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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 14, ISSUE 13
3RD MARCH 2019

THE OATH OF BRUTUS

BY REKHA
VALLIAPPAN
NOMADIC MONK-
LIKE CREATURES
OF THE OUTER
VOID...

THE AMAZING DEAD BY GK MURPHY

TRANSMOG- RIFICATION

BY PETER
FOSTER
ANOTHER
GROTESQUE
WITH A DEAD
MASK FACE...

BOUNCY CASTLE... OF EVIL ROB BLISS

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Valliappan, Aaron Pfau, Gregory KH Bryant, Rob Bliss, H Rider Haggard, A Merritt*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

Vol. 14, Issue 13

3rd March 2019

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *2014 Zombie Walk Carytown RVA* by [Mobilus In Mobili](#). Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week the leprechaun returns in search of his pot of gold. A primate breakout on Baffin Island means bad news for Brutus. Peter Foster returns with another Zombie essay. Two paranormal investigators find more than they have bargained for in Australia. And everything is happy in Happyville... until the clowns come to town.

Carter Ward's adventures continue. Swanhild bids farewell to Eric Brighteyes. And Goodwin and Larry approach the portal.

—Gavin Chappell

Now available from Rogue Planet Press: [*Schlock Quarterly Vol 3 Issue 7*](#)



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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"I'M NOT VERY GOOD AT NON-VERBAL SOCIAL SKILLS, SO IF I TIRE OF THIS CONVERSATION I'LL JUST HAVE TO TELL YOU TO BUG OFF."

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

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

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

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

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THE LEPRECHAUN'S RAINBOW by Aaron Pfau

Part II.

I ran into the kitchen so fast that I almost ploughed into my mom, who stood in the frame of the door holding the screen open. I couldn't wait to tell her all about what had happened to me today. Without even pausing to breathe, I told her about Charlie the leprechaun, the pot of gold, and the four-leaf clover.

"Look! See!" I urged, showing the lucky clover to my mom.

"That's very nice," she replied absently, taking the clover from my hands and placing it carelessly on the shelf above the sink. "Look at you, you're a mess. Go on and get washed up for dinner, but don't wake your father."

"I'm telling the truth," I insisted. "I met a real-life leprechaun. He has a pot of gold and everything. He says that we're going to be rich! Then we'll be able to buy back our old house and dad won't have to work anymore."

"A pot of gold?" mom asked doubtfully, folding her arms sternly across her chest.

"Well, I have to help him find it first," I admitted. "But, trust me, we're going to have nothing but good luck for now on!"

Mom sighed. "I'm sorry, Naomi, I'm just not in the mood for games right now."

"You're the one who said that I should make new friends," I argued. "I thought you'd be happy for me. This is going to help us all!" I felt really upset that my mom wouldn't believe me. She was acting like it was all just a big game or something.

My mom took my hands into her own. "Look, sweetie, I know that you're just trying to help, but what I need from you right now is to help me take care of your father. Not running around chasing some imaginary pot of gold. No magical good luck flowers. Do you understand? I need you here, helping out around the house."

That afternoon, a rainbow stretched across the sky.

After dinner, I still hadn't been able to get Charlie the leprechaun out of my mind. As I washed up the dishes in the kitchen sink, I found myself wondering if I had simply imagined it all. I mean, there couldn't really be an actual leprechaun living in our woods. There couldn't really be a pot of gold. Could there?

Suddenly, Barry started up in the back yard. Bark! Bark! Bark!

"What a weird dog," I grumbled, drying my hands on the dishrag hanging across the oven.

I figured that it had probably started to rain again. Whenever it rains, Barry feels the need to read it the riot act, as if he's protecting us from it or something. But, when I glanced out the kitchen window, I saw that Barry was barking at something else instead.

Charlie the leprechaun stood near the edge of the woods, waving to me. He looked just like a lawn gnome, I thought with amusement.

I dropped the dishrag on the floor and bolted out the screen door I was so excited to see my new friend again. So excited that he wasn't just a figment of my imagination.

Barry was tugging on his lease with his teeth, as if trying to put as much distance between Charlie and himself as possible, barking and growling.

"You came back!" I said, greeting my friend.

"We are friends, aren't we?" Charlie replied warmly.

"Of course," I said, then added reluctantly, "But I'm afraid that I can't play right now. I have to help my mom out around the house."

"If we want to find me pot of gold, we must be fast," Charlie said. "It's not far, but the rainbow won't last."

"Your pot of gold! It's nearby?" I exclaimed.

"My gold can be found at the end of the rainbow," he said, drawing my attention to the sky. The fading rainbow reached to the other end of the woods.

"I'm really sorry, but I can't go with you right now," I repeated. "By the way, my mom said that I'm not allowed to go into the woods."

Charlie the leprechaun looked at me. "You do want to find me pot of gold?" he asked, his voice lower than usual. "After all, we are friends."

I had so many chores! And mom would be so disappointed in me if I didn't finish them all. I mean, she couldn't be expected to do everything around the house. Dad certainly wasn't going to help out. When he drank, he mostly slept all day. He was usually more pleasant asleep than awake.

However, it's hard to turn your back on a pot of gold. That much gold would solve all of our problems.

Barry tugged on my pant leg with his mouth, whimpering.

"The walk isn't far," Charlie added reassuringly. "And us leprechauns are good luck. On my word, you shan't be harmed."

“What’s that for?” I asked, pointing to the woodsman axe that I had just noticed in Charlie’s right hand. He must have been holding it behind his back.

“If you want me pot of gold,” Charlie said again, more direct this time, “we must go now.”

I took a step forward. Barry yelped. He wouldn’t let go of my pant leg.

“Maybe I shouldn’t,” I reconsidered. Walking deep into the woods with a total stranger, without my mom’s permission, didn’t feel right. I mean, I know Charlie was my friend and all, but still.

“You don’t want to?” the leprechaun asked.

“No, I do!” I replied quickly. “But if Barry doesn’t want to, then I can’t go. I never go anywhere without Barry. How else would I find my way back home?”

Charlie’s eyes went from me to my dog. “I see,” he said.

“But we can play later, I promise.”

“Then I will see you later,” Charlie said, turning to leave. Then, over his shoulder, he added, “Both of you.”

That night, as I lay in bed trying to catch sleep, Charlie came to me again.

I had been lying in bed trying to catch sleep, counting backwards from two-hundred, visualizing each number in my head. I can usually put myself to sleep around seventy. However, that night, I found that I couldn’t concentrate on the numbers. When I rolled over to gaze out my bedroom window, I noticed a figure sitting on the sill. It was Charlie.

“What are you doing here?” I gasped, sitting up in bed. I turned on the small table lamp on my night-stand. The lamp bathed Charlie’s face with a yellow incandescent glow.

“Why, I’ve come to play,” he said.

“But it’s too late for me to play right now,” I replied, still nervous from earlier. I was afraid that I had offended Charlie by not following him into the woods. “We’ll wake my mom and dad.”

Charlie leaned forward on the window sill. He looked just like an Elf on the Shelf, I thought. I would have laughed out loud if not for his face. He was frowning. I could tell that he was despite the deep shadow that hid his features as he leaned out of the lamp’s glow. I wondered how long he had been sitting there watching me.

“I know a better place that we can play,” Charlie said. His face may have been angry, but his voice was still jovial. “On the other side of the woods. Come with me to my leprechaun cabin and you shall have every toy that you could ever imagine.” He held his hand out for me to take.

“You don’t understand,” I said carefully, my voice weak and trembly. “I’m not allowed to leave the house after dark.” And that was the honest truth. If my mom caught me, I’d be in a world of trouble.

“I feel like you are lying,” he replied slowly. “I feel like you don’t want to play with me.”

“No, that’s not true at all!”

“I feel like you don’t want to be friends.” His voice wasn’t so cheerful anymore.

“I do!” I said, nodding my head yes rapidly. But, as you could probably guess, I was starting to become afraid of the leprechaun.

“After all,” Charlie contemplated, looking at his fingertips, “I did lend you my four-leaf clover, didn’t I?”

I gulped, grasping the blanket tightly in my hands. I felt really scared. Sweat soaked through my clothes and onto my bedspread.

“Tomorrow we will go to the other side of the woods and play,” Charlie said. It wasn’t worded like a question. Then, he opened the window and climbed out.

I don’t remember falling asleep, but I must have. I awoke to a sound that I hadn’t heard in months.

Laughter. From downstairs. The kitchen. My mom’s laughter.

I ran down the stairs like a kid on Christmas morning, taking them two at a time. I couldn’t believe what I saw when I rounded the corner into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” mom said cheerfully, wearing a sunny smile. She looked five years younger, I thought. “You’ll never believe it. Dad is trying to make breakfast for us.”

“Dad’s making breakfast?” I asked, as if I didn’t even know the meaning of the words.

“Trying is the operative word,” dad said, smiling, flipping a burnt egg over in a saucepan. “I hope you like scrambled.”

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked in disbelief. It was a terrible question. I mean, dad was just trying to do something nice for us. But, given how miserable he had been the past few months, I just couldn’t believe his sudden transformation.

I found myself wondering if it had all been one long bad dream. Not just last night with Charlie, but everything, everything since the move.

“Never better,” dad replied. Then, more soberly, he said, “I know that’s hard to believe. Lately, I’ve put this family through a lot, I suppose. But starting today, things are going to be much different.”

“Tell Naomi the good news,” mom said.

“Huh, what good news?” I asked.

“Well, it seems that the school board is having second thoughts about letting your dad go.”

“Firing me, to tell you the truth,” dad amended, turning off the stove and sliding the Frankenstein’s monster of an omelette onto a plate. “But Chuck Borris called this morning. You remember him? We had him over for dinner that night your mom set the smoke detectors off?”

Mom gave dad a playful shove.

“And it seems,” dad continued, “that the board voted 5-2. In favour of giving me my old job back.”

“Does that mean we’re going to move back into our old house?” I asked, practically shrieking with excitement at the good news.

Dad shrugged, and then smiled again. “I suppose that I can’t be expected to make a fifty-mile commute every morning, now, can I?”

For the first time in months, we ate breakfast as a family. I was so happy that I had almost completely forgotten about Charlie and the four-leaf clover. I mean, we were finally going to move out of this dumpy little town. Far away from this gross house. Far away from Charlie. Everything was going great! But, by dinner time, I noticed that I hadn’t heard my dog barking all day. Practically unheard of for Barry.

I ventured out into the backyard with a bowl full of Alpo. Barry’s favourite.

“Barry!” I called. Nothing. Strange, I thought.

His leash lay in the grass, still hitched to a spike in the ground, but there was no dog attached to it.

“You are looking for your dog?” A light, child-like voice asked. I knew who it belonged to even before I glanced up.

This time, I didn’t feel any delight at seeing my “friend” Charlie the leprechaun. He stood near the edge of the woods, axe in hand.

“Where’s Barry?” I asked him sternly.

“I found your dog wandering around in the woods like a stray,” Charlie said. “So, I took him back to my place to eat and to play.”

“I want to see my dog! I want to see Barry! Bring him back to me!”

“I can take you to him,” Charlie replied. “And we can all play together. We can all be friends.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I said defiantly. “A real friend wouldn’t take my dog like that. I want to see Barry now!” It was the first time that I had raised my voice at Charlie.

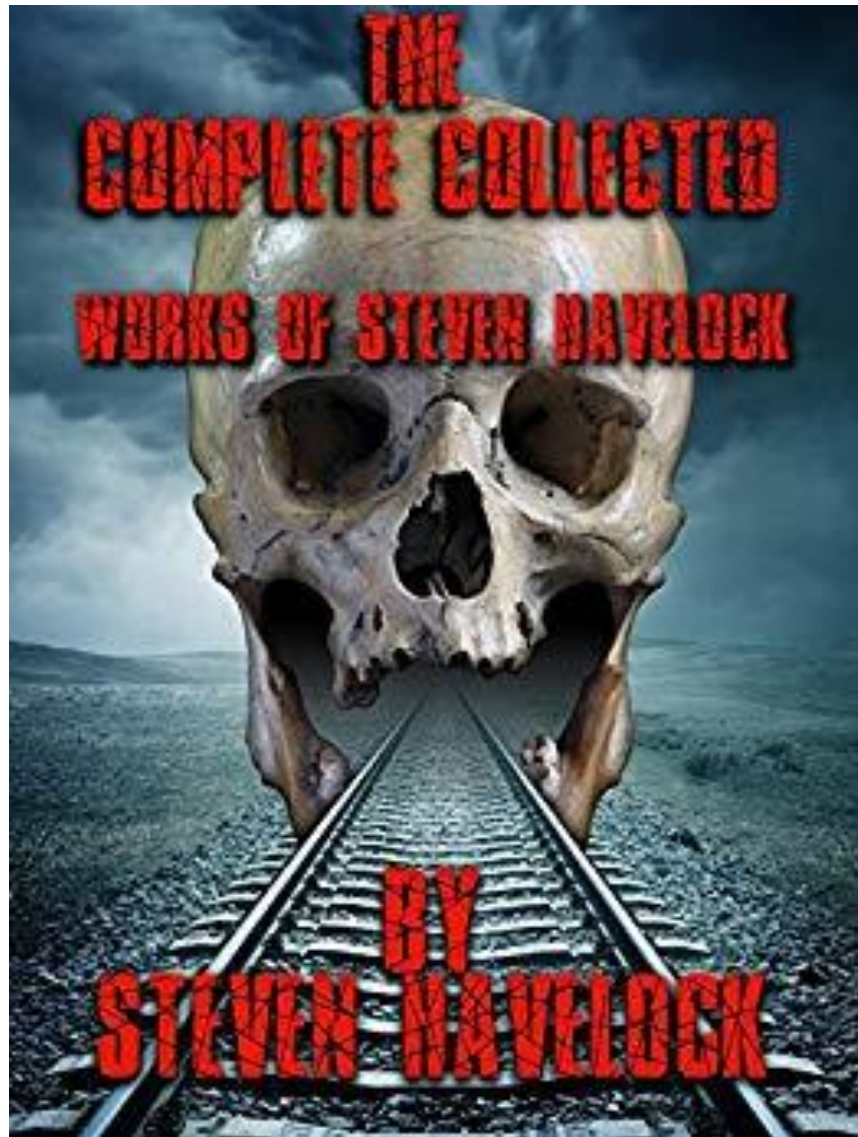
He looked at me for a long time. Even though he stood a few inches shorter, I could feel him looking down on me. A chill tingled the nape of my neck, rousing all of the hair there to attention.

“The next time you see a rainbow in the sky,” the leprechaun said, “meet me here, at the edge of the woods, and we will follow it to its end. There, you will find your friend. That is, if you want to see your dog again.”

“And if I don’t follow you?”

“I lent you my good luck and I can take it back just as easily,” Charlie threatened, grinning sinisterly. He looked up into the sky, studying the clouds. “It will rain soon. I will be expecting you.” He then turned and disappeared into the woods, but not before adding, “We’re going to have so much fun together! All of us.”

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THE OATH OF BRUTUS by Rekha Valliappan

“Although the dream is a very strange phenomenon and an inexplicable mystery, far more inexplicable is the mystery and aspect our minds confer on certain objects and aspects of life.”

Thirteen primates from the Brutus Protocol had broken out of the MIDAS research facility on Baffin Island. Four days ago. Typically, a series of lightning events would have unfolded, in a cumulative domino effect knockdown, to contain the breakout. Such had been the strategy at the height of the Vasnik Rampage. But this time it was zen-like at the laboratories. These were no ordinary creatures. Given their Brut-Thing capabilities the range of their reach encompassed several Sampasans, which was the worry.

The remote island lay in the frozen wastelands of Sampasan VI, inhabited by the Bisquith peoples, a tribe of nomadic monk-like creatures of the outer void. Sam-Government sources were confirming there was no cause for alarm. Life could return to normal. It never did. Special Sera-Forces had been sent to effectively deal with the breakout. MIDAS was in lockdown. While it was speculated that Blackaquus was the region where the fire-throwing gorgons were headed, their location remained unknown.

Every effort made to obtain an interview with the pivotal person in the equation—the unrelenting Director-in-Chief, was to no avail. All that was known was MIDAS was in compliance with all regulatory safety standards for Brutus.

Frustrated and furious, Brutus Mar, the Director-in-Chief of MIDAS was seated in the control station at headquarters on Baffin Island, going over last minute preparations for the interview he was eluding like a shingles attack. It was to air shortly, streamed live from Blackaquus. The perilous location had been deliberately chosen, to bring home to Sampasan households that there was no danger. None whatsoever. He looked worn, a trifle impatient to be gone. Anyone studying him closely could see he was in physical pain, roving the small chrome and stainless steel room in animal-like agitation.

Occasionally he clutched at his sides in agony, like a well-tailored mannequin forced to crawl with giant sea shrimp. The pain was starting up. None knew of his affliction. With advanced pankskree, the prognosis for him was very slim. He had concealed both the disease and the experimentations for as long as he dared. His lifework was not complete. His energy was at record lows. Time had run out. If only he could last out the week. If only...

He pulled a glinting metal tube and spat into it. He pushed a button, closed his tired eye and felt the silicone vent shoot into his mouth a square umbra. If only! It was crushing to see his brainchild fail.

He cast an exploratory eye on the melting clock, rotating time with the face of butter, a large edifice, which could channel his mind to unlock the sprockets of his will.

It was shut! He could not reach his creatures—Brutus Thirteen. Their intel-mind had closed up like a wall. This had not happened before.

Feeling at odds, Brutus willed the anchor Mia to appear, the only journalist he had agreed to, for the interview. He wished it were over. She was with her production crew. A recognized face on Language of Earth and Asteroids Acceleration, she would do. It was a small TV-interlocking station, no bigger than a drone, picked at random. The obstructive grandiosity dispensed by the larger networks, after the Big War V, did not suit the MIDAS drilling-down ideology. But he did not feel as emboldened at the moment, given what had occurred.

A deafening loud gong went off in his third ear, a toxic fury, followed by blue auras. Tinnitus. It felt like a war zone in the days he had manned the space station during

Big War IV. Could it be Brutus Thirteen? He grimaced in agony. It was only the melting watch monitoring his vital signs, with the ringing persistence of buttered time. He could not hold out much longer.

Brutus Mar, the maverick Brut-researcher of multi planetary disciplines, ran the 20-Nth Parallel's experimentation facility in the remote asteroid-axis called Qu-world. The subterranean underground was so vast it extended from Baffin Island in the extreme north, to the Lake of the Woods in the south, at the shared border with their vast neighbours—Sampasan V. None knew of the cavernous interconnections except Mar and the Voda, special scientists, whose work carried on in secret, making Mar's more difficult.

The Middle Institute of Dimension and Space (MIDAS), had been circumambulating in bouts of feverish turmoil for four whole days. Avoiding the hard questions, Brutus had been exploding like a steam boiler whose safety valves had corroded. While the Qu-world waited. Whereabouts of the Brutus Thirteen was critical to public safety. Bisquiths suspected the creatures to have taken refuge in the forbidden swamplands at Blackaquus, where they could stay lost forever. Against his better judgment he had agreed to the interview. It was a waste of time. None of this would return those creatures. He should be at the labs forcing contact, not hobnobbing here.

Mia signalled she was ready. Ordinarily a bold minx in her natural habitat, she was nervous. She had replaced the main host, since the interview had been downgraded, she did not know why. It did not matter. She was told the Director would be difficult. She understood the ropes, buddy up to him. She took her seat hurriedly for the cameras. Her face cracked into a smile. She hoped he noticed. Her long green locks were neatly in place. Her golden eyes shone in metallic disquiet. Manicured fingers nervously held her notes in place. She looked into the cameras, calling for the disc roll, not sure she liked the look of the sparse stainless steel room hurriedly secured for the interview.

“Are we ready?” she signalled the production control room. The interview was being simulcast live via radio signals. It would be picked up by all Sampasan nations I—VI.

“Yes, please begin the interview,” replied Brutus Mar in well-measured tones, indicating his

impatience with a slight wave of his hand.

“Dr. Mar, the world recognizes your immeasurable contributions to academia in the field of Brut-research. Your awards span quartos of outstanding accomplishments in the field of mental repair. Your time devoted to intel-mind and brain function recovery post-trauma are the best known in...”

Brutus smiled mirthlessly. Accolades. He knew the drill. Soften him up. The girl had done her homework. Probably gathered from Dogstar variants, or his website, access to which was normally denied, but in her instance, she would have used Capstone. Cut the crap. Let’s move on.

“Yes, yes,” he mouthed impatiently, “my past is well documented. My books are studied in all Bisquith universities. May I suggest, Ms. Dasma, we skip the formalities and get right down to what you have in mind. Time is not a luxury I can afford. Focus on my current work instead. It’s why we’re here.”

I hear, you grumpy old fart! Just for a second she wavered, uncertain, then in a loud voice carried on as if she had not heard “Would you bring us up to date Sir on what in your expert opinion went wrong at MIDAS? And then would you care to elaborate on your new wonder-drug Voclor and its side effects?” Mia stammered, giving a slight shrug. Mar was going to be difficult. She had been warned. Mar had the unpleasant reputation of walking off sets without granting interviews, depending on his moods. She could not afford to lose him.

Voclor was the potent new ‘cocktail’ manufactured by MIDAS labs. It had been rigorously tested. Then it had stalled. Partly tamped down by news blackout. Partly thwarted by a rival group seeking similar certification. Without Sam-DA approval nothing could be done. Unless MIDAS proceeded with production in secret? To Dr. Mar caught between life and death with his own terminal disease, the death knell had been struck.

Voclor, amplified intelligence at a staggering pace, just as effectively on beasts as man. While, as a doctor of science Mar firmly clung to the timeworn principles of using medicine for the purpose of healing, the other half of him, the side that had feverishly worked the space stations where his bio-rhythms were altered between the two Big Wars fixated on its uses to prolong life. Win-Win for all. Some in the northern parallel were already surviving to two hundred years. Qu-world was not impressed. Mar did not care. His path had been long set. MIDAS was his world, hand in hand with his ideology. The Brutocratic Oath. Voclor was the much-needed miracle answer to enhance quality of life. No mistake.

The field of Brut-pharma was hardly new. The use of chemical processes to alter and stimulate mental performance dated back thousands of years. Long before the Big Wars created the six Sampasans, long before the asteroids collided. The track he followed was always one of schema and orderliness, drugs and devices. Besides, Mar obtained the best results. No doubt of that.

“I work by instinct. Cognitive impairment of the brain has been at the root of all research at MIDAS,” Brutus defended, wriggling to a comfortable position in his chair, his fingers moving

like earthworms in June tunnelling through undigested waste. He was a small-sized man, hunched like a buzzard in the walnut brown over-used office chair.

“But the breakdown in the intravenous testing on the chimps. Your random trials. The creatures have escaped. Why?”

“I am getting to it,” Brutus replied testily, wincing. The melodramatic action scrunched up his face, captured on camera. This was not going as planned. He had a morbid dislike for name-calling. Chimps? You moron, they are more human than you can ever be!

“Please do,” Mia, the prescient critique, could scarcely contain her nervousness or dislike at what she was expected to hear

“I’m going to be direct. This may come as a shock. Here’s what occurred. The vertebrate test samples our laboratories received were compromised. It led to...”

“Director Mar, who botched the planning! Are you now blaming our helpful neighbours for faulty samples? Aren’t they your main suppliers?” Mia studied her notes, rolling her golden eyes in distress, one eye on the melting clock, the other on her dilettante assistant signalling they were out of time.

“I am merely citing the facts. How we review our disc algorithms determine...”

“Sorry to interrupt, Director Mar, but in simple layman terms would you explain why the Brutus Protocol failed?”

“I have a conscience too, Ms. Dasma, despite all your attempts to dismiss my humanity or lack of it. This is not the first time. I do not expect it to be the last. The creatures have my care and protection, despite doubts you express. I will certainly make every attempt to provide adequate explanation. I do not grasp at straws. Our neighbours we do not need to worry about. They have better capabilities that we do. To call the experimentation a failure is getting ahead of ourselves. The fallout as I have succinctly repeated has been contained. At MIDAS we do not deal in hypotheticals.”

“Not when it is hopeless, Director Mar. Not when Qu-world is kept uninformed. Five hundred foot creatures larger than triple-decker Sam-buses are now running amok in streets and neighbourhoods. They are scaring the school children. They carry the contagion. They could storm in here even as we speak. Doesn’t that worry you? Surprise me. Nationwide disarray. Can you explain how six thousand war victims given asylum in the Parallel have simply gone missing? Is it at the hands of your monster prodigies? Rather alarming, wouldn’t you agree, their appetite for meat?”

“Very interesting, Ms. Dasma. We do not comment on the changing structure of our Qu-world. Rest assured, you are in no physical danger. I would not have agreed to Blackaquus if I had thought otherwise. We were made aware of the changes to our test samples ordered only when the regular provider was stopped at a checkpoint. Most unfortunate mistake by our neighbours,

for which they must answer.”

“Unfortunate? Is that what you call it? Is that all you can say? Seven hundred war refugees crowded into an eighty ton truck, to be experimented upon, and...” Her voice shrieked then trailed into silence, fumbling for the right words. She felt herself fuming at her lack of adequacy, at the battle of wills developing, despite her efforts to stay calm. It was weird. The interview was clearly not going as expected. In seconds she would start freaking out, melting. Here! On-Air! Then it hit her. Of course! Mind control! The conniving weasel! She was unprepared. Mar was clearly in charge, at full throttle, his evil genius willing to entangle, to have shot at the game.

Brutus frowned at the pushback he was receiving. Strong woman! He could have used her in his lab. He frowned. He had been promised his tell-all air time. He damn well be sure he got it!

“Voclor has been tested by the best in the field. Make no mistake, our scientists are the very brightest, every one of them, legitimate Voda rankings, on a scale of one-sig. They understand our philosophy at MIDAS. We have come far, despite the meddling. When our neighbour scientist Raddi decided to join, we knew we were in for the most promising of results. Sampasan V is far advanced. His work on brain schisms is extraordinary.”

“Are you referring, Sir, to Professor Dr. Larte Raddi? That scheming Dr. Jekyll the world knows joined MIDAS without mandated Blackstar clearance? Your facility Sir, if I may point out, is no longer secure! Who approved the modifications to Brutus Protocol? Bisquiths have lost their trust.” Mia found herself uncharacteristically ranting, unable to keep her voice from rising.

“And rightly so, if you will spare me a moment to explain Ms. Dasma, rather than going off on a witch-hunt or turning hysterical. Voclor is a wonder drug in many areas.

Approval is expected any day. We have waited a long time for this very moment of victory! Without the miracle drug the setback will be irrecoverable. We believe that Voclor can offer a range of superb derivatives, which we are working on. Each of those can cure many anomalies that are compromising our prolonged longevity. We made the standard call for targeted volunteers. We procured way above target. The war victims.

It was a strategic manoeuvre, well executed by Professor Raddi. All those who have sacrificed their lives in the cause of science will be well remembered. Have no fear, Ms. Dasma.”

He was going too fast for her. “Anomalies? Derivatives? Are you suggesting there are more drugs in the works imitating Voclor? You’re lying, Director Mar. I think not. How were the barriers jumped from vertebrates to invertebrates? Isn’t this a game with you to take Brutus Protocol to whole new levels without necessary approvals? Now we’re all caught flat-footed, because we do not know who among your groups, war victims or creatures, have turned super-intelligent in excess of their normal state! It could be the thirteen primates!” The news anchor rolled her golden eyes desperately to convey her shock. She stood up trembling, as if she was going to run away, unable to express her horror.

“And there you go again with the hysterics and high drama. Really, Ms. Dasma if you will only

make a serious attempt to concentrate, as I have repeatedly assured you our mild and moderate creature divisions at MIDAS have not been affected in any way. Essentially we are all safe. Work has temporarily halted, but only as a precaution. It will carry on as usual, as soon as the lockdown is lifted. Only our advanced non-recovery divisions have been compromised, which is under investigation. A few of our primates escaped. Thirteen to be exact. That is all. For the sake of argument let us concede them Bru-Thing capabilities. They can't get far. I have my intel-mind resources. I have no doubt we will arrive at the bottom of it, even as we speak. All this information is highly sensitive in nature. But for the good of Qu-world I am prepared to share it with our viewers."

"Director Mar, we all make mistakes. But Prof. Raddi was struck off the rolls for the very malpractice you describe? His work focused on mind control experiments, part of POTA project. His techniques included un-patterning the mind, then re-patterning with newer memories. Our war victims are living testimony to his unethical practices. We lost our buffer for the dilution effect. How could you team up with such a monster to produce something similar?"

Brutus Mar blanched, visibly shifting in his seat. Sweat glistened from his brow. He squirmed uncomfortably, pulled out a square piece of cloth which looked like a handkerchief. He feverishly mopped his brow, his fingers puckering. He searched for the silicone vent. He could not hold out much longer. The waves of pain were unbearable.

"I am well aware Ms. Dasma regarding ethical ramifications surrounding Prof. Raddi's brilliant work and the light that you choose to cast to your Qu-world audience. Believe me, I do not endorse any of it. However, I do honour his outstanding achievements. The genius this man possesses is nothing short of brilliant. After thousand years of trying we are at the forefront of our research. Just think. Any positive result we obtain that helps science leap forward is for the common good. I ask all your viewers to join me in celebration. I have gladly done so. Embrace the results, unashamedly!"

"But, Director Mar you did not stop only with chimps. You took it to the gerbils and wax-worms. And then you re-took it to us. We were out of the loop! Now we are all sunk. What drove you to such madness...?"

The screen went blank, flickered briefly. Brutus Mar's face looked pinched, then faded from view.

The news crew at master control called down to the studio room, switching different cameras, other frequencies. Nothing. The communication with Brutus Mar was lost.

Mia Dasma's image filled the rest of the telecast. A paper was hurriedly thrust into her hands. She took a sip of yellow juice, gulping it down in one swallow. Studio cosmetic assistants patted her hair, powdered her spotted nose, checked out her purple lip gloss, signalling with a thumbs up that she was screen ready.

She read into the cameras, "Six days ago the MIDAS facility on Baffin Island went into lockdown. Several creatures escaped in the melee, all altered. Most are contained. Thirteen are

still at large. Malfunctions are presumed to have occurred at the sleep deprivation testing centre. Tunnelling through the labs underground the creatures escaped into Blackaquus. The forbidden area. All thirteen are superiorly intelligenced. They obey no known commands. Bisquiths are warned to stay clear. The creatures are dangerous.

The War Victim Program is being re-examined. Originally launched to house thousands and provide them makeshift shelters at Tri-Angle the preferred location, they quickly became the largest supplier of readymade volunteers willing and prepared to test Voclor, the wonder drug miracle answer to assuage the disorders of Big War V. While users are unaware of its mind-altering qualities and growth augmentation side effects, Sam-Government is taking every effort to check this dependency, more so since it is selling over the counter, marketed by MIDAS as Voclor.”

Mia concluded her announcements. She was trembling. Working in tandem, she signalled Bendy and Dru, her tick-tock camera crew, on the way out. She made for the doors in a hurry. She felt sick.

“I need to get to Baffin Island right now.”

“What? It’s suicidal!” Her Boss-Manager frowned. “You don’t know what’s out there.”

“That’s the reason I must.”

“Winds have picked up speeds. Gusting like a hurricane. Besides you have no real update. What if it’s a virus outbreak? As we first suspected? What if it’s contagious?”

“It isn’t. Didn’t you just see Director Mar? He looked perfectly fine to me.”

“Oh no, he didn’t. That one time he almost slid off his chair sweating profusely.”

“It’s his panskree. He thinks no one knows. He’s in end-stage, for heaven’s sake. How he agreed to give me the interview is beyond me.”

“They’re not human there any more, Mia. They’re all just—uh—creatures. Including your hero, Director Mar. Altered. Contaminating each other. I know how much you worship him, but as your boss I must insist. Don’t go!”

“He promised me the story. He’s out of time. I want that inside look. There’s no one else. I’m the only one left. Besides, Qu-world needs to know. What if we’re all in danger?”

Five more minutes of wrangling and Mia was on her way in the network’s bubble-encased Sam-Magma. In moments the three were jetting over the dark expanse of ocean, buffeted by wild winds, exactly as her Boss-Manager had forecast. They were entering the ghost region of endless night.

Their plan was to land in the harbour, then take the fishing trawler to the inlet at Baffin Island,

one of many docked at the wharves, used for crab and lobster trawling, in better weather.

She had never experienced a flight such as this, yawed and tossed in rotating motion, deflecting sparks of brilliant light bursts. She would never board another when this assignment was through. She glanced wanly at her companions. Dru looked decidedly ill, her face a nasty shade of orange as she barfed into a bag. Bendy the cameraman was faring better. He smiled bravely, an irrepressible twinkle in his teal blue eyes. His calm demeanour was what she clung to most.

They were well into the flight when the pilot intercepted an emergency message from studio headquarters, crackling a warning into their earphones.

Abort mission! Abort! Urgent! Thousands of chimp looking creatures wash up in Bisquith Bay. Area no longer accessible to small craft. Brut-Things have been sighted. Suspect to be the thirteen. Shoot on sight orders are in place. Men in hazmat gear swarming over Baffin Island. Director Brutus Mar cannot be reached. Nor Professor Larte Raddi. Suspect all have fled MIDAS. State of emergency in effect. Residents being evacuated to one hundred thousand miles behind 29-Nth meridian east. No boats available. Return! Immediately!

Mia felt her heart plummet. The pilot looked inquiringly at her, with a what-now? raise to his eyebrows. Seconds ticked into eternity. Torn between indecision and a plan she had every intention of fulfilling, her fingers working at kill-speeds, she pulled up a succession of maps on the console, frantically searching.

Moments into her fevered search she had zeroed in, finding what she sought. Excited, she proceeded to explain as briefly as she could her next plan. As hair-raising as the first, but the only one left, if she was meant to follow the journalist's ultimate religion, to go where the story took her. Within seconds she was making her case to her incredulous Boss-Manager back at headquarters.

"You're going where?"

"Lake of the Woods."

"To do what?"

"Complete the interview."

"Oh for goodness' sake, Mia. Have you taken complete leave of your senses?"

"Say yes! Puh-leez! You won't regret."

MIDAS II! Yes! Where else? The abandoned underground facility. Why hadn't it occurred to her? Perfect hiding location. For the Thirteen. For Dr. Mar. They were never at Blackaquus. The lying, scheming villain. It lay on the border and so far south as to be almost impossible to find. She would trek on foot the underground caverns all the way to Baffin Island if that is what it came to.

Three hours later the bubble-encased Sam-magma low on fuel, executed an impossible landing at the small Northwest Angle Airport in the Tri-Angle inlet. The pilot gave Mia two suns, to fly them back. No more. He could not defy joint orders. Not in a contaminated zone. With curfews declared the region was a tinder keg.

They parted ways, the party of three making their way to the rustic Tomahawk Lodge where they would spend the remainder of the night. An original fishing and hiking lodge in the summer for seasonal anglers dedicated to walleyed pike and bass, the place was dilapidated and seemed empty. They looked around absorbing the strangeness. It was almost dawn. It would have to do. Three hours to stretch their limbs and get some much needed sleep.

Early the next morning they departed, after encountering some initial difficulty.

None of them had slept. The landscape was thick with ice and snow. They were given choice of jeepster or snow-mobilotor by a hibernating koala wrapped in a woolly hide, who could scarcely open his eyes. He mistook them for vacationing tourists jeering at their cluelessness, morosely informing them that boats did not work the winter. *We aren't tourists. Of course we prefer the jeepster. Do we look like snow-mobilotorers?*

The hibernating monk-bear was hard of hearing, so did not hear. *You'll be lucky this time of year to spot a moose or even a wandering caribou. Come to think of it, you do not look like skiers either. Holla! Have you seen me on the Goatskills? Huh? Hmm! Let's see, you do not look like anglers either. What may we be?* Mia almost exploded. At last they were informed snow-mobilotors were the recommended choice, take it from the woolly-bear expert, especially over thinner ice. *You do not want to fall through, although at this time of year our lake waters are secure. Very secure. Like concrete. You don't say.*

After an interminable length of hard-boiled wrangling they secured the much-wanted jeepster, a rusty contraption with peeling paint and weathered seats which jounced and bounced roughly at the smallest touch. Relic from Earth Colony II, before the asteroid strike. The manner in which it took to the frozen ice was far worse than the circular rotations of the plane. But at least, they were on their way.

Dotted with a multitude of islands, the sight of Lake of the Woods' pristine wilderness was unexpectedly pleasant. In no time they grew engulfed in its calm stillness, succumbing to its watchful tranquillity, as untouched it appeared to them as when the first earth explorers had landed. Only they neither had the inclination nor the time to fully absorb the sensations and sights. In due course they were passing other snow-mobilotorers, out for the day, exploring. A couple of cross-country skiers overtook their roaring junk heap with ease, out on their daylight hike.

Bendy covered with his camera as much of the passing scenes as he could. The

Exi Treaty Portage although just a narrow twenty stretch tested their patience sorely. The jeepster broke down thrice and had to be resuscitated. They mistook PowWow Island for the one

they were looking for, and had to detour.

With one sun lost, or wasted, they arrived by nightfall at the haunted mines of

Skottis Island, their final destination, hidden in the centre of the frozen lake. It exuded an air of disquiet, stretching endlessly. Vestiges of broken signage remained, indicating a welcome outpost of centuries ago, set up for the earliest earth hunters, fur trappers and traders. It was clear no one visited this island.

The exhausted trio descended the narrow entranceway, and found themselves underground in a disused space-way, built long ago, which to all appearances seemed to have retained its shape. It was dark and damp within, and smelt strangely. They shone their torches adjusting their sights to the dimness within. The first interior led to another hall. Then a third. And a fourth. They wandered through a maze of passageways, each as vast and empty as the first. Not a table or chair was in sight. No papers or notes. No tubes or bottles. No shelves or crates. No wires or instruments either. Only endless stretches of white broken-tiled walls, yellowed with age, running end to end, eerily.

They had drawn a blank.

After what seemed hours of wandering, in which time stood still, they knew they were lost. They were lost! No one spoke a word when it hit them. They should have arrived at the harbour, underground. But they had not. Each passage had so overlapped into another they had only moved in circles, with no headway.

“HELLO!” Mia yelled, her frustration unmasked. “Is anyone there?”

“Hello!” Bendy echoed, his voice bouncing hollowly. In the darkness of the cavernous interior his teal blue eyes glowed fuchsia.

Dru broke down, weeping copiously. Her nerves were fraught.

“It’s no use!” Bendy sounded despondent. “We have to re-calculate...”

“Shhh!... What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“I thought I heard a scrape, a cough. Listen!”

“Now look here, Mia. We’re under the Bay. Frigid water all around. If you’re going to imagine...”

“Shhh!” she signalled waving her arms, “There it’s again, much closer...”

“Now I hear it... a grunt! Oh, what is it?” Dru had stopped crying, eyes rolling in terror so visible

it was as if she had run into one of the thirteen escaped creatures.

“I’m quite sure...”

A distinct metallic scraping was heard, much louder this time. It was upon them.

“Well! Well! Well! If it isn’t Ms. Dasma, and her loyal entourage...” a familiar voice sounded from close by.

They gasped. Mia spun around twisting towards the sound. Dru screamed. They all turned in the direction of the booming sound. In seconds gigantic shadows of indeterminate shapes filled the interior, looming into view. Bendy shone his torch wildly, unable to focus, the light jettisoning in arcs in the cavernous hideout.

“Dr. Mar?” Mia could scarcely believe what she was hearing. “Is that you?”

A fiendish cackle was heard, drowning all speech. Brutus Thirteen? Then a complete silence, so unreal even the shadowy shapes stopped dancing, and just hovered alarmingly.

“Who else did you expect? You knew you would find me here. I salute your insight into the workings of my mind. Welcome to our humble abode. We are flattered indeed by your unexpected visit.”

“But I don’t see you.”

“You will, my dear. All in good time. But first shall we say we are mutually in agreement on the greatness of science? Isn’t that why you’ve risked life and limb to be here? And may we conclude our unfinished business of the interview?”

Mia hesitated for a fraction, uncertain how to proceed, her mind taking stock. Her moral conscience was in disarray. But this was why she had come. For self-glory. If only she would be permitted a glimpse of the Brut-Things. If only for a second. Her mission would be complete. Would she get her heart’s desire? Would Dr. Mar grant her wish? Of course he would. He was the creator, the most brilliant of scientists to ever walk the face of Qu-universe. The brilliance of his mind-control was unparalleled. He knew what she was thinking, how fervently she wanted this assignment. But was it worth the price she would pay for compromising her principles? She would have made Brutus Mar famous for all time. Did he deserve to be? Wouldn’t she serve Bisquiths better if she dropped all pretence of an interview and settled instead to calling Mar out for the cold-blooded monster he was, the diabolical fiend he had become?

Bendy had the cameras rolling.

“Dr. Mar, I came here for the interview. And that is the truth. But now that I have found you I am not sure I want to proceed with it.”

“Ms. Dasma, your candour is refreshing. After Big War V it is also very rare to find a Bisquith as

outspoken as you. Most Bisquiths hide in the shadows. I could not agree more. I would have preferred we meet in more amicable circumstance. But such is Qu-life. In this instance we must settle for less to do more. If you could look to your right.”

The group turned in unison as the entire wall lit up in white fluorescent brilliance revealing a metallic room encased in a sheet of translucent glass. Mia gasped. So he had been here all along, watching them. So close. Deserter! She had imagined him everywhere else but here.

“And now to get to the meat of our presentation so that we begin, may I offer the greatest scientist of us all, Professor Larte Raddi? Dr. Raddi, Ms. Mia Dasma. She is an outstanding journalist. I am optimistic and rely on her greatly to do her part.” Brutus Mar spoke in the manner of a music conductor elucidating a symphony of musical scores, making every attempt to sound nonchalant and cheerful.

Into the radiance stepped a tall gaunt-shaped ferret. He appeared to float like he was moving on casters to where Dr. Mar remained stiffly standing. Mia expected to recognize him in an instant. She had seen many photographs of a young Raddi, blond, white-eyed, muscular, although he shied away from cameras and rarely gave interviews. She was mistaken. Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw—an aged Raddi. His pointed face and body structure were completely gunmetal sheathed. Not even his eyes were visible. He was unrecognizable. They certainly made a good pair.

She glanced at Bendy, her cue, not wishing to waste the moment, hoping he was filming. She need not have worried. Bendy knew his job well. He was an expert of relevant moments.

“May we begin?” Prof. Raddi politely inquired, in the same measured metallic voice of Director Mar’s. The harder she listened the more she could not distinguish one speech from the other. How odd! Like talking to a pair of clones. She hesitated for just a fraction longer, her pause noticeable even to herself. Then she plunged right in.

“Is Brutus Thirteen here? Those sounds. Is this their lair? Thousands are dead Director Mar. Bodies are washing up...”

“We know, Ms. Dasma. It is unnecessary to describe the situation. The distress this has caused us at MIDAS is immense. As I have repeatedly attempted to explain, for final stage trials to succeed...”

“Succeed? You’re failures! Both of you. How could you possibly call it success? Without approvals?”

“Prof. Raddi, I will let you take this query. Ms. Dasma is prone to frequent hysterical attacks.”

“Very well. Thank you, Director Mar. We required a volunteer, just one, for end stage, who would understand how far we have reached, who would consent to the full spectrum of risks, who would be proud to share in our success. We thought these would be Brutus Thirteen. All would have been saved. Unfortunately...”

“But how do you know this? Do you have this one volunteer? Who is it?”

Prof. Raddi hesitated to reply exchanging meaningful glances. In that instant Mia knew.

“Are you telling me it is you?” Mia gasped incredulous, her voice shaking, eyes widening in disbelief as the scale of what was being revealed.

“Correct. The final trials started two weeks ago. We needed a volunteer fast. With Thirteen unavailable...”

“You consented to experiment on yourself... with Voclor?” Mia’s voice dropped to a whisper, eyes brimming.

“It’s a wonder drug like no other. Do not think badly of me. Science through the ages has always shown us the way. From Polusc to Roth, brave men of medicine who laid down their lives to experiment on themselves. Advancements would never have been possible if these great men had not put themselves at risk for the principles of medicine they held dear. I humbly follow in their great footsteps. The glare of public scrutiny will be intense and unpleasant. But the magnanimous spirit of Bisquiths reside in us all. I’m prepared. I commend you for your devotion to duty.”

“But why? Why?”

“The world knows I am dying. MIDAS knows I do not have time left. In fact hardly any. You personally have known it for some time Ms. Dasma. My work has been my life. It is nothing new. Critical and of absolute importance to me. If we had waited for approvals in the normal process crucial time would have been lost, which, as you know I do not have. A decision was taken.”

A lengthy silence followed. Mia, too stunned for words was bereft of speech for the first time in her line of work. She found she could no longer even wax hysterical.

Processing it in her mind produced blanks. The physician had turned on himself. What could she ask? She felt a helpless rage. He had made the ultimate sacrifice, enjoined with Brutus Thirteen.

Director Mar indicated with a wave of his hand that the interview was at an end.

Prof. Raddi more stiff than before creakily drew the sick scientist to his feet. She saw Dr. Mar stagger slightly, held upright by his colleague.

“I will expect you to do your job, Ms. Dasma, as you must. I thank you for it. So does MIDAS. All I ask before we depart is that you grant me three days. THREE. Do not break the story before! Not to anyone. By this time the final experimentation will be complete. Can I count on you?”

A chill ran through her, a chill so cold her veins turned to ice. She could not remember if she nodded her assent. She must have.

“On Day Three victory will be mine. I will reach you. Just think of it—the fame. The success. All this that you now see will be forgotten, the dead bodies, Brut-Things, creatures, war victims, the tragedy. You will be the toast of journalism. Can you feel the aura? Of course you do! Success always comes to those who seek, at a price if it must, remember my words, Ms. Dasma...” Director Mar’s metallic voice was growing faint. Mia was having difficulty in understanding the garble. It was breaking up.

“Oh yes... exit... left passageway... outside... not tarry... afraid... thirteen... out of control.”

Mia felt a rush of freezing air. The lights started to die out. Fingers cold as ice brushed her throat. She scrambled in panic. So he was keeping her alive because he needed her to announce to the world his victory? What of her companions? Were they expendable?

The two scientists withdrew, gliding peculiarly on what looked like motorized prosthetics. What else could it be? And Mia found her voice.

“Wait! Wait! Professor Raddi! What are you?” She could not recall what prompted her outburst. Something about their smooth walk. Something in their appearance. Something in the way they looked at each other. Something in the way they moved in sync. Whatever it was she had been unable to control her outburst. Bendy rolled his eyes in desperation, signalling not now! He did not like this entire operation. Or the place. Ordinarily he knew Mia well enough to trust her instincts although there were times she took him unawares. Like now!

“I am R-A-D-D-I Product 9560002137. Manufactured by MIDAS Brut. Programmed for auto-response,” Raddi was mechanically replying.

“An exoskeletal-bot?” Mia was having difficulty in registering she had been conversing with a bot. A shiver ran up her spine at the implications. These were no Bisquiths. Was Dr. Mar a bot too? Had she been conversing all this while with machines? So where were the real Raddi and Mar?

RaddiBot turned towards her advancing in loud steel clanks. Now that she knew what he really was he looked menacing. She turned helplessly to Bendy, seeking a means of escape. There was none. She was trapped. They all were.

“Do not resist, Ms. Dasma. All programs are fully functional in our structures,” RaddiBot was explaining metallically.

Mia felt her golden eyes grow molten hot like her brains were being skewered.

Her temples started throbbing as if a steel hand was reaching into her cranium pulping what was inside. Her head was ready to explode. The fire-eaters!

“I am sorry, Ms. Dasma. You’ve had a shock. Try to understand...” Mar was apologizing from what seemed far, far away.

Mia tensed. A strange light-headedness seized her. Almost against her will she found herself being dragged towards the glass wall turning opaque. What lay beyond? The dark shadows of moments ago had returned, turning markedly visible. A fiendish chatter arose as if the passageway were being invaded by thousands of primates.

RaddiBot rolled in closer, faster. The closer he came, the greater the gravity force of his metallic exterior pulling her through the glass. Mia struggled, grasping at Bendy, who had flung camera aside to hold onto her. Despite the struggle she felt her hand dissolve in an instant into the patina of glass. This could not be happening. A second longer and she would vanish within. Together with Bendy who was desperately clinging. She screamed at Dru to assist. The young assistant had fallen onto the floor in a crumpled heap.

“Please, Ms. Dasma. We could do without the theatrics. Control yourself. Here at MIDAS we follow the rules. You may leave now. And hurry. Your work awaits you,” Mar’s voice was saying, still floating from afar. The hypnotic trance seizing her broke. The unnatural screeching and whining ceased. RaddiBot evaporated, floating on casters to take his place quietly alongside a fast fading Brutus Mar. The shadows vanished. The threat dissipated as brilliant white light with one final burst was snuffed out, plunging them in pitch darkness.

Mia broke down in sobs. Bendy was staring at her transfixed, the retrieved camera hanging limp in his hands. He was speechless.

“Did you get that?” was all she could say when she regained composure.

“How could I?” replied Bendy helplessly, “I was trying to save you, remember?”

“Pity! We could have done a lot with that footage.”

“Yea. Mind control. Boy, does it work!”

Qu-world mourns the sudden death of brilliant scientist, Dr. Brutus Mar, known for his outstanding achievements in the field of anthro-genetics. His lifetime of work will continue under his mentor and associate Professor Larte Raddi. The lockdown of Brutus Protocol has been lifted. MIDAS is an equal opportunity institute. Bisquiths are encouraged to apply. Blackaquus continues to be designated a danger zone and is a threat to the community. The fate of Brutus Thirteen remains unknown. No links to Baffin Island have been noted in the recent tragic deaths of various species at Bisquith Bay. The War Victim Rehabilitation Program is deemed a success. With the recent approval of Voclor it is envisioned more successes are in store for Qu-world under the able leadership of Prof. Raddi.

In a small studio a TV journalist would mourn the unexpected demise of Dr. Brutus Mar. But for

different reasons. She has been robbed of her final glory. The brilliant scientist who was to have made her famous on day three ironically would be dead on day two!

Ironically he would die not of panskree as he had feared, but betrayed by his own Voclor, meant to bring him end stage success. That last interview he had promised her would remain in the annals of historical might-have-beens—forever a bitter memory.

THE END



Available from [Amazon](#).

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TRANSMOGRIFICATION by Peter Foster

How must it feel to turn into a Zombie and become the vicious, relentless beast of legend? To live purely for the slaughter of the living, killing them without mercy, is a terrifying prospect. And to do so without having the mental capacity to question your actions renders us fearful of these lumbering creatures of evil.

But as you stare at the festering wound on your arm, would you be able to recognize your final moments as a human, with ideals and dreams fading away, before they are replaced by a surging, unhinged violence which cannot be sated? The yellowed eyes see only the next blood-splattered meal, with humans only registering as just another food source. The expression changes from dislike to hatred to bloodlust as your loved ones scream in terror as you cross the appalling Rubicon into Undeath. Your lips fold back, baring your teeth, as you advance upon friends and family but recognizing no one. The stiffening of muscle, aiding physical strength, contrasts markedly with the weakened brain, reduced to little more than pulp, as you claw your way towards your next victim, snarls escaping between your bloody lips.

To know you're infected with the Zombie Virus means a lingering death sentence, brought into effect as the incubation period is finally ended. Your eyes close and your last feelings of rage and fear are hopelessly confused. You feel sick with worry, shaking with the knowledge of what awaits you.

Later...

Your eyes snap open and a bloody grin creeps over your face. For a short while you lie there gazing up at the grey sky with its dark, brooding clouds and brief glint of sunlight. Your dull eyes are momentarily distracted by birds squabbling up in the tree tops before human activity finally rips you from your torpor. Your grin widens as you embrace a satanic call of the wild, mindless and fearless, as you struggle to your feet. Other corpses, also risen, stagger towards the terror stricken civilians while your clawed hand catches hold of a young man who struggles to break free but fails. Your eyes, relaying little to your destroyed brain, lock upon the subdued male who seems to have frozen in fear, accepting his ghastly fate.

Blood covers your mouth, with more trickling down your clammy forehead, as you feast on the glistening entrails of the fallen man. Bodies lie everywhere with ghoulish figures leaning over each one as they tear the flesh from the still-warm cadavers. Growls and snarling fill the air as corrupted bodies embrace the insanity of what is unfolding. The trees sway in the weak breeze, with their leaves whispering softly—a backdrop of normality while all else is chaos. In the High Street, blood trickles into the gutter, some of it finding its way into a rusty grating in the road where it falls into the Stygian darkness. Standing in your bloody clothes you stare into a shop window and watch the TV screens with vacant eyes. The straggly meat of a consumed rat hangs from the corner of your mouth and you turn clumsily upon hearing movement behind. You celebrate another death with a savage cackle while the town dies around you. Its shattered windows twinkle in the dying light as dusk closes in. Screaming merges with the car horns from wrecked vehicles; some are overturned, while others burn brightly with smoke billowing out from beneath crumpled metal.

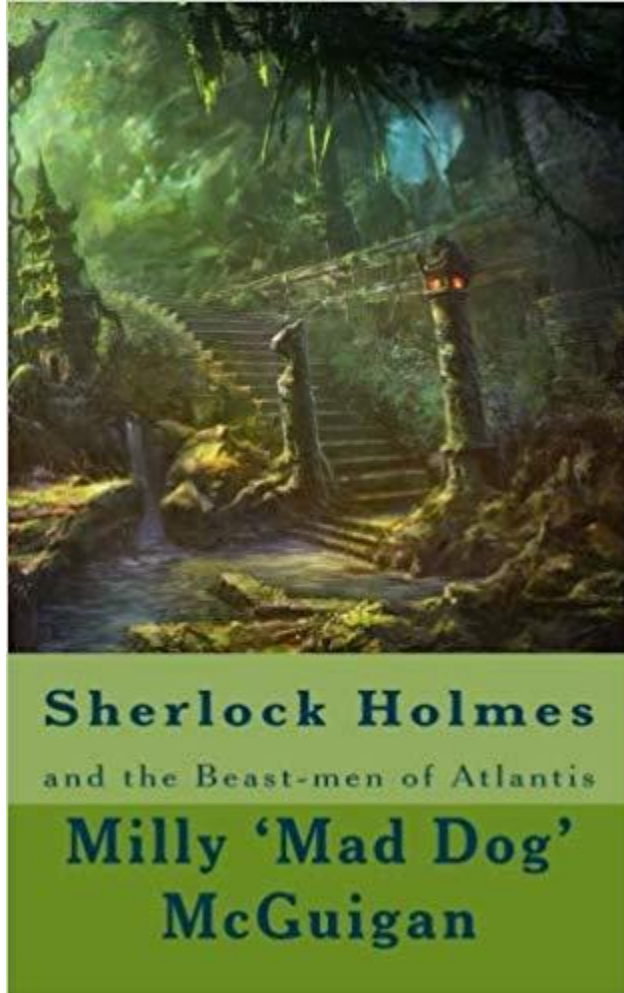
A droplet of blood drips from your thumbnail and falls onto the face of an elderly woman, her face still caught in a silent, endless scream. Her shopping bags lie nearby with meals for one spilling out of the torn plastic. But you stare at this uncaringly, uncomprehendingly as you bite through her fingers one by one...

But how did this cataclysm arrive? Was it through a particularly virulent strain of rabies? Or, perhaps, a military experiment gone wrong? Given Man's track record of widespread inhumanity—even with our rational brains—it seems quite possible that if there ever is a terrible Contagion then it may well be because of a government's meddling in genetics. This prospect is extremely unsettling when one considers the fact that scientists are often reckless individuals only too eager to try out new drugs on an unsuspecting society. Today's test subject guinea pigs could be tomorrow's flesh-ripping Zombies eager for a taste of human meat.

So what about you, now you've transmogrified into a rabid killer?

You're now in the story as just another grotesque with a dead mask face overseeing the collapse of humanity. It's irrelevant to you how this started, and irrelevant to you how this will end.

THE END



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THE AMAZING DEAD by GK Murphy

Paranormal investigators George Lee and Amanda Clements accompanied 85-year-old Irish-born priest, Father Rowan Presley, into the deserted churchyard situated in the tiny hamlet of Corn Borough, just ten miles from the big city. In fact, it was not a long drive away from the Sydney Opera House, in of all places, spook-ridden Central Australia. George and his English colleague Amanda, who were here in Oz investigating three such cases at the moment, had taken special interest in this one in particular. Because of its shock value, they sure as pie made it a priority.

Not a wise choice entering the cemetery at night, but didn't that add to the fun for the two young ghost hunters?

However, tonight, ghosts and such were not on the cards for the intrepid 26-year-olds, eager for one sighting at least, given their usual discoveries of meagre bumps and shrubbery shuffles in the wee small hours. But, it was these slightest of movements that were their bread and butter, and which they had to document in their notebooks and laptops, so they possessed the advantage of holding occasional debates on their trips abroad (on college funds), or on their latest adventures and escapades in their bi-quarterly University lecture, or completing dissertations for wily Professor Dunn, also a paranormal junkie out for glory, who welcomed all input from students eager to shine a light on this enigmatic subject—in particular, the proof ghosts existed.

Anyone would have thought, this being Australia, it would have been warm. Yet, at ten after midnight, it was so chilly that the elderly clergyman could hear his bones creak.

George Lee was the most impressionable out of the pair whereas his female cohort proved more steadfast and grounded as the more pessimistic of the two. This was never proved an exemplary trait for those dabbling in exposing the Supernatural, unless they secretly harboured the desire to expose the entire premise as fake.

Father Presley reached into his overcoat pocket and extracted a small silver hipflask filled with brandy. He wiped his lips with his right arm and immediately took a mouthful, belching delightfully.

George and Amanda raised their eyebrows and smiled ever so gently at the old boy.

A murky fog enveloped the cemetery, almost as if some kind of welcome for the three. However, it was perhaps not this but instead a warning to go no further but turn back, retrace their steps in the swampy sludge and treacherous mire of the yard which could have swallowed up humans whole. This danger might have relinquished their mission to expose anything untoward they may discover hereabouts. George shivered and said, "Is it just me or has it just turned much colder over the last two minutes?"

"You big girl," Amanda said with the hint of a smile, "And we're in Australia, of all places. Just down the road we have the Sydney Opera House."

The priest shook his head. He said, “No, lass, he’s every word correct. Never underestimate the forces of evil and their vile tricks. The spirits work in mysterious ways, indeed. And yes, I brought you into the yard for a specific reason tonight.”

Amanda said, “And perhaps you’d explain that reason to us now? We’ve come all the way from England to wind up in this cesspit of weeds and mud, and thus far you’ve clarified nothing whatsoever. Maybe we should just turn back and reboot the fact we are here for a holiday in the sun.”

George jumped, hearing a sound.

“Fuck me,” he gasped, “What was that?”

“They’re here,” Father Presley said, eyes wide and slack-jawed, immediately taking another slug of brandy, “I do believe we are not alone...” He glanced at his wristwatch, “...We’re fifteen minutes past the Witching Hour already.”

Amanda scolded George, “And you told me this was nothing to worry about. You told me we needed no equipment. Jesus, George...”

“We can document everything once we get back to the hotel,” George snapped back, “Don’t break my balls, Amanda. We’ve been in this situation before. We’ve always pulled through. Remember, it’s the living that can harm you, not the dead.”

The priest chuckled, “You really believe that bullshit?”

Stunned, Amanda said, “And you call yourself a man of the cloth. You use disgusting language and drink like a raging alcoholic. I’m shocked—and you should be ashamed, Father Presley!”

George snorted, “I’ve seen worse. Professor Dunn drinks like a fish and all his students think the sun shines out of his arse. Who knows, in thirty years’ time, maybe sooner, we might find solace in the bottom of a bottle.”

Another noise, somewhere in the yard, like a woman’s squeal, like somebody in pain—and then, in another direction nearer to the three of them, a guttural low moaning, not from one source, but many.

The priest laughed, “They’re emerging from the earth around us. You will find you have no place to run to, children. Tonight, my work is done. Tonight, I will feed you to my masters.”

Realization struck like a lightning bolt and George said in anger, “You bastard—you brought us here, it was a trick—you knew this would happen.”

Presley grinned, and the young investigators winced as they observed his yellowing teeth. They noticed with sickening horror the front two were missing. The priest laughed, “You’re not the first. You won’t be the last.”

George noticed he was standing on a grave. A body was currently emerging from the thin layer of top soil, first the arms and shoulders, then the corpse's craggy and ruined face. Be assured, this body was one long-since deceased, buried in its plot many years ago. Yet, for something so long dead and starved of activity and oxygen, there was some rare vibrancy to this pathetic, shambling abomination. It had discovered a renewed strength. It possessed a new and almost childlike curiosity in the world around it as it gazed up at its potential meal—since it was about this with all the hungry dead, the flesh, the blood, the sweet brains.

As the priest howled with demonic laughter, the two investigators made a run for it. But they did not anticipate the glorious vision. It simply beggared all belief. It stunned George and Amanda into a total state of stillness as they drew to a halt and looked on in awed horror.

In seconds, the deadly corpses had risen above their once-occupied graves and now floated like ridiculous, bloated balloons, hovering over the graveyard, their faces dishevelled and devoid of flesh. Yet, they somehow appeared to grin like psychotic lunatics starved of flesh and the glorious taste of blood they had long-missed for so many years—or rather, since the last time Father Presley fed them. In essence, these very simple, stark creatures amazed in their grace of movement, as they hovered and negotiated the air above the yard. One by one more and more of these amazing dead emerged from the ground.

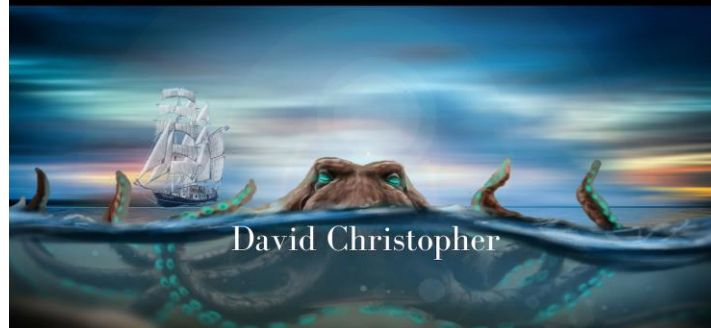
Blood cascaded and spurted as the first of these creatures twisted the head off George's neck and shoulders in order to catch the flow in its mouth. Other monsters set about this decapitated head, feasting on delicacies such as nose, lips and eyeballs, cracking the youthful skull against a nearby grave-marker to spill the brains.

Grinning like a crooked Cheshire cat, Father Presley raised his brandy flask and drank, as Amanda scarpered into the night screaming. The spirits and floating abominations gave chase, and the priest quipped, "Bon appetit..."

THE END

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BOUNCY CASTLE... OF EVIL by Rob Bliss

(For Louise)

It was exactly one-storey tall. And the story it would come to tell was one of horror.

It was a sun-shiny day in Happyville. Birds were chirping symphonies which would never be recorded by Man. Animals tittered and frittered and ate only plant matter to help spread seeds. No flesh was consumed; no blood was shed.

Yet.

Little Timmy Bachenshurkeneinenraj was having his seventh birthday party, and all of the children on Neighbourly Avenue were invited. Parents made various salads—macaroni, coleslaw, chicken, tuna, Greek, three-bean, spicy salsa and corn chip, Caesar, and many others. A long set of tables lined end-to-end were draped with colourful birthday paper and held the multitude of salads, property of the moms. The dads all gathered around the barbecues rolled over from several porches to cook plenty of hot dogs, hamburgers, sausages and any steaks or larger cuts of meat anyone wanted to supply.

It was the human beings who brought the edible flesh.

Everyone pitched in to keep costs down. Generosity should not put a family in debt. It was Timmy's birthday, after all, a day of joy and love and happiness and free delicious meat.

Or so it would seem.

The moms sipped fluorescent drinks that tickled their noses and gave them hot flashes. The dads drank beer and belched. Some of the dads checked out some of the moms who were not their wives; some of the moms watched their children and told their husbands to do something, so the dads stomped away from barbecues to threaten unruly children and to give the occasional cuff behind the ear.

The bouncy castle arrived on a long flatbed truck with a forklift attached to the end. Many over-the-limit dads had to get car keys from their wife's purses to move their cars and open a gap for the truck to back in and extend a loading ramp. The dads wanted to tell the castle crew where to put the castle and how best to unload it, but they were too often distracted when their wives reminded them that they were fathers who needed to watch children and to discipline them if the little shits got in the way of either the truck or the crew.

The castle crew were three strapping youths who inadvertently inspired lust in many moms and envy in many dads. They wore tight shirts advertising "Crazy Clown Party Rentals" and cargo shorts which showed vague outlines of thickly curled penises. They were almost triplets, and if one got close enough to them, one would see that the crew each had black irises laced with an eerie tint of red.

They were evil. Pure evil. And they didn't care who knew it.

In only half an hour, the bouncy castle was positioned and inflated and ready to be inhabited. The crew shook hands and traded smiles with the many dads and moms, but they soon drove away. Dads were too drunk to move their cars back and assumed no vehicle would get ticketed or towed on such a lovely day. Moms watched their children stream into the castle and begin to bounce. Then they backed away so as not to be injured by the immense, moving behemoth, and headed to the alcohol table to freshen their drinks.

The parents watched the happy children scream and laugh, then started trading stories about air mattresses and Caribbean vacations and innertubes sliding down snow hills, and whatever else came to mind. The alcohol was hitting many of them. The moms ate many hot dogs or sausages—or had one cut in half to share, not feeling too hungry, watching their waistlines—and sampled the salads of their friends, but not those of their secret enemies.

The dads ate meat. And were told to put a little of their wife's salads on their plates, even if they weren't going to eat it. Then wives would pull their husbands along the tables and spoon chosen salad samples onto their husband's plates as they praised the ingenuity of salads which they may or may not have tasted themselves. Many of the wives picked off of their husband's plates, while their own remained empty to show discipline. Often, a husband would sample—and prefer—the salad of one of his wife's enemies. He would go back for seconds. Husbands were always hungry, so they just ate and stood in a wide circle facing each other, or some would face outward towards the castle so that their bellies didn't touch. They rarely wondered—until later at home when they were cornered—why their wives weren't talking to them.

But upon this day, there could be more—oh, much much more—for parents to discuss when they returned to their homes ... if they ever did.

A child began crying from within the bouncy castle. Paper plates were abandoned on tables and fingers sucked as mothers rushed to the inflated purple entrance of the castle. Those mothers who had arrived first relayed back pertinent information. It was not know whose child had been injured. There were so many children inside and they were all talking at once, trying to answer the many voices belonging to the many faces poking through the shuddering doorway to retrieve as much information as possible.

The injured child was told to come forward, to show themselves for positive identification. Other children were told to stop bouncing. They did not. Tempers revved up. Some of the mothers who had arrived early at the castle doorway threw up their hands and said they were fed up, they didn't know whose child it was. Those mothers vacated their perfect positions. Drunk parents abhorred a vacuum. Mothers pushed their way in, some falling into the castle.

Children laughed and bounced harder. Which didn't make anything better. Laughter never did.

Insulted, mothers told children not their own to stop bouncing and come out of the castle immediately, fun and games were fine until somebody got hurt. Another child cried. More mothers pushed into the castle, shoving children aside, trying to see around bodies to find the

criers. Drinks were spilled. Cautions were given that drinks should not go inside the castle as glass could break and the castle pop and did anyone know how much something like that cost? A lot, was the answer.

Children continued to bounce, because they could. And because it was fun and some of the mommies couldn't get back onto their feet. The bouncing knocked other smaller children off their feet and kept them from getting back up which was frustrating and made them cry because the bouncing of the bigger children was even more fun if it could be used as a weapon. The children were learning ... growing strong.

More crying erupted beneath the wobbling ceiling of the castle, from all corners. Some mothers were sure they had recognized the cries of their own children, so they pushed inside. Drinkless hands lashed out to grip ankles and trip mothers climbing over mothers. Some of the children who had formerly laughed at the grown-ups seemingly wanting to play children's games now cried seeing their mothers pulling the hair of other mothers and saying bad words.

Salads were insulted.

The dads noticed eventually that something was going on with the womenfolk. A few grabbed another beer and wandered over to assess the commotion. Some moms let dads through, but the deeper into the crowd meant that the dads would get nudged and their beers spilled.

They called to tell the ladies to come out of the castle, nothing would get solved by everyone cramming inside, that they'd probably break it, and that it must've cost a pretty penny.

Dads tried to finish their beers but too often the beer was spilled down shirts and shorts and bare hairy legs and onto rubber sandals. The bottles were knocked from hands and rolled under sandals and wedged heels.

From a distance, it looked as though a dad no longer married to a mom had knocked that mom to the ground, where she was quickly swallowed by the undulating mob. This view brought other dads away from barbecues and the rare addictive salad (salsa and corn chip) to assess and assist in the crisis.

The majority of the adults soon congregated around the doorway of the castle. The children were trapped inside. They wept and wailed and fell over each other and could not get up, even the bigger kids. As mothers saw and heard the helplessness of their children, panic gripped them and they pushed deeper into the castle as other mothers tried to push their way out with their child held on their hips.

Fighting amongst mothers continued and grew into a battle, and children were dropped to the soft castle surface where some of them landed safely and fought their tears then started bouncing once again.

The fight of the mothers brought forth the masculine fury of the fathers. War had enveloped the bouncy castle on all sides. Beer bottles were emptied without being consumed, then smashed to

use as blades. Beer bellies were cut, faces slashed, arms twisted into arm locks mimicked from professional wrestlers, and fistfights danced across the lawn.

Whether it was from a piece of glass, an ostentatious wedding band, a fallen earring, a salad fork, a manicured nail, or a child's tooth knocked free, no one could source how the hole began. But, lo, the hole did grow, stretched by air pressure and the battering of human limbs.

The bouncy castle began to deflate. Its roof and pillars crumbling softly, folding to suck the walls inward or slant them outward. The adults and children caught inside became the meat in the burger, and their horrified cries were soon muted as polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, fabric covered their faces, sucked tighter with each breath.

Hands clawed and gagged mouths screamed against the rubbery surface of the castle, but without air to keep it aloft, the full weight of the structure bore down on the bodies inside and slowly squeezed the life out of them.

Outside, little battles raged on. Fighters joined fights they had not been invited into just to draw blood and feel young again. Wrestling and boxing and martial arts moves seen on television and in movies were tried out to see how effective they really were. Some who couldn't maintain the stamina a fight demanded hit the ground and stayed there, blood-sugar out of whack, spots of flashing light swimming in vision before blackouts put some to sleep. False teeth were knocked free, toupees ripped off, glasses were twisted off faces and trampled.

A father grabbed a father to press his face to the hot black grill of a barbecue—and hammered down the lid. Grabbed a bottle of mesquite-flavoured Texas-style barbecue sauce and added it to the scorching flesh before holding down the lid again and letting the black socks and Crocs kick.

A propane tank was unhooked from a barbecue hose and the gas lit with a Zippo lighter etched with "World's Greatest Dad" on it tethered to a belt by a retractable line. The impromptu flamethrower erupted the backs of sweaty shirts and bubbled tanning bed torsos, bleeding off chest and breast freckles and suspicious, raised moles. Until a well-thrown, shatterproof bowl of raspberry and walnut spinach salad (which few had touched except to pluck out the odd berry) exploded against the flamethrower wielder's head. Who dropped himself and the propane simultaneously, one burning the other.

A mother pawed the air with bloody fingers, her eyes torn out and painted with washes of crimson, a foreign false nail dangling from her lower eyelid, half glued on with blood. She called out for her child, but the child never heeded the call.

Broken bodies crawled to and over the dead, finding enemies who still lived, and mashed teeth into cheeks and jugulars, chewed off lips, swallowed caked-on cosmetics, ate bloody potato salad. Bellies had been split open to expose undigested food held cupped in the bowels of severed stomachs, streaked with meat juice and the yellow-red-green of mustard, ketchup and relish. Eyes stared sightless at the patterns made by tree leaves waving in the breeze, blocking and unblocking sunlight.

Flies gathered before all of the dead had a chance to die.

Blood washed the mown green grass and was splashed up white fence pickets. Before the war, a brand new John Deere push mower had been brought out to be enjoyed visually and discussed in detail by the fathers. Now, its blades were clotted with human skin and tufts of scalp, gasoline spilled and set alight to scorch one half of a fallen woman's torso, her right breast exposed, her polyester golf shirt singed brown, fibres curled and turned to burnt plastic.

No cavalry arrived either to stop the war or tally the dead. Police, fire and ambulance all knew the avenue, were all citizens of Happytown (formerly, Happiton; formerly Habit-On-The-Green; formerly Hellton; formerly Hell), and had either joined the joyous celebration—at their own peril—or had stayed away since their children had not been invited.

Timmy was dead. As were his parents. No one was left alive to bury the corpses.

The “Crazy Clown Party Rentals” magi returned, backed their flatbed through the maze of toppled and burning cars and minivans and SUVs to extend their ramp down onto a remaining patch of uncluttered, unbloodied grass. The crew had done it all before and were now professionals. As with coroners, the dead did not faze them; they even somewhat enjoyed the smell.

Emptying the collapsed castle of its corpses involved hooks on long poles and the forklift that came with the flatbed. Once the bodies were hooked and pulled free, the forklift offered a standard courtesy and piled the corpses into a pyramid on the lawn, to be claimed later by various relatives. Someone would eventually notice the dead and begin cold-calling family members, but such a duty was not in the contract agreed upon (and signed in triplicate) between the birthday boy's parents and the bouncy castle crew.

They cleaned the castle of blood and cake and salad and gristle, and a Satanic prayer was quickly intoned by the crew to freshen the structure's evil.

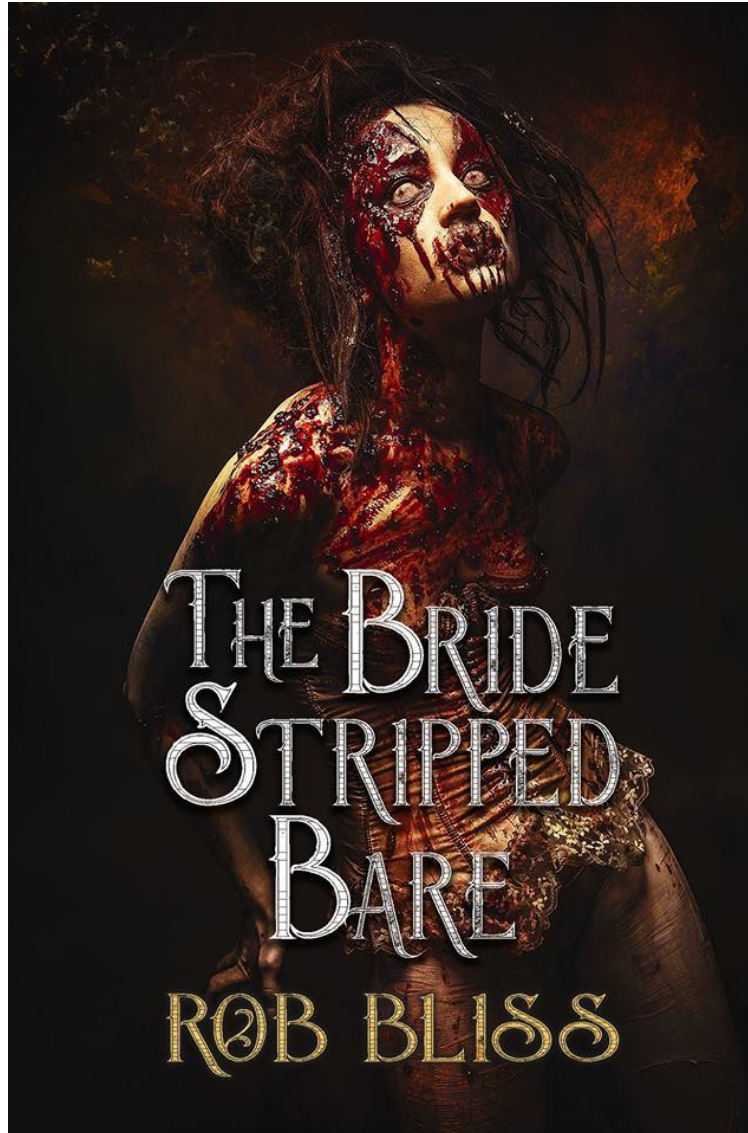
The castle was then rolled up using cables and a winch. Then the long, heavy roll was bound together and the forklift dragged it across the blood-slippery lawn to hoist it up onto the flatbed. Using the right machine or tool for the right job meant that the crew didn't break their backs, and, thus, were able to head to their next job right after.

The cargo and forklift were chained onto the flatbed and the crew all climbed into the cab. The truck put on its signal and turned onto the quiet suburban street. Black smoke coughed out of the tall twin exhaust pipes behind the cab, and the engine rumbled a bass echo under the canopy of trees sheltering the street.

Crows flew in from all directions and they and all carnivores and insects that could make the journey to the little boy's birthday party ate well that day.

THE END

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THE SEARCH FOR ASTRA PALACE by Gregory KH Bryant

Part Fifty-One

They hadn't got far. Ward managed to drag Lacey only but a few yards into the darkening tunnels of wires and cages when they were suddenly confronted by a holographic projection. There before them was Turhan Mot, Mokem Bet, Horst Dal and Yamir, all laughing at Ward's and Lacey's pain. Behind them and surrounding them were countless other such projections. The throngs followed him tightly and closely.

"The mighty Carter Ward," Horst Dal gloated. "You give us a good show so far, space rat!"

"Fuck you," Ward said.

As it happened, the multitudes of spectators crowding the cages through the holographic projections worked to Ward's advantage, for the crowded field made aiming a pistol or a rifle very tricky business. With the holographic crowds flooding the field, betting became impossible. But that was part of the fun of it, wasn't it? Booze, drugs and sex all flowed with free abandon.

Still dodging the laser blasts coming from inside and outside the cage, Ward and Lacey approached the laser rifle suspended in the rusted tunnel ahead. Stank coils of smoke enveloped them.

And Ward was hit directly with one of the first of many enigmas of the killing field.

Coming within hitting distance of the rifle, Ward slowed his step. He dropped to the floor of the cage and crawled cautiously forward. Raucous laughter echoed through the howling blasts of flames and steam.

Ward approached the rifle cautiously. It could have been wired to explode. It could have been wired to electrocute. Just as Ward came within punching distance of the rifle, he was knocked to the deck by a heavy weight.

He threw the weight off his back, causing it to land directly on top of the rifle. And, as Ward half-expected, the rifle exploded in his face.

The weight, which happened to be the weight of an adult Scrounger, clocking in at seven feet and somewhere above two hundred pounds, was quite sufficient to trigger the mechanism to cause the rifle to blow.

The Scrounger's legs, blown from his hips, went spinning past his shoulders, while bits of his body flew by, like pieces of bloodied confetti. Ward himself, protected by the Scrounger's body, was sent sailing several yards through the air. He landed hard against the wire cages.

Lacey, for her part, was carried by the blast and Ward's body. She landed with heavy force on Ward's scarred, barely conscious body. Cheers rang out loud.

Lacey, barely conscious, picked herself up from the rubber mat that covered the deck of the cage. She saw a barely conscious Ward rousing himself. He gave his head a huge shake. Streams of sweat came spinning from his face. Large warm and salty droplets splattered Lacey's face and body.

"Mister Ward?" Lacey asked with a quavering voice. "...uh... Ward... Carter?"

"Yeah, watcha want?" Ward demanded, rubbing his very sore head with his fingertips

"Are you all right?" Lacey asked.

Ward did not answer. Instead, he threw himself at her and shoved her brutally to the deck. Just scarcely in time to avoid the small drone, no larger than a bloody handprint on a greasy wall – the drone sailed on for another ten feet, hit one of the cage walls, and exploded. A rainfall of jellied gasoline fell, creating a hellish blaze that extended for another forty feet beyond the point where the drone had crashed.

"Not a friendly place," Ward remarked to Lacey.

"Nuh-uh," Lacey agreed.

The flames from the drone burned, giving the cage tunnels a hallucinatory glow. The loud laughter of sadists, the screams of the dying, crackling flames and purple smoke all conspired together to create a surrealist symphony dragged from the torn and bloodied pages of hell. And Ward, of course, was there.

"C'mon, babe," he said to Lacey. "This isn't any kind a' place for decent folk."

"But... where?" Lacey asked.

"We'll know when we get there, I'm supposin',". Ward answered, "First thing is getting' the hell outta here.."

"But where... how?" Lacey asked.

Ward searched the labyrinthine cages with a sharp eye. Two narrow tunnels bifurcated outwardly from the tunnel where he and Lacey stood. To the left, he saw hanging from the cages a combat knife, not unlike his own. Thick handle, a solid eight-inch blade.

Three buttons in the handle. One, presumably, to discharge a load on CO2 into the wound opened up by the blade. Ward often worked with such a knife. The second and third buttons most

likely gave a solid jolt of electricity, sufficient to stun or to discharge a dose of some poison or other. Ward had worked with such knives as well, but to see all three buttons on a single knife was not a common sight.

In the wire tunnel leading away in the opposite direction, Ward saw rows of hand-held grenades fastened to the cages.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Another shot flashed between him and Lacey. Glancing behind, Ward saw a dozen Scroungers clambering into the tunnel, their laser pistols unholstered. Again, the holographic images of Horst Dal, Turhan Mot, and hundreds of others filled the air. Laughter swelled. Carter Ward recognized the laughter of Horst Dal.

“The famous Carter Ward has stumbled himself into a trap, it would seem,” Horst Dal said. And then he disappeared. Turhan Mot spoke next.

“Do give us a spectacle, won’t you. Mokem Bet has been bold enough to offer us a wager. Ten thousand Universal Credits for every Scrounger you kill.

Turhan Mot watched with great amusement, as Ward’s face dropped.

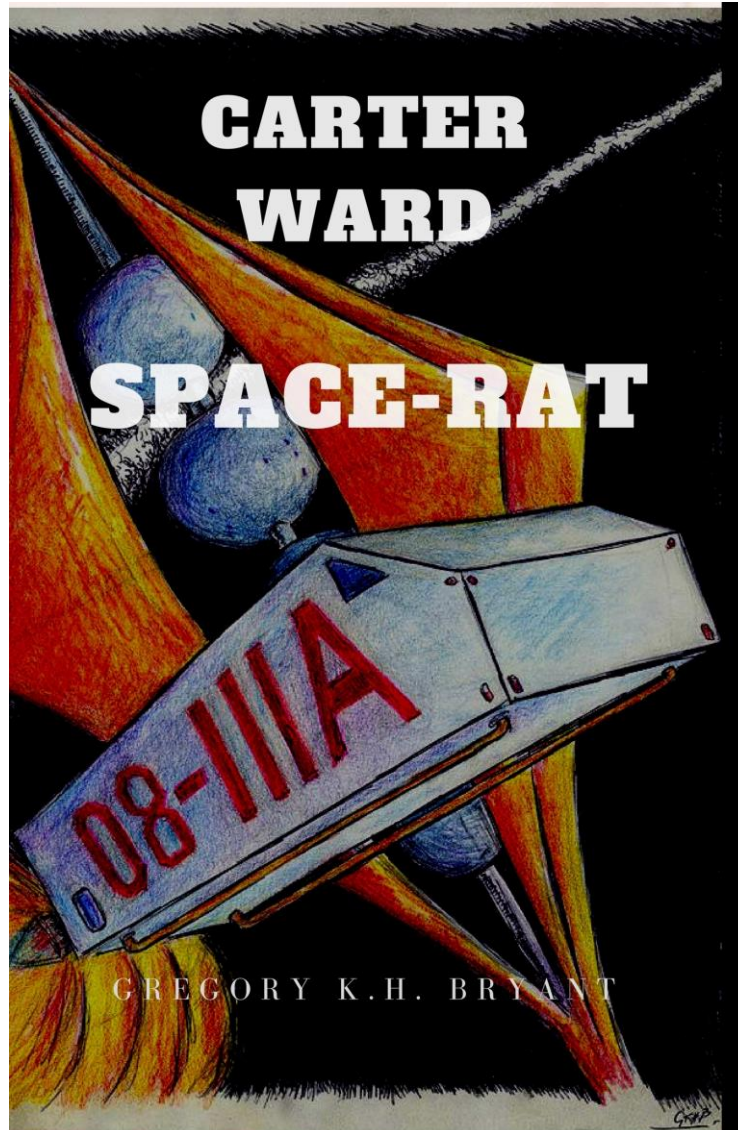
“Obviously,” Turhan Mot said, “The promise that I shall benefit at all, seeing you slaughter my fellows, has taken much of the satisfaction you might have hoped for, had you been free to kill without any such considerations clouding your aim.

Then Turhan Mot vanished. Ward was left alone with Lacey, who had nothing to say at all.

Ward turned to see a dozen Scroungers creeping up on him.

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

XI: How Swanhild Bid Farewell to Eric

Now all this while Asmund sat deep in thought; but when, at length, men were sunk in sleep, he took a candle of fat and passed to the shut bed where Swanhild slept alone. She lay on her bed, and her curling hair was all about her. She was awake, for the light gleamed in her blue eyes, and on a naked knife that was on the bed beside her, half hidden by her hair.

“What wouldst thou, foster-father?” she asked, rising in the couch. Asmund closed the curtains, then looked at her sternly and spoke in a low voice:

“Thou art fair to be so vile a thing, Swanhild,” he said. “Who now would have dreamed that heart of thine could talk with goblins and with were-wolves—that those eyes of thine could bear to look on murder and those white hands find strength to do the sin?”

She held up her shapely arms and, looking on them, laughed. “Would that they had been fashioned in a stronger mould,” she said. “May they wither in their woman’s weakness! else had the deed been done outright. Now my crime is as heavy upon me and nothing gained by it. Say what fate for me, foster-father—the Stone of Doom and the pool where faithless women lie? Ah, then might Gudruda laugh indeed, and I will not live to hear that laugh. See,” and she gripped the dagger at her side: “along this bright edge runs the path to peace and freedom, and, if need be, I will tread it.”

“Be silent,” said Asmund. “This Gudruda, my daughter, whom thou wouldst have foully done to death, is thine own sister, and it is she who, pitying thee, hath pleaded for thy life.”

“I will naught of her pity who have no pity,” she answered; “and this I say to thee who art my father: shame be on thee who hast not dared to own thy child!”

“Hadst thou not been my child, Swanhild, and had I not loved thee secretly as my child, be sure of this, I had long since driven thee hence; for my eyes have been open to much that I have not seemed to see. But at length thy wickedness has overcome my love, and I will see thy face no more. Listen: none have heard of this shameful deed of thine save those who saw it, and their tongues are sealed. Now I give thee choice: wed Atli and go, or stand in the Doom-ring and take thy fate.”

“Have I not said, father, while death may be sought otherwise, that I will never do this last? Nor will I do the first. I am not all of the tame breed of you Iceland folk—other and quicker blood runs in my veins; nor will I be sold in marriage to a dotard as a mare is sold at a market. I have answered.”

“Fool! think again, for I go not back upon my word. Wed Atli or die—by thy own hand, if thou wilt—there I will not gainsay thee; or, if thou fearest this, then anon in the Doom-ring.”

Now Swanhild covered her eyes with her hands and shook the long hair about her face, and she

seemed wondrous fair to Asmund the Priest who watched. And as she sat thus, it came into her mind that marriage is not the end of a young maid's life—that old husbands have been known to die, and that she might rule this Atli and his earldom and become a rich and honoured woman, setting her sails in such fashion that when the wind turned it would fill them. Otherwise she must die—ay, die shamed and leave Gudruda with her love.

Suddenly she slipped from the bed to the floor of the chamber, and, clasping the knees of Asmund, looked up through the meshes of her hair, while tears streamed from her beautiful eyes:

“I have sinned,” she sobbed— “I have sinned greatly against thee and my sister. Harken: I was mad with love of Eric, whom from a child I have turned to, and Gudruda is fairer than I and she took him from me. Most of all was I mad this night when I wrought the deed of shame, for ill things counselled me—things that I did not call; and oh, I thank the Gods—if there are Gods—that Gudruda died not at my hand. See now, father, I put this evil from me and tear Eric from my heart,” and she made as though she rent her bosom— “I will wed Atli, and be a good housewife to him, and I crave but this of Gudruda: that she forgive me her wrong; for it was not done of my will, but of my madness, and of the driving of those whom my mother taught me to know.”

Asmund listened and the springs of his love thawed within him. “Now thou dost take good counsel,” he said, “and of this be sure, that so long as thou art in that mood none shall harm thee; and for Gudruda, she is the most gentle of women, and it may well be that she will put away thy sin. So weep no more, and have no more dealings with thy Finnish witchcraft, but sleep; and to-morrow I will bear thy word to Atli, for his ship is bound and thou must swiftly be made a wife.”

He went out, bearing the light with him; but Swanhild rose from the ground and sat on the edge of the bed, staring into the darkness and shuddering from time to time.

“I shall soon be made his wife,” she murmured, “who would be but one man's wife—and methinks I shall soon be made a widow also. Thou wilt have me, dotard—take me and thy fate! Well, well; better to wed an Earl than to be shamed and stretched across the Doom-stone. Oh, weak arms that failed me at my need, no more will I put trust in you! When next I wound, it shall be with the tongue; when next I strive to slay, it shall be by another's hand. Curses on thee, thou ill counsellor of darkness, who didst betray me at the last! Is it for this that I worshipped thee and swore the oath?”

The morning came, and at the first light Asmund sought the Earl. His heart was heavy because of the guile that his tongue must practise, and his face was dark as a winter dawn.

“What news, Asmund?” asked Atli. “Early tidings are bad tidings, so runs the saw, and thy looks give weight to it.”

“Not altogether bad, Earl. Swanhild gives herself to thee.”

“Of her own will, Asmund?”

“Ay, of her own will. But I have warned thee of her temper.”

“Her temper! Little hangs to a maid’s temper. Once a wife and it will melt in softness like the snow when summer comes. These are glad tidings, comrade, and methinks I grow young again beneath the breath of them. Why art thou so glum then?”

“There is something that must yet be told of Swanhild,” said Asmund. “She is called the Fatherless, but, if thou wilt have the truth, why here it is for thee—she is my daughter, born out of wedlock, and I know not how that will please thee.”

Atli laughed aloud, and his bright eyes shone in his wrinkled face. “It pleases me well, Asmund, for then the maid is sprung from a sound stock. The name of the Priest of Middalhof is famous far south of Iceland; and never that Iceland bred a comelier girl. Is that all?”

“One more thing, Earl. This I charge thee: watch thy wife, and hold her back from witchcraft and from dealings with evil things and trolls of darkness. She is of Finnish blood and the women of the Finns are much given to such wicked work.”

“I set little store by witchwork, goblins and their kin,” said Atli. “I doubt me much of their power, and I shall soon wean Swanhild from such ways, if indeed she practise them.”

Then they fell to talking of Swanhild’s dower, and that was not small. Afterwards Asmund sought Eric and Gudruda, and told them what had come to pass, and they were glad at the news, though they grieved for Atli the Earl. And when Swanhild met Gudruda, she came to her humbly, and humbly kissed her hand, and with tears craved pardon of her evil doing, saying that she had been mad; nor did Gudruda withhold it, for of all women she was the gentlest and most forgiving. But to Eric, Swanhild said nothing.

The wedding-feast must be held on the third day from this, for Atli would sail on that same day, since his people wearied of waiting and his ship might lie bound no longer. Blithe was Atli the Earl, and Swanhild was all changed, for now she seemed the gentlest of maids, and, as befitted one about to be made a wife, moved through the house with soft words and downcast eyes. But Skallagrim, watching her, bethought him of the grey wolf that he had seen by Goldfoss, and this seemed not well to him.

“It would be bad now,” he said to Eric, as they rode to Coldback, “to stand in yon old earl’s shoes. This woman’s weather has changed too fast, and after such a calm there’ll come a storm indeed. I am now minded of Thorunna, for she went just so the day before she gave herself to Ospakar, and me to shame and bonds.”

“Talk not of the raven till you hear his croak,” said Eric.

“He is on the wing, lord,” answered Skallagrim.

Now Eric came to Coldback in the Marsh, and Saevuna his mother and Unna, Thorod’s daughter, the betrothed of Asmund, were glad to welcome him; for the tidings of his mighty deeds and of the overthrow of Ospakar and the slaying of Mord were noised far and wide. But at Skallagrim

Lambstail they looked askance. Still, when they heard of those things that he had wrought on Horse-Head Heights, they welcomed him for his deed's sake.

Eric sat two nights at Coldback, and on the second day Saevuna his mother and Unna rode thence with their servants to the wedding-feast of Swanhild the Fatherless. But Eric stopped at Coldback that night, saying that he would be at Middalhof within two hours of sunrise, for he must talk with a shepherd who came from the fells.

Saevuna and her company came to Middalhof and was asked, first by Gudruda, then by Swanhild, why Brighteyes tarried. She answered that he would be there early on the morrow. Next morning, before it was light, Eric girded on Whitefire, took horse and rode from Coldback alone, for he would not bring Skallagrim, fearing lest he should get drunk at the feast and shed some man's blood.

It was Swanhild's wedding-day; but she greeted it with little lightsomeness of heart, and her eyes knew no sleep that night, though they were heavy with tears.

At the first light she rose, and, gliding from the house, walked through the heavy dew down the path by which Eric must draw near, for she desired to speak with him. Gudruda also rose a while after, though she did not know this, and followed on the same path, for she would greet her lover at his coming.

Now three furlongs or more from the stead stood a vetch stack, and Swanhild waited on the further side of this stack. Presently she heard a sound of singing come from behind the shoulder of the fell and of the tramp of a horse's hoofs. Then she saw the golden wings of Eric's helm all ablaze with the sunlight as he rode merrily along, and great bitterness laid hold of her that Eric could be of such a joyous mood on the day when she who loved him must be made the wife of another man.

Presently he was before her, and Swanhild stepped from the shadow of the stack and laid her hand upon his horse's bridle.

"Eric," she said humbly and with bowed head, "Gudruda sleeps yet. Canst thou, then, find time to hearken to my words?"

He frowned and said: "Methinks, Swanhild, it would be better if thou gavest thy words to him who is thy lord."

She let the bridle-rein drop from her hands. "I am answered," she said; "ride on."

Now pity stirred in Eric's heart, for Swanhild's mien was most heavy, and he leaped down from his horse. "Nay," he said, "speak on, if thou hast anything to tell me."

"I have this to tell thee, Eric; that now, before we part for ever, I am come to ask thy pardon for my ill-doing—ay, and to wish all joy to thee and thy fair love," and she sobbed and choked.

“Speak no more of it, Swanhild,” he said, “but let thy good deeds cover up the ill, which are not small; so thou shalt be happy.”

She looked at him strangely, and her face was white with pain.

“How then are we so differently fashioned that thou, Eric, canst prate to me of happiness when my heart is racked with grief? Oh, Eric, I blame thee not, for thou hast not wrought this evil on me willingly; but I say this: that my heart is dead, as I would that I were dead. See those flowers: they smell sweet—for me they have no odour. Look on the light leaping from Coldback to the sea, from the sea to Westman Isles, and from the Westman crown of rocks far into the wide heavens above. It is beautiful, is it not? Yet I tell thee, Eric, that now to my eyes howling winter darkness is every whit as fair. Joy is dead within me, music’s but a jangled madness in my ears, food hath no savour on my tongue, my youth is sped ere my dawn is day. Nothing is left to me, Eric, save this fair body that thou didst scorn, and the dreams which I may gather from my hours of scanty sleep, and such shame as befalls a loveless bride.”

“Speak not so, Swanhild,” he said, and clasped her by the hand, for, though he loathed her wickedness, being soft-hearted and but young, it grieved him to hear her words and see the anguish of her mind. For it is so with men, that they are easily moved by the pleading of a fair woman who loves them, even though they love her not.

“Yea, I will speak out all my mind before I seal it up for ever. See, Eric, this is my state and thou hast set this crown of sorrow on my brows: and thou comest singing down the fell, and I go weeping o’er the sea! I am not all so ill at heart. It was love of thee that drove me down to sin, as love of thee might otherwise have lifted me to holiness. But, loving thee as thou seest, this day I wed a dotard, and go his chattel and his bride across the sea, and leave thee singing on the fell, and by thy side her who is my foe. Thou hast done great deeds, Brighteyes, and still greater shalt thou do; yet but as echoes they shall reach my ears. Thou wilt be to me as one dead, for it is Gudruda’s to bind the byrnie on thy breast when thou goest forth to war, and hers to loose the winged helm from thy brow when thou returnest, battle-worn and conquering.”

Now Swanhild ceased, and choked with grief; then spoke again:

“So now farewell; doubtless I weary thee, and—Gudruda waits. Nay, look not on my foolish tears: they are the heritage of woman, of naught else is she sure! While I live, Eric, morn by morn the thought of thee shall come to wake me as the sun wakes yon snowy peak, and night by night thy memory shall pass as at eve he passes from the valleys, but to dawn again in dreams. For, Eric, ‘tis thee I wed to-day—at heart I am thy bride, thine and thine only; and when shalt thou find a wife who holds thee so dear as that Swanhild whom once thou knewest? So now farewell! Yes, this time thou shalt kiss away my tears; then let them stream for ever. Thus, Eric! and thus! and thus! do I take farewell of thee.”

And now she clung about his neck, gazing on him with great dewy eyes till things grew strange and dim, and he must kiss her if only for her love and tender beauty’s sake. And so he kissed, and it chanced that as they clung thus, Gudruda, passing by this path to give her betrothed greeting, came upon them and stood astonished. Then she turned and, putting her hands to her

head, fled back swiftly to the stead, and waited there, great anger burning in her heart; for Gudruda had this fault, that she was very jealous.

Now Eric and Swanhild did not see her, and presently they parted, and Swanhild wiped her eyes and glided thence.

As she drew near the stead she found Gudruda watching.

“Where hast thou been, Swanhild?” she said.

“To bid farewell to Brighteyes, Gudruda.”

“Then thou art foolish, for doubtless he thrust thee from him.”

“Nay, Gudruda, he drew me to him. Hearken, I say, thou sister. Vex me not, for I go my ways and thou goest thine. Thou art strong and fair, and hitherto thou hast overcome me. But I am also fair, and, if I find space to strike in, I also have a show of strength. Pray thou that I find not space, Gudruda. Now is Eric thine. Perchance one day he may be mine. It lies in the lap of the Norns.”

“Fair words from Atli’s bride,” mocked Gudruda.

“Ay, Atli’s bride, but never Atli’s love!” said Swanhild, and swept on.

A while after Eric rode up. He was shamefaced and vexed at heart, because he had yielded thus to Swanhild’s beauty, and been melted by her tender words and kissed her. Then he saw Gudruda, and at the sight of her all thought of Swanhild passed from him, for he loved Gudruda and her alone. He leapt down from his horse and ran to her. But, drawn to her full height, she stood with dark flashing eyes and fair face set in anger.

Still, he would have greeted her loverwise; but she lifted her hand and waved him back, and fear took hold of him.

“What now, Gudruda?” he asked, faltering.

“What now, Eric?” she answered, faltering not. “Hast seen Swanhild?”

“Yea, I have seen Swanhild. She came to bid farewell to me. What of it?”

“What of it? Why ‘thus! and thus! and thus!’ didst thou bid farewell to Atli’s bride. Ay, ‘thus and thus,’ with clinging lips and twined arms. Warm and soft was thy farewell kiss to her who would have slain me, Brighteyes!”

“Gudruda, thou speakest truth, though how thou sawest I know not. Think no ill of it, and scourge me not with words, for, sooth to say, I was melted by her grief and the music of her talk.”

“It is shame to thee so to speak of her whom but now thou heldest in thine arms. By the grief and the music of the talk of her who would have murdered me thou wast melted into kisses, Eric!—for I saw it with these eyes. Knowest thou what I am minded to say to thee? It is this: ‘Go hence and see me no more;’ for I have little wish to cleave to such a feather-man, to one so blown about by the first breath of woman’s tempting.”

“Yet, methinks, Gudruda, I have withstood some such winds. I tell thee that, hadst thou been in my place, thyself hadst yielded to Swanhild and kissed her in farewell, for she was more than woman in that hour.”

“Nay, Eric, I am no weak man to be led astray thus. Yet she is more than woman—troll is she also, that I know; but less than man art thou, Eric, thus to fall before her who hates me. Time may come when she shall woo thee after a stronger sort, and what wilt thou say to her then, thou who art so ready with thy kisses?”

“I will withstand her, Gudruda, for I love thee only, and this is well known to thee.”

“Truly I know thou lovest me, Eric; but tell me of what worth is this love of man that eyes of beauty and tongue of craft may so readily bewray? I doubt me of thee, Eric!”

“Nay, doubt me not, Gudruda. I love thee alone, but I grew soft as wax beneath her pleading. My heart consented not, yet I did consent. I have no more to say.”

Now Gudruda looked on him long and steadfastly. “Thy plight is sorry, Eric,” she said, “and this once I forgive thee. Look to it that thou givest me no more cause to doubt thee, for then I shall remember how thou didst bid farewell to Swanhild.”

“I will give none,” he answered, and would have embraced her; but this she would not suffer then, nor for many days after, for she was angry with him. But with Swanhild she was still more angry, though she said nothing of it. That Swanhild had tried to murder her, Gudruda could forgive, for there she had failed; but not that she had won Eric to kiss her, for in this she had succeeded well.

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THE MOON POOL by A Merritt

Chapter XXXI: Larry and the Frog-Men

Long had been her tale in the telling, and too long, perhaps, have I been in the repeating—but not every day are the mists rolled away to reveal undreamed secrets of earth-youth. And I have set it down here, adding nothing, taking nothing from it; translating liberally, it is true, but constantly striving, while putting it into idea-forms and phraseology to be readily understood by my readers, to keep accurately to the spirit. And this, I must repeat, I have done throughout my narrative, wherever it has been necessary to record conversation with the Murians.

Rising, I found I was painfully stiff—as muscle-bound as though I had actually trudged many miles. Larry, imitating me, gave an involuntary groan.

“Faith, mavourneen,” he said to Lakla, relapsing unconsciously into English, “your roads would never wear out shoe-leather, but they’ve got their kick, just the same!”

She understood our plight, if not his words; gave a soft little cry of mingled pity and self-reproach; forced us back upon the cushions.

“Oh, but I’m sorry!” mourned Lakla, leaning over us. “I had forgotten—for those new to it the way is a weary one, indeed— “

She ran to the doorway, whistled a clear high note down the passage. Through the hangings came two of the frog-men. She spoke to them rapidly. They crouched toward us, what certainly was meant for an amiable grin wrinkling the grotesque muzzles, baring the glistening rows of needle-teeth. And while I watched them with the fascination that they never lost for me, the monsters calmly swung one arm around our knees, lifted us up like babies—and as calmly started to walk away with us!

“Put me down! Put me down, I say!” The O’Keefe’s voice was both outraged and angry; squinting around I saw him struggling violently to get to his feet. The Akka only held him tighter, booming comfortingly, peering down into his flushed face inquiringly.

“But, Larry—darlin’!”—Lakla’s tones were—well, maternally surprised— “you’re stiff and sore, and Kra can carry you quite easily.”

“I won’t be carried!” sputtered the O’Keefe. “Damn it, Goodwin, there are such things as the unities even here, an’ for a lieutenant of the Royal Air Force to be picked up an’ carted around like a—like a bundle of rags—it’s not discipline! Put me down, ye omadhaun, or I’ll poke ye in the snout!” he shouted to his bearer—who only boomed gently, and stared at the handmaiden, plainly for further instructions.

“But, Larry—dear!”—Lakla was plainly distressed— “it will hurt you to walk; and I don’t want you to hurt, Larry—darlin’!”

“Holy shade of St. Patrick!” moaned Larry; again he made a mighty effort to tear himself from the frog-man’s grip; gave up with a groan. “Listen, alanna!” he said plaintively. “When we get to Ireland, you and I, we won’t have anybody to pick us up and carry us about every time we get a bit tired. And it’s getting me in bad habits you are!”

“Oh, yes, we will, Larry!” cried the handmaiden, “because many, oh, many, of my Akka will go with us!”

“Will you tell this—BOOB!—to put me down!” gritted the now thoroughly aroused O’Keefe. I couldn’t help laughing; he glared at me.

“Bo-oo-ob?” exclaimed Lakla.

“Yes, boo-oo-ob!” said O’Keefe, “an’ I have no desire to explain the word in my present position, light of my soul!”

The handmaiden sighed, plainly dejected. But she spoke again to the Akka, who gently lowered the O’Keefe to the floor.

“I don’t understand,” she said hopelessly, “if you want to walk, why, of course, you shall, Larry.” She turned to me.

“Do you?” she asked.

“I do not,” I said firmly.

“Well, then,” murmured Lakla, “go you, Larry and Goodwin, with Kra and Gulk, and let them minister to you. After, sleep a little—for not soon will Rador and Olaf return. And let me feel your lips before you go, Larry—darlin’!” She covered his eyes caressingly with her soft little palms; pushed him away.

“Now go,” said Lakla, “and rest!”

Unashamed I lay back against the horny chest of Gulk; and with a smile noticed that Larry, even if he had rebelled at being carried, did not disdain the support of Kra’s shining, black-scaled arm which, slipping around his waist, half-lifted him along.

They parted a hanging and dropped us softly down beside a little pool, sparkling with the clear water that had heretofore been brought us in the wide basins. Then they began to undress us. And at this point the O’Keefe gave up.

“Whatever they’re going to do we can’t stop ‘em, Doc!” he moaned. “Anyway, I feel as though I’ve been pulled through a knot-hole, and I don’t care—I don’t care—as the song says.”

When we were stripped we were lowered gently into the water. But not long did the Akka let us splash about the shallow basin. They lifted us out, and from jars began deftly to anoint and rub us

with aromatic unguents.

I think that in all the medley of grotesque, of tragic, of baffling, strange and perilous experiences in that underground world none was more bizarre than this—valeting. I began to laugh, Larry joined me, and then Kra and Gulk joined in our merriment with deep batrachian cachinnations and gruntings. Then, having finished apparelling us and still chuckling, the two touched our arms and led us out, into a room whose circular sides were ringed with soft divans. Still smiling, I sank at once into sleep.

How long I slumbered I do not know. A low and thunderous booming coming through the deep window slit, reverberated through the room and awakened me. Larry yawned; arose briskly.

“Sounds as though the bass drums of every jazz band in New York were serenading us!” he observed. Simultaneously we sprang to the window; peered through.

We were a little above the level of the bridge, and its full length was plain before us. Thousands upon thousands of the Akka were crowding upon it, and far away other hordes filled like a glittering thicket both sides of the cavern ledge’s crescent strand. On black scale and orange scale the crimson light fell, picking them off in little flickering points.

Upon the platform from which sprang the smaller span over the abyss were Lakla, Olaf, and Rador; the handmaiden clearly acting as interpreter between them and the giant she had called Nak, the Frog King.

“Come on!” shouted Larry.

Out of the open portal we ran; over the World Heart Bridge—and straight into the group.

“Oh!” cried Lakla, “I didn’t want you to wake up so soon, Larry—darlin’!”

“See here, mavourneen!” Indignation thrilled in the Irishman’s voice. “I’m not going to be done up with baby-ribbons and laid away in a cradle for safe-keeping while a fight is on; don’t think it. Why didn’t you call me?”

“You needed rest!” There was indomitable determination in the handmaiden’s tones, the eternal maternal shining defiant from her eyes. “You were tired and you hurt! You shouldn’t have got up!”

“Needed the rest!” groaned Larry. “Look here, Lakla, what do you think I am?”

“You’re all I have,” said that maiden firmly, “and I’m going to take care of you, Larry—darlin’! Don’t you ever think anything else?”

“Well, pulse of my heart, considering my delicate health and general fragility, would it hurt me, do you think, to be told what’s going on?” he asked.

“Not at all, Larry!” answered the handmaiden serenely. “Yolara went through the Portal. She was very, very angry— “

“She was all the devil’s woman that she is!” rumbled Olaf.

“Rador met the messenger,” went on the Golden Girl calmly. “The ladala are ready to rise when Lugur and Yolara lead their hosts against us. They will strike at those left behind. And in the meantime we shall have disposed my Akka to meet Yolara’s men. And on that disposal we must all take counsel, you, Larry, and Rador, Olaf and Goodwin and Nak, the ruler of the Akka.”

“Did the messenger give any idea when Yolara expects to make her little call?” asked Larry.

“Yes,” she answered. “They prepare, and we may expect them in—” She gave the equivalent of about thirty-six hours of our time.

“But, Lakla,” I said, the doubt that I had long been holding finding voice, “should the Shining One come—with its slaves—are the Three strong enough to cope with it?”

There was troubled doubt in her own eyes.

“I do not know,” she said at last, frankly. “You have heard their story. What they promise is that they will help. I do not know—any more than do you, Goodwin!”

I looked up at the dome beneath which I knew the dread Trinity stared forth; even down upon us. And despite the awe, the assurance, I had felt when I stood before them I, too, doubted.

“Well,” said Larry, “you and I, uncle,” he turned to Rador, “and Olaf here had better decide just what part of the battle we’ll lead— “

“Lead!” the handmaiden was appalled. “You lead, Larry? Why you are to stay with Goodwin and with me—up there, there we can watch.”

“Heart’s beloved,” O’Keefe was stern indeed. “A thousand times I’ve looked Death straight in the face, peered into his eyes. Yes, and with ten thousand feet of space under me an’ bursting shells tickling the ribs of the boat I was in. An’ d’ye think I’ll sit now on the grandstand an’ watch while a game like this is being pulled? Ye don’t know your future husband, soul of my delight!”

And so we started toward the golden opening, squads of the frog-men following us soldierly and disappearing about the huge structure. Nor did we stop until we came to the handmaiden’s boudoir. There we seated ourselves.

“Now,” said Larry, “two things I want to know. First—how many can Yolara muster against us; second, how many of these Akka have we to meet them?”

Rador gave our equivalent for eighty thousand men as the force Yolara could muster without

stripping her city. Against this force, it appeared, we could count, roughly, upon two hundred thousand of the Akka.

“And they’re some fighters!” exclaimed Larry. “Hell, with odds like that what’re you worrying about? It’s over before it’s begun.”

“But, Larree,” objected Rador to this, “you forget that the nobles will have the Keth—and other things; also that the soldiers have fought against the Akka before and will be shielded very well from their spears and clubs—and that their blades and javelins can bite through the scales of Nak’s warriors. They have many things— “

“Uncle,” interjected O’Keefe, “one thing they have is your nerve. Why, we’re more than two to one. And take it from me— “

Without warning dropped the tragedy!

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