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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 1

7TH JULY 2019

THE LADY OF LOCH EALA

BY ELLIS
HASTINGS—
HIS OWN
SOLITARY LEVEL
OF HELL...

THE MUD GODS

BY CARLTON
HERZOG—
YOUR DAY OF
RECKONING IS
FAST
APPROACHING...

TEDDY BY LUKE TEBB

TIT FOR TAT BY KEN GOLDMAN

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SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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Gavin Chappell

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Ken Goldman, Jesse Zimmerman, H Rider Haggard, C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

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

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

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

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This Edition

This week's cover illustration is *The Lady of the Lake* by Lancelot Speed. Graphic design © by Gavin Chappell, logo design © by C Priest Brumley.

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EDITORIAL

This week, a lonely man meets a strange lady from the lake. Friedrich Heine ventures outside the castle. A persecuted Native American encounters one of the ancient Mud Gods. A well intentioned gift has horrific consequences. And a young girl finds something nasty in her older sister's underwear.

The Challenger's adventure reaches its conclusion this week—but he'll be back with Flora and Fauna sometime soon. Meanwhile, in the Dark Ages, a bridal night is celebrated. And even further back, in ancient Atlantis, Nais is buried alive.

—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"HAS ANY OF US EVER SCREAMED I'LL GET YOU MY PRETTY!
EVEN ONCE?"

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 LADY OF LOCH EALA by Ellis Hastings

The house sat at the end of a long stretch of poorly-paved road in the countryside of Southern Georgia. Calling it small would be an understatement. At no more than six-hundred square feet, the home looked better suited to a hobbit than a human. In addition to its unremarkable stature, the house was decrepit. It was so old, in fact, that its original owner, the man who single-handedly built it in 1846, had long since died within its confines. So had his kids, his kids' kids, and several generations following. The newest proprietor, a recently divorced man on the fringe of middle-age, was owner number twelve: a firefighter from the Eastern-most suburb of Atlanta.

Paul Thomas walked along the outside of his new home, examining it. It was cramped, but that was okay. Living in a station with seven other guys every third day made him use to confined spaces. Plus, the low price he paid, just over a third of what he'd paid for the house he had shared with his ex-wife and their ten-year-old daughter, made it much more enticing. After his recent strike-out in life, it was nice to feel like he accomplished something.

As he completed his walk-around of the house, Paul began to dwell on the events that had brought him to where he now stood. One morning the year prior, Paul arrived home from work to find his wife in the midst of packing his belongings into cardboard boxes.

What's this? he'd asked. His wife responded with something that sounded like the steady buzz of static on an unrecognized channel. All he made out was that she was tired of him not valuing her time, tired of him being gone for twenty-four—sometimes forty-eight—hours, only to come home and throw himself into his hobbies, and that she needed a man who would treasure her. After a few drawn-out months that made Paul want to eat the barrel of a .44, Julia Adams-Thomas dropped the Thomas from her last name and made off with half of Paul's small fortune, while Paul was awarded a chunk of her decades-unpaid student loans. To make matters worse, Paul lost Annabelle in a custody battle that was over as quickly as it began.

Months later, Paul came to find out that, for the back half of his marriage, Julia had been shagging a twenty-something semi-professional boxer from Munich every day he'd been at work. The dagger of sorrow stuck in his heart was twisted another notch. He needed a change of scenery, so he packed what few belongings Julia didn't take from him and moved fifty-miles South of Atlanta to a rural town without a single stoplight named Loch Eala. The name, he had heard, was Gaelic for Swan Lake.

Although the house itself wasn't anything to brag about, the land it sat upon was something else. The heart-shaped lake sat beyond the boundaries of his backyard. Its water, an iridescent blueish-purple, shone beneath the pale glow of the full moon; its shimmering waves resembling a night sky speckled with a million stars. A family of mute swans slept scattered across his lawn, their long necks forming the letter S as their heads rested between their wings. Paul observed the elegant creatures with grace, suddenly realizing he hadn't ever seen one in person before.

Something flickered in his peripheral vision. He focused his eyes on the centre of Loch Eala and found the arched figure of a swan silhouetted beneath the moonlight as it floated across the water. Its head thrust beneath the surface searching for food, the swan's body seemed to change. It no longer resembled a bird of grace; now it was the dark shape of a drowning man

clawing at the air. A breeze flowed off the waves, and an invisible hand caressed the back of his neck. With a subtle sense of unease forming in his gut, Paul went to his car to unpack the rest of his few belongings.

When Paul entered the home, he was greeted by a single, narrow hallway with a door on each side, leading into an open room. His bedroom, no more than the size of a child's, held a single, stained queen-sized mattress in the centre. Paul placed a hand on the bed and pressed down. It was firm and screamed when he sat on it.

A few paces from the bed, next to the cracked window, was an antique mahogany dresser standing chest-height. Metal studs, once painted gold but now faded to a dull silver, ran along each of the four drawers. Paul threw his box of clothes—mostly t-shirts acquired from merch booths at concerts from his earlier years and jeans that didn't fit him anymore—on top of the dresser. He glanced outside and noticed a well marking the halfway point between the house and lake.

A yellowing square of paper greeted Paul when he opened the top drawer of the antique dresser. He picked it up and examined it. It felt like sandpaper beneath his fingertips. Dated on the back in faded ink was either the year 1920 or 1950. Paul couldn't make out the third number. When he unfolded it and saw the contents of the letter, he made an educated guess that the parchment's date was from the earlier half of the twentieth century.

Running delicately across the page was a portrait done in quill and ink of a woman wearing an unmarked but beautiful white dress with a corsage pinned above her left breast. Her dark hair was pulled back into one of those old-timey buns many women had in the Victorian era. A pendant hung from her neck, stopping just below the sternum.

Her eyes gazed longingly into the distance over his shoulder, and the faint hint of a smile dressed her lips. Paul examined the portrait in awe. Although it was only a drawing, he could tell that this woman had been the most beautiful creature to ever grace the earth with her presence. Unable to help himself, he placed a thumb at the side of her face and caressed it. Sweat from his hands ran across the portrait, but luckily it didn't smear the ink. Paul studied the page. His eyes fell south to a series of cursive letters forming a simple name: The Lady of Loch Eala.

Paul snapped out of his trance after what must have been at least ten minutes of eyeballing the drawing and found himself chewing on his lower lip. He laughed softly.

"God, I'm an animal," he said.

His mouth was dry; his saliva stuck in his throat when he swallowed, and his head throbbed. He was parched. Laying the portrait atop the dresser, Paul went to the living room/kitchen hybrid. The space was mostly lounge area. The kitchen was stowed away in the corner behind a wooden divide in the wall, acting as a counter. It was identical to the layout of an apartment. He retrieved an old glass left behind by one of the past owners from the shelf. The glass was white with a film of dust older than him—and maybe even older than his parents. Paul placed the glass in the sink and turned the knob, recoiling when a fountain of bronze sludge erupted from the faucet. Going to his knees, he opened the cabinet beneath the counter

and saw that the entire piping system was corroded. No wonder the house and land were so cheap. He got to his feet, knees popping and sending aches down his legs, and cast his eyes outside towards the cobblestone well.

“At least I’ve got that,” he said.

An old, frayed rope reeking of mildew and neglect descended into the depths of the well. Always afraid of heights, Paul leaned forward hesitantly, placing a steady hand on the cold stone at his waist. He gazed into the void below and could almost feel it staring back. Beckoning him.

You’re alone, he imagined the darkness saying. You’re single and thirty-seven, long past your glory years. You only get to see your daughter once every other weekend. She won’t miss you for long. She’ll get over your death faster than you’ll fall. All you have to do is lean forward a little more.

The ground began to slide out beneath his feet as if he were on a rug being pulled out from under him—slowly as not to alarm. If someone so desired, they could come up behind him, and with one good shove, send him to an early grave. And, although Paul didn’t sense her, something waited behind him, its intents unknown.

The darkness from the depths of the well seemed to grow, climbing to the surface as it swallowed the surrounding walls. The rope began to sway mesmerizingly. A sense of dread swelled like a balloon inside Paul, growing outwards further and further, nearing the point of its expansive limit—threatening to pop.

I am everything there is and everything there won’t be. I am the Alpha, the Omega, the beginning and the end. I am Death.

Paul broke free from his paralysis and stepped away from the well. He caught his breath, then peered his head over the side like a meerkat from its burrow. The shadows had returned to the deeper end, the well’s bottom hidden from view. Paul caught the swaying rope and began to pull the bucket up. The leather was damp and squishy beneath his grasp, and several strings of rope curled off along its sides.

Like the pipes below the sink, the metal of the bucket’s handle was rusted. However, the water was relatively clean—apart from a cloudy murk within that distorted his reflection so his image looked like that of a funhouse mirror. It wasn’t anything a little heat wouldn’t fix.

Gentle waves rippled within the pan as the well water boiled on the stovetop. It had grown to a gentle simmer; small bubbles resembling spider eggs were rising to the surface. The milky pollution was beginning to dissipate. Paul didn’t know how long you were supposed to heat untreated water to kill bacteria but estimated that bringing it to a boil for a few minutes would probably work well enough.

“The water’s clean,” the soft voice of a woman said.

Nearly jumping out of his skin, Paul spun around. His muscles loosened, his legs threatened to give out, and his jaw dropped open. Standing before him was the undeniable figure of the woman from the portrait: The Lady of Loch Eala. She regarded him with that same look of intrigue she held in the image. Despite how it looked in the sketch, her hair wasn't black, but an auburn free of even a single strand of grey. Her perfect, uncracked lips were pulled up in a closed smile that caused Paul's body to grow warm and tingly. He felt as if a thousand gentle fingers were running down every inch of his body, giving him goosebumps.

Below her smooth, unblemished face was a thin neck decorated with the same necklace from the drawing. Paul's eyes fell to the pendant at the end and saw that the gem inside was an emerald. She wore a white dress with the shape of flowers stitched into the trimming. It looked like a dress pulled directly from a history book. The ample shape of her breasts were visible beneath the linen. Paul swallowed nervously. A line of sweat had formed along his brow.

Snapping out of his stupor, he wiped his face and was about to instruct the woman to leave his home, but when his eyes met hers—a pair of sky blue orbs—he was frozen in place by their beauty; turned to stone like the victims of Medusa. His Adam's apple bobbed comically, and all he managed was a squeaky, "Who are you?" He was immediately embarrassed. He hadn't felt this way since he first entered puberty nearly three decades ago.

She laughed softly. A gentle giggle that sent more chills across his nerve endings. "I use to live here," she bit her lower lip subtly. A sign of attraction, Paul immediately realized. He was completely smitten with everything she did. Is this how love at first sight feels? He asked himself.

"Oh," Paul said in little more than a whisper. "When? The owner who sold it to me was a single male... just like myself, but much older."

"I lived here with my husband two years before the turn of the century."

It's been twenty years? There's no way. She isn't more than twenty-four, twenty-five max. "1998? You must be older than you look... no offence, I mean," Paul turned red.

The Lady of Loch Eala paid no mind to his comment. Instead, she simply said, "No. The century before."

Paul's heartbeat halted, and time slowed; infatuation gave way to unease. He once more looked into her eyes and saw a flicker of malcontent within: sizing him up, piercing like an arrow into his soul. However, when this goddess in human form smiled, all worries went out the window. Paul eased his nerves by telling himself that she must be playing an elaborate prank on him and surely still had a key to the house.

Before Paul could make his next statement, he noticed the violent hiss of steam from behind him. A thin fog had settled over the room. Turning back to the stove, Paul saw that he had almost evaporated the entire pot of water. Swearing beneath his breath, he spun off the dial and turned back to the woman from the portrait. She watched him with affection, now partially concealed within the cloud. Except, when Paul looked closer, he realized she was

gone, and instead the vapour had formed the figure of a woman before fading into nothingness.

She smiled at him and he was smitten.

Paul was outside. He could feel his feet sinking into the damp earth below. His face was warm, and he heard the faint thunder of what was either the early stages of a storm or an applauding crowd. The rumble grew louder and was then joined by several cheerful shouts and whistles. Paul opened his eyes and was temporarily blinded by the disorienting white light of the sun.

He blinked several times and turned his head away from the clear blue sky. When the black fuzz faded and his vision returned, Paul saw that he was outside his new home. The heart-shaped lake sat in the near distance, and at the concave of the natural symbol of affection was a swan. It was identical to every other he'd seen, but somehow he could tell it was the same swan from the lake when he moved in. The one that looked like a drowning man.

White lawn chairs sat in meticulously positioned rows, separated down the middle by a gap forming an aisle. The white, yellow and pink of petals torn from a flower's stem were sprinkled across the ground, growing thinner and thinner until stopping at the base of a podium. Atop the small stage, beneath a metal arch with decorative clouds clipped on, was a thin woman gowned in a white dress. Her auburn hair was pulled back in a series of beautiful curls. She stood perfectly still: an image frozen on a screen.

Without being in control of his own muscles, Paul's legs began to move, pulling him up the aisle. The faint crunch of petals called out beneath his feet as he neared the woman. In every row on each side was his family—both alive and dead. They were all standing and clapping, their unblinking eyes locked on him. Their mouths moved in what looked like cheers, but Paul could barely hear them. Their voices were low, sounding as if they were calling to him from underwater. From beneath the surface of the lake.

Paul reached the stage and was greeted by the back of a woman in a dress identical to the Lady of Loch Eala's, except instead of white it was black. A shade so dark that it wasn't merely the absence of light which gave it its colour; it was as if the dress expelled light. It looked like a shadow wrapped around the womanly figure of a bride.

In the distance, the swan sat in place at the centre of the lake, observing the scene without emotion. Clouds shifted overhead the closer Paul got to the woman. When he finally reached the top of the podium and stood directly behind the creature in the black dress, the sun had been kidnapped by an overcast sky, and the vibrant colour of the world below faded into a dull grey. Paul took the figure gently by the shoulders and spun it around. Her face was partially visible beneath a dark veil that hid it from view. The cheers from the audience stopped, but Paul didn't notice. The woman's hands were curled together around a bouquet of white flowers with bleeding petals.

Paul unveiled the figure and found the woman from the portrait staring back at him, desire—or repulsion—glimmering beneath the surface of her depthless eyes. A previously undiscovered emotion now lived inside him: something like the middle point between love and fear.

“Kiss her,” shouted a voice from the otherwise silent crowd. Paul didn’t look to see who said it. His full attention was held by the Lady of Loch Eala.

The same smile she gave him in the kitchen returned. One that both chilled and warmed him to the core. “Yes, kiss me, Paul,” she said.

Paul slid his hands up from her slender waist to the sides of her head. Her skin was cold within his grasp. Paul froze.

“Come on. They’re watching,” the Lady of Loch Eala said. “Your whole family’s here.”

Paul’s focus finally escaped his bride and fell upon the decomposing faces of a hundred generations of his family. Their withering skulls were without eyes, yet still, Paul could feel the burn of them watching him. Waiting for him to seal his new marriage with a final kiss.

Your whole family’s here.

Paul’s eyes sprung open. He was lying in bed, entangled within a shroud of twisted sheets clinging to the sweat on his body. His chest was rising and falling rapidly, and his head was spinning. The room was cold; it had become a freezer, but the window was closed, and Paul estimated it was no less than seventy-degrees outside. It was August in the South, after all.

He sat up, at which point he began to hear the steady buzz of an army of flies from beyond the wall. Neglecting to put on his slippers, Paul climbed out of bed and wandered barefoot into the hallway, his half-awake mind lost in a dense fog of incomprehension. The buzzing stopped when he stepped outside his room. The hall was empty.

Without thinking, as if no longer in control of his body like in the nightmare, Paul stumbled towards the door. He paused at the end of the hallway, his hand latched onto the cold metal of the doorknob. His stomach a series of knots, he twisted the knob all the way to the right and stepped outside.

Scattered—like flower petals—across his yard, was the family of swans: dead from an unknown cause. Their oval-shaped bodies lay still, flies swarming hungrily around them. They were missing their feathers in clumps; the skin beneath rotten patches of necrotic flesh. The pungent odour of death settled into Paul’s nostrils. His stomach was a series of knots; he wanted to vomit but couldn’t.

As he stared at the mass grave, something moved near the centre. Paul carefully stepped over the bodies of the dead birds to find that one still lived. Although he couldn’t tell the difference between individual swans, this one seemed familiar. The sudden thought came to him that this was the swan from the lake and his nightmare.

It struggled to stand, rising above the bodies of its fallen family like a phoenix from its ashes. A cascaded pattern of crimson decorated its back, running down the sides where its wings should be, except they weren’t there. The swan’s wings looked to have been torn off by something.

Paul’s stomach turned. He took a knee and felt the damp earth soak into his pyjama pants. With a shaking hand, he reached out to the swan, trying to pet its head to calm it. The bird

stared at him absentmindedly, or so he lied to himself. In all actuality, the swan seemed to be aware of its surroundings and even seemed to recognize him. It became evident when the maimed creature let out a loud honk at Paul when his shaking hand neared it.

“It’s alright, little guy. I’m trying to help you,” Paul said.

As if in response to his words, the swan hissed and sent the surprisingly-sharp edge of its bill into the palm of his outstretched hand. Paul recoiled with a grunt and turned his hand towards himself. A single line of blood ran down the groove in his palm towards the wrist.

The swan hissed again, then turned and clumsily waddled away towards Loch Eala. Paul watched it go, a newfound sadness in his heart—a sense of pity for the creature. The swan reached the lake and ventured into the water, never looking back. As it waded deeper into the water, its body was tossed by the waves like a ship threatening to capsize. After a short fight, the swan pitched to the side and was consumed by the lake.

Paul now stood at the birth of the lake. He could feel the cold bite of the water numbing his toes to the bone. His eyes were trained ahead, focused on something moving beneath the surface where the swan had been just seconds before. Paul could tell something was there by the pattern of waves. In the majority of the lake, the waves were coming towards him on the shore. But in that small, maybe five-foot in diameter gap, the water was calm, and the waves outside the circle rippled outwards, away from the centre, running opposite to the rest.

Suddenly, a head began to crown from the black water. The hair was pulled back in a bun and appeared perfectly dry. Slowly rising from the surface was the still figure of the Lady of Loch Eala. Like her hair, the rest of her body remained dry—her dress untarnished by the murky depths below. The woman now floated; her thin, pale feet hovering just inches above the surface. She levitated, like a trick done by an experienced magician, but real.

The woman watched him without blinking. Upon seeing his face, the same faint smile as before appeared on her lips. She lifted a hand towards him and fluttered her fingers in a gesture that said hello. He was speechless, unable to turn away. The emotions he felt in this moment were baffling. He was both lustful towards her and repulsed in a way. The Lady of Loch Eala’s hand moved, palm turning inwards. She kissed it and blew it towards him.

Against his brain’s advice, his arm broke free from his full-body paralysis. He caught the invisible kiss and pressed it to his neck, where it burned. It felt like he had been stung by a paper wasp. With his other hand, his fingers grazed the injury and felt swollen ridges of flesh in the shape of lips between the tendons.

Once more, the Lady of Loch Eala smiled and waved at him. Like with the pot of boiling water, a fog came off the waves, enveloping the woman in a hundred tendrils of mist. The Lady of Loch Eala slowly dematerialized, leaving only her cold eyes hovering in the smoke, piercing into his soul until, they too, faded away.

Three months had passed following Paul’s last encounter with the Lady of Loch Eala. He had almost forgotten her; the paper her portrait was drawn upon seemed to have. When Paul rediscovered the parchment neglected on the floor beneath the dresser, he unfolded it to see

nothing more than a blank sheet of paper looking back at him. The woman had vanished. Leaving him alone, as everyone else had.

Paul sat at his table, a mountain of dented and empty tin-cans with the labels ripped off lying at his feet. He gazed defeatedly out the window at the field of withered crops. Two months prior, when his memory of the Lady of Loch Eala first started to fade, Paul had gone into town to buy an acre's worth of seeds in an attempt to grow his own food. He hadn't gone into work since he moved into his new home, his checking account had a thousand dollars of overdraft fees in it, and his savings were on the brink of depletion. Growing his own food had been his last attempt at self-sufficiency.

One thing Paul found odd, was that it wasn't just his crops that had died, it was that ever since his encounter with the Lady of Loch Eala, all crops and vegetation that had been here before have withered as well. It was raining enough—it was Georgia, after all—so Paul knew it wasn't a matter of the crops not getting enough water. This land in Unholy, he thought. There is no life here. Paul's fingers ran along the scar on his neck that had grown to the size of a golf ball. He smiled grimly and a sharp pain pulsed through the mass.

What was once an idyllic escape from the world that had caused him endless strife, Loch Eala had since become, to him, not the place of personal renewal he hoped it would be. It had become his own solitary level of Hell. One where he was forced to dwell on his own shortcomings and insecurities. The Lady of Loch Eala wasn't the spirit of a past owner, he now realized. It was the manifestation of Paul's fear of abandonment brought to life by his stress.

His eyes fell south to the empty can in his hand. His bearded and unwashed face stared back through the funhouse mirror ripples at the bottom. He almost didn't recognize himself. This was the first time he had sported a beard since before the fire academy nearly two decades ago. It was long, thinning in places, and speckled with wisps of grey. It made him look a decade older than he was. He sighed, a harsh rasp emanating from his lips.

"Paul..." came a soft voice behind him. Standing over his reflection's shoulder was a blurred face he couldn't make out. But he immediately recognized the sound and was overcome with guilt that he had ever doubted her existence.

"You've become weak," the Lady of Loch Eala said this with pity, not judgment.

Paul felt a cold and gentle hand land on his shoulder. The touch stung the flesh through his shirt, but he didn't pull away. It felt so good to be touched by another soul—living or dead. His head fell forward into his hands, and he began to cry.

"Don't cry, Paul. You won't be alone for much longer." Another hand went to his face, wiping away the tears. He felt a stream of blood begin beneath his eye.

"It's almost time."

The Lady of Loch Eala kissed his temple, then moved south and gave a gentle nibble to his earlobe. Welts instantly popped up at both locations. It felt like someone had thrown a pot of boiling water in his face.

“It’s almost time,” the Lady of Loch Eala repeated.

When Paul finally forced himself to turn around and face her, the Lady of Loch Eala was gone. Paul wept, but not from the fire that had been ignited in his face and shoulder. He cried because he was alone once more with his thoughts, and that had become his greatest fear.

It was a bitterly cold day in January a month later when Paul was awoken by a strange feeling in his soul. It was a sense of knowing something was amiss. Many would call that paranoia. Paul called it an intuition. He didn’t feel in any particular danger. No, that wasn’t it. It felt to Paul like he was running late for an important meeting.

Upon failing to return to the land of his dreams after trying for another half-hour, Paul scrapped the idea of sleep altogether. It was early. He estimated the time was probably somewhere between three and four in the morning, but that wasn’t a problem. He’d been awake much earlier at his previous job.

The room had grown colder than usual. A gentle breeze wafted through, but all doors and windows were shut. Paul’s small hairs stood on end. He fixed his sights on the closed window and could see, between the smudges on the glass, the shape of the Lady of Loch Eala one hundred yards away on the shore of the lake. She was looking at him through the window—he could feel it. And she was beckoning him forth. The ghosts of voices long gone echoed in the darkest chambers of his mind.

You won’t be alone for much longer.

It’s almost time.

You’ve become weak.

The white haze of cold radiated off the waters around her; waiting to steal away his only companion as it always had, but he wouldn’t let it. She was right: he had become weak, but not just physically, he was weakened spiritually, mentally, and, worst of all, emotionally. He had become vulnerable to all the darkest corners of the human mind he used to ignore. He couldn’t take it anymore. He missed his daughter, he missed his job, he missed his old life and how mundane it had been. But, most surprising of all, he missed his ex-wife. Except he didn’t so much miss her as he missed the warmth of affection. Or, at the very least, just having someone there.

Paul turned for the door but stopped, fearing that if he let her out of his sights, she’d vanish again. Still the Lady of Loch Eala remained stationary, silently calling for him. Paul slid the window open. He had to put his back into it. The hinges, like everything else in this house, had rusted due to a lack of use. It wouldn’t surprise Paul if it hadn’t been opened in decades.

The sting of cold sank its fangs into his bones when Paul emerged from the window. There the Lady of Loch Eala stood, clearer now, continuously beckoning him. Paul stepped forward but almost collapsed. His legs wobbled weakly, and his stomach growled with starvation. Paul looked down at his bare chest and saw his ribs threatening to tear through the flesh. Below, his stomach was a sunken pit.

Determined and fuelled by the desire—the need—for affection, Paul pressed forth. His face, shoulder, and neck pulsed the closer he got to the Lady of Loch Eala. It felt like he had three new hearts to replace the one that had been broken. The throbbing growths grew hot, filled with steaming pus. He was so close he could hear her faint voice calling for him.

“It’s time now, Paul,” she said. “But you must hurry.”

“I’m... trying,” he gasped. His lungs burned and crackled with the cancer taking over every system of his body.

Paul reached the edge of the lake. The frostbite-inducing cold nipped at the skin of his exposed legs. The Lady of Loch Eala hovered above the water ten-yards out from him.

“Paul, you must hurry.”

“But... the water...” He dipped a barefoot into the water and instantly felt it go numb, the nerves killed by the arctic chill.

“You have to decide. We can be one, Paul. Two broken halves of one heart. You don’t have to be alone.”

Paul would have cried if he had any tears left to shed. Due to a lack of food, he hadn’t had enough energy to get water from the well in the last three days. His head pounded with dehydration; a hammer burying a hundred rusted nails into his shrivelled and dying brain.

He looked up. The spirit of the woman from the portrait that had once been remained in the same spot, but now a slow-moving cloud began spreading up her body, devouring her legs up to the knees. Below, her feet were gone. It was how she always left him, except this time, Paul’s intuition told him she would be gone for good.

“You have to decide,” she repeated.

The cloud inched its way to mid-thigh; her knees vanished.

Sucking in his breath like a swimmer embracing the cold of a pool, Paul charged out towards her, arms opened wide like a lost child reunited with its mother.

“No, please don’t go! Don’t leave me!” Paul wailed. The water rose to his own knees; the numb legs below becoming rubber.

“Paul,” The Lady of Loch Eala strained. He could hear agony in her voice.

Paul lunged forth and embraced the spirit. He half-expected to pass through her and faceplant into the frozen depths. Instead, when his arms wrapped around her half-dematerialized waist, they stuck. He could feel the soft frill of silk beneath his fingers. Relieved, he rested his head on her shoulder and kissed her cheek. The flesh was cold—as expected with a lack of blood—but compared to this weather, it was hot.

Paul felt a chill run down his spine as the cloud passed over his hips. He looked down. Only the top half of the Lady of Loch Eala remained, but Paul's own limbs beneath the cloud remained solid.

His eyes grew wide, "What's happening? You're still vanishing!"

She looked him sadly in the eyes, "Paul... we have to become one."

"How?"

"The dream, Paul."

The wisp climbed its way to the bottom of her breasts; it was gaining speed. The Lady of Loch Eala grimaced, pained by the process.

"The dream..." Paul thought aloud. A lightbulb went off in his head. "Become one. Will you marry me? Can we do that? Without a priest?"

Her subtle smile grew, spreading from ear to ear. The pearls of teeth within were sharp—like those of a wolf. The Lady of Loch Eala quickly closed her mouth.

"How do we do that?" Paul continued.

"Kiss me, Paul," she said.

A sense of déjà vu called out to him from his memory. She had said the same thing in the dream months prior.

His eyes fell upon the decomposing faces of a hundred generations of his family.

"You have to make a decision." The Lady of Loch Eala was now nothing more than a head and neck attached to a floating sternum.

Their withering skulls were without eyes.

"Now, Paul."

Still, Paul could feel the burn of them watching him. Waiting for him to seal their marriage with a final kiss.

Paul, beginning to succumb to hypothermia, looked the Lady of Loch Eala in the eyes—those orbs that exposed his very soul. Paul kissed her.

The Lady of Loch Eala changed, but Paul didn't see a thing, for his eyes were closed as their lips were joined. Or so he thought. Instead, the spirit's jaw was spread open, latched over his own. The Lady of Loch Eala's hair had become withered and unkempt like someone in the late stages of cancer. Her eyes had narrowed, becoming two snake-eyed slits, and the colour within was red.

Paul didn't feel much as his soul was stripped from his body and devoured by the Lady of Loch Eala. He felt a sense of displacement, but most of all, he felt relief. He was free from this miserable existence as Paul Thomas. Now, he and his bride would be joined as one. The eyelids of the empty shell of his body opened reflexively; the whites showing within the sockets. The body's arms had fallen limply to its sides. The Lady of Loch Eala unhooked its fangs from the corpse's jaw and let it fall into the lake, disappearing into the depths below. The Lady of Loch Eala had claimed another.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 12

The air outside the castle's front doors was cool and thick with dense mountain mist. My view down the road leading to the valley was obstructed, the tangled forest brush on either side of the path stood in the fog like a mob of stilled grotesque figures. I tried to push the image of the burning ghost woman from my mind, ruminating on its existence, its purpose. I could only assume, that if it truly were a ghost (and psychoanalysis holds with no theory proposing for such creatures to exist, though dementia of the subconscious could account for a vision of one), that I assumed her to be the dead sister—death by fire—who followed the remaining members of her family to their current abode. But to what purpose, I couldn't surmise.

I wandered out from under the porte-cochère and felt a thin dew light upon my face. With the collar of my raincoat tucked around my neck, I edged my bowler down further on my crown, stuffed hands in pockets, and lead myself on tour of the castle grounds.

Cobblestones provided enough of a walking surface for my shoes to stay off the soft, wet ground, bringing my path to the stables. I wondered if Gustav was also in charge of the horses. Two chestnuts and a bay, their curious billiard ball eyes looking at me as I entered, then they returned to their oats, and shuffled their hooves in the hay of their immaculate stalls. Perhaps attended by an unseen stable hand who rode the long road up the mountain to do his early morning duty before returning home to his cottage far below? Kasimir had the resources to afford the assistance of the poor townsfolk.

I petted and cooed soothing words to the horses, and none shied from my hand. They snorted amicably and snuffled my sleeve.

I wandered back into the clear air, filled my lungs, felt at peace surrounded by the blue-grey mist. All sound was dampened except for the tap of my shoes on stone. The grey castle walls and towers rose high above me. I realized that I had seen very little of my temporary abode, inside or out. Would I ever see all of it? Its vastness was imposing as I stood at a tower's base, myself a mere flea peering up at a behemoth.

A rattling of vegetation drew my eye down from lofty heights. A hare darted from beneath a small clump of bushes growing against the north tower. A flash of gold from amongst the leaves held my gaze and urged my steps toward the greenery.

I climbed through the twisted branches and nettles to find a small wooden door with a somewhat tarnished brass handle. Not gold, but a less fine metal alloy, had tempted me to behold it with its shine.

The door was locked. A hearty knock divulged that it was solidly constructed. I inspected the brass plate and keyhole surrounding the handle. One would assume that brass would stain and corrode on an exterior door, especially given the amount of rainfall the mountain received. And yet, as I alluded to, it shone like gold.

There was some wear, however, around the keyhole, scratches gouged in the metal. As though, perhaps, someone attempted to gain entrance at night, their key repeatedly going astray of the keyhole. I peered through the hole and saw only a depth of blackness.

Curiosity as to the door's purpose held me for a time as I continued my wanderings around the perimeter of the walls. Ivy and other greenery grew up the towers, but held no other surprise entrances or exits that I could determine.

The north wall of the castle was almost flush with the mountainside, and dropped to a dizzying precipice. I gazed into the fog and thought I could just make out the shadows of dwellings in the valley below, but I was sorely mistaken. The mist being too thick and the village too distant. I knew not what those shadows detailed.

I returned to the interior of the castle to continue my tour, unbuttoning my coat and draping it over my arm. I came to door after door down various hallways and found them all locked. I respected Kasimir's privacy and did not attempt to break any barrier. I passed through a hallway chequered with black and white tiles, lined with painted portraits of the seemingly endless genealogy of the family Khole.

Stopping between two paintings, I gazed up at who I felt must be the deceased patriarch of Kasimir. A stately man with a thick head of grey hair and muttonchops, strong hands holding the arms of the carved wooden chair in which he sat, wearing military decorations of a past era. His soft blue eyes gazed out from the portrait with an edge of worry and concern. A particular slant to his open mouth reinforced the trepidation in his visage, as though he were about to ask a vital query of the age.

His wife was a beautiful specimen of womanhood in the portrait beside his, slender and tall, her raven ringlets piled high on her head, a tan shade to her skin as though she had been born in Mediterranean climes. Her slender hands were cupped like a tortoise shell as though she held some delicate bird and was about to release it to its freedom.

I stood before the portraits for a prolonged time, in admiration, feeling as though they were the pillars on which the regal lineage stood, true to its ancient bearing.

Stepping farther along the hallway, I was halted again. This time by the children of the couple. Kasimir looking as he did in his university days, full of youth and vigour, not sallow and prematurely aged, as at present. Cybele was almost as stunning as conveyed by the brush as she was in her corporeal frame. I compared the healthy glow of her painted cheeks with the rose blush I had seen on her face as she slept. She was as beautiful, if not more, in health as she was in sickness. I questioned my first impression of her, now juxtaposed against her painted self. If she had suffered from such madness as Kasimir claimed, should she not be pale and thin, her looks haggard, blue shadows beneath her eyes, a wrinkle or two to her smooth skin from insomnia, from night terrors? And yet none of these effects were present in her, even when she had held a razor to my throat. Painted or real, sane or mad, she was beautiful.

And the portrait next to hers was her twin. Only the ebony hair of the deceased sister was done in an alternate fashion, the dress of the same cut but of a different hue, a small locket at her throat in the shape of an Ouroboros. Minor differences, possibly for the clarity of the

viewer to tell the twin daughters apart, so that such an appreciation of art did not assume that the painter had brought to form the same beauty twice.

I gazed at the twins even longer than I had at their parentage.

But soon I felt the minutest throb resume its pace in my temples. Too much fresh air of the exterior (or perhaps stale air of the interior) had returned my headache to my pate. My eyes stung, and my muscles felt weary, needing more rest than I had given them.

I made my way through the castle, ascending slowly one of the staircases rising in the foyer, each step a hammer against my skull. I passed suits of armour and medieval battle-axes and weapons of ancient warfare framed on the walls between stained glass windows.

In my room, I was soon back in my night clothes, not knowing the time, but too increasingly exhausted to attempt to keep my eyes open, to measure the movement of day into night.

When I returned, there was a fresh cup of green elixir waiting for me on the night table. Gustave was the perfect manservant. With a volume of Schopenhauer perched on my chest and the elixir in my stomach, my eyelids soon weighted down, and I was fast asleep.

My door was left closed but unlocked, Kasimir holding the key, so I felt my safety assured as I slipped into a sleep rife with another disturbing dream.

CONTINUES NEXT WEEK



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THE MUD GODS by Carlton Herzog

It may be said with some assurance that not everything meeting the eye is as it appears. Case in point: Johnny Proudfoot looked as if he had been chiselled from solid granite, a brown-skinned black-haired Adonis, whose very physical being radiated a larger than life strength, grace and nimble sure-footedness. Nevertheless, Johnny had a baked in habit of tripping over his own elegantly crafted feet, so much so he was called Johnny Tangle-Feet.

On this day, Johnny had gone to the Raratona River to gather mussels and clams. Since his natural clumsiness followed him everywhere like a shadow, it should have come as no surprise when he stumbled face first into the mudflat left by the receding tide. But Johnny believed this time was different and unnatural. For as he pitched forward into that shimmering smooth plain of sediment, he thought he saw bony hands clutching his ankles. He hit the mud with a slap and sank into it face first. It filled his mouth, nose and ears. Anger and revulsion consumed him as he thought of the bird and turtle droppings, the urine and dead things imbedded in that viscous noisome slop. He got to his feet, then slipped again, this time falling backwards, so that he was now covered head to toe with river mud.

Whether he had simply imagined those prehensile hands grabbing at him or not, was, to his mind, not relevant, since either way, this latest humiliation was simply another in a long line of mud related episodes. After all, mud was the go-to weapon of his white tormentors: they took a perverse delight in throwing it at him, throwing him into it, and on two occasions, forcing him to eat it as they held him down. To his mind, the universe, or whatever it was that ran the show, was not going to let him forget his degraded social status as a native American in the white man's world, a mere thing in and of the mud no better than a lowly fiddler crab or a clam.

In the weeks that followed, he began having nightmares of muddy suffocation. Vivid and violent, the horror begins with disembodied hands dragging him into down into the mud. In the recurring nightmares, he tries to scream but the moment his mouth opens the mud pours into his mouth and throat. Then there's only the feel of a slow progressive submergence into darkness and death. Then he wakes in a cold sweat, half-believing he nearly died, or did. The relentless frequency of the nightmares prompted him to visit the school counsellor.

Nightmares are a normal part of sleep, a way to process the emotions and events of the day. The recurring nocturnal drownings are your mind's way of releasing your anger and fear. Given your last experience on the river, and your run-ins with the local louts and philistines, your nightmares are a way for you to blow off psychic steam. Forgive the pun, but I wouldn't lose too much sleep over them. Eventually, they'll go away.

Johnny found her take a little too glib and facile. If he had been white, then maybe, he thought, she might take his concerns more seriously.

So, he turned to his grandfather, a former Sioux shaman. He had a much different take on the nightmares:

You are being visited by angry spirits. They won't hurt you. They just want to get your attention, let you know that they're there below waiting. But they can be a pain in the neck. I know. When I first moved here, they pestered me at night too. I'm going to mix you a potion that will block their influence so you can sleep. It's made from the hair of a donkey, the

spleen of a turtle and the blood of a pig. And I'll make you a chuchakata, or good luck charm, to wear as protection when the need arises.

It smelled disgusting and tasted worse. The first few sips made Johnny retch, and when he could finally hold it down, his stomach boiled, and his head burned. To his grandfather's credit, the nightmares stopped. Johnny chalked the success up to the power of suggestion rather than any preternatural abilities possessed by his grandfather.

Johnny's lack of confidence in his grandfather's mystical abilities stemmed from his grandfather's looking and acting more like a grizzled convict than a spiritual leader. Leather-faced, with a canyon-deep scar running from his chin to just below his cobalt blue eyes and a smaller one across his thrice broken nose, he could have passed for a lifer at Alcatraz. During World War II, he had served in the Pacific as a code talker for the marines, transmitting secret tactical messages for the allies. After the war, he had served as police officer for the Seven Tribes of the Great Sioux Nation in Nebraska.

Even though he was in his late 80s, he was endowed with a vitality that bordered on the divine. Perhaps that vital energy is what allowed him to survive the killing fields of the Last Massacre where California prospectors had killed 80 unarmed men, women and children—including his parents. Like his parents before him, Jimmy Jumping Frog belonged to the Sioux Ghost Dance cult, a movement which foretold of the resurrection of dead ancestors who would kill the white usurpers and renew the earth.

He was not Johnny's first choice for a living companion. He had come to live with him after his parents were shot and killed in that most white American of past-times, the mass shooting. But in retrospect, he was exactly the kind of guide Johnny needed, someone who could toughen him up and school him in the ways of this world.

His grandfather had the kind of perspective on life that Johnny needed. So, when Johnny came home from a protest where he and his pals had thrown bricks and piss-filled balloons at Neo-Nazis, his grandfather chided him.

Sure, throwing piss at Neo Nazis is hilarious, but what does it accomplish? Once you add bricks and piss to the conversation it's pretty much over. All you've done is sunk to their level. And nobody can claim the moral high ground when you're all standing in the mud.

Think about it: Martin Luther King didn't do it, and he and his supporters had it way worse than you what with the dogs, the fire hoses and the beatings.

That kind of practical wisdom seemed incongruous with the mystical books filling his grandfather's shelves, many of which centred on acquiring knowledge from the spirit world, such as the *Inferi Sapientia* (Wisdom of the Dead). And then there was the oft repeated chant of deliverance and protection sung by his grandfather that always began as *Whosoever readeth your spells daily over himself shall escape death and never suffer evil for very long.*

As wacky as it all seemed, Johnny concluded, after some reflection, that his grandfather's obsession with the power of the occult was a left-handed way of compensating for his feelings of impotence in a white dominated land, and nothing more.

His grandfather's house sat on the edge of wetlands that abutted the mighty Raratona River, a long winding twist of murky brown, polluted water that snaked up and around that enormous reedy wetland. Under natural conditions, the wetlands filtered the water, contained storm surges, and acted as a wildlife refuge.

Many years ago, its lushness and quietude attracted a small band of Egyptian refugees. They had fled persecution by Muslims, who branded them heretics for their allegiance to the old gods of ancient Egypt. They lived in mud-huts, built small temples to Ra, fished the river, hunted its wildlife, farmed in places and even made their own papyrus from the river reeds.

Regrettably, the settlement stood in the way of the planned Chimera pharmaceutical complex. Chimera ordered the settlers to leave, and when they didn't, Chimera's private security force—a hodgepodge of ex-cons, local criminals, and thugs—dragged the gypsies to a large mudflat created by low-tide and shot them. They left the bodies to slowly sink into the mud never to be seen again. Or so an anonymous witness claimed.

After that, the Chimera complex was up and running in record time. Chimera made full use of the river as its personal sewer for industrial and pharmaceutical wastes, and the marshes around it as a landfill. As a result, what had once been a thriving eco-system became a polluted wasteland. The plants and animals died, the water turned brackish and undrinkable, and the whole area smelled like an open sewer.

Even more disturbing was the wholesale transformation of the wildlife. The gender bending chemicals in the waste gave birth to transgender fish, and later, muskrats and ducks. The flood of hormones and chemicals also altered the genetic pathways to such a degree that Chimera began producing actual chimeras through its waste disposal process. At first, the composites were simple fusions of form: a frog's head on a fish's body, fish fins on a muskrat, whiskers on a duck. But other larger and more complicated things soon joined that freakish menagerie.

Dead half-formed things and composite things were found drifting down the river or washing up on its banks. Other times blobs or sheets of skin filled with multiple mouths and eyes would flow out to sea in numbers that would rival a jellyfish bloom. Most defied classification, and the ones that could be identified were obscene abnormalities.

But the most disturbing things were the human deformities that started showing up in the local maternity wards as the waste chemicals found their way into the food chain and water table. The most grotesque were the two-headed babies, those born with two sets of arms and legs, and the crawling eyes and mouths moving on flippers. There would have been a public outcry, but Chimera was quick to dispose of the monstrosities and pay its hush money.

In an ironic twist, somewhere around 1956, Chimera's night-shift workers started disappearing. Chimera doubled its security and hired private investigators with dogs to comb the area but could find nothing. The disappearances reached epidemic proportions in the 1960s prompting the use of helicopters to search, but again, the missing workers were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn't long after that the search teams started vanishing. Fear gripped the rank and file employees, so much so that Chimera could not keep enough people to stay in business, and eventually abandoned the area. The property deteriorated, so that by the time Johnny arrived

at his grandfather's home some fifty years later, wind and weather and neglect had taken their toll: the once glitzy state of the art complex looked like the ruins of a dead civilization.

Over time, life slowly returned to the water and the land. And as it did, the Excelsior Corporation, a land developing conglomerate, saw that new vitality as a business opportunity. Its plan was to build a residential waterfront community complete with golf course, shopping mall, and parking garage.

Unfortunately, for it, Jimmy Jumping Frog's land sat square in the middle of where Excelsior wanted to build. At first, they tried the carrot: friendly sales letters and personal visits punctuated by generous offers of cash. But Jimmy had no intention of selling. His grandson would often ask him, and the answer would always be the same:

Why do you stay here when you can go anywhere and live like a king with the cash, they're offering you?

I have a sacred duty to stop the white man from poisoning this land again. If they want me gone, then they'll have to kill me.

This land is not worth dying for.

Isn't it? Without good land and clean water there can be no future.

Johnny's gut told him that this would not end well for either one of them. Things would get worse before they got better.

A week later, things came to a head. Three of Johnny's usual tormentors pushed him inside a locker, and one of them asked him: Are you a casino Indian or a Slurpee Indian? Then they dumped a blue sports drink on his head, and laughingly said, Warpaint Geronimo.

After they walked off laughing, Johnny pulled himself out of the locker and followed them into a class room. He grabbed a large stapler and cracked his interrogator in the head. Then he turned on the other two. One got away. The other one got it in the mouth. There were copious amounts of blood pooling on the floor when the teachers grabbed and hauled him away.

When his grandfather brought him in to contest the pending suspension, things got testy between him and the principal.

They torment him every-day, yet you just sit back and do nothing to stop it, so how else can he defend himself against these bullies? Why aren't they suspended?

I understand your frustration, but there's a big difference between aggravated battery and a soaking with a soft drink. He's lucky he's not in jail, but that might change. The other students' parents want to press charges; they want to sue the school. I can't just let him back. Time off is just what he needs to think about what's he done wrong.

Speaking of time, yours is about up.

You think that threatening to get me fired will make me back down?

That's not what I'm talking about, Paleface. Your day of reckoning is fast approaching.

Don't threaten me old man with your crazy old-world Indian mumbo jumbo. My brother is the chief of police. I suggest you take your grandson and go.

That's where the matter was left—suspension for the rest of the semester. It would have been much worse, but Johnny's science teacher Mr. Timko offered him a job as his research assistant. He was doing a study of the local wetlands. So now Johnny could make some money and at least have something to fill in the gap on his resume.

Timko had him sieve mud using river water, put the samples in petri dishes, and look for mud creatures using hand lenses and microscopes. Johnny learned that mudflats support an abundance of life with an estimated 40,000 microscopic organisms living in a double handful of mud alone.

Johnny found that Timko had a thing for mud, what some would call an obsession that translated itself into his being a walking encyclopaedia of mud information of the weird kind.

Mud cults proliferated in the ancient world, especially in places like the flood plains of the Nile Delta. Primitives saw mud, a mixture of earth and water, as a fertility fetish. They also believed it was the mother of the great Nile predators, such as the crocodile, the hippopotamus and the lion.

In Polynesia, the tribal legends speak of the mud giants—the Gommatas—who protected the locals by stomping the European invaders to death. In India, legends abound of Vishnu—the protector—using mud tidal waves and mud slides to cleanse the world of evil, chaotic and destructive forces.

In both modern-day science and religion, mud is seen as much more than just a simple mixture of earth and water but a power unto itself. Modern day Christians hold the belief that mud cleanses the body and soul, as when Jesus healed the blind man by smearing mud on his eyes. For his part, Darwin, in the Origin of Species, acknowledged that a simple muddy bank like the one we're standing on, has the power to evolve endless forms most beautiful and wonderful.

I myself have often wondered if mud could be conscious in some way with a kind of dim self-awareness. Since we don't know how our own minds emerge from the three pounds of glop between our ears, then how can we discount the possibility that mud operates as a matrix for primitive thought, especially in places where dead animals and people decompose and their remnants have been absorbed into the ground?

Corny as it sounds, I think of mud as a doorway between what was and what can be, a ghost-filled graveyard and the womb of time with endless possibilities waiting to be born.

Johnny listened politely to these adventures in conjecture and whimsy but thought to himself that *This guy is as nutty as my grandfather.*

They spent five Saturdays doing the sieving. At times, Timko was tedious; at others downright absurd. But hanging with him still seemed saner than sitting around the house with

his grandfather who sang to the crawdads and chatted up long dead ancestors, as if he were the Sioux version of Sylvia Brown.

Following his fifth outing with Mr. Timko, Johnny came home to find his grandfather being strong-armed by six rough looking men. He walked in and they all got quiet until one of them said: *If you don't care about yourself old man, maybe you'll care about your grandson.*

The man grabbed Johnny by his ponytail and pulled him over in front of his grandfather, who had a big bloody gash on his forehead, puffy eyes and a swollen lip.

How's about I cut out the kid's eyes for starters?

That won't change anything.

The next moment they were pushed out the door at gunpoint. The eight of them walked to two large motorboats moored at the river. The men dragged their captives on board, and the two boats headed into the wetlands. They had gone about a mile when they turned down a channel on the opposite bank. The boat travelled about two miles before it came to an enormous mudflat created by the receding tide. It was the same place Johnny had tripped and fallen into the mud.

The goons pushed Johnny and his grandfather out and told them to walk. No sooner had they hit the surface than they began to sink. To motivate them, the men started shooting into the mud. The only thing they could do to keep moving was to crawl on all fours like great sea turtles.

While you're crawling in that vile stuff, you'll have time to think about our offer. At the end of that time, we're going to ask you again about selling us your property. And if we don't like your answer, we'll shoot you dead, and leave your bodies for the birds and fish and whatever other hungry things live on the river.

Johnny was getting tired. He worried that Pops would have a heart attack or a stroke before he could answer, let alone sign any papers.

Pops, we gonna die out here; you need to give them what they want.

No, we not gonna die. Just be patient. Are you wearing the charm I gave you?

Yes.

Things gonna get interesting here in a minute or so.

And then he began to chant:

*Hail Thoth, Lord of divine words and master of Papyrus,
Who madest Osiris victorious over his enemies,
Make me then to be victorious over my enemies in this place
Hear my petition:*

Reach deep into the earth for me and bring forth your blessed children—our protectors—who shimmer in the mud. Rise then mighty Ammit, balancer of the scales; rise too, Kek and Kakeut, children of chaos and darkness.

No sooner had those words come out of his mouth than the mudflat began to bubble and roil. And it began to stink. Not the standard polluted river mud stink they had been breathing for the past fifteen minutes, but the sulphur infused, mephitic breath of hell itself, a miasma so putrid, so acrid, it burned their eyes and throats, and would have seared their skin were it not for the muddy integument covering their bodies.

What happened next seemed like a nightmare, and to this day, Johnny doesn't want to admit its reality. He heard a great rumbling and could feel what seemed like the entire planet vibrating, as if its very atoms were alive. He turned to look behind himself and saw an enormous shape rise from the flat. It swayed back and forth, and as it did, the mud slid off it, revealing first the head of an enormous crocodile and the body of a lion. Its mouth opened revealing rows of jagged teeth. It roared, a rumbling bellow that resonated through his body and must have echoed for miles.

It surveyed the kidnappers with cold reptile eyes. As it did, some of the men opened fire to no effect. Its enormous muddy paw hammered one boat down into the mud then shattered the other into splinters and boards, sending the occupants flying into the reeds. It didn't matter if they survived the landing because a moment later, they were dragged back by the serpentine tongues of enormous frog-headed beetles. They pinned the men them on their backs with their rear legs, then used their barbed forelegs to tear open their chests and expose their still beating hearts. Then one by one the frog headed beetles used their tongues to rip out those hearts and offer them up one by one to the great crocodilian thing.

The crocodilian held out its paw. In one was a still beating heart; in the other a feather. For a moment, it seemed to be weighing them against one another, then promptly stuffed the heart into its enormous maw.

Johnny and his grandfather watched the grisly feast with a mixture of satisfaction that justice had been meted out to their tormentors and sheer terror that they might be next. But they were left them alone, and when the gruesome business was completed, the crocodilian submerged into the mud along with its confederates.

After the weighing of the hearts had concluded, Johnny and his grandfather noticed that there had been an audience on the opposite bank, though not of the living. The restless spirits of the massacred gypsies had risen in spectral form to see justice done, if not to those who murdered them, but to those like them. Their stone-faced expressions signifying the grim emotionless approval of those bereft of a physical body and its accompanying emotions.

Without a word, Johnny and his grandfather crawled back to the beachhead and slowly made their way over the reed stumps along the bank. By the time they got near the house, the tide had flowed in, so they swam across the river to the opposite bank. Johnny remembered cleaning up and collapsing on his bed. The next day at breakfast, he asked Pops what exactly had happened.

All you need to know is that the mud gods will always protect us here.

Johnny wanted to call him crazy, but he couldn't deny what he had seen and the fact that the two of them were still alive. Johnny knew that he would never look at mud the same again.

Johnny tried to make sense of it all. He speculated that what we call supernatural is nothing more than the fuzzy domains of nature we don't comprehend, and probably never will.

Were those manifestations of ancient Egyptian gods that rose from the mud? Perhaps they were chimeras created by all the chemical dumping over the years. Maybe they left me and Pops alone because they had eaten their fill, and not because Pops had any power over them. Whatever the case, appearances are an unreliable measure of reality. I used to see mud as a viscous inert mixture of earth and water. Under Mr. Timko's tutelage, I saw mud as a matrix of biological life. But now I see that mud seethes with an enigmatic and terrible animal life, mud gods, if you prefer, hidden from sight, revealing themselves only when most needed, in forms earthly yet otherworldly, and then with deadly finality. Whether that life comes from heaven above or an accelerated artificial evolution below matters not to me.

In the end, I don't need to know how a clock works to know the time. And the time is one of quiet reverence for things I don't understand.

THE END

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TEDDY by Luke Tebb

Prologue

In a toy factory in the heart of the countryside, a woman named Evelyn stitched together a teddy bear. Every day she worked at her desk, hands trembling uncontrollably, vision clouded with tears. She'd lost her son. He was just three and had passed away unexpectedly in his sleep. She couldn't gather herself, and the bear ended up a poor quality and not up to the standard of the Huggable Bears Company.

Seeing how deeply Evelyn had been affected by the loss of her child, the manager of the company told her to take a couple of weeks off. He threw the bear into a bin, where it was found by another factory worker named Ryan.

Ryan thought the bear would make a good present for his daughter, who would be five. The stitching was messy, the eyes and nose were out of place, and the stuffing didn't fill out the entire body, but he couldn't afford to buy her a present. It would have to do.

One Month Later...

Naomi's face lit up when she saw the teddy bear. She wasn't expecting any presents, and this was her second. The first, a Barbie doll, was from Mrs. Evans, a kind neighbour who lived in the flat above. She gave the bear a big hug and didn't seem to mind the poor quality.

Ryan and his daughter Naomi lived halfway up a tower block, around five miles from the toy factory. Every morning they got up at seven o'clock, washed, dressed, ate breakfast in the tiny kitchen area, walked down the endless stairs and up the road to the bus stop. Naomi was dropped off just outside the gates of Layton CE Primary School, while Ryan was dropped off just outside the factory car park. They had a weekly budget for food and household essentials, and rarely bought new clothes. Naomi ate free school dinners, which a girl named Laura a couple of years above teased her for. Ryan made a formal complaint to the head teacher, and Laura's mum was brought in. She was just as arrogant and entitled as her daughter, and so the situation was hopeless.

"Do you like him?" Ryan asked.

"Yes," Naomi beamed, blowing back a strand of hair which had fallen onto her face. She smiled at the bear and hugged it again.

Ryan checked his watch. "We'd better get ready to go. You have a birthday cake waiting for you after school, but leave some for me."

Naomi took the bus home and used a spare key to unlock the flat. Unless she was going to an after-school club she'd be home hours before him. Ryan knew it wasn't safe for her to be on her own, especially considering the area they lived in, but there wasn't anything he could do. Mrs. Evans was the only neighbour who offered to babysit for him, but Ryan knew that she didn't have any time to spare. She worked two jobs, and still struggled to pay for the essentials, and he wouldn't let her quit one so she could look after Naomi. She was the sort of person who would do that and keep quiet the fact that it meant she wouldn't be able to pay the bills.

Ryan and Naomi ate breakfast while listening to the local radio. Ryan threw on his work uniform, splashed his face with water, brushed his teeth, and grabbed his big overcoat. Naomi was waiting by the door, wrapped in an oversized pink coat, filing through her school bag.

“Ready?” Ryan asked.

Naomi nodded. They walked down the endless stairs to a pair of big red doors. The paint was peeling and collecting in rugged piles on the floor. Outside light grey clouds were marching across the sky, and it was so cold Ryan could see his breath in the air. They walked hand in hand to the bus stop at the top of the road.

The bus was on time and the ride went smoothly as usual. When they stopped outside the school gates Ryan leaned over to Naomi and said, “If the girl in your class says anything, let me know, okay?”

“Okay, I will,” Naomi replied, grabbing her school bag and running to the front of the bus.

The bus arrived at the toy factory ten minutes later. The building was made of very old bricks and dotted with tall semi oval windows. A billboard above the bus stop advertised a new range of Huggable bears, due to come out in spring.

Ryan walked through the gates, across the courtyard and through the unsteady wooden doors. He showed his pass to the receptionist and walked up the stairs to the factory floor. He placed his coat and lunch box in his locker while greeting his co-workers. From his work desk he could see rolling hills and fields dotted with patches of snow and leafless trees. He wished that he could live in the countryside one day and own a large house with a garden.

When he approached the door of his flat that evening, Ryan could’ve sworn he heard two voices. It wasn’t uncommon to hear Naomi’s voice. She often talked to her toys, or sang along to the radio. The other voice was male, though. Low and deep. Ryan couldn’t quite make out what was being said.

He unlocked the door and burst through, expecting to find a burglar. Instead, Naomi was sat at the kitchen table doing her homework. She’d place the damaged bear on a chair opposite her.

“Is someone else here?” Ryan asked, surveying the main room.

“No,” Naomi replied plainly. She stole a glance at the bear.

“Oh,” Ryan said, puzzled. “I thought I heard another voice.” He threw his coat and backpack on the sofa. “Maybe it came from upstairs.”

After a shower and a change of clothes, Ryan set out a buffet on the coffee table for Naomi, and lit the candles on the cake. It wasn’t much of a birthday celebration, but it was the best he could do. He was worried that now she was of an age when she was aware it was her birthday, Naomi would cry and scream that she didn’t get enough presents or a big enough

party. By some miracle she hadn't yet. Ryan had never intended to have children; in fact he made it a vow not to. Despite zero experience with children and no help during the hectic days and sleepless nights in the early stages, Ryan's daughter had turned out an angel, not a devil.

Ryan owned a second hand TV, small by modern standards, but couldn't afford a DVD player, so he flicked through the channels until he found something they could watch as they ate. There was a showing of *Toy Story* in ten minutes.

Before she went to bed, Naomi grabbed her new bear. Ryan followed her to her bedroom. There was only one bedroom in the flat, so he slept on the sofa. She climbed into bed and held the bear against her chest. Ryan read her another chapter of *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*. It was his third time reading it, but Naomi seemed to enjoy the book just as much as the first time. Ryan wasn't sure that she would enjoy it when he found it in a charity shop, as the Captain Underpants books seemed to have been written more for boys, but she liked it nonetheless.

Ryan watched some TV with the volume turned down before covering the sofa in a blanket and lying down to sleep.

The next morning Ryan woke to the sound of Naomi crunching Frosties. He must have slept through his alarm clock. As he walked to the bathroom he saw that she had placed the bear on the chair next to her, with a spoon and bowl full of cereal. "Make sure you put the Frosties back in the box," he said. "Don't want food going to waste, remember?"

"Okay," Naomi said, stroking the bear's arm.

Ryan rushed breakfast and made sure Naomi had everything she needed for school. As they were about to head down the stairs Ryan felt a finger tap him on the shoulder. Mrs. Evans smiled at him. "Good morning."

"Morning," Ryan replied.

"How are you, Naomi?" she asked, kneeling down to reach Naomi's height.

"Fine, thank you," Naomi replied.

"What have you got there?" It was only then Ryan noticed Naomi was holding the bear under her arm.

"It's show and tell today," Naomi explained.

"He's a lovely bear," Mrs. Evans said, her earrings rattling. "What's his name?"

"I don't know yet," Naomi said shyly.

Mrs. Evans stood back up, her handbag slipping down her arm. "How about you, Ryan? You okay for money?"

“Just about managing,” Ryan replied honestly.

“You sure you don’t need me to babysit?”

“It’s fine. Naomi knows how to stay safe.”

Naomi nodded. “Make sure the door is locked and look through the peep hole before letting anyone in.”

“I’m always here if you need me,” Mrs. Evans added before they went their separate ways.

When Ryan arrived home that evening he again heard another voice beside Naomi’s. He pressed his ear against the door. The voice was definitely male, but again whoever it was, they were speaking too quietly for him to hear properly.

Ryan stepped inside and scanned the main room. It was empty. He opened the bedroom door and found Naomi sat on her bed, eyes on the bear, which she’d placed next to her. She jumped when she saw him.

“Just checking you’re okay,” Ryan said.

“We’re okay,” Naomi smiled. She leant over and picked the bear up.

“Does he have a name yet?” Ryan asked.

“His name’s Dylan,” Naomi said, stroking the bear’s ears.

Dylan? It was a very unusual name for a five year old girl to call her teddy bear. “Glad you like him. Need any help with your homework?”

Naomi shook her head.

“I’ll get dinner ready.”

Ryan was woken that night by a strange sound. He sat up on the sofa and listened closely. A female voice, sobbing. It must’ve been Naomi. Ryan couldn’t remember if he’d ever heard her sobbing before.

He walked bleary eyed to her bedroom and opened the door. The bed was empty. In the dim light he could make out Naomi’s silhouette in the corner.

Her knees were drawn up to her chest and her head was down. Her bedroom was much colder than the main room. Ryan couldn’t afford to have the heating on for very long, and so in winter the flat could get extremely cold, but the temperature in Naomi’s room was arctic. He

switched on the bedside lamp. As he knelt down next to her, goosebumps appeared along his arms.

“What are you doing sat in the corner?” he asked.

Naomi lifted her head and tucked her hair behind her little ears. Her eyes were filled with water. She remained silent.

“What’s the matter?” Ryan asked.

“I feel sad,” Naomi replied in a small voice.

“Did something happen at school?”

“No.”

“Did Laura say something to you?”

“No.”

“Did she tell you not to tell anyone what she said or did?”

“No.”

Ryan predicated that the monosyllabic answers would keep coming if he carried on trying to find out what had happened. “You’d feel a lot better if you were tucked up in bed,” he said. He lifted her up in his arms and placed her on her bed, drawing the duvet to her chin. He asked if she wanted him to read from one of her books, but she didn’t reply, just grabbed the bear and sank into the pillow.

Ryan had to finish work early the next day because Naomi’s school rang the factory regarding an incident that occurred at lunchtime. All he was told was that Naomi and Laura were shouting at each other when Naomi suddenly attacked Laura.

Ryan felt a pang of fear in his stomach as the bus neared the school gates. Did he not bring up Naomi well enough? He imagined the teachers staring at him as he walked to the headmaster’s office, and the students going home and telling their parents what a terrible dad Naomi’s father must be.

Rain began to fall as the bus shuddered to a stop. Ryan zipped up his jacket and reluctantly walked towards the school. As he walked down the corridors, a couple of Naomi’s teachers recognised him and said hello, but there was no judgement in their eyes.

In the headmaster’s office, Naomi was sat in a big chair, picking at the upholstery. The headmaster was sat at his desk, wiping his glasses with the edge of his suit jacket.

“Mr. Dawson,” he started, gesturing towards a fancy chair. “I’m sorry to call you away from your work, but I’m afraid there’s been a serious incident on the school premises. Naomi has

acted violently towards a pupil in year four, Laura Findlay. I'm afraid I'm going to have to exclude her for three days."

Ryan was shocked. "I've already made a formal complaint about Laura, and nothing was done. She's been picking on Naomi for the past few months."

The headmaster frowned. "Laura's mother has assured me she's brought her daughter up in the proper way, and taught her good manners and to treat everyone equally."

"Then she's delusional," Ryan snapped. "Laura picks on Naomi because she's from a lower class. Her and her mum look down on people like us. If you're not going to do anything about her behaviour—again—then I'll have to take Naomi to another school."

The headmaster shifted in his chair. "You need to understand that I'm in a very difficult position. Laura's mother has claimed that Laura comes home in tears some days because Naomi has said she looks ugly and is stupid. I have to take all accusations seriously. At the moment it's her word against yours."

Ryan gave a sigh of exasperation. "You must know how ridiculous that accusation sounds. Naomi is too young to have started bullying, and when have you ever heard of a bully targeting someone older and bigger? Bullies are cowards; they always target someone smaller and fragile. As a teacher you must've seen it countless times."

"Not always," the head teacher said stubbornly. "That's a generalisation. I'll talk to Laura's mother again."

Ryan figured there was no use in arguing any more, and took Naomi back home. He gave her his coat as the rain was still hammering down. She didn't say anything as they walked out of the school and onto the bus.

When they got back to the flat Ryan sat down with Naomi at the kitchen table and asked her what happened. She didn't reply, just sat with her arms folded and head down, her hair forming a curtain across her face. Ryan brushed her hair back and asked what happened again. Naomi's eyes were vacant, though still an arresting blue.

"I know you didn't say anything wrong to Laura," he consoled. "When you get older, though, you'll realise violence is not the answer to your problems. It will make them worse. I'll take you another school so you won't have to see Laura again." She didn't reply.

It took hours for Ryan to get to sleep that night. He was full of anger at Laura's mum for playing the victim, and full of worry about Naomi's future. If he sent her to another school, she would have to make friends all over again and the way the students learnt could be very different. He couldn't afford to take the next few days off work while she was excluded, and he certainly wasn't going to leave her all on her own in an area like theirs. Mrs. Evans could look after her, though Ryan would make sure it didn't mean she would miss a day's pay.

Bang! Ryan jolted awake. He checked the alarm clock on the coffee table. He'd been asleep for an hour and a half. He walked across the frozen floor and switched the lights on. A

cardboard box had fallen from the top of a chest of drawers. Papers were scattered across the floor.

The box was full of manuscripts of short stories and one novel which Ryan had written. He'd loved writing stories since he was little, and continued the hobby into adulthood. He decided in his teenage years that he wanted to be an author. Being able to write stories and let his imagination go wild for a living seemed like Heaven. The box contained all the manuscripts he'd sent to magazines and publishers which had been returned... in other words it contained every story he'd written.

Ryan bent down and began to gather up the papers. Stamped on the front of many in big red capital letters was the word *Rejected*. He'd hoped being accepted by a magazine or a publisher would mean that he didn't have to work odd jobs which he didn't enjoy. Working at the Huggable Bears factory was straightforward and didn't cause him any grief, but he didn't get anything out of it either. The hope of being able to write full time some day had faded as the rejection letters piled up, as did his enthusiasm and motivation for writing. Ryan was too tired to organise the pages, and dumped the jumbled pile into the box and collapsed on the sofa.

He couldn't get back to sleep. He kept wondering what his life might've been like if he'd made it as an author. He could've ended up having plenty to eat, nice clothes, maybe living in a really nice big house with a car and able to go on holidays abroad.

The next day Ryan got back from work to find Mrs. Evans standing outside the door to the flat, fear written across her face. As he stepped closer he saw that she had four scratch marks of equal length across her cheek.

"What happened?" Ryan asked frantically.

"I—I'm sorry," Mrs. Evans stammered. "I just—I couldn't stay in there. Naomi—she's been acting very strangely all day. She only gave me yes or no answers and wouldn't concentrate on the homework the school has left for her to do. She always had to have her new teddy bear sat next to her. I know you're going to think I've gone crackers, but I could've sworn at one point the bear raised a smile at me. Its eyes looked human, and they appeared to be staring right through me.

"While I was sat on the sofa, telling Naomi to do her homework, the bear appeared from behind and scratched me." She pointed to her cheek. "I ran out here." She checked her watch. "That was half an hour ago. I thought I'd better wait for you so you didn't think that I left Naomi on her own."

Ryan didn't know what to say. Mrs. Evans wasn't the type to make up stories or spread gossip. He decided to wait until he knew the facts before reacting. "I'm sorry you've been hurt. Thank you for helping out. When I figure out what happened I'll come and let you know. Do you need me to get you anything?"

"I'll be fine," was all she said before disappearing up the stairs.

Everything in the flat was how he'd left it that morning. Naomi's homework lay half completed on the kitchen counter. He heard her inside her bedroom. Again he could hear another, male voice. This time he pressed his ear against the wall and listened attentively.

"I'll get told off," Naomi was saying.

"You won't," the male voice replied, low, raspy, laced with malice. Whoever it was started to giggle quietly, and after a few seconds Naomi joined in.

Ryan opened the door. Naomi was sat on her bed, hands tucked under her legs. The bear was sat facing her. He had had enough. Ryan grabbed the bear, stormed out of the flat and down the endless stairs to the tower block car park.

The air was bitterly cold, though Ryan was walking at too fast a pace to notice. He opened one of the giant blue bins at the edge of the car park and threw the bear inside. The retched thing had caused him nothing but frustration. Ryan wasn't one to believe in the supernatural, and he didn't for one minute believe a teddy bear had been talking to his daughter and attacking his neighbour. Naomi had formed an unusual attraction to her new toy, though.

When he got back to the flat Naomi was stood in the middle of the main room, eyebrows furrowed and fists clenched. "Where is Dylan?" she demanded.

"I've taken Dylan away," Ryan said calmly. "You need to stop talking to your toys. What happened to your friends at school?"

Naomi glared at him. "Where is he?"

"You can have him back if you tell me what happened in the flat today. Why has poor Mrs. Evans got scratch marks on her face?"

"She fell in the bathroom," Naomi said earnestly. "Then she said she was feeling ill and wanted to go outside."

Ryan frowned. "She told me Dylan made the marks on her cheek with his claws. Did you attack her with him because you don't like her?"

Naomi stalled for a few seconds before replying. "I like Mrs. Evans. I saw her fall in the bathroom."

"Mrs. Evans doesn't tell lies," Ryan said knowingly. "If you did something wrong, tell me. You'll be in lots more trouble if you tell lies."

Naomi raised her voice suddenly. "I'm telling the truth. Give me Dylan back."

Ryan refused to collect the bear, and made her finish her homework for that day. He knew he had to be cruel to be kind, otherwise Naomi would grow up thinking she could get away with murder. The tower block bins were emptied the next day, much to Ryan's relief.

For the next few weeks Ryan offered to work an extra couple of hours a day in order to pay for a babysitter for Naomi. One evening, he was stitching a bear together on the factory floor when he heard a loud bang coming from the locker room. All the other workers had left for the night, and the only other people on the premises were the factory owner and the security guard.

Ryan carried on stitching. Snow had collected on the edges of the windows and a vicious wind rattled the glass. There was another loud bang. Ryan decided to investigate quickly. A window could have been left open, causing a door to keep slamming or objects to fall over. It was cold enough inside the factory with the windows closed.

He walked over to the locker room and switched the light on. All the windows were shut tightly and the floor was bare. Ryan turned to go back when there was another, much louder bang. An aggressive, violent sound. He scanned the room again, but couldn't place the source.

A locker door swung open and before he knew it Ryan was lying face down on the floor, a screwdriver embedded in his left ankle. Barely audible footsteps came past him. He found himself face to face with Dylan the bear. Its claws had grown by a few inches, and had gone from soft to shell like. Now that he was very close Ryan could see that Mrs. Evans was right about how human the eyes seemed.

The bear opened its mouth. Teeth had grown out of the black cotton, triangular and jagged. "I know what you're thinking," it said. The voice was deep and croaky like a chain smoker's. "I must be dreaming. You're not, believe me. If you were, would you be able to feel this?" The bear ran around him with its tiny legs and jammed the screwdriver deeper into his ankle.

Ryan screamed. The security guard would surely hear him.

"What are you?" Ryan asked.

"I'm every tear you've ever shed. I'm all the days you've felt desperate or lonely rolled into one. I'm every dark memory you've had and ever will have."

"What do you want with my daughter?" Ryan demanded.

"Naomi and I share a common goal: to rid ourselves of the sadness which dominates our lives. And we won't let anyone get in our way."

Ryan cursed in pain. "You won't let anyone get in your way. You're going nowhere near my daughter again. Her happiness is my responsibility; if some thing's wrong, I'll deal with it as best I can."

The bear grinned darkly. "Naive, innocent thinking. I'm afraid life isn't fair. If you obey the rules and always try to do what's right, you end up with nothing. You end up alone, angry, resentful. Sooner or later Naomi will come to realise that fact. I'm showing her early on so she won't end up a sad loser like you."

Ryan went to grab the bear but it ran away. He tried to stand up, pushing his arms up and carefully bringing his legs up. The pain in his ankle was as if someone had stuck a burning

candle into his flesh. He just about managed to stand on his two feet and began to limp towards his work station. His phone was inside his coat pocket, which hung over his chair.

“Argh!” Ryan was back down on the floor. The bear had pushed the screwdriver in further. He looked over his shoulder and saw the metal sticking out the other side of his foot. The bear stepped around him. “Tomorrow Naomi will hear about a very nasty accident her daddy suffered at work while working alone in the dark. Then she’ll be mine. And we’ll conquer the world.”

When the bear stepped around to his right side, Ryan grabbed a needle out of his trouser pocket and stabbed it in the eye. He missed, but still got its mouth. The bear stumbled backwards and cried out in pain. Ryan took the chance to get to his workstation. There was no point trying to stand up and walk, so he crawled as fast as he could. The pain was stinging. He pushed forward, trying to ignore it. One push at a time and he’d get there.

After what felt like an age Ryan reached his workstation. He turned his chair over. The coat slipped off the chair and landed in front of him. He unzipped the pocket and pulled out his phone. As he began to dial 911 the screen cracked. He felt cold breath on his neck. The bear had scraped its claws along the screen. Ryan tried to grab the bear but it was out of his grasp quicker than he could react. It climbed up the leg of his desk and stood above him, laughing at him. Its pupils were like moons against a black sky. “Watch out,” it snarled.

A sewing machine fell down from the desk. It landed on his right shoulder blade. There was no way he’d be able to get up now.

The bear slid down the leg of the desk and landed with a light thud. Its fur was sprinkled in dust and soot. It grabbed the sewing machine and dragged it along the floor. The machine made a screeching sound as it was pulled to where Ryan’s right hand was laid out.

“Bye bye,” the bear sneered. It dug its claws into Ryan’s skin to keep him from pulling his hand back. It placed his hand underneath the needle and pressed its chubby foot on the pedal with full force. Ryan howled as the needle tore through his hand and arm, tearing up skin. He nearly fainted. He needed to stay alert. The bear kept its foot pressed on the pedal. If he didn’t pull himself free his whole arm would be shredded and bleeding profusely.

Something about the pain sent his thoughts away from what was happening to Naomi. She relied on him to keep her safe and give her the best start in life. There was no one else in her life to take over that job. Ryan hadn’t spent years working round the clock to make sure Naomi had everything she needed, was happy and always had shelter and food to have her taken away from him.

Ryan gritted his teeth and pulled his arm free from the sewing machine. He dragged himself back to his feet. He ignored the pain. Before the bear had a chance to react Ryan grabbed it by the neck and pulled the legs and feet off. The bear cried out as a foam like substance seeped out of the mouth. The eyes turned an ugly red before fading to the hollow black of a normal teddy bear.

Ryan stuffed the legs and arms into his pocket and limped across the factory floor to the grinding machine. Every step was agonising but he needed to make sure the bear was fully destroyed.

He placed what was left of the bear into the mixer and switched the machine on. He added in the arms and legs to make sure all of the bear was gone. Relief swept over him as he watched the pieces disappear and land in a crushed pile of fur and cotton in a bowl. Ryan swept the pile into a bin bag and staggered from the factory floor.

Epilogue

Naomi gleamed as she ripped open her Christmas present. A large furry teddy bear stared back at her. Its eyes were big and its smile was bigger. Ryan had found it in a charity shop. He was worried that Naomi wouldn't like it, but she seemed happy. Her friends would be opening laptops and iPads, countless presents instead of just one, and no doubt they would've been telling her at school what they'd be getting for Christmas. Ryan worried that she'd feel jealous and disappointed.

"Thank you, daddy," Naomi said, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I love him." She hugged her new bear tightly.

Ryan still worked at the Huggable Bears factory. He didn't tell his co-workers about Dylan the bear. How in the world would they believe him? He wasn't sure exactly what happened himself. He'd had some luck recently though; a UFO magazine had awarded one of his short stories first prize in their annual competition. It wasn't life changing but it was a start.

Ryan and Naomi went up to Mrs. Evans flat later in the day, who'd invited them for Christmas dinner. It was nice to see Naomi smiling and having a good time.

Whoever, whatever, Dylan the bear was, it was gone now. No doubt there would be many more horrors waiting, but life was too short to worry about tomorrow.

THE END

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TIT FOR TAT by Ken Goldman

“Boob, like the object it identifies, is such a well-rounded word.”

—Jarod Kintz, *This Book Has No Title*

Bethany didn't bother to knock. She just stood at Tatum's bedroom door, her hands on her hips, looking very much the pissed off big sister that she was. At a ripening sixteen, she was big in more ways than one, 'big' in the way adolescent horn-dog boys appreciated most.

“You were in my drawers again, weren't you, twerp! Am I going to have to get a friggin' lock to keep you out?”

Blaming her skinny pre-teen sibling for anything that went missing had become a habit of Bethany's, accusations she levelled at the girl at least once a week. A dollar bill from her bureau gone? Tatum must have taken it. A favourite set of earrings? Tatum again. Today it was Bethany's expensive new brassier, a silken B-cupped miracle of design, damned impressive for a girl only midway through her teens.

“I'm talking to you, Tatum Carlisle, you little thief! You took my new bra! Not that you would have any use for it.”

This time Bethany's accusation was true. So was her assessment of her sister's meagre attributes. Tatum smiled her best little girl grin, knowing how it won most people over no matter what mischief she had caused. “I just wanted to try it on, is all. I'm getting tits too, you know. See?” She raised her One Direction t-shirt to reveal her own blossoming womanhood. Far from impressive, still it was a start for a girl on puberty's doormat.

Bethany pretended to squint. “You call those mosquito bites breasts? You want support for those, go find some egg shells!” The older girl broke into laughter. It was a sister thing for Bethany to feign anger, but it never lasted long. “Well, let's see how it looks on you.” Tatum's face lit up. She ran to her room, returning with the fancy bra's cups hanging loosely from her chest like twin feed bags. Bethany almost doubled over. “You need a few more years to fill that thing. Like, maybe twenty.” She held out her hand. Reluctantly, Tatum handed the bra to her and pulled her t-shirt back to where it belonged. Bethany's smirk melted and she looked puzzled. She touched the bra's interior. “There's something gooey inside. Dammit, Tat! Did you figure a smear of this stuff would hold your pathetic tit bits inside these cups? For that you need real tits, twerp! My bra better not be ruined! Look at this!”

A thin pea soup-like coating appeared inside each cup, a gooey green residue of some sort. “I thought something felt sticky when I put this on. Beth, I swear I don't know what that slime is.” Tatum retrieved a Kleenex; wiping the muck from beneath her tee, she sniffed the tissue. “It stinks.”

“Next time you feel like some thievery, steal Gramma's Depends, okay? This smell would be right at home there.” Bethany explored the goo with her finger. “Ick! Are you growing mould in your undies drawers? Wash your gym suit much? A little personal hygiene, please, before the local maggots have Mardi Gras in your panties.”

Tatum's little girl grin reappeared. "Yeah? If anyone has Mardi Gras in their panties around here, it's not me." The sisters looked at each other and laughed themselves schoolgirl silly. Bethany tossed the bra back to Tatum.

"Okay, fun time is over, squirt. This goes into the washing machine now, and you get to do the honours. Wash it in the bathroom sink first, and I mean wash it good. I paid forty dollars for that bra, and if that green stuff doesn't come out, you're dead. Comprene? Capice?" She made a slicing gesture with her finger across her throat and left Tatum's room.

"Older sisters can be such cunts," Tatum whispered to herself and headed for the bathroom. Holding the bra under the faucet, she watched the stuff inside Bethany's brassier burp and bubble like a small volcanic eruption, and in a minute there was a lot more of it spilling from the sink as if she had poured out the entire contents of a box of detergent. Splashing on her, the stuff smelled like fertilizer, and with one whiff Tatum felt nauseous, her chest uncomfortably heavy. Contact with the green gunk had some nasty side effects.

"Damn, what is this stuff?"

She rushed for the cleaning pail and mop, but by the time she returned more bubbles had spilled to the bathroom floor. Mopping into the bucket what she could, she poured the blistering glop into the toilet, and flushed. A rim of sickly green remained inside the bowl, but most of it went down. Some of the stuff had doused her shirt, warm goo soaking through to her skin. Cursing, she flushed a second load.

"Fuck you, green goo, I'll get you and your little dog too..."

From outside the door her mother shouted, "Tat, is someone in there with you?" Tatum didn't feel like explaining what was going on since she had no idea herself. Sweeping her sneaker at a thin tributary of remaining slime on the tile, she hoped none of the glop found its way under the door.

"I'm fine, Mom. Go back to your flowers. I'm just talking about junk to Stephanie on my cell, is all."

"Liam's, Louis', or Harry's junk?" The woman snickered; Tatum had no idea why.

"I'm fine, Mom."

She waited until her mother's footsteps disappeared down the stairs. Stripping bare and grabbing her sister's loofa from the shower, she climbed into the tub. Under the hottest water she could stand, she scoured herself raw, almost blinded by the steam. Exhausted, scrubbed numb, she dried off. Examining her saturated t-shirt, she saw Harry Styles' face had gone a dark green. Tossing the shirt into the hamper, she stopped into her room for an old Justin Bieber tee. If more goo somehow appeared from nowhere, Tatum didn't care if she ruined Bieber's likeness, he was such a jerk. The shirt felt tight; staring at her mirror, what she saw took a moment to register. More confused than frightened, she lifted the shirt.

“What the —No!” She called for Bethany, although never in her entire life had she invited her sister into her bedroom. Bethany always came without the invitation. Now for the second time in one day she stood at her sister’s door.

“So? Did you visit the washing machine?”

Tatum’s arms crisscrossed Bieber’s baby face. “Shut the door. Fast! I don’t want Mom to come up and accidentally see.”

“See what?”

Tatum turned dramatic.

“These...” She lifted the tee, allowing Bethany a moment to take in what she saw. In ten minutes Tatum Carlisle’s chest had gone from flat screen to three dimension. “They’re like some kind of special effect! They’re not as big as yours, but they weren’t there ten minutes ago. I think it was that stuff! It was all over the bathroom and I got it on me!”

Bethany needed another minute before she could utter a word. “How did they get so big? How did they get there at all?”

“The stuff expanded under the sink water like some kind of yeast. I scrubbed and scrubbed, but I couldn’t get all of it off.” Tatum pulled the shirt down. She didn’t want to look at herself; worse, she didn’t want her sister looking at her any more.

Bethany didn’t seem to know how to respond. She half smiled. “I think you’ve done breast implants one better. If that mystery goo works, we could be rich. Tits in ten minutes! Think of it!”

“Stick it up your ass. In the neighbourhood you’ve always been Bethany Mucho. Me, I’m scared.”

Bethany’s uncertain smile evaporated completely. “Well, we have to tell Mom. Maybe you caught something, an infection from some bacteria in that slime. This isn’t natural, Tat. It’s like elephantiasis or something. But, really, they don’t look bad.”

Tatum shook her head. “We can’t tell Mom. She’ll have a major panic attack, maybe stroke out. She’ll think I’m dying. You know how she gets.”

“One look and she’ll know what you’re packing. The whole world will. I have some sweats that may cover them a little.”

Tatum sat on her bed, head in her hands. “I have to think this out. This doesn’t just happen. Suppose they just keep growing? Suppose they get so big I’ll need a wheel barrow? I’ll be some medical freak. Damn! I think I’m getting cramps too! Do you think maybe I’m getting my—? Shit!”

“You’ve seen too many horror movies, but if Aunt Flow arrives green during her first visit, I’m calling *People Magazine*.”

“That’s not funny.” Tatum sat on her bed, waited a moment. “I think the cramps are gone now. But —” She thought about her sister’s remark. “You know what else is green, Beth? Plants and grass, they’re green. And Mom is always digging up shit in the garden. That’s where she is now. Maybe something she dug up got into the water, through a pipe to the toilet or the sink — something that found its way to your bra! A plant, or a fungus or mould was growing out there, and—and—maybe, it’s not even a plant from here, maybe it’s some kind of spore or pod, or...? Poison ivy makes you swell up, doesn’t it? It spreads over your skin and makes it act crazy. Plants are alive, they feel, maybe they even think, and sometimes they grow overnight. And weeds, they spread fast. So does a fungus. Maybe whatever it is wants me—”

“A fungus isn’t a plant, it’s—”

“I don’t care! Maybe I’m being possessed, or being replaced. It doesn’t have to be the same for everyone, just some part of us that starts changing, then—”

“Right. Photosynthesis be damned because my sister’s tits are possessed by plants or fungi or God knows what. It’s the day of the chrysanthemums! Listen, moron. If you’re possessed by anything it’s that idiot group, One Direction.”

Tatum wasn’t buying it. Bethany tried logic.

“Maybe you’ve just had some kind of crazy growth spurt, is all. It happened to me too, just slower. Nature sometimes fucks with us, does crazy shit like splicing twins together, or making someone wake up speaking Swahili, or giving animals two heads. You, it gave tits. Maybe that’s a good thing. It beats having two heads.”

Tatum considered this. “You think having instant mutant hooters is such a good thing, do you? You touched that green stuff too!”

Bethany considered this, then dismissed it. “Nothing is happening to me. And I already have big breasts, thank you.”

“Your finger is still green where you touched it.”

Bethany studied her finger, shook her head. “It would be green if I stuck it into a can of paint too. It’ll come off. I think you’re overreacting, Tat. This whole thing is a little ridiculous, when you think about it.”

“This isn’t ridiculous, dammit. Maybe something is happening inside you, something you can’t see. I don’t know. But that stuff in your bra is what did this!” Tatum smacked herself in the head. “Shit! I left your bra in the bathroom sink. I got spooked, and that gunk is on the loofa in the shower. It’s on the mop too!”

Bethany touched Tatum’s shoulder. “Calm down, okay? I think you may need to see a doctor or someone, like right now, just to make sure you’re all right. You could have some kind of infection that’s making you swell up.”

“You’re so sure?”

The girl mimicked *Star Trek*'s McCoy, "Damn it, Jim, I'm a cheerleader, not a doctor!"

That got a smile. "You won't tell Mom?"

"She'll think you've been fucking around with drugs or steroids or some crap like that to make the soccer team. Remember how she got last summer when she found my weed? Mom would never understand what's happening, especially when we don't know either."

Tatum forced a smile. "See the evil that plants can do? And that's just if you smoke them."

"Well, let's find out just how evil this stuff is." Bethany headed for the bathroom with Tatum following. They stopped at the door, hesitating before Bethany pushed it open. The warmth of a hot house vapour filled the bathroom and slime seemed everywhere, some dripping in rope-thick stalks spiralling from the ceiling, more filling the tub, turning it into a cauldron of steaming goo. Bubbling like lava, sliding snake-like along the tiled floor, some glob separated into several thick channels slithering towards the girls, some rising from the tiles coiled like cobras about to strike.

Together slamming the door, the sisters looked at each other, faces turned white. Tatum sputtered, "That stuff is alive! Should I tell you I told you so?"

"You do and I'll punch you in those shiny new tits." Bethany studied her index finger, now a darker green that had spread to the tip of a second finger. She grabbed her sister's shoulder, her eyes bulging like agate marbles. "Mom is in the garden—watering her plants!"

Together they sprang down the stairway and through the sliding door into the back yard. Alyssa Carlisle stood near her rose bushes, her back turned to them, pail in hand.

"Mom? Is everything okay? Are you—?" Bethany tried to make her voice sound normal, but it didn't happen. The woman kept watering her beloved roses as if she didn't hear. She said nothing.

Tatum managed a better semblance of normalcy. "Mom?"

Still no response, but Alyssa turned to her daughters and smiled. She removed her gardening gloves slowly, meticulously as a debutante. She had been watering her plants all afternoon nourishing seedlings that promised colourful flower beds before summer. A living bouquet of assorted flora already grew in one corner, red roses in another, and all around grew dozens of plants and shrubs of all sizes and shapes.

Bethany's hand went to her mouth and Tatum found it difficult to breathe. Each watched their mother stand with her pail while she kept smiling. Her daughters could only stare silently back at the woman who had raised them with more care than she had ever given to her flower garden. But something had gone very wrong with Mrs. Alyssa Carlisle.

"Hello girls. Lovely day for gardening, isn't it?" Her tongue flopped from her mouth like a thirsty dog's. "So hot," she said, taking a long drink from the watering pail.

The sisters spoke together, "Mom...?"

Alyssa's smile broadened, a full open mouthed clown's smile that revealed the impossible.

"Thirsty. So very thirsty..."

Her tongue was pale green.

So was her face.

"Hedges need a little trimming," she said as she reached for her shears.

Three blocks south of the Carlisle home, Billy Tomlinson, the sixteen year old quarterback for his school's football squad, stood before his bathroom mirror. He was not a vain kid, and he didn't give much thought to how he looked because he knew he always looked good. But today something didn't feel right as he removed his grass stained uniform. Having experienced the most irritating case of jock itch he had ever known, Billy dropped his pants and his BVDs to the floor.

And then Billy screamed...

THE END

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THE CHALLENGER IN THE VALE OF DRAGOS

Part 5:

With the Challenger escorting their healer friend back to her daughter, the sisters Flora and Fauna are trapped in the library with Qilla (who can make people temporarily invisible) and Hue who has four legs! Gemok, the High Priest of Dragosia has brought a mob and two Dragon Guardians Automatons. What's this? The Constable brought them here? The man supposedly charged with keeping the peace has helped those with more access to power?

Outside on the floor of the cobbled courtyard stands a row of figures and I know the two tall ones with thin necks and long faces are the Dragon Guards, whatever they are. In their arms I see polearms, the light of their gem axes glow in the shadow of the tower we are in.

"Come out!" calls a man.

"That's the constable we ran into," Fauna laments. "He must have seen us when we were made visible again."

I see the man with a black round cap atop head too big for his thin body. To his side a slightly taller man in greens steps forward, a dragonhead sceptre in hand. His face is twisted in an enraged snarl and his cheeks flex as if he is fighting a battle with us with his stare. The little man with the trumpet is at his side, peering out from behind the priest's robes. There are more, miners, the burly man who'd gotten his eyes poked by the Challenger earlier. He's regained his vision and looks angry as he stands with two other miners bearing their spades, looking ready for a fight.

More come from the alley to the right. Shadows at first, then I see some bearing pitchforks while we hear shouts of "Blasphemers!"

"If we're blasphemers then shouldn't those devils be on our side?" Fauna asks me.

"They're farmers," we hear Qilla say. We notice she and Hue have come over to the space right behind us and are too peering out the broken window.

"I knew that," says Sister and turns back to the scene.

"I count eighteen," I say.

"Me too," says Qilla.

"I third that," says Hue and takes a step back and then raises three of his wooden legs up in front of him to show us. Qilla chuckles a bit and then beckons us all away from the window. Once we move back Fauna gets her sword out and I am rummaging through my packsack (or whatever you call it) for my magnet and Delipha's Rod, putting my bag back on my back as I hold both items in my two hands, my dagger at my belt. I don't want to use it. There must be a way out of this that's peaceful.

"Alright," says Qilla. "You girls hide. I'll deal with them. And Hue, try not to show your four legged self to the villagers this time?"

“I am only a village legend, keeps people in after dark lest they be spotted by the Four Legged Wanderer!” he half-laughs and begins to step on his wooden legs backward into the shadows of the inner library.

Fauna moves to intercept Qilla. “I got an idea,” my sister tells her and looks to me.

As far as Gemok and the gathered folk can see, only the old librarian emerges from the front door and steps into the light of the moon and the crowd’s burning torches. She speaks.

“Goodnight to you, Gemok. There is no one here save myself.”

Some of the miners behind him snarl. The two sentinels wheel forward a little towards Qilla.

“Lies!” Gemok declares and wags his sceptre at her and pouts his lips, his bushy eyebrows flinging into his tall winged cap.

“No one save me,” returns Qilla.

The High Priest in green’s face turns red and his head looks like a tomato with a long double winged stem. He moves toward the old woman and, sceptre in both hands, he charges hard, checking Qilla across the shoulders, the rod of his staff slamming against her frame. She falls back, making a small noise as she hits the street beneath.

I hear two more cries, angry ones, my sister and Hue. All three of us are beside Qilla, having been made unseen by her, but now her concentration breaks and we all appear at her side. Fauna, closest to Qilla, has already unleashed her sword and stands poised to cut as the blade arrives at Gemok’s neck.

The priest freezes as he sees the glint on the weapon.

I see a wooden leg swing from one side above, smacking the side of Gemok’s head. Hue hovers over him now, pouncing all four of his curved feet upon him, pinning him to the ground. Members of the mob shriek at the sight. I run to Qilla.

Coughing, she leans up and gives me an eager nod to tell me she is fine. “So long as my head is unhurt,” she says as she stands. I tell her she should get inside, but she won’t leave her husband.

Hue picks Gemok up by the neck in a curved leg and throws him across the courtyard. The little trumpet retainer screams like a cock and runs after him into the shadows. The constable runs as well. Fauna still has her sword drawn. Two of the miners step toward her, the biggest one swinging his spade. Sister ducks as it comes exceptionally close, and then she cuts her blade twice in the air, causing the miners to jump back to the others in the crowd.

I hear Gemok shouting from afar: “Stop them! We need inquisitive questioning!”

Before me the green dragon guard slides toward Hue, swinging the turquoise polearm, prompting the old four legged man to lean back, his two front legs raised before him defensively. He gingerly backs to the library as the sentinel move forward. Hue shoots a

curved end of a leg at the middle of the polearm, grasping it and pulling. Now they're tugging back and forth, clasped together at the staff's midpoint, Hue glaring up at the long face that peers down at him.

Qilla reaches an arm towards her husband and the dragon sentinel, and then Hue vanishes. The guard, though its face is in a permanent grimace appears stunned, and it falls back a bit, seemingly surprised that its adversary is gone. Its big boxy fingers are still rolled about its gem tipped polearm, yet something else grips it, Hue's unseen wood feet/hands. The sentinel's brief shock is the moment Hue takes to seize the polearm, and I see it fling from the guard's grasp and then hover above its tall head.

The sharp green-blue blade comes slicing down into the dragon face of the green automaton. Bright gem-coloured light splits from the impact, and I see Hue's form, looming now over the fallen thing, and he raises the polearm once again, slicing hard against the green face.

I tear my face from the sight as bright light emerges from the impact, looking to my left to Fauna, who shields the side of her vision with her free hand. The blue sentinel wheels towards her, slowly at first, but it seems to use the distraction of its fallen comrade to sneak up on her. When Fauna realizes it's moved in the dragon guard is standing right over her, and she looks up and raises her blade.

"Qilla!" I call, and race to Fauna's side, raising the Mighty Magnet in my right hand and Delipha's Rod in the other.

The magnet does nothing, and as I get a close look at the looming thing I see that there is no metal, only painted wood. Delipha's Rod! It shoots forth water and I can smell the salt! The stream hits the fake maw of the dragon face, filling its fake mouth, pushing the fake head upwards, jolting it for only a second. I keep spraying, moving down towards its chest (also fake), and I lower the magnet to its broad body; no effect!

Salt water is splashing in my face, all of it falling down.

Through my burning eyes I see the dragon sentinel move back. Fauna jumps to her left, and the polearm comes crashing down where she stood. I am still shooting the water. We must be unseen! The long blue face glances about, ignoring the water that is still ricocheting off of it and hitting me.

"Duck!" Fauna shouts to me. She usually calls me an Owl, so she's serious here!

I duck out of the way and start scrambling away and, hunching over like an ape, I run! I am leaving puddles behind me, and I hear the wheels of the sentinel give chase. It sees me!

I roll to my side, the gem axe missing me...barely, and I see, for one split moment, that Hue is now surrounded by villagers, the green sentinel crumpled beneath him. They wave their torches at him and he backs off.

Next I see the gem axe come for me again, this time from my other side, and I roll again, back the way I came. It misses once more, and I see the enduring wild blue dragon face above me. The sentinel lifts with both hands the polearm above its tall head.

I hear the trumpet blare from the far end of the courtyard, from the shadows where Hue had earlier tossed Gemok. I raise the Mighty Magnet and I wave it as I activate it. I run, still pointing the two thick ends at the crowd and the courtyard, and I turn about the nearest wheel of the automaton guard. The big sentinel spins about to face me behind.

I release everything at it.

The small trumpet, at least six pitchforks, four shovels, the dragonhead sceptre, and a few other metallic tools all fly from the crowd, slamming against the dragon sentinel at various places. The flying objects only serve as a distraction. This is enough for me to run to my sister, who is beside Hue, swinging her blade at the space between the four-legger and the crowd now bare of any weaponry save torches.

“You are a freak!” I hear a man shout to Hue.

“Get some wheels, blasphemer!” someone else yells.

Hue is backing towards the library, Fauna and I at his side. Qilla is with us, and she makes us unseen. I am still dripping. The mob edges forward slightly, all taunting us even if they only see water dropping in our place.

The sentinel that still stands, the one I just ran from, rolls to us, ready to swing the space we occupy. Water is still falling from my body, puddling at my feet.

“This is my fault,” I think.

The thing raises the gem polearm again.

I gaze up in horror.

Two ropes appear from behind it, two ropes with loops tied at the ends. One goes about its long neck, another on the end of the polearm. A third rope, a bigger one, shoots up and goes about its body, about its arms. Next I see a figure, two figures, up on the dragon sentinel’s massive shoulders.

I hear Qilla’s voice in my head: “Is that not your friend?”

The Challenger!

The other’s face is covered in green and black cloth!

Our ranger friend begins slashing the side of the long face of the automaton with his blade. The other person, attired in black clothing, lowers onto one of the arms, and then leaps to the ground. I see two other folks come forward from the crowd, and at first I think they are part of the mob, but I notice they too have their faces covered save their eyes. In their hands are large brass vials, which they promptly spew at the automaton. I then see another person, a woman, I think, with green cloth over her mouth and nose. She grabs a torch from someone’s hands and throws it.

The dragon sentinel is aflame in seconds! It backs away fast, the fires growing, and then it wheels away down the alleyway, lighting up the shadows as it flees.

My sister and I begin laughing. Members of the crowd seem confused. I look over and see around a dozen folks now, faces covered, their backs to us, fronts to the mob, some pushing them away. I hear Gemok yell something: "This isn't over!"

Soon the courtyard is cleared of the torch wielding mob. Only our small party, Qilla and Hue, and the masked folks, about a dozen or so remain.

The woman with the green cloth on her face removes it.

"Emera!" I cry in amazement.

The healer smiles. Qilla has made us visible again.

"And my brothers," she says, introducing us to two other masked men who nod to us. We thank them, everyone who came out to protect us.

Fauna pats the Challenger on the shoulder and both smile. "You think I would miss a fight?" asks the ranger cockily.

Emera looks to the downed dragon sentinel. "I have a feeling we have a long fight before us," she says.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "This is our fault."

Emera shakes her head. Qilla does the same. They insist this was an eventuality, someone would have revealed the truth. "Because of what happened we found new allies," says Qilla, looking to Emera and the others before looking at us three visitors. "Now, do you wish to leave?"

Fauna and I exchange looks; both of us can tell the other thinks that it's for the best. The Challenger tells Hue he wants to return one day, coming over the other side of the mountain, as Hue had told him earlier was possible. The ranger looks to Emera and promises he will return. I sense something going on with them, a bit disappointed...anyway!

Qilla tells us she will make us unseen and her and Hue will escort us into the mines and take us deep where the Under the Dark begins.

"The priests warn that the land beneath is full of dangerous things," says Emera.

"Same priests that say that Dragos is returning?" I ask and she shrugs.

"Thank you for everything," Fauna tells her.

"Thank you, Dragosia Antifa Chapter!" the Challenger says to those wearing masks as Qilla makes us unseen.

Qilla and Hue travel with us through the Vale. The sun is beginning to peak over the mountain walls. I wish I had proper time to see Dragosia but we soon come to an immense cave, the entrance to the mines. We follow tracks, there are six in all, and we follow one a long way, slowly moving downward as the floor of the mine descends. We reach an open chamber that's lighted only by a few torches on the walls. There is a portal, an entranceway only a bit bigger than ourselves, and a wooden sign is beside it that reads: To the Under the Dark, Forbidden by Holy Decree.

Qilla makes us seen once more. Hue stands over us, smiling with his kindly face. I will miss this cute couple. They bid us farewell and assure us that they will watch over Emera and her family and that more villagers are willing to join them in the fight against Gemok.

We stare into the dark tunnel.

Fauna turns to the Challenger. "Do you wish to stay?"

"I won't let you two venture alone into a new dangerous place," he says and smiles. "I am with you until we reach daylight."

Qilla hands us a bag full of breads. Hue waves with three of his four legs.

We depart into Under the Dark...

The journey continues...

THE END

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ERIC BRIGHTEYES by H Rider Haggard

XXIX: How Went the Bridal Night

Now Eric and Gudruda sat silent in the high seat of the hall at Middalhof till they heard Skallagrim enter by the women's door. Then they came down from the high seat, and stood hand in hand by the fire on the hearth. Skallagrim greeted Gudruda, looking at her askance, for Skallagrim stood in fear of women alone.

"What counsel now, lord?" said the Baresark.

"Tell us thy plans, Gudruda," said Eric, for as yet no word had passed between them of what they should do.

"This is my plan, Eric," she answered. "First, that we eat; then that thy men take horse and ride hence through the night to where the ship lies, bearing word that we will be there at dawn when the tide serves, and bidding the mate make everything ready for sailing. But thou and I and Skallagrim will stay here till to-morrow is three hours old, and this because I have tidings that Gizur's folk will search the ship to-night. Now, when they search and do not find us, they will go away. Then, at the dawning, thou and I and Skallagrim will row on board the ship as she lies at anchor, and, slipping the cable, put to sea before they know we are there, and so bid farewell to Swanhild and our woes."

"Yet it is a risk for us to sleep here alone," said Eric.

"There is little danger," said Gudruda. "Nearly all of Gizur's men watch the ship; and I have learned this from a spy, that, two days ago, Gizur, Swanhild, and one thrall rode from Coldback towards Mosfell, and they have not come back yet. Moreover, the place is strong, and thou and Skallagrim are here to guard it."

"So be it, then," answered Eric, for indeed he had little thought left for anything, except Gudruda.

After this the women came in and set meat on the board, and all ate.

Now, when they had eaten, Eric bade Skallagrim fill a cup, and bring it to him as he sat on the high seat with Gudruda. Skallagrim did so; and then, looking deep into each other's eyes, Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda the Fair, Asmund's daughter, drank the bride's cup.

"There are few guests to grace our marriage-feast, husband," said Gudruda.

"Yet shall our vows hold true, wife," said Eric.

"Ay, Brighteyes," she answered, "in life and in death, now and for ever!" and they kissed.

"It is time for us to be going, methinks," growled Skallagrim to those about him. "We are not wanted here."

Then the men who were to go on to the ship rose, fetched their horses, and rode away. Also they caught the horses of Skallagrim, Eric, and Gudruda, saddled them and, slipping their

bridles, made them fast in a shed in the yard, giving them hay to eat. Afterwards Skallagrim barred the men's door and the women's door, and, going to Gudruda, asked where he should stay the night till it was time to ride for the sea.

"In the store-chamber," she answered, "for there is a shutter of which the latch has gone. See that thou watch it well, Skallagrim; though I think none will come to trouble thee."

"I know the place. It shall go badly with the head that looks through yonder hole," said Skallagrim, glancing at his axe.

Now Gudruda forgot this, that in the store-chamber were casks of strong ale.

Then Gudruda told him to wake them when the morrow was two hours old, for Eric had neither eyes nor words except for Gudruda alone, and Skallagrim went.

The women went also to their shut bed at the end of the hall, leaving Brighteyes and Gudruda alone. Eric looked at her.

"Where do I sleep to-night?" he asked.

"Thou sleepest with me, husband," she answered soft, "for nothing, except Death, shall come between us any more."

Now Skallagrim went to the store-room, and sat down with his back against a cask. His heart was heavy in him, for he boded no good of this marriage. Moreover, he was jealous. Skallagrim loved but one thing in the world truly, and that was Eric Brighteyes, his lord. Now he knew that henceforth he must take a second place, and that for one thought which Eric gave to him, he would give ten to Gudruda. Therefore Skallagrim was very sad at heart.

"A pest upon the women!" he said to himself, "for from them comes all evil. Brighteyes owes his ill luck to Swanhild and this fair wife of his, and that is scarcely done with yet. Well, well, 'tis nature; but would that we were safe at sea! Had I my will, we had not slept here to-night. But they are newly wed, and—well, 'tis nature! Better the bride loves to lie abed than to ride the cold wolds and seek the common deck."

Now, as Skallagrim grumbled, fear gathered in his heart, he knew not of what. He began to think on trolls and goblins. It was dark in the store-room, except for a little line of light that crept through the crack of the shutter. At length he could bear the darkness and his thoughts no longer, but, rising, threw the shutter wide and let the bright moonlight pour into the chamber, whence he could see the hillside behind, and watch the shadows of the clouds as they floated across it. Again Skallagrim sat down against his cask, and as he sat it moved, and he heard the wash of ale inside it.

"That is a good sound," said Skallagrim, and he turned and smelt at the cask; "aye, and a good smell, too! We tasted little ale yonder on Mosfell, and we shall find less at sea." Again he looked at the cask. There was a pigot in it, and lo! on the shelf stood horn cups.

"It surely is on draught," he said; "and now it will stand till it goes sour. 'Tis a pity; but I will not drink. I fear ale—ale is another man! No, I will not drink," and all the while his hand went up to the cups upon the shelf. "Eric is better lain yonder in Gudruda's chamber than I

am here alone with evil thoughts and trolls,” he said. “Why, what fish was that we ate at supper? My throat is cracked with thirst! If there were water now I’d drink it, but I see none. Well, one cup to wish them joy! There is no harm in a cup of ale,” and he drew the spigot from the cask and watched the brown drink flow into the cup. Then he lifted it to his lips and drank, saying “Skoll! skoll!”^[1] nor did he cease till the horn was drained. “This is wondrous good ale,” said Skallagrim as he wiped his grizzled beard. “One more cup, and evil thoughts shall cease to haunt me.”

Again he filled, drank, sat down, and for a while was merry. But presently the black thoughts came back into his mind. He rose, looked through the shutter-hole to the hillside. He could see nothing on it except the shadows of the clouds.

“Trolls walk the winds to-night,” he said. “I feel them pulling at my beard. One more cup to frighten them.”

He drank another draught of ale and grew merry. Then ale called for ale, and Skallagrim drained cup on cup, singing as he drained, till at last heavy sleep overcame him, and he sank drunken on the ground there by the barrel, while the brown ale trickled round him.

Now Eric Brighteyes and Gudruda the Fair slept side by side, locked in each other’s arms. Presently Gudruda was wide awake.

“Rouse thee, Eric,” she said, “I have dreamed an evil dream.”

He awoke and kissed her.

“What, then, was thy dream, sweet?” he said. “This is no hour for bad dreams.”

“No hour for bad dreams, truly, husband; yet dreams do not weigh the hour of their coming. I dreamed this: that I lay dead beside thee and thou knewest it not, while Swanhild looked at thee and mocked.”

“An evil dream, truly,” said Eric; “but see, thou art not dead. Thou hast thought too much on Swanhild of late.”

Now they slept once more, till presently Eric was wide awake.

“Rouse thee, Gudruda,” he said, “I too have dreamed a dream, and it is full of evil.”

“What, then, was thy dream, husband?” she asked.

“I dreamed that Atli the Earl, whom I slew, stood by the bed. His face was white, and white as snow was his beard, and blood from his great wound ran down his byrnie. ‘Eric Brighteyes,’ he said, ‘I am he whom thou didst slay, and I come to tell thee this: that before the moon is young again thou shalt lie stiff, with Hell-shoes on thy feet. Thou art Eric the Unlucky! Take thy joy and say thy say to her who lies at thy side, for wet and cold is the bed

¹ “Health! health!”

that waits thee and soon shall thy white lips be dumb.’ Then he was gone, and lo! in his place stood Asmund, thy father, and he also spoke to me, saying, ‘Thou who dost lie in my bed and at my daughter’s side, know this: the words of Atli are true; but I add these to them: ye shall die, yet is death but the gate of life and love and rest,’ and he was gone.”

Now Gudruda shivered with fear, and crept closer to Eric’s side.

“We are surely fey, for the Norns speak with the voices of Atli and of Asmund,” she said. “Oh, Eric! Eric! whither go we when we die? Will Valhalla take thee, being so mighty a man, and must I away to Hela’s halls, where thou art not? Oh! that would be death indeed! Say, Eric, whither do we go?”

“What said the voice of Asmund?” answered Brighteyes. “That death is but the gate of life and love and rest. Harken, Gudruda, my May! Odin does not reign over all the world, for when I sat out yonder in England, a certain holy man taught me of another God—a God who loves not slaughter, a God who died that men might live for ever in peace with those they love.”

“How is this God named, Eric?”

“They name Him the White Christ, and there are many who cling to Him.”

“Would that I knew this Christ, Eric. I am weary of death and blood and evil deeds, such as are pleasing to our Gods. Oh, Eric, if I am taken from thee, swear this to me: that thou wilt slay no more, save for thy life’s sake only.”

“I swear that, sweet,” he made answer. “For I too am weary of death and blood, and desire peace most of all things. The world is sad, and sad have been our days. Yet it is well to have lived, for through many heavy days we have wandered to this happy night.”

“Yea, Eric, it is well to have lived; though I think that death draws on. Now this is my counsel: that we rise, and that thou dost put on thy harness and summon Skallagrim, so that, if evil comes, thou mayst meet it armed. Surely I thought I heard a sound—yonder in the hall!”

“There is little use in that,” said Eric, “for things will befall as they are fated. We may do nothing of our own will, I am sure of this, and it is no good to struggle with the Norns. Yet I will rise.”

So he kissed her, and made ready to leave the bed, when suddenly, as he lingered, a great heaviness seized him.

“Gudruda,” he said, “I am pressed down with sleep.”

“That I am also, Eric,” she said. “My eyes shut of themselves and I can scarcely stir my limbs. Ah, Eric, we are fey indeed, and this is—death that comes!”

“Perchance!” he said, speaking heavily.

“Eric!—wake, Eric! Thou canst not move? Yet hearken to me—ah! this weight of sleep! Thou lovest me, Eric!—is it not so?”

“Yea,” he answered.

“Now and for ever thou lovest me—and wilt cleave to me always wherever we go?”

“Surely, sweet. Oh, sweet, farewell!” he said, and his voice sounded like the voice of one who speaks across the water.

“Farewell, Eric Brighteyes!—my love—my love, farewell!” she answered very slowly, and together they sank into a sleep that was heavy as death.

Now Gizur, Ospakar’s son, and Swanhild, Atli’s widow, rode fast and hard from Mosfell, giving no rest to their horses, and with them rode that thrall who had showed the secret path to Gizur. They stayed a while on Horse-Head Heights till the moon rose. Now one path led hence to the shore that is against the Westmans, where Gudruda’s ship lay bound. Then Swanhild turned to the thrall. Her beautiful face was fierce and she had said few words all this while, but in her heart raged a fire of hate and jealousy which shone through her blue eyes.

“Listen,” she said to the thrall. “Thou shalt ride hence to the bay where the ship of Gudruda the Fair lies at anchor. Thou knowest where our folk are in hiding. Thou shalt speak thus to them. Before it is dawn they must take boats and board Gudruda’s ship and search her. And, if they find Eric, the outlaw, aboard, they shall slay him, if they may.”

“That will be no easy task,” said the thrall.

“And if they find Gudruda they shall keep her prisoner. But if they find neither the one nor the other, they shall do this: they shall drive the crew ashore, killing as few as may be, and burn the ship.”

“It is an ill deed thus to burn another’s ship,” said Gizur.

“Good or ill, it shall be done,” answered Swanhild fiercely. “Thou art a lawman, and well canst thou meet the suit; moreover Gudruda has wedded an outlaw and shall suffer for her sin. Now go, and see thou tarry not, or thy back shall pay the price.”

The man rode away swiftly. Then Gizur turned to Swanhild, asking: “Whither, then, go we?”

“I have said to Middalhof.”

“That is into the wolf’s den, if Eric and Skallagrim are there,” he answered: “I have little chance against the two of them.”

“Nay, nor against the one, Gizur. Why, if Eric’s right hand were hewn from him, and he stood unarmed, he would still slay thee with his left, as, swordless, he slew Ospakar thy father. Yet I shall find a way to come at him, if he is there.”

Then they rode on, and Gizur's heart was heavy for fear of Eric and Skallagrim the Baresark. So fiercely did they ride that, within one hour after midnight, they were at the stead of Middalhof.

"We will leave the horses here in the field," said Swanhild.

So they leaped to earth and, tying the reins of the horses together, left them to feed on the growing grass. Then they crept into the yard and listened. Presently there came a sound of horses stamping in the far corner of the yard. They went thither, and there they found a horse and two geldings saddled, but with the bits slipped, and on the horse was such a saddle as women use.

"Eric Brighteyes, Skallagrim Lambstail, and Gudruda the Fair," whispered Swanhild, naming the horses and laughing evilly— "the birds are within! Now to snare them."

"Were it not best to meet them by the ship?" asked Gizur.

"Nay, thou fool; if once Eric and Skallagrim are back to back, and Whitefire is aloft, how many shall be dead before they are down, thinkest thou? We shall not find them sleeping twice."

"It is shameful to slay sleeping men," said Gizur.

"They are outlaws," she answered. "Hearken, Ospakar's son. Thou sayest thou dost love me and wouldst wed me: know this, that if thou dost fail me now, I will never look upon thy face again, but will name thee Niddering in all men's ears."

Now Gizur loved Swanhild much, for she had thrown her glamour on him as once she did on Atli, and he thought of her day and night. For there was this strange thing about Swanhild that, though she was a witch and wicked, being both fair and gentle she could lead all men, except Eric, to love her.

But of men she loved Eric alone.

Then Gizur held his peace; but Swanhild spoke again:

"It will be of no use to try the doors, for they are strong. Yet when I was a child before now I have passed in and out the house at night by the store-room casement. Follow me, Gizur." Then she crept along the shadow of the wall, for she knew it every stone, till she came to the store-room, and lo! the shutter stood open, and through it the moonlight poured into the chamber. Swanhild lifted her head above the sill and looked, then started back.

"Hush!" she said, "Skallagrim lies asleep within."

"Pray the Gods he wake not!" said Gizur beneath his breath, and turned to go. But Swanhild caught him by the arm; then gently raised her head and looked again, long and steadily. Presently she turned and laughed softly.

"Things go well for us," she said; "the sot lies drunk. We have nothing to fear from him. He lies drunk in a pool of ale."

Then Gizur looked. The moonlight poured into the little room, and by it he saw the great shape of Skallagrim. His head was thrown back, his mouth was wide. He snored loudly in his drunken sleep, and all about him ran the brown ale, for the spigot of the cask lay upon the floor. In his left hand was a horn cup, but in his right he still grasped his axe.

“Now we must enter,” said Swanhild. Gizur hung back, but she sprang upon the sill lightly as a fox, and slid thence into the store-room. Then Gizur must follow, and presently he stood beside her in the room, and at their feet lay drunken Skallagrim. Gizur looked first at his sword, then on the Baresark, and lastly at Swanhild.

“Nay,” she whispered, “touch him not. Perchance he would cry out—and we seek higher game. He has that within him which will hold him fast for a while. Follow where I shall lead.”

She took his hand and, gliding through the doorway, passed along the passage till she came to the great hall. Swanhild could see well in the dark, and moreover she knew the road. Presently they stood in the empty hall. The fire had burnt down, but two embers yet glowed upon the hearth, like red and angry eyes.

For a while Swanhild stood still listening, but there was nothing to hear. Then she drew near to the shut bed where Gudruda slept, and, with her ear to the curtain, listened once more. Gizur came with her, and as he came his foot struck against a bench and stirred it. Now Swanhild heard murmured words and the sound of kisses. She started back, and fury filled her heart. Gizur also heard the voice of Eric, saying: “I will rise.” Then he would have fled, but Swanhild caught him by the arm.

“Fear not,” she whispered, “they shall soon sleep sound.”

He felt her stretch out her arms and presently he saw this wonderful thing: the eyes of Swanhild glowing in the darkness as the embers glowed upon the hearth. Now they glowed brightly, so brightly that he could see the outstretched arms and the hard white face beneath them, and now they grew dim, of a sudden to shine bright again. And all the while she hissed words through her clenched teeth.

Thus she hissed, fierce and low:

“Gudruda, Sister mine, hearken and sleep!
By the bond of blood I bid thee sleep!—
By the strength that is in me I bid thee sleep!—
Sleep! sleep sound!

“Eric Brighteyes, hearken and sleep!
By the bond of sin I charge thee sleep!—
By the blood of Atli I charge thee, sleep!—
Sleep! sleep sound!”

Then thrice she tossed her hands aloft, saying:

“From love to sleep!

From sleep to death!
From death to Hela!
Say, lovers, where shall ye kiss again?"

Then the light went out of her eyes and she laughed low. And ever as she whispered, the spoken words of the two in the shut bed grew fainter and more faint, till at length they died away, and a silence fell upon the place.

"Thou hast no cause to fear the sword of Eric, Gizur," she said. "Nothing will wake him now till daylight comes."

"Thou art awesome!" answered Gizur, for he shook with fear. "Look not on me with those flaming eyes, I pray thee!"

"Fear not," she said, "the fire is out. Now to the work."

"What must we do, then?"

"Thou must do this. Thou must enter and slay Eric."

"That I cannot—that I will not!" said Gizur.

She turned and looked at him, and lo! her eyes began to flame again—upon his eyes they seemed to burn.

"Thou wilt do as I bid thee," she said. "With Eric's sword thou shalt slay Eric, else I will curse thee where thou art, and bring such evil on thee as thou knowest not of."

"Look not so, Swanhild," he said. "Lead on—I come."

Now they creep into the shut chamber of Gudruda. It is so dark that they can see nothing, and nothing can they hear except the heavy breathing of the sleepers.

This is to be told, that at this time Swanhild had it in her mind to kill, not Eric but Gudruda, for thus she would smite the heart of Brighteyes. Moreover, she loved Eric, and while he lived she might yet win him; but Eric dead must be Eric lost. But on Gudruda she would be bitterly avenged—Gudruda, who, for all her scheming, had yet been a wife to Eric!

Now they stand by the bed. Swanhild puts out her hand, draws down the clothes, and feels the breast of Gudruda beneath, for Gudruda slept on the outside of the bed.

Then she searches by the head of the bed and finds Whitefire which hung there, and draws the sword.

"Here lies Eric, on the outside," she says to Gizur, "and here is Whitefire. Strike and strike home, leaving Whitefire in the wound."

Gizur takes the sword and lifts it. He is sore at heart that he must do such a coward deed; but the spell of Swanhild is upon him, and he may not flinch from it. Then a thought takes him

and he also puts down his hand to feel. It lights upon Gudruda's golden hair, that hangs about her breast and falls from the bed to the ground.

"Here is woman's hair," he whispers.

"No," Swanhild answers, "it is Eric's hair. The hair of Eric is long, as thou hast seen."

Now neither of them knows that Gudruda cut Eric's locks when he lay sick on Mosfell, though Swanhild knows well that it is not Brighteyes whom she bids Gizur slay.

Then Gizur, Ospakar's son, lifts the sword, and the faint starlight struggling into the chamber gathers and gleams upon the blade. Thrice he lifts it, and thrice it draws it back. Then with an oath he strikes—and drives it home with all his strength!

From the bed beneath there comes one long sigh and a sound as of limbs trembling against the bed-gear. Then all is still.

"It is done!" he says faintly.

Swanhild puts down her hand once more. Lo! it is wet and warm. Then she bends herself and looks, and behold! the dead eyes of Gudruda glare up into her eyes. She can see them plainly, but none know what she read there. At the least it was something that she loved not, for she reels back against the panelling, then falls upon the floor.

Presently, while Gizur stands as one in a dream, she rises, saying: "I am avenged of the death of Atli. Let us hence!—ah! let us hence swiftly! Give me thy hand, Gizur, for I am faint!"

So Gizur gives her his hand and they pass thence. Presently they stand in the store-room, and there lies Skallagrim, still plunged in his drunken sleep.

"Must I do more murder?" asks Gizur hoarsely.

"Nay," Swanhild says. "I am sick with blood. Leave the knave."

They pass out by the casement into the yard and so on till they find their horses.

"Lift me, Gizur; I can no more," says Swanhild.

He lifts her to the saddle.

"Whither away?" he asks.

"To Coldback, Gizur, and thence to cold Death."

Thus did Gudruda, Eric's bride and Asmund's daughter, the fairest woman who ever lived in Iceland, die on her marriage night by the hand of Gizur, Ospakar's son, and through the hate and witchcraft of Swanhild the Fatherless, her half-sister.

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THE LOST CONTINENT by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne

13. The Burying Alive Of Nais

There is no denying that the wishes of Phorenice were carried into quick effect in the city of Atlantis. Her modern theory was that the country and all therein existed only for the good of the Empress, and when she had a desire, no cost could possibly be too great in its carrying out.

She had given forth her edict concerning the burying alive of Nais, and though the words were that I was to build the throne of stone, it was an understood thing that the manual labour was to be done for me by others. Heralds made the proclamation in every ward of the city, and masons, labourers, stonecutters, sculptors, engineers, and architects took hands from whatever was occupying them for the moment, and hastened to the rendezvous. The architects chose a chief who gave directions, and the lesser architects and the engineers saw these carried into effect. Any material within the walls of the city on which they set their seal, was taken at once without payment or compensation; and as the blocks of stone they chose were the most monstrous that could be got, they were forced to demolish no few buildings to give them passage.

I have before spoken of the modern rage for erecting new palaces and pyramids, and even though at the moment an army of rebels was battering with war engines at the city walls, the building guilds were steadily at work, and their skill (with Phorenice's marvellous invention to aid them) was constantly on the increase. True, they could not move such massive blocks of stone as those which the early Gods planted for the sacred circle of our Lord the Sun, but they had got rams and trucks and cranes which could handle amazing bulks.

The throne was to be erected in the open square before the royal pyramid. Seven tiers of stone were there for a groundwork, each a knee-height deep, and each cut in the front with three steps. In the uppermost layer was a cavity made to hold the body of Nais, and above this was poised the vast block which formed the seat of the throne itself.

Throughout the night, to the light of torches, relay after relay of the stonecutters, and the masons, and the sweating labourers had toiled over bringing up the stone and dressing it into fit shape, and laying it in due position; and the engineers had built machines for lifting, and the architects had proved that each stone lay in its just and perfect place. Whips cracked, and men fainted with the labour, but so soon as one was incapable another pressed forward into his place. No delay was brooked when Phorenice had said her wish.

And finally, as the square began to fill with people come to gape at the pageant of to-day, the chippings and the scaffolding were cleared away, and with it the bodies of some half-score of workmen who had died from accidents or their exertions during the building, and there stood the throne, splendid in its carvings, and all ready for completion. The lower part stood more than two man-heights above the ground, and no stone of its courses weighed less than twenty men; the upper part was double the weight of any of these, and was carved so that the royal snake encircled the chair, and the great hooded head overshadowed it. But at present the upper part was not on its bed, being held up high by lifting rams, for what purposes all men knew.

It was to face this scene, then, that I came out from the royal pyramid at the summons of the chamberlains in the cool of next morning. Each great man who had come there before me had banner-bearers and trumpeters to proclaim his presence; the middle classes were in all their bravery of apparel; and even poor squalid creatures, with ribs of hunger showing through their dusty skins, had turbans and wisps of colour wrapped about their heads to mark the gaiety of the day.

The trumpets proclaimed my coming, and the people shouted welcome, and with the gorgeous chamberlains walking backwards in advance, I went across to a scarlet awning that had been prepared, and took my seat upon the cushions beneath it.

And then came Phorenice, my bride that was to be that day, fresh from sleep, and glorious in her splendid beauty. She was borne out from the pyramid in an open litter of gold and ivory by fantastic savages from Europe, her own refinement of feature being thrown up into all the higher relief by contrast with their brutish ugliness. One could hear the people draw a deep breath of delight as their eyes first fell upon her; and it is easy to believe there was not a man in that crowd which thronged the square who did not envy me her choice, nor was there a soul present (unless Ylga was there somewhere veiled) who could by any stretch imagine that I was not overjoyed in winning so lovely a wife.

For myself, I summoned up all the iron of my training to guard the expression of my face. We were here on ceremonial to-day; a ghastly enough affair throughout all its acts, if you choose, but still ceremonial; and I was minded to show Phorenice a grand manner that would leave her nothing to cavil at. After all that had been gone through and endured, I did not intend a great scheme to be shattered by letting my agony and pain show themselves, in either a shaking hand or a twitching cheek. When it came to the point, I told myself, I would lay the living body of my love in the hollow beneath the stone as calmly, and with as little outward emotion, as though I had been a mere priest carrying out the burial of some dead stranger. And she, on her part, would not, I knew, betray our secret. With her, too, it was truly "Before all Atlantis."

I think it spared a pang to find that there was to be no mockery or flippancy in what went forward. All was solemn and impressive; and, though a certain grandeur and sombreness which bit deep into my breast was lost to the vulgar crowd, I fancy that the outward shape of the double sacrifice they witnessed that day would not be forgotten by any of them, although the inner meaning of it all was completely hidden from their minds. When it suited her fancy, none could be more strict on the ritual of a ceremony than this many-mooded Empress, and it appeared that on this occasion she had given command that all things were to be carried out with the rigid exactness and pomp of the older manner.

So she was borne up by her Europeans to the scarlet awning, and I handed her to the ground. She seated herself on the cushions, and beckoned me to her side, entwining her fingers with mine as has always been the custom with rulers of Atlantis and their consorts. And there before us as we sat, a body of soldiery marched up, and opening out showed Nais in their midst. She had a collar of metal round her neck, with chains depending from it firmly held by a brace of guards, so that she should not run in upon the spears of the escort, and thus get a quick and easy death, which is often the custom of those condemned to the more lingering punishments.

But it was pleasant to see that she still wore her clothing. Raiment, whether of fabric or skin, has its value, and custom has always given the garments of the condemned to the soldiers guarding them. So as Nais was not stripped, I could not but see that someone had given moneys to the guards as a recompense, and in this I thought I saw the hand of Ylga, and felt a gratitude towards her.

The soldiers brought her forward to the edge of the pavilion's shade, and she was bidden prostrate herself before the Empress, and this she wisely did and so avoided rough handling and force. Her face was pale, but showed neither fear nor defiance, and her eyes were calm and natural. She was remembering what was due to Atlantis, and I was thrilled with love and pride as I watched her.

But outwardly I, too, was impassive as a man of stone, and though I knew that Phorenice's eye was on my face, there was never anything on it from first to last that I would not have had her see.

"Nais," said the Empress, "you have eaten from my platter when you were fan-girl, and drunk from my cup, and what was yours I gave you. You should have had more than gratitude, you should have had knowledge also that the arm of the Empress was long and her hand consummately heavy. But it seems that you have neither of these things. And, moreover, you have tried to take a certain matter that the Empress has set apart for herself. You were offered pardon, on terms, and you rejected it. You were foolish. But it is a day now when I am inclined to clemency. Presently, seated on that carved throne of granite which he has built me yonder, I shall take my Lord Deucalion to husband. Give me a plain word that you are sorry, girl, and name a man whom you would choose, and I will remember the brightness of the occasion, you shall be pardoned and wed before we rise from these cushions."

"I will not wed," she said quietly.

"Think for the last time, Nais, of what is the other choice. You will be taken, warm, and quick, and beautiful as you stand there this minute, and laid in the hollow place that is made beneath the throne-stone. Deucalion, that is to be my husband, will lay you in that awful bed, as a symbol that so shall perish all Phorenice's enemies, and then he will release the rams and lower the upper stone into place, and the world shall see your face no more. Look at the bright sky, Nais, fill your chest with the sweet warm air, and then think of what this death will mean. Believe me, girl, I do not want to make you an example unless you force me."

"I will not wed," said the prisoner quietly.

The Empress loosed her fingers from my arm, and lay back against the cushions. "If the girl presumes on our old familiarity, or thinks that I jest, show her now, Deucalion, that I do not."

"The Empress is far from jesting," I said. "I will do this thing because it is the wish of the Empress that it should be done, and because it is the command of the Empress that a symbol of it shall remain for ever as an example for others. Lead your prisoner to the place."

The soldiers wheeled, and the two guards with the chains of the collar which was on the neck of Nais prepared to put out force to drag her up the steps. But she walked with them willingly, and with a colour unchanged, and I rose from my seat, and made obeisance to the Empress and followed them.

Before all those ten thousand eyes, we two made no display of emotion then, not only for Atlantis' sake, but also because both Nais and I had a nicety and a pride in our natures. We were not as Phorenice to flaunt endearments before others.

Yet, when I had bidden the guards unhasp the collar which held the prisoner's neck, and clapped my arms around her, showing all the roughness of one who has no mind that his captive shall escape or even unduly struggle, a thrill gushed through me so potent that I was like to have fainted, and it was only by supreme strain of will that I held unbrokenly on with the ceremonial. I, who had never embraced a woman with aught but the arm of roughness before, now held pressed to me one whom I loved with an infinite tenderness, and the revelation of how love can come out and link with love was almost my undoing. Yet, outwardly, Nais made no sign, but lay half-strangled in my arms, as any woman does that is being borne away by a spoiler.

I trod with her to the uppermost step, the vast throne-stone overhanging us, and then so that all of those who were gazing from the sides of the pyramids and the roofs of the buildings round might see, though we were beyond Phorenice's view, I used a force that was brutal in dragging her across the level, and putting her down into the hollow. And yet the girl resisted me with no one effort whatever.

So that the victim might not struggle out and be crushed, and so gain an easy death when the stone descended, there were brazen clamps to fit into grooves of the stones above the hollow where she lay, and these I fitted in place above her, and fastened one by one, doing this butcher's work with one hand, and still fiercely holding her down by the other. Gods! and the sweat of agony dripped from me on to the thirsty stone as I worked. I could not keep that in.

I clamped and locked the last two bars in place, and took my brute's hand away from her throat.

The hateful finger-marks showed as bloodless furrows in the whiteness of her skin. For the life of me, yes, even for the fate of Atlantis, I could not help dropping my glance upon her face. But she was stronger than I. She gave me no last look. She kept her eyes steadfastly fixed on the cruel stone above, and so I left her, knowing that it was best not to tarry longer.

I came out from under the stone, and gave the sign to the engineers who stood by the rams. The fires were taken away from their sides, and the metal in them began to contract, and slowly the vast bulk of the throne-stone began to creep down towards its bed.

But ah, so slowly! Gods! how my soul was torn as I watched and waited.

Yet I kept my face impassive, overlooking as any officer might a piece of work which others were carrying out under his direction, and on which his credit rested; and I stood gravely in my place till the rams had let the stone come down on its final resting place, and had been carried away by the engineers; and then I went round with the master architect with his plumbline and level, whilst he tested this last piece of the building and declared it perfect.

It was a useless form, this last, seeing that by calculation they knew exactly how the stone must rest; but the guilds have their forms and customs, and on these occasions of high ceremonial, they are punctiliously carried out, because these middle-class people wish always

to appear mysterious and impressive to the poor vulgar folk who are their inferiors. But perhaps I am hard there on them. A man who is needlessly taken round to plumb and duly level the tomb where his love lies buried living, may perhaps be excused by the assessors on high a little spirit of bitterness.

I had gone up the steps to do my hateful work a man full of grief, though outwardly unmoved. As I came down again I had a feeling of incompleteness; it seemed as though half my inwards had been left behind with Nais in the hollow of the stone, and their place was taken by a void which ached wearily; but still I carried a passive face, and memory that before all these private matters stood the command of the High Council, which sat before the Ark of the Mysteries.

So I went and stood before Phorenice, and said the words which the ancient forms prescribed concerning the carrying out of her wish.

“Then, now,” she said, “I will give myself to you as wife. We are not as others, you and I, Deucalion. There is a law and a form set down for the marrying of these other people, but that would be useless for our purposes. We will have neither priest nor scribe to join us and set down the union. I am the law here in Atlantis, and you soon will be part of me. We will not be demeaned by profaner hands. We will make the ceremony for ourselves, and for witnesses, there are sufficient in waiting. Afterwards, the record shall be cut deep in the granite throne you have built for me, and the lettering filled in with gold, so that it shall endure and remain bright for always.”

“The Empress can do no wrong,” I said formally, and took the hand she offered me, and helped her to rise. We walked out from the scarlet awning into the glare of the sunshine, she leaning on me, flushing, and so radiantly lovely that the people began to hail her with rapturous shouts of “A Goddess; our Goddess Phorenice.” But for me they had no welcoming word. I think the set grimness of my face both scared and repelled them.

We went up the steps which led to the throne, the people still shouting, and I sat her in the royal seat beneath the snake’s outstretched head, and she drew me down to sit beside her.

She raised her jewelled hand, and a silence fell on that great throng, as though the breath had been suddenly cut short for all of them.

Then Phorenice made proclamation:

“Hear me, O my people, and hear me, O High Gods from whom I am come. I take this man Deucalion, to be my husband, to share with me the prosperity of Atlantis, and join me in guarding our great possession. May all our enemies perish as she is now perishing above whom we sit.” And then she put her arms around my neck, and kissed me hotly on the mouth.

In turn I also spoke: “Hear me, O most High Gods, whose servant I am, and hear me also, O ye people. I take this Empress, Phorenice, to wife, to help with her the prosperity of Atlantis, and join with her in guarding the welfare of that great possession. May all the enemies of this country perish as they have perished in the past.”

And then, I too, who had not been permitted by the fate to touch the lips of my love, bestowed the first kiss I had ever given woman to Phorenice, that was now being made my wife.

But we were not completely linked yet.

“A woman is one, and man is one,” she proclaimed, following for the first time the old form of words, “but in marriage they merge, so that wife and husband are no more separate, but one conjointly. In token of this we will now make the symbolic joining together, so that all may see and remember.” She took her dagger, and pricking the brawn on my forearm till a head of blood appeared, set her red lips to it, and took it into herself.

“Ah,” she said, with her eyes sparkling, “now you are part of me indeed, Deucalion, and I feel you have strengthened me already.” She pulled down the neck of her robe. “Let me make you my return.”

I pricked the rounded whiteness of her shoulder. Gods! when I remembered who was beneath us as we sat on that throne, I could have driven the blade through to her heart! And then I, too, put down my lips, and took the drop of her blood that was yielded to me.

My tongue was dry, my throat was parched, and my face suffused, and I thought I should have choked.

But the Empress, who was ordinarily so acute, was misled then. “It thrills you?” she cried. “It burns within you like living fire? I have just felt it. By my face! Deucalion, if I had known the pleasure it gives to be made a wife, I do not think I should have waited this long for you. Ah, yes; but with another man I should have had no thrill. I might have gone through the ceremony with another, but it would have left me cold. Well, they say this feeling comes to a woman but once in her time, and I would not change it for the glory of all my conquests and the whirl of all my power.” She leaned in close to me so that the red curls of her hair swept my cheek, and her breath came hot against my mouth. “Tasted you ever any sweet so delicious as this knowledge that we are made one now, Deucalion, past all possible dissolving?”

I could not lie to her any more just then. The Gods know how honestly I had striven to play the part commanded me for Atlantis’ good, but there is a limit to human endurance, and mine was reached. I was not all anger towards her. I had some pity for this passion of hers, which had grown of itself certainly, but which I had done nothing to check; and the indecent frankness with which it was displayed was only part of the livery of potentates who flaunt what meaner folk would coyly hide. But always before my eyes was a picture of the girl on whom her jealousy had taken such a bitter vengeance, and to invent spurious lover’s talk then was a thing my tongue refused to do.

“Words are poor things,” I said, “and I am a man unused to women, and have but a small stock of any phrases except the driest. Remember, Phorenice, a week ago, I did not know what love was, and now that I have learned the lesson, somewhat of the suddenest, the language remains still to come to me. My inwards speak; indeed they are full of speech; but I cannot translate into bald cold words what they say.”

And here, surely the High Gods took pity on my tied tongue and my misery, and made an opportunity for bringing the ceremony to an end. A man ran into the square shouting, and showing a wound that dripped, and presently all that vast crowd which stood on the pavements, and the sides of the pyramids, and the roofs of the temples, took up the cry, and began to feel for their weapons.

“The rebels are in!” “They have burrowed a path into the city!” “They have killed the cave-tigers and taken a gate!” “They are putting the whole place to the storm!” “They will presently leave no poor soul of us here alive!”

There then was a termination of our marriage cooings. With rebels merely biting at the walls, it was fine to put strong trust in the defences, and easy to affect contempt for the besiegers’ powers, and to keep the business of pageants and state craft and marryings turning on easy wheels. But with rebel soldiers already inside the city (and hordes of others doubtless pressing on their heels), the affairs took a different light. It was no moment for further delay, and Phorenice was the first to admit it. The glow that had been in her eyes changed to the glare of the fighter, as the fellow who had run up squalled out his tidings.

I stood and stretched my chest. I seemed in need of air. “Here,” I said, “is work that I can understand more clearly. I will go and sweep this rabble back to their burrows, Phorenice.”

“But not alone, sir. I come too. It is my city still. Nay, sir, we are too newly wed to be parted yet.”

“Have your will,” I said, and together we went down the steps of the throne to the pavement below. Under my breath I said a farewell to Nais.

Our armour-bearers met us with weapons, and we stepped into litters, and the slaves took us off hot foot. The wounded man who had first brought the news had fallen in a faint, and no more tidings was to be got from him, but the growing din of the fight gave us the general direction, and presently we began to meet knots of people who dwelt near the place of irruption, running away in wild panic, loaded down with their household goods.

It was useless to stop these, as fight they could not, and if they had stayed they would merely have been slaughtered like flies, and would in all likelihood have impeded our own soldiery. And so we let them run screaming on their blind way, but forced the litters through them with but very little regard for their coward convenience.

Now the advantage of the rebels, when it came to be looked upon by a soldier’s eye, was a thing of little enough importance. They had driven a tunnel from behind a covering mound, beneath the walls, and had opened it cleverly enough through the floor of a middle-class house. They had come through into this, collecting their numbers under its shelter, and doubtless hoping that the marriage of the Empress (of which spies had given them information) would sap the watchfulness of the city guards. But it seems they were discovered and attacked before they were thoroughly ready to emerge, and, as a fine body of troops were barracked near the spot, their extermination would have been merely a matter of time, even if we had not come up.

It did not take a trained eye long to decide on this, and Phorenice, with a laugh, lay back on the cushions of the litter, and returned her weapons to the armour-bearer who came panting

up to receive them. “We grow nervous with our married life, my Deucalion,” she said. “We are fearful lest this new-found happiness be taken from us too suddenly.”

But I was not to be robbed of my breathing-space in this wise. “Let me crave a wedding gift of you,” I said.

“It is yours before you name it.”

“Then give me troops, and set me wide a city gate a mile away from here.”

“You can gather five hundred as you go from here to the gate, taking two hundred of those that are here. If you want more, they must be fetched from other barracks along the walls. But where is your plan?”

“Why, my poor strategy teaches me this: these foolish rebels have set all their hopes on this mine, and all their excitement on its present success. If they are kept occupied here by a Phorenice, who will give them some dainty fighting without checking them unduly, they will press on to the attack and forget all else, and never so much as dream of a sortie. And meanwhile, a Deucalion with his troop will march out of the city well away from here, without tuck of drum or blare of trumpet, and fall most unpleasantly upon their rear. After which, a Phorenice will burn the house here at the mine’s head, which is of wood, and straw thatched, to discourage further egress, and either go to the walls to watch the fight from there, or sally out also and spur on the rout as her fancy dictates.”

“Your scheme is so pretty, I would I could rob you of it for my own credit’s sake, and as it is, I must kiss you for your cleverness. But you got my word first, you naughty fellow, and you shall have the men and do as you ask. Eh, sir, this is a sad beginning of our wedded life, if you begin to rob your little wife of all the sweets of conquest from the outset.”

She took back the weapons and target she had given to the armour-bearer, and stepped over the side of the litter to the ground. “But at least,” she said, “if you are going to fight, you shall have troops that will do credit to my drill,” and thereupon proceeded to tell off the companies of men-at-arms who were to accompany me. She left herself few enough to stem the influx of rebels who poured ceaselessly in through the tunnel; but as I had seen, with Phorenice, heavy odds added only to her enjoyment.

But for the Empress, I will own at the time to have given little enough of thought. My own proper griefs were raw within me, and I thirsted for that forgetfulness of all else which battle gives, so that for a while I might have a rest from their gnawings.

It made my blood run freer to hear once more the tramp of practised troops behind me, and when all had been collected, we marched out through a gate of the city, and presently were charging through and through the straggling rear of the enemy. By the Gods! for the moment even Nais was blotted from my wearied mind. Never had I loved more to let my fierceness run madly riot. Never have I gloated more abundantly over the terrible joy of battle.

Nais must forgive my weakness in seeking to forget her even for a breathing-space. Had that opportunity been denied me, I believe the agony of remembering would have snapped my brain-strings for always.

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