

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

# Schlock!

**WEBZINE**

VOL. 15, ISSUE 11  
15TH SEPTEMBER 2019

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Schlock! Webzine

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Carlton Herzog, Christopher T Dabrowski, Rex Mundy, Edgar Wallace, Charles B Stilson*

## 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!

For details of previous editions, please go to the [website](#).

Schlock! Webzine is always willing to consider new science fiction, fantasy and horror short stories, serials, graphic novels and comic strips, reviews and art. Submit fiction, articles, art, or links to your own site to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk). We no longer review published and self-published novels directly, although we are willing to accept reviews from other writers. Any other enquiries, including requests to advertise in our quarterly printed magazine, also to [editor@schlock.co.uk](mailto:editor@schlock.co.uk)

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*This Edition*

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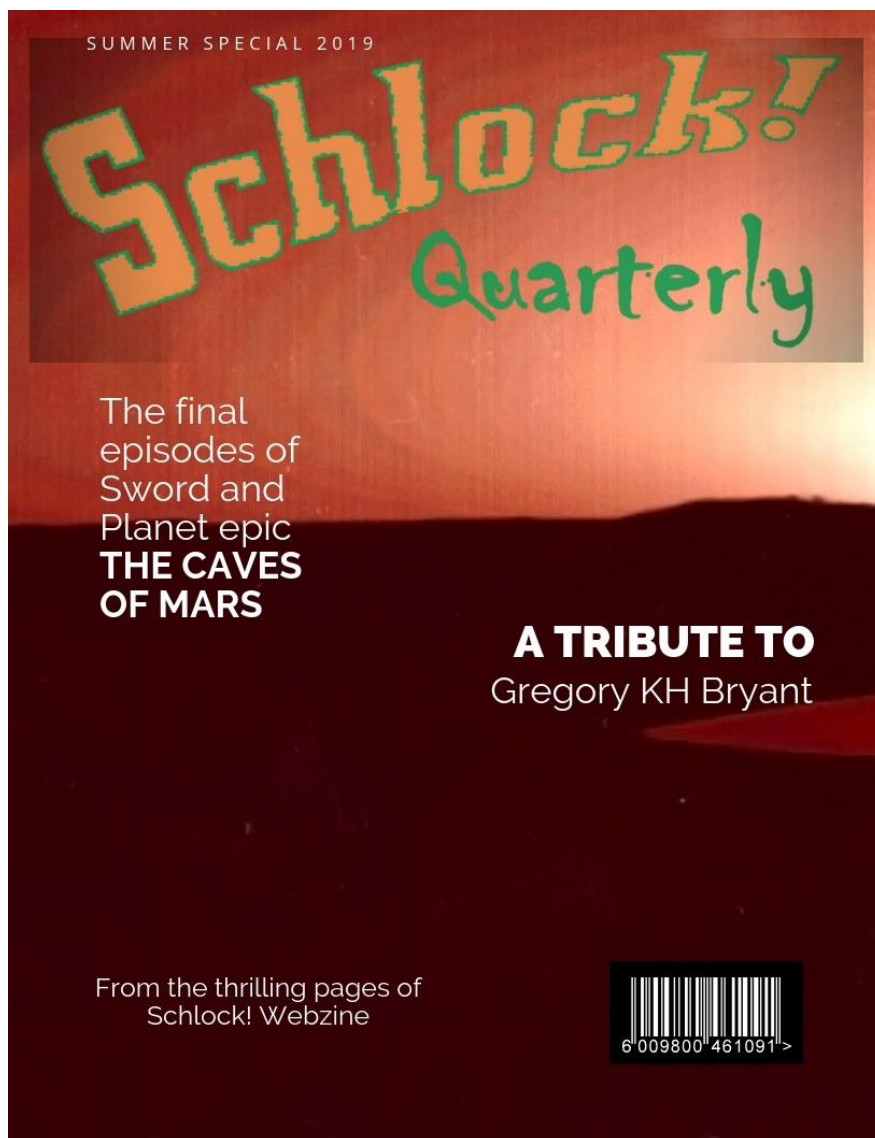
## EDITORIAL

This week we pay a visit to a music hating dystopia. Kasimir Kohl prepares his visitor to engender a soldier of the new race. Skeeter's murderous plans go awry when he finds something nasty in a spittoon. Astronauts on an alien planet start hearing voices. And a lifelong pessimist tries a new approach.

Out in the desert, a patrol of legionnaires is massacred. Lensman pursues a fugitive. And in the frozen north, Polaris stands accused of murder.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [Schlock Quarterly Volume 3, Issue 9](#)



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"YOU GUYS ARE CRAZY, YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S UNDER THERE!"

*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.*

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## THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED by Carlton Herzog

I feel bad about cutting out your tongue, but you knew the rules, and even if you didn't, ignorance of the law is no excuse. Besides, it could be worse. My own brother had his eyes burned out for trafficking in books. Now he walks around with two grisly craters where his peepers used to be.

I wanted to help him but couldn't without looking like a collaborator. And if I couldn't help him, how could I, in good conscience, help you.

The worst part is that you were singing in public. You weren't humming to yourself or tapping your foot to rhythms only you could hear. No, you put it out there for everyone to hear. You're lucky the music police were nearby otherwise that crowd of Loyalists would have torn you apart the way a pride of lions does a gazelle.

I call someone like you an "encrypted soul" because your motives are opaque. But I like a good mystery as much as the next person. And it's my job to discover what you hoped to accomplish by your public display of dubious talent.

You're dribbling blood all over yourself. Wipe yourself. I know it hurts. But relax, we've perfected the art of elinguation, so you'll bleed some, but not entirely. Think of the procedure the way you would a tonsillectomy—the removal of inflamed tissue but without the ice-cream afterwards.

I'm going to share some things with you. You have no tongue, so you can't speak to anyone about it. And if you put it on paper, I'll cut off your hands.

I feel your pain, I really do. Life would be so much easier to swallow if it were accompanied by a peppy soundtrack. If you ask me, music is the language of the heart. It doesn't need words to make its meaning clear. I suppose that's why the old church choirs could be infinitely more moving than anything the preacher would say. In the end, we may find God is more Gaga than Newton, more Beyoncé than Einstein, and a lot less tight-assed than his earth-bound representatives.

Music made me feel good. It got me out of myself. I saw it as a temporary reprieve from my sentence of life. An existential Maalox, if you will, that relieves the bloating and nausea that comes with living in this world for too long.

Like you, I liked the idea of singing my way through life. I liked the idea of bursting into song anywhere, anytime. But even before the Music Prohibition was enacted, there was that silent dictatorship forbidding public displays of glee particularly when they were set to music. I wanted to do it. I needed to do it. But I never did.

Besides I got to witness first-hand what happens when someone gives their inner song bird free reign in public. I was standing in a line—a rather long one at that—of Manhattan-bound travellers. We were at the Toms River New Jersey bus terminal waiting for the New York Express to arrive. It was a cold wet day and the bus was already an hour late.

Suddenly, someone burst into song. And not just any song mind you. It was the Backstreet Boys "I want it that way."

When he did, I scanned the line to see who among us had broken protocol. I was surprised to find the warbler a clean-cut well-dressed young man of twenty or so. He didn't look crazy. There was no drooping lip or idiot grin, no fisticuffs with invisible assailants, no smell of excrement coming from his pants. There was only that broad smile displaying the whitest, brightest, most symmetrical teeth I had ever seen in my life. For a moment, I thought he was a wind-up toy that would run down and stop unless someone turned his key. He kept keep singing the same line "I want it that way" over and over.

At first, I didn't mind. I, the eternal romantic, wanted to join in the refrain. But I had become a realist, such that spontaneous displays of any sort were no longer in my nature. Whatever fire I had for some acapella antics burned itself out the way a rising ember does above a fire and is seen no more.

He kept singing as we boarded the bus. Some passengers snickered, some snarked, and others heckled him, but no one told him to stop, not even the driver. I suspected that he would sing all the way up the Parkway, then onto the Turnpike, through the Lincoln Tunnel and into Port Authority, and that would make my head explode.

Then it hit me. He wasn't singing along to music on his phone, piped into his head with earbuds. He was free of gigabytes and bars and apps and likes and emojis and swipes and tweets. Somehow, Maya Angelou's caged bird had incarnated as this young man and broken free, free of our depressed, violent, suicidal, drug-addicted, social media obsessed tribe, and had taken flight, leaving all the expectations and rules and prohibitions and codes and requirements and mores behind.

Of course, that would never do. What happened next came as no surprise. Two burly young men of the red-neck persuasion, wearing *Wrestle-mania* tee-shirts and Budweiser caps, walked up to the bus singer, and ordered him to stop under penalty of a 'whuppin'. When he smiled, and kept on singing, they rained punches onto his face and head. Nobody intervened. The driver kept us on schedule, and the passengers kept their heads in their phones, talking, texting, listening.

I'm sure you saw the feed about the case. It took place around the same time vigilantes began torching libraries and bookstores and art galleries. It wasn't long after that the white mobs rioted, burning homes and businesses in black, Hispanic and Muslim communities. And after that, the gay, the lesbian and the transgender communities had their day in white hot heterosexual hyper-Christian Hell.

The State turned a blind eye, not because it was lazy. Rather it had its hands full enforcing the new Parasite Control Law, which called for the eradication of the infirm, the handicapped, the addicted and the aged to conserve our diminishing resource base—a downside of catastrophic climate change.

After that the music had to go because it got hyper-politicized into protest anthems and code for anti-government action. The administration went after rap and hip-hop first, then moved to ethnic tunes. But the opposition started coding their messages into rock and pop so those had to go. And when they did, classical gospel carried the message of protest until they too were eradicated.



It seems harsh. But just taking away books and civil liberties is a half-measure. If they still have music, then they have a way to bond and share information outside officially approved channels. Take away their music and you keep them fragmented and ignorant, and in that state, they are no threat to anyone.

I've talked way too much. Let's get you into some street clothes. What you're going to do is walk up and down the block outside this facility carrying this sign which reads: "I AM GUILTY OF MUSIC CRIME IN THE FIRST DEGREE." You won't be alone. There's a half dozen or so already out there doing the tongue-less walk of shame. Around noon, we'll bring you in for some soup. This is all for the best.

THE END

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## THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

### Chapter 22

We retired to the parlour where wingback chairs offered us repose. Gustav made the rounds ensuring that we each had a snifter of brandy and a box of cigars on each of the tables beside our chairs. He lit a fire, then left us to our conversations.

Due to my current circumstances, I can now see into every shadowed corner of my own life, of the lives of those surrounding me, of every mildew-encrusted nook of the castle. All time is one, lacking the divisions of past, present, and future. Yet I can only see so far into the future—far enough, I am sure.

I now relate to you the heart of Gustav, grand servant of our family. A man without eyes, yet who sees more than a sighted man. And a blind man still has ears. And an acute mind. One may unfortunately assume that the disabled members of the species are less intelligent than the able-bodied. I now beg to differ. (This formerly grated against my adherence to a Nietzschean logic, I realize, but I told no one—have no one now to tell. Every god achieves his devil, every devil his god—the world is a mass of contradictions, and always has been, yet mortals still refuse to accept that a mad logic will always govern the minds of the sane and civilized.)

Gustav saw all, heard all, knew every twisting passage of the castle. As a servant, it was his duty to listen and observe, but not to comment. Good servants have no opinions. If asked, they will revert their stance back to you; the true servant reinforces the master's mind and will; the servant remains aloof, abstract, states fact as it is, not as he perceives it to be.

If I asked Gustav, "Do you believe it is my right to murder one's enemies and stack their bodies in locked rooms?" His answer would be, "It is as you say, m'lord."

He knew the contents of the castle, of course—the stench alone would give away the holocaust within the castle walls. But he was a servant. If it was his master's wish (and I was now his master, not my father), then the decision was the correct one. Only in silly fantasies, romantic women's novels, frivolous plays and operas, would a servant inform an authoritative figure of law that a crime had been committed, leading to his master's undoing. Fiction. Gustav was a faithful manservant.

And I knew he overheard my and the cabal's plans for the race of masters, genetically superior men and women. The blind, for example, would have no place in such an empire. If a child was born blind or deformed, well then, the ancient ritual of taking the babe into the wilderness to be consumed by the elements or by savage beasts would be made mandatory. For the betterment of the race.

Knowing of his own demise within my world, he still kept his silence. He was an old man, so perhaps that is the simple reason why he played a part in the theatre of that night. Why he betrayed me. He had served enough, and saw his death imminent. I mistook his soul, thinking that his servitude had overcome his humanity. I can now (in this realm) admit that my assumption was incorrect.

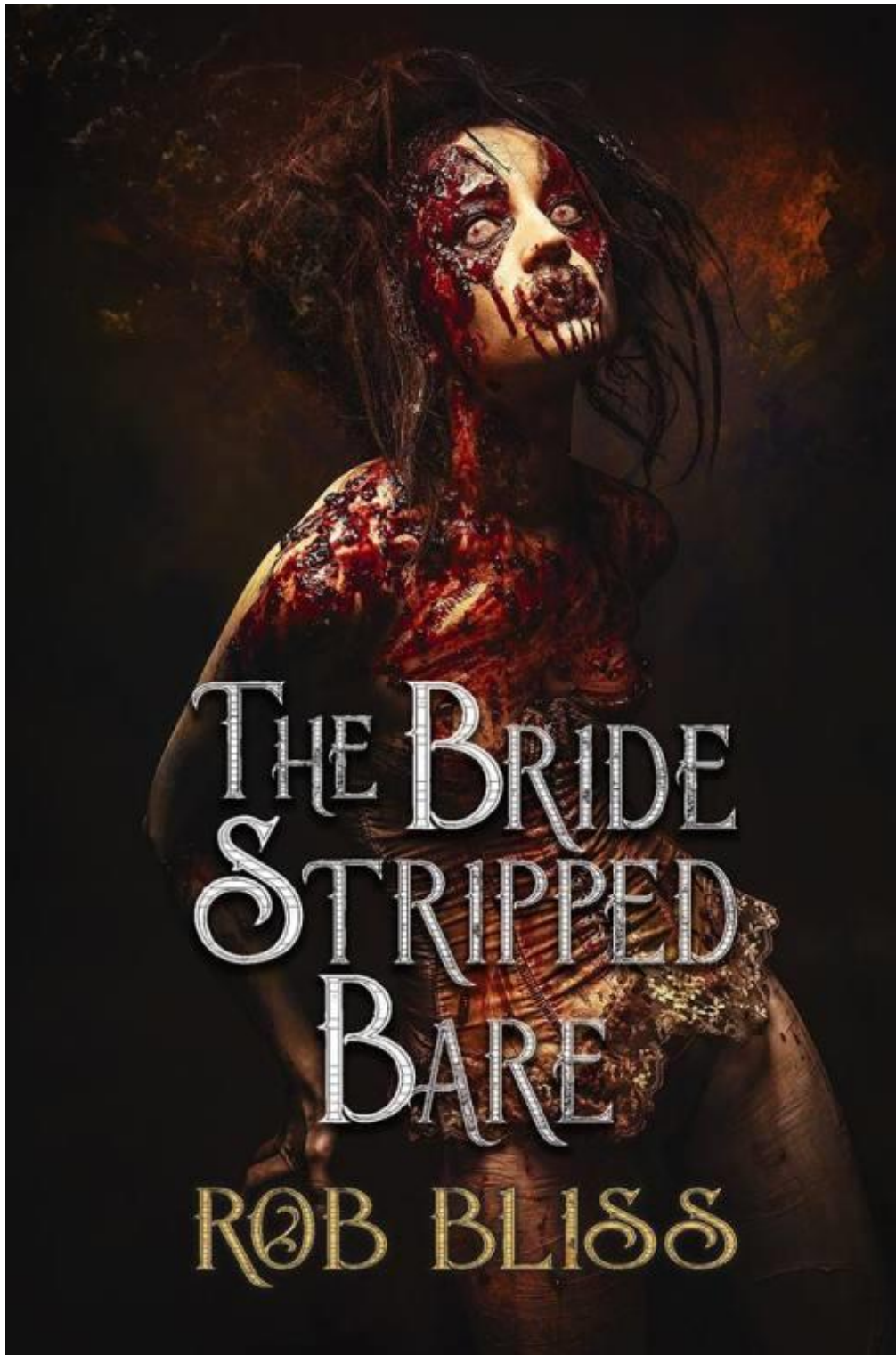
We drank and smoked and conversed, but all were eager to move our blood-lust, our libidos (as Herr Freud would say), down to the dungeon. Herr Hitler felt little lust, but he agreed with the divine purpose of his insemination of my sister.

He was reluctant to have the cabal witness such a private act, and requested that they remove themselves from the room itself, inhabiting instead an anteroom at the dungeon's entrance until the act was consummated.

I agreed, yet insisted that I alone must be present for the consummation. If for no other reason, it would be symbolically necessary to have me witness the conception of the first soldier of the new race.

He agreed, and we all descended the stairs to the lower depths.

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## THE PLAN by William Brennan Knight

Each Saturday in the summer I mowed her lawn, raked up the leaves and weeded her garden patch. Every damn Saturday morning was the same, except in the winter when I shovelled the snow off her driveway. It didn't matter how backbreaking the work might be, she always gave me the \$20 and a one dollar tip. I tried to quit a bunch of times, but my old man told me I needed to save my half of the money for trade school. Yeah, sure, dad, like I'm ever going to learn a fuckin' trade.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Halderson."

You old bitch. That's what I wanted to say on a particularly hot and humid Saturday, but never did. I smiled at her as I stashed the 21 bucks in my pocket, but I was already on to other things. I was wondering if that sweet, snobbish smile would still be plastered on her face if she found herself in the back yard with her bloody intestines wrapped around her neck, hanging from a tree and baking in the hot sun.

I tried to kill the old rag many times, but at that point, only in my mind, I guess. It started with little things like pouring cooking oil on her doorstep, and in the winter I poured water on it so it froze. She was supposed to come out and slip, but she always wore these sneakers with the deep threads that stuck to everything, so none of that worked. In fact, I had to clean up the damn oil and remove the ice once she noticed it.

Some way, I knew I needed to get into the house, but I just didn't know how. She was very guarded and only opened the door about six inches every time she gave me the money after I was done working. Her groceries were always delivered, and I could never find anyone who actually saw her leave the house in over 20 years.

That summer, I spent a lot of my free time in the garage burning insects, lighting small fires and slicing my inner thigh with a razor blade. I had to do it in a place where my old man wouldn't notice because I couldn't imagine what he would do if he ever found out I was cutting myself. Anyway, I became obsessed with finding a way to get into old lady Halderson's house.

I could break in, but old people always had an alarm system, and I bet hers was balls out. No, I had to come up with something more creative than that. So far, my planning was only about getting inside; I really didn't have much of an idea what I would do if I succeeded. Rob her? Kill her? Probably both.

The next day I got tired of shooting birds with my BB gun, so I was sitting inside the garage fantasizing about how I could get rid of old lady Halderson's body. If I killed her, I had to make sure there was no blood involved. Even though I'm slight, I figured I would still be able to strangle her without much of a problem. Then, I would drag her to the bathtub and make a long incision down the length of her body and let all the blood drain out.

I saw on one of those crime shows that a common bleach you could get at the grocery store would destroy any DNA evidence. As long as the blood stayed on a hard surface without any cracks, I would be fine. That's why draining her blood in the bathtub was so important. After that, it would be a simple matter of dismembering the body and putting the limbs and torso into small trash bags. I could take them one at a time over to the park and feed them into one

of the self-serve compactors they just installed. That old gangster Jimmy Hoffa would be easier to find by the time I was done with her.

I was lost in thought when a light exploded near my left eye, and the shock of someone slapping the side of my head caused me to flinch and recoil.

“Ha, ha, you dumbass. Didn’t even hear me riding up. Man, Skeeter, you’re sure a dumbass.” Ricky Smits straddled his bike and grinned at me condescendingly. Ricky was an asshole, but I guess he was the closest thing I had to a friend.

“I told you not to call me Skeeter. I hate that name.”

“You wanna go ridin’, Skeeter?” he asked while ignoring my plea. “Let’s go down to Ryan’s Park pool. Some of them high school girls will be showin’ off their bodies this time of year. Oooo lala.” His eyes widened and he made a gesture like he was cupping a girl’s breasts.

Ricky was just one rung above me on the social status ladder, and the “cool kids” only included him when a regular was sick and they needed a fill-in. Most of the time he was rejected, and that’s when he came looking for me or Tommy Obrigon, the fat kid from Georgia who was always picking his nose.

“I’m busy; now let me be,” I said while turning away.

“Yeah, you look real busy.” He got off his bike and let it drop to the pavement. “Aw, c’mon, Skeeter, my dad says I have to stay away until they fix the air conditioner. The damn house is hotter than hell. The repairman won’t be by until 4:30, so I’ve got to stay busy till then.”

“Your air conditioner broke down? Did your dad call mine?”

“Naw, my dad says your old man charges too much and does shitty work. He called a real A/C company this time.”

“Yeah, well my dad says your air conditioner is so old Willis Carrier himself probably installed it.” I stopped talking because the mere thought of defending my father nauseated me.

“Who gives a shit, anyway?” he said before back washing and spitting out a wad of phlegm. “Well, are we going to the pool or not?”

“I’m not swimming,” I said.

“Yeah, fine. Me neither. I only want to look at the hot chicks.”

Reluctantly, and mostly because I didn’t have anything else to do, I agreed. After pulling my faux BMX bike out of the garage, I followed Ricky down Maple Street until we reached Jasmine Drive, which was a connecting artery to the main highway about a mile farther north. For some reason, no one ever bothered to put a bike lane on Jasmine, and every time a car passed, the heat and wind pushed us further toward the dirt and gravel and created a burning sensation on my bare legs.

This was one of those moments where I wished I had “the button.” The button was something I conjured up in my mind kind of like a black box with a big red button in the middle of it. Every time someone deserved it, I could press the button and they would be stamped out of existence, painfully I imagined. I’d use it on the bullies at school who called me “Skeeter” and the jerks who ripped up my homework and stole my textbooks.

The arrogant “cool kids” with their attitudes and posing would be gone with one push. Eighth grade was hard enough with all the damn learning, but being in an environment where you felt threatened and humiliated was unbearable. Every day, as the new school year approached, I grew a little more anxious. Junior high was degrading enough, but I could only imagine the horrors that awaited me in high school. As another car honked and sped past, I knew that if I had the button, every one of those asshole drivers would be dead.

Anyway, we turned off on Beldon and rode the short distance to the pool. We showed our city cards to the bored attendant at the ticket counter and walked through the gates, past the showers and locker room. The smell of the body odour, mould and heavily chlorinated water in there made me cringe. It reminded me of gym class where my nudity provided the bullies with too many opportunities to humiliate me. I can’t help it I have colitis, so every time one of them grabbed my brown-stained underwear and showed everyone how I crapped my pants, the shame was almost too much to bear.

One time, Tony Soranto stuffed my soiled underwear in my mouth, and I just stood there crying while they all gathered round and laughed and spit on me. I tried to think of the button and how I’d use it on all of them, but it was still hard. After school that day, I went home and got my old man’s insulation knife and went over to Tony’s house. They always let their cat out at night, and I watched from behind the shrubs across the street. It wasn’t until 10:30 that they finally opened the door, and the stupid thing sauntered outside.

I tracked that cat for a mile before I caught up with him and slit his throat. He scratched and clawed at me like crazy, but just before he died, he made a really weird screeching noise I’ll never forget, but it gave me something like a nice buzz. I waited until the last light went out in the Soranto house before I took the cat and put it on Tony’s doorstep. Fortunately, when I came home, my old man was passed out in his recliner with a fifth of Jack in his hand like usual, so he didn’t see the all the blood on my clothes. I went out and buried them in the backyard so there wouldn’t be any questions later. I don’t care what those stupid detergent commercials say; the washing machine doesn’t get blood out of clothes.

Tony was absent from school for the next three days. For me, it was the best time I had for the entire year. When he finally did come back, he always looked at me with a funny look on his face, but he didn’t say a word and never picked on me again. I think he knew I did it, but what could he do about it? If he brought it up, I’d deny it, and then I’d tell everyone what he did to me, and I had witnesses.

We went out to the cool deck and found a couple lawn chairs out of the sun in the area farthest away from the pool. Ricky lay on his stomach gawking at the girls as they strutted and primped poolside, rubbing oil on their tanned and glistening bodies. Occasionally he would let out an “oooo, hot mama” or “I think that one’s checking me out.” Personally, I could care less about the girls. They never really interested me. Besides the fact that I was bigger and could probably intimidate them, they had no value to me.



My old man thought that way too. While my mother was alive, he cuffed her around all the time and made her thank him for it when he was done. I don't remember much about her, but I know she was a very sad woman. There wasn't a day when she didn't have a drink in her hand no matter what time it was. Somehow, she managed to live until I was nine, but then her liver gave out.

Watching someone die from cirrhosis is a horrible thing, but even when she was diagnosed, she kept on drinking. Killed herself as sure as if she used a gun. My old man refused to pay for a funeral, so my mother was cremated at the state's expense. I'm not sure, but I think he washed her ashes down the drain in the kitchen sink. After she was gone, it almost seemed like she never existed. It's only been five years, but I can hardly remember her face.

"C'mon, Ricky, I want to get out of here," I said after about an hour. A group of "cool kids" had showed up, and I didn't want them to see me. When they were with girls, the bullies mostly ignored me, but you could never tell. Getting away before they noticed you was always a better alternative.

"I told you, I can't. The A/C won't be fixed until 4:30."

That was the moment, the epiphany I was waiting for. I don't know why inspiration hits when it does. I saw the Kramer's garage on fire in a dream one night, and knew I had to do it. About a week later as I stood and watched the billowing flames in the street with all the other neighbours, I never knew why that thought popped up in my brain when I was asleep. But looking at Mr. Kramer crying because his '93 Dodge Viper was burning was so beautiful I started to cry.

The same inspiration washed over me when Ricky brought up his air conditioner again. We were in the middle of a Missouri heat spell, and the temperature was pushing 95 with thick humidity. If Mrs. Halderson's A/C went out, she'd have no choice but to get it fixed. The beautiful part was that she called my old man whenever she needed a tune-up or repair, and guess who he took with him when he had to have a helper?

In some misguided effort to teach me "the trade," he forced me to go out on jobs more and more often. Of course, he never paid me, but he expected me to do all the shit work in the attics and basement. The last time he visited Mrs. Halderson for a spring tune-up, I was there. Still, I never got inside. She insisted I wait outside while my old man checked out the furnace and blower in the house.

If I caused her air conditioner to stop working when I was over there cutting her lawn, she would immediately call my father, except there was no way he would work on a Saturday. Since she knew I had experience with air conditioners, maybe I could convince her to let me work on it, and it might be the opportunity I needed to get into her house.

"Ricky, I'm going. You can stay here and jerk off if you want, but I'm getting too hot." I stood up and looked at him, but he just waved me off and kept looking at the girls.

"You're getting too hot, Skeeeeeeter? Well, let's see if we can take care of that." The voice came from behind me, and I whirled around just before Talone Pearson grabbed my arms and started dragging me toward the pool. I squirmed and yelled and kicked my legs, but then Sammy Tunnsil grabbed both of them, and I was picked up off the ground in a horizontal

position. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see their girlfriends tittering as they watched their tough-guy boyfriends shame me.

Once they were at the edge of the pool, they began swinging me from side to side, counting down from five. Once they reached zero, they let go, and I flew about five feet out over the pool before crashing belly-first into the water, fully clothed. The journey down to the bottom offered a momentary respite, but I needed to get back up to the surface for air. Unfortunately, I hit the water on an exhale, so my lungs weren't filled with much oxygen. Coupled with the weight of my clothes, I found it difficult to get up to the surface, especially since I was a poor swimmer.

For a long moment, a terrifying panic swept through me as I realized I wouldn't be able to make it. As I started to sink back down, I felt someone wrap an arm around my chest. I grabbed at whoever it was, but they knew how to keep me away from their body so I couldn't pull them down. The lifeguard pushed us up with a couple powerful kicks and strokes. When I finally reached the surface, I took a long, deep breath and flailed my arms while screaming, only vaguely aware of the laughter from the bullies and their girlfriends.

After the lifeguard pulled me out of the pool and made sure I was alright, he let me leave with Ricky, who was caught somewhere between finding the whole thing funny and feeling bad for me. The bullies got kicked out of the pool for a month. That was their only punishment.

For most of the next week, I was forced to travel with my old man because his work schedule was so heavy with the heat wave. It wasn't until Saturday arrived that I was able to get away from him and his disgusting beer breath. He reserved Saturdays for getting shit-faced drunk anyway, but he always encouraged me to cut lawns on the weekends so that I could split the money with him.

That morning, I pulled out an old pair of meters and gauges from his gang box and put them in a tool bag he never used. He bought new gauges a year ago, so the old ones wouldn't be missed. When I brought them over to Mrs. Halderson's house, it would give her a feeling of confidence that I knew what I was doing. I tossed a few wrenches in the bag, a powered screwdriver and the long-double bladed knife I was going to use to kill her.

I left earlier than normal, pushing the mower down the street and turning the corner in the same way I always did. Her house was the fourth one up the street, and our routine was so regular there was no reason to knock. I started the mower and began cutting her grass like usual, looking up to see her peeking out from behind the curtains when I arrived. After finishing the front yard, I started pushing the mower to the back. Usually, I took a break between the front and back yard and would drink a bottled water or a sports drink, but today, I'd use the break for something different.

The outdoor condenser was set on the side of the house, hidden from view by a thick row of hedges that ran from the edge of the living room to the fence. Only a small area between the bushes and fence remained clear so you could get back and forth. The air conditioner hummed as it cycled, and I waited until the familiar back spin of the compressor signalled it had shut off.

I pulled my powered screwdriver out of the bag and began taking out the screws that held the sheet metal cover over the electronics. Pulling a fuse probably would have worked, but I

figured she might check that, so once I got the cover off, I reached in and took out the two screws that held the contactors in place. I took the small unit out and put it in my pocket before replacing the cover and screwing it back down. The whole process couldn't have taken more than five minutes, and there was no way she would suspect anything was wrong at this point.

I drank my water quickly and rolled the mower into the backyard and started it up. Every time I finished a row and started a new one, I faced the rear of the house, and I would glance up to see if she was looking. After about half an hour, I was unloading the last bag of clippings, convinced the old hag could exist on the surface of Venus. It had to be hot as hell in the house by now, yet there was nothing going on inside that I could see. Finally, just as I was zip tying the last bag, the back door opened a crack.

“Kyle, did you hit the air conditioner with the mower?” Her voice was like fingernails on a blackboard. Raspy and screechy with a tone that said, “I should have died by now.”

“No, Mrs. Halderson. Is there something wrong with it?”

She paused, but the door stayed open a crack. “Yes, it's not working. I called your father, but he won't answer. The other company in town can't get to it today. It's getting quite warm in here.”

“Well,” I said, recognizing I would have to play my cards very carefully. “You can't stay here today with no A/C, that's for sure. Can you go to a hotel for the night? Maybe you can visit a relative?”

There was another long pause. “I can't leave here, you see. There are no relatives, and hotels are filthy and filled with germs.”

I scratched my head as though I was in deep thought. “Hmmm... Well, I don't know if you're aware, but I work with my dad quite a bit. He's teaching me the trade. I could take a look at it for you if you'd like.”

“I—I don't know, Kyle. Are you certified?”

“No, I haven't been to trade school yet. But I know how to troubleshoot an air conditioner, that's for sure. If you'd like me to see if I can fix it...”

The door opened just a little bit wider. “Well, okay, I guess. But the indoor unit is right here inside the furnace room in the kitchen. You're not to come in any further than that, do you understand? Your father never comes in further than that. There was a plumbing problem once, and the plumber was the only one who came into the whole house. I don't like people in my house.”

Besides the fact she was an old, dried up hag, she was obviously pretty creepy as well. “Ah, sure. Let me just run home and get my gauges.”

I wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible for when the cops investigated her disappearance, so I wheeled my lawn mower back home and returned with just the bag that had the gauges, wrenches, screw driver and knife.

It wouldn't look good if someone saw me on the front porch, so I went around to the back of the house and knocked on the door. I heard the clatter of multiple locks opening, and finally, the knob turned slowly, and the door cracked open an inch or so. I pushed on it against her resistance, giving me just enough space to get inside.

Trying to gain my bearings, I looked around, but oddly, Mrs. Halderson was nowhere in sight. The heavy shades across all the windows made the room dark, and my eyes had trouble adjusting from the bright sun. The house had a distinctive odour that reminded me of Mrs. Halderson herself: old, mouldy and decayed. But there was something else hidden underneath the other smells I couldn't quite place.

The kitchen itself was immaculate, but the décor reminded me of those classic cars you see that look really outdated but brand new at the same time. The appliances were a weird green colour, but the exterior of the oven and refrigerator gleamed with a polished shine, and there wasn't a fingerprint or sign of wear on anything.

I saw the thermostat on the wall between the kitchen and the living room. Even though she told me to stay in the kitchen, I needed to turn off the system before I could replace the contactors outside. The temperature in the house was rising by the minute, and that didn't help the smell at all.

"Mrs. Halderson, I have to leave the kitchen and go into the hallway to turn off the thermostat," I yelled for reasons I couldn't understand. I mean, after all, I was going to kill her anyway, so why did I care if she knew I left the kitchen?

"Mrs. Halderson?"

I waited about a minute, and when she didn't reply, I started walking down the hallway, ignoring the thermostat and moving into the living room. I pulled the knife out and set the bag down, keeping it hidden behind my back as I slowly moved forward, checking the dining room and looking behind the hutch and underneath the table. With every step, whatever smell was hidden under the old age and rot became stronger, and by the time I reached the living room, it was overpowering.

I called out her name again, but my voice was not nearly as assertive this time. The smell was so bad I placed my hand over my nose, but that didn't help at all, and I started to gag. My eyes were drawn to a corner of the room where an antique brass container—which I would learn later was called a spittoon—sat between the sofa and chair just below the fireplace. That's where the smell was coming from. I never knew why I went over there, but when I reached the spittoon, I swore I heard noises like a stomach growling coming from inside it. I stretched and leaned over as far as I could until I was able to see inside.

The sight was so bizarre I tried to scream, but the sounds stuck in my throat, and I could only let out a weak rasp and wheezing noise. There's no real way to explain it except to say the inside of the spittoon had no bottom. That is, I could see down to depths that seemed infinite. A yellowish florescent goo with a consistency somewhere between motor oil and Vaseline shimmered and sloshed from side to side, temporarily covering the bottom before sliding away until the infiniteness appeared once again.

That sight alone was enough to pucker my asshole, but when a pair of bloodshot, green eyes formed inside the goo and looked straight at me, I thought my heart stopped. The eyes were intelligent, and their piercing stare penetrated through to my soul. My legs buckled, but I couldn't turn away. Somehow, whatever was inside the goo was conscious, and something like a rolling fog oozed out from its eyes and travelled the distance between us. As it reached me, it felt like someone poured acid onto my skin, and I instinctively brought my hands up to my face and stumbled backwards, which broke the connection. I couldn't catch my breath, but somehow managed to turn around, staggering toward the back door.

That's when I heard her voice.

"Kyle, what are you doing in the living room? I told you not to go past the furnace closet. You disobeyed my explicit instructions."

Though my eyes were watering and bleary, I looked up to see Mrs. Halderson blocking my path. I stuck the knife out in front of me and waved it back and forth. "Let me out of here, you crazy old bitch. Let me the fuck out of here. What the hell is this place, and who are you?"

She didn't seem flustered or the least bit frightened by the sight of me wielding a knife. Instead she took a step forward as I retreated.

"I mean it; I'll kill you," I said while blinking and trying to refocus my vision. I was certain my threat wasn't intimidating her in the least.

"Of course, Kyle. That's what you had in mind when you came here today, wasn't it? You were going to kill me after you fixed the air conditioner you purposely broke."

"What? How could you know that?"

"Come now, Kyle, you must know the elderly are security conscious. Hidden cameras cover every inch of the exterior of my house. I suspected you had some nefarious intentions, and when I saw you opening the air conditioner outside, I knew it."

"Then—then why didn't you just call the cops or something?"

She smiled. "Oh no, this is much better." She took another step towards me.

As the panic rose inside me, my fight/flight instinct took over. When I looked up, I swore I saw a very small person, or something that resembled a person, run down the stairs for a moment, crouch and hold the banister while looking through the rails. He growled and snapped his jaws at me before bolting back up the stairs. The whole incident couldn't have lasted ten seconds.

"Who the fuck was that?" I yelled at her.

"What are you talking about," she replied. "Are you seeing things, Kyle?"

I wasn't thinking clearly, but there was no way I was going past that spittoon to get to the front door. I couldn't get all the locks opened in time get out anyway. The door to the

basement was about five feet off to my left, and I figured I could smash a window and climb out into one of the wells and get away. When she took another step toward me, I dropped the knife and sprinted toward the door. I saw a blur as she lunged at me, but I made it inside and bolted the latch a second before she arrived. She began shrieking and pounding in a way that could only be described as psychotic insanity. I've never experienced anyone with such raw anger before or after.

Slowly, I walked down the steps until I reached the dirt floor below. The light from outside shone through the ground-level windows and lit up the place pretty well. The smell down here was just as bad as upstairs. Just as bad, but—different. I was walking over to the windows while looking for something I could use to break them when I noticed several six or seven foot long white lines placed at identical distances throughout the basement floor. It looked like flour or something similar.

I couldn't find anything nearby to bust out the windows, so I started exploring. In the distance, I thought I saw a fireplace poker next to an old wooden chest set up against a wall in the corner. As I moved closer, I noticed something propped up between the furniture and the adjacent wall. Every step was heavy as my mind screamed at me to look somewhere else, but I kept going for reasons I still can't explain. About three feet away, I stopped as my heart sank into my stomach when I realized it wasn't a something I was looking at, it was a someone. I backed up, but I couldn't overcome the compulsion to see who it was. Did I know this person?

When I got close enough to see the corpse in detail, I fell to my knees and began to shake. I'm fairly certain I pissed my pants too. I looked up again to see the matted brown hair, the decayed and rotted flesh that sagged and hung off the skull. Maggots and flies climbed in and out of the eye sockets freely, consuming what little sustenance was left on the bone. In a sitting position, the small profile told me this was a woman, and she had probably been starved to death or died of dehydration. She may have been unrecognizable to most, but when I looked at the dress, shoes and size of the skeleton, there was who mistaking who it was. Mrs. Halderson had died down in her own basement.

I was barely able to process what I was looking at when it occurred to me that if this was Mrs. Halderson, who was the person upstairs that had assumed her identity? Was it a zombie? A pod person? She looked exactly like Mrs. Halderson. The same mannerisms, physical characteristics and speech patterns. How could that be? How... What the fuck was going on here?

"Well, Kyle, we're well past mere mischief, aren't we? You have committed some very serious transgressions here today."

I turned around so quick I toppled over and lay prone on the dirt as the "other" Mrs. Halderson looked down and smiled at me. In one hand she held my knife, and in the other, she had a glass filled with the same goo I saw in the spittoon.

"Okay, you're freaking me out here," I managed to say while stuttering. "Just tell me what the fuck you are."

She replied, but I couldn't understand what she said. It sounded like a foreign language or something. Yet, as she was speaking, she raised the glass of goo and threw its contents

directly into my face. The stuff felt like thousands of caterpillar legs crawling all over my skin as it entered my body through my eyes, mouth, nose and ears. I remember feeling like I was losing my identity as the goo invaded my mind, changing my emotions and rewiring my brain. The thoughts I was having weren't my own, and it fused all these strange memories and weird urges into my head. I tried to fight it, but the goo pushed me away time after time as it did its work.

I don't remember passing out, but I must have because when I woke, I was standing in Mrs. Halderson's kitchen with my tool bag in hand facing the back door.

"Thank you for repairing my air conditioner, Kyle," she said in her raspy old lady's voice.

I turned around slowly to face her. I had a pounding headache and my throat was very dry. My skin was clammy, and I was hot like I had a fever or something.

"Mrs. Halderson, what—what happened here today?"

"Oh, Kyle, don't make a soufflé out of a couple eggs and a cup of flour. You mowed my lawn and fixed my air conditioner. That's it."

"No, I mean the other... things. The body in the basement and that stuff you poured on my face. And what are all those white lines down there?"

She raised her finger to her lips. "Shhhh. It's better that you don't talk of such things, Kyle." As if on cue the pounding in my head grew far worse. "Do you understand?" she asked.

I nodded vigorously although the pain was nearly unbearable.

"Good. Then you just go about your business, and we'll be in touch with you. It may be many years from now, but we will be in touch with you, Kyle."

The pain faded and then disappeared. I nodded more slowly.

She walked over to the kitchen counter and began kneading fresh bread dough. "Oh, and by the way. I thought you should know there was a tragic accident at the mall today. Seven children threw themselves over the railing from the second floor."

I just looked at her with stunned expression. "What?"

"Yes, seven children killed themselves. From what I hear, Tony Soranto, Sammy Tunnsil and Talone Pearson suffered a great deal before they died. What a shame.... Weren't they your age, Kyle?" She turned around and smiled at me before I could answer. "Oh well. Now, get along. I'm sure your father wonders where you are."

I looked over my shoulder one last time before opening the back door and walking out into the sunshine.

For the next seventeen years, I often wondered if what I saw in Mrs. Halderson's house that day was real or just a hallucination. I couldn't forget about it, but with time, I almost convinced myself it was a dream or my imagination run wild.



But this morning, something inside my head said, “Hello,” and a long, yellow slick of goo dropped out of my nose. At that moment, it occurred to me that instead of going to church today, I think it’ll be a better idea to start building a bomb and take it to Chicago...

THE END

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## THE VOICE by Mason Yates

*Grayson!*

The raspy voice echoed all around her, and in response, she flung her head from side to side, her brown hair following her every move. Around her, trees towered, and a fine mist settled next to the ground. The forest was dark for the most part, but the moon above provided a sufficient amount of light.

*Grayson, why did you ever leave?* the voice asked. This time, the raspy sound faded. Instead, it sounded womanly and faint. Even though it was faint, it sounded as if the voice was right next to her ears. Inside her head, perhaps?

“Who are you?” Grayson asked, terrified. Her eyes were large, her legs shook, and her head spun to find the voice. From what she saw, she was all alone. From all sides of her, the forest went as far as the eye could see. After a certain distance, all she could see was blackness.

*You know who I am,* the voice responded, this time sounding as if it was coming from her right. She spun around with her hands out just in case she needed to fight. The voice sounded menacing, yet she knew who it belonged to.

“Mom?”

Suddenly, the whole forest exploded. The ground was ripped apart and thrown in the air; the trees splintered in every direction; and a void opened below her. It took only a millisecond for this to occur and for everything to stop in mid-flight. Then, before Grayson knew what was happening, she found herself in the desert. A massive cactus spread its arms out a few feet away from her, and the sand on the ground blew between her feet. Above her, high in the sky, the sun shined hot rays upon her. Her skin was already starting to burn.

The burning feeling did not last long, however. She recognized the place where she stood, and it took away the feeling she felt on her skin. Memories started to float into her mind, but before she was engulfed in nostalgia, her mother appeared before her, walking out of a haze that was placed in front of her by the sun. Her childhood home was just out of Phoenix, Arizona, and she recognized the landscape. Past her mother, mountains rose to the sky. Earlier in her life, as a little girl, she remembered a moment just like the one she was seeing now. Her mother and her used to walk in the desert together, and this moment felt close.

“Mom? What’s going on?” Grayson asked.

No answer. Her mother kept walking towards her.

“Mom?”

She stopped before her daughter and gazed into her brown eyes.

*You shouldn’t have left, Grayson. You have to watch out.*

“Watch out for what?”

*The planet plays tricks.*

Grayson stood confused before her mother. She tried to analyse her facial expressions, but it was no use. The desert blew up as well. Grains of sand projected upward and hung all around her. In the distance, she saw the mountains split and huge chunks of rocks were obliterated. Her mom, on the other hand, remained standing in front of her. Grayson knew now that the person was not her mom, but instead it was something else that was taking her form. What it was, she had no idea.

This time, there were no other visions. The forest and the desert were completely gone, and she woke up instead. They were only dreams. Very vivid dreams.

“Ah,” Grayson said, sitting up. She was in a white pod that was just big enough for her body. Around the pod, which was positioned three feet off the ground, a small room gave her privacy. She looked down at herself and found that she was naked, and next to her, hanging from a hook that was screwed into the wall were clothes. She reached over, grabbed them, and stepped out of the pod and onto the cool metal floor. She changed quickly.

When she was finished, she exited the small room through a door and stepped out into a hall. She took a right to where she knew the main room was located. They were in a spaceship, and the rooms were not too hard to find.

After a minute she went into the large room to find three men sitting at a massive round table. Two of them were smoking, watching their smoke dance in the air, while the other one was writing something onto a piece of paper. Grayson guessed it was another one of his stories he so desperately craved to get published one day. Maybe, she thought, he would be able to publish it when they returned to Earth, but as for now, they were billions of miles away.

“We touch down yet?” Grayson asked upon entering, referring to the planet the mission had their sights on.

“An hour ago; yes. We’re waiting for everyone to wake up from their slumber.”

Grayson nodded and walked further into the room, taking a seat at the table with the men. She looked at each of them. Robert still had his eyes glued to his story, while the other two—Nick and Austin—watched Grayson through their smoke. She looked at each of the two individually. First at Austin, who had shaggy hair and a scar on his left cheek. Then, she turned to Nick.

*Bad. Bad.*

The raspy voice that she had heard from her dreams echoed in her mind. She spun around again, hoping to catch the person behind it, but the three of them were the only ones in the room. Nick saw this sudden move and asked her what the matter was. In response, Robert looked up from his story, a child-like curiosity stamped on his face.

“Did you hear anything?” Grayson asked. “Someone talking?”

“No,” Nick responded, shaking his head. She saw that Austin was shaking his head, too. “You must still be tired.”

Grayson nodded and saw that Robert's humble face was still staring at her. He looked so much like a child, so content and soft.

*He knows.*

This time, Grayson did not bother turning her head. She knew the voice was in her mind, and she wondered how it got there. She wished it would go away. Instead of looking around, she looked down at the table and wondered what it all meant. What did it mean when it said those things?

Overtime, a few more astronauts walked into the room. They were excited about landing on the planet that their mission was destined to. It had been a two-year flight, and everyone was finally relaxed. Over the past year, the stress levels in the ship had been through the roof. Everyone was ready to land.

Nick was the first one to address the chattering crowd. Fifteen people of all backgrounds were crammed into the space, and Nick had gotten onto the table to speak. Everyone stared at him. Even Robert took his eyes off his story long enough to listen. Grayson watched the humble man with a curiosity of her own.

"I'm glad you all are finally cheerful. As we all know the past year has been a rough one and tension is high. Being cramped into this God-awful ship for two years can really drain the life out of someone, wear down their mind."

*It really wore down his,* the voice spoke inside Grayson's head.

"Today we are all going to have a chance to stretch our legs and take a look at this place for ourselves. We don't plan on going far though, just a perimeter sweep. This planet has enough oxygen to support human life, so there's no need to wear a suit. You can go out in your underwear if you like, but please stay aware of that fact that we don't know what's beyond this ship. What we do know is that there seems to be nothing hostile out there, and so far, we've been here for a few hours and nothing has attacked. It seems safe enough."

"What's it look like out there? I haven't looked out a window or anything yet," someone spoke up from the crowd.

"We're on the edge of a forest," Nick said. "From the looks of it, it's massive. On the other side of us, there's a massive ocean. But let's quit this talking and get ready to explore. This seems like a future home for mankind, and we're the first ones to step on it. How do you feel?"

A murmur of cheer slithered through the crowd.

It took no less than a half an hour before they were all stepping off the ship and onto the land. The ground underneath their feet was firm, and the air around them was cool and fresh. As soon as they began to wander away from the ship, an odd feeling passed over them. No one knew what it was, but it was there. It could have been a good or bad feeling; they had no clue. Everyone felt it, but no one mentioned it.

“Seems that the water is fresh,” Nick called out. Grayson, who was standing on the edge of the forest, looked over and saw Nick standing in the water, cupping his hands to scoop the water to drink. She looked at the muscular man with a hint of attraction in her eyes. There was no use hiding the fact that Nick was a handsome guy—well-built and nice features. She loathed that he had a better figure than she. She felt that she was not nearly as attractive, but despite her thoughts, she was a beautiful woman.

She turned back to the forest, which held a haunting familiarity that beckoned her forward. In the back of her mind, she heard the raspy voice telling her to walk into it. Then, she remembered where she saw the forest: in her dream. In it, it had blown up, showering her with dirt and splinters, but she doubted the forest would actually blow up. The Arizona desert had never blown up when she was younger, so she doubted the forest on this strange planet would. With the desire to walk into the forest on the forefront of her mind, she gave in to the pressure. The ground felt softer and inviting.

*There you go, the voice spoke within her mind. I'll show you the future.*

An image of the interior of the spaceship flashed across her mind. In it, the hallways were splattered with blood, and there were pieces of skin stuck to the white walls. On the floor, small puddles of blood had formed, and at the far end of the hall, a man who she could not recognize was lying dead against the wall. From the looks of it, the dead astronaut was butchered.

The image passed. Grayson wanted to scream, but she held it in. Next, another image passed through her vision. She saw herself running through the forest with a panicked look stamped on her face. This vision went away quicker than the last.

She found herself standing in the forest, still not far away from the spacecraft. She turned around and could still see the astronauts wandering the beach. A few were even close to her, no more than fifty feet away, and one in particular—Robert—was standing by the spacecraft admiring her. She met his eyes and dashed her stare away.

*He's a friend, the raspy voice said.*

She had no idea what that meant, but sooner or later she knew she would find out.

It was not until later in the day, when the planet's sun was beginning to lower, that the astronauts all decided to retreat into the spaceship for shelter from the night. They joked, laughed, and shook hands in celebration over the newly discovered planet. Everything that they had seen was very Earth-like. The only thing that came off odd about the planet was the subtle feeling they had all received when they first stepped foot on the ground. The feeling only lasted for a second, however, but even so, it had still happened. Nobody talked about it over dinner that night. It was all a big party with burgers, cake, and a few beers.

Grayson had not heard the voice for a few hours, but the sound of it was still in her memories. She thought about it the whole time the party lasted. She wondered what it meant; she wondered if anyone else had heard the voice; and she wondered when it would come back. Surely it would.

With the thoughts on the tip of her mind, she snuck away from the party and into the hallway that led to her room. In a flash, she saw the image she had seen earlier—the hallway splattered with blood. She was frightened and stopped. Once the image dissipated, she shook her head and continued. Maybe, she thought, she needed sleep. Maybe tomorrow morning would be a whole lot better.

She reached her room in a jiffy and started to open the door when Robert rounded the corner down the hall with a book in his hand. When was he not reading or writing? Grayson looked up to see him and smiled. They rarely talked; there was something about him that seemed different than everyone else. Maybe it was the child-like feeling he gave off, or maybe it was how he kept his distance that gave her the inability to understand. He was a shy person, but no matter what, she knew he was a smart man. Everyone on the ship was incredible intellectually.

“Grayson, can we talk?” Robert spoke.

Grayson was shocked that Robert had actually said something to her. Usually he kept quiet, so she assumed that whatever he had to say was important. It was.

“Sure,” Grayson said, nodding. She closed her room’s door and leaned against the white hallway wall that just a second ago had been completely stained with blood in her imagination. “What’s on your mind?”

“You’ve been hearing the voice, too,” Robert said, not making a question but a statement.

“Yes?” she said. “Have you?”

“Yeah. It’s trying to tell us something.”

“I’ve kind of already had that idea. You know what it’s trying to say?”

“Something bad is going to happen. Most likely it’ll be tonight.”

The bloody hallway, Grayson thought.

“And I think it has something to do with Nick,” Robert said, sounding as if he did not really want to say it, but he obviously felt better when he did. He nodded and licked his chapped lips. “I think it does.”

Grayson remembered earlier that morning when the voice had said “bad, bad” when she had looked at Nick. The puzzle pieces were starting to fit together. Then, she remembered what the voice had said when she had looked at Robert: *He knows*.

Well, he had known. The voice was right; she was not alone, and Robert knew about everything.

“What even is this voice?” Grayson asked.

“I don’t know. I never had it until we reached this place. Have you?”

She shook her head. Standing before her, Robert's child-like ways seemed to vanish, and a new, manlier Robert presented himself. He was confident and seemed to take charge.

"It has to be something in the air. Maybe the planet has some sort of psychic phenomena that it has placed in our minds. It's just a guess. Or maybe the planet is able to speak telepathically."

"The planet is able to speak?" Grayson questioned.

"It's only a theory, but from what I've seen, it's a good theory that's very plausible. Think about it. We get here and this very morning we end up hearing things and seeing--"

"What have you seen?" Grayson cut in.

"You've seen something?"

"Yes. What have you seen?"

"I saw an image of a hand holding a knife that was dripping blood. What have you seen?"

She told him about the hallway that they were standing in. She even pointed down the hall to where a man in her vision had been sitting limp against the wall covered in his own blood. Robert kept his gaze down the hall as if he was trying to see the man, but when he returned his gaze to Grayson's, she guessed that he could not see what she had.

"Do you know who was sitting there?" he asked her.

"No. It was too far away to have a clear picture of his face."

He nodded.

"What should we do?" she asked him.

"What is there to do?" he returned. "We're the only ones hearing the voices. Maybe nothing will happen."

*But it will happen*, the raspy voice said, entering both of their minds. *Tonight*.

Robert and Grayson stared into each other's eyes. What were they to do?

In the other room, where the party was still alive and David Bowie's "Starman" was blasting from a CD player, Nick finished off his fifth beer and began to slip to a place where he had not been for a while. When he used to be an alcoholic, he called the place The Dark Side of The Earth. It was where another side to him roamed wild and free. It was a violent side.

"Ah, hell," Nick said, taking a sixth beer off the table. He cracked it open and began to let the liquid slide down his throat. How wonderful it felt! The last time he had a drink was four



years ago, and the act of drinking was a rebellion. The other side to him began to grab a hold of his personality. It felt as if he was crawling in his skin, and the voices of the dark began to echo in his mind. It was not the raspy voice Robert and Grayson were hearing, but instead, it was his own twisted mind.

*Take another drink, Nick. You know you want to.*

Nick eyed another beer. He took his seventh and cracked it open. He was resting on one of the chairs in the room, and his eyes began to droop. Everyone around him was still partying. He had been left to wallow in his drunken stupor.

*You know what you should do, Nick? Kill. They aren't paying any attention to you.*

He shook his head, but the voices raged on in his mind.

*Grab a knife and slice and dice. Don't hold back. See that knife over there?*

Nick's eyes rose to where a knife was sitting next to the cake. It gleamed in the light, and it was left abandoned in the middle of the party.

*Yeah. You see it. Get it.*

Nick stumbled up from his chair and wobbled over to the knife. Still, nobody paid any attention. David Bowie's song changed and Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson" boomed over the speakers. As soon as the words started, Nick picked up the knife and slashed at the party. Screams erupted, blood flew, and a stampede occurred. As this happened, Nick managed to kill three. He slashed one's throat, stabbed one's heart, and sunk the knife into the last one's stomach. By the time three astronauts were dead, everyone had piled out of the room. An odd smile formed on Nick's face.

*Kill. Kill. Kill.*

Nick ran into the hallway that Grayson and Robert had just been in, but now, they were by the opening of the ship, where earlier that day they had got off and stepped onto the planet. Robert smashed his hand on the red button on a control panel and suddenly the huge wall in front of them slid open and a ramp protruded from the floor. The ramp touched down on the planet's soil, and when it did, Grayson and Robert snuck away with a few other astronauts. Some of the unfortunate one's had fled the party and into their rooms, and the one's that did were killed eventually. Nick had gone insane.

Inside the ship, Nick forced open a few rooms, and he found a few astronauts concealed in there. He sliced them open and blood tricked all over the floor. In one instance, another astronaut was running through the hallway and Nick managed to earn another kill. Finally, the hallway was splattered in blood just like Grayson had seen in her visions.

However, she was glad that she was not another kill. Robert grabbed Grayson's hand, and together, they ran through the forest. She realized that if he had failed to stop her in the hall, she would have been in her room and eventually slaughtered.

*Thank God for him, she thought. Thank God.*

“We have to hide,” Robert told her when they had reached a good distance from the ship. From where they stopped and stood, they could see the ship and the glow from inside. If Nick was going to step foot outside the ship, they would see it. Robert grabbed Grayson’s arm and manoeuvred them a few yards away behind a tree with a massive trunk that hid the both of them. Together they stayed put.

For a time, the silence was overwhelming, and it reminded her of the horror movies that one of her high school boyfriends liked to take her to see in the theatre. There was always a silent part in the movie that made her stomach churn, and her nerves were always set on edge. She secretly wished that Robert would wrap his arm around her like her boyfriend had done all those years back. However, this was real. She was living a horror movie. As they waited to see if Nick would emerge from the ship, she crawled in her skin. It felt as if something was ripping inside her, tearing at her, eating at her.

Then, the minutes were over, and Nick emerged with the gleaming knife in his hands. A twisted smile covered his face, and even from where Grayson stood, she could see the hatred in his eyes. They were full of hate, and they even looked possessed.

*Stay with Robert, the raspy voice spoke up in her mind.*

“I will,” Grayson said without realizing it. Following this, Robert covered her mouth and held her. He shushed her, but still not trusting her, he kept his hand over her mouth. His eyes looked questioningly at her, but now was not the time to ask why she had just said that. Now was the time to prepare for a fight or flight. He looked around the tree and watched as Nick began to walk into the woods.

*Someday you’re going to marry him, the raspy voice said.*

Robert took his gaze off Nick and looked around the dark forest. Nobody else was around them. The other lucky astronauts had fled the area, and they had left Grayson and himself to deal with Nick.

“We got to try to get back to the ship,” Robert told her in a whisper. His hands were still covering her mouth and holding her against him. Robert did not want to let the embrace go because he liked the warmth and comfort, but he told her, “I’m going to let you go so you can run, but don’t talk.”

She nodded, and he let go. They prepared to run.

“When I say go,” Robert said, “we’re going to get low and run. Stay close to the trees. We’re going to try to get back to the ship. Maybe we can get off this planet once we do.”

Ignoring Robert’s command for her to stay quiet, she asked, “what about the others?”

Remembering the other astronauts, Robert shook his head and said, “We have to protect ourselves. The only way is to get off this planet. But let’s go.”

Together they stealthily ran to the next tree, then the next. Grayson could not help but take peeks at Nick, who was still walking through the forest with the knife. She was thanking God every second the maniac failed to see them.

By the time she and Robert made it to the ship, Grayson's heart was beating rapidly. She was glad that they gotten away from the killer, but she was still terrified. There was a chance that Nick could still get to them. They crept up to the ship, but once they reached the entrance, they sprinted up the ramp, which made a loud clanging sound with each footstep. Nick became aware of this and turned around. Grayson, still running up the ramp, looked back in time to see Nick change his direction and run towards the ship. Her chest began to hurt, but now was not the time to deal with pain. Now was the time to close the ship's entrance.

Robert ran to the control panel immediately began fumbling around with the buttons until the ramp began to slide back into the ship. Although it was decently fast, Grayson doubted the ramp was moving fast enough. Her eyes were wide open in terror.

*What if he gets to the ship in time before the entrance is closed?* she thought.

*He won't,* the voice in her head spoke.

She saw Nick grow closer and closer. The ramp was almost back inside the ship, but that still was not enough. Nick could easily still jump in before the doors closed. She watched the maniac run, knife still in hand. Remembering back to her high school days again, she remembered the horror movies. Every villain had that smile—that smile that seemed to scream insanity. Jack Torrance had it in *The Shining*; Norman Bates had it in *Psycho*; and the Joker from the *Batman* movies always had that twisted smile as well.

The ramp had closed, and now the doors began to slide shut. Nick was gaining speed, and the knife swung back and forth in his hands. It gleamed in the light from the ship.

“Come on. Come on. Come on,” Grayson repeated. She threw her nails into her mouth and began to chew on them—something that she had not done since her preteen years. “Shut the damn doors already!”

The smile did not leave Nick's face, and that image pierced her thoughts. For as long as she lived, she knew she would never forget that face. Then, suddenly, she was grabbed by Robert and taken away from the doors that were still closing. He needed to get her away from the doors. The last thing he wanted was her hurt. The child-like way about him had vanished. He had taken control, and as she was dragged away by Robert, she seemed to think that it was her who was the child.

Luckily, the doors closed just as Nick had arrived. Instead of seeing the killer jump onto the ship's platform and start to come at the two of them, they both saw the metal doors lock in place. What followed were loud banging sounds. Then, there were scraping sounds, which both of them understood was Nick slashing the knife at the metal exterior of the ship.

“We did it,” Robert said with a sigh of relief.

“Yeah. We did,” Grayson acknowledged.

They sat in the large room with the loud thumping and scraping sounds to the left of them, where the doors were locked in place. Nick was not giving up on slashing at the doors, but even he had to know that slashing at them was not going to get him into the ship. With all their might, Grayson and Robert tried to ignore the sounds. They held each other tightly and felt the warmth of one another. It had been so long since the two of them had felt another person's embrace, especially an embrace in which they were in at the moment. This was more than an embrace that someone gives another after saving their lives. This had begun to grow into something more. Robert slowly manoeuvred Grayson around so that she was facing him. Then, his head lowered, and Grayson lifted her chin up so she could meet his lips.

Just before the day broke apart the night, the ship that the astronauts had come on began to lift into the air. Robert and Grayson sat at the head of the ship and watched as the planet below them began to grow smaller and smaller. The voice that had been in their heads quickly faded until nothing was there. Now, it was only their thoughts. They both wondered what would happen to the people they had left on the planet. What would become of them? Would Nick murder them eventually? The answers to their questions were unknown. There was one thing they did know though: they were lucky to be alive.

THE END

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010010101 PICK UP by Christopher T Dabrowski

*English translation by Monika Olasek*

That was supposed to be THE DAY—the day to prove himself and all the others that he was able to pick up beautiful girls. He wanted to get out of his shell and overcome the shyness that had been eating him for ages. He was fed up with sitting alone in front of a computer. He was bored with virtual flirts on the Internet. He was nagged by the awareness that the time was passing by and he still didn't know how it was.

He was marching along the main street. There was only one thought in his mind, 'I'll do it. I must do it!', as if he wanted to silence the underskin fear; the anxiety that no matter what he would do, he was doomed to failure. For sixteen years he had been hiding a major pessimist in his rickety body. He had to get rid of him as fast as possible. That was the day!

He was scrutinizing the crowd, looking for a suitable candidate. Suddenly, he saw a comely female.

*It would be great to synchronize my joystick with her mouse, he thought.*

Her hips were swinging as she walked. 'What a casing!' he sighed. He scanned her image immediately to run a thorough analysis. She was sun-tanned, with blonde hair flying in the wind, ripe breasts, long, shapely legs, tiny waist—a very attractive interface; a real ideal.

The time had come! All he needed was just a proper access code to log in, he thought feverously. He might even be the sole user. He hoped it would not turn out that she was already taken. He felt a wave of heat. Blushing—not good; either the graphics card was going mad or the processor was overheating. He had to calm down, as long as she was still far away; otherwise a critical error could occur and it would be all over.

He took a deep breath, started an anti-stress filter and reset himself. He had to act quickly. She was getting close. After the system had stabilized, he decided to find information about picking up girls in the database. Two days earlier he had read a great book about it and had copied a lot of helpful advices onto his hard drive. He was searching his memory; cluster after cluster, folder after folder. The beautiful stranger was only a mere twenty metres from him.

Maybe the data was at a different partition, he thought.

He felt as if that tension made all the connectors burn out. There it was! He found it! It was... compressed. Jeesusuus, how could he forget about the unzipping! *I won't make it*, a thought of despair shot through his logical circuits.

He made it! Now he just had to synchronize the coordinates, come closer to her and say something. He chose a password. He straightened his back—he had to look confident. Now a little adjustment of the sound card—he did not want to sound like a teenager during breaking of voice; his voice had to be deep and sensual. He blocked the girl's way.

‘Hi! I’d like to meet you,’ he started with a light tone and presented his keyboard in a wide smile.

‘But I don’t. Beat it!’

That was not what he had expected! The guidebook said that “self-confidence, a right stance and a proper tone guarantee a success.” He was crushed—he had no idea what to do. It was supposed to be different! He didn’t have a link to an advice on how to cope with such a situation. With every long, passing second there were less and less chances that they could be compatible. A failure! He felt his ears burn. Her eyes were full of contempt. He was like a computer attacked by a Trojan virus.

She was laughing at him. Louder and louder, till she cried. He ran away. He could not stand the tension. He had never been so humiliated—he almost burned from shame. Enough of this picking up! He would never be popular with women—he had to accept it. He took a desperate try and he was defeated. Enough! He returned to the world of computers, Internet, programs and games. He sank deeper into his shell of unapproachability and was soon traversing the vast binary lands. There he was an invincible lord and master.

THE END

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## SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE by Rex Mundy

### 1. The Attack

The attack came as we began to march down the defile between two craggy hills.

Sand thudded under the hoofs of our sergeant's horse, the lowering cliffs echoed back the jingle of equipment, the sun beat down fiercely from a coppery sky, but the Legionnaires marched in silence. Our two patrols had met on the far side of the line of cliffs, both with a fruitless search to report.

There had been no sign of the desert raiders who had torched peaceful settlements in several nearby oases, and Sergeant Herzog had given the order to ride back to Fort Elise. But as the two combined patrols reached halfway up the rock strewn defile, we discovered where our quarry had gone to ground.

The first I knew of the attack was a pop-pop-pop of matchlock fire from the boulders that lay along one side of the defile, jagged rocks fallen from the towering cliffs at some point in antiquity. Smoke blossomed a dozen times from amongst them before being whipped away in the desert wind.

At the same instant, the man ahead of me fell with a cry, his white kepi knocked from his head to roll hectically across the sand. More matchlocks opened up from the cliffs on the other side, a ragged volley that betrayed all the indiscipline of the desert folk, but nevertheless men and camels fell to its unexpected onslaught.

Sergeant Herzog was riding at the front, his tanned, bearded face down beneath his black kepi as he spurred his horse onwards. More legionnaires fell.

Firing broke out from some of the men, who blazed away aimlessly at the rocks from which had come the stinking clouds of gunpowder. With the sudden resolution that the conviction of one's own death brings, I added my own fire to the attack.

But what with the smoke and the glare of the sun and the thunderous noise of firing as it echoed back from those high cliffs, I do not believe I shot a single. At times I glimpsed blue robed figures ducking into cover or rising to fire matchlocks before ducking again to reload. But I soon saw that the fight was futile, shouted 'Courir!' to the men about me, and raced down the defile in pursuit of Sergeant Herzog.

A stray bullet winged me, but I barely noticed it, feeling only a solid thump from the vicinity of my shoulder. All my attention was focused on Sergeant Herzog, who was riding out of sight into the cover of a tall rock like a menhir leaning against the cliff. I grinned to myself. This would give us a chance against our sneaking opponents. This would even the field. I turned to shout encouragement to my comrades, only for the words to die stillborn on my lips.

The defile was littered with bodies of legionnaires. Only a few men put up a splendid defence, firing from behind fallen boulders and the dead pack camel. Still the cliffs on either hand popped with matchlock fire. It was incredible. The best part of twenty fully armed and fully trained men of the French Foreign Legion had fallen to the matchlock fire of a few

cowardly nomads. I looked back in horror as I reached the cover of the leaning rock but then my view was cut off by its cool, shaded immensity.

A declivity led down into the gloom. The sergeant looked up from where he was loading his pistol, standing beside his snorting steed. His eyes narrowed. From the defile filtered the continuing clamour of the firefight.

‘Sergeant!’ I cried. ‘I must report a massacre.’

‘Legionnaire Mundy,’ he drawled in his Pennsylvanian accent. ‘Why did no one follow me? I gave the order clear as day.’

‘I heard nothing,’ I admitted, ‘and I don’t think anyone else did. Most of the men fell in the first volley.’ I looked down at the ground as his horse snorted in seeming derision.

‘We found the raiders,’ I added quietly. But my words were almost drowned out by the roar of gunfire.

‘What’s happening now?’ Herzog demanded, scratching his beard irritably. ‘Go find out!’

Unwillingly, I jumped down from the saddle and crawled a short way back up the sandy gradient until the defile came into view. It was much as I had left it, strewn with the dead, only a few legionnaires firing from the makeshift redoubt of dead pack camel and boulders. One seemed to be in command, a tall man who had been leading the second patrol. He was a man from a different troop, and I had not met him before. And yet there was something strangely familiar about his lean form.

I saw him aim his gun, squeeze the trigger—and a blue robed figure fell with a scream from the lee of a rock. I licked dry lips. At least we’d take a few of them with us. Herzog crawled up to join me.

‘Sergeant,’ I said urgently, ‘we must help them!’

The stocky sergeant spat a brown line of tobacco into the sand beside me. ‘Better we return to Fort Elise to report this attack,’ he said dispassionately. ‘Those men are already dead, legionnaire.’

Anguished, I watched as another legionnaire was shot down, falling over a rock to twitch and writhe out his last in the blood stained sand. A shadow fell over me. I looked up to see that above the clouds of gun smoke that choked the defile, several vultures were wheeling.

‘Sergeant,’ I said, ‘I must protest. Besides, how will only two of us have any hope of returning to the fort with this shocking news?’

Herzog gritted his teeth. ‘Stay here and die with the rest of them if you must, legionnaire,’ he said uncaringly. ‘I must take word to Commandant le Boucher.’

But he made no move to return to his horse. Instead I skidded back down the sandy slope into the shade of the great rock, seized the sergeant’s nervous horse by the reins and calmed him, then mounted, reloaded my rifle, and rode back up into the full glare of the sunlight.



As I reached the place where Herzog still watched on hands and knees, I saw to my horror that the raiders had risen from their cover and were converging on the valiant legionnaires. Blades flashed in the desert sunlight as they cut men down. For a moment, I wanted to ride far away, forget this slaughter, forget the desert, forget that I had ever joined the Legion. I blamed ol' Jenny Wren—we boys' nickname for our headmaster—who had told such fearful bosh about his days in the Legion on award days, and, of course, when he thrashed a chap.

But where could I go? A man does not join the French Foreign Legion if he has a hope of going home. I could never return to England, my home.

Besides, I knew the penalties for desertion from the Legion. It was this as much as any other consideration that encouraged me to spur the horse and ride back into the defile, firing as I came.

Blue robed men looked up in surprise or fell to my shooting, but I paid them no heed and rode into the mass of them, to where one legionnaire stood alone, a broken sabre in his fist, his long lean form slick with blood. Bodies lay heaped at his feet, some those of his comrades, but more those of the raiders.

A huge raider cut at him with an ornate scimitar, and wearily the legionnaire parried with his broken blade, then seized the man by a fold of his robe and flung him to one side, but another man came to take his place. They baited that legionnaire like mangy pariah dogs menacing a wolf. Now he flung away the blade, snatched up a fallen rifle and swung it like a club.

Then I was there, my horse riding down raiders, scattering them as the sand drummed to his hoofs. The legionnaire glanced up, and I saw cold grey eyes firm with resolve beneath his white kepi, a cruel mouth twisted into a sneer. In that moment I knew him. This was no stranger. I had known him long ago. I had cause to hate him.

But I thought nothing of this in that instant, as I rode past him, snatched him up so he scrambled onto the back of the horse and clung on for dear life as I sawed at the reins and we rode back through the shrieking desert men, back towards the head of the defile where even now Sergeant Herzog was racing from beneath the leaning rock, running for freedom.

## 2. March or Die

'The Arabs are still following,' I called back to my comrades.

Looking back at the stony stream where one horse and two men knelt gulping at the brackish water, packs and saddlebags strewn about the rocks beside them, I raised my voice. 'I say, the Arabs are still after us.'

I looked back, peering through the gap in the line of boulders that stood along the ridge overlooking the stream. Beyond it rolled the desert sands, a scorching waste as dry as ashes that stretched into the shimmering haze. Long shadows were flung across the nearer reaches as the sun descended, but out there, out in the open desert, there was little to cast a shadow. It stretched flat and featureless but for the distant figures of mounted men.

They had been pursuing us ever since we had evaded them in the defile, although we had initially thought we had lost them among the labyrinth of rocks south of the gorge where they had ambushed us. And after many hours of hard riding and marching—these alternated as we took turns to ride the sergeants horse—they were still following our trail across the sands. Still a long way off, looking like ants as they toiled under the desert sun, they were indisputably following us.

‘They’re not Arabs,’ said the tall, lean man who I had snatched from certain death. As he rose lithely, he dabbed fastidiously at the water that clung to his moustache.

After hours of marching in the baking sun I was in no mood for contradictions. ‘Of course they’re Arabs,’ I snapped.

Ned Storey was his name. I knew him of old.

‘They are Touaregs.’ Sergeant Herzog also rose, having filled his belly and his water bag. ‘No Arabs live this far out into the desert,’ the American added. Droplets dewed his black beard. The horse continued to slurp at the meagre stream waters. ‘The name means the Abandoned of God.’

‘Gad, I don’t care if they’re Esquimaux!’ I said. ‘The fact is, they’re still following us. We’ve got to get away from here.’

The sergeant indicated the setting sun. ‘It’ll be dark soon,’ he said. ‘The Touaregs will not be able to follow us in the dark.’

Storey shot him a look. ‘Can we be so sure, sergeant?’ he asked. ‘They have followed our trail all day without stopping. Why should nightfall daunt them?’

Herzog shrugged and laid a hand on his horse. ‘The beast is too tired to go on, legionnaire,’ he said. ‘The rest will do him good.’ He shivered. The cold of the desert night was fast stealing upon us.

‘But we can’t camp here, sergeant,’ I said, indicating the rocky landscape through which wound the stream, trickling futilely into the desert sands. ‘We’ll need somewhere we can defend—against predators at least, even if these Touaregs as you call them will give us the night off.’

Herzog scanned our immediate surroundings. The stream trickled down from a beetling rocky eminence above us, in whose lea grew a few scrub trees and bushes. ‘We’ll find somewhere to sleep up there,’ he said. ‘Gather firewood from those shrubs.’

He led the horse by the bridle up the stream and into an area flanked on two sides by walls of sandstone, with the cliff behind it and only the stream itself as an entrance. Here he corralled our mount amidst the rocks. Storey and I worked quickly to gather up dry twigs and branches while Herzog loaded a rifle and disappeared beyond the rocks on a mysterious errand.

‘Do you really suppose this will keep out marauding Touaregs?’ I asked Ned Storey as we laid the fire on a flat stretch of ground by the stream. ‘If they decide to make a night attack, I mean?’

Storey looked pensive. ‘The horse won’t be able to go any further without rest,’ he said with a yawn. ‘Nor will I, truth be told. Are you such an iron man that you can march all night as well as all day?’

I rubbed my tired muscles regretfully. ‘Certainly not,’ I said, as Storey lit the fire, ‘but our pursuers, call them Arab, Touareg or anything you like, are steadfast and determined. They’ll be only too glad to slit out throats. And we have to return to the camp and warn the commandant! That’s why you insisted we take this route, since you said it’s a quicker...’

A shot rang out from beyond the boulders. We both exchanged glances. Storey scrambled up onto a high rock and surveyed the area with one hand shading his eyes.

‘Is it the Touaregs?’ I hissed. ‘Have they got the sergeant?’

He laughed suddenly, and leapt down again. Seconds later, Sergeant Herzog swaggered into the camp, rifle in one hand, the carcass of a gazelle over his shoulders. He dropped it down on the ground, and leant on his gun, looking pleased with himself. He saw the fire.

‘We’ll not starve tonight,’ he said with a laugh, and knelt down to skin and gut his quarry.

‘Did you see any sign of our pursuers, sergeant?’ I asked as he cut up the meat and placed it on sticks to roast over the flames. He nodded without looking up.

I’d always warmed to the sergeant. Since he was the only other English speaker in the troop, it was natural. The rank and file were another matter—particularly the rank. Krauts, dagoes, and worse. And all of them seemed to speak French better than I did.

‘I caught sight of them, legionnaire,’ Herzog said absently, ‘further down the valley. Seems they had lost our trail. They were examining the ground. Seemed to be having some kind of dispute, as if not sure they should go on.’

‘Our trail would have died when we entered the rocks,’ Storey observed. I glanced at him, where he sat with his back to the cliff, a rifle over his knees. ‘Even Touaregs would have trouble following our tracks across the arid stretch we have traversed to get here.’

‘Maybe this plan was not so foolish,’ I muttered.

‘Maybe, legionnaire,’ said Herzog. ‘And maybe you can take first watch.’

As the guttering flames made the darkness darker, I sat by the fire, rifle at the ready. Down here, in this little valley, it would not be visible to our pursuers, or so the sergeant had assured us. He lay beside the fire, bundled in a blanket, head resting on his saddle bag. On the far side, Storey also slept. The horse stood, gently blowing and nickering to himself. I rose to my feet.

I crossed over to where Storey lay and stood looking down at him. I remembered him as he was at our school, captain of the rugby team and a promising scholar, two years above me. He had seemed almost godlike in those days. Our ways had separated after school—not that we had ever been pals in the first place, although I’d known a chap who was his fag.

It was several years later that I had next heard of him, but that was when the whole country knew his name—the Great Detective, to the life. The closest thing England ever had to the fictional Sherlock Holmes. That had all been forgotten about, of course, after the scandal. The idol of the mob proved to have feet of clay.

I knelt down and began searching through his knapsack, moving very slowly, very tentatively. I found a change of clothes, the tinderbox he'd used to light the fire, a penknife... Nothing of any interest. I turned to search through his pockets—he would be keeping it very close, of course—and froze.

'You won't find it in there,' Ned Storey told me, breaking the silence.

His cold grey eyes glittered malevolently in the firelight. I felt a cold flush prickle across my skin. 'I... I don't know what you mean,' I stammered awkwardly. The man slept like a cat!

'It's not in my knapsack, what you're looking for,' he said. 'And you won't find it on my person, either.'

He rose and stretched, then picked up his rifle. 'It must be time for second watch,' he added quietly. 'Get some sleep. You'll need to be ready and refreshed for the journey in the morning.'

I wanted to say something. To think of some witty sally. I felt humiliated, ashamed. And frustrated.

I said nothing, but instead unrolled my bedroll, bundled myself in my blanket, and sought sleep. As I lay there, I went over the events of the day in my mind. Two whole patrols of the Legion wiped out, except for we three fugitives. It was unheard of. Surely there was an explanation. How had the Touaregs known to attack us in that place? A chill ran through me. Had we been betrayed?

The last thing I saw before I nodded off was Storey sitting by the fire, cleaning his gun.

I awoke with a start.

It was still dark. What had woken me? I listened. As I did, I heard a strange whirring sound. Craning my neck round, I saw a figure by the fire, holding a flaming brand high overhead, swinging it back and forth in what was obviously a signal. A signal—to our enemies?

I was about to speak but before I could assemble a suitable sentence in my mind, another dark figure burst into the firelight and dragged the first to the ground in a flailing of limbs. As I flung off my blanket I heard the two men struggling.

'Storey? Sergeant?' I called. 'What's going on?'

They paid me no heed, grappling with each other and raining each other with blows. I sprang across the small space and seized the taller, leaner of the two figures.

‘You fool!’ Storey shoved me away and I staggered backwards. Herzog seized the opportunity to wrap an arm round Storey’s neck and began to throttle him. Still my fellow countryman struggled.

‘Sergeant,’ I hissed. ‘He was signalling to our enemies! They could be out there, in the darkness! Try to keep quiet or they’ll hear us and come looking!’

Herzog flung Storey to the ground, snatched up his rifle and levelled it at him. Without looking away, he said, ‘He was signalling to the Touaregs? Why would he do that? A legionnaire of France!’

‘This man, sergeant,’ I said, ‘is a murderer and a thief!’ The Legion did not lack such folk, of course. One might as well have pointed out to the judge at my trial that he and the police who had arrested me were all members of the Freemasons. But I forged on regardless. ‘That ambush—it must have been his doing! He brought the Touaregs down on us!’

‘Keep your voice down yourself,’ Storey spat. I had come close to shouting. ‘Quiet!’

He raised a hand for silence, ignoring the gun Herzog had trained on him. And I heard the clatter of hoofs amongst the rocks below us. Other, similar noises were audible from either side. Riders were approaching our position.

‘Touaregs!’ I hissed, as a mounted figure rode into the firelight.

But I was wrong. This was no Mohammedan desert nomad. This fierce, barbaric rider was a woman.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK

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PLANETOID 127 by Edgar Wallace

Chapter VI

HILDRETH'S face went white.

"Do you suggest that I am responsible for Colson's death?"

"You were responsible directly and indirectly," said Tim. "You sent a man here to steal the code-book—a man who has been identified this afternoon as a notorious criminal. Whether you told him to shoot, or whether he shot to save his skin, we shall never know. The burglar was killed so that he should not blab."

"By whom?" asked Hildreth steadily.

"You know best," was the curt reply.

Tim opened the door and stood waiting. The man had regained some of his composure, and, with an easy laugh, walked into the corridor. "You will hear from me again," he said.

"Thank you for the warning," was Tim's rejoinder.

After he had seen his unwelcome visitor off the premises, Tim went in search of Stamford, who, with his two assistants, was working in a little study getting out particulars of the old man's investments. The lawyer listened in silence while Tim narrated what had passed.

"He is a very dangerous man," said Mr. Stamford at last; "and, so far from being rich, I happen to know that he is on the verge of ruin. There are some queer stories about Hildreth. I have had a hint that he was once in an Australian prison, but, of course, there is no evidence to connect him with this terrible crime. What are your immediate plans?"

"The voice amplifier has been reconstituted," said Tim. "The experts are making a test to-day, though I very much doubt whether they will succeed in establishing communication."

A smile fluttered at the corner of the lawyer's mouth.

"Do you still believe that Mr. Colson was in communication with another planet?"

"I'm certain," said Tim emphatically.

He went back to the blue drawing-room, and had hardly entered before Sir Charles came in.

"It is as I thought," said the scientist; "neither Zeta nor Theta! It is, in fact, a distinct body of some kind, and, in my judgment, well outside the orbit of the hypothetical Vulcan. If you look at the back of the photograph—"

He turned it over, and Tim saw that, written in pencil in the microscopic calligraphy of the Professor, were a dozen lines of writing.

“I knew, of course, that this was a dead world, without atmosphere or even water. There can be no life there. I made an enlargement by my new process, and this revealed a series of flat, rocky valleys.”

“What the deuce his new process was, heaven only knows!” said Sir Charles in despair. “Poor Colson must have been the most versatile genius the world has known. At any rate, that disposes of the suggestion that this planetary body is that whence come the signals—if they come at all.”

Sir Charles waited until the experts had finished the work of reassembling two of the more complicated machines; but, though experimenting until midnight, they could not establish communication, and at last, with a sense of despair, Tim ordered the work to cease for the night.

The whole thing was becoming a nightmare to him: he could not sleep at nights. Chap and his sister came over in the morning to assist him in a search, which had gone on ever since the death of Professor Colson.

“We can do no more,” said Tim helplessly, “until we have seen the Professor’s manuscript. Until then we do not know for what we are searching.”

“What about that stone in the garden? Won’t that tell you anything?” asked Chap. “I’d like to see it.”

They went out into the courtyard together and stood before the stone in silence.

E 6 O 1 T 2 D 4 H 4 L 1 A 1 N 3 W 1 U 1 R 2 B 1 I 3 S 2

“Of course, that isn’t as difficult as it appears,” said Chap, to whom cryptograms were a passion. “There is a sentence written there, containing so many ‘e’s’, so many ‘h’s’, etcetera, and perhaps, when we find the sentence, the mystery will be half solved.”

He jotted the inscription down in a notebook, and throughout the day was puzzling over a solution. Night came, and the two were on the point of departure, when Chap said suddenly: “Do you think you were wise, Timothy, to tell the reporter Johnny all you did?”

(Tim had given an interview to a local newspaper, which had described more fully than he had intended—more fully, indeed, than his evidence at the inquest—what had happened immediately preceding Colson’s death.)

“Because, y’ know, it struck me,” said Chap, “that the poor old Professor’s manuscript would be very valuable to a certain person. Does it occur to you that our friend might also be searching for this narrative?”

This was a new idea to Tim.

“Why, yes,” he said slowly; “I never thought of that. No; that didn’t strike me. But I don’t know where he would find it. We’ve taken out every likely stone in the building; I’ve had the cellars searched—”

“What makes you think it’s behind a stone?” asked Chap.

“His reference to a mason. My guess—and I may not be far wide of the mark—is that Mr. Colson, having written his manuscript, hid it in one of the walls. But so far I have not been able to discover the hiding-place.”

He walked to the end of the drive to see his friends off, and then returned to the study. He was alone in the house now, save for the servants. Sir Charles had gone back to town by the last train, and Stamford had accompanied him.

The butler came in to ask if he wanted anything before he went to bed, and Tim shook his head.

He had taken up his quarters in a spare room immediately above the library, and for an hour after his visitors had departed he sat on the broad window-seat, looking down into the courtyard, now bathed in the faint radiance of the crescent moon. The light shone whitely upon the cryptogram stone, and absent-mindedly he fixed his eyes upon this, the least of the old man’s mysteries. And then—was his eye playing tricks with him? He could have sworn he saw a dark figure melt out of the darkness and move along the shadow of the box hedge.

He pushed open the casement window, but could see nothing.

“I’m getting jumpy,” he said to himself, and rising with a yawn, took off his coat preparatory to undressing. As he did so, he glanced out of the window again and started. Now he was sure: he could see the shapeless black shadow, and it was moving towards the cryptogram stone.

His pulse beat a little quicker as he watched. There was no doubt about it now. In the moonlight the figure in the long black coat and the broad sombrero which shaded his face, stood clearly revealed. It was touching the stone, and even as Tim looked the little obelisk fell with a crash.

In a second Tim was out of the room and speeding along the corridor. As he came into view of the figure, it stooped and picked something from the ground.

The manuscript! What a fool he had been! That was where the old man had concealed the story of his discovery! But there was no time for regret: the mysterious visitant had already disappeared into the shadows. Was he making for the river? Tim was uncertain. He was halfway down the slope before he realised that he had made a mistake. Behind him he heard the soft purr of a motor-car, and, racing up the slope, he came into view of a red tail-light as it disappeared down the broad drive towards the road. The great iron gates were closed, and that would give him a momentary advantage, though he knew he could not reach the car before they were open.

Then he remembered Colson’s motor-bicycle: he had left it leaning against the wall and had forgotten to bring it in after the trip he had made to Bisham that morning. Yes, there it was! He had hardly started the machine going when he heard a crash. The unknown had driven his car through the frail iron gates and was flying along the road to Maidenhead.



Tim came out in pursuit and put his machine all out. The car ahead gained until it came to the foot of a long and tiring hill, and then the gap between them closed. Once the driver looked back, and a minute later something dropped in the road. Tim only just avoided the spare tyre, which had been thrown overboard to trip him.

The car reached the crest of the hill as Tim came up to its rear, and, heedless of danger, stretched out his hand, and, catching hold of the hood, let the motor-bicycle slip from between his knees.

For a second he held on desperately, his feet swinging in the air, and then, with an effort, he threw his leg over the edge of the hood and dropped breathlessly on to the seat behind the driver. At first the man at the wheel did not realise what had happened, and then, with a yell of rage, he turned and struck blindly at the unauthorised passenger.

The blow missed him by a fraction of an inch, and in another second his arm was around the driver's neck. The car swayed and slowed, and then an involuntary movement of the man revealed the whereabouts of the manuscript. Tim thrust into the inside-pocket and his fingers touched a heavy roll of paper. In a flash the packet was in his hand, and then he saw the moonlight gleam on something which the man held.

The car was now almost at a standstill, and, leaping over the side, Tim plunged into the hedge by the side of the road. As he did so, he heard the "zip!" of a bullet and the patter of leaves. He ran on wildly, his breath coming in short gasps. To his ears came the blundering feet of his pursuer. He was out of breath and in no condition to meet the murderous onrush of his enemy.

And then, as he felt he could not go a step farther, the ground opened underneath his feet and he went down, down, down. For a second he lost consciousness. All that remained of his breath was knocked from his body, and he could only lie and gape at the starlit sky.

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

3. Polaris Makes a Promise

Both stood transfixed for a long moment—the man with the wonder that followed his anger, the woman with horror. Polaris drew a deep breath and stepped a hesitating pace forward.

The woman threw out her hands in a gesture of loathing.

“Murderer!” she said in a low, deep voice, choked with grief. “Oh, my brother; my poor brother!” She threw herself on the snow, sobbing terribly.

Rooted to the spot by her repelling gesture, Polaris watched her. So one of the men had been her brother. Which one? His naturally clear mind began to reassert itself.

“Lady,” he called softly. He did not attempt to go nearer to her.

She raised her face from her arms, crept to her knees, and stared at him stonily. “Well, murderer, finish your work,” she said. “I am ready. Ah, what had he—what had they done that you should take their lives?”

“Listen to me, lady,” said Polaris quietly. “You saw me—kill. Was that man your brother?”

The girl did not answer, but continued to gaze at him with horror-stricken eyes. Her mouth quivered pitifully.

“If that man was your brother, then I killed him, and with reason,” pursued Polaris calmly. “If he was not, then of your brother’s death, at least, I am guiltless. I did but punish his slayer.”

“His slayer! What are you saying?” gasped the girl.

Polaris snapped open the breech of his revolver and emptied its cartridges into his hand. He took the other revolver from its holster and emptied it also. He laid the cartridge in his hand and extended it.

“See,” he said, “there are twelve cartridges, but only one empty shell. Only two shots were fired—one by the man whom I killed, the other by me.” He saw that he had her attention, and repeated his question: “Was that man your brother?”

“No,” she answered.

“Then, you see, I could not have shot your brother,” said Polaris. His face grew stern with the memory of the scene he had witnessed. “They quarrelled, your brother and the other man. I came behind the drift yonder and saw them. I might have stopped them—but, lady, they were the first men I had ever seen, save only one. I was bound by surprise. The other man was stronger. He struck your brother into the crevasse. He would have shot me, but my mind returned to me, and with anger at that which I saw, and I killed him.

“In proof, lady, see—the snow between me and the spot yonder where they stood is untracked. I have been no nearer.”

Wonderingly the girl followed with her eyes and the direction of his pointing finger. She comprehended.

“I—I believe you have told me the truth,” she faltered. “They had quarrelled. But—but—you said they were the first men you had ever seen. How—what—”

Polaris crossed the intervening slope and stood at her side.

“That is a long tale, lady,” he said simply. “You are in distress. I would help you. Let us go to your camp. Come.”

The girl raised her eyes to his, and they gazed long at one another. Polaris saw a slender figure of nearly his own height. She was clad in heavy woollen garments. A hooded cap framed the long oval of her face.

The eyes that looked into his were steady and grey. Long eyes they were, delicately turned at the corners. Her nose was straight and high, its end tilted ever so slightly. Full, crimson lips and a firm little chin peeped over the collar of her jacket. A wisp of chestnut hair swept her high brow and added its tale to a face that would have been accounted beautiful in any land.

In the eyes of Polaris she was divinity.

The girl saw a young giant in the flower of his manhood. Clad in splendid white furs of fox and bear, with a necklace of teeth of the polar bear for adornment, he resembled those magnificent barbarians of the Northland’s ancient sagas.

His yellow hair had grown long, and fell about his shoulders under his fox-skin cap. The clean-cut lines of his face scarce were shaded by its growth of red-gold beard and moustache. Except for the guns at his belt he might have been a young chief of vikings. His countenance was at once eager, thoughtful, and determined.

Barbaric and strange as he seemed, the girl found in his face that which she might trust. She removed a mitten and extended a small, white hand to him. Falling on one knee in the snow, Polaris kissed it, with the grace of a knight of old doing homage to his lady fair.

The girl flashed him another wondering glance from her long, grey eyes that set all his senses tingling. Side by side they passed over the ridge.

Disaster had overtaken the camp which lay on the other side. Camp it was by courtesy only—a miserable shelter of blankets and robes, propped with pieces of broken sledge, a few utensils, the partially devoured carcass of a small seal, and a tiny fire, kindled from fragments of the sledge. In the snow some distance from the fire lay the stiffened bodies of several sledge dogs, sinister evidence of the hopelessness of the campers’ position.

Polaris turned questioningly to the girl.

“We were lost in the storm,” she said. “We left the ship, meaning to be gone only a few hours, and then were lost in the blinding snow. That was three days ago. How many miles we wandered I do not know. The dogs became crazed and turned upon us. The men shot them.

Oh, there seems so little hope in this terrible land!” She shuddered. “But you—where did you come from?”

“Do not lose heart, lady,” replied Polaris. “Always, in every land, there is hope. There must be. I have lived here all my life. I have come up from the far south. I know but one path—the path to the north, to the world of men. Now I will fetch my sledge up, and then we shall talk and decide. We will find your ship. I, Polaris, promise you that.”

He turned from her to the fire, and cast on its dying embers more fragments of the splintered sledge. His eyes shone. He muttered to himself: “A ship, a ship! Ah, but my father’s God is good to his son!”

He set off across the snow slopes to bring up the pack.

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