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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 2
21ST JULY 2019

SEBASTIAN AND THE MURDER MYSTERY

BY STE
WHITEHOUSE
CONCLUDES...

ALCOHOL

BY PETER
FOSTER—
COMBINED
WITH A HINT OF
MADNESS...

THANKS KITTY CHRISTOPHER T DABROWSKI

VINCENT CURBY'S FINAL TICKET MICHAEL D DAVIS

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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 *Caduta Dei Dannati (Inferno)* by Dirk Bouts. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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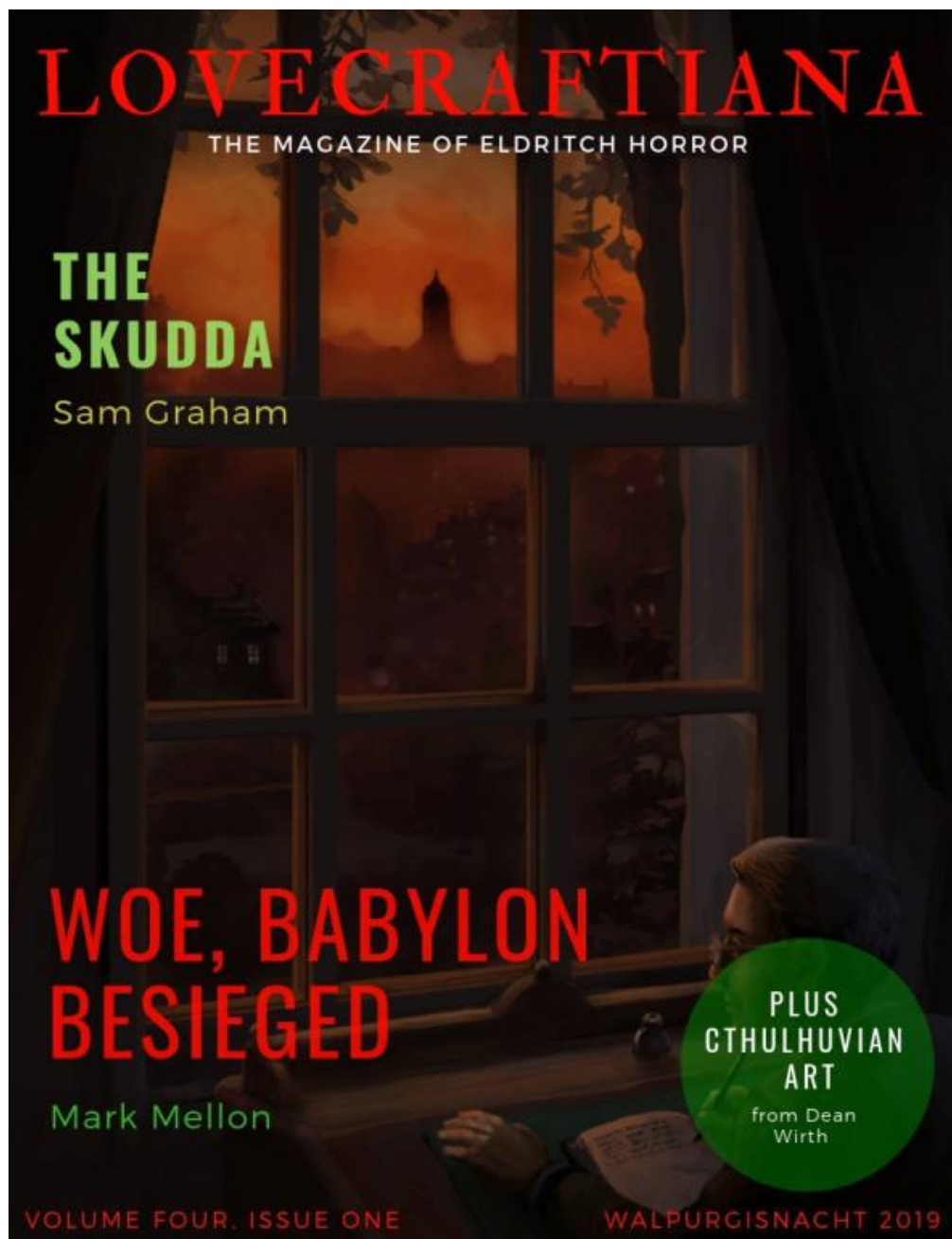
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EDITORIAL

This week, we have the conclusion to Sebastian and the Murder Mystery. Friedrich Heine learns the truth about his old friend. The imbibing of Alcohol has shocking results. Mark and Natasha take a horrific trip to the beach. Vincent Curby finds himself in Hell—with problems. Matt Johnson interviews George about the weird events in his house. Eric rides away from Gudruda's grave. And Deucalion wanders a dinosaur infested wilderness.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"AT LAST WE CAN FINALLY BREATHE."

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 MURDER MYSTERY by Ste Whitehouse

Part Two

Sebastian has been asked to discover who murdered a man on the 47th floor of a hotel when the room was locked from within. The hotels owner and three other guests all appear to have something to hide.

Le Petite was waiting, his door open.

“I guess I’m next,” he said flatly. He was a tall, lanky man who had once been bigger; his clothes hung desolately on his angular frame. His eyes were the pale blue of a winter’s morning and held a suggestion of sadness and discomfort. He wore overalls over a white Tee and faded jeans. His room was in stark contrast to everyone else’s; a splash of vivid colours scattered like a second rate Pollock across canvases that were strewn everywhere. On the walls, and windows; resting on and against furniture; piled in spare corners. Some held the impression of vague shapes; figures or faces; a Monroe or a Winehouse. Others appeared to be landscapes; shattered and burnt landscapes from the hell that was of his own making. None of it inspired Sebastian.

He slouched into a free chair and spoke, his voice thick with insolence. “I was here, painting as always, my door shut. I heard a bang; THE shot and came out. Smith was just leaving his room and Hilt hers. We crossed the corridor to Annie’s who was just coming out of her own room and came to Spellers. His door was shut, locked; and we tried to get in. Couldn’t. The rest of the help arrived, as unhelpful as always, and someone suggested we bring that thing up from downstairs. It finally broke the lock and we found him there; dead.” He finally looked up at Sebastian a faraway look in his eyes as if he were already planning what to do when he had left. “Is that precise enough for you?”

“So you know who Miss Smith is?”

“It was easy enough to figure out. We’ve both been staying here months. Things slip after a while. You get to see the real person underneath.”

“Do you mind if I search your room? The correct answer is yes.”

He nodded and the bot quickly slipped nimble ‘fingers’ through Le Petite’s drawers of underwear and socks. His room, despite the avant-garde decoration, was laid out similar to the other three, including the empty half closet in what was generally the living space. Sebastian was unsure what to do next. They had all had time to ‘fix’ their accounts and although none sounded that rehearsed it all felt a little too smooth.

Despite that there was still a mystery. A locked room murder with four of the suspects alone in their rooms but visible almost immediately after the sound of the gunshot. No one would’ve been able to make it back to their room even Miss Smith and anyhow; how was the door locked from the inside if the murderer left?

Sebastian thanked Le Petite and started to leave, stopping at the door and turning to ask him. “So what did Speller have on you?”

He stared for a minute and the mechanoid thought that he was not going to answer when the thin man suddenly answered. "He found out that I actually like women."

Sebastian had to literally process that sentence and finally repeated it back to him asking. "What do you mean?"

"Speller found out that I sleep exclusively with women"

"So?"

"For god's sake man!" He exploded in exasperation. "I'm one of the fathers of the gay-Pollock movement. We set our stall out on an expression of our sexuality and art. Our work comes from our inclinations and predilections; an art that transcends mere talent and wrenches your very being into a force dominated by who you make love too."

He was almost shouting. "I was one of its founders; men looked up to me as a guide, a beacon of hope in a dangerous world. Some hated gays and our art became a mirror held up to reflect their ugliness and contemptible behaviour."

Sebastian looked around at the canvases. He could see a LOT of ugliness but he just wasn't sure it 'reflected the soul' of anyone but the artist.

"So you started a gay artistic movement but weren't actually gay?" Sebastian asked.

"The ignominy of it all. I had merely mentioned the idea one night at a drinking establishment a number of us frequented and the next thing I knew a major movement had coalesced and the whole of B'jing was abuzz. It stretched almost the length of Ah'kis. I tried other forms but it was the only way I could display my genius; no other gallery would exhibit my culturally relevant canvases."

"And Speller knew?"

"He was a vile man, with vile.... passions. Truly despicable. But I did not, could not murder a man in cold blood." He stared with a combination of despair and anger but with nothing else to say.

Sebastian met Sonia outside and she smiled timidly, pushing back a strand of red hair behind an ear. She told him that she was on her way to Mrs Hilt's to serve supper. He followed the young woman.

A rasping voice echoed from within the room. "Is that you girl? For The Builders sake come on in; a woman could starve in the time it takes you lot to get up here."

Sonia gingerly pushed the door opened and Sebastian had a sense that this wasn't the first foul mood Hilt had displayed.

"You lousy sl..." She saw the bot and stopped. "Oh. It's you. Sebastian? Come in; come in. Never mind the girl." She eyed Sonia. "Maid, get my supper immediately." The old woman

tried a rare smile and failed spectacularly. “The help. Ha! Should be called the hindrance. Still what have you learnt so far?”

He was about to speak when Sonia rolled a service cart stacked with cold meats, fruit and beans. Suddenly he understood the purpose of the half closets in each room and also the how of the mystery.

“Mr... Sebastian?”

“I’m sorry. Just a stray thought. I need to ask you some questions about this morning.”

“I’ve spoken to you already,” she said obviously annoyed.

“You were in your room I believe?”

“Yes. We all seem to remain in our rooms more and more these days; as if our very presence in each other’s company has begun to offend our sensibilities. It was close to twelve, I remember thinking that soon one of these people,” She indicated Sonia. “Would serve lunch. I heard a shot and came out where I saw Mr Smith and Mr Le Petite both ahead of me. All three of us rushed towards the sound and Miss Smith exited her own room ahead of us. She told us that Mr Speller had closed the door and when we tried it we found the door locked.”

“Mr Speller was a journalist.” Sebastian said slowly.

“So? He rented the room just like they all do.”

“This place appears less a hotel and more a halfway house.”

“Our guests stay as long as they wish; or as long as their coin remains.”

“Speller?”

“He had stayed here on and off for the past decade or so. His coin is ALWAYS good.” She looked at him in exacerbation. “Now could I possibly have some privacy while I eat?”

He left with Sonia and asked her to take him to the staff areas. As they used the stairs he asked her some questions. “I believe you were the maid that morning?”

She nodded in agreement. “Yes; I am the.... maid every day. I cleaned their rooms and took away their breakfast dishes earlier.”

“And then?”

“Cleaning the corridors, ensuring that the guests’ needs are catered for.” She looked uncomfortable he didn’t ask the question he wanted too but instead asked. “How many staff are allowed up there on the guest floor?”

“A handful at most. Me, Cyl occasionally; a chef if one of the guests wishes some special meal later that day.”

“Cyl?”

“Cyril Made. Another cleaner.”

“Husband?” Sebastian asked.

“No. We are both cleaners, maids. It is our name and description.”

Sebastian then understood that what he had heard as Made was in fact Maid. He asked.

“There was a child seen running from Spellers room.”

Sonia looked horrified. “Oh no! That’s Danni. She’s just.... she’s not even ten yet. We’re teaching her the workings of the hotel. How to serve and clean and even cook. She is so good at all of it really. A true servant,” she said proudly.

They reached the lower floor and two things hit Sebastian at once; the noise and the heat. People were rushing along narrow aisles between cookers and work benches; carrying dishes, food, scraps, waste. Chopping and slicing; dicing and crushing while all around them the ovens gave off a pernicious heat that sapped your strength. The sheer number of people was astounding. Did the five of them living above, or four now, really need dozens of staff?

Along one wall a row of mattresses’ lay; the odd personal item sitting incongruously alongside. Another wall held a row of industrial sized washing machines which today added to the bedlam. Soap and cooking smells mixed alarmingly

“Is it always like this?” he asked in a loud scream.

Sonia smiled and nodded. “It rarely stops. The chef has to rise early to prepare bread and the washers and dryers run most of the night.”

“Why don’t you leave?”

Sonia held up her arm. The ceramic almost translucent bracelet clung to her skin. “They can track us anywhere with these. We all have one. Even the children.”

“Children? Plural?”

“Eleven; ranging from five months to fifteen.” She noticed Sebastian glancing around and added. “There’s an annex where we try to teach them as much as we can. We have some books. I can write well enough. We take it in turn to nurse the babies.”

Sebastian looked around at the cramped, noisy, smelly, inhuman conditions and made a snap decision that Kassi would have been proud of. He pointed to the shafts that rose up towards the ceiling. “And those are the dumb waiters to each of the rooms above?”

A look of alarm crossed her face as she said yes.

“I’ll need to speak with Danni.” If anything Sonia’s face became even more horrified. “Don’t worry will be easy with her. It’s just that she was the last person to see Speller alive.”

Somehow that did not calm the young woman but she was used to taking orders and crossed over the room to one of the beds. Even before the child looked up Sebastian knew that she would have red hair like her mother.

“Your daughter.” It wasn’t a question.

Sonia nodded wide eyed in fear.

The child looked dirty like she was a street urchin from some Dickensian paperback with eyes similar to Sonia’s but holding less pain.

“Danni. This is the machine I told you about. He wants to speak with you. Is that alright?” The child looked suddenly anxious but nodded silently.

“Is there a room with less noise?”

Sonia led them to a stairwell at the corner of the kitchen. She waited as they went down a few steps and sat beside each other as though they were friends.

Sebastian waited for his ears to work again and then asked. “You saw Mr Speller this morning.”

Danni’s eyes were wide with that look young children everywhere get when real life intrudes into their lives. Sebastian noticed she wore a name badge, some old plastic thing from before the war with the name of the Hilt Tower Hotel emblazoned upon it and a crest of some sort. The name said Daniel.

“That’s an odd badge.”

The girl shrugged and said. “It was given to me when I was born. You just get given the next one or the one of someone you’re replacing.”

“Replacing?” That didn’t sound good.

“Y’know. If someone’s died and they bring in someone new. They’re given the name. Billy, he’s my friend although he’s two years and seven months older than me, he says that my name is a boy’s name but I can beat him so he doesn’t say that anymore. It’s not a boy’s name is it mister?”

“Nah! Danni’s a girl’s name; he’s just winding you up.”

The girl smiled and they sat in silence for a little longer.

“So,” he finally said. “Mr Speller?”

Danni looked miserable obviously remembering something unpleasant.

“He was not nice.” She almost sobbed. “He was mean to the adults but he tried to be friendly to me. He used to tell me I was special and he wanted to show me a picture of a pony. He

always.... held my hands.... and.... stuff. BUT I didn't really like it." Her voice trailed off into silence her eyes wide with tears.

"And your mother knew about this?"

An emphatic nod as Danni bit into her bottom lip. "I was quiet and she asked and I said that Mr Speller had said that I was pretty and that he had told me not to tell anyone because I was so pretty and then mom got soooo angry and said 'not again' and stormed off to see him." She rushed it all out in one sentence.

"That was this morning?" Sebastian asked tentatively.

"No." Danni shook her head in an exaggerated fashion. "That was the day before."

"So what happened this morning?" He looked directly at the girl and spoke as softly as he could manage considering. "You're not in trouble Danni; neither is your mom. I just want to know what happened in his room." Sebastian wasn't too sure that he did want to know.

"Billy said Mr Speller had some cherry cola and he wanted to share one with me." She looked down. "I didn't think mom would mind so I went. He.... he said I was pretty again and touched my.... I didn't feel good but I really wanted a cherry cola. He said I smelt good which was funny 'cuz I hadn't washed that morning and mom was angry with me for that." She looked up her eyes full of tears. "I mean that it was funny odd, not funny ha ha."

"When did your mom...?"

"Right then. She was pis.... angry and she shouted at me to leave and called Mr Speller a 'dis-gus-ting old man' and that 'once was enough.' I ran out as mom slammed the door shut behind me and came down here. Next thing I know is that everyone's talking about him getting shot and we all run up the stairs to his room. Mom was behind me and she held me tight whispering that what happened there should be 'our secret'; but that's what he said; Right!?"

"Some secrets are worth hiding Danni and some aren't. Your mom's right on this one. No one else is to know okay?"

She nodded and he let her return to her Sonia. He understood why and how. All that he needed to do was just tidy things up. Dot the T's and cross the I's so to speak. He went back into the kitchen come washroom come bedroom and asked around. Everyone told him a variation on a theme; they either heard the shot or heard someone else who had heard the shot. As a group they made their way upstairs and yes Sonia was with them bringing up the rear.

Sebastian checked the layout of the floors. The main room, the kitchen come everything else including the kitchen sink, held the six shafts leading to the four guests, Hilt's room and an open lounge/bar opposite her room close to Spellers and Annie Clarabelle Dawson's rooms. If everyone was turned to the stairs leading to the guests their backs would be to the dumb waiters.

When he had arrived Sebastian had become blinded by the old woman's prejudices. This was a murder and they needed someone capable of murder; someone obviously their equal. In truth it was sheer luck that had created the situation and not intelligent cunning. But the 'guest's' did not see the staff, could not even recall their names. To them the staff were just moving objects no more useful than a troll in the field.

"You know," Sonia said as she stepped close to me. It wasn't a question.

"You went to protect your daughter from a predator." Sebastian looked up into her eyes and understood much more. "A predator that had struck before many times."

She looked away and he could barely hear her voice. "He liked little girls. I was barely little older than Danni when he..."

"You sent her out. He argued. Lunch had just been sent up, that was why you were there, and you grabbed a knife. He pulled out a gun but he was old and slow. You struggled; he fell. You ran the knife into his hand and then you picked up the gun."

"I was only thinking of what he would do to Danni. It was too late for me but she has her life; even here in hell."

"You took the gun and realising that the corridor was out of the question you used the dumb waiter to lower yourself back into the kitchen where you could follow everyone else upstairs."

"I threw the gun away on my way to find you. I just couldn't believe my luck. She sent me."

"Okay here's what we need to do."

Sebastian entered the lounge to find all four 'guests' there, each sitting or standing as far away from the others as could be; a centrifugal force keeping them apart. Hilt hustled over demanding to know why they had been kept waiting. The impertinence of it all; he was a machine, a thing and didn't things just jump to their beat?

The mechanoid said nothing settling instead at the centre of the room. He waited until all four realised that it was better to let him speak than babble on amongst themselves. He resisted the urge to begin by saying 'we are gathered here today' and instead went straight into his prepared speech.

"You hired me to come here and discover who amongst you killed Tomas Speller. Who this person is and why they perpetrated such a crime. I can tell you that the person who committed this act resided within the hotel." The four began to glance warily at each other suspicion in all their eyes.

"I can also tell you something each and every one of you already knew. That Speller was a man with grotesque tastes and that each and every one of you colluded to allow him continual access to his crimes." Miss Smith loudly proclaimed her innocence but he could see it in her

face; the knowledge of the man and his acts over the years and more. That same look echoed in every face.

“You all allowed him to continue. Fed him in fact with fresh young girls. The staff are very vocal on that. You Mrs Hilt encouraged only the youngest of travellers to stay, using Miss Smith and Mr Le Petite even to ‘encourage’ them to stay. Mr Smith here supplied you with the means to keep your ‘staff’ in line with the use of nerve-line bracelets able to not only track a suspect but create pain greater than most trained soldiers can take. Your staff had little defence against such tactics.” Hilt and Smith gave him murderous looks but Sebastian continued.

“So is it any surprise that Spellers choices in life became so indicative of his death?”

“The staff!” Hilt snarled. “One of them killed him. Which one? Which one of the little brats did this?”

“Are now there is the rub. Yes one member of your staff did indeed finish Speller but which one?”

“You know or you wouldn’t be putting us through this pointlessness,” Le Petite said sharply.

Sebastian said grimly. “Yes I know who did it. And I’ve decided to tell you on only one condition.”

“CONDITION! YOU HAVE A CONDITION! Tell us. Tell us now!” Hilt screamed her face contorted in rage.

“Take it or leave it. That’s my offer.”

“Oh for god’s sake what is this bloody condition?” The young actress said bitterly.

“Simple. Tell me the name of a member of your staff, with a good description of them—just so you can’t cheat and run off any number of names—and I’ll give you the name of the person you want.”

There was silence.

“A name?” Smith senior asked curiously.

“With a description.” Sebastian wished he could smile. “Come now. Who brings you your meals; or cooks for you; or cleans your rooms? You make sure they only use the names from the badges of dead employees so who is who?”

“Candy?” asked Le Petite. “Or was it Cindy?”

“Anne?” Clarabelle?” Hilt said.

“You stupid bitch,” exclaimed Miss Smith. “That’s me!”

“Mark. John. Luke. Matthew,” Smith stuttered.

“Oh for god’s sake why not John, Paul, George and Ringo?” Miss Smith retorted.

Sebastian began to walk away.

“Wait! Where are you going? You have to tell us,” Hilt cried out.

“If you actually knew your staff, and treated them as staff then I wouldn’t have been needed.”

“It doesn’t matter,” snarled Smith. “We can make them talk when you’re gone.” He laughed and Le Petite joined in whinnying like a horse.

“Oh. Didn’t I say? I hacked your little charm bracelets while you were all waiting here for me. They are useless. All of your staff have already left.” He walked to the lift and waited for it to arrive. Hilt came out looking disorientated, her world turned upside down.

“You bastard!” she cried.

“Not from where I stand,” the bot replied.

The doors open and Sebastian took the car back down to the ground. Tina had left along with the rest of the staff. He had played for time allowing them to leave but Sonia was waiting in the lobby with Danni.

“Mrs Hilt gave me some coin for you. She wasn’t sure whether you would need paying up front. Here.” She went to give him a small bag of but he declined.

“No. You and Danni, and the rest, need it more than I do. Take it.”

They left to join the others and Sebastian began his long walk back to Kassi. He needed a good wash.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 14

I needed to appeal to Cybele's sane mind, which I felt, after the ghost's visitation, was more the case than her mind having succumbed to dementia. I needed to inform her that I was no threat, and that I had come to help her. Doctor Freud, it was true, had had remarkable success with diverse cases, some seemingly incurable of their stress, paranoia, and fear. The physician in me could not give up hope.

And perhaps the ghost was giving me a secondary message by lighting the candelabra: I was to go to Cybele's chamber immediately to help her, that time was of the essence, that her madness would vanish if she only had a single sympathetic ear to hear her words.

I crept to her room and found the door ajar, a light inside sending a ray through the cracked doorway to spear across the hallway.

Softly, I pushed the door inward and stepped inside. Held my rigid stance as my heart leapt in my chest, eyes agape at a vision I had not expected.

Cybele Kohl sat on the edge of her bed, the surrounding white gauze curtain acting as a backdrop to her posture as though she were about to perform on a theatrical stage. Her hair a black halo contrasting her chalk white skin.

Hands folded in her lap, gowned in her white nightdress, she smiled at me and said, "Please come in."

I stepped in slowly, bearing the candelabra before me, my throat too thick to speak. I was still somewhat afraid of any psychosis in her—now calm, but perhaps soon to lash out. Glancing at her hands folded and at rest, I still feared she had a razor somewhere hidden on her person.

"You don't have to be afraid anymore," she said, opening her hands and placing them flat on either knee. "I know who you are now and why you are here. I apologize for attacking you. Granted, I could have killed you—had somewhat intended on doing so—but that would have solidified my brother's case against me."

I stepped closer. Candlelight flickered against her features, adding shadow contours to her beauty.

"Please sit," she said, gesturing to a Louis XIV chair, upholstered with white fleur-de-lis on a dark blue background, which sat in a corner of the room.

As I stepped toward the chair, my eye caught a small iron fireplace grill. There were andirons, but no ash sat within the metal hollow. It was too small and I doubted that, if there had been a fire ablaze, it would throw much heat into the room. A revelation came to me that it must be the metal shield which I had encountered on my crawl through the tunnel and into this chamber.

I pulled the chair closer to the foot of her bed and attempted to relax my rigid sitting posture. Yet what she was about to confess would not allow such repose.

“The ghost of my sister informed me about your identity and purpose. She has haunted me since her tortuous demise. Even death cannot part twins. Hers is not a frightening haunt, but one of solace and joy. To daily look upon the face of a deceased loved one is a blessing so few of the living ever receive, yet all hope for. She will be by my side until I, too, pass on and join her.”

She spent a few moments looking off, her gaze drifting through the windows, painted black with the night. A few drops of rain tapped against the glass, the sound cutting through the thick silence in the room as Cybele recollected the past.

She turned her darkened gaze back to mine. “My brother is not who he says he is. He has not revealed the truth to you, nor will he. He wishes to have me committed to an asylum, but I am not mad. I have fought him, screamed at him—told him of the spectre of our sister appearing to me to tell me of his true nature. He has used all of this as ‘proof’ that my mind is lost. But it is his mental capacity that is slipping quickly away.”

“What has happened to him?” I interrupted. “He seems not the same man he was when we were studying at university. Thinner now, more emaciated ... terribly old for his years.”

She inhaled deeply and nodded. “It is his lust for power that has aged him. He belongs to the Brotherhood of the Ouroboros, as had my father and grandfather. But where they belonged to a peaceful secret society, manipulating politics and law and economics for the betterment of all Mankind, my brother wishes to sway them towards his own agenda. Many members have rejected his pleas, warned him even, but he is the son of my father, who was a great and much-esteemed member, so they won’t dismiss him and eject him from the Brotherhood.”

My brow furrowed at her words, my thoughts racing. I knew so little of Kasimir and reflected back to our student days. There were times when he had disappeared from our room at midnight and didn’t return until the morning, revealing nothing to me as to his whereabouts. Though I recall once, while pretending to sleep, that I cracked open an eyelid as he changed into his night clothes and saw the most horrifying bruises and fresh cuts across his back. I never spoke of what I saw.

“Is the Brotherhood here ... in the town down in the valley?”

“Their reach is extensive throughout Germany, Austria, parts of Czechoslovakia, and resides as clandestine pockets in some of Scandinavian countries. There is even a growing membership in Spain. My brother is using his heritage to sway whom he can, and he has so far collected a small cabal who are guided by his bias leanings. If he can become more powerful and rich, he will sway even more members to his side. And then I fear what he may do.”

I shook my head, confused, leaning toward her as I sat on the edge of the chair. “Rich?” I looked at the room, threw up my hands to embrace the opulence that surrounded me. “Are we not surrounded by vast wealth? What more could he lack?”

The minutest, almost imperceptible smile edged a corner of her perfect mouth and her eyes sparked with candlelight.

“None of this belongs to him. It all belongs to me. My father knew that my brother was essentially ... evil. He saw traces of it when we were all children, then his lust for power grew during his youth and onward into his student years. My brother has committed great atrocities—so said my father, yet he saved my conscience and innocence by revealing none of them to me. I trusted my father as I trusted my sister. He would not lie. The inheritance went to my sister and me. Only if she and I both died would the estate go to our brother. My father gave an untold sum to the Brotherhood, but my brother would not be able to have it for himself. Yet there was a stipulation in my father’s will. A clause of foul play.”

Her face bowed to her lap as she squeezed a portion of her nightdress between her fingers. Collecting herself, she wiped a shadowed tear from her eye, let the emotion ebb from her demeanour, and continued her tale.

“If my sister or I died of natural causes, my brother would be a rich man. But if we died—either together or separately ...” She halted and looked off to the rain tapping against the windows, tears rising to her eyes. She spoke not to me, but to her memory. “We were seldom separate, my sister and I. I was visiting a paramour in Denmark at the time, a man of military rank and bearing. My sister told me to join his side unaccompanied—if we two went to meet Anders, he’d become confused as to which one of us he loved.” She let loose a short laugh, remembering better days. I wanted to ask her what had happened to her beau, but did not want too much tragedy to fall upon her at once. I could only assume being here in the castle with her brother, that she had to let love slip through her fingers.

Her face fell once again. “To think, if she had come with me to meet Anders ... she would not be a ghost haunting these walls ... as I feel I do as well.” Another tear slipped free from her eyes. She let it slip, lifting her gaze again to me. “The fire was not seen as suspicious circumstances. My brother consulted the attorney governing my father’s will, and it was only then that he was told of the foul play clause. He read the will for the first time then. And he saw that if either my sister or I—now just myself—did not die, but was deemed incompetent in her senses—essentially, mad—then Kasimir would stand to gain the fortune of our family.”

“I see,” I uttered in a whisper, sagging back into the chair beneath the weight of the horrible truth. “That’s why he needed me. Why he needs my signature on that document.”

Now it was her turn to sit forward, to lean toward me with confusion etched on her brow. “What document?”

I revealed to her what Kasimir had asked of me during our unappetizing dinner. Panic took her as she stood and paced the room, moving in and out of the candlelight, passing before me, wringing her hands.

“But you mustn’t sign!” she pleaded. “Don’t you see? That document is part of his grasp for power. With your signature, he’ll be able to declare me mad and send me to the asylum where I will rot for the remainder of my days. Where I’ll burn with utter hatred for my brother—where I’m sure I will become mad! With the fortune in his personal coffers, he’ll be able to purchase the political and legal influence he needs. He’ll sway—or buy—more of the Brotherhood, who will in turn pressure others to put themselves under the direction of Kasimir, hoisting him into the halls of power.” She knelt now before me, hands clenched onto

either arm of the chair. "He will kill those who get in his way. He is evil. Believe my father's wisdom as I do."

I leaned down to put soft hands on the small bones of her perfect, flushed face, but resisted the kiss I desired to take from her. All men wish not to merely gaze upon beauty when it is so close, but to also touch it, even slightly, to ensure that it is no mirage.

My eyes sank into hers. "I will not sign."

She sank to the floor, head pressed to the carpet, a sigh of relief escaping her lips. I stood and lifted her to her feet.

"Why did you come to this castle? Why not flee to Denmark to live and be protected by your lover?"

She turned from my arms and rushed to the window, leaning against the pane and watching the rain as it slipped down the glass. She wept. "I tried. After the tragedy of my family members, I wrote Anders telling him of my horror. He wrote back that he did not wish to see me again. I was confused, my heart shattered, depression consuming my days and nights. I wept for months, refused to eat, grew as thin as a skeleton. I wrote Anders many times, asking him to explain, pleading with him to change his answer ... but he never wrote again."

She stepped away from the window, resumed her seat at the foot of the bed. I sat again on the chair and was an attentive audience to her sorrow.

"My sister's ghost came to me, revealing that my brother had intercepted my letters. They never reached my love. He had written, wondering why he had not heard from me, but my brother confiscated all of his letters as well. It was my brother who wrote the horrific letter that broke my heart, emptied my soul of hope, made me vulnerable to his whims. He moved me into this castle and I obeyed. I did not note that the penmanship was not that of my love since its message had devastated me. Shortly after reading it, I burned it in that grate." Her eyes moved to the tiny metal fireplace. "I wanted a fireplace large enough to throw myself into, but my brother has locked most of the castle against my passage." Her gaze turned to me. "As the letter burned, I discovered that the fire grate was false, that there was a passage behind it. Small, but I could fit. Unfortunately, it only went into the room where you are housed. It was my personal library. I have read everything on the shelves in your room, and the tales of wonder and adventure have been my only escape from this prison. If there are tunnels throughout the castle, behind every wall, I know not of them. My brother kept your room locked from the outside, so my venturing always had too short an end."

I thought to myself: then it must have been Kasimir who erected the canvas wall of stone as I lay unconscious, deaf to his hammer. I stood, gave myself the bearing of a man of will, of decision. Looked down at her and waited until she lifted her tear-stained visage to me.

"We must find a way of escape. For both of us. Your brother is clearly not the man I knew. Perhaps he never was."

A heavy lump swallowed down her slender throat. Her clasped hands tightened. Desperate eyes pleaded with me, "Do you mean what you say? Escape?"

I lowered myself to a single knee as I cradled one of her hands in mine. “I do. We must delay no further. We must go tomorrow.”

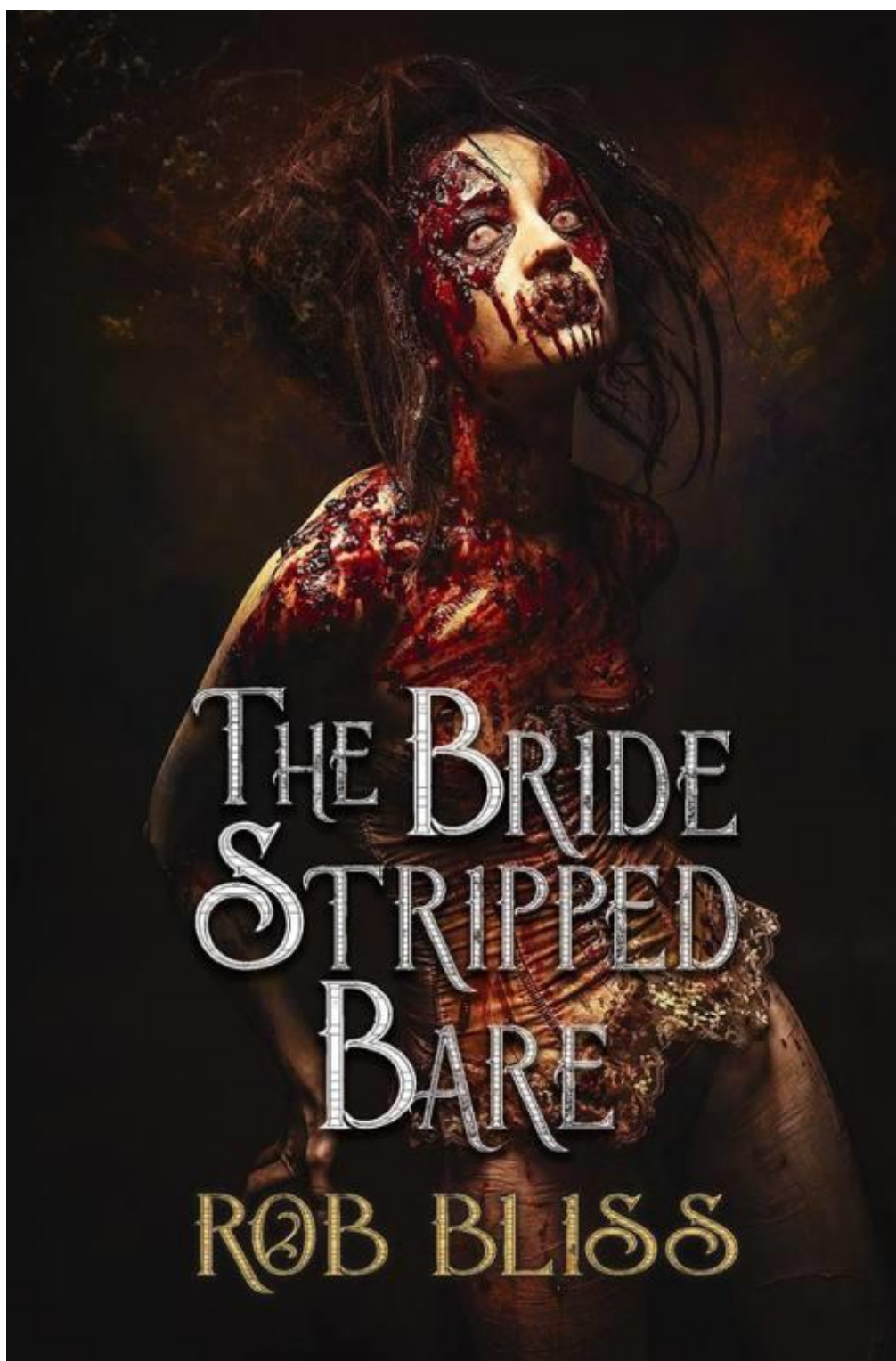
“But how?” she cried in a whisper of desperation. “He watches me. Especially after I attacked you, surely some part of him must fear that I shall attack him as well. I want to—oh, how desperately I would banish myself to Hell to strike him down ... as revenge for what he did to our family.”

I had no answer but a pat of her hand, maintaining my bravery to hold true to my word. I would not leave the castle in order to save myself (if Kasimir was a killer, what tortuous demise would he construct for me—one who had no bearing on his receiving the fortune? Quite the opposite, in fact. With my determination not to sign the document, I would be intentionally opposing his devices).

I would only be leaving the castle with Cybele and not without her.

We devised a plan.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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ALCOHOL by Peter Foster

My relationship with Alcohol has been generally agreeable. While I realize that it can twist minds, create violence, and ruin lives, I've been able to avoid that and merely suffer from the "acting like a silly arse" scenario. From the fairly common: throwing up in a cab and being kicked out in the middle of nowhere, to taking a lady out to dinner and then blowing it by making ludicrous observations. My "every meerkat can play the trumpet" comment didn't go down especially well.

For me, the onset of inebriation makes everything glitter and shine so that the possibilities of creative endeavour become almost endless. A bottle of red wine gets things going nicely, helping along a sublime mix of artistic planning combined with a hint of madness. Perhaps the sibilant voices I sometimes hear are merely the hissing of ruptured water pipes and not the gentle mocking of demons surrounding me. Lovecraft made insanity work for him as he conjured up his evil Mythos, inhabited as it was by hellish creatures wanting to destroy humanity.

(There comes the sound of blood-red wine pouring into a slender, crystal glass...)

The whispering gets louder as wine is swallowed. The sun slips down; its final shafts of light dappling the encroaching darkness with a watery gold wash as I sway softly, enjoying the sharp clinking of glasses as celebrations echo around me. My eyes half close as pallid faces, eyes dull yellow, peer at me from the long grass while blood-splatters trickle down their porcelain skin. I am insane and these creatures understand, their mouths curving up appreciatively as they begin to suspect that we are similar. Jagged nails grip withered rose bushes, faces twitching in delicious pain as the thorns tear flesh.

The clip-clop of high heels arrests my attention, and there she is: skin flashing seductively; her hair a tumble of curls and crimps. Full red lips partially hide razor-sharp incisors which make me shudder excitedly. My head drops and I rest heavily on a rickety beer garden table, a glass tipping over, as I try to gather my thoughts.

I slurp more wine, finally draining the bottle as her cold breath touches my glowing face. With a snigger, I pick up a bottle of quality red although I know not where it's come from. Soon I'm filling the glass and then begin to sup deeply. The weakening sunlight seems to spin around me, shimmering weirdly as skinny, cadaverous shapes move and twist in the hazy background. She smiles as she loosens the belt around her stylish dress, the soft fabric falling open to reveal her large, pale breasts and slim waist. A glinting silver choker merges with her alabaster skin and her small, yet strong hands yank my head up to hers—for she is tall—and she kisses me forcefully before pushing my head down. I indulge her frantically, ignoring the soft laughing of the creatures around me, and she groans as she stares upwards into the sinister trees. More wine is imbibed and I feel like a god, clutching my face as I scream my immortality to the evil stars suddenly gazing down. She falls to her knees and I glance at the red lips around my nether region and raise my shaking arms to punch the air, tears slipping from my watery eyes.

Half empty glasses surround me and I stare at the sunken faces peering up. I shift position on my throne, feeling the cold steel sending goose pimples spreading over my skin. The blood squelches beneath me and I glance at her as she views her minions, blood dripping down

between her engorged breasts. Her crown of bone is splattered in crimson, her eyes enraptured as her skinny cohorts whisper to her, their wavering voices gaining power.

I come to, my breath in unsteady gasps as I prop myself up as I try to remember. Delicate leaves fall onto me from the gold-brown canopy above, the boughs creaking in melancholy protestation. My tired eyes widen at the ribs poking through my tattered clothing. Old, dried blood covers me as does a layer of crispy, disintegrating leaf matter. As I struggle up, a number of opened and empty wine bottles—dozens of them—clink together and roll away. With a soft snarl, I crawl along the floor, parting the bushes and easing myself through. After reaching the High Street, the screaming starts. One female shopper, too slow to retreat, utters a whimper as my fevered face finds her bare legs, my yellowed teeth sinking into her smooth skin. Her uneven screech pleases me as I tear a section of flesh from her, the youth falling to the floor and thrashing around. My heavy breathing becomes more excited as I claw my way up her torso, finally biting off a thumb and snarling savagely -

(I'm sure I can hear laughing from somewhere...)

—before swallowing the small lump of meat. I rip her ears off and raise my face and look into the shop window. My bloody reflection stares back at me and I can hear more screams—and the first sirens. My jagged teeth gore her neck, my throat gulping down the torrent of blood.

I pluck a bottle of wine from her blood-splattered cloth shopping bag and my eyes widen. Chateauneuf-du-Pape! Soon I'm gulping down the Alcohol, my crimson, puckering lips tasting blood and booze and I start to cackle hysterically at the semi-circle of terrified faces staring at my emaciated form. I stagger to my feet to hold forth:

““What a piece of work is a man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties. In form and moving, how express and admirable. In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god...””

I'm swigging more Alcohol as the first bullets strike me, shattering the bottle and puncturing my frail body. Blood and wine merge in the listless air and I fall onto the dead girl, my dying eyes resting on the advancing policemen, their guns still smoking.

A dribble of Alcohol escapes my mouth to be replaced by a surge of blood, and I smile a last crooked grin as my memories of youth, vigour, and lost dreams begin to fade.

THE END

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THANKS KITTY by Christopher T Dabrowski

English translation by Monika Olasek

The sky was astonishingly blue, as every other day. The sun was providing substantial heat and the rustle of the sea was making everybody pleasantly calm and relaxed. The last day of vacation.

Natasha and I were heading for “our beach”, as we called the less crowded part of “normal” beach, located further away. The walking street was empty, since we were the only early birds who went to the beach so early. But within an hour, the place would be as crowded as usually.

Far away, a lump was digging in garbage cans. Next to him, I saw a small black shape. Most probably a cat.

With a corner of my eye I caught a sight of a delightfully shaped girl eating a huge ice-cream. Her solid buttocks round as a bowling ball were asking for a man’s attention. It took all my strength to resist, just because of my girlfriend who was walking next to me.

Oh, if only Natasha would take care of herself a bit, she could have buttocks like that, not those soft, muddy things of hers. And generally, she’s been making me mad lately. She would always let her nasty boss fool around with her and the boss took advantage of that, giving her extra work, and then instead of having some time for regeneration, Natasha went to a bigger or smaller party with some good friends. This made me feel a bit lonely in our relationship. What’s more, Natasha’s body was no longer coping with this speed of living, and her health was rumbling in different ways. This all ended up in me regularly witnessing her being torn by different ailments. And I had to listen how tired she was times and times again.

I would feel sorry for her if it wasn’t her own fault; if she hadn’t done it to herself.

Not to make Natasha sad unintentionally, I focused on observation of the lump who stopped his garbage treasure hunt and looked at the beauty passing next to him. I was curious whether he wanted the ice-cream, as most probably it was a long time since he had something delicious like that, or maybe he wanted to beauty to grab his hand and pull him into the nearest bush to do you-know-what.

The girl changed her path to walk an arch around him—if she could, she would enter the street to be as far as possible from him.

It didn’t surprise me.

And by the way, I wondered what the man’s pleasure in life was, if any, and whether the lump saw any sense in life any more. Wasn’t it devastating when he saw happy, relaxing people around him? Wasn’t he sorry that he couldn’t go into the first bar in a row with pleasant smells coming from inside? Just like people do? Did it make any sense for him to see beautiful women and know that the only feeling they had for him was disgust? Wouldn’t he like to lie down somewhere and simply die? Leave the damaged body and the world of temptations where he had no perspective apart from a still greater suffering?

After a moment, we were passing by him.

‘Yh...’ Natasha moaned, moving to my left.

Well, I could tell she was in a less philosophic mood than I was.

Suddenly, we heard a groan and a sound of falling. It was the lump.

Unconscious, he was lying on the sidewalk.

Did he faint? Was he alive? Was he dead? We must help him!

I wanted to go towards him, but I felt fingers of steel on my shoulder.

‘Leave him. He must have drunk too much.’

I couldn’t smell any alcohol.

‘I doubt it.’

‘Then maybe he’s stoned.’

She was still holding me, trying to pull me away from the lump. And she was partly succeeding.

‘I must...’

‘No, you don’t! How can you help him?’

‘But...’

‘And what, will you give him a mouth-to-mouth?’

God, I felt sick just thinking of it. But on the other hand, he was a human being! A lump or not, we had to save him. I wouldn’t be able to sleep, if my conscience was burdened with the thought that maybe I could help.

And by the way, that was a bit egoistic, me wanting to save a person in order not to hurt my inside.

‘Just think about the diseases you can be infected with,’ Natasha was still fighting and was more and more convincing. My feet were resisting less and less. We were moving slowly backwards.

I looked at the other side of the street and a way to solve the ventilation issue came into my mind—a rolled restaurant menu stuck into the lump’s mouth would be a lot better than mouth-to-mouth, but if resuscitation would be necessary that would be more disgusting.

And I would certainly need someone to help me. Natasha was not the one I could count on, though.

‘You cannot even call an ambulance. We haven’t taken our mobiles!’ she insisted, feeling my growing resistance. ‘Oh, but look, the thing is all over now.’ She pointed to a taxi that was stopping. ‘The driver must make the call or help.’

‘Well, she’s right,’ I sighed with relief—the responsibility was no longer on my shoulders.

Unfortunately, we managed to make just a few steps when I heard the taxi move. A moment later, it drove next to us.

Did the driver call for help? Or maybe not? Would he or she do that? Or not?

I wanted to turn around and go back, do something, but Natasha was firmly pulling me straight forward. I started telling myself that the taxi driver must have called for help, or if he hadn’t, he would certainly do that any second now.

There was a black cat in front of us. He was sitting still, a bit strange, sad.

Of course, Natasha felt no sympathy for a man, but as soon as she saw the cat, she shot towards it with delight, such a sweetie and such a poor little thing, so very tired.

The cat was not only tired; there was something wrong with it; it was swaying side to side, its fur was ruffled, with some bald spaces here and there, as if it took part in a cat fight. And it had something between its paws.

Maybe it had puked?

Natasha was already leaning over it to pet it. She was already squatting.

It was spittle. The cat was sick. Rabies.

‘Nata...’ I didn’t make it. The cat grabbed her wrist with its teeth. She screamed in surprise.

‘Mark!’ she was looking at me with despair.

And me... I was still bothered by the lump issue, so I turned back one more time. And I wasn’t sure that I wouldn’t run towards the man if I hadn’t seen two people leaning over him.

‘Mark!’ Natasha was screaming. ‘What are you doing? Take it off me.’

I turned to her and, without a particular reason, I felt distance and disdain. I really didn’t want to sacrifice myself and take the risk of having a series of painful belly injections. Not for her—something broke inside me.

‘Hold his neck tight,’ such was my advice.

‘It’ll suffocate,’ she was weeping.

He's dead either way—I wanted to say, but I didn't. Instead, I kicked the cat's belly. The animal let go of the hand and rolled to the side. A moment later, it was dead.

'You killed the cat!' Natasha was shocked to state this fact.

Or maybe we killed that guy by not helping him on time?—such a thought shot through my mind.

'I made its suffering shorter.'

For the rest of the day, I felt her growing distance that turned into disdain on our way back to Poland. As if I had hurt her in a way.

I knew that she would tell me that “we had to talk” after we got back. I was right—we did “talk.”

A bit sad, but also a bit happy. We weren't right for each other. And by the way, I could not share life with such a woman without her heart. Well, at least without a larger part of her heart.

Thanks, kitty!

THE END

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VINCENT CURBY'S FINAL TICKET by Michael D Davis

The man in line a few places ahead of Vincent Curby was an odd sight to behold. He was tall, dirty, with unwashed hair that held random leaves and a wrinkled, skinny body that was visible to all around him because he only wore a pair of stained underwear and a single slipper. However, unlike Vincent, he did have his ticket.

The hall was lined with dark red wallpaper and the occasional old framed picture. Everything seemed to have a layer of dust or a damp smell to it. On top of everything else behind the ugly, poorly applied, peeling wallpaper sounds of scuttling emerged as the people in line shifted their feet.

Vincent tapped the shoulder of the heavy-set man in front of him saying politely, "Excuse me."

"Yes," said the man turning around.

"I am sorry to bother you, but I was wondering where you got that?"

Vincent pointed at the red ticket clutched in the big man's sweaty hand.

"You sayin' you don't have a ticket?"

"Well, no not yet."

"That ain't good."

"No, so why don't you tell me where you got your ticket and I'll go fetch one."

"Well, let's see here... um ... you know I don't rightly remember."

"Come again?"

"It just seems like I've had it for a long time. But I don't recollect where I got it from."

Vincent frowned slightly then said, "Well, have you at least seen a place to purchase one?"

"Nope, I've just been in line here. Name's Dale Bonter, what's yours?"

"Vincent Curby."

"Good to meet you, Vincent."

"Yeah, you too, do you at least know what we're in line for?"

"Couldn't tell ya." Dale stuck his head around the side, but he couldn't see the lines end.

"Many people, maybe a convention or a movie opening or something. I once stood outside a movie theatre for six hours just to get a ticket."

"That's dedication."

“I love my movies.”

“I just wish I knew what this line was for.”

“I’m sure we’ll figure it out soon, see, lines movin’ already. Anyways I shouldn’t get too anxious to get to the front if I were you, Vinny, not havin’ a ticket and all.”

Vincent laughed. “You’re right, what the Hell am I getting in a hurry about?”

The next part I’ll skip with little to no comment as it is a rather dull time-consuming area where minimal happens. Vincent and Dale chatted pleasantly as the line moved forward at a snail’s pace. After what certainly seemed like decades to Vincent the start of the line finally appeared.

Sitting on an old wooden chair in front of a large lime green and black striped door was a grumpy, balding little man with thick glasses. He tore people’s tickets, grumbling at them out of the side of his mouth before they entered through the green and black door. Not until Vincent was only a few places from the front could he hear what the man was saying.

“Crooked lawyer huh? Got a lotta you guys down here, go through the door, suit wearin’ asshole. And you? Rape and murder I should’ve figured. Look at ya, ya ugly bastard, get through the door. What about you, string bean? Oh, you held a woman in your basement for years.”

“It’s not what it looks like,” said the guy in line, “she was my sister.”

“Yeah, that makes it a lot better. Get through the fuckin’ door you sick fuck.”

The skinny man in line slumped his shoulders then proceeded through the door. It was now Dale Bonter’s turn, he slowly handed the little man his ticket. The man took it muttering, “What about you, crabapple pie?” He ripped Dale’s red ticket in two, then said, “Scammed old bags out their life savings, huh? Funny. Through the door.” Dale took his stub, nodded at Vincent and went through the door.

“Ticket, ticket for fuck’s sake!” the man growled.

“I do apologize sir, but I don’t seem to have one,” Vincent said, smiling sheepishly.

“What?”

“I said—”

“I know what you said, but everyone here has a ticket, asshole. That’s why they’re here.”

“Again, I apologize, but I don’t and what exactly is this place?”

“Well, it used to be a river called Styx and I was tortured for a millennium by sitting in a rickety splintery boat. Now, it’s a hall and I’m tortured by sittin’ in a rickety, splintery chair

with one leg shorter than the rest all the time dealing with dog's asshole eating fuckers like you. Now ticket!"

"Again, I do not have a ticket. And are you saying that behind that green and black striped door is Hell?"

"Yes. And the door frankly looks different to everyone because everyone's Hell is unique like my Hell is this situation."

Vincent straightened up and said, "Well, I don't mean to be a problem. It's just I don't have a ticket, here I'll turn out my pockets." Emptying his jacket, pants and even shoes nothing was found, but lint and a handkerchief.

"Fine, you don't have a ticket. Maybe I can guess your sin. You seem like a murder man to me maybe even a family member. Which was it: patricide, matricide, sororicide, fratricide, avunculicide, mariticide, menticide, prolicide?"

"Dear me," Vincent said making a horrid face, "I don't even know what most of that is."

"Fine, looks like I'm gonna need some higher powers."

A burnt-out looking woman behind Vincent said, "You mean God?"

"Yes," said the man in the chair, "you're in Hell and the higher power is God? Son of a bitch, is your reason for being here fucking stupidity?"

There was a short, sweet, and profane conversation on a landline located on the hall wall. Then Vincent was told in so many words to go through the door. After proceeding through hesitantly, it snapped shut behind him quickly like the jaws of a rabid dog.

Looking around, Vincent realized he was in another hallway, but this time it seemed to be located in an office building. Doors were all up and down the hall hundreds on each side. Picking one Vincent turned the knob and opened it. He was met with a blood-curdling scream and someone yelling, "Please God, no more!" Vincent said sorry quickly and closed the door again.

A strong hand grasped his shoulder and Vincent nearly screamed himself. He turned to see a man waiting pleasantly for him. I feel here more than anywhere else in the story a description is warranted because the man waiting for Vincent had no lower jaw. On top, his face was completely normal, but under his nose and top lip his tongue wiggled restlessly and the remainder was simply a festering puss filled wound that ate away down deep into his neck and chest. Not knowing what to do Vincent complimented the man's shoes.

Without responding the man led him down the long hall to a particular door. The half-faced man went in first and sat behind a small desk then pointed at an inner door. Vincent opened the door and saw a grey-haired woman sitting behind a large desk.

"Your secretary told me to come in," Vincent said.

"Then don't just stand there holding the door open. Sit for shit's sake."

Vincent followed her instruction, saying, “You another tortured soul?”

“No. I’m a demon, you dumb fuck.”

Pointing at the nameplate on her desk he said, “A demon named Darlene?”

“It’s just my human name. Policy while consorting with humans we use human names because your species doesn’t have the compacity to pronounce my true name.”

“Oh, interesting...Darlene.”

“Yeah, shut the fuck up.”

Pulling a file from a large cabinet behind her Darlene said, “Okay, let’s try to fix this.”

“What’s that?”

“Your file.”

“Ooh, does it have all my pre-school infractions?” Vincent said joking.

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Vincent Edgar Curby, born October 28th nineteen-fifty occupation... cafeteria worker?”

Darlene looked at Vincent over the file, he adjusted his bowtie nervously. “I work in the kitchen or since I’m here, worked in the kitchen at South Hinchley Elementary School. You know, giving the kids their daily slop.”

“Uh huh... weird.”

“What’s that?”

Putting down the file she said, “Something’s not right here Mr. Curby. You show up here without a ticket and now looking in your file I see you don’t have any death date.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’re alive, Mr. Curby.”

“Then what am I doing here?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to have to get in touch with the higher ups on the totem pole even maybe the man in charge as this has never happened before. In the meantime I’ll answer your stupid questions, humans always have stupid questions. You do, don’t you?”

“Several.”

“Let me make a phone call then. I’ll answer them.”

When Darlene hung up the phone Vincent started in fast.

“Why isn’t it hot in here?”

“The air conditioner’s on.”

“Are my parents here?”

“Not according to your file.”

“What about my cousin Dale, he was a dick?”

“He’s here.”

“Why do you have an office and not off torturing someone?”

“Because I’m in management, others are torturers.”

“Is the Devil red with a tail and horns?”

“When he wants to be.”

“Is all of Hell just a series of doors?”

“No, that’s simply just what you’ve seen so far. Look out the window.”

Vincent looked where she pointed and saw a window that he wasn’t positive was there before. He got up and looked out, it was just like a town. There were buildings, and streets where which demons and tortured souls all went about their business all under a blue sky with ashen clouds. “Amazing,” was all Vincent could get out.

Meanwhile, as Vincent enjoyed the view of Hell, a good ways south in a large black stoned building a nervous-looking little demon adjusted his glasses and told his boss the situation.

“How’d he get here without a ticket?” Lucifer roared at the demon.

“I don’t know sir, no one does.”

“Well, get rid of him. No ticket. No admittance. This is Hell, not some place for undesirables.”

“Yes, sir, but it’s not that simple. It seems that Heaven has heard and they have expressed interest in him.”

“Really? Why? Does he have a ticket to the wet wiped gates?”

“No, sir.”

“What an enigma, I’m starting to like him. Well, they can’t have him. Send a message up to the cloud footed fucks saying he’s now a citizen of Hell and if they want him, they’ll have to deal with me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Darlene got a phone call explaining all that was needed to be done. Once she pulled Vincent from the window, she laid out what was happening.

“It has been decided that we will offer you a deal to resolve this issue.”

“What kind of deal? A deal with the Devil? Or is it a deal with Darlene?”

Darlene ignored Vincent’s comment and continued. “In exchange for becoming a resident of Hell, we will offer you whatever you desire.”

“That’s it, just for remaining here?”

“Yes, no Heaven or Purgatory.”

“What exactly is Purgatory?”

“A timeless void that I hear is like falling down the rabbit hole for all eternity.”

“Interesting.”

“So, what do you want, Vincent Curby?”

Adjusting his bowtie, Vincent said, “There is something I’ve always thought would be wonderful.”

“Name it, Mr. Curby.”

It was smack dab in the middle of downtown. Just like he’d always dreamt it, down to the black and white striped awning. The painted letters on the picture window said it all: The Hell Hole Candy Shop Twisted Confectioneries from the Bowels of the Abyss. A little different than how he first imagined it, but beggars can’t be choosers.

A demon walked in making the bell over the door ring. Vincent popped up from behind the counter and said, “Hello, there. We got a special today on pus filled gummies and lollypops with razor blade centres...”

THE END

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DOMESTIKA

Two

For the best part of the last half an hour, Matt Johnson of KLF Local News and his film crew had been broadcasting coverage of the amazing aftermath of events that occurred in the home of George and Lillian Carpenter, perhaps something like two hours previously—during which George called in the police, thus starting the whole domino effect. Matt was a tough customer, called a spade a spade, and never hesitated getting down to the brass tacks of the news he reported on in the local Cumbria community. In his time, he had been nominated for many reporting awards. Yet, up until now won none, which sickened his stomach, but made him ever the more eager for that one big story—and recognition in the media. Matt dreamed of that big contract with the BBC or Sky News.

He was a young buck who took no prisoners and prized himself on his bluntness and getting straight to the point in on-the-spot interviews. However much of a riddle newsworthy events' turned out, Matt was certain to get to the very bottom of them.

He spotted George Carpenter emerge from the front door of his Whitehaven home flanked by two constables, so decided it was time to pounce—make his move. He rushed across the neatly-trimmed front lawn with his cameraman in tow and wasted no time in ramming his microphone straight under George Carpenter's nose, who appeared actually relieved to be accosted by the in-depth reporter and his team.

Matt said, "George Carpenter, what exactly occurred here tonight? We understand there are strange events afoot concerning your wife, whom, as it has been reported, has quickly been rushed by ambulance and police escort to West Cumberland Hospital with suspected pneumonia...and yet we also understand—and this is why the media is currently been driven wild with expectation—her lungs, kidneys and even her heart, have seized up. Yet, she seems utterly unawares of her current physical condition, that her body is resolutely dead, but continues to operate like somebody completely alive. Can you elaborate on this intriguing state of affair for our viewers, sir?"

The policemen stopped and allowed George to speak before bundling him into their squad car, since there were many questions to answer at the station. But all parties concerned suspected there was no foul play involved tonight. It seemed to everyone it was just a bizarre freak of nature—a strange Act of God, perhaps? It baffled the scientific community as they woke in the early hours to the news of Lillian Carpenter, rendering most geeks and boffins confused, as global media companies inundated them with phone-calls and emails.

Bad news travelled fast, or it seemed that way certainly.

George said with a brave face, "There was an intruder in my house, in my kitchen, as my wife and I were in the bedroom trying to sleep, so I told her I had better go and investigate, and that if there was anybody there in the kitchen, no matter how intimidating or nasty—or murderous—they were, and that she needn't worry, as I was a bigger man than them and I'd see them off. After all, I am a qualified 7th Dan green belt in Karate, and I even know some Judo..."

Matt said, “Did you discover the intruder, Mr Carpenter? I mean, was there a scuffle, a conflict or confrontation, between yourself and this rumbled potential thug, any violence?”

“He was a big black guy...a big nigger...who escaped through the back door and made a run for it as I entered the kitchen, when he shouted back at me “I’ll be back to get you next time, honky!” in a thick Birmingham accent. Admittedly, yes, I was unnerved, but I knew my wife was alone, so my priority was keeping Lillian safe.”

“There was no mention of a black man in the police report.”

George looked angered, “Are you calling me a liar? I tell you, he was black, big, muscular, angry...and as he ran away, he was shouting things about the Government, how he was going to plant a bomb under Parliament and blast everybody inside into space and oblivion!”

“Are you making this up, Mr Carpenter? KLF News isn’t a soap-box for your racist rants!”

Adamant, the man said, “I tell it like it is, that’s all. You and your pansy media set-up just can’t handle the fucking blind truth.”

Matt Johnson peered at the cameraman, “Cut the cursing, Mike...” and turned back to George.

George appealed, “Why would I lie? My wife is severely ill in hospital. She might even die.”

Matt laughed, “That’s just it, sir. Apparently—technically—she is dead as we speak, yet somehow fully functioning as per normal. The phenomena has the vast majority of the scientific community up in arms, they are utterly baffled. She’s a zombie!”

“My wife LILLIAN isn’t a FUCKING ZOMBIE!”

“Tell me, sir...how did you first notice something wasn’t right with your wife? I mean, before you decided to call the authorities?”

Pissed off, George inhaled deeply, and then slowly exhaled. He paused in an attempt to somehow compose himself.

He said, “We were lying in bed together. We had been making love...you know...fucking, like married couples do, nothing wrong there. But we took a break, and after a little while, I noticed she looked a bit off-colour. Still in sexy mood, I put my hand down her knickers, and then slipped my fingers into her cunt...”

Transfixed, Matt egged him on, “Yes...and what next?”

“...It felt cold...icy cold...her pussy, just damp and cold, like dipping your fingers into a can of mushy peas that’s stood for too long in the freezer. Plus, she wasn’t responding when I attempted time after time to wake her up, even when I raised my voice and shouted, until I started screaming, not because I was scared...well, I was scared, yes...but I was only scared for Lillian, in case my wife was dead. And then I realized she was not even breathing. She opened her eyes and her eyes were like Luther’s eyes, yellow, glowing, demonic...”

“Who is Luther? Is that the intruder’s name? I thought he ran away into the night.”

“Luther...Luther, the cat, our cat, a domestic pet.”

Nervously, Matt Johnson turned to look back into the camera, much to George Carpenter’s chagrin. For George, it seemed the camera-angle was more important than interviewing the most important person here—him!

Matt turned back to him. He looked like he was going to laugh, since the interview had taken some amusing detour. He said, “Your cat’s eyes were yellow? Like those of your wife? Are you serious?”

“I saw my wife’s eyes and I saw Luther’s eyes and they were both yellow!”

Feigning to look around the front lawn and garden, Matt teased, “I don’t see any cats around here? Tell me, when you put your fingers inside that cold pussy, did you suddenly want to put your dick in and screw something similar to good old Eskimo pussy?”

The two policemen laughed along with Matt and the cameraman. For these guys, events had taken some kind of darkly hilarious turn.

Matt turned to the camera, “Edit those last remarks out, Mike.” He turned back to George, resting his hand on his shoulder, adding, “I suggest you go to the station and file your report, and then get some sleep. We all need sleep right now, even filthy hacks like me seeking exploitation and brownie points in whatever corners they dwell...” He glanced back at the camera, “...Matt Johnson, KLF News, signing off...enjoy the rest of the day, folks, until next time!”

And that was a wrap...

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ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

XXXI: How Eric Sent Away His Men from Mosfell

Now Eric and Skallagrim came to Mosfell in safety, and during all that ride Brighteyes spoke no word. He rode in silence, and in silence Skallagrim rode after him. The heart of Skallagrim was broken because of the sorrow which his drunkenness had brought about, and the heart of Eric was buried in Gudruda's grave.

On Mosfell Eric found four of his own men, two of whom had been among those that the people of Gizur and Swanhild had driven from Gudruda's ship before they fired her. For no fight had been made on the ship. There also he found Jon, who had been loosed from his bands in the booth by one who heard his cries as he rode past. Now when Jon saw Brighteyes, he told him all, and fell at Eric's feet and wept because he had betrayed him in his fear.

But Eric spoke no angry word to him. Stooping down he raised him, saying, "Thou wast never overstout of heart, Jon, and thou art scarcely to be blamed because thou didst speak rather than die in torment, though perhaps some had chosen so to die and not to speak. Now I am a luckless man, and all things happen as they are fated, and the words of Atli come true, as was to be looked for. The Norns, against whom none may stand, did but work their will through thy mouth, Jon; so grieve no more for that which cannot be undone."

Then he turned away, but Jon wept long and loudly.

That night Eric slept well and dreamed no dreams. But on the morrow he woke at dawn, and clothed himself and ate. Then he called his men together, and with them Skallagrim. They came and stood before him, and Eric, drawing Whitefire, leaned upon it and spoke:

"Hearken, mates," he said: "I know this, that my hours are short and death draws on. My years have been few and evil, and I cannot read the purpose of my life. She whom I loved has been slain by the witchcraft of Swanhild and the coward hand of Gizur the murderer, and I go to seek her where she waits. I am very glad to go, for now I have no more joy in life, being but a luckless man; it is an ill world, friends, and all the ways are red with blood. I have shed much blood, though but one life haunts me now at the last, and that is the life of Atli the Earl, for he was no match for my might and he is dead because of my sin. With my own blood I will wash away the blood of Atli, and then I seek another place, leaving nothing but a tale to be told in the ingle when fall the winter snows. For to this end we all come at the last, and it matters little if it find us at midday or at nightfall. We live in sorrow, we die in pain and darkness: for this is the curse that the Gods have laid upon men and each must taste it in his season. But I have sworn that no more men shall die for me. I will fight the last great fight alone; for I know this: I shall not easily be overcome, and with my fallen foes I will tread on Bifrost Bridge. Therefore, farewell! When the bones of Eric Brighteyes lie in their barrow, or are picked by ravens on the mountain side, Gizur will not trouble to hunt out those who clung to him, if indeed Gizur shall live to tell the tale. Nor need ye fear the hate of Swanhild, for she aims her spears at me alone. Go, therefore, and when I am dead, do not forget me, and do not seek to avenge me, for Death the avenger of all will find them also."

Now Eric's men heard and groaned aloud, saying that they would die with him, for they loved Eric one and all. Only Skallagrim said nothing.

Then Brighteyes spoke again: "Hear me, comrades. If ye will not go, my blood will be on your heads, for I will ride out alone, and meet the men of Gizur in the plain and fall there fighting."

Then one by one they crept away to seek their horses in the dell. And each man as he went came to Eric and kissed his hand, then passed thence weeping. Jon was the last to go, except Skallagrim only, and he was so moved that he could not speak at all.

It was this Jon who, in after years, when he was grown very old, wandered from stead to stead telling the deeds of Eric Brighteyes, and always finding a welcome because of his tale, till at length, as he journeyed, he was overtaken by a snowstorm and buried in a drift. For Jon, who lacked much, had this gift: he had a skald's tongue. Men have always held that it was to the honour of Jon that he told the tale thus, hiding nothing, seeing that some of it is against himself.

Now when all had gone, Eric looked at Skallagrim, who still stood near him, axe in hand.

"Wherefore goest thou not, drunkard?" he said. "Surely thou wilt find ale and mead in the vales or oversea. Here there is none. Hasten! I would be alone!"

Now the great body of Skallagrim shook with grief and shame, and the red blood poured up beneath his dark sin. Then he spoke in a thick voice:

"I did not think to live to hear such words from the lips of Eric Brighteyes. They are well earned, yet it is unmanly of thee, lord, thus to taunt one who loves thee. I would sooner die as Swanhild said yonder thrall should die than live to listen to such words. I have sinned against thee, indeed, and because of my sin my heart is broken. Hast thou, then, never sinned that thou wouldst tear it living from my breast as eagles tear a foundered horse? Think on thine own sins, Eric, and pity mine! Taunt me thus once more or bid me go once more and I will go indeed! I will go thus—on the edge of yonder gulf thou didst overcome me by thy naked might, and there I swore fealty to thee, Eric Brighteyes. Many a year have we wandered side by side, and, standing back to back, have struck many a blow. I am minded to do this: to stand by thee in the last great fight that draws on and to die there with thee. I have loved no other man save thee, and I am too old to seek new lords. Yet, if still thou biddest me, I will go thus. Where I swore my oath to thee, there I will end it. For I will lay me down on the brink of yonder gulf, as once I lay when thy hand was at my throat, and call out that thou art no more my lord and I am no more thy thrall. Then I will roll into the depths beneath, and by this death of shame thou shalt be freed of me, Eric Brighteyes."

Eric looked at the great man—he looked long and sadly. Then he spoke:

"Skallagrim Lambstail, thou hast a true heart. I too have sinned, and now I put away thy sin, although Gudruda is dead through thee and I must die because of thee. Stay by me if thou wilt and let us fall together."

Then Skallagrim came to Eric, and, kneeling before him, took his hands and kissed them.

"Now I am once more a man," he said, "and I know this: we two shall die such a great death that it will be well to have lived to die it!" and he arose and shouted:

“A! hai! A! hai! I see foes pass in pride!
A! hai! A! hai! Valkyries ride the wind!
Hear the song of the sword!
Whitefire is aloft—aloft!
Bare is the axe of the Baresark!
Croak, ye nesting ravens;
Flap your wings, ye eagles,
For bright is Mosfell’s cave with blood!
Lap! lap! thou Grey Wolf,
Laugh aloud, Odin!

“Laugh till shake the golden doors;
Heroes’ feet are set on Bifrost,
Open, ye hundred gates!
A! hai! A! hai! red runs the fray!
A! hai! A! hai! Valkyries ride the wind!”

Then Skallagrim turned and went to clean his harness and the golden helm of Eric.

Now at Coldback Gizur spoke with Swanhild.

“Thou hast brought the greatest shame upon me,” he said, “for thou hast caused me to slay a sleeping woman. Knowest thou that my own men will scarcely speak with me? I have come to this evil pass, through love of thee, that I have slain a sleeping woman!”

“It was not my fault that thou didst kill Gudruda,” answered Swanhild; “surely I thought it was Eric whom thy sword pierced! I have not sought thy love, Gizur, and I say this to thee: go, if thou wilt, and leave me alone!”

Now Gizur looked at her, and was minded to go; but, as Swanhild knew well, she held him too fast in the net of her witcheries.

“I would go, if I might go!” answered Gizur; “but I am bound to thee for good or evil, since it is fated that I shall wed thee.”

“Thou wilt never wed me while Eric lives,” said Swanhild.

Now she spoke thus truthfully, and by chance, as it were, not as driving Gizur on to slay Eric—for, now that Gudruda was dead, she was in two minds as to this matter, since, if she might, she still desired to take Eric to herself—but meaning that while Eric lived she would wed no other man. But Gizur took it otherwise.

“Eric shall certainly die if I may bring it about,” he answered, and went to speak with his men.

Now all were gathered in the yard at Coldback, and that was a great company. But their looks were heavy because of the shame that Gizur, Ospakar’s son, had brought upon them by the murder of Gudruda in her sleep.

“Hearken, comrades!” said Gizur: “great shame is come upon me because of a deed that I have done unwittingly, for I aimed at the eagle Eric and I have slain the swan Gudruda.”

Then a certain old viking in the company, named Ketel, whom Gizur had hired for the slaying of Eric, spoke:

“Man or woman, it is a niddering deed to kill folk in their sleep, Gizur! It is murder, and no less, and small luck can be hoped for from the stroke.”

Now Gizur felt that his people looked on him askance and heavily, and knew that it would be hard to show them that he was driven to this deed against his will, and by the witchcraft of Swanhild. So, as was his nature, he turned to guile for shelter, like a fox to his hole, and spoke to them with the tongue of a lawman; for Gizur had great skill in speech.

“That tale was not all true which Eric Brighteyes told you,” he said. “He was mad with grief, and moreover it seems that he slept, and only woke to find Gudruda dead. It came about thus: I stood with the lady Swanhild, and was about to call aloud on Eric to arm himself and come forth and meet me face to face——”

“Then, lord, methinks thou hadst never met another foe,” quoth the viking Ketel who had spoken first.

“When of a sudden,” went on Gizur, taking no note of Ketel’s words, “one clothed in white sprang from the bed and rushed on me. Then I, thinking that it was Eric, lifted sword, not to smite, but to ward him away; but the linen-wearer met the sword and fell down dead. Then I fled, fearing lest men should wake and trap us, and that is all the tale. It was no fault of mine if Gudruda died upon the sword.”

Thus he spoke, but still men looked doubtfully upon him, for his eye was the eye of a liar—and Eric, as they knew, did not lie.

“It is hard to find the truth between lawman’s brain and tongue,” said the old viking Ketel. “Eric is no lawman, but a true man, and he sang another song. I would slay Eric indeed, for between him and me there is a blood-feud, since my brother died at his hand when, with Whitefire for a crook, Brighteyes drove armed men like sheep down the hall of Middalhof—ay and swordless, slew Ospakar. Yet I say that Eric is a true man, and, whether or no thou art true, Gizur the Lawman, that thou knowest best—thou and Swanhild the Fatherless, Groa’s daughter. If thou didst slay Gudruda as thou tellest, say, how come Gudruda’s blood on Whitefire’s blade? How did it chance, Gizur, that thou heldest Whitefire in thy hand and not thine own sword? Now I tell thee this: either thou shalt go up against Eric and clear thyself by blows, or I leave thee; and methinks there are others among this company who will do the same, for we have no wish to be partners with murderers and their wickedness.”

“Ay, a good word!” said many who stood by. “Let Gizur go up with us to Mosfell, and there stand face to face with Eric and clear himself by blows.”

“I ask no more,” said Gizur; “we will ride to-night.”

“But much more shalt thou get, liar,” quoth Ketel to himself, “for that hour when thou lookest once again on Whitefire shall be thy last!”

So Gizur and Swanhild made ready to go up against Eric. That day they rode away with a great company, a hundred and one in all, and this was their plan. They sent six men with that thrall who had shown them the secret path, bidding him guide them to the mountain-top. Then, when they were come thither, and heard the shouts of those who sought to gain the platform from the south, they were to watch till Eric and his folk came out from the cave, and shoot them with arrows from above or crush them with stones. But if perchance Eric left the platform and came to meet his foes in the narrow pass, then they must let themselves down with ropes from the height above, and, creeping after him round the rock, must smite him in the back. Moreover, in secret, Gizur promised a great reward of ten hundreds in silver to him who should kill Eric, for he did not long to stand face to face with him alone. Swanhild also in secret made promise of reward to those who should bring Eric to her, bound, but living; and she bade them do this—to bear him down with shields and tie him with ropes.

So they rode away, the seven who should climb the mountain from behind going first, and on the morrow morning they crossed the sand and came to Mosfell.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

15. Zaemon's Summons

Since the days when man was first created upon the earth by Gods who looked down and did their work from another place, there have always been areas of the land ill-adapted for his maintenance, but none more so than that part of Atlantis which lies over against the savage continents of Europe and Africa. The common people avoid it, because of a superstition which says that the spirits of the evil dead stalk about there in broad daylight, and slay all those that the more open dangers of the place might otherwise spare. And so it has happened often that the criminals who might have fled there from justice, have returned of their own free will, and voluntarily given themselves up to the tormentors, rather than face its fabulous terrors.

To the educated, many of these legends are known to be mythical; but withal there are enough disquietudes remaining to make life very arduous and stocked with peril. Everywhere the mountains keep their contents on the boil; earth tremors are every day's experience; gushes of unseen evil vapours steal upon one with such cunningness and speed, that it is often hard to flee in time before one is choked and killed; poisons well up into the rivers, yet leave their colour unchanged; great cracks split across the ground reaching down to the fires beneath, and the waters gush into these, and are shot forth again with devastating explosion; and always may be expected great outpourings of boiling mud or molten rock.

Yet with all this, there are great sombre forests in these lands, with trees whose age is unimaginable, and fires amongst the herbage are rare. All beneath the trees is water, and the air is full of warm steam and wetness. For a man to live in that constant hot damp is very mortifying to the strength. But strength is wanted, and cunning also beyond the ordinary, for these dangerous lands are the abode of the lizards, which of all beasts grow to the most enormous size and are the most fearsome to deal with.

There are countless families and species of these lizards, and with some of them a man can contend with prospect of success. But there are others whose hugeness no human force can battle against. One I saw, as it came up out of a lake after gaining its day's food, that made the wet land shake and pulse as it trod. It could have taken Phorenice's mammoth into its belly,¹ and even a mammoth in full charge could not have harmed it. Great horny plates covered its head and body, and on the ridge of its back and tail and limbs were spines that tore great slivers from the black trees as it passed amongst them.

Now and again these monsters would get caught in some vast fissuring of the ground, but not often. Their speed of foot was great, and their sagacity keen. They seemed to know when the worst boilings of the mountains might be expected, and then they found safety in the deeper lakes, or buried themselves in wallows of the mud. Moreover, they were more kindly constituted than man to withstand one great danger of these regions, in that the heat of the water did them no harm. Indeed, they will lie peacefully in pools where sudden steam-bursts are making the water leap into boiling fountains, and I have seen one run quickly across a flow of molten rock which threatened to cut it off, and not be so much as singed in the transit.

¹ TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Professor Reeder of the Wyoming State University has recently unearthed the skeleton of a Brontosaurus, 130 ft. in length, which would have weighed 50 tons when alive. It was 35 ft. in height at the hips, and 25 ft. at the shoulder, and 40 people could be seated with comfort within its ribs. Its thigh bone was 8 ft. long. The fossils of a whole series of these colossal lizards have been found.

In the midst of such neighbours, then, was my new life thrown, and existence became perilous and hard to me from the outset. I came near to knowing what Fear was, and indeed only a fervent trust in the most High Gods, and a firm belief that my life was always under Their fostering care, prevented me from gaining that horrid knowledge. For long enough, till I learned somewhat of the ways of this steaming, sweltering land, I was in as miserable a case as even Phorenice could have wished to see me. My clothes rotted from my back with the constant wetness, till I went as naked as a savage from Europe; my limbs were racked with agues, and I could find no herbs to make drugs for their relief; for days together I could find no better food than tree-grubs and leaves; and often when I did kill beasts, knowing little of their qualities, I ate those that gave me pain and sickness.

But as man is born to make himself adaptable to his surroundings, so as the months dragged on did I learn the limitation of this new life of mine, and gather some knowledge of its resources. As example: I found a great black tree, with a hollow core, and a hole into its middle near the roots. Here I harboured, till one night some monstrous lizard, whose sheer weight made the tree rock like a sapling, endeavoured to suck me forth as a bird picks a worm from a hollow log. I escaped by the will of the Gods—I could as much have done harm to a mountain as injure that horny tongue with my weapons—but I gave myself warning that this chance must not happen again.

So I cut myself a ladder of footholes on the inside of the trunk till I had reached a point ten man-heights from the ground, and there cut other notches, and with tree branches made a floor on which I might rest. Later, for luxury, I carved me arrow-slit windows in the walls of my chamber, and even carried up sand for a hearth, so that I might cook my victual up there instead of lighting a fire in all the dangers of the open below.

By degrees, too, I began to find how the large-scaled fish of the rivers and the lesser turtles might be more readily captured, and so my ribs threatened less to start through their proper covering of skin as the days went on. But the lack of salads and gruels I could never overcome. All the green meat was tainted so powerfully with the taste of tars that never could I force my palate to accept it. And of course, too, there remained the peril of the greater lizards and the other dangers native to the place.

But as the months began to mount into years, and the brute part of my nature became more satisfied, there came other longings which it was less easy to provide for. From the ivory of a river horse's tooth I had endeavoured to carve me a representative of Nais as last I had seen her. But, though my fingers might be loving, and my will good, my art was of the dullest, and the result—though I tried time and time again—was always clumsy and pitiful. Still, in my eyes it carried some suggestion of the original—a curve here, an outline there, and it made my old love glow anew within me as I sat and ate it with my eyes. Yet it did little to satisfy my longings for the woman I had lost; rather it whetted my cravings to be with her again, or at least to have some knowledge of her fate.

Other men of the Priests' Clan have come out and made an abode in these Dangerous Lands, and by mortifying the flesh, have gained an intimacy with the Higher Mysteries which has carried them far past what mere human learning and repetition could teach. Indeed, here and there one, who from some cause and another has returned to the abodes of men, has carried with him a knowledge that has brought him the reputation amongst the vulgar for the workings of magic and miracles, which—since all arts must be allowed which aid so holy a

cause—have added very materially to the ardour with which these common people pursue the cult of the Gods. But for myself I could not free my mind to the necessary clearness for following these abstruse studies. During that voyage home from Yucatan I had communed with them with growing insight; but now my mind was not my own. Nais had a lien upon it, and refused to be ousted; and, in truth, her sweet trespass was my chief solace.

But at last my longing could no further be denied. Through one of the arrow-slit windows of my tree-house I could see far away a great mountain top whitened with perpetual snow, which our Lord the Sun dyed with blood every night of His setting. Night after night I used to watch that ruddy light with wide straining eyes. Night after night I used to remember that in days ago when I was entering upon the priesthood, it had been my duty to adore our great Lord as He rose for His day behind the snows of that very mountain. And always the thought followed on these musings, that from that distant crest I could see across the continent to the Sacred Mount, which had the city below it where I had buried my love alive.

So at last I gave way and set out, and a perilous journey I made of it. In the heavy mists, which hung always on the lower ground, my way lay blind before me, and I was constantly losing it. Indeed, to say that I traversed three times the direct distance is setting a low estimate. Throughout all those swamps the great lizards hunted, and as the country was new to me I did not know places of harbour, and a hundred times was within an ace of being spied and devoured at a mouthful. But the High Gods still desired me for Their own purposes, and blinded the great beasts' eyes when I slunk to cover as they passed. Twice rivers of scalding water roared boiling across my path, and I had to delay till I could collect enough black timber from the forests to build rafts that would give me dry ferriage.

It will be seen then that my journey was in a way infinitely tedious, but to me, after all those years of waiting, the time passed on winged feet. I had been separated from my love till I could bear the strain no longer; let me but see from a distance the place where she lay, and feast my eyes upon it for a while, and then I could go back to my abode in the tree and there remain patiently awaiting the will of the Gods.

The air grew more chilly as I began to come out above the region of trees, on to that higher ground which glares down on the rest of the world, and I made buskins and a coat of woven grasses to protect my body from the cold, which began to blow upon me keenly. And later on, where the snow lay eternally, and was blown into gullies, and frozen into solid banks and bergs of ice, I had hard work to make any progress amongst its perilous mazes, and was moreover so numbed by the chill, that my natural strength was vastly weakened. Overhead, too, following me up with forbidding swoops, and occasionally coming so close that I had to threaten it with my weapons, was one of those huge man-eating birds which live by pulling down and carrying off any creature that their instincts tell them is weakly, and likely soon to die.

But the lure ahead of me was strong enough to make these difficulties seem small, and though the air of the mountain agreed with me ill, causing sickness and panting, I pressed on with what speed I could muster towards the elusive summit. Time after time I thought the next spurt would surely bring me out to the view for which my soul yearned, but always there seemed another bank of snow and ice yet to be climbed. But at last I reached the crest, and gave thanks to the most High Gods for Their protection and favour.

Far, far away I could see the Sacred Mountain with its ring of fires burning pale under the day, and although the splendid city which nestled at its foot could not be seen from where I stood, I knew its position and I knew its plan, and my soul went out to that throne of granite in the square before the royal pyramid, where once, years before, I had buried my love. Had Phorenice left the tomb unviolated?

I stood there leaning on my spear, filling my eye with the prospect, warming even to the smoke of mountains that I recognised as old acquaintances. Gods! how my love burned within me for this woman. My whole being seemed gone out to meet her, and to leave room for nothing beside. For long enough a voice seemed dimly to be calling me, but I gave it no regard. I had come out to that hoary mountain top for communion with Nais alone, and I wanted none others to interrupt.

But at length the voice calling my name grew too loud to be neglected, and I pulled myself out of my sweet musing with a start to think that here, for the first time since parting with Tob and his company, I should see another human fellow-being. I gripped my weapon and asked who called. The reply came clearly from up the slopes of mountain, and I saw a man coming towards me over the snows. He was old and feeble. His body was bent, and his hair and beard were white as the ground on which he trod, and presently I recognised him as Zaemon. He was coming towards me with incredible speed for a man of his years and feebleness, but he carried in his hand the glowing Symbol of our Lord the Sun, and holy strength from this would add largely to his powers.

He came close to me and made the sign of the Seven, which I returned to him, with its completion, with due form and ceremony. And then he saluted me in the manner prescribed as messenger appointed by the High Council of the Priests seated before the Ark of the Mysteries, and I made humble obeisance before him.

“In all things I will obey the orders that you put before me,” I said.

“Such is your duty, my brother. The command is, that you return immediately to the Sacred Mountain, so that if human means may still prevail, you, as the most skilful general Atlantis owns within her borders, may still save the country from final wreck and punishment. The woman Phorenice persists in her infamies. The poor land groans under her heel. And now she has laid siege to our Sacred Mountain itself, and swears that not one soul shall be left alive in all Atlantis who does not bend humbly to her will.”

“It is a command and I obey it. But let me ask of another matter that is intimate to both of us. What of Nais?”

“Nais rests where you left her, untouched. Phorenice knows by her arts—she has stolen nearly all the ancient knowledge now—that still you live, and she keeps Nais unharmed beneath the granite throne in the hopes that some time she may use her as a weapon against you. Little she knows the sternness of our Priests’ creed, my brother. Why, even I, that am the girl’s father, would sacrifice her blithely, if her death or ruin might do a tittle of good to Atlantis.”

“You go beyond me with your devotion.”

The old man leaned forward at me, with glowering brow. “What!”

“Or my old blind adherence to the ancient dogma has been sapped and weakened by events. You must buy my full obedience, Zaemon, if you want it. Promise me Nais—and your arts I know can snatch her—and I will be true servant to the High Council of the Priest, and will die in the last ditch if need be for the carrying out of order. But let me see Nais given over to the fury of that wanton woman, and I shall have no inwards left, except to take my vengeance, and to see Atlantis piled up in ruins as her funeral-stone.”

Zaemon looked at me bitterly. “And you are the man the High Council thought to trust as they would trust one of themselves? Truly we are in an age of weak men and faithless now. But, my lord—nay, I must call you brother still: we cannot be too nice in our choosing to-day—you are the best there is, and we must have you. We little thought you would ask a price for your generalship, having once taken oath on the walls of the Ark of the Mysteries itself that always, come what might, you would be a servant of the High Council of the Clan without fee and without hope of advancement. But this is the age of broken vows, and you are going no more than trim with the fashion. Indeed, brother, perhaps I should thank you for being no more greedy in your demands.”

“You may spare me your taunts. You, by self-denial and profound search into the highest of the higher Mysteries, have made yourself something wiser than human; I have preserved my humanity, and with it its powers and frailties; and it seems that each of us has his proper uses, or you would not be come now here to me. Rather you would have done the generalling yourself.”

“You make a warm defence, my brother. But I have no leisure now to stand before you with argument. Come to the Sacred Mountain, fight me this wanton, upstart Empress, and by my beard you shall have your Nais as you left her as a reward.”

“It is a command of the High Council which shall be obeyed. I will come with my brother now, as soon as he is rested.”

“Nay,” said the old man, “I have no tiredness, and as for coming with me, there you will not be able. But follow at what pace you may.”

He turned and set off down the snowy slopes of the mountain and I followed; but gradually he distanced me; and so he kept on, with speed always increasing, till presently he passed out of my sight round the spur of an ice-cliff, and I found myself alone on the mountain side. Yes, truly alone. For his footmarks in the snow from being deep, grew shallower, and less noticeable, so that I had to stoop to see them. And presently they vanished entirely, and the great mountain’s flank lay before me trackless, and untrodden by the foot of man since time began.

I was not shaken by any great amazement. Though it was beyond my poor art to compass this thing myself, having occupied my mind in exile more with memories of Nais than in study of those uppermost recesses of the Higher Mysteries in which Zaemon was so prodigiously wise, still I had some inkling of his powers.

Zaemon I knew would be back again in his dwelling on the Sacred Mountain, shaken and breathless, even before I had found an end to his tracks in the snow, and it behoved me to join him there in the quickest possible time. I had his promise now for my reward, and I knew that

he would carry it into effect. Beforetime I had made an error. I had valued Atlantis most, and Nais, my private love, as only second. But now it was in my mind to be honest with others even as with myself. Though all the world were hanging on my choice, I could but love my Nais most, and serve her first and foremost of all.

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