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# **Schlock!**

## **WEBZINE**

VOL. 14, ISSUE 15  
17TH MARCH 2019

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—“HELLO. I AM  
SURFACE  
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# SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Schlock! Webzine

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## SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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## EDITORIAL

This week, Kassi is back for another Pipe-World adventure. In Godan's world, things are getting violent. One man finds himself lost in darkness. Another broods over lost love. And a third concocts his own band of doomsday.

Carter Ward's adventures continue. Eric the Viking is all at sea. And Titans meet in the Moon Pool.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

## IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



**AFTER SIX UNSUCCESSFUL TRIES AT FINDING A SOLID, ATTENTIVE PSYCHIATRIST, MEDDY LANDS ON LUCKY NUMBER SEVEN.**

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*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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## KASSI AND THE MECH MERCHANTS by Ste Whitehouse

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

Kassi lay bleeding. Frothy blood bubbled out from under her left breast and the spring cold seeped into her bones.

“Se.”

{Bas.}

“Ti.”

{An.}

She called out spluttering words and thoughts together as best she could. No one answered; at least none she could hear. She looked up and across the arch of Ah'kis. The day was cloudy and the sunline a mere smudge of lighter cloud. A field clockwise stood half ploughed and she wondered if her voice could carry so far.

Her chest felt tight. She tried to cough but felt fluid pressing in on her lungs fighting against the air she desperately tried to gulp in. The metal tunic she wore seemed to constrict her chest adding to her breathing problems. Kassi fingered the punctured hole; felt the warm wetness of her blood oozing out with each beat of her heart. She sensed the world growing dimmer, fraying at the edges of her vision; draining colour from the world. She knew that she would never make her eighteenth birthday now; never make it out of Brackenwood. Never visit the Spire or explore a dungeon. She would die, here less than ten days walk from home.

A cough rumbled up through her throat, wet and gelatinous. She tasted blood on her tongue. Breathing was harder now. More effort was needed to draw in air and the spring air was suddenly much colder. And then there seemed to be no temperature at all. The ground, the air, the wind all faded away.

It was the first real time Kassi had been away from her home village of Shirô. Of course she had spent one whole summer at the Southend's ice fields—(Kassi and the Dig)—but back then she had accompanied her brother and father along with a dozen or more men from the village; and she had travelled with her father to Brackenwood's largest market town where he had brought her a silver locket she still wore to this day. But alone—not counting Sebastian—and armed? This was the first.

She felt the cool spring breeze against her unprotected arms and rolled her shoulders in the badly fitting steel chest piece her mother had insisted she wore. The round targe—a shield of wood and leather—sat uncomfortably across her back and the sword she had received from Mataso the previous summer sat in a newly sown leather and oak holster on her right hip. The needle work was from her mother, the armour her father. Kaze, her brother, had furnished the targe finding the old shield on one of his many trips to the Longsdale market.

Each had voiced trepidation at her focus; or pig-headedness as most called it. A young lady (Ha!) was not built to wander Ah'kis alone. It is unnatural for a girl to dress so, and Ah'kis is not a place for a lady to roam about. And finally; Who will marry YOU!!? That last had been her mother's constant refrain; as though by repetition Kassi would somehow come to see some error in her ways—and then settle down with a nice boy. As she had bested all the local lads, and younger men, and grown deaf to their taunts Kassi wondered, on the odd occasion when there was not much else to do, who exactly this young man would be? After all even the local women mostly shunned her and some of them were considered witches!

Sebastian at her side stood for a second. His once gleaming metal surface now dulled with time, although he said that it gave him a patina of elegance and maturity; but then he could be a sarcastic bastard at times. Absently she stroked the knot of wires and cylinders that constituted his neck. The mental link they had still felt slightly 'odd' even after a year but she could sense his trepidation; and he hers.

"Kassi love if you are going to think about how the village treats you perhaps we should walk a little apart so that the wash of your emotions does not destabilise me." He paused to consider his next words carefully. "Perhaps a hundred or so miles may help?"

She glared at him.

"Doesn't it annoy you when they say things about you?" she asked.

"I am a machine. I do not get annoyed," he replied calmly.

"Oh yeah? What happened when Mr 'I-do-not-get-annoyed' lost at 'Find Queenie' during last year's Summer Fayre?"

"That was a technicality."

"Sure. The technicality being that you couldn't find the card."

"He cheated."

"Of COURSE he cheated! But you were so sure you could find out how."

"His dexterity was finer than I initially thought. Given enough time. . ."

"And coin."



“Given enough time I would have worked out his system,” Sebastian replied firmly giving Kassi the impression that he spoke through gritted teeth.

“You’re just pissed that I had to bail you out.” This had been by showing the youth the error of HIS ways by showing him Kassi’s large broadsword. He had initially laughed at the thought of a woman swordsmith but when she had cut the front of his shirt—thus exposing partially HOW he succeeded at Find Queenie so well what with there been a dozen hiding in his shirt front alone—his trousers and finally, just for the hell of it, cut two cards into quarters as they fluttered to the ground he had decided upon reflection to let Sebastian off his debt.

“And you are just bringing this up in the hope that I will forget your misgivings.”

Kassi smiled brushing a fringe of black hair away from her eyes. “Well you still owe me twenty bronze coin I reckon.”

“I shall pawn a leg at the first market we come to,” Sebastian said with a none-too-subtle hint of pathos. Kassi was unsure whether he meant it or not. Still the opportunity was too good to miss.

“Are you sure you’d get twenty bronze? They might need a bit more of you, y’know. I mean I’d pay twenty obviously but.” She smiled sweetly at the mechanoid who raised a middle arm and split it into two distinct appendages.

Sebastian huffed and was about to speak when he stopped.

Without a pause Kassi spoke telepathically. {I heard it too.} She pulled her sword out ready.

Around the bend of the dirt path came a ragtag caravan pulled along by an old grey mare and followed by two men attired in what initially looked to be suits of armour. Yet each man stood almost nine feet in height and carried long wands—or short staff—that ended in the stock and trigger more commonly found on crossbows. Kassi heard a whirl of gears as each walked taking a careful step at a time. A whiff of burnt oil was suspended on the wind.

The elderly man at the reins of the gaudy caravan pulled up alongside them and greeted them wordlessly. His companion, a younger lad with pale almost porcelain skin, jumped down and ran over to them yelling in a dialect Kassi did not recognise.

{He says that ‘it is him’} Sebastian said wordlessly.

{He means you?} Kassi asked in concern.

{To be honest luv you’re not exactly dressed for a dance now are you? He could well mean you.}

Kassi just harrumphed silently.

“Please forgive my younger brother.” An older man appeared from the caravan and climbed down. He was almost as pale as the lad, with an arm encased partially in armour of some sorts. “He tends to speak in our own tongue when excited.” He waved the lad away. “And forgive my manners. We are Mech Merchants and we did hear of this magnificent creation from traders northwards a few weeks back.” He indicated Sebastian. “We were told that you lived in a village further south, close to the ice and snow but by chance we have come upon you here.”

Neither Kassi nor Sebastian liked the word chance.

“Please I am Johann and this is my father Georg.” He indicated the old man. “And that is my brother Sveen.”

“And the. . .” Kassi tried to think of a word to describe the heavily armoured men.

“Downne and Treeth. Fellow merchants. We not only deal in mechanics but we learn from them and use them.” He raised his armoured arm and Kassi noticed thin threads of circuitry pulsing deep within the hard ceramic coat. At his touch a small image of Sebastian flickered in the air. The man called Johann appeared impressed. “You are obviously used to such magic. Many times we make more money from such shows than from any trade.” He smiled but Kassi still felt ill at ease.

“I am Kassi and this is. . .” She felt a sudden pang of guilt at letting slip that Sebastian was named but before she could continue the mechanoid filled in the gap.

“Sebastian. I am called Sebastian.”

There was a gasp from the younger man and Kassi noticed the two heavily armoured ‘merchants’ step forward. She swung her blade forward planting its tip visibly in the soil before her and waited.

“Then it is true,” Johann replied apparently ignoring Kassi’s discomfort. “You have speech.”

“All Surface Engineering Bots have vocal capacity,” Sebastian said mildly.

Johann nodded then continued. “But not such eloquence.” He played his fingers across the device on his arm—Kassi had decided that it was not armour but some form of machine—and there came a sound from the back of the caravan. Sebastian’s double carefully made its way towards them bright blue lenses gleaming.

“Hello. I am Surface Engineering Bot H7S2.”

It felt to Kassi that the world was fading. Her body felt lighter, as though there were less of it. Instead of thinking about her legs or her arms she had time to consider her breaths. Drawing air in. Thick viscous treacly, the air fought against her. A petulant child not wanting to join in. Even

when she at last managed to inhale it then felt oddly thin and insipid despite its earlier viscosity. It was as though it had been altered in passage from the air around her to her lungs. Some bizarre alchemy that now worked within her throat. To make matters worse there was never enough to fill her lungs and thus feed her body.

She breathed out and found even that caused her pain. Perhaps it would be best just to stop. To not make the effort. The universe after all now solely consisted of her lungs and her mind. She felt as though she no longer possessed a body. But then where did this bloody pain come from? If not some remnant of a life then from where? She coughed and tasted blood again. Was that normal? She could no longer think properly.

Kassi recalled tales of people who returned from the dead. Many had spoken of a tunnel of light and she had often suspected that was just their eyes recalling Ah'kis and the sunline far above and yet central to the pipe world. For herself there was no light but also no darkness. No warmth and yet no cold. She barely felt the arms that abruptly held her and tried desperately to save her fading spark of life.

The bot came to a stop besides Johann.

“We found this mechanoid a year back but have not been able to communicate with it other than its name,” Johann said.

As if on cue the bot said. “Hello. I am Surface Engineering Bot H7S2.” As drily as before. Kassi found it odd that the mechanoid sounded so much like Sebastian but that there were also subtle differences. The machine before them lacked certain things that made Sebastian who he was.

“He does not tell us anything other than this one thing. Although to be fair he is useful for other things. So when we heard of a young girl whose companion was similar to this and yet it behaved independently from her and could even communicate beyond its name, we travelled south to see such a thing.”

“So you came all this way to see us. How sweet.” Johann missed the sarcasm in Kassi's voice.

“We are merchants. There is no one place we call home. Besides we also heard that the ice was driving dwarfs to the surface and there are rumours of tek beyond any dreamed.” A faraway look came into the man's eyes at the thought of wealth—and the chance to play with new toys.

“Sebastian is not for sale.” she replied bluntly.

“We will pay a good price for it,” Johann said.

“HE is not for sale. You would not sell another man would you?”

The man waved a hand imperiously. “It is said that there are slavers who cross the Deadlands

who do just that. You would be surprised at what people will sell when needs must.” Johann smiled coolly. “Still I can see that you do indeed view it as your companion and so are greatly attached to it. We will trouble you no further.” He bowed theatrically and turned from both her and Sebastian.

{That went TOO well.} Kassi ‘said’ to Sebastian. {Why travel so far only to give up almost immediately?}

{I agree but cannot see what he means to do. See even the men in their Mechsuits are powering down. . . Kassi!}

As suddenly as Sebastian was aware what was happening it occurred. One second he, and his ‘brother’, were standing the next Kassi felt a wash of silence and the two mechanoids collapsed harmlessly to the ground.

Johann spun around a grim smile playing on his thin lips. Even as Kassi raised her sword he spoke. “A pulse of magnetism and electricity. It fells all machines bar those switched off.”

She roared and ran at him unaware that one of the men in the Mechsuits had raised his long wand. There was a blunt snap that echoed faintly in Kassi’s ears and an instantaneous push that felled her. She rolled over from her back and began to stand. Abruptly pain filled the left side of her chest. Blunt and burning as though a fire had been lit in her lungs. She dropped her sword, her arm feeling suddenly useless, and staggered forward two steps before the sheer effort overcame her and she fell to the ground. She gasped for air, tasting blood as it bubbled out of her mouth. The Mech Merchants bundled the inert bots onto their caravan and continued on their way ignoring the dying girl.

Kassi woke; or at least became aware that she no longer slept. She recalled been struck by the wand from afar and little else. She placed this new information, that wands did not need electricity to actually work, to one side. Pain. She remembered pain; and difficulty in breathing. She felt warm and ever so slightly numb. A pleasantry caused either by alcohol, drugs or death. At present she could not say which; nor if one was more acceptable than any other. She was resting on a bed, a soft mattress beneath her, and muted sounds of people filtered to where she lay.

She shifted and realised three things. There was a thick blanket covering her—did they NEED blankets in Valhalla?—her arm was strapped to something and her left breast hurt. On balance she considered that she may be alive but decided to refrain from making too rash a judgement until she had further information. After all she had been downed by magic and perhaps she needed magic to heal her before the Builders took her back? She opened her eyes and saw a hazy whiteness. Possibly a tent?

A foul smell she had not noticed before drifted in on a breeze. That was definitely cabbage stew and Kassi knew with certainty that no Valhalla would ever serve such a disgusting beverage. It

was a favourite of her mother's, particularly when she was ill, so much so that for a second Kassi wondered if she were actually still in Shirô her village. No; she recalled Sebastian and. . . . At the thought of her friend she sat up. Which proved to be enlightening and a mistake. She now had proof that she was alive by the wrenching pain that dragged across her chest and down her left side. She flopped down again.

"AH. You awaken. Good," a cool feminine voice said.

Kassi warily opened one eye. A slim woman her blonde hair curled up into a bun sat beside the bed. She looked to be ageless; both young and old together and Kassi realised that it was because her deep brown eyes held a sense of age and wisdom Kassi had not seen in many but the elders at Shirô. She looked at the warrior quizzically.

"It was fortunate that the Founders asked us to stay in this area or else you may well have died." The woman smiled showing even white teeth and a warmth Kassi seldom saw. It was surprising how unwelcoming people could be to a young woman armed with a broadsword and sarcastic wit. "Come allow me to detach you from the IV. The tube attached to your arm."

Kassi looked down to see a p'las-tik tube taped to her right arm. The woman's long fingers carefully unwound the bandage.

"We use this to give you fluids and alchemicals but now that you're awake we can give you an extract of willow bark for the pain."

"The fluids kept me 'hydrated'," Kassi said softly.

The woman looked at her and smiled. "Yes. But how could you know? The Founders taught us these techniques."

"I have no idea who these Founders are but my companion is. . . . knowledgeable." Kassi refrained from saying smart-arse. She considered for a second and added. "Perhaps he was also trained by these Founders?"

The woman looked puzzled. "I would doubt that. We were brought together less than a decade ago and taught the arts of healing. Nothing more. We are but a handful of women and we travel together. Press here. I am Fyonne. Watch-Mother under the Founders."

"Kassi. Lost waif from Shirô." Kassi was used to collections of words not making sense—she had after all been friends with Sebastian for almost ten years—and besides she had more pressing matters than Founders and Watch-Mothers.

The woman removed a vicious looking needle from Kassi's arm and placed a wad of cloth over the small wound. Close to Kassi could tell that the woman was little older than her but moved with a grace that belied her age. Those deep brown eyes watched her with open amusement.

Kassi sat up and swung her legs over the side of the low bed. A shaft of pain wrenched through

her left side and she felt both warm and faint; light-headedness washing over her.

“Careful,” the woman said in a voice that bordered on a reprimand.

Cautiously breathing in cool air Kassi asked. “How long have I been here?”

“Over two days.”

“Shit!” Kassi felt a wave of helplessness come over her. “My friend. They must have taken him.” She recalled how Sebastian had collapsed, lifeless alongside the second mechanoid. Was he even alive? Had these merchants killed him there and then? She refused to give up hope; but two days? They could be leagues away by now. She tried to contact him telepathically but with no luck.

“They?” The woman asked.

“Some merchants. They showed an inordinate interest in Sebastian; my friend.”

“Did they by chance travel by a decorative caravan?”

Kassi looked up in surprise. “Yes!” She replied in between a bout of sickness.

“Then you are in luck. We saw such a vehicle travelling away from the sound of the wand. Fortunately we were close at hand or else you would be dead; bled out upon the road side.” Fyonne noted the look of exasperation on Kassi’s face and hurried on. “They have travelled only to Bennërian’s Mount. A short distance from here. There they have remained camped these past three nights.”

“Then I have a chance.” If Sebastian lives; she thought morosely.

“A chance to do what? You’re injured badly and need to rest.” The woman tried to force Kassi onto her back again but the young girl refused. She stood, unsteadily, and tried to sound stronger than she felt—which to be honest was fairly easy; she felt about as strong as a new born kitten.

“I need to find my friend before. . .” her voice trailed into silence.

Fyonne’s brown eyes scrunched up quizzically. “We have seen the lights of magic o’er the mount these past nights and from what we saw of the men they make their living by machines; mechs as they call them. Why would they be interested in your friend?”

“Sebastian’s a machine.”

“Oh.” The woman weighed up the situation in a second and then continued with a sigh. “Well I suppose there is nothing I can do to prevent you from taking this action. Here; this is dried powder grown from mould—do not look like that. The Founders taught us how to extract a potion that will prevent later infection in the wound.” She handed Kassi a small pouch. “Now I



do insist that you wait a day- these merchants are in no hurry to leave and you need to regain some of your strength at the least. It would do you no good to collapse before you even reach these people. We had to cut into you to retrieve the bullet and also to drain fluid from your lungs. There will be much scarring I'm afraid."

She helped Kassi across the small tent and to a chair. "I'll retrieve your clothing, we scrubbed the metal as clean as we could of blood but the hole remains, and your weapons are here. Watch-Sister Margrett has a stew on that will put flesh back onto you." Kassi silently prayed to The Builders that it was not cabbage.

The Watch-Mother stood and looked reproachfully down at the young girl. "These merchants have strong wards to protect them, fields of energy that shines at night and magic fields to detect movement, but they camp over the entrance to a dwarf's dungeon that sits close to the surface." She smiled warmly. "I was born close to these woods and know the area well. Now let us get you as ready as we can."

A day later, after Kassi had left with instructions on how to find the long corridors that crawled under the land like a spider's web, Fyonne sat back and considered the Founders words. The prophecy that they would come to the aid of a woman and a machine. That they were to do ALL in their powers to keep the woman alive. The red furred masters had been correct and the woman felt blessed to have been the first Watch-Mother to help the girl. Still she felt concern for the mission ahead, if this was the girl and she continued to behave as she did the Watch Mothers would be quite busy for the foreseeable future.

It was the fourth night that Sebastian had been in captivity. Johann as always came over and spoke with him. Berating him for not answering their questions during the day and dangling offers of respite. In return all he need do was speak with them, enlighten them. All five men wore artefacts; technologies and body armour from at least seven different mechanoids as far as Sebastian could see. The young brother, Sveen, had a top constructed from the skin of a surface bot just like Sebastian.

His obstinacy in fact came not from fear nor intransigency but from a deep well of grief. When he had rebooted after the EMP attack he had found himself shackled in polysteel cuffs with molecular bonding—on an atomic level the bonds 'slipped' between shackle and wearer making it impossible to take them off. Johann had then happily informed him of Kassi's death. Sebastian had obviously reached out telepathically but their bond was strongest when they were close, a mile or two at most so either she was too far away or else Johann had told the truth. He kept telling himself that Kassi was miles away but the merchant was so sure in his telling of the girl's death that Sebastian slipped inevitably into a black depression. Besides the mechanoid recognised the area as close to where he had been taken.

He barely acknowledged the men's presence as he tried to come to terms with his friend's death. The jolts of currant they ran through his body only momentarily brought him out of his stupor; and then into painful and violent sensations which made it hard for the mechanoid to think let

alone speak. They disrupted neural pathways and tried to reboot him a dozen times; each time hoping to break his spirit. Little did they realise that it was already broken; fragmented into shards of ice that cut deep into his soul.

Sebastian had long ago given up on the philosophical musings about life and consciousness. Artificial or not, he felt and that had been enough. Except that now those feelings tore him apart, weighing down upon him a burden he was unable to carry. He looked up into Johann's eyes. A sheen of madness glazed them, his pupils tiny pin-pricks of night amidst a sea of pale blue. The man's spittle jumped as he spoke eloquently with passion. Sebastian had once been burdened with the knowledge of his friend's death. But now, this past hour, the bot began to wait patiently.

As Johann tried to eke the knowledge he desperately desired from the machine a silent alarm went off. He stopped berating the thing tied up before him and ran his fingers across the unit that encased his arm.

"Downne? I have a reading coming towards camp. North and counter-clockwise ten degrees."

There was a flare of static then a reply.

"I have contact. One human. Alone."

"Treeth here. I'm closing in also."

Johann considered briefly before replying. "Negative. Resume patrol. This may be a diversion. Downne?"

"I have her sir. Lone female. Completely unarmed."

Female? "Bring her in. Treeth, extend patrol out a dozen yards or so." He extended the sensors that they had set up just in case. Smaller creatures may get through but the sensors would still detect anything man-sized. Mech merchants they were called, he mused, but in truth they manipulated magic as well as any Sigh or Jinn.

The familiar wheeze of gears and hydraulics grew from his left and Downne appeared, towering over a slight figure giving her a child-like appearance despite been over six feet tall. As they came into the bright lights set up around the camp Johann was surprised to see that it was the girl from five days ago. The girl he thought dead. He heard Sveen, his younger brother, swear and their father shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He never noticed how still Sebastian waited. She wore the same armour and carried herself with the same swagger. He noted the hole, a patch of steel badly riveted onto the chest plate, and there was a slight hesitation in her demeanour but otherwise this was the same girl they had shot dead.

"Wait!" Johann held up his hand keeping her at a distance. Downne had his hand upon the large rifle he had used on the girl. She waited a smile playing across her lips. Was she paler than

before? Johann did not believe in ghosts but then the machines appeared able to do just about anything. Could one have brought her back?

Johann ran a scanner over her. At least she registered as physically there and there was no metal—other than her armour and no weapons. He indicated for Downne to continue his patrol and stepped back to the campfire looking at her with suspicion.

“Sit?” He barked, feeling less confident than he sounded.

She sat awkwardly but with that same damnable smile on her face. It worried him immensely. The machine said nothing. Johann did not want to appear weak so ignored the girl’s miraculous reappearance and instead asked her. “Why are you here?”

“I want to know what you want with Seba. . . the surface bot.”

Johann’s eyes flickered from machine to girl and back trying to think. Finally he replied. “He thinks differently from other machines. They have set routines and yet he can converse. If we can discover why this is so we can alter other machines. Use them like the Sighs do.”

Kassi sat back her smile broadening. Johann felt as though she were privy to a conversation he could not hear.

“Is that all? Well now I can tell you that. But first; I must find the fulcrum of storytelling.” She stood with effort and glanced about. Johann was about to tell the girl to sit when she walked away from the machine and to a place underneath one of the bright magical lamps they used to push back the night. “Here will do,” she said smiling before sitting and starting her tale. It appeared such a trivial thing that Johann allowed her to stay.

Once sitting comfortably she continued. “Y’see many, many years ago when the Builders had finished Ah’kis they left a swarm of machines ‘outside’ to maintain our world.” Johann nodded silently. He had heard similar tales before of an ‘outside’ to the world. None had ever explained HOW or WHY such a thing could exist but the stories persisted nevertheless.

“Now although the Builders were great gods in the form of men and Jinn I am led to believe that even they had difficulty in creating the fine pathways etched into the spongium that holds the minds of these. . . machines. In other words even they could not create a machine that lived and thought such silly things as Finding Queenie.” She smiled at the mechanoid besides Johann as if sharing some private joke. “Despite this limitation the surface engineering bots could still handle many unusual occurrences by working out their own solutions. They were, they are, sentient; but only in the sense that a bird or a bee is sentient. There are limits.”

“Now after The Quake shook our world thousands of years ago A5T1 somehow became trapped outside permanently; unable to return to shelter from the ‘universe’ beyond.” She waved a hand dramatically and said the word in a soft ominous voice. “This ‘outside’ world has many dangers one of which is the constant bombardment from minute particles of energy. A magic even stranger than the electricity we see around us this night.” She indicated the lamp above her.

Johann squinted at her.

“It was these small collections of electrons and neutrons which over the millennia slowly carved deeper and more complex pathways within the mechanoids brain expanding his thought processes. His is a truly unique brain as all of his ‘brothers’ have remained shielded during the millennial journey our world has travelled.”

Johann observed that she had closed her eyes as though she visualised the events unfold in her mind. Her next words were indistinct and almost whispered. He leant forward instinctively to hear what else she had to say. Above the arc lamps flickered and the low rumbling of their generator changed pitch, spluttering in the darkness. A soft smile played across her lips. Johann felt vaguely concerned but ignored the feeling straining as he was to listen to the girl.

“Gotcha!”

The lights blinked off.

In the silence left by the absent generator metal ticked softly in the blackness of the night. Above the moonline glowed faintly as Johann’s eyes began to adjust to the sudden darkness. Kassi slipped the sharp wooden knife out from her right sleeve stepped forward and calmly slit the man’s throat. His eyes grew wide, their whites almost saucer like and ghostly in the shroud of night, as he tried to stem the pulses of blood from the wound. His mouth moved wordlessly as vocal cords refused to respond.

She stood her own eyes accustomed to the dark. The old man half stumbled from his chair whilst the younger brother slid to the ground and blindly ran. She tossed the knife inelegantly—this was after all her less dominant hand. It found the younger man’s side and he cried out in pain and surprise before falling to the ground. Shouts arose from the remaining three men.

{ Well Kassi luv. That went on for an inordinately long time. I thought you would never finish. By the way the two armoured Mechs will be here in seconds. If you release me I can help. }

{ Don’t worry. I’ve got this. } She ‘said’ telepathically before darting around the base of the lamp. { And besides I had no idea how long their engine would take to run out of oil after I had cut the lines earlier. } She dug quickly beneath a shallow pit finding her sword, shield and back pack where she had left them. The Watch-Mother Fyonne was correct in that tunnels ran underneath the Mech merchants enclosed camp and she had used one prior to entering the camp to by-pass their electronic fence and place her weapons in readiness. She had then informed Sebastian of her plan.

There were shouts from either side of the camp and the heavy sounds of machinery clanking into action followed by arcs of blue/white light.

{ Kassi they are coming. I would suggest you release me. }

{ Sebastian sometimes you just have to have a little faith. Okay? }

{I have great faith in your abilities my dear but even at full fitness you would be hard pressed to defeat both of these monsters. They have created an amalgam of man and machine capable of great destruction despite their limited firepower.} She could sense the worry in his mind.

Kassi waited a second or five. Possibly eight. The mechs clumsily scoured the camp.

Then came the Whoomph of an explosion and the scream of a man. One of the mechs fell down in flames.

{You placed a charge upon his armour earlier.} Sebastian said, finally understanding his companions desire to wait.

{See? Now do you trust me?}

{I would be happier if the old man was not waving a very large cattle prod in my face.}

Kassi gave a 'loud' theatrical sigh and jogged over to Sebastian's side. The old father turned to face her still waving the prod in the machines general direction.

She smiled—for Sebastian's benefit—and asked the machine. {You keep on telling me you have no pain receptors. Why the panic?}

{First. I am not panicking. Secondly I now realise that the sensation is rather uncomfortable thus I really would wish not to go through it again.}

The old man looked at them both in confusion aware that somehow they were communicating.

She sighed loudly again and dropped her shield swinging her crossbow from her back and in one fluid movement fired a shot. Before her shield had fully hit the ground the old man was dead at Sebastian's feet.

"Not bad for your right hand," Sebastian muttered grudgingly.

{To be fair even YOU couldn't miss at that distance.} She answered.

Kassi picked up her sword and shield and turned towards the remaining mech as he lumbered awkwardly into the camp. Lights swung too and fro as he swept the camp for her, catching the edges of metal causing them to glint like rain during the sunshine.

Kassi put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. Downne turned and, upon spotting her, ran picking up speed. Nine feet tall and nearly two tons in weight the behemoth raced at her. To his surprise Kassi ran towards him and before he could get off a shot from his wand she had rolled between his legs and neatly cut into the thin hydraulics that ran up the inside of his legs. (Thanks to Sebastian she knew all their weak spots—even in his despair he had watched and observed the man/machines.)

He turned but she was already scrambling along his back cutting into wiring and tubes of compressed fluids with abandon. It felt strange as wire pulling was usually Sebastian's forte. She hauled herself up, with effort as both she and the man/machine were coated in oil, and kicked the wand/gun from the man's oversized hands encased in leather and metal. A slip of her dagger under the breast plate and the motor that powered his suit died. He tried to grab her but his movements were slowing as vital hydraulic liquid ran from cut tubes. For a second she stood before him smiling. He raised an arm meaning to swat at her but it juddered upwards and froze; he no longer had the strength to move the heavy armour.

Kassi ducked under his uplifted arm and thrust her dagger into his side.

"That's for shooting me, y'bastard," she whispered to him before stepping back. It would take a while but the man would possibly bleed to death. She could live with that.

The young girl turned her attentions finally to her companion. One twist of the polysteel cuffs and the electrons shifted back into their normal pattern freeing Sebastian. Kassi grabbed a few of the better, more expensive, items for sale at the next town and slowly they walked away from the camp. The young lad moaned in pain but made no move to stop her. Kassi partially felt sorry for the boy. Having a father AND a brother who were both idiotic couldn't have been easy. Still he was old enough to understand and make his own choices, bad as they had been.

"I must say I am surprised Kassi," Sebastian said as they left.

"And why is that?" she replied through a mouthful of chicken leg rescued from the pot.

"I would have thought that killing the last man, especially since he had shot you, would have. . ."

There was a second subdued explosion and the sound of fire burning. From the camp a man's screams began to rise. They looked back. A line of flame ran from the edge of the camp before it spread in a circle around it enclosing the camp; then it ran towards the immobilised mech and the man within. A cylinder of petrol exploded violently and pieces of metal showered down barely missing them. The hydraulic oils began to burn brightly, blues and greens.

"Ahhh," said Sebastian in understanding.

"A second timed explosive," Kassi replied as a way of explanation.

"For a moment there I thought you were getting less bloodthirsty," the mechanoid said sadly.

"Sorry."

He made a gesture with an arm indicating a shrug. "Never mind. I should have realised."

There were handfuls of explosions erupting all over the camp now. Whatever remained of the merchant's wagon would be useless by dawn.



“Come. We need to find these Watch-Mothers and have your wounds seen to.”

“I’m fine,” she protested. And continued to do so all the way back to the women healers.

THE END

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## GODAN: QUEEN OF THE THIRD COAST by Garret Scheulke

### Part Two

“Don’t you already have enough werewolf slaves?” Elena asked.

Dia sat down on the futon. “He just killed them all—and I need a replacement. He’s more powerful than an entire army of those rejects!”

“I don’t think Lord Ruthven would approve of your approach,” Silvia said.

“The good times are about to start. I’ll talk to you all soon.”

Dia ended the conversation just as Silvia was about to reply. My scent didn’t entice him, she thought, biting her lip in anticipation as she watched the security cam, so I guess I’ll have to take this farther.

“Just because I wear a mask doesn’t mean I’m a robber,” Godan said, as the bouncer loomed over him. “Do you see a crowbar or knapsack on me?”

“I’m still not letting you in, dweeb” the bouncer said.

“We got off to a rocky start. Let me summarize: one of your dancer’s plans on making your boss take a dirt nap. I’m here to stop her.”

“What dancer?”

Godan snapped his fingers repeatedly. “Oh! It’s Sandra! Dancer dressed up like a wolf girl.”

“What?” The bouncer shook his head. “Bullshit!”

“Your girl’s a monster, sorry to inform you of that.”

“Listen, man, I’ve been friends with Sandra—”

A window above them shattered. A gun landed on the pavement. Screams from the dancers and patrons emitted from inside the club.

“She’s tearing shit up now!” Godan said. The bouncer entered the club, pushing people to the side as they tried to escape. Godan followed, doing the same thing.

The dancers were peeking out behind the stage curtain. A group of men surrounded one of the co-owners body guards, who was clutching the stump where his right hand used to be.

“Where’s Mr. Stegman?” the bouncer yelled. One of the men pointed towards the private booth area.

Godan and the bouncer entered the area to find Sandra being held back by three bouncers. Stegman, whose arms were torn up, stood trembling next to his other body guard, who Sandra gutted.

“SANDRA, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” the bouncer yelled.

“You guys can’t handle her,” Godan patted the bouncer’s shoulder. “Get your boss, and everyone else, out of the building. Leave her to me!”

Sandra used her tail to hit the bouncer who had her in a choke hold in the crotch, releasing her. She spun around and slashed him across the face.

Godan tackled Sandra. “GET OUT!”

Stegman and the bouncers ran out of the club. Sandra grunted and growled as she tried to free herself.

“Jeez, what did Dia do to you?” Godan said. He punched her in the face. Sandra dodged the second punch, and bit down on Godan’s wrist.

“SHIT!” Godan yelled as he tore his arm away. Sandra sprung up and head butted him. He tumbled off her.

She pounced on Godan. He grabbed her by the mouth before she could bite down on his throat. Godan tossed her aside, got up, and rammed her against the partition, revealing the main floor to be vacant. Godan unleashed a fury of punches, and kicked her in the stomach, sending her flying across the room.

She’s way stronger than Dia’s other freaks, Godan thought as he lifted up an armchair over his head. Sandra suddenly appeared in front of him, and slashed at his chest and face. Godan screamed and released the chair, smashing it on his head.

She’s faster too, Godan thought as he crossed his arms to cover himself from Sandra’s slashes. She kicked him in the stomach, making him fall to his knees

Sandra ran off and tried to open the locked door. Godan watched her as she looked around and, spotting an open window, climbed up the wall, tore off the screen, and crawled out.

“Damn!” Godan muttered, struggling to his feet. “She’ll probably go after the crowd.”

Godan jumped onto the wall and climbed through the same window. He fell to the ground. The crowd, whose attention had been elsewhere, immediately looked over towards Godan, many recording with their cell phones.

“YO!” Godan yelled, getting up. “Which way did that werewolf chick go? Anyone?”

Everyone pointed at the nearby field that they were previously looking towards.

“Thanks much!” Godan saluted them and ran off.

Even before his eyes could fully adjust to the darkness, Godan saw a tree up ahead. He growled, and sped up. A dark figure appeared from behind the tree—it let out a roar and charged towards him.

“Oh, good! You’re not gonna make me chase you!” Godan jumped over Sandra, getting into a battle stance when he landed. “I’m tired enough as it is!”

Sandra pounced at him. Godan grabbed her by the arm and slammed her into the ground. She began flailing. Godan flung her against the tree. Sandra immediately recovered and bolted towards him.

“Goddamn!” Godan said, dodging Sandra claws and putting her into a headlock. “Where’d you learn how to fight?”

“They’re over here!” someone in the distance yelled. Flashlight beams broke through the darkness, illuminating Godan and Sandra. “Unload on them!”

Sandra head butted Godan in teeth. “Hey wait!” Godan yelled at Sandra between his fingers as she ran towards the lights.

The shooting began. Sandra stopped in place—her body convulsing as the bullets riddled her. A loud boom was followed by a huge explosion of blood from Sandra’s body. She collapsed.

Godan spit the blood out of his mouth. He saw figures approaching, and assumed the worst.

Just who I need to deal with, he thought, fucking cops.

The bouncer he argued with earlier appeared, holding a shotgun. He pointed it at Sandra’s head and blew it to pieces.

“I’m not one to complain about ‘overkill’,” Godan said, spitting more blood out of his mouth. “But yeah, good ‘overkill’ there.”

Stegman, the club co-owner, appeared, flanked by the other bouncers and bodyguards.

“Hey, co-owner!” Godan wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “You might wanna look into your dealings with Dia...”

Stegman took a pistol out of his jacket and aimed it at him. The others did the same. The bouncer from earlier reloaded his shotgun.

Godan looked at the bouncer. “Oh, come on! You seriously can’t stand there and tell me that she’s still a good person after you blew her fucking head off?”

Godan back flipped into the darkness as they began shooting. He landed, and the lights covered him as he took off towards the road. Bullets entered into his back and shoulders as the flashlight beams faded. He tried to accelerate. A bullet entered his leg, making him stumble and roll. He got up and continued running. He hopped over the fence and tumbled onto the highway.

He reached down his leg and touched the bullet wound. He cringed, felt the other side of his leg, and cringed again. He sighed, relieved that the bullet just went through his thigh.

Light bathed the entire road. Godan stood up, ready to fight. A semi-truck blew its horn, brakes squealing. Godan leapt forward. The front of the semi smashed into his legs, sending him spinning into the nearby ditch. Breathing heavily, he got up and powered through the pain, sliding through the rails of the fence, and ran into the next field.

Godan kept his eyes closed. He heard someone, who he presumed was the truck driver, yelling in the distance. He tried to ignore the pain and kept going. His foot hit a rock, and he fell to the ground.

He turned his head sideways. Before his eyes closed, he saw the outline, and heard the grunt, of a buffalo.

Godan woke up. He looked up and saw a moving, starry sky. Okay, I’m being dragged, he thought. His body went over a rock. He used the moment to pretend that his head naturally turned over to the side. Sandra’s headless corpse was being dragged alongside him. The person dragging him stopped. Godan closed his eyes and pretended he was still passed out.

“He just had to run off into the buffalo field,” he heard the person who was dragging them say, letting go of their legs. “God, I hate the smell here.”

Godan took the time to assess his wounds. The bullet wounds won’t be a problem, he thought, but my legs are still royally fucked. Godan clenched his fists. Never tried healing in this type of situation before.

“Well, this is another thing I can add when I bitch Varney out later:” The figure took Godan and Sandra by their legs and began dragging them again, “not getting me powerful, dedicated henchmen so I wouldn’t have to do this shit.”

Varney, Godan thought. He had healed his legs to the point that they were mildly numb. Is that Dia?

The figure dragged them over some gravel. One of the rocks jabbed Godan in the back of the neck. He grunted. The figure stopped dragging them.

Shit, Godan thought.

“Hey, are you alive?” the figure said. They lightly scraped Godan’s cheek with their claw. “Come on, cutie, you can stop faking.”

Godan rolled to the side, tripping the figure. He got onto one knee, claws at the ready.

“Thanks, asshole,” Dia said, dusting herself off as she got up, “I didn’t avoid all that blood just to get dirt all over me.”

Godan sprung at her. His legs gave out, and he face planted into the ground.

“Will you calm down?” Dia said, walking up to Godan, hands on her hips. “It’s not like I can do any worse than what they did to you.”

Godan growled, and sprung up again at her. Dia stepped the side, and allowed Godan to hit the ground. He tried to get up again, but she got on top of his back.

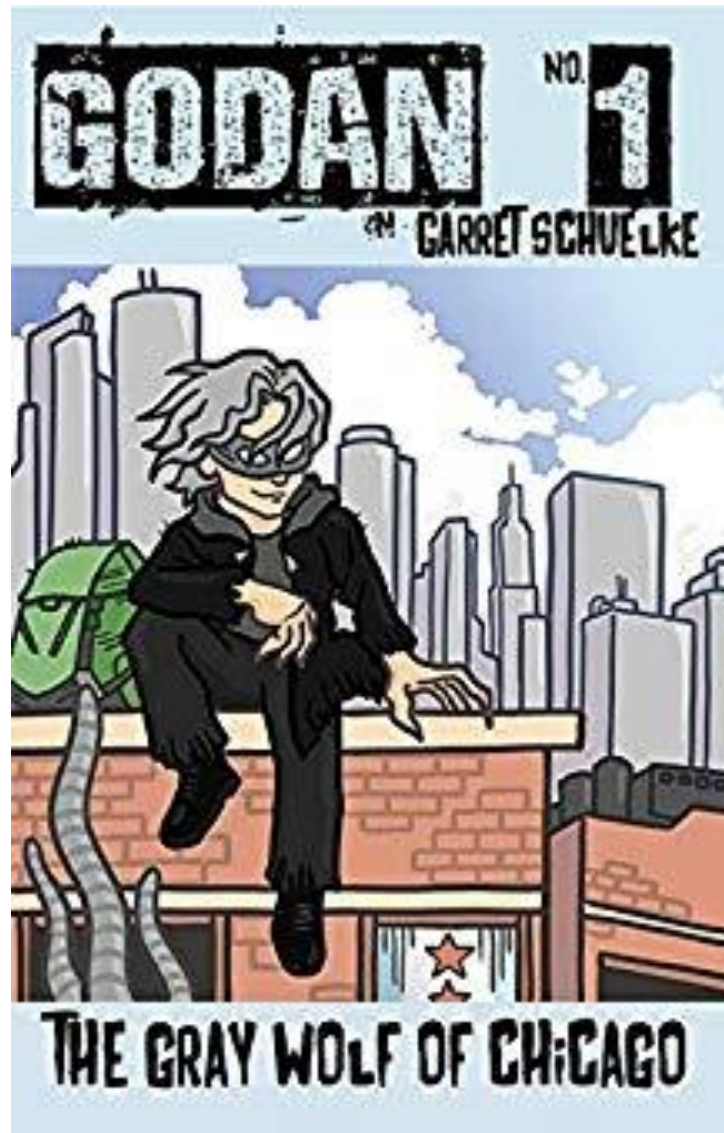
“Looks like I’ll have the chance to try this out,” Dia said, putting her hand underneath Godan’s chin and lifting his head up. Godan struggled as Dia sunk her fangs into Godan’s neck.

He screamed as colours flashed before his eyes. Godan’s head felt like it was on fire. He tried to buck her off him, but his body gave out.

One last push, Dia thought as she sunk her fangs deeper into Godan’s flesh. The colours disappeared. Godan took a deep breath. One final flash of intense pain went through his head, and he passed out.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK





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## AMONG OUR KIND by Honza Votjisek

When he woke up, he could not see anything. He just had an intense feeling. Of something tight, unwelcoming. Like being in a crush. Almost of a palpable and heavy darkness, silence. A strange pressure on his chest. Before he got his bearings and thoroughly recalled the memories of the recent moments, he heard a voice.

A soldier from another platoon?

“Hey?” he called.

“I can hear,” replied the voice. “But I can’t see anything.”

“It must have been a mighty blow,” he said. “Pretty close and pretty strong.” After a short while he added: “Do you remember anything?”

“Just a shrill, piercing sound, then a deafening noise, and pain.”

“Where have they put us?” he asked. “Even if I can’t see anything, I don’t feel comfortable. Rather like I’m squeezed in a tin can.”

“Some kind of a provisional infirmary, maybe,” said another voice from somewhere far away. It was hardly audible. “A little way beyond the front. They must have found a still standing structure, and they have placed us there before they come for us.”

“Or before we die...” added another voice, uncertainly.

“Maybe they thought that since we can’t see anything after the blow, we would not care,” concluded the voice self-confidently by now. “But it must have been a wham, I feel like I have a tank standing on me. And apart from you I can’t hear anything. Perhaps my ears have not recovered yet.”

“The important thing is that we are among our kind,” said a voice from the left.

After he said it, however, they did not even have time to agree as there was a desperate shout. In a language they did not understand. In the language of their enemy.

“It can’t be!” cried an outraged voice.

“Enemy,” added another. “They won’t have us together with them in one place!”

“They can’t have it like this!”

The voice spoke again. Even though they did not understand it, they sensed that it asked something. And it was frightened.

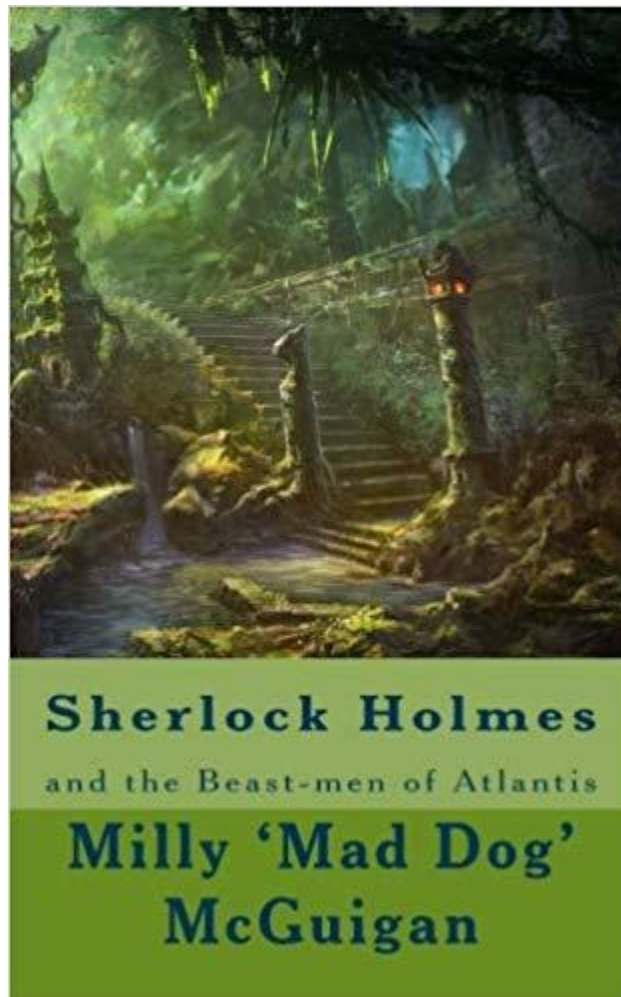
“Oh no,” he said resolutely. “I am leaving this place. I have to get out of here!”

“Sure, as you wish...” said a new voice from the right. It astonished by its calm. “If you can dig through several metres of soil and dozens of bodies lying above you...”

THE END

*Honza Vojtíšek (\*1978)*

*Czech horror writer. Publisher of the electronic horror magazine Howard. He published three collections of short stories, his work can be found in more than ten anthologies in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. He edits horror anthologies, writes comic scripts. Organizes the HorrorCon. Three of his short stories were adapted for film.*



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## A SINGLE POINT OF LIGHT by Joseph J Patchen

I love the way a candle burns. I marvel at the simple complexity. The flame is so small and compact and the process of its twisting destruction is so smooth and so steady. The potential and actual deconstruction to its host, the candle, is so complete; so final.

Fire is deliberate and ordered in its operation yet so beautifully hypnotic in its performance.

Bright and alluring is the flickering transformation of matter, tickling as it devours the wick and wax below. The melt is slow all the while the flame dances, as the wax quickly skips and trickles down the cooler sides of the candle only to freeze again at rest.

I love the way a candle burns.

Seductive; so seductive in its sensual call akin to caressing the back of a beautiful young woman up to her neck then slowly down to her shoulders. Fleeting is the taste of her flesh as mouth and tongue glide down the line of her spine to her quivering curves waiting below.

Subtle in its dimming and lighting; at times intensely bright when it shows its teeth in a steady burn and other times when it slowly swallows the wax it cools and heads toward the dark steadily treading that line between sight and blind.

Destruction is seduction; slowly moving the tips of my fingers across her breast with light touches and circular motions on her nipples. Her head tilts as my touch breaks down her reserve; as I further explore her back with hot puffs of breath preceding the coverage of my lips.

All as a periodic winding smoke twists up from the wax and flame only to lightly disappear above.

As the moon and the stars do endlessly turn distances away so does the candle burn below; so do the physical loves of my life, everyone's life in every passing moment; in sweeping memories that make an existence whole.

I spend most nights in the glow of the moving light first moisturizing her flesh to keep it supple. Then as time ravages existence and her flesh begins to tear and fall off, my time is spent rearranging her bones and the remains of those townsfolk we were once in prior lives.

I have carefully collected them. I keep them sometimes together, sometimes as mere acquaintances and other times passing images with only a slight wisp of a view.

All times in the past played out over the generations we did fulfil our roles deeply knowing and believing of the connection within our hearts. Destiny may have trapped us in this space, this village now turned city, but it is fate that keeps our deep binding love for one another alive over time.

The spirits have stopped coming through my floor. The manifestations of what has gone have ceased to post their claims.

This can only mean she has found a found a new host.

I needed to find her reincarnated form. I began my search for the vessel her soul needs to save. My love won't be re-born as an infant, as some virginal blank slate.

No my eternal love will steady some soul in turmoil. My love will use her experience and knowledge of decades and centuries past to quell the miseries of the present and the living to deliver peace.

Our love is heroic. Our love is medicinal. Our love is transformative.

Think of a caterpillar and butterfly.

This is the way it has been for us for centuries; saving those in despair and allowing themselves to reclaim their very existence. We guide the troubled. We are healers. We are saviours. We have been that for all of time. Such is our roles upon this plane doing the Lord's work.

And as our reward we share our love for all time.

With her dead now, ravaged from that insidious disease and by my hands; I need to complete my promise based upon her release in search of a more productive form. I need to find her again. I need to nurture her again. I need to reclaim her and her love.

And I have succeeded.

All we are in our most elemental form is a single point of light. We live a shell that slices and decomposes so easy. We support a frame that crumbles and snaps and bleaches so quickly in the sun. Ironical though, for beings who, in their most elemental form, are bags of water generating pure light.

I waited and waited so patiently for a sign to rise above that most loved form to signal me that she has been found. I walked amongst them to discern the most troubled and find the one in most need so I can reclaim her and care for her until the date of the next of our deaths.

A single point of light hovered and nestled ever so close to an aura dimming and deteriorating. I knew this is where my love would be. A single slender yet bright point of light where it's always been...

That is the light I saw above you...

"I can hear you but I can't see you. Where are you? You seem to be all around me. Who are you and how did you get in?"

You shiver; are you cold?

“How did you get in?”

Floor boards have spaces my dear; floor boards also move. The smallest cracks and slivers will always allow me and my kind to move about freely. Until I find the light again all I am is an inky black mist. Your recognition of our love will restore me to a physical form.

“A black shadowing mist; I am still asleep. I am still asleep jibbering nonsense the same nonsense my brain is running before I can wake...a dream. This is a dream; just a poorly configured nightmare ... Yes there is no one here. I should stop watching those films...”

If this theory allows you peace; then please partake. But you have nothing to fear. You should rejoice at the deliverance you are about to receive. You have the light. You have the redemption for both of us.

“I have to have another drink...maybe I should make that a joint...”

My darling it is the bondage created from drink and other synthetics that you will be delivered from. You will no longer need to hide from reality. You will no longer need to be numbed into relationships where you are treated as dirt. You are the light.

“Smoke? Oh my God is that smoke?”

The mist rises slowly, twisting ever so slowly up from the floor. Look at them. See them rise as if lit from a flame. They are so pure in this form without any physical deformity. They are so pure in their wants and desires because they are simply stripped to their essence where the light can show through.

“What? ...”

Hush please hush my darling, hush, please. Don't you understand you are my one and only? You are my single point of light.

“I...”

Hear them? Just listen to them. Hear them? Their whispers are beginning to grow. They moan long and hard. They sigh soft and sing high. They dance and revel in what they have become. They revel in their fate...your fate; our fate.

It's the eternal life of the collective. Watch them as they manifest. See the resemblance?

“Stop I can't take this! I need this to end...I need to sleep. I need to get this out of my head.”

And so you shall when I strip you of your flesh and bone and claim your soul to dance with me for the ages just as I have done with them.



“Why won’t my light go on? I can’t move... I...”

You are slowly paralyzing in place. It is for your safety. You shall remain as such until the mists can overcome you and become one with you. Think of it as an anaesthesia as I remove your flesh and bones and deliver you to your rebirth as one of us.

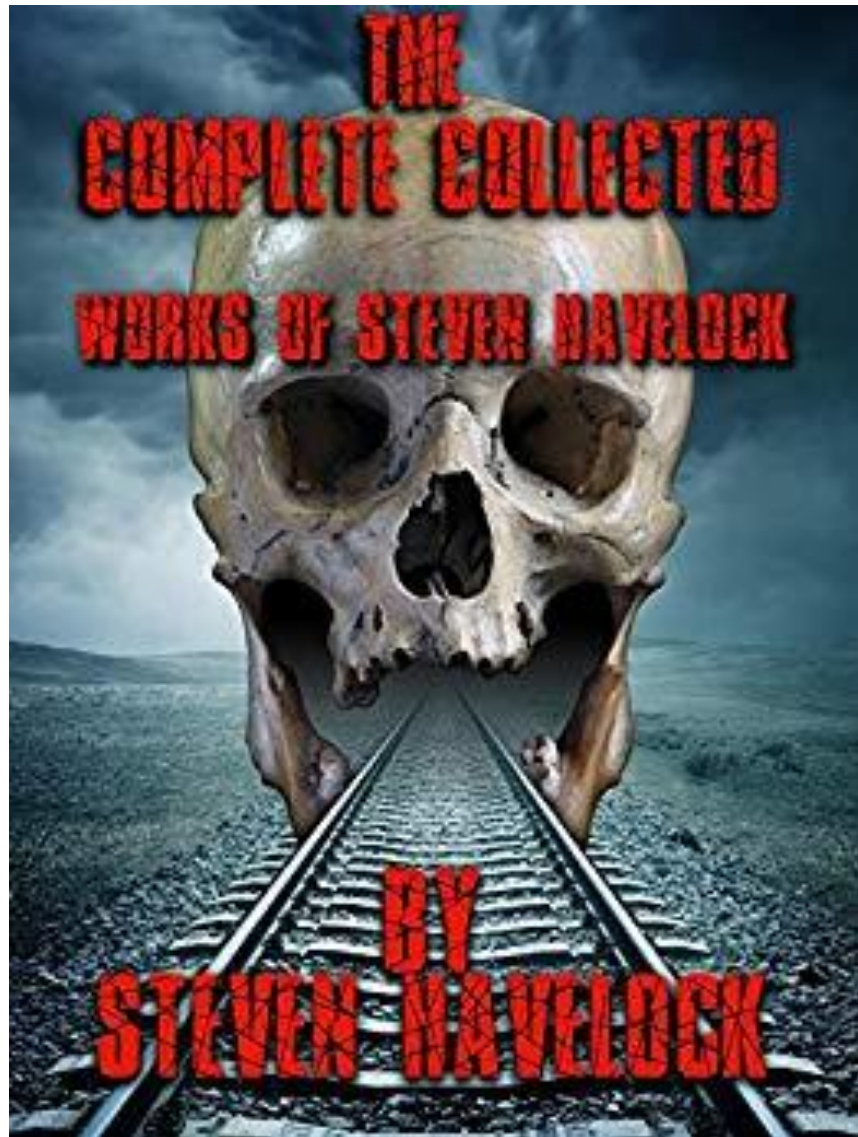
No longer will you be shackled by your emotions or the need to be numb. No longer shall you be limited by your fears. Let them slip into your mouth and pours. Breathe in the mist. Breathe in your earlier lives and experiences and recognize them for what they are; your redemption.

Let them penetrate into your mind and soul. Don’t resist because in the end you cannot. Deep down you want them inside you. Deep down you need them to aid in the completion of your being.

Feel them as they surround you; as they slowly wind and wash over you, caress you and become reunited with you. From centuries and decades past they have returned to you so you can return to me and light our way into the future.

I love the way a soul can be extracted. I marvel at the simple complexity. A person’s soul is so small and compact and the process of its twisting destruction is so smooth and so steady. The potential and actual deconstructions from its accomplishments made to the human form are so complete; so final.

THE END



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## BUMMED OUT DOOMSDAY by GK Murphy

In a time where the very existence of Mankind hung in the balance, there was one guy who didn't give a fuck.

His name was scientist Roger Bach and he who was concocting his own brand of doomsday. In his mind, he had grown weary of petty media speculation, the threat of a nuclear strike by Russia, China or North Korea, or even the USA. It seemed world allies and friends were no longer part of any single country's master-plan. It just seemed every country's leaders and governments were all for themselves and cared not a jot about anyone else on the planet. Again, there was another Cold War, climate change was out the window, wars and mass bloodshed in the Middle East and African nations, and a long-served arms race persisted which only served to piss over everything including mutual agreements and any semblance of the future possibility of global bonding among nations. Nothing like this existed anymore. The world was in a state of moral and environmental decline. Frankly, the whole wide world had turned to shit, and soon it seemed, this entire huge toilet would be no more but go up in smoke.

On a remote island off the coast of West Cumbria in the Irish Sea, from which you could easily make out Scotland and the Isle of Man, Roger Bach lived day in-day out in his warehouse, which he just referred to as his Studio.

Nobody knew it, but he had been developing a new ground-breaking drug—one which would change life as we knew it forever. This was a basis for scrutiny by scientists the world over, should they ever get a whisper of his antics, or perhaps his new formula. It would have changed everything known to God and Man. In fact, his superlative new concoction would revert these times back to a scenario once experienced by Stone Age man and the dinosaurs.

As he heated some of the precious liquid up over the small hotplate on his desk, he reached to his side to grab a peanut-butter sandwich, which he bit into hungrily. Oh yes, things he loved as a child had persisted into his sixties, since in three weeks' time, on a Friday, Bach would turn 67 years of age.

Also, one thing that didn't go down well for him was the fact he drank mug after mug of coffee and had for years, and was a keen smoker. He doubted he'd see 70 at this rate. Plus, he lacked exercise, which was a bummer as well.

He'd never been married but was hardly bothered about the fact. If he needed gratification sexually he simply reached down and masturbated, coating his prick with Baby Oil lubricant, and jerked into the wee small hours of the night, repeatedly, sometimes so excessively he actually managed to orgasm as he shot his load several times a night.

He could be a randy old fucker.

Sometimes, with Roger Bach, it proved rather messy as he carried the hum of stale semen on his clothes for weeks, since Bach barely washed his body or his clothes. He was a hermit on this

island and this never bothered the stinking, rancid old timer. Hygiene, soap and shampoo could fuck right off...

He'd been working secretly on this special serum most of his scientific life, or at least thirty years (half his lifetime, anyway), and it proved only now, during a tumultuous time amongst the planet's nations, he had honed and perfected his serum, and felt sure at last that if administered on a human being that it would shock not only the scientific community but that fantastical events would occur...thus cementing Roger Bach and his good name in world history forever, the greatest scientist of all time, winner of the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer, and there may even have been a probable knighthood from the Queen in the pipeline...

Knight of the Realm...

...Roger Bach OBE, yes, it had a ring to it!

But no, none of that would happen in a month of Sundays, for Roger Back would be the guinea pig, the monkey, the mouse, call it what you will. He would be the acting laboratory rat for testing his new serum. It didn't scare or deter him from his goal of stunning the planet with his man-made miracle. Shocking the world suited him fine...even though, perhaps, he wouldn't be around to see it, that he might be dead and his formula a renowned disaster, a great pathetic failure that achieved nothing in the scientific world.

There would be only one way to find out.

"Damned fools..." he muttered, chewing the sandwich.

If what he heard on the radio was true, the first nuclear-equipped warheads were already en route to their destination, Mainland UK, as they were many other places across the oceans, on a way to Doomsday.

It would not be long before the first one struck. He could be vaporized and melt like a child's plastic doll in the radioactive blast—the flare that silenced and stopped every single movement on the planet—the home God gave us, just for us to destroy. The world, a place of union and goodwill, of love and fellowship, a place of joy and happiness, all squandered in one horrid act of violence, the deployment of nuclear missiles. What kind of person could order such a thing, signing the world's death warrant, as well as their own and their peoples?

It was irresponsible beyond belief.

It was mass stupidity and suicide.

"God help us," Bach said, "What kind of madman is responsible for this atrocious act of murder?"

In the distance, a thunderous sound rang out. It may have been coming from France or Germany. One of the missiles—perhaps two of them—Bach gathered had struck. All those poor people, those that never had a say, those who died innocently.

He had to act fast. He stripped to his waist and tempered the syringe as he lay on his desk in the laboratory, quickly for the final time making the sign of the cross.

“Goodbye, my dearest cock...” he said, and closed his eyes as he penetrated the tip of his penis with the needle and hurriedly injected the serum.

Once that job was done, the solution in his bloodstream acted effectively in a mere matter of flying seconds. Roger Bach relaxed his bones on the desk as he poised himself and waited to be affected in no uncertain terms by the juice infiltrating his arteries.

Abruptly and painfully, the ageing scientist’s dick began to ache and throb.

It was bubbling and the flesh bloating out, whilst the head of his penis was growing bigger and bigger by the second.

“What the hell have I created?” Bach muttered, regretting the entire thing.

Too late now...

“Shit,” he said, “I knew I should have stuck to dissecting frogs and mice!”

Suddenly, it looked like Bach had grown another leg, for that was the size of his penis. Yet it continued to get bigger, pulsating, throbbing and expanding in its very length and width. His dick was becoming a monster of massive proportion.

In no time at all, the penis was the size of a garden shed as it crushed Roger Back to a bloody pulp, as his eyes popped from their sockets heralding a spray of white and yellow bloody pus. His body splattered in an instant, his legs and arms simply disconnecting with his body and seeming to fall off.

It was still growing, though.

As the first of the missiles made deathly ground with London, Bach’s dick had grown to the size of a building, and not only this, developed stumpy legs and arms to assist movement and its passage away from the island. The cock would traverse the waters of the Irish Sea until it reached the mainland not so many miles away. As this happened, a warhead struck Scotland, followed by another one shortly afterwards. The cock seemed to relish the flare and expanse of the mushroom cloud ascending into the atmosphere whilst ever burning a gaping orange sodium-light-like hole in the ether.

It was, indeed, a Doomsday scenario. But this massive cock was ready for it.

AN HOUR LATER...

On the 32nd Floor of Royston Tower apartment block, in a room overlooking Carlisle city centre, two lovers frolicked for perhaps what was to be a final time—one final fling. Leonardo Caspian was Spanish and heir to his father's oil fortune. Stephanie Lee was his 23 year old girlfriend, a young woman that started as a secretary and worked her way into his heart—or rather, wormed her way in.

No, not farther from the truth could one get.

In all fairness, the intrepid pair had both simply fallen in love with one another and their passion seemed to have far surpassed the constraints of commerce and business as well as the perks of overnight flights to Monaco from Heathrow or Gatwick to spend a couple of weeks on the harbour-side afloat aboard the Caspian Family's huge two-million-dollar vessel, where they enjoyed and lavished in weekends dowsed in caviar and bottles of the best champagne, and travelling downstream to Cannes to sample some of the finest wines available on the French Riviera.

In the darkened, rose-tinted apartment's main bedroom, the couple knew of their fate as well as the fate of the world, destined to be swallowed up by nuclear obliteration at any time, and within perhaps mere hours.

What better way, then, to spend your final hours, minutes, seconds, not quite knowing exactly when Doomsday would dawn (than spend it fucking) as it rendered everything obsolete and damned to high heaven? It was a conundrum even masters of mathematics may have struggled to fathom, so why indeed should these two even attempt to make head or tail of it? Brighter, cleverer minds were rendered baffled by the problem, and these geniuses still were dumbfounded to reveal any real solution to the world's current sordid predicament.

Leonardo, being dark and devilishly handsome, was a muscular gentleman in his fifties, twice the age of Stephanie, which meant one thing—experienced in love-making.

It helped that he was hung like a thoroughbred stallion.

What woman, in her right state of mind, did not prefer the gentleman with the bigger cock?

Knelt on the bed beckoning him to come nearer, Stephanie looked the portrait of lust in her white lace stocking and suspenders and nothing else. Her tits were ample and pert only a little, her nipples round and protruding like rocket-tips.

On the other hand, however, Leonardo stood there with a solemn expression on his face, a look of knowledge, massaging his cock, already stiff and ready to explode.

Stephanie pointed to the cabinet in the corner which contained varied kinky contraptions. “Get the whip, Leonardo. I want you to whip my butt until it bleeds. Do it, do it now, and hurry, we’re running out of time—let’s make this time the greatest ever!”

“I don’t want to whip you, sweetheart. We’re about to die in a blaze of glory and you want me to cause you pain?”

“But it is the sweetest of pain, Leonardo.”

The Spaniard was adamant. He said, “I refuse,” as he reached over to the shelf next to him, where he produced some handcuffs, grinning as he said, “I want to wear these, so that you can do whatever you like in our final minutes. I want you to tease me, Stephanie—something you do expertly.”

Stephanie seemed to respond with lustre and in no time Leonardo was on his back, naked, handcuffed to the gold-plated bedpost. The red-tinted light added to the eroticism of the occasion.

His erection stood out like a beacon, the shiny circumcised head emanating a purple hue befitting for his years. Something she loved nothing more to do was to tease and put his length in her mouth and muzzle it for all she was worth.

She said, “Do you want to stick it in my arse? It hurts, you know that...but it’s a beautiful hurt, and if it pleases you, I’m prepared to hurt?”

“I don’t wish for you to hurt but if you insist, yes, do it.”

She knelt on the duvet next to him and reached out to grab it. “I want to play with it for a while.”

“Do as you wish, Stephanie. But don’t leave it too long. We’re running out of time with every second that passes. Somehow, I don’t think we’re the only ones in this cruel world naked and about to fuck.”

She giggled, “The whole world is fucking the brains out of each other right now, I bet.”

Leonardo remained stony and serious-faced. He was a man of little humour, if any at all. “Give me my final blowjob, Stephanie. I want to shoot into your mouth one last time before we say goodbye. But Heaven awaits, and we will get our reward in Heaven. We will be together again.”

“How can Heaven be better than what we have now? How can it be better than the last three years?”

Finally breaking into a smile, the Spaniard replied curtly, “You need to have faith, sweetheart.”

Her face hovered over the tip of his dick, where she flicked it with the end of her tongue, playfully and as a precursor as to what came next, when she put the head in her mouth, before

swallowing it whole, taking it completely into the depth of her throat. She groaned and gargled as if she was choking. She even coughed and spluttered at first. Leonardo adored every second, when he smiled broadly and sighed as he experienced the warmth wrapped around his wet shaft, the warmth around the purple bulbous head. It jutted and throbbed. Stephanie worked his cock like an expert.

He wanted to reach down and stroke her hair as her head bobbed and she sucked. In the distance outside, low guttural rumbles could be heard once the missiles struck other UK cities and landscape, demolishing and vaporizing its peoples, on the street, in town, at home, death spared nobody, just stole like a heartless brigand.

But then, Stephanie did something she had always dreamed of doing.

Leonardo had no idea. Yet the pain and agony was massive.

As blood spurted skywards, he tried to sit up but couldn't as he squealed in agony, just then when Stephanie spat out severed morsels of his bloody penis.

He writhed and cursed. Stephanie started to laugh. Suddenly, she punched her Spanish boyfriend on the nose with her right fist, shattering the bridge of his nose.

Why, Stephanie, why...?

It seemed there would be no answer to this question. Truth was, she knew she was about to die in a nuclear blast, so why go out on plain sex, when it could be something a step up, something more powerful, something like murder?

The blow to the nose set Leonardo spark out. He was completely unconscious and oblivious to his festooning shaft spurting scarlet arcs in all directions.

It did not end there, currently as people scurried around the Carlisle streets beneath them in blind desperation and panic. Abruptly, Stephanie Lee put her mouth to Leonardo's neck and bit down hard, an action which enabled her to remove a large chunk of his flesh, and a segment of his Adam's Apple, making way for a fresh spurt of blood. She had to admit, though—his semen tasted better.

"Holy shit..." she said, looking out over the Carlisle skyline. She couldn't believe her eyes.

A huge cock appeared there, just hovering above the streets below it and the scurrying human race flitting everywhere in blind panic and dazed confusion. It was a mammoth cock, bigger than a dinosaur. It looked as if it was a fucking dinosaur...had to be! Cruelly, Stephanie smiled at the monstrosity and its ridiculousness, unknowing this phallus would generate just as much destruction as any nuclear missile that made land on these shores.

Wiping blood away from her lips with her forearm, Stephanie the Murderess said, "Go for it, big cock—go for it!"



It was like taking a solitary peek into some weird, stupendous dream—a wacky yet terrifying nightmare.

Then, the missile struck—it made contact with the monster outside the window. The nuclear warhead hit the phallus in its centre, blowing a big hole in it. Yet, the damage done to the cock saved the people of the North of England—or rather, this vicinity—who would have been knocked for six otherwise had it not been for the fleshy shield in their midst.

Stephanie witnessed first-hand the massacre outside amongst the tall building as the huge penis deflated and folded into a shrivelled mushy lump on the road below.

The war was done.

The warheads had struck their targets and for the UK the nuclear strikes were over. Many had perished in the cities and towns yet Carlisle had been saved by a massive dinosaur cock. Stephanie wandered onto the balcony overlooking the streets below, and looking down at the mess of semen and burnt flesh, which actually permeated the sour aroma of the ocean (such was semen), when she made a decision. She knew she would go to prison for murder. The solution was simple and a decision was to be made before any other steps were taken.

It was a better time than any to commit suicide.

She did not wish to exist as a killer in this world. She'd let herself and everybody else down badly, leaving only one option—an option she embraced. Climbing over the railing of the balcony, she hovered on the ledge as she peered down at the mass panic way down below.

“I’m so sorry, Leonardo...” she said, a sad smile on her face.

Finally, she stepped away from the ledge when she adopted a diving stance and plummeted downwards towards certain death.

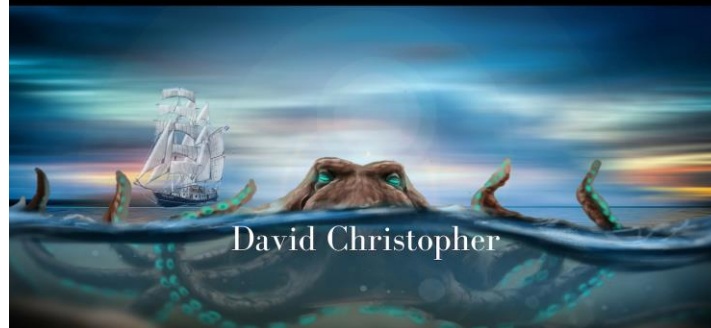
The world had been saved by a massive dick.

God bless Roger Bach.

THE END

GONZO PULP PUBLICATIONS  
PRESENT

# Long John Silver and the Squid-God of Lemuria



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## THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

### Part Fifty-Three

Rat wasn't such a bad guy after all, Mud decided, after talking with him a few times. Just an asshole. That's all. Mud knew a lot of assholes. Hell, he, Mud admitted, was an asshole himself, depending who you asked. But once you got to know Rat, why it was he was such an irredeemable asshole, you could understand the man. Oh, not in any silly, sappy 'he had a rotten childhood' way.

No, Rat was an asshole because he didn't know any better. And there had been plenty of times when Mud found that being a total and complete asshole was very efficacious in extricating himself from any number of extremely unhealthy situations. So, it was sometimes a good thing to be a bit of the asshole. Problem for the poor dumb idiot Rat was he had no imagination. He had just one type to him, and that was it.

So Mud cut the man a little slack. Professional courtesy, you might call it.

Mud let Rat run around the ship a bit. Didn't matter. Cameras tracked every movement throughout the "Charon". Rat didn't seem much interested in causing any trouble, anyway. Labouring under the belief that Mud was taking him to Mars, or to some asteroid decently far enough away from Astra Palace that he need not fear the vengeance of Horst Dal, Rat was content to while the hours away pouring shots of bourbon down his throat, which he followed with an uncountable number of pipefuls of mud, whack and ice.

Yes, Rat sometimes reflected when in one of his rare introspective moods, life can be good.

Ward had no time to think. He could only act.

In the tunnel leading away to his left, the combat knife, not unlike his own, but a grade or two higher than the knives he carried in his armoury. The instant he laid his eyes upon it, he coveted that knife.

But there were the grenades in the opposite tunnel, the one leading away to his right. Barbed wire was threaded through the tunnel.

"Ow! Huh!"

Ward heard Lacey's cry of pain. Turning, he saw her dropping to her knees and clutching her hip in pain.

Ward picked her up. A single swift glance told him that Lacey had been hit with a laser pistol. The odour of her burning flesh told him it was a standard issue, probably stolen from some Martian Ranger doing escort service on a deep space transport. The thing had been set on burn/kill.

But Lacey responded when he grabbed her up from the deck. She opened her eyes and looked at him when she felt his strong hands pulling her up from the wire cage that formed the portion they were in.

Two more shots flashed hard past them. It singed Ward's scalp. One last glance toward the opening from where the shots were fired revealed over a dozen Scroungers (identifiable by their tattoos), treasure hunters, opportunists, killers and many other adventurers by many other names.

To the right, ahead of him, a tunnel with a combat knife he wanted. To the left, a tunnel strung with barbed wire and hand grenades.

One of these tunnels could be a trap. Or both of them. Or neither.

"Hold on tight, babe. It's gonna be rough," Ward said.

"Uh-huh," Lacey answered.

"If one of these tunnels is a trap," Ward had concluded, "It's gonna be the one that looks easy."

He threw Lacey into the left hand tunnel, following closely on his hands and knees.

"Go! Go! Go!" he shouted at Lacey. The two of them clawed their way through the barbed wire. It cut deeply into their flesh, tearing and ripping, leaving deep gashes that bled freely.

The tunnel they had just fled was filled with raging blasts of scarlet and purple.

But Ward and Lacey persisted. Somehow, through the chaos, the slashes from the barbed wire, and the nuisance of the grenades which bumped against their bodies with a nerve-wracking frequency.

They spilled out into a narrow cage of a room. Lacey, face stained with tears that cascaded freely, asked, "Wha... what do we do now?"

Ward ignored her. He pulled a grenade from its place, strung against the wall of the tunnel they had just left. A Scrounger poked his head around the corner, firing his plasma pistol. The plasma field discharged from it nearly took Ward's head off his neck.

Ward was quicker, though. He tossed the grenade into the tunnel. It was only then that he looked for any possible escape.

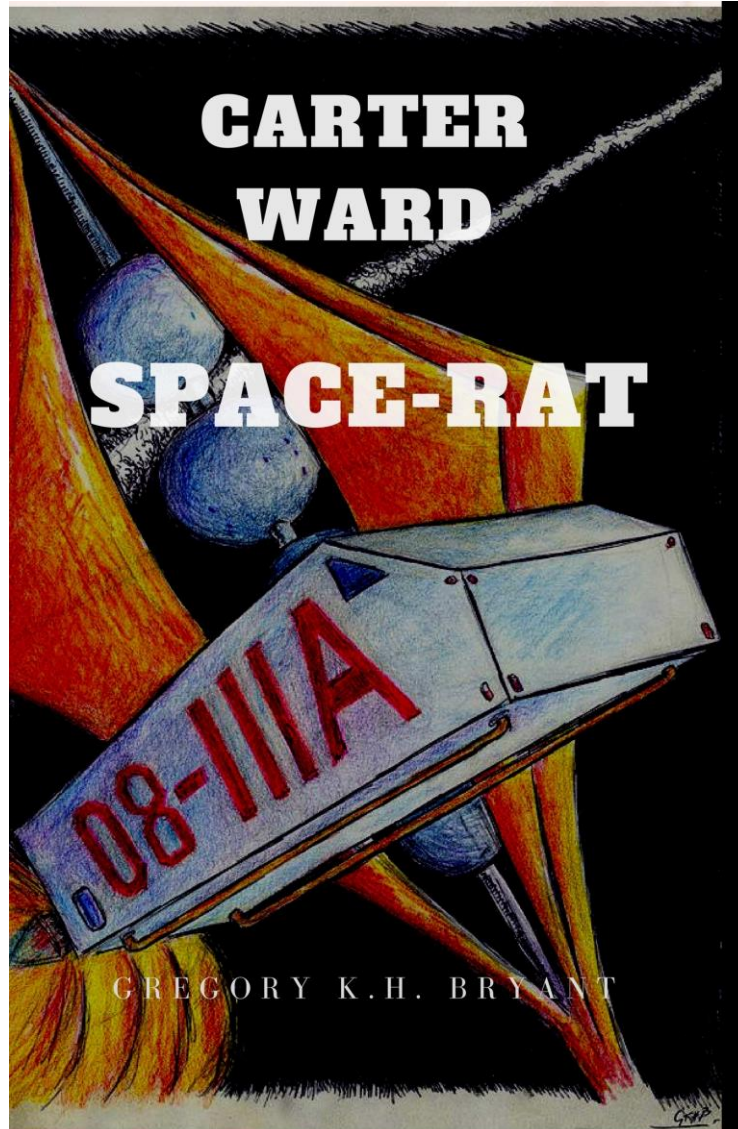
Nothing.

No tunnels in the wall he and Lacey were facing. Nothing to the left, no escape to the right.

"Fuck me for an idjit!" Ward shouted at himself.

CONTINUES NEXT ISSUE

Now available from Schlock! Publications: *Carter Ward—Space Rat* by Gregory KH Bryant.



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## ERIC BRIGHTYES by H Rider Haggard

### XIII: How Hall the Mate Cut the Grapnel Chain

Gudruda bent her head like a drooping flower, and presently sank to earth, for her knees would bear her weight no more; but Eric marched to the lip of the sea, his head held high and laughing merrily to hide his pain of heart. Here stood Asmund, who gripped him by both hands, and kissed him on the brow, bidding him good luck.

“I know not whether we shall meet again,” he said; “but, if my hours be sped before thou returnest, this I charge thee: that thou mindest Gudruda well, for she is the sweetest of all women that I have known, and I hold her the most dear.”

“Fear not for that, lord,” said Eric; “and I pray thee this, that, if I come back no more, as well may happen, do not force Gudruda into marriage, if she wills it not, and I think she will have little leaning that way. And I say this also: do not count overmuch on Björn thy son, for he has no loyal heart; and beware of Groa, who was thy housekeeper, for she loves not that Unna should take her place and more. And now I thank thee for many good things, and farewell.”

“Farewell, my son,” said Asmund, “for in this hour thou seemest as a son to me.”

Eric turned to enter the sea and wade to the vessel, but Skallagrim caught him in his arms as though he were but a child, and, wading into the surf till the water covered his waistbelt, bore him to the vessel and lifted him up so that Eric reached the bulwarks with his hands.

Then they loosed the cable and got out the oars and soon were dancing over the sea. Presently the breeze caught them, and they set the great sail and sped away like a gull towards the Westman Isles. But Gudruda sat on the shore watching till, at length, the light faded from Eric’s golden helm as he stood upon the poop, and the world grew dark to her.

Now Ospakar Blacktooth had news of this sailing and took counsel of Gizur his son, and the end of it was that they made ready two great ships, dragons of war, and, placing sixty fighting men in each of them, sailed round the Iceland coast to the Westmans and waited there to waylay Eric. They had spies on the land, and from them they learned of Brighteyes’ coming, and sailed out to meet him in the channel between the greater and the lesser islands, where they knew that he must pass.

Now it drew towards evening when Eric rowed down this channel, for the wind had fallen and he desired to be clear at sea. Presently, as the Gudruda came near to the mouth of the channel, that had high cliffs on either hand, Eric saw two long dragons of war—for their bulwarks were shield-hung—glide from the cover of the island and take their station side by side between him and the open sea.

“Now here are vikings,” said Eric to Skallagrim.

“Now here is Ospakar Blacktooth,” answered Skallagrim, “for well I know that raven banner of

his. This is a good voyage, for we must seek but a little while before we come to fighting.”

Eric bade the men lay on their oars, and spoke:

“Before us is Ospakar Blacktooth in two great dragons, and he is here to cut us off. Now two choices are left to us: one is to bout ship and run before him, and the other to row on and give him battle. What say ye, comrades?”

Hall of Lithdale, the mate, answered, saying:

“Let us go back, lest we die. The odds are too great, Eric.”

But a man among the crew cried out, “When thou didst go on holmgang at Thingvalla, Eric, Ospakar’s two chosen champions stood before thee, yet at Whitefire’s flash they scurried through the water like startled ducks. It was an omen, for so shall his great ships fly when we swoop on them.” Then the others shouted:

“Ay, ay! Never let it be said that we fled from Ospakar—fie on thy woman’s talk, Hall!”

“Then we are all of one mind, save Hall only,” said Eric. “Let us put Ospakar to the proof.” And while men shouted “Yea!” he turned to speak with Skallagrim. The Baresark was gone, for, wasting no breath in words, already he was fixing the long shields on the bulwark rail.

The men busked on their harness and made them fit for fight, and, when all was ready, Eric mounted the poop, and with him Skallagrim, and bade the rowers give way. The Gudruda leapt forward and rushed on towards Ospakar’s ships. Now they saw that these were bound together with a cable and yet they must go betwixt them.

Eric ran forward to the prow, and with him Skallagrim, and called aloud to a great man who stood upon the ship to starboard, wearing a black helm with raven’s wings:

“Who art thou that bars the sea against me?”

“I am named Ospakar Blacktooth,” answered the great man.

“And what must we lose at thy hands, Ospakar?”

“But one thing—your lives!” answered Blacktooth.

“Thrice have we stood face to face, Ospakar,” said Eric, “and it seems that hitherto thou hast won no great glory. Now it shall be proved if thy luck has bettered.”

“Art yet healed, lord, of that prick in the shoulder which thou camest by on Horse-Head Heights?” roared Skallagrim.

For answer, Ospakar seized a spear and hurled it straight at Eric, and it had been his death had he

not caught it in his hand as it flew. Then he cast it back, and that so mightily that it sped right through the shield of Ospakar and was the bane of a man who stood beside him.

“A gift for a gift!” laughed Eric. On rushed the Gudruda, but now the cable was strained six fathoms from her bow that held together the ships of Ospakar and it was too strong for breaking. Eric looked and saw. Then he drew Whitefire, and while all men wondered, leaped over the prow of the ship and, clasping the golden dragon’s head with his arm, set his feet upon its claws and waited. On sped the ship and spears flew thick and fast about him, but there Brighteyes hung. Now the Gudruda’s bow caught the great rope and strained it taut and, as it rose beneath her weight, Eric smote swift and strong with Whitefire and clove it in two, so that the severed ends fell with a splash into the quiet water.

Eric sprang back to deck while stones and spears hissed about him.

“That was well done, lord,” said Skallagrim; “now we shall be snugly berthed.”

“In oars and out grappling-irons,” shouted Eric.

Up rose the rowers, and their war-gear rattled as they rose. They drew in the long oars, and not before it was time, for now the Gudruda forced her way between the two dragons of Ospakar and lay with her bow to their sterns. Then with a shout Eric’s men cast the irons and soon the ships were locked fast and the fight began. The spears flew thick, and on either side some got their death before them. Then the men of that vessel, named the Raven, which was to larboard of the Gudruda, made ready to board. On they came with a rush, and were driven back, though hardly, for they were many, and those who stood against them few. Again they came, scrambling over the bulwarks, and this time a score of them leapt aboard. Eric turned from the fight against the dragon of Ospakar and saw it. Then, with Skallagrim, he rushed to meet the boarders as they swarmed along the hold, and naught might they withstand the axe and sword.

Through and through them swept the mighty pair, now Whitefire flashed, and now the great axe fell, and at every stroke a man lay dead or wounded. Six of the boarders turned to fly, but just then the grappling-iron broke and their ship drifted out with the tide towards the open sea, and presently no man of that twenty was left alive.

Now the men of the ship of Ospakar and of the Gudruda pressed each other hard. Thrice did Ospakar strive to come aboard and thrice he was pushed back. Eric was ever where he was most needed, and with him Skallagrim, for these two threw themselves from side to side, and were now here and now there, so that it seemed as though there were not one golden helm and one black, but rather four on board the Gudruda.

Eric looked and saw that the other ship was drawing round, though somewhat slowly, to come alongside of them once more.

“Now we must make an end of Ospakar, else our hands will be overfull,” he said, and therewith sprang up upon the bulwarks and after him many men. Once they were driven back, but came on again, and now they thrust all Ospakar’s men before them and passed up his ship on both boards.



By the mast stood Ospakar and with him Gizur his son, and Eric strove to come to him. But many men were between them, and he could not do this.

Presently, while the fight yet went on hotly and men fell fast, Brighteyes felt the dragon of Ospakar strike, and, looking, saw that they had drifted with the send of the tide on to the rocks of the island. There was a great hole in the hull amidships and the water rushed in fast.

“Back! men; back!” he cried, and all his folk that were unhurt, ran, and leapt on board the Gudruda; but Ospakar and his men sprang into the sea and swam for the shore. Then Skallagrim cut loose the grappling-irons with his axe, and that not too soon, for, scarcely had they pushed clear with great toil when the long warship slipped from the rock and foundered, taking many dead and wounded men with her.

Now Ospakar and some of his people stood safe upon the rocks, and Eric called to him in mockery, bidding him come aboard the Gudruda.

Ospakar made no answer, but stood gnawing his hand, while the water ran from him. Only Gizur his son cursed them aloud.

Eric was greatly minded to follow them, and land and fight them there; but he might not do this, because of the rocks and of the other dragon, that hung about them, fearing to come on and yet not willing to go back.

“We will have her, at the least,” said Eric, and bade the rowers get out their oars.

Now, when the men on board the other ship saw the Gudruda drawing on, they took to their oars at once and rowed swiftly for the sea, and at this a great roar of laughter went down Eric’s ship.

“They shall not slip from us so easily,” said Eric; “give way, comrades, and after them.”

But the men were much wearied with fighting, and the decks were all cumbered with dead and wounded, so that by the time that the Gudruda had put about, and come to the mouth of the waterway, Ospakar’s vessel had shaken out her sails and caught the wind, that now blew strong off shore, and sped away six furlongs or more from Eric’s prow.

“Now we shall see how the Gudruda sails,” said Eric, and they spread their canvas and gave chase.

Then Eric bade men clear the decks of the dead, and tend the wounded. He had lost seven men slain outright, and three were wounded, one to death. But on board the ship there lay of Ospakar’s force twenty and three dead men.

When all were cast into the sea, men ate and rested.

“We have not done so badly,” said Eric to Skallagrim.

“We shall do better yet,” said Skallagrim to Eric; “rather had I seen Ospakar’s head lying in the scuppers than those of all his carles; for he may get more men, but never another head!”

Now the wind freshened till by midnight it blew strongly. The mate Hall came to Eric and said:

“The Gudruda dips her nose deep in Ran’s cup. Say, Eric, shall we shorten sail?”

“Nay,” answered Eric, “keep her full and bail. Where yonder Raven flies, my Sea-stag must follow,” and he pointed to the warship that rode the waves before them.

After midnight clouds came up, with rain, and hid the face of the night-sun and the ship they sought. The wind blew ever harder, till at length, when the rain had passed and the clouds lifted, there was much water in the hold and the bailers could hardly stand at their work.

Men murmured, and Hall the mate murmured most of all; but still Eric held on, for there, not two furlongs ahead of them, rode the dragon of Ospakar. But now, being afraid of the wind and sea, she had lowered her sail somewhat, and made as though she would put about and run for Iceland.

“That she may not do,” called Eric to Skallagrim, “if once she rolls side on to those seas Ran has her, for she must fill and sink.”

“So they hold, lord,” answered Skallagrim; “see, once more she runs!”

“Ay, but we run faster—she is outsailed. Up, men, up: for presently the fight begins.”

“It is bad to join battle in such a sea,” quoth Hall.

“Good or bad,” growled Skallagrim, “do thou thy lord’s bidding,” and he half lifted up his axe.

The mate said no more, for he misdoubted him of Skallagrim Lambstail and his axe.

Then men made ready for the fray as best they might, and stood, sword in hand and drenched with foam, clinging to the bulwarks of the Gudruda as she wallowed through the seas.

Eric went aft to the helm and seized it. Now but a length ahead Ospakar’s ship laboured on beneath her small sail, but the Gudruda rushed towards her with all canvas set and at every leap plunged her golden dragon beneath the surf and shook the water from her foredeck.

“Make ready the grapnel!” shouted Eric through the storm. Skallagrim seized the iron and stood by. Now the Gudruda rushed alongside the Raven, and Eric steered so skilfully that there was a fathom space, and no more, between the ships.

Skallagrim cast the iron well and truly, so that it hooked and held. On sped the Gudruda and the cable tautened—now her stern kissed the bow of Ospakar’s ship, as though she was towing her, and thus for a space they travelled through the seas.

Eric's folk shouted and strove to cast spears; but they did this but ill, because of the rocking of the vessel. As for Ospakar's men, they clung to their bulwarks and did nothing, for all the heart was out of them between fear of Eric and terror of the sea. Eric called to a man to hold the helm, and Skallagrim crept aft to where he stood.

"What counsel shall we take now?" said Eric, and as he spoke a sea broke over them—for the gale was strong.

"Board them and make an end," answered Skallagrim.

"Rough work; still, we will try it," said Eric, "for we may not lie thus for long, and I am loath to leave them."

Then Eric called for men to follow him, and many answered, creeping as best they might to where he stood.

"Thou art mad, Eric," said Hall the mate; "cut loose and let us drive, else we shall both founder, and that is a poor tale to tell."

Eric took no heed, but, watching his chance, leapt on to the bows of the Raven, and after him leapt Skallagrim. Even as he did so, a great sea came and swept past and over them, so that half the ship was hid for foam. Now, Hall the mate stood near to the grapnel cable, and, fearing lest they should sink, out of the cowardice of his heart, he let his axe fall upon the chain, and severed it so swiftly that no man saw him, except Skallagrim only. Forward sprang the Gudruda, freed from her burden, and rushed away before the wind, leaving Eric and Skallagrim alone upon the Raven's prow.

"Now we are in an evil plight," said Eric, "the cable has parted!"

"Ay," answered Skallagrim, "and that losel Hall hath parted it! I saw his axe fall."

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## THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

### Chapter XXXIII: The Meeting of Titans

It is not my intention, nor is it possible no matter how interesting to me, to set down ad seriatim the happenings of the next twelve hours. But a few will not be denied recital.

O'Keefe regained cheerfulness.

"After all, Doc," he said to me, "it's a beautiful scrap we're going to have. At the worst the worst is no more than the leprechaun warned about. I would have told the Taitha De about the banshee raid he promised me; but I was a bit taken off my feet at the time. The old girl an' all the clan'll be along, said the little green man, an' I bet the Three will be damned glad of it, take it from me."

Lakla, shining-eyed and half fearful too:

"I have other tidings that I am afraid will please you little, Larry—darlin'. The Silent Ones say that you must not go into battle yourself. You must stay here with me, and with Goodwin—for if—if—the Shining One does come, then must we be here to meet it. And you might not be, you know, Larry, if you fight," she said, looking shyly up at him from under the long lashes.

The O'Keefe's jaw dropped.

"That's about the hardest yet," he answered slowly. "Still—I see their point; the lamb corralled for the altar has no right to stray out among the lions," he added grimly. "Don't worry, sweet," he told her. "As long as I've sat in the game I'll stick to the rules."

Olaf took fierce joy in the coming fray. "The Norns spin close to the end of this web," he rumbled. "Ja! And the threads of Lugur and the Heks woman are between their fingers for the breaking! Thor will be with me, and I have fashioned me a hammer in glory of Thor." In his hand was an enormous mace of black metal, fully five feet long, crowned with a massive head.

I pass to the twelve hours' closing.

At the end of the coria road where the giant fernland met the edge of the cavern's ruby floor, hundreds of the Akka were stationed in ambush, armed with their spears tipped with the rotting death and their nail-studded, metal-headed clubs. These were to attack when the Murians debauched from the corials. We had little hope of doing more here than effect some attrition of Yolara's hosts, for at this place the captains of the Shining One could wield the Keth and their other uncanny weapons freely. We had learned, too, that every forge and artisan had been put to work to make an armour Marakinoff had devised to withstand the natural battle equipment of the frog-people—and both Larry and I had a disquieting faith in the Russian's ingenuity.

At any rate the numbers against us would be lessened.

Next, under the direction of the frog-king, levies commanded by subsidiary chieftains had completed rows of rough walls along the probable route of the Murians through the cavern. These afforded the Akka a fair protection behind which they could hurl their darts and spears—curiously enough they had never developed the bow as a weapon.

At the opening of the cavern a strong barricade stretched almost to the two ends of the crescent strand; almost, I say, because there had not been time to build it entirely across the mouth.

And from edge to edge of the titanic bridge, from where it sprang outward at the shore of the Crimson Sea to a hundred feet away from the golden door of the abode, barrier after barrier was piled.

Behind the wall defending the mouth of the cavern, waited other thousands of the Akka. At each end of the unfinished barricade they were mustered thickly, and at right and left of the crescent where their forest began, more legions were assembled to make way up to the ledge as opportunity offered.

Rank upon rank they manned the bridge barriers; they swarmed over the pinnacles and in the hollows of the island's ragged outer lip; the domed castle was a hive of them, if I may mix my metaphors—and the rocks and gardens that surrounded the abode glittered with them.

"Now," said the handmaiden, "there's nothing else we can do—save wait."

She led us out through her bower and up the little path that ran to the embrasure.

Through the quiet came a sound, a sighing, a half-mournful whispering that beat about us and fled away.

"They come!" cried Lakla, the light of battle in her eyes. Larry drew her to him, raised her in his arms, kissed her.

"A woman!" acclaimed the O'Keefe. "A real woman—and mine!"

With the cry of the Portal there was movement among the Akka, the glint of moving spears, flash of metal-tipped clubs, rattle of horny spurs, rumblings of battle-cries.

And we waited—waited it seemed interminably, gaze fastened upon the low wall across the cavern mouth. Suddenly I remembered the crystal through which I had peered when the hidden assassins had crept upon us. Mentioning it to Lakla, she gave a little cry of vexation, a command to her attendant; and not long that faithful if unusual lady had returned with a tray of the glasses. Raising mine, I saw the lines furthest away leap into sudden activity. Spurred warrior after warrior leaped upon the barricade and over it. Flashes of intense, green light, mingled with gleams like lightning strokes of concentrated moon rays, sprang from behind the wall—sprang and struck and burned upon the scales of the batrachians.

"They come!" whispered Lakla.

At the far ends of the crescent a terrific milling had begun. Here it was plain the Akka were holding. Faintly, for the distance was great, I could see fresh force upon force rush up and take the places of those who had fallen.

Over each of these ends, and along the whole line of the barricade a mist of dancing, diamonded atoms began to rise; sparking, coruscating points of diamond dust that darted and danced.

What had once been Lakla's guardians—dancing now in the nothingness!

"God, but it's hard to stay here like this!" groaned the O'Keefe; Olaf's teeth were bared, the lips drawn back in such a fighting grin as his ancestors berserk on their raven ships must have borne; Rador was livid with rage; the handmaiden's nostrils flaring wide, all her wrathful soul in her eyes.

Suddenly, while we looked, the rocky wall which the Akka had built at the cavern mouth—was not! It vanished, as though an unseen, unbelievably gigantic hand had with the lightning's speed swept it away. And with it vanished, too, long lines of the great amphibians close behind it.

Then down upon the ledge, dropping into the Crimson Sea, sending up geysers of ruby spray, dashing on the bridge, crushing the frog-men, fell a shower of stone, mingled with distorted shapes and fragments whose scales still flashed meteoric as they hurled from above.

"That which makes things fall upward," hissed Olaf. "That which I saw in the garden of Lugur!"

The fiendish agency of destruction which Marakinoff had revealed to Larry; the force that cut off gravitation and sent all things within its range racing outward into space!

And now over the debris upon the ledge, striking with long sword and daggers, here and there a captain flashing the green ray, moving on in ordered squares, came the soldiers of the Shining One. Nearer and nearer the verge of the ledge they pushed Nak's warriors. Leaping upon the dwarfs, smiting them with spear and club, with teeth and spur, the Akka fought like devils. Quivering under the ray, they leaped and dragged down and slew.

Now there was but one long line of the frog-men at the very edge of the cliff.

And ever the clouds of dancing, diamonded atoms grew thicker over them all!

That last thin line of the Akka was going; yet they fought to the last, and none toppled over the lip without at least one of the armoured Murians in his arms.

My gaze dropped to the foot of the cliffs. Stretched along their length was a wide ribbon of beauty—a shimmering multitude of gleaming, pulsing, prismatic moons; glowing, glowing ever brighter, ever more wondrous—the gigantic Medusae globes feasting on dwarf and frog-man alike!

Across the waters, faintly, came a triumphant shouting from Lugur's and Yolara's men!

Was the ruddy light of the place lessening, growing paler, changing to a faint rose? There was an exclamation from Larry; something like hope relaxed the drawn muscles of his face. He pointed to the aureate dome wherein sat the Three—and then I saw!

Out of it, through the long transverse slit through which the Silent Ones kept their watch on cavern, bridge, and abyss, a torrent of the opalescent light was pouring. It cascaded like a waterfall, and as it flowed it spread whirling out, in columns and eddies, clouds and wisps of misty, curdled coruscations. It hung like a veil over all the islands, filtering everywhere, driving back the crimson light as though possessed of impenetrable substance—and still it cast not the faintest shadowing upon our vision.

“Good God!” breathed Larry. “Look!”

The radiance was marching—marching—down the colossal bridge. It moved swiftly, in some unthinkable way intelligently. It swathed the Akka, and closer, ever closer it swept toward the approach upon which Yolara's men had now gained foothold.

From their ranks came flash after flash of the green ray—aimed at the abode! But as the light sped and struck the opalescence it was blotted out! The shimmering mists seemed to enfold, to dissipate it.

Lakla drew a deep breath.

“The Silent Ones forgive me for doubting them,” she whispered; and again hope blossomed on her face even as it did on Larry's.

The frog-men were gaining. Clothed in the armour of that mist, they pressed back from the bridge-head the invaders. There was another prodigious movement at the ends of the crescent, and racing up, pressing against the dwarfs, came other legions of Nak's warriors. And re-enforcing those out on the prodigious arch, the frog-men stationed in the gardens below us poured back to the castle and out through the open Portal.

“They're licked!” shouted Larry. “They're—”

So quickly I could not follow the movement his automatic leaped to his hand—spoke, once and again and again. Rador leaped to the head of the little path, sword in hand; Olaf, shouting and whirling his mace, followed. I strove to get my own gun quickly.

For up that path were running twoscore of Lugur's men, while from below Lugur's own voice roared.

“Quick! Slay not the handmaiden or her lover! Carry them down. Quick! But slay the others!”

The handmaiden raced toward Larry, stopped, whistled shrilly—again and again. Larry's pistol

was empty, but as the dwarfs rushed upon him I dropped two of them with mine. It jammed—I could not use it; I sprang to his side. Rador was down, struggling in a heap of Lugur’s men. Olaf, a Viking of old, was whirling his great hammer, and striking, striking through armour, flesh, and bone.

Larry was down, Lakla flew to him. But the Norseman, now streaming blood from a dozen wounds, caught a glimpse of her coming, turned, thrust out a mighty hand, sent her reeling back, and then with his hammer cracked the skulls of those trying to drag the O’Keefe down the path.

A cry from Lakla—the dwarfs had seized her, had lifted her despite her struggles, were carrying her away. One I dropped with the butt of my useless pistol, and then went down myself under the rush of another.

Through the clamour I heard a booming of the Akka, closer, closer; then through it the bellow of Lugur. I made a mighty effort, swung a hand up, and sunk my fingers in the throat of the soldier striving to kill me. Writhing over him, my fingers touched a poniard; I thrust it deep, staggered to my feet.

The O’Keefe, shielding Lakla, was battling with a long sword against a half dozen of the soldiers. I started toward him, was struck, and under the impact hurled to the ground. Dizzily I raised myself—and leaning upon my elbow, stared and moved no more. For the dwarfs lay dead, and Larry, holding Lakla tightly, was staring even as I, and ranged at the head of the path were the Akka, whose booming advance in obedience to the handmaiden’s call I had heard.

And at what we all stared was Olaf, crimson with his wounds, and Lugur, in blood-red armour, locked in each other’s grip, struggling, smiting, tearing, kicking, and swaying about the little space before the embrasure. I crawled over toward the O’Keefe. He raised his pistol, dropped it.

“Can’t hit him without hitting Olaf,” he whispered. Lakla signalled the frog-men; they advanced toward the two—but Olaf saw them, broke the red dwarf’s hold, sent Lugur reeling a dozen feet away.

“No!” shouted the Norseman, the ice of his pale-blue eyes glinting like frozen flames, blood streaming down his face and dripping from his hands. “No! Lugur is mine! None but me slays him! Ho, you Lugur—” and cursed him and Yolara and the Dweller hideously—I cannot set those curses down here.

They spurred Lugur. Mad now as the Norseman, the red dwarf sprang. Olaf struck a blow that would have killed an ordinary man, but Lugur only grunted, swept in, and seized him about the waist; one mighty arm began to creep up toward Huldricksson’s throat.

“Ware, Olaf!” cried O’Keefe; but Olaf did not answer. He waited until the red dwarf’s hand was close to his shoulder; and then, with an incredibly rapid movement—once before had I seen something like it in a wrestling match between Papuans—he had twisted Lugur around; twisted him so that Olaf’s right arm lay across the tremendous breast, the left behind the neck, and Olaf’s left leg held the Voice’s armoured thighs vicelike against his right knee while over that knee lay



the small of the red dwarf's back.

For a second or two the Norseman looked down upon his enemy, motionless in that paralyzing grip. And then—slowly—he began to break him!

Lakla gave a little cry; made a motion toward the two. But Larry drew her head down against his breast, hiding her eyes; then fastened his own upon the pair, white-faced, stern.

Slowly, ever so slowly, proceeded Olaf. Twice Lugur moaned. At the end he screamed—horribly. There was a cracking sound, as of a stout stick snapped.

Huldricksson stooped, silently. He picked up the limp body of the Voice, not yet dead, for the eyes rolled, the lips strove to speak; lifted it, walked to the parapet, swung it twice over his head, and cast it down to the red waters!

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