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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 12, ISSUE 16
7TH JANUARY 2018

ENTER THE DREAM ROOM

BY ELLIS HASTINGS
*SO MUCH
UNDISCOVERED...*

DEEP SIX

PART TWO
BY GERALD
SHEAGREN
*EXTREME
PREJUDICE...*

**HELL IS
SQUARE
BY ALEX S
JOHNSON**

**THE SUCCUBUS
AND THE KNIGHT
BY JULIE DOLLAR**

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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EDITORIAL

This week Adams enters the dream room to learn Dr Birindelli's darkest secrets. Samantha and the *Deep Six* crew are back, this time pitted against the unassuming Smith family of Virginia. An imprisoned survivor of the previous regime speaks about Hell. A knight encounters a seductive demon. And GK Murphy's *Conflict of Witches* reaches a splatterpunk finale.

Stephen Hernandez is your reviewer this week, with a return to the oeuvre of James Parsons. The Battle for Callisto comes to an epic close. And the interplanetary invaders demonstrate the superiority of Martian technology to the primitive Earth people.

—Gavin Chappell

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ENTER THE DREAM ROOM by Ellis Hastings

“Earth,” said Dr Birindelli from the frozen chambers of his laboratory. “It’s remarkable, isn’t it? We humans can learn so much about this very planet we call our home, but at the same time know so little.”

“What do you mean?” asked his student. “I believe mankind has done quite a lot in its relatively short time here.”

“Yes. Yes, we have, I suppose. But we have still left so much... undiscovered.”

The doctor crossed the room to a large door sealed off by a series of thick, titanium latches. A computer sat on a post; connected to the locks by an intricate series of wires. Apart from the sound of shivering from the perplexed student and the clicking of plastic on a keyboard, the room was silent. Dr Birindelli hit *Enter* following a series of numbers and digits, and a red light—like a laser—emerged from where the camera would be on the computer.

“Doctor, what—”

Dr Birindelli gently shushed him; simultaneously placing his eye in the path of the laser. “We must be silent for this part. You wouldn’t want the system to think I’m an intruder and incinerate my retina, now would you, Adams?”

The young man shook his head. “Sorry,” he whispered.

After a moment, the laser turned green before vanishing with a low-pitched *ding*. Cogs began to spin on the door as the first pair of latches lifted like cranes carrying boxes in a warehouse. The module lit up as the outline of a hand appeared onscreen. Dr Birindelli placed his dominant hand against the warm glow of the glass, held it for precisely four seconds, then ripped it away suddenly as if burned. On the screen, the outline of the hand held a myriad of colours; a vibrant red in the centre, followed by a summer orange in the middle and a faint daisy shaded yellow on the outskirts. It was a heat sensor, Adams realized. By this point, his fascination had grown. The scientist whom he had known for years was unlocking the door to what he called his Dream Room. Adams couldn’t believe it. He had always longed to know what hid behind those doors, yet the doctor had kept it under wraps as if it contained the plague; growing defensive if Adams so much as even mentioned it.

Wondering if the man had forgotten he was in the room with him, Adams said, “Do you mean to open the doors?”

Dr Birindelli cast him an odd look as the final lock broke and a fog like smoke danced from the cracks. “No, Adams, what do you mean?” he asked sarcastically. “Of course I do. I’ve grown quite old during my time on the plane of existence, Adams, and I fear that I may not have much longer to enjoy this side of the cosmos. I need someone I have taken under my wing to pick up where I left off when I’m gone. Someone I trust.”

“Oh, wow,” escaped the young man’s lips. Was this finally happening? Was Dr Birindelli finally going to show him the interior chambers of his laboratory? Surely this was simply another vivid dream. Adams had experienced quite a few of those in the days leading up to this moment. “I don’t know what to say... I’m honoured.”

“Keep your honour. That’s for the knights of King Arthur, and they’ve been long gone by 2025.” The doctor seized the latch to the door with his wrinkled and liver spotted hands, then turned back to the young man. “Let me ask you before I change your life forever: do you consider yourself a sceptic, Adams?”

The doctor’s successor thought about it for a moment, then said, “Well... of course, all men of science should consider themselves so.”

“You won’t be after this.” Dr Birindelli forced the latch down and swung the door open.

A group of men sat huddled by a fire. It had grown awfully cold in these lands as it always did around this time of the Celestial Year. Most of the group held the anatomy of normal humans. However, there were still a few “freaks” among them. A man, resembling a cyclops but on a much more disappointing scale of five foot six, used a stick to prod at something in the flames. A dwarf, clad in armour looking to be straight out of a video game, sat by the tiny cyclops. Several small and disfigured goblin children—each one’s skin of a varying shade of green—ran rampant after an improvised soccer ball. However, despite the many peculiar differences in each of the men and creatures’ appearances, they all shared one similar trait: their eyes were a smooth silver; void of the sparkle of life commonly seen in humans.

Suddenly, their world seemed to grow dimmer as the large rectangular shape of a door opened behind the camp. The goblin children stopped playing, the short cyclops dropped his stick, and the rest of the group jumped up—some running for cover; others cautiously approaching the door in the air as if to make a mad dash for the opening in an attempt to escape to the other side. Before they could get a second glimpse of the portal, the old and haggard silhouette of the man they had fearfully named Venandi emerged in the doorway, preventing their escape. However, he wasn’t alone, they saw. He had younger company with him—no doubt the next Venandi who would terrorize them and their children for generations to come.

Adams’ mouth dropped open in surprise upon crossing into the bright light of Dr Birindelli’s Dream Room. It wasn’t a room at all. It was another land—another world—hidden between the cracks of reality. The elderly intellectual of eighty-four was right; suddenly, all scepticism and understanding of earth as he knew it evaporated from Adams’ mind.

Dr Birindelli looked back at Adams with a look that said *I told you so*, then he quickly turned back to the humanoid creatures before them. “This, Adams, is the Dreamscape.”

Adams didn’t speak. For a brief moment, he had forgotten how to do so. His mind and its vision of reality was crumbling with every passing second spent in this alien world. Finally, after a long pause, he opened his cracked lips and said, “What the hell is the Dreamscape?”

“Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“I... I guess I do now,” Adams said.

Laughter erupted from the doctor, “Oh, my dear boy, this is not the afterlife. It is but one of the four layers stitched into the fabric of existence.”

The strange humanoid creatures remained frozen like statues; their silver eyes jumping back and forth between the old Venandi and the new one. The old man was here for another one of them—or two, or three.

“Think of our world as a pyramid. The top level of the structure—the peak—is Earth. Reality as we know it. The second level is this place: The Dreamscape. As the name implies, this is where dreams are born—literally.”

“So... those people?”

“It’s best if you don’t call them people, Adams.”

“Why not? That’s what they look like.” The young man’s eyes fell on the green children staring at him with fear in their large, puppy dog eyes. “Well, what most of them look like.”

“Whenever you dream of a person or creature, that thought manifests itself in physical form here. Fortunately, my door is a portal into this side of the Dreamscape and not the edge where the nightmares reside.” Dr Birindelli shivered as if cold, “These creatures are nightmarish enough on their own. I would hate to see what lives beyond the horizon.”

He gestured out towards the end of the sunless sky. A dark cloud blanketed what appeared to be trees, except they weren’t trees, they were giant creatures moving slowly across the landscape. They were too far away for either Adams or Dr Birindelli to get a clear look at what they were, and Adams felt thankful for that.

The young man turned his attention to the armour-clad dwarf. “Do any of you speak?”

The dwarf’s bushy orange beard drew upwards as his eyes narrowed distrustfully. He remained silent.

“Yes, they can speak, Adams.” The doctor slid a subtle hand into the side of his stainless lab coat. “But it’s best if you don’t give them the opportunity. You wouldn’t want their tainted words to influence your judgment.” He raised his voice menacingly at the creatures. “None of you savages speak up.”

Adams’ curiosity shifted into a growing sense of unease, and a new form of scepticism: one aimed at his teacher. “You said you had a job here. What do you do?”

Before Dr Birindelli could answer, one of the creatures spoke. This creature had an arched back and green skin, slightly resembling the goblin children but a good deal older, “He’s killing us.”

The figure’s wart caked head burst with a bang. A final muffled sigh escaped the creature’s disfigured mouth before it collapsed lifelessly to the dirt. The goblin children screamed as they rushed to the body of their parent. Adams turned his head slowly back to the doctor;

eyes wide and face soaked with a panicked sweat. A long-barrelled pistol was held in a firm grip by the old man. On his face, opposite to Adams, was a look of callousness.

“I know it’s hard to witness, but it had to be done.” Dr Birindelli said emotionlessly, never taking his eyes off the cowering group of dream people.

“It didn’t have to be done, he posed no threat to you!” Adams shouted. His voice had risen an octave higher. It always did so when he was frightened.

“But it did,” the gun lowered; its sights falling on the dwarf. The redheaded man closed his eyes and whispered something under his breath. A prayer. Dr Birindelli’s gun went off a second time. The dwarf’s face took on the look one gets when they smell an unpleasant odour. Sparks erupted from the chest plate as the bullet pierced the metal. The short man was thrown back five feet as if struck by a car, then he landed on his back with a grunt. Blood sprayed from the geyser in the dwarf’s armour as a final breath escaped his lips.

“Stop, Leonard, stop!” Adams shouted.

Dr Birindelli paused. “Calling your old teacher by his first name?” He laughed. “That’s quite unorthodox, wouldn’t you say?”

“Why are you doing this to them?”

“Because I can’t risk them getting through the portal.”

“But, the door behind it is locked, Dr Birindelli. Even if they got through, who cares? They’re not a threat to anyone.”

“He’s right, we mean you no harm,” the cyclops squeaked from his position balled up on the ground. Dr Birindelli aimed the pistol at the creature and fired. The bullet went off target. Adams had shoved the gun down as the doctor pulled the trigger. A look of disgust came across the man’s wrinkled face. He turned back to his student.

“How could you do that, Adams?”

“You have no right taking innocent life!”

“Those things don’t deserve life! They’re a threat to society. If they got through, that would be detrimental to how mankind, as a whole, views and understands the process of being!”

Dr Birindelli aimed the gun back at the cowering cyclops and pulled the trigger as he received a hard shove from the young man. He was thrown off balance but managed to hit the creature in the gut. The cyclops cried out as his abdomen became a crater, then he fell to the side shaking uncontrollably in pain.

“Adams, you fool!” Dr Birindelli cursed as he regained his footing. “I am playing a vital role in protecting the sanity of mankind! Think of the chaos that will ensue if and when those things get into our world! What will we scientists say? That these creatures who seemingly popped out of thin air were simply born out of a dream? That they are figments of our imagination but real? It doesn’t make sense, Adams. Nothing does! I have enough trouble

coming to terms with that horrid realization, and I'm a man of intellect! How do you think the common people that make up ninety percent of the earth's population will handle this revelation if we sit by and let these abominations reach them? I am doing what is necessary! I'm doing God's work!"

"Please," moaned the cyclops as he clutched his wound, as if trying to thrust his intestines back into the cavity. His eye had begun to gloss over and his orange skin had become void of colour, "We don't want to enter your world. We simply want to live in peace."

Dr Birindelli stepped quickly away from Adams and aimed the gun at the dying creature's head and said, "Liar," then pulled the trigger.

"It's been done before! You creatures don't change, there's no teaching you! My very own experiment has proven that to be a fact." Dr Birindelli's eyes fell on Adams. His face had grown gaunt and grim. Adams saw the gun was fixed on his own chest.

"Adams," the old man said; a hint of regret in his voice.

"Easy now," Adams said softly, his hands raised in a *Don't shoot* gesture, "You want to look where you're pointing that thing, Dr Birindelli."

The old man burst into tears, "Don't you *Dr Birindelli* me!"

Adams had slowly begun walking towards the old man. A tactic often used to get close enough to disarm a gunman without startling him with a sudden movement.

"I wasn't always like this! I tried the experiment before; letting one of the dream figures cross over." Dr Birindelli didn't seem to notice his student steadily closing the distance between them. "Many years ago my pregnant wife was killed in a car accident. We had dreamed of having a child for years up to that fateful day. I still wanted a child, but I never wanted to remarry, and adoption didn't seem right. I wanted one that came from me. Years later I had a dream that I had a son. A dream that he would become just like me. So I went into the Dreamscape and sought out that son then brought him back to earth, because I couldn't bear to let him die in this wasteland."

Adams was now just a few mere feet from the gunman. The surviving creatures sat silently on their knees like hostages; watching the altercation unfold before them with a nervous uncertainty.

"What happened to him?" Adams asked to keep the doctor's focus away from him.

With a few final whimpers, Dr Birindelli's tear filled eyes met Adams's. His finger fell to the trigger, and he said, "It was you."

Adams' silver eyes went wide. He lunged for Dr Birindelli and seized his hands, attempting to pry his finger from the trigger. "It's not me!"

"It is, Adams, it is!" Dr Birindelli was weak. He could feel the gun slowly being stripped away from him.

“How come I can’t remember this place, then?”

“Because,” Dr Birindelli was whipped to the side by his student, but still maintained enough of a grip on the gun to keep from being cast to the ground. “Those who cross over can’t remember doing so. Like how we humans can’t remember the act of leaving the womb to become a part of the war-torn planet we call Earth. You were the one I brought over—you were the exception, but even just one person appearing out of the blue raised quite a few eyebrows. Especially because you were so different than the other students, and not just because of your eyes. It’s like they could tell you weren’t of their genes—could sense it. Imagine the damage it would do if hundreds, or thousands even, crossed over at once! I’m doing what is right, Adams! Maybe not for the individuals I’m erasing from existence, but for the greater good!”

Suddenly, the old man sunk his crooked yellow teeth into Adams’ hand. The young man let out a howl like a dog whose tail had been stepped on and reflexively loosened his grip on the gun. Dr Birindelli was just able to tear the pistol free from his student’s grip. He turned to the open door less than ten feet back and dashed for it. Adams lunged out and caught the doctor by the feet and pulled him to the ground. The gun slipped from Dr Birindelli’s grasp but he quickly reobtained it. As Adams came upon him, Dr Birindelli threw his gun wielding arm back blindly and pulled the trigger.

Adams collapsed to the ground, unable to stand on his wounded leg. Bright red blood spurted from the hole on the inside of his thigh, two inches above the knee.

“I’m sorry, Adams,” Dr Birindelli huffed. “It had to be done. You were the bridge that would have let those things into our world.” The doctor climbed to his feet and brushed dirt off his uneven and torn coat.

“You’re wrong,” Adams said wearily. He had been hit in the femoral artery and was losing blood fast. He began to feel heavy—his body a biodegradable sack of meat being pulled through the ground. “Wrong to kill them. They—or we—didn’t asked to be created this way. If you dreamed of me, that makes me your son, right? How could you let your own son die?”

Dr Birindelli crossed to the portal then stopped in the doorway. He turned back to Adams. His son was already dead. Feeling remorse that was overshadowed by a sense of heroism, Dr Birindelli said, “Dreams don’t die. They simply cease to be.”

The doctor exited his Dream Room and closed the door behind him.

THE END

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DEEP SIX by Gerald Sheagren

Part Two

The day was a mild eighty-two degrees in Key West, Florida; cottony clouds decorating a robin's egg blue sky. Palm fronds rustled in a gentle breeze, as the waters of the Atlantic lapped gently at the beach. Gulls were screeching and squawking overhead.

Jessica Barnes lay sprawled on a towel, wearing a bright yellow bikini, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, her lithe body glistening with suntan lotion. Seated in a nearby lawn chair was Beatrice Wiggins, wearing a frumpy dress and broad brimmed straw hat. As homage to Ernest Hemingway—whose historical home was less than a mile away—she was engrossed in one of the novels he'd written there— "A Farewell to Arms". Eleven-year-old Samantha was just finishing up on a medieval castle she'd constructed out of wet sand, pouring a plastic pail of ocean water into its moat.

They were all enjoying a little downtime from their jobs at Deep Six. And it was well deserved, since their last mission, in Yemen, had been a real hair raiser. Due to Samantha's wondrous powers, the Yemeni warlord, Hassan Ahmed el-Berkani, and twenty-three of his fighters had suffocated to death in a devastating sandstorm. But not before a shootout with a contingent of his men that had nearly gotten Jessica and Troy Larson killed. Luckily, Samantha had come to the rescue, melting the Jihadists' weapons in their hands, causing their flesh to burn away to the bone.

Troy walked across the beach toward the others. He was barefooted, wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts. As the team leader, he was expected to keep in contact with Deep Six headquarters—even during times of R&R. Whereas he should be smiling with pleasure, his brow was knitted, and his lips were pursed.

Beatrice looked up from her novel, seeing his troublesome look, and released a long weary sigh. "Before you open your mouth, let me take a guess. You're going to turn all of this loveliness into a pile of bat guano."

"Unfortunately, Bea—you're exactly right. The Director wants us up and going in less than an hour. He's sending a jet to pick us up."

Sighing, Jessica sat up on her blanket, peering over the top of her sunglasses. "What now? Is there more Jihadists to rub out?"

"I wish it were that simple, but this is a lot more serious. Let's go to that table over there and I'll fill you all in."

When they were seated, Troy cleared his throat and began. "Byron, our top clairvoyant, got an alert early this morning, to a sleeper cell of Iranian agents, living somewhere in Virginia. They're not from Iran, but from somewhere in Western Europe. That makes it all the easier for them to blend in. They're a husband and wife, mid-forties, and their two sons, early twenties, and a daughter in her late teens. They've been dormant for five years, but recently received a communique from their handlers to launch an attack on Washington."

Jessica raised an eyebrow. "What made Byron pick up on this?"

“Who knows? You know how he is—his premonitions just come out of nowhere. He could be just sitting there and bingo. He received a few threads and began to concentrate harder, coming up with what I’ve just told you.”

“Do we have names and a more specific location of where they’re living?”

“Byron’s working on that.”

“What sort of an attack on Washington?”

“He’s also working on that.”

“What’s with the FBI?” Beatrice snuffled. “They must be sleeping at the wheel.”

Troy shrugged. “Well, with the problems of this day and age they’re pretty hard pressed and over extended. They’re doing their best. Plus, they usually shy away from using clairvoyants. So that gives Deep Six a pretty big advantage.”

“And I suppose we’re not going to inform them.”

“Uh-uh. This’ll be totally our ballgame.” Troy smiled, regarding Jessica’s cleavage. “I have to say—you look wonderful in yellow.”

“Keep your eyes in their sockets. So what’s the deal? Is this going to be an extermination mission? Are we going to send this sleeper cell to the hereafter?”

“We’ll play it as it goes. But I imagine the Director would like our mind readers to question one or more of them. They might give us knowledge about more sleeper cells.”

Sighing, Beatrice dropped her novel onto the sand. “There’re oodles of them—Russian, ISIS, North Korean and Iranian. They’re all just waiting for the go signal. Hell, aliens from other planets probably have a few sleeper cells here. After all, America is very easy to get into.” The old woman barked a laugh. “We’re an equal opportunity country.”

“Shit!” Samantha strode over to her sand castle and began to stomp it to oblivion. “And here I was—having such a good time!”

Beatrice pointed a stern finger at the girl. “Watch your language, young lady!”

“Shit!” Samantha kicked away the last tower of her castle. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!”

Byron, the clairvoyant, was a geeky guy, with horned rimmed glasses and a pasty complexion, his prematurely bald head glinting in the overhead lights. He was wearing a black and yellow bowtie that was as big as a tropical butterfly. He would have made a great addition to the movie, “Revenge of the Nerds”.

“Okay. I’ve concentrated real hard and came up with a lot more info. The father is named William and the mother, Claudia. The two brothers are Brian and Joel. The sister is Tiffany. Their last name is Smith.”

Beatrice snorted a laugh. “Smith—now isn’t that original. Why couldn’t they have come up with Wojohowicz or Popadopoulos?”

“They probably thought it sounds more American. They live on an isolated farm, some twelve miles outside of Charlottesville, Virginia.” Byron stabbed the table top with a forefinger to accentuate his next statement. “Coincidentally, it’s only twenty point seven miles due north from our headquarters, here.”

Jessica frowned. “Do you think they’re aware of that?”

“Good heavens—no. Not even the president knows of our existence.”

Troy stood and started to pace. “So what kind of attack are they planning for Washington? Did you pick up on any of that?”

“Only fragments, but it all makes sense. I’ve gotten images of a truck, along with C-4 and a shitload of ball bearings. You don’t have to be a brain surgeon to put that together.”

Beatrice snorted another laugh. “Isn’t that quaint? I was expecting more along the lines of a dirty bomb.”

Byron cast the old woman a glare. “Is this situation boring you, Beatrice? If it is, the Director can easily have you replaced.”

“Don’t you worry about me, nerdy boy. This old granny can run circles around you.”

“Ah, if I remember right, you can kill in a hundred different ways.”

“Make that a hundred and one.”

Troy cleared his throat. “Speaking of the Director, where is he? If this problem is so urgent, he should be here in person.”

Byron shrugged. “He would have liked to. But he flew up to Washington, to hobnob with a few members of Congress. He has to keep his ears to the ground, so he knows everything that’s going on.”

Beatrice harrumphed. “Nothing meaningful ever goes on in Congress. The Capitol building is nothing but a marble mausoleum.”

“Be that it as it may,” said Byron. “But if this sleeper cell isn’t taken care of, the Capitol building may very well turn into a mausoleum. So, speaking for the Director, the four of you had better get your butts in gear.”

Jessica smirked. “So now you speak for the Director.”

“I do. He’s put me in charge of this mission.” Byron leaned toward Samantha. “Are you ready to go, little girl?”

Samantha bristled. “Don’t call me ‘little girl’. I’m bigger than all of you put together.”

The four of them lay on their stomachs, on a hilltop about a quarter mile away from their objective. Troy had binoculars focused on the valley, observing a white painted farmhouse, a vintage red barn, and three other outbuildings. There wasn’t another house for a good two-mile radius.

Jessica grumped. “Since you’re hogging up the binoculars, what do you see?”

“There’s a U-Haul truck backed up to the barn and they’re all loading furniture aboard. There’s a couch, three stuffed chairs and two bureaus.”

“Not just furniture,” added Beatrice. “I bet it’s all packed with C-4 and a few thousand ball bearings and nails. Oh, and not to mention a timing device. I wonder where they got their hands on the C-4.”

“They probably have numerous contacts. And there’s always the black market. Whoops, the mother’s on the move.” Troy watched as the woman separated from the others, walked to an SUV, hopped in and headed down the long driveway toward the road. “I wonder where she’s headed.”

Jessica chuckled. “She probably has a yoga class.”

Troy hit a speed dial on his cell phone.

Byron answered in a heartbeat. “What’s up?”

“The mother just left the scene, driving a silver coloured SUV. Have our eyes in the sky track her, so we know where she’s going.”

“I’m one step ahead of you. I’m watching her as we speak. She’s heading north. And I bet you ten to one she’s on her way to Washington.”

“Probably to get a good view of their objective, so she can update the others regarding traffic, parking conditions and police presence.”

“That’s my thought, exactly. I’ll keep a close eye on her. Are you ready to make your move?”

“I’m leaving it totally up to Samantha. Since we can nab the wife, we won’t need the others for info.”

“So it’s going to be an ‘extreme prejudice’ operation?”

“Oh yes—very extreme.”

“Let me know when it’s over so I can notify the Director.”

“I’ll do that.” Breaking the connection, Troy turned to Samantha who was reading a book on quantum physics. “Ready yourself, Sam. The ball’s in your court. Dig deep into your Pandora’s box.”

“No survivors?”

“No survivors.”

Samantha gave it some thought then pointed off to the left. “Let’s move on over there, so you guys can lay flat in that little gully.”

“And what would be the reason for that?”

“Your survival will be the reason. Is that a good enough explanation?”

“Yeah, it is—but what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. My protective shield will be up. You know how that works.”

“Indeed I do. A guided missile couldn’t penetrate it.”

When they were all in position, Samantha sat down, crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap. And then she fell into a deep concentration, her extraordinary eyesight riveted on the U-Haul truck. She began to tremble, sweat lacing her brow, the inevitable drop of blood appearing in her right nostril. As usual, the pupils of her eyes had turned to pinpricks. A half mile of air started to waver, emitting crackles of energy, like a stack of dried twigs ignited by fire.

The engine of the U-Haul truck sprang to life with a growl, the gearshift slipping from park into reverse. With that, the truck began to back into the barn, where the four remaining terrorists were gathering up more furniture. Then Samantha tweaked her nose, causing the timing device to do its job hours ahead of schedule.

There was a tremendous roar and the barn exploded in a fireball, sending out a heatwave, followed by a shrapnel storm of wood splinters, glass shards, engine parts, nails and ball bearings. Everything that struck Samantha’s protective shield ricocheted away, emitting sparks, like bullets glancing off the surface of an iron wall. In the distance a great plume of grey smoke billowed into the sky. Scraps of smouldering tire rubber, riding on air currents, finally fluttered to the ground.

Deeming it safe to stand up, Troy, Jessica and Beatrice stared in astonishment at a scene of total devastation. The house, barn and outbuildings were no longer, the surrounding grass scorched black for hundreds of feet around. The father and his three offspring had been vaporized.

Jessica blew a long breath. “Holy cow—that was one hell of a blast. Can you imagine the casualties if that had gone off in Washington?”

Beatrice nodded. "It wouldn't have been as great as 9 11, but it would have been one for the record books." Then she hustled over to Samantha, helping the girl to her feet. "Sweetie, you saved this nation a lot of grief."

Troy hit the speed dial on his cell.

Byron was quick to pick up. "Well, is it done?"

"Oh yes—with flying colours." Troy couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm surprised you didn't feel the aftershock."

"Not a thing. You know this place. It's stronger than Fort Knox."

"Do you still have your eyes on the mother?"

"She's already some forty miles from your location and pushing the metal to the pedal. There's no doubt that D.C. is her destination. I'm sending a chopper in to pick you guys up. Once she gets to where she's going, you can pay her a little visit."

"We'll look forward to it."

They walked into a Starbucks, where the mother was seated at a table next to a window, giving her a view of Pennsylvania Avenue. There was a blueberry muffin and a large Styrofoam cup of Frappuccino in front of her. A look of irritation etched her attractive face as she spoke urgently into her smartphone.

"Bill, are you and the kids on the way? Where in the heck are you? This is the fifth time I've called. Pick up, for God sakes."

Troy leaned on the table, startling her. "Hell doesn't have any cell towers, Claudia. Because that's where Billy boy and your wretched children are."

The woman scowled. "Who in the fuck are you?" Then she looked at the others. "And who in the fuck are they?"

"We're your worst nightmare, baby."

"I'm not your 'baby'." A nervous tic began to pull at the right corner of Claudia's mouth. "And what do you mean my husband and children are in Hell?"

"Premature detonations can be a bitch."

The woman stood from her chair so suddenly she nearly toppled it over. "What...what...what are you saying?"

"I'm saying you'd need a magnifying glass to find pieces of your family."

As Claudia's hand darted for her purse, Samantha twitched her nose, freezing the woman in place. She stood there like a statue, her mouth opened in a silent curse. Smiling, Troy reached into her purse and pulled out a nine-millimetre Sig Sauer.

That's when the Starbucks manager hurried over, his brow furrowed in concern. "Is there a problem here? And what's with the gun? Maybe I'd better call the police."

Jessica patted the man's shoulder. "Relax. We are the police. This woman recently escaped from a mental asylum and somehow got her hands on this firearm. You're lucky we got here in time. There's no telling what could have happened."

"But...but why is she like that? She's not moving a muscle."

"She's prone to seizures. When they strike, she gets like this. We'll just escort her out of here and everything will be fine."

Troy grabbed Claudia under her right arm and Jessica did the same to her left. With that, they began to drag the woman towards the door.

Samantha poked the manager in the arm. "Hey, since we came to the rescue in the nick of time, I think I deserve a reward. Like one of your Candy Cane Whoopie Pies."

"Uh...yeah...I guess I can arrange that."

"Well, hurry it up."

Jason, one of Deep Six's mind readers, blew a weary breath and flung his arms in the air. "I give up! You have a blank for a brain, lady."

Claudia chuckled, jiggling her handcuffs against the desk anchor. "Ha, I can do that at will. We are so much superior to you Americans."

"We're not finished yet."

"Do what you must. I don't care."

Jason exited the interrogation room, slamming the door. He walked up to Troy and Jessica who were on the viewing side of the one-way glass. "The woman's a rock. I couldn't read her mind worth a shit."

Beatrice walked over, with her arm draped across Samantha's shoulders. "Let the two of us have a shot at her."

Jason huffed. "If I can't come up with anything, what do you expect to get?"

"We'll have volumes of knowledge in less than five minutes."

Snorting, the mind reader bowed and flourished a hand toward the door. “Go ahead, knock yourself out.”

As Beatrice and Samantha entered the room, Claudia broke out in a gale of laughter. “Well, look what we have here—they’re resorting to an old lady and a child.”

Samantha slipped onto the chair opposite the woman, folding her small hands on the table top. “Have you ever seen the Stephen King movie—*Firestarter*?”

Claudia spit on the floor. “I don’t watch your American rubbish movies.”

“That’s too bad. Well, compared to me, Charlie McGee was a girl scout.”

“You can do anything you want. Hours of bright lights, loud music and sleep deprivation won’t work with me. Neither will starvation or waterboarding.”

Samantha smiled. “I wasn’t thinking of anything so mundane. Let me try this.”

The girl wiggled her nose and Claudia’s right ear began to sizzle, its skin turning bright red. A small tendril of smoke rose into the air. The woman screamed in agony, struggling so hard against the handcuffs they tore some of her flesh away.

“You psycho little shit! How’d you do that?”

“I can do a whole lot more. So, how many other sleeper cells do you know about—names and locations.”

“Up your ass, girlie girl!”

“Talking about asses—let me try yours.”

Samantha tweaked her nose and Claudia began to scream, bouncing up and down on her butt.

“How’s that for a fiery case of haemorrhoids? Do you need some Preparation H?”

“Stop it, stop it!”

“How many sleeper cells do you know about—names and locations?”

“Screw you!”

Samantha gave another nose tweak and the woman began to howl, struggling so hard against the agony she nearly tipped the chair over.

“I’m waiting. As a fair warning, I’m going for your eyeballs next.”

“Okay, okay, okay! There’s a sleeper cell in Alexandria, Virginia, and another in New York City, and another just outside of Philadelphia, and another in Los Angeles, and another in....”

Beatrice laughed and held up a hand. “Whoa, whoa, whoa—I have to get a recording machine in here. You better cool her butt off, Sam.”

“Only a little bit. I want to keep reminding her until she’s provided us with everything.

The Director rubbed his hands together, smiling from ear to ear. “What a coup! Are SWAT teams broke up a grand total of twenty-six sleeper cells—eleven Iranian, six North Korean, five ISIS, and four Hezbollah. We struck so fast they didn’t know what hit them. It’s a surprise how all of these cells kept in contact with one another, regardless of their country of origin.”

Beatrice harrumphed. “As the old saying goes—The ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’. They all want to destroy this country. I hate to say it, but we only took care of a fraction of the cells out there. They’re probably oodles more, flying under the radar.”

The Director nodded with agreement. “I’ve put Byron and the other clairvoyants to work on that. They’re at it as we speak.” The man clapped his hands together. “I’ve been thinking about your next mission. Would you all like to hear about it?”

“Yeah sure,” said Troy. “But before we go on another assignment the four of us would like two weeks of uninterrupted R&R, back in Key West.”

The Director made a face. “Oh? Do you think the problems of this country will wait for you?”

“You have six other op teams out there. They can cover any emergencies that may arise.”

“But you’re the best.”

“Stroking our egos won’t get you anywhere. So, do we have those two weeks?”

“They’re yours. Now, do you want to hear about the mission I’ve been giving some serious thought to?”

“Go ahead. We’re all ears.”

“How about if Deep Six sneaks the four of you into North Korea, so you can eliminate Kim Jong un? But it can’t be too obvious. We don’t want any fingers being pointing back to this country. Maybe Samantha can create some kind of natural disaster that just happens to kill Kim. You know—like an earthquake or a volcanic eruption or a devastating tidal wave.”

Jessica’s eyes grew wide. “That mission would be nothing short of suicide.”

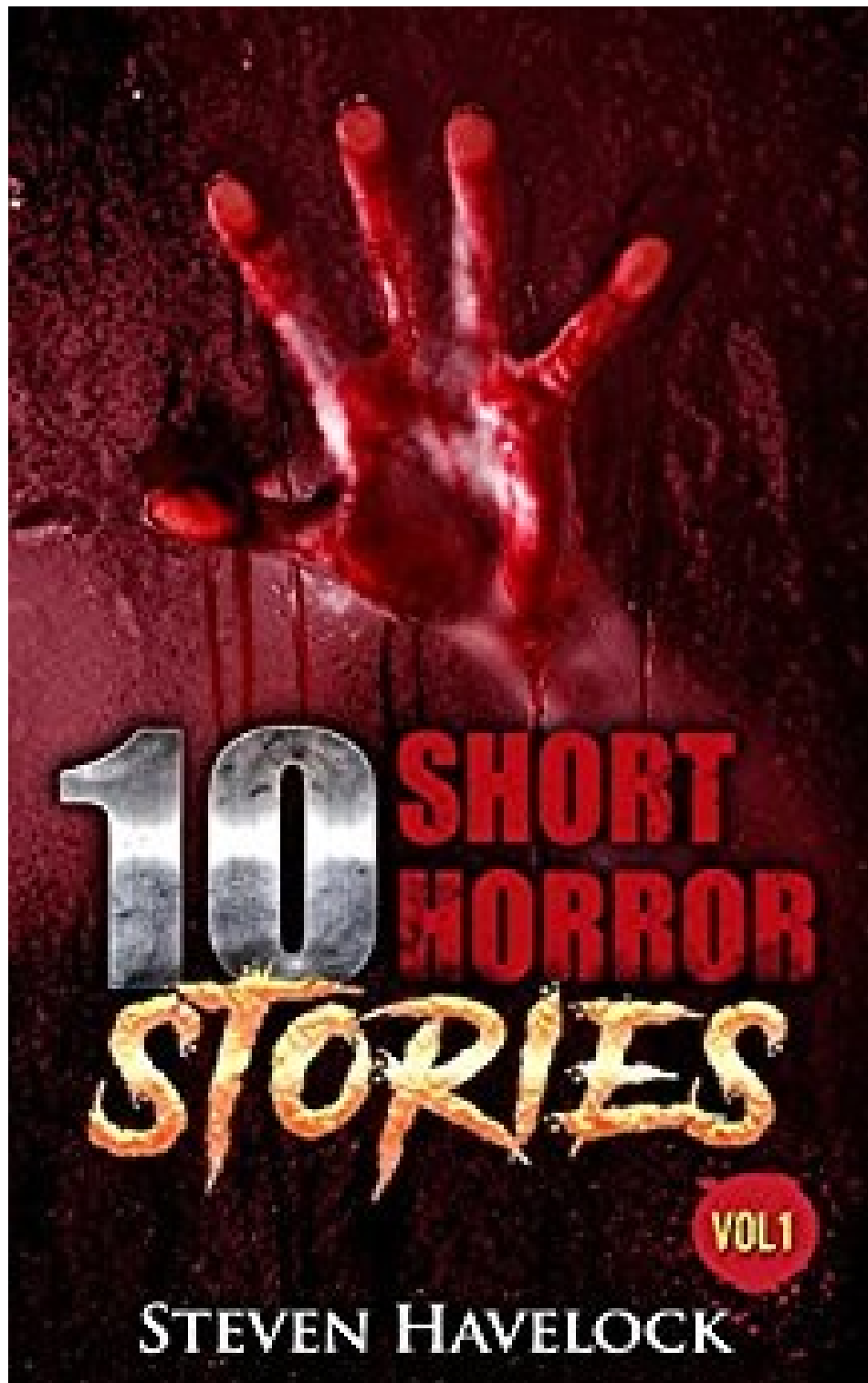
“Naw. The four of you can handle anything.”

Groaning, Troy whirled and headed for the door. “Not this guy. I’m looking forward to getting old, so I can play bingo and shuffleboard.”

The others nodded in agreement and followed in his wake.

Just as she was exiting, Samantha turned with a smile. “I’ll send you a postcard from sunny Florida, Mister Director.”

THE END



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HELL IS SQUARE by Alex S Johnson

Hell is square. I couldn't prove it to you intellectually, but if you sat where I do, you would understand.

I have learned other things in this place, such as: diagonals leak poison if you cross them at the wrong juncture, or move in the wrong direction when the forces of good and pain free are flowing the opposite way.

Would kill for some softness, but the corners hold firm, and there are always four. Until and unless there are five, or six.

Or a thousand.

One of my jobs, my duties, while working for the former government, was convincing the dissidents they were crazy. I was very good at my job. By the time they emerged blinking into the sunlight from a lab I ran, they wouldn't hurt a fly. I saw a few with my own eyes walk into heavy traffic, smeared across lanes on the spot. I'd trained them to deny the evidence of their senses, to distrust their instincts, to defy what every cell in their body screamed at them. The drivers couldn't understand what they'd done: "He looked like a zombie. I honked my horn and yelled at him to stop, but it was too late. He just wouldn't slow down."

Of course not.

We were very understanding. And experts at surgically plucking those memories, making those smears evaporate on contact, making these incidents vanish from the universal retina.

Like I said, I was very good at my job. But then, so were most operatives in the former government. And why it took years and years of patient, careful investigation to penetrate the operations we had set up. Layer upon layer of deniability was built into the platform. We felt like gods, kings, rulers. Some of us got cocky, though, which is ultimately what crashed the system.

I discovered too late how essential humility is to maintaining true power. You cannot pretend you are better than they are—any of them; demos—the people. You must remember at all times how vulnerable you are, and build some of that attitude into the platform. Otherwise, you wind up like me—and a few others I'm only aware of from their death noises.

When another ex-operative expires, they hold the current square still. No changes, nothing positive or negative. They may even introduce some music, fill the square with sweet smells, some of my favourite memories splashed on the walls, so vivid I relive them, melt into them, and they're even better than they were in the first place. The brain edits so much, always in retrospect, a fact we used to our advantage when breaking down the dissidents.

When it first happened, I was so relieved for even the briefest reprieve from psychological torture, I allowed the calm to wash over me. I even began to hope. Yes, I know how foolish it may sound, but I even began to think about what might come after prison. Although my sentence was for life, to be served in a virtual module, I don't think I ever fully believed the new government would last. I and my cohorts were convinced up until the end that ours was

the superior approach. Going back to the theme of power and hubris for a moment, the fact that we lasted so long reinforced the collective delusion that everything we did was right—even the things we knew in our hearts were clearly wrong. After all, for those of us down in the trenches with the bio soft plugs, our fingers on the controls, it was war: battle after battle. Warriors don't hesitate, have no qualms about severing heads, crushing hearts, breaking families.

Killing minds.

I was a warrior, doing what he was instructed and doing it well. Or so I thought. But a true warrior doesn't abandon his post for a moment, even if the post only exists as a simulacrum in his head. Or, in the case of the operatives, a desperate stand. We gripped our truth, our winning truth, with white knuckles. And as we passed through the memory portals, spent time with families long abandoned, played with our kids, inhaled ancient odours of sandlots and fresh cut grass and the mysteries of insects and the arcane knowledge certain flowers hold, some part of us warned us to resist. To fight it. To not let go.

Which is precisely where we failed, and why. Because you cannot fool nature indefinitely. You can convince a man that up is down and black is white, but beyond and behind everything exists a hope that cannot be killed. Because it doesn't belong to anyone, cannot be contained, and doesn't only live in the body, or even the mind. It's something other.

I was called back from my peaceful drift into memory by the sounds they made when they expired. At first the operators piped these sounds in beneath the surface of a lawn or hedge, chess board, virtual stamp collection, or inside a favourite song. A hitch in the heart's rhythm. A gasp, a gurgle. The death rattle.

The death rattle is a distinctive, unforgettable, horrible noise we've nearly forgotten in our anesthetized times, but this literal last breath suddenly surmounts all else. It's our sole stimulus. They gradually fade the images and the other sounds and pump the one signal.

Suddenly, once more, the lesson is clear: keep to your station. Do not indulge. Do not let yourself hope.

Which is, of course, an impossibility.

The opposition won because they hoped, but they will lose again to the likes of us. And I'll tell you why. They've taken our methods—the black spaces, the geometric mind fucking, the loaded die game, the learned helplessness game—and used them against us. This is not the way. The fact that they're still torturing people to punish them for having fought for the opposite side shows they will not last. Yet this insane dance continues.

The squares go from left to right, except when they go from right to left.

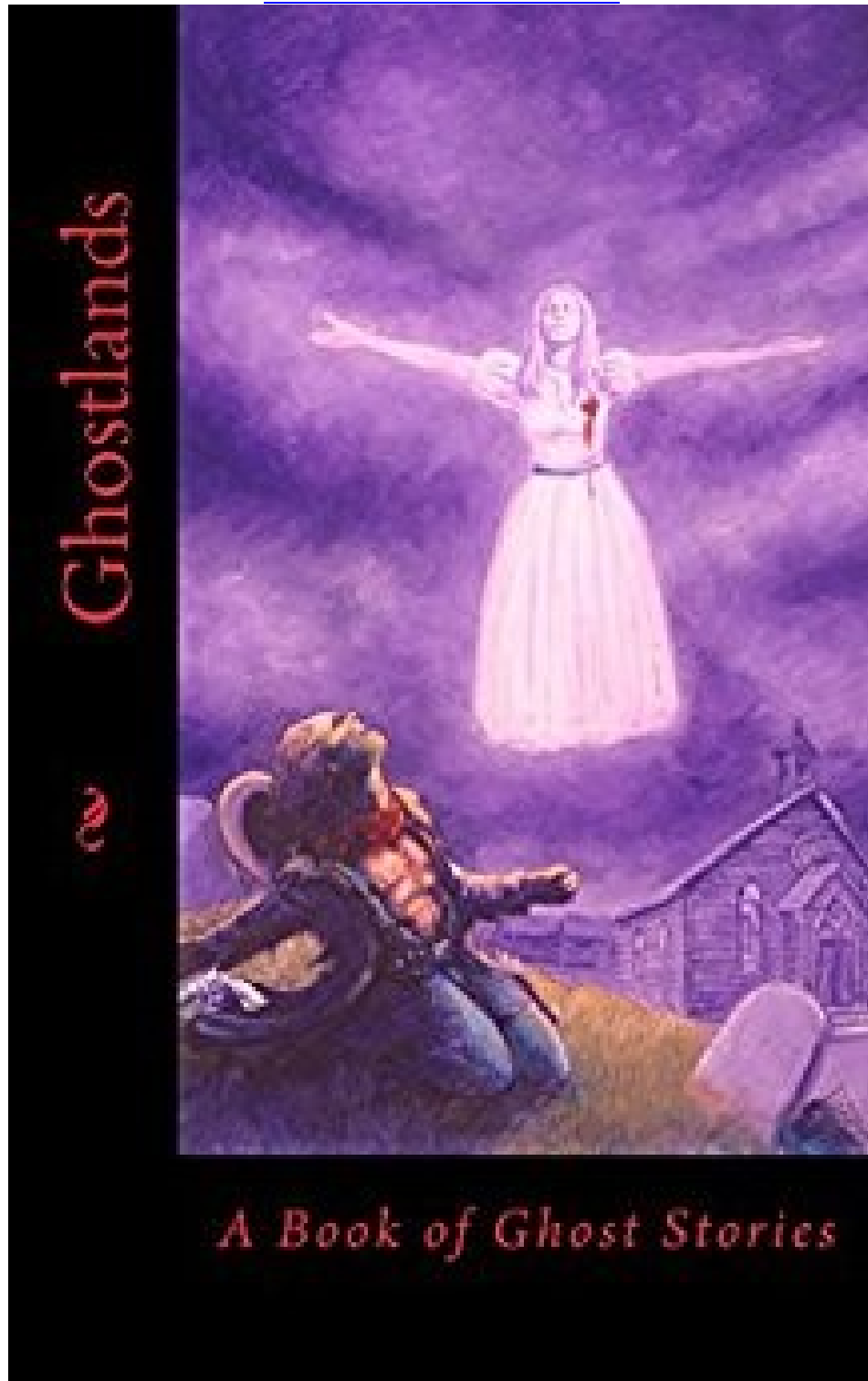
The squares are free to travel diagonally, but diagonals leak, and when they do, the poison settles on every nerve end like a tiny, biting insect. I never knew pain until I realized that the poison, after all, did not exist. That it was I who was manufacturing it, with my own faculties, and could do so indefinitely. And that is only one of thousands upon thousands of lessons they have subjected me to.

Liquid assumes the shape of the vessel that contains it. So does consciousness.

Hell is square, and many other shapes besides.

THE END

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THE SUCCUBUS AND THE KNIGHT by Julie Dollar

Wynne walked into the seedy tavern. It was the only place in the bustling town that had a room available. He crossed over to a dark corner and found a table. His plate armour weighed heavily on his shoulders because he had been sweltering in the heat. He grabbed a seat and tried to hide from the seedier patrons in the bar. As he began staring in the general direction of a tall skinny man wearing a dark brown cloak, a young woman, with long wavy red hair, came over to his table.

She leaned forward, and seductively whispered in his ear, “Sir, would you like company tonight? Somebody to warm your bed?”

Wynne glared at her. “Leave me, wench.” He pushed her aside with his armoured hand, causing her to stumble. He continued to stare intensely at the man in the brown cloak.

“You must be one of those that like boys,” she said. “We’re not that kind of establishment, sir. We have standards.” The red-haired wench turned and left Wynne alone to sit in the dark corner by himself. She went over to an older woman who appeared to be a serving girl.

The older woman came over. “Can I serve you something, milord? Ale and a piece of pork, perhaps?”

Wynne glared up at her. “Yes, that will be fine.” Then he resumed staring at the man.

The older woman left Wynne’s table. The man in the dark brown cloak whispered something to a very pretty young woman. The young woman turned so he could untie her bodice. Her bodice dropped to the floor and the man pulled her blouse down so both her breasts were bare. The woman then kneeled down and untied the man’s breeches. Wynne’s stare intensified as the man in the brown cloak and the woman carried out their lewd act in the tavern.

The tavern’s patrons turned to watch the display. Just as the man in the brown cloak was about to climax, Wynne got up from his dark corner. He walked over to the couple having oral sex. His armour clanked as he drew his sword.

Wynne towered over them both and said, “Brannon Awbry, by the church of Palimore and the divine knights, you have been decreed a traitor. Treason is punishable by death.”

Wynne swung his heavy sword with two hands and cleaved Brannon Awbry’s head clear off his shoulders. The young woman was doused with blood and she screamed out in horror. Awbry’s head rolled across the floor and hit the corner leg of a nearby table. The tavern erupted in chaos. Patrons cried out and shouted as they ran for the exit. Wynne stood there, blood dripping off his sword, his armour smeared in red.

Though it’s clear that this man has broken his vow of chastity, I have no knowledge of what traitorous act he had committed. I didn’t know Brannon Awbry, but he was no different from any other fallen knight that I have put to the sword.

The church was powerful in Tritania. The swift execution of justice carried out by Templar knights rarely raised any action from the city guards.

Wynne walked up the stairs of the tavern. He wanted to rest in his room for the evening.

Wynne arrived at the church and met with Father Elfred. Father Elfred was an older man and had known Wynne his whole life. The priest knew him better than anyone.

“Palimore’s blessings to you, Wynne,” Father Elfred said.

“Father Elfred, good to see that you are in fine health,” said Wynne, pointing at the Father’s stomach.

“Yes, too many sugar cakes, I’m afraid.” Father Elfred smiled and clasped Wynne’s shoulder. “I’m glad to see you made it back.”

“Yes, father, justice has been done.”

“May Palimore’s blessing be with you, son. I knew you’d be up to the task. That is why I sent you.”

Wynne looked away from Father Elfred.

“Wynne, there is a matter that we need to discuss.”

Wynne turned to face him. “Yes, Father Elfred?”

“The church wants you to take on a squire. I know—”

“Father, we’ve talked about this,” Wynne said as he clenched his armoured fist. “Having a traveling companion, squire, butler, or bard is out of the question. The road is far too dangerous, and I cannot be responsible for some boy’s safety.”

“You wouldn’t have to be responsible for a boy. Cade is perfectly capable of—”

“Cade, Cade Bryse?”

“Yes, Cade is—”

Wynne’s armour clanked as he paced up and down. “I can’t believe that you would even think that I would take Cade on as squire. The man has no honour.”

“Wynne, he’s very capable with a sword. He’s sharp witted—”

“He’s a miscreant,” Wynne shouted.

“Wynne, be still ... hear me out,” Father Elfred said. “Cade is a young man, anxious to experience life. He needs a mentor, someone strong to guide him.”

“Has he even taken the vows?” said Wynne.

“No, he hasn’t of yet. But with your guidance and strong character as an example I’m sure that he’ll make the right choice. Wynne, I promised his father, Dale, that I would do what I could to protect Cade and raise him with honour. But I can’t make him take a vow, if it’s not in his heart to do so.”

Wynne clenched his sword. Dale was just another fallen knight with another broken vow. “I respectfully decline.”

“Wynne, you don’t have a choice in the matter. The church has already decided. You are to take Cade on as a squire.”

Cade was a tall, young blond man, slender, muscular, and handsome in the face. He walked the streets of Hallswel at dusk trying to find provisions needed for their journey. From what he was told, they would be going to the Shadow Caves, several days travel to the south. He would need to get provisions for two weeks for three people. Though it was only going to be Wynne and him initially, they were expecting to meet a third person on the way.

Rain started to come down as Cade grabbed the last of his provisions. He ducked into a building to get out of the rain. When he entered the establishment, he saw several half naked women smiling at him.

One of the women said, “Hey Cade, looking for a friend tonight?”

Cade blushed and said, “You know I miss all you lovely ladies, but I have important business to attend to and I don’t have—”

“I know what you’re trying to do, Cade. Okay, I’ll only charge half price,” the woman said.

Cade thought for a second, “Deal.”

Cade went upstairs with the young woman. Gwen was pretty with long brown hair and a plump round figure. Cade often thought of Gwen when he was alone in the abbey at night in his bed, but he also thought of Martha and Nia and some of the women in the brothel. Still, Gwen held a special place in his heart. As much as he liked her, he often got the feeling that Gwen had deeper feelings for him.

Cade and Gwynn entered the dark room and closed the door behind them. They began to kiss one another and ripped off each other’s clothes. Cade pulled the strings from her bodice, pulled off her blouse, and ran his hands along her spine. Gwen roughly kissed Cade and bit his lip.

Cade tasted a tiny bit of blood and put his finger to his lip. “You’re being bad,” he said. “I’m going to have to punish you.” He pulled up Gwen’s long skirt and spanked her sharply on her bottom.

“Ooh, I am being bad. You’re going to have to punish me some more.” Gwen stepped out of her skirt completely, naked, and pounced on Cade. Cade grabbed her and began to kiss her

softly. He undid his trousers and gently placed her on the bed. He entered her, and she cried out with a slight shriek as he thrust himself into her.

A loud thud came from the door as Wynne entered the room. “Boy, what are you doing?” he said coldly through clenched teeth. “You were supposed to be getting provisions.”

“Ah, Wynne, I’m kind of busy here,” Cade said as he looked up.

Wynne clanked over to Cade and cracked him in the jaw with an armoured backhand.

Cade flew off the bed.

“Cade!” Gwen cried out.

Cade covered his face with his hand as blood trickled down his forehead. “Oh god, I’m bleeding.”

“Get the provisions, Cade,” ordered Wynne, “then come back to the abbey.”

Cade and Wynne travelled on for several hours. Cade’s face was swollen and blackened where Wynne had struck him. He didn’t understand why his new master had beaten him so brutally. Why did this man hate him so much?

As they travelled along the road, tall trees and heavy undergrowth lined the side of the road. The further down the road, the denser the vegetation got until they were in a dark forest. The road was still passable, but tall trees towered above them.

Cade heard a soft rustle in the underbrush. In a split second an arrow caught Wynne in the leg. Two men with short stout swords came out of nowhere and struck Wynne’s horse. The blow took Wynne and his horse down. Wynne lay trapped. He could not get to his sword and his legs were pinned.

Cade quickly dismounted his horse, his long sword in hand. In a flash he descended on one of the bandits and took the bandit down with a quick thrust to the gut. He leaped over to the other bandit and sliced him in the face. The bandit struck at him, but Cade parried the blow. Cade leapt back with catlike reflexes and thrust his sword into the bandit’s neck. The bandit went down with a thud as blood gushed from his wound.

Cade walked over to where Wynne lay helpless on the ground. Struggling, he lifted the horse up slightly, so Wynne could free his pinned legs.

Wynne grimaced as he pulled himself out from under the horse. He realized Cade had just saved his life. He couldn’t believe this skinny young squire had actually taken down two very formidable foes. He couldn’t help but feel a small pang of guilt as he looked at Cade’s face and his swollen, blackened eye.

Cade pulled Wynne over to a tree. He leaned down and looked at the arrow. It was still sticking in Wynne’s leg in the joint of his plated armour. He started to undo the straps that

held Wynne's armour in place and helped him slide out of his leg plates. He pulled out his dagger and cut the clothing around the arrow in Wynne's leg.

"This is going to hurt," Cade said.

He handed Wynne a wine skin. He gently sliced the flesh around the arrow.

Wynne screamed out in anguish as Cade continued to cut.

Cade put a hard piece of leather between Wynne's teeth. "Put this between your teeth. We don't want you biting your tongue off."

Cade quickly yanked the arrow out of Wynne's leg. Wynne bit down hard on the leather. Pain raced up his leg. He felt nauseous from the agonizing pain he was feeling.

On the wound Cade put a special salve that Father Elfred had given him, finished dressing Wynne's leg, then began to set up camp. He said nothing to Wynne as he continued his tasks. He started a small fire, gathered some wood, and laid out two bedrolls.

He helped Wynne out of his armour and helped him to his bed. He pulled out some salted fish, hard bread, and a skin of water, and handed it to Wynne. Wynne ate the rations in silence.

Cade glanced back at Wynne and began humming a sultry tune. Wynne recognized the melody. It was a song that he'd once heard from a bard in a tavern. It was a song of a forbidden love that ended with the lovers dying in each other's arms after committing suicide. He recalled that the lovers committed suicide because their circumstances prevented them from being together. Wynne noted that Cade seemed to have a very soothing voice. He looked into Cade's piercing green eyes and then turned away.

Cade eased out of his leather armour and continued humming the tune. Wynne noticed the hard muscles in Cade's arms and the rough callouses on his hands. His leg was stinging with pain but somehow, he felt a calm comfort as he watched Cade undress, and the pain didn't seem so bad. Wynne laid back in his bedroll.

Cade eased beside Wynne and brushed his brow with his hand. "You rest, Wynne. I'll keep watch and protect you."

Wynne drifted off to sleep.

In a dark secluded cave, a young woman with golden blond hair stood chained naked to a dark pillar. A dark winged beast stood over her with an ornate silver dagger. The winged beast plunged the dagger into her flesh and sliced her throat. The woman cried out in agony as a silver bowl on the floor filled with blood.

Cade watered and saddled the horse. He packed up the camp and secured their supplies. Wynne donned his armour except for the piece of plate armour that would cover his wounded leg. He mounted their only steed with Cade's help. Cade then pulled himself onto the horse. They travelled for half a day through the forest before they made it through.

The main road widened. They came upon several wagons on the road. The strangers in the wagon paid the knight and squire no mind. Wynne and Cade continued on their journey until they came upon a small village. Wynne felt sharp pains in his leg and he was starting to feel feverish. The horse was tired, carrying the weight of the two knights. If they were going to make it to their destination, they were going to need to get another horse. Wynne needed medical attention and the horse needed to rest and be watered.

They rode up to a stable. They heard grunts coming from a group of men behind one of the stable's stalls. The knight and squire moved to the stall to look for a stable hand that could help them.

"Hello?" Cade called out. They turned the corner and saw two men and a woman naked in the stable. A large fat man stood over the ragged looking woman. They ignored Cade as they continued their fun. The ragged woman looked at Cade pleadingly as tears ran down her face.

Wynne turned the corner and saw the same scene. He drew his sword and called out, "Get off that woman, vile animals."

The large fat man scrambled for his dagger. The older man stopped what he was doing and stood in silence.

The fat man said, "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do? She's mine. I keep her and feed her. I can do as I please."

"No honourable man forces his wife to bed another man."

The fat man laughed, "Ha! Who said she was my wife?"

"Slavery is unlawful in the realm."

The large man moved toward the knight with his dagger. Wynne, without thought, struck him to the ground with a heavy blow from his sword.

The old man held up his hands and said, "I don't want any trouble." Wynne glared at him as the old man reached towards a coin bag on the ground. "I ... ah ... I just need to get my money back, is all." Wynne continued to stare as the old man grabbed the coin purse and a pair of pants and slipped out of the stable.

The woman scrambled for her clothes and covered herself. Wynne held out his hand to help her to her feet. She stared into his cold steel and then quickly turned away.

"Thank you, milord. I don't know how to repay you."

"What is your name?" Wynne said.

“My name is Llio.”

As she was speaking, Wynne felt faint. Sweat was pouring out of him. His temperature was heating up. His vision blurred and suddenly the world went dark.

Llio had long dark hair. She was small framed and frail. Llio tended to Wynne’s wounded leg. She was good with herbs, salves and the healing arts. Her mother had been a healer and had passed down the knowledge to her. After her mother died she was sold into slavery by her older brother. The stable man had brought her to his stables to care for his horses and animals, but he also used her for his own pleasures, and would even sell her to other men in the village. Slavery was unlawful in the realm but in remote villages, little was done to stop it.

Wynne’s fever broke, and he saw Llio standing over him. “What happened?” he said.

“You had an infection from the wound in your leg,” Llio said. She then turned away to avoid eye contact.

Wynne saw that his leg had been wrapped in bandages and he smelled the scent of fresh herbs. He sat up, looked at Llio, and grabbed her arm gently. “Thank you, Llio. I don’t know how I can repay you. Ask Cade to give you some coin for our lodging and your healing salves.”

Llio spoke in a quiet voice, “No, it’s not needed, milord.”

Wynne smiled warmly at her then lay back down and drifted off to sleep.

Clanking armour woke Wynne up. He saw Cade polishing his Templar knight’s plate mail.

“Rise and shine, sleepy head,” Cade said. “Llio says that your wound is pretty much healed up. We should be off soon to meet the scout informant.”

“How many days have we been here?” Wynne asked groggily.

“Three days,” Cade said.

“Ugh, we need to get moving.” Wynne got out of the bed. “Cade, help me with my armour.” Cade went over to the plate mail and started to help Wynne put it on.

Llio entered the room. “Milord, you mustn’t. The stitching in your leg will tear. You need rest, please.” Tears began to well up in her eyes.

Wynne was caught off guard.

“Wynne is a tough old bird, Llio. Do not worry, he’ll be fine,” Cade said.

“Llio, I thank you for your healing hands and generous hospitality, but we must be leaving.” Wynne looked at her squarely in the eyes. “You understand?”

“Yes, milord,” Llio said, staring down.

Wynne turned and continued donning his armour with Cade’s help.

Llio looked up with a determined look. “I’ll go with you,” she said.

“Llio, it would be too dangerous,” Wynne said.

“No, I must go. If your stitches come undone, or if your wound festers, I can heal you. You must take me. I . . . I can’t stay here.” Tears began to well up again.

Wynne started to protest, then Cade pulled him to the side. “Wynne, let her come with us. If she stays here in this wretched village, what would become of her? Besides, she’s a talented healer, we may need her help.”

Wynne thought for a moment, then looked at Llio. “You may come with us.”

Wynne, Llio, and Cade saddled three horses, restocked on provisions, and set out to the Shadow Caverns to the south. They travelled most of the day down a long hilly road. They could see mountains in the distance.

As they set up camp that night, Cade found kindling to start a fire and Llio skinned and dressed a rabbit that Cade had shot earlier in the day with his bow. She hummed a soft tune while she worked. After she was done she roasted the rabbit over the open flame. Wynne began salivating. He couldn’t take the delicious smell any longer. He pulled off a small piece of the cooked rabbit, gobbled it down quickly, and said, “Llio, this is delicious. What did you do to make it so tasty?”

Llio said, “I used some herbs that I had with me and some that I found along the trail today.” She smiled at Wynne. She was very happy that she had managed to please Wynne. She wanted nothing more than to stay with him.

Cade then grabbed some of the rabbit and ate. “Llio, you better get some before we eat it all.” Llio grabbed a smaller piece and then ate some dried fruit with hers. She offered some of the candied fruit to Cade and Wynn. They both graciously accepted.

“This is the best meal we ever ate on the road,” Cade said.

“This may be the best rabbit I’ve ever had,” Wynne said.

Llio smiled at Wynne, then looked down shyly. “I’m glad that you both enjoyed it.”

Wynne and Cade both set out their bedrolls while Llio cleaned up the camp. After she was done, she set out her bedroll close to Wynne’s. She couldn’t help it. She wanted to be near him.

Cade took the first watch.

Wynne said, "Cade, wake me in a few hours. Then I'll keep watch." Cade moved closer to the road, so he could spot any travellers making their way down the path.

Wynne quickly drifted off to sleep. Llio could hear him breathing nearby. She grew restless and had trouble sleeping. She thought of how Wynne had saved her from her former slave master. Then she thought of Wynne's broad shoulders and strong hands. She imagined what it would be like to have him touch her, caress her, and place his soft sweet lips on hers. She shifted around restlessly in her bedroll for most of the evening till sleep finally came.

The next morning, they packed up camp and travelled for most of the morning. They were coming closer to their destination. Up ahead, they could see an abandoned outpost, a ramshackle small wooden building with a large black stallion saddled and tied outside.

As they rode closer, the black horse whinnied, and a tall muscular, blond woman emerged from the cottage. She wore studded leather armour and carried a great sword on her back. She waved at them.

Wynne dismounted from his horse. "You must be Briallen, the guide that was going to take us to the Shadow Caves?"

Cade smiled, "This is the scout? She's one handsome wilderness guide."

Briallen, smiled at them both then gave a formal curtsy. "Milords, I am Briallen. I am at your command and service. Anything, that you need, just ask."

"Anything we need, huh? I like the sound of that," Cade said with grin.

The four of them camped for the night in the small wooden cottage. Wynne looked at Llio. She seemed so helpless. He knew if she was going to survive this journey, she would need to learn self-defence with a sword.

"Llio, have you ever used a sword?" he asked.

"No, milord," Llio said, looking down shyly.

"Come here and let me show you," Wynne said as he handed her a short sword.

Llio went over to Wynne and grabbed it out of his hand.

"Now swing. Let me see your form," he said.

Llio swung the sword clumsily. It slipped from her fingers, dropping to the floor.

"No, like this," Wynne said, picking up the sword. "You grab the hilt firmly and slice. Then you jab at your opponent, like so," he said, demonstrating a sword thrust. "Now you try."

Llio grabbed the hilt with a firm grip. She mimicked what Wynne had demonstrated.

“Good, good keep practicing, Llio. Learning to swing a sword may just save your life one day.”

Llio practiced for the rest of the evening until she grew tired and settled into her bedroll. Her thoughts began to wander. Perhaps Wynne really did care for her. She dreamt that maybe one day he would even grow to love her.

In the morning, when they set out, their path ascended uphill and their pace grew slower as the terrain began to switch from grassy land to rocky hills. As they approached the large mountains, they came upon a cliff wall of granite and rock.

In the distance they could hear the soft sweet sound of a woman singing. Cade dismounted from his horse. “What is that lovely sound?” he said. He started walking towards the direction of the voice.

“Cade, stop,” Wynne said, dismounting. Briallen also dismounted.

Cade continued up the path to where the sound was coming from. He paused and said, “That sound is so beautiful.” He continued climbing up the path but at a quicker pace. Wynne struggled to keep up, but his armour kept him moving at a slower pace and he was not able to climb the rocky hill. Cade had a dream like stare in his eyes.

Out of one of the cliff’s crevices, flew a large bare breasted female with wings. She had large talon claws for hands and feet. Her face was feathery, with fangs.

“Harpy,” shouted Wynne.

“Oh, she’s so beautiful,” said Cade as he continued climbing closer to her.

The others were several feet away from Cade. The harpy swept down on him and grabbed him with her claws. Cade smiled as she flew with him up to the rocky outpost that was her nest.

On the ground, Wynne and Briallen started to climb up the rock face. Four more winged women came out of the rocky outcrop, swooping down on Wynne and Briallen.

One harpy managed to rake Wynne’s face with its talon clawed feet. He stumbled backwards as he drew his sword. Two other harpies swooped down on Briallen. She gripped the hilt of her enormous great sword and swung, cracking the hideous creature in the head. The harpy’s head split in half and blood splattered on Briallen as the beast fell to the ground. With an artful turn Briallen swung round to face the second harpy. She swung again and caught the harpy in the side. The harpy stumbled back, then flew up and swiped its claws at Briallen. Briallen dodged the harpy’s attack, and then swung her sword again, catching the harpy in throat. The harpy fell to the ground with a thud.

Wynne lay on the ground, wounded and bleeding. Llio dismounted her horse and grabbed her medicine bag. She helped him out of his armour and began applying medicine to his wounds.

“We have to get Cade away from those harpies. They’ll eat him alive,” Wynne said.

“You mustn’t,” said Llio. “Your wounds, milord.”

Wynne began to stand, but slumped to the ground in agonizing pain. Briallen swung her sword over her back and started to climb up the cliff. She looked back at the injured man and his friend. “Don’t worry, I’ll bring him back.”

Wynne grimaced, “I hope it’s not too late.”

Briallen climbed the rocky cliff face with ease. She scampered up to the top and entered into a dark cool dimly lit cavern, the harpy den. In the corner, Cade was lying on the ground, naked. Two harpies were standing over him. Small gashes lined his flesh where the harpies had been feeding on him. He had a blissful look on his face as he lay there silently.

Briallen drew her sword and charged the harpies. One of the harpies flew up and hovered above her while the other swiped at her with its talons. Briallen swung at it and sliced the claws right off its feet. The harpy screeched in agony. Briallen dodged the other harpy’s blows and swung her sword, cutting it in half. Blood was everywhere. The harpy in the air flew further back into the cave.

Briallen decided not to pursue. Cade was in dire need of medical attention. She grabbed him and swung him over her back. Walking out of the cavern, she threw her sword down to the ground below, and carefully scaled down the rock wall.

Cade suddenly snapped out of his dreamy state. He screamed in pain. Briallen held tight to the walls. “Hold still and stop screaming or we will both fall to our death,” Briallen said as her knuckles went white.

Cade, realizing the situation, groaned softly in pain. He stayed as still as he possibly could, allowing Briallen to carefully climb down.

They reached the safety of the ground. Briallen gently placed Cade next to Wynne. Llio began treating Cade’s wounds.

Wynne looked solemnly at Cade. “You okay, Cade?”

Cade groaned in agony. Wynne became distraught seeing Cade in so much pain. He felt like a failure. He was the knight protector; his duty was to protect his charges. His squire lay tortured and dying. He could not bear the shame.

Briallen cleaned the blood and flesh off her sword and armour. Wynne felt a pang of jealousy, realizing that she had succeeded where he had failed. She’d saved them from the foul harpies and had rescued Cade from his tortures. He hated her for that.

Also, there was something else that he did not like about Briallen: her swagger and her confidence. He'd never met a woman who had shown such confidence in her abilities. Most women that he knew stayed and worked in towns and small villages. They worked at mundane jobs, or raised children. He'd never seen a woman that could swing a sword, let alone slaughter horrible beasts as if only cutting through butter. There was something unsettling about Briallen.

Briallen stood up and said, "We'll need to set up camp, Llio."

"But the harpies?" Llio said.

"I don't think it's wise to move the injured. Do you?"

Llio looked down at Wynne and Cade. "No, we probably should not move them. But if the harpies come back...."

"I don't think the harpies will come back. But I'll keep watch and if they come back," Briallen said with a wink, gripping the hilt of her huge sword, "I'll take care of them."

How is she going to take all the watches and get sleep? Wynne thought. Then drowsiness came over him. The herbs that Llio gave him were starting to take affect and he started drifting out of consciousness.

Wynne awoke with a start, his face stinging as if it had been slapped.

Briallen stood above him. "Wake up, sir, we must be moving. Llio has informed me that you are well enough to travel."

"How long have we been here?" Wynne said.

"We've been here for three days," Llio said.

Wynne looked at Briallen, wondering if she had slept at all in those three days. She appeared as strong and confident as ever, no signs of fatigue on her face. She seemed eager to get moving.

Wynne pulled himself up. "Llio, help me with my armour."

Cade appeared ragged and pale. Barely being able to stand, he grabbed his sword and carefully put on his leather armour. Every movement brought a sharp feeling of pain.

Briallen brought the horses around. Llio packed and cleared the camp, then saddled and packed the horses.

Cade and Wynne gathered their weapons. Briallen helped Cade mount his horse. Cade groaned in agony.

Briallen then helped Wynne mount his horse. Wynne's wounds were mostly healed but he was still groggy from Llio's medicinal herbs.

The ragged band motioned their horses forward and began to travel down the road.

They travelled for two days. By the time they reached the Shadow Caverns, Cade was so fatigued that he needed help dismounting his horse. Wynne was also sore, and fatigued from his injuries and the travel. Llio looked as if she had not rested; dark circles had formed under her eyes. Only Briallen looked rested and battle ready. Wynne could not figure out why this woman, who had been traveling for several days without sleep, looked like she had been resting in a posh palace.

Briallen grabbed her great sword and gracefully dismounted her horse. "We will need to continue on foot from here," Briallen said.

Wynne and Llio slid from the horses and gathered up what they could before they left the horses watered and ready. Wynne looked around at his friends and Briallen. They looked at him waiting for his instructions.

"We've arrived at our destination, and I know that you have been wondering why the church of Palimore has set us on this treacherous journey."

"Why indeed?" Cade said softly.

"Lady Ariana of Kingsly has been kidnapped. Her captors have put up a ransom for her return. We are not here to oblige her captors. The church wants us to slay them, and bring Lady Ariana safely back to her family in Kingsly. Briallen, our guide, is to help us get into the caves without being detected so we can take our foes unaware."

"Llio, you will stay here and care for the horses." Wynne grabbed a short sword and handed it to Llio. "You may need this. Take care. We should be back within a day."

Wynne, Briallen, and Cade entered the dark cool caves. Cade lit a torch, so they could make their way down the dark passageways. Wynne took the lead, for several hours trudging deeper into the dark mildewed caves. The passage opened up into a cavern with a small pool of water in the centre. Stalactites hanging from the ceiling dripped water to the pool below.

Wynne drew his sword. His party followed as he stepped deeper into the open cavern. Out of the shadows a demonic creature appeared, dark with red eyes, fangs, and leathery wings. It had long claws like fingernails and long arms. The beast descended on them. The demon slashed at Wynne with its claws and knocked him down.

Cade dropped the torch and drew his sword. Briallen stood there smirking at the two men as they battled the demon. Cade moved forward, sword in hand. He was still in pain from his previous tormentors. He lifted his sword to strike down the demon but before he could land the blow, Briallen stood in front, blocking his strike with her great sword. Cade stumbled back, taken by surprise.

Wynne quickly got to his feet and stuck the demon with the point of his sword. The demon fell back but was not mortally wounded. The injured demon retreated down a passage, then disappeared. Wynne turned and saw Briallen raise her sword in the air, ready to strike.

“No!” Wynne cried out. Briallen’s sword came down with force and struck its target, sending Cade’s head flying across the cavern.

Wynne gripped the hilt of his sword and rushed Briallen, swinging his sword wildly at her. Briallen skilfully blocked every blow. Then Briallen struck at Wynne, pushing him back deeper into the cavern, until Wynne was on the ground, crushed into submission by Briallen’s forceful strikes. Briallen grinned, “Good night, sweetling.” Her sword came down hard on Wynne’s skull with the flat of the blade, knocking him unconscious.

Llio sat quietly, waiting for Wynne, Briallen and Cade to return. The horses began to whinny as if they were distressed by something. Llio got to her feet quickly with the short sword in hand. She looked around cautiously, but did not see anything. She sang quietly to the horses, hoping to calm them down. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shadowy figure moving toward her. Quickly, she turned to face it. It was a demonic creature with red eyes and fangs, and looked like it had been wounded.

“Wynne!” she cried out.

“Wynne is dead, and now I will feed on your flesh.”

The beast descended on Llio. She quickly stuck it with her small sword. The demon slashed her in the face and her side. She pulled the sword out of its belly and jabbed it again as the demon continued to rake her flesh.

The demon fell to the ground, bloodied. Llio walked over to the dying beast.

The demon looked at her and said, “Your friends are all dead, and you will soon die too, you pathetic girl.”

Fuelled by rage, Llio slit the demon’s throat, then stabbed it through the heart.

Llio stumbled to the horses. She realized she would not survive if she stayed. She did not know if the beast was telling the truth or deceiving her. But she felt that there was truth in his words and she made the decision to survive. She felt a pang of shame and guilt as she mounted the horse. Wynne... she thought, then she rode off down the trail.

Wynne woke up naked, chained to a black obsidian pillar, still in the Shadow Caves. The cavern was cold and dark. He felt vulnerable, hungry, and alone. He wondered how long he’d been chained up. The feeling of failure struck him. His squire was dead; he’d failed to save him. Llio was probably dead too, or captured by the bandits and Briallen. He was defeated. He knew he would probably die in this desolate cavern. Silently, he prayed to his god, Palimore. He prayed for the safety of his friend, Llio, and for a quick death.

A tall blond creature with dark wings came out of the shadows of one of the passageways. Wynne recognized the creature as Briallen. Briallen had transformed into a beautiful winged beast. She stood naked before him. Her large bare breasts heaved on her chest. She slowly approached Wynne.

“You are mine now, valiant knight. You are my slave and plaything. You will do as I command.” She leaned herself against Wynne. She bent down and ran her moist tongue up his neck and nibbled gently at his ear.

Wynne struggled. Tightly bound by his chains, there was little he could do to get away. He was prey to the succubus and she had her way with him.

Wynne woke up gagging. The taste of blood filled his mouth. Kneeling over him was Briallen. In her hand she had a silver bowl filled with blood. She’d pushed the bowl up to his lips.

“Drink this, valiant knight,” she said, “you need nourishment.”

Wynne gagged and spit the blood out. “Get away from me, you foul creature.”

Briallen grinned at him. “Very well, as you wish. I have already gotten what I needed. Your seed has already taken root and now the prophecy will be fulfilled.”

“What are talking about?” Wynne was weak and barely able to speak.

“The fruit of our passion will bear a child of darkness. He will unite my demon brethren, raise an army, and bring the realm to its knees.”

Wynne felt a wave of shame and remorse. He realized that because of his weakness a demon child would be unleashed onto the world. Innocent people were going to die because of his folly.

“Because you have served me well, I am going to set you free.”

Briallen was afraid that if she killed Wynne, her unborn child might hate her for it.

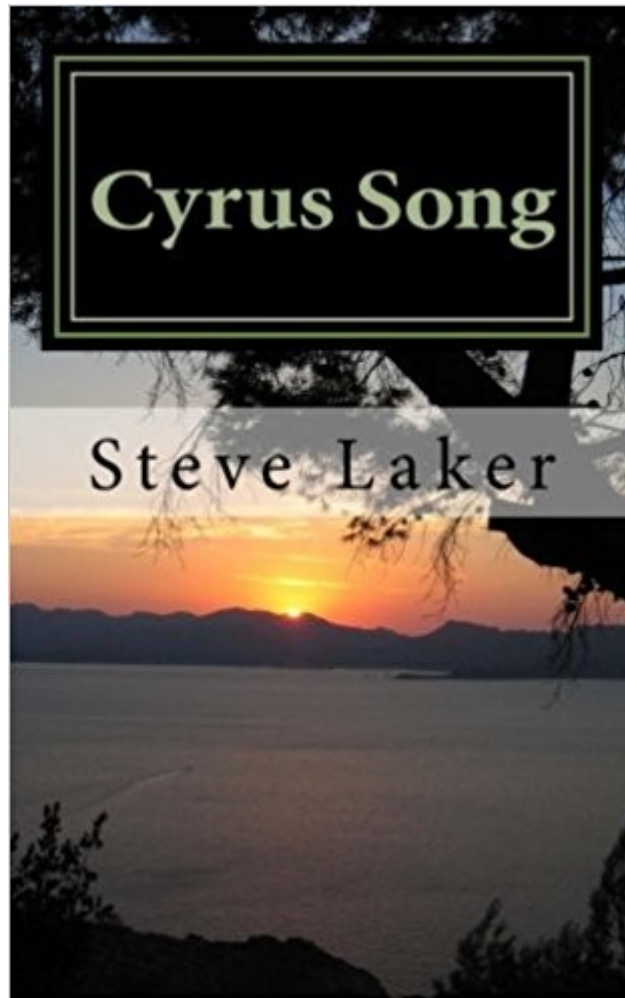
“Why me?” Wynne asked feebly.

Briallen smiled and pressed her soft lips to his. “The prophecy, my sweet; you were a chaste and valiant knight. I needed a human of virtue to fulfil the prophecy.”

Briallen undid his chains. Wynne slumped to the ground, naked, broken and defeated. Briallen spread her dark leathery wings and flew out of the cavern.

THE END

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CONFLICT OF WITCHES by GK Murphy

(5)

Saturday morning, the two friends stood before the huge door that led into the lobby of Kurt's Uncle Dom's country mansion. This gentleman was a farmer, often visiting auctions to sell his produce. This meant herds of grass fattened cows and sheep—but no pigs since those were harder to sell, as well as ugly and downright smelly. Dom couldn't tolerate them. Cows were stately, and sheep were affectionate and meek.

Harry turned to Kurt and said, "I thought he was expecting us, Kurt. We've knocked three times, plus this building is almost Gothic and freaks me out. I say we turn around and go back to town. I'll buy you a burger and shake."

Kurt said, "Yeah, I think that's a good idea. Let's get the hell away from this place. I'm getting the shits just standing here in the cold. I didn't realize that Uncle Dominic's place was so creepy and downright big. It's like a fucking castle disguised as a barn—like something a vampire would occupy."

Harry laughed, "I second that emotion. Come on, I'm getting hungry."

But then a voice boomed out from behind the boys, and they spun around.

A tall but stout gentleman stood there, in his hands two butchered rabbits. His clothes were stained and ragged, and the boys grimaced at the stink of body odour and other smells of the country.

He grinned at the boys like an old school ruffian and bullyboy.

Dom said, "Have you been waiting here long? I've been expecting you and so have my buddies inside. Those buggers refuse to answer any knock at the door. They're a bit shy, you see..." He walked past them, heading around the back, "It is probably best we go through this back door into the house and into my old kitchen. My good friend Andrew will have the broth cooking. All it needs is this meat...hence the presence of our friends, these two pesky rabbits. I've saved the local foxes and other vermin a job today by killing these two, yet I won't receive any credit for it."

The two rattled boys followed him around the back, keeping their mouths shut and saying nothing to the eccentric seventy-five-year-old. He was the older and wealthier brother of Kurt's deceased dad, who everyone knew served with the British Army abroad and paid the ultimate price. As they went, the noise of big steps in puddles of mud harmonized the trip, as Kurt's ageing uncle put to good use his thick rubber soled Wellington boots.

Dom asked, "Are you two scallywags feeling hungry this morning? I've prepared you a room to share, if that's all right...if you don't mind sharing, that is?" Then, he laughed and added in an off-key manner which unnerved Kurt and Harry, "I gather you have both seen each other's balls and cocks?"

The teens said nothing.

“Has the cat got your tongues?” Dom bleated.

Kurt was the first to react. “No, Uncle Dom, of course not...” he said, adding the lie, “your place is really nice, kind of homely...Believe me, we’re both happy to be here, and happy to make your acquaintance, sir!”

“Yeah,” Harry spluttered, “Your house is very big. I thought it would be smaller...more compact, less antique...”

Dom did not take offence. “Oh, it’s a bloody antique all right. I was thinking of a title for it. I finally settled on Dominic’s Cave, and it’s registered as so at the Post Office and banks. The poor postman has some journey up here, though. Still, he gets a good tip every Christmas. Anyway...” He waved his hand as they reached the back door of the mansion, gesturing them to follow him indoors, “Come in and meet the men, my best friends in the world. Friendship is important at every age and always will be. Regardless of what people might say, a good friend or buddy is twenty times better than any sister or brother!”

Kurt had to agree. “I totally see where you’re coming from, sir. Blood doesn’t always prove thicker than water.”

“And that is so dead fucking right, sonny!”

The kitchen was massive yet without decoration. It had grey, musty walls and stank of age. The centrepiece was the huge long dining table in the middle of the room, where three men sat. It was a horrid term but the first thing that came to mind was ‘inbreeding’.

One had a cleft lip, and another had humourless eyes and thick black eyebrows. These were the first thing you noticed about Dom’s friend Andrew.

“Is the broth stewing, Andrew?” Dominic enquired, casting the dead rabbits into a tin bucket by the stainless steel industrial sink. “Get this pair skinned and boiled, then be a good man and shred them of cooked flesh and add to the broth with the vegetables. I trust you did the vegetables, did you?”

Hunched in his scruffy duffel coat, Andrew shivered and stammered, “I’ll do it now, sir. Unfortunately, the vegetables slipped my mind. I’ll get straight to it now.”

Uncle Dominic said, “It would make a difference to the taste, Andrew.” It was sarcasm, of course, and Andrew winced as if he’d been slashed by a razor-sharp blade along his spine.

“You other two men,” Dom said, “can prepare the living room, stoke the fireplace and do a spot of dusting and sweeping the floor...we must give a fine example in honour of our two distinguished guests and put on a good show for both of them, especially my youthful nephew here!”

Harry felt a pang. It hurt to know this was all about Kurt. Of course, it had to be, didn’t it? They were family.

“Frank,” Dom said, gesturing to another man, “The boys will perform at their pinnacle once they’ve woken from a morning’s nap, so if you would, Frank...I’d be much happier if you

escort them upstairs to their quarters ...” The gentleman turned to scrutinize his two young guests, and added, “I trust your trip into the country has made you tired?”

Harry started, “Well, me, I’m fine, I just thought...” but stopped when Kurt nudged him in the ribs.

Kurt smiled, “I am feeling a bit bushed, as it happens. Yeah, a nap would be great right now.”

Dom looked at Harry. He said, “I take it you could do with a wee sleep as well?”

Harry said, “I’m absolutely knackered, sir...” and waited for the man’s serious expression to change. It never did. He turned to leave the kitchen.

Harry whispered to Kurt, “I haven’t offended him, have I?”

“He’s seventy-five, remember...give him his due. He’s had an illustrious life and seen many folks come and go, some bad, some good, some a bit weird probably...but overall, he’s a good old bloke just working his fields in order to earn a crust.”

Harry said, “You said that very succinctly, squire!”

The man Dom had called Frank gestured for the boys to follow him from the kitchen. Lumbering somewhat, he led them into a stark, grey lobby and towards a staircase which had no carpeting, just wooden boards. He motioned for the boys to follow him. It seemed like there were a thousand steps on this abomination of a staircase, and halfway Kurt had to pause to find his second breath.

He joked, “I love Uncle Dom already!”

They climbed the steps until they came to a door where they were shown inside by the tall, gawky, raven haired Frank, who let them in, and said nothing. Once they were in there, he slammed the door shut behind them. It seemed as if this was to seal their fate and doom them to perish in the most hideous manner in this mansion.

Two beds with grey sheets stood in squalid, tiny room. Standing side by side, they stared in disbelief at the unmade blankets on the beds before them, made from thick industrial canvas and deeply uncomfortable.

Lamely, Kurt said, “What do we do now?”

“I guess we sleep,” Harry suggested.

A heavy fusion of stink and sleeping gas penetrated the room through the ventilator system in the walls and high ceiling. Distraught and fearful, Harry and Kurt panicked and clutched their throats as they choked and spluttered. They tried the door, but it must have been locked from the outside.

Choking, both boys collapsed unconscious to the floor.

(6)

A couple of nights previously, Keith Healy, still acting the troubled teenager, proved that he still had a bee in his bonnet over not seeing his brother Jonny—or rather, spending more time with his older sibling—when he found himself loitering outside Nicholson Morgue. It was a fucking creepy spot, especially at night, in the middle of nowhere with just the huge graveyard, and bats in nearby trees making a cacophony.

Behind the morgue stood the hills of West Cumbria, huge and foreboding, once home to scenes of druids and witchcraft in a long-ago era, those practising the fabled Black Arts, wizardry, sacrifice to the Devil, mass burnings and the slaughter of local young virgins, who were roasted after being systematically raped and abused, until the night was halfway through, when these sacrifices were devoured.

Keith Healy shivered as he stood in the chill breeze with just a flashlight to keep him comfort—or sane.

God only knew what monsters roamed that landscape nowadays, but he could just bet something went on with the weirdoes, and so much so it didn't bear wasting time thinking about.

He remembered Mary Donegal, a woman who lived near to the Morgue, a virtual recluse who never gave anyone the time of day. She was elderly and just did her own thing. Nobody knew why she shut herself away. That was, if Mary was still alive...

Some folk said Mary Donegal was a witch. After all, how on this Earth had she possibly found the secret to live so fucking long? She must have been over a hundred years old. Didn't bear thinking about, really... Yeah, Keith thought, nobody lived over a hundred these days, the woman was probably long dead and buried. Or perhaps, she was still up there right now, lying there dead on the floor of her house, a shrivelling corpse, maggot ravaged and rotting...

Keith pictured an old lady's dead face, pallid and grey, with worms clambering from her eyeless sockets, with just a tiny hint of yellowed bile and blood oozing from the darkened hollows. Fuck, why did he think that weird shit? Keith knew exactly why—too many damn horror videos. They were all the rage with teenagers in the 80s, a good thing for many yet it still upset and angered a few, especially in the radio, TV and other network media. It seemed to get up the nose of that woman with the big plastic spectacles, what was her name, the jolly crusader... Mary Whitehouse. Wow, Keith thought, thinking about frigging bloody witches...

The torch illuminated the way through the woodland copse, and now he found he was going through the morgue door, which remained open to the public at all times. He knew why he was here this evening and pretty much knew what he had to do to obtain one final glimpse of his deceased brother Jonny.

Before he knew it (he'd never been here before), he was in a long lobby. He stood in awe at the floor which was beautiful white marble with grey swathes embedded to add a decoration. The vast marble floor was so clean and neat, you could probably have eaten your dinner off it!

He wandered along the corridor with quiet deliberation, until he arrived at a three-way junction, and took the one which led him into another brightly illuminated corridor.

Pausing, he pondered, “Was this shit such a good idea, after all?” For the first time tonight since embarking on his journey to the morgue, he felt scared. “Maybe I should get the fuck out of here...”

Thoughts of Jonny crammed his head, all the laughs they shared, and the good times. These thoughts alone (and there were many) encouraged him to continue. Shortly he was stood facing a series (three rows, in fact—three stories high) of “the racks”, “the shelves” you withdrew from the walls, each titled with names, inside which lay the departed.

He soon discovered his brother JONOTHON HEALY on the bottom row. Suddenly, Keith felt like an intruder. But he needed to see Jonny—just one last time—and Keith would be at peace.

He felt like he was committing a serious crime.

Keith was closer to tears than ever, gasping at his brother’s face staring upwards into the air when he pulled his rack out, horrified to see a dead human being. He groaned and threw his body on top of Jonny’s chest and wept. But something was amiss. Keith could feel it. What was it?

Keith’s right hand strayed over Jonny’s chest. There was a crevice in his brother’s chest, and a deep one at that. It was like a hole had been dug out in Jonny’s chest.

Keith turned to face the source of laughter he heard behind him.

“Good evening, boy!” it said.

Before the teenager knew it, the heart thief, the serial killer of Nicholson, was upon him. In a murderous frenzy, his blade entered the boy’s body again and again. Keith Healy was dead before his carcass hit the floor. Soon enough, a sharp instrument of the local butcher was inserted, then twisted and gouged.

Soon enough, the killer had his prize.

(7)

For at least ten seconds, the vision of serial killer Richard Florence was burned into the psyche of Harry Nicks. That gaunt and macabre face, those thin lips and that long, sharp snout. He seemed to grin malevolently at the boy, as if planning his latest victim’s fate. Harry had never seen the man whilst wandering the streets. This made Florence the uglier and an eerie sight. Harry worked overtime to erase this abomination from his mind.

The monster stood before Harry in a vast white room. It was like Heaven.

Had he died, and was this the afterlife?

The killer stood a few feet away with his right hand extended. In that hand was a bloodied organ, a pumping heart, the sound pulsated and resonated as Richard Florence offered Harry his dripping, glistening takings of the night.

And then, the vision of horror was gone. Harry Nicks was alone in the grey room at Kurt's Uncle Dominic's mansion house in the hills, in the back end of nowhere.

He looked around for Kurt.

Harry went over to the nearest wall and knocked on it, getting nothing in return. It was only hard brick, and that there was nothing hollow about these tough walls.

Kurt was nowhere to be seen. Harry looked over at the two beds, barren and empty, there sheets unruffled and unused.

"Kurt, are you around here somewhere?"

It was one fucked up and desperate state of affairs. Here he was, in the hills of Cumbria, locked in a horrible dingy little room akin to a prison cell or asylum seclusion pad, and alone and clueless. If he didn't do something quick, he would be stuck here a long time before someone came.

He shouted, "HELLO?" and, "IS ANYBODY THERE? CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Silence ensued. Harry went to the huge metallic door and—again—as if it made a difference—tapped on it with his knuckles. He rested the palm of his hand on its metallic, pewter like surface, to discover its icy coldness.

It was so cold his hand almost stuck to it.

"Hello?" Harry said, and banged on the door for a minute or so before giving up.

He could detect the scent of gas. It reminded him of the dentist.

Harry stepped back from the door. He knew nobody was coming. Kurt might be dead, for all he knew. And it was time enough to resort to his instincts...

Firstly, he closed his eyes.

Secondly, he started to breathe heavily, in and out, slowly and deliberately, focused yet deathly cool. He concentrated and drew from his darkest energy.

Thirdly, he lifted his hands, balled them into fists, and aimed them at the door. He began to chant a mysterious mantra, something he learnt from his many books, as the forces conspired to make him a bona fide and complete white witch.

The door collapsed. It came off its hinges and fell forwards with a thud that shook the ground.

Harry Nicks opened his eyes and covered his mouth against rising dust. He was delighted by his magical gifts, yet there was just one stumbling block. He had to find Kurt.

He walked into the corridor. He thought he knew the direction to the dining room, the centre of the manor house.

He thought he heard a wail or a scream.

“Kurt...?”

For all Harry knew, these bastards might have been torturing Kurt. Who could have told with these sick fuckers? Uncle Dom...he'd gone from kindly old man to ruthless scourge, evil entity, a right cunt...

Again, moaning...

There was also a sound that was like whipping, somebody receiving lashes to the body perhaps?

Harry seemed rooted to the spot. Despite his powers, he was scared, uncertain his magic could stretch that far, and he was—right now—scared for his own safety—his life.

He should make for the front door and see how far he got before these maniacs caught up. Or like they had with Kurt...what if that person being whipped, being lashed and flailed, was in fact his best friend, who he loved like a brother, who he'd known all his life, and was better than any brother?

He increased his pace.

Approaching the dining room door, Harry shoved it wide. He was horrified by the vision greeting him from across the long room, more horrified than he expected. From the upper ceiling beam, Kurt hung in a noose and his limp body dangled like a rag doll. Dominic and his cronies whipped his naked body, laughing and cheering.

A hammer struck the back of Harry's skull and he collapsed. Again and again the instrument descended upon his skull. Wet brain tissue spilled onto the floor.

In moments, it seemed Harry was dead.

Dominic walked across to his body. “Take my nephew from that noose, and take his brainless friend, and take them to the basement. Yes, my friends, we will eat well for the next month, and over Christmas. Pity Harry and his magic cannot work miracles!” Tossing back his head, Dominic laughed as he added, “Such nice young men as well!”

Little did Dominic realize, to kill these two boys would not be such a simple act...One of them, after all, was a qualified white witch.

(8)

As night closed down in the basement of the manor, two lifeless bodies, Kurt and his best friend Harry Nicks, lay unmoving, bloody and deathly cold.

Kurt was naked and riddled by lacerations to his body, his skin ripped from the bone, his face constricted by pain and abject horror, reflecting his ill treatment by his uncle and his cronies.

The boy Adam Donegal manifested in the dingy cellar. The deceased 7-year-old reached down and passed his hand over the dead teens' faces.

The two boys opened their eyes. Sitting up, Kurt and Harry looked at each other in bewildered astonishment. They couldn't believe it. They laughed and wanted to cheer and celebrate existence on planet Earth. They wanted to hug and embrace each other.

Kurt said, "What happened? Where are we? Where is Uncle Dom?"

Harry saw the ghostly young boy in the far corner, "Your uncle is one evil old motherfucker that tried to kill us. He's a cannibal. The serial killer, Richard Florence, butchers for Dominic, kills prostitutes, cuts out their hearts and other vital organs. Everything he gathers on the darkened streets of Nicholson ends up on Uncle Dom's dinner table to share between him, Florence and his henchmen. He planned on eating us next."

"How do you know all this?" Kurt asked.

"I've been enlightened. Spirits and supernatural forces are at play tonight over the town of Nicholson..." Harry pointed into the darkness, "Plus, we have Mary Donegal to thank for our rebirth, who is a white witch and a good witch..." Something blacker than the night shifted in the nearby darkness.

Her face remained hidden throughout as she spoke to the boys. "I've lived in these hills many years, just my boy and me...a boy that never ages, yet instead remains ever youthful and spritely. The man named Dominic has broken so many laws, crossed too many lines, and destroyed and killed many men in bloody fashion. Tonight, I burn him down, yet you, Harry Nicks, must confront Dominic and do fevered battle with him, and slaughter him as his abode dissolves in the thickest flame..."

Harry said, "Are you a witch as well?"

The shadow in the corner shook her head. "I'm just a sad and regretful old lady that seeks justice. On the week that my boy Adam was killed, Dominic was part of a jury that voted adversely to redeem my boy's true murderer, the murderous mayor of Nicholson. Because of Dominic, justice was miss carried that day. Dominic, like the others on the jury, voted in favour of the mayor."

Harry tentatively touched the back of his skull. It had been caved in by a hammer. "You have the power to bring back the dead? Why not bring back your son?"

"My son Adam Donegal died horribly many years ago. His death occurred years before I practised witchcraft—years too late, I'm afraid. But his spirit remains with me and always will do—and I'm thankful to those powers which enabled that to happen. Now, please, make haste...the door into the dining room is open and Dominic awaits you, Harry..." She gestured to the naked teenager, who had stayed silent, "Kurt, I suggest you run away, head towards town."

Harry addressed his friend, “You heard her...run!”

“But what about you...?”

“Get going, while the going is good. Get running and don’t stop running until you’ve escaped your uncle’s evil. Go and get the police up here!”

Immediately, Kurt was up and through the basement door.

Laughter pierced the air. Mary Donegal held something up for Harry Nicks to observe. “Something I prepared earlier...” She held the severed head of Richard Florence in her hand. Harry didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

He muttered, “The butcher Richard Florence will kill no more.”

Shoulders hunched, head bowed, Harry went upstairs, along the corridor, and into the dining room of the manor house.

His nemesis was waiting, grinning like a lunatic, sitting at the long oak table alone in the room, slicing through a disembowelled organ, and eating it.

“You’re a disgusting, degenerate piece of shit...” Harry said, repulsed and sickened to the core.

“You want to try some meat, boy?”

Silence followed as the witches faced each other across the room.

Dominic stood and walked around the table. “Look...” He gestured towards the windows and the flames licking the sandstone walls, “Mary Donegal is at work, her and that boy, that brat...she’s always wanted to burn my home to the ground—that witch—that HORRID AND DISGUSTING WITCH. She’ll leave me with nothing—nothing—nothing at all—nothing but memories, just like she has.”

“You’re finished, Dominic. Get used to the idea of spending an eternity in Hell, with Lucifer’s balls in your mouth!”

Dominic reached out, his face contorting, and battle commenced. Harry came right back at him. For a minute of silence, the pair faced each other and fought a psychic war.

A dribble of blood escaped the teenager’s mouth, his organs shifted, crushed and mangled. Yet, he would never submit nor give in the fight. He reached out into the air, and grasped something invisible, something which only he could see and touch. He grasped again and again, wrenching the man before him, reaching into his body and ripping forth his intestines.

Groaning and spitting blood, Dominic panicked as he lost the unholy war.

He reached up and clutched either side of his skull as the cranium walls began to expand and crack. A sharp splinter resonated in the room as the skull began to fragment.

Harry smiled, “Now, you bastard!”

Dominic cried out as streams of blood squirted from both his tear ducts as well as his cracked nose, ears and mouth. His fat and bloated face and head exploded, spewing brain tissue everywhere. His headless carcass collapsed to the floor.

Harry fell to his knees.

He would be okay. But something wasn’t right. There was a price to pay.

“You are a skilled witch,” Mary Donegal said. Harry scrutinized her ruined, elderly face for the first time and gasped, “But as a witch, you still have a lot to learn before you become completely accomplished. This is why you are coming with me to my house to stay for many, many years, until you become like me, ancient yet skilled and practised in The Art.”

“I don’t want to come with you, miss.”

“Do not argue, boy. Do as you are told and learn from your seniors...” The flames licked at the two witches, one kneeling, one standing a few yards away as the walls began to cave in and the heat grew. Expressionless, she reached out a hand, “You either accept my invitation or remain here and burn to death—your choice, young man...young witch.”

“I would rather burn. I’m done with witchcraft.”

“You would forsake your gift?”

“Certainly...”

She shook her head. “My words cannot convince you? I cannot scare you enough into coming with me? You would rather sacrifice your magical power? You are braver than I thought. That alone deserves a reward. What do you think, Adam?”

The ghostly boy said nothing.

“Then, so be it...” Mary Donegal said, and waved her hand.

Harry Nicks was no longer indoors. He was in a field nearby Dominic’s house, watching it burn in the night. He felt completely free, without shackles, appreciative of everything Mary Donegal had done for him.

He heard a voice from nearby. “How did you get here?” It was Kurt, still naked. “Anyway, that doesn’t matter. Let’s just scarper and get the fuck out of here!”

“I second that motion, my friend.”

Together, the boys ran all the way into town. Some stories they had to tell at school in the coming days.

THE END

WINTER 2017-18

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Northern Souls by James Parsons

This is James Parsons' debut in the world of horror. He is already an established Sci Fi author with books such as *Orbital Kin* and *Minerva Century* under his belt. He has previously written his novels using the soubriquet James E. Parsons, I presume this is to delineate between the two genres (Sci Fi and Horror), and their prospective audience. A method favoured by Iain Banks (for mainstream fiction), and Iain M. Banks (for SF.).

I reviewed the aforementioned SF novel 'Minerva Century' in Schlock! Volume 10, Issue 4, back in July 2016. I had enjoyed 'Minerva Century' so I was looking forward to seeing how Mr Parsons would fare in the world of horror. I should also say much as I was 'looking forward to' his latest offering it was also tinged with some trepidation as crossing from one genre to another is not always easy, and especially in this case when the two quite often become confused because a firm border has not really been established between them. Both genres are, shall we say—fantastical? so the border is blurred. This is at its most apparent in bookstores where you will usually find a corner entitled: Fantasy / Sci Fi / Horror (the corner I inevitably head for). It is also even more apparent in the cinema—is the 'Alien' series Sci Fi or Horror? By the same token is Kubrick's '2001' Horror or Sci Fi? However, Mr Parsons seems do have travelled from one genre to the other without any apparent detrimental side effects.

As is usual with his writing style he dives straight in at the deep end, but before he pushes you in first. It starts with death—appropriately enough. A funeral. It's the funeral of a loved one—a young woman, Grace, whose boyfriend, Eric, blames himself. He's determined to commit suicide, but finds his attempts constantly thwarted by some outside force. He is being kept alive by someone or something, and that 'thing' is involved, somehow, in the death of Grace.

He sees the ghost of Grace, although, at first, he refuses to believe it as he considers himself to be a sane kind of chap, who pleads with him enigmatically 'to stop them'. These 'Them' turn out to be demonic tribes who are fighting to gain total control of the north east of England. His close friends help him investigate the increasingly horrible and brutal attacks whilst the ghost of Grace aids him in his quest by giving him necessary directions. Eric and his friends do battle with the unholy fiends all over the north east of England, which, I must say, turns out to be a very apt setting for this kind of scenario. Without giving away too much of this enjoyable yarn Eric makes a pact with a group of demons in return for saving the soul of Grace. He is given supernatural powers which his character struggles to deal with. The carnage does not stop; however, it becomes worse and all of the souls in the North East are at risk. So to sum up, if the plot can be summed up: can Eric manage to save everyone's immortal soul including his own?

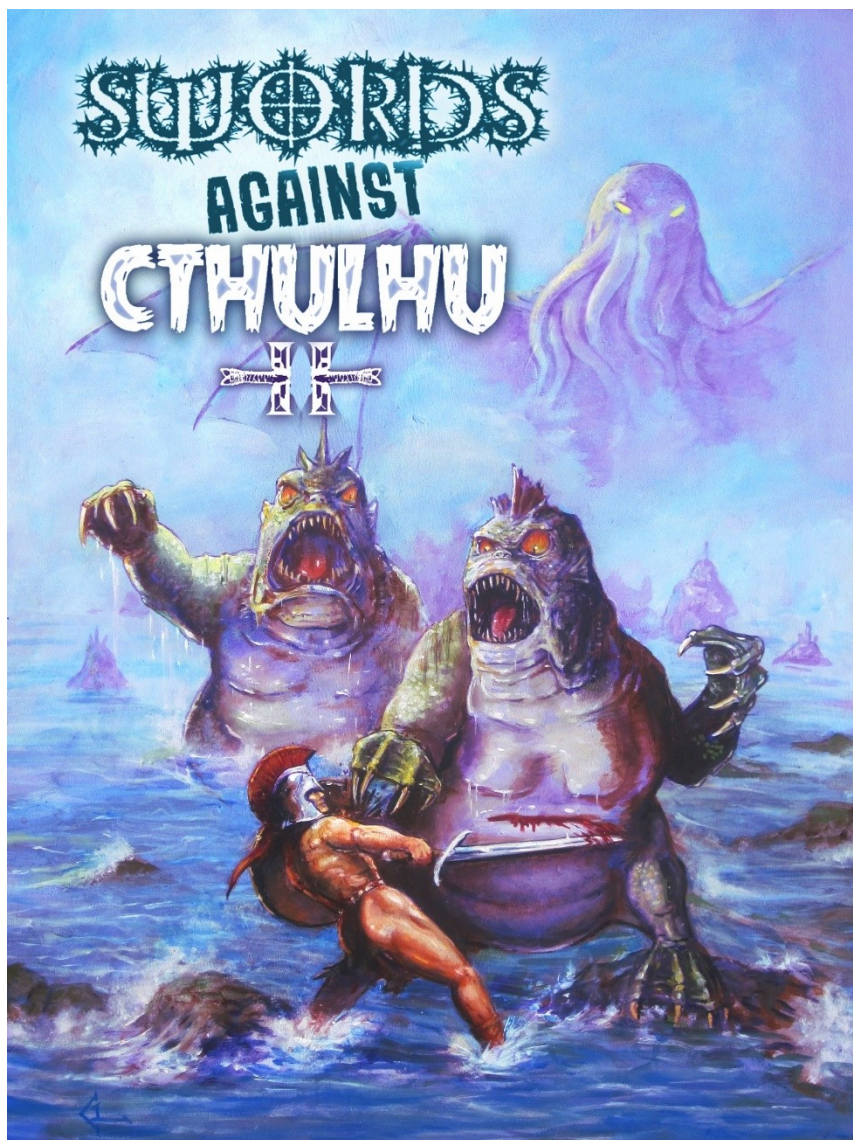
The plot is pretty complicated and at times becomes convoluted and this can overwhelm the reader, James has said in interviews that he is influenced by such writers as Clive Barker and Graham Masterton and this is clear in some of his writing but whilst these masters of the genre tend to create characters that stick in the mind Mr Parsons creates characters that seem to appear from nowhere, create an interesting first impression, but then disappear as if they too have been swallowed up by the scale of the plot, or, have got bored and wandered off to do something else, but no one could accuse him of not fleshing out his characters.

There is only one serious fault as I see it with the book and that is maybe Parsons has chosen quantity over quality, and in my opinion, it could have done with some more ruthless editing and benefitted from a more concise approach. But I will leave you to judge that for yourselves as wordiness, nowadays in fiction, is not considered the primal sin it used to be.

This will help send a chill up your spine over the winter, if the weather doesn't, and would make a good, late stocking filler for the New Year for any horror fan especially those not familiar with the north east of England, or for those who actually live there and wish to see its potential darker side.

Stephen Hernandez
Schlock! Webzine Reviewer

THE END



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THE BATTLE FOR CALLISTO by Gregory KH Bryant

Episode Forty

Months passed before Colonel Bridgemont and Colonel Westland could begin any meaningful analysis of the battle. Both were far too busy restoring the bases and taking account of the damage done during the battle to take time out for anything else.

The “Bellerophon” was heavily damaged, having lost one of its seven pods in its entirety, while every other pod that composed the ship bore scars that made them nearly non-functional. Colonel Westland sent most of his crew to Callisto Base 1 to assist with the rebuilding there, keeping only sufficient crew—a number the “Bellerophon” could still support—to work on the ship.

But at last, the “Bellerophon”, Callisto Base 1 and the other Jovian bases had been sufficiently stabilized to permit Bridgemont to delegate the oversight of rebuilding to a team reporting to him. Colonel Westland, likewise, was anxious to begin the analysis of the battle. Complete rebuilding of the bases would take years; indeed, the rebuilding would never be truly finished, but analysis of the battle was necessary, and with Secretary Benson’s demands coming from Earth, growing even more urgent.

There were many questions that had to be answered, and soon. How many ships were in the attacking fleet? What kinds? How did they manage to come so close before they were first observed? To where did they retreat? How did the Scroungers manage to put together such a vast armada, without any knowledge whatever of Earth Space Forces? And, perhaps most importantly, how was it that, against all odds, the “Bellerophon” and Jovian Security managed to beat off the Scroungers, though they were overwhelmingly outnumbered?

Compounding the urgency of this inquiry were the incessant demands of Secretary Benson, the Executive Officer of the Alliance of Western States, on Earth. News of the attack on Callisto and the other Jovian bases had sent shock waves all throughout the Solar System. Pirates attacking the colonies of Jupiter? Were any colonies safe, now?

But the shock was most particularly felt on Earth, which had invested several quadrillion dollars over the course of two centuries to develop those ‘properties’, as Benson and his cabal called them.

Before now, Benson had been most sanguine, even complacent, about those Jovian bases. His mind wholly absorbed on his intrigues against the Eastern Alliance on Earth, and his planned campaign to retake Mars, he had given the colonies in the Jovian system almost no thought at all.

Though they were built on the very edge of the wilder regions of the Solar System, Benson had anticipated no particular threat to those colonies from any direction. Why would he? Surely, the Scroungers, a rag tag miscellany of undisciplined thieves who plundered the more carelessly run bases in the asteroids, were completely incapable of posing any threat to the extensive and well protected colonies throughout the asteroid belt and surrounding Jupiter.

But now, shockingly, the Scroungers had proven themselves perfectly capable of putting together a vast armada and planning an extensive and very complex assault on Callisto,

Europa and Ganymede, too. Even though they had been repulsed this time, if they could attack there, without warning, where else might they next appear?

Benson chafed to do it, but he must respond to the threat of the Scroungers. This forced him to make very radical adjustments to his own schemes against the Eastern Alliance on Earth and against Mars.

Which all put him, never a very temperate man in even the best of times, into a frothing rage.

“One good thing to come out of this,” Colonel Westland explained to Colonel Bridgemont, “Is that General Howe was able to convince Benson to leave the “Bellerophon” here, patrolling the Jovian bases until we can be rotated out, probably by the “Vengeance”, which is pretty well tricked out for military expeditions. If not the “Vengeance”, then the other big transport we’re got is, of course, the “Explorer”.

“Uh huh,” Bridgemont replied. The “Explorer” came frequently to Callisto, like the “Bellerophon”, and it was also accompanied by a fleet of fighter ships.

They sat in Colonel Westland’s office in the “Bellerophon”. With them were Lieutenant Hardy, Illara, acting as Colonel Bridgemont’s adjutant, and Story Talbot, Senior Advisor. The five of them, Westland had decided, were sufficient to begin laying out the investigation of the battle. They would send their raw data back to Earth, of course, along with the reports of the fighters involved in the battle. But first they must gather this data, the reports, and organize all the material so that it would be coherent for the analysts based on Earth.

“That was good of Howe,” Bridgemont said. “Tell him I appreciate it, could ya?”

“Sure. Will do. I gotta tell you, Howe is playing a dangerous game. Real dangerous.”

“I think we do all understand that,” Talbot said.

“Benson does not take any difference of opinion lightly,” Westland explained. “He takes any such a difference to be an act of disloyalty.”

Talbot chuckled.

“Yes, for a tragic fact, he does,” Talbot said.

“So,” Westland continued, “Benson is set on retaking Mars and to make Mars an Earth colony once again. But this attack changes all that. And Bill, General Howe, was quick to see the opportunity in that. He suggested the “Bellerophon” remain here, at Callisto, until it could be rotated out. He did that knowing full well that without the “Bellerophon”, or the ships that could replace her, Benson is lacking the force needed to take Mars.

“And just how soon can one of these other ships come out to relieve you?” Illara asked.

“Two Earth years at the very soonest. The “Explorer” is at Venus, for the moment, and the “Vengeance” is circling Mars, which happens now to be at its furthest distance from Jupiter, at opposite end of the Solar System.

Compiling the raw data for the analysis of the battle was the responsibility of the technologists aboard the “Bellerophon”, a team of twelve always overworked men and women.

Little data was coming from the Scroungers themselves. Not one of them lived to be interrogated, all of them choosing to fight to the death, rather than surrender. Those who were outnumbered, and stranded, alone, on Europa and Ganymede, chose suicide, rather than allow themselves to succumb to the police forces of the Jovian system.

Otherwise, the Scroungers proved themselves to be very careless in their communications during the battle. While Westland and Bridgemont wisely imposed a total communications shutdown during the battle, the undisciplined Scroungers bragged to each other throughout the fight, boasting of their kills, and reporting back to their mother ships every few minutes.

Westland and Bridgemont both carefully recorded every syllable of these communications, which gave them invaluable data afterwards. It was from these careless communications that they were able to learn the names of the two large transport ships that attacked them, as well as the names of the commanders, and many other extremely interesting details.

While the pilots of the “Bellerophon” and the Jovian forces were busy working on their own detailed reports, the technologists aboard the “Bellerophon” were working feverishly to reconstruct a holographic map of the battle.

First, they compiled the digital data from the gun cameras of all the fighter ships that fought against the Scroungers. The digital footage from the ships that survived the battle was easily transferred to their central databases, all in but a few hours. The data from the ships that were shot down took longer, much longer to gather, and, of course, several ships were so thoroughly destroyed that no data was ever to be recovered from them.

This preliminary effort also incorporated footage from the ubiquitous cameras throughout Callisto Base 1, and all other bases of the Jovian colonies. Many, many countless teraflops were inputted into the quantum computers, enough to keep the computers collating the data for many long and tedious days.

From the initial instants of battle, when Illara first engaged the Scroungers at Io, to the very final moments, when Lieutenant Hardy pursued the last of the fleeing Scroungers, sending them to oblivion under his guns, the data from the gun cameras, detailing almost every moment of the battle, was compiled, and then organized into a vast chronological sequence.

From this, the technologists created a scalable, holographic animation of the entire battle, one that could be played forward and backward, at any speed. Commands allowed the analysts to zoom in on details as small as a millimetre, and outward again, to take in the entire panorama of the battle as it unfolded, from Io to Callisto.

Creating this animation took many months of effort. Only when it was completed did the team of technologists turn it over to Colonel Westland who accepted it with great satisfaction. Until that time, Westland, Bridgemont and the others addressed themselves to studying the

reports of the combat pilots, and the civilian witnesses, and subjecting them to repeated interviews.

“Thank you,” Colonel Westland told the team of technologists, all crowded into his office. “Thank you all. What you have done for us here is priceless.”

“Proud to assist, sir,” answered the chief among them, a stocky, middle aged man who spoke from his chest, named Al, a man with a grizzled grey crew cut and muscular hands.

The actual, ‘eyes on’ and detailed analysis of the battle from the holographic animation was a matter of another many months, as Colonel Westland and the others pored over it from every possible point of view. Each dogfight was studied in turn, the many assaults upon the “Bellerophon” closely analysed. Not knowing what had happened, except in the broadest terms, it was weeks before they knew where, and what to focus their attention on.

“I just don’t get it,” Westland said, shaking his head. “They had us. With their two huge transports, the one, the “Grand Marquis”, and that other one... what was it again?”

“The “Reliant” is what they call it,” Colonel Bridgemont offered.

“Yeh, the “Reliant,” that one, and their fleet of fighter ships, they had us. They had us good. We were dead.”

Illara shifted in her seat. Her lips were taut across her face.

“But then the “Grand Marquis” just pulls out,” Westland continued. “After launching their first squads of fighters, the “Grand Marquis”, presumably commanded by the one they call ‘Turhan Mot’, just pulls out of the battle. If it hadn’t been for that, if those two ships had hit us with their big guns...”

Colonel Westland shrugged his broad shoulders in eloquent silence.

“So what the hell?” he asked of everyone, generally.

“I think I can guess,” Illara said.

“Yeah?” Westland asked, turning to her.

“We should get a close up look at the “Grand Marquis”, she said. “Real close. I saw them. Well, Ward. Coming back from Io, when I saw the battle surrounding Callisto, I saw Ward’s ship. It was leaving the “Grand Marquis”.”

“You don’t know? Didn’t ya talk to him...?” Colonel Westland began to ask.

Illara shook her head decisively.

“No,” Illara interrupted. “Ward doesn’t talk much. You know that, and I knew better than to pester him.”

“You didn’t talk with him about the battle? At all?”

Illara's lips were tight across her face.

"You should know, Colonel. He's not that kind of man. He doesn't, well, he's not one for war stories. He just..."

"Okay," Westland replied. "Gotcha. So you saw Ward flying out of the "Grand Marquis?"

"Yeah," Illara answered. "Early. Early in the battle. With Mud."

"That friend of his? The big guy? Yeah, I know him."

"Uh huh. He followed Carter with his own ship, he calls it the "Charon". I was able to follow them back down to Callisto. Caught up with them there. At the Space Port."

"And I guess Mud wasn't any more forthcoming than Ward, huh?"

"No. We'd all been kinda preoccupied with Emily."

Colonel Westland cast a glance toward Story Talbot. With an unusual gentleness, he asked, "Sorry. I let it slip my mind. How is your daughter?"

Talbot gave a curt answer.

"Her condition is unchanged."

"I'm sorry, Talbot. Any hope?"

"We don't know."

"God damn, I am sorry to hear that, Story. It goes without saying, I hope, that anything we can do for you, here on the "Bellerophon", just ask..."

"Thank you, Colonel."

Westland pushed a button and called up the holographic animation of the battle. Colonel Bridgemont, Illara, Lieutenant Hardy and Story Talbot watched intently as Westland scrolled to the early part of the battle, then zoomed in on the "Grand Marquis"

They all watched intently as the O8 111A and the "Charon", a ship almost twice as large as Ward's ship, flew through the astonished outgoing squadrons of Turhan Mot's fighters, directly into the landing bay of the "Grand Marquis".

"What in the holy fuck?" Colonel Bridgemont barked.

"Is that man insane?" Westland agreed.

Lieutenant Hardy, who had been quiet through these deliberations, shook his head in wonderment.

“Who could have...?” he began. But he did not have the words to finish his question.

They all watched in silence, as flames burst from within the landing bay of the “Grand Marquis”, and then, some moments later, from the command centre at the bridge of the ship.

“Look there,” Illara pointed. All five people in Colonel Westland’s office looked toward the single pixel that was fleeing from the nose of the “Grand Marquis”. Westland expanded the view, and they saw the pixel grow until it was a tiny ship.

“That’s their escape pod,” Illara said. “Turhan Mot and Mokem Bet are in there.”

They followed the escape pod’s panicked path toward Callisto.

“Go back to the ship,” Illara said.

Colonel Westland rewound the holographic animation. He zoomed in, once again, on the “Grand Marquis”. Explosions rocked the ship.

Then two tiny pixels flew out from the landing bay amidstships.

“There they are,” Illara said, pointing at the two pixels. “That’s Ward. And right behind him, is Mud.”

They all watched Ward’s ship and Mud’s as they pursued Turhan Mot’s escape pod to the Space Port of Callisto Base 1.

They sat in silent wonderment, contemplating what they had just seen.

“Well... darn...” Lieutenant Hardy, whispered, breaking the stunned silence.

“God dammit, Hardy,” Colonel Westland snapped. “You better damn well learn how to swear like a man. You’re due for a promotion to Captain, especially now, after what you did, kicking those Scroungers’ collective asses. But I can’t see my way to doing that, you’re gonna talk like a fucking Sunday school teacher all your goddamn life. You hear me?”

“Fucking A, sir,” Hardy answered, with a perfectly straight face.

“That’s better, Captain,” Westland said, with a chuckle.

Everyone enjoyed a moment of laughter, of course.

“Welcome to the rank,” Illara said, holding her hand out to Hardy. The two shook, smiling.

Westland, turning to Illara, asked, “All right, Ward is gone. Been gone for some time. But where’s that friend of his, Mud? He got his pay a while ago. I hadn’t seen him since. We owe them both a helluva lot more than we can ever pay them. They weren’t civilians, I’d give `em medals. Weren’t for them, all of the Jovian system would be in the hands of the Scroungers now. If I can’t thank Ward personally, at least I can thank Mud. I wanna shake his hand. He’s a helluva man. Tell him we wanna see him.”

“Can’t,” Illara answered.

“Why not?” Colonel Westland asked.

Illara took a moment to answer.

“He’s gone. He left a few days after Carter did.”

“Where? Where to?”

“Well, at least he had the courtesy to tell me personally,” Illara said. “He said he had to follow Ward. ‘That boy’s gonna get himself hurt good,’ he said. ‘And somebody’s gotta keep an eye on his sorry ass.’ Yeah. That’s the way those guys talk.”

“Oh?” Westland asked. “And where’d those to idjits get themselves going?”

Illara took a moment before she could answer.

“Carter’s looking for Turhan Mot,” she said, after a few moments. “Says he’s going to cut his throat, for what he did to Emily. And Mud (Illara’s throat was taut. She found it hard to speak.) And Mud... he followed Carter.”

Westland leaned back in his chair and glared at the ceiling.

“Well goddamn it,” he said. “I sure could use those two men. We’re going after those bastards, those Scroungers. Gonna wipe them outta this Solar System. And I for damn sure could use those two guys.”

“Whaddya mean, Frank?” Colonel Bridgemont asked his friend, Colonel Westland.

“We’re still huntin’ Scroungers,” Westland answered. “You know that. That’s why we’re here. Now we gotta find out where these rat bastards are deploying from. From their own chatter during the battle, it seems to be a place called ‘Astra Palace’, on some asteroid outside Jupiter. So Hardy,” he said, turning to the newly promoted captain, “That’s your next little expedition. Find me this ‘Astra Palace’.”

“Yes, sir!” Captain Hardy replied.

Illara squirmed in her seat, and Bridgemont caught her motion from the corner of his eye.

“Something troubling you, Captain?”

“Sir...” Illara began, then she faltered.

“Just get it said, Captain. Don’t waste my time.”

“Permission to accompany Captain Hardy, sir?”

Bridgemont took a long moment, glaring first at Illara, and then turning to Westland. Westland returned Bridgemont's stare without blinking. Silently, Bridgemont turned to Story Talbot, and then to Captain Hardy, studying them each on turn.

At last, he returned his gaze to Illara.

"Granted," was all he said.

Epilogue

Horst Dal stared with hard and baleful eyes upon the man that Yamir had brought to him. The three were sequestered in Horst Dal's private suites at one end of the asteroid, 53 102 AT, where, at great expense and hardship, the Scroungers had built their hideaway, known only to a few, and called Astra Palace.

Between the two men kneeled Tu Hit, late pilot of the "Grand Marquis". The room was thick with the smoke of the narcotic that Horst Dal and Yamir had shared, before Horst Dal commenced his interrogation of Tu Hit, and had continued smoking, throughout it.

Surrounding them were the naked courtesans, of numerous genders and many ages, their bodies painted silver and gold and other radiant colours, who all served the myriad tastes of Horst Dal and his guests.

The interrogation had been long. Tu Hit's answers to Horst Dal's cunning questions had put to rest any doubts the man might have entertained, regarding Yamir. No, Horst Dal had decided, there was no treachery in his friend. And that provided Horst Dal great relief. It would have saddened him, a man with few emotions, to be forced to remove Yamir's head from his neck. Thankfully, Tu Hit's answers proved to him that there was no need for such extreme remedy.

But of Turhan Mot? What of him? After long and patient questioning, Horst Dal came to conclude that Turhan Mot's worst crime was one only but of cowardice, not of treachery. Turhan Mot only but abandoned his ship and fled his crew, out of craven fear for this man, Carter Ward.

So, when Turhan Mot next came to him, Horst Dal, whether he did so freely, or in chains, Horst Dal would give him the benefit of that much doubt, at least, that he would not have the man killed upon the instant.

No, he would give the man the courtesy of a hearing. That much, the coward did deserve.

And as for this creature, this Tu Hit? What of him?

"Our brother, Yamir, he has brought with him the wreckage of the ship, the "Grand Marquis"," he said to Tu Hit. "What should we do with it, think you?"

"May I plead, in most earnestness," Tu Hit answered. "She is a beautiful ship, a commanding ship, and one to whom I should gladly give all my life. If but she could be rebuilt, and a good captain to steer her, that is all I should ever ask."

“We do have the wherewithal with which to rebuild her,” Horst Dal said, languidly, the narcotic he and Yamir shared between them causing in him a most comfortable numbness, but not in the least inhibiting the sharpness of his intellect.

“And has this Tu Hit any recommendations, as to who it is who should captain such a fine ship?”

“I only ask that she be preserved,” Tu Hit answered. “More than that, I should not presume.”

“And does Tu Hit believe that he should make of her a good captain?”

Tu Hit shook his head.

“I am but a pilot, may it please the great Horst Dal to hear it. I ask no more but that the “Grand Marquis” be preserved against the scrap heap. Otherwise, Tu Hit is but the servant of him, the great Horst Dal.”

Horst Dal allowed a sardonic smile to crawl across his face.

“Rise, Tu Hit,” Horst Dal said, pleased with Tu Hit’s answers. The man had sought nothing for himself, not even by insinuation, except but to preserve the ship, the “Grand Marquis”.

“Sit with us and smoke this pipe with your friends, Yamir and Horst Dal. I am pleased, quite pleased, you have not wasted my time with lies or vanity. We shall rebuild the “Grand Marquis”, to even better proportions than before. And if Tu Hit will not be the captain of the fine ship that shall arise from the ashes of the “Grand Marquis”, then we shall appoint anyone that Tu Hit shall choose for the post, even if it were the coward, Turhan Mot, himself.

“What say you to this bargain? Do you agree?”

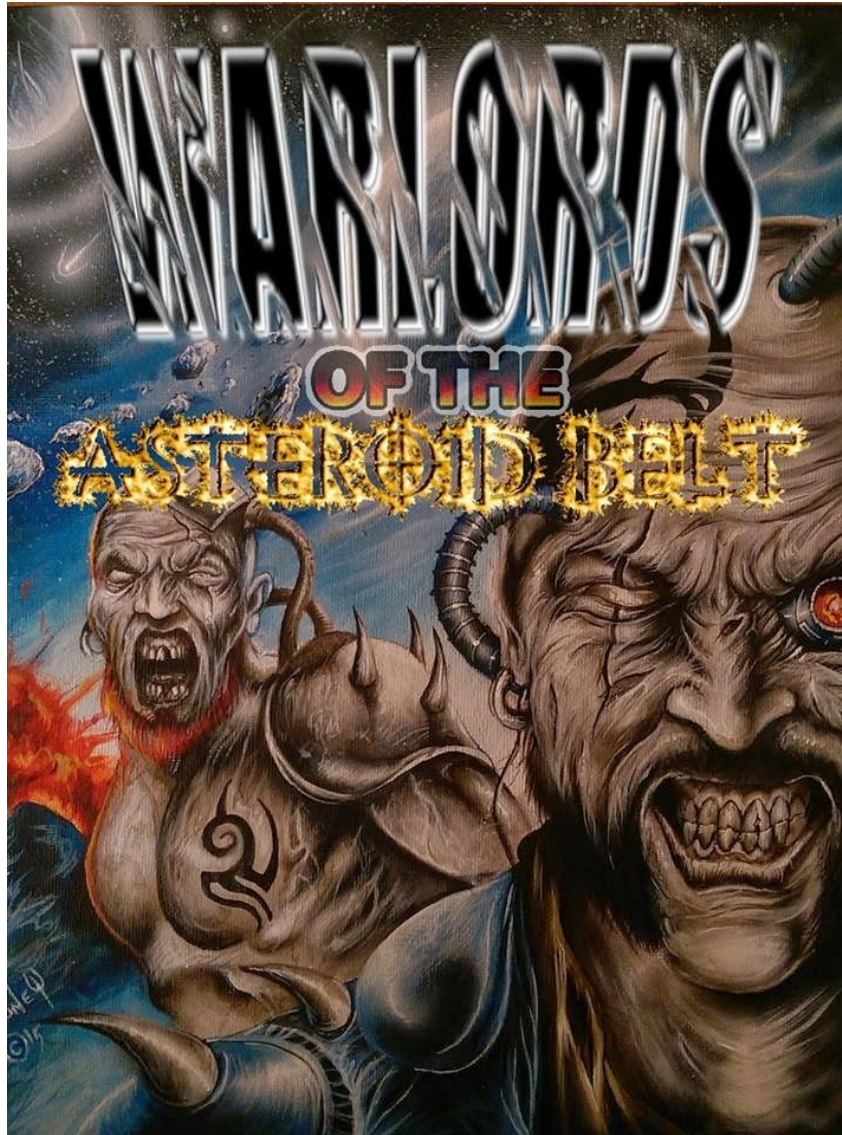
“That my ship, the “Grand Marquis” should live yet, is all I could ask,” Tu Hit answered. “For all else, Tu Hit can only be but most grateful to him, the most generous Horst Dal.”

“Be it so, then,” Horst Dal said, with a glance at one of his gilded concubines as she loaded a pipe for him. He ran an appreciative hand along her sculpted lines.

“And the first task of the rebuilt “Grand Marquis”, whoever should be its captain, will be to hunt down this Carter Ward, and, otherwise, whoever it may be, who should accompany him, and bring them here, to Astra Palace, that I might lay my own eyes upon this man, and hear him speak with mine own ears, before I tender his flesh to my chefs.”

THE END

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



Out now from [Rogue Planet Press](#).

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THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by HG Wells

Book One: The Coming of The Martians

Chapter Five: The Heat Ray

After the glimpse I had had of the Martians emerging from the cylinder in which they had come to the earth from their planet, a kind of fascination paralysed my actions. I remained standing knee deep in the heather, staring at the mound that hid them. I was a battleground of fear and curiosity.

I did not dare to go back towards the pit, but I felt a passionate longing to peer into it. I began walking, therefore, in a big curve, seeking some point of vantage and continually looking at the sand heaps that hid these new comers to our earth. Once a leash of thin black whips, like the arms of an octopus, flashed across the sunset and was immediately withdrawn, and afterwards a thin rod rose up, joint by joint, bearing at its apex a circular disk that spun with a wobbling motion. What could be going on there?

Most of the spectators had gathered in one or two groups—one a little crowd towards Woking, the other a knot of people in the direction of Chobham. Evidently, they shared my mental conflict. There were few near me. One man I approached—he was, I perceived, a neighbour of mine, though I did not know his name—and accosted. But it was scarcely a time for articulate conversation.

"What ugly brutes!" he said. "Good God! What ugly brutes!" He repeated this over and over again.

"Did you see a man in the pit?" I said; but he made no answer to that. We became silent, and stood watching for a time side by side, deriving, I fancy, a certain comfort in one another's company. Then I shifted my position to a little knoll that gave me the advantage of a yard or more of elevation and when I looked for him presently he was walking towards Woking.

The sunset faded to twilight before anything further happened. The crowd far away on the left, towards Woking, seemed to grow, and I heard now a faint murmur from it. The little knot of people towards Chobham dispersed. There was scarcely an intimation of movement from the pit.

It was this, as much as anything, that gave people courage, and I suppose the new arrivals from Woking also helped to restore confidence. At any rate, as the dusk came on a slow, intermittent movement upon the sand pits began, a movement that seemed to gather force as the stillness of the evening about the cylinder remained unbroken. Vertical black figures in twos and threes would advance, stop, watch, and advance again, spreading out as they did so in a thin irregular crescent that promised to enclose the pit in its attenuated horns. I, too, on my side began to move towards the pit.

Then I saw some cabmen and others had walked boldly into the sand pits, and heard the clatter of hoofs and the grind of wheels. I saw a lad trundling off the barrow of apples. And then, within thirty yards of the pit, advancing from the direction of Horsell, I noted a little black knot of men, the foremost of whom was waving a white flag.

This was the Deputation. There had been a hasty consultation, and since the Martians were evidently, in spite of their repulsive forms, intelligent creatures, it had been resolved to show them, by approaching them with signals, that we too were intelligent.

Flutter, flutter, went the flag, first to the right, then to the left. It was too far for me to recognise anyone there, but afterwards I learned that Ogilvy, Stent, and Henderson were with others in this attempt at communication. This little group had in its advance dragged inward, so to speak, the circumference of the now almost complete circle of people, and a number of dim black figures followed it at discreet distances.

Suddenly there was a flash of light, and a quantity of luminous greenish smoke came out of the pit in three distinct puffs, which drove up, one after the other, straight into the still air.

This smoke (or flame, perhaps, would be the better word for it) was so bright that the deep blue sky overhead and the hazy stretches of brown common towards Chertsey, set with black pine trees, seemed to darken abruptly as these puffs arose, and to remain the darker after their dispersal. At the same time a faint hissing sound became audible.

Beyond the pit stood the little wedge of people with the white flag at its apex, arrested by these phenomena, a little knot of small vertical black shapes upon the black ground. As the green smoke arose, their faces flashed out pallid green, and faded again as it vanished. Then slowly the hissing passed into a humming, into a long, loud, droning noise. Slowly a humped shape rose out of the pit, and the ghost of a beam of light seemed to flicker out from it.

Forthwith flashes of actual flame, a bright glare leaping from one to another, sprang from the scattered group of men. It was as if some invisible jet impinged upon them and flashed into white flame. It was as if each man were suddenly and momentarily turned to fire.

Then, by the light of their own destruction, I saw them staggering and falling, and their supporters turning to run.

I stood staring, not as yet realising that this was death leaping from man to man in that little distant crowd. All I felt was that it was something very strange. An almost noiseless and blinding flash of light, and a man fell headlong and lay still; and as the unseen shaft of heat passed over them, pine trees burst into fire, and every dry furze bush became with one dull thud a mass of flames. And far away towards Knaphill I saw the flashes of trees and hedges and wooden buildings suddenly set alight.

It was sweeping round swiftly and steadily, this flaming death, this invisible, inevitable sword of heat. I perceived it coming towards me by the flashing bushes it touched, and was too astounded and stupefied to stir. I heard the crackle of fire in the sand pits and the sudden squeal of a horse that was as suddenly stilled. Then it was as if an invisible yet intensely heated finger were drawn through the heather between me and the Martians, and all along a curving line beyond the sand pits the dark ground smoked and crackled. Something fell with a crash far away to the left where the road from Woking station opens out on the common. Forth with the hissing and humming ceased, and the black, dome like object sank slowly out of sight into the pit.

All this had happened with such swiftness that I had stood motionless, dumbfounded and dazzled by the flashes of light. Had that death swept through a full circle, it must inevitably

have slain me in my surprise. But it passed and spared me, and left the night about me suddenly dark and unfamiliar.

The undulating common seemed now dark almost to blackness, except where its roadways lay grey and pale under the deep blue sky of the early night. It was dark, and suddenly void of men. Overhead the stars were mustering, and in the west the sky was still a pale, bright, almost greenish blue. The tops of the pine trees and the roofs of Horsell came out sharp and black against the western afterglow. The Martians and their appliances were altogether invisible, save for that thin mast upon which their restless mirror wobbled. Patches of bush and isolated trees here and there smoked and glowed still, and the houses towards Woking station were sending up spires of flame into the stillness of the evening air.

Nothing was changed save for that and a terrible astonishment. The little group of black specks with the flag of white had been swept out of existence, and the stillness of the evening, so it seemed to me, had scarcely been broken.

It came to me that I was upon this dark common, helpless, unprotected, and alone. Suddenly, like a thing falling upon me from without, came—fear.

With an effort I turned and began a stumbling run through the heather.

The fear I felt was no rational fear, but a panic terror not only of the Martians, but of the dusk and stillness all about me. Such an extraordinary effect in unmanning me it had that I ran weeping silently as a child might do. Once I had turned, I did not dare to look back.

I remember I felt an extraordinary persuasion that I was being played with, that presently, when I was upon the very verge of safety, this mysterious death—as swift as the passage of light—would leap after me from the pit about the cylinder and strike me down.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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