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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 11, ISSUE 23
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WICKED CONCESSION

BY CHARLES
DUNPHEY
—DARKNESS
CONSUMED HER
DWELLING ...

UNWILLINGLY IMMORTAL

BY DYLAN COBINE
—I TRIED TO
CLAW AT THE
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THE LOCKER ROOM BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

DRYLANDS DRIFTER OF MARS

BY REX MUNDY

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Steven Havelock, Rex Mundy, Gregory KH Bryant, Johann August Apel, Jules Verne, H Rider
Haggard*

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, Ruth feels only hatred for her heroin addicted mother, but she soon sees things from a new perspective. A trip to Mexico on the Day of the Dead results in a clash with an ancient Aztec cult. A mother's recurring nightmare takes on horrific life. A Venusian fugitive shares with two Martian canal gipsies the secret of untold wealth and the rebuilding of their dying civilisation. And Illara makes a flying visit to the colony on Europa.

In *Tales of the Dead* we embark upon the story of *The Death Bride*. On Lincoln Island, the settlers clash with the pirates. And in Byzantium, Olaf finds the one he has been searching for all these years.

—Gavin Chappell

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WICKED CONCESSION by Charles Dunphey

Ruth's mother had not left her bedroom for over a year.

Darkness consumed her dwelling, blackout curtains swallowing the light and preventing the room from discerning the difference between day and night. Her china cabinets spawned layers of dust, blanketing the once fine finish of the wooden frames with a grey hue soft and hilly. Porcelain dolls stood within glass cabinets, staring out at the hibernating occupant with glass eyes and featureless faces. Their expressions relayed the placid complacency of addiction in a reflecting manner toward the motionless woman.

Every Friday, Ruth would guide her maternal corpse to the scale, legs wobbly and movements drowsy. Every Friday, the scale would tip at a few pounds lower than the previous week. She had lost eighty pounds in total by the last weighing of the year. The once plump and voluptuous woman who had birthed Ruth now stood dilapidated, incapacitated, and ghoulish. It was difficult to find compassion for her mother; the acknowledgement of free will deflected any glints of remorse Ruth knew.

This was her choice. She embraced a vegetative state in the same way a heroin addict would embrace a debilitating high. The opiates in her system bore one difference from the drug Ruth had seen in movies, ruining lives and signifying the downfalls of famous celebrities and musicians. The difference was that the opiates her mother consumed were prescribed. With the signature of a doctor, this heroin was morally acceptable and encouraged by those who claimed to be in the business of helping others.

A combination of opiates, muscle relaxants, tranquilizers, painkillers, and anti depressants culminated into a sickening condition of dependency that Ruth related to the materialistic nature she witnessed in other people her age. Their consumption of clothing, fragrances, technology, all drilling their conscience into a state of dopamine injected elation. Purely psychological triggers infecting their minds with indifference and creating a vacancy where the difference between 'want' and 'need' once inhabited. How was her mother any different than the fiends she despised so much? How could she have sympathy for her when she held none for others in similar situations?

They want this life. They made the conscious decision to choose drugs and things over reality and true happiness. They are addicts. They are wretches.

Her brain often splurged justifications and explanations that suited her own beliefs. Yet these thoughts only fostered the guilt that nestled within her heart. No matter how many times she buried these thoughts into the back of her mind, she couldn't help but feel that extracting sympathy and compassion for her mother would be the right choice to make. Something in her wanted to hope.

Despite the reality and gloomy vividness of her mother's increasingly dreadful condition, Ruth would often seek counsel from the woman. Responses were never expected; grumbling and unintelligible droning were the only replies she ever received. Nonetheless, there was something comforting in spilling her guts to her emaciated mother. The heavy, laboured breathing never dissuaded her nor prevented her from adhering to her original objective of venting in the most unfiltered, unrestrained ways possible. Sometimes tears would dive from Ruth's cheeks, landing onto the quilt that her mother had sewed all those years ago.

Its purple threaded borders crossed diagonally between curving and looping designs crafted with golden silk, shiny but subtle. The quilt apparently took years to finish and now it stood at the foot of her mother's bed, a divan for the small Poodle she had raised for so many years. The grey hair blossoming from the canine's underbelly and throat resembled an ashy grey that likely bore the precursors of age and the eventuality of death.

Ruth couldn't help but wonder if her mother would even remember the animal if it died. Lucy the dog would just become another faded, deformed dream trapped between conceptualization and deletion. Her mother barely remembered anything anymore. Sometimes she would call Ruth by strange names and titles she had never heard before. Often her mother would speak of things in her drug induced coma that would terrify Ruth.

It's just the drugs, Ruth would reason.

The largest feed of guilt stemmed from the explanation that Ruth's father gave concerning her mother's current state. Her father informed Ruth of the suicide attempt and the subsequent letter that arrived directly after she returned from the hospital, stitches on her wrists still lightly leaking crimson. The letter is what led Ruth's mother to the drug abuse, according to her father. She started seeing a psychiatrist as a requirement from the state after her attempt at her own life. Once the letter travelled into her hands, she ravenously begged the doctor for more and more pills—more suicidal attempts accompanying these requests in a fashion that implied blackmail. Her father said that something had taken a hold of her, wrapping black toxic tendrils around her soul.

'I'll be honest with you, hun. I don't know who she is anymore,' said her father one night.

It only fuelled her hatred for her mother even more.

The arrival of the letter marked the beginning of the downward spiralling madness that would eventually choke and strangle the household and family Ruth had come to hold so dearly. As soon as the name 'Deacon' was mentioned, everything seemed to change. This person's obituary seemed to infect her mother with a poisonous, malignant acrimony. Whether this Deacon's name bore representation of a professional nature or simply that of an oddly chosen name, the designation became synonymous to Ruth and her family with all things malevolent and macabre. When her mother first read the letter, she broke out into tears—violently grasping the hard stock paper edges until bent and hyperventilating, red cheeked and confused.

'Why are you crying?' asked Ruth's father.

'Because ... he wanted forgiveness,' sobbed her mother.

'After everything that bastard did, you want to forgive him?'

'You don't understand.'

'Well, make me understand.'

'It's Ruth. It's only a matter of time before—'

Ruth had been standing in the corner of the hallway, eavesdropping on the conversation. Her parents noticed her in that moment, due to the sobs she began to expel at the sight of her mother. The horror conveyed in her mother's eyes only channelled inner morbidity within Ruth. Something awful had happened to her. She didn't need to know what to know how much it had affected her. In those watery, crystalline eyes atop that reddened visage, Ruth stared at her mother for the last time. The soulless, lifeless cadaver she became would never be her mother, but the pill head who became the source of her conversations with others.

Later on, Ruth's father sat with her and tried to shed light on what her mother was so upset about. He told her that she would be seeing a psychiatrist again because ever since the news of this Deacon character came to fruition, her mother had been trying to hurt herself once more. He informed Ruth of the sexual assaults that enveloped her mother's childhood and young adult life. Nearly fifteen years of rape and molestation from this Deacon had fractured her mother's mind, and for some reason, the death of this monstrosity of a being had brought everything back to light. Even events that she had forgotten.

Ruth felt it foolish to blame herself for the initial insensitive reactions to her mother's new addictions, as well as the current. She hadn't even been conceived when these atrocities took place. Why should they affect her in any way other than in the form of a residual empathetic sadness?

Guilt pervaded Ruth's thoughts on the day that marked a year since her mother had left her bedroom. She quietly stepped into her mother's room, lifting the door while pushing in an attempt to alleviate the creaks. The master bedroom was always dim lit, thick curtains smothering daylight before it reached into the cavernous room. The small rays of light that broke the blinds in places the cloth didn't shield reached out into the room and up onto the walls, dust glittering and wafting within the breezy illuminations. Lucy stirred at Ruth's presence but fell back into a deep slumber reminiscent of her mother's death like rest.

Her mother weakly tossed and turned in her bed, likely feeling the invasion of cool air from the opened door whilst shaking and muttering dark thoughts projected from dreams. Ruth held her hand and caressed it, afraid for her mother in a way she hadn't been amongst the company of others. Her pride would deteriorate into nothingness at the sight of the rapidly thinning and violently inebriated being that lay before her. Memories of her childhood would bombard her mind, ruminations of swings, fields of grass, and lackadaisically coloured stick figures portraying their once happy family. A tear fell from Ruth's cheek and landed lazily on her mother's favourite quilt as they always did.

'Deacon?' her mother woefully growled from slumber.

Ruth froze, realizing her mother's eyes were wide open, her gaze staring through and above her daughter.

'Deacon, is that you?' she mourned again.

Ruth's contempt returned to a festering hatred, and reluctant feelings of love and concern clambered into her thoughts. The girl stood up from the bed and began to depart from the clutch of depravity her mother's presence had become.

‘A dog,’ said her mother.

Lucy began to growl in a weak, purring manner—though the aggression was remarkably evident.

The words of her mother and the subtle guttural snarling drifted to Ruth’s ears, freezing her in her steps.

Her mother was ... having a conversation. Though her eyes were open and her features bore consciousness, something was wrong. Ruth followed her mother’s hollow gaze, eventually turning ninety degrees and facing a shadowy, indiscernible corner of the ceiling. All colour and shape seemed to dissipate within the darkness. This corner of the room was the one spot that the blackout curtains devoured most.

What terrified Ruth most was the fact that anything could be in that corner, staring down at her from the darkness. She had no way of illuminating the blackness that shrouded the room, seeming to reach out with long ghastly claws across her imagination’s canvas.

‘Ruth?’ her mother asked.

She turned quickly, excited for this episode to be over.

‘Yes, mom? What is it? Are you okay?’

‘She would never,’ her mother told the darkness of the ceiling corner.

Ruth stood petrified. The woman she had known her whole life seemed to wither away before her eyes. Grasping at the mattress to push herself up, bones and joints snapped and crackled like kittling in a fire. The sound perturbed and disturbed Ruth. Every muscle, tendon, and ligament strained and constricted, suffocated by the thinning layer of skin and tissue that concealed it. It seemed as though her insides were screaming to escape from the fleshy layer that was their prison.

When her mother sat up, her head sloped forward, scraggly and unwashed hair slightly masking her skull like features. Protruding cheekbones and sunken eye sockets hid behind her chaotic and mangy mane. The vertebrae in her back poked outward like dorsal fins, ribs tightening around her spine like large skeletal fingers grasping onto a breath of life.

Lucy stood up. Her fluffy hair began to rise and angle in a direction that Ruth found mortifying. The small, weak, old and frail animal burst with energy, barking and yelping at the corner of the ceiling.

Ruth shushed the animal over and over to no avail.

After several seconds of Lucy’s screeches, the small creature silenced abruptly. The dog began to shake and whimper.

The walls behind Ruth seemed to stretch, sounds of fingernails across drywall rattling from the darkness. Scratching sounds clicked and ripped across the ceiling. Ruth gasped as she remembered to breathe.

Her mother began to cry as Ruth turned from her to face the sounds. The darkness in the room was not enough to hide the ghoul that her mother once inhabited. In some ways, the possibilities of what the darkness held were more bearable than the sight of the carcass that pretended to be her mom.

‘Don’t hurt her. Please. Not the way that you hurt me,’ her mother said.

Ruth stared once more into the oblivion above. Suddenly, her mind grew aware of a presence in the room that was not hers or her mother’s. Something sinister. Something petulant and avaricious.

The scratching stopped.

Lucy jumped off the bed and ran in front of Ruth’s feet, hiding and trembling whilst facing her mother’s bed.

‘Those eyes. They ... they are so hollow—don’t turn!’

Ruth gasped. She heard something from behind lurch onto her mother’s bed, the springs screeching and the structure groaning of a thing immense. She knew her mother was talking to her with the last interjection.

‘Your hands ... they are strange,’ her mother suddenly wept a sound morose, ‘Deacon ... what have you become? ... No. No, you cannot. Not Ruth. I don’t care what you—don’t look!’

Ruth shuddered again. Every muscle in her body wanted to turn and face her mother. Fear managed to maintain a vice over her movement, paralyzed by the presence of something nefarious.

Behind Ruth, a vile, insidious murmuring began to spur into existence. The indescribable speech dripped with venom, hysteria plaguing her mind as she began her best efforts to ignore the whispers. The springs and wood in the bed began to moan and sigh as they emanated rhythmically through the air. Her mother grunted on tempo and the reality of the situation began to take hold of Ruth’s consciousness.

‘Mommy,’ the tearful words crept from her mouth.

The incessant sounds began to grow more intense, the bed now rattling and her mother’s grunts becoming more pained.

‘Mommy,’ Ruth said again, her tears flooding down her cheeks, ‘Please stop.’

The whispers grew to audible speech, their malicious tone and dualistic quality electrifying the deepest roots of her fears.

‘Lirg eh tem evig ... lirg eh tem evig ... lirg eh tem evig ... desi morpu oy. Smaer dreh nise moc god eht. Lirg eh tem evig.’

Ruth screamed until her lungs deflated and incinerated with pain.

The bedroom door swung open, the silhouette of her father casting high over the now illuminated bed. Ruth spun around to face her mother only to see a faded cloud of ash drifting out of existence. Her mother's hands were pinned down, her hair ragged and pulled. Tears flooded down her cheeks.

Ruth's father stood in shock and bewilderment at what they had both just seen.

Her mother slowly released tension as the darkness dissipated from atop her stomach. She muttered words saddening and disturbing.

'I told him to take me. I told him to leave Ruth alone. I begged for him to take me but he didn't want me anymore. He said I wasn't good enough. I can't do this anymore,' said her mother, chin trembling.

With each word exhaled, veins rose beneath her temples and sweat trickled down her oily, pasty skin. Veins squeezed around her anorexic arms like pythons around their prey. The light from outside shone brightly on Ruth's mother, illustrating her pestilence in a light as yet unseen.

Her father gasped in horror at the thought of his wife reaching a state so decrepit. Emotions of helplessness and sorrow encompassed his mind, looming a dark cloud over his conscience not soon to depart.

'Ruth! Get out of here. Go to your room. I need to take care of your mother,' said her father.

'Why? Did you not just see what I saw? Did you not hear what I heard? Something was in here with us. It hurt mom!'

'Go to your room!'

Ruth bolted out of the bedroom, rage tightening around her rational thought.

How could he? Why would he just ignore what he saw? I know he saw what was in that damn room. It was ... Deacon! But how?

After ascending the final steps, Ruth collapsed onto her bed. Her mind scattered chaotically between streams of thought and vivid memories of the hallucinatory scene that took place that day. Something sinister slept in her mother's past; something that neither her mother nor father wanted to speak of or acknowledge. And it haunted her still.

She tossed and turned for several hours, frustration spiking in her mind as she attempted to hush her brain to rest. Eventually, sandy fingers brushed against her eyelids, soothing them to shut. Calm surged through Ruth's bones as a deep sleep abducted her from the reality she had come to dread so fervently.

Ruth's eyes opened to the revolving blades of the ceiling fan in her bedroom, circling at a speed that seemed to intensify the longer she stared. Her room was dark; the embrace of night had soared into her dwelling all consumingly. All sound seemed to dwindle beneath the

weight of the fan's blades and the ticking of the grandfather clock that stood tall in the corner of her room.

In the calm embrace of nightfall, it felt as if the house itself was dying.

She rolled her feet over the mattress of her bed, slipping into her sandals before descending the stairs in search of her mother. The memories of what happened earlier slowly embellished into fantastical accounts of the supernatural.

Could it have been real? Could it be that she just wanted it to be true that something was afflicting someone she cared for so dearly? Removing her mother of all responsibility and promises not kept gave her reassurance she hadn't had in a long time? But she couldn't help but wonder if any of it was even real.

The only thing that mattered to Ruth now was finding her mother and making sure she was alright. When her small feet caught the last step of the staircase, Ruth noticed something that pleasantly surprised her but filled her heart with disbelief.

Her mother sat in the dining room on the desktop, her genealogy papers all spread across the glass table top. She hadn't seen her mother work on these projects in ages. The happiness it brought to Ruth's heart was welcomed but the curiosity and doubt held steadfast within her thoughts.

'Mom?' asked Ruth.

'Oh hey, dear. Just wrapping up on Mrs. Brenda's ancestry documents. She has over four relatives who were in the Revolutionary War. I can't wait to tell her,' her mother said, smiling, but never looking up from her papers.

The light in the dining room was the only source of illumination in the house, her mother appearing heavenly under the white light. Her skinny, wireframe figure was smooth and graceful like an elk in spring. Warmth in her cheeks blossomed into colours that Ruth could only associate with health.

Ruth looked out the window beside the dining table, the huge backyard covered in misty fog and irradiated by the expressions of the moon. The gaseous vapours fogged over the dark grass like ghostly figurines dancing to a haunting tune. Ruth gazed out into the mist, something propelling her to maintain her gaze, unflinching.

Across the field, near the neighbour's large wooden fence, a shadow began to materialize in the vaporous haze. The dark shadow slowly crept closer to the house in a meditative, patient pace.

The shadow belonged to the largest dog Ruth had ever seen.

'Mom?'

'Yes, dear?'

'What is in our backyard?'

‘It’s probably just one of the neighbour’s dogs. They are always loose.’

Ruth turned to nod at her mother in agreement, but as she glanced toward the dining room table, she was greeted by only an empty chair and eerie silence within the house. The lights were all off and her mother was nowhere to be found. In the blink of an eye, she had disappeared. Or had she ever been there at all?

Panicking, Ruth turned back towards the condensation covered window. She leapt back in terror. The giant canine stood mere feet from the house, planted in the wet, moonlit grass. Its head was bowed, fur gleaming with moisture and untidy. The animal reared back and stood upon its two hind feet, outstretching what Ruth recognized now as human like, furry hands behind its back. Its knees bent inwards at an awkward angle until snapping the creature into a completely upright position. Its figure rose and rose as it transformed.

It’s at least twelve feet tall, thought Ruth.

When it finally curved its neck back and revealed its face, Ruth gasped in horror.

Never had she seen something so frightening. Never had her eyes gazed upon something so fearsome and ferocious. The beast before her held no resemblance to man or animal. Its face was a cold, pale white pigment, wrinkles across the forehead bearing darker tints, reminiscent of cracks within a façade of face paint. The cheekbones perked upward, stiff. They elongated the mouth, lips appearing to be at the bottom of the creature’s mien. The hair covering its body avoided the face like small black ants lining a pool of water. Its hands were nude also, five fingers replacing paws in a manner unsettling and horrifying. Light glinted across its mane and the moon seemed to beam all its embrace on this singular, putrid beast.

Yet the feature that horrified Ruth most, the feature that made her heart sputter out of control and the air in her lungs escape into breathlessness, were the monster’s eyes. There was nothing within them! Only blackness that reflected Ruth’s own expression of horror, like peering into a dark cesspool of a baleful swamp. The eyes sunk into nothingness and the surrounding eye sockets seemed to clasp onto the memory of sight in a desperate attempt to retain whatever was left. Those eyes bore into Ruth’s soul, drilling her entire body into immobility and a trembling sweat.

The fiend’s movements seemed short, small, and sporadic as it flexed and twitched before her—like an image convulsing within a broken frame. It reached its massive hairless palm to the window, flattening its hand. The creature tilted its head as its elongated fingers gently screeched against the glass, condensation clouding its shape.

In this small gesture, Ruth could feel a volcanic eruption of intentions streaming from the beast and into her thoughts. Endless volumes of sickening and pervasive sensations burst through her skull like fireworks. Ruth’s knees wobbled, the life seeming to drain from her body like a soul escaping after death. Cries of woe and sorrow bellowed through her core, ripping and severing her connections to all things pleasant and good natured. Ruth fought the desire to collapse and give into the cries.

The beast cocked its head in an inquisitive manner, as if it was aware and curious of the pain it was causing Ruth. Perhaps because it had lost all connection with emotion and humanity.

Maybe its expression was that of something that no longer understood human concepts such as pain or misery. Ruth even considered that this gesture may have been because it was amused by her revolting reaction.

Inside of her head, voices chambered like choruses, reciting the same line over and over.

‘Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig.’

The melodic, entrancing vocalizations brought a word shining and eminent within Ruth’s mind’s eye.

Deacon.

With all the strength she had left in her body, Ruth broke from the monster’s hold. She sprinted up the staircase and slammed her bedroom door shut, screws and hinges rattling with tension. She climbed into her bed, and pulled her blankets tightly around her head. Ruth buried her face within her knees, the wallowing cries still within her brain, shaking nuts and bolts loose and sending her into a state of panic and distraught tension.

Slowly, her body went limp and she fell into an exhausted and ephemeral slumber.

Ruth awakened to her ceiling fan off, the lights in her room still illuminating the posters and memories chronicling her life along the wall. Her sweat soaked the sheets beneath her, reminisces of the nightmare still pervading her thoughts. Everything felt as if it were so real. She could feel the beast staring at her, hear the sorrowful moans it communicated telepathically. Thoughts of her mother sprang to mind; the events earlier no longer absent in reflection.

Ruth hurried down the staircase, each step thudding along. Turning the corner of the hallway, Ruth caught glimpse of a note posted on the fridge in the kitchen.

*Ruth,
I am heading to an emergency appointment with mom’s psychiatrist. I will be back before noon. Make sure to keep an eye on her. If anything happens before I get back, call me immediately.
Love,
Dad*

Ruth slipped the note from its magnets and studied the chaotic writing. Her father’s panicked message coloured her curious. Had he seen what she saw in the room? Or was he still pretending?

How long have I been asleep? Ruth thought.

As she read over the note again and again, something stirred within the house. She could feel an overwhelming sense of dread fumigating her hollow home. It was obvious that she and her mother were not alone. The absence of her father only swelled her dismay.

A creaking sound broke Ruth's concentration. She dropped the note, watching it waltz to the floor slowly and silently. Her mother's door was open. The edge of it broke into view beyond the kitchen.

'Mom?' Ruth called into the quiet air with reluctance spilling out in unsteady speech.

Silence.

She slowly paced to the room, every hair on her neck standing at attention. As she gazed into the darkness of her mother's room, a horrific sight choked her lungs.

A tall, dark, and hairy figure was mounted upon her mother as she lay in her bed. The creature from her dream had transcended the realm of nightmares and birthed itself into Ruth's reality. Her mother's body lay beneath it, motionless and silent. Every tendon and ligament in Ruth's body seized and her blood drained from her cheeks.

'Let me let go of her, you monster!' Ruth cried.

A voice clambered inside of her skull. It banged pots and pan in her cranium, the sound scrambling her streams of thought. Erratic and harrowing resonances tore across a placid sea of unknown. A war of attrition had broken out in her psyche, the drums of battle beating to the tempos of her worst fears realized.

'Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig. Lirg eh tem evig,' chanted the enormous wolf like creature.

It postured up, raising its head towards the ceiling; its flat hairless face glistening beneath some ghostly gaslight from origins unbeknownst to Ruth.

The body beneath it that Ruth had come to despise so much turned to face her. She prepared for the relinquished compassion to once again flicker with sympathy.

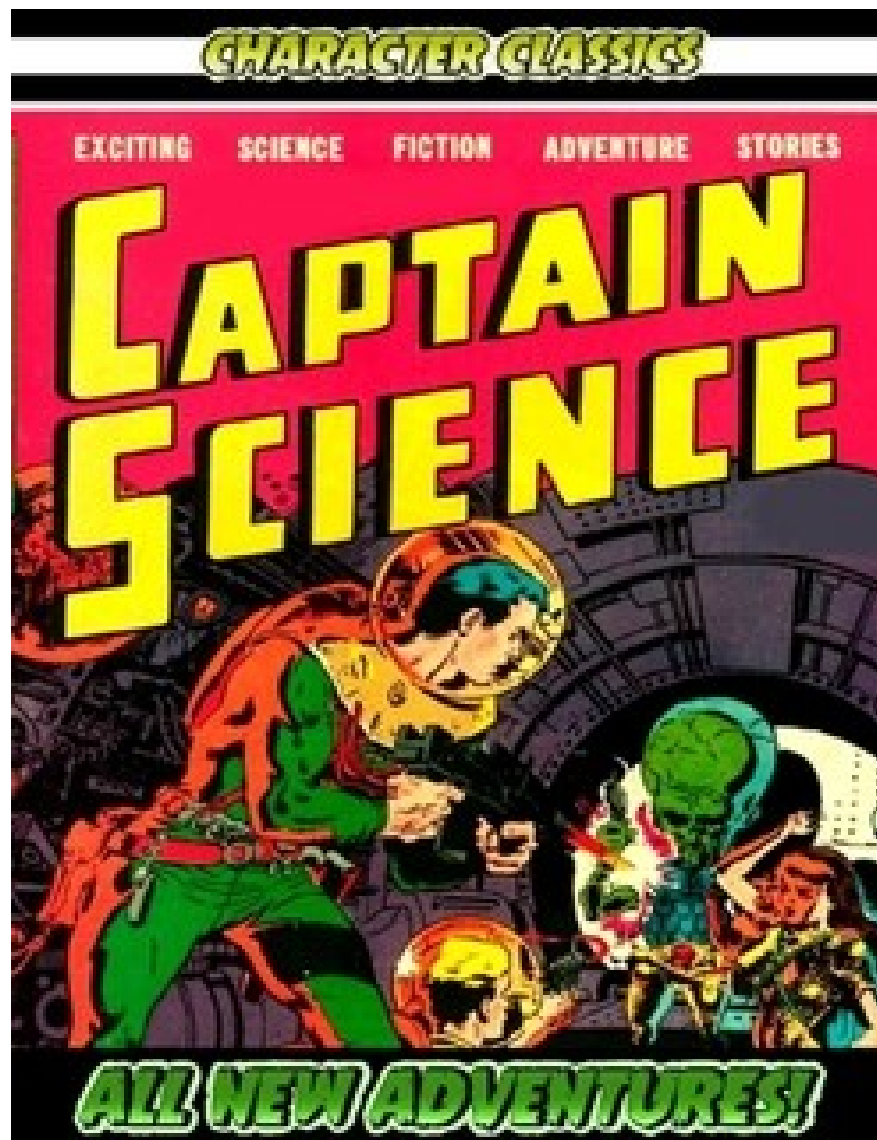
The war sounds halted. All sound suctioned from Ruth's ears, a dull ringing replacing the once quiet stirrings of the house. Her hands shook intensely and her heart palpitated uncomfortably within her ribcage, banging against bone and meat.

It was not her mother beneath the beast.

The face that the body underneath Deacon wore was Ruth's.

THE END

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UNWILLINGLY IMMORTAL by Dylan Cobine

A soft rustle, followed by a louder thump, stirred me from my sleep. I tried to sit up to see where the sound that disturbed me came from and my forehead collided with a hard surface. I was bathed in complete darkness. I tried to wiggle around and found that I had minimal space to move my arms and legs. Where was I?

In my abysmal sealed enclosure, I fidgeted. Tremors wracked my body, and I took long ragged inhalations. The narrow space shrank. What was I in, and who put me in here? I felt around my surroundings, like a blind man running his hands over someone's face, to paint a picture in my mind's eye of my environment. It was soft and velvety.

Another thump hit the top of my cushioned prison. My patience was threadbare. I kicked my feet and banged my hands against the surface, so sparsely above me. The outside sound of whatever had been colliding against the surface suddenly stopped. Breathing heavier and trying to think of the last thing I could remember, I came up with nothing. I had started to sweat and the insides of this lightless box felt like a sauna. I tried to shout out but my throat felt as if I had been stranded in a desert without a drink for days. All I managed was a weak, hoarse moan.

In the midst of me beating against the walls of my confines, like a kindergartener trying to knock down a skyscraper with a spoon, I was abruptly interrupted by the loudest commotion so far. It bombarded my tiny prison. Jostling me around in what little space I had. I thanked whatever higher power there was for the soft cushioning of my lightless cell. More muffled murmurs bled through my confines.

My muddy brain began shutting down, and I now experienced micro moments of unconsciousness. Upon every lucid moment I tried to claw at the walls. Little shreds of silky substance fluttered against my face. I managed a weak growl that only achieved more pain in my desiccated throat. I had been scratching against the ceiling of my confines so much that my fingertips were as tattered as the soft substance I had torn through. My pores were vomiting sweat, and my lungs burnt from my dwindling supply of oxygen.

Suddenly, light penetrated my sombre tomb with the force of an alien ship abducting a new specimen. With it came the sweet taste of fresh air and my lungs quenched their greedy lust for it. The light from above continued to spotlight me. My eyes hurt from their starvation of the luminescence. I had to squint and filter the light through trembling hands to see a figure hovering above me.

'What in the hell?' my saviour said. He spoke with the accent only those native to the southern Midwest could recognize. Hell came out sounding like "erl." A hand appeared, reaching for me. I was hesitant at first and didn't immediately do anything. Then I was grasped around the collar, callused hands grated against my clothes, and gently lifted me out of my prison. The air kissed my skin and chilled the sweat that coated my whole body. I felt like a new born baby being birthed into the world. The environment around me seemed strange and alien.

'Water,' I said. My voice sounding like gravel grating against itself.

‘What did you say, boy?’ He closed the gap between us, cocking his head to the side so that his ear was directed towards my quivering lips.

‘Water,’ I said, struggling to be heard.

‘Darrell, get this poor soul something to drink.’ Whoever Darrell was, I heard his footsteps rapidly fade into the distance. Seconds ticked by feeling like days while the unnamed stranger sat cradling my frail body in his arms.

‘It will be alright, son,’ he spoke, rocking me gently. The man who cradled me spoke with a grandfatherly tone. The effect of his soothing voice helped still some of the tremors wracking my body. His breath had the smell of cheap whiskey and his clothes stunk of one who lit a cigarette with another cigarette. Right now, they were the most beautiful fragrances in the world. I buried my face in his shoulder and greedily inhaled. Beyond his scent was an earthy undertone. One of grass and moist dirt.

From an unknown distance, I heard his companion shout, ‘Mister Jimmy, all I can find is Gatorade and your flask.’

‘Damnit, Darrell! Just bring anything,’ Jimmy said. ‘This boy looks absolutely parched. And grab my coat. He’s shaking so bad his shoes look like they will rattle off.’ Mister Jimmy was right. I was parched, and when I licked my lips, sandpaper rubbing against cardboard.

Darrell, his helper, came jogging back panting at the exertion or excitement. I couldn’t tell and didn’t really give a shit. Just as long as he had fluids. He gently tossed down a transparent plastic bottle filled with blue liquid. It made a hollow thud against the box that I had been inside. From his head Jimmy removed the light that had signalled my release from my imprisonment, and set it aside. It cast our distorted shadows against walls of dirt.

He reached out with the hand that wasn’t holding me up and grabbed the Gatorade bottle. As soon it was close enough for me to grab I snatched it from him and spun the cap off. I took sloppy, selfish gulps and some of the drink sloshed down my chin, sunshine and heaven sliding down my throat.

‘Slow down, boy,’ he said, ‘or you’re going to sick up.’

‘Mister Jimmy, I brought the whiskey too.’ Darrell said, shaking the flask back and forth in his hands. ‘I figured someone who has been buried alive has earned a drink more than most folks.’

Memory came flooding back into my brain like a dam that had broken.

My name is Eric Stalton, and I am what you would call an action journalist. I chase the dangerous stories. The ones that many other action journalists won’t even take. My colleagues say that I am such an adrenaline junky that it bordered on suicidal. I have patrolled with rangers in Afghanistan without a weapon of my own. (They made me wear a vest). Dove into shark infested waters outside the cage. Conducted interviews with Islamic terrorists

while wearing a cross visibly around my neck. Ran with the bulls in Pamplona. Laughing and snapping pictures over my shoulder the whole time. Pretty much if it scared the shit out of you, I liked to do it.

I had just stepped off the plane at Benito Juarez International Airport in Mexico City. I had chased a lead down here of a cult that worshiped an Aztec god named Mictlantecuhтли, who, upon further research, predated the empire. They were known to sacrifice tourist to the god, but a murder charge hadn't been pegged on them yet. Pretty good shit and right up my alley.

All I had brought with me was a carry on. I liked to travel light. This made it easier for me to get in and out of unsavoury situations fast. Which I seemed to find myself in more often than not. It was a nice little Echo Sigma bag that had many compartments and a MOLLE system set up for attachments and other pouches. What is nice about the MOLLE system is that it can be fully customizable, leaving the user to pick and choose what gear is necessary for a specific setting. This type of backpack is common amongst the military and survival communities.

Weaving between the other passengers, furiously chewing a piece of Nicorette, and coming out of the gate, I tapped my plane ticket against the palm of my hand heading to the area where my escort was supposed to pick me up. A fifty dollar bill got me through customs with nothing more than a head nod from the customs officer. It isn't like I had any contraband besides a SIG SAUER Compact P250 with four extended twenty round mags and maybe some other accessories. Hey, you never know what you will run into in my line of work. It is better to have it and not need than need it and not have it.

In the pickup area of the airport, I found my escort. He was a portly man on the shorter side of six foot. He held a sign above his head waving it back and forth so it could be seen around the other travellers and wanderers of the airport. His sign had Señor Stalton written on it in bright orange marker. I slowed my pace and came walking up to him wearing my best, devious smile. It is usually the one that gets me into trouble.

'Hey, Mateo,' I said, hands in the pockets of my khaki cargo jeans. Mateo Vargas had been my contact and all around go to guy whenever I came down to this part of the world. His size and stature misdirected his abilities. He was literally a jack of all trades. A crooked grin revealed tobacco stained, twisted teeth.

'So did you get any info for me, good buddy?' I asked, peering down at him.

His green eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement. 'Yes, Señor Eric, I did, and something *muy preocupante* is going on,' he said, lowering his voice so as not to be heard by those amongst the sea of travellers.

'What is so disturbing, my friend?' I asked.

'We shall discuss that in the car ride to the hotel, my loco amigo.'

On the bland car ride to my nondescript hotel, Mateo filled me in on the cult. We had the windows rolled down in his beat-up piece of moving metal because when he turned on his air conditioning it gave off the noise akin to that of a strangled cat in heat. The aromas of the city

accosted me. Smells of sweet spices, being hawked by street vendors, and that of urine intermingled like lovers who didn't know whether to fight or copulate.

Seemingly since my last update from him, three more tourists had come up missing, and the police had no leads, but Mateo did. They were all graduate students down here studying the local history. All three pursuing degrees in anthropology, two guys and a girl. I don't believe in consequence and immediately connected the too apparent dots.

'They were down here studying ancient Aztec culture, weren't they, Mateo?'

'Yes, my friend, and I believe they may have found themselves a little *demasiado profundo*.'

I cocked an eyebrow at him. 'How so, my jolly little buddy?'

'You see, señor, they were on the same trail that I have put you on.'

I found this to be even more intriguing. Before I could think further on what he had said Mateo tossed a folder across the car. It flew over discarded candy bar wrappers and empty fast food soft drink cups to land on my lap. I went to open the file but was interrupted.

'It would be best to look at that in your room, my friend,' he said. 'Some of those pictures need to be viewed in close proximity to a *baño*, *muy preocupante*.'

I nodded my sweating head at the haunted look in his eyes. If these images disturbed Mateo to that extent, then it would be best to take heed of his warning. With my arm resting on the door, I leaned my head out the window and let the funky breeze cool me.

We pulled into the hotel and parted ways for the time giving each other the normal adieu. The hotel he dropped me off at was literally called Downtown Mexico. It had a cracked, grey brick front with wrought iron railings surrounding a second story balcony. I walked up to the massive oak door with metal studs throughout it and pushed my way in. It easily glided open deceiving the intimidating size of it. I felt like I had stepped into a time machine back into seventeenth century Mexico.

It had just the amount of privacy I needed and placed perfectly in the region of the city in which I would be investigating the most. When I saw Mateo next I would have to toss him a little extra because he had really outdone himself. I quickly acquired my room key from the check in counter and hurried to my room. Inside of my suite, I flung my bag onto the king size bed and proceeded to devour the info Mateo had gathered for me.

The cult had carved a bloody swathe across the past decade. At least ninety unsolved murders could be loosely connected to them but not enough to make any charges stick. Many local newspaper articles were included in the file accompanied by crime scene photos, autopsy photos, and victim backgrounds. Skimming through all the data he had collected I was suddenly halted by one crime scene photo in particular. In the attached notes, I noticed the victim had been filleted down the front, leaving the chest cavity hanging to the sides exposing the meaty insides. The organs had been methodically placed around the corpse with the care of a home decorator renovating a house. I assumed that the brown crusted hieroglyphs strategically placed all around the room had been painted with the victim's blood.

The way the body had been dissected hinted to someone with a medical background. The close ups of the body showed smooth, precise incisions and the organs had minimal damage that is normal of removing them. Even the lungs lying at the head of the body had been removed immaculately intact. What was most shocking was the age of the victim. It was a nine year old blonde girl. If you looked closely you could see a Dora the Explorer backpack had been angrily discarded in one of the room's corners. Its scattered contents portrayed the trajectory and force of which the bag had been tossed. Tiny, unimportant knick knacks that only a little girl would carry lay about the bag. Her iceberg blue eyes stared into nothingness, no longer taking in the innocent beauties of a nine year old's world. This revealed to me that she had been awake through the whole ritual.

A cold sweat broke out on my brow, and my stomach became an acrobat gone mad. It performed erratic handsprings and backflips until I rushed to the bathroom and violently expelled the inflight meal of packaged chicken enchilada and microwaved veggies into the luxurious toilet. In my chosen profession I have witnessed many atrocities across the globe, but this blatant disregard for life borderlines that of the surreal. What sort of creature could take such a sweet little girl and end her short life without what seemed to be a single care in the world?

I needed a drink after seeing this macabre scene. Quickly washing the clinging remnants of my mile high lunch off my face. I stared at myself in the mirror. Dilated pupils and a grey complexion stared back at me. Briefly, I considered checking this whole trip off as a loss and going home to curl up in the security and warmth of my blankets. The inner me said to quit being a pussy. I never won a battle with that arrogant prick. Curiosity and ego took hold and I lazily towelled my still damp face off.

I rammed the room key into my coat pocket, slung my pack over my shoulder and walked out the door trying to avoid making eye contact with the file. My façade of smooth composure back in place I strolled out of the hotel giving the cute girl at the front desk one of my best 'I'm a badass' smiles as I walked by. My hurried pace at which I walked deceived the air of cool mofo that I was trying to portray. My feet ate up distance on the cobblestone sidewalks and streets played out underneath my feet. About two blocks from my hotel the rhythm to my stroll became its normal casual pattern. I was once again Mr. Sunshine and smiles.

It was still early in the day, the sun not reaching its noonday apex, and the locals were revving up for their *dia de los Muertos* celebrations that would kick into high gear later on that night. Colourful sugar candy skulls, papier mâché skull death mask, devil's horns, and all sorts of elements related to the beloved holiday were in every shopfront along the tourist district which I haunted at this moment. I decided to get out of the city and do some investigatory work. What place better to get some filler info for my next story than the Teotihuacan Pyramids and Shrine of Guadalupe. I hailed down a cab with the skill of a New Yorker native, which means I was ignored until I held out a twenty in my hand, an American twenty.

A yellow rust bucket cut through cars causing screeching brakes and some colourful Spanish I hadn't even heard until it came to halt right in front of me. A dirt and grime coated TAXI sign adorned the top of a dented, sad, yellow car. Behind the wheel the driver turned to look at me, his belly dragging against the steering wheel. Signalling for me to get in, he nodded smiling. It looked as if all his teeth were capped in gold. Oddly, his canines had been modified to make them more profound, seemingly a vampiric-in-gold look. I guessed it was

in preparation for tonight's festivities. Despite the many tree air fresheners, the inside of the cab smelt like yesterday's tamales and desperation.

He jovially greeted me with his disturbing gold monster teeth and asked where I was headed and where had I been. I turned my head away from monster mouth to the scene playing out on the street outside the cab. Pedestrians and tourist shoppers made a chorus that sang of the beauty of humanity. I felt I had witnessed something sensual, something shared between lovers in a bedroom, not for an outsider like me who seemed to be peeking in a window, not out of one. It was still better than focusing on the smell of the cab and creepiness of my driver. I shoved the twenty into his greasy hand and told him to take me to the pyramids. His mask of faux happiness stayed in place and he bowed his head. Just like that the taxi shot into traffic and wove a chaotic path in between cars.

The driver turned up the radio and in the mirror, his eyebrows rose. '*Te importa?*' He asked.

'*No es muy fina,*' I said.

The sound of three mariachis singing of love lost eventually faded into the most recent hit by one of Latin America's biggest pop sensations. Let's just say her hips don't lie. I noticed the inside of his car had scattered decorations of Aztec hieroglyphic figures. A man spearing a serpent on the ceiling above his head. What appeared to be a girl being devoured by a winged beast above my own. Many other ideographs were haphazardly placed throughout the car. I filed this away for later and let the music carry me into a state of oblivion. Before I knew it, we were at the pyramids. Had I dozed a little, and what did that say about my mental state if I was able to nap in the back of this mobile roach motel?

His sweaty sphere rotated and gave me another ghoulish grin. '*Estamos aquí, señor.*' We are here, sir.

I handed him another ten and shoved the door open. '*Muchas gracias.*'

Before he sped off to pick up the next sorry bastard he handed me a card. On it was Quetzalcoatl Cab: "*Nos movemos como el viento!*" "We move like the wind" is the translation. Very catchy, considering Quetzalcoatl was the Aztec God of the Wind.

'Just call and ask for Carlos if you want me to pick you up,' he said, in plain English.

'Thanks, buddy,' I said before I doubled took and realized how he had spoken. That sly son of a bitch.

He smiled ruefully and gunned the gas pedal kicking up gravel. The puttering sound of his motor and Latin music faded into the distance. I turned from the site of his departure, gazing upon the titans that were the Teotihuacán Pyramids.

The rest of the day was filled with me asking questions to the tour guides about Aztec culture, as we trekked the tour grounds, and scribbling frantic annotations on my little OD green write in the rain notepad. When the sun started to reach the horizon, I decided to call Carlos. Surprisingly, he was there within ten minutes. Almost as if he had been waiting for my call. He pulled up wearing that I'm going to eat you smile and turned down his Latin pop music. I found his love for it bordering on obnoxious.

‘You have a good time, señor?’

‘It was uneventful and sometimes that does just fine with me,’ I said, even though that was a total lie. Don’t get me wrong. I love gathering info, but put me in a firefight in Fallujah with a handful of freedom loving marines any day. ‘Would you please take me back to Downtown Mexico Hotel?’ I said.

‘If that is what you want, señor.’

What else would I want? I shook my head yes and hopped into the back. Reacquainting myself with a malodorous haze of the cab. He turned his music up and fell back into his wannabe NASCAR driver routine. Once again, I seemed to lose track of time. I was hopping out of the cab onto the cobblestone sidewalk in front of my hotel, paying Carlos, and walking into the hotel before I noticed that I had blanked out the whole trip back. I did a breakneck about-face and looked around. The sun had set, and the streets were overrun with the dead.

Many skull adorned faces ran about laughing and singing. Some held candles. A couple here and there were dressed as corpse groom and bride. Up-tempo music filled the air. The dead danced and played. Colourful skulls synonymous with the holiday were painted on faces or worn as a mask. A few in the crowd abstained from wearing some sort of an honorific to the dead. These were usually the old or infirm matriarchs and patriarchs of families. The ones who would probably in the near future be celebrated on this day. They had the looks of past memories of their own days dancing about and being mischievous in their haunted eyes.

A feminine voice behind me said, ‘Sir, someone left a message for you.’

I wheeled back around to see the exotic beauty that had been working the front desk earlier in the day when I departed the hotel for the pyramids. An envelope with a note inside. The only person who knew I was here was Mateo. I took it thanking the dark-haired beauty and went up to my room to freshen up.

Minutes later I came out of the bathroom towelling off my freshly washed hair. Tossing the damp towel into a corner of the room I walked over to the bed leaving a damp trail behind me. When I had come back to my room earlier I had closed the file like I was trying to pick up hot coals. The envelope with the message for me lay beside it torn open. A flyer of some local Mexican bar was inside and the note was hastily scribbled on the back. Meet me at nine was all it said. Mateo didn’t have a mysterious bone in his body. This rang of an outsider and I was truly intrigued. Throwing on my usual outfit, putting my SIG in a shoulder holster with extra magazines, and putting on a jacket to conceal my pistol, I snagged the flyer and headed out into the masses of the celebratory dead.

The bar was only a few blocks away. I popped some more nicotine gum in and began my trek towards my meeting with destiny. Weaving through the convulsing crowd, I kept thinking about the message on the back of the flyer. Who would know where I was, and mainly how did they find me? Only my editor and Mateo knew I was down here.

Lost in the Socratic Method, still aware of my trivial surroundings, I made my way to the destination on the flyer. It was on a side road littered with garbage and items no longer useful to the owner. A pair of filth stained women’s lace panties lay next to a half-broken bottle of

local tequila just a few feet from the door of the bar. I looked up to the sign over the bar. *Un Diablo Que Usted Conoce* matched the name on the flyer. 'A Devil You Know.' I wrinkled my brow and shook my head as I took my first step into who knows what.

The inside of the dive wasn't much better than the outside. At least the inside wasn't decorated with dirty women's underwear. Some local Mexican band played eerie music to fit the holiday, and they were dressed as dead mariachis. As I walked in, it seemed like everyone turned an inquiring eye on me. A bead of sweat ran down my face but there was no way in hell I was going to wipe it off. I gave a come get some smile back to the crowd, and it was like I was Norm walking into some hellish version Cheers.

I walked up to the bar and slumped down. An old veteran of countless bar fights and smoky nights was tending. I ordered a shot of cheap tequila, no expensive stuff here, and a local Cerveza. The shot disappeared turning my throat into a stinging slip and slide. I sucked the glorious fumes of the shot back into my body. One thing I loved was rotgut tequila. Call it a guilty pleasure of mine. I used the mirror on the back of the bar to covertly scan the patrons, hoping to find my secret admirer.

Suddenly, a voice spoke, the cinnamon scented breath tickling my ear. 'You look lost, gringo,' a feminine voice said, dripping with Latin sexuality.

My beer almost slipped out of my hand. I will contribute that to the beads of sweat from the cold bottle. A woman no older than me stood sharing a reflection with me. The face looking back at me predatorily, a very feline quality. Almond shaped, dark brown eyes dusted with gold flecks reflected the dim light of the room. Her full, red lips tugged up to one side in a devious smile, and her black hair that ended in ringlets at her shoulder begged to be pulled. Damn, I hadn't even been around this woman thirty seconds, and I was thinking about making sweet animalistic love to her. No way in hell I was going to let her see that, though.

Casually spinning around on my bar stool, I said, 'Not lost at all. I believe I am right where I need to be.' She looked at me like I missed the joke and she threw her head back giving the room a smoky laugh.

'I see you got my note.'

My eyes widened and my mouth may have hung open for a second or ten. I am a quick recover, though. 'You seem to have me at a disadvantage. Who might I be so blessed to speak with, and how do you know me?'

'You should be careful with what you call blessings. Sometimes they aren't the ones you want.' She danced around my questions easily, not giving me a clear answer to either of my inquiries. I liked her immediately.

'Are we going to play this game all night or was there a reason you invited me to this den of thieves?' A little acid touching my voice.

She cocked one eyebrow up and bit the corner of her lip before answering me. 'A feisty one, I see. Mateo warned me you would be leery of me.'

I blew out a breath and let the tension in my shoulders out. If Mateo had told her to meet me then she must be someone reliable. He doesn't like to have useless people in his close circle, and his close circle is all there is in his life. Believe me, I know. We have a past that is a story for another day.

I held out my hand. 'Let's start over. I think we both may have played the wrong cards first. My name is Eric, as you already know. Would you like to have a drink with me?'

She shifted her hips and looked me in the eyes, trapping me in her gaze. It felt like seconds turned into an eternity before she responded to me. 'Okay, gringo. I am Katrine, and yes I would be very pleased with a drink.'

'How about my good old friend Tequila? He likes to make you dance and sometimes wake up without any pants. Anyways, the dirty bastard has done that to me more times than I would like to count.' If you hadn't noticed yet, sometimes I have a tendency to ramble. But she seemed to be amused because she favoured me with another of her lovely laughs. I ordered us four shots of tequila, and she also ordered some form of margarita alien to me. The bartender just grunted and went to work preparing our drinks. What a lovely fellow.

I find alcohol a great icebreaker between strangers. She briefly told me that she had known Mateo since she was a little girl, and he was the only semblance of family she had. For just a tiny moment her eyes welled up with tears, but she quickly got herself under control. That ended the friendly chatter, and she went straight into business mode. She filled me in on locations, possible suspects, and the area heaviest with victims discovered. All of it was quite informative but I wasn't giving it attention. I had become enamoured in all that was her. She was a total contradiction. At times in our conversation she seemed vulnerable and then suddenly she was a Valkyrie with a flaming sword in her hands.

'Well, Katrine, it has been swell, but my drunk ass needs to get back to my room before I can't find it. Care to join me?'

She hesitated, never a good sign. Twirling a curl between her fingers, she said, 'I'm sure that we would both enjoy that, but I still have a few things I need to do tonight.'

What the hell did she still have to do at this time of night? I shrugged. 'Your loss, but maybe we can do this again some other time.' I stood up reeling a little and made my way swaying to the door. I turned and waved bye to her. 'See you in the funny pages, kid.' All I got back was a weak smile.

Out in the air away from the bar I took a deep breath trying to find my centre. I began my wobbly journey back to Downton Mexico City Hotel wondering what I had done to strike out with her. About halfway back my bladder told me I wasn't going to make it back to my room, so I dipped into the darkness of the nearest alley. The streets were still pretty crowded and the days of me getting drunk and showing my blinding white ass to the public are behind me. In the middle of my glorious urination, three people come walking out of the alley.

'Got a light, hombre?' one of them said. Of course, he had to be the biggest out of the three. Two other guys stood behind him still partially bathed in darkness.

‘Nope, man. I quit smoking a while ago. I would appreciate it if you let me finish my business. I mean what kind of guy asks a dude for a light when his dick is in his hands?’

This didn’t seem to strike him as funny because he walked up and kicked me over, mid piss. I flew out of the alley into the street, rolling and peeing in symphony. That may strike some as funny but it really, I hate to say this, pissed me off. When I settled I put my partner back in my pants and picked myself unsteadily up of the ground.

‘Now hold up, partner,’ I said, holding my hands out in front of me and wobbling more than I actually needed to. ‘I don’t want any trouble. I was just trying to be funny. Don’t you have a sense of...’ Before I finished my line I yanked my pistol out of the holster and levelled it at Sluggo’s chest. ‘Now you boys have two choices. Keep on stepping and continue to enjoy life, or I can put two in each of your chests, and to be safe I will add one to your heads.’

The big one that I named Sluggo didn’t seem scared. He came right at me. I held good on my promise and dropped him. The report from my pistol echoed along the streets and alley. His buddies dropped what they had in their hands. Was I really that drunk? I quietly scolded myself for not noticing they had weapons also. I was better than that.

‘Now, once again. Do we wish to continue?’ I said, my senses in overdrive. I was fully aware of how my heart was racing and I checked my peripherals to see if anyone else was coming. It seemed that my shots were drowned out by the ruckus of the night and hadn’t even bothered the ongoing celebrations of the dead. Well, they had one more to celebrate. I slowly started to backpedal my way to a more crowded street. I didn’t make it five steps when I noticed them smiling at me. The mouth of my pistol still pointed in their direction I didn’t see any reason for them to be smiling.

‘What the hell is so...’

Darkness.

A dull pain in my head was the first thing I noticed as I swam back into consciousness. I was lying down and couldn’t move. Slowly, I cracked my eyes and fought sparks of agony that danced across my vision. As the feeling of looking through a smeared lens faded I noticed that I was in a stone room with all kinds of indiscernible writing. Many white candles sat sweating their fat drops of wax onto the stony surface in which they had been placed. The candles cast dancing shadows across the room. A faint breeze tickled my body and gooseflesh sprang up across my skin. I was wearing nothing but my birthday suit. Rapidly trying to sit up I barely moved. My hands and feet had been restrained by crusty leather straps connected to a stone slab that I discovered I was laying on. I tried to speak, but the ability to speak had been stolen from me by a piece of cloth gag. Chains rattled around my head, and when I looked up three nude figures hung by their feet right over my head struggling and trying to scream through their gags. It was the three missing college kids. The two guys were hanging on either side of the girl. All were wide eyed and convulsing.

Birthing from the shadows robed figures started to gather around me. Many of their faces remained hidden in the shadows of the hoods. Two of them didn’t wear robes though, and it

was these two that sent my head spinning. Chest bare and in only a loin cloth Mateo stood at my feet. He had on some kind of ceremonial headdress. It had many dark coloured, voluminous feathers in it. Next to him stood Katrine. She was dressed similarly to him but no headdress. Many beaded necklaces with symbols I couldn't quite place lay lazily in between her supple breast. Now was not the time to get aroused. She had a knife with an onyx blade tucked into the waistband of her loin cloth.

'I am sorry, my friend, but you were chosen for this from the start,' Mateo said. His voice monotone.

Katrine remained silent. A look of pure lust flamed her eyes. It wasn't a lust for me, no matter what I told myself. The others gathered closer around and started to murmur in a garbled tongue I hadn't ever heard. They started slowly, and the tempo picked up. They would reach the end of their litany and shout one word. *Mictlantecuhli*. A flash of some skull faced figure in full head dress pounded images into my brain. Then they would start over, swaying and reciting it faster.

In unison, Mateo and Katrine walked on opposite sides of the slab I lay on. When they reached the sides closest to my chest they stopped. Katrine withdrew the onyx blade and held it up over her head. Turning in each direction of the compass she spurted out some chatter. Then she turned back to me and lowered the tip of the blade to my chest. White hot fire lanced across my flesh as she began carving something into me. I bit down so hard on my gag a coppery taste filled my mouth. Pain has a way of distorting time, and it felt like days before she was done. Then she handed the knife over to Mateo. He took his turn carving into me. Then they walked up to the three hanging at my head.

The voices of the other sadistic bastards rose to a disturbed cacophony. My vision started to warp around the edges. I felt like I was looking through a bubble. Mateo walked up to the first guy on my right and held the blade up into the air. He said a little bit, and then with lightning speed he lashed out and slit the kid's throat. Arterial spurting painted my body and ran into every orifice of my face. I tried to scream but only managed futile, muffled protestations. The chains the other two hung from immediately started to madly jingle and clatter. The bodies convulsed as if they were in the throes of Grande Maule seizures. Mateo and Katrine switched sides. Mateo repeated himself and ended the life of the second young man.

Now bathed in the blood of two people, I savagely thrashed back and forth. Trying to find any way to break free. Shaking my drenched head to clear the viscera from my eyes I looked up at the young girl hanging above me. She screamed, and tears poured down her forehead. A shadow passed over me, and I noticed Mateo handing Katrine back the knife. The other ritual members crowded the room with noise from their chanting. It seemed to reach a sexual rhythm. Rising higher and faster. Katrine raised the blade to the young girl's naval, her mouth moving rapidly, spewing out garbage I didn't care to translate. The college girl and I made eye contact right before Katrine plunged the black blade into her midsection and savagely drug it down to her sternum. Her freed organs made their home on my body, leaving me wrapped in a cardinal blanket of warmth and stink that only those who have been around death could recognize. I will say one thing about Mateo and Katrine. They didn't drag out the deaths. This wasn't torture. It was sacrifice, and each of the three died swiftly.

Now it was my turn. They curbed their attention back to me, as unwanted as it was. They moved back to the positions they had taken when they had a carving party on my chest. Now they joined in on chanting the archaic words of the ritual. When they yelled Mictlantecuhtli they threw their heads back in elation and I was once again assaulted with the image of the skull faced figure. The other members followed suit and one of them had been my taxi driver. What kind of sick bastards were these people? They were all rapidly swaying together now. Mateo and Katrine joined hands over me. I looked up and in their hands was the sinister onyx knife. The clumps of flesh clung to it and the candle light cast mad reflections upon its surface. For a brief moment, I swore I saw faces writhing in agony and torment. Then as they were reaching their climax the cult members screamed Mictlantecuhtli. Mateo and Katrine plunged the blade down into my chest. A living shadow accompanying the descending blade.

I jerked in Mister Jimmy's embrace at the remembrance of the blade penetrating and breaking the bone of my sternum. He tightened his hold trying to stop me from clawing at the area of my chest where the blade had entered me.

He cooed into my hair. 'It's alright, boy. Shhh, it will be okay.'

'Mister Jimmy, what is that poor man doing?' Darrell said, standing at the mouth of the grave.

'Shut up, you fool boy, and help me get him out of here,' he said. Then to me he said gently, 'Can you stand?'

I nodded and we rose, him holding me like I was made of brittle porcelain and me on two rickety excuses of legs. He leaned me up against the dirt wall and climbed out. Then he and Darrell lay on their bellies and reached down with callused hands to help me rise out of the hole, bringing me back into the world of the living once again. Darrell ran back to the truck to grab a blanket and a phone. I sat there with my feet dangling into the hole of my prison. Darrell came back and tossed Jimmy the blanket. It was an old ragtag affair that Jimmy kept in his truck for no reason he could remember.

Swaddled in the blanket now, Jimmy asked me if I wanted to call anyone, possibly the authorities. I told him I needed to collect myself first. He just gave me a knowing nod and rubbed my back in small rotations. Darrell plopped down on the opposite side of the hole, and we passed the flask around quickly draining it of its bitter elixir. I was suddenly wracked with uncontrollable laughter. I just couldn't stop giggling. I am sure I looked like a mad man to them, but they both held their tongues. Good for them. Looking up and wiping tears from my eyes I asked if they wanted to know how I got here. Both stiffened at first as if I had slapped them in the face and then slowly beckoned me to continue. I told them everything that had led up this point. Their faces drained of all colour and Darrell looked like he was going to lose his lunch. I think my jovial tone threw them off.

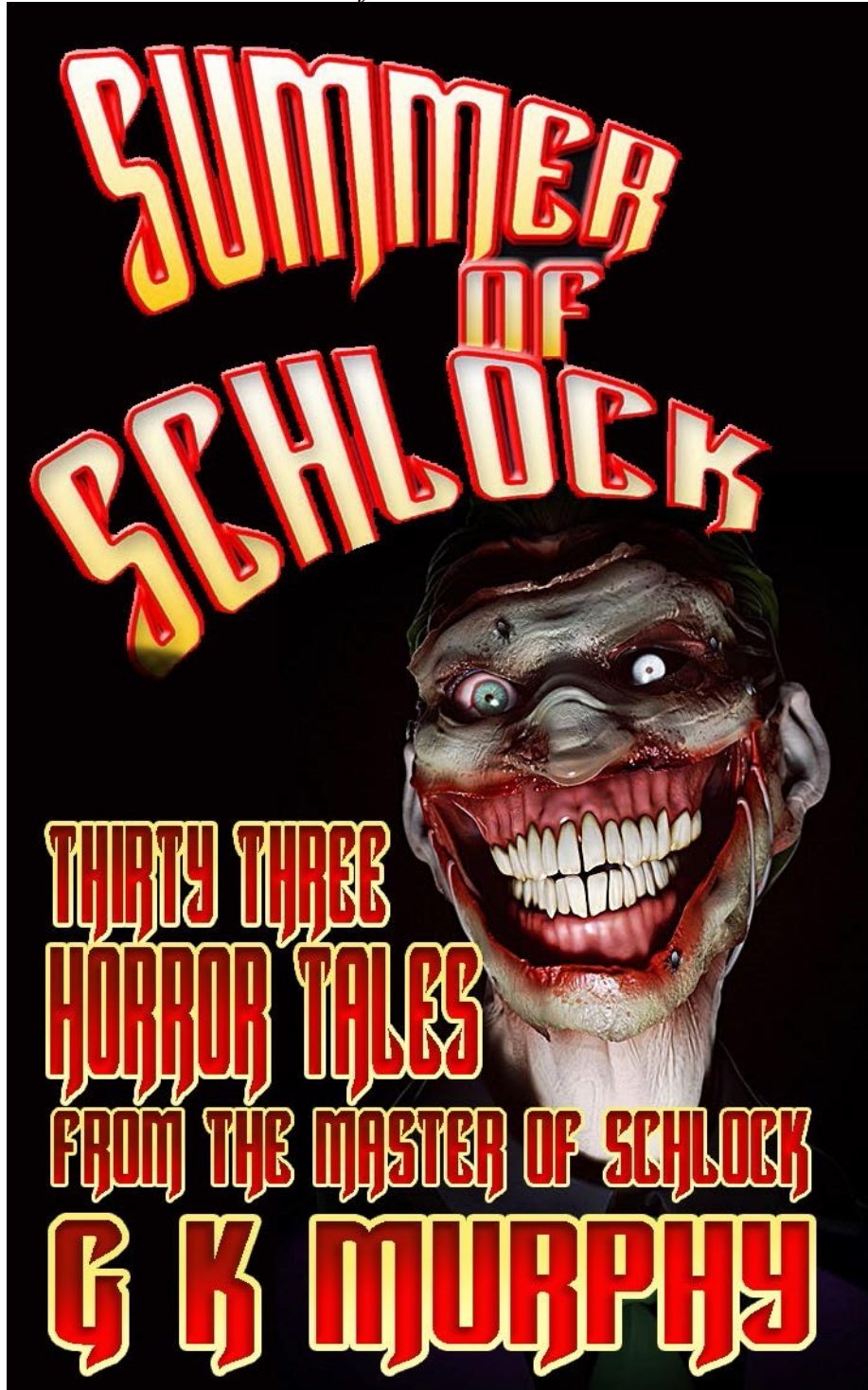
'You know what the best part about this is?' I said to them with blacked out eyes. Their faces contorting into screaming mask. 'I am finally free.'

Unlike Mateo and Katrine, I take my time dismantling a body. I think one should take pleasure in his art, and I tried to keep Jimmy and Darrell alive as long as possible. Their fruitless screams washed over the cemetery. The only thing that displeased me during the whole glorious process was that snivelling bastard Eric, wailing against the walls of the cage

I locked him in the back of our head. I took a long drag from the cigarette I pilfered from Jimmy's scattered corpse. It felt good to be back.

THE END

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THE LOCKER ROOM by Steven Havelock

The door slammed behind Sue.

This can't be the right place.

The room was tiled with kitchen slate tiles. There was a short man at the other end of the ten-metre room. He had a hose and was cleaning dark red patches on the floor with the hose.

There's something strange about him.

To the left side of the room was a row of lockers.

God, what is this place? That woman who gave me directions; there was something not right about her, either.

Sue turned around and tried to open the door, but there was no handle this side.

It's firmly locked shut!

Sue walked over towards the man who was cleaning the floor with a hose.

His eyes seemed glazed, just like the woman who gave me directions. What the hell is going on here?

'Hello? Can you help me please?' asked Sue.

The man didn't reply, then just as she was a few feet away from him. He reached to his back and produced a gun.

Oh God! No, not like this!

The man pulled the trigger. A red gash appeared on Sue's forehead and she collapsed to the floor.

Sue awoke.

I feel sick to my stomach. What's that rolling motion? What are all these things I'm tangled up in?

There was a dim light shining from somewhere up above and Sue looked up.

Then she realised that she was tangled up in and what the rolling motion was. She stopped a scream escaping her mouth at the last second.

I'm on a trolley along with about five or six other dead bodies. That maniac with the glazed eyes is taking me somewhere.

I will pretend to be dead, too. It's probably my only chance to get out of here alive.

Soon the tunnel which the trolley was making its way through ended. The trolley came to a stop and the man left.

Thank God for that!

A little hope glimmered in Sue's heart. A few seconds later Sue heard a sound.

What the hell was that? Sounded like the slithering of a giant snake!

From the dim lights in the ceiling Sue could make out a serpentine figure slithering towards her trolley.

I got to run!

Sue clambered out of the trolley as fast as she could. She started to run and then froze.

My mind! What's happening to my mind? Everything is going foggy. I can't think!

Then blackness swallowed her.

Sue awoke.

What a horrible nightmare.

She looked at the clock.

Oh my God! Is that the time.

Her husband, Frank, was at work, but her eight-year-old son was at home. She had told her husband that their son David had an ENT appointment at the local hospital.

Sue got David up and ready, then they headed towards the hospital.

That night Frank arrived back from work.

'Where's David?' he asked.

'He's on the hospital ward. It's your day off tomorrow, we will go and see him.'

The next day at about one o'clock, Sue and Frank headed towards the hospital to see David.

'Are you sure it's this way?' asked Frank

'Yes, positive,' Sue replied.

Frank went into the room first. Sue was right behind him; her eyes seemed to have a glazed expression.

Frank walked up the man who was cleaning the floor with the hosepipe.

‘Something’s not right here—’ He never got to finish his sentence; the man with hose pulled out a gun and opened fire.

Frank collapsed to the floor, and just as the man with the hose pipe and Sue had done yesterday with her son, they put Frank’s body in the trolley and took it through the underground tunnel.

A Week Later

‘Sue, are you sure I have to go to the hospital?’ asked Sue’s mum.

‘Yes, quite sure, mother,’ replied Sue, a glazed expression on her face.

Soon they were in the room with the lockers again. Just like last time, the man with the same glazed expression on his face—the same expression that Sue wore also—pulled out a gun and shot Sue’s mother.

Sue awoke.

What a nightmare!

Then her face seemed to glaze over.

*My mind’s going foggy... Where is my son David? Where is my mother and my husband?
Can’t think...can’t...*

Sue reached for her mobile and dialled Frank’s mother’s number.

‘Yes...Frank’s in the hospital. I will come pick you up and take you to see him.’

THE END

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DRYLANDS DRIFTER OF MARS by Rex Mundy

1. The Dark Fugitive

The dust storm rolled onwards across the dead sea bottom.

Stinging clouds of grit tore through the thin air, unstopped and unstoppable. Nothing could survive within that broiling mass, surely? The drylands stretched on like a vast stone table top, caked with sand, and only occasional rocky ridges rose to impede the dust storms progress. The storm had been blowing across the drylands of Mars for a thousand years. And yet within those clouds of dust, those deadly clouds, something moved. Raced. Hurtled. Something black, fast, desperate. And in the sky, chasing the dark fugitive, three small air cars.

The shriek of the wind was audible even down in the broad, green, artificial valley that flanked the blue waters of the Grand Canal. Sheltered by high, rocky walls, the two narrow strips of fertile land were home to farms and towns, tyrants and traders. Narrow boats sailed the wide canal waters, hauled by scaled, reptilian beasts that trudged along crumbling towpaths of hewn stone, placed there by sweating gangs of slaves centuries ago.

The canal gipsies had set up their market along the towpath in the shadow of a great rocky outcrop, a spur of the main cliffs. Down here, the wail of the wind was muted, and the bartering of canal traders and their customers went on unabated.

Samphire sat beside the bank, hugging her knees, and watching as Stith spoke with potential buyers. She kept an eye on her stock, a collection of pots and pans and kitchen utensils for which the impoverished canal dwellers would pay much in Martian corn. Her job was to lay out the stock, keep an eye out for thieves and Zêrevanîya, and to look on admiringly as Stith rolled out his patter, and be as pretty as she could manage in her grubby tunic.

‘Come and get your pots and pans,’ Stith called out to the bustling crowds. ‘Nice and cheap, ask no questions, get them at competitive prices. You, madam,’ he addressed a blue skinned Martian matron, as she passed by with three or four squalling children in tow, ‘See that quality? Real plastic, made by Atlantean Vril artisans before the Flood.’

Even as Stith spoke, voice raised to be heard above the hubbub of the canal gipsies’ market, Samphire could hear a growing humming over the background roar of the desert wind. She tensed. She had heard that noise too many times before. She rose to her knees and reached out to tug at her business partner’s arm. Stith had to be warned. They had to conceal their stock and get back out on the free wide waters of the Grand Canal, where the Zêrevanîya had no jurisdiction.

But even as she touched Stith’s forearm, the eerie glow of Zêrevanîya air cars swept over the rocky ridge of red stone that towered over the market. She leapt to her feet and Stith, moving with the speed of a man possessed seeing the danger, seized the plastic blanket on which the merchandise had been made, bundled it up, and thrust it into her hands.

‘Get back in the boat!’ he yelled. ‘Get back in the boat, girl.’

Even as Samphire prepared to leap up onto the deck, a dark figure appeared atop the rocky cliff directly above. The glow of the air cars shone upon its glossy black hide. It shot down the cliff with seemingly supernatural rapidity, bounded across the rock, and vanished with a splash into the canal just beside their narrow boat. Samphire and Stith exchanged glances.

Three air cars shot up over the cliff and descended in a steep curve. People ran screaming in all directions as the Zêrevanîya fired off a warning fusillade from their Vril lances.

Samphire and Stith hit the dirt. As the emaciated girl cowered in the reddish grit that coated the towpath, Samphire heard a hatch opening on the lead air car. Booted feet descended the companionway. She looked up, squinting in the dust filtered sunlight to see four or five Zêrevanîya surveying the scene.

‘This market is illegal,’ announced their leader, a tall, flaxen haired man with a cruel look on his flushed face. He wore harness of black plasti-leather and a red lined black cloak, and clutched a Vril lance negligently in one hand. Noticing Samphire’s lifted head, he pointed at her. ‘You!’ he shouted over the whine of the wind. ‘What do you have in that bundle, gipsy?’

Resentful, defiant, she opened it enough to show a glimpse of the contents. The Zêrevanîya leader stomped forward in a swirl of cloak and knocked the bundle from her hands. The contents scattered in the grit, some clattering against the scales of the slumbering dray beast, some rolling over the side to vanish into the murky waters as had the dark fugitive before them.

‘Illegal selling,’ the Zêrevanîya shouted, and his fellow guards nodded censoriously. ‘It is against the law for trade to be conducted outside designated markets. I should confiscate this merchandise straightaway, and apprehend all you miscreants.’

Stith rose from where he had been cowering. ‘Sir, please don’t do that,’ he cringed. ‘We are not selling any merchandise, we’re merely resting on the canal side before continuing to the city of Dikana Mezin to sell in the legitimate market. By law, our merchandise cannot be confiscated while it is being transported along the free waters; your authority does not extend so far.’ He wrung his hands. ‘May I have the honour of knowing who I address?’

‘I am Serokê,’ the Zêrevanîya said. ‘I am captain of this patrol. Enough of your wrangling, fat man. I see you know the law well. What does it say about the harbouring of fugitives?’

Samphire glanced back involuntarily at the broad waters of the canal. Serokê saw her look, and levelled his Vril lance at her, an action copied by his fellow Zêrevanîya.

‘We are in pursuit of a fleeing Venusian,’ Serokê barked. ‘He escaped Bajarê Bajêr when the storm hit it, and fled across the drylands in this direction.’ He raised his voice so the rest of the cowering people could hear. ‘Who among you has seen him?’

‘What would a Venusian look like?’ asked Stith, playing for time. Samphire knew what Venusians looked like, they all did. It was the Venusians who had subjected Mars to the catastrophe that gripped them to this day.

Serokê sneered. ‘Tall and sinewy,’ he said, ‘with glossy black skin. Unclad. This one would have been carrying a stolen Vril lance.’ He levelled his own lance at Samphire again. ‘One of

you must have seen him! He came this way! Are you harbouring him aboard your pathetic boats?’

Turning, he scanned the ragged line of people. ‘Or is he amongst you?’ Serokê stamped forward, seized a woman by the arm, dragged her up, then tore back her hood to reveal the ruddy skin of a Martian highlander. Serokê snarled and flung her aside. He checked several other people with the aid of his men, tearing hoods and veils back, each time to reveal normal coloured skin for this part of Mars.

Samphire looked at Stith. ‘Didn’t we see the...’

He scowled, shook his head. ‘Don’t speak,’ he said. ‘The first chance, get aboard the narrow boat. They’re not allowed to follow us there.’

Serokê flung aside another Martian in frustration. ‘You’re all participating in illegal marketing,’ he shouted. ‘One of you must have seen the Venusian. Tell me where he is hiding or I will have you all arrested and flown to Bajarê Bajêr.’

‘Nobody saw him,’ shouted a white bearded old man, temper snapping in the hot sun and the gritty air. The storm was growing louder and the air was alive with tension. Samphire put a hand to her temples. She was developing the headache she always had when the storm hit. ‘I think you dreamed him!’ the old man added. ‘Go back to your air city and leave us. Ha! If you can still get it off the ground!’

Serokê levelled his Vril lance and pressed a stud. A cobalt ray struck the old man in the chest and his body fell back smoking as it hit the paving of the towpath. A gasp rose from the throats of the assembled people. It was against all law for Zêrevanîya to issue summary executions, Samphire knew. Stith had told her that long ago. Stith knew all about the Zêrevanîya, having worked for them as a clerk before the Terran Flood and the ensuing collapse of Martian civilisation. She watched as the Zêrevanîya turned to menace them all with their Vril lances. One had her in his sights.

Then the storm struck, billowing remorselessly over the lip of the canal valley. Stinging clouds of grit rolled rapidly down the side towards the wetlands below. The Zêrevanîya turned in horror as the clouds consumed their aircraft then galloped straight for them. The crowd scattered, diving for shelter. Samphire felt Stith’s pudgy hand on her shoulder and she looked at him.

‘Get the merchandise into the boat,’ he said. ‘Whip up the beast!’

Moments later, they both stood on deck, sheltering behind a plastiglass windscreen as the dray beast plodded down the towpath through the howling, grit filled wind, its scaled hide impervious to the assault. Behind them the Zêrevanîya vanished into the clouds of dirt.

‘Let us hope that is the last we see of Serokê the Zêrevanîya,’ said Samphire, clinging to a stanchion as the narrow boat bobbed on the waves that stirred the normally placid canal water. ‘We were lucky to escape him. I think he’d have killed us if we hadn’t told him about seeing the fugitive.’

Two black paws reached over the side and a dark figure hauled itself up to join them. ‘My thanks,’ it grunted.

2. Treasure of the God Kings

‘Who are you?’ said Samphire spiritedly. ‘A Venusian savage? Why were you fleeing the Zêrevanîya?’ Her eyes flicked up and down the newcomer’s glossy black hide.

‘How did you get aboard?’ Stith demanded, his chins wobbling in dismay. ‘I thought you drowned when you dived into the canal.’

‘I am Kursaal,’ said the Venusian, resting a forearm on the Vrîl lance that he carried over one shoulder—he wore nothing else. Two red eyes glittered brightly in his jet-black face, taking in Samphire’s skinny limbs, barely concealed by her threadbare tunic, and her half-starved, lemur like face.

‘The Zêrevanîya took me prisoner not long after I first came to Mars. I was betrayed by those I thought my friends.’ His eyes flicked over to Stith. ‘I trod water while you were speaking with the Zêrevanîya, clinging to the other side of this vessel’s hull. I held on as you set off. I thought you might take me away from my pursuers, and the storm.’ He glanced balefully at the stormy skies and choppy canal waters.

Stith shook his head. ‘Lies,’ he said, then gulped as Kursaal glowered at him again. ‘I mean to say,’ the fat man protested, ‘no one could spend so long in water without drowning.’

‘Is that why you did not betray me to the Zêrevanîya?’ Kursaal asked, absently watching the dray beast plodding down the crumbling towpath. Behind them the outlier of the eternal dust storm roiled across the valley like smoke from an erupting volcano, but they were on its edges now. ‘And I thought that at last I had friends in this world.’

‘I merely thought the less they knew the better,’ said Stith. ‘I thought you dead in the water. I cannot see how any man could last so long.’

‘You desert dwelling Martians fear water,’ Kursaal said. ‘You know so little of it, having none but that which you melt from your ice caps to irrigate these meagre strips of land.’ A black claw indicated the fertile regions that lay between the towpath and the cliffs. ‘On Venus, all is water. Salt seas roll tideless from pole to pole. Swamp and jungle are inundated by brine. The air is filled with moisture. It rains every day during the wet season. Children can swim before they can walk. It is no country for drylanders such as you Martians. And yet it did not stop you coming to enslave us.’

‘I heard it was a Venusian that brought the Flood on Terra,’ said Stith slowly. ‘That he sabotaged the ancient Phaethonian engines that kept the planet in an ice age, ensuring the orichalcum mines of Atlantis were above the surface of the ocean. Until the ice caps began to melt and the sea level rose and Atlantis was sunk.’

Kursaal grinned harshly. ‘A Venusian did destroy Atlantis,’ he said. ‘And now the orichalcum mines are lost beneath the waves, and all Atlantis and the Martian colonists who dwelt there with them...’ He looked troubled. ‘And yet many of my own folk were killed in

the catastrophe as well. Venusian slaves worked those mines.’ He brushed tiredly at his face. ‘I killed them all.’

‘You killed them?’ Samphire turned her emerald eyes upon the dark man’s impassive face. ‘You destroyed Atlantis? It was you?’

‘No wonder the Zêrevanîya wanted to find you,’ hissed Stith, covertly eyeing the savage as he dripped upon their deck. ‘It was you who brought about this great catastrophe! Now that the orichalcum mines are inaccessible, Mars is dying. No more orichalcum, no more Vril. No more Vril, and the ether ships that traded with other planets no longer fly, the engines that keep Mars habitable begin to die. You destroyed our world.’

Samphire gazed at Kursaal bitterly. She remembered her happy childhood, raised by loving parents on a rich and prosperous planet, governed by wise rulers. How it had all collapsed before she had known her first bleed. People had starved when crops ran out, and fields went dry.

The world had split apart, splintered into a world of war between nomad tribes of the drylands and impoverished city states of the canals, policed by the Zêrevanîya from their flying city of Bajarê Bajêr. She had met Stith, after the death of her parents, and lived and worked with him as a Cihok, a canal gipsy. She had known no other life ever since—gipsying up and down the Grand Canal, selling and buying, avoiding the swingeing tolls of the Zêrevanîya as best they could, trading in canal gipsies’ markets whenever possible.

‘What brings you to Mars?’ she said. ‘Would you destroy what little remains of our life?’

Kursaal snarled. ‘I escaped Atlantis in the last ether ship,’ he said. ‘I was bound for Venus, but her orbit had taken her to the far side of the sun, and I landed here to refuel for the long journey. Here I was told that there is not enough Vril available on the planet to power even one ether ship; the Zêrevanîya keep what is left to fuel their air city and their fliers with which they dominate the dying world. Now I am stranded, a drifter wandering the drylands, unable to return to my home, on a planet that hates me and my kind.’

‘With reason,’ said Stith gently. ‘This was once a rich world. Now it is a nightmare.’

‘Your riches were based on the slavery of my people,’ said Kursaal. ‘Now you can no longer sail the skies on slave raids, now you are cut off from the orichalcum mines of Atlantis, and you think your civilisation has fallen. But I know better.’

‘You do?’ Samphire said. ‘You think our life can be rebuilt?’

Kursaal turned to face her. ‘I was betrayed by men who called themselves friends,’ he repeated. ‘The Zêrevanîya took me to their air city, and I escaped death only because of the storm. But I know something you on this planet have forgotten. The location of the Phaethonian stockpile.’

‘The stockpile?’ said Stith. ‘That was lost in the dryland sands years ago. It was indeed forgotten, redundant after we found the orichalcum mines on Terra. If you truly know its location...’

‘I could access enough Vril fuel to power an ether ship to Venus,’ Kursaal said. ‘Or even further, out into the asteroids, some of which are said to still contain orichalcum seams from when they were the ur-planet of Phaethon.’

Samphire remembered from her childhood schooling that all human life in the solar system had begun on Phaethon, the lost planet. The god kings of that world had seeded colonies on the inner planets before destroying their home world by meddling with dark technological forces.

After Phaethon’s destruction and the death of the god kings, the inner planet colonies had fallen into barbarism from which the Martians had finally dragged themselves millenia after when a drylands traveller had stumbled upon a Phaethonian stockpile of ether ships, orichalcum and Vril fuel, Vril lances, everything needed to begin a new civilisation. Exploration of neighbouring Terra and Venus had revealed savage tribes of ape like primitives, degenerate descendants of the original colonists, who were set to work in the fabled orichalcum mines of Atlantis, whose ore produced the raw material for Vril, the mysterious energy source that had powered the Phaethonian technology.

Now all that was gone, and Martian civilisation was rapidly receding into barbarism like that from which it had lifted itself, but did this savage truly know the forgotten location of the original stockpile? If he did, perhaps civilisation could be restored.

‘How do you know of the stockpile’s location?’ she challenged him.

‘I saw it on a map in the subterranean city of Shamballa, on Terra,’ said Kursaal. ‘It identified all such stockpiles on all colony planets.’

‘Any man knowing the location of the Phaethonian stockpiles,’ Stith mused, ‘could to put his hands on power and riches untold. He could make himself god emperor—as powerful as any ancient Phaethonian.’

‘All I want is to return to my home planet,’ said Kursaal. ‘But I need help getting there, and I must be concealed from the Zêrevaniya patrols. Anyone who aided me would have the pick of the stockpile. They could indeed make themselves rich, if such was their wish. They could even take an ether ship out into the asteroids, and find new sources of orichalcum, if they exist.’

Samphire looked from one to the other, this black visaged savage who by his own admission had caused the deaths of millions in the Terran Flood, and the grasping canal gipsy who had been her only companion for all these years, who now licked his lips like a glutton at the pictured vision of such power and riches. All she wanted was civilisation restored to her planet. But that seemed a faint hope if power was to be placed in the hands she saw now clasp each other in amity.

‘I’ll help you, Venusian,’ said Stith. ‘I’ll help you find the stockpile. I’ll hide you from the Zêrevaniya and make sure you are guided across the drylands. And in return you’ll make me very rich. Very powerful.’

He laughed, but Samphire felt only despair.

3. The Drylands

The storm passed over the canal to trouble the Drylands to the west. The narrow boat cruised south down the Grand Canal as slowly as the dray beast trudged on its six reptilian legs. And Kursaal travelled south west with it, concealed in the hold. After a journey of seven Martian days, they reached the city of Dikana Mezin, which stood spire upon spire and dome upon dome on an artificial island in the waters at a junction of the Grand Canal with the Orontes. Here they berthed on the great stone wharf, carved from living rock long ages ago by the god kings of Phaethon who first constructed the canals, and Stith went ashore to secure them means to travel safely across the drylands.

Samphire sat with Kursaal in the hold.

‘You have aroused Stith’s cupidity,’ she told him. ‘Tell him there is profit and he will travel to the polar ice caps. But what of the Zêrevanîya?’

Kursaal gave a shrug of his massive shoulders. ‘We have seen little of them during the voyage,’ he said. ‘And now we will take to desert travel.’

‘Will they not be able to follow us?’ Samphire worried for her own skin, of course; she had learnt the importance self-preservation in recent years; but, for some irrational reason, she did not want to see this Venusian savage die either. ‘They have the air cars.’

‘In an effort to conserve fuel they seldom use them,’ Kursaal said, ‘If Serokê and his men have not lost my trail yet, they will be hard put to follow our riding beasts across the shifting sands that leave no prints.’

‘If you could tell us where to find the stockpile,’ said Samphire, ‘we could find the place with ease—steal one of their air cars and fly there.’

Kursaal shook his head. ‘You I trust, girl, even in such a hazardous endeavour,’ he said, ‘but your avaricious friend would betray me in seconds if he thought he could get to the stockpile without my aid. No. We travel the drylands with the aid of a nomad caravan until we are near to the place. Only I will know the exact location—but the nomads will escort us to the right sector of the desert.’

Samphire sat in thought. At last she stirred. ‘Stith is gone a long time,’ she said. ‘Wait here. I will go and see if I can find what is keeping him. This journey must be made. Otherwise Mars will remain a dying world of barbarism until all life is extinguished.’

She went down the gangplank into the busy streets of the island city.

Sometime later she returned to the wharves to find Stith about to board the vessel. With him were two men with the tanned skin and pale hair of drylanders. She ran to him.

‘Where have you been?’ she said breathlessly. ‘I could not find you in the city, though I spoke to several people.’

Stith waved a hand for silence. She caught a waft of *şerab* liquor on his breath, and followed his pointing thumb. ‘Was with these gentlemen,’ he said cunningly. ‘Want you to welcome Master Thujone the Drylander and his friend, who will guide us across the sands.’

‘For a price,’ said Thujone, the scrawnier of the two scarf-swathed Kochari nomads. ‘You’ll pay us when the journey is done?’ He seemed disgruntled. ‘We’ll want some payment in advance, to... encourage us.’

‘Master Thujone,’ said Stith. ‘You will have your bodyweight in orichalcum if you ensure that my friends and I reach the location safely.’

‘How do we know we’ll get there?’ Thujone argued, fingering the tribal cicatrices that crisscrossed his cheeks. ‘This informant of yours would have met us here, if he wasn’t on the run. We don’t want trouble with the Zêrevanîya. And why won’t this informant give the location outright?’

‘That’s none of your business, Master Thujone,’ said Stith. ‘Your job is to ensure we get there. He will tell you where we are going as and when. Even I don’t know. Now I must bid you a good day until we meet at the rendezvous.’

‘They’ll be troublesome,’ Samphire observed as the Kochari melted into the crowd.

‘They’re the best I could find,’ said Stith wearily, ‘without them demanding we give payment up front. You know we can’t do that. They—like us—must wait until we get there if they want payment. But it’ll be worth it.’ He licked his lips. ‘It’ll be worth it.’

‘You make me sick,’ said Samphire. ‘All you think of is yourself, not Mars.’

Stith raised an eyebrow. His partner in crime was now an idealist.

They went upstream for half a league, until they reached a point where the bluffs marking the edge of the drylands came very close to the water. Now Stith and Samphire moored in a secluded inlet where an irrigation channel, half choked with dust, sluggishly entered the Grand Canal. Herre they disembarked, letting their passenger free from the hold and then leaving the dray beast licking at several sun dired reptile carcasses to keep it alive during their absence.

Kursaal looked around suspiciously. It must be difficult consulting a map from memory, Samphire realised.

‘We meet the nomads up this valley,’ said Stith, pointing to a fissure in the rock that led between the tumbledown bluffs. Its walls were carved with incredibly ancient depictions of ether ships and space travellers.

At the top, they smelled the spicy tang of the desert as the wind blew grit in their faces. Beyond the bluffs a dead sea bottom stretched for many empty leagues, flat and lonely, all the way to the puce sky. Several Kochari appeared from behind the rocks, leading smaller riding versions of the dray beast. Thujone walked at their head. He stopped suddenly, seeing Kursaal.

‘This is a Venusian!’ he hissed, turning to Stith. ‘What, is he an escaped slave?’ His brow furrowed.

The canal gipsy nodded hastily. ‘Remember that bodyweight of orichalcum,’ he said. Thujone turned away from Kursaal at once, as if he could not see the man.

‘Ride to the Wells of Kurian,’ Kursaal stated, after taking his place in the saddle of a riding beast. Stith and Samphire sat another beast, Samphire riding pillion.

‘Onwards,’ said Thujone. He kicked his beast into a trot and led them up out of the rocks and out into the sun-baked wastes of the Drylands.

Dust rose from the creatures’ reptilian feet as they pounded the hard-packed sand. It seemed to Samphire that they were riding endlessly into nowhere. The heat of the sun was like a furnace. From time to time sand devils stirred, breaking the monotony. On the second day, they dismounted and took refuge behind the beasts’ backs as a dust storm wailed over the sands for several hours. By the time they had reached the Wells of Kurian—a small oasis where green plants showed where once a river had flowed aeons ago—nomads and their passengers were all coated in a thin veneer of puce grit.

‘Where now?’ Thujone asked Stith, still acting as if Kursaal was invisible. Samphire glanced over at the Venusian, sitting unmoving on the back of his riding beast, face impassive. She ached all over. It had taken her three days to grow accustomed to the endless motion. She wished they could have done as she had said, and stolen air cars from the Zêrevanîya.

‘Where now, Kursaal?’ Stith said, irritably mopping his brow.

‘We ride north now,’ said the Venusian after some thought. ‘North to the Girik Cliffs.’

Stith scowled at Thujone. ‘You heard that?’ he snapped. ‘The Girik Cliffs.’

Thujone looked at his fellow Kochari. Then his face cleared. ‘Girk Dunes now,’ he said, wonderingly. ‘How long ago was this map made?’

‘Long enough,’ said Stith. He turned to Kursaal. ‘And then we will reach the stockpile?’

Kursaal bared his white teeth. ‘You’ll know when we have reached the stockpile,’ he said.

Samphire gazed at the sky. It was puce and pink and empty. Nothing to be seen all day in that vast emptiness. That night as they camped on the edge of the Wells of Kurian, having refilled their water bottles and hunted for fresh lizard meat, she gazed up at the stars. At one point, she thought she saw something fly over, but realised that it must be one of the moons.

‘Why do you keep looking at the sky?’ Stith asked her as they rode the following evening, along a narrow canyon the nomads swore led to the Girk Dunes.

‘I wonder if we’re being followed,’ she said.

Over his shoulder Stith gave her an alarmed look. ‘Followed? Who by? Who knows where we are? Or where the Venusian is?’ He glanced over at the savage, still sitting his riding beast

like an imperturbable idol of ebony. Then at the Kochari. ‘Do you think Thujone plans to betray us?’

Even as he spoke, Thujone cried out as air cars shot up humming from behind the rocks and descended, firing a fusillade of beams. One hit Kursaal’s riding beast and it collapsed to the rock, spilling the Venusian to the ground.

He leapt to his feet, white teeth bared as he glared at the descending fliers.

4. Journey’s End

The nomads kicked their riding beasts into the cover of the rocks, producing compound bows as they went. A shower of arrows clattered from the lead air car but to no avail. More beams rained down, hitting the ground at Kursaal’s feet as he ran straight down the canyon, in the direction they had been following. He vanished behind a rock as the air cars landed and spilled out Zêrevanîya toting Vril lances. The Kochari loosed their arrows from cover, and two Zêrevanîya fell, riddled with arrows.

Stith sawed at the reins of his riding beast and galloped after Kursaal. Samphire gripped on and yelled in his ear, ‘Where are you going?’ The roar of Vril lances and the hiss of arrows receded as the beast pounded the grit with its massive paws, throwing choking plumes of dust spiralling up into the air.

Stith gave her a desperate look over his shoulder. ‘I’m not letting that cursed Venusian out of my sight,’ he barked.

They galloped on through the grit. Furious, Samphire tried to look back. All she could see was a dust cloud split by occasional lightning flashes of Vril beams. She looked over Stith’s shoulder again. They rode through the rocks. There was no sign of Kursaal.

She supposed it would be better to keep the Venusian in sight. But now it seemed they had lost both their protectors and their guide.

Kursaal sprinted through the Martian canyon. This heat was telling on him and he felt weak and giddy. He could run for miles, thanks to his Venusian birth, just as he had when escaping the air city; his people could run vast distances along the sandbars of their swamps. And yet despite this iron endurance, his amphibian skin would dry out in this baking heat unless he found shelter, and preferably water.

How had the Zêrevanîya known they were there, so far out into the Drylands? Someone must have betrayed them. Stith, obviously. The fellow was a fool. He stood to make far more out of aiding Kursaal than by betraying him to the authorities. Kursaal had had every intention of allowing the canal gipsy the pick of the stockpile, and his little girl companion too, once he himself had secured enough fuel to resupply his ether ship and make the flight back to Venus. Ever since the slavers attacked his tribe and he became first a slave and then a space pirate, he had spent so long on alien worlds. He had seen the megalithic cities of Atlantis and Lemuria, the green ice of Terra, the vermillion sands of Mars.

Well, now the fool was no doubt dead, and the nomads with them. Kursaal hoped he could make it to the stockpile before the Zêrevanîya came after him. A wind blew down the canyon but he doubted it was enough to hide his tracks in the sand. He ran light and fast, but from above the Zêrevanîya would be able to track him. He cursed. Only he knew the location of the stockpile. He had hoped to use that knowledge to negotiate with the Zêrevanîya until the storm hit their air city and Kursaal seized the chance for escape. He had used it successfully to barter aid from the canal gipsies and nomads. Now he had almost reached the place. But he could not risk leading the Zêrevanîya to it. He would have to act fast.

He turned a corner, went over a rise, and saw it was there before him. The hollow in the sand dominated by the weathered jade sphinx where, the Phaethonian map from Shamballa asserted, the Martian stockpile would be found. This was the one that had been found long years ago by the desert traveller, whose riches had reinitiated Mars' long climb back to civilisation. Now, if enough Phaethonian artefacts remained, Kursaal would be able to return to his own savage world, which now that Mars and Terra had both returned to barbarism would be free from Martian raids.

With his bare hands, he tore at the gritty sand beneath the base of the sphinx.

At last he uncovered a verdigrised brazen trapdoor set in a much larger hatch. It opened to reveal metal rungs of a ladder. He slithered down it, finding himself at the bottom in a cool, dry underground chamber, dimly lit by the same eerie Vril glow that emanated from the air cars.

The chamber was so large he could not see its further walls. The vicinity of the hatch was empty of artefacts, its dusty floor covered with footprints wearing the sandals of old Mars. Much had been taken, long ago, before the Martians had learnt of the Atlantean orichalcum mines. Entire ether ships had been discovered down here, along with air cars and Vril engines and fuel pods. Dark, shadow shrouded shapes ranked the further depths of the chamber. Grit crunched beneath Kursaal's feet as he strode through the gloom.

Sometime later, he was sitting in the cockpit of a small ether ship, similar in design to the one in which he had escaped Terra after the Flood. He had come here hoping for fuel and now he found a fully fuelled ether ship with enough Vril to take him into space and fly as far as Venus—or the asteroids. Large Vril lance armaments on the prow would defend him against attack. He issued a command into the speaker and slowly, painfully, the main hatch began to rise. Sand cascaded down into the chamber. Kursaal pressed a control and the ether ship rose on Vril beams into the glaring sunlight.

Stith reined his weary riding beast. Before them was a hollow in the sand dominated by a green, weathered old sphinx, which showed signs of water erosion. It must be incredibly old. At its base, a small black square seemed to be represent kind of hatch. Kursaal's running footprints led straight towards it.

'Here we are,' he said. 'We've found Kursaal's treasure cave. Now we're rich, you and me, girl!'

Samphire shook her head. 'I don't think so,' she said, then leapt off the back of the beast. Stith turned in his saddle.

'But we're here,' he said, 'at journey's end. The riches Kursaal promised... Oh, we'll have to negotiate, of course, do another deal with him... But he owes us. Without my help, he'd never have got....'

An eerie glow lit up the rocks. Two humming Zêrevanîya air cars rose into sight. Samphire smiled sadly.

'Time you—and the Venusian—gave yourselves up to the Zêrevanîya.' She turned to wave at the hovering vehicles. 'I contacted them in Dikana Mezin,' she added in explanation. Stith stared at her in shock and horror.

'You betrayed us?' he whispered. 'Is that how they came to follow us?' Samphire produced the homing device she had been given when she spoke to the Zêrevanîya in Dikana Mezin. 'You foolish girl. Is this how you repay me? I took you under my wing when you were alone and friendless, taught you to survive. I would have made you rich. With this stockpile, we would have been able to become powerful, more powerful than the Zêrevanîya. Nothing would be outside our grasp, nothing.'

She shook her head. 'I don't want that,' she said. 'I don't want power. I want peace. I want civilisation. With this in the hands of the Zêrevanîya, Mars can be reborn.'

The air cars had landed as they were speaking and now Serokê and his men stepped out. Serokê trained his Vril lance on Stith. The canal gipsy stared in horror.

'Take him into custody,' said Samphire. 'Don't treat him badly. He is not a bad man.'

Serokê shot Stith down. The blackened corpse fell off the back of the beast which reared into life, thundering away across the rocks. Samphire wheeled round.

'You killed him!' she said accusingly. 'Without trial! I thought you represented the law!'

'We represent power,' said Serokê coldly. 'Power that will be all the greater now the Phaethonian stockpile is in our hands.' He lifted his Vril lance again. 'And we don't need any witnesses.'

Gasping, Samphire staggered away down the sand. Sand and grit exploded on either side as Serokê and his men opened fire. She ran towards the green sphinx. She didn't know why. Perhaps because it was a last remnant of the civilisation she yearned for.

But even as she ran for it in a hail of Vril beams, the ground shook. At first, she had thought it was another Vril blast, but then the bottom of the hollow slid back and out floated an ether ship. Seeing the Martians, its occupant opened fire. Samphire was knocked off her feet and she rolled down the slope to the edge of the great hatch where she lay senseless.

Epilogue

She came round to see a black shape standing over her, blocking out the light of the sun. Focusing, she recognised it as Kursaal. She shrank away from this man who had caused the deaths of cities and islands and entire peoples, but he took her slim hand in his massive black paw and hauled her to her feet.

‘How did Serokê follow us here?’ the Venusian demanded.

Shamefaced, Samphire looked about her. ‘I betrayed you,’ she said in a choked voice. She could see the smoking wrecks of air cars, and the body of Serokê and the other Zêrevanîya scattered about the sand. Further up the side lay the charred remains of Stith.

‘You betrayed me?’ Kursaal rumbled. ‘Why?’

Her emerald eyes were wet with tears. ‘I wanted the Zêrevanîya to have the stockpile,’ she said. ‘I thought they would rebuild civilisation. But like everyone else, they just wanted power.’

‘I don’t want power,’ said Kursaal broodingly. ‘Once I wanted revenge. Now all I desire is to return to my home world.’ He looked down into the hole. ‘This ship is all that was left. Everything else was plundered long ago. There is not enough to rebuild civilisation on this planet.’ He shot her a glance. ‘You may come with me, if you want.’

‘You want to re-join your people?’

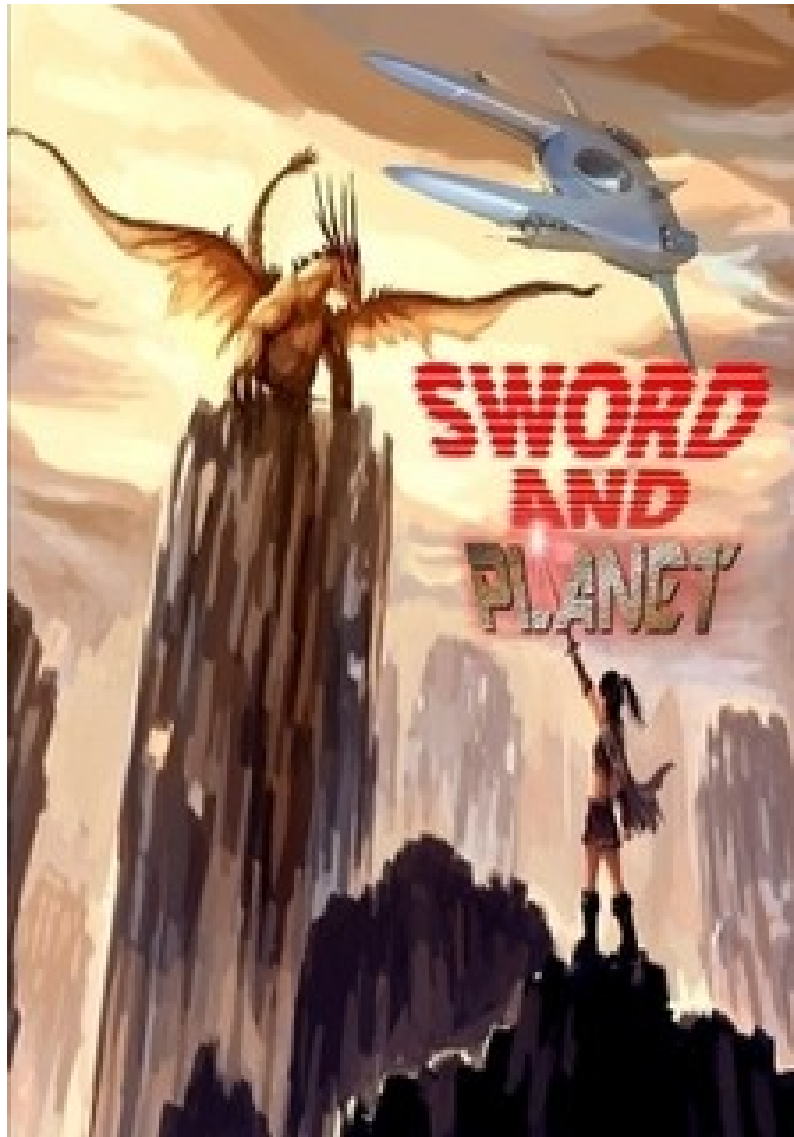
‘My tribe is dead. I am the last. I don’t know what will wait for me when I return.’ He gazed up at the desert sun. ‘Mine is a world of barbarism. Now Terra and Mars are sunk into savagery as well. Where else is there to go?’

Samphire took his arm. ‘We have an ether ship,’ she reminded him. ‘With its fuel, we could fly to your own savage world, but what is there for us? Listen to me, Kursaal. It is said that even greater reserves of orichalcum and Phaethonian devices exist in the asteroids—the ruins of the lost planet. We could go there in this ship. We could rebuild civilisation from the ruins of Phaethon.’

Kursaal led her by her hand into the ether ship.

THE END

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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Sixteen

Illara made two quick orbits around Io, seeking out any other ships that may have attacked the bases there. But there were none. The inhospitable moon was of little interest to the Scroungers, with such tempting targets as Europa and Ganymede so close at hand.

With all communications silence imposed during the attack, Illara was hard pressed to decide what she should do. Return immediately to Callisto? Patrol the moons of Jupiter, seeking out any other enemy action? And then what? Engage?

Whatever she decided to do, she was on her own.

Jovian Security forces had very few ships. Never before had the colonies been attacked, so the need for heavy security had been, until this point, minimal. Each colony had its own branch of security, all under the command of Colonel Bridgemont. When the rare need for security personnel to meet did come up, they took passage on any of the many small civilian craft that plied the skies between Callisto and Io.

All this made Illara's patrol ship 'Izzy' that much more valuable to Jovian Security. Illara's ship was one of only two dozen small craft controlled by the security forces of the moons of Jupiter.

Europa was the next moon outward from Jupiter, and in a line toward Callisto. Illara pushed 'Izzy' hard through space, and came upon the moon in two short hours after leaving Io.

She flew low to the moon, grazing the surface at an altitude of only fifty feet. There, at Clarke Base 3, she saw four ships huddled outside the airlocks that led to the landing bay. Twenty people in space suits had clustered about the airlocks.

The bases on Europa and Ganymede were built on the same lines as the bases on Callisto. A long central street connected small 'pods', each covered with a geodesic dome of transparent steel. The launching facilities were at one end of the colony, and several miles removed, connected by a light train that carried both passengers and cargo.

The trick was to overrun the colony without destroying it. Simply blasting the airlocks would send the vacuum of space into the colony, destroying every living thing, and much of the valuable material within it.

So they had to override the computers that drove the airlocks, a matter that took much cunning, and a considerable amount of time. Half a dozen technicians had set themselves up with their equipment to do exactly that, overriding the security codes that kept the airlocks shut during emergency, and elude the backup systems that went automatically in action when the airlocks were tampered with.

So intent were they all on the task that Illara was able to fly the nearly invisible 'Izzy' right up upon them.

Ordnance or personnel? Which would do the greater damage at the least cost to her? Crippling their ships, or killing the crews?

Illara opted and set her pulse cannon at a wide spread.

At fifty yards, the figures standing outside their ships came clear as individuals on Illara's screens. Some milled between ship and airlock, carrying out the commands of their captains.

She fired. Once, twice, three times.

The pulses surged through flesh and metal, stretching the distances between the atoms that composed them. A half-dozen figures expanded suddenly to a ridiculous height of twelve feet and more, and then they collapsed like paper dolls upon the soil of Europa.

Illara managed to damage all the ships substantially. Canopies popped open, sending crewmen out into the deadly environment of Europa. All of the ships would require extensive work before any of them was flyable again.

But Illara had emptied her pulse cannons. She had only her plasma cannon and her laser cannon to fight with.

Nor had the Scroungers on the ground been idle. Instantly they knew they were under attack, they sent out communications to the ships that were laying siege to the other European colonies. Their response was nearly instantaneous. Within forty seconds, three ships from the attack on Clarke Bases 2 and 4 were en route to Clarke Base 3.

Illara guessed that pursuit would be quick upon her, so after one run against the Scroungers, she pulled the nose of her ship away from Europa, and she leaped high into the skies of Jupiter.

The three ships that set off in pursuit of her searched the skies for her ship, knowing that Illara's ship must be there. They were dogged. They signalled ahead.

'Kill Team 1 to Kill Team 2. Be alert for any Callistoan ship en route to Callisto. Stealthy. Kill Team 1 is in pursuit.'

'As if we don't have enough already to worry about,' Dash Yortal said. He was a crewman on one of the ships now surrounding Ganymede Base 2. They were also seeking to bypass the security codes that would let them open the airlock to the shuttered landing bay.

'Shut up,' grunted his captain, Pal Ordnat. He turned his head and barked out his orders.

'Scan the sky. Anything shows up, we'll send some ships out.'

'Yes, sir,' his second in command saluted.

Tiny pieces of incandescent shards of spinning burning metal came raining down upon the dome of Callisto Base 1. They bounced off the transparent steel and bounded into the icy plains beyond, raising swift small geysers of steam.

Emily and Jeffrey stood transfixed, unable to take their eyes away from the spectacle.

Heavier pieces tumbled down, twisted metal beams from the greenhouse that was destroyed when Lieutenant, Junior Grade, McAllister's ship, nearly destroyed by Scrounger fire, crashed into it.

The beams spun wildly, crashing into the remnants of McAllister's ship, and down upon the geodesic dome above Emily and Jeffrey.

One beam hit, and then another. Huge booms went through the air, hitting Jeffrey and Emily like punches in the chest. Then came the nose section of the destroyed pursuit craft. It hit the dome at a terrifying velocity. An appalling crack opened in the transparent steel.

A low, almost silent 'hisssssss' came from the crack.

'Oh, no,' Jeffrey said. 'It's cracked. The air is leaking out.'

Another siren blared through the colony.

In preparation for exactly this contingency, all the Jovian bases were modular. Should the dome in any one section be compromised in any way, that section was quickly shut off from the rest of the colony with a series of airproof walls.

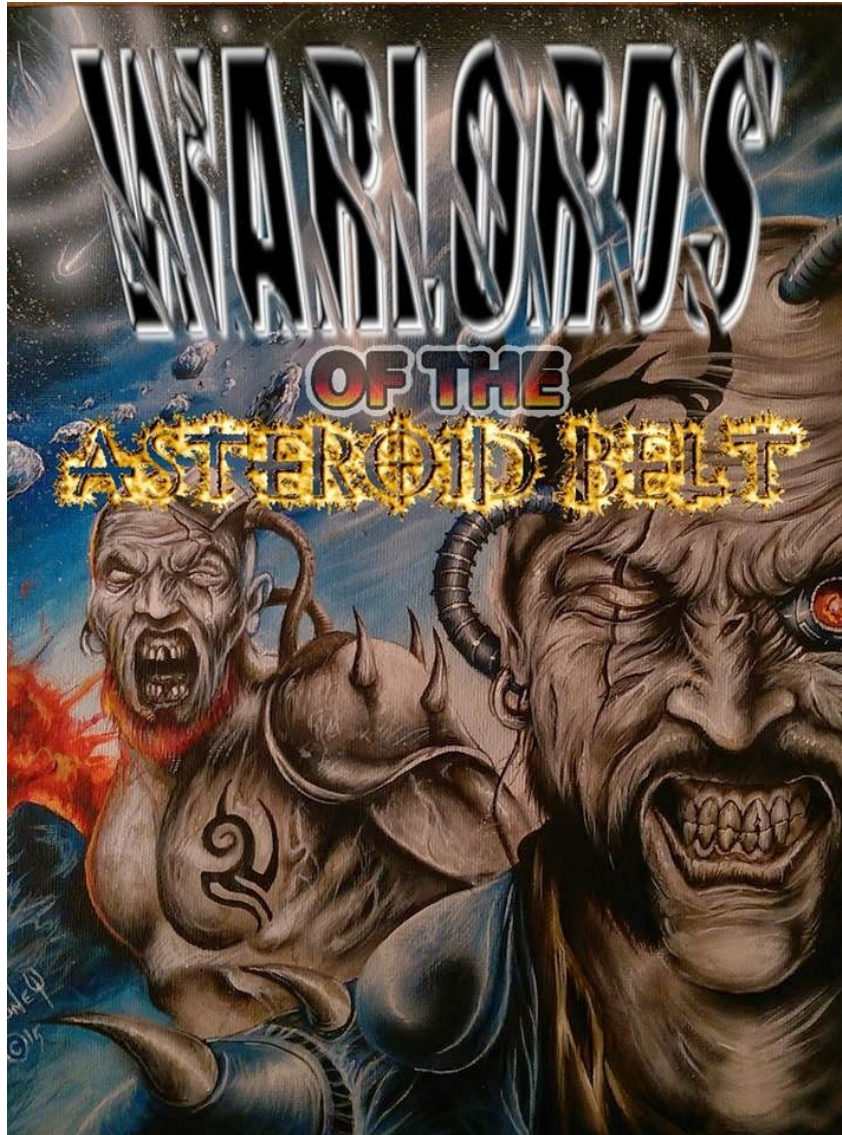
The siren was to warn those in that compromised section to evacuate as quickly as they could. This was one of the first lessons Emily and Jeffrey had learned on Callisto. They had less than a minute to find their way out, and into a section that was not compromised.

They spun on their heels.

Already the walls were coming down.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

Carter Ward's earlier adventures, along with those of other interplanetary rogues, are chronicled in [Warlords of the Asteroid Belt](#) and [Deep Space Dogfights](#).



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TALES OF THE DEAD by Johann August Apel

The Death Bride: Part One

The summer had been uncommonly fine, and the baths crowded with company beyond all comparison: but still the public rooms were scarce ever filled, and never gay. The nobility and military associated only with those of their own rank, and the citizens contented themselves by slandering both parties. So many partial divisions necessarily proved an obstacle to a general and united assembly.

Even the public balls did not draw the beau monde together, because the proprietor of the baths appeared there bedizened with insignia of knighthood; and this glitter, added to the stiff manners of this great man's family, and the tribe of lackeys in splendid liveries who constantly attended him, compelled the greater part of the company assembled, silently to observe the rules prescribed to them according to their different ranks.

For these reasons the balls became gradually less numerous attended. Private parties were formed, in which it was endeavoured to preserve the charms that were daily diminishing in the public assemblies.

One of these societies met generally twice a week in a room which at that time was usually unoccupied. There they supped, and afterwards enjoyed, either in a walk abroad, or remaining in the room, the charms of unrestrained conversation.

The members of this society were already acquainted, at least by name; but an Italian marquis, who had lately joined their party, was unknown to them, and indeed to everyone assembled at the baths.

The title of Italian marquis appeared the more singular, as his name, according to the entry of it in the general list, seemed to denote him of Northern extraction, and was composed of so great a number of consonants, that no one could pronounce it without difficulty.

His physiognomy and manners likewise presented many singularities. His long and wan visage, his black eyes, his imperious look, had so little of attraction in them, that everyone would certainly have avoided him, had he not possessed a fund of entertaining stories, the relation of which proved an excellent antidote to ennui: the only drawback against them was, that in general they required rather too great a share of credulity on the part of his auditors.

The party had one day just risen from table, and found themselves but ill inclined for gaiety. They were still too much fatigued from the ball of the preceding evening to enjoy the recreation of walking, although invited so to do by the bright light of the moon. They were even unable to keep any conversation; therefore it is not to be wondered at, that they were more than usually anxious for the marquis to arrive.

'Where can he be?' exclaimed the countess in an impatient tone.

'Doubtless still at the faro table, to the no small grief of the bankers,' replied Florentine. 'This very morning, he has occasioned the sudden departure of two of these gentlemen.'

'No great loss,' answered another.

‘To us—,’ replied Florentine; ‘but it is to the proprietor of the baths, who only prohibited gambling, that it might be pursued with greater avidity.’

‘The marquis ought to abstain from such achievements,’ said the chevalier with an air of mystery. ‘Gamblers are revengeful, and have generally advantageous connections. If what is whispered be correct, that the marquis is unfortunately implicated in political affairs—.’

‘But,’ demanded the countess, ‘what then has the marquis done to the bankers of the gaming table?’

‘Nothing; except that he betted on cards which almost invariably won. And what renders it rather singular, he scarcely derived any advantage from it himself, for he always adhered to the weakest party. But the other punters were not so scrupulous; for they charged their cards in such a manner that the bank broke before the deal had gone round.’

The countess was on the point of asking other questions, when the marquis coming in changed the conversation.

‘Here you are at last!’ exclaimed several persons at the same moment.

‘We have,’ said the countess, ‘been most anxious for your society; and just on this day you have been longer than usual absent.’

‘I have projected an important expedition; and it has succeeded to my wishes. I hope by tomorrow there will not be a single gaming table left here. I have been from one gambling room to another; and there are not sufficient post horses to carry off the ruined bankers.’

‘And cannot you,’ asked the countess, ‘teach us your wonderful art of always winning?’

‘It would be a difficult task, my fair lady; and in order to do it, one must ensure a fortunate hand, for without that nothing could be done.’

‘Nay,’ replied the chevalier, laughing, ‘never did I see so fortunate a one as yours.’

‘As you are still very young, my dear chevalier, you have many novelties to witness.’

Saying these words, the marquis threw on the chevalier so piercing a look that the latter cried:

‘Will you then cast my nativity?’

‘Provided that it is not done today,’ said the countess; ‘for who knows whether your future destiny will afford us so amusing a history as that which the marquis two days since promised we should enjoy?’

‘I did not exactly say amusing.’

‘But at least full of extraordinary events: and we require some such, to draw us from the lethargy which has overwhelmed us all day.’

‘Most willingly: but first I am anxious to learn whether any of you know aught of the surprising things related of the Death Bride.’

No one remembered to have heard speak of her.

The marquis appeared anxious to add something more by way of preface; but the countess and the rest of the party so openly manifested their impatience, that the marquis began his narration as follows: —

‘I had for a long time projected a visit to the count Lieppa, at his estates in Bohemia. We had met each other in almost every country in Europe: attracted hither by the frivolity of youth to partake of every pleasure which presented itself, but led thither when years of discretion had rendered us more sedate and steady. —At length, in our more advanced age, we ardently desired, ere the close of life, once again to enjoy, by the charms of recollection, the moments of delight which we had passed together. For my part, I was anxious to see the castle of my friend, which was, according to his description, in an extremely romantic district. It was built some hundred years back by his ancestors; and their successors had preserved it with so much care, that it still maintained its imposing appearance, at the same time it afforded a comfortable abode. The count generally passed the greater part of the year at it with his family, and only returned to the capital at the approach of winter. Being well acquainted with his movements, I did not think it needful to announce my visit; and I arrived at the castle one evening precisely at the time when I knew he would be there; and as I approached it, could not but admire the variety and beauty of the scenery which surrounded it.

‘The hearty welcome which I received could not, however, entirely conceal from my observation the secret grief depicted on the countenances of the count, his wife, and their daughter, the lovely Ida. In a short time I discovered that they still mourned the loss of Ida’s twin sister, who had died about a year before. Ida and Hildegard resembled each other so much, that they were only to be distinguished from each other by a slight mark of a strawberry visible on Hildegard’s neck. Her room, and everything in it, was left precisely in the same state as when she was alive, and the family were in the habit of visiting it whenever they wished to indulge the sad satisfaction of meditating on the loss of this beloved child. The two sisters had but one heart, one mind: and the parents could not but apprehend that their separation would be but of short duration; they dreaded lest Ida should also be taken from them.

‘I did everything in my power to amuse this excellent family, by entertaining them with laughable anecdotes of my younger days, and by directing their thoughts to less melancholy subjects than that which now wholly occupied them. I had the satisfaction of discovering that my efforts were not ineffectual. Sometimes we walked in the canton round the castle, which was decked with all the beauties of summer; at other times we took a survey of the different apartments of the castle, and were astonished at their wonderful state of preservation, whilst we amused ourselves by talking over the actions of the past generation, whose portraits hung in a long gallery.

‘One evening the count had been speaking to me in confidence, on the subject of his future plans: among other subjects he expressed his anxiety, that Ida (who had already, though only in her sixteenth year, refused several offers) should be happily married; when suddenly the gardener, quite out of breath, came to tell us he had seen the ghost (as he believed, the old chaplain belonging to the castle), who had appeared a century back. Several of the servants

followed the gardener, and their pallid countenances confirmed the alarming tidings he had brought.

‘I believe you will shortly be afraid of your own shadow,’ said the count to them. He then sent them off, desiring them not again to trouble him with the like fooleries.

‘It is really terrible,’ said he to me, ‘to see to what lengths superstition will carry persons of that rank of life; and it is impossible wholly to undeceive them. From one generation to another an absurd report has from time to time been spread abroad, of an old chaplain’s ghost wandering in the environs of the castle; and that he says mass in the chapel, with other idle stories of a similar nature. This report has greatly died away since I came into possession of the castle; but it now appears to me, it will never be altogether forgotten.’

‘At this moment the duke de Marino was announced. The count did not recollect ever having heard of him.

‘I told him that I was tolerably well acquainted with his family; and that I had lately been present, in Venice, at the betrothing of a young man of that name.

‘The very same young man came in while I was speaking. I should have felt very glad at seeing him, had I not perceived that my presence caused him evident uneasiness.

‘Ah,’ said he in a tolerably gay tone, after the customary forms of politeness had passed between us; ‘the finding you here, my dear marquis, explains to me an occurrence, which with shame I own caused me a sensation of fear. To my no small surprise, they knew my name in the adjacent district; and as I came up the hill which leads to the castle, I heard it pronounced three times in a voice wholly unknown to me: and in a still more audible tone this strange voice bade me welcome. I now, however, conclude it was yours.’

‘I assured him, (and with truth,) that till his name was announced the minute before, I was ignorant of his arrival, and that none of my servants knew him; for that the valet who accompanied me into Italy was not now with me.

‘And above all,’ added I, ‘it would be impossible to discover any equipage, however well known to one, in so dark an evening.’

‘That is what astonishes me,’ exclaimed the duke, a little amazed.

‘The incredulous count very politely added, ‘that the voice which had told the duke he was welcome, had at least expressed the sentiments of all the family.’

‘Marino, ere he said a word relative to the motive of his visit, asked a private audience of me; and confided in me, by telling me that he was come with the intention of obtaining the lovely Ida’s hand; and that if he was able to procure her consent, he should demand her of her father.

‘The countess Apollonia, your bride elect, is then no longer living?’ asked I.

‘We will talk on that subject hereafter,’ answered he.

‘The deep sigh which accompanied these words led me to conclude that Apollonia had been guilty of infidelity or some other crime towards the duke; and consequently I thought that I ought to abstain from any further questions, which appeared to rend his heart, already so sensibly wounded.

‘Yet, as he begged me to become his mediator with the count, in order to obtain from him his consent to the match, I painted in glowing colours the danger of an alliance, which he had no other motive for contracting, than the wish to obliterate the remembrance of a dearly, and without doubt, still more tenderly, beloved object. But he assured me that he was far from thinking of the lovely Ida from so blameable a motive, and that he should be the happiest of men if she but proved propitious to his wishes.

‘His expressive and penetrating tone of voice, while he said this, lulled the uneasiness that I was beginning to feel; and I promised him I would prepare the count Lieppa to listen to his entreaties, and would give him the necessary information relative to the fortune and family of Marino. But I declared to him at the same time, that I should by no means hurry the conclusion of the affair by my advice, as I was not in the habit of taking upon myself so great a charge as the uncertain issue of a marriage.

‘The duke signified his satisfaction at what I said, and made me give (what then appeared to me of no consequence) a promise that I would not make mention of the former marriage he was on the point of contracting, as it would necessarily bring on a train of unpleasant explanations.

‘The duke’s views succeeded with a promptitude beyond his most sanguine hopes. His well-proportioned form and sparkling eyes smoothed the paths of love, and introduced him to the heart of Ida. His agreeable conversation promised to the mother an amiable son in law; and the knowledge in rural economy, which he evinced as occasions offered, made the count hope for a useful helpmate in his usual occupations; for since the first day of the duke’s arrival he had been prevented from pursuing them.

‘Marino followed up these advantages with great ardour; and I was one evening much surprised by the intelligence of his being betrothed, as I did not dream of matters drawing so near a conclusion. They spoke at table of some bridal preparations of which I had made mention just before the duke’s arrival at the castle; and the countess asked me whether that young Marino was a near relation of the one who was that very day betrothed to her daughter.’

‘Near enough,’ I answered, recollecting my promise—Marino looked at me with an air of embarrassment.

‘But, my dear duke,’ continued I, ‘tell me who mentioned the amiable Ida to you; or was it a portrait, or what else, which caused you to think of looking for a beauty, the selection of whom does so much honour to your taste, in this remote corner; for, if I am not mistaken, you said but yesterday that you had purposed travelling about for another six months; when all at once (I believe while in Paris) you changed your plan, and projected a journey wholly and solely to see the charming Ida?’

‘Yes, it was at Paris,’ replied the duke; ‘you are very rightly informed. I went there to see and admire the superb gallery of pictures at the Museum; but I had scarcely entered it, when my

eyes turned from the inanimate beauties, and were riveted on a lady whose incomparable features were heightened by an air of melancholy. With fear and trembling I approached her, and only ventured to follow without speaking to her. I still followed her after she quitted the gallery; and I drew her servant aside to learn the name of his mistress. He told it me: but when I expressed a wish to become acquainted with the father of this beauty, he said that was next to impossible while at Paris, as the family were on the point of quitting that city; nay, of quitting France altogether.

‘Possibly, however;’ said I, ‘some opportunity may present itself.’ And I looked everywhere for the lady: but she, probably imagining that her servant was following her closely, had continued to walk on, and was entirely out of sight. While I was looking around for her, the servant had likewise vanished from my view.’

‘Who was this beautiful lady?’ asked Ida, in a tone of astonishment.

‘What! you really did not then perceive me in the gallery?’

‘Me!’—‘My daughter—!’ exclaimed at the same moment Ida and her parents.

‘Yes, you yourself, mademoiselle. The servant, whom fortunately for me you left at Paris, and whom I met the same evening unexpectedly, as my guardian angel, informed me of all; so that after a short rest at home, I was able to come straight hither.’

‘What a fable!’ said the count to his daughter, who was mute with astonishment.

‘Ida,’ he added, turning to me, ‘has never yet been out of her native country; and for myself, I have not been in Paris these seventeen years.’

‘The duke looked at the count and his daughter with similar marks of astonishment visible in their countenances; and conversation would have been entirely at an end, if I had not taken care to introduce other topics: but I had it nearly all to myself.

‘The repast was no sooner over, than the count took the duke into the recess of a window; and although I was at a considerable distance, and appeared wholly to fix my attention on a new chandelier, I overheard all their conversation.

‘What motive,’ demanded the count with a serious and dissatisfied air, ‘could have induced you to invent that singular scene in the gallery of the Museum at Paris? for according to my judgment, it could in no way benefit you. Since you are anxious to conceal the cause which brought you to ask my daughter in marriage, at least you might have plainly said as much; and though possibly you might have felt repugnance at making such a declaration, there were a thousand ways of framing your answer, without its being needful thus to offend probability.’

‘Monsieur le comte,’ replied the duke much piqued; ‘I held my peace at table, thinking that possibly you had reasons for wishing to keep secret your and your daughter’s journey to Paris. I was silent merely from motives of discretion; but the singularity of your reproaches compels me to maintain what I have said; and, notwithstanding your reluctance to believe the truth, to declare before all the world, that the capital of France was the spot where I first saw your daughter Ida.’

‘But what if I prove to you, not only by the witness of my servants, but also by that of all my tenants, that my daughter has never quitted her native place?’—

‘I shall still believe the evidence of my own eyes and ears, which have as great authority over me.’

‘What you say is really enigmatical,’ answered the count in graver tone: ‘your serious manner convinces me you have been the dupe of some illusion; and that you have seen some other person, whom you have taken for my daughter. Excuse me, therefore, for having taken up the thing so warmly.’

‘Another person! What then, I not only mistook another person for your daughter; but the very servant of whom I made mention, and who gave me so exact a description of this castle, was, according to what you say, some other person!’

‘My dear Marino, that servant was some cheat who knew this castle, and who, God only knows for what motive, spoke to you of my daughter as resembling the lady.’

‘Tis certainly no wish of mine to contradict you; but Ida’s features are precisely the same as those which made so deep an impression on me at Paris, and which my imagination has preserved with such scrupulous fidelity.’

‘The count shook his head; and Marino continued: —

‘What is still more—(but pray pardon me for mentioning a little particularity, which nothing short of necessity would have drawn from me)—while in the gallery, I was standing behind the lady, and the handkerchief that covered her neck was a little disarranged, which occasioned me distinctly to perceive the mark of a small strawberry.’

‘Another strange mystery!’ exclaimed the count, turning pale: ‘it appears you are determined to make me believe wonderful stories.’

‘I have only one question to ask: —Has Ida such a mark on her neck?’

‘No, monsieur,’ replied the count, looking steadfastly at Marino.

‘No!’ exclaimed the latter, in the utmost astonishment.

‘No, I tell you: but Ida’s twin sister, who resembled her in the most surprising manner, had the mark you mention on her neck, and a year since carried it with her into the grave.’

‘And yet ‘tis only within the last few months that I saw this person in Paris!’

‘At this moment the countess and Ida, who had kept aside, a prey to uneasiness, not knowing what to think of the conversation, which appeared of so very important a nature, approached; but the count in a commanding tone ordered them to retire immediately. He then led the duke entirely away into a retired corner of the window, and continued the conversation in so low a voice that I could hear nothing further.’

‘My astonishment was extreme when, that very same evening, the count gave orders to have Hildegard’s tomb opened in his presence: but he beforehand related briefly what I have just told you, and proposed my assisting the duke and him in opening the grave. The duke excused himself, by saying that the very idea made him tremble with horror; for he could not overcome, especially at night, his fear of a corpse.

‘The count begged he would not mention the gallery scene to any one; and above all, to spare the extreme sensibility of the affianced bride from a recital of the conversation they had just had, even if she should request to be informed of it.

‘In the meantime the sexton arrived with his lantern. The count and I followed him.

‘It is morally impossible,’ said the count to me, as we walked together, ‘that any trick can have been played respecting my daughter’s death: the circumstances attendant thereon are but too well known to me. You may readily believe also, that the affection we bore our poor girl would prevent our running any risk of burying her too soon: but suppose even the possibility of that, and that the tomb had been opened by some avaricious persons, who found, on opening the coffin, that the body became reanimated; no one can believe for a moment that my daughter would not have instantly returned to her parents, who doted on her, rather than have fled to a distant country. This last circumstance puts the matter beyond doubt: for even should it be admitted as a truth, that she was carried by force to some distant part of the world, she would have found a thousand ways of returning. My eyes are, however, about to be convinced, that the sacred remains of my Hildegard really repose in the grave.

‘To convince myself!’ cried he again, in a tone of voice so melancholy yet loud that the sexton turned his head.

‘This movement rendered the count more circumspect; and he continued in a lower tone of voice:

‘How should I for a moment believe it possible that the slightest trace of my daughter’s features should be still in existence, or that the destructive hand of time should have spared her beauty? Let us return, marquis; for who could tell, even were I to see the skeleton, that I should know it from that of an entire stranger, whom they may have placed in the tomb to fill her place?’

‘He was even about to give orders not to open the door of the chapel, (at which we were just arrived,) when I represented to him, that were I in his place I should have found it extremely difficult to determine on such a measure; but that having gone thus far, it was requisite to complete the task, by examining whether some of the jewels buried with Hildegard’s corpse were not wanting. I added, that judging by a number of well-known facts, all bodies were not destroyed equally soon.

‘My representations had the desired effect: the count squeezed my hand; and we followed the sexton, who, by his pallid countenance and trembling limbs, evidently shewed that he was unaccustomed to nocturnal employments of this nature.

‘I know not whether any of this present company were ever in a chapel at midnight, before the iron doors of a vault, about to examine the succession of leaden coffins enclosing the remains of an illustrious family. Certain it is, that at such a moment the noise of bolts and

bars produces such a remarkable sensation, that one is led to dread the sound of the door grating on its hinges; and when the vault is opened, one cannot help hesitating for an instant to enter it.

‘The count was evidently seized with these sensations of terror, which I discovered by a stifled sigh; but he concealed his feelings: notwithstanding, I remarked that he dared not trust himself to look on any other coffin than the one containing his daughter’s remains. He opened it himself.

‘Did I not say, so?’ cried he, seeing that the features of the corpse bore a perfect resemblance to those of Ida. I was obliged to prevent the count, who was seized with astonishment, from kissing the forehead of the inanimate body.

‘Do not,’ I added, ‘disturb the peace of those who repose in death.’ And I used my utmost efforts to withdraw the count immediately from this dismal abode.

‘On our return to the castle, we found those persons whom we had left there, in an anxious state of suspense. The two ladies had closely questioned the duke on what had passed; and would not admit as a valid excuse, the promise he had made of secrecy. They entreated us also, but in vain, to satisfy their curiosity.

‘They succeeded better the following day with the sexton, whom they sent for privately, and who told them all he knew: but it only tended to excite their anxious wish to learn the subject of the conversation which had occasioned this nocturnal visit to the sepulchral vault.

‘As for myself, I dreamt the whole of the following night of the apparition Marino had seen at Paris; I conjectured many things which I did not think fit to communicate to the count, because he absolutely questioned the connection of a superior world with ours. At this juncture of affairs, I with pleasure saw that this singular circumstance, if not entirely forgotten, was at least but rarely and slightly mentioned.

‘But I now began to find another cause for anxious solicitude. The duke constantly persisted in refusing to explain himself on the subject of his previous engagement, even when we were alone: and the embarrassment he could not conceal, whenever I made mention of the good qualities that I believed his intended to have possessed, as well as several other little singularities, led me to conclude that Marino’s attachment for Apollonia had been first shaken at the picture gallery, at sight of the lovely incognita; and that Apollonia had been forsaken, owing to his yielding to temptations; and that doubtless she could never have been guilty of breaking off an alliance so solemnly contracted.

Foreseeing from this that the charming Ida could never hope to find much happiness in a union with Marino, and knowing that the wedding day was nigh at hand, I resolved to unmask the perfidious deceiver as quickly as possible, and to make him repent his infidelity. An excellent occasion presented itself one day for me to accomplish my designs. Having finished supper, we were still sitting at table; and someone said that iniquity is frequently punished in this world: upon which I observed, that I myself had witnessed striking proofs of this remark; —when Ida and her mother entreated me to name one of these examples.

‘Under these circumstances, ladies,’ answered I, ‘permit me to relate a history to you, which, according to my opinion, will particularly interest you.’

‘Us!’ they both exclaimed. At the same time I fixed my eyes on the duke, who for several days past had evidently distrusted me; and I saw that his conscience had rendered him pale.

‘That at least is my opinion,’ replied I: ‘But, my dear count, will you pardon me, if the supernatural is sometimes interwoven with my narration?’

‘Very willingly,’ answered he smiling: ‘and I will content myself with expressing my surprise at so many things of this sort having happened to you, as I have never experienced any of them myself.’

‘I plainly perceived that the duke made signs of approval at what he said: but I took no notice of it, and answered the count by saying,

‘That all the world have not probably the use of their eyes.

‘That may be,’ replied he, still smiling.

‘But,’ said I to him in a low and expressive voice, ‘think you an uncorrupted body in the vault is a common phenomenon?’

‘He appeared staggered: and I thus continued in an under tone of voice: —

‘For that matter, ‘tis very possible to account for it naturally, and therefore it would be useless to contest the subject with you.’

‘We are wandering from the point,’ said the countess a little angrily; and she made me a sign to begin, which I accordingly did, in the following words: —

‘The scene of my anecdote lies in Venice.’

‘I possibly then may know something of it,’ cried the duke, who entertained some suspicions.

‘Possibly so,’ replied I; ‘but there were reasons for keeping the event secret: it happened somewhere about eighteen months since, at the period you first set out on your travels.

‘The son of an extremely wealthy nobleman, whom I shall designate by the name of Filippo, being attracted to Leghorn by the affairs consequent on his succession to an inheritance, had won the heart of an amiable and lovely girl, called Clara. He promised her, as well as her parents, that ere his return to Venice he would come back and marry her. The moment for his departure was preceded by certain ceremonies, which in their termination were terrible: for after the two lovers had exhausted every protestation of reciprocal affection, Filippo invoked the aid of the spirit of vengeance in case of infidelity: they prayed even that whichever of the lovers should prove faithful might not be permitted to repose quietly in the grave, but should haunt the perjured one, and force the inconstant party to come amongst the dead, and to share in the grave those sentiments which on earth had been forgotten.

‘The parents, who were seated by them at table, remembered their youthful days, and permitted the overheated and romantic imagination of the young people to take its free

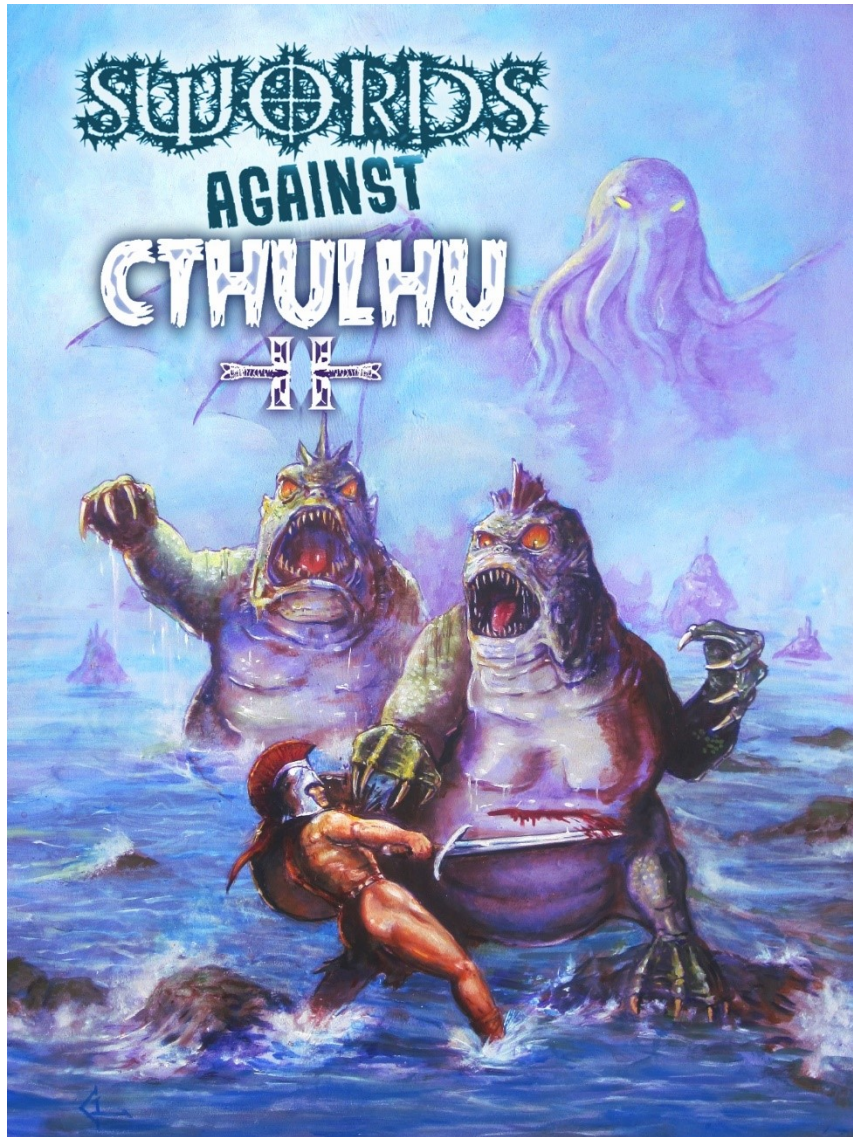
course. The lovers finished by making punctures in their arms, and letting their blood run into a glass filled with white champagne.

‘Our souls shall be inseparable as our blood!’ exclaimed Filippo; and drinking half the contents of the glass, he gave the rest to Clara.’

At this moment the duke experienced a violent degree of agitation, and from time to time darted such menacing looks at me, that I was led to conclude, that in his adventure some scene of a similar nature had taken place. I can however affirm, that I related the details respecting Filippo’s departure as they were represented in a letter written by the mother of Clara.

‘Who,’ continued I, ‘after so many demonstrations of such a violent passion, could have expected the denouement? Filippo’s return to Venice happened precisely at the period at which a young beauty, hitherto educated in a distant convent, made her first appearance in the great world: she on a sudden exhibited herself as an angel whom a cloud had till then concealed, and excited universal admiration. Filippo’s parents had heard frequent mention of Clara, and of the projected alliance between her and their son; but they thought that this alliance was like many others, contracted one day without the parties knowing why, and broken off the next with equal want of thought; and influenced by this idea, they presented their son to the parents of Camilla, (which was the name of the young beauty,) whose family were of the highest rank.

CONCLUDES NEXT WEEK



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THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND by Jules Verne

Part 3. The Secret of the Island

Chapter 2

There was no longer any doubt as to the pirates' intentions. They had dropped anchor at a short distance from the island, and it was evident that the next day by means of their boats they purposed to land on the beach!

Cyrus Harding and his companions were ready to act, but, determined though they were, they must not forget to be prudent. Perhaps their presence might still be concealed in the event of the pirates contenting themselves with landing on the shore without examining the interior of the island. It might be, indeed, that their only intention was to obtain fresh water from the Mercy, and it was not impossible that the bridge, thrown across a mile and a half from the mouth, and the manufactory at the Chimneys might escape their notice.

But why was that flag hoisted at the brig's peak? What was that shot fired for? Pure bravado doubtless, unless it was a sign of the act of taking possession. Harding knew now that the vessel was well armed. And what had the colonists of Lincoln Island to reply to the pirates' guns? A few muskets only.

'However,' observed Cyrus Harding, 'here we are in an impregnable position. The enemy cannot discover the mouth of the outlet, now that it is hidden under reeds and grass, and consequently it would be impossible for them to penetrate into Granite House.'

'But our plantations, our poultry yard, our corral, all, everything!' exclaimed Pencroft, stamping his foot. 'They may spoil everything, destroy everything in a few hours!'

'Everything, Pencroft,' answered Harding, 'and we have no means of preventing them.'

'Are they numerous? that is the question,' said the reporter. 'If they are not more than a dozen, we shall be able to stop them, but forty, fifty, more perhaps!'

'Captain Harding,' then said Ayrton, advancing towards the engineer, 'will you give me leave?'

'For what, my friend?'

'To go to that vessel to find out the strength of her crew.'

'But Ayrton—' answered the engineer, hesitating, 'you will risk your life—'

'Why not, sir?'

'That is more than your duty.'

'I have more than my duty to do,' replied Ayrton.

'Will you go to the ship in the boat?' asked Gideon Spilett.

‘No, sir, but I will swim. A boat would be seen where a man may glide between wind and water.’

‘Do you know that the brig is a mile and a quarter from the shore?’ said Herbert.

‘I am a good swimmer, Mr. Herbert.’

‘I tell you it is risking your life,’ said the engineer.

‘That is no matter,’ answered Ayrton. ‘Captain Harding, I ask this as a favour. Perhaps it will be a means of raising me in my own eyes!’

‘Go, Ayrton,’ replied the engineer, who felt sure that a refusal would have deeply wounded the former convict, now become an honest man.

‘I will accompany you,’ said Pencroft.

‘You mistrust me!’ said Ayrton quickly.

Then more humbly, —

‘Alas!’

‘No! no!’ exclaimed Harding with animation, ‘no, Ayrton, Pencroft does not mistrust you. You interpret his words wrongly.’

‘Indeed,’ returned the sailor, ‘I only propose to accompany Ayrton as far as the islet. It may be, although it is scarcely possible, that one of these villains has landed, and in that case two men will not be too many to hinder him from giving the alarm. I will wait for Ayrton on the islet, and he shall go alone to the vessel, since he has proposed to do so.’ These things agreed to, Ayrton made preparations for his departure. His plan was bold, but it might succeed, thanks to the darkness of the night. Once arrived at the vessel’s side, Ayrton, holding on to the main chains, might reconnoitre the number and perhaps overhear the intentions of the pirates.

Ayrton and Pencroft, followed by their companions, descended to the beach. Ayrton undressed and rubbed himself with grease, so as to suffer less from the temperature of the water, which was still cold. He might, indeed, be obliged to remain in it for several hours.

Pencroft and Neb, during this time, had gone to fetch the boat, moored a few hundred feet higher up, on the bank of the Mercy, and by the time they returned, Ayrton was ready to start. A coat was thrown over his shoulders, and the settlers all came round him to press his hand.

Ayrton then shoved off with Pencroft in the boat.

It was half past ten in the evening when the two adventurers disappeared in the darkness. Their companions returned to wait at the Chimneys.

The channel was easily traversed, and the boat touched the opposite shore of the islet. This was not done without precaution, for fear lest the pirates might be roaming about there. But after a careful survey, it was evident that the islet was deserted. Ayrton then, followed by Pencroft, crossed it with a rapid step, scaring the birds nestled in the holes of the rocks; then, without hesitating, he plunged into the sea, and swam noiselessly in the direction of the ship, in which a few lights had recently appeared, showing her exact situation. As to Pencroft, he crouched down in a cleft of the rock, and awaited the return of his companion.

In the meanwhile, Ayrton, swimming with a vigorous stroke, glided through the sheet of water without producing the slightest ripple. His head just emerged above it and his eyes were fixed on the dark hull of the brig, from which the lights were reflected in the water. He thought only of the duty which he had promised to accomplish, and nothing of the danger which he ran, not only on board the ship, but in the sea, often frequented by sharks. The current bore him along and he rapidly receded from the shore.

Half an hour afterwards, Ayrton, without having been either seen or heard, arrived at the ship and caught hold of the main chains. He took breath, then, hoisting himself up, he managed to reach the extremity of the cutwater. There were drying several pairs of sailors' trousers. He put on a pair. Then settling himself firmly, he listened. They were not sleeping on board the brig. On the contrary, they were talking, singing, laughing. And these were the sentences, accompanied with oaths, which principally struck Ayrton: —

‘Our brig is a famous acquisition.’

‘She sails well, and merits her name of the “Speedy”.’

‘She would show all the navy of Norfolk a clean pair of heels.’

‘Hurrah for her captain!’

‘Hurrah for Bob Harvey!’

What Ayrton felt when he overheard this fragment of conversation may be understood when it is known that in this Bob Harvey he recognized one of his old Australian companions, a daring sailor, who had continued his criminal career. Bob Harvey had seized, on the shores of Norfolk Island this brig, which was loaded with arms, ammunition, utensils, and tools of all sorts, destined for one of the Sandwich Islands. All his gang had gone on board, and pirates after having been convicts, these wretches, more ferocious than the Malays themselves, scoured the Pacific, destroying vessels, and massacring their crews.

The convicts spoke loudly, they recounted their deeds, drinking deeply at the same time, and this is what Ayrton gathered. The actual crew of the “Speedy” was composed solely of English prisoners, escaped from Norfolk Island.

Here it may be well to explain what this island was. In 29deg 2’ south latitude, and 165deg 42’ east longitude, to the east of Australia, is found a little island, six miles in circumference, overlooked by Mount Pitt, which rises to a height of 1,100 feet above the level of the sea. This is Norfolk Island, once the seat of an establishment in which were lodged the most intractable convicts from the English penitentiaries. They numbered 500, under an iron discipline, threatened with terrible punishments, and were guarded by 150 soldiers, and 150

employed under the orders of the governor. It would be difficult to imagine a collection of greater ruffians. Sometimes, —although very rarely, —notwithstanding the extreme surveillance of which they were the object, many managed to escape, and seizing vessels which they surprised, they infested the Polynesian Archipelagos.

Thus had Bob Harvey and his companions done. Thus had Ayrton formerly wished to do. Bob Harvey had seized the brig ‘Speedy,’ anchored in sight of Norfolk Island; the crew had been massacred; and for a year this ship had scoured the Pacific, under the command of Harvey, now a pirate, and well known to Ayrton!

The convicts were, for the most part, assembled under the poop; but a few, stretched on the deck, were talking loudly.

The conversation still continued amid shouts and libations. Ayrton learned that chance alone had brought the “Speedy” in sight of Lincoln Island; Bob Harvey had never yet set foot on it; but, as Cyrus Harding had conjectured, finding this unknown land in his course, its position being marked on no chart, he had formed the project of visiting it, and, if he found it suitable, of making it the brig’s headquarters.

As to the black flag hoisted at the Speedy’s peak, and the gun which had been fired, in imitation of men of war when they lower their colours, it was pure piratical bravado. It was in no way a signal, and no communication yet existed between the convicts and Lincoln Island.

The settlers’ domain was now menaced with terrible danger. Evidently the island, with its water, its harbor, its resources of all kinds so increased in value by the colonists, and the concealment afforded by Granite House, could not but be convenient for the convicts; in their hands it would become an excellent place of refuge, and, being unknown, it would assure them, for a long time perhaps, impunity and security. Evidently, also, the lives of the settlers would not be respected, and Bob Harvey and his accomplices’ first care would be to massacre them without mercy. Harding and his companions had, therefore, not even the choice of flying and hiding themselves in the island, since the convicts intended to reside there, and since, in the event of the “Speedy” departing on an expedition, it was probable that some of the crew would remain on shore, so as to settle themselves there. Therefore, it would be necessary to fight, to destroy every one of these scoundrels, unworthy of pity, and against whom any means would be right. So thought Ayrton, and he well knew that Cyrus Harding would be of his way of thinking.

But was resistance and, in the last place, victory possible? That would depend on the equipment of the brig, and the number of men which she carried.

This Ayrton resolved to learn at any cost, and as an hour after his arrival the vociferations had begun to die away, and as a large number of the convicts were already buried in a drunken sleep, Ayrton did not hesitate to venture onto the “Speedy”s’ deck, which the extinguished lanterns now left in total darkness. He hoisted himself onto the cutwater, and by the bowsprit arrived at the forecastle. Then, gliding among the convicts stretched here and there, he made the round of the ship, and found that the “Speedy” carried four guns, which would throw shot of from eight to ten pounds in weight. He found also, on touching them that these guns were breech loaders. They were therefore, of modern make, easily used, and of terrible effect.

As to the men lying on the deck, they were about ten in number, but it was to be supposed that more were sleeping down below. Besides, by listening to them, Ayrton had understood that there were fifty on board. That was a large number for the six settlers of Lincoln Island to contend with! But now, thanks to Ayrton's devotion, Cyrus Harding would not be surprised, he would know the strength of his adversaries, and would make his arrangements accordingly.

There was nothing more for Ayrton to do but to return, and render to his companions an account of the mission with which he had charged himself, and he prepared to regain the bows of the brig, so that he might let himself down into the water. But to this man, whose wish was, as he had said, to do more than his duty, there came an heroic thought. This was to sacrifice his own life, but save the island and the colonists. Cyrus Harding evidently could not resist fifty ruffians, all well armed, who, either by penetrating by main force into Granite House, or by starving out the besieged, could obtain from them what they wanted. And then he thought of his preservers—those who had made him again a man, and an honest man, those to whom he owed all—murdered without pity, their works destroyed, their island turned into a pirates' den! He said to himself that he, Ayrton, was the principal cause of so many disasters, since his old companion, Bob Harvey, had but realized his own plans, and a feeling of horror took possession of him. Then he was seized with an irresistible desire to blow up the brig and with her, all whom she had on board. He would perish in the explosion, but he would have done his duty.

Ayrton did not hesitate. To reach the powder room, which is always situated in the after part of a vessel, was easy. There would be no want of powder in a vessel which followed such a trade, and a spark would be enough to destroy it in an instant.

Ayrton stole carefully along the between decks, strewn with numerous sleepers, overcome more by drunkenness than sleep. A lantern was lighted at the foot of the mainmast, round which was hung a gun rack, furnished with weapons of all sorts.

Ayrton took a revolver from the rack, and assured himself that it was loaded and primed. Nothing more was needed to accomplish the work of destruction. He then glided towards the stern, so as to arrive under the brig's poop at the powder magazine.

It was difficult to proceed along the dimly lighted deck without stumbling over some half sleeping convict, who retorted by oaths and kicks. Ayrton was, therefore, more than once obliged to halt. But at last he arrived at the partition dividing the aftercabin, and found the door opening into the magazine itself.

Ayrton, compelled to force it open, set to work. It was a difficult operation to perform without noise, for he had to break a padlock. But under his vigorous hand, the padlock broke, and the door was open.

At that moment a hand was laid on Ayrton's shoulder.

'What are you doing here?' asked a tall man, in a harsh voice, who, standing in the shadow, quickly threw the light of a lantern in Ayrton's face.

Ayrton drew back. In the rapid flash of the lantern, he had recognized his former accomplice, Bob Harvey, who could not have known him, as he must have thought Ayrton long since dead.

‘What are you doing here?’ again said Bob Harvey, seizing Ayrton by the waistband.

But Ayrton, without replying, wrenched himself from his grasp and attempted to rush into the magazine. A shot fired into the midst of the powder casks, and all would be over!

‘Help, lads!’ shouted Bob Harvey.

At his shout two or three pirates awoke, jumped up, and, rushing on Ayrton, endeavored to throw him down. He soon extricated himself from their grasp. He fired his revolver, and two of the convicts fell, but a blow from a knife which he could not ward off made a gash in his shoulder.

Ayrton perceived that he could no longer hope to carry out his project. Bob Harvey had reclosed the door of the powder magazine, and a movement on the deck indicated a general awakening of the pirates. Ayrton must reserve himself to fight at the side of Cyrus Harding. There was nothing for him but flight!

But was flight still possible? It was doubtful, yet Ayrton resolved to dare everything in order to rejoin his companions.

Four barrels of the revolver were still undischarged. Two were fired—one, aimed at Bob Harvey, did not wound him, or at any rate only slightly, and Ayrton, profiting by the momentary retreat of his adversaries, rushed towards the companion ladder to gain the deck. Passing before the lantern, he smashed it with a blow from the butt of his revolver. A profound darkness ensued, which favoured his flight. Two or three pirates, awakened by the noise, were descending the ladder at the same moment.

A fifth shot from Ayrton laid one low, and the others drew back, not understanding what was going on. Ayrton was on deck in two bounds, and three seconds later, having discharged his last barrel in the face of a pirate who was about to seize him by the throat, he leaped over the bulwarks into the sea.

Ayrton had not made six strokes before shots were splashing around him like hail.

What were Pencroft’s feelings, sheltered under a rock on the islet! What were those of Harding, the reporter, Herbert, and Neb, crouched in the Chimneys, when they heard the reports on board the brig! They rushed out on to the beach, and, their guns shouldered, they stood ready to repel any attack.

They had no doubt about it themselves! Ayrton, surprised by the pirates, had been murdered, and, perhaps, the wretches would profit by the night to make a descent on the island!

Half an hour was passed in terrible anxiety. The firing had ceased, and yet neither Ayrton nor Pencroft had reappeared. Was the islet invaded? Ought they not to fly to the help of Ayrton and Pencroft? But how? The tide being high at that time, rendered the channel impassable.

The boat was not there! We may imagine the horrible anxiety which took possession of Harding and his companions!

At last, towards half past twelve, a boat, carrying two men, touched the beach. It was Ayrton, slightly wounded in the shoulder, and Pencroft, safe and sound, whom their friends received with open arms.

All immediately took refuge in the Chimneys. There Ayrton recounted all that had passed, even to his plan for blowing up the brig, which he had attempted to put into execution.

All hands were extended to Ayrton, who did not conceal from them that their situation was serious. The pirates had been alarmed. They knew that Lincoln Island was inhabited. They would land upon it in numbers and well armed. They would respect nothing. Should the settlers fall into their hands, they must expect no mercy!

‘Well, we shall know how to die!’ said the reporter.

‘Let us go in and watch,’ answered the engineer.

‘Have we any chance of escape, captain?’ asked the sailor.

‘Yes, Pencroft.’

‘Hum! six against fifty!’

‘Yes! six! without counting—’

‘Who?’ asked Pencroft.

Cyrus did not reply, but pointed upwards.

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THE WANDERER'S NECKLACE by H Rider Haggard

Book II: Byzantium

Chapter VI: Heliodore

That night there was feasting at the palace, and I, Olaf, now known as Michael, as a convert was one of the chief guests, so that for me there was no escape. I sat very silent, so silent that the Augusta frowned, though she was too far off to speak to me. The banquet came to an end at last and before midnight I was free to go, still without word from the Empress, who withdrew herself, as I thought in an ill humour.

I sought my bed, but in it knew little of sleep. I had found her for whom during all the long years I had been searching, though I did not understand that I was searching. After the ages I had found her and she had found me. Her eyes said it, and, unless I dreamed, her sweet voice said it also.

Who was she? Doubtless that Heliodore, daughter of Magas, the prince of whom the Bishop Barnabas had spoken to me. Oh! now I understood what he meant when he spoke of another necklace like to that I wore, and yet would explain nothing. It lay upon the breast of Heliodore, Heliodore who was such a one as he wished that I might wed. Well, certainly I wished it too; but, alas! how could I wed, who was in Irene's power, a toy for her to play with or to break? And how would it fare with any woman whom it was known that I wished to wed? I must be secret until she was gone from Constantinople, and in this way or in that I could follow her. I, who had ever been open minded, must learn to keep my own counsel.

Now, too, I remembered how Barnabas had said the Augusta commanded that this Prince Magas and his daughter should come to the palace as her guests. Well, the place was vast, a town in itself, and likely enough I should not see them there. Yet I longed to see one of them as never I had longed for anything before. I was sure, also, that no fears could keep us apart, even though I knew the road before me to be full of dangers and of trials, knew that I went with my life in my hand, the life of which I had been quite careless, but that now had become so dear to me. For did not the world hold another to whom it belonged?

The night passed away. I rose and went about my morning duties. Scarcely were these finished when a messenger summoned me to the presence of the Augusta. I followed him with a sinking heart, certain that those woes which I had foreseen were about to begin. Also, now there was no woman in the whole world whom I less wished to see than Irene, Empress of the Earth.

I was led to the small audience chamber, whereof I have already spoken, that on the floor of which was the mosaic of the goddess Venus making pretence to kill her lover. There I found the Augusta seated in a chair of State, the minister Stauracius, my god father, who glowered at me as I entered, some secretaries, and Martina, my god mother, who was the lady in attendance.

I saluted the Empress, who bowed graciously and said:

'General Olaf—nay, I forgot, General Michael, your god father Stauracius has something to say which I trust will please you as much as it does him and me. Speak, Stauracius.'

‘Beloved god son,’ began Stauracius, in a voice of sullen rage, ‘it has pleased the Augusta to appoint you——’

‘On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius,’ interrupted the Empress.

‘——On the prayer and advice of me, Stauracius,’ repeated the eunuch like a talking bird, ‘to be one of her chamberlains and Master of the Palace, at a salary of’ (I forget the sum, but it was a great one) ‘with all the power and perquisites to that office pertaining, in reward of the services which you have rendered to her and the Empire. Thank the Empress for her gracious favour.’

‘Nay,’ interrupted Irene again, ‘thank your beloved god father Stauracius, who has given me no peace until I offered you this preferment which has suddenly become vacant, Stauracius alone knows why, for I do not. Oh! you were wise, Olaf—I mean Michael—to choose Stauracius for a god father, though I warn him,’ she added archly, ‘that in his natural love he must not push you forward too fast lest others should begin to show that jealousy which is a stranger to his noble nature. Come hither, Michael, and kiss my hand upon your appointment.’

So I advanced and, kneeling, kissed the Augusta’s hand, according to custom on such occasions, noting, as doubtless Stauracius did also, that she pressed it hard enough against my lips. Then I rose and said:

‘I thank the Augusta——’

‘And my god father Stauracius,’ she interrupted.

‘——And my god father Stauracius,’ I echoed, ‘for her and his goodness towards me. Yet with humility I venture to say that I am a soldier who knows nothing whatsoever of the duties of a chamberlain and of a Master of the Palace, and, therefore, I beg that someone else more competent may be chosen to fill these high offices.’

On hearing these words Stauracius stared at me with his round and owl like eyes. Never before had he known an officer in Constantinople who wished to decline power and more pay. Scarcely, indeed, could he believe his ears. But the Augusta only laughed.

‘Baptism has not changed you, Olaf,’ she said, ‘who ever were simple, as I believe your duties will be. At any rate, your god father and god mother will instruct you in them—especially your god mother. So no more of such foolish talk. Stauracius, you may be gone to attend to the affairs of which we have been speaking, as I see you burn to do, and take those secretaries with you, for the scratching of their pens sets my teeth on edge. Bide here a moment, General, for as Master of the Palace it will be your duty to receive certain guests to day of whom I wish to speak with you. Bide you also, Martina, that you may remember my words in case this unpractised officer should forget them.’

Stauracius and his secretaries bowed themselves out, leaving the three of us alone.

‘Now, Olaf, or Michael—which do you wish to be called?’

‘It is more easy for a man to alter his nature than his name,’ I answered.

‘Have you altered your nature? If so, your manners remain much what they were. Well, then, be Olaf in private and Michael in public, for often an alias is convenient enough. Hark! I would read you a lesson. As the wise King Solomon said, ‘Everything has its place and time.’ It is good to repent you of your sins and to think about your soul, but I pray you do so no more at my feasts, especially when they are given in your honour. Last night you sat at the board like a mummy at an Egyptian banquet. Had your skull stood on it, filled with wine, it could scarce have looked grimmer than did your face. Be more cheerful, I pray you, or I will have you tonsured and promoted to be a bishop, like that old heretic Barnabas of whom you are so fond. Ah! you smile at last, and I am glad to see it. Now hearken again. This afternoon there comes to the palace a certain old Egyptian named Magas, whom I place in your especial charge, and with him his wife—at least, I think she is his wife.’

‘Nay, Mistress, his daughter,’ interrupted Martina.

‘Oh! his daughter,’ said the Augusta suspiciously. ‘I did not know she was his daughter. What is she like, Martina?’

‘I have not seen her, Empress, but someone said that she is a black looking woman, such as the Nile breeds.’

‘Is it so? Then I charge you, Olaf, keep her far from me, for I love not these ugly black women, whose woolly hair always smells of grease. Yes, I give you leave to court her, if you will, since thereby you may learn some secrets,’ and she laughed merrily.

I bowed, saying that I would obey the Augusta’s orders to the best of my power, and she went on:

‘Olaf, I would discover the truth concerning this Magas and his schemes, which as a soldier you are well fitted to find out. It seems he has a plan for the recovery of Egypt out of the hands of the followers of that accursed false prophet whose soul dwells with Satan. Now, I would win back Egypt, if I may, and thereby add glory to my name and the Empire. Hear all that he proposes, study it well, and make report to me. Afterwards I will see him alone, who for the present will send him a letter by the hand of Martina here bidding him open all his heart to you. For a week or more I shall have no time to spend upon this Magas, who must give myself to business upon which hangs my power and perchance my life.’

These words she spoke heavily, then fell into a fit of brooding. Rousing herself, she went on:

‘Did you note yesterday, Olaf, if you had any mind left for the things of earth, that as I drove in state through the streets many met me with sullen silence, while others cursed me openly and shouted, “Where is the Augustus?” “Give us Constantine. We will have no woman’s rule.”’

‘I saw and heard something of these things, Augusta; also that certain of the soldiers on guard in the city had a mutinous air.’

‘Aye, but what you did not see and hear was that a plot had been laid to murder me in the cathedral. I got wind of it in time and if you were still governor of yonder prison you’d know

where the murderers are to day. Yet they're but tools; it is their captains whom I want. Well, torture may make them speak; Stauracius has gone to see to it. Oh! the strife is fierce and doubtful. I walk blindfold along a precipice. Above are Fortune's heights, and beneath black ruin. Perhaps you'd be wise to get you to Constantine, Olaf, and become his man, as many are doing, since he'd be glad of you. No need to shake your head, for that's not your way; you are no hound to bite the hand that feeds you, like these street bred dogs. Would that I could keep you nearer to me, where hour by hour you might help me with your counsel and your quiet strength. But it may not be—as yet. I raise you as high as I dare, but it must be done step by step, for even now some grow jealous. Take heed to what you eat, Olaf. See that your guards are Northmen, and beneath your doublet wear mail, especially at night. Moreover, unless I send for you, do not come near me too often, and, when we meet, be my humble servant, like others; aye, learn to crawl and kiss the ground. Above all, keep secret as the grave.

'Now,' she went on after a pause, during which I stood silent, 'what is there more? Oh! with your new offices, you'll retain that of captain of my guard, for I would be well watched during these next few weeks. Follow up the matter of the Egyptian; you may find advancement in it. Perchance one day you will be the general I send against the Moslems—if I can spare you. On all this matter be secret also, for once rumour buzzes over it that peach rots. The Egyptian and his swarthy girl come to the palace to day, when he will receive my letter. Meet him and see them well housed, though not too near me; Martina will help you. Now be gone and leave me to my battles.'

So I went, and she watched me to the door with eyes that were full of tenderness.

Again there is a blank in my memory, or my vision. I suppose that Magas and his daughter Heliodore arrived at the palace on the day of my interview with Irene, of which I have told. I suppose that I welcomed them and conducted them to the guest house that had been made ready for them in the gardens. Doubtless, I listened eagerly to the first words which Heliodore spoke to me, save that one in the cathedral, the word of greeting. Doubtless, I asked her many things, and she gave me many answers. But of all this nothing remains.

What comes back to me is a picture of the Egyptian prince, Magas, and myself seated at some meal in a chamber overlooking the moonlit palace garden. We were alone, and this noble, white bearded man, hook nosed and hawk eyed, was telling me of the troubles of his countrymen, the Christian Copts of Egypt.

'Look on me, sir,' he said. 'As I could prove to you, were it worth while, and as many could bear witness, for the records have been kept, I am a descendant in the true line from the ancient Pharaohs of my country. Moreover, my daughter, through her Grecian mother, is sprung from the Ptolemies. Our race is Christian, and has been for these three hundred years, although it was among the last to be converted. Yet, noble as we are, we suffer every wrong at the hands of the Moslems. Our goods and lands are doubly taxed, and, if we should go into the towns of Lower Egypt, we must wear garments on which the Cross is broidered as a badge of shame. Yet, where I live—near to the first cataract of the Nile, and not so very far from the city of old Thebes—the Prophet worshippers have no real power. I am still the true ruler of that district, as the Bishop Barnabas will tell you, and at any moment, were my standard to be lifted, I could call three thousand Coptic spears to fight for Christ and Egypt. Moreover, if money were forthcoming, the hosts of Nubia could be raised, and together we

might sweep down on the Moslems like the Nile in flood, and drive them back to Alexandria.’

Then he went on to set out his plans, which in sum were that a Roman fleet and army should appear at the mouths of the Nile to besiege and capture Alexandria, and, with his help, massacre or drive out every Moslem in Egypt. The scheme, which he set forth with much detail, seemed feasible enough, and when I had mastered its particulars I promised to report it to the Empress, and afterwards to speak with him further.

I left the chamber, and presently stood in the garden. Although it was autumn time, the night in this mild climate was very warm and pleasant, and the moonlight threw black shadows of the trees across the paths. Under one of these trees, an ancient, green leaved oak, the largest of a little grove, I saw a woman sitting. Perchance I knew who she was, perchance I had come thither to meet her, I cannot say. At least, this was not our first meeting by many, for as I came she rose, lifting her flower like face towards my own, and next moment was in my arms.

When we had kissed our full, we began to talk, seated hand in hand beneath the oak.

‘What have you been doing this day, beloved?’ she asked.

‘Much what I do every day, Heliodore. I have attended to my duties, which are threefold, as Chamberlain, as Master of the Palace, and as Captain of the Guard. Also, for a little while, I saw the Augusta, to whom I had to report various matters. The interview was brief, since a rumour had reached her that the Armenian regiments refuse to take the oath of fidelity to her alone, as she has commanded should be done, and demand that the name of the Emperor, her son, should be coupled with hers, as before. This report disturbed her much, so that she had little time for other business.’

‘Did you speak of my father’s matter, Olaf?’

‘Aye, shortly. She listened, and asked whether I were sure that I had got the truth from him. She added that I had best test it by what I could win from you by any arts that a man may use. For, Heliodore, because of something that my god mother, Martina, said to her, it is fixed in her mind that you are black skinned and very ugly. Therefore, the Augusta, who does not like any man about her to care for other women, thinks I may make love to you with safety. So I prayed for leave from my duties on the guard this evening that I might sup with your father in the guest house, and see what I could learn from one or both of you.’

‘Love makes you clever, Olaf. But hearken. I do not believe that the Empress thinks me black and ugly any longer. As it chanced while I walked in the inner garden this afternoon, where you said I might go when I wished to be quite alone, dreaming of our love and you, I looked up and saw an imperial woman of middle age, who was gorgeous as a peacock, watching me from a little distance. I went on my way, pretending to see no one, and heard the lady say:

“Has all this trouble driven me mad, Martina, or did I behold a woman beautiful as one of the nymphs of my people’s fables wandering yonder among those bushes?”

‘I repeat her very words, Olaf, not because they are true—for, remember, she saw me at a distance and against a background of rocks and autumn flowers—but because they were her words, which I think you ought to hear, with those that followed them.’

‘Irene has said many false things in her life,’ I said, smiling, ‘but by all the Saints these were not among them.’

Then we embraced again, and after that was finished Heliodore, her head resting on my shoulder, continued her story:

“‘What was she like, Mistress?’ asked the lady Martina, for by this time I had passed behind some little trees. ‘I have seen no one who is beautiful in this garden except yourself.’

“‘She was clad in a clinging white robe, Martina, that left her arms and bosom bare’—being alone, Olaf, I wore my Egyptian dress beneath my cloak, which I had laid down because of the heat of the sun. ‘She was not so very tall, yet rounded and most graceful. Her eyes seemed large and dark, Martina, like her hair; her face was tinted like a rich hued rose. Oh! were I a man she seemed such a one as I should love, who, like all my people, have ever worshipped beauty. Yet, what did I say, that she put me in mind of a nymph of Greece. Nay, that was not so. It was of a goddess of Old Egypt that she put me in mind, for on her face was the dreaming smile which I have seen on that of a statue of mother Isis whom the Egyptians worshipped. Moreover, she wore just such a headdress as I have noted upon those statues.’

‘Now the lady Martina answered: ‘Surely, you must have dreamed, Mistress. The only Egyptian woman in the palace is the daughter of the old Coptic noble, Magas, who is in Olaf’s charge, and though I am told that she is not so ugly as I heard at first, Olaf has never said to me that she was like a goddess. What you saw was doubtless some image of Fortune conjured up by your mind. This I take to be the best of omens, who in these doubtful days grow superstitious.’

“‘Would Olaf tell one woman that another was like a goddess, Martina, even though she to whom he spoke was his god mother and a dozen years younger than himself? Come,’ she added, ‘and let us see if we can find this Egyptian.’

‘Then,’ Heliodore went on, ‘not knowing what to do, I stood still there against the rockwork and the flowers till presently, round the bushes, appeared the splendid lady and Martina.’

Now when I, Olaf, heard all this, I groaned and said:

‘Oh! Heliodore, it was the Augusta herself.’

‘Yes, it was the Augusta, as I learned presently. Well, they came, and I curtsied to them.

“‘Are you the daughter of Magas, the Egyptian?’ asked the lady, eyeing me from head to foot.

“‘Yes, Madam,’ I answered. ‘I am Heliodore, the daughter of Magas. I pray that I have done no wrong in walking in this garden, but the General Olaf, the Master of the Palace, gave me leave to come here.’

“And did the General Olaf, whom we know as Michael, give you that necklace which you wear, also, O Daughter of Magas? Nay, you must needs answer me, for I am the Augusta.’

‘Now I curtsied again, and said:

“Not so, O Augusta; the necklace is from Old Egypt, and was found upon the body of a royal lady in a tomb. I have worn it for many years.’

“Indeed, and that which the General Michael wears came also from a tomb.’

“Yes, he told me so, Augusta,’ I said.

“It would seem that the two must once have been one, Daughter of Magas?’

“It may be so, Augusta; I do not know.’

‘Now the Empress looked about her, and the lady Martina, dropping behind, began to fan herself.

“Are you married, girl?’ she asked.

“No,’ I answered.

“Are you affianced?’

‘Now I hesitated a little, then answered ‘No’ again.

“You seem to be somewhat doubtful on the point. Farewell for this while. When you walk abroad in our garden, which is open to you, be pleased to array yourself in the dress of our country, and not in that of a courtesan of Egypt.”

‘What did you answer to that saying?’ I asked.

‘That which was not wise, I fear, Olaf, for my temper stirred me. I answered: ‘Madam, I thank you for your permission to walk in your garden. If ever I should do so again as your guest, be sure that I will not wear garments which, before Byzantium was a village, were sacred to the gods of my country and those of my ancestors the Queens of Egypt.’”

‘And then?’ I asked.

‘The Empress answered: ‘Well spoken! Such would have been my own words had I been in your place. Moreover, they are true, and the robe becomes you well. Yet presume not too far, girl, seeing that Byzantium is no longer a village, and Egypt has some fanatic Moslem for a Pharaoh, who thinks little of your ancient blood.’

‘So I bowed and went, and as I walked away heard the Empress rating the lady Martina about I know not what, save that your name came into the matter, and my own. Why does this Empress talk so much about you, Olaf, seeing that she has many officers who are higher in her service, and why was she so moved about this matter of the necklace of golden shells?’

‘Heliodore,’ I answered, ‘I must tell now what I have hidden from you. The Augusta has been pleased—why, I cannot say, but chiefly, I suppose, because of late years it has been my fancy to keep myself apart from women, which is rare in this land—to show me certain favour. I gather, even, that, whether she means it or means it not, she has thought of me as a husband.’

‘Oh!’ interrupted Heliodore, starting away from me, ‘now I understand everything. And, pray, have you thought as a wife of her, who has been a widow these ten years and has a son of twenty?’

‘God above us alone knows what I have or have not thought, but it is certain that at present I think of her only as one who has been most kind to me, but who is more to be feared than my worst foe, if I have any.’

‘Hush!’ she said, raising her finger. ‘I fancied I heard someone stir behind us.’

‘Fear nothing,’ I answered. ‘We are alone here, for I set guards of my own company around the place, with command to admit no one, and my order runs against all save the Empress in person.’

‘Then we are safe, Olaf, since this damp would disarrange her hair, which, I noted, is curled with irons, not by Nature, like my own. Oh! Olaf, Olaf, how wonderful is the fate that has brought us together. I say that when I saw you yonder in the cathedral for the first time since I was born, I knew you again, as you knew me. That is why, when you whispered to me, ‘Greeting after the ages,’ I gave you back your welcome. I know nothing of the past. If we lived and loved before, that tale is lost to me. But there’s your dream and there’s the necklace. When I was a child, Olaf, it was taken from the embalmed body of some royal woman, who, by tradition, was of my own race, yes, and by records of which my father can tell you, for he is among the last who can still read the writing of the old Egyptians. Moreover, she was very like me, Olaf, for I remember her well as she lay in her coffin, preserved by arts which the Egyptians had. She was young, not much older than I am to day, and her story tells that she died in giving birth to a son, who grew up a strong and vigorous man, and although he was but half royal, founded a new dynasty in Egypt and became my forefather. This necklace lay upon her breast, and beneath it a writing on papyrus, which said that when the half of it which was lost should be joined again to that half, then those who had worn them would meet once more as mortals. Now the two halves of the necklace have met, and we have met as God decreed, and it is one and we are one for ever and for ever, let every Empress of the earth do what they will to part us.’

‘Aye,’ I answered, embracing her again, ‘we are one for ever and for ever, though perchance for a while we may be separated from time to time.’

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SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL SUBMISSIONS CALL
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Lovecraftiana—the Magazine of Eldritch Horror

Lovecraftiana is a quarterly publication from Rogue Planet Press, with issues coming out April 30th, July 31st, October 31st, and January 31st, featuring stories, articles, poetry or artwork on Cthulhu Mythos / Lovecraftian themes.

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