducked as one of the hooks swung close to her head on a long oil smeared chain.

{ So it appears to want to keep you as far from them as it can. } Sebastian replied within her head.

Kassi hated sarcasm, or at least Sebastian’s. “So a good slash from another direction may help?”

{ I have my ‘hands’ full up here, Kassi; sorry, lass. }

She glanced up to see Sabastian hanging from a second chain as it swung in an arc over the trolls ‘head’.

“Sebastian, the wall,” she called out.

{ I see it. } He dropped from the chain, twisting mid-air to land on all eight legs before dodging two of the troll’s large feet and sliding underneath its main body.



{ A bit more distraction, luv. }

Kassi shook her head silently, then ran forward into view of one of the troll's snaking eyes. She feigned a left then darted right, catching the creature off guard. The troll swung one of its legs laterally, trying to catch her own legs and knock them from under her, but Kassi jumped at the last second; managing to slash at some ancient jury-rigged tethers that held the leg together.

It fell to the ground with a satisfying crash just as she landed and rolled away under the thing. Sebastian was concentrating on a number of loose panels. She smiled to herself as he 'said' without turning to look at her. { I am NOT indecisive! If I cut into this thing willy-nilly there may be no usable batteries remaining. }

"There may be no usable us remaining."

Three snake-like appendages cluttered around, trying to feel for either of them.

{ You make a valid point, Kassi. } He slipped a single appendage into a small gap and pulled, metal scraping across metal. The plate buckled at first and then fell away noisily. Two of the arms stopped sweeping. The troll staggered up and took a few steps away before turning to face them; Sebastian hanging on to the thing's belly for all intents and purposes like a giant spider.

"Sebastian?" Kassi shouted.

He thrust his appendage in further and she saw his face light up from the circuits as they shorted. A smell of burnt plastic and wiring fanned outwards. Above her the troll continued to move.

"Backup treys?"

"More likely slow circuits. It has yet to realise it is dead." Even as he spoke the troll's movements slowed and he rolled out from underneath it as quickly as he could, just in case. The troll stopped moving, although parts of it whirled and clanged. An arm snaked across the floor blindly and Kassi's impression was that the behemoth was still somehow alive.

"Let's get the treys quickly," she said in a whisper, cautious of waking the thing.

"You're preaching to the converted here, luv. Let's see... There should be a bundle here."

He ripped at a side panel tearing it open with his hardened 'fingers'. Under a mass of wires and circuits she spied three black oblongs of polymer plastic.

Kassi's more dexterous fingers detached them from the monster and she slipped two into her backpack. The third she slid into the casing in her shield; + against + and - against - just as Sebastian had taught her. A blue light momentarily flared over the shield before extending outwards. Beneath her fingers she felt an array of buttons along the strap and wished they had more time to spend finding out what exactly the shield could do.

As though reading her mind—although she knew they were no longer ‘connected’—Sebastian said. “Great. Now can we bugger off out of here, please?”

They stepped back into the stairwell.

“All the way up?” she asked.

“Might as well. After bloody dwarfs and trolls nothing else can annoy us.”

“Demons?”

“May I say that you are the only human who has seen these ‘demons’,” he said gently.

“You’ve seen them in my mind,” she replied quietly. “You know that they are real. They took Kaze.”

“And we will get your brother back,” Sebastian replied gently.

The stairs eventually opened up into scrubland a mile from where they had first entered the dungeon. Kassi looked towards Northend, still over four thousand miles away. She could see down the narrow pipe that it was night there and the moonline was already on; a pale hoary sliver of the sunline masked by distant clouds. Southwards the sunline was still strong and at Southend itself reflecting off the large mass of snow and ice that was steadily accumulating there, or so she imagined. Southend was almost a thousand miles distant and lost in sunline and clouds, its end most likely a dot for this distance. She and Sebastian had seemed to be travelling for months to reach only this far along the world pipe.

Overhead, at the central axis of the pipe world, the sunline was fading and she could now see further around the curve of Ah’kis as it sloped upwards and over. As the dimmer moonline faintly appeared lights were coming on in a village clockwise almost one hundred degrees from them and the woods surrounding it still caught the remains of the light. Even from ten miles away looking almost down at this angle they saw only the tops of the trees and a murmur of starlings as they flowed like a dark cloud over the trees catching the late evening insects. Further still, around the curve of the pipe, the sunline obscured the opposite floor. It was a cloudless night.

Northwards, moonlight caught the tall spires of Circle City, still six hundred miles away and partially hidden by a corkscrew of dull clouds. Beyond it Kassi knew that the dark mass of the Ring Sea circled around and around the world, a broad band of water almost a thousand miles across; and beyond that something akin to lightning arched across the sky at The Spike. Kassi breathed in deeply the spring scents of hyacinths and lilac. She thought of her brother and the distance they still had to travel.

“Yes. We’ll find him,” she said.

THE END

SPRING 2018

# Schlock!

## Quarterly

Includes Two  
Episodes of  
Sword and  
Planet epic  
**THE CAVES  
OF MARS**

### **BENEATH THE TOWERS**

by Alex S Johnson

### **THE SEVEN WIVES OF RICHARD COPELAND**

BY LAUREN SCHARHAG

Plus Four More Stories  
from the thrilling pages of  
Schlock! Webzine



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## BOILED HEAD by Rob Bliss

Ma boiled the head this time instead of having Pa skewer it through the ears and giving it the slow roast over the barrel fire. Nelly and Fridge found a pot that was big enough, might've been a tractor gas tank, found by the blue Edsel, rusted to shit but that mostly scraped off, and besides a little iron is good for you, Gramps used to say. He's been dead near on ten years now, not even half of him decent enough to eat, rife with the syphilis, screwing wharf whores when he was in the Navy, screwing four-leggers with rabies. We're all meat for something, he used to say. We eat and are eaten, so if it don't taste good, screw it. So he did ... and we do.

Pa told Ma to burn off the beard and the rest of the head hair first since it'd take too long for the water to loosen the skin. They started arguing, naturally.

"Hair can be saved—make it into a shirt, a scarf—"

"Who'd ever want a raggedy old scarf made outa that frizz?"

"Ain't no worse'n yours—and you got a godforsaken nest of critters living in yours!"

"I ain't eatin' no hair head, god damn it all!"

"Blasphemer! Pray to Jesus right now! Kids—y'all kneel to Jesus before the head's ready—thank Him for this bounty we's gonna receive."

So we kids all, young and old, knelt with Pa on the sackcloth and ashes to the great chrome bumper Christ, feathered pretty with corn stalks and chosen rags and colourful wrappers. Greased hands folded, uttering praise and glory and the same old wishes by the dozen ... a cool breeze, a warm sun, a fair rain fallen in all the upturned hubcaps ... and, of course, for the occasional wayward traveller who can't read a map, who finds himself come our way.

The road provides. Months, years of quiet incest, death void of blue eyelids, then a short spurt of action and satisfaction. New kill always smells so clean, like rain still impregnating the clouds, flashing boom branches, making the hair rise between your legs.

We sometimes let them hope and try to use their little devices to escape, but mostly we're too hungry. Can smell the blood in 'em. Hear the hearts bumping the side ribs—tough not to think of barbecue. In a quick swarm of kin, we're all hopping and laughing and hard, and they scream. Scream good. Like music.

And soon the meat falls. After a bit of a run and then it's quiet, crickets in the grass. We don't hang 'em up to dry or talk—we ain't nothing to reason with, why do they always try? Before the sky bleeds its prettiest colours, they're all stripped and screwed, meat tenderized by chain and pelvis, and a few of us got new clean clothes to try on.

The daddy got a beard. That's what Ma and Pa were going on about. Must be the fashion of the times on the outside, beyond the dump, full beards for the fellas. Used to be handlebar

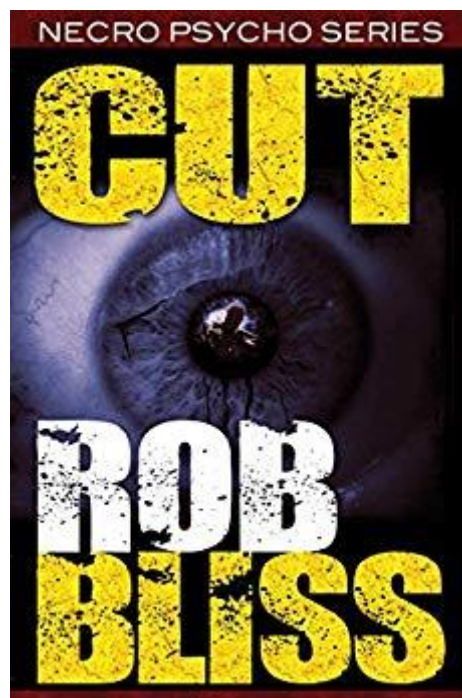
moustaches and side-chops. Even the son, in his first breeding years, had a wisp of beard on his smooth white chin to match his caterpillar. Some of the thinnest cockscomb I ever saw.

Anyway, don't know why Pa was bitching, he got his barbecue for most of it. Ma just wants her style once in a harvest moon. Took longer, but the taste is different. Even with all the hair scorched clean, head is head, boiled or baked or barbecued.

Always delicious meat.

Jesus got His share, too. Gotta feed the Christ.

THE END



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## THE ICE WARRIORS by Stephen Hernandez

*Thoric dwelt for many years in the strange land of Ultima Thule with his consort the Pale Lady. He arrived there after the Viking raiding ship he was aboard was dragged into the roaring maelstrom known as Hvergelmir. He was the only survivor. Washed ashore on an inhospitable beach inhabited by giant crabs, he believed he was in the Land of the Gods—Valhalla. He was rescued by a stranger who ruled the crabs. He journeyed through the land overcoming many perils until he came to the Castle of the Pale Lady, only to find that it was she, in different guises, who had rescued him throughout. She led him to her castle to overcome a dragon and rescue her in turn. Time in the Castle of the Pale Lady had no meaning, and Thoric dwelt peacefully in seeming paradise. But all that was about to change....*

It started innocuously enough: a message from the Pale Lady's raven. An iceberg had appeared out of the maelstrom, and was heading towards the same beach where Thoric had landed. This in itself was not unusual; all sorts of things washed ashore out of the mouth of Hvergelmir. But this iceberg was different—it contained what looked like a ship, and from its description Thoric knew it to be a Viking ship.

The tamed giant crab, Thoric's unusual steed that now lived in the Pale Lady's castle, had been asleep a long while. It was its habit when it grew bored. And too many juicy whelks, snails and eels served it on silver platters had made it fat and sluggish—it made sleeping all the more pleasant. Thoric roused it by repeatedly kicking its thick carapace. Stalk eyes reluctantly protruded from its moss covered shell, looking at him reproachfully. It had been having a good dream of wandering by the seashore and catching fish in the rock pools. It blinked. Its master, came into focus. Thoric was preparing his saddle to ride it! Wide awake now, the crab clacked its pincers with joy. Affectionately, Thoric patted its huge, craggy, barnacled back.

He did not need to steer the crab. As always, the crab seemed to know the path Thoric wished to take. Thoric had made the Pale Lady a promise to remain within the safety of her castle's walls until he was sure the frozen ship did not present a danger. Although he was not sure what sort of danger a frozen ship would pose, he felt uneasy.

Along the way he met up with his friends—the seven dwarves. He asked them to accompany him, which they did willingly. Sometimes even the steadfast dwarves grew bored of standing guard over their Sleeping Princess, but still they left two of their number—just in case.

The entourage arrived at the seashore without mishap. Both Thoric and the crab knew the lay of the land and managed to avoid any dangers. The giant crabs that inhabited the shore of the maelstrom recognised Thoric's steed as their leader and clacked their enormous mandibles in greeting. They accompanied them along the deserted, windswept beach.

They were met by a strange sight: the iceberg had beached. It was an enormous misshapen thing. The ice was opaque, but transparent enough to make out its contents. It was a Viking warship and the remains of its frozen crew were still aboard. Thoric immediately recognised it as a Drekar—a fearsome dragon ship, designed and used only for raiding, plundering, and principally killing. Even so he was glad to see the longship. A ship from his world—Midgard. It proved his

home did exist. Sometimes, alone with his thoughts, he wondered if it had all been a dream and Ultima Thule was the only reality. Now, he felt truly alive again.

The iceberg was grounded in the shallows. Close up it seemed as huge as a mountain. It had a strange inner glow like the green bioluminescence of the cavern fungus that the smaller crabs fed off, or some deep-sea creature seldom seen by the eyes of men. The cold waves washed and crashed around it to no effect. Even so it was melting. Gently weeping its pure frozen water into the briny ocean.

Thoric and his companions set up camp in one of the many caves along the beach. By some sort of mutual consent the crabs left Thoric and the dwarves alone in their vigil. The small group decided they would wait until the iceberg had melted properly, then burn the longship and its dead occupants—a proper Viking burial...

Thoric was dreaming a strange dream. He was in a world that was somehow familiar but on the other hand completely alien... he awoke to an even stranger reality. It was the alarmed clacking from his crab that alerted Thoric to the danger. He woke the dwarves, who were snoring loudly in their deep untroubled sleep, as if they did not have a care in the world. It was their Dwarvish way. There was not much that could keep a dwarf from his food or sleep. He had to kick them awake. They got up, grumbling in their guttural Dethek, rubbing sleep sand from their eyes. Thoric pointed to the seashore. Suddenly they were fully awake....

The day was unusually bright and the ice was fully melted. But it was not the now clear revelation of the Viking ship that that was holding them all in awe. The once frozen Vikings were twitching and shaking themselves—they were alive! The dwarves muttered amongst themselves: it was dark magick. The ship must have been cursed with some strange enchantment like their Sleeping Beauty.

Thoric was not interested in the dwarves' superstitions. He had seen something even more terrible within the now fully revealed Drekar than its unearthly, reanimated crew. He could not help but shudder at the sight. It filled Thoric with a remote dread he thought long dead. It was not the fearsome giant of a captain, the huge red-bearded warriors, or savage shield-maidens, but something shackled in chains to the mast. It wore only a filthy, ragged loincloth. Something... not quite human. Something... betwixt a man and a beast. Something... that struck chill fear into his heart, like a dagger of ice from whose frozen embrace it was emerging. Something even worse than a Viking warrior... the sum of all men's fears: it was a Berzerker.

The Pale Lady's raven, who had accompanied them the whole trip, flapped its wings as if it too shared Thoric's alarm. It flew back to its owner's castle. Thoric rapped on his crab steed's iron-like shell. It was a means of communication they had developed between each other over the years. The crab lurched off sideways in its habitually awkward form of ambulation, to summon its fellows and give them the relayed orders. After years of knowing the crab, Thoric would normally have observed this with some amusement, as he knew his friend was trying to look dignified, given its now exalted position as the steed/bodyguard of the Pale Lady's prince, but today there was no place for merriment.

The dwarfs wanted to know if they should accompany Thoric to greet his countrymen. Thoric told them that for the moment they should remain in hiding and see what the Norsemen did. The dwarfs, who were eager to meet the strangers, could not understand Thoric's hesitation. Then Thoric told them about Berzerkers....

He had never seen one in the flesh but he had no need to be told that the ragged half-human, half animal thing was one of the legendary killers. A demon in human form that even the most ferocious Viking raider feared. The legends of their terrible deeds were passed from father to son and were used by mothers to scare their children into obedience. 'If you are naughty, a Berzerker will come for you... he'll rip out your heart and eat your liver'.

The one they called Doc (on account he could read) said, 'But the thing has no weapons.'

'Aye,' said Grumps (on account of his belligerent temper), 'he'll be no match for mar axe.' He stroked the razor edged with something akin to fondness—as if caressing a woman. An unnatural and unlikely event in itself as dwarf women are as rough (and bearded) as their menfolk, and made Grumps temperament seem mild in comparison.

Thoric said, almost to himself, 'What need does a Berzerker have of weapons when it is a weapon itself...'

The once frozen warriors were fully animated now. There were only fifteen of them—half a crew. They were all enthusiastically banging their axes or swords against their shields so hard that they made enough noise for several crews on the deserted beach. They did not seem at all bemused by the foreign shore or their miraculous reanimation. Thoric knew the prelude to a raid when he saw one.

He ordered his crab to summon his comrades and send a group of the largest of them down to the shore. He was sure that the sight of them would deflate any ideas of fighting that the Vikings might have, enable him to talk to them, and welcome them peacefully to Ultima Thule. It was a dangerous enough place without bloodthirsty Vikings roaming the country. Instead of being horrified at the sight of the giant crabs swarming from the dark caves, clacking their huge claws, the Vikings gave a joyous yell and charged full-on at them. The carnage was terrible. But it was not the newly thawed raiders who were slaughtered. It was the crabs. The Viking warriors leapt onto the backs of the creatures and somehow managed to hack through the thick carapaces. Shards of chitin flew through the air and the giant crustaceans' soft flesh was revealed. They hacked off claws as if they were mere twigs and pulled out the crabs' eyes by the stalks as if they were uprooting weeds. Even when the crabs managed to snip off a limb, the warriors took no notice; fighting without a leg or arm seemed to mean nothing to them. One of the Vikings even managed to kill a crab by battering it to death with one of his own legs that the crab had sliced off. In the end all that remained of the giant crabs were bits of shells, stalk eyes, flesh and gore spread over the beach.

Thoric's steed gazed at the scene, its eye stalks at their fullest extension and clacked and clicked its mandibles in alarm. Worse was to come... the Vikings fell upon the dead and dying crabs, gorging themselves on the raw flesh, noisily sucking the giant claws and pulling lumps of meat

from the carapaces. Crab juice and crab meat ran down their faces and mixed with their beards. They sang songs to Odin and Thor, of war and triumph, all the while. Then, as was the Viking way, once they had feasted they set up camp.

Thoric ordered the remaining crabs to flee the recently desecrated beach with them. They had to put some distance between them and the Vikings whilst he decided what to do. They put a day's march between them and the raiders. The Dwarf known as Shy, on account of his bashfulness, was left to keep watch on the Vikings and report on their movements.

Thoric sat alone in his tent to think. He had faced many dangers in his time in Ultima Thule, but they had been dangers to himself. Now the whole land he had grown to love and care for was in danger, and to him had fallen the unenviable task of saving it. He would need all his wits. When it came to using his wits he always fell back on the memory of his father. His father had been a farmer, and once a great warrior of some renown. Songs were often sung of him in the Great Hall. They were songs that told not so much of his great valour but of his great cunning. Perhaps that was why he had survived so many raids. Thoric liked to think of him as a kind of Ragnar Lothbrok—his boyhood hero. Ragnar 'Shaggy Breeches', as he was more commonly known, was by far, to his way of boyish thinking, the greatest Viking that ever lived. He remembered only too well the day he mentioned this to his father. He was speechless with surprise when his father let out a great bellow of laughter—he seldom laughed after Thoric's mother's death. He was even more surprised to learn that his father had actually met Ragnar. Thoric's admiration for his father increased tenfold, if that were possible.

'Do you know why he was called 'Shaggy Breeches?'' his father asked.

Thoric had always been told in reverent tones that it was because Ragnar had been a humble farmer—just like his father. He repeated the stock answer. His father merely chuckled.

'I will tell you about great Ragnar Lothbrok's trousers.'

Which he proceeded to do with great relish...

According to his father Ragnar always wore loose, baggy, brown trousers not because of his farmers' roots but to disguise the fact that since childhood he had always suffered from incessant chronic diarrhoea. From a distance it was not so noticeable, because of the trousers, but up close the smell was unmistakable.

In one stroke his father had destroyed all Thoric's notions of a hero.

He tried to summon his father's spirit in his head. What would he do in this situation? The answer came to him in a flash of insight. The key was the Vikings themselves. These were clearly no ordinary raiders. To have survived the maelstrom was one thing but to have massacred the hitherto indestructible giant crabs with such ease was another. They needed to find out their secret and in order to do that they needed to capture one of them—easier said than done. They would have to separate one of them from the closely knit group.

It was rare that a Viking would venture alone into unknown territory. They always travelled in pairs or more, even if it was just to forage. But here would be some scouts amongst them and they would need to isolate one of these. He put his plan to the dwarves who readily agreed. They had no knowledge of Vikings, apart from Thoric, and as far as they were concerned he would know best on how to deal with them. All of them except Grumps agreed. Grumps, with a face as red as if it had recently been sandpapered, was still polishing his axe, wanted to fight them head on, but Thoric pointed out to him that was just the way the Vikings were used to fighting. Great warrior, though he was, he would be no match for all of them. The flattery temporarily eased Grumps' bloodlust, and he went back to murmuring his misgivings to his beloved axe.

The trap was set. Shy reported that two scouts were approaching the swampland. It was full of poisonous serpents that the dwarves were skilled at avoiding. Dopey, so named because of his constant slack-jawed expression was a key part of Thoric's plan. Dopey had apparently fell out of a tree when he was young. It was this misadventure many believed that was the cause of his idiocy. That, and climbing a tree. Dwarves did NOT climb trees. They just didn't have the bodies for it. They had bodies made for digging and burrowing. You might just as well have asked a dwarf to fly as climb a tree. They much preferred being underground than above it... apart from Dopey. His permanently bewildered countenance was misleading. Thoric considered him the sharpest of the dwarves, and that included Doc. One of Dopey's 'gifts' that did not go unnoticed was his extraordinary ability to imitate voices....

The two grizzled Vikings plodded slowly and cautiously through the swamp. They had already spotted several huge serpents sliding easily through the mud. Some of them had bellies the size of a strong man's thighs and were as long as a tree. The serpents could quite easily swallow a man whole, and the Vikings for the first time since their arrival showed caution. The deeper they penetrated into the swamp the thicker the vapours rising from the mud became. Inevitably the two warriors became separated. This was where Dopey came in. He and Shy had been following the two huge grizzled men since they entered the swamp. It had been easy work. The Vikings seemed oblivious to the fact that they might be being followed, or more chillingly—they simply didn't care. Dopey had learned the two men's names and some of their vocabulary by just listening to their conversation. Once the men were separated it was easy to lead them in different directions by imitating their voices. The Viking they had picked to draw into the trap was led farther and farther away from his companion by Dopey pretending to be his friend calling out to him in the distance.

The trap was actually a real trap—an animal trap. A cruel device. It was simply a hole in the ground disguised with thin twigs and moss. At the bottom were viciously sharp stakes. Thoric thought it unnecessarily cruel but necessary. In order to give mediation a chance, he proposed to stand in front of the hole and only move aside if the Viking proved overly aggressive....

There was no negotiation. The warrior just charged at him. It was difficult getting the Viking's body off the stakes. Not least because he was still alive.

The body came away in pieces. Each individual piece was still pulsing faintly with life, and the man's head never stopped a never-ending stream of profanities. Thoric did not bother to translate his words. They were too foul. It was not the only strange thing about the body that should have



been a corpse. The skin had a greenish tinge, and still appeared to be frozen. There was no blood—just red ice. It was only when they built a small fire to cook a brace of coneys that the Viking went quiet. The Viking's disembodied head stared at the flames in stupefaction, as if he had never seen such a thing before. Doc experimentally brought one of the burning branches closer to the head's face. The look of stupefaction turned to one of terror, and then came a torrent of supplication from the previously aggressively vociferous Viking.

The dwarves asked Thoric to tell them what he was saying. Torn between pity and remorse he reluctantly told them—he had already guessed the consequences. 'He is begging us to kill him. The warmth from the fire has reminded him of being alive.'

'An' 'ow are we to do that?' asked Grumps, suddenly interested. 'Ow you kill somefin' tharts already dead?

Thoric looked sad.

'He wants us to burn him. Well... all the bits of him, anyway.'

'No problem there then,' Grumps said, piling more wood on the fire.

Grumps threw one of the man's feet experimentally onto the flames. The Viking let out a shrill scream of anguish. Thoric and the dwarves, apart from Grumps, blocked their ears. Even the crabs showed visible signs of distress. Clacking their claws and clicking their mandibles they withdrew their eye-stalks into their sockets. Grumps had an entirely different reaction...

'Arl fix his noise,' he said. He proceeded, much to the others' horror, to sew up the Viking's lips.

When it was all finished, only Grumps seemed satisfied with the grizzly work.

'Now we know how to destroy them,' he said to Thoric.

'Really? And what do you propose—we invite them all to a barbeque?'

Grumps went off in a huff.

The Pale Lady walked down and down a never-ending staircase. It was a long time since she had visited the castle's dungeons.

She took a large key from around her neck and opened the thick iron door. Inside there was only darkness. With a wave of her hand there was light. In one corner, piled on a bed of hay, there was an enormous black egg. The last remaining dragon's egg....

The Pale Lady's raven arrived back at their temporary camp with a message that a troop of μούδιασμα City's finest soldiers were on their way. The Numb City's inhabitants owed a great favour to Thoric and they had not forgotten. It meant they would have to delay the Vikings until their arrival.

Doc handed Thoric a small leather purse. 'Inside, there may be what you are looking for.' He strolled off, whistling some long forgotten Dwarvish tune, something about whistle while you work. It was catching, and Thoric found himself whistling it as he opened the pouch. It contained a nut wrapped in some dry leaves. Without even thinking what he was doing, he popped it into his mouth and swallowed. At first nothing seemed to be happening and he put it down to one of Doc's ever increasing eccentricities. Then he noticed the rain. It was gradually slowing until he could perceive one drop at a time as it crashed to earth. He watched a dew drop fall from a leaf—silent. Then the thunderous impact as it met the ground and splintered into a thousand dazzling shards. And then all was black....

He was standing above a rabbit hole. He watched the little white furry tail disappearing down the burrow. With a hunter's instincts, he reached out to grab it. And then he found himself falling...falling.... But this was no ordinary sensation of falling. It was more like floating downwards, as if he were a leaf separated from a tree and caught on a gentle breeze. Strange objects floated around him, some going down, some going up. Finally he stopped and found himself seated behind a long bench. Facing him in a much larger chair was a tall, stern looking man dressed in strange clothes. He spoke, his voice booming from every angle. Thoric knew he was in the presence of a great wizard. Perhaps he was in the very halls of Hel itself.

'I am Jeremy Paxman, and this is University Challenge.' Without even attempting to shout, his voice radiated power, and somehow Thoric understood the language.

Thoric looked around him. Emaciated young men with long bedraggled hair coupled with an unhealthy pallor sat beside him. Their pale and rash covered skin spoke of days long deprived of sunlight and healthy food and drink. Clearly they were prisoners dragged from some foul dungeon. Thoric was in no doubt the Paxman meant to torture them.

He did not know how he managed to understand the strange Paxman language but he could, and so, seemingly, could the other prisoners—it must all be part of Hel. Even his bizarre questions aimed at the poor, clearly demented captives were not normal questions; they were beyond any human comprehension except the tortured souls themselves.

They wilted under his gaze and visibly trembled when they attempted to answer. Then the Paxman turned his terrible gaze onto Thoric.

'And your bonus questions are on Norse Mythology.'

Thoric felt something unspontaneous arise within him as if he were on the verge of vomiting: He KNEW this!

The first question fired at him from under the thunderous eyebrows was, ‘What was the real reason that Ragnar Lothbrok was known as “Shaggy Breeches”?’

He found himself telling the Paxman, and the audience who were hidden in the darkness of Hel, the embarrassing details of his hero’s impediment.

The Paxman congratulated him on being right and the hidden audience of Hel cheered. The Paxman eyed him once again with his malevolent gaze and gave him another question.

‘What drug was believed to be administered to the Berzerkers to make them so wild in battle?’

Thoric thought he knew the answer to this question also because his father had told him. They were fed a cocktail of drugs, with the main ingredient being betel nut wrapped in its leaf, probably the same drug the Doc had given him. He was right once again and was told he had been awarded points. These no doubt would be the points of arrows that would be fired into his body.

He was told he had to answer one last question. He had to identify a piece of music. Thoric was not sure what music really meant. His ears were suddenly bombarded by the most terrible cacophony. Men wailed, strange instruments screeched, and drums thumped in complicated synchronicity—truly the sound of his impending execution. Thoric could take no more—the merciful darkness of oblivion overcame him....

Thoric awoke to find the preoccupied face of Doc looking down at him. ‘I think you have been suffering a nightmare.’

Thoric nodded, ‘I have been to Hel and back,’ he said.

Doc nodded, ‘I too have visited that terrible place. Every person who partakes of the secret medicine experiences a different version of that unhappy world... some, it is said to make wise, others merely mad. I trust it has made you wiser.’

‘I think so, and now I think I know how to delay these ice warriors. But it depends if you have more of your special medicine.’

Doc said he did but he did not advise Thoric to take anymore. Thoric explained it was his belief that the Vikings had not released the Berzerker because they did not have any of the nuts left or they had been washed overboard. It would have been common practice for his compatriots to release the Berzerker first before they themselves landed. The fact that they had him still chained to the masthead, and that he appeared to be sleeping would seem to confirm this.

Thoric wanted to know if there was a way that the Doc could somehow poison the nuts and immobilize the Berzerker and any other Vikings that ate them. It would give them time to wait

for reinforcements from the Numb City. They had fine archers amongst them and it was Thoric's plan to use the black ooze, which was unusually inflammable and floated in puddles on the swamp land, to bathe the arrowheads, ignite them, and use them against the warriors. They would also burn the longship. If anything was likely to deter the Vikings from further attack, it was the sight of their beloved vessel and home being destroyed.

The Vikings were suspicious when only one of their scouts returned. Their leader took half his warriors to search for him. They came across a strange shrine and there is nothing Vikings liked more than stealing from shrines. They recognised Dwarvish carved ornaments and goblets, but it was the offerings placed on a dish before the unknown god that interested them most. Betel nuts wrapped in leaves.

They went back to their camp to celebrate and awaken their Berzerker.

Thoric and the dwarves watched on in disappointment as the Vikings celebrated by sacrificing to the god Odin a goat they had captured, but left the nuts untouched. Then came the moment Thoric had been waiting for. They unleashed the Berzerker and fed him some of the nuts. These had been heavily soaked in one of Doc's concoctions and they would have killed any normal man, but a Berzerker was not a normal man. They looked on in horror as the Berzerker started to sniff the ground on all fours, like a dog picking up a scent. It bared its teeth, except it no longer resembled either a man or a dog. It looked like a wolf—a ravenous wolf. It had picked up their scent and now death was surely upon them.

The ice warriors followed behind the Berzerker. Thoric felt he would rather die like a man than a cowering wretch, so he and the others stood along a ridge above the beach accompanied by the remaining crabs and awaited their fate.

The Berzerker made a horrible grimace which could perhaps have been interpreted as a grin on a human. The ice warriors cheered and smashed their axes against their shields, a prelude to their charge and the carnage to come.

Then they all suddenly stopped. Including the Berzerker. They were all gazing with stupefaction at something in the distance. Thoric realised that whatever it was, it was behind them. He turned around cautiously.

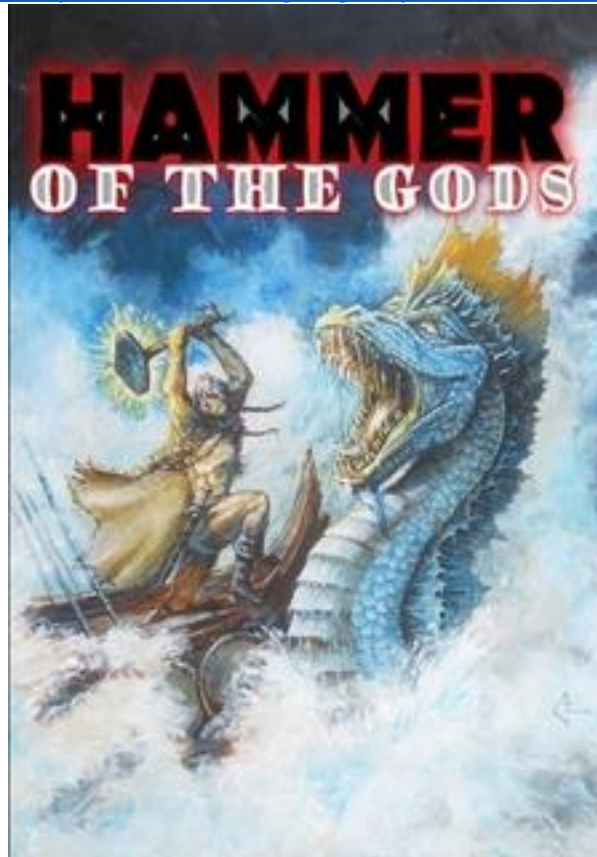
He did not know if his heart should leap with joy or he should fall on his knees in worship. There was the Pale Lady on her majestic horse accompanied by an escort of the Numb City's soldiers. But it was what was behind her that held everyone in awe...

The Pale Lady held a thin leash as if she were walking a small dog. Except this was no dog—it was a dragon. Its nostrils were already smoking. The Pale Lady languidly let go of the leash as if she had mistakenly dropped it. The dragon took to the air as if it was born for it. Which of course it was. What happened next took less than seconds. All that was left of the ice warriors, including the Berzerker, were puddles of steaming water. Then, the dragon obediently returned to the Pale Lady's side.

The entourage turned their back on the beach. Thoric took one last look at the cinders that remained of the longship. Whatever links he had with his home were gone. He followed as obediently as the others behind the Pale Lady back into Ultima Thule.

THE END

You can read more of Thoric's adventures in Ultima Thule in Rogue Planet Press anthologies [\*Hammer of the Gods: Viking Sagas of Sword and Sorcery:\*](#)



and [\*Hammer of the Gods II: Ragnarok\*](#)



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## LIBRARY by Benjamin Welton

“You want to know a secret about this place?”

Jane leaned over Patrick’s cubicle. Her wide, green eyes twinkled with electric excitement. Patrick saw a hint of drool at the corner of her mouth.

“Sure. I’m always happy to know secrets,” Patrick said a little too eagerly.

He had been working at the library’s archival research centre for about two months. It was an easy summer job that paid okay. For a struggling Ph.D. student like Patrick, \$13 an hour was a lifesaver that allowed him to (barely) pay the rent each month. So far, only his fellow workers made the job somewhat annoying. There was Lynette, the diminutive and loud New England Italian who only talked about her physical illnesses; Georgina, the faux-English 80-year-old who bragged about sleeping with B-list actors from the 1970s; Prospero, a sluggish non-entity whose milquetoast personality did not live up to his outlandish name; and Cathy, a woman who danced in the kitchen while making tea and talking about how she was almost a famous poet. The other workers in the centre were graduate students too. Patrick tolerated them, although he often grew tired of hearing about their cats and anti-anxiety medication.

Jane was the only person in the entire building that Patrick actually liked.

“This place, including the downstairs library and the vault, are cursed!”

“What?”

“It’s cursed. I mean, I don’t know for sure that there is some kind of hex on this place, but it certainly seems like it.”

“What do you mean specifically?” Patrick took a sip from his cup of coffee, but spit it into the trash can when he realized it was stone cold. He choked on the near-frozen liquid until Jane slapped him hard on the back.

Jane laughed, then continued: “Do you know how many people have died after working here? I have been here less than a year, and I have already seen two brain aneurysms and one bicycle accident. Prospero nearly died three months ago from a heart attack, but managed to cling to life.”

“Jesus!”

Jane laughed again, this time because Patrick exclaimed so loudly. Luckily, they were the only ones in the office; the rest of the staff was away at a lunch meeting.

“Right? I’m telling you that this place is cursed. Better yet, I did hear one story from the cleaning crew about how badly cursed this place might be.”

“Okay, I’m game. Lay it on me.”

“Well, Claudio is the Portuguese janitor that cleans our carpets, and...”

“Wait, I thought he was Brazilian.”

“No, I’m pretty sure he’s Portuguese. Or maybe he’s from the Azores. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. So, one night way back in the day, Claudio left work at his usual time—5:30 p.m. However, on this day, Claudio made it all the way to Brookhaven without realizing that he had left his cell phone in his locker.”

“Dude, I would have been flipping out,” Patrick said over a fresh cup of coffee.

“Me too. I have panic attacks if I walk outside without my cell, let alone drive twenty minutes without it. But I guess Claudio is made of sterner stuff, right? Well, that night, Claudio came back to the building. It was around 7-7:30, and since it was winter, it was pitch black outside. The only light was coming from our floor.

“Realizing that nobody should be working here that late, Claudio took the south elevator up, walked a few steps into the lobby, then heard the boss’s door slam shut.” Jane pointed to the office door belonging to Camille DeJean, the centre’s boss who never came to work.

“Next, the lights in the reading room started to flicker uncontrollably. There were sounds of glass breaking and cries of pain. Claudio was freaked so bad that he forgot all about his cell phone and drove home. The next day when we opened, there was no sign of any disturbances.”

“Maybe it was a nightmare,” Patrick said.

“No way. I’ve talked to Claudio down in the lunch room. That guy is still shaken up about the whole thing. He’s even convinced the other cleaner, Angelina, to never come up here.”

“So that’s why this place is so dirty,” Patrick snickered.

“I don’t know about you, but I think this place has a ghost. Maybe even a demon. That’s why employees keep dropping like flies.”

“Now why would we be haunted? Our building was only built in the ‘90s. Nobody ever comes in here either. What would cause a haunting here?”

“Man, have you ever looked through our archives? We have some seriously old stuff here. Some of the books are from like the 1600s. One book I saw was written in Latin and bound in human skin.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. I’m telling you, one of our archives contains a spirit or a curse or something else. I’m



going to prove it tonight if you want to join.”

“How are you going to prove it?”

“EVP sessions, video cameras, tape recorders, and thermal imaging, man. Document the haunting with science. Haven’t you ever watched *Ghost Hunters*?”

“Sure, but that is all fake.”

“The show might be, but ghost hunting is the real deal. I have done it before and have heard some crazy stuff. I’ll let you hear it tonight if you come.”

Patrick finished the remnants of his coffee. He smirked at Jane, but remained silent for a while. When he spoke, he slammed his paper cup on his artificial wood desk.

“Sure, what else have I got to do on a Tuesday night?”

Patrick met Jane outside the building later that night at nine o’clock. The flat, grey library occupied a desolate block right next to an industrial park. Its only other neighbour was a scrubby field that once hosted baseball games. Besides Jane and Patrick, nobody else was around.

“You ready?”

“Sure. How are we getting inside? Are we breaking in?”

“Nope. I grabbed the keys from Angelina. She crossed herself and warned me not to do this, but whatever.”

“I guess we’re both crazy.”

In response, Jane shook the small clutch of keys. She used a long and oddly shaped one to enter a side entrance, then picked a chubby key to unlock the security doors guarding the library’s main reading room.

Patrick looked around the empty and dark building. “Damn, libraries are spooky when they’re empty.”

“Yeah, like schools.”

Jane pressed the “Up” button on the south elevator. The chime of the lift sounded disturbingly loud in the silence. They rode the elevator up to the sixth floor.

“Okay, I’ll set up here in the lobby, you go in the reading room.” Jane handed Patrick a small tape recorder. She then told him to keep his cell phone on “Record” until it almost ran out of power.

“And do not turn on the lights,” Jane barked as Patrick walked towards the reading room.

The reading room was no bigger than a college classroom. However, it was full of knick-knacks, like sculptures of Greek gods, landscape paintings, and movie posters from the 1940s. Underneath the display cases, which housed everything from newspaper clippings to photographs and at least one combat knife from World War I, were rows and rows of books. Patrick had never bothered to look at any of them, so he decided to start snooping.

Patrick leafed through several small, army-issued pulp novels that were fraying to the point of extinction. One book’s cover showed a partially nude woman in the clutches of a giant robot or alien with green skin or steel plating. He tried to be as gentle as possible with this book, but ripped at least three pages while Jane asked questions to the ghost. This was all part of her EVP session. Patrick also asked questions, but he was mostly concerned with rifling through the books.

He thumbed through another book. This one was a history hardcover, written in 1965. It concerned somebody named Alfred Packer, a prospector who went out West in the 19th century. While snowbound with others high up in the Colorado mountains, Packer resorted to cannibalism. Patrick noted that the book’s dust jacket claimed that the author thought that Packer was innocent of the charges.

Patrick stopped his impromptu book search when he landed on a medium-sized brown book that smelled very, very old. The binding was rotten, and the leather was chipping and had probably been chipping for over a hundred years. Using his cell phone as a reading light, Patrick cracked the spine on the tome and began. Reading proved impossible because the writing was a mixture of Greek and Latin. The spidery text, which was in red ink, would have been indecipherable even if it had been written in American English. Patrick flipped back to the front page in search of an author, but could find no name. The only thing on that page was a strange coat-of-arms that portrayed a triptych: the left side showed a knight in green-ish armour riding a pale white horse, while the middle section showed a black castle high up in the mountains and surrounded by a meandering moat. The final section on the right was downright gruesome: it showed the severed head of a man with a long black topknot and a moustache. The head’s left eye was being feasted on by what looked like an inky crow.

Patrick was on the point of putting the book away when he came across the pictures. One was a crude drawing showing a rural scene where a group of nude tribesmen were dancing around an open fire. Above the flames and on a grill, Patrick saw pieces of severed human flesh. Another picture, which had also been drawn by hand, showed the cannibals feasting on the cooked flesh. Towards the back of the book, Patrick saw a drawing of a strange demon-like figure with a bull’s face and horns. Where the creature’s stomach should have been there was a rectangular window with flames and the shadows of grasping hands. That is when the lights of the reading room flashed on.

“Okay, my elbow really hurts from PT this morning. Gosh I need some Advil.”

Lynette was seated at one of the room’s desks. She was nude, but had a white table napkin

placed over her knees. An equally nude Prospero took a long and slow sip of seltzer water, while Georgina, also nude, mindlessly worked a crossword puzzle.

Only Jane and Claudio paid any attention to Patrick. Claudio pointed a revolver at him, while Jane was sharpening a large butcher knife.

“Don’t worry, Pat, we won’t eat until the boss shows up. The bad news is that we will be eating you.”

Patrick tried to make a run for safety, but Claudio shot him in his left kneecap. The blood began oozing out, the deep red mixing with the lighter red of the reading room’s carpet. The pain was unbearable.

“Don’t hurt yourself trying to escape. It is pretty hopeless,” Jane said.

Patrick wanted to ask why they were all doing this, but he could not form words to save his life. All of his energy was focused on his wounded knee.

“You know that book is really fascinating. It has taught all of us quite a lot, but it has been terrible for our employee turnover.”

Georgina laughed at Jane’s comment, but did not look up from her crossword puzzle. Cathy, who was knitting while nude, said in a childish sing-song voice, “She’s here.”

The chime of the elevator rang. Patrick felt the carpet shake. Something heavy was coming. He heard it utter a deep, inhuman moan. Its toenails, which had to be long, tapped on the carpet. The horror of it all dawned on Patrick—the boss had arrived.

“I got to tell you, my therapist is not doing anything for my lower back. Gosh, it hurts so bad,” Lynette said to Prospero over the wet crunch of the first bite and Patrick’s last scream.

THE END

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## MR GAUNT by Gregory Owen

### Part Two

That afternoon warranted another visit to Liza, but she, of course, didn't believe him. Hunter was cognizant of the fact that he was causing undue stress on her and her pregnancy, and he understood that he probably sounded completely insane. Who wouldn't? He still had difficulty comprehending it all himself, so he decided to take her advice at the time, though, just to humour her: to deal with his grief, he just needed to calm down and wait, and concentrate on what he loved about Aubrey.

After two days of trying, Hunter believed he had waited long enough—too long, in fact—and determined that what he loved most about his sister was her being alive and making the Dahl family whole. He knew he had little to go on as evidence of Mr. Gaunt's identity. He merely had a hunch built around a poem and some theories from legends, but he was intelligent, and this hunch, this stirring feeling down in his bowels, told him that he was on the right track.

Hunter knew that he really needed to take his time, to plot how he was going to go about the final step of his plot, but his desire for vengeance turned to impatience, which in turn became recklessness. He needed to act, to get it all over with—Aubrey had been dead for much too long to him, for nearly a month, and he could wait no longer. Mr. Gaunt would meet his end, and he'd never hurt anyone else. Hunter just hoped he had some luck on his side.

How appropriate that a powerful storm began to brew on the night that Hunter enacted his endgame. Just like a movie, he had thought, looking outside his window, wondering if, just if, Mr. Gaunt was watching him, too. Just like he had done to Aubrey. Just like that night that he murdered her. No one else...never again.

Just after midnight, Hunter grabbed his long tan hunting coat and removed Dad's shotgun from his bag and loaded it, taking time to look down the sights like Dad taught him to on their past hunting trips, and placed it back inside. He arranged the gun, the ammo, and the knives to be easily grabbed in a pinch if needed, and stepped into the hallway. Looking down to Mom and Dad's bedroom, he saw no light coming from under their closed door, a definitive sign that they were asleep, or at least trying to get some rest. They rarely talked anymore, either; for both of them, it was just work, home, dinner, and bed. Maybe once they knew that Hunter had ended the threat, they'd return as close to normal as possible. He could only hope.

He turned to head down the hallway to the living room and to the front door, but Hunter paused at Aubrey's door. It was closed, or at least as closed as it could be, since Dad never replaced the doorknob and the wood was all cracked around where it would have been. The police still had the doorknob as evidence, anyway. Hunter imagined it was again the night of her death—all the blood, the broken glass, the ashes...

That reminded him. In all of his obsession and determination, he had forgotten to remove his own room's doorknob. He thought momentarily about how stupid that would sound: "I killed a monster with a doorknob." Indeed, it was odd to think of, but he mainly thought he could use the

brass doorknob as a deterrent, especially if it had truly burned the creature's hand during its...feasting...on Aubrey. It only took a few minutes for Hunter to return to his bedroom, get a screwdriver from his nightstand, and remove the screws holding the doorknob in place; he'd have finished sooner if he weren't worried about waking Mom and Dad, having learned how to do so from all of those times he had helped his father with repairs around the house. Looking at it as he placed it in his bag alongside the other weapons, he felt that while it might not end up being used to kill Mr. Gaunt, it could be seen as something of a symbolic lucky charm. In that foolish little way, he thought, Aubrey's spirit could be with him. After all, his lack of imagination had grown into something more accepting of those things in the previous weeks.

On his way out, Hunter made a detour to the garage and took the gas can that Dad used to fuel his lawnmower or in case either he or Mom ran out of gas, which could happen from time to time. Hunter thought that he could use it—maybe to conceal what he was about to do, or maybe to set this thing on fire. After all, fire scared Karloff's Frankenstein, so maybe it'd work on Mr. Gaunt. It couldn't hurt, and he'd pay Dad back for whatever gas he used. He also took a pack of matches from Dad's toolbox on his way out.

Thirty minutes of walking as the storm churned above and Hunter ultimately stood outside of the gates of the Green Oaks Mortuary. He looked about the property through the slender bars of iron, and could see very little thanks to the dim lights on the street. Now or never, he kept thinking, and as he pulled his bag tightly over his shoulder and held the gas can firmly, he climbed up and over and landed on the driveway as the rainfall began, slowly increasing in heaviness as each moment passed. Taking one last look around to make sure he hadn't been seen, Hunter made his way around the mortuary to the back, finding the back door and noticing Craven's Chrysler parked nearby. He could've been gone; he didn't need a car to go after prey. He didn't need his skin, either. But Hunter hoped, prayed, that the monster was inside.

Opening the back door, thankful that it wasn't locked, he saw that his prayers were answered. But why leave the door unlocked? Could it be that Craven was indeed a man, and not Mr. Gaunt like Hunter thought? Green Oaks was a small town, and strangely not dangerous from crime—not crimes committed by humans, Hunter posed, but still...or maybe Mr. Gaunt was so accustomed to not being found that he had grown arrogant. He was confident he wouldn't be discovered by anyone. It would be his undoing—Hunter Dahl would see to that.

Luck was on Hunter's side, though—it was possible that Aubrey was with him in some way, and maybe his doorknob was indeed some form of charm, for Mr. Craven was standing in right in view of Hunter as he stepped through the door, which led into some form of a backroom for supplies and surplus tools. They were all stacked neatly on shelves in neat little rows. Craven stood at a table near the far wall, his lanky silhouette framed by the dimming flicker of lamplight. It appeared he was writing—invoices for more funeral furnishings and tools, Hunter reckoned. It seemed that Mr. Gaunt had to definitely go all in for performances, doing everything to look like the mortician that the town respected, diligent and hardworking, even during late nights sometimes in between slaughters. Hunter figured that was why he was so hard to pinpoint, though not for him. Luck...or fate.

Near him was a collection of coffins, and their handles were a dark metal—not the typical brass,

but more like iron. Looking around, all of the metal of the gurneys, the carts, the racks, the shelves, everything was not made of steel, brass, or any other metal aside from iron, just like the gate and fences outside. Even the handle on the back door had been made of the same iron, but in that moment, Hunter had something else in mind.

He wasn't sure if it was adrenaline or maybe some of that arrogance belonging to Mr. Gaunt had rubbed off on him, but Hunter immediately felt the uncontrollable urge to reveal his presence to the monster within Mr. Craven's skin. He carefully placed the gas can down on the floor and unzipped his bag, pulled out Dad's shotgun, and pulled back both hammers, taking aim at the mortician's back as he did so. He wanted to kill this thing head-on, like a man—like he was well on his way to being.

"I know who you are...what you are," Hunter declared loudly, moving slowly forward. "And I'm here to put an end to it!"

"Hmm?" Mr. Craven looked around the room for the voice's source, finally focusing upon Hunter. Even in darkness, he appeared sickly, the skin of his face looser around the cheeks, the hair moist, and his pallor the colour of a gravestone. When he saw the gun aimed at him, he slowly raised his hands, appearing fearful, but Hunter got the hint that it was nothing more than an appearance. "Oh, my...what do you want?"

"You heard me," Hunter replied, not taking his eyes off of Craven. "I'm puttin' an end to you tonight."

Mr. Craven's head bobbed around, his eyes squinting, trying to ascertain who was training a potential delivery of buckshot on him, until he finally deduced who it was. "Hunter? Hunter...Dahl, correct? Aubrey Dahl's brother?"

Hunter felt his hands trembling. "Don't you say her name, you asshole!"

"Look...I am still...deeply sorry for your loss...I cannot begin to—"

"No! You did it! I know you're not Mr. Craven!" Hunter stepped closer. "How long has he been dead?"

Mr. Craven expressed ignorance, breathing slowly. "I am Donald Craven—"

"Bullshit!" He pulled the butt of the gun deeper into his shoulder. "Bullshit! You're a monster! You're Mr. Gaunt, and you killed Aubrey!" That was when he saw it. Mr. Craven's face didn't show it, necessarily—in fact, his expression of trying to remain cool didn't even shift after the accusation. But Hunter could swear that, for just a fraction of a moment, he saw a glint of satisfaction in the mortician's eyes, though it was gone almost as soon as it appeared. And then, he knew that his assumption was right.

"Aubrey," Craven muttered, and Hunter saw that the mortician's hands were lowering.

“Don’t you move!”

Craven smiled. “Fine. I grow weary of this little game, boy...” The act was at an end, and the creature no longer cared about the ruse. “Do you think you’re the first? The first to figure it out? I’ll give you some credit...you found me out pretty quickly. It’s as though most turn a blind eye to what goes on. It’s given me room to manoeuvre. It’s how I’ve been able to stay in this town for so, so long. Fear will do that for you.”

“Don’t move!” Hunter shouted again, and when he realized that Craven’s hands were now at his sides, he squeezed the trigger. The blast sent Hunter back a step and tore a hole through Craven’s shoulder, though the beast moved fast enough to knock the lamp off of the table, sending it to the floor with a shatter and leaving the entire room in the dark. Hunter could hear scampering footsteps as the monster took off running to any of the corners, just barely above his own thumping heartbeat, and could only blindly aim in any direction. God, why hadn’t he packed a flashlight? He couldn’t even see the end of the gun’s barrels in front of him.

Little did he know that his sister’s killer could see very well in this environment, his eyes capable of nocturnal vision. It watched Hunter, breathing heavily, excited by the prospect of another kill, even if the boy had discerned his identity. How had this little shit done so, and so easily?

Mr. Gaunt, throughout his years in Green Oaks, had taken great care to hide information about himself. While in different guises, he’d checked out books randomly from the library that contained detailed information about what he was, and after reading them, they’d be burned or shredded. After a number of years, especially with the invention of the Internet, he became bored with doing this; after all, the Internet only contained passing stories and accounts, few reliable and even fewer from people that weren’t “crackpots.” If he were honest with himself, he enjoyed the recognition. Even that poem, which had been around for nearly as long as he could remember—possibly soon after he came into being, long before he lived in Green Oaks—carried with it a most exquisite renown. He salivated when he heard residents using it as a macabre lullaby or children skipping rope to it in the park.

The monster remembered Aubrey; he remembered watching her at night once he learned of her, knowing that she could see him, too; knowing that she was terrified. This disguise as Donald Craven, the town mortician, had proven to be such an excellent way to blend. He’d have to find another one soon...but he had a more important matter to attend to.

Moving behind Hunter, who had dropped to the floor to hunt through his baseball bag, Craven began convulsing, but with a sense of control, as if practiced through decades of experience. Bones within began to shift and crack, and there were popping tears of cloth and skin, bursting open like an overinflated balloon, and his height began to increase slowly but surely, until he was three feet taller than the teenager. “I suppose I’ll be needing a new one anyway,” the creature gurgled, kicking off the Craven suit like discarded underwear.

The teenager could hear the noise, too, and was bristling with fright at the awareness of what was happening out of his view. He dropped the shotgun and frantically rummaged for one of Mom’s silver knives and plucked it from the bag.



Mr. Gaunt, content that he was able to eliminate his prey, felt it was time to gloat. “I don’t know how you found me out, but I think you just got lucky...lucky me.” He watched as Hunter searched his bag. “I knew you. But when I found out about her, oh...It’s been so long since I’ve tasted such tenacious meat. A little tough and it requires a bit more jaw strength to chew, but it’s satisfying all the same.” The creature hissed and smacked its slimy tongue along its gleaming, jagged teeth, sputtering translucent bile as it spoke. “I look forward to peeling your skin like paper and sucking the tender muscle from your bones! Your squeals will be fine music for my meal just like Aubrey’s...” The creature longed to savour the juicy electricity of the boy’s sticky flesh chunks, able to acutely hear Hunter’s speeding heartbeat as he spoke. “At least we don’t have to worry about anyone interrupting this time...”

With that, Mr. Gaunt broke into a stride and leapt at Hunter, who stood from his bag with both hands clutching items. A stinging sensation sent the monster back, but only briefly, and with a free hand, Mr. Gaunt gripped Hunter’s throat with long, spindly fingers. With the other, he removed what caused the pain: a silver knife. “Silver?” the beast scoffed, examining it, though Hunter could see nothing except pitch darkness. “Should have done more research, boy...though I know I left little for anyone to find...”

A blinding flash of lightning through a nearby window illuminated the room and Hunter could briefly see Mr. Gaunt’s true, ferocious form, and he gasped in terror and from lack of air. The monster’s grip was powerful, nearly enough to crush his larynx to dust, so he said what he felt he needed to say while he still could. “I...thought it was either...that...or brass.” Hunter brandished his bedroom doorknob, held in his other hand. “Copper...or zinc...or any other metals in it...”

In the dark, Hunter couldn’t see Mr. Gaunt’s expression. What was once satisfaction and a desire to taste his human flesh gave way to something the monster hadn’t felt in many, many years: fear. He had learned a long time ago to avoid copper, and anything that had it in its composition, namely brass, because of the terrible pain—it felt white hot when it touched him. He never knew why, but it just was. He remembered the doorknob in Aubrey Dahl’s room, having to grab it to barricade the door, and the agony of the touch; this child was indeed a lucky little shit. With a deafening roar, Mr. Gaunt opened his mouth and prepared to clamp his razor teeth into the morsel that he held before he could cause any damage.

Hunter, this time, was too fast for the monster—luck was on his side. Deducing that the roar was one of a terrified animal and believing, rightly, that it was a precursor to his own bloody end, the teenager forced the doorknob down Mr. Gaunt’s slimy maw as he lunged toward him. Hunter was sure that his arm would leave him, taken by the bite, but all he could feel was warm, gooey ooze soaking his skin and a rapidly swelling tongue, and the grip around his neck relinquished, dropping him to his knees. He tried to regain his breath when his attention was taken by a growing light from the creature. Oily liquid erupted from Mr. Gaunt’s mouth and onto the floor in front of Hunter. The refuse of it coated his clothes in uneven splashes, and when the monster’s blood began exploding into fire, Hunter scampered back to avoid being touched by the vomit splattering all around.

Alternating between screeching moans and vicious coughs, Mr. Gaunt ran aimlessly in a circle in

a poor effort to extinguish the flames consuming him, turning him to ash from the inside out as the doorknob's metal scorched through his being with agonizing fury. Pieces of flesh crackled off in hunks and exposed bone, and from the holes in its skin, tiny sparks of flame burst outward, providing a radiance brighter than anything Heaven could provide, emblazoning the room with pinholes of light. Within seconds, piece by piece, what had been Mr. Gaunt collapsed and disintegrated into nothing but blackened shreds of ash and the monster's wails became a whisper on the air.

He was unsure of why he did what came next, but Hunter found himself running his fingers through the crackling ashes of Mr. Gaunt's remains. He moved his fingers from one side to another, almost spellbound as he tried to comprehend and accept his victory, feeling the warmth of a month's worth of grief and happiness at avenging his sister wash over his cheeks until he felt a large object in the powder and sticky ooze. Thinking that it was what was left of the doorknob, Hunter quickly ascertained that he was holding something emaciated and twisted and nothing metal at all. It was the last truly physical, tangible remnant of Mr. Gaunt: one of his curled, clawed hands, which had somehow survived its owner's destruction.

Taking the appendage and putting it into his coat pocket, Hunter looked for the doorknob one last time—it must have been destroyed with him. Melted, perhaps turned to ashes, too. So, he then set about the last remaining step of his endeavour, making his way toward the back door and retrieving the gas can. Once he soaked the floors of the backroom, taking care to cover the ashy remains of Mr. Gaunt and the decaying portions of Mr. Craven's skin in a little extra, he moved into the front part of the mortuary itself and coated the carpets, plush and red and smelling slightly of formaldehyde until soaked with gasoline. With the last little bit of gas, he poured a trail to the back door, and, pulling his baseball bag over his shoulder, Hunter lit a match and started the blaze. And the first on his list of visiting, telling what happened, before anyone else, was his adult friend, Liza.

Once Hunter's tale concluded, he noticed that Liza was eying the remaining piece of the monster that slaughtered Aubrey with a look that no longer resembled horror, but had shifted to something more puzzling. To his young mind, it appeared to be closer to regret, as though a close family member had passed. He had seen it on both his parents' faces at Aubrey's funeral, and was sure his face had looked similar on that day, so he knew what it looked like; still, he passed it off as her being upset about the death of Mr. Craven, and maybe she couldn't separate the real man from the creature that had murdered him. Liza looked up at Hunter and her typically gentle expression was stonier. He felt icicles form in his bones. "I can't believe it," she muttered to herself. Through the kitchen window, the flashing red lights of fire trucks could be seen beyond the dripping rain like the blinking eyes of a waking demon.

"I know it probably sounds crazy," Hunter said, "but it's true. I've been telling you—I didn't believe it before, and I still had a hard time with it, but I definitely believe now. There has been some weird shit in Green Oaks..." He looked up and remembered he was in front of an adult. "Sorry..."

“No...I believe you.” She placed her hand on the severed hand on the table. “I just can’t believe...it.”

The teenager eyed Liza, confused, and he was unsure of what to say next. “So, now what? Should we call the police?” he managed.

“No.” She shook her head. “No. They wouldn’t believe it.”

“Well—”

“Hunter, dear, where did you put your bag? You didn’t have it coming in.”

“The dumpster by the Quik Mart on Moore Avenue. Didn’t want to get stopped by cops just in case, and didn’t want to bring a gun into your house...don’t need it anymore, anyway,” he sighed, smiling. “We’re safe, but I’ll get it back on the way home. Since it has Dad’s shotgun, you know.”

Liza nodded. “No one’s ever truly safe. But I’m glad that you’re alright.” She leaned back in her chair. “What of the doorknob?”

“Gone. I couldn’t find it. Definitely turned out to be a lucky charm.”

“Oh, luck is definitely what I’d call it based on what you’ve told me. Luck for me, too...since you’re okay.”

“I got him,” Hunter said proudly, finally smirking, comfortable after the ordeal earlier that night. “I may not have been able to find a lot on him, but I got the son-of-a...well, you know.”

“So, Hunter, since this turned out to be true, have you ever considered that maybe this Mr. Gaunt may not be the only one of his kind?”

Caught off guard by the question’s implications, Hunter leaned forward in his seat. “What-what do you mean?”

Liza could tell by his expression that he had not considered that idea. “There’s another poem, if I remember correctly. I haven’t heard it in a long time, and nowhere near as much as his. All of this, since your sister’s passing and what you’ve told me since...and tonight...it reminded me.”

“What poem?”

Closing her eyes, Liza ran a gentle hand over her stomach, trying to soothe the kicking of her unborn. “A companion to Mr. Gaunt’s. How did it go again?”

*You’ve surely heard of Mr. Gaunt,  
But what about the Missus?  
Like him, she truly loves to daunt,*

*She's meaner, twice as vicious.*

*It is true the male is cruel,  
He's really quite the beast.  
Yet his acts are merely fuel  
For all his spouse's feasts.*

*Mr. Gaunt loves to hunt,  
While she awaits her prey,  
She lures them in and strings them up,  
And sends them to their graves.*

*She needs no protection,  
Her husband's quite mistaken,  
His belief needs correction,  
His fears should be forsaken.*

Being the worst of the two,

*She'll take your flesh when it comes due,  
The Missus gathers all the food,  
All for her and her brood..."*

"Brood?" Hunter asked, staring at Liza, dumbfounded by the poem. "What is that?"

"Yes, it means 'child' or 'children.'"

"You never told me before..."

"I didn't want to add fire to what I thought was some kind of grief-fuelled fever dream, Hunter. But from what you've told me...it's something to consider..."

"Could there be another one? And a child?"

"Oh, I'm sure there is, Hunter. I doubt you can have one creature without at least a spouse. And spouses generally reproduce," she added morosely.

"I guess...that makes sense...I never heard that rhyme, though." Hunter's mind was alight with the implications of this new information. He was lucky when it came to killing the male...but a female? A child, or children? Multiple monsters? Shit.

"It's not as well-known. She's not as well-known. Not like him."

"Must not be...I saw nothing about that in any of the books in the library, or online...some mentions of him, yeah, and that was slim...but there was absolutely nothing about her or anything else related to him, really."

“So you killed a ghost,” Liza said. “In a manner of speaking. Someone...thing...that won’t be missed.”

“I did,” Hunter affirmed. “He killed Aubrey, and now we’re even. Green Oaks has nothing to be afraid of now...except for this Mrs. Gaunt, if she’s around.”

“Even. And I would hope not, for all our sakes.”

“Right.” Hunter looked about and saw the time on a nearby clock, an old wooden cuckoo clock with a swinging pendulum, and saw the time. It was nearly 4 A.M. “Oh, it’s that late? I’m sorry, Ms. Geller...I’ll go...I’d better get home. I just wanted you to know what happened...that you were okay, now.” He stood from his chair, pulling his coat tight and wiping his moist hair from his brow. “Oh, and I’m sorry about the mud...I can come by after school and clean it up for you...I’ll definitely get a shower before I come by again,” he attempted with humour.

“It’s fine, but you don’t have to leave just yet. Honestly, I wanted to talk to you about something...since we’re confessing things...” Liza looked up from the floor. “Did I ever tell you about the father?” she posed, gesturing to her midsection.

Hunter shook his head, sitting back down slowly. “Well, no, I always figured—”

“Dead?”

He nodded. “Or ran off or something. Like Jenny Orr’s dad. She lives at the end of my street.”

“No, we were simply separated. Though he did pass recently...” Liza trailed off for a moment before returning to her thoughts. “He...he was a good provider. Always has been. He definitely believed in the old “hunter-gatherer” role of the man. A bit old-fashioned, but still, he enjoyed it. Kind of like those poems...it’s funny now,” she laughed lightly.

“Yeah...maybe monsters are like people in some ways...I think even Mr. Gaunt was a person at one time...like I told you.”

Liza continued, as though lost in her own fantasies about her mystery man. “But he got a bit careless. Reckless. You know a bit about that yourself. He liked being out in the open, you know. A bit too much. I told him it’d get him in trouble, but he wouldn’t listen. He said I’d be safe as long as I stayed hidden, and let him do his work. He always had to be on the move.”

“Military?” Hunter asked, knowing a few of his classmates who had been new students once and said they ‘moved around a lot.’ Being a teenager with little experience in the world, he could only make basic conclusions on things of that nature.

“No, but we did move around a lot in the beginning...then he’d move off, and I’d follow...move, follow...it was a pattern. It was safer, he would say, to be separate.”

“Did he come to Green Oaks at all? Was he from here?”

Liza jumped, feeling the baby kick. “No, but he was here a while before I came.”

“Oh...well what was his name? Maybe I knew him.”

“I doubt it, Hunter. Few people truly knew him,” she muttered with a grimace. “But his reasoning for leaving in the first place...he underestimated me, since I’m a female, I suppose. It’s what most men do, and he always did it. I’m defenceless because I’m a woman, and with child,” she explained, stroking her hands along her distended belly. “After all, that’s how you and I met, wasn’t it?”

The teenager thought then that perhaps Liza’s hormones were suddenly kicking into overdrive, for her normally calm speech patterns, her reserved and caring demeanour, quickly took a turn. It was as though she were accusing him of a transgression. He didn’t like it. “Ms. Geller—”

“You thought I was helpless,” she continued. “But if you ask me, being an expectant mother...that only makes me more dangerous.”

“Ms. Geller, I don’t think I understand...”

“We can protect ourselves despite the stupid thought that we need protection. He needed protection. He needed it because he got too comfortable. I didn’t. I didn’t need it at all!”

Hunter Dahl, feeling every inflection of her rising voice stab into him like daggers, squirmed in his chair uneasily. What had come over Liza? He had saved her and everyone else in Green Oaks, though now he needed to look into this whole Mrs. Gaunt thing. He still couldn’t understand how it was possible that she was never mentioned. He was, barely, but not her, not at all. He looked about the room in a bid to remove himself from what Liza was saying, and perhaps to think of an excuse to leave. It had to be hormones, even though he wasn’t quite sure what those were—Mom and Dad had signed him up for the sex education class in the spring, so he’d find out then.

“Think of the Black Widow. The Female Mantis. The Lioness. All dangerous, and fully capable, females.”

“Right, Ms. Geller, but what’s your—” Hunter stopped once he realized something that had never occurred to him, not at all during his story, during Liza Geller’s “confession,” before that instant, and for a matter of a second, he wanted to kick himself more than he wanted to run. He wanted to call himself a dumbass, and mentally, he was doing so, questioning how he could be so stupid not to notice, but more than that, his inner voice was telling him to get out quickly but quietly. However, he was finding it hard to mask the horror revealing itself on his face, much less gather the composure to casually utter a plausible excuse and leave without arousing Liza’s suspicion.

“No brass,” he motioned with his mouth, but no voice exited his lungs. There was no brass in the

house. Not on the cabinets, the doors, the window latches—nothing. It was all iron. Just like-

“Oh, and Mrs. Gaunt, of course,” Liza concluded with a rigid grin.

Reflex took hold since his inner voice wasn't succeeding and Hunter rushed in his attempt to grab anything to use as a defensive weapon, but Liza was much too quick, the guise of the nearly helpless, pregnant, single mother gone in an instant. With inhuman power, she stood and easily took the boy's neck in one hand and hurled him effortlessly against the kitchen cabinet behind him. On impact, Hunter felt the wooden drawers and the countertop splinter inward from the force, and couldn't help but mentally question how he was still breathing as he collapsed.

The room flickered in and out, everything spinning, but Hunter could make out a low chuckle, and he could see Liza moving toward him, pushing his chair aside. Get up! his mind commanded, but he couldn't.

“I guess I'm not like those other powerful females, really. I like to toy with my prey. I mean, I draw them in and take my time...a mother-to-be has to have some hobbies. I would've killed you in time. I told him that you were my mark once he found out about you coming here...and when he found out you had a little sister, he couldn't resist. Impulses...young ones do taste very good, and you're young, yourself.” She sighed. “I just regret thinking you didn't have the nerve to face my husband. I figured you wouldn't live up to your threats, so I played them off—we all make mistakes. And if you did, well, I thought he'd have gotten you.

“We'd have argued over him taking my kill, but that's all. Just an argument. I still loved him, I hate to admit, despite his idiotic belief that he was keeping me safe from the world. Honestly, I came here to Green Oaks to try and entice him back, more so than in those other towns...let him meet our little one.” Liza's attention briefly left Hunter to her rounded stomach, but quickly returned. “I liked you, Hunter...you seemed so harmless, like a tiny gnat. An insect. But I suppose not. Even an insect can be dangerous. Poisonous. You're good...pretty smart...but not smart enough. Did you know his name isn't truly Mr. Gaunt?” Liza mocked.

While she talked, Hunter had barely managed to lift himself from the floor and propped his head against the wall. His neck throbbed with excruciating electricity, and when he tried to move his legs to try and stand, he made a horrible realization: he couldn't feel them. Oh God, he couldn't feel them!

“I also thought that maybe your grief over your sister would have stopped you. Again, mistakes. Grief over my husband won't stop me, either, or my child.” She giggled. “My brood.”

Panic consumed Hunter—there was nothing left of the luck he'd had earlier that night. The doorknob! It was gone...Aubrey's spirit was gone now! No brass, nothing to use to fight back! He gripped his knees and shook them fiercely, but they provided no response—no means to help him escape.

“If it's any consolation at all, he shared her with me...he always did share when we were together, and when I've been near...she was delectable...”

Rage bubbled from underneath all of the uncontrollable, dreadful fear permeating his every fibre upon hearing Liza share that fact about his deceased sister so coldly made Hunter wish he had a weapon, a means, to kill her slowly—much more slowly than he had even killed Mr. Gaunt, Aubrey's true murderer. "You...bitch! Aargh!"

"But I told him, over and over, that he would get into trouble, but damn him, he loved the recognition! This kill won't be his, but I wonder who'll get the credit!" Stopping just short of standing right on top of his legs, Liza paused, rubbing around her neck, and Hunter could make out the flesh's movement under her fingers, like an old glove that was too large for its hand, and had been used so often that it was in danger of ripping apart. "This skin has run its course, I think. I could always get them to last a while, longer than he could, but the stress of motherhood...Guess Ms. Geller's skin wasn't as strong as I thought...hold on..."

Like her spouse, Liza's form altered horrifically and quickly, but Hunter bore witness to it all, not protected by the darkness of the mortuary's back room as before. Serrated claws pierced and tore through the ends of her fingers, forcing the flesh apart into bloody mouths with curved blades as tongues. Smiling crookedly, she reached up to her face with her clawed hands, just below her eyes, and clutched tightly. Like a putrid mask in her grip, Liza's skin was stretched terribly and began to tear away in a floppy shred, revealing the beastly Mrs. Gaunt within.

Stretching and extending higher and higher as she burst from her confines, she was taller than her spouse, almost touching the ceiling and blocking out much of the overhead light's brightness with her enormous form. Mrs. Gaunt ripped the last of her nightgown off as the human skin used as her disguise fell to the floor in a heap. What were once her human eyes, at least in appearance, peeled off in round, white strips like contact lenses and glinting black eyes shined in the waning luminosity.

Trying desperately to regain feeling—pain, numbness, something—in his legs, Hunter instead felt hot tears flowing profusely down his chin and his heart pounding like a steam hammer. What he saw next made him want to scream. Just like Aubrey had. On the creature's waist was something resembling a lumpy tumour. It pulsed and quivered, and then seemed to stir, as though waking from a long sleep. The veiny shape was attached to Mrs. Gaunt's pelvis and wrapped around her slender body like a veil of gruesome flesh, though the bulk of it bulged from her belly. Hunter thought it to be a parasite of some kind, but the malicious glee in Mrs. Gaunt's opal eyes expressed otherwise. "Our little boy..."

Brood.

The 'head' came undone from Mrs. Gaunt's abdomen, its mouth yawning as bubbling, crimson saliva dribbled from the oblong maw. The thing's spiny teeth clicked together in a quickening rhythm. "Wake up, darling," the mother cooed. "Wake up...I have something for you..."

From underneath its body, deformed, elongated legs with bony hands and feet uncurled and showed themselves, and the creature, the size of an adult alligator, slithered to the floor and turned to a helpless Hunter. Eyes opened. They were the same eyes as its mother.



“You should’ve done more research, Hunter!” Mrs. Gaunt bellowed. “Luck always runs out!”

The small creature screeched irritably, looking up to its mother, and then to Hunter, its expression curious and probing.

“He killed Daddy!” Mrs. Gaunt confirmed to her child.

“Daaaaa-deeeeeee?” It sputtered, bloody phlegm coating its teeth. Hunter, in all of his terrified frenzy, briefly associated the creature’s teeth with something he had seen in nature: a piranha. But his mouth had enough teeth for four full-grown piranhas. And its eyes, closely resembling its mother’s, twinkled with wetness. It knew its father...and it was in the presence of his killer—the killer of a loved one.

Hunter knew the feeling well, and he knew what could come next.

“Time to eat, my little one!”

“No...No! No! God, nooo!” Hunter managed weakly, trying hopelessly to pull himself backward across the floor, away from the advancing beast. Preparing itself, the child braced its tiny legs and launched itself at Hunter while Mrs. Gaunt looked upon her little one with the satisfaction of a proud mother. She would be fine, and so would her child. She loved and would mourn her husband, but she’d be just fine.

As the little Gaunt chewed into his tender shoulder, tearing cloth and flesh with equal gnashing ferocity, all Hunter Dahl could think of was his little sister, and all he could do was scream.

Three houses down, little Anne Wilkins awoke in her bed, shivering, rocking back and forth. “Daddy!” she cried, again and again.

Luckily for the frightened child, her father was close by, already on his way once he heard the screams, too. He knew damage control was in order. He opened her door and stepped inside. “Honey, I know, I heard it, too.”

Anne reached for her father with outstretched arms, and her grip around his neck was something akin to that of an anaconda’s. “Daddy, I’m scared. What is it? Is someone hurt?”

“Maybe,” he muttered. “Honey, have I ever told you about Mr. Gaunt?”

“No, Daddy...” She released his neck and wiped the beginnings of tears from her eyes. “Who...who is he?”

“Well,” her father began, “he is a monster...been around Green Oaks for a long time. He comes after people at night...sometimes anyone, but especially if they’re naughty or don’t do what

they're supposed to. But we're okay. We're both good, right?" His face took on a seriousness despite the tiniest fraction of nervousness in his eyes. It seemed he wasn't strictly trying to convince his daughter—to a degree, he was also convincing himself.

Anne nodded with vigour. "Yes, I try to be good...hopefully Mr. Gaunt won't get me," she said. "Not like...them," her father added, noticing then that the shrill screams had finally ceased. "Okay, honey, I need you to get some sleep, okay?"

Climbing under the covers of her bed and gripping a large, stuffed unicorn tightly, Anne looked to her father pleadingly. "Tell me more about him, Daddy. So I can be safe."

He leaned down and kissed her forehead gently, and nodded. "Okay, sweetheart. But then it's bedtime." He inhaled and ran his fingers through her curly blonde hair. "You must avoid Mr. Gaunt, a vile, unearthly spawn..." he began.

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 Nineteen

“Now, let’s get talking on where we’re goin’ and summa the people we’re gonna meet there,” Mud said, sipping on his beer.

“There’s Lacey,” Mud began. His face darkened with a scowl. He stopped talking and glared through his heavy beard at the space on the table top between his elbows. After a moment of meditation angry and silent, he looked up at Hardy and Illara.

“Nice girl,” he said. “Friendly. Likes ta talk, y’know? She’s the one that yer man Talbot asked me to look after. Now she’s gone.”

Illara stopped smiling.

“Yeah,” she said. “We heard about it. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” Mud said. He gave his heavy head a shake. “She talked to me. Shudna done that. She talked to me about ‘Astra Palace’. Shudna done that, either. What I didn’t know, and neither did Lacey, was the table was wired. Every word we spoke went right back to the scroungers. Everything about Callisto, everything about Astra Palace. Astra Palace is a hub for the scroungers out here, but they don’t want a whole shitload of people knowing about it.

“And then she comes along, blabbing everything she knows to me. And of course the scroungers heard about it. Miriam.. she’s a barkeep with Ed, works his off hours, well Miriam tells me the table is wired. These places are sick with scroungers. Miriam tells me Ed has to play nice with them. So there it is,” Mud said, leading back on his stool.

“Yeah, out here, I guess you gotta do what you gotta do,” Illara said.

“So she disappeared on account of she blabbed herself empty to me. After I find Carter, I’m going after the rat-assed bitches who disappeared Lacey.”

“Do what you have to do,” Hardy replied. “Let’s hope that we can make it so her death isn’t pointless. Through her, we learned about the existence of Astra Palace, and with that, we’re learning about whole populations developing out here that we know nothing about. But our search now is for Astra Palace.

“And we wanna start that search, maybe, with a sharp-faced little wise guy. Says he wants to do business with me.”

“What kind of business?” Hardy asked.

“Said he likes the size of my cargo bay,” Mud said, smoothly avoiding the question.

“So whut I figger is we’ll catch up with Rat, maybe do a little business, and see what he has to tell us.”

“Sounds good,” Hardy said. I wish I knew what this business was.”

“We’ll just have ta find out,” Mud said.

The approach was routine, and asteroid AT-4442-ST was, on the surface at least, as boring and uninteresting as one could hope to find among the asteroids. Those who sought out the remote regions of were not especially keen on letting themselves be too easily seen.

So those who built these retreats sought out the more obscure craters. Like many other such tiny townships among the asteroids, the several dozen that populated asteroid AT-4442-ST were buried below the surface. Landing lights purposely dimmed with dust guided those who understood their significance.

Mud, Illara and Hardy were all in Mud’s ample bridge, watching as the asteroid grew large in Mud’s huge windows.

“Whatcha think, kids?” Mud boomed across the bridge.

“Beautiful view,” Illara said with a broad smile.

“It’s nice to have someone else do the driving for a change,” Hardy laughed.

“Always pleased to serve,” Mud said, as he started his close approach.

A reddish, rugged piece of rock, the asteroid AT-4442-ST rolled heavily on its side, relative to the plane of the Solar System. Far, far distant in the infinite night Jupiter was tiny, visible as a reddish purple pinprick of light. The Milky Way Galaxy was brilliant and bright, and shining deep and wide.

Mud brought the “Charon” to his rented berth. The ground crew, who had become familiar with him – this being his fourth stopover at Base 014, sometimes called ‘Ed’s Place’ – waved him into his berth.

Gleaming white and silver walls. Men and women worked with an efficiency that belied the beards, tattoos, and the embedded studs. Raucous music played from a half-dozen speakers mounted in the walls.

“Welcome to AT-4442-ST,” Mud said, as he locked his ship into the landing chocks in his berth. Ground crew ran forward, hosing down Mud’s ship with a dozen disinfectants.

“Thank you,” Illara chirped.

“Yeah,” Hardy echoed. “It’s been a great trip.”

“The party’s just beginning, gang,” Mud said with a huge grin.

Mud, like Ward, was a generous tipper, and he made sure that his ground crew knew that their efforts were appreciated. This generosity was paid back to him in many helpful ways, not least of all were the tips of the spoken and whispered kind that provided him very profitable and very timely information.

In this instance, the tips he received were both timely and profitable.

“Watch out for Rat,” came the barely needed warning, “He’s out for ya. Workin’ with the scroungers on it. They’re out to put a hurtin’ on ya.”

“Why?” Mud asked.

“Dunno. Only that him and some of them scroungers hangin’ with that Kharl Stoff guy are lookin’ to make a deal on any man that hangs with Carter Ward. And that’s you.”

“Well, thank y’ friend,” Mud said. He raised his wristband and made a gesture, offering his tipster a very generous tip. She accepted it gladly.

Wasting no time, Mud led Illara and Hardy through the crudely wrought tunnels and passages that provided the transportation system for this tiny base. Small tracks lined some of the walls, ceilings and floors, with passengers passing side by side. The halls were narrow and circuitous. They traced crazy pathways through the rock of the asteroid, and riding the rails was often like riding a roller coaster, with people walking carelessly by.

The lighting changed with locale. White light gave way to red and pink lighting which gave way to emerald and yellow and gold.

Mud escorted Illara and Hardy through the bewildering maze of lights and drugs, pornography, alleys crowded with cheap casinos and brothels.

“Nice place, huh?” Mud asked.

“Sure,” Illara smiled. “After work, we’re going to have to come back and check some of these places out.”

“Maybe we can getcha a job,” Mud grinned. He slapped the wall of a particularly lurid casino, with lush purple satin fabric.

“I dunno, big fellah,” Illara replied. “This looks to me more to your taste than mine.”

“I coulda brought ya the long way around, and we could checked out the machine shops, if that’s

whatcha would have preferred.

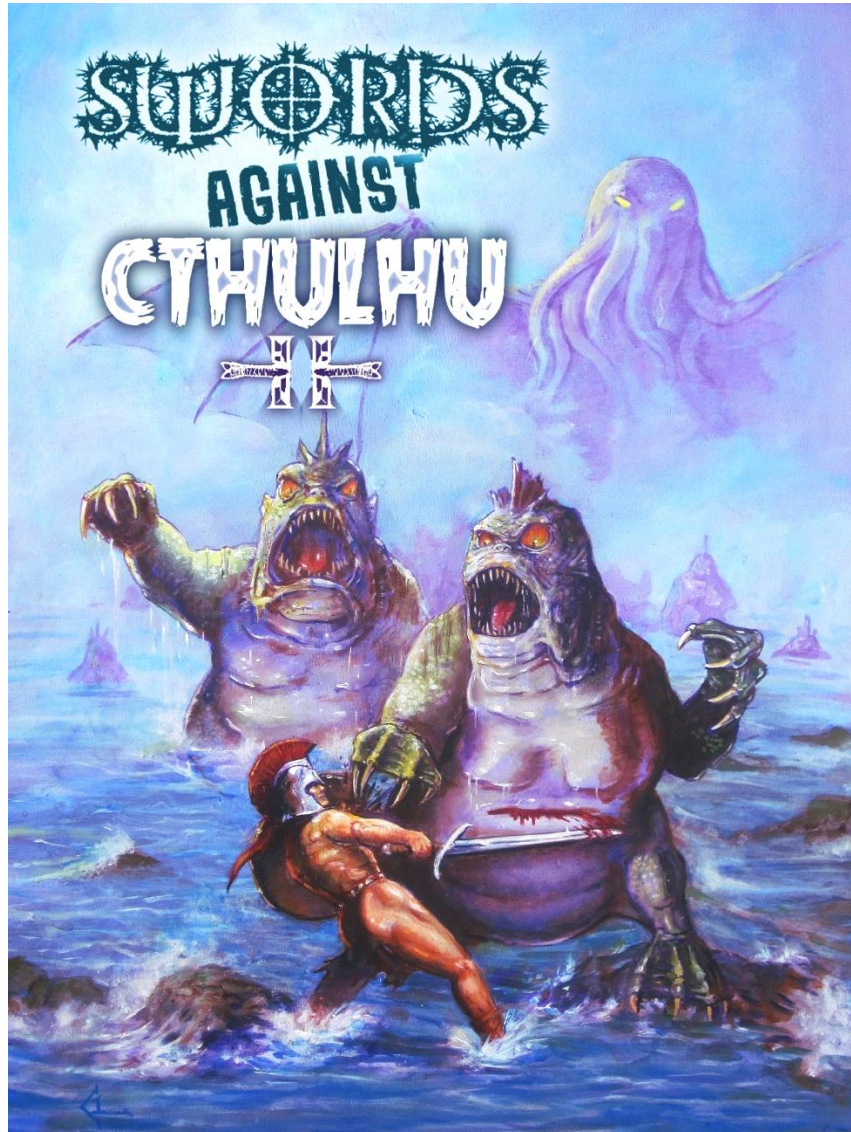
“That makes me no never mind,” Illara said. “I can’t see setting down here, anyway.”

“Maybe you can put up with the place for a few hours,” Mud said.

“Sure, yeah,” Illara said. “I can put up with this dump for a few hours.”

“Good,” Mud grinned. “Cuz here we are. This is Ed’s place.”

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE



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## ACROSS THE ZODIAC by Percy Greg

### Chapter XXV—Apostacy.

We were received on landing by our former host and conducted to his house. On this occasion, however, I was not detained in the hall, but permitted at once to enter the chamber allotted to us. Eveena, who had exacted from me all that I knew, and much that I meant to conceal, respecting the occasion of our journey, was much agitated and not a little alarmed. My own humble rank in the Zinta rendered so sudden and imperative a summons the more difficult to understand, and though by this time well versed in the learning, neither of us was familiar with the administration of the Brotherhood. I was glad therefore on her account, even more than on my own, when, a scratch at the door having obtained admission for an ambâ, it placed before me a message from Esmo requesting a private conference. Her father's presence set Eveena's mind at rest; since she had learned, strangely enough from myself, what she had never known before, the rank he held among the brethren.

"I have summoned you," he said as soon as I joined him, "for more than one reason. There is but one, however, that I need now explain. Important questions, are as a rule either settled by the Chiefs alone in Council, or submitted to a general meeting of the Order. In this case neither course can be adopted. It would not have occurred to myself that, under present circumstances, you could render material service in either of the two directions in which it may be required. But those by whom the cause has been prepared have asked that you should be one of the Convent, and such a request is never refused. Indeed, its refusal would imply either such injustice as would render the whole proceeding utterly incompatible with the first principles of our cohesion, or such distrust of the person summoned as is never felt for a member of the Brotherhood. I would rather say no more on the subject now. Your nerve and judgment will be sufficiently tried to-night; and it is a valuable maxim of our science that, in the hours immediately preceding either an important decision or a severe trial, the spirit should be left as far as possible calm and unvexed by vague shadows of that which is to come."

The maxim thus expressed, if rendered into the language of material medicine, is among those which every man of experience holds and practically acts upon. I turned the conversation, then, by inviting Esmo into my own apartment; and I was touched indeed by the eager delight, even stronger than I had expected, with which Eveena welcomed her father, and inquired into the minutest details of the home life from which she had been, as it seemed to her, so long separated. What was, however, specially characteristic was the delicate care with which, even in this first meeting with one of her own family, she contrived still to give the paramount place in her attention to her husband, and never for a moment to let him feel excluded from a conversation with whose topics he was imperfectly acquainted, and in which he might have been supposed uninterested. The hours thus passed pleasantly away; and, except when Kevimâ, joined us at the evening meal, adding a new and unexpected pleasure to Eveena's natural delight in this sudden reunion, we remained undisturbed until a very low electric signal, sounding apparently through several chambers at once, recalled Esmo's mind to the duties before him.

"You will not," he said, "return till late, and I wish you would induce Eveena to ensure, by composing herself to sleep before your return, that you shall not be asked to converse until the



morning.”

He withdrew with Kevimâ, and, as instructed, I proceeded to change my dress for one of pure white adapted to the occasion, with only a band of crimson around the waist and throat, and to invest myself in the badge of the Order. The turban which I wore, without attracting attention, in the Asiatic rather than in the Martial form, was of white mingled with red; a novelty which seemed to Eveena’s eyes painfully ominous. In Martial language, as in Zveltic symbolism, crimson generally takes the place of black as the emblem of guilt and peril. When Esmo re-entered our chamber for a moment to summon me, he was invested, as in the Shrine itself, in the full attire of his office, and I was recalled to a recollection of the reverence due to the head of the Brotherhood by the sudden change in Eveena’s manner. To her father, though a most respectful, she was a fearlessly affectionate child. For Clavelta she had only the reverence, deeply intermingled with awe, with which a devout Catholic convert from the East may approach for the first time some more than usually imposing occupant of the Chair of St. Peter. Before the arm that bore the Signet, and the sash of gold, we bent knee and head in the deference prescribed by our rules—a homage which the youngest child in the public Nurseries would not dream of offering to the Campât himself. At a sign from his hand I followed Esmo, hoping rather than expecting that Eveena would obey the counsel indirectly addressed to her. Traversing the same passages as before, save that a slight turn avoided the symbolic bridge, and formally challenged at each point as usual by the sentries, who saluted with profoundest reverence the Signet of the Order, we passed at last into the Hall of Initiation.

But on this occasion its aspect was completely changed. A space immediately in front of what I may call the veil of the Shrine was closed in by drapery of white bordered with crimson. The Chiefs occupied, as before, their seats on the platform. Some fifty members of the Order sat to right and left immediately below; but Esmo, on this occasion, seated himself on the second leftward step of the Throne, which, with the silver light and the other mystic emblems, was unveiled in the same strange manner as before at his approach. Near the lower end of the small chamber thus formed, crossing the passage between the seats on either hand, was a barrier of the bright red metal I have more than once mentioned, and behind it a seat of some sable material. Behind this, to right and left, stood silent and erect two sentries robed in green, and armed with the usual spear. A deep intense absolute silence prevailed, from the moment when the last of the party had taken his place, for the space of some ten minutes. In the faces of the Chiefs and of some of the elder Initiates, who were probably aware of the nature of the scene to follow, was an expression of calm but deep pain and regret; crossed now and then by a shade of anxiety, such as rarely appeared in that abode of assured peace and profound security. On no countenance was visible the slightest shadow of restlessness or curiosity. In the changed aspect of the place, the changed tone of its associations and of the feelings habitual to its frequenters, there was something which impressed and overawed the petulance of youth, and even the indifference of an experience like my own. At last, stretching forth the ivory-like staff of mingled white and red, which on this occasion each of the Chiefs had substituted for their usual crystal wand, Esmo spoke, not raising his voice a single semitone above its usual pitch, but with even unwonted gravity—

“Come forward, Asco Zvelta!” he said.

The sight I now witnessed, no description could represent to one who had not seen the same. Parting the drapery at the lower end, there came forward a figure in which the most absolutely inexperienced eye could not fail to recognise a culprit called to trial. "Came forward," I have said, because I can use no other words. But such was not the term which would have occurred to anyone who witnessed the movement. "Was dragged forward," I should say, did I attempt to convey the impression produced; —save that no compulsion, no physical force was used, nor were there any to use it. And yet the miserable man approached slowly, reluctantly, shrinking back as one who strives with superior corporeal power exerted to force him onward, as if physically dragged on step by step by invisible bonds held by hands unseen. So with white face and shaking form he reached the barrier, and knelt as Esmo rose from his place, honouring instinctively, though his eyes seemed incapable of discerning them, the symbols of supreme authority. Then, at a silent gesture, he rose and fell back into the chair placed for him, apparently unable to stand and scarcely able to sustain himself on his seat.

"Brother," said the junior of the Chiefs, or he who occupied the place farthest to the right; —and now I noticed that eleven were present, the last seat on the right of him who spoke being vacant— "you have unveiled to strangers the secrets of the Shrine."

He paused for an answer; and, in a tone strangely unnatural and expressionless, came from the scarcely parted lips of the culprit the reply—

"It is true."

"You have," said the next of the Chiefs, "accepted reward to place the lives of your brethren at the mercy of their enemies."

"It is true."

"You have," said he who occupied the lowest seat upon the left, "forsworn in heart and deed, if not in word, the vows by which you willingly bound yourself, and the law whose boons you had accepted."

Again the same confession, forced evidently by some overwhelming power from one who would, if he could, have denied or remained silent.

"And to whom," said Esmo, interposing for the first time, "have you thus betrayed us?"

"I know not," was the reply.

"Explain," said the Chief immediately to the left of the Throne, who, if there were a difference in the expression of the calm sad faces, seemed to entertain more of compassion and less of disgust and repulsion towards the offender than any other.

"Those with whom I spoke," replied the culprit, in the same strange tone, "were not known to me, but gave token of authority next to that of the Camptâ. They told me that the existence of the Order had long been known, that many of its members were clearly indicated by their household

practices, that their destruction was determined; that I was known as a member of the Order, and might choose between perishing first of their victims and receiving reward such as I should name myself for the information I could give.”

“What have you told?” asked another of the Chiefs.

“I have not named one of the symbols. I have not betrayed the Shrine or the passwords. I have told that the Zinta is. I have told the meaning of the Serpent, the Circle, and the Star, though I have not named them.”

“And,” said he on the left of the Throne, “naming the hope that is more than all hope, recalling the power that is above all power, could you dare to renounce the one and draw on your own head the justice of the other? What reward could induce a child of the Light to turn back into darkness? What authority could protect the traitor from the fate he imprecated and accepted when he first knelt before the Throne?” “The hope was distant and the light was dim,” the offender answered. “I was threatened and I was tempted. I knew that death, speedy and painless, was the penalty of treason to the Order, that a death of prolonged torture might be the vengeance of the power that menaced me. I hoped little in the far and dim future of the Serpent’s promise, and I hoped and feared much in the life on this side of death.”

“Do you know,” asked the last inquirer again, “no name, and nothing that can enable us to trace those with whom you spoke or those who employed them?”

“Only this,” was the answer, “that one of them has an especial hatred to one Initiate present,” pointing to myself; “and seeks his life, not only as a child of the Star, not only as husband of the daughter of Clavelta, but for a reason that is not known to me.”

“And,” asked another Chief, “do you know what instrument that enemy seeks to use?”

“One who has over her intended victim such influence as few of her sex ever have over their lords; one of whom his love will learn no distrust, against whom his heart has no guard and his manhood no wisdom.”

A shiver of horror passed over the forms of the Chiefs and of many who sat near them, incomprehensible to me till a sudden light was afforded by the indignant interruption of Kevimâ, who sat not far from myself.

“It cannot be,” he cried, “or you can name her whom you accuse.”

“Be silent!” Esmo said, in the cold, grave tone of a president rebuking disorder, mingled with the deeper displeasure of a priest repressing irreverence in the midst of the most solemn religious rite. “None may speak here till the Chiefs have ceased to speak.”

None of the latter, however, seemed disposed to ask another question. The guilt of the accused was confessed. All that he could tell to guide their further inquiries had been told. To doubt that what was forced from him was to the best of his knowledge true, was to them, who understood

the mysterious power that had compelled the spirit and the lips to an unwilling confession, impossible. And if it had seemed that further information might have been extracted relative to my own personal danger, a stronger tie, a deeper obligation, bound them to the supposed object of the last obscure imputation, and none was willing to elicit further charges or clearer evidence. Probably also they anticipated that, when the word was extended to the Initiates, I should take up my own cause.

“Would any brother speak?” asked Esmo, when the silence of the Chiefs had lasted for a few moments.

But his rebuke had silenced Kevimâ, and no one else cared to interpose. The eyes of the assembly turned upon me so generally and so pointedly, that at last I felt myself forced, though against my own judgment, to rise.

“I have no question to ask the accused,” I said.

“Then,” replied Esmo calmly, “you have nothing now to say. Give to the brother accused before us the cup of rest.”

A small goblet was handed by one of the sentries to the miserable creature, now half-insensible, who awaited our judgment. In a very few moments he had sunk into a slumber in which his face was comparatively calm, and his limbs had ceased to tremble. His fate was to be debated in the presence indeed of his body, but in the absence of consciousness and knowledge.

“Has any elder brother,” inquired Esmo, “counsel to afford?”

No word was spoken.

“Has any brother counsel to afford?”

Again all were silent, till the glance which the Chief cast in order along the ranks of the assembly fell upon myself.

“One word,” I said. “I claim permission to speak, because the matter touches closely and cruelly my own honour.”

There was that inaudible, invisible, motionless “movement,” as some French reporters call it, of surprise throughout the assembly which communicates itself instinctively to a speaker.

“My own honour,” I continued, “in the honour dearer and nearer to me even than my own. What the accused has spoken may or may not be true.”

“It is true,” interposed a Chief, probably pitying my ignorance.

“May be true,” I continued, “though I will not believe it, to whomsoever his words may apply. That no such treason as they have suggested ever for one moment entered, or could enter, the

heart of her who knelt with me, in presence of many now here, before that Throne, I will vouch by all the symbols we revere in common, and with the life which it seems is alone threatened by the feminine domestic treason alleged, from whomsoever that treason may proceed. I will accuse none, as I suspect none; but I will say that the charge might be true to the letter, and yet not touch, as I know it does not justly touch, the daughter of our Chief.”

A deep relief was visible in the faces which had so lately been clouded by a suspicion terrible to all. Esmo’s alone remained impassive throughout my vindication, as throughout the apparent accusation and silent condemnation of his daughter.

“Has any brother,” he said, “counsel to speak respecting the question actually before us?”

One and all were silent, till Esmo again put the formal question: —

“Has he who was our brother betrayed the brotherhood?”

From every member of the assembly came a clear unmistakable assent.

“Is he outcast?”

Silence rather than any distinct sign answered in the affirmative.

“Is it needful that his lips be sealed for ever?”

One or two of the Chiefs expressed in a single sentence an affirmative conviction, which was evidently shared by all present except myself. Appealing by a look to Esmo, and encouraged by his eye, I spoke—

“The outcast has confessed treason worthy of death. That I cannot deny. But he has sinned from fear rather than from greed or malice; and to fear, courage should be indulgent. The coward is but what Allah has made him, and to punish cowardice is to punish the child for the heritage his parents have inflicted. Moreover, no example of punishment will make cowards brave. It seems to me, then, that there is neither justice nor wisdom in taking vengeance upon the crime of weakness.”

In but two faces, those of Esmo and of his next colleague on the left, could I see the slightest sign of approval. One of the other chiefs answered briefly and decisively my plea for mercy.

“If,” he said, “treason proceed from fear, the more cause that a greater fear should prevent the treason of cowardice for the future. The same motives that have led the offender to betray so much would assuredly lead him to betray more were he released; and to attempt lifelong confinement is to make the lives of all dependent on a chance in order to spare one unworthy life. The excuse which our brother has pleaded may, we hope, avail with a tribunal which can regard the conscience apart from the consequences. It ought not to avail with us.”

But the law of the Zinta, as I now learned, will not allow sentence of death to be passed save by

an absolutely unanimous vote. It is held that if one judge educated in the ideas of the Order, appreciating to the full the priceless importance of its teaching and the guilt of treason against it, is unpersuaded that there exists sufficient cause for the supreme penalty, the doubt is such as should preclude the infliction of that penalty. It is, however, permitted and expected that the dissentients, if few in number, much more a single dissentient, shall listen attentively and give the most respectful and impartial consideration to the arguments of brethren, and especially of seniors. If a single mind remains unmoved, its dissent is decisive. But it would be the gravest dereliction of duty to persist from wilfulness, obstinacy, or pride, in adhesion to a view perhaps hastily expressed in opposition to authority and argument. The debate to which my speech gave rise lasted for two hours. Each speaker spoke but a few terse expressive sentences; and after each speech came a pause allowing full time for the consideration of its reasoning. Two points were very soon made clear to all. The offender had justly forfeited his life; and if his death were necessary or greatly conducive to the safety of the rest, the mercy which for his sake imperilled worthier men and sacred truths would have been no less than a crime. The thought, however, that weighed most with me against my natural feeling was an experience to which none present could appeal. I had sat on many courts-martial where cowardice was the only charge imputed; and in every case in which that charge was proved, sentence of death had been passed and carried out on a ground I could not refuse to consider sufficient: —namely, that the infection of terror can best be repressed by an example inspiring deeper terror than that to which the prisoner has yielded. Compelled by these precedents, though with intense reluctance, I submitted at last to the universal judgment. Esmo having collected the will, I cannot say the voices, of the assembly, paused for a minute in silence.

“The Present has pronounced,” he said at last. “Are the voices of the Past assentient?”

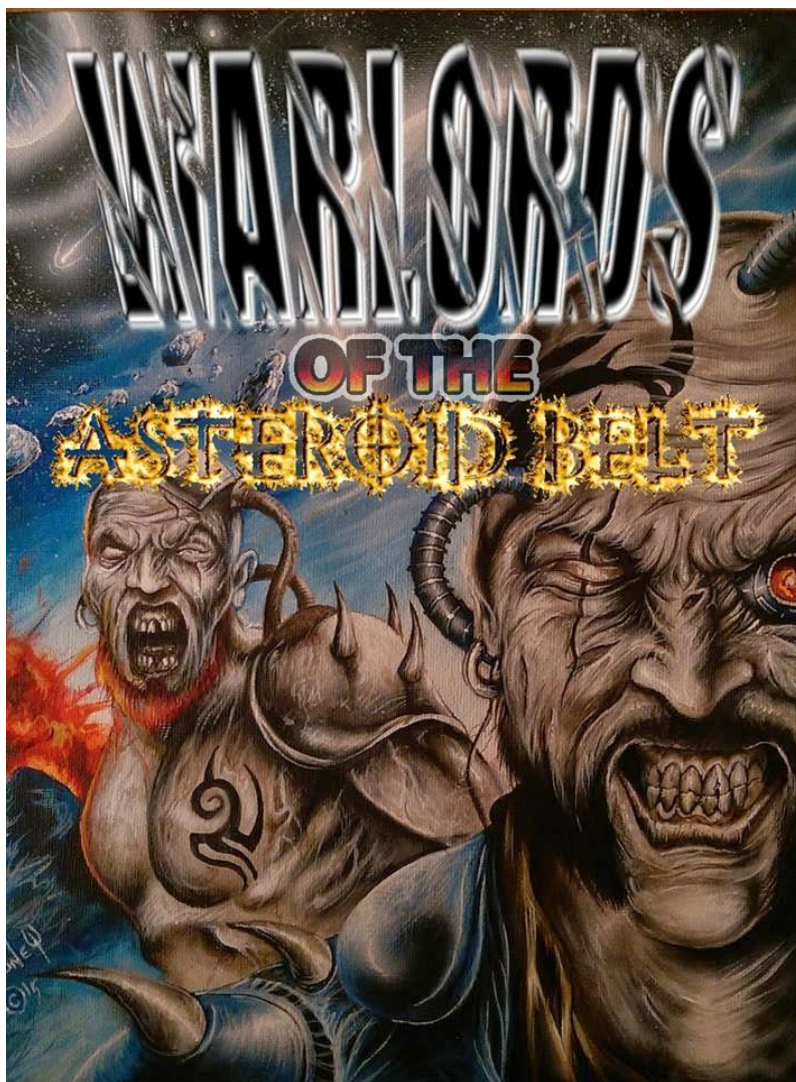
He looked around as if to see whether, under real or supposed inspiration, any of those before him would give in another name a judgment opposite to that in which all had concurred. Instinctively I glanced towards the Throne, but it remained vacant as ever. Then, fixing his eyes for a few moments upon the culprit, who started and woke to full consciousness under his gaze—and receiving from the Chief nearest to him on the left a chain of small golden circles similar to that of the canopy, represented also on the Signet, while he on the right held a small roll, on the golden surface of which a long list of names was inscribed—our Superior pronounced, amid deepest stillness, in a low clear tone, the form of excommunication; breaking at the appropriate moment one link from the chain, and, at a later point, drawing a broad crimson bar through one cipher on the roll:—

*“Conscience-convict, tried in truth,  
Judged in justice, doomed in ruth;  
Ours no more—once ours in vain—  
Falls the Veil and snaps the Chain,  
Drops the link and lies alone: —  
Traitor to the Emerald Throne,  
Alien from the troth we plight,  
Nature native to the night;  
Trained in Light the Light to scorn,  
Soul apostate and forsworn,*

*False to symbol, sense, and sign,  
To the Serpent's pledge divine,  
To the Wings that reach afar,  
To the Circle and the Star;  
Recreant to the mystic rule,  
Outlaw from the sacred school—  
Backward is the Threshold crossed;  
Lost the Light, the Life is lost.  
Go; the golden page we blot:  
Go; forgetting and forgot!  
Go—by final sentence shriven,  
Be thy crime absolved in Heaven!"*

Once more the Throne and the Emblems behind and above it had been veiled in impenetrable darkness. Instinctively, as it seemed, every one present had risen to his feet, and stood with bent head and downcast eyes as the Condemned, rising mechanically, turned without a word and passed away.

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## A VOYAGE TO THE MOON by Cyrano de Bergerac

### I.--Arrival on the Moon

After many experiments I constructed a flying machine, and, sitting on top of it, I boldly launched myself in the air from the crest of a mountain. I had scarcely risen more than half a mile when something went wrong with my machine, and it shot back to the earth. But, to my astonishment and joy, instead of descending with it, I continued to rise through the calm, moonlight air. For three-quarters of an hour I mounted higher and higher. Then suddenly all the weight of my body seemed to fall upon my head. I was no longer rising quietly from the Earth, but tumbling headlong on to the Moon. At last I crashed through a tree, and, breaking my fall among its leafy, yielding boughs, I landed gently on the grass below.

I found myself in the midst of a wild and beautiful forest, so full of the sweet music of singing-birds that it seemed as if every leaf on every tree had the tongue and figure of a nightingale. The ground was covered with unknown, lovely flowers, with a magical scent. As soon as I smelt it I became twenty years younger. My thin grey hairs changed into thick, brown, wavy tresses; my wrinkled face grew fresh and rosy; and my blood flowed through my veins with the speed and vigour of youth.

I was surprised to find no trace of human habitation in the forest. But in wandering about I came upon two strong, great animals, about twelve cubits long. One of them came towards me, and the other fled into the forest. But it quickly returned with seven hundred other beasts. As they approached me, I perceived that they were creatures with a human shape, who, however, went on all-fours like some gigantic kind of monkey. They shouted with admiration when they saw me; and one of them took me up by the neck and flung me on his back, and galloped with me into a great town.

When I saw the splendid buildings of the city I recognised my mistake. The four-footed creatures were really enormous men. Seeing that I went on two legs, they would not believe that I was a man like themselves. They thought I was an animal without any reasoning power, and they resolved to send me to their queen, who was fond of collecting strange and curious monsters.

All this, of course, I did not understand at the time. It took me some months to learn their language. These men of the Moon have two dialects; one for the nobility, the other for the common people. The language of the nobility is a kind of music; it is certainly a very pleasant means of expression. They are able to communicate their thoughts by lutes and other musical instruments quite as well as by the voice.

When twenty or thirty of them meet together to discuss some matter, they carry on the debate by the most harmonious concert it is possible to imagine.

The common people, however, talk by agitating different parts of their bodies. Certain movements constitute an entire speech. By shaking a finger, a hand, or an arm, for instance, they can say more than we can in a thousand words. Other motions, such as a wrinkle on the forehead, a shiver along a muscle, serve to design words. As they use all their body in speaking in this

fashion, they have to go naked in order to make themselves clearly understood. When they are engaged in an exciting conversation they seem to be creatures shaken by some wild fever.

Instead of sending me at once to the Queen of the Moon, the man who had captured me earned a considerable amount of money by taking me every afternoon to the houses of the rich people. There I was compelled to jump and make grimaces, and stand in ridiculous attitudes in order to amuse the crowds of guests who had been invited to see the antics of the new animal.

But one day, as my master was pulling the rope around my neck to make me rise up and divert the company, a man came and asked me in Greek who I was. Full of joy at meeting someone with whom I could talk, I related to him the story of my voyage from the Earth.

“I cannot understand,” I said, “how it was I rose up to the Moon when my machine broke down and fell to the Earth.”

“That is easily explained,” he said. “You had got within the circle of lunar influence, in which the Moon exerts a sort of sucking action on the fat of the body. The same thing often happens to me. Like you, I am a stranger on the Moon. I was born on the Sun, but, being of a roving disposition, I like to explore one planet after another. I have travelled a good deal in Europe, and conversed with several persons whose names you no doubt know. I remember that I was once famous in ancient Greece as the Demon of Socrates.”

“Then you are a spirit?” I exclaimed.

“A kind of spirit,” he replied. “I was one of the large company of the Men of the Sun who used to inhabit the Earth under the names of oracles, nymphs, woodland elves, and fairies. But we abandoned our world in the reign of the Emperor Augustus; your people then became so gross and stupid that we could no longer delight in their society. Since then I have stayed on the Moon. I find its inhabitants more enlightened than the inhabitants of the Earth.”

“I don’t!” I exclaimed. “Look how they treat me, as if I were a wild beast! I am sure that if one of their men of science voyaged to the Earth, he would be better received than I am here.”

“I doubt it,” said the Man of the Sun. “Your men of science would have him killed, stuffed, and put in a glass case in a museum.”

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