

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

Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 28
16TH JUNE 2019

SEBASTIAN AND THE FALL

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
2000 LIGHT
YEARS FROM
HOME...

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SHAY FIELDS

BY COLT LEASURE
WHY DIDN'T YOU
TELL THE COPS
ABOUT THE FLYING
DISK?

SCAREDY CAT BY STEVEN HAVELOCK

KOMBAT SEKTOR BY GK MURPHY

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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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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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *Fractal mandelbulb 3D* by *cpmacdonald*. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

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Eric Brighteyes goes to Middalhof. And Deucalion adheres to the old gods.
—Gavin Chappell

PS: Congratulations to Paul Lubaczewski on the publication of his vampire comedy *[I Never Eat Cheesesteak](#)*.

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Lovecraftiana Walpurgisnacht 2019](#)

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"NOISE? WHAT NOISE?"

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

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

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

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

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SEBASTIAN AND THE FALL by Ste Whitehouse

'The Pipe-world, Ah'kis, is five thousand miles long and just over ten miles in diameter. Kassi seeks her brother who has been kidnapped by 'demons' and now travel north to the end of the world. She is accompanied by Sebastian a sentient bot of dubious origins with whom she can communicate telepathically. That ability seems to set her apart from the rest of the world's population. This is an earlier tale.'

The dwarves had appeared from behind them and Sebastian had two questions that preyed on his mind. Firstly why was it that some dwarfs attacked them whilst others actively invited them into their 'dungeons'—even going as far as trading with them; and secondly where the hell did this group come from? He and Kassi had wisely checked each room and cupboard space on their descent anticipating just such an event. Even now Kassi's displeasure registered in the silent way she dispatched two of the dwarfs, her face clouded with anger.

He couldn't really blame her. He had insisted on taking things slowly ensuring that each nook and cranny was well searched and yet here they were still fighting. He wondered if either he—or more likely Kassi—had a large sign painted upon their backs saying 'feel free to kick the shit out of us!' with added large smiley face.

He ran at the wall his 'feet' clinging expertly as momentum pushed him up and above a particularly large dwarf—one almost fifty inches in height. They wore dark armour with faces mostly unprotected; a pale sallow oval clouded in shadow. Sebastian scaled the wall easily and swung his aft legs in an arc that connected with the dwarf's solid looking chin. There was a satisfying crack and pale watery eyes drifted out of consciousness. As the dwarf fell Sebastian dropped onto him using the dwarfs own momentum to aim at a second fighter.

Sebastian was a mechanoid—a segmented flattened body of four parts—and eight legged. As he moved he rolled himself up as much as he could. Kassi called him the 'hemisphere of death'—in tones that it must be said were less than flattering—but he had become accustomed to ignoring the human girl. Still hemisphere or not his weight caught a second dwarf midriff and they tumbled to the floor. He rolled up onto his back four legs standing just slightly taller than the dwarf who staggered to his own feet. One swift strike of an 'arm', its delicate web of 'fingers' meshed into a solid sphere, and the creature was down.

Sebastian looked around as Kassi finished off her own attackers much more viciously. His molecular sensors picked up iron in the air as pale silver arterial blood sprayed a far wall. He was about to admonish the girl when a shadow detached itself from the far corridor and a dwarf encased in powered armour ran at them. There was a hum of electronics and the soft whirr of gears as the dwarf moved, his head nearly reaching the ceiling. Sebastian jumped at the Mech 'fingers' digging into servos and wires as he slid across the armoured surface. As he fell he managed to slice a thick plastic tube and hydraulic fluid spilled out across the ancient tiled flooring, filling the confined space with the bitter scent of oil.

Despite the damage the dwarf/machine lumbered onwards and Kassi—as always—leapt towards the thing, sword in hand. She had struck it twice before enough armour had been peeled away to allow her to slip the blade into the dwarfs stomach. He staggered arms flailing and fell against a battered pair of lift doors. Even as Sebastian looked on the doors buckled

beneath the weight of the Mech and both the dwarf and Kassi slipped into the stygian darkness.

He had time to call out her name before she vanished into the deeper darkness. There was the sound from the deep shaft of metal on metal. A cacophony of tones filling the darkness before fading into silence. Despite been able to navigate the dungeon in complete darkness Sebastian still maintained a wide beam of light. He rushed to the opening and peered downwards afraid of what awaited him. The light penetrated only a hundred metres or so but he could see the young woman dangling from a collection of cables once able to carry people back and forth from the interior surface to much deeper. She was almost at the edge of the light.

“Are you trying to blind me!?” she demanded huffily.

“I thought you already were, the way you leapt at that Mech,” he replied trying to keep the obvious relief from his voice.

“You had merely scratched it,” she retorted defiantly. Then she smiled. “Now will you pull up these damn cables my arms are getting tired.”

“Oh, NOW you want my help.” Sebastian steadied his four back legs firmly on the tiled flooring and placed his third pair holding the gap where the lifts doors had once opened and closed. He then leant as far forward as he dared and extended a lone ‘arm’ outwards curling it around as many of the cables as he could. They felt thin and papery beneath his sensors. Gently he pulled them up and grabbed more with his free arm. Slowly he lifted Kassi upwards.

“A little faster would be appreciated. I feel as though I’m carrying a rucksack full of gold coins.”

“It’s the centrifugal force. We’re closer to the outer circumference of Ah’kis here and so the spin is faster causing our weight to increase,” he replied in-between each handful of cable. One splintered under his grip and he paused.

“Are we okay?” she asked.

“Perhaps if you clung to the shaft itself, and I came down to you.”

“No. The walls here look like crap and besides the dwarf-in-a-mech-suit damaged so much on his long fall. I’m not sure they would take my weight let alone yours.”

“Are you saying I am fat?” he asked trying to keep her mind off the situation.

She smiled again. “You could do with losing a couple of kilos.”

He pulled her higher, methodically checking each strand of cable as he did so. She was over half way, and then three quarters. Then twenty feet to go. He felt optimistic. And that was when the cable five feet above Kassi unravelled painfully slowly. He called out. Tried to admonish the cable. Demanded that it stop at once but a second cable split and then a third. After what had seemed years but was in fact a handful of seconds all the cables split and the

young woman plunged down into the shadows. He saw her flail at the wall to her left, catch it only for the rim of metal to crumble under her fingers. She bounced once off the wall and then was enveloped in darkness. To her credit she did not scream.

{KASSI!} he cried out telepathically but there was no reply. Long echoing sounds, some soft some metal upon metal, rumbled upwards. Sebastian could picture the shaft reaching down a mile or more towards the Arks outer surface. He could picture the girl speeding up as ‘gravity’ increased and she was flung harder and harder ‘downwards’.

{Kassi!} he called out again into the silence.

How long he sat there on the edge of the shaft Sebastian had no idea. His positron infused spongium brain contemplated various scenarios. The two were telepathically connected but as Kassi had never died before he could not tell if he would sense the girl’s death or not. Was she lying somewhere down there bled out and twisted or was she still alive? At the least he needed to confirm his worst fears. But it was more than a desire to know that would drive him downwards. The flood of emotions washing over him ensured that.

The sound of a dwarf rousing himself from unconsciousness stirred the mechanoid. Sebastian’s sensors could reach only a few hundred meters down due to the debris which clustered in the shaft and from them there was no sign of Kassi. Instead he sent out a high pitched call at the edge of human hearing and sensed the returning sounds as echolocation building a picture of the deep shaft. Still it did not show where the girl was. For some reason he thought to call it Murdock vision but couldn’t really say why. He switched the light off.

Picking his way carefully across the corridor he first struck the dwarf again rendering him unconscious and then went in search of Kassi. The walls of the shaft were decrepit and seemed unlikely to hold the mechanoid’s weight. This meant finding another way downwards. Three females turned a corner before him and for a second he had hoped to avoid them in the pitch darkness but somehow the three women sensed him and two drew short swords and ran at him silently. He dodged both whilst deducing that they too must use this Murdock Vision as a form of radar to sense the world around them.

He tripped one disarming her as she tumbled forward and used the sword to defend himself from the second’s attack. The third woman ran at him snarling; twin stilettos in her hands. He pivoted much like he had seen Kassi do swinging a coiled ‘arm’ across the woman’s forehead dropping her to the ground instantly. Two more jabs and the other women were also unconscious.

He found a door, stiff with age, that led to a series of steps both up and down. He followed the stairs downwards for seven flights before rubble forced him back into the corridors inhabited by the dwarfs. Here the corridor was wide and low with sets of double doors spaced evenly along each side. There was a warm scent of soil and vegetation which drew him towards the first set of doors.

Inside he noted that the room was at least three floors high and ran the length of the corridor. Hundreds of square metres of agriculture. Slowly he climbed a wall and viewed the vast warehouse. Dim light from a bioluminescence moss filled the huge hanger sized space. Soil had been brought down—or up; soil was after all merely broken down rock and there was plenty of THAT around—and under a dim light wheat—or something similar—grew. From

above Sebastian could see the thin diaphanous husks as they swayed under some imagined breeze.

The room was very warm and he wondered if the plants had been genetically altered to take energy from heat rather than sunlight. Each plant was almost translucent and Sebastian could even see the transpiration streams move water and nutrients upwards. In truth he had never considered what the dungeon dwelling dwarfs ate. Most likely in the initial aftermath of the impact upon the Ark—or The Quake as it was known Ah'kis-wide—many groups fearing a coming apocalypse felt that the safest place was 'underground'; as it were. Setting up crops that could grow without the sunline made sense. It was probably not their intent to spend so many lifetimes below that the higher gravity forced their bodies into the compact albino forms seen today.

Sebastian recalled that each Ark was meant to travel 200 years at most and yet Ah'kis—Ark 6—was now almost seven thousand years into its journey. No wonder its population had forgotten earth. Even as he crossed the high vaulted ceiling he calculated that, at almost a third the speed of light, the Ark was around 2000 light years from home. Somehow that caused a tune to echo in his mind but for the life of him he could not work out why.

Two men, short and in loincloths of rough linen crossed the field, guns slung over their shoulders. Sebastian froze, waiting for them to pass beneath him. They stopped and before Sebastian could react had swung each weapon up towards him. He scuttled as best he could but the dwarves appeared to know exactly where he was and two bullets slammed into his skin. He dropped, turning mid-air and curling into the 'Hemisphere of death' landed on the first dwarf heavily, knocking him out. The second managed one more round which skidded across Sebastian's back before he too lay unconscious.

Sebastian dropped his gait until he was barely skimming the soil and moved quickly. An intake of protein—often in the form of milk—would enable him to repair the scratches on his back and he needed to find the girl quickly. Shouts echoed behind him as he crossed the large hanger and entered a second with more translucent crops; this time barley. A third hanger held row upon row of stunted fruit trees, apples, pears and grape but no dwarfs. He found a side door welded shut by age and delicately pried it open. More stairs.

Shutting the door as best he could the mechanoid scrambled down the walls vertically, jumping when he thought it safe and skirting those sections that looked fragile. He risked using his lamp on its dimmest setting aware that to the dwarfs it would be a beacon flaring. Still his only thought was on the girl. He still could not sense her telepathically nor was he even aware in which direction she was. He told himself that this was because he was worried. That the masonry and metalwork that held much of the Ark together blocked their connection. This close to the outer surface the rock was undoubtedly threaded with thick coils of polysteel. He wondered if perhaps one of the nodes that facilitated telepathy was on the fritz scrambling all communication. At each thought a hundred or more reasons why it could or could not be swirled around his mind causing even more distraction.

Half a mile down, he stepped into yet another corridor. It could have been any of the million or so miles of them threaded through and around the five thousand mile length of the Ark. A faded plastic sign said Level C001 could have meant a hundred things. Most likely this was one of the outer corridors closer to the exterior of the Ark—or at least its large reservoir of water that protected the population from radiation. For a second Sebastian had a sense of

nostalgia. Only another half a mile or so and he could be outside again where he—initially—belonged. Away from the heavy pull of the world as it spun around the sunline so far above.

Shaking the feeling off, he continued onwards. His pathway and the image he had formed of the shaft held in his mind's eye, creating a detailed map that told him exactly where he was. Coming to a junction he turned left. A large mech, with a tiny dwarf, stood before him. Both looked surprised but Sebastian was the first to recover and even as the mech fired his 50ml rounds the mechanoid had disabled the mech's main electronics and hydraulic liquid was spilling freely across the stone tiled floor. The mech crashed to the floor trapping the dwarf within.

Sebastian hurried along driven to the lift shaft down which Kassi had fallen. Finally he sensed her, the soft touch of her mind a hundred metres to his left. He hurried, the sense of relief almost overwhelming him. In truth he was still concerned. Neither of them fully understood how their telepathy worked. A Sigh—a scientist—had rewritten part of his code four years previous¹—and Kassi appeared to be a natural telepath as were a number of the original crew of the vessel. But as to how they communicated or even sensed each other's direction or moods was a complete mystery. It was not outside the realm of possibilities that his friend lay dead and all he sensed were the dying embers of her mind. But THAT thought he tried to bury deep.

He came to the lift shaft but it was blocked by rubble. He sensed that Kassi was two floors up and there was a convenient stairwell next to the lifts. He hurried up the two flights of steps and stopped. The wall between the stairwell and the lift shaft was shattered and fresh rubble lay around. With trepidation Sebastian eased his body over the collapsed inner wall and peered down at the body of his friend.

If he had need to breathe then a long nervous breath would have escaped from deep within. He sensed the girl's thoughts, a jumble of pain and fear, and felt such elation that he almost danced for joy!

"You'd only ... move like a Troll ... with half... its servos clogged up," a frail, dry voice said faintly.

"You're alive!" Sebastian said without thinking.

"Of course. Death would be less painful." She tried to sit up but cried out in pain.

"Let me examine you," he said gingerly crawling down the rubble to her side. He considered what he could do. X-ray vision would be useful around now or a fully stocked emergency room. Instead he had a scanner built on ultrasonics and useful for testing the exterior bits of the Ark. But...

Sebastian reset his inbuilt scanner and tried it on Kassi. A slight change to a section of algorithm and he could 'see' her bones, and the nasty fracture of her right femur; as well as a numerous cracks along the one side of her ribs.

"All this way down and all you have is a broken leg?" he said incredulously.

¹ See ['Kassi and the Sword.'](#)

Kassi shifted uncomfortably and replied. "I can always die here and now for you if you like."

"No. I meant..."

She placed a grubby hand over one of his limbs. "I caught the odd cable and brick work but the bloody things just crumbled in my hands. All I received for my action was a slam against the side. After that it's pretty cloudy. I think I landed on something but still kept moving." She shook her head—the only part of her that didn't cause her any pain. "How that's possible I haven't got a clue."

Sebastian looked at the rubble around her and underneath them. "From the looks of things you landed on one of the lifts cars and that slid down the rest of the shaft. Looks like its inertia brakes still worked after seven thousand years."

"Well YOU work after all that time," Kassi replied winching at each word.

He gently touched her cheek with his front 'arm'. "I'll need to splint your leg or else moving will be painful for you." He gathered steel rods that looked sturdy enough and some plastic clothe which he tore into strips.

She gasped and tried to smile through the winch. "It can't be any more painful than breathing."

Her breath misted in the air and Sebastian realised how cold it suddenly had become. In a micro second he had calculated their position in respects to the Ark and he 'saw' that the large gash along the south end of the vessel was close by. Although no interior damage had occurred millennia ago—other than the fact that its two hundred year mission had become unending—heat was obviously escaping which did explain the recent ice fields developing at the southend.

"You have your sciencey face on," Kassi said between wheezes gently stroking the collection of wires and tubes that made up Sebastian's neck.

"Sciencey is not a word."

She pulled a face of her own, tinged with pain.

"I'm sorry," he said, emotionless.

"For what?"

He pulled her broken leg, straightening it. Kassi screamed once and fainted with the pain.

"For that." Sebastian muttered as he bound her leg in steel and tied it to her right leg.

There was a sound from above. Without turning he could sense two dwarfs peer over the edge of the lift shaft above them. Four of his limbs independently sought out rubble and almost casually threw it at the men. Each struck home rendering both of them unconscious.

He could hear more dwarfs scurrying down towards them so hurried as he wove a frame of steel with more plastic cloth and placed the young women gently onto it. He then secured her and the frame to his back and began to climb up the lift shaft. The cold had begun to break the concrete and steel. It crumbled under his touch but with care—and much too slowly for his liking—he found secure patches of wall and ascended. Voices sounded far below them but he thought that the dwarfs would not use their rifles in the pitch darkness of the shaft despite their excellent night vision. They did though and a number of bullets pinged around the narrow shaft. A section of wall groaned and slowly rumbled out of its place and fell onto the dwarfs below.

‘Never shoot fish in a rock solid barrel where the bullets can ricochet,’ Sebastian thought.

Sebastian stopped and braced himself against the frame of a door and used four of his limbs to open them. It was warmer now the chill of space was far below. Two dwarfs stood facing him long—for them—swords in hand. He lay Kassi down gently and curved up and around the walls of the corridor in a second before the two could react. He dropped on them spinning around two limbs stiffly out and knocked both unconscious. More shouts could be heard echoing all around them.

“Get me my back pack.” Kassi’s voice was weak and frail. She added stiffly. “I can protect your back.” Handing her the bag Sebastian picked up the litter and carried onwards. He heard her mutter a few choice words as she armed her crossbow. Behind him he sensed a dwarf step out but before he could act the bow sounded and the figure dropped to the floor. Kassi wound the string back.

A dwarf in full mech gear stepped before them, his helmeted head scrapping the ceiling of the corridor. Without pausing Sebastian dropped Kassi’s litter and with one swift movement he ran up and over the mech dismantling parts as he did so. The dwarf tried to fire his rifle but Sebastian caught the barrel and aimed it upwards. There was an explosion of sound and light and then a flutter of shredded ceiling tiles. Sebastian hit the dwarf hard on the nose and the mech dropped to its knees before keeling over.

He picked up the litter and moved forward searching for a set of lifts to the surface. He heard Kassi’s crossbow twice more before a likely set of doors came into view. Four dwarfs stood in his way, two with ancient rifles.

{ Things may get rough. } he sent.

{ This has been smooth!?! }

Sebastian brought up half his body to protect the girl and ran forward the still carrying the girl behind. The gun wielding dwarfs fired once each, leaving deep indentations on what could possibly be called his chest. A third shot went wild as Sebastian reached the dwarfs and ploughed through them. Setting Kassi down, he spun, catching one gun-dwarf on the side of his head. A sweep of limbs pulled a second dwarfs feet from under him. Two short jabs and both were no longer a problem.

The two remaining dwarfs stepped back hesitantly. Sebastian leapt upwards, caught hold of the ceiling and swung behind them. Before either could react he was down and slamming

both their heads together. A bolt slipped past his head finding a fifth dwarf trying to sneak up on the mechanoid.

“I did see him luv,” he said huffily.

“Never doubted it, Sebastian.” Kassi began to gasp.

“Let us hope that the Founders hospital is close by with a full complement of Watch Mothers,” he said.

“It’s just ... harder ... to breathe with all ... this extra gravity,” Kassi replied slowly. “Still; you’ve kept on at me ... for ages to put some weight on.” She smiled wanly.

Sebastian tore the lift doors open and pulled Kassi and the litter onto his back.

“Hardee-bloody-har,” he replied with a hint of sarcasm.

He pulled on the cables which appeared in better condition than their brethren below and hurried upwards. Below muffled shouts echoed and he heard the scramble of dwarfs running towards them but he was up and climbing the cables deftly Kassi in tow before any reached them. Seven hundred metres he climbed never tiring. At the top he forced more doors open and was rewarded with sunlight. Had they only been gone eight hours? Even by Sebastian’s super quick memory the day had passed quicker than usual. He lay for a second alongside Kassi, who took the opportunity now to puke, and drank in the warmth of the sunline. Perhaps he could persuade the girl NEVER to venture underground again; but somehow he doubted it.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 9

I had drifted off for only a moment, it seemed, when I heard again the key turn in the lock. I had expected Kasimir's return, but instead was presented with a monster.

An ancient man dressed in a black suit with tails, wearing white gloves, bearing a silver tray on which perched a slender crystal cup. The crystal held a transparent green fluid.

My heart pounded and my limbs felt numb beneath the bed covers as the man approached. Candle light flickered across his visage, and I easily saw the anomaly of his face.

He had no eyes.

Sunken depressions of stretched, blue-veined skin covered the form of his skull beneath, his brows angular and pronounced, so that whenever he moved too far from the candle light, shadows sank into the pits where his eyes should have been. Lipless and a jutting chin, a strong line to his bony jaw.

Without the assistance of a cane, his slow, measured steps brought him to the side table next to my pillow. With precision, his hand lifted the crystal cup and sat it onto the table, disturbing not even a dust mote, and missing my volume of Goethe.

"Master Kohl felt a medicinal would assist your healing and rest, sir," he said as he stood at erect height over me, the tray held against his chest.

"Uh ... thank you," my voice uttered after a lump held in my throat dropped into my stomach.

"I am Gustav, sir, Master Kohl's manservant. I attend to all the duties of the Castle Ouroboros and have done so since the late Master Kohl, Senior."

"I see. Thank you for your care, Gustav. I'll assume it was you who brought my bags from the foyer into my chamber?"

"Yes, sir. I hope all is to your liking."

"Yes, thank you." I couldn't keep myself from staring into the depths of his eyeless eyes. I burned with curiosity. All I was able to do, however, was to clear my throat before he answered my unasked question.

"I realize my appearance is discombobulating to many, sir, but please do not be alarmed. I am well-acquainted with the structural dimensions of the entire castle down to the placement of every candlestick. My steps have never faltered in these many decades of service."

I nodded, though I knew not why. My syllables stuttered until they found words, my eyes attempting to look away from his shadowed depths.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you’re very skilled in your duties.” My gaze wrenched to the green toddy as an escape and a new focus. “So this ... beverage is to assist my pain, is it?”

“Yes, sir,” said Gustav, turning his face precisely to gaze down at the small, hourglass-shaped cup. As though he could see it! I was astounded by his mental capacity to map every inch of the castle in his mind. The human brain truly was the most complex of all nature’s masterpieces. “It is a calming elixir with anaesthetic properties brewed by the townsfolk from a centuries-old recipe. Quite effective, I assure you, and refreshing upon waking.”

“Yes, I see.” I took up the small goblet and examined the green hue within the light of a steady candle flame. A pure liquid without a speck or grain floating in its fluid stasis. I felt somewhat apprehensive to sip it, however, having it delivered by an eyeless man. “I’m sure I shall enjoy it. Thank you, and thank Master Kohl for me. It’s been a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Gustav.”

He bowed and strode accurate steps to the door, the silver tray tucked beneath his arm. The key turned again in the lock upon his departure.

I smelled the liquid and delighted at the waft of peppermint. I tasted the brew. Delicious. The entire contents were soon warming my stomach and swimming through my veins. I extinguished the candles and felt a soothing numbness slip down my calves and tingle my feet, and a mental calm inhabited my being.

I was soon immersed in slumber. And onward came the most horrific dream.

Every book on the shelves lining my room turned to a slab of stone. The walls closed in, squeezing me into a space barely allowing me enough room in which to breathe. The air was a thick green smog, suffocating. I tore at my nightclothes until I was naked, my body burning with intolerable heat. My eyes melted into a syrup and drained down my face, my cheeks sunken, patches of my skull exposed where the skin was thinnest. And yet I could still see, could determine my surroundings down to the microscopic level. The wood grain of my bedside table, the bubbles of wax dripping down a taper shaft, dust motes forming geometric shapes in the air around me. Vermin swarmed every surface, crawled across my exposed skin.

And then Cybele was entwined around me within the stone tunnel. Also naked. Two damned lovers contained within a stone sarcophagus, limbs twisted around each like the vines of Eden, like snakes around a caduceus. Her hair swam as though underwater, tendrils swirling passed my eyes, around my neck, weaving a mesh veil across my dead eyes.

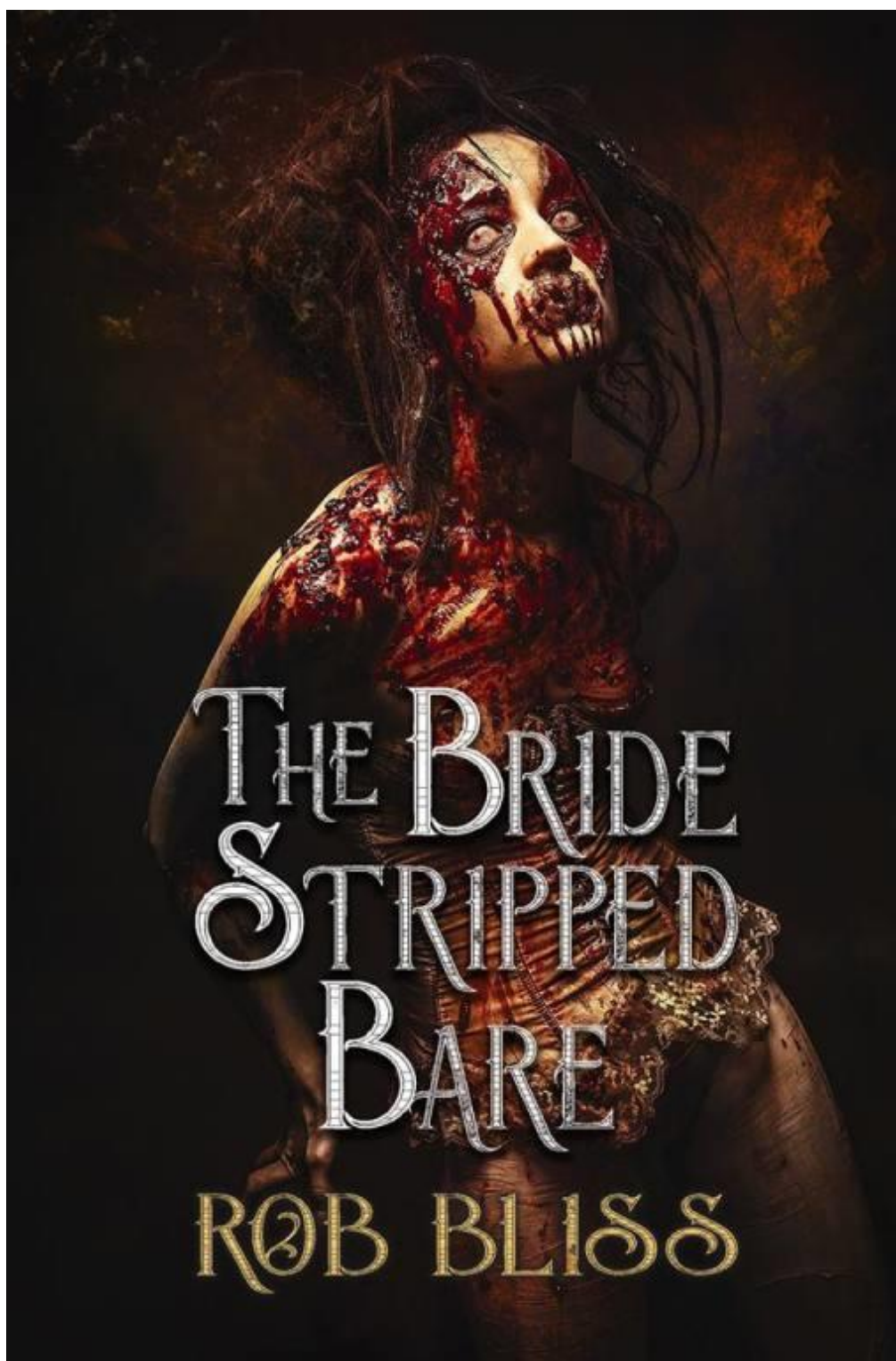
I was both in love and in libidinous ecstasy with this succubus, this queen of Thanatos. I wanted to give her my essence, to let her devour me in every way, to take my soul to whichever hell or heaven in which she resided.

Staring into her eyes, I saw specks of ebony in their emerald pools, and fell deep into them. She touched the softest kiss with her rose petal lips onto my mouth. My eyes rolled back into my head and I saw the channels of my green blood flow in a raging torrent.

When I opened my eyes to behold her, her mouth had extended into a snake's maw for her to swallow me whole. I fell down an endless chasm the tint of ink, slipping down the tunnel of her ruby throat, into the surrogate womb of her essence.

I snapped my eyes awake as my heart pounded against my ribcage. A small candle flame held my stilled focus and Cybele herself leaned over me, as beautiful and seductive as she had been in my phantasmagoria nocturne.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SHAY FIELDS by Colt Leasure

1

Hobbs, New Mexico

Andrew Kurtz sat in his bedroom and read an on-line article about the disappearance of a girl he had known for years. Shay Fields had not been seen in forty eight hours. He received news of her vanishing by word of mouth around school, and was determined to find out what happened.

According to eyewitness sources, Shay was last been seen with Jason Mitchell. They were on a date and went to an abandoned railway station.

Andrew was familiar with it, knowing it to be a hangout spot for people wanting to skateboard and listen to music in the shade on sweltering days. There were urban legends about there being an underground tunnel which led to Area 51, but they were campfire stories which were never proven.

Shay did not have a strained relationship with her parents and had not spoken of plans to run away. She was popular at school with a reputation for being a valued and talented runner on the track team.

The article's ending stated authorities were going to continue to search for answers, and offered monetary rewards in exchange for the community's help with any leads.

After finishing the news piece, he stretched out on his bed and reflected on his past encounters with Jason Mitchell.

Mitchell was a loner who wore a lot of black clothing and had an interest in painters like Goya, being a dedicated illustrator with dreams of going to art school after senior year ended. Mitchell was known for spending most of his time buried in a sketchbook. Andrew suspected Mitchell had to know more than he was letting on.

A knock on his door brought him away from his thinking.

Wes Keller stood in the threshold and donned a long white lab coat with a variety of colours staining its fabric. Keller's laboratory was at the end of the hallway, a room which was off limits. The only rule of Keller's household was not to enter his working space. The chemist was hired by the government and did exclusive work for the military, the details of which Andrew was seldom given, despite being Keller's adopted son a year prior to the scientist's divorce from a Florida based lawyer who took half of everything he owned when Andrew was still a child.

"Happy Friday," Keller said. "Sorry I've been so busy. I didn't even get to ask you how your day was. How'd you do on your Biology test?"

"Well," Andrew said, knowing he was exaggerating his own confidence. News of Shay's vanishing had thrown him out of balance and limited his focus when the time for taking the exam had arrived.

“Great. Listen, I’m going to sleep now, but we’ll see a movie over the weekend, okay?”

After Keller closed the door, Andrew fetched his phone and called his best friend Russell Bayard.

“I’ve been waiting on your call,” Russell’s tired voice said. “I’m guessing you’ve heard about Shay.”

“Of course I have. Mitchell’s been cleared as a suspect. How stupid are the cops in this town? He’s one of the weirdest guys at our school, and they believe he’s innocent.”

“He could be. You ever considered how she could have witnessed cartel activity walking around the desert? I hear about it all the time, people going missing on their commute from work or a drive from the bar. They could have been doing drugs, she fell into a ditch and found a place not meant to be discovered. You can’t rule anything out.”

“Your mind’s going all over the place. You believe Shay was the type to do something illegal? Caffeine was too hard for her. Sugar kept her awake for days. How many times have you seen her drinking coffee, let alone even contemplate doing something like acid or pot?”

“Okay, good point.”

“I need your help. Come over tonight. You’re the best hacker I’ve ever met.”

“Don’t say it over the phone, man. Someone in your house works for the government.”

“Visit me.”

Russell was at his door in half an hour. They walked upstairs to his room. The two spoke in hushed tones as they went upstairs to his room.

“Wes told me a year ago he was working on a formula intended for use by the government on hard-core criminals, and those who posed a threat to our nation’s safety.”

“Why would he tell you this? Why share it and implicate me? I don’t want to get in trouble.”

“It was at dinner, he was celebrating with a glass of whiskey. His tongue was a little loose. I asked a lot of questions, about the development of what he called a truth serum. He said we’d be in danger if he told me too much. He said the drink was a lot more sophisticated than the sodium pentothal described in movies and spy novels. When I pressed him to let me have some, he flipped the table over and made me swear not to tell anyone. We can use it for a good cause if we get our hands on it.”

“Fine, but how does it involve me?”

“He has the serum in his office. It has to be completed by now. We steal it, slip it into Mitchell’s food or beverage, and confront him for the answers on where he last saw Shay. I know he’s not telling the cops everything. We can save our friend if she’s still alive. I need

you to help me. You'll black out the surveillance camera and override the code on the front of the door. I need you to crack the numerical safety net."

"Isn't he in the laboratory right now?"

Andrew stood, crept out into the hallway, and walked a dozen feet to the right, nearing the entrance to the master bedroom. He cracked the door open a notch and peered inside, not seeing Keller in bed.

He cursed under his breath and went back to his room.

"He's been working overtime," Andrew said. "He's sleeping in the laboratory."

"So it's a no go for tonight."

"Here's my idea. Tomorrow, Wes and I will grab a bite to eat. You can follow through on the plan when we're out. I'll give you my house key and notify you with a text."

"Shay's lucky we like her so much."

Russell went home and Andrew slipped into bed. He pulled the covers over his head and stared at the ceiling. He was lost in reveries about what the next step would be. A mounting anxiety rose in him, but he managed to suppress it before falling into slumber.

Andrew went downstairs to grab a can of something caffeinated after he awoke. He found a post-it note on the counter with unmistakable and blocky handwriting belonging to Wes.

It read WENT TO CANNON. DON'T KNOW WHEN I'LL BE BACK, TAKE CARE OF THE HOUSE.

Andrew knew he was talking about Cannon Air Force base. The circumstances around why were confidential and would remain so, whether it was in regards to a national crisis, an advancement of a top secret project, or a geopolitical calamity. Either way, Andrew knew it was his opportunity to get the serum.

He went back upstairs after grabbing a can from the refrigerator and called Russell.

"Now's our chance," Andrew said.

"I'll be right over."

2

Andrew stood in front of the laboratory door in the hallway, guessing which numbered buttons to press on the pad.

"Stop," Russell said with a frustrated sigh as he pulled out a black briefcase and placed it at his feet. "You have to outsmart the system or it'll lock you out as an intruder. I'll override the administrator code with a break in one, but I swear to God Andrew, you better forget my name if you're ever brought to a windowless room and asked about this, got it?"

“Of course, man. What’s in the case?”

Russell opened the leather container. Odd and unfamiliar devices were inside, along with black gloves. He handed a set over and Andrew slipped them on. Russell pulled out a tablet and touched the screen, his eyes focused on the data before him which scrolled across the surface in bright lettering.

A noise similar to a valve coming undone filled the space, and the door in front of them loosened. It cracked open half an inch.

Andrew was close to opening the door before Russell put a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait,” Russell said, pulling out one of the devices which resembled a divining rod from a bygone and superstitious age. “I need to burst the circuit board of the surveillance camera inside the lab.”

Andrew kept back for a few minutes. The sound of an electronic appliance shorting out, like a guitar amplifier dropped in a puddle, was audible to both of them.

They walked inside. The laboratory consisted of shelves filled with beakers, Erlenmeyer flasks, test tubes, tongs, racks, watch glasses, crucibles, and funnels, all of which were kept fluorescent with light poles in the ceiling. The place had a smell of acetone, burnt rubber, scorched straws and chlorine.

“How are you going to know where the serum is?” Russell asked.

“Easy,” Andrew said, going near a drawer and pulling out a row of files. “I follow the diagrams.”

“You know how to read those?”

“I know how Wes writes. He doesn’t use any kind of cryptic language, because it would confuse him too much. He might be a genius, but trust me, he’s a simple one.”

“I hope you’re right. Even if Mitchell’s implicated, we don’t want to kill him by poisoning. Not yet, anyways.”

Andrew glared at him.

“I was kidding.”

Andrew rummaged around for minutes on end through paperwork, coming across blueprints, flow charts, and equations.

“Over here,” Russell said, pulling out a piece of paper the size of an average movie poster. On it was a square of fine print. Over the top of it was a bold heading which read CANDOR.

“It describes the serum as reddish orange,” Russell said.

Andrew gazed at the drawing and saw it hinted at being in a closet. He searched the perimeter before finding an unmarked door with a crack on its front.

“You don’t happen to have a crowbar in your bag, do you?”

Russell exited the room to search through his pack, and walked back in with a baton which had a forked end. They pried the hidden access open.

They stood before a desk propped against the wall of the closet’s interior. It a row of potions stacked to resemble the shape of the pyramid, and at the top of it was a pomegranate coloured liquid in a vial with a cork. Below it was a note in Keller’s unmistakable and blocky handwriting. It read CANDOR.

“This has to be the serum,” Andrew said as he lifted the vial it from its makeshift stand.

Alarms went off in the house.

“How can we kill the noise?” Andrew asked.

“I’ll have to access the mainframe. Give me a minute.”

Russell went out into the hall and tapped the screen of his tablet. Watching Russell crack the system reminded him of video games where you had to sync correct patterns with the right numbers in order to complete a mission, a type of playing style Russell was far better at than he was.

The blaring stopped. A dead silence followed, and the two stared at each other with relief.

A loud knock on the first level’s front door caused them to jump.

Andrew peered out the hallway window onto the street below and saw a dark blue uniformed police officer on the porch. The man’s hand was on the hilt of his gun. A street lamp at the end of the walkway made his badge shine.

“I’ll talk to him,” Andrew said.

“What are you going to tell him?”

“I tripped the system on accident. Hide.”

Andrew walked down the steps, straightened out his shirt and answered the door.

“Hello, officer.”

“Do you live here? Where are your parents?”

“I do, and they’re dead.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I mean they didn’t die tonight or anything. They’ve been dead for a long time. My adoptive father is a man named Wes Keller, but he’s out of town right now on a business trip, so he left the house to me.”

“I know Wes Keller,” the Officer said, folding his arms. “I see him at community meetings every now and again. Tell me, how did the alarms go off?”

“I locked myself out of the house. I got back from the theatre with my friends, and when I figured out I left my key in my room, I broke in.”

“I don’t see any signs of forced entry.”

“I picked the lock.”

“Good skill to have. I doubt Wes taught you.”

“You can learn almost anything on You Tube nowadays, and I was close enough to use the Wi-Fi on my phone. All it took was a paper clip and a pocket knife.”

“Huh. What’s in your hand? You’re not old enough to drink booze, kid.”

Andrew was still holding the red coloured serum. The cop’s flashlight beam struck it, making it radiant.

“Energy shot,” Andrew said. “From a gas station a few blocks from here.”

“You might want to quit those. They’re not healthy.”

“It’s organic. I made it myself.”

“All right,” the cop said after putting his flashlight back in its holster. “I’ll be moving on. You can guess some of the neighbours were concerned when they heard the alarms going off. Nice meeting you, tell Wes I said hi when you see him. Have a great evening.”

The cop went to his patrol vehicle and drove away.

As Andrew was about to close the door, he saw a figure standing near the street light. The stranger wore a black suit and puffed on a cigarette. The man stepped into a black SUV and sped off.

3

Andrew and Russell sat in a red leather booth in the back of the Wilder café, a diner across the street from the Baymont hotel. Night had arrived, and they had a view of headlights passing by outside near the restaurant’s neon sign. They ordered burgers, onion rings, and cherry colas as a celebratory way of acknowledging their successful last minute heist.

Andrew patted the vial in his pocket and contemplated how much power he had at his disposal.

“What if the man was an agent?” Russell asked while dipping a French fry into a side of thousand-island dressing.

“Could be, but he didn’t approach us, so we know he doesn’t have a case. He would have talked to us by now if he did. He could be watching us.”

“Him stalking us doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it does, but we did this to find out what happened to Shay. Minor setbacks can’t stop us.”

“Being under surveillance by the government is a minor setback?”

“Everybody’s under surveillance all the time.”

“Fair. We should have considered this earlier, but when Wes gets back, how are you going to explain the damaged camera to him?”

“He won’t know we did it. Cameras malfunction. I’ll have to organize his lab tonight so he won’t know about anybody messing around in there. I’ll fill his vial with cranberry juice and return it before he gets back. Let’s focus on getting Mitchell to take the serum.”

Russell took another bite of his food and leaned back in the booth, folding his arms and staring at Andrew.

“I’m anxious. Sorry if I’m snappy.”

“I’m used to you being moody,” Russell said as he pulled out a folded piece of paper and slid it across the table.

“What’s this?”

“Jason Mitchell’s route after he’s done with school. He rides his skateboard from campus to his house on this path every single day, except for the rare occasions he’ll bum a ride. He buys an Alpine Thunder lime soda at the Solar Goods gift shop every evening like clockwork. We slip it into the pop behind the clerks back, and we approach him after he leaves. We ask him questions he’ll be left with no other choice but to answer.”

“Are there surveillance cameras?”

“They only have one, and it’s on the cash register.”

“Let me buy you a couple root beer floats,” Andrew said with a smile.

It was a sun scorched Monday afternoon when the two went into the Solar Goods gift shop. The place was a single story building with a jade roof on a town block with nothing but a car wash, a motel, and a deli.

The store made its living off of two kinds of customers, the first being conspiracy theorists who were deep in studying the Roswell incident, and the second being the locals who wanted to buy liquor.

Andrew had been in the shop before, but forgot how much alien-related paraphernalia there was on sale. Glow-in-the-dark glass figurines of green ETs lined the shelves, their bulbous heads and wide black cavernous eyes peering at him, resembling pictures he had seen of modernized Miller brand alien toys of the 1950s. It reminded him of nights when he would spend time studying Ufology by watching interviews with people like Dr. Steven Greer and Bob Lazar.

He peered over at the front counter. The clerk went into the back and plucked new items to re-stock parts of the place. When the employee was out of sight, he turned to Russell.

“You’re positive this is the only kind of soda he buys?”

“I’ve never seen him buy another brand at school.”

“Here it goes.”

Andrew neared the refrigerated partition filled with cans of fizzy carbonation. He got his hands an Alpine Thunder plastic bottle. Its liquid resembled melted radioactive emeralds. He undid the cap and poured some of the serum in and re-twisted the covering back on, before placing it in its original spot.

In order to avoid suspicion and leave Mitchell with no other choice, they both purchased the remaining Alpine Thunders.

They walked across the street and stood in an alleyway next to a vacant building, keeping their sight on Solar Goods, waiting for their intended target to walk inside.

Jason Mitchell skated to the front of the store before stepping on the tail of his board, kicking it upwards and tucking it under his arm before entering the establishment.

Russell dropped the grocery bag full of soda on the concrete and uncapped them.

“We’re never going to finish all these,” Andrew said.

“Don’t dare me,” Russell shot back before he guzzled the first one. “How long will it take before the serum kicks in?”

“I don’t know. It should be instantaneous. We’ll find out.”

They hid in the alleyway behind a dumpster.

Mitchell was sipping on the soda when he exited. The bottle was half consumed.

They jumped out and ran across the street before he could get on his board again. They stood on both sides of him.

Andrew gripped Mitchell by the lapels and pushed him into the alleyway between the gift shop and the car wash. Russell acted as the lookout, peering around the corner for any passing witnesses.

“What happened to Shay Fields? I need to know where you last saw her and what she was doing.”

“It was at the empty train station,” Mitchell said while raising his arms, the soda still in the grip of his right hand and the board in the other. “She went onto the flying disk we found in the desert near the tracks.”

Mitchell’s eyes bulged in terror, surprised at the words escaping his mouth. He retaliated and swung his skateboard at Andrew. They both hit the ground. The Alpine Thunder soda fizzed out onto the concrete after having been knocked from Mitchell’s grip.

The liquid sopped onto Andrew’s hands. Andrew tried to control his opponent by bending Mitchell’s fingers before an elbow struck him on the cheek.

Russell came over and flattened Mitchell out, wrapping his arms around Mitchell’s torso to try and maintain control with a grapple.

“Why didn’t you tell the cops about the flying disk?” Andrew said. He ran hand over his face to see if any blood was leaking out before he found it was dry.

“I did,” he said. “The feds told me to stay quiet about it. She walked into the beam of light coming from the disk, and seemed happier than I’d ever seen her before. I couldn’t stop her. There was nothing I could do to make her come back.”

The alleyway darkened after the sun was blocked out by an SUV parking at the end of the lane. Men in suits hopped out.

What happened next was a blur. Mitchell had his hands folded behind his back after getting tackled, and was pushed against one of the brick walls and told to not move. Andrew was placed on his side before his hands were locked in cuffs. Russell escaped the alleyway, although Andrew was concerned with the distance he achieved.

“You’re coming with me,” one of the suits said, lifting Andrew and taking him to the black vehicle.

4

They drove from the highway to a military hangar and tarmac air strip on the outskirts of the town. When they approached the facility, the car parked at the side of the road before one of the men came around and put a blindfold on him.

The vehicle sped for another few blocks before it came to a standstill. The muzzle of a gun poked in his side as he heard a door open.

“Step out. Do as we say and you won’t get hurt. No sudden movements.”

Andrew kicked his feet out before stepping onto the pavement as the acrid stench of diesel fuel bombarded his nostrils. Following their instructions, he walked with them. The breeze coming off the mountains was no longer noticeable to his senses after a half hour, which caused him to believe he was indoors.

The clanging of a metal door sounded like the crashing of a drum cymbal as he was pushed through another threshold. His arm banged against the frame.

Two hands landed on his shoulders and repositioned him. A pat down was performed, searching for weapons or something illicit. He knew they would find the vial, which was taken away from him a half minute later.

“Should we take his cuffs off?”

“Sure, he’s not going anywhere.”

The restraints were removed.

“Sit,” a gruff voice said.

He was led a few steps before a chair hit the back of his legs.

Andrew’s blindfold was slipped off as he was forced to take a seat. He was in a colourless room. There was a metal table, a pitcher of water with two half-filled glasses on both sides of the slab, and a grey ceiling fan covered in dust. The walls had a bluish tinge.

“I am agent Phillips with the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” the man said, sitting down while he sipped from a Styrofoam cup of coffee. “Don’t try anything stupid, because there will be consequences. Don’t fight me, spit on me, or get smart with me. Understood?”

“Yes sir.”

The agent focused on the vial and placed it between them. “What’s in there?”

“I don’t know.”

The agent glared at him like a predator does its meal, and signalled at the two other agents to leave the room.

While Phillips’s back was turned and the other suits exited, Andrew dipped his finger in the glass furthest away from him, hoping the sticky residue of Alpine Thunder would dissipate in the liquid. He brought his fingers out of the glass and folded his arms on the table.

The agent turned around again to gaze at his subject, and stared into Andrew’s eyes.

“Listen, young man, you come from an unusual household. I know what your guardian does for a living. We’ve all met him. He’s a significant contributor to our cause. My Dad was a lead CIA Security Officer, so I can relate to you. Men like the ones who raised us are often introverted, but the information they have can slip. If you know about something you shouldn’t, now is the time to say so, otherwise deceit will put you in a worse situation.”

The agent drank from the water glass.

“Am I under arrest or am I being detained, agent Phillips?” Andrew asked.

“You’re detained. Our probable cause is thin. We wanted to get you for juvenile disorderly conduct to make it seem as though our actions in regards to holding you were for the sake of delinquency prevention, but there was zero chance of it sticking since the street fight was mutual combat at best, and Jason Mitchell is not wishing to press charges at this time. Since you’re not an adult, any misdemeanour we try to slap on you has a small survival rate.”

Phillips’s reaction to the words escaping his lips were akin to Mitchell’s earlier, complete shock and horror at his own lack of inner censorship.

“Do you have irrefutable evidence I’ve broken the law?”

“I know you have, but I can’t prove it without a confession, which is why we’re here.”

“If I were to leave right now on the promise I won’t hire a lawyer and charge you with false imprisonment of a minor, would any harm come to me?”

“No, although we will continue to survey and monitor you, waiting for a slip or to engage in any suspicious activity we can construe as treason.”

“I’ll be going. By the way, the disappearance of Shay Fields at the abandoned train station outside of Hobbs, did it involve extra-terrestrials, and if so, why?”

A frantic shuffling of footsteps pattered outside the room. Andrew knew his time was limited.

“She was abducted,” Phillips said while wiping sweat from his brow, “but she’s happier with them than she was on earth. The aliens extract adrenaline from the human body to further their own experimentations in regards to improving hyper athleticism. Their bodies need adrenaline, but their foreign anatomical forms can’t produce it the way ours does. They like to take their subjects from isolated locations. This is why they study the Olympics, because they view those events as a feast.”

An agent walked into the room and pulled Phillips out by the collar.

Another agent with a much bigger physical stature walked in, wearing a soft wool Italian luxury suit. His clothes were accompanied by a glinting watch made of dark tinted glass shimmering in the dim light of the room.

“You’re fortunate your fake Dad is who he is,” the stranger said. “We will allow you to leave this place, albeit blindfolded. If you quote any of what happened here today on a blog, social media, or even hint at it in a private email, you will disappear. We’re being generous to you and Mr. Keller at this point. Is that clear?”

“Nothing happened,” Andrew said.

They blindfolded him again, placed his wrists in handcuffs, and led him back to the SUV.

Later the next day, Andrew got on his bike and rode out to the desert, passing by arid mesas and climbing the high plains as his clothes were covered in dust blown by the relentless winds.

He pulled out his cell phone and called Russell.

“Are you okay?”

“I was worried about you, man. Who were those people?”

“It’s a long story. Meet me tonight at the abandoned train station. Also, what happened to Mitchell?”

“I saw him today at school. He was fine but a little rattled when I ran into him. He didn’t want to talk to me.”

“At least he’s not in a secret prison somewhere. See you soon.”

He pedalled on a path lined on both sides with cherry tinged flower cacti. The outline of the station was in the distance.

When he neared it, he rode inside and parked his bike near what used to be a ticket selling booth. The train station resembled the interior of a cathedral without glass, its circular ceilings curving in a crescent shape like a half moon towards the ground level. The tracks were diminished with rust.

It was an hour before Russell arrived.

“Follow me,” Andrew said, walking out towards the back of the building, where there was nothing but rolling mounds of dirt with pinyon-juniper woodlands beyond it.

Andrew told Russell about his experiences with the G-men.

“You sound like a crazy person,” Russell said.

“Oh, so I’m imagining it?”

“No, I don’t believe that. I wish I could.”

“If what the big boss said about the extra-terrestrials needing our adrenaline is true, it explains all those drug addicts who report abductions. Meth users weren’t lying or hallucinating. Their heart was racing when they summoned the space travellers without meaning to, and the aliens made contact knowing their abductees would be called unstable when they recounted their story. I want them to come to us.”

“How do you aim to achieve this? I’m not using drugs.”

“There’s a safer way of getting adrenaline going.”

“I’m also not doing any crazy jump stunts, man. You’re not turning me into Johnny Knoxville.”

“What if Shay is still out there somewhere?” Andrew asked while pointing at the lowering sun. “We can summon her. Let’s fight each other to bring them here.”

“What? Now you’re off the deep end.”

Andrew struck Russell in the face.

The hacker took a few steps back and pivoted when Andrew went for a second punch. They ended on the ground, rolling around on the desert earth.

Andrew moved off after a kick impacted the back of his leg, deciding it was safer to reset and attempt a standing fight.

As he regained his footing, Russell stood and stared at him. The two circled each other with their fists up, and Andrew landed a hard right jab on Russell’s temple before his friend performed an uppercut beneath his jaw.

Before the momentum of the fist could send Andrew stumbling backwards, he hooked his knuckles into Russell’s nose. A couple streams of scarlet stained the dirt between them.

Russell lifted his leg and performed a kick at Andrew’s stomach, which made him double over. He felt an elbow crash down at the top of his skull. He clawed the earth in an attempt to get up, when Russell’s sneaker swung in his right peripheral. Andrew put up his forearm to block it, and gripped Russell’s ankle with his other hand, twisting as hard as he could until he went down, a cloud of dirt swirling around both.

“It’s not working,” Russell said while he swung his arm around Andrew’s neck and accomplished a headlock.

A green radiating luminosity surrounded them. The stones and pebbles on the ground aligned in unusual shapes, as if they were telekinetically forming tetrahedrons by the hands of an invisible deity. The firmament above resembled a solarium with dissipated metallic clouds.

Andrew’s body lifted, as if a giant marionette’s strength were guiding him by string pulling.

He was surrounded by flashing lights, consoles, and cylindrical corridors made of steel and obsidian.

At the end of the large space was a girl in a silver dress, smiling at them with open arms.

“Shay?” Andrew asked, before he ran towards her. He said her name again even louder.

“I’m never going back,” she said with a feathery voice.

The place crumbled around them like blocks of simulated text dropping from a computer screen, and the two were back in the high plains, lying on the ground surrounded by rocks.

“Never again please,” Russell said after spitting out blood into thistle.

“I whooped you bad.”

“Keep dreaming. I’m not the one with a bump on his forehead. I snuck you with a hard elbow.”

Andrew ran his fingers over the rough abrasion above his eyes and knew it would be sore for weeks. He stood and helped Russell to his feet.

The two stared out at the rolling hills of cacti and brush, the empty transit spot, and the rocks arranged into witchy glyphs.

“We’re never getting her back,” Andrew said, staring at his shoes.

Russell’s hand went on his shoulder. “It’s what she wants. Forcing her to come back would only make her mad at us.”

The sun lowered as both of them walked towards their bikes, the stars above a phosphorescent blanket of unlimited reminders that others lived in the cosmos.

Andrew walked to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee the next morning, rubbing his eyes after a night of decent rest.

Wes Keller sat on the couch in front of their seventy inch flat screen TV, and turned around.

“What happened?”

“I got into a fight on my way to buy a soda,” Andrew lied.

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I said something to provoke it. I’m fine.”

Keller’s face gave away how he did not believe the story despite wanting it to be true.

“It’s good to be home,” Wes said, flipping through the channels until he landed on the news. “I’m glad you’re alright. By the way, you might want to see this.”

The executive of the Department of Defence was having a press conference. Reporters filled the room like a jury wanting to hear a judge’s final decision. The public was stunned at the recent sightings of UFOs in the sky, in places like New Mexico, Arizona, and the Sierra Nevada’s, and journalists were there to get answers.

Andrew recognized him right away as the boss he had met in the interrogation room.

“I was with Greg Dumont over the weekend,” Wes said. “I’m sick of all the secrecy.”

Wes scanned the room, as if someone could have been there stalking them.

“I gave an extra strong version of the truth serum I told you about a while ago to Dumont on my last day at Cannon Air Force base,” Keller continued. “I doused his cigars in the formula. He has one every morning. We might have to leave the country as whistle blowers soon. Any question he’s about to be asked by the press? He’ll have no other choice but to answer.”

Andrew’s legs grew weak as he continued to watch the television screen.

A journalist grabbed the microphone.

“Are they fighter jets with the capacity to move through the air at impossible speeds, or are they extra-terrestrials?”

“I know for a fact they are aliens,” Dumont said.

Cameras flashed and a wave of shouting washed over the conference room.

THE END

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STEVEN HAVELOCK

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SCAREDY CAT by Steven Havelock

All Alan's friends and relatives were gathered in the small room to hear the reading of the will.

"And I leave all my money to..."

As the lawyer read out the name, the people gathered in the room turned white with shock.

Shit! My dad's late again. What if Jamie sees me?

A boy with jet black hair, a full head shorter than Alan, appeared from the school gates. As the boy saw him, Alan saw a smile of glee spread across the boy's features.

Oh no not again!

Alan's stomach rumbled,

I didn't have any dinner again today. Jamie took my dinner money. I feel too weak to have another fight. Not that it's much of a fight, I get beat every time.

The boy walked up to Alan and stared him in the eyes. His arm flashed out, too fast for Alan to block it.

"Ouch!" Alan cried as he was punched in the stomach.

He doubled over in pain. More pain coursed through his nose as the boy—Jamie—kneaded him in the face.

A crowd of several boys gathered around him, Alan was on the floor spitting blood from his nose and mouth.

"Kiss my feet!" shouted Jamie, as he kicked Alan in his chest, "I said kiss my feet!" he screamed again.

I can't take any more!

Alan kissed Jamie's dirty black shoes. Laughter from all the other kids rang around him.

"Pussy! Pussy!" they screamed as they suddenly dispersed.

As Alan pulled himself up, he saw his dad's car pull up to the gates.

"What happened to you?" shouted his dad as he saw his blood stained face and clothes.

Alan was grabbed by the hand and found himself being dragged to the headmaster's office. The headmaster a kindly person and Alan was fond of him.

“Go on tell him who did this to you,” said Alan’s dad.

I can’t. I just can’t. They will hit me even more.

“Go on,” said Alan’s dad.

Alan just looked down, an expression of abject misery on his face.

I just can’t.

Alan stayed silent. The silence stretched out... He saw the headmaster give his dad a look.

“If he doesn’t say who it is, there’s nothing we can do.”

A trickle of urine escaped from Alan’s trousers and made a small puddle on the floor. Alan saw an expression on his dad’s face that he would never forget to his dying days. An expression of total disgust and pity.

Many Years Later

On this dreary drizzly morning Alan stood staring at the coffin in front of him. Tears came to his eyes.

My father.

Alan was a successful computer programmer.

I set up my tech company at the age of 20, just fresh out of uni.

He remembered the look all those years ago that his father had given him in the headmaster’s office.

I’m a success, soon I will be worth billions...If only...If only my father was here to see me, but now he never will...

The tears came thick and fast.

Several Years Later

I made my first billion last week. I have people all around me but I’m lonely, so so lonely. I have no real friends...Even...Even my wife is cheating on me with my best friend.

He heard the door to his large plush mansion open.

“Hi hun,” said his wife walking into the kitchen, “How was your day?” she asked as she planted a wet kiss on his lips.

He didn't reply. He just stared down at the ground.

My best friend...

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he said, looked up and smiled his most convincing happy smile. His wife seemed placated.

"Another tough day at the office?" she asked.

"Yes." He nodded.

My best friend...I should hire a hit man...But I'm a...a...a coward.

Several Decades Later

I'm a coward. I have been a coward all my life.

It was 8 am.

The doctor will be here soon, the best doctor in the business and that money can buy. And yet even he can't stop my death...

The thought of death sent Alan's mind spinning and fear rampaged through his weak and old emaciated body.

I do not want to die! The cancer must be cured. It must be!

Six Months Later

Eventually the immortality I have searched for is in my grasp. My money has helped me buy books on the occult that most people don't even know exist. I've ordered all my staff in my mansion to take the evening off; I can't have them seeing me conjuring the Devil.

A short while later in Alan's large expansive basement. Alan had drawn a circle in chalk around himself. He read incantations from the book in his hand. His breath coming in short low gasps. Then a tall slender man dressed in a black suit and hat appeared out of the darkness.

Those eyes! They are so piercing! Can't show fear now...Got to be strong...

"What is it you want?" asked the tall man.

"My death approaches. I have inoperable aggressive cancer."

The man seemed to look bored.

“You don’t want to die, no shit.”

“I want to live forever.”

“Forever is a long time, you may live to regret it.”

“I want this! I want to be immortal! I am too scared to die.”

The tall slender man seemed to be growing taller and taller.

Those eyes are so piercing! I can’t look at them!

“Okay,” said the tall thin man, “I will grant you your desire to be immortal. At a price though.”

Alan didn’t hear the rest of the sentence; his heart was pumping and his heart racing at the thought of been immortal.

“Sign here,” said the darkly clad apparition, producing a contract and a pen.

I need this, I don’t want to die.

Sweat was dripping off Alan’s forehead. He knew he was now making the most important deal of his life.

He signed.

There. It’s done.

“...But I want to ask you a question, what animal would you like to be immortal as?”

The slender man had now grown tall enough to be touching the ceiling with his hat. Fear ran through Alan’s veins.

Am I doing the right thing? Yes...I cannot die...I must not die...

The Devil asked again, “What would you like to be immortal as, human? Or some animal?”

Alan wasn’t listening.

The look on my father’s face, all those years ago in the headmaster’s office.

“What form do you want to take?”

Alan was too much in his head now.

My dad saw me as a coward...I can’t say it...He saw me as a...

“Pussy!” he blurted out loud.

The devil's laughter rang out.

"So be it!" he said and disappeared in a blaze of bright white light.

Oh my God. What the hell have I done?

All Alan's friends and relatives were gathered in the small room to hear the reading of the will.

"And I leave all my money to..."

As the lawyer read out the name, the people gathered in the room turned white with shock.

"I leave all my money to Sammy my pet cat, who is closer to me than any of you will ever know."

THE END

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KOMBAT SEKTOR by GK Murphy

Cumbria in the mid-80s had its fair share of trends amongst youth. Football hooliganism, just like in the South of England, was also rife in the North, and in particular, few things were rarer than the Skinhead, Mod and SKA—and Rude Boy—movements. Carlisle United FC had its hands full with an ongoing hooligan epidemic, as maniacal football supporters showed up at The Park to attend most fixtures, simply to shout racist chants at black or foreign players and supporters alike. However, it was more so they attended matches in the stark hope they'd seek out this ilk in the crowd and crack some opposition skulls. It wasn't a Beautiful Game anymore. It never really had been beautiful, actually. It was a show of strength and the bland opportunity to flex communal Borough muscle—and yes, in many cases even to commit acts of assault—even murder—in the stalls, or in car parks respectively, or on the terraces themselves—because it seemed nobody was exempt from Supremacist violence and fan mischief.

Michael Bride was one such skinhead, a 22 year old with a massive chip on his shoulder, who would travel from his hometown of Whitehaven this week to support his team in their home city, Carlisle United. It was just a train ride away—perhaps two hours. The club itself discouraged hooliganism and demonized it as a plague that ought to have been distinguished round about the same era as Moses and The Ark, yet fans being fans some of them took the colourful sport far too seriously, just attending matches with the scent of new blood in their snouts.

In Whitehaven, he shared a two bedroom flat with a variety of lovers from the locale, last night having screwed a local hooker everyone in town had probably screwed at some point, Big Tracy.

Big Trace was a good fuck yet specialized in expert blowjobs, bearing in mind she was a prostitute and had plenty of practice. As some folk (mostly blokes) often joked, indeed, Trace had the skills to make every paying feller feel like a million dollars, since everyone knew she had the morbid ability to suck a golf ball through a garden-hose. She had a habit of putting the client's ball sack in her mouth and sucking that. It could be kind of painful and awkward at first but it was something which shortly turned into an extra add-on to the night's festivities, and helped transform things into ecstasy for all involved.

Last night had turned into a fucking nightmare, though.

About midnight, Michael had shot his load over her face only to infect her right eye with his frigging semen. The trouble was her own fault and nobody else's, since when she'd gone to wipe the mess off her face, she'd rubbed her eye too coarsely and this had caused the infection. It had cost Michael ten quid to pay for her to get a taxi to the nearest hospital, on top of the money he had to pay her for the pleasure of her company that Friday evening.

Never fucking again....

This morning—Saturday—he had to discuss ongoing matters in general with Olaf and Victor, his two visiting pals from Poland who were staying in the North this weekend, who so far he had only corresponded with via post or telephone, two Skins that took the entire Skinhead scene rather a bit too seriously. Like Michael, they were 'qualified' and 'able' Supremacists,

and also, in many aspects (something Michael Bride was not) overt Nazis. They had spilled their fair share of blood for the cause.

This was long before the Combat 18 firm started.

Olaf and Victor were far meaner than Combat 18. In Poland and Germany, things were done a whole lot differently to the UK because tensions there were much more stringent and compartmentalized, as shaven-soldiers strived in earnest to cleanse the townships and cities of coloured undesirables, those that were never meant to be there in the first place, who would never fit in or belong in a white man's land. Quite simply, it was not their country, and they would never be welcome.

For these cunts, the message was simple.

This morning in Michael Bride's flat in Whitehaven, Cumbria, they provided him with the info on the job he had to do in Carlisle, shared some early-morning Vodka, and departed, hugging their brother beforehand. Michael knew what he had to do at last. With any luck, he'd do it, get away cleanly, and avoid prison—a stiff sentence, fuck yes, if he was caught and brought before a judge. They'd throw away the fucking key on this one. Still, he was a 'brother' now and had to please the Poles.

It wasn't to just butcher and kill a certain black man at the Carlisle/Workington match. It was murder ANY BLACK MAN!

There was nothing too complicated about it whatsoever, in fact. One black guy at a time so that over the years these dinosaurs' fledgling organization grew and grew, and their cause expanded through Western culture and just became stronger and stronger still as their number continued to swell, mainly across Europe.

Anybody might have thought Michael Bride supported a team like Workington, having been closer to Whitehaven than Carlisle. Not so, as Carlisle was his father's side, and it only ever seemed the right thing to do in keeping with tradition as this was a key integral element in Bride's growth as a person and what made his type pillars of the community.

He was a disgrace to the Skinhead community, though.

Most local Skinheads shunned him and kept their distance. Like so many, these guys smelled a rat, they knew of his kind, so it was only right they avoided him—he was trouble in so many ways, not worth the hassle of getting involved in his communication with his friends far and wide, or his sickening activity.

Real Skinheads were good people. Yes, it was a movement, just like Mod, Punk or Goth, but it was also a peaceful movement.

Michael Bride, as it turned out, was an embarrassment.

Simply put, he had been radicalized by this neo-Nazi brigade from the darker side of Europe. These thugs were attempting to grow and expand their number by selecting and working on poor souls in the UK, since—amongst other things—this was the home of the British Bulldog and Union Jack, whilst these great statutes and ancient symbols proved a challenge to

conquer as they warped one person at a time, if this was what it took to fulfil their quota. It seemed only right for these pricks.

The Carlisle/Workington match was a disappointment and finished without any player scoring a single goal between them, while as per usual tensions on the pitch ran quite high as three players got sent off the field, two for nasty fouls, and one player who got a three-match ban for spitting in the face of the referee. And people wondered why shit like this occurred in the stands, fighting and ill temper, when these fools on the field of play behaved like spoilt brats and displayed the attitude of village idiots. If anybody needed shot, it certainly wasn't the players, but instead, the prick who labelled this sport The Beautiful Game!

Michael Bride stood by the Car Park, waiting, watching, until he saw his opportunity to make his move on the young black man who entered the toilets on the grounds' premises. It was twenty minutes after the game had finished and not a great deal of folk were about, which made life so much easier for this thuggish wannabe aggravator out to make a stand for his cause, as well as make the boys from Poland very proud.

He waited a little while and then entered the toilets.

Richard Croft never saw his killer approach him from behind. It proved far too late for meaningful response anyway, since the huge blade entered his back mere centimetres from his spine again and again in quick succession, ripping holes in his flesh while it assaulted time and time again as it crippled his central nervous system, killing this devoted football fan in seconds. Bloodied and sweaty, Bride grinned down at the dead man and said, "You never belonged here. This was never your country. You deserved to die." And then he was gone, heading down towards the nearby ravine to clean and tidy up before heading off to the station to catch the last train back to Whitehaven. At last, he'd finally done it, and hopefully not for the last time—murdered his first foreigner. Olaf and Victor would love him for this. They'd make him a General. They'd promote him to Commander of Operations.

The murder weapon was wrapped in a plastic carrier-bag and dumped in the river before heading off to the far side of town. After all, there was a train he needed to catch. He had to be quick since the City of Carlisle harboured no mystery for him anymore—just a crime scene, a place of blood and death. Michael Bride had soiled this magnificent place and no longer wished to savour the city's culture and hospitality. Never once did a thought enter his mind which alluded to his inevitable capture by the police—the manhunt and news bulletins, national and international—and his lifelong incarceration in HM Durham Prison. But the fuckers had to catch him first. So far, he'd covered his tracks and left no clues, and it was just Olaf and Victor who knew of today's slaughter.

The train reached the station exactly on time and set off on time.

As it rolled into Workington, many disembarked, leaving Michael and an elderly woman the only two passengers seated in the deserted carriage. Bride bit his lip, feeling like a cigarette so bad. The woman across the narrow aisle stared at him, making him uncomfortable and feeling somewhat in the wide open and exposed. Dressed all in black, she carried a large and morbid, black leather handbag and donned a preposterous black hat on her head.

"What the fuck do you think you're staring at, old witch?" the Skinhead sneered, and this singular tirade of brutish contempt rattled her somewhat and forced the woman into a minor

state of shock and despair. Hurriedly, the lady got to her feet and stormed off further along the carriage away from the obnoxious monster, leaving Bride the only one there—all alone.

After gazing at the countryside flashing past outside the window, albeit in the darkness of night, he swore and cursed, and suddenly began to consider matters more intensely. He reconsidered his identity as a Skinhead...as a murderer.

Michael Bride lifted his right thigh off the seat and farted loudly. “Good arse...” he said, “...yeah, it’s true in fact that a good arse speaks for itself!”

However, he didn’t laugh. Not even a smile...he appeared to have a tense, worried expression etched to his face, until the scent of his fart struck and he grimaced, wafting away the stench with his hand. “That’s one rotten statement!” he said, still unsmiling.

Suddenly, as he stared into the creeping darkness through the carriage window and the night as it flashed by, he thought of his victim. The unfortunate and deceased one would remain faceless and without identity or personality. Bride had crept up on him from behind like a coward and plunged the knife into his back, then turned and scarpered as he made his retreat. No, evidently there could be nothing brave or heroic derived in what this racist had done tonight and certainly nothing that anybody could possibly be proud of. After all, was there any pride awarded in committing murder, butchering an innocent person? Of course not—yet he did it for Country and Queen, for his Polish brothers, for the fucking cause!

As hail began to strike the carriage window, he pondered whether he would actually see Olaf and Victor again. They said they’d phone him to congratulate him on his success in a couple of days’ time. They said they would return to Cumbria to see him soon. Now, Michael had his doubts as he paused to reflect. Would he ever see these two mysterious Skinhead Poles again?

Then, here, Michael Bride took notice of something—something mind-numbingly terrifying.

The corpse pointed its finger at him accusingly, sealing the Skinhead’s fate with this one singular gesture, which was enough to make him freeze, dumbfounded and speechless.

It was the deceased young man he’d murdered in cold blood hours before.

The corpse’s eyes had yellowed and seemed somehow more bulbous and wide in their darkened sockets, as beneath, the mouth’s lips was downturned and slack. When it attempted to speak, blood drooled from between its lips, covering the front of the Workington Reds’ football shirt. The figure appeared menacing, vengeful, angered as it hovered inches about the carriage floor like a phantom of sorts, its glare one of an evil, desperate spirit direct from Hell, here to strike fear into the heart, to kill, to stop the heart of its killer, make him suffer in vast quantities. Richard Croft had returned from the dead for a reason.

Suddenly, it swooped in until it hovered closer to Michael Bride, its mouth growing elongated and wide like it was shaping a tortured, silent scream. By now, Bride’s face constricted with fear for his life. It was a portrait of doom. This thing, he knew, sought revenge—it could be the only motive. And for the first time, this heartless killer observed his victim’s face, Up until this juncture, Bride had just observed the young man from behind—in Carlisle, in the toilets—hours earlier when he stabbed him multiple times in the back, where

he thought he put him out of commission permanently. No, it wasn't meant to happen this way. Ghosts and zombies were stuff of fictitious books and movies and didn't exist in the real world, any bloody fool knew that. Yet, this wasn't true at all. His victim was here in front of him, and directly in his face—because they were face to face right now—which proved there was a definitive argument for life after death, or those that were done wrong in life, who were enabled to make a fleeting return to reality to ensure important justice was served. This zombie-like creature might have been on a fucking mission.

“Please, I’m sorry...” Bride gibbered, weeping like a baby, so frightened by the sight of this monster’s face inches away from his own.

Bride could smell the creature’s fetid breath and baulked with the scent of decomposition.

Suddenly, Croft raised its right hand towards a hysterical Michael Bride’s open, screaming mouth where it abruptly yet somewhat awkwardly forced its path inside, at first grappling with to get past his murderer’s lips and contorted face, until, after some effort, managed to enter fully at a push and bypass his teeth and tongue, and into the depths of his throat and jugular.

Shortly, Bride struggled to breathe as his airways became completely blocked. Richard Croft seemed to grin as he carried out this ordeal—still, as blood drooled and spluttered from his mouth in thick globules and dripped everywhere. Croft’s killer’s eyes bulged as he jerked every limb whilst still struggling to be free, yet despite all the effort the creature proved far too powerful and weighed too much for him, and with the escalating absence of oxygen getting to his heart and lungs, his body simply finally shut down. His eyes eventually closed and he struggled no more, when all signs of life left his person and he became as dead as his victim—and tormentor.

Seconds later, the lady in black reappeared in the carriage. She arrived as the train pulled into Whitehaven train station, where she imagined the ugly youth would disembark. But he just sat there, still, unmoving, devoid of expression, seemingly asleep.

Perhaps she might give him a little nudge?

“Young man,” she said, “Wake up, I think this is your stop?” She reached out her hand and poked his right shoulder.

Suddenly, his eyes opened. They appeared to be blood-red in their sockets, no whites of eyes whatsoever—just two bloody gaping bulbs. The woman had never quite seen anything as disturbing as this and was quite taken aback by the frightening vision in the deserted train carriage. But, as she covered her mouth with her hand and stifled a groan of disgust, one thing was for sure. He was dead as a doornail and she guessed he wouldn’t be getting off the train at Whitehaven.

Shame...everybody deserved a second chance.

THE END

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THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS by Jesse Zimmerman

Part Two

While venturing on through a maze of mountains, the flying ship our heroes rode went crashing into an elevated plateau of some kind. Flora, with her perfect memory due to the blue slug in her head, saw and remembered the bones of a great dragon on the other side of this mountain wall. Here on this green plateau, our story plateaus as well...

I wake up a little sore, confused more than anything.

I rest on a cosy pillow in a small bed that looks like it was made for someone my size. A furry blanket is over me, covering my toes up to my chin. I feel content and warm, my feet particularly toasty and I'm fairly sure that my hosts are not captors, or lest they make a comfortable prison. Calming sunlight streams in from a window behind the bed.

The room is as warm, the walls of light wood. There's only a small desk and chair across from me and a big closed door to the left.

I see a figure. I lean myself up and wipe both eyes.

"Fauna!" I cry when my sister comes into focus. I'm feeling a rush of joy!

Her arm wrapped in a cloth sling, she stands at the foot of the bed, the sun lighting up her red outfit and cap. She begins slowly laughing. I expect the Challenger to barge in the door next and for the three of us to have a big happy scene, but he doesn't and I ask where he is.

"Are your limbs working?" Fauna asks.

My legs ache a bit, but I am okay to walk. As I get up Fauna tells me she jumped from the stern of the ship as it crashed, landing on her right arm, but was quickly found and brought here.

"Is it broken?" I ask.

"The ship? Yes. If you meant my arm, only a little," she says with a smile.

"Where are we?" I ask as we leave the cosy room and enter a long hallway with reddish walls. There are doors every few paces on both sides, small torches hung and burning between them. We head to a bigger door at the end of the hallway.

"Well, I've slept most of the time just like you," she tells me. "I was told I was out for two days."

“Really?” I gasp, realizing that there are some things that my blue brain slug cannot determine; time and space become warped when one is wounded and asleep. I also realize I am not wearing my spectacles. “Are the people here friendly?”

“They tended to us, didn’t they?” Fauna says as she pushes the door to reveal a chamber three times the size of the room we were just in. Warm air hits me as we enter. It feels like a summer marsh. There is glistening white fog everywhere, but I can make out the four walls, the furthest of which has a few small windows. The daylight makes rainbows in the steam.

I hear a man’s voice singing.

Before us is a big porcelain tub in the centre of the room. Our ranger friend is taking a steaming hot bath in bubbly water.

He splashes as he turns around and I can make out a smile on his face. He shouts happily: “I was wondering when you’d wake up!”

I smile. “And how are you?”

The Challenger stands, sending water over the sides of the tub, and I can barely see him in the rainbow steam and with my bad eyes, but I can make out that his body is about as hairy as his face. Fauna finds a towel and throws it to him. He jumps out, splashing, landing perfectly on the marble floor like a cat, snatching the towel mid-air.

He wraps it about his waist and I see red and brown marks over his muscled torso, and I ask him if he is hurt.

“Nothing the good healers couldn’t handle,” he says, winking, still wearing his eyepatch. “For once we end up somewhere friendly!”

“Healers?” I ask.

“Healers!” a defiant voice interjects from behind and I turn, only seeing a slender figure in white stepping over from the left wall. I can see that she stands slightly taller than me and her hair is a deep green shade of which I can only see a little of under the white shawl that is wrapped about her head. I can’t make out her face aside that her eyes are big and also green.

“Hello,” I say, finding her presence both calming and intimidating.

“Greetings to you, Miss Flora,” says she, her tone softer. She approaches, smelling flowery, and presents to me a pair of spectacles, wide-rimmed and circular like my old ones. I take them and put them on my nose.

I can see her now. She is maybe in her early thirties (an older young person) with small features with a bit of a longish nose, though only slightly and it totally works on her! She too wears spectacles, big ones that rest on the end of it and make her eyes bigger, like me, also resembling an owl with them.

“New lenses,” she tells me.

I look her over and can see better than ever. “Thank you!”

She smiles, showing dimples and I feel warm in my face. She then pulls out a tiny feather quill and a small scroll that she rests on her palm for support. “Do you feel any pains in your head or inside your body?”

“No,” I tell her truthfully. “Maybe a bit tired. Fauna came and got me.” I look at my white gown and my face turns hot. “I guess you took my clothes.”

“The clothes were dirty, ripped. We cleaned them, sewed them. And we have all your items,” she said and smiled again as she looked over at my sister and the Challenger. “You guys have quite the interesting stash! I am guessing that you’re adventurers?”

“How did you guess?” asks the Challenger with a chuckle, wiping his wet hair with his dripping hand.

She laughs before she turns to me. “I imagine you have questions?”

I nod eagerly. “Many!” I say and ask: “What is this place?”

“You’ve never heard of it? Few outsiders have, I imagine. We once called ourselves New Northsphere because most of our people were from there.”

“Oh yeah,” Fauna says and looks at me. “We literally just saved Old Northsphere.”

“Yeah, I’m from there originally,” adds the Challenger.

“Oh? Over the generations many others have been brought here from elsewhere too, so we call our home the Valley of Dragos,” our new host explains.

“Dragos?” I ask, my brain slug turning up no reference.

“We’ve been here for at least two hundred years. Let me take you on a balcony tour and then I can answer all your questions,” says the green-haired healer. She tells us to meet her in the hallway soon and tells us her name is Emera as she leaves.

“She seems nice,” I tell the others.

The Challenger nods. Fauna tells me that she has a daughter she saw earlier, a little version of Emera who is really cute. My ranger friend turns to me and mouths something, something that I can't quite make out, but it seems to rhyme with 'ilf'. I ignore it as a pair of attendants, a smiley boy and a girl who look younger than me and Sis, arrive with my clothes and a tray with three glasses of a juice of undecided between lemon and orange, but very refreshing. We soon get our items back as well and I go back to my lent room to change. The clean fabrics are nice and bouncy and pressed and smelling meadowy!

Fauna and I then fetch the now clothed Challenger and Emera returns and takes us down the other way and then up a set of winding stairs that remind me of the library we were in on our last adventure. We arrive up in a big room, an atrium with a high ceiling, a golden dome with four bronze-hued beams that run out from the circular edges and conjoin in the middle into a cross (or an X depending on what angle). I can hear Fauna gasp but I am looking at Emera, who has moved on up ahead toward one of the walls where there is a big door.

"We see a lot of atriums in our adventures," remarks the Challenger.

I follow our white-clad, green haired host out the door into sunlight, to a balcony that wraps around this tall building we are in. Fauna and the Challenger soon arrive at our sides. Emera tells us it's the Healing House, and she seems to anticipate the next thing I want to ask her.

"There is our library," she says, pointing an arm, moving to the stone rail. I follow and see across the way an even taller tower, about six stories, a pearl-white spire that is set among the roofs of smaller structures. It is far taller than any of the other things I see, most of which from here are just roofs of various colours. She then moves her pointing arm to the next largest building in view, a big pastel green one that is as wide as the library is tall and she tells us this is their great hall.

I lean my upper body over the rail slightly. Spreading out from the base of the Healing House, straight down, I see first a brick road and a line of markets, typical box-like shops, some with tents over counters at their fronts. Beyond is another street and then a complex of homes, some two, others three storeys tall. I also see open spaces, like open plazas among the clustered structures, and I see too what look like wagons, tiny from here, that move through the streets and squares with no horses. There are people too, many people! And they swarm the streets, and I soon notice that many crowd at the base of this building, and yet others approach from alleys and streets.

As far as I look are more lanes and buildings, and it all expands on until I see fields and more unpaved spaces with homes further apart from one another. It eventually ends halfway from where we stand to the furthest wall of mountains, great farmland, meadows, and some clumps of woodlands with winding rivers in the distance before the wide mountain wall.

“You don’t even need a town gate,” remarks the Challenger to our host. “You know, for when barbarians and kobolds might try to raid?”

“Doesn’t happen here,” Emera says with a shrug and a shake of her head, her face bunching up a bit.

She leads the three of us all the way around the stone balcony. It is thin, but has enough space for us to walk abreast one another. There are beautiful flowers in clay pots every ten feet or so, some flying insects buzzing about them. I don’t get a close enough look at the flowers or the bees to identify them with the help of the slug in my head as I am too busy looking out over the city. On the far side of the balcony we see that we are closer to the great wall of rock that rises from this edge of the city. At its base I see wooden shacks and lines of track. I look at my sister and the ranger, seeing all three of their eyes are wide in amazement.

“Mines,” Emera tells us. “There are rocks under these mountains, all of them, as far as we can dig. The miners,” she says, motioning her head and sighing. “They go only so far.”

“Oh?” asks Fauna and she looks at me.

I know what she will ask.

“Can we go through the mines, under the mountains and leave when we’re fully healed?”

“Yeah, I probably just need a few more Hit Points and I’ll be good to get ranging again,” says the Challenger and winks with his one eye again.

Emera, our host and healer who has been thus far so warm and friendly, suddenly looks sad. She bites her lower lip and speaks: “I am really sorry, but no one leaves the Vale of Dragos.”

“What?” I say and gaze at Emera, trying to recall something, anything I might know about this place, how to leave, or if I saw something as we fell that could be a way out.

I find nothing.

“Oh, we don’t work well as captives,” Fauna groans.

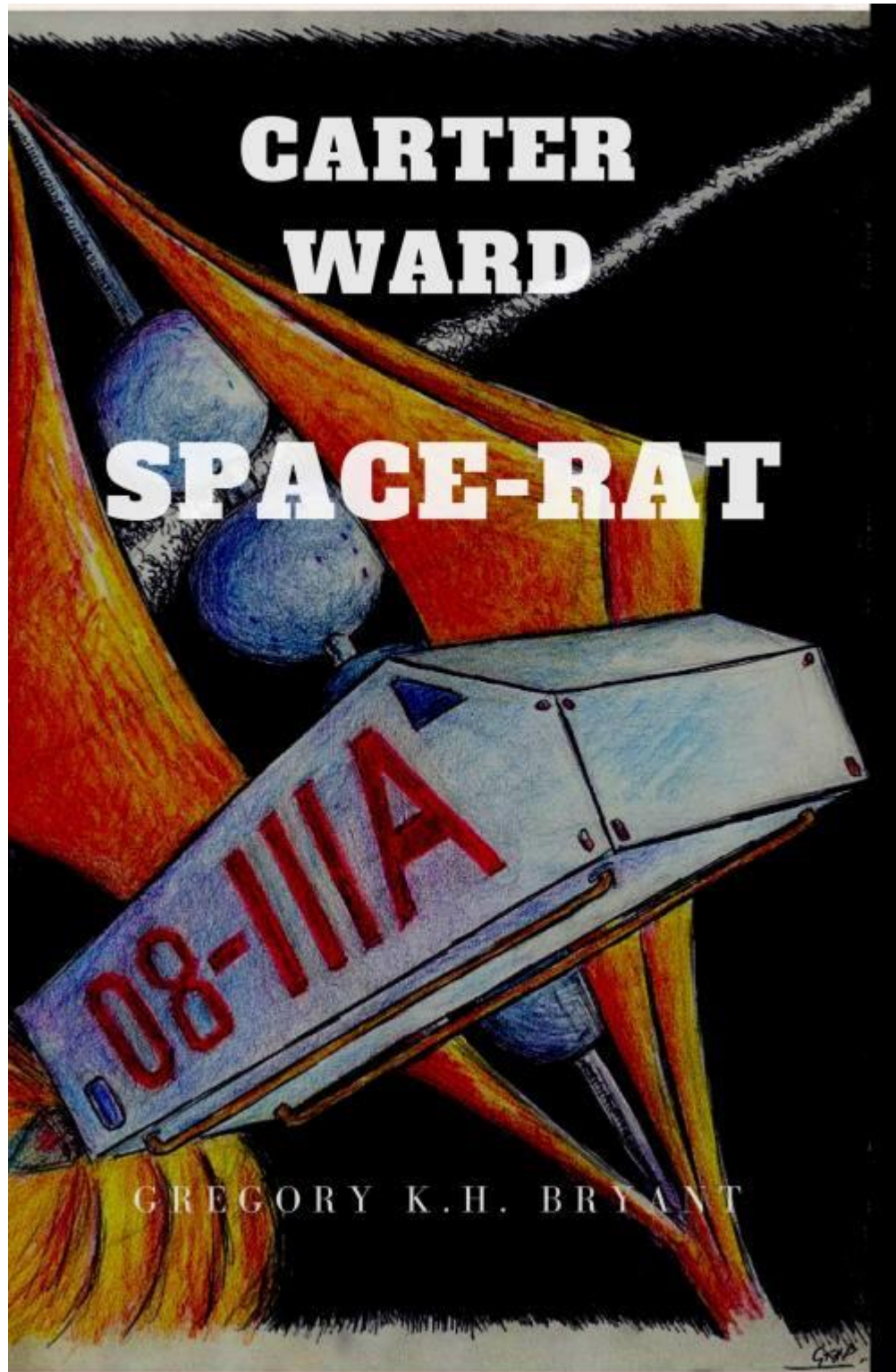
Emera shakes her head. “No, it’s not that. It’s just—no one can leave. We are trapped until Dragos returns and bring us out. Until that day, I’m afraid you’re New Northspherians, or Dragosians, or whatever. Sorry. But it’s not a bad place to live. And we are told that Dragos will come back soon.”

“Dragos?” I ask. Even without the help of the brain slug I can tell where this is going. “Tell me about Dragos...is this a big dragon with horns and wings?”

Emera smiles again and nods and the image of the gigantic draconian skeleton I saw on the other side of the mountains as we crashed suddenly emerges in my mind.

“Oooooohhhh.”

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXVI: How Eric Ventured Down To Middalhof and What He Found

Gizur went north to Swinefell, and Swanhild went with him. For now that Ospakar was dead at Eric's hand, Gizur ruled in his place at Swinefell, and was the greatest lord in all the north. He loved Swanhild, and desired to make her his wife; but she played with him, talking darkly of what might be. Swanhild was not minded to be the wife of any man, except of Eric; to all others she was cold as the winter earth. Still, she fooled Gizur as she had fooled Atli the Good, and he grew blind with love of her. For still the beauty of Swanhild waxed as the moon waxes in the sky, and her wicked eyes shone as the stars shine when the moon has set.

Now they came to Swinefell, and there Gizur buried Ospakar Blacktooth, his father, with much state. He set him in a chamber of rock and timbers on a mountain-top, whence he might see all the lands that once were his, and built up a great mound of earth above him. To this day people tell that here on Yule night black Ospakar bursts out, and golden Eric rides down the blast to meet him. Then come the clang of swords, and groans, and the sound of riven helms, till presently Brighteyes passes southward on the wind, bearing in his hand the half of a cloven shield.

So Gizur bound the Hell-shoes on his father, and swore that he would neither rest nor stay till Eric Brighteyes was dead and dead was Skallagrim Lambstail. Then he gathered a great force of men and rode south to Coldback, to the slaying of Eric, and with him went Swanhild.

Gudruda sat alone in the haunted hall of Middalhof and brooded on her love and on her fate. Eric, too, sat in Mosfell cave and brooded on his evil chance. His heart was sick with sorrow, and there was little that he could do except think about the past. He would not go to foray, after the fashion of outlaws, and there was no need of this. For the talk of his mighty deeds spread through the land, so that the people spoke of little else. And the men of his quarter were so proud of these deeds of Eric's that, though some of their kind had fallen at his hands in the great fight of Middalhof and some at the hands of Skallagrim, yet they spoke of him as men speak of a God. Moreover they brought him gifts of food and clothing and arms, as many as his people could carry away, and laid them in a booth that is on the plain near the foot of Mosfell, which thenceforth was named Ericsfell. Further, they bade his thralls tell him that, if he wished it, they would find him a good ship of war to take him from Iceland—ay, and man it with loyal men and true.

Eric thanked them through Jon his thrall, but answered that he wished to die here in Iceland.

Now, when Eric had sat two months and more in Mosfell cave and autumn was coming, he learned that Gizur and Swanhild had moved down to Coldback, and with them a great company of men who were sworn to slay him. He asked if Gudruda the Fair had also gathered men for his slaying. They told him no; that Gudruda stayed with her thralls and women at Middalhof, mourning for Björn her brother. From these tidings Eric took some heart of hope: at the least Gudruda laid no blood-feud against him. For he waited, thinking, if indeed she yet loved him, that Gudruda would send him some word or token of her love. But no word came, since between them ran the blood of Björn. On the morrow of these tidings Skallagrim spoke to Eric.

“This is my counsel, lord,” he said, “that we ride out by night and fall on the folk of Gizur at Coldback, and burn the stead over them, putting them to the sword. I am weary of sitting here like an eagle in a cage.”

“Such is no counsel of mine, Skallagrim,” answered Brighteyes. “I am weary of sitting here, indeed; but I am yet more weary of bringing men to their death. I will shed no more blood, unless it is to save my own head. When the people of Gizur came to seek me on Mosfell, they shall find me here; but I will not go to them.”

“Thy heart is out of thee, lord,” said Skallagrim; “thou wast not wont to speak thus.”

“Ay, Skallagrim,” said Eric, “the heart is out of me. Yet I ride from Mosfell to-day.”

“Whither, lord?”

“To Middalhof, to have speech with Gudruda the Fair.”

“Like enough, then, thou wilt be silent thereafter.”

“It well may be,” said Eric. “Yet I will ride. I can bear this doubt no longer.”

“Then I shall come with thee,” said Skallagrim.

“As thou wilt,” answered Eric.

So at midday Eric and Skallagrim rode away from Mosfell in a storm of rain. The rain was so heavy that those of Gizur’s spies who watched the mountain did not see them. All that day they rode and all the night, till by morning they came to Middalhof. Eric told Skallagrim to stay with the horses and let them feed, while he went on foot to see if by chance he might get speech with Gudruda. This the Baresark did, though he grumbled at the task, fearing lest Eric should be done to death, and he not there to die with him.

Now Eric walked to within two bowshots of the house, then sat down in a dell by the river, from the edge of which he could see those who passed in and out. Presently his heart gave a leap, for there came out from the woman’s door a lady tall and beautiful to see, and with golden hair that flowed about her breast. It was Gudruda, and he saw that she bore a napkin in her hand. Then Eric knew, according to her custom on the warm mornings, that she came alone to bathe in the river, as she had always done from a child. It was her habit to bathe here in this place: for at the bottom of the dell was a spot where reeds and bushes grew thick, and the water lay in a basin of rock and was clear and still. For at this spot a hot spring ran into the river.

Eric went down the dell, hid himself close in the bushes and waited, for he feared to speak with Gudruda in the open field. A while passed, and presently the shadow of the lady crept over the edge of the dell, then she came herself in that beauty which since her day has not been known in Iceland. Her face was sad and sweet, her dark and lovely eyes were sad. On she came, till she stood within a spear’s length of where Eric lay, crouched in the bush, and looking at her through the hedge of reeds. Here a flat rock overhung the water, and Gudruda sat herself on this rock, and, shaking off her shoes, dipped her white feet in the water. Then suddenly she threw aside her cloak, baring her arms, and, gazing upon the shadow of her

beauty in the mirror of the water, sighed and sighed again, while Eric looked at her with a bursting heart, for as yet he could find no words to say.

Now she spoke aloud. "Of what use to be so fair?" she said. "Oh, wherefore was I born so fair to bring death to many and sorrow on myself and him I love?" And she shook her golden hair about her arms of snow, and, holding the napkin to her eyes, wept softly. But it seemed to Eric that between her sobs she called upon his name.

Now Eric could no longer bear the sight of Gudruda weeping. While she wept, hiding her eyes, he rose from behind the screen of reeds and stood beside her in such fashion that his shadow fell upon her. She felt the sunlight pass and looked up. Lo! it was no cloud, but the shape of Eric, and the sun glittered on his golden helm and hair.

"Eric!" Gudruda cried; "Eric!" Then, remembering how she was attired, snatching her cloak, she threw it about her arms and thrust her wet feet into her shoes. "Out upon thee!" she said; "is it not enough, then, that thou shouldst break thy troth for Swanhild's sake, that thou shouldst slay my brother and turn my hall to shambles? Wouldst now steal upon me thus!"

"Methought that thou didst weep and call upon my name, Gudruda," he said humbly.

"By what right art thou here to hearken to my words?" she answered. "Is it, then, strange that I should speak the name of him who slew my brother? Is it strange that I should weep over that brother whom thou didst slay? Get thee gone, Brighteyes, before I call my folk to kill thee!"

"Call on, Gudruda. I set little price upon my life. I laid it in the hands of chance when I came from Mosfell to speak with thee, and now I will pay it down if so it pleases thee. Fear not, thy thralls shall have an easy task: for I shall scarcely care to hold my own. Say, shall I call for thee?"

"Hush! Speak not so loud! Folk may hear thee, Eric, and then thou wilt be in danger—I would say that, then shall ill things be told of me, because I am found with him who slew my brother?"

"I slew Ospakar too, Gudruda. Surely the death of him by whose side thou didst sit as wife is more to thee than the death of Björn?"

"The bride-cup was not yet drunk, Eric; therefore I have no blood-feud for Ospakar."

"Is it, then, thy will that I should go, lady?"

"Yes, go!—go! Never let me see thy face again!"

Brighteyes turned without a word. He took three paces and Gudruda watched him as he went.

"Eric!" she called. "Eric! thou mayest not go yet: for at this hour the thralls bring down the kine to milk, and they will see thee. Liest thou hid here. I—I will go. For though, indeed, thou dost deserve to die, I am not willing to bring thee to thy end—because of old friendship I am not willing!"

“If thou goest, I will go also,” said Eric. “Thralls or no thralls, I will go, Gudruda.”

“Thou art cruel to drive me to such a choice, and I have a mind to give thee to thy fate.”

“As thou wilt,” said Eric; but she made as though she did not hear his words.

“Now,” she said, “if we must stay here, it is better that we hide where thou didst hide, lest some come upon thee.” And she passed through the screen of rushes and sat down in a grassy place beyond, and spoke again.

“Nay, sit not near me; sit yonder. I would not touch thee, nor look upon thee, who wast Swanhild’s love, and didst slay Björn my brother.”

“Say, Gudruda,” said Eric, “did I not tell thee of the magic arts of Swanhild? Did I not tell thee before all men yonder in the hall, and didst thou not say that thou didst believe my words? Speak.”

“That is true,” said Gudruda.

“Wherefore, then, dost thou taunt me with being Swanhild’s love—with being the love of her whom of all alive I hate the most—and whose wicked guile has brought these sorrows on us?”

But Gudruda did not answer.

“And for this matter of the death of Björn at my hands, think, Gudruda: was I to blame in it? Did not Björn thrust the cloven shield before my feet, and thus give me into the hand of Ospakar? Did he not afterwards smite at me from behind, and would he not have slain me if Skallagrim had not caught the blow? Was I, then, to blame if I smote back and if the sword flew home? Wilt thou let the needful deed rise up against our love? Speak, Gudruda!”

“Talk no more of love to me, Eric,” she answered; “the blood of Björn has blotted out our love: it cries to me for vengeance. How may I speak of love with him who slew my brother? Listen!” she went on, looking on him sidelong, as one who wished to look and yet not seem to see: “here thou must hide an hour, and, since thou wilt not sit in silence, speak no tender words to me, for it is not fitting; but tell me of those deeds thou didst in the south lands over sea, before thou wentest to woo Swanhild and camest hither to kill my brother. For till then thou wast mine—till then I loved thee—who now love thee not. Therefore I would hear of the deeds of that Eric whom once I loved, before he became as one dead to me.”

“Heavy words, lady,” said Eric—“words to make death easy.”

“Speak not so,” she said; “it is unmanly thus to work upon my fears. Tell me those tidings of which I ask.”

So Eric told her all his deeds, though he showed small boastfulness about them. He told her how he had smitten the war-dragons of Ospakar, how he had boarded the Raven and with Skallagrim slain those who sailed in her. He told her also of his deeds in Ireland, and of how he took the viking ships and came to London town.

And as he told, Gudruda listened as one who hung upon her lover's dying words, and there was but one light in the world for her, the light of Eric's eyes, and there was but one music, the music of his voice. Now she looked upon him sidelong no longer, but with open eyes and parted lips she drank in his words, and always, though she knew it not herself, she crept closer to his side.

Then he told her how he had been greatly honoured of the King of England, and of the battles he had fought in at his side. Lastly, Eric told her how the King would have given him a certain great lady of royal blood in marriage, and how Edmund had been angered because he would not stay in England.

"Tell me of this lady," said Gudruda, quickly. "Is she fair, and how is she named?"

"She is fair, and her name is Elfrida," said Eric.

"And didst thou have speech with her on this matter?"

"Somewhat."

Now Gudruda drew herself away from Eric's side.

"What was the purport of thy speech?" she said, looking down. "Speak truly, Eric."

"It came to little," he answered. "I told her that there was one in Iceland to whom I was betrothed, and to Iceland I must go."

"And what said this Elfrida, then?"

"She said that I should get little luck at the hands of Gudruda the Fair. Moreover, she asked, should my betrothed be faithless to me, or put me from her, if I should come again to England."

Now Gudruda looked him in the face and spoke. "Say, Eric, is it in thy mind to sail for England in the spring, if thou canst escape thy foes so long?"

Now Eric took counsel with himself, and in his love and doubt grew guileful as he had never been before. For he knew well that Gudruda had this weakness—she was a jealous woman.

"Since thou dost put me from thee, that is in my mind, lady," he answered.

Gudruda heard. She thought on the great and beauteous Lady Elfrida, far away in England, and of Eric walking at her side, and sorrow took hold of her. She said no word, but fixed her dark eyes on Brighteyes' face, and lo! they filled with tears.

Eric might not bear this sight, for his heart beat within him as though it would burst the byrnie over it. Suddenly he stretched out his arms and swept her to his breast. Soft and sweet he kissed her, again and yet again, and she struggled not, though she wept a little.

“It is small blame to me,” she whispered, “if thou dost hold me on thy breast and kiss me, for thou art more strong than I. Björn must know this if his dead eyes see aught. Yet for thee, Eric, it is the greatest shame of all thy shames.”

“Talk not, my sweet; talk not,” said Eric, “but kiss thou me: for thou knowest well that thou lovest me yet as I love thee.”

Now the end of it was that Gudruda yielded and kissed him whom she had not kissed for many years.

“Loose me, Eric,” she said; “I would speak with thee,” and he loosed her, though unwillingly.

“Hearken,” she went on, hiding her fair face in her hands: “it is true that for life and death I love thee now as ever—how much thou mayest never know. Though Björn be dead at thy hands, yet I love thee; but how I may wed thee and not win the greatest shame, that I know not. I am sure of one thing, that we may not bide here in Iceland. Now if, indeed, thou lovest me, listen to my rede. Get thee back to Mosfell, Eric, and sit there in safety through this winter, for they may not come at thee yonder on Mosfell. Then, if thou art willing, in the spring I will make ready a ship, for I have no ship now, and, moreover, it is too late to sail. Then, perchance, leaving all my lands and goods, I will take thy hand, Eric, and we will fare together to England, seeking such fortune as the Norns may give us. What sayest thou?”

“I say it is a good rede, and would that the spring were come.”

“Ay, Eric, would that the spring were come. Our lot has been hard, and I doubt much if things will go well with us at the last. And now thou must hence, for presently the serving-women will come to seek me. Guard thyself, Eric, as thou lovest me—guard thyself, and beware of Swanhild!” Then once more they kissed soft and long, and Eric went.

But Gudruda sat a while behind the screen of reeds, and was very happy for a space. For it was as though the winter were past and summer shone upon her heart again.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

10. A Wooing

A murmur quickly sprang up round me, which grew into shouts. "Kneel," one whispered, "kneel, sir, or you will be seen." And another cried: "Kneel, you without beard, and do obeisance to the only Goddess, or by the old Gods I will make myself her priest and butcher you!" And so the shouts arose into a roar.

But presently the word "Deucalion" began to be bandied about, and there came a moderation in the zeal of these enthusiasts. Deucalion, the man who had left Atlantis twenty years before to rule Yucatan, they might know little enough about, but Deucalion, who rode not many days back beside the Empress in the golden castle beneath the canopy of snakes, was a person they remembered; and when they weighed up his possible ability for vengeance, the shouts died away from them limply.

So when the silence had grown again, and Phorenice turned and saw me standing alone amongst all the prostrate worshippers, I stepped out from the crowd and passed between two of the great stones, and went across the circle to where she stood beside the altar. I did not prostrate myself. At the prescribed distance I made the salutation which she herself had ordered when she made me her chief minister, and then hailed her with formal decorum as Empress.

"Deucalion, man of ice," she retorted.

"I still adhere to the old Gods!"

"I was not referring to that," said she, and looked at me with a sidelong smile.

But here Ylga came up to us with a face that was white, and a hand that shook, and made supplication for my life. "If he will not leave the old Gods yet," she pleaded, "surely you will pardon him? He is a strong man, and does not become a convert easily. You may change him later. But think, Phorenice, he is Deucalion; and if you slay him here for this one thing, there is no other man within all the marches of Atlantis who would so worthily serve—"

The Empress took the words from her. "You slut," she cried out. "I have you near me to appoint my wardrobe, and carry my fan, and do you dare to put a meddling finger on my policies? Back with you, outside this circle, or I'll have you whipped. Ay, and I'll do more. I'll serve you as Zaemon served my captain, Tarca. Shall I point a finger at you, and smite your pretty skin with a sudden leprosy?"

The girl bowed her shoulders, and went away cowed, and Phorenice turned to me. "My lord," she said, "I am like a young bird in the nest that has suddenly found its wings. Wings have so many uses that I am curious to try them all."

"May each new flight they take be for the good of Atlantis."

"Oh," she said, with an eye-flash, "I know what you have most at heart. But we will go back to the pyramid, and talk this out at more leisure. I pray you now, my lord, conduct me back to my riding beast."

It appeared then that I was to be condoned for not offering her worship, and so putting public question on her deification. It appeared also that Ylga's interference was looked upon as untimely, and, though I could not understand the exact reasons for either of these things, I accepted them as they were, seeing that they forwarded the scheme that Zaemon had bidden me carry out.

So when the Empress lent me her fingers—warm, delicate fingers they were, though so skilful to grasp the weapons of war—I took them gravely, and led her out of the great circle, which she had polluted with her trickeries. I had expected to see our Lord the Sun take vengeance on the profanation whilst it was still in act; but none had come: and I knew that He would choose his own good time for retribution, and appoint what instrument He thought best, without my raising a puny arm to guard His mighty honour.

So I led this lovely sinful woman back to the huge red mammoth which stood there tamely in waiting, and the smell of the sacrifice came after us as we walked. She mounted the stair to the golden castle on the shaggy beast's back, and bade me mount also and take seat beside her. But the place of the fan-girl behind was empty, and what we said as we rode back through the streets there was none to overhear.

She was eager to know what had befallen me after the attack on the gate, and I told her the tale, laying stress on the worthiness of Nais, and uttering an opinion that with care the girl might be won back to allegiance again. Only the commands that Zaemon laid upon me when he and I spoke together in the sacred tongue, did I withhold, as it is not lawful to repeat these matters save only in the High Council of the Priests itself as they sit before the Ark of the Mysteries.

“You seem to have an unusual kindliness for this rebel Nais,” said Phorenice.

“She showed herself to me as more clever and thoughtful than the common herd.”

“Ay,” she answered, with a sigh that I think was real enough in its way, “an Empress loses much that meaner woman gets as her common due.”

“In what particular?”

“She misses the honest wooing of her equals.”

“If you set up for a Goddess—” I said.

“Pah! I wish to be no Goddess to you, Deucalion. That was for the common people; it gives me more power with them; it helps my schemes. All you Seven higher priests know that trick of calling down the fire, and it pleased me to filch it. Can you not be generous, and admit that a woman may be as clever in finding out these natural laws as your musty elder priests?”

“Remains that you are Empress.”

“Nor Empress either. Just think that there is a woman seated beside you on this cushion, Deucalion, and look upon her, and say what words come first to your lips. Have done with ceremonies, and have done with statecraft. Do you wish to wait on as you are till all your

manhood withers? It is well not to hurry unduly in these matters: I am with you there. Yet, who but a fool watches a fruit grow ripe, and then leaves it till it is past its prime?"

I looked on her glorious beauty, but as I live it left me cold. But I remembered the command that had been laid upon me, and forced a smile. "I may have been fastidious," I said, "but I do not regret waiting this long."

"Nor I. But I have played my life as a maid, time enough. I am a woman, ripe, and full-blooded, and the day has come when I should be more than what I have been."

I let my hand clench on hers. "Take me to husband then, and I will be a good man to you. But, as I am bidden speak to Phorenice the woman now, and not to the Empress, I offer fair warning that I will be no puppet."

She looked at me sidelong. "I have been master so long that I think it will come as enjoyment to be mastered sometimes. No, Deucalion, I promise that—you shall be no puppet. Indeed, it would take a lusty lung to do the piping if you were to dance against your will."

"Then, as man and wife we will live together in the royal pyramid, and we will rule this country with all the wit that it has pleased the High Gods to bestow on us. These miserable differences shall be swept aside; the rebels shall go back to their homes, and hunt, and fight the beasts in the provinces, and the Priests' Clan shall be pacified. Phorenice, you and I will throw ourselves brain and soul into the government, and we will make Atlantis rise as a nation that shall once more surpass all the world for peace and prosperity."

Petulantly she drew her hand away from mine. "Oh, your conditions, and your Atlantis! You carry a crudeness in these colonial manners of yours, Deucalion, that palls on one after the first blunt flavour has worn away. Am I to do all the wooing? Is there no thrill of love under all your ice?"

"In truth, I do not know what love may be. I have had little enough speech with women all these busy years."

"We were a pair, then, when you landed, though I have heard sighs and protestations from every man that carries a beard in all Atlantis. Some of them tickled my fancy for the day, but none of them have moved me deeper. No, I also have not learned what this love may be from my own personal feelings. But, sir, I think that you will teach me soon, if you go on with your coldness."

"From what I have seen, love is for the poor, and the weak, and for those of flighty emotions."

"Then I would that another woman were Empress, and that I were some ill-dressed creature of the gutter that a strong man could pick up by force, and carry away to his home for sheer passion. Ah! How I could revel in it! How I could respond if he caught my whim!" She laughed. "But I should lead him a sad life of it if my liking were not so strong as his."

"We are as we are made, and we cannot change our inwards which move us."

She looked at me with a sullen glance. "If I do not change yours, my Deucalion, there will be more trouble brewed for this poor Atlantis that you set such store upon. There will be ill doings in this coming household of ours if my love grows for you, and yours remains still unborn."

I believe she would have had me fondle her there in the golden castle on the mammoth's shabby back, before the city streets packed with curious people. She had little enough appetite for privacy at any time. But for the life of me I could not do it. The Gods know I was earnest enough about my task, and They know also how it repelled me. But I was a true priest that day, and I had put away all personal liking to carry out the commands which the Council had laid upon me. If I had known how to set about it, I would have fallen in with her mood. But where any of those shallow bedizened triflers about the court would have been glibly in his element, I stuck for lack of a dozen words.

There was no help for it but to leave all, save what I actually felt, unsaid. Diplomacy I was trained in, and on most matters I had a glib enough tongue. But to palter with women was a lightness I had always neglected, and if I had invented would-be pretty speeches out of my clumsy inexperience, Phorenice would have seen through the fraud on the instant. She had been nurtured during these years of her rule on a pap of these silly protestations, and could weigh their value with an expert's exactness.

Nor was it a case where honest confession would have served my purpose better. If I had put my position to her in plain words, it would have made relations worse. And so perforce I had to hold my tongue, and submit to be considered a clown.

"I had always heard," she said, "that you colonists in Yucatan were far ahead of those in Egypt in all the arts and graces. But you, sir, do small credit to your vice-royalty. Why, I have had gentry from the Nile come here, and you might almost think they had never left their native shores."

"They must have made great strides this last twenty years, then. When last I was sent to Egypt to report, the blacks were clearly masters of the land, and our people lived there only on sufferance. Their pyramids were puny, and their cities nothing more than forts."

"Oh," she said mockingly, "they are mere exiles still, but they remember their manners. My poor face seemed to please them, at least they all went into raptures over it. And for ten pleasant words, one of them cut off his own right hand. We made the bargain, my Egyptian gallant and I, and the hand lies dried on some shelf in my apartment to-day as a pleasant memento."

But here, by a lucky chance for me, an incident occurred which saved me from further baiting. The rebels outside the walls were conducting their day's attack with vigour and some intelligence. More than once during our procession the lighter missiles from their war engines had sung up through the air, and split against a building, and thrown splinters which wounded those who thronged the streets. Still there had been nothing to ruffle the nerves of any one at all used to the haps of warfare, or in any way to hinder our courtship. But presently, it seems, they stopped hurling stones from their war engines, and took to loading them with carcasses of wood lined with the throwing fire.

Now, against stone buildings these did little harm, save only that they scorched horribly any poor wretch that was within splash of them when they burst; but when they fell upon the rude wooden booths and rush shelters of the poorer folk, they set them ablaze instantly. There was no putting out these fires.

These things also would have given to either Phorenice or myself little enough of concern, as they are the trivial and common incidents of every siege; but the mammoth on which we rode had not been so properly schooled. When the first blue whiff of smoke came to us down the windings of the street, the huge red beast hoisted its trunk, and began to sway its head uneasily. When the smoke drifts grew more dense, and here and there a tongue of flame showed pale beneath the sunshine, it stopped abruptly and began to trumpet.

The guards who led it, tugged manfully at the chains which hung from the jagged metal collar round its neck, so that the spikes ran deep into its flesh, and reminded it keenly of its bondage. But the beast's terror at the fire, which was native to its constitution, mastered all its new-bought habits of obedience. From time unknown men have hunted the mammoth in the savage ground, and the mammoth has hunted men; and the men have always used fire as a shield, and mammoths have learned to dread fire as the most dangerous of all enemies.

Phorenice's brow began to darken as the great beast grew more restive, and she shook her red curls viciously. "Someone shall lose a head for this blundering," said she. "I ordered to have this beast trained to stand indifferent to drums, shouting, arrows, stones, and fire, and the trainers assured me that all was done, and brought examples."

I slipped my girdle. "Here," I said, "quick. Let me lower you to the ground."

She turned on me with a gleam. "Are you afraid for my neck, then, Deucalion?"

"I have no mind to be bereaved before I have tasted my wedded life."

"Pish! There is little enough of danger. I will stay and ride it out. I am not one of your nervous women, sir. But go you, if you please."

"There is little enough chance of that now."

Blood flowed from the mammoth's neck where the spikes of the collar tore it, and with each drop, so did the tameness seem to ooze out from it also. With wild squeals and trumpetings it turned and charged viciously down the way it had come, scattering like straws the spearmen who tried to stop it, and mowing a great swath through the crowd with its monstrous progress. Many must have been trodden under foot, many killed by its murderous trunk, but only their cries came to us. The golden castle, with its canopy of royal snakes, was swayed and tossed, so that we two occupants had much ado not to be shot off like stones from a catapult. But I took a brace with my feet against the front, and one arm around a pillar, and clapped the spare arm round Phorenice, so as to offer myself to her as a cushion.

She lay there contentedly enough, with her lovely face just beneath my chin, and the faint scent of her hair coming in to me with every breath I took; and the mammoth charged madly on through the narrow streets. We had outstripped the taint of smoke, and the original cause of fear, but the beast seemed to have forgotten everything in its mad panic. It held furiously on with enormous strides, carrying its trunk aloft, and deafening us with its screams and

trumpetings. We left behind us quickly all those who had trod in that glittering pageant, and we were carried helplessly on through the wards of the city.

The beast was utterly beyond all control. So great was its pace that there was no alternative but to try and cling on to the castle. Up there we were beyond its reach. To have leapt off, even if we had avoided having brains dashed out or limbs smashed by the fall, would have been to put ourselves at once at a frightful disadvantage. The mammoth would have scented us immediately, and turned (as is the custom of these beasts), and we should have been trampled into a pulp in a dozen seconds.

The thought came to me that here was the High God's answer to Phorenice's sacrilege. The mammoth was appointed to carry out Their vengeance by dashing her to pieces, and I, their priest, was to be human witness that justice had been done. But no direct revelation had been given me on this matter, and so I took no initiative, but hung on to the swaying castle, and held the Empress against bruises in my arms.

There was no guiding the brute: in its insanity of madness it doubled many times upon its course, the windings of the streets confusing it. But by degrees we left the large palaces and pyramids behind, and got amongst the quarters of artisans, where weavers and smiths gaped at us from their doors as we thundered past. And then we came upon the merchants' quarters where men live over their storehouses that do traffic with the people overseas, and then down an open space there glittered before us a mirror of water.

"Now here," thought I, "this mad beast will come to sudden stop, and as like as not will swerve round sharply and charge back again towards the heart of the city." And I braced myself to withstand the shock, and took fresh grip upon the woman who lay against my breast. But with louder screams and wilder trumpetings the mammoth held straight on, and presently came to the harbour's edge, and sent the spray sparkling in sheets amongst the sunshine as it went with its clumsy gait into the water.

But at this point the pace was very quickly slackened. The great sewers, which science devised for the health of the city in the old King's time, vomit their drainings into this part of the harbour, and the solid matter which they carry is quickly deposited as an impalpable sludge. Into this the huge beast began to sink deeper and deeper before it could halt in its rush, and when with frightened bellowings it had come to a stop, it was bogged irretrievably. Madly it struggled, wildly it screamed and trumpeted. The harbour-water and the slime were churned into one stinking compost, and the golden castle in which we clung lurched so wildly that we were torn from it and shot far away into the water.

Still there, of course, we were safe, and I was pleased enough to be rid of the bumpings.

Phorenice laughed as she swam. "You handle yourself like a sore man, Deucalion. I owe you something for lending me the cushion of your body. By my face! There's more of the gallant about you when it comes to the test than one would guess to hear you talk. How did you like the ride, sir? I warrant it came to you as a new experience."

"I'd liefer have walked."

"Pish, man! You'll never be a courtier. You should have sworn that with me in your arms you could have wished the bumping had gone on for ever. Ho, the boat there! Hold your arrows.

Deucalion, hail me those fools in that boat. Tell them that, if they hurt so much as a hair of my mammoth, I'll kill them all by torture. He'll exhaust himself directly, and when his flurry's done we'll leave him where he is to consider his evil ways for a day or so, and then haul him out with windlasses, and tame him afresh. Pho! I could not feel myself to be Phorenice, if I had no fine, red, shaggy mammoth to take me out for my rides."

The boat was a ten-slave galley which was churning up from the farther side of the harbour as hard as well-plied whips could make oars drive her, but at the sound of my shouts the soldiers on her foredeck stopped their arrowshots, and the steersman swerved her off on a new course to pick us up. Till then we had been swimming leisurely across an angle of the harbour, so as to avoid landing where the sewers outpoured; but we stopped now, treading the water, and were helped over the side by most respectful hands.

The galley belonged to the captain of the port, a mincing figure of a mariner, whose highest appetite in life was to lick the feet of the great, and he began to fawn and prostrate himself at once, and to wish that his eyes had been blinded before he saw the Empress in such deadly peril.

"The peril may pass," said she. "It's nothing mortal that will ever kill me. But I have spoiled my pretty clothes, and shed a jewel or two, and that's annoying enough as you say, good man."

The silly fellow repeated a wish that he might be blinded before the Empress was ever put to such discomfort again.

But it seemed she could be cloyed with flattery. "If you are tired of your eyes," said she, "let me tell you that you have gone the way to have them plucked out from their sockets. Kill my mammoth, would you, because he has shown himself a trifle frolicsome? You and your sort want more education, my man. I shall have to teach you that port-captains and such small creatures are very easy to come by, and very small value when got, but that my mammoth is mine—mine, do you understand?—the property of Goddess Phorenice, and as such is sacred."

The port-captain abased himself before her. "I am an ignorant fellow," said he, "and heaven was robbed of its brightest ornament when Phorenice came down to Atlantis. But if reparation is permitted me, I have two prisoners in the cabin of the boat here who shall be sacrificed to the mammoth forthwith. Doubtless it would please him to make sport with them, and spill out the last lees of his rage upon their bodies."

"Prisoners you've got, have you? How taken?"

"Under cover of last night they were trying to pass in between the two forts which guard the harbour mouth. But their boat fouled the chain, and by the light of the torches the sentries spied them. They were caught with ropes, and put in a dungeon. There is an order not to abuse prisoners before they have been brought before a judgment?"

"It was my order. Did these prisoners offer to buy their lives with news?"

"The man has not spoken. Indeed, I think he got his death-wound in being taken. The woman fought like a cat also, so they said in the fort, but she was caught without hurt. She says she

has got nothing that would be of use to tell. She says she has tired of living like a savage outside the city, and moreover that, inside, there is a man for whose nearness she craves most mightily.”

“Tut!” said Phorenice. “Is this a romance we have swum to? You see what affectionate creatures we women are, Deucalion.”—The galley was brought up against the royal quay and made fast to its golden rings. I handed the Empress ashore, but she turned again and faced the boat, her garments still yielding up a slender drip of water.—”Produce your woman prisoner, master captain, and let us see whether she is a runaway wife, or a lovesick girl mad after her sweetheart. Then I will deliver judgment on her, and as like as not will surprise you all with my clemency. I am in a mood for tender romance to-day.”

The port-captain went into the little hutch of a cabin with a white face. It was plain that Phorenice’s pleasantries scared him. “The man appears to be dead, Your Majesty. I see that his wounds—”

“Bring out the woman, you fool. I asked for her. Keep your carrion where it is.”

I saw the fellow stoop for his knife to cut a lashing, and presently who should he bring out to the daylight but the girl I had saved from the cave-tigers in the circus, and who had so strangely drawn me to her during the hours that we had spent afterwards in companionship. It was clear, too, that the Empress recognised her also. Indeed, she made no secret about the matter, addressing her by name, and mockingly making inquiries about the ménage of the rebels, and the success of the prisoner’s amours.

“This good port-captain tells me that you made a most valiant attempt to return, Nais, and for an excuse you told that it was your love for some man in the city here which drew you. Come, now, we are willing to overlook much of your faults, if you will give us a reasonable chance. Point me out your man, and if he is a proper fellow, I will see that he weds you honestly. Yes, and I will do more for you, Nais, since this day brings me to a husband. Seeing that all your estate is confiscate as a penalty for your late rebellion, I will charge myself with your dowry, and give it back to you. So come, name me the man.”

The girl looked at her with a sullen brow. “I spoke a lie,” she said; “there is no man.”

I tried myself to give her advocacy. “The lady doubtless spoke what came to her lips. When a woman is in the grip of a rude soldiery, any excuse which can save her for the moment must serve. For myself, I should think it like enough that she would confess to having come back to her old allegiance, if she were asked.”

“Sir,” said the Empress, “keep your peace. Any interest you may show in this matter will go far to offend me. You have spoken of Nais in your narrative before, and although your tongue was shrewd and you did not say much, I am a woman and I could read between the lines. Now regard, my rebel, I have no wish to be unduly hard upon you, though once you were my fan-girl, and so your running away to these ill-kempt malcontents, who beat their heads against my city walls, is all the more naughty. But you must meet me halfway. You must give an excuse for leniency. Point me out the man you would wed, and he shall be your husband to-morrow.”

“There is no man.”

“Then name me one at random. Why, my pretty Nais, not ten months ago there were a score who would have leaped at the chance of having you for a wife. Drop your coyness, girl, and name me one of those. I warrant you that I will be your ambassadress and will put the matter to him with such delicacy that he will not make you blush by refusal.”

The prisoner moistened her lips. “I am a maiden, and I have a maiden’s modesty. I will die as you choose, but I will not do this indecency.”

“Well, I am a maiden too, and though because I am Empress also, questions of State have to stand before questions of my private modesty, I can have a sympathy for yours—although in truth it did not obtrude unduly when you were my fan-girl, Nais. No, come to think of it, you liked a tender glance and a pretty phrase as well as any when you were fan-girl. You have grown wild and shy, amongst these savage rebels, but I will not punish you for that.

“Let me call your favourites to memory now. There was Tarca, of course, but Tarca had a difference with that ill-dressed father of yours, and wears a leprosy on half his face instead of that beard he used to trim so finely. And then there is Tatho, but Tatho is away overseas. Eron, too, you liked once, but he lost an arm in fighting t’other day, and I would not marry you to less than a whole man. Ah, by my face! I have it, the dainty exquisite, Rota! He is the husband! How well I remember the way he used to dress in a change of garb each day to catch your proud fancy, girl. Well, you shall have Rota. He shall lead you to wife before this hour to-morrow.”

Again the prisoner moistened her lips. “I will not have Rota, and spare me the others. I know why you mock me, Phorenice.”

“Then there are three of us here who share one knowledge.”—She turned her eyes upon me. Gods! who ever saw the like of Phorenice’s eyes, and who ever saw them lit with such fire as burned within them then?—“My lord, you are marrying me for policy; I am marrying you for policy, and for another reason which has grown stronger of late, and which you may guess at. Do you wish still to carry out the match?”

I looked once at Nais, and then I looked steadily back to Phorenice. The command given by the mouth of Zaemon from the High Council of the Sacred Mountain had to outweigh all else, and I answered that such was my desire.

“Then,” said she, glowering at me with her eyes, “you shall build me up the pretty body of Nais beneath a throne of granite as a wedding gift. And you shall do it too with your own proper hands, my Deucalion, whilst I watch your devotion.”

And to Nais she turned with a cruel smile. “You lied to me, my girl, and you spoke truth to the soldiers in the harbour forts. There is a man here in the city you came after, and he is the one man you may not have. Because you know me well, and my methods very thoroughly, your love for him must be very deep, or you would not have come. And so, being here, you shall be put beyond mischief’s reach. I am not one of those who see luxury in fostering rivals.

“You came for attention at the hands of Deucalion. By my face! you shall have it. I will watch myself whilst he builds you up living.”

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